

MARY RENAULT

FUNERAL GAMES

A NOVEL OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT



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“I foresee great contests at my funeral games.”
—Reported deathbed words of “Alexander the Great

Contents

Principal Persons

323 B.C.

322 B.C.

321 B.C.

319 B.C.

318 B.C.

317 B.C.

316 B.C.

315 B.C.

310 B.C.

Author's Note

Principal Sources

A Biography of Mary Renault

Principal Persons

INVENTED CHARACTERS ARE ITALICIZED; all those in roman type are historical. Persons marked * are dead before the story opens. Minor characters making a brief appearance are omitted.

ALEXANDER III	The Great. All further references to Alexander refer to him unless his son, Alexander IV, is specified.
ALEXANDER IV	His posthumous son by Roxane.
ALKETAS	Brother of Perdikkas, the general.
*AMYNTAS	Son of Philip II's elder brother, King Perdikkas. An infant when Perdikkas died, he was passed over in favor of Philip, after whose murder he was executed for treason. Husband of Kynna, father of Eurydike.
ANTIGONOS	General of Alexander; Satrap of Phrygia. Later a king, and founder of the Antigonid dynasty.
ANTIPATROS	Regent of Macedon during Alexander's years in Asia, and at the time of his death.
ARISTONOUS	A staff officer of Alexander; later loyal to Alexander IV.
ARRIDAIOS	See Philip III.
ARYBBAS	A Macedonian nobleman, designer of Alexander's funeral car. His real name was Arridaios; he is here given a rather similar Epirote name to distinguish him from Philip Arridaios.
<i>Badia</i>	<i>A former concubine of King Artaxerxes Ochos of Persia.</i>
BAGOAS	A young Persian eunuch, favorite successively of Darius III and Alexander. Though a real person, he vanishes from history after Alexander's death, and his appearance in this Story is fictional.
*DARIUS III	The last Persian Great King; murdered by his generals after his defeat by Alexander at Gaugamela.
DEMETRIOS	Son of Antigonos. (Later known as The Besieger, he became King of Macedon after Kassandros' death.)
DRYPETIS	Younger daughter of Darius III; widow of Hephaistion.
EUMENES	Chief Secretary and general of Alexander; loyal to the royal house.
EURYDIKE	Daughter of Amyntas and Kynna. Her given name was Adeia; Eurydike was the dynastic name conferred on her at her marriage (or betrothal) to Philip III. She was the granddaughter of Philip II and of Perdikkas III, his brother.
*HEPHAISTION	Alexander's lifelong friend, who died a few months before him.
IOLLAS	Son of Antipatros the Regent of Macedon, younger brother of

	Kassandros; formerly Alexander's cupbearer.
KASSANDROS	Eldest son of Antipatros; lifelong enemy of Alexander. (Became King of Macedon after the murder of Alexander IV.)
<i>Kebes</i>	<i>Tutor to the boy Alexander IV.</i>
KLEOPATRA	Daughter of Philip II and Olympias, sister of Alexander. Married to King Alexandros of Molossia, which she ruled after his death in Italy. Her father, Philip, was assassinated in her wedding procession.
<i>Konon</i>	<i>A Macedonian veteran, attendant on Philip Arriddios.</i>
KRATEROS	Alexander's highest-ranking officer, absent on a mission to Macedon when Alexander died.
KYNNA	Daughter of Philip II by an Illyrian princess, from whom she learned the skills of war. Widow of Amyntas, mother of Eurydike.
LEONNATOS	Staff officer and kinsman of Alexander; betrothed to Kleopatra before his death in battle.
MELEAGER	(Greek spelling Meleagros.) A Macedonian officer, enemy of Perdikkas, supporter of Philip III.
NIARCHOS	Boyhood friend and admiral of Alexander.
NIKAIA	Daughter of the Regent Antipatros, married and divorced by Perdikkas.
NIKANOR	Brother of Kassandros; general in Eurydike's army.
*OCHOS	(King Artaxerxes Ochos.) Great King of Persia before the short reign of Darius III.
OLYMPIAS	Daughter of King Neoptolemos of Molossia; widow of Philip II; mother of Alexander.
PEITHON	Staff officer of Alexander, later of Perdikkas.
PERDIKKAS	Second in command to Alexander after Hephaistion's death. Betrothed to Kleopatra after death of Leonnatos.
*PERDIKKAS iii	Elder brother of Philip II, who succeeded him after his death in battle. (See Amyntas.)
PEUKESTES	Staff officer of Alexander; Satrap of Persia.
*PHILIP II	The founder of Macedonian supremacy in Greece; father of Alexander.
PHILIP III	(Philip Arridaios.) His son by Philinna, a minor wife. The royal name of Philip was conferred at his accession.
POLYPERCHON	Staff officer of Alexander; Regent of Macedon after Antipatros' death.
PTOLEMY	(Greek spelling Ptolemaios.) Staff officer, kinsman, and reputed half-brother of Alexander. Later King of Egypt, founder of the Ptolemaic dynasty, and author of a history of Alexander extensively used by Arrian.
ROXANE	Wife of Alexander, married on campaign in Bactria. Mother of Alexander IV.
SELEUKOS	

Staff officer of Alexander. (Later King of the Seleucid empire in nearer Asia.)

SISYGAMBIS Mother of Darius III, befriended by Alexander.

STATEIRA Daughter of Darius III, married in state by Alexander at Susa.

THEOPHRASTOS Aristotle's successor as head of the Lyceum University at Athens, patronized by Kassandros.

THESSALONIKE Daughter of Philip II by a minor wife; later wife of Kassandros.

323 B. C.

THE ZIGGURAT OF BEL-MARDUK had been half ruinous for a century and a half, ever since Xerxes had humbled the gods of rebellious Babylon. The edges of its terraces had crumbled in landslides of bitumen and baked brick; storks nested on its ragged top, which had once held the god's golden bedchamber and his sacred concubine in his golden bed. But this was only defacement; the ziggurat's huge bulk had defied destruction. The walls of the inner city by the Marduk Gate were three hundred feet high, but the ziggurat still towered over them.

Near by was the god's temple; this Xerxes' men had succeeded in half demolishing. The rest of the roof was patched with thatch, and propped on shafts of rough-hewn timber. At the inner end, where the columns were faced with splendid but chipped enamels, there was still a venerable gloom, a smell of incense and burnt offerings. On an altar of porphyry, under a smoke-duct open to the sky, burned in its bronze basket the sacred fire. It was low; the fuel-box was empty. Its shaven acolyte looked from it to the priest. Abstracted though he was, it caught his eye.

"Fetch fuel. What are you about? Must a king die when it serves your laziness? Move! You were got when your mother was asleep and snoring."

The acolyte made a sketchy obeisance; the temple discipline was not strict.

The priest said, after him, "It will not be yet. Maybe not even today. He is tough as a mountain lion, he will die hard."

Two tall shadows fell at the temple's open end. The priests who entered wore the high felt miters of Chaldeans. They approached the altar with ritual gestures, bowing with hand on mouth.

The priest of Marduk said, "Nothing yet?"

"No," said the first Chaldean. "But it will be soon. He cannot speak; indeed he can scarcely breathe. But when his homeland soldiers made a clamor at the doors, demanding to see him, he had them all admitted. Not the commanders; they were there already. The spear-bearers, the common foot-men. They were half the morning passing through his bedchamber, and he greeted them all by signs. That finished him, and now he is in the death-sleep."

A door behind the altar opened to let in two Marduk priests. It gave a glimpse of a rich interior; embroidered hangings, a gleam of gold. There was a smell of spiced meats cooking. The door closed on it.

The Chaldeans, reminded of an old scandal, exchanged glances. One of them said, "We did our best to turn him from the city. But he had heard that the temple had not been restored; and he thought we were afraid of him."

A Marduk priest said stiffly, "The year has not been auspicious for great works. Nebuchadrezzar built in an inauspicious year. His foreign slaves rioted race against race, and threw each other off the tower. As for Sikandar, he would still be fortunate, sitting safe in Susa, if he had not defied the god."

One of the Chaldeans said, "It seems to me he did well enough by the god, for all that he called him Herakles." He looked round, pointedly, at the half-ruined building. He might as well have said aloud, "Where is the gold the King gave you to rebuild, have you eaten and drunk it all?"

There was a hostile silence. The chief of the Marduk priests said, with emollient dignity, "Certainly you gave him a true prediction. And since then have you read the heavens?"

The tall miters bent together in slow assent. The oldest Chaldean, whose beard was silver against his dark face and purple robe, signed to the Marduk priest, beckoning him to the broken end of the temple. "This," he said, "is what is foretold for Babylon." He swept round his gold-starred wand, taking in the crumbling walls, the threadbare roof, the leaning timber-props, the fire-stained paving. "This for a while, and then ... Babylon was."

He walked towards the entry and stood to listen; but the night noises were unchanged. "The heavens say it begins with the death of the King."

The priest remembered the shining youth who, eight years before, had come offering treasure and Arabian incense; and the man who had returned this year, weathered and scarred, the red-gold hair sun-bleached and streaked with white; but with the deep eyes still burning, still ready with the careless, reflex charm of the youth beloved, still terrible in anger. The scent of the incense had lasted long on the air, the gold much longer in the treasury; even among men who liked good living, half was in the strongroom still. But for the priest of Bel-Marduk the pleasure had drained out of it. It spoke now of flames and blood. His spirit sank like the altar fire when the fuel was low.

"Shall we see it? Will a new Xerxes come?"

The Chaldean shook his head. "A dying, not a killing. Another city will rise and ours will wane. It is under the sign of the King."

"What? Will he live, then, after all?"

“He is dying, as I told you. But his sign is walking along the constellations, further than we can reckon in years. You will not see it setting in your day.”

“So? Well, in his life he did us no harm. Maybe he will spare us dead.”

The astrologer frowned to himself, like an adult seeking words to reach a child. “Remember, last year, the fire that fell from heaven. We heard where it fell, and went there, a week’s journey. It had lit the city brighter than full moon. But we found, where it had struck, it had broken into red-hot embers, which had charred the earth around them. One had been set up by a farmer in his house, because that day his wife bore twin sons. But a neighbor had stolen it for its power; they fought, and both men died. Another piece fell at a dumb child’s feet, and speech came back to him. A third had kindled a fire that destroyed a forest. But the Magus of the place had taken the greatest piece, and built it into the fire-altar, because of its great light while it was in the sky. And all this from the one star. So it will be.”

The priest bowed his head. A fragrance drifted to him from the precinct’s kitchen. Better to invite the Chaldeans than let the meat spoil with waiting. Whatever the stars said, good food was good food.

The old Chaldean said, looking into the shadows, “Here where we stand, the leopard will rear her young.”

The priest made a decent pause. No sound from the royal palace. With luck, they might get something to eat before they heard the wailing.

The walls of Nebuchadrezzar’s palace were four feet thick, and faced with blue-glazed tiles for coolness; but the midsummer heat seeped in through everything. The sweat running down Eumenes’ wrist blotted the ink on his papyrus. The wax glistened moistly on the tablet he was fair-copying; he plunged it back into the cold-water tub where his clerk had left it, with the other drafts, to keep the surface set. Local scribes used wet clay; but that would have set hard before one could revise on it. For the third time he went to the doorway, seeking a slave to pull the punkah cord. Once again the dim hushed noises—soft feet, soft voices furtive or awed or grieving—sent him back behind the drawn door-curtain to his listless task. To clap the hands, to call, to shout an order, were all unthinkable.

He had not sought his clerk, a garrulous man; but he could have done with the silent slave and the waft of the punkah. He scanned the unfinished scroll pinned to his writing-board. It was twenty years since he had written with his own hand any letter not of high secrecy; why now was he writing one that would never go, short of a miracle? There had been many miracles; but, surely, not now. It was something to do,

it shut out the unknown future. Sitting down again he retrieved the tablet, propped it, dried his hand on the towel the clerk had left, and picked up his pen.

And the ships commanded by Niarchos will muster at the river-mouth, where I shall review them while Perdikkas is bringing the army down from Babylon; and sacrifices will be made there to the appropriate gods. I shall then take command of the land force and begin the march to the west. The first stage ...

When he was five, before he'd been taught to write, he came to me in the King's business room. "What's that, Eumenes?" "A letter." "What's the first word that you've written big?" "Your father's name. PHILIP, King of the Macedonians. Now I'm busy, run back to your play." "Make me my name. Do, dear Eumenes. Please." I gave it him written, on the back of a spoiled despatch. Next day he'd learned it, and carved it all over the wax for a royal letter to Kersobleptes of Thrace. He had my ruler across his palm ...

Because of the heat he had left open his massive door. A brisk stride, half hushed like all other sounds, approached it. Ptolemy pushed aside the curtain and drew it to behind him. His craggy war-weathered face was creased with fatigue; he had been up all night, without the stimulus of action. He was forty-three, and looked older. Eumenes waited, wordlessly.

"He has given his ring to Perdikkas," Ptolemy said.

There was a pause. Eumenes' alert Greek face—not a bookish one, he had had his share of soldiering—searched the impassive Macedonian's. "For what? As deputy? Or as Regent?"

"Since he could not speak," said Ptolemy drily, "we shall never know."

"If he has accepted death," Eumenes reasoned, "we may presume the second. If not ...?"

"It's all one, now. He neither sees nor hears. He is in the death-sleep."

"Do not be sure. I have heard of men who were thought already dead, and who said later that they heard everything."

Ptolemy suppressed an impatient gesture. These wordy Greeks. Or what is he afraid of? "I came because you and I have known him since he was born. Don't you want to be there?"

"Do the Macedonians want me there?" An ancient bitterness pinched, for a moment, Eumenes' mouth.

"Oh, come. Everyone trusts you. We shall need you before long."

Slowly the Secretary began to put his desk in order. He said, wiping his pen, “And nothing, to the last, about an heir?”

“Perdikkas asked him, while he could still get a whisper out. He only said, ‘To the best man. *Hoti to kratisto.*’”

Eumenes thought, They say dying men can prophesy. He shivered.

“Or,” Ptolemy added, “so Perdikkas told us. He was leaning over. Nobody else could hear.”

Eumenes put down the pen and looked up sharply. “Or *Krateros*? You say he whispered, he was short of breath.” They looked at one another. *Krateros*, the highest-ranking of all Alexander’s staff, was on the march to Macedon, to take over the regency from Antipatros. “If *he’d* been in the room ...”

Ptolemy shrugged. “Who knows?” To himself he thought. If Hephaistion had been there ... But if *he’d* lived, none of this would have happened. He’d have done none of the crazy things he’s dying of. Coming to Babylon in midsummer—boating about in the filthy swamps down river ... But one did not discuss Hephaistion with Eumenes. “This door weighs like an elephant. Do you want it shut?”

Pausing on the threshold, Eumenes said, “Nothing about Roxane and the child? Nothing?”

“Four months to go. And what if it’s a girl?”

They moved into the shadowy corridor, tall big-boned Macedonian and slender Greek. A young Macedonian officer came blundering towards them, almost ran into Ptolemy, and stammered an apology. Ptolemy said, “Is there any change?”

“No, sir, I don’t think so.” He swallowed violently; they saw that he was crying.

When he had gone, Ptolemy said, “That boy believes in it. I can’t yet.”

“Well, let us go.”

“Wait.” Ptolemy took his arm, led him back into the room, and dragged-to the great ebony door on its groaning hinges. “I’d best tell you this while we’ve time. You should have known before, but ...”

“Yes, yes?” said Eumenes impatiently. He had quarreled with Hephaistion shortly before he died, and Alexander had never been easy with him since.

Ptolemy said, “Stateira is pregnant, too.”

Eumenes, who had been fidgeting to be gone, was struck into stillness. “You mean Darius’ daughter?”

“Who else do you suppose? She *is* Alexander’s wife.”

“But this changes everything. When did ...?”

“Don’t you remember? No, of course, you’d gone on to Babylon. When he came to himself after Hephaestion died” (one could not avoid the name forever) “he went to war with the Kossaians. My doing; I told him they’d demanded road-toll, and got him angry. He needed to be doing something. It did him good. When he’d dealt with them, and was heading here, he stopped a week at Susa, to call upon Sisygambis.”

“That old witch,” said Eumenes bitterly. But for her, he thought, the King’s friends would never have been saddled with Persian wives. The mass wedding at Susa had gone by like some drama of superhuman magnificence, till suddenly he had found himself alone in a scented pavilion, in bed with a Persian noblewoman whose unguents repelled him, and whose only Greek consisted of “Greeting, my lord.”

“A great lady,” said Ptolemy. “A pity his mother was not like her. *She* would have had him married before he set out from Macedon, and seen that he got a son. He could have had an heir of fourteen by this time. *She’d* not have sickened him with marriage while he was a child. Whose fault was it that he wasn’t ready for a woman till he met the Bactrian?” Thus, unofficially, did most Macedonians refer to Roxane.

“Done is done. But Stateira ... Does Perdikkas know?”

“That’s why he asked him to name his heir.”

“And still he would not?”

“‘To the best’, he said. He left it to us, to the Macedonians, to choose when they came of age. Yes, he’s a Macedonian at the last.”

“If they are boys,” Eumenes reminded him.

Ptolemy, who had been withdrawn into his thought, said, “And if they come of age.”

Eumenes said nothing. They went down the dim corridor with its blue-tiled walls towards the death-chamber.

Nebuchadrezzar’s bedroom, once ponderously Assyrian, had been Persianized by successive kings from Kyros on. Kambyzes had hung its walls with the trophies of conquered Egypt; Darius the Great had sheathed its columns with gold and malachite; Xerxes had pegged across one side the embroidered robe of Athene, looted from the Parthenon. The second Artaxerxes had sent for craftsmen of Persepolis to make the great bed in which Alexander now lay dying.

Its dais was covered with crimson tapestries worked in bullion. The bed was nine feet by six; Darius the Third, a man seven feet tall, had had ample room. The high canopy was upheld by four golden fire-daimons with silver wings and jeweled eyes. Propped on heaped pillows to help him breathe, and looking small among all these

splendors, the dying man lay naked. A thin linen sheet had been spread half over him when he had ceased to toss about and throw it off. Damp with sweat, it clung to him as if sculpted.

In a monotonous cycle, his shallow rattling breath grew gradually louder, then ceased. After a pause during which no other breath was drawn in the crowded room, it started again, slowly, the same crescendo.

Until lately there had been scarcely another sound. Now that he had ceased responding to voice or touch, a soft muttering began to spread, too cautious and muted to be located; a ground-bass to the strong rhythm of death.

Perdikkas by the bed's head lifted at Ptolemy his dark heavy eyebrows; a tall man, with the Macedonian build but not the coloring, and a face on which authority, long habitual, was growing. His silent gesture of the head signaled "No change yet."

The movement of a peacock fan drew Ptolemy's eye across the bed. There, as he had been for days, seemingly without sleep, seated on the dais was the Persian boy. So Ptolemy still thought of him though by now he must be three-and-twenty; with eunuchs it was hard to tell. At sixteen, he had been brought to Alexander by a Persian general involved in Darius' murder, to give exonerating evidence. This he was well placed to do, having been the King's minion, with inside knowledge of the court. He had stayed on to give his story to the chroniclers, and had never been far from Alexander since. Not much was on view today of the famous beauty which had dazzled two kings running. The great dark eyes were sunk in a face more drawn than the fever-wasted one on the pillows. He was dressed like a servant; did he think that if he was noticed he would be turned out? What *does* he think, Ptolemy wondered. He must have lain with Darius in this very bed.

A fly hovered over Alexander's sweat-glazed forehead. The Persian chased it off, then put down the fan to dip a towel in a basin of mint-scented water, and wipe the unmoving face.

At first Ptolemy had disliked this exotic presence haunting Alexander's living-quarters, encouraging him to assume the trappings of Persian royalty and the manners of a Persian court, having his ear day and night. But he was a fixture one had grown used to. Through Ptolemy's own grief and sense of looming crisis, he felt a stir of pity. Walking over, he touched him on the shoulder.

"Get some rest, Bagoas. Let one of the other chamberlains do all this." A knot of court eunuchs, ageing relicts of Darius and even of Ochos, advanced officiously. Ptolemy said, "He won't know now, you know."

Bagoas looked round. It was as if he had been told he was condemned to immediate execution, a sentence long expected. "Never mind," said Ptolemy gently. "It's your right; stay if you wish."

Bagoas touched his fingers to his forehead. The interruption was over. With his eyes fixed once more on the closed eyes of Alexander, he waved the fan, shifting the hot Babylonian air. He had staying power, Ptolemy reflected. He had weathered even the brainstorm after Hephaestion's death.

Against the wall nearest the bed, on a massive table like an altar, Hephaestion was still enshrined. Enshrined and multiplied; here were the votive statuettes and busts presented by condolent friends, assiduous place-seekers, scared men who had once had words with the dead; commissioned by the best artists found at short notice, to comfort Alexander's grief. Hephaestion stood in bronze, a nude Ares with shield and spear; precious in gold armor with ivory face and limbs; in tinted marble with a gilded laurel crown; as a silver battle-standard for the squadron which was to bear his name; and as a demigod, the first maquette for the cult-statue of his temple in Alexandria. Someone had cleared a space to put down some sickroom object, and a small Hephaestion in gilded bronze had fallen over. With a quick glance at the blind face on the pillows, Ptolemy set it up again. Let them wait till he's gone.

The small sound drew Eumenes' eye, which quickly looked away again.

Ptolemy thought, You've nothing to fear now, have you? Oh yes, he could be arrogant now and then. Towards the end, he thought he was the only one who understood—and how far was he wrong? Accept it, Eumenes, he was good for Alexander. I knew when they were boys at school. He was somebody in himself and both of them knew it. That pride you didn't like was Alexander's salvation; never fawning, never pushing, never envious, never false. He loved Alexander and never used him, kept pace with him at Aristotle's lessons, never on purpose lost a match to him. To the end of his days he could talk to Alexander man to man, could tell him he was wrong, and never for a moment feared him. He saved him from solitude, and who knows what else? Now he's gone, and this is what we have. If he were alive, we'd all be feasting today in Susa, whatever the Chaldeans say.

A frightened physician, pushed from behind by Perdikkas, laid a hand on Alexander's brow, fingered his wrist, muttered gravely and backed away. As long as he could speak, Alexander had refused to have a doctor near him; and even when he was light-headed, none could be found to physic him, lest they should later be accused of having given him poison. It was all one now; he was no longer swallowing. Curse

that fool quack, Ptolemy thought, who let Hephaestion die while he went off to the games. I'd hang him again if I could.

It had long seemed that when the harsh breathing changed, it could only be for the death-rattle. But as if the doctor's touch had stirred a flicker of life, the stridor took a more even rhythm, and the eyelids were seen to move. Ptolemy and Perdikkas each took a step forward. But the self-effacing Persian by the bed, whom everyone had forgotten, put down the fan and, as if no one else were in sight, leaned intimately over the pillowed head, his long light-brown hair falling around it. He whispered softly. Alexander's grey eyes opened. Something disturbed the silky cloak of hair.

Perdikkas said, "He moved his hand."

It was still now, the eyes shut again, though Bagoas, as if transfixed, was still gazing down at them. Perdikkas' mouth tightened; all kinds of people were here. But before he could walk up with a reprimand, the Persian had resumed his station and picked up his fan. But for its movement, he could have been a statue carved from ivory.

Ptolemy became aware of Eumenes speaking to him. "What?" he said harshly. He was near to tears.

"Peukestes is coming."

The huddled functionaries parted to admit a tall well-built Macedonian dressed as a Persian, even—to most of his countrymen's shocked disapproval—down to the trousers. When given the satrapy of Persis he had adopted the native dress to please Alexander, not unaware that it suited him. He strode forward, his eyes on the bed. Perdikkas advanced to meet him.

There was a low buzz of talk. The eyes of the two men exchanged their message. Perdikkas said formally, for the benefit of the company, "Did you receive an oracle from Sarapis?"

Peukestes bowed his head. "We kept the night-watch. The god said at dawn, 'Do not bring the King to the temple. It will be better for him where he is.'"

No, thought Eumenes, there will be no more miracles. For a moment, when the hand had moved, he had almost believed in another.

He turned round looking for Ptolemy; but he had gone off somewhere to put his face in order. It was Peukestes who, coming away from the bedside, said to him, "Does Roxane know?"

The palace harem was a spacious cloister built around a lily-pond. Here too were hushed voices, but differently pitched; the few men in this female world were eunuchs.

None of the women whose home the harem was had set eyes on the dying King. They had heard well of him; they had been kept by him in comfort and unmolested; they had awaited a visit that never came. And that was all, except that they knew of no male heir who would inherit them; in a little while there would even, it seemed, be no Great King. The voices were muted with secretive fear.

Here were all the women Darius had left behind him when he marched to his fate at Gaugamela. His favorites, of course, he had taken with him; these who remained were something of a mixture. His older concubines, from his days as a nobleman unplaced in line for the throne, had long been installed at Susa; here were girls found for him after his accession, who had failed to retain his interest, or had come too late to be noticed by him at all. As well as all these, there were the survivors of King Ochos' harem, who could not in decency be put out of doors when he died. An unwelcome legacy, they formed with one or two old eunuchs a little clique of their own, hating the women of Darius, that usurper they suspected of complicity in their master's death.

For Darius' concubines it was another matter. When brought there they had been fourteen, fifteen, eighteen at most. They had known the real drama of the harem; the rumors and intrigues; the bribery to get first news of a royal visit; the long intricacies of the toilet, the inspired placing of a jewel; the envious despair when the menstrual days enforced retirement; the triumph when a summons was received in a rival's presence; the gift of honor after a successful night.

From a few such nights had come one or two little girls of eight or so, who were dabbling in the pool and telling each other solemnly that the King was dying. There had been boys too. When Darius fell, they had been spirited away with every kind of stratagem, their mothers taking it for granted that the new, barbarian King would have them strangled. Nobody, however, had come looking for them; they had returned in time and now, being of an age to be brought out from among women, were being reared as men by distant kindred.

With the long absence of any King from Babylon, the harem had grown slack. At Susa, where Sisygambis the Queen Mother lived, everything was impeccable. But here they had seen little even of Darius, nothing of Alexander. One or two of the women had managed to intrigue with men from outside and run away with them; the eunuchs, whom Ochos would have impaled for negligence, had kept it quiet. Some girls in the long idle days had had affairs with one another; the resulting jealousies and scenes had enlivened many hot Assyrian nights. One girl had been poisoned by a rival; but that

too had been hushed up. The Chief Warden had taken to smoking hemp, and disliked being disturbed.

Then, after years in the unknown east, after legendary victories, wounds, perils in deserts, the King sent word of his return. The harem had aroused itself as if from sleep. The eunuchs had fussed. All through the winter, the Babylonian season of gentle warmth, when feasts were held, he was expected but did not come. Rumor reached the palace that a boyhood friend had died—some said a lover—and it had sent him mad. Then he had come to himself, but was at war with the mountain Kossaians. The harem slipped back into its lethargy. At last he was on his way, but had broken his march at Susa. Setting out again, he had been met by embassies from all the peoples of the earth, bringing him golden crowns and asking him for counsel. Then, when late spring was heating up for summer, the earth had shaken under the horses and the chariots, the elephants and the marching men; and the palace had seethed with the long-forgotten hustle of a king's arrival.

Next day, it was announced that the King's Chief Eunuch of the Bedchamber would inspect the harem. This formidable person was awaited with dread; but turned out, shockingly, to be little more than a youth, none other than the notorious Bagoas, minion of two kings. Not that he failed to impress. He was wearing silk, stuff never seen within those walls, and shimmered like a peacock's breast. He was Persian to his fingertips, which always made Babylonians feel provincial; and ten years at courts had polished his manners like old silver. He greeted without embarrassment any eunuchs he had met in Darius' day, and bowed respectfully to some of the older ladies. Then he came to business.

He could not say when the King's urgent concerns would give him leisure to visit the harem; no doubt he would find in any case the perfect order which declares respect. One or two shortcomings were obliquely hinted at ("I believe the custom is so-and-so at Susa") but the past was left unprobed. The wardens were concealing sighs of relief, when he asked to see the rooms of the royal ladies.

They led him through. These rooms of state were secluded from the rest, and had their own courtyard, exquisitely tiled. There had been some dismay at their abandoned state, the dry plants and withered creepers, the clogged fountain with green scum and dead fish. All this had been seen to, but the rooms still had the dank smell of long disuse. Silently, just opening his delicate nostrils, Bagoas indicated this.

The rooms of the Royal Wife, despite neglect, were still luxurious; Darius, though self-indulgent, had been generous too. They led him on to the smaller, but still

handsome rooms for the Queen Mother. Sisygambis had stayed here in an early year of her son's short reign. Bagoas looked them over, his head tilted slightly sideways. Unconsciously, over the years, he had picked up this tic from Alexander.

"Very pleasant," he said. "At any rate it can be made so. As you know, the lady Roxane is on her way here from Ekbatana. The King is anxious that she should have an easy journey." The eunuchs pricked up their ears; Roxane's pregnancy was not yet public news. "She will be here in about seven days. I will order some things, and send in good craftsmen. Please see they do all they should."

In a speaking pause, the eunuchs' eyes turned towards the rooms of the Royal Wife. Those of Bagoas followed them, inexpressively.

"Those rooms will be closed at present. Just see they are well aired and kept sweet. You have a key for the outer door? Good." No one said anything. He added, blandly, "There is no need to show these rooms to the lady Roxane. If she should ask, say they are in disrepair." He left politely, as he had come.

At the time, they had decided that Bagoas must have some old score to pay. Favorites and wives were traditional antagonists. The rumor ran that early in her marriage Roxane had tried to poison him, but had never again tried anything, so dreadful had been the anger of the King. The furniture and hangings now sent in were costly, and the finished rooms lacked nothing of royal splendor. "Don't be afraid of extravagance," Bagoas had said. "That is to her taste."

Her caravan duly arrived from Ekbatana. Handed down the steps of her traveling-wagon she had proved to be a young woman of striking, high-nosed beauty, with blueblack hair and dark brilliant eyes. Her pregnancy hardly showed except in opulent softness. She spoke fluent Persian, though with a Bactrian accent which her Bactrian suite did nothing to correct; and had gained a fair command of Greek, a tongue unknown to her before her marriage. Babylon was as foreign to her as India; she had settled without demur in the rooms prepared for her, remarking that they were smaller than those at Ekbatana, but much prettier. They had their own small courtyard, elegant and shady. Darius, who had held his mother in awe as well as in esteem, had always been attentive to her comfort.

Next day a chamberlain, this time of venerable age, announced the King.

The eunuchs waited anxiously. What if Bagoas had acted without authority? The King's anger was said to be rare, but terrible. However, he greeted them courteously in his scanty, formal Persian, and made no comment when shown to Roxane's rooms.

Through chinks and crannies known in the harem since the days of

Nebuchadrezzar, the younger concubines glimpsed him on his way. They reported him handsome in countenance, for a westerner at least (fair coloring was not admired in Babylon); and he was not tall, a grave defect, but this they had known already. Surely he must be older than thirty-two, for his hair had grey in it; but they owned that he had presence, and awaited his return to see him again. They expected a lengthy vigil; but he was back in barely the time it would take a careful woman to bathe and dress.

This made the younger ladies hopeful. They cleaned their jewels and reviewed their cosmetics. One or two, who from boredom had let themselves get grossly fat, were derided and cried all day. For a week, each morning dawned full of promise. But the King did not come. Instead, Bagoas reappeared, and conferred in private with the Chief Warden. The heavy door of the Royal Wife's room was opened, and they went inside.

"Yes," said Bagoas. "Not much is needed here. Just there, and there, fresh hangings. The toilet-vessels will be in the treasury?"

Thankfully (they had tempted him more than once) the Warden sent for them; they were exquisite, silver inlaid with gold. A great clothes-chest of cypress-wood stood against the wall. Bagoas raised the lid; there was a drift of faded fragrance. He lifted out a scarf stitched with seed-pearls and small gold beads.

"These, I suppose, were Queen Stateira's?"

"Those she did not take with her. Darius thought nothing too good for her."

Except his life, each thought in the awkward pause. His flight at Issos had left her to end her days under the protection of his enemy. Under the scarf was a veil edged with green scarab-wings from Egypt. Bagoas fingered it gently. "I never saw her. *The loveliest woman of mortal birth in Asia*—was that true?"

"Who has seen every woman in Asia? Yes, it well may be."

"At least I have seen her daughter." He put back the scarf and closed the chest. "Leave all these things. The lady Stateira will like to have them."

"Has she set out from Susa yet?" A different question trembled on the Warden's lips.

Bagoas, well aware of it, said deliberately, "She will be coming when the worst of the heat is over. The King is anxious she should have an easy journey."

The Warden caught a sharp breath. Fat old chamberlain and slender glittering favorite, their eyes exchanged the immemorial communication of their kind. It was the Warden who spoke first.

"So far, everything has gone smoothly *there*." He glanced towards the other set of