

The Fate of Arzemia

By Henry Iliowizi

In the ninth year of his rule Chosroes Nushirvan, the conqueror of kingdoms, sat one day on his gem-incrusted throne, surrounded by all the symbols of earthly majesty. The room was the famous, star-bespangled hall of state in his celebrated palace at Ctesiphon, his capital, an edifice so large that on this occasion the entire division of his dreaded "fifty thousand golden spears" were required to draw a cordon around its enclosure in the heart of that splendid city on the bank of the Tigris. Dazzling jewels, exquisite art, weird magnificence, and incalculable wealth characterized the imperial scene. The golden throne stood on a prodigious carpet of silk, embroidered in imitation of a semitropical garden,—plant, leaf and blossom being artistically reproduced in gems of all hues, from the emerald to the sparkling diamond and sapphire. The vaulted hall represented a miniature firmament adorned with golden spheres responding by an operation of machinery to the motions of the planets and the signs of the zodiac. Chosroes was enclosed in a brilliant coat of mail, and his hand rested on a sword bedecked with jewels of untold value. His crown was so heavy that in order to sustain its priceless weight, a golden chain held it suspended over the head of Iran's invincible lord. On a lower seat at his right hand sat the venerable *Zarathustrotema*, the primate of all the sun-worshippers, the high-priest of the high-priests; while before the throne stood in servile attitude the chiefs and servitors of his court, prepared to sink prostrate at the nod of the autocrat.

As many eyes as there were in the hall threw furtive glances at the contracted brows of the arbitrary monarch, whose discordant mood was evident. Whether it was anger, melancholy, or despair, remained to be seen; there was no beam in his face to relieve the gloom. Why that ill-humor on a day dedicated to festive joy? For it was the seventh day after the birth of a royal babe, the day set for the naming and blessing of his newborn child. But the mighty lord of Iran had for six days and nights been stirred by the vivid picture of a dream which caused his blood to run cold as often he recalled its horrifying incidents. His vision was unlike that of Nebuchadnezzar, who saw a human form fashioned of various metals shattered by a fragment of rock. Chosroes thought that he was roaming through one of his delightful gardens, teeming with singing birds and delicious fruits, musing over the great victories he had won, and the hoards which filled his vaults with enormous wealth, enabling him to rival the Great Mughul in the luxuries of his court. His only worthy enemy was Rome, and even her power seemed to bend to his will. Might, pomp, royal ease and love were his,—what remained for him to attain but the rule of the entire world? "First Rome, then India!" cried he. But lo! what is that? A grim *tower of silence* so near his marble palace, how did it come there? He had never seen it there ere this. The towers of silence, where the fire-worshippers expose their dead to be denuded of flesh by carrion vultures, earth being too sacred to be polluted by the decay of human flesh, are usually located in remote groves, preferably on hills haunted by the carnivorous bird; here was one in the vicinity of the royal palace,—since when?— and by whose order built?

Chosroes turned his eyes toward the top of the dismal building to account for the voracious swarm of vultures that circled around it, as though a corpse had been there deposited, and great was his horror to see the flock make towards him. In his confusion he tore a twig from a tree to beat off the pest; blood flowed from the tree thus wounded; the obscene swarm disappeared, the tower vanished, and when he looked at the twig in his hand, he soon accounted for its great

weight by finding it to be a sceptre of gold, adorned by leaves of resplendent stones. Then he became conscious of a ravening hunger, which to satisfy, Chosroes put forth his arm to pick the nearest fruit; his touch petrified it into a transparent jewel. Repeated attempts had the same result. Tormented by hunger, the king sent his eye in every direction in the hope of help. Redoubled terror seized him on perceiving that the entire garden turned into a wilderness of blinding glitter. A lamenting breeze passed through the lifeless masses of stiffened green frozen into stone,—tree, fruit and blossom fiercely reflecting the glare of the sun. The wind was the only thing that moved, whining like a ghost that passed to eternal perdition. Thirst followed hunger; the deluded victim turned to a cool spring to find the precious liquid therein crystalized into solid diamonds.

“*Ahura-Mazda*, if this be an evil work of the *devas*, then send *Vohu Mano*, *Asliem* and *Armaiti* to lead me into thy light! O, thou who didst create my being in accordance with thy wisdom!” prayed the humbled Shah, consumed by the double torment of hunger and thirst.

A diabolical laugh made the nightmare hideous; it came from a monstrous shape hidden behind a tree, a winged dragon with the head of a man, the head of one in the royal family. Recoiling from that frightful apparition, Chosroes tried to flee, but was intercepted by the same flock of carrion fowl who, returning, lighted on him like so many fiends, lifting him bodily from the ground, and carried him to the funereal grating on the top of the tower of silence, which seemed to have again cropped up from the ground. The agony of being torn to pieces roused him from the horrid nightmare, breathing heavily and trembling all over.

The first object that met his eyes was the court master-of-ceremonies, who, with arms folded and head inclined, informed his majesty of a new royal birth. Shirin, the envied and most favored sultana of his thousands of wives, had the selfsame night been delivered of a female child, as beautiful as is the blushing cheek of *Arustra*. The coincidence of a child’s birth with what he could not help accepting as a portent of some catastrophe to come was not to be dismissed by a Zarathustrian to whom the whole universe was one vast battlefield contested by the hostile armies of Ormuzd the good, and Ahriman the evil. Yet instead of consulting the wisdom of the Magi, high-priests unerring in their interpretations of dreams and casting of nativities, Chosroes had concluded to wait until the seventh day after the confinement when it is the custom of the votaries of Zarathustra to have the child named by a priest, and its horoscope cast. That there might be no preconcerted deception practiced by the shrewd Magi, a secret order had been issued by the king to three different fire-temples, far apart, for the head of the local priesthood to report at court on a day named, and the Zarathustrotema received a call of a similar nature. Thus did it come about that the throne-hall of Chosroes Nushirvan wore that awful solemnity of pregnant suspense which passed down from the head of the empire to those who stood uninformed and powerless at the foot of his throne.

“Know thou, great head of Iran’s light-worship, whom Ahura-Mazda illumined, that my calling thee hither has a high purpose to be presently divulged. From the fire-temples of Ardashir and Kanjak I had the wisest *dasturs* summoned to appear before me this day to read the stars in behalf of a little daughter to be named Arzemia. Chosroes Nushirvan ordains it that his daughter’s horoscope be cast this hour by three of the wisest Magi, each one unknown to and unenlightened by the other. Thy presence, Zarathustrotema, shall wisdom add to wisdom, should some deep remain unfathomed,” spoke the ruler in a nervous voice.

Hereupon a venerable priest was ushered into the royal presence. After paying the proper homage, the Magian unrolled a parchment bedecked with hieroglyphics, drew various lines

thereon with a rod in his hand, then, with his eyes turned toward the zodiacal figures set in motion on the firmament of the hall, he began:

“The god-stars under whose auspices thy new-born child came to this world show me a field of light on a background of impenetrable night. I see a career of strength and beauty, beams of sunshine swallowed by seas of darkness. The god-stars favor Arzemia, O king, with more than woman’s grace and royal fame. Among immortal queens thy daughter will stand high; but length of years *Mazda* denies her; lest she rule and build, like Semiramis, Ninevehs, Babylons, hanging gardens, and towers piercing the skies. With her, Iran’s might and fame will blossom new, but there is a floating chaos back of all,—red lightning, bleeding armies, wrecked kingdoms and fallen thrones. The god-stars reveal an era of triumph, drawing up one of crime, tears, woe, blood and ruin.”

The next horoscoper assumed the air of one entranced by the adumbrations of his dark prophecy, which ran thus: “The powers of *Angro Maniyush* stand arraigned against the seed of Chosroes Nushirvan. Born under Cleopatra’s constellation, the child named Arzemia will exceed Egypt’s enchantress in the quality which makes woman sovereign, and the witchery which makes kings her slaves. A dark veil hides the rest; let it remain unlifted.—Iran’s destiny breaks on my vision in streaks of splendor dimmed by thunder-clouds rising from the eternal abyss.”

“Arzemia’s fate,” cried the third prophet of evil, “is intertwined with that of the Sasanian dynasty. Like Tadmor’s queen, she will rule over a mighty empire in combat with one yet mightier. But not like Zenobia’s will be the end of her career. Trembling seizes me as I behold Iran’s great tragedy, which *Ahura-Mazda* wrote in the book of fate, preceded by an era of triumphs unequalled in the Orient’s tale. In the distance I hear the evil spirits whisper things to come, which my lips shall not articulate. Why conjure night while the sun is at his zenith?—Rome is not thy deadliest foe, O, Chosroes Nushirvan; beware of a serpent in thy bosom.”

The echo of “in thy bosom” vibrated in the monarch’s ear, the silence of the throne-hall being unbroken by a breath, so fearful was the impression left by the weird astrologers. With ill-disguised alarm Chosroes turned his look on the face of the Zarathustrotema, whose mien betrayed evidence of anxiety.

“Why sees the one not what the other sees, the god-stars being there unchanged? They prophesy a queenship like three others and unlike,—where the congruity? Lift up the veil, that certainty dispel all doubt. If Persia’s downfall be decreed on high let the horoscope be unambiguous; give me truth,” commanded the autocrat.

“When, since Zarathustra’s blessed age, did *Ahura-Mazda* bestow of his purest light on a mortal, O, king of kings? The god-stars foreshadow our fate, they do not unequivocally foretell it; and man may well be grateful for the doubt that leaves hope to feed his dreams. Horoscopy shows that the zodiacal signs under which Arzemia beheld light indicate qualities of sovereignty common to those three famous queens, leaving much unsolved to cherish bright probabilities. Benign *Mazda*, lest impending evil mar the joy of the happier hour, withholds the secrets of futurity from our eye. Let not, I beseech thee, future events overcast thy glorious horizon. Proceed with thy triumphant march, while we, guardians of the sacred fires, pray for the success of thy arms. If fall we must, then let us fall great. Let thine empire grow with Arzemia, her mind be irradiated by the wisdom of Zarathustra, and her heart be stirred by the emulation of Babylon’s immortal queen,” closed the primate of Iran appealingly.

With an irrepressible presentiment dominating his being, Chosroes sought relief in the vortex of a reckless activity, and his still swelling tide of fortune began to weaken the apprehension that he was laboring under the frown of unauspicious god-stars. His cupidity seemed to grow with the

incessant influx of treasure sent by the chiefs of his victorious armies, largely engaged against the forces of the Roman emperor, Heraclius, and nothing was too costly which tended to gratify his fondness for display.

The dreaded auxiliaries of the Persian army were several cohorts of drilled elephants. Each division of troops had its elephantine accompaniment, but the fifty thousand “golden spears” relied for effective pioneer work on fifty of those prodigious trampers led by a white mammoth called Mahmud, the same who, in times bygone, carried the Ethiopian king, Abraba, when he invaded Mecca. Mahmud was elevated to the rank of a general, and he acted his part with a dignity and a foresight worthy of a distinguished strategist. His command was trained to follow their chief in all he did, to eject volumes of water and mud, stored up for the purpose in their capacious receptacles, into the eyes of the enemy to use the proboscis to good advantage, to crush out life and to break the serried files of an advancing foe. Mahmud’s onslaughts paved the way for many a victory, and no officer of Iran’s great army enjoyed more consideration and affection than that intelligent brute. Whether at home or in the camp, Mahmud’s quarters and attendants were as sumptuous as those of the other generals, while his gold-bestrewed robe was of the finest silk, and embroidered with precious stones.

With this inbreaking engine, of a resistless momentum, as a wedge for an enormous host, swelled by new levies and animated by dashing generals, Chosroes Nushirvan not only wrested Asia Minor from the Roman grip, but had his banner carried as far as Libya, Egypt and Carthage. In the ample vaults of his white palace the insatiate king received and hoarded the spoils of nations, exhibiting only valueless trophies for the edification of the populace and a disaffected nobility. In his domestic relations the lord of Iran was an unjust father, a tyrant, a poltroon, and a pompous braggart, owing his power and prestige to the bravery of his generals; but conspiracy was lurking where he least suspected it.

The stir and clash of armies and the overthrow of kingdoms did not disturb the early childhood of Arzemia, who, in the retreats of the imperial harem, blossomed into adorable maidenhood, endowed with talents of the highest order and a thirst for knowledge seldom heard of in Oriental courts. Infatuated with his charming daughter, Chosroes lavished treasures in surrounding her with all the luxuries of a queen, and provided a staff of wise heads to imbue her with the essence of Zarathustrian, not less than secular, wisdom. At the age of sixteen Arzemia astonished the court by her appearance at her father’s side in the hall of audience. Robed in a purple dress, with a blaze of gems in the shape of a heart on her left breast, and a sparkling tiara on her head, the enthroned princess looked more like a goddess than a maiden prematurely developed. To the courtiers at the foot of the throne she appeared an image of a dream, perfect in form, ineffably beautiful, and divinely self-sufficient, her eyes darting those arrows which strike the incurable wound.

It was a great gala day. Among the trophies laid before the throne, was the true cross brought by the famous general who had taken Jerusalem; and a slipshod envoy from the interior of Arabia was to be heard,—the main object, however, being the debut of Shirin’s adorable daughter.

“Is it homage or tribute that thou bringest hither from my slaves in Arabia?” asked Chosroes of an uncombed Bedouin in sluttish habit.

In lieu of answer, the Arab impassively delivered a missive in writing, and gave no sign that the splendor of the scene overawed him. Translated, the message read: “In the name of the most merciful God! Mohammed, son of Abdallah and apostle of God, to Chosroes Nushirvan, king of Persia—”

“Hold, fool! What do I hear! Does a savage slave of the desert dare put his name before mine in writing?” cried the autocrat in great anger, seizing the document and tearing it to pieces.—“Get this dog out of my sight, and write to my satrap in Yemen that there lives a madman in Medina who claims to be a prophet; if he cannot cure him, let him send me his head.”

With this incident closed a scene that had been fraught with vast consequence for Iran, and with not less significance for Arzemia. Henceforth visions different from those that haunted her brain in the harem’s privacy invaded her imagination. There had been eyes in the hall of a glow and a sympathy so passionately contagious that the entire being seemed irrevocably absorbed in that enchanting look. It was a woman’s first passion, which she was unable to analyze. Before that event her active spirit, if not engaged in fathoming the mysteries of Zarathustra, delighted in the weaving of fantastic tissues, with heroes and heroines as the forerunners of her future greatness. Destined by the god-stars to wear a crown, what, with Iran as her heritage, could prevent her from eclipsing the achievements of Semiramis? The entire world then lay prostrate at her feet; kings and Cæsars would worship her. Why not rather be a goddess than the mate of a mortal, even if he be a Ninus, an Antony, or an Odenatus? Why not shine like blessed *Mithra*, who illumines the heavens unmated? “Be one man’s inferior companion rather than the awe and adoration of the great world? This was thy folly, ill-fated Cleopatra, and thine, nobler Zenobia; but the child of Derceto proved herself worthy of her divine mother, and Arzemia shall not be less than Semiramis, with no Ninus to divide her empire,” were the last words of a reverie overheard by Shirin. And the sultana thought it high time to draw the budding maiden into the open world. Her period of childhood was ended.

“Thou knowest, my lord, that our child’s angelic beauty is far exceeded by the brilliancy of her mind; that she has mastered the languages spoken by the great nations, and the wisdom taught by the Magi; but since, obeying thy behest, I cautiously gave her some intimation of her horoscope, I perceive a change in her demeanor which gives me much concern. Seeking the lonely haunts of our gardens, Arzemia acts as though she held communion with spirits, discoursing on the hollowness of love, and dreaming of a superhuman destiny reserved for her by the god-stars. *Ahura-Mazda* has granted us the blessed child to cheer our later years. Our daughter is a harp strung to charm discord and to scatter gloom, not to be untuned by disuse. May the fearful *devas* pass her, who roams in realms too visionary to be safe!” prayed the scheming sultana, sure of her game.

“What wouldst thou have me do, Shirin? Give her in marriage to the man whom Chosroes honors most?” asked the father imperiously, early marriage being compatible with Zarathustra’s moral teachings.

“Not now, my lord; let the child see the court, the court see her, before the question of love is broached,” suggested the emboldened sultana.

“Sultana, it was my pleasure that exalted thee above the fairest of my harem, and thy son above his brothers; it is love’s triumph, and thy daughter, favored by the god-stars, shall be favored more than ever princess was. Arrayed like *Arustra*, she shall receive her first homage at my side,” promised the autocratic sire. And so did Shirin once more triumph over her rivals in royal grace.

Thus drawn into publicity at her mother’s initiative, Arzemia dazzled the court with her houri-like graces not less than her imperial bearing. Here it was, however, that the girl’s heart received the winged arrow from love’s unerring bow, shattering all foregone imaginings as a spire smitten by lightning. It was as though a curtain had risen to reveal a magic scene with one fascination greater than all the others—and he a man whose like could well account for love like Zenobia’s, and madness like Cleopatra’s. In frame but little above the average, otherwise a figure

reminiscent of the war-god whom the Olympians feared; unhandsome, but imposing; complexion olive, nose aquiline, eyes deep, black, flashing but mild; chin hidden by a beard, raven black; heavy hair and mustache harmonizing with the beard; thick, arched eyebrows; a curling, sensuous lip; shapely feet, shapelier hands; the whole in the attire of a Persian general. Such was Shahrbaraz to whose talents Chosroes was largely indebted for his most valuable conquests. Covered with glory, cumbered with royal favors, flattered by the courtier, idolized by the army, and lionized by the people, the general had hardly anything to wish for when Arzemia's eye met his; then all other ambitions paled before the one, all-devouring passion to kneel in tender worship before her who looked so much more divine than human.

That was Arzemia's day of destiny, and it did not close without an incident which alarmed both king and court. The cause was a sealed document found before the celebrated grand portal of Chosroes Nushirvan's white palace, warning the monarch that a plot was ripe to overthrow him by a sudden blow, and that the bodyguard was implicated in the nefarious conspiracy. Prompt action was urgent, and Chosroes, frightened out of his wits, summoned his bravest general to take temporary charge of his capital and palace. Shahrbaraz pledged himself to continued vigilance until the conspirators should be brought to grief—"Within the walls of Ctesiphon are twelve thousand golden spears; twenty-five thousand more are within the courier's call let not thy peace be disturbed, oh, my sovereign; Shahrbaraz will not sleep," spoke the resourceful strategist with an inward laugh, and proceeded to arrange matters to suit himself.

Unaware of the cause which stirred the authorities of the court, the people wondered at the feverish activity of the military. Large bodies of troops moved out, larger ones moved into the fortifications of the splendid city, so that with the descent of night every access to the palace was under strong guard, and Ctesiphon presented the aspect of a besieged place, prepared to repel an aggressive enemy. What was going to happen that night?

As to Arzemia, untouched by this wave of commotion, she abandoned herself to an overmastering passion, burning to the core of her fiery nature; and, succumbing to the fever of her soul, she fled the confinement of her sumptuous bed-chambers to seek the cooling breeze in the garden, a separate enclosure within the royal park. It was night, and the darkness was hardly broken by the thin crescent of the new moon, when the princess nimbly picked her way to a sequestered nook on a terrace whence in daylight an extensive view of the pleasure-ground was afforded. Here in a recess was an arbor furnished exquisitely, and here, in the posture of supplication, the maiden invoked the help of Zarathustra's revealed Power—*Ahura-Mazda*.

"Thou, eternal *Ahura-Mazda*, the god of gods, the creator of light, who furthest throughout all space the good and the true, the holy and the beautiful,—and ye bright ministers, who yearn to do his bidding,—if what I feel as fire burning in my heart is love by heaven kindled, then let no barrier stand between the one for whom I burn and me,—yea, no longer than the time required for two wind-lashed flames to rush together and melt in one celestial blaze. Messengers of *Ahura-Mazda*, my messengers carry to him whom fate has named my lord; bend ye walls, be deaf ye watchmen, that he who loves Arzemia fly hither unhindered!"

There had been a mysterious gleam on the lower balconies of the palace; it flared up, vanished, reappeared again, and once more; and then nothing was seen or heard save at the postern of the garden, where the signal must have been looked for and understood. Swift as a hind there sped from the mazes of the darkened palace a human figure athwart the semi-tropic thickets of the grounds, admitted another one through the rear-gate, whispered a few syllables, and returned to the white pile of a thousand apartments hushed in perfect silence. The intruder, obviously informed of the whereabouts of his object, glided like a ghost toward Arzemia's retreat, and

stood enchanted by the voice which articulated the essence of his highest felicity. Hardly did the last word die on her lip when the problematic person sank on his knees and, inclining his head as in adoration, spoke in a tone thrilling with passion, "Divine child, whom *Ahura-Mazda* graces with the light of his countenance, grant me the privilege to worship at thy feet, an humble supplicant, my heart being thine, my soul thine—forever thine."

The frightened maiden would have screamed for help had not the voice she heard recalled a succession of notes that were still ringing in her ears. In a second she realized what she trembled to believe possible.

"And who art thou, most daring of men, who fearest not to invade the inviolable privacy of Chosroes Nushirvan's daughter?" cried the maiden in fluttering apprehension, dreading the realization of her prayer.

"Forgive! I am not what I was before thine eye smote me with madness to be thy votary—thy slave,—or not to be at all," was the answer.

"*Ahura-Mazda!* thou the man whom Iran honors—thou, Shahrbaraz?" cried the girl.

"Thy servitor, thy slave in eternity," was the appealing reiteration.

"The auspicious god-stars brought thee hither. Oh! but humble not Arzemia in thus humbling thyself; the god-stars have linked our fates and, come what may, I am thine, yea, and thou art mine in eternity!" exclaimed the enraptured maiden.

"My heaven!" was the laconic ejaculation of the great soldier who, leaping to his feet, embraced her rapturously, pressing her to his heart.

As if in hymeneal sympathy with love's delicious union, the bulbul poured forth a stream of soul-stirring song, the sweet cadence calling forth responsive notes from the thick of sylvan recesses. Tears flowed from the eyes of Arzemia and fell on the face of her lover, who raised her like an infant in his mighty arms, covering her cheeks with passionate kisses.

"Thy tears of bliss will make the angels weep in paradise, sweet goddess," whispered Persia's world-renowned hero.

"The bulbul!—I never heard the bulbul sing so sad, so sweet, so prophetic; ah! it seems to sigh and weep and speak to my heart of things words cannot express! Some spirit moves it to move our hearts," breathed Arzemia with emotion.

"Thou art creation's sympathetic harp, responsive to spiritual harmonies lower natures fail to realize; the bird's melody is to me an unmeaning song, but in thy voice I hear *Mazda's* music which moves the heavenly spheres," said Shahrbaraz softly,

"It is bliss to receive tribute from the lip of love; but what a thing am I, compared with thee, Iran's pride, who smote the Roman and took his holy city! Who has done a greater deed? If the armies of Chosroes were thine, wouldst thou not conquer the world?"

"I have conquered earth and heaven, star of my felicity; thou being mine, what remains in all the worlds to wish for? To smite the Roman and take his holy city was less an achievement than to come near to thee, the pearl of beauty, reached at greater hazard than he faces who dives into the ocean's abyss in quest of treasure," affirmed the general.

"Alas, thou art right! O, gods!—Thy life, thy dear life—shouldst thou be found at this hour with me at this place! Dearest, what power enabled thee to pass the guards, whose heads would answer for thy presence where the king alone has right?—Go hence, O, my soul's adorer, my heart's adored, go hence, lest the *devas* thwart our happiness! I hear the friendly spirits whisper—depart," urged Arzemia, awaking to the danger that beset her lover under the circumstances.

“Thy prayer, child of light, that bade the walls to bend and the watchmen to be deaf,— yea, and love, whom Orpheus followed to the world of shades, have leveled my pathway hither, fearless of fate. They who enter heaven laugh death to scorn. Thy presence renders me invulnerable to mortal steel. Ah! waste no second, cherub, in the thought of death or danger,” cried Shahrbaraz ardently.

“Forbid it, *Ahura-Mazda*, that Iran’s glory be smitten by a treacherous hand!—Yet play not with the envious fates, lest they grow jealous of Arzemia’s bliss, who would no heaven take for what is here on earth,” cried the girl appealingly.

“Let all thy cares henceforth be mine, divine Arzemia. My ‘golden spears’ hold every fort and gate, and have no will but that of thy Shahrbaraz, who could be king this hour were he inclined. To come near thee I had to act my part unfair or fair; love knows no scruples. A scheme devised by me and taken seriously by the king gave me control of Ctesiphon and court,” explained the strategist.

“The god-stars rule that I be queen one day and thou my king; my Ninus thou, I thy Semiramis, with Rome and Iran prostrate at our feet!—Ah, there a light!” exclaimed the girl in alarm, her eyes having caught a glimmer in the palace.

“It is the signal for me to begone,” said Shahrbaraz, and a moment later the postern closed behind him, having given and received the kiss that is a taste of Elysian rapture.

The clandestine intercourse between the greatest general and the fairest princess of Iran was thus carried on for a time, when revolutionary changes threw Ctesiphon into confusion. Chosroes Nushirvan’s court was a hotbed of intrigue, and his harem a seething caldron, overflowing with all the vices and evils engendered by arbitrary rule. Among the host of jealous females under the roof of the palace, Shirin, the Christian sultana, had the upper hand, having charmed her lord to the extent of disinheriting and imprisoning Kavadh, the legitimate heir to the throne, in favor of her son Mardanshah. But a turn of the wheel gave Kavadh the reins of government, and his first act was to drag his wretched father into his vaults of uncounted treasures, and let him perish there of hunger. Seventeen brothers were next executed to insure the rule of the monstrous parricide. These fearful crimes were inspired less by vengeance than—who would have dreamed it?—by Kavadh’s vehement passion for Shirin. But the distracted sultana recoiled with loathing from the murderer of her husband and her son, and when the miscreant resorted to force he held a bleeding corpse in his arms, the sultana having ended her life by a self-inflicted wound. Arzemia was her only surviving child, and Shahrbaraz knew how to provide for the safety of his worshipped princess. Shortly after Kavadh fell.

During the chaotic conditions which followed the fall of Kavadh, Shahrbaraz matured a plot for the usurpation of Iran’s sovereignty. Sustained by his fifty thousand golden spears, and favored by Arzemia’s friends, the dashing general entered Ctesiphon in triumph, and had himself crowned in the palace of the voluptuous Chosroes. When it transpired that Arzemia not alone favored the usurper, but was going to be wedded to him in the imperial fire-temple, her many suitors combined in organizing a conspiracy, headed by Faruch-Zad, the mighty satrap of Khorassan, who was desperately in love with the princess. Shahrbaraz was assassinated on the day set for his wedding, his body was mutilated and dragged by an ass through the streets of Ctesiphon. Arzemia’s horror was scarcely exceeded by her sorrow and her vengeance; and her opportunity was not slow in coming, being called to the succession of her father’s throne, when Faruch-Zad urged his suit with obtrusive audacity. Policy forced her to smile on the man she hated, while her armies were engaged in the fateful struggle against the now all-conquering hordes of overflowing Islam. Impatient of delay and tortured by uncertainty, the satrap of

Khorassan resolved to take by force what was denied him by favor. But the queen's friends learned of the plot; Faruch-Zad's followers were overpowered at the portal of the palace, and he was arraigned as a traitor before the one whose hatred for him could hardly be surpassed by his love for her. Arzemia blessed the gods for the chance thus afforded her to avenge the murder of Shahrbaraz. She apostrophized the culprit with bitter contumely, and had him executed under most cruel circumstances.

Faruch-Zad was not dead an hour when tidings from the battle-field spread consternation in the court. The golden lances, long held to be invincible, sustained a crushing defeat at the hands of Islam's votaries, and among the slain was Mahmud, the intelligent elephant, who bled to death through a wound struck at the extremity of his trunk. Mahmud's fall was generally accepted as prophetic of worse things to follow, and Arzemia, seeing her empire crumbling, turned to the Magi for an ungarbled version of her horoscope which was kept for reference in the royal archives. With fatalistic resignation the youthful queen listened to the dark prophecies associated with her birth, and insisted on having her father's dream read to her, it having been kept on record with the documents of her nativity. Deeply impressed by the fearful purport of her sire's vision on the night of her coming into this world, and remembering its ghastly realization in subsequent developments, Arzemia exclaimed resignedly, "It is *Ahura-Mazda's* immutable decree that Iran's ancient glories fade with me at whose birth the god-stars frowned. Were it not better for Arzemia not to have been born?"

The queen had hardly uttered these words when an ominous noise in the royal courtyard caused her armed guard to rush toward the entrance of the palace. Here they were met by a desperate band of conspirators led by a relative of Faruch-Zad. The encounter was short and decisive. Arzemia fell into the hands of the avenger of the dead satrap, was tortured with refined cruelty, and put to death ignominiously.

Thus perished the noblest and most virtuous sovereign lady of one of the greatest empires which succumbed to the sword of Islam.