

CHAPTER VIII. THE LADY AMADA

Now day by day, hour by hour and minute by minute every detail of that journey appeared before me, but to set it all down is needless. As I, Allan Quatermain, write the record of my vision, still I seem to hear the thunder of our horses' hoofs while we rushed forward at full gallop over the plains, over the mountain passes and by the banks of rivers. The speed at which we travelled was wonderful, for at intervals of about forty miles were post-houses and at these, whatever might be the hour of day or night, we found fresh horses from the King's stud awaiting us. Moreover, the postmasters knew that we were coming, which astonished me until we discovered that they had been warned of our arrival by two King's messengers who travelled ahead of us.

These men, it would seem, although our officers and guides professed ignorance of the matter, must have left the King's palace at dawn on the day of our departure, whereas we did not mount in the city till a little after noon. Therefore they had six hours good start of us, and what is more, travelled lighter than we did, having no sumpter beasts with them, and no cooks or servants. Moreover, always they had the pick of the horses and chose the three swiftest beasts, leading the third in case one of their own should founder or meet with accident. Thus it came about that we never caught them up although we covered quite a hundred miles a day. Only once did I see them, far off upon the skyline of a mountain range which we had to climb, but by the time we had reached its crest they were gone.

At length we came to the desert without accident and crossed it, though more slowly. But even here the King had his posts which were in charge of Arabs who lived in tents by wells of water, or sometimes where there was none save what was brought to them. So still we galloped on, parched by the burning sand beneath and the burning sand above, and reached the borders of Egypt.

Here, upon the very boundary line, the two officers halted the cavalcade saying that their orders were to return thence and make report to the King. There then we parted, Bes and I with the six hunters who still chose to cling to me, going forward and the officers of the King with the guides and servants going back. The good horses that we rode from the last post they gave to us by the King's command, together with the sumpter beasts, since horses broken to the saddle were hard to come by in Egypt where they were trained to draw chariots. These we took, sending back my thanks to the King, and started on once more, Bes leading that beast which bore the gold and the hunters serving as a guard.

Indeed I was glad to see the last of those Easterns although they had brought us safely and treated us well, for all the while I was never sure but that they had some orders to lead us into a trap, or perhaps to make away with us in our sleep and take back the gold and the priceless, rose-hued pearls, any two of which were worth it all. But such was not their command nor did they dare to steal them on their own account,

since then, even if they escaped the vengeance of the King, their wives and all their families would have paid the price.

Now we entered Egypt near the Salt Lakes that are not far from the head of the Gulf, crossing the canal that the old Pharaohs had dug, which proved easy for it was silted up. Before we reached it we found some peasant folk labouring in their gardens and I heard one of them call to another,

"Here come more of the Easterns. What is toward, think you, neighbour?"

"I do not know," answered the other, "but when I passed down the canal this morning, I saw a body of the Great King's guards gathering from the fort. Doubtless it is to meet these men of whose coming the other two who went by fifty hours ago, have warned the officers."

"Now what does that mean?" I asked of Bes.

"Neither more nor less than we have heard, Master. The two King's messengers who have gone ahead of us all the way from the city, have told the officer of the frontier fort that we are coming, so he has advanced to the ford to meet us, for what purpose I do not know."

"Nor do I," I said, "but I wish we could take another road, if there

were one."

"There is none, Master, for above and below the canal is full of water and the banks are too steep for horses to climb. Also we must show no doubt or fear."

He thought a while, then added,

"Take the royal seal, Master. It may be useful."

He gave it to me, and I examined it more closely than I had done before. It was a cylinder of plain white shell hung on a gold chain, that which Bes had bitten through, but now mended again by taking out the broken link. On this cylinder were cut figures; as I think of a priest presenting a noble to a god, over whom was the crescent of the moon, while behind the god stood a man or demon with a tall spear. Also between the figures were mystic signs, meaning I know not what. The workmanship of the carving was grown shallow with time and use for the cylinder seemed to be very ancient, a sacred thing that had descended from generation to generation and was threaded through with a bar of silver on which it turned.

I put the seal which was like no other that I had seen, being the work of an early and simpler age, round my neck beneath my mail and we went on.

Descending the steep bank of the canal we came to the ford where the sand that had silted in was covered by not more than a foot of water. As we entered it, on the top of the further bank appeared a body of about thirty armed and mounted men, one of whom carried the Great King's banner, on which I noted was blazoned the very figures that were cut upon the cylinder. Now it was too late to retreat, so we rode through the water and met the soldiers. Their officer advanced, crying,

"In the name of the Great King, greeting, my lord Shabaka!

"In the name of the Great King, greeting!" I answered. "What would you with Shabaka, Officer of the King?"

"Only to do him honour. The word of the King has reached us and we come to escort you to the Court of Idernes, the Satrap of the King and Governor of Egypt who sits at Sais."

"That is not my road, Officer. I travel to Memphis to deliver the commands of the King to my cousin, Peroa, the ruler of Egypt under the King. Afterwards, perchance, I shall visit the high Idernes."

"To whom our commands are to take you now, my lord Shabaka, not afterwards," said the officer sternly, glancing round at his armed escort.

"I come to give commands, not to receive them, Captain of the King."

"Seize Shabaka and his servants," said the officer briefly, whereon the soldiers rode forward to surround us.

I waited till they were near at hand. Then suddenly I plunged my hand beneath my robe and drew out the small, white seal which I held before the eyes of the officer, saying,

"Who is it that dares to lay a finger upon the holder of the King's White Seal? Surely that man is ready for death."

The officer stared at it, then leapt from his horse and flung himself face downwards on the ground, crying,

"It is the ancient signet of the Kings of the East, given to their first forefather by Samas the Sungod, on which hangs the fortunes of the Great House! Pardon, my lord Shabaka."

"It is granted," I answered, "because what you did you did in ignorance. Now go to the Satrap Idernes and say to him that if he would have speech with the bearer of the King's seal which all must obey, he will find him at Memphis. Farewell," and with Bes and the six hunters I rode through the guards, none striving to hinder me.

"That was well done, Master," said Bes.

"Yes," I said. "Those two messengers who went ahead of us brought orders to the frontier guard of Idernes that I should be taken to him as a prisoner. I do not know why, but I think because things are passing in Egypt of which we know nothing and the King did not desire that I should see the Prince Peroa and give him news that I might have gathered. Mayhap we have been outwitted, Bes, and the business of the lady Amada is but a pretext to pick a quarrel suddenly before Peroa can strike the first blow."

"Perhaps, Master, for these Easterns are very crafty. But, Master, what happens to those who make a false use of the King's ancient, sacred signet? I think they have cut the ropes which tie them to earth," and he looked upwards to the sky rolling his yellow eyes.

"They must find new ropes, Bes, and quickly, before they are caught. Hearken. You have sat upon a throne and I can speak out to you. Think you that my cousin, the Prince Peroa, loves to be the servant of this distant, Eastern king, he who by right is Pharaoh of Egypt? Peroa must strike or lose his niece and perchance his life. Forward, that we may warn him."

"And if he will not strike, Master, knowing the King's might and being somewhat slow to move?"

"Then, Bes, I think that you and I had best go hunting far away in those lands you know, where even the Great King cannot follow us."

"And where, if only I can find a woman who does not make me ill to look on, and whom I do not make ill, I too can once more be a king, Master, and the lord of many thousand brave armed men. I must speak of that matter to the holy Tanofir."

"Who doubtless will know what to advise you, Bes; or, if he dies not, I shall."

For a while we rode on in silence, each thinking his own thoughts. Then Bes said,

"Master, before so very long we shall reach the Nile, and having with us gold in plenty can buy boats and hire crews. It comes into my mind that we should do well for our own safety and comfort to start at once on a hunting journey far from Egypt; in the land of the Ethiopians, Master. There perchance I could gather together some of the wise men in whose hands I left the rule of my kingdom, and submit to them this question of a woman to marry me. The Ethiopians are a faithful people, Master, and will not reject me because I have spent some years seeing the world afar, that I might learn how to rule them better."

"I have remembered that it cannot be, Bes," I said.

"Why not, Master?"

"For this reason. You left your country because of a woman? I cannot leave mine again because of a woman."

Bes rolled his eyes around as though he thought to see that woman in the desert. Not discovering her, he stared upwards and there found light.

"Is she perchance named the lady Amada, Master?"

I nodded.

"So. The lady Amada who you told the Great King is the most beautiful one in the whole world, causing the fire of Love to burn up in his royal heart, and with it many other things of which we do not know at present."

"You told him, Bes," I said angrily.

"I told him of a beautiful one; I did not tell him her name, Master, and although I never thought of it at the time, perhaps she will be angry with him who told her name."

Now fear took hold of me, and Bes saw it in my face.

"Do not be afraid, Master. If there is trouble I will swear that I told the Great King that lady's name."

"Yes, Bes, but how would that fit in with the story, seeing that I was brought out of the boat for this very purpose?"

"Quite easily, Master, since I will say that you were led from the boat to confirm my tale. Oh! she will be angry with me, no doubt, but in Egypt even a dwarf cannot be killed because he has declared a certain lady to be the most beautiful in the world. But, Master, tell me, when did you learn to love her?"

"When we were boy and girl, Bes. We used to play together, being cousins, and I used to hold her hand. Then suddenly she refused to let me hold her hand any more, and I being quite grown up then, though she was younger, understood that I had better go away."

"I should have stopped where I was, Master."

"No, Bes. She was studying to be a priestess and my great uncle, the holy Tanofir, told me that I had better go away. So I went down south hunting and fighting in command of the troops, and met you, Bes."

"Which perhaps was better for you, Master, than to stop to watch the lady Amada acquire learning. Still, I wonder whether the holy Tanofir is always right. You see, Master, he thinks a great deal of priests and priestesses, and is so very old that he has forgotten all about love and that without it there never would have been a holy Tanofir."

"The holy Tanofir thinks of souls, not of bodies, Bes."

"Yes, Master. Still, oil is of no use without a lamp, or a soul without a body, at least here underneath the sun, or so we were taught who worship the Grasshopper. But, Master, when you came back from all your hunting, what happened then?"

"Then I found, Bes, that the lady Amada, having acquired all the learning possible, had taken her first vows to Isis, which she said she would not break for any man on earth although she might have done so without crime. Therefore, although I was dear to her, as a brother would have been had she had one, and she swore that she had never even thought of another man, she refused so much as to think of marrying who dreamed only of the heavenly perfections of the lady Isis."

"Ump!" said Bes. "We Ethiopians have Priestesses of the Grasshopper, or the Grasshopper's wife, but they do not think of her like that. I hope that one day something stronger than herself will not cause the lady Amada to break her vows to the heavenly Isis. Only then, perhaps, it may be for the sake of another man who did not go off to the East on account of such fool's talk. But here is a village and the horses are spent. Let us stop and eat, as I suppose even the lady Amada does sometimes."

On the following afternoon we crossed the Nile, and towards sunset

entered the vast and ancient city of Memphis. On its white walls floated the banners of the Great King which Bes pointed out to me, saying that wherever we went in the whole world, it seemed that we could never be free from those accursed symbols.

"May I live to spit upon them and cast them into the moat," I answered savagely, for as I drew near to Amada they grew ten times more hateful to me than they had been before.

In truth I was nearer to Amada than I thought, for after we had passed the enclosure of the temple of Ptah, the most wonderful and the mightiest in the whole world, we came to the temple of Isis. There near to the pylon gate we met a procession of her priests and priestesses advancing to offer the evening sacrifice of song and flowers, clad, all of them, in robes of purest white. It was a day of festival, so singers went with them. After the singers came a band of priestesses bearing flowers, in front of whom walked another priestess shaking a sistrum that made a little tinkling music.

Even at a distance there was something about the tall and slender shape of this priestess that stirred me. When we came nearer I saw why, for it was Amada herself. Through the thin veil she wore I could see her dark and tender eyes set beneath the broad brow that was so full of thought, and the sweet, curved mouth that was like no other woman's. Moreover there could be no doubt since the veil parting above her breast showed the birth-mark for which she was famous, the mark of the young moon, the

sign of Isis.

I sprang from my horse and ran towards her. She looked up and saw me. At first she frowned, then her face grew wondering, then tender, and I thought that her red lips shaped my name. Moreover in her confusion she let the sistrum fall.

I muttered "Amada!" and stepped forward, but priests ran between us and thrust me away. Next moment she had recovered the sistrum and passed on with her head bowed. Nor did she lift her eyes to look back.

"Begone, man!" cried a priest, "Begone, whoever you may be. Because you wear Eastern armour do you think that you can dare the curse of Isis?"

Then I fell back, the holy image of the goddess passed and the procession vanished through the pylon gate. I, Shabaka the Egyptian, stood by my horse and watched it depart. I was happy because the lady Amada was alive, well, and more beautiful than ever; also because she had shown signs of joy and confusion at seeing me again. Yet I was unhappy because I met her still filling a holy office which built a wall between us, also because it seemed to me an evil omen that I should have been repelled from her by a priest of Isis who talked of the curse of the goddess. Moreover the sacred statue, I suppose by accident, turned towards me as it passed and perhaps by the chance of light, seemed to frown upon me.

Thus I thought as Shabaka hundreds of years before the Christian era, but as Allan Quatermain the modern man, to whom it was given so marvellously to behold all these things and who in beholding them, yet never quite lost the sense of his own identity of to-day, I was amazed. For I knew that this lady Amada was the same being though clad in different flesh, as that other lady with whom I had breathed the magical Tadaki fumes which had power to rend the curtain of the past, or, perhaps, only to breed dreams of what it might have been.

To the outward eye, indeed she was different, as I was different, taller, more slender, larger-eyed, with longer and slimmer hands than those of any Western woman, and on the whole even more beautiful and alluring. Moreover that mysterious look which from time to time I had seen on Lady Ragnall's face, was more constant on that of the lady Amada. It brooded in the deep eyes and settled in a curious smile about the curves of the lips, a smile that was not altogether human, such a smile as one might wear who had looked on hidden things and heard voices that spoke beyond the limits of the world.

Somehow neither then nor at any other time during all my dream, could I imagine this Amada, this daughter of a hundred kings, whose blood might be traced back through dynasty on dynasty, as nothing but a woman who nurses children upon her breast. It was as though something of our common nature had been bred out of her and something of another nature whereof we have no ken, had entered to fill its place. And yet these two women were the same, that I knew, or at any rate, much of them was the

same, for who can say what part of us we leave behind as we flit from life to life, to find it again elsewhere in the abysses of Time and Change? One thing too was quite identical--the birthmark of the new moon above the breast which the priests of the Kendah had declared was always the seal that marked their prophetess, the guardian of the Holy Child.

When the procession had quite departed and I could no longer hear the sound of singing, I remounted and rode on to my house, or rather to that of my mother, the great lady Tiu, which was situated beneath the wall of the old palace facing towards the Nile. Indeed my heart was full of this mother of mine whom I loved and who loved me, for I was her only child, and my father had been long dead; so long that I could not remember him. Eight months had gone by since I saw her face and in eight months who knew what might have happened? The thought made me cold for she, who was aged and not too strong, perhaps had been gathered to Osiris. Oh! if that were so!

I shook my tired horse to a canter, Bes riding ahead of me to clear a road through the crowded street in which, at this hour of sundown, all the idlers of Memphis seemed to have gathered. They stared at me because it was not common to see men riding in Memphis, and with little love, since from my dress and escort they took me to be some envoy from their hated master, the Great King of the East. Some even threatened to bar the way; but we thrust through and presently turned into a thoroughfare

of private houses standing in their own gardens. Ours was the third of these. At its gate I leapt from my horse, pushed open the closed door and hastened in to seek and learn.

I had not far to go for, there in the courtyard, standing at the head of our modest household and dressed in her festal robes, was my mother, the stately and white-haired lady Tiu, as one stands who awaits the coming of an honoured guest. I ran to her and kneeling, kissed her hand, saying,

"My mother! My mother, I have come safe home and greet you."

"I greet you also, my son," she answered, bending down and kissing me on the brow, "who have been in far lands and passed so many dangers. I greet you and thank the guardian gods who have brought you safe home again. Rise, my son."

I rose and kissed her on the face, then looked at the servants who were bowing their welcome to me, and said,

"How comes it, Lady of the House, that all are gathered here? Did you await some guest?"

"We awaited you, my son. For an hour have we stood here listening for the sound of your feet."

"Me!" I exclaimed. "That is strange, seeing that I have ridden fast and hard from the East, tarrying only a few minutes, and those since I entered Memphis, when I met----" and I stopped.

"Met whom, Shabaka?"

"The lady Amada walking in the procession of Isis."

"Ah! the lady Amada. The mother waits that the son may stop to greet the lady Amada!"

"But why did you wait, my mother? Who but a spirit or a bird of the air could have told you that I was coming, seeing that I sent no messenger before me?"

"You must have done so, Shabaka, since yesterday one came from the holy Tanofir, our relative who dwells in the desert in the burial-ground of Sekera. He bore a message from Tanofir to me, telling me to make ready since before sundown to-night you, my son, would be with me, having escaped great dangers, accompanied by the dwarf Bes, your servant, and six strange Eastern men. So I made ready and waited; also I prepared lodging for the six strange men in the outbuildings behind the house and sent a thank offering to the temple. For know, my son, I have suffered much fear for you."

"And not without cause, as you will say when I tell you all," I answered

laughing. "But how Tanofir knew that I was coming is more than I can guess. Come, my mother, greet Bes here, for had it not been for him, never should I have lived to hold your hand again."

So she greeted him and thanked him, whereon Bes rolled his eyes and muttered something about the holy Tanofir, after which we entered the house. Thence I despatched a messenger to the Prince Peroa saying that if it were his pleasure I would wait on him at once, seeing that I had much to tell him. This done I bathed and caused my hair and beard to be trimmed and, discarding the Eastern garments, clothed myself in those of Egypt, and so felt that I was my own man again. Then I came out refreshed and drank a cup of Syrian wine and the night having fallen, sat down by my mother in the chamber with a lamp between us, and, holding her hand, told her something of my story, showing her the sacks of gold that had come with me safely from the East, and the chain of priceless, rose-hued pearls that I had won in a wager from the Great King.

Now when she learned how Bes by his wit had saved me from a death of torment in the boat, my mother clapped her hands to summon a servant and sent for Bes, and said to him,

"Bes, hitherto I have looked on you as a slave taken by my son, the noble Shabaka, in one of his far journeys that it pleases him to make to fight and to hunt. But henceforth I look upon you as a friend and give you a seat at my table. Moreover it comes into my mind that although so

strangely shaped by some evil god, perhaps you are more than you seem to be."

Now Bes looked at me to see if I had told my mother anything, and when I shook my head answered,

"I thank you, O Lady of the House, who have but done my duty to my master. Still it is true that as a goatskin often holds good wine, so a dwarf should not always be judged by what can be seen of him."

Then he went away.

"It seems that we are rich again, Son, who have been somewhat poor of late years," said my mother, looking at the bags of gold. "Also, there are the pearls which doubtless are worth more than the gold. What are you going to do with them, Shabaka?"

"I thought of offering them as a gift to the lady Amada," I replied hesitatingly, "that is unless you----"

"I? No, I am too old for such gems. Yet, Son, it might be well to keep them for a time, seeing that while they are your own they may give you more weight in the eyes of the Prince Peroa and others. Whereas if you gave them the lady Amada and she took them, perchance it might only be to see them return to the East, whither you tell me she is summoned by one whose orders may not be disobeyed."

Now I turned white with rage and answered,

"While I live, Mother, Amada shall never go to the East to be the woman of yonder King."

"While you live, Son. But those who cross the will of a great king, are apt to die. Also this is a matter which her uncle, the Prince Peroa, must decide as policy dictates. Now as ever the woman is but a pawn in the game. Oh! my son," she went on, "do not pin all your heart to the robe of this Amada. She is very fair and very learned, but is she one who will love? Moreover, if so she is a priestess and it would be difficult for her to wed who is sworn to Isis. Lastly, remember this: If Egypt were free, she would be its heiress, not her uncle, Peroa. For hers is the true blood, not his. Would he, therefore, be willing to give her to any man who, according to the ancient custom, through her would acquire the right to rule?"

"I do not seek to rule, Mother; I only seek to wed Amada whom I love."

"Amada whom you love and whose name you, or rather your servant Bes, which is the same thing since it will be held that he did it by your order, gave to the King of the East, or so I understand. Here is a pretty tangle, Shabaka, and rather would I be without all that gold and those priceless pearls than have the task of its unravelling."

Before I could answer and explain all the truth to her, the curtain was swung aside and through it came a messenger from the Prince Peroa, who bade me come to eat with him at once at the palace, since he must see me this night.

So my mother having set the rope of rose-hued pearls in a double chain about my neck, I kissed her and went, with Bes who was also bidden. Outside a chariot was waiting into which we entered.

"Now, Master," said Bes to me as we drove to the palace, "I almost wish that we were back in another chariot hunting lions in the East."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because then, although we had much to fear, there was no woman in the story. Now the woman has entered it and I think that our real troubles are about to begin. Oh! to-morrow I go to seek counsel of the holy Tanofir."

"And I come with you," I answered, "for I think it will be needed."