

CHAPTER III

THE VALLEY OF THE DEAD KINGS

Martina and I had made a plan. Palka, after much coaxing, took us with her one evening when she went to place the accustomed offerings in the Valley of the Dead. Indeed, at first she refused outright to allow us to accompany her, because, she said, only those who were born in the village of Kurna had made such offerings since the days when the Pharaohs ruled, and that if strangers shared in this duty it might bring misfortune. We answered, however, that if so the misfortune would fall on us, the intruders. Also we pointed out that the jars of water and milk were heavy, and, as it happened, there was no one from the hamlet to help to carry them this night. Having weighed these facts, Palka changed her mind.

"Well," she said, "it is true that I grow fat, and after labouring all day at this and that have no desire to bear burdens like an ass. So come if you will, and if you die or evil spirits carry you away, do not add yourselves to the number of the ghosts, of whom there are too many hereabouts, and blame me afterwards."

"On the contrary," I said, "we will make you our heirs," and I laid a bag containing some pieces of money upon the table.

Palka, who was a saving woman, took the money, for I heard it rattle in

her hand, hung the jars about my shoulders, and gave Martina the meat and corn in a basket. The flat cakes, however, she carried herself on a wooden trencher, because, as she said, she feared lest we should break them and anger the ghosts, who liked their food to be well served. So we started, and presently entered the mouth of that awful valley which, Martina told me, looked as though it had been riven through the mountain by lightning strokes and then blasted with a curse.

Up this dry and desolate place, which, she said, was bordered on either side by walls of grey and jagged rock, we walked in silence. Only I noted that the dog which had followed us from the house clung close to our heels and now and again whimpered uneasily.

"The beast sees what we cannot see," whispered Palka in explanation.

At last we halted, and I set down the jars at her bidding upon a flat rock which she called the Table of Offerings.

"See!" she exclaimed to Martina, "those that were placed here three days ago are all emptied and neatly piled together by the ghosts. I told Hodur that they did this, but he would not believe me. Now let us pack them up in the baskets and begone, for the sun sets and the moon rises within the half of an hour. I would not be here in the dark for ten pieces of pure gold."

"Then go swiftly, Palka," I said, "for we bide here this night."

"Are you mad?" she asked.

"Not at all," I answered. "A wise man once told me that if one who is blind can but come face to face with a spirit, he sees it and thereby regains his sight. If you would know the truth, that is why I have wandered so far from my own country to find some land where ghosts may be met."

"Now I am sure that you are mad," exclaimed Palka. "Come, Hilda, and leave this fool to make trial of his cure for blindness."

"Nay," answered Martina, "I must stay with my uncle, although I am very much afraid. If I did not, he would beat me afterwards."

"Beat you! Hodur beat a woman! Oh! you are both mad. Or perhaps you are ghosts also. I have thought it once or twice, who at least am sure that you are other than you seem. Holy Jesus! this place grows dark, and I tell you it is full of dead kings. May the Saints guard you; at the least, you'll keep high company at your death. Farewell; whate'er befalls, blame me not who warned you," and she departed at a run, the empty vessels rattling on her back and the dog yapping behind her.

When she had gone the silence grew deep.

"Now, Martina," I whispered, "find some place where we may hide whence

you can see this Table of Offerings."

She led me to where a fallen rock lay within a few paces, and behind it we sat ourselves down in such a position that Martina could watch the Table of Offerings by the light of the moon.

Here we waited for a long while; it may have been two hours, or three, or four. At least I knew that, although I could see nothing, the solemnity of that place sank into my soul. I felt as though the dead were moving about me in the silence. I think it was the same with Martina, for although the night was very hot in that stifling, airless valley, she shivered at my side. At last I felt her start and heard her whisper:

"I see a figure. It creeps from the shadow of the cliff towards the Table of Offerings."

"What is it like?" I asked.

"It is a woman's figure draped in white cloths; she looks about her; she takes up the offerings and places them in a basket she carries. It is a woman--no ghost--for she drinks from one of the jars. Oh! now the moonlight shines upon her face; it is that of Heliodore!"

I heard and could restrain myself no longer. Leaping up, I ran towards where I knew the Table of Offerings to be. I tried to speak, but my

voice choked in my throat. The woman saw or heard me coming through the shadows. At least, uttering a low cry, she fled away, for I caught the sound of her feet on the rocks and sand. Then I tripped over a stone and fell down.

In a moment Martina was at my side.

"Truly you are foolish, Olaf," she said. "Did you think that the lady Heliodore would know you at night, changed as you are and in this garb, that you must rush at her like an angry bull? Now she has gone, and perchance we shall never find her more. Why did you not speak to her?"

"Because my voice choked within me. Oh! blame me not, Martina. If you knew what it is to love as I do and after so many fears and sorrows----"

"I trust that I should know also how to control my love," broke in Martina sharply. "Come, waste no more time in talk. Let us search."

Then she took me by the hand and led me to where she had last seen Heliodore.

"She has vanished away," she said, "here is nothing but rock."

"It cannot be," I answered. "Oh! that I had my eyes again, if for an hour, I who was the best tracker in Jutland. See if no stone has been stirred, Martina. The sand will be damper where it has lain."

She left me, and presently returned.

"I have found something," she said. "When Heliodore fled she still held her basket, which from the look of it was last used by the Pharaohs. At least, one of the cakes has fallen from or through it. Come."

She led me to the cliff, and up it to perhaps twice the height of a man, then round a projecting rock.

"Here is a hole," she said, "such as jackals might make. Perchance it leads into one of the old tombs whereof the mouth is sealed. It was on the edge of the hole that I found the cake, therefore doubtless Heliodore went down it. Now, what shall we do?"

"Follow, I think. Where is it?"

"Nay, I go first. Give me your hand, Olaf, and lie upon your breast."

I did so, and presently felt the weight of Martina swinging on my arm.

"Leave go," she said faintly, like one who is afraid.

I obeyed, though with doubt, and heard her feet strike upon some floor.

"Thanks be the saints, all is well," she said. "For aught I knew this

hole might have been as deep as that in the Chamber of the Pit. Let yourself down it, feet first, and drop. 'Tis but shallow."

I did so, and found myself beside Martina.

"Now, in the darkness you are the better guide," she whispered. "Lead on, I'll follow, holding to your robe."

So I crept forward warily and safely, as the blind can do, till presently she exclaimed,

"Halt, here is light again. I think that the roof of the tomb, for by the paintings on the walls such it must be, has fallen in. It seems to be a kind of central chamber, out of which run great galleries that slope downwards and are full of bats. Ah! one of them is caught in my hair. Olaf, I will go no farther. I fear bats more than ghosts, or anything in the world."

Now, I considered a while till a thought struck me. On my back was my beggar's harp. I unslung it and swept its chords, and wild and sad they sounded in that solemn place. Then I began to sing an old song that twice or thrice I had sung with Heliodore in Byzantium. This song told of a lover seeking his mistress. It was for two voices, since in the song the mistress answered verse for verse. Here are those of the lines that I remember, or, rather, the spirit of them rendered into English. I sang the first verse and waited.

"Dear maid of mine,
/ I bid my strings
Beat on thy shrine
/ With music's wings.
Palace or cell
/ A shrine I see,
If there thou dwell
/ And answer me."

There was no answer, so I sang the second verse and once more waited.

"On thy love's fire
/ My passion breathes,
Wind of Desire
/ Thy incense wreathes.
Greeting! To thee,
/ Or soon or late,
I, bond or free,
/ Am dedicate."

And from somewhere far away in the recesses of that great cave came the answering strophe.

"O Love sublime
/ And undismayed,

No touch of Time
/ Upon thee laid.
That that is thine;
/ Ended the quest!
I seek my shrine
/ Upon thy breast."

Then I laid down the harp.

At last a voice, the voice of Heliodore speaking whence I knew not,
asked,

"Do the dead sing, or is it a living man? And if so, how is that man
named?"

"A living man," I replied, "and he is named Olaf, son of Thorvald,
or otherwise Michael. That name was given him in the cathedral at
Byzantium, where first his eyes fell on a certain Heliodore, daughter of
Magas the Egyptian, whom now he seeks."

I heard the sound of footsteps creeping towards me and Heliodore's voice
say,

"Let me see your face, you who name yourself Olaf, for know that in
these haunted tombs ghosts and visions and mocking voices play strange
tricks. Why do you hide your face, you who call yourself Olaf?"

"Because the eyes are gone from it, Heliodore. Irene robbed it of the eyes from jealousy of you, swearing that never more should they behold your beauty. Perchance you would not wish to come too near to an eyeless man wrapped in a beggar's robe."

She looked--I felt her look. She sobbed--I heard her sob, and then her arms were about me and her lips were pressed upon my own.

So at length came joy such as I cannot tell; the joy of lost love found again.

A while went by, how long I know not, and at last I said,

"Where is Martina? It is time we left this place."

"Martina!" she exclaimed. "Do you mean Irene's lady, and is she here? If so, how comes she to be travelling with you, Olaf?"

"As the best friend man ever had, Heliodore; as one who clung to him in his ruin and saved him from a cruel death; as one who has risked her life to help him in his desperate search, and without whom that search had failed."

"Then may God reward her, Olaf, for I did not know there were such women in the world. Lady Martina! Where are you, lady Martina?"

Thrice she cried the words, and at the third time an answer came from the shadows at a distance.

"I am here," said Martina's voice with a little yawn. "I was weary and have slept while you two greeted each other. Well met at last, lady Heliodore. See, I have brought you back your Olaf, blind it is true, but otherwise lacking nothing of health and strength and station."

Then Heliodore ran to her and kissed first her hand and next her lips. In after days she told me that for those of one who had been sleeping the eyes of Martina seemed to be strangely wet and red. But if this were so her voice trembled not at all.

"Truly you two should give thanks to God," she said, "Who has brought you together again in so wondrous a fashion, as I do on your behalf from the bottom of my heart. Yet you are still hemmed round by dangers many and great. What now, Olaf? Will you become a ghost also and dwell here in the tomb with Heliodore; and if so, what tale shall I tell to Palka and the rest?"

"Not so," I answered. "I think it will be best that we should return to Kurna. Heliodore must play her part as the spirit of a queen till we can hire some boat and escape with her down the Nile."

"Never," she cried, "I cannot, I cannot. Having come together we must separate no more. Oh! Olaf, you do not know what a life has been mine during all these dreadful months. When I escaped from Musa by stabbing the eunuch who was in charge of me, for which hideous deed may I be forgiven," and I felt her shudder at my side, "I fled I knew not whither till I found myself in this valley, where I hid till the night was gone. Then at daybreak I peeped out from the mouth of the valley and saw the Moslems searching for me, but as yet a long way off. Also now I knew this valley. It was that to which my father had brought me as a child when he came to search for the burying-place of his ancestor, the Pharaoh, which records he had read told him was here. I remembered everything: where the tomb should be, how we had entered it through a hole, how we had found the mummy of a royal lady, whose face was covered with a gilded mask, and on her breast the necklace which I wear.

"I ran along the valley, searching the left side of it with my eyes, till I saw a flat stone which I knew again. It was called the Table of Offerings. I was sure that the hole by which we had entered the tomb was quite near to this stone and a little above it, in the face of the cliff. I climbed; I found what seemed to be the hole, though of this I could not be certain. I crept down it till it came to an end, and then, in my terror, hung by my hands and dropped into the darkness, not knowing whither I fell, or caring over much if I were killed. As it chanced it was but a little way, and, finding myself unhurt, I crawled along the cavern till I reached this place where there is light, for

here the roof of the cave has fallen in. While I crouched amid the rocks I heard the voices of the soldiers above me, heard their officer also bidding them bring ropes and torches. To the left of where you stand there is a sloping passage that runs down to the great central chamber where sleeps some mighty king, and out of this passage open other chambers. Into the first of these the light of the morning sun struggles feebly. I entered it, seeking somewhere to hide myself, and saw a painted coffin lying on the floor near to the marble sarcophagus from which it had been dragged. It was that in which we had found the body of my ancestress; but since then thieves had been in this place. We had left the coffin in the sarcophagus and the mummy in the coffin, and replaced their lids. Now the mummy lay on the floor, half unwrapped and broken in two beneath the breast. Moreover, the face, which I remembered as being so like my own, was gone to dust, so that there remained of it nothing but a skull, to which hung tresses of long black hair, as, indeed, you may see for yourself.

"By the side of the body was the gilded mask, with black and staring eyes, and the painted breast-piece of stiff linen, neither of which the thieves had found worth stealing.

"I looked and a thought came to me. Lifting the mummy, I thrust it into the sarcophagus, all of it save the gilded mask and the painted breast-piece of stiff linen. Then I laid myself down in the coffin, of which the lid, still lying crosswise, hid me to the waist, and drew the gilded mask and painted breast-piece over my head and bosom. Scarcely

was it done when the soldiers entered. By now the reflected sunlight had faded from the place, leaving it in deep shadow; but some of the men held burning torches made from splinters of old coffins, that were full of pitch.

"'Feet have passed here; I saw the marks of them in the dust,' said the officer. 'She may have hidden in this place. Search! Search! It will go hard with us if we return to Musa to tell him that he has lost his toy.'

"They looked into the sarcophagus and saw the broken mummy. Indeed, one of them lifted it, unwillingly enough, and let it fall again, saying grimly,

"'Musa would scarce care for this companion, though in her day she may have been fair enough.'

"Then they came to the coffin.

"'Here's another,' exclaimed the soldier, 'and one with a gold face. Allah! how its eyes stare.'

"Pull it out,' said the officer.

"Let that be your task,' answered the man. 'I'll defile myself with no more corpses.'

"The officer came and looked. 'What a haunted hole is this, full of the ghosts of idol worshippers, or so I think,' he said. 'Those eyes stare curses at us. Well, the Christian maid is not here. On, before the torches fail.'

"Then they went, leaving me; the painted linen creaked upon my breast as I breathed again.

"Till nightfall I lay in that coffin, fearing lest they should return; and I tell you, Olaf, that strange dreams came to me there, for I think I swooned or slept in that narrow bed. Yes, dreams of the past, which you shall hear one day, if we live, for they seem to have to do with you and me. Aye, I thought that the dead woman in the sarcophagus at my side awoke and told them to me. At length I rose and crept back to this place where we stand, for here I could see the friendly light, and being outworn, laid me down and slept.

"At the first break of day I crawled from the tomb, followed that same road by which I had entered, though I found it hard to climb up through the entrance hole.

"No living thing was to be seen in the valley, except a great night bird flitting to its haunt. I was parched with thirst, and knowing that in this dry place I soon must perish, I glided from rock to rock towards the mouth of the valley, thinking to find some other grave or cranny where I might lie hid till night came again and I could descend to the

plain and drink. But, Olaf, before I had gone many steps I discovered fresh food, milk and water laid upon a rock, and though I feared lest they might be poisoned, ate and drank of them. When I knew that they were wholesome I thought that some friend must have set them there to satisfy my wants, though I knew not who the friend could be. Afterwards I learned that this food was an offering to the ghosts of the dead.

Among our forefathers in forgotten generations it was, I know, the custom to make such offerings, since in their blindness they believed that the spirits of their beloved needed sustenance as their bodies once had done. Doubtless the memory of the rite still survives; at least, to this day the offerings are made. Indeed, when it was found that they were not made in vain, more and more of them were brought, so that I have lacked nothing.

"Here then I have dwelt for many moons among the dust of men departed, only now and again wandering out at night. Once or twice folk have seen me when I ventured to the plains, and I have been tempted to speak to them and ask their help. But always they fled away, believing me to be the ghost of some bygone queen. Indeed, to speak truth, Olaf, this companionship with spirits, for spirits do dwell in these tombs--I have seen them, I tell you I have seen them--has so worked upon my soul that at times I feel as though I were already of their company. Moreover, I knew that I could not live long. The loneliness was sucking up my life as the dry sand sucks water. Had you not come, Olaf, within some few days or weeks I should have died."

Now I spoke for the first time, saying,

"And did you wish to die, Heliodore?"

"No. Before the war between Musa and my father, Magas, news came to us from Byzantium that Irene had killed you. All believed it save I, who did not believe."

"Why not, Heliodore?"

"Because I could not feel that you were dead. Therefore I fought for my life, who otherwise, after we were conquered and ruined and my father was slain fighting nobly, should have stabbed, not that eunuch, but myself. Then later, in this tomb, I came to know that you were not dead. The other lost ones I could feel about me from time to time, but you never, you who would have been the first to seek me when my soul was open to such whisperings. So I lived on when all else would have died, because hope burned in me like a lamp unquenchable. And at last you came! Oh! at last you came!"