

ALEXANDER IN BABYLON.

BY H. A.

ACT III.

SCENE: Belshazzer's Hall in the Palace at Babylon. The room is vast and ornate. The walls are adorned with winged bulls, gryphons, bearded divinities and triumphing kings, set off by bands of varicolored encaustic. The entrances are high and pillared. At one end is a lofty throne, rich with gold and supported by carven images of captives from the various nations of the ancient world, chained and bowed.

Enter Kidinnu, the Astrologer, and Calanus, the Gymnosophist.

KIDINNU: Behold the hall of the kings of Babylon!
'Twas here they sate, O friend from the wiser East,
Here in their glory thro' the proud great years
Of Babel's might. High Khammurabi, here,
Who from the stars their better wisdom brought
And set their order for a law to men;
Semiramis here, kissed by our holy Ishtar—
Her fame re-echoes thro' the sounding world
With swelling tumult! Ah, she was a queen,
As he a king who crushed to futile dust
Vain Nineveh, and reared his mightier son—
Nebuchadrezzar, may his soul find peace!
To roar with thundrous chariotry thro' the lands,
E'en to the coasts of Egypt. These be they—
My race, my kings, down from the dawn of time—
Who sate with haughty splendor in this hall!

CALANUS: Tales I have heard of these, on Gunga's bank,
Told dimly like faint dreams. We of the East—
Though our kings, too, each in his bustling day,
Bray with loud trumpets—we remember less.

KIDINNU: Can ye forget? Oh, we can not forget,
Who gave such monarchs to resounding time!

CALANUS: Shadows of Brahman. . . . O my friend, thy stars
Should read thee deeper quiet. Kings are wraiths
On the glass of the eternal. Thine are gone.

KIDINNU: Gone, aye—but to return! . . . In this same hall
And on this crusted throne, Belshazzer sate.
Harps and singing women and the clash
Of sounding timbrels fell to sudden hush
When on the wall a spectral hand did write—
There, on that wall—words of an unknown doom.
A cursèd slave of the cursèd Jews read out,
“God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it;
“Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting.”
That very night the Persian Cyrus cleft
Our citadels of bronze, and this wide hall
Was ruddied with the wine of royal blood. . . .
Fools in their day destroy us, but my stars
Still tell that Babel’s crown shall be her own!
We are old, old, old, and can abide the gods.

CALANUS: In years ye are old, but Wisdom knows no age:
And e’en these ancient years are but a dream
That mars the night of Brahm. Behind the stars
We Indians see a vacant plenitude:
Ye call it death; our name for it is peace;
And kings and their ambitions are its fools.—
But who comes here?

KIDINNU (*contemptuously*):

These lithe and supple Persians!

Oh, they too deem them wise—and yesterday
They hunted asses and clothed in asses’ hair!
’Tis the Magian Sisimithres, who now hates
These conquering Greeks as we have hated them
Who conquered us—their Cyrus and his tribe.
(Sisimithres, who has entered, approaches the two wise men.)

SISIMITHRES (*to Kidinnu*):

Seer of the stars, I, who am friend of light,
Salute thee, and thy friend!

KIDINNU: The hour is near
Foretold me by the stars. Now let us hence.

SISIMITHRES: My duty bids me stay. Farewell!

KIDINNU: Strength with you!

Exeunt Kidinnu and Calanus. Sisimithres follows them to the pillared exit.
From another entrance Roxana enters, hesitatingly. She looks upon the throne.

ROXANA: There she will sit, beside him. . . . And he will take
Her hand in his, and kiss her on her lips. . . .
Statira will be queen, and be his wife,
And loved one. Oh, she is so beautiful—
So hateful beautiful! He'll love her, too!
And me, Roxana, who have been his love,
Forgotten in my chamber, with the son
He has forgot, I'll wait. . . . I will not wait!
Statira's line is royal; is not mine,
Drawn from Deioeces' house, more ancient still
In royalty? He loves me, too—did love—
And he would love our son should he but see
How every kingly glance is mirrored back
In the boy's true eyes. . . . But, oh, I do forget!
His is a world; mine but these little hands;
And I must wait, wait, for the king who never comes.

SISIMITHRES (*advancing*) : May Anahita bless thee, as I bless
Oxyartes' daughter !

ROXANA (*startled*): Sisimithres! Thou?

SISIMITHRES: Yea, Roxana's slave.

ROXANA: What dost thou here?

SISIMITHIRES: To watch the hall of feasting I am set.
I serve the King.

ROXANA: Doth Alexander trust thee?

SISIMITHRES: From the day he took the Sogdianian rock
Magnanimously the King hath prized mine art:
I am chief Magian unto thy roval husband.

ROXANA: Oh, husband! And this night another's husband! . . .
Sisimithres, once, ere Alexander came,
My father pledged me to thy proffered love:
Didst thou love me then?

SISIMITHRES: With love which yet I bear,
O starriest of women! I am now,
As then, thy slave.

ROXANA: Magian, thou heardst me speak?
Am I less royal than Statira is?
Less fit to mate the King? And she a queen!
And I—what shall I be? And what my son?

SISIMITHRES: The line of Media's kings—thou know'st it well—
Is nearer to the Magi than the new
Proud line of Cyrus.

ROXANA: Thou wilt help me, then?
Oh, in thy sorceries is some dark spell,
Some charm, some potency of mounting love
Will win me back his heart and meward draw
The eyes of his desire? But bring me it—
Bring me it! Oh, I'll give thee such reward
As queens do buy with!

SISIMITHRES: Where Dusi-yara reigns
There is a rock within the wilderness
Congealed of frosty dew, from whence distil
Thin potent potions which we Magians draw.
But know, O Princess, that in every drop
Are life and death and love so intermixed
That none save God resolves them.

ROXANA: Bring it me.
I'll pray to Auramazda. Bring it me.

SISIMITHRES: The third day hence, when upward toward the noon
The sun ascends, to Semiramis' Gardens
I will bring the potion.

ROXANA: Oh, thou art kind to me. . . .
But whither dost thou gaze? What seest thou?

SISIMITHRES:

There!

Upon the throne! A form did come and go,
Like to a king—or god. See! Nay, 'tis gone....
This Calanus!

ROXANA:

Away! The feasters come.

Oh, fail me not, Sisimithres—fail me not!

(Exit.)

SISIMITHIRES: Ghosts sit upon his throne. . . . I'll bring such draught
As he who drinks shall ghostly sit, mid ghosts!

(Exit.)

Enter Onesicritus, Iolaus and servants. The latter go about placing couches and tables for the banqueters.

ONESICRITUS: Son of Antipater, thy father is—
Antipater! Is it not so?

IOLAUS:

So 'tis.

My father hath my mother's word for it.
And in my face his better repetition.

ONESICRITUS; Enough, enough! Thou art thy father's son.
Thy face doth save thy mother's character—
Though methinks a fairer face had much absolved
In thy mother's conduct. Antipater 's thy sire;
Thy brother is Cassander?

IOLAUS:

Ave, Cassander.

ONESICRITUS: Famously well; and now more famously,
Thou servest Alexander?

IOLAUS :

Ilm I serve.

ONESICRITUS: Answering to his call, as when he saith,
 "Iolaus," thou dost come; and when he saith,
 "Iolaus," thou dost go? Thy name 's Iolaus?

IOLAUS: 'Twas so my father called me.

ONESICRITUS:

Thou hast said it:

Antipater is thy father, and the big
Cassander is thy voiceful brother—so!
Thy master's Alexander, and thou art called—

Being an empty nothing—father's son,
 Brother's brother, master's man, each a blank
 That bears the tag "Iolaus." Seest thou me?

IOLAUS: As bat sees bat.

ONESICRITUS: I am Onesicritus—
 Who may have had a father, may have not;
 And as for brother, one there is who saith,
 Puffing admirèd cheeks, "My brother is
 "The learnèd Onesicritus, who serves
 "No lord, who answers to no call, but stands
 "The proper image of a man!"

IOLAUS: Indeed!
 And like an image empty of the stuff
 That makes man manful!...Poom!...Thou echoest back
 As hollow as a cask that's soundful sucked
 By slakeless Promachus!

ONESICRITUS: Now chance mischance thee!
 If thews were matched with wit, I'd make of thee
 A prime philosopher. But 'tis thy art
 To fill the cup that steals from other men
 The wit that thou 'rt denied. Resolve me this:
 Since thou bearest the cup that heats men's appetites,
 Is it an honest trade?

IOLAUS: Honester than thine.

ONESICRITUS: Nay, mine is to discover honesty.
 For that, the lanthorn of Diogenes
 (Which is the light of mine own sapience),
 I chose. Now answer: Is it right to rob?

IOLAUS: 'Tis not accounted so.

ONESICRITUS: And he who robs
 From those who have takes what they have?

IOLAUS: Quite true.

ONESICRITUS: Which is not honesty?

IOLAUS: To steal 's dishonest.

ONESICRITUS: Then thou'rt self-proven dishonest.

IOLAUS: How is that?

ONESICRITUS: Why, cupbearer, so: the wine thou tak'st to men
Takes from them thirst, which is their own. Theft one.
It makes them bibulous and gives their tongues
In artless wagging unto other men.
Theft two. And as thou emptiest thy cups
Into men's bellies, wine doth there condense
The natural rarefaction of their wits
To heavy slumber. Sleep's the twin of Death!
Oh, this third theft of thine smells high to murder!

IOLAUS: Nay, thou'rt the murtherer! For when thou sleep'st,
Thou snor'st, and snores are slumber's suicide!...Ha!
Here come the lords. Seek thine own kennel—Dog-wit!

During this colloquy the servants have been arranging couches for the banqueters. Now Cassander, Nearchus, Craterus and others enter leisurely, garlanded for the feast.

CASSANDER: It is not thus the kings of Macedon
Were wont to lord it—perfumes and Persian tire,
And heads to earth, and tongues that mew and mow
Their fulsome flattery. The King a god!
Amyntas and stout Philip were content
To be but men among men. Aye, men were—
Men as well as kings—in those good days.

CRATERUS: Cassander takes this day no Persian bride
Earned in the Bactrian snows or India's heat!

NEARCHUS: He breathes good Macedonian, which blows fresh
As old Atlantic's gales. But here in the East
Avoyaging, he'll tack to softer breezes.

CASSANDER: And here 's the temple cella, painted o'er
With humbled gods! And here the worshipers
Will feast and sacrifice, and on that throne
Will Zeus himself—

(He stops amazed.)

NEARCHUS (*astonished*): By heaven, there he sits!

CASSANDER: What is 't? Not Alexander?

NEARCHUS (*in consternation*): 'Tis no man.
It is some god.

CRATERUS: In garb 'tis Nysa's son—
Great Bacchus come to grace the marriage rite!

CASSANDER: A god forsooth! A mummer—a mere man.

CRATERUS: Hephæstion—

Enter Hephæstion, dressed like Bacchus in long embroidered robe, ivy-leaf garland and leopard skin. He holds up before him a great cluster of grapes.

HEPHAESTION: O purple glory of the grape!
Each sphere more lucent than the spherèd world,
Richer in ruby wealth, in golden hope—
Love's swift persuader, in whose juices runs
The ichor of high gods! By Bacchus, yes—
And in my veins the Bacchic liquor, too,
Feeds life with splendors!... Ho friends! ho, Panes mine!
This day there 'll nuptials be!...

(He sees the figure seated on the throne:)

What man is this
Dare steal the garb of Bacchus?... Or what god
Dare sit enthroned?... Nay, man or god, not thou
Shalt have the better of Hephæstion!
Oh, I am full of gods! and from this throne
I'll challenge the immortal!

As he rushes forward, there enter Alexander and generals—Ptolemy, Perdiccas, Seleucus—guards with spears, attendants. Alexander, in royal Persian attire, crowned with the blue and white tiara, advances. He perceives Hephæstion, and thence the figure on the throne.

ALEXANDER: Hold thee, man!
'Tis not for thee—no, nor for any friend
Of Alexander to ascend his throne!

Alexander, advancing, pulls Hephæstion back from the stair of the throne.
He turns toward the image seated there.

ALEXANDER: What art thou that dost sit impassive there
Where kings do seat them? I am the King.
I'll seat me in thy stead though it cost the world!

He mounts the throne and seats himself, the wraith vanishing as he does so

CASSANDER: Where is 't?

CRATERUS: 'Tis gone.

NEARCHUS: It vanished like thin smoke.

PTOLEMY: As if the King had drunk it.

NEARCHUS: Hephæstion 's sick.

PTOLEMY: In figure 'twas his double.

CRATERUS: 'Twas his soul.
Or yet the god that seized him—Bacchus' self.

ALEXANDER: Where kings ascend, none stay to meet them.
For good or ill this ghost is come and gone.
Bring hither Aristander, my diviner.
(Aristander comes forward.)

ALEXANDER: Aristander, what means this sign?

ARISTANDER: Lord King,
From the image that was seated where thou sitst
Find only joy. It was like the holy god
Whose cup delights our banquets. For the nonce
He held Hephæstion's soul; now enters thine.
Let but the feast its bright libation pour
Unto the god in thee, and all is well.

ALEXANDER: Thou call'st me to my duty. Let there be wine
From Persia's richest flagons bubbling drawn
Into the richer flagons of our souls!—
Hephæstion, wake thee to thy brighter self:
Thy spirit's loss is all our spirits' glory!
Oh, we will make a wedding that shall be
The song of centuries! Drink to it, friends!
Drink to the queenly beauty of the world!

While Alexander is speaking, the lords and generals betake them to the couches prepared by the servants. The latter bring in great jars of wine, and from lesser vases fill the cups, which they hand to the feasters. As they all drink to the King's toast, music is heard, and a gorgeous and beflowered procession enters—the Persian Princesses and their attendants.

Alexander descends from the throne and meets Statira, who is foremost of those who come; he takes her by the hand.

ALEXANDER: Royal Statira, daughter of the line
 That Achæmenes sired and Cyrus made
 Great in the world, unto the ancient throne
 Thy house hath glorified I do conduct thee—
 There royally to sit, Queen over Greece
 And Persia and such realm as never yet
 Was woman queen of—which thy love shall bind
 In unity and peace, healing the wounds
 Of ancient wars and bringing the golden joy
 Of Kronos' reign back to the world forever.

STATIRA: My lord and King, 'tis given unto men
 To know the ways of statcraft. Ye make wars
 And heal them with the glitter of great thrones.
 We women harken, though the deep-seamed scars
 Within our hearts still bleed beneath the shows
 Wherewith ye do adorn us. It is my prayer
 That from our union here there may come peace
 To women's hearts hereafter. . . . My loyalty.

She kisses Alexander's hand. He leads her toward the throne. As they pass Hephæstion, who is leaning in a half stupor against a pillar, Statira gazes for a moment into his eyes. She drops a rose at his feet, and passes on. Hephæstion picks up the rose, looks at it, then at Statira ascending the throne-stair with Alexander.

HEPHAESTION (*in a muttered aside*):
 "Life is sweet, but love is sweeter. . . ."

Alexander seats Statira and takes his place beside her. The Macedonian generals (excepting Cassander) similarly conduct their several brides to seats beside them, the women sitting, the men reclining on the couches. Wine is handed to each bridegroom. Alexander takes his cup and rises.

ALEXANDER: To Persia's gods and Persia's fair, I drink.
 And may the wine Statira sips with me
 Unite our souls in wedded harmony!

Each bridegroom pours a bit of the wine in libation to the gods; each tastes from his own cup and then offers it to his bride, who likewise sips of it. Then all rise.

ALL: Hail! Hail to Persia! To Macedonia, hail!

They seat themselves. Musicians have arranged themselves in the background. Dancers come forward, in voluptuous Oriental dances, to the accompaniment of music. The dances cease, and a Greek Singer with a lyre steps forward to sing the prothalamion.

THE SINGER:

Goddess, whose zone is the star-zone!
 Goddess, whose feet clave the sea,
 Imbuing its waves with the anguish
 Of ever aspiring to thee!

Whose tresses englamor Olympus
 And weave all the world in their gold,
 Till the hearts of immortals and mortals
 Are caught in each aureate fold!

Ourania, Pandemos and Cypris,
 Cytherea, Mylitta, the Bee
 Who doth sting with desire and doth cure it
 With the honey that nourisheth thee!

Implacable Queen of the Heaven,
 Implacable Mistress of Earth!
 Oh, purge my hurt soul with thy passion:
 Bring Eros, winged Eros to birth!

(The Singer ceases and the Auditors cry their applause—)

ALL: Fair sung! Fair sung!

(Alexander leaps from the throne and embraces the Singer.)

ALEXANDER: A wreath! a wreath! O singer of sweet Love!
 And this gold flagon filled with Orient pearls
 To match the pearlèd treasure of thy song! . . .
 Ho, friends! The praise of Love shall be the theme
 Whereto each tunèd fancy shall be turned,
 And he who praises best shall wear a crown
 Richer than Persia's! Let the wine-jars pass:
 Whose cup is emptied first is Love's first tongue!

ONESICRITUS: Alethea loosed my tongue when I was born:
 It needs no other wine to give it leash
 Than love of truth, and love of truth 's the love
 That makes love truthful—or tells the truth of love!
 Weave ye the net of truth: 'twas in her mesh
 That Ares and Aphrodite lay entrapped
 To be the laughter of the better gods.

Do will thriambic revelry! Wine, wine—
 Let wine be drunk! We'll drive this kill-joy out!
 Love is our theme, which makes of mortal men
 Divinities! . . . Hephæstion, what of love?

HEPHAESTION (*rousing from his stupor of thought*):

My King, I was a poet and a god—
 I am a man, blinded with such a glare
 Of queenly splendor that my words do fail
 The glory of the goddess seated there
 Within the circle of thy jeweled rod.
 Of love 'tis not for kings to give the right
 To speak. None but the goddess in her might
 And loveliness can sweep aside the veil
 That hides the vision, and release the tongue
 To utterance of such words as can be sung
 Only in love's dear presence.—Princess, now
 None other can release me—none save thou—
 To praises of the wonder that I seek;
 Thine only 'tis to will that I should speak.

STATIRA: Sing to me of love, Hephæstion—sing.

I am a queen, but dearer than a throne
 Are words of love that thou alone canst sing.

ALEXANDER: How like a shining dust the world swims round.

Thin and dissolvent, full of stings and pricks
 That smart the soul! Is 't this, to be a god?

HEPHAESTION (*at the feet of Statira*):

Love! I beheld thee, Titan of the Dawn,
 Like huge Astræus touching sea and skies
 With flowing splendors ever drifting on,
 While still and tender stars shone in thine eyes,
 And far thy twain spread pinions had outfurled
 Their plumes in silken banners o'er the world!

Love! I beheld thee, shining at Life's morn
 Upon the glowing margin of the Sphere!
 First of Immortals from Darkness thou wert born
 To vanquish Death and vision give us here
 Of the high glories veiled by the opal she!
 That domes this shadowy mead whereon we dwell!

ALEXANDER (*holding aloft the reddened spear*):

The god is in me, and mine ears do ring
With clamor of the Bacchanals that climb
The Nysæan mountain, chasing the spotted fawn
Through myrtled vallies! I am he who holds
The peak of Meros, casting o'er the world
The purple mantle of mine empery!
Wreathe me with vine, with vine, as I will wreathe
My world with vinèd splendors, who am god!

He rushes forth, as if possessed of the god, followed by the excited and horrified revelers.

[CURTAIN.]

[TO BE CONCLUDED.]