

handle. Well, perhaps you are wise, since what I have told you is not all the truth. For example, it comes back to me now that it was not in the temple on the Nile, or indeed upon the Earth, that I saw the vision of Aphrodite and of Isis, but elsewhere; also that it was here in Kōr that I was first consumed by passion for Kallikrates whom hitherto I had scorned. In two thousand years one forgets much, Allan. Out with your questions and I will answer them, unless they be too long."

"Ayesha," I said humbly, reflecting to myself that my questions would, at any rate, be shorter than her varying tale, "even I who am not learned have heard of these goddesses of whom you speak, of the Grecian Aphrodite who rose from the sea upon the shores of Cyprus and dwelt at Paphos and elsewhere----"

"Yes, doubtless like most men you have heard of her and perchance also have been struck across the eyes with her hair, like your betters before you," she interrupted with sarcasm.

"----Also," I went on, avoiding argument, "I have heard of Isis of the Egyptians, Lady of the Moon, Mother of Mysteries, Spouse of Osiris whose child was Horus the Avenger."

"Aye, and I think will hear more of her before you have done, Allan, for now something comes back to me concerning you and her and another. I am not the only one who has broken the oaths of Isis and received her curse, Allan, as you may find out in the days to come. But what of

these heavenly queens?"

"Only this, Ayesha; I have been taught that they were but phantasms fabled by men with many another false divinity, and could have sworn that this was true. And yet you talk of them as real and living, which perplexes me."

"Being dull of understanding doubtless it perplexes you, Allan. Yet if you had imagination you might understand that these goddesses are great Principles of Nature; Isis, of throned Wisdom and strait virtue, and Aphrodite, of Love, as it is known to men and women who, being human, have it laid upon them that they must hand on the torch of Life in their little hour. Also you would know that such Principles can seem to take shape and form and at certain ages of the world appear to their servants visible in majesty, though perchance to-day others with changed names wield their sceptres and work their will. Now you are answered on this matter. So to the next."

Privately I did not feel as though I were answered at all and I was sure that I know nothing of the kind she indicated, but thinking it best to leave the subject, I went on,

"If I understood rightly, Ayesha, the events which you have been pleased first to describe to me, and then to qualify or contradict, took place when the Pharaohs reigned. Now no Pharaoh has sat upon the throne of Egypt for near two thousand years, for the last was a Grecian woman whom

the Romans conquered and drove to death. And yet, Ayesha, you speak as though you have lived all through that gulf of time, and in this there must be error, because it is impossible. Therefore I suppose you to mean that this history has come down to you in writing, or perhaps in dreams. I believe that even in such far-off times there were writers of romance, and we all know of what stuff dreams are made. At least this thought comes to me," I added hurriedly, fearing lest I had said too much, "and one so wise as you are, I repeat, knows well that a woman who says she has lived two thousand years must be mad or--suffer from delusions, because I repeat, it is impossible."

At these quite innocent remarks she sprang to her feet in a rage that might truly be called royal in every sense.

"Impossible! Romance! Dreams! Delusions! Mad!" she cried in a ringing voice. "Oh! of a truth you weary me, and I have a mind to send you whither you will learn what is impossible and what is not. Indeed, I would do it, and now, only I need your services, and if I did there would be none left for me to talk with, since your companion is moonstruck and the others are but savages of whom I have seen enough.

"Hearken, fool! Nothing is impossible. Why do you seek, you who talk of the impossible, to girdle the great world in the span of your two hands and to weigh the secrets of the Universe in the balance of your petty mind and, of that which you cannot understand, to say that it is not? Life you admit because you see it all about you. But that it should

endure for two thousand years, which after all is but a second's beat in the story of the earth, that to you is 'impossible,' although in truth the buried seed or the sealed-up toad can live as long. Doubtless, also, you have some faith which promises you this same boon to all eternity, after the little change called Death.

"Nay, Allan, it is possible enough, like to many other things of which you do not dream to-day that will be common to the eyes of those who follow after you. Mayhap you think it impossible that I should speak with and learn of you from yonder old black wizard who dwells in the country whence you came. And yet whenever I will I do so in the night because he is in tune with me, and what I do shall be done by all men in the years unborn. Yes, they shall talk together across the wide spaces of the earth, and the lover shall hear her lover's voice although great seas roll between them. Nor perchance will it stop at this; perchance in future time men shall hold converse with the denizens of the stars, and even with the dead who have passed into silence and the darkness. Do you hear and understand me?"

"Yes, yes," I answered feebly.

"You lie, as you are too prone to do. You hear but you do not understand nor believe, and oh! you vex me sorely. Now I had it in my mind to tell you the secret of this long life of mine; long, mark you, but not endless, for doubtless I must die and change and return again, like others, and even to show you how it may be won. But you are not worthy

in your faithlessness."

"No, no, I am not worthy," I answered, who at that moment did not feel the least desire to live two thousand years, perhaps with this woman as a neighbour, rating me from generation to generation. Yet it is true, that now when I am older and a certain event cannot be postponed much longer, I do often regret that I neglected to take this unique chance, if in truth there was one, of prolonging an existence which after all has its consolations--especially when one has made one's pile. Certainly it is a case, a flagrant case, of neglected opportunities, and my only consolation for having lost them is that this was due to the uprightness of my nature which made it so hard for me to acquiesce in alternative statements that I had every cause to disbelieve and thus to give offence to a very powerful and petulant if attractive lady.

"So that is done with," she went on with a little stamp of indignation, "as soon you will be also, who, had you not crossed and doubted me, might have lived on for untold time and become one of the masters of the world, as I am."

Here she paused, choked, I think, with her almost childish anger, and because I could not help it, I said,

"Such place and power, if they be yours, Ayesha, do not seem to bring you much reward. If I were a master of the world I do not think that I should choose to dwell unchangingly among savages who eat men and in

a pile of ruins. But perhaps the curses of Aphrodite and of Isis are stronger masters still?" and I paused inquiringly.

This bold argument--for now I see that it was bold--seemed to astonish and even bewilder my wonderful companion.

"You have more wisdom than I thought," she said reflectively, "who have come to understand that no one is really lord of anything, since above there is always a more powerful lord who withers all his pomp and pride to nothingness, even as the great kings learned in olden days, and I, who am higher than they are, am learning now. Hearken. Troubles beset me wherein I would have your help and that of your companions, for which I will pay each of you the fee that he desires. The brooding white man who is with you shall free his daughter and unharmed; though that he will be unharmed I do not promise. The black savage captain shall fight his fill and gain the glory that he seeks, also something that he seeks still more. The little yellow man asks nothing save to be with his master like a dog and to satisfy at once his stomach and his apish curiosity. You, Allan, shall see those dead over whom you brood at night, though the other guerdon that you might have won is now passed from your reach because you mock me in your heart."

"What must we do to gain these things?" I asked. "How can we humble creatures help one who is all powerful and who has gathered in her breast the infinite knowledge of two thousand years?"

"You must make war under my banner and rid me of my foes. As for the reason, listen to the end of my tale and you shall learn."

I reflected that it was a marvellous thing that this queen who claimed supernatural powers should need our help in a war, but thinking it wiser to keep my meditations to myself, said nothing. As a matter of fact I might just as well have spoken, since as usual she read my thoughts.

"You are thinking that it is strange, Allan, that I, the Mighty and Undying, should seek your aid in some petty tribal battle, and so it would be were my foes but common savages. But they are more; they are men protected by the ancient god of this immemorial city of Kôr, a great god in his day whose spirit still haunts these ruins and whose strength still protects the worshippers who cling to him and practise his unholy rites of human sacrifice."

"How was this god named?" I asked.

"Rezu was his name, and from him came the Egyptian Re or Ra, since in the beginning Kôr was the mother of Egypt and the conquering people of Kôr took their god with them when they burst into the valley of the Nile and subdued its peoples long before the first Pharaoh, Menes, wore Egypt's crown."

"Ra was the sun, was he not?" I asked.

"Aye, and Rezu also was a sun-god whom from his throne in the fires of the Lord of Day, gave life to men, or slew them if he willed with his thunderbolts of drought and pestilence and storm. He was no gentle king of heaven, but one who demanded blood-sacrifice from his worshippers, yes, even that of maids and children. So it came about that the people of Kôr, who saw their virgins slain and eaten by the priests of Rezu, and their infants burned to ashes in the fires that his rays lit, turned themselves to the worship of the gentle moon, the goddess whom they named Lulala, while some of them chose Truth for their queen, since Truth, they said, was greater and more to be desired than the fierce Sun-King or even the sweet Moon-Lady, Truth, who sat above them both throned in the furthest stars of Heaven. Then the demon, Rezu, grew wroth and sent a pestilence upon Kôr and its subject lands and slew their people, save those who clung to him in the great apostasy, and with them some others who served Lulala and Truth the Divine, that escaped I know not how."

"Did you see this great pestilence?" I asked, much interested.

"Nay, it befell generations before I came to Kôr. One Junis, a priest, wrote a record of it in the caves yonder where I have my home and where is the burying-place of the countless thousands that it slew. In my day Kôr, of which, should you desire to hear it, I will tell you the history, was a ruin as it is now, though scattered in the lands amidst the tumbled stones which once built up her subject cities, a people named the Amahagger dwelt in Households, or Tribes and there sacrificed



men by fire and devoured them, following the rites of the demon Rezu. For these were the descendants of those who escaped the pestilence. Also there were certain others, children of the worshippers of Lulala whose kingdom is the moon, and of Truth the Queen, who clung to the gentle worship of their forefathers and were ever at war with the followers of Rezu."

"What brought you to Kôr, Ayesha?" I asked irrelevantly.

"Have I not said that I was led hither by the command and the symbol of great Isis whom I serve? Also," she added after a pause, "that I might find a certain pair, one of whom had broken his oaths to her, tempted thereto by the other."

"And did you find them, Ayesha?" I asked.

"Aye, I found them, or rather they found me, and in my presence the goddess executed her decree upon her false priest and drove his temptress back to the world."

"That must have been dreadful for you, Ayesha, since I understood that you also--liked this priest."

She sprang from her couch and in a low, hissing voice which resembled the sound made by an angry snake and turned my blood cold to hear, exclaimed,

"Man, do you dare to mock me? Nay, you are but a blundering, curious fool, and it is well for you that this is so, since otherwise like Kallikrates, never should you leave Kôr living. Cease from seeking that which you may not learn. Suffice it for you to know that the doom of Isis fell upon the lost Kallikrates, her priest forsworn, and that on me also fell her doom, who must dwell here, dead yet living, till he return again and the play begins afresh.

"Stranger," she went on in a softer voice, "perchance your faith, whate'er it be, parades a hell to terrify its worshippers and give strength to the arms of its prophesying priests, who swear they hold the keys of doom or of the eternal joys. I see you sign assent" (I had nodded at her extremely accurate guess) "and therefore can understand that in such a hell as this, here upon the earth I have dwelt for some two thousand years, expiating the crime of Powers above me whereof I am but the hand and instrument, since those Powers which decreed that I should love, decree also that I must avenge that love."

She sank down upon the couch as though exhausted by emotion, of which I could only guess the reasons, hiding her face in her hands. Presently she let them fall again and continued,

"Of these woes ask me no more. They sleep till the hour of their resurrection, which I think draws nigh; indeed, I thought that you perchance----But let that be. 'Twas near the mark; nearer, Allan, than

you know, not in it! Therefore leave them to their sleep as I would if I might--ah! if I might, whose companions they are throughout the weary ages. Alas! that through the secret which was revealed to me I remain undying on the earth who in death might perhaps have found a rest, and being human although half divine, must still busy myself with the affairs of earth.

"Look you, Wanderer, after that which was fated had happened and I remained in my agony of solitude and sorrow, after, too, I had drunk of the cup of enduring life and like the Prometheus of old fable, found myself bound to this changeless rock, whereon day by day the vultures of remorse tear out my living heart which in the watches of the night is ever doomed to grow again within my woman's breast, I was plunged into petty troubles of the flesh, aye and welcomed them because their irk at times gave me forgetfulness. When the savage dwellers in this land came to know that a mighty one had arisen among them who was the servant of the Lady of the Moon, those of them who still worshipped their goddess Lulala, gathered themselves about me, while those of them who worshipped Rezu sought to overthrow me.

"'Here,' they said, 'is the goddess Lulala come to earth. In the name of Rezu let us slay her and make an end,' for these fools thought that I could be killed. Allan, I conquered them, but their captain, who also is named Rezu and whom they held and hold to be an emanation of the god himself walking the earth, I could not conquer."

"Why not?" I asked.

"For this reason, Allan. In some past age his god showed him the same secret that was shown to me. He too had drunk of the Cup of Life and lives on unharmed by Time, so that being in strength my equal, no spear of mine can reach his heart clad in the armour of his evil god."

"Then what spear can?" I inquired helplessly, who was bewildered.

"None at all, Allan, yet an axe may, as you shall hear, or so I think. For many generations there has been peace of a sort between the worshippers of Lulala who dwell with me in the Plain of Kôr, or rather of myself, since to these people I am Lulala, and the worshippers of Rezu, who dwell in the strongholds beyond the mountain crest. But of late years their chief Rezu, having devastated the lands about, has grown restless and threatened to attack on Kôr, which is not strong enough to stand against him. Moreover he has sought for a white queen to rule under him, purposing to set her up to mock my majesty."

"Is that why those cannibals carried away the daughter of my companion, the Sea-Captain who is named Avenger?" I asked.

"It is, Allan, since presently he will give it out that I am dead or fled, if he has not done so already, and that this new queen has arisen in my place. Thereby he hopes to draw away many who cling to me ere he advances upon Kôr, carrying with him this girl veiled as I am, so that

none may know the difference between us, since not a man of them has ever looked upon my face, Allan. Therefore this Rezu must die, if die he can; otherwise, although it is impossible that he should harm me, he may slay or draw away my people and leave me with none to rule in this place where by the decree of Fate I must dwell on until he whom I seek returns. You are thinking in your heart that such savages would be little loss and this is so, but still they serve as slaves to me in my loneliness. Moreover I have sworn to protect them from the demon Rezu and they have trusted in me and therefore my honour is at stake, for never shall it be said that those who trusted in She-who-commands, were overthrown because they put faith in one who was powerless."

"What do you mean about an axe, Ayesha?" I asked. "Why can an axe alone kill Rezu?"

"The thing is a mystery, O Allan, of which I may not tell you all, since to do so I must reveal secrets which I have determined you shall not learn. Suffice it to you to know that when this Rezu drank of the Cup of Life he took with him his axe. Now this axe was an ancient weapon rumoured to have been fashioned by the gods and, as it chanced, that axe drew to itself more and stronger life than did Rezu, how, it does not matter, if indeed the tale be more than a fable. At least this I know is true, for he who guarded the Gate of Life, a certain Noot, a master of mysteries, and mine also in my day of youth, who being a philosopher and very wise, chose never to pass that portal which was open to him, said it to me himself ere he went the way of flesh. He told this Rezu

also that now he had naught to fear save his own axe and therefore he counselled him to guard it well, since if it was lifted against him in another's hands it would bring him down to death, which nothing else could do. Like to the heel of Achilles whereof the great Homer sings--have you read Homer, Allan?"

"In a translation," I answered.

"Good, then you will remember the story. Like to the heel of Achilles, I say, that axe would be the only gate by which death could enter his invulnerable flesh, or rather it alone could make the gate."

"How did Noot know that?" I asked.

"I cannot say," she answered with irritation. "Perchance he did not know it. Perchance it is all an idle tale, but at least it is true that Rezu believed and believes it, and what a man believes is true for him and will certainly befall. If it were otherwise, what is the use of faith which in a thousand forms supports our race and holds it from the horrors of the Pit? Only those who believe nothing inherit what they believe--nothing, Allan."

"It may be so," I replied prosaically, "but what happened about the axe?"

"In the end it was lost, or as some say stolen by a woman whom Rezu had

deserted, and therefore he walks the world in fear from day to day. Nay, ask no more empty questions" (I had opened my mouth to speak) "but hear the end of the tale. In my trouble concerning Rezu I remembered this wild legend of the axe and since, when lost in a forest every path that may lead to safety should be explored, I sent my wisdom forth to make inquiry concerning it, as I who am great, have the power to do, of certain who are in tune with me throughout this wide land of Africa. Amongst others, I inquired of that old wizard whom you named Zikali, Opener of Roads, and he gave me an answer that there lived in his land a certain warrior who ruled a tribe called the People of the Axe by right of the Axe, of which axe none, not even he, knew the beginning or the legend. On the chance, though it was a small one, I bade the wizard send that warrior here with his axe. Last night he stood before me and I looked upon him and the axe, which at least is ancient and has a story. Whether it be the same that Rezu bore I do not know who never saw it, yet perchance he who bears it now is prepared to hold it aloft in battle even against Rezu, though he be terrible to see, and then we shall learn."

"Oh! yes," I answered, "he is quite prepared, for that is his nature. Also among this man's people, the holder of the Axe is thought to be unconquerable."

"Yet some must have been conquered who held it," she replied musingly. "Well, you shall tell me that tale later. Now we have talked long and you are weary and astonished. Go, eat and rest yourself. To-night when

the moon rises I will come to where you are, not before, for I have much that must be done, and show you those with whom you must fight against Rezu, and make a plan of battle."

"But I do not want to fight," I answered, "who have fought enough and came here to seek wisdom, not bloodshed."

"First the sacrifice, then the reward," she answered, "that is if any are left to be rewarded. Farewell."