

Chapter XXIII. In the Temple of Fate

Yva glanced at me, and in her eyes I read tenderness and solicitude, also something of inquiry. It seemed to me as though she were wondering what I should do under circumstances that might, or would, arise, and in some secret fashion of which I was but half conscious, drawing an answer from my soul. Then she turned, and, smiling in her dazzling way, said:

"So, Bickley, as usual, you did not believe? Because you did not see him, therefore the Lord Oro, my father, never spoke with Humphrey. As though the Lord Oro could not pass you without your knowledge, or, perchance, send thoughts clothed in his own shape to work his errand."

"How do you know that I did not believe Arbuthnot's story?" Bickley asked in a rather cross voice and avoiding the direct issue. "Do you also send thoughts to work your errands clothed in your own shape, Lady Yva?"

"Alas! not so, though perhaps I could if I might. It is very simple, Bickley. Standing here, I heard you say that although the sun was well down there was no one to meet you as Humphrey had expected, and from those words and your voice I guessed the rest."

"Your knowledge of the English language is improving fast, Lady Yva. Also, when I spoke, you were not here."

"At least I was very near, Bickley, and these walls are thinner than you think," she answered, contemplating what seemed to be solid rock with eyes that were full of innocence. "Oh! friend," she went on suddenly, "I wonder what there is which will cause you to believe that you do not know all; that there exist many things beyond the reach of your learning and imagination? Well, in a day or two, perhaps, even you will admit as much, and confess it to me--elsewhere," and she sighed.

"I am ready to confess now that much happens which I do not understand at present, because I have not the key to the trick," he replied.

Yva shook her head at him and smiled again. Then she motioned to all of us to stand close to her, and, stooping, lifted Tommy in her arms. Next moment that marvel happened which I have described already, and we were whirling downwards through space, to find ourselves in a very little time standing safe in the caves of Nyo, breathless with the swiftness of our descent. How and on what we descended neither I nor the others ever learned. It was and must remain one of the unexplained mysteries of our great experience.

"Whither now, Yva?" I asked, staring about me at the radiant vastness.

"The Lord Oro would speak with you, Humphrey. Follow. And I pray you all do not make him wrath, for his mood is not gentle."

So once more we proceeded down the empty streets of that underground abode which, except that it was better illuminated, reminded me of the Greek conception of Hades. We came to the sacred fountain over which stood the guardian statue of Life, pouring from the cups she held the waters of Good and Ill that mingled into one health-giving wine.

"Drink, all of you," she said; "for I think before the sun sets again upon the earth we shall need strength, every one of us."

So we drank, and she drank herself, and once more felt the blood go dancing through our veins as though the draught had been some nectar of the gods. Then, having extinguished the lanterns which we still carried, for here they were needless, and we wished to save our oil, we followed her through the great doors into the vast hall of audience and advanced up it between the endless, empty seats. At its head, on the dais beneath the arching shell, sat Oro on his throne. As before, he wore the jewelled cap and the gorgeous, flowing robes, while the table in front of him was still strewn with sheets of metal on which he wrote with a pen, or stylus, that glittered like a diamond or his own fierce eyes. Then he lifted his head and beckoned to us to ascend the dais.

"You are here. It is well," he said, which was all his greeting. Only when Tommy ran up to him he bent down and patted the dog's head with his long, thin hand, and, as he did so, his face softened. It was evident to me that Tommy was more welcome to him than were the rest of us.

There was a long silence while, one by one, he searched us with his piercing glance. It rested on me, the last of the three of us, and from me travelled to Yva.

"I wonder why I have sent for you?" he said at length, with a mirthless laugh. "I think it must be that I may convince Bickley, the sceptic, that there are powers which he does not understand, but that I have the strength to move. Also, perhaps, that your lives may be spared for my own purposes in that which is about to happen. Hearken! My labours are finished; my calculations are complete," and he pointed to the sheets of metal before him that were covered with cabalistic signs. "Tomorrow I am about to do what once before I did and to plunge half the world in the deeps of ocean and lift again from the depths that which has been buried for a quarter of a million years."

"Which half?" asked Bickley.

"That is my secret, Physician, and the answer to it lies written here in signs you cannot read. Certain countries will vanish, others will be spared. I say that it is my secret."

"Then, Oro, if you could do what you threaten, you would drown hundreds of millions of people."

"If I could do! If I could do!" he exclaimed, glaring at Bickley. "Well,

tomorrow you shall see what I can do. Oh! why do I grow angry with this fool? For the rest, yes, they must drown. What does it matter? Their end will be swift; some few minutes of terror, that is all, and in one short century every one of them would have been dead."

An expression of horror gathered on Bastin's face.

"Do you really mean to murder hundreds of millions of people?" he asked, in a thick, slow voice.

"I have said that I intend to send them to that heaven or that hell of which you are so fond of talking, Preacher, somewhat more quickly than otherwise they would have found their way thither. They have disappointed me, they have failed; therefore, let them go and make room for others who will succeed."

"Then you are a greater assassin than any that the world has bred, or than all of them put together. There is nobody as bad, even in the Book of Revelation!" shouted Bastin, in a kind of fury. "Moreover, I am not like Bickley. I know enough of you and your hellish powers to believe that what you plan, that you can do."

"I believe it also," sneered Oro. "But how comes it that the Great One whom you worship does not prevent the deed, if He exists, and it be evil?"

"He will prevent it!" raved Bastin. "Even now He commands me to prevent it, and I obey!" Then, drawing the revolver from his pocket, he pointed it at Oro's breast, adding: "Swear not to commit this crime, or I will kill you!"

"So the man of peace would become a man of blood," mused Oro, "and kill that I may not kill for the good of the world? Why, what is the matter with that toy of yours, Preacher?" and he pointed to the pistol.

Well might he ask, for as he spoke the revolver flew out of Bastin's hand. High into the air it flew, and as it went discharged itself, all the six chambers of it, in rapid succession, while Bastin stood staring at his arm and hand which he seemed unable to withdraw.

"Do you still threaten me with that outstretched hand, Preacher?" mocked Oro.

"I can't move it," said Bastin; "it seems turned to stone."

"Be thankful that you also are not turned to stone. But, because your courage pleases me, I will spare you, yes, and will advance you in my New Kingdom. What shall you be? Controller of Religions, I think, since all the qualities that a high priest should have are yours--faith, fanaticism and folly."

"It is very strange," said Bastin, "but all of a sudden my arm and hand

are quite well again. I suppose it must have been 'pins and needles' or something of that sort which made me throw away the pistol and pull the trigger when I didn't mean to do so."

Then he went to fetch that article which had fallen beyond the dais, and quite forgot his intention of executing Oro in the interest of testing its mechanism, which proved to be destroyed. To his proposed appointment he made no illusion. If he comprehended what was meant, which I doubt, he took it as a joke.

"Hearken all of you," said Oro, lifting his head suddenly, for while Bastin recovered the revolver he had been brooding. "The great thing which I shall do tomorrow must be witnessed by you because thereby only can you come to understand my powers. Also yonder where I bring it about in the bowels of the earth, you will be safer than elsewhere, since when and perhaps before it happens, the whole world will heave and shake and tremble, and I know not what may chance, even in these caves. For this reason also, do not forget to bring the little hound with you, since him least of all of you would I see come to harm, perhaps because once, hundreds of generations ago as you reckon time, I had a dog very like to him. Your mother loved him much, Yva, and when she died, this dog died also. He lies embalmed with her on her coffin yonder in the temple, and yesterday I went to look at both of them. The beasts are wonderfully alike, which shows the everlastingness of blood."

He paused a while, lost in thought, then continued: "After the deed is

done I'll speak with you and you shall choose, Strangers, whether you will die your own masters, or live on to serve me. Now there is one problem that is left to me to solve--whether I can save a certain land--do not ask which it is, Humphrey, though I see the question in your eyes--or must let it go with the rest. I only answer you that I will do my best because you love it. So farewell for a while, and, Preacher, be advised by me and do not aim too high again."

"It doesn't matter where I aim," answered Bastin sturdily, "or whether I hit or miss, since there is something much bigger than me waiting to deal with you. The countries that you think you are going to destroy will sleep quite as well tomorrow as they do tonight, Oro."

"Much better, I think, Preacher, since by then they will have left sorrow and pain and wickedness and war far behind them."

"Where are we to go?" I asked.

"The Lady Yva will show you," he answered, waving his hand, and once more bent over his endless calculations.

Yva beckoned to us and we turned and followed her down the hall. She led us to a street near the gateway of the temple and thence into one of the houses. There was a portico to it leading to a court out of which opened rooms somewhat in the Pompeian fashion. We did not enter the rooms, for at the end of the court were a metal table and three couches also of

metal, on which were spread rich-looking rugs. Whence these came I do not know and never asked, but I remember that they were very beautiful and soft as velvet.

"Here you may sleep," she said, "if sleep you can, and eat of the food that you have brought with you. Tomorrow early I will call you when it is time for us to start upon our journey into the bowels of the earth."

"I don't want to go any deeper than we are," said Bastin doubtfully.

"I think that none of us want to go, Bastin," she answered with a sigh.

"Yet go we must. I pray of you, anger the Lord Oro no more on this or any other matter. In your folly you tried to kill him, and as it chanced he bore it well because he loves courage. But another time he may strike back, and then, Bastin--"

"I am not afraid of him," he answered, "but I do not like tunnels.

Still, perhaps it would be better to accompany you than to be left in this place alone. Now I will unpack the food."

Yva turned to go.

"I must leave you," she said, "since my father needs my help. The matter has to do with the Force that he would let loose tomorrow, and its measurements; also with the preparation of the robes that we must wear lest it should harm us in its leap."

Something in her eyes told me that she wished me to follow her, and I did so. Outside the portico where we stood in the desolate, lighted street, she halted.

"If you are not afraid," she said, "meet me at midnight by the statue of Fate in the great temple, for I would speak with you, Humphrey, where, if anywhere, we may be alone."

"I will come, Yva."

"You know the road, and the gates are open, Humphrey."

Then she gave me her hand to kiss and glided away. I returned to the others and we ate, somewhat sparingly, for we wished to save our food in case of need, and having drunk of the Life-water, were not hungry. Also we talked a little, but by common consent avoided the subject of the morrow and what it might bring forth.

We knew that terrible things were afoot, but lacking any knowledge of what these might be, thought it useless to discuss them. Indeed we were too depressed, so much so that even Bastin and Bickley ceased from arguing. The latter was so overcome by the exhibition of Oro's powers when he caused the pistol to leap into the air and discharge itself, that he could not even pluck up courage to laugh at the failure of Bastin's efforts to do justice on the old Super-man, or rather to

prevent him from attempting a colossal crime.

At length we lay down on the couches to rest, Bastin remarking that he wished he could turn off the light, also that he did not in the least regret having tried to kill Oro. Sleep seemed to come to the others quickly, but I could only doze, to wake up from time to time. Of this I was not sorry, since whenever I dropped off dreams seemed to pursue me. For the most part they were of my dead wife. She appeared to be trying to console me for some loss, but the strange thing was that sometimes she spoke with her own voice and sometimes with Yva's, and sometimes looked at me with her own eyes and sometimes with those of Yva. I remember nothing else about these dreams, which were very confused.

After one of them, the most vivid of all, I awoke and looked at my watch. It was half-past eleven, almost time for me to be starting. The other two seemed to be fast asleep. Presently I rose and crept down the court without waking them. Outside the portico, which by the way was a curious example of the survival of custom in architecture, since none was needed in that weatherless place, I turned to the right and followed the wide street to the temple enclosure. Through the pillared courts I went, my footsteps, although I walked as softly as I could, echoing loudly in that intense silence, through the great doors into the utter solitude of the vast and perfect fane.

Words can not tell the loneliness of that place. It flowed over me like a sea and seemed to swallow up my being, so that even the wildest and

most dangerous beast would have been welcome as a companion. I was as terrified as a child that wakes to find itself deserted in the dark.

Also an uncanny sense of terrors to come oppressed me, till I could have cried aloud if only to hear the sound of a mortal voice. Yonder was the grim statue of Fate, the Oracle of the Kings of the Sons of Wisdom, which was believed to bow its stony head in answer to their prayers. I ran to it, eager for its terrible shelter, for on either side of it were figures of human beings. Even their cold marble was company of a sort, though alas! over all frowned Fate.

Let anyone imagine himself standing alone beneath the dome of St. Paul's; in the centre of that cathedral brilliant with mysterious light, and stretched all about it a London that had been dead and absolutely unpeopled for tens of thousands of years. If he can do this he will gather some idea of my physical state. Let him add to his mind-picture a knowledge that on the following day something was to happen not unlike the end of the world, as prognosticated by the Book of Revelation and by most astronomers, and he will have some idea of my mental perturbations. Add to the mixture a most mystic yet very real love affair and an assignation before that symbol of the cold fate which seems to sway the universes down to the tiniest detail of individual lives, and he may begin to understand what I, Humphrey Arbuthnot, experienced during my vigil in this sanctuary of a vanished race.

It seemed long before Yva came, but at last she did come. I caught sight of her far away beyond the temple gate, flitting through the unholy

brightness of the pillared courts like a white moth at night and seeming quite as small. She approached; now she was as a ghost, and then drawing near, changed into a living, breathing, lovely woman. I opened my arms, and with something like a sob she sank into them and we kissed as mortals do.

"I could not come more quickly," she said. "The Lord Oro needed me, and those calculations were long and difficult. Also twice he must visit the place whither we shall go tomorrow, and that took time."

"Then it is close at hand?" I said.

"Humphrey, be not foolish. Do you not remember, who have travelled with him, that Oro can throw his soul afar and bring it back again laden with knowledge, as the feet of a bee are laden with golden dust? Well, he went and went again, and I must wait. And then the robes and shields; they must be prepared by his arts and mine. Oh! ask not what they are, there is no time to tell, and it matters nothing. Some folk are wise and some are foolish, but all which matters is that within them flows the blood of life and that life breeds love, and that love, as I believe, although Oro does not, breeds immortality. And if so, what is Time but as a grain of sand upon the shore?"

"This, Yva; it is ours, who can count on nothing else."

"Oh! Humphrey, if I thought that, no more wretched creature would

breathe tonight upon this great world."

"What do you mean?" I asked, growing fearful, more at her manner and her look than at her words.

"Nothing, nothing, except that Time is so very short. A kiss, a touch, a little light and a little darkness, and it is gone. Ask my father Oro who has lived a thousand years and slept for tens of thousands, as I have, and he will say the same. It is against Time that he fights; he who, believing in nothing beyond, will inherit nothing, as Bastin says; he to whom Time has brought nothing save a passing, blood-stained greatness, and triumph ending in darkness and disaster, and hope that will surely suffer hope's eclipse, and power that must lay down its coronet in dust."

"And what has it brought to you, Yva, beyond a fair body and a soul of strength?"

"It has brought a spirit, Humphrey. Between them the body and the soul have bred a spirit, and in the fires of tribulation from that spirit has been distilled the essence of eternal love. That is Time's gift to me, and therefore, although still he rules me here, I mock at Fate," and she waved her hand with a gesture of defiance at the stern-faced, sexless effigy which sat above us, the sword across its knees.

"Look! Look!" she went on in a swelling voice of music, pointing to the

statues of the dotard and the beauteous woman. "They implore Fate, they worship Fate. I do not implore, I do not worship or ask a sign as even Oro does and as did his forefathers. I rise above and triumph. As Fate, the god of my people, sets his foot upon the sun, so I set my foot upon Fate, and thence, like a swimmer from a rock, leap into the waters of Immortality."

I looked at her whose presence, as happened from time to time, had grown majestic beyond that of woman; I studied her deep eyes which were full of lights, not of this world, and I grew afraid.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Yva, you talk like one who has finished with life."

"It passes," she answered quickly. "Life passes like breath fading from a mirror. So should all talk who breathe beneath the sun."

"Yes, Yva, but if you went and left me still breathing on that mocking glass--"

"If so, what of it? Will not your breath fade also and join mine where all vapours go? Or if it were yours that faded and mine that remained for some few hours, is it not the same? I think, Humphrey, that already you have seen a beloved breath melt from the glass of life," she added, looking at me earnestly.

I bowed my head and answered:

"Yes, and therefore I am ashamed."

"Oh! why should you be ashamed, Humphrey, who are not sure but that two breaths may yet be one breath? How do you know that there is a difference between them?"

"You drive me mad, Yva. I cannot understand."

"Nor can I altogether, Humphrey. Why should I, seeing that I am no more than woman, as you are no more than man? I would always have you remember, Humphrey, that I am no spirit or sorceress, but just a woman--like her you lost."

I looked at her doubtfully and answered:

"Women do not sleep for two hundred thousand years. Women do not take dream journeys to the stars. Women do not make the dead past live again before the watcher's eyes. Their hair does not glimmer in the dusk nor do their bodies gleam, nor have they such strength of soul or eyes so wonderful, or loveliness so great."

These words appeared to distress her who, as it seemed to me, was above all things anxious to prove herself woman and no more.

"All these qualities are nothing, Humphrey," she cried. "As for the beauty, such as it is, it comes to me with my blood, and with it the glitter of my hair which is the heritage of those who for generations have drunk of the Life-water. My mother was lovelier than I, as was her mother, or so I have heard, since only the fairest were the wives of the Kings of the Children of Wisdom. For the rest, such arts as I have spring not from magic, but from knowledge which your people will acquire in days to come, that is, if Oro spares them. Surely you above all should know that I am only woman," she added very slowly and searching my face with her eyes.

"Why, Yva? During the little while that we have been together I have seen much which makes me doubt. Even Bickley the sceptic doubts also."

"I will tell you, though I am not sure that you will believe me." She glanced about her as though she were frightened lest someone should overhear her words or read her thoughts. Then she stretched out her hands and drawing my head towards her, put her lips to my ear and whispered:

"Because once you saw me die, as women often die--giving life for life."

"I saw you die?" I gasped.

She nodded, then continued to whisper in my ear, not in her own voice, but another's:

"Go where you seem called to go, far away. Oh! the wonderful place in which you will find me, not knowing that you have found me. Good-bye for a little while; only for a little while, my own, my own!"

I knew the voice as I knew the words, and knowing, I think that I should have fallen to the ground, had she not supported me with her strong arms.

"Who told you?" I stammered. "Was it Bickley or Bastin? They knew, though neither of them heard those holy words."

"Not Bickley nor Bastin," she answered, shaking her head, "no, nor you yourself, awake or sleeping, though once, by the lake yonder, you said to me that when a certain one lay dying, she bade you seek her elsewhere, for certainly you would find her. Humphrey, I cannot say who told me those words because I do not know. I think they are a memory, Humphrey!"

"That would mean that you, Yva, are the same as one who was--not called Yva."

"The same as one who was called Natalie, Humphrey," she replied in solemn accents. "One whom you loved and whom you lost."

"Then you think that we live again upon this earth?"

"Again and yet again, until the time comes for us to leave the earth for ever. Of this, indeed, I am sure, for that knowledge was part of the secret wisdom of my people."

"But you were not dead. You only slept."

"The sleep was a death-sleep which went by like a flash, yes, in an instant, or so it seemed. Only the shell of the body remained preserved by mortal arts, and when the returning spirit and the light of life were poured into it again, it awoke. But during this long death-sleep, that spirit may have spoken through other lips and that light may have shone through other eyes, though of these I remember nothing."

"Then that dream of our visit to a certain star may be no dream?"

"I think no dream, and you, too, have thought as much."

"In a way, yes, Yva. But I could not believe and turned from what I held to be a phantasy."

"It was natural, Humphrey, that you should not believe. Harken! In this temple a while ago I showed you a picture of myself and of a man who loved me and whom I loved, and of his death at Oro's hands. Did you note anything about that man?"

"Bickley did," I answered. "Was he right?"

"I think that he was right, since otherwise I should not have loved you, Humphrey."

"I remember nothing of that man, Yva."

"It is probable that you would not, since you and he are very far apart, while between you and him flow wide seas of death, wherein are set islands of life; perhaps many of them. But I remember much who seem to have left him but a very little while ago."

"When you awoke in your coffin and threw your arms about me, what did you think, Yva?"

"I thought you were that man, Humphrey."

There was silence between us and in that silence the truth came home to me. Then there before the effigy of Fate and in the desolate, glowing temple we plighted anew our troth made holy by a past that thus so wonderfully lived again.

Of this consecrated hour I say no more. Let each picture it as he will.

A glory as of heaven fell upon us and in it we dwelt a space.

"Beloved," she whispered at length in a voice that was choked as though with tears, "if it chances that we should be separated again for a little while, you will not grieve over much?"

"Knowing all I should try not to grieve, Yva, seeing that in truth we never can be parted. But do you mean that I shall die?"

"Being mortal either of us might seem to die, Humphrey," and she bent her head as though to hide her face. "You know we go into dangers this day."

"Does Oro really purpose to destroy much of the world and has he in truth the power, Yva?"

"He does so purpose and most certainly he has the power, unless--unless some other Power should stay his hand."

"What other power, Yva?"

"Oh! perhaps that which you worship, that which is called Love. The love of man may avert the massacre of men. I hope so with all my heart. Hist! Oro comes. I feel, I know that he comes, though not in search of us who are very far from his thought tonight. Follow me. Swiftly."

She sped across the temple to where a chapel opened out of it, which was full of the statues of dead kings, for here was the entrance to their

burial vault. We reached it and hid behind the base of one of these statues. By standing to our full height, without being seen we still could see between the feet of the statue that stood upon a pedestal.

Then Oro came.