

ZOROASTER

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Zoroaster by F. Marion Crawford

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F. MARION CRAWFORD

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ETC.

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TO

My Beloved Wife

I DEDICATE THIS DRAMA

CHAPTER I.

THE hall of the banquets was made ready for the feast in the palace of Babylon. That night Belshazzar the king would drink wine with a thousand of his lords, and be merry before them; and everything was made ready.

From end to end of the mighty nave, the tables of wood, overlaid with gold and silver, stood spread with those things which the heart of man can desire; with cups of gold and of glass and of jade; with great dishes heaped high with rare fruits and rarer flowers; and over all, the last purple rays of the great southern sun came floating through the open colonnades of the porch, glancing on the polished marbles, tinging with a softer hue the smooth red plaster of the walls, and lingering lovingly on the golden features and the red-gold draperies of the vast statue that sat on high and overlooked the scene.

On his head the head-dress of thrice royal supremacy, in his right hand and his left the sceptre of power and the winged wheel of immortality and life, beneath his feet the bowed necks of prostrate captives;—so sat the kingly presence of great Nebuchadnezzar, as waiting to see what should come to pass upon his son; and the perfume of the flowers and the fruits and the rich wine came up to his mighty nostrils, and

he seemed to smile there in the evening sunlight, half in satisfaction, half in scorn.

On each side of the great building, in the aisles and wings, among the polished pillars of marble thronged the serving-men, bearing ever fresh spices and flowers and fruits, wherewith to deck the feast, whispering together in a dozen Indian, Persian and Egyptian dialects, or in the rich speech of those nobler captives whose pale faces and eagle eyes stood forth everywhere in strong contrast with the coarser features and duskier skins of their fellows in servitude,—the race not born to dominate, but born to endure even to the end. These all mingled together in the strange and broken reflections of the evening light, and here and there the purple dye of the sun tinged the white tunic of some poor slave to as fair a colour as a king's son might wear.

On this side and on that of the tables that were spread for the feast, stood great candlesticks, as tall as the height of two men, tapering from the thickness and heavy carving below to the fineness and delicate tracery above, and bearing upon them cups of bronze, each having its wick steeped in fine oil mixed with wax. Moreover, in the midst of the hall, where the seat of the king was put upon a raised floor, the pillars stood apart for a space, so that there was a chamber, as it were, from the wall on the right to the wall on the left, roofed with great carved rafters; and the colour of the walls was red,—a deep and glorious red that seemed to make of the smooth plaster a sheet of precious marble. Beyond, beneath the pillars, the panels of the aisles were pictured and made many-coloured with the story of Nebuchadnezzar the king, his conquests and his feasts, his captives and his

courtiers, in endless train upon the splendid wall. But where the king should sit in the midst of the hall there were neither pillars nor paintings; only the broad blaze of the royal colour, rich and even. Beside the table also stood a great lamp, taller and more cunningly wrought than the rest,—the foot of rare marble and chiselled bronze and the lamp above of pure gold from southern Ophir. But it was not yet kindled, for the sun was not set and the hour for the feast was not fully come.

At the upper end of the hall, before the gigantic statue of wrought gold, there was an open space, unencumbered by tables, where the smooth, polished marble floor came to view in all its rich design and colour. Two persons, entering the hall with slow steps, came to this place and stood together, looking up at the face of the golden king.

Between the two there was the gulf of a lifetime. The one was already beyond the common limit of age, while he who stood beside him was but a fair boy of fourteen summers.

The old man was erect still, and his snowy hair and beard grew like a lion's mane about his massive brow and masterful face. The deep lines of thought, graven deeper by age, followed the noble shaping of his brows in even course, and his dark eyes still shot fire, as piercing the bleared thickness of time to gaze boldly on the eternity beyond. His left hand gathered the folds of a snow-white robe around him, while in his right he grasped a straight staff of ebony and ivory, of fine workmanship, marvellously polished, whereon were wrought strange sayings in the Israelitish manner of writing. The old man stood up to his noble height, and looked from the burnished face of the king's image