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HAGGARD

THE WORLD'S DESIRE

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H. Rider Haggard

The World's Desire

PREFACE

The period in which the story of *The World's Desire* is cast, was a period when, as Miss Braddon remarks of the age of the Plantagenets, "anything might happen." Recent discoveries, mainly by Dr. Schliemann and Mr. Flinders Petrie, have shown that there really was much intercourse between Heroic Greece, the Greece of the Achaeans, and the Egypt of the Ramessids. This connection, rumoured of in Greek legends, is attested by Egyptian relics found in the graves of Mycenae, and by very ancient Levantine pottery, found in contemporary sites in Egypt. Homer himself shows us Odysseus telling a feigned, but obviously not improbable, tale of an Achaean raid on Egypt. Meanwhile the sojourn of the Israelites, with their Exodus from the land of bondage, though not yet found to be recorded on the Egyptian monuments, was probably part of the great contemporary stir among the peoples. These events, which are only known through Hebrew texts, must have worn a very different aspect in the eyes of Egyptians, and of pre-historic Achaean observers, hostile in faith to the Children of Israel. The topic has since been treated in fiction by Dr. Ebers, in his *Joshua*.

In such a twilight age, fancy has free play, but it is a curious fact that, in this romance, modern fancy has accidentally coincided with that of ancient Greece.

Most of the novel was written, and the apparently “un-Greek” marvels attributed to Helen had been put on paper, when a part of Furtwängler’s recent great lexicon of Mythology appeared, with the article on Helen. The authors of *The World’s Desire* read it with a feeling akin to amazement. Their wildest inventions about the Daughter of the Swan, it seemed, had parallels in the obscurer legends of Hellas. There actually is a tradition, preserved by Eustathius, that Paris beguiled Helen by magically putting on the aspect of Menelaus. There is a mediaeval parallel in the story of Uther and Ygerne, mother of Arthur, and the classical case of Zeus and Amphitryon is familiar. Again, the blood-dripping ruby of Helen, in the tale, is mentioned by Servius in his commentary on Virgil (it was pointed out to one of the authors by Mr. Mackail). But we did not know that the Star of the story was actually called the “Star-stone” in ancient Greek fable. The many voices of Helen are alluded to by Homer in the *Odyssey*: she was also named *Echo*, in old tradition. To add that she could assume the aspect of every man’s first love was easy. Goethe introduces the same quality in the fair witch of his *Walpurgis Nacht*. A respectable portrait of Meriamun’s secret counsellor exists, in pottery, in the British Museum, though, as it chanced, it was not discovered by us until after the publication of this romance. The Laestrygonian of the Last Battle is introduced as a pre-historic

Norseman. Mr. Gladstone, we think, was perhaps the first to point out that the Laestrygonians of the *Odyssey*, with their home on a fiord in the Land of the Midnight Sun, were probably derived from travellers' tales of the North, borne with the amber along the immemorial Sacred Way. The Magic of Meriamun is in accordance with Egyptian ideas; her resuscitation of the dead woman, Hataska, has a singular parallel in Reginald Scot's *Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584), where the spell "by the silence of the Night" is not without poetry. The general conception of Helen as the World's Desire, Ideal Beauty, has been dealt with by M. Paul de St. Victor, and Mr. J. A. Symonds. For the rest, some details of battle, and of wounds, which must seem very "un-Greek" to critics ignorant of Greek literature, are borrowed from Homer.

H. R. H. A. L.

THE WORLD'S DESIRE

by **H. Rider Haggard and Andrew Lang**

Come with us, ye whose hearts are set
On this, the Present to forget;
Come read the things whereof ye know
They were not, and could not be so!

The murmur of the fallen creeds,
Like winds among wind-shaken reeds
Along the banks of holy Nile,
Shall echo in your ears the while;
The fables of the North and South
Shall mingle in a modern mouth;
The fancies of the West and East
Shall flock and flit about the feast
Like doves that cooled, with waving wing,
The banquets of the Cyprian king.
Old shapes of song that do not die
Shall haunt the halls of memory,
And though the Bow shall prelude clear
Shrill as the song of Gunnar's spear,
There answer sobs from lute and lyre
That murmured of The World's Desire.

There lives no man but he hath seen
The World's Desire, the fairy queen.
None but hath seen her to his cost,
Not one but loves what he has lost.
None is there but hath heard her sing
Divinely through his wandering;
Not one but he has followed far
The portent of the Bleeding Star;
Not one but he hath chanced to wake,
Dreamed of the Star and found the Snake.
Yet, through his dreams, a wandering fire,
Still, still she flits, THE WORLD'S DESIRE!

BOOK I

I THE SILENT ISLE

Across the wide backs of the waves, beneath the mountains, and between the islands, a ship came stealing from the dark into the dusk, and from the dusk into the dawn. The ship had but one mast, one broad brown sail with a star embroidered on it in gold; her stem and stern were built high, and curved like a bird's beak; her prow was painted scarlet, and she was driven by oars as well as by the western wind.

A man stood alone on the half-deck at the bows, a man who looked always forward, through the night, and the twilight, and the clear morning. He was of no great stature, but broad-breasted and very wide-shouldered, with many signs of strength. He had blue eyes, and dark curled locks falling beneath a red cap such as sailors wear, and over a purple cloak, fastened with a brooch of gold. There were threads of silver in his curls, and his beard was flecked with white. His whole heart was following his eyes, watching first for the blaze of the island beacons out of the darkness, and, later, for the smoke rising from the far-off hills. But he watched in vain; there was neither light nor smoke on the grey peak that lay clear against a field of yellow sky.

There was no smoke, no fire, no sound of voices, nor cry of birds. The isle was deadly still.

As they neared the coast, and neither heard nor saw a sign of

life, the man's face fell. The gladness went out of his eyes, his features grew older with anxiety and doubt, and with longing for tidings of his home.

No man ever loved his home more than he, for this was Odysseus, the son of Laertes – whom some call Ulysses – returned from his unsung second wandering. The whole world has heard the tale of his first voyage, how he was tossed for ten years on the sea after the taking of Troy, how he reached home at last, alone and disguised as a beggar; how he found violence in his house, how he slew his foes in his own hall, and won his wife again. But even in his own country he was not permitted to rest, for there was a curse upon him and a labour to be accomplished. He must wander again till he reached the land of men who had never tasted salt, nor ever heard of the salt sea. There he must sacrifice to the Sea-God, and then, at last, set his face homewards. Now he had endured that curse, he had fulfilled the prophecy, he had angered, by misadventure, the Goddess who was his friend, and after adventures that have never yet been told, he had arrived within a bowshot of Ithaca.

He came from strange countries, from the Gates of the Sun and from White Rock, from the Passing Place of Souls and the people of Dreams.

But he found his own isle more still and strange by far. The realm of Dreams was not so dumb, the Gates of the Sun were not so still, as the shores of the familiar island beneath the rising dawn.

This story, whereof the substance was set out long ago by Rei, the instructed Egyptian priest, tells what he found there, and the tale of the last adventures of Odysseus, Laertes' son.

The ship ran on and won the well-known haven, sheltered from wind by two headlands of sheer cliff. There she sailed straight in, till the leaves of the broad olive tree at the head of the inlet were tangled in her cordage. Then the Wanderer, without once looking back, or saying one word of farewell to his crew, caught a bough of the olive tree with his hand, and swung himself ashore. Here he kneeled, and kissed the earth, and, covering his head within his cloak, he prayed that he might find his house at peace, his wife dear and true, and his son worthy of him.

But not one word of his prayer was to be granted. The Gods give and take, but on the earth the Gods cannot restore.

When he rose from his knees he glanced back across the waters, but there was now no ship in the haven, nor any sign of a sail upon the seas.

And still the land was silent; not even the wild birds cried a welcome.

The sun was hardly up, men were scarce awake, the Wanderer said to himself; and he set a stout heart to the steep path leading up the hill, over the wolds, and across the ridge of rock that divides the two masses of the island. Up he climbed, purposing, as of old, to seek the house of his faithful servant, the swineherd, and learn from him the tidings of his home. On the brow of a hill he stopped to rest, and looked down on the house of the servant.

But the strong oak palisade was broken, no smoke came from the hole in the thatched roof, and, as he approached, the dogs did not run barking, as sheep-dogs do, at the stranger. The very path to the house was overgrown, and dumb with grass; even a dog's keen ears could scarcely have heard a footstep.

The door of the swineherd's hut was open, but all was dark within. The spiders had woven a glittering web across the empty blackness, a sign that for many days no man had entered. Then the Wanderer shouted twice, and thrice, but the only answer was an echo from the hill. He went in, hoping to find food, or perhaps a spark of fire sheltered under the dry leaves. But all was vacant and cold as death.

The Wanderer came forth into the warm sunlight, set his face to the hill again, and went on his way to the city of Ithaca.

He saw the sea from the hill-top glittering as of yore, but there were no brown sails of fisher-boats on the sea. All the land that should now have waved with the white corn was green with tangled weeds. Half-way down the rugged path was a grove of alders, and the basin into which water flowed from the old fountain of the Nymphs. But no maidens were there with their pitchers; the basin was broken, and green with mould; the water slipped through the crevices and hurried to the sea. There were no offerings of wayfarers, rags and pebbles, by the well; and on the altar of the Nymphs the flame had long been cold. The very ashes were covered with grass, and a branch of ivy had hidden the stone of sacrifice.

On the Wanderer pressed with a heavy heart; now the high roof of his own hall and the wide fenced courts were within his sight, and he hurried forward to know the worst.

Too soon he saw that the roofs were smokeless, and all the court was deep in weeds. Where the altar of Zeus had stood in the midst of the court there was now no altar, but a great, grey mound, not of earth, but of white dust mixed with black. Over this mound the coarse grass pricked up scantily, like thin hair on a leprosy.

Then the Wanderer shuddered, for out of the grey mound peeped the charred black bones of the dead. He drew near, and, lo! the whole heap was of nothing else than the ashes of men and women. Death had been busy here: here many people had perished of a pestilence. They had all been consumed on one funeral fire, while they who laid them there must have fled, for there was no sign of living man. The doors gaped open, and none entered, and none came forth. The house was dead, like the people who had dwelt in it.

Then the Wanderer paused where once the old hound Argos had welcomed him and had died in that welcome. There, unwelcomed, he stood, leaning on his staff. Then a sudden ray of the sun fell on something that glittered in the heap, and he touched it with the end of the staff that he had in his hand. It slid jingling from the heap; it was the bone of a forearm, and that which glittered on it was a half-molten ring of gold. On the gold lambda these characters were engraved:

IKMALIOS MEPOIESEN

(Icmalios made me.)

At the sight of the armlet the Wanderer fell on the earth, grovelling among the ashes of the pyre, for he knew the gold ring which he had brought from Ephyre long ago, for a gift to his wife Penelope. This was the bracelet of the bride of his youth, and here, a mockery and a terror, were those kind arms in which he had lain. Then his strength was shaken with sobbing, and his hands clutched blindly before him, and he gathered dust and cast it upon his head till the dark locks were defiled with the ashes of his dearest, and he longed to die.

There he lay, biting his hands for sorrow, and for wrath against God and Fate. There he lay while the sun in the heavens smote him, and he knew it not; while the wind of the sunset stirred in his hair, and he stirred not. He could not even shed one tear, for this was the sorest of all the sorrows that he had known on the waves of the sea, or on land among the wars of men.

The sun fell and the ways were darkened. Slowly the eastern sky grew silver with the moon. A night-fowl's voice was heard from afar, it drew nearer; then through the shadow of the pyre the black wings fluttered into the light, and the carrion bird fixed its talons and its beak on the Wanderer's neck. Then he moved at length, tossed up an arm, and caught the bird of darkness by the neck, and broke it, and dashed it on the ground. His sick heart was mad with the little sudden pain, and he clutched for the knife in his girdle that he might slay himself, but he was unarmed. At last

he rose, muttering, and stood in the moonlight, like a lion in some ruinous palace of forgotten kings. He was faint with hunger and weak with long lamenting, as he stepped within his own doors. There he paused on that high threshold of stone where once he had sat in the disguise of a beggar, that very threshold whence, on another day, he had shot the shafts of doom among the wooers of his wife and the wasters of his home. But now his wife was dead: all his voyaging was ended here, and all his wars were vain. In the white light the house of his kingship was no more than the ghost of a home, dreadful, unfamiliar, empty of warmth and love and light. The tables were fallen here and there throughout the long hall; mouldering bones, from the funeral feast, and shattered cups and dishes lay in one confusion; the ivory chairs were broken, and on the walls the moonbeams glistened now and again from points of steel and blades of bronze, though many swords were dark with rust.

But there, in its gleaming case, lay one thing friendly and familiar. There lay the Bow of Eurytus, the bow for which great Heracles had slain his own host in his halls; the dreadful bow that no mortal man but the Wanderer could bend. He was never used to carry this precious bow with him on shipboard, when he went to the wars, but treasured it at home, the memorial of a dear friend foully slain. So now, when the voices of dog, and slave, and child, and wife were mute, there yet came out of the stillness a word of welcome to the Wanderer. For this bow, which had thrilled in the grip of a god, and had scattered the shafts of the

vengeance of Heracles, was wondrously made and magical. A spirit dwelt within it which knew of things to come, which boded the battle from afar, and therefore always before the slaying of men the bow sang strangely through the night. The voice of it was thin and shrill, a ringing and a singing of the string and of the bow. While the Wanderer stood and looked on his weapon, hark! the bow began to thrill! The sound was faint at first, a thin note, but as he listened the voice of it in that silence grew clear, strong, angry and triumphant. In his ears and to his heart it seemed that the wordless chant rang thus:

Keen and low
Doth the arrow sing
The Song of the Bow,
The sound of the string.
The shafts cry shrill:
Let us forth again,
Let us feed our fill
On the flesh of men.
Greedy and fleet
Do we fly from far,
Like the birds that meet
For the feast of war,
Till the air of fight
With our wings be stirred,
As it whirrs from the flight
Of the ravening bird.
Like the flakes that drift

On the snow-wind's breath,
Many and swift,
And winged for death —
Greedy and fleet,
Do we speed from far,
Like the birds that meet
On the bridge of war.
Fleet as ghosts that wail,
When the dart strikes true,
Do the swift shafts hail,
Till they drink warm dew.
Keen and low
Do the grey shafts sing
The Song of the Bow,
The sound of the string.

This was the message of Death, and this was the first sound that had broken the stillness of his home.

At the welcome of this music which spoke to his heart – this music he had heard so many a time – the Wanderer knew that there was war at hand. He knew that the wings of his arrows should be swift to fly, and their beaks of bronze were whetted to drink the blood of men. He put out his hand and took the bow, and tried the string, and it answered shrill as the song of the swallow.

Then at length, when he heard the bowstring twang to his touch, the fountains of his sorrow were unsealed; tears came like soft rains on a frozen land, and the Wanderer wept.

When he had his fill of weeping, he rose, for hunger drove him – hunger that is of all things the most shameless, being stronger far than sorrow, or love, or any other desire. The Wanderer found his way through the narrow door behind the dais, and stumbling now and again over fallen fragments of the home which he himself had built, he went to the inner, secret storehouse. Even *he* could scarcely find the door, for saplings of trees had grown up about it; yet he found it at last. Within the holy well the water was yet babbling and shining in the moonlight over the silver sands; and here, too, there was store of mouldering grain, for the house had been abundantly rich when the great plague fell upon the people while he was far away. So he found food to satisfy his hunger, after a sort, and next he gathered together out of his treasure-chest the beautiful golden armour of unhappy Paris, son of Priam, the false love of fair Helen. These arms had been taken at the sack of Troy, and had lain long in the treasury of Menelaus in Sparta; but on a day he had given them to Odysseus, the dearest of all his guests. The Wanderer clad himself in this golden gear, and took the sword called “Euryalus’s Gift,” a bronze blade with a silver hilt, and a sheath of ivory, which a stranger had given him in a far-off land. Already the love of life had come back to him, now that he had eaten and drunk, and had heard the Song of the Bow, the Slayer of Men. He lived yet, and hope lived in him though his house was desolate, and his wedded wife was dead, and there was none to give him tidings of his one child, Telemachus. Even so life beat strong in his heart, and his hands

would keep his head if any sea-robbers had come to the city of Ithaca and made their home there, like hawks in the forsaken nest of an eagle of the sea. So he clad himself in his armour, and chose out two spears from a stand of lances, and cleaned them, and girt about his shoulders a quiver full of shafts, and took in hand his great bow, the Bow of Eurytus, which no other man could bend.

Then he went forth from the ruined house into the moonlight, went forth for the last time; for never again did the high roof echo to the footstep of its lord. Long has the grass grown over it, and the sea-wind wailed!

II THE VISION OF THE WORLD'S DESIRE

The fragrant night was clear and still, the silence scarce broken by the lapping of the waves, as the Wanderer went down from his fallen home to the city on the sea, walking warily, and watching for any light from the houses of the people. But they were all as dark as his own, many of them roofless and ruined, for, after the plague, an earthquake had smitten the city. There were gaping chasms in the road, here and there, and through rifts in the walls of the houses the moon shone strangely, making ragged shadows. At last the Wanderer reached the Temple of Athene, the Goddess of War; but the roof had fallen in, the pillars were overset, and the scent of wild thyme growing in the broken pavement rose where he walked. Yet, as he stood by the door of the fane, where he had burned so many a sacrifice, at length he spied a light blazing from the windows of a great chapel by the sea. It was the Temple of Aphrodite, the Queen of Love, and from the open

door a sweet savour of incense and a golden blaze rushed forth till they were lost in the silver of the moonshine and in the salt smell of the sea. Thither the Wanderer went slowly, for his limbs were swaying with weariness, and he was half in a dream. Yet he hid himself cunningly in the shadow of a long avenue of myrtles, for he guessed that sea-robbers were keeping revel in the forsaken shrine. But he heard no sound of singing and no tread of dancing feet within the fane of the Goddess of Love; the sacred plot of the goddess and her chapels were silent. He hearkened awhile, and watched, till at last he took courage, drew near the doors, and entered the holy place. But in the tall, bronze braziers there were no faggots burning, nor were there torches lighted in the hands of the golden men and maids, the images that stand within the fane of Aphrodite. Yet, if he did not dream, nor take moonlight for fire, the temple was bathed in showers of gold by a splendour of flame. None might see its centre nor its fountain; it sprang neither from the altar nor the statue of the goddess, but was everywhere imminent, a glory not of this world, a fire untended and unlit. And the painted walls with the stories of the loves of men and gods, and the carven pillars and the beams, and the roof of green, were bright with flaming fire!

At this the Wanderer was afraid, knowing that an immortal was at hand; for the comings and goings of the gods were attended, as he had seen, by this wonderful light of unearthly fire. So he bowed his head, and hid his face as he sat by the altar in the holiest of the holy shrine, and with his right hand he grasped

the horns of the altar. As he sat there, perchance he woke, and perchance he slept. However it was, it seemed to him that soon there came a murmuring and a whispering of the myrtle leaves and laurels, and a sound in the tops of the pines, and then his face was fanned by a breath more cold than the wind that wakes the dawn. At the touch of this breath the Wanderer shuddered, and the hair on his flesh stood up, so cold was the strange wind.

There was silence; and he heard a voice, and he knew that it was the voice of no mortal, but of a goddess. For the speech of goddesses was not strange in his ears; he knew the clarion cry of Athene, the Queen of Wisdom and of War; and the winning words of Circe, the Daughter of the Sun, and the sweet song of Calypso's voice as she wove with her golden shuttle at the loom. But now the words came sweeter than the moaning of doves, more soft than sleep. So came the golden voice, whether he woke or whether he dreamed.

“Odysseus, thou knowest me not, nor am I thy lady, nor hast thou ever been my servant! Where is she, the Queen of the Air, Athene, and why comest *thou* here as a suppliant at the knees of the daughter of Dione?”

He answered nothing, but he bowed his head in deeper sorrow. The voice spake again:

“Behold, thy house is desolate; thy hearth is cold. The wild hare breeds on thy hearthstone, and the night-bird roosts beneath thy roof-tree. Thou hast neither child nor wife nor native land, and *she* hath forsaken thee – thy Lady Athene. Many a time didst

thou sacrifice to her the thighs of kine and sheep, but didst thou ever give so much as a pair of dove to *me*? Hath she left thee, as the Dawn forsook Tithonus, because there are now threads of silver in the darkness of thy hair? Is the wise goddess fickle as a nymph of the woodland or the wells? Doth she love a man only for the bloom of his youth? Nay, I know not; but this I know, that on thee, Odysseus, old age will soon be hastening – old age that is pitiless, and ruinous, and weary, and weak – age that cometh on all men, and that is hateful to the Gods. Therefore, Odysseus, ere yet it be too late, I would bow even thee to my will, and hold thee for my thrall. For I am she who conquers all things living: Gods and beasts and men. And hast thou thought that thou only shalt escape Aphrodite? Thou that hast never loved as I would have men love; thou that hast never obeyed me for an hour, nor ever known the joy and the sorrow that are mine to give? For thou didst but ensure the caresses of Circe, the Daughter of the Sun, and thou wert awearied in the arms of Calypso, and the Sea King's daughter came never to her longing. As for her who is dead, thy dear wife Penelope, thou didst love her with a loyal heart, but never with a heart of fire. Nay, she was but thy companion, thy housewife, and the mother of thy child. She was mingled with all the memories of the land thou lovest, and so thou gavest her a little love. But she is dead; and thy child too is no more; and thy very country is as the ashes of a forsaken hearth where once was a camp of men. What have all thy wars and wanderings won for thee, all thy labours, and all the adventures thou hast achieved?

For what didst thou seek among the living and the dead? Thou soughtest that which all men seek – thou soughtest *The World's Desire*. They find it not, nor hast thou found it, Odysseus; and thy friends are dead; thy land is dead; nothing lives but Hope. But the life that lies before thee is new, without a remnant of the old days, except for the bitterness of longing and remembrance. Out of this new life, and the unborn hours, wilt thou not give, what never before thou gavest, one hour to me, to be my servant?"

The voice, as it seemed, grew softer and came nearer, till the Wanderer heard it whisper in his very ear, and with the voice came a divine fragrance. The breath of her who spoke seemed to touch his neck; the immortal tresses of the Goddess were mingled with the dark curls of his hair.

The voice spake again:

"Nay, Odysseus, didst thou not once give me one little hour? Fear not, for thou shalt not see me at this time, but lift thy head and look on *The World's Desire!*"

Then the Wanderer lifted his head, and he saw, as it were in a picture or in a mirror of bronze, the vision of a girl. She was more than mortal tall, and though still in the first flower of youth, and almost a child in years, she seemed fair as a goddess, and so beautiful that Aphrodite herself may perchance have envied this loveliness. She was slim and gracious as a young shoot of a palm tree, and her eyes were fearless and innocent as a child's. On her head she bore a shining urn of bronze, as if she were bringing water from the wells, and behind her was the foliage of a plane

tree. Then the Wanderer knew her, and saw her once again as he had seen her, when in his boyhood he had journeyed to the Court of her father, King Tyndareus. For, as he entered Sparta, and came down the hill Taygetus, and as his chariot wheels flashed through the ford of Eurotas, he had met her there on her way from the river. There, in his youth, his eyes had gazed on the loveliness of Helen, and his heart had been filled with the desire of the fairest of women, and like all the princes of Achaia he had sought her hand in marriage. But Helen was given to another man, to Menelaus, Atreus's son, of an evil house, that the knees of many might be loosened in death, and that there might be a song in the ears of men in after time.

As he beheld the vision of young Helen, the Wanderer too grew young again. But as he gazed with the eyes and loved with the first love of a boy, she melted like a mist, and out of the mist came another vision. He saw himself, disguised as a beggar, beaten and bruised, yet seated in a long hall bright with gold, while a woman bathed his feet, and anointed his head with oil. And the face of the woman was the face of the maiden, and even more beautiful, but sad with grief and with an ancient shame. Then he remembered how once he had stolen into Troy town from the camp of the Achæans, and how he had crept in a beggar's rags within the house of Priam to spy upon the Trojans, and how Helen, the fairest of women, had bathed him, and anointed him with oil, and suffered him to go in peace, all for the memory of the love that was between them of old. As he

gazed, that picture faded and melted in the mist, and again he bowed his head, and kneeled by the golden altar of the Goddess, crying:

“Where beneath the sunlight dwells the golden Helen?” For now he had only one desire: to look on Helen again before he died.

Then the voice of the Goddess seemed to whisper in his ear:

“Did I not say truth, Odysseus? Wast not thou my servant for one hour, and did not Love save thee in the city of the Trojans on that night when even Wisdom was of no avail?”

He answered: “Yea, O Queen!”

“Behold then,” said the voice, “I would again have mercy and be kind to thee, for if I aid thee not thou hast no more life left among men. Home, and kindred, and native land thou hast none; and, but for me, thou must devour thine own heart and be lonely till thou diest. Therefore I breathe into thy heart a sweet forgetfulness of every sorrow, and I breathe love into thee for her who was thy first love in the beginning of thy days.

“For Helen is living yet upon the earth. And I will send thee on the quest of Helen, and thou shalt again take joy in war and wandering. Thou shalt find her in a strange land, among a strange people, in a strife of gods and men; and the wisest and bravest of man shall sleep at last in the arms of the fairest of women. But learn this, Odysseus; thou must set thy heart on no other woman, but only on Helen.

“And I give thee a sign to know her by in a land of magic, and

among women that deal in sorceries.

“On the breast of Helen a jewel shines, a great star-stone, the gift I gave her on her wedding-night when she was bride to Menelaus. From that stone fall red drops like blood, and they drip on her vestment, and there vanish, and do not stain it.

“By the Star of Love shalt thou know her; by the star shalt thou swear to her; and if thou knowest not the portent of the Bleeding Star, or if thou breakest that oath, never in this life, Odysseus, shalt thou win the golden Helen! And thine own death shall come from the water – the swiftest death – that the saying of the dead prophet may be fulfilled. Yet first shalt thou lie in the arms of the golden Helen.”

The Wanderer answered:

“Queen, how may this be, for I am alone on a seagirt isle, and I have no ship and no companions to speed me over the great gulf of the sea?”

Then the voice answered:

“Fear not! the gods can bring to pass even greater things than these. Go from my house, and lie down to sleep in my holy ground, within the noise of the wash of the waves. There sleep, and take thy rest! Thy strength shall come back to thee, and before the setting of the new sun thou shalt be sailing on the path to The World’s Desire. But first drink from the chalice on my altar. Fare thee well!”

The voice died into silence, like the dying of music. The Wanderer awoke and lifted his head, but the light had faded, and

the temple was grey in the first waking of the dawn. Yet there, on the altar where no cup had been, stood a deep chalice of gold, full of red wine to the brim. This the Wanderer lifted and drained – a draught of Nepenthe, the magic cup that puts trouble out of mind. As he drank, a wave of sweet hope went over his heart, and buried far below it the sorrow of remembrance, and the trouble of the past, and the longing desire for loves that were no more.

With a light step he went forth like a younger man, taking the two spears in his hand, and the bow upon his back, and he lay down beneath a great rock that looked toward the deep, and there he slept.

III THE SLAYING OF THE SIDONIANS

Morning broke in the East. A new day dawned upon the silent sea, and on the world of light and sound. The sunrise topped the hill at last, and fell upon the golden raiment of the Wanderer where he slept, making it blaze like living fire. As the sun touched him, the prow of a black ship stole swiftly round the headland, for the oarsmen drove her well with the oars. Any man who saw her would have known her to be a vessel of the merchants of Sidon – the most cunning people and the greediest of gain – for on her prow were two big-headed shapes of dwarfs, with gaping mouths and knotted limbs. Such gods as those were worshipped by the Sidonians. She was now returning from Albion, an isle beyond the pillars of Heracles and the gates of the great sea, where much store of tin is found; and she had rich merchandise on board. On the half-deck beside the steersman was the captain, a thin,

keen-eyed sailor, who looked shoreward and saw the sun blaze on the golden armour of the Wanderer. They were so far off that he could not see clearly what it was that glittered yellow, but all that glittered yellow was a lure for him, and gold drew him on as iron draws the hands of heroes. So he bade the helmsman steer straight in, for the sea was deep below the rock, and there they all saw a man lying asleep in golden armour. They whispered together, laughing silently, and then sprang ashore, taking with them a rope of twisted ox-hide, a hawser of the ship, and a strong cable of byblus, the papyrus plant. On these ropes they cast a loop and a running knot, a lasso for throwing, so that they might capture the man in safety from a distance. With these in their hands they crept up the cliff, for their purpose was to noose the man in golden armour, and drag him on board their vessel, and carry him to the mouth of the river of Egypt, and there sell him for a slave to the King. For the Sidonians, who were greedy of everything, loved nothing better than to catch free men and women, who might be purchased, by mere force or guile, and then be sold again for gold and silver and cattle. Many kings' sons had thus been captured by them, and had seen the day of slavery in Babylon, or Tyre, or Egyptian Thebes, and had died sadly, far from the Argive land.

So the Sidonians went round warily, and, creeping in silence over the short grass and thyme towards the Wanderer, were soon as near to him as a child could throw a stone. Like shepherds who seek to net a sleeping lion, they came cunningly; yet not so

cunningly but that the Wanderer heard them through his dreams, and turned and sat up, looking around him half awake. But as he woke the noose fell about his neck and over his arms and they drew it hard, and threw him on his back. Before they could touch him he was on his feet again, crying his war-cry terribly, the cry that shook the towers of Ilium, and he rushed upon them, clutching at his sword hilt. The men who were nearest him and had hold of the rope let it fall from their hands and fled, but the others swung behind him, and dragged with all their force. If his arms had been free so that he might draw his sword, it would have gone ill with them, many as they were, for the Sidonians have no stomach for sword blades; but his arms were held in the noose. Yet they did not easily master him; but, as those who had fled came back, and they all laid hands on the rope together, they overpowered him by main force at last, and hauled him, step by step, till he stumbled on a rock and fell. Then they rushed at him, and threw themselves all upon his body, and bound him with ropes in cunning sailor knots. But the booty was dearly won, and they did not all return alive; for he crushed one man with his knees till the breath left him, and the thigh of another he broke with a blow of his foot.

But at last his strength was spent, and they had him like a bird in a snare; so, by might and main, they bore him to their ship, and threw him down on the fore-deck of the vessel. There they mocked him, though they were half afraid; for even now he was terrible. Then they hauled up the sail again and sat down to

the oars. The wind blew fair for the mouth of the Nile and the slave-market of Egypt. The wind was fair, and their hearts were light, for they had been among the first of their people to deal with the wild tribes of the island Albion, and had brought tin and gold for African sea shells and rude glass beads from Egypt. And now, near the very end of their adventure, they had caught a man whose armour and whose body were worth a king's ransom. It was a lucky voyage, they said, and the wind was fair!

The rest of the journey was long, but in well-known waters. They passed by Cephalonia and the rock of Ægilips, and wooded Zacynthus, and Samê, and of all those isles he was the lord, whom they were now selling into captivity. But he lay still, breathing heavily, and he stirred but once – that was when they neared Zacynthus. Then he strained his head round with a mighty strain, and he saw the sun go down upon the heights of rocky Ithaca, for that last time of all.

So the swift ship ran along the coast, slipping by forgotten towns. Past the Echinean isles, and the Elian shore, and pleasant Eirene they sped, and it was dusk ere they reached Dorion. Deep night had fallen when they ran by Pylos; and the light of the fires in the hall of Pisistratus, the son of Nestor the Old, shone out across the sandy sea-coast and the sea. But when they were come near Malea, the southernmost point of land, where two seas meet, there the storm snatched them, and drove them ever southwards, beyond Crete, towards the mouth of the Nile. They scudded long before the storm-wind, losing their reckoning, and

rushing by island temples that showed like ghosts through the mist, and past havens which they could not win. On they fled, and the men would gladly have lightened the ship by casting the cargo overboard; but the captain watched the hatches with a sword and two bronze-tipped spears in his hand. He would sink or swim with the ship; he would go down with his treasure, or reach Sidon, the City of Flowers, and build a white house among the palms by the waters of Bostren, and never try the sea again.

So he swore; and he would not let them cast the Wanderer overboard, as they desired, because he had brought bad luck. "He shall bring a good price in Tanis," cried the captain. And at last the storm abated, and the Sidonians took heart, and were glad like men escaped from death; so they sacrificed and poured forth wine before the dwarf-gods on the prow of their vessel, and burned incense on their little altar. In their mirth, and to mock the Wanderer, they hung his sword and his shield against the mast, and his quiver and his bow they arrayed in the fashion of a trophy; and they mocked him, believing that he knew no word of their speech. But he knew it well, as he knew the speech of the people of Egypt; for he had seen the cities of many men, and had spoken with captains and mercenaries from many a land in the great wars.

The Sidonians, however, jibed and spoke freely before him, saying how they were bound for the rich city of Tanis, on the banks of the River of Egypt, and how the captain was minded to pay his toll to Pharaoh with the body and the armour of the

Wanderer. That he might seem the comelier, and a gift more fit for a king, the sailors slackened his bonds a little, and brought him dried meat and wine, and he ate till his strength returned to him. Then he entreated them by signs to loosen the cord that bound his legs; for indeed his limbs were dead through the strength of the bonds, and his armour was eating into his flesh. At his prayer they took some pity of him and loosened his bonds again, and he lay upon his back, moving his legs to and fro till his strength came back.

So they sailed southward ever, through smooth waters and past the islands that lie like water-lilies in the midland sea. Many a strange sight they saw: vessels bearing slaves, whose sighing might be heard above the sighing of wind and water – young men and maidens of Ionia and Achaia, stolen by slave-traders into bondage; now they would touch at the white havens of a peaceful city; and again they would watch a smoke on the sea-line all day, rising black into the heavens; but by nightfall the smoke would change to a great roaring fire from the beacons of a beleaguered island town; the fire would blaze on the masts of the ships of the besiegers, and show blood-red on their sails, and glitter on the gilded shields that lined the bulwarks of their ships. But the Sidonians sped on till, one night, they anchored off a little isle that lies over against the mouth of the Nile. Beneath this isle they moored the ship, and slept, most of them, ashore.

Then the Wanderer began to plot a way to escape, though the enterprise seemed desperate enough. He was lying in the

darkness of the hold, sleepless and sore with his bonds, while his guard watched under an awning in the moonlight on the deck. They dreamed so little of his escaping that they visited him only by watches, now and again; and, as it chanced, the man whose turn it was to see that all was well fell asleep. Many a thought went through the prisoner's mind, and now it seemed to him that the vision of the Goddess was only a vision of sleep, which came, as they said, through the false Gates of Ivory, and not through the Gates of Horn. So he was to live in slavery after all, a king no longer, but a captive, toiling in the Egyptian mines of Sinai, or a soldier at a palace gate, till he died. Thus he brooded, till out of the stillness came a thin, faint, thrilling sound from the bow that hung against the mast over his head, the bow that he never thought to string again. There was a noise of a singing of the bow and of the string, and the wordless song shaped itself thus in the heart of the Wanderer:

Lo! the hour is nigh
 And the time to smite,
When the foe shall fly
 From the arrow's flight!
Let the bronze bite deep!
 Let the war-birds fly
Upon them that sleep
 And are ripe to die!
Shrill and low
 Do the grey shafts sing

The Song of the Bow,
The sound of the string!

Then the low music died into the silence, and the Wanderer knew that the next sun would not set on the day of slavery, and that his revenge was near. His bonds would be no barrier to his vengeance; they would break like burnt tow, he knew, in the fire of his anger. Long since, in his old days of wandering, Calypso, his love, had taught him in the summer leisure of her sea-girt isle how to tie the knots that no man could untie, and to undo all the knots that men can bind. He remembered this lesson in the night when the bow sang of war. So he thought no more of sleeping, but cunningly and swiftly unknotted all the cords and the bonds which bound him to a bar of iron in the hold. He might have escaped now, perhaps, if he had stolen on deck without waking the guards, dived thence and swam under water towards the island, where he might have hidden himself in the bush. But he desired revenge no less than freedom, and had set his heart on coming in a ship of his own, and with all the great treasure of the Sidonians, before the Egyptian King.

With this in his mind, he did not throw off the cords, but let them lie on his arms and legs and about his body, as if they were still tied fast. But he fought against sleep, lest in moving when he woke he might reveal the trick, and be bound again. So he lay and waited, and in the morning the sailors came on board, and mocked at him again. In his mirth one of the men took a dish of

meat and of lentils, and set it a little out of the Wanderer's reach as he lay bound, and said in the Phoenician tongue:

“Mighty lord, art thou some god of Javan” (for so the Sidonians called the Achæans), “and wilt thou deign to taste our sacrifice? Is not the savour sweet in the nostrils of my lord? Why will he not put forth his hand to touch our offering?”

Then the heart of Odysseus muttered sullenly within him, in wrath at the insolence of the man. But he constrained himself and smiled, and said:

“Wilt thou not bring the mess a very little nearer, my friend, that I may smell the sweet incense of the sacrifice?”

They were amazed when they heard him speak in their own tongue; but he who held the dish brought it nearer, like a man that angers a dog, now offering the meat, and now taking it away.

So soon as the man was within reach, the Wanderer sprang out, the loosened bonds falling at his feet, and smote the sailor beneath the ear with his clenched fist. The blow was so fierce, for all his anger went into it, that it crushed the bone, and drove the man against the mast of the ship so that the strong mast shook. Where he fell, there he lay, his feet kicking the floor of the hold in his death-pain.

Then the Wanderer snatched from the mast his bow and his short sword, slung the quiver about his shoulders, and ran on to the raised decking of the prow.

The bulwarks of the deck were high, and the vessel was narrow, and before the sailors could stir for amazement the

Wanderer had taken his stand behind the little altar and the dwarf-gods. Here he stood with an arrow on the string, and the bow drawn to his ear, looking about him terribly.

Now panic and dread came on the Sidonians when they saw him standing thus, and one of the sailors cried:

“Alas! what god have we taken and bound? Our ship may not contain him. Surely he is Resef Mikal, the God of the Bow, whom they of Javan call Apollo. Nay, let us land him on the isle and come not to blows with him, but entreat his mercy, lest he rouse the waves and the winds against us.”

But the captain of the ship of the Sidonians cried:

“Not so, ye knaves! Have at him, for he is no god, but a mortal man; and his armour is worth many a yoke of oxen!”

Then he bade some of them climb the decking at the further end of the ship, and throw spears at him thence; and he called others to bring up one of the long spears and charge him with that. Now these were huge pikes, that were wielded by five or six men at once, and no armour could withstand them; they were used in the fights to drive back boarders, and to ward off attacks on ships which were beached on shore in the sieges of towns.

The men whom the captain appointed little liked the task, for the long spears were laid on tressels along the bulwarks, and to reach them and unship them it was needful to come within range of the bow. But the sailors on the further deck threw all their spears at once, while five men leaped on the deck where the Wanderer stood. He loosed the bowstring and the shaft sped on

its way; again he drew and loosed, and now two of them had fallen beneath his arrows, and one was struck by a chance blow from a spear thrown from the further deck, and the other two leaped back into the hold.

Then the Wanderer shouted from the high decking of the prow in the speech of the Sidonians:

“Ye dogs, ye have sailed on your latest seafaring, and never again shall ye bring the hour of slavery on any man.”

So he cried, and the sailors gathered together in the hold, and took counsel how they should deal with him. But meanwhile the bow was silent, and of those on the hinder deck who were casting spears, one dropped and the others quickly fled to their fellows below, for on the deck they had no cover.

The sun was now well risen, and shone on the Wanderer's golden mail, as he stood alone on the decking, with his bow drawn. The sun shone, there was silence, the ship swung to her anchor; and still he waited, looking down, his arrow pointing at the level of the deck to shoot at the first head which rose above the planking. Suddenly there was a rush of men on to the further decking, and certain of them tore the shields that lined the bulwarks from their pins, and threw them down to those who were below, while others cast a shower of spears at the Wanderer. Some of the spears he avoided; others leaped back from his mail; others stood fast in the altar and in the bodies of the dwarf-gods; while he answered with an arrow that did not miss its aim. But his eyes were always watching most keenly the hatches nearest

him, whence a gangway ran down to the lower part of the ship, where the oarsmen sat; for only thence could they make a rush on him. As he watched and drew an arrow from the quiver on his shoulder, he felt, as it were, a shadow between him and the deck. He glanced up quickly, and there, on the yard above his head, a man, who had climbed the mast from behind, was creeping down to drop on him from above. Then the Wanderer snatched a short spear and cast it at the man. The spear sped quicker than a thought, and pinned his two hands to the yard so that he hung there helpless, shrieking to his friends. But the arrows of the Wanderer kept raining on the men who stood on the further deck, and presently some of them, too, leaped down in terror, crying that he was a god and not a man, while others threw themselves into the sea, and swam for the island.

Then the Wanderer himself waited no longer, seeing them all amazed, but he drew his sword and leaped down among them with a cry like a sea-eagle swooping on seamews in the crevice of a rock. To right and left he smote with the short sword, making a havoc and sparing none, for the sword ravened in his hand. And some fell over the benches and oars, but such of the sailors as could flee rushed up the gangway into the further deck, and thence sprang overboard, while those who had not the luck to flee fell where they stood, and scarcely struck a blow. Only the captain of the ship, knowing that all was lost, turned and threw a spear in the Wanderer's face. But he watched the flash of the bronze and stooped his head, so that the spear struck only the

golden helm and pierced it through, but scarcely grazed his head. Now the Wanderer sprang on the Sidonian captain, and smote him with the flat of his sword so that he fell senseless on the deck, and then he bound him hand and foot with cords as he himself had been bound, and made him fast to the iron bar in the hold. Next he gathered up the dead in his mighty arms, and set them against the bulwarks of the fore-deck – harvesting the fruits of War. Above the deck the man who had crept along the yard was hanging by his two hands which the spear had pinned together to the yard.

“Art thou there, friend?” cried the Wanderer, mocking him. “Hast thou chosen to stay with me rather than go with thy friends, or seek new service? Nay, then, as thou art so staunch, abide there and keep a good look-out for the river mouth and the market where thou shalt sell me for a great price.” So he spoke, but the man was already dead of pain and fear. Then the Wanderer unbuckled his golden armour, which clanged upon the deck, and drew fresh water from the hold to cleanse himself, for he was stained like a lion that has devoured an ox. Next, with a golden comb he combed his long dark curls, and he gathered his arrows out of the bodies of the dead, and out of the thwarts and the sides of the ship, cleansed them, and laid them back in the quiver. When all this was ended he put on his armour again; but strong as he was, he could not tear the spear from the helm without breaking the gold; so he snapped the shaft and put on the helmet with the point of the javelin still fixed firm in the crest, as Fate

would have it so, and this was the beginning of his sorrows. Next he ate meat and bread, and drank wine, and poured forth some of the wine before his gods. Lastly he dragged up the heavy stone with which the ship was moored, a stone heavier far, they say, than two other men could lift. He took the tiller in his hand; the steady north wind, the Etesian wind, kept blowing in the sails, and he steered straight southward for the mouths of the Nile.

IV THE BLOOD-RED SEA

A hard fight it had been and a long, and the Wanderer was weary. He took the tiller of the ship in his hand, and steered for the South and for the noonday sun, which was now at his highest in the heavens. But suddenly the bright light of the sky was darkened and the air was filled with the rush, and the murmur, and the winnowing of innumerable wings. It was as if all the birds that have their homes and seek their food in the great salt marsh of Cayster had risen from the South and had flown over sea in one hour, for the heaven was darkened with their flight, and loud with the call of cranes and the whistling cry of the wild ducks. So dark was the thick mass of flying fowl, that a flight of swans shone snowy against the black cloud of their wings. At the view of them the Wanderer caught his bow eagerly into his hand and set an arrow on the string, and, taking a careful aim at the white wedge of birds, he shot a wild swan through the breast as it swept high over the mast. Then, with all the speed of its rush, the wild white swan flashed down like lightning into the sea behind the ship. The Wanderer watched its fall, when, lo! the water where

the dead swan fell splashed up as red as blood and all afoam! The long silver wings and snowy plumage floated on the surface flecked with blood-red stains, and the Wanderer marvelled as he bent over the bulwarks and gazed steadily upon the sea. Then he saw that the wide sea round the ship was covered, as far as the eye could reach, as it were with a blood-red scum. Hither and thither the red stain was tossed like foam, yet beneath, where the deep wave divided, the Wanderer saw that the streams of the sea were grey and green below the crimson dye. As he watched he saw, too, that the red froth was drifted always onward from the South and from the mouth of the River of Egypt, for behind the wake of the ship it was most red of all, though he had not marked it when the battle raged. But in front the colour grew thin, as if the stain that the river washed down was all but spent. In his heart the Wanderer thought, as any man must have deemed, that on the banks of the River of Egypt there had been some battle of great nations, and that the War God had raged furiously, wherefore the holy river as it ran forth stained all the sacred sea. Where war was, there was his home, no other home had he now, and all the more eagerly he steered right on to see what the Gods would send him. The flight of birds was over and past; it was two hours after noon, the light was high in the heaven, when, as he gazed, another shadow fell on him, for the sun in mid-heaven grew small, and red as blood. Slowly a mist rose up over it from the South, a mist that was thin but as black as night. Beyond, to the southward, there was a bank of cloud like a mountain wall, steep, and polished, and

black, tipped along the ragged crest with fire, and opening ever and again with flashes of intolerable splendour, while the bases were scrawled over with lightning like a written scroll. Never had the Wanderer in all his voyaging on the sea and on the great River Oceanus that girdles the earth, and severs the dead from the living men – never had he beheld such a darkness. Presently he came as it were within the jaws of it, dark as a wolf's mouth, so dark that he might not see the corpses on the deck, nor the mast, nor the dead man swinging from the yard, nor the captain of the Phoenicians who groaned aloud below, praying to his gods. But in the wake of the ship there was one break of clear blue sky on the horizon, in which the little isle where he had slain the Sidonians might be discerned far off, as bright and white as ivory.

Now, though he knew it not, the gates of his own world were closing behind the Wanderer for ever. To the North, whence he came, lay the clear sky, and the sunny capes and isles, and the airy mountains of the Argive lands, white with the temples of familiar Gods. But in face of him, to the South, whither he went, was a cloud of darkness and a land of darkness itself. There were things to befall more marvellous than are told in any tale; there was to be a war of the peoples, and of the Gods, the True Gods and the False, and there he should find the last embraces of Love, the False Love and the True.

Foreboding somewhat of the perils that lay in front, the Wanderer was tempted to shift his course and sail back to the sunlight. But he was one that had never turned his hand from the

plough, nor his foot from the path, and he thought that now his path was fore-ordained. So he lashed the tiller with a rope, and groped his way with his hands along the deck till he reached the altar of the dwarf-gods, where the embers of the sacrifice still were glowing faintly. Then with his sword he cut some spear-shafts and broken arrows into white chips, and with them he filled a little brazier, and taking the seed of fire from the altar set light to it from beneath. Presently the wood blazed up through the noonday night, and the fire flickered and flared on the faces of the dead men that lay about the deck, rolling to larboard and to starboard, as the vessel lurched, and the flame shone red on the golden armour of the Wanderer.

Of all his voyages this was the strangest seafaring, he cruising alone, with a company of the dead, deep into a darkness without measure or bound, to a land that might not be descried. Strange gusts of sudden wind blew him hither and thither. The breeze would rise in a moment from any quarter, and die as suddenly as it rose, and another wind would chase it over the chopping seas. He knew not if he sailed South or North, he knew not how time passed, for there was no sight of the sun. It was night without a dawn. Yet his heart was glad, as if he had been a boy again, for the old sorrows were forgotten, so potent was the draught of the chalice of the Goddess, and so keen was the delight of battle.

“Endure, my heart,” he cried, as often he had cried before, “a worse thing than this thou hast endured,” and he caught up a lyre of the dead Sidonians, and sang: —

Though the light of the sun be hidden,
 Though his race be run,
Though we sail in a sea forbidden
 To the golden sun:
Though we wander alone, unknowing, —
 Oh, heart of mine, —
The path of the strange sea-going,
 Of the blood-red brine;
Yet endure! We shall not be shaken
 By things worse than these;
We have 'scaped, when our friends were taken,
 On the unsailed seas;
Worse deaths have we faced and fled from,
 In the Cyclops' den,
When the floor of his cave ran red from
 The blood of men;
Worse griefs have we known undaunted,
 Worse fates have fled;
When the Isle that our long love haunted
 Lay waste and dead!

So he was chanting when he descried, faint and far off, a red glow cast up along the darkness like sunset on the sky of the Under-world. For this light he steered, and soon he saw two tall pillars of flame blazing beside each other, with a narrow space of night between them. He helmed the ship towards these, and when he came near them they were like two mighty mountains of

wood burning far into heaven, and each was lofty as the pyre that blazes over men slain in some red war, and each pile roared and flared above a steep crag of smooth black basalt, and between the burning mounds of fire lay the flame-flecked water of a haven.

The ship neared the haven and the Wanderer saw, moving like fireflies through the night, the lanterns in the prows of boats, and from one of the boats a sailor hailed him in the speech of the people of Egypt, asking him if he desired a pilot.

“Yea,” he shouted. The boat drew near, and the pilot came aboard, a torch in his hand; but when his eyes fell on the dead men in the ship, and the horror hanging from the yard, and the captain bound to the iron bar, and above all, on the golden armour of the hero, and on the spear-point fast in his helm, and on his terrible face, he shrank back in dread, as if the God Osiris himself, in the Ship of Death, had reached the harbour. But the Wanderer bade him have no fear, telling him that he came with much wealth and with a great gift for the Pharaoh. The pilot, therefore, plucked up heart, and took the helm, and between the two great hills of blazing fire the vessel glided into the smooth waters of the River of Egypt, the flames glittering on the Wanderer’s mail as he stood by the mast and chanted the Song of the Bow.

Then, by the counsel of the pilot, the vessel was steered up the river towards the Temple of Heracles in Tanis, where there is a sanctuary for strangers, and where no man may harm them. But first, the dead Sidonians were cast overboard into the great river, for the dead bodies of men are an abomination to the Egyptians.

And as each body struck the water the Wanderer saw a hateful sight, for the face of the river was lashed into foam by the sudden leaping and rushing of huge four-footed fish, or so the Wanderer deemed them. The sound of the heavy plunging of the great water-beasts, as they darted forth on the prey, smiting at each other with their tails, and the gnashing of their jaws when they bit too eagerly, and only harmed the air, and the leap of a greedy sharp snout from the waves, even before the dead man cast from the ship had quite touched the water – these things were horrible to see and hear through the blackness and by the firelight. A River of Death it seemed, haunted by the horrors that are said to prey upon the souls and bodies of the Dead. For the first time the heart of the Wanderer died within him, at the horror of the darkness and of this dread river and of the water-beasts that dwelt within it. Then he remembered how the birds had fled in terror from this place, and he bethought him of the blood-red sea.

When the dead men were all cast overboard and the river was once more still, the Wanderer spoke, sick at heart, and inquired of the pilot why the sea had run so red, and whether war was in the land, and why there was night over all that country. The fellow answered that there was no war, but peace, yet the land was strangely plagued with frogs and locusts and lice in all their coasts, the sacred river Sihor running red for three whole days, and now, at last, for this the third day, darkness over all the world. But as to the cause of these curses the pilot knew nothing, being a plain man. Only the story went among the people that

the Gods were angry with Khem (as they call Egypt), which indeed was easy to see, for those things could come only from the Gods. But why they were angered the pilot knew not, still it was commonly thought that the Divine Hathor, the Goddess of Love, was wroth because of the worship given in Tanis to one they called THE STRANGE HATHOR, a goddess or a woman of wonderful beauty, whose Temple was in Tanis. Concerning her the pilot said that many years ago, some thirty years, she had first appeared in the country, coming none knew whence, and had been worshipped in Tanis, and had again departed as mysteriously as she came. But now she had once more chosen to appear visible to men, strangely, and to dwell in her temple; and the men who beheld her could do nothing but worship her for her beauty. Whether she was a mortal woman or a goddess the pilot did not know, only he thought that she who dwells in Atarhechis, Hathor of Khem, the Queen of Love, was angry with the strange Hathor, and had sent the darkness and the plagues to punish them who worshipped her. The people of the seaboard also murmured that it would be well to pray the Strange Hathor to depart out of their coasts, if she were a goddess; and if she were a woman to stone her with stones. But the people of Tanis vowed that they would rather die, one and all, than do aught but adore the incomparable beauty of their strange Goddess. Others again, held that two wizards, leaders of certain slaves of a strange race, wanderers from the desert, settled in Tanis, whom they called the Apura, caused all these sorrows by art-magic. As if, forsooth,

said the pilot, those barbarian slaves were more powerful than all the priests of Egypt. But for his part, the pilot knew nothing, only that if the Divine Hathor were angry with the people of Tanis it was hard that she must plague all the land of Khem.

So the pilot murmured, and his tale was none of the shortest, but even as he spoke the darkness grew less dark and the cloud lifted a little so that the shores of the river might be seen in a green light like the light of Hades, and presently the night was rolled up like a veil, and it was living noonday in the land of Khem. Then all the noise of life broke forth in one moment, the kine lowing, the wind swaying the feathery palms, the fish splashing in the stream, men crying to each other from the river banks, and the voice of multitudes of people in every red temple praising Ra, their great God, whose dwelling is the Sun. The Wanderer, too, praised his own Gods, and gave thanks to Apollo, and to Helios Hyperion, and to Aphrodite. And in the end the pilot brought the ship to the quay of a great city, and there a crew of oarsmen was hired, and they sped rejoicing in the sunlight, through a canal dug by the hands of men, to Tanis and the Sanctuary of Heracles, the Safety of Strangers. There the ship was moored, there the Wanderer rested, having a good welcome from the shaven priests of the temple.

V MERIAMUN THE QUEEN

Strange news flies fast. It was not long before the Pharaoh, who then was with his Court in Tanis, the newly rebuilt city, heard how there had come to Khem a man like a god, wearing

golden armour, and cruising alone in a ship of the dead. In these years the white barbarians of the sea and of the isles were wont to land in Egypt, to ravage the fields, carry women captive, and fly again in their ships. But not one of them had dared to sail in the armour of the Aquaiusha, as the Egyptians named the Achæans, right up the river to the city of Pharaoh. The King, therefore, was amazed at the story, and when he heard that the stranger had taken sanctuary in the Temple of Heracles, he sent instantly for his chief counsellor. This was his Master Builder, who bore a high title in the land, an ancient priest named Rei. He had served through the long reign of the King's father, the divine Rameses the Second, and he was beloved both of Meneptah and of Meriamun his Queen. Him the King charged to visit the Sanctuary and bring the stranger before him. So Rei called for his mule, and rode down to the Temple of Heracles beyond the walls.

When Rei came thither, a priest went before him and led him to the chamber where the warrior chanced to be eating the lily bread of the land, and drinking the wine of the Delta. He rose as Rei entered, and he was still clad in his golden armour, for as yet he had not any change of raiment. Beside him, on a bronze tripod, lay his helmet, the Achæan helmet, with its two horns and with the bronze spear-point still fast in the gold.

The eyes of Rei the Priest fell on the helmet, and he gazed so strangely at it that he scarcely heard the Wanderer's salutation. At length he answered, courteously, but always his eyes wandered

back to the broken spear-point.

“Is this thine, my son?” he asked, taking it in his hand, while his voice trembled.

“It is my own,” said the Wanderer, “though the spear-point in it was lent me of late, in return for arrows not a few and certain sword-strokes,” and he smiled.

The ancient priest bade the Temple servants retire, and as they went they heard him murmuring a prayer.

“The Dead spoke truth,” he muttered, still gazing from the helmet in his hand to the Wanderer; “ay, the Dead speak seldom, but they never lie.”

“My son, thou hast eaten and drunk,” then said Rei the Priest and Master Builder, “and may an old man ask whence thou camest, where is thy native city, and who are thy parents?”

“I come from Alybas,” answered the Wanderer, for his own name was too widely known, and he loved an artful tale. “I come from Alybas; I am the son of Apeidas, son of Polypemon, and my own name is Eperitus.”

“And wherefore comest thou here alone in a ship of dead men, and with more treasure than a king’s ransom?”

“It was men of Sidon who laboured and died for all that cargo,” said the Wanderer; “they voyaged far for it, and toiled hard, but they lost it in an hour. For they were not content with what they had, but made me a prisoner as I lay asleep on the coast of Crete. But the Gods gave me the upper hand of them, and I bring their captain, and much white metal and many swords and cups

and beautiful woven stuffs, as a gift to your King. And for thy courtesy, come with me, and choose a gift for thyself."

Then he led the old man to the treasure-chambers of the Temple, which was rich in the offerings of many travellers, gold and turquoise and frankincense from Sinai and Punt, great horns of carved ivory from the unknown East and South; bowls and baths of silver from the Khita, who were the allies of Egypt. But amidst all the wealth, the stranger's cargo made a goodly show, and the old priest's eyes glittered as he looked at it.

"Take thy choice, I pray thee," said the Wanderer, "the spoils of foemen are the share of friends."

The priest would have refused, but the Wanderer saw that he looked ever at a bowl of transparent amber, from the far-off Northern seas, that was embossed with curious figures of men and gods, and huge fishes, such as are unknown in the Midland waters. The Wanderer put it into the hands of Rei.

"Thou shalt keep this," he said, "and pledge me in wine from it when I am gone, in memory of a friend and a guest."

Rei took the bowl, and thanked him, holding it up to the light to admire the golden colour.

"We are always children," he said, smiling gravely. "See an old child whom thou hast made happy with a toy. But we are men too soon again; the King bids thee come with me before him. And, my son, if thou wouldst please me more than by any gift, I pray thee pluck that spear-head from thy helmet before thou comest into the presence of the Queen."

“Pardon me,” said the Wanderer. “I would not harm my helmet by tearing it roughly out, and I have no smith’s tools here. The spear-point, my father, is a witness to the truth of my tale, and for one day more, or two, I must wear it.”

Rei sighed, bowed his head, folded his hands, and prayed to his God Amen, saying:

“O Amen, in whose hand is the end of a matter, lighten the burden of these sorrows, and let the vision be easy of accomplishment, and I pray thee, O Amen, let thy hand be light on thy daughter Meriamun, the Lady of Khem.”

Then the old man led the Wanderer out, and bade the priests make ready a chariot for him; and so they went through Tanis to the Court of Menepthah. Behind them followed the priests, carrying gifts that the Wanderer had chosen from the treasures of the Sidonians, and the miserable captain of the Sidonians was dragged along after them, bound to the hinder part of a chariot. Through the gazing crowd they all passed on to the Hall of Audience, where, between the great pillars, sat Pharaoh on his golden throne. Beside him, at his right hand, was Meriamun, the beautiful Queen, who looked at the priests with weary eyes, as if at a matter in which she had no concern. They came in and beat the earth with their brows before the King. First came the officers, leading the captain of the Sidonians for a gift to Pharaoh, and the King smiled graciously and accepted the slave.

Then came others, bearing the cups of gold fashioned like the heads of lions and rams, and the swords with pictures of

wars and huntings echoed on their blades in many-coloured gold, and the necklets of amber from the North, which the Wanderer had chosen as gifts for Pharaoh's Queen and Pharaoh. He had silks, too, embroidered in gold, and needlework of Sidonian women, and all these the Queen Meriamun touched to show her acceptance of them, and smiled graciously and wearily. But the covetous Sidonian groaned, when he saw his wealth departing from him, the gains for which he had hazarded his life in unsailed seas. Lastly, Pharaoh bade them lead the Wanderer in before his presence, and he came unhelmeted, in all his splendour, the goodliest man that had ever been seen in Khem. He was of no great height, but very great of girth, and of strength unmatched, and with the face of one who had seen what few have seen and lived. The beauty of youth was gone from him, but his face had the comeliness of a warrior tried on sea and land; the eyes were of a valour invincible, and no woman could see him but she longed to be his love.

As he entered murmurs of amazement passed over all the company, and all eyes were fixed on him, save only the weary and wandering eyes of the listless Meriamun. But when she chanced to lift her face, and gaze on him, they who watch the looks of kings and queens saw her turn grey as the dead, and clutch with her hand at her side. Pharaoh himself saw this though he was not quick to mark what passed, and he asked her if anything ailed her, but she answered: —

“Nay, only methinks the air is sick with heat and perfume.

Greet thou this stranger.” But beneath her robe her fingers were fretting all the while at the golden fringes of her throne.

“Welcome, thou Wanderer,” cried Pharaoh, in a deep and heavy voice, “welcome! By what name art thou named, and where dwell thy people, and what is thy native land?”

Bowing low before Pharaoh, the Wanderer answered, with a feigned tale, that his name was Eperitus of Alybas, the son of Apheidas. The rest of the story, and how he had been taken by the Sidonians, and how he had smitten them on the seas, he told as he had told it to Rei. And he displayed his helmet with the spear-point fast in it. But when she saw this Meriamun rose to her feet as if she would be gone, and then fell back into her seat even paler than before.

“The Queen, help the Queen, she faints,” cried Rei the Priest, whose eyes had never left her face. One of her ladies, a beautiful woman, ran to her, knelt before her, and chafed her hands, till she came to herself, and sat up with angry eyes.

“Let be!” she said, “and let the slave who tends the incense be beaten on the feet. Nay, I will remain here, I will not to my chamber. Let be!” and her lady drew back afraid.

Then Pharaoh bade men lead the Sidonian out, and slay him in the market-place for his treachery; but the man, whose name was Kurri, threw himself at the feet of the Wanderer, praying for his life. The Wanderer was merciful, when the rage of battle was over, and his blood was cool.

“A boon, O Pharaoh Meneptah,” he cried. “Spare me this

man! He saved my own life when the crew would have cast me overboard. Let me pay my debt.”

“Let him be spared, as thou wilt have it so,” spoke Pharaoh, “but revenge dogs the feet of foolish mercy, and many debts are paid ere all is done.”

Thus it chanced that Kurri was given to Meriamun to be her jeweller and to work for her in gold and silver. To the Wanderer was allotted a chamber in the Royal Palace, for the Pharaoh trusted that he would be a leader of his Guard, and took great pleasure in his beauty and his strength.

As he left the Hall of Audience with Rei, the Queen Meriamun lifted her eyes again, and looked on him long, and her ivory face flushed rosy, like the ivory that the Sidonians dye red for the trappings of the horses of kings. But the Wanderer marked both the sudden fear and the blush of Meriamun, and, beautiful as she was, he liked it ill, and his heart foreboded evil. When he was alone with Rei, therefore, he spoke to him of this, and prayed the old man to tell him if he could guess at all the meaning of the Queen.

“For to me,” he said, “it was as if the Lady knew my face, and even as if she feared it; but I never saw her like in all my wanderings. Beautiful she is, and yet – but it is ill speaking in their own land of kings and queens!”

At first, when the Wanderer spoke thus, Rei put it by, smiling. But the Wanderer, seeing that he was troubled, and remembering how he had prayed him to pluck the spear-point from his helmet,

pressed him hard with questions. Thus, partly out of weariness, and partly for love of him, and also because a secret had long been burning in his heart, the old man took the Wanderer into his own room in the Palace, and there he told him all the story of Meriamun the Queen.

VI THE STORY OF MERIAMUN

Rei, the Priest of Amen, the Master Builder, began his story unwillingly enough, and slowly, but soon he took pleasure in telling it as old men do, and in sharing the burden of a secret.

“The Queen is fair,” he said; “thou hast seen no fairer in all thy voyagings?”

“She is fair indeed,” answered the Wanderer. “I pray that she be well-mated and happy on her throne?”

“That is what I will tell thee of, though my life may be the price of the tale,” said Rei. “But a lighter heart is well worth an old man’s cheap risk, and thou may’st help me and her, when thou knowest all. Pharaoh Menepthah, her lord, the King, is the son of the divine Rameses, the ever-living Pharaoh, child of the Sun, who dwelleth in Osiris.”

“Thou meanest that he is dead?” asked the Wanderer.

“He dwelleth with Osiris,” said the Priest, “and the Queen Meriamun was his daughter by another bed.”

“A brother wed a sister!” exclaimed the Wanderer.

“It is the custom of our Royal House, from the days of the Timeless Kings, the children of Horus. An old custom.”

“The ways of his hosts are good in the eyes of a stranger,” said

the Wanderer, courteously.

“It is an old custom, and a sacred,” said Rei, “but women, the custom-makers, are often custom-breakers. And of all women, Meriamun least loves to be obedient, even to the dead. And yet she has obeyed, and it came about thus. Her brother Meneptah – who now is Pharaoh – the Prince of Kush while her divine father lived, had many half-sisters, but Meriamun was the fairest of them all. She is beautiful, a Moon-child the common people called her, and wise, and she does not know the face of fear. And thus it chanced that she learned, what even our Royal women rarely learn, all the ancient secret wisdom of this ancient land. Except Queen Taia of old, no woman has known what Meriamun knows, what I have taught her – I and another counsellor.”

He paused here, and his mind seemed to turn on unhappy things.

“I have taught her from childhood,” he went on – “would that I had been her only familiar – and, after her divine father and mother, she loved me more than any, for she loved few. But of all whom she did not love she loved her Royal brother least. He is slow of speech, and she is quick. She is fearless and he has no heart for war. From her childhood she scorned him, mocked him, and mastered him with her tongue. She even learned to excel him in the chariot races – therefore it was that the King his father made him but a General of the Foot Soldiers – and in guessing riddles, which our people love, she delighted to conquer him. The victory was easy enough, for the divine Prince is heavy-witted;

but Meriamun was never tired of girding at him. Plainly, even as a little child she grudged that he should come to wield the scourge of power, and wear the double crown, while she should live in idleness, and hunger for command.”

“It is strange, then, that of all his sisters, if one must be Queen, he should have chosen her,” said the Wanderer.

“Strange, and it happened strangely. The Prince’s father, the divine Rameses, had willed the marriage. The Prince hated it no less than Meriamun, but the will of a father is the will of the Gods. In one sport the divine Prince excelled, in the Game of Pieces, an old game in Khem. It is no pastime for women, but even at this Meriamun was determined to master her brother. She bade me carve her a new set of the pieces fashioned with the heads of cats, and shaped from the hard wood of Azebi.¹ I carved them with my own hands, and night by night she played with me, who have some name for skill at the sport.

“One sunset it chanced that her brother came in from hunting the lion in the Libyan hills. He was in an evil humour, for he had found no lions, and he caused the huntsmen to be stretched out, and beaten with rods. Then he called for wine, and drank deep at the Palace gate, and the deeper he drank the darker grew his humour.

“He was going to his own Court in the Palace, striking with a whip at his hounds, when he chanced to turn and see Meriamun. She was sitting where those three great palm-trees are, and was

¹ Cyprus.

playing at pieces with me in the cool of the day. There she sat in the shadow, clad in white and purple, and with the red gold of the snake of royalty in the blackness of her hair. There she sat as beautiful as the Hathor, the Queen of Love; or as the Lady Isis when she played at pieces in Amenti with the ancient King. Nay, an old man may say it, there never was but one woman more fair than Meriamun, if a woman she be, she whom our people call the *Strange Hathor*.”

Now the Wanderer bethought him of the tale of the pilot, but he said nothing, and Rei went on.

“The Prince saw her, and his anger sought for something new to break itself on. Up he came, and I rose before him, and bowed myself. But Meriamun fell indolently back in her chair of ivory, and with a sweep of her slim hand she disordered the pieces, and bade her waiting woman, the lady Hataska, gather up the board, and carry all away. But Hataska’s eyes were secretly watching the Prince.

“‘Greeting, Princess, our Royal sister,’ said Meneptah. ‘What art thou doing with these?’ and he pointed with his chariot whip at the cat-headed pieces. ‘This is no woman’s game, these pieces are not soft hearts of men to be moved on the board by love. This game needs wit! Get thee to thy broidery, for there thou may’st excel.’

“‘Greeting, Prince, our Royal brother,’ said Meriamun. ‘I laugh to hear thee speak of a game that needs wit. Thy hunting has not prospered, so get thee to the banquet board, for there, I

hear, the Gods have granted thee to excel.’

“‘It is little to say,’ answered the Prince, throwing himself into a chair whence I had risen, ‘it is little to say, but at the game of pieces I have enough wit to give thee a temple, a priest and five bowmen, and yet win,’ – for these, O Wanderer, are the names of some of the pieces.

“‘I take the challenge,’ cried Meriamun, for now she had brought him where she wanted; ‘but I will take no odds. Here is my wager. I will play thee three games, and stake the sacred circlet upon my brow, against the Royal uraeus on thine, and the winner shall wear both.’

“‘Nay, nay, Lady,’ I was bold to say, ‘this were too high a stake.’

“‘High or low, I accept the wager,’ answered the Prince. ‘This sister of mine has mocked me too long. She shall find that her woman’s wit cannot match me at my own game, and that my father’s son, the Royal Prince of Kush and the Pharaoh who shall be, is more than the equal of a girl. I hold thy wage, Meriamun!’

“‘Go then, Prince,’ she cried, ‘and after sunset meet me in my antechamber. Bring a scribe to score the games; Rei shall be the judge, and hold the stakes. But beware of the golden Cup of Pasht! Drain it not to-night, lest I win a love-game, though we do not play for love!’

“The Prince went scowling away, and Meriamun laughed, but I foresaw mischief. The stakes were too high, the match was too strange, but Meriamun would not listen to me, for she was very wilful.

“The sun fell, and two hours after the Royal Prince of Kush came with his scribe, and found Meriamun with the board of squares before her, in her antechamber.

“He sat down without a word, then he asked, who should first take the field.

“‘Wait,’ she said, ‘first let us set the stakes,’ and lifting from her brow the golden snake of royalty, she shook her soft hair loose, and gave the coronet to me. ‘If I lose,’ she said, ‘never may I wear the uraeus crown.’

“‘That shalt thou never while I draw breath,’ answered the Prince, as he too lifted the symbol of his royalty from his head and gave it to me. There was a difference between the circlets, the coronet of Meriamun was crowned with one crested snake, that of the divine Prince was crowned with twain.

“‘Ay, Menepthah,’ she said, ‘but perchance Osiris, God of the Dead, waits thee, for surely he loves those too great and good for earth. Take thou the field and to the play.’ At her words of evil omen, he frowned. But he took the field and readily, for he knew the game well.

“She moved in answer heedlessly enough, and afterwards she played at random and carelessly, pushing the pieces about with little skill. And so he won this first game quickly, and crying, ‘*Pharaoh is dead*,’ swept the pieces from the board. ‘See how I better thee,’ he went on in mockery. ‘Thine is a woman’s game; all attack and no defence.’

“‘Boast not yet, Menepthah,’ she said. ‘There are still two sets

to play. See, the board is set and I take the field.’

“This time the game went differently, for the Prince could scarce make a prisoner of a single piece save of one temple and two bowmen only, and presently it was the turn of Meriamun to cry ‘*Pharaoh is dead,*’ and to sweep the pieces from the board. This time Meneptah did not boast but scowled, while I set the board and the scribe wrote down the game upon his tablets. Now it was the Prince’s turn to take the field.

“‘In the name of holy Thoth,’ he cried, ‘to whom I vow great gifts of victory.’

“‘In the name of holy Pasht,’ she made answer, ‘to whom I make daily prayer.’ For, being a maid, she swore by the Goddess of Chastity, and being Meriamun, by the Goddess of Vengeance.

“‘Tis fitting thou should’st vow by her of the Cat’s Head,’ he said, sneering.

“‘Yes; very fitting,’ she answered, ‘for perchance she’ll lend me her claws. Play thou, Prince Meneptah.’

“And he played, and so well that for a while the game went against her. But at length, when they had struggled long, and Meriamun had lost the most of her pieces, a light came into her face as though she had found what she sought. And while the Prince called for wine and drank, she lay back in her chair and looked upon the board. Then she moved so shrewdly and upon so deep a plan that he fell into the trap that she had laid for him, and could never escape. In vain he vowed gifts to the holy Thoth, and promised such a temple as there was none in Khem.

“‘Thoth hears thee not; he is the God of lettered men,’ said Meriamun, mocking him. Then he cursed and drank more wine.

“‘Fools seek wit in wine, but only wise men find it,’ quoth she again. ‘Behold, Royal brother, *Pharaoh is dead*, and I have won the match, and beaten thee at thine own game. Rei, my servant, give me that circlet; nay, not my own, the double one, which the divine Prince wagered. So set it on my brow, for it is mine, Menephtah. In this, as in all things else, I have conquered thee.’

“And she rose, and standing full in the light of the lamps, the Royal uraeus on her brow, she mocked him, bidding him come do homage to her who had won his crown, and stretching forth her small hand for him to kiss it. And so wondrous was her beauty that the divine Prince of Kush ceased to call upon the evil Gods because of his ill fortune, and stood gazing on her.

“‘By Ptah, but thou art fair,’ he cried, ‘and I pardon my father at last for willing thee to be my Queen!’

“‘But I will never pardon him,’ said Meriamun.

“Now the Prince had drunk much wine.

“‘Thou shalt be my Queen,’ he said, ‘and for earnest I will kiss thee. This, at the least, being the strongest, I can do.’ And ere she could escape him, he passed his arm about her and seized her by the girdle, and kissed her on the lips and let her go.

“Meriamun grew white as the dead. By her side there hung a dagger. Swiftly she drew it, and swiftly struck at his heart, so that had he not shrunk from the steel surely he had been slain; and she cried as she struck, ‘Thus, Prince, I pay thy kisses back.’

“But as it chanced, she only pierced his arm, and before she could strike again I had seized her by the hand.

“‘Thou serpent,’ said the Prince, pale with rage and fear. ‘I tell thee I will kiss thee yet, whether thou wilt or not, and thou shalt pay for this.’

“But she laughed softly now that her anger was spent, and I led him forth to seek a physician, who should bind up his wound. And when he was gone, I returned, and spoke to her, wringing my hands.

“‘Oh, Royal Lady, what hast thou done? Thou knowest well that thy divine father destines thee to wed the Prince of Kush whom but now thou didst smite so fiercely.’

“‘Nay, Rei, I will none of him – the dull clod, who is called the son of Pharaoh. Moreover, he is my half-brother, and it is not meet that I should wed my brother. For nature cries aloud against the custom of the land.’

“‘Nevertheless, Lady, it *is* the custom of thy Royal house, and thy father’s will. Thus the Gods, thine ancestors, were wed; Isis to Osiris. Thus great Thothmes and Amenemhat did and decreed, and all their forefathers and all their seed. Oh, bethink thee – I speak it for thine ear, for I love thee as mine own daughter – bethink thee, for thou canst not escape, that Pharaoh’s bed is the step to Pharaoh’s throne. Thou lovest power; here is the gate of power, and mayhap upon a time the master of the gate shall be gone and thou shalt sit in the gate alone.’

“‘Ah, Rei, now thou speakest like the counsellor of those who

would be kings. Oh, did I not hate him with this hatred! And yet can I rule him. Why, 'twas no chance game that we played this night: the future lay upon the board. See, his diadem is upon my brow! At first he won, for I chose that he should win. Well, so mayhap it shall be; mayhap I shall give myself to him – hating him the while. And then the next game; that shall be for life and love and all things dear, and I shall win it, and mine shall be the uraeus crest, and mine shall be the double crown of ancient Khem, and I shall rule like Hatshepu, the great Queen of old, for I am strong, and to the strong is victory.'

“‘Yes,’ I made answer, ‘but, Lady, see thou that the Gods turn not thy strength to weakness; thou art too passionate to be all strength, and in a woman’s heart passion is the door by which King Folly enters. To-day thou hatest, beware, lest to-morrow thou should’st love.’

“‘Love,’ she said, gazing scornfully; ‘Meriamun loves not till she find a man worthy of her love.’

“‘Ay, and then – ?’

“‘And then she loves to all destruction, and woe to them who cross her path. Rei, farewell.’

“Then suddenly she spoke to me in another tongue, that few know save her and me, and that none can read save her and me, a dead tongue of a dead people, the people of that ancient City of the Rock, whence all our fathers came.²

² Probably the mysterious and indecipherable ancient books, which were occasionally excavated in old Egypt, were written in this dead language of a more

“I go,’ she said, and I trembled as she spoke, for no man speaks in this language when he has any good thought in his heart. ‘I go to seek the counsel of That thou knowest,’ and she touched the golden snake which she had won.

“Then I threw myself on the earth at her feet, and clasped her knees, crying, ‘My daughter, my daughter, sin not this great sin. Nay, for all the kingdom of the world, wake not That which sleepeth, nor warm again into life That which is a-cold.’

“But she only nodded, and put me from her,” – and the old man’s face grew pale as he spoke.

“What meant she?” said the Wanderer.

“Nay, wake not *thou* That which sleepeth, Wanderer,” he said, at length. “My tongue is sealed. I tell thee more that I would tell another. Do not ask, – but hark! They come again! Now may Ra and Pasht and Amen curse them; may the red swine’s mouth of Set gnaw upon them in Amenti; may the Fish of Sebek flesh his teeth of stone in them for ever, and feed and feed again!”

“Why dost thou curse thus, Rei, and who are they that go by?” said the Wanderer. “I hear their tramping and their song.”

Indeed there came a light noise of many shuffling feet,

ancient and now forgotten people. Such was the book discovered at Coptos, in the sanctuary there, by a priest of the Goddess. “The whole earth was dark, but the moon shone all about the Book.” A scribe of the period of the Ramessids mentions another indecipherable ancient writing. “Thou tellest me thou understandest no word of it, good or bad. There is, as it were, a wall about it that none may climb. Thou art instructed, yet thou knowest it not; this makes me afraid.” Birch, *Zeitschrift*, 1871, pp. 61-64. *Papyrus Anastasi I*, pl. X. 1. 8, pl. X. 1. 4. Maspero, *Hist. Anc.*, pp. 66-67.

pattering outside the Palace wall, and the words of a song rang out triumphantly:

The Lord our God He doth sign and wonder,
Tokens He shows in the land of Khem,
He hath shattered the pride of the Kings asunder
And casteth His shoe o'er the Gods of them!
He hath brought forth frogs in their holy places,
He hath sprinkled the dust upon crown and hem,
He hath hated their kings and hath darkened their faces;
Wonders He works in the land of Khem.

“These are the accursed blaspheming conjurors and slaves, the Apura,” said Rei, as the music and the tramping died away. “Their magic is greater than the lore even of us who are instructed, for their leader was one of ourselves, a shaven priest, and knows our wisdom. Never do they march and sing thus but evil comes of it. Ere day dawn we shall have news of them. May the Gods destroy them, they are gone for the hour. It were well if Meriamun the Queen would let them go for ever, as they desire, to their death in the desert, but she hardens the King’s heart.”

VII THE QUEEN’S VISION

There was silence without at last; the clamour and the tread of the Apura were hushed in the distance, dying far away, and Rei grew calm, when he heard no longer the wild song, and the clashing of the timbrels.

“I must tell thee, Eperitus,” he said, “how the matter ended

between the divine Prince and Meriamun. She bowed her pride before her father and her brother: her father's will was hers; she seemed to let her secret sleep, and she set her own price on her hand. In everything she must be the equal of Pharaoh – that was her price; and in all the temples and all the cities she was to be solemnly proclaimed joint heir with him of the Upper and Lower Land. The bargain was struck and the price was paid. After that night over the game of pieces Meriamun was changed. Thenceforth she did not mock at the Prince, she made herself gentle and submissive to his will.

“So the time drew on till at length in the beginning of the rising of the waters came the day of her bridal. With a mighty pomp was Pharaoh's daughter wedded to Pharaoh's son. But her hand was cold as she stood at the altar, cold as the hand of one who sleeps in Osiris. Proudly and coldly she sat in the golden chariot passing in and out the great gates of Tanis. Only when she listened and heard the acclaiming thousands cry *Meriamun* so loudly that the cry of *Meneptah* was lost in the echoes of her name – then only did she smile.

“Cold, too, she sat in her white robes at the feast that Pharaoh made, and she never looked at the husband by her side, though he looked kindly on her.

“The feast was long, but it ended at last, and then came the music and the singers, but Meriamun, making excuse, rose and went out, attended by her ladies. And I also, weary and sad at heart, passed thence to my own chamber and busied myself with

the instruments of my art, for, stranger, I build the houses of gods and kings.

“Presently, as I sat, there came a knocking at the door, and a woman entered wrapped in a heavy cloak. She put aside the cloak, and before me was Meriamun in all her bridal robes.

“‘Heed me not, Rei,’ she said, ‘I am yet free for an hour; and I would watch thee at thy labour. Nay, it is my humour; gainsay me not, for I love well to look on that wrinkled face of thine, scored by the cunning chisel of thy knowledge and thy years. So from a child have I watched thee tracing the shapes of mighty temples that shall endure when ourselves, and perchance the very Gods we worship, have long since ceased to be. Ah, Rei, thou wise man, thine is the better part, for thou buildest in cold enduring stone and attirest thy walls as thy fancy bids thee. But I – I build in the dust of human hearts, and my will is written in their dust. When I am dead, raise me a tomb more beautiful than ever has been known, and write upon the portal, *Here, in the last temple of her pride, dwells that tired builder, Meriamun, the Queen.*’

“Thus she talked wildly in words with little reason.

“‘Nay, speak not so,’ I said, ‘for is it not thy bridal night? What dost thou here at such a time?’

“‘What do I here? Surely I come to be a child again! See, Rei, in all wide Khem there is no woman so shamed, so lost, so utterly undone as is to-night the Royal Meriamun, whom thou lovest. I am lower than she who plies the street for bread, for the loftier the spirit the greater is the fall. I am sold into shame, and power

is my price. Oh, cursed be the fate of woman who only by her beauty can be great. Oh, cursed be that ancient Counsellor thou wottest of, and cursed be I who wakened That which slept, and warmed That which was a-cold in my breath and in my breast! And cursed be this sin to which he led me! Spurn me, Rei; strike me on the cheek, spit upon me, on Meriamun, the Royal harlot who sells herself to win a crown. Oh, I hate him, hate him, and I will pay him in shame for shame – him, the clown in king's attire. See here,' – and from her robe she drew a white flower that was known to her and me – 'twice to-day have I been minded with this deadly blossom to make an end of me, and of all my shame, and all my empty greed of glory. But this thought has held my hand: I, Meriamun, will live to look across his grave and break his images, and beat out the writings of his name from every temple wall in Khem, as they beat out the hated name of Hatshepu. I – ' and suddenly she burst into a rain of tears; she who was not wont to weep.

“Nay, touch me not,' she said. ‘They were but tears of anger. Meriamun is mistress of her Fate, not Fate of Meriamun. And now, my lord awaits me, and I must be gone. Kiss me on the brow, old friend, whilst yet I am the Meriamun thou knewest, and then kiss me no more for ever. At the least this is well for thee, for when Meriamun is Queen of Khem thou shalt be first in all the land, and stand on the footsteps of my throne. Farewell.’ And she gathered up her raiment and cast her white flower of death in the flame of the brazier, and was gone, leaving me yet

sadder at heart. For now I knew that she was not as other women are, but greater for good or evil.

“On the morrow night I sat again at my task, and again there came a knocking at the door, and again a woman entered and threw aside her wrappings. It was Meriamun. She was pale and stern, and as I rose she waved me back.

“Has, then, the Prince – thy husband – ’ I stammered.

“‘Speak not to me of the Prince, Rei, my servant,’ she made answer. ‘Yesterday I spoke to thee wildly, my mind was overwrought; let it be forgotten – a wife am I, a happy wife’; and she smiled so strangely that I shrunk back from her.

“Now to my errand. I have dreamed a dream, a troublous dream, and thou art wise and instructed, therefore I pray thee interpret my vision. I slept and dreamed of a man, and in my dream I loved him more than I can tell. For my heart beat to his heart, and in the light of him I lived, and all my soul was his, and I knew that I loved him for ever. And Pharaoh was my husband; but, in my dream, I loved him not. Now there came a woman rising out of the sea, more beautiful than I, with a beauty fairer and more changeful than the dawn upon the mountains; and she, too, loved this godlike man, and he loved her. Then we strove together for his love, matching beauty against beauty, and wit against wit, and magic against magic. Now one conquered, and now the other; but in the end the victory was mine, and I went arrayed as for a marriage-bed – and I clasped a corpse.

“I woke, and again I slept, and saw myself wearing another

garb, and speaking another tongue. Before me was the man I loved, and there, too, was the woman, wrapped about with beauty, and I was changed, and yet I was the very Meriamun thou seest. And once more we struggled for the mastery and for this man's love, and in that day she conquered me.

“I slept, and again I woke, and in another land than Khem – a strange land, and yet methought I knew it from long ago. There I dwelt among the graves, and dark faces were about me, and I wore That thou knowest for a girdle. And the tombs of the rock wherein we dwelt were scored with the writings of a dead tongue – the tongue of that land whence our fathers came. We were all changed, yet the same, and once more the woman and I struggled for the mastery, and though I seemed to conquer, yet a sea of fire came over me, and I woke and I slept again.

“Then confusion was piled upon confusion, nor can my memory hold all that came to pass. For this game played itself afresh in lands, and lives, and tongues without number. Only the last bout and the winner were not revealed to me.

“And in my dream I cried aloud to the protecting Gods to escape out of the dream, and I sought for light that I might see whence these things were. Then, as in a vision, the Past opened up its gates. It seemed that upon a time, thousand, thousand ages ago, I and this man of my dream had arisen from nothingness and looked in each other's eyes, and loved with a love unspeakable, and vowed a vow that shall endure from time to time and world to world. For we were not mortal then, but

partook of the nature of the Gods, being more fair and great than any of human kind, and our happiness was the happiness of Heaven. But in our great joy we hearkened to the Voice of the That thou knowest, of that Thing, Rei, with which, against thy counsel, I have but lately dealt. The kiss of our love awakened That which slept, the fire of our love warmed That which was a-cold! We defied the holy Gods, worshipping them not, but rather each the other, for we knew that as the Gods we were eternal. And the Gods were angered against us and drew us up into their presence. And while we trembled they spake as with a voice:

““Ye twain who are one life, each completing each, because with your kisses ye have wakened That which slept, and with the fire of your love have warmed That which was a-cold: because ye have forgotten them that gave you life and love and joy: hearken to your Doom!

““From Two be ye made *Three*, and through all Time strive ye to be Twain again. Pass from this Holy Place down to the Hell of Earth, and though ye be immortal put on the garments of mortality. Pass on from Life to Life, live and love and hate and seem to die: have acquaintance with every lot, and in your blind forgetfulness, being one and being equal, work each other's woe according to the law of Earth, and for your love's sake sin and be shamed, perish and re-arise, appear to conquer and be conquered, pursuing your threefold destiny, and, at the word of Fate, the unaltering circle meets, and the veil of blindness falls from your eyes, and, as a scroll, your folly is unrolled, and the

hid purpose of your sorrow is accomplished and once more ye are Twain and One.”

“Then, as we trembled, clinging each to each, again the great Voice spoke:

““Ye twain who are One – let That to which ye have hearkened divide you and enfold you! Be ye Three!”

“And as the Voice spoke I was torn with agony, and strength went out of me, and there, by him I loved, stood the woman of my dream crowned with every glory and adorned with the Star. And we were three. And between him and me, yet enfolding him and me, writhed that Thing thou wottest of. And he whom I loved turned to look upon the fair woman, wondering, and she smiled and stretched out her arm towards him as one who would take that which is her own, and Rei, in that hour, though it was but in a dream, I knew the mortal pain of jealousy, and awoke trembling. And now read thou this vision, Rei, thou who art learned in the interpretation of dreams and in the ways of sleep.’

“Oh, Lady,’ I made answer, ‘this thing is too high for me, I cannot interpret it; but where thou art, there may I be to help thee.’

“I know thy love,’ she said, ‘but in thy words is little light. So – so – let it pass! It was but a dream, and if indeed it came from the Under World, why, it was from no helpful God, but rather from Set, the Tormentor; or from Pasht, the Terrible, who throws the creeping shadow of her doom upon the mirror of my sleep. For that which is decreed will surely come to pass! I am blown

like the dust by the breath of Fate; now to rest upon the Temple's loftiest tops, now to be trodden underfoot of slaves, and now to be swallowed by the bitter deep, and in season thence rolled forth again. I love not this lord of mine, who shall be Pharaoh, and never may *he* come whom I shall love. 'Tis well that I love him not, for to love is to be a slave. When the heart is cold then the hand is strong, and I am fain to be the Queen leading Pharaoh by the beard, the first of all the ancient land of Khem; for I was not born to serve. Nay, while I may, I rule, awaiting the end of rule. Look forth, Rei, and see how the rays from Mother Isis' throne flood all the courts and all the city's streets and break in light upon the water's breast. So shall the Moon-child's flame flood all this land of Khem. What matters it, if ere the morn Isis must pass to her dominion of the Dead, and the voice of Meriamun be hushed within a sepulchre?"

"So she spoke and went thence, and on her face was no bride's smile, but rather such a gaze as that with which the great sphinx, Horemku, looks out across the desert sands."

"A strange Queen, Rei," said the Wanderer, as he paused, "but what have I to make in this tale of a bride and her mad dreams?"

"More than thou shalt desire," said Rei; "but let us come to the end, and thou shalt hear thy part in the Fate."

VIII THE KA, THE BAI, AND THE KHOU

"The Divine Pharaoh Rameses died and was gathered to Osiris. With these hands I closed his coffin and set him in his splendid tomb, where he shall rest unharmed for ever till the

day of the awakening. And Meriamun and Meneptah reigned in Khem. But to Pharaoh she was very cold, though he did her will in everything, and they had but one child, so that in a while he wearied of her loveliness.

“But hers was the master-mind, and she ruled Pharaoh as she ruled all else.

“For me, my lot was bettered; she talked much with me, and advanced me to great dignity, so that I was the first Master Builder in Khem, and Commander of the legion of Amen.

“Now it chanced that Meriamun made a feast, where she entertained Pharaoh and Hataska sat beside him. She was the first lady about the Queen’s person, a beautiful but insolent woman, who had gained Pharaoh’s favour for the hour. Now wine worked so with the King that he toyed openly with the lady Hataska’s hand, but Meriamun the Queen took no note, though Hataska, who had also drunk of the warm wine of the Lower Land, grew insolent, as was her wont. She quaffed deep from her cup of gold, and bade a slave bear it to the Queen, crying, ‘Pledge me, my sister.’

“The meaning of her message was plain to all who heard; this waiting lady openly declared herself wife to Pharaoh and an equal of the Queen. Now Meriamun cared nothing for Pharaoh’s love, but for power she did care, and she frowned, while a light shone in her dark eyes; yet she took the cup and touched it with her lips.

“Presently she lifted her own cup in turn and toyed with it, then

made pretence to drink, and said softly to the King's paramour, who had pledged her:

“Pledge me in answer, Hataska, my servant, for soon, methinks, thou shalt be greater than the Queen.’

“Now this foolish woman read her saying wrong, and took the golden cup from the eunuch who bore it.

“With a little nod to the Queen, and a wave of her slim hand, Hataska drank, and instantly, with a great cry, she fell dead across the board. Then, while all the company sat in terror, neither daring to be silent nor to speak, and while Meriamun smiled scornfully on the dark head lying low among the roses on the board, Pharaoh leaped up, mad with wrath, and called to the guards to seize the Queen. But she waved them back, and, speaking in a slow, cold voice, she said:

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