

CHAPTER III. ALLAN GIVES HIS WORD

Mr. Atterby-Smith proved on acquaintance to be even worse than unfond fancy painted him. He was a gentleman in a way and of good family whereof the real name was Atterby, the Smith having been added to secure a moderate fortune left to him on that condition. His connection with Lord Ragnall was not close and through the mother's side. For the rest he lived in some south-coast watering-place and fancied himself a sportsman because he had on various occasions hired a Scottish moor or deer forest. Evidently he had never done anything nor earned a shilling during all his life and was bringing his family up to follow in his useless footsteps. The chief note of his character was that intolerable vanity which so often marks men who have nothing whatsoever about which to be vain. Also he had a great idea of his rights and what was due to him, which he appeared to consider included, upon what ground I could not in the least understand, the reversal of all the Ragnall properties and wealth. I do not think I need say any more about him, except that he bored me to extinction, especially after his fourth glass of port.

Perhaps, however, the son was worse, for he asked questions without number and when at last I was reduced to silence, lectured me about shooting. Yes, this callow youth who was at Sandhurst, instructed me, Allan Quatermain, how to kill elephants, he who had never seen an elephant except when he fed it with buns at the Zoo. At last Mr. Smith, who to Scroope's great amusement had taken the end of the table and assumed the position of host, gave the signal to move and we adjourned

to the drawing-room.

I don't know what had happened but there we found the atmosphere distinctly stormy. The ample Mrs. Smith sat in a chair fanning herself, which caused the barbaric ornaments she wore to clank upon her fat arm. Upon either side of her, pale and indeterminate, stood Polly and Dolly each pretending to read a book. Somehow the three of them reminded me of a coat-of-arms seen in a nightmare, British Matron sejant with Modesty and Virtue as supporters. Opposite, on the other side of the fire and evidently very angry, stood Lady Ragnall, regardant.

"Do I understand you to say, Luna," I heard Mrs. A.-S. ask in resonant tones as I entered the room, "that you actually played the part of a heathen goddess among these savages, clad in a transparent bed-robe?"

"Yes, Mrs. Atterby-Smith," replied Lady Ragnall, "and a nightcap of feathers. I will put it on for you if you won't be shocked. Or perhaps one of your daughters----"

"Oh!" said both the young ladies together, "please be quiet. Here come the gentlemen."

After this there was a heavy silence broken only by the stifled giggles in the background of Mrs. Scroope and the canon's fluffy-headed wife, who to do her justice had some fun in her. Thank goodness the evening, or rather that part of it did not last long, since presently Mrs.

Atterby-Smith, after studying me for a long while with a cold eye, rose majestically and swept off to bed followed by her offspring.

Afterwards I ascertained from Mrs. Scroope that Lady Ragnall had been amusing herself by taking away my character in every possible manner for the benefit of her connections, who were left with a general impression that I was the chief of a native tribe somewhere in Central Africa where I dwelt in light attire surrounded by the usual accessories. No wonder, therefore, that Mrs. A.-S. thought it best to remove her "Twin Pets," as she called them, out of my ravening reach.

Then the Scroopes went away, having arranged for me to lunch with them on the morrow, an invitation that I hastily accepted, though I heard Lady Ragnall mutter--"Mean!" beneath her breath. With them departed the canon and his wife and the curate, being, as they said, "early birds with duties to perform." After this Lady Ragnall paid me out by going to bed, having instructed Moxley to show us to the smoking room, "where," she whispered as she said good night, "I hope you will enjoy yourself."

Over the rest of the night I draw a veil. For a solid hour and three-quarters did I sit in that room between this dreadful pair, being alternately questioned and lectured. At length I could stand it no longer and while pretending to help myself to whiskey and soda, slipped through the door and fled upstairs.

I arrived late to breakfast purposely and found that I was wise, for

Lady Ragnall was absent upstairs, recovering from "a headache." Mr. A.-Smith was also suffering from a headache downstairs, the result of champagne, port and whisky mixed, and all his family seemed to have pains in their tempers. Having ascertained that they were going to the church in the park, I departed to one two miles away and thence walked straight on to the Scroopes' where I had a very pleasant time, remaining till five in the afternoon. I returned to tea at the Castle where I found Lady Ragnall so cross that I went to church again, to the six o'clock service this time, only getting back in time to dress for dinner. Here I was paid out for I had to take in Mrs. Atterby-Smith. Oh! what a meal was that. We sat for the most part in solemn silence broken only by requests to pass the salt. I observed with satisfaction, however, that things were growing lively at the other end of the table where A.-Smith père was drinking a good deal too much wine. At last I heard him say,

"We had hoped to spend a few days with you, my dear Luna. But as you tell us that your engagements make this impossible"--and he paused to drink some port, whereon Lady Ragnall remarked inconsequently,

"I assure you the ten o'clock train is far the best and I have ordered the carriage at half-past nine, which is not very early."

"As your engagements make this impossible," he repeated, "we would ask for the opportunity of a little family conclave with you to-night."

Here all of them turned and glowered at me.

"Certainly," said Lady Ragnall, "'the sooner 'tis over the sooner to sleep.' Mr. Quatermain, I am sure, will excuse us, will you not? I have had the museum lit up for you, Mr. Quatermain. You may find some Egyptian things there that will interest you."

"Oh, with pleasure!" I murmured, and fled away.

I spent a very instructive two hours in the museum, studying various Egyptian antiquities including a couple of mummies which rather terrified me. They looked so very corpse-like standing there in their wrappings. One was that of a lady who was a "Singer of Amen," I remember. I wondered where she was singing now and what song. Presently I came to a glass case which riveted my attention, for above it was a label bearing the following words: "Two Papyri given to Lady Ragnall by the priests of the Kendah Tribe in Africa." Within were the papyri unrolled and beneath each of the documents, its translation, so far as they could be translated for they were somewhat broken. No. 1, which was dated, "In the first year of Peroa," appeared to be the official appointment of the Royal Lady Amada, to be the prophetess to the temple of Isis and Horus the Child, which was also called Amada, and situated on the east bank of the Nile above Thebes. Evidently this was the same temple of which Lady Ragnall had written to me in her letter, where her husband had met his death by accident, a coincidence which made me start when I remembered how and where the document had come into her hands and

what kind of office she filled at the time.

The second papyrus, or rather its translation, contained a most comprehensive curse upon any man who ventured to interfere with the personal sanctity of this same Royal Lady of Amada, who, apparently in virtue of her office, was doomed to perpetual celibacy like the vestal virgins. I do not remember all the terms of the curse, but I know that it invoked the vengeance of Isis the Mother, Lady of the Moon, and Horus the Child upon anyone who should dare such a desecration, and in so many words doomed him to death by violence "far from his own country where first he had looked on Ra," (i.e. the sun) and also to certain spiritual sufferings afterwards.

The document gave me the idea that it was composed in troubled days to protect that particularly sacred person, the Prophetess of Isis whose cult, as I have since learned, was rising in Egypt at the time, from threatened danger, perhaps at the hands of some foreign man. It occurred to me even that this Princess, for evidently she was a descendant of kings, had been appointed to a most sacred office for that very purpose. Men who shrink from little will often fear to incur the direct curse of widely venerated gods in order to obtain their desires, even if they be not their own gods. Such were my conclusions about this curious and ancient writing which I regret I cannot give in full as I neglected to copy it at the time.

I may add that it seemed extremely strange to me that it and the other

which dealt with a particular temple in Egypt should have passed into Lady Ragnall's hands over two thousand years later in a distant part of Africa, and that subsequently her husband should have been killed in her presence whilst excavating the very temple to which they referred, whence too in all probability they were taken. Moreover, oddly enough Lady Ragnall had herself for a while filled the rôle of Isis in a shrine whereof these two papyri had been part of the sacred appurtenances for unknown ages, and one of her official titles there was Prophetess and Lady of the Moon, whose symbol she wore upon her breast.

Although I have always recognized that there are a great many more things in the world than are dreamt of in our philosophy, I say with truth and confidence that I am not a superstitious man. Yet I confess that these papers and the circumstances connected with them, made me feel afraid.

Also they made me wish that I had not come to Ragnall Castle.

Well, the Atterby-Smiths had so far effectually put a stop to any talk of such matters and even if Lady Ragnall should succeed in getting rid of them by that morning train, as to which I was doubtful, there remained but a single day of my visit during which it ought not to be hard to stave off the subject. Thus I reflected, standing face to face with those mummies, till presently I observed that the Singer of Amen who wore a staring, gold mask, seemed to be watching me with her oblong painted eyes. To my fancy a sardonic smile gathered in them and spread

to the mouth.

"That's what you think," this smile seemed to say, "as once before you thought that Fate could be escaped. Wait and see, my friend. Wait and see!"

"Not in this room any way," I remarked aloud, and departed in a hurry down the passage which led to the main staircase.

Before I reached its end a remarkable sight caused me to halt in the shadow. The Atterby-Smith family were going to bed en bloc. They marched in single file up the great stair, each of them carrying a hand candle. Papa led and young Hopeful brought up the rear. Their countenances were full of war, even the twins looked like angry lambs, but something written on them informed me that they had suffered defeat recent and grievous. So they vanished up the stairway and out of my ken for ever.

When they had gone I started again and ran straight into Lady Ragnall. If her guests had been angry, it was clear that she was furious, almost weeping with rage, indeed. Moreover, she turned and rent me.

"You are a wretch," she said, "to run away and leave me all day long with those horrible people. Well, they will never come here again, for I have told them that if they do the servants have orders to shut the door in their faces."

Not knowing what to say I remarked that I had spent a most instructive evening in the museum, which seemed to make her angrier than ever. At any rate she whisked off without even saying "good night" and left me standing there. Afterwards I learned that the A.-S.'s had calmly informed Lady Ragnall that she had stolen their property and demanded that "as an act of justice" she should make a will leaving everything she possessed to them, and meanwhile furnish them with an allowance of £4,000 a year. What I did not learn were the exact terms of her answer.

Next morning Alfred, when he called me, brought me a note from his mistress which I fully expected would contain a request that I should depart by the same train as her other guests. Its real contents, however, were very different.

"My dear Friend," it ran, "I am so ashamed of myself and so sorry for my rudeness last night, for which I deeply apologise. If you knew all that I had gone through at the hands of those dreadful mendicants, you would forgive me.--L.R."

"P.S.--I have ordered breakfast at 10. Don't go down much before, for your own sake."

Somewhat relieved in my mind, for I thought she was really angry with

me, not altogether without cause, I rose, dressed and set to work to write some letters. While I was doing so I heard the wheels of a carriage beneath and opening my window, saw the Atterby-Smith family in the act of departing in the Castle bus. Smith himself seemed to be still enraged, but the others looked depressed. Indeed I heard the wife of his bosom say to him,

"Calm yourself, my dear. Remember that Providence knows what is best for us and that beggars on horseback are always unjust and ungrateful."

To which her spouse replied,

"Hold your infernal tongue, will you," and then began to rate the servants about the luggage.

Well, off they went. Glaring through the door of the bus, Mr. Smith caught sight of me leaning out of the window, seeing which I waved my hand to him in adieu. His only reply to this courtesy was to shake his fist, though whether at me or at the Castle and its inhabitants in general, I neither know nor care.

When I was quite sure that they had gone and were not coming back again to find something they had forgotten, I went downstairs and surprised a conclave between the butler, Moxley, and his satellites, reinforced by Lady Ragnall's maid and two other female servants.

"Gratuities!" Moxley was exclaiming, which I thought a fine word for tips, "not a smell of them! His gratuities were--'Damn your eyes, you fat bottle-washer,' being his name for butler. My eyes, mind you, Ann, not Alfred's or William's, and that because he had tumbled over his own rugs. Gentleman! Why, I name him a hog with his litter."

"Hogs don't have litters, Mr. Moxley," observed Ann smartly.

"Well, young woman, if there weren't no hogs, there'd be no litters, so there! However, he won't root about in this castle no more, for I happened to catch a word or two of what passed between him and her Ladyship last night. He said straight out that she was making love to that little Mr. Quatermain who wanted her money, and probably not for the first time as they had forgathered in Africa. A gentleman, mind you, Ann, who although peculiar, I like, and who, the keeper Charles tells me, is the best shot in the whole world."

"And what did she say to that?" asked Ann.

"What did she say? What didn't she say, that's the question. It was just as though all the furniture in the room got up and went for them Smiths. Well, having heard enough, and more than I wanted, I stepped off with the tray and next minute out they all come and grab the bedroom candlesticks. That's all and there's her Ladyship's bell. Alfred, don't stand gaping there but go and light the hot-plates."

So they melted away and I descended from the landing, indignant but laughing. No wonder that Lady Ragnall lost her temper!

Ten minutes later she arrived in the dining-room, waving a lighted ribbon that disseminated perfume.

"What on earth are you doing?" I asked.

"Fumigating the house," she said. "It is unnecessary as I don't think they were infectious, but the ceremony has a moral significance--like incense. Anyway it relieves my feelings."

Then she laughed and threw the remains of the ribbon into the fire, adding,

"If you say a word about those people I'll leave the room."

I think we had one of the jolliest breakfasts I ever remember. To begin with we were both hungry since our miseries of the night before had prevented us from eating any dinner. Indeed she swore that she had scarcely tasted food since Saturday. Then we had such a lot to talk about. With short intervals we talked all that day, either in the house or while walking through the gardens and grounds. Passing through the latter I came to the spot on the back drive where once I had saved her from being abducted by Harût and Marût, and as I recognized it, uttered an exclamation. She asked me why and the end of it was that I told her

all that story which to this moment she had never heard, for Ragnall had thought well to keep it from her.

She listened intently, then said,

"So I owe you more than I knew. Yet, I'm not sure, for you see I was abducted after all. Also if I had been taken there, probably George would never have married me or seen me again, and that might have been better for him."

"Why?" I asked. "You were all the world to him."

"Is any woman ever all the world to a man, Mr. Quatermain?"

I hesitated, expecting some attack.

"Don't answer," she went on, "it would be too long and you wouldn't convince me who have been in the East. However, he was all the world to me. Therefore his welfare was what I wished and wish, and I think he would have had more of it if he had never married me."

"Why?" I asked again.

"Because I brought him no good luck, did I? I needn't go through all the story as you know it. And in the end it was through me that he was killed in Egypt."

"Or through the goddess Isis," I broke in rather nervously.

"Yes, the goddess Isis, a part I have played in my time, or something like it. And he was killed in the temple of the goddess Isis. And those papyri of which you read the translations in the museum, which were given to me in Kendah Land, seem to have come from that same temple. And--how about the Ivory Child? Isis in the temple evidently held a child in her arms, but when we found her it had gone. Supposing this child was the same as that of which I was guardian! It might have been, since the papyri came from that temple. What do you think?"

"I don't think anything," I answered, "except that it is all very odd. I don't even understand what Isis and the child Horus represent. They were not mere images either in Egypt or Kendah Land. There must be an idea behind them somewhere."

"Oh! there was. Isis was the universal Mother, Nature herself with all the powers, seen and unseen, that are hidden in Nature; Love personified also, although not actually the queen of Love like Hathor, her sister goddess. The Horus child, whom the old Egyptians called Heru-Hennu, signified eternal regeneration, eternal youth, eternal strength and beauty. Also he was the Avenger who overthrew Set, the Prince of Darkness, and thus in a way opened the Door of Life to men."

"It seems to me that all religions have much in common," I said.

"Yes, a great deal. It was easy for the old Egyptians to become Christian, since for many of them it only meant worshipping Isis and Horus under new and holier names. But come in, it grows cold."

We had tea in Lady Ragnall's boudoir and after it had been taken away our conversation died. She sat there on the other side of the fire with a cigarette between her lips, looking at me through the perfumed smoke till I began to grow uncomfortable and to feel that a crisis of some sort was at hand. This proved perfectly correct, for it was. Presently she said,

"We took a long journey once together, Mr. Quatermain, did we not?"

"Undoubtedly," I answered, and began to talk of it until she cut me short with a wave of her hand, and went on,

"Well, we are going to take a longer one together after dinner to-night."

"What! Where! How!" I exclaimed much alarmed.

"I don't know where, but as for how--look in that box," and she pointed to a little carved Eastern chest made of rose or sandal wood, that stood upon a table between us.

With a groan I rose and opened it. Inside was another box made of silver. This I opened also and perceived that within lay bundles of dried leaves that looked like tobacco, from which floated an enervating and well-remembered scent that clouded my brain for a moment. Then I shut down the lids and returned to my seat.

"Taduki," I murmured.

"Yes, Taduki, and I believe in perfect order with all its virtue intact."

"Virtue!" I exclaimed. "I don't think there is any virtue about that hateful and magical herb which I believe grew in the devil's garden. Moreover, Lady Ragnall, although there are few things in the world that I would refuse you, I tell you at once that nothing will induce me to have anything more to do with it."

She laughed softly and asked why not.

"Because I find life so full of perplexities and memories that I have no wish to make acquaintance with any more, such as I am sure lie hid by the thousand in that box."

"If so, don't you think that they might clear up some of those which surround you to-day?"

"No, for in such things there is no finality, since whatever one saw would also require explanation."

"Don't let us argue," she replied. "It is tiring and I daresay we shall need all our strength to-night."

I looked at her speechless. Why could she not take No for an answer? As usual she read my thought and replied to it.

"Why did not Adam refuse the apple that Eve offered him?" she inquired musingly. "Or rather why did he eat it after many refusals and learn the secret of good and evil, to the great gain of the world which thenceforward became acquainted with the dignity of labour?"

"Because the woman tempted him," I snapped.

"Quite so. It has always been her business in life and always will be. Well, I am tempting you now, and not in vain."

"Do you remember who was tempting the woman?"

"Certainly. Also that he was a good school-master since he caused the thirst for knowledge to overcome fear and thus laid the foundation-stone of all human progress. That allegory may be read two ways, as one of a rise from ignorance instead of a fall from innocence."

"You are too clever for me with your perverted notions. Also, you said we were not to argue. I have therefore only to repeat that I will not eat your apple, or rather, breathe your Taduki."

"Adam over again," she replied, shaking her head. "The same old beginning and the same old end, because you see at last you will do exactly what Adam did."

Here she rose and standing over me, looked me straight in the eyes with the curious result that all my will power seemed to evaporate. Then she sat down again, laughing softly, and remarked as though to herself,

"Who would have thought that Allan Quatermain was a moral coward!"

"Coward," I repeated. "Coward!"

"Yes, that's the right word. At least you were a minute ago. Now courage has come back to you. Why, it's almost time to dress for dinner, but before you go, listen. I have some power over you, my friend, as you have some power over me, for I tell you frankly if you wished me very much to do anything, I should have to do it; and the same applies conversely. Now, to-night we are, as I believe, going to open a great gate and to see wonderful things, glorious things that will thrill us for the rest of our lives, and perhaps suggest to us what is coming after death. You will not fail me, will you?" she continued in a pleading voice. "If you do I must try alone since no one else will

serve, and then I know--how I cannot say--that I shall be exposed to great danger. Yes, I think that I shall lose my mind once more and never find it again this side the grave. You would not have that happen to me, would you, just because you shrink from digging up old memories?"

"Of course not," I stammered. "I should never forgive myself."

"Yes, of course not. There was really no need for me to ask you. Then you promise you will do all I wish?" and once more she looked at me, adding, "Don't be ashamed, for you remember that I have been in touch with hidden things and am not quite as other women are. You will recollect I told you that which I have never breathed to any other living soul, years ago on that night when first we met."

"I promise," I answered and was about to add something, I forget what, when she cut me short, saying,

"That's enough, for I know your word is rather better than your bond. Now dress as quickly as you can or the dinner will be spoiled."