

# The Cat of Bubastes

## A Tale of Ancient Egypt

G. A. Henty

Sample

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Summary: In 1250 B.C. the teenaged son of the Egyptian high priest sets off a series of harrowing events when he accidentally kills the sacred cat of Bubastes and, accompanied by his sister and two foreign slaves, embarks on a dangerous journey to find safe haven beyond the borders of Egypt.

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## Chapter 1

The sun was blazing down upon a city on the western shore of the Caspian. It was a primitive city, and yet its size and population rendered it worthy of the term. It consisted of a vast aggregation of buildings, which were for the most part mere huts. Among them rose, however, a few of more solid build and of higher pretensions. These were the abodes of the chiefs and great men, the temples, and places of assembly. But although larger and more solidly built, these buildings could lay no claim to architectural beauty of any kind, but were little more than magnified huts, and even the king's palace was but a collection of such buildings closely adjoining each other.

The town was surrounded by a lofty wall with battlements and loopholes, and a similar but higher wall girt in the dwellings of the king and of his principal captains. The streets were alive with the busy multitude; and it was evident that although in the arts of peace the nation had made but little progress, they had in everything appertaining to war made great advances. Most of the men wore helmets closely fitting to the head and surmounted by a spike. These were for the most part composed of hammered brass, although some of the head-pieces were made of tough hide, studded with knobs of metal. All carried round shields—those of the soldiers, of leather stiffened with metal; those of the captains, of brass, worked with considerable elaboration.

In their belts all wore daggers, while at their backs were slung quivers of iron; painted bows hung over one shoulder, and some had at their waist a pouch of smooth flat stones and leather

slings. Their chief garment was a sort of kilt falling to the knee. Above the waist some wore only a thin vest of white linen, others a garment not unlike the nightgown of modern times, but with short sleeves. The kilt was worn over this. Some had breast-pieces of thick leather confined by straps behind; while in the case of the officers the leather was covered with small pieces of metal, forming a cuirass.

All carried two or three javelins in the left hand, and a spear some ten feet long in the right. Horsemen galloped about at full speed to and from the royal palace, while occasionally chariots, drawn sometimes by one, sometimes by two horses, dashed along. These chariots were small, the wheels not exceeding three feet in height. Between them was placed the body of the vehicle, which was but just large enough for two men to stand on. It consisted only of a small platform, with a semicircular rail running round the front some eighteen inches above it. A close observer would have perceived at once that not only were the males of the city upon the point of marching out on a military expedition, but that it was no mere foray against a neighbouring people, but a war on which the safety of the city depended.

Women were standing in tearful groups as they watched the soldiers making towards the gates. The men themselves had a resolute and determined look, but there was none of the light-hearted gaiety among them which betokened the expectation of success and triumph. Inside the palace the bustle of preparation was as marked as without. The king and his principal councillors and leaders were assembled in the great circular hut which formed the audience-room and council-chamber. Messengers arrived in close succession with news of the progress and strength of the enemy, or with messages from the neighbouring towns and tribes as to the contingents they had furnished, and the time at which these had set out to join the army.

The king himself was a tall and warlike figure, in the prime of life. He had led his warriors on many successful expeditions far to the west, and had repulsed with great loss the attempts of the Persians to encroach upon his territory. Standing behind him was his son, Amuba, a lad of some fifteen years of age. The king and his councillors, as well as all the wealthy inhabitants of the

city, wore, in addition to the kilt and linen jacket, a long robe highly coloured and ornamented with fanciful devices, and having a broad rich border. It was fastened at the neck with a large brooch, fell loosely from the shoulders to the ankles, and was open in front. The girdles which retained the kilts and in which the daggers were worn were highly ornamented, and the ends fell down in front and terminated in large tassels.

All wore a profusion of necklaces, bracelets, and other ornaments of gold; many of the chiefs wore feathers in their helmets, and the greater portion of all ranks had figures tattooed on their arms and legs. They were fair in complexion, with blue eyes; their hair was for the most part golden or red, and they wore their beards short and pointed. The young Prince Amuba was attired for the field; his helmet was of gold, and his cuirass covered with plates of the same metal. He listened with suppressed impatience to the arguments of his elders, for he was eager to be off, this being the first time that he had been permitted to take part in the military expeditions of his country.

After listening for some time and perceiving that there was no prospect of the council breaking up, he retired to the large hut adjoining the council-chamber. This served as the dwelling-place of the ladies and their family. It was divided into several apartments by screens formed of hide sewn together and hidden from sight by coloured hangings. In one of these a lady was seated on a low couch covered with panthers' skins.

"They have not done talking yet, mother. It has been a question as to where we shall assemble to give battle. It does not seem to me to make much difference where we fight, but they seem to think that it is most important; and of course they know more about it than I do. They have fixed upon a place at last—it is about fifteen miles from here. They say that the ground in front is marshy and can hardly be traversed by the enemy's chariots; but if they cannot get at us, it seems to me that we cannot get at them. Messengers have been sent off to order all the contingents to assemble at that spot. Six thousand men are to remain behind to guard the city; but as we mean to beat them I do not think there can be much occasion for that; for you think we shall beat them. Used by Permission

"I hope so, Amuba; but I am very fearful."

"But we have several times repulsed them when they have invaded our country, mother; why should we not do so this time?"

"They are much stronger than they have ever been before when they have come against us, my boy; and their king is a great warrior, who has been successful in almost every enterprise he has undertaken."

"I cannot think why he wants to conquer us, mother. They say the riches of Egypt are immense and the splendour of their temples and buildings such as we have no idea of. We have no quarrel with them if they will but let us alone."

"No country is so rich that it does not desire more, my son. We have gold and are skilled in the working of it, and no doubt they anticipate that they will capture much treasure in the land; besides, as you say, their expeditions against the Rebu have been several times repulsed, and therefore their monarch will reap all the greater honour if he should defeat us. As to their having no quarrel with us, have we not made many expeditions to the west, returning with captives and much booty? And yet the people had no quarrel with us—many of them, indeed, could scarcely have known us by name when our army appeared among them. Some day, my son, things may be managed differently; but at present kings who have power make war upon people that are weaker than themselves, spoil them of their goods, and make slaves of them.

"I hope, Amuba, you will not expose yourself too much in the conflict. You have not come to man's strength yet; and remember you are my only child. See that your charioteer covers you with his shield when you have entered the battle, for the Egyptians are terrible as archers. Their bows carry much further than do ours, and the arrows will pierce even the strongest armour. Our spearmen have always shown themselves as good as theirs—nay, better, for they are stronger in body and full of courage. It is in the goodness of her archers and the multitude of her chariots that the strength of Egypt lies. Remember that although your father, as king, must needs go into the thick of the battle to encourage his soldiers, there is no occasion why you, who are yet a boy, should so expose yourself

“It will doubtless be a terrible battle. The Egyptians have the memory of past defeats to wipe out, and they will be fighting under the eye of their king. I am terrified, Amuba. Hitherto when your father has gone out to battle I have never doubted as to the result. The Persians were not foes whom brave men need dread; nor was it difficult to force the hordes passing us from the eastward towards the setting sun to respect our country, for we had the advantage in arms and discipline. But the Egyptians are terrible foes, and the arms of their king have been everywhere victorious. My heart is filled with dread at the thought of the approaching conflict, though I try to keep up a brave face when your father is with me, for I would not that he should deem me cowardly.”

“I trust, mother, that your fears are groundless, and I cannot think that our men will give way when fighting for their homes and country upon ground chosen by themselves.”

“I hope not, Amuba. But there is the trumpet sounding; it is the signal that the council have broken up and that your father is about to start. Bless you, my dear boy, and may you return safe and sound from the conflict!”

The queen fondly embraced her son, who left the apartment hastily as his father entered in order that the latter might not see the traces of tears on his cheeks. A few minutes later the king, with his captains, started from the palace. Most of them rode in chariots, the rest on horseback. The town was quiet now and the streets almost deserted. With the exception of the garrison, all the men capable of bearing arms had gone forth; the women with anxious faces stood in groups at their doors and watched the royal party as it drove out.

The charioteer of Amuba was a tall and powerful man; he carried a shield far larger than was ordinarily used, and had been specially selected by the king for the service. His orders were that he was not to allow Amuba to rush into the front line of fighters, and that he was even to disobey the orders of the prince if he wished to charge into the ranks of the enemy.

“My son must not shirk danger,” his father said, “and he must needs go well into the fight; but he is still but a boy, not fit to enter upon a hand-to-hand contest with the picked warriors of

