

CHAPTER VI. THE DOOM OF THE BOAT

The guards led me to my chariot and thrust me into it, and with me Bes. I asked them if they would murder him also, to which the eunuch, Houman, answered No, since he had committed no crime, but that he must go with me to be weighed. Then soldiers took the horses by the bridles and led them, while others, having first snatched away my bow and all our other weapons, surrounded the chariot lest we should escape. So Bes and I were able to talk together in a Libyan tongue that none of them understood, even if they heard our words.

"Your life is spared," I said to him, "that the King may take you as a slave."

"Then he will take an ill slave, Master, since I swear by the Grasshopper that within a moon I will find means to kill him, and afterwards come to join you in a land where men hunt fair."

I smiled and Bes went on,

"Now I wish I had time to teach you that trick of swallowing your own tongue, since perhaps you will need it in this boat of which they talk."

"Did you not say to me an hour or two ago, Bes, that we are fools to stretch out our hands to Death until he stretches out his to us? I will not die until I must--now."

"Why 'now,' Master, seeing that only this afternoon you bade me kill you rather than let you be thrown to the wild beasts?" he asked peering at me curiously.

"Do you remember the old hermit, the holy Tanofir, who dwells in a cell over the sepulchre of the Apis bulls in the burial ground of the desert near to Memphis, Bes?"

"The magician and prophet who is the brother of your grandfather, Master, and the son of a king; he who brought you up before he became a hermit? Yes, I know him well, though I have seldom been very near to him because his eyes frighten me, as they frightened Cambyses the Persian when Tanofir cursed him and foretold his doom after he had stabbed the holy Apis, saying that by a wound from that same sword in his own body he should die himself, which thing came to pass. As they have frightened many another man also."

"Well, Bes, when yonder king told me that I must die, fear filled me who did not wish to die thus, and after the fear came a blackness in my mind. Then of a sudden in that blackness I saw a picture of Tanofir, my great uncle, seated in a sepulchre looking towards the East. Moreover I heard him speak, and to me, saying, 'Shabaka, my foster-son, fear nothing. You are in great danger but it will pass. Speak to the great King all that rises in your heart, for the gods of Vengeance make use of your tongue and whatever you prophesy to him shall be fulfilled.' So I

spoke the words you heard and I feared nothing."

"Is it so, Master? Then I think that the holy Tanofir must have entered my heart also. Know that I was minded to leap upon that king and break his neck, so that all three of us might end together. But of a sudden something seemed to tell me to leave him alone and let things go as they are fated. But how can the holy Tanofir who grows blind with age, see so far?"

"I do not know, Bes, save that he is not as are other men, for in him is gathered all the ancient wisdom of Egypt. Moreover he lives with the gods while still upon earth, and like the gods can send his Ka, as we Egyptians call the spirit, or invisible self which companions all from the cradle to the grave and afterwards, whither he will. So doubtless to-day he sent it hither to me whom he loves more than anything on earth. Also I remember that before I entered on this journey he told me that I should return safe and sound. Therefore, Bes, I say I fear nothing."

"Nor do I, Master. Yet if you see me do strange things, or hear me speak strange words, take no note of them, since I shall be but playing a part as I think wisest."

After this we talked of that day's adventure with the lions, and of others that we had shared together, laughing merrily all the while, till the soldiers stared at us as though we were mad. Also the fat eunuch,

Houman, who was mounted on an ass, rode up and said,

"What, Egyptian who dared to twist the beard of the Great King, you laugh, do you? Well, you will sing a different song in the boat to that which you sing in the chariot. Think of my words on the eighth day from this."

"I will think of them, Eunuch," I answered, looking at him fiercely in the eyes, "but who knows what kind of a song you will be singing before the eighth day from this?"

"What I do is done under the authority of the ancient and holy Seal of Seals," he answered in a quavering voice, touching the little cylinder of white shell which I had noted upon the person of the King, but that now hung from a gold chain about the eunuch's neck.

Then he made the sign which Easterns use to avert evil and rode off again, looking very frightened.

So we came to the royal city and went up to a wonderful palace. Here we were taken from the chariot and led into a room where food and drink in plenty were given to me as though I were an honoured guest, which caused me to wonder. Bes also, seated on the ground at a distance, ate and drank, for his own reasons filling himself to the throat as though he were a wineskin, until the serving slaves mocked at him for a glutton.

When we had finished eating, slaves appeared bearing a wooden framework from which hung a great pair of scales. Also there appeared officers of the King's Treasury, carrying leather bags which they opened, breaking the seals to show that the contents were pure gold coin. They set a number of these bags on one of the scales, and then ordered Bes to seat himself in the other. So much heavier did he prove than they expected him to be, that they were obliged to send back to the Treasury to fetch more bags of gold, for although Bes was so short in height, his weight was that of a large man. One of the treasurers grumbled, saying he should have been weighed before he had eaten and drunk. But the officer to whom he spoke grinned and answered that it mattered little, since the King was heir to criminals and that these bags would soon return to the Treasury, only they would need washing first, a remark that made me wonder.

At length, when the scales were even, the six hunters whose lives I had won and who had been given to me as slaves, were brought in and ordered to shoulder the bags of gold. I too was seized and my hands were bound behind me. Then I was led out in charge of the eunuch Houman, who informed me with a leer that it would be his duty to attend to my comfort till the end. With him were four black men all dressed in the same way. These, he said, were the executioners. Lastly came Bes watched by three of the king's guards armed with spears, lest he should attempt to rescue me or to do anyone a mischief.

Now my heart began to sink and I asked Houman what was to happen to me.

"This, O Egyptian slayer of lions. You will be laid upon a bed in a little boat upon the river and another boat will be placed over you, for these boats are called the Twins, Egyptian, in such a fashion that your head and your hands will project at one end and your feet at the other. There you will be left, comfortable as a baby in its cradle, and twice every day the best of food and drink will be brought to you. Should your appetite fail, moreover, it will be my duty to revive it by pricking your eyes with the point of a knife until it returns. Also after each meal I shall wash your face, your hands and your feet with milk and honey, lest the flies that buzz about them should suffer hunger, and to preserve your skin from burning by the sun. Thus slowly you will grow weaker and at length fall asleep. The last one who went into the boat--he, unlucky man, had by accident wandered into the court of the House of Women and seen some of the ladies there unveiled--only lived for twelve days, but you, being so strong, may hope to last for eighteen. Is there anything more that I can tell you? If so, ask it quickly for we draw near to the river."

Now when I heard this and understood all the horror of my fate, I forgot the vision of my great uncle, the holy Tanofir, and his comfortable prophecies, and my heart failed me altogether, so that I stood stock still.

"What, Lion-hunter and Bearder of kings, do you think it is too early to go to bed?" mocked this devilish eunuch. "On with you!" and he began to

beat me about the face with the handle of his fly-whisk.

Then my manhood came back to me.

"When did the King tell you to touch me, you fatted swine?" I roared, and turning, since I could not reach him with my bound hands, kicked him in the body with all my strength, so that he fell down, writhing and screaming with agony. Indeed, had not the executioners leapt upon me, I would have trampled the life out of him where he lay. But they held me fast and presently, after he had been sick, Houman recovered enough to come forward leaning on the shoulders of two guards. Only now he mocked me no more.

We reached a quay just as the sun was setting. There in charge of a one-eyed black slave, a little square-ended boat floated at the river's edge, while on the quay itself lay a similar but somewhat shorter boat, bottom uppermost. Now the hunters whom I had won in the wager, with many glances of compassion, for they were brave men and knew that it was I who had saved their lives, placed the bags of gold in the bottom of the floating boat, and on the top of these a mattress stuffed with straw. Then the girdle of rose-hued pearls was made fast about my middle, my hands were untied, I was seized by the executioners and laid on my back on the mattress, and my wrists and ankles were fixed by cords to iron rings that were screwed to the thwarts of the boat. After this the other, shorter boat was laid over me in such a manner that it did not touch me, leaving my head, my hands and my feet exposed as the eunuch

had said.

While this wicked work was going forward Bes sat on the quay, watching, till presently, after I had been made fast and covered up, he burst into shouts of laughter, clapped his hands and began to dance about as though with joy, till the eunuch, who had now recovered somewhat from my kick, grew curious and asked him why he behaved thus.

"O noble Eunuch," he answered, "once I was free and that man made me a slave, so that for many years I have been obliged to toil for him whom I hate. Moreover, often he has beaten me and starved me, which was why you saw me eat so much not long ago, and threatened to kill me, and now at last I have my revenge upon him who is about to die miserably. That is why I laugh and sing and dance and clap my hands, O most noble Eunuch, I who shall become the follower and servant of the glorious King of all the earth, and perhaps your friend, too, O Eunuch of eunuchs, whose sacred person my brutal master dared to kick."

"I understand," said Houman smiling, though with a twisted face, "and will make report of all you say to the King, and ask him to grant that you shall sometimes prick this Egyptian in the eye. Now go spit in his face and tell him what you think of him."

So Bes waded into the water which was quite shallow here, and spat into my face, or pretended to, while amid a torrent of vile language, he interpolated certain words in the Libyan tongue, which meant,

"O my most beloved father, mother, and other relatives, have no fear. Though things look very black, remember the vision of the holy Tanofir, who doubtless allows these things to happen to you to try your faith by direct order of the gods. Be sure that I will not leave you to perish, or if there should be no escape, that I will find a way to put you out of your misery and to avenge you. Yes, yes, I will yet see that accursed swine, Houman, take your place in this boat. Now I go to the Court to which it seems that this gold chain gives me a right of entry, or so the eunuch says, but soon I will be back again."

Then followed another stream or most horrible abuse and more spitting, after which he waded back to land and embraced Houman, calling him his best friend.

They went, leaving me alone in the boat save for the guard upon the quay who, now that darkness had come, soon grew silent. It was lonely, very lonely, lying there staring at the empty sky with only the stinging gnats for company, and soon my limbs began to ache. I thought of the poor wretches who had suffered in this same boat and wondered if their lot would be my lot.

Bes was faithful and clever, but what could a single dwarf do among all these black-hearted fiends? And if he could do nothing, oh! if he could do nothing!

The seconds seemed minutes, the minutes seemed hours, and the hours seemed years. What then would the days be, passed in torture and agony while waiting for a filthy death? Where now were the gods I had worshipped and--was there any god? Or was man but a self-deceiver who created gods instead of the gods creating him, because he did not love to think of an eternal blackness in which he would soon be swallowed up and lost? Well, at least that would mean sleep, and sleep is better than torment of mind or body.

It came to me, I think, who was so weary. At any rate I opened my eyes to see that the low moon had vanished and that some of the stars which I knew as a hunter who had often steered his way by them, had moved a little. While I was wondering idly why they moved, I heard the tramp of soldiers on the quay and the voice of an officer giving a command. Then I felt the boat being drawn in by the cord with which it was attached to the quay. Next the other boat that lay over me was lifted off, the ropes that bound we were undone and I was set upon my feet, for already I was so stiff that I could scarcely stand. A voice which I recognised as that of the eunuch Houman, addressed me in respectful tones, which made me think I must be dreaming.

"Noble Shabaka," said the voice, "the Great King commands your presence at his feast."

"Is it so?" I answered in my dream. "Then my absence from their feast will vex the gnats of the river," a saying at which Houman and others

with him laughed obsequiously.

Next I heard the bags of gold being removed from the boat, after which we walked away, guards supporting me by either elbow until I found my strength again, and Houman following just behind, perhaps because he feared my foot if he went in front.

"What has chanced, Eunuch," I asked presently, "that I am disturbed from the bed where I was sleeping so well?"

"I do not know, Lord," he answered. "I only know that the King of kings has suddenly commanded that you should be brought before him as a guest clothed in a robe of honour, even if to do so, you must be awakened from your rest, yes, to his own royal table, for he holds a feast this night.

Lord," he went on in a whining voice, "if perchance fortune should have changed her face to you, I pray you bear no malice to those who, when she frowned, were forced, yes, under the private Seal of Seals, against their will to carry out the commands of the King. Be just, O Lord Shabaka."

"Say no more. I will try to be just," I answered. "But what is justice in the East? I only know of it in Egypt."

Now we reached one of the doors of the palace and I was taken to a chamber where slaves who were waiting, washed and anointed me with scents, after which they clad me in a beautiful robe of silk, setting

the girdle of rose-hued pearls about me.

When they had finished, preceded by Houman I was led to a great pillared hall closed in with silk hangings, where many feasted. Through them I went to a dais at the head of the hall where between half-drawn curtains surrounded by cup-bearers and other officers, the King sat in all his glory upon a cushioned golden throne. He had a glittering wine-cup in his hand and at a glance I saw that he was drunk, as it is the fashion for these Easterns to be at their great feasts, for he looked happy and human which he did not do when he was sober. Or perchance, as sometimes I thought afterwards, he only pretended to be drunk. Also I saw something else, namely, Bes, wondrously attired with the gold chain about his neck and wearing a red headdress. He was seated on the carpet before the throne, and saying things that made the King laugh and even caused the grave officers behind to smile.

I came to the dais and at a little sign from Bes who yet did not seem to see me, such a sign as he often made when he caught sight of game before I did, I prostrated myself. The King looked at me, then asked,

"Who is this?" adding, "Oh, I remember, the Egyptian whose arrows do not miss, the wonderful hunter whom Idernes sent to me from Memphis, which I hope to visit ere long. We quarrelled, did we not, Egyptian, something about a lion?"

"Not so, King," I answered. "The King was angry and with justice,

because I could not kill a lion before it frightened his horses."

This I said because my hours in the boat had made me humble, also because the words came to my lips.

"Yes, yes, something like that, or at least you lie well. Whatever it may have been, it is done with now, a mere hunters' difference," and taking from his side his long sceptre that was headed with the great emerald, he stretched it out for me to touch in token of pardon.

Then I knew that I was safe for he to whom the King has extended his sceptre is forgiven all crimes, yes, even if he had attempted the royal life. The Court knew it also, for every man who saw bowed towards me, yes, even the officers behind the King. One of the cup-bearers too brought me a goblet of the King's own wine, which I drank thankfully, calling down health on the King.

"That was a wonderful shot of yours, Egyptian," he said, "when you sent an arrow through the lioness that dared to attack my Majesty. Yes, the King owes his life to you and he is grateful as you shall learn. This slave of yours," and he pointed to Bes in his gaudy attire, "has brought the whole matter to my mind whence it had fallen, and, Shabaka," here he hiccupped, "you may have noted how differently things look to the naked eye and when seen through a wine goblet. He has told me a wonderful story--what was the story, Dwarf?"

"May it please the great King," answered Bes, rolling his big eyes, "only a little tale of another king of my own country whom I used to think great until I came to the East and learned what kings could be. That king had a servant with whom he used to hunt, indeed he was my own father. One day they were out together seeking a certain elephant whose tusks were bigger than those of any other. Then the elephant charged the king and my father, at the risk of his life, killed it and claimed the tusks, as is the custom among the Ethiopians. But the king who greatly desired those tusks, caused my father to be poisoned that he might take them as his heir. Only before he died, my father, who could talk the elephant language, told all the other elephants of this wickedness, at which they were very angry, because they knew well that from the beginning of time their tusks have belonged to him who killed them, and the elephants are a people who do not like ancient laws to be altered. So the elephants made a league together and when the king next went out hunting, taking heed of nothing else they rushed at the king and tore him into pieces no bigger than a finger, and then killed the prince his son, who was behind him. That is the tale of the elephants who love Law, O King."

"Yes, yes," said his Majesty, waking up from a little doze, "but what became of the great tusks? I should like to have them."

"I inherited them as my father's son, O King, and gave them to my master, who doubtless will send them to you when he gets back to Egypt."

"A strange tale," said the King. "A very strange tale which seems to remind me of something that happened not long ago. What was it? Well, it does not matter. Egyptian, do you seek any reward for that shot of yours at the lioness? If so, it shall be given to you. Have you a grudge against anyone, for instance?"

"O King," I answered, "I do seek justice against a certain man. This evening I was led to the bank of the river in charge of the eunuch Houman, who desired to take me for a row in a boat. On the road, for no offence he struck me on the head with the handle of his fly-whip. See, here are the marks of it, O King. Unless the King commanded him to strike me which I do not remember, I seek justice against this eunuch."

Now the King grew very angry and cried,

"What! Did the dog dare to strike a freeborn noble Egyptian?"

Here Houman threw himself upon his face in terror and began to babble out I know not what about the punishment of the boat, which was unlucky for him, for it put the matter into the King's mind.

"The boat!" he cried. "Ah! yes, the boat; being so fat you will fit it well, Eunuch. To the boat with him, and before he enters it a hundred blows upon the feet with the rods," and he pointed at him with his sceptre.

Then guards sprang upon Houman and dragged him away. As he went he clutched at Bes, but hissing something into his ear, the dwarf bit him through the hand till he let go. So Houman departed and the King's guests laughed at the sight, for he had worked mischief to many.

When he had gone the King stared at me and asked,

"But why did I disturb you from your sleep, Egyptian? Oh! I remember. This dwarf says that he has seen the fairest woman in the whole world, and the most learned, some lady of Egypt, but that he does not know her name, that you alone know her name. I disturbed you that you might tell it to me but if you have forgotten it, you can go back to your bed and rest there till it returns to you. There are plenty of boats in the river, Egyptian."

"The fairest and most learned woman in the world?" I said astonished.

"Who can that be, unless he means the lady Amada?" and I paused, wishing I had bitten out my tongue before I spoke, for I smelt a trap.

"Yes, Master," said Bes in a clear voice. "That was the name, the lady Amada."

"Who is this lady Amada?" asked the King, seeming to grow suddenly sober. "And what is she like?"

"I can tell you that, O King," said Bes. "She is like a willow shaken in

the wind for slenderness and grace. She has eyes like those of a buck at gaze; she has lips like rosebuds; she has hair black as the night and soft as silk, the odour of which floats round her like that of flowers. She has a voice that whispers like the evening wind, and yet is rich as honey. Oh! she is beautiful as a goddess and when men see her their hearts melt like wax in the sun and for a long while they can look upon no other woman, not till the next day indeed if they meet her in the evening," and Bes smacked his thick lips and gazed upwards.

"By the holy Fire," laughed the King, "I feel my heart melting already. Say, Shabaka, what do you know of this Amada? Is she married or a maiden?"

Now I answered because I must, for after all that boat was not far away, nor did I dare to lie.

"She is married, O King of kings, to the goddess Isis whom she loves alone."

"A woman married to a woman, or rather to the Queen of women," he answered laughing, "well, that matters little."

"Nay, O King, it matters much since she is under the protection of Isis and inviolate."

"That remains to be seen, Shabaka. I think that I would dare the wrath

of every false goddess in heaven to win such a prize. Learned also, you say, Shabaka."

"Aye, O King, full of learning to the finger tips, a prophetess also, one in whom the divine fire burns like a lamp in a vase of alabaster, one to whom visions come and who can read the future and the past."

"Still better," said the King. "One, then, who would be a fitting consort for the King of kings, who wearies of fat, round-eyed, sweetmeat-sucking fools whereof there are hundreds yonder," and he pointed towards the House of Women. "Who is this maid's father?"

"He is dead but she is the niece of the Prince Peroa, and by birth the Royal Lady of Egypt, O King."

"Good, then she is well born also. Hearken, O Shabaka, to-morrow you start back to Egypt, bearing letters from me to my vassal Peroa, and to my Satrap Idernes, bidding Peroa to hand over this lady Amada to Idernes and bidding Idernes to send her to the East with all honour and without delay, that she may enter my household as one of my wives."

Now I was filled with rage and horror, and about to refuse this mission when Bes broke in swiftly,

"Will the King of kings be pleased to give command as to my master's safe and honourable escort to Egypt?"

"It is commanded with all things necessary for Shabaka the Egyptian and the dwarf his servant, with the gold and gems and slaves he won from me in a wager, and everything else that is his. Let it be recorded."

Scribes sprang forward and wrote the King's words down, while like one in a dream I thought to myself that they could not now be altered. The King watched them sleepily for a while, then seemed to wake up and grow clear-minded again. At least he said to me,

"Fortune has shown you smiles and frowns to-day, Egyptian, and the smiles last. Yet remember that she has teeth behind her lips wherewith to tear out the throat of the faithless. Man, if you play me false or fail in your mission, be sure that you shall die and in such a fashion that will make you think of yonder boat as a pleasant bed, and with you this woman Amada and her uncle Peroa, and all your kin and hers; yes," he added with a burst of shrewdness, "and even that abortion of a dwarf to whom I have listened because he amused me, but who perhaps is more cunning than he seems."

"O King of kings," I said, "I will not be false." But I did not add to whom I would be true.

"Good. Ere long I shall visit Egypt, as I have told you, and there I shall pass judgment on you and others. Till then, farewell. Fear nothing, for you have my safe-conduct. Begone, both of you, for you

weary me. But first drink and keep the cup, and in exchange, give me that bow of yours which shoots so far and straight."

"It is the King's," I answered as I pledged him in the golden, jewelled cup which a butler had handed to me.

Then the curtain fell in front of the throne and chamberlains came forward to lead me and Bes back to our lodging, one of whom took the cup and bore it in front of us. Down the hall we went between the feasting nobles who all bowed to one to whom the Great King had shown favour, and so out of the palace through the quiet night back to the house where I had dwelt while waiting audience of the King. Here the chamberlains bade me farewell, giving the cup to Bes to carry, and saying that on the morrow early my gold should be brought to me together with all that was needed for my journey, also one who would receive the bow I had promised to the King, which had already been returned to my lodgings with everything that was ours. Then they bowed and went.

We entered the house, climbing a stair to an upper chamber. Here Bes barred the door and the shutters, making sure that none could see or hear us.

Then he turned, threw his arms about me, kissed my hand and burst into tears.