

H. Rider Haggard

Belshazzar

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Генри Райдер Хаггард

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Аннотация

The last novel written by Haggard; finished just before his death and published posthumously.

Ramose is the offspring of an Egyptian Pharaoh and a Greek woman. Brought up in a life of luxury he is catapulted into a life of adventure which leads him to the fall of Babylon at the hand of the Persian Empire under Cyrus.

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H. Rider Haggard

Belshazzar

A. Cowan Guthrie, Esq., M.B.

Dear Cowan Guthrie,

You, a student of that age, persuaded me to write this tale of Belshazzar and Babylon. Therefore I offer it to you.

Sincerely yours,

Sincerely yours, H. Rider Haggard.

Chapter 1

Ramose and his Mother

Now when by the favour of the most high God, Him whom I worship, to whom every man is gathered at last, now, I say, when I am old, many have urged upon me that I, Ramose, should set down certain of those things that I have seen in the days of my life, and particularly the tale of the fall of Babylon, the mighty city, before Cyrus the Persian, which chanced when he whom the Greeks called Nabonidus being newly dead, Belshazzar his son was king.

Therefore, having ever been a lover of letters, this I do in the Grecian tongue here in my house at Memphis, the great city of

the Nile, whereof to-day I am the governor under Darius the Persian, for it has pleased God after many adversities to bring me to this peace and dignity at last. Whether any will read this book when it is written, or whether it will perish with me, I do not know, nor indeed does it trouble me much, since none can tell the end of anything good or ill, and all must happen as it is decreed. Man makes a beginning, but the rest is in the hands of fate; indeed his life itself is but a beginning of which the end is hid.

Now to-day when he is almost forgotten, I can say without fear that I am a king's son, for my father was none other than the Pharaoh Uah-ab-Ra, whom the Greeks called Apries and the Hebrews Hophra. Nor is my blood all royal, seeing that I was not the son of the wife of Pharaoh, but of one of his women, a Grecian lady named Chloe, the daughter of Chion, an Athenian by birth, of whom the less said the better for my mother told me that being a spendthrift and in want of money, he turned her beauty to account by giving her to Apries in exchange for a great present. I know no more of the matter because she would seldom speak of it, saying that it was shameful, adding only that her father was well-born; that her mother had died when she was an infant, and that before she came to the court at Sais, they saw many changes of fortune, living sometimes in wealth, but for the most part humbly and in great poverty which in after years bred in her a love of rank and riches.

Here in the palace of Sais during the little time that my mother

was in favour with Pharaoh, I was born, and here I lived till I was a young man grown, being brought up with the sons of the great nobles and taught all things that one of my station should know, especially the art of war and how to ride and handle weapons. Further I got learning because always from the first I loved it, being taught many things by Greek masters who were about the court, as well as by Egyptians; also by a certain Babylonian named Belus, a doctor who was versed in strange lore concerning the stars. Of this Belus, my master and friend but for whom I should long ago be dead, I shall have much to tell.

Thus it came about that in the end I could read and speak Greek as well as I could Egyptian, which was not to be wondered at, seeing that I learned it at my mother's breast. Also I mastered the Babylonian or Chaldean tongue, though not so well, and with it the curious writing of that people.

Of my father, the Pharaoh, I saw little for he had so many children such as I, born of different mothers, that he took small heed of us, he upon whom lay this hard fortune, that from those who were his queens according to the law of Egypt, he had no offspring save one daughter only, while from those who were not his queens he had many. This was a heavy grief to the Pharaoh my father, who saw in it the hands of the gods to whom he made great sacrifices, especially to Ptah-Khepera the Creator and Father of Life, building up his temple at Memphis, and praying of him a son of the pure blood. But no son came and an oracle told him that he who loved the Greeks so much must to

the Greeks for offspring, which was true, for all his sons were born of Grecian women, as perhaps the oracle knew already.

On a certain day I and other lads of my age were running races after the Grecian fashion. In the long race I outran all the rest, and fell panting and exhausted into the arms of one who, followed by three companions, stood wrapped in a dark cloak, (for the time was winter,) just by a wand that we had set in the ground to serve us as a winning-post.

“Well run and well won!” said a voice which I knew for that of Apries. “How are you named and who begot you?”

Now I rose from the ground upon which I had sunk, and pretending that he was a stranger to me, gasped out,

“Ramose is my name, and as for that of my begetter, go ask his of Pharaoh.”

“I thought it,” muttered Apries, considering me. Then he turned to the first of his councillors and said,

“You know of what we were talking just now; this lad is straight and strong and has a noble air; moreover I have a good report of him from his instructors who say that he loves learning. Why should he not fill a throne as well as another? The double crown would look well upon his brow.”

“Because his skin is too white, Pharaoh,” answered that councillor. “If the Egyptians learned that you purposed to set a Greek to rule them after you, they would cut his throat and perhaps tumble you into the Nile.”

I remember these words very well, because although spoken

at hazard, they must have been inspired, for they were in fact a prophecy, seeing that in the after years Apries was tumbled into the Nile whence Amasis who had usurped his throne, rescued his body and gave it royal burial.

After this Pharaoh spoke to me for a while, but not until he had bidden one of his councillors to lift the cloak from his shoulders and throw it round me, lest I, who was hot with the racing, should take cold. So there I stood, wrapped in the royal cloak of Tyrian purple, while those King's Companions muttered together, thinking that this was an omen and that one day I should sit upon the throne. Yet it was none, for it was not fated that any of the blood of Uah-ab-Ra, or Apries, should reign after him. That cloak I have to this day, though I do not wear it because of its royal clasp, for Pharaoh does not take back his gifts, or even that which he has lent for an hour. Yes, I have the cloak but not the crown, though this in truth I never sought.

Well, he searched me with his shrewd eyes that at times could look so fierce, and asked me questions as to my studies; also what I wished to be, a priest or a scribe or a soldier.

“What Pharaoh pleases,” I answered, “though if I had my will, I would be all three, a priest because he draws nigh to the gods; a scribe because he gathers learning which is strength, and a soldier because he defends his country and wins glory. Yet most of all I would be a soldier.”

“Well spoken,” said Pharaoh, like one who was astonished at my answer. “You shall have your way if I can give it to you.”

Then he held out his hand to me to kiss and left me, muttering, “Would that his mother had been Egyptian and not Greek.”

Here I must tell that before this time my mother, Chloe, who long ago had been succeeded by others in Pharaoh’s favour, no longer dwelt at the court in Sais. For Apries, wishing to do well by her, had given her in marriage to a wealthy Egyptian named Tapert, who was one of his officers at Memphis where he filled the place of a judge and overseer of revenues. This Tapert, a kindly-faced, grizzled little man, had fallen in love with my mother’s beauty while he was at court making report to Pharaoh on matters at Memphis, and especially as to the rebuilding of the temple of Ptah in that city, with which he had to do. Noting this, as he noted all, when the time came for Tapert to return to Memphis, Apries asked him if he desired any gift of Pharaoh whom he had served well. Tapert made no answer but let his eyes rest upon my mother who, with other women of the royal household, sat at a distance broidering linen with Grecian patterns, as she loved to do.

Apries thought a while, then said,

“Take her, if she will go. For you are a good man, if ugly, and as your wife she may be happier than here – as nothing. Ask her. You have my leave.”

So he asked as it was made easy for him to do, and in the end, although she loved the pomp and pleasures of the court, my mother listened to him, knowing him for a very rich and honest man of good blood and station, one, too, whom she could rule.

So it came about that while she was still a young and beautiful woman, for the Greeks do not wither as early as do the Egyptians, by the permission of Pharaoh my mother was married according to the full custom to the Count Tapert, a man of many offices and titles who settled wealth upon her should he die. Thus it happened that she went to live with him at Memphis, while I stayed behind at Sais.

Our parting was sad, although after my childhood we had met but little, because the laws of the court kept us apart.

“Hearken, my son,” she said to me. “I make this marriage for a double reason. When I was but a child I was delivered into the hands of Pharaoh, who soon forgot me in favour of others who came after, but because I had borne him a son, treated me honourably. Now while I am still fair I have opportunity to leave this cage with golden bars, and to become a free woman as the wife of a rich and honest man who loves me, one by whom I shall be cherished, and I take it thankfully who, if I stayed here, might one day find myself thrown into the street. Yet not altogether for my own sake, because it means that we must be parted; also, if I am loved, I do not love. Know, my son, that what I do, I do for you more even than for myself. Here in the palace you are highly placed; the Pharaoh looks upon you with favour; there are some who think that in the end he will make a prince of you and, having no lawful heirs of the royal blood, name you to follow after him. It may be that this is in his mind. But if so I am sure that it could never come about while your mother, the Grecian

slave, remained at court to remind the great ones of Egypt that you are base-born of a woman whose people the Egyptians hate, whereas if I go away this may be forgotten, though I fear that your skin will always tell its own story.

“Nor is this all. As Tapert has whispered to me, Pharaoh is rich; Pharaoh is powerful and under him the people have prosperity, the arts flourish and their gods are better served than they have been for many an age, all of which comes about because Egypt is guarded by the Greeks whom Pharaoh hires. Yet he says that they hate those guardians, they who will not protect themselves, and it may well happen that from this hatred trouble will come, bringing with it the fall of Pharaoh and of those of his House. Therefore, should that chance, I would make ready a refuge for you, my son.

“Tapert is very rich, as he has told me, one of the richest men in Egypt, although few know it, and henceforth all he has is mine, and what is mine is yours, for I do not think that I shall ever bear him children. Therefore, in the hour of trouble remember always that there is a place where you can lay your head, my son of the royal blood of Egypt, whose throne you still may win by help of the wealth that I can give you, and thereby make me, a Grecian slave bought for her beauty, the mother of a king.”

Thus she spoke and as she did so I read her heart, who although I was so young had knowledge of the court ladies and their ways. She went because she thought it no longer safe to stay near to Pharaoh who was weary of the sight of her and of her

importunities for gifts and honours, and might at any time cast her out. Still I was sad, for I who had no one else to love, loved my mother however vain and foolish she might be.

So she departed and became the wife of Tapert, Pharaoh making many gifts to her. But I stayed on at court and grew in strength and stature, also in favour with Pharaoh. Hence it came about that I was advanced beyond my station and made a Count of Egypt and a Companion of the King with other offices and titles, seeing which all men bowed down to me, thinking that in days to come, although I was base-born and half a Greek, I still might sit where Pharaoh sat. And so it might have chanced had it not been decreed otherwise and had not Hathor, whom the Greeks call Aphrodite, lit a flame of love within my heart that burned me up and wellnigh brought me to my death.

It happened thus. The King of Babylon had attacked certain peoples in Syria of whom the chief king was named Abibal, an old man. Now in the fighting the Babylonians were driven back, or rather had retired purposing to return at their own season with a larger army – it might be next year, or the year after, or the year after that, as it suited them, to burn the cities of Abibal and his allies and to slay their peoples or take them captive.

Now in this fighting the old king Abibal was wounded with an arrow in the thigh, which wound festered so that in the end he died. Before he died he determined to seek the aid of Apries, the Pharaoh of Egypt, against the Babylonians. Therefore since he trusted no one else, he left command that a young wife of his

named Atyra, whom he had married in his age, the daughter of another Syrian king, should go in person to the court of Egypt and lay the cause of her country before Pharaoh, so that he might send an army to defend it from the Babylonians. For this old king cared nothing of what might happen to his young wife after he was dead, or who should take her, but for his people, and the other peoples who were his allies, he cared much.

So he bound the Queen Atyra by a solemn oath to do his bidding, calling down the curse of his spirit and that of his gods upon her if she failed therein, and she who was youthful and desired to see new lands, and above all Egypt, swore all that he wished readily enough, after which he died and was buried. When he had been sealed up in his tomb Queen Atyra, a woman of great beauty who had been brought up in statecraft, with a voice so sweet and a mind so subtle that she could win any man to her will, started upon her journey in much pomp and bearing many gifts, leaving her dead lord's successor seated upon his throne.

At length having passed all dangers and escaped from a troop of the Babylonians that was sent out to capture her, she came safely to Egypt and encamping at a little distance from Sais, despatched messengers to Pharaoh to announce her and ask his safeguard for herself and her companions. As it chanced I, Ramose, now a young man in my twentieth year, was the captain of the guard that day; therefore it fell to me to receive these messengers and bring them before Pharaoh and his officers.

He listened to their tale of which already he knew something from his spies and those who served him in Syria. Then, having consulted with his councillors and scribes, he beckoned to me and when I came and bowed before him, said,

“Ramose, take an escort with you and ride out to the camp of this lady Atyra, and say to her that it is too late for me to answer her prayer to-day when the sun is already near to setting, but that I will consider of it tomorrow. Talk with her yourself, if you can, for she will suspect no guile in one so young, but at least spend the night at her camp learning all that you are able concerning her and her business, and to-morrow at the dawn return to make report to me.”

So I went clad in the Grecian armour that Apries had commanded the guard to wear, thereby giving much offence to the Egyptian generals and soldiers, taking my newest cloak and mounted on a fine horse of the Arab breed. Indeed, having heard through the messengers that this lady was young and beautiful, I desired to look my best, for to tell the truth, like many youths of my age I was somewhat vain and wished to please the eyes of women. Moreover this was not altogether strange, seeing that all thought me comely, who was tall and well-shaped, having clear-cut Grecian features that I inherited from my mother, brown hair that curled upon my head and large dark eyes, the gift of my Egyptian blood. Further, I was ready of speech and could talk of anything, though in truth as yet I knew little, all of which I do not shame to write now when I am old. Lastly I must add this, though

it is not to my credit; that I was too fond of women and made love to them when the chance came my way, which was often at the court of Sais. Or perhaps they made love to me – I do not know; at least none of them had really touched my heart, or I theirs.

Thus, full of youth and goodliness and the lust of life and all the gifts that the gods give us when we are young, of which we think so little until we have grown old and they are gone, followed by my escort I galloped forth proud of my mission and hoping for adventure. For little did I know that I rode into the arms of terror and of sorrow.

Chapter 2

The Cup of Hathor

An hour later, guided by the messengers, one of whom had gone on ahead to warn this lady Atyra of my coming, I caught sight of her camp set upon the sand at the edge of the cultivated land, and noted that it was large. The tents were many, dark in colour, most of them, for they were woven of camel hair after the Arab fashion, but in their midst was a great white pavilion dyed with stripes of blue and red, over which fluttered a strange, three-pointed flag which seemed to be blazoned with stars of gold.

This banner, I guessed, must mark the resting-place of the lady Atyra who called herself a queen. What sort of a queen was she, I wondered. Thick-made and black probably, though these Syrians whom in my ignorance I believed to be swarthy folk, thought her fair, as indeed all queens are fair according to those who serve them.

Whilst I was musing thus we came to the camp and must pass between two lines of camels, many of which were lying down chewing their food. Now like most horses, mine, a spirited beast, hated the sight and smell of camels and growing restive, took the bit between its teeth in such fashion that I could not hold it. Rushing forward it headed straight for the great pavilion with the coloured stripes. Soldiers or servants sprang forward to stay the

beast, but without avail, for it overthrew one of them, causing the rest to fly. On we went, till at the very door of the tent my horse caught its feet in a rope and fell, hurling me straight through the open entrance. Over and over I rolled and though my bones were unharmed, for the sand was covered with thick carpets, the breath was shaken out of me, so that for a while I sat gasping with my helmet all awry like to that of a drunken soldier.

The sound of laughter reached me, very gentle laughter that reminded me of water rippling over stones. Also there was other coarser laughter such as might come from the throats of slaves or eunuchs or of serving-girls. It made me very angry, so much so that being half-stunned, with what breath I had left I said words I should not have uttered, adding that I was Pharaoh's envoy.

"And if so, Sir, is this the fashion in which Pharaoh's envoys enter the presence of those whom it pleases Pharaoh to honour?" asked a silvery voice, speaking in the Grecian tongue though with a soft and foreign accent.

"Yes," I answered, "if they set stinking camels to frighten their horses and lay ropes to snare their feet."

Then the blood went to my head and I suppose that I fainted for a while.

When my sense returned I found myself stretched upon a couch and heard that same voice giving orders both in Greek and in the Babylonian or Chaldean tongue of which I knew something through the teaching of my tutor, Belus, also in others that I did not know, all of which talk concerned myself.

“Take that helm from his head,” said the soft voice, though not softly. “O daughter of a fool, can you not see that you are pressing the edge of it upon the bruise? Away with you! Let me do it. So. Now remove the breastplate – that is easy for the straps have burst – and open the tunic to give him air. What a white skin he has for an Egyptian. Any woman would be proud of it. By the gods he is a noble-looking youth and if he dies, as he may for I think his neck is twisted, those who tied the camels there and left the ropes lying shall pay for it. Now, wine. Where is the wine? Lift him gently and pour some down his throat. Nay, not so. Would you drown the man? Hand me the cup. Has that old leech been found? If not, bid him get himself back to Syria as best he may – ”

Just then I opened my eyes to the lids of which leaden weights seemed to have been tied. They met the glance of other eyes above me, very beautiful eyes that were neither blue nor black, but something between the two. Also I became aware that a white arm was supporting my head and that the fair and rounded breast of a very beautiful woman who was kneeling beside me, touched my own.

“I am the envoy of the Pharaoh Apries, King of the two Lands and of the countries beyond the sea. The Pharaoh says – ” I began in feeble tones, repeating the lesson that I had learned.

“Never mind what the Pharaoh says,” answered she who leant over me in a rich, low voice. “Like most of his messages of which I have had many, I doubt not that it will serve as well to-morrow

as to-day. Drink this wine and lie quiet for a while – that is, if your neck is not broken.”

So I drank and lay still, thankful enough to do so for I had fallen on my head and been much shaken, having clung with my hands to the reins of my horse as I had been taught to do in the military school, instead of stretching them out to protect myself. The wine was good and warmed me; also it seemed to clear my brain, so that soon I was able to look about me and take note.

I saw that the pavilion in which I lay was finer than any that I had ever known, being hung all round with beautiful mats or carpets that shone like silk wherever the light fell upon them. Also there was a table at its end set with vessels of gold and silver, and round it folding stools made of ebony inlaid with ivory and piled with cushions, and a brazier that stood upon a tripod, for the desert air was chill, wherein burnt wood that gave out sweet odours. Moreover there were hanging lamps of silver that presently were lit by a swarthy eunuch, for now night was closing in, which burned with a clear white flame and like the fire gave out scents.

The eunuch, clad in his rich apparel and head-dress of twisted silk, glanced at me out of his oblong eyes and went away, leaving me alone in that perfumed place. Lying thus upon my soft, cushioned bed, a strange mood took hold of me, as it does at times of those whose brains reel under the weight of some heavy blow. I seemed to lose all sense of time and place; I seemed to be floating on a cloud above the earth, looking backwards and

forwards. Far away behind me was a wall or mass of blackness out of which I crawled, a tiny, naked child, into the light of day. Then came visions of my infancy, little matters in my life that I had long forgotten, words that my mother had murmured into my baby ears, her caresses when I was sick; the softness of her cheek as she pressed it against my fevered brow, and I know not what besides. And all this while I, the infant in her arms, seemed to be asking this question of her,

“Mother, whence came I and why am I here?”

To which she answered, “I do not know, my child. The gods will tell you – when you are dead.”

The stream of time flowed on. Yes, it was a stream, for I saw it flowing, and on it I floated, clutching day by day at sticks and straws wherewith I built me a house of life, as a bird builds its nest, till at last I saw myself falling from the horse and for a moment all grew dark. Then out of the darkness there appeared shadowy shapes, some beautiful, some terrible, and I knew that these were the spirits of the future showing me their gifts. They passed by and once more before me was a black wall such as that whence I had seemed to come in the beginning, which wall I knew was Death. I searched to find some opening but could discover none. I sank down, outworn and terrified, and lo! as I sank there appeared a glorious gateway, and beyond it a city of many palaces and temples in whose courts walked gods, or men who looked like gods.

My vision passed and I awoke, wondering where that city

might be and if within it I should find any habitation.

It was a foolish dream, yet I set it down because I think it told me something of the mystery of birth and death. Or rather it set out these mysteries, revealing nothing, for who knows what lies beyond those black walls that are our Alpha and Omega and between which we spell out the alphabet of Life. Also it was not altogether foolish, for even then I knew that the shapes of terror which seemed to wait upon my path were portents of advancing woe – and trembled...

It must have been the dead of night when I awoke thus out of my swoon, for now there was no sound in the camp, save the tramping of the sentries and the howling of distant dogs or jackals smitten of the moon. In the pavilion the scented lamps burned low or had been shaded, so that the place was filled with a soft gloom, in which shadows seemed to move, caused no doubt by the swinging of the lamps in the draught of the night air. Yet one of these shadows, the most palpable of them all, did not move; indeed it seemed to stand over me like a ghost that waits the passing of one whom it has loved. I grew afraid and stirred, thinking to speak, whereon the shadow turned its head so that the light of the lamp fell upon the beautiful face of a woman.

“Who are you?” I asked in a whisper, for I seemed to fear to speak aloud.

A sweet voice answered,

“O Ramose, Pharaoh’s son and envoy, I am your hostess Atyra, once a queen.”

“And what do you here, Queen Atyra?”

“I watch you, my guest, in your swoon.”

“A poor task, Lady, more fitting to a leech or slave.”

“I think not, Ramose, son of the king, as I have been told that you are by your escort and others. There is much to be learned from those who sleep by one who has the gift of reading souls.”

“Is it your gift, Lady?”

“I have been taught it by wise men in Syria, magi the Persians call them, and as I think not quite in vain. At least I have read your soul.”

“Then, Lady, you have read that which is worth nothing, for what is written upon so short a scroll?”

“Much, Count Ramose, for our life is like the chapters of a book, and already at our birth Fate has stamped the titles of those chapters upon its clay, leaving it to Time to write the rest. Your story, I think, will be long, if sad in part. Yet it was not to talk of such things that I have come here alone at night.”

“Why, then, did you come, Lady?”

“First to see how you fared, for your fall was heavy, and secondly, if you were well enough, to hear your message.”

“It is short, Lady. Pharaoh bids me say that he will answer your requests to-morrow, since to-day it is too late.”

“Yet it was not too late for him to send you, Count Ramose, charged with words that mean nothing. I will tell you why he sent you; it was to spy upon me and make report to him.”

Thus she said, resting her chin upon her hand and looking at

me with her great dark eyes which shone in the lamplight like to those of a night-bird, but I remained silent.

“You do not answer, O Ramose, because you cannot. Well, your office is easy, for I will tell you all there is to learn. The old king, Abibal, whose wife I was in name, is dead, and dying left a charge upon me – to save his country from the Babylonians, calling down the curse of all the gods upon my head in life and on my soul in death, should I fail by my own fault to fulfil his dying prayer. Therefore I have come to Egypt, although the oracles warned me against this journey, for the case of these Syrians is very hard and desperate, and in Egypt lies their only hope who alone cannot stand against the might of Babylon. Tell me, Son of the king, will Apries help us?”

“I do not know, Lady,” I answered, “but I do know that least of all things does he, or Egypt, desire a war against Babylon. You must plead your own cause with him; I cannot answer your question.”

“How can I plead my cause, Count Ramose? I bring great gifts of gold and silks and spices, but what are these to him who holds the wealth of Egypt? I can promise allegiance and service, but my people are far away and Egypt seeks no war in which they can be used.”

Again I answered that I did not know, then added, “Yet your nation could have found no better envoy, for Pharaoh loves a beautiful woman.”

“Do you think me beautiful?” she asked softly. “Well, to tell

truth, so have others, though as yet such favour as I have, has brought me little joy – ” and she sighed, adding slowly, “Of what use is beauty to her who has found none to love?”

“I know little of such things, Lady. Yet, perhaps for you the search is not finished.”

She looked at me a while before she answered,

“My heart tells me that you are right, O Ramose. The search is not finished.”

Then she rose and taking a cup of wine gave me to drink of it, afterwards drinking a little herself as though to pledge me.

This done, she poured the rest of the wine upon the ground, like to one who makes an offering before some god, bent down so close that her scented breath beat upon my brow, whispered to me to sleep well, and glided away.

I think there must have been some medicine in that wine, for presently all the pain left my head and neck and I fell fast asleep, yet not so fast but that through the long hours I seemed to dream of the loveliness of this Syrian queen, until at length I was awakened by the sunlight shining in my eyes.

A servant who must have been watching me, noted this and went away as though to call some one. Then an old man came, one with a white beard who wore a strange-shaped cap.

“Greeting, Sir,” he said in bad Greek. “As you may guess, I am the court physician. Most unhappily I was absent last night, seeking for certain plants that are said to grow in Egypt, which must be gathered by the light of the moon, since otherwise they

lose their virtue; indeed, I returned but an hour ago.”

“Is it so, Physician?” I answered. “Well, I trust that you found your herbs.”

“Yes, young sir, I found them in plenty and gathered them with the appropriate spells. Yet I would I had never learned their name, for I hear that my mistress is very wrath with me because I was not present when you chanced to roll into the tent like a stone thrown from a catapult, and may the gods help him with whom she is wrath! Still I see that you live who, I was told, had a broken neck. Now let me see what harm you have taken, if any.”

Then he called to the eunuch to come within the screens that had been set round me, and strip me naked. When this was done, he examined me with care, setting his ear against my breast and back, and feeling me all over with his hands.

“By Bel, or whatever god you worship,” he said, “you have a fine shape, young lord, one well fitted for war – or love. Nor can I find that there is aught amiss with you, save a bruise upon your shoulder and a lump at the back of your head. No bone is broken, that I will swear. Stand up now and let me treat you with my ointments.”

I stood up, to find myself little the worse save for a dizziness which soon passed away, and was rubbed with his aromatics, and afterwards washed and clothed. Then I was led out of the pavilion to where my men were camped, who rejoiced to see me living and sound, for a rumour had reached them that I was dead. With them I ate and a while later was summoned to the presence of

the Queen Atyra.

So once more I entered the pavilion, to find this royal lady seated in a chair made of sycamore wood inlaid with ivory. I bowed to her and she bowed back to me, giving no sign that she had ever seen me before. Indeed she looked at me with her large eyes as though I were a stranger to her, and I looked at her clad in her rich robes over which flowed her black abundant hair, and marvelled at her beauty, for it was great and moved me.

I will not set out all our talk; indeed after these many years much of it is forgotten, though that which we held at midnight I remember well, when we were but man and woman together, and not as now, an envoy and a foreign queen discussing formal matters of state. The sum of it was that she grieved to hear of my mischance, and prayed me to accept a stallion of the Syrian breed in place of my own which had been lamed through the carelessness of her servants, but rejoiced to know from her physician that beyond a blow which stunned me for a while, I had taken little harm.

I thanked her and delivered Pharaoh's message, at which she smiled and said that it told her nothing, except that she must wait where she was, until it pleased him to send another. Meanwhile she hoped that I would be her guest as the physician told her I was not yet fit to ride.

Now as this plan pleased me well, for to tell truth I longed for more of the company of that most lovely woman, I summoned the scribe who was amongst those who rode with me, and wrote

a letter to Pharaoh, telling him of what had chanced, which letter I despatched in charge of two of my guard. They departed, and at evening returned again, bringing an answer signed by Pharaoh's private scribe, which bade me stay till I was able to travel, and then accompany the Queen Atyra to the court.

So there I remained that night, being given a tent to sleep in near to the pavilion. In the evening also I was bidden to eat with the queen and certain of her councillors, when, as she alone knew the Grecian tongue, the talk lay between her and me. Indeed as soon as the meal was finished she made some sign whereat these men rose and went away, leaving us alone.

The night was very hot, so hot that presently she said,

“Come, my young guest, if it pleases you, let us leave this tented oven, and walk a while beneath the moon, breathing the desert air. No need to call your guard, for here you are as safe as though you sat in Pharaoh's palace.”

I answered that it pleased me well, and calling for two of her women to accompany us, we set forth, the queen wearing a hooded, silken cloak that the women brought to her, which covered her white shape and glittering jewels like a veil. I too was wrapped in a cloak, since I wore no armour, and thus, we thought, the pair of us passed unnoted through the camp.

At a distance on the crest of a sandy hill, stood the ruin of some old temple overlooking the cultivated land and the broad waters of the Nile. Thither we wended followed by the two women; at least at first we were followed by them, but later when

I looked I could not see them any more. Still of this I said nothing who was well content to be alone with this gracious and beautiful lady. We came to the temple and entered its hoary courts whence a jackal fled away, as did a night-bird perched upon a cornice, telling me that here there was no man. At the far end of the court there remained a statue of Hathor, one of a pair, for the other had fallen. That it was Hathor might easily be known for she wore the vulture cap and above it horns between which rested the disc of the moon. Near to the feet of this statue in the shadow of a wall, Atyra sat herself down upon a broken block of alabaster, motioning to me to place myself at her side.

“What goddess is this,” she asked, “who carries the horns of a beast upon the brow of a fair woman?”

“Hathor, goddess of Love,” I answered, “whom some call Mistress of the gods.”

“Is it so? Well, by this title or by that she is known in every land, and well is she named Mistress of the gods and men. Strange that amidst all this ruin she alone should have stood through the long centuries, an emblem of love that does not die. How beautiful is the night! See the great moon riding in yonder cloudless sky. Look at her rays glittering on the river’s face and hark to the breeze whispering among the palms beneath. Truly such a night should be dear to Hathor, so dear that – ”

Here she broke off her dreamy talk, then said suddenly,

“Tell me of yourself, Prince Ramose.”

“Do not give me that title,” I exclaimed. “If it were heard it

might bring trouble on me who am but a Count of Egypt by Pharaoh's grace!"

"Yet it is yours, Ramose," she answered, "and in this place there is none to hear save Hathor and the moon. Now speak."

So I told her my short tale, to which she listened as though it had been that of the deeds of a king; then said,

"But you have left out the half of it all. You have left out Hathor."

"I do not understand," I answered, looking down to hide my blushes.

"I mean that you have left out love. Tell me of those whom you have loved. Do you not know that it is of love that all women wish most to hear?"

"I cannot, Lady, for I have – never loved."

"If that be true, how deep a cup of love is left for you to drink, whose lips have not yet sipped its wine, Ramose. So here in the shadow of Hathor sit a pair of us, for to give you truth for truth, I tell you that though I am your elder, I too have never loved."

"Yet you are a widow," I said astonished.

"Aye, the widow of an aged man who married me because of my birth, my wit, my wealth, and the great friends I brought him, and whom I married to serve my people that were threatened, as his are to-day, by the giant might of Babylon. Abibal was to me a father and no more, if a beloved father whose commands I will execute to the death, which commands bring me upon a long and perilous journey to seek help from mighty Pharaoh who desires

to give me none.”

Now I glanced at her sideways, and said,

“You are very beautiful, Lady. You have the eyes of a dove, the step of a deer, the wisdom of a man and the grace of a palm. Were there then none who pleased your eyes about your court in Syria?”

“While my lord lived I was blind, as became a loyal wife,” she answered.

“And now that he is dead, Lady?”

“Oh! now I cannot say. No more do I seek a husband who am a queen and would remain free, the slave of no one, for what slavery is there like to that of marriage? Yet it is true that I desire love, if I may choose that love. Come; let us be going, for yonder Egyptian Hathor of yours casts her spell over me and brings thoughts that for long I have forbidden in my heart. I think that this is an evil-omened place; its goddess tells of love, but its hoar ruins tell of death. Doubtless did we but know it, here we sit above the shrouded dead who, staring at us from their sepulchres, mock our beating hearts which soon will be as still as theirs. Come; let us be going, who yet are young and free from the webs of Hathor and of death. Death, I defy thee while I may. Hathor, I make a mock of thee and thy calm, compelling gaze. Dost thou not also make a mock of Hathor, Ramose?” and turning, she looked at me with her great eyes that seemed to glow in the shadows like to those of an owl.

“I do not know,” I answered faintly, for those eyes drew the

strength out of me. “Yet it is dangerous to mock at any goddess, and most of all at Hathor. Still, let us go, I think it very wise that we should go; the scent of your hair overwhelms me who have been ill. My brain rocks like a boat upon the sea. Hathor has me by the hand.”

“Yes, I think that Hathor has us both by the heart,” she answered in her low rich voice, a voice of honey.

Then our lips met, for there in her temple we had drunk of Hathor’s cup.

Chapter 3

The Counsel of Belus

We rose; her face was like the dawn, her eyes were dewy, but I trembled like a leaf, I whose heart for the first time love had gripped with cruel hands.

I thought I saw a shadow flit across a pool of moonlight that lay within the temple's broken pylon, the shadow of a man.

"What frightens you?" she asked.

I told her in a whisper.

"Perchance it was a spirit of which this place must be full, for such, they say, look like shadows. Or perchance it was thrown from the broad wings of some fowl of the night," she answered lightly. "At least if it be otherwise, that watcher was too far away to have seen us here, seated side by side in gloom. Certainly he could not have heard our words. Yet, Ramose, Hathor's gift to me, I would warn you. Among those who sat with us at the board to-night, did you take note of one, a bearded man of middle age, hook-nosed, with flashing eyes like to those of a hawk?"

"Yes, Lady Atyra, and I thought that he looked askance at me."

"It may be so. Listen. That man was a councillor of Abibal's, a priest of his god also, and as such one of great power in the land. Always he has pursued me with his love, and now he would wed me. But I hate him, as hitherto I have hated all men, and

will have none of him. Moreover,” here her voice grew hard and cold, “when I am strong enough I will be rid of him, but that is not yet. If I can win Pharaoh’s friendship and bring it to pass that he names me to succeed to the throne of Abibal, as his subject queen, then and not till then shall I be strong enough, for this Ninari has a large following and the half of my escort are sworn to him. Meanwhile, have no fear and be sure that in this, our first kiss, I pledged my heart to you and to no other man.”

“I thank you, O most Beautiful,” I answered. “Yet tell me, Lady, how can this matter end? You have been a queen and will be one again, while I am but Pharaoh’s base-born son, one of many, though I think that he loves me best of all of them. Also I am young and unproved. What then can there be between us?”

“Everything before all is done, I think, Ramose, if you will but trust to me who am wise and strong in my fashion, and being alas! older than you are, have seen and learned more. Already I have a plan. I will persuade Pharaoh to send you with me to Syria, there to be his eyes and envoy, and once back in my own country I will be rid of this Ninari and will take you as my husband, saying that such is Pharaoh’s will.”

“May that day come soon!” I muttered, who already was as full of love of this royal woman, as a drunkard is with wine.

Meanwhile we had left the temple, and were walking side by side but not too near, down the slope of sand towards the camp. As we went, from a clump of stunted sycamores appeared the two waiting-ladies whom Atyra chided because they had not followed

her more closely.

They answered that they had seen a man who looked like a thief of the desert, watching them and being afraid, had taken refuge among the trees till he went away down towards the river. Then they had come out but could not find us, and therefore returned to the trees and waited, not knowing what else to do.

“You should have run back to the camp and fetched a guard,” she answered angrily. “For is it meet that the Lady Atyra should wander unaccompanied in the night?”

Then she dismissed them and they fell behind us, but although I was young and knew little of women’s tricks, the only thing I believed about that tale, was that they had seen a man, perchance the same whose shadow flitted across the moonlight within the broken pylon.

When we reached the camp and had passed the sentries in front of the pavilion, we met the councillor and priest Ninari, who seemed to be waiting there, doubtless for our return. He bowed low and spoke to the queen in a Syrian tongue which I did not understand, and in that tongue she answered him, somewhat sharply, as I thought. Again he bowed low, almost to the ground indeed, but all the while I felt that his fierce eyes were fixed upon me. Then with some courteous words to myself, thanking me for my company, she passed into the pavilion.

I, too, turned to go to my own quarters where my escort awaited me, when this Ninari stepped in front of me and said in bad and guttural Greek,

“Young lord from the Pharaoh’s court, your pardon, but I would have you know that whatever may be the fashions of Egypt, it is not our custom for strangers to walk alone with a great lady at night, especially if she chances to be our queen.”

Now there was something in the man’s voice and manner which stirred my blood, and I answered, holding my head high,

“Sir, I am a guest here and Pharaoh’s envoy, and I go where my hostess asks me to go, whatever may be your Syrian customs.”

“You are strangely favoured,” he said sneering. “Your horse which you cannot manage, hurls you like a sack stuffed with barley into the presence of our mistress. She doctors your bruised poll, and now takes you out walking in the moonlight. Well, well, I should remember that you are but a forward, cross-bred Egyptian boy, well-looking enough as bastards of your kind often are in their youth, just such a one as it pleases grown women to play with for an hour and then cast aside.”

I listened to this string of insults welling like venom from the black heart of the jealous Syrian. At first they amazed me to whom no such words had ever been used before. Then as the meaning of his coarse taunts, hissed out in broken Greek, came home to me, being no coward I grew enraged.

“Dog!” I said, “beast of a Syrian, do you dare to talk thus to Pharaoh’s envoy, a Count of Egypt?” and lifting my arm I, who was a trained boxer, doubled my fist and smote him in the face with all my strength, so that he went headlong to the ground.

At the sound of my raised voice men ran together from here

and there – some of them those of my own escort whose tents were near at hand, some of them Syrians – and stood staring as this Ninari went backward to the earth. In a moment he was up again, blood pouring from his hooked nose, and came at me, a curved and naked blade in his hand, which I suppose he had drawn as he rose. Seeing this, I too drew my short Grecian sword and faced him, though there was this difference between us, that whereas I had no armour, being clothed only in a festal dress of linen, he wore a coat of Syrian mail. My men, noting this, would have thrown themselves between us, but I shouted to them to stand aside. The Syrians would have done likewise, but at some command that I did not hear, they also fell back. Thus we were left facing each other in the full moonlight which was almost as clear as that of day.

Ninari smote at me with his broad, curved blade. I bent almost to my knee and the blow went over my head. Rising, I thrust back. My sword-point struck him full beneath the breast but could not pierce his good armour, though it caused him to reel and stumble. Again he came at me, smiting lower to catch me on the body which he knew was unprotected, and this time I must leap far backwards, so that the point of his blade did no more than cut through my linen garment and just scratch the skin beneath.

Yet that scratch stung me, more perhaps than a deeper wound would have done, and made me mad. Uttering some old Greek war-cry, as I think one my mother had taught me as that of her father's House, I flew at the man and smote him full upon his

helm, shearing off one side of it and causing him to stagger. Before he could recover himself I smote again and though the steel glanced from the edge of his severed helm, yet passing downwards, it cut off his right ear and sank deep into his neck and shoulder.

He fell and lay there, as it was thought, dead. The Syrians began to murmur for they did not love to see a noted warrior of their race thus defeated by an unarmoured youth. My men, fearing trouble, ringed me round, muttering such words as:

“Well done, young Ramose!” “You have lopped that cur’s ear, Count, although he wore a collar when you had none.” “Now if any other Syrian would like a turn – ” and so forth, for this escort of mine, some of them Greek and some Egyptian, were all picked fighters of Pharaoh’s guard, and rejoiced that their boy officer should have won in so uneven a fray.

The business grew dangerous; the friends of Ninari drew their weapons and waved spears. My escort made a ring about me in the Grecian fashion, their swords stretched out in front of them. Then I heard a woman’s voice cry,

“Have done! Fools, would you bring Pharaoh’s wrath upon us and cause our country’s prayer to him to be refused? If this young Egyptian lord has done ill, let Pharaoh judge him.”

“Queen,” I broke in, panting between my words, “I have done no ill. This follower of yours,” and I pointed to Ninari who lay upon the sand groaning, “for no cause bespattered me with the vile mud of insults, till at length unable to bear more, I felled him

with my hand. He rose and although I wear no mail, sprang at me to slay me with his sword. So I must defend myself as best I might. There are many here who can bear witness that I speak the truth.”

“It is needless, Count Ramose,” she answered in a clear voice, “for know that I heard and saw something of this business and hold that you were scarcely to blame, save that you should have taken no heed of mad or wine-bred talk. Yet, lest harm should come to you and I and my people be put to shame, I pray you leave this camp now at once and return to Sais whither I will follow you tomorrow to seek audience of Pharaoh and ask his pardon. Let the horses of Pharaoh’s envoy be made ready.”

Men ran to do her bidding, but my guard who looked doubtfully at the Syrians, remained about me, save two of them who went to my tent and thence brought my armour which they helped me to gird on.

Meanwhile that same old leech who had tended me, had been busy with Ninari whom he ordered to be carried to his tent. Now he rose and made his report to Atyra.

“The Lord Ninari henceforth must go one-eared,” he said. “Also the Egyptian’s sword has cut through his mail and sunk into the flesh of his shoulder, for the blow was mighty. Yet by chance it seemed to have missed the big vein of the neck, so unless his hurts corrupt I think that he will live.”

“I pray the gods it may be so,” answered Atyra in a cold voice, “and that henceforth his tongue may remember what has chanced

to his ear. Hear me all! If any lifts a hand against Pharaoh's envoy or his company because of this matter, he dies. Farewell, Count Ramose, till we meet again at Sais," and with one flashing glance of her great eyes, she turned and went, followed by her women.

A while later I and my guard rode out of the camp, I mounted upon the desert-bred stallion that the queen had given me in place of my own beast which was lamed. The Syrians watched us go in silence, except one fellow who cried out,

"You won that fight, young cock of Egypt, but it will bring you no good luck who have cropped the ear of the priest Ninari and earned the curse of his god."

I made no answer, but presently when we were clear of the camp and riding alone in the moonlight, I began to think to myself that this visit of mine had been strange and ill-omened. It began with the fall of my horse, which hurled me, as Ninari had said, like a sack of barley into the presence of her to whom I was sent, a mischance which even to this day I cannot remember without shame. Then came those hours when I lay half-swooning and in pain, and woke to find that most beautiful queen watching me alone, which in Egypt we should have thought strange, though mayhap the Syrians and the desert-dwellers had easier customs. At last she spoke and told me that she had come thus to read my soul while I slept. Why should she wish to read the soul of one who was unknown to her until that day?

Now I bethought me of what had passed between us afterwards in the ruined temple, and an answer rose in my mind.

It must be because at first sight of my face this lady had been smitten with love of me, as I had heard sometimes chances to women and to men also. Could I doubt it with her kiss still burning on my lips? And yet who knew – it might be that she did but play a part to serve her secret ends, which caused her to put out her woman's strength and make me her slave. Why not?

This love of hers, if love it were, had been most swift. Was it to be believed that she, my elder by some years, would suddenly become enamoured of a lad? Was it not easy (as indeed I knew) for a woman to feign passion? Was it not done every day on the street or elsewhere? What did a few kisses matter to such a one? Was I more than a young fool beguiled, and for this beguilement was there not good reason? I was Pharaoh's son whom he was known to favour in his fashion because I was well-looking, quick, and, in a way, learned. Also I was his envoy, one whose report he would accept. Further, this great Syrian lady desired Pharaoh's help. What more natural, then, than that she should strive to win that favoured son and envoy to her interests, and how could she bind him better to her than with her lips and wanton hair?

So this was the sum of it, that I knew not whether I were but a painted plaything or the jewel on her breast. All I knew, alas! was that she had taken my heart into those soft white hands of hers and that passion for her burned me up.

Truly it was an evil business and to make it worse I had quarrelled with and hewn off the ear of that jealous-hearted, foul-tongued priest-minister of hers, who doubtless hoped to wed

her and thus win a throne. Oh! truly this had been an accursed journey from which no good could come, as that shouter of a Syrian had foretold. And yet – and yet, I was glad to have made it, for Atyra’s kisses burned upon my lips and I longed for more of them when she came to Sais.

We reached the palace before the dawn and I went to my chamber and slept, for after all that had chanced to me this night I was very weary. Also there was time, since none might appear before Pharaoh until within two hours of midday, after he had made his offerings to the god and rested. When at length I awoke, the first thing that my eyes fell upon was the brown, wrinkled face of my master and friend, the learned Babylonian, Belus.

“Greeting, Ramose,” he said. “I heard that you were returned and as you did not come to me, I have come to you. They are telling strange stories in the courtyards of your adventures yonder in the desert, stories that are little to your credit as an envoy, although they praise you as a man. At least I hear that your escort speak well of your swordsmanship. Now out with these tales, for they will go no further than my ears, and for the rest, perhaps I can give you good counsel.”

So because we loved each other, I told him everything from the beginning to the end. He listened, then said,

“When I entered this chamber, Ramose, I smelt two things, the scent of a woman’s hair and the reek of a man’s blood; which was natural as you have neither bathed your face nor cleaned your sword. Or perhaps the spirit that is in me did this; it does

not matter. Now what has chanced to you was to be expected, seeing that you are young and well-favoured, one of a kind that women will seek out, as butterflies seek the nectar that they love in the throats of certain infrequent flowers; one, too, whose hand is shaped to a sword-hilt. So the woman has come and the sword has swung aloft and now follows the trouble.”

He paused a while in thought, then went on,

“As you know, Ramose, in the time that I have to spare from the writing of letters to Babylon and work or learning of the useful sort, I follow after divination according to our Babylonian methods by the help of stars and the shadows that these throw in crystals or in water, a foolish and uncertain art, yet one through which now and again peeps the cold eye of Truth. Last night at least it told me something, namely that you would do well to take a journey by Pharaoh’s leave, say to Memphis to see your mother, until this half-queen, Atyra, has finished her business at the court and returned to Syria.”

“I do not wish to leave the court at present, Belus,” I answered awkwardly.

“Ah! I guessed as much. They say that though past her youth, this Syrian woman is very fair and doubtless those experienced eyes of hers have pierced to your heart and set it afire. Yet I pray you to go till she has departed back to Syria.”

“You speak earnestly, Belus. Tell me, what else did the starlight show you in your crystal?”

“That which I liked little, Son – much, and yet nothing. That

light turned to blood – whose blood I do not know, yet in the red mist I saw shapes moving and one of them was – yours, Ramose.”

Now I grew afraid and that I might find time to think, bade him speak on.

“Hearken, Son. You have tasted a wine that some men desire more than any other and you would drain the cup. Yet the dregs of this passionate drink from nature’s ancient cup are always bitter and often deadly or charged with shame. You would make that woman yours and perchance if she does not play with you, you may succeed, for I think that she too found the potion sweet. Yet I say that if so it will be to your sorrow and hers.”

“Why should I not love her?” I broke in. “She is beautiful and wise, she is unwed. Though she be older than I am I would make her my wife and share her fortunes. May not a man take a wife who pleases him and whom he pleases?”

“A man may if he is foolish,” answered Belus with his quiet smile, “but what is mere unwisdom for a man, for a lad is often madness. Moreover this lady lies like a bait in a snare-net full of policies, high policies that you do not understand. To meddle with her may bring about a war with Babylon, or perchance may throw the peoples whose cause she is here to plead, into the arms of Babylon and thus open Egypt’s flank to Egypt’s foes. If either of these troubles happened, do you think you would earn Pharaoh’s thanks? I say that he would curse you and cast you forth, perhaps over the edge of the world into death’s darkness.

“Indeed already one of them has begun. Because of her you

have fought with a priest of her gods that are not your gods or those of Egypt, or even of the Greeks, black gods and bloody. You have cut him down and maimed him, even if he is not slain. Do you hold that this priest and counsellor will suffer those gods or their worshippers to forget such an outrage against their minister? Will he not lay that severed ear of his upon their altar and cry to them for vengeance. Already it seems the Syrians muttered curses on you as you rode away, and if they come to learn that you, an alien of another faith, are the favoured lover of their lady, the widow of their king, through whom since he has left no children, perchance one of them hopes to win his throne, what then?

“Lastly, I warn you that this business may end in terrors, or rather I pass on the warning that my spirit gives me. I pray you, Ramose, to heed my counsel. Let me go to Pharaoh and ask of him to send you hence till this embassy is finished. Indeed I would that I had gone already, as soon as I learned your tale.”

Thus he spoke and watching him I noted that he was much in earnest, for his face had flushed and his hands quivered. Now, although my flesh rebelled, for I yearned to see Atyra again more than ever I had yearned for anything, my reason bent itself before the will of this master of mine, whom I loved and who, as I knew, loved me. I would accept his decree as though it were that of an oracle; if Pharaoh permitted, I would go to Memphis or elsewhere and if I must find a sweetheart, she should be one of a humbler sort upon whose favours hung no great matters of the

state. Yet, having as it seemed, made conquest of so lovely and high-placed a lady, a victory of which I was proud indeed, it was very hard to leave her without reason given or farewell. Still it should be done – presently.

“Belus,” I said, “wait a little while I bathe myself and change my garments, and eat a mouthful of food. I think that I will do as you wish, but you ask much of me and I would have a space in which to think. Be pleased, therefore, dear Belus, to grant it to me.”

He studied me with his bright and kindly eyes, then answered, “Take what you wish, for well I know the vanity of youth and that if I deny your will, it may turn you against my counsel. I will wait, though in this matter I hold that delay is folly. Be swift now, for with every minute that passes, danger draws more near.

So I withdrew and the black slaves who were my servants, for in all ways at the palace I was treated as a great lord and even as a prince, bathed me and clothed me in fresh garments and dressed my hair. While they did so I ate a little and drank a cup of wine that was brought to me. These things done I went into the anteroom where Belus walked to and fro with bowed head.

“What word?” he asked.

“Master,” I answered, “I have taken counsel with myself and though it costs me dear, I bow to your will, knowing that you are wise, while I am but a lad and full of folly. Go to Pharaoh, lay all this matter before him, giving it your own colour. Then, if having heard, he thinks it well that I should depart, I will do

so at once and see the Queen Atyra no more, though thus I earn her scorn, or even her hate.”

“Well spoken, Son!” he answered, “though I would that you had been less stubborn and had found those words an hour ago. Still, such sacrifice is hard to the young and I forgive you. Now bide you here while I wait on Pharaoh in his private chamber to which I have entry as one whom he consults upon many secret matters, also on those of his health. Presently I will return with his commands.”

As the words left his lips the curtains at the far end of the chamber opened and through them came a messenger, clad in the royal livery, who bowed to me and said,

“King’s Son and Count Ramose, Pharaoh commands your presence, now, at once.”

“I obey,” I answered but Belus at my side groaned and muttered,

“All is spoilt! Too late! Too late!”

Chapter 4

The Fall of Ramose

I was led to Pharaoh's private chamber, Belus coming with me. Here I found him in a troubled and a wrathful mood, and guessed from his face and those of certain who waited on him, among them Amasis the General, he who was afterwards destined to become Pharaoh, that there was evil tidings in the wind. Here I should write that this Amasis, a fine-looking man though of no high birth, and a great soldier, was a friend to me to whom he had taken a fancy while I was still quite a boy. It was under his command that I had learned all I knew of matters which have to do with war, the handling of weapons and the leading of men.

“How shall we act?” Pharaoh was saying to Amasis. “There can be no doubt that the King of Babylon intends to threaten, if not to attack Egypt now that he has finished with those Hebrews. Moreover it is the matter of the Syrian tribes over whom Abibal was king that has brought the business to a head. Nebuchadnezzar, or whoever holds the real power in Babylon now that he is sunk in age, has heard of the embassy of the Queen Atyra to me, and purposes to be beforehand with us, fearing lest we should aid the Syrians. That is why he sends an army against Egypt.”

“I hold that it is but a feint, Pharaoh,” answered Amasis, “for as yet the Babylonians have not strength upon the frontier for so vast an enterprise. The best plan is to be bold. Do you send me with another army to guard our borders, and meanwhile speak this queen fair, lest suddenly she, or her Syrians, should turn round, make peace with Babylon and join in the onslaught. Then the danger would be great because those Syrian tribes are countless.”

“Good counsel, or so I think,” said Pharaoh. “Do you set about gathering troops, friend Amasis, and make all things ready, but as quietly as may be.”

At this moment his eye fell upon me, and he said,

“So you are back, son Ramose. Now tell me what is all this tale I hear about you? First it seems you tumble off your horse and make yourself a laughing-stock to the Syrians, and next you quarrel with one of them, a dangerous fellow and a priest called Ninari of whom I have heard before, and crop him of an ear. I am angry with you. What have you to say?”

“Only this, Pharaoh,” I answered. “It was my horse that tumbled over a rope, not I, and for the rest the Syrian insulted me, using words that you would not have wished your son to suffer; no, nor any gentleman of Egypt.”

“Why did he insult you, Ramose? Had you perchance drunk too much of that strong Syrian wine?”

“Not so, Pharaoh. It was because at her own request I had led the Queen Atyra to the ruined temple above her camp, that

thence she might look on the river by moonlight. This I did because Pharaoh bade me to win the friendship of the queen and learn all I could of her mind.”

“Indeed, Ramose. And did you perchance learn anything else of her – let us say, that her eyes were bright or her lips soft?”

Now the blood came to my face while Amasis laughed in his rough fashion, and even Pharaoh smiled a little as he went on,

“Well, if you did, you will not tell me, so to ask is useless. Listen. I know this – for when I sent you on that business, I sent others to keep a watch on you – I say I know that this lady found you to her taste, or made pretence to do so for her own ends. Therefore I overlook your foolishness and purpose to make use of you. Presently she will be at the palace. I appoint you the officer in attendance on her with command to draw from her all you can and report what you learn to me. For now that I do not trust this woman who perchance is after all but a spy of Babylon. Do you hear me?”

“I hear, Pharaoh,” I answered bowing low to hide the doubt and trouble in my eyes.

“Then understand this also: That I put a great trust upon you, Ramose. Play the lover if you like, but remember that your first duty is to play the spy. Above all, no more quarrels with Ninari or any other. Do nothing foolish. Speak warm words, but let your heart stay cold. Now opportunity is in your hand and if you fail me, it will be for the last time; aye, your life may hang on it.”

“Spare me this task, Pharaoh,” I muttered, “for it is one that

may prove too hard for me. Give it to another, an older man like – like Belus.”

Pharaoh looked at Belus who although not very old, already was bald and withered like to an ancient papyrus that for centuries has been buried in the sand. He was cold-eyed also and one who shrank away from women as though they were smitten by a plague, a man from whom wisdom and learning seemed to ooze, but whose history, heart and ends were hidden; somewhat sinister withal, save to the few he loved, perhaps from long acquaintance with dark secrets whispered by spirits in the night. Yes, Pharaoh looked at him and laughed.

“The learned Belus has his uses,” he said, “as all know when they are smitten in body or in soul, but I do not think that the cozening of fair women is one of them. Each to his trade and part. But, Ramose, beware lest you betray the one and overdo the other. Take, but give nothing, and above everything be friends with all, even with this Ninari if he lives, praying his pardon and salving his hurt with gifts.”

Then he waved his hand to dismiss me and once more fell into talk with the General Amasis.

I prostrated myself and went, followed by Belus, my tutor, who, when we had reached my quarters, sat himself down upon the floor like a mourner and wiped his brow, saying,

“Unless you are wiser than I think, son Ramose, all is finished and you are lost.”

I stared at him in question and he went on,

“Do you not understand that Pharaoh has set you a terrible task? You, the hungry bee, must hover over the open flower but not taste its nectar; you, the dazzled moth, must wheel round the flame but not scorch your wings. You, the young and ardent, must play the part of the aged and the cold. Moreover, this he has done of deep purpose, to try your quality and to learn whether duty can conquer passion. I think that if you prevail in this matter, he means to lift you high, even to the footsteps of the throne. But if you fail, why then, farewell to you.”

“I shall not fail,” I answered wearily, “for my honour is on it. Now let me rest a while. I have been hurt, I have gone through much and for two nights I have had little sleep; also I have fought for my life.”

Then without more words I threw myself down upon my bed and soon forgot all things, even Atyra.

When I awoke it was already late afternoon, so late that scarcely was there time before night fell for me to visit the chambers of the palace where the Queen Atyra and her servants were to lodge, and give orders for their preparation, as now I had authority to do. These chambers as it chanced, whether by design or by accident, adjoined my own, for I dwelt in some small rooms of that wing of the great palace that was used to house Pharaoh’s guests. Therefore I had not far to go, only the length of a short passage indeed, and through a door of which I held the key.

Until it was dark and next morning from the sunrise, aided by chamberlains and other palace servants, I laboured at this making

ready. All was clean, all was garnished, everywhere flowers were set. Beautiful curtains were hung up, vessels of gold and silver fit for a queen's use were provided; the garden ground that lay in the centre of this wing of the palace, having in it a little lake filled with lotus flowers, was tended so that if she pleased, the Queen Atyra might sit there beneath the shadow of palms and flowering trees, the eunuchs were furnished with fresh robes, and I know not what besides.

At length when all was prepared, I looked out from an upper window and saw the cavalcade of the Syrians drawing near to the palace. In its centre, preceded and followed by white-robed, turbaned men mounted upon camels, was a splendid litter which doubtless held the queen for it was surrounded by a guard of horsemen. Also there were other litters for her women, while last of all came one like that on which the sick are borne, whereof the bearers stepped very carefully, that I guessed hid none other than the priest Ninari, who to tell truth I hoped had gone to the bosom of Osiris, or of whatever god he worshipped. Belus who was by me, read as much in my eyes and shook his head, saying,

“Snakes are very hard to kill, my son, as I who have hunted one for years, know as well as any man and better than most. Be careful lest this one should live to bite you.”

Then I hurried away to be arrayed in the festal robes of a Count of Egypt and to put about my neck the gold chain that marked my rank as the son of a king. Scarcely was I prepared when a messenger summoned me to the great hall of audience.

Thither I went to find Pharaoh gloriously attired, wearing the double crown, with the gold ear-rings and other ornaments of state, and holding in his hand a sceptre. Round about him were the great officers of the court, at his feet crouched scribes, while just behind the fan-bearers stood his generals, some Egyptian and some Greek, all clad in armour, amongst whom I noted Amasis.

I advanced, followed by Belus my tutor, and prostrated myself before the throne. Pharaoh bade me rise and with his sceptre pointed to where I should stand among, or rather a little in front of, the nobles and king's sons, of whom there were several, my half-brothers born of different ladies, though I was the eldest of them. As I went, stepping backwards and bowing at each step, Pharaoh turned and spoke to Amasis and I think his words were that I was a young man of whom any king might be proud to be the father.

“Yes,” answered Amasis in a hoarse whisper that reached me, “yet it is pity that he is so like to one of those statues that the Greeks of whom you are so fond, fashion of their gods. His mother has too much share in him, Pharaoh. Look at his curly head.”

Then they both laughed and I nearly fell in my confusion.

At this moment trumpets blew, heralds cried aloud, and preceded by officers with white wands, the Queen Atyra appeared between the pillars at the end of the hall of audience. On her head she wore a glittering crown, jewels shone upon her

breast, pearls were twisted in her looped and raven locks and round her white wrists, while her silken train was borne by fair waiting-women. Oh! seen thus, she was beautiful, so beautiful that as I watched her tall, imperial shape glide up that hall like a sunbeam through its shadows, my heart stood still and my lips burned with the memory of her kiss. A little sigh of wonder went up from the courtiers and through it I heard the jesting Amasis whisper once more,

“I wish that you had given me Ramose’s office, Pharaoh,” to which Apries answered,

“Nay, you are too rough, you would frighten this Syrian dove, whereas he will stroke her feathers.”

“Dove! Dove!” muttered Amasis.

Then Pharaoh lifted his sceptre and there was silence.

Atyra drew near in all her scented beauty, with bent head and downcast eyes. Yet for one instant those dark eyes were lifted and I felt rather than saw them flash a look upon me, saw also the red lips tremble as though with a little smile. I think that Belus saw also, for I heard a groan come from where he stood near by in attendance on me. The queen mounted the royal dais and curtseyed low, though prostrate herself she did not because she was a majesty greeting a majesty. Pharaoh descended from his throne and taking her hand, led her to a seat that was placed near though slightly lower than this throne.

Then she spoke – in Greek which by now had become the courtly language among many nations that did not know each

other's speech. An interpreter began to render her words, but Apries, waving him aside, answered her in the same tongue which he knew as well as he did his own, having learned it from my mother and others. This caused many of the Egyptians round him to frown, especially those that were old or wedded to ancient ways which had come down to them through thousands of years, who hated the Greeks with their new fashions, their language and all that had to do with them. Indeed I noted that even Amasis frowned and shrugged his shoulders and that the other Egyptian generals looked on him with approval as he did so.

As for the talk between Atyra and Pharaoh, it need not be set out. She made a formal prayer to him, reminding him of the ancient friendship between the Syrians and Egypt that more than once during the generations which had gone by, had been their over-lord, yes, from the time of the great Thotmes onward, though sometimes they had quarrelled "as a wife will, even with the husband whom she loves." Now she, the widow of Abibal who had been the head king of the Syrian peoples and who had died leaving his mantle upon her shoulders, came to seek renewal of that alliance, even though Syria must thus once more become the wife of Egypt and serve as a wife serves.

Here Pharaoh asked shrewdly if this wife sought to shun the arms of some other lover, whereon she answered with boldness, "yes," that this was so and that the name of that lover was Babylon, Egypt's ancient enemy and the one from whom she had most to fear.

Now Pharaoh grew grave, saying that this was a very great matter of which he must consider with himself and his councillors, after private talk with her. Then dismissing all such affairs of state, he asked her how it had fared with her during her long journey, from which he hoped that she would rest a while here in his palace at Sais, treating it as her own. She answered that she desired nothing better, who all her life had hoped to visit Egypt and acquaint herself with its wonders and its wisdom.

So this prepared and balanced talk went on, reminding me of a heavy weight swinging to and fro, and never going further or less far, till at length Pharaoh bade her to a banquet that night. Then, as though by an afterthought, he added,

“O Queen Atyra, the other day I sent Ramose, a young Count of Egypt in whom runs no mean blood, to your camp to welcome you in Egypt’s name. I grieve to hear that while he was there a quarrel arose between him and one of your followers, and for this I ask your pardon.”

“There is no need, Pharaoh,” she answered smiling, “seeing that in every quarrel there is something to be said on either side.”

“Then, Queen Atyra, if you can forgive him, would it please you that while you are here I should appoint this Ramose who stands yonder, to be your chamberlain to attend upon your wants and bear your wishes to me? Or would you prefer that I should choose some older man to fill this office?”

“I think that it would please me well,” she answered indifferently, “seeing that I found the Count Ramose a pleasant

companion and one with whom I could talk in Greek; also one who can instruct me in the customs and history of Egypt and in its tongue, all of which I desire to learn. Yet let it be as the Pharaoh wills. Whoever Pharaoh chooses will be welcome to me.”

So saying, she turned her head to speak to one of her servants in her own language, as though the matter troubled her not at all.

“Count Ramose,” said Pharaoh, addressing me, “for the days of her stay at our court we give this royal lady into your keeping. Let it be your duty to wait upon her and to attend to her every want, making report to us from time to time of how she fares. Know, Ramose, that we shall hold you to strict account for her safety and her welfare and that if aught of ill befalls her while she is in your keeping, you shall make answer for it to us.”

Thus in formal, stately words was the lady Atyra set in my charge. I heard and bowed, while the other courtiers looked on me with envy, for this was a great duty and one that should bring with it advancement and rewards. Yet it is true that as I bowed my heart, which should have leapt for joy, seemed to sink and fail so that I could scarcely feel it beat. It was as though some icy hand of fear had gripped it by the roots. A great terror took hold of me, a shadow of woe to come fell upon me. Almost I determined to prostrate myself and pray Pharaoh to confer this honour on some other man, one with more knowledge and older. I even turned to advance to the steps of the throne and do so, although I knew that such a prayer would cause me to be mocked by all the court. It was too late, Pharaoh had risen; his decree

was written on the rolls, the audience was at an end.

Now I will press on with the terrible story of Atyra which was to turn the current of my life and for aught I know, robbed me of the throne of Egypt. At least so Belus held, as did some others, though if so, that is a loss over which I do not grieve.

For a while all went well. I waited on the queen; with her officers I was her companion at her table; I instructed her as best I might in all she wished to learn, for to me alone she would listen and not to Belus or another. When she visited Pharaoh and his councillors I accompanied her, standing back so that I might not overhear their secrets. In short I did all those things I had been instructed to do, even to make report of everything I learned from the queen as I had been bidden.

One day she turned on me laughing and said,

“I thought you were my friend, Ramose, but I find that you are nothing but a spy who repeats to Pharaoh all I say. I know it because he used to me some of my very words, thinking that they were his own, which words could only have come to him through you.”

Now I turned aside and hung my head, whereon she leant over me, whispering,

“Foolish boy, do not think I am angry with you, who know well that you must do your duty and therefore tell you nothing that you may not cry out from every pylon top. These matters of policy are between me and Pharaoh, or rather between Syria and Egypt. I and you have others to discuss that Pharaoh would

think dull. Now tell me of your boyhood and of the woman that you first thought fair.”

So it went on and ever as I drew back, so she came forward. At first I think that she was puzzled who could not understand why I resisted her and made search to find some other woman who had built a wall between us. Soon she discovered that there was none; indeed she drew this out of me. At last in a flash she guessed the truth – that I was under an oath, to my own heart or another, which, mattered not, to treat her as a queen who was Egypt’s guest, and no more.

Then Atyra did what she should not have done, as doubtless she knows today. She set herself to make me break that oath. For nothing else do I blame her who, I know, loved me truly, boy though I was. But for this, how can she escape from blame? She knew that her witchery was on me, she knew that she had made me mad – indeed in those days of resistance I went near to madness, I who worshipped her as a thing divine, and yet she put out all her woman’s strength to break my will and cause me to forswear myself.

At last the matter came to a head, as such do always. The feast was over, the guests had departed, I presented myself, as I must, to take my farewell of her for the night, and found that I was alone with her in the little antechamber where a single lamp burned dimly. She was standing at a window-place cut in the thickness of the wall, watching the rising of the moon, a figure clad all in white, but for some scarlet pomegranate blooms fastened upon

her breast, for her maids had relieved her of her royal ornaments, save a girdle of gold about her waist.

Discovering her at length I advanced to inquire her commands for the morrow, bow and be gone.

“How quietly you walk, Ramose,” she said. “I heard you not, yet I knew that you were coming. Yes, I felt your presence, as we do that of those whom we love – or hate. My orders? Oh! I have none to give you at the moment, young chamberlain. Why think of the morrow on such a night as this. Look at that great moon rising yonder out of the desert. No wonder that you Egyptians set your Isis in the moon, for it is a lovely throne fit for any goddess. Now of what does this one put me in mind? Ah! I remember – of that which rose over the waters of the Nile when you and I sat together in a ruined temple of the desert. Do you not remember it?”

I muttered some answer, I know not what it was, and half-turned to go, when with a swift and sudden motion she flung herself against me. Yes, from her foot to her shoulder I felt all the weight of her beautiful body leaning against me.

I never stirred, I did nothing, and yet I know not how, presently her lips were on my own.

She drew away, laughing low and happily, and asked, “Now, Ramose, do you remember that night in the ruined temple when we looked together at the moon rising over the Nile?”

I fled away, and as I fled, still she laughed.

It was after this that for the first time I saw the priest Ninari among the other servitors of the queen, recovered of his wounds but wearing a cap with lappets that hung down over his ears. He greeted me courteously enough, but in his eyes was a fierce look that I could not misunderstand.

“We quarrelled once, young lord,” he said, “but now that you are the appointed guardian of my queen, we are friends, are we not?”

“Surely,” I answered.

“Then all is well between us, young lord, while you guard her faithfully, who otherwise may quarrel once more and with a different ending.” And again he smiled upon me with those fierce eyes and was gone.

On the evening of my meeting with Ninari, I was in waiting on Queen Atyra in the garden of which I have written, and noted that she was troubled. Presently she led me to a seat beneath the palms in front of which lay the little pool where flowered the blue lotus lilies. It was a pleasant, secluded seat hidden from the rest of the garden and from the palace windows by a bank of flowering shrubs and of tall reed-like plants with feathery heads.

“What ails you?” I asked.

“Everything, Ramose,” she answered. “All goes awry and I would that I were dead. My mission to Pharaoh is ended, and not so ill. To-morrow at the dawn the Egyptian general Amasis, with a great force most of which has gone on before, advances to attack the Babylonians on the borders of Egypt. To-morrow also

I leave Sais to journey back to my own country. It was decided but an hour ago. Do you understand that I leave Sais?"

"I understand, Queen, though this sudden plan amazes me. Why do you go so swiftly?"

"I will tell you. Ninari has been with Pharaoh and has told him that news has come from my country that those who are left in power there, urged on by the people who are afraid, threaten to make peace with Babylon, and that one of the terms of that peace will be that we Syrians should join the Babylonians in the attack on Egypt. He has told him also that there is but one hope of defeating this treachery, namely, that I should return at once bearing Pharaoh's offers of alliance, and as the wife of Ninari who alone can control the priesthood, which is the real power in the land, and overthrow this plot."

"As the wife of Ninari," I gasped. "May the gods avert it!"

"The gods make no sign, Ramose. If there be any gods, these ask of men that they should carve their own fate upon the cliffs of Time. In this matter Ninari is the god."

For a little while we sat silent staring at the lotus blooms. Then she spoke again.

"Do you love me, Ramose?"

"You know that I love you," I answered.

"Yes, yet your love is to my love but as a dewdrop to the waters in that lake. Ramose, a madness has taken hold of me. I will tell you the truth. You are very young and as yet of small account in the world, while I am a queen who perchance will become

the sovereign of a great country, if with Egypt's help we can overthrow Babylon, as may happen now that Nebuchadnezzar grows old and feeble and there is none to take his place. Still I say to you that you, the son of Pharaoh's woman, are more to me than all earth's thrones and glory. Here fate thrusts me on, not folly or passion, but fate itself with an iron hand. I will have none of Ninari. Rather than that accursed priestly hound should creep into my chamber, I will die, or better still, he shall die who knows not with whom he has to deal. Yes, here and now I pronounce his doom."

Thus she spoke in slow, cold words that yet were full of fearful menace, then suddenly went on in a soft, changed voice.

"Let us talk no more of this foul Ninari. Hearken! If you will play the man I have plans that shall make of you a great king and give to you one of earth's fairest and most loving women as a wife. But I, who perhaps have said too much already, dare not speak them here. Always I am watched, the very air seems to play the spy upon me, and even now I feel – " and she shivered. "Moreover my women wait to tire me for Pharaoh's farewell feast and I must be gone. Ramose, you have the key of the door that leads to my chambers. In the first of them I sleep quite alone, for I will have no one near me in my slumbers and the guards and eunuchs are set far away beyond. Come to me at midnight and I will tell you all. Will you come, knowing that if aught miscarries, your life hangs in it?"

"My life," I answered sadly. "What is my life? Something of

which I think I should be well rid could I say good-bye to it with honour. I have not been happy of late, Queen Atyra. Pharaoh laid a charge upon me and, forgive me for saying it, it seems that always you have put out your strength to cause me to break my trust. By Amen I have fought my best, but alas! I am weak with love of you. When your eyes shine upon me I grow dizzy and at your touch my purpose melts like wax in the midday sun. What you command, that I must do and if death waits at the end of your road, may Thoth, the Weigher of hearts, be merciful and give me sleep that I may forget my shame.”

She looked at me and there was pity in her eyes. Then the pity passed and they burned with the light of passion.

“I grieve for you as I grieve for myself, whose danger is greater than your own,” she said. “Yet for me the choice lies between you and madness. Know, Ramose, that without you I shall go mad, and ere I die work woes at which the world will shudder. Think! is such a love as mine a gift to be lightly cast away?”

“I will come, I have said it,” I answered.

Then she rose and went.

Pharaoh’s feast that night was very glorious and at it none was merrier than the Queen Atyra. Indeed she was so beautiful in her royal apparel that she drew all eyes to her and every man bent forward to watch her and hear her words, yes, even Pharaoh’s self. Yet to me it seemed a feast of death and even the scented cup I bore to her wherein she pledged her country’s future fellowship with Egypt, smelt of the tomb.

At length it was over. The dancers ended their dancing, the music faded away. The lovely queen bent before Pharaoh and he kissed her hand. She departed with her company. The lamps died out.

It was midnight. I unlocked the passage door; I crept to her chamber like a thief, for now all my doubts were gone and I was aflame. Its door was ajar. I entered, closing it behind me. In the chamber burned a hanging lamp of which the flame wavered in the hot night-wind that came through the open window-place. There upon a couch she lay clothed all in white, a thing of beauty, her black locks flowing about her. I went to her, I knelt down to kiss her lips, but she did not stir, she said nothing. I touched her brow and lo! although her shape stayed still, her head rolled towards me.

Then I saw that her neck was severed through and through. She was dead!

I rose from my knees, smitten with a silent madness. From behind a curtain appeared Ninari, a red sword in his hand.

“Young Count of Egypt,” he said in a soft voice, “know that I heard all your talk with this traitress, for I was hidden in the bushes behind you in the garden. Now, that our queen might not be shamed, I have executed the decree of my god upon her, and go to make report of what has been done to the people over who she ruled. I bid you farewell, Count Ramose, trusting that you who are young and were sorely tempted, will have learned a lesson which cannot be forgotten.”

My strength came back to me. I said no word. I sprang at him as a lion springs. He struck; I caught his arm with such a grip that the sword fell from his hand. I closed with him and in the might of my madness I broke him like a stick. At least suddenly he sank together in my hands and his head fell backwards.

Then I hurled him through the window-place. I took his sword and set its hilt upon the pavement, purposing to fall upon it. Already I bent over its point when it was struck away. I looked up. There by me, white, wide-eyed, stood Belus.

“Come!” he said hoarsely, “come swiftly, for your life’s sake!”

Chapter 5

The Flight to Amasis

In the doorway of the chamber I glanced back. By the wavering light of the lamp I saw the white shape of her who had been the Queen Atyra and my love, lying still and dreadful on the couch, her head turned strangely as though to watch me go. On the floor from beneath a rug and a splendid garment which she had worn at the feast, crept the red stream that told of murder, and near by it lay the sword of Ninari. Some jewels glittered upon a stool and among them was a flower, one which that afternoon I had given to her – yes, she had taken it from my hand, kissed it and set it in her girdle. The moon shone through the open window-place out of which I had hurled Ninari. Such was the picture, a terrible picture that in every detail must haunt me till I die.

I wished to turn back to recover that flower, but Belus thrust me before him and closed the door. We passed down the passage to my apartment. This door also Belus closed and locked. We stood face to face in my chamber.

“What now?” I said drearily. “Give me one of those drugs of yours, Belus, that which kills so swiftly, for all is done.”

“Nay,” he answered, “all is but begun. Be a man and hearken. The woman is dead; by her lies the sword of Ninari. Who save I

knows that you entered her chamber? Ninari is dead also; he lies broken at the foot of the palace wall for I saw you cast him from the window-place whence it will be believed he flung himself after doing murder, since he is untouched by knife or sword.”

“I know, Belus, I know; and my face will tell the tale or I shall go mad and babble it.”

He nodded his wise head.

“Perchance, Ramose. At least Pharaoh will kill you because she was in your charge. Or, if he does not, those Syrians will, guessing the truth. By this hand or by that, death awaits you here, sure death, and with it shame.”

“I seek to die,” I answered.

“You cannot, for it is written otherwise. Have I not read it in your stars? Listen. The General Amasis has departed to join the army that goes to fight the Babylonians on the frontiers of Egypt. Pharaoh does not trust this Amasis whom the soldiers love too well. He sends me to be his counsellor and to spy upon him, and I depart within an hour for the command is urgent. Disguised as my scribe you will accompany me. Forseeing trouble already I have ordered all. To-morrow you will be missed and perhaps it may be thought that some ill has befallen you. Do not young men wander out at night and meet with adventures that have been known to end evilly? Has not the Nile borne the bodies of many such towards the sea? Or may not the Syrians have murdered you, as they murdered the queen who was known to look on you so kindly? At best there will be much talk and Pharaoh

will be wrath, but as you have vanished away the matter will be forgotten. If afterwards it is learned that, seeking adventure, you went to join Amasis, you may be forgiven – that is unless those Syrians know all and plotted this murder. Answer not, but come, bringing your sword and what gold you have.”

A while later, it may have been one hour, or two, I forget, whose memory of that night is dimmed by a fog of wretchedness, two figures might have been seen leaving that part of the palace which was called Dream House because there always dwelt the royal astrologer. They left it by a small gate guarded by a single soldier who challenged them. Belus gave some password; also he showed a ring and spoke in the guard’s ear.

“Right enough. All in order,” said the man. “Belus the Babylonian and a scribe we were commanded to pass. Well, here is Belus the Babylonian whom we all know, for he tells our fortunes by the stars, and there’s the scribe in a dark cloak with a hood to it. A very fine young man, too, for a scribe who generally are short and round-stomached, or sometimes, quite small and very like a girl, for many are named scribes who never served apprenticeship in a temple or a school. Magician Belus, I fear that I cannot let this scribe pass until I have called the officer to have a look at him – or her.”

“What do you mean, man?” asked Belus coldly. “Is not Pharaoh’s ring enough?”

“Not to-night, Master. Although you may not have heard it, there is trouble yonder in the palace. Something terrible has

happened there. Some great one has been murdered. Who it is I know not. Still word has come that all gateways are to be watched and none allowed to pass whose faces are covered or who are not known, even under Pharaoh's seal. Therefore I pray you stay a minute until the officer and his guard pass upon their round."

"As you will," said Belus, "and while we wait, friend, tell me, how is that little daughter of yours whom I visited two days ago in her fever?"

"Master," answered the man in another voice, a trembling voice, "she hangs between life and death. When I left to come on guard at length she had fallen asleep and the wise women said that either it is the beginning of the sleep of death or she will wake free of the fever and recover. Tell me, Master, you who are wise and can read the stars, which she will do. For know, I love this child, my only one, and my heart is racked."

With the staff he bore Belus made a drawing in the sand. Then he looked up at certain stars and added dots to the drawing, which done, he said,

"Events are strangely linked with one another in this world, my friend, nor can we understand who or what it is that ties them thus together. Who for instance would have dreamed that your daughter's fate hangs upon whether I and this scribe of mine, whom perchance you guessed rightly to be a woman, though a tall one such as are loved by small men like myself, pass at once upon our business, or wait until it pleases some officer to wander this way upon his rounds. If we pass, the stars say that your daughter

will live; if we wait, while we are waiting she will die – yes, before the moonlight creeps to that mark, she will die. But if my departing footstep stamps upon it, she will live.”

“Pass, Magician Belus, with the girl disguised as a scribe,” said the man, “for such I see now she is, though at first the moonlight deceived me. Pass.”

“Good night, friend,” said Belus, “the blessing of the gods be upon you, and upon that daughter of yours who will live to comfort your old age.”

Then with his foot he stamped out the pattern on the sand and we went on.

“Will the child live?” I asked idly, for this sight of the grief of another seemed to dull my own.

“Yes,” answered Belus. “My medicines have worked well and that sleep is a presage of her recovery. Surely she will live, but what will happen to her father when it is learned that he has suffered some veiled traveller to pass out, I do not know.”

“Perchance he will keep silence upon that matter.”

“Aye, but when the light comes our footprints on the sand will tell their own tale, that is, unless a wind rises. Still by that time we shall be far away. Run, Scribe, run. The horses and the escort, men who are sworn to me, await us in yonder grove.”

Eight days later we came to the camp of Amasis upon the borders of Egypt. An officer led us to the tent of Amasis whom we found in jovial mood, for he had dined and drunk well, as was his custom.

“Greeting, learned Belus,” said Amasis. “Now tell me on what business Pharaoh sends you?”

Belus drew out a roll, laid it to his forehead and handed it to Amasis, saying,

“It is written here, General.”

He undid the roll, glanced at it and cast it down.

“It is written in Greek,” he exclaimed, “and I, an Egyptian, will not read Greek. Repeat its contents. Nay, it is needless, for I have heard them already by another messenger who has outstripped you, one of my own captains whom Pharaoh did not send. The writing orders that I must make report daily, or as often as may be, of all that passes in this army, through you, Belus the Babylonian. Is it not so?”

“Yes,” answered Belus calmly, “that is the sum of it.”

“Which means,” went on Amasis, “that you are sent here to spy upon me and all that I do.”

“Yes, General,” replied Belus in the same quiet voice. “Pharaoh, as you know, is jealous and fears you.”

“Why, Belus?”

“Because the Egyptians love you, especially the soldiers, and do not love Pharaoh who they think, favours the Greeks too much, and in all but blood is himself a Greek.”

“That I know. Is there no other reason?”

“Yes, General. As you may have heard, like other Babylonians I have some skill in divination and in the casting of horoscopes. Pharaoh caused me to cast his, and yours also, General.”

“And what did they say, Belus?” asked Amasis leaning forward.

Belus dropped his voice and answered,

“They said that the star of Apries wanes, while that of Amasis grows bright. They said that ere long where shone the star of Apries, will shine the star of Amasis alone, though first for a time those two stars will ride in the heavens side by side. That is what they said though I told Apries another tale.”

“Do you mean the throne?” asked Amasis in a whisper.

“Aye, the throne and a certain general wearing Pharaoh’s crown.”

For a while there was silence, then Amasis asked,

“Does Pharaoh send you to poison me, as doubtless you can do, you strange and fateful Belus, who like a night-bird, have flitted from Babylon to Egypt for your own dark and secret purpose?”

“Nay, and if he did, I, their servant, am not one to fight against the stars. Fear nothing from me who am your friend, though there are others whom you will do well to watch. Now, General, here in this camp I am in your power. You can kill me if you will, but that would be foolish, for I have not told you all the horoscope.”

“Your meaning?”

“It is that if you kill me, as I think you had it in your mind to do but now, me or another, that star of yours will never shine alone, because my blood will call for yours. Am I safe with you and if I need it, will you protect me when you grow great?”

“You are safe and I will protect you now and always. I swear it by Amen and by Maat, Goddess of Truth. Yet, why do you turn from Pharaoh who has sheltered you ever since you escaped from Babylon? – for I have heard that you did escape on account of some crime.”

“Because Pharaoh turns from me and presently will seek my life; indeed I think that he seeks it already. For the rest, the crime of which you have heard was not mine, but that of another – upon whom I wait to be avenged in some far-off appointed hour,” he added and as he spoke the words, his face grew fierce and even terrible.

“Be plain, Belus, but tell me first, who is this with you who listens to our most secret thoughts? How comes it that I never noted him?”

“Perchance because I willed that you should not, General, or perchance because wine dims the eyes. But look on him, and answer your own question.”

As he spoke, very swiftly Belus bent forward and unclasped the long cloak which I wore, revealing me clad as a soldier with an armoured cap upon my head. Amasis stared at me.

“By the gods!” he said, “this is none other than Ramose, Pharaoh’s bastard and my pupil in arms whom I love well. Now what does this young cock here? Is he another of Pharaoh’s spies whom you have brought to be your witness?”

“A poor spy, I think, General. Nay, like me he flies from Pharaoh’s wrath. There has been trouble in the palace. A certain

Syrian queen whom you will remember, for in truth she sent you here, has come to her end – a swift and bloody end – as has her minister.”

“I have heard as much, for rumour of the death of great ones flies more swiftly than a dove, but what has that to do with Ramose? Did he perchance stifle her with kisses, as I would have done at his age?”

“Nothing, nothing at all, General. But Ramose was her guardian and chamberlain, and Pharaoh demands his life in payment for hers, so do her Syrians, or will ere long. Therefore he seeks refuge under the shield of Amasis, his captain.”

“And shall have it, by the gods. Am I a man to give up one who has served under me, over the matter of a woman, even to Pharaoh’s self? Not so, and yet I must remember that this youngster is Pharaoh’s son and half a Greek and has heard words that would set a noose about my neck. Do you vouch for him, Belus?”

“Aye, Amasis. Listen. From boyhood this lad has been as one born to me and I, who now am – childless – love him. He has been drawn into trouble, and thereby, as I fear, embroiled Syria and Egypt. Therefore his life is forfeit, as is mine who have befriended him and aided his escape. Therefore, too, both of us have fled to you, and henceforward swear ourselves to your service, looking to you to shield us. Tell us, may we sleep in peace, or must we seek it elsewhere?”

“Yes, you may sleep easy, even from Pharaoh, for here in this

camp I am Pharaoh," answered Amasis proudly. "Have I not sworn it already and am I a troth-breaker?" he added.

Scarce had the words passed his lips when from without came a sound of sentries challenging, followed by a cry of "Pass on, Messenger of Pharaoh." The tent opened and there appeared a travel-stained man clad in Pharaoh's uniform, who bowed, handed a roll to Amasis and at a sign, retired.

"Pharaoh sends me many letters," he said, as he cut the silk and undid the roll. Then he read, looked up and laughed.

"Your guardian spirit must be good, Belus. At least you two were wise to take that oath of me upon the instant. Harken to what is written here," and he read aloud,

"Pharaoh to the General Amasis, "The Syrians who came hither with the Queen Atyra who is dead, as the price of the friendship of their nation to Egypt, demand the life of the Count Ramose who was her chamberlain, because he failed in his duty and did not keep her safe; also because as they allege he murdered one Ninari. If he has fled to your camp disguised as a scribe, as is reported, put him to death and send his head to Sais that it may be shown to them. With it send Belus the Babylonian, that the truth of all this matter may be wrung from him. "Sealed with the seals of Pharaoh and his Vizier."

"Now, Belus," went on Amasis, "tell me, you who are wise in counsel, what shall I do? Obey Pharaoh or my oath?"

I listened like to one in a dream, but Belus answered quietly, "Which you will, Amasis. Obey Pharaoh, cause this lad to

be murdered and send me to the torturers at Sais, and see your star set – as I promised you. Obey your oath, and see that star shine out above all storms, royally and alone. Yet, is it needful to urge Amasis to honesty by revealing what Thoth has written concerning him in the Book of Fate?”

“I think not,” answered Amasis with his great laugh. “Do they not say of me in Egypt that never yet did I break troth with friend or foe, and shall I do so now? Young man, I see that you have scribe’s tools about you; therefore be seated and write these words:

“From Amasis the General, to Pharaoh, “The letter of Pharaoh has been received. Know, O divine Pharaoh, that it is not the custom of Amasis to kill those who are serving under him in war, save for cowardice or other military offence. If the Syrians have aught against the Count Ramose, let them come hither and set out their case before me and my captains. For the rest, Belus the Babylonian, whom the good god Pharaoh sent hither to watch me, is too weary to travel. Moreover, I keep him at my side that I may watch him.”

When I had finished writing, Amasis read the roll, sealed it and summoning an officer, bade him to give it to the messenger to be delivered to Pharaoh at Sais. When the officer had gone he thought a while, and said in his open fashion,

“The quarrel between me and Pharaoh or rather between the Egyptians and his friends the Greeks, has long been brewing. It is strange that it should have boiled over upon the little matter

of this young Count and his love affairs, yet doubtless so it was decreed. Have no fear, Ramose, Pharaoh is cowardly for otherwise he would not seek the life of his own son for such a trifle from dread born of Syrian threats; a tyrant also and when tyrants are taken by the beard, they grow afraid. Yet my counsel to both of you is, to keep out of the reach of Pharaoh's arm till this business is forgotten. If ever he speaks of it to me again, I will tell him to his face that he should thank me who have saved him from the crime of murdering his son, whose blood would have brought the curse of the gods upon him. Now drink a cup of wine, both of you, and let me hear this tale of the death of Atyra, if she be dead in truth."

So I told it to him, keeping nothing back. When it was done, he said,

"I am glad that you threw that Syrian rat through the window-place, sending him to settle his account with Atyra in the underworld. Grieve not, young man. There are more women left upon the earth who will teach you to forget your trouble, and for the rest this ill-fated lady was one hard to be resisted. Now, go rest. To-morrow I will find you a place in my bodyguard and we shall see whether you are luckier in war than you have been in love."

Thus he spoke though in the after years, when he had ceased to be a bluff general and had become a wily Pharaoh steeped in statecraft, he forgot, or pretended to forget all this story and asserted that Atyra had borne me a child before her death. But

of this in its season.

That night ere I slept, for the first time I opened all my heart to Belus, showing him how great was its bitterness and woe. Moreover I told him that if I escaped the wrath of Pharaoh and the accidents of war, I had sworn an oath before the gods to have no more to do with women.

“I rejoice to hear it, Son,” answered Belus, with his strange wise smile, “and I pray that the memory of the gods of Egypt is not too long. You say that you have done with women, but mayhap women have not done with such a man as you, nor because one has brought you sorrow, is it certain that another may not bring you joy. Now grieve no more over what cannot be mended nor for her who is dead because of you, but follow after Fortune with a brave heart, for such she loves. Only one thing I hope of you, that you will suffer me, your master, to stay at your side through bad weather and through good, until perhaps I am drawn away to fulfil the purpose of my life.”

Then without telling me what was that purpose, he kissed me on the brow and I laid me down and slept.

Chapter 6

The Gift of God

Next day the march began. I saw and knew all, for Amasis, a man of his word in those days, appointed me to be an officer of his guard, also, because I was a scholar, one of his private scribes. Further he kept Belus in attendance on him, so that between us we learned all there was to know. Thus I came to understand how great was the power of Amasis, the beloved of the soldiers.

About him was none of the ceremonial of Pharaoh's court. His captains were his fellows; also he drank, jested and bandied stories, some of them coarse enough, with the common soldiers round their fires. A man of the people himself, he talked to them of their fathers, yes, and mothers too. He asked no great reverence from them, nor that any man should bow to the dust when he passed by and to many a fault he was blind. If one off duty drank too much, or broke camp to seek some girl who had looked at him kindly, he said nothing; but if such a one did these things when he was on duty, then let him beware, for he would be flogged, or even hanged. No man was promoted for lip-service or because his birth was high, but to those who were brave and loyal every door was open. Therefore the army loved him, so much indeed that he dared to defy Pharaoh in such a letter as he had written concerning Belus and myself, and yet fear nothing.

Some thirty or forty thousand strong not counting the camp-followers, we marched against the Babylonians, a great host of them under the command of Merodach, said to be a son of Nebuchadnezzar, who awaited us beyond the borders of Egypt. Or rather they did not await us for as we came on, they retreated. Then we discovered that we were being led into a trap, for Syrians by the ten thousand, were hanging on our flank waiting to cut us off. Belus learned this from spies whom we had taken, but who, it seemed, belonged to some secret brotherhood of which he was a chief.

For although Belus was willing to fight against his own people, I found that among them he still had many friends. This at the time I could not understand, for not until many years had gone by did I come to know that the Babylonians were divided among themselves, numbers of them hating the kings who ruled over them and all their cruelties and wars.

So Amasis separated his army. Half of it he left entrenched upon a range of little hills that encircled an oasis where there was water in plenty, beyond which hills the Babylonians had retreated, thinking to draw us into the desert on their further side. The rest, among whom were nearly all the horsemen and chariots, he sent to swoop down on the Syrians. Making a long night march we caught them at the dawn just as they were breaking camp. Until we fell upon them they did not know that we were near. Therefore, although they outnumbered us by three to one, our victory was great. Hemming them round in the gloom, we

attacked at daybreak and slew thousands of them before they could form their ranks. Also we made prisoners of thousands more and took a great booty of horses and camels.

This done we returned to the low hills in a fortunate moment, for discovering that the half of our army was gone, at length the Babylonians had determined to attack. Night was falling when we reached the camp and therefore they did not see us advancing under cover of the hills. Some of us, I among them, pushed on and made report to Amasis of how it had gone between us and the Syrians, a tale that pleased him greatly. Moreover, having heard me well spoken of by those under whom I served for the part I played in that fray, he promoted me to be captain of a company of which the officer had been killed by an arrow. This company was part of what was called the General's Legion, appointed to surround him in battle and to fight under his own command. I knew it already, since from it was drawn his bodyguard, of whom I had been one until I was sent out against the Syrians.

Next morning at the dawn from the crest of our hills, far away upon the plain and half hidden by clouds of dust, we saw the Babylonians approaching, a mighty host of them. Indeed so countless were they and so vast was their array, that at sight of it my heart sank for it seemed as though for every man of ours they could count ten. While I stood staring at them, suddenly I found Amasis himself at my side wrapped in a common soldier's cloak.

"You are afraid, young man," he said. "Your face shows it. Well, I think none the worse of you for that. Yet take courage,

since it is not numbers that make an army terrible, but discipline and the will to conquer. Look now at this great host. As its standards show, it is made up of many peoples all mixed together. See, it keeps no good line, for its left wing is far advanced and its right straggles. Also its centre, where is Merodach, the king's son, with his chosen guards, is cumbered with many waggons and litters. In those waggons are not food or water, but women, for these soft Babylonians soaked in luxury, will not move without their women even in war, and they must be protected. Therefore I say to you, and to all, be not afraid."

Then he departed to talk to others.

All that morning the Babylonian multitude came on slowly, till by noon they were within a mile of us. During the heat of the day they rested for some two hours or more, then once more they advanced, as we thought to the attack. But it was not so, for when they had covered another three furlongs again they halted as though bewildered, perhaps because they could see so few of us, for the most of our army was hidden behind the crest of a hill. At length officers rode forward, five or six of them, carrying a white flag, and reined up almost at the foot of the hills.

Amasis sent some forward to speak with them, among whom was Belus whose tongue was their own, disguised as an Egyptian captain, a garb that became him ill. They talked a long while. Then Belus and the others returned and reported that the Prince and General, Merodach, gave us leave to retire unmolested, also that he offered a great present of gold to Amasis and his captains,

if this were done. Then, he said, he would retire to Babylon and make it known to the King Nebuchadnezzar that he had gained a victory over the Egyptians, who had fled at the sight of his army.

When Amasis heard this, he laughed. Nevertheless he sent back Belus and the others to ask how much gold Babylon would pay as a tribute to Pharaoh, and so it went on all the afternoon, till at length Amasis knew that it was too late for the Babylonians to attack, for night drew near. Then he sent a last message, demanding that the Babylonians should surrender and give hostages; also the gold that they had offered. This was the end of it.

Later Belus came and told me the meaning of this play. "Those Babylonians have no water," he said, "save what they carry with them. To-morrow they will be thirsty and drink all, leaving nothing for the horses and the elephants, that they thought would drink at the springs of the oasis to-night. Truly Amasis is a good general."

All that night we watched, thought with little fear for there was no moon and we knew that in such darkness the Babylonians would not dare to attack. Now I thought that Amasis would fall on them at the dawn, as we had done on the Syrians. But he did not, who said that thirst was the greatest of captains and he would leave him in command. Still when he had seen that all our army was well fed and all our horses were well watered, he sent out a body of cavalry, five thousand of them perhaps, with orders to charge at the centre of the Babylonians as they began to

muster their array, and then suddenly to retire as though seized with panic.

This was done. When they saw the horsemen coming the Babylonians formed up with great shoutings, and the elephants were advanced. As if frightened at the sight of these elephants, our men wheeled about and fled back towards the hills, though not too fast. Now happened that which Amasis had hoped.

The enemy broke his ranks and pursued the Egyptians. Elephants, chariots and clouds of horse pursued them all mingled together, while after them came the bulk of the host. The word went down our lines to stand firm behind the crest of the hill. We opened and let our horsemen through, to re-form behind us, which they did, having scarce lost a man. Then we closed again and waited.

The hordes were upon us; chariots, horse and elephants toiled up the sandy slopes of the hills, slipping back one step for every two forward. At a signal our bowmen rose and loosed their arrows, cloud after cloud of arrows. Soon the heads and trunks of the elephants were full of them. Maddened with pain the great brutes turned and rushed down the hill, crushing all they met. The horses also, those of them that were not killed, did likewise, while the sand was strewn with dead or wounded men. The charge turned to a rout and few that took part in it reached the great army unharmed. Still, so vast was it that those who had fallen with their beasts were but a tithe of its numbers, though now few of the elephants were fit for service and the chariots and the

horsemen had suffered much.

At this repulse rage seized the Babylonians or their generals. Trumpets blew, banners waved, words of command were shouted. Then suddenly the whole host, countless thousands of them whose front stretched over a league of land, began their advance against our little line of hills that measured scarcely more than four furlongs from end to end.

Amasis saw their plan, which was to encircle and closing in from behind, to overwhelm us with the weight of their number. He divided our horse into two bodies and weary as they still were from their journey against the Syrians, commanded them to charge round the ends of the hills and to cut through those wings, leaving the breast of the great host like a bull with severed horns. This they did well enough, charging forward, and back again through and through those Babylonians, or their allies, till between the horns and the head there were great gaps; after which they changed their tactics and charged at the tips of the horns, crumpling them up, till from ordered companies they became a mob.

Meanwhile the breast advanced, leaving a reserve to guard the waggons and the stores and the plain below.

Wave upon wave of the picked troops of Babylon, they dashed up at us, like breakers against a reef, and the real fight began.

We raked them with our arrows, killing hundreds, but always more poured on, till they came to the crest of the hills and met the Egyptians sword to sword and spear to spear.

I had no part in that fight who stood behind in reserve, with the General's Legion that guarded Amasis and Egypt's banners. Yet I saw it all and noted that many of those who attacked, were wasted with thirst, for their mouths were open and their tongues hung out, while the hot sun beat down upon their helms and armour.

Amasis saw it also, for I heard him say, "I thank the gods that they have given me no Babylonian prince to be the captain of my life. Now, on them, Egyptians!"

We rose, we charged, we drove them before us in a tumbled mass, down those blood-stained slopes we drove them; yes, there they died by the hundred and the thousand. At the foot of the hill we re-formed, for many of us had been killed or wounded in the great fray. Then we charged at the heart of the Babylonian host where flew the banners of their general, the Prince Merodach, a dense array of fifteen or twenty thousand of the best of their troops, set to guard the general, the women and the baggage. We fell on them like a flood, but were rolled back from their triple line as a flood is from a wall of rock. We hung doubtful whose force after all was small, when suddenly at the head of about a thousand of his guards, whom he had kept in reserve, Amasis himself charged past us. We, the rest of that legion, would not be left behind. Leaving our dead and wounded we charged with him. How it happened I do not know, but we broke the triple line, we went into it as a wedge goes into wood, and it split in two.

Suddenly I saw the inmost body of horsemen that surrounded the Babylonian standards, wheel about and gallop off. A soldier

cried into my ear,

“Merodach flies! Yes, he flies. Babylon is beaten!”

So it was indeed, for when the host saw that their general had deserted them with his guard of chariots and horsemen, the heart went out of them. No longer were they battalions of brave men, nay, they became but as sheep driven by wolves or dogs. They packed together, they fled this way and that, trampling one upon the other. They fought no more, they flung down their arms, each man seeking to save his own life. The Egyptians slew and slew until they were weary. Then the trumpets called them back, save the horsemen that for a while followed the wings of the army which, seeing what had happened, abandoned hope and joined in the rout.

What happened to that host? I do not know. Thousands of them died, but thousands more wandered off into the desert seeking safety and water, but above all water at the wells in their rear. I can see them now, a motley crowd, elephants, camels, chariots, horse and footmen, all mingled together, till at length they vanished in the distance, except those who fell by the way. Doubtless many of them reached Babylon and told their tale of disaster into the ears of Nebuchadnezzar the Great King. But he was aged and it was said distraught, almost on his deathbed indeed, and had heard many such before. Always his hosts gathered from the myriads of the East, were going forth to battle. Sometimes they conquered, sometimes they were defeated. It mattered little, seeing that there were always more myriads out

of which new hosts could be formed. In Babylon and Assyria and the lands around life was plentiful and cheap, for there men bred like flies in the mud and sun, and wealth was great, and when the king commanded they must go out to die.

The victory was won! Now came its fruits, the hour of plunder was at hand. There were the great parks of waggons filled with stores and women; there were the pavilions of the royal prince, the generals and the officers. Amasis himself, riding down our lines his helmet in his hand, laughing as ever, shouted to us to go and take, but to be careful to keep him his share.

We rushed forward without rank or order, for now there was nothing to fear. All the enemy were fled save those who lay dead or wounded, swart, black-bearded men. I, being young and swift of foot, outran my fellows. We came to the pavilion of the prince over which the banners of Babylon hung limply in the still air. The soldiers swarmed into it seeking treasure, but I who cared nothing for golden cups or jewels, ran round to another pavilion in its rear which I guessed would be that of the women. Why I did this I was not sure, for I wanted women even less than the other spoil; but I think it must have been because I was curious and desired to see what these ladies were like and how they were housed.

Thus it came about that I entered this place alone and letting fall the flap of the tent, which was magnificent and lined with silk and embroideries, stared round me till my eyes grew accustomed to the shadowed light and I saw that it was empty. No, not empty,

for at its end, seated on a couch was a glittering figure, clad it seemed in silver mail, and beside it something over which a veil was thrown. Thinking that this was a man, I drew my sword which I had sheathed, and advanced cautiously.

Now I was near and the figure of which the head was bowed, looked up and stared at me. Then I saw that the face beneath the silver helm was that of a woman, a very beautiful woman, with features such as the Greeks cut upon their gems, and large dark eyes. I gazed at her and she gazed at me. Then she spoke, first in a tongue which I did not understand, and when I shook my head, in Greek.

“Egyptian, if so you be,” she said, “seek elsewhere after the others who are fled. I am no prize for you.”

She threw aside a brodered cape that hung over her mail, and I saw that piercing the mail was an Egyptian arrow of which the feathered shaft was broken off, also that blood ran to her knees, staining the armour.

I muttered words of pity, saying that I would bring a physician, for suddenly I bethought me of Belus.

“It is useless,” she said, “the hurt is mortal; already I die.”

Not knowing what to do, I made as though to leave her, then stood still, and all the while she watched me.

“You are young and have a kindly face,” said she, “high born too, or so I judge. Look,” and with a swift motion she cast off the veil from that which rested against her.

Behold! it was a child of three or four years of age, a lovely

child, beautifully attired.

“My daughter, my only one,” she said. “Save her, O Egyptian Captain.”

I stepped forward and bent down to look at the child. At this moment some soldiers burst into the tent and saw us. Wheeling round I perceived that they were men of my own company.

“Begone!” I cried, whereon one of them called out,

“Why, it is our young captain, the Count Ramose, who woos a captive. Away, comrades, she is his, not ours, by the laws of war. Away! and tell the rest to seek elsewhere.”

Then laughing in their coarse soldier fashion, they departed and presently I heard them shouting that this tent must be left alone.

“Save her, Count Ramose, if such be your name,” repeated the woman. “Hearken. She is no mean child, for I am a daughter of him who once was King of Israel. Now at the last I grow clear-sighted and a voice tells me to trust you whom my God has sent to me to be my friend. Swear to me by him you worship that you will guard this child, yours by spoil of war; that you will not sell her on the market, that you will keep her safe and clean, and when she comes to womanhood, suffer her to wed where she will. Swear this and I, Mysia, of the royal House of Israel, will call down the blessing of Jehovah on you and yours and all your work, as should you fail me, I will call down His curse.”

“A great oath,” I exclaimed hesitating, “to be taken by one who is no oath breaker.”

“Aye, great, great! Yet, hearken. She is not dowerless.”

She glanced about her wildly to make sure that we were alone, then from her side, or perhaps from some hiding-place in the couch, she drew a broidered bag, and thrust it into my hands.

“Hide it,” she said. “These royal jewels are her heritage, among them are pearls without price.”

I thrust the bag into the pouch I carried, throwing from it the water bottle and the food which it had contained. Then I answered,

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