



THE WITCH  
QUEEN OF  
K H E M



ENA FITZGERALD





# THE WITCH QUEEN OF KHEM

*BY THE SAME AUTHOR*

---

# PATCOLA

## A TALE OF A DEAD CITY

"In this tale of a dead city the authoress has risen to enviable heights in her efforts to create the light and life of the East in a bygone age. A fine imaginative piece of fiction, it deals with stirring times in a picturesque area of India, south of the Deccan. [Something new, this can be read without any fear of ennui."—NEWCASTLE DAILY JOURNAL.

"In very dignified, yet almost poetic, language Miss Fitzgerald unfolds the history of Krishna the Great, the noblest and most perfect of Indian kings, and of Vijayanagar, the City of Victory, and the Forest of Learning, a capital of which nothing is left but desolate ruins. . . . The author tells of the deep friendship that bound together Krishna and the Rajah Patcola. . . . All lovers of India should read this book. It brings the past and present together in a remarkable way, and holds one spell-bound to the end."—PALL MALL GAZETTE.

"A splendid subject for a tale, sir, and our author has done it justice. No one should fail to read it."—BLACK AND WHITE.

"A tale which abounds in animated and magnetic power and one which will not be readily relinquished until it is finished."—LEICESTER POST.

"Carefully and well written."—DAILY TELEGRAPH.

"An exciting, workmanlike, conventional story."—CLARION.

"Highly commended."—DUNDEE ADVERTISER.

"The tale . . . deserves to live in the imaginative literature of our land."—DUNDEE COURIER.

"A delightful story for old or young."—REGISTER (Australia).

"A very fine story."—BRISBANE COURIER (Australia).

**GREENING & CO., LTD.**



# The Witch Queen of Khem

*A TALE OF A WRONG MADE RIGHT*

BY

ENA FITZGERALD

AUTHOR OF "PATCOLA : A TALE OF A DEAD CITY"



LONDON  
GREENING AND CO., LTD.

1909

**RICHARD CLAY & SONS, LIMITED,  
BREAD STREET HILL, E.C., AND  
BUNGAY, SUFFOLK.**

DEDICATED  
TO  
MY MATERNAL GRANDMOTHER  
OF BLESSED MEMORY TO WHOM I SHALL EVER  
FEEL INDEBTED



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

THE plot of the following romance is mainly historical; it being an account of a weird mysterious Queen who reigned over the land of Egypt (Khem) long before the Christian Age. The names of two of the characters have been changed for certain reasons, and any reader acquainted with the ancient records may be able to recognize with interest the historical personages in the strange tale.

*Newport, Isle of Wight.*





# CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE
I. AMASIS . . . . .	11
II. THE ASTROLOGER'S PAPYRUS . . . . .	20
III. THE REVELATION . . . . .	29
IV. ATH . . . . .	37
V. SEEDS OF EVIL . . . . .	46
VI. SEKHET AGAINST PASHT . . . . .	56
VII. A STRANGE ACQUAINTANCE . . . . .	64
VIII. THE SECRET COMMISSION . . . . .	75
IX. THE VOICE OF THE WATCHER . . . . .	85
X. THE COMING OF THE HEBREW . . . . .	94
XI. THE AWAKENING . . . . .	101
XII. TO RIGHT THE WRONG ! . . . . .	112
XIII. "THE CHOSEN THREE" . . . . .	125
XIV. THE LAY OF THE WATCHER SPIRITS . . . . .	135
XV. THE DWELLER IN DARKNESS . . . . .	142
XVI. "LIFT THINE EYES TO THE HEAVENS" . . . . .	153
XVII. THE MESSENGER . . . . .	161
XVIII. THE PASSING OF PHARAOH . . . . .	172
XIX. THE WISDOM OF RAMES . . . . .	184
XX. "LET ATH BEWARE !" . . . . .	193

CHAP.		PAGE
XXI.	"STAND FIRM, O SONS OF KHEM" . . . . .	207
XXII.	"PHARAOH IS BETRAYED !" . . . . .	214
XXIII.	AT THEBES . . . . .	220
XXIV.	THE RIDE OF THE WARRIOR QUEEN . . . . .	228
XXV.	IN PHARAOH'S CAMP . . . . .	232
XXVI.	A WONDER IN THE HEAVENS . . . . .	239
XXVII.	SPIRITS OF THE DESERT . . . . .	251
XXVIII.	SEB REVEALS HIMSELF . . . . .	262
XXIX.	"NO MAN KNOWETH" . . . . .	274
XXX.	"FAREWELL, O MY BELOVED" . . . . .	286
XXXI.	THE LAST OF THE WITCH QUEEN . . . . .	297
XXXII.	THE DEPARTURE . . . . .	307

# THE WITCH QUEEN OF KHEM

## CHAPTER I

### AMASIS

MANY, many years ago, centuries before the Christian era, a strange excitement fell upon the land of Khem, which is now called Egypt.

In all parts the people flocked together into the open, a murmur of expectancy passing through their midst. From above, the breath of the Sun-god (Ra) bore heavily upon them, as in his "bark of eternity" he followed his path in the cloudless sky.

But the crowds surged to and fro in spite of the intensity of heat; gay streamers hung limply from their poles; heavy-scented flowers formed wreaths on the heads of women, or were heaped gracefully here and there, making a great mass of colour.

In stately Thebes the pulse of excitement and rejoicing beat at its highest; here the harps of the musicians twanged unceasingly, and the shriller note of the double pipes intermingling, formed one continuous roll of melody. Song and laughter echoed across into the distance as Ra smiled happily upon his people.

In the public squares and in the wide, perfumed

gardens, fountains of all sizes shot their crystal burdens far above the heads of the moving throng. On the broad waters of the Nile gay pleasure crafts with multi-coloured sails flitted to and fro, while the murmur that rose from their midst reached the shores, and joined itself to the myriad voices in the city. The pylon and statues before the great Temple of Amen bore up its burden of trailing half-open lotus buds and foliage; the vivid banners hung down upon them from the tall masts above; the rich paintings with the deeply-cut hieroglyphics gleamed and sparkled between the leaves and petals.

A few people sat on the flat house-tops or wide balconies, fanning themselves lazily and watching the more excited crowd beyond. All manner of work was thrown aside, for on this day the pleasure-loving people of Thebes gave themselves up unreservedly to mirth and laughter.

On one of the rock hills just on the outskirts of the City two solitary travellers sat alone. They were poor and uninteresting to look at—an old man rather shabbily clothed, clasping a staff, the other a youth barely out of his teens, carrying a wallet on his back. Both were slight and delicately made, the complexion being somewhat of a lighter hue than that of the ordinary Egyptian peasant. Only that morning they had entered Thebes after a weary journey from the Lower Plains. Among the middle classes the old man was recognized as a skilled preparer of drugs and a seller of herbs; so he travelled continually up and down the banks of the Nile, hawking potions of wonderful worth, in company with the youth at his side. He had come



across him during one of his journeys, a homeless peasant child. Whereupon the old man's lonely heart had been touched; he took the orphan under his care, who thus after a time became a disciple of his trade. Gradually the knowledge of the one was imparted to the other; and when the aged physician's hand trembled, it was the young steady fingers that exactly measured the fluid drugs required in their trade.

Sometimes the old man read horoscopes along the route while his companion turned minstrel and amused the crowd.

They had entered Thebes but a few hours previously, and, sheltered from the rays of the hot sun by a single overspreading tree, the older man had dropped wearily to sleep, his case of drugs, herbs, and an astronomical calendar lying beside him on the warm, thick grass.

His companion was evidently not disposed to take rest. For a long time he sat coiled up on the ground, his hands resting on his knees, staring moodily into space. Now and then a flash of animation lit up his small, handsome features, and his eyes twinkled beneath the dark, heavy brow. This occurred whenever the confused murmur from the City became suddenly louder, or the roll of drums mingled with the clash of varied music. Yet they were far enough from the actual city for their resting place to be called quiet.

Presently the young man arose, stretched his cramped limbs, and stood for a few moments looking across at the barge-laden Nile; then, with a sudden thought, unslung a tiny harp which always hung from his right shoulder.

## 14 THE WITCH QUEEN OF KHEM

Lifting one foot on to a block of stone, he rested the instrument on his knee, running his fingers lovingly across the strings. Then he opened his lips, and in soft caressing tones warbled a favourite Egyptian song.

“Who knoweth not the Land of Khem” (he sung),  
With all its wealth and mystery?  
Who knoweth not her valiant men  
Which built up her great history?

Of all the countries far and near  
Which lie beyond the Desert Sand,  
There is not one that doth not fear  
The avenging blow of Khemi's<sup>1</sup> hand.

He paused a moment, looking across the placid waters of the Nile, and then recommenced—

“Sing to the might of Egypt,  
To the glory of Amen and Ptah.  
In the laps of the gods we are kept,  
Under the Eye of Ra.

Here grows the fragrant lotus ;  
Here did the gods descend ;  
Then sing, O Khem, in chorus ;  
Sing till the great World's End !”

A sudden shout rose up from the City; a smile crossed the face of the singer as he struck a livelier chord.

“Sing to Thebes the wonderful.  
Chant a praise to Sihor  
Of birth unknown.  
Sing to the Watcher of Ra  
Who dwells in the Desert alone,  
Gazing afar.”

Again the dull motley of sound floated upwards from the City, a sudden flash leapt into the young

<sup>1</sup> *Khem, Khemi*=ancient names for Egypt.

man's eyes, and slinging his harp to its case, he went softly over to the aged sleeper. Carefully he laid the instrument on the ground, called the faithful Nubian hound who accompanied them in their travels, and placed him on guard beside the Seller of herbs.

Then he turned, ran swiftly down the face of the hill into the heart of the City, and mingled with the gaily surging throngs.

Ra, riding in the "bark of eternity," had long left the highest track in the heavens when the sleeper on the hill-side at last opened his eyes. The dog whined dolefully, and the old Herb Seller, glancing at the forsaken harp, sighed, then rose slowly to his feet.

At the same time he beheld a lithe form ascending the hill with light, swift, eager steps.

"Amasis, Amasis, my son, where went thou?" he cried as the young man hastened towards him with quick coming breath and flashing eyes. "Has Thebes claimed thee altogether for her own?"

"What! my father, does not even thy pulse beat higher on this great day of rejoicing in Khem? I have seen and heard wonderful things beyond. I would thou also had been there."

"What didst thou see?" asked the old man, pressing his hand to his eyes. "I remember no cause for this excitement. Sleep has robbed me of my memory; it is a blank, save for dreams which flitted before me in my rest. But say on."

"Why," answered Amasis in surprise, "I fear that of late thy mind has dwelt too keenly on the preparation of that new drug thou hast in hand. Behold, from this day Ath reigns over Khem as

joint ruler with the new Pharaoh, and regent for the child Zar."

"By Amen," interrupted the old Herb Seller, whose name was Horus, "my mind has become clear—I remember all. So the voice of Thebes called thee away to witness her rejoicing, she——"

"Yea, she called, my father," answered Amasis hastily, another flash lighting up his dark eyes. "I have seen the great Ath herself and have heard her speak with these ears."

"And have easily become a slave to the eyes and lips of a winning woman," finished the old man with quiet sarcasm. "It is Unas, her brother, who should have won thy admiration. I do not believe in a woman's rule over so great a country as Khem."

"Ath and the new Pharaoh passed through the streets in a golden chariot on the way back to the palace," continued Amasis eagerly. "Near the small temple of Amen where the crowd was very thick the chariot halted, and Ath, wearing the uræus crown of Khem, arose, and flung out her arms towards the people. Then she opened her mouth to speak, and O my father, her words had all the majesty of a Pharaoh, yet all the gentleness of a woman. A great deal of her speech was lost to me, for I stood on a stone bench on the outer edge of a crowd many thousands strong. She spoke of all the might of Egypt; of the conquests which had been made; then she asked for the affections of the people—indeed, by the time she had finished, the cry of 'Ath' was heard on every side. Then when the chariot moved slowly away, the Queen still stood and smiled royally upon the people. With

one hand she scattered a bunch of lotus among them; with the other she held her robes in place."

"Thou hast made no mention of Unas, her brother and co-ruler," returned the old Herb Seller, "what of him?"

"I fear he was almost forgotten in the presence of his mightier sister," said Amasis. "But now I remember he sat by the Queen's side, smiling also and lazily biting his nails! And when the chariot moved off I fear the shout of 'Pharaoh' was altogether swallowed up in the cry of 'Ath.'"

"Is the Prince a fool?" broke in Horus with a blaze of sudden anger. "Does he hold his royalty so lightly as this? Or is his mind so weak that he cannot stand against a greater and a mightier one? Does he think he will win back an atom of what that ambitious woman will seize? In the Game of Draughts can ye ever regain that which has been swept from the board?"

He leant forward on his staff and peered with angry eyes into the young man's face.

"My father, my father," cried Amasis, retreating a step or two in astonishment. "What are the fortunes of Pharaoh to thee, so long as peace and prosperity are in Khem? Never before have I seen thee so agitated by any news—thou who generally art content to sit among thy medicines in the day, and thy horoscopes during the greater part of the night! Nevertheless I would thou hadst looked upon Ath's royal grace and heard her speech."

"I have heard speech of another kind," answered the old man gruffly. "Ath! Ath! Why wilt thou make the words ring in mine ears? Her face is more than known to me. I have no need to run



after a woman who is a Queen, and will yet be greater than a Queen—like thee,” he added. He turned his back as he spoke, and stood staring across at the unruffled Nile.

“Thou hast seen the Queen before?” cried Amasis, unwilling to let the subject drop. “I never knew thou had aught to do with her.”

The Herb Seller wheeled round, and regarded the youth intently.

“Once,” he said impressively, drawing his brows together over the deep sunken eyes. “Once in the reign that has passed, Ath, now Lady of Khem, honoured my poor trade several times as I passed through Thebes. My skill was greater in those days, and my hand was steadier in the use of deadly drugs. But on one occasion when she knew I was within the city she sent for me. A strange dream which she had had I interpreted, and then I read her horoscope after study of the stars. I told her their meaning and she was pleased—oh, very pleased—until I reached the end, then her face darkened, and she swore by Thoth and all the gods of Khem that I spoke falsely, also that her own diviners knew such things as I prophesied could not happen. Yet for all her anger I saw she feared my words. She swore she would not see my face again, and I left—left the palace and Thebes. After that I dwelt for five years in the North Land without journeying once into the South. Ath was but a girl in those nays—a girl with a strong woman’s mind; now she is a woman with the will of a strong Pharaoh. Oh, whisper but the name of Horus the Magician into the ear of Ath the Lady of Khem, and she would pale in the midst of her triumphs

and stand trembling. But enough, in another hour we will descend hence and find a lodging for the night."

"But what evils didst thou prophesy?" cried Amasis eagerly.

"How dost thou know that I prophesied evils?" returned the old man with a frown. "Perchance after all it was the foretelling of a great good that made the Queen's face darken. Question no more. Unnecessary inquisitiveness is not seemly in a youth."

## CHAPTER II

### THE ASTROLOGER'S PAPYRUS

ON a hot morning, about a week after their entry into Thebes, Horus the Seller of Herbs and Mouth-piece of the Stars, with Amasis his apprentice and adopted son, sat poring over a huge scroll of papyrus, in a plain low-roofed chamber which formed their day and night apartment. The owner of the house, who belonged to the poorer middle class, was thankful enough when an occasional stranger thought his meagre, ill-furnished front chamber worthy to be hired. Horus had made this man's house his place of lodging two or three times previously when he had been passing through Thebes, although it was ever his boast that if he wished he could find a house ready to welcome him free of cost, in every village and city through all the lands of Egypt.

On this particular morning Horus had bolted the door of the room wherein they sat and given orders that on no account should they be disturbed. For some time they had been studying the large scroll of papyrus that lay upon the old man's knee. It contained a minute description of certain drugs of very rare value, which were only used by those who had reached a high standard in the art of medicine. If Horus had been of an ambitious

mind, he could easily have rivalled with the most learned and skilful physician in the two Egypts. As it was, he preferred to travel at his own leisure up and down the banks of the Nile, mixing only with the humbler classes, much against the wishes of Amasis, who, knowing the extent of his master's wonderful skill, secretly longed for a somewhat higher sphere of life. During the many years of their close companionship, Horus had educated the lad in various branches of medicine and astronomy, so that during the past year he had been his valuable assistant.

Presently the old man arose, crossed the chamber and opened a square box filled with curious bottles of all sizes, some of circular shape with a tiny lip, others no thicker than a man's finger like an ordinary phial.

"Amasis, my child," he called suddenly, "I must needs ask thee to measure out the portions for me; my hand trembles strangely this morning, age alone can be the cause. I fear the disciple will soon out-distance the master," he continued, as the young man tilted the phials and poured out the required amount to a hair-breadth. "Finish the mixture according to the way I have instructed thee. As for me, I will set in writing a discovery I made while thou wert asleep and I sat in deep study of the stars."

He drew a clean roll of papyrus to him and retired into a far corner. Then there was a short silence, broken only by the slight jangle of bottles, the crunching of sun-dried herbs and the scratching of the Astrologer's pen over the smooth papyrus.

## 22 THE WITCH QUEEN OF KHEM

Amasis had nearly finished his task before he spoke again.

"Hast thou heard," he cried, "that in seven days Pharaoh and the Queen in company with a few members of their household travel in the royal barge to Memphis? It seems that there is some sort of a grievance among the people, and so they will travel thence to understand the matter better. Perchance I shall see the royal barge as it starts; it will be worth the while, for every one loves a good sight. Pharaoh-Osiris (all honour to his name) was too much of a plain living man to dwell in much splendour. Khem has ever loved gay times and majesty and beauty in a king or queen. Now it seems that she will have her fill. Indeed, indeed," he rattled on happily, "with every country we are at peace; Pharaoh-Osiris accomplished that. After work comes the play; was there ever a more auspicious time?"

A deep growl came from the other side where Horus sat with suspended pen. "Indeed, indeed," he echoed sarcastically, mimicking the young man's tones. "Khem is mad; Thebes is mad, every one is mad, and thou above all art mad!"

He ended the words with a snort and bent over his writing again. Amasis took little notice of the old man's abrupt speech; he was a good-tempered youth and accustomed to his master's eccentricities.

"By Thoth," he broke in, with a light laugh, "I know thou carest for nothing save medicine and the stars; but then I must speak with some one when my heart travels into a lighter mood. Caffu has told me much concerning the royal household. He had it from the mouth of a slave who tends



the incense. Never would I have believed that there could be so much splendour under any single roof! If the Lady of Khem is as wonderful to behold in the open street, why, what must she be within yon palace walls? Would we had the chance to pass beyond the gates for one brief hour! Wilt thou never again seek to pass thence, my father?"

His voice was like that of a child hankering after a brilliant plaything. And indeed in many ways Amasis was still a child; he had learnt nothing save that which he had been taught by the Herb Seller, who had been his sole companion from boyhood. Every village and city on the banks of the great placid Nile he had travelled in, and knew thoroughly. He had mixed with the mighty crowds that gathered in the streets of the Cities of Wonder. Yet they were always a Wonderland to him; he understood nothing of the great Pulse of Life that beat continually within. In certain things, Amasis could reason and give voice to thoughts worthy of a learned man, in others he was but a child setting his eager feet upon the uneven paths of Knowledge. It drew him on with fascination and he followed happily and light-heartedly enough. At present he had no idea of the great evils that lurked within the gaily smiling earth, or of the dark shadows that sometimes leap up and cover the gleaming sun.

"My father," he repeated again, "wilt thou not take me once to peep within the inner gates? Thou art acquainted with the member of the guard and he would not say nay to thou, who art well known."

"The monkey loves to climb on the lion's nose to see what makes the eyes gleam so brightly," cried the deep voice out of the corner. Then the pen began to scratch, and Amasis, with a sigh, turned to his phials again.

Presently Horus arose, unbolted the door and went out, a frown still hanging over his deep sunken eyes. While he was gone Amasis took down the harp he loved so well and tuned the slender strings afresh.

Had he known it, Horus had not gone far from the house, but at this very moment stood outside the open wooden shutters that protruded some distance, effectually preventing any penetration of the sun's hot rays. For a few moments the old man stood in deep thought his hands crossed and clasping his shoulders, Egyptian fashion.

Suddenly the soft twang of the harp reached his ears, and he drew a little nearer the shutters. The frown had died on his face; in its stead a faint smile dawned at the corners of his lips; while an unusually soft light gleamed in the eyes that were fringed with thin white lashes. It was not often that Horus the Astrologer and Physician appeared thus. As a rule he was grave and majestic, though not altogether forbidding; but one whose nature would appear stern to a stranger.

Again his countenance changed; deep thought made the wrinkles prominent. The music began to die away; he moved forward till he could peep through a crack in the shutter. The lad stood in the centre of the room clasping the harp—a fine specimen of budding manhood, delicate and slender after the better-class Egyptian type. The bright

merry eyes glanced from beneath the thick lashes; the head was poised with proud grace.

The old man began to mutter to himself under his breath: "Resolution in the mouth, courage in the chin, calmness in the brow when youth has bloomed forth into manhood. Let it be as it has been decreed, for I see things as I have never seen them before."

He left the window and walked feebly towards the entrance. Suddenly he reeled and half fell against the wall.

"It shall be set in writing," he muttered, "before the dawning of to-morrow's sun. How my hand trembles! A mist rests before mine eyes. What I do must be done quickly; already I have delayed too long. Yet I have striven; now the end has come, and the gods are striving against me!"

He re-entered the chamber and stumbled across to the corner which he had occupied before. He drew a clean sheet of papyrus towards him and soon the light, reed pen flew over it quickly and feverishly. As he paused a moment, Amasis took the opportunity to speak.

"My father," he said, as he gently replaced the harp by the wall, "thou art fond of telling the horoscopes of strangers; yet never once can I remember that thou prophesied anything concerning me."

A muttered exclamation broke from the old man's lips as he turned round sharply, the reed pen slipping from between his fingers. At the same moment he swiftly covered the half-written papyrus with the end of his loose sleeve and stared fixedly at the back of the young man's head.

"Many and many are the times," continued

## 26 THE WITCH QUEEN OF KHEM

Amasis, "that I have heard thee repeat the message of the stars before thy astonished hearers, and now a sudden curiosity has come upon me concerning myself. When wilt thou grant me my desire?"

By this time Horus had risen unsteadily to his feet and walked across to the young man. He thrust a small package into his hand.

"Take this swiftly to Segron the embalmer," he said kindly, "I promised he should have it by to-night. When thou art returned we will talk."

He watched Amasis till the door was closed, hearkening till the patter of footsteps died away. Then with a sigh, and a strange look in his eyes he went back to the papyrus scroll.

After about the space of an hour the young man returned, for the embalmer's house was a long distance off. Horus still bent over the writing, and Amasis, seeing him thus, stepped in softly. The room was wrapped in silence, not even the reed pen scratched as usual, so the young man reckoned his master was in deep thought.

Gradually, very gradually, the sun moved majestically towards the horizon. In less than half-an-hour the sky would be stained with crimson light and the broad Nile would reflect the rosy rays.

The silence had become almost oppressive when Amasis strode towards the far corner.

"My father," he murmured gently.

The old man did not raise his head, but the reed pen slipped out of his fingers and fell to the floor with a loud clatter.

The head bent a little more forward over the scroll and the young man touched his arm. Then

he started back in fear, for now he knew that Horus the Astrologer was dead; Osiris had claimed him for his own.

Just now the purple sun shot a flood of colour through the half-open shutters; the ruddy arm of light gleamed upon the old man's face, and upon the written papyrus scroll.

Thus Ra bent down and kissed his own, and the spirit had fled, clothed in the radiancy of the glorious light.

Amasis raised the body gently into the chair, and stood fixed like one carven in stone. Suddenly his eyes went to the scroll. The sun now cast its rays on the uppermost lines of writing. Then the young man saw that his name was written there, a halo of purple setting the words on fire.

*This is the Scroll of Horus the Sun's Beloved, Physician and Prophet in the Land of Khem. Let none read within save Amasis the beloved disciple, Child of the Moon, and son by adoption of Horus the Physician.*

Amasis bent down, took the scroll reverently from under the dead man's hand, and placed it within his bosom. Then he laid his lips upon the wrinkled brow and striding across the room, threw open the door.

The owner of the house stood in conversation with several friends near at hand. They paused in consternation looking at the young man's face. He remained motionless for a moment, then flung up his arms towards the sky.

"Horus the Astrologer, the Physician is dead!" he cried in a voice that rang like a wail. "Osiris has sent his Messenger! Horus is dead!"

## 28 THE WITCH QUEEN OF KHEM

Cheffu and his neighbours ran forward exclaiming loudly, but Amasis without vouching any further answer, passed out from the door into the courtyard. The olive after-glow was already faded, while a deep grey flooded the unending sky.

Thus night fell upon the Land of Khem as Amasis the Child of the Moon went out in silence, and stood beneath its sheltering veil.

## CHAPTER III

### THE REVELATION

A WEEK later Amasis sat once more on the side of one of the hills that encircled the vast plains below, and thus overlooked the majestic city of Thebes. It was the same spot whereon he and his master had rested on the day they entered into Thebes and found rejoicing therein because Unas and Ath his sister became joint rulers over the Double Egypt.

It is concerning this wondrous mystic Queen of which the story tells; how her womanhood fled before the coming of the Evil Genius; how she conspired and overcame, until by the uprising of a greater, mightier force she herself was overcome at last.

The reign of Ath was one of the marvels of Egypt; yet for many centuries afterwards her name was tabooed in the very land over which she held dominion. Most all her records were destroyed, few scrolls bear her awful name, for the kings which came after sought by every means in their power to efface her memory from men's hearts. For many, many years after her death it was whispered that she haunted the silent, rocky tombs as an outcast from Amenti, and so must wander, seeking the rest she could not find; but rousing the echoes in the silent corridors of the dead. Then at night

certain of the poorer classes with less cultured minds would cry in shuddering nervousness, one to another, saying: "Ath is passing; may she soon find rest."

As Amasis sat alone on the hill-side that day, he drew forth the papyrus scroll which he had found under the dead hand of Horus. A week had passed since the old physician's sudden death, and the embalmers now made ready for the funeral. In his grief Amasis had almost forgotten the existence of the scroll, and being obliged to fulfil many necessary duties, his time hitherto had not been his own.

Strange feelings coursed through him as he slowly and carefully unrolled the dead man's writing. A vision of the bent head and scratching pen came to his mind; he remembered that Ra had flooded his crimson radiance upon his beloved in the hour of death, also how the light had moved gently and silently till it had rested at last upon the unknown scroll, and upon his own name that was inscribed therein.

He opened it and commenced to read.

*This is the Scroll of Horus the Sun's Beloved, Physician and Prophet in the Land of Khem. Let none read within save Amasis, the beloved disciple, the Child of the Moon, son by adoption of Horus the Physician. If any see this scroll, let them put it down when they have read these words, lest the curse of Horus rest upon them, and his shade and the shades he might summon should torment their days.*

*Amasis, my child, let thine eyes be open; to thee I speak with secret words. Age speaks with youth, Death with Life, for my hand trembles sorely, and*



*a mist comes continually before mine eyes. Surely I am very near Amenti's<sup>1</sup> gates. Who, indeed, can say that one foot is not already set within the portal? Yet there is much for me—Horus, the Sun's Beloved, to say unto thee, O Amasis, Child of the Moon, before I pass out into the Halls of the Dead, and the Guardian of the Tomb leads me in to the throne of Osiris.*

*Now I must go back to the time when I first found thee, a tiny, wretched, half-clad child, running aimlessly about in the streets of Tanis; having no parents to call thy own—though I understood that Memphis had been the city of thy birth. Eight years was thine age when I, Horus, the wandering Physician, took thee to my heart, loved thee and made thee what thou art. Wherefore was it that I picked thee out among the many thousands in that long, broad street? Perchance there are many, many reasons; but the chiefest are these—I saw thou wert a child with a quick receiving brain, and that what thou wert once taught remained for ever within thee. This pleased me well, for I loved to pour my knowledge into another. Then I, who delve into mysteries, learnt that the gods had ordained a strange path for thee to tread. This path was revealed to me, and I saw all the turnings and by-ways, the soft smooth road; the dark, thick forest, the false paths which lead into nothingness; the twilight in the valleys, the sunshine that sits on the mountain tops.*

*Upon thee it fell to right a mighty wrong; and I knew a time would come when thou wouldst leave my side and follow a beckoning hand which should*

<sup>1</sup> *Amenti*=The Egyptian Place of the Dead.

## 32 THE WITCH QUEEN OF KHEM

*make known to thee thy mission. Then my love for thee, perchance, overcame my duty; and I strove if it might be to alter thy course of life, knowing how certain ones would cross thy path, and thou wouldst need all thy strength and wisdom. At one time I thought that I had modelled thee as I desired; then gradually I beheld thy mind dwelling on other things; ambition leapt into thee, the great and the mighty called thee, and though, perchance, thou knew it not, yet no longer wert thou altogether content to rest by thine old master's side. How in those days I strove to curb thy thoughts when they wandered into the world beyond the things I alone had taught! I would that thou mightest have remained a simple, contented child of Khem, happy in thy work, living an uneventful life, obeying the laws of heaven and earth.*

*In spite of all my strivings I have failed; yet Amasis, my child, all this I did out of my blind love for thee; and now in consequence I feel my feet treading nearer the Gates of Amenti before I have gained that gift of the gods—the age of five score years and ten. Among the ones who shall rise up in thy path, and of whom I am not forbidden to speak, will be Ath, the Lady of Khem. I know thou wilt marvel how it shall be that thou shalt rise to so high a position as to have aught to do with her. In the Halls of Mystery I, Horus, have seen the Scroll of thy life unfold! Again I say, mark what dealings thou hast with Ath. Her royalty thou hast little need to fear—it is her womanhood, and the great power which lies beyond, which is at present unrevealed to her; of this*

*thou must beware; for Ath is more than a woman, yet less than a woman. Remember that.*

*I have told thee how I spake with this Queen when she was but a girl, and dwelt in her father's house—how I prophesied things good, great and mighty. Then she smiled; I saw her eyes flash, and I knew her mind dwelt on the triumphs she hoped to achieve. But the end came, and with it evils leapt up, evils that might be swept away if she but would. Girl as she was she knew when the time came she would have no mind to sacrifice the proud triumphs that should herald the coming of disaster. She swore by all the gods of Khem that she would have her triumphs and yet overcome the evils in the end. Then, as I have said before, I set my face against the gilded palace and against the City of Thebes.*

*Amasis, my son, it is necessary that I speak in riddles, for my lips are sealed as to the things I told the Lady Ath. To-day she is Mistress of Khem, and the prophecy commences to unfold.*

*In her horoscope among many I beheld thee; and if it had not been ordained for thee to right a mighty wrong, my bidding would be to overcome thy fate, and continue thy master's trade in peace on the banks of Sihor.<sup>1</sup> As it is, I say go forward; play the part that thou must play, and though I can reveal but little else, yet I know the gods will show thee where to commence; as to the ending, thou thyself shalt make it. With thy help the people of Khem shall become still mightier, for thou art one of a chosen three who will cause another to be great.*

<sup>1</sup> Ancient name for the Nile.

*Prosper in thy mission, my son, and think kindly on thine old master who would have given thee a brighter path whereon to tread through the forest of trees that shuts out the light—yet it rests upon thyself entirely as to how often the sun may find a loophole among the trees.*

*Amasis, thou hast asked for thy horoscope; here it is written before thine eyes. Now perchance thou canst understand many things and why the name of Ath and thy ambitions have been distasteful in my ears.*

*This scroll shall be given to thee on the day I depart for Amenti. In the meanwhile I place it in the hands of Cheffu, my friend the potter, whom I know I can trust to fulfil my final charge. Amasis, my child, farewell. When thou hast fulfilled thy mission, and come at last to die, then it may be that I, Horus, will issue forth from the tombs of the dead, and stretching out my arms, shall greet the object of my love. Till then I shall watch and wait with my hand resting on Amenti's Gate, and as the souls pass in, I shall look for thine, and so continue till I find at last. Farewell.*

*Written on the twentieth day of Paophi, in the City of Thebes, in the first year of the reign of Pharaoh Unas and Ath, his sister, by the hand of Horus the Sun's Beloved, the truly devoted to Osiris, the Mouthpiece of the Stars; Prophet and Physician in the Land of Khem.*

Amasis read the scroll twice before he laid it safely away in his bosom; then he arose from the mound of stones whereon he sat, and stood staring across at the calm, grey Nile. How short a time it had been since he and Horus had together

watched at the same place. Indeed, how great a journey one may take in a tiny space of time!

As the barges flitted silently over the waters a distant cry of rejoicing fell dully on the young man's ears.

Presently the warm glow of coloured sails flashed from afar, and Amasis remembered that to-day Pharaoh and Ath departed for a sojourn in Memphis. A sudden thought struck him; in the hour when the twain began to rule over Khem, he had sung a wild song on his well-loved harp. As before, the notes of his music should mingle with the cries beyond, for it seemed fitting that it should be so. Once again the strings twanged tremulously, and the lithe young form swayed gently to and fro as the words rang out.

"The great one has gone to his rest,  
Ended his task and his race.  
Thus men are aye passing away,  
And youths are aye taking their place.  
As Ra rises up every morning,  
And Tum every evening doth set,  
Each soul in its turn draweth breath.  
Each man that is born seeth death."

The voice of the singer grew louder, and the harp vibrated sharply beneath his touch, as if it almost guessed an omen in the words.

"Men pass on to the Silent Shore,  
And their place doth know them no more:  
They are as if they had never been  
Since the Sun went forth on high.  
They sit on the banks of the stream  
That floweth in stillness by."

The voice and the music trembled, then died away; a clash of drums and shrill pipes echoed from the distant convoy of royal boats; gay sails

flashed from afar as the two rulers in pride and glory moved northwards to Memphis; unconscious of the one who stood on yonder sunlit hill—a youth whose manhood had not yet dawned, and one who would seem a strange instrument for the gods to use to right a wrong. But then the ways of the gods are strange. The soul and its power must remain hidden till the proper time of its manifestation. Greatness leaps from little, and that which seemeth small and of no account becomes mighty. In all quarters of the universe this comes about; therefore let they who would seek to crush beware!

Amasis stood awhile in deep silence before descending the hill.

“The way is not yet clear before me,” he murmured softly to himself, “but the gods know that their servant waits!”

## CHAPTER IV

### ATH

FROM the time of the old astrologer's death and the reading of the strange scroll three years had passed. Now we enter into the royal palace of Thebes where art and beauty dwelt together, to behold, for the first time, Ath, the Lady of Khem.

A richly sculptured hall, part of which was fashioned like a verandah, looked out upon the luxuriant gardens beyond. Huge columns supported the carved and painted ceiling; while at the farther end, where the apartment was open to the sky, a softly flowing fountain issued from its glistening, white marble stand crowded with dark green plants.

The walls and floor were made of coloured marble cut in blocks and arranged to form a pattern. Statues large and small lined the long hall, while frescoes of the blue lotus peeped out where heavy curtains were drawn aside and kept in place by heavy gold and silver ornaments. Also between the lotus columns and colossal painted statues, curiously shaped seats and couches of every description were placed, so arranged that any one walking up the marble floor could not tell at a glance whether the hall was empty, but must search within each recess.

A short distance from the central fountain, on a carved ivory couch heavily ornamented with gilded animal heads, reclined a woman of youthful years. A loose, white robe, thin to transparency, with a bright coloured border and hanging tassels revealed the shape of her graceful, supple form. The neck and arms were bare, while several bracelets, representing coiling snakes, jangled pleasantly whenever she moved. The small feet, encased in a pair of beautiful sandals, just peeped from beneath the edge of the long robe. A chaplet of half-open lotus buds was set upon the wavy clouds of jet-black hair.

This was Ath, joint ruler with Pharaoh, her brother, over Khem, and who as a Queen was one of the most marvellous who ever sat upon the Egyptian throne.

For one hour on this hot, breathless day Ath, against her usual custom, had indulged in a brief repose. The softly flowing fountain produced a faint refreshing breeze in contrast to the relentlessly burning sun outside; while two handsome Egyptian girls stood on either side of the couch, waving huge ostrich fans dyed in brilliant colours and fastened into sticks of gold.

Presently Ath lifted the thick lashes which veiled a pair of splendid dark eyes. The calm expression of repose left her face instantly; with a quick movement she raised her head till it rested on her hand. Her features were well-cut, but coldly beautiful, and gave one the idea that she bore little or no affection for her fellow-creatures. There was the unsmiling resolute mouth, the delicately chisled chin bearing the stamp of unwavering determination; the straight nose, the proud, graceful poise



of the erect head. The eyes were her most curious characteristic, for they showed a keenly penetrating power underlying an alluring fascination.

During the three years which had passed since the coronation day, Ath had so woven her influence around the hearts of the Egyptians that they almost came to regard her as their sole ruler. Pharaoh, who lacked determination, they began to ignore, although the Queen apparently did nothing that might point her as rival to her weaker brother. The people beheld in her the qualities of Hathor while the dominion of Set was hidden from them. The Egyptians were satisfied, and there were few among the light-hearted, easy-going nation who troubled to probe into affairs at the royal court of Thebes.

It is of this hidden side of Ath's character about which the story tells; how the seed of evil was sown in the weakest spot, and the strong will and the indomitable courage failed to overcome. Thus the tree planted refused to be uprooted; the fangs spread and infested its surrounding parts with canker.

When the Queen raised herself on the couch, she glanced over her shoulder into the face of one of the two fanners.

"Taska," she said, "I feel very wakeful. Come, sit down here and relate one of the stories of which thou hast such a store."

The girl laid down her fan and came forward with slow, stately steps. She was very young, hardly more than sixteen, but had all the developed beauty of a full-grown woman. Her features were delicately cut, the eyes resplendent with a deep

lustre, her voice clear and remarkably sweet. Taska was one of the very few to whom the Queen showed any affection. She sank down on the edge of the couch languidly.

"What manner of tale will please thy Majesty best? Shall it be the wandering of Amenhotep in a dream through the Underworld, or a story of a strange magician?"

"Too solemn," said the Queen. "Tell me a tale in which war and the influence of woman are connected—something in which I can imagine I live in the person of the heroine."

Taska smiled, and sat in thought for a few moments. She told her story in simple, vivid language, engaging the liveliest interest on the part of her royal listener. In plot the tale was very similar to the history of Helen of Troy and the Trojan War.

The Queen sighed as the tale finished.

"The influence of woman in the world is unbounded," she remarked, "and yet the world sometimes hardly realizes it."

"Nor woman either," added Taska reflectively, as she sat with her chin in her hand, gazing into space.

Ath glanced at her rather sharply, and then closed her eyes again, for the afternoon was exceptionally warm.

When she opened them again a few minutes later, the heavy brodered hangings at the far end of the hall shook apart, and a man's figure stood in the entrance.

This was Seti, Ath's first cousin, who was governor over one of Egypt's outlying provinces,

and was at the present time making a short visit at the Theban palace. He was rather taller and broader than most Egyptians, and had the Cushite type of face. The features were prominent, the nose short and the lips thick, showing the trace of Ethiopian blood that ran in his veins on his mother's side. The eyes, which were small and piercing, gave one the idea that they could never rest on any object for long without calculating its worth and advantage to their owner's sordid grasping soul.

Seti stood in the entrance, glancing cautiously down the hall. He saw Ath and made a movement as if to withdraw, but at this moment the Queen half shut her eyes, and watched him carefully from beneath the thick lashes. Thus they looked at each other, and each studied the other's inmost mind.

Presently Ath half rose from the couch, and Seti in his rich hunting tunic stepped eagerly forward from the entrance. He had on his mind something which he wished to disclose, and this, by intuition, Ath knew. With a wave of her hand she beckoned him forward. He bowed low before he took the seat she motioned him to.

"Thou hast had good sport?" questioned the Queen languidly.

"Fairly," he answered; "but the hunting round Thebes is nothing to the sport one may have nearer the north of Khem on the outskirts of the Great Sand Plain."

They talked of hunting and other sports for some time longer; when suddenly a shadow fell across the wide doorway which led into the gardens. A

light, boyish laugh floated towards them as two figures emerged from behind the outer columned terrace, and walked rapidly down an avenue of motionless trees. The Queen and her cousin watched them awhile without speaking.

Presently those in the garden halted, and the younger of the two sat down upon a natural bank formed under a spreading sycamore. This was Zar, the brother of Pharaoh and half brother to Ath, a youth of some seventeen years of age. After the present King he would become ruler of Egypt, and Ath would act as regent for him till he were of age, supposing Unas died while his brother was yet a boy. This had been the will of the late Pharaoh.

The young man who stood by his side was no other than Amasis, the ancient astrologer's disciple. How, during the three years that had elapsed since the old man's death and the beginning of the new reign, he had entered into the royal court it shall be told presently.

After a moment Zar pulled his attendant's sleeve and made him sit with him on the natural seat. Evidently Amasis was relating some story to the young Prince, for the lad's face beneath its swarthy tint was flushed, and his eyes sparkled happily.

Inside the hall Ath was discussing the necessity of erecting a granary in Edfu, where the people seemed ill supplied with corn. Seti was in favour of her suggestion, but had grown silent the moment Zar and Amasis entered the gardens. The Queen noted his thoughtful silence and therefore ceased speaking.

"Royal cousin," she cried at last, "thy mind has

wandered far, and I do not care that my words should travel out to meet that roaming mind."

She leant farther back on the cushions with a half offended air, and half motioned him to withdraw.

This he had no intention of doing, and instantly hastened to restore the Queen's good humour. Just at that moment Amasis raised his right arm with a tragic gesture as if to illustrate the tale he told. The short wide sleeve of his tunic fell back, revealing a vividly scarlet crescent-shaped mark which he bore from birth on the upper part of his arm. The mark was large and noticeable even from the distance, and Seti, glancing out into the garden, uttered a low exclamation.

Ath turned at the sound, regarding her cousin with amazement, slightly tinged with scorn.

"I had not known before what a strange companion thou couldst be," she remarked quietly; "as I said, thy mind has wandered far this noon-day, and only left the empty case as a substitute till its return."

Her tone was slightly impatient while she watched Seti's eyes which were fixed upon the figures in the grounds beyond the wide entrance, ornamented with climbing plants in bloom.

"My mind is here, royal cousin," answered Seti gravely, "even at thy feet. I have a boon to ask of thee."

"Thy manner ill-befits one who would ask a favour," cried the Queen.

"Who is yonder attendant with Zar in the gardens?" asked Seti eagerly.

"Is that all?"

Ath leant a little more forward, and peered out between the trees.

"It is one of the lad's favourite attendants," she said carelessly. "He is named Amasis, and has been in the palace three months."

She ceased, and endeavoured to draw her cousin's attention to the more important question of erecting a granary in Edfu.

"Amasis, Amasis," repeated Seti between his teeth, a half frightened look upon his face. "And canst thou tell me no more concerning him? As a favour I ask it, royal cousin; thy information may be important to me."

The Queen put the plan of the granary on one side with a sigh, and bade the attendant maids retire for a time. "I remember his coming well," she continued, "for I pride myself on knowing the history and character of all my servants. It seems that Ptahmes the Architect was out hunting one day on the Libyan side of Thebes, when one of his favourite dogs, who, I think, must have been weak in the wind, outran himself, and rolling over lay, as it seemed, dying. Yon Amasis was watching the chase from a high tree. He jumped down on seeing the dog thus, and administered some unknown fluid to it from a phial. The animal lay limp like one dead for some few moments, then it rose suddenly and walked across to its master. Ptahmes learnt that this Amasis was a wandering druggist-musician—and indeed he can make good music on a stringed instrument. Ptahmes told this tale to Zar, with whom the dog was also a favourite. He desired to see Amasis, and accordingly after some little difficulty, Ptahmes brought him hither.

I was not witness to the meeting, but it seems that Zar greeted him strangely and pressed him to enter his service. Amasis refused for some time, and then consented, though many would have been eager to accept the offer immediately. But Zar is happy with him, and I am satisfied."

Seti listened eagerly to every word, while his small eyes sunk beneath the arching brows.

"Strange how this Amasis should have gained such a wonderful knowledge of medicine," he said.

"From his father, I think, who died some few years back. He appears to possess several secret remedies with which no other physician in Khem is apparently acquainted. Perchance in a future day we shall learn more of the young man's art, which after all may be nothing more than a clever mind making the most of a slight knowledge. But why art thou interested in him? Hast thou had aught to do with him?"

Seti arose from his seat for an instant; his swarthy face became even darker, and the thick lips seemed still coarser. Then he sat down again and his face became rigid.

Ath rose with a faint scream, rapping sharply against a marble stand with the end of her fan stick.

Two attendants came rushing in.

"The Lord Seti is seized with a sudden illness," she began, when his features relaxed and became more natural.

"Nay, royal cousin," he cried, "it has passed. Dismiss thy waiting maids, I pray thee, and let us talk."

She waved her hand, and they were alone again.

## CHAPTER V

### SEEDS OF EVIL

SETI sat in silence for a few moments before he spoke again. Evidently his mind was filled with unpleasant thoughts, for his face was not agreeable to look on. Once again he glanced into the gardens before turning to the Queen.

"I do not like to meet any one with the name of Amasis," he cried.

He stopped short and muttered a string of magical words.

"Dost thou know the meaning of the name, royal cousin?"

"Child of the Moon, methinks," returned Ath; then she added with a laugh, "like thine, the Child of Seti."

He frowned darkly, for he detested his name. Then his teeth chattered. "Thou knowest also the legend connected with our noble house?"

Ath nodded. The story was well known in those days. It told how some two hundred years back a wealthy ancestor of this same Seti had laid aside a great sum of money, consecrating it within the Temple. This gift he gave into the hands of the Chief Priest in the House of Amen, to be used for the benefit of the worthy poor in the time of disaster, either by the inundation or other calamity;



for the erection of a school in Thebes where the holy worship might be taught; also for the maintenance of the priests appointed to teach. Suddenly an evil fit laid hold on the donor, and he sent his servants and with brazen words demanded the return of the gift.

Then the High Priest sent back every whit of the treasure, saying that the god had no use for unwilling offerings. This ancestor, who was named Apepi, did not repent, but lived riotously, using his wealth evilly. And one of the Seers of the Land laid a curse upon him, swearing that the gods would yet be avenged and blot out his house and his name for ever from Khem. The memory of him, he said, should pass away; his tomb should not be left in peace, but should be desecrated by the hands of strangers.

Then Apepi became afraid and repented of all his evil. He went mourning for the rest of his life and called continually on the name of his gods. Whereupon Amen, through one of the prophets, took back the curse which he had laid upon him and made him free. Nevertheless it was to hang conditionally over his descendants for ever. And if by any chance a member of Apepi's house in generations to come, should sin against the god's own person, or against any one on whom the god had placed his protection, then a Child of Light should arise from the midst of the lowly ones of Khem. He should strike upon the house of Apepi until it should fall and perish, and its name be blotted out for ever. This was the prophecy in the ancient days, but the descendants of Apepi had hitherto escaped from the evil which hung over

them. Then came Seti, a man with a cowardly heart and unscrupulous mind. He knew of the curse and was afraid; yet he prided himself that he also would pass into Amenti free, because of the wealth he gave yearly to the Temple of Amen in Thebes.

"Last night," continued Seti, "a sudden unaccountable fear came upon me; so in disguise I consulted a seer and his oracle. He mumbled to himself for some time before he spoke. Then he told me of one who should cross my path whose name should mean Light, while the sign of the crescent should be upon him. I questioned him further, and his words were thus: 'The Child of Light shall have an arm of strength; the arm of strength shall carry the crescent sign, and so beware.' Then without thought I revealed my real name. The man ran from the room with a hideous cry, and I saw him no more. And now on the day following I meet with one whose name is Light, bearing the crescent mark."

Ath laughed.

"The name of Amasis is common in Khem," she said, "and what is a birth-mark? Thou hast done no wrong—then wherefore this fear? If ye thus search for evil, ye will find it in any place, O cousin."

The Queen spoke languidly, almost impatiently. She had known the story of the conditional curse from childhood; and familiar things sometimes pall, even when they relate to dangers. In her heart she disliked Seti, only tolerating him at the court because it was politic, he being equal in power to a petty king, although cowardly.

Seti seemed partly soothed by her words. Rising, he called for a goblet of wine. It was brought, and he drank deep—deeper than was good for any man. At that time Ath forgot she also belonged to the house of Apepi.

Presently Seti's spirits rose, and he turned towards the Queen with a laugh.

"Health to the Star of Khem," he cried loudly as he drained the cup. His eyes flashed brightly and he spoke as one who carries a light heart. He was more pleasing to the Queen in this mood, for his gayer manner made one forget the lack of a goodly countenance.

"I came at this hour to offer thee my advice," he cried, "and not to put any idle tales before thee. I pray thee listen to me. Dost thou know the name of Horus?"

The slightest quiver passed through the Queen's frame. Otherwise she was perfectly calm. Whatever Ath might feel, she always knew how and when to conceal it from others.

"Thou shouldst know him well if I mistake not," continued her cousin. "This Horus was a wandering druggist, also a skilled astrologer, was he not? He told horoscopes to all classes, and even once to thee, O royal cousin?"

He paused and watched her face. The Queen said nothing. She well remembered confiding the words of Horus several years back when her father ruled. She hoped by this time he had forgotten them. She told herself that it had been a weak action on her part not to guard her secret. But then she was a girl at that time, now she was a woman and strong. So she said nothing, but

pretended to listen carelessly to her cousin's speech while her heart fluttered within her.

"Thou knowest I am ever eager for thy welfare, O Star of Khem," continued Seti. "Among many things, if I mistake not, this Horus foretold the rising of a star which in time should outshine and finally darken thine. Is this not so?"

The Queen nodded. "Thou hast a good memory," she said quietly.

"Aye, a good memory when it concerns one whose interests must be guarded. This star, it was said, should rise out of the land which lies round the Image of Harmachis. Say, O cousin, in what part of Khem does this image lie?"

The Queen laughed. "Thou hast asked a riddle, Seti," she said lightly. "Harmachis has many images in Khem."

"Think, and thou wilt know," answered Seti, sinking his voice. "Where does the great statue of Harmachis stand? Was it not fashioned by the gods, and will it not stand till the end of time? The Watcher has smiled since the beginning; it smiles as it looks on the face of the sun, and so it will smile in the day when the star that is foretold shall rise, cross thy path, and bring in its train clouds black and thick which shall veil thy light."

Seti knew how to use his words when it pleased him. He had his own wishes to gain in this speech, and was inwardly glad when he saw that he had played on the Queen's fears. Ath remained silent. She knew he spoke of the Sphinx that smiles so strangely on the land of its unknown birth—the Great Sphinx which lay east of the City

of Memphis, and was called the Image of Harmachis, the Watcher of Ra.

"Therefore this star shall rise out of the White-walled City, Memphis," continued Seti quietly. "Now of those who could possibly eclipse thee and thy power there is only one who was born in Memphis, and that is the lad out yonder—the heir Zar!"

The Queen rose from her seat.

"Peace," she said sternly. "The Prince is little more than a child and my brother. Be careful how thou speak of him, O cousin."

Seti did not flinch under her wrath. He waited coolly till she resumed her seat before speaking again.

"Only for thy good do I speak these words, O Light of Khem. As thou sayest, the Prince Zar is but a child, and one who in less than six years will be a man. The health of Pharaoh his brother is somewhat delicate—he has the symptoms of a wasting disease which perchance may carry him into the arms of Osiris before even two years have passed. Therefore the power, save in part name, is entirely in thy hands; Khem already looks to thee for her rule and not to Pharaoh. Surely thou knowest this already. Thou must have heard for thyself that the people speak more often of the Queen than they do of the King. Zar, whose character and bearing is strong, will leap into manhood before thou art aware. Khem will be taken from thy hands, and wilt thou, O cousin, be satisfied?"

Seti had played his hand well. Ath would not be satisfied. She had told herself even in her father's time that she would be ruling Queen of

Khem. She who had nearly fulfilled her desire knew she would not brook her light at any time to be outshined. She remembered the words of Horus, the words he had written in the papyrus scroll. He had foretold glory and triumph, and an evil which would need to be conquered. She remembered how she had sworn to see his face no more, but to taste the honey of her ambition and yet to shield herself from all the stings. She remembered how, ten years back, she had laughed in the old man's face, and he, in silent anger, had shaken the dust of the palace from off his feet. The words concerning the star rang in her ears—the star that should rise out of Memphis.

Seti had aimed his arrow straight; but his wisdom was wrong when he said the rising, outshining light could only be Zar, for there were others of whom he did not know.

"Of course thou thyself might have foreseen this," said Seti; "but now that I have made it clear, act upon my advice. While the Prince is still a youth, take him from the palace where he learns too much—for he hath a quick brain—and place him where he will not grow up to interfere with thee. Egypt is satisfied with thee; they will not demand another to rule over them while thou dost live; that is, if thou maintain thy unbounded influence upon the land."

"Where would be this place of exile?"

"There are many; near the Libyan Hills or in the North Land, where few dwell. It is almost inaccessible for prying strangers."

"This shall not be," said Ath warmly. "It is a known thing that the North is not healthy."

In spite of her vehement words her tone was less resolute. Seti was silent; it mattered not to him concerning the Prince's health.

"Cease thy talk and thy planning," cried the Queen again. "I tell thee it shall not be."

Seti rose with a sigh—the sigh of a man who has done his best and earned ingratitude as his reward. He waited a moment before he spoke. This time his words were addressed to the fountain in a soft undertone.

"I had told myself that Ath the Mistress of Khem was strong, strong with the strength and power of a mighty Pharaoh. I had likened her to one in whom no weakness was found. Now, behold, I see my ideal cast upon the earth after it has soared within the heavens. To Horus she swore to overcome any evils in her path, and now she has failed."

Once more the Queen flushed, for Seti's words roused her. Again he had shot into that weak spot—Ath's pride. She told herself that hers was no woman's rule; she had strength, strength of mind, of will, of power. Khem should tell her sons in generations to come how Ath had ruled the land as well and as mightily as any Pharaoh. Perhaps in this moment her good spirit whispered, saying: "Show thy strength now, O Ath; in this seeming weakness let thy power shine." If she heard she heeded not, but construed a meaning to please herself.

"I am not weak," she cried angrily; "I have cultivated strength, and I act thereon."

"Royal cousin," said Seti softly, "I tell thee thou art weak even now; again I remind thee how thou swore before the aged seer's face to overcome thy

fate and any evil that might cross thy path. Yea, I find thee weak, O Ath, because thou failest to overcome ! ”

Thus was evil sown in the Queen's heart, for after this she listened to Seti's entreaties. Ath the woman of the strong mind failed to see beyond, or to plan for herself while this wickedness was spoken in her ear. Hence by the method of her overcoming she herself was to be overcome at last.

Now it took Seti but a very short time to convince her that his advice was good ; and even as the sound of the Prince's voice floated toward them from the garden, the plot which should outwit the rising star was planned in every detail. In a little while Zar must depart from the palace.

“ Let it be told whether my plan is good by the result of the Throwing of Pieces,” said Seti.

This was a sort of game played among the Egyptians—generally among those whose ideals were not of the highest, and whose minds were overweighed by superstition. Yet the strong woman Ath did not flinch from this, but was willing to follow the method by which the ignorant visited the mysteries of fate, rather than consult the oracles in the Temple, which to her were pure and holy.

“ Who shall play the game ? ” she asked quietly. Inwardly she marvelled at her own calmness.

“ It is fitting that it should be played between thee and the Prince Zar,” answered Seti, “ while I will act as scribe and note the result on each side.”

The Queen flushed faintly. For one brief moment the good in her revolted at the thought that the boy should innocently wager his fate in the Throwing of Pieces. Then the soft voice of Seti broke upon her.



"Let it be played on the morrow," he cried, "at this hour."

She acquiesced.

He rose from his seat with a satisfied air and bowed low, the wine still working in his brain. On the morrow he would complete his plans; failure was not for him—and then he would seek Ath his cousin in marriage, and she could not say him nay because he was aiding the fulfilment of her ambitions. Very possibly she might soon become sole ruler of Khem, and he hoped he would find it easy to win a place for himself on her throne. Zar, the heir, was the only one who could stand in his path, and he smiled inwardly, congratulating himself at the well-laid plot formed for his riddance.

Again he bowed low before her, placing his forehead upon her cold hands.

"Farewell for a short space, O Rose of Khem," he murmured softly, looking into her eyes with all the fascination which at times he could assume.

Then the marble floor echoed under his step, and the heavy entrance curtains shook as he passed without.

## CHAPTER VI

### SEKHET AGAINST PASHT

NEXT day, at the same hour, Ath sat once more in the hall that looked out upon the great and splendid gardens. She half reclined upon the gilded couch, her cousin Seti watching her from a near seat, with a roll of papyrus and a pen lying before him on a small round table. This was the time appointed for the game that should decide Prince Zar's fate.

The Queen appeared in her customary loose, clinging robes. Only her face was changed, for any one could plainly see a new, strange hardness upon the well-cut features. In fact, her whole appearance resembled that of one who is unconsciously under the influence of another. Seti saw this and was satisfied. He had drunk heavily of the red wine of Khem that day, and its strange power was working upon him at this moment. Both were silent as they waited the coming of Zar.

On a table near the Queen stood an oblong board covered with coloured squares arranged in patterns, and two cubes like the English dice bearing pictures of lionesses and cats on the six sides. The rule was that two persons played the game, choosing to be either a cat or a lioness—Pasht or Sekhet—these also being the names of two Egyptian god-

desses represented with heads of a cat and she-lion. The pieces were then cast into the air after the fashion of dice, and according to the side which fell downwards the player moved one square up the board on his own colour. Sometimes the person who was Sekhet had that animal's picture cast up several times in succession. Sometimes, also, that side would constantly fail to appear. Thus it was altogether a game of chance; and so on this occasion thought Zar and Ath.

Footsteps were suddenly heard on the marble floor some distance from the hall when Seti bent forward and whispered into the Queen's ear.

"Royal cousin," he said in a deep voice, "is it that as the game decides thou wilt decide? Whatever the issue thou wilt abide by it? Remember the spirits who guide thy fortune shall themselves throw the pieces, thy hand being only the instrument."

The Queen nodded, but a faint shiver ran through her frame.

"Ath has spoken," she answered calmly; "she shall never go back on her word."

Seti bowed, and leaning back in his chair studied her face between his half-closed lids. The power of the wine gleamed through his eyes, and in this hour he forgot how the spirits which are sometimes sent among the living stood looking upon them, clothed in invisibility.

Presently the sound of steps became louder and Zar entered from behind the arches. He was followed by Amasis, who remained silently by the curtains. The Prince was dressed richly, carrying his head with natural grace as he advanced up the

hall, his dark, merry eyes dancing with boyish pleasure. If at this moment any stranger had seen him, they would have said in unfeigned admiration: "Ah, verily here stands a Prince!"

"Greeting unto thee, royal sister, and to thee, my cousin," he said, staying his steps a short distance from the Queen's couch. "Honoured am I by thy commands this day," he continued; "not often is Zar called upon to be partner in a game with the Queen of Khem. And now I have a boon to ask—it is this, that Amasis my attendant may be witness to the game since I desire."

Seti made no answer, for the wine had too much filled his head, and as for Ath, she could not bring her eyes to look upon the Prince's face. Although it was a strange request she nodded her head coldly without speaking while Seti prepared the board.

For one moment a puzzled expression played upon Zar's features. Almost unknowingly he glanced across at Amasis, and saw that wonder was also written on his young companion's face.

From that moment the laughter died out of the Prince's heart, and, unaccountably to him, he felt like one who has done for ever with childhood. Slowly he advanced, taking up a position near the table while Seti fingered with the reed pen. Methinks in that moment the Watcher Spirits closed in their circle, and in the dead stillness that followed a silent sigh broke from their ghostly lips. For are they not possessed with far sight to look ahead into the pages of the mystic book which no earthly eye can scan? Perchance they read of the things which should presently come to pass; so they sighed again wearily, rustling their

wraith-like robes. Each one in his right hand bore a crook. Who can say it is not with these they invisibly guided their beloved until at last they also reached Amenti's Gate?

Seti took up one of the pieces, balancing it carefully in the palm of his hand; then he threw it high in the air, and so recklessly was it flung that it missed the table and rolled across to where Amasis stood. The young man picked it up, giving it again into the Governor's hand. As he did so their eyes met in one intense gaze and their fingers touched for the first time.

Seti turned away swiftly towards the Queen.

"Thou wilt choose the head of the lioness?" he asked. "Sekhet shall be thy guardian in the game? Remember," he added beneath his breath, "Ath must be the lioness of Khem!"

"Zar may have the choice," said his cousin slowly; "perchance it were better so."

The Prince had risen to his feet. "Nay," he answered with a gallant obeisance, "the choice is thine, O sister. The Queen of Khem must have precedence. The image of Pasht shall suffice for me," and he moved the pieces towards her.

Such was the nature of Zar that he was generous hearted in all things. Seti nodded to the youth with forced affection, his eyes sparkling with the effect of wine. He was glad there was no difficulty in persuading the Queen to take Sekhet, for he had had the pieces specially weighted before he left his own province. Indeed, for some months previously he had nursed this plot against Zar, whom he considered an obstacle to the fulfilment of his ambitions.

Suddenly the Queen threw up the pieces, and they both fell with the lioness's head downwards. Seti took up his pen and notified two moves on the board. Then the Prince flung them up and again the lioness's head fell beneath. As he had chosen to be Pasht and the cat's head failed to appear, he could count no move.

Thus the game proceeded; yet, to the astonishment of all except Seti, Zar did not win a single point.

It was towards the end of the game when a strange thing occurred. Although it was but three hours after noon, the hall had become gradually darkened, and in the sky outside a dense yellow light spread into a dull grey. The players took little heed—perhaps it was ordained that they should not. Seti, not thinking of the hour, bade the lamps be brought in, without noticing how nervous were the attendants who adjusted the wicks.

Outside, the heavy darkness deepened till it loomed like a dense, unbroken curtain. A strange whistling wind had set up in the lower quarters of the hall, while the hangings swayed violently where they caught the stronger gusts. Perchance it was the wailing spirit voices that sighed in the wind, or maybe it was at this moment that they took their flight from the unholy earth and swept out in a circling body on their ghostly whispering wings.

The game ended, and Zar throughout had failed to win a single move. Still he forced his spirits to be high, and even smiled good-naturedly as he looked upon his blank end of the board.

"After all," he cried, "it was a good game, though never before has my luck so deserted me. Sekhet has been truly on thy side, my sister."

He leant across the couch and kissed Ath lightly on the cheek. The lad was utterly astonished at his utter defeat, but his brave spirit preserved a happy humour. Suddenly he started and glanced at the lamps.

"What hour is this?" he asked in alarm. "Is it night? for methought the sun shone when I entered here."

His words aroused Ath; she arose hastily from her seat, while Seti also glanced towards the open but darkened entrance. By this time the effect of the wine had well-nigh passed, and his light-heartedness fled before a wave of terror.

A cry now rose up from the palace corridors, mingling with the rushing, shrieking wind that tore furiously at the great hangings. Outside the land was wrapped in the dense blackness which was even heavier than the blackness of night. Seti ran to the doorway peering nervously into the heavens. Never had the like of this been seen in Khem before. Suddenly there was a roar in the distance; muffled shouts rose from the palace and the streets, when a tongue of fire shot out of the impenetrable gloom and bending down towards the earth touched Seti silently and swiftly upon the brow. Then came another thunderous booming; a sudden shriek of the furious winds, a swift parting in the sheet of clouds, and the heavy darkness became as a dim, uneven twilight.

Not a word had come from Ath's lips; she stood still and calm with one hand resting upon the

couch. Zar had drawn a tiny dagger which he wore about him and stretched out a protecting arm before his half-sister. As the terror abated Amasis ran to the entrance where Seti had stood but an instant before. Zar followed, and together they peered out till they found the body as it had fallen partly hidden amid a group of tall, flowering plants.

At this moment the frightened attendants entered, and one of them at the Prince's command brought a lamp to the entrance.

The face of the dead man lay uppermost, and they stared long and fixedly at it, for on the brow appeared the strange imprint of a crescent moon! Suddenly Ath with a little scream ran across the floor, her long robes flying behind. She had seen the swift lightning kiss its victim, and now without being told she knew that he was dead. But she turned away before she saw his face and passed between the curtains into her own chamber.

The dim twilight had again changed; the heavy clouds parted; the shrieking wind ceased, and a light like that which comes at dawn flooded upon the frightened earth.

Beyond the palace gates and in the busy city the terror of the people was beginning to abate, and when an hour later Ra appeared as he moved slowly towards the horizon, they sighed in thankful relief. Whereupon they shook their heads in astonishment, quoting a proverb which had reference to one of their ancient myths when Sekhet was supposed to have descended as an avenger, but was stayed by the more merciful Pasht (Bast).



"It has been terrible as Sekhet," they cried, "and now it is as kindly as Pasht."

They did not know that the image of the lioness had won the game against the cat's head within the palace at the very hour when the strange and almost unprecedented storm occurred. Had they known their wonder might have still been greater. As it was, they went slowly back to their various tasks with loyal words on their lips for the mighty Queen who dwelt in the palace of the "hundred gated" Thebes. Few there were who mentioned the name of Pharaoh. Ath was gathering the reins of government into her own hands, and the people were satisfied so long as all was well with them.

Presently song and laughter rose up from the city; Thebes had cast all care aside, and one man told another how great was the power of Khem.

## CHAPTER VII

### A STRANGE ACQUAINTANCE

THAT same evening Amasis had occasion to be out in the City streets. He had taken a message from Ptahmes, the Chief Architect, to the house of a noble official, and was now already on the road which led back to the palace.

The greater number of the people had retired into their houses for the night; only a few loitered under the dazzling moonlight sky in which all trace of the strange storm had long disappeared.

He passed the entrance of the Temple of Amen and gazed admiringly at the huge pylon and obelisks with the deep-cut hieroglyphics which told the story of their erection. The vivid paintings on the stone sides with the gilded roofs glittered majestically beneath the yellow light. For one moment Amasis paused and stood in the shadow of the pylon. It was not often that his duty took him outside the palace at night; therefore he specially enjoyed to the full, the calm splendour of the scene, drawing in deep breaths of the cool, soft air. The echo of voices reached him from the distance; occasionally he heard footsteps from the far side of the wide street, which was wrapped in black shadows cast by the tall buildings. Once a white-robed priest issued from the Temple walls,

and seeing Amasis peered curiously at him. But the young man moved aside till the priest had gone. Then he resumed his place and stood awhile in deep thought. To-night his mind dwelt on the strange happenings of the day; then he wandered still farther back, till in his imagination a vision of the dead Horus loomed before him. He seemed to gaze once more into the unreadable, yet kindly, eyes of the ancient astrologer. In his brain was stamped the image of the mystic scroll; he read it anew, and the words he uttered on the hillside rose again to his lips. "The gods know that their servant waits," he cried, "for the way is not yet clear before me."

He never doubted that he had some mission; he believed the gods would call him when the time was ripe. It has been told how he came to serve in the royal household; and sometimes he felt that in doing so he had placed his feet on the tiny, narrow path which should presently lead to the plains of hidden things. In the days of Horus he had felt pleasure in the mention of the court and Ath. He had been stricken with wonder and admiration for her since the day she became Lady of Khem. Her royal words still echoed in his ear, while he, her servant, grew to admire her more and more as the months passed on.

He had full faith in his mission; yet it is to be feared that he sometimes forgot the warning he received concerning Ath. He boasted that he was strong in himself; he thought he possessed that rare will power which would allow him to dwell beside evils and yet remain unsoiled and uninfluenced.

He cast eager eyes up to the heavens and watched

## 66 THE WITCH QUEEN OF KHEM

the myriad stars therein. The dead astrologer had instructed him in the science of the planets; he was able to locate their position at a glance. This was the month Mechir, which to us is January. He saw Orion, which held the soul of Horus, and Horus the Opener of Secret Ways.

A sudden noise made him look down on the earth again. It was the sharp tap of an old man's staff upon the limestone ground. Amasis watched the aged, half-bent figure and wrinkled face until it vanished behind a bend in the street. All ancient men appealed to the young man's heart. They made his eyes grow dim, bringing Horus to his remembrance—his father by adoption whom the gods had ordained as protector for a homeless child. A muttered exclamation made him suddenly start; the sound came from the direction in which the old man had disappeared.

Amasis hurried round the corner. He found the stranger leaning against the outer wall of a tall building, gazing in front with an angry frown upon his face. Round another corner a huge dog was vanishing, with the old man's thick staff in its mouth.

Its owner had already opened his lips to shout while he shook his fist violently at the retreating animal, when Amasis appeared before him. The young man bowed as he approached. Old age was very sacred to him.

"Pardon an intrusion," he said deferentially, "but may a stranger lend his assistance?"

The bent figure straightened suddenly and peered with half-closed eyes at Amasis, who stood a little in the shadow.

"Thou art very welcome," he answered gratefully. "I chanced to drop my staff, and as I endeavoured to pick it up, yon beast appeared and thought it a pleasure to rob me of it altogether. I am almost helpless without it, having yesterday sustained an injury to one leg, and methought before thou camest that I should need to crawl the remaining distance home."

Amasis bowed again, and ran a few steps forward after the dog. For a moment the animal had laid the staff on the ground some distance off and stood toying with it. On seeing a pursuer, it picked it up and was soon lost in the great, dark patches of shadow.

Amasis returned to the stranger.

"I fear the recovery of thy staff is impossible," he cried; "therefore perchance thou wilt accept my arm in place of it for the remainder of thy journey."

The old man considered a moment. "I should regret to lead thee from thine own path at this hour," he answered, "yet it seems I may not do otherwise."

Amasis extended a strong right arm, and together they walked slowly forward. They soon reached the less wealthy part of the city, where shops of lesser degree were placed. Then they passed down a narrow alley which was quite unknown to Amasis, who, by reason of his early roaming life, thought he knew every street in all the principal towns of Khem.

At the end of the alley they stopped. In front was a tiny court leading to a poor interior. Here they entered, and the old man desired Amasis to bring another staff from one of the chambers at

the back. He gave him a lamp and directions as to which passage he should follow.

When Amasis returned he found that several lamps had been lit within the first chamber, while the aged occupier sat on a hard seat by the open door, the lamp light showing dimly from within, while the yellow moon threw its dazzling rays upon the seated figure. As Amasis crossed the tiny courtyard with a staff in his hand he paused a moment and looked before him. The wrinkled face of the stranger was upturned towards the heavens, the thin, bony hands lay loosely by his side; while the dark, keen eyes were half hidden by the shaggy brow. How like Horus, the dead astrologer! How often had Amasis seen him thus with his rugged face lifted dreamily towards the skies. He felt his heart throb as he advanced with the staff. Never since the old man's death had he known such love as he had bestowed—though perhaps it was sometimes shown in an eccentric and peculiar manner. Yet for all that Amasis knew that it was none the less warm and sincere. In return he (Amasis) had given generously out of the depths of his young, affectionate heart, and when the old man passed into the arms of Osiris, this love was still poured into the regions of the dead. The living might have no claim upon it, except perhaps Zar, whose personal attendant he had been during the last few months.

For Ath he possessed a deep reverence, almost akin to worship. She seemed to him like a star set high in the heavens, which must strike awe into the hearts of all beholders. When his palace duties as chief favourite attendant on the young Prince

took him into her presence, he watched her every move with dumb devotion, only seeing her outwardly beautiful surface of character. In the time of Horus he had mingled in, yet understood nothing of the world. Now he was a novice who had much to learn; gradually the veils fell away, but the thickest had yet to be drawn aside.

The bent figure by the door thanked Amasis for his generous help, and pointed to another seat opposite to the one he occupied.

"I pray thee pardon me if I leave instantly," cried Amasis, "that is if I can serve thee in no other way."

"I cannot let thee go with such scant courtesy," answered the old man. "If it is possible I pray thee remain a short while with me. I am now rested and can talk. Where is thy dwelling place?"

"I am a servant in the royal palace," answered Amasis, "and a constant attendant on the Prince Zar."

The old man was silent for a moment before he spoke again.

"There have been strange happenings this day in Khem," he continued; "I fear Amen must be angry with his people. It is rumoured that Seti, the royal cousin, is dead, being struck down by the hand of fire. Say, is this so?"

"It is so," answered Amasis quietly; "myself saw the dread thing."

"The mark of the crescent was on his brow, and when this happened the storm ended; the darkness was lifted from Khem; the terror of the people abated, and Ra smiled once more upon his people."

The old man spoke the words monotonously, as if he were reading them from a book rather than speaking to any person.

Suddenly his manner changed; his eyes began to roll with excitement; his long, bony fingers clenched the staff until the knuckles shone polished and smooth.

"Thebes knew the curse which hung over the house of Seti for generations," he cried. "Thou dost know it also, and the condition upon which it might be fulfilled?"

Amasis nodded.

"This day is the word fulfilled. Listen. Two nights back Seti visited me on this same spot, he stood where thou art standing."

Here Amasis hastily moved aside.

The ancient man smiled grimly. "Seti was by no means loved in Egypt," he said, "it would not bring luck to man or beast to stand in his steps. On that night he came to consult my art, which is that of an astrologer, for his cowardly spirit quailed under the curse which could not affect any but the evil-minded. In the horoscope I saw many things, but this alone I told him, that his fate was in his own hands, but if Amen saw reason to avenge himself then one would rise who should prove his undoing, and on the arm of strength of this one should be borne the sign of the crescent. By the crescent has he perished, and yet the prophecy is not fulfilled. I was sorely puzzled, so this day I went down into the city and visited the Oracle of Amen in secret. And thus spake Amen: '*Behold Amen's wrath arose, the weed might flourish too greatly before the One who is named*



*by prophecy could pluck him out. Amen has a greater work for this unknown one to do; hence he (the Dweller in Thebes) has wrought the vengeance so that his servant's hands might remain pure.'* Then the voice of the oracle sank into a whisper and told me things I may not yet disclose. Seti is dead," the astrologer continued, his voice growing louder, "the tyrant of those he governed, the one who caused groans in his province, is dead. Praise be unto Amen who has avenged his great affront!"

The words rose shrilly, ending in a soft shriek. Amasis recoiled a little, for the old man looked inhuman with the silver moon playing upon the dark, wrinkled face.

"Tell me thy name," cried Amasis, "for I who know Thebes well have never seen thy face before."

"I am one Rames," cried the old man solemnly; "my trade thou already knowest."

Amasis stared at the bent form without answering.

"Have I astonished thee?" asked Rames.

"Once," answered Amasis reverently, while his voice trembled slightly, "once I knew another of thy calling who was very like thee in appearance and age. Indeed, he was my father by adoption from my childhood."

The old man looked surprised, and asked Amasis his name.

As the young man spoke, he lifted his arm to steady himself against the portal. The short sleeve fell back revealing the vivid crescent-shaped mark above and at the back of the elbow. Rames caught sight of it, but being a man of great control he

refrained from showing any surprise. Nevertheless, his small piercing eyes grew bright with astonishment, and he commenced to mutter something under his breath.

He jerked Amasis authoritatively by his tunic. "Sit here," he said, "and tell me about this ancient man who was thy father by adoption, and whose calling and appearance was similar to mine. I believe that our strange meeting is but the beginning of other things."

Amasis did not refuse; he sank upon the bench like an obedient child; for such was the invisible power of his new acquaintance that he seemed to weave the net of his influence (yet pleasantly so) upon all who came near him.

Whereupon the young man related his history from the time the dead Horus had found him; he spoke of their travels together and their happy contented life. Then, with tears in his eyes, he told of the old man's sudden death and of all that happened to him from that time till Ptahmes took him into his service; of how Zar took a sudden affection for him, and his entrance into the palace as the Prince's attendant.

Rames listened carefully, frequently putting in a question; he seemed to be specially interested in the dead astrologer. When he was apparently satisfied in all details he greatly surprised Amasis by telling him that he also had been acquainted from childhood with Horus.

"When thou mentioned the name and trade, I suspected that adopted father was also my friend, but now I am sure."

Then in a few words he told how he and Horus

had been companions from their youth upwards. Both were born in the same year; both followed the same calling, he himself preferring to trade in Thebes, while Horus wandered from town to town throughout Khem.

"In our childhood," continued Rames, "we entered the House of Learning, the same scribe teaching us. But of late years we have not met at all."

The young man marvelled why his master had never spoken of, or met this friend, until he learnt that Rames had been travelling in Nubia and afterwards in Ethiopia for several years, so that his whereabouts were not known.

"In a strange way," said the old man, "thou hast brought me news of one who was almost a brother to me. Now I mourn that I have not looked upon his face for so long a time. Leave me now, O Amasis, but come again on the morrow if thou canst."

The aged seer doubled up on his seat till his head well-nigh touched his knees. Thus his face was hidden.

Amasis rising, moved softly across the courtyard. As he turned at the entrance he paused in astonishment, for his strange host had risen to his feet; the bent figure straightened itself, while the quaint, wrinkled face was lifted towards the starry heavens.

A dead silence reigned as the uncanny moonlight looked down upon the scene. Suddenly, with a swift gesture, the old man extended his arms; then his quavering voice echoed shrilly around and away into the far distance,

"I, Rames the living, a dweller in Thebes," he cried, "give greeting unto thee, O Horus the Osirian, a dweller in Amenti ! In the name of the Great One of Khem, I, Rames the Egyptian, salute thee ! "

But Amasis heard no more, for as the thin voice floated out again upon the still night air, he turned and fled.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE SECRET COMMISSION

THREE months had gone by since the day when the fatal game was played; and the news went about that the Prince Zar sojourned awhile in the North Land—which we moderns call the Delta—to learn the art of hunting and the spearing of water-fowl. The people asked no questions; as yet the Prince Zar, who was only a youth, interested them but little. In the three years that had passed since the beginning of the joint reign, the name of Pharaoh Unas came seldom from their lips. Ath was spreading her mystic influence over Khem; the cankerous root which Seti by his evil words had nourished, had pushed its head far above the soil. The fangs thereof were strong; presently they would encircle the whole fair Egyptian land. Amasis remained in the palace, and had not accompanied Zar to the far north.

Pharaoh, also, was absent from Thebes; he, with a body of attendants, being engaged in hunting lions several miles south of Memphis on the borders of the Libyan Desert, where such beasts and others were to be found.

On a certain morning, while Amasis lingered idly amid the painted porticoes, a slave appeared and called him instantly into the presence of Ath.

Since the departure of Zar to the Delta his duties

often brought him into immediate contact with the Queen; his handsome bearing and silent, almost reverential, devotion being pleasing to her. His individuality was altogether different from that of any of the court attendants. They for the most part were of higher rank, yet their style and manner portrayed less nobility in blood and character. Amasis, now attained to manhood, was like a beautiful work of art set among a crowd of ill-sculptured statues. He could boast of no parentage; nevertheless, his every word and gesture marked him as a king among men. His very humility increased his majesty; yet there was not a single inhabitant in the whole palace who was base enough to be jealous—his winning personality prevented that.

The Queen was not long in learning the young man's composition. His quick brain and deferential faithfulness, free of the usual toadyism of the courtiers, pleased her. She read him as one reads a book, and made her own secret plans accordingly.

When Amasis passed within the curtain of her apartment she was alone, reclining on a lion-headed couch, one arm supporting her stately head, while her dark, dreamy, penetrating eyes were partly veiled by the thick lashes. She motioned him to approach, and he did so, bowing low.

"Amasis," she said suddenly, "I am about to place a matter of great importance into thy hands. Secrecy will be needed, but, methinks, thou canst promise me that."

The soft, mellow tones of the rich voice thrilled him; he found himself vowing to perform her word, whatever it might be.

The Queen lowered her voice slightly, and bent

forward on the couch, the eyes of the sacred asp sparkling strangely from the midst of her dark hair.

"It is a scroll which I desire thee to take to Memphis," she continued. "On no account must it leave thy hands until it is delivered in that quarter of the City which I shall tell thee later. None must know of thy going in my name; word must be passed throughout the palace that I have given thee leave of absence for a short time for thine own pleasure. Not even if Pharaoh himself question thee at any time (and he is absent now) must thou tell the reason. The scroll is of great importance, and the finding of it would mean——" She broke off her words and frowned darkly, while the encircling snake glittered strangely as the light fell on it. "Amasis," she continued, "not as a queen do I entrust thee, but as a friend. Wilt thou undertake my commission in that light? Wilt thou guard it as if it were thine own?" She stretched out her hands to lend expression to her words, and the lashes lifted, to display the appealingly, radiant orbs beneath.

Oh, why did Ath thus appeal to Amasis, a mere servant in her court? Why did she not give her command and bid him depart? But this was her wisdom—her evil wisdom, for so she wove the cord that would bind him faster in her service. Where the command of royalty failed, the appeal of her womanhood would overcome. This Ath knew, and so for a time she became a woman, and was no longer an unapproachable queen in his sight.

"The Lady of Khem knows that she can put secrecy upon me for ever," cried Amasis eagerly.

## 78 THE WITCH QUEEN OF KHEM

"I can do and carry out any good thing in her name."

Almost imperceptibly Ath started, and a hardness came into her eyes. But the thick lashes veiled it, and the next moment she smiled dreamily.

"Aye," she cried, "who is Ath that she should commission thee for evil?"

Again she raised her arms languidly, sending abroad a flood of delicate scent from her perfumed garments.

"Be diligent in this mission," she continued; "perchance the outcome of it shall be good for Khem—and thee. Start early on the morrow if thou canst, and I will presently give thee private directions for thy travel."

Ath rose from her seat as she spoke and took from a side chest a bracelet, such as was sometimes worn by Egyptian men of rank. She motioned him to approach, and, as he dropped on one knee, clasped it tenderly round his right wrist.

For a moment the young man was dumb.

"I need no reward from thee, O Star of Khem," he cried; "thy command has been enough; if it were not, I should do it for——"

He hesitated over the last words, when Ath, laughing lightly and musically, took them out of his mouth.

"For love of me, thou wouldst say?" she cried gaily. "Fulfil it, then, in that light, and wear yon jewel—why—perchance because of my love for thee!"

She dropped his wrist as she spoke, motioning him to rise. Then into his hand she pressed a tiny scroll tied securely and sealed with royal seal.



"Now fulfil all thy uttered words," she cried, "and mark what I have said."

He put the roll to his lips, then hid it safely in his bosom.

"Before sunrise," she said as he was about to withdraw, "before sunrise see that thy face is set towards Memphis."

He bowed without uttering a word; his face was aglow with pleasure, and the keen eye of Ath for once read wrong, and thought that she dealt with a weak-willed youth like her sweet-natured brother, who was as yet termed Pharaoh, but whom she was gradually and almost imperceptibly ousting from his place.

Amasis went out instantly to his own quarters in the palace. Here he wrapped the scroll in a strip of linen and secured it firmly about his person. Then taking his tiny harp, from which he had never parted, he strode out into the far end of the grounds, away from the immediate palace, strumming lightly and happily upon the strings. He always played and sung according to his mood; this day it was a merry one.

When he finished and had reached the outer courtyard, he beheld an Ethiopian slave hurrying towards him.

In his hand was a letter which he gave to Amasis.

"This was brought to the gates but a few moments past by a messenger in poor dress," he said as he advanced. "At first none could persuade him to give it up into any hands save thine own, but I, who happened to be near at hand, vowed I would see its safe delivery."

Amasis was a general favourite among those of

the court household, to whom his warm-hearted affection was pleasing. He thanked the Ethiopian graciously for his trouble, and when he had departed he examined the package more closely. It was addressed to "*Amasis, attendant in the royal palace of Thebes.*"

He opened it wonderingly. Inside he found a short missive, which had evidently been penned hastily.

"*Well-beloved Amasis,*" began the writer, "*I am sending this by the hand of a trusty messenger. Come if it be possible to my poor abode two hours after the sun has set, for I have private words of importance to pour into thine ear. If thy duties will not permit of thine absence, then send an answer by the hand of my messenger, who has orders to wait outside the palace gates for one full hour after thou hast received this scroll. If he is given no answer I shall know that thou wilt abide by my words.*"

"*If thy coming is altogether impossible, I must find another way of communicating with thee. Amasis, in the name of Amen and Isis, I conjure thee, come.*"

"*Thy friend and well-wisher—RAMES.*"

Amasis read the scroll twice before he walked across to a pool and washed the writing out. He did not desire that it should fall into other hands.

Then he went into the palace, and, with a light heart, aided Ptahmes, the Chief Architect of Khem and Scribe to Pharaoh, in the writing of records for the masons and others who should reproduce

the words in deep-cut hieroglyphics on a Temple pylon south of Thebes.

That same evening he passed through the guarded gates into the thronging streets. He carried his head proudly as was his wont; his step was firm and majestic. Surely with regard to face and form, the gods had been most lavish with their gifts.

The darkness was vanishing before a pale moonlight as he entered into the poorer streets and came to the alley at the head of which lay the house he sought.

The tiny courtyard was empty, while several tall palms and an arching vine cast strange, shapeless shadows over the cool stone ground. Two benches were placed within the rudely-columned doorway, and on one of these sat Rames, the writer of the letter which had brought Amasis to him that night. The old man's head had fallen on to his chest as he rested with his arms crossed. When Amasis appeared, he glanced up, greeted him kindly and bade him sit down on the opposite bench.

"I have come," said Amasis, "even as thou hast called."

For a few moments Rames regarded him quietly and keenly before he opened his lips.

"If I had not called thee," he began at last, "wouldst thou have come to bid thy new, yet ancient friend farewell *before thou departest for Memphis in the dawn of to-morrow?*"

Amasis uttered a low exclamation and started to his feet. His usual caution vanished as he stood surprised. "What is this?" he cried. "Who knows that I go to Memphis?"

"I, Rames, thyself and—another!" answered the old man quietly. "Who the other is, thou knowest. Sit down and be calm," he added, "and, above all, marvel not that I have learnt thy secrets. My son, be not amazed when I tell thee that I can pierce into dark corners and drag out hidden things to light."

"How canst thou know of my actions?" began Amasis, when Rames broke in on his words.

"I shall not satisfy thy curiosity as to my knowledge—that alone is my secret," he said proudly. "I know that Ath has cajoled thee into her service, and why should she take thine honour from thee?"

Amasis leapt once more to his feet.

"Honour!" he cried hotly; "who speaks of honour? Ath is the very soul of honour; she has laid the virtue more fully upon me!"

Then he added, in a quieter tone, "Since thou hast learnt that I am about to take a journey, is it astonishing if I go for mine own pleasure? I have leave."

"Ath has sealed thy lips," said Rames, taking little notice of the young man's vehemence. "That which she has given thee should melt and perish in the hottest flames," and with his bony fingers he suddenly lifted his companion's wrist, peering at the golden bracelet, fashioned curiously, and finished with a glittering serpent's head. Nothing escaped the old man's keen eyes.

Amasis murmured something beneath his breath. "Try not to take it off," he cried; "I swear it shall rest there till the gods themselves tear it from me!"

Rames clasped his hand. "Go not to Memphis

on the morrow," he said appealingly. "Who has summoned thee there?"

Amasis hesitated.

"The Watcher of Ra calls me," he answered. "I will pay homage to the god Horemkhû, who looks for ever towards the rising sun."

Rames watched him narrowly. "My son, go not," he said. "Answer me, is not the secret word of Ath in thy heart, and is not thy journey concerning her?"

The young man rose to his feet and tried to glance fearlessly into the old, keen eyes. Then, for the first time, he lied openly—lied for the sake of Ath the Witch Queen of Khem.

"No," he said boldly, "she alone has given me leave of absence."

A deep silence followed, for neither spoke again for some few moments.

"If thou hast no further need of me," said Amasis at last, "I will depart."

Rames also rose, and putting his thin hands on the young man's shoulders, peered into the handsome, well-cut features, on which the moon cast a pale glow, and sighed.

"Aye," he cried in deep, thrilling accents, emphasizing each word; "depart and sleep and dream, and still continue in that dream till the day of thy great awakening!"

He removed his hands as he spoke and stepped back.

Amasis looked puzzled—he could not understand the old man's words, but he questioned no further. In a few moments he took his departure, passing slowly down the court.

## 84 THE WITCH QUEEN OF KHEM

Rames stood and watched him as he walked.

"His shadow lies thick and black to-night," he murmured to himself, "but the light of Ra shall come and dispel it all when the day breaks."

The echo of the young man's footsteps had died away when Rames, still muttering gently, entered his poor abode.

Then the silence of night reigned, save for an occasional sound from the broad, outer streets; while from above, the cold, yellow moon looked down and smiled peacefully.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE VOICE OF THE WATCHER

ON the morrow Amasis quitted the palace quietly before the rising of the sun. Few had asked any questions, and the young man, having a ready tongue, easily satisfied them.

He did not take ship immediately for Memphis, but rode swiftly and unnoticed till he reached Coptos, the "City of Mourning." Then he embarked on the earliest boat he could find, and stood for a long time at the door of his cabin, watching the city with its marble temple and gilded domes till it vanished at last into a filmy haze.

A dreamy smile crept over his face as he thought of Ath who dwelt within the "Hundred-Gated" Thebes, and whose business he started to perform this day.

Then he felt for the tiny sealed package hidden in his girdle; touched the golden serpent that encircled his wrist, and smiled again almost pittingly as he remembered his meeting with Rames on the previous night. He boasted he knew his Queen, her power and goodness; and if the people of Khem did not know, then they must learn.

He glanced around, watching the steep hills on either side that enclosed the great Nile; now and then he recognized some familiar building that reminded him of his former travels by foot on the

## 86 THE WITCH QUEEN OF KHEM

shore of the broad waterway. Day after day he spent gazing forth, noticing the smallest details of the landscape. One by one small and great towns came in sight with the sculptured temples of Osiris, Hathor and Isis looming majestically above the low-roofed houses. Then at last the longed-for Memphis appeared, and here the great Temple of Ptah rose in all its splendid beauty. On the other side of the river stood the tiny city of On, sacred to Ra. This small city was one of the chief centres of learning; here the young men of Egypt were taught medicine, writing, alchemy, music, architecture, geometry, law and astronomy, as well as all other sciences and arts. Here also some of the priests were initiated into the holy mysteries of the gods. It was in this city that that fabled bird of Ra, the Phoenix, was said to appear once in five hundred years, when it charmed the ears of men with its song, and, building itself a funeral pyre of sweet-smelling woods, was consumed in the fire it produced by the fanning of its wings, after which a new Phoenix arose from the smouldering ashes.

Amasis had felt the journey long and tedious, for there were few on the vessel with whom he might converse.

It was mid-day when the ship reached Memphis, where Amasis disembarked, the vessel resuming its voyage towards the north, near to the town of Bubastes.

Amasis made his way into the heart of the city, and keeping the Queen's directions well in his mind, sought the house where he should deliver his sealed letter. He found it easily.



The owner was an official in the Egyptian army and an exceedingly ugly man. Amasis, having seen the letter safely in his hands, gladly took leave of the villainous-looking recipient, and refusing his hospitality, passed out into the streets.

He could not return to Thebes before three days, as no ship was sailing just then. For the remainder of the day Amasis renewed his acquaintance with the familiar streets, also passing some long time within the beautifully painted walls of the Temple of Ptah.

Early on the morrow he quitted the city, setting out towards the Pyramids and Sphinx, which lay a few miles north of Memphis. He took but little notice of the resting-places of the ancient kings, but passed along the soft desert sand towards the colossal statue of Ra Harmachis, of whom the Sphinx was a supposed incarnation.

Here he paused, and resting for a while, let the sand run idly through his fingers while his eyes gazed with reverence upon the immovable feature of the gigantic god who has looked from time unknown towards the rising sun with the same placid expression upon its stony face, silently asking many riddles which tribes and nations still endeavour to fathom, yet come no nearer the great answer. And so the Sphinx smiles silently, keeping its secret as it looks across the unchanging desert sand.

Amasis sat for a long time digging his fingers into the soft dry grains, when a shout from the distance brought him to his feet. He turned round with his hand laid on a hidden dagger. In these more northern parts the foreign dwellers of the sand

did not always feel kindly disposed towards an Egyptian.

He beheld some half-dozen men hurrying towards him; so still on his guard he stood and waited under the shadow of the Watcher of Harmachis. The men were professional hunters attired in scanty tunics and armed with short swords, also carrying bows and quivers of arrows.

Presently the troop opened, and a little man wearing garments similar to the rest, only of richer quality, stepped forward.

Amasis immediately recognized him as Unas the brother of Ath and joint ruler of Egypt. Therefore he bowed low and was about to repeat the obeisance, when Pharaoh motioned him to draw near without further ceremony.

"I saw thee in the distance," he cried, "and thought mine eyes did not play me false. How is it that thou art here in Memphis?"

Amasis repeated the tale which Ath had put into his mouth. He was aware that Pharaoh was sojourning awhile on the borders of the Libyan desert, but did not know he had advanced so far north.

The attendants withdrew to a little distance, leaving Pharaoh and Amasis standing alone in the shadow of the Sphinx.

The King glanced almost pathetically at the graceful and supple figure of his companion. He himself was short and awkwardly shaped, while his features were far from handsome. Also his cheek-bones were high, and there was a stamp of delicacy resting upon the thin and somewhat bony frame.

All this Pharaoh knew, and he passed his sad-looking eyes wistfully over Amasis. In spite of the efforts of the most learned physicians of Egypt a wasting disease had sown its seed in the weakly body; Unas knew that it bore him slowly, but surely, towards Amenti's gates. Ath, his senior, had no liking for puny men, and he being sensitive in the extreme, rarely entered her presence save for a matter of absolute necessity. Hence it was that his reins of the kingdom fell loose, while Ath was gradually drawing them into her stronger hands.

Suddenly Pharaoh sighed and sank down upon the restful sand, bidding his companion do the same.

"I shall do no more hunting to-day," he said, "it exhausts me over much. There was a time when I could follow a lion a whole day without fatigue, and in taking the gazelle I never failed. Now I find the sand a welcome resting-place."

Amasis sought some soothing words. "One may not hunt day after day without exhaustion," he said. "To-morrow thy strength will return."

The young Pharaoh turned with a smile on his lips.

"To-morrow," he repeated gently, "it is always to-morrow, but mine, methinks, will dawn in Eternity!"

"Say not so, my lord," said Amasis, and unconsciously he felt like an elder brother towards the poor afflicted King. "Hunting does not suit all," he continued, seeking to put comfort into his words. "But at another season, O Pharaoh, perchance thou wilt again cast thy light over this more distant part of Khem."

## 90 THE WITCH QUEEN OF KHEM

Unas laid his weakly hand on the young man's shoulder. "Cease such language," he cried, with a touch of sternness in his voice, "no longer are we in the Court of Thebes where the royal house is likened to the sun and moon and sickened by terms of flattery. I came here to escape from the circle of courtiers. They praise me before my face, but behind my back they deride and scorn this puny, ill-shaped frame. My strength is not the strength of other men; yet my feelings are the same—perhaps more sensitive. Therefore I left Thebes with my party of honest hunters and sought the solitude of this 'land of emptiness,' where yon holy image watches for ever. Yet it was also my wounded pride that bade me come hither to hunt, for I vowed I would return to Thebes bearing the skins of a score of lions as trophies of the chase, to stop the courtiers' mouths who mock at my poor puny body and woman's strength. To-morrow I return to the capital, having accomplished my task. Now they shall see that Pharaoh can hunt as other men and speed an arrow with an unswerving hand."

His pathetic eyes sparkled with enthusiasm as his face for one instant cast off its veil of weariness. Then he turned towards Amasis again.

"Thou art greatly blessed by the gods," he said gently, laying his hand on the young man's strong, sinewy arm, "truly thou art well endowed, while they could not even spare one tiny gift for me. Gratitude should be ever in thy heart with praise and thanksgiving."

Amasis felt at a loss for words; it was a moment before he spoke again.

"The gods have given thee their greatest gift,"

he said, "without which the loveliest frame would be utterly useless, and that is—life!"

Pharaoh smiled his slow, sweet smile and rose to his feet. They walked beside the great body of the Sphinx till they stood some distance from the shelter of its shadow. Then Unas paused, and throwing himself once more on the sand, gazed up into the stony face.

"Amasis," he cried suddenly, "look yonder. Methinks the Watcher has a message for thee and me."

"What does the holy one say, my lord?" asked Amasis softly. He was always ready to wander into the realms of imagination.

Pharaoh was some time before he answered. Then his voice sounded far away while his fingers glided caressingly over the warm, dry sand.

"As I look," he began dreamily, "a smile lightens on the Watcher's face, and in that smile I read many things. Behold, Horemkhû speaks; let me listen that I may catch his words. 'I was born under the hand of a god,' he cries, 'born before the age of man. In this region of loneliness I dwelt centuries before its habitation by tribes. The great sandy Desert was my home; I would look around and smile over my vast kingdom. Happy was I in those days with only silence for my companion. Then a great storm came, and the wind flung sand against me until I was covered, so that I could no longer look upon Ra, whose Image I am. When I gazed forth once more the land was changed; tribes passed at my feet; beasts had their haunts yonder; birds screamed overhead; armies fought on the borders of my dominion—

only I remained unchanged with Ra and the Desert.

“Ages upon ages have passed; tribes have perished and risen; discordant warfare has sounded in mine ears, but I have held my peace with my face continually towards the horizon. Few have heard my voice because few can understand my silent words; so the smile has died from my lips and is only seen by those who read my mind.

“Behold centuries shall heap upon centuries; then once again I shall hide my face behind a wall of sand, for it shall rise up and cover me. Then when again I look forth, the land shall be utterly changed. Only Ra, the Desert and myself will be the same. Mine eyes will behold a fair-skinned tribe, who shall enter this land and dwell therein. They shall come from far-off parts, filled with knowledge; being wiser in many things than the wisest in Khem. They shall cast their eyes upon me with curiosity; but as for me I will harden my heart; the smile will vanish completely from my lips and in their eyes I shall seem naught but an image of wondrous majesty. The secrets of the world are locked within me; all this people and the peoples long ago I know, remembering them one by one.

“Thus I shall remain till the end of time—I, who have been since the beginning, while this fair-faced tribe shall seek the knowledge of this land, searching for the things which are hidden. Then I, knowing them all, will smile again because of my knowledge and their efforts.’”

These were the words of Pharaoh as he gazed upwards upon the wondrous Image. He spoke in

soft, dreamy tones, and Amasis, listening, caught every word.

The Sphinx in after years became covered by the desert sand which so often rises on the arms of the wind and travels far. And so it lay for centuries around and upon the great statue till the people of later years came and dug it out, so that its face looked once more forth towards the sun. We moderns search for the hidden history of Khem; we pore over records in forgotten tongues and enter into the tombs of the dead, while the great Sphinx looks upon us and smiles mockingly, seeming to say—

“Behold, ye mortals, I, who have lived since the beginning of history, watch ye strive for the key of knowledge which I alone hold. Lo! I keep my secret, and none of you shall ever read my riddle. Perhaps in ages to come, Khem shall flourish under her own again, and the intruder shall be turned away from her sacred soil. But if this my dream prove vain, then I, the Watcher, the Image of Ra and Harmachis, must watch upon this Desert Land until the end!”

## CHAPTER X

### THE COMING OF THE HEBREW

THE next day Pharaoh with his hunters quitted Memphis, going farther south, where he would remain for a short time before finally returning to Thebes. Amasis stayed till the following morning, when he would return by boat.

That last day he spent in the quieter parts round Memphis. He walked past several farms where great herds of cows were grazing, until he came to the outside walls of a large orchard. This was situated at the foot of a short, steep hill.

The day was hot and dusty, and Amasis, feeling a little weary after his long walk, rested thankfully upon a low stone bench placed under a tall, spreading tree which overhung the orchard walls. From his position he had an excellent view of the hill on his right and the lower levels near the city on his left. At this hour scarcely any one passed by, so Amasis closed his eyes, fanning himself meanwhile with a large, flat leaf.

Presently, after feeling refreshed, he roused and sat up, interesting himself in his surroundings. Toiling up the long, white road which led from the city was a man of rather unusual appearance. He was perhaps about the age of fifty, taller and broader than the ordinary Egyptian. He walked



slowly but firmly, and carried a small rush basket in one hand.

Amasis watched him curiously as he approached, when the stranger, suddenly perceiving him, also commenced to stare. In a very few minutes he reached the farther end of the seat, and laying the basket on the ground, sat down, leaning against the wall. Amasis regarded him sideways with some curiosity. The new-comer was well proportioned; his limbs showed strength yet grace, while the skin was of a lighter hue than the average. The un-Egyptian features were clear cut, the nose aquiline, the brow massive and smooth. The chin showed determination; but the eyes were the special feature of the rather remarkable face. These were large, intensely black and dreamily soft, but gave one the idea that their owner was weighed down by some hidden sorrow. About the handsome mouth there was also a certain wistful sadness. Amasis noted all these details carefully, wondering of what rank the stranger might be, for his clothes were of excellent quality and became the wearer well.

Suddenly he stooped, and opening his basket displayed a quantity of freshly picked fruit of several kinds. Whereupon Amasis politely turned his head aside as his unknown companion commenced to eat.

Presently he became aware that the stranger had moved beside him and was speaking softly and melodiously close to his ear. Two lustrous eyes were looking into his face while the half-smiling lips spoke a word of greeting. Amasis gazed steadfastly at the older man for a moment. Then he also smiled.

"Strangers who meet on a desolate road have no need to wait for ceremony before they speak," said the new-comer. Amasis rose to his feet with the natural Egyptian courtesy.

"Greeting," he cried, with a graceful obeisance. "Nephtys, Isis and Amen be thy guardians and may Osiris grant thee everlasting peace!"

The stranger had also risen with outstretched hands, but as his companion spoke he paused, and a look of blank dismay came over him. A moment later the smile returned to his face, and he clasped the young man's hands.

"Greeting," he said a little awkwardly, "peace be with thee."

Then they both resumed their seats while a slight pause fell between them. The silence was only momentary, but it gave Amasis time to remark to himself that, after all, he had been rather impulsive in his eagerness for friendship with an utter stranger whose kindly manner and interesting appearance had appealed to him. His greeting had been perhaps a trifle unusual; but then Amasis always loved the picturesque, and he meant every word he had said from his heart. But he could not understand why the stranger had stared so blankly at him, answering with some hesitation even though he himself had made the first approach.

Suddenly his companion turned, his hands full of fruit, and laid it on the younger man's knees.

"Eat," he cried with a smile; "who am I that I should partake of these good things alone?"

After the hot, dusty walk Amasis gladly accepted the gift, and so they sat under the branching tree

while the stranger, between eating, spoke of all the latest happenings in Egypt, often adding modest theories of his own until Amasis found himself listening with an interest which reminded him of his boyhood days when he used to sit immovable for hours together, while that remarkable old philosopher Horus discoursed on the arts and sciences which he loved so well.

Presently, when the fruit was finished, Amasis once more expressed gratitude to his companion, round whose lips dawned the strangely winning smile.

"And our thanks be unto Hapi the Nile god, who has guarded the inundation and given so bountifully," he added reverently.

The other made no response, but kept his head averted for a moment. Amasis stared at him with unchecked surprise, and then for the first time thought it remarkable that neither knew the other's name; but with natural shy courtesy he hardly liked to question one whose years were so much greater than his own.

At last his curiosity bade him say, "We have spoken, we have eaten and blessed each other with wishes and kindly thoughts, yet all without knowledge of one another's name. As for me I am called Amasis and live in Thebes."

"And I," returned the other, "am one Jehudda, a dweller in Memphis."

"Jehudda," repeated Amasis, "pardon me if I say it, but it is a strange name and one not often heard in Khem."

"No," replied the other quietly, "Khem has no children of that name but Israel has!" He spoke

the words with such reverent deliberation that Amasis stared at him in astonishment.

"Thou an Israelite—an Hebrew!" he said, while to himself he added, "Now I understand why the names of Isis, Hapi and Osiris brought no happy flush upon thy face."

"Aye, an Israelite," repeated Jehudda in an even tone, "a child of a despised race, and I fear—a coward!"

Amasis made no answer, but waited for the other to continue. He was aware that the Hebrew was not liked in Egypt.

"A coward," repeated Jehudda bitterly, "because when it has been possible I have hidden my true blood and, having mingled with Egyptians since my birth, I have lived more happily than others of my race, therefore been less despised. An Israelite is not loved, hence my sensitive nature shrank from being hated. Few have questioned my belief, so I have been able to worship my God in secret."

"Then why, O Jehudda," asked Amasis, "dost thou speak thus to me who am a stranger, also an Egyptian?"

"Because I have wakened," he answered, "because the God of my fathers, of Isaac and Jacob shall not be honoured only in secret. With Egypt has Israel mingled—O, how easily has her heart been turned aside! When thou greeted me in the name of thy gods, whose praises I hear sung every day, I recoiled from the secrecy of my religion. Now I am Jehudda the Hebrew who is not afraid to make known his belief."

Amasis sat still, making no answer for a moment.

"I am glad to know all this," he said at last, "I like thee the better for having confided the truth."

"Thy face commands the truth," answered Jehudda. "Thy words and thy manner are frank and must have frankness in return. Wilt thou listen to me, O Amasis—I who have no friends in whom I might confide? Many years ago when I traded in Bubastis, all knew my religion and for a time I was tolerated. But one day the street in which I dwelt took fire, and all the trading stalls perished save mine, which stood at a corner.

"Whereupon the people declared that I had laid some secret magic upon them, and in their fury they would have handled me roughly only I managed to escape from them. The secret of my magic was this, that I prayed to my God while the fire raged. Then I travelled here, disguising myself and my race, but to-day I have awakened and seen that the God of my fathers must be known openly. Dost thou understand, O Egyptian?"

Amasis rose to his feet and took the other's hand in his.

"Israelite," he said softly, "I endeavour to follow in the paths of honour and duty, therefore I reverence those who also walk therein."

"Thou art different from all other Egyptians," cried Jehudda; "who shall say this chance meeting may not prove of profit to us both—perchance in some far distant time?"

After that they soon parted, and Amasis watched the Hebrew as, with a firm, majestic step, he ascended the tiny hill. Then he also turned and passed down the dusty streets which led into Memphis, the "Good Abode."

Several days later Amasis landed on the banks of Thebes joyful and happy in heart. Some distance from the landing stage he perceived a well-known figure. It was Rames leaning upon a staff surmounted by blue stones. The old, keen eyes looked fixedly upon him as he went forward.

"Behold," the old man cried, "I have come to greet thee on thy arrival—I who knew of it by a secret few possess. Hast thou accomplished thy work?" He spoke the last words with emphasis, and Amasis, although he inwardly flinched, would not understand.

"Yea," he cried, "I have accomplished more than I had set myself to do." But he said nothing more concerning his doings in Memphis, neither did he mention his meeting with Jehudda the Israelite.

Rames hobbled slowly with him in silence till they came near to the palace gates. Whereupon he paused.

"Farewell, my son," he cried; and he added in a voice that was a trifle mocking, "I go—what to do who can tell?—perchance to delve into other and stranger secrets." He chuckled hoarsely to himself and was gone.

Then Amasis turned and passed through the gates alone.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE AWAKENING

TEN days after Amasis had returned to Thebes, having fulfilled the Queen's commands in Memphis, he stood in one of the long corridors of the palace.

Down the whole length of the passage were placed huge, coloured statues representing departed kings, each robed in his royalty, wearing the uræus crest, while their stiff fingers grasped the emblem of power. Amasis glanced up to the painted ceiling with a contented smile upon his face. Then he let his eyes wander slowly down the hall, with its colossal pillars which resembled gigantic lotus stems terminating with a head of that lovely blossom; and over the bevy of cultivated plants set in bronze pots upon the cool, shining floor. This was his home—this gorgeous palace of splendour and luxury.

Life appeared very bright and joyful, his imagination brought dreams of the future before him, he loved the bustle of the gay court, and he remembered his humble childhood with affection, yet it all seemed like a dim past left very, very far behind. His nature was not such as would find its level among the uneducated middle classes. He himself was cultured and only happy with people of similar ideas.

The palace life had made Amasis blind to everything but his immediate surroundings. Even the scroll written by the dead Horus he read with a sort of vague wonder, much as he treasured and revered the memory of his old master. Sometimes he would scan the words warning him against Ath, and then hiding the roll inside a hollow aperture in his harp, would run out to perform the Queen's bidding with a light heart. Ath in his eyes was a living double of Hathor,<sup>1</sup> endowed with all wisdom, virtues and beauty. He told himself that evil had no resting-place within her. Truly Amasis was blind and wilfully so. Yet let him not be altogether blamed. Horus had only given him a one-sided education, and above all, the young man had never known that most wonderful and sacred thing on earth—a mother's care and tender love.

Suddenly a slight noise made Amasis turn. A woman had issued from the far end of the hall, beyond which lay the Queen's apartment. Her step was quick and light, and the curtain that she had violently pushed aside on entering swayed until its gilded ornaments clanked. She almost ran up the hall, and as she came, Amasis saw it was Taska, the Queen's favourite attendant. Her robes of white linen fluttered out behind her, while her beautiful, refined face presented an expression of terror. Amasis watched her in wonder; then as she did not appear to see him, he stepped from beside a statue. Instantly she paused; her breath coming in little short gasps.

<sup>1</sup> The Egyptian goddess of beauty, love and joy—The Protectress.



"What is this?" he asked. "What makes the lady Taska afraid?"

She glanced round fearfully before taking a step nearer.

"Hast thou been in the Queen's presence this morning?" she asked.

"Yea," he answered. "Ath saw fit to call her unworthy servant." He uttered the Queen's name reverently like a priest, be he heathen or Christian, who speaks of his God.

"I went into her apartment just now," cried the agitated girl, "and I saw the Queen—yet it was not the Queen, for she seemed utterly changed. Though no one else was in the room, with her arms upraised she stood talking, her voice sounding strangely hard and cracked. I, who was at the entrance behind her, could not move for fear. Amasis, her words were not in the tongue of our people; presently when she ceased, another voice from where I do not know, answered her. As it spoke she swayed gently to and fro with her arms lifted thus. Then suddenly the voice of the unknown speaker died away, ending in one long shriek. After that there was a short silence, and Ath, turning her face, was beautiful and smiling as before. As for me, I fled softly and trembling, knowing that the Queen would surely slay me with the little golden dagger she wears at her girdle, if she knew I had seen. Even now I can hear the echo of that shriek in mine ears, and I know it will still haunt me in my dreams."

She paused, the pupils of her eyes small with terror.

"Lady," said Amasis sternly, "what strange

story is this? It is not fitting that thou should use the sacred name of Ath in the telling of such tales. Come," he added in a gentler tone, seeing the girl's distress, for she swayed from side to side in a half swoon, and taking her by the arm he led her across to a tiny table upon which stood a flagon of wine and fruit. He filled a cup for Taska.

"Drink," he said imperatively, "something has overwrought thee. Drink, and then seek solitary rest for an hour. Also see that thou repeat this tale to no one else."

Taska took the cup obediently and drained it. Then she looked at him out of the depths of her splendid, dark eyes.

"Thou hast dealt unceremoniously with my tale," she said. "I hope that thou never see or hear what I have——" She broke off her words with a jerk.

"I would have added something else," she said, "but a chain seems laid upon my tongue. I will go and rest awhile until this fear passes from me."

Whereupon she suddenly turned, and like a frightened animal, fled down the long hall, her hands clasped over her ears, her flowing draperies flying out behind by reason of her speed. Amasis watched wonderingly until she disappeared and the sound of her swishing garments and softly jangling jewels had died away.

Two hours later Amasis stood in the shelter of a carved porch-way in conversation with one of the courtiers. After a time his companion left, and the young man leaning against a pillar looked out upon the gardens before re-entering the hall

behind. On his left, several yards away, lay the antechamber to one of the Queen's day apartments.

Suddenly a murmur of voices reached his ear. The sounds were those of a man and a woman talking together, and Amasis prepared to move away when the voices, which had grown louder, caused him to start. It was Ath speaking with Ptahmes, an aged counsellor and Chief Architect of Khem.

"In the name of Amen the everliving and Maut the Justifier," Amasis heard the old man say, "I bid thee cease this plotting. Who art thou, O Ath, to use the innocent and the honourable as thy tool?"

The Queen's voice broke in upon him.

"And who art thou, O Ptahmes, to address thus the Lady of Khem?" she asked coldly. "This Amasis was a ready instrument in my hands; when I beckoned he followed; where I trod he walked gladly. What I have done I have done and take the whole burden of it upon myself."

At the mention of his name and the Queen's words, Amasis stood fixed in the porch-way. His first impulse of departure had fled; he could not now move if he would. He heard the old man sigh deeply and make a noise as if he clasped his hands.

"Methinks the burden may fall heavily upon thee," he said. Then there was a silence for a moment.

The Queen broke into a light laugh—a soft, mocking laugh that echoed through the hall.

"Ptahmes," she said, "thou art over zealous. I tell thee Khem will be safe and prosper in my

hands. Where I tread none must cross my path unscathed—ever hast thou known that.”

“I know, I know,” answered the old Architect sadly. “The gods have endowed thee with greatness among thy many gifts. Use it well, O my daughter, lest the wrath of the divine ones fall upon thee. Amen will brook of no insult; he will not see his beloved and his chosen despised. Thou canst not reject him unpunished because his enemy shows thee a more golden path—and who can say what terrors lie at the end thereof?”

Once more Ath’s voice broke in, only this time it shook with anger.

“Beware, O Ptahmes,” she said, “neither does the Lady of Khem brook of any insult. Ever have I loved and honoured thee; but I must warn thee lest thou overstep thy boundary. Therefore beware of Ath, who holds the might of Egypt in her hands! Oh, why did ill-luck fall upon me on that day so that the scroll was read by thee?”

“Perchance it was so ordained,” the old man answered slowly. “Strange it is that thou shouldest write two scrolls in a hour—one relating to an important matter of the state—the other intended for Kenaten the captain in Memphis, which made known the real reason why Prince Zar tarries in the northern swamps, which, according to thy orders, he shall never leave alive. Strange also is it that thou shouldest have hidden one scroll in a secret place, and laying the other on the table, bade me enter thy chamber and read it. The scroll relating to the death of Prince Zar on the last day of the month Epep was the one I read, while in mistake the state letter was hidden.”

"I understand it not," Ath answered. "By Thoth, I could swear that I made no mistake."

"Hush," cried Ptahmes sternly, "use not the sacred name. Then the gods themselves must have made the exchange. Daughter, daughter, let this sin be undone. Thou knowest how I pleaded with thee in that hour when I learnt thy awful plot. So long as I live I shall never understand that day, for while I talked thou madest no answer but looked at me with those burning eyes of thine; then my voice floated out into the distance and I fell down like one in a trance which lasted two whole days. During that time thou lured Amasis into thy power, and because of his high sense of honour thou knew the scroll was safe in his hands. Woe unto thee, O Ath; woe unto thee who set Amasis to carry the order of his master's doom—the master in whom his heart is wrapped up. He being above all other men thou didst this! Pharaoh thy brother has allowed all power to fall into thy hands, and when the disease carries him into the arms of Osiris—as it must in a very short time—still thou wilt be regent for the Prince Zar. Even when he is fully established thou wilt be the chief Lady in Khem. Art thou not satisfied? Why seek an armful when a handful is freely given? Ath, Ath, art thou a woman, or art thou an incarnation of something we cannot understand?"

Again the Queen's voice rang out.

"Ptahmes, Ptahmes," she cried, "well is it for thee that thou dost not understand. Once thou tasted of my power, art thou then eager for more? Wisdom is mine, wisdom of a strange kind. Anger

me not too much, lest something should chance to happen; for as yet even I myself do not know the extent of my secret power. Hasten now from my presence, and set a seal upon thy tongue that it babble not. The Lady of Khem is no weak woman, and this I say, all the land shall feel her influence, and not one person in the two Egypts shall issue scathless who sets an obstructing foot upon her path."

Suddenly Ptahmes raised his voice from the clear whisper in which they had hitherto been talking.

"Woe, woe unto me," he cried, "woe unto me who held thee a babe in mine arms, and watched thee through every year of thy life, instructing thee in rightful knowledge. And now I find I have cherished one who has delved into the hidden magic, and shall be known in the years to come as the Witch Queen of Khem!"

He paused and a sudden silence fell upon the room. Then as he was about to continue there was a swift clanking of gold ornaments as if Ath walked quickly towards him. Again a silence. A moment later Ptahmes passed through the anteroom into the hall and great porch-way to where Amasis stood. The old counsellor walked majestically, looking on neither side. His face was unnaturally set; his manner was that of one who walks in his sleep.

The young man touched him on the arm as he passed; then started back, for his flesh was cold and clammy. Ptahmes walked on heedlessly, his eyes seeing nothing; his step light and wraith-like.

Then fear and horror laid hold on Amasis, and with a single glance behind, he fled down the

hall into a tiny chamber, where he sank upon the floor.

The Queen's words rang like an echo in his ears: "Amasis was an easy tool in my hands; when I beckoned he followed; where I trod he walked gladly." The words ate into his heart, and her mocking laughter burnt into his brain. So this was to be the end of his dream after he had obeyed her commands, lured by the dread fascination she possessed! The scroll that doomed his beloved master had been carried in his bosom; he had even kissed it in her presence and vowed that nothing but death itself should make him break his oath.

Suddenly he tore at his wrist and flung down the bangle which her own soft hands had bestowed. Time after time he had gazed upon it, thinking of her who had seemed such a bright star in his sky but set oh, so far and high above him.

Gradually the room grew dark; he seemed to be sinking into the midst of the earth. Horus the dead astrologer stood looking upon him with a tenderly reproachful smile. In his hand was the strange scroll he wrote in the hour of his death; the words therein were now written in ruddy fire. Horus seemed to be holding it out before the young man's eyes.

*Behold (Amasis read), upon thee it falls to right a mighty wrong. . . . I say go forward, play the part that thou must play; and though I can reveal but little else, yet I know the gods will show thee where to commence—as to the ending thou thyself shall make it. With thy help the people of Khem shall become still mightier, for thou art one of a chosen three who shall cause another to be great.*

*Prosper in thy mission, my son, and think kindly on thine old master who would have given thee a brighter path whereon to tread through the forest of trees that shuts out the light—yet it rests upon thyself entirely as to how often the sun may find a loophole among the leaves. . . . Amasis, my child, farewell. When thou hast fulfilled thy mission, and come at last to die, then it may be that I, Horus, will issue forth from the Tombs of the Dead and stretching out my arms shall greet the object of my love. Till then I shall watch and wait with my hand resting on Amenti's Gate, and as the souls pass in, I shall look for thine and so continue till I find at last.*

Softly and slowly the vision passed, and as it vanished Horus looked out with a smile on his lips and a calm light in his eyes. The letters of fire died out, and from the depths of darkness Amasis arose. Sunshine poured into the room, bathing that part of the floor whereon the vision had seemed to stand, while outside a soft, sweet music swelled upwards blending with the voices of the birds. It was a harper in the garden beyond playing before a group of the Queen's attendants, telling in music how a certain Bubatin, the son of Shuma, in bygone years which were rendered dark with time, had returned to his native Khem after wandering in the endless Desert seeing all the mysteries of the earth and slaying the monster that warred continually against the Sphinx. Since that day the Watcher rested in peace, and Bubatin, endowed with power from on high, leapt into the heavens and dwelt for ever with the Sun.

Amasis stood listening intently. Then suddenly



he flung up his arms: "Behold," he cried, "the gods know that their servant has waited, though forgetful at times. The way is clear before me; I go forth to right the wrong!"

He turned to the entrance, pulling aside the curtains, while with the words still on his lips he commenced to run down the passage.

"To right the wrong!" he muttered aloud, scarcely knowing that he did so, his eyes aflame, his body swaying with excitement.

Suddenly a woman's arm shot out of a shadow and laid hold on his outstretched one.

"To right what wrong?" she asked melodiously, and with a swift movement she confronted him.

Amasis started. It was Ath!

## CHAPTER XII

### TO RIGHT THE WRONG!

"WHAT meant those words?" repeated the Queen. "Who should right what wrong?"

Amasis, who had fallen back a space or two, bowed and then drew himself up proudly. Thus they confronted each other, Ath in the full beauty of her womanhood, her dark eyes sparkling with gentleness and frank innocence. Her oval face was tilted slightly, showing to advantage the perfectly chiselled chin and small, straight nose.

Masses of cloudy hair hung partly over her shoulders, loosely bound with a fillet of gold, in the centre of which loomed the imperial asp. A lotus blossom fresh from its cool water-bed hung over her smooth brow, pouring out a sweet fragrance upon the already laden air. One hand caught up her draperies; the other was half outstretched, the young man having backed from its sudden grasp on his arm.

But now her beauty had no more power over him; the star had fallen to the ground; his high ideal of a goddess in living flesh had passed for ever, for the throbbing waters of Truth and Honour had flung the pedestal down as they broke through the iron gates that had hitherto held them back.

His eyes no longer gleamed with enthusiasm as

they beheld her; nevertheless his control over himself was great, for it was by no means wise that she should learn his thoughts.

He lifted his eyes to hers, which were glowing with dark, dreamy beauty. Could it be that within them lurked deadly magic and the secret power which only came to those who entered into a bond with the unseen evil that haunted the Underworld—a bond that bound on earth and throughout all Eternity?

Amasis opened his lips.

"Hail to thee, O Ath," he cried with forced calmness. "Who am I that thou shouldest take note of my wild babblings? Behold I have dreamed a dream, O Queen——"

"A dream," she interrupted; "then tell it in mine ears, O faithful one, for ever am I interested in the hearing of such."

Amasis considered.

"Behold the dream passes," he cried; "only the memory of it remains. Methought I saw a fair, sweet vision, nothing tarnished its beauty; I stood watching with greedy eyes; with my hand outstretched I adored it; nothing in all life seemed so fair as it. I heaped all my love upon it, becoming as a slave in its power. Still it wanted more, and I, enraptured, gave it all, even the gifts from on high which the gods have lent me. Then in the midst of my watching I awoke, and behold it was nought but a dream, and there was no ideal upon the whole wide earth of which my vision told. Strange words came to my lips as I roused in terror, for something black seemed to leap out of a deep abyss, and I cried out for fear."

Amasis spoke the words shrilly like one who sings a chant, swaying himself to and fro.

Ath regarded him curiously. "A strange dream," she remarked.

"Aye, a strange dream," he answered quickly, "and yet nothing but a dream. I pray thee let me go, O Ath; I am not myself, and my lips form words against the bidding of my mind."

Before he knew it she had laid her cool fingers on his brow.

"Thou art feverish," she cried; "go, and a physician shall come to thee."

But he did not answer; already he had fled past her down the wide corridors, with his hand pressed to the place she had touched, while the statues of the dead kings looked forth with a smile upon their stiff features. It was well that none saw him at this moment, for his eyes, flashing with excitement, burnt strangely in his head.

Ath watched his flying form in amazement, but even her magic could not as yet pierce this new wonder.

Presently with a firm, majestic step she turned and entered the chamber he had quitted. On the floor lay the golden bracelet, emblem of her favour, which Amasis had thrown violently off. She stooped and picked it up.

"Mad, mad," she murmured to herself, as she fingered the ornament, noting a slight injury it had sustained when it was flung down with force. "Verily my heart is sorry for him. The medicine of Khem must now play a part, for this Amasis is too valuable a servant to lose. His vision was strange, but told of a maddened mind."

It was well that she deemed him mad. But a higher power was watching over him which she did not know.

Late that day Rames stood in the centre of the tiny courtyard which was anteal to his humble dwelling-place. It was the hour of the rising moon, and as he stood the old man gazed upon it.

Its silvery light fell upon his thin face and gaunt frame. Perfectly motionless he stood, seeming like a statue of some long-dead hero who haunts the place of his final battle.

Centuries seemed to hang upon his aged head. He did not appear to be a living man, but a strange ghost who had risen up from the dead Egyptian past.

The brilliant light and the dense silence made him almost unearthly. The thin lips were set firmly, the hands hung limp at the side; even the aged chest had ceased to heave.

Suddenly he raised his eyes. They were youthful in appearance though sunken far into the sockets. Ah, there were hidden marvels and mighty strength in that withering frame which none can realize till this tale is done.

Gradually life crept back; slowly the deathlike, unnatural look passed from his face while a gentle sigh escaped his lips. With a sudden quick movement he lifted up his arms, muttering something under his breath as he did so. From soft the words became loud as a clear whisper, but there were none who stood by to hear. Also this language was not the language of Khem, but an almost perished tongue known by very few astrologers.

## 116 THE WITCH QUEEN OF KHEM

No mere fortune-teller might learn it, and no scroll existed wherein its rules were set down. Certain books relating to physic, the stars, and containing rare secrets were written in it, and only read by those who had been initiated into the almost perished tongue. Rames, being one of these, could lay claim to be called a master of his art.

The words which the old man uttered sank from a clear whisper into a murmuring and then died away into silence. He paused a moment, turned so that he looked fully into the moon's face, and then extended his arms once more.

"Amasis! Amasis! Amasis!" he cried loudly, his voice shrill. For an instant his face became unnaturally rigid, and he called again.

"Amasis! Amasis! Amasis!"

The words rang out in the silent air.

"Son of the Moon! Beloved!"

Then the set expression passed from his countenance; a smile hung in the corners of his lips, and he dropped his arms wearily like one who had called into the distance and knows that his beloved will come.

Once again he searched the horizon before he turned towards the porchway. As he walked the smile changed to sternness, then to pity, while a tiny tear rolled down the deeply wrinkled face into the dusty ground. Then he set seats for two in the doorway and placed a frugal meal for three upon a wooden table within the chamber.

He smiled to himself as he went behind a dark curtain that hung over a corner of the room. When he reappeared he carried in his hand a tiny, transparent phial. Crossing to the door he held it up

against the moonlight. The fluid, deep-red in colour, filled half the bottle, while from the top issued many-hued rays like flames. The old man shook it; then the bottle became filled with a strange fire which burnt lower and lower till at last it appeared nothing but a simple liquid of deep red colour.

He set it on one side carefully before going out to sit in the doorway. Here he folded his arms over his chest with quiet deliberation like one who waits for another and knows that his waiting will not be in vain.

For a whole hour he remained in the same position with the faint smile resting upon his lips. He thought deeply and at last, as if his vigil was over, arose.

As he did so there came the sound of steps up the narrow path, and a moment later Amasis appeared in the courtyard walking with his usual firm, proud gait. Only his face was changed. The eyes no longer laughed merrily, the clear-cut, handsome features were hardened by a sternness that gave age. Rames, noticing all this, said nothing, but motioned him to the stone seat.

For a few moments they were silent; but when the old man saw that the golden bracelet shaped like a serpent had disappeared from his young companion's wrist, he began to speak.

"My son," he said gently, "what has chanced to the Child of the Moon to-day? Has the beauty of the uræus vanished before the rays of a greater light?"

Amasis looked puzzled. Then he understood.

"Yea," he cried with a broken note in his voice,

"it has passed away for ever from here and there," and he pointed to his bosom and his arm round which the jewel had been clasped.

The old man nodded as if he was fully aware of everything that had happened; yet bade Amasis tell him all, and why his countenance was so changed that night. "For I see that something has come about," he said. "Tell it into my ears."

Whereupon Amasis told him all, beginning from his meeting with Taska, relating word for word the conversation he had overheard between Ath, the Lady of Khem, and Ptahmes, her counsellor. Also how, after the realization of the evil she had done, he had come face to face with the Queen and fled madly from her presence. Amasis spoke passionately, his words full of anger and scorn.

The old Astrologer listened quietly as if it were no new thing he heard; and when the young man buried his face in his arms after his tale was told, he laid his thin hands on his head like a father might to a son.

"It was a good answer thou gave the Queen," he said; "verily, in the dream thou related there was a great meaning which she shall never learn. My son, dost thou remember my words to thee on the night before thou departed for Memphis? Behold, I said: '*Depart and sleep and dream, and so continue in that dream until the day of thy great awakening*'—and now——"

"And now," returned Amasis, rising with a tragic movement, "see, the day has arrived; I am awake and the dawn has come!"

He bent forward and kissed the old man's



wrinkled brow even as he had kissed the ancient Horus.

"My son," said the Astrologer, "after thou fled from Ath what befell thee?"

"I sought my apartment, sinking upon a couch, when a physician came to me and poured some fluid down my throat which made me sleep. When I awoke I was calm, and passing out quietly, came here."

"And in that sleep," interrupted Rames, "didst thou dream?"

"How dost thou know that I dreamt? Forced sleep does not bring dreams."

Rames smiled.

"How shall I answer thee?" he cried. "Behold, I gain my knowledge. But from whence shall I say I obtain it? Thy dream?"

"It concerned thee," answered Amasis. "Lo, methought I saw thee stand in yonder courtyard with thy face uplifted towards Nut the Sky. Thine arms were extended thus, and it almost seemed as if I could see the moonlight playing upon thy face. Thy lips moved silently, till presently thou spoke aloud, and I distinctly heard my name called by thee. In my sleep I started; then, when thou called again for the second time, I awoke—and came."

"How strange are dreams!" said Rames with a smile and a chuckle. "At what hour dost thou return to the palace?" His question was apparently casual.

Amasis arose. "Return?" he cried passionately. "The Child of the Moon does not dwell in the House of Darkness."

"No," said Rames, "not when he knows it is dark!"

"Hear me," continued the young man, "behold, I am no longer a servant in the palace of Ath. She has used my service in wrong-doing, causing me to carry the order that shall doom my master the Prince Zar to a treacherous death. Oh, I read all her plotting; Pharaoh is dying; in nine months Zar will be of age, and his rule will commence. Then she would cease to be supreme over Khem, for the Prince has a strong mind; this she knows, and it pleases her not. The gods heard me swear allegiance; behold, now they shall hear it unsworn. Ath shall find that when she beckons I do not follow, and where she walks I do not care to tread. When I think that I kissed the package I took to Memphis and counted myself happy because I went in her service——"

"And made Maut the goddess of Truth hide her face when thou affirmed to me that thy journey was for thine own pleasure," finished Rames quietly.

Amasis flushed, but made no answer.

"My father," he cried at last, holding out his arms pathetically, "what shall I do? Behold, from this day I am a fugitive in Khem. That I have sinned I acknowledge, for I have been heedless of the path I trod."

He was referring to the curious scroll which was hidden in his harp. But Rames knew nothing of this, for the young man was bound to keep it secret. "Ath I will not serve again; neither will I remain in her household, for I could not do so honourably. I must undo that which she has

caused to me to do; I must save the Prince Zar. Oh that I had told the true reason of my presence in Memphis to Pharaoh when I met him there. At least he has enough power to frustrate the plot."

Rames shook his head. "Ath would have found a way to carry out her design. She has no fear of Unas—are not all the people with her? Do they not despise the weakling monarch?"

Amasis was silent for a moment. "My father," he said at last, "now we must plan, thou and I, but for the night I must pray thee give me of thy shelter."

"Yea," answered Rames, "my sleeping chamber has room for two, and there is supper enough for three."

"I must tell thee this," broke in the young man. "There is one in the palace who knows of my flight."

"And he is——?"

"Ptahmes, my benefactor, who placed me in court favour. I met him as I passed out and told him what I had heard. Whereupon he thanked the gods for it, since he felt forced to be silent and could not have spoken of it. Then he blessed me and said he wished he also could turn his back on the palace. Verily, my father, I believe a spell has been put upon him, for he said that Ath drew him to her and he could not cut the bond. As we parted he commended me into Amen's hands, pressing these upon me."

Amasis, from under his girdle, drew forth a small leathern bag inside of which lay a small handful of loose jewels and a valuable ring which Ptahmes had taken from off his finger.

Rames looked at them carefully, calculating their worth.

"These will provide thee with wealth in plenty till thy fortune changes," he said, "though without them thou would have had money enough from me. For I have treasures of many kinds which people would never find, even if they came and sought. Put these away and let us talk of other things."

He straightened himself and entered the house, bidding Amasis remain.

After a few moments he returned with a peculiar set look upon his face, like one who has undergone a great mental strain. As he came forward it gradually passed away.

"Añh thinks thou hast been seized with a sudden madness, and being a valuable servant to her, she was concerned for thee. This is so?"

"It is; but she may have learnt that I have gone since I was obliged to pass the guard at the gates. They had not heard of my supposed madness, else I should have been detained."

"It is well. Now hearken, and do not begin questioning as thou dost whenever I tell thee anything strange. Believe what I say as the truth. Thy chamber in the palace has not been entered since thou left, and Ptahmes will be able to keep his secret, since he would be held guilty for thy escape. On the morrow Ath will know that thou hast disappeared, and though she may consult her magic, yet she will learn nothing for the space of fifteen days, for perchance another power may counterbalance hers—who can say?" and he waved his hand with a smile. "After that time she will

learn thy secret—ask me not how—and will act accordingly. Meanwhile thou wilt have travelled into the North Land and perchance have warned thy Prince. Dost thou understand?"

Amasis looked at him in astonishment.

"Thou art marvellous," he said. "Never have I seen such a one. Not even when I lived with Horus, who was thy friend and my master, did I ever see or hear such wonders as this."

"There is another coming here to-night," said Rames suddenly. "At this moment he is even at the entrance to the alley."

Amasis listened but heard no steps.

"I do not wish any one to see me," he said; "if my presence were known here it might bring the Queen's vengeance upon thee when she learns that with the help of the gods I am about to undo her work."

Rames brought his piercing eyes upon him.

"This is no stranger who comes to-night. Thy lips tell me that I am wise," he said scornfully, "and yet thy manner says thou thinkest I am a fool. Till to-morrow morn until one hour before mid-day Ath shall know nothing of thy absence. Have no fear. Afterwards they may follow thee. What of that? The Child of the Moon shall not be left desolate; neither shall the chosen of Amen be overcome, though he may be tried. I have said."

Amasis bowed and was silent. Suddenly there was a sound of swift footsteps; some one had entered at the end of the courtyard. As the stranger stepped from beneath the shadow of a fig tree, the moon, which gave a light that was

almost as bright as day, revealed him fully. The newcomer was tall, broad and majestic in gait. He paused a moment before advancing to the old man, who had risen to his feet. As the stranger hesitated, Amasis, who now saw his features clearly, started.

It was Jehudda the Hebrew !

## CHAPTER XIII

### "THE CHOSEN THREE"

RAMES, after greeting the Israelite, brought him to the porchway. Jehudda then went across to Amasis and took his hand in a friendly grasp.

"Thou and I are bound to meet in a strange way," he said, "first at Memphis under the orchard wall, and then suddenly at Thebes in the stillness of night under the moonlit sky."

Amasis was about to make some answer when Rames called them within the house. He did not seem in the least surprised that they had met before. They sat down to the humble but plentiful meal in the spacious front chamber, which overlooked the courtyard and was lit by several lamps. They ate for a while in silence till curiosity and astonishment made Amasis speak—

"Art thou visiting Thebes?" he asked the Israelite; "it is strange we should meet so soon again."

"Did I not say that I believed something more would come of our first meeting?" answered Jehudda; "else why did I put my confidence in thee? Behold, I have come to abide some time in Thebes, for Memphis will have none of me." He sighed wearily. "An Israelite is not liked in Khem," he continued. "Dost thou remember I told thee how

they treated me at Bubastis and said I had saved my goods from fire by witchcraft? After meeting with thee, I gave it out openly that I was of Hebrew race and religion, for I vowed that no longer should Jehovah be hidden. Then gradually everything changed: my neighbours looked at me with distrust; they shrank from the name of my God and said I brought misfortune on the city. Then my trade diminished, the people mocked at me, saying that Jehovah cared little for His people since He had forsaken them, and left them to dwell in foreign lands. Few are the worshippers of the Lord of Hosts! How easily are their hearts turned aside! Pardon," he cried suddenly, "I had forgotten that I spoke in the presence of Egyptians." His companions made no answer, but Rames frowned slightly.

"And now," continued the Hebrew after a short pause, "I have to thank thee, O Rames, for all thy hospitality and friendship to me throughout my troubles." Then seeing the young man's surprise, he added, "We have been acquainted since the first year of Ath's reign."

Amasis started. The Queen's name brought forth bitter memories.

"Friend Jehudda," cried Rames suddenly, "I fain would speak with thee privately to-night on a serious matter."

Then he turned to the young man.

"It is my desire," he said, "to entrust thy secret with Jehudda, for good may come of it. The hour grows late and we would talk alone."

Whereupon he arose and, taking up one of the lamps, led Amasis down a passage at the back of the house into a large sleeping chamber. Here



Rames waited till he had lain down to rest. Then the old man walked over to him and placed his hand on his brow.

"Sleep," he said softly, "the brain and the mind are weary; to-morrow thou wilt need all thy strength. Sleep," he added imperatively in a lower voice. "Sleep!"

Under the gentle pressure of the old man's hand Amasis suddenly felt drowsiness creep over him. He closed his eyes obediently without a murmur, and when a moment later Rames removed his hand sweet, refreshing slumber had fallen upon him.

Shading the lamp with one hand, Rames gazed at the tired young face. Then from his bosom he drew out the tiny phial containing the fiery fluid. Lifting the sleeper's arm he dropped the liquid slowly on the wrist, on the very place where the Queen's bracelet had been clasped. It dried quickly on the flesh, but Amasis moaned slightly in his slumber as the liquid burnt him.

Rames was muttering to himself.

"The bond that bound the heart is broken," he said, "but also the unholy touch of the bracelet shall be removed. Ath, Ath, thou hast sought to set thy seal upon my beloved, but see, I have burnt away the stain for ever!"

He looked closely at the young man's arm. Nothing was to be seen except a thin, encircling scar. Suddenly Amasis spoke in his sleep and Rames, bending down to catch the words, heard the murmur of his own name. Also he must have heard something else, for a strangely softened expression came over the usually stern face. Then he took up the lamp and left the chamber, a happy smile upon his lips.

"Let those who would seek to injure my beloved, beware," he murmured beneath his breath. "My heart, which was dead, has come to life, for the breath of love is upon it."

In the entrance porchway, which looked out upon the moonlit courtyard, he found Jehudda leaning against one of the wooden pillars. Instantly they seated themselves on the stone benches, and Rames commenced to talk. He told the Israelite everything relating to Amasis and the Queen, keeping nothing back, repeating almost word for word all that the young man had said that night.

Jehudda listened in quiet wonder until the old Astrologer had finished.

"A most strange tale," he remarked. "Is it possible that Ath possesses this power of which thou speakest? Truly Khem is the birthplace of new wonders. Friend Rames, what part dost thou expect me to play, for this witchery makes me afraid."

The old seer regarded him coldly.

"Why have I told thee all this?—why have I placed the secret of my beloved in other hands? Because, O Israelite, my spirit tells me that good may issue from it. Behold, Amasis has sworn to wage war against an evil; I also shall unite with him. We have strength, yet our strength is not enough, and I seemed to hear a voice saying, 'Confide in Jehudda the Hebrew, then shall ye be strong.' As for the part thou must play, it shall show itself presently."

The Israelite rose from his seat and paced rapidly to and fro for a few minutes. Suddenly he paused and confronted Rames.

"I will have no dealings with the gods and the magic of Khem," he said firmly. "A sojourner am

I in a strange land; nevertheless, I honour thee, O Rames, and him whom thou callest thy beloved, for I perceive that ye are not as other Egyptians. Prosper in thy undertaking, knowing all thou hast said is safe with me."

A dead silence followed as Rames arose also and faced the Israelite.

"Who has asked thee to put thy hand to magic or to have aught to do with the gods of Khem?" he asked in cold anger. "On the morrow Amasis journeys to the North Land to warn Prince Zar. When he is saved, is our work done? No, the power of Ath will remain to be broken, for Khem must be ridded from the daughter of darkness before the spell she has cast becomes too strong. Hark," he continued, taking hold on the Israelite's arm. "Hark!" From the far distance came the sounds of laughter, the light, merry laughter of a party of happy Thebans gathered to some family feast. "See how joyous is Khem; the people smile and sing because prosperity dwells in the land. Unas' name is seldom heard, but the name of Ath is sacred to them. See how she casts her net around the nation while they know it not. But one day the meshes shall be tighter and envelop every whit of the fair land, and not one person therein shall be able to escape."

These words fell with little meaning on Jehudda's ears, but at a later time he came to see that Rames was right.

"Behold," the old man continued, "thou hatest the magic of Khem, then wherefore wilt thou not agree to uproot this deadly power?"

The Israelite smiled.

"Dost thou not delve into magic thyself," he

asked; "many and many a time have I heard thy name spoken with awe by those who have consulted thee."

The Astrologer threw back his head and laughed softly.

"Doubtless among many my name is spoken of with wonder," he said, "yet how easily are the children of Khem deceived! There are those who come to me and say, 'What shall be my fortune?' I look at them; I see they are possessed of little or no discretion. They desire to look into the future, not that they may guard against an evil, for they forget that fate lies in every man's hand. Man models his own life both here and for hereafter; yet such ones as these fail to see it. If you foretell an evil, they will mope and be filled with fear, because they believe it is sure to happen. Hence if it comes it must necessarily be greater than if they had striven against it, for then it might never have come to pass at all. To such I tell some pretty tale of little meaning, and they go from me happy. They become light-hearted, and because of their very contentedness and joyousness of spirit any lurking calamity falls less heavily upon them. Sometimes it never falls at all and then they marvel and say how the words of my prophecy are fulfilled. Now is there any magic in that?"

He leant back against the pillar and shook with quiet laughter.

"See how many should be grateful to me," he continued, "when any ask my advice I give it; I sorrow with those who tell me a sad tale, I smile when they tell of their pleasures. Then there is another sort of people also possessed of no discretion. Generally they are those who let their

imagination govern their possible character. To them I must appear in all ways as a magician; no smile must be upon my face; my dress must suggest mystery and, above all, an astrologer's instruments and charts must be strewn around me in profusion. If I see any wonderful good fortune in their horoscope I must not tell it, for I know that they will be puffed up with pride and forget that the life they lead has a bearing upon their fortunes. Therefore to these also I must be careful what I disclose, so I talk with the air of one who is learned, using long words of difficult and undecisive meaning. They dare not say they do not understand, for though their education is of little account, yet they do not forget their rank in Khem. They have riches, and riches, according to their idea, has made noble blood. These also go away happy, and the more mysterious and learned I appear the larger is the payment they leave behind. Few, indeed, are the ones to whom I may speak openly, for these must have a well-balanced head and be of an intelligent mind, having self-control and the power of calm deliberation. Behold, O Israelite, I have thrown open my secrets to thee. Do they show that I delve in much magic? Yet I have not told all. Among those who seek my wisdom are a few who are always ill with divers complaints. My physic as well as my astrology is famous, therefore when they come to me they are ill; when they leave they are well, and then go forth to spread my name and power in Khem, and why? Because I have administered medicine of a dark hue, but pure as water, and calling forth the power that lies within me I have exercised my influence upon them. With much show it is done and they are satisfied. Hence

this is another sort of people whom I make happy. Say, O Jehudda, is there any magic in this?"

The Israelite joined in the old man's laughter. "Suppose," he said, "suppose I should tell all this to the people of Khem?"

Rames laughed again even louder. "Tell it," he answered, "tell it and see how many will believe thee. No, the name of Rames the Physician, the Wizard, can make many turn pale with fear and wonder."

"And is this the full extent of thy power?" asked Jehudda.

"No," said Rames; "but it is not cast before others. I keep it until there is an actual need. I have cultivated a power till I can read a man's character and thoughts in an instant; I can put my influence upon others, and can even make it travel to them in the distance. Many, indeed, are the things I can do with a mind which is less strong than mine; then it is called magic! No, no, I have not outlived so many aged men in Egypt without daily increasing in knowledge of various kinds."

Rames paused, while the Israelite was also silent.

"Behold," the old man continued, "the magic which Ath possesses is nothing akin to my strange wisdom. Only a few can withstand her power, which will grow mightier because its source is in the Land of Darkness. Unless a man is very, very strong, of unconquerable determination and of a pure, holy mind, he cannot resist her influence if she thinks he may prove of use to her. She may rob him of his manhood and he will not know it till it has passed utterly from him. The ambitions of Ath are wonderful, but her dark, hidden powers

are even more marvellous. Many stand near her, happy and undefiled. The Prince Zar is one of these, but Pharaoh is enchained as was Amasis. This is the magic which we would fight against before all the goodness in Khem has perished under the power of its strange Witch Queen. Dost thou understand?”

“Yea,” answered Jehudda; “but how dost thou know all this?”

“How shall I say? Behold I see and read where to others all is a blank.”

“And why shouldest thou tell thy secrets, and put thy confidence in a Hebrew? What power have I in Khem?—and yet”—he paused and looked Rames well in the face—“is it that I may beseech the blessings of the God of my fathers upon thee and Amasis?”

The old man started and half hesitated.

“No,” he said almost roughly. “Who am I to forsake the gods of Khem? Are they not everywhere, in the heavens, on the earth; in the Underworld and all around us? I spoke to thee, perhaps because Amen the Everliving put the thought into my heart.”

He tried to put fervour and enthusiasm into his words when he spoke of his native gods. But he utterly failed, while a half-startled look came over his face. Yet a certain relief seemed to rest upon him, and the Israelite, who saw it, was glad.

Presently Rames arose and with Jehudda paced slowly up and down the moonlit court. It was the Israelite who spoke generally; a strange silence seemed to have come upon the older man. After a while Jehudda prepared to depart, Rames accompanying him down the alley into the broader streets.

The old Astrologer watched him depart, then, suddenly, with remarkable agility, hobbled after him. Jehudda turned at the sound of footsteps, when Rames, who had caught him up, clutched him tightly by the arm. He sank his voice and whispered in the Hebrew's ear—

"*Pray, O Israelite,*" he said, in almost anguished tones, "*pray unto thy Jehovah for the safety of Amasis!*"

Before Jehudda could answer the old man had hurried off again. When he reached the entrance to the alley the Hebrew was still standing where he left him. They turned and smiled to each other, and any one passing would have thought nothing of that smile, but the Astrologer read it as an opened book, and knew that Jehudda had understood. Then he re-entered the courtyard, but although the hour was late, he did not retire. During the greater part of that night he sat in the porchway upon the stone bench, wrapt in thought. His head was buried in his arms while the cold moonlight continued to stream down upon him.

Towards the early morning he raised his face and a calm gentleness rested upon it. He smiled peacefully with his eyes towards the sky. A little while and the dawn would break, and the warm rays of Ra would take the place of the cold, unsympathetic moon. He entered the apartment, and throwing himself down upon a rude couch sunk into a soft slumber. What his thoughts had been during all those long hours would never be known, for he had locked them away for ever in the secret closet of his heart.



## CHAPTER XIV

### THE LAY OF THE WATCHER SPIRITS

THE next morning Amasis started for the Delta. He had assumed a peasant's dress which Rames had procured for him; also his skin was greatly darkened by a preparation of which the old Physician alone knew the secret. On his back was slung his beloved harp, and throughout his journey he posed as a minstrel travelling to Memphis to meet others of his profession.

As far as Bubastis he intended to travel by boat; and when, some three hours before mid-day, the moorings were cast and Thebes vanished in the distance, he heaved a great sigh of relief.

The last scene he remembered was that of Rames standing alone and apparently unconcerned on the quay. The old man thought it wise that they should appear strangers to each other; hence publicly they spoke no word of farewell. The lounging Thebans watched the old Astrologer with awe, plying him with any questions which their superstitious minds prompted.

Only once did Rames glance across at Amasis as he stood on the deck. The young man understood the silent words, and accordingly he remained within a cabin till the boat pushed off. Then he reappeared and watched till the City vanished from view.

The long, tedious journey, with its almost unchanging scenery, has been briefly described elsewhere. After many days of travel upon the smooth, unruffled Nile, Amasis arrived in the very heart of the Delta, or the North Land, as it was called in those days. He quitted the ship as soon as possible, and, when he reached the more swampy parts, mingled with the villagers, who chiefly obtained their livelihood by fishing and killing the abundant water-fowl. It was well known that the Prince Zar, with a party of hunters, was staying here for some short time to enjoy the sport which these desolate parts afforded.

The villagers spoke of the Prince with loyal affection; he mingled freely with them, casting aside all pomp. He did not remain many days in the same place, but frequently struck a new camp among the numerous sand dunes. All this Amasis learnt from the hard-working and poorly-recompensed fishermen. He watched their stern, weary faces light up with pleasure at the mention of the Prince's name. Very little news travelled up into these desolate, sandy expanses, where the land could not be cultivated, save in a few hollows.

Amasis was satisfied; he had not known exactly in what direction to find the royal encampment, so he journeyed on light heartedly, knowing that he would soon reach it. The air was colder in these parts than at Thebes, and he found brisk walking pleasant.

Sand hills were on every side of him, and on one of these Amasis climbed. He saw that he was near the borders of Lake Menzaleh. The great sheet of water extended almost as far as the eye could reach,

yet a faint black ridge beyond was discernible. Amasis knew it was a bar of sand which formed a boundary between these waters and the sea. The papyrus grass grew thickly on the lake's margin, while a constant murmuring noise came from the surface of the waters where the water-fowl lived in vast numbers. A short distance behind him were a few tiny mud huts belonging to the fishermen who came every day to spear the birds and fish.

Amasis peered round on his left. Half hidden behind a sand dune, he discerned signs of an encampment. It was the only one, and he hurried towards it. He questioned an old hunter he met on the way; whereupon the man told him the Prince had only that morning been seen using the throwing-stick, bringing down vast numbers of water-fowl by his skilful aim. Amasis thanked the man and walked on.

Presently he came to the encampment in the shadow of a high sand hill and looked round. Two men, bending over cooking-pots, had their backs to him; neither did they look up, for his footsteps made no noise. They were evidently preparing the mid-day meal for the sportsmen, and Amasis, who had eaten but little or nothing that morning, felt a longing towards the appetising savouries. He passed by the camp softly, walking half round the sand hill, then proceeded toward the edge of the rush-covered lake. Seeing no one about, he retreated behind a shrub and waited.

After a while a party of hunters appeared at some distance, carrying scores of fish and water-fowl—evidently the result of the morning's labour. They went towards the encampment, but the Prince was

not among them. A little later, Amasis saw a solitary figure follow in their steps; he leapt from his hiding-place. It was Zar.

The Prince, clad in a short hunting-tunic, carried nothing but a bow and arrows in his left hand, while a small sword was girt at his side. A thoughtful expression rested upon his handsome face as he walked with slow, majestic steps, casting his dark, pleasant eyes around. For the time being he did not perceive Amasis, who, hardly realizing his action, jerked his harp from his shoulder, running his fingers tenderly over the strings. The low, sweet, almost trembling notes floated out, and at the sounds the Prince halted in astonishment. They were some distance from the encampment, the place being deserted save for these two.

As the Prince stopped, Amasis went forward, playing as he walked, yet not knowing what he played. Zar stood in amazement, without a word on his lips, his head inclined in a listening attitude. He seemed unaccountably rooted to the spot, without power to move or speak. Then, when only a few paces remained between them, Amasis gave the royal salute.

"Hail, O Prince Zar!" he cried, raising his arm. "From Thebes have I journeyed to see thee. Never has any one travelled so swiftly!"

On hearing his voice, the Prince's dark eyes lit up with recognition as he stretched out his hands eagerly towards the young man.

"Very welcome art thou," he said, while his voice rang with genuine pleasure. "But why art thou in disguise? I should not have known thee but for thy voice. Hast thou brought a message from my

royal sister? By her desire I came to learn sport in the North Land; but never did I think that these parts were so strangely monotonous, with scarcely any news from Thebes. Amasis, I have missed thee sorely. Hast thou forgotten the tales thou told me of war and travel in bygone times? Ha!" he added, seeing the anxious look upon his companion's face; "thou hast brought ill tidings? Tell thy business speedily."

Amasis glanced around carefully before he drew nearer, sternness deepening on his face.

"Behold," he cried in a half-whisper, "I, Amasis, am a fugitive from Thebes, and have come to warn thee, O Prince Zar, that thy life is in peril."

Zar started slightly, with a faint smile on his lips. He was a Prince and a brave man, who could look upon dangers with a smile.

"Peril!" he echoed. "From whom?"

"From Ath, the Lady of Khem!"

Zar stepped back and looked at Amasis keenly. He had drawn himself up majestically, while his eyes flashed with surprise and controlled anger.

"Art thou mad?" he asked; "or is this some ill-befitting jest?"

"By the Feather of Maut, the goddess of Truth," answered Amasis solemnly, "my words are true. Show me some place where we may speak without fear of intrusion. Who am I, O royal Zar, to cast wanton jests in thy face?"

"A feather is a light thing to hold," said the Prince; "see that thou grasp it firmly."

Then, looking at Amasis, his quick mind realized that something must be really amiss to bring his favourite attendant all the way from Thebes into

the swampy Delta. He pointed towards a growth of shrubs and tall grasses springing up at the side of a sand hill a short distance away.

"No eye can pierce yon natural curtain," he said; "let us hasten."

Amasis immediately broke into a run, while Zar, filled with wonder, followed. As they came to the shelter, the Prince paused, gripping his companion's arm.

"Amasis," he said "why didst thou play that music just before we met?"

"What was it, O Prince? I know not what I played. My fingers fell upon the strings and played their own tune."

Zar looked at him out of his keen, dark eyes as if he sought truth from the other's face.

"Thou hast played the Lay of the Spirit Watchers, the mystic tune that is heard by some people on the eve of some danger in their life. On the night of the royal Seti's death, when I played with my sister, the Lady of Khem, I heard it in my dreams for the first time in my life. Dost thou remember that on the following morning I tried to sing the tune to thee? Also thou endeavoured to reproduce it on thy harp, but failed? Since I have come here my life was once in peril, by reason of a rashly-shot arrow. Perchance it was of that I was warned by the Lay of the Spirit Watchers."

He paused and dropped his voice slightly.

"The mystic tune I had not heard since that awful night. To-day thy harp sobbed forth that same weird and doleful melody. Canst thou tell me why?"

A look of wonder came over his companion's

face. The strange music was only heard by a very few in Khem, and up till then no human voice or earthly strings had been known to reproduce it. Sometimes it was heard in dreams, sometimes in the moaning of the wind during the height of a storm; and very often in the deep, dead silence which occasionally surrounds the soul.

"Behold," he cried, "I knew not what I played. If it is that my harp sang the Lay of the Watcher Spirits, why then, Prince Zar, know that danger is already at hand, and I, thy servant, have come to give thee warning!"

He paused a moment; but the Prince seized his arm eagerly, pointing behind the shrubs.

"Hasten! hasten!" he cried imperatively; "my heart burns to hear thy tale. Come!"

## CHAPTER XV

### THE DWELLER IN DARKNESS

It was in one of the corridors which ran parallel to the Queen's day apartment in the palace at Thebes on the last day of Epep, about a month after the disappearance of Amasis.

The marble floor was dotted here and there with large and small statues, while the sun looking through the side openings, showed upon the frescoes of blue lotus which were delicately, but stiffly, patterned upon the walls. On either side of a doorway, which led into another roofless hall, were placed two enormous Sphinxes, considerably higher than the average tall man. Behind one of these two persons stood.

It was Ptahmes, the chief Counsellor and Architect of Khem, with Taska, the Queen's favourite attendant. Ptahmes leant against the body of the Sphinx; his arms folded over his broad chest. A quiet, habitual smile played round the corners of his mouth, while his eyes were directed towards the brightly coloured ceiling, without apparently seeing anything there. His whole attitude told of a thoughtful calmness, like that of some holy priest standing alone in silence before the altar of his God.

A sudden pause had fallen between them and Taska stood looking at Ptahmes. She seemed to be labouring under a suppressed excitement; her



usually bright face bore a look of despair, and she sighed once heavily.

"Wherefore this calmness?" she cried at last; "hast thou no fear?"

The old man turned towards her.

"My daughter," he said gently, "I am not afraid now, for I feel that we stand on the eve of great events."

The girl shuddered.

"My heart trembles when I am in the Queen's presence," she said. "She has changed lately; everything in the palace has changed. At one time it was a pleasure to attend on her—but now——" She shivered again and turned away.

"Yes?" said Ptahmes; "and now?"

"The Lady of Khem is not as she was. When I enter her chamber a strange sensation comes over me; the room seems filled with faint murmuring noises, and I feel that it is not good for me to be there. Sometimes I hear her speaking when she thinks she is alone, and her language is not ours, neither is her voice the same. Ath is beautiful, but her beauty is not of this earth."

"Does it seem above this earth?" asked Ptahmes.

"No," said Taska. "It seems from below! I myself am different from what I was formerly, and sometimes I feel as if a bond has been laid upon me, and I cannot act of my own free will. Often I think that I ought to fly from hence, but I know I cannot move. Would Pharaoh and the Prince were here! For me to live continually with one who talks with evil spirits is impossible. Madness has seized Amasis; he has fled. Where? Perhaps to death. But I fear that madness will attack us

all in time if we stay in this unholy place. Ath talks continually of Amasis. Thinkest thou that we shall ever see him again?"

A smile passed over the old Architect's face.

"Yea," he said, "we shall see him again and many times, I believe."

"Thou dost not think him dead?"

"Nay, I *know* that he is not dead!"

He watched an expression of relief dawn upon the girl's face.

"Ask no more," he added, "and keep what I have said to thyself."

Taska looked up and smiled. Her natural brightness had returned at his words. "I will not ask how thou knowest," she said almost joyfully, "but because thou hast told me, I am happy, and not even the magic of Ath shall draw thy words from me."

She turned as she spoke and walked lightly down the hall; her small head held proudly. Ptahmes stood and watched her.

"She is happy because Amasis is safe," he thought, "it is well that I told her, for she will bury the secret down deep, putting the key in her heart as she said, and not even the Lady of Khem shall be able to take it from her. A bond is laid upon us; but it will be broken; how and when let Amen alone decide. But who can say what part the Lady Taska may play in the drama-to-come?"

Then, with a strange smile on his face, he strode through the hall into the gardens. Taska hurried till she came to the Queen's apartment, where she knew her mistress required her. Her spirits were lighter than they had been for many days, and

the dimples danced out on her face as some happy thought made her smile.

Ath was ready for her attendant as the girl entered the gaily coloured room heavy with perfume. Several massive couches were ranged round the chamber, the legs and side pieces being carved and inlaid with gold and ivory. On a table lay a great mass of roses, a flower esteemed by the Egyptians next to the sacred lotus. Statues stood in three corners of the apartment, painted to represent life, and near the open window place were several copper pots in which grew rare foreign plants.

The Queen was clad in a clinging, yellow robe, leaving the neck and arms bare, while her long, dark tresses hung down in wavy masses far below her waist. She stood in the centre of the room as the girl entered, looking at a piece of exquisite pottery which had been specially made by her design. Presently she sat down on one of the couches, and Taska, taking the thick, dark hair in her deft fingers bound it in the fashion of the day. A pure white robe of the finest linen, embroidered heavily at the hem and bosom, was exchanged for the yellow one; after which her usual ornaments were placed on her neck and arms. Then the Queen sank back on the couch and smiled at her reflection in the silver mirror.

After a few minutes she arose and placed the royal uræus on her head. Taska never touched the ornament except when she was obliged, for it always seemed to her that the eyes of the snake glittered wickedly.

"Taska," said the Queen suddenly, "I believe we

shall soon learn the whereabouts of Amasis. That he passed out of the gates is certain, for the guards saw him; yet strange to say, it seems that he did not appear mad to them, but quite calm. He was a valuable servant to me," she continued; "this mystery must be cleared."

Taska did not reply for a moment. She hoped Amasis would not return to the palace; there were already too many who dwelt within its unholy walls.

"Perchance he is dead," she said at last; "in his madness he may have killed himself, else he could not be so utterly lost. More than a month has passed since his disappearance, for this is the last day of Epep, thou knowest."

Ath turned round sharply at the last words, but Taska did not notice the movement. She was bending over the flower-laden table and did not know that the Queen started at the mention of the day which was to prove fatal to Zar.

"I have sent out spies," continued Ath, "and they have failed. But he shall be found; apart from his value to me, I will not let the mystery pass by thus."

"Thou dost not think he is dead?" asked Taska.

"No," replied the Queen firmly, "neither dost thou!"

The girl, who was bending down, glanced up astonished and opened her mouth to speak; but Ath continued—

"Moreover thou must help me to find him, that is, if other ways fail. I know that thou, at least, would be glad to see him again."

Taska looked straight at the Queen.

"Because he was thy servant and my friend, I should bid him welcome," she answered steadily. "Beyond that he is nothing to me."

Then seeing that she was no longer required, she left the chamber. Once outside she shivered violently and suddenly burst into tears. Whereupon she ran noiselessly down the corridors and rushed against Ptahmes, who was entering the hall by another passage. They whispered together for a moment; then the old man took her gently by the arm and led her away. Had he glanced over his shoulder, he would have seen that the door to the Queen's apartment was slightly ajar, while Ath, through the aperture, was gazing down the hall. He did not look back, but presently reached a secluded part at the far end of the palace where he and Taska sat talking for a full hour.

Ath waited till they disappeared. Then she stepped back to the apartment, closed the door behind her and drew an iron bolt across it. Next she cleared the ivory table from its burden of flowers; placed a small copper dish upon it, two small ebony boxes, a tiny phial half full of liquid and a cup about a quarter the size of an ordinary drinking vessel. Lastly she moved to the window place and drew across a thick side curtain. A tiny ray of light still glimmered in, but she fastened the hangings down till the room was cast into complete darkness. It was not well that Ra should be witness to the unholy mysteries in which she was about to delve.

Into the copper dish she flung two dark powders. Immediately there was a faint hissing noise, while from the centre of the pan a tiny flame sprang up,

giving out a heavy odour so that Ath herself was almost overcome. She drank some fluid from the phial; then spreading her hands above the fire, muttered softly in an unknown language.

The flame leapt higher as her voice grew shriller and then dropped lower, ending in a faint whisper. The fire burnt down to a deep red, till at last it became so small that it seemed an eye of fire set in the centre of the burnished plate.

Ath flung her jewelled arms high above the flames; the fluid she had drunk made her eyes sparkle curiously, and swaying gently to and fro, she commenced to speak in the ordinary Egyptian tongue.

"I have whispered thy name," she said. "Come forth, O Thou whom I summon."

As she spoke a faint murmur filled the room, and the fire leapt up with a hissing noise. Then with a wild, unearthly shriek, like the cry of an out-cast, wandering spirit, the answer came.

"I, whom thou hast summoned, am here," said the unholy Voice, and it sounded so near to her ear that Ath started.

"What is thy name?" asked the Queen, "give me thy secret name that I may know thee." She bent her ear and a faint whisper answered her.

"I am the Dweller in Darkness," the Voice continued. "Out of the Eternal Regions have I come because my child called me. To-day I am free—free to come at thy summons; for though I heard thy voice at other times, I could not answer because another Power kept me back. Ask what thou wilt quickly, O Ath, and let me hence."

"Go on a journey for me," said the Queen,

"travel into the far North Land and tell me what thou seest there."

There came a rumbling noise; another faint and dismal shriek.

"Art thou there?" cried Ath, and a hollow murmur answered—

"I am there."

"What dost thou see?"

"I see a vast desolate plain of sand, and water that stretches into the distance. There are hills of sand, and two men talk together in whispers near one of these. They are alone; one shows despair on his face, the other anger, and they glance about furtively as if they would not be seen. One carries a bow and a quiver of arrows, a helmet is on his head while the royal uræus twines around it."

Ath started. "Is it Zar?" she cried, and the hollow wailing Voice replied—

"It is Zar."

"Who speaks with him?"

"One who is known to thee; is valued, and is lost."

The Queen trembled excitedly. "Tell me his name," she said shrilly. A sudden thought rushed through her mind, but she put the idea aside as impossible. A silence fell, and no answer came to her question.

"Is it Amasis?" she asked; her voice shaking with fear was almost as weird as that of the answering Spirit.

"It is Amasis."

"How comes he there, and what are the words he speaks to the Prince Zar?"

"I cannot hear their speech, but Amasis has learnt thy plot, and his madness was feigned."

Then the Queen remembering the day, realized that her conversation with Ptahmes must have been overheard.

"What more dost thou see?"

"I look across the plain; I see approaching Kenaten, thy captain in Memphis, who is in thy pay. He is garbed as a peasant; but underneath the tunic are instruments of death. In his hand is a bow and the arrows are poisoned. He is fulfilling his part well, O Ath; for presently he will shoot at the birds and kill the Prince; and because of the desolation of the place, the deed will not be known."

A silence fell.

"What dost thou see?" asked the Queen again.

"Amasis has perceived the coming stranger and his keen eyes study him carefully. He is startled, and calls to the Prince, for he knows the face of the captain to whom he bore the message. He leads Zar to the edge of the water. A fisherman's boat is there covered with standing new-cut rushes. They enter into it and move among the tall reeds that are higher than any man, and are hidden. Bid me go, O Ath, for I am weary."

"Not yet, not yet," said the Queen excitedly. "What dost thou see?"

A long pause followed, and when the Spirit spoke again, its voice was weak and trembling.

"In the dim distance I discern a crocodile moving among the rushes; it half leaps from the water, I hear the water-fowl scream and fly away in fear while the lake is foaming as in the time of storm. I see no more, for I have become like one who is



blind. Another Power is rising and crushes me down. Let me go, O Ath, for I cannot stay in the North Land."

The Voice was very faint, and the Queen knew that she must not let it linger.

"I summon thee back," she cried, "Dweller in the Darkness, come!"

Then there was another rumbling noise when the Spirit spoke again into her ear.

"What shall befall the two whom thou hast seen speaking together in the North Land?"

"Mention them not. Another Power has risen and shields them from me. I am overcome when I stand near them, for as the day fights against the night, so this Power strives against me. Let me hence, O Ath."

"Not yet, not yet. Give me my desire."

"What is thy desire?"

"Make me the greatest in Khem. Make me to be the wonder of the earth; let my beauty, my power and my wisdom have no equal."

"Much hast thou asked; nevertheless, because of thy former promises to me, I grant thee all this. Wheresoever thou goest all shall follow; wheresoever thou lookest thy beholders shall become entranced. Thy beauty shall increase from day to day, none shall excel it. All this I, the Dweller in Darkness, give unto thee."

"Give me a sign that I may know my power may last."

"My word is enough," said the Spirit, "but my gifts will never fail till the great tree which stands outside the Temple of Ptah in Memphis is dragged from its root by a single man."

The Queen laughed as her fears passed.

"There is no man living who can do that," she said, "twenty would be required to accomplish such a task. Shall I then be endowed with a treble length of life?"

"All my gifts shall be thine," answered the Spirit, "so long as no man uproots the tree."

"I thank thee, O Invisible One, it seems that my life may outlast many and many a century to come."

Suddenly the voice of the Spirit broke into a wail.

"Let me hence," it cried. "The Power I dreaded has followed me even here, and I must go."

Ath was satisfied, although she knew that Amasis had become her enemy.

"Pass," she said triumphantly. "Pass from hence into the downward regions. Dweller in Darkness, farewell!"

A hollow murmur answered her; then came the heavy rumbling sound; the flame on the dish died out, and Ath fell back on the ground in a half swoon.

Could she at this hour have looked into a distant part of Thebes, she would have seen a tall stranger standing in the centre of a humble room, with his arms outstretched, his lips moving and his face set with the intensity of his words.

It was Jehudda fulfilling his promise, entreating Jehovah for a blessing on Amasis and Zar the Prince.

Thus it was that the Higher Power arose in the hour of unholy magic and cast a shield over the two on whose behalf the Hebrew prayed.

## CHAPTER XVI

### "LIFT THINE EYES TO THE HEAVENS"

SIX months had passed. Nothing had been heard of the Prince Zar or Amasis since the last day of Epep; even Kenaten had disappeared, and never again was he seen in Khem. Ath failed to learn whither her royal brother and Amasis had fled. She resorted to her dark wisdom many times, yet on each occasion the Spirit she called was blinded by the Higher Power it so dreaded. In the dismal sand plains of the Delta many deaths might assail a hunter. It was known that Zar had not returned to the encampment; also the Spirit had seen a crocodile. Hence the word went out that Zar had perished in the Northern swamps, and, as the months passed by, Ath grew more confident, and felt that her power was indeed great. For a while the people mourned; then they forgot, and the name of Zar was no longer heard on their lips.

Many other changes had also come to pass in Khem. As the Dweller in Darkness had foretold, Ath's beauty increased day by day, till there was none to equal it in the vast lands of Egypt; every eye that looked upon it felt the power of her marvellous fascination. None could withstand her; wherever she went, a strange bond seemed laid

upon the people, so that her fame spread beyond the Great North Sea and into the uttermost parts of the known world. She alone was ruler of Khem; Zar was forgotten, Pharaoh was no greater than a lord who dwelt in her palace. The nation was glad that they might serve her; they made her a goddess among them, and chanted songs in her praise. Ptahmes and Taska alone saw her with different eyes. They knew that a power drew them to her; yet they shivered when they saw her face to face.

They watched silently as the people flocked to catch sight of Ath the Queen whenever she drove through the broad streets in a shining, golden chariot, as was her custom, with a scarlet canopy stretched above her, the crowns of Khemi set upon her head, and the jewelled serpents glittering about her brow.

As on the day of her coronation, she would smile royally upon her people; her eyes burnt into their souls as they looked, and she would smile again as she saw the extent of her power.

All this Taska and Ptahmes beheld, and they mourned secretly because of the spell that was cast over Khem. Yet they knew that a time would come when the nation should awake from their mystic dream.

Unas had returned from his hunting expedition four months after his meeting with Amasis in Memphis. Then suddenly the news went throughout all the vast Egyptian lands that Pharaoh, the joint ruler of Khem, was dying—dying of the slow, cruel disease which had robbed him of youthful joys and given him the name of weakling king.

The people repeated and discussed the news whenever they met, but one answered the other with the same words : “Behold, Death comes to all; but Ath has ruled Khemi alone, and so she will do in the days to come.”

A week after it was known that Pharaoh’s days were numbered, Rames sat in one of the chambers at the back of his humble house. In front of him was a table strewn with papyri, astronomical charts and physic phials. On either side sat two young Egyptians, listening as he read to them from the scrolls. Both were handsome, and clad in ordinary citizens’ dress. They were Zar, the Prince Royal of Khem, and Amasis, his faithful friend.

It is now necessary to push back time and see how they fared on and after the last day of Epep. They alone knew the end of Kenaten. Hidden among the tall rushes, they had seen a crocodile pounce upon the captain as he stood on the shore. Their shouts had mingled with his, and Zar even burst from his hiding-place, but the reptile had carried its victim under, and was seen no more.

Presently, when all was calm, and the frightened water-fowl had returned to their feeding-place, the fugitives emerged and hastened away till they reached a long sand hill. They had feared lest the hunters might return and seek them out.

For two hours they walked continuously, meeting no one in the vast sandy plain, till at last they came across an old fisherman’s hut. In the doorway sat the owner, a kindly-faced peasant of middle age, carving a set of throwing-sticks. He had been one of those to instruct the Prince in spearing fish;

therefore, on recognizing his royal master, he arose immediately and saluted. Zar bade Amasis remain, while he took the old fisherman aside. How much he told him, Amasis never learned, but triumph was written on the Prince's face when he returned after their private conversation. Then the man, leading them into his tiny mud hut, laid before them a humble, but plentiful, meal. After which he brought the Prince rough peasant garments, then he dug a deep hole in the porchway of his cottage, and placed therein the embroidered hunting-tunic, together with the royal headdress, about which twined the imperial asp. He filled up the place, Zar watching him as he stamped upon the earth to make it flat.

Amasis was already in disguise, and needed no addition, but he was careful to darken his royal master's skin by means of the fluid which Rames had given him. As soon as possible they departed, the old fisherman showing them a path he knew well. When they finally left him they exchanged no word of farewell, but Amasis read in his face that he would keep their secret.

Thus was commenced their perilous journey back to Thebes, for the old Astrologer had bidden Amasis bring the Prince to his humble dwelling. There they would be perfectly safe, for the superstitious nature of the people of Khem would not allow them to pry into the affairs of the strange old wizard. He might cause affliction to come upon them, blight their crops, strike down the cattle, or cause the inquisitive ones to become dumb!

Witchcraft had few unbelievers in those days; Rames knew it, and played on their fears.

The two fugitives passed through many adventures; once, indeed, they thought they had been tracked.

Amasis carried a small amount of money on him, and when at last this failed he drew out his harp and played on the banks of the river. Zar acted the buffoon, and the pleasure-loving Egyptians who watched never dreamt that the dark-skinned, thin-faced, half-ragged minstrel and his companion were any other than what they pretended to be. Zar entered into the spirit of the daring adventure, clapping his hands in the people's faces, bowing with extravagant gestures, making jokes in their ears.

Whereupon they would pass on to the next town, sometimes walking, sometimes taking short journeys by boat. Gradually they worked their way down to Thebes, and often they were drawn into conversation regarding the supposed death of Zar. Every day the Prince learnt more and more the extent of Ath's power, and how the people heaped their admiration and worship upon her. Then Amasis would become almost afraid, for the Prince's dark, pleasant eyes would suddenly flash with fire, and his hands would be clenched with almost uncontrollable fury.

But the gods were kind, and any strange actions on the part of the minstrel and his companion were not heeded. When at last they reached Thebes it was late in the evening, and they proceeded to the old Astrologer's house at once. Here they remained four months, remaining indoors during the day, going out only at night.

As for Rames, he casually mentioned to those he thought it necessary, that, owing to his advanced

years, he found he required help in his trade, and had taken two young disciples to assist him.

Zar found the seclusion very distasteful, but Rames kept them both occupied, and in after years the Prince understood how much he owed to the wise old Astrologer, who taught him things few kings of Egypt ever knew. Under his strange, but kindly, influence the Prince felt his ideas broaden, his aims become nobler, and he realized that up till then he had not really known what life was. He had been born and tutored within palace walls, and yet was ignorant of many things in which, in contrast to him, the poorest inhabitant of Khem was learned.

On this particular day when we meet Zar and Amasis after their perilous journey from the Delta, Rames had been reading and explaining several passages from one of the numerous scrolls he had brought out. It was half essay and half story, full of deep meaning, and showed that the writer was gifted with a clear, unerring insight into the human character.

Rames had written several of these, as the ideas came to him, and now for the first time he let them be heard by other ears.

The one he had chosen was full of sympathetic pathos. He took his listeners into some wild, imagined land, in the centre of which lay a great continuing highway, bound in by perpendicular cliffs reaching almost to the clouds. In this wonderful road between the high, black rocks only a faint light could gleam below, where no plant or tree ever grew because of the darkness. This land was ruled by a weird, invisible king, and peopled



by a nation who were never seen by strangers, but always seemed to be present amid the shadows. When after a while the traveller reached the borders of these dominions, the wonderful highway broadened and opened out into another land vast and beautiful to the eye. During the greater part of the journey the ground was rough and uneven, while in certain places stood tiny pools of stagnant water, seething with loathsome reptiles. Sometimes noises would surround the traveller, to be followed by a dense silence, which was almost more unbearable than the mystic howlings. "At such times," continued the essay, "lift up thine eyes to the heavens, O traveller, and it shall be that the light from above will be reflected into thine eyes, and from thine eyes to thy path, and thou shalt see and pass on thy way in safety."

That was the summary of the essay, and the old man read it in soft, dreamy tones, which lent reality to the things he imagined. He spoke of the traveller in a tender voice, with a dimness in his eyes, as if he awoke memories of his own secret life story which none ever knew. He sighed heavily as he finished, rolled up the scroll carefully and put it away.

A deep silence followed. Amasis remained leaning against the wall, while Zar sat at the table, his hands supporting his chin. Rames went over to him and touched him gently on the shoulder.

"My son," he said, "I will add no explanations to my peculiar writings. Any thoughts which it may have roused in thee keep to thyself; only this I will say, that throughout the years to come, when strange happenings have been seen in Khem, and

the friends whom thou knowest now are dead, that thou lift thine eyes continually towards the heavens; then, because of thy desire, the light shall come. Yes," he added softly, as if speaking to himself, "the light *shall* come."

The Prince made no answer, but his eyes spoke silently. Rames went to the door, paused, and turned sharply round. He seemed as if he were about to speak, but suddenly checked himself.

Then he went forth and left them alone.

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE MESSENGER

ZAR and Amasis retired to their sleeping chamber at rather an early hour that night, and Rames sat by the light of a smoky lamp poring over some private scroll on which were drawn several curious figures. It was at night, after all was quiet, that he generally experimented and had the best results.

He had just been left alone, and was about to commence his work, when he heard an unusual tapping at the outer door. It consisted of two quick and then two slow knocks.

Rames pushed aside his scrolls hastily and arose. The one who waited without was evidently impatient, for the soft knocking was almost immediately repeated.

"It must be Ptahmes," the old man muttered as he crossed the room; "'tis the knock we agreed upon last time he was here."

Then he flung open the door. The moonlight streamed into the dimly-lit room, throwing into greater prominence the tall, slender figure that stood without, muffled in a long, dark cloak. In an instant he knew it was not Ptahmes, and immediately assumed his stern, penetrating manner which brought fear to so many.

Suddenly the stranger loosened the thick mantle,

and Rames again wondered, for he saw that it was a woman.

"I am the messenger of the Lord Ptahmes from the royal palace," she said in a low, sweet voice. "May I speak with thee alone?"

Rames was on his guard, and did not move nor relax his forbidding features. "We are alone," he said coldly. "Reveal thy name and something more of thy business, for I do not converse with such as keep their identity hidden."

"I am Taska," she answered, "one of the Queen's waiting-women. The Lord Ptahmes has given me a letter that thou mayest know I speak truthfully. He has entrusted me with a great secret concerning one who is called Amasis and another who is Zar the Prince." She whispered the last words almost into the old man's ear. "Ptahmes is quite unable to visit thee himself, but as the matter is very important I have come in his stead. Art thou satisfied that I speak truly?"

The shrewd old man made no answer, but taking her by the shoulder, swung her round till the moonlight streamed upon her face. Then, still holding her, he looked intently into her countenance, his keen, piercing eyes studying every feature minutely. She did not flinch from the gaze which had frightened so many. Evidently Rames was satisfied, for presently he dropped her arm and moved to the doorway.

"Enter," he said shortly; "what I have read in thee tells me that thy heart is true."

Taska stepped in lightly and flung off the dark outer cloak. Underneath she wore a filmy white robe, open at the neck and leaving the right arm

and shoulder bare. The hem of her garment was heavily embroidered with gold threads and clung round her tiny sandalled feet. In the centre of the bosom she wore a large glittering ornament cut from a single emerald, while upon her rounded arms were several snake bangles set with sparkling, green eyes. Her dark, lustrous hair fell loosely over her shoulders, having escaped from its fastenings, and from her ears hung tiny twinkling rings. She threw off her cloak wearily, looking at the stern-faced old wizard out of her large, sweet eyes.

Then she handed him a letter which she had taken from her girdle. Rames broke the fastenings and read—

*Friend Rames (began the scroll), it is not possible for me to come to see thee to-night as I had intended. I have deemed it wise to entrust the lady Taska with the secret we both hold; therefore thou mayest speak with her even as thou wouldst speak to me. I am continually with Pharaoh, who, as thou and all Khemi art aware, is dying. The disease has laid him down at Amenti's Gate, and in a little while—it may be only a few hours—the doors will open and he will pass therein. How I mourn for him—for the unloved, generous heart that soon shall cease to beat! His frame is wasted, being almost repulsive to look on; yet I love him, knowing how lofty are his ideals, how pure his soul. Ath comes seldom to see him, which has caused him grief. But that is passed, and now he will have very few admitted to his chamber, for he desires to pass hence in peace. One great sorrow, however, seemed to have*

*weighed heavily upon him. He believed his brother Zar and Amasis to be dead, and many are the times I have seen him weep because of them. To-day I barred the chamber so that none might enter, and told him that they both live. Friend Rames, thou shouldest have seen his countenance; he uttered scarcely a word but grasped my hand. Then he questioned me, and I told him all. He blessed thee, O Rames, a happy smile lighting up his thin features. And now he has one great desire, it is to speak with his brother and Amasis before he dies. I have considered his request and find that it may be done without danger. When I told him of this he smiled again, and I knew I had brought one ray of happiness into his dismal life. "Let me see them one by one," he said; "to-night Amasis, to-morrow Zar." I was astonished he did not wish to see the Prince first; but he answered: "No, Amasis has the mind of one of older years; I desire to speak privately with him. My brother I will see to-morrow night; but because it concerns Khemi I must see Amasis first." These were his words, O Rames; and because of his dying condition I cannot refuse. Behold, I am acquainted with a forgotten subterranean passage leading into the palace. A former king made it; but because strange horrors were supposed to haunt the place it was closed. Though I cannot come, the lady Taska has undertaken to lead Amasis to the entrance of the secret way. When she gives the signal I will loose the doors and take him by the underground corridors into Pharaoh's room. Have no fear, O Rames, for the safe return of thy beloved. Soon after this letter is read by thee it will be the first*

*hour of the morning; Taska and Amasis must leave thee then, and by the time they have reached the palace all will be safe and slumbering. I beseech thee, fulfil Pharaoh's last desire, and trust thy ever watchful and sincere friend—PTAHMES.*

The wary old Astrologer read the letter through carefully. When he looked up he saw that Taska was watching him with curiosity.

"Lady," he said, "dost thou know the contents of this?"

"Yes," she answered, with a bend of her graceful head. "The Lord Ptahmes has told me all. Nothing is hidden from me."

Rames gazed at her keenly while his features hardened slightly.

"Is there any woman in Khemi—nay, on the whole wide earth—who can guard a secret in her heart for ever?"

The girl looked at him fixedly out of her dark eyes and answered him quietly, though she understood the undercurrent of sarcasm in his words.

"Yes," she said, "there is one—her name is Taska, and she dwells in Thebes!"

The stern, forbidding expression passed from the old man's face as a slow smile dawned. "Sit thou here till I return," he said.

"Amasis shall come with me?" she asked, and Rames bowed.

"He shall come," he answered. Then he vanished down the back corridor.

Taska sank upon a low seat and listened to the echo of footsteps on the stone floor. Then a silence fell, so she glanced round the room with some curi-

osity and interest, for never before had she been inside a mystical seer's house. Strange shadows were cast over the room, and the lamps shining upon the untidily strewn table looked weird. Curious-shaped instruments were lying here and there, transparent glass phials containing liquids of all colours, and mysterious-looking drawings which none but those of the old man's profession could understand.

It was some time before Taska again heard the sound of returning footsteps, and in her suppressed excitement she commenced to pace rapidly up and down the room. Presently the silence broke; then Rames entered followed by another. The girl stood still in the centre of the chamber as Amasis walked up to her. He held out his hands eagerly, clasping hers.

"Lady," he said in his soft, thrilling voice, which he knew so well how to use, "how good it is to see the face of a friend after so long an absence; how can I thank thee for what thou hast done to-night?"

She smiled gently.

"What else should I do? It is for Pharaoh's sake." She withdrew her hands quickly as she spoke, and Amasis released them with an unconscious sigh.

The voice of the old Astrologer broke in upon them, but this time his tones were strangely soft.

"My children," he said, "delay not. Behold, it is close upon the first hour of the morning."

Amasis went aside to fasten on a dark mantle, while Rames opened the door, letting in a flood of light. Drawing the girl towards him in the porchway, he whispered in her ear. "While the Prince still sleeps I have told Amasis all," he said, "and



I trust the gods will guard thou and him to-night. My daughter, forget any stern speech which I may have used towards thee. Like a lioness guards her young, so I, Rames, guard Amasis, who is my beloved; hence I was perhaps harsh for his sake and for the sake of Zar the Prince."

Taska glanced up to the starlit heavens and spoke as if half to herself.

"For the sake of the heart's beloved one may do many things," she said. Her soft, gentle voice rose like a sob in her throat.

Then Amasis appeared wrapped in his dark cloak and her mood changed. "May the gods prosper this venture for the fulfilment of Pharaoh's desire," she added, as she stepped from the porchway, throwing the end of the mantle over her head.

Rames watched them pass out into the night's stillness with a prayer on his lips. Suddenly he remembered that Jehudda prayed every day for the fugitives and their friends. The Israelite would be wrapped in slumber at that hour, nevertheless his earlier prayer would have ascended into the heavens. Rames thought of this, and though he boasted of Amen as his god, yet strangely enough the thought comforted him.

He re-entered the porchway slowly.

"Ptahmes did well to confide in the lady Taska," he muttered. Then he thought of her words: "For the sake of the heart's beloved one may do many things."

He chuckled softly to himself and sat down on the stone bench with his face towards the heavens. He would wait for the return of his beloved.

Taska led Amasis swiftly and silently through the

streets, keeping well in the dark shadows cast by the tall buildings. They shunned the wide thoroughfares, walking noiselessly down intricate by-ways. Silence lay heavily upon Thebes, lending majesty to the columned buildings, gilded temples' roofs and the tall, painted pylons.

The moon, set high in the midst of the clear heavens, smiled down, shedding a new, strange beauty upon the splendid, prosperous City. No sound rose up save when a dog yelped in the far-off distance or a bat rushed out from the silent shadows. Taska sped on without pausing till they came to the great Temple of Amen. They passed between the pylons into the first court, which was so large that in the moonlight the full extent could not be seen. Then they turned to the right to be confronted by an immense sculptured pillar of great girth, the second of a row of painted columns. Here Taska stopped, and for the first time spoke to the wondering Amasis.

"Behold," she said, pointing to the pillar, "yonder lies the way." In case there were any to spy on them she peered carefully round the court, which was open to the moonlight; they were quite alone, and she sighed with relief.

"We go through the vaults of darkness," she continued, "art thou afraid?"

Amasis looked at her and saw that her face was calm, though her large eyes burnt with excitement.

"Where a woman goes I can go," he answered in a whisper. "I pray thee hasten, O Taska."

She placed her cool hand in his, at the same time pressing one of the carved fruits which twined round the pillar. There was a faint scraping sound

as one side of the column disappeared, leaving an aperture as large as a small doorway. It was utterly dark within, and they carried no light.

Taska stepped forward quickly. "Come," she said, and drawing him in, she touched something which closed the door upon them. Carefully they passed down twelve steps and stood on level ground. The atmosphere was not as hot as might have been expected, and Amasis thought there must have been air passages on either side. The dead silence, together with the awful darkness, went far to make the young man feel afraid, but Taska's cold fingers resting within his told how calm she was. Evidently she knew the way perfectly, for she passed on without pausing. Amasis noticed the floor gradually sank at every step, so that they seemed to be descending to some great depths beneath the outer earth.

Presently a faint shriek fell upon their ears, and Amasis half started. The next moment he felt a flutter of wings in his face and knew it was some bat whose habitation they had disturbed. Then he heard faint, shrill cries from other parts and did not wonder the people had said that horrors haunted the dismal corridors. Once he ventured to speak, but the echo caught up his words until it seemed as if a thousand voices shrieked discordantly together. Still the ground sank beneath their feet until with a suddenness that almost frightened him, it became level. Then Taska groped towards the left, paused, and pressed her hand upon a wall which faced them. The scraping noise was heard again; something slid back, and through the open space a faint light shone strangely.

After the inky blackness it almost blinded them. Then they saw the light in front move, come nearer, and a moment later Ptahmes himself appeared with the lamp held high while he looked anxiously into the darkness. They stepped through the open doorway and Taska spoke with accents of relief in her voice.

"My father," she said, "at last we have reached the end of the bat-haunted home, and are safe." The echo no longer shrieked her words abroad.

The old Architect's set expression relaxed.

"Thanks be unto Amen," he ejaculated, "though I grieve that I have been obliged to send a woman on such a journey. Suppose thou hadst become afraid?"

The girl laughed softly. "Have I not been with thee many times, my father?" she asked. "The terrors do not make me fear."

Then suddenly she started and withdrew her hand from Amasis', who had not released it when they stepped into the dimly-lighted hall. Ptahmes motioned them to follow him.

"We walk immediately beneath the palace," he said. "I feared lest I should not have been in time to meet thee, for I have to be very careful that my actions do not create suspicion, even with the night guards."

"The journey in these underground passages would have been rendered less weird if we had borne a light," remarked Amasis.

"It could not have been conveniently done," replied Ptahmes. "The lady Taska knew the way; and as for me, I would rather pass through yon corridors in darkness."

Amasis was puzzled, but he learnt afterwards that the old man was correct, for the passages had been adorned by some former king with horribly grotesque paintings representing demon attendants of Set.

Presently they stood before a flight of steps, which Ptahmes ascended first. When the others arrived at the top the wall had opened, whereupon they walked into a marble corridor heavy with a delicious perfume, dimly lit with hanging lamps and lined with gaily painted statuary. Then Amasis knew that once more he stood within the palace of the Lady of Khem.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE PASSING OF PHARAOH

IN the corridors they paused while Ptahmes went forward alone. Presently he returned.

"My daughter," he said, turning to Taska, "thou hadst best retire to thy chamber instantly; behold, midnight is long passed."

The girl was about to smile a farewell to Amasis when he took a quick step forward.

"Lady," he said gently, "we cannot part without a word. I know not when we may meet again, but my heart is full of grateful thanks to thee." He seemed as if he would have added more when he suddenly checked himself. But he caught up her hands and kissed them reverently.

Taska spoke in his ear.

"Go," she said, "the Lord Ptahmes waits; for woe unto thee if thou art seen by any others in the palace."

She walked noiselessly down the corridor, but Amasis would not move till he had seen the last of her. Presently she turned into another dimly lighted passage and vanished. The young man never forgot the picture she made on this night as she passed from him; her small head proudly poised, her full, white garments clinging round her fair, shapely form.

Ptahmes touched him impatiently on the arm.

"Come," he said sharply, "dost thou know that while we wait here we stand on the threshold of danger?"

Amasis followed him silently through two long corridors. In the shadow of an ornamental archway they paused.

"Remain here," said Ptahmes, "while I go into Pharaoh's chamber. Behind thee is another entrance into his room; it is seldom used, but I will unbolt it from the inside and thou wilt enter by it."

Amasis nodded in assent as he drew far back into the shadows. From his position he could look down the full length of the passage without being seen. Perfect stillness reigned in the palace, though the faintest noise seemed exaggerated in his ears. Several minutes passed thus which seemed as many hours, for in the strange silence he hardly dared to breathe. Suddenly he started, thinking he heard a faint rustle in one of the corridors. Instantly he put the idea aside as the result of his imagination, when the sound grew gradually louder until it resembled the soft tread of some person walking stealthily in the distance.

With his heart beating violently he drew farther back into the shadows. Some one was evidently approaching the corridor in which he hid, and the young man fervently wished that Ptahmes would open the door behind and so admit him into Pharaoh's room.

When he turned his face, after looking over his shoulder, he stifled a cry upon his lips. The person with the rustling robes had by this time entered the passage. It was a woman walking with a slow

stately step, while a long trailing cloak was flung over her thin, white, clinging garments and held together in the front by her upraised hand.

Amasis became rigid as he gazed at her, for this was no other than Ath, the Lady of Khem !

Without pausing she passed up the corridor with the same swaying, rhythmical step, coming nearer to him every moment. Her long, black, unbound hair fell in heavy masses far below her waist; a single ornament sparkled on her arm, while she directed her eyes straight into the corner where the young man stood. Strange thoughts coursed through him; with terror in his heart he wondered how it might end. Had the Queen by some means or other learned of his presence in the palace, and would she presently stamp her tiny sandalled foot upon the ground and summon a party of guards to take him away to captivity or, it might be, to death? Perhaps her vengeance would fall in a different manner. Maybe she hoped to spirit away his will-power by the gaze of her unnatural eyes which, as she advanced, were never for a moment removed from his face.

Not a word did she speak, but presently her robes ceased to rustle and she stood before him, so close, indeed, that he breathed in the perfume from her garments. Amasis strained back into the corner; his limbs were numbed, he could not have cried out if he would. For one brief instant, which seemed to him an eternity, she leant forward as if to touch him, when suddenly she fell back like one who reels under a blow.

Then she flung up her arms; began the rhythmical step again and turned down a side passage



on the young man's left, singing some monotonous chant in low tones. Amasis stared after her in astonishment; then the truth dawned upon him, and he knew that Ath was walking in her sleep!

He watched as she moved slowly down the passage, with her arms swaying overhead and the sound of her strange song echoing in his ears. He could not understand a single word of it, for it was not in the language of Egypt. With a thankful heart Amasis moved back to his corner, when he felt some one touch him on the shoulder. It was Ptahmes, who had opened the door behind. He, too, was staring in blank terror down the passage after the Queen. Then he drew the young man into the chamber and bolted the door, a great sigh of relief escaping his lips as he did so.

"Thou hast seen?" asked Amasis in an undertone. "Does the Queen often walk in her sleep?"

Ptahmes muttered something under his breath. "Never did my heart so tremble before," he said at last. "The spirits make her seek them in her sleep, and something tells me it was some unholy song she sang which none would chant save they who delve into the Darker Magic. Day by day she makes me become more afraid," he moaned softly. "The Power which companions her in the day will not even let her rest at night. Yet though I witness all this, I can only say within my heart, 'Woe, woe unto Khem!' Come," he added in a different voice. "In Pharaoh's quarter of the palace at least thou art safe."

They moved noiselessly across the wide chamber till they came to a closed door which Ptahmes flung open.

"Enter," he cried in a low voice. "Enter into the only chamber which is undefiled! Enter into the presence of Pharaoh of the Great Heart!"

Amasis stepped forward softly into another large apartment as the door shut with a faint clank behind him. He stood still by the entrance for a few minutes, half blinded by the full glare of the lamps. When he recovered he found himself in a large square chamber furnished in all the splendour of which Ath and the court were so fond. On the walls were painted pictures resplendent in rich toned colours; the ceiling also was ornamented, bordered with the favourite lotus pattern. All the furniture was inlaid with gold and ivory, having carved animals as supports for the couches. At the far end of the room lay a bed canopied with coloured draperies held in place by twining golden serpents which appeared ready to dart at any intruder. Round the posts snakes also encircled, stretching their long bodies upwards till their glittering heads reared far above the tall posts to which was fixed the canopy. On this bed lay Pharaoh.

Amasis gazed at him amazed; he had utterly changed since they had last met. The wasted frame looked even smaller, while the tiny hands seemed almost womanish in their delicate thinness. The face, changed beyond recognition, was more like that of an aged man. Yet, although the cheeks were painfully hollow, an indescribable sweetness rested upon the dying King's features. The large eyes were filled with dreamy softness, and as they fell upon Amasis their strange beauty increased till they seemed like a mirror reflecting the spotless

purity of the passing soul. Unas did not speak, but just stretched out his hands with a glad smile. Amasis drew near and kissed them reverently.

Then he sank down by the side of the bed and gazed upwards into Pharaoh's face.

"If this hour had been prophesied to me in years gone by," cried the afflicted King, "I should not have believed. Amasis, hearken carefully to every word I shall say to thee to-night. But first give me news of Zar my brother. Dost he know of thy coming?"

"He sleeps, O Pharaoh. On the morrow he will rejoice because it is possible for him to look upon thy face."

Unas smiled feebly.

"It will not be possible," he answered, "because by that time I shall have passed within Amenti's Gates. A great load is lifted off my heart now that I know the ones whom I mourned as dead, live. Thou art older than Zar and of a more developed mind, hence I bade Ptahmes fetch thee first that I might speak with thee alone. And now, during this last hour, it has been revealed to me that I shall not live to see my brother's face on the morrow night. Amasis, dost thou remember when thou and I met in the sandy plains outside Memphis and looked upon the watching face of the holy Horemkhû? In that hour, methought our souls linked together and soared above this strange living world. Thou and I went up into the heavens; we cast behind us all thought of the merry-making earth and wandered happily and untiring in the land of Higher and Holier Ideals. I liked thee more and more from that day, until at last I have come to love

thee—I who have loved so few, and pass from the world unloved ! ”

He sighed wearily, closing his eyes, like a homesick child. Amasis did not answer a word. He felt a strange beating of the heart, for the remembrance of his journey to Memphis brought up memories of great bitterness.

“The Watcher of Ra looked down upon us and smiled,” continued Pharaoh in slow even tones, like one who dwells upon some treasured incident which has brought him joy.

“Out in desert plains far from the royal beauty of Thebes and Memphis; seeming no greater than ordinary citizens without rank or title, we stood. Horus smiled, the sun smiled, and this weak, puny frame heaved like a bird released from fetters. New thoughts came to me; I scorned all those who scorn; I told myself I would henceforth live as a man, not suffering my mind to be crushed by any mockings. I left the desolate wastes and returned here. I forced myself to appear brave and any sensitiveness I concealed. But gradually my spirits fell and I seemed to live under an invisible influence. I could not fight against it, but returned to the old weary, monotonous life, feeling there did not exist for me a single corner upon the whole, wide earth. Never was I fitted to be a ruler; all majesty is given to the Lady Ath: she has will, strength and bravery, and a strange, unnatural beauty from which I shrink. I cannot wrestle against her; she grasps and I open my hands and let her take. Let one who is stronger than I, both in mind and body, seek to regain the place I have lost in the hearts of the people of Khem.”

He raised himself as he spoke.

"This must be Zar, whose life she sought. The gods have endowed him generously. Therefore take this message to him. Bid him use their gifts to wrench asunder the chain that binds Khem. Why do I speak thus against Ath my sister? Because I have seen and heard many things within this palace—and not I only, but others have seen. I do not feel that it is good for me to remain here, therefore my soul hastens to reach the Immortal Gates. Tell Zar to be steadfast, to fortify himself where I have fallen. Bid him lift his mind above the earth that it may not become defiled above cleansing. Tell him my soul shall not rest in peace till I know he has restored the things I lost—till he has done the work which it is right for him to do."

Pharaoh turned away from Amasis for a few moments. When he spoke again his voice was an even monotone, like one who speaks in his dreams.

"Once I had a sister," he said, "whose name was Ath; she was beautiful in her innocence, strong and all-ruling in her beauty. Her mind could soar into the Holy Habitation; the very smile that lit up her face was a reflection of the things her soul saw within the heavens. But now Ath whom I loved is no more: only her memory lives. Another Ath has risen up to take her place; nothing is the same, and I think——"

He turned his face away again adding, in deep mournful tones, "I think if Ath tried to look into the heavens now it would be shut against her gaze!"

A deep silence followed. Then suddenly Pharaoh

sat up quite erect in the bed, his head resting upon the snake-entwined posts. New strength came into him; his eyes shone excitedly, while the feeble voice swelled into one of pure thrilling tones.

"Amasis," he said, flinging out his arm with a gesture of command, "dress me in the royal garb which hitherto has been nothing but a mockery of the power I did not possess. My time is short. Let me pass hence with the golden uræus twining about my brow; let the royal ornaments be upon my neck and arms and the embroidered garments upon my shoulders. This bed shall be my chariot. For one hour I will be truly Pharaoh and issue my commands unto thee, O Amasis, and through thee to Zar my brother."

Amasis was amazed at the King's strange words, and would have protested that he was overtaxing his strength, but Unas repeated his command in strangely thrilling tones, so he rose to obey. The young man went across the room and fetched the royal garments, flinging them as a mantle upon the dying King's shoulders. On his head he placed the war helmet with the golden asp gleaming upon the brow; in his hand the sceptre, and round his neck the chain he had always worn.

Amasis fulfilled his task with deft fingers while Pharaoh, his lips parted in a happy smile, leant against the network of twining snakes. None who looked upon him in this hour would have thought this was a king who would perish unloved, and in loneliness. He held his head proudly, speaking in soft, yet commanding tones like one who knows that he is released from an influence which had hitherto crushed him down.

Royalty was written upon him, in his keen joyous eye, in the unfaltering voice; while the gorgeous jewels and embroideries glittered even more brightly as if they knew they were worn for the last time by one who had never felt himself a king till now.

"Draw near," said Pharaoh suddenly, "draw near, O Amasis my servant. Now I am truly satisfied. The invisible ones who watch will know I died a monarch and will cry among themselves, saying, 'At last Pharaoh became a King and released himself from any who weighed him down!' Harken, O Amasis, and guard my saying well. Into thy hands and into the hands of Rames I commend Zar my brother. He is young and has not so developed a mind as thou. But presently, like a bud, his character will unfold, and all Khemi shall marvel at the glorious flower. Behold the Gates of the Future open before mine eyes: I see great wonders in store—battles and blood. Egypt shall tremble as a leaf when Zar rises up and Ath opposes. Ra shall turn away his face, Seb shall utter strange groanings, swift arrows shall fall from the hand of Nut. Yet light will come again at last and the Sungod shall smile. But when the darkness and terrors arise, bid Zar banish despair and look up into the heavens. For if the soul is chained in the body and never soars above the earth during life, how shall it be able to rise high enough in the final hour?"

Pharaoh ceased, and Amasis was rendered silent by reason of his astonishment. For were not these words an echo of the curious essay which Rames had read that very day?

"Dost thou swear to fulfil my commands?" cried the King again. "Wilt thou give Zar thy first thoughts and exert thyself for his benefit and, therefore, for the benefit of Khem?"

"By Amen, Maut and Neith I swear," answered Amasis steadily. "A faithful few shall make the Prince Zar great."

Pharaoh sighed wearily. "Now that I am satisfied I will lay me down and sleep."

He closed his eyes and smiled, and as he smiled he died. Amasis bent over and spoke; no answer came. Then, with a groan on his lips, he fell back upon the coverlet and wept.

A quarter of an hour later he opened the door to find Ptahmes in the antechamber. Amasis whispered to him and together they re-entered the room of Death. There sat Pharaoh arrayed in all his glory with the bed in place of a chariot, the sceptre in his hand and a happy smile carved upon his motionless lips. But a greater magnificence struck the watchers, and this was the calm, still majesty of Death. The royal uræus glittered with a strange light upon the still brow, while the snakes which held the scarlet canopy in place looked down protectingly, seeming to twine themselves into a pillow for their lord.

"What wilt thou do?" said Amasis at last.

Ptahmes stretched out his hands tragically. "Do?" he repeated dully. "I shall do nothing till the morning except to see thee safely back into the house of Rames. If I rouse Ath and the household would they mourn truly? No. Let Pharaoh's body sit in the midst of its glory till to-morrow's



dawn, while his soul soars upward into the bosom of Ra. Then I, Ptahmes, shall lead them in, and say, 'Behold how Pharaoh died! Behold the unloved King!' And if any ask how he came in his dying hour to be arrayed thus, then I alone will answer them."

About an hour afterwards Ptahmes and Amasis stood at the entrance of the alley which led to the old Astrologer's house. The Architect had conducted the young man in safety from the palace. Now they bade each other farewell.

"I hope thou wilt be able to return without being discovered," said Amasis. "How wilt thou pass the hours that yet remain of to-night?"

Ptahmes lowered his voice till it sounded like a soft, shrill cry. "I shall return to the palace of Ath," he said. "Then I shall enter into the room of the dead and wait for the morning!"

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE WISDOM OF RAMES

ONE month had passed since Pharaoh's death. No other important event had taken place in Khemi, but the multitudes were soon to be surprised by one which would appear all the more wonderful because of its silent growth.

After the midnight visit of Amasis to the royal palace, four people would sit together for hours almost every day in the old Astrologer's humble habitation at Thebes. These were Rames, Amasis, the Prince and Jehudda the Hebrew.

When they met for these secret discussions the doors were carefully bolted, while the room chosen lay at the back of the house. They were planning how they might place Zar upon the throne of Egypt and thus defeat the Witch Queen's plot.

It was generally Rames and Amasis who spoke for any length of time; the others listened attentively, making short comments now and then. On this particular day they had assembled early, but a hopeless silence seemed to rest upon them. Their many meetings brought them no nearer their aim, and they sighed almost despairingly. Each day the power of Ath increased: every hour her strange influence sank deeper into the hearts of her people until gradually all their will was crushed out of

them, and they knew no will but hers; the higher aspirations of the mighty nation fled, and they found in Ath not only a Queen but a goddess.

In the old Astrologer's home the two younger men lounged with their arms resting upon a table, at the end of which sat Jehudda. The Prince and the Israelite maintained a low-toned conversation; while Amasis directed his eyes to the far corner of the room where Rames had retired. The bent frame was huddled up insignificantly on a wooden seat; the deep-set eyes seemed to have sunk even deeper into the sockets, while a stern frown rested upon the rugged face. Before him on a table lay a small unwritten scroll of papyrus. At this the old man sat staring without the faintest movement of any part of the body—not even seeming to breathe.

Suddenly he jerked himself up, seized a reed pen and made a series of rapid marks upon the papyrus. Then he would lapse into immobility again before he wrote anything else. So he continued by fits and starts while each time the frown lifted gradually from his countenance as the faintest of smiles took its place.

Whereupon Amasis prepared himself for great revelations; for this was the look of a man who has set himself an almost impossible task to accomplish, but has worked out the problem thoroughly and is confident of the result.

Suddenly Rames arose and faced the small company. An indescribable air of majesty rested upon his gaunt frame; and Amasis, who was of an imaginative turn of mind, likened him to the Egyptian heroes of ancient days. How great a

king he would have made ! How wonderful would have been his discernment of character ; how evenly would every small item of his rule have been balanced in his keen, far-seeing mind.

It was his boast that not a moment of Time was lost to him. Even when he sat in seeming idleness, that was the birth hour of his greatest ideas. From everything—no matter what it was—he sought knowledge. And he did not, like so many moderns, shut it up in the store-house of his brain until the existence of that particular branch of knowledge was forgotten, when as a rare and precious perfume it should have given forth a delicious and never-ending fragrance. Sometimes it is closed in so tightly that it can never get out, or become a source of joy to its possessor. Rames was not one of these ; he brought into full use his wonderful, almost illimitable knowledge, and when sometimes he played the part of a strange, mysterious wizard, underneath lay the kindly, genial qualities of his true nature.

Suddenly he arose, stretched his stiff limbs, gathered up the scroll in his hand and advanced towards the table. The three looked up at him wonderingly, and Zar pulled out another seat. Rames thrust it aside, drawing up his gaunt frame till it seemed to tower over them full of majesty. Then he opened his mouth to speak, and the voice was low, almost tremulous.

"Behold," he cried, "Thoth has been with me to-day—even Amen himself. I am filled with joy by reason of the things they have told me. My sons, hear my words ; and if thou, O Jehudda, findest my speech not altogether agreeable to thy

creed, let it pass, knowing that I am an Egyptian and speak with an Egyptian mind. Let me paint pictures upon the wall of Time and take you back into the ancient Past. What is Khemi? It is the vast lands stretching north and south watered by Sihor, whose source is not known—whose birth is hidden. It is more. It is the land smiled upon by the Eternal Deity; where Ra looks down with an unchanging face. How many are the secrets which Khemi holds, how wonderful have been her glories—how unending her knowledge! All nations are barbarians to us; how mighty and high are we placed above them! Where else will ye find the arts in which we are familiar; where else the glories of golden Thebes and of Khemi's thousand cities? To the Deity be all praise because he has set us on a pedestal to the wonder of the wide, rude world. This is Egypt's Past and Present. Where other nations crawled, she walked; where they walked she ran; and where they ran she leapt. And all the time Ra has smiled down and the Eternal One, whose face is hidden, has smiled. And why should we of Khemi be singled out to be lords of the earth? Why not the fair-haired Libyans, the ungainly Ethiopians, or the tribes who dwell beyond the narrow sea in Ta-shut, the Land of Emptiness? Or the uncouth Syrians; the dwellers in holy Punt, where strange things grow, or the Mesopotamians? Nay, the Everlasting Ones breathed out upon these broad, smiling plains and named it their Chosen Place. They set their foot upon it and even descended from their Great Abode to rule for a space in the shape of man. Why was all this done? was it to gratify

the craving yearnings of our hearts; to fulfil our never-satisfied ambitions and to cause pride to dwell in us, so that we might cry abroad in a shrill voice of triumph: 'Behold how great we are; the gods in the heaven have made us the gods of the earth! Ye are naughty. Get ye behind our majesty!' Nay, and a thousand times nay! It was not for this!"

The old man paused and stretched out his arms with a tragic gesture. His slim body swayed to and fro; his tones shook with the trembling passion of his words.

"My sons," he continued, "knowledge was given to Khem so that we might learn how we should live; that we, the great jewel of the earth, should show how others might obtain an equal lustre. That precious stone is purity, holiness and affection. Each dweller in this land polishes his own tiny portion till another ray of light shoots out—or else he tarnishes it! Because we are given much, much is expected from us. All through the dead ages our jewel has shone bright and we have been the envy and the wonder of nations. Now I see that the lustre is dulled; the heavenly Light which causes our reflection is hidden from us—and why? Because a cloud has arisen and enshrouded us. As yet the veil is thin; but gradually it is becoming thicker, and the Land of Glorious Wonder will become the Land of Blackness and of Shadows. Wherefore is our dazzle tarnished? Behold the Eternal Ones' anointed has turned aside and followed after the unholy Hidden Mysteries. These are swift to bring forth their fruit which are fair and lovely to look on; but soon a Hand shall

touch them and they shall crumble and become as burning dust, together with those who relied on them. Then gone is the Chosen Land, the sweet plains of smiling peace. The Everlasting Ones shall shout in their wrath as did Ra in former days : ' Behold we will set our choice upon no nation ! Man is hateful unto us ! We will arise and destroy him ! ' ”

Again Rames paused, looking at his companions with one of those sweet pathetic smiles which rarely lit up his countenance.

“My sons,” he said with fatherly tenderness, “I have told ye all this and drawn a picture of the splendours of Egypt so that ye might see how great a thing may hang over a deep abyss because of the deeds of one. When the wind passes over a lotus-covered lake, how sweet is its breath as it travels afar ! Even so the canker of the dark spot in Thebes is spread into the distant parts and none know it ! ”

The soft, dreamy look passed out of the Astrologer's eyes ; the sweet patheticness died out of his voice, and he looked down at the scroll which lay on the table.

When he spoke again there was a faint triumphant ring in his tones ; the blood leapt excitedly in his veins and his manner was that of an ancient warrior who smells a battle from afar.

Then he disclosed part of the plot which his ingenious brain had conceived—the plot which was to make Zar Pharaoh of all Khemi, and so break the unholy bond which dragged the unconscious people down. He only gave a summary of his wonderful idea ; for he wished it to remain partly

his own secret until the actual time came for him to act upon it.

He spoke of the vast kingdom as if it were no more than a mere draught board, and its inhabitants the pieces with whom he would play. He hinted at his methods of attack until Zar and Jehudda gasped at his very daring; but Amasis said nothing. He knew the Astrologer's character well and fell in with the plot gladly, knowing what he had sworn to Pharaoh. The old man spoke confidently and wisely. Tact and discretion were the chief weapons he proposed to use, and he moved his pieces on the imaginary board with such brave calmness that no one would have dreamt that he played with the people of a vast empire. It would have seemed madness for any one but himself to attempt to carry out his ingenious plans.

When he had finished speaking a quietly triumphant smile lit up his countenance; he had worked out the problem carefully and was confident of the result.

Yes, whenever Rames undertook to accomplish any task, he never doubted himself; he always planned and plodded until he won.

At last he arose from his seat, resting his keen, deep-sunken eyes upon Zar.

"Tell us," he cried, "what are thy ambitions when thou art ruler of Khemi?"

The Prince rose to his feet, standing before them like a young lion who scents the wild wind and longs to leave the lair and try his strength. His well-shaped, graceful head sat proudly on his shoulders; his eyes flashed with quiet enthusiasm. Although he wore an ordinary citizen's dress, yet his very bearing showed his royal blood. His fine



supple frame seemed to tower above them as he bent his head almost reverently and answered in a soft, rich, majestic voice—

“I shall make Khemi worthy of the gods; and of those who lived in ancient days and were the instruments of making her what she is.”

There was a silence after his words. The Prince seemed so royal in his poverty and seclusion; so indescribably a king that none dared to speak.

Rames watched him keenly for a moment; then smiled. He had half expected a burst of youthful enthusiasm, and although he did not say it, yet he rejoiced at the unlooked for answer.

“To-morrow morning,” he said in the tone of one whose mind is fully made up. “Thou and I will depart for Memphis, O Pharaoh!”

Zar started. It was the first time he had heard the title applied to himself; yet it was truly his since he was now of age. He looked Rames full in the eyes and then bowed. He knew that the old man was silently pleased at his answer, otherwise he would not have given him the name of Pharaoh.

Presently the Prince and Amasis withdrew, leaving the Astrologer and Jehudda alone. The Hebrew had been generally silent during the long discussion, and now he also rose to depart.

“Thou art wonderful,” he cried in unfeigned admiration, “never did I think thou couldst be so daring.”

Rames chuckled softly.

“I should be nothing alone,” he answered. “All must play their part and especially do I rely on Amasis. The lad has a marvellous brain and is brave to the very core. Unity shall be the watch-word——”

"What work may a poor Hebrew do?" interrupted Jehudda. "I have no power like thee."

A blank look came over the old man's face as he fumbled uneasily with his robe.

"Thou canst do much," he answered falteringly, and then a silence fell between them.

Jehudda watched Rames, who kept his eyes fixed on the ground. He saw the lips twitch while a pained, half-puzzled expression came over his companion's countenance.

"Thou meanest——" he began, when he suddenly stopped and grasped the old man's hands.

Their eyes met in one long, earnest gaze, and Jehudda read that Rames desired him to continue his prayers. Without another word he passed out through the doorway.

The Astrologer watched him depart and heaved a troubled sigh. Who was he to doubt Amen and all the gods of Khem and run after the Deity of a despised nation? Strange thoughts coursed through him as he walked unsteadily back to a seat. He took up a scroll and tried to read, but in vain. His mind was very, very troubled and he wondered why Jehudda was so necessary in the fulfilment of their plot; yet his spirit told him that without the Hebrew they would fail. He laid his head in his arms, sitting in the silence thus for a full hour.

Then he arose and called himself a coward because he, an Egyptian, had doubted the gods of Khem.

Yet his mind was not at rest; unconsciously he fought a battle which would have no end for many and many a long day.

## CHAPTER XX

### 'LET ATH BEWARE'

It was now the sixth day of Paophi, about two and a half years after Rames had partly disclosed his wonderful plot in his tiny home at Thebes.

A sound of merry-making was heard throughout the palace, for this was the birthday of Ath, the Witch-ruler of Khem. The huge banqueting hall was laid for a feast; lotus blossoms and roses hung in profusion everywhere, putting to shame their gaudy, unnatural imitations on the roof and walls. The Egyptians loved flowers, considering no place complete without them. Long tables ran round three sides of the spacious chamber, covered with fine white linen, and bearing a fare so sumptuous that Khem had never known its equal. Crimson wines sparkled from the wide-brimmed goblets; figs and grapes from Syria, sent green from their native soil, to ripen on the journey down, and the rare produce of Punt were there. The tables creaked under their weight, while the great gilded vase in the centre filled with lotus blossoms and trailing convolvuli sent forth a shower of overwhelming perfume. Seats of curious shape were set round the board, at the head of which stood a tall ivory chair, emblazoned in gold, and having the arms carved as couchant lions. The sun's disc ornamented the back, round which twined huge

coiling snakes, with jewelled eyes and forked tongues.

Presently there arose a murmuring sound from the passages without; laughter and voices mingled, growing louder. Then the door swung open, and the merry company entered.

They moved in one continuous stream, lords and ladies together, till it seemed as if all the nobility, not only of Thebes, but of Egypt, must be assembled that night. Most of the women wore lotus wreaths on their heads, while the swaying of their filmy garments and clashing jewels made a never-ceasing wave of noise. Their talk was light and merry; their laughter echoed against the high ceilings; yet their smiles appeared forced, and the faces did not seem so utterly happy as their lightsome words implied. Something weighed their spirits down; none spoke of it, yet each unconsciously felt it, and hoped presently to drown the strange melancholy in the good red wine of Khem.

Suddenly a hush fell upon the hall; the sound of music rose to their ears, and the company divided, lining two sides of the walls. The double doors were flung back, a band of musicians entered, passing to the farther end; Nubian slaves came forward, bearing fans, and, lastly, three or four gaily dressed girls—immediate attendants on the Queen.

Then Ath herself appeared, with Taska at her side. The Queen moved majestically up the room, her splendid, heavily-embroidered robes rustling at every step. On her head was placed the usual head-dress, set with the glittering uræus, and in her hand a sceptre.

A faintly triumphant, half-mocking smile hung

round the corners of her full lips, such as the Evil One might give when he had ensnared foolish, unconscious souls. The sweet, shrill pipes mingled in soft melody as Ath passed proudly to the carved ivory chair, with its golden, life-like snakes.

A strange, uncanny hush had fallen upon the assembly, when suddenly the Queen's voice rang out in some lightsome jest to an old counsellor who stood near. It fell like a shock upon the people, who looked as if they had half expected some dread terror to manifest itself. Then they sighed as if in relief. The tension seemed over, and once again the light laughter rang out, while Ath joined in the merrymaking, with the same alluring, yet strangely mocking, smile upon her lips. Fans moved incessantly to and fro; slaves passed noiselessly down the board; the double pipes and harps twanged melodiously, and as the warm red wine splashed into the goblets, the spirits of the assembly rose, and they laughed at fear.

They chattered incessantly, giving witty compliments to Ath over the wine cups. She accepted their praise, making merry answers, for she had a ready tongue. Ath loved pleasure, and since the death of Pharaoh she often smiled down on her nobles from the head of the banqueting-table. It reminded her that she alone was ruler of Khem, and in the faces of those who gathered there her keen eyes read the extent of her influence. She was confident that all her plotting had succeeded, though she had often wondered why her magic always failed to answer when her questions had any reference to Zar or Amasis.

But now these names were blotted out from her

mind; she was fulfilling all the ambitions of her heart, and her name would be spoken of with awe in the mouths of those who came after. She smiled again upon the company; for had not the oracle intimated that a century should be but a single year in her life? The great tree before the Temple of Ptah in Memphis should be dragged from the soil by a single man before her days came to an end. Such strength in any man was impossible; therefore Ath laughed at the spirit's words, and at the figure of speech which, she told herself, might mean an eternity. Perhaps the Dweller in Darkness laughed also as he read her thoughts, and knew the construction she put upon his words.

Among the merry company there was one who remained silent, drinking no wine. This was Ptahmes. He let his eyes wander slowly up and down the great hall, resting in turn on the faces of each one gathered there.

His features carried a Sphinx-like expression—none could read it—while he scarcely ever opened his mouth to speak. He heard the ring of light laughter and the merry jest without a smile upon his lips. When the Queen spoke, he would watch her fixedly for several moments; then sometimes his breast heaved slightly, but his countenance remained unchanged.

Near the royal chair stood Taska; Ptahmes caught her eye as he turned his head. The girl smiled faintly, and, when the feast was over, the old man left his seat to walk towards her. The harps twanged softly; the conversation rolled happily as before.

Ath, finding her asp-crown a little heavy, changed

it for a simple wreath, and, descending from the gold and ivory chair, settled herself gracefully on a couch, while certain privileged ones in the company grouped round her. Two girls stood behind, waving feathery fans; then the professional singers drew near and sang together.

Just as the merrymaking had reached its highest pitch, the double doors opened quickly, and a momentary hush fell upon the company. Two slaves had entered, bearing a life-sized effigy of Osiris. With solemn mien, in turn they bore it before each guest, saying the customary words.

"Look upon the image of death, knowing the time must come when thou shalt be as this. Therefore make the most of thy life and be merry."

Each one looked at the wooden mummy in silence, and with a subdued face; but when it was placed before the Queen she smiled almost disdainfully, and bade the slave begone.

Ptahmes, amazed at her manner, turned to Taska.

"Hast the Mistress of Khem passed beyond all fear of death?" he asked in a low voice. "Does she think that she will never be obliged to sleep in the arms of Osiris?"

The girl shuddered slightly, and drew him for a moment into the shadow of a column.

"Be not astonished at anything the Queen may do," she whispered. "Thou and I cannot read her. Yet often and often she makes me tremble, for she has told me plans which she declares she will fulfil in five score years to come."

Ptahmes started.

"What is this?" he began, when Taska continued—

"This very morning, while I was in the Queen's chamber, I happened to mention the name of an old woman who had become very infirm. Ath gazed into my face, with a half-triumphant smile, bidding me know that she had no fear of age, for the bloom of youth would remain with her, even when I myself am ancient."

Ptahmes looked up incredulously.

"That must have been a jest on the Queen's part," he said; "and, being under the influence of fear, thou hast perchance misconstrued her words."

"It was no jest," answered Taska shortly. Then she broke into sudden laughter, much to the old man's astonishment.

"Ath watches," she whispered beneath her breath. "Throw off seriousness and feign merriment."

Ptahmes, taking the hint, held up his hand playfully.

"It pleases the lady Taska to so use her words that an old man thinks she is serious, till it is suddenly revealed to him that she is but jesting."

He spoke in a loud voice, so that all present might hear. Taska laughed again, and then moved majestically away from the side column. The Architect looked across the hall and saw that Ath's eyes were fixed full upon him. She lay on an ivory inlaid couch, her hair and bosom wreathed with roses.

Suddenly she raised her jewelled arm and beckoned to him. Whereupon the old man walked towards her with slow, infirm steps. A noble rose from his seat to make room, when the double doors were flung quickly open, and the chief of the



Queen's body-guard entered hurriedly, a bewildered expression on his face.

A hush fell upon the company while the man made his way to the royal couch. Not a word was spoken; each person present seemed to feel that something unusual was about to be revealed. Even Ath rose from her reclining position, with a touch of excitement in her manner.

"What is this?" she asked; then added impatiently, as the man made a repeated obeisance, "Speak instantly, I command thee."

The half-frightened look deepened on the man's face.

"Strange things are happening at the doors of thy palace, O Queen," he began. "Behold, less than half-an-hour ago an ancient man accosted the guards, saying he had a letter to place in thy royal hands. He was determined to enter thy presence; on no account would he pass the message on to me. That he is a wizard is certain, for, when he was refused admission, he made no answer, but looked upon the men who guard thy gates. They retreated from him in fear, not being able to speak. He passed them by, and now stands without. What is thy command, O Queen, for thy servant is sore perplexed, knowing not what to do."

"What!" cried Ath scornfully. "Who is he that he should dare to force his way to me? The men at the gates must have the timid hearts of boys if they quail so easily. Surely I myself must show them what my power is."

The man's limbs trembled more violently as he lowered himself almost to the ground.

"Yea, O Queen," he answered humbly; "we

know how great and full of wonder are thy deeds. I pray thee pardon the weaknesses of thy servants, who would be as dead men didst thou put forth thy marvellous power. Shall I force yon vagabond to yield his letter, since, perchance, it were well for thee to know its contents?"

Before Ath could answer, the curtains at the entrance were flung violently apart to admit a wizened-faced old man. For one moment he stood on the threshold; then settling his small, keen eyes upon the Queen, he advanced towards her.

As if under a spell, the company moved from his path. They seemed to fear this decrepit, mystical-looking ancient, who was a stranger to them all. A dead silence fell upon the merrymakers as he went forward with slow, gliding steps, seeming like some wrinkled mummy suddenly come to life.

As he passed Ptahmes and Taska, who were standing together, he glanced at them in an apparently casual manner; yet they almost cried out in astonishment, for the expression in his eyes told them his identity, and they knew that he was no other than Rames!

They stared after him in dumb amazement, unnoticed by the company, who were stricken with another kind of fear. The old man was most effectually disguised; his skin being toned to a deep yellow, and so puckered by wrinkles that many years seemed added to his already great age. Even his figure was different. He no longer appeared a man of medium height, but, instead, his frame was astonishingly small and wizened. Then his garments, of a sombre hue, lent him a certain mysterious air which would not fail to terrify the superstitious.

Ptahmes and the girl would never have pierced the marvellous disguise had not the old Astrologer put a meaning gaze upon them.

In front of the Queen he paused, looking at her fixedly. She bore his scrutiny calmly, though inwardly she knew she shrank.

"Who art thou?" she asked.

Her voice was slightly faltering, and told of the sudden fear she felt. For answer the old Astrologer held out a tiny scroll. Ath took it, handing it to Ptahmes.

"Read aloud the letter which the strange messenger has brought," she said.

While the seals were being broken, Rames stood with his arms folded, a proud, disdainful, yet commanding expression upon his face. When he glanced round at the company, instinctively they shrank from him; Ath alone remained unmoved, though, for the first time in her life, speech failed her.

Suddenly Ptahmes looked up, an exclamation breaking from his lips. Whereupon the Queen turned upon him impatiently, commanding the letter to be read aloud.

"The message is very strange," he answered, fumbling at the roll as he cleared his throat.

*"Greeting unto thee, O Ath; I, who have been thought dead, live. Doubtless thou hast reckoned thy wickedness successful because so great a time has passed since the fatal day. Know, then, that Amasis, having overheard thy plot, performed so brave a deed as to travel up into the North Land where I and my company, at thy suggestion,*

*hunted. Never did I think when thou and I parted with every show of affection, that thou plotted my death! We saw Kenaten, thy servant, perish by the crocodile, in spite of our endeavours to save him. Being quite alone on the borders of the lake, we determined not to return to the encampment, but to escape. This we did after many adventures, enduring much poverty, yet being happy in heart, knowing the gods were with us. Many moons have risen and waned since those days, but I and my friends have not been idle; hence at the present time we deem ourselves so strong that I am able to demand of thee my rights as heir. If that which has been unlawfully seized is restored, then all else shall be forgiven. Thou mayest even retain thy rank, and dwell in one of the outlying cities round Thebes. Black magic such as thine must be stamped out of Egypt, and I, Zar, by the help of the gods, will do it. Hence as Pharaoh, I, the Prince Royal, come to claim my own. Consider mine no puny demand, for know that in my cause many and many a thousand hearts stand true. If, therefore, war is forced, let Ath beware! I, Pharaoh, wait an answer by the hand of the bearer of this scroll."*

A dead silence fell after the reading of the letter; then the Queen seized it from Ptahmes, scanning it through hurriedly. When she looked up again she trembled slightly. The old Astrologer did not take his eyes from her, and unconsciously she recoiled.

"What madness is this?" she began, with a forced laugh. "It must be some jest played upon

us. We know that our lamented brother does not live.”

Then, for the first time, Rames opened his mouth.

“By Amen,” he said, “I swear that Zar, the Prince Royal, and Amasis, the Child of the Moon, do live. Is there no answer to the letter I have brought?”

“If I believed that Zar were living, I should reply——” Ath began, when the Astrologer raised his hand.

“Thou *dost* believe,” he interrupted calmly; “though thou art trying to force thyself to think that the news is false. I know that inwardly thou hast had misgivings of late.”

His audacity rendered her speechless for a moment.

“Then defiance is my weapon, with all the power of Khem to wield it,” she cried at last. “These are my words to Zar, whom, thou sayest, lives.”

Then she looked round at the company, noting their fixed faces.

“Again I say that this madness——” she began in a loud, shrill voice, when Rames broke in upon her.

By this time he had walked backwards to the entrance and was now standing on the threshold.

“When ye see the dust rising from the swift driving of Pharaoh’s chariot, will ye still affirm that this is madness?”

Then he disappeared, leaving the company transfixed.

Suddenly Ath’s manner changed; the strange

influence which the old man had held over her was gone, and all her cold, proud hauteur returned.

"Go swiftly after yon messenger and bring him back," she cried, with her eyes ablaze. "He has insulted our royal self, and shall not go hence scathless."

At the sound of her voice the company roused slowly. Three or four hurried to fulfil her commands. Presently they returned.

"He passed the guard a few moments hence, and has utterly disappeared," they told the angry Queen.

Her eyes flashed so dangerously that the nobles looked at her in astonishment.

"Does not the Lady of Khem believe the letter to be a jest?" said one of the courtiers; "for so she declared when it arrived. Doubtless it is the work of some mad fellow down whose throat the red wine of Khem has poured too freely on this day of rejoicing."

Ath sprang upon him like an enraged lioness.

"Zar lives! Zar lives!" she cried shrilly. "Zar lives; of that I am certain. Nevertheless, I still am Queen!"

Confusion followed her words; the tongues of the assembly were loosened, and a babel of voices broke out.

"It is of no avail to deny that I believe the letter to be true," she continued, waving her hand for silence. "Zar lives, and will war against me—all this I know, for my heart tells me so. But we shall win, my friends—yes, we shall win."

She stood on the steps of the ivory chair, smiling down upon the company; her voice had become entreatingly sweet, while a patheticness crept into her eyes.

"Do ye wish for a new ruler?" she asked. "Are my poor efforts worthless to ye?"

"Nay, nay," they cried in unison; "we will have Ath and no other. Hail unto thee, O Queen of Khem!"

She smiled again, a sweet, slow, ravishing smile.

"If I have ruled unwisely or hardly, let me go, and bid this new Pharaoh take my place."

Once more their shouts rang through the hall.

"We will have no Pharaoh!" they cried, with vehemence. "In the name of Ath, we defy him!"

The Queen, taking the wreath from her hair, broke off the blossoms, flinging them among the crowd who pressed so eagerly round her chair. Then she bade them depart, being satisfied, since she had cast all fear out of her heart.

On the morrow one of the guards picked up in the outer courtyard an arrow which must have been shot during the night. The weapon, besides being painted a deep red, was bound firmly round with a narrow strip of papyrus. The man took it to one of the captains, who, not liking to open it, carried it before the Queen.

When she broke the fastenings a second slip fell out. On it was written—

206 THE WITCH QUEEN OF KHEM

*"Let Ath and her magic beware, for Pharaoh comes!"*

Soon the news was spread in Thebes that Zar lived. Gradually the report found its way into the North and South Lands, and a great excitement ran high in all the cities of Egypt.



## CHAPTER XXI

“STAND FIRM, O SONS OF KHEM !”

A FORTNIGHT later Rames sat gazing reflectively on the yellow waters of the broad Nile from the deck of a small cargo vessel. He was journeying north to Memphis, having quitted Thebes immediately after his interview with Ath.

It is now necessary to travel back in our history to learn what took place during the two and a half years which had elapsed after the secret meeting when the old man partly revealed his daring plot.

Rames had immediately travelled with Zar and Amasis to Memphis in disguise. In that city he was well known, so taking a trustworthy friend into his confidence he lodged them in his house. There they remained for some long time, being able, with the aid of a slight disguise, to enjoy perfect freedom, for none thought to connect them with the supposed dead Prince who had been so very seldom seen in public. Rames worked alone at first. He brought his wonderful power of character-reading into play, mentally sifting the large number, who having great faith in his wisdom and supposed magic, flocked to see him. After two months he had found twenty who thoroughly satisfied his silent examination. To these he showed Zar, telling them his story ; whereupon they

## 208 THE WITCH QUEEN OF KHEM

swore to aid him and guard his secret. Then Rames being satisfied with the progress of his task, bound them by the most sacred oath in Khem. To this twenty he gave the power of searching for others to join the growing band, and when any were found the old man became acquainted with them in an apparently casual way. If they passed his character test and were deemed entirely suitable in all points, they likewise became enrolled. Such had to be men of strong, determined wills, whose ideals ranked above those of their ordinary fellow citizens. Thus the band grew and Rames became more secretly jubilant every day in spite of the many drawbacks which met him. Two or three times he travelled to Thebes with the Prince and Amasis in disguise, and in that city furthered his plot in the same way. Over the rich trading classes his influence was very great; he exerted it to the utmost on the behalf of the cause he had taken up. In four months he could count five hundred staunch followers, and he promised the Prince that before another two the number would be doubled. He was right, so binding them all by the sacred oath he continued his daring work.

Zar chafed at leading a comparatively idle life; but Rames always answered him with these words: "Behold, I sow the grain; 'tis for thee to tend its growth and reap the harvest."

He never drew the people on to his side by mere use of his influence, but would gently and firmly open their eyes to the real state of affairs in Egypt—affairs which in their selfish pleasure-making they had altogether forgotten. His ready tongue drew pathetic pictures of the dead Pharaoh's

miserable life and unhappy end when all the spirit and soul-soaring ideals had been crushed out by the heavy weight of a stronger, relentless and ambitious mind. He showed how power grasped power; he roused them from their mental sleep, setting all the veins of his hearers running with the warm blood of sympathetic enthusiasm. Sometimes the sleepers were hard to awaken, but when it was accomplished Rames knew that the victory he had won would be lasting. Once the weeds were torn aside from the garden of each man's soul, then the light shone through and the Eternal One found room to place His finger therein and bid the Higher Aspirations grow.

The speech he had made in his tiny home at Thebes, he repeated at Memphis; and when after two and a half years, two thousand were secretly sworn to allegiance, he thought it time to hasten on his work.

Just then it happened that the Governor of Memphis fell into disfavour with the Queen. He was a high-spirited man and one who had utterly failed to succumb—as had all her other officers—to her strange influence. It came about that one day he travelled down to Thebes on some important matter of state, returning to Memphis with the intimation that in a little while he would be removed from his governorship. A private interview had taken place with the Queen, but none ever learnt their conversation, for he was extremely reserved on the subject.

In Memphis he was greatly beloved, and when certain incidents gradually leaked out, the fiery indignation of the people was stirred, so much so

that they vowed to rise in arms if he were deposed. Besides this, there always existed a certain amount of jealousy between Memphis and Thebes, which city had taken the place of the former as capital of all Egypt. Their objects of veneration were for the most part opposite and it was no unusual thing for a Memphite to make a witticism on the crocodile-loving Theban.

Rames saw his opportunity and took it. From that day he became more open in his plotting; he approached the insulted Governor and won him over to Zar's cause. Then feeling that his path was sure he straightway departed for the capital, bearing the Prince's message to Ath. His secret band was in touch with all his doings, and he knew that when he returned, the Governor had but to show Zar before the enraged people and their power would be great enough to defy the Mistress of Khem.

Rames journeyed to and fro in a boat belonging to one of his trusted merchant friends who was ready to take him back to Memphis immediately he quitted the palace, so that the ship might have a good start before Ath recovered from her surprise. Thus when the Thebans searched for Rames in the capital, they found him not. Nevertheless, through a slight accident that happened to the vessel, the old Astrologer's arrival in Memphis was delayed, much to the anxiety of his friends, who were afraid evil had befallen him, for it had been rather against their wish that he should be the bearer of Zar's letter. But the old man having made his decision remained unmoved by their entreaties.

On the same day that Rames reached Memphis, the Governor assembled all the troops under his command in a large public square. Being a great favourite among them, he held their close attention in a long speech he made, paving the way for the revelations which were to follow. Then came Rames, who in clear, ringing tones made his secret known. He related the history of the supposed dead Prince together with the bravery of Amasis, who had travelled into the far Delta to warn his master.

Whereupon Zar, stripped of all his disguise, stood up in the Governor's chariot and spoke in public for the first time in his life. When the astonishment of the people had somewhat abated, a thrill of enthusiasm ran through them as in the tall, broad, handsome warrior who confronted them, they recognized the tiny child Prince of earlier years. Certain ones who had formerly served in the palace body-guard remembered the determined curve of the lips and the unquenchable spirit which sparkled in the brave, dark eyes even in infancy. The sympathy and pity of the assembly were roused, and as Rames vividly portrayed Zar's escape from the North Land, they followed the scene mentally, while many an eye was dim with tears when the old man's stirring speech was ended.

They broke out into one great unison of cheers; they hailed the Prince as "Pharaoh," followed by shouts for Amasis, the Governor, and the old Astrologer. The City rang with the cries; warriors cast their spears into the air and the crowds grew larger, when suddenly a man on horseback rode

hurriedly into their midst, striving to make his way towards the royal chariot.

It was Jehudda. The great public square was filled to overflowing, so that there was but little room for him to pass.

After a few moments part of the troop fell back, and the Israelite rode on to where the Prince and Rames stood. A rapid conversation took place; then the old man ascended the chariot again.

"My children," he said, as he spread out his hands over their heads, "a rumour has reached us that large bodies of troops are seen ascending the river Sihor to attack Memphis and Pharaoh. By both land and water they come, and if this be true—I myself do not doubt it—we must instantly make ready to defend the city. Hasten, O my sons, let your hearts be steadfast; for with Ath comes power. Yet in unity we shall find strength though we may be but a handful against the usurper's forces. Stand firm, stand firm, O sons of Khem; then who shall resist the wall of your true hearts? Pledge yourselves for Pharaoh, O sons of the Land of Ra! In the hearing of holy Ra, pledge your lives for Pharaoh!"

The troops took up the cry instantly; the crowd beyond echoed it, and the names of Zar and Amasis rang out to the heavens. The old man's eyes blazed with suppressed excitement; the words came clear and shrilly from his throat as he leant over the heads of the people with arms outstretched.

Suddenly he pointed to the clouds, the gaze of the people following him.

"See," he cried, "behold Ra is pleased! He has sent his messenger to hover over us!"

A great hawk circled and swooped above, while the crowds hailed it with joy, for this was the bird that was sacred to Ra the Sungod. Then the Governor gave direction to his officers and the troops moved away in ordered companies. But still the wild cries of jubilation rang out, echoing in the distance.

"Hail! Hail to Pharaoh," they shouted; "hail to the Blessed of Ra!"

## CHAPTER XXII

### “PHARAOH IS BETRAYED !”

JEHUDDA'S warning had proved only too true. He had been in the southern quarters of the City when certain spies returned; whereupon the news they brought he instantly communicated to those assembled in the public square.

Through the vessel's delay Rames had arrived in Memphis only one day in advance of Ath's troops, for the Queen in the meantime got to know by some means or other that Memphis was in a state of unrest, especially as its Governor had been told of his coming degradation, but the people were never quite sure as to the source of her information.

The Memphites were engaged in strengthening the defences of their City when other runners came in with the news that the shimmering shields of a vast army could be discerned in the dim distance; also that Ath herself was at the head of the great array. Before sunset it would reach the gates. Could Memphis the Secure, the Beautiful, hold her own against Thebes, her greater rival?

The well-trained troops within the City were quickly arranged in order, one half being placed in readiness to defend the gates. These were under two of the chief captains, while the Governor, with



Pharaoh, headed the regiments on the other side.

In the midst of swift preparation the Queen's vast Theban array drew near, halting some short distance from the walls. Those inside the city waited anxiously, not knowing what course the enemy would take. They had not long to wait, for presently a herald bearing a white stave left the Theban army and made towards the walls. The Governor, who had seen this, waited for the message to be brought to him, when to his utter astonishment the two captains defending the gates held a short conversation with the man, who at once returned at full speed back to his camp.

The Governor, being unable to leave his position, sent to know the reason why the message had not been reported to him. Whereupon one of the captains replied that the Queen demanded surrender, but he had taken it upon himself to return a suitable answer. The Governor fumed at the usurpation of his authority and was about to ride down to the gates, but he saw that the Theban army was pressing swiftly forward, accompanied by the sounds of shrill music and war-cries. At once he moved nearer to survey the position, when suddenly a discord of shouts rose up, followed by jubilant cries of "Ath!"

An arrow whizzed past the Governor's head, while at the same moment he beheld to his horror that the gates were being flung open as their defenders joined the Theban forces. They on the opposite side of the wall also saw it.

"Treachery! Treachery!" they shouted to those below.

The Governor plunged his horse forward, waving his weapon on high.

"Treachery!" he cried hoarsely. "Pharaoh is betrayed! Prepare yourselves to fight, O Memphites, for let no man expect mercy from Ath!"

Then all was confusion; voices, music, clashing swords mingled tumultuously. Now that the defenders of the gates had forsaken their cause, the young Prince's army was diminished to half its size. At the moment when the Queen's forces entered the City, the departing sun was bathed in its glorious, burning light, setting the heavens aglow. Now with all the swiftness, which is usual in Eastern countries, the fiery ball was just about to drop below the horizon, its reflection dancing on the polished surface of the soldiers' shields, the helmets and weapons.

The tiny army stood ready, waiting the onrush. Pharaoh and Rames remained in a chariot together.

"Will triumph follow the Lady of Khem wherever she goes?" asked Zar distractedly. His voice sounded like a moan, though his outward appearance was bravely calm.

"Only for a season," answered the old man quietly. "Only for a season. Encourage thy men, O Pharaoh, for I have known greater odds than these in a battle."

Zar looked at him in wonder, but made no answer, for at that moment a shower of arrows fell upon them, while the chariots of the Thebans rushed onwards, the continuous roll of the wheels seeming like one prolonged roar of thunder.

Strangely enough very few of the enemy's arrows did any harm, being badly aimed, for the Queen's

archers had the light from the fiery heavens reflected full in their faces. Pharaoh's faithful regiments responded bravely, darting their spears and arrows with such skill that each one took effect.

Night had fallen; deep solemn night.

Ra in his fiery bark had sunk far beneath the horizon to pass through the twelve chambers of the Underworld where the souls watched for his coming, and mourned greatly when the last door shut, leaving them in darkness as he ascended again into the heavens at the beginning of a new-born day. The deep alive afterglow had given place to a blue grey, and now the round yellow moon had risen in the midst of the sapphire skies, encircled by myriad coloured stars.

On the desert plain, south of the Sphinx, a great silence reigned. A few tents gleamed strangely in the moonlight, while occasionally noiseless figures moved in and out between the shadows. Now and then a thin curl of smoke rose up where cooking was being done over the charcoal and wood fires, for this was the encampment of Zar's troops and they were resting for the night.

Less than a thousand yards south-east of the vigilant army rose the tent lines of Ath's vast array. It was quite three times the size of the harrassed, but still compact, regiments on the north and under the dome of the clear sparkling heavens they sat like animals at bay throughout the night, watching each other.

After some half-hour's fighting within the City, the Governor had changed his tactics lest by any chance the Thebans might succeed in hemming

them in. Although there seemed little chance of victory the men's hearts were still cheerful. They knew they had a good commander and relied upon him. Behind Pharaoh's army lay the Desert, on the borders of which the Governor thought it best to retire, since to remain within the City meant complete annihilation. In the open plains death could be better faced if necessary.

The order to retire was quietly passed through the midst. Twilight was just merging into night when the regiments, partly veiled by the prevailing gloom and the dense shadows, suddenly cut through a few Theban stragglers on the right and made in the direction of the Desert.

Arrows and missiles showered upon them, but the aim, owing to the half darkness shielding them, was not good. The enemy followed swiftly, but to the intense relief of the Memphites, halted some distance away, arranging their scanty tents for the night. Evidently Ath thought it wise to wait till morning before she finally swept down upon Pharaoh's diminished regiments, who having very few tents with them were forced to snatch what sleep they could under the shelter of the far-off heavens. A few fires were lit to cook the small quantities of food, while sentinels were posted at frequent intervals to warn them of any change on the Theban side. Thus the camps rested.

Rames moved among the soldiers, giving kindly words of cheer, working with the energy of a young man. Whenever any one remarked anxiously on the morrow, he would always answer, "My words may seem strange; but did not the messenger of Ra hover on us, and is it not well that the battle

should take place before the eyes of the Watcher of Ra?”—They were encamped not far from the Great Sphinx.

Then they became silent, holding the old wizard in veneration, for no word of his was to be treated lightly.

Presently the moon rose high in the heavens, smiling with gentle radiance upon the resting world; a little wind sprang up from the Desert, sighing in loneliness to itself. When the day dawned, what would the issue be? But no answer came to the many hearts which said those words. Perhaps the dead Pharaohs knew as they lay in their splendid silent tombs within the adjacent Pyramids, their spirits invisibly hovering over the land of their ancient glory.

Peace and silence on the earth, but on the morrow  
—War!

## CHAPTER XXIII

### AT THEBES

THE day after Rames had entered so unexpectedly into the royal banqueting hall at Thebes, Ath astonished all her court by announcing that she was determined to start instantly for Memphis at the head of a large body of Theban troops. She, who had laughed at the possibility of her half-brother being alive, now commenced to plot his overthrow with feverish eagerness. Immediately after the old Astrologer's disappearance and her sudden wild appeal to the nobles, she had withdrawn into the seclusion of her apartment.

Taska, who remained some time in the royal anteroom, could hear the Queen pacing the chamber rapidly to and fro until at last she seemed to relapse into silence. Then other sounds broke on the girl's ears; and she fled, for they were sounds she had heard before, and she knew it was not good for her to be there. She sought out Ptahmes in his solitary chamber on the north side of the palace. When she knocked lightly a familiar voice bade her enter.

The old man was seated with writing materials before him, a large model temple designed by himself standing at the side. He looked up with a ready smile as the girl entered, the reed pen poised

in mid air. Taska often intruded upon what he called his lonely pleasure, but he could never find it in his heart to resent her affectionate regard.

The indulgent fatherly smile deepened upon his features as he watched her sink with childish pleasure upon the seat he proffered. For some few minutes she silently admired and touched his carefully designed temple, the old man continuing to write upon the papyrus on which he was occupied until she chose to open up a conversation.

"The Queen takes me with her on the morrow to Memphis," she said suddenly.

There was an unmistakable note of pleasure in her voice, and Ptahmes, putting down his pen, looked at her in astonishment. It was not often that the Lady of Khem's commands brought her joy, although in spite of her unsympathetic nature, she was as fond of Taska as she could possibly be of any fellow creature. The girl's father during his lifetime had held a high office in the royal court; then came his death, and rather than take up her home with her widowed step-mother, she eagerly accepted the position and favours which Ath bestowed.

She saw the old man's look, and hastened to add—

"How could I dwell in Thebes and be forced to wait the issue of the fight?"

"Yea," answered Ptahmes slowly, "especially when thy heart is on the other side."

Taska flushed slightly.

"Yea," she repeated softly, "but thy heart as well as mine is on the other side."

The old man nodded slowly, seeming as if he

stood at loss for words. Almost unconsciously, and partly because he knew not what to do or say, he took up his pen and commenced to write rapidly.

Taska did not interrupt him but leant forward, resting her face between her hands, her deep black eyes fixed wonderingly upon the old Architect's countenance. At last Ptahmes glanced up and caught her steadfast gaze with some show of embarrassment. Never had he seen the girl so strange in her manner before. The silence was becoming almost oppressive.

"Thou hast something on thy mind," he said gently; "be not afraid to speak, O my daughter."

"Hast thou ever thought that thou and I have no right to remain in this royal palace?" she asked.

"It is not good for us to be here," he answered slowly, "but——"

"And dost thou know," she interrupted swiftly, "dost thou know the character which we have assumed?"

Ptahmes looked at her in amazement, scarcely understanding the meaning of her words.

"The character of traitors," she finished quietly. "How can I wait upon the Queen day after day, receive her favours, and know that my heart is not with her or any of her actions? It is the same with thee, O my father; methinks we have forgotten."

The old man bent his brows upon her, searching her face keenly.

"But Ath delves into black magic," he answered. "Are we not conscious that her good fortune is not from the gods? I mourn to say it, but she, whom I cherished as a babe, has delved into things which



are forbidden by the true gods. Woe unto the one who seeks to triumph by the dealings of awful mysteries, for in the end it must be that they themselves are overcome."

He paused, and began to pace nervously up and down the room. The girl watched him with the same puzzled expression on her face. Suddenly he wheeled round.

"What wouldst thou have us do?" he asked.

"That which our spirits prompt."

"And that is——?"

"Quit this defiled spot; let our feet be no more stayed upon it till a purifying fire has come and burned away the dross."

A silence fell between them.

"Yea," she continued, rising and laying her hand on his arm. "Behold I have sworn an oath to myself and it must be kept. Before the next rising of the waters of Sihor, I will be gone from hence."

Ptahmes led her gently back to her seat and leant forward till he almost spoke into her ear.

"My daughter," he said, "hear me speak. When thou camest into this royal palace being little more than a child thou loved Ath and served her willingly. In those days thou wouldst not have fled from her even had it been possible. Thou wert happy and so was I. Then came a change. Ath emptied her soul of that which was good, and in the void place came—Evil. A man's soul can never be empty, it must always be full to overflowing with something. Whatever it be, it envelops his outer character, so that Man is but the reflection of his Soul. Ath has chosen that which brings her power. Yea, it has done that; but when she

reaches the bottom of the glittering goblet, the dregs of the wine shall be bitter; when she has bitten to the heart of the fair-skinned peach and come to the kernel thereof, behold it shall be full of worms and seething with rottenness ! ”

Ptahmes paused tragically, with a thoughtful air glancing up through the open window-place to the heavens. Taska shuddered faintly, but remained silent.

“What chanced to Khem in those days?” he continued; “what came to pass with Ath? A strange beauty grew upon her—the like of which has never been seen before. That which she desired was done; none withstood her—she wove a chain round Khem. Her court submitted to her; yet they knew not why they did so, nor had they power to question if they would. I have no need to repeat the unhallowed incidents which thou and I beheld. The people found no fault with her; they thought they loved her, but in reality they feared her. It matters not. Yet why was it, O Taska, that thou and I have not followed so blindly after her as have others? Because our wills were stronger; still we felt her power, and were not altogether able to resist her.”

Then Ptahmes told Taska that he had always known that Zar lived and that Ath was plotting for his death. He also related how he had read the scroll which Ath sent under the hand of her infatuated messenger—Amasis—to Memphis. He repeated his conversation with the Queen when he bade her, in the name of Amen, cease and repent. He explained how she had cast her burning eyes upon him and silenced his tongue at her will so that

when he strove to speak of the evil she had done he always failed.

Taska listened in amazement, but Ptahmes checked the words on her lips with a gesture of his hand.

"And why is it, O daughter," he continued, "that now my tongue is loosed and I am able to speak with thee on things which hitherto I have been bound? Because," he added triumphantly, in a clear, penetrating voice, "because I, Ptahmes, the aged Scribe and Chief Architect in Khem, am free! Shall I tell thee how it came about? Behold it was at the feast given in honour of the Queen's birthday that I felt a sudden strange thrilling sensation and seemed like a vessel which had hitherto been shut and full of darkness. A veil was lifted from me; a piercing, burning ray of light streamed in; whereupon I saw and understood things in a manner which I had never done before. My will became mine own and I rejoiced. Since that time I have remained silent, hardly knowing which way to turn. I wondered if this same feeling would come over thee, so I waited—watching for any change. Behold it has come, though unconsciously to thee—else thou hadst never spoken as thou hast to-day. My daughter, thou art right; it is not well for us to be here, and my spirit tells me that when we quit Thebes to-morrow morn, we shall not set our feet upon the City again until its pollution is gone. Why has the influence of the Mistress of Khem departed from us in the midst of her great power? We stand on the eve of strange events, and henceforth we shall see many things with unveiled eyes."

Taska looked at him a moment without speaking.

"Strange that the Queen's influence should quit us on the sixth day of Paophi."

She repeated the date of the royal birthday feast several times as if it held some fascination for her. At last she leant across the table, drawing forward a thick roll that contained the Egyptian Calendar.

"I will see if the day was propitious," she explained as her companion looked up questioningly.

"It has been that already," muttered Ptahmes, when she commenced to read—

*6th day of Paophi.—Auspicious! Auspicious! Auspicious! Ra rejoiceth in the heavens. The gods are in peace before Ra. Many shall remember this day because of the joy it brought!*

Taska read the words aloud twice before putting the roll aside. Then she laughed almost gaily. "*Many shall remember this day because of the joy it brought!* Behold, we do that already. On the morrow we depart for Memphis and view the hosts of Pharaoh!"

"Yea," interrupted Ptahmes, "and what we shall do then let us not discuss, for methinks that things will come to pass. My daughter, leave me, I pray thee, for a little while; when I have finished my work then we will again talk together."

He patted her hand carressingly, looking down upon her with that whole-hearted affection which to a fatherless girl is sweet.

Taska rose, passing to the entrance with her usual slow, stately step. She felt satisfied with their conversation and smiled up into the old man's face.

"Continue that which thou hast to do," she cried joyfully, "for all is auspicious, auspicious, auspicious!"

A faint knocking sounded beyond and the girl paused. Ptahmes going across to the door, threw it open. To his utter astonishment he beheld that Ath herself stood without. It was not unusual for her to descend to the old man's chambers. They both looked at her in wonder, for her strange beauty was lit up with a soft, almost tender smile.

"Auspicious, auspicious, auspicious," she repeated, with a questioning glance, "of course all is auspicious!"

Her smile became a trifle mocking, as it always did when any one expressed a doubt as to the outcome of her actions.

"I wish thee to do some writing for me instantly," she said, as Ptahmes looked across at Taska. The girl understood his glance and passing out shut the door upon them.

The Queen's sudden appearance had alarmed her for a moment; but she felt confident that all would be well, and she went out into the gardens singing.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### THE RIDE OF THE WARRIOR QUEEN

AT mid-day a new wonder was seen in Thebes. Ath ordered a review of all the Theban troops besides those which she had summoned from the cities near at hand. Therefore at noon every man was in his place, arrayed as if for battle. In single rows the warriors stood, lining the long streets, waiting the coming of Ath. For it was known that she would pass through their midst at the time when Ra should have reached the highest point in the heavens. Behind the soldiers thronged crowds of civilians, thousands leaning from the flat roofs, filling the balconies, or pressed together in a mass in the streets below.

The day had been hot and sultry, but now a soft breeze arose, lighting with refreshing coolness on the shimmering rows of armed soldiers. Each shield and spear caught the reflection of the Sun-god's face; the living line of fire spread, burning on the breastplates of the horses and ornaments of the chariots.

Suddenly a sound was heard in the distance, faint at first, but growing in volume. Voices rose up; cries broke out; the name of Ath was borne along until it was thundered by many a thousand throats. Gradually the soft breeze sprang up into a wind,

playing almost roughly with the plumes on the horses' heads and the loose garments of the women who leaned forward from the flat roof-tops and balconies.

Then there came the swift sound of rushing chariot wheels, and the people hushed their voices, for they knew that the great Ath came.

Round the corner of the public square gleamed the gilded harness of the oncoming vehicle, and the staid warriors quenched the jubilant cry that rose to their lips at the wonder of the sight. The Queen stood upright in the chariot and alone. The silken reins lay slack in her hands while the three horses bounded forward at her word.

Robed in flowing white garments she approached, her long hair sweeping out behind her in a cloudy mass. The war helmet, such as was worn by the Pharaohs, sat upon her erect head, while the royal sparkling uræus twined with becoming majesty about her brow. The slender figure leant slightly forward, seeming to tower above the eagerly watching crowds upon whom her dark eyes burnt out of the midst of her set, motionless face.

Then the strange wind howled, catching at her garments till they streamed and fluttered behind her with a swishing noise. The sudden astonishment of the people passed as they broke into one continuous shout, echoing the name of "Ath" to the skies till it seemed like one long thunderous roar.

Onward, onward rushed the wild chariot, borne by flying horses who entered into the spirit of the warrior Queen's wild ride, turning wheresoever she willed them to go, without a check of the reins or a

spoken word. The yellow sunlight played upon the coils of the royal asp, upon the glittering war helmet and the golden snake that encircled her slender waist. Her bosom heaved tumultuously as, like an entrancing spirit, she bent her gaze upon her people.

The wheels flew with a grinding sound down the streets, but never a swerve or a pause did the plumed horses make.

"Hail, O Ath!" thundered the double lines of troops. "Hail, O Warrior Queen!" screamed the hundred thousand throats beyond.

Still the strange wind roared, shrieking among her wild, ethereal garments and streaming hair. But none apparently noted the changed elements, for their gaze was fixed solely upon Ath. As they looked their hearts went out to her, and with their hearts their wills—such power the Queen had upon them.

For fully two hours the Queen rode—through the very heart of the city to Asher, Luxor and Karnak, wherever her battalions stood. The crowds thronged closer; shrill music burst into tune while the cry of the bewildered people echoed around till it reached the habitation of the dead who dwelt in the eternal tombs. Never in all the history of Khem was seen such a wondrous ride before!

Presently the wind abated, from a wild shriek sobbing itself again into a soft refreshing breeze. And when Ath returned to the palace still equipped in her warrior dress, the irresistible, yet faintly mocking smile crept over her countenance. She had gone forth in the spirit of conquest to return flushed with her victory, for her dark magic had



advised her in this, and in those days she consulted it continually. The people of Thebes were with her, and without questioning a single action they prepared to follow her on the morrow to Memphis the Secure—the Land of the Watcher of Ra.

So this was the manner in which Ath the Witch Queen of Khem drew the inhabitants of Thebes and the surrounding parts towards her, thus forming the mighty army which increased in size during its long journey, arriving at the gates of the Northern City-Beautiful at an hour when Pharaoh's stout-hearted regiments were still weak in their defence.

## CHAPTER XXV

### IN PHARAOH'S CAMP

BEFORE Ra in his "bark of Eternity" had ascended the heavens, the armies that faced each other on the Libyan side of Memphis had risen. Each strengthened their defences, preparing for a battle which did not take place that day.

At sunrise Rames entered Pharaoh's tent, one of the few they had been able to take with them. He found him equipped in the royal warrior dress, a sword girt at his side, a quiver and bow at hand, while on his head was set a burnished helmet circled by the glittering asp. Amasis was also within, and the two stood talking earnestly, in voices hardly raised above whispers.

Rames paused at the entrance—he had not been perceived—watching the young men in silent admiration. Never before had Zar seemed so royal, so calmly brave than at this hour. Amasis, who was of equal height and girth, leant lightly upon a spear he carried in his hand, likewise arrayed in full war dress.

At this moment the Prince turned round, and seeing Rames at the entrance, bowed low with that reverent respect which he always accorded to the old man.

The Astrologer extended his arms with dramatic suddenness.

"Hail, O Pharaoh," he cried. "May Ra look upon thee to-day and henceforth."

Zar thanked him gracefully, adding: "Thou hast given me a title which I have by no means won, my father."

Rames smiled faintly. "I never flatter," he remarked shortly, "or honour any one who does not deserve it."

The Prince made no answer, being well acquainted with the old man's curious characteristics. Amasis broke the momentary silence.

"Behold," he said, "it is the suggestion of Pharaoh that another message be sent to the camp of Ath——"

"Wherefore?" asked Rames sharply; and carefully securing the tent opening he sat down on a wooden couch ornamented with leather.

"Pharaoh desires that, if possible, peace may be brought about and bloodshed saved. Perchance Ath may have seen her wrong, but is too proud to speak."

The Astrologer stood up and faced them with his arms folded upon his chest. "Save thy good papyrus," he said shortly. "Do the paper reeds of Egypt grow to be used in waste?"

"Is it waste to seek to avert war?"

It was Zar who spoke.

"Can war be averted?" returned Rames. "Think ye to temporize with evil? Are ye now afraid of Ath?—ye on whom Ra's messenger has hovered?"

The Prince flushed slightly, and his lips tightened.

"I am not afraid," he replied simply. "All my

hosts shall know that I can fight in the hour of battle."

Amasis struck his spear into the ground and said: "We have gone through many dangers; surely Ra and the gods will not forsake us now, although we lost our stronghold yesternight! Nevertheless, with Pharaoh, I think that this final letter to Ath should be sent."

"Send it, send it," said Rames, waving his hand as if he wished the subject finished. "Set it in writing, my son."

Amasis took up a pen and Zar dictated a brief message. It was written in the first person, and although it portrayed unwavering determination, yet an appeal to the better nature of the Queen was made. Pharaoh affixed his seal and handed it to the Astrologer. The old man scanned the roll with a grunt.

"It will bring no result except that Ath may think we are afraid and be less thorough in her preparations," he said at last. "And many a battle has been lost through too much vain confidence. Send this instantly, for I long to read the answer."

A herald bearing a white stave took the royal message across to the enemy's camp. And in due course one of the Thebans arrived with the Witch Queen's answer. Pharaoh opened it himself and read aloud. It was a curt answer, taunting the Memphites that they were afraid of battle. *For if Zar is beset with fear (continued the papyrus) let him seek peace by surrendering all into the hands of Ath. The Lady of Khem is merciful, and will grant life to Zar and his troops so long as Amasis and Rames the Wizard, who delves in wickedness,*

*be delivered up to a death which she shall name. Memphis shall be doubly taxed, while he who calls himself "Pharaoh" shall dwell in kindly exile. These are the terms of peace betwixt Thebes and Memphis.*

*Written on the third day of Athyr, in the royal tent of the Living Horus; Mistress of the Diadems of the Vulture and the Snake; Consort of Amen, living for ever; Queen of Upper and Lower Egypt; the Sun-god's daughter whose name is Ath.*

Zar threw down the roll and set his foot upon it, his eyes flashing with the fire the old man so loved to see.

"This shall be answered as it deserves," he said. "I will heap no more reproaches upon Ath. Woe will come soon enough upon her, for has not she—the witch who delves in wickedness—taken the name of Ra and the gods in vain?"

He drew a clean sheet of papyrus towards him and wrote rapidly. It was a short message. Meanwhile the Astrologer took up the roll and read it for himself.

"Let Ath beware how she insults Rames," he said wrathfully, "or the 'Wizard who delves in wickedness' may show her a little of his magic which is so much feared in Khem."

He called a soldier, bidding him bring some charcoal embers in a brazier. When it came he set Ath's letter upon it, watching it flare up into a bright blaze and then die down into a mere black mass.

"See," he cried triumphantly, "Ath's boasting words have perished utterly in the midst of the purifying fire!"

Then he went aside and washed his hands.

After that they remained together in earnest talk for some short time, when presently the Governor of Memphis—a man famed for his warrior qualities—entered, and they fell to discussing a new and carefully drawn-up plan. At last they decided that it would be best to remain on the defensive rather than venture an attack. The small, but well equipped army was to be divided into five divisions under the commanders. Although the men were so few in number, yet each warrior was filled with a flaming enthusiasm. Amasis left the tent to call in one of the principal captains, when he returned hurriedly, bearing a package in his hand.

"Behold," he cried, "one of the guards was given this message, it having been brought by a herald from the opposing camp."

Pharaoh took it and handed it to Rames.

"Thou shalt read it this time," he said with a smile.

The old man tore open the wrappings, disclosing an inner letter; then he stood up and read—

*Can the owl look upon the face of the Sun? Can Zar find so little joy in life that he is willing to perish at the hands of Ath?*

That was all, and a dead silence followed its reading. Then the Governor laughed aloud, and Rames went out to place the roll on charcoal embers.

"There will be no battle to-day," said one of the captains presently, "but on the morrow let each man stand in readiness."

The party in the tent broke up, after which Rames, in company with Pharaoh, walked round

the camp, watching the preparations. As they passed one of the tents the flap fell back, revealing a small portion of the interior. The old man with a gesture of silence bade Zar look within.

A well-built man, his face covered by the loose end of his robe, knelt on the soft ground. His back was opposite to the watchers whose ears caught the murmuring words which proceeded from his lips. It was Jehudda the Israelite sending up a petition to Jehovah in the calm stillness of the early morn.

Rames drew the flap of the tent across quietly and almost reverently. Then he moved aside, beckoning to Pharaoh.

"Disturb him not," he whispered. "Jehudda the Hebrew is of great worth to thee, O Zar."

The Prince looked up half puzzled.

"Yea," continued the old man, "and because of what I have seen I am confident and long for the battle of to-morrow."

"Last night's events have certainly not made thee down-hearted," said Pharaoh. "Nevertheless, this eagerness is strange to me."

A pained expression passed over the old man's countenance as it had done many a time before when he talked with the Israelite; he seemed as if he would have recalled his words, which had burst from him involuntarily. He averted his face and relapsed into silence, asking himself why so often lately he had placed more trust in the prayers which Jehudda made to his Deity, than in those which were carried upwards on the breath of incense in the white marble temples of Khem. He could never answer the question to his own satisfaction,

## 238 THE WITCH QUEEN OF KHEM

and he called himself a traitor that a current of doubt had ever passed through him.

This incident happened at sunrise, and all through the hours that followed the opposing armies spied on each other, expecting an attack which never came.

Once more the calm, solemn night closed in upon them and the moon, following the law of its Creator, traced its way across the heavens, looking down with silent anger upon the discontented earth, where men are ever eager to leave the path in which it is ordained that they shall walk, sighing and wrestling for the thing they have not.

Then the red lights of the camps flared up, and they waited for the dawning of another morn, mutely watching each other.



## CHAPTER XXVI

### A WONDER IN THE HEAVENS

DAWN! Sweet mystic dawn, so splendid in the intensity of its solemn purity! The birth hour of an unblemished day given by a Merciful Creator that puny man may have another chance to win his way to heaven. How fair is the new-born day and yet how vilely black with sin does it become before it passes once again into peaceful night!

In the calmly breaking morning the camps on the plains awakened. Pharaoh's small army placed itself in readiness for an attack, silently watching the moving warriors opposite. The Governor of Memphis assumed the chief command. He was a man of great skill in war, and knew how to arrange a small body of troops in the best positions. He himself stood in his chariot issuing orders to his officers.

Silently they waited, each warrior with his hand on his weapon, an expression of half anxious impatience on his countenance. Waiting is always wearisome, and especially when a great crisis hangs in the balance.

Just as the first blaze of rosy light flashed across the grey blue sky a new movement was discerned on the part of the Theban companies. They were drawn up into the form of a crescent, chariots on

the flanks. Each man in Zar's army stood tense, for the great array on the opposite side now advanced swiftly towards them.

On they came in lines of shimmering mail, with their spears catching the soft light of the early day; the archers with their bows drawn; the war-horses sniffing the air distressfully as if their instinct warned them of the coming of some unusual event. Suddenly a clarion voice rang out, and the multitude paused. Pharaoh's army wondered at the strange tactics when a shower of arrows fell upon them. The men on the Prince's side, with the strings of their bows tight, answered them shot for shot. This was the beginning of the second battle between Ath and Zar.

Silently the lithe war missiles sped, striking upon the uplifted shields. For several minutes the fight continued thus, the armies still some distance apart. Zar's men were in perfect order, aiming so skilfully that several of Ath's soldiers fell, while they themselves remained almost unhurt.

Suddenly a clash of trumpets proceeded from the Thebans, a deep voice rang out with striking clearness and the attacking archers ceased. A quick rumbling sound was heard, a war cry echoed through the air; then the vast body of the Queen's regiments moved like the gigantic wave of a stormy sea and swept down relentlessly upon the staunch lines of opposing warriors. Down they came amidst a din of cries and shrill music.

In the centre of the wildly rushing troops and surrounded by cavaliers loomed a great gilded chariot, more splendid than all the rest. In it, robed in long sweeping garments and wearing the

war helmet of the Pharaohs, stood the tall, majestic form of Ath.

The men on Zar's side saw her beauteous face high above the encircling mass of soldiers. Into her dark jewel-like eyes had entered the spirit of war, and they flashed about from side to side like darts of lightning, dazzling all beholders. Her full lips were slightly parted, while her bosom, in the centre of which blazed a brilliant gem, heaved with the excitement of the hour. All this the troops of Memphis saw; but they did not flinch, only set themselves like a firm wall to receive the onrush. The enemy was very near now, when the radiant expression on Ath's face somewhat changed. A shade of disappointment passed over it and a deep angry light came into her eyes, making them seem even more wonderfully luminous. She beheld the unfaltering attitude of the opposing army. She who led along paths where her blind followers came after, glad to tread in her steps, was not accustomed to see men harden their faces at the sight of her.

Suddenly she raised her hand, upon which sparkled the ring of royal office, and cried aloud in clear, ringing tones. Her command was carried down the ranks; the trumpets blazed out discordantly and the vast array rushed recklessly upon the Memphites.

The opposing bodies met. War cries broke out incessantly and the name of "*Ath*" echoed clearly across until it was drowned in the shout of "*Zar*" and the awful clash of weapons which followed the onslaught. The real battle began. The Thebans strove to break through the Prince's ranks, but

were met with such vigorous sword play that they were forced to retire for the moment. Again the white figure of the Queen loomed up and this time her eyes sparkled angrily.

The Governor of Memphis saw his opportunity, and sent a shower of arrows upon the momentarily discomfited troops. They whizzed around Ath dangerously, but she heeded them not—not even when one struck and remained entwined in her thick hair. The very captains who had behaved so treacherously toward Zar and their sworn cause were strangely enough two of the very first to fall beneath the flying war missiles.

Amid a din another rush was made. The Memphites stood their ground well at first as the keen-eyed commanders cheered their efforts.

Then horror dawned upon them as they saw their brave-hearted warriors show signs of weakness before the stronger Thebans. The front lines were broken and the small compact army, although straining its utmost, retreated inch by inch before the array of the Lady of Khem. Her chariot moved more to the fore; she stood up in it, swaying gently from side to side. Her eyes, still sparkling with jewel-like radiance, were faintly mocking.

One of the archers on the Prince's side took up his bow to aim at her. The arrow flew straight to the bosom of the strange Witch Queen, when unaccountably it deviated from its course and passed harmlessly by without so much as grazing against her snowy garments. Ath saw the archer's movement and the expression of astonishment which came over his countenance at his

failure. She looked at him full in the eyes, a strange smile dawning in the corners of her lips. To a casual observer the Queen's smile was one of tender reproach, but the man on whom it was directed read certain things beneath it, which made him pale for an instant and then grasp his bow more tightly.

Zar saw the front lines of his soldiers break beneath the terrific onslaught, and rode in princely bravery farther into the fight. His captains, being fearful of his life, called him back, but he heeded them not, but plunged forward more furiously. His clear voice broke into an echoing cheer, and, feeling the presence of their young commander, the men closed up more firmly against the enemy. But it was only for an instant; then the front lines broke again, and the Memphites were pressed back—still back, nearer towards the Desert. But their faces were set towards the foe as each inch of ground was fought and paid for in brave men's blood.

Zar looked round with a wave of agony passing over his face. Not far distant from him he beheld the majestic figure of the Queen who sought his life. For an instant their eyes met in one intense gaze. His handsome face was unflinching in its bravery, but Ath's was cold and motionless. Suddenly the same smile which had overcome the archer dawned upon her, and taking up a bow out of the fore part of her chariot, she set an arrow in the string and drew it to her ear. Still they gazed each at the other fixedly, reading each other's soul. As the slow smile deepened on her face the lithe missile trembled beneath her hand.

That arrow was never sped, for something prompted her to remove the bow from her shoulder; and Zar, reading her thoughts, knew that she would have her victory first before pronouncing judgment on her rebel brother.

The Thebans rushed on steadily and relentlessly, pushing the tiny force before it. Farther and farther into the Desert they were pressed—nearer to the great image of Ra to whom a single battle was as naught to its wondrous history. Zar saw the helpless retreat; the captains of the Memphites saw it and passed the war cry down the ranks. Ath, standing up in her chariot, beheld all this and smiled, while Amasis, in a frenzy of despair, made his way farther into the fight.

He caught the Witch Queen's gaze upon his face, her expression changing almost magically to one of gentle reproof. But he lowered his eyes immediately, an unnatural sternness creeping round his lips. Then he turned resolutely aside and, with the name of "Pharaoh" ringing in his throat, rode down the ranks.

Back, back, ever backwards, with the dust whirling around in little clouds; yet the Memphites kept their face towards the foe. Behind stretched the endless Desert of sand, farther north the colossal Sphinx and the wonderful Pyramid tombs. How would it all end? Amasis asked himself the question with a twang of hopelessness in his heart.

His eyes went up to the heavens. The blue dome was very, very fair; therein lay the glistening glory of the Sun-god. There was no war up in those dreamy heights, no spilling of brave men's

blood. He looked across the flat landscape with its colourless monotony, then to the placid face of the Watcher of Ra. Majesty was written thereon—majesty, to which the sorrow of men count as nothing.

How would it all end? The great carven Statue gazed across the glowing sands, mute and unpitying.

Back the half demolished army was pressed; back, still back, like men standing on the edge of a precipice they fought, knowing that presently they must step over the brink!

Rames realized the possible result of the battle. Because of his age he stood up in a chariot a little in the rear. He, too, had seen Ath, and his small keen eyes flamed out in silent wrath; the old blood surged wildly in his veins, and being of no use as a warrior he rallied the men, crying the war cry in a thin, shrill voice till it echoed from side to side. He watched the brave ranks mowed down like wheat in the fields of Thebes and his heart beat madly in his anguished frenzy. He shouted the name of Ra in the ears of the regiments; he waved his arms towards the Watcher, praying silently. Still the slow but sure retreat, still the jubilant onrush of Ath's battalions.

Suddenly the old man's eyes were riveted to a spot at the far left of where he stood, and an idea came to him. Whereupon he laid his hand heavily upon the arm of his charioteer.

"Turn thy horses, and lead me out of the hosts," he cried, "and that right swiftly!"

The driver obeyed, and when he came to a standstill, to his utter astonishment, Rames leapt out

with wonderful agility, instantly vanishing amid the swaying motley of troops. After a few moments he found the one he sought and that was Jehudda. The Hebrew was standing on the steps of Pharaoh's chariot, loosening a quiverful of arrows before handing them to Zar, who, on the advice of his captains, had relinquished his horse for a somewhat safer position.

The Astrologer plucked Jehudda by his garment and spoke softly into his ear—

"Wherefore dost thou not perform thy duty?" he asked sternly.

"My duty!" echoed the Israelite, starting in amazement, "am I not serving Pharaoh in the hour of battle?"

"Why camest thou with us to Memphis? Why wert thou made a chosen one of our secret band?" Rames' voice broke. "Why dost thou make it so hard for me," he cried passionately; "I who am not as thou art, but an Egyptian?"

A look of blank dismay passed over Jehudda's face.

"Woe is me," he said, striking one hand on his chest. "In the excitement of battle I had forgot. Say no more," he added gently, "I know what thou desirest me to do; it shall be done."

"Thou knowest, thou knowest," moaned the Astrologer, "I, Rames, the Egyptian, beseech thee, O Israelite, to do that which seemeth good!"

Jehudda handed the quiver of arrows to Zar, who had not heard a single word of their conversation, so occupied was he in fighting. The old man, grasping the Hebrew by the arm, led him away into his own chariot.



"Wait not, wait not," he cried impatiently, "for as Ra liveth the battle is lost, only the brave regiments will not own it."

Then he went back to Pharaoh, standing up in the vehicle with his eyes not on the troops, but watching Jehudda.

Suddenly a cry broke out from the midst of the small company surrounding the chariot.

"Know ye not that the battle is lost, my brothers? How can Egyptians conquer in the evil presence of a Hebrew? Our luck has departed, and with it the blessing of the gods!"

The words came from the lips of a tall, brawny soldier, and Rames, hearing them, ground his teeth in rage. It was half what he had expected. Never for long could the people of Khem quench their hatred of the unhappy Israelites, daily their dislike of the alien race increased.

The old man leant out of the chariot and struck the soldier sharply on the mouth.

"Cease thy cowardly bawlings," he cried. "Is it the open boast of an Egyptian that he quails and is beaten in the presence of a Hebrew? By Thoth, thou shalt take back thy words to-day, for we stand on the eve of a battle won! Fight on, fight on, and then cheer for the great victory of Zar, thy Pharaoh!"

The man looked stupefied, but without a word pressed farther into the heart of the battle.

Rames, steadying himself on the edge of the chariot, gazed beyond on the left. Jehudda was there with his arms outstretched, his face uplifted towards heaven. The Astrologer watched almost wistfully, for on the Israelite's features rested a

calm peaceful expression, telling of a perfect, child-like faith. His lips moved faintly, but he seemed to so shut out his soul from the awful surroundings that he might have stood in the most sublimely desolate place, talking alone with his God. The patheticness written on the old man's face deepened; the semblance of a tear crept into his eye, while a heavy sigh escaped his faintly trembling lips.

With a jerk he removed his gaze from the far-off figure of the praying Israelite. So far had his thoughts travelled in the brief space of time that he had almost forgotten the terrible battle surging before and around him. The realization returned with a shock when he suddenly saw that the blue skies were overcast with a strangely tinted veil. The sun was no longer visible and the heavens presented a curiously heavy appearance. No one as yet seemed to notice it, but Rames, who was watching, marvelled. Gradually the dull hues deepened into a sinister-looking brown. The Astrologer shut his eyes, thinking that perchance his vision played him false. When he opened them again, an exclamation came from his lips; he was now sure that the earth was being gradually wrapped in a strange darkness which neither resembled the blackness of night nor yet the gloom of twilight.

At that moment the troops also realized the changed heavens; simultaneously they paused in their fighting, standing still in frightened astonishment. Thus for one moment the two armies faced each other in silence.

Then a wild frantic cry broke from the centre

ránk̄s of Ath's vast array. Some one was shouting that the vengeance of the gods had fallen.

"Fly, fly," said the voice, "we are not fighting against men but gods!"

The impetus was given to the startled troops, a moment later the army of the Lady of Khem was broken, the men fled like pursued animals away from the scene of battle, anywhere and everywhere, only that they might escape the terrors of the day. Zar's troops remained motionless, dumb with surprise; partly because of the strange wonder in the skies, and partly at the sudden and speedy flight of their terrible enemy.

The curious twilight passed into deeper shades; the sun appeared as a small crescent in the heavens, the surrounding parts of the orb presenting a deep indigo hue, gradually shading from brown to a brilliant scarlet nearer the horizon. The black mass moved gradually farther over the sun's face, while a luminous corona of rose tint burned around. Presently the stars sprang out, increasing the wonder of the spectators.

Suddenly Rames, making a trumpet of his hands shouted to the regiments.

"See what the Eternal One has done on our behalf," he cried. "My children, I have seen this wonder before, though never attended by so much majesty; be not afraid, but retire as best ye may to your camp. Ra has hidden his face behind another planet; presently he will shine again in his glory. Again I say ye have naught to fear."

He ceased, the charioteer driving him carefully out of the host. Once he looked behind him and caught sight of a white-robed figure gesticulating

wildly. It was Ath crying in a shrill voice to her heedless troops. The driver of her chariot, in spite of her commands to the contrary, lashed his horses till they flew over the ground far from the scene of the wondrous battle.

Pharaoh's troops moved back to their tents as swiftly as the dismal light would allow, then to relieve the terrible solemnity of the strange eclipse, Rames talked with the soldiers, calming their fears.

"Behold," he said, speaking in clear impressive tones, "to-day a murmur went up among ye that the battle would never be won because of the presence of a Hebrew. The victory is ours, my children, rejoice in your hearts and be glad, for never again will the Thebans find courage to fight against us; to them this wonder appears as magic, and they are filled with consternation."

Then he told how at the moment that the Israelite prayed the darkness descended.

"Hate not a Hebrew," he finished dramatically, "for through one ye have triumphed over the enemy."

He paused and a murmur of voices arose. The troops in the curiously dim light peered into each other's faces. Then a voice spoke out of the darkness—a voice clear and triumphantly sweet.

"Rames, Rames," it said, "I, Jehudda, deserve none of thy praise. I have besought, and my God hath answered my prayer."

## CHAPTER XXVII

### SPIRITS OF THE DESERT

TIME passed, and still the strange, unnatural darkness prevailed. Clouds appeared in the western quarters of the horizon, moving swiftly across the sky, blotting out the glittering planets which during the eclipse sprung out with mystifying radiance. The black mass gradually passed over the sun's face, while below the landscape seemed to be painted a deep bronze tint.

From the actual city there rose up muffled cries; the horses neighed loudly; a few solitary birds twittered in terror. The inhabitants of Memphis "the Secure" were truly seized with fear, and rushed madly along the wide streets, or in the narrow passages, stumbling over each other, calling wildly on the gods for light.

Some said that man was about to be exterminated; Ra would presently descend on the earth, create a new and holier world, and then rule therein supreme. Others muttered incantations, declaring that the evil was caused by the magic of Ath—for in this hour, strangely enough, her bond seemed lifted from them, and they saw her as she was. They realized that Zar alone was the true heir of Khem and all its mighty domains. So they shrieked against the Witch Queen who had forced them to

fight against the "Son of Ra," as the Pharaohs were termed in those ancient days.

Yet there were a few who said that Zar and his wizard friend, Rames, brought the darkness. Thus they cried, one against the other, as they crouched in terror, watching the mystic halo which shone at the edges of the sun's hidden face. Their eyes became more accustomed to the phenomenally heavy twilight, and they beheld each other as dark apparitions, while the voices that sounded out from the denser shadows cast by the gigantic buildings and the palms seemed as the moaning of the multitude in Amenti, where Ra in the "Bark of Eternity" passed during the twelve hours of the night through the twelve chambers of the Underworld. As says the Book of the Dead: "When at the end of the twelfth hour the last door has swung to, then there was a great mourning among the souls who dwell in Amenti and remain in darkness."

The imagination of the people conjured up strange things; few, indeed, stood in brave silence; even the very priests of the Temple of Ptah were likewise frantic. A minority found courage to sing their accustomed hymns in a faintly quivering voice, so that the mingled noise of shouting, moaning, wailing and singing rushed like a discordant wave across the city. All the regiments belonging to the Queen were also broken up; fear was upon them.

Zar's small army felt little or no sense of terror now that the first shock had passed. Rames, Amasis and Pharaoh moved among the soldiers, talking with them. A few lamps were lit in the camp, and the men either rested silently near the

scanty tents or else gathered together in groups, watching an occasional star, and the heavy indigo hue of the darkened sky, whose appearance was rendered more marvellous by the rising of an unbroken curtain of clouds out of the west. They whispered in awe-stricken voices, yet were strangely free from the overpowering terror experienced by their enemy.

Presently a little wind sprang up from the Desert, wrinkling the soft, warm sand. Immediately a small party, headed by Amasis and one of the captains, set out with lighted torches towards the scene of battle. There they sought out all the wounded and brought them to the camp, together with many of the dead.

The wind rose swiftly and shrieked along the silent, darkened plain, twirling the sand round its invisible fingers, flinging it high in the air. The men crowded into the shelter of their scanty tents, drawing the loose flaps tightly across. Still the dusty grains forced their way in, covering the interior and half choking the uncomfortable occupants.

Outside it whirled in spiral columns, sinking as rapidly as it rose, then rising again to a greater height, flinging itself with an angry sound against any object in its path. The voice of the wind still shrieked; the horses and camels neighed, cowering pathetically; the red sand leapt up out of the "land of emptiness," and took curious forms, moving now in a mass, now in separate shapes. Occasionally some more venturesome soldier looked out from beneath his shelter. A wonderfully strange sight met his gaze, and then he would draw back quickly, his eyes full of the soft, fine sand.

In this hour the Desert laughed triumphantly to itself. Man had no love for the "land of emptiness"; yet how easily he hid his head when it shook out its rippling lap and played at warriors—warriors of sand, who fought together and moved according to the will of the commanding wind. The vast, incomprehensible Desert, barren of the earth's great treasures, voiceless and doomed to solitude! Now it spoke in its own strange language and sang its own plaintive song, the meaning of which few knew, save those who dwelt on the borders of the desolate place.

"Behold me and my warm, warm sand,  
No man knoweth me.  
They shrink from the touch of my hand,  
Only Ra loveth me.  
When I sit in silence alone  
Every one hateth me.  
When I sing and dance to the Sun  
Every man feareth me."

So sang the Desert. Half-triumphantly, half-plaintively the imagined voice rang out. The wind sobbed loudly, while the spiral columns of sand still rose like spirit-figures dancing.

The Sphinx, also, was happy; like a guardian it gazed across the mighty sea of sand, feeling its warm embrace. Only man hid his face and hated the vast stretch of barren land.

Later, when the storm had abated and the troops moved from the shelter of their tents, a strange scene met their bewildered eyes. The glimmering stars had disappeared, the indigo and deep bronze tints had faded from the sky, while a sweet, welcome light had dawned. Yet there was an unnaturalness about the heavens, for while the dark-



ening eclipse had passed, still the sun was by no means visible, but, instead, a thick, impenetrable curtain seemed to enshroud the usually blue-grey dome. An indescribable something hung over Memphis, and though the people rejoiced at the return of day, yet the mystery of the heavens caused them still to feel a strange bewilderment.

The Desert was comparatively quiet; only an occasional ripple stirred as the wind moaned itself into silence. The image of the Watcher of Ra was partially covered, its great paws being entirely hidden. And Amasis, who watched the stony face, thought it smiled half-disdainfully, half-mockingly, as if it would say—

“O mortals, ye who can turn the course of the waters of Sihor<sup>1</sup> and sing of your victories, how small and puny ye seem when the full wonder of creation is revealed ! ”

Then he looked forth upon the scene of battle and behold, no trace of war remained ! The sand, like a veil, had covered it up, leaving a mark of peace upon it. A cry of wonder went up from the troops as they emerged swiftly from their shelter. Then they dropped their voices into an awed whisper, treading carefully over the ruffled sands, and upon the place where they had fought only a short time before.

It seemed as if Nature had set herself the task of obliterating the grim horrors which marred her splendid majesty. Silence rested upon the scene of dread battle—silence and peace under the strange, heavy twilight curtain which hung upon the land like a shadowing mantle, as if seeking to hide the

<sup>1</sup> King Menes turned the course of the Nile to build Memphis.

sins of the earth from the burning eyes of the Deity.

In the royal tent Zar, Rames and the Governor of Memphis sat in close discussion. The unexpected turn of battle necessitated the formation of new plans, for they knew they had yet many difficulties to encounter. Amasis, with a reed pen in hand and a roll before him, acted as scribe.

About an hour later, when the meeting of the commanders was over, the young man arose and passed outside the tents. It was now the hour of sunset, but no burning tints illumined the dark sky. The strangely overcast heavens showed no signs of Ra's departure, but presently the twilight deepened, heralding the coming night. Amasis stood at the tent door, breathing in the cool, refreshing air, while the faintest of breezes fanned his heated brow. He put one arm upon the opposite shoulder in Egyptian fashion and contemplated the happening of the day. Round him the soldiers moved silently; from the heart of the City rose up a motley of muffled noises. That same night, three hours before dawn, Pharaoh, on the advice of his captains, would move near Memphis, when he determined to demand its surrender. Little or no opposition was expected, since the Queen's troops were now in a state of terrified disorder. Amasis tightened the grip upon the sword at his side as he thought of the morrow. He loved Zar with a whole heart, and in his devotion deemed no sacrifice too great. He knew that the Prince returned that love, and at the thought his eyes glistened tenderly.

"Strange are the ways of the gods," he murmured to himself. "First a wandering harpist on the

banks of Sihor, knowing no friend save a wise astrologer. From thence into the royal court at Thebes, a favoured servant of a queen ! ”

A hard smile crossed his features; a bitterness crept into his eyes.

“A Pharaoh’s chosen companion and friend,” he continued, “many and many a scroll would the record of my life fill. Perchance it shall be written some day, and be laid with me in my tomb. Then when in three thousand years I come again, I shall know the story of my former life ! Or else the tale may be set down so that they who come after may read. And in that book, what shall they call me ? Behold, I am naught but Amasis—a son of Khem. No line of nobles is mine; no known parentage have I—none but the sweet, restful lap of Seb ! ”

A sudden sadness hung round the corners of his lips. The knowledge of his unknown birth and wretched early childhood had always been a source of secret grief to him. He was gifted with the natural culture so prominent in those of gentle blood; his talents were above the usual, and yet he was doomed to pass through life not knowing his parentage.

“The scroll of my life,” he continued to himself, “shall say that the ancestors of Amasis were without names; while as for me, I shall be called the son of——”

“A son of the Unknown,” said a voice near at hand, and Amasis, turning with a start, found himself face to face with Rames.

The old Astrologer had been standing there for some few minutes watching the young man’s face;

then when he uttered his thoughts in an undertone Rames, with the help of his quick brain, understood much. The darkness had by this time deepened considerably, while the lights in the camp flared up.

"A son of the Unknown," he repeated, with emphasis, and Amasis took up his words with a ring of sadness in his voice.

"That am I indeed," he answered. "A child of the streets of Khem can claim no line of ancestors, however much that same child may feel the flow of noble blood in his veins."

"Why this train of thoughts to-night? What higher parentage can one desire than to be a son of the Unknown?" asked the old man in his usual enigmatical tone. He glanced up with meaning towards the heavens, in which no star gleamed with that peculiar brightness known only to Eastern countries, and more especially to Egypt.

Amasis bowed his head in silent assent.

"I understand thy meaning," he murmured.

"Be content; for all thy lack of ancestry, thou canst not say that thou art despised; and in the realms of Osiris, surely many things shall be revealed unto thee. Set thy mind upon thoughts of to-morrow. Strange events may take place; if so, thou and I must do our heart's best for Pharaoh."

"For Pharaoh!" echoed Amasis, with a sudden return of his enthusiastic light-heartedness. He twirled his short sword overhead as he spoke, as if he shouted a war-cry down the ranks.

"And for Khemi," finished Rames as he moved away, disappearing among the tents.

Amasis stood a few minutes longer, and then, going in search of his cloak, he commenced to walk

slowly through the camp, exchanging a greeting with the sentinels on duty. Lights were flashing dimly from the City beyond, while a dull murmur rose in the still night. The Governor of Memphis was confident that no attack was to be expected from the Queen's troops; through his spies he knew how great was the disorder in the City, therefore, as Ath had lost influence over her regiments, no fear was felt in Pharaoh's camp.

Amasis soon reached the outpost of the last sentinel. Just as he was turning back he thought he saw a suspicious movement on the part of some black object a little distance to the right. A faint whistle fell upon his ears, so, with his hand on his sword, he turned to the soldier standing close by.

"By Thoth," he whispered, "there is some spy noting the movements of our camp. Follow me." The thought flashed through his mind that after all another attack might be contemplated on the Queen's part; he knew she was not a woman to acknowledge defeat so readily. The twilight had not yet quite departed when, in the shadow of a mass of low bushes, he heard a light, stealthy tread; then, as another very faint whistle rose up, the two men crept along the ground cautiously. They were now some fifty yards away from the nearest sentry. At last they reached the bush, where they halted altogether, still remaining in a crouching attitude. A dead silence followed, and Amasis and his companion were beginning to think that after all they had made some mistake, when a faint movement took place in the shadow of the hedge-growth. By the sounds, the supposed spy was evidently lurking on the opposite side of the low bush.

Again there was a dead pause; then Amasis, with some impatience, arose and stepped forward, weapon in hand. The twilight had by this time merged into night, and he peered around with difficulty.

"Who lurks beneath the shadow of the hedge?" he called loudly.

The faint hooting of an owl answered him.

"Come forth, O Owl," the young man cried again, with irony in his voice.

Never for an instant was he to be deceived that he had come upon a night-bird's nest. He motioned his companion to move round in an opposite direction. Amasis himself was brave to recklessness, taking no heed of personal danger. Something told him that he had discovered a spy creeping on the outskirts of the tiny army, so he acted with his usual courage, hampered as he was by the almost dense darkness.

Another hooting rose up from the deep shadows, whereupon a small, lithe figure darted out, making off in the direction of the City. The young man, with equal swiftness, followed. After some little distance the dark figure in front paused, then suddenly and silently disappeared. Amasis glanced over his shoulder, noticing with some surprise that the soldier was not with him. Just at that moment he heard a muffled sound proceed from the bushes, which, in running after the phantom figure, he had left far behind. From the same vicinity another hooting echoed, which told Amasis that more than one spy was in lurking. He continued slowly, occasionally feeling round with his sword. Once he fancied he heard a faint movement beside him,

but discerned nothing. So eager was he in his quest that he never thought of turning back for his companion, nor had he noticed how great a distance he had put between himself and Pharaoh's camp.

Suddenly something caught round his feet, throwing him off his balance. He fell heavily to the ground, his sword flying from him; then, before he could make an attempt to rise, a dark object sprang upon him, while a heavy blow rendered him partially unconscious. Then he saw a flash of myriad lamps, followed by utter darkness. The man by his side gave a low, shrill whistle, whereupon two or three lithe figures ran forward from the distant bush. Between them they lifted the insensible young man, and instantly moved off at a quick pace in the direction of Memphis.

Over Khem hung the dense blackness of night, unrelieved by even a single star; beyond loomed distant lights, glimmering with misty radiance. Once the sound of singing came from the direction of Pharaoh's camp; then it ceased, and a dull murmur took its place.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### SEB REVEALS HIMSELF

WHEN Amasis awoke from unconsciousness an hour later, he found himself in a strange place. He was lying on a low couch in a large square room, the walls of which were richly decorated with carvings and paintings. The floor was of marble slabs, while over the entrance hung thick coloured draperies. The young man rose from the couch with a throbbing sensation about the temples, and taking up one of the two lamps from a shelf set in the wall, he examined the apartment carefully. The door was apparently barred from the outside, for it did not yield when he tried to force it open. He was quite alone; then suddenly his memory returned to him with a rush, so he sat down on the edge of the couch and tried to think.

Occasionally a faint sound resembling the tramping of heavy feet reached his ears. His body ached, his head throbbed painfully, but his senses were now as keen as ever.

Suddenly he heard the clanking of arms immediately at the entrance, and the next moment there was a creaking noise as of stiff bolts being drawn aside. Amasis stood up in the room, watching the door as it opened to reveal a couple of fully-



armed soldiers. One of them entered the chamber with slow, deliberate steps, his weapons clanking as he walked. The young man at once recognized him as a member of the Queen's body-guard, a Theban with whom he had often held converse.

"The recovery of my lord has been speedy," remarked the soldier, with a touch of mockery in his voice. "Doubtless a rest amid the luxuries of a royal palace has benefited him. Perchance he welcomes a change from the hard camping-ground of a few frightened Memphites."

Amasis faced him scornfully.

"Thou art insolent," he cried coldly. "Methinks it was the Thebans who became terror-stricken in the hour of battle. Where am I?"

"In the royal palace of Ath, the Lady of Khem," the man answered, with more respect as he looked at Amasis and noticed his almost regal demeanour. "If thou hadst not sought to capture a few spies thou thyself would not have been taken. The men tried to mislead thee until they heard thee speak. Then they thought: 'Behold, the voice is the voice of Amasis; it will be well with us if we take him!' So one ran out; thou followed, and what happened after that, thou knowest as well as any."

The man smiled complacently.

"Thy efforts have been in vain," said Amasis, "think ye that Pharaoh will suffer me to remain in this polluted spot?"

"A lentil for thy Pharaoh! The sovereignty of the Lady of Khem satisfies us. Never till her day did we soldiers drink so plenteously of Egypt's ruddy wines, nor revel in so much feasting."

"I understand," answered Amasis coldly. "Slovenly in the day; feasting at night, and a sotted brain in the morning! Why," he added, as the soldier drew nearer, "verily even now thy head is fuddled with wine! Call thyself a son of Khem! Thou art not fit to lay thy hands on war weapons!"

The man's face flushed angrily.

"By all the gods of Khemi, I warn thee," he cried in a thick voice, "for I may use my arms on thee!"

"Are all thy companions like thee?" asked Amasis undaunted. "Are they all drunken?"

"The Queen's regiments waste no time; when they are not fighting, they strengthen themselves. Nothing like the good red wine of Khem for making a man fit!"

The man grunted to himself as if he recollected some pleasant incident. Amasis drew back in disgust.

"Doubtless in time it will not fail to give him a fit!" he remarked.

The soldier made no answer. Evidently he had but lately drunk deep of the beverage he so loved, and its effect had already begun to manifest itself, for he stumbled and then leant against the wall for support.

The young man seeing his helpless state contemplated an escape, when he remembered the other soldier outside the door. He could hear him walking slowly up and down at that moment.

"Wherefore camest thou here?" asked Amasis suddenly. "I have no use for thy presence; take it hence!"

The man looked confused for a moment,

"Why came I here?" he muttered half aloud; "not to hear thy fine words, of that I am sure! By Hapi, I remember! It was to bring thee into the presence of the Mistress of Khem if thou wert recovered."

He lurched towards the door as he spoke and opened it. Then he stumbled, and failing to catch hold of the side-post, fell prone across the threshold. The other soldier came up with a laugh on his face.

"Sleep till the next wine drinking," he said, addressing the prostrate figure as he stepped over it into the room, "thou and I were never good friends!"

Nevertheless, this man also seemed scarcely steady on his feet.

"Follow me," he cried loudly to Amasis. "The Mistress of Khem desires to speak with thee. The palace is well guarded," he added, "so see that thou make no attempt of escape."

Summoning another comrade from the far end of the corridor, the three proceeded down the statue-lined passages, past innumerable turnings. Then they entered into that portion of the palace in which the Queen's apartments lay. The gorgeous luxury resembled that of Thebes, for Ath always kept the palace at Memphis fit for her reception, since she often travelled to the North.

In these corridors they met no one, till suddenly as they walked past an alcove, a familiar face looked out. It was Taska. Fear and sorrow were mingled on her countenance, but putting her finger on her lip, she smiled across to Amasis. The soldiers had not noticed her; they were talking to-

gether, and she kept well in the shadow of a colossal statue. The young man smiled bravely in return, resting his eyes with pleasure on her sweet face. Patheticness was stamped upon her features; also they lost their usual childish roundness, while her dark orbs, once so full of merry laughter, now seemed all the more brilliant because of a touch of sadness in them. A moment later she disappeared with the same reassuring smile upon her lips.

Presently they reached the door of the Queen's apartments. Here the soldiers, without a word, lifted the hangings and pushed Amasis in.

He found himself in a tiny square chamber, furnished in the usually luxuriant style. At the end lay a narrow, inlaid ivory couch. From this Ath arose and advanced towards him with slow, stately steps.

She was dressed in her favourite white garments, while at her girdle hung a tiny jewelled dagger, which sparkled as she walked. On her hair was set the asp sign of eternity; but on a table close at hand lay the war helmet which she always donned whenever she appeared outside the palace. As she reached the centre of the room, she paused, fixing her dark, and strangely luminous eyes on Amasis. Her head wreathed in its cloudy mass of hair was slightly elevated with commanding grace, and her bosom, also bearing a glittering, snake-shaped ornament, heaved with calm regularity. Amasis met her gaze for a moment; then remembering former days he averted his eyes; the sternness that gave him age creeping round the corners of his lips.

Anger flashed over the Queen's face for one

brief instant; then she veiled it under a smile and commenced to speak.

"The gods have delivered thee into my hands," she began.

"Doubtless they will also deliver me out!" broke in Amasis quickly.

Ath raised her head imperiously.

"I shall detain thee as a hostage and threaten Zar—who I know loves thee as a brother—with thy death, if he does not retract his insolent demands."

Then she relapsed into gentler tones, which covered up the dark intrigues of the heart.

"It grieves me deeply to speak thus to one who was once my faithful servant," she continued. "A traitor is always a pitiful sight to behold."

"Yea," answered Amasis shortly, looking at her with meaning, "and one who betrays the trust of the gods is even more pitiful."

"By Pasht," cried Ath furiously, "in the camp of my rebellious half-brother, thou hast learnt insolence! Forget not that once thou loved me!"

Amasis took a step forward and drew himself up with a proud gesture. His eyes shone brilliantly, reflecting the undaunted bravery of his soul. Even the Queen thought to herself that never before had she seen the young man thus. His presence partially overwhelmed her; she seemed to stand face to face with some mighty king, whose every look and word reflected grace and majesty.

"Loved thee!" echoed Amasis. "Never! By Pasht and Amen and all the gods of Khem, I swear it—never!"

He raised his hands pathetically, gazing at the far end of the room.

"Once," he continued, speaking every word with calm, piercing distinctness. "Once I served a beauteous vision who bore a likeness to Ath, the Lady of Khem. In that glorious phantom I beheld all things good; the reflection of the unblemished soul was ever before me. I was happy beneath its smile; I delighted in its service, verily, in that day I would have made my life a sacrifice if it had been necessary! The vision drew me into a snare, it played on the trusting heart of its servant, it deemed that it had but to call, and I, Amasis, would follow. The beauteous phantom used me as a tool for its wickedness; I even lied for its sake, causing Maut to hide her face! Then came the day of awakening; I saw my fair dream fade away like the mists of the morning when the sun smiles forth from the lap of Nut. My heart became bitter, for I beheld the ideal which I had likened to an unreachable star sink down and down till it disappeared entirely in the blackness of night. What can a man do when his honour and trust have been played upon? Why, he must strive to redeem that which was tarnished; he must set himself the task of guarding his soul's purity! This have I done, O Ath. As thou sayest, a traitor is pitiful to look on; yet how much more pitiful is the one who, having power, wisdom and high estate, causes another to be the medium of an evil deed! I was warned against thee, O Queen, warned by one who loves me dearly. Yet I answered his word with a lie—all for thy sake!"

He paused tragically, lowering his head for an

instant at the remembrance of former days. The Queen watched him curiously; for a moment there was a pause between them. Her emotions seemed partially roused; then she cast them aside, turning on Amasis in angry disdain.

"Cease thy impassioned speech," she said coldly. "Remember thy life is in my hands!"

Amasis looked undaunted.

"Is an Egyptian afraid of death?" he asked. "If thou sent me hence because of thy rage against me, why, it would avail thee nothing, for we should one day meet again in the Underworld!"

"Amasis!" cried Ath, as she took a step forward, the asp on her hair and bosom glittering with an unnatural light. "Once more I warn thee. Now I command, give me a true answer to the question I shall ask. What are the plans of him whom thou callest Pharaoh?"

"Thinkest thou that I can answer?"

"Thou canst and thou wilt. Dost thou know that I can crush Zar and Memphis under my foot? A few cowards in my regiments are gone; but what of that? I am yet strong."

Her voice rose shrilly, and she moved so close to Amasis that her scented robes almost touched him.

"I am no ordinary woman," she continued, "neither is my power ordinary. Provoke me not to wrath, lest I be forced to show thee my magic which hitherto I have partially hid from mortal eyes. I could cause the people of Khem to become dumb with terror. Béhold, the hidden wisdom is mine; I alone have knowledge of things mysterious which have not been revealed to any other in

Khem. Mock me not, O Amasis, lest thou shouldst become blind with the dazzle of my power ! ”

The young man moved away from the touch of her perfumed garments, looking upon her with sad eyes.

“Ath, Ath,” he cried at last, “how great might have been thy power for good in the world; how wonderful thy influence ! But thy present strength shall prove thy overthrow. Lo, the spirit of prophecy is mine for this hour ! That which thou trustest shall become weak; it shall snap like a reed which is bent and breaks beneath the strain ! In days gone by thy power has availed thee much; that was the power given by the gods. Now it mingles with the mysteries of darkness and therefore all shall be taken from thee ! Turn thee, O Ath; walk in the paths which thou didst leave because their summit seemed less fair. The road which leads into the habitation of the gods is long and weary to climb. Yet the glory of the end is so great that it would have blinded the eye of puny man to have gazed upon its full extent until he had passed through the stages of preparation ! ”

The Queen gazed at him in astonishment.

“Amasis,” she said, “the terrors of war have overcome thee. Thy talents are not such as should be wasted on commonplace things; the blood of nobles runs in thy veins; thy thoughts are worthy of a great councillor.” She touched him gently on the arm and whispered almost into his ear : “Tell me the secret of thy Pharaoh’s power and I, the Mistress of Khem, can make thee great, O



Amasis. Let Egypt be rid of this mad half-brother of mine, and who shall put a limit to the possibilities of thy might? Never was it ordained for thee to pass thy life unknown; why, even a Pharaoh might be glad to exchange his brain and body for thine, if he could! Tell me the secret of this rebellious army's magic."

Amasis dragged his eyes away from her strangely beauteous face and stepped back a pace or two. Then he confronted her with his arms folded over his chest. He had drawn himself up to his full height and stood clad in the splendour of his natural majesty.

"Zar, the Lord of the Two Lands, the Pharaoh of Khem, consorts with no magic," he said, "save that power which abides in all things—in all parts of the heaven and the air!"

"Can it shake the earth?" asked Ath mockingly; "behold, I shall do that in a time to come!"

"Yea," answered Amasis slowly. "It can!"

There was a pause between them and a strange, rumbling sound broke upon their ears. It was like the noise of a thousand chariots rushing with the swiftness of the wind. It grew louder, thundering nearer, and then the palace rocked; the lamps in the chamber fell to the ground and were extinguished, leaving them in darkness, while shrill, terrified cries were heard from the streets.

Ath threw up her hands.

"The earth quakes," she said. "Seb the Earth god reveals himself!"

In that moment Amasis remembered the dying words of Pharaoh Unas. Once again he stood

beside the gilded bed, hearkening to the voice of the unloved King.

"Behold," he had said, *"the Gates of the Future open before mine eyes. I see great wonders in store; battles and blood. Egypt shall tremble like a leaf when Zar rises up and Ath opposes. Ra will turn away his face; Seb the Earth shall mutter strange groanings, swift arrows shall fall from the hand of Nut. Yet light will come again and the Sun-god will smile!"*

The young man marvelled to himself at the manner in which the prophecy had come to pass.

The mysterious underground noises ceased suddenly; the land trembled once again and then was still. Confused shouts rose up from all parts; running feet were heard in the corridors beyond.

Amasis had not spoken a single word. The darkness in the room was intense; he could not even see the outline of the Queen's white-robed figure. Suddenly she stamped with her sandalled feet upon the floor, and a few moments later the door opened, revealing the ante-room beyond where the suspending lamps still swung violently to and fro with the shock of the earthquake. Two guards entered bearing lights, fright written upon their faces. Ath was trembling slightly, but she hid it under a veil of courage.

"See that the lamps are re-lit in my chamber," she said, "and take Amasis into the unused room below the palace; then bring me the keys thereof."

The man muttered something beneath his breath, while Amasis without a word stepped out into the

corridors. Then the guards closed round him and led him down the passage ; but not before his keen eyes had spied two familiar figures at the far end. They were the Queen's waiting-maid, Taska, with Ptahmes, the kindly old Architect of Khem.

## CHAPTER XXIX

“NO MAN KNOWETH !”

It was midnight, and consternation reigned in the camp of Pharaoh. An outpost sentinel had been found lying insensible some short distance from his station. And when after some time his senses returned, he related a strange tale before the assembled officers; how Amasis had called him when in search of a spy who was supposed to be in lurking. He told how the owl hooted and the lithe figure sprang out, Amasis following. Then the soldier felt something strike him on the head as he also began to run in pursuit. He knew no more after that, since the force of the blow was so great that he fell prone upon the earth unconscious.

The commanders listened to the man's story in surprise and bewilderment. Amasis certainly was missing; yet the manner of his disappearance was strange. Rames sat with his arms folded, a stern, inscrutable expression on his face; Jehudda appeared to be muttering to himself, while as for Zar, he paced the tent floor in speechless agitation. The Governor of Memphis stood with a perplexed frown puckering his brows. At last he struck his sword on the table before him.

“Pharaoh,” he cried, “that the noble Amasis has

been entrapped into the enemy's hands there is no doubt, and how it fares with him at this moment is more than I can hazard. Nevertheless, having considered all things, I should advise, O Zar, that the attack on Memphis' palace be made as speedily as possible—which would be in about three hours. Let every man in the army be told of the disappearance of Amasis, and ye'll see how they will fight all the harder in their efforts to free him, for he is loved by every soldier. There is something so strong, so noble, yet such winning humility about him that he makes even those who possess titles and are of ancient blood feel their puniness. Now I have only one fear, and that is lest Ath should hold him as a hostage and threaten his life if we persist in our attack. No doubt she has already sought to worm our secret plot from him. But I know Amasis. His heart is as true as my bronze sword."

He struck it on the ground as he spoke.

Pharaoh ceased his pacing.

"Good friend," he said, turning to the Governor, "thy speech is wise; let the attack be made as soon as it may. As for me my heart burns with eagerness."

A young captain sitting near one of the lamps arose. He was unprepossessing in appearance, having a low forehead, heavy chin, thick lips and a remarkably short nose. There were two distinct types of Egyptians, one showing refinement and delicacy of limb and feature; the other portraying the characteristics borne by this young officer. He made an obeisance to Pharaoh, and then began to

## 276 THE WITCH QUEEN OF KHEM

speak in a low voice which would not have been unpleasant if it had not reflected the naturally irritable nature of its owner.

"Spare thy sorrow concerning this Amasis," he said. "Pharaoh, thy heart is too kind. Was not the young man once a devoted servant of Ath, the Witch Queen of Khem? Has he not confessed the extent of his infatuation? Doubtless he still longed for the light of her beauty even after he had taken his vows to thee."

He looked up at Pharaoh's face and caught the Prince's gaze. For a moment he seemed ashamed and astonished; then he resumed, modifying his words.

"Or else the Queen's influence over Amasis has been too strong. Out of the distance she has called; and he has conjured up a plot whereby the sentinel should be led to believe that he has been seized by spies. What should be more probable seeing that this same young man had been in the Queen's presence and the recipient of her favours, even more than thou, O Zar!"

He broke off hastily and retreated a step or two, for the Prince now stood before him, his eyes burning with silent fury.

"Well is it that I have learnt self-control," he said, "or else thy head should not be safe on thy shoulders! I tell thee that in all the camp there is not a more faithful heart than that of Amasis. Let me hear no more of thy ill-pleasing, slander-ing speech. The time shall come when thou shalt see Amasis for thyself again and know how brave and unflinching a spirit he carries. I pass over thy

wild words concerning him, being willing to believe that thou didst speak them out of thy untiring devotion for me and my gallant brothers here."

He ceased, and the young captain, seeming abashed, sat down again under the lamps. Rames glanced up at the Prince with approving eyes. Inwardly he admired his speech, in which was mingled scorn, reproof, and yet a gentleness that cut more than stormy anger. The young captain might have secretly resented a violent reproach, for he was hot-tempered. Whereas he sat down meekly, and a few minutes later made several useful suggestions as to the proposed attack.

Then the old Astrologer smiled again, and told himself that Zar was never ordained to be anything else than a king!

In the stone-walled room beneath the palace Amasis sat in dreary solitude. The chamber was large, being apparently cut out of solid rock and having the ceiling carved in a curiously grotesque manner. A single lamp shed a solemn and almost mystifying radiance, making the darkness beyond the circuit of light seem all the more intense, and the shadows almost lifelike when the flame flickered.

Dead silence reigned, not even the faintest sound being heard from the palace above or the outside world. The young man had been overcome with an oppressive sensation of weary depression; since his bold speech before the Queen his spirits forsook him and reaction set in.

He took up the lamp and examined the flat walls,

## 278 THE WITCH QUEEN OF KHEM

which seemed to bear no crack upon them. At the far end he noticed several drawings chalked in red ochre, representing pastoral scenes apparently in the time of one of the earliest kings of Egypt. Near them were a group of papyrus and lotus blossoms, above which was a life-sized picture of Isis and the child Horus, both wearing the crown of their divinity. They were rudely drawn, showing that the artist had not yet attained much skill, or they had been executed in extreme haste.

Amasis held the lamp closer to the wall. The red ochre seemed perfectly fresh; every detail was distinct, and might have been done but the day before. A curious sensation of awe came over him, and he felt like one who is on the eve of a great discovery. He puzzled over the curious drawing for some few minutes, wondering who the artist might be. Then he moved down the wall, hushing his steps as he went, for the place seemed filled with mystifying stillness. Again he halted, for the flickering light had revealed some writing on the flat rock in red pigment.

"Ah," said Amasis to himself, "here is some key to the strange pictures."

The writing was rather faint, and gave the impression that the one who had inscribed the words was suffering, or of great age. An exclamation left his lips as he commenced to read. Then he laid the lamp down on the ground, for his hand trembled exceedingly. The inscription ran thus—

*I, Amenartis, lesser Scribe in the House of Ptah,  
an outcast from the Great King's Court and being*



*appointed to die, do make my final testimony on these walls, in the underground chamber in which, by the aid of Sarable, a companion-scribe and life-long friend, I have sought a refuge from the fury of the King. Because this place has been forgotten I am hidden therein, Sarable having sworn to release me by means of the secret way, which he and I found by accident during our explorations of the palace in private. Oil and food have I enough for three days, and I occupy myself in picture-drawing upon the walls.*

The writing became partly illegible here; the hand of Amenartis had evidently trembled. Amasis brought the lamp closer, shaking with excitement. The awful solemnity of the chamber with its death-like stillness almost frightened him.

*. . . Behold (continued the inscription), Sarable comes not! How many days have passed I know not, only that I have eaten my last food, while the lamp burns the final dregs of oil. Yesterday I was mad with terror; to-day I am possessed with a strange calmness, and to-morrow no man knoweth where I shall be. I have hearkened at the walls for the coming of Sarable, for the chamber opens into a secret way on the outer side. Has my friend forsaken me? I think not. My heart will not let me imagine that he is unfaithful to me. Perchance his actions are watched, or else he himself is dead. And now Death—that enemy, or shall I say that Deliverer?—has followed me here, and presently in His company I shall pass through the walls of*

## 280 THE WITCH QUEEN OF KHEM

*stone into the Great Beyond. Of my accusation I am innocent; even at this hour I feel no sorrow or fear. The silence of the chamber no longer terrifies me, although my body is weak; my eyes grow dim, soft voices speak in my ear, and among them there is one who cries: "Sarable comes not!" The words echo round me. What if after all he has been treacherous to me? Let the thought pass. Nothing matters now; for the flame of my life burns low, and my spirit being weary, already flutters its wings to the Underworld . . . the last few drops of oil are gone; the lamp flares up for the final time before dropping out into final darkness; and as it goes, I, Amenartis the Scribe, depart hence in peace. . . .*

A few illegible marks followed. Amasis, having read the strange inscription twice, went back and examined the rude drawing of Horus and Isis once more. The writing gave no date nor even the name of the King who reigned; his bewilderment increased as he returned to gaze upon the curious and pathetic testimony of the dead Amenartis. He pictured the awful scene in his desolate refuge, the stages of slow death; the terror he must have endured when Sarable came not.

How came it he had never heard of the writing before, and that the story of the Scribe was not known, for the Egyptians loved to tell strange tales? In the bewildering excitement Amasis forgot his own danger and the reason which brought him into the underground place. He carried the lamp down the wall, searching for further writings

or drawings. He found none; but his eyes suddenly caught on something bright lying in the dark shadows. He stooped down and picked up a heavy ring, set with a glittering scarabæus. The colour seemed to change continually under the flickering light, radiating a curious glow. The young man slipped it over his finger, watching its fascinating sparkle.

"It has belonged to the dead Scribe," he said to himself; then he raised his voice and called aloud—

"Amenartis! Amenartis! I, Amasis, wear thy ring! May it bring me good luck!"

The words fell against the walls, filling the room with sound. Then he turned back to look at the inscription once more, when he beheld to his utter amazement that in place of the writing was an opening in the wall. Some one in a dark cloak stepped through quickly.

"Have no fear," said a voice he knew so well from beneath the coverings. "Thy friends have not left thee to languish in the hands of the Queen of Khem!"

Then Taska threw off her mantle and smiled triumphantly up into his face. Amasis well-nigh dropped the lamp in his sudden surprise, when the girl, stretching out her hand, took it from him.

"Make ready," she said quickly, "the time is propitious, and thou shalt bid farewell for ever to this palace of mysteries."

Amasis opened his lips at last.

"Lady," he said, "thy kindness is so great that I may never hope to repay it."

She laughed tremulously.

## 282 THE WITCH QUEEN OF KHEM

"Thou hast many friends who would venture this much for thee. I suggested this chamber to the Queen for thy confinement; she agreed with me as to its safety; but then I knew this secret way, which, when closed, no one will be able to imagine how thou hast got free."

"Tell me the history of the room," said Amasis; "hast thou read yon inscription?"

"What!" cried Taska in surprise, "wouldst thou delay now? I have read the writings, and the very breath of the chamber makes me feel afraid."

She took a firm hold on his arm as she spoke and led him through the opening in the wall, holding the lamp aloft to light the way. Then, with a deft movement, she turned and pressed a small projection; a faint grinding sound fell on their ears as the square block of stone slipped into place. Taska smiled.

"See," she cried, "presently they will come and search for thee, and a cry shall go up that a spirit has carried thee off."

Amasis sighed with relief, and then together they sped down a narrow passage which led to the foot of some half-dozen stone steps. Here stood an oil lamp burning with bright radiance. It was the one which Taska had brought with her. They passed up the steps into a small irregular chamber having only three sides, the fourth being open. Taska threw her cloak on the floor and sat down.

"We must wait a short time," she said, "till Ptahmes brings word that all is safe."

"Again I can only give thee my thanks," answered Amasis, "for all thou hast done—the

thanks of a grateful and a devoted heart. During the time of waiting tell me, I pray thee, the history of the room I have occupied; my curiosity is great.”

The girl flushed under the ardent gaze of his brilliant eyes; then, handing him a couple of figs which she had thoughtfully brought with her, she commenced—

“The room has only lately been opened up. The proper entrance was blocked up for a century, I believe, until some two or three years ago Ptahmes suggested that it might be made use of as a store-room. The door was accordingly freed from all obstruction and the Architect, myself and several masons descended. We searched the chamber curiously, finding nothing till Ptahmes spied the writing. We read it together in amazement, but kept the words to ourselves, for the men were ignorant. Although the room was opened, no use was made of it after all, except that Ptahmes and myself often came down alone to puzzle over the strange inscription, also to find the secret way mentioned therein. At last, after many examinations, I remembered another subterranean corridor beginning at the east corner of the palace. We followed a passage which branched off to the right, leading in this direction. We found a projection in the wall which, when jerked in a peculiar way, opened into the very chamber whose secret entrance we sought. Still we told no one, but kept our discovery to ourselves. And all this took us a long time to accomplish, for the Queen did not often journey to Memphis. With regard to the history of the dead Amenartis

I know nothing; no other records are known of him."

"The proper entrance must have been blocked in his day," said Amasis.

"Doubtless," answered Taska. "Perchance Ath will descend into the chamber when it is told that thou art gone, and seeing the writing, will think thou hast found a secret exit."

Amasis glanced around him as far as the glimmer of the lamp would allow. The stone wall bore an ancient look, like a dark forgotten tomb which is suddenly opened up to the light.

"And this is the passage through which Sarable should have passed to release the hiding Scribe," he said softly. "Poor Amenartis! How often his *ka* must wander back to this dreary place. Even now I can see him tracing the words in red ochre and hear him mutter to himself with a mournful, fearful ring in his voice: '*Sarable comes not. Yesterday I was beset with terror; to-day I am possessed with a strange calmness; and to-morrow no one knoweth where I shall be.*'"

He repeated the words dreamily as if they came from his very soul. Taska touched him on the arm gently.

"Think no more of the writing," she said; "thou sayest the words as if thou wert the Scribe Amenartis thyself; as if thou stoodest on the brink of death instead of on the threshold of freedom. I hear Ptahmes' secret knock; let us ascend."

They rose to their feet; and the girl stooped to touch a projection in the wall. Amasis heard the dull sound of a tap beyond thrice repeated, but

still his thoughts ran back to the chamber he had left. He followed Taska slowly, unconsciously swaying rhythmically from side to side.

*"To-day I am possessed with a strange calmness,"* he repeated to himself in soft caressing tones, *"and on the morrow no man knoweth where I shall be!"*

## CHAPTER XXX

"FAREWELL, O MY BELOVED!"

It was two hours before dawn; Ath took a slight repose upon the splendid couch at the far end of her chamber. Lamps burned dully from their sconces in the wall, for the Queen never for an instant allowed herself to remain in the dark if she could help it. She lay fully dressed, her hair gathered together at the back, one hand thrown up, supporting her head.

Even the uræus still sparkled from her brow, while the jewelled snakes flashed from the bosom and twined around her fair, supple arms. She could not sleep, a strange restlessness seemed to have seized her; she would shut her eyes for a moment, and then open them at the next, fear seizing hold on her. True repose had not been hers for several years; she seemed to need very little sleep, and secretly boasted that eternal strength was hers.

Suddenly a confused noise broke on her ears, tramping of feet echoed beyond. Then some one ran along the corridors outside her chamber, and the next moment one of the two waiting women she had brought with her to Memphis burst in uncere-  
moniously.

"Tidings, O Queen!" she cried excitedly, her voice shaking for fear. "The young man named



Amasis, who was captured from the rebel army, has disappeared ! ”

Ath rose to her feet, her white garments clinging caressingly about her tall, perfect form.

“What meanest thou, girl?” she asked imperiously. “How should Amasis be gone?”

The woman leant against the doorway.

“The room wherein he was confined is empty,” she said, flinching from the Queen’s angry gaze; “the guards have searched diligently, but nothing shows how he may have vanished, except that on the wall they have found some strange writing in red ochre. It is written by one who calls himself Amenartis, and the captain of the guards thinks it may have been inscribed by this Amasis, though why, no reason is apparent. The door was fast, no window exists in the chamber, yet he has escaped—and not only he, but also the lamp which lighted the place.”

“The guards are mad or drunk,” said Ath furiously; “there must be some way of exit. I will descend there instantly; fool I was to abide by the advice of Taska ! ”

She made a movement towards the door, when the girl began to speak again.

“There are other tidings,” she said; “it is rumoured that he who calls himself Pharaoh approaches upon the city ! ”

Before the Queen could make any answer, men’s heavy tread was heard without, and a loud rapping echoed on the door of the anteroom.

Ath passed into the chamber beyond and admitted the soldiers. They bowed almost to the ground when they beheld that it was the Queen herself.

## 288 THE WITCH QUEEN OF KHEM

"Ye bring news?" she asked impatiently; "hasten instantly and speak."

The taller of the three stepped a pace or two forward.

"We grieve to bring these tidings before the Mistress of Khem," he said, "but all Memphis is in confusion; Zar approaches swiftly upon us, and there are none to stay his coming."

Ath started, and, with a quick movement, swung herself round till the lamps shone more fully on the man's face. The asp glittered strangely from her brow, and she drew herself up, seeming to tower above him in awful majesty.

"Thou hast something else to tell; hasten, and keep nothing back," she cried. "What are my regiments doing? Have their hearts grown weak at the sight of the rebel army?"

"Nay," said the man, "new strength seems to be theirs; none lift a spear against Zar, but they hail him joyfully, and at this moment take their places in his host. Hark, how the shouts ring!"

He paused, and distant sounds reached them. It seemed like a thousand voices raised in a mighty joyful unison.

"What shall be done, O Queen? Fighting is of no avail. Wherever Zar puts his foot, he triumphs. Still, there remains a small troop without. Shall it be an escort in thy flight? I pray thee, go while thou mayest, royal Mistress, and in Thebes, perchance, we may strengthen ourselves."

Ath smiled coldly.

"I shall not fly," she said. "Even yet triumph will be mine, for I shall put forth magic in this hour!"

The man stepped back with sudden awe, as if he stood in the presence of some goddess.

"All Khemi knows that thou of all rulers have been most marvellous."

He almost prostrated himself as he spoke.

"Ye have witnessed many wonders since our stay in Memphis," continued Ath, "all of which were caused by the gods on my behalf, for the purpose of frightening the rebel array! Although my regiments fled at the darkened heavens, yet the methods of the gods were good, for my triumph will at last be so great that it shall be talked of in three thousand years to come! Dost thou understand? To enjoy victory, one must win it under almost overwhelming difficulties. Presently ye shall see great things, and my regiments who were stricken in the time of darkness and earthquake shall, under my will, perform marvels; not only they, but also in company with the powers of air and the depths!"

"We know thou canst do strange things," he muttered, and his thoughts went back to the Queen's wild ride through the streets of Thebes, when the horses, possessing supernatural strength, flew without pausing from one hour to another, with the mysterious wind shrieking overhead.

"It is well, perchance, to tell thee, O royal Queen," he continued, "that the earthquake has done no injury to Memphis except near the Temple of Ptah."

"What has been destroyed?"

"A tree, the greatest of three outside the building, has been loosened from the soil. It threatened to fall, therefore one of the soldiers guarding the Temple dragged it from its place single-handed,

partly to satisfy a boast he had made with regard to his strength."

He paused in consternation, for the Queen's appearance had utterly changed; her face resembled that of one set in death.

"Is it the great tree on the right hand side of the pylon?" she asked quickly. "Art thou sure it is the largest of the group?"

"Yea," he answered; "the extraordinary height and girth of this particular tree is known all over Khem. It now lies in the empty courtyard at the back of the palace."

"Lead the way and show it to me," cried Ath imperiously.

With wonder written on his face, the man hastened to obey.

"Swift! swift!" she cried again, and she urged on his steps to running.

Out into the open air they passed, into the darkness of night. The soldier called a bearer of lamps, and together they entered the courtyard, in the centre of which lay a mighty tree, tall and of great girth. The place was now deserted; sometimes the sound of shouting broke upon their ears, while occasionally a haze of light leapt up in the distance.

Ath saw the tree, and remained looking at it silently for several moments. Then she turned towards the men and the waiting women who had followed their mistress out. The Queen was holding the lamp overhead, and its light fell full upon her. The glory of her unnatural beauty so startled the watchers that they staggered back in fear.

Then Ath opened her mouth to speak, and the

words came slowly, and with strange distinctness from her lips.

“Hear ye yon shouts?” she cried. “Hear ye the name of Pharaoh? Go, I command ye, mingle your voices with theirs! Was it not sworn to me that strength should be mine till a man could be found who, single-handed, should drag the great tree by its roots out of its soil by the side of the Temple of Ptah? In those days I deemed the words a mere figure of speech. Again I bid ye go; join in the triumph of Zar. The hour of my magic is past—depart, and leave me alone!”

“The Queen is mad!” said they who stood by; “a spirit has overbalanced her mind.”

But she turned from them even as they spoke, and casting the lamp on the ground, where it was extinguished, fled swiftly and noiselessly away, disappearing round the courtyard through the darkness.

The increasing hosts of Pharaoh passed down the wide streets of Memphis. At the appointed time they had started out softly and silently, carefully watching in case of a sudden attack. It did not come, but, instead, when the array arrived at the gates with Zar and Rames riding in the royal chariot, and the herald blew a blast, demanding surrender, to their utter surprise, the gates flew open, and they passed within.

All Memphis cried out that Zar came, but there was no fear in their voices; they shouted like a people who had been set free from a strange bondage. And so the tiny host increased; Zar, standing up in the chariot, smiled royally upon the inhabitants, even as Ath had done in former years.

Past the Temple of Ptah swept the vast array. The clash of weapons, the thundering rush of the war vehicles, the hissing of the flaming torches, the echo of the hailing cries; all these rushed like a wave of noise around, and into the far-off distance.

Then out of the crowd rose a clear, shrill voice.

*"He who was born in the Land of the Watcher of Ra, let him be King!"* it said.

And with one accord the throng echoed—

"Yea, yea; let him be King!"

Whereupon they glanced on all sides for the one who had spoken, but in vain.

The torches swayed from hand to hand, wood fires sprang up in the public squares, the helmets and the spears caught the ruddy light, the chariots were bathed in flame, as if the glow of sunset were upon them. Thus they swept on into sight of the white-walled palace of Memphis.

Rames in the chariot cast his eyes around with a sphinx-like expression on his face. Zar turned to whisper in his ear—

"Strange are the ways of the gods," he said; "who would have guessed such an entry?"

But the old man vouchsafed no answer.

Presently the Prince started violently.

"Behold," he cried, "methought I saw a familiar face among the throng."

Rames glanced up swiftly.

"Who?" he asked.

"The face of even Ath herself! It loomed before me for one instant; now it is gone, and I see it no longer."

He broke off abruptly, for the same voice which

had called before rang out again, with the same strange clearness—

*“Memphis,”* it said, *“lo, ye are free;—revel, O People, in your freedom!”*

There was an undercurrent of bitterness in the tones which might be noticed by a keen observer. The crowd took up the cry lustily.

“Free! Free!” they echoed wildly. “Hail to Pharaoh, who makes us free!”

The shout rose in joyful unison; yet if one person had turned to another and questioned from what bondage they had been released, they could not have answered. The glare of torches turned the night into day; the huts, the squares, the buildings and the surging faces stood bathed in the increasing yellow radiance, and still the unknown voice cried aloud in clear, resonant accents—

*“Hail, O Pharaoh!”* it said once more. *“One riseth, another falleth: such is the way of the gods!”*

The crowd glanced about them angrily, but found not the speaker whose tones were so strangely thrilling, and echoed above the dense wave of shouts of many a thousand lusty throats.

While Memphis heralded the approach of Zar the new Pharaoh, a man cloaked in a dark mantle, stepped out into the shadow of one of the court-yards of the palace. He was walking softly, like one who seeks to hide his identity. It was Amasis. The palace was deserted, the inhabitants having flocked into the streets. When he reached the entrance gates in safety a smile flickered across his pale features, for he heard the name of

"Pharaoh" borne upon his listening ears. A few minutes more and he would join the approaching host, where his beloved would give him welcome. The darkness was heavy overhead; only the lights in the deserted palace relieved the monotonous gloom. A faint breeze fanned him with refreshing gentleness as he lifted his head majestically and glanced up into the sombre heavens.

Suddenly other footsteps echoed beside him. A man had stepped out of the darkness and confronted him. Amasis recognized him as a member of the Queen's body-guard, a soldier who, since his sojourn in Memphis, had been more often drunken than sober.

"Who wanders forth from the palace?" he cried thickly.

Even now he reeled in his gait as he set himself in front of the young man's path. Amasis made no answer, but moved quickly aside. The man muttered something about his authority, and laid hold on the cloak which he wore.

It slipped partially from its position, allowing the soldier's drunken eyes to peer more easily into the other's face.

"Thou art Amasis!" he cried in astonished tones; "he whom the spirits carried out of the subterranean chamber but an hour ago."

He laughed wildly as he firmly grasped the young man's arm.

"Thou art the Magician of Khem—he who caused Ra to depart and Seb to reveal himself! Ha, ha! Amasis! Amasis! He who walks through rock walls—he who can become a spirit when he wills!"



Amasis tried to wrench himself free, for he now knew that the man was not only drunken, but mad; mad with the terrors and excitement of the day. The soldier clung faster, until at last they closed together in a fight. Amasis had no weapon, and, having eaten very little that day, found his strength unequal to the other's, whose very madness lent him power. They rolled in wild fury, Amasis seeking to extricate himself from his adversary's hold. At last he was prepared to run across the courtyard, when the soldier, drawing his short sword, lunged with full strength.

It caught Amasis straight in his side, and he sank down upon the ground with scarcely a groan. The man looked surprised for an instant, then, flinging his weapon from him, he laughed wildly to himself before dashing off into the darkness.

Just at that moment a woman ran swiftly out from a side portal. Taska, having heard a noise, had ventured forth to see if Amasis had passed out safely, when she saw the flash of the soldier's sword.

Now she sprang forward, with a little scream, and knelt down beside him. Amasis opened his eyes slowly as she bent over him.

"Thou livest, thou livest!" she cried in tones of relief. "Let me see the wound."

He held her off gently.

"Nay, nay," he said; "it is too late. Already my spirit departs from me."

He moved on to his side as he spoke, and, bending lower, she felt her hand clenched tightly, while his soft voice breathed into her ear,

"Farewell, farewell, O my beloved," he said, in tones of infinite sweetness.

And when she looked again the soul of Amasis, the Child of the Moon, had taken its flight into the heavens, and was "joined into the company of Ra."

Taska rose to her feet with a wild, shrill cry that echoed up and down the courts with a dirge-like sound. Even at this moment she heard the shouts that attended the coming of Pharaoh, and a moment later she knew his chariot was riding across the floor of the chief courtyard, which lay on the other side.

And so, under the dome of the heavy skies, Taska mourned in loneliness and despair, her soft, wailing sobs uniting strangely with the cries of rejoicing from beyond.

## CHAPTER XXXI

### THE LAST OF THE WITCH QUEEN

It was dawn, and throughout the wondrous night not a single inhabitant in the populous City had slept. Now the soft morning rays began to pierce the thick curtains of darkness, like fingers of light darting gently down upon the earth. The misty veils slipped away invisibly, and when a little later the people looked up into the strange sky they rent the air with a cry of jubilation, for they beheld that the Sun-god was rising in a shimmering majesty of many colours—the Sun-god who had hidden his face so long and smitten his children with darkness. Then they lulled themselves into silence, watching the long streaks of vivid purple light sweep across the mighty plains of the heavens, making the white marble buildings gleam in the fiery rays, piercing the black shadows with its radiant glory.

They looked with their faces raised in hushed silence until they saw Ra himself appear as a wondrous fiery ball. Then they broke into one long, wild, jubilant cry.

“The Sun! the Sun!” they shouted.

And they on the house-tops echoed back the words.

“Great is the majesty of Ra! Behold the dawn

over Khem! The Sun-god is pleased with his people! Rejoice! Rejoice, ye who are Children of the Sun!"

Pharaoh stood in the central hall of the great palace, his officers round him, engaged in low, earnest conversation. Shouts still rose up from the outside, while occasionally one or two soldiers belonging to the Queen's body-guard would reel across the outer courtyard, careless of the happenings of the day and chorussing a drunken ditty in discordant unison.

A hushed silence seemed to have fallen upon those inside the central hall, and their eyes often gazed with a sort of lingering tenderness towards a flat couch at the far end, where the remains of the dead Amasis had been but lately laid. The body was covered with a long green drapery on which was emblazoned the pattern of royal embroidery. They had by this time heard the story of the young man's sudden death just as he was stepping out in joyful anticipation to join the hosts of Pharaoh. Taska had told them all, and even now stood silently apart from the little group.

Zar was pacing slowly up and down, as was his wont when perplexed or excited. Once he went over and lifted the green cloth gently. At that moment the light of the rising sun found its way through a narrow window place. The hall was filled with the glow as the last beam of rosy radiance streamed in with flooding energy and rested like a scarlet pall upon the couch where the dead lay. For an instant it became enveloped in the fiery mantle, then the majestic splendour

passed and the yellow light of the fully risen sun appeared.

Zar stepped back quietly, turning to Taska.

"Thou sayest the Queen cannot be found?" he asked. His voice was strangely calm, like one who labours under a strong emotion and yet succeeds in hiding it.

"Nay," she answered, "none have seen her since she fled from the guards near the fallen tree and disappeared in the darkness."

"Let a thorough search be made," cried Zar, "flight has been impossible. Seek out any secret hiding-places."

"That has been done, my lord; will Pharaoh deign to search the palace for himself? Then he shall see all things as they are."

"That is good advice," answered Zar. "Come," he said, turning to one of the commanders. "And as for thee, O Taska, I pray thee to lend me thy services and lead the way."

They passed down the long corridors into that portion of the palace where the Queen's apartments were situated, Taska talking all the time, relating into Zar's eager ear as much as she knew of the story of Amasis' captivity in the palace together with the part she had played in his release.

"Would I could have foreseen that which has happened," she finished, with a sob rising in her throat. "I showed him a secret exit and the path which should have led him into thy hosts, and now my work is of no avail, only serving to bring mourning into thy royal camp."

"Yet," said Pharaoh gently, "thou didst what

thou couldest, and I know that Amasis is still with us."

They had reached the Queen's apartment and, passing through the anteroom, entered. A death-like silence rested upon it; the lamps were still burning dully, although the sunlight streamed in and lit up every corner of the exquisite chamber. No one was within, but a heavy perfume such as Ath was accustomed to use rose to the nostrils of the searchers. A few articles were thrown about in careless confusion, but nothing suggested that the occupier had quitted the palace in flight.

Taska went forward and groped behind a curtain, then glanced up the next moment.

"Not a single outdoor garment belonging to the Queen is missing," she said, "no mantle or cloak of any kind."

Pharaoh looked even more bewildered, and strode across the floor with resounding steps.

"My lord," said Taska timidly, "if thou shouldst find Ath thou wilt not slay her?"

Zar wheeled round abruptly.

"Who am I to kill a woman?" he asked coldly; "my decree should only be exile for ever. Thinkest thou that I am a coward and would cut off the time of her repentance?"

"Let my lord's wrath be appeased," answered the girl. "Although I was her servant because I could not separate myself from her, yet she was ever good to me."

The Prince studied her carefully.

"Girl," he said, "canst thou swear to me that thou dost not know thy mistress's hiding-place?"

"Nay," answered Taska, "I know it not."

"By Amasis, who being in the Hall of Judgment can see the truth in thy heart, canst thou swear?"

"I swear."

He dropped the hand he had laid on her shoulder and turned round. Something glittering on a low table caught his eye in the far corner of the chamber. He hastened across, the girl following. Suddenly she uttered a faint scream and pointed down.

"Behold," she cried, "yonder lies the asp the Queen was accustomed to wear about her brow—and this upon her arm."

She held up a thick golden coil, representing a serpent about to strike.

"Mystery upon mystery," she ejaculated; "my lord, I fear she has hidden herself away in one of the secret chambers to die by poison."

"Dost thou know of such hiding-places?"

"A secret passage lies on the opposite side of the palace; will my lord descend?"

"Yea, yea," he answered, "let us hasten."

They passed out and down the long winding corridors, not heeding the colossal statues smiling forth with strange stiffness from under the covering of vivid paint.

Just near to the entrance of the secret passage through which Amasis had escaped, they saw the Israelite approaching, walking with his usually slow majestic step. Pharaoh called, and together they descended the tiny flight of underground stone steps, Taska holding a lamp overhead.

"As far as I know," said the girl, "Ath had no

knowledge of this passage; nevertheless, we may find that it leads to others."

She pressed forward quickly, while the dull echo mimicked the sound of their voices with extraordinary exaggeration. Presently they reached a blank of wall and turned back till they came to the outer side of the chamber where Amasis had been confined. Taska opened the invisible door and they entered.

The stone chamber was perfectly empty, but the proper entrance on the other side stood slightly ajar. The three walked over the floor slowly, holding the lamp in a manner which gave the best light.

Taska had told Pharaoh part of the room's strange history, together with an account of the writing on the wall. He went over to read it, the others following him. Towards the end of the inscription the girl suddenly started and touched his arm.

"The Queen has entered this chamber lately," she said excitedly, "seest thou that?"

She pointed to the wall where the red ochre became unintelligible through the apparent feebleness of Amenartis. Below, some words were traced in some sort of a black pigment. She took the lamp nearer and read aloud—

*"On the morrow no man knoweth where I shall be,"* and then followed the Queen's royal signature.

"We are in the midst of riddles," said Taska in a subdued voice; "yonder is Ath's writing. Yet strange that Amasis should repeat these same



## THE LAST OF THE WITCH QUEEN 303

words as if his spirit forewarned him of coming events."

She was trembling with nervousness.

"I am frightened," she said faintly. "Methinks we have seen the last of Ath, the Witch Queen of Khem, for the palace and the surrounding parts have been searched and I know of no other hiding-place. I pray thee, let us ascend."

But Jehudda stepped forward and re-read the writing for himself.

"Methinks the lady Taska is right," he said solemnly; "Ath possessed knowledge and secrets of a curious kind. If she is alive no man knoweth where she is; or if she be dead still none can name the place of her abode. Ye have searched, and it has proved of no avail. Now as for this chamber over which time passed without the echo of a voice being heard within, let it be closed up for ever from the sight of man—its secret with it!"

He gathered up his garments as he spoke and moved out on to the threshold. As soon as the room was empty he closed the door with a loud slam.

"Hear ye that?" he said, "let no man in the present age or in ages yet to come, seek to place his foot within. Behold, I have shut the door upon the room's history, let the record of Amen-artis the Scribe and the writing of Ath the Witch Queen of Khem remain enshrouded in undisturbed solitude and silence till the world's end."

Pharaoh watched him in wonder; yet he did not attempt to gainsay the Israelite's words. Then

they ascended into the palace proper, Jehudda carrying the lamp in front.

At the end of the first corridor he halted and faced Zar with a thoughtful look.

"What a strange people ye are, O Egyptians," he said slowly, "strange and full of mystery! A riddle are ye to nations living, and still a riddle will ye be when many a thousand years has passed away. Your fame shall be the wonder of men and of your secrets few shall find an answer. With what wonders are ye possessed! But it behoves you, O Egyptians, to use your treasures well. How great had been the ruling of Ath, how marvellous her might had she but followed in the paths of goodness! Then she would not have had cause to write out of the bitterness in her heart—*On the morrow no man knoweth where I shall be!*"

He sighed gently and turned away to extinguish the lamp, for the corridors were filled with the radiance of shining day.

Suddenly Ptahmes was seen to be approaching.

"My son," he said as he came near to Pharaoh, "Rames the venerable Astrologer would see thee instantly."

Zar walked away to where he understood that the old man waited. As he went Jehudda stepped up to Taska and the old Architect.

"Lady," he said, "although I am acquainted with Ptahmes never have I spoken with thee before. Yet I would crave permission to say that I honour thee above all Egyptian women, because thou hast passed through an ordeal unscathed. Good always triumphs at last; many and many a time have I

besought Jehovah on thy behalf and on those thou lovest"—he turned with a nod to Ptahmes. "Once indeed I felt that ye would have special need of strength. I prayed for thee to my God for several hours together."

"What day would that be?" asked Ptahmes quickly.

"Sixth of Paophi; I remember it well."

The old Architect said nothing, but glanced in wonder at Taska. That had been the same day on which they conversed in the old man's chamber and the girl read aloud from the calendar.

Ptahmes turned the conversation quickly with the same puzzled expression on his face as often came to Rames when he spoke with the Hebrew.

"What are Pharaoh's commands?" asked Jehudda presently.

"I know not," he answered. "As for me I shall crave permission to return instantly to Thebes in company with the lady Taska. She and I desire to leave the court for ever, as it brings bitter memories to us. I am rich and have no daughter, and Taska has consented to enter my household as such. So now I can live my remaining days in peace—I who am not far off the allotted four score years and ten."

Taska smiled up into the old man's face.

"I shall be very happy with thee," she said softly, "for always have I regarded thee in the light of a father."

. . . . .

This was the last that was ever seen of the Witch Queen of Khem. The palace and the land was

## 306 THE WITCH QUEEN OF KHEM

searched throughout, but where she went no man learned. Some said she vanished by aid of her sorcery, others affirmed that she hid herself in an unknown subterranean way and died by poison.

The strange rock chamber was blocked up, and so its secret knowledge, with the record of the unknown Amenartis, was buried for all time and given into the keeping of Silence for ever.

## CHAPTER XXXII

### THE DEPARTURE

ZAR found Rames waiting in one of the apartments leading from the central hall. The old man rose from a seat as the Prince entered.

"Come," he said imperatively; "let us stand and talk together under the shining dome of heaven."

He took his staff and led the way up several flights of steps till they reached the flat roof of the palace. A sudden feebleness seemed to have fallen upon him, and for a time his remarkable energy departed. When they had ascended to the top, Rames turned and faced Zar with his arms extended towards the sky. The bent frame drew itself up majestically while the old fire appeared in the keen, deep-sunken eyes.

"Hail, O Pharaoh!" he cried tragically. "I, Rames the Astrologer, give thee the royal salute!"

His voice rose to shrillness and echoed far around, even down into the empty courtyards.

"Look on all sides of thee, O Zar, knowing thou art King of all thou seest. Into thy hands have the gods given Khem; they have placed the double crown upon thy head. Guard thee thy charge; make no mockery of thy majesty, and then all shall be well with thee and thine, both now and in the hereafter. For a time great events have come to

an end; that which I planned to do I have done, and therefore I would depart hence on a long journey."

"Where wouldst thou go, my father?" asked Zar tenderly. He led the old man to a seat as he spoke.

"To Thebes," said Rames, "back again to my old home, where I shall make ready for another voyage."

"But," said Pharaoh, "surely thou wilt not return to thy medicines and pore over thy charts as in former days? Come, I pray thee, dwell in the royal palace of Thebes. I swear by Isis that I will see thou hast all honour, and riches according to thy needs. It is now the time for thee to rest in peace and luxury. Thy work is done, now thou canst look back upon it with pleasure, knowing that in sacrifice and love thou hast accomplished much."

Rames rose to his feet and leant on his staff.

"It cannot be," he said firmly. "How could I, who have lived in humble happiness and work, find pleasure in idle splendour? My age is great, very great—no man in Khem knoweth the year I was born. Even to me my childhood seems a misty memory, for I always felt old—old in mind and heart. Now I, who have outlived many and many an ancient inhabitant of Egypt, know that the days of my life are numbered. Let me hence, O Pharaoh, so that I may do even that which seemeth good unto me. On the morrow I depart for the city I love so well, and with me goes Jehudda the Hebrew. . This North Land suits me not; therefore

I long to journey back on the bosom of glorious Hapi into the smiling port of wondrous Thebes. Once more I shall work among the medicine phials and the charts which tell the story of heaven's stars. Once again I shall pore over the ancient papyri filled with secrets which no man knoweth save myself. Then when I feel certain that my days are done, I shall build a great fire and burn up the sources of my knowledge into nothingness, lest they fall into hands which might use them for evil."

He rubbed his palms gently, smiling the while, like a child who has grown homesick in a strange place. Then he took up his staff and hobbled slowly towards the steps.

"My father," said Zar, "wilt thou not reconsider thy decision?"

Rames turned at the head of the steps.

"Why should I?" he asked. "Nay, I shall work here on earth till I join my beloved in heaven! In Thebes, perchance I shall see thee again; till then, farewell. Think kindly on the old man who tended thee as a son, and has seen thee ascend into the highest office a man can have on earth—that of being guardian of a mighty nation. Again I say, beware of thy responsibility and the gods shall reward thee. Hail, O Pharaoh—hail and farewell!"

A week or two later Rames, in company with Jehudda, had reached Thebes in safety. Pharaoh still remained in Memphis, and would stay for some time longer, putting all matters to rights.

The old Astrologer travelled down by the next

## 310 THE WITCH QUEEN OF KHEM

boat he could find, not listening to Zar's suggestion that a special luxurious vessel should be arranged. The Hebrew tended the old Egyptian carefully, for of late feebleness had robbed him of his usual energy. His features aged; the keen eyes lost something of their brightness and the limbs tottered.

Throughout the journey he spoke very little, but would rest for hours together in their cabin, gazing forth upon the placid waters dreamily, as if he saw visions there. Sometimes he moved his lips in a soft murmuring, and when the Israelite bent forward to catch its meaning, he would hear the name of Amasis whispered in childlike repetition.

Then when night came and the myriad stars shone forth in the dome of the endless heavens with the moon set in its midst, Rames would look upwards into the heights with a happy smile upon his face.

"See," he would say softly, "yonder dwells the Child of the Moon—Amasis, my beloved——"

Whereupon his fingers would feel for a package which never left his side; for he had borne the harp which Amasis loved so well away with him. Jehudda at such times would make no answer, only watch the old man tenderly as he babbled in dreamy incoherence to himself.

At last the great City of Thebes loomed in view. The buzz from the squares and markets found its way upon the placid waters of the sluggish Nile. The white marble buildings, brilliant with coloured stone and covered with hieroglyphics; the tall obelisks pointing towards the heavens and dedi-



cated to Ra, brought a smile of joy to the faces of the travellers. The quay swarmed with people, some waiting for friends to arrive; tradesmen shouting their wares; jugglers calling for all to come and see; wandering minstrels playing on the shrill pipes, sailors rolling bales across the landing stage; merchants quarrelling and bartering for goods; and above all the unceasing din of shouts and loud conversation.

Rames roused from his lethargy as he saw the dazzling splendour of his beloved city looming in the distance, and by the time he and Jehudda had reached the humble little dwelling place, so cut off from neighbours, strength seemed to return to him, his limbs were less tottering and he talked with his usual vivacity.

The next day after their return Rames brought out all his medicine phials and jars; rereading the rolls of papyri, the contents of which no one but himself ever knew. Indeed, the old man was like a child who after a long while is restored to his favourite toy.

About a week later, during which time Jehudda had much difficulty in restraining the crowds who, hearing of the old Astrologer's return, flocked to see him, Rames called the Israelite to him.

"Friend," he said, "I desire to be alone to-day, leave me, I pray thee, till to-night, neither come again till the moon has dawned fully in the heavens."

So Jehudda, knowing the old man's strange character, asked no questions, but went on a journey to a friend in that part of the city called Western Thebes, which is also known as the Ceme-

tary of the Dead. That was in the morning, and Rames shut himself in his chamber and wrote till the setting of the sun.

Then he arose, and sealing the papyri, laid them on one side carefully. He opened the door, watching the ruddy glow of the fiery orb staining sky and earth with its vivid hues. At last it fell over the horizon behind the clouds and the usual olive after-glow spread abroad, followed by a deep blue-grey. Rames waited till he saw the rim of the yellow moon manifesting itself; whereupon with a smile on his face he re-entered the room, leaving the door open.

When he re-appeared his arms were full of rolls, closely written and worn with reading. Night was now descending with Eastern rapidity; the stars peeped faintly forth, while all around rested a sweet stillness.

The old man came to the centre of the tiny courtyard, throwing his rolls on the ground. Whereupon he kindled a small fire, and when the flames leaped up, he flung them in one by one, gazing at them tenderly, for they had been his friends. Slowly the fire grew larger; then Rames looking up into the skies saw that the majesty of night had risen in all its splendour. Once again he entered the house, to return bearing the harp belonging to the dead Amasis. On top of the hissing flames he placed it, not knowing the secret it bore within in the shape of the scroll which the dead Horus had written in the hour of his death.

The Astrologer stepped back into the portal to watch his work. With a smile lingering on his

face he sat down on the stone bench. For Rames knew that death was approaching quickly upon him, therefore he prepared against its coming.

The flames ran like swiftly gliding fingers over the tiny harp, touching the strings caressingly with its burning hand. Suddenly a throbbing came from its midst and a soft, shrill dirge wailed across the court.

Rames started to his feet.

"Ha," he said beneath his breath, "there is the sound of music in my ears. Sing, O harp, sing for the final time! Did I not swear that no hand should touch thy sacred strings since he who played thee is dead?"

He advanced and spread out his arms over the lowering fire; the myriad stars blinked overhead, the full moon streamed upon his uplifted face as it had done many and many a time before when he had gazed forth with searching eyes into the heavens in the midst of the stillness of night. The low dirge echoed in tremulous sweetness, increasing in volume, till it gradually dropped into a soft wailing, and then with a little sob lulled into silence.

Meanwhile Rames rocked himself gently to and fro; on the rugged features lay a great calmness, while the child-like smile flickered round the corners of his lips. He opened his mouth to speak with the stars and heavens for his hearers.

"Amasis! Amasis!" he cried, in a soft, purring voice. "Child of the Moon, hearken! I, Rames the Astrologer in Thebes, a dweller among the

### 314 THE WITCH QUEEN OF KHEM

Living, give greeting unto thee, O Beloved, who art in Amenti. Behold, I follow swiftly in thy steps; I hear the approach of the One whom men call Death, and presently I shall leap into His arms and pass noiselessly away into the West. Amasis! Amasis!" he continued shrilly; "beloved, I see thy face. Hand in hand with thee stands Horus, mine ancient friend. Once before under the moonlit sky I greeted him, and my voice breaking the silence of Night, entered his abode. Now I greet thee again, O Horus. The harp of the dead has played a dirge; the hand of fire has touched the strings, and all the papyri I loved so well have become a little heap of dust. On the morrow the wind shall come and carry the tiny grains abroad; thus perisheth the sources of my knowledge and the relic of him whom my heart loved. My wisdom mingling with the soft soil of Khem; my mortal days into Life Eternal! Fitting end; for in the Great Beyond all things will be revealed unto me and I shall laugh at the knowledge I counted so dear during my sojourn on earth. Farewell, farewell, O Egypt; land of Wisdom and Wealth, of Wonders and Mystery. Farewell all ye who have known Rames the Astrologer! Farewell to thee, O Sihor, whose birth-place is unknown! Amasis waits with his hand on Amenti's portal, and I must hasten to give him hail——"

Jehudda found the old man resting in the porchway of his house asleep in the arms of Death. A faint smile hung round the corners of his still lips, while the queen of the night shone in silent glory,

keeping vigil over the dead. A tiny heap of dust and ashes smouldered in the centre of the courtyard as the Israelite in sorrowful wonder entered the house. On the table he found two sealed rolls, one inscribed for Pharaoh, the other to himself. He took his own out to read by the light of the moon, breaking the fastening carefully. The epistle was long, yet only one thing in it need be recorded. It was this—that the old man passed over every atom of his wealth into the hands of the Hebrew, at the same time giving concise directions as to how it could be obtained.

On the morrow a cry of wailing went up throughout Thebes, and the people spoke in hushed voices one to another saying: "Rames the Astrologer is dead; mourn for the man of strange wisdom; wail for him who was Rames the Beloved of Ra!"

Pharaoh, standing alone in the gardens of his palace, heard the cry and mourned because in the midst of his power he was desolate. Then from the distance the soft sound of singing rose to his ears. It was a chorus of voices chanting a dirge for the dead.

"The great one has gone to his rest" (they sang),  
"Ended his task and his race.  
Thus men are aye passing away,  
And youths are aye taking their place.  
As Ra riseth up every morning,  
And Tum every evening doth set,  
Each soul in its turn draweth breath,  
Each man that is born seeth death!"

The soft dirge died away, and in the silence that followed, Zar, looking forward into the future,

## 316 THE WITCH QUEEN OF KHEM

bade farewell to the awful past. He knew that the spirits of the dead were around him, and even as he stood gazing into the far-off distance, the glory of the sun gleamed forth more brightly upon the peaceful earth, and Hope dawned in the heart of Pharaoh and on Khem.

THE END

## NEW FICTION

### **The Old Man in the Corner**

By BARONESS ORCZY. Illustrated by  
H. M. BROCK ... .. 6/-

### **Henry of Navarre**

By MAY WYNNE. (Adapted from the  
play by WILLIAM DEVEREUX) ... 6/-

### **Penelope Ann**

By J. HENRY HARRIS, author of  
"Cornish Saints and Sinners" ... 6/-

### **The Disc**

By J. B. HARRIS BURLAND, author of  
"The Financier," etc. ... 6/-

### **The Breath of Scandal**

By ELLA SAWTELL ... .. 6/-

### **The Master Schemer**

By MRS. VERE CAMPBELL, author of  
"Ferriby," etc. ... .. 6/-

### **The Runaways**

By R. ANDOM ... .. 3/6

### **The Spitfire**

By EDWARD PEFLE ... .. 6/-

### **The Wanton**

By FRANCES FORBES-ROBERTSON ... 6/-

### **A Black Inheritance**

By JOHN MCENERY ... .. 6/-

### **Moon of Valleys**

By DAVID WHITELAW, author of "The  
Gang" ... .. 6/-

### **In the Shadow of the Peaks**

By STATA B. COUCH ... .. 6/-

### **Beauty Retire**

By DORA MELLOR ... .. 6/-

# The Lotus Library

Foolscap 8vo, cloth, top edge gilt, with bookmark, 1s. 6d. net;  
leather, with bookmark, 2s. net.

*Several popular English and French Classics are in preparation  
for this series.*

- Thais.** By ANATOLE FRANCE. Translated by ERNEST TRISTAN.
- The Nabob.** By ALPHONSE DAUDET. Translated and Edited by HENRY BLANCHAMP.
- Drink.** By ZOLA. Done into English by S. J. ADAIR FITZ-GERALD, with Illustrations by CHAS. DE LACY.
- Madame Bovary.** By GUSTAVE FLAUBERT. Done into English by HENRY BLANCHAMP.
- The Black Tulip.** By ALEXANDRE DUMAS. Newly done into English with Introduction by S. J. ADAIR FITZ-GERALD.
- Sapho.** By ALPHONSE DAUDET. A new Translation by G. F. MONKSHOOD.
- A Woman's Soul.** By GUY DE MAUPASSANT. Done into English by HENRY BLANCHAMP.
- La Faustin.** By EDMOND DE GONCOURT. Done into English by G. F. MONKSHOOD and ERNEST TRISTAN.
- A Modern Man's Confession.** By ALFRED DE MUSSET. Translated from the French by G. F. MONKSHOOD.
- The Matapan Affair.** By FORTUNE DU BOISGOBEY. Translated by G. F. MONKSHOOD.
- Vathek.** By WILLIAM BECKFORD. Edited, with an Introduction, by JUSTIN HANNAFORD.
- Romance of a Harem.** Translated from the French by C. FORESTIER-WALKER.
- When it was Dark.** By GUY THORNE.
- Woman and Puppet.** By PIERRE LOUYS. Translated by G. F. MONKSHOOD.
- The Blackmailers.** By EMILE GABORIAU. Translated by ERNEST TRISTAN.
- Adventures of Baron Munchausen.** With an Introduction by HENRY BLANCHAMP. Illustrated.
- The Mummy's Romance.** By THEOPHILE GAUTIER. Translated by G. F. MONKSHOOD.
- The Blue Duchess.** By PAUL BOURGET. Translated by ERNEST TRISTAN.
- The Latin Quarter.** By HENRY MURGER ("Scenes de la Vie de Boheme"). Translated by ELLEN MARRIAGE and JOHN SELWYN, with an Introduction by ARTHUR SYMONS.
- Salammbo.** By GUSTAVE FLAUBERT. Translated by J. W. MARRIAGE, with an Introduction by ARTHUR SYMONS.
- A Woman's Heart.** By PAUL BOURGET. Translated by ERNEST TRISTAN.
- A Good-natured Fellow.** By PAUL DE KOCK. Translated by HENRY BLANCHAMP.
- Andre Cornells.** By PAUL BOURGET. Translated by G. F. MONKSHOOD.
- The Rival Actresses.** By GEORGES OHNET. Translated by G. F. MONKSHOOD.



**THE OLD MAN  
IN THE CORNER**

BY

BARONESS ORCZY

*Illustrated by H. M. BROCK*

---

PRICE SIX SHILLINGS

---

**THE OLD MAN  
IN THE CORNER**

# **PENELOPE ANN**

**A Charming Cornish Story**

BY

**J. HENRY HARRIS**

*Author of "CORNISH SAINTS AND SINNERS"*

---

**AT ALL BOOKSHOPS**

**6/=**

**ASK FOR IT AT YOUR  
LIBRARY**

**PENELOPE ANN**