

CHAPTER XI. THE HOLY TANOFIR

We entered the City of Graves that is called Sekera. In the centre towered pyramids that hid the bones of ancient and forgotten kings, and everywhere around upon the desert sands was street upon street of monuments, but save for a priest or two hurrying to patter his paid office in the funeral chapels of the departed, never a living man. Bes looked about him and sniffed with his wide nostrils.

"Is there not death enough in the world, Master," he asked, "that the living should wish to proclaim it in this fashion, rolling it on their tongues like a morsel they are loth to swallow, because it tastes so good? Oh! what a waste is here. All these have had their day and yet they need houses and pyramids and painted chambers in which to sleep, whereas if they believed the faith they practised, they would have been content to give their bones to feed the earth they fed on, and fill heaven with their souls."

"Do your people thus, Bes?"

"For the most part, Master. Our dead kings and great ones we enclose in pillars of crystal, but we do this that they may serve a double purpose. One is that the pillars may support the roof of their successors, and the other, that those who inherit their goods may please themselves by reflecting how much handsomer they are than those who went before them. For no mummy looks really nice, Master, at least with its wrappings off,

and our kings are put naked into the crystal."

"And what becomes of the rest, Bes?"

"Their bodies go to the earth or the water and the Grasshopper carries off their souls to--where, Master?"

"I do not know, Bes."

"No, Master, no one knows, except the lady Amada and perhaps the holy Tanofir. Here I think is the entrance to his hole," and he pulled up his beast with a jerk at what looked like the doorway of a tomb.

Apparently we were expected, for a tall and proud-looking girl clad in white and with extraordinarily dark eyes, appeared in the doorway and asked in a soft voice if we were the noble Shabaka and Bes, his slave.

"I am Shabaka," I answered, "and this is Bes, who is not my slave but a free citizen of Egypt."

The girl contemplated the dwarf with her big eyes, then said,

"And other things, I think."

"What things?" inquired Bes with interest, as he stared at this beautiful lady.

"A very brave and clever man and one perhaps who is more than he seems to be?"

"Who has been telling you about me?" exclaimed Bes anxiously.

"No one, O Bes, at least not that I can remember."

"Not that you can remember! Then who and what are you who learn things you know not how?"

"I am named Karema and desert-bred, and my office is that of Cup to the holy Tanofir."

"If hermits drink from such a cup I shall turn hermit," said Bes, laughing. "But how can a woman be a man's cup and what kind of a wine does he drink from her?"

"The wine of wisdom, O Bes," she replied colouring a little, for like many Arabs of high blood she was very fair in hue.

"Wine of wisdom," said Bes. "From such cups most drink the wine of folly, or sometimes of madness."

"The holy Tanofir awaits you," she interrupted, and turning, entered the doorway.

A little way down the passage was a niche in which stood three lamps ready lighted. One of these she took and gave the others to us. Then we followed her down a steep incline of many steps, till at length we found ourselves in a hot and enormous hall hewn from the living rock and filled with blackness.

"What is this place?" said Bes, who looked frightened, and although he spoke in a low whisper, our guide overheard him and turning, answered,

"This is the burial place of the Apis bulls. See, here lies the last, not yet closed in," and holding up her lamp she revealed a mighty sarcophagus of black granite set in a niche of the mausoleum.

"So they make mummies of bulls as well as of men," groaned Bes. "Oh! what a land. But when I have seen the holy Tanofir it was in a brick cell beneath the sky."

"Doubtless that was at night, O Bes," answered Karema, "for in such a house he sleeps, spending his days in the Apis tomb, because of all the evil that is worked beneath the sun."

"Hump," said Bes, "I should have thought that more was worked beneath the moon, but doubtless the holy Tanofir knows better, or being asleep does not mind."

Now in front of each of the walled-up niches was a little chapel, and at the fourth of these whence a light came, the maiden stopped, saying,

"Enter. Here dwells the holy Tanofir. He tended this god during its life-days in his youth, and now that the god is dead he prays above its bones."

"Prays to the bones of a dead bull in the dark! Well, give me a live grasshopper in the light; he is more cheerful," muttered Bes.

"O Dwarf," cried a deep and resounding voice from within the chapel, "talk no more of things you do not understand. I do not pray to the bones of a dead bull, as you in your ignorance suppose. I pray to the spirit whereof this sacred beast was but one of the fleshly symbols, which in this haunted place you will do well not to offend."

Then for once I saw Bes grow afraid, for his great jaw dropped and he trembled.

"Master," he said to me, "when next you visit tombs where maidens look into your heart and hermits hear your very thoughts, I pray you leave me behind. The holy Tanofir I love, if from afar, but I like not his house, or his----" Here he looked at Karema who was regarding him with a sweet smile over the lamp flame, and added, "There is something the matter with me, Master; I cannot even lie."

"Cease from talking follies, O Shabaka and Bes, and enter," said the tremendous voice from within.

So we entered and saw a strange sight. Against the back wall of the chapel which was lit with lamps, stood a life-sized statue of Maat, goddess of Law and Truth, fashioned of alabaster. On her head was a tall feather, her hair was covered with a wig, on her neck lay a collar of blue stones; on her arms and wrists were bracelets of gold. A tight robe draped her body. In her right hand that hung down by her side, she held the looped Cross of Life, and in her left which was advanced, a long, lotus-headed sceptre, while her painted eyes stared fixedly at the darkness. Crouched upon the ground, at the feet of the statue, scribe fashion, sat my great-uncle Tanofir, a very aged man with sightless eyes and long hands, so thin that one might see through them against the lamp-flame. His head was shaven, his beard was long and white; white too was his robe. In front of him was a low altar, on which stood a shallow silver vessel filled with pure water, and on either side of it a burning lamp.

We knelt down before him, or rather I knelt, for Bes threw himself flat upon his face.

"Am I the King of kings whom you have so lately visited, that you should prostrate yourselves before me?" said Tanofir in his great voice, which, coming from so frail and aged a man seemed most unnatural. "Or is it to the goddess of Truth beyond that you bow yourselves? If so, that is

well, since one, if not both of you, greatly needs her pardon and her help. Or is it to the sleeping god beyond who holds the whole world on his horns? Or is it to the darkness of this hallowed place which causes you to remember the nearness of the awaiting tomb?"

"Nay, my Uncle," I said, "we would greet you, no more, who are so worthy of our veneration, seeing we believe, both of us, that you saved us yonder in the East, from that tomb of which you speak, or rather from the jaws of lions or a cruel death by torments."

"Perchance I did, I or the gods of which I am the instrument. At least I remember that I sent you certain messages in answer to a prayer for help that reached me, here in my darkness. For know that since we parted I have gone quite blind so that I must use this maiden's eyes to read what is written in yonder divining-cup. Well, it makes the darkness of this sepulchre easier to bear and prepares me for my own. 'Tis full a hundred and twenty years since first I looked upon the light, and now the time of sleep draws near. Come hither, my nephew, and kiss me on the brow, remembering in your strength that a day will dawn when as I am, so shall you be, if the gods spare you so long."

So I kissed him, not without fear, for the old man was unearthly. Then he sent Karema from the place and bade me tell him my story, which I did. Why he did this I cannot say, since he seemed to know it already and once or twice corrected me in certain matters that I had forgotten, for instance as to the exact words that I had used to the Great King in

my rage and as to the fashion in which I was tied in the boat. When I had done, he said,

"So you gave the name of Amada to the Great King, did you? Well, you could have done nothing else if you wished to go on living, and therefore cannot be blamed. Yet before all is finished I think it will bring you into trouble, Shabaka, since among many gifts, the gods did not give that of reason to women. If so, bear it, since it is better to have trouble and be alive than to have none and be dead, that is, for those whose work is still to do in the world. And you, or rather Bes, stole the White Signet of signets of which, although it is so simple and ancient, there is not the like for power in the whole world. That was well done since it will be useful for a while. And now Peroa has determined to rebel against the King, which also is well done. Oh! trouble not to tell me of that business for I know all. But what would you learn of me, Shabaka?"

"I am instructed to learn from you the end of these great matters, my Uncle."

"Are you mad, Shabaka, that you should think me a god who can read the future?"

"Not at all, my Uncle, who know that you can if you will."

"Call the maiden," he said.

So Bes went out and brought her in.

"Be seated, Karema, there in front of the altar, and look into my eyes."

She obeyed and presently seemed to go to sleep for her head nodded. Then he said,

"Wake, woman, look into the water in the bowl upon the altar and tell me what you see."

She appeared to wake, though I perceived that this was not really so, for she seemed a different woman with a fixed face that frightened me, and wide and frozen eyes. She stared into the silver bowl, then spoke in a new voice, as though some spirit used her tongue.

"I see myself crowned a queen in a land I hate," she said coldly, a saying at which I gasped. "I am seated on a throne beside yonder dwarf," a saying at which Bes gasped. "Although so hideous, this dwarf is a great man with a good heart, a cunning mind and the courage of a lion. Also his blood is royal."

Here Bes rolled his eyes and smiled, but Tanofir did not seem in the least astonished, and said,

"Much of this is known to me and the rest can be guessed. Pass on to

what will happen in Egypt, before the spirit leaves you."

"There will be war in Egypt," she answered. "I see fightings; Shabaka and others lead the Egyptians. The Easterns are driven away or slain. Peroa rules as Pharaoh, I see him on his throne. Shabaka is driven away in his turn, I see him travelling south with the dwarf and with myself, looking very sad. Time passes. I see the moons float by; I see messengers reach Shabaka, sent by Peroa and you O holy Tanofir; they tell of trouble in Egypt. I see Shabaka and the dwarf coming north at the head of a great army of black men armed with bows. With them I come rejoicing, for my heart seems to shine. He reaches a temple on the Nile about which is camped another great army, a countless army of Easterns under the command of the King of kings. Shabaka and the dwarf give battle to that army and the fray is desperate. They destroy it, they drive it into the Nile; the Nile runs red with blood. The Great King falls, an arrow from the bow of Shabaka is in his heart. He enters the temple, a conqueror, and there lies Peroa, dying or dead. A veiled priestess is there before an image, I cannot see her face. Shabaka looks on her. She stretches out her arms to him, her eyes burn with woman's love, her breast heaves, and above the image frowns and threatens. All is done, for Tanofir, Master of spirits, you die, yonder in the temple on the Nile, and therefore I can see no more. The power that comes through you, has left me."

Then once more she became as a woman asleep.

"You have heard, Shabaka and Bes," said Tanofir quietly and stroking his long white beard, "and what that maiden seemed to read in the water you may believe or disbelieve as you will."

"What do you believe, O holy Tanofir?" I asked.

"The only part of the story whereof I am sure," he replied, evading a direct answer, "is that which said that I shall die, and that when I am dead I shall no longer be able to cause the maiden Karema to see visions. For the rest I do not know. These things may happen or they may not. But," he added with a note of warning in his voice, "whether they happen or not, my counsel to you both is that you say nothing of them beforehand."

"What then shall we report to those who bid me seek the oracle of your wisdom, O Tanofir?"

"You can tell them that my wisdom declared that the omens were mixed with good and evil, but that time would show the truth. Hush now, the maiden is about to awake and must not be frightened. Also it is time for me to be led from this sepulchre to where I sleep, for I think that Ra has set and I am weary. Oh! Shabaka, why do you seek to peer into the future, which from day to day will unroll itself as does a scroll? Be content with the present, man, and take what Fate gives you of good or ill, not seeking to learn what offerings he hides beneath his robe in the days and the years and the centuries to come."

"Yet you have sought to learn those things, O Tanofir, and not in vain."

"Aye and what have they made of me? A blind old hermit weighed down with the weight of years and holding in my fingers but some few threads that with pain and grief I have plucked from the fringe of Wisdom's robe. Be warned by me, Nephew. While you are a man, live the life of a man, and when you become a spirit, live the life of a spirit. But do not seek to mix the two together like oil and wine, and thus spoil both. I am glad to learn, O Bes, that you are going to make a king's, or a slave's wife, whichever it may be, of this maiden, seeing that I love her well and hold this trade unwholesome for her. She will be better bearing babes than reading visions in a diviner's cup, and I will pray the gods that they may not be dwarfs as you are, but take on the likeness of their mother, who tells me that she is fair. Hush! she stirs.

"Karema, are you awake? Good. Then lead me from the sepulchre, that I may make my evening prayer beneath the stars. Go, Shabaka and Bes, you are brave men, both of you, and I am glad to have the one for nephew and the other for pupil. My greetings to your mother, Tiu. She is a good woman and a true, one to whom you will do well to hearken. To the lady Amada also, and bid her study her beauteous face in a mirror and not be holy overmuch, since too great holiness often thwarts itself and ends in trouble for the unholy flesh. Still she loves pearls like other women, does she not, and even the statue of Isis likes to be adorned. As for you, Bes, though I think that is not your name, do not lie except when

you are obliged, for jugglers who play with too many knives are apt to cut their fingers. Also give no more evil counsel to your Master on matters that have to do with woman. Now farewell. Let me hear how fortune favours you from time to time, Shabaka, for you take part in a great game, such as I loved in my youth before I became a holy hermit. Oh! if they had listened to me, things would have been different in Egypt to-day. But it was written otherwise, and as ever, women were the scribes. Good night, good night, good night! I am glad that my thought reached you yonder in the East, and taught you what to say and do. It is well to be wise sometimes, for others' sake, but not for our own, oh! not for our own."

"Master," said Bes as we ambled homewards beneath the stars, "the holy Tanofir is a man for thought to feed on, since having climbed to the topmost peak of holiness, he does not seem to like its cold air and warns off those who would follow in his footsteps."

"Then he might have spared himself the pains in your case, Bes, or in my own for that matter, since we shall never come so high."

"No, Master, and I am glad to have his leave to stay lower down, since that hot place of dead bulls is not one which I wish to inhabit in my age, making use of a maiden to stare into a pot of water, and there read marvels, which I could invent better for myself after a jug or two of

wine. Oh! the holy Tanofir is quite right. If these things are going to happen let them happen, for we cannot change them by knowing of them beforehand. Who wishes to know, Master, if his throat will be cut?"

"Or that he will be married," I suggested.

"Just so, Master, seeing that such prophecies end in becoming truths because we make them true, feeling that we must. Thus, now I must marry yonder Karema if she will marry me for fear lest I should prove the holy Tanofir to be what he called me--a liar."

I laughed and then asked Bes if he had taken note of what the seeress said of our flight south and our return thence with a great army of black men armed with bows.

"Yes, Master," he answered gravely, "and I think this army can be none other than that of the Ethiopians of whom by right I am the King. This very night I send messengers to tell those who rule in my place that I still live and am changing my mind on the matter of marriage. Also that if I do change it I may return to them, the wisest man who ever wore the crown of Ethiopia, having journeyed all about the world and collected much knowledge."

"Perhaps, Bes, those who rule in your place may not wish to give it up to you. Perhaps they will kill you."

"Have no fear, Master; as I have told you, the Ethiopians are a faithful people. Moreover they know that such a deed would bring the curse of the Grasshopper on them, since then the locusts would appear and eat up all their land, and when they were starving their enemies would attack them. Lastly they are a very tall folk and simple-minded and would not wish to miss the chance of being ruled over by the wisest dwarf in all the world, if only because it would be something new to them, Master."

Again I laughed thinking that Bes was jesting according to his fashion. But when that night, chancing to go round the corner of the house, I came upon him with a circlet of feathers round his head and his big bow in his hand, addressing three great black men who knelt before him as though he were a god, I changed my mind. As I withdrew he caught sight of me and said,

"I pray you, my lord Shabaka, stay one moment." Then he spoke to the three men in his own language, translating sentence by sentence to me what he said to them. Briefly it was this:--

"Say to the Lords and Councillors of the Ancient Kingdom that I, the Karoon" (for such it seemed was his title) "have a friend named the lord Shabaka, he whom you see before you, who again and again has saved my life, nursing me in his arms as a mother nurses her babe, and who is, after me, the bravest and the wisest man in all the world. Say to them that if indeed I double myself by marriage and return having fulfilled the law, I will beg this mighty prince to accompany me, and that if he

consents that will be the most joyful day which the Ethiopians have seen for a thousand years, since he will teach them wisdom and lead their armies in great and glorious battles. Let the priests of the Grasshopper pray therefore that he may consent to do so. Now salute the mighty lord Shabaka who can send one arrow through all three of you and two more behind, and depart, tarrying not day or night till you reach the land of Ethiopia. Then when you have delivered the message of Karoon to the Captains and the Councillors, return, or let others return and seek me out wherever I may be, bringing of the gold of Ethiopia and other gifts, together with their answer, seeing that I and the lord Shabaka who have the world beneath our feet, will not come to a land where we are not welcome."

So these great men saluted me as though I were the King of kings himself, after which they rubbed their foreheads in the dust before Bes, said something which I did not understand, leapt to their feet, crying "Karoon" and sprang away into the night.

"It is good to have been a slave, Master," said Bes when they had gone, "since it teaches one that it is even better to be a king, at least sometimes."

Here I may add that during the days which followed Bes was often absent. When I asked him where he had gone, he would answer, to drink in the wisdom of the holy Tanofir by help of a certain silver vessel that the maiden Karema held to his lips. From all of which I gathered that he was

wooing the lady who had called herself the Cup of Tanofir, and wondered how the business went, though as he said no more I did not ask him.

Indeed I had little time to talk with Bes about such light matters, since things moved apace in Memphis. Within six days all the great lords left in Upper Egypt were sworn to the revolt under the leadership of Peroa, and hour by hour their vassals or hired mercenaries flowed into the city. These it was my duty to weld into an army, and at this task I toiled without cease, separating them into regiments and drilling them, also arranging for the arming and victualling of the boats of war. Then news came that Idernes was advancing from Sais with a great force of Easterns, all the garrison of Lower Egypt indeed, as his messengers said, to answer the summons conveyed to him under the private Seal of seals.

Of Amada during this time I saw little, only meeting her now and again at the table of Peroa, or elsewhere in public. For the rest it pleased her to keep away from me. Once or twice I tried to find her alone, only to discover that she was engaged in the service of the goddess. Once, too, as she left Peroa's table, I whispered into her ear that I wished to speak with her. But she shook her head, saying,

"After the new moon, Shabaka. Then you shall speak with me as much as you wish."

Thus it came about that never could I find opportunity to tell her of

that matter of what had happened at the court of the Great King. Still every morning she sent me some token, flowers or trifling gifts, and once a ring that must have belonged to her forefathers, since on its bezel was engraved the royal uræus, together with the signs of long life and health, which ring I wore hung about my neck but not upon my finger, fearing lest that emblem of royalty might offend Peroa or some of his House, if they chanced to see it. So in answer I also sent her flowers and other gifts, and for the rest was content to wait.

All of which things my mother noted with a smile, saying that the lady Amada showed a wonderful discretion, such as any man would value in a wife of so much beauty, which also must be most pleasing to her mistress, the goddess Isis. To this I answered that I valued it less as a lover than I might do as a husband. My mother smiled again and spoke of something else.

Thus things went on while the storm-clouds gathered over Egypt.

One night I could not sleep. It was that of the new moon and I knew that during those hours of darkness, before the solemn conclave of the high priests, with pomp and ceremony in the sanctuary of the temple, Amada had undergone absolution of her vows to Isis and been given liberty to wed as other women do. Indeed my mother, in virtue of her rank as a Singer of Amen, had been present at the rite, and returning, told me all that happened.

She described how Amada had appeared, clad as a priestess, how she had put up her prayer to the four high priests seated in state, demanding to be loosed from her vow "for the sake of her heart and of Egypt."

Then one of the high priests, he of Amen, I think, as the chief of them all, had advanced to the statue of the goddess Isis and whispered the prayer to it, whereon after a pause the goddess nodded thrice in the sight of all present, thereby signifying her assent. This done the high priest returned and proclaimed the absolution in the ancient words "for the sake of the suppliant's heart and of Egypt" and with it the blessing of the goddess on her union, adding, however, the formula, "at thy prayer, daughter and spouse, I, the goddess Isis, cut the rope that binds thee to me on earth. Yet if thou should'st tie it again, know that it may never more be severed, for if thou strivest so to do, it shall strangle thee in whatever shape thou livest on the earth throughout the generations, and with thee the man thou choosest and those who give thee to him. Thus saith Isis the Queen of Heaven."

"What does that mean?" I asked my mother.

"It means, my son, that if, having broken her vows to Isis, a woman should repeat them and once more enter the service of the goddess, and then for the second time seek to break them, she and the man for whom she did this thing would be like flies in a spider's web, and that not only in this life, but in any other that may be given to them in the world."

"It seems that Isis has a long arm," I said.

"Without doubt a very long arm, my son, since Isis, by whatever name she is called, is a power that does not die or forget."

"Well, Mother, in this case she can have no reason to remember, since never again will Amada be her priestess."

"I think not, Shabaka. Yet who can be sure of what a woman will or will not do, now or hereafter? For my part I am glad that I have served Amen and not Isis, and that after I was wed."