

KING HEZEKIAH

A TRAGICAL DRAMA

IN A PROLOGUE AND FOUR ACTS

BY

W. H. T. GAIRDNER

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FOREWORD

My experiences at the Old Vic., where for some years I have arranged performances of "Everyman" during Lent, and of Nativity plays at Christmas, as well as of Mendelssohn's oratorio "Elijah" in action, have taught me that many whom the message of the Bible does not otherwise reach are influenced by religious drama. I found that "Elijah," for instance, proved more moving when acted and accompanied by the colour and beauty of Eastern clothes and scenery than when sung as an oratorio.

I strongly feel that biblical drama is an immense help to the souls of those who take part in it, and of those who watch. In "King Hezekiah" the episode chosen is essentially dramatic; the writer has brought the utmost reverence and earnestness to his subject, and if the same sincerity is employed in the production, I am sure that it will deepen and broaden the lesson of this story.

LILIAN BAYLIS.

THE OLD VIC.,
WATERLOO ROAD,
LONDON.

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

KING HEZEKIAH of Judah.

ISAIAH, son of Amoz, the Prophet of the Lord.

SHEBNA, the Lord Treasurer and Mayor of the King's Household :
first Minister of State.

ELIAKIM, son of Hilkiah, the Secretary : second Minister of
State.

JOAH, son of Asaph the Recorder : third Minister of State.

THE CHIEF CAPTAIN of the Royal Forces.

URIEL, the Master of the Horse.

MICHAIAH, a Courtier.

COURTIERS AND LORDS.

ELEAZAR, a Chief Priest.

A PSEUDO-PROPHET.

A WATCHMAN.

A TROOPER.

REFUGEES, with their headman.

EKRONITE AMBASSADORS, with their spokesman.

ASSYRIANS.

SENNACHERIB, King of Assyria.

THE TARTAN, Commander of the Assyrian Forces.

THE RAB-SHAKEH, Lord of the Cup-bearers } great Ministers of
THE RAB-SARIS, Lord of the Eunuchs } State.

ASSYRIAN LORDS.

The Scene is in Jerusalem throughout, except in Act IV.,
Scene I, where it is laid in Sennacherib's pavilion at his camp in
the plains.

Time, the closing years of the eighth century B.C.

ARGUMENT

King AHAZ, the father of King HEZEKIAH, had involved the kingdom of Judah in an alliance with the Assyrian empire, which brought in its train inglorious tribute and subject-alliance. For this, and for the heavy sins of the nation, ISAIAH, the prophet of the Lord, has announced the discipline of inevitable punishment, whereof Assyria itself is to be the dreadful agent. In view of this he has forbidden, in the name of God, all attempts to change the state of affairs, whether by worldly revolt or a fresh worldly alliance: such facilities can only make bad worse. For Judah can only be saved through a dire punishment and the turning unto God of the remnant who shall survive its fires. Wherefore, said he, "in quietness and confidence shall be your strength."

King HEZEKIAH is loyal to ISAIAH and to this policy. In the Prologue he is detached from this allegiance by a sudden temptation levelled at his vanity by his intriguing minister of state, SHEBNA. This SHEBNA tricks him into breaking with Assyria and its new king SENNACHERIB through the alliance which he pledges to the revolted city of Ekron, and his assumption of the custody of its pro-Assyrian king, Padi. Convicted by ISAIAH, the king offers to retract his rash action; but ISAIAH warns him that this is no longer possible, and that he and his people must work out their chosen course even to its bitter end; the good king must drink the cup of nameless suffering with his people. But *then* shall he and "a remnant" be saved. Meanwhile, let him play the man. King HEZEKIAH makes an anguished submission . . . and prepares to put Jerusalem into a state of defence.

[NOTE.—If it is desired to shorten the drama for the purposes of representation, the Prologue and Act I., Scene 2, may be omitted. In which case the above Argument in full should be in the hands of those who witness the drama.]

PREFACE

THAT the events, both spiritual and external, which led up to the catastrophe of Sennacherib were "tragical" for Jerusalem and the Hebrew nation is manifest on the surface of the narrative itself, and is still more deeply impressed on the mind by the prophecies of Isaiah—none the less tragical, indeed, though the final issue of those events was a "divine comedy." That they were also, in terrible sort and degree, tragical for Hezekiah, the reigning king of Judah, is no less certain, though the records are curiously reticent about the part he played in the historic drama until just the end; and though the commentators, absorbed as they are in the two protagonists, Isaiah and the Nation, have for *his* agony hardly a thought to spare. A real dilemma, however, is encountered by whoso tries to relate the tragedy of the nation in those days and that of the soul of this king. Hezekiah was "a good king," and unquestionably, therefore, on the side of the prophet Isaiah; how then was his Government in the hands of that prophet's enemies? Either he was a mere puppet, as imbecile as he was "good," a supposition intolerable in itself, and forbidden by what we know of the man: *or* he was not; but then, how did he become officially responsible for a policy which was branded by the prophet of God as a policy of hell? and, stranger still, how comes it that amid the latter's terrific denunciations of that policy and all who had a hand in it, there is no direct, or even indirect, attack upon the responsible head of the Government himself? Is the alternative of his imbecility forced on us, after all, by this?

To these questions and this problem the present drama is an attempted answer. The events of those terrible, heroic years are therein read in such a way as to show how, through the dark shadows of that nation's agony, the eye of

imagination may discern a head who was no mere figure-head ; may discern, looming large, the figure of a HEZEKIAS AGONISTES.

The "VOICES" which at three spiritual crises of the action speak from the Unseen are not intended to affect the realism of the drama in any way. They merely interpret the unspoken, hardly realized thoughts of the human persons of the drama ; and they echo, as it were, the divine response to the appeal of the earthly situation.

Certain minor historic insolubilities are alluded to in the Appendix, where notes are given upon the scriptural and other data that have been woven into the action or the text.

The author acknowledges, with gratitude, a valuable service rendered by his friend Miss Constance Padwick in the course of the preparation of this work for the press.

CAIRO,
August, 1923.

KING HEZEKIAH

PROLOGUE

A reception court in the palace of HEZEKIAH in Jerusalem. SHEBNA, the Lord Treasurer, seated with JOAH the son of Asaph the Recorder. SHEBNA is a florid man, with able, energetic face, but shifty eyes. He speaks with a slightly foreign accent, and is somewhat overdressed.

SHEBNA (*with impatient disgust*).

A child might read our riddle, yet the king cannot! Is not EGYPT its clue? To go down to Egypt for help; to stay on her horses and trust in her chariots, for they are many, and in her horsemen, for they are very strong. Is this not clear as the noontide?

JOAH.

Truly, my lord Shebna, thus and thus alone do we hope to escape from the yoke of these terrible ones, these Assyrians. Oh that the king, then, would seek alliance and league with Egypt!

SHEBNA.

My good, worthy Joah, he willeth not so much as to break with the King of Assyria! And (*contemptuously*) knowest thou why? Aye, *why*? Tell me that, thou son of Asaph!

JOAH.

Hath not Isaiah the son of Amoz the prophet set his face against this thing like a flint? Ever since the king's father, Ahaz, entangled us in this Assyrian alliance—say slavery rather!—hath he not in the name of the Lord denounced all alliances and policies of men, that in mending we mend not bad with worse?

KING HEZEKIAH

SHEBNA (*contemptuously*).

Isaiah! prophet! What's a prophet? This day I will show unto thee a prophet—with hairy robe, matted locks, and rolling eyes, and all other accoutrements and signs of their guild to boot—who will say unto us in the name of Jehovah, "Go down to Egypt and prosper, for then the Lord shall deliver Assyria into thy hand."

JOAH (*moodily*).

'Tis true these prophets deceive us with their cross-wise speeches. But (*looking dryly at SHEBNA*) this young prophet thou speakest of—doth he not eat from the table of Shebna, who is over the King's household?

SHEBNA (*unabashed*).

What of it? By the gods—I crave thy pardon; the speech of our provincials runs away with the tongue!—by Jehovah, the God of Israel, a man must live!

JOAH.

Aye, and Shebna is a man! What way went those secret messengers of the King of Egypt to the house of Shebna last moon? I knew them, even if our lord, King Hezekiah, did not. Was it not to win Shebna, the Lord Treasurer, to the Egyptian league and alliance?

SHEBNA (*amused*).

Tush, man; be as open as thou art wise! Thou meanest, "with the customary fees and compliments in their hands"! Of which most lawful fees, now and to come, shall our dear Joah son of Asaph the Recorder have his due share. But what of it! Or ever those secret messengers came I had considered that with this new king, Sennacherib, on Assyria's throne, with Babylon rebelling on the south, with Elam stringing the bow and Kîr uncovering the quiver, with Egypt frothing like a boiling pot, aye, and with Tirhaka, the mighty Nubian, behind Egypt, there had come to us the chance of a hundred years—to break the hated yoke of Assyria and be free! And then—I must be balked by this foolish king of ours, and Joah the Recorder must prate to me of a moonstruck prophet, this Isaiah!

Ye gods!—thy pardon as before—thou God of Israel! is it not monstrous?

JOAH.

Thou art right, though not all thou sayest liketh me. The matter, then, is to cause our king to break with Assyria . . .

SHEBNA.

Thou hast hit it. For, *this* done, leave the rest to me! Having swallowed the dromedary of Nineveh, he will not be such a fool as to strain out the gnat of Egypt. And, by Isaiah himself, why should he *not* break with Nineveh? For I have heard his prophetic reverence himself speaking against the Assyrian words that were of the most intolerable.

JOAH.

That's true, that's most true; and that would weigh heavily with the king. Yet . . .

SHEBNA.

Spare me "yets" and "buts." And see that we watch warily for an expedient that shall turn the matter as we desire.

Enter a MESSENGER; he passes rapidly across the scene.

MESSENGER.

Salutations to the most noble counsellors, and their pardon! I must away . . .

SHEBNA.

Whither away, friend Michaiah, whither away so fast?

MICHAIAH (*pausing*).

Matters of state, and hotly pressing.

SHEBNA (*frowning*).

Matters of state, and hotly pressing, and the Lord Treasurer of State may not hear? Bethink thyself!

MICHAIAH (*rapidly*).

I cannot refuse thee. Know, then, that I go to announce to the king the sudden approach of ambassadors from the noble city of Ekron, our old Philistine foe, now desirous to become our worthy friend. They have had their fill of Pâdi,

the kingly whom the King of Assyria set up in their midst. They are resolved to break with Assyria—surely Egypt also hath egged them on?—and they seek the worthiest, noblest, bravest, and most powerful of the kings of these coasts to the intent that they may lodge Pâdi with *him*, in durance vile or in honourable custody, as may seem good in his eyes. They are at the gates; behold, I have told thee. I must away; I cannot tarry.

SHEBNA (*who has been exchanging with JOAH glances of rising excitement*).

Now listen, O Micaiah thou son of Boaz; thy lucky star is in the ascendant. One small thing I beg, nay, command; one, and no more. But ere I make mention thereof . . . dost thou not covet Imlah's post among the Recorders, and eke one little, little field that is in the Valley of Rephaim? Behold, they are thine, if thou wilt but refrain from entering in unto the king a space while thou mightest with moderate speed number five hundred. What, afraid? Tush, man! thy headdress is disordered—thy sandal strap hath snapped—thou sweatest or art scant of breath—one of a score of such trifles will serve for excuse; think of one while thou countest the five hundred! In the ante-chamber there! (*pushing him out*)—by thy leave!—trust Shebna!—the little field!—poor Imlah! his post knoweth him no more! (*He pushes the confounded MESSENGER out and returns in great excitement to JOAH.*) Heed him not; I have him skewered. Listen: the Lord hath delivered them into our hands. Lo, the expedient! Hezekiah is noble and godly and brave, but he is vainglorious. Thou forgettest not the ambassador of Merodach-Baladan, King of Babylon, and how lightly he bewitched Hezekiah with his honourable embassy. Ha, ha! the pious king burned his fingers with his father, the prophet Isaiah, that day! I know not whether it be his own glory or the glory of Jerusalem, his darling, the daughter of Zion, he seeketh ever—if he could indeed tell himself! But that's all one. For now by the selfsame snare may he be taken captive again this day. The sentence of our wise Solomon may have been true of his birds, but not of men, for verily, *not* in vain is the net set twice, no, nor fifty times, in their sight. Lo now, hold the king when he comes; I go to encounter—by merest chance and hap,

ha, ha!—this Ekronite embassy at the Western Gate. Prepare, then, the mind of the king, or at least hold thy politic peace! Nay, bungle it not. Look to it! [*Exit.*]

JOAH.

Jehovah is the God of Israel, and His glory I would serve. But how? The world's a whirligig; who can discern one thing surely fixed in the whirl? If our lord, King Hezekiah himself, discerneth not Jehovah's will, shall Joah be blamed if he entereth in at the gate that is wide, and walketh in the path that is broad?

Enter KING HEZEKIAH, attended by ELIAKIM the son of Hilkiah, with the MESSENGER. HEZEKIAH is a man nearing fifty. His presence is dignified and noble, his face strong, earnest, and thoughtful. The anxieties of perilous and anxious times have deeply furrowed his countenance and grizzled his hair and beard. ELIAKIM is also a grave personage, older than his king.

KING HEZEKIAH.

What's the matter? Lo, thou art panting still; recover thy breath.

MESSENGER (*with forced scantiness of breath*).

I came in hottest haste. It is to tell the King's majesty that an embassy from Ekron hath appeared suddenly at the Western Gate demanding instant admittance to thy royal presence.

KING HEZEKIAH.

For what purpose? But let us not keep them waiting. Thou son of Asaph, see that they be honourably met and escorted. Knowest thou why they come? (*to MESSENGER, who is about to speak, when JOAH frowns at him, and exit*).

MESSENGER.

My liege, I ween—I think—perchance—I know not. (*He edges uncomfortably towards the entrance.*) Lo now: they must be at hand! Even so! They come, and Joah with them; and oh, fortunate chance, the Mayor of the Household honourably escorteth them. It is doubtless not meet for me to be present. I crave my liege's permission.

KING HEZEKIAH

KING HEZEKIAH.

Thou mayest go, Michaiah.

MESSENGER.

I humbly thank your majesty. [Exit.

Enter from the other side SHEBNA, JOAH, and the Ekronite deputation. With deep obeisance they range themselves before HEZEKIAH, who courteously welcomes them.

KING HEZEKIAH.

You are very welcome. It would seem that you have some high matter to propound. Pray you, say on.

FIRST EKRONITE NOBLE.

From Goliath, King of Ekron, to Hezekiah, king of kings.

KING HEZEKIAH.

Goliath? Is King Pâdi gathered to his fathers then?

EKRONITE.

Hear us, most noble Hezekiah, and let the glorious daughter of Zion listen in the listening of her anointed one! (*Aside to SHEBNA*) Was that the phrase?

SHEBNA (*aside to Ekronite*).

So, even so. (*Aside to JOAH*) What sayest thou? A master-stroke, hey? Shebna's own!

EKRONITE.

Hear us, great king. Ekron's noble sons have turned against the slave Pâdi, whom Sargon, King of Assyria, set up. Who is the King of Assyria? Woe to him! Hail, freedom! Let us be free! For in our ears hath thundered the word of the man of God, Isaiah the son of Amoz, who said, by inspiration of thy God: "*I will punish the fruit of the stout heart of the King of Assyria, and the glory of his high looks: and the high ones of stature shall be hewn down, and the haughty shall be humbled.*"

SHEBNA (*aside*).

Bravely—oh, bravely!

ELIAKIM.

Oh, good my liege, bethink thee how that word was prefaced: "*It shall come to pass that WHEN THE LORD HATH PERFORMED HIS WHOLE WORK UPON MOUNT ZION AND ON JERUSALEM, I will punish the fruit of the King of Assyria's stout heart. . . .*"

A CHIEF-PRIEST (*prompted by SHEBNA, and with religious earnestness*).

And, good my liege, hath *not* the Lord—blessed be His name!—performed that work? Lo, the multitudes of the sacrifices, the burnt-offerings of rams, and fat of fed beasts; the diligent keeping of the new moons and Sabbaths; the assemblies, the solemn meetings; the incense which ascendeth in clouds to the nostrils of Jehovah of Hosts? Are these blessed days as the days of Ahaz thy father? Remember thy own work: didst thou not remove the high places? . . .

KING HEZEKIAH.

Oh, peace! Eliakim is right: the holy prophet, well I know it, meant that the Lord must first chastise His people, alas!

SHEBNA.

Chastise! And have not these twenty years been one chastisement! The yearly indignity of the tribute; the yearly disdain of the heathen, when they blaspheme the name of our God; the yoke on the neck of the Daughter of Zion. . . . (*A loud voice is suddenly heard without.*)

PROPHET (*from without*).

Woe unto the ungodly nation, woe! (*He enters. He is clad as SHEBNA described. A yoke is about his neck. With rolling eyes*) Thus saith the Lord: Even thus is the yoke of the terrible one about the neck of the Daughter of Zion; and even thus shall it now be broken. (*He violently breaks the yoke and casts it to the ground. . . . Oh, where am I? (He looks round amazed; he staggers.)*)

KING HEZEKIAH (*to Joah*).

Let him be attended.

PROPHET.

Thy pardon, my liege lord. I thought I was in the court of my house. Behold, I know not what I say, nor what I do, nor anything in the world. *[Exit, led by JOAH.]*

EKRONITE.

An oracle indeed! What can Dagon show to this? Behold, in us Philistia worships Jehovah in His holy city. *(They prostrate.)*

KING HEZEKIAH.

'Tis wonderful!

SHEBNA.

Wonderful indeed! *(Aside to JOAH)* And yet not so wonderful!

EKRONITE.

Let me swiftly end my word, great king. When we sought where most fitly and most safely to sequester this slave, Pâdi, then was there but one voice: "In the city of the Lord of Hosts; in Zion, whereof glorious things are spoken; with Hezekiah, the Anointed of JEHOVAH. Let *him* head the league of Egypt and of Babylon, of Philistia, of Tyre, and of Ethiopia. He only is worthy." I have spoken!

KING HEZEKIAH *(starting up)*.

Not thou, but Jehovah of Israel. This thing is of the Lord. Now shall Zion be free of the heathen's yoke, and the day of the Lord and His Anointed come indeed. *(To SHEBNA:)* Lodge these lords right nobly. Let Pâdi be bound in the tower of the Corner. I, Hezekiah, assure his custody. Let the treaty with Philistia be made incontinent. Lo, here is my seal; take it, and make the treaty fast. After they have eaten bread, bring them into the house of my precious things, and I will show them that they have not spoken vain words; I will show them the silver and the gold, and all the house of my armour and my munitions, and all that is found in my treasures: there shall be nothing in my house nor in all my dominions that I will not show. Between confederates shall aught be concealed?

EKRONITE (*joyfully*).

'Tis the voice of royal goodness and bounty. (*They make obeisance.*)

SHEBNA.

My most dear liege! (*He kisses Hezekiah's hand, then rapidly escorts the EKRONITES away.*)

ELIAKIM (*deeply troubled*).

But, my lord the king! . . . (*HEZEKIAH is in a trance of radiant delight. ELIAKIM pauses.*) Dear my liege! . . .

SHEBNA (*from the door roughly*).

Let my lord the Secretary come instantly. Behold the royal seal. In the king's name!

(*ELIAKIM solemnly shakes his head and raises his hand in despairing protest. All go out with various expressions of emotion. HEZEKIAH is left alone on his throne, with vision delightfully entranced.*)

Enter ISAIAH. *He is a man of sixty. But though his hair and beard are white as the driven snow, his countenance is unwrinkled. It glows with strength, and his eyes burn with light. He is dressed like a Hebrew noble, but without ostentation.*

ISAIAH (*in a tone of chilling reproach*).

What said these men? And from whence came they unto thee?

KING HEZEKIAH (*looking up with a start*).

They are come from . . .

ISAIAH.

"From a far country, even Babylon?" Or perchance from a near country, even Philistia?

KING HEZEKIAH (*clutching his heart*).

Oh! thy words reopen the old wound, with the echo of thine old rebuke. My bowels—my bowels! My father, canst thou mean, can it be, that I have played the fool a second time? that I have *not* "gone softly all my days because of the bitterness of my soul"? that I am turning the wheel a second time in the same accursed circle?

Deliver me from my pain! Let me hear the word of the Lord, even if it be worse than the worst I fear.

ISAIAH.

Thou hast done foolishly. The word of the Lord hath full oft come to thee by my mouth, by the mouth of Micah the Moreshite, and by the mouths of His servants the prophets, rising early and speaking unto thee: that after that the Lord hath done His perfect work upon Judah and upon Jerusalem by means of the overflowing scourge of the King of Assyria, then shall a remnant turn unto the mighty God, and then shall that remnant be saved: then—but only then. For first shall the Lord God of hosts make a consumption, decreed and determined, in the midst of this land. Hear, therefore, the consumption that is decreed: Your country shall be desolate, your cities burned with fire, your land strangers shall devour in your presence; and the daughter of Zion shall be left as a cottage in a vineyard, as a lodge in a garden of cucumbers, a besieged city. And THEN shall be broken the yoke of thy burden, the staff of thy shoulder, the rod of thy oppressor, as in the day of Midian. For when the Assyrian shall shake his hand against the mount of the daughter of Zion, the hill of Jerusalem, then shall the Lord stir up a scourge for him according to the slaughter of Midian at the rock of Oreb. Then—but only then!

KING HEZEKIAH (*who has been bowing lower and lower*).

And I? Shall these sheep be harried, and I, the false shepherd, escape?

ISAIAH.

Nay, thou, too. Behold, the days are at hand when all that is in thy house, and that which thy fathers have laid up in store until this day, shall be carried away; nothing shall be left, saith the Lord. And of thy sons and daughters that thou hast begotten shall they take away. And they shall make thy sons eunuchs and thy daughters concubines in the palace of the King of Assyria. (HEZEKIAH *groans*.) So shall the iron enter into thy soul. But so shalt thou, with the remnant of Israel, be saved.

KING HEZEKIAH (*raising his head and gazing with noble steadfastness at ISAIAH*).

Good is the word of the Lord: (*after a pause*) for there shall be peace, with truth, at the latter end, in my days. (*He pauses again.*) The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. (*After a pause, to ISAIAH*) And now, bid me recall the seal! Bid me deliver Padi back!

ISAIAH.

Thou canst not. Thou hast chosen thy path and thou must walk it to its evil end. Thou shalt walk it alone. Behold, thou shalt not see my face again until the Day of Shear-Jashúb, when "the Remnant shall Turn" to the Lord our God. Behold, my God beholdeth thee from afar: but—He beholdeth thee.

KING HEZEKIAH.

Oh, my father! Is it not "Immanuel—God with us," with me?

ISAIAH (*with deep sadness and tenderness*).

Not yet. In the Day "when the Remnant Turns." And now, tread the winepress alone; be a man, be courageous. Fulfil all the duties of thine office. Farewell!

KING HEZEKIAH (*with a lamentable voice*).

Be not far from me, my father. Pray for me to the Lord, O my father.

ISAIAH.

God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for thee. In that day thou shalt call for me, and I will come unto thee: the day of the returning to God. Then shall He also return to Israel. Till then, play the man. Farewell. (*He gazes at the stricken king, silently blesses him, and is gone.*)

KING HEZEKIAH.

God of Israel, my God! Art Thou far or near? Is it not both near and far? even as my soul is one burning wound, and yet finds in that wound its peace. (*He springs resolutely to*

his feet.) Let the will of the Lord be done, in its length and in its breadth, its height and its depth! (*He claps his hands.*) Ho there! (*Enter a COURTIER.*) Send hither instantly the Chief Captain of the host, my Master of Munitions, and my Prefect of the Fortifications!

END OF THE PROLOGUE.

ACT I
SCENE I

The same as before. But this time the court is full of feverish bustle and activity. Officials are passing in and out, giving reports and messages, and receiving commissions. KING HEZEKIAH is seated on the throne, with ELIAKIM standing by his side. Other high officials near.

KING HEZEKIAH.

Where is the son of Asaph?

JOAH.

Here am I, my lord the king.

KING HEZEKIAH.

Have I not set thee over all the work that is beyond the walls? Hast thou then stopt the waters of the fountains that are without the city?

JOAH.

There has gathered much people together, my liege, and they have stopt all the fountains and the brook that flows through the midst of the land. As for the spring of Gihon, O king, was not its water brought formerly by thine own providence into the pool of Siloah, by the king's garden, within the City of David?

KING HEZEKIAH.

'Tis well. Why should the King of Assyria come and find much water?

Enter the PREFECT OF FORTIFICATIONS much agitated.

PREFECT.

My lord, the breaches in the wall in the City of David are still many, and there fail me both stone for the building, and men and time for the quarrying thereof.

KING HEZEKIAH.

Take courage: number the houses of Jerusalem, and break down the houses and fortify the wall, and build up all the wall that is broken down, and heighten the towers. Withal, strengthen my citadel in the City of David. But begin with the dwelling-houses that are beyond the walls. Why should they be coigns of vantage for the engines of the Assyrian? Thou son of Asaph, number unto the Prefect these houses: they are in thy province.

JOAH.

Let my own be the first, my liege-lord. Break it.

KING HEZEKIAH.

Bravely said! The Lord build thee an house, thou son of Asaph! (*Exeunt* PREFECT and JOAH.) Come hither, thou Chief of my Captains of War. How speeds it?

CHIEF CAPTAIN.

We have arrayed the host, and have ordered it into bands. These we train, assigning to each its post. As for the Arab auxiliaries whom we have hired, my hope is slender that they will strengthen us. They are fickle and untrained; also, they worship other gods.

KING HEZEKIAH.

What is this? What have we to do with these hirelings? They will be neither help nor profit, but a shame and also a reproach.

CAPTAIN.

The counsel was not mine, nor is not. Thy chief counsellor, Shebna (*HEZEKIAH looks up sternly*), was very urgent—yea, he constrained me. He was ashamed because of the fewness of the archers.

KING HEZEKIAH (*to himself*).

Shebna!

CAPTAIN.

And the Master of the Horse is ashamed because of the fewness of the horses and of the chariots. But we have spoken comfortably to the people, according to thy word, O king, saying: "Be strong and courageous: be not afraid for the King of Assyria, nor for all the multitude that is with him, for there be more with us than with him." Therefore have we given them this day thine old watchword—"IMMANUEL: GOD WITH US!"

(HEZEKIAH'S *face, hitherto calmly cheerful, is suddenly overcast.*)

KING HEZEKIAH.

Aye, my *old* watchword! But *now* . . . ! (*He groans and becomes abstracted.*)

CAPTAIN.

My lord the king?

KING HEZEKIAH.

Thou wast saying——? (*He passes his hand across his brow.*) Thou saidst right well. How took my people my royal message? How is their spirit?

CAPTAIN.

Confident, O king. May an old captain speak freely? Then, *too* confident! Methought their spirit was a thought too light. And, for thy good message, "With us is the Lord of hosts to help us," had the people been heavy it would have come pat to the purpose. But, being light, they were confirmed, indeed . . . but, as it were, in their lightness. (*HEZEKIAH winces.*) Beshrew my tongue! I crave your Majesty's pardon! (*HEZEKIAH motions him away.*)

KING HEZEKIAH (*to ELIAKIM*).

Thou seest! My coin was gold; but the gold being flawed, it sounded as cracked and base as any counterfeit. Oh, in this vice's grip, wherein daily I live, my very good is evil. O misery! (*To the departing CAPTAIN*) Captain! see that the watchword is changed.

KING HEZEKIAH

CAPTAIN.

Change "IMMANUEL"! And the new one, O king?

KING HEZEKIAH.

"GOD'S TRUTH," O Captain! (*The CAPTAIN goes out at a loss.*) Truth, Eliakim! though it sting, though it burn, and burning, heal. Truth!

ELIAKIM.

Endure, O dear my liege! Oh patience!

Enter URIEL, *the Master of the Horse, a flamboyant young nobleman, and* SHEBNA, *elated.*

SHEBNA.

Business of state, great king; white-hot and most glorious. May it please your Majesty to put forth all save your Majesty's privy councillors.

[*At a sign from the KING, exeunt all save* SHEBNA, ELIAKIM, *and* URIEL.

HEZEKIAH (*coldly*).

Say on, thou son of Zeruah!

(*SHEBNA flushes and is confounded.*)

URIEL (*to* SHEBNA).

Joab! Joab, man! King David's great Captain of the Host!

SHEBNA (*recovering*).

My king flatters his poor servant. Listen, my liege. This time thou canst not refuse us of the Egyptian party. The mighty Nubian, Tirhaka, hath sent an embassy from Ethiopia and hath united King Sabako and the Princes of Zoan and Nether Egypt into one front. They offer to draw the main host of Sennacherib on, and meet its shock full on the plain, ere thou comest to Arish on the Wady of Egypt. On condition that thou, from these highlands, shalt but harass his flank. For which purpose he doth promise to send us one thousand horses, and chariots very many . . .

URIEL.

Oh, glorious!

SHEBNA.

. . . for to issue from the vales of Ajalon, of Sorek, and of Elah, and harass them even unto the plain of the Philistines. Nay, performance hath raced a race with promise, and the twain have reached the goal abreast!—for lo, the Egyptian embassy hath arrived, and they have brought with them the horses, in number twice five hundred.

URIEL.

Glorious! Oh, glorious!

VOICES (*without*).

Egypt! Egypt! Egypt for ever!

KING HEZEKIAH.

What is this? Whose plotting hand hath been at work here? Uninvited they had not come on with this insolent parade of confidence. My soul loathes this Egyptian policy. Remember the day of Rafah, when the Assyrian Sargon smote these same Egyptians in the hinder parts, and put them to perpetual shame; and the holy prophet Isaiah spoke against them an oracle. Alliance with Egypt!

ELIAKIM.

Aye, my king, and now also did Isaiah speak in my ears against Egypt, saying . . .

SHEBNA.

Isaiah! (*He contemptuously returns to his subject.*) I crave my liege's exalted attention. Egypt will fight Assyria, whether we strike hands with her or no. May I know, then, the wisdom of affronting her with our backs? The Assyrians will not the more spare us. I may recall to my lord's remembrance one Padi, late of Ekron, now lodged in thy tower of the Corner. And, while we speak of Ekron, I learn from these Egyptians that, as they passed by Ekron, they concluded a pact with thy Majesty's good ally, King Goliath. Behold, here it is. Now a child knoweth that the confederates of the same confederate are likewise confederates one of another. Didst thou speak, my lord the king?

(HEZEKIAH *has been as one on the rack, and SHEBNA, for all his silken courtesy, has been as one who with every sentence gives the rack's lever a turn.*)

KING HEZEKIAH (*with a groaning aside*).

Ah! son of Zeruah, "too hard for me," ah-h!

SHEBNA.

May thy servant conclude? Thy servant confesses that in some slight manner he, as it were, forestalled the—ah!—event, and presumed to prepare the way privily with Sabako for alliance and league, with terms as here engrossed (*giving a parchment*), to which thy servant now craveth his lord's royal seal. (*He turns with an insolent smile to URIEL.*)

KING HEZEKIAH.

Serpent!

VOICES (*without*).

Egypt! Give us the Egyptian alliance!

Other VOICES.

The horses of Egypt and her chariots!

SHEBNA.

Thou seest, O king. Thy people's voice is one. They, not thy poor servant, beg the affixing of thy seal.

VOICES.

The horses of Egypt and her chariots!

HEZEKIAH.

O cunning, and false! Is this thy "privy" matter?

ELIAKIM (*passionately*).

My liege, but a sennight since, Isaiah the son of Amoz spake, "*Woe to the rebellious children, saith the Lord, that walk to go down to Egypt, and have not asked at My mouth. Woe unto them that seek deep to hide their counsel from the Lord, and their works are in the dark, and they say, Who seeth us? Who knoweth us?*" Wilt thou reject the counsel of God's prophet, O my king? That be far from thee!

SHEBNA.

Treason, O king! How should that man know the secret of the Lord's privy councillors? This thing was secret.

ELIAKIM (*with contempt*).

Fool! Thinkest thou to weave one thread of thy web, but my God speaketh of it in the ears of the son of Amoz.

HEZEKIAH.

And traitor to boot! For what treason is as the treason of the privy councillor who had secrets from his *king*? How long, O God of Israel? Eliakim, thou art right—yet wrong! For Isaiah said also in my ears, “Thou hast chosen thy path, and thou must walk in it alone to its evil end.” (*He seizes his seal.*) With one more lie, shall I not hasten that end? Come quickly, O Day of God’s damnation! Lo, this second time I *speed* it (*he seals passionately at the word*); and let the third time be when the Day hath come; for only with its damnation cometh our salvation. But *yours*, my lords (*passionately giving the parchment to SHEBNA*), ye who made and love the lie? I trow not! (*He turns to ELIAKIM.*) I am this day weak, though anointed king, and these men, the sons of Zeruah, be too hard for me. The Lord shall reward the doer of evil for his wickedness. (*He turns with a passionate gesture.*) Forth from my sight ere ye make me mad! (*He clutches ELIAKIM’S hands, convulsed with emotion, averting his gaze from SHEBNA and URIEL, who retire, smiling and shrugging their shoulders.*)

SHEBNA (*as they go, aside to URIEL*).

Celebrate we this day with strong wine to-night! Drink we deep to Egypt and the alliance!

URIEL.

Have with you! Shall wine flow and Uriel be not there?

[*They pass out. ELIAKIM is still holding the king’s agonized hands, and looking down on him with questioning pity and concern.*]

SCENE II

SHEBNA's palace. SHEBNA, URIEL, the Prophet and Chief Priest of Scene I., and many young nobles, drinking in the banqueting-hall. The tables are to the right, and a door at the top of some steps is on the left, opposite the tables. All are flushed and excited, and all are far gone in drink. SHEBNA himself is half-intoxicated, but he leads the revels with vigour from where he reclines, crowned with flowers, in the place of the Ruler of the Feast. Musicians with harp, pipe, tabor, and viol are playing on their dais at the back, adding fuel to the inflamed excitement of the rout.

URIEL (*crowned with flowers, setting down his cup*).

Where's Joah, the little Recorder ?

SHEBNA.

Would have none of it! 'A said the times were too earnest! They had begun upon his house ere sunset. Ha, ha, ha!

URIEL.

There's a fool, to propose his own house for breaking! A pest on all sour faces, say I! But a little and Joah's face will be as long as old Eliakim's. (*Laughter, with groans.*)

THE PROPHET.

Or Isaiah's.

(*Deeper groans.*)

SHEBNA.

How now, reverend sir? That from a guild-brother! Oh, fie! (*General laughter, in which the PROPHET joins himself heartily.*) Drink, nobles and sirs! Drink, my little prophet, and drown all annoys. Fill, fill, ye varlets! (*to the slaves*). Come, drink! Are ye ready? Then—To Egypt and the Alliance!

ALL (*shouting*).

Egypt! Egypt! Long live the Alliance!

SHEBNA.

Long live King Sabako, and the army of Egypt!

ALL.

Sabako—o!

URIEL.

Hurrah for mine uncle Sabako and his gift of a thousand nags and one! Hurrah for the chariots of Judah and the horsemen thereof! Come, give tongue, boys!

ALL.

Long live Uriel! The cavalry of Judah for ever!

URIEL.

Thy blessing, Holiness!

ELEAZAR (*the Chief Priest, with drunken solemnity*).

The Lord bless thee, my son, with thy thousand nags and one. Whereat laughest thou, thou reprobate?

URIEL.

At thee, father! A full cup for his sanctity! Ah, come the day when I and my gallant yeoman shall descend on the Assyrian boars! Shall we not spit them, hey, my Lord Treasurer?

SHEBNA.

At them, gallants! Hah! brave boys!

ALL.

Uriel, Uriel!

URIEL.

And here's to Lord Shebna and his noble Arabs!

ALL.

Shebna! Arabia for ever!

URIEL.

Let them but show nose and we shall see! Ha! (*rising and flourishing as if with a spear*) to snick them and stick them, and snip them and rip them, hanging on to their flanks until thou come even unto the Kishon, while they scamper helter-skelter from noble Sabako's host!

ALL.

Sabako—o—o! Egypt!

SHEBNA.

Drink to Sabako, and the Egyptian league. But say, lads of Jewry, did we not therein steal a long march on the

KING HEZEKIAH

son of Amoz, and on our royal master—God bless him! I promise you it was dark work; I was fain to learn delving in the dark like any mole. Dark work, I say.

PROPHET.

Well delved, Sir Mole! (*Irate*) Didst hear me? I said, Well delved, Sir Mole!

SHEBNA.

I hear thee; I hear everything, my little prophet. And (*lowering his voice*) I'll tell ye a thing more; right infernal counsellors found the mole in those dark galleries. Aha! the wizards that peep and mutter! Aha! the crones with familiar spirits! The denizens of hell! The spirits of the dead! King Saul for me! The witch of Endor was the true prophetess. Saving your reverence (*to the Prophet*), the peeping, muttering shades are more to me than the sons of the prophets, and cost me less, look 'ee, prophet! Long live the dead! Verily he who will cozen the son of Amoz must come with Shebna and agree with Sheol, and strike covenant with Death its lord.

URIEL.

And take refuge in lies, yea in good, strong, sound lies; trust Shebna for that! Long live our noble Treasurer! Down with Isaiah! (*Groans.*) Again lads, again! Isaiah! (*Groans and curses.*)

MICHAIAH (*the Messenger of the Prologue*).

Isaiah! Who's Isaiah? Who is he to treat us men like infants? Are we children that he should teach us knowledge, or babes that he should make us understand doctrine? Curse him! Were we weaned last year?

URIEL.

He despiseth us; he lectureth us like any dominie. (*With grotesque mimicry.*) "See now, children; it is sign-on-sign, sign-on-sign; line-on-line, line-on-line; a jot here, a jot there!" (*A roar of laughter.*)

MICHAIAH.

By Dagon and Baal, 'tis Isaiah to the life! (*He echoes the heavy, equal accents of the words with grotesque rhythm, thumping on the table at each syllable.*) "Sign-on-sign, sign-on-sign;

line-on-line, line-on-line; a jot here, a jot there! (*wagging his head*).

ALL (*with peals of laughter, hammering the tables*).

"Sign-on-sign! line-on-line! a jot here, a jot there!"

ELEAZAR.

By the Lord, a right religious song! It shall to the Chief Musician, as I live! Thus (*he chants, wagging his head*), "Line-on-line, sign-on-sign. . . ."

SHEBNA (*grossly mimicking him*).

"Or Wine-on-wine. . . ."

ALL (*shouting the tune*).

Hear him! "Wine-on-wine!"

PROPHET (*to everybody*).

Mark you, he said "Wine-on-wine," not "Line." Hath changed but a single letter, and he has "Wine"! An excellent quip, in faith. "Wine," quothun, not "line"—ha, ha, ha—'tis a merry fellow! "Wine!" Uriel, dost take him? "Wine-on-wine"—what we're e'en drinking!

URIEL.

The seer hath seen a thing, and prophesied to boot. (*Ironical laughter and applause.*) "A jot here" for his reverence! (*He fills the Prophet's cup.*)

MICHAIAH.

"A pot here, a pot there!"

(*Roars of laughter and applause again.*)

PROPHET.

Hark again, my lord! Hath altered the word, thus, as it were, as one should say—By my life, I know not what one should say!

URIEL.

Prophet, cease prophesying! Fill the pots, ye varlets! "Nine-times-nine," ha, ha! Isaiah! Burn him, I say!

SHEBNA.

To-morrow shall burn—no, shall hang—no, shall be sawn in sunder—shall . . . What pranks have those lads forward there? Have at it, brave lads!

(The whole hall is in uproar; some of the younger lords, headed by MICHAIAH, have risen and linked arms; they stagger across the hall in step.)

MICHAIAH.

Like this, Uriel *(they stamp out the former rhythm, singing)*: “Step-by-step; line-on-line.” . . . Now back again across the hall, come along!

URIEL.

Nay, leave not Uriel out of the jest. Come, dance we to Sheol and to Death; sing we the son of Amoz's new psalm in the new moon. Sing, ye others, while we dance! Mark us the time, Sir Priest, and sing with thy sons of Asaph till ye burst! Bang us it out, ye others! Now, musicians, strike up!

(He joins himself to the linked rank in the stamping dance across the floor, with extravagance yet more grotesque. SHEBNA, with enormous gesticulations, gives the time, imitated by the Priest. Those at the benches sing and thump out the rhythm. The din, mingled with the frantic playing of the musicians and the screams of laughter, reaches a climax.)

ALL.

“Sign-on-SIGN, sign-on-SIGN! Line-on-LINE, line-on-LINE! A jot HERE——”

(The line of dancers have reached the steps on the left. ISAIAH is suddenly perceived. He has been standing for some moments in the doorway at the top of the steps watching. They are brought up sharp, staring at the motionless figure. The noise dies down suddenly, then ceases utterly. The line of petrified dancers loose arms and reel backwards to the tables, where they stand, transfixed. SHEBNA supports himself against the wall on the right, where he remains, unable to withdraw his staring gaze. A deadly silence.)

ISAIAH.

What, sobered? (*with burning contempt*). Hear then, O ye drunkards of Ephraim, the word of the Lord. Woe unto them that seek deep to hide their counsel from Jehovah, and their works are in the dark; that say, Who seeth us? and Who knoweth us? Fools! O ye brutish among the people: He that hath planted the ear, shall He not hear? Hear, therefore, ye who through wine have erred, and through strong drink are out of the way; ye priests and ye prophets that are swallowed up of wine, erring in vision, stumbling in judgment. Faugh! your tables are full of vomit and filthiness, so that there is no place clean. . . . Listen: "Whom shall He teach knowledge, and whom shall He make to understand doctrine?" Even you! For the word of the Lord is unto you: "SIGN-ON-SIGN (*with unflinching emphasis equal to theirs*), SIGN-ON-SIGN; LINE-ON-LINE, LINE-ON-LINE; A JOT HERE, A JOT THERE—THAT YE MAY GO, AND FALL BACKWARD, AND BE BROKEN, AND SNARED, AND TAKEN!" (*The Priest and the Prophet fall forward, one after the other, among the cups with a startling clatter. No one moves an inch.*) Wherefore, hear the word of Jehovah, ye scornful men that rule this people which is in Jerusalem. Because ye have said, "We have made a covenant with Death, and with Hell are we in agreement; we have made lies our refuge, and under falsehood have we hid ourselves, and therefore, when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, it shall not come to us!" Therefore, thus saith the Lord your God, your refuge of lies, the hail shall sweep it away, and your hiding-places, the water shall overflow them. And your covenant with Death shall be disannulled, and your agreement with Hell shall not stand; and when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, know that it is YE that shall be trodden down by it.

URIEL.

How elude the arrow of his word, speeding at me from his mouth? Ah, it hath struck me here! (*He claps hands to eyes, and sits down heavily.*)

ISAIAH (*fixing his eyes on URIEL*).

And when the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, said: "In returning and rest shall ye be saved," ye said: "No,

but we will flee upon horses"; therefore *shall ye flee!* And "we will ride upon the swift;" therefore shall they that pursue you be swift! The one-thousand of you shall flee at the rebuke of one; at the rebuke of five shall ye flee away, saith the Lord. . . . (*He pauses.*) Now therefore be wise, O ye drunkards of Ephraim, ere the Lord of hosts do His work, His strange work, and bring to pass His act—His strange act. For I have heard from the Lord of hosts a consumption, even determined upon the whole earth. And because I do this unto thee, prepare to meet thy God, O Israel! (*They hide their faces in their garments. SHEBNA alone remains staring at ISALIAH. ISALIAH turns to him with fury.*) As for thee—thee, thou mighty to drink wine, to mingle strong drink; thou who grindest the face of the poor and beatest my people to pieces, and takest away the judgment of the innocent; that callest evil good and good evil; that puttest darkness for light and light for darkness; that puttest bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter. Thus hath the Lord of hosts said unto me, thou son of—No-one: "Go, get thee unto this Treasurer, even unto Shebna, which is over the household, and say unto him: What hast *thou* here, whom hast *thou* here, that thou hast hewed thee a sepulchre *here*; that gravest an habitation for thyself in a rock! Behold the Lord will carry thee away captive with a mighty captivity, yea, He will lay fast hold on thee, and wind thee round and round like a ball, and (*with a terrible gesture*) violently hurl thee into a large country. There shalt thou . . . die!

(*A panic seizes on the whole company. They rush out with exclamations of dismay. ISALIAH has disappeared. SHEBNA, the spell on him released, staggers wildly forward.*)

SHEBNA.

Death! Traitor! Lay hands on that man!

(*He is transfixed, gazing at vacancy. All have departed; only URIEL remains with his hands over his eyes; and the PROPHET and PRIEST, fallen motionless among the cups.*)

END OF ACT I.

ACT II

SCENE I

The open space within the western gate. HEZEKIAH seated, surveying a great bustle of military activity and business. Enter SHEBNA elated.

SHEBNA.

All goes to admiration, my liege-lord. The city could sustain a siege as Tyre herself. The people reckes naught, neither of danger nor of privation. Our northern scouts bring tidings that the Assyrians advance in force; our southern, that the Egyptians advance to meet them on the Philistine plain. The Master of the Horse leads your Majesty's horsemen this day to the hill-passes, either to harass the foe's left flank, or to effect instant junction with our noble ally. They are in marvellous trim.

(A trumpet without.)

Enter URIEL, also elated.

URIEL.

My king's blessing! This moment we quit the city for the passes to the plain.

KING HEZEKIAH.

What blessing is in me? Did my father David bless Joab and Abishai, the sons of Zeruiah? *(He is speaking coldly, but also mechanically, for his gaze is fixed upon the gate.)* Who are these?

(The other two turn and gaze through the portal.)

SHEBNA *(annoyed)*.

These, my lord? Refugees, naught else; mere refugees; refugees! *(disgusted)*.

URIEL.

They flow like a stenching drain into the city. Out on them! Are we a cesspool? The King of Assyria might have them for aught I care! (HEZEKIAH makes an indignant motion, but URIEL's gaze is averted. He turns.) I crave my king's permission and his blessing.

HEZEKIAH (*sternly*).

Stand aside!

(URIEL and SHEBNA impatiently stand apart, and watch what follows, yawning and impatient. The refugees appear within the gate, a dolorous procession. They bear bundles and poor relics of household stuff. Mothers are carrying infants, and the smaller children are carried astride on the shoulders of the men and women, on whose heads the little heads have dropped asleep. All are dusty, draggled, weary, and in despair. As they catch sight of the KING, the women break into shrill, the men into deeper, lamentation.)

VOICES.

Ai, Shepherd of Israel! Ai, our father! Ai, ai!

SHEBNA (*starting forward*).

Silence, base herd! The king has no time for you, nor ears for your puling!

KING HEZEKIAH (*with a terrible gesture*).

Silence thou, O mine enemy (*in a low voice, then louder*). Bring them hither to me. (SHEBNA shrugs his shoulders and brings the leader of the band.) Ye are wearied, my children; sit ye down and rest awhile. (Attendants constrain them to sit on the ground in a half-circle before the KING. Their spokesman remains standing.) Tell me all, my son.

FIRST COUNTRYMAN.

O son of David, 'tis a tale grieves me to tell and thee to hear. Or ever we were aware of the Assyrians, their scouts were spied riding up our valley, the main host being yet no further than Megiddo—thus have we since heard. Remained naught but to fly to the hill, scarce taking our lives as a prey. Ay me! and we must leave the very aged to the wild beasts. From Beth-Horon we saw the monsters fire

the village—our dear, sweet village in Ajalon Vale, and when those aged ones came to the doors, they were speared back into the flames. Ah! and we heard their shrieks up the hillside!
(*A burst of lamentation from all.*)

KING HEZEKIAH (*to SHEBNA, forcing down his emotion*).

Let them be lodged and cared for. Be comforted, O my children, the Lord's mercies are very great. I also am in a great strait with you.

FIRST COUNTRYMAN.

O son of David, when *thou* speakest comfortably to us we can bear this, and more than this also.

[*They are conducted out by SHEBNA.*]

KING HEZEKIAH.

O noble! Lo, the son of David has sinned and done wickedly; but these sheep, what have they done? Let Thy hand, I pray Thee, be against me, and against my father's house; but spare these—spare these!

SHEBNA (*re-entering*).

War! my liege-lord, war! What wouldest thou? As touching the things of moment, all goes famously (*rubbing his hands*). The Assyrian wolf is nosing into our baited trap. And *now*, O king, perchance it may be deemed worth the king's time to give audience and farewell to the king's Master of Horse!

(*URIEL comes forward.*)

KING HEZEKIAH.

Go! prosper as thou deservest.

URIEL (*delighted*).

Your Majesty does me too much honour!

KING HEZEKIAH.

Go; and the Lord have mercy on us all!

(*He motions him away, and URIEL makes a low obeisance.*)

URIEL *to* SHEBNA.

Farewell, dear my lord. Long live fresh, frolicsome war!
Woe to the vanquished!

KING HEZEKIAH

SHEBNA (*conducting him to the door*).

Ha! smite me through their hairy scalps, Captain; smite!

URIEL

Nay, trust me for that!

(*He goes out; immediately there is a great shout outside.*)

VOICES

Uriel! The horses of Israel and the chariots thereof!

(*SHEBNA waves exultingly. The KING has not once moved.*)

SCENE II

The roof of the Citadel, above the western gate. Night. The solitary figure of a sentinel in a small turret looms dark against the dim starlight.

SENTINEL (*chanting*).

“‘ Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night?’ The morning cometh, and also the night! If ye will enquire, enquire ye. Turn ye: come!” ’Twas Isaiah the prophet who read me that rede.

Enter KING HEZEKIAH with ELIAKIM, SHEBNA, and the CHIEF-CAPTAIN.

KING HEZEKIAH,

Watchman, what of the night? (*He goes straight to the parapet and looks out.*) Ah, dreadful! Those baleful fires again? More again to-night?

SENTINEL.

The Lord be the defence of His anointed! Five more fenced cites of Judah fired this night (*pointing from west to north*). Lo, where they have made of Mizpeh a beacon on its heights! Beside what is behind the Mount of Olives eastwards; behold the red glare; and southwards there the flaring towards Bethlehem also.

KING HEZEKIAH.

They be everywhere, Eliakim! Aye, 'tis even as the son of Amoz said: Our cities burned with fire; and the Daughter of Zion left as a cottage in a vineyard, as a lodge in a garden of cucumbers, as a besieged city. Ay, verily, unless the Lord of hosts had left unto us a very small remnant, we . . . Another! Lo there! Another fiery dart shot through Hezekiah's heart! . . . But, in God's name, Eliakim, where makest thou that blaze?

ELIAKIM (*with consternation*).

As God liveth, O king, that must be Eleph! 'Tis not a league from this western gate! As it were a torch brandished in our very faces! beneath our very walls!

KING HEZEKIAH.

What doth this portend? My spirit within me misgiveth me.

SHEBNA (*at the other side, to CAPTAIN*).

War, Captain, war, what wouldst thou? Grievous, doubtless; but the price we pay for the immunity of Zion. Is aught in this world without price? While they waste their strength on these hovels, Jerusalem stands impregnable, and presently Sabako will smite them once on the seaward plain—once, nor smite again.

CAPTAIN.

Would God I thought so! If thou knewest what I know!

SHEBNA (*sneering*).

Art thou Captain of the Lord's Host? Well, well, since the Lord hath spared to give thee courage, put thy trust like Shebna in Egypt, her chariots and her horses.

Enter a Trooper suddenly, in extremest exhaustion and emotion.

TROOPER.

Which of ye is my lord the king? Oh, let the king pardon a messenger of ill! O day of shame! Woe's me!

ALL.

What sayest thou?

TROOPER.

Uriel's horse! Destroyed! and would it were with honour! Foully disgraced!

ALL.

Ah!

TROOPER.

The battle that decides all was joined at dawn, in the field of Eltekeh. 'Tis Egypt or Assyria this day! But ere they fell to, the horsemen on the hither flanks came together—theirs and ours. Ai, ai, ai, how shall I say what befel? A spirit of fearfulness seized on Uriel and his lieutenants—they fled from the field, and they that pursued them were swift. Then we too, being shepherdless, broke and scattered without a blow struck—pursued, hunted down, ridden through, hacked, stamped into the earth like vermin . . . the rest surrendering cowardly. I alone cut my way through. I eluded the bands in the hill-passes and am come hither, I alone, to tell the evil tale. Woe worth the day!

(He reels ; ELIAKIM supports him.)

KING HEZEKIAH.

Shamed! Come death, but not black shame!

CAPTAIN.

Uriel! Ah, the peacock! Ah, the strutting popinjay
Doth this surprise you?

KING HEZEKIAH.

Shamed! O City of God!

SHEBNA.

Verily, Captain, we knew him, thou and I. In truth an affair of pickets, ere Sabako strikes the blow that ends all. God's life, fellow, stand upright: leave whining and tell us, what of the main hosts?

TROOPER *(half fainting.)*

They were arrayed over against Eltekeh. Multitudes.
Twas a fearful sight. I know naught more.

SHEBNA *(striking him furiously).*

Fool!

ELIAKIM.

Art not ashamed? Peace! (*To Trooper*) Depart!
thou hast played the man; the Lord be with thee!

[*Exit Trooper.*]

SHEBNA.

I tell you Egypt will carry it! They cannot choose but
carry it! It is not possible but that Egypt will carry it!

(*A trumpet call below.*)

CAPTAIN.

That is no Judean note. As the Lord God liveth, and as
thy soul liveth, O king, there sounded an Assyrian trump!

ALL.

Assyrian! At the gate!

(*A loud lamentation breaks out below.*)

KING HEZEKIAH.

Hark! what wail they? Oh, this stress will kill me!

Enter JOAH, distraught.

JOAH.

Lost! lost! all lost! Ah-h!

SHEBNA.

God forbid! What's lost? Thou misbegotten fool,
what's lost? It cannot be.

KING HEZEKIAH.

Speak, and speak quickly; the worst!

JOAH (*to the KING*).

Judge thou, my lord the king. An Assyrian captain of
ten thousand is at the gate, with a great troop of horse.
They have ridden in hot haste from the field of Eltekeh. He
demandeth safe-conduct to thy presence with Sennacherib's
terms. For the Egyptians broke and fled! (*A dreadful cry
from all present.*) And the Assyrians are pursuing them, and
smiting them in their hinder parts even unto Rafah and the
Wady. Egypt no more is. There is no longer in all the
world a power save the King of Assyria. The day is lost,
and we with it—lost!

SHEBNA (*raving wildly*).

Liar and slave! a villain Assyrian trick! A lying, cozening Assyrian spy is at the gate. My lord the king, command the Arab archers. . . .

JOAH.

O my liege, bid this blasphemer hold his peace, while thou hearest the full verification of the thing. Uriel is with them! Ay, and with him five Chief-Captains of the Egyptians! 'Twas Uriel himself, and these Egyptian lords, verified unto us the Assyrian's word, ere—ere—how shall I say it?—ere the Assyrian . . . struck out his eyes with his spear-point in the sight of all the people on the walls and in the gate, he kneeling before him in the dust. His eyes and face run streaming with blood. And the monsters have pierced their noses, their lips, their tongues with hooks, and hale them with a cord like cattle, the while they insolently demand admittance.

SHEBNA (*madly*).

Admittance, thou coward! Why didst thou not shoot the fellow like a dog? (*He raves up and down.*)

JOAH (*furiously*).

Thou foreign curse! Thine Arabs, thy villain Arabs! When they saw the game was lost they mutinied . . .

CAPTAIN.

Ha! what said I?

JOAH.

And *they* demand a safe-conduct for this Assyrian envoy, that he may present the King Sennacherib's terms, so that we resist no more. Yea, and the people will have it so.

(*SHEBNA remains staring, as one in horrible amaze.*)

KING HEZEKIAH.

And the people will have it so! Then have it so they *shall*, to their shame! Admit him that we may hear his rede. But I beseech thee, son of Asaph, blind not these our eyes with the horror thou hast spoken of—make shift to leave those sons of misery below. (*Exit JOAH.*) To me, Captain, listen! Jerusalem must be saved, and *shall* be. Isaiah, the prophet of God, hath pledged me this. And we have been

prepared for this strait these two years past. Let the heathen Arabs join themselves unto the heathen Assyrians; then let us resist their will for ever.

CAPTAIN.

My liege, the fortifications have been prepared, the munitions, the water, the victuals. But *we* are unprepared to this hour. Is this a time for aught save the naked truth? I say to thee, the heart of this people is rotten. They will fail thee, King. Didst thou not hear Joah's word? The King of Assyria will pull them down like a medlar. Lo now! what hearest thou? (*Hysterical laughter without.*) Villain laughter! And to-night! (*They listen.*)

VOICES (*from the house-tops on the right*).

Blaspheme God and the king!

(*Laughter again, with clamour.*)

OTHER VOICES (*on the house-tops on the left, distant*).

Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow . . . we d-i-e!

CAPTAIN.

With these shall we defend the City of God? Cursed be the day that I was born!

ELIAKIM.

Oh, may I die this night!

KING HEZEKIAH.

It is enough. Well said the prophet Isaiah, "The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint: from the sole of the foot to the crown of the head there is nothing but wounds and festering sores." My shame! shame deep as the abyss, everlasting! Come, make an end. We must grant them any terms, so we save the city herself. Go, hasten him hither. (*Exeunt CAPTAIN and ELIAKIM.*) O God! how long! Is this the Day of the Return to thee? That laughter of hell! . . . How now, thou Shebna! He is bemused. Ah, thou that wouldst trust in Egypt rather than in the living God, where is now thine Egypt? Alas! and thou, O king, where is now thy God? (*He bows low, covering his face.*)

SENTINEL (*above*).

"The morning cometh, and also the night; if ye will enquire ye, enquire ye: turn ye, come."

KING HEZEKIAH (*raising himself*).

I turn! I turn! I come! Look upon me this night, a lonely and desolate man, O Thou God.

Enter JOAH and ELIAKIM and the CAPTAIN with the Assyrian Envoys.

CHIEF ENVOY.

Which is your master? That slave there? Hear my lord's word to thee, thou rebel. "Thy head is in the noose, thou rebel Hezekiah. Of thy fenced towns, fortresses, and small cities, two score have I cast down and burned with fire. Two hundred thousand of thy subjects, young and old, male and female, and horses, mules, asses and camels, oxen and sheep, without number, I have brought from these, I have counted as spoil. Thyself have I shut up like a caged bird in Jerusalem, thy royal city." Dost thou hear, thou rebel slave? Art thou not overwhelmed by the fear of the brightness of my lord's lordship? How, then, shalt thou resist his might? Accept his terms, nor seek to chaffer, thou mean Canaanite, if thou wouldest save skin and city. Behold, then, my lord's terms. He saith, "King Padi must be surrendered to me this night. Thy territory shall be minished, for thy cities which I have plundered shall be separated from thy land and given to loyal kings. To the former tribute, paid yearly, shall be added the tribute of alliance. Moreover, 30 talents of gold, 800 talents of silver, precious stones, and a heavy treasure shalt thou pay. And thy daughters and the women of thy palace shalt thou instantly deliver up for concubines, thy sons for eunuchs, thy young men and thy young women to be sent to Nineveh, the city of my lordship."

(At each clause the lords have been manifesting their consternation and dismay. HEZEKIAH has laid an iron hand on his emotion, which the last sentences break through.)

KING HEZEKIAH (*with a bitter cry*).

Isaiah! Thou saidst it! Ai-i!

ENVOY.

Accept these to the last jot and tittle, and to-night, and thou savest city and skin. What! heardst not what my lord did with that rebel king of Ekron? How he laid him naked before the gate of his own city, in the sight of all his people, and tore his skin off him alive? Aha! for half the work he bore the torment in silence, but thereafter his screaming was heard in the utmost parts of his city. Bethink thee, then.

KING HEZEKIAH (*lifting his head, and looking steadfastly at Envoy*).

I have offended. Let my lord do thus with me. Only spare these my innocent sheep!

ENVOY.

No more of that (*brutally*). Thou mayst thank thy god that my master is in greater need of gold to pay his men, and of woman-flesh for himself and his lords, than for thy bloody hide, and that for these thou mayst keep thy royal skin and thy royal city. Lo, the first light of dawn behind the mountain there, if it be not haply one of the flares that we have lit. I give thee till the rising of the sun for thy reply. Afford me safe-conduct now to without the gate.

(*He is escorted out. The ministers gather hurriedly round the KING.*)

ELIAKIM (*to the stricken KING*).

O beloved master, thou must accept even—this price—for Zion!

JOAH.

For Zion's sake, not our own, nor thine!

CAPTAIN.

The gold will save this City of God!—her own people cannot—will not.

SHEBNA.

Gold, the only way.

KING HEZEKIAH.

Gold? Is this the Day of the Return? Is this the day of Immanuel? No, but a foulest night of sin and shame;

the filling up of the full cup of our filthiness, that I may drink it, I and my people, down to the unclean dregs. Come, let us drink the cup, so I hasten the dawning of the morn of our salvation. My lord Treasurer (*markedly turning from SHEBNA to ELIAKIM, while SHEBNA hides his face*), whether is the greater—the Temple of the Lord's House, or the gold of the Temple? Give him all the silver and gold that is found in the House of the Lord, and in the treasury of my palace. Cut the gold from the doors of the Temple of the Lord, and from the pillars which Hezekiah did overlay; give it to the King of Assyria. And thou, O Captain of the Host, call the people to prayer and to repentance in sackcloth and ashes. My lord Recorder (*to JOAH*), thou knowest what must be done in the palace below, ere sunrise. Acquaint my sons (*his voice trembles, then chokes*) . . . and my daughters . . . ah, my little Tamar!

(*He is convulsed; he throws himself on to a battlement, his whole frame shaken. The lords gather round him in anguished sympathy.*)

CAPTAIN.

His anguish is greater than he can bear.

ELIAKIM.

Oh, hush!

SHEBNA (*kneeling*).

I return my lord the seal of office. I repent; behold, I know that with Egypt's fall I fall. Yet shame me not, I pray thee, before the people.

KING HEZEKIAH (*restraining himself with a terrible effort*).

Fill the son of Hilkiah's post as Secretary: for what have I done unto thee? Thou hast thy cup of dishonour, I mine. (*He takes the seal from SHEBNA and gives it to ELIAKIM.*) Lo, a third time I give my seal to a bond of infamy and woe, the last ere the Day of the Lord, when the remnant shall turn to the Holy and Living God. Go, write: "Hezekiah to the King of Assyria: I have offended; what thou putteth on me I will bear." Oh, go, my lords, and leave me to tread the winepress of the wrath of God alone.

(*They go out, their faces buried in their robes. A dreary dawn is extinguishing the stars. A hot gust of*

sirocco sweeps suddenly across the city, rattling the dry leaves of the trees in the court below.)

KING HEZEKIAH (*kneeling, suddenly with hands strained upwards*).

Hezekiah to the King of Kings! I have offended. That which Thou hast put upon me I will bear.

(He droops lower and lower.)

SENTINEL.

"The morning is come. And also the night."

(The loud wailing of women is suddenly heard in the palace below.)

KING HEZEKIAH (*with a loud cry*).

Ah-h-h! *(He falls prone upon his face.)*

SCENE III

The same. The sun has risen. HEZEKIAH has disappeared, and the SENTINEL is now pacing the platform. A confused sound of many voices pervades the air.

Enter ISAIAH. He hastens eagerly to the SENTINEL.

ISAIAH.

Watchman! O my disciple! Hath the Day dawned for Zion? Have her shadows fled away?

SENTINEL.

Alas! my master, it is even according to that word of thine: "The morning cometh, and also the night," for they enquire not, neither turn, nor come.

ISAIAH.

God forbid!

WATCHMAN (*pointing to the east*).

Thou seest the sun hath hidden his face in foul clouds of dust, that he may not look down on the sight that I now show thee. *(He draws ISAIAH to the parapet.)* Lo, on every roof-top; lo, there, and there, and there!—rejoicing and

revelry ; laughter as of the shades of hell, when they crowd to drink the blood of an unclean sacrifice. Out on them !

(The confused hum of voices, mixed with the low, rhythmical thrumming of tambourines, swells louder, and distant shouts and laughter break through it audibly.)

VOICES *(confusedly)*.

Saved ! Laugh and rejoice ! Neighbours, rejoice !

OTHER VOICES.

Have with you, neighbours ! "Sign-on-sign !"

(Laughter.)

VOICES *(from all round, louder)*.

"Line-on-line !"

(Peal after peal of laughter. This suddenly dies away, and the low thrumming and hum continues.)

ISAIAH.

Is it possible ?

SENTINEL.

They are clean beside themselves. An unclean spirit hath possessed them. Woe unto them !

VOICES.

Gone is the foe ! Rejoice, O Zion !

OTHER VOICES.

Long live the nation ! Long live the peace !

(The thrumming and the voices swell out.)

ISAIAH.

Peace ! the peace of Sodom and Gomorrah ! Ha, I will stand upon my watch-tower and set me to see what the Lord will say concerning this people.

(He ascends the turret, and stands silhouetted against the tawny-yellow sky. He gazes fixedly into the heavens, motionless, with arms upraised over the city, the back of his hands turned outwards. The festive noises continue without ceasing. Then suddenly the rapt prophetic voice rings out clearly above all.)

ISAIAH.

What aileth thee that thou art wholly gone up to the house-tops, thou that art full of stirs, a tumultuous city, a joyous city? Yet thy slain were not slain with the sword, or dead in battle. All thy rulers fled together; all that were found of thee were bound together, they fled afar off. Therefore I say, Look away from me, I will weep bitterly; labour not to comfort me, for the spoiling of the daughter of my people. (*He suddenly covers his face with his mantle and weeps, agonized. He resumes his former attitude.*) For it is a day of discomfiture and of treading down and of perplexity from the Lord, the Lord of Hosts; a breaking down of the walls and a crying to the mountains. For lo, to-day, even this day, doth the Lord, the Lord of Hosts, call to weeping and to mourning and to baldness and to girding with sackcloth; and behold! joy and gladness, slaying oxen and killing sheep, eating flesh and drinking wine.

(The thrumming of the tambourines, the voices and laughter, increase; and then on the wind there is borne, distant, but with the distinctness of many voices, the refrain of the night before—)

VOICES.

LET US EAT AND DRINK, FOR TO-MORROW WE DIE-E-E-E!

(The unholy laughter breaks out again.)

ISAIAH *(with a passionate gesture of denunciation.)*

Therefore it was revealed in mine ears by the Lord of Hosts, "SURELY THIS INIQUITY SHALL NOT BE PURGED AWAY FROM YOU TILL YE DIE."

(The noise suddenly ebbs and ceases. In the silence ISAIAH remains with outstretched arms as before. His disciple remains with eyes riveted in anguished concern on his master. The sound of lamentation suddenly breaks out again from the palace below.)

END OF ACT II.

ACT III

SCENE I

Jerusalem, as in the Prologue.

KING HEZEKIAH.

“The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.” Thou art safe, O City of God, and that is all; safe, not saved. By the Lord’s mercies we are not consumed; we are not dead, yet we have not life. For the remnant hath not turned unto God, and God hath not turned His face unto us. He is silent and Isaiah gives no sign. How long, O Lord? Turn us again, O Lord God of Hosts; cause Thy face to shine and we shall be saved!

Enter in greatest haste ELIAKIM, SHEBNA, JOAH, and the

CHIEF-CAPTAIN.

ELIAKIM.

Treason, my lord the king! treason, oh, foul!

JOAH.

The heavens fall!

SHEBNA.

Death and ruin!

KING HEZEKIAH.

How say ye?

ELIAKIM (*frantic*).

The Assyrians are returned!

(They beat their heads and breasts.)

KING HEZEKIAH (*starting up as if stung*).

It cannot be! The treaty! the treaty! which cost us our bodies, yea, our souls! which was signed in ink distilled from my heart-blood—the treaty stands between us!

SHEBNA.

Said we not treason, foul treason? Villains! Villains!

CAPTAIN.

My lord the king, we are giving thee the story tail-first. It is true an Assyrian power stands without the gate, and their appearance augurs nothing good. But we as yet know not what is the matter; for their officers refuse to say aught. They are standing by the conduit of the upper pool, in Fuller's-Field-Road, and they call upon thee, O king!

KING HEZEKIAH.

Who be they?

CAPTAIN.

The Tartan, their chief Commander; the Rabsaris, Chief of the Eunuchs; and the Rabshakeh, Chief of the Cup-bearers: one soldier with two politicals. 'Ware two dog-foxes, O king!

ELIAKIM.

If they were to forswear the treaty!—but no, the Lord God is in heaven.

JOAH.

Perjury! Is't possible, ye treacherous dealers?

SHEBNA.

We should be undone, undone! Death, ruin, destruction, the horror of great darkness, the blackness of Sheol and the pit for ever!

CAPTAIN.

Aye, we have shot our last bolt, even our last within the quiver; our quiver is empty.

KING HEZEKIAH.

No! (*they all turn and stare*). For *then* should the Lord God abide alone, and to Him alone should we be shut up, both we and the whole people. Oh, calm yourselves then, my lords. You, my ministers of state, go forth to meet these Assyrians under safe-conduct. Captain, thy place is on the wall, where the people will congregate, crowding to see and hear what passes. Command them in the king's name that they keep silence; lo, I command most straitly that they

answer not a word. I go up to the House of the Lord; there will I await you. Go! and God be our help and strength, a very present help in this hour of trouble!

[Exeunt the KING by one door, and the lords by another, with gestures of dismay.]

SCENE II

Before the walls. By the conduit stand the TARTAN, the RABSARIS, and the RABSHAKEH, with a group of officers.

TARTAN.

Give them the smooth and also the rough of thy tongue, my lord; spare them not.

THE RABSHAKEH.

Nay, trust me for that! Lo you now, the people like ants upon the wall.

TARTAN.

We look to thee to effect their surrender of this city. Thou knowest this force is but a threat to put them into fear. Our lord the king needeth it for the containing of Libnah and of Lachish, the while he presseth on to devour Egypt with a devouring. For which same cause he fears to leave this fortress and nation unsubdued, a danger in his rear.

THE RABSHAKEH.

Tush, they are as weak as a woman an hour after child-birth! With one puff I can blow this Hezekiah down to the ground.

OFFICERS (*laughing*).

Hear him! Rabshakeh of the silken tongue.

THE RABSARIS.

Silken! Give them its rasp, my lord. Show us some sport.

TARTAN.

Lo, the ministers of King Hezekiah.

Enter ELIAKIM, SHEBNA, JOAH. Silently and gloomily they range themselves in such a manner that the Assyrian party is somewhat turned from the city wall.

TARTAN.

So! Which of you bears the King's seal? Which of you is over the Household?

ELIAKIM.

I am, O Tartan: Eliakim, son of Hilkiah.

TARTAN (*delivering a letter*).

Take this letter from our lord to your master. But first, my Lord of the Cup-bearers hath a word or two for you, mean lords of Jewry, by way of commentary on the text.

RABSHAKEH (*advancing while the other lords stand apart*).

Listen well, ye lordlings, to my rede. Say ye now to Hezekiah, "Thus saith the great lord, the King of Assyria, What confidence is this in which thou trustest? Thou sayest, but they are vain words, There is counsel and strength for war. Now, then, on whom dost thou trust that thou hast rebelled against me?"

ELIAKIM (*in indignant protest*).

The treaty! the treaty is between us! Our lord, after his submission, hath rebelled not at all.

RABSHAKEH.

Thou dog of Jewry! Thy master hath not rebelled? Whence then these shut gates, yon horrid parade of war?

ELIAKIM.

In common prudence, my lord! Your armed and menacing presence before our gates. . . .

RABSHAKEH (*thundering*).

Ye lie, false Jews! Treason! The treaty is between us? Lo, it was a treaty (*producing the bond, then tearing it with utmost violence*), and now—two shreds of parchment!

(*He flings the pieces violently to the ground.*)

THE THREE JEWS (*with one voice and gesture of horror*).
Ah!

TARTAN (*aside to the rest*).
The wolf and the lamb in very life!

A LORD.
And the wolf's stage-wrath, how magisterial it is!

RABSHAKEH (*in his former tones*).
And now pleaseth it to return to the former starting-point? On whom art thou trusting, false, rebellious Hezekiah? Now behold thou trustest, perchance, on this bruised reed, even upon Egypt, whereon if a man lean it will go into his hand and pierce it; so is Pharaoh, King of Egypt, to all who trust in him. Remember Eltekeh!

TARTAN.
Pinked again! Didst thou mark the fat one? (*indicating Shebna*).

RABSHAKEH.
Not Egypt, hey? Mayhap, then, ye say unto me, "We trust in Jehovah our God." Is not he that Jehovah whose high places and whose altars Hezekiah hath taken away, and hath said to Judah and to Jerusalem, "Ye shall worship before His altar at Jerusalem"?

(*He pauses to let his words take effect, and strolls carelessly towards the others.*)

SHEBNA (*to JOAH*).
Hearst thou that?

JOAH (*uncomfortably*).
The serpent!

RABSARIS (*to RABSHAKEH*).
I'll warrant there's a thrust they not expected! My lord, 'tis beyond applause!

RABSHAKEH.
Nay, did I well? So now, mark you again! (*Returning with careless insolence and resuming*) Now, therefore, I pray thee, good Hezekiah, give pledges to my master, the King of Assyria, and I will give thee—ahem!—two thousand horses

if thou be able on thy part . . . to set riders upon them!
Ha! ha! ha!

ALL THE LORDS (*with a shout of laughter*).

Uriel! Uriel and his thousand! Oh, unkind! Oh, very unkind! Ha! ha! ha!

(*They hold on to one another, laughing consumedly.*)

RABSARIS.

By Asshur, a shrewd thrust! Ha! ha! ha!

TARTAN.

A cruel cut, by the gods! Lo, he hath shamed them abominably.

(*The Jewish ministers have hung their heads and clenched their hands.*)

RABSHAKEH.

Ha! ye take me? How, then, can ye turn away the face of one captain of the least of my lord's officers and put thy trust in Egypt for chariots and horsemen?

SHEBNA AND JOAH.

Oh, intolerable!

RABSHAKEH (*suddenly and sharply raising his voice*).

Come now, listen! My lord saith, "Am I now come up without Jehovah against this place? (*Very loud.*) Why, 'twas JEHOVAH said to me, Go up against this land and destroy it!"

(*An astonishing commotion is instantly caused by these words. ELIAKIM, SHEBNA, and JOAH, as though stung, suddenly start forward, and with hurried agitation intervene. A thrill is palpable on the walls; a low moan is heard. The Assyrians are beside themselves with delight.*)

LORDS.

Oh, a master-stroke!

RABSARIS.

That finishes it, hey?

AN OFFICER.

A thrust home to the vitals. Lo, these cattle on the walls have it in the guts! Hark to them lowing!

ELIAKIM (*in a low tone of desperate protest*).

Oh, speak, I pray thee, to us thy servants in Aramaic, for we understand it; but speak not in the Hebrew tongue in the hearing of the people that are upon the wall!

RABSHAKEH (*with utmost brutality*).

Ha, sayest thou so? What, hath my lord sent me to thy master and to thee to speak these words? Or is it not even unto the men that are upon the wall? Is it not they who will have to sup with you upon their own dung, if Hezekiah shuts these gates a second time in my master's face? By God! I'll speak to them, not you!

ALL THE LORDS.

Ha! Ha-a-a!

(The ministers again close round him in despairing protest. He deliberately, and with vilest rudeness, gives them his back, and addresses himself to those on the wall.)

RABSHAKEH.

Ho, you there upon the wall, hearken to what I say!

(ELIAKIM, SHEBNA, and JOAH fall back overwhelmed with shame, hiding their faces.)

CHIEF CAPTAIN (*on the wall*).

In the king's name, answer him not a word! Whoso answereth one word, I throw him down from the wall!

RABSHAKEH.

Are you ready? Then hear ye the words of the great king, the King of Assyria! Thus saith the king: "Let not Hezekiah deceive you, for he shall not be able to deliver you out of my hand. Neither let Hezekiah make you trust in Jehovah, saying, Jehovah will surely deliver us, and the city will not be given into the hand of the King of Assyria. Harken not unto Hezekiah, but hearken unto the King of Assyria: Make your peace with me, and come out to me, and eat and drink in peace, until I come and take you away to a land like to your own land, a land of corn and wine, a

land of bread and vineyards, a land of oil-olive and of honey, that you may live—not die here like dogs locked into their kennels!" (*He pauses.*)

CHIEF CAPTAIN (*on the wall*).

Peace, I say—oh, peace! (*Murmurs of the people*). Peace!

TARTAN.

"Peace!" You hear! He seduceth them with his sweet words.

RABSARIS.

They weaken, my lord Rabshakeh; they weaken palpably. Give them the quietus. Now for it!

TARTAN.

Watch now for it!

RABSHAKEH.

Therefore, O ye people, hearken not to Hezekiah when he persuadeth you saying, Jehovah will deliver us. Jehovah! Hath any of the gods of the nations ever delivered his land out of the hand of the King of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and of Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Who are they among all the gods of all the countries that have delivered their country out of my hand, that JEHOVAH should deliver *his* country and his city of Jerusalem out of my hand? Jehovah! My lord will pull him down with the rest of them!

ELIAKIM AND JOAH (*in uncontrolled emotion*).

Blasphemy! Blasphemy!

(*They rend their outer robe with violence. SHEBNA, after a moment's pause, follows suit.*)

ELIAKIM.

No more! To the king!

(*They rush away with gestures of passionate abhorrence against RABSHAKEH. SHEBNA follows more slowly.*)

THE PEOPLE ON THE WALL.

Blasphemy! Blasphemy! Ai-i!

(*A long wail, growing louder and louder.*)

CHIEF CAPTAIN.

Away! To the king! To the Temple of Jehovah!

KING HEZEKIAH

URIEL'S VOICE (*loud*).

O Israel, turn we to Jehovah our God—turn!

VOICES (*more distant*).Ai-i! (*All have disappeared from the wall.*)RABSHAKEH (*who has been standing somewhat dumbfounded*).I had scarce finished, 'tis true; but even sans peroration
my words seem to have . . .(*All surround RABSHAKEH, congratulating him.*)

RABSARIS.

That topped all! They'll surrender the city to-night.

A LORD.

Full cups to the Chief of the Cup-bearers to-night.

RABSARIS.

That last lunge spitted them all on one blade!

ALL.

Long live Rabshakeh!

(*They conduct him away joyously. The TARTAN lingers thoughtfully.*)

TARTAN.

Hm? Spitted them all on his blade? Or perchance
spitted himself, by his own too-monstrous thrust, on his
adversary's feeble sword?VOICES (*faint, long-drawn*).

Ai!

(*The TARTAN listens with absorbed attention to the distant moan. He slowly shakes his head.*)

SCENE III

*The Outer Court of the Temple; steps to the left lead to the Inner Court, Altar, and Shrine (unseen). HEZEKIAH is pacing these steps, restless, brooding. On the other side a small group of chief priests are keeping the outer entrance of the precinct.*FIRST PRIEST (*suddenly pointing*).

They come!

SECOND PRIEST.

And—oh, horror!—with robes rent! (*They turn and hasten across to HEZEKIAH.*) My lord the king, they come, and with woe! (*The KING strikes his left hand to his heart.*)

Enter ELIAKIM, JOAH, and SHEBNA with robes rent. They cross the court frantically.

ELIAKIM AND JOAH.

Blasphemy, blasphemy, O king!
(*They strike their heads with clenched hands.*)

SHEBNA.

Blasphemy? What's that to us now? Thou King of Judah, 'tis death and destruction! They have torn up the treaty! (*A howl rises from the priests.*) Ay, howl your bellyful! for Sennacherib hath resolved to destroy this city and to carry this people away to Assyria. (*They shriek aloud.*) He demands the instant surrender of the king and this city. (*Again they shriek.*)

KING HEZEKIAH.

What! the city where the one living God who created the whole earth is worshipped? God forbid! It shall not be.

JOAH.

Said we not they blaspheme the living God? O our king, how shall these lips repeat to the anointed of Jehovah the blasphemy wherewith they have blasphemed the holy God. They said—

ELIAKIM.

No, no, it cannot be said. The letter! and pray God it be not repeated there! Our lord the king, Sennacherib hath sent thee this letter by his officers.

(*He delivers it. The KING, slowly, and with trembling hands, breaks the seal and unrolls the scroll.*)

SHEBNA (*apart*).

Oh, end we this mummery! our doom hath gone forth. Why prate ere we yield to it?

HEZEKIAH (*after looking at it unsteadily*).

Read it; I cannot. (*He hands it to ELIAKIM.*)

KING HEZEKIAH

ELIAKIM (*reading*).

“To Hezekiah, King of Judah: Let not thy god in whom thou trustest deceive thee saying, Jerusalem shall not be delivered into the hand of the King of Assyria. Behold, thou hast heard what the kings of Assyria have done unto all lands, destroying them utterly; and shalt *thou* be delivered? Have the gods of the nations delivered those whom my fathers have destroyed? And who then is Jehovah of Judah, that he should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand?”

KING HEZEKIAH AND THE PRIESTS (*with a terrible cry*).
Blasphemy! Blasphemy! (*They rend their robes.*)

SHEBNA (*apart*).

Aye, and what then?

ELIAKIM.

Yea, and even so spake the Rabshakeh!

JOAH.

Even so, in the hearing of all the Lord's people!

KING HEZEKIAH (*at last lifting his head*).

Isaiah! Ay, now to Isaiah! His day and hour are come, For now avails neither Egypt, nor Philistia, nor alliances, to save the city of God. You, my ministers of state, I send you now, in the sight of all the people, to the prophet of God. Say unto him: “Thus saith Hezekiah, This day is a day of trouble, and of rebuke, and of blasphemy; for children are come to the birth, and there is not strength to bring forth. It may be that the Lord thy God will hear all the words of Rabshakeh; whom his master, the King of Assyria, hath sent to reproach the living God, and will reprove the words which the Lord thy God hath heard. Wherefore, lift up thy prayer for the Remnant that is left.” Go! (*They hasten away. He turns to the High Priest.*) I beseech thee, gather thy brethren of the priests and Levites to weep and pray between the porch and the altar (*pointing through the open gate*), while I spread this living shame before the living God.

PRIESTS.

We have sinned!

FIRST PRIEST.

To what purpose hath been the multitude of our sacrifices?
Woe unto us! [*Exeunt.*]

KING HEZEKIAH (*regarding them attentively*).

Ha! is that the moan that presages the birth-pang?
For a child hath come to the birth, but there is no strength
to bring forth. The birth-pang! Oh for one throe of
burning agony, and Zion should be re-born innocent again
into the world. (*He stands agonized, then slowly turns, ascends
to the topmost step, and faces towards the open portal. He takes
the scroll and spreads it. Then, kneeling down, he slowly raises it
towards the Temple.*) O Thou that dwellest between the
cherubims, behold! Jehovah, Thou God of Israel, Thou
art the God, even Thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the
earth; Thou hast made heaven and earth. Jehovah, bow
down Thine ear and hear; open, Jehovah, Thine eyes and
see, and hear these words of Sennacherib, which hath sent
him to reproach the living God. Of a truth, Jehovah, the
kings of Assyria have destroyed these nations and these
lands, and have cast their gods into the fire; for *they* were
no gods, therefore they have destroyed them. Now, there-
fore, O Jehovah our God, I beseech Thee, save Thou us
out of his hand, that all the kingdoms of the earth may
know that THOU art the Lord God, even Thou alone!

(*He lowers the scroll till it rests on the pavement before him,
then slowly bows his head till his forehead touches the
ground, while his hands with upturned palms are
spread out before him. Dead silence. All is motion-
less.*)

CELESTIAL VOICES (*very softly from above, singing*).

O thou afflicted! tossed with the tempest and not comforted!
For a small moment hath He forsaken thee; but with great mercies
will He gather thee.

Heaviness may endure for a night; but joy cometh in the morning.
The night is spent, the morning is at hand: the day dawns, the
shadows flee away.

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of Hosts; the whole earth is full
of His glory. (Silence.)

SHEBNA has entered from the opposite side, and contemplates the prostrate, motionless form of the KING.

SHEBNA.

It is enough; I can no more. I tried penitence, but it skilled not. This city stifles me. Behold that king there! What sorry farce is this he plays, yet not plays out? There is that in this air of Jerusalem now that chokes me; I cannot breathe it. What! stay here with canting fools, or with Joah and the rest turned hypocrites? Away, away! By hell, it is intolerable! What! be taken like a rat in this accursed, doomed city alive? By all the muttering spirits of hell, for whom or for what should I be taken, and risk skin and dear life, to go down into the loathed darkness before my time? For Jehovah of Judah? Ha, ha! that joke's too rich! I think there's a deity in topmost heaven that takes the side of the big battle-hosts here below! Shall I, then, side against him? Those battle-hosts I see, and Shebna I see; this skin and body I see, the cohorts and chariots of Nineveh I see, swifter than leopards and more fierce than evening wolves—ha! who shall stand in their path and not be torn to pieces! *There*, at the least, is something real, can be seen and touched and handled; there touch I truth; there shall a man be able to breathe the air. But here—

KING HEZEKIAH (*as before*).

Jehovah, God of Israel, save Thou alone!

SHEBNA.

Silence, thou madman! Silence, or thou drivest me mad (*putting his fingers in his ears*). Lo now, not Shebna flies, but Jerusalem drives him forth! Away!

[*He rushes desperately out.*]

VOICES (*as before*).

Whither shall he go, then, from Thy Spirit? or whither shall he flee, then, from Thy presence?

If he fly unto the uttermost parts of the sea: behold, Thou art there.

Holy, holy, holy art Thou, O Lord God of Hosts; the whole earth is full of Thy glory!

Re-enter ELIAKIM and JOAH; they shout at once joyously.

ELIAKIM AND JOAH.

Salvation, O lord the king! Hosanna!

(HEZEKIAH rises and turns; they hasten to meet each other.)

ELIAKIM.

Here is the answer which Isaiah the son of Amoz sends to King Hezekiah: "Thus saith Jehovah, God of Israel, That which thou hast prayed to Me against Sennacherib, King of Assyria, I have heard. This is the word that Jehovah hath spoken concerning him: The virgin, the daughter of Israel, hath despised thee, O Sennacherib, and hath laughed thee to scorn; the daughter of Jerusalem hath shaken her head at thee. By thy messengers thou hast reproached and blasphemed. But I know thy abode and thy rage against Me; and because thy rage against Me is come into Mine ears, therefore I will put My hook in thy nose, and My bridle in thy lips, and I will turn thee back by the way by which thou camest. Thou shalt not come into this city, nor shoot an arrow there, nor come before it with shield, nor cast an embankment against it. For I will defend this city, to save it for My own name's sake, and for My servant David's sake, saith the Lord, the Lord of Hosts."

KING HEZEKIAH.

Salvation! Hosanna! Praise Jehovah, O my soul! Thus for Sennacherib! *(He reads the scroll, and casts it to the earth.)* And now, is not this the dawn at last? Oh, shall not "the Remnant turn" this day to the Lord?

ELIAKIM.

Aye, my anointed lord. Jehovah hath wrought this mercy also. Lo now where they come, Uriel and the people. We passed them on the way, wending with repentance and tears and lamentation to the temple of the Lord's house.

VOICES OF THE PEOPLE *(without)*.

To Jehovah, turn ye, turn!

Enter the CAPTAIN OF THE HOST, leading URIEL, blind. They are followed by many nobles and people in deep dejection; the hands of all are outstretched.)

URIEL.

Bring me to my king; bring me to the anointed of Jehovah.

CAPTAIN.

Lo, now . . .

KING HEZEKIAH.

. . . he is before thee.

URIEL (*falling on his knees*).

I have played thee the fool. I turn to Jehovah. I repent.

(He weeps suddenly and falls down, holding HEZEKIAH by the feet.)

KING HEZEKIAH.

My son, my son!

THE PEOPLE (*beating their breasts*).

We have sinned and done wickedly.

URIEL.

I was a shallow fool, a son of Belial; I have sinned!

MICHAIAH.

And I!

MANY VOICES.

And I! and I!

THE PEOPLE.

And we all! Have mercy on us, O Lord!

KING HEZEKIAH.

Lo, the birth-pang! Now shall the child be born!
(*Raising his voice*) Come ye, my children, let us turn unto the Lord our God! Rise, my son.

(He, with the CAPTAIN, leads URIEL to the steps. He ascends some of the steps and stands. Behind him are ranged URIEL, the CAPTAIN, and the lords; behind these the crowd of people. As the voices of the priests in the Inner Court suddenly break forth, the entire company fall on their knees.)

PRIESTS:

Spare Thy people, O Lord ; spare Thy people.
 Behold Thy priests, the ministers of the Lord, weeping
 between the porch and the altar.
 Give not our heritage to reproach, that the heathen should
 rule over us.
 Wherefore should the heathen say among the peoples,
 Where is now their God ?
 Turn us again, Jehovah of Hosts ; show us the light of Thy
 countenance, and we shall be healed.
 Spare us !

KING, NOBLES, AND PEOPLE (*with a deep murmur*).

Spare us, O Lord !
 Turn us again, Jehovah of Hosts ; show us the light of Thy
 countenance, and we shall be healed.
 (ISAIAH *has entered by an entrance at the back. He has
 made his silent way to the top of the steps, and stands
 contemplating all.*)

ISAIAH.

The sinners in Zion are afraid ; fearfulness hath surprised
 the hypocrites. Who among us shall dwell with the de-
 vouring fire ? who among us shall dwell with everlasting
 burnings ? And this day, even on this day, it shall come
 to pass that he that is left in Zion, and he that remaineth
 at Jerusalem, shall be called holy, everyone that is written
 for life in Jerusalem ; when Jehovah shall have washed
 away the filth of the children of Zion, and shall have purged
 the blood of Jerusalem from the midst thereof by the Spirit
 of judgment, and by the Spirit of burning. (*Slowly, tenderly*)
 In that day shall the inhabitant of the city not say, I am
 sick ; FOR THE PEOPLE THAT DWELL THEREIN . . . ARE FOR-
 GIVEN THEIR INIQUITY !

(*He raises his arms in absolution and blessing.*)

VOICES (*from above as before.*)

Amen.

(*All have bowed their heads and crossed their arms upon
 their breasts.*)

END OF ACT III.

ACT IV

SCENE I

The pavilion of the King of Assyria. It is night, and the banqueting chamber is lit with lamps. KING SENNACHERIB is stretched on a rich divan, eating fruits and drinking wine. The TARTAN, the RABSHAKEH, and other lords are on other divans, eating and drinking.

KING SENNACHERIB.

It irks me that that rebel slave did not surrender me Jerusalem. With Tirhaka advancing from Egypt, and all at stake, I care not to leave so much as a gnat to annoy my flank and rereward. Asshur curse thee, Sir Rabshakeh, how wagged thy glib tongue so feebly that it wrought not the surrender of the city?

RABSHAKEH.

Great king . . .

KING SENNACHERIB.

Great Rabshakeh, for a little I'd pull thee thy great tongue out, and make thee eat it salted; it might lend thee wit.

RABSHAKEH.

Great king, then would it be wholly mine, whereas now it is mine and thine. Leave it, I pray thee, to wag for thee yet. I pledge it to thee, thou needest not give Jerusalem, nor Hezekiah, nor his Jews, one thought. Their greatest are playing the turncoat and stealing forth to join us. What says my liege of Lord Treasurer Shebna, the head and front of the Egyptian party which compassed their whole rebellion? This tongue hath e'en drawn him hither; he entered the camp this evening with other lords. Their rulers, it seems, are fleeing away together.

KING SENNACHERIB.

Ha, say'st thou so? That's better. Have him in. (*SHEBNA is brought in. He is deadly pale, and his face is hard set. He prostrates himself at SENNACHERIB'S feet.*) Rise, man, and stand upon thy feet. Sennacherib bears no grudge to those who submit to the brightness of his majesty. But that rebel Hezekiah's hide I must and will have; the curses of all the gods of hell upon him! Well, what's the news?

SHEBNA.

Great king, live for ever! Thy slave, whom thy clemency hath spared, reports to thee that the oration of thy Rabshakeh hath shaken the city to its foundations. From king to dungman I left them puling and snivelling. Zion is garrisoned with old women, eunuchs, and praying priests.

KING SENNACHERIB.

'Tis well. They'll not fight, then? They'll not annoy our flank or rereward?

SHEBNA.

Schoolmaster Isaiah hath set them praying to Jehovah, their stomachs not being for fight. But that he has bewitched Hezekiah thou hadst had the city, great king, as have it thou shalt, and lightly too. 'Tis Isaiah's skin thou shouldst tear off first. Hah!

KING SENNACHERIB.

And shall. What thou sayest reassureth me. A cup for the lord Shebna. Drink, lords, and be merry. What! hath no one some bawdy tale or merry jest to give us a laugh ere we sleep? This campaigning begins to pall. Come, a bawdy tale!

TARTAN.

My liege, my estimation of the lord Rabshakeh's judgment as *counsellor* in these matters of peace or war I reserve for the privy hearing of my lord. But let the lord Rabshakeh tell the merry tale of his Jewish bear-baiting; for, as *play-actor*, I allow gladly that he's not to be matched. Ha, ha! I yet laugh when I think on't!

KING HEZEKIAH

SENNACHERIB.

So? Come, then, let's have it while we're still in some sort sober. Full cups, lords, the night holds bravely! Now, my lord Chief of the King's Players!

RABSHAKEH.

Most great king, it was indeed a droll piece. There were the people straining their necks and pricking up their long ears upon the wall, and there were the ministers of King Hezekiah (saving my worthy friend's presence here!) nigh dead with terror lest my words should carry thither! They desired me to speak in Aramaic; I spoke the more in Hebrew. They conjured me to speak low; I bawled. Ha, ha!

ALL.

Ha, ha, ha!

RABSHAKEH.

Also I flicked the raw of their former Master of the Horse—my lord remembers Uriel, whose eyes we struck out—he whose thousand knights we pulled off their nags at Eltekeh? Ha, ha! If blind eyes can blink, I'll warrant Uriel's blinked on the wall then when I offered to the Jews . . . two thousand horses *more*—

RABSARIS.

—if they could find, buy, bribe, or breed the riders to sit astride of them without falling off the same!

ALL.

Ha, ha, ha! (*Roars of laughter.*)

RABSHAKEH.

But I protest, my liege, 'twas when I turned theologue my jest grew thickest. They have a god, Jehovah, and I know not what binds them to the fear of his name more than the case is with the other nations and their gods. Nay, let not my pious liege-lord be afraid! He's a hill-god, thy learned priests have told me. In their library in the Temple of Asshur at Nineveh he's registered as "Chief hill-god of Judah; doubtful, of Israel": certain, his jurisdiction extendeth not to these plains. We can talk here without being overheard—ha, ha!—nor need thy servant whisper,

which were a pity, for the tale requireth now that I roar like any Assyrian lion!

TARTAN.

Ha, ha, ha! to think on't! Now then, thou mummer, let's have the roaring scene!

RABSARIS.

Forgetting not that most virtuous indignation of thine, thou hypocrite!

RABSHAKEH.

I first, O my king, told them that it was their god, Jehovah, who had bidden the King of Assyria avenge the destruction of his fanes in all the high places of Judah. There ended the first lesson!

RABSARIS.

But it drew blood! Oh, rise, my lord, and show our lord the king how it was! See here, I am the embassy—nay, man (*to SHEBNA*), look not so glum; by our lord's beard, thou shalt play now thine old part with me. (*SHEBNA is pulled sullenly over to the side of RABSARIS.*) Aye, thou lookedst so! And here, my lord Rabshakeh, wast thou—I pray my liege to excuse his back for the nonce. Now, then, I am Eliakim: "Oh, dear my lord, oh, good my lord, oh, sweet my lord, I prithee speak lower, I prithee speak Aramaic, I prithee speak Hittite. We are old, and our skins are very tough, but we fear for the tender virtue of those children on the wall."

ALL.

Ha, ha, ha!

RABSHAKEH (*playing to him*).

"What's this? Is it not the children to whom I'm giving these most moral lessons in divinity? Hear now the second lesson!" (Never heed its consistency with the first, which I allow is the faultiest.) "The scholars on the wall do not hear well? I'll make them hear, and in choice Hebrew, too? (*He gives RABSARIS his back, and vociferates with upturned face*) Hear, my children! Where is Jehovah? What is Jehovah? Whoever, whatever, wherever he is, is he greater than the gods of Hamath, of Philistia, and of Iva? Did not my master pull these nations down, and

their gods with them? Did not he pull down this Jehovah's Samaria? And shall, then, Jehovah deliver *this* city out of my master's hand? Nay, shall not Sennacherib even so pull down Hezekiah and Jerusalem, and with them this JE . . ."

(*He gives a horrible choking cry and claps his hands to his throat.*)

ALL (*laughing, applauding, and beating the table.*)

Ha, ha, ha! Finish the jest! Oh, rich!

RABSHAKEH (*staggering*).

Ah!

TARTAN (*springing up*).

By God, that's not set down in the part! What's the matter, man?

RABSARIS (*supporting him*).

My lord, my lord, art thou sick?

RABSHAKEH (*flinging him off and reeling to and fro, gasping*).

Air, air . . . I choke! Have mercy . . . Jehovah! Ah!

(*He crashes to the ground. A dreadful shriek is heard without. Enter a Sentry, his hand to his throat.*)

TARTAN.

Out, rascal! Art mad?

SENTRY (*frantically pointing off*).

There! there! (*Shrieks without.*) Oh, I'm a dead man!
(*Suddenly he crashes down.*)

Enter another Sentry, distraught, from the other side.

SENTRY.

In the north quarter of the camp, my lords, they fall, they fall! Oh! (*He collapses.*)

KING SENNACHERIB.

My lord the Tartan, hie thee forth and find out what these lunatics may mean. My lord Rabsaris, look to the Chief of the Cup-bearers.

(*RABSARIS, who has been bending over RABSHAKEH, crawls to the feet of the KING, gasping. As he reaches him, he gesticulates in agony, then collapses at his feet.*)

THE GUESTS (*springing up*).

Escape for your lives from the house of death! For your lives!

(*Some collapse where they recline, the rest rush out. Shrieks and hubbub outside from every quarter increase.*)

Re-enter the TARTAN.

TARTAN.

By hell, king, they choke and fall and die in every quarter of thy camp! We are bewitched; we are accursed! Who is the god of this place?

SHEBNA (*who has been leaning with his back against a pole of the pavilion, his face buried in his hands, springing forward*).

Jehovah!—and of every place. Too late, too late!

KING SENNACHERIB.

Jehovah! Oh, we have angered him; we are lost! To horse! Away! [*He rushes out.*]

TARTAN.

To horse!

[*Exit*]

SHEBNA.

“Hurled like a ball to a far country!” Death and hell!

[*Exit desperately.*]

(*The hubbub without gradually dies down, then ceases. The bodies in the pavilion are quite still. A ghastly quiet pervades all. The lights have been sagging low. They go out. Darkness. Silence.*)

VOICES (*very low and dark*).

Asshur is fallen, fallen.

How hath the oppressor ceased, who smote the nations continually! Fear, and the pit, and the snare are upon thee, O thou oppressor.

Hell from beneath is moved for thee, to meet thee at thy coming.

The worm is spread under thee, and the worms cover thee.

Thou goest whence thou shalt not return; to the land of darkness and the shadows of death:

(*Still lower and more darkly.*)

A land of darkness, as darkness itself; without any order; and where the light . . . is as darkness.

(The voices merge into the dead silence of the night.)

* * * * *

(The light of dawn begins to filter in; the corpses are just visible. Enter creeping figures stealthily. They whisper hoarsely together.)

FIRST ARAB.

This must be the royal tent. Ha, who's this?

(They turn RABSHAKEH stealthily over.)

SECOND ARAB.

A great officer of state. Lo, his jewels! Strip him quick!

(They spoil RABSHAKEH.)

THIRD ARAB.

Here's the king's place. The gods send that this lump of carrion was royal!

FOURTH ARAB.

No; another great lord. No matter, spoil him! By the gods, what does all this mean? Were all those things outside corpses?

THE OTHERS.

I'll warrant you.

FIRST ARAB.

The camp was as silent as a tomb. Not a soul stirred. Lo, 'tis lighter now. Two of you, go view it o'er and bring us word while we take these noble cups. Praise be to all the gods and goddesses of Arabia!

(Exeunt two Arabs, then re-enter.)

SECOND ARAB.

'Tis wonderful, 'tis beyond speech. Hundreds, thousands! As far as the eye can reach, dead corpses!

THIRD ARAB.

The rest have fled.

FIRST ARAB.

Sennacherib among them, it would seem. The god of the land has been angry with him. The Assyrians are destroyed and their war is ended. 'Tis all one to us Arabs.

SECOND ARAB.

To whom must this news go? Who will give us a noble
guerdon for being first with it?

THIRD ARAB.

Yes, yes. Let's leave this carrion to the jackals and find
a live prince!

SECOND ARAB.

Aye, better a live dog of Jewry than dead lions of Assyria.

FIRST ARAB.

King Hezekiah! King Hezekiah in Jerusalem! Away
to him!

SECOND ARAB.

Have with you! On Assyrian horses!

ALL.

Haste, haste away!

[*They rush out.*]

SCENE II

The roof of the Citadel as in Act II. To the left, KING HEZEKIAH seated on a throne, with ISAAH on his right, ELIAKIM on his left hand. Other nobles, priests, and elders of the people present. The SENTINEL is in the watch-tower.

KING HEZEKIAH.

Behold we are all together according to thy word.

ISAAH.

Prepare ye the tables; watch in the watch-towers; arise, ye princes, eat and drink. Yea, eat and drink, for to-morrow we—live! For thus hath the Lord said unto me: "Go, set a watchman; let him declare what he seeth."

SENTINEL (*from the tower*).

My lord, I stand upon the watch-tower continually in the day-time, and I am set in my ward whole nights. Behold, I watch!

KING HEZEKIAH

KING HEZEKIAH.

Thou that art the Lord's watchman, look out diligently and with much heed, and thy reward is from the Lord.

(*A pause.*)

ISAIAH (*suddenly*).

Thus hath the Lord said unto me, "Let him declare what he seeth."

SENTINEL (*with a sudden shout*).

Ha! My lord, here cometh a chariot of men with three couple of horsemen! Arabs! Arabs! Behold, they signal violently with their lances, the signal of tidings of great joy.

ISAIAH (*as one inspired*).

Asshur is fallen, is fallen! (*Infinite emotion of all.*)

KING HEZEKIAH (*to the CAPTAIN and JOAH*).

Hasten down, haste, haste, and bring us their tidings.
Haste, oh, haste! [*Exeunt CAPTAIN and JOAH.*]

ALL (*low to each other*).

Asshur fallen!

ISAIAH (*as before*).

Asshur is fallen, and all the graven images of her gods hath He broken into the ground. Oh, my threshing! Oh, corn of my threshing-floor! That which I have heard of the Lord of Hosts have I declared unto you. (*He remains calmly entranced.*)

(*The joy-shrilling of women is heard without.*)

ALL.

The women have it! Lo, they shrill!

The CAPTAIN and JOAH burst in shouting.

BOTH.

THE ASSYRIAN IS FALLEN, IS FALLEN!

(*A tremendous shout goes up from all. The words are taken up with shoutings, again and again renewed, and mingling presently with the joy-shrilling of the women and the shouts of the people without. Many weep passionately. Many embrace, with ecstatic laughter or tears. When the storm of emotion dies down and ceases—*)

CAPTAIN.

O prophet, marvellously hath it been according to thy word. Aye, in that day when the Assyrian shook his hand against the mount of the daughter of Zion, the hill Jerusalem, in that day, through the voice of the Lord, hath he been beaten down. He hath fallen with the sword, but not the sword of a mighty man, nor the sword of a mean man; no, nor the sword of *man*, but the sword of the angel of the Lord, the Captain of His Sabaoth!

KING HEZEKIAH (*deeply echoed by all*).

Oh, how sayest thou?

CAPTAIN.

The Arabs have come in from Sennacherib's camp. Lo, at night, in the dead of night, the Angel of the Lord went forth, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians thousands, yea, thousands upon thousands. When the men passed through early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses. And the king, and all who had lived, had fled away together. Behold the jewels, spoiled from the corpse of the Rabshakeh, in earnest that they lie not!

(*Renewed great emotion of all. Men gaze silently in each other's faces, as those whose hearts are too full for speech.*)

ELIAKIM.

We are like . . . them . . . that dream.

JOAH (*as in a muse*).

Now say we among the heathen, Jehovah hath done great things for us.

ALL (*murmuring low*).

Great things . . . whereby we are glad.

KING HEZEKIAH (*rising, as one inspired*).

*God is our refuge and strength : a very present help in trouble.
Therefore will we not fear, though the earth be removed : though
the mountains be carried into the midst of the seas.
For Jehovah of Hosts is with us : the God of Jacob is our refuge.*

ALL.

The Lord of Hosts is with us : the God of Jacob is our refuge.

KING HEZEKIAH.

*Glorious things are spoken of thee, thou City of God !
God is in the midst of thee : thou shalt not be moved. (In a great
voice) Chief Captain ! The watchword to-day again—
IMMANUEL !*

ALL (*very softly*).

Immanuel ! God with us !

(*The KING sinks back upon the throne.*)

ISAIAH (*as one quietly waking from a dream*).

Immanuel ! And I said, an oracle from the oracles of God : " Behold, the Virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel : God with us. Yea, for unto us a Child is born ; unto us a Son is given ; and the government shall be upon His shoulders. Of the increase of His government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, to establish it with justice and with judgment for ever and ever." (*He turns to KING HEZEKIAH*). O thou seated upon David's throne ! O anointed Christ of God, art thou even He ?

KING HEZEKIAH.

I ! who played the fool ? I ! grey, and broken with many sorrows, furrowed with the deep ploughings of the Lord's chastisements ? I, with face so marred, more than the sons of men ? I, a sinful man ? O prophet of God !
(*He covers his face ; he weeps.*)

ISAIAH (*regarding him with deepest tenderness and compassion*).

Not thou ! O thou afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted ! Comfort thee, comfort thee, saith the Lord. For lo, thine eyes shall see the King in His beauty, they shall behold the land that is very far off.

KING HEZEKIAH.

The King ! . . . in His beauty !

ISAIAH.

Thou shalt see Him, but not now. Thou shalt behold Him, but not nigh. In that day !

KING HEZEKIAH.

Let Him come quickly ! O prophet of God, would I not rise from this throne (*he rises*) and set Him here ? Would I

not take this diadem (*he tears it off*) and fall before Him, and cast it low at His feet: at His feet Who shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace? Let the Christ come! (*He has turned and now kneels before the throne, prostrating low.*)

ISAIAH (*with quiet ecstasy*).

Behold, a king shall reign in righteousness, and princes rule in judgment. Behold (*with rising tones*), there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. In Him shall the nations trust. And this throne shall be for Him whose right it is: Immanuel! (*He gazes into the heavens, rapt.*)

VOICES (*as though from all around and from above, yet mysteriously removed*).

AMEN.

KING HEZEKIAH (*raising himself from prostration*).
Blessed be He that cometh . . . !

VOICES.

AMEN.

(*The king offers the diadem before the empty throne. ISAIAH raises his arms heavenwards, and all the people reverently bow low and kneel.*)

THE PEOPLE (*in response to the king*).

. . . in the Name of the Lord!
(*They stretch out their hands towards the throne.*)

VOICES.

AMEN! BEHOLD . YOUR . KING . COMETH, COMETH,
SAITH . THE . LORD . OF . HOSTS ; IMMANUEL.

(*ISAIAH is motionless, with upturned face and upraised palms ; the people with outstretched hands. As the voices become softer and softer and their sound fades, KING HEZEKIAH bows his head and folds his hands upon his breast, after gently laying the diadem upon the vacant throne.*)

THE END.

APPENDIX

THE events of the few years that preceded the year 700 B.C. are probably better documented than any other in the whole Old Testament; for no less than three separate searchlights of historical testimony have concentrated their beams upon this small patch—viz. : (1) The vivid historical narrative, not contemporary, but obviously based on *contemporary* sources; (2) the prophecies of the *contemporary* Isaiah; (3) the extraordinarily pertinent cylinders of the *contemporary* Sennacherib, those cuneiform inscriptions which may be seen in our own British Museum; to say nothing of the tremulous but lurid little ray contributed by Herodotus two and a half centuries later. And yet, in spite of this unusual wealth of material, it is astonishing how impossible it is to draw up a complete narrative of those years which shall be, in details, consistent with itself and with all the three sources. For example, it seems impossible even to be certain (at least, the commentators are all divided) as to who the contemporary king of Egypt was, whether Sabako or Shabataka, and what was the precise relation of the Nubian Tirhaka to the kingship or kingships of Egypt at that time. Similarly, the precise chronological relation of the decisive battle of Eltekeh to Hezekiah's capitulation is quite obscure. And, lastly, the relation of the campaign of which the Rabshakeh mission was an incident to the final catastrophe of Sennacherib is uncertain. It cannot be denied that these obscurities suit a dramatist very well; for in the complete absence of authoritative guidance he may well plead that the construction which seems to him dramatically true may just as likely be historically true, also, as any other.

The following are the chief historical references to the historical and prophetic books of the Old Testament.

Scriptural language from books belonging to totally different times has also been deliberately used, but no reference to such phrases is given below.

PROLOGUE.

- SHEBNA, "*to go down . . .*" See Isa. xxxi. 1.
 "Padi . . ." All this is one of the fragments of information supplied by Sennacherib's cuneiform inscriptions.
 "Merodach-Baladan." The precise relation of this embassy (Isa. xxxix.) to the present series of events is uncertain. It may well be that it was *this* embassy which started Hezekiah and the nation on the downward path. In what follows, therefore, incidents and language from it are applied to the Ekronite incident.
 "The Mayor of the Household," corresponding to the scriptural phrase, "which is over the House (or, the Household)." See Isa. xxii. 15; cp. 2 Kings xviii. 37.
 EKRONITE, "*I will punish . . .*" See Isa. x. 12.
 A CHIEF PRIEST. See Isa. i. 11-14.
 ISAIAH, "*From a far country . . .*" See Isa. xxxix. 3.
 HEZEKIAH, "*gone softly . . .*" See Isa. xxxviii. 15.
 ISAIAH, "*the overflowing scourge.*" See Isa. xxviii. 15.
 "*first shall the Lord of Hosts . . .*" See Isa. x. 22, 23.
 "*Your country . . .*" See Isa. i. 7, 8.
 "*shall be broken . . .*" See Isa. ix. 4.
 "*when the Assyrians . . .*" See Isa. x. 32.
 "Shear-Jashub," "a Remnant shall Turn"; evidently a watchword with Isaiah. See Isa. x. 21 and vii. 4.
 "Immanuel," another watchword. See Isa. vii. 14; viii. 8, 10.

ACT I.

SCENE I.

- HEZEKIAH, "*the waters of the fountains . . .*" See 2 Chron. xxxii. 3, 4.
 "*the spring of Gihon . . .*" See 2 Chron. xxxii. 30; Isa. xxii. 9.
 "Siloah," the pool of Siloam, at the south-east corner of the city. See 2 Chron. xxxii. 5.
 HEZEKIAH, "*Take courage,*" etc. See Isa. xxii. 8-10.

CHIEF CAPTAIN. See 2 Chron. xxxii. 6. This detail of the Arab auxiliaries is from the Assyrian records.

CAPTAIN, "*fewness of the horses and the chariots.*" See Isa. xxxi. 1.

"*Be strong . . .*" See 2 Chron. xxxii. 6, 7.

"*With us is the Lord . . .*" See 2 Chron. xxxii. 8.

"Sargon" and the Raphia campaign. See Isa. xx. 1. The details are supplied by the Assyrian inscriptions. This Raphia is the Rafah of our own Palestine campaign.

For "*the Egyptian alliance*" see Isa. xxx., xxxi.

ELIAKIM, "*Woe,*" etc. See Isa. xxx. 1; xxix. 15.

SCENE II.

"*Musicians with harp, pipe,*" etc. See Isa. v. 11, 12, 22.

SHEBNA, "*the wizards . . .*" See Isa. viii. 19. The "*covenant with death.*" See Isa. xxviii. 15.

URIEL, "*sign-on-sign . . .*" For the whole of this passage see Isa. xxviii. 7-18. The commentators are agreed that a parodying of Isaiah by drunkards is alluded to there. (Isa. xxviii. 7 amply justifies the introduction of the Priest and the Prophet in this scene.) The heavy syllables and jingling rhymes of the Hebrew are imitated in this rendering, syllable for syllable.

ISAIAH, "*Woe unto them . . .*" See Isa. xxix. 15 and xxviii. 9-15.

ISAIAH to URIEL. See Isa. xxx. 15-17.

ISAIAH to SHEBNA. See Isa. xxii. 15-18.

ACT II.

SCENE II.

"*Watchman, what of the night?*" See Isa. xxi. 11.

SENTINEL, "*Five more fenced cities . . .*" See 2 Kings xviii. 13.

HEZEKIAH, "*Our cities burned . . .*" See Isa. i. 7-9.

TROOPER, "*Eltekeh . . .*" We owe our knowledge of this very important event to the Assyrian inscriptions. The site (Josh. xix. 24) is unknown, but it was probably not far from Ludd. (Assyrian "Altaku.")

JOAH, "*struck out his eyes . . .*" The monstrous brutalities mentioned here and elsewhere are all common features of the inscriptions.

VOICES, "*Blaspheme God and the king!*" See Isa. viii. 21.

"*Let us eat and drink . . .*" See Isa. xxii. 13.

HEZEKIAH, "*Well said the prophet . . .*" See Isa. i. 5, 6.

CHIEF ENVOY. The whole of this is practically verbatim from Sennacherib's cuneiform records. They may be seen at the British Museum.

HEZEKIAH, "*Isaiah! Thou saidst it!*" See Isa. xxxix. 6, 7.

HEZEKIAH (*markedly turning from Shebna to Eliakim . . .*).

This transference of the Prime-Ministership was prophesied in Isa. xxii. 20-22, and is verified by a comparison of Isa. xxii. 15 with xxxvi. 3.

"*give him all the silver and gold . . .*" See 2 Kings xviii. 14-16.

"*Fill the son of Hilkiah's post . . .*" See Isa. xxxvi. 3.

"*I have offended,*" etc. See 2 Kings. xviii. 14.

SCENE III.

For the whole of this scene see Isa. xxii. 1-14.

ACT III.

SCENE I.

ELIAKIM, "*The Assyrians are returned!*" Cp. 2 Kings xviii. 16 with xvii.

JOAH, "*ye treacherous dealers!*" See Isa. xxxiii. 1.

HEZEKIAH, "*lo, I command most straitly . . .*" See 2 Kings xviii. 36.

SCENE II.

TARTAN, "*Libnah and Lachish.*" See 2 Kings xix. 8.

Enter ELIAKIM, SHEBNA, JOAH . . . For this whole scene see 2 Kings xviii. 17-37.

SCENE III.

For this scene see 2 Kings xix. 1-34. It must be confessed that the episode of Sennacherib's *letter* took place some weeks later. But spiritually, and therefore dramatically, it belongs *here*.

HEZEKIAH, ". . . *between the porch and the altar.*" See Joel ii. 17—*i.e.*, in the innermost court, the court of the priests, the king being in the precinct, afterwards

called "the Court of the Women." The outer court ("the Court of the Gentiles") would thus be outside, on the right. The gate on the right is thus the one afterwards called "the Beautiful Gate."

ISAIAH, "*The sinners in Zion . . .*" These words, and Isaiah's absolution, come from chap. xxxiii. of his prophecies.

ACT IV.

SCENE I.]

SENNACHERIB, "*With Tirhaka advancing . . .*" See 2 Kings xix. 9; cp. v. 7. As hinted above, it may be that we have unified what were really *two* campaigns of Sennacherib.

RABSHAKEH, "*Chief hill-god of Judah.*" See 1 Kings xx. 23. For the catastrophe see 2 Kings xix. 35, 36.

SHEBNA, "*Hurled like a ball . . .*" See Isaiah's denunciation above, Act I., Scene 2.

SCENE II.

The main features of the first part of this scene are taken from Isa. xxi. 1-10, one of Isaiah's own prophecies, though spoken in a different connection; but with so exquisite an adaptability to the present circumstances that to use it was not evitable.

CAPTAIN, "*He hath fallen with the sword,*" etc. See Isa. xxxi. 8.

HEZEKIAH (*rising, as one inspired*). From Ps. xlvi. It is generally agreed that this Psalm is contemporary, and refers directly to the downfall of Sennacherib and the deliverance of Jerusalem.

For the Messianic prophecies see Isa. vii. 14; ix. 6, 7; xi. 1; and xxxii. 1.

For the diadem see a later prophecy—*e.g.*, Ezek. xxi. 26, 27.

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