

SEMIRAMIS

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Author: Edward Peple

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[image]

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She had come into the lion's very lair. (Page 143)

SEMIRAMIS

A Tale of Battle and of Love

BY
EDWARD PEPLE

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To
"THE LITTLE PADRE"

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PREFACE.

The existing history of Assyria's greatest ruler, Semiramis, is so confounded with the religions and superstitions of the ancients that little or no authentic fact may be gleaned therefrom. Again, these legends were handed down from father to son among the Syrians and imaginative Persians, till finally recorded by the more imaginative Greeks. These latter gentlemen seemed seldom to allow mere truth to stand as a stumbling block in their literary paths, but leaped it nimbly for the entertainment of an admiring world.

As for poets, they ever sing of Queen Semiramis at a period of her seasoned age and wickedness, though her "devilish beauty" continued to abide with her, being wielded as an evil scepter o'er the souls of men; yet much must be forgiven in a poet, because of that strange inaptitude of truth for a friendly relationship with meter and with rhyme.

In every human, however bad, there exists a trace of virtue, even as, on the other hand, no mortal yet has lived without some blemish of flesh or mind or heart; thus Nature balances her weird accounts, leaving the extremes of vice or purity to mythical ideals.

Given a woman without imagination or originality, and that woman deserves no credit whatsoever for her righteousness. She exists; she does not live; for her temptation possesses no attractive lure. Yet given another woman, of beauty, temper, brains, and for her the battles of good and evil will be waged till her fires are dead. Her better self must battle against ambition, passion, the blood of direct inheritance, the thousand ghostly guides that lead her into perilous ways, while on the scales of circumstances must hang the issue of her rise or fall. She must face still other foes, in men who are stronger than herself—men who seek her charms for weel or woe; for perfect love is a woman's highest goal, and a man may make or mar it by the mould of his great or little heart.

If, therefore, in her later days Semiramis was evil, the fault was not all her own. She chose her master—not the master of her mind, but the master of her woman’s heart, and to him she gave her all. What wonder, then, that when her all was filched by lustful treachery, departing peace awoke a sleeping devil in her blood?

Great faults had Queen Semiramis, and many, as viewed by enlightened women from a reach of two thousand years; yet who shall say that evil would have claimed this splendid savage had fate not raised another savage to mould her destiny?

It is not the purpose of this work to present a series of historical facts, for even the legends of Semiramis are too absurd and fragmentary to admit of such a hope. Its aim—in emulation of the worthy Greeks—is, at least, to entertain, albeit a truth or two may now and again be handled carelessly. It treats of ancient loves and wars, a tangle of myth and probability—a patch-work, woven into a quilt which, at worst, may assist the reader in going peacefully to sleep.

July, 1907. E. P.

SEMIRAMIS

CHAPTER I

THE RAISING OF THE SIEGE

King Ninus sat his war horse, gazing sadly out across the walls of Zariaspa. His cheek was bronzed by the brush of many winds, his muscles hardened by the toil of battle in a hundred lands; the blood of dauntless youth ran riot in his veins, yet it whispered at his heart that the King had failed.

Behind him the mountains of Hindu-Kush towered, dull and purple, in the morning light, their peaks obscured in coils of snake-like mist. Southward they ran, a ragged line of hills, till they reached the height of Hindu-Koh and claimed a brotherhood with the mighty Himalayas. To right and left the hill-steeps lay, a barren waste of rock and stunted shrubbery, while at the feet of Assyria’s King

stretched fertile valleys, and the plains of Bactria reaching away to the banks of the River Oxus.

In the centre of the plain stood Zariaspa, the city which defied Assyria's might, a fortress whose walls rose thirty cubits above the earth, grim, battle-scarred, but still unconquered. Within, the defenders feasted from a never ending store of food which seemed to drop by magic from the brazen skies, while without, a hungry host of besieging foes sat, cursing, in the sand.

So Ninus sat upon his horse in troubled thought, a monarch cheated of his heart's desire—cheated by craft and prowess more subtle than his own. To his side rode Menon down a mountain trail, a Prince of the house of Nairi, now travel-stained from a baffled hunt for the secret of Zariaspa's store of food. He made report, and Ninus listened, silent, nodding slowly, frowning at the distant walls.

In feature and form these two were as oddly matched as the sons of a kindred race might be. The King was of massive frame and corded thews, a leader of men who ruled by the right of might, who offered to those he loved an open hand—to his enemies a hard-clenched fist. Haughty of mien was he, with the eyes of a restless hawk burning beneath the shadow of his brow; his strong, square chin lay hidden in his beard, while from his helm swept a mass of hair, resting in thick, oiled curls upon his shoulders.

The Prince beside him was but a boy in years, with a beardless face of beauty to look upon, a slender, nimble frame, yet hardened in the school of hunting and of war. Where Fate was pleased to mark his path, there Menon[#] rode with a loose, free rein, mocking at danger as he played at love, yet scorning not discretion's padded shield.

[#] This name is known to modern writers as Onnes or Cannes, but the historian Diodorus called him Menon and this name has been used by the author throughout.

Where Ninus smashed his way through the bristling ranks of opposing force, Menon skimmed in crafty circles till he found the weakest point, then cut it cleanly, as the swallow cuts the wind. Where Ninus frowned and crushed obedience to his will, there Menon bought devotion's merchandise with the price of a joyous laugh; yet the boy, withal, had need to lean upon the arm of power, while the King was a king from helm to heel, a lord to whom his mighty armies gave idolatry and the tribute of their blood.

"Menon," spoke the King at length, as he pointed across the plain to Zariaspa, "I have sworn by Bel and Ramân to lay yon city low, to sack it to the dust of its whitest ash. Thinkest thou we may some day cease to squat in the manner of toads outside its walls?"

"Aye, my lord," the Prince returned, with a fleeting smile, "some day—when

the toads have learned to fly.”

King Ninus nodded thoughtfully, and with his fingers combed at his thick, black beard.

”True,” he answered, ”true; and yet we soon will be upon the wing. Look thou and listen.” Again he pointed, not at the city’s walls, but to the monster camp which circled Zariaspa as a girdle rests about a woman’s waist. ”See, Menon, thy King hath learned to fly.”

Now even as he spoke, the besieging army woke as from a heavy sleep. On the gentle wind came a clank and clatter of swiftly gathered arms, the squeak of wheels and the harsh, shrill cries of captains to their men. At first the sound was faint and far, a whispered echo through the morning mists; yet anon it multiplied and swelled into a busy roar, as the vanguard of Assyria’s hosts turned tail upon their enemies and crawled toward the southern mountain-pass.

Menon, like the King, gazed out across the plain, but in wonder and amaze, then raised his eyes to his master’s frowning face. Twice he strove to speak, and twice fell silent, turning again to the marvel of Assyria’s army in retreat.

”My lord—” he began at last, but Ninus checked him with a lifted hand.

”Nay, Menon,” the master sighed, ”thy soul is troubled because of the strangeness of this thing; yet heed me and know the cause. My heart is still for battle, yet the heart hath taken council of the mind, and wisdom soundeth my retreat.”

The King dismounted from his steed, leading the Prince to a seat upon a stone which overlooked a wider view of the breaking camp. He placed his arm in fatherly caress on Menon’s shoulder, and spoke once more:

”My warriors have called their chief a god.” He paused to smile behind his beard, and for an instant sat in reverie. ”Now godhood hath its virtues so long as it leadeth unto victory and beds of ease; yet this have I learned, and to my woe, that a pot of boiling grease poured down from a city’s wall will scald a god as it scaldeth a naked slave. Defeat is mortal; gods bring victory alone, and my faithful followers begin to mutter among themselves.”

Again King Ninus paused in reverie, then stretched his knotted arm toward the stubborn city.

”Three years have we girded Zariaspa’s walls and battered at its masonry. Three years! and what hath been compassed in these weary days? We scrape an hundred-weight of scales from off the stones, and sacrifice a third of an army’s strength to the sport of our laughing enemies. Our shafts are as swarms of harmless gnats, our lances reeds in the hands of girls; our mightiest engines toys at which the foemen crow and chuckle in their merriment. From the Oxus to the hills we harry the land in search of food, while the Bactrians fatten as they loll upon their battlements. Aye, meat have they, the which they devour in lazy ar-

rogance, tossing the bones thereof at our hungry men below! Whence cometh this vast supply? From Bel or Gibil, it matters not; they gorge themselves, and laugh! Five score spies have I sent by craft into the city, and five score spies have they hanged upon the walls! By the breath of Shamashi-Ramân, it rouseth me to wrath!"

The King arose and set to striding in fury to and fro, while Menon forbore to question him, knowing that if his master willed he would speak in time.

"And so," sighed Ninus, pausing at last beside the boy, "and so will we journey westward for a space, to conquer other and weaker lands, to fatten my army with the fruits of spoil, to help them forget that a god hath failed. When this be compassed, then will I rest from war beside the Tigris where my city shall be builded in the sand—a city, Menon, the like of which no eye hath yet beheld—a fortress beside whose strength this little Zariaspa is but a nut to crack beneath thy heel. And there will I set my court and hold dominion over all the world—hold it, till men and the children of men shall wear my footstool smooth with the pressure of their knees!"

The monarch's bosom heaved in wrapt desire; his dark eyes kindled with a flame inspired, as he raised them toward the clouds. As a prophet he saw this pearl of glory rise from out the wilderness. He saw its monster walls, surmounted by a thousand and a half a thousand soaring towers. In fancy he fashioned gleaming palaces and sumptuous banquet halls. He dreamed of gardens drowsing in the cool of spreading palms, where a king might rest from the toil of his lion-hunt; he heard the splash of fountains murmuring through the long blue night, till the torch of morning lit his terraces, and the grapes of Syria ripened to his hand. He watched in triumph from his palace roof the vast brown city stretching at his feet, while the echoed roar of its busy din climbed upward in waves of melody. He heard the clang of its mighty gates of bronze that opened to the commerce of the earth—that opened again to the outrush of his war-armed hosts, a thousand nations melted into one grand hammer-head that rose and fell in obedience to his lightest nod.

"And because of this city," King Ninus cried aloud, "the peoples of every land shall hold my memory till the passing ages rot, for I swear to mount it on a deathless throne and crown it with the splendour of my name! Up, Menon, and journey with thy King to NINEVEH!"

And thus was born that Nineveh which rode astride the world, to fall at last, as falls the pride of power, and find its grave in the dust from whence it sprung—to lie forgotten in a mouldy crypt of dreams, till the peoples who slipped from the womb of another age swarmed forth to dig again—to spell out a kingdom's vanished glories from the symbols of a vanished tongue.

Menon and the King rode down into the valley and across the plain to

where the great war-serpent of Assyria began to uncoil itself and crawl toward the west. For the space of a moon the joyless work went on. The camps of horse and foot were struck, the rude utensils and heavier arms being strapped to the backs of beasts of burden, while an hundred thousand chariots were hitched and deployed across the plains. Cumberous engines for the hurling of heavy stones were dragged from beneath the city walls, to be burned and destroyed, or hauled through gaps in the distant mountain range by lowing oxen and toiling, sweating slaves. The warriors set torches to the huts and houses behind their trenches, and a roar of flames was added to the bustling din of moving men-at-arms. Great columns of spark-shot smoke arose, to roll above the city in a suffocating cloud—to choke the defenders who coughed and crowded along the battlements. As each dense mass of besiegers passed, the Bactrianas set up shouts and songs of victory, while they hurled their taunts, together with flights of shafts and stones, at the growling, cursing enemy below.

From day to day the scene was one of turbulence and haste, a jumble of groaning carts and provision trains, of swiftly formed battalions passing westward on the run, to join the vanguard and be lost in a cloud of thick, low-hanging dust. And thus an hundred nations trickled into order through the teeming ruck, each yelling in its native tongue as it flung defiance back at Zariaspa; while above the rumbling tramp of myriads of feet rose the blare of countless signal horns.

When the last day dawned, King Ninus marshalled an array to bid farewell to his jeering foes. Where he faced the city gates, a thousand chariots were formed in a curving, triple line, with steeds whose polished trappings glittered in the sun, their drivers giants picked from the flower of his force. The wings were shaped by cavalry, dark-visaged riders from the south, in turbans and flowing robes, while a horde of footmen were massed behind. Here were seen the harnessed tribes that bowed to Assyria's rule; Indian bowmen, with weapons fashioned from bones of saurians; spearmen from Babylonia, archers from the north; grim swordsmen from the Upper and Lower Nile, bearing their shields of painted bronze; wild slingers from the Syrian hills, half clothed in the skins of beasts; Afghans, sullen Khatti, proud Armenians in solid, bristling ranks—the warriors of the world who had swept all Asia as with a flame, yet failed to drag the walls of Zariaspa down.

In the centre of the curving front King Ninus sat his war horse silently; on his right rode Menon, while on his left a mounted herald waited for command. The monarch gave a sign; the stern battalia advanced, to halt within an arrow-shot of the city gates; then the herald raised his voice, demanding audience with Oxyartes, King of Bactria.

Now the Bactrians on the walls, suspecting some deceitful snare, answered the summons with hoots and laughter, with the mimic howls of animals and

the mocking crow of cocks. A cloud of arrows fell like drops of rain, galling the restive chariot steeds, while a captain on the wall released the beam of a catapult. A monster rock came hurtling through the air, to strike the earth within a spear's length of the King and crash through the triple line of chariots; whereat a mighty roar of rage went up, the clamour growing into fury, till Ninus wheeled his horse and gave a sharp command. At his word, the centre of the line began to bend in a deeper curve, divided at last, and two great columns of horse and foot streamed westward toward the hills, while the rumbling chariots, twelve abreast, brought up the rear.

With Menon alone King Ninus sat motionless upon his steed till his warriors left the space of a thousand paces clear; then he rode to the gate and struck it sharply with the hilt of his heavy sword.

"Come forth, King Oxyartes!" he cried aloud. "Come forth!"

Now the people of Bactria loved a fearless man, be he enemy or friend, so they cheered him till the city rocked with the thunder of their shouts, and Oxyartes stood out upon the battlements.

"What would Ninus of the King of Bactria?" he called; and Ninus answered, albeit he lifted not his eyes:

"It is not meet that the lord of Assyria hold speech with fowls who roost in trees. Come down and parley, King to King."

A bowman from above took umbrage at the haughty tone, and loosed a shaft which broke upon the monarch's metal helm, yet because of this deed King Oxyartes seized the miscreant and flung him from the wall. Then he called for a rope which, being brought, was looped beneath his arms, and his warriors lowered him to the earth, for the city gates were sealed. In his hand he held a naked sword, and Ninus noting this laughed scornfully, dismounted and cast his weapon on the ground, awaiting his enemy with folded arms. The Bactrian flushed in shame, flung his own blade aside, and advanced with outstretched hands.

"Pardon, my lord," he begged. "With one so strange to fear, I might have brought my trust as I brought my sword."

"Nay," smiled Ninus; "where the sword is wisdom, there caution is a shield."

Oxyartes was of that mould of warrior which Ninus loved; the straight, lean form, the kingly head beneath whose brow the eyes looked out with a level gaze, while the hands he offered were firm in the strength of youth—a fitting shield for the heart of his sturdy land.

"And why," he asked, "am I honoured by a parley with Assyria's lord, when his army marcheth westward in retreat?"

King Ninus laid his hand upon the Bactrian's shoulder, looked into his eyes, and spoke:

"I come to bid farewell to a worthy foe, ere I turn toward the Tigris where my city shall be builded on its shore. There will I rest and plan my coming wars. There will I raise another and a mightier force, to return when three short years have passed and blot thy city from the plains. Ah, smile if thou wilt, friend Oxyartes, but I come again, and at my coming, look well to Zariaspa's walls!"

So Oxyartes ceased to smile, casting his gaze upon the earth, for he knew his foe spoke truth and would come again.

"My lord," he asked at length, "wherefore should our races be at war? In the country round about I may not match thy multitude of men-at-arms; yet behind my battlements I defy thy proudest strength. Wisdom crieth out for truce, a compact wherein I weld my force with thine and share all conquests and a portion of the spoil thereof. Speak, Ninus, for the compact seemeth just."

"True," the monarch nodded gravely, "true; and yet I may not do this thing. When Bactria is conquered and thy citadel laid low, then will I make a treaty with thy nation's chiefs. They shall join their strength to mine and share a goodly part of my captives and my spoils." He paused to smile, and once more laid his hand on the shoulder of Oxyartes. "Their warrior King will I set among my best beloved, for I hold him as a brother in the arts of war; yet heed me, friend, I have sworn by Bel and Ramân to rake the ashes of thy Zariaspa into sacks and with them feed the waters of the sea! And this will I do, or leave my bones to bleach beneath the brow of Hindu-Kush! Till I come again—farewell."

Then Oxyartes embraced the Assyrian king, begging him to tarry for a day as an honored guest, to feast and receive the richest gifts his kingdom might afford; but Ninus smiled and shook his head.

"Nay, suffer me to treasure up the thought," he answered with a laugh, "yet keep thy gifts till I come to take them for myself."

"So be it," smiled the Bactrian in return. "Three years of peace thou givest me, and in them will I dig the grave of Assyria's lord in the shadow of frowning Kush! Farewell!"

He stooped and gave the sword of Ninus into the monarch's hand, stroked the charger's neck till its master mounted, then watched the King and Menon ride away across the sunlit plains.

Not once did Ninus give a backward glance, yet Menon wheeled his steed and kissed his hand to a gathering of maidens watching from the battlements.

CHAPTER II

THE BUILDING OF A CITY

The Assyrian host dragged westward till it wormed its way through notches in the mountain range, descended the further slopes, then fared upon its way. It split at last into lesser armies, each beneath the leadership of a trusted chief, each charged with a separate mission of its own. One force swung north, to harry the shores of the Black and Caspian seas and to levy tribute for the building of the city. Another force went south through the plains and valleys of Armenia, while still another fared afar to the Sea of the Setting Sun. Here fleets of Phoenician merchantmen were seized and pressed into the service of the King, for in the eyes of Ninus a nation's traffic was but a paltry thing till Nineveh should be. These ships sailed out toward the delta of the Nile, presently to return with swarms of Egyptian workers, together with their cutting-tools of bronze, their winches and their levers used in the wielding of mighty weights. Ten score thousand riders spread forth through every land and every tribe, summoning workers by pay or promises; and where a tribe rebelled, Assyria's warriors herded them like sheep toward one central hub of toil.

King Ninus himself sat down upon the river bank where the waters of the Tigris and the Khusur join, and here he wrought his plans. A band of men went northward to the forest lands, felled trees, and split them into boards with which they fashioned a fleet of wide flat boats. These boats, propelled by sweeps and pushing-poles, were manned by Phoenicia's sons, for Assyria knew no more of ship-craft than hillsmen know the camel's back; yet Ninus employed the skill of others in his self appointed task. While the boats were being builded, he marked the line of his city wall in the form of a mighty egg, full twenty leagues around; then the King began to dig.

He caused two trenches to be sunk, the one within the other; the outer trench being twenty cubits wide and ten in depth, while the inner trench was shallower, but of greater width. These he flooded by means of the river Khusur, forming two vast canals, with a ring of earth between whereon should rest the walls of Nineveh. Then the whole wide world, it seemed, was set a-making bricks.

On the Tigris river-flats, above and below the city site, a million workers toiled by night and day—warrior, captive, slave, King Ninus cared not, so he moulded bricks. These bricks were fashioned from river mud brought down by inundation, the mud commingled with straw and the fibrous parts of reeds to give it strength, and were set to bake in the heat of the summer sun.

Later these river flats would be employed for the making of other bricks—the kiln-baked bricks which were glazed and tinted with every color known to men, designed for the facing of temples and of palaces; but now the work went

on for the city wall alone. And yet not quite alone, for in the centre of the city's line, where the Khusur cut the site in twain, the King erected a monster mound whereon his royal palace would one day sit; then on the summit of the mound he builded a watch-tower, and abode therein. Here, beneath a shading canopy, the master-builder sat from dawn till dark, watching his work, for he had sworn a sacred oath to indulge in neither hunt nor war till Nineveh was Nineveh.

And now he saw the budding of his dream. From the Tigris banks and up the Khusur came his flatboats, piled high with bricks; they floated on his two canals, supplying the workers who builded the wall between. In time this inner canal would disappear, being filled with earth, but the outer trench would ever remain, to serve as a moat which girt the city round about.

Like unto ants the workers swarmed beneath the eye of Ninus on his tower, yet every little insect moved in lines marked out by patient thought. The well-nigh countless throng was divided into ordered gangs, each gang provided with an over-chief who urged his laborers by word of mouth or the lash of whips. Beneath the tower sat a ring of mounted men-at-arms who galloped forth with orders of the King, or brought report from points too distant for his eye to scan; for the builder willed his work to grow, not with gaps or breaks, but as one splendid whole, each section of the wall arising in conformity with its brother parts, until a straight, unvaried line should mount each day toward the sky.

From dawn till dark the robe of Ninus fluttered on the tower's crest—a banner of warning to those who shirked their toil. Where diligence grew slack from weariness, or the work of a section fell behind, a man-at-arms spurred out toward the offending gang, to strike off the head of its over-chief and cast his body into an empty boat. Presently this boat, on its outward journey for a load of bricks, would drop the corpse into the Tigris, and another chief was set in the sleeper's place.

Beyond the wall the army of Assyria lay encamped, yet active beneath the rule of Menon and his chiefs. A kingdom in itself it was, whence recruits were drilled and trained to combat with the veteran warriors; whence engines of offense were builded against the day when Zariaspa again would suffer siege; whence foraying bands went forth to gather grain and fruits, likewise sheep and cattle, wherewith to feed the multitudes of slaves and soldiery. It was here deserters from the wall were caught and crucified in sight of those who harboured thoughts displeasing to the King; for Ninus punished, not in impotent gusts of rage, but rather with that cold precision of a master-mind. And because of these things his work went on apace.

When the wall had risen twenty cubits above its base, the King contrived from his inner trench a myriad of intersecting channels converging toward his central mound. Through these he conveyed material for the laying of his streets,

for the erection of houses and the temples unto Ishtar, the fire-god Gibil, and the temple of his great Lord Asshur upon the hill. The royal palace would be modeled last of all, for the mind of Ninus, released from other cares, might give its power to the grandeur of his halls, to their splendour of adornment wherein the arts of an hundred nations would be taxed to lend them glory.

And now the deep-tongued voice of labour swelled in volume, rolling upward in incessant waves of melody to where the King sat smiling on his tower. He listened to the roar of sharp command, commingled with the answering cries of slaves and the groan of laden carts. Far out across the plain he spied a train of sleds, each drawn by a thousand men, and creeping inch by inch through tawny sands; from the quarries in the south they bore huge blocks of basalt wherefrom strange effigies would be carven in the likeness of gods, of lions and of wingéd bulls. Beyond the wall King Ninus heard the humming din of Assyria's hosts encamped, the clank of arms and the rumbling tread of horse and foot. Within, he listened to the whine of ropes, to the creak of hoisting-cranes which lifted a world of brick and swung like living tentacles above the sweating pigmies down below. He heard the songs of boatmen on his black canals, a droning air that rose and fell, stilling the harsher cries of labour's pain, and seeming to chant the kingly builder's praise.

The heat of the summer sun poured down, a pitiless, parching blaze, while a horde of delvers bowed beneath their lashes and their loads. They staggered at their tasks, each praying to his gods for the shades of night to fall, when he slept like a beaten dog till dawn awoke him to another hell of toil.

And thus fair Nineveh grew, as if by magic, from the dust, the while a master-devil watched it from his tower. And the heart of Ninus swelled within him and was glad.

CHAPTER III

THE GOVERNOR OF SYRIA

King Ninus, grandson of the mighty Shalmaneser, mounted his throne in youth, a throne which ruled a kingdom run to seed through the slothful reign of Shamashi-Ramân; yet as his grandsire's heart had beat for war alone, so beat the heart of Ninus, resting not till the glory of Assyria flamed forth again.

From the city of Kalah, crumbling in decay, he began his little conquests,

conquering his neighbors and joining their strength to his, making them friends and allies rather than slaves who bowed beneath a yoke of might. He moulded their uncouth valor into ordered rule, exchanging their clumsy weapons for his better tools of war, till, presently, an army raised its head from out the mud of ignorance. A conquered people, so long as they paid him tribute and kept their covenants, were left in peace, their gods untroubled, their temples sacred to their own desires; but should they revolt, then Ninus and his grim, unpitying host returned, to leave their cities smouldering heaps upon the plain, the heads of their chiefs set up on poles by way of warning to all who entertained a similar unrest.

And thus, like ever widening circles in a pool, the Assyrian Empire grew apace, until at length its confines stretched away, even to the shores of the Sea of the Setting Sun. Beneath the rule of Ninus bowed Media and Armenia, the roving, battle-loving Khatti, Tyre, Sidon, Edom and Philistia. Proud Babylon was once more wedded to Assyria, albeit she ever scratched and bit in the manner of fractious and unwilling wives. Damascus fell, a feat which even Shalmaneser failed to compass, and the peaceful fields of Syria were overrun, their cattle eaten by the hungry conquerors. The dwellers on the shores of the Black and Caspian seas were subject to the sway of Ninus, and Egypt paid him endless tribute in precious metals and shields and swords of bronze.

And yet two kingdoms lay as stumbling blocks in the path of Assyria's power. The one was Bactria, a land whose armies, beaten in the field, took refuge behind the massive walls of Zariaspa, defying siege for three long years, their turrets lined with well-fed, jeering men-at-arms.

The other unconquered kingdom was Arabia, ruled by a wily Prince, by the name Boabdul Ben Hutt, who chose a saddle for his throne, his sceptre a loose-sheathed scimitar. This country abounded in a breed of swiftest steeds which wrought King Ninus to the verge of mad desire; yet the prize was beyond his grasp, like the fruit of a palm whose trunk he could neither fell nor climb. And more; its inner kernel was protected by a circling rind of desertland, far deadlier than a force of a million warriors. Moreover this kingdom stood in constant menace to the plans of Ninus, and so soon as an adjacent country was subdued and the armies marched to further wars, a cloud of dusky riders would descend in a swirling rush of sand, to obliterate the tracks of Assyria's patient toil.

Report came now to Ninus as he sat upon his tower, and vexed him till he fain would crucify the messengers of evil tidings. The horsemen of Boabdul were troubling Syria with the points of spears, devouring the fattest flocks and bearing off rich spoils which the King desired in the building of his city. For an hour King Ninus combed his beard in thought, then sent for Menon and spread before him a feast of fruits and wine.

"Menon," spoke the King, when the feast was done, "to-morrow shalt thou journey down into Arabia and seal a covenant with our worthy foe, Prince Boabdul Ben Hutt."

Menon stared and set his goblet on the board.

"A covenant?" he asked in wonder, for he feared lest he had not heard aright.

"Aye, a covenant of peace," King Ninus nodded gravely; "for, heed thee, fools alone make war upon the birds of flight, while a wise man feedeth them from his store of grain, in that they fatten against a time of need." Menon smiled, and the King spoke on: "Go thou, then, unto Arabia, seek out Boabdul and bear him gifts which I now make ready. Offer them together with the love and fellowship of Assyria's lord, and call him brother in my name. Seal, thou, a covenant whose bonds provide that we trespass not upon one another's lands; that in all new conquests, wherein he lendeth aid, a half of the spoils thereof shall be his part. In turn, Arabia may call upon the arm of Ninus for the smiting of her enemies, and the lands subdued shall be divided in two equal shares. Accede to such demands of the noble Prince as wisdom and justice may advocate, yet upon one point hold fast as a buck-hound's grip, though the treaty come to grief because of it."

"And that?" asked Menon, still marvelling at the master's tone.

"Stallions!" cried the King, as he struck the table with his hairy fist. "These must I have, to add to the glory of my stud, to draw my chariots and to fill the stalls of my stables here at Nineveh. Look to it, Menon, three thousand steeds of the noblest stock will Boabdul send each year; and for the which he may ask his price in maidens or other merchandise. The steeds, my friend, the godly steeds of Barbary!"

For a space the King and his faithful general spoke thoughtfully of matters pertaining to the truce, then Menon rose to take his leave; but Ninus detained him further.

"When the covenant shall be sealed," said he, "send messengers with the terms thereof to my allies in the South; likewise dispatch a trusty courier to me, then journey into Syria. In Syria thou wilt wait upon its Governor, one Surbat by name, a drowsy man who ruleth with the wisdom of a sheep. Send me his head; and when he, thus, shall be removed from office, rule thou in his stead—yet wisely and with wakefulness."

Menon's cheeks grew red with pride at the honours which his master was about to heap upon him, and he would have fallen to his knees in gratitude, but the King restrained him.

"Nay, listen," said he, "the hills of Syria are fat with the fat of plenty, their vast tribes rich in cattle and in sheep, while Ninus hath grievous need of food in the building of his city. Pinch them with tax, my son, till their veins run dry,

yet spare their skins that they puff again for a later need. I, myself, will send a messenger unto Surbat, advising him of my will in the change of rule, albeit as to the smiting of his neck, I will leave it till thou comest on him suddenly.”

Once more Menon sought to sink upon his knee, but Ninus took his hands and raised him, saying, with a smile:

”Nay, spare thy thanks till the lion’s hide is dried; for, remember, I send thee down to Syria for Surbat’s head. Rule boldly, but with craft, lest perchance I may some day send for still another head. And now, farewell.”

Menon journeyed down the Tigris in a barge whose sweeps were manned by swart Phoenicians; and beside the guard accompanying him, there were certain slaves who bore provisions and the royal gifts for Arabia’s Prince. By day and night they travelled swiftly till they came to the town of Kutha, where they crossed by land to the Euphrates and embarked in another boat. Thence they floated for many days on the current of this muddy stream, and rested at last by Burwar, a league below the site where Babylon, the Queen of Cities, would some day rise. Here they dispatched an Arab messenger unto Boabdul Ben Hutt, and sat down to wait the pleasure of the Prince and an escort through the desertlands.

At length the escort came, a band of turbaned savages who stole like ghosts across the sands on the backs of lurching camels; whose weapons and trappings gave no sound; whose visages were hardened to the breath of heated winds and the sting of burning dust. Their Sheik bade Menon welcome in his master’s name, and strapped the gifts of Ninus on a vicious lead-beast’s hump. He mounted the leader and seven of his men-at-arms, but the others, together with the slaves and servants, he commanded to remain behind.

There were those of Menon’s guard who sat uneasy in their seats, because of the strangeness in the gait of these awesome beasts; and one, when his camel floundered from its knees, clutched wildly at nothing and pitched headlong to the earth, to arise from the dust with curses, amid the laughter of the Bedouins.

Now it is not good to mock at a Babylonian in distress, so he, one Babus, nursed a certain soreness of his pride which was like to bring the cause of Menon into bitter stress, yet the time was not yet come.

For the space of eleven days the cavalcade fared westward through the trackless wastes, the sky a brazen lake of fire, the plains a tawny, dizzy sea that seemed to heave with endless waves of sand. In the hours of noon they rested long beneath the shade of canopies, and slept; then took up their flight again, to shiver through the cool of night when a huge moon leapt with wondrous suddenness from beneath the world and raced away along his curving, star-lit path. And thus they journeyed till the dawn of the twelfth red day, when Menon spied the fringe of a green oasis as it rose from the desert’s rim. Like a cool, sweet dewdrop it seemed to lie in the core of a yellow leaf, and after a weary ride at

quicken pace the travellers came upon the outposts of Boabdul's camp.

Here the Assyrians were conducted into tents of skins, that of Menon being sumptuous in appointment; it was deep, commodious, and provided with silent slaves to wait upon the chieftain's needs. One servant bore a cooling draught of wine, while another prepared a bath—a tub devised of a camel's hide supported on stakes which were driven in the earth. The juice of the grape was sweet to Menon's swollen tongue, but the bath was like unto the spirit of a loved one who took him in her arms and kissed away his weariness. In the water he lingered listlessly, at rest, at peace, while his thirsty pores drank in the precious moisture; then a black attendant clothed him in a filmy robe, and a rich repast was spread. There were dates and figs, with cakes of pounded grain; there was wine in jeweled cups, and melons chilled in the depths of Boabdul's wells. The Assyrian ate and was satisfied, then sank upon a couch, to slumber dreamlessly throughout the day, throughout the night, till at dawn the tingling blood ran knocking at his heart with the message that he lived again.

When, once more he had eaten and was conducted from his tent, Menon found the camp astir with the life and bustle of moving warriors, of shifting sentinels, and horsemen who led their steeds to water and provided feed. Through groves of palms he could see a vast array of tents which stretched away to the uttermost edges of the green oasis, while on the plains beyond white clouds of riders wheeled and darted to and fro. The great red sun arose, and with its coming Menon and his men-at-arms were led before Arabia's Prince.

Boabdul Ben Hutt stood waiting in the opening of his royal tent, a youth of lordly mien, with a proud, disdainful beauty stamped upon his beardless face. About his head was wound the folds of a milk-white turban whose tall aigret was caught in the clasp of a splendid emerald. His robe was wrought with precious gems and threads of gold, while a jeweled scimitar swung from his studded belt.

In Assyria's tongue he greeted Menon and his followers, bidding them welcome to his couch and board, for the Prince was schooled in the speech of many lands. He questioned them as to the health of the King, their master, and sought to know if the messengers had rested from their tedious march; and then, when the rind of courtesy was peeled away, Boabdul demanded that the meat of Assyria's quest be laid upon the palate of his understanding.

So Menon spoke as Ninus had desired, calmly, craftily, setting forth the marked advantage of a union with his lord. He touched with truth upon Assyria's wants, yet pointed out Arabia's crying needs. He laid the terms of treaty before the Prince till the scales of justice balanced to a grain of sand; then, he called Boabdul brother in his monarch's name and asked for stallions from the plains of Barbary.

The Arab listened in the patience of his race, albeit a frown of anger now

rode upon his brow, while his fingers fluttered about the hilt of his keen-edged scimitar. When Menon ceased to speak Boabdul spurned the gifts of Ninus with his foot and loosed the bridle of his fiery tongue.

"What!" he stormed. "Is Arabia's Prince an owl? Shall he blink at the glory of Assyria's sun, while foxes pluck out feathers from his tail? My stallions! No! Go back to thy master who would pillage where he conquereth not, and lead him a bridled jackal for his stud. Go! Say that Boabdul knoweth not a brother of his name, and bear him as my gift thy two palms heaped with dust!"

A close-packed ring of Bedouins girt the messengers round about, and those who understood passed whispered words to their fellow warriors, till soon a threatening murmur rose, and many a scimitar itched to leave its sheath.

Now Babus, the Babylonian—he whose pride was sore because of his fall from the camel's back—spoke out unbidden and flung a taunt in the teeth of the angry Prince, whereat an Arab impaled the offender on his lance, so that Babus writhed upon the earth, and died. The Assyrian guard would have drawn their swords to avenge the stroke, and of a certainty would have lost their lives and marred their master's truce, but Menon wheeled upon them with a word of sharp command.

"Peace!" he cried. "The mouth of a braying ass is closed with the dust which wise Boabdul sendeth as a gift to Ninus." He paused, to set a chain of gold about the neck of the Arab who had wrought the deed, then turned to the Prince with palms held downward. "See, my lord," he smiled, "my hands are empty now. What, then, shall I bear to Ninus who waiteth at Nineveh for a seal of truce?"

"The jackal!" flashed Boabdul. "Bear him that!"

"Nay," spoke Menon, pointing to the corpse of Babus at his feet, "thy second gift will I also put to use in devouring the flesh of this fallen fool, whom my lord will forget, aye, even as a generous Prince forgetteth wrath."

The Bedouins nodded among themselves and smiled, for they loved the turn of a crafty tongue, yet the Prince ceased not to scowl.

"And why," he asked, "if Ninus would call me brother of his heart, doth Ninus not come in person to my tents, or seek a council on some middle ground?"

"Because," replied the messenger, "he buildeth a city on the Tigus river-bank; a city so vast that none save he alone may direct the rearing of its walls and palaces."

"Oho!" the Arab scoffed. "So the master thatteth huts, and sendeth a hired servant where he dare not risk the peril of his neck."

Menon flushed, but checked a hot retort upon his lips, and held the eyes of Prince Boabdul in a level gaze.

"Aye, truly," he answered, with a slow, unangered speech, "I am but an humble servant of my King; and yet I lead his hosts to battle, even as thou, my

lord, lead those of thine honored father, whom I learn, with sorrow, is too infirm by reason of his years to bear the stress of war."

Again the Bedouins murmured among themselves, but now in approval of the Assyrian's words, yet Boabdul checked them with a frowning glance, and their tongues were stilled.

Of a truth the Prince was pleased in secret at the covenant which Ninus offered, yet would not seem too eager of his own desires. Therefore he feigned a marked disfavor to the plan, in hope that the treaty might lean more lightly on the shoulders of Arabia.

"And this master of thine," he asked, with a dash of scorn, "is he then so high in power that the world must kneel before his kingly nod? Is he mightier than I, Boabdul Ben Hutt, who sweepeth the land with sword and flame? who ruleth from the desert to the lip of the western sea and balanceth a kingdom on the edge of his whetted scimitar? Speak, servant of thy King! Would Ninus face me, man to man, and still be conqueror?"

"As to that," smiled Menon, openly, "I may not say. Long have I known my master as a father and a friend, yet remember not that he boasted of his deeds."

Now the words of Menon were the words of bald untruth, for Ninus was a very prince of braggarts, causing a record of his feats of arms to be graven on mighty tablets, the which were designed for the wondering eyes of men who should follow after him. But Menon was unafraid, and the sting of his calm reproof was as a spur in the flanks of the Arab's rage.

"I would to my gods," he cried, "that this builder of huts were here at hand, in that I prove a weapon on his teeth!"

"Alas!" sighed Menon, "he is far away at Nineveh, where he trusteth some day to receive Boabdul as his honoured guest."

"And thou," the Arab sneered; while he trembled with fury because of the other's unruffled mien, "thou who bearest the terms of this foolish truce and shieldeth thy master's insolence, wilt thou dare face me, afoot or astride a steed?"

"Aye," said Menon, as he took Boabdul's measure thoughtfully; "if thereby our treaty may be sealed—with all my heart."

"Come!" cried the Arab fiercely. "Come cross thy blade with mine; and if I fall, the treaty shall be made in accord with the covenants set forth. If not, a second council shall be held, whereat thy King shall sue for peace upon his knees."

Beneath the shade of date-palms a circle of warriors was formed, and in its centre the two prepared to battle for the terms of truce. Their robes were laid aside lest the folds become entangled with their legs, and they stood forth naked except for waist cloths girt about their loins. The Arab was lean and wiry to the litheness of a cat, with corded thews that lay in knots upon his dusky skin. The

Assyrian's flesh, though pale with the tint of a northern clime, was firm and hard, its muscles rippling smoothly with the movement of his limbs. He was taller and of longer reach, well schooled in the arts of war, and possessed of a lynx-eyed watchfulness as a match to the speed of his nimbler foe.

Boabdul wielded his curving scimitar, which was weighted at its point, and held a tiny target upon his arm in easy grace, while Menon was armed with a shield of bronze and a heavy two-edged sword, the gifts of Memetis, an Egyptian prince held hostage at the court of Ninus.

For a moment the two stood motionless, each striving to note a weakness in the other's guard, each ready for thrust or parry should an opening chance; then the Arab crouched and began to move in circles round and round. Menon, making a pivot of his heel, turned slowly with his hawk-like adversary, presenting a steady front to every point of menace or attack, and daring the Arab with his smiling eyes. Of a sudden Boabdul feinted with an under-thrust, recovered, and lashed out wickedly at Menon's head; yet the scimitar only rasped along the edge of a waiting sword, and the Arab bounded back beyond the danger line. Again and again he sought an opening, and was met by a steady, cool defense, while the watching Bedouins and Assyrian men-at-arms cheered lustily for their champions.

Stung by repeated failure, Boabdul's blood ran hot within his veins, and the battle waxed in fierceness and in speed. As the leopard springs, so the Arab darted in and out, his scimitar a wheel of light, a weapon in every spoke, that now rang sharply on a shield of bronze or gritted against a sword; the while Prince Menon fixed his gaze on the Arab's eyes and waited a whisper from his gods.

In circles they stamped the earth, amid the din of hoarse, wild cries of men who lusted for a sight of blood; and then a shout went up, for a crimson stream ran trickling down the Assyrian's thigh. The crafty Boabdul, too, had seen, and he bounded to a fresh attack, but Menon caught the blow on his brazen shield and turned the stroke aside; then swiftly, and with all his strength he smote the foeman's target with the flat of his heavy sword. His gods had whispered, for the Arab's arm hung numbed and useless at his side.

And now it was Menon's turn to forsake the waiting game and push his foe-man to the wall. The fresher of the two, because of his calm defense, he pressed upon the Prince without a feather-weight of mercy, nor gave him pause. In vain Boabdul fought with all his skill to regain an aggressor's vantage ground, yet could not, for his blade was now his shield, while Menon warded blows with either arm. Still the battle was not yet won. The Arab strove by a score of cunning tricks to lure his enemy into faulty guard or a weakness of attack. He even sought with taunts and mockery to tilt the even temper of his foe; but Menon pressed him closer still and laughed—which troubled Boabdul grievously. Once the wily

Arab flung himself upon the earth and slashed at the other's legs, but Menon leaped and the stroke passed harmlessly beneath, while the Prince regained his feet and moved backward on the run.

They closed again for a final test of strength and artifice, twisting, thrusting, showering blows that were turned aside or evaded by a shifting foot, each panting in his toil, each weary but undismayed; then, of a sudden, Menon locked his sword in the curve of the Arab's scimitar, and, grunting, heaved it from Boabdul's grasp. The Prince, in an effort to elude the snare, reeled backward, tripped, and rolled upon the earth. In a flash the Assyrian sprang upon him and pressed his point beneath the dusky chin.

With screams of rage the circling Arabs lowered their spears to swoop upon the victor and save the vanquished if they might, but Menon flung his shield arm up in warning.

"Back!" he cried, "or by the crown of Ishtar will I slit his throat!"

The sons of the desert halted, as a steed is curbed, each poised for a savage thrust, each waiting in awesome dread for a thread of life to snap, while Boabdul Ben Hutt gazed upward into Menon's eyes, though the brand of fear burned not upon his cheek.

"Strike, dog!" he groaned, in the shame and anguish of defeat; but Menon tossed his sword away and stretched forth his hands that the fallen one might rise.

In silence stared the Bedouins; in silence Boabdul rose and looked in puzzled wonder on his conqueror.

"Assyrian," he asked at length, "why now is thy blade unstained, when a twist of fortune gave me over into thy hand?"

"My lord," spoke Menon solemnly, and yet with a certain twinkling of the eye, "I seek to seal a covenant with Arabia's Prince; not with Boabdul dead."

The Arabian had looked on death, and knew that the wine of life was sweet to him; so anger departed utterly, and humor seized him till he laughed aloud.

"Now by my father's beard," he cried, as he caught the Assyrian's hands in his and pressed them against his breast, "if Ninus keepeth faith as he chooseth messengers, right gladly will I call him Brother of my Soul!"

Then a mighty cheer arose, whose echoes rolled far out across the plains—a cheer for Ninus, lord of all Assyria—and another, louder, longer still, for the lion-hearted messenger. It had come upon the Arabs that Menon not once had sought to strike a fatal blow, but had stood before the desert's fiercest scimitar, undaunted, staking all upon his strength, and had spared where he might have slain.

They led him unto Boabdul's tent, where the Prince's aged leech administered to his wound. They bathed and anointed him lest he suffer hurt because of

his heated blood, and clothed him in raiment from Boabdul's royal chests.

The treaty was duly sealed, to stand between two kingdoms through the march of years; and neither monarch once broke its covenants, albeit the links thereof were oft' times strained by jealousies and the wild unrest of evil men.

When the terms of peace were closed to the smallest point, then Menon and his followers abode with the Prince for the space of seven days, wherein the hours of light were passed in hunting and in sports of arms, while the nights were given o'er to feasts and revelry. The guests were regaled at a kingly board, where wine cups circled till the thirsts of men could ask no more, their senses steeped in the charms of music and of maidens who danced unveiled before their eyes.

In the hour of parting Boabdul took the Assyrian to his heart and bade him think on Araby as a tent-flap ever held aside; and more, he made the gift of a noble steed from the plains of Barbary, a brother stallion to the one which he himself bestrode. With the steed went an Indian slave whom the Prince called Huzim, a giant from the Indus, with shoulders of mighty girth and whose bow no arm save his alone could draw.

So Menem, in sadness, parted from his host and journeyed into Syria, where he came upon Surbat, the drowsy Governor thereof. This man he removed from office and sent the head of him to Nineveh, taking council with the gods of craft that he save his own.

Then he rode upon the back of Syria, as a mahout drives a fractious elephant, goading with a goad of tax, till the hills resounded with its echoed trumpetings.

CHAPTER IV

THE FISH GODDESS

Menon, Governor of Syria, was troubled in his soul. Throughout the night he had courted sleep, yet rest came not to body or to mind, for the air was close, and vexious thought stood sentinel beside his couch.

When the cool of dawn came stealing down on Syria, he left his heated pallet, clothed himself, and wandered along the lake shore where the freshening breezes blew. He sprawled at ease upon a shelving stone, cast off his outer robe, and watched for a ruby sun to spring from out the east.

Behind him lay the village of Ascalon, where dwelt the herders of sheep, the tillers of the thirsty soil and the wardens of flocks and herds. Before him stretched the lake, deep, green and chill, the palm and pomegranate casting ghostly shadows from its shores. On the further side, in the gloom of shrubbery and trees, the temple of the fish-god Dagon seemed but the end of a morning mist that trailed across the waters. In the shallows beside the rocks swam countless fishes, now darting to cover beneath the stones, now leaping at some luckless fly that swung too near the danger line. From end to end the surface broke with myriads of fins, while ever and again a louder splash proclaimed some monster's upward rush, the widening ripples cut by minnows in a scurrying flight.

They dwelt in peace, these denizens of the deep, for the Syrians eat no fish, nor may they snare them with hooks or nets lest the wrath of Dagon utterly destroy such fools, together with their flocks and herds, their wives and children, their soil and the fruits therein. And thus the fish lived on and multiplied.

There were men, as countless as the fish of Ascalon, who envied Menon as one on whom the gods had smiled; yet now he sat with his chin upon his palm, with a foot that tapped impatiently on the wave-bathed shore, while he scowled at the glory of a coming dawn.

Wherefore should he scowl, this favorite of the gods, Chief Governor of Syria, a warrior beloved of men, a youth watched covertly from many a latticed screen till his careless passing caused a yearning sigh? Wherefore should he mutter curses in his palm and dig his heel into the sands? Had he not on yestereve received a scroll from the King himself, wherein that monarch praised him for his services afield, and, more, for his crafty rule? Had Ninus not made offer of a high reward when Nineveh should be builded at the end of two short years? Ah, here the sandal galled! Full many an older man, for very joy, might have danced upon the lake shore happily, yet Menon muttered curses in his palm and dug his heel into the sands.

Ere another moon was dead, the waiting messengers must return to Nineveh and with them bear an answer to the lord of all the lands. Agreement to the King's desire meant cruelty more bitter than he dared to dream. Refusal dragged the keystone from his arch of hope, to crush him beneath the very walls his youthful strength had raised. To seek delay—

Of a sudden Menon started from his reverie, as a round white pebble struck his knee and bounded into the lake. He looked to learn whence the missile came, but all was still. Behind him in the distance stretched the rolling hills, with herders following in the wake of drowsy sheep; to the right, the lake's rim lay in peace, barren save for a fluttering bird or two, while on the left a fringe of bush ran out on a point of rocks, too low, it seemed, to screen a human form. Still wondering, the Assyrian rubbed his knee and gazed reproachfully at the fishes in

the lake, when a flute-like laugh pealed forth—a joyous, bubbly laugh—that rang along the shores till every rocky ledge took up its notes and flung a mocking echo across the waves.

Menon sprang upon a stone, to explore each nook and crevice with a hunter's circling gaze. With body bent, with every sense alert, he swept the shores for the jester's hiding place; and at last, when hope was well-nigh spent, he caught the gleam of a wind-blown lock of hair from the rocky point close down by the water's edge. Menon smiled, then seemed to become engrossed in the sight of some floating object far out upon the lake; yet, the while, from the tail of his crafty eye, he watched the point whence mischief hid as behind a shield. A silence fell. No sound was heard save the splash of plunging carp, the yelp of a shepherd's dog, and the harsh, shrill cry of a crane that passed in lazy, lumbering flight.

From the water a form rose noiselessly, while a pair of dancing eyes looked out through a leafy screen; a rounded arm was raised, and Menon wheeled and caught the second pebble as it came. For an instant the two stood motionless; the one surprised at her swift discovery, the other stricken speechless with amaze at the bold, unearthly beauty, of a water nymph.

"A goddess!" he gasped at length, and stared in the wonder of a dreamer roused from sleep.

She stood at the water's edge, a girl just budding into womanhood, her fair skin glistening with the freshness of her bath. A clinging skirt from hip to knee, revealed her slender symmetry of limb, clean, lithe, and poised for nimble flight. For the rest she was nude, save for a tumbling wealth of flame-hued locks, tossed by the rising breeze, half veiling, half disclosing, a gleaming bust and throat. Above, a witch's face, Grecian in its lines, yet dashed with the warm voluptuousness of Semitic blood; a mouth, firm, fearless in its strength, yet tempered by a reckless merriment—a mouth to harden in a tempest-gust of scorn, to quiver at the sigh of passion's prayer, or fling its light-lipped laughter in the teeth of him who prayed. Her eyes—a haunted pool of light, wherein, a man might drown his soul, and, sinking, bless his torturer.

For an instant more stood Menon, gaping at the girl, till humor gripped him, and he flung back his head and laughed.

"By Asshur," he cried aloud, "a kiss shall be the price of thy sweet impertinence!"

At a bound he cleared the intervening space and stretched his hand for a wayward coil of hair, yet ere his fingers closed the girl leaped backward, turned, and plunged into the lake. In a flash she disappeared, to rise again and strike out swiftly in a line with Dagon's temple on the further shore.

"Oho!" laughed Menon, "t'is then a fish's game! So be it, saucy one, for two

shall play it to the end!"

Not pausing to divest himself of clothing or the leathern sandals strapped upon his feet, he followed after, sank and shot upward, snorting as he shook his head to free his ears and eyes. With strong, free strokes he began the race, smiling happily because of its speedy end. What chance had she against his splendid strength, he who had breasted the swollen Euphrates, or stemmed the Tigris when its waters sang to the plunge of hissing arrow points? The chilling bath lent vigor to his limbs and sent the young blood bubbling through his veins. The shoulder muscles writhed beneath his skin, while his heart beat faster in the fierce exhilaration of pursuit. What joy to run such quarry down, that gleaming body moving with an easy sweep, the flame-red hair that barely kept beyond his reach!

Faster and faster Menon swam, with every grain of power behind his strokes; yet the maiden kept her lead, now pausing to fling a mocking glance behind, now darting forward till the ripples danced against her breast. And so the chase went on, till the lake was well-nigh crossed, till the temple, which had seemed to twinkle among the trees, now stood out boldly, and an image of the ugly fish-god Dagon watched the stragglers in stony silence.

Then the pace began to tell, even upon the Assyrian's strength. His muscles ached; his hot breath broke between his lips in labored gasps; about his breast a band of bronze seemed squeezing out his life, and a sweat of weakness dripped into his eyes. He was gaining now! He saw with a hunter's joy that his quarry wearied of her work. Her strokes grew feeble, while the flaming head sank lower among the waves.

"By Bêlit," he wheezed, "the kiss is mine, or I rest my bones at the bottom of thy lake!"

The space of a spear's length lay between the two, and inch by inch the pursuer cut it down, while the nymph had ceased to mock him with her laughter, and bent her ebbing strength to the effort of escape. For her the race was run. On came the panting hunter in her wake, remorseless, eager, a hard hand reaching for her floating locks. She ducked her head, eluding seizure by a finger-breadth, leaped as the struggling fishes dart, and regained a tiny lead. Once more vantage slipped away, and now was hanging on a thread of chance. Again and again the Assyrian's hand shot out, to clutch the air or a dash of spray in his empty fist. His failure angered him. He clenched his teeth and worried on, yet splashing clumsily, for exertion now was fraught with agony.

"The kiss!" he breathed. "I'll have the kiss, I swear, or—"

The oath died suddenly upon his lips, for the maiden tossed her arms and disappeared. With a cry the youth plunged after her, forgetting his pain in the fullness of a self-reproach. He reached the spot where her form had sunk, and

strove to dive, but weary nature proved a master of his will. He floated to regain his wind, while scanning the lake for a rising blotch of red; but only the leaping carp made circles through the waves, and a ruby sun climbed upward from a bed of mist. The breeze hummed foolishly among the palms, and a blue crane flung an accusing cry across the waters.

Menon's hope ebbed low and lower still, to die, to spring again to life at a peal of bubbly laughter, sweet unto his ears. Behind him he caught a flash of flaming hair, the gleam of a throat that shaped the taunt, a shoulder cutting through the ripples easily—the lake-nymph, fresh, unwearied, an impish victor of the race!

By a trick she had lured him to expend his strength in the chase of one who swam as the minnows swim; and to Menon came this knowledge like a blow between the eyes. He turned him shoreward with a feeble stroke, striving to keep himself afloat, for his heavy sandals weighed him down, and languor seized on every fibre of his frame. He was beaten, spent. A blurred mist rose before his eyes, while the droning call of distant battle raged within his ears. A thousand flame-hued heads danced tauntingly beyond his reach, and laughed and laughed. The world went spinning down into a gulf of gloom, and a clumsy crane reeled after it—a steel-blue ghost that stabbed him with a beak of fire. He choked; he fought for life as he lashed out madly, till the foam-churned waters mounted high and fell to crush him in their roaring might.

For the space of an indrawn breath a white face rode upon the surface of the lake, then slowly the Assyrian sank.

It was easier now! He seemed to slide from the grip of pain to a waving couch of peace. The world had slipped from out its gulf of gloom at last, to rock through league on league of emerald cloud, and the crane was gone. The lake-nymph's laughter, too, had died away. She fled from him no more, but stretched her arms and held him close, his limp head pillowed on her breast. She warmed his flesh with the coils of her fiery hair, and her child-voice rose and fell in a crooning slumber-song.

"The kiss!" sighed Menon, and the waters hung above him drowsily.

CHAPTER V

A PRAYER TO DAGON

As the young Assyrian sank, the maid smiled cunningly and edged away, fearing to be snared in a trap of her own device; yet when the moments melted one by one, her merriment gave place to fear. Full well she knew the space a swimmer might remain beneath the waves, and when at last four tiny bubbles rose, she took one long, deep breath, and dived.

Downward her course was laid in a slanting line, down to the very lake-bed, where the rocks were coated with a slimy muck, and tall grey weeds swayed gently to and fro. She worked in circles among the sharp-edged, slippery stones, groping with hands and feet where shadows closed the mouths of the darker pools; and at last she touched his hand. She strove to seize it, but her breath was well-nigh spent, and with a spring she shot toward the air.

A moment's rest and again she dived, now certain of the spot whereon he lay. She reached him, paused an instant while her fingers sought a clutching point and closed upon his belt. She raised his weight, then bent her knees to lend a springing start, and began a battle for the stranger's life.

Slowly, too slowly, was the journey made, for the body in its water-laden robes was dragging heavily, while the swimmer, with only one free arm, was hampered in her toil. But still she rose, though her lungs were like to burst, and the sinews across her chest were taut with pain. Up, still up, till youth and will could bear the double tax no more. She had ceased to move. She was sinking now, and of a sudden loosed her hold and raced for life—alone. High up she shot, till her slim waist cleared the water line. Another long, glad breath, and she sank again ere the body might once more settle among the weeds; and now she was beneath it, swimming cautiously, lest her burden slip.

How far it seemed to that wavy blur of light above, and how he weighed her down! How the lagging moments crawled, while each was a hope that slid away as the waters swept beneath her arms! His trailing hands were checking speed, and his robe was torn and entangled with her feet; yet across her shoulder hung his head, his cheek pressed close against her own.

By Ishtar, she would save him now, or rest beside him on his couch of weeds!

At last! A prayer of thankfulness to Dagon whistled across her lips with the first sweet rush of imprisoned breath; then, grasping the Assyrian's locks, she turned upon her back and swam to the temple's marble steps.

Once she had seen her foster-father bring back the life of a shepherd boy whose spark was well-nigh quenched in a swollen mountain stream; and so she wrought with Menon, first turning him upon his face and by her weight expelling the water from his lungs; then she chafed his pulses, beat with her fists upon his body, and moved his arms with a rhythmic motion to and fro. This she did and more, for, womanlike, when hope had oozed away, she took him on the cradle of

her breast and sought to coax him back to life by soothing, childish words.

"Live! Live!" she breathed. "How young thou art to die! And I—a fool!—a fool!—to cause thee ill! Come back, sweet boy, and I will give the kiss! Aye, an hundred if thou wilt—but come!"

She wound her arms about him and looked into his upturned face. How beautiful he was, but oh, how still! How deep were his eyes which gazed into her own, but saw not her tears of pity and of pain! Some noble was he, perchance, in the train of Menon, the mighty Governor, who would doubtless sell her into slavery because of her wicked deed. But why should a youth do foolish things? Why had he dared the waters of her lake where fish alone or the child of fishes swim? Must a life so young, so precious, pay the price of folly? The folly of a kiss! Ah, he might have it now, though his lips were cold, unconscious, beneath the pressure of her own.

Again and again the blazing head was bowed, while the color raced from cheek to throat, and the lake-nymph's blood awoke—awoke with a flame that would one day boil the caldron of Assyria, when the froth was stirred by a spoon of passionate unrest—a flame that would parch a thousand lands and drive their hordes to madness in a quenchless lust for war.

With the strength of despair the maiden lifted Menon's body, dragged it up the temple steps and laid it at the foot of Dagon's altar; then on her knees beside it she raised her arms and prayed, in a woman's passion-born desire.

"See, Dagon," she cried aloud, "see what the spirits of thy lake hold prisoner! See how still he lieth—he who was warm and filled with the breath of youth! An offering? No, no, sweet god, 'tis not an offering at thy daughter's hands. The fruits, the garlands, and the grain are thine; the fattest kids and the first of the springtime ewes, but he is mine! List thee, mighty one! Why lookest thou across the lake in silence, unmoved, and heeding not my cry? Do I not bring thee dates and flowers, the goat's milk and the buds from the tallest palms? No boon have I asked of thee, yet grant it now! Ah, pity, pity, and give him back to me!"

The suppliant bowed her head and waited, but the fish-god gave no sign. High up he towered, a hideous effigy in rough-hewn stone, with human face and hands, with the scaly body of a fish, while below his human feet were seen, distorted, half concealed in heaps of withered blossoms borne in offering by his shepherd worshippers. Behind him lay a carven plow, in emblem of the tiller's art, a sickle, a herder's crook, and vessels of wine from the vineyard's choicest juice.

Long moments passed. The lake-nymph's eyes were shifted from Dagon's visage to the stranger at her side. His body lay in an ugly, helpless sprawl, his arms outstretched, his dark eyes fixed on nothingness, as vacant as the idol's own. Once more the maiden turned to the god who seemed to mock her with his

icy calm, whose stony ears were closed to the voice of prayer. She waited, and childish reverence melted as a mist dissolves, and fury rent her heart. She sprang to her feet and beat upon the effigy with doubled fists, her eyes ablaze, her loose hair whipping at her naked breast.

"Awake! Awake! Art sleeping, Dagon, that thou heedest not? Awake, I say! 'Tis I who call—*Shammuramat!*[#] Am I, too, not a child of gods, whom the good witch Schelah sayeth will one day rule the world? Heed, or I tear thy temple down and set a Moloch in thy stead! Awake, thou fool! Awake!"

[#] The name "Shammuramat" has been corrupted by the Greeks into Semiramis, in which form the great Assyrian Queen is better known.

The shrill voice ceased. The pale girl listened with a chill of terror till the echoes died in the temple's dome. Once more she fell upon her knees, and though her rage still stormed within her heart she softened her speech, as in after years she won by flattery where anger failed to lash obedience to her will.

"Forgive, dear Dagon," she whispered, as she clasped his feet, "my tongue is the tongue of Derketo, my mother, whom thou didst curse with a just unhappiness. Yet listen! In error didst thou cause this youth to sink in the waters of thy lake, for he, too, loveth thee, with a love as great as mine. Give me his life, divine one, and in payment will I steal rich wine from my father's oldest skins—the palm-wine, Dagon, which is sweet and strong. Also, my goat is thine. I will slay it here in sacrifice and lay its heart in the hollow of thy hand."

She paused in thought profound. The bribe was large, yet the scales of barter needed still another weight; and well she knew the gods demand in sacrifice the parting with gifts which cause the keenest pangs. Of all her treasures two were held most dear, her dog and a string of pearls; and now, as she looked into Menon's sightless eyes, her treasures seemed to shrink in worth. Yet ere she squandered all upon an altar stone, the voice of wisdom whispered at her ear and caused her to hide a smile.

"Hear me, Dagon," she murmured, meekly, "thou knowest my good dog Habal that on rest-days cometh to thy temple's door? Him, too, might I give in offering to turn thy heart, yet the deed were folly and to thee unjust; for doth he not watch my father's flocks, with a faithful eye upon the lambs which are slain for thee alone? Were Habal dead, who then might save thy lambs from the beasts of prey? Nay, Habal's teeth can serve thee unto better ends than Habal's blood."

She stole a glance at Dagon, and, finding his features placid in content, became emboldened to seal her bargain with a master-stroke. In a corner of the

temple lay her robe of fine spun wool, discarded for her morning bath; and now from beneath its folds she brought her necklace, holding it up for the greedy god to see.

"Look! Look, sweet god," she cried. "This I offer thee—a treasure given by a great Armenian prince. Soften thy heart and I cast it into the deepest waters of thy lake, where none may find it and dispoil thee of my gift."

True, Semiramis herself might dive and recover it at will, albeit she hoped a point so trifling might escape the god. Yet, lest the thought occur to him, she hastened on:

"Knowest thou not the value of such pearls? With a single bead thou couldst buy an hundred Habals for thine altar's needs. Think, then, what all would mean—they are twice a score—and I give them for the life of this one poor youth, whom me-thinks is of common blood and lowly born. Heed, wise one, and hasten, lest wisdom tempt me and I keep my pearls."

A shaft of sunlight filtered through the thick leaved palms, wavered, and crawled across the temple's floor; for an instant it rested on a tangle of blazing hair, then slowly climbed the fish-god's scaly side. As the maiden watched, with parted lips, with bosom fluttering to a quickened pulse, the flame of sunlight flickered and went out. Yet at her choking cry, it leaped to life again, to splash the face of Dagon with a leering glow of happiness—and Menon groaned and stirred.

While one might count a score, the girl leaned, limp and nerveless, on Dagon's altar stone; then she cast aside the blistered cat's paw of divine appeal and set in its place a swift, more vigorous god of force. With a zeal of hope she fell upon the body of her charge in all the strength her wild, free life had built, till Menon's eyelids fluttered and a frown of half unconscious protest ridged his brow. In the twilight of understanding, he fancied himself an ill used prisoner in the hands of enemies who mauled him from neck to heel; and when with returning life came an agony of water-laden lungs that labored to be free, he turned on his side and muttered curses, deep, fervent, touched by the fires of poesy.

It was then, then only, that the toil of Semiramis gave place to indolence. She rested her chin upon her knees and listened to the music of his oaths—music far sweeter than the liquid notes of shepherd's flutes, or the echoes of sheep bells tinkling through the dusk. A seed of love had broken from its strange, unharrowed soil, and the bud had opened to look upon its god.

With a sigh of peace she rose and clothed herself in the robe of fine spun wool, clasped tight her girdle and strapped the sandal thongs about her feet; then she rested Menon's head upon her lap and forced between his teeth the rim of a wine cup of which she recklessly deprived great Dagon's shrine.

"Dagon and I," she murmured, with an impish smile, "have compassed

much; yet Dagon alone, without the measure of my aid—”

She paused, for a young cloud slid across the sun, flinging a shadow on the temple floor, a shadow which crept and crept till the fish-god's visage darkened with its gloom; then Semiramis remembered, rose, and cast her pearls far out into the lake.

Once more she sat beside her charge, chafing his temples with a patient, lingering caress. Long, long she watched, her fancy looming lace-work webs of fate, while her heart marked joyfully his battle with reluctant life; till, presently, his breath flowed gently and the sweat of pain was dried upon his brow.

Menon's glance met hers, and a flush of shame grew hot upon his cheek—the shame of defeat to him, a war-tried soldier, at the hands of a shepherd girl. Yet in her smile a man might forget defeat—forget and rejoice—forget all else save the smile and the maid who smiled.

His color spread, yet the blood-warmed tint now told no more of the sting of an humbled pride. He strove to raise his arms, but they seemed as weights too heavy for his strength, and sank beside him weakly. His thews were slack; he lay as helpless as an unweaned babe, yet the victor's eyes were laughing down into his own, and were kind.

”The kiss!” sighed Menon, and the maiden bent and gave her soul into the keeping of his lips.

CHAPTER VI

THE DAUGHTER OF DERKETO

A coppery sun climbed upward on his hill of cloud; the south-wind ceased, and the lake drowsed lazily in the morning sun. The Assyrian still reclined with his head upon the lap of Semiramis, for in the beginning she would not suffer him to tax his strength with speech. She urged that he rest, while she told her name and the story of her birth; and he, content, asked nothing more than to look and listen, while his heart grew hungry and his pulses sang to a tune of joy. So the maiden babbled on of gods and men, of the shepherd's home with Simmas, her foster-father, and of her simple life with sheep that browsed upon the hills and the fishes swam in the waters of Ascalon.

Her mother, Derketo, had been a goddess whom the Syrians worshipped in her temple beside the lake, till she drew the fatal wrath of Dagon down, because

of her beauty and her foolish vanities. She lured the hearts of mortals from their level paths, consuming them with mad desires which were barren and unfulfilled; playing with passion, yet drinking not its flame—a reckless sprite who mocked at hell, while she danced on a thread that stretched across its throat.

Then Dagon, troubled at her wickedness, brought forth from some far eastern land a warrior youth who sighed and sang before Derketo's shrine. Slender was he and shapely, with deep blue eyes and locks that shone as a flame of golden red; so the goddess came out to him and was pleased because of the sweetness of his song. Through the long blue night he sang and whispered in her ear, till by his arts and a subtle tongue he wrought her fall, then straightway disappeared.

A babe was born, and Derketo, in her shame and grief, stole out by night upon the hills and left her child among the rocks to die; then, weeping, she crept into her temple, hiding behind its altar's shadow from the sight of men. By day she slept; by night she crouched beside the water's edge, to fling shrill curses at Dagon across the lake.

Then Dagon in wrath waxed terrible, and sent a lightning bolt which destroyed the goddess and her temple utterly, so that Syria knew her beauty and her wiles no more.

Now a farmer who dwelt in Ascalon was sorely vexed because of theft, yet never could he lay his hands upon the pilferer, albeit he watched together with his wife and sons. The goats' milk left in crocks outside his door would disappear in the broad of day, and after a space his cheeses began to suffer likewise. Marveling, he set himself to watch again, and at dawn a flock of doves dropped down before his door. They pecked at his cheeses, or filled their beaks with milk, then winged their flight to a distant point on the hillside over against the lake. The farmer and his sons marked out the spot and journeyed thither, to find a babe that was sheltered among the stones—the same which Derketo left to perish, and now was nurtured by these sacred birds.[#]

[#] This is the accepted legend of the origin of Semiramis.

The farmers bore her tenderly to the house of Simmas, chief warden of the royal flocks, a kindly man who reared her as his own; and they called her Shammuramat, which name, in the Syrian tongue, means Dove.

Thus the offspring of a goddess, and adopted child of doves and mortal man, grew swiftly to a strength and beauty of the gods themselves. From early childhood she loved the lake, where she sported among the waves till none might match her in speed or grace of stroke; yet, truly, born of Derketo, goddess of the fishes, what marvel, then? Again, as her mystic father hunted through far off eastern lands, so the girl soon turned to hunting through the hills of Syria, with a passion which made her bow and spear a wonder among the simple shepherd folk.

"And now," said Semiramis, as she toyed with Menon's hand, "and now am I a woman grown, with lovers who come in droves as the cattle come, yet daring not to voice the yearnings of their hearts. Great, stupid youths are they, the sons of farmers and tenders of our herds, who stare at me in tongue-tied wonderment; aye, like unto the yearling calves whose thoughts we may not fathom because of their foolishness."

The Assyrian laughed and drew her down till her lips met his and clung; and she joined his merriment, in that he seemed so unakin to the yearlings of which she spoke. Then, presently, she thought to ask his name.

"Menon," he answered simply, whereat she started, pushed his head from out her lap and edged away.

"Menon—*thou!*" she cried. "Ah, no, my lord! A jest! That man is but a devil's leech who clingeth to the throat of Syria, taxing, taxing, till its very blood is sucked in tax! *Thou—!*" She paused to laugh. "The Governor is ugly, fat—and thou—"

Again she stopped, with suddenness, and blushed.

"Nay, harken," said Menon, "of a truth I am the Governor; and it cometh to me that I would tax thy country further still—tax it till I snatch from thy foster-father, Simmas, his choicest store of all."

"Eh—what!" she demanded, angered at his words. "My father—that kind old man? Shame! Shame, my lord!"

Menon pursed his lips and ridged his brow with his sternest frown.

"I fain would rob him as I say; yea, even thy sacred doves and the very gods themselves, of Syria's Pearl—Shammuramat."

The girl said naught, but gazed in silence out across the lake, while a smile played softly at the corners of her mouth. She was not ill pleased to be called the Pearl of Syria, albeit she herself had long been conscious of the pretty truth. Moreover, t'was most unseemly in a maid to gainsay a mighty Governor; and in her heart she could find no dread of this weighty tax on Syria's birds and gods. Therefore she waited for his further speech, which came at length with earnestness:

"Now as to these taxes, concerning which I am called a devil's leech, it grieveth me sorely to oppress a simple folk, and it causeth my soul's unrest by night and day."

Again the maiden laughed.

"Aye, truly," she answered, spreading out her locks for the sun to dry; "I well can believe thy words, for never have I looked upon a youth so melancholy, or one on whom his sorrows ride with a tighter knee. Yet tell me, O Prince of Woe, what in truth may chance to be thy station and thy name?"

Menon spread his hands, though he could not help but smile at the maiden's

doubt of him.

"Nay, believe me," he urged, "I speak the truth. I swear it on thy fish-god's altar. I am indeed the Governor, sent hither at the King's command, to do his bidding, not my will alone. King Ninus buildeth a city for himself on a far off river bank, a city which is like unto a huge, devouring monster, swallowing up the stores of men, the fruits of the earth, and the children of every land. This, then, is why I come to tax thine honest neighbors of their wealth."

He told her of the city's walls and of how they rose from out the waste of sand; of the temples, palaces, the towers and the soaring citadel. He told of millions toiling through the nights and days, and of an army which girt the walls around, while Semiramis sat listening, drinking in his words.

"Ah!" she breathed. "Ah, now I understand! And what is this city called?"

"Nineveh—the Opal of the East."

Again Semiramis came close to Menon's side, and, at his pleading, once more took his head into her lap.

"This monarch of thine," said she, as she nodded thoughtfully, "is right. He is wise and strong. My people are fools to murmur against the justice of his tax. For listen! I, too, will some day build a city, more grand, more vast in its reach and splendour, aye, even than this Opal of the East. Its walls shall top thine highest towers—its gardens shall hang between the earth and sky. Ah, laugh if thou wilt, yet Schelah hath seen it all—as I have seen—as it rises on her kettle's smoke."

At Menon's look of wonder, she told him that Schelah was a witch who dwelt in a cave among the hills, who wrought strange spells, told fortunes, and healed disease with her arts and herbs.

"A withered crone is she," the maiden said, "ugly and of crooked limbs, whose very name the farmers fear; and yet she is not an evil witch, but kind and gentle to those who understand. Why, I fear her no more than—than—"

"Than me?" asked Menon, with a smile.

"Than thou," she nodded happily, "and I fear *thee* none at all. Yet tell me more."

He told her of the battles he had seen; of the siege of Zariaspa, where Ninus, baffled of desire, needs turn away till a mightier army could be raised, and engines devised to batter down the walls. He told her of other wars, long, fierce, triumphant in the end; and as he spoke Semiramis saw it all, even as she once had seen a dim and ghostly Babylon which rose from out old Schelah's kettle-smoke.

She saw vast, rolling plains, where armies met with a rending crash and roar; where warriors, locked in a grip of rage, fought desperately and died; where chariots charged as against a cliff, to totter and overturn, and the sands ran red with blood. She heard the cries of men and the clang of blows, exultant shouts of victory and the shrieks of those who fled—the rumble of wheels and hoofs that

shook the earth—the clamour of ranks that reeled through tossing clouds of dust. Her bosom heaved; her cheeks, her lips, grew crimson with the rush of blood; her dark eyes kindled, and she trembled as in a chill.

"Ishtar!" she cried, as she raised her head and clenched her outflung hands. "Oh, if I but once might sing a battle-song! To struggle—to fight—!"

Menon checked her with a rich, full-throated laugh that echoed to the temple's dome.

"Fight?" he asked. "In the name of all the gods, fight whom?"

She gave no heed to his merry tone, for the spark had caught, the flames were lit, and the fuel needs must burn.

"*Poof!* I care not, so it be a foe—a foe who will stand and scorns to fly!" Again she raised her arms, her rich voice shrill in its pitch of feverish desire: "To drive a chariot and lash its steeds through hedges of swords and spears! To drink of the wine of war! To conquer and to reign—a queen! And see!" she cried, as she caught her flame-hued hair, "this will I cut away, that none may know me for a maid. Then, then wilt thou suffer me to follow as a youth who is in thy train. Speak, lord, I wait."

Menon smiled and shook his head, for a maiden's path, he told her, was not amidst the perils of the field; but she took his cheeks in both her palms and bent till her breath was mingled with his own.

"Nay, once," she pleaded, in her haunting, liquid tone, "one *little* war—no more! Ah, Menon, sweet, thou will let me go?" Lower she bent and leaned upon his lips, while her strange eyes burned their passion into his, her fair arms clinging in a love caress. "Menon! Menon!"

He trembled, for his heart cried out aloud and longed to give this maid whatever she asked; and she held him closer still, murmuring into his ear as her mother, Derketo, might have whispered when she lured the steps of men from their level paths.

"Heed me," she pleaded low, and brushed his cheek with the velvet of a softer curve, "didst thou not will to tax my father of the Pearl of Syria? What then? Wouldst leave me in thy home—alone—to yearn for a loved one far afield, to weep, to listen for his footstep through the weary night? Nay, Menon, that were cruelty, and thou art kind."

A shadow settled on the Governor's brow. He arose and paced the temple's floor, his hands locked tight behind his back. Grim duty called his name, and it came to him that the scepter of Assyria was thrust between his heart and the woman for whom it beat alone.

"What troubleth thee, my lord?"

For a space he answered naught, but kept to his thoughtful pacing to and fro.

"Maiden," he began at last, "there are matters of state which come to pass, and a woman may not understand, by reason of their strange complexities."

The girl looked up, with a sparkle in her eye which warred with a sense of vague misgiving in her heart.

"Perchance, my lord, the tongue of a learned Governor is happily of that turn which maketh such matters simple, even to a woman's foolish mind. I pray thee try."

Menon laughed, then began to tell his trouble as best he might, though the task now seemed more weighty than the sealing of a truce; and rather far would he have faced Boabdul's scimitar than the eyes of this red-haired girl who watched him, hanging on his utterance.

"King Ninus," said he, "hath sent me messengers who on yesterday were come. They bear me a scroll wherein my master is pleased to laud my deeds with flatteries and praise. At his command have I taxed thy people till the very grass blades wilt, and thereby won the enmity of all the land; yet the King is glad, for because of me he receiveth vast stores for the building of his city. In reward"—here Menon faltered, turned away his eyes and looked upon the floor—"in reward he offereth me his daughter's hand—Sozana—when the walls and palaces of Nin-veh shall be."

"Ah!" breathed Semiramis. "Ah! I see!" She crouched upon the temple steps, one knee clasped tight within her arms, her pink chin resting on it thoughtfully. "Go on, my lord."

"This offer," continued Menon, scowling as he spoke, "is a fruit of bitterness upon my tongue, for the maid is loved by my best of friends—Memetis—an Egyptian Prince whom Ninus holdeth hostage at his court lest his nation rise to—"

He stopped, for Semiramis had checked his speech with a cold command.

"Nay, let Memetis rest! What manner of maid may this Sozana chance to be?"

"She is dark and slight," the Governor answered slowly, "of a trustful nature, gentle in her ways, and kind." The girl beside him laughed, yet merriment was not its tone; and Menon blundered on: "As children we played together, she and I—a saucy little rogue of mirth and song—a child, for whom I'd cut away my hand rather than bring a pang of suffering."

"So," said Semiramis, in a whispered drawl, "so the Princess is fair to look upon. I did divine as much. Well? Well, my lord?"

"And now," sighed Menon, "the King would cause this pretty child to stifle love and wed where she hath no will."

"Not so," declared Semiramis, with a snap of her firm white teeth. "Be warranted, my lord, the jade hath put him up to it. What! Hath she not seen thee?"

Hast thou not beguiled her with thy, craftful wiles? How should it, then, be otherwise?"

Again the lake-nymph laughed, ungently, and with a shrill, derisive ring.

"Nay!" said Menon. "Nay! She yearneth not for me, nor do I yearn for her. In secret is she betrothed unto Memetis whom she loveth utterly; and should I bow to the King's desire, t'would bring a hurt to her whom I took to wife, and to him whose happiness I hold more dearly than mine own."

Once more the Assyrian paused and gazed in trouble through the temple's door. In the waters of the lake he seemed to see the faces of his monarch and his friends, the King, with a smile upon his bearded lips; Memetis, sad and silent in reproach, and sweet Sozana, wondering at a grief too deep for tears.

"Then why," asked Semiramis, quivering as she spoke, "then why, in the name of Bel and Moloch, wouldst thou do this wicked thing?"

The Governor stood before her, cast in gloom, and answered sullenly:

"The offer of the King is the King's command, and once, once only, may a subject thwart his will."

"Ah!" breathed Semiramis once again. "Ah, I see! Moreover, I do perceive that Menon hath a mighty leaning to this maid of Nineveh, who is dark and slight, of a trustful nature, gentle in her ways, and kind. Nay, shake not thy head, deceitful one. Shammuramat is not a fool. What, then, remaineth for my lord to choose?"

Menon sighed, but answered naught, while she sat and watched him pacing in his deep unrest. Presently she spoke again, slowly, softly, yet the tone was cold:

"I have marked, my lord, that those of smallest mind demand the longest span of time in making up the same. The wise man acteth! His love and greed he weigheth not in the selfsame scale. What! Hath the mighty Governor still to choose?"

The Assyrian leaned against a pillar of the temple, gazed gloomily before him, and brooded on the mandate of the King. The warrior within him whispered at his ear, calling, pleading, as with a trumpet's blast. Another voice there was, that told of a love of power—of the joy in ruling over weaker men—and Menon's place was beside the King. They dragged him, these voices, as with a chain of bronze, yet his heart cried out Shammuramat! With her he could dwell in peace for all time, an outcast from his land, a wanderer, in want and poverty—a worshipper who died content in the glory of her smile. And yet—

"Is my lord still praying to his gods of guile, or doth he slumber because of weariness—and me?"

The troubled Governor did not note a certain purring in her tone, nor the gleam of her eye, while she crouched as the leopard crouches, noiseless, ready for its spring.

"By the great lord Asshur," Menon muttered between his teeth, "my wits are tried and grievously." He shook himself and turned with his winning smile. "Can the friend of the good witch Schelah lend aid to one who is vexed in spirit and in mind?"

"Yea!" cried Semiramis, springing to her feet in a gust of fury. "Yea!" Her eyes flamed hotly, and her fingers clenched till the nails bit deep into her palms. "Go, thief of kisses! Go, when thou hast scorched my country bare with tax! Go back to thy maid of Nineveh—this whining jade whose sire is but a savage and a fool! Yet tell her this—thou hast looked on the Pearl of Syria! *Tell her—and she will understand!*"

For an instant stood Semiramis, a queen of consuming rage and scorn; then she laughed—laughed hoarsely—in the mockery of mirth, sprang down the temple steps, and was gone.

Menon followed after, shouting, begging her return, as he sought her among the trees and tangled undergrowth.

"Shammuramat! Shammuramat!" he called aloud, and only the echoes of his yearning voice came back to taunt him. For a weary space he searched, yet his search was vain; and when hope had departed utterly, he turned him homeward, skirting the lake shore with a lagging step.

Then a girl crept out from the shadows among the trees and sat on the temple steps. She rested her arms upon her knees, her chin upon her arms, and watched till Menon's drooping figure passed from sight.

Once more she cast her robe aside, tore off her sandals and flung them down; and then, in the wondrous beauty of her form unveiled, she stood in wrath before the fish-god Dagon, her eyes aflame, her red hair tumbling in disorder on her neck.

"What!" she stormed. "Did I—Shammuramat—drag out this liar from the lake, to save him for a minx at Nineveh?"

She snapped her fingers scornfully and turned upon her heel; then she dived for her string of pearls.

CHAPTER VII

A MASTER'S KISS

For a year, since his appointment, the Governor of Syria had dwelt at Azapah, a

central point where his army camped, and whence his agents and his spies went forth to every tribe. Yet Azapah was a home in name alone, for Menon's eye was ever set on the works of his under-officers. He would ride from point to point, descending at uncertain times on those whose duties dozed in lethargy, or on others whose fingers stuck by chance to certain taxes of the King. And as Ninus made examples on the walls of Nineveh, so Menon dealt with those who disobeyed his will; for the body of a wicked, slothful servant was held to be of higher value when detached from the head which led his steps astray. Thus Menon won the name of a cruel master, albeit a whisper now and again went forth of many a poor man's taxes paid in full from the Governor's own purse.

He journeyed ever on his noble steed of Barbary, whose name was Scimitar, in honor of Boabdul's blade, and, likewise, was attended by the Indian slave who came as the Arab's second gift. In Huzim he found a jewel and a friend, whose heart he won by a stroke of policy. From the first the Governor had been kind to him, and when the borders of Arabia were passed, Huzim was given his freedom, to return if he would to his home upon the Indus; but the Indian fell upon his knees, to kiss the master's hand and cover it with tears. His freedom he accepted with a grateful heart, yet prayed to remain in the service of his lord, to whom he proved a faithful watch-dog unto the end. His mighty bow and shafts brought many a dish of flesh to Menon's board, and at night his body lay athwart the master's door, where none might pass and live to slink away again.

Now Menon had tarried beside the lake of Ascalon for a longer space than was his wont to abide in any place; yet business there was none to stay his leave, nor taxes in arrears. The voice of duty whispered warnings in his ear, pointing unto urgent matters far afield; yet duty, he swore, might sleep with Gibil till Semiramis was seen again.

For many days he sought her among the hills, from the crack of dawn till the brazen sun went down, yet found her not; and his heart, because of its hunger for the maid, grew faint within him and clamored for a food denied.

Semiramis, too, was haunted by a certain restlessness of mind and foot, a goad which ever kept her on the move. Close hidden within some clump of trees, she would watch the hunter's fruitless search from hour to hour. Her eyes grew wistful, and a fever burned in her racing blood, though pride, a demon's pride, forbade that she suffer capture at his hands. If the seeker came near unto her hiding place, she would straightway creep away to some other vantage point and watch him with a scowl. Yet, because of his lack of craft in snaring her, hot anger mounted to the heights of foolishness, causing her to mutter curses on him, bitter, deep, and to vent her wrath upon things inanimate. At last she left the lover to his own device, and with her spear and arrows hunted far and wide, thus finding relief in a savage joy of killing beasts—the great, the small—she cared

not which, so be it that she killed.

Then Menon, in despair, set Huzim on her trail, for in prowess of the chase, or in coming up with wary things, there were none the like of him throughout the land. So Huzim circled round about and found what his master sought.

At the close of one long red day, when the sun swung low and purple clouds were banked against the rim of night, the Indian bore word that Semiramis returned to Ascalon by way of a certain path; so Menon hid himself and lay in wait. From a leafy screen he watched her coming, while his breath grew warm and quick, and nearer she came, unconscious of the snare. Her bow and quiver rattled at her back with each slow step; she used her spear for a walking staff, and her flame-hued head was bowed upon her breast. In the dust she dragged the body of a leopard by its tail, while her sheep-dog Habal trotted at her heels.

Of a sudden Menon stepped across her path, and, with folded arms, stood smiling as he blocked her way. With a startled cry Semiramis leaped backward, while Habal crouched between his mistress and the man, his thick hair bristling down his spine, an ugly rumble in his hoarse, deep growl.

The Governor spoke contritely and in a prayerful tone, yet the maiden met his pleading with a torrent of abuse. This he bore with fortitude, and when she paused for breath, he strove to gain his end by reason, knowing not that an angry woman scorns it as she scorns no other thing in heaven or hell. Of this he learned unto his woe, but when he would have overborne her, snatching at her hand, she struck him with the butt of her hunting spear and set her dog upon him.

Straight at his throat the black dog leaped, but Menon caught it by the neck and held its jaws, though its strength was great and it battled with him mightily. For a space they struggled for a master-grip, yet Habal's teeth, in the end, were of no avail, for Menon squeezed him till his bones were like to crack, while he turned once more to Semiramis and urged his suit.

Now a lover will find a grievous task in murmuring into a maiden's ear, and at the same time hold a foaming, furious dog; so the maiden mocked him because of his sad discomfiture, and stirred his wrath. Peal on peal of impish laughter rang out in the twilight hush, till Menon cursed, and, clutching Habal still, turned angrily away.

Then the maiden's merriment died swiftly on her lips, for she saw that he stole her dog; and with a cry of fury she set a shaft upon her bow and drew it to its head. In an instant now the Governor would tax her land no more, and Habal and her heart might then be free. And yet she faltered—paused; then dashed her weapon on the earth, to fling herself beside it, weeping bitterly.

So Menon bore the struggling Habal in his arms, till he reached his house, where he tamed the brute and made of him a friend. Long, long he labored unto this end with morsels of tempting food and many a soft caress, till at last the

captive wagged his tail and licked a master's hand.

Menon had conquered, yet he could not soothe a look of sadness deep in Habal's eyes, nor cause him to desist from snuffling at the outer door where he scratched with his paws and whined.

At length, when the third day passed, the lover clasped a collar of gold on Habal's neck and whispered into his ear; but Habal looked into his face, bewildered, for he did not understand.

"*Shammuramat!*" cried Menon, sharply, and the glad beast sprang upon him, whimpering in his joy. The door was opened. Habal, barking, bounded through, to burn the earth with the beat of his flying paws. Yet on the crest of a distant hill he stopped, looked back and barked again, then disappeared. And the lover, watching, understood—and smiled.

So Habal found his mistress, as she drooped in the doorway of her father's home, and overturned her in the pure delight of coming into his own. He fawned upon her, yelping out his love aloud; he muzzled her, caressing with paw and tongue, to prove devotion far deeper in its purity than aught a mortal holds on the altar of his heart.

Semiramis, too, was glad at her dog's return, for she took him in her arms, and, weeping strangely, hid her face on his shaggy breast; but when she saw the collar Habal wore, her fury boiled afresh. She tore it from his neck and gave it to a beggar who had wandered into Ascalon.

The beggar took the trinket gratefully, then hobbled away as fast as his legs might carry him, though ever and anon he cast a glance behind, in the manner of one who marvels and may not understand. Now whether this persistent turning brought good or evil, is a matter hidden in the beggar's soul alone, for, presently, a horse came tearing down the wind, while a wild-haired girl leaned low upon its neck, augmenting speed with frantic voice and heel. She came upon the wanderer suddenly, reining in her steed till it reared upon its haunches, pawing at the air, its mouth stretched wide, its nostrils red and quivering. Then the girl dismounted, demanding back her gift.

The beggar protested, and, muttering, turned away, but she menaced him with her hunting spear, and of a certainty would have pinned him to the earth had he not obeyed. Slowly he produced the golden collar from his pouch and tossed it at her feet.

"Hound!" cried Semiramis, "pick it up and give it in my hand!" Again her spear was poised, so the beggar stooped to do her bidding hastily; then, while this fiery hawkling rode away, he lingered, gazing after her in loose-jawed wonderment.

Semiramis made a wide detour to pass the lake, where she flung poor Habal's collar far into the deep—repented, and on the morrow dived and recovered

it again. That night she sought her sleep with the bauble nestling upon her heart; but sleep came not, for her flesh seemed burned by every golden link. She hurled it from her angrily and was happy for a space, then stole from her couch and hunted till she found it in the dark.

When she had it, she hated it; but when she had it not, she longed for it with a gnawing, furious desire which ever increased in heat and magnitude; wherein it may be seen that Semiramis, though a goddess born, was human—and a woman—after all.

Meanwhile the Messengers of State were waiting patiently for Menon's answer to the King at Nineveh; yet the Governor bade them tarry on for yet a little while, and took to hunting from a vantage point on the back of his good steed Scimitar.

One morning Habal's barking caught his ear, so he followed the sound till he reached the spine of a high, adjacent hill. In the centre of a plain beyond he spied Semiramis, unarmed, and walking slowly; so his heart rose up as he patted Scimitar and loosed the rein. In the night he had vowed no more to plead his cause with a lowly mien, but would break this witch's spirit though he heat her with his fists.

Semiramis saw him coming, and her heart stood still. The lake was far too distant for a haven of retreat, and the plain was bare of bush or thicket through which she might elude pursuit. Should she stand and face him? Yea! By Ishtar, *no!* He then might fancy that she waited him—she—Semiramis! So she turned and fled.

The maid was fleet of foot, and skimmed the earth with the speed of a frightened fawn; yet her pace, alas, was a paltry match for the splendid stride of Scimitar. Behind her she heard the thunder of his hoofs, but louder still chimed out the notes of Menon's laughter as his joy gave tongue. He was nearer now! He pressed upon her flank! Then Menon bent and gathered up the maiden in his arms. She screamed and bit his hand; she scratched him, raining buffets on his face and breast; but he only; laughed the more, and kissed her on the mouth and eyes.

On, on they sped, with mighty leaps and bounds, for Scimitar knew not what manner of warlocks fought upon his back, so he took the bit between his teeth and ran as before he had never run, while the toiling Habal panted far behind.

Now after a space Semiramis ceased to strive, and lay passive in the rider's grasp. It pleased her thus to be torn from the roots of her own hot willfulness. It joyed her to be battered against a victor's heart, to drink in the pain of a hand wound tight within her locks, and to feel her strength give way beneath his brutal power. For thus it was written that Semiramis should love, in stormy passion,

where an humble prayer was trampled under foot in scorn.

So it came to pass that of a sudden she flung her arms about the conqueror's neck and sobbed as though her soul were rent in twain, while he, to soothe the tempest of her tears, bent down and kissed her lips. Again and yet again he bent, till Semiramis raised her head and stared upon him in amaze.

"In the name of the gods!" she cried, "how many wouldst thou take?"

"Not one," laughed Menon, "which thou givest me unwillingly, for I do but return thy courtesies upon the temple steps."

"Eh—what!" she faltered, flushing crimson at his speech. "Nay, truly, I recall but three—"

"So be it, then," said Menon, with another laugh and still another kiss. "T'is in my mind that when my body had been drowned, and lying helpless in thy power—"

"Beast!" she stormed, in grievous doubt if she should strain him to her heart or take his life; yet Menon lived.

The Governor turned his steed on the backward trail and journeyed till they came in sight of Ascalon; then he slid from the back of Scimitar and walked beside, lest idle shepherds marvel at the strangeness of uncommon things; albeit he still held tight to the maiden's hand.

Semiramis, from her perch, looked down into her lover's eyes, and her spirit sang because of its bubbling joy, for now he was hers—*hers!*—till the very stars should die; yet, suddenly, she dragged at the bridle rein.

"Wait! What, then, of this minx, Sozana?"

Menon frowned, yet looked upon her steadily.

"Of her," he answered, "thy mind need hold no fear, for I love her not. Tomorrow will I leave the service of my King and fly with thee into Arabia. With Prince Boabdul will we there abide, for his love will shield me, even from the wrath of Ninus."

"Now that," spoke Semiramis, thoughtfully, "were the course of a fledgling and a fool." A moment more she pondered, looking up at last. "Tell me, can Ninus conquer Zariaspa, or will he fail again?"

"Zariaspa?" asked Menon, vacantly, wondering how this matter ran with his flight into the desert with a wife. "Zariaspa?"

"Aye, Zariaspa!" she repeated in impatience. "The town—the city! What! Is my lord a frog? Come, lace thy wits. Will Ninus conquer Zariaspa in the end?"

"Nay," said Menon, "for the walls are high and strong, while the food of the garrison is brought by some mysterious means, the which is a puzzle unrevealed by thought, or search, or vigilance. Again, and yet again, will Ramân-Nirari fail."

"Ah!" breathed Semiramis, nodding in the manner of some venerable judge.

"Then write thy King in this wise: I, Menon, Governor of Syria, greet my lord and

master, even as a son might greet his father, in love and reverence. Because of the honor he hath done me, my heart o'erfloweth with a joy, and in glad obedience to a monarch's will, I accept his dau—"

"Hold!" cried Menon, angrily. "Now by, the beard of—"

"Nay," laughed Semiramis, "but wait the end." Again she borrowed of an aged judge's mien. "—I accept thy daughter's hand. And now, O Radiant One, I crave a boon—not for myself alone, but for my King. When Zariaspa shall be overthrown, and another gem is set in the war-crown of my lord, then let these nuptials be proclaimed. Thus, men will marvel, saying among themselves: Of a verity King Ninus is divine; for who but a god would share the glory of his name with an humble warrior—one unworthy of reward so high." Semiramis paused to smile. "In closing thy letter, praise the King because of the city which he buildeth on the sand. Contrive thy words with an artful edge of truth, in that you touch his vanity. A touch—no more. Yet, above all else, be brief, and of a not too marked humility."

A light of understanding crept into Menon's eyes, yet a cloud arose to mar his perfect happiness.

"But—but," he stammered, "if, peradventure, King Ninus conquereth this city, after all—then—"

"Poof!" scoffed Semiramis. "At worst we will have loved for two untroubled years—and much may chance in that goodly span of time."

For answer, Menon, caring not a fig if a thousand shepherds saw, laughed happily, then drew her down to him and kissed her laughing lips.

Across the hills of Syria the lovers journeyed at a crawling pace, Semiramis enthroned upon the back of Scimitar, while Menon, with her hand clasped tight in his, strolled slowly at the bridle-rein.

They reached the home of Simmas, and a dancing dog ran out, to spring upon them, barking joyously.

CHAPTER VIII

THEY THAT DEPART AND HE THAT IS LEFT BEHIND

Simmas, chief warden of the royal flocks and herds, was a venerable man both wise and strong, yet his heart was as water running before the will of his foster-child. Unto him the lovers brought the matter of their vows, concealing naught of

the danger to themselves, nor the wrath of Ninus should he learn how they sought to flatter him and dim his eye. Gravely had Simmas listened, smiling indulgent smiles, though his heart was sore afraid for her whom he loved so tenderly; and, at length when the tale was done, he sighed and shook his wise old head.

"My son," said he, "there are valiant men who have hied them forth to capture beasts of prey with arrows and with spears; others, more reckless still, go armed with ropes and stones, yet never have I known of one who laboured to that end by tickling a lion's nose with straws."

"How know we, then," asked Semiramis, "that a lion may not be vastly pleased thereat?"

Poor Simmas was forced to laugh, for how could the man do otherwise, with two round arms clasped tight about his neck, a pink cheek nestled lovingly against his own? And thus his foster-child met every argument, twisting his threads of wisdom into ropes of foolishness, until, reluctantly, he gave them blessing, smiling through his tears.

"Down, Habal," cried Semiramis, "and lick thy master's hand." And the dog went down.

So it came to pass that the messengers went out from Syria and knelt to Ninus as he sat upon his watch-tower in the heat of a certain day. They bore him a missive which that Monarch read for the seventh time, then read again in sore perplexity, his fingers combing at his beard. It preened his vanity as by a feather-touch of truth, and joyed his nostrils with the unctuous odour of his own divinity—a point whereon his pride was prodded grievously of late.

At his failure in subduing Zariaspa, a whisper leaked abroad that Ninus was but a mortal, after all; and through his harshness unto those who toiled on the walls of Nineveh, the whisper swelled in volume and in frequency, till now it lay upon him in the hours of sleep. The voice of the people grumbled sullenly, or cried aloud because of the yoke of tax; yet, far more clamorous still, the whisper troubled at his heart, for a god once doubted is a god undone.

Therefore, in Menon's missive, the King found goodly food for thought; and yet, on the other hand there seemed a haunting something underneath, a something which caused him to taste with care ere he swallowed whole.

"Now as I live," mused Ninus to his inward self, "my Menon loveth me with a love that is rare amongst the sons of men; or else, full cry, he followeth the trail of a woman other than Sozana. A woman of wit! A dreadless woman—a guileful and a wise."

The monarch pondered deeply for a space, while he combed at his beard and gazed toward the walls of Nineveh; then, suddenly, he frowned and leaned across the parapet.

"Zomar!" he called to a mounted man-at-arms below, "ride out to yonder

chief of labourers by the western gate and admonish him to ply his whip with a higher diligence; for it cometh to me that the villain's head is balanced overlightly on his neck."

* * * * *

Across the Syrian hills, beneath the splendour of a million stars, rode Menon and Semiramis, side by side. Their hearts were full with the fullness of a joy which conquers speech and leaves them to beat with a voiceless pulse of peace. Their eyes alone told secrets, tender, deep, for each had hunted through the desert for a grain of sand, and, finding it, was glad, for they knew that its name was love.

Before them, silent too, rode Huzim, his head bowed low upon his mighty chest, for a worm of jealousy had entered him because of this love of a master for his bride. Was a slave not human? Should his lowly mind be proof against the poison of forgetfulness? A slave! And yet—the master's hand had freed him of his chains, while he himself had riveted them again. What now? Were the cloaks of love not strange and manifold? So gratitude rose up to choke the jealous worm; then Huzim raised his head once more and crooned the songs of those who dwell where the Indus runs and the sun is warm.

For league on league they journeyed through the night, each heart a slave, each thought a link in the chain of loving servitude. In the van rode Huzim, singing softly in his native tongue; behind him came Menon and Semiramis, hand in hand, while, still again, as a rear-guard of the march, the wise, untroubled Habal trotted at their heels.

* * * * *

On the hills of Syria the shepherds built their fires against the chill of night; and many a youth looked long amongst the flames for the eyes of Shammuramat—strange eyes that peered from the embers impishly, half veiled in coils of smoke. They danced! They mocked! Now laughing when some green young twig was burned; now falling into darkness with its blackened ash. How sad they were, these ashes of a dream—as sad as the bleat of a wandering sheep as the cry came floating down the wind. And yet—what, then, should a goddess have to do with the herders of browsing beasts, or they with her? Should an ox lick salt from off the stars? Nay, not so!

Thus wisdom came to the watchers of the fires, till peace was brought by drowsiness, and the shepherds slept.

* * * * *

In the home of Simmas an old man paced the silent rooms and found not peace nor rest. How bare and desolate when a loved one came no more! How pitiful they were, these homely things that her hand was wont to touch—a broken spear—a quiver cast aside—a sandal old and worn!

He fled to the housetop from the ghosts below, but they followed, clutching at his robe with the hands of memory. He had hunted through the desert for a grain of sand, and found it not, for, lo! his sand was dust. Then Simmas fell upon his knees and stretched his withered arms toward the stars.

"Oh, Ishtar, Ishtar," he cried aloud, *"fling pity to a weak old man!"*

CHAPTER IX

THE EAGLET NURSED BY DOVES

In troublous times the government of Syria was not a game at which a child might play; and, albeit Menon dwelt with his wife at Azapah, he needs must circle round about through many a restless tribe. From Nineveh came an endless call for grain wherewith to feed the multitudes of labourers, for oxen, asses, and the water buffalo, whose strength was now employed in the drawing of heavy loads. Train on train of lowing, braying beasts were driven from out the land; and so soon as their tails had ceased to switch in Syria, a cry went up for more. Thus the Syrians whispered amongst themselves, as others muttered far away at Nineveh; and soon the whisper swelled, till each man spoke his thoughts aloud, and thought was bitter against the Governor.

So Menon journeyed forth and back again, chiding, soothing, punishing. His hand was heavy when the rod was lifted of necessity; and when it fell, the back of the smitten wore a mark. Throughout he was honest, just, and unafraid in all things save one alone—Semiramis. He dare not suffer her to share the perils of the road, nor did he desire that tidings should leak abroad concerning his wedded state; for of all swift messengers, both of earth and air, not one keeps pace with the babble of an idle tongue—and the ears of the King were sharp.

True, Menon might have wedded both Sozana and Semiramis, together with a score of other wives, yet the mate of a daughter of the King must cherish one wife alone. And still again, that man who would divide his love betwixt some other and Semiramis had best go down at once amid the raging fires of Gibil to seek his peace of soul. So Menon, as he rode, was wont to ponder upon these

things, and was troubled because of fear.

Semiramis fretted in the absence of her lord, till her heart was rife with a clamorous unrest. She loved him as a tigress loves its mate, and knew no peace till he came to her side again.

Huzim, too, was left behind for a watch-dog in the Governor's house, a servant who vied with Habal as a sentinel against alarm. If the Indian loved his master, to the mistress he gave idolatry, and naught was there which he would not do to bring her happiness. In the chase which she loved he taught her arts of the jungle-hunt, when the tracker's hand is brother to his eye, and the eye must sweat because of its constant roving to and fro. He taught her to use her bow, not in the manner of Syrian archers who sight along the shaft, but to shoot from the hip, with vision fixed upon the mark alone, thus giving a quickness following hard upon the heels of thought. Above all other arms he schooled her in the use of a heavy-headed spear on which to receive the body of a pouncing beast; and for his patience Huzim found good cause to thank his gods.

On a certain morning they trailed across the hills, the Indian and Semiramis, while Habal snuffled joyously for any breed of mischief that he chanced to find. Long they hunted, but without a kill, till at mid-day, of a sudden, the dog set up a furious barking in a deep ravine. Semiramis, who chanced to be in the valley's neck while Huzim hunted far above, came first to the point whence the angry uproar told of game. At first there was naught to see, save Habal dancing in his rage, his lips rolled back, his thick hair bristling; yet, presently, through a tangled screen of thorn and vine, she spied a lion crouched upon the body of a goat, the blood of his victim dripping from his jaws. A mighty beast was he, ill pleased at being thus disturbed; and now, at the sight of Semiramis, he roared his wrath and leaped upon his enemies.

As the lion sprang, the heart of Huzim was like to stop its beat in fear. With a cry of anguish from above he plunged down the steep declivity, heedless of stones and thorns that tore his flesh as he rended a pathway through the interwoven shrubberies. He saw his mistress crouch, and brace the butt of her hunting spear behind her on the earth. He saw a tawny body hurtling through the air, to land on the waiting spear point which, by reason of the brute's own weight, sank deep into his neck; then the monster shot in a curve above the woman's head and, snarling, fell among the rocks. With all her strength the huntress clung to her weapon's haft, striving to hold her prey upon his back, while the cautious Habal, with that over-plus of noise which sometimes covers a lack of pluck, snapped viciously at the brush of the lion's tail.

Panting, breathless with his toil, the Indian raced toward the spot, notching an arrow as he came, yet Semiramis would have none of him.

"Hold, Huzim!" she cried. "On thy life dare loose a shaft! The kill is mine!"

So Huzim stayed his hand, though it irked him sore to watch while his mistress gripped her spear and was tossed like a rag upon the wind; but at length the lion ceased to struggle, sighing, as he stretched his splendid limbs in death.

Then Huzim—that trail-tried hunter, of many a fight more terrible than this—did a thing which was full of strangeness in a man. Trembling, he cast himself upon the earth, to clasp the feet of Semiramis, to kiss them, and to weep as a child might weep; but his mistress laughed, and patted Huzim's head, even as it was her wont to fondle Habal for a deed of love.

Homeward they journeyed across the hills, Semiramis proud of the pelt which Huzim bore, while Habal pranced before them, with the air of one who had done this deed alone, and cared not a pinch of wind if the whole world knew and marveled because of a most uncommon dog.

So the hunts went on, for Menon now was much abroad in quelling troubles which arose on every hand; though often in his leisure hours he joined the sport, and this Semiramis loved best of all.

Then the Kurds arose in fierce revolt, and the Governor needs leave his wife for a longer space, though many a bitter tear she shed, in that he would not suffer her to go. She was mad for a taste of war, mad as when with kisses she had urged him on the temple steps at Ascalon; yet Menon closed his ears alike to prayer and subtle argument. And thus it came to pass that she dried her eyes and watched him depart alone.

Now the Kurds were a wild and valiant race of hillsmen dwelling among the rocks, bold men who ceased to long for battle only when vultures picked their carcasses; so Menon and his army journeyed forth and laboured unto that end. He tracked them through wastes of sand, through gorges where torrents rushed, and monster stones came thundering down the pass; yet after a space he lured them to the centre of a plain and sought to give them one more taste of Assyria's scourge. He screened a strong reserve behind a hill, and then, in seeming disarray, marched down upon the enemy, while the Kurds looked on and were overjoyed because of the greater number of their warriors.

The Kurds awaited not the enemy's attack, but, shrieking in their barbarous tongue, poured down the slope to catch him in a dip between the hills.

In sooth the case of Assyria seemed evil, yet at a low command the disorder vanished utterly. As if by magic warriors sprang into the close-ranked form of a crescent moon, its curving front a line of bristling spears, its long horns tipped by horse, while in the rear and on either flank a cloud of bowmen waited for their prey.

In the hush before the storm a rider came spurring down the hill, to fling himself from his winded steed and to fall at Menon's feet.

"Huzim!" breathed the Governor, in a nameless dread. "What now?"

"Forgive, my lord," the Indian begged upon his knees, "and slay me if thou wilt. The lady Shammuramat—hath gone!"

"Gone?" cried Menon, whitening to the lips. "In the name of Bêlit—where?"

"Nay, lord, I know not," Huzim, in his grief, protested wildly. "In the hours of night she slipped away unseen. At morning, Habal, Scimitar and she were gone. I tracked them hither, lord, and now—"

His speech was drowned in a rush of howling Kurds, their first line breaking as a wave is shattered on a rock, their second crumpled, bleeding, tossed back in heaps of slain, while the third for an instant glared across the spears, then died as their brothers died. Yet more came on, and more again, an endless stream of madmen, delirious in rage, each caring naught for life so be it that he dragged a foeman down. They hacked at lance heads with their clumsy swords and wormed their way through the legs of the heaving front, till the crescent swayed and was like to burst in rout. And still they came, like waves from out the sea, to strike and fall, roll backward, rise and strike again.

The Governor had held the temper of his enemies in contempt too light, and now repented of his rashness in giving them a vantage ground. He looked for his horsemen screened behind the hill, but Kedah, their captain, was not the man to charge without an order from his chief; so Menon's soul was troubled for his army's fate.

"The reserve!" he roared into a courier's ear. "Ride on the wings of hell! Nay, look! By the grace of all the gods, they come!"

Of a truth it was so. A cloud of horsemen swept along the ridge in the form of a solid wedge, its sharp point aiming full at the foemen's flank. To the front, three lengths ahead, a steed of Barbary ran low against the earth, on its back a wild-eyed imp of war, unhelmeted, her red hair whipping out behind. In her hand she waved a hunting spear, and urged her men in a high, shrill scream that rang above the battle's din—and the men came on as evil spirits drive. Downward they plunged, to strike the Kurds with the shock of a thunder-bolt, to bore a ragged pathway through the seething ruck; then turned and bored back again.

And now the hearts of the Kurds grew faint, and a scrambling rout began; yet ere they could flee, the horsemen battered through their flank once more, circled, and took them in their rear. The crescent steadied, formed its line again, and spread to cut the Kurds' retreat; but Menon, shouting words that were hoarse and strange, flung wisdom to the seven winds, and charged.

Destruction dire might have come upon the enemy, but so long as he saw that flaming head that rocked on a surf of reeling, blood-mad warriors, he knew no thought save one—to reach Semiramis and be her shield. With Huzim close behind he won his way through a tangle of plunging steeds and men, but paused at last, to battle vainly at a human wall which he might not pierce.

As it chanced, the Kurds were caught between two closing jaws which pinched them as in a vice; yet full a third swarmed out at right and left, to scurry away among the distant crags where none but snakes might follow after.

The battle was done at last. A silence fell where the crash and roar of carnage had resounded through the hills. The Assyrian footmen were drawn in triple lines, and Menon recalled his horsemen who galloped far and wide, impaling stragglers on their points. At last they came, Semiramis in the lead, while behind her rode a soul-sick horseman, his chin sunk low upon his breast. Kedah was he called, the captain in whose command the reserve had been entrusted, and he who had charged without his chieftain's word. In silence he dismounted; from his saddle he produced a rope which he looped about his neck, then gave the end into Menon's hand.

The Governor frowned darkly and his rage was deep; not that the officer had charged without command, but because this underling had dared to bring Semiramis into a raging, blood-bespattered pool of death.

"Speak, Kedah—the truth! Be brief!"

"My lord," replied the man, who thought himself about to die, "my lips speak truth, as Bêlit watcheth me. I sat behind yon hill and waited for the word to ride. I heard the tumult when the battle joined, and though I yearned to come upon the dogs, I held my will in leash." The offender paused, glanced backward at Semiramis, smiled, and spoke again: "Of a sudden, my lord, this goddess dropped upon us from the clouds, for I swear I saw her not till her grip was on mine arm and she cursed me in mine ear. 'Fool!' she cried, 'why dawdle here when the great lord Menon sweateth in the toils. At them, ye swine, or by the living gods I charge alone!'"

Kedah paused, to shrug and spread his hands, palms upward.

"My lord, I came. I know not why I came—but came."

Another silence fell. The angered Governor looked from Kedah to Semiramis. She sat her steed in the glory of a beauty dear to him; her cheeks were flushed, her eyes aflame with battle-fires, her red locks tumbling on a breast revealed, for her robe was rent and torn. Still Menon's lips moved not; then Kedah raised his head, his fingers toying nervously at his noose.

"My lord, I do perceive no tree in sight, yet, haply, further on—"

He stopped, for Semiramis loosed a ringing laugh and vaulted from the back of Scimitar, to approach the chief without a sense of fear or shame.

"My lord," said she, and pointed with her hunting spear, "if, in truth, this sturdy warrior must hang, then first shalt thou hang Shammuramat." She snatched the noose from Kedah's neck and laid it about her own. "And harken, O Prince of Justice," she cried aloud, "in his throat this fellow lieth! Aye, even to spare me thy reproof! It was I who disobeyed, not he, for I told him I came at

thine own command.”

Now the lady had spoken no such thing, and, truly, it was as Kedah said; yet the sweet lie joyed the hearts of the horsemen mightily, and a smile ran rippling down the line. Presently Semiramis spoke again, humbly, sadly, with her hands clasped tight, in the manner of a slave condemned to die:

”My lord, I do perceive no tree in sight, yet, haply, further on—”

Then a roar of laughter burst from every rank, and even as it broke, so yearned these men to break from their ordered lines, to hoist a war-queen up and bear her on their harnessed backs, to shout her praise aloud.

So Menon ceased to frown, for how could he hold his anger at a conqueror of enemies and friends? Had she not saved his army and his very life itself? What now! So he took her to his heart, though his heart was sad. In a little space the tidings would leak abroad concerning this warrior queen who was his wife, and because of love his soul grew dark within him and was afraid.

On the homeward march Semiramis sought by many an art and wile to chase away his gloom, but ever he would sigh and shake his head.

”Ah, love,” he murmured, ”now have we cut a link from out our chain of happiness, for when my master learneth of this thing—”

”*Poof!*” she laughed. ”’Twas worth a link or two of love; and even though King Ninus naileth me against his wall, still will I have thundered down that slope and tasted once of the wine of war. Smile, Menon mine!”

And Menon smiled—in that she bade him smile.

CHAPTER X

THE LIFTING OF A TAX

The army marched swiftly back to Azapah, for the place was sore in need of the Governor’s fist. In his absence the people, growing bold, had stoned his agents, slaying many in their hatred toward Assyria’s King. So Menon straightway rode from tribe to tribe, advising patience until Nineveh was builded, when peace and plenty would once more lay upon the land. Where wisdom and cunning failed to pacify, there Menon employed a rod of force, even as Ninus held the growling hordes of Egypt beneath his thumb. The King had grown vexed at reports from Karnak that the children of the Nile were chafing beneath their yoke, so he sent swift messengers, saying that upon the day when Egypt flew to arms, that day

would he crucify their Prince Memetis on the walls of Nineveh. And Egypt ceased to growl.

In all his dealings with the tribes of Syria, Menon soon learned that the wit of Semiramis was sharper than his own. When his strings of policy grew twisted into knotted snarls, she would lay her fingers on the hidden ends, pull deftly, and the skein was free again. Thus, more and more, the Governor leaned upon the shoulder of his wife's advice, till there came a time when, stricken by a fever, he gave the rule of Syria into her hands.

Tenderly Semiramis nursed her lord through the life of a summer moon, and yet not once did her eyelids close on the troubles beyond her house. From there she sent her agents forth with oil upon their tongues, or planned with Kedah, in whose command she placed the Assyrian force of arms; for Kedah loved her with such a love as Habal gave, albeit he rarely snapped at the brush of a lion's tail. In her best appointed room she received the headmen of every tribe, who came with grievances, or for favours great and small. To each she listened thoughtfully, while scanning his face for flaws beneath the skin, then she dealt with the man in accordance with his flaws. With the bold she was bold; with the timid, gentle in her speech; with the sullen she soothed away the temper in their hearts and made them whole again. On the vain she smiled, nor recked the issue to his soul, while she laughed with the gay, and was sober before the wise. Thus each man came and went, rejoicing at departure because of his own uplifted understanding, yet knowing not that the swaying of mortal flesh, to Semiramis, was a master-art of arts.

"The juice of flattery," said she, "must needs be mixed with bread—not honey-cakes—for an over-sweetness cloyeth and is vain."

Now it chanced, that among the dwellers at Azapah, there were those who starved, alike on the bread of flattery and the little left them by the grasp of tax; so they met in a secret place and contrived a plot to destroy the Governor's house with fire, while those who slept therein should come not forth alive. With the army close at hand they dare not move; yet when Kedah led his force away to fall upon a certain band of malcontents, the plotters over-powered the guards who were left behind, slew them, then came to make their evil works complete.

At the hour of midnight Semiramis sat by Menon's couch, albeit the fever now had passed and his body was on the mend; yet it joyed her thus to mother him and to watch him while he slept. Habal lay yawning at her feet, but of a sudden the bristles rose upon his back and a rasping mutter trembled in his throat.

"Peace, Habal, peace!" his mistress urged, fearful lest the growls disturb her lord; yet the dog would not be stilled. Crouched at the stout-barred door, he growled afresh, and Semiramis knew full well that Habal snuffed a trouble in the

air; so, calling Hazim, she mounted to the roof.

To the left she saw the tents of her guard in flames, while through the night came a close-packed throng, their ugly visages alight in the glare of many a torch. A hideous crew they were, the scum and evildoers of the plains, half clothed, and armed with staves and stones. At the sight, the heart of Semiramis grew cold within her breast—not for her own alarm, but for him who slept below, and, shrinking with Huzim behind a parapet, she waited, pondering hard and fast.

On came the crowd, full twenty score, who, if they would, might override the Governor's feeble strength in the twinkling of an eye, dash down the doors and drag the inmates forth to butchery. Yet ere a torch could be set against the walls, the plotters saw a woman leap upon the parapet above, to smile upon them and raise her hands in glad surprise, as though they bore her precious wedding gifts.

"Greeting!" she cried. "What seek ye of Shammuramat?"

Now a murderer's liver is a cousin to his slinking mind, and these who came were murderers. Of a certainty, had they reached the house by stealth, they would have burned it to the earth, showing no mercy to the Governor or his wife. Yet when this vision stood upon the housetop, not as one who pleads for life, but as a master knowing them for the cattle which they were, then the plotters faltered in their course and paused. A silence fell, and for a moment no man found his tongue.

"What seek ye of Shammuramat?"

"The Governor!" cried a voice amongst the throng. "The Governor! Give him into our hands!"

"Ah!" said the lady upon the roof, as she nodded pleasantly. "Ah, I see! Right gladly would my lord come out to you, but my lord is not within." She raised her hand to check a murmur of dissent, and smiled. "If friends would speak with him, I pray them wait for a little space, for even now he returneth with his men-at-arms. Harken!" She placed a hand behind her ear and gazed toward the north, whence Kedah and his force would come at dawn. "Harken to the clatter of his cavalry and the beat of hoofs upon the plain. Patience, good friends—he cometh!"

They listened, tricked for an instant by her words, but only the croak of frogs and the hum of insects sounded on the breeze; then the cowards' muttering swelled into a roar of rage. A volley of stones was flung against the house, one missile striking her upon the temple, causing her to totter on the roof's edge dizzily, while a trickle of blood ran down her cheek. Huzim had marked the man who hurled this stone, and, cursing, he set an arrow on his bow; but the mistress stayed his hand.

"Down, Huzim! I yet may deal with them. Be not a fool!"

Once more she turned to the scowling men who had stopped their rush when they saw the wound to one on whom their vengeance lay not so heavily; yet they hung in the balance now, and the weight of a hair might tip the beam.

"Perchance," she called aloud, "ye have a grievance, just, and one which I might quickly mend. What, then, would ye have of me?—I who have ever kept my promises, even though it brought me wounds, as I now am wounded at your hands. Speak! If it lieth within my power to grant—"

She was checked by a babel of discordant cries from the tongue of each who sought above the rest to air a separate woe; and Semiramis smiled within herself, though she frowned upon them with the dark displeasure of a queen.

"Be silent, dogs!" she commanded, fiercely. "What! Would ye burst my ears with the yelpings of your pack? Have done!"

They stared. She had them marveling now, and would keep them marveling, lest idle thought breed mischief ere she clipped its wings.

"Let one step forth!" she called. "Your leader. What! Is there not one man in all this valiant throng?" She paused to raise her eyes and hands. "Dear Ishtar, pity them!"

A mighty murmuring arose, when each man nudged his fellow, urging him to speak for all, till at last a hairy-chested, black-browed villain pushed toward the front—the same who had flung the stone, and Huzim's fingers curled about his bow, and he whimpered in restraint.

The leader spoke. He made his charge against the Governor who pressed, he said, upon the people till their children cried aloud for food. He lied; yet he lied with a certain air of honesty; and as he marked each point, the rabble applauded him, while their fury was like to bubble up afresh. He told of his nation staggering beneath the load of an unjust tax, when Ninus built him palaces wherein to squander wealth in wild debauchery. His people, he declared, were overjoyed to obey the King and pay him tribute according to the law; but when he sought to starve them by the right of might, then Syria bared her teeth. Justice they asked—no more—and received the lash.

"Stay!" cried Semiramis, seeing that the crowd was pushed by frenzy to the danger line. "If your hearts are hot against the King alone, why then would ye seek to harm my lord who standeth between the wrath of Ninus and your worthless carcasses?"

A reckless speech it was, and well she knew that she laid her finger on an open sore.

"Why?" the leader thundered. "Why? Because we would strike the master through the man! A Governor shall be no more in Syria, save a Governor dead!" Amid hoarse shoutings he lifted up his voice again: "If Menon would plunder bread from the mouths of women, let Menon come forth alone, to reckon with

their sons—their brothers—and those who love them as they love their land.”

A tumult now arose. The torch-lights flickered on a sea of upturned faces, black with wrath, distorted by the passions of ferocious men full ripe for a deed of blood. They gathered for a rush; great stones were raised aloft, and flaming brands were whirled in eager fists.

But Semiramis had one shaft in her quiver still, and, setting it upon the string of craft, she let it fly. She flung her arms toward the sky, and laughed—a shrill, derisive peal that echoed far beyond the outskirts of the band and for an instant checked its charge; then, from the housetop, she pointed a scornful finger at the black-browed chief.

”Thou child!” she cried. ”Thou suckling babe! Thou fool! to whom the asses of the wilderness are as oracles! What! Hast thou, then, not heard?” She paused, to give her listeners the space of an indrawn breath, then full in their teeth she launched a master-lie.

”Harken!” she cried, ”and bend your knees in gratitude. *King Ninus hath lifted his tax from Syria—and no man needs must pay!*”

A hush of wonder fell upon the throng, and in the silence Semiramis heard a rustling at her side. Turning, she looked into Menon’s eyes, grown large in fear, and seeming larger still against the pallor of his pain-drawn face. He had heard the tumult and had risen from his couch, to crawl to the house-top, trembling in the weakness of his state.

”*Bêlit!*” he gasped in hoarse dismay. ”What madness wouldst thou do?”

”Nay, wait!” she whispered. ”Huzim, hold thy master, that these madmen see him not.” Then she turned to the crew below. ”Oho!” she scoffed. ”I see that ye are filled with shame; yet hear the end. At the prayers of my lord the Governor, King Ninus harkened to your murmurings, and giveth unto Syria what he giveth no other land. Not only doth he lift the burden of your tax, but commandeth that no man pay a sum which he payeth not of his own desire; wherein the King would measure generosity, not by force, but love. Moreover, he offereth a high reward in the nature of a prize. To the tribe which may aid his needs by the largest store, that tribe will Ninus set above all other tribes in riches and in power, receiving its headmen as his honoured guests at Nineveh.” Once more the speaker paused, till the meaning of her words had sunk into wondering ears. ”What now,” she asked, ”is the King a tyrant, or your Governor a beast to slay?”

For a moment more a silence held the marveling men, then they broke into a mighty roar, shouting while they stamped upon their torches, weeping, cheering lustily for Menon and the King. Yet Semiramis was not yet done with them. She raised her hand for silence, pointed to the smoking ruins of the camp, and spoke in her sternest tone:

”For what ye have done this night, my lord forgiveth you because of your

swinish ignorance. Yet have a care, for every evil face amongst your pack is chiseled on my memory. Once, not twice, the Governor may forgive, and a rope there is in Syria for each offending neck. Now go! and thank the gods for the little wisdom ye have learned.”

So the murderers dispersed, and, silent, scattered far and wide to seek their homes, while a priestess of guile, who lingered on the housetop, looked after them and laughed.

”Menon mine,” she murmured, filled with glee, as she smoothed the pillows on his couch, ”by Ishtar I swear ’twas keener sport than a dash against the Kurds!”

* * * * *

Menon and Semiramis took thought together, long and earnestly; for now, when the Syrians learned how they had been deceived, the ashes of murder would burst again in flames. Menon was for hanging every man who had sought to burn his house, but Semiramis said nay.

”By craft have we sown a seed; by craft will we nurture it and eat the fruit.”

Thus it came to pass that a cunning proclamation was sent throughout the land, and the simple peoples rejoiced and sang songs of praise because of the lifting of their tax. Moreover the many tribes began to vie with one another for the prize which Semiramis had offered in the name of Ninus, till unto Azapah they brought such stores of metals and of food, that Menon reaped a harvest far beyond his dreams. Where tribes were wont to dole their tribute out through doubled fists, they now came swiftly and unbidden, with treasures on their backs—for men look not where their footsteps fall when chasing swamp-flies to a goal of greed and power.

And now to Nineveh came mighty stores of grain and wine, long lines of sheep and cattle, asses, goats, and the water buffalo. Metals came likewise, silver, gold and brass; fruits were there also, and honey in earthen jars. Whatever dry Syria owned, that Syria sent, till Ninus, seeing this stream of riches pouring through his gates, sat down upon his stool both suddenly and hard, in the grip of profound amaze.

”Now by the great lord Asshur,” he muttered in his beard, ”these eyes of mine have never looked upon the like before! In thought have I wronged my Menon grievously, for in truth he loveth me with a love that is rare amongst the

sons of men.”

CHAPTER XI

THE SANDAL AND THE STRAWS

And now came a day when Nineveh was Nineveh at last, and Ninus stood upon his palace roof and was glad because of the Opal of the East. At his feet a vast brown city lay—a city builded by his heart—each brick a monument to other hearts that broke in rearing temples to Assyria’s gods. In the streets a busy hum of trade arose, where marts and booths were opened to the sale of a thousand wares; where citizens in gala dress swarmed in and out of unfamiliar doors; where troops of children danced in wreaths of flowers, or white-robed priests filed past, chanting their deep-toned songs and bearing loads in sacrifice to the temple of Nineb and up its winding ziggurat.

From the palace steps a broad, smooth road ran down to the western gate and was lined by effigies of stone, great wingéd bulls, and lions crouching as for a spring. Around it all the mighty wall lay coiled, its top of a width whereon three chariots might be driven abreast, while above rose a thousand and a half a thousand towers.

The army still encompassed Nineveh around, yet the King was not for war. He looked on his work and sighed a sigh of peace, then stretched his mighty limbs and prepared a lion hunt. For three long years his heart had yearned for sports afield, with a yearning which hunters alone may know; yet, because of his vow, the bow and spear were left untouched by the monarch’s hand.

Consulting his oracles, and likewise the prophet Azet whose arts foretold great deeds of wonder to his arms, the King appointed another Governor in Syria and commanded Menon to join him on the banks of the lower Euphrates. Here game might be found in plenty where Ninus had known rare pleasures of the chase in former days; so, smiling, he set him forth.

When the messengers had come to Azapah, Menon bowed to the master’s will and departed with a heavy heart, first sending Semiramis with Huzim back to Ascalon, to dwell for a little space till chance might bring him into Syria again. He reached the banks of the Euphrates and waited the royal hunter till a moon had waned; but Ninus came not, because of the slowness of his journey to the place.

The King, in sitting much upon his tower while Nineveh was being builded, had laid a deal of fat upon his bones, and tedious travel irked him; moreover, in the hunt his breath was shorter than of yore and his thews less strong. Yet the mind may oftentimes entertain a zeal beyond the body's power, and in this King Ninus brewed a trouble for himself—but the trouble was yet to come.

* * * * *

Semiramis, at parting with her lord, wept bitter tears; yet she, too, bowed where wisdom left no loophole of escape, and journeyed with Huzim and Habal back to Ascalon. And here her grief must find another stab, keener, deeper, more sad than the parting from one who would come again; for in the house of Simmas an old man lay asleep—a woman's sandal pressed against his beard.

They buried Simmas far out upon the hillside, where in years gone by a babe was mothered by a flock of doves. The babe was a woman now, who loved her foster-father tenderly and above all others save her lord alone; so she wept beside the grave for many days.

"A dove was he," she whispered to her lonely heart, "so fond, so gentle in his ministries—a dove that winged his flight and left me, only because of Ishtar's yearning cry."

In her two long years of absence Semiramis had oft'times dreamed of Ascalon, longing to roam its hills once more or to swim in its cool, green lake; yet now it all seemed strangely poor and small. The shores of the lake had shrunk together in the night; the hills were not so high as the hills of yore, nor the trees so green; the vault of the very sky itself seemed pressing down to smother her, and the smell of the very earth was not the same. Ah, if she were like to Habal who could see no change in the march of time; yet Habal was but a dog!

Now, concerning this dog, the mistress erred and grievously. Not only did he mark the change in Ascalon, but a greater one within himself. He swaggered through the village with his tail held high, in the manner of one who had done large deeds abroad, passing old canine friends without a sniff or wag, yet eyeing interlopers scornfully. On these he would fall at the slightest wink of provocation, and leave his memory marked upon their hides; so his name became a wonder unto other dogs.

Semiramis was not of Habal's stamp, nor did she boast of her deeds abroad; yet still their memory beckoned, till her soul was full with a great unrest. At home she was idle, grieving for the things so changed, wandering through a house made desolate by the flight of those she loved. Old friends would come—gaunt shepherds, gazing on her beauty with the eyes of cattle that rove the hills—to linger, then slink away to hide the passion in their hearts.

"Home! Home!" she cried. "No longer is it home, for the dove hath flown, and my lord is not beside me in the gloom!"

Through the hush of night there were whispers on the wind—relentless ghosts that glide from the outer world to mock us with their sighs; to bring on their garments odours of the days that were, and the hopes of other days to come; to haunt us, till we harken to their murmurings and know not peace.

They called to Semiramis, these whispers, in the name of love, whence Menon seemed to stretch his arms in loneliness. They called through a shattered fringe of Kurds who screamed and struggled under hoof and heel; they called in the tongues of madmen whirling torches round and round, their evil faces yellow in the flame and smoke. They called her to deeds of arms—to work—to power. Oh, Ishtar, if she might ride under whip and spur to Nineveh, and pit her wits against the King! To play the thirsty game, with life the stake, its hazard on a single cast! Ah, if she might glide, as these ghosts were gliding through the night, far out beyond the rim of solitude, to the teeming battle-ground of hearts and men!

For days she wandered, silent, yearning to be gone, while the faithful Huzim dogged her every step. His master had admonished him to watch his charge with a winkless eye, lest spirit override her reason and tempt her to a recklessness. It troubled Huzim thus to be a jailer to one he loved, yet the master's will was law, so the Indian followed ever on her trail.

Semiramis knew no peace nor rest, and at last she came to Dagon's temple down beside the lake, to lay her sorrows on the fish-god's knees and ask a sign.

All day, all night, she prayed, yet when the dawn came oozing from out the east, the face of Dagon was as a face of stone. The suppliant sat upon the temple steps, weary, warring with despair. With listless eyes she watched a beetle crawling at her feet, then, of a sudden, hope rose up and lived. She grasped the bug between her thumb and finger, holding it above the surface of the lake, while she closed her teeth as a gambler might at the whirl of his last remaining coin.

"Now this," she murmured to herself, "shall tell me of Dagon's will. If the beetle swim, I go! If he sink, I rot in Ascalon!"

She cast it in, smiling, for she knew right well that the bug must float, yet turning her back lest Dagon mark her knowledge of such things. For an instant the victim struggled pleasingly with leg and wing, while the smile of Semiramis broadened in its reach, to flicker, to fade, to die. A monster carp came upward with a rush. One snap, and the tempting morsel disappeared, thus making the fish-god's judgment clear, beyond the very hem of Redemption's robe.

Semiramis sat upon the temple's steps, her chin upon her hands, her eyes on a wheel of ripples that widened away from its hub of swift calamity. She pondered long, her thoughts like cats in trees, with Habal barking furiously below.

"He sank," she sighed. "Of a certainty he sank. I may not make it otherwise. And yet"—she paused to steal a glance at Dagon's face—"and yet the fool *did* swim for a *little* space. Mayhap—" Again she paused, then spread her hands and raised her eyes appealingly. "In truth my beetle proveth naught at all. For a space he swam. For a space he sank. Dagon, Dagon, what meanest thou in this?"

No answer came. Once more she pondered, her fair brow puckered with the lines of deep perplexity; till, presently, the truant colour raced to her cheek again and her great eyes lit with the flame of understanding.

"Ah!" she breathed. "Ah, now I see. Thou meanest, O wise and radiant one, that, *sink or swim*, must I do this thing. What!" she cried, "hast thou, thyself, not said it? And, lo! I am but a weak and foolish woman in thy power. Ah, Dagon, Dagon, thou art a crafty god, indeed!"

In haste Semiramis left the temple door, and, singing loudly, tripped toward her home. Her god had sent a sign. She was free to journey now as her heart desired. Free! And yet, a doubt came prowling after her—a watchful, sleepless doubt that dogged her steps, even as Huzim slipped upon her trail from his hiding-place behind a stone. On the hill she paused, to mutter to herself in a soothing tone:

"The sign is clear. Did I linger on in Ascalon, some evil might befall me, even as that carp arose to snatch my beetle in his greedy maw. Did Menon know, he would urge that I fly to him without delay."

She went her way and took up her song again, but paused to reason with a small brown toad that hopped across her path.

"Little beast," said she, "thou comest as a warning of some ugly chance, the which, I confess, hath filled me with the juice of fear. Therefore will I hasten out of Syria in time."

She walked around the toad with care, and, singing, journeyed on till she reached the house where the old dove Simmas dwelt in days gone by. At the door she lingered, ere she raised the latch, for one last argument in the cause of a heart's desire.

"Now Dagon," she reflected, grieving at the thought, "is in truth a careless god in the matter of his signs. Had Ishtar cursed me with a simple mind, I might have misinterpreted, alas!"

Semiramis then slept, to dream of Menon till the shades of night wore on, and in her dreams found weightier reasons which she laid on the fish-god's judgment scale.

"Huzim," she asked, when the Indian had brought the evening meal, "did I seek escape from Ascalon, what course would thy duty run?"

"Mistress," he answered her, "like an arrow in my heart is the thought of force with one whose happiness is held above my hopes of peace; yet the master's

will is the master's will, and a servant must obey."

"Ah," she nodded thoughtfully. "Ah, I see! Yet if, by chance, I slipped away in the gloom of night, as I did at Azapah—what then?"

The Indian cast a troubled gaze upon the floor, and heaved a sigh.

"I would follow, mistress, as before I followed, till I fell because of weariness."

"Then follow!" said Semiramis, "for I go to join my lord at Nineveh—and to tickle the lion's nose with straws."

CHAPTER XII

THE SORROWS OF A KING

King Ninus, lord of all Assyria, lay cursing in his royal litter, while slaves and attendants bore him northward on the banks of the Euphrates. Presently they left their course, struck eastward till they reached the Tigris and again turned north, whence, with many rests and long, forced marches in the cool of night, the stricken King at length was placed upon his couch at Nineveh.

Full many a grievous matter rode upon the monarch's mind, and the pale attending leech wrought vainly to quell his patient's fever, one augmented by a sleepless, boiling rage within. By day the King would fret; by night he rioted throughout his dreams and found no rest.

First there was his wound, a ragged, half-healed gash, laid open by a lion's claw and running from a point beneath his arm-pit to his hip. It was not the wound itself, nor the pain thereof, which fired the hunter's wrath, but rather the truth that he, Ramân-Nirari—the greatest hunter since beasts and hunters were—should miss his kill and seek his life in flight. Of witnesses there were only three: Shidur-Kam, a warrior whom the King might trust to entrench his tongue behind his teeth, and a slave who was safer still, for Ninus had cast his body into the Euphrates; but, then, there was a girl—a red-haired girl—who perched in the boughs of a citron tree and laughed as the King sped underneath, a wounded lion leaping at his horse's haunch.

At another time the monarch might have held this face, and the echo of a bubbly laugh, in pleasing memory; yet raillery, directed at a royal personage in the stress of flight, begets a recollection of a different breed. So the mocking laughter haunted Ninus through all the day and caused him to wake at night and

grind his teeth in fury.

"Argol," said he, to the faithful leech beside him, "give order that a thousand horse repair to the region of our lion hunt. Command them to scour the country round about in a circuit of thirty leagues and bring me every red-haired wench they may chance to find. By Gibil's flame! I have a pressing need of them!"

The leech sighed sadly, tapped upon a gong of bronze, then waited in silence till an officer strode in, saluted, and sank upon his knees. The order given and the soldier gone, Argol administered a sleeping draught and sat once more at his weary post.

Yet the King slept not, for still another matter lay heavy on his heart. There was a certain man called Azet, the venerable seer who had prophesied with lies. Before the hunt he had opened the carcasses of seven cranes, finding in the entrails of each and all an omen of success. Full thirty beasts, said Azet, should the King overcome, returning unto Nineveh triumphant and sound of limb. Was not this prophet, then, to blame for the ills which had come to pass? Wherefore should he prophesy unto evil ends, or cause witch-women to laugh from the boughs of citron trees? Could virtue not be found in the vitals of seven sacred cranes? or was this holy man but a monster and a fool?

The King's dark brow grew darker still with troublous thought, as he questioned his leech for the hundredth time in fretful tones:

"Argol, good Argol, tell me, I pray thee, man, how in the name of Asshur may I teach this wretch to mend his auguries?"

"My lord," the leech replied, as he raised his drooping lids and gazed out dreamily to where the Tigris flowed, "my lord, the breath of man ariseth from his breast, but in his throat are shaped his evil prophesies."

"Eh—what?" the King demanded. "What manner of speech is this, and how doth it run with Azet and his seven cranes?"

"Hang him, my lord," said Argol, drowsily, and turned away.

A slow smile lit the features of the King, while for a space he pondered, plucking at his coverlet; then, summoning an officer, he gave an order in a weak but cheerful voice, at the same time causing his couch to be removed to a shaded spot upon the palace roof. Here, with his watch-worn leech beside him, he could lie at ease and feast his eyes on the glory of completed Nineveh. Across his terraced gardens where fountains sparkled in the sun, he could see the temple of Asshur and of Ishtar upon their hills; likewise the temple of the fire-god Gibil, above whose dome a wreath of smoke hung low, belched upward from the flames beneath. He could see his streets, his marts, his mighty gates and the tawny plains beyond where the Tigris and the Khusur ran. He could see his wall—that shield of his heart's desire—which made his city a fortress against the world; yet the thoughts of Ninus were not for walls and shields.

He watched a thousand horsemen pass the western gate and gallop swiftly down the river bank, then disappear from Nineveh for the space of many days. The chief was a man of little love beyond his sword and steed, one, who would give short shift to devils with flame-hued hair, and the heart of the King was glad.

Of a sudden a tumult rose from the streets below, while a concourse gathered, and a sound of weeping ascended to the palace roof. Through the surging throng a band of soldiers fought their way, leading the prophet Azet toward the wall and beating back the populace with the butts of their heavy spears.

The western gate was spanned by a monster arch, on the shoulder of which sat the highest tower of all, and thither the soldiers led their victim by a winding stair. When at last they appeared on the turret's edge, a wail of anguish rang out afresh, while the multitude gazed upward, swarming to and fro.

"Now truly," chuckled Ninus as he watched, "this fellow hath a wondrous following, who, because of their ignorance, grieve at things they may not understand."

From the turret the soldiers thrust a wooden beam; from the end thereof they hanged the prophet by a noose, and, according to a writing set above the gate, "The prophecies of Azet ceased to be throughout the land."

Argol then bound his master's wound in a healing salve, and the sufferer straightway slept for many hours; on waking, his fever had departed utterly, so he mended in body and in mind. He appointed another prophet, one Nakir-Kish, a wise and observing man whose promises of good and ill were the like of kites, the strings thereof being held within his hand till his eye had marked the temper of all heavenly winds. Thus Nakir-Kish endured.

King Ninus now sent for Bobardol, a sculptor of high renown, the same who had carved a famous bull that had, in all, five legs. This extra limb might at first seem strange and at odds with Nature's own design; yet, even so, it had its marked advantages. An observer gazing on this masterpiece—no matter where he stood—might always perceive four legs; "And that," said Bobardol, "is Art." So Ninus was pleased, and retained the sculptor in his service.

The King gave order for a monster *stèle*, whereon should be carved a scene from the lion hunt, the monarch being pictured, not in wild retreat, but faced about and causing great discomfiture to a mighty foe. True, the attitudes of the King of Assyria and the king of beasts would be quite reversed, yet Ninus was a god whose front was more imposing than his back; moreover it *would* have been as pictured had Azet not prophesied with lies. Shall a King be held to blame where foolish servants err through ignorance? Not so!

The sculptor Bobardol now set to work, while Ninus commanded a sumptuous feast to be prepared, whereby he might celebrate his triumphs in the chase. His soldiers and populace should pass in lines through the palace hall and gaze

in awe upon this unveiled tablet, set up to the glory of the high lord Asshur—and to the glory of the King.

While waiting this work of art, and at the same time resting so that his wound might heal, Ninus was wont to recline within his litter which was borne along the top of the city wall. Here he could watch at will, or give directions in the order of another enterprise which dwelt in his mind and heart. Three years had now passed by since his warriors turned tail from Zariaspa; and the time approached when Ninus must seal his promises to rake the ashes of this city into sacks and with them feed the waters of the sea.

The army encamped within and without the walls of Nineveh was twice so great as that which had failed in the former siege, and Ninus gave much thought to the plans of his second war. On the plain a wall had been erected, in height and thickness measuring that of Zariaspa, and here the Assyrians practiced methods of assault. Great carts they had, with platforms twenty cubits above their wheels, propelled by slaves who were hidden underneath, while above the platforms ladders rose and slanted toward the wall. Up these the men-at-arms would clamber rapidly, to grapple with defenders at the top; and so great was their zeal in this mimic war that many lives were lost because of it. There were tall machines which worked on pivots, whose swinging buckets could set a score of men upon a parapet; there were towers faced by armor-plates of brass, from the crests of which wide bridges might be flung, while warriors swarmed across to engage the enemy. Huge catapults were built, of new design and hurling power, some casting single rocks, and others to rake a battlement with a volley of smaller stones. Full many a strange machine of cunning workmanship was thus devised and stored against departure, when the King would once more lead his armies to the East.

In the lowgrounds and on the rolling slopes beyond the river Khusur which flows between the mounds of Koyunjik and Nebbi Yunas, myriads of oxen and beasts of burden were set to graze upon the pasture-lands. These had been employed in the building up of Nineveh, and now were resting for a further need, for their final strength would be utilized in hauling the traps of war through desert lands and toilsome ways, on spongy forest roads to the hills beyond, up heavy mountain slopes to gorges between the peaks of Hindu-Kush. Thence they would scramble down into the plains of Bactria, to become at last the food for a hungry host; and thus the cattle served unto many ends.

The waiting army was under sole command of Menon, whose heart was now divided between two loves. To prepare for war would have joyed him vastly, except for his vow to wed Sozana when Zariaspa fell before the King; and this he might not do because of Semiramis, of whom he dreamed as resting peacefully in the valley of Ascalon. Had Ninus spoken aught to him of the red-haired imp

who laughed from the bough of a citron tree, Menon's heart might then have borne a double weight; but the happening was not that quality of jest on which a monarch is pleased to regale his chiefs.

It chanced on a certain day that Menon was summoned to the palace for a council with the King, and, striding through the gardens, he came with suddenness upon Sozana, who sat alone. Fair was she, with the beauty of a childish maid; yet in her green simar, and the silvery veil which was wound about her throat, Sozana was a princess, from her raven hair to the jeweled sandals on her tiny feet.

Since returning from Syria Menon had found no opportunity for speech with her, and now he came forward joyously, his hands outstretched. At the sound of footsteps Sozana had risen from her seat, but, on seeing him, she gave a little cry of disappointment and of pain, flushed crimson and turned away without an answer to his greeting; and when he sought to question her concerning such treatment of an old-time friend, she sank upon a bench, to weep as though her heart would break.

For a moment Menon stood irresolute, then, as he began to speak again, a hand was laid upon his shoulder, and, turning, he looked into the eyes of Memetis the Egyptian, a youth whom he loved as he might have loved his mother's son, but who now refused his greeting coldly, spurning the proffered hand and placing his own behind his back.

"How now," asked Menon, "is this the manner of Memetis to his friends?"

"Nay," returned Memetis, frowning as he spoke; "true friends I greet in love and tenderness; the false may rest with Hathor ere I take their hands."

Then it came upon Menon that Memetis and Sozana knew of the mandate of the King, and were bitter in their thoughts of one who came between them and their happiness.

"Memetis," the Assyrian asked, "is it, then, to the walls of Zariaspa that thine eyes are turned, fearing lest a friend hath juggled with thy trust as a traitor might?"

The Egyptian's black eyes glowed in anger which he vainly strove to check, while his fingers played about the hilt of a dagger at his belt.

"Aye," he answered bitterly, "to the walls of Zariaspa do I turn mine eyes, for with their fall falls every hope which Isis dangled before my foolish heart. And thou!" he cried, "the false! The treacherous! who would tear Sozana from mine arms, aye, even as the hawk would swoop upon a nest of doves!"

Menon strove to speak, but the Egyptian would not harken to his words. The Assyrian faced Sozana, stretching forth his hand, but Memetis sprang between them, drawing his dagger, and in a low, fierce whisper spoke his wrath:

"Lay but a finger on this maid, or speak her name again, and as Osiris liveth,

will I take thy life!"

Menon looked into the lover's eyes, and slowly spread his arms.

"Strike!" he murmured sadly. "Strike, and learn from other lips than mine that Memetis is a fool."

He waited, but the Egyptian made no move, because of the sorrow on the face of one who had been a cherished friend.

"And dost thou dream," asked Menon, pointing to the girl who wept beside him, "that I would willingly bring sorrow to this child? Nay, listen, both, then judge me when ye know the truth."

The Egyptian's hand sank down beside him, and his blade was tossed upon the earth.

"Speak on," he begged, "but, oh, my friend, I pray thee show me no mirage of hope that melteth when a thirsty traveller would drink."

So Menon sat between them on the bench and told them of Semiramis. He told of the artifice by which he sought to gull the King, in a firm belief that Zariaspa would not fall; and yet, should chance prove otherwise, he would fly with his wife into Arabia, where Prince Boabdul offered them a safe retreat. He spoke of his life in Syria, of the wonder of his love for her whom he left behind; and as the tale went on Sozana dried her tears and held the teller's hand in both her own, for she and Memetis knew at last that Menon betrayed no trust in him, and their hearts were glad because of a hope restored.

"Forgive," Memetis pleaded as his friend arose; and Menon smiled, bent down and kissed Sozana as a brother might, then left them with a heavy heart to seek the King.

Ninus still reclined upon his couch—for his hurt was yet unhealed—and rested beneath the shade of a canopy on the palace roof, while he waited in impatience for Menon's coming till the hour was past. Now it is not good to linger when a wounded monarch waits, so Ninus fretted, combing at his beard as was his wont when matters troubled him or anger rose.

"How now," he asked, when Menon came at length with a hasty step, "am I the master, or do I sleep, to awaken presently and find myself a servant—*thou* the King?"

"Forgive, my lord," begged Menon, falling on his knee; "King Ninus sleepeth not. 'Twas the servant who drowsed beside the way. In the garden below I chanced upon Sozana with whom I have held no speech since—"

"Ah!" said the King, his anger fading, while a smile began to play about his mouth. "So the eagle needs must wait when pigeons peck at love. Speak on, my son."

Menon flushed and cast his gaze upon the floor.

"I—I sat with her, my lord, and spoke of many things, taking no thought of

how the moments flew, till—”

”Hark!” said Ninus, as he raised his hand. ”Can it be that I hear Sozana singing from the garden there?” Menon listened, nodded, and the King went on: ”Strange!” he mused. ”For days she hath tasted lightly of her food, and sighed and drooped her head; yet now at thy coming she hath straightway plumed herself, and pipeth a saucy song. Look thou, master fox, what miracle is this?”

Menon flushed again and smiled a foolish smile; yet he answered cunningly, with a lingering grip on the slippery skin of truth:

”My lord, I—I whispered into the maiden’s ear.”

”Oho!” laughed Ninus. ”Now by my beard, I’d give a goodly sum to learn thine art. But come, what chanced to be the burden of this pretty speech?”

”As to that,” said Menon boldly, in a manner which ever pleased his lord, ”my whisper is a secret in the keeping of discretion’s tongue and the maiden’s ear alone.”

”U’u’m!” mused Ninus. ”How many men-at-arms are now prepared to take the field against our good friend Oxyartes?”

For a space the two discussed their plans for a second war against the Bac-trians, then Menon saluted his master’s hand and took his leave. Alone, the King lay thinking on his war, when of a sudden his thought was disarranged by the notes of another song, no longer Sozana’s voice, but that of a man, deep, tender, and pleasing to the ear:

Like Love is the fragile Lotus bud,
When kissed by the gleaming, golden flood
Of light from shining Ra;
It blooms ’neath the warm, caressing beams
On the Nile of Life, and its blossom seems
To shine as a milk-white star.

But lo! when the fateful season turns,
And the tawny desert glows and burns,
Shimmering, parched, and dry—
As the vanquished foe to the victor stoops,
All faded and shriveled the Lotus droops—
And, withered, it falls to die!

”Strange!” mused Ninus, combing at his beard. ”The Egyptian sitteth with

Sozana in the gardens down below and singeth a song of love; albeit I mark that his song be sad.... Yet—why should he sing at all, the fool! Doth he, too, whisper

into the maiden's ear, and—”

The monarch paused abruptly, to call to his faithful leech in a tone of petulance:

”Argol! come stroke my side in the region of my wound; for I tell thee, man, it itcheth damnably.”

CHAPTER XIII

THE SKIN OF A ONE-EYED LION

The throne-hall of the palace was of lofty pitch—and of spacious depth and width. In its rear, through arches, lay an open portico, while beyond could be seen the Valley of the Tigris and the reaches of the river on its journey to the sea. Within were carven pillars of marble and of stone brought hither by utmost toil from foreign lands; likewise other pillars of malachite, of silver, and of hammered gold, draped with hangings of purple and embroidered stuffs from the treasure-stores of far Phoenicia. There were curious arms, the trophies of chase and war, rare gifts from conquered princes sent to Nineveh through love or fear, and the mounted heads and skins of beasts which had fallen before the King's own spear and shafts.

The entrance was set with chiselled lions, and wingéd bulls in miniature of those which guarded the western gate, while the walls were lined with *steles*, whereon were pictured the battles of the King, his deeds of prowess in the hunt, his sacrifices at the altars of his gods.

On the ceiling stretched a tessellated emblem of all the deities wrought cunningly with bits of tinted stone and precious gems, a work of art so fabulous in price that even the spendthrift Ninus drew his breath when the cost thereof was known to him. In the centre sat the great lord Asshur in his godly robes, his breast adorned with the wingéd disk designed in pearls and sapphires on a base of lapis-lazuli. Before high Asshur King Ninus knelt, obedient to the heavenly will alone, while around them were grouped the lesser deities—Ramân hurling forth his lightning forks, Bel in his hornéd cap, red Gibil peering out through sacrificial flame and smoke, Bêlit princess of the dawn, Shala, Nebo, Ninêb, and Nerga of the chase, Shamashi-Ramân, father of the King—a heavenly litter of divinities, each dear to the heart of his special worshipper.

On a sumptuous throne sat Ninus, with Sozana at his side, for the queen

had passed away ere Nineveh was complete; so now his daughter held the highest place in the monarch's heart. The hall was thronged with chieftains, priests, and the king's good friends. At the feet of Ninus sat Menon, and at his side the Arabian Prince, Boabdul Ben Hutt, whom the king had urged to grace his festival. There were kings of Tyre and Sidon, from beside the Sea of the Setting Sun, whose cities sent their caravans of tribute and of tax with muttered curses trailing after them; and likewise came the sons of Canaan, giant Khatti chiefs still restless beneath their yoke, princes of Babylon, Syrians, lords of the desert and the sea; grim mountaineers who had fought like rats in the caverns of their rocky homes; governors, rulers, and a swarm of wives and daughters of these men, all now unveiled at the mandate of the King.

From behind a pillar Memetis looked upon Sozana's face, his hope an oasis whence his soul might drink the waters of his love; yet now must he sip lest Ninus mark his thirst and be aggrieved thereat. So, with his eyes, the Egyptian looked out upon the throng, yet with his heart he saw one maid alone.

A goodly gathering it was, in rich attire, in armor and robes of state, the warriors of a hundred wars, the proudest beauty of the court, assembled now to view the monster tablet carven in honor of the King. It was newly set within the wall, hidden from sight by crimson draperies, and on either side stood the sculptor Bobardol and the High Priest Nakir-Kish, the one to draw the cloth aside, the other to bless the *stèle* in the name of Asshur.

A breathless silence fell upon the courtiers; King Ninus gave a sign, and the sculptor drew the draperies aside. On the *stèle* was pictured in *bas-relief* a wondrous exploit of the King, who, mounted on a rearing charger, battled with a king of beasts. This lion was springing upon the withers of the steed, seeking to drag the hunter from his seat with teeth and claws, while Ninus gripped its throat and crushed its skull with a haft of his broken spear.

A triumph of art it was, bespeaking valor spirited and rare, rather than exactness of the facts concerning this glorious happening, and a murmur of admiration rose to every lip because of the daring monarch and the skill of Bobardol.

Below an inscription told the story of the deed, in language employed by Assyria's Kings, wherein they laid aside the robes of modesty and spake for the world to hear:

"I, Ramân-Nirari, son of Shamashi-Ramân and mightiest of all Assyria's Kings, by the will of Asshur, lord of earth and sky, fared forth to conquer lions in this the twentieth year of my resplendent reign. Much game I slew, my horse bestriding, likewise upon my feet alone with arrows and with spear. Thus it came to pass that I, Ninus, to whom no other may compare in skill and lack of dread, joined battle with a mighty, one-eyed lion in the thickets along the Euphrates. Terrible in rage was he, this lion, because of the wounds I gave, roaring till my

servants fled in fear away. Yet I, alone, took hold upon his throat and smote him thrice, in that his roaring ceased and went out of his belly with the death of a so great beast.”

”To the high lord Asshur praise! To Ninus praises greater still, for Asshur watched while Ninus wrought the deed!”

Amid rejoicings the *stèle* was blessed by the High Priest Nakir-Kish, while the wine cup circled and a chant was heard from a train of hidden priests—a chant which now was taken up in the temples throughout vast Nineveh, and the gods smelt sacrifice from a thousand altar stones. A jingling tinkle then arose, when from right and left two lines of dancers tripped into the hall, to bow before the King, to rise and glide in rhythmic steps through the measures of their dance. A score they were, of beauties picked from many lands and climes, arrayed in gauzy robes, rich head dress and bangles of bronze and gold. They swayed to a pace of slow monotony, with the sad, melodious strain of citherns and of flutes of quaint design; then, suddenly, at a crash of cymbals, the dancers woke to life, whirling, tossing high their arms, leaping through a swift, bewildering maze, with gleaming bodies, crimson lips and pleading eyes. Louder and louder rang the music’s call to passion and to love, while faster and faster the pink feet fell in velvet kisses on the floor of tinted brick; till, at last, with a scurrying rush, the maidens left the hall, while a shout of applause and noise of clapping hands rolled after them down the corridors.

A silence followed, wherein the courtiers waited eagerly for a signal that the feast was spread, when an officer stepped toward the throne and bowed before the King.

”Thy pardon, lord,” he faltered, ”but a woman clamoreth at the palace door. She would enter without delay and will not be denied.”

So strange was the man’s demeanor that all who heard him marveled at its cause, yet Ninus spoke impatiently:

”Bid her begone, lest my servants scourge her from the city gates!”

The officer, with downcast eyes, retreated toward the door where every eye was turned in sharp expectancy of a stranger unbidden to the feast. From without the audience heard a murmur of protest cut short by a firm, imperious command; then the officer came slinking back into the hall.

”Lord,” he quaved, trembling before the King, ”thy high commands I gave, bidding the woman depart in peace, yet—yet she will not go.”

”*Will not!*” King Ninus roared. ”By Gibil’s breath, what manner of wench is this to defy me in my teeth?”

”Lord,” the soldier stammered in confusion, while his cheeks went white and red by turns, ”lord, no mortal wench is she, but a spirit from the outer world, so fair to look upon that—”

A roar of laughter checked him, and even Ninus joined therein, yet presently the King spoke sternly, striving to hide his smile:

"Go, ape, and bring her hither! Yet mark you, man; if she be not fairer than any woman of my land, I swear to hang you from the highest roof in Nineveh!"

A titter arose and the blushing officer retired, to presently return with—not one stranger in his wake—but three. In the lead a woman strode, yet such a woman as the court of Ninus had never looked upon. She was clothed in a skirt of lamb's wool whose border touched her knee, her limbs encased in doe skin lashed with thongs; across her breast was flung a leopard's silky hide, and head dress had she none save a crown of flame-hued hair. In her hand she held a hunting spear, and at her back was slung her bow, together with its quiver and a sheaf of shafts. Behind her walked an Indian, of lowly mien but of mighty strength, who, besides his spear and bow, bore a half dried lion's skin, while at his heels a shepherd's dog came swaggering in as though the palace were some kennel of a lesser dog—and, strangely, the woman's bearing seemed the same.

On the assembled court the effect was varied and most strange. The women raised their brows in outward scorn of this stranger and her garb, yet in their secret hearts they knew a rival who outstripped them far; therefore they hated her and yearned that some swift calamity befall; but their husbands looked with a kindlier gaze. The warriors, the statesmen, aye, even the priests themselves, for a moment stood in silent awe, each face revealing what each soul would hide—wonder, worship, base desire—for the passions of men are tuned to divers keys when beauty strikes the chords.

To Menon the woman came as a fevered dream from which he longed to wake and know that she was safe in Ascalon; yet the dog was there—and Huzim—Huzim who looked into his master's eyes and dropped his own. It was true! She had come into the lion's very lair, and the voice of Fear cried out aloud that Folly had claimed its own.

"*Shammuramat!*" breathed Menon, leaning limp and white on the shoulder of Boabdul. "May the gods lend aid, where I may give her none!"

"Courage, friend!" the Arab whispered, "for in this, as in all things, my scimitar is brother to thy sword."

The King leaned back upon his throne, with folded arms, with eyelids narrowed into slits beneath his frown, with fingers that combed his beard, while the heart of him rejoiced. At last it was she! The red-haired devil who had perched in a citron tree and mocked him as he fled before a wounded lion. Ah, now should she pay the price of laughter in the coin of tears!

A hush had fallen on the company, each waiting with bated breath for the King to speak; but the King spoke not. At length Semiramis, wearying of the pause, stepped forward without the royal word of sufferance.

"My lord," said she, and pointed to her servant and the gift he bore, "I bring a lion's skin from the thickets of the Euphrates. A mighty one-eyed lion which—"

"Hold!" cried Ninus, leaping to his feet, his hard hands clenched, his neck veins standing out to a wrathful rush of blood. For a moment he stood, regarding the woman with a dark, malignant frown, then he turned to a man-at-arms beside his throne: "Go down with this wench to the keep below and let her taste the lash!"

To those who heard, this deep injustice came like a thunderbolt, for naught had the woman done save to bear a present to the King and speak without his leave. A murmur of protest sounded throughout the gathering, and Menon half arose with his hand upon his sword; yet the Arab checked him by a warning word and a grip upon his arm, for the time was not yet ripe to place a life in jeopardy.

The man-at-arms, obedient to his master's will, strode forward and laid his hand upon the prisoner's arm; but at his touch Semiramis took a backward step, then with her doubled fist she struck him fair upon the apple of his throat. With a grunt of pain the fellow sprawled full length, his armor clanging on the floor, while Huzim lowered his spear point threateningly and Habal crouched beside the prostrate man, his lips rolled back, his eye upon his mistress, waiting for a sign.

Again fell silence, to linger till one might count a score, while all looked on in dumb amaze at this queen who dared the rage of Ninus, meeting his eye with an eye that knew not fear and his scowl with a reckless smile.

"My lord," she began once more, her low voice smooth and even as though the stretching of a warrior on his back were but a pleasing courtesy, "my lord, I bring a lion's skin from the thickets of the Euphrates. A mighty one-eyed lion which leaped upon thy horse's neck and—"

"Have done!" stormed Ninus. "What witch's foolery is this of lions in the thickets of the Euphrates?" He paused to laugh derisively. "Perchance it was even thou who slew the brute—thou with thy puny might."

"Puny?" smiled Semiramis, pointing to the fallen man-at arms. "Nay, ask this grimy dog who dared to pollute me with his touch. And as for the lion, good my lord, I have his skin. Mayhap I slew him, and again mayhap he laid aside his coat in the manner of a wrestler, eager for another bout with Ninus, who, alas, receiveth gifts with but a sorry grace." She smiled once more and again took up her interrupted speech: "My lord, I bring a lion's skin—"

"Peace! Peace!" cried the King, then turned to glare about him savagely. A laugh had broken from some hidden soldier's throat, and, as a flame is kindled from a spark, so mirth ran riot up and down the hall.

The King, whose temper had been weakened by his wound, was placed in a grievous pass. Should he suffer this witch to tell her damning tale of disaster

in the chase, it would brand the royal hunter as a braggart and a liar—a case far out of tune with a king’s desire to be thought a god. On the other hand, should he check her speech by force, there were those who would hold displeasure for a deed they could not understand. Therefore Ninus swallowed down his spleen and sought to meet guile with guile.

”Princess,” he laughed, as he once more took his seat, ”with anger assumed did I test the mettle of a huntress at my court, and my heart is glad because of the spirit she hath shown. Speak then, fearing naught, and if thy tale prove true and pleasing to our ears, demand what thou wilt from Ninus in exchange for this one-eyed lion’s skin.”

Semiramis bowed low and was about to speak, when the monarch checked her with a lifted hand.

”Nay, a moment,” he begged. ”Now perchance I might tell this tale myself, and thereby lose no shred of its palatable meat.” He smiled to his court amusedly and once more bent his glance upon Semiramis: ”A lion’s skin is borne me from the thickets along the lower Euphrates—a one-eyed lion, fierce and strong, that leapt upon my charger’s neck and pressed me hurtfully. I, Ninus, in my terror of a beast so strange, then flung my weapons down, turned tail and fled for safety in my distant camp, whilst thou—all praise to Asshur for the deed—came after me and slew my enemy.” Again the monarch laughed and stretched his hand toward the huntress: ”Speak, pretty one, is this the tale of Ninus and the one-eyed lion?”

The King, in painting with a brush of truth, had spread his colors artfully, for it came to him that to steal the thunder from an accusing tongue was better far than a shield of defensive lies. So the courtiers whispered among themselves and smiled at the pleasing humor of their Song. This joyed the monarch vastly, for his vanity was large, and now that his wit had given him a vantage ground, he turned to Semiramis, ready for attack, but was ill prepared for his subtle enemy.

On her face came a look of childish wonderment and pain, while her hands were raised in protest of a thought so wrongful to the King. She stood with her back toward the *stèle* which pictured the lion hunt, yet, on entering the hall, her eye had marked it, and memory served her well.

”Ah, no, my lord,” she answered timidly, as she slowly shook her head, ”of a truth thy words are the words of jest, for I saw thy battle from the bough of a citron tree wherein I had climbed in my wish to gaze upon the King.”

She paused to drop her eyes, but raised them again at a smile and a word from Assyria’s lord.

”Speak,” said the King, ”and fear not, for we fain would hear this tale.

”O radiant one,” returned Semiramis, ”small skill have I in the telling of a deed so great, and yet each day my prayers of praise go up to Ishtar, in that I saw this glorious battle of a god.”

The King breathed easy and ceased to comb his beard, and Semiramis began her story, of the hunt. At first her voice was low, melodious and calm, yet presently it rose to the fevered pitch of an orator whose audience is but a harp beneath his hand, each string a heart to thrill and quiver at a master-touch. Her listeners seemed to see the hunter charge the king of beasts, his stout spear shivering with the impact of the blow. They heard the lion's roar of fury as he leaped on the shoulder of the rearing steed, to tear at his enemy, while the two tossed to and fro in a grip of death. They heard the rip of armored garments at the stroke of raking claws, while the blood of Ninus dyed his vestments red and his arm rained blows upon the skull of a maddened beast. They saw its mighty jaws relax, the tawny body heave in agony, to drop to the earth at last in death. Then the conqueror strove to staunch his wounds and, failing, rode for succor to his distant camp.

Semiramis ceased to speak, and those who had listened drew a long, deep sigh of wonder at the King's escape and at her who told the tale so truthfully. King Ninus likewise heaved a sigh, but of peace and sweet content, for never since his reign began had he looked upon so glorious a liar.

"Behold!" cried Nakir-Kish, and pointed to the *stèle*.

Semiramis turned, to stare in seeming wonder at the carved miracle. One fluttering hand was drawn across her eyes; her lips moved slowly, giving forth no sound, and all save two who watched her felt that here, indeed, was truth. King Ninus raised his hand to check a tribute of applause, and spoke in a voice of gentleness.

"What more?" he asked. "How came it to pass that a woman beareth the lion's skin to Nineveh?"

Semiramis spread her hands in the manner of one who does a deed too small for the waste of words.

"O mighty one," she answered simply, "of a truth my tale is told. When the beast lay dead I descended from out my tree to watch while my servant removed its skin." She took the lion's hide from Huzim and laid it at the monarch's feet. "My lord, I bring this simple token of my love to Nineveh, in trust that the King of all the world will grant my small desires."

"Say on," cried Ninus, "and by the sword of Asshur do I swear to make a just reward. Speak, then, for we harken to thy wish."

Semiramis spoke not. She raised her eyes to his in the wondering innocence of a little child and smiled.

"Nay, lord, why now should I name desires which Ninus in his wisdom knoweth well?"

"True," returned the monarch thoughtfully, once more combing at his beard and wondering if some trap were being laid, "true, and yet 'twere well to name

thy wish aloud, in that these my friends may ever bear a witness to the promise made. Speak, for Ninus heedeth."

"Forgiveness!" begged Semiramis, kneeling upon the lion's skin. "This, O Father of the Land, I ask alone."

"Granted!" cried the King, "though I swear I know not—um—though thy sin be great or small."

Semiramis pressed the fingers of the King against her lips, then, rising, turned with a joyous cry and flung herself into Menon's arms.

A gasp of wonder rose from those who saw, while Menon flushed, and his friend Boabdul smiled. Sozana sought the eyes of Memetis with a furtive glance, but the King rose up in wrath.

"What now!" he demanded, in a voice which shook with passion, but Semiramis checked him with a laugh and stood before him holding Menon's hand.

"Three years ago, as thou knowest well, my lord, he wedded me in Syria."

"Eh—what!" cried the puzzled King. "In truth he is thy spouse?"

"Aye," she nodded happily, "in defiance of his master's will; and thought—the foolish boy—to blind the eyes of the Eagle of Assyria. Yet as for me, my lord, I laughed, for well I knew that the vanities of man must come to dust. What! I asked him, is thy master a fool whose eye can fathom naught beyond his nose? Nay, King Ninus is a god whose wisdom marketh the works of lesser men, and he smileth because of them. Therefore, since Ninus knoweth all, he will treasure up this jest till such a time as Menon cometh unto Nineveh, and will rally him in the sight of all the court. Speak then, O generous lord, that thy courtiers may laugh with thee."

The monarch made no answer. He was like unto a man who stood between two ditches, each too wide to spring across, yet spring he must. To admit a knowledge of his governor's disobedience, would mean forgiveness where the measure of his wrath was fain to fall; and yet denial stamped him, not as a high, far-seeing god, but a mortal fool whose vision ceased at the tip of his royal nose. So Ninus pondered thoughtfully.

"How now, my lord," asked Semiramis with her witch's smile, "in truth didst't thou not know of this joyous happening from the first?"

"Aye," growled Ninus, savagely, "I knew it—from the first."

CHAPTER XIV

THE TURN OF A WOMAN'S TONGUE

For many days the mind of the King was troubled by a fractious mood. He strove to nurse an anger against Semiramis, yet, even as he brooded, his thought would trail away from the wrong she had put upon him, and linger on the witchery of the woman's eyes.

"*Heh!*" he muttered, savagely. "This imp is not an imp to be forgotten in a day!"

There were hours wherein he was prone to pass the matter by, to forgive these lovers who had balked his will by a wit more subtle than his own; yet moments would come when he longed to strip her shoulders bare and watch the lash laid on; and in such a mood he caused her to be brought before him as he lolled in his garden in the noontide heat.

His couch had been set beside a fountain's edge, beneath a trellaced arbor whereon a vine of Syria climbed, the great black grapes in clusters peeping from their leaves and set apart for the lips of the King alone. At his hand were a jeweled flagon and a dish of fruit on which he regaled himself from time to time as he waited for Semiramis, while at his head stood a eunuch who waved a fan of feathered plumes and watched lest a buzzing insect rest upon his monarch's skin.

King Ninus, smiling grimly, watched Semiramis coming down a garden-path, and hardened his heart, for now, alone with her, he would speak his mind as befit the master of the world, and even learn, perchance, if her arrogance would break beneath the lash.

Then presently she stood before him, clothed in a white simar, whose edges were stitched with pale blue feathers of some tiny bird, crossed on her breast and caught by a silver girdle at her waist, the soft folds falling to her sandaled feet. Her hair was drawn from her temples in a drooping curve, confined with jeweled pins in a knot behind, and was covered by a gauzy veil, now lifted from her face in deference to the King.

In the eyes of Ninus she was fair beyond his fondest dreams of womankind, yet, withal, she galled him by her calm assurance of the power to charm. So, for a space he regarded her and spoke no word, till Semiramis, uninvited, perched herself upon a stool and inquired into the monarch's health as though she had been his leech in charge.

"Woman," growled the King, "knowest thou why I bring thee here—alone—where none may hear my words or thine?"

She smiled and looked into his eyes, striving to read the mind beneath, then plucked a bunch of his sacred grapes from the vine about her head and began to eat them thoughtfully.

"Mayhap my lord is weary of himself and willeth to be amused."

The King half raised himself upon his arm in angry astonishment, for the

impudence of both her act and speech was past belief. Serene and undismayed, she spoke as an equal, to *him*—the lord of all Assyria—and pecked at his royal fruit with the recklessness of some wanton bird. His mouth went open, while he vainly sought for words wherein to shape his wrath; yet, ere he could find them, Semiramis had poised a luscious grape between her thumb and finger and thrust it between his lips.

"Eat, my lord," she murmured, smiling happily, "for never have I tasted fruit that lay more sweet upon my tongue."

So the monarch, marveling at a weakness which he could not understand, devoured the grape and cast its skin into the fountain at his side.

"The grapes of Syria!" laughed Semiramis. "Ah, good my lord, their flavor, like unto a memory, leadeth me among my native hills—to the lake of Ascalon and the vine-clad temple crouching on its shore. If my lord would hunt, I can lead him where the beasts of prey are fierce and strong—where—"

"Nay," said the King who stretched himself at ease upon his couch, "I would hear the story of Shammuramat."

She bowed her head in obedience to his will, and, as before she had spoken to Menon on the steps of Dagon's temple, so now again she told the tale of a babe that was nursed by doves, the while she fed her royal listener with grapes, and watched his anger fade. She told him of her home with Simmas, the father-dove, and of her other home in Azapah, whence she fled by night to join the battle of the Kurds.

The eyes of Ninus were sparkling now, his lips had twitched into a smile; and when he learned how the tax on Syria was raised, he laughed till the tears ran down and the pain in his wounded side aggrieved him sorely.

Was this the woman above whose back he longed to hear the whistle of a scourge? Nay, strive as he would, he failed to harbor wrath against Semiramis, yet in his breast there rankled still a wound to pride. Someone must suffer because of the disobedience; if not the woman, then justice must fall upon the man. Should Menon be blest above all other men—to enjoy the love of Ninus and also the love of one who was fit to mate with kings? Nay! By the necklace of the five great gods, this thing was not to be!

So Ninus nursed a grave displeasure against his general, while he lay with half closed eyes and hung upon the words of his general's wife. He watched her lips, her eyes, the curve of her rounded breast, and the tiny veins on her velvet skin where the blood of passion drowsed. In the soil of his soul a seed was planted deep, and though he knew not its name, it would grow in might, a sturdy vine that twined its soft, insidious tendrils round a monarch's heart, till it dragged him to the earth with the weight of its ripened fruit.

The palace gardens lazed in a silence of the noon-day's heat that was bro-

ken only by the fountain's gurgling song, the flutter of a bird that dropped to drink, and the voice of Semiramis, low, melodious, and sweet. The sounds on the city streets below were hushed in the hour of rest, and the lisp of the breeze was but a whisper among the palms. Farther and fainter the Syrian's murmurs trailed away, till they seemed to the King the nameless voices of the night, when a hunter sprawls beside his camp-fire, listening, listening, while he slides from weariness to peace—and Ninus slept.

In his dreams he sat upon the throne at Nineveh and looked toward the east. His eye could pierce the snow-capped mountain range, and the rolling mists beyond which hung above the walls and citadel of Zariaspā. He saw his armies swarming up the battlements, to be beaten back and tumble headlong to the earth, while his foemen waved their bloodstained arms and shouted, though their shouts he could not hear. He strove to cry commands, but a hot wind blew them back into his throat, and the Bactrians leaped from their battlements to smite the children of Assyria. Yet, suddenly, they seemed to pause in fear, retreating to their walls before the charge of a single chariot which swept across the plain. It was drawn by three white steeds that fought with hoof and teeth, the taut reins held in the shield hand of Semiramis. Her locks, unbound, were streaming in the wind. The sun's rays lit her golden armor with a flash of fire that burned through the ranks of her fleeing enemies. Straight at the walls she drove, while the King looked on and trembled in his dread. A stone from a catapult went hurtling out and burst upon her shield, but she laughed and urged her steeds. He saw her splash through a bloody moat, and, shuddering, closed his eyes; yet when he opened them again, lo! the city walls had crumbled into dust, and the chariot raced across great mounds of smoking wreck. Westward it came, through passes and defiles, up, up to the summit of the Hindu-Kush, to thunder down into the plains beyond, wheel swiftly to the west and speed for Nineveh! She was coming! Semiramis was coming! Ah, he could see her clearly now—her great eyes blazing from a splotch of red and gold—her white throat gleaming through a web of wind-blown hair. She passed the city gates, which burst before her rush, and drove full swing between long rows of winged bulls and crouching lions. The King could now discern the beat of hoofs, the ring of the driver's voice as she urged her steeds, and the crack of her pitiless lash. He heard the shock of her chariot wheels when they struck the palace steps, and the splintering crash of Ramān's statue as it overturned; then the massive doors of the hall fell in, while a queen of battle thundered over them, to check her panting steeds beside the throne.

"Bactria is no more!" she cried, and leaped to a seat beside the King. Then Ninus flung wide his arms, yet ere he felt her weight against his breast, a black cloud slid between them—and the lord of dreams awoke.

Semiramis had gone, and in her place stood Menon, waiting till the slumbers of his master ceased.

"My lord," spoke Menon humbly, as he bent his knee, "the armies of Assyria lie beyond the wall, ready to march on Zariaspa at the King's command."

For many moments Ninus scowled upon this man who in days of old had been his friend in joy and grief, in peace, in victory and defeat.

"Then lead them forth at dawn," he answered, sternly; "and mark thou, Menon, this for thine ear alone. On Zariaspa's fall will hang the fate of those who disobey my will."

Menon looked up swiftly, and the King spoke on:

"Thy deed in Syria hath grieved me sorely, the more because of a trust misplaced, and so thy hand shall dip no more in the fleshpots at thy master's board. Go, then, without the love of Ninus which was like unto the love of a father for his son, and sue for pardon when our enemies shall cease to be."

The monarch waved his hand as a sign that the conference was done, yet Menon lingered still.

"And she, my lord?" he asked, striving to quell the tremor in his tone. "If Bactria falleth, what then of my wife Shammuramat?"

The King lay still and pondered for a space, till at length his dark eyes glowed with the fires of craft. A plan was born wherein he might compass his own desires, and at the self same time hold Menon in the grip of unceasing diligence.

"Shammuramat," said Ninus, smiling in his beard, "remaineth a hostage here at Nineveh till the war be done. My army, once beyond the Hindu-Kush, shall divide in twain, the one half mine, the other thine, albeit Ninus is the chief of all. Then will we each lay siege to Zariaspa, the one upon the east, the other on the west; and as thy men are spurred to deeds of valor by promises of high reward, so will I urge mine. And look thou, boy, the walls are strong, their copings manned by sturdy foes; yet to him who first shall stand a conqueror on the summit of their citadel, that man shall receive a prize."

"And the prize, my lord?" asked Menon, shivering at a dread to which he dared not give a name.

"*Shammuramat!*" cried Ninus, bringing down his doubled fist, till the table rocked and the flagon overturned, the dark wine gurgling out upon the earth like the blood of a stricken warrior. "To the conqueror shall go this prize—by Asshur I swear it!—though he be her wedded spouse or the spawn of a Hittite serf. Now go! and set thy hope on the citadel of Zariaspa."

For an instant Menon lingered still, his gaze fixed fast upon the eyes of Ninus, his hot blood surging madly through his veins, his sword hand playing nervously about his blade; then he laughed and turned upon his heel without

salute, albeit his laughter was like unto the cry of a strangled wolf.

"Wait!" called the King, and as Menon paused, he pointed a warning finger at his under-chief. "No parting word may be spoken with thy wife, save in my presence and in my audience hall this night. And more; should thy lips tell aught which Ninus gave in secret to thine ear, then marvel not if my men-at-arms cast lots amongst them for a concubine!"

So Menon went out from the gardens of the King, and, with a head that drooped upon his breast, rode slowly to the camp beyond the city wall.

CHAPTER XV

AN ARMY ON THE MARCH

Sad at heart Semiramis stood on the palace roof at dawn and watched the army, like a mighty serpent, wriggling away toward the east.

Her parting with Menon had been strange indeed, for while his lips spoke bravely of the days to come, in his eyes lurked shadows of a troubled soul. Some secret preyed upon him which he dare not share with her, and the eagle glance of Ninus rested on him ceaselessly, even while the husband's kiss was pressed upon her lips; and Menon stumbled as he left the hall. What danger to her lord lay hidden behind the master's smile, and why should he hold her here, a prisoner, at Nineveh? Menon, too, had bade her stay behind, though since her coming, in the one sweet night when she rested at his side, he had sworn to part from her no more till Ishtar snapped the thread. What now? Was his change of heart a mandate of the King, whereby her lord should suffer in secret for his disobedience, when open forgiveness was but a close-masked lie? By Gibil, if he dared—!

Semiramis leaned across the parapet, shaking her hard-clenched fist toward the lines of marching men which had swallowed up the purple litter of the wounded King. Hour by hour she watched the armies move, like restless waves on the breast of a shoreless sea, the sunlight flashing on their polished gear. Line on line of footmen swung in measured stride, archers, slingers, pikemen, and those who fought with axes and with staves; vast clouds of riders skirting the Khusur river's edge where the way was cleared for the monster catapults now knocked apart and bound upon carts with wooden wheels. As far as the eye could reach great lines of lowing oxen drew these machines of war, their drivers goading them with whips and the points of swords, while as a rear-guard came

a rumbling host of chariots clanging through the city's eastern gate.

A brazen sun climbed upward on its arch, hung like a keystone over Nineveh, then dipped toward the west; and still Assyria's forces stretched in sight of the high brown walls, a tangle of an hundred nations pressing on at the will of a wounded King. A ball of dull red fire hung low behind the hills; a purple mist came creeping down on Nineveh, and the tail of an army disappeared beyond the river bend. Then Semiramis cast herself upon the palace roof and wept, for in the sob of a rising breeze she seemed to hear the sigh of Dagon and the rush of a carp that dragged her beetle down. It were better far that she should rot in Ascalon than dwell a prisoner at Nineveh, watching, listening, through the dull eternities of night for the footstep of a loved one who came not back to her.

* * * * *

The Assyrian host crawled eastward through the dust and heat, skirting the mountain spurs, and marching through the plains of Media, where an infant nation gave but weak resistance to the progress of the King. For four long moons they journeyed slowly, with many halts, for the ponderous machines of war retarded speed because of their weight and the breaking of axles and of wheels. Up mountain sides they were dragged by ropes attached to cattle and to slaves who held them back from running down the slopes beyond, though anon some heavier cart would sway, careen, and tumble with a rending crash among the stones.

In the van, and guarded by wings of flying horse, went an army of workmen who smoothed the way, hewing wide roads through forestlands, bridging the smaller streams, or constructing barges where rivers needs be crossed. Through desert wastes they laid a track of wood, whereon the wheels of catapults might roll and sink not deeply into the sands; and thus Assyria moved, by force of slow, brute strength, till the slopes of Hindu-Kush were reached and the toil of gods began.

King Ninus might have fretted at the slowness of his pace, yet his wound had healed and his strength came back again; so while his engines and his baggage carts crept slowly along their way, he foraged through the lands, subduing strangers, adding them to his mighty host, or collecting tribute and a store of food against the hungry days of siege. Where peoples were peaceful or stricken with fear before his might, then would he hunt from dawn till the shades of evening fell, though since the day of his going out from Nineveh, Menon joined not in his master's sports, nor dipped his hand in the fleshpots at the royal board; and in the eyes of men this thing was strange.

To the warriors in Menon's charge, their chieftain had passed from boy-

hood to sterner age, for his laugh no more resounded through the camp as in days of old, and a frown of gloom sat always upon his brow. Where the followers of Ninus feasted by night and day, laying great rolls of fat upon their bones, Menon's men were held to the toil of war, to the practice of arms and a temperate use of wine and food, till slender and gaunt they grew, yet clear of sight and as hard as the rocky roads up which they climbed.

When half of the mountain's side was scaled and the army rested in the valley's lap, King Ninus proclaimed a council of his chiefs wherein he set forth plans to take the enemy unawares. That Oxyartes smelled their coming, was clear because of his many spies who dodged like mountain goats among the crags; yet weary days must pass ere the great machines of war could be dragged into the plains beyond, and this the Bactrians likewise knew full well. Therefore Ninus planned a sudden dash of chariots and horse through the highest mountain pass and a swift descent on Zariaspa, thereby cutting off a mass of Bactrians ere they found a safe retreat behind their walls.

This strategy seemed wise, and the chiefs as with one voice agreed thereto save Menon only, who sat apart and spoke no word. King Ninus, noting this, grew vexed and gave command that Menon stay behind in charge of the footmen and the baggage trains, a flout which hurt the youthful warrior to the marrow of his pride. For a moment he looked upon his master, then shrugged and left the council tent in silence, striding down the rocky path to his camp below. He yearned to reach the walls of Zariaspa, yet he knew full well that Ninus might accomplish naught without the aid of his ladders and his catapults; and these must be watched with a sleepless eye, for in them lay the hope of a breach in the city's walls or a path which led to the summit of the citadel. One man would stand upon that lofty goal and claim the prize—Semiramis—and Menon swore by his every god of light and gloom to be that man!

When the cloak of evening fell King Ninus with his horsemen and his chariots moved stealthily up the winding trail which led to the mountain's top, while Menon brooded by his camp fire far into the night. In the valley about him his soldiers lay asleep, wrapped in their cloaks, for the mountain air was chill; on the cliffs above his ghostly sentinels could be seen against the stars, watchful lest marauding bands swoop down to pillage the baggage trains or scatter the beasts of burden through intersecting glades. Many and bold were the Bactrian mountaineers who spared no pains to harass the Assyrians' march, though far too weak to battle openly; therefore they clung to the army's flanks, as insects gall a steed; and because of them Assyria itched by night and day.

The hours dragged on and on, till Menon with a sigh arose at last and entered his tent where he flung himself upon his couch of skins for an hour of sleep; but sleep came not, for his heart was heavy, and his thoughts trailed ever

back to Nineveh and to her who lay in peril of a fate unknown. Then, presently, his eyelids drooped with a restless drowsiness wherein came tangled, half wakeful dreams through which he clambered up the walls of Zariaspa, while Ninus pushed him downward, laughing to see him fall. In the far, dim distance the voice of a woman stormed, sobbing because she might not reach his side; then, suddenly, Menon sat upright, listening, at the call of a sentry outside his tent. The flap was thrust aside, and Huzim entered, bearing a heavy burden in his arms.

When a torch was kindled, its light revealed a Bactrian spy whom Huzim had captured on the outskirts of the camp and whose limbs were bound with leathern thongs, for the Indian found less labor in bearing this spy upon his mighty back than in leading him, struggling, down a tedious defile.

The prisoner was questioned concerning his master, Oxyartes, but refused to speak. They scourged him, yet he bore the lash in silence, scowling at his enemies, till Huzim procured a torture iron, clamped it on the Bactrian's bare foot and turned the screws; then the wretch's spirit broke; he shrieked for mercy, promising to reveal all secrets which the Assyrians wished to learn. Menon nodded, and by a sign directed Huzim to keep the iron about the prisoner's foot, then he turned to the sufferer sternly:

"Speak," he commanded; "yet remember, fellow, that much is known to us, and for each false word that slips your tongue, this screw shall sink a hair's breadth into your ankle bone."

The threat proved potent; Menon learned, by swift, adroit questionings, that Oxyartes lay in wait for Ninus at the outlet of a deep defile on the ridge of the highest mountain pass, where, aided by rising ground and the towering cliffs on either side, he could crush the Assyrians, even as this devil's iron bit into a captive's foot.

Menon pondered thoughtfully, for the case was evil, demanding all his craft. Mayhap the captive lied, seeking to draw away another force from the baggage trains, when hidden mountaineers might pour into the valley, wrecking the machines of war and dealing a fatal blow to the plans of siege. On the other hand, should Ninus, in his overconfidence of strength, become entangled in the narrow gorge, then of a certainty Assyria's fate was sealed.

Menon faltered. A haunting whisper worried at his ears:

"Let Ninus die! Wherefore should a mortal shield an enemy who houndeth him in a cause of cruelty? Leave him to his fate! Race back to Nineveh and the goal of a heart's desire!"

'Twas sweet, this haunting whisper, yet another voice within him cried aloud—cried for the glory of Assyria and the lives of those who rode into a snare. Should he soil a warrior's after-memory with the murder of his friends—those who had charged with him in Syria against the Kurds? By the breath of Ishtar,

no! Semiramis would scorn him as the weakness of a craven merited!

In a moment Menon's tent was thronged with officers and under-chiefs to whom he issued swift commands. The camp in the valley woke to sudden life. Slumbering warriors roused to cast their cloaks aside and form in silent, eager bands, their heavier armor left behind, their backs untrammelled by any weight save their arms alone, their pouches for food, and leathern flasks for water and for wine.

In the valley, carts and wagons were set in one vast oval barricade, while oxen and the burden-beasts were roped within. Beneath the wheels lay a force of men who slept upon their arms, and treble sentries paced the outposts and lined the cliffs above. The baggage train was a fortress now which well might hold its own till Menon could reach his threatened King, strike at the enemy, and hasten back again.

And now the force was on the move, Menon in the van, while at his side strode the faithful Kedah, he who had served in Syria, and at his master's lightest nod would charge across the lip of a precipice. Three spears' lengths in advance went the Bactrian spy who, choosing between the torture-iron and a sack of gold, had promised to lead the Assyrians by a shorter route to where King Oxyartes lay concealed; yet, lest he betray his trust, a noose was knotted about his neck and Huzim followed close upon his heels.

To those who raced with the coming dawn on slippery mountain paths, circling deep chasms, leaping from stone to stone where torrents cut their way, the ceaseless trainings of Menon's camp now stood them in good stead. The chill of the altitude was felt no more, for the soldiers' blood ran bubbling through their veins as their limbs grew damp with the sweat of toil. Upward they clambered, swinging westward in a wide detour, in the hope of taking Oxyartes in his rear, now running swiftly down some gentle slope, now clinging like flies to the face of a dizzy cliff, then up again on narrow, tortuous ways.

They came at last upon the point where Ninus and his force had passed when they entered the gorge which notched the summit of the mountain range; and as Menon paused, his ear could faintly catch a distant rumble of the chariot wheels where the rearguard dragged its way on the stony trail.

Well might Menon pause. To dash into that gulf of gloom, meant only to become a part of Assyria's slaughter when the battle joined; nor might a single spy press on with warning, for the march of Ninus, beyond a peradventure, was followed up by a force of Bactrians who would balk retreat. To advise the King of impending fate was beyond the powers of Menon's strength or strategy; yet, what if after all his journey bore no fruit save the knowledge of a fool who was lured by phantoms to forsake a trust? In fancy he fashioned swarms of hairy mountaineers who tumbled down the cliff sides to the valley's lap, charg-

ing his wagons, stabbing at his men beneath the wheels. He heard their howls of triumph—smelled the smoke, as great red flames leaped, roaring, at his priceless machines of war, while maddened cattle-beasts surged round and round, trampling his men beneath their frenzied hoofs.

Well might Menon cast his eyes along the backward trail, for if judgment served him ill, what hope of her who watched upon the walls of Nineveh, listening for the footsteps of a loved-one coming in the night? He faltered, yet, as he stood, irresolute, there came a memory of Semiramis admonishing a foolish serving-maid in their home at Azapah:

”Thou child!” she chided. ”When once the mind be set upon a thing, go straightway and do that thing, leaving the broken threads of consequence to be gathered up in afterdays.”

So Menon wiped the beads of sweat from off his brow and gave the word to move. He divided his men-at-arms, commanding Kedah to mount the heights on the gorge’s right, while he, with an equal force, would take the left; thus the two long files diverged from the central point and soon were hidden among the beetling crags.

For an hour they stole along uncertain paths, hugging the edge of a slit-like mountain pass which marked the march of Ninus in the depths below. They moved with speed, yet cautiously, lest the rattling of a weapon or a stone displaced give warning to the enemy, while beneath their very feet could be heard the clattering hoof-falls of three score thousand war steeds plodding sleepily—and Menon and his men raced on to reach the van.

At length the gloom of night began to fade. A smear of grey crept up from out the east. Then, of a sudden, the hills awoke, resounding with the crash of arms, the thunder of descending stones, the cries of men, and the shriek of stricken steeds.

”Too late!” sighed Menon, gazing down into the shadowy gulf whence the tongues of tumult roared. ”Too late! Yet, perchance, the hand of Ishtar stayed my speed!”

CHAPTER XVI

THE PASS OF THE WEDGE

With the army of Ninus the night had passed without alarm, for in the lead crept

a force of spies who watched the way and made report by signals that the road was clear of enemies. Following the spies came a mass of mounted spearmen, armed also with swords and shields, a vanguard for the King who reposed in his royal litter borne by slaves. Then came another horde of close-ranked horsemen, nodding on the backs of their toiling steeds, or cursing at the steepness of their tedious ascent. Behind rolled a host of heavy chariots, their horses well-nigh spent by the labor of their climb and the need of water for their thirsty throats.

Slowly and more slowly still this mighty monster crawled upward on its way, through gloom more dense than night because of towering rock-walls which shut it in, deflecting icy winds that searched the crevices of armor-plate or the seams of leathern coats. Then the road became more difficult, for, as dawn approached, the mountain pass grew narrower in its cleft, till far above the riders' heads the cliffs leaned inward, leaving but a ribbon's width of star-stabbed sky between.

And now the gorge came suddenly to an end, as though rent apart by giants of some forgotten age. The ground still sloped toward the ridge of Hindu-Kush, but the hillsides sheared away on either hand, their faces scarred by black ravines, by twisting ridges, tangled root-dried shrubbery, and wastes of splintered rock.

This place was known to travellers as the Pass of the Wedge, because of its strange formation, resembling in shape some splitting instrument which forced two soaring mountain-backs apart. In its neck, at the narrowest point, six chariots might drive abreast, yet it broadened till its widest reach might hold a thousand horsemen standing flank to flank; and here the Assyrian vanguard spread as spreads a fan, rejoicing to be free at last from the gloomy gorge which had closed about their heads.

Here, too, the crafty Oxyartes laid his snare, for as each Assyrian spy came through the pass, a shadowy form rose up behind him, and in a moment more a noose would grip his neck, and his shout of warning died with his strangled breath. Then the Bactrians, themselves, stole backward down the trail with signals that the road was clear, luring a drowsy army on to a swift awakening of woe.

Thus, in the haze of dawn, the foremost Assyrian riders came against a barrier of high-piled stones whose crevices were filled with a hedge of planted spears. Too late the horsemen checked their steeds, wheeling to warn their followers. A torch flared out from the rocks above, and at the sign the battle broke with a deep, tumultuous roar, wherein the screams of men were intermingled with a rushing avalanche of stones, the hiss of shafts and the whine of leaden pellets hurled from slings. Great boulders, hurtling down the steep declivities, would strike the bottom, rending bloody lines through the mass of close-packed horsemen, or, bursting into fragments, hurl a score of riders from their steeds.

The last of the horses had passed the gorge's neck, and at the signal of alarm, long files of chariots came streaming out, to meet a heaving, backward wave of terror-stricken men, each seeking safety from the missiles of their unseen enemies, and finding death in a rush of wheels. The chariot horses reared and plunged beneath a galling hail of darts, fell and became entangled with their harness, while other chariots crashed into them and piled upon the wreck.

Another signal torch flared up, and blood-mad Bactria seemed to tear the very hills apart. A storm of stones was poured into the gorge's neck, till a mound of splintered chariots and dying warriors arose, choking egress, cutting off retreat, and locking Ninus with the flower of his force in a trap of death.

Beyond, in the centre of the press, the King, aroused from sleep, sprang from his litter and seized a passing steed; half clad, unarmored and unhelmed, he rose to Assyria's stress. Here was no weakling, cowering at a grave mischance of war, but a King who conquered nations, teaching them, like dogs, to lick his hand; and when they snarled he walked among them with a whip. What recked it though his foes were hidden among the heights, his army writhing in a pit of gloom? A King was a King, and peril ran as mothers-milk on the lips of the lord of men.

In the half light Ninus towered above his followers, his bare arms raised aloft, his great voice rolling forth commands, till those who had lost their wits in the sudden fury of attack, plucked courage from their master's fearless front. Where tossing, disordered troops ran riot among themselves, balking defense and fanning the torch of panic into flame, they now pressed backward from the valley's sides and the zone of plunging rocks, raising their shields to protect their heads from showers of arrows and smaller stones. Where horsemen proved a hindrance, the riders dismounted, and while one force was sent ahead to tear away the spear-set barrier, still others charged the hillsides, scrambling up by the aid of projecting roots, in a valiant effort to dislodge their foes; but the Bactrians beat them back with savage thrusts of javelins and of spears. So soon as an Assyrian head arose above some ledge, a wild-haired mountaineer would cleave it with an axe and laugh aloud as the corpse went tumbling down, itself a missile, thwarting the progress of its scuffling friends.

Again and again the assault was checked, till the climbers faltered and then went reeling down the slope, while the Bactrians shrieked their triumph from above, and the wrath of Ninus knew no bounds. He raged about him, striking with his sword at every flying warrior within his reach, cursing their cowardice and leaping from his steed to lead one last mad onslaught on his enemies.

There were those who fain would save their King, so they flung themselves upon him and clung in the manner of wriggling eels; yet even as they struggled a louder shouting rose among the rocks, and the strugglers paused in awe. Com-

mingled with the shouts came cries of sharp alarm, while the Bactrian shafts were aimed no longer in the valley's bed, but upward at the crags. King Ninus looked and marveled. The gloom of dawn was thinning rapidly; great coils of mist, that swam among the peaks, unwound and disappeared, scattered by shifting winds, or sucked into thirsty, deep defiles. The red sun shot above a ragged spur, flinging his torch of hope into the death-strewn pass, for upon the heights on either hand the warm light lit the arms of Menon and Kedah as they led their men.

As Bactria had pressed upon Assyria's force below, so now Prince Menon galled the Bactrians from his vantage point above, destroying them with arrows and with slings, with down-flung stones and the trunks of fallen trees. With Kedah came the Syrian hillsmen, silent, pitiless, while Menon led the loose-limbed mountaineers from the land of Nairi, to whom a fray was as a feast of wine. They sang as they swept the cliffs, jeering, mocking while they slew, seizing their fallen foes where other missiles failed and flinging their bodies on the heads of those beneath.

In the gorge the King's men once more scrambled up the slopes, snatching at the foemen's legs and feet, dragging them from rifts and crevices. Anon two foes would grapple on some narrow ledge, totter, and plunge, still fighting with nails and teeth, till the shock of death released them from the fierce embrace. The Bactrians who sought to fly were caught below on the points of spears with shouts of vengeful joy, while those who held their ground in the courage of despair, were slain where they stood, for mercy they begged not nor received.

A breach had now been torn through the barrier of stones which stretched across the gorge, and the King, to relieve the press within, led three score thousand horsemen out and breasted the gentle slope beyond; yet scarce had he cleared the opening when Oxyartes, with a cloud of riders, swept into view and came thundering down the hill. They far outnumbered the Assyrian horse and held a marked advantage by reason of their whirlwind rush; yet the heart of the King arose. Here was no unseen enemy hurling stones from shrouded heights, but a foe to charge on even ground, sword to sword and shield to shield—a foe to conquer in the glory of his strength, or to free a royal saddle of its weight.

"At them!" he cried and loosed his bridle rein, while his followers with a shout of joy came streaming after him. With a clangorous roar the riders met, their horses rearing to the shock, battling with hoofs or toppling backward upon those who pressed behind. For an instant Bactrian and Assyrian both recoiled, then drew their breath and fell to the work of war—a struggle, deadly, fraught with fate, for victory gave the whip-hand unto Ninus or the brave King Oxyartes; and so the leaders vied in their deeds of arms. They met at last, the sword of Ninus clanging on the Bactrian's blade; and for a space they glared across their shield-rims silently, then rose in their saddles for a scepter-stroke that would mark a

kingdom's fall.

Yet fate had written that this stroke was not to be, for the chiefs were swept apart by a surging rush of men, and each was forced to steep his blade in the blood of meaner foes, while the tangled, battling mass was moving once again, downward, when the weight of Oxyartes's force began to tell. Slowly, foot by foot, the Assyrians gave ground, in spite of Ninus and his mighty arm, till the rearward riders backed into the barrier of stones, or struggled vainly, in its narrow breach.

Of a certainty the King was in a grievous case, yet now from the hillsides Menon and Kedah stung the Bactrians' flanks, taking them with flights of shafts that pierced their armpits, sank into their necks or unprotected backs, while the Syrian slingers marked their own and grunted in their toil. A leaden pellet smote King Oxyartes full upon the helm. He reeled and would have plunged beneath his horse's hoofs, but a warrior leaped behind him, clutching the drooping form and guiding the good steed rearward on the run.

Shorn of their chief, the fury of the Bactrians ceased, and, fearing the day was lost, they wheeled and sought for safety in retreat. The mountaineers of Nairi barred their path, but were ridden down as an east wind sweeps a lake, though many a horse and rider fell before their spears. Upward the Bactrians toiled, with Ninus and his riders hacking at their heels, till the mountain top was reached, and a beaten army fled like foxes to the plains below. Their King had made a valiant cast for victory, yet Ninus stood, a conqueror, on the spine of Hindu-Kush.

And now came a swarm of fighting-men from out the bloody pass—exulting horsemen, shouting charioteers, Menon and his men-at-arms who had run throughout the night to shield the glory of Assyria and the glory of Assyria's King.

The eyes of the monarch fell upon the Prince of Nairi who strode toward him through the throng, and his heart grew warm with the old, strong love that slumbered, but had not died. He was fain to forget the follies of this youth, to take the hands of Menon into his own and lay them against his breast; yet the smile of a sudden faded from his lips, his brow grew clouded, and his outstretched arms sank slowly to his sides. On the tongues of the multitudes a shout arose—a shout that rolled across the trembling hills till its echoes bounded back from a thousand crags; and the name it roared was not the name of Assyria's lord, but Menon! MENON!—and the King grew cold in wrath. A serpent of jealousy had coiled about his heart, and, striking, stung it to its core.

"How now!" he demanded. "What manner of craft be this which bringeth thee upon my heels? Perchance, when silent in our council tent, thou knewest of this peril in our path, yet spoke no word, in the hope of profit to thyself."

"Nay, lord," answered Menon, humbly, while he looked into his master eyes;

"too late to warn thee I learned from a captured spy of this trap beyond the pass, so I hastened by a shorter path across the hills, with as great a force as I dare detach from the army left on guard."

"A likely tale!" the angry monarch scoffed, though he knew in his heart that Menon spoke the truth. "Go back to my wagon-trains which are left as a tempting bait to our watchful foes! And mark thou this," he cried as he clenched his fist, "bring down my stores and my engines of war unharmed before the walls of Zariaspa, or account to Ninus for a trust betrayed!"

Prince Menon flushed, then paled again as he strove to hold an eager tongue in bounds.

"So be it," he answered, haughtily, and turned upon his heel; but Ninus called him back, for it came to him that his words were hasty and hurtful to the minds of those who heard.

"What wilt thou," he asked, "in payment of thy deed? Where Assyria oweth, there Assyria will pay, nor boggle at the price. What, then, wilt thou have at the hands of Assyria's King?"

"Naught," said Menon, looking on his master with a level gaze. "There are mongers of fish who hawk their wares in the open market-place. A warrior may buy; but a warrior selleth not—even to Assyria's lord."

Once more he turned upon his heel, and, commanding Kedah to collect his men-at-arms, strode down the mountainside on the backward trail, while the King gazed grimly after him and spoke no word.

A failure Ninus might forgive, but Menon's triumph galled him, even as an ill-set bandage chafes a wound.

CHAPTER XVII

IN THE SHADOW OF ZARIASPA

From the walls of Zariaspa the Bactrians watched a besieging host descend into the plains. First came mounted warriors who paused at the mountain's foot, one half to pitch their camp and guard the road which swarms of workmen delved to smooth, while the other half made shift to sweep the country round about, to seize on points of vantage or to beat back hostile bands of horse and foot that sought to enter the city and aid its strength. Then followed long lines of chariots, till the eyes of the Bactrians ached with the glitter of the proud array. This second

army, when it reached the plains, began likewise to divide, stretching away to east and west in the manner of two huge, creeping arms that girt the city in a close embrace. Day after day went by, till the war-cars stood at rest in a circle six hundred cubits distant from the walls; then came the footmen.

As a locust pest descends upon a land, so swarmed this horde from out the hills, till the earth was hidden and the grass blades died beneath their tread. As the forces of horse and chariots had split, so split the footmen, swinging to east and west, then sitting down behind the besieging circle's outer rim.

The Assyrians offered no assault upon the walls, for their engines of war must first be guided down the mountainside and their catapults and towers be set in place; yet the army lay not in idleness. Detachments were sent to forage through the land, laying up stores among the foot-hills where the camp of supplies was set. Here the cattle were put to fatten on fertile slopes where water abounded in the valleys near at hand. Here grass was plucked and borne away as feed for the chariot steeds. Here, also, the pack trains were brought to camp under guard of a strong reserve, for the feeding of the army proved a mighty task. Below this camp ten thousand slaves toiled ceaselessly among the rocky wastes, piling huge stones upon wooden sledges, dragging them away and piling them up again for use of the waiting catapults. Still other slaves filled water-skins which they strapped on the backs of asses and drove the braying beasts to distant points where springs and streams were not; so the labors of men went on.

On an eminence among the hills, where three long years ago the King had sat his horse and watched an army break its camp, Ninus now sat before his tent, commanding the order of his force below. Even as he builded Nineveh, that splendid city of defense, he now laid out a thousand cities of assault. Like the tire of a chariot wheel his army encompassed the hub of Zariaspa, the spokes thereof being long, wide avenues, converging toward the city walls and affording unhampered ground for the moving of his men, or for bearing food to his hungry hosts. Each spoke was a sharp dividing line between the outposts of a separate camp, each camp in command of a leader accounting to an over-chief who in turn accounted to the King.

This plan of war seemed good to Ninus, and in his joy he forgot all else save the fire of a mighty conqueror; yet when his engines were dragged into the plains and set at vantage points within his lines, he remembered Menon, and his heart grew cold again.

This man had saved Assyria's vanguard from defeat, aye, even the life of Ninus he had saved, and thereby won the love of a multitude who were witness to the deed. Justice cried out for the King's forgiveness, yet it cried in vain, for justice is ever a feather-weight in the scale of jealousy.

"Nay," the monarch muttered, sullenly, "him may I not forgive; yet, lest

these foolish chieftains murmur among themselves, I will keep my covenants.”

Therefore he summoned Menon to his tent, dismissing the guard so that none might overhear his words, and spoke:

”In Syria I set thee to a task and bade thee wed Sozana when all things were accomplished in that land. A servant thou art, and the price of disobedience is the heaviest debt a servant needs must pay. If, therefore, thou judgest me because I withhold my love, think then of the trust I placed in thee and the manner in which my faith hath been deceived.”

”My lord,” replied the Prince, ”I pray thee suffer me to speak as in other days thine ear was turned in patience to my words.” Ninus nodded, and the youth went on: ”In all things, save one alone, I have set the King’s desires above the yearnings of my will. In childhood I bore his wine cup, obedient to his lightest nod. From him I learned the arts of war, and served him through conquests of four score lands, sparing neither strength nor blood to bring him victory. When Nineveh was rising from the earth I journeyed down into Arabia, measured my sword with the Prince Boabdul, and sealed a treaty which gave Assyria peace along the border lands. It bringeth thee stallions from the plains of Barbary, and an army of mounted Bedouins; it bringeth thee peace of heart, for thine enemies are now thy friends. In Syria I ruled till summer for the third time came, nor grudged the ceaseless labor of my hands. For my master’s needs at Nineveh I sapped the wealth of every Syrian tribe, save the Sons of Israel alone, whose grip on treasure no mortal man hath yet been born to loose with profit unto himself.”

”Ah, good my lord, I have no will to wag a boastful tongue, yet man to man I give thee simple truth, urging that a life’s devotion outcount the grave displeasure of my King.”

Ninus was moved. In his heart he loved this youth as he loved no other throughout the kingdom of Assyria, and now he sat in reverie, his chin upon his hand, with eyes that gazed upon the armies at his feet and saw them not. Full well he knew the value of a servant’s deeds; full well he knew the power of Menon’s sway among the soldiery, who, since the battle in the mountain pass, had set him upon a perch of fame. In the siege of the city Menon’s sword would rise as a tower of strength, yet might it not outshine the King’s? What profited the fall of Zariaspa if the name of Menon rolled on the tongue of victory? Could a single chariot hold two gods of war? Nay, not so; for one must drive while the other smote the enemy. Who, then, should ply the whip and who the spear? By Gibil, it were better far that the grapes of triumph hung unplucked than to watch a rival make merry on their juice! Yet Ninus was Ninus, and what had he to fear from a beardless under-chief?

”Harken!” said the King. ”Thy prayer is granted, and my anger, together with thy one misdeed, shall be forgotten, even as we cleanse our blades with

moistened sand. To the glory of Asshur must Zariaspa fall, and Menon shall follow Ninus through its broken shell.”

In the eyes of the Prince rose tears of gratitude, as he sought to kiss his master’s robe; but the master in haste withdrew it, for a woman peeped through memory’s veil, and her smile was a smile of mockery.

”Nay, not so fast,” King Ninus growled. ”The trader’s pack is lightened ere his purse may swallow up the gain. To enjoy the fruits of a monarch’s love, first, then, must the cause of sorrow be dispelled.”

”What meanest thou, my lord?” asked Menon, rising from his knees; and the King smiled grimly, combing at his beard.

”Put by Shammuramat—dream of her no more—and take the daughter of Ramân-Nirari to thy bed and board.”

At the words of the King a flame of anger lit the young Assyrian’s eyes; yet he curbed his tongue and stood, in silence, beneath the tyrant’s gaze. Long thus he stood, but made reply at last:

”My lord, did Shammuramat bid me tear the memory of Ninus from my heart, I would answer as I answer now—it may not be. Thy servant is one whom Sozana loveth not, and to me she is naught save a friend and the daughter of my King. Shammuramat is mine—by the will of Ishtar and the word of my master given in the halls of Nineveh. With her, her only, will I share my bed and board, till it pleaseth the gods to rend our vows apart.”

”So be it,” Ninus answered, and pointed across the valleys to the sun-lit plains beyond. ”Mark yon road which runneth from the foot-hills to the city’s southern gate! Beyond it on the east lieth half my army. Go forth and take command. The west is mine. Since Menon setteth his will against the King’s, so shall he set his strength against my strength, and in the fall of Zariaspa prove the better man.”

For a space Prince Menon made no answer, but scanned the distant road which cut the besieging host in twain as a knife divides a loaf. To the east lay sun-baked plains where water was scarce and stones were few, while on the west lay fertile valleys where the fattening oxen browsed, and hillsides abounding in stones wherewith to feed the catapults. Again, on the west were set the heaviest engines of assault, while to Menon’s lot fell the lighter towers and weaker catapults of clumsy and old design.

It was easy to perceive why Ninus chose the west, for every resource lay ready at his hand. His outposts commanded all mountain roads, and the camp of supply was set within his lines, whence food and water must be borne to the eastern army over parching Bands. In event of a counter-siege, attack must come from the border lands along the river Oxus, thus causing the east to bear the brunt of each assault—and the Scythian riders were wont to strike in hours of sleep.

Menon was quick to mark the wisdom of the monarch's choice, yet he hid his rage and spoke with a mocking smile:

"My lord, the master's generosity is here made manifest, for on the eastern camp the sun is first to rise, thus giving me a longer day wherein to wrestle with mine enemies. I yield my gratitude, O Lord of Earth and Heaven, and may Ishtar smile on him who first shall stand upon the citadel."

Then Menon made obeisance, mounted his good steed Scimitar and rode toward the east, while the King gazed after him, combing at his beard.

When Menon reached his camp, he entered his tent and straightway summoned Huzim to his side. To the Indian he recounted all which had come to pass, and laid a trust upon him which to another might not be given.

"Huzim," he began, "of all who have served me, there is none the like of you in faith and love; yet now must I add to my weight of debt in a task of peril and of toil. Go you in secret unto Nineveh and there gain speech with my wife Shammuramat. Tell her of all these things which I breathe into your ear alone, then contrive her escape and together journey to the land of Prince Boabdul who will give you both retreat. When this be compassed, send me a trusted messenger, when I, myself, will follow after you."

Menon ceased to speak, and for a space the Indian looked thoughtfully upon the earth.

"My lord," he answered, "this thing will I do, as in all things else I serve my master, even with my life; yet would it not be better far that I lay in wait for Ninus when he hunteth among the hills? An arrow in his throat—"

"Nay," smiled Menon; "we may not harbor murder against Assyria's King, even though we live because of it. Go you to the furthest outposts of our camp, and when night is fallen creep away among the hills. Cross them, avoiding all roads and passes held by our men-at-arms, then make such speed to Nineveh as wisdom and your craft have taught. If it please the gods that Shammuramat shall reach Arabia, there guard her, Huzim, till I come to prove my gratitude."

To the Indian Menon gave a pouch of precious metal for his needs on the road to Nineveh and for his flight therefrom; then Huzim embraced his master's knees and disappeared toward the south.

* * * * *

In the three long years of peace which had come to Bactria since Assyria's first attack, the people had not lain down in idleness, but labored diligently against the second coming of the King. If Ninus marched against their smaller towns, he found their walls unmanned, their streets deserted save for forgotten dogs, the houses empty of inhabitants or stores. Beyond the river Oxus an army of

mounted Bactrians lay encamped, but far too fleet and numerous to be followed ere their chief of cities be destroyed; so Ninus pursued them not.

The years of peace had likewise wrought a change in Zariaspa, for its walls were heightened and capped by jutting battlements, whereon the besieged could laugh at ladders which their foes set up; and its many gates were sealed with masonry. Save at a single point on the north-west side, where the plain sloped downward into a deep and dry ravine, the Bactrians had digged a mighty ditch about their walls, though whence came the water which ever filled this trench, was a mystery as dark as the city's source of food. None might drink this water, lest they sicken and die, with swollen bodies and discolored flesh; for in truth the trench was poisoned by reason of offal flung therein.

By day the Bactrians thronged their battlements, gibing at their foes, while at night the walls were lighted by flaring braziers clamped beneath the jut-stones and fed with pitch through slits which pierced the masonry. Thus the parapets were shrouded in uncertain gloom, while beneath, the walls were bathed in light; and woe unto him who sought to swim the trench and clamber up.

On every side the Assyrians began to fill this trench, and labored to that end by hurling stones and the waste of camp materials by means of their catapults. Likewise, by night, a myriad of slaves took up the tasks, and of a sudden a horde of naked men would rush from out the darkness, each bearing on his head a sack of sand, each flinging his burden into the trench and beating swift retreat; though many were slain, and weary days went by ere the grievous work was done.

On the city's western side King Ninus straightway urged a fierce assault, and from dawn till dusk the battlements resounded with the crash of mighty stones. Great creaking towers of metal-plated wood were pushed against the wall, while from their swaying tops the Assyrians flung out bridges, battling with the Bactrians hand to hand. Anon they would win a foothold among their enemies who repelled them with swords and spears, or destroyed their towers by means of engines of strange and devilish design. These engines, set on wheels and dragged to given points along the parapet, were fashioned in the form of a mighty bow whose missiles were trunks of trees with sharpened points. These shafts were soaked in oil and smeared with pitch or resinous gum, and before discharge they were set on fire, then crashed into the clumsy towers, to stick and wrap the whole in flames, while the choked Assyrians leaped down to death or roasted in the wreck. So, thus, for the space of a moon King Ninus toiled, compassing naught save the bitterness of defeat, grave loss of his men-at-arms, and destruction to his engines of assault.

On Zariaspa's eastern walls Assyria made no attack. Menon foresaw that the city must be won by strategy rather than by might; therefore he put his camps in order, looking to the health and comfort of his men ere he sacrificed their lives

in a fruitless siege.

To lessen the toil of bearing water from the distant hills, he commanded that wells be dug in every camp; and having sunk these wells—many to the depth of thirty cubits—his wisdom was rewarded by the bounty of Mother Earth. Now toward the north the digging was in vain, while southward the shallower wells gave forth a cool, sweet flow of water; and the reason thereof was a sore perplexity, albeit, in after-days the solving of the riddle was, to Semiramis, a simple task.

Next, Menon caused his chariots to be set in double lines and tilted upon their tails. From their upright harness-poles he stretched wide canopies of cloth and matted grass; thus, in the noon-day heat, which ever increased in fierceness as the summer grew, his men might rest beneath a grateful shade. This joyed the Assyrians mightily, and where chariots there were none, they planted their spears and devised a roof of vines and the boughs of trees. 'Twas a little thing, this thought for the common soldiery, yet it bought an army utterly, and the Prince was looked upon with pride.

Then to Menon came the thought that if he alone could see beyond the city walls, a marked advantage might be scored against the King; and for many days he rolled the problem in his brain, till suddenly he laughed aloud and summoned a messenger to his side. This messenger, presently, rode southward, skirting the city wall, till he crossed the dividing road and came to the western camp, where he found King Ninus in a fretful mood.

"O King," spoke the messenger, falling upon his knees, "my master sendeth greeting to the lord of Earth and Heaven, and speaketh through the mouth of his humble slave. Because of the height of Zariaspa's walls, the lord of Assyria knoweth naught of what the Bactrians do within; therefore my master urgeth that a mighty mound of earth be raised to the reach of forty cubits above the plains."

"How now!" cried Ninus, angrily. "Wherefore should I do this foolish thing?"

"Nay, lord," the messenger made reply, "I do but recount my master's words. From the summit of this mound the King might dispose his armies with a wider view; and, likewise, mark the weakest points within the foemen's walls. This, my lord, is all, save thy royal answer which my master chargeth me to bear."

Now had Ninus himself devised the plan, it might have seemed good to him; yet, coming from Menon in the form of fatherly advice and spoken in the presence of a score of chiefs, it roused the monarch's ire. His brow grew black with rage; he rose and spurned the messenger with his foot.

"Go back," he thundered, "and say that Ninus fighteth upon the earth, and not in the manner of kites above the clouds. Urge, also, that the meddler hold his

tongue, lest Asshur tempt me and I cut it out. Begone!”

So the messenger returned to Menon, who smiled at the anger of his King and straightway began to raise a mound upon the east, while Ninus, from the west, still battered at the walls with ponderous stones.

For many days and nights the eastern camp was given o’er to sweating toil, as cubit by cubit rose the monster mound which even unto this day may be seen on the plains of Bactria. And while this labor grew apace, another and more irksome task was laid upon the soldiery, for stones must be gathered from the distant hills wherewith to serve the catapults, and loud rose the mutterings of those who journeyed back and forth beneath the sun.

”My lord,” spoke Kedah, one day dismounting at Menon’s side, ”our chiefs are murmuring amongst themselves and the men wax petulant.”

”Wherefore?” asked Menon, laying a gentle hand on the shoulder of his friend.

”Because,” answered Kedah, ”they yearn to fly at Zariaspa’s throat, yet weapons rust, and my lord employeth men in the tasks of slaves. It is not meet that warriors strain their thews in dragging stones across the sands, nor in digging earth wherewith to build a mountain on a plain.”

”Patience, good Kedah,” Menon urged, ”for the mountain is well-nigh done; and as for the gathering of stones, I bethink me of another plan.”

He leaned and whispered into Kedah’s ear, and as he spoke the soldier grinned, then laughed aloud and smote himself upon the thigh. So Kedah, chuckling, rode away; and, as Menon had whispered into his ear, in turn he whispered into the ear of the chief of every camp, who grinned and rubbed his palms.

That night the Bactrians heard a mighty hammering outside their walls, and when morning dawned they marvelled at a line of scaffolding of strange design which had risen in the darkness. On upright spears were bits of rag, fluttering like banners in the breeze, while at intervals were set huge effigies of Oxyartes and the chiefs of Zariaspa, in attitudes which caused a wound to their stately pride.

The Assyrians came forth with shoutings and mysterious signs. They danced in circles, while pointing scoffing fingers at their enemies upon the walls, and bowed in obeisance before their ugly effigies.

Now the Bactrians knew not what manner of strategy lay concealed behind this scaffolding, so they set their catapults and battered it down with a storm of stones; thereat the Assyrians sent up wailings, shrieks of rage—and the noise of their mouths was great. With bitter curses they shook their fists, attacking their foes with arrows and with slings: yet after a space they retreated sullenly beyond the danger line. When night was come the Bactrians again heard hammerings, and morning found the scaffolds once more set in place, though a pace or two

more distant from the walls. This time the Zariaspians laughed, and reduced the work to splinters with stones from their hurling-beams, while Assyria's children cursed them till the deed was done.

For seven nights the scaffolds were rebuilt, each night a pace or two more distant from the catapults, yet the enemy each day would find the range and fling them to the earth. On the seventh day the effigies of Oxyartes and his chiefs were hung by their necks with ropes, and were placed at the furthest scope of the Bactrian machines. On the scaffolds were crowded a swarm of soldiery who bellowed songs of praise, or flung vile insults at their foes, goading them to fury by names of a foulness hitherto unknown. In vain the Bactrians strove to smite their mockers, striving till the mid-day hour, yet their missiles fell short, and Menon perched upon the summit of his mound, jeering at Oxyartes.

Now the spies of Ninus brought him word of the strangeness of Menon's deeds, and, divining not the reason of these things, the King waxed warm with curiosity. In his chariot he drove to the eastern camp, a slave behind him who held a feathered screen above his head, for the heat of the day was such that many died.

From afar the monarch spied the mound on which sat Menon, and it came to Ninus that his general lolled at rest where grateful breezes blew, while he, the lord of all Assyria, must sweat on a baking plain—and it vexed him mightily. Likewise he perceived a half a league of scaffolding, whereon clung a multitude of idle men. Wherefore should Menon waste the hours of day when Zariaspa lay unconquered before his eyes? Must Ninus toil to feed this lazy horde who swapped the work of war for childish sports? By the glory of Asshur, this shameful thing should cease!

"Come down!" he cried to Menon, as he leaped from his brazen chariot; and Menon came down and bowed before the King.

"What foolery is this which has come to pass?" the king demanded, pointing to the hideous effigies, and he spoke with scorn: "Must Assyria set up new and hateful gods, to worship them before the eyes of Bactria?"

"Nay, lord," answered Menon, humbly, "we worship none save Assyria's gods and Assyria's King."

A murmur rose from the circling chiefs, and the wrath of Ninus cooled beneath the salve of flattery; yet still he scowled, and the tone of his speech was harsh:

"If it be not worship, why then should ye toil for seven nights, and watch each day while yonder Bactrians beat your temples to the ground?"

"My lord," replied Prince Menon, "our eastern camp is far removed from the rock-strewn hills; and to lighten the labor of dragging stones across the sands, we borrow from our good friend Oxyartes."

"Borrow!" cried the King. "What meanest thou?"

For answer Menon pointed to the ground outside the walls, now sown with missiles which the Bactriana had cast from catapults.

"See, my lord, what the generous foemen give in payment for our gibes. To gather such a store of stones would fill the space of two weary moons; yet Oxyartes flingeth them out to me in seven days. Therefore we hold them as a passing loan, till, presently, we shall hurl them back again."

For a moment King Ninus spoke no word, yet his frown departed and his features lit with a ghostly smile; then he mounted his chariot and drove toward the west.

A shout went up from Menon's merry warriors, and when night was come they gathered great piles of borrowed stones, with the which, in time, they would storm the walls of Zariaspa.

CHAPTER VIII

THE RAISIN IN A SKIN OF VINEGAR

Through the hot brown streets of Nineveh a merchant of Phoenicia hawked his wares. His frame, once huge and splendid in its strength, was bent with seeming age, and a grey beard fell to the belt of his trailing robe. Before him, by a leathern strap about his neck, hung a wooden tray whereon his trinkets were displayed, baubles of polished metal, beads of coral and of carven wood, rings, amulets, and fragrant scents. Here, too, were bracelets, chains of many links, scarfs of web-like fabrics and of gaudy hue, colored with the secret dyes from the Sea of the Setting Sun.

From street to street the merchant pushed his way, while ever and anon he raised his voice in a strange shrill cry which drew attention to himself and to his wares; and thus he bartered among the foolish wives of Nineveh. Yet at last he wandered past the market-place to the richer quarters of the city, and came to the central mound whereon sat the palace of the King. To the westward terraced slopes ran down to the level of the streets and to smooth, wide avenues which stretched to the river gate; yet here, where the merchant walked, the walls of the mound rose twenty cubits, masking the royal gardens which drowsed in the noon-day heat.

Again and yet again from the old man's throat came his strange, harsh call,

resembling the cry of a startled crane in flight; then, presently, he paused at the joyous barking of a dog and a woman's voice in sharp admonishment: "Peace, Habal, peace!"

The merchant hurried onward, yet at the entrance of a narrow lane he turned, cried out once more and disappeared, while within the gardens Semiramis hid a smile and sought to soothe the whining of a shepherd's dog.

When noontide came again, the merchant once more wandered past the garden walls, and now a captain of the guard came out to him.

"Hey, old man!" the soldier called. "Come, follow me, for the Princess Sozana would look upon your wares."

"Nay," said the merchant, smiling as he shook his head, "my trinkets deck the charms of common maidens in the market-place. The daughter of a king would scorn them, for their price is small."

So spoke the merchant, and smiled once more as he turned upon his heel, but the captain caught him roughly by the robe and whispered into his ear:

"Fool! The Princess Sozana asks but once to look upon a merchant's tray. Come quickly, lest I urge your pace by a spear-point in your hams."

The old man trembled at the threat, and followed meekly, through a door of bronze which pierced the wall. At the head of a narrow flight of steps he reached the gardens which King Ninus made for the pleasure of his idle hours. There were palms and vines from Syria, flowers from an hundred lands, trees and shrubs which were strange to the merchant's eyes, and fragrant thickets interlaced by tiny paths. Here a fountain bubbled, and there an artificial spring gushed forth as though by nature moistening the earth, while countless birds of brilliant plumage fluttered down to drink.

Of a sudden the merchant and his guide came face to face with those who had sent the summons. Beneath an arbor on a bench of stone sat the Princess Sozana in a green simar which was wrought with precious gems and with threads of gold. At her side lazed Semiramis, robed in white; yet, unadorned, her beauty far outshone the daughter of the King. At Sozana's feet lay Prince Memetis, the Egyptian hostage, toying with her veil which was cast aside, and behind them stood an Afgan mute who waved a monster fan of plumes. None else was near, save Kishra, chief eunuch of the palace-guard whom Ninus had left in charge of his household and his prisoners, and who now in watchful silence sat apart, his sharp eyes resting on the merchant's face.

The old man knelt, bent forward till his forehead touched the earth, and sprinkled dust upon his head; then, kneeling still, he displayed his wares to the women's listless gaze. One by one he raised them from his tray, expounding their virtues or the potency of sacred amulets; yet none were pleasing to Sozana's mind.

"See," she pouted, plucking at the sleeve of Semiramis, "there is naught save jingling rubbish such as slaves may wear. Wherefore shouldst thou bring this merchant from the streets to weary me? Ho, Kishra! Bid the man begone."

The eunuch strode forward, but Semiramis stayed him with a lifted hand.

"Nay," she pleaded, "I did but think to ease the dullness of the hour, and the baubles please me, for many of the like have I seen in Syria."

The merchant raised his head, a light of hope within his eyes; then he fumbled in a hidden corner of his tray, producing a tiny fish which was carven in malachite and suspended by a leathern stong.

"Ah!" cried Semiramis, and clapped her hands. "Look, Sozana! 'Tis a symbol of Dagon which the Syrian shepherds wear about their necks when they roam the hills by night. Buy it for me, Kishra, for 'twill keep off evil, bringing peace to me and to those who serve."

The eunuch scowled, but did her bidding, while Semiramis turned once more to the trinket tray.

"Dost know the land of Syria, old man?"

"Aye, lady," the merchant answered with sparkling eyes, "from the slopes of Lebanon to the Sea of Death—from Jordan where dwells the Sons of Israel to Azapah and the valley of Ascalon—"

"Sweet Ishtar!" cried Semiramis, flinging up her hands. "My home, Sozana! He hath journeyed even to my home in Ascalon!" She laughed and turned to the merchant once again, for now in truth she knew that Huzim hid beneath the Phoenician's robe. "Speak," she commanded, in the Syrian tongue which was strange to Kishra and her friends, "speak, for they may not understand. What message from my lord?"

So Huzim answered her and told of the danger-snares which beset his master round about. He told of the battle in the pass, of the wrath of Ninus, and of how the King made proclamation of the prize to him who should first stand conqueror on the citadel of Zariaspa. He spoke of all which Menon had commanded him, and though his words were heavy with the weight of fear, yet Semiramis nodded in seeming happiness and clapped her hands.

"What telleth he?" Sozana asked, and Semiramis answered with a joyous smile:

"He telleth of my lake which sparkleth like unto a jewel among the hills; of my fishes that swim therein, and of Dagon's little temple on the shore. I see the sheep that browse by day, till the sun is low behind the desert's rim, and one by one the shepherds' fires leap, twinkling, through the dusk. Ah, Sozana, mine, 'tis like unto the joy of Prince Memetis when he dreameth by night of his silver Nile and the mighty pyramids."

Sozana, turning, cast a look of tenderness on him who smiled into her eyes,

and suffered her hand to linger when the Egyptian raised it to his lips.

"Say on," begged Semiramis of the merchant once again, "for I tell you, friend, when first I heard your hunter's call in the streets below, my heart was set a-leaping, even as Habal loosed his tongue in honest joy. Poor Habal! I have shut him in my chamber, lest in his gladness he spring upon your breast and thereby undeceive this eunuch Kishra, who even now regardeth you with a doubting eye. Be, therefore, brief. What more of my troubled lord?"

"Mistress," replied the faithful Indian, "he urgeth that we steal away from Nineveh by craft and journey to the land of Prince Boabdul, whither the master followeth when my messenger shall bear him word that all is well."

"So be it," said Semiramis, puckering her brows. "Kishra, bear a draught of wine to this aged man who is athirst and would now depart."

The chief of eunuchs departed on her errand, and in his absence Semiramis spoke quickly, albeit she smiled the while:

"Go, Huzim, and sell your wares through Nineveh by day, yet wait by night on the further river-bank where the water lilies grow. If seven nights pass by and I come not to the place, then walk once more by the garden wall, and Sozana shall summon you again. Buy baubles of Egypt, Huzim, for her lover is of that land, and trifles will seem of value in her sight; yet if Ishtar smileth I will win to the river-bank and journey to Arabia as my lord hath willed."

When Kishra returned with a cup of wine, the Princess listened eagerly to the merchant's tale of a ring he had seen and would seek to find. It was fashioned, he said, of yellow metal in the form of two serpents intertwined. It was set with moon-stones, jewels sacred to the goddess Isis who shed her light on the land of Pharaohs far beyond the sea; and Sozana laughed in happiness, urging that he buy this ring though it brought the price of an hundred slaves. The merchant promised as he drank his wine, then, once more bowing till his forehead touched the earth, he departed whence he came. In the streets below he smiled as he hawked his wares, while those in the garden heard his voice uplifted ever and anon in the cry of a startled crane.

Three days passed by, and Semiramis whipped her brain for means of escape from Nineveh; yet all in vain, for liberty seemed as far denied as though her limbs were weighted down by chains. On the parapets of the garden wall paced sentinels from dawn till dawn was come again, so that none might pass unchallenged or unscathed. The palace was but a prison perched on its lofty mound, and though its halls still swarmed with servants and with slaves, its portals were sealed while the King made war on Bactria. By night Semiramis shared the chamber of Sozana, yet the door she might not pass, for across its threshold the eunuch Kishra lay, the curtain-rope made fast to a copper bracelet on his waist. If by chance she could cross the watch-dog's form to the gardens beyond

and clamber down the brick-built mound, she still must face the barrier of the city wall or the brazen gates closed fast in the hours of night. True, bribery of the sentinels might buy a path to the river-bank, whence swimming the Tigris would be as play to the daughter of Derketo; yet, one false step—one virtuous fool who scorned to barter honesty for coin—and Huzim might wait among the lily beds in vain.

Full many a wakeful hour Semiramis stared through the opening in the roof, with eyes which followed not the shimmering stars, nor the chariot of Ishtar rolling down the sky. To her troubled brain came a thousand daring plans, each smiling hope, each ending in a jeer of mockery, till her head grew hot, and anger rose to devour her in its might. What! Was she, the child of gods, to be balked at every turn, when love cried out and Menon battled with his fate alone? Nay, by the breath of Gibil, this thing was not to be! Gold she had none wherewith to buy release, nor jewels to tempt a captor's lust for wealth; and yet— Of a sudden Semiramis laughed aloud, till the fair Sozana stirred, awaking with a cry.

"Nay, child, 'tis naught," the Syrian whispered, as she stroked a trembling hand. "Hush, sweet; I did but dream, and the spirits of the night have brought me words of wisdom and of peace."

* * * * *

The eunuch Kishra sat beneath a palm, his mind a prey unto vexious thought. He was hideous to look upon, with a bloated paunch, a thick-lipped mouth, and crafty eyes which peeped from their pouch-like rims. Long had he served in the household of the King, and now was chief of the palace-guard and warden of the chambers where the women dwelt. When Ninus marched to Bactria, the rearward wing of the palace had been sealed, and, together with the gardens, was set apart for Sozana and Semiramis, while Memetis, the Egyptian hostage, was confined in a distant court, in charge of an under-chief. Now the Princess had pined for the presence of him she loved, and sought by bribery to have him brought to her; yet Kishra feared the wrath of Ninus, and naught would move him. Sozana then contrived, through her tire-maid Nissa, to bribe the guard who paced before the Egyptian's door, and in secret this maiden bore many a tender message to and fro, till she came at last to a grievous end.

Kishra once marked her stealing from a shadowy passage-way, and on the morrow he lay in wait, following upon her heels and listening while Memetis whispered with the maid. In the knowledge of being thus befooled, so great was his rage that he fell upon Nissa and slew him with his sword, too late repenting the folly of his deed. With the Princess he sought to excuse himself, but for once Sozana forgot her gentle mien and rose in wrath.

"Dog!" she cried, "your life shall pay for the murder of this child, for I swear by Asshur to see you crucified upon the garden wall."

Now the eunuch knew that Ninus loved his daughter utterly, and at her pleading, would surely nail him to the mortar between the bricks; so he groveled at her feet with tears and prayers, beseeching that she speak no word on the King's return; yet the Princess spurned him with her foot and refused to heed, till Semiramis spoke softly into her ear, then the maiden's cheeks grew red again with a rosy flush.

"Kishra," she answered, "I will spare your worthless life, yet exact a price therefor. Memetis shall come each morning to the garden here, and, beneath your sight, remain till the evening hour. Do this, and silence holds my tongue. Refuse, and the god of darkness claims you for his own."

Thus it came to pass that the eunuch, in his dread of being crucified, suffered Sozana to have her will, albeit, at very sight of the Egyptian, his blood became as water in his veins. If Ninus learned that Memetis came each day to the women's dwelling-place, short shift would the chief of guards receive, and Ninus was prone to beset the passing of a man with pain. Thus Kishra roasted betwixt two fires of woe, and because of all these things he pondered much upon his lot, and his sleep was fraught with evil dreams.

As he now sat pondering beneath the palm, Semiramis and Sozana talked with Prince Memetis on a distant garden-seat. This oft' occurred, yet now there was somewhat in their manner which annoyed the eunuch's thoughts, for they whispered, with their heads held close together, while ever and anon they glanced to where Kishra sat, and laughed as at some merry jest. So the eunuch waxed suspicious of their murmurings; yet, when he came toward them, they straightway ceased to smile and began to speak of the garden birds, the flowering plants, or the heat of the mid-day sun. Throughout the day they counseled among themselves in secret, with fingers upon their lips and many a swift, mysterious sign, till Kishra sweated because of curiosity.

All night he cudged at his brain for means by which to overhear their words, and ere the dawn he bethought him of a plan. Behind the garden-seat, whereon the conspirators were wont to loll, was a muddy fish pond surrounded by overhanging shrubs; and here the eunuch submerged himself, with his chin upon the bank, his fat head covered by a mass of matted vines. In this retreat he waited for a weary space, yet the plotters came at last, seating themselves a spear's length from the listener's open ears.

"Hast found a messenger?" Sozana asked, in a voice subdued.

"S-h-h-h! Have a care," the Syrian cautioned, with a finger against her lip; "the fox is listening, perchance. Keep watch, Memetis, lest he steal upon us suddenly."

Kishra grinned from his covert in the pond, but gave no sign; then Semiramis drew from her bosom the little fish of malachite which was bought from the merchant of Phoenicia.

"Of a truth," said she, "the messenger hath been found, and under Kishra's very nose. Two nights he waiteth in the street below, till I give him warning by a night-bird's cry and cast this trinket from the garden wall. See! I have marked it with a secret sign, for proof to my lord in Bactria that the runner speaketh truth."

"Ah!" sighed Sozana. "And, seeing it, he will come to thee?"

"Aye," returned Semiramis, with a smile of joy, "as fast as Scimitar can bear him on his way. Upon his coming, then will I escape from Nineveh, and with my dear lord cross the Tigris, where we dig our buried treasure from the earth, and—"

"Treasure!" cried Memetis. "Nay, of this thou has spoken naught before."

"Hush!" begged Semiramis, clutching at his arm. "Methought I marked a movement in the shrubbery. Go see, Memetis, for Kishra would give an eye to learn of what I tell."

The Egyptian rose and beat about the undergrowth, but found no sign of him who watched, for the eunuch lay as a dead man in the pond, scarce breathing, though his heart was pounding in his breast. A treasure! This, then, was why the plotters whispered secretly. Fools! The fox's teeth, perchance, might sink beneath the feathers when he snapped.

"'Tis naught," the Egyptian made report, as he came once more to the garden-seat. "Say on, Shammuramat, for none can overhear."

"Mayhap," the Syrian laughed, "it were wiser that I held my tongue, yet ye who love me will ever be discreet. When we journeyed from Azapah to the court of Ninus, I bore a store of jewels in a leathern sack; and, knowing not if the King would smile or frown, I buried it on the river's further bank against a time of need. Ah, Sozana, thou who loveth gems, shouldst look upon this store! There are pearls from India, rubies from beyond the Sea of the Setting Sun, blue girasols and the opals of the Nile, zircons gleaming as the eyes of Bêlit shine, amethysts, and corals carven in the forms of birds and beasts. Tyre, Sidon, and the far off Heliopolis have helped to heap this hoard. With half a kingdom might be bought, yet now it lyeth hidden in a bed of river mud."

The Princess sighed, and Semiramis pinched her dusky cheek, promising to keep the choicest gem of all as a wedding gift for the little daughter of Assyria.

"Nay," Sozana smiled, "'tis not for the gems I sigh, but because of a loved one who would depart from me. Why, sweet, wouldst thou do this thing?"

Semiramis looked thoughtfully upon the earth and stirred a lizard with her sandaled foot.

"Dost remember the merchant of Phoenicia who was here three days

agone? He told me of my home in Ascalon. Since then I yearn for the smell of my dew-moist hills, for the reach of the valleys, and my sweet, cool lake which sparkleth in its bed of rocks. The water, Sozana!—and here I look upon a tepid spring—a fountain fed by cisterns on the palace roof. Downward this water floweth, to trickle weakly from the earth, while eunuchs gather it in skins and bear it back upon the roof again. Dear Ishtar, what a flout to Nature's pride!"

For a space the three sat silent, then the Egyptian hostage asked:

"And if thou wouldst fly with Menon unto Ascalon, what then would chance to Kishra when the master cometh from his wars?"

Semiramis laughed softly.

"Poor Kishra! In truth he sleepeth on the hornéd cap of Bel. The master knoweth much concerning his servant's treachery, and hath sworn to hang him from the highest tower in Nineveh."

There were ripples in the fish pond, but the plotters gave no heed.

"It cometh to me," Semiramis laughed again, "that this eunuch will gather up such treasure-store as may be wrung from those who serve him, and fly to some distant land ere Ninus nail him to the city gate. A villain is he, yet none may say that Kishra be a fool."

For a space they argued strategems of escape from the palace walls, and of the journey unto Ascalon, then the three arose, and, chattering, wandered down the garden path.

From the fish pond Kishra crawled, with an evil grin upon his face, and made his way by stealth along the wall, a stream of muddy water dripping from his muddy robe.

From a vine-clad arbor by the fountain's pool, Semiramis watched him creeping through the trees, and smiled.

"Of a truth," she murmured, happily, "the poison in his blood will work; aye, even as a raisin in a skin of vinegar."

CHAPTER XIX

THE STRATAGEM

With Kishra it came to pass as Semiramis had prophesied, for a poison worked within his veins till he sickened and knew no peace. Hour by hour he squatted upon the earth, while the words of the Syrian burned into his heart:

"The master knoweth much concerning his servant's treachery, and hath sworn to hang him from the highest tower in Nineveh!"

In sooth it were wise to hide away in some secret place where the tramp of Assyria's hosts was but an echo down the wind, and India offered many a safe retreat. Yet, one grown lazy at a post of power revolts at the thought of poverty and toil, for the cup and a savory dish were as musk to the eunuch's nose. If he could but lay his hand on the treasure of Semiramis! To dwell in plenty and in ease! To swing the lash above the backs of a hundred slaves! Ah, this were peace! These jewels lay hidden in a leathern sack—a sack concealed in a bed of river mud. Mayhap, if craft were exercised—! Mayhap!

Long Kishra crouched, with burning eyes, with parching lips which he moistened with a restless tongue, while the raisin worked in a skin of vinegar. To his brain came many a cunning scheme which faltered not at a stain of blood, till the sun-lit garden reeled before his sight, and the pebbles in the path were as a million precious gems which mocked his greed. Then Kishra slept, to dream of being crucified on the brazen gates of Nineveh.

When night was come the eunuch set a guard in the streets below, with commands to seize on all who loitered in the shadow of the wall; then he hid himself and lay in wait.

Through the garden stole Semiramis, clothed in a sombre robe and bearing the fish of malachite now wrapped in a veil and bound with cords. She skirted the fountain and bent her steps toward the east, where fewest sentries paced the parapets, and here she paused. Kishra rejoiced that Habal followed not at the Syrian's heels, for the eunuch's scent would speedily have caused a warning growl; yet now the spy had removed his sandals, and his cat-like tread fell, noiseless, on the trail.

Close in the shadow of the wall, Semiramis raised her voice in a night-bird's cry. For a space she listened. An answering cry came faintly back, then she raised her packet to fling it across the wall; but behind her Kishra rose, caught the uplifted arm and wrenched the amulet from her grasp.

With a smothered cry, Semiramis wheeled upon him, her eyes two pools of fury, while a storm of passion bubbled to her lips.

"Hound! give back my own. What! Am I, the spouse of Syria's Governor, to be tracked like a pilferer through the night? Have done! Give o'er my packet and begone!"

So fiery was her mien that Kishra took a backward step, drawing a dagger from his belt and presenting its point against attack.

"Not so," he answered, tauntingly. "When captives send forth messengers to Bactria, a palace warden risketh the hazard of his head."

The woman started. What if the eunuch had overheard her whisperings

and was advised of all? Yet, how could it chance, when Memetis had watched on every hand. So Kishra read her thoughts, for anger departed from her tongue, and in its place came a tone of craft:

"'Tis naught, good Kishra. 'Tis naught, I swear, save a message to my lord—a token that all is well at Nineveh—an amulet—the little green fish which the merchant of Phoenicia sold. See, Kishra. I pray you break the seal."

The eunuch laughed.

"True," he nodded, "'tis but a fish, and being but a fish, can wait for a moon till the stores of grain be dispatched to the King at Zariaspa. Thy message shall journey with the guard."

"Nay," she reasoned, "these wagon-trains are slow, and my haste is great. To-night must it go, or to-morrow, else my runner will come too late."

"Ah!" grinned Kishra. "Then perchance thy lord in Bactria will reward this runner for his haste."

"Aye," replied the Syrian, "even as you shall be rewarded if you cross me not."

"The price of broken faith is large," said the eunuch, artfully. "How much?"

"A purse that is weighted to its very throat."

He laughed in scorn and turned away, but Semiramis caught his robe with a swift, detaining hand.

"Listen," she urged; "if the price be small, then will I add to the purse another purse and such ornaments as are mine—even to the pearls that rim my sandals round."

Kishra still shook his head and withdrew his robe, retreating through the garden, while the Syrian followed after him.

"What, then?" she pleaded, and sighed in hope to see him pause.

For a moment he pondered, then, leaning forward till she felt his breath upon her cheek, he whispered, hoarsely:

"The leathern sack of gems!"

Once more she started, yet controlled her voice, answering in a tone of wonderment:

"A leathern sack of gems? In truth I know naught of it. As Bêlit liveth, your words are the words of foolishness."

"True," grinned Kishra; "no treasure is hidden on the river bank, nor is there a garden-seat before our eyes, nor a fish pond near at hand where a man may hide his body beneath the scum and harken unto whisperings."

At his taunting speech Semiramis raised her fist as if to dash it in his evil face, then let it fall beside her, while she sank upon the garden seat in bitter tears. The eunuch for a space stood silent, for well he knew the value of a bridled tongue, so he waited for her heart to battle with her mind and conquer it.

"Give me this sack," he said at length, "and thy runner shall go unharmed."

"Nay," sobbed Semiramis, "a purse—no more."

"A half," urged Kishra, but she shook her head, again repeating her offer of the purse.

"A third. Think, mistress, vast riches will be left to thee, and a third is little." She made no answer, and a light of cunning crept into his eyes. "All might I have if I willed to serve thee ill, for I know the spot on the river bank where—"

"*Liar!*"

The Syrian once more faced him, trembling in her wrath.

"No eye save mine can find the hiding place, though it sought till the sun is cold. Who, then, shall point the way for thieves?" She laughed derisively. "Shall I, Shammuramat, go forth—disguised, perchance, as some kitchen wench—at the heels of a sexless beast? Nay, not till Nineveh hath rotted from the plain!" Again she laughed and snapped her scornful fingers in the eunuch's face. "Safe by the river my treasure lieth—a treasure for which the King might barter half his power—yet not one gem shall fall into your grasp. Go out and hunt the Tigris, from the mountains to the sea. Dig! and may Gibil damn you for a fool!"

She drew her robe aside, as though she passed some thing of pestilence, and strode away, while Kishra came pattering meekly after her. His avarice had over-shot the mark, and failure gnawed his bowels with the teeth of fear.

They now had reached the fountain's pool where the palace torches glimmered through the foliage, casting strange shadows upon the earth till the garden seemed thronged with myriads of dancing ghosts. Here Kishra put forth his hand and grasped a fold of the Syrian's simar.

"Heed me," he begged, and as Semiramis swung angrily about, he began once more to bargain for the gems. "Be patient, mistress, for my needs are sore, and I, too, would escape from Nineveh, even as thou and thy lord will fly to Ascalon. Give me but a little part of this treasure store and I swear to aid thee with an aid none else may give."

Semiramis pondered thoughtfully.

"Fling my packet from the wall and I promise you a part."

But the man was not to be deceived by slippery promises.

"Nay; when the gems are in my hand, then shall the fish of malachite be given unto thy messenger."

Their horns were locked again. Yet, a moment since, when the Syrian had cursed him in her scorn, her words had left a maggot in his mind. "What!" she had demanded. "Shall I, Shammuramat, go forth to point the way for thieves—disguised, perchance, as some kitchen wench?" Ah, if he could but bend her pride, how simple would be the rest!

"Listen," he begged, with deep humility. "In the hour of stress we stoop to

many things. What harm if the lady Shammuramat conceal her beauty beneath an humble cloak and fare with Kishra to the river bank? By boat we may cross, returning ere the night is old, and none would be the wiser, for the city gates are free to me."

"No!" declared Semiramis, with a gesture of disdain. "I trust you not, nor will I leave the palace mound, though you prayed till dawn."

Her speech was firm, yet in it the eunuch marked a sign of wavering, so he urged his case with a beating heart:

"The gems once buried in the garden here, we wait in peace till Menon cometh to take thee hence, and for a third of this treasure store a friend is made, where an enemy might balk thy every move."

His words were words of wisdom, yet the Syrian frowned in doubt, while her sandal tapped impatiently on the graveled path.

"What will it profit," the tempter asked, "if wealth be stored away, when he whom thou loveth shall die in a distant land?"

"What mean you?" cried Semiramis, with a gasp of fear, and Kishra drove the nail:

"If the fish of malachite, with the message which it beareth, shall go into Bactria, coming not to Menon, but to the King's own hand, then in truth thy lord may suffer grievously."

At his thin-veiled threat the woman quailed, while terror leaped into her eyes.

"Nay—nay," she pleaded, clinging to his arm, "'twere cruel to do this thing. Be merciful, good Kishra, and I give a tenth."

The battle was won. The eunuch could scarce restrain his joy, for in his heart an evil plan took root. The treasure once dug from the river bank, the body of Semiramis should fill the hole; yet, lest suspicion rise, he wrought by subtlety, grumbling at the smallness of his pay.

"And my messenger," Semiramis demanded, "what of him? Two days will he wait—no more. Alas, we will be too late!"

"Then come with me to-night," breathed Kishra, biting at his nails.

The Syrian wavered, her will tossed back and forth on the shields of doubt and love, till Kishra hinted at further ills to Menon; then her spirit broke. Trembling from head to heel, she agreed to go, but laid an oath upon him, and sought to bind him with a thong of bribery.

"Kishra," she faltered, "I have promised you a tenth. Be faithful and I give a greater part. Dost swear to guard me from every harm and bring me in safety to the palace once again?"

In the gloom the man smiled wickedly, yet gave his pledge; then whispered into her ear:

"Go to thy chamber, and when the princess sleepeth, creep forth and join me at the garden-seat. An hour must pass, for I send a messenger to the river shore to find a boat. A cloak will I have for thee, and pigment wherewith to stain thy skin, lest the keepers of the gate should marvel at thy comeliness. Go now, and count on Kishra as a servant faithful to the end."

For a moment more she lingered, faltering; then bowed her head and passed from the garden with a weary tread.

In the sleeping-chamber, Sozana drew her down beside the couch, asking in whispered mirth:

"Didst hear my answer to the night-bird's call? How fareth the jest with Kishra?"

"It worketh," breathed Semiramis into a tiny ear, "for the son of fools will journey to the river bank and dig for dreams. Sleep, dear one, and to-morrow we may laugh aloud."

Long lay Semiramis, staring through the opening in the roof, while she waited for sleep to kiss Sozana's eyes. Her bosom heaved; her breath came hot, impatient, from her lips. If all went well the city would soon be left behind, and the gardens of Ninus would be but a haunting memory. How sweet to snap the bonds of dull captivity and face such crouching dangers as the darkness veiled! And yet, a sorrow came to share the treasure of her joy. The Princess and Memetis thought her plan was but a jest whereby to trouble Kishra's peace of mind; and to-morrow they must mourn her as one who slips away into the great unknown and leaves no trace. Again, came a sharper pang for a friend deserted—one who would grieve as none other save her lord might grieve—for Habal, too, must be left behind.

Her hand stole out from the couch's edge and fell upon him in a fond caress, while Habal licked the hand, and his tail beat happily upon the tiles. Then Semiramis drew him up to her, and wept, with her face deep hidden on his shaggy breast.

* * * * *

The Princess slept. Semiramis arose and moved in stealth toward the door; yet she paused on the threshold, for her dog came creeping at her heels.

"Down, Habal, down!" she whispered, struggling with her tears, and the dog obeyed, though he whined because of impending evil—a sense which is keen in the hearts of beasts, and is passing strange.

In the garden all was still. Semiramis crept to the appointed place where the eunuch waited, eager to begone. She smeared her hands and face with pigment, donned a slave's simar, and hid her flame-hued hair beneath a ragged hood; yet,

when all was ready, she hung back, trembling, till Kishra's patience broke, and he longed to urge her on by blows.

The door of bronze, which pierced the garden wall, was opened by a sentry who saw but the eunuch and a kitchen wench with a basket upon her head. Oft had he seen the like before when Kishra went forth in search of dainties for his pampered appetite; so when the door clanged sharply at their backs, the sentry once more nodded at his post.

As the street was reached Semiramis well-nigh swooned for joy, and vowed a gift to Ishtar should the city gates be passed. In silence they began to walk, when of a sudden each started at the sound as of a body falling from the palace mound. They paused, but naught was heard or seen, so the two set out again.

Westward their course was laid, past many a booth where women laughed, and crafty hucksters lured them on to buy; past a teeming market-place, for Kishra went boldly in accustomed paths, lest marauders spring upon him from some darkened alley-way. The place was a place of noises, lights and evil smells, of leering, besotted crowds who knew the eunuch and gibed him because of the woman at his side. The Syrian's blood burned hotly in her veins, till she yearned to tear the jesters with her nails; yet wisdom whispered, so she laughed in the manner of an easy-virtued kitchen wench, and went her way.

And now the booths were passed, and they came at length to the city wall with its mighty gates of brass. Here fortune once more favored them, for a band of belated horsemen came clattering in, the riders nodding on their weary steeds; so Kishra whispered with the captain of the gate, slyly pressing a coin into his palm; then, as the keeper turned his back, the two slipped by and went unnoticed out of Nineveh.

In silence the treasure-seekers crossed the plain till they came to the river bank. Here a boat was found in charge of an under-keeper's boy who stretched out his hand for pay, then straightway disappeared. Kishra produced a digging tool from beneath his cloak, laid it beside him on the beach, and began to unloose the boat; and while he was thus employed, Semiramis cast a lingering glance at the city wall that loomed against the sky, so black, so stern, with its monster towers which seemed to stand on guard like giant wardens of the night.

As she gazed, her heart grew sad again—sad for the little Princess dreaming on her couch, and because of Habal, watching for the mistress who would come not back to him.

She sighed and turned; yet, turning, felt a cold nose thrust into her hand; then with a cry of joy Semiramis fell upon her knees, her arms clasped tight about the neck of the faithful dog. She remembered the sound of a body falling from the palace mound; 'twas Habal that had leaped to the street below, where he lay for a space with the breath dashed out of him, then hobbled along her trail with

a broken paw. At the city gate he had darted between the legs of the horses filing in, and now crouched, panting, at the Syrian's side, to receive caresses, or reproof because of his disobedient love.

Now the coming of Habal proved a check to Kishra's plan of murdering the woman when her treasure was in his hands; so, cursing, he snatched up his digging tool wherewith to slay the beast; but Semiramis sprang between them, furious as a mother who defends her child, while the dog rose, snarling, eager for Kishra's blood.

"Lay but a finger tip upon him," the mistress cried, "and you hunt alone on the further shore! Have done! The dog is wounded, and with us he shall go!"

Kishra paused. Full well he knew the risk of trifling with a woman's whims. It were better to humor her in this little thing than to hazard all ere the gems were in his clutch; so, grumbling, he cast his digging tool into the boat and made ready to depart. The craft was small, and rude of shape, yet would serve to bear them safely to the other side; and when Semiramis and Habal had settled in the bow, Kishra with his paddle pushed out into the stream.

"Whither, mistress?" he asked in a muffled tone, as though he feared some lurker on the bank might hear.

"To the lily beds in line with the city gate," the Syrian whispered, with a hidden smile, while she tore a strip from her nether garment and bound it on Habal's broken paw.

For a space they were silent, and, as the boat slipped forward in the gloom, dim voices of the night came floating to their ears—to the woman, sweeter than a zittern's softest strain. She listened to the river's droning hymn as it worshipped on its way to the Sea-god's shrine, and the deep-toned song of frogs from a reedy marsh. She heard the lisp of the paddle in the yellow tide, a heron's echoed cry, and the far, faint call of sentries from the battlements of Nineveh.

On the heart of Kishra these voices cast a spell of fear, chilling the fever of his greed which till now had urged him on. Why should the Syrian be overjoyed to greet her dog if she thought to return ere the dawn had come? Perchance she laid some snare to trip his feet, and would fly to Ascalon, cheating him of his wealth so coveted. The treasure! Mayhap no gems were hidden there at all, and hers was but a trick to lure him to his death.

A thousand terrors trickled from out the gloom; they swam through the waters, climbed into the boat, and lay upon him heavily. Of a sudden the traitor paused, with his paddle across his knees.

"Mistress," he asked, "what proof have I that no enemy lurketh beside the lily beds, to fall upon me when we reach the shore?"

"None," replied Semiramis. "He who would dig for leathern sacks, must dare such dangers as the night-gods send. Yet, if yours be a coward's heart, turn

back, for it cometh to me that a tenth is usury." She smiled again, and bent to her restless dog: "Down, Habal, down! What troubleth thee?"

The boat now floated in the middle of the stream, and ere Kishra began his paddling once again, his fears were confirmed by the actions of the dog. Habal had risen, sniffing at the air. On the western breeze he caught a scent, and his bark rang out till the echoes rolled from shore to shore. A friend was near at hand, and the dog gave joyous tongue.

For a moment Kishra sat staring at Semiramis, while through his evil brain shot the knowledge of his own credulity. From the first she had gulled him, luring him to lie in a muddy fish pond, harkening unto whisperings. No runner waited for her fish of malachite. Her tremblings and her tears were but a mask. Even in her well-feigned fury she had fed him with designs for his own undoing, and he, in his gross cupidity, had eaten of the fruit of fools. No treasure lay hidden on the river shore, but enemies who smiled and waited for their own.

Mad with terror, Kishra spun the boat about, but, in his over-strength of fear, the paddle snapped, and Semiramis laughed aloud. Helpless he sat, a victim to this gloating witch who befooled him with her guile—he—Kishra, warden of the King, who dared not return again to his post of ease. Then fury took him utterly. He seized on the digging tool, arose, and swung it high above his head in the thought to brain her at a blow.

"Devil," he snarled, "thou hast tricked me with a lie!"

Down came the implement, but not upon the Syrian, for Habal had leaped at Kishra's throat, and Semiramis overturned the tossing craft.

For an instant all was darkness, fraught with fear; then the man rose, gasping, clutching at the boat. A spear's length away he spied a foaming swirl, where Semiramis flung high her arms and disappeared.

Then the river again took up its droning hymn; the sentries called from the distant battlements; a dog's head rode the waves as it pointed to the westward shore, and a boat went spinning down the Tigris, while Kishra clung in terror to its slippery keel.

CHAPTER XX

THE FLIGHT

"Ho, Huzim!" called Semiramis, as she gained a footing on the river mud and

splashed through the shallows where the lilies grew; and Huzim, with a cry of greeting, stretched forth his hands to draw her up upon the bank.

"Art safe?" he asked. "No hurt hath come to thee? Of a truth I rejoiced at the voice of Habal, yet close upon it came a sound of tumult, and my strength forsook me utterly. See, mistress, I tremble still, for the night hath brought a terror to my heart."

In his joy the faithful servant, who would have dared the anger of the gods themselves to shield Semiramis, sank down and clasped her knees, to weep as a child might weep.

"Nay," laughed the woman, with a gentle hand upon his straight black locks, "'twas naught indeed save a plunge and a joyous swim, for the waters thronged about me with the kisses of old, remembered friends. Up, Huzim! Bear Habal in your arms, for his leg hath received a hurt, poor beast. And hasten! Yon apish eunuch whirling down the stream may arise an outcry, bringing a troop of horse upon our trail."

The Indian arose, and raising Habal as his mistress bade him, strode forward through the darkness, while she, in the joy of freedom, walked happily at his side, wringing the water from her wet simar and whispering of all which had come to pass. For a league they journeyed westward till they came to a hillock crowned by trees, and here the Indian bade his mistress wait, while he, himself, went onward to secure their steeds which waited in a secret place in the wooded lands beyond.

"Keep watch," he urged, then filled his lungs with a hopeful breath and vanished in the gloom.

Alone, the Syrian raised her eyes toward the sky and once more listened to the voices of the night. The river's hymn was hushed; no sentry's call rang out from distant Nineveh, and across the plains came only a foolish wind that murmured among the trees. Yet other voices rose in the heart of Semiramis, to cry aloud with every quickened beat. Menon! Menon! they shouted, till the echo mounted to the burning stars, to catch their flame and tumble back to the heart which sent it forth. Thus cried Derketo, that mother whose passion stirred in the daughter's blood, till her eyes grew dim in yearning tenderness. As a song it sounded in her ears—a song of fire and love; yet with it rose a strain more harsh, the voice of her unknown sire—perchance a war-god from the Southern Seas. It rose in a stern command and was taken up on the tongues of marching multitudes, in the snarl of the battle-horn, and the rumble of charging chariots.

To the south lay far Arabia, whence peace might follow in the thread of love; yet Semiramis stretched her arms toward the east where Zariaspa sat, unconquered, on the plains.

From the darkness came Huzim on the back of a goodly steed, leading an-

other by its bridle rein. To the saddle-skin of each was bound a food-sack, arms, and a woollen cloak to shield the body from the chill of night. Likewise, for Semiramis, he had brought a brave attire, for henceforth she must travel, not as a woman, but as a man; so, from a screen of the hillock's trees, she discarded her wet simar and soon stepped forth in the guise of a youthful warrior. From her shoulders hung a linen tunic, belted and falling to the knee, while her limbs were encased in heavier cloth, bound round with thongs. Her arms were bare, and on her head sat a brazen helm, of a pattern worn by fighting chiefs on the Syrian coast, its stiff rim lined with a veil of many folds.

With a laugh Semiramis leaped astride her steed, causing her dog to be set before her on the saddle-skin, for their pace would be swift, and Habal might not follow with his broken foot.

"See, mistress," whispered Huzim, coming to her side and stretching forth his arm toward the south; "there lieth our road which leadeth by devious ways to the desert home of Prince Boabdul, whence we journey at my lord's command."

"Aye," the Syrian nodded, "'twas even so two moons ago, yet now the world hath somehow gone awry, till Arabia no longer lieth in the south. Come, hasten! that we catch this wandering land ere it shift again."

With another laugh she wheeled her steed and raced toward the north, while for an instant Huzim gazed after her, his jaws agape in wonderment; then he cursed, and spurred upon her track. For a space she held the lead, till the Indian cut it down and at last stretched forth his hand which closed on her bridle-rein.

"How now," he cried, when the steeds had come to a fretful stand, "what madness wouldst thou do? Come, turn southward, for to Arabia we journey, else Huzim must first be slain."

For the first time since the battle with the Kurds she marked a frown of anger upon the servant's brow, yet little she reckoned of the wrath of any man.

"Huzim," she answered, and her teeth shone white in the light of a riding moon, "I know not what path is best for fools to take, nor if you would hide in idleness beneath the desert's sands; but as for me, as Ishtar hears my oath, I go to Bactria."

"But why?" he demanded, in a tone of keen despair. "Why tempt the gods when wisdom pointeth out the way?"

Once more Semiramis raised her arms toward the stars, and her fists were clenched.

"To join my lord and share the perils which are his; to wrest a loved one from the toils which hedge him round about, or drive my hunting spear through the body of Assyria's King!"

In vain the Indian pleaded; in vain he besought her with prayers and tears to discard a plan so mad, but she paid no heed.

"What!" she demanded, "am I born of coward's blood? Nay; what man may do, that also will I, a woman, compass; and, failing, the fault is mine alone. Think," she argued, "if hiding seemeth good to you, then will we lie concealed among the crags which overtop the plains of Bactria, whence you, good Huzim, may creep by night into Menon's camp and guide him safely to my side. Once joined with him, we journey where he wills, though it be to Gibil or to Ramân's thunder-halls."

Thus in the end the reluctant Indian gave in, and they rode toward the north, though for a space he lagged behind in troubled silence, his chin upon his breast. As he rode it came to him that his mistress had never held a thought of flying to Arabia, but had curbed her tongue lest wisdom move him to prevent escape from Nineveh. It was now too late to husband wine when the skin was rent, so Huzim shook the anger from him, and, with one last sigh of doubt, came up to the side of Semiramis.

For a league they held to the river bank, then forded at a shallow point and travelled eastward swiftly till the night was gone. And thus they fared for many days, boldly by night, and resting throughout the day in close retreats, for they knew not if Kishra had perchance survived to send out hunters on their trail. Poor Habal's paw healed quickly, and soon he rode no more on the saddle-skin, albeit a moon went by ere he ran upon four sound legs again; yet, even with a bandaged limb, the dog served faithfully, and many a lurking danger came to naught by reason of his warning growls.

And now they came into Media, and the fear of pursuit was lost; so onward they pushed, avoiding the open roads. They passed through trackless forestlands, through verdant valleys and up again to the crests of wooded hills, where at their feet the lands of foreign peoples stretched far and wide, their dwelling places marked by coils of smoke. Anon they skirted woodland villages, and, peering through a screen of leaves, saw naked children sporting in the sun, their naked mothers pounding grain with stones, while uncouth warriors drowsed at ease beneath the shade. Once, on a hillside, they came full face upon a hunter, bearing a forest pig upon his back, in his hand a spear. For a space the man stared stupidly, then dropped his burden, cast his spear at Huzim, and went shrieking down the slope. From stone to stone he leaped, as leaps a mountain goat, the while he cried out shrilly to his friends beneath; yet in his final plunge he bore no message save a shaft between his shoulder blades.

"Of a truth," sighed Huzim, "'twas pity to slay the fool, yet wise, perchance, for his tribesmen know not if we be an army or a single man. Come, hasten, mistress, lest his friends be cursed with curious minds."

They hastened on, and for a space no other mischief came to trouble them, though many evils stalked abroad by night and day; yet these were passed be-

cause of Huzim's cunning woodcraft, and Habal's wit in scenting peril from afar. Then, when the skin of Semiramis was tanned to a ruddy brown, and the steeds were lean and weary from their toil, the travellers neared the foothills of Hindu-Kush, to fall upon a grave mischance. They had come to a forest's edge, where a sloping plain of a league in width stretched out before them, ascending to the mountain steeps beyond; and here the Indian counseled that they lie concealed till the shades of night should fall, but Semiramis would have none of it.

"Nay," she urged; "I burn to reach the mountain top for a peep into the land of Bactria, and to know, perchance, if my lord still battlETH there. Come, Huzim, lest I leave a faithful friend behind."

The servant shook his head and galloped after her, yet his hope came back again when the middle of the plain was reached and naught was seen save a watchful kite that swung in the blue above. Then Habal wheeled on the backward trail, and barked. From the forest left behind came a score of riders who spread to right and left, then lashed their mounts and advanced in a ragged line.

"'Tis even as I feared," growled Huzim beneath his breath. "Speed thee, mistress! We yet may win to the hills in time."

But ere they had ridden twenty paces he was fain to draw his rein, for out from a fringe of woods ahead another band appeared, to spread as the first had spread, with an aim of closing in upon the fugitives. The Indian unslung his bow, casting about him for a spot wherein to halt and hold his foes at bay, but Semiramis smiled upon him and took command.

"Be not a child," she whispered. "Your shafts are useless, for these our enemies outnumber us, and our steeds are spent. Obey me and speak no word."

She drew her bridle, shielded her eyes from the sunlight's glare, then waved her hand and dashed full speed toward the Bactrian troop.

"In the name of the gods—!" gasped Huzim, spurring after her; but she laughed and, once more waved her hand.

Now the horsemen, marveling at the strangeness of this move, drew rein upon the slope and waited till their quarry came to them. Outposts they were whom Oxyartes set beyond the mountains, to watch all roads, to cut off messengers, and to bring report of armies or of food-trains coming out from Nineveh.

"Ho, friends!" laughed Semiramis, pausing in their midst and speaking in the Bactrian tongue, a deal of which she had learned from Menon while in Syria. "For the moment I feared ye were a herd of Assyrian swine. Who leadeth here?"

A Bactrian youth dismounted and stepped before her, his fellows gathering in a close-packed ring.

"How art thou called?" she questioned, looking straight into his eye.

"Dagas," he answered, with a bow and a smile of merriment.

The woman was fair to look upon and easy in her speech, yet spies were

ever prone to claim a friendship with their foes in a hope of deceiving them; so the Bactrian smiled, and was not to be deceived.

"Ah!" sighed Semiramis, stretching her hand to him. "Then bear me wine, good Dagas—the best—for to-day I have journeyed far and am athirst. See, likewise, to our steeds and to my servant here, who—"

She paused, for now the chieftain laughed aloud because of her impudence, while those about him joined in a roar of mirth; yet mirth was turned to wonderment, when a gust of fury lit her eyes, and she struck at the head of Dagas with a haft of her hunting spear.

"Fool!" she stormed, "is the sister of Oxyartes to be mocked by a brainless dog?"

The shaft went home. The laughter died upon their lips; yet, ere their startled senses woke again, Semiramis swept on:

"What! Know ye not that Babylon is in revolt? That Tyre and Sidon fling aside the yoke? That Syria flies to arms and sends her armies forth to crush King Ninus as a grain of corn? Does Bactria sleep, as sleeps Assyria's lord, when Nineveh hath tumbled to the earth—a blotch of mud upon the plains? Does Dagas know not that the hosts advance, with horsemen countless as the forest leaves, with slingers, axemen, hordes of Hittite charioteers, and a swarm of riders from the desert lands?" She flung back her head and laughed. "O worms of ignorance! O sons of fishes, knowing naught beyond their slimy pool! Go out and guard each road—each mountain pass—lest fugitives slip by and cry disaster to the King!"

She paused for lack of breath, and a buzz of confusion rose among the men-at-arms; then, at their chieftain's questioning glance, Semiramis spoke again:

"Five days must pass ere the vanguard cometh, yet I and my servant hasten on to warn the King of Zariaspa; for when our warriors pour down the mountain sides, then must Oxyartes sally forth and take King Ninus in his rear."

Dagas knit his brows in troubled thought, then raised his eyes and asked:

"What surety have I that thy words are the words of truth—that thy tidings be not a trick to befool mine ears?"

"None," she answered, in majestic pride. "None save my word alone. If thou doubttest, then hold me prisoner." Again she paused, to look upon the youth in scorn. "Yet I warn thee, Dagas, that should a mischief come of it, or I suffer by delay—by every god in heaven, thy flesh shall puff in one great blister from the lash!"

Once more the Bactrian pondered, torn 'twixt duty and a fear of some bold deceit, then he asked, as a final test:

"And how wilt thou reach the city when Ninus encompasseth it about in a deep, unbroken ring? How scale the walls and bear thy message in?"

It was now the Syrian's turn to ponder, for on her wit hung fortune, good

and evil, balanced to a hair. To blunder meant captivity, death perchance; to answer rightly was beyond her power; yet she faltered not, and staked her all upon a single cast. She smiled upon Dagas, leaned down, and whispered into his ear:

"Why scale a wall when a message may go to Zariaspa by the secret way?"

The Bactrian started, glanced swiftly toward the north, and back to her dancing eyes.

"What meanest thou?" he asked, and hung upon her words as one who waits on death.

Once more Semiramis smiled upon him, stooping till her breath played warm upon his cheek.

"Thou comely child," she murmured into his blood-flushed ear, "where stores of food are sent for my brother's needs, there, also, may a message find its way, though it float or fly."

This she delivered boldly, on the hazard of a guess, and Dagas fell upon his knee and made obeisance, begging that she hold no evil memory against him, in that he had harbored doubt.

"Nay," she answered him, "of all which hath come to pass I will make report to Oxyartes;" then, as the Bactrian's cheeks went white, she added, meaningly: "The King would know when his chiefs mix caution with their zeal, else how shall he make a just reward?"

Dagas rose up in a flush of pride, and of vanity which ever follows certain men of war.

"Command me," he cried, "and thy lightest wish shall be mine own desire."

Semiramis paused, to look upon the earth in thought; then from her finger she drew a jewel, placing it within his hand.

"Dagas," she enjoined, "when the conquering host hath come from out the west, seek thou the King of Tyre, saying that she of the flame-hued locks hath come in safety unto Hindu-Kush. In proof of thy words, display this bauble before his eyes—then keep it for thine own." With a radiant smile she checked his thanks and spoke again: "Ride southward with all thy men-at-arms to guard the roads, lest Assyrian runners pass. Nay, I need no guide to the Secret Place, for the way is known to me. Now set us wine and meat, and then—farewell!"

The young chief hastened to do her bidding eagerly, in hope of the rich reward from Oxyartes, though to his racing heart it seemed that in life he could ask no higher gift than to bask in this woman's smile. So he set them a feast, which being done, his guests arose. Henceforth they must go on foot, for the mountain paths were such that horses might not climb, so the steeds were left with Dagas and his followers. At parting the Bactrian lingered, gazing with awe into the Syrian's eyes.

"Princess," he faltered, "in days to come I pray thee to hold my memory, for the sword of an humble man is thine, be it drawn against enemy or friend."

Thus Dagas spoke, yet little did he dream that in after years this love of his would part a nation and its king.

Semiramis yearned to question him concerning many things, but her tongue gave thanks alone, as her hand dropped into his and pressed it. So she fared to the north, with Huzim and Habal following her lead, while Dagas stood watching till they passed from sight; then he turned and sighed.

For a space the travellers journeyed swiftly, the woman smiling to herself, while Huzim pondered and spoke no word; yet, presently, he laid his hand upon her arm.

"Mistress," said he, "our path is upward among the crags, and as we journey now, we risk the peril of unknown ways and wander from our course."

"Nay," Semiramis denied, "our quest is in the north, for there a weighty secret lieth. Listen; to Zariaspa cometh a strange supply of food, vexing Ninus, in that he may not cut it off and starve his enemies; therefore in the north I seek its source, though I hunt the hills for the space of a double moon."

The Indian frowned and slowly shook his head. One hour ago she had burned to reach the mountain top, and now would hunt behind it for the space of a double moon. Of a surety the ways of women were a trouble unto Huzim's mind.

"And how," he asked, "may we know that this secret place be hidden in the north?"

Again the Syrian laughed, and the laughter pleased her to the finger tips.

"Good Dagas betrayed it by a fleeting glance, and knew not that he gave his master into my hand. What manner of place it is, or where it lieth, the spirits of the mountains only know; yet, mayhap, these spirits may be taught to wag their tongues."

Once more the patient Huzim shook his head, following on in silent thought, and for a space they bent their steps on a gently ascending path, till they came to a rocky spur which overlooked the plains.

"See!" cried Semiramis, pointing with her spear, while her merriment was loosed, to echo back from stone to stone. "Yon troop of Bactrians rideth toward the south, to cry alarm, to guard all roads, and to wait a phantom host which cometh to Zariaspa's aid."

Huzim gazed out and saw that her words were true, though he joined not in her merriment.

"Nay, mistress," he murmured, "this Dagas is but a fool; yet deeply was I troubled for thy fate, till streams of sweat poured out upon my skin. Thou didst say that Syria had risen in revolt—that Hittite chariots advanced—that Nineveh

was but a blotch of mud upon the plain. 'Twas wifful craft, I grant, though hazardous, for truth was twisted inside out, even as women wring their garments at a washing time."

"Aye," sighed Semiramis, dreamily, as she rested on her hunting spear and watched the riders vanish in a cloud of dust, "aye, good Huzim, in song and legend this truth of which thou speakest is a wondrous thing, yet oft must the god of wisdom robe himself in the splendor of a lie."

CHAPTER XXI

THE RIDDLE OF THE SECRET WAY

The day waxed old. The sun plunged down into a fiery death, as though a Moloch swallowed it, to breathe back flames from his brazen throat; then the crimson glow grew faint and faded from the west; the twilight deepened, while a purple haze stole up on the mountain slopes, to wrap the loftiest crags in gloom, till the moon rode forth and set them free.

Semiramis and Huzim now paused for rest and food, for the way grew more precipitous, and naught might be accomplished while the darkness held; so when the Indian had eaten he stretched himself in sleep, but for the Syrian there was none. She sat with her chin upon her hand, gazing in thought upon the mountain stream which tumbled noisily beside the resting place, while through her brain a question rioted and gave no peace—a question which mocked, yet lured her on through swamps of deep perplexity. Whence came these stores of food to Zariaspa? and why in the name of Nebo should the Bactrians set the place on the further side of a mountain range? To cross the ridge was but to meet with Ninus and his ring of warriors. How pass them and win to the city walls?

"Ah, little stream," she murmured, with a heavy sigh, "what secrets of the hills thy hundred tongues could tell did I but understand thy strange, wise songs!"

The stream sang on, a roar of dull monotony that lulled her senses into drowsiness, and again the Syrian sighed as she stretched her limbs for sleep; yet slumber hid itself away as hid the answer to her quest, and suddenly a silence fell—a silence so deep that the wind-gods seemed to hold their breath as for a coming storm, while through the hush ran a whispered chant of insects of the night—that murmurous hum from the tongues of tiny, things.

The Syrian started, sat upright on the earth, and stared at the stream in

wide-eyed unbelief. Where, before, a torrent rushed along its way, leaping the stones with a foaming, boisterous swirl, now ran a trickling rivulet. Its song was stilled; black rocks protruded from its bed, and a stranded fish flapped clumsily upon the sand. For a moment longer stared Semiramis, then leaped to her feet and shook the sleeping Indian.

"Awake!" she cried. "As Ishtar liveth, I have spoken with the stream—and the stream hath answered me!"

For a space she whispered eagerly, pointing to the north, till Huzim rose and brushed the slumber from his eyes. They bound the jaws of Habal with a leathern thong, lest the dog give tongue and sound alarm; then they crept in silence up the water-course. Northward it ran, yet suddenly it sheared away toward the east where the hills bent inward, forming a mighty pocket in the mountainside, and here the hunters paused, for faintly down the wind came the calls of men, the bellow of a burden-beast, and the sound of many hammer-strokes.

"Ah," breathed Semiramis, "'tis there the riddle hath its root, hanging like grapes till we come to strip the vine."

They left the stream and clambered upward, with an aim of spying from above, the Indian creeping on ahead, while Semiramis came after him, her dog in leash. The steeps grew difficult, but the seekers spared their strength, mounting slowly till they came upon a sentry seated in a narrow pass and singing softly to himself.

"How white is his throat," smiled Huzim, as he notched a shaft and knelt among the rocks; but Semiramis laid a restraining hand upon his arm.

"Nay, spare him; for see, he looketh upon the stars, and, all unknowing, giveth praise to Ishtar. To slay him were to bring us evil. Come!"

To the right they crept, in a circuit which brought them far above the watcher's post, then turned and bent upon their course again; and thus they journeyed stealthily, as in days of old they had stalked their game in Syria, coming at last to the lip of a precipice. Prostrate they lay and peeped below, yet naught could be seen because of gloom, and the trailing mists which eddied to and fro at the chase of a fickle breeze. Strange sounds came floating up to them, an oath, a sharp command, the crack of a lash, and the jumbled echoes of haste and toil; and now the moon slid out from behind a crag, bathing the slopes in a wave of light, while the call of sentries echoed far and wide, and the din in the valley ceased.

The watchers crept into the shadow of an over-hanging rock, continuing to peer into the depths beneath; and, as they looked, they caught the gleam of water, whereon a clumsy barge was pushed by men who waded to their waists.

"See!" gasped Huzim, pointing to the loaded barge. "It floateth toward the cliff! What manner of mystery is this?"

It was even as he said. Another barge came out, and still another, till seven

in all were counted, each pushed by waders toward the cliff, each disappearing suddenly as if it sank into some yawning well. On the water's edge swarmed scores of men, each busied with his appointed task; then after a space a gang came forth to labor at a wooden gate which slid between jaws of masonry. By means of a prizing-beam this gate was raised, when the dammed-up water once more rushed into the bed of the mountain stream, and the earth was seen where a lake had rested in a basin among the hills.

Now all these things were strange to Huzim and as marvels beyond his grasp, but Semiramis smiled and thus reproached herself:

"In truth have I been but a suckling babe concerning wit and the wiles of men; yet beyond the mountains lie twice a million other babes, with Ninus who croweth mightily and sitteth enthroned—the master-babe of all!" She turned to the Indian, thoughtfully: "Tell me, didst say that Menon dug his wells to the east of Zariaspa and found sweet water there?"

"Aye," said Huzim; "but what hath this to do with barges on a mountain-side?"

"Much," the Syrian laughed, "for these boats go down through a cavernous passage-way, beneath the mountain, beneath the earth where Ninus is encamped, and beneath the city's walls. There the Bactrians receive their stores of food and burn these barges which may not travel back again. The water they gather up in cisterns for the city's needs, or loose it at will, whence it floweth away, to sink in the thirsty sands beyond. Thus Menon hath digged his wells, and marveleth at what is found."

The Indian listened with an open mouth, grunting his wonder, but offering no reply, and Semiramis spoke again:

"By Ishtar, 'tis a cunning wile, yet craft may match it unto Bactria's woe. Menon is mine at last!" she cried exultantly. "The King is mine! And Zariaspa lieth in the hollow of my hand! Up, Huzim, for we climb to the mountain top ere dawn hath come!"

Once more they journeyed, with care at first because of sentinels who watched the hillsides as a mother eagle guards her young; but at length the danger line was passed and they mounted with quickened pace. Up, up they climbed till the moon went down, and the chill of the lofty altitude came searching beneath their cloaks; then for an hour they rested, and the ascent was begun again. By the gleam of the stars alone they toiled, till a sickly glow came stealing from out the east; and then, as the sun came up, they stood at last on the mountain's spine, poor Habal dropping at their feet with heaving flanks and a lolling tongue.

Semiramis heaved a sigh. Beneath her lay the land of Bactria, yet hidden now by a ghostly sea of mist—a mist that writhed and heaved, revealing giant peaks that seemed to peep out timidly, to turn and flee as though pursued by

spirits of the under-world; then the peaks, emboldened as the sunrays drank the vapors down, rushed back again, while scurrying clouds dissolved like rabble before a war-king's chariot.

Lower and lower sank the mist, till the battlements of Zariaspa pierced the veil, and on the walls long lines of white-robed priests came forth in worship of the sun, while warriors dipped their banners, knelt, and raised their gleaming arms aloft.

As Semiramis watched, the scene unrolled as to one who looks into a witch's caldron when the reek is blown away. She saw the valleyed foothills, and the tawny plain that stretched beyond till lost in an ochre haze. She saw the city, grim, defiant in its might, and the vast brown monster coiled around its outer shell, hungry, baffled, weary of its fruitless grip. From north to south long ridges seamed the earth where trenches had been dug to hold the slain and the offal of the camps, the whole heaped o'er with sand lest pestilence arise, while scattered far and wide lay blackened skeletons of scaling-towers, engines of assault, and abandoned catapults, which the enemy had wrecked or burned with fire.

And now the army wakened, not as warriors eager for the siege, but as sluggards who find it easier far to hurl a drowsy curse than to labor like men in a cause of little hope.

"See!" cried Semiramis, pointing with a trembling arm, while her great eyes blazed in scorn. "King Ninus lieth down in sloth, and a million warriors rot in idleness! By Ishtar, with such a force I'd overthrow yon town as a woodsman felleth a sapless tree!" She paused to sigh, then turned to Huzim with a smile: "Among the stars above strange happenings are ordained, yet perchance unto Ninus I may whisper soon, in that he rouseth from his lethargy."

The Indian regarded her both earnestly and long.

"Mistress," he answered, grimly, in the manner of one who is charged with truth, "if thou wouldst whisper in the ear of Assyria's King, first make its opening larger with the barb of thy hunting spear."

"Nay," laughed Semiramis; "a woman's wit may sink far deeper and will leave no scar. Now point me out where my good lord Menon hath set his camp."

The Indian's finger swept the line of the city's eastern wall, to a mound beyond, to a dull brown horde of idle warriors—as idle as the warriors of the King.

"Ah!" sighed the yearning wife, and walked apart to gaze across the walls of Zariaspa, in hope that her heart might lead her eyes unto one she sought among a myriad of midges on the distant field.

"Menon," she whispered, her arms outstretched, her sensuous soul out-flung, "were Shammuramat in truth a dove, how swiftly would she wing her

way to thee!"

* * * * *

As the sun slid down and the shadows of the hills crept out across the plains, King Ninus sat within his tent, while about him stood a score of his under-chiefs. Warriors they were of many lands which made Assyria's kingdom one, stern men of copper hue, half naked in the summer heat, gaunt of feature, lean and sinewy of limb. On the faces of many was stamped a look of weariness; on others anger, while the monarch wore his darkest scowl; for a council was being held, wherein rebellion against the King had risen to a fever-pitch, and fierce internal strife was like to rend the army from end to end.

"Heed me!" cried Asharal, the Babylonian Prince whose hatred of the conqueror led him ever to dispute. "What need to starve in Bactria when plenty lieth along the Tigris and the Euphrates? Why break our teeth against a wall of stone when naught may come of it save a bleeding mouth? We storm a city, fling away a nation's wealth as though its coffers served a catapult! Our soldiers sicken at the lack of food and because of the bitterness of long defeat! If Ninus be in truth a god, then let him give this city into our hands; if not, he will lead his wearied servants home!"

For answer the King rose up and smote Prince Asharal full upon the mouth, in that he fell upon the earth with twitching limbs and eyes that rolled in vacancy.

"So," growled Ninus, nursing the knuckles of his great brown fist, "the dog, at last, hath a mouth that bleeds." He turned to the Babylonian's friends and spoke again, calmly, but as a master speaks: "Because he is born a fool, I spare him—the next of his like shall hang!"

A silence fell within the council tent, save for the shifting of uneasy feet, and the creak of harness as the fallen man breathed fast and hard; then, in the hush, a sentry entered, bowing low before the King.

"Lord," said he, "a messenger is without, demanding an audience of Ninus and of his chiefs."

The lips of the monarch parted for an oath, and yet no sound came forth; instead his mouth stretched wider still in wonderment, for before him stepped a woman warrior, the like of whom his eyes had never lit upon. Her shapely limbs were encased in linen, bound with thongs, as were the leathern sandals on her feet; she wore her tunic, washed white in a mountain stream, and across her breast was flung a leopard's skin, caught with a clasp behind and forming a quiver for her shafts. She carried a bow and hunting spear, and on her shoulders, brown and bare, her red locks rippled from a brazen helm.

The chieftains stared; and yet it was not the splendor of her raiment which

held them in amaze, but her beauty, strange and devilish—her eyes, deep pools of ever changing light wherein the sons of men grew foolish and were consumed.

"Shammuramat!" breathed the King. "Whence comest thou?"

"Shammuramat no more," the Syrian answered, "but a merchant from the west with wares for sale."

"By Bêlit," grunted Gazil, a hairy chieftain from the uplands of the river Hit, "did the merchant sell herself, I'd buy, though the bargain stripped me to the bone."

"Hush!" a nudging neighbor whispered. "Be sparing of thy tongue, lest Ninus serve thee as he served yon Babylonian fool."

So Gazil held his peace, and Ninus looked in silence on Semiramis. In the mind of the King two spirits warred for mastery; the one in anger at this prisoner who escaped from Nineveh to defy his will, the other unwilling admiration of her recklessness.

"And why," he asked, as he combed his beard, "doth the merchant risk her head in a journey unto Zariaspa?"

Semiramis regarded him with a look of childish wonder wherein was mingled trust untouched by fear.

"Right well the lord of Assyria knoweth that I come at his own command."

Now the King had commanded no such thing, yet, recalling how the Syrian's wits had befooled him in the halls at Nineveh, he took council with himself lest it chance again.

"Speak," he urged, with a cautious mien, "that these my chiefs and friends may hear."

Semiramis bowed before him humbly and turned to the listening men.

"My lords," she began, and looked on each in turn, "far better than I might Ninus speak, for the glory of this deed is his." She paused an instant, then spoke once more, her rich tones falling strangely on the ears of those who heard. "In a vision came the King unto my side—a spirit in the godly robes of Asshur and the hornéd cap of Bel. 'Arise, Shammuramat,' he commanded, in a voice that rolled as from afar; 'arise and seek through the hills of Hindu-Kush for a wondrous secret hidden there—a secret through which all Zariaspa feasteth long, while Assyria must prowl, a hungry wolf outside its walls.'"

"Ah!" cried Ninus, leaping to his feet, "thou knowest, then, whence cometh Zariaspa's store of food?"

"Aye," she answered, "but the spirit of the King said more." The monarch sank into his seat, and she turned to the gaping chiefs: "'My spirit,' spoke the spirit of the King, 'is heaven-born, yet my flesh is mortal as all men know full well; so follow thou where my spirit leadeth and sell this secret to my mortal flesh for such a price as justice may demand.'"

The King looked up, a light of anger in his eyes; but he curbed his speech, for he knew not what was yet to come, and half a god was better far than being proven not a god at all.

"Say on," he muttered, and Semiramis said on. She wove a wondrous tale of magic and of myth, of how the spirit led her through the gates of Nineveh unseen; of how a steed awaited beyond the walls to bear her on her way; of the arms and raiment found upon its back, and its speed in passing through the lands of enemies.

Now in these days the sons of Assyria were as children whose minds were swayed by superstitious fears; in demons they believed who thronged the earth and air, the waters and the sky; so the words of Semiramis were the words of truth to all save two, who listened and were not deceived. The one was the King; the other Nakir-Kish, High Priest of the Magi, a man of wisdom who stood apart with folded arms, and smiled. The Syrian marked his look of ill-veiled jealousy, for she trod too close upon his own dark rites to pass unchallenged; therefore she sought to disarm an enemy ere the weapon of his speech was raised.

"My lords," said she to the wondering chiefs, "the tale is done. As the spirit of Ninus led my steps, so followed I and found; yet if there be one to doubt my words, then let him ask of Nakir-Kish, by whose high arts was the spirit of the King unleashed and sent to me at Nineveh."

All eyes were turned upon Nakir-Kish who flushed as the Syrian's shaft went home, for of a certainty he stood in a grievous pass. To deny would strip him of a boasted power and cheat his magic of a splendid deed; to confirm her words was but to mark him as the ally of a liar; so the High Priest pondered for a space and held his tongue. Yet the chieftains waited, so at last he strode to the center of their ring and raised his arms.

"'Tis even as she telleth," he cried aloud, and Semiramis smiled, with the air of one who conquers Kings; then Ninus arose and spoke:

"Peace, Nakir-Kish! It is not meet that our works be heralded abroad. Let the woman tell of the Bactrians' store-house hidden from our mortal eyes."

The Syrian shook her head.

"My lord," she made reply, "'tis true the merchant selleth wares, yet the merchant hath a price."

"Name it," growled the King. "If thy words be true, I give a chariot's weight in gold; if false—beware!"

"Nay, radiant one," she smiled, "is Shammuramat a thief? One chariot I ask—of wood and brass—with a man to drive me whither and when I will."

"Granted," agreed the King. "Choose chariot, steeds, and charioteer, but in the name of Nebo tell us quickly of what we yearn to know."

"Wait!" said Semiramis. "My bargain must first be sealed. As to steeds, I

care not, so be they sound in wind and limb; yet as to him who driveth, is of greater moment to my sale.”

She turned to the listening warriors, then paused to laugh again, for half a score of men stepped forward, eager to drive her, though the road be laid through Gibil’s smoking gates.

It is ill to tweak a King’s impatient mood, yet this the Syrian dared to do, knowing right well the price Assyria would pay to call proud Bactria slave; therefore she paid no heed to Ninus, but wrought with his chieftains, smiling, conscious of her power.

”Nay, friends, ’tis I whose pride is roused at thought of riding forth with valiant men of war. Each—all—I love ye, for your strength, your loyalty to him who leadeth, who by his wisdom conquereth the world; yet one alone may drive my chariot, and he—”

”Prince Menon!” cried Nakir-Kish, seeking to win a friend where he dare not make an enemy, and Semiramis turned and bowed before the King.

The monarch frowned, and for a space he pondered, weighing the value of the Syrian’s knowledge against the measure of his royal pride; yet it came to him that her arts had left him but a single path, for in her secret lay the nation’s welfare and the King’s. His chieftains plotted treason, while the army trembled between revolt and loyalty, wavering, waiting for a leader’s cry to plunge them headlong into open war—a war at which the Bactrians would laugh aloud in very joy. Peace, then, the Syrian offered—peace and victory—her price the forgiveness of a single man. Forgiveness! It was galling to the King, yet, where a King drinks gall, it were well that he drain his goblet with a smile, as though the draught lay sweet upon his tongue; therefore Ninus smiled, rising to speak in a voice which all might hear:

”Listen, my children. Long have I yearned to take Prince Menon to my heart; yet, because of stubbornness, he sitteth upon his mound, devoured by spleen. If now he would once more call himself my son, a father will bid him welcome, even as he welcometh a daughter in Shammuramat.”

At this a mighty shout went up, and the Syrian’s great eyes filled with tears. She fell upon her knees and would have pressed her lips to the monarch’s hand, but Ninus raised her and kissed her upon the mouth.

Then before them all Semiramis told her tale of the water-way beneath the hills; of the cleft in the cliffs on the further side where the Bactrians damned a mountain stream, raising the waters to the height desired. She told of the outposts guarding this secret round about, while through the fertile lands an army of hunters combed the forests and the fields for game; this game to be borne to the hidden cleft and loaded on barges, whence it floated through the bowels of the earth unto waiting Zariaspa.

"And thus," cried Semiramis, "cometh food to our hated enemies—stores and a flow of sweet, cool water, when Assyria must sit outside the walls, unconquering, hungered and athirst."

She ceased, and silence lay within the royal tent, silence save for the sound of heavy breathing and, anon, a gasp of wonderment; yet, presently, the High Priest Nakir-Kish strode forth, with the aim of sharing in the Syrian's fame. He raised his naked arms, a light of battle in his eyes, his voice a tempest charged with the fires of prophecy:

"Glory to Asshur, lord of all the lords! for on the spirit-tongue of Ninus is chanted Zariaspa's song of death! Harken, ye chiefs of proud Assyria, and ye who follow at their heels! This day your King will lead ye o'er the peaks of Hindu-Kush, to crush the foeman's strength, to destroy his store-house in the mountain side, and fill the tunnel's mouth with stones! Up, Gazil! Sound thy battle horn! Collect thy swordsmen from the hills of Nairi and thy slingers from the north! Up, men of Babylon and Nineveh, to follow where your King may lead, and let your war-cry be—*Shammuramat!*"

The Syrian bowed low, yet even as the chieftains rose with her name in war-cry on their lips, she stayed them with a lifted hand.

"Nay, lords," she laughed, "your mighty priest hath offered but a jest, to test the temper of his dogs in leash. Bark not so loud, brave dogs, for none will climb the mountain side this day."

At her daring speech, the High Priest Nakir-Kish grew pale in wrath, and Ninus watched in silence, knowing there was somewhat yet to come, while the men-at-arms drew closer, in a circle of wonder and of awe.

"What need to climb," the woman asked, "when the master hath a fairer plan?"

"Say on," commanded Ninus, cautiously, and Semiramis turned her back upon Nakir-Kish.

"My lord," she spoke, "'tis not in thy mind to cross the mountain range and tumble stones into the tunnel's throat, for thereby this great supply of food will cease. Rather would the King go forth and dig till he find this sunken river-bed; and then, when the laden boats come down, their stores shall fill the stomach of Assyria, while Zariaspa looketh on with curses at our feast. This, then, is the thought in the mind of Ninus, for the mind of the King is wise."

She ceased, and once more silence fell. The chieftains cast their eyes upon the earth, nudging one another slyly, while the High Priest glowered and spoke no word. King Ninus was likewise silent for a space, yet presently his great beard trembled beneath his fingers, as he gazed at the woman leaning on her spear; then he burst into a roar of laughter, taking her hand as he might the hand of a brother and a King.

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In the valley among the foothills, hidden from the sight of Zariaspa's walls, an army of slaves began to dig a mighty trench; full twenty cubits deep it was, running from north to south in a line which must cross the hidden river-bed. For eleven days they dug, yet all in vain, till many looked askance upon Semiramis, believing her tale to be the fancies of some foolish dream; and of those who doubted, the first was Nakir-Kish, while Ninus followed close upon his heels.

The King set watch upon Semiramis, commanding that Menon come not into the western camp till proof of her word was manifest; yet at all these doubts the Syrian laughed, urging her diggers on with promises of reward—reward, forsooth, which would come from the coffers of the King.

She demanded the post of chieftain of these works, and from dawn till darkness fell she set the pace for labor, even as Ninus himself had toiled in the building up of Nineveh. At night, when the camp was stilled in sleep, she would creep through the valley's dip, listening from time to time with her ear pressed close against the earth, and at last she reaped reward in the faint far gurgle of waters underneath.

On the morning of the eleventh day, the diggers ceased their toil, for their trench had come upon a rocky water-course whose roof was fashioned of timbers and the trunks of trees, whose height five cubits might embrace and whose width was of greater span. No water now flowed through this strange black hole, yet its bottom was wet, and soon a stream came trickling down, to deepen and grow in magnitude; then, while the diggers leaned upon their implements, watching open-mouthed, the current turned upon itself, no longer sweeping toward the city walls, but into the trench Semiramis had dug—a tiny river, running in a strange new bed.

And now a marvellous happening came to pass, for, suddenly from out the earth shot a wooden barge full laden with the carcasses of bear and mountain-goat, sheep, and the deer which wander through the hills of Hindu-Kush, much grain and skins of wine. Then, seeing these things, the diggers dropped their tools and fled from Semiramis as from one accursed; but the Syrian laughed and leaped upon the barge.

The King, aroused from sleep by a thunderous roar of many voices, came out from his tent and stared into a new-made river flowing at his feet. On its tide sat a rocking barge piled high with food and drink, while on the very topmost sack of grain a red-haired witch was perched, her eyes aglow, her hand outflung in impish greeting to the King.

"Ho, master!" she cried, with a bubble of laughter in her tone, "the lords of

Bactria send tribute to the lord of all the world!"

CHAPTER XXII

WHO RULETH, FIRST MUST RISE

A sumptuous feast was held, whereat the greater and lesser chiefs of every camp assembled, each in his appointed place; moreover, throughout the army of Assyria no soldier went unfed, or thirsted for a gulp of wine.

At the head of the royal board sat Ninus, in his robes of state, with Menon on his left, Semiramis on his right, while below them ran a double row of grim-faced warriors from many lands, the bearded nobles of Assyria's court, the swart barbarian clad in skins; yet pieces all in the bloody game of war. With thumpings of hairy fists they bawled for wine—red wine from the hills of Syria—and in the riot of a drunken toast they thundered forth the name—*Shammuramat!*

King Ninus smiled into Menon's eyes, dropping his hand upon the shoulder of the youth, while Menon smiled in turn, lifted the monarch's hand and pressed it to his lips. And thus amid wild music of the sheep-skin drum and the zither's tinkling whine, beneath the flickering glare of torches filling the air with resinous reek, a truce was made; a treaty betwixt Prince Menon and the King, wherein all enmity should cease, and the youth once more might claim a foster-father's love. In peace might he dwell with his wife Semiramis, and, fearing naught, lead forth his men-at-arms to storm the walls of Zariaspa.

Deep into the night a din of revelry was heard, till the vault of the skies turned gray and the burning stars winked out, even as the brawlers one by one dispersed, to rest till a span of sleep brought back their fires again. Then Menon and Semiramis gave thanks unto the King for his bounty and his love, made low obeisance, kissed his robe, and hand in hand went forth into the night.

Outside the tent, amid a glare of torches, a chariot stood, its steeds grown restless at the weary wait, and thither Menon led his wife, now his for all time by the oath of Assyria's King; yet ere they could mount and loose the reins, a white-clad figure stole from the shadow of a lesser tent, stood full in the chariot's path and raised his arms. Menon peered beneath the hood, then bent his knee to the High Priest Nakir-Kish.

"What wouldst thou?" he asked, and the High Priest answered, solemnly:

"Of Menon—naught!" Then he laid a finger upon his lip and beckoned to

Semiramis.

Marvelling, she followed him to a point beyond the hearing of her lord, and by the light of a dying moon she marked his features, grim and cold, his thin lips twitching beneath a manelike beard. A man of commanding beauty was Nakir-Kish, strong in the vigor of his two score years, and stronger still in the pride of his mystic power; and now with folded arms he looked upon Semiramis, keenly, without a show of haste, then, presently, he spoke:

"Princess, thy crafts become thee not, nor is it meet that a woman meddleth in affairs of men. Go, then, to the tent of thy lord whom Ninus spareth, and rear him children, leaving the arts of magic and of war to priests and warriors."

"Wherefore?" she asked, and looked into his eyes.

"Because," he made reply, "where the fires of heaven fall, the earth is seared, and the daughters of mortals sleep to wake no more."

She smiled, then answered, proudly, and as one who knows not fear:

"My mother was Derketo; my father a warrior-god from the Eastern Seas. The fires of heaven may warm me, but will never blight."

Full well she knew the cause of his discontent, for the worm of jealousy may eat into the hearts of priests, even as it feeds upon the vanity of lesser men. In bending Ninus to her will, she had filched the boasted powers of Nakir-Kish, and even though she gave him credit for his magic arts, still she contrived to stand upon a step above his own. Where an army of spies had failed to win the secret of Zariaspa's food, where even the Magi with their spells and slaughtered birds discovered naught, a woman had sought among the hills and found; thus, coming as the savior of Assyria's hosts, her, shadow fell athwart the temple's door, and the pride of the priest was shamed. What if this shadow grew? What if this woman thirsted for a higher power and yearned to sway a nation, even as she swayed the minds of a score of fools? Might she not, in the end, push Ninus from his godly pedestal, and in his fall bring bruises to the flesh of Nakir-Kish? Born of devils or of men, what the Syrian craved, that thing must be her own; so the heart of the priest was troubled lest these happenings come to pass.

"Think," he whispered; "once, once only, will Assyria's King forgive, and at a word from me the pardon of thy lord may slip his memory, in that Menon passeth from our sight to comfort thee no more."

Now threats against herself Semiramis could bear, and smile at them as at an idle puff of wind, yet at a hint of evil unto her lord, the tigress within her woke and showed its claws.

"Priest," she answered, in that purring tone which in after years her courtiers learned to dread, "I bethink me of a little fox I reared in Syria. A weakling he was that grew in strength and appetite because of my bounty and my care. From my hand he received his food, from my heart a love which shielded

him from every harm; yet when he stole my father's fowls and hid among the rocky hills, nine days I hunted him with this my hunting spear, and nailed his skin against the wall."

Semiramis thrust her weapon upright in the earth and beside it held forth her hand.

"Choose, Nakir-Kish—I care not which—but choose!"

The High Priest pondered, looking into her winkless eyes. Fowls must he have, and wisdom warred with pride. His pride called out aloud for open enmity, for the measuring of his power against her wits, yet wisdom whispered that it were better far to receive his food in peace rather than buy it with the price of a priestly skin; therefore he loosed her spear from out the earth, gave back her own, and took the proffered hand.

"Thou hast stood my test," he murmured, with a lying smile; and Semiramis watched him till he disappeared beyond the shadows of his tent ere she mounted the chariot beside her waiting lord.

"What seeketh the High Priest?" Menon asked, and the Syrian laughed softly as she answered him:

"He fain would be our friend, for the great man, in his wisdom, hath divined that thou and I may one day rise in power."

Across the plain they drove, eastward, till they reached a clump of sheltering trees, and here Prince Menon drew his rein. As to wherefore, she questioned not, for as the moon slipped out from behind a cloud, the warrior took her in his arms, the first embrace since Nineveh was left behind, and her lips met his in a kiss of passion and of tenderness.

Yet others beside the moon looked on, with frowns as dark as the gathering clouds; for from the shadows watched Nakir-Kish, sullen in the helpless fury of defeat, while the lord of Assyria saw, also, and clenched his mighty fists.

The moon went down behind the spine of Hindu-Kush, and the High Priest slept at last; but Ninus sat brooding till the dawn had come, and the thoughts of the King were evil.

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And now fresh plans were set afoot for the conquering of Zariaspa; King Ninus still laid siege to the western wall, while Menon set upon the east, though between the two no outward enmity was seen. By night they wrought their stratagems within the royal tent, and by daylight scanned the city from the crest of Menon's mound, till those who watched them said within themselves:

"Now, verily, are they like unto a father and a son, wherefore Assyria will profit and be glad."

Then it came to the mind of Nakir-Kish that Semiramis, because of her splendid deeds, would claim some office of leadership, thereby fermenting jealousies amongst the warrior chiefs; but in this were his prophecies confounded. The Syrian asked for naught. So the High Priest wrought in secret with the King, urging that he set her in command of the Babylonians, whose chief, Prince Asharal, had been stripped of office through the wrath of Ninus. By this design a mighty part of Assyria's host would hate the girl and seek her downfall, even though her blood was spilled; yet when Ninus offered to set her in the place of Asharal, she laughed and shook her head.

"What!" she demanded, "shall I, a woman, wear the sword of so great a man? Nay, lord, if thou wouldst please me best, forget thy wrath and restore this fallen idol unto Babylon."

"Not so," cried Ninus; "in my teeth hath he defied me, and though I spared his life, no more shall he lead his warriors to war. Of a verity, the race of Asharal is run."

"True," spoke Semiramis; "right well doth he merit death, yet what of the Babylonians who followed in his lead? With another chief they are but as sullen swine, undiligent, earning not their salt; yet under command of Asharal, who, in the strangeness of their hearts they love, no longer are they swine, but fighting men. Justice, therefore, cheateth Ninus, when craft will give him an hundred thousand allies to his strength."

King Ninus, marveling at her wisdom, laughed aloud, and set Prince Asharal in office once again, though when it was whispered that Semiramis and not the King had compassed it, Ninus gained little love from Babylonia, while the Syrian won a kingdom for a friend—a kingdom which would one day set her up on high, and hail her Queen, from sun-parched Egypt to the frozen waters of the North.

Thus Semiramis foiled the high priest Nakir-Kish, refusing all honors, taking no part in battle save such assistance as might be rendered to her lord in strategy; yet at length she chose her own reward and was set in command of the subterranean river-bed, together with all supplies therefrom, and in this her choice was good. She pitched her tent among the foot-hills beside the opening of her trench, then summoned the faithful Syrian Kedah, placing him as chief of a thousand men-at-arms. With this her body-guard, and Huzim who slept across the opening of her tent, she could rest in peace, knowing that none would molest her person or pry into the secrets of her charge.

Three days went by, and many a laden barge came down to fatten Ninus and his men, yet on the fourth day a great commotion was observed upon the city walls; a throng of priests came forth with Oxyartes at their head, and gazed toward the distant mountain range, then an under-priest made ready a pyre of

wood, drenched it with pitch and applied a torch, so that soon a column of dense black smoke ascended in the breezeless air. Then another pyre was lit, likewise a third, though his last was smothered by a mighty cloth in the hands of many priests. The cloth they removed anon, then thrust it back again, and lo! the smoke went up, not in columns the like of the other fires, but in short black puffs with intervals between.

To those who watched, these pitch-fires seemed but some religious rite of their strange, barbaric foes, but one among them was of different mind.

"By Bêlit," cried Semiramis, springing to her feet, "the Bactrians signal to their friends among the hills! Go, Kedah, take a force of slingers to gall those busy priests upon the wall. Up, Huzim! Light a score of fires, in that the signs of Oxyartes may be confounded. Go!"

She watched, and soon a myriad of fires sprang up, to send a spark-shot curtain rolling above the battlements; the while a band of Hittites camped hard by, thinking an attack was planned, ran out and stormed the walls. A wild, unwonted hubbub rose, whereat the King grew wroth and sent a force of men with whips to flog the Hittites back into their camp again. Then the Bactrians, looking down upon these things, were mystified and whispered among themselves in wondering awe:

"To the high gods, praise! King Ninus hath lost his reason, for of a certainty the man is mad!"

That day the trench which led to the camp of Ninus was closed by a mighty gate of wood, and the subterranean river flowed once more to Zariaspa, and the Bactrians ate of the food which travelled underneath their towering hills.

"How now!" the King demanded of Semiramis when report was made to him by Nakir-Kish. "Wherefore should we feed our foes? Lift straightway this foolish gate and let us feast again."

"Nay, lord," the Syrian made reply, "this thing I may not do;" and the King stepped backward, rent by wonder at her words.

To Ninus, one who disobeyed was as one whose life is forfeited forthwith, for the pride of the man was great, and commands, once given, were carried through, even though the cost thereof was greater than the vantage gained; yet in the calm defiance of this red-haired imp there lurked a spirit as fearless as his own—a something which bewitched the soul of him, causing him to swallow down his wrath and ask with a meekness new to his fiery tongue:

"Where the King desireth the welfare of Assyria's host, wherefore wouldst thou thwart so just an aim?"

Thoughtfully she scraped the earth with one sandaled foot, smiled, and made reply:

"Of a surety my lord would be a half-fed serpent rather than an empty-

bellied hawk.”

”What meanest thou?” he asked, and again the Syrian smiled.

”’Tis better far that the belts of Assyria hang loose for a little space than to shout to Oxyartes concerning our knowledge of his river bed. Should he signal again to his friends across the Hindu-Kush, then straightway will they cease to load their boats, and albeit Zariaspa thereby starveth, naught is gained, for Ninus suffereth the hunger of a fool. So, then, to Oxyartes shall go one-half, till he, in wonder at the small supply, will signal to his friends for more; and thus may we satisfy the needs of all.”

For a space the monarch made no answer, but looked in thought across the yellow plain, then at length he spoke, as one who communes with himself alone:

”By the splendor of Shamashi-Ramân, the time hath come when Ninus must cease to meddle in affairs of craft.”

He spoke no more, but mounted his chariot and drove to his distant camp, slowly, with his head bowed low, though ever and anon he laughed, as one who gloats with pride at his own contrivances.

When the King was gone, Semiramis sat pondering, with puckered brow, with eyes which saw not, yet seemed to pierce the city walls; then she caused the river-gate to be raised once more, and, whispering a command to Kedah, called Huzim to her side and disappeared with him till the strength of the sun was spent and night had settled down upon the hills.

Prince Menon, coming from his eastern camp to seek Semiramis, could find no trace of her. In vain he sought, but none could give him news, while even Kedha lied stoutly concerning her affairs, though it pained his vitals to falsify unto one he loved. In despair the Prince was thinking of departure, when Semiramis herself appeared with a suddenness which caused her spouse to stare. From beneath a mat in a corner of her tent the head of Huzim rose; after it came his body which stooped and raised Semiramis as from a pit. Wet were her garments, soaked with mud and slime, till it seems as if she must have wallowed in a mire, while even her hair hung dank and dripping about her neck.

”In the name of the gods—!” cried Menon, but she checked him with a grimy hand thrust swiftly across his mouth. She looked to note that none were lingering outside her tent, then, laughing softly, whispered into Menon’s ear:

”Fear not, my lord; no accident hath befallen me; yet the soul of the King desireth a bird called Zariaspa, and I—in the hope of pleasing him—have sprinkled

a pinch of salt upon its tail.”

CHAPTER XXIII

THE SIEGE

Semiramis in her chariot drove slowly round the wall of Zariaspa, scanning it from every vantage point; impenetrable, grim, it towered above her in the dignity of strength—the majesty of strength—which scorned to even mock the puny power of muscle and of brain.

”Mistress,” asked Huzim who stood beside her in the chariot, ”what booteth it to win this outer wall when the higher walls of the citadel must needs be scaled?”

”It booteth much,” she answered with a smile, ”for this citadel was made a gift to me two moons ago.”

The Indian drew his reins and stared upon her in deep concern, thinking the sun, perchance, had touched her brain.

”What meanest thou?”

For a moment there came no answer, yet presently she raised her impish eyes:

”Huzim, my father Simmas once spake a mighty truth, saying that he whose tongue betrayed the children of his thought was both a murderer and a fool.”

The Indian flicked his steeds, and in silence drove along the city’s western side till Semiramis bade him draw his reins again; wherefore he knew not, for she paused to watch the common sight of a giant catapult hurling stones against the wall. This engine was fashioned in the form of a flinging-beam, the beam bent downward by ropes of human hair and sinews from the necks of bulls, while on its end was set a heavy stone. The beam, released, sprang upward, propelling its missile in a lumbering curve, yet wrought no harm, for the heavier stones fell short, while the lighter ones flew high, to crash into some house beyond the walls.

”See,” said Semiramis, sitting upon the rim of a chariot wheel and pointing to the fruitless work, ”they ever miss their mark because of these stones of unequal weight and shape. See, Huzim, the Bactrians hold no fear of missiles which fly so slowly and do but encumber the earth beneath their walls. If, perchance—”

She paused of a sudden, one brown hand rubbing idly on the chariot wheel,

her gaze fixed fast on a heap of broken stones; then she laughed aloud and danced upon the sand in the manner of some joy some child.

"What aileth thee, my mistress?" asked the Indian, and she laughed again in answer to his questioning:

"In truth, good Huzim, once more am I the mother of a thought—a sturdy brat—and thou shalt help me nurture him, for, lo! these laboring swine have made to me the gift of Zariaspa's outer walls."

Menon, Huzim and Semiramis sat far into the night, pondering over plans and stratagems, and when morning came the Indian and his mistress sought out a hidden valley among the hills. With them went seven score of workmen, a full-armed guard, and slaves who bore the beams and bodies of abandoned catapults; and straightway the voice of labor rose on the mountain side, while along the valley's lip was set the guard, who with slings and shafts made answer to wandering curiosity.

In Menon's camp a labor was likewise set afoot, and engines of siege were put to rights again, while the army, wondering at things they could not understand, were set to making sacks. These sacks they contrived of fibre, of discarded clothes, of the cloth of canopies, or of any fabric gleaned from far or near sobeit they held two hundred-weight of sand; and when a warrior made questionings as to the strangeness of this toil, his chief would bid him hold his tongue, for the reason thereof was known to Menon and Semiramis alone.

When tidings of these happenings were brought unto the King, he drove away the messenger with oaths, for his heart was sick of fruitless stratagems. Where Ninus failed, there also must Menon fail; so the King went hunting through the uplands, finding little game, but much to vex the soul of him because of unhappy ponderings. Glory he desired, and the mastery of all the world, yet greater than these was his haunting thirst for the mastery of one woman's love and the glory of her passion lit for him alone.

In such a mood King Ninus one day came upon Semiramis returning from the valley in the hills, and marveled at the score of engines which she dragged across the sands. So frail they were, so slender as to build and the fashioning of hurling-beams, that the King desired to know if these toys were designed to fling the stones of cherries at their enemies.

"Aye," said Semiramis, gravely and without a smile, "for the Bactrians like not cherries, nor the stones thereof. Come, good my lord, tomorrow, for tomorrow a red juice trickleth from their battlements."

This answer puzzled Ninus, puzzled him throughout the night and filled his very dreams with a deep unrest; so on the morrow he drove into Menon's eastern camp to mark what craft might lie beneath the Syrian's words. Yet, if craft it was, its meaning was hidden from the monarch's mind, for Menon was

now employed in throwing sacks of sand against the city wall. No aim had they to harm the besieged upon the battlements, but smote the masonry with a harmless thud and piled upon the earth. Full two score engines, set in line and served by eager, sweating men, were thus engaged in a foolish sport; and as Ninus laughed in scorn, so laughed the Bactrians, gibing Menon and urging him to a greater diligence.

Now, strangely, Menon's warriors made no answer to the enemy's abuse, but wrought in silence, bearing endless bags of sand upon their backs, while beyond sat the engines of Semiramis, idle, aiding naught in this mockery of siege; yet beneath the walls a mound of sand-sacks grew apace; then, of a sudden, the jeering Bactrians understood. Their laughter was changed to curses, their merriment to shouts of rage, for they saw that Menon built a sloping road-way to their battlements and soon would launch a horde of warriors upon the walls.

And now a tumult rose—the cries of captains raging at their men, the shriek of battle-horns and the answering din of Bactrian soldiery rushing to defense. On the walls were set their heaviest catapults with the aim of wrecking Menon's lighter engines of assault; but now the "thought-child" of Semiramis took a part, and even Ninus watched in awe.

This engine was not the like of other engines, for its hurling-beam bent backward in half a circle's space, and on the beam was set a chariot wheel. When loosed, the beam sprang forward with a sidelong sweep and the missile was launched as a boy might fling a shell. At the first discharge—aimed high because of a lurking vanity in the Syrian's soul—the wheel spun out, and, with a strange, melodious sound, went whining over Zariaspa. The eyes of Assyria's host looked on in wonder and in pride of her, and the joy of Semiramis was like unto the joy of a crowing babe.

Soon other engines were set in place and a score of chariot wheels were loosed, with a mournful, pleasing hum—pleasing to those who sent it forth, yet of different tune to the hapless warriors who were dashed from off their walls. These wheels, by reason of their roundness and their equal weight, could be flung with a wondrous accuracy, and woe unto those who sought to serve the Bactrian catapults; while Menon, in peace, went forward with his toil of piling sacks of sand.

If the Bactrians raged because of this new-born stratagem, so Ninus also raged, but in another vein of wrath. None had communed with him concerning it, and Menon, in secret, sought to snatch a glory from his King; so Ninus cast about him for a cause of just displeasure at the man. With the road against the wall he could find no fault, for the sands of the desert were free to all; yet the casting away of his chariot wheels was wicked extravagance, a crime, and in no wise to be borne.

"How now, Shammuramat!" he cried, striding to her side, and trembling in his wrath. "Wherefore shouldst thou do this evil thing? and how shall my hosts ride home to Nineveh when the wheels of my chariots are cast among our enemies?"

"Nay, lord," she answered, with her devil's laugh, "to-day, when Zariaspa shall be thine, then mays't thou gather up these cherry-stones and call them wheels again."

So Ninus, cursing, turned upon his heel, mounted his waiting chariot and drove furiously toward the western camp, in his ears a roar from Zariaspa's walls and an answering roar from those who toiled beneath; then Semiramis left her engines, and, with Huzim to drive her steeds, went clattering along the dust-trail of the King.

The camp once reached, the King deployed his armies in a swift attack upon the western wall, in the hope that Bactria's force was bent on the distant point where Menon struck his blow; so creaking towers and mighty structures of wood and brass were pushed toward the battlements, and men swarmed up, to grapple with defending foes, to fall and die.

Semiramis, following in the wake of Ninus, caused Huzim to draw his reins at the camp of Asharal, the Babylonian Prince whom the monarch had deprived of office, yet restored again at the pleadings of the Syrian. To him she whispered, and at the whisper Prince Asharal smiled happily and straightway sought the King. The King he found in a fretful mood because of the slowness of his armies and their failure to win the walls, and it troubled him the more when Asharal in meekness bent his knee and spoke:

"My lord, in what appointed place shall thy servant serve, trusting thereby to aid my King in this his sore discomfiture?"

Now this question, to Ninus, was like salt in an open wound, and he fain would have smitten Asharal upon his humble mouth; yet many watched, and so the King stretched forth one trembling arm and pointed to the citadel.

"There standeth what we seek! Go seek it, fool, and trouble me no more with idle questionings!"

The Babylonian bowed his head, half in homage, half in his wish to hide a joyous smile, and so went out from the presence of the King; yet, presently, he came upon Semiramis, sprang upon her chariot-tail, and the steeds were lashed in a race toward the hills. They made no pause till they reached the gateway of the subterranean river course, where Asharal made choice of a thousand Babylonian men-at-arms, and, commanding them to follow, disappeared with Kedha, Huzim and Semiramis into the bowels of the earth.

This move was made in secret and with care, yet a rumor thereof was learned by the prying High Priest Nakir-Kish who forthwith hastened to the

King; yet Ninus was in the stress of an ill-gone battle, frowning tugging at his beard, so the High Priest held his tongue till a more propitious moment for his evil news. He waited apart, but Ninus spied him presently and called him to his side.

"Priest," said he, "a weighty question haunteth me, without a pause or peace, and the answer thereto is hidden from my mind; yet, mayhap, some aid may rise from out thine auguries."

"Speak on," begged Nakir-Kish, and the troubled monarch spoke:

"At Nineveh I swore an oath that he who first stood conqueror on the citadel of Zariaspa might claim a woman as his own, be the man a king or the spawn of a Hittite serf. In Bactria I gave this woman unto Menon, swearing again in an oath to part them not." He paused and looked on Nakir-Kish with narrowed eyes. "May a monarch swear two oaths, the one against the other, keeping both? Not so. Which, then, shall I keep, and which may Ninus break without affront to the justice of our gods?"

The High Priest looked upon his master and read the evil in his heart. Full well he knew which oath the King would break; full well he knew the danger in unpleasing auguries; so he closed his eyes, and in a solemn voice made answer, craftily:

"To one who is born a god, the gods alone make known their highest will. Heed, then, O King, thy servant's poor advice. Stand first thyself upon the citadel, and in thy justice give this woman unto him who best deserveth such a prize."

He paused. The moment now was ripe to tell of Semiramis and Asharal, yet ere he could speak the tide of battle called the King who leaped into his chariot, leaving Nakir-Kish alone. In the sands of the desert the High Priest stood, watching his master's receding form till it passed from sight, then he muttered in his beard:

"A man may be born a King; a man may be born a fool; yet if I were King I would stamp this Syrian devil in the dust, lest she ride one day on a kingdom's back as a beggar may ride an ass."

So the High Priest Nakir-Kish went out and opened the carcass of a sacred crane, finding therein no augury of happiness for master or for man.

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On the eastern side of the city wall the sand heap grew apace, and now a band of Hittites rushed furiously up the slope to engage the defenders of the battlements. No foothold might they gain upon the wall, and were slain because of their ardor and their foolishness; yet their bodies added to the growing pile.

On the walls thronged hordes of reckless Bactrians, stemming the assault,

and among them crashed the spinning chariot wheels, landing with an upward lurch and causing wide, bloody gaps, to be filled by other martyrs in a hopeless cause. The Bactrians liked not cherries, and, even as Semiramis had said, a red juice trickled from their battlements. Likewise, beneath the walls were many Assyrians slain by darts and slings, and, when sacks of sand grew scarce, their corpses were set in the catapults and hurled upon the heap, till the roadway well-nigh reached the summit of the wall.

The forces of Menon now gathered for a rush, but the Bactrians checked them by a brave device. From the wall's lip they emptied great vats of oil which ran in the crevices between the sacks of sand, and when torches were flung thereon the roadway became a Gibil's path which mortals might not climb and live. Huge tongues of yellow flame licked forth; dense clouds of smoke puffed out and went rolling towards the sky; yet if this sea of fire held hungering Assyria back, it likewise drove their foemen from the battlements, and so for a space defense and assault alike were quelled.

And now a watcher from the summit of Menon's mound cried out a warning unto those below.

"*The King! The King!*" he cried. "Ho, brothers, look ye and beware! King Ninus hath won to the western wall!"

It was even as he said, for on the west but a weak defense was given, and Ninus and his warriors had mounted to the parapets, soon to descend into the city streets and cleave a pathway to the citadel. The Citadel! There Menon, too, had sworn to stand the first, for his heart was troubled by the master's double oath; yet now the road was blocked by raging flame.

"Sand! Sand!" he cried, and the sacks were slit and set in the catapults. On striking they would burst, the loose sand being scattered far and wide; and thus, through diligence and the urging of his men by lashes and the promise of rich reward, the flames were in part subdued.

Then up this smoking pathway rushed the armies of Assyria, lusting for blood in the thirst of a long year's wait, hungering for the plunder of this mighty jewel-chest, mad for the women waiting in the grip of fear. They burned their hands on the blistered masonry, scorched their feet as they trod the parapets; yet quickly they spread to distant points along the wall or leaped below on the spear points of the Bactrians.

The walls once gained, Assyria held the whip-hand, and an endless stream of fighting men came pouring into the streets. On the western side King Ninus had torn away the masonry which blocked the gate, and a wedge of chariots came thundering in, to ride the defenders down. Thus, east and west, Assyria pressed on Bactria, forcing the foemen inward toward their citadel, and through every street and alley battle rioted and knew no pause. For every pace King Oxyartes

asked a price of blood which Ninus paid, and the sons of Zariaspa struggled to the death for their hearths and homes, while women from the house tops tore away the tiles and flung them down—flung curses also, and their very beds which they dragged upon the roofs and tumbled on the conquerors.

On every hand the awesome din of war arose, the screams of death and victory, the battle chants of charging men, and the roar of flame which wrapped the city round about. As clouds of rolling smoke went up, with the tongue of carnage sounding underneath, the household doves of Bactria took fright and began to wheel in dizzy circles overhead. A warrior saw therein an omen, and cried to his fellows that Semiramis was born of doves; therefore Asshur smiled upon her and on the arms of those who served.

Forthwith a mighty roar went up, and as Assyria pushed toward the citadel her warriors thundered forth the name—SHAMMURAMAT.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE CITADEL

Along the subterranean river course, cautiously and without a light, groped Kedha, Semiramis and Asharal, while at their heels walked Huzim bearing on his shoulder a mighty hammer with a ponderous head of brass; and following after came a thousand Babylonian warriors picked for their courage and their skill in deeds of arms.

One other came also, albeit none had bidden him, and now he came snuffing to the Syrian's side, knowing full well that the time was past when his mistress might send him back; so Semiramis cursed Habal softly and suffered him to go.

"Asharal," she whispered presently, "in this my enterprise a chance is given thee to win renown among the peoples of thy land, yet in return therefor I ask a price." She laid a hand upon his shoulder and spoke into his ear: "If the halls of the citadel be cleared, no man save Menon first must stand with me upon the roof, else a woe may come of it. Pledge me, therefore, in the word of a Prince of Babylon."

"Princess," he answered, "the kingdom which I serve is thine, even as its chief is thine, and he who passeth Asharal upon the stair must pass him dead."

Now Kedah, who heard, said naught, but his hand sought the hand of Semi-

ramis whom he loved; he raised it and in the darkness pressed it to his lips.

Prince Asharal went backward, whispering to the chieftains of his line who in turn passed down the purport of command to every follower, then in silence the march went on.

They came at last to the mouth of the passage-way which was guarded by a double gate of brass, and beyond, through its massive bars, could be discerned a vaulted chamber, where the city cisterns lay, stretching away in impenetrable gloom. Behind the gates sat a full-armed sentinel drowsing at his post, yet an arrow in his throat brought deeper slumber to the man; then Huzim raised his hammer and, grunting, struck the gates. Thrice fell his mighty blows, with a clanging crash that sent the echoes rolling down a hundred passage-ways, and from out the murk came running other sentinels, trumpet-tongued in the flush of dread alarm.

"Strike, Huzim!" shrilled Semiramis. "Strike in the name of Bêlit—and in mine!"

So Huzim once more raised the hammer head above his own and, with a heave which drove the blood from out his nostrils, struck; the brazen gates fell inward, smitten from their hinges, and Semiramis sprang over them. Upward her warriors pressed toward halls of Zariaspa's citadel, and where a doorway barred their path, there Huzim smote it, till wood and metal gave before his strength; then into the central hall burst a raging imp of war, with the wolves of Babylonia baying at her heels.

Within the inner court were gathered many women, the wives of nobles, the children of King Oxyartes and his spouse, huddled together in the fear of death, but these Semiramis harmed not. Her work was laid among the warriors who manned the gates of the outer court, holding them for the inrush of the Bactrians fighting in the streets, for every man who might be spared from the citadel's defense was flung against the invading hordes of Menon and the King. So it chanced that within the citadel were, in all, three thousand men-at-arms, and these Semiramis attacked as a hound may leap at a lion's throat; yet ill it might have gone with her slender force had Menon not sent another thousand warriors to follow down the hidden river course. They came at the turning point of fate, the mountaineers from the land of Nairi, wild, hairy men who sang as they fought, or died with a broken song upon their lips; thus their strange, barbaric tongues gave heart to Babylon, even as their swords brought woe amongst the enemy.

The gates were won; the victors pursued their quarry from hall to hall, through winding passageways and on stairs that dripped with blood, while Semiramis, with Kedah and Huzim, worked ever upward toward the highest battlements. Two stairways led to an opening on the roof, the one upon the right, the

other on the left, and these they mounted, while from without came the roar of battle raging in the streets.

When the Bactrians, pressed by Ninus, sought refuge in their citadel they came upon fast-locked gates, and so a tangled swarm of defeated warriors were squeezed against the walls, while into them drove Menon and the King, cleaving a pathway to the goal of their hearts' desire.

From the press King Ninus looked upward to the summit of the citadel and marvelled at what he saw, for a shepherd dog—the first to stand a conqueror thereon—looked down and barked and barked; then Semiramis sprang beside him, her red locks tossing from beneath her helm. She, too, looked down, on a caldron of murder seething in the pool of Zariaspas's walls; then she raised her round young arms, and, even as the conquering eagle screams, so screamed Semiramis, in a vaunting battle-cry.

In the streets below that cry reechoed from the thirst-parched tongues of a raging multitude that thundered at the fast-locked gates and trod on a floor of slain; then the bolts were drawn and the halls of the citadel were gorged with the inrush of a conquering horde. In the van ran Ninus, and close beside him Menon came, each intent on mounting to the battlements, each watching covertly lest the other gain some vantage ground; thus it came about that the two contrived a separate road. The King advanced to the stairway on the right, and with sword in hand looked backward, in a grim, unspoken vow to slay the man who followed him; but a Babylonian whispered in the ear of Menon who was straightway swallowed up amongst the throng.

Now the followers of Asharal, according to their pledge, made way for Menon, opening a path toward the flight of stairs upon the left, while the right was barred by the fighting-men of Babylon. Here none might mount and live, yet at the coming of the King—this black-browed warrior-lord of all the world—the blood of Babylon was cooled; their sword points fell, and they suffered him to pass—to pass across the wounded, senseless form of Asharal.

So, upward ran Prince and King, the one upon the right, the other on the left, each panting in his toil till their veins were swelled into throbbing, purple knots; each casting aside all reckoning of life and death save the one desire to outstrip his fellow animal in the race toward the roof. The roof!—whereon a woman stood—one mould of mortal clay, yet mixed with the blood-red wine of passion, whereof men drink, and in their madness trample on the altars of their gods.

Upward, still upward, till a single flight remained, and none might say which held a vantage of the lead; then Menon groaned aloud and sank exhausted on the stair. Huzim, watching from above, leaped down to seize his master in his arms and bear him upon the roof; yet, alas! too late, for the mighty sinews

of the King would win to the summit of the citadel. The race was well-nigh run. Between the lord of all Assyria and his goal there stood one man alone—Kedha the faithful—he who loved Semiramis as a dog may love the master of his heart; he who loved in silence since that bygone day in Syria when a red-locked imp of war had cursed him in his teeth and with him charged a wall of battling Kurds. At the coming of the King he crouched upon the stair, not in fear, but in awe of that crowning flash of Destiny when a man and his spirit reach the parting of the way. An arm shot out and seized the monarch's thigh; a shoulder pressed him, and the two plunged downward, rolling to the bottom of the stair.

In the fall poor Kedha lay beneath the King—beneath two hairy hands that in fury gripped his throat. These hands had builded Nineveh; they had played with nations as a juggler toys with sharpened blades; they had woven the thongs of servitude—from sun-baked Egypt to the frozen waters of the North—and now they closed, till the neck of one last slave was snapped and his body lay in a bleeding, huddled heap. Thus Kedha passed, in the cause of those he loved, and, in passing, wrought a nobler deed than the lord of all Assyria could boast, with scepter and with sword.

When Ninus at last came out upon the roof, Menon rested from the toil of battle and the stress of his racing climb, breath-spent, with fast-closed eyes which noted not the coming of his King. In his heart of hearts the monarch yearned to raise the victor in his arms and hurl him from the battlements, but Semiramis leaned upon his hunting spear, even as Huzim leaned upon his mighty hammer haft; therefore the monarch smiled. He raised Prince Menon and set him upon the battlements, and then, in the sight of the watching hosts, proclaimed him conqueror; whereat a mighty roar went up, till the soul of the King grew faint with fury, though his hand was steady, and he smiled.

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When darkness fell, great braziers of oil and fat were lighted in the hall of the conquered citadel, and there the King made feast in honor of his victory. Beside him sat Menon and Semiramis, on whom the monarch looked with a look of love, hiding his flaming jealousy in smiles. Beyond them sat the brave Prince Asharal, on whom King Ninus also smiled, with a devil of hatred clawing at his heart. So the feast went on and on, and joy was rife throughout Assyria and Babylon.

When the wine was half consumed, and when beasts and captives had been slain in sacrifice of Asshur, then Ninus arose and spoke concerning the splendor of all things which had come to pass. To those deserving praise, he praised without stint of measure, promising such reward as the treasures of plundered Bactria might yield; yet Menon he set in honor above the rest. He bade his warriors look

upon this man as the son of Ninus—son of his loins and heart—who would henceforth share in the stress of war and the rule of the King’s dominion over men.

”For who,” he cried, ”shall sit upon Assyria’s throne if Ninus, perchance, be gathered to his fate?”

A silence fell throughout the hall, and each man looked upon his fellow, wondering. Semiramis, too, sat silent, her eyes fast fixed upon the master’s face, striving to read his hidden heart, even as a seeker after truth may scan a graven lie upon a monument.

So the feast, at last, was done, and each man sought his rest, the King to toss upon his couch and plan a war of craft, while Semiramis, because of a wounded knee, was borne in the arms of Menon to his tent, and slept from weariness.

The feast was done; yet within the stricken city’s gates another feast was made—a feast of horror—for the victors fell to plundering far and wide, seeking for wine and blood, for hidden gold, for jewels—and for those who wore the gems.

As Fate has written, women must ever shed the tears of war; so now they were hunted from home to home, to fall a prey to the brutish lust of conquerors. Some shrieked for mercy, and received it not; some slew themselves and passed to judgment undefiled; while others still would smile on being comforted. The feast, at least, was done. A red moon hung above the peaks of Hindu-Kush, and dipped into the gloom. A stillness fell on stricken Zariaspa, for the gods of mercy sent it sleep. Anon, the stillness broke to the howling of a dog, or the rustle of some wounded warrior who crawled from out the shadows in search of a cooler spot whereon to die.

CHAPTER XXV

SHIFTING THE BURDEN

The High Priest Nakir-Kish was summoned to an audience with the King, and was bade to bear a sacred fowl for the manifestation of an augury; so he went forthwith and came upon his master, alone and seated on the throne of Oxyartes, with a naked sword across his knees. The High Priest marveled at the strangeness of this thing, but held his peace, bending his knee and asking in what manner he might serve his gracious lord.

Ninus for a space sat silent, combing at his beard, his black brows drawn into a knot above his nose; then, suddenly, he spoke:

"May a King do homage to a dog?"

The priest stepped back a pace; he passed a hand across his eyes, in the fear that, mayhap, he dreamed; but the King spoke on:

"Shall the lord of Assyria keep covenant with a barking beast, whose mind is such that an oath is naught to him?"

Then Nakir-Kish divined. His master would shift the burden of an evil deed, even though he set it on the shoulders of the gods; therefore the High Priest answered cunningly:

"Nay, lord, in matters concerning the King alone, there is one endowed by birth and mind to best interpret them—thysself."

"Not so!" cried Ninus, "for the fate of others is woven in the skein. As my deeds of arms are wrought for the glory of Asshur and the lesser gods, so, then, must the gods point out my way when their servant wandereth in the mists of doubt." He paused, then spoke again, as an humble traveller who had lost his path: "Heed, Nakir-Kish, and lend me aid. The first to stand a conqueror upon the citadel was Habal—and Habal is but a dog. Shall Habal take Shammuramat to wife? Not so! One oath is thus dissolved."

"Aye," spoke the priest, "but who was next to stand with Habal on the summit of the citadel?"

"Menon!" breathed the King, in smothered wrath. "Menon to whom I swore a second oath and gave him this Syrian for his own."

The High Priest shook his head.

"'Twould seem," he ventured, "that one covenant dissolved would bind its maker's faith to the second covenant, and thereby lift the troublous mists of doubt."

"True," the monarch nodded; "true, to the feeble mind of man; yet, mayhap, in the judgment of the gods, this matter hath a deeper trend. Shammuramat, not Menon, was the conqueror; and albeit he stood before me on the citadel, his vantage was won by trickery!—by his servant who cast me down the stairs, in the cause of his master's evil selfishness!"

King Ninus paused again, and his fingers, which had squeezed the breath from Kedha, combed gently at his beard, then dropped to the sword across his knees.

"Heed, Nakir-Kish; rive open thy sacred bird, and in its entrails seek an answer to my questionings."

So the High Priest wrought his master's will; yet the while he pondered, seeking some nook of wisdom wherein to hide himself. He slew the sacred crane and opened it; he plucked three downy feathers and, giving each a name, dropped them into the carcass, then bound the whole with a silken cord. Head downward he held the crane, and by its slender legs he swung it in mystic circles before the

King, then laid it at last upon an altar-stone. When the carcass once more was opened, two feathers lay curled in a close embrace, while the third was lost to sight, and the cheek of the High Priest paled.

"Read!" breathed Ninus; yet Nakir-Kish stood silent, casting a troubled gaze upon the floor. The King stretched forth a hand and pointed to the bird; and in that moment the High Priest knew that an augury of truth was but an augury of death. The master made no threat by word of tongue, yet slid his fingers down the edge of a naked sword, as he looked on the warm brown throat of Nakir-Kish—and smiled.

The trembling priest said naught. His brain swam round and round, and a mist of fear arose before his eyes, for the feather which bore the name of Ninus had disappeared in the entrails of the slaughtered crane.

"Speak!" growled the King, and the pale priest lifted up his voice and spoke, though he spoke in shame:

*"Prince Menon shall pass from the sight of those who love him best!
The lord of the world will claim his own—and take Shammuramat—to wife!"*

He ceased, and the King sat pondering, with fingers that combed his beard in a feather-touch; then the High Priest gathered up the sacred crane and went his way. On the burning sands he strode, in the glare of a molten sun, seeking to free his spirit from the shadow of a lie.

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The King sat pondering. Unto him came a trusted spy with word that in the mountains of Hindu-Kush was gathered a mighty force of Bactrians, those who had escaped from Zariaspa and from the lesser cities round about. The monarch harkened to these tidings with a bounding heart, for in his brain an evil plan was born. Desiring to hold the secret of the Bactrian force, he spoke no word of it to any man, and put the spy to death; then mounting his chariot, he drove to the tent of Menon and Semiramis. Here he came upon them, the Syrian resting upon a couch of skins, by reason of her wounded knee, while Menon sat beside her on the ground.

The monarch greeted them, and with them held a secret council, setting forth the expedients of war. King Oxyartes he would make an ally to Assyria's might, when the scattered Bactrians had been subdued and the terms of treaty were thereby cheapened for the conquerors. Concerning Zariaspa, he would not destroy it, but would set a governor within its walls and keep it as a stronghold in the East. Therefore he begged that Semiramis would lead a force of twenty thousand warriors across the mountains, seizing upon the source of the hidden river-course, lest the Bactrians choke the cleft with stones and cheat the city of

its water and its food.

Right gladly would Semiramis have wrought this deed, yet because of her wound she might not scale the mountains steeps; so, sorrowing at the idleness of many days to come, she offered her servant Huzim as a guide. The King demurred. It was not meet, he said, that a slave should win the glory of so great a thing; yet since Semiramis and the Indian alone might point the way, he would suffer Huzim to lead the army hence. So thus it was agreed, and, after discoursing on other weighty matters of the time, Ninus went forth and once more mounted to his chariot.

Now it chanced that when the King was gone Semiramis held council with her lord, and in that council wrought more woe unto herself than in all her other days since she lay, a deserted babe, among the rocks of Ascalon.

"Menon," said she, "'tis well that thou and I bask always in the light of uncommon things. Mayhap our works may oft' times fret the King to jealousy; yet, even so, we win the homage of Assyria and Babylon. Go, therefore, thyself and, leaving Huzim here to guard my tent, point out the way to the Bactrians' secret place."

"Nay," sighed Menon, "how, then, shall I mark a trail through the hills of Hindu-Kush when the way thereof is hidden and unknown to me?"

Semiramis laughed aloud. Through the open tent she pointed to a cleft which split two mountain peaks in twain:

"Climb yonder and pass between, then journey down the further slope till the second mountain stream is reached; hunt northward toward its source, and the foam-tongued waters will shout thy way, even as hounds lift up their song on the quarry's trail." She paused to laugh again: "In truth, King Ninus is of little wisdom, else to him I might have pointed out this open path, even as I point it out to thee."

Prince Menon looked upon his wife and smiled, then dispatched a messenger to Ninus, begging to lead the army over Hindu-Kush; but the King refused. Then Menon went himself before the master, beseeching that this honor might be his, and setting forth such argument that the King at last was moved, albeit he gave consent reluctantly; so Menon, rejoicing, went out from the presence of his lord and came again unto Semiramis.

Yet when he was gone, the King sat pondering on his throne, combing at his beard with a feather-touch, rejoicing, even as the younger man rejoiced. Full well he knew that the fastness of the hills now swarmed with Bactria's fighting-men. Full well he knew that this horde of warriors, driven from their cities and their homes, would watch from commanding heights and fall upon Menon with the fury of a lion brought to bay. And thus would the master send him forth to die, even as in after days King David of the Jews sent forth the husband of

Bathsheba to perish on the spear-points of the sons of Ammon.

And because of these things, the lord of all the world sat pondering on his throne, combing at his beard with a feather-touch—rejoicing—for now in truth would he set the burden of his sin on the shoulders of the gods.

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When darkness descended Menon lashed his armor on and bade farewell to his wife Semiramis. He smiled in parting, yet she, because of a haunting whisper-ghost of fear, clung tightly to her lord with her round, warm arms and warmer lips, setting about his neck a leathern thong whereon hung a little fish of malachite—the same which had befooled the eunuch Kishra and brought her in safety out of Nineveh.

”See,” she whispered, ”’tis a charm which we of Syria wear, averting evil and bringing back a cherished one unto those who love him best. Wear, then, my charm, as I will ever wear the garment of thy love, for if thou comest not back to me, ah, Menon mine, the joy of the world is but as a cup of water spilled.”

So Menon held his woman to his breast and looked into the heart-pools of her eyes—looked and was gone—on a road of darkness wherein he would grope for a cherished one in vain, and fling his cries of anguish at a throne of unlistening gods.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE PASSING OF A MAN

King Ninus took council within himself, and was afraid. Menon, he knew full well, was a seasoned warrior, one who even from the ashes of defeat would oft times snatch a brand of victory. What if he won to the Bactrians’ secret-place and returned unscathed? He would thereby add more glory to his name and bring his master’s design to naught. Nay, Menon must pass from the sight of those who loved him best! What chance, the like of this, might again arise, and when? Mayhap the lord of the world must wait—alone—for the waning of many moons, while Menon lay nightly at the side of Semiramis—and the thought was not to be endured. By the spirit of Shamashi-Ramân, the spirit of this man must pass!

And yet King Ninus pondered, tossed back and forth by passion and the

haunting whisper-ghost of fear. Then he lifted his head and laughed. It was not meet that the lord of all Assyria should whine at the altar stone of circumstance.

"Therefore," he reasoned within himself, "will I twist the tail of chance; for when the steed of Doubt be saddled, mount him, lest a rider be left behind."

So it came to pass that Menon, ere he led the army forth, was summoned before the King, and found him seated in the hall of Oxyartes, attended by Neb and Ura, two tongueless eunuchs of giant frame and knotted thews, whom Ninus had brought from the land of the Lower Nile. At right and left of the royal seat they stood, awaiting the master's nod—a nod which would be obeyed, though it asked the slaying of an enemy or destruction to themselves; yet Ninus gave no sign to them as Menon bowed before the throne. It had come to the King, in thought, that by plucking his rival's wife from out his arms and sending him to death, mayhap the wrath of the goddess Ishtar might work an evil unto him who wrought the deed; therefore it were wise that Menon yield to the master's will, though consent be won by bribery or the torture-chain. So Ninus smiled, and spoke in a voice of honey mixed with oil:

"Son of my heart, it hath come to me that our needs demand a King in the land of Syria; and because of thy deeds will I set thee up, to reign in plenty, bringing glory to thy house and name."

Menon looked upon his master, marveling; yet at his heart suspicion came a-knocking, even as a runner speeds by night to sound alarm from door to door. He feared, yet knelt before his lord and spoke in gratitude; then, rising at last, he took the bit of chance between his teeth, and asked:

"Who, lord, shall follow me to Syria and there remain?"

And Ninus answered him and said:

"An army of chosen warriors to hedge thee in safety round about—my daughter Sozana to sit beside thee on a throne."

A silence fell. Each looked into the other's eyes, in measure of the final cast; then Menon spoke a single word in answer:

"No!"

Again fell silence, till the monarch's cloak of gentleness was pealed away, leaving him a brutish ruler over men—a ruler naked in his flame of power—before whose passion the passions of lesser men must be consumed and die.

"Heed well," he cried, and pointed a finger, trembling in spite of will, "'tis better far to sit a throne in Syria than to rot and be forgotten in the hills of Hindu-Kush. Choose, then, to live or die! Choose now, for I tell thee this: though the arch of heavens fall, Shammuramat shall be thy wife no more—but mine!"

For answer Menon set one foot upon the dais of the throne, and, curving his spine, struck fiercely with a doubled fist. It sank into the monarch's beard, and deeper, to the cruel mouth beneath; whereat King Ninus reeled, and the great

dim hall spun round and round in a misty smear of light. Then Menon's sword came rasping from its sheath, for he, too, looked through a blinding mist, though the mist was red; yet ere he could smite, the eunuchs Neb and Ura fell upon him, dragging him to the floor where they bound his wrists with thongs.

The King arose, though leaning dizzily against his throne. He wiped a blood stain from his wounded lips and spoke, in a voice which was strangely calm:

"Bear me this dog to a chamber beneath the citadel and nail him to the wall!"

So the eunuch Neb went out and cleared the passage-ways of all who lolled therein, while Ura covered Menon with a cloak and bore him on his back to a distant chamber where the city cisterns were. Here they stripped him of his armor and of all he wore besides, even to the little fish of malachite; then, deaf to his curses, they pierced his hands and feet and nailed him against the wall, where he hung in agony.

When this was accomplished Ninus came to view his handiwork. He looked and his heart was glad, for now no more would this man rise up to steal his fruits of passion or of power.

"Heed," spoke he; "renounce Shammuramat for evermore, and I lift thee from the nails and heal thy wounds." Menon made no answer, and presently the master spoke again: "To fling away thy life is but the deed of a mindless fool, for I swear by the breath of Asshur thine eyes shall look no more upon Shammuramat!"

"Liar!" cried Menon, and laughed in scorn—laughed, though a sweat of anguish dripped down upon his breast; and the laughter enraged the King.

With his fingers he touched his eyes; touched, too, the dagger in his girdle and made a sign to the eunuch Neb. Two thrusts, and the brain of Menon wandered on a darkened road; then Ninus looked up and mocked at the man impaled upon the wall.

"Who now," he asked, "will look upon Shammuramat? and who shall say that the lord of Assyria speaketh falsely, even to a fool?"

He ceased; then Menon raised his drooping head and cursed his King in prophecy:

"Thou spawn of hell! Laugh now in my hour of tears! Rejoice, ere the hand of reckoning shall draw thy taunting tongue! Thou hast slain my heart and let my body live! Slay, thou, the body, also, but the spirit thou can'st not slay! 'Twill come to thee, this spirit, watching at thy couch and board, watching through thy huntings and thy wars—through days of waking and the nights of troubled sleep! 'Twill bay thy trail of blood and lead the hounds of Ishtar to their kill! Laugh, then, O lord of lies, and wait for Menon! Wait!"

The shrill voice ceased to ring throughout the chamber, and he who cried

in prophecy hung limp and speechless from the nails. The eunuchs crouched, trembling, at the master's feet, and the master, also, was afraid. Nor man nor beast he feared, yet if a spirit rode upon his soul, full well he knew that the steed would race for Gibil's smoking stalls; so the King took council within himself whereby to cheat a ghostly rider of his mount.

"In truth," he mused, "if Menon liveth, his spirit may not wander from its outer shell; and if it there remain, how, then, shall it follow me, with a nose of vengeance snuffing at my trail? Again, should the woman accuse me of his death, right well may I swear a guiltless oath while his life be still his own."

Thus mused Ninus and washed his conscience of a stain, then turned to his eunuchs in a sharp command:

"Lift ye this man from the nails upon the wall; restore his breath with water from the cisterns, and his strength with wine. Bring garments wherewith to warm his flesh, and a salve to heal his wounds. Guard ever this doorway, bearing food and drink, for I charge ye that his body must not die, but live."

So the King came up from under the under-chambers of the citadel and caused a thousand torches to be set aflame; yet, even in the glare of burning pitch, a shadow seemed to haunt him, with a low-hung muzzle snuffing at his heels.

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From the city gates went twenty thousand warriors, and in the van a spy whose name was Akki-Bul, a man who knew the hills of Hindu-Kush and would lead an army hence. Why, he fathomed not, yet wore the armor of a chieftain and his sword, a chieftain's nether garments, while about his neck, from a leathern thong, hung a charm of carven malachite. So, pondering upon the strangeness of these things, proud Akki-Bul went forth to spy the way, ten spear lengths in advance of those who followed after him.

Through the opening in her tent Semiramis watched an army steal across the plain and disappear into a valley's dip; then she slept, to dream of her home in Ascalon, of Dagon's lake, of the creatures that swim therein, and of Menon—with a little green fish of malachite that nestled against his heart.

In a chamber beneath the citadel lay a sorely stricken man. In fever and pain he lay, and cried aloud to the far, unlistening gods. With tortured hands he groped on a darkened road and found no staff wherewith to feel his way. His book of light was closed; the water from his cup had spilled, and the glory of the world was gray.

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The morning mists came writhing from their valley-beds, and the Hindu-Koh loomed red through an opal haze. A drowsing desert shrank from the heat to come, and the world awoke and yawned.

Now those who watched from the city wall, looked westward and were amazed, for down the hill-slopes came a swarm of warriors, fleeing as from the unclean bogbards of an under-world; and after them ran other men, smiting with sword and shaft, till the shreds of a death-torn army came streaming across the plain. They poured through the city gate, choking it with the inrush of a bawling crew, while many fell panting, in the shadow of the wall; then Ninus, roused by a signal of alarm, drove, raging, into the press. Half clad, he leaned from his rocking chariot, lashing at all who came within his reach, cursing the cowardice of men who brought a shame to Assyria's King.

Semiramis, too, awoke, and at the clamour of retreating men, her blood ran chill and she trembled for her lord. In haste she clothed herself, unmindful of her wounded knee, and limped to the city gates. She yearned to question each passer-by, and dared not, because of a terror clawing at her heart; so the daughter of Derketo crouched in a shadow of the wall, with parching tongue and hunted eyes, waiting, listening for the tidings which would blight the glory of her world.

King Ninus marked her coming, yet gave no sign, for now he had a part to play, wherein he would befool the craftiest of women to whom the gods had given breath and brain. He called aloud for Menon, but no answer came, nor were there any knowing aught of him since the rout began; so Ninus reviled them, swearing vengeance on all who had left their chieftain to perish among the hills. He gave command that a mighty force make ready for attack against the Bactrians, a force which he himself would lead, in search for Menon, held prisoner or dead; then, wheeling his chariot, drove swiftly to the citadel; and there, as he lashed his armor on, he chuckled joyously, for a lion had learned the wisdom of a fox.

From the shadow of the wall Semiramis groped her way toward her tent, numb, tearless, and with a sense of wonder at the strangeness of her grief. She seemed to look in pity, from afar, on this silent thing who set a helm upon her flaming locks and a breast-plate on a breast which now was dead. So the one Semiramis watched the other make ready for a journey into Hindu-Kush; she saw the silent one take up her hunting spear, mount on her chariot and drive to the city gate, where she-waited, shivering, in the glory of a summer sun.

When the King came forth to find her waiting there, his heart misgave him, for if Semiramis chanced to find the body of Akki-Bul in Menon's armor, then in truth would the crust of Gibil's pit be lifted from its fires. Therefore he sought to dissuade her will, saying that he himself would accomplish all things, while she remained at rest till her wound was healed; yet to his pleadings she answered

naught, for to her his words were meaningless and like unto the idle whisperings of rain drops as they fell. She stood upon her chariot, gazing in silence out toward the prison of the hills which hid her lord, and waited for Assyria to move.

Then the King, in secret, gave command to all who followed him that if any came upon Menon's body or the armor which he wore, no word of it should reach Semiramis, because of her consuming grief; and those who loved her, promised, and the army marched across the plains of Bactria.

To Semiramis came the faithful Huzim with a whispered word of hope. He seated her on the chariot's floor and took the reins, while after them trotted Habal, for the dog, perchance, might lead the seekers where the cunning of man would falter on the trail. When the foot-hills were reached the chariot was left behind; Semiramis rode an unharnessed steed which Huzim led, and the toil of ascent began.

And now the slopes of Hindu-Kush awoke to the din of strife, for the hill rocks swarmed with Bactria's fighting-men who loosened great stones upon the climbers, or smote them with down-flung spears and whistling shafts; and even as the voice of battle woke, so woke Semiramis from the slumber of her grief. In her veins ran the blood of two great passions which must ever rule the world—the passions of love and war—begotten in the lust-lock of Derketo and a battle-god.

Thus a child of passion went raging through the hills of Hindu-Kush, and where she might not climb, there Huzim bore her on his mighty back. At her side fought Asharal and the chiefs of Babylon, while about them was ever set a ring of the men of Naïri, those hairy mountaineers who sang as they battled; yet now, because of Menon whom they loved, the battle-chant was hushed upon their lips.

Upward they toiled, through valley and defile smiting their Bactrian enemies on every hand, pursuing them from crag to crag, or cutting off retreat; and where the foeman hid away in caverns, they were smoked therefrom and slain. So Assyria came at last to the mountain-top, surged through the pass and swept the slopes beyond, coming by night to the source of the hidden river-bed, while the Bactrians fled to the forest lands beyond, hiding in swampy glades where Ninus might not follow them.

When morning was come and a force had been left to guard the mouth of the river-bed, the Assyrian army once more breasted the mountain slope, and on the eastern side began a search for Menon, though the task was great. There were those who thought to find the spot whence the first assault had come, yet, by reason of the darkness which had made the marks on the mountain side seem strange, they found it not; nor might they trace it by the bodies of the slain, for the second battle had strewn the rocky wastes with dead, even as the field-man scatters grain.

For seven days the hunters combed the hills, while the sun poured down in

fury, and from the sky great birds of prey descended to their feast; at approach they would reel away in lazy flight, mocking the seekers with discordant cries, then settle to some other dread repast. So the search went on in vain, and day by day the spirits of Ninus rose, for, if Semiramis came not upon the corpse of Akki-Bul, the monarch's treachery would lie forever with the lost; then came to pass a happening which fitted the King's desire, even as a sword may slide into its sheath.

The good dog Habal had hunted with his mistress and her slave, yet found no scent to lead them on their quest; and now as he snuffled along the edge of a precipice his footing gave beneath him, and, clawing at the loosened stones, the dog went whirling down into the depth below. As he fell, Semiramis cried out in pain and grief, for Habal she loved, with a love which woman only may fathom or understand. Sorrowing, she commanded Huzim to descend into the rift to learn if a spark of life remained within her dog; so the Indian went down.

The way was grievous, and at the bottom he was forced to stone away a flock of noisome vulture-birds; then he came upon Habal with the breath of life dashed out of him. The Indian stooped, yet paused in stark amaze, for the dead dog lay beside the body of a man—a man who wore Prince Menon's armor and his broken helm; yet, because of heat and the beaks of birds, none now might see therein a semblance of the hapless Akki-Bul. Thus it seemed that, even in his death, a faithful beast had led his loved ones on the trail of the master whom he loved.

So Huzim climbed up to Semiramis, and, sorrowing, gave into her hand Prince Menon's sword, together with a little green fish of malachite suspended on a leathern thong; and, seeing these things, her wails of anguish echoed throughout the hills, for now she knew in truth that her lord would come to her no more.

She would have clambered down to him, but Huzim dissuaded her, saying that the steeps would cause her wound to open; and again, it were better that she hold the memory of her lord in life than to look upon this rotting thing below. So Huzim, with Asharal and the men of Nāiri, descended into the rift and left Semiramis weeping on the lip of the precipice.

They dug a grave and laid therein the body of Akki-Bul, dropping their tears upon it in the name of Menon, Prince of the house of Nāiri; and with him they buried Habal, as every faithful dog would yearn to sleep, with his paws and muzzle resting on a master's breast. Above, among the rocks, a thousand warriors watched, grim sons of battle and of blood, yet children now in the grip of unselfish grief. Semiramis they loved, because of the glory of the woman's flesh and the glory of her deeds; her sorrows were even as their sorrows, so their hearts were sad within them, and they wept.

Then down the mountain side went the army of Assyria, to the foot-hills

and across the hot brown plains, coming at last to the city of Zariaspa; and in the lead went Ninus, a chant of mourning on his lips, a song of passion in his heart.

Throughout the day Semiramis lay within her tent as one who is stricken by a sword, and Huzim sat beside her, cooling her brows with water, and driving the fever from her wound with ointment and pounded herbs. At evening came the King, with words of gentleness, mourning with her at the double loss of Menon and her shepherd dog; but she answered him and said:

”Nay, lord, mourn not because of Habal, for in his death the gods let fall a dew of comfort and of peace. In the rimless fields of the over-world my Menon is not alone, for Habal’s spirit hunteth at his master’s side.”

Now if this thought brought peace unto Semiramis, no peace it brought unto the King, for his cheek went pale beneath his beard. Since Menon had hung upon the wall and cursed him, swearing to lead the hounds of Ishtar on his trail, a dog was a dread abomination in his sight—a thing to bay his memory and patter after him on ghostly feet.

When night was come he tossed upon his couch in troubled dreams, watching a ghoulish army trail across the sky. Spirits they were of those he had sent to perish in the hills of Hindu-Kush; and in their lead flew Menon’s spirit—with the spirit of a dog in leash. And the King awoke and caused his torches to be lit.

CHAPTER XXVII

A PATH WHICH LED TO ITS STARTING POINT

King Ninus now rested from his war and disposed of the affairs of state. He sealed a treaty with Oxyartes whereby all Bactria lay subject to Assyria’s rule, each city paying yearly tribute to the King. King Oxyartes he took unto himself as a brother-chief, and in Zariaspa set up as Governor of Tax a man whose name was Tiglath-Shul, a chieftain who would likewise hold a force of warriors in command of the city wall.

When this was accomplished, Ninus brought before him the eunuchs Neb and Ura, and charged them to guard the prison door of Menon, suffering none to enter or learn the name of him who lay therein. Likewise he whispered in the ear of Tiglath-Shul, saying that a Bactrian hostage was being held in the keep below, and the head of a certain Governor would, mayhap, be forfeit for those who meddled in the King’s affairs. Therefore the Governor took council with himself,

refrained from prying, and set a blight on all who were overcurious. Then Ninus, when other weighty matters had been put in order, commanded that the armies of Assyria depart on the homeward way.

Once more the marching host like a monster serpent crawling through the dust, crept upward among the hills, through the Pass of the Wedge now strewn with whitening bones, and down the rugged slopes beyond; through forest-lands and the countries of those who dwelt among the rocks, through Media ripening for a conquest by the King; scaling the Zagros mountains, and coming at last unto Arbela where the army sat down in weariness.

Throughout the journey Semiramis lay within her litter, holding speech with none save Huzim who ever sat on guard, while the King, albeit he yearned for a sight of her, restrained his ardor till her term of mourning passed and her grief had spent itself.

"Because," he mused, "a fruit hath life so long as it hangeth on its mother-branch. But once may this fruit be plucked—no more; take, therefore, heed lest in plucking we find it green."

So the lion persevered in the wisdom of the fox and broke not upon the seclusion of Semiramis; then, after a rest of twenty days, the army left Arbela, marched northward across the river Zab and thence to the eastern gate of Nineveh; and at their coming the people flocked to the city walls, with songs of rejoicing for the conquerors, with love-lit eyes for those who returned to waiting homes, with hunted eyes that watched in vain for others who slept in the vales of Hindu-Kush. Thus it came to pass that Nineveh was rent with joy and tears; for where the thousands wept into the ashes of their hearths, the tens of thousands steeped their hearts in wine, and laughed. Laughter and tears, entwined in a close embrace, for the joy of a man is ever his neighbor's woe.

In the palace of the King there was likewise joy, much feasting and the dance of timbril-girls; then Ninus, in the gardens, came upon Sozana and Memetis who together had dwelt in happiness since the eunuch Kishra ran afoul of fate. An infant had been born to them, so Ninus tore his beard in wrath and gave his daughter in wedlock to the man; albeit he would have surely slain the Egyptian had Semiramis not pleaded mightily.

"Heed," said she, "what profit in this deed of blood? What promise in a babe left fatherless? See what a sturdy little warrior, who, as Asshur liveth, hath the eye of Ninus and his very nose!"

Thus the wrath of the King grew less, as the wrath of man must ever grow beneath the soothing subtleties of a woman's tongue. Then Semiramis shut herself within her chamber, communing with none save Sozana and the child; and thus through the life of seven moons she mourned for Menon, sitting by day in the garden's shade, or at night on the palace roof, seeking for peace in the rays

of Ishtar and her sister stars.

Now Ninus, who loved her, grew impatient of her grief, and sought by every art to contrive a wakening therefrom, yet in every pleasure set for her he failed; then came a time when he must journey in India to seal a covenant with that country's King. So he summoned Huzim who was born of that land where the Indus runs, and spoke unto him, saying:

"Thy mistress pineth, dreaming in regret of things which even the high god Asshur may not mend. Plead, therefore, with Shammuramat, urging that she follow with Sozana in my train, and, perchance, the wonders of thy native land may rouse her from her sorrows and her lethargy."

The Indian bowed before the King and promised, then sought his mistress in the gardens on the mound. He found her, seated beside the fountain's pool, feeding the fishes that swam therein, while in her hand she held another fish—a little green thing of carven malachite suspended on a leathern thong. This saddened Huzim, yet he spoke to her concerning India, of the marvels of its mighty river and the game abounding on its marshy banks; he told her of other game, strange beasts that made their lairs within the jungle where hunters followed after them on the backs of other beasts; and as he spoke, the eyes of Huzim glowed in joy and his muscles quivered, even as the muscles of a battle-steed, for he yearned for his native land, and his hope ran high that his mistress might journey there.

Semiramis smiled in sadness, for she saw the hope in her servant's heart, albeit she knew he would here remain at Nineveh through all his days rather than part from those he served.

"Ah, Huzim," she sighed, as she laid a hand upon his mighty arm, "'tis even as my good lord Menon spoke to me on many a day, for in all the world thou art ever first in faith and love. Go, therefore, unto Ninus, saying that I, Shammuramat, wilt journey in his train to the land of my faithful Huzim, where the Indus runs and the sun is warm."

The servant wept in gladness, and would have kissed her feet, but she raised him gently and bade him seek the King; so Huzim went out from Semiramis, rejoicing, with the half forgotten songs of childhood bubbling beneath his tongue.

Thus it came to pass that in royal barges, manned by boatmen of Phoenicia, King Ninus and his train fared down the Tigris, even to the point of its marriage with the Euphrates, and thence to the gulf beyond; and throughout the journey Semiramis sat apart with her tiring-maids, nor did the King pay court to her, but minded his own affairs in the wisdom of the fox.

At the gulf's head they left their barges and climbed to the deck of a mighty ship which rocked upon the waters till the King and all his court were like to die of a sickness which came upon them; for Assyrians ever hate the sea, and now their

inwards turned in riotous revolt. The King himself was assailed most grievously, for he groaned aloud in anguish, beseeching his servants that they slay him and have done with woe; yet the seizure passed at length, and after many days the great ship came to rest upon the Indus, while its two score oarsmen dropped among their chains, and slept.

At the river's mouth King Khama met his royal visitor, with much rejoicing and the beating of wooden drums, and, after exchange of gifts and courtesies, King Ninus and all his train were paddled in bobbing reed-boats, till they came at last to Surya, the City of the Sun; and here rare feasts were held and the covenants of peace were duly sealed.

Then followed more feasting, with toothful dishes, and a native wine which provokes the heart to mirth, while before them came jugglers performing deeds of prodigy, and madmen who mocked at death in a snake-dance with the hooded cobra, till even Semiramis was stirred to pleasure and amaze.

To those of Assyria were the sacred rites of India made manifest in the temples of the fire-god Agni, and of Indra who ruled the open skies, while priests made offerings of the moon-plant's milk, and melted butter which they set atrickle on the altar stones. In the fastness of the hills were viewed the shrines of the devil gods, where the wild-eyed Khonds made sacrifice to Siva the Destroyer, or to Kali, the goddess of dread iniquities, whose necklace was a string of human skulls.

When the guests were weary of sacred things, King Khama took them hunting, whereat the heart of Ninus rose from out the dust, while Semiramis smiled as Huzim gave into her hand a spear and an oddly fashioned bow. Then for many days they trailed through swamp and forest-land, slaying monsters in the thickets along the river shores, or hunting tawny jungle-beasts from the backs of elephants. These elephants, to Semiramis, were ever a wonder and a joy, because of their strength and the wisdom in their little eyes; yet to Ninus they brought no joy, for their motion recalled the heavings of a ship and took away his zest of life and of all things contained therein. Therefore he bestrode a steed, or met his game on foot and slew it in the glory of his strength.

Thus Semiramis awoke from her lethargy of grief, and, albeit, she sorrowed still, her blood ran quickly through her veins, while laughter rose upon her lips and was not stayed; whereat the King was glad, and in his gladness begged that she choose a gift from out the riches of this marvelous land. She pondered thoughtfully, then voiced a desire so strange that Ninus stared upon her and combed at his beard in wonderment:

"My lord, I thank thee, and of thy bounty will ask a thousand sheaves of reeds, with two score reeds in every sheaf thereof."

Now on the river marshes grew these reeds, to a heighth three times the

stature of a man, and were light of weight and strong; also their outer rind was hard, so that fishermen fashioned boats of them, and the water came not in. Likewise, so plentiful they were that a beggar might build him a house of reeds and thatch his roof, or feed them to his fires.

Thus Semiramis chose a worthless seeming gift, when she might have picked from the jewels of a wonder-land, yet when Ninus questioned her concerning the folly of her choice, she laughed and would tell him nothing of her thoughts; so the thousand sheaves of reeds were dispatched to Nineveh, though the labor and the cost thereof was great.

And now came a final feast, with a parting from India's King, and the train of Ninus faced its homeward way; albeit they journeyed not upon a heaving ship, for the master swore by the thunder of the gods that nevermore would he rive his belly on a thrice accursed sea. Therefore they marched by land along the coast, hunting much game as they fared at easy pace, till they came again to the Tigris where the boats awaited to bear them on to Nineveh.

As they journeyed slowly up this stream, the King paid court unto Semiramis, but at first she would answer nothing to his prayers. With the death of Menon her heart had died within her breast, and never again could she look with love on any man; yet, since the passion of love was spent, it left in her heart full sweep for that other passion—the passion of power—to wind the skein of destiny, or snap it as she would. She yearned to say unto a nation, Go! and to another nation, Come!—to shape the ends of the peoples of the earth—to cause them to bow into the dust and worship one who could lift them up again. How better then, could this passion of desire be wrought than in mating with Assyria's lord? To barter one human body in exchange for dominion over all the world! True, Ninus drove the chariot of state, yet she had but to whisper in the driver's ear to turn the course of its plunging steeds. If Ninus held the reins, a woman held the lash—and, by the smoke of Gibil, she would lay it on!

Thus dreamed Semiramis, while about her the waters of the Tigris crooned their chant of mystery; above, the great stars hung, and flung their burning meteors across the sky; the marshes throbbed with the drone of things invisible and though the gloom rose the vast black walls of Nineveh.

Semiramis, weeping, clung still to a thread of memory—a thread which stretched from a grave in the Hindu-Kush to the steps of Assyria's throne; yet strand by strand it parted, till at last it snapped, and into the Tigris her trailing hand let fall a little green fish of carven malachite.

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The great brown city woke to the thunder-throated voice of festival; the princes

of the world foregathered there in honor of the King who would take Semiramis to wife. From every land they came, together with their followers in arms, and Nineveh resounded with the shoutings of foreign tongues. In the temples on every hill great fires were lit, and the nostrils of the gods were filled with the smoke of sacrifice, while Nakir-Kish and his swarm of under-priests slew flocks of cranes and found in every one an omen of joy unutterable. Through the streets ran youths and maidens twined with flowers, exchanging favors freely in this gladsome hour when none need count the cost. The warriors might quench their thirst at brimming tubs of wine, with naught to pay save shouts for Assyria's Queen; so they drank to the verge of madness and fought fiercely among themselves, for their hearts were glad.

Likewise, the forests and the fields were swept for meat wherewith to feed the multitudes, for Ninus dipped into his treasures with a reckless hand, even as men in the drunkenness of joy will ever squander all their substance, regretting it sorely in the sober after-days.

In the palace, the wealth of kingdoms sank from sight through feasting of costly foolishness, where jewels were baked in the very bread, and the bidden guests would oft'times break their teeth thereon; albeit they kept the jewels, smiling at their pain. Then the King, who was mad with love, went forth and set Semiramis upon a chariot of gold, driving her slowly through the streets, so that all might behold the glory of her charms. He bade his people worship her, and as they knelt he scattered treasures on their heads, till the worshippers vied viciously among themselves, seeking this wealth in the whirling dust where they battled with fists and nails.

At last came the wedding rites, and as Semiramis sat with Ninus on his throne, the palace rocked with bellowing acclaim; then followed more feasting, with the din of music, the songs of thickening tongues, and all Assyria was glad save one alone. Through the reek of flaring torches and the fumes of wine, a woman fled to the peace of the silent roof; yet the echoes of joy came climbing after her, hounding her heart with the memories of other days—the whisper-ghosts that would not die, though crushed beneath a throne.

On her knees the woman fell, and flung her arms toward the dim, unlistening stars.

"Oh, Menon, Menon," she cried aloud, "how empty is the world without the solace of thy kisses on my breast!"

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Thus it came to pass that the nursling of doves made a nest on Assyria's throne. For a year she dwelt in the master's house, and bore him a son whose name

was Ninyas; albeit Semiramis never loved the child, who was weak and petulant, of a slothful nature and a selfish heart—a son who in after days would seek his mother's death, then reign in besotted idleness and squander the strength of a kingdom built on swords.

Now Ninus loved his Queen, to the verge of madness, and naught was there which he would not do to gladden her or indulge her whims; yet Semiramis loved not the King, for in her heart rose ever the image of one man alone—Menon the Beautiful—who dwelt with the dead in a valley of Hindu-Kush.

Thus, since her passion slumbered with him who would wake no more, ambition borrowed of love's desire and rode on a chariot of war. War, red war! till the peace of remotest lands was rent by the screams of battle-horns. Thus the kingdom of Assyria grew apace. The fathers of men had fashioned a map of the countries of all the world; yet it fitted not the fancy of Semiramis, so the War Queen changed it, with a finger dipped in blood.

Where the fury of battle knotted its tightest snarl, there she would drive her chariot, to leap at the throat of danger, breast the surf of death, ride over it, and leave a crimson trail behind. And the warriors bowed down and worshipped her, half in unknowing passion, half in awe, forgetting the glory of the high god Asshur in the glory of a woman-god. As she rode in her chariot of gold, so she rode in the hearts of men, driving them on with a feather-lash, yet driving where she willed; and Ninus became not jealous of her worship or her deeds, for the Queen was his, and the glory of Shammuramat was, also, his.

As the years of war went by, she changed not in the beauty of form and face, for her strange, unearthly charms remained with her, thus causing all to wonder at her immortality; yet with Ninus it was otherwise. Grizzled he grew; the furrows of age ran, straggling, across his brow, and his great beard whitened, even as the coat of a battle-steed is streaked with foam. There were moments when his wrath would burst all bounds, without a cause therefor, and he seemed a man who harkened to a whisper-ghost that hunted him and worried at his ears. Each year a trusted messenger brought report from Zariaspa that Menon's spirit still tarried in the body of the man; yet the master knew no peace throughout his days, and a dog was ever hateful in his sight. By night he would awaken at the distant baying of a hound, then lie in the sweat of fear, huddling for comfort at a woman's side.

The finger of Fate swept slowly round in a circle of a score of years, and the monarch's path of evil led homeward to its starting point. In the Zagros mountain lay a mighty gap through which, in after years, would pour a race of the white-skinned sons of Iran, conquering the world and holding proud dominion till the end of time; and through this gap now crept a train of Bactrians, hiding by day and faring forth again in the hours of night. With them they bore a curtained

litter wherein lay a man whose fingers curved like the claws of birds, whose feet were shrivelled so that he might not stand thereon, and his weak hands wandered always, as if groping on a darkened road.

Nearer, nearer drew this blind, misshapen thing, moaning as his litter rocked from side to side, helpless, shorn of strength; yet better far for Ninus had the hounds of Ishtar fallen on his trail. Outside the walls the Bactrian train lay hidden in the night; then, presently, a warrior chief came knocking at the gates of Nineveh.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE CRY OF THE TIGRESS TO HER MATE

Semiramis, Queen of all Assyria, sat in the royal gardens, in the light of a great round moon which swung above the walls of Nineveh. About her were grouped her maidens, lolling on the fountain's rim, splashing their tiny feet in the coolness of the waves, while their laughter vied with the gurgling music of a water-song. This song burst forth from the fountain's heart, low, soothing, in the summer night, yet was marred of a sudden by the shrieks of Ziffa, a timorous maiden from the north on whose white knee a clammy little frog had sprung. So Ziffa shrieked, till saved by a laughing warrior, the son of Sozana and Memetis, now grown into a man; then the maidens crowned him with a wreath of lily leaves, and their merriment waxed shrill in the gladsome foolishness of youth.

In this harmless mirth Semiramis took no part, for to-night her heart was sad. Her fancy roved through the thickets of a score of years, led on by a thread of memory, and lingered in the vale of Hindu-Kush. Again she looked upon the everlasting hills and the plain below, that thirsty plain on which her cup of water had been spilled, which drank her joy and made a brother-desert of her soul.

As she sat apart, her great eyes lifted to the glow of Ishtar's trail, a man-at-arms came clanking down the garden path, bearing report that a stranger waited beyond the wall with a message for the Queen alone. His name was Dagas, a Bactrian warrior, and, as surety of faith and good intent, he sent a jeweled ring, declaring that Assyria's Queen once wore it on her hand.

Semiramis took the jewel, which in truth had been her own, and, remembering, laughed aloud. This Dagas was the same whom her wits befooled in the foot-hills of Hindu-Kush, when she claimed a sisterhood to Oxyartes and sent

the Bactrian seeking for an army of phantom warriors. So, laughing again, she dismissed her maidens and suffered Dagas to approach alone.

He knelt before her, pressing her sandal to his lips, then at her bidding rose, and gave her smile for smile; no longer the beardless youth, but a grizzled man of war, on whom the heel of years had trod and set its mark. She looked upon him now, remembering how her charms had dazzled him in the day of long ago, so she smiled again and spoke in gentleness:

"Ah, Dagas, thou has come at last to reproach me for deceiving thee. In exchange for Zariaspa I gave thee a jewel and a lie. For thee an evil bartering, my Dagas; yet ask of my bounty, and receive. What wouldst thou?"

"Naught," returned the Bactrian, with a sigh, "naught save thy memory of one who hath loved Shammuramat, and who loveth still."

To the eyes of the woman leaped the fires of wrath, for how should a slave presume to babble of his love?—for *her*—the Queen of all Assyria! She would have clapped her hands in summons of her guard to slay the dog, yet Dagas restrained her gently, smiling as he shook his head.

"Nay, Mistress of the World, I speak not of myself, albeit of myself the same is true; for while I wore thy ring I took no wife unto my breast, no hope unto my heart. For another I plead—for one who shall grope in darkness all his days—yet in his hell of everlasting night, one cry hath rung through the empty hall of years—one heart-cry beating at the doors of life—Shammuramat!"

The Bactrian ceased. The Queen, in wonder, was silent, too, for the words of the man seemed strange and meaningless. Yet why should the dead arise to life? Why should the thread of memory become a chain and drag her back to her lord of other days?—to Menon the Beautiful—he who had torn the veil of Ishtar, and bade her look on the naked glory of a heart!

"Speak," she whispered, watching Dagas, as before she watched in the shadow of Zariaspa's wall, waiting, listening, for tidings of the lost; and Dagas spoke.

He told her of a pestilence which had run through his city's streets, knocking at the doors of beggar and of prince till those who might took refuge in the hills, while others remained because of poverty or lack of fear, and died. Among the stricken were two Egyptian eunuchs, Neb and Ura, who guarded a certain prisoner by command of Tiglath-Shul; yet when these eunuchs died, the Governor set Dagas and a brother warrior as keepers of the man. They had ministered to this prisoner, whose eyes were blind and whose hands and feet were useless by reason of his being nailed against the wall.

"And so," said Dagas, "in sorrow of his state, I sought to hearten him, and became his friend. To me he told his tale, in the truth whereof I may not vouch, for it brandeth him as madman, or else the saddest son of chance since tears were

fashioned by the pitying gods.”

Semiramis made no answer, but she raised her trembling hand, so that Dagas understood and spoke again:

”By night, by day, he pleaded with me, saying: I am Menon, Prince of the House of Naïri, whom Ninus hath crucified. Go, thou, unto my wife Shammuramat and tell her of this thing—tell her I swear it by her kisses on the temple steps at Ascalon! And if she doubt thee still, say thou of me, in her parting words, that the garment of her love hath gone, and the joy of the world is but as a cup of water spilled!”

The Bactrian ceased. Semiramis sat, silent, on the garden seat; no longer Queen of proud Assyria—Mistress of the World—but *the woman*, stripped of royalty and power; *the woman*, crouching in a huddled heap, whence two great eyes looked out and suffered; eyes which would have shrieked, had tongues been given them, yet staring now, in the terror of a stricken beast.

Through the gardens floated laughter—song—the tinkling mirth of zitherns softly played. On the night breeze ran the hum of Nineveh, joyous, flinging care to the seven winds; and a woman’s heart was wondering at the strangeness of it all. Menon lived! Menon the Beautiful who had died in the glory of his youth! Yet Menon lived! Who, then, lay down with Habal in the vale of Hindu-Kush? Speak, Ishtar! Who?

No answer came, till Dagas, in tones of gentleness, told her how this man had journeyed out of Bactria and now lay hidden beyond the city wall; then Semiramis arose and spoke, though her voice was as the voice of some other woman, broken and unknown to her;

”Go, thou, with my servant Huzim and bring him in secret unto me.”

She spoke no more, nor did she offer gold or gratitude to him who had proved devotion rare among the sons of men; yet the Mistress of the World bent down and pressed her lips to the hand of an humble warrior.

* * * * *

Huzim and Dagas came to the hiding-place where Menon lay, and the servant knew not his master, because of his shrunken form and the hair which grew upon his cheeks and chin; yet in Huzim’s arms the master lay sobbing out his joy, till the servant knew, rejoicing that the dead had risen up to live again.

They cut away his beard, washed him, and clothed his form in a garment of fine-spun wool; then they bore him in secret to a chamber on the palace mound.

And Semiramis came in to him—alone—for on that meeting nor you nor I may seek to look, when even the goddess Ishtar might have turned away in pity and in pain.

Through the long blue night he lay with his head upon her breast, weeping, babbling of the aching solitude of his prison years, caressing her hair, her features, with the crooked fingers which were now his eyes. And Semiramis rocked him in the cradle of her arms, as she might have rocked a babe, soothing, whispering her love to this poor misshapen thing, crooning, till he slept at last, to forget the tangle of his joy and grief.

Then the Queen of Assyria stole away—away from the horror of it—seeking the housetop, where none might see, where none might hear, where none might follow save the ghosts of pain. On the roof she stood and opened her robe to the cool, sweet breath of the morning stars. She looked upon Bêlit riding down the sky; she looked upon sleeping Nineveh which was builded by the King. The King! who had builded up another curse and set its walls on a woman's heart—its palace on a woman's shame! The King! who had wrenched the glory from a woman's soul and crucified it!

And now, when her soul could bear no more, she loosed one long-drawn, quivering scream—the cry of the tigress to her stricken mate.

CHAPTER XXIX

WHEN A WOMAN RULED THE WORLD

In the palace of the King there was revelry unstinted, for a change had come upon Semiramis. Through the score of years when she reigned with Ninus, she had paid the tribute of a wife, in sufferance of love which she gave not back again, bearing his son, while her heart roved ever through the hills of Hindu-Kush. She graced his throne and added to his kingdom's power; she ruled his house and gave obedience to her lord; yet the King asked more. He asked for all, not tithes, but the utmost treasure of a woman's heart—her smiles, her yearnings, and the fruits of love which ripened for her mate alone; and now, when the frost of age was set as a helm upon his locks, the hope of youth burst forth to flower again.

Semiramis smiled upon the King, and there was somewhat in her eyes which sent the hot blood bounding through his veins, which caused his breath to flow the faster and his hand to tremble in a lingering caress. Her beauty was for him—the master of men—the lord of a woman's yielding soul—the love-mad king who groveled at a shrine of craft.

So Semiramis suffered the King's caress, smiling her smiles of promise,

while she hushed the curses of her fury-throated hate. She waited now, even as the tigress stalks her kill, patient, tireless, crouching till a shifting wind had passed, to rise again and steal toward the pouncing-point. King Ninus she might have slain by day or night, and there were moments when her fingers clung to a weapon hungrily; yet the King was King, and his nation might not be slain. Nay, first must she strip this man of a nation's love, strip him to the very nakedness of guilt, then nail him to a wall of suffering, even as Menon hung upon a wall of stone. So the tigress waited, and her quarry frolicked through the fields of pleasant ways.

High revelry resounded on the palace mound, till the echoes thereof were borne to a distant chamber where Huzim sat on guard, where Semiramis would steal from the hateful feasts and comfort Menon, till the whisper of wisdom urged return. And the King was mad with love, haunting her footsteps, heaping her lap with his splendid gifts; yet his gifts she would not receive, and retreated from the ardor of his love. She lured him to a deeper madness still, drawing him on by every artful charm, repulsing in a gust of petulance; now warm, now cold, till Ninus knew not if he stood upon his royal head or upon his royal heels. She withdrew to her chamber, heedless of his knockings and his calls, till his soul became afraid of losing her again, and he followed her with pleadings and with prayers. At his prayers she scoffed; at his wrath she answered with a higher wrath, then, of a sudden, gave freely where he had not asked.

Thus Ninus marveled at the strangeness of her mind, and begged that she ask of him such gifts as would please her best, for he swore by the robe of Shamashi-Ramân that none might fathom aught at all in the wilderness of a woman's whims.

At his offer of gifts, the Queen took thought, pondering upon it for the space of a day and night; then she came unto him, saying:

"My lord, if thou wouldst please me best, go hunt for lions in the thickets along the Euphrates."

"Eh--what?" cried the King, thinking she sought to banish him from his bed and board; but she laughed and laid her hand upon his arm.

"Nay, lord, grieve not at parting from my side, for, as Ishtar liveth, *I swear to follow after thee!*" Again she laughed, to smooth the hidden meaning of her oath, and smiled upon him as her tongue tripped on: "Yet in thy absence I would reign as Queen of all Assyria—to rule alone—for the span of one short moon. Give, thus, the chariot of state into my hands, and Shammuramat will drive it, to the wonder of her lord and King."

Once more the master looked upon the promise in her eyes—strange orbs that swam in passion's misty light—and though the voice of wisdom cried aloud against this thing, the voice of love cried, also, till the tongue of warning ceased

to clamor and was still. Thus it came to pass that Ninus and his hunters rode toward the south, while criers ran through the streets of Nineveh, proclaiming the Queen as Ruler Absolute, for the life of a summer moon.

Now as these criers ran, so ran a host of other messengers, bidding the warrior chiefs of every land to appear at court, while their followers might feast within the city walls, nor pay the reckoning thereof. So, while the master hunted beasts, the mistress hunted men. She brought them to her board and feasted them, till hunger and thirst could ask no more. She made such gifts as never a pillaged city yielded to a conqueror, and even the mouths of beggars she filled with gold. To those in office she gave a higher office still, with dream-land promises to all who sought to climb; but to their wives and daughters she offered naught, nor gave; for her thoughts were now of men—the fighting men from the face of all the earth, who would rise as one and dash a monarch from his throne.

Since that by-gone day when she set Prince Asharal again into his place, proud Babylon, to a man, was hers; yet now she wanted more than Babylon. She wanted the warriors of Assyria—the warriors who had worshipped Ninus as a god. She wanted the blood and bone which had raised him up on high—and she wanted them to stamp him in the dust from whence he sprung.

So, now, through Nineveh rang the voice of joy, the voice of feastings and the voice of praise; and on these several tongues the name of Ninus sounded not, but in its place one mad, tumultuous roar—*Shammuramat!*

Queen of the Moon they called her, and she smiled upon their happiness, and gave and gave. She sapped the country bare of wine and food. She flung her gems amongst them as a drunken sower scatters grain. She spilled the blood of a nation's wealth, till the treasury staggered in the manner of a wounded ox, and still she smiled; smiled though her heart was breaking for a man—alight with the flames of Gibil for another man.

Thus it came to pass, at the waning of the moon, that one last feast was held in the hall of the spendthrift Queen, a hall now choked with a press of warrior chiefs and the princes of the world, grim fighters who wore their swords and battle-scars. Such men alone were bidden to the feast—such men who in secret loved the Queen, yet dared not lay a tongue to the telling of their love.

Then unto these sons of war came the mistress of Assyria, not in her gem-sewn robes of state, but in the armor of a battle-queen. On her breasts were set her nipple-plates of gold; on her flame-hued locks that helm which had flashed like star-fire through the ruck of war. Across her shoulders was flung a leopard skin, and her arms were bare, stripped of all save the bands of bronze which bound the sinews of her wrists. No longer was she the laughing imp who had charged against the Kurds, but a woman—a queen—a tempest-hearted battle-hawk.

At her coming no man spoke, but looked in awe, till presently—they knew not why—the silence was rent by thunders of acclaim, and the Queen bowed low before the sons of war. No smile she gave in greeting; no light-lipped laughter to these men who had followed her through storm and sun; but on her face rode a look of fierce resolve which caused them to wait the coming of uncertain things.

In silence she bade them sit; in silence she sat amongst them, albeit she caused one seat to be vacant at her side; then in silence the feast began. It was not the like of her other feasts, for before them was set the simple fare of warriors afield; and where the wine of Syria was wont to slake their thirst, each found a cup of water at his hand. The Queen sought not their drunken passion which would die before the morrow's sun, for now she would feed their hearts on the flesh of truth and mix their lasting curses with her own. Thus each man, marveling, ate in silence and waited for the coming of the storm; and then, when the feast was done at last, Semiramis arose and spoke:

"My brothers," she began, "brothers in war, in love, in the days of idleness and peace, the heart of your Queen is sad. As I share with you the bounty of my throne, so now I share my sorrows, giving each a part; yet, ere I bare my grief, I would ask if there be any here to offer me reproach. If there be one to say that Shammuramat hath sent him into danger where she herself would fear to lead, speak now, that I brand him liar! Come forth and say injustice hath been done to any man—that I looked with lack of pity on a wound, or gave not of my own to all who hungered and were athirst! Come forth, my brothers, and name the price of one grievance unavenged, that I, your sister and your Queen, may pay it ere I bare my heart!"

None spoke; yet a growling murmur rose, and each man looked upon his fellow fiercely, daring him to loose a tongue, lest his blood be loosed to wash away the lie.

Semiramis had paused, but she lifted up her voice once more. As in days of old she had played upon the hearts of men, even as a harper sounds the chords of curses and of tears, so now she played again. She told them of her home in Ascalon, and how Prince Menon came to wake her soul. She told them of her wedded years wherein her lord had striven for the King—had conquered Zariaspa and stood with her upon the fallen citadel.

"And you," she cried, "who loved him! You who shared his bounty and the peril of his wars! You who stood with me on a vale's lip in the Hindu-Kush and saw him buried in the earth! What! Know you not that his armor alone is buried there? For in his armor lay a rotting lie! A lie! For Habal—my good dog Habal—sleepeth with his paws and muzzle on a stranger's breast! A lie, I say! A lie! *For Menon liveth and by Ninus was crucified!*"

The shrill voice ceased. It had risen to the scream of a tigress calling to

her mate; but now no answering roar burst forth in echo of her call. The sons of Assyria sat silent—wondering. All had heard the tale of Prince Menon's death, and many had seen him laid away to sleep. On the vale's lip they had wept for a man they loved. They had seen—had known! How, then, should the dead arise to life again? Semiramis had branded ears and eyes as the keepers of a lie—a lie which dragged the gods of honor down and damned them! Aye, a lie; but should it rise to point its finger at a King, or point it at a Queen? So each man cast his gaze upon the floor and sat in silence—wondering.

Semiramis smote her palms together, thrice. At the sign, a door swung open and Huzim strode in, bearing a burden in his arms, a burden which he set upon the vacant seat beside the Queen. A man it was, or the semblance of a man, whose eyes were blind; whose form was shrunken, and whose hands were curved in the manner of horrid claws.

"Look!" cried the Mistress of the World. "Look ye upon this torn, misshapen thing who was once the glory of a woman's heart! Look ye and learn from him what the King hath wrought—for you who loved him—and for me! Look! for a lie hath risen from the grave, and liveth to mark its own!"

In awe they gathered round him, though they knew him not, by reason of the horror of his state; but the warriors Prince Menon knew, and voiced his joy in meeting them again; weeping as he found the features of old friends with his wandering finger-tips; sobbing as he called them each by name, or whispered secrets known to him and their hearts alone. Then Huzim raised him up, and he called aloud on the sons of Nāiri, his children of war, who would harken to a father's battle-cry; and as that cry rang out, they knew him once again, and knelt before him, weeping bitterly.

"And now," called Semiramis to her kneeling warriors, "I ask that you follow me to pluck a vulture from his roost on Assyria's throne! To cast him out, as a father might cast a serpent from the bosom of his babe! The King! who hath shorn me of my joy in life! The King! who hath stolen away my lord—who caused me to bear him a bastard son—who hath made a strumpet of your Queen! The King! The King no more! Naught do I ask but justice! Give me this, or the edge of your pitying swords!"

She ceased. She knelt at the side of her stricken mate and held him in the cradle of her arms, her eyes upturned to those who shared her suffering. From the throats of these men there came no shout of fury at the King, no wrathful curse, no sound save the wrench of a stifled sob; yet on their faces rode a look of death, as each man drew his sword and laid it at the feet of the undone Mistress of the World.

As the feast had passed in silence, so now these men departed one by one, and, treading softly, went out into the night; then each sought out his home or

tent, and slept—to dream and mutter curses in his troubled sleep.

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Through the western gate passed a troop of horse, swinging toward the south and riding as the spirits drive.

It is written of Ninyas, son of Semiramis and the King, that never one good deed came out of him; and now he rode with warnings to his father in the south, who straightway fled into Arabia, seeking a shield in the desert's sands and a sword in Boabdul's scimitar.

It was Ninyas who turned against his mother in her hour of stress. It was Ninyas who, in after years, spread forth report that Semiramis had lied—that Menon had hanged himself in Bactria—that the Queen had set a maimed imposter in his place to accomplish her evil ends.

Yet, as Ninyas reigned in sloth and foul debauchery, so judgment came upon him at last. As his heart was false, so also, his tongue was false, for who will credit aught of him who has turned against a mother in her hour of stress?

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Through the long blue night Semiramis sat beside her withered lord; and if she had loved him on the temple steps at Ascalon, when he lay in the splendid beauty of his youth, so now she loved him a hundred fold when the wine of his life was spilled for her. What matter though his hands were curved and his eyes were blind? What matter though his outer shell was dead? The heart of the man still lived, and it beat for her alone. Together they had hunted through the desert for a grain of sand, and, finding it, were glad, for they knew that its name was Love.

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When morning came stealing down on Nineveh, the city awoke and growled. A loose-tongued warrior had whispered to his wife; his wife had whispered to a neighbor's wife,—and the city knew. Through the streets ran men who were swollen with the bounty of Semiramis, and with them foregathered other men—lean dogs who licked their chops and gazed on the glories of more benefits to come. So Nineveh woke to growlings, which grew into a bark of wrath, till, from end to end, the Opal of the East gave tongue, frothing, struggling at the leash, and yearning to leap like the hounds of Ishtar on a master's trail.

Thus, after a space, the western gate was opened wide, and through it poured the war-hounds of Assyria. Southward they swung, and in their lead

rode a queenly hunter in her battle-gear—for Semiramis had kept her oath to Ninus, and would follow after him.

CHAPTER XXX

THE DESERT AND THE KING

On the rim of Arabia's desert Semiramis and her army sat down to rest, for well she knew this pitiless, burning waste would offer a sterner barrier than the points of a million swords; therefore the Queen took council with herself and prepared to battle with the scourge of thirst.

On every chariot was loaded wine-skins, filled with water and covered o'er with cloths and matted grass to keep them cool. Each rider was commanded to fare on foot, while across his steed were balanced other water-skins; then came to light the wisdom of Semiramis in choosing ten score thousand reeds as a gift from the King in India.

These reeds were of mighty length, and on their ends were set the heads of spears; again, they were hollow, and, the pith therein being bored away, they were filed with water, when their butts were closed with plugs of wood. Thus it came to pass that each man bore a new and fearsome weapon in his hands, wherefrom he might drink and ease the torture of a thirsty tongue.

Then, presently, the army moved toward Boabdul's stronghold in the desert's heart. By night they journeyed, when the sun shone not and the air was chill; by day they slept beneath the shade of canopies which were stretched on the points of planted spears; yet even their vast supply of water dwindled into nothingness, and the beasts of burden suffered and were sad. Men drank of their spears, but the heat had warmed their drink, and many died of madness and were left behind.

Yet Semiramis journeyed on. Her pathway led, not straight to the goal of her hot revenge, but by a devious course which touched the palm-groves of oases, where springs and wells were found; and where these wells had dried beneath the fierceness of the sun, there Semiramis drove her reeds into the earth till off' a grateful gush of water flowed therefrom. In these groves her warriors rested, drinking the precious juice of life and filling again their reed-spears and their water-skins; then the journey was taken up once more.

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Now it came about that the scurrying riders of Boabdul brought word that Assyria marched across the plain; so the Arab prepared to give them battle on the sands, or to fly if the force proved stronger than his own.

King Ninus had befooled the Arabian Prince, persuading him that the people rose in an unjust cause, till Boabdul harkened and was wroth because of this shameful thing, swearing to give his blood, if need be, in behalf of a brother king.

And now, at the dawn of a certain day, these two looked out on the desert, and were amazed. Through the mists came the army of Assyria, not as a strong-armed host to batter down its foes, but as men who were famished by the desert's breath, whose strength was spent, who reeled and fell upon the sand, to rise and struggle on again. Their war-wings stretched in ragged disarray; their chariots came crawling far behind where they should have held the van, and horsemen limped across the fiery plains, leading their drooping steeds.

At the sight, Boabdul looked into the eyes of Ninus, and Ninus looked into Boabdul's eyes, and laughed. 'Twere pity to fall upon this heat-picked skeleton of strength and ride it down; yet, since it was written thus, who, then, should thwart the will of Asshur and his scribe of fate? So Ninus and Boabdul laughed again, and prepared a slaughter for the sons of sacrifice.

Two clouds of wild-eyed riders swept around the grove of palms, their white robes fluttering their lances flung aloft and caught as they fell again. They joined in one, a mad-mouthed horde of desert-wolves, who loosed their reins and raced at the core of Assyria's stricken lines.

At their coming, Assyria bended as a twig which it trod upon; yet, of a sudden, the twig would bend no more. Where warriors had seemed to sink exhausted on the sand, they now stood up in the splendor of their strength. Where lines seemed torn to wilted shreds, they now closed tightly, and Arabia came upon a hedge of spears—the reed-spears of Semiramis. Behind the first line stood another line, their spears protruding against attack; and behind these two stood other lines, till he who would reach Assyria must leap a hurdle of seven rows of points. Thus Arabia hacked vainly at a wall of death, even as in after days the blood of Sparta spilled itself on the spears of Macedonia.

And now the war-wings ceased their feeble flutterings, to close upon Boabdul and his men, to take them in as a mother might take a wanderer in her arms; though on that mother's breast they found no peace of heart. The Bedouin horsemen backed upon themselves in a close-packed, tangled mass, fighting with scimitars against a storm of darts and the thrusts of spears; then a lane was opened, and into the boiling ruck drove Semiramis and her wedge of chariots.

In the car of the Queen stood Huzim, holding the reins and striving to guard

his mistress with a mighty shield of bronze; yet to-day Semiramis cared naught for shields, nor recked of death, so long as she came upon the Vulture of Assyria. For him alone she sought—the King!—and never before had the tigress raged as she raged this day. Where an hundred scimitars flashed about her head, she rode them down and bored toward the King—bored till her steeds were slain and her chariot overturned, then she arose from the earth and bored on foot into the press.

She cared not for a thousand swords, and yet one scimitar there was which she might not pass unscathed. High up it swung, in the fist of Prince Boabdul; but ere it could descend upon her, Huzim leaped and dragged the Arab from his horse. On the blood-wet sands they battled, beneath the hoofs of plunging steeds, where dying Bedouins sought with dagger thrusts to claim still one more death ere they stood before their gods; and Huzim, who was once the Arab's slave, prevailed against Boabdul, gripped him tightly, and whispered into his ear:

"Peace, little master! for it grieveth me to crack thy bones. Peace, then, for I hold thee fast!"

Now the Prince whose rage and mirth went ever hand in hand, forbore to strive with his mighty conqueror, and laughed because of Huzim's words; yet the Arabs, seeing their chieftain fallen, surged backward and burst their way through Assyria's wall of men. Beaten, they fled like foxes from the trap which Semiramis had set for them; and in the van of their flying pack rode Ninus, on a matchless steed of Barbary. Away they sped through the desert's shimmering haze, where Assyria might not follow after them, nor did Semiramis seek to follow, for in her brain was born a craftier design.

In the grove of palms she caused Boabdul to be brought before her where she cut his bonds and offered him her hand.

"My lord," she spoke, "with thee I have no cause for war, nor did I seek to bring a harm to these thy followers who are dead or scattered o'er the plains. My concernment is with the Vulture of Assyria, and him I will snare though I rake the sand-wastes of Arabia from end to end."

Then she told Boabdul of all things which had come to pass—how the King had crucified Prince Menon whom the Arab loved, and had stolen his wife for the space of a score of years; and so great was Boabdul's wrath that he rent his robe and swore by his gods of fire to follow after Ninus, to find him, and to nail him on a wall of woe.

"Fear not," he cried, "for my desert is but a prison-yard, where the wardens of heat and thirst will hedge our captive round about and drive him to the arms of those who seek. Fear not, for soon will we come upon the King."

And thus Semiramis had won unto her cause the man who above all other men could aid her in her quest; the man who balanced a thousand tribes on the

edge of his whetted scimitar; the man who now sent forth his riders, recalling all who had scattered across the plains.

Throughout the day Semiramis rested in the shade, and slept; but when night was come she chose a few from amongst her warrior-chiefs, then with Boabdul and his brown-skinned Bedouins she slipped across the sands. On camels they rode, those long-limbed, lurching beasts that devoured the leagues with a tireless, padding gait—that glided like ghosts beneath the icy stars—that slid through the wastes of red Arabia on a trail of death.

And in the silence of the night Semiramis raised her eyes and arms and cried unto the stars:

"Oh, Ishtar, Ishtar, give over this devil to the vengeance of my heart—keep, thou, my lord till I come again to him at Nineveh!"

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King Ninus was mounted on a matchless steed of Barbary, and his eagerness to be gone from out Arabia kept pace with his matchless steed. Full well he knew that Semiramis would follow after him; full well he knew that, since Boabdul's arm was lost to him, his hope lay eastward in the distant country of India's King. Could he win to the Euphrates, cross over it, and skirt the coast, coming at last to the river Indus, he there might mock the huntings of all Assyria, and bide his time till an army could be raised—an army which should give him back his throne, his power; for these King Ninus craved, and would have them, though his years were few.

That Semiramis hunted him, was a thought of bitterness in the monarch's heart, for he loved her utterly; yet, since Prince Menon had risen from the dead, a terror, also, rose, which vied with the yearnings of his love and sent him eastward in a line as straight as an arrow's flight. His steed outstripped the flying Bedouins who had burst through Assyria's lines, and soon the King sped on alone—alone on the desert's fiery breast—and hour on hour he fled from the vengeance of Semiramis.

At evening the King grew faint from heat and his lips were parched with thirst, while even his splendid mount was drooping, and faltered in its stride. The wise steed scented the breath of a cool oasis toward the north, and would have turned thereto, but Ninus knew naught of the plainsman's lore and lashed the wise one, racing him eastward in a dead straight line.

Thus it came about that when night had fallen the horse grew lame, so Ninus dismounted and rested upon the sand. Then a cold wind rose, which sang across the desert, searching his bones till he shivered and cursed aloud; and the good steed shivered, also, because of his sweating body and the lack of a master's

care. Naught had this stallion of Barbary known save love and tenderness; and now, with drooping head, he looked upon the cursing King, and wondered. No covering was there to shield his flanks against the cold; no water wherewith to bathe his wind-burned nostrils; no hand to stroke his muzzle in caress; no lips to croon the love-songs of the land of Araby. The chill of the night had entered into him, till he whinnied for the shelter of a master's tent, and coughed in pain; then man and beast lay down together in a hollow in the sands which Ninus dug with his royal nails.

When the warmth of morning came again, the two went on their way; yet a red sun rose to harry them, to pour its light upon them in a wavy glare; and the stallion of Barbary reeled toward the east. Again came night. Again came day—the pitiless, parching day, when league on league of tawny desert wrapped them round in a world of flame; when their tongues were black and swollen from the pangs of thirst, a thirst which took them by the throat and shook them, a thirst which reached beyond and gripped their hearts.

Then, presently, the faithful steed could bear his weight no more; he staggered and fell upon the sands to die. King Ninus slew him, and, in the fury of his thirst, he drank of the horse's blood; but the blood was warm and brought no ease to him, for rather did it spur his mad desire. Then the famished man rose up and wandered away on the desert's breast—alone.

No more he fled from the anger of Semiramis toward the east, but strayed in circles, while the heat-waves danced before his eyes, causing a haze which blinded him, till through it ran the twisted fancies of a dream. Before him he spied a river gurgling through the sands—a deep, sweet river, where the cool palms waved upon its shores; so Ninus spread his arms and rushed toward it eagerly. Yet, at his coming, the waters fled away and melted as a morning mist dissolves; then the King fell prone upon his face, to bury his lips in a draught of the flaming sands. To his knees he rose and lifted his hairy arms aloft, whispering hoarsely to the gods on high; and unto Ninus came the gods!

He saw them on the far horizon's line, gaunt spirits sweeping down as the storm-king rides—red Ramân, prince of lightnings and the thunder-bolt—the lord god Asshur and his underlings of war and death; and even as Ninus had set a sin on the shoulders of these gods, so now they bore that sin, and the sin was in the likeness of Prince Menon who had come at last to reckon with his King. And the lord of the world would have burrowed in the sands to hide himself, but the spirit of a blind man pointed out the way, and Ishtar's spirit snapped the leash of her spirit hounds.

Straight at their prey they sprang, but the King was a King, and stood upon his feet to battle with them mightily—to fight as his hands had fought from childhood to declining years; yet now he was old and the glory of his strength was

spent. He felt the teeth of Ishtar's hounds upon his throat, and, in his madness, knew not that the deathly grip was of thirst alone; so Ninus screamed and died—died battling, as the man had battled all his days, yet Menon's prophecy was a prophecy of truth.

* * * * *

When the red sun, weary of his raging, sank behind the desert's rim, Boabdul and Semiramis came upon the ending of their trail. The King! On his back he lay, his wide eyes staring at the heavens whence his judgment came. The body of a King! The shell of a spirit which had ruled the wills of lesser men, which had conquered all save the spirits of the gods alone, and, conquering, had used the world as a sandal for his lordly feet. The body of a King; yet now a King no more, but dust!

Semiramis looked down upon him, sorrowing—sorrowing because of one who had cheated her in life, as now he cheated her in death; but the Arab read another tale in that kingly heap of dust, and spoke to her in gentleness and in the ripened wisdom of his years:

"Grieve not, O Queen Shammuramat, because of a vengeance that is lifted from out thy hands. Grieve not, for of a truth King Ninus hath been crucified on a wall of the desert's wrath."

CHAPTER XXXI THE CROWNING OF THE DEAD

Prince Ninyas, when he had brought his warnings to the King, fled not with him into Arabia, for he had no thought to risk his slothful bones in the peril of a war; therefore he hired a score of boatmen and was paddled up the Tigris till he came again to Nineveh.

Now in every land and in every city there are those who suffer with the worms of a strange unrest, and did their highest god come down to rule amongst them they would find some cause for disaffection, yearning for a change in government.

With men of this breed Prince Ninyas whispered, promising that when the throne was his a reign of peace should come to Nineveh, wherein the wormy ones

might look for the fruits of their souls' desire; so, when the Queen returned, and report was spread concerning the death of Ninus, then a million infant lies were born. They waxed in strength, these lies, till soon they muttered through the city streets; yet, because of the whip-hand of Semiramis, they muttered secretly.

Now secret discontent was ever hateful to the Queen, for she held that a man should bring his grievance to the stool of a justice, setting forth his wrongs in the manner of a man, else hold his tongue; therefore she sought to bring this trouble to a head and set her heel upon it, swiftly and with weight.

Through the streets ran scores of criers, with word that on the morrow would the court be held before the eyes of Nineveh; so when the morrow came the streets were packed with multitudes that surged toward the palace mound, waiting for weary hours before the appointed time, in expectancy of uncommon things. Dread whisperings went round about concerning the Queen who had slain the King, and who now would tax the people grievously, demanding their wealth to supply a treasury made lean; thus growlings arose on every hand, till the waiting crowds swarmed to and fro and fought amongst themselves.

To the ears of the High Priest Nakir-Kish came warnings of the Queen's intent; so he hastened unto her, urging that she rule in wisdom, lest fierce internal wars ferment throughout Assyria. Semiramis looked upon him, smiling, and answered in a tone of softness which was like unto the purring of a cat:

"For thy wise advice I pay in humble gratitude; yet the tongue of a fool may oft' undo him by its flutterings. Hold it, O Priest, and follow, thou, my will this day, lest, one by one, my servants shall draw thy teeth." She paused and looked upon him keenly through her half closed lids. "It cometh to me that Nakir-Kish was ever close to Ninus, even in sins. Take, therefore, a further heed, lest thy bread be eaten with slowness and in pain."

Then the priest went out from the presence of Semiramis, took council with himself and held his tongue; wherein the man was wise, for to wag it would bring him woe.

The palace steps ran down from the royal mound to an open square wherein were set the effigies of lions and wingéd bulls, and here the sons of Nineveh foregathered at the mandate of the Queen. At the head of this stairway, before the palace doors, was set Assyria's double throne, while about it stood a ring of priests, and the chiefs of war in their battle-gear. Then, presently, Semiramis came forth, resplendent in her gem-sewn robes, and, descending the palace steps to a middle distance, she raised her arms to check the shouts of loud acclaim, then addressed the multitude:

"My children," she called, "it hath come to mine ears that ye murmur amongst yourselves because of foolishness and lies—because I would take away what my hand hath given, and become a pilferer where ye look to find a friend.

Know, then, that I, Shammuramat—Queen of Assyria—Mistress of the World—ask naught from *any* man!”

At her words a thunderous shouting rose, and men danced madly in their joy on the open square. One loud-mouthed warrior sprang upon the back of a wingéd bull and bawled to his friends below:

”Long reign the Queen! A curse on Ninyas—son of Ninus—and the Prince of Liars! A curse upon his evil tongue!”

The curse was taken up by five score thousand mouths, till the roarings rocked the palace mound, and the din was great; then Semiramis once more raised her arms and spoke to the seething multitude:

”Naught do I ask, my children, in taxes or in gifts; for now would I make a royal gift to you. The King is dead! He died in a distant land, where I followed after him because of his evil works. The King is dead; yet now do I give to you another King!”

She ceased. No shout arose, for her listeners stood silent, wondering if she thought to set the liar, Ninyas, on her throne; so they waited, each man drawing in his breath.

Through the palace doors strode Huzim, bearing a burden in his mighty arms—a burden which he set on Assyria’s double throne. A man it was, or the semblance of a man, whose eyes were blind; whose form was shrunken, and whose hands were curved in the manner of horrid claws. This, then, was the King whom Semiramis would give!

In silence the people gazed on Menon while one might count a score, then from their throats came a quivering wolf-lipped howl. No pæan of rejoicing rode that tempest-gust of sound, but the snarl of men whose passions were stirred to madness and to deeds of blood. Would Semiramis dare to crown this hideous thing?—this mockery of man who swayed in weakness as he sat on high? Nay, better to set a prince of liars on the throne! Better to crown a graven effigy! So the people howled their wrath and surged toward the palace steps, seeking to tear the idol from a woman’s shrine and stamp it in the dust.

About Semiramis were gathered her chiefs of war, Prince Asharal of Babylon, Boabdul Ben Hutt whose scimitar could match a score of swords, Huzim the faithful, Dagas who loved and whose shield was hers in any cause, while many more stout arms were there to work her will; but of these the Queen thought not as she faced the coming throng.

”Ye dogs!” she stormed, ”am I to be sickened by the yelpings of your pack? Ye swine of Assyria! who have fattened on the plenty of Shammuramat! I who have puffed your bellies with the food of gods! Have done! Go down in peace, nor lay your tongues to idle mutterings! In peace, I say, lest I cease to love you and destroy you utterly!” She paused for an instant, then flung her hand toward

her stricken mate, lifting her voice that all might hear and heed: "*On a throne King Menon sitteth, and shall sit! Down! Down upon your knees and worship him, who is lord of my heart and lord of all the world!*"

Now those who would have rushed upon her, paused at the very wonder of her love, and in that pause Semiramis turned and made a sign to Nakir-Kish. The High Priest would have set the crown on Menon's head, but the head drooped forward, sinking upon his breast. His little strength had ebbed. The tumult of the populace below had seemed like the roar of battle in his ears, though the meaning thereof was strange to him, and he knew not that he was King. One thought alone was in his heart—Semiramis!—and to her he stretched his broken, wandering hands.

But the Queen would have her will. She snatched the crown from the High Priest Nakir-Kish and set it on Menon's brow—a brow which now would never feel its royal weight, for a dead man slid from Assyria's throne and fell upon his face.

And the people shouted not, but were very still, for beside the crownless King a weeping woman knelt—forgetful that the swine of all Assyria looked upon her grief—knowing only that the Mistress of the World had *lost* her world.

CHAPTER XXXII

A WAR QUEEN'S PROPHECY

Once more the priests and the chiefs of war foregathered at the mandate of the Queen; and now they waited not on the palace steps, but assembled in the council hall, that spacious chamber where, in days of old King Ninus was wont to issue his commands. There, through its open end, could be seen the Tigris, chanting a wordless song as it ran to a chanting sea; there hung proud trophies of the battle and the chase; there, on the walls, were the carven *steles* of Ninus, each telling a tale of a monarch's mighty deeds.

And to those who waited there, Semiramis came at last; no longer clothed in the splendor of her gem-sewn robes, or the glory of her battle-gear. She wore a garb of mourning, and on the flame-hued locks was set no diadem save a crown of withered leaves. In silence she came into the hall, and in silence took her seat upon the throne. In silence she looked on the men before her—men who had followed through the desert's fire and the storm of many a war; then the Queen

arose and spoke:

"My brothers," she began, "brothers in battle and the pleasant ways of peace, your sister Shammuramat is sad. The King is dead; yet I grieve not for the King. The king of my heart is dead, and I grieve for him."

She paused. Her warrior brothers bowed their heads, and each man hid his eyes in the hollow of his hand; then the Queen spoke on:

"And now will I reign alone! Alone, till it pleaseth Ishtar to call me unto one who will wait and listen for my footsteps coming in the night. And so will I reign alone! Yet harken, ye children of Assyria, and ye who write on tablets and the graven *stèle*! In after-days the sons of men will say of me that Shammuramat was one of an evil heart!—that her heart was for war, for blood, for pillage, and the conquering of all the earth! They will say that she slew the King—slew him in brutish lust for a lesser man! They will say that she ruled with a rod of might, and set ambition on a higher altar than the altar of her gods! All this, and more, will run from the babbling tongues of men—*and Shammuramat will strive to make it true!*"

Once more she paused and looked upon her wondering warriors.

"Heed, then, my brothers who will marvel at my wrathful days to come! Heed ye and remember one who hath wrought this evil in my soul! The King! who hath crucified a woman's love! The King! who hath torn a woman's heart from out her breast and set a raging devil as the master of her blood! So harken, ye children of Assyria, and ye who write on tablets and the graven *stèle*! Remember! And now make ready for a war!"

"A war?" cried Nakir-Kish, who knew that the nations rested on their arms and were at peace. "What war?"

Semiramis turned upon him with a cry of consuming rage, and with the scepter of an hundred lands she smote him across his mouth. The High Priest Nakir-Kish went down before her throne, and she raised her eyes on high and called aloud:

"Dear Ishtar, hear the fool who asketh me what war!"

She turned to her brother warriors, her children of the sword, grim, battle-scarred, and faithful unto death; and to them she stretched her empty arms and opened her empty heart.

"War! War!" she cried. "I care not where nor how, so be it that we war! *Rise Babylon—and sink Assyria!*"

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