

CHAPTER II

OF THE DISOBEDIENCE OF HARMACHIS; OF THE SLAYING OF THE LION; AND OF THE SPEECH OF THE OLD WIFE, ATOUA

And after these things Ptolemy the Piper troubled us no more, nor did he again send his soldiers to seek for him of whom it was prophesied that he should be Pharaoh. For the head of the child, my foster-brother, was brought to him by the eunuch as he sat in his palace of marble at Alexandria, flushed with Cyprian wine, and played upon the flute before his women. And at his bidding the eunuch lifted up the head by the hair for him to look on. Then he laughed and smote it on the cheek with his sandal, bidding one of the girls crown Pharaoh with flowers. And he bowed the knee, and mocked the head of the innocent child. But the girl, who was sharp of tongue--for all of this I heard in after years--said to him that "he did well to bow the knee, for this child was indeed Pharaoh, the greatest of Pharaohs, and his name was the Osiris and his throne was Death."

Aulêtes was much troubled at these words, and trembled, for, being a wicked man, he greatly feared entering into Amenti. So he caused the girl to be slain because of the evil omen of her saying; crying that he would send her to worship that Pharaoh whom she had named. And the other women he sent away, and played no more upon the flute till he was once again drunk on the morrow. But the Alexandrians made a song on the matter, which is still sung about the streets. And this is the beginning of it--

Ptolemy the Piper played
Over dead and dying;
Piped and played he well.
Sure that flute of his was made
Of the dank reed sighing
O'er the streams of Hell.
There beneath the shadows grey,
With the sisters three,
Shall he pipe for many a day.
May the Frog his butler be!
And his wine the water of that countrie--
Ptolemy the Piper!

After this the years passed on, nor did I, being very little, know anything of the great things that came to pass in Egypt; nor is it my purpose to set them out here. For I, Harmachis, having little time left to me, will only speak of those things with which I have been concerned.

And as the time went on, my father and the teachers instructed me in the ancient learning of our people, and in such matters appertaining to the Gods as it is meet that children should know. So I grew strong and comely, for my hair was black as the hair of the divine Nout, and my eyes were blue as the blue lotus, and my skin was like the alabaster within the sanctuaries. For now that these glories have passed from me I may speak of them without shame. I was strong also. There was no youth of my years in Abouthis who could stand against me to wrestle with me,

nor could any throw so far with the sling or spear. And I much yearned to hunt the lion; but he whom I called my father forbade me, telling me that my life was of too great worth to be so lightly hazarded. But when I bowed before him and prayed he would make his meaning clear to me, the old man frowned and answered that the Gods made all things clear in their own season. For my part, however, I went away in wrath, for there was a youth in Abouthis who with others had slain a lion which fell upon his father's herds, and, being envious of my strength and beauty, he set it about that I was cowardly at heart, in that when I went out to hunt I only slew jackals and gazelles. Now, this was when I had reached my seventeenth year and was a man grown.

It chanced, therefore, that as I went sore at heart from the presence of the High Priest, I met this youth, who called to me and mocked me, bidding me know the country people had told him that a great lion was down among the rushes by the banks of the canal which runs past the Temple, lying at a distance of thirty stadia from Abouthis. And, still mocking me, he asked me if I would come and help him slay this lion, or would I go and sit among the old women and bid them comb my side lock? This bitter word so angered me that I was near to falling on him; but in place therefore, forgetting my father's saying, I answered that if he would come alone, I would go with him and seek this lion, and he should learn if I were indeed a coward. And at first he would not, for, as men know, it is our custom to hunt the lion in companies; so it was my hour to mock. Then he went and fetched his bow and arrows and a sharp knife. And I brought forth my heavy spear, which had a shaft of thorn-wood, and at its end a pomegranate in silver, to hold the hand from slipping; and,

in silence, we went, side by side, to where the lion lay. When we came to the place, it was near sundown; and there, upon the mud of the canal-bank, we found the lion's slot, which ran into a thick clump of reeds.

"Now, thou boaster," I said, "wilt thou lead the way into yonder reeds, or shall I?" And I made as though I would lead the way.

"Nay, nay," he answered, "be not so mad! The brute will spring upon thee and rend thee. See! I will shoot among the reeds. Perchance, if he sleeps, it will arouse him." And he drew his bow at a venture.

How it chanced I know not, but the arrow struck the sleeping lion, and, like a flash of light from the belly of a cloud, he bounded from the shelter of the reeds, and stood before us with bristling mane and yellow eyes, the arrow quivering in his flank. He roared aloud in fury, and the earth shook.

"Shoot with the bow," I cried, "shoot swiftly ere he spring!"

But courage had left the breast of the boaster, his jaw dropped down and his fingers unloosed their hold so that the bow fell from them; then, with a loud cry he turned and fled behind me, leaving the lion in my path. But while I stood waiting my doom, for though I was sore afraid I would not fly, the lion crouched himself, and turning not aside, with one great bound swept over me, touching me not. He lit, and again he bounded full upon the boaster's back, striking him such a blow with his

great paw that his head was crushed as an egg thrown against a stone. He fell down dead, and the lion stood and roared over him. Then I was mad with horror, and, scarce knowing what I did, I grasped my spear and with a shout I charged. As I charged the lion lifted himself up above me. He smote at me with his paw; but with all my strength I drove the broad spear into his throat, and, shrinking from the agony of the steel, his blow fell short and did no more than rip my skin. Back he fell, the great spear far in his throat; then rising, he roared in pain and leapt twice the height of a man straight into the air, smiting at the spear with his forepaws. Twice he leapt thus, horrible to see, and twice he fell upon his back. Then his strength spent itself with his rushing blood, and, groaning like a bull, he died; while I, being but a lad, stood and trembled with fear now that all cause of fear had passed.

But as I stood and gazed at the body of him who had taunted me, and at the carcass of the lion, a woman came running towards me, even the same old wife, Atoua, who, though I knew it not as yet, had offered up her flesh and blood that I might be saved alive. For she had been gathering simples, in which she had great skill, by the water's edge, not knowing that there was a lion near (and, indeed, the lions, for the most part, are not found in the tilled land, but rather in the desert and the Libyan mountains), and had seen from a distance that which I have set down. Now, when she was come, she knew me for Harmachis, and, bending herself, she made obeisance to me, and saluted me, calling me Royal, and worthy of all honour, and beloved, and chosen of the Holy Three, ay, and by the name of the Pharaoh! the Deliverer!

But I, thinking that terror had made her sick of mind, asked her of what she would speak.

"Is it a great thing," I asked, "that I should slay a lion? Is it a matter worthy of such talk as thine? There live, and have lived, men who have slain many lions. Did not the Divine Amen-hetep the Osirian slay with his own hand more than a hundred lions? Is it not written on the scarabæus that hangs within my father's chamber, that he slew lions aforetime? And have not others done likewise? Why then, speakest thou thus, O foolish woman?"

All of which I said, because, having now slain the lion, I was minded, after the manner of youth, to hold it as a thing of no account. But she did not cease to make obeisance, and to call me by names that are too high to be written.

"O Royal One," she cried, "wisely did thy mother prophecy. Surely the Holy Spirit, the Knepth, was in her, O thou conceived by a God! See the omen. The lion there--he growls within the Capitol at Rome--and the dead man, he is the Ptolemy--the Macedonian spawn that, like a foreign weed, hath overgrown the land of Nile; with the Macedonian Lagidæ thou shalt go to smite the lion of Rome. But the Macedonian cur shall fly, and the Roman lion shall strike him down, and thou shalt strike down the lion, and the land of Khem shall once more be free! free! Keep thyself but pure, according to the commandment of the Gods, O son of the Royal House; O hope of Khemi! be but ware of Woman the Destroyer, and as I have said, so shall it be. I am poor and wretched; yea, stricken with

sorrow. I have sinned in speaking of what should be hid, and for my sin I have paid in the coin of that which was born of my womb; willingly have I paid for thee. But I have still of the wisdom of our people, nor do the Gods, in whose eyes all are equal, turn their countenance from the poor; the Divine Mother Isis hath spoken to me--but last night she spake--bidding me come hither to gather herbs, and read to thee the signs that I should see. And as I have said, so it shall come to pass, if thou canst but endure the weight of the great temptation. Come hither, Royal One!" and she led me to the edge of the canal, where the water was deep, and still and blue. "Now gaze upon that face as the water throws it back. Is not that brow fitted to bear the double crown? Do not those gentle eyes mirror the majesty of kings? Hath not the Ptah, the Creator, fashioned that form to fit the Imperial garb, and awe the glance of multitudes looking through thee to God?

"Nay, nay!" she went on in another voice--a shrill old wife's voice--"I will--be not so foolish, boy--the scratch of a lion is a venomous thing, a terrible thing; yea, as bad as the bite of an asp--it must be treated, else it will fester, and all thy days thou shalt dream of lions; ay, and snakes; and, also, it will break out in sores. But I know of it--I know. I am not crazed for nothing. For mark! everything has its balance--in madness is much wisdom, and in wisdom much madness. La! la! la! Pharaoh himself can't say where the one begins and the other ends. Now, don't stand gazing there, looking as silly as a cat in a crocus-coloured robe, as they say in Alexandria; but just let me stick these green things on the place, and in six days you'll heal up as white as a three-year-child. Never mind the smart of it, lad. By Him who sleeps

at Philæ, or at Abouthis, or at Abydus--as our divine masters have it now--or wherever He does sleep, which is a thing we shall all find out before we want to--by Osiris, I say, you'll live to be as clean from scars as a sacrifice to Isis at the new moon, if you'll but let me put it on.

"Is it not so, good folk?"--and she turned to address some people who, while she prophesied, had assembled unseen by me--"I've been speaking a spell over him, just to make a way for the virtue of my medicine--la! la! there's nothing like a spell. If you don't believe it, just you come to me next time your wives are barren; it's better than scraping every pillar in the Temple of Osiris, I'll warrant. I'll make 'em bear like a twenty-year-old palm. But then, you see, you must know what to say--that's the point--everything comes to a point at last. La! la!"

Now, when I heard all this, I, Harmachis, put my hand to my head, not knowing if I dreamed. But presently looking up, I saw a grey-haired man among those who were gathered together, who watched us sharply, and afterwards I learned that this man was the spy of Ptolemy, the very man, indeed, who had wellnigh caused me to be slain of Pharaoh when I was in my cradle. Then I understood why Atoua spoke so foolishly.

"Thine are strange spells, old wife," the spy said. "Thou didst speak of Pharaoh and the double crown and of the form fashioned by Ptah to bear it; is it not so?"

"Yea, yea--part of the spell, thou fool; and what can one swear by

better nowadays than by the Divine Pharaoh the Piper, whom, and whose music, may the Gods preserve to charm this happy land?--what better than by the double crown he wears--grace to great Alexander of Macedonia? By the way, you know about everything: have they got back his chlamys yet, which Mithridates took to Cos? Pompey wore it last, didn't he?--in his triumph, too--just fancy Pompey in the cloak of Alexander!--a puppy-dog in a lion's skin! And talking of lions--look what this lad hath done--slain a lion with his own spear; and right glad you village folks should be to see it, for it was a very fierce lion--just see his teeth and his claws--his claws!--they are enough to make a poor silly old woman like me shriek to look at them! And the body there, the dead body--the lion slew it. Alack! he's an Osiris[*] now, the body--and to think of it, but an hour ago he was an everyday mortal like you or me! Well, away with him to the embalmers. He'll soon swell in the sun and burst, and that will save them the trouble of cutting him open. Not that they will spend a talent of silver over him anyway. Seventy days in natron--that's all he's likely to get. La! la! how my tongue does run, and it's getting dark. Come, aren't you going to take away the body of that poor lad, and the lion, too? There, my boy, you keep those herbs on, and you'll never feel your scratches. I know a thing or two for all I'm crazy, and you, my own grandson! Dear, dear, I'm glad his Holiness the High Priest adopted you when Pharaoh--Osiris bless his holy name--made an end of his son; you look so bonny. I warrant the real Harmachis could not have killed a lion like that. Give me the common blood, I say--it's so lusty."

[*] The soul when it has been absorbed in the Godhead.--

Editor.

"You know too much and talk too fast," grumbled the spy, now quite deceived. "Well, he is a brave youth. Here, you men, bear this body back to Abouthis, and some of you stop and help me skin the lion. We'll send the skin to you, young man," he went on; "not that you deserve it: to attack a lion like that was the act of a fool, and a fool deserves what he gets--destruction. Never attack the strong until you are stronger."

But for my part I went home wondering.