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THE ASP OF ISIS.

Never had so beautiful a day dawned in the Upper Kingdom. Never had the sun shone so bright or the sky seemed so blue. Never before had royal Thebes, with her temples and palaces and gardens, looked half so fair.

Perhaps the day borrowed some of its glory from the joyousness of my spirits, for never before had I been so happy as now in my chariot I rode through the streets toward the king's palace. Yes I, Pent Ra, a man of the people, was on my way to the high abode of the lord of three kingdoms.

Though my race was sprung from ancient kings, for many generations it had lost power and influence. It was long, indeed, since one of my family had been summoned as guest to the royal palace. But today I was going at the bidding of Ne-ne-hofra herself, the greatest and most beautiful of princesses into the presence of her for whose smile half the young lords of Thebes would barter their birthright. Well might I be proud and exultant!

It happened thus. Yesterday, as on many days before, I stood watching the train of the princess who was being borne to her morning worship at the great temple of Amon-Ra. In her hand she held a bunch of fragrant Lotos blossoms and as she passed, dropped one. I leaned forward and seized it as it fell. Then, for one moment, my eyes met hers shining like stars beneath the swaying fans of the attendants. And she, daughter of the Lord of Kings, most beautiful of mortals, smiled—smiled upon me. Pent-Ra, an humble man of the common people. In that moment I knew why all Thebes was mad over her beauty, why scores of its nobles had ventured far into the land of demons in the burning south, or amongst the wild barbarians of the north seeking jewels to win her favor, why the meanest of them would brave the horrors of the nether world did she command them.

Half dazed, half exultant, I stood holding the Lotos blossom while the train of the princess swept by. Only when it was quite gone and I turned to depart I saw that I was not alone. A tall, dark man, clad in a gorgeous yellow-striped robe was saluting me. "The princess Ne-ne-hofra desires thy presence at the palace tomorrow, O Pent-Ra. Bring this, her signet." He slipped into my hand a golden ring set with an emerald wrought into the shape of a Lotos blossom. His small eyes glittered wickedly and a sinister smile curled his lips, as he turned away. I knew him to be Im-Hotep, chief of the princess' household. Often before I had seen him in her train. Among the people it was rumored that he was in league with Set and Apophis, for he was known to be cruel and merciless. But of all this I never thought then. I felt only the pride and joy that his message gave.

I was grateful to the gods for this great favor, and I reproached myself for long neglect of them. For twenty years I had not been to any temple. Generous in my new gratitude I gathered together a great offering of cattle and sheep and of gold and silver rings—for my house was a wealthy one. At first I intended it for the great temple of Amon-Ra, where the king and all who wished to gain his special favor worshipped and sacrificed; but I remembered a small and ancient shrine of Isis across the river in a neglected part of the Necropolis, whither I had often gone with my father in former days. But one priest—a very old man—still remained faithful to the little temple,

which was almost in ruins from long neglect. An offering here where nothing was to be gained in the esteem and favor of men, would be doubly acceptable to the goddess, and my offering was to be purely and wholly to the immortals.

When I came to the temple, followed by slaves driving the beasts and bearing the gift of golden rings, the priest came forth to meet me. He was tall and still straight, though so old that none could remember when he was not in this temple, which his family had served through four dynasties. His face was marked with hundreds of fine lines, but no deep furrows, and his eyes were bright and flashing. In his robe of white linen, adorned only with the leopard skin of high priesthood, he seemed a grander and nobler servant of the Queen of Heaven than any of his brethren in the great temple.

I saluted him reverently. "I have brought a gift for the Holy Mother, O Het-Su," I said, "and I crave from her a blessing." The old man's eyes softened as he beheld my offering. I well knew the little temple had not seen such a one for many years. I was proud of my generosity.

"Surely, Pent-Ra, shall Isis bless thee," answered he, "for this, her most loved shrine, though men have long neglected it, was builded by the mighty Khufu, of whose family thou art. Wherefore thy fathers have always worshipped here, and even so have prospered." Then Het-Sa prayed and sacrificed in the sanctuary of the goddess, and besought me her blessing, and when I was ready to depart he touched a golden asp which he wore upon his arm, and thereupon it uncoiled as of itself, having neither clasp nor spring. On my wrist he pressed it, and like a live thing, it coiled itself again. "This is a powerful talisman, Pent-Ra," he said. "Wear it always and the goddess who has blessed it will keep guard over thee." Thus I came by the Asp of Isis.

II.

A slave received the signet and conducted me into the presence of Ne-ne-hofra. She reclined on an ivory couch in the midst of an apartment which on one side opened upon an inner court where was a basin of water covered with Lotos plants, the fragrance of whose blossoms filled the air. The walls of the room were of cedar, carved and painted, and the floor was strewn with skins of lions, many of which the princess had slain with her own hand, for she often went with her royal father to the chase and no archer was more skillful than she.

Ne-ne-hofra's mother was a princess captured by her father in his northern wars. Her beauty was not as the beauty of the daughters of Chemi, and Ne-ne-hofra was like her mother. Her skin was white and fair, and her eyes blue like the northern skies, while her hair was of the color of the golden band that held it. In her robe of spotless ribbon, woven with threads of gold, she was more beautiful than anything I had ever beheld before. Some have ventured to say that Hathor, the goddess of love herself, is not so fair. This much I know, that when first I saw her there, wonder and awe at the beauty of which before I had had but a glimpse, overcame me wholly. If I saluted her I cannot say—I might well have knelt worshipping at her feet. I saw her smile; I heard her voice, soft and clear, and her low, musical laughter—all as though dreaming.

There was a feast and red wine, there was music of harps and the rhythmic swaying of the dancing girls. I leaned on a couch by the side of the princess and saw and heard only her. They crowned us with wreaths of fresh flow-

ers—Hathor's crowns, the princess said, and smiled upon me. I remembered that. Incense was burned and the air became dense and heavy. The music and the dancers and the smoke of the incense intermingled in a vague fantasia. Only the princess was real to me. She drew from her bosom a Lotos blossom and held it to her nostrils. Dreamily I breathed in its fragrance. Then I lay as one half sleeping—even Ne-ne-hofra had grown vague to me.

Presently, I seemed to see her clasp her hands together, to see Im-Hotep enter with slaves, who raised me up and bore me away through the city, now grown dark, over the Nile to the far hills beyond the Necropolis. I felt neither power nor desire of movement; all was dreamy and unreal. Then came blackness as of entering a cavern. Torches flashed vaguely to and fro as I halted in a vast, dim hall pervaded by an odor sickening though sweet. I was laid upon a great stone block, and a slave brought a basket of Lotos blossoms and threw them over me. In the gloom I could see other stone blocks and over all were great piles of Lotos blossoms. Slaves were piling fresh ones upon them. In the glare of a torch gleamed the cruel eyes and sinister smile of Im-Hotep directing them. Another basketful was thrown upon me; then another. I could not breathe the dense, musky atmosphere; its strange sweetness was stealing my senses. Vainly I sought to rise—a great weight pressed me down. Then all was dark and silent.

In infinite gloom, in infinite silence, in the infinite horror of the tomb, long ages passed away. I had lost all sense save that of the passing of time, which was measured only by the slow—slow dying and turning to dust of the Lotos blossoms that covered me. Motionless I lay, as my fathers alone in the eternal night by their pyramids; and as the years were summed into centuries, the slow settling dust wrapped me about as in mummy clothes.

III.

I knew I had lain there for centuries. Long since the last hard Lotos stem had turned to powder, and only the infinitely slower accumulation of cavern dust recorded the passing years. I had forgotten all things; I knew nothing; I felt nothing save that time still was.

What aroused me I knew not. Sensation, life, consciousness, were born afresh in me, and as from a long sleep. I awoke and sat up on the stone couch that had held me for ages. A pale light filled the chamber, disclosing the inscriptions on the walls and the stone benches below them. There were nine of these and on each laid a dried and withered mummy. Their skin, clinging tight to the bones, was shriveled and brown like ancient papyrus, and the lips shrunk back from the yellow teeth left on every fact a hideous grin. Over each was spread a thin shroud of dust—the dust of Lotos blossoms. Shuddering, I covered my eyes.

Then from the stillness came a voice: "Arise, Pent-Ra, follow me. Thy vengeance shall be mine." I looked up. At my feet, glowing like a flame, was the golden asp which had encircled my wrist. It began to glide away and I followed it. Through long passages, up and down, right and left, we passed, until at last the light of day burst upon my eyes, and I gazed down into the Nile Valley. But where was Thebes, her temples and palaces? Gone. Only ruins and desert sands now covered the site of the proud city of a hundred gates.

Now I knew not which way to go, and sought for the shining asp to follow it. It was gone, but on my wrist once again was the golden bracelet coiled.