

CHAPTER III

OF THE REBUKE OF AMENEMHAT; OF THE PRAYER OF HARMACHIS; AND OF THE SIGN GIVEN BY THE HOLY GODS

For a while as I, Harmachis, went, the juice of the green herbs which the old wife, Atoua, had placed upon my wounds caused me much smart, but presently the pain ceased. And, of a truth, I believe that there was virtue in them, for within two days my flesh healed up, so that after a time no marks remained. But I bethought me that I had disobeyed the word of the old High Priest, Amenemhat, who was called my father. For till this day I knew not that he was in truth my father according to the flesh, having been taught that his own son was slain as I have written; and that he had been pleased, with the sanction of the Divine ones, to take me as an adopted son and rear me up, that I might in due season fulfil an office about the Temple. Therefore I was much troubled, for I feared the old man, who was very terrible in his anger, and ever spoke with the cold voice of Wisdom. Nevertheless, I determined to go in to him and confess my fault and bear such punishment as he should be pleased to put upon me. So with the red spear in my hand, and the red wounds on my breast, I passed through the outer court of the great temple and came to the door of the place where the High Priest dwelt. It is a great chamber, sculptured round about with the images of the solemn Gods, and the sunlight comes to it in the daytime by an opening cut through the stones of the massy roof. But at night it was lit by a swinging lamp of bronze. I passed in without noise, for the door was not altogether shut, and, pushing my way through the heavy curtains that

were beyond, I stood with a beating heart within the chamber.

The lamp was lit, for the darkness had fallen, and by its light I saw the old man seated in a chair of ivory and ebony at a table of stone on which were spread mystic writings of the words of Life and Death. But he read no more, for he slept, and his long white beard rested upon the table like the beard of a dead man. The soft light from the lamp fell on him, on the papyri and the gold ring upon his hand, where were graven the symbols of the Invisible One, but all around was shadow. It fell on the shaven head, on the white robe, on the cedar staff of priesthood at his side, and on the ivory of the lion-footed chair; it showed the mighty brow of power, the features cut in kingly mould, the white eyebrows, and the dark hollows of the deep-set eyes. I looked and trembled, for there was about him that which was more than the dignity of man. He had lived so long with the Gods, and so long kept company with them and with thoughts divine, he was so deeply versed in all those mysteries which we do but faintly discern, here in this upper air, that even now, before his time, he partook of the nature of the Osiris, and was a thing to shake humanity with fear.

I stood and gazed, and as I stood he opened his dark eyes, but looked not on me, nor turned his head; and yet he saw me and spoke.

"Why hast thou been disobedient to me, my son?" he said. "How came it that thou wentest forth against the lion when I bade thee not?"

"How knowest thou, my father, that I went forth?" I asked in fear.

"How know I? Are there, then, no other ways of knowledge than by the senses? Ah, ignorant child! was not my Spirit with thee when the lion sprang upon thy companion? Did I not pray Those set about thee to protect thee, to make sure thy thrust when thou didst drive the spear into the lion's throat! How came it that thou wentest forth, my son?"

"The boaster taunted me," I answered, "and I went."

"Yes, I know it; and, because of the hot blood of youth, I forgive thee, Harmachis. But now listen to me, and let my words sink into thy heart like the waters of Sihor into the thirsty sand at the rising of Sirius.[*] Listen to me. The boaster was sent to thee as a temptation, he was sent as a trial of thy strength, and see! it has not been equal to the burden. Therefore thy hour is put back. Hadst thou been strong in this matter, the path had been made plain to thee even now. But thou hast failed, and therefore thy hour is put back."

[*] The dog-star, whose appearance marked the commencement of the overflow of the Nile.--Editor.

"I understand thee not, my father," I answered.

"What was it, then, my son, that the old wife, Atoua, said to thee down by the bank of the canal?"

Then I told him all that the old wife had said.

"And thou believest, Harmachis, my son?"

"Nay," I answered; "how should I believe such tales? Surely she is mad. All the people know her for mad."

Now for the first time he looked towards me, who was standing in the shadow.

"My son! my son!" he cried; "thou art wrong. She is not mad. The woman spoke the truth; she spoke not of herself, but of the voice within her that cannot lie. For this Atoua is a prophetess and holy. Now learn thou the destiny that the Gods of Egypt have given to thee to fulfil, and woe be unto thee if by any weakness thou dost fail therein! Listen: thou art no stranger adopted into my house and the worship of the Temple; thou art my very son, saved to me by this same woman. But, Harmachis, thou art more than this, for in thee and me alone yet flows the Imperial blood of Egypt. Thou and I alone of men alive are descended, without break or flaw, from that Pharaoh Nekt-nebf whom Ochus the Persian drove from Egypt. The Persian came and the Persian went, and after the Persian came the Macedonian, and now for nigh upon three hundred years the Lagidæ have usurped the double crown, defiling the land of Khem and corrupting the worship of its Gods. And mark thou this: but now, two weeks since, Ptolemy Neus Dionysus, Ptolemy Aulêtes the Piper, who would have slain thee, is dead; and but now hath the Eunuch Pothinus, that very eunuch who came hither, years ago, to cut thee off, set at naught the will of his master, the dead Aulêtes, and placed the boy Ptolemy

upon the throne. And therefore his sister Cleopatra, that fierce and beautiful girl, has fled into Syria; and there, if I err not, she will gather her armies and make war upon her brother Ptolemy: for by her father's will she was left joint-sovereign with him. And, meanwhile, mark thou this, my son: the Roman eagle hangs on high, waiting with ready talons till such time as he may fall upon the fat wether Egypt and rend him. And mark again: the people of Egypt are weary of the foreign yoke, they hate the memory of the Persians, and they are sick at heart of being named 'Men of Macedonia' in the markets of Alexandria. The whole land mutters and murmurs beneath the yoke of the Greek and the shadow of the Roman.

"Have we not been oppressed? Have not our children been butchered and our gains wrung from us to fill the bottomless greed and lust of the Lagidæ? Have not the temples been forsaken?--ay, have not the majesties of the Eternal Gods been set at naught by these Grecian babblers, who have dared to meddle with the immortal truths, and name the Most High by another name--by the name of Serapis--confounding the substance of the Invisible? Does not Egypt cry aloud for freedom?--and shall she cry in vain? Nay, nay, for thou, my son, art the appointed way of deliverance. To thee, being sunk in eld, I have decreed my rights. Already thy name is whispered in many a sanctuary, from Abu to Athu; already priests and people swear allegiance, even by the sacred symbols, unto him who shall be declared to them. Still, the time is not yet; thou art too green a sapling to bear the weight of such a storm. But to-day thou wast tried and found wanting.

"He who would serve the Gods, Harmachis, must put aside the failings of the flesh. Taunts must not move him, nor any lusts of man. Thine is a high mission, but this thou must learn. If thou learn it not, thou shalt fail therein; and then, my curse be on thee! and the curse of Egypt, and the curse of Egypt's broken Gods! For know thou this, that even the Gods, who are immortal, may, in the interwoven scheme of things, lean upon the man who is their instrument, as a warrior on his sword. And woe be to the sword that snaps in the hour of battle, for it shall be thrown aside to rust or perchance be melted with fire! Therefore, make thy heart pure and high and strong; for thine is no common lot, and thine no mortal meed. Triumph, Harmachis, and in glory thou shalt go--in glory here and hereafter! Fail, and woe--woe be on thee!"

He paused and bowed his head, and then went on:

"Of these matters thou shalt hear more hereafter. Meanwhile, thou hast much to learn. To-morrow I will give thee letters, and thou shalt journey down the Nile, past white-walled Memphis to Annu. There thou shalt sojourn certain years, and learn more of our ancient wisdom beneath the shadow of those secret pyramids of which thou, too, art the Hereditary High Priest that is to be. And meanwhile, I will sit here and watch, for my hour is not yet, and, by the help of the Gods, spin the web of Death wherein thou shalt catch and hold the wasp of Macedonia.

"Come hither, my son; come hither and kiss me on the brow, for thou art my hope, and all the hope of Egypt. Be but true, soar to the eagle crest of destiny, and thou shalt be glorious here and hereafter. Be false,

fail, and I will spit upon thee, and thou shalt be accursed, and thy soul shall remain in bondage till that hour when, in the slow flight of time, the evil shall once more grow to good and Egypt shall again be free."

I drew near, trembling, and kissed him on the brow. "May all these things come upon me, and more," I said, "if I fail thee, my father!"

"Nay!" he cried, "not me, not me; but rather those whose will I do. And now go, my son, and ponder in thy heart, and in thy secret heart digest my words; mark what thou shalt see, and gather up the dew of wisdom, making thee ready for the battle. Fear not for thyself, thou art protected from all ill. No harm may touch thee from without; thyself alone can be thine own enemy. I have said."

Then I went forth with a full heart. The night was very still, and none were stirring in the temple courts. I hurried through them, and reached the entrance to the pylon that is at the outer gate. Then, seeking solitude, and, as it were, to draw near to heaven, I climbed the pylon's two hundred steps, until at length I reached the massive roof. Here I leaned my breast against the parapet, and looked forth. As I looked, the red edge of the full moon floated up over the Arabian hills, and her rays fell upon the pylon where I stood and the temple walls beyond, lighting the visages of the carven Gods. Then the cold light struck the stretch of well-tilled lands, now whitening to the harvest, and as the heavenly lamp of Isis passed up to the sky, her rays crept slowly down to the valley, where Sihor, father of the land of Khem, rolls on toward

the sea.

Now the bright beams kissed the water that smiled an answer back, and now mountain and valley, river, temple, town, and plain were flooded with white light, for Mother Isis was arisen, and threw her gleaming robe across the bosom of the earth. It was beautiful, with the beauty of a dream, and solemn as the hour after death. Mightily, indeed, the temples towered up against the face of night. Never had they seemed so grand to me as in that hour--those eternal shrines, before whose walls Time himself shall wither. And it was to be mine to rule this moonlit land; mine to preserve those sacred shrines, and cherish the honour of their Gods; mine to cast out the Ptolemy and free Egypt from the foreign yoke! In my veins ran the blood of those great Kings who await the day of Resurrection, sleeping in the tombs of the valley of Thebes. My spirit swelled within me as I dreamed upon this glorious destiny, I closed my hands, and there, upon the pylon, I prayed as I had never prayed before to the Godhead, who is called by many names, and in many forms made manifest.

"O Amen," I prayed, "God of Gods, who hast been from the beginning; Lord of Truth, who art, and of whom all are, who givest out thy Godhead and gatherest it up again; in the circle of whom the Divine ones move and are, who wast from all time the Self-begot, and who shalt be till time--hearken unto me.[*]"

[*] For a somewhat similar definition of the Godhead see the funeral papyrus of Nesikhonsu, a Princess of the Twenty-

first Dynasty.--Editor.

"O Amen--Osiris, the sacrifice by whom we are justified, Lord of the Region of the Winds, Ruler of the Ages, Dweller in the West, the Supreme in Amenti, hearken unto me.

"O Isis, great Mother Goddess, mother of the Horus--mysterious Mother, Sister, Spouse, hearken unto me. If, indeed, I am the chosen of the Gods to carry out the purpose of the Gods, let a sign be given me, even now, to seal my life to the life above. Stretch out your arms towards me, O ye Gods, and uncover the glory of your countenance. Hear! ah, hear me!"
And I cast myself upon my knees and lifted up my eyes to heaven.

And as I knelt, a cloud grew upon the face of the moon covering it up, so that the night became dark, and the silence deepened all around--even the dogs far below in the city ceased to howl, while the silence grew and grew till it was heavy as death. I felt my spirit lifted up within me, and my hair rose upon my head. Then of a sudden the mighty pylon seemed to rock beneath my feet, a great wind beat about my brows and a voice spoke within my heart:

"Behold a sign! Possess thyself in patience, O Harmachis!"

And as the voice spoke, a cold hand touched my hand, and left somewhat within it. Then the cloud rolled from the face of the moon, the wind passed, the pylon ceased to tremble, and the night was as the night had been.

As the light came back, I gazed upon that which had been left within my hand. It was a bud of the holy lotus new breaking into bloom, and from it came a most sweet scent.

And while I gazed behold! the lotus passed from my grasp and was gone, leaving me astonished.