

The next day an uneasy feeling pervaded Heseec. Everybody was conscious of it, yet nobody could say with precision what caused it. A few of the King's chief men were moving silently around the city, as though they had important business on hand. The guards at some of the more important posts were changed. A single officer of high station was seen to enter the great magazine. Little knots of grave-faced men were seen standing on the streets conversing earnestly in a low tone, but when a royal officer approached any of these groups they would break of, or their manner would suddenly change as though they changed the topic of conversation. A feeling of gloom and apprehension hung over the city. Men grew restless and uneasy; the artisan left his bench, the merchant his warehouse. Toward night groups of idlers congregated at the gates, and all sorts of rumors began to be circulated. One said that the King's officers had discovered a conspiracy in the city; another that King Shedad had obtained assistance and was marching at the head of an army to recover his lost throne; a third that the Ishmaelites were plundering the country toward Mesa and were threatening Heseec. This last rumor, it was said, was put in circulation by the friends of the reigning king.

The same evening, at sunset, Malec and a companion were walking on the parapet of the great reservoir.

"A great fear," said the latter, "weighs me down. My own soul and the portents of nature all point toward impending calamity. See yonder sun, gloomy and sullen. Mark the aspect of nature all about us. Everything forebodes disaster."

Malec laughed a low mocking laugh. "I thought, Walid," he said, "that your soul was free from these degrading fears which arise from the miserable superstitions of the priests and those who believe there is a God."

"Do not you believe there is a God—a supreme Being who made all things, and who rules and governs all things?" Walid inquired in amazement.

"Nay," said Malec contemptuously, "it is the fable of the priests."

"But what power, then, responds to the invocations of the wise, of the magicians; and what power works with those men who possess the secrets of nature, who practice mysteries, and who know the word, the unspoken name engraved in undecipherable characters on the signet ring of Solomon the wise King of Israel? Even last night did not these powers shake the island palace in the Garden of Irem, and rescue one of the members of that band from the land of the king?"

"That" Malec returned, passing by the first part of the question—"that was a mystery I fain would solve. That Al Ammin was suddenly snatched away and conveyed out of the Garden is a fact: that any supernatural power aided him is not proved and is beyond my belief. Not the less am I anxious to discover how he escaped from the palace, and where he is hidden. Till I find him the face of the King is turned from me. And it is for that purpose I have sent for you, Walid. You have spoken of the disciples of Solomon. Do you know where they meet?"

"No" said Walid; "they keep all their transactions secret."

"Al Ammin admitted last night; Malec returned," that he had met with them in a cave, and it is said that the island palace was built by King Shedad for their temple. I suspected there were secret chambers in it, in which Al Ammin might be hidden; but I have searched and