

THE SOUDAN, THE SPHINXES, THE CUP, THE LAMP.

("Zim-Zizimi, Soudan d'Égypte.")

[Bk. XVI. i.]

Zim Zizimi--(of the Soudan of burnt Egypt,
The Commander of Believers, a Bashaw
Whose very robes were from Asia's greatest stript,
More powerful than any lion with resistless paw)
A master weighed on by his immense splendor--
Once had a dream when he was at his evening feast,
When the broad table smoked like a perfumed censer,
And its grateful odors the appetite increased.
The banquet was outspread in a hall, high as vast,
With pillars painted, and with ceiling bright with gold,
Upprepared by Zim's ancestors in the days long past,
And added to till now worth a sum untold.
Howe'er rich no rarity was absent, it seemed,
Fruit blushed upon the side-boards, groaning 'neath rich meats,
With all the dainties palate ever dreamed
In lavishness to waste--for dwellers in the streets
Of cities, whether Troy, or Tyre, or Ispahan,
Consume, in point of cost, food at a single meal
Much less than what is spread before this crowned man---

Who rules his couchant nation with a rod of steel,
And whose servitors' chiefest arts it was to squeeze
The world's full teats into his royal helpless mouth.
Each hard-sought dainty that never failed to please,
All delicacies, wines, from east, west, north or south,
Are plenty here--for Sultan Zizimi drinks wine
In its variety, trying to find what never sates.
Laughs at the holy writings and the text divine,
O'er which the humble dervish prays and venerates.
There is a common saying which holds often good:
That cruel is he who is sparing in his cups.
That they are such as are most thirsty of man's blood--
Yet he will see a slave beheaded whilst he sups.
But be this as it all may, glory gilds his reign,
He has overrun Africa, the old and black;
Asia as well--holding them both beneath a rain
Of bloody drops from scaffold, pyre, the stake, or rack,
To leave his empire's confines, one must run a race
Far past the river Baxtile southward; in the north,
To the rude, rocky, barren land of Thrace,
Yet near enough to shudder when great Zim is wroth.
Conquering in every field, he finds delight
In battle-storms; his music is the shout of camps.
On seeing him the eagle speeds away in fright,
Whilst hid 'mong rocks, the grisly wolf its victim champs.
Mysore's as well as Agra's rajah is his kin;

The great sheiks of the arid sands confess him lord;
Omar, who vaunting cried: "Through me doth Allah win!"
Was of his blood--a dreaded line of fire and sword.
The waters of Nagain, sands of Sahara warm,
The Atlas and the Caucasus, snow-capped and lone,
Mecca, Marcatta, these were massed in part to form
A portion of the giant shadow of Zim's throne.
Before his might, to theirs, as hardest rock to dust,
There have recoiled a horde of savage, warlike chiefs,
Who have been into Afric's fiery furnace thrust--
Its scorching heat to his rage greatest of reliefs.
There is no being but fears Zim; to him bows down
Even the sainted Llama in the holy place;
And the wild Kasburder chieftain at his dark power
Turns pale, and seeks a foeman of some lesser race.
Cities and states are bought and sold by Soudan Zim,
Whose simple word their thousand people hold as law.
He ruins them at will, for what are men to him,
More than to stabled cattle is the sheaf of straw?

The Soudan is not pleased, for he is e'er alone,
For who may in his royal sports or joys be leagued.
He must never speak to any one in equal tones,
But be by his own dazzling weightiness fatigued.
He has exhausted all the pastimes of the earth;
In vain skilled men have fought with sword, the spear, or lance,

The quips and cranks most laughed at have to him no mirth;
He gives a regal yawn as fairest women dance;
Music has outpoured all its notes, the soft and loud,
But dully on his wearied ear its accents roll,
As dully as the praises of the servile crowd
Who falsely sing the purity of his black soul.
He has had before his daïs from the prison brought
Two thieves, whose terror makes their chains to loudly ring,
Then gaping most unkingly, he dismissed his slaves,
And tranquilly, half rising, looked around to seek
In the weighty stillness--such as broods round graves--
Something within his royal scope to which to speak.

The throne, on which at length his eyes came back to rest,
Is upheld by rose-crowned Sphinxes, which lyres hold,
All cut in whitest marble, with uncovered breast,
While their eyes contain that enigma never told.
Each figure has its title carved upon its head:
Health, and Voluptuousness, Greatness, Joy, and Play,
With Victory, Beauty, Happiness, may be read,
Adorning brands they wear unblushing in the day.

The Soudan cried: "O, Sphinxes, with the torch-like eye,
I am the Conqueror--my name is high-arrayed
In characters like flame upon the vaulted sky,
Far from oblivion's reach or an effacing shade.

Upon a sheaf of thunderbolts I rest my arm,
And gods might wish my exploits with them were their own.
I live--I am not open to the points of harm,
And e'en my throne will be with age an altar-stone.
When the time comes for me to cast off earthly robe,
And enter--being Day--into the realms of light,
The gods will say, we call Zizimi from his globe
That we may have our brother nearer to our sight!
Glory is but my menial, Pride my own chained slave,
Humbly standing when Zizimi is in his seat.
I scorn base man, and have sent thousands to the grave.
They are but as a rushen carpet to my feet.
Instead of human beings, eunuchs, blacks, or mutes,
Be yours, oh, Sphinxes, with the glad names on your fronts!
The task, with voice attuned to emulate the flute's,
To charm the king, whose chase is man, and wars his hunts.

"Some portion of your splendor back on me reflect,
Sing out in praiseful chains of melodious links!
Oh, throne, which I with bloody spoils have so bedecked,
Speak to your lord! Speak you, the first rose-crested Sphinx!"

Soon on the summons, once again was stillness broke,
For the ten figures, in a voice which all else drowned,
Parting their stony lips, alternatively spoke--
Spoke clearly, with a deeply penetrative sound.

THE FIRST SPHINX.

So lofty as to brush the heavens' dome,
Upon the highest terrace of her tomb
Is Queen Nitrocis, thinking all alone,
Upon her line, long tenants of the throne,
Terrors, scourges of the Greeks and Hebrews,
Harsh and bloodthirsty, narrow in their views.
Against the pure scroll of the sky, a blot,
Stands out her sepulchre, a fatal spot
That seems a baneful breath around to spread.
The birds which chance to near it, drop down dead.
The queen is now attended on by shades,
Which have replaced, in horrid guise, her maids.
No life is here--the law says such as bore
A corpse alone may enter through yon door.
Before, behind, around the queen, her sight
Encounters but the same blank void of night.
Above, the pilasters are like to bars,
And, through their gaps, the dead look at the stars,
While, till the dawn, around Nitrocis' bones,
Spectres hold council, crouching on the stones.

THE SECOND SPHINX.

Howe'er great is pharaoh, the magi, king,
Encompassed by an idolizing ring,
None is so high as Tiglath Pileser.
Who, like the God before whom pales the star,
Has temples, with a prophet for a priest,
Who serves up daily sacrilegious feast.
His anger there are none who dare provoke,
His very mildness is looked on as a yoke;
And under his, more feared than other rules,
He holds his people bound, like tamèd bulls.
Asia is banded with his paths of war;
He is more of a scourge than Attila.
He triumphs glorious--but, day by day,
The earth falls at his feet, piecemeal away;
And the bricks for his tomb's wall, one by one,
Are being shaped--are baking in the sun.

THE THIRD SPHINX.

Equal to archangel, for one short while,
Was Nimroud, builder of tall Babel's pile.
His sceptre reached across the space between
The sites where Sol to rise and set is seen.
Baal made him terrible to all alike,
The greatest cow'ring when he rose to strike.
Unbelief had shown in ev'ry eye,

Had any dared to say: "Nimroud will die!"
He lived and ruled, but is--at this time, where?
Winds blow free o'er his realm--a desert bare!

THE FOURTH SPHINX.

There is a statue of King Chrem of old,
Of unknown date and maker, but of gold.
How many grandest rulers in his day
Chrem pluckèd down, there are now none can say.
Whether he ruled with gentle hand or rough,
None know. He once was--no longer is--enough,
Crowned Time, whose seat is on a ruined mass,
Holds, and aye turns, a strange sand in his glass,
A sand scraped from the mould, brushed from the shroud
Of all passed things, mean, great, lowly, or proud.
Thus meting with the ashes of the dead
How hours of the living have quickly fled.
The sand runs, monarchs! the clepsydra weeps.
Wherefore? They see through future's gloomy deeps,
Through the church wall, into the catacomb,
And mark the change when thrones do graves become.

THE FIFTH SPHINX.

To swerve the earth seemed from its wonted path

When marched the Four of Asia in their wrath,
And when they were bound slaves to Cyrus' car,
The rivers shrank back from their banks afar.
"Who can this be," was Nineveh's appeal;
"Who dares to drag the gods at his car-wheel?"
The ground is still there that these wheel-rims tore--
The people and the armies are no more.

THE SIXTH SPHINX.

Never again Cambyses earth will tread.
He slept, and rotted, for his ghost had fled.
So long as sovereigns live, the subjects kneel,
Crouching like spaniels at their royal heel;
But when their might flies, they are shunned by all,
Save worms, which--human-like--still to them crawl
On Troy or Memphis, on Pyrrhus the Great,
Or on Psammeticus, alike falls fate.
Those who in rightful purple are arrayed,
The prideful vanquisher, like vanquished, fade.
Death grins as he the fallen man bestrides--
And less of faults than of his glories hides.

THE SEVENTH SPHINX.

The time is come for Belus' tomb to fall,

Long has been ruined its high granite wall;
And its cupola, sister of the cloud,
Has now to lowest mire its tall head bowed.
The herdsman comes to it to choose the stones
To build a hut, and overturns the bones,
From which he has just scared a jackal pack,
Waiting to gnaw them when he turns his back.
Upon this scene the night is doubly night,
And the lone passer vainly strains his sight,
Musing: Was Belus not buried near this spot?
The royal resting-place is now forgot.

THE EIGHTH SPHINX.

The inmates of the Pyramids assume
The hue of Rhamesis, black with the gloom.
A Jailer who ne'er needs bolts, bars, or hasps,
Is Death. With unawed hand a god he grasps,
He thrusts, to stiffen, in a narrow case,
Or cell, where struggling air-blasts constant moan;
Walling them round with huge, damp, slimy stone;
And (leaving mem'ry of bloodshed as drink,
And thoughts of crime as food) he stops each chink.

THE NINTH SPHINX.

Who would see Cleopatra on her bed?
Come in. The place is filled with fog like lead,
Which clammy has settled on the frame
Of her who was a burning, dazzling flame
To all mankind--who durst not lift their gaze,
And meet the brightness of her beauty's rays.
Her teeth were pearls, her breath a rare perfume.
Men died with love on entering her room.
Poised 'twixt the world and her--acme of joys!
Antony took her of the double choice.
The ice-cold heart that passion seldom warms,
Would find heat torrid in that queen's soft arms.
She won without a single woman's wile,
Illumining the earth with peerless smile.
Come in!--but muffle closely up your face,
No grateful scents have ta'en sweet odors' place.

THE TENTH SPHINX.

What did the greatest king that e'er earth bore,
Sennacherib? No matter--he's no more!
What were the words Sardanapalus said?
Who cares to hear--that ruler long is dead.

The Soudan, turning pale, stared at the TEN aghast.

"Before to-morrow's night," he said, "in dust to rest,

These walls with croaking images shall be downcast;

I will not have fiends speak when angels are addressed."

But while Zim at the Sphinxes clenched his hand and shook,

The cup in which it seems the rich wine sweetly breathes,

The cup with jewels sparkling, met his lowered look,

Dwelling on the rim which the rippling wine enwreathes.

"Ha! You!" Zim cried, "have often cleared my heated head

Of heavy thoughts which your great lord have come to seek

And torture with their pain and weight like molten lead.

Let us two--power, I--you, wine--together speak."

THE CUP.

"Phur," spoke the Cup, "O king, dwelt as Day's god,

Ruled Alexandria with sword and rod.

He from his people drew force after force,

Leaving in ev'ry clime an army's corse.

But what gained he by having, like the sea,

Flooded with human waves to enslave the free?

Where lies the good in having been the chief

In conquering, to cause a nation's grief?

Darius, Assar-addon, Hamilcar;

Who have led men in legions out to war,

Or have o'er Time's shade cast rays from their seat,

Or throngs in worship made their name repeat,

These were, but all the cup of life have drank;

Rising 'midst clamor, they in stillness sank.
Death's dart beat down the sword--the kings high reared,
Were brought full low--judges, like culprits, feared.
The body--when the soul had ceased its sway--
Was placed where earth upon it heavy lay,
While seek the mouldering bones rare oils anoint
Claw of tree's root and tooth of rocky point.
Weeds thrive on them who made the world a mart
Of human flesh, plants force their joints apart.
No deed of eminence the greatest saves,
And of mausoleums make panthers caves."

The Cup, Zim, in his fury, dashed upon the floor,
Crying aloud for lights. Slaves, at his angry call,
In to him hastily, a candelabra bore,
And set it, branching o'er the table, in the hall,
From whose wide bounds it hunted instantly the gloom.
"Ah, light!" exclaimed the Soudan, "welcome light, all hail!
Dull witnesses were yonder Sphinxes of this room;
The Cup was always drunk, in wit did ever fail;
But you fling gleams forth brightly, dazzling as a torch;
Vainly to quell your power all Night's attempts are spent;
The murky, black-eyed clouds you eat away and scorch,
Making where'er you spring to life an Orient.
To charm your lord give voice, thou spark of paradise!
Speak forth against the Sphinxes' enigmatic word,

And 'gainst the Wine-Cup, with its sharp and biting spice!"

THE LAMP.

Oh, Crusher of Countless Cities, such as earth knew
Scarce once before him, Ninus (who his brother slew),
Was borne within the walls which, in Assyrian rite,
Were built to hide dead majesty from outer sight.

If eye of man the gift uncommon could assume,
And pierce the mass, thick, black as hearse's plume,
To where lays on a horrifying bed

What was King Ninus, now hedged round with dread,
'Twould see by what is shadow of the light,
A line of feath'ry dust, bones marble-white.

A shudder overtakes the pois'nous snakes
When they glide near that powder, laid in flakes.

Death comes at times to him--Life comes no more!
And sets a jug and loaf upon the floor.

He then with bony foot the corpse o'eturns,

And says: "It is I, Ninus! 'Tis Death who spurns!

I bring thee, hungry king, some bread and meat."

"I have no hands," Ninus replies. "Yet, eat!"

Zim pierced to the very quick by these repeated stabs,

Sprang to his feet, while from him pealed a fearful shout,

And, furious, flung down upon the marble slabs
The richly carved and golden Lamp, whose light went out--
Then glided in a form strange-shaped,
In likeness of a woman, moulded in dense smoke,
Veiled in thick, ebon fog, in utter darkness draped,
A glimpse of which, in short, one's inmost fears awoke.
Zim was alone with her, this Goddess of the Night.
The massy walls of stone like vapor part and fade,
Zim, shuddering, tried to call guard or satellite,
But as the figure grasped him firmly, "Come!" she said.

BP. ALEXANDER

A QUEEN FIVE SUMMERS OLD.

("Elle est toute petite.")

[Bk. XXVI.]

She is so little--in her hands a rose:
A stern duenna watches where she goes,
What sees Old Spain's Infanta--the clear shine
Of waters shadowed by the birch and pine.

What lies before? A swan with silver wing,
The wave that murmurs to the branch's swing,
Or the deep garden flowering below?
Fair as an angel frozen into snow,
The royal child looks on, and hardly seems to know.

As in a depth of glory far away,
Down in the green park, a lofty palace lay,
There, drank the deer from many a crystal pond,
And the starred peacock gemmed the shade beyond.
Around that child all nature shone more bright;
Her innocence was as an added light.
Rubies and diamonds strewed the grass she trode,
And jets of sapphire from the dolphins flowed.

Still at the water's side she holds her place,
Her bodice bright is set with Genoa lace;
O'er her rich robe, through every satin fold,
Wanders an arabesque in threads of gold.
From its green urn the rose unfolding grand,
Weighs down the exquisite smallness of her hand.
And when the child bends to the red leaf's tip,
Her laughing nostril, and her carmine lip,
The royal flower purpleal, kissing there,
Hides more than half that young face bright and fair,
So that the eye deceived can scarcely speak

Where shows the rose, or where the rose-red cheek.
Her eyes look bluer from their dark brown frame:
Sweet eyes, sweet form, and Mary's sweeter name.
All joy, enchantment, perfume, waits she there,
Heaven in her glance, her very name a prayer.

Yet 'neath the sky, and before life and fate,
Poor child, she feels herself so vaguely great.
With stately grace she gives her presence high
To dawn, to spring, to shadows flitting by,
To the dark sunset glories of the heaven,
And all the wild magnificence of even;
On nature waits, eternal and serene,
With all the graveness of a little queen.
She never sees a man but on his knee,
She Duchess of Brabant one day will be,
Or rule Sardinia, or the Flemish crowd
She is the Infanta, five years old, and proud.

Thus is it with kings' children, for they wear
A shadowy circlet on their forehead fair;
Their tottering steps are towards a kingly chair.
Calmly she waits, and breathes her gathered flower
Till one shall cull for her imperial power.
Already her eye saith, "It is my right;"
Even love flows from her, mingled with affright.

If some one seeing her so fragile stand,
Were it to save her, should put forth his hand,
Ere he had made a step, or breathed a vow,
The scaffold's shadow were upon his brow.
While the child laughs, beyond the bastion thick
Of that vast palace, Roman Catholic,
Whose every turret like a mitre shows,
Behind the lattice something dreadful goes.
Men shake to see a shadow from beneath
Passing from pane to pane, like vapory wreath,
Pale, black, and still it glides from room to room;
In the same spot, like ghost upon a tomb;
Or glues its dark brown to the casement wan,
Dim shade that lengthens as the night draws on.
Its step funereal lingers like the swing
Of passing bell--'tis death, or else the king.
'Tis he, the man by whom men live and die;
But could one look beyond that phantom eye,
As by the wall he leans a little space,
And see what shadows fill his soul's dark place,
Not the fair child, the waters clear, the flowers
Golden with sunset--not the birds, the bowers--
No; 'neath that eye, those fatal brows that keep
The fathomless brain, like ocean, dark and deep,
There, as in moving mirage, should one find
A fleet of ships that go before the wind:

On the foamed wave, and 'neath the starlight pale,
The strain and rattle of a fleet in sail,
And through the fog an isle on her white rock
Harkening from far the thunder's coming shock.

Still by the water's edge doth silent stand
The Infanta with the rose-flower in her hand,
Caresses it with eyes as blue as heaven;
Sudden a breeze, such breeze as panting even
From her full heart flings out to field and brake,
Ruffles the waters, bids the rushes shake,
And makes through all their green recesses swell
The massive myrtle and the asphodel.
To the fair child it comes, and tears away
On its strong wing the rose-flower from the spray.
On the wild waters casts it bruised and torn,
And the Infanta only holds a thorn.
Frightened, perplexed, she follows with her eyes
Into the basin where her ruin lies,
Looks up to heaven, and questions of the breeze
That had not feared her highness to displeas;
But all the pond is changed; anon so clear,
Now back it swells, as though with rage and fear;
A mimic sea its small waves rise and fall,
And the poor rose is broken by them all.
Its hundred leaves tossed wildly round and round

Beneath a thousand waves are whelmed and drowned;
It was a foundering fleet you might have said;
And the duenna with her face of shade,--
"Madam," for she had marked her ruffled mind,
"All things belong to princes--but God's wind."

BP. ALEXANDER