

BALTHASAR

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Balthasar by Anatole France

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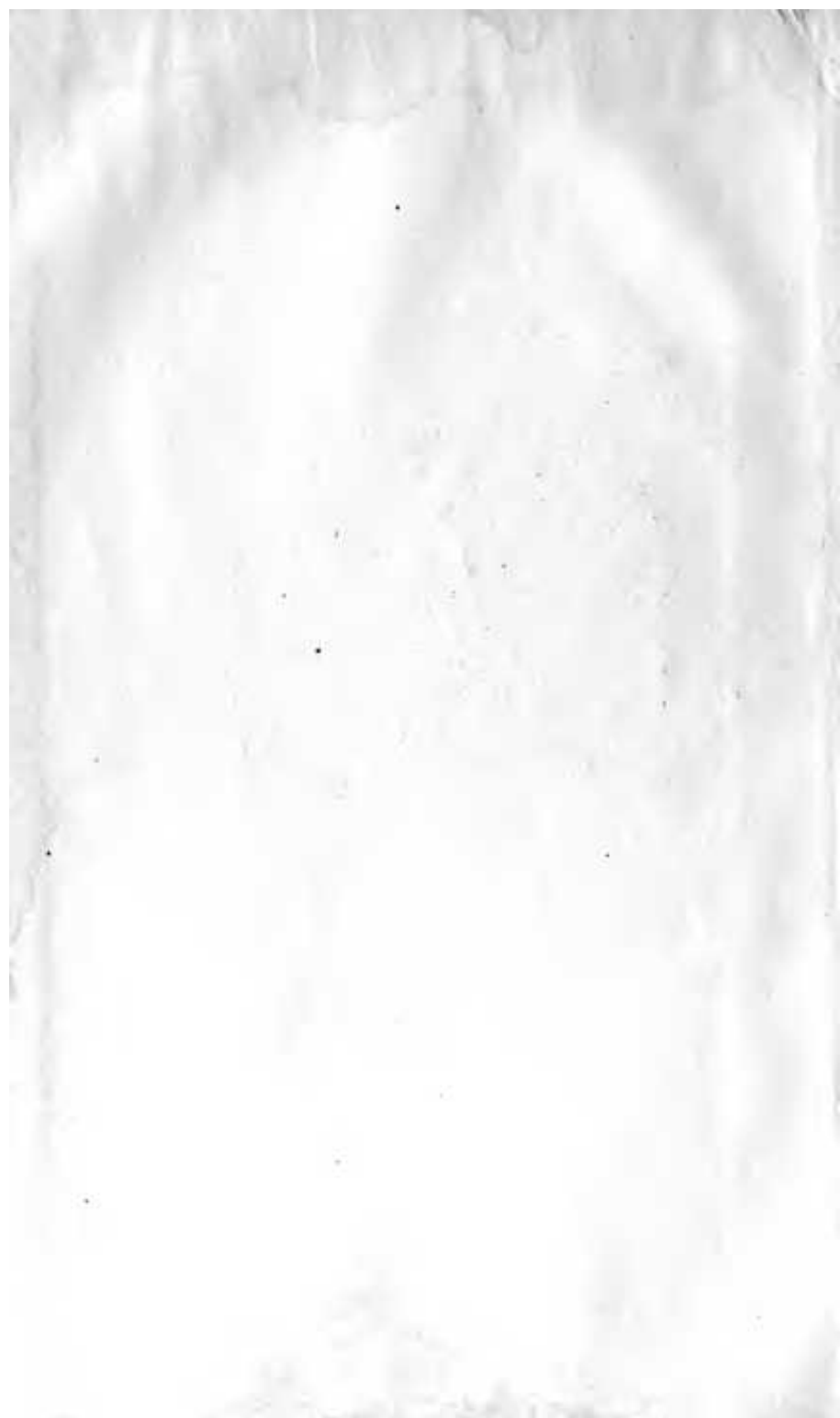
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ANATOLE FRANCE

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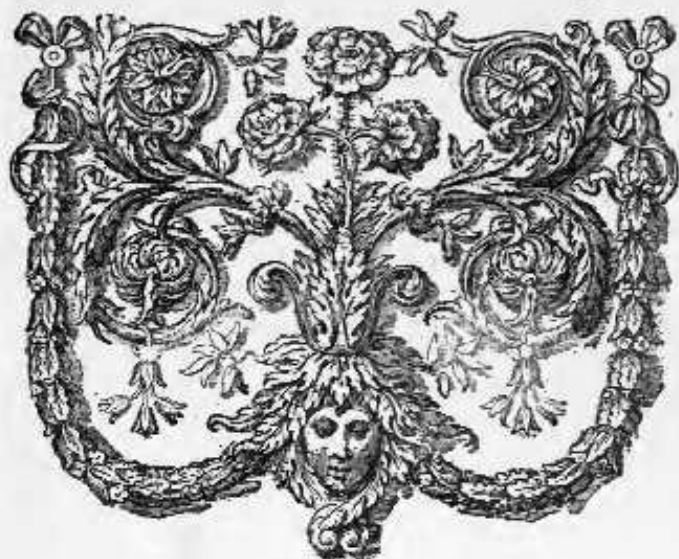


part 1

BALTHASAR

BY ANATOLE FRANCE

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BALTHASAR

TO THE VICOMTE EUGÈNE
MELCHIOR DE VOGÜE

BALTHASAR

"Magos reges fere habuit Oriens."¹

TERTULLIAN.



IN those days Balthasar, whom the Greeks called Saracin, reigned in Ethiopia. He was black, but comely of countenance. He had a simple soul and a generous heart.

The third year of his reign, which was the twenty-second of his age, he left his dominions on a visit to Balkis, Queen of Sheba. The mage Sembobitis and the eunuch Menkera accompanied him. He had in his train seventy-five camels bearing cinnamon, myrrh, gold dust, and elephants' tusks.

As they rode, Sembobitis instructed him in the influences of the planets,¹ as well as in the virtues of precious stones, and Menkera sang to him canticles from the sacred mysteries. He paid but little heed to them, but amused himself instead watching the

¹ The East commonly held kings versed in magic.

jackals with their ears pricked up, sitting erect on the edge of the desert.

At last, after a march of twelve days, Balthasar became conscious of the fragrance of roses, and very soon they saw the gardens that surround the city of Sheba. On their way they passed young girls dancing under pomegranate trees in full bloom.

"The dance," said Sembobitis the mage, "is a prayer."

"One could sell these women for a great price," said Menkera the cunuch.

As they entered the city they were amazed at the extent of the sheds and warehouses and workshops that lay before them, and also at the immense quantities of merchandise with which these were piled.

For a long time they walked through streets thronged with chariots, street porters, donkeys and donkey-drivers, until all at once the marble walls, the purple awnings and the gold cupolas of the palace of Balkis, lay spread out before them.

The Queen of Sheba received them in a courtyard cooled by jets of perfumed water which fell with a tinkling cadence like a shower of pearls.

Smiling, she stood before them in a jewelled robe.

At sight of her Balthasar was greatly troubled.

She seemed to him lovelier than a dream and more beautiful than desire.