

## CHAPTER IV. THROUGH THE GATES

Short as was the time at my disposal before the dinner-gong sounded, it proved ample for reflection. With every article of attire that I discarded went some of that boudoir glamour till its last traces vanished with my walking-boots. I was fallen indeed. I who had come to this place so full of virtuous resolutions, could now only reflect upon the true and universal meaning of our daily prayer that we might be kept from temptation. And yet what had tempted me? For my life's sake I could not say. The desire to please a most charming woman and to keep her from making solitary experiments of a dangerous nature, I suppose, though whether they should be less dangerous carried out jointly remained to be seen. Certainly it was not any wish to eat of her proffered apple of Knowledge, for already I knew a great deal more than I cared for about things in general. Oh! the truth was that woman is the mightiest force in the world, at any rate where the majority of us poor men is concerned. She commanded and I must obey.

I grew desperate and wondered if I could escape. Perhaps I might slip out of the back door and run for it, without my great coat or hat although the night was so cold and I should probably be taken up as a lunatic. No, it was impossible for I had forged a chain that might not be broken. I had passed my word of honour. Well, I was in for it and after all what was there of which I need be afraid that I should tremble and shrink back as though I were about to run away with somebody's wife, or rather to be run away with quite contrary to my own inclination?

Nothing at all. A mere nonsensical ordeal much less serious than a visit to the dentist.

Probably that stuff had lost its strength by now--that is, unless it had grown more powerful by keeping, as is the case with certain sorts of explosives. And if it had not, the worst to be expected was a silly dream, followed perhaps by headache. That is, unless I did not chance to wake up again at all in this world, which was a most unpleasant possibility. Another thing, suppose I woke and she didn't! What should I say then? Of a certainty I should find myself in the dock. Yes, and there were further dreadful eventualities, quite conceivable, every one of them, the very thought of which plunged me into a cold perspiration and made me feel so weak that I was obliged to sit down.

Then I heard the gong; to me it sounded like the execution bell to a prisoner under sentence of death. I crept downstairs feebly and found Lady Ragnall waiting for me in the drawing-room, clothed with gaiety as with a garment. I remember that it made me most indignant that she could be so happy in such circumstances, but I said nothing. She looked me up and down and remarked,

"Really from your appearance you might have seen the Ragnall ghost, or be going to be married against your will, or--I don't know what. Also you have forgotten to fasten your tie."

I looked in the glass. It was true, for there hung the ends down my

shirt front. Then I struggled with the wretched thing until at last she had to help me, which she did laughing softly. Somehow her touch gave me confidence again and enabled me to say quite boldly that I only wanted my dinner.

"Yes," she replied, "but you are not to eat much and you must only drink water. The priestesses in Kendah Land told me that this was necessary before taking Taduki in its strongest form, as we are going to do to-night. You know the prophet Harût only gave us the merest whiff in this room years ago."

I groaned and she laughed again.

That dinner with nothing to drink, although to avoid suspicion I let Moxley fill my glass once or twice, and little to eat for my appetite had vanished, went by like a bad dream. I recall no more about it until I heard Lady Ragnall tell Moxley to see that there was a good fire in the museum where we were going to study that night and must not be disturbed.

Another minute and I was automatically opening the door for her. As she passed she paused to do something to her dress and whispered,

"Come in a quarter of an hour. Mind--no port which clouds the intellect."

"I have none left to cloud," I remarked after her.

Then I went back and sat by the fire feeling most miserable and staring at the decanters, for never in my life do I remember wanting a bottle of wine more. The big clock ticked and ticked and at last chimed the quarter, jarring on my nerves in that great lonely banqueting hall. Then I rose and crept upstairs like an evil-doer and it seemed to me that the servants in the hall looked on me with suspicion, as well they might.

I reached the museum and found it brilliantly lit, but empty except for the cheerful company of the two mummies who also appeared to regard me with gleaming but doubtful eyes. So I sat down there in front of the fire, not even daring to smoke lest tobacco should complicate Taduki.

Presently I heard a low sound of laughter, looked up and nearly fell backwards, that is, metaphorically, for the chair prevented such a physical collapse.

It was not wonderful since before me, like a bride of ancient days adorned for her husband, stood the goddess Isis--white robes, feathered headdress, ancient bracelets, gold-studded sandals on bare feet, scented hair, ruby necklace and all the rest. I stared, then there burst from me words which were the last I meant to say,

"Great Heavens! how beautiful you are."

"Am I?" she asked. "I am glad," and she glided across the room and locked the door.

"Now," she said, returning, "we had better get to business, that is unless you would like to worship the goddess Isis a little first, to bring yourself into a proper frame of mind, you know."

"No," I replied, my dignity returning to me. "I do not wish to worship any goddess, especially when she isn't a goddess. It was not a part of the bargain."

"Quite so," she said, nodding, "but who knows what you will be worshipping before an hour is over? Oh! forgive me for laughing at you, but I can't help it. You are so evidently frightened."

"Who wouldn't be frightened?" I answered, looking with gloomy apprehension at the sandal-wood box which had appeared upon a case full of scarabs. "Look here, Lady Ragnall," I added, "why can't you leave all this unholy business alone and let us spend a pleasant evening talking, now that those Smith people have gone? I have lots of stories about my African adventures which would interest you."

"Because I want to hear my own African adventures, and perhaps yours too, which I am sure will interest me a great deal more," she exclaimed earnestly. "You think it is all foolishness, but it is not. Those Kendah priestesses told me much when I seemed to be out of my mind. For a long

time I did not remember what they said, but of late years, especially since George and I began to excavate that temple, plenty has come back to me bit by bit, fragments, you know, that make me desire to learn the rest as I never desired anything else on earth. And the worst of it has always been that from the beginning I have known--and know--that this can only happen with you and through you, why I cannot say, or have forgotten. That's what sent me nearly wild with joy when I heard that you were not only alive, but in this country. You won't disappoint me, will you? There is nothing I can offer you which would have any value for you, so I can only beg you not to disappoint me--well, because I am your friend."

I turned away my head, hesitating, and when I looked up again I saw that her beautiful eyes were full of tears. Naturally that settled the matter, so I only said,

"Let us get on with the affair. What am I to do? Stop a bit. I may as well provide against eventualities," and going to a table I took a sheet of notepaper and wrote:

"Lady Ragnall and I, Allan Quatermain, are about to make an experiment with an herb which we discovered some years ago in Africa. If by any chance this should result in accident to either or both of us, the Coroner is requested to understand that it is not a case of murder or of suicide, but merely of unfortunate

scientific research."

This I dated, adding the hour, 9.47 P.M., and signed, requesting her to do the same.

She obeyed with a smile, saying it was strange that one who had lived a life of such constant danger as myself, should be so afraid to die.

"Look here, young lady," I replied with irritation, "doesn't it occur to you that I may be afraid lest you should die--and I be hanged for it," I added by an afterthought.

"Oh! I see," she answered, "that is really very nice of you. But, of course, you would think like that; it is your nature."

"Yes," I replied. "Nature, not merit."

She went to a cupboard which formed the bottom of one of the mahogany museum cases, and extracted from it first of all a bowl of ancient appearance made of some black stone with projecting knobs for handles that were carved with the heads of women wearing ceremonial wigs; and next a low tripod of ebony or some other black wood. I looked at these articles and recognized them. They had stood in front of the sanctuary in the temple in Kendah Land, and over them I had once seen this very woman dressed as she was to-night, bend her head in the magic smoke

before she had uttered the prophecy of the passing of the Kendah god.

"So you brought these away too," I said.

"Yes," she replied with solemnity, "that they might be ready at the appointed hour when we needed them."

Then she spoke no more for a while, but busied herself with certain rather eerie preparations. First she set the tripod and its bowl in an open space which I was glad to note was at some distance from the fire, since if either of us fell into that who would there be to take us off before cremation ensued? Then she drew up a curved settee with a back and arms, a comfortable-looking article having a seat that sloped backwards like those in clubs, and motioned to me to sit down. This I did with much the same sensations that are evoked by taking one's place upon an operation-table.

Next she brought that accursed Taduki box, I mean the inner silver one, the contents of which I heartily wished I had thrown upon the fire, and set it down, open, near the tripod. Lastly she lifted some glowing embers of wood from the grate with tongs, and dropped them into the stone bowl.

"I think that's all. Now for the great adventure," she said in a voice that was at once rapt and dreamy.

"What am I to do?" I asked feebly.

"That is quite simple," she replied, as she sat herself down beside me well within reach of the Taduki box, the brazier being between us with its tripod stand pressed against the edge of the couch, and in its curve, so that we were really upon each side of it. "When the smoke begins to rise thickly you have only to bend your head a little forward, with your shoulders still resting against the settee, and inhale until you find your senses leaving you, though I don't know that this is necessary for the stuff is subtle. Then throw your head back, go to sleep and dream."

"What am I to dream about?" I inquired in a vacuous way, for my senses were leaving me already.

"You will dream, I think, of past events in which both of us played a part, at least I hope so. I dreamt of them before in Kendah Land, but then I was not myself, and for the most part they are forgotten. Moreover, I learned that we can only see them all when we are together. Now speak no more."

This command, by the way, at once produced in me an intense desire for prolonged conversation. It was not to be gratified, however, for at that moment she stood up again facing the tripod and me, and began to sing in a rich and thrilling voice. What she sang I do not know for I could not understand the language, but I presume it was some ancient chant that

she learned in Kendah Land. At any rate, there she stood, a lovely and inspired priestess clad in her sacerdotal robes, and sang, waving her arms and fixing her eyes upon mine. Presently she bent down, took a little of the Taduki weed and with words of incantation, dropped it upon the embers in the bowl. Twice she did this, then sat herself upon the couch and waited.

A clear flame sprang up and burned for thirty seconds or so, I suppose while it consumed the volatile oils in the weed. Then it died down and smoke began to come, white, rich and billowy, with a very pleasant odour resembling that of hot-house flowers. It spread out between us like a fan, and though its veil I heard her say,

"The gates are wide. Enter!"

I knew what she meant well enough, and though for a moment I thought of cheating, there is no other word for it, knew also that she had detected the thought and was scorning me in her mind. At any rate I felt that I must obey and thrust my head forward into the smoke, as a green ham is thrust into a chimney. The warm vapour struck against my face like fog, or rather steam, but without causing me to choke or my eyes to smart. I drew it down my throat with a deep inhalation--once, twice, thrice, then as my brain began to swim, threw myself back as I had been instructed to do. A deep and happy drowsiness stole over me, and the last thing I remember was hearing the clock strike the first two strokes of the hour of ten. The third stroke I heard also, but it sounded like to that of

the richest-throated bell that ever boomed in all the world. I remember becoming aware that it was the signal for the rolling up of some vast proscenium, revealing behind it a stage that was the world--nothing less.

What did I see? What did I see? Let me try to recall and record.

First of all something chaotic. Great rushes of vapour driven by mighty winds; great seas, for the most part calm. Then upheavals and volcanoes spouting fire. Then tropic scenes of infinite luxuriance. Terrific reptiles feeding on the brinks of marshes, and huge elephant-like animals moving between palms beyond. Then, in a glade, rough huts and about them a jabbering crowd of creatures that were only half human, for sometimes they stood upright and sometimes ran on their hands and feet. Also they were almost covered with hair which was all they had in the way of clothes, and at the moment that I met them, were terribly frightened by the appearance of a huge mammoth, if that is the right name for it, which walked into the glade and looked at us. At any rate it was a beast of the elephant tribe which I judged to be nearly twenty feet high, with enormous curving tusks.

The point of the vision was that I recognized myself among those hairy jabberers, not by anything outward and visible, but by something inward and spiritual. Moreover, I was being urged by a female of the race, I

can scarcely call her a woman, to justify my existence by tackling the mammoth in her particular interest, or to give her up to someone who would. In the end I tackled it, rushing forward with a weapon, I think it was a sharp stone tied to a stick, though how I could expect to hurt a beast twenty feet high with such a thing is more than I can understand, unless perhaps the stone was poisoned.

At any rate the end was sudden. I threw the stone, whereat a great trunk shot out from between the tusks and caught me. Round and round I went in the air, reflecting as I did so, for I suppose at the time my normal consciousness had not quite left me, that this was my first encounter with the elephant Jana, also that it was very foolish to try to oblige a female regardless of personal risk....

All became dark, as no doubt it would have done, but presently, that is after a lapse of a great many thousands of years, or so it appeared to me, light grew again. This time I was a black man living in something not unlike a Kaffir kraal on the top of a hill.

There was shouting below and enemies attacked us; a woman rushed out of a hut and gave me a spear and a shield, the latter made of wood with white spots on it, and pointed to the path of duty which ran down the hill. I followed in company with others, though without enthusiasm, and presently met a roaring giant of a man at the bottom. I stuck my spear into him and he stuck his into me, through the stomach, which hurt me most abominably. After this I retired up the hill where the woman pulled

the spear out and gave it to another man. I remember no more.

Then followed a whole maze of visions, but really I cannot disentangle them. Nor is it worth while doing so since after all they were only of the nature of an overture, jumbled incidents of former lives, real or imaginary, or so I suppose, having to do, all of them, with elementary things, such as hunger and wounds and women and death.

At length these broken fragments of the past were swept away out of my consciousness and I found myself face to face with something connected and tangible, not too remote or unfamiliar for understanding. It was the beginning of the real story.

I, please remember always that I knew it was I, Allan, and no one else, that is, the same personality or whatever it may be which makes each man different from any other man, saw myself in a chariot drawn by two horses with arched necks and driven by a charioteer who sat on a little seat in front. It was a highly ornamented, springless vehicle of wood and gilded, something like a packing-case with a pole, or as we should call it in South Africa, a disselboom, to which the horses were harnessed. In this cart I stood arrayed in flowing robes fastened round my middle by a studded belt, with strips of coloured cloth wound round my legs and sandals on my feet. To my mind the general effect of the attire was distinctly feminine and I did not like it at all.

I was glad to observe, however, that the I of those days was anything but feminine. Indeed I could never have believed that once I was so good-looking, even over two thousand years ago. I was not very tall but extremely stalwart, burly almost, with an arm that as I could observe, since it projected from the sleeve of my lady's gown, would have done no discredit to a prize-fighter, and a chest like a bull.

The face also I admired very much. The brow was broad; the black eyes were full and proud-looking, the features somewhat massive but well-cut and highly intelligent; the mouth firm and shapely, with lips that were perhaps a trifle too thick; the hair--well, there was rather a failure in the hair, at least according to modern ideas, for it curled so beautifully as to suggest that one of my ancestors might have fallen in love with a person of negroid origin. However there was lots of it, hanging down almost to the shoulders and bound about the brow by a very neat fillet of blue cloth with silver studs. The colour of my skin, I was glad to note, was by no means black, only a light and pleasing brown such as might have been produced by sunburn. My age, I might add, was anywhere between five and twenty and five and thirty, perhaps nearer the latter than the former, at any rate, the very prime of life.

For the rest, I held in my left hand a very stout, long bow of black wood which seemed to have seen much service, with a string of what looked like catgut, on which was set a broad-feathered, barbed arrow. This I kept in place with the fingers of my right hand, on one of which

I observed a handsome gold ring with strange characters carved upon the bezel.

Now for the charioteer.

He was black as night, black as a Sunday hat, with yellow rolling eyes set in a countenance of extraordinary ugliness and I may add, extraordinary humour. His big, wide mouth with thick lips ran up the left side of his face towards an ear that was also big and projecting. His hair, that had a feather stuck in it, was real nigger wool covering a skull like a cannon ball and I should imagine as hard. This head, by the way, was set plumb upon the shoulders, as though it had been driven down between them by a pile hammer. They were very broad shoulders suggesting enormous strength, but the gaily-clad body beneath, which was supported by two bowed legs and large, flat feet, was that of a dwarf who by the proportions of his limbs Nature first intended for a giant; yes, an Ethiopian dwarf.

Looking through this remarkable exterior, as it were, I recognized that inside of it was the soul, or animating principle, of--whom do you think? None other than my beloved old servant and companion, the Hottentot Hans whose loss I had mourned for years! Hans himself who died for me, slaying the great elephant, Jana, in Kendah Land, the elephant I could not hit, and thereby saving my life. Oh! although I had been obliged to go back to the days of I knew not what ancient empire to do so in my trance, or whatever it was, I could have wept with joy at

finding him again, especially as I knew by instinct that as he loved the Allan Quatermain of to-day, so he loved this Egyptian in a wheeled packing-case, for I may as well say at once that such was my nationality in the dream.

Now I looked about me and perceived that my chariot was the second of a cavalcade. Immediately in front of it was one infinitely more gorgeous in which stood a person who even if I had not known it, I should have guessed to be a king, and who, as a matter of fact, was none other than the King of kings, at that time the absolute master of most of the known world, though what his name may have been, I have no notion. He wore a long flowing robe of purple silk embroidered with gold and bound in at the waist by a jewelled girdle from which hung the private, sacred seal; the little "White Seal" that, as I learned afterwards, was famous throughout the earth.

On his head was a stiff cloth cap, also purple in colour, round which was fastened a fillet of light blue stuff spotted with white. The best idea that I can give of its general appearance is to liken it to a tall hat of fashionable shape, without a brim, slightly squashed in so that it bulged at the top, and surrounded by a rather sporting necktie. Really, however, it was the kitaris or headdress of these monarchs worn by them alone. If anyone else had put on that hat, even by mistake in the dark, well, his head would have come off with it, that is all.

This king held a bow in his hand with an arrow set upon its string,

just as I did, for we were out hunting, and as I shall have to narrate presently, lions are no respecters of persons. By his side, leaning against the back of the chariot, was a tall, sharp-pointed wand of cedar wood with a knob of some green precious stone, probably an emerald, fashioned to the likeness of an apple. This was the royal sceptre. Immediately behind the chariot walked several great nobles. One of them carried a golden footstool, another a parasol, furled at the moment; another a spare bow and a quiver of arrows, and another a jewelled fly-whisk made of palm fibre.

The king, I should add, was young, handsome with a curled beard and clear-cut, high-bred looking features; his face, however, was bad, cruel and stamped with an air of weariness, or rather, satiety, which was emphasized by the black circles beneath his fine dark eyes. Moreover pride seemed to emanate from him and yet there was something in his bearing and glances which suggested fear. He was a god who knows that he is mortal and is therefore afraid lest at any moment he may be called upon to lose his godship in his mortality.

Not that he dreaded the perils of the chase; he was too much of a man for that. But how could he tell lest among all that crowd of crawling nobles, there was not one who had a dagger ready for his back, or a phial of poison to mix with his wine or water? He with all the world in the hollow of his hand, was filled with secret terrors which as I learned since first I seemed to see him thus, fulfilled themselves at the appointed time. For this man of blood was destined to die in blood,

though not by murder.

The cavalcade halted. Presently a fat eunuch glittering in his gold-wrought garments like some bronzed beetle in the sunlight, came waddling back towards me. He was odious and I knew that we hated each other.

"Greeting, Egyptian," he said, mopping his brow with his sleeve for the sun was hot. "An honour for you! A great honour! The King of kings commands your presence. Yes, he would speak with you with his own lips, and with that abortion of a servant of yours also. Come! Come swiftly!"

"Swift as an arrow, Houman," I answered laughing, "seeing that for three moons I, like an arrow, have rested upon the string and flown no nearer to his Majesty."

"Three moons!" screeched the eunuch. "Why, many wait three years and many go to the grave still waiting; bigger men than you, Egyptian, though I hear you do claim to be of royal blood yonder on the Nile. But talk not of arrows flying towards the most High, for surely it is ill-omened and might earn you another honour, that of the string," and he made a motion suggestive of a cord encircling his throat. "Man, leave your bow behind! Would you appear before the King armed? Yes, and your dagger also."

"Perchance a lion might appear before the King and he does not leave his claws and teeth behind," I answered drily as I divested myself of my weapons.

Then we started, the three of us, leaving the chariot in charge of a soldier.

"Draw your sleeves over your hands," said the eunuch. "None must appear before the King showing his hands, and, dwarf, since you have no sleeves, thrust yours into your robe."

"What am I to do with my feet?" he answered in a thick, guttural voice.

"Will it offend the King of kings to see my feet, most noble eunuch?"

"Certainly, certainly," answered Houman, "since they are ugly enough to offend even me. Hide them as much as possible. Now we are near, down on your faces and crawl forward slowly on your knees and elbows, as I do. Down, I say!"

So down I went, though with anger in my heart, for be it remembered that I, the modern Allan Quatermain, knew every thought and feeling that passed through the mind of my prototype.

It was as though I were a spectator at a play, with this difference. I could read the motives and reflections of this former ego as well as

observe his actions. Also I could rejoice when he rejoiced, weep when he wept and generally feel all that he felt, though at the same time I retained the power of studying him from my own modern standpoint and with my own existing intelligence. Being two we still were one, or being one we still were two, whichever way you like to put it. Lastly I lacked these powers with reference to the other actors in the piece. Of these I knew just as much, or as little as my former self knew, that is if he ever really existed. There was nothing unnatural in my faculties where they were concerned. I had no insight into their souls any more than I have into those of the people about me to-day. Now I hope that I have made clear my somewhat uncommon position with reference to these pages from the Book of the Past.

Well, preceded by the eunuch and followed by the dwarf, I crawled through the sand in which grew some thorny plants that pricked my knees and fingers, towards the person of the Monarch of the World. He had descended from his chariot by help of a footstool, and was engaged in drinking from a golden cup, while his attendants stood around in various attitudes of adoration, he who had handed him the cup being upon his knees. Presently he looked up and saw us.

"Who are these?" he asked in a high voice that yet was not unmusical, "and why do you bring them into my presence?"

"May it please the King," answered our guide, knocking his head upon the ground in a very agony of humiliation, "may it please the King----"

"It would please me better, dog, if you answered my question. Who are they?"

"May it please the King, this is the Egyptian hunter and noble, Shabaka."

"I hear," said his Majesty with a gleam of interest in his tired eyes, "and what does this Egyptian here?"

"May it please the King, the King bade me bring him to the presence, but now when the chariots halted."

"I forgot; you are forgiven. But who is that with him? Is it a man or an ape?"

Here I screwed my head round and saw that my slave in his efforts to obey the eunuch's instructions and hide his feet, had made himself into a kind of ball, much as a hedgehog does, except that his big head appeared in front of the ball.

"O King, that I understand is the Egyptian's servant and charioteer."

Again he looked interested, and exclaimed,

"Is it so? Then Egypt must be a stranger country than I thought if such

ape-men live there. Stand up, Egyptian, and bid your ape stand up also, for I cannot hear men who speak with their mouths in the dust."

So I rose and saluted by lifting both my hands and bowing as I had observed others do, trying, however, to keep them covered by my sleeves. The King looked me up and down, then said briefly,

"Set out your name and the business that brought you to my city."

"May the King live for ever," I replied. "As this lord said," and I pointed to the eunuch----

"He is not a lord but a dog," interrupted the Monarch, "who wears the robe of women. But continue."

"As this dog who wears the robe of women said"--here the King laughed, but the eunuch, Houman, turned green with rage and glowered at me--"my name is Shabaka. I am a descendant of the Ethiopian king of Egypt of that same name."

"It seems from all I hear that there are too many descendants of kings in Egypt. When I visit that land which perhaps soon I must do with an army at my back," here he stared at me coldly, "it may be well to lessen their number. There is a certain Peroa for instance."

He paused, but I made no answer, since Peroa was my father's cousin and

of the fallen Royal House; also the protector of my youth.

"Well, Shabaka," he went on, "in Persia royal blood is common also, though some of us think it looks best when it is shed. What else are you?"

"A slayer of royal beasts, O King of kings, a hunter of lions and of elephants," (this statement interested me, Allan Quatermain, intensely, showing me as it did that our tastes are very persistent); "also when I am at home, a breeder of cattle and a grower of grain."

"Good trades, all of them, Shabaka. But why came you here?"

"Idernes the satrap of Egypt, servant of the King of kings, sought for one who would travel to the East because the King of kings desired to hear of the hunting of lions in the lands that lie to the south of Egypt towards the beginnings of the great river. Then I, who desired to see new countries, said, 'Here am I. Send me.' So I came and for three moons have dwelt in the royal city, but till this hour have scarcely so much as seen the face of the great King, although by many messengers I have announced my presence, showing them the letters of Idernes giving me safe-conduct. Therefore I propose to-morrow or the next day to return to Egypt."

The King said a word and a scribe appeared whom he commanded to take note of my words and let the matter be inquired of, since some should

suffer for this neglect, a saying at which I saw Houman and certain of the nobles turn pale and whisper to each other.

"Now I remember," he exclaimed, "that I did desire Idernes to send me an Egyptian hunter. Well, you are here and we are about to hunt the lion of which there are many in yonder reeds, hungry and fierce beasts, since for three days they have been herded in so that they can kill no food. How many lions have you slain, Shabaka?"

"Fifty and three in all, O King, not counting the cubs."

He stared at me, answering with a sneer,

"You Egyptians have large mouths. I have always heard it of you. Well, to-day we will see whether you can kill a fifty-fourth. In an hour when the sun begins to sink, the hounds will be loosed in yonder reeds and since the water is behind them, the lions will come out, and then we shall see."

Now I saw that the King thought me to be a liar and the blood rose to my head.

"Why wait till the sun begins to sink, O King of kings?" I said. "Why not enter the reeds, as is our fashion in the Land of Kush, and rouse the lions from sleep in their own lair?"

Now the King laughed outright and called in a loud voice to his courtiers,

"Do ye hear this boasting Egyptian, who talks of entering the reeds and facing the lions in their lair, a thing that no man dare do where none can see to shoot? What say ye now? Shall we ask him to prove his words?"

Some great lord stepped forward, one who was a hunter though he looked little like it, for the scent on his hair reached me from four paces away and there was paint upon his face.

"Yes, O King," he said in a mincing voice, "let him enter and kill a lion. But if he fail, then let a lion kill him. There are some hungry in the palace den and it is not fit that the King's ears should be filled with empty words by foreigners from Egypt."

"So be it," said the King. "Egyptian, you have brought it on your own head. Prove that you can do what you say and I will give you great honour. Fail, and to the lions with him who lies of lions. Still," he added, "it is not right that you should go alone. Choose therefore one of these lords to keep you company; he who would put you to the test, if you will."

Now I looked at the scented noble who turned pale beneath his paint. Then I looked at the fat eunuch, Houman, who opened his mouth and gasped like a fish, and when I had looked, I shook my head and said as though

to myself,

"Not so, no woman and no eunuch shall be my companion on this quest," whereat the King and all the rest laughed out loud. "The dwarf and I will go alone."

"The dwarf!" said the King. "Can he hunt lions also?"

"No, O King, but perchance he can smell them, for otherwise how shall I find them in that thicket within an hour?"

"Perchance they can smell him. How is the ape-man named?" asked the King.

"Bes, O King, after the god of the Egyptians whom he resembles."

"Dare you accompany your master on this hunt, O Bes?" inquired the King.

Then Bes looked up, rolling his yellow eyes, and answered in his thick and guttural voice,

"I am my master's slave and dare I refuse to accompany him? If I did he might kill me, as the King of kings kills his slaves. It is better to die with honour by the teeth of a lion, than with dishonour beneath the whip of a master. So at least we think in Ethiopia."

"Well spoken, dwarf Bes!" exclaimed the King. "So would I have all men think throughout the East. Let the words of this Ethiop be written down and copies of them sent to the satraps of all the provinces that they may be read to the peoples of the earth. I the King have decreed it."