

CHAPTER X. SHABAKA PLIGHTS HIS TROTH

Bes and I went armed to the palace, walking in the middle of the road, but now that the sun was up we met no more robbers. At the gate a messenger summoned me alone to the presence of Peroa, who, he said, wished to talk with me before the sitting of the Council. I went and found him by himself.

"I hear that you were attacked last night," he said after greeting me.

I answered that I was and told him the story, adding that it was fortunate I had left the White Seal and the pearls in safe keeping, since without doubt the would-be thieves were Easterns who desired to recover them.

"Ah! the pearls," he said. "One of those who handled them, who was once a dealer in gems, says that they are without price, unmatched in the whole world, and that never in all his life has he seen any to equal the smallest of them."

I replied that I believed this was so. Then he asked me of the value of the gold of which I had spoken. I told him and it was a great sum, for gold was scarce in Egypt. His eyes gleamed for he needed wealth to pay soldiers.

"And all this you are ready to hand over to me, Shabaka?"

Now I bethought me of my mother's words, and answered,

"Yes, Prince, at a price."

"What price, Shabaka?"

"The price of the hand of the Royal Lady, Amada, freed from her vows. Moreover, I will give her the pearls as a marriage dowry and place at your service my sword and all the knowledge I have gained in the East, swearing to stand or fall with you."

"I thought it, Shabaka. Well, in this world nothing is given for nothing and the offer is a fair one. You are well born, too, as well as myself, and a brave and clever man. Further, Amada has not taken her final vows and therefore the high priests can absolve her from her marriage to the goddess, or to her son Horus, whichever it may be, for I do not understand these mysteries. But, Shabaka, if Fortune should chance to go with us and I should become the first Pharaoh of a new dynasty in Egypt, he who was married to the Royal Princess of the true blood might become a danger to my throne and family."

"I shall not be that man, Prince, who am content with my own station, and to be your servant."

"And my son's, Shabaka? You know that I have but one lawful son."

"And your son's, Prince."

"You are honest, Shabaka, and I believe you. But how about your sons, if you have any, and how about Amada herself? Well, in great businesses something must be risked, and I need the gold and the rest which I cannot take for nothing, for you won them by your skill and courage and they are yours. But how you won the seal you have not told us, nor is there time for you to do so now."

He thought a little, walking up and down the chamber, then went on,

"I accept your offer, Shabaka, so far as I can."

"So far as you can, Prince?"

"Yes; I can give you Amada in marriage and make that marriage easy, but only if Amada herself consents. The will of a Royal Princess of Egypt of full age cannot be forced, save by her father if he reigns as Pharaoh, and I am not her father, but only her guardian. Therefore it stands thus. Are you willing to fulfil your part of the bargain, save only as regards the pearls, if she does not marry you, and to take your chance of winning Amada as a man wins a woman, I on my part promising to do all in my power to help your suit?"

Now it was my turn to think for a moment. What did I risk? The gold and

perhaps the pearls, no more, for in any case I should fight for Peroa against the Eastern king whom I hated, and through him for Egypt. Well, these came to me by chance, and if they went by chance what of it? Also I was not one who desired to wed a woman, however much I worshipped her, if she desired to turn her back on me. If I could win her in fair love--well. If not, it was my misfortune, and I wanted her in no other way. Lastly, I had reason to think that she looked on me more favourably than she had ever done on any other man, and that if it had not been for what my mother called her soul and its longings, she would have given herself to me before I journeyed to the East. Indeed, once she had said as much, and there was something in her eyes last night which told me that in her heart she loved me, though with what passion at the time I did not know. So very swiftly I made up my mind and answered,

"I understand and I accept. The gold shall be delivered to you to-day, Prince. The pearls are already in your keeping to await the end."

"Good!" he exclaimed. "Then let the matter be reduced to writing and at once, that afterwards neither of us may have cause to complain of the other."

So he sent for his secret scribe and dictated to him, briefly but clearly, the substance of our bargain, nothing being added, and nothing taken away. This roll written on papyrus was afterwards copied twice, Peroa taking one copy, I another, and a third being deposited according to custom, in the library of the temple of Ptah.

When all was done and Peroa and I had touched each other's breasts and given our word in the name of Amen, we went to the hall in which we had dined, where those whom the Prince had summoned were assembled. Altogether there were about thirty of them, great citizens of Memphis, or landowners from without who had been called together in the night. Some of these men were very old and could remember when Egypt had a Pharaoh of its own before the East set its heel upon her neck, of noble blood also.

Others were merchants who dealt with all the cities of Egypt; others hereditary generals, or captains of fleets of ships; others Grecians, officers of mercenaries who were supposed to be in the pay of the King of kings, but hated him, as did all the Greeks. Then there were the high priests of Ptah, of Amen, of Osiris and others who were still the most powerful men in the land, since there was no village between Thebes and the mouths of the Nile in which they had not those who were sworn to the service of their gods.

Such was the company representing all that remained or could be gathered there of the greatness of Egypt the ancient and the fallen.

To these when the doors had been closed and barred and trusty watchmen set to guard them, Peroa expounded the case in a low and earnest voice. He showed them that the King of the East sought a new quarrel against Egypt that he might grind her to powder beneath his heel, and that he

did this by demanding the person of Amada, his own niece and the Royal Lady of Egypt, to be included in his household like any common woman. If she were refused then he would send a great army under pretext of taking her, and lay the land waste as far as Thebes. And if she were granted some new quarrel would be picked and in the person of the royal Amada all of them be for ever shamed.

Next he showed the seal, telling them that I--who was known to many of them, at least by repute--had brought it from the East, and repeating to them the plan that I had proposed upon the previous night. After this he asked their counsel, saying that before noon he must send an answer to Idernes, the King's Satrap at Sais.

Then I was called upon to speak and, in answer to questions, answered frankly that I had stolen the ancient White Seal from the King's servant who carried it as a warrant for the King's private vengeance on one who had bested him. How I did not mention. I told them also of the state of the Great King's empire and that I had heard that he was about to enter upon a war with the Greeks which would need all its strength, and that therefore if they wished to strike for liberty the time was at hand.

Then the talk began and lasted for two hours, each man giving his judgment according to precedence, some one way and some another. When all had done and it became clear that there were differences of opinion, some being content to live on in slavery with what remained to them and others desiring to strike for freedom, among whom were the high priests

who feared lest the Eastern heretics should utterly destroy their worship, Peroa spoke once more.

"Elders of Egypt," he said briefly, "certain of you think one way, and certain another, but of this be sure, such talk as we have held together cannot be hid. It will come to the ears of spies and through them to those of the Great King, and then all of us alike are doomed. If you refuse to stir, this very day I with my family and household and the Royal Lady Amada, and all who cling to me, fly to Upper Egypt and perhaps beyond it to Ethiopia, leaving you to deal with the Great King, as you will, or to follow me into exile. That he will attack us there is no doubt, either over the pretext of Amada or some other, since Shabaka has heard as much from his own lips. Now choose."

Then, after a little whispering together, every man of them voted for rebellion, though some of them I could see with heavy hearts, and bound themselves by a great oath to cling together to the last.

The matter being thus settled such a letter was written to Idernes as I had suggested on the night before, and sealed with the Signet of signets. Of the yielding up of Amada it said nothing, but commanded Idernes, under the private White Seal that none dared disobey, to wait upon the Prince Peroa at Memphis forthwith, and there learn from him, the Holder of the Seal, what was the will of the Great King. Then the Council was adjourned till one hour after noon, and most of them departed to send messengers bearing secret word to the various cities

and nomes of Egypt.

Before they went, however, I was directed to wait upon my relative, the holy Tanofir, whom all acknowledged to be the greatest magician in Egypt, and to ask of him to seek wisdom and an oracle from his Spirit as to the future and whether in it we should fare well or ill. This I promised to do.

When most of the Council were gone the messengers of Idernes were summoned, and came proudly, and with them, or rather before them, Bes for whom I had sent as he was not present at the Council.

"Master," he whispered to me, "the tallest of those messengers is the man who captained the robbers last night. Wait and I will prove it."

Peroa gave the roll to the head messenger, bidding him bear it to the Satrap in answer to the letter which he had delivered to him. The man took it insolently and thrust it into his robe, as he did so revealing a silver chain that had been broken and knotted together, and asked whether there were words to bear besides those written in the roll.

Before Peroa could answer Bes sprang up saying,

"O Prince, a boon, the boon of justice on this man. Last night he and others with him attacked my master and myself, seeking to rob us, but finding nothing let us go."

"You lie, Abortion!" said the Eastern.

"Oh! I lie, do I?" mocked Bes. "Well, let us see," and shooting out his long arm, he grasped the chain about the messenger's neck and broke it with a jerk. "Look, O Prince," he said, "you may have noted last night, when that man entered the hall, that there hung about his neck this chain to which was tied a silver key."

"I noted it," said Peroa.

"Then ask him, O Prince, where is the key now."

"What is that to you, Dwarf?" broke in the man. "The key is my mark of office as chief butler to the High Satrap. Must I always bear it for your pleasure?"

"Not when it has been taken from you, Butler," answered Bes. "See, here it is," and from his sleeve he produced the key hanging to a piece of the chain. "Listen, O Prince," he said. "I struggled with this man and the key was in my left hand though he did not know it at the time, and with it some of the chain. Compare them and judge. Also his mask slipped and I saw his face and knew him again."

Peroa laid the pieces of the chain together and observed the workmanship which was Eastern and rare. Then he clapped his hands, at which sign armed men of his household entered from behind him.

"It is the same," he said. "Butler of Idernes, you are a common thief."

The man strove to answer, but could not for the deed was proved against him.

"Then, O Prince," asked Bes, "what is the punishment of those thieves who attack passers-by with violence in the streets of Memphis, for such I demand on him?"

"The cutting off of the right hand and scourging," answered Peroa, at which words the butler turned to fly. But Bes leapt on him like an ape upon a bird, and held him fast.

"Seize that thief," said Peroa to his servants, "and let him receive fifty blows with the rods. His hand I spare because he must travel."

They laid the man down and the rods having been fetched, gave him the blows until at the thirtieth he howled for mercy, crying out that it was true and that it was he who had captained the robbers, words which Peroa caused to be written down. Then he asked him why he, a messenger from the Satrap, had robbed in the streets of Memphis, and as he refused to answer, commanded the officer of justice to lay on. After three more blows the man said,

"O Prince, this was no common robbery for gain. I did what I was

commanded to do, because yonder noble had about him the ancient White Seal of the Great King which he showed to certain of the Satrap's servants by the banks of the canal. That seal is a holy token, O Prince, which, it is said, has descended for twice a thousand years in the family of the Great King, and as the Satrap did not know how it had come into the hands of the noble Shabaka, he ordered me to obtain it if I could."

"And the pearls too, Butler?"

"Yes, O Prince, since those gems are a great possession with which any Satrap could buy a larger satrapy."

"Let him go," said Peroa, and the man rose, rubbing himself and weeping in his pain.

"Now, Butler," he went on, "return to your master with a grateful heart, since you have been spared much that you deserve. Say to him that he cannot steal the Signet, but that if he is wise he will obey it, since otherwise his fate may be worse than yours, and to all his servants say the same. Foolish man, how can you, or your master, guess what is in the mind of the Great King, or for what purpose the Signet of signets is here in Egypt? Beware lest you fall into a pit, all of you together, and let Idernes beware lest he find himself at the very bottom of that pit."

"O Prince, I will beware," said the humbled butler, "and whatever is

written over the seal, that I will obey, like many others."

"You are wise," answered Peroa; "I pray for his own sake that the Satrap Idernes may be as wise. Now begone, thanking whatever god you worship that your life is whole in you and that your right hand remains upon your wrist."

So the butler and those with him prostrated themselves before Peroa and bowed humbly to me and even to Bes because in their hearts now they believed that we were clothed by the Great King with terrible powers that might destroy them all, if so we chose. Then they went, the butler limping a little and with no pride left in him.

"That was good work," said Peroa to me afterwards when we were alone, "for now yonder knave is frightened and will frighten his master."

"Yes," I answered, "you played that pipe well, Prince. Still, there is no time to lose, since before another moon this will all be reported in the East, whence a new light may arise and perchance a new signet."

"You say you stole the White Seal?" he asked.

"Nay, Prince, the truth is that Bes bought it--in a certain fashion--and I used it. Perhaps it is well that you should know no more at present."

"Perhaps," he answered, and we parted, for he had much to do.

That afternoon the Council met again. At it I gave over the gold and by help of it all was arranged. Within a week ten thousand armed men would be in Memphis and a hundred ships with their crews upon the Nile; also a great army would be gathering in Upper Egypt, officered for the most part by Greeks skilled in war. The Greek cities too at the mouths of the Nile would be ready to revolt, or so some of their citizens declared, for they hated the Great King bitterly and longed to cast off his yoke.

For my part, I received the command of the bodyguard of Peroa in which were many Greeks, and a generalship in the army; while to Bes, at my prayer, was given the freedom of the land which he accepted with a smile, he who was a king in his own country.

At length all was finished and I went out into the palace garden to rest myself before I rode into the desert to see my great uncle, the holy Tanofir. I was alone, for Bes had gone to bring our horses on which we were to ride, and sat myself down beneath a palm-tree, thinking of the great adventure on which we had entered with a merry heart, for I loved adventures.

Next I thought of Amada and was less merry. Then I looked up and lo! she stood before me, unaccompanied and wearing the dress, not of a priestess, but of an Egyptian lady with the little circlet of her rank upon her hair. I rose and bowed to her and we began to walk together beneath the palms, my heart beating hard within me, for I knew that my

hour had come to speak.

Yet it was she who spoke the first, saying,

"I hear that you have been playing a high part, Shabaka, and doing great things for Egypt."

"For Egypt and for you who are Egypt," I answered.

"So I should have been called in the old days, Cousin, because of my blood and the rank it gives, though now I am but as any other lady of the land."

"And so you shall be called in days to come, Amada, if my sword and wit can win their way."

"How so, Cousin, seeing that you have promised certain things to my uncle Peroa and his son?"

"I have promised those things, Amada, and I will abide by my promise; but the gods are above all, and who knows what they may decree?"

"Yes, Cousin, the gods are above all, and in their hands we will let these matters rest, provoking them in no manner and least of all by treachery to our oaths."

We walked for a little way in silence. Then I spoke.

"Amada, there are more things than thrones in the world."

"Yes, Cousin, there is that in which all thrones end--death, which it seems we court."

"And, Amada, there is that in which all thrones begin--love, which I court from you."

"I have known it long," she said, considering me gravely, "and been grateful to you who are more to me than any man has been or ever will be. But, Shabaka, I am a priestess bound to set the holy One I serve above a mortal."

"That holy One was wed and bore a child, Amada, who avenged his father, as I trust that we shall avenge Egypt. Therefore she looks with a kind eye upon wives and mothers. Also you have not taken your final vows and can be absolved."

"Yes," she said softly.

"Then, Amada, will you give yourself into my keeping?"

"I think so, Shabaka, though it has been in my mind for long, as you know well, to give myself only to learning and the service of the

heavenly Lady. My heart calls me to you, it is true, day and night it calls, how loudly I will not tell; yet I would not yield myself to that alone. But Egypt calls me also, since I have been shown in a dream while I watched in the sanctuary, that you are the only man who can free her, and I think that this dream came from on high. Therefore I will give myself, but not yet."

"Not yet," I said dismayed. "When?"

"When I have been absolved from my vows, which must be done on the night of the next new moon, which is twenty-seven days from this. Then, if nothing comes between us during those twenty-seven days, it shall be announced that the Royal Lady of Egypt is to wed the noble Shabaka."

"Twenty-seven days! In such times much may happen in them, Amada. Still, except death, what can come between us?"

"I know of nothing, Shabaka, whose past is shadowless as the noon."

"Or I either," I replied.

Now we were standing in the clear sunlight, but as I said the words a wind stirred the palm-trees and the shadow from one of them fell full upon me, and she who was very quick, noted it.

"Some might take that for an omen," she said with a little laugh,

pointing to the line of the shadow. "Oh! Shabaka, if you have aught to confess, say it now and I will forgive it. But do not leave me to discover it afterwards when I may not forgive. Perchance during your journeyings in the East----"

"Nothing, nothing," I exclaimed joyfully, who during all that time had scarcely spoken to a youthful woman.

"I am glad that nothing happened in the East that could separate us, Shabaka, though in truth my thought was not your own, for there are more things than women in the world. Only it seems strange to me that you should return to Egypt laden with such priceless gifts from him who is Egypt's greatest enemy."

"Have I not told you that I put my country before myself? Those gifts were won fairly in a wager, Amada, whereof you heard the story but last night. Moreover you know the purpose to which they are to be put," I replied indignantly.

"Yes, I know and now I am sure. Be not angry, Shabaka, with her who loves you truly and hopes ere long to call you husband. But till that day take it not amiss if I keep somewhat aloof from you, who must break with the past and learn to face a future of which I did not dream."

For the rest she stretched out her hand and I kissed it, for while she was still a priestess her lips she would not suffer me to touch. Another

moment and smiling happily, she had glided away, leaving me alone in the garden.

Then it was for the first time that I bethought me of the warnings of Bes and remembered that it was I, not he, who had told the Great King the name of the most beautiful woman in Egypt, although in all innocence. Yes, I remembered, and felt as if all the shadows on the earth had wrapped me round. I thought of finding her, but she had gone whither I knew not in that great palace. So I determined that the next time we were alone I would tell her of the matter, explaining all, and with this thought I comforted myself who did not know that until many days were past we should be alone no more.

After this I went home and told my mother all my joy, for in truth there was no happier man in Egypt. She listened, then answered, smiling a little.

"When your father wished to take me to wife, Shabaka, it was not my hand that I gave him to kiss, and as you know, I too have the blood of kings in me. But then I was not a priestess of Isis, so doubtless all is well. Only in twenty-seven days much may happen, as you said to Amada. Now I wonder why did she----? Well, no matter, since priestesses are not like other women who only think of the man they have won and of naught before or after. The blessing of the gods and mine be on you both, my son," and she went away to attend to her household matters.

As we rode to Sekera to find the holy Tanofir I told Bes also, adding that I had forgotten to reveal that it was I who had spoken Amada's name to the king, but that I intended to do so ere long.

Bes rolled his eyes and answered,

"If I were you, Master, as I had forgotten, I should continue to forget, for what is welcome in one hour is not always welcome in another. Why speak of the matter at all, which is one hard to explain to a woman, however wise and royal? I have already said that I spoke the name to the King and that you were brought from the boat to say whether I was noted for my truthfulness. Is not that enough?"

While I considered, Bes went on,

"You may remember, Master, that when I told, well--the truth about this story, the lady Amada asked earnestly that I should be scourged, even to the bones. Now if you should tell another truth which will make mine dull as tarnished silver, she will not leave me even my bones, for I shall be proved a liar, and what will happen to you I am sure I do not know. And, Master, as I am no longer a slave here in Egypt, to say nothing of what I may be elsewhere, I have no fancy for scourgings, who may not kiss the hand that smites me as you can."

"But, Bes," I said, "what is, is and may always be learned in this way or in that."

"Master, if what is were always learned, I think the world would fall to pieces, or at least there would be no men left on it. Why should this matter be learned? It is known to you and me alone, leaving out the Great King who probably has forgotten as he was drunk at the time. Oh! Master, when you have neither bow nor spear at hand, it is not wise to kick a sleeping lion in the stomach, for then he will remember its emptiness and sup off you. Beside, when first I told you that tale I made a mistake. I did tell the Great King, as I now remember quite clearly, that the beautiful lady was named Amada, and he only sent for you to ask if I spoke the truth."

"Bes," I exclaimed, "you worshippers of the Grasshopper wear virtue easily."

"Easily as an old sandal, Master, or rather not at all, since the Grasshopper has need of none. For ages they have studied the ways of those who worship the gods of Egypt, and from them have learned----"

"What?"

"Amongst other things, Master, that woman, being modest, is shocked at the sight of the naked Truth."