

CHAPTER XIII. AMADA RETURNS TO ISIS

We fought a very terrible fight that evening there by the banks of Nile. Our position was good, but we were outnumbered by four or five to one, and the Easterns and their mercenaries were mad at the death of the Satrap by my hand. Time upon time they came on furiously, charging up the slope like wild bulls. For the most part we relied upon our archers to drive them back, since our half-trained troops could scarcely hope to stand against the onset of veterans disciplined in war. So taking cover behind the rocks we rained arrows on them, shooting the horses in the chariots, and when these were down, pouring our shafts upon the footmen behind. Myself I took my great black bow and drew it thrice, and each time I saw a noble fall, for no mail could withstand the arrows which it sent, and of that art I was a master. None in Egypt could shoot so far or so straight as I did, save perhaps Peroa himself. I had no time to do more since always I must be moving up and down the line encouraging my men.

Three times we drove them back, after which they grew cunning. Ceasing from a direct onslaught and keeping what remained of their chariots in reserve, they sent one body of men to climb along the slope of the hill where the rocks gave them cover from our arrows, and another to creep through the reeds and growing crops upon the bank of the river where we could not see to shoot them well, although the slingers in the ships did them some damage.

Thus they attacked us on either flank, and while we were thus engaged their centre made a charge. Then came the bitterest of the fighting for now the bows were useless, and it was sword against sword and spear against spear. Once we broke and I thought that they were through. But I led a charge against them and drove them back a little way. Still the issue was doubtful till I saw Bes rush past me grinning and leaping, and with him a small body of Greeks whom we held in reserve, and I think that the sight of the terrible dwarf whom they thought a devil, frightened the Easterns more than did the Greeks.

At any rate, shouting out something about an evil spirit whom the Egyptians worshipped, by which I suppose they meant that god after whom Bes was named, they retreated, leaving many dead but taking their wounded with them, for they were unbroken.

At the foot of the slope they reformed and took counsel, then sat down out of bowshot as though to rest. Now I guessed their plan. It was to wait till night closed in, which would be soon for the sun was sinking, and then, when we could not see to shoot, either rush through us by the weight of numbers, or march back to where the cliffs were lower and climb them, thus passing us on the higher open land.

Now we also took counsel, though little came of it, since we did not know what to do. We were too few to attack so great an army, nor if we climbed the cliffs could we hope to withstand them in the desert sands, or to hold our own against them if they charged in the dark. If this

happened it seemed that all we could do would be to fight as long as we could, after which the survivors of us must take refuge on our boats. So it came to this, that we should lose the battle and the greater part of the Easterns would win back to Sais, unless indeed the main army under Peroa came to our aid.

Whilst we talked I caused the wounded to be carried to the ships before it grew too dark to move them. Bes went with them. Presently he returned, running swiftly.

"Master," he said, "the evening wind is blowing strong and stirs the sand, but from a mast-head through it I caught sight of Peroa's banners. The army comes round the bend of the river not four furlongs away. Now charge and those Easterns will be caught between the hammer and the stone, for while they are meeting us they will not look behind."

So I went down the lines of our little force telling them the good news and showing them my plan. They listened and understood. We formed up, those who were left of us, not more than a thousand men perhaps, and advanced. The Easterns laughed when they saw us coming down the slope, for they thought that we were mad and that they would kill us every one, believing as they did that Peroa had no other army. When we were within bowshot we began to shoot, though sparingly, for but few arrows were left. Galled by our archery they marshalled their ranks to charge us again. With a shout we leapt forward to meet them, for now from the higher ground I saw the chariots of Peroa rushing to our rescue.

We met, we fought. Surely there had been no such fighting since the days of Thotmes and Rameses the Great. Still they drove us back till unseen and unsuspected the chariots and the footmen of Peroa broke on them from behind, broke on them like a desert storm. They gave, they fled this way and that, some to the banks of the Nile, some to the hills. By the light of the setting sun we finished it and ere the darkness closed in the Great King's army was destroyed, save for the fugitives whom we hunted down next day.

Yes, in that battle perished ten thousand of the Easterns and their mercenaries, and upon its field at dawn we crowned Peroa Pharaoh of Egypt, and he named me the chief general of his army. There, too, fell over a thousand of my men and among them those six hunters whom I had won in the wager with the Great King and brought with me from the East. Throughout the fray they served me as a bodyguard, fighting furiously, who knew that they could hope for no mercy from their own people. One by one they were slain, the last two of them in the charge at sunset. Well, they were brave and faithful to me, so peace be on their spirits. Better to die thus than in the den of lions.

In triumph we returned to Memphis, I bringing in the rear-guard and the spoils. Before Pharaoh and I parted a messenger brought me more good news. Sure tidings had come that the King of kings had been driven by

revolt in his dominions to embark upon a mighty war with Syria, Greece and Cyprus and other half-conquered countries, in which, doubtless by agreement, the fires of insurrection had suddenly burned up. Also already Peroa's messengers had departed to tell them of what was passing on the Nile.

"If this be true," said Peroa when he had heard all, "the Great King will have no new army to spare for Egypt."

"It is so, Pharaoh," I answered. "Yet I think he will conquer in this great war and that within two years you must be prepared to meet him face to face."

"Two years are long, Shabaka, and in them, by your help, much may be done."

But as it chanced he was destined to be robbed of that help, and this by the work of Woman the destroyer.

It happened thus. Amidst great rejoicings Pharaoh reached Memphis and in the vast temple of Amen laid down our spoils in the presence of the god, thousands of right hands hewn from the fallen, thousands of swords and other weapons and tens of chariots, together with much treasure of which a portion was given to the god. The high priests blessed us in the name of Amen and of the other gods; the people blessed us and threw flowers in our path; all the land rejoiced because once more it was free.

There too that day in the temple with ancient form and ceremonial Péroa was crowned Pharaoh of Egypt. Sceptres and jewels that had been hid for generations were brought out by those who knew the secret of their hiding-places; the crowns that had been worn by old Pharaohs, were set upon his head; yes, the double crown of the Upper and the Lower Land. Thus in a Memphis mad with joy at the casting off of the foreign yoke, he was anointed the first of a new dynasty, and with him his queen.

I too received honours, for the story of the slaying of Idernes at my hands and of how I held the pass had gone abroad, so that next to Pharaoh, I was looked upon as the greatest man in Egypt. Nor was Bes forgotten, since many of the common people thought that he was a spirit in the form of a dwarf whom the gods had sent to aid us with his strength and cunning. Indeed at the close of the ceremony voices cried out in the multitude of watchers, demanding that I who was to marry the Royal Lady of Egypt should be named next in succession to the throne.

The Pharaoh heard and glanced first at his son and then at me, doubtfully, whereon, covered with confusion, I slipped away.

The portico of the temple was deserted, since all, even the guards, had crowded into the vast court to watch the coronation. Only in the shadow, seated against the pedestal of one of the two colossal statues in front of the outer pylon gate and looking very small beneath its greatness, was a man wrapped in a dark cloak whom noting vaguely I took to be a

beggar. As I passed him, he plucked at my robe, and I stopped to search for something to give to him but could find naught.

"I have nothing, Father," I said laughing, "except the gold hilt of my sword."

"Do not part with that, Son," answered a deep voice, "for I think you will need it before all is over."

Then while I stared at him he threw back his hood and I saw that beneath was the ancient withered face and the long white beard of my great-uncle, the holy Tanofir, the hermit and magician.

"Great things happen yonder, Shabaka. So great that I have come from my sepulchre to see, or rather, being blind, to listen, who thrice in my life days have known the like before," and he pointed to the glittering throng in the court within. "Yes," he went on, "I have seen Pharaohs crowned and Pharaohs die--one of them at the hand of a conqueror. What will happen to this Pharaoh, think you, Shabaka?"

"You should be better able to answer that question than I, who am no prophet, my Uncle."

"How, my Nephew, seeing that your dwarf has borne away my magic Cup? I do not grudge her to him for he is a brave dwarf and clever, who may yet prove a good prop to you, as he has done before, and to Egypt also. But

she has gone and the new vessel is not yet shaped to my liking. So how can I answer?"

"Out of the store of wisdom gathered in your breast."

"So! my Nephew. Well, my store of wisdom tells me that feasts are sometimes followed by want and rejoicings by sorrow and victories by defeat, and splendid sins by repentance and slow climbing back to good again. Also that you will soon take a long journey. Where is the Royal Lady Amada? I did not hear her step among those who passed in to the Crowning. But even my hearing has grown somewhat weak of late, except in the silence of the night, Shabaka."

"I do not know, my Uncle, who have only been in Memphis one hour. But what do you mean? Doubtless she prepares herself for the feast where I shall meet her."

"Doubtless. Tell me, what passes at the temple of Isis? As I crept past the pylon feeling my way with my beggar's staff, I thought--but how can you know who have only been in Memphis an hour? Yet surely I heard voices just now calling out that you, Shabaka, should be named as the next successor to the throne of Egypt. Was it so?"

"Yes, holy Tanofir. That is why I have left who was vexed and am sworn to seek no such honour, which indeed I do not desire."

"Just so, Nephew. Yet gifts have a way of coming to those who do not desire them and the last vision that I saw before my Cup left me, or rather that she saw, was of you wearing the Double Crown. She said that you looked very well in it, Shabaka. But now begone, for hark, here comes the procession with the new-anointed Pharaoh whose royal robe you won for him yonder in the pass, when you smote down Idernes and held his legions. Oh! it was well done and my new Cup, though faulty, was good enough to show me all. I felt proud of you, Shabaka, but begone, begone! 'A gift for the poor old beggar! A gift, my lords, for the poor blind beggar who has had none since the last Pharaoh was crowned in Egypt and finds it hard to live on memories!'"

At our house I found my mother just returned from the Coronation, but Bes I did not find and guessed that he had slipped away to meet his new-made wife, Karema. My mother embraced me and blessed me, making much of me and my deeds in the battle; also she doctored such small hurts as I had. I put the matter by as shortly as I could and asked her if she had seen aught of Amada. She answered that she had neither seen nor heard of her which I was sure she thought strange, as she began to talk quickly of other things. I said to her what I had said to the holy Tanofir, that doubtless she was making ready for the feast since I could not find her at the Crowning.

"Or saying good-bye to the goddess," answered my mother nodding, "since

there are some who find it even harder to fall from heaven to earth than to climb from earth to heaven, and after all you are but a man, my son."

Then she slipped away to attire herself, leaving me wondering, because my mother was shrewd and never spoke at random.

There was the holy Tanofir, too, with his talk about the temple of Isis, and he also did not speak at random. Oh! now I felt as I had done when the shadow of the palm-tree fell on me yonder in the palace garden.

The mood passed for my blood still tingled with the glory of that great fight, and my heart shut its doors to sadness, knowing as I did, that I was the most praised man in Memphis that day. Indeed had I not, I should have learned it when with my mother I entered the great banqueting-hall of the palace somewhat late, for she was long in making ready.

The first thing I saw there was Bes gorgeously arrayed in Eastern silks that he had plundered from the Satrap's tent, standing on a table so that all might see and hear him, and holding aloft in one hand the grisly head of Idernes and in the other that of the hawk-eyed noble whom he had slain, while in his thick, guttural voice he told the tale of that great fray. Catching sight of me, he called aloud,

"See! Here comes the man! Here comes the hero to whom Egypt owes its liberty and Pharaoh his crown."

Thereon all the company and the soldiers and servants who were gathered about the door began to shout and acclaim me, till I wished that I could vanish away as the holy Tanofir was said to be able to do. Since this was impossible I rushed at Bes who leapt from the table like a monkey and, still waving the heads and talking, slipped from the hall, I know not how, followed by the loud laughter of the guests.

Then heralds announced the coming of Pharaoh and all grew silent. He and his company entered with pomp and we, his subjects, prostrated ourselves in the ancient fashion.

"Rise, my guests," he cried. "Rise, my people. Above all do you rise, Shabaka, my beloved cousin, to whom Egypt and I owe so much."

So we rose and I took my seat in a place of honour having my mother at my side, and looked about me for Amada, but in vain. There was the carven chair upon which she should have been among those of the princesses, but it was empty. At first I thought that she was late, but when time went by and she did not appear, I asked if she were ill, a question that none seemed able to answer.

The feast went on with all the ancient ceremonies that attended the crowning of a Pharaoh of Egypt, since there were old men who remembered these, also the scribes and priests had them written in their books.

I took no heed of them and will not set them down. At length Pharaoh

pledged his subjects, and his subjects pledged Pharaoh. Then the doors were opened and through them came a company of white-robed, shaven priests bearing on a bier the body of a dead man wrapped in his mummy-cloths. At first some laughed for this rite had not been performed in Egypt since she passed into the hands of the Great Kings of the East and therefore was strange to them. Then they grew silent since after all it was solemn to see those death-bearing priests flitting in and out between the great columns, now seen and now lost in the shadows, and to listen to their funeral chants.

In the hush my mother whispered to me that this body was that of the last Pharaoh of Egypt brought from his tomb, but whether this were so I cannot say for certain. At length they brought the mummy which was crowned with a snake-headed circlet of the royal uræus and still draped with withered funeral wreaths, and stood it on its feet opposite to Peroa just behind and between my mother and me in such a fashion that it cut off the light from us.

The faint and heavy smell of the embalmer's spices struck upon my nostrils, a dead flower from the chaplets fell upon my head and, glancing over my shoulder, I saw the painted or enamelled eyes in the gilded mask staring at me. The thing filled me with fear, I knew not of what. Not of death, surely, for that I had faced a score of times of late and thought nothing of it. Indeed I am not sure that it was fear I felt, but rather a deep sense of the vanity of all things. It seemed to come home to me--Shabaka or Allan Quatermain, for in my dream the

inspiration or whatever it might be, struck through the spirit that animated both of us--as it had never done before, that everything is nothing, that victory and love and even life itself have no meaning; that naught really exists save the soul of man and God, of whom perchance that soul is a part sent forth for a while to do His work through good and ill. The thought lifted me up and yet crushed me, since for a moment all that makes a man passed away, and I felt myself standing in utter loneliness, naked before the glory of God, watched only by the flaming stars that light his throne. Yes, and at that moment suddenly I learned that all the gods are but one God, having many shapes and called by many names.

Then I heard the priests saying,

"Pharaoh the Osiris greets Pharaoh the living on the Earth and sends to him this message--'As I am, so shalt thou be, and where I am, there thou shalt dwell through all the ages of Eternity.'"

Then Pharaoh the living rose and bowed to Pharaoh the dead and Pharaoh the dead was taken away back to his Eternal House and I wondered whether his Ka or his spirit, or whatever is the part of him that lives on, were watching us and remembering the feasts whereof he had partaken in his pomp in this pillared hall, as his forefathers had done before him for hundreds or thousands of years.

Not until the mummy had gone and the last sound of the chanting of the

priests had died, did the hearts of the feasters grow light again. But soon they forgot, as men alive always forget death and those whom Time has devoured, for the wine was good and strong and the eyes of the women were bright and victory had crowned our spears, and for a while Egypt was once more free.

So it went on till Pharaoh rose and departed, the great gold earrings in his ears jingling as he walked, and the trumpets sounding before and after him. I too rose to go with my mother when a messenger came and bade me wait upon Pharaoh, and with me the dwarf Bes. So we went, leaving an officer to conduct my mother to our home. As I passed her she caught me by the sleeve and whispered in my ear,

"My son, whatever chances to you, be brave and remember that the world holds more than women."

"Yes," I answered, "it holds death and God, or they hold it," though what put the words into my mind I do not know, since I did not understand and had no time to ask her meaning.

The messenger led us to the door of Peroa's private chamber, the same in which I had seen him on my return from the East. Here he bade me enter, and Bes to wait without. I went in and found two men and a woman in the chamber, all standing very silent. The men were Pharaoh who still wore his glorious robe and Double Crown, and the high priest of Isis clothed in white; the other was the lady Amada also clothed in the snowy robes

of Isis.

At the sight of her thus arrayed my heart stopped and I stood silent because I could not speak. She too stood silent and I saw that beneath her thin veil her beautiful face was set and pale as that of an alabaster statue. Indeed she might have been not a lovely living woman, but the goddess Isis herself whose symbols she bore about her.

"Shabaka," said Pharaoh at length, "the Royal Lady of Egypt, Amada, priestess of Isis, has somewhat to say to you."

"Let the Royal Lady of Egypt speak on to her servant and affianced husband," I answered.

"Count Shabaka, General of the armies," she began in a cold clear voice like to that of one who repeats a lesson, "learn that you are no more my affianced husband and that I who am gathered again to Isis the divine, am no more your affianced wife."

"I do not understand. Will it please you to be more plain?" I said faintly.

"I will be more plain, Count Shabaka, more plain than you have been with me. Since we speak together for the last time it is well that I should be plain. Hear me. When first you returned from the East, in yonder hall you told us of certain things that happened to you there. Then the dwarf

your servant took up the tale. He said that he gave my name to the Great King. I was wroth as well I might be, but even when I prayed that he should be scourged, you did not deny that it was he who gave my name to the King, although Pharaoh yonder said that if you had spoken the name it would have been another matter."

"I had no time," I answered, "for just then the messengers came from Idernes and afterwards when I sought you you were gone."

"Had you then no time," she asked coldly, "beneath the palms in the garden of the palace when we were affianced? Oh! there was time in plenty but it did not please you to tell me that you had bought safety and great gifts at the price of the honour of the Lady of Egypt whose love you stole."

"You do not understand!" I exclaimed wildly.

"Forgive me, Shabaka, but I understand very well indeed, since from your own words I learned at the feast given to Idernes that 'the name of Amada' slipped your lips by chance and thus came to the ears of the Great King."

"The tale that Idernes and his captain told was false, Lady, and for it Bes and I took their lives with our own hands."

"It had perhaps been better, Shabaka, if you had kept them living that

they might confess that it was false. But doubtless you thought them safer dead, since dead men cannot speak, and for this reason challenged them to single combat."

I gasped and could not answer for my mind seemed to leave me, and she went on in a gentler voice,

"I do not wish to speak angrily to you, my cousin Shabaka, especially when you have just wrought such great deeds for Egypt. Moreover by the law I serve I may speak angrily to no man. Know then that on learning the truth, since I could love none but you according to the flesh and therefore can never give myself in marriage to another, I sought refuge in the arms of the goddess whom for your sake I had deserted. She was pleased to receive me, forgetting my treason. On this very day for the second time I took the oaths which may no more be broken, and that I may dwell where I shall never see you more, Pharaoh here has been pleased, at my request to name me high priestess and prophetess of Isis and to appoint me as a dwelling-place her temple at Amada where I was born far away in Upper Egypt. Now all is said and done, so farewell."

"All is not said and done," I broke out in fury. "Pharaoh, I ask your leave to tell the full story of this business of the naming of the lady Amada to the King of kings, and that in the presence of the dwarf Bes. Even a slave is allowed to set out his tale before judgment is passed upon him."

Peroa glanced at Amada who made no sign, then said,

"It is granted, General Shabaka."

So Bes was called into the chamber and having looked about him curiously, seated himself upon the ground.

"Bes," I said, "you have heard nothing of what has passed." (Here I was mistaken, for as he told me afterwards he had heard everything through the door which was not quite closed.) "It is needful, Bes, that you should repeat truly all that happened at the court of the King of kings before and after I was brought from the boat."

Bes obeyed, telling the tale very well, so well that all listened earnestly, without error moreover. When he had finished I also told my story and how, shaken by all I had gone through and already weak from the torment of the boat, the name of Amada was surprised from me who never dreamed that the King would at once make demand of her, and who would have perished a thousand times rather than such a thing should happen. I added what I had learned afterwards from our escort, that this name was already well known to the Great King who meant to make use of it as a cause of quarrel with Egypt. Further, that he had let me escape from a death by horrible torments because of some dream that he had dreamed while he rested before the banquet, in which a god appeared and told him that it was an evil thing to slay a man because that man had

bested him at a hunting match and one of which heaven would keep an account. Still because of the law of his land he must find a public pretext for loosing one whom he had once condemned, and therefore chose this matter of the lady Amada whom he pretended to send me to bring to him.

When I had finished, as Amada still remained silent, Pharaoh asked of Bes how it came about that he told one story on the night of our return and another on this night.

"Because, O Pharaoh," answered Bes rolling his eyes, "for the first time in my life I have been just a little too clever and shot my arrow just a little too far. Hearken, Pharaoh, and Royal Lady, and High Priest. I knew that my master loves the lady Amada and knew also that she is quick of tongue and temper, one who readily takes offence even if thereby she breaks her own heart and so brings her life to ruin, and with it perchance her country. Therefore, knowing women whom I have studied in my own land, I saw in this matter just such a cause of offence as she would lay hold of, and counselled my master to keep silent as to the story of the naming of her before the King. Some evil spirit made him listen to this bad counsel, so far at least, that when I lied as to what had chanced, for which lie the lady Amada prayed that I might be scourged till my bones broke through the skin, he did not at once tell all the truth. Nor did he do so afterwards because he feared that if he did I should in fact be scourged, for my master and I love each other. Neither of us wishes to see the other scourged, though such is my lot

to-night," and he glanced at Amada. "I have said."

Then at last Amada spoke.

"Had I known all this story from the first, perhaps I should not have done what I have done to-day and perhaps I should have forgiven and forgotten, for in truth even if the dwarf still lies, I believe your word, O Shabaka, and understand how all came about. But now it is too late to change. Say, O Priest of the Mother, is it not too late?"

"It is too late," said the priest solemnly, "seeing that if such vows as yours are broken for the second time, O Prophetess, the curse of the goddess will pursue you and him for whom they were broken, yes, through this life and all other lives that perchance may be given to you upon the earth or elsewhere."

"Pharaoh," I cried in despair, "I made a bond with you. It is recorded in writing and sealed. I have kept my part of the bond; my treasure you have spent; your enemies I have slain; your army I have commanded not so ill. Will you not keep yours and bid the priests release this lady from her vow and give her to me to whom she was promised? Or must I believe that you refuse, not because of goddesses and vows, but because yonder is the Royal Lady of Egypt, the true heiress to the throne who might perchance bear children, which as prophetess of Isis she can never do. Yes, because of this and because of certain cries that came to your ears in the hour of your crowning before Amen-ra and all the gods?"

Peroa flushed as he heard me and answered,

"You speak roughly, Cousin, and were you any other man I might be tempted to answer roughly. But I know that you suffer and therefore I forgive. Nay, you must believe no such things. Rather must you remember that in this bond of which you speak, it was set down that I only promised you the lady Amada with her own consent, and this she has withdrawn."

"Then, Pharaoh, hearken! To-morrow I leave Egypt for another land, giving you back your generalship and sheathing the sword that I had hoped to wield in its defence and yours when the last great day of trial by battle comes, as come it will. I tell you that I go to return no more, unless the lady Amada yonder shall summon me back to fight for her and you, promising herself to me in guerdon."

"That can never be," said Amada.

Then I became aware of another presence in the room, though how and when it appeared I do not know, but I suppose that it had crept in while we were lost in talk. At least between me and Pharaoh, crouched upon the ground, was the figure of a man wrapped in a beggar's cloak. It threw back the hood and there appeared the ashen face and snowy beard of the holy Tanofir.

"You know me, Pharaoh," he said in his deep, solemn voice. "I am Tanofir, the King's son; Tanofir the hermit, Tanofir the seer. I have heard all that passes, it matters not how and I come to you with a message, I who read men's hearts. Of vows and goddesses and women I say nothing. But this I say to you, that if you break the spirit of your bond and suffer yonder Shabaka to go hence with a bitter heart, trouble shall come on you. All the Great King's armies did not die yonder by the banks of Nile, and mayhap one day he will journey to bury the bones of those who fell, and with them yours, O Pharaoh. I do not think that you will listen to me to-night, and I am sure that yonder lady, full of the new-fanned flame of the jealous goddess, will not listen. Still let her take counsel and remember my words: In the hour of desperate danger let her send to Shabaka and demand his help, promising in return what he has asked and remembering that if Isis loves her, that goddess was born upon the Nile and loves Egypt more."

"Too late, too late, too late!" wailed Amada

Then she burst into tears and turning fled away with the high priest. Pharaoh went also leaving me and Bes alone. I looked for the holy Tanofir to speak with him, but he too was gone.

"It is time to sleep, Master," said Bes, "for all this talk is more wearisome than any battle. Why! what is this that has your name upon it?" and he picked a silk-wrapped package from the floor and opened it.

Within were the priceless rose-hued pearls!