

“Psappha, as she called herself in her soft Aeolian dialect, was born at Eresus, on Lesbos”
The Life of Greece by Will Durant’*

-- I --

On the opposite side of the island from her birthplace, on a hill above and somewhat south of Mitylene, Psappha leaned her back against the outside of her stepfather’s garden wall and stared across open water. The mainland shore remained in shadow as Dawn dressed ancient mountaintops in brilliant white. Soon the sun would move higher to grace the twelve mainland Aeolian cities with early morning light. Near the second to last, a thin column of smoke wafted upward. Whatever vessel had the signal fires ablaze throughout the night was getting closer. *It should reach Mitylene by noon.*

She edged into the shadows as her mother’s husband exited the main gate. His robes drew a dark green line across dew-drenched grass as he hurried toward the oleander-shrouded path that led down to The Lady’s Park and from there to the beach, which would soon be crowded with people headed into the city of New Mitylene to learn what news the night fires foretold.

Despite her mothers repeated warnings of what could happen to her afoot in the city “now that you’re almost all grown up”, Psappha followed Eurigios*, being careful to not let her former nursemaid catch her. Praxinoa* would make her use her mother’s sedan chair. “Its curtains will protect you from prying eyes,” Praxinoa would have said. *They’d also hide everything interesting from me,* Psappha secretly replied.

She peered between towering oleanders to catch fleeting teasing glimpses of the twin cities beyond The Lady’s Park. When she stepped from between the hedges, Old Mitylene displayed itself before her. *Like a jade and ivory cameo, tied with two golden-ribbon bridges to the teeming young city on the shore. A jewel in a crescent of noise,* Psappha thought as a poem began to form. Before she went to

* Psappha (Suh-FAH)

* Eurigios (you-ri-GUY-aus)

* Praxinoa (prax-in-NO-ah)

bed, she would inscribe it into the wax tablet that lay always ready on her dressing table.

The ancient city of mansions and gardens rested on an island in the middle of the bay. In the near harbor, the fishing fleet nestled like a flock of many-colored ducks. In the deep harbor beyond the bridges, a black-sailed trireme strained at anchor. *A great, chained panther its three rows of oars like claws reaching skyward.*

On the farthest shore, The Lady's sacred olive grove stretched away from the beach with young leaves shimmering in dawn-light. *Like a thousand needles sewing up the sky.*

Eurigios spoke and the next line of some future poem escaped her. "Where do you think you're going, young lady? And where's your chair?" Eurigios stroked his neatly cropped blond beard in a pretense of age and authority. "Your mother will never forgive me if I allow you to stroll about the city like a street urchin."

Determined, Psappa squared her shoulders to accent small, pointed breasts beneath a clinging Egyptian linen peplos. The ribbons girdling her trim waist held her skirt just above her unpainted toes. "Please," she said, in a studied imitation of her mother's most seductive tone.

Eurigios blinked. "But" His uncertain demeanor advertised his youth.

Scarcely ten years older than Psappa, Eurigios was born a scant year before her brother Charaxos*. *Maybe that's why Charaxos chose to study with Pythagoras in Croton instead of joining Mother and I in exile: Or was it because his birth twin Alkaios* left to rent his sword to King Neccho* of Egypt? A pity. They used to all be such good friends.*

Eurigios paid a high price in friendship to gain my mother's hand. A shame he never gained her love. Then nobody does-- except maybe Charaxos.

Eurigios moved onto and across the grass at the beachside edge of The Lady's Park. Psappa hurried to follow. Enveloped as she was in bitter childhood memories, she failed to notice the marble bench half hidden in a cluster of azaleas. It nearly toppled her.

"O-o-oh," she moaned as she collapsed onto the bench. "I've stubbed my toe."

Across the glade, a giggle of girls danced among the trees, following a lithe young woman whose ivory-cream skin and long, silver-gold hair perfectly defined the generally accepted concept of beauty. *If only Mother could have such a*

* Charaxos (KAY-rah-khaus)

* Alkaios (Al-KAY-aus)

* Neccho, Pharaoh of Egypt (609-593 bce)

child. Long-legged, graceful, creamy-skinned and golden-haired, the dancer was the embodiment of everything Psappa considered beautiful in a human being: The opposite of her abbreviated, olive-hided, dark-haired self. "Who is she?"

"Who?"

"That marvelous dancer, who is she?"

Eurigos arched a brow, then shrugged and said, "I don't know much about her but if you'll stop dawdling I'll tell you what I do know as we walk."

Psappa hurried ahead of him then turned and walked toward the city backward. "Tell me."

"Most suppose she is Athenian or an Aeolian from the far country. Her coloring is Athenian, like your mother's, but she knew no Hellene when they found her."

"Found her? Where? What is she called?"

"Turn around, Psappa' and walk beside me before you stumble again and fall. Here. Give me your hand. They found her in some wreckage on the beach. That's why they call her Atthis*."

"Is she really Atthis, Goddess of the Rugged Coast come to live among us?"

"I don't know," Eurigos said. "She could be I suppose. Who knows? From the way Poseidon-Earthshaker raged that day, she must at least have his protection."

"Oh, yes." Psappa skipped a step to keep pace with him. "I remember. A few weeks ago, Earth trembled greatly as she repulsed Poseidon's advances."

Eurigos nodded. "They discovered Atthis on the beach the next morning."

"Atthis," Psappa whispered. The name tickled her palette.

"Come, Psapph'. You're dawdling again."

The marketplace on the beach in New Mitylene was a wonder of riches from throughout the world and Psappa loved every noisy, stinking inch of it. She would have dashed ahead but for his firm hold on her hand. Fascinated by the crowds, colors and varying smells, she barely noticed the shabbiness of the booths that lined the filthy street.

"Here, little lady, sir," a hawker whined, "the finest wines of the house of Judah. Sweet wine fit only for so beautiful a lady."

"No, no, friends," another pleaded, "only the moon-kissed dates of Libya are sweet enough to pass the lips of so fair a child of Aphrodite*."

Psappa laughed at their exaggerations. *Fair indeed. Ha!*

* Atthis (AT-this)

* Aphrodite = one of The Lady's many names.

They brushed by another merchant dressed in gaudy foreign garb, his voice dripping honey. “Pay no attention to them, good sir. No wine nor dates can compare with the sweetness of Apollo's succulent, golden globes. From the Sun's own sacred groves I bring you the biggest and the sweetest of his blessed fruits.”

Psappa edged through a crowd near the temple of Zeus, pulling Eurigios with her. In the shop there, amid bins of figs, nuts and dried grapes, a dark little man displayed rough gold disks.

“These are what Achaeans use for trade,” he said, stroking his small, dark beard. “See the fine image of Aphaea* by which they mark them. No more must merchants spend their days in idle bargaining solely to end up with more goods for still more bargaining. Now you can pay us in gold coins and with them we can purchase only that which will sell quickly.”

“But, where would we get them?”

Psappa turned her head enough to see who spoke. Near the edge of the crowd, a muscular peasant stood, arms akimbo, eyes prancing.

“From me,” said the merchant. “Sell me goods I want and you'll soon have a supply of gold coins.”

“Where would I carry them?” the man scoffed. “Do you expect me to carry a basket like a woman?”

Psappa giggled at a mental picture of the huge ruffian with a basket on his head.

The bearded merchant was not amused. “Where else but in your mouth?” he snapped. “I'm sure you could carry a fortune there.”

The bleating of a trio of goats being driven into the temple caught Psappa's attention. Their perfect beauty reminded her of her distrust of priests and gods who, unable to bleed painlessly themselves, murdered Gaea's sacred creatures to appease their jealousy.

A grubby merchant in desert robes insinuated a small, jewel-encrusted mirror in front of Psappa's frown.

“Ah, sir,” he proclaimed, addressing Eurigios. “It is for such beauty as this that my master makes his magic glass.”

Psappa turned away from him in a huff and confronted her own image, full-length in a magnificent piece of standing glass.

“Eurigios,” she exclaimed bringing her palms together sharply. “You must buy this for Mother.”

“I doubt she would like it much right now.”

* Aphaea (a [as in at] FAY-ah)

“I know,” Psappa admitted; her enthusiasm dampened, “but the reflection is so much clearer than in her polished-copper one. You could save it and present it to her as a birthing gift.”

“Perhaps it is you who would like it,” he teased.

She crinkled her nose. “I have no use for mirrors. Even if I did, I could not let you buy me presents.”

“Why not? You are my wife’s daughter and you will marry my brother when he returns. Why should you feel shy with me?”

Psappa hung her head and scuffed the dust with her shoe. How could she tell him that she hated the thought of Alkaios’s return? How could she tell that after seven years his beloved younger brother had become a stranger: *A stranger to whom our parents betrothed me at birth: A stranger to trap me in a life of sedan-chairs and babes. I want more.* Unsure as to what that something more might be she decided that hurting Eurigios would be pointless. Instead, she smiled and walked quickly on.

They made their way through the crowds, passing booths bright with fabrics from unknown lands, brought to Mitylene by Phoenician traders -- stalls overflowing with figurines and presided over by stiff-bearded Egyptians -- open corrals filled with bellowing cattle. Eurigios hurried her past a refinery where naked slaves stirred great vats of boiling fleece. Psappa sidestepped huge jars of lanolin. She ran past slaughter pens swarming with green flies and held her nose before swine pens deep in slime.

She dawdled near stalls of rare oils, tables strewn with exotic herbs, brocade-bedecked bins of rare spice. Eurigios tugged her hand and they stepped onto the quay. Psappa paused once more to admire the sleek, black trireme. *A fitting tribute to the shipwrights of Tyre who built her.*

Such contrast, she thought as a flamboyant Egyptian dragon ship slid past the black trireme.

“Come, Psapph’. The Egyptian will have news.” Eurigios’s grip tightened but Psappa held her ground.

From here she could see her ancestral home in the old city, tucked close by the citadel’s south wall, close beside the seat of power. *As was my father. The House of Scamandronomos* should belong to me! Not Charaxos. He left. Our father would want me to have it. And, not this new babe Mother’s expecting. Let Eurigios provide for his own.*

Eurigios tugged her hand and pulled her along as he hurried the length of the wharf. The pleasing scents of incense, spices and rare oils quickly gave way to the stench of rotting fish and sweating stevedores. The dock nearest the

* Skamandronomos (Skam-an-DRO-no-maus)

dragon ship gabbled with people. At the very end, a man shouted from atop a bale of papyrus.

“. . . on the west bank of the river Euphrates, near its westernmost bend. We camped behind the city. From our fires, we could see Neccho's encampment.

“The enemy arrived at night. Their fires lit most of the riverbank. We did not find out who they were until after the battle. By then, they had pushed us south into Judea. We camped again near Jerusalem.

“The Chaldeans* must have been fat with victory. They left us to make our way back to Egypt as best we could: Nipping at our heels to keep us moving.”

“What of the Lesbians?” someone called from the crowd.

“They fought bravely and well,” the man said. “Those who did not fall at Charchemish have earned their wages.”

“Where are they now?” another in the throng shouted.

“Many elected to remain in the Pharaoh's new city for Greeks called Naucratis*,” the man said. “The rest we brought home with us.”

Eurigios did not wait to hear more. Psappha ran to keep pace with him.

“Wait!” she gasped.

“I'm sorry,” he said when she arrived at his side breathless and panting. “I thought Alkaios might have returned and I forgot everything else.”

“It doesn't matter.” She sighed as her breathing slowed. “I know how much you love your brother.”

They had re-entered The Lady's Park. The stone path crackled beneath their sandals. The dust of the street fell softly from their feet. Psappha glanced over her shoulder, holding Mitylene in her gaze until the trees blocked her view.

“Hurry, Psapph', your mother will be worried.”

No, she won't.

Eurigios took the hill in sure strides. Psappha's legs seemed to grow shorter the longer they climbed. The way seemed rougher than it had in the morning.

They reached the house to find the outer gate already bolted for the night. Eurigios called to the guard and the gate squeaked open. “Word has come from your father's house,” the gatekeeper announced. “Your brother has returned.”

* The 11th dynasty of the Kings of Babylon (6th century BC) is conventionally known to historians as the Chaldean Dynasty.

* Naucratis (gnaw-KRAT-tiss) Egypt

Eurigos danced an impromptu jig that ended in an exuberant hug. "I must greet him," he said as he let her go. "Don't look so glum. I'll tell Praxinoa it's my fault you're late." *But not before she's boxed my ears.* "Torches," he shouted into the darkness. "Tell your mother where I've gone. I won't be long," he called over his shoulder as he hurried away. Two torchbearers ran to precede him.

Psappa slumped through the gate. A large dog growled softly then ambled toward her as she entered the garden. Turquoise-black birds scattered in his wake.

Psappa knelt to scratch Gruff's long, drooping ears. Nuzzling his neck while his tail whipped up dust clouds, she watched the strange new birds. They glistened in the sunlight. Their excited clucking tickled her belly. She chuckled softly, not wanting to disturb the old gardener who pattered near the kitchen door. She smiled an apology as he approached.

"The Minorcan who sold them to us claimed their eggs finer than duck eggs," the old gardener said.

"I doubt we'll ever convince my mother. Though they're the whitest eggs I've ever seen."

The old man nodded agreement. "The merchant said they rival those of the peahen. Perhaps you could have some prepared without telling her."

"Nothing in this house goes without her notice." *Except me.*

"I suppose you're right," the old gardener said. "But, if that he-bird doesn't stop waking Dawn, I'll wager he gets eaten before the eggs."

Psappa returned his grin. "I don't think I'll take that wager."

Most of her understanding of passing events had come from overheard conversations between this wily old man and her nursemaid, Praxinoa.

As if conjured by a thought, the front door creaked and Praxinoa's presence filled the doorway. Psappa's hands sprang to protect her ears.

"What kept you so late? Don't plug your ears when I'm talking to you. I had a terrible time getting your mother to rest."

"I'm sorry." Psappa lowered her hands and picked at the folds of her peplos. "I was with Eurigos."

"Of course you were. Eurigos left half an hour ago."

Psappa breathed in as much false confidence as her chest would hold. "I was in the garden trying to find the right words to tell Mother that he's gone to welcome Alkaios. I didn't want her to be angry with him."

"It's you she's displeased with. I had to tell her where you've been all day. This will be your last childish jaunt, I'm sure."

Psappa hung her head.

"Change your dress and wash the city from your feet before you see her."

* * *

Psappa's satin slippers made no sound as she slipped into her mother's chamber. The room was huge and trimmed throughout with precious purple and intricate 'broidery. A great lavender-veiled bed dominated one corner; an orchid draped chaise at its foot.

Klies* reclined upon it, the back of one hand shading her closed eyes while a servant-girl brushed pale hair that glistened like sun-drenched sacred spider-webs. The sheer violet linen of her gown parted below her distended abdomen to frame long, slender legs. A second slim, perfectly manicured hand lay over her voluptuous breasts. Psappa remembered when her mother's nails had been cracked and broken, when, in the bad times following Scamandronomos's death there was no time for pampering and the purple dye had been too dear. *Was that when I failed her? Did she turn cold because she needed rest and all I did was cry for her to hold me?*

She took a step closer to the chaise, silently catching the servant's attention.

"Mind you don't wake her," the girl whispered as she passed Psappa the brush. "To awaken a pregnant woman is to endanger the life within."

Psappa perched on the edge of the servant-girl's stool. *Superstitious nonsense*, she thought as she continued the brushing of her mother's hair without missing a stroke. The long, moon-gold tendrils entwined her fingers like gossamer silk. Strands of downy hair draped themselves across her lap. She wished that she could weave a kiton of them and walk forever with its kiss upon her skin.

After about ninety strokes, she decided Klies was asleep. Silently signaling the girl, she whispered, "Come for me the instant she awakes."

Klies's azure-blue eyes opened wide and threatening. "Must you come in here chattering like a blue monkey every time I try to rest?"

"I'm sorry," Psappa choked through a hidden sob. She had broken a primary rule. Klies was not to be upset, yet Psappa invariably managed to do exactly that. In a fluster of movement, she sprang to her feet and fluffed Klies's cushions. "Eurigos sent me. He told me to tell you his brother has returned."

"I know."

Psappa sighed. *I should have been first with the news.* "He said to tell you he'd return soon."

"With the dawn no doubt. No matter. It will give us time to talk. Here. Come. Sit by me. That's better," she added as Psappa returned to the servant girl's stool. "It's time to plan your wedding."

Psappa flinched. "Can't we do that tomorrow?"

* Klies (KLEE-ace)

“Now that Alkaios has returned, there’s no reason to wait. Your marriage has been postponed far too long already.”

Psappa felt as if her mind was on fire. An emotional fever ran through her veins as she tried to recall his face.

“Psappa, you’re shivering, dear. Run lower the tapestry over the window.”

“I’m not cold,” Psappa responded honestly, and then went to lower the tapestry.

The moment she returned, Klies continued. “We must set a date,”

“Yes, ma’am. I s’pose we must.”

“By Aphrodite’s sandals, Psappa!” Klies swung her long legs off the side of the couch and sat up. One would think you’d be pleased.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why must I marry? I have my songs. I could hire myself out to sing at other people’s weddings.”

“You’re much too old to waste your time plucking your lyre & longing for fame that will never come. You’ll have enough glory in Alkaios’s shadow, if he’ll still have you. Every woman needs a husband.”

“Why?”

“Why to raise your children of course.”

“I don’t need children.”

“Of course you need children. Every woman needs children.”

You don’t need me. Psappa hung her head, avoiding the impatience in Klies’s eyes. *What good to be the daughter of kings when my own mother thinks I’m ugly? I’d rather be a golden-haired goose-girl.* She blushed as she remembered things overheard from goose-girls and shepherd boys while hidden in the orchard.

“Don’t you want to be loved?”

“Of course but why must I marry?”

“Why? Because. That’s why.”

“I will not marry just because.”

“You will marry whom and when you are told.”

“I won’t!”

Klies slapped her. Psappa jumped to her feet, threw the brush across the room and kicked the stool after it. “I won’t! I’ll weep and wail and cut my hair.”

“You’ll do no such thing.”

“I will. I will.” Psappa paced the room, keeping just out of view, measuring her thoughts. “I’ll wed when and if I’m ready or I’ll go to my marriage bed veiled in black with hair no longer than a robin’s tail. And -- I won’t wed a stranger; Eurigios’s brother or no. I’d rather spend the rest of my

life in The Lady's temple. I saw what happened to Dika. She married against her will and she's not played or sung a note since. The Lady revoked her gift."

"That's enough, Psappa. You will marry Alkaios and that's that. It's what your father wanted."

Psappa plunked her hands on her hips and glared. "That's not fair. Everything I don't want to do is 'what your father wished'. My father didn't wish to die but it didn't stop him."

Klies looked as if Psappa had hit her. *Now I've done it. What was it the girl said? Too awoken... but she's already awake so maybe it's all right.* In a fluster of fear for her unborn sister, Psappa hastily fluffed Klies's cushions and eased her among them. "I'm sorry," she said and this time she meant it. "I'll go. You need to rest."

"No." Klies restrained her with a light touch on her arm. "Stay. We can talk about weddings another time."

Must we? "Can't it wait until after my sister is born?"

Klies smiled. "Sister?"

"Of course a sister." Psappa retrieved her mother's brush. With the hairbrush once more in her hand, she resumed her brushing as deftly as she sometimes stroked the strings of her lyre.

The lyre Alkaios made me after Charaxos failed to teach my immature fingers the secrets of his kithara. She remembered the day he gave it to her. That was the day she decided she'd be a notable in The Congress of Poets someday. She couldn't wait to tell Alkaios but when she did, he laughed. "Only men receive invitations from that exalted bunch." *We'll see,* she remembered thinking. *We'll see.*

She had once shared her dream with her mother but Klies had scoffed. Now, she shyly shared another. "The child you carry will be a beautiful little golden sister who will grow up looking just like you."

"For shame, Psappa. Such flattery. You shouldn't defy the gods. They'll get jealous."

"It isn't flattery when it's true. You're beautiful. I can't wait to see you dance at the summer festivals. Oh-h-h," she groaned with exaggerated grief. "I can't possibly marry without you there to dance."

Klies sniggered. "Perhaps you're right. Perhaps we should delay the wedding until after the birth. I have but one daughter. I will want to dance at your marriage feast. Perhaps Alkaios will agree to wait for the youngest guest." She cast a wry smile toward her abdomen.

Psappa fought to hide her exultation. *The child is not due for weeks. There's ample time for everyone to change their minds.*

* * *

Later, in her own chamber, Psappa devoured the fresh fruit and nuts that Praxinoa had left for her. Praxinoa had prepared her for sleep since before she could remember. This night, Psappa was glad she wasn't there. She needed time alone to sort her thoughts. Her mind was a maze of questions she preferred to ignore. Determinedly, she covered her doubts with Praxinoa's habitual evening queries. *What did you do all day? Did you study your Homer? Did you make any new songs?*

When that no longer worked, she left her clothes in a rumple on the floor and snuggled into bed where she hugged her goose down pillow and scrunched her eyelids tight. However, Morphios was busy elsewhere and his dream-evoking son Hypnos was nowhere to be found.

Toward midnight, she got up, took up her lyre and went to perch, nude, on the sill of the open arch that served her as a window. At first, her touch on the strings was automatic; her throaty alto voice doleful as she sang, "Maidenhood, maidenhood why wouldst thou fly from me? Golden-tressed Lady-of-the-pure-and-beautiful where is thy compassion? Electrum-crowned Majesty, have mercy," she sang to Aphrodite but it was Klies she envisioned on the peacock throne. "I am to wed a man I no longer know."

After a time, her music brought her calm and comfort and finally, inevitably, joy. Her fingers danced upon the sacred strings; composing; creating prayer-songs of such beauty and power that she was herself amazed by The Lady's gifts.

The heavy throb of a kithara vibrated through the night and she missed a note. A moment later, she joined the unseen kitharist in an ode to Eros that caused her pulse to quicken. Each note blended with those of her dulcet lyre.

The tempo increased as the kitharist led her into a rousing paean to Pan. She recognized the melody. She had heard it often as a child. She blushed, remembering the day Alkaios taught her the paean's naughty words. She sighed almost with relief when the irreverent paean strummed to a close.

Her rest was brief. A moment and then the twang of martial music stormed the night. The composition, an intricacy of trills and patterns designed to defeat the skill of a lesser artist was one Psappa had never heard but she quickly rose to the kitharist's challenge then followed with a new piece of her own. The kithara quieted, as if the kitharist had faltered. Not so. When she finished her piece, the challenger continued.

Psappa picked up the next tune with little effort. This time she recognized the song. It was a toast to wine and roistering, played as only Alkaios could play it. She recalled the first time she heard it. She was nine. A week later, he was gone.

Now, as their duet carried her back to childhood -- yesterday -- when encumbering responsibilities had been a distant illusion she set aside her

distaste for his martial compositions, his fascination for war and wine, and heard only the interwoven harmony. Alkaios was her teacher and her friend. She had forgotten that she missed him.

As she matched his kithara with her grown up lyre, perfect harmony brought back the beauty of his face. It was a boy's face. *But -- he is no longer a boy!*