

CHAPTER XIV. SHABAKA FIGHTS THE CROCODILE

"Where to?" I said to Bes when we were outside the palace, for I was so broken with grief that I scarcely knew what I did.

"To the house of the lady Tiu, I think, Master, since there you must make preparations for your start on the morrow, also bid her farewell. Oh!" he went on in a kind of rapture which afterwards I knew was feigned though at the time I did not think about it, "Oh! how happy should you be who now are free from all this woman-coil, with life new and fresh before you. Reflect, Master, on the hunting we will have yonder in Ethiopia. No more cares, no more plannings for the welfare of Egypt, no more persuading of the doubtful to take up arms, no more desperate battle-ventures with your country's honour on your sword-point. And if you must see women--well, there are plenty in Ethiopia who come and go lightly as an evening breeze laden with the odour of flowers, and never trouble in the morning."

"At any rate you are not free from such coils, Bes," I said and in the moonlight I saw his great face fall in.

"No, Master, I am tying them about my throat. See, such is the way of the world, or of the gods that rule the world, I know not which. For years I have been happy and free, I have enjoyed adventures and visited strange countries and have gathered learning, till I think I am the wisest man upon the Nile, at the side of one whom I loved and holding

nothing at risk, except my own life which mattered no more than that of a gnat dancing in the sun. Now all is changed. I have a wife whom I love also, more than I can tell you," and he sighed, "but who still must be looked after and obeyed--yes, obeyed. Further, soon I shall have a people and a crown to wear, and councillors and affairs of state, and an ancient religion to support and the Grasshopper itself knows what besides. The burden has rolled from your back to mine, Master, making my heart which was so light, heavy, and oh! I wish it had stopped where it was."

Even then I laughed, sad as I was, for truth lived in the philosophy of Bes.

"Master," he went on in a changed voice, "I have been a fool and my folly has worked you ill. Forgive me since I acted for the best, only until the end no one ever knows what is the best. Now here is the house and I go to meet my wife and to make certain arrangements. By dawn perhaps you will be ready to start to Ethiopia."

"Do you really desire that I should accompany you there, Bes?"

"Certainly, Master. That is unless you should desire that I accompany you somewhere else instead, by sea southward for instance. If so, I do not know that I would refuse, since Ethiopia will not run away and there is much of the world that I should still like to visit. Only then there is Karema to be thought about, who expects, or, when she learns all,

soon will expect, to be a queen," he added doubtfully.

"No, Bes, I am too tired to make new plans, so let us go to Ethiopia and not disappoint Karema, who after holding a cup so long naturally would like to try a sceptre."

"I think that is wisest, Master; at any rate the holy Tanofir thinks it wisest, and he is the voice of Fate. Oh! why do we trouble who after all, every one of us, are nothing but pieces upon the board of Fate."

Then he turned and left me and I entered the house where I found my mother sitting, still in her festal robes, like one who waits. She looked at my face, then asked what troubled me. I sat down on a stool at her feet and told her everything.

"Much as I thought," she said when I had finished. "These over-learned women are strange fish to catch and hold, and too much soul is like too much sail upon a boat when the desert wind begins to blow across the Nile. Well, do not let us blame her or Bes, or Peroa who is already anxious for his dynasty and would rather that Amada were a priestess than your wife, or even the goddess Isis, who no doubt is anxious for her votaries. Let us rather blame the Power that is behind the veil, or to it bow our heads, seeing that we know nothing of the end for which it works. So Egypt shuts her doors on you, my Son, and whither away? Not to the East again, I trust, for there you would soon grow shorter by a head."

"I go to Ethiopia, my Mother, where it seems that Bes is a great man and can shelter me."

"So we go to Ethiopia, do we? Well, it is a long journey for an old woman, but I weary of Memphis where I have lived for so many years and doubtless the sands of the south make good burial grounds."

"We!" I exclaimed. "We?"

"Surely, my Son, since in losing a wife you have again found a mother and until I die we part no more."

When I heard this my eyes filled with tears. My conscience smote me also because of late, and indeed for years past, I had thought so much of Amada and so little of my mother. And now it was Amada who had cast me out, unjustly, without waiting to learn the truth, because at the worst I, who worshipped her, had saved myself from death in slow torment by speaking her name, while my mother, forgetting all, took me to her bosom again as she had done when I was a babe. I knew not what to say, but remembering the pearls, I drew them out and placed them round my mother's neck.

She looked at the wonderful things and smiled, then said,

"Such gems as these become white locks and withered breasts but ill.

Yet, my Son, I will keep them for you till you find a wife, if not Amada, then another."

"If not Amada, I shall never find a wife," I said bitterly, whereat she smiled.

Then she left me to make ready before she slept a while.

Work as we would noon had passed two hours, on the following day, before we were prepared to start, for there was much to do. Thus the house must be placed in charge of friends and the means of travel collected. Also a messenger came from Pharaoh praying me for his and Egypt's sake to think again before I left them, and an answer sent that go I must, whither the holy Tanofir would know if at any time Pharaoh desired to learn. In reply to this came another messenger who brought me parting gifts from Pharaoh, a chain of honour, a title of higher nobility, a commission as his envoy to whatever land I wandered, and so forth, which I must acknowledge. Lastly as we were leaving the house to seek the boat which Bes had made ready on the Nile, there came yet another messenger at the sight of whom my heart leapt, for he was priest of Isis.

He bowed and handed me a roll. I opened it with a trembling hand and read:

"From the Prophetess of Isis whose house is at Amada, aforetime
Royal Lady of Egypt, to the Count Shabaka,

"I learn, O my Cousin, that you depart from Egypt and knowing the
reason my heart is sore. Believe me, my Cousin, I love you well,
better than any who lives upon the earth, nor will that love ever
change, since the goddess who holds my future in her hands, knows
of what we are made and is not jealous of the past. Therefore she
will not be wroth at the earthly love of one who is gathered to
her heavenly arms. Her blessing and mine be on you and if we see
each other no more face to face in the world, may we meet again in
the halls of Osiris. Farewell, beloved Shabaka. Oh! why did you
suffer that black master of lies, the dwarf Bes, to persuade you
to hide the truth from me?"

So the writing ended and below it were two stains still wet, which I
knew were caused by tears. Moreover, wrapped in a piece of silk and
fastened to the scroll was a little gold ring graven with the royal
uræus that Amada had always worn from childhood. Only on the previous
night I had noted it on the first finger of her right hand.

I took my stylus and my waxen tablets and wrote on one of them:

"Had you been a man, Amada, and not a woman, I think you would have judged me differently but, learned priestess and prophetess as you are, a woman you remain. Perchance a time may come when once more you will turn to me in the hour of your need; if so and I am living, I will come. Yea, if I am dead I think that I still shall come, since nothing can really part us. Meanwhile by day and by night I wear your ring and whenever I look on it I think of Amada the woman whose lips have pressed my own, and forget Amada the priestess who for her soul's sake has been pleased to break the heart of the man who loved her and whom she misjudged so sorely in her pride and anger."

This tablet I wrapped up and sealed, using clay and her own ring to make the seal, and gave it for delivery to the priest.

At length we drew near to the river and here, gathered on the open land, I found the most of those who had fought with me in the battle against the Easterns, and with them a great concourse of others from the city. These collected round me, some of them wounded and hobbling upon crutches, praying me not to go, as did the others who foresaw sorrow to Egypt from my loss. But I broke away from them almost in tears and with my mother hid myself beneath the canopy of the boat. Here Bes was waiting, also his beautiful wife who, although she seemed sad at leaving Egypt, smiled a greeting to us while the steersmen and rowers of the boat, tall Ethiopians every one of them, rose and gave me a General's

salute. Then, as the wind served, we hoisted the sail and glided away up Nile, till presently the temples and palm-groves of Memphis were lost to sight.

Of that long, long journey there is no need to tell. Up the Nile we travelled slowly, dragging the boat past the cataracts till Egypt was far behind us. In the end, many days after we had passed the mouth of another river that was blue in colour which flowed from the northern mountain lands down into the Nile, we came to a place where the rapids were so long and steep that we must leave the boat and travel overland. Drawing near to it at sunset I saw a multitude of people gathered on the sand and beyond them a camp in which were set many beautiful pavilions that seemed to be brodered with silk and gold, as were the banners that floated above them whereon appeared the effigy of a grasshopper, also done in gold with silver legs.

"It seems that my messengers travelled in safety," said Bes to me, "for know, that yonder are some of my subjects who have come here to meet us. Now, Master, I must no longer call you master since I fear I am once more a king. And you must no longer call me Bes, but Karoon. Moreover, forgive me, but when you come into my presence you must bow, which I shall like less than you do, but it is the custom of the Ethiopians. Oh! I would that you were the king and that I were your friend, for henceforth good-bye to ease and jollity."

I laughed, but Bes did not laugh at all, only turned to his wife who already ruled him as though he were indeed a slave, and said, "Lady Karema, make yourself as beautiful as you can and forget that you have ever been a Cup or anything useful, since henceforth you must be a queen, that is if you please my people."

"And what happens if I do not please them, Husband?" asked Karema opening her fine eyes.

"I do not quite know, Wife. Perhaps they may refuse to accept me, at which I shall not weep. Or perhaps they may refuse to accept you, at which of course I should weep very much, for you see you are so very white and, heretofore, all the queens of the Ethiopians have been black."

"And if they refuse to accept me because I am white, or rather brown, instead of black like oiled marble, what then, O Husband?"

"Then--oh! then I cannot say, O Wife. Perhaps they will send you back to your own country. Or perhaps they will separate us and place you in a temple where you will live alone in all honour. I remember that once they did that to a white woman, making a goddess of her until she died of weariness. Or perhaps--well, I do not know."

Then Karema grew angry.

"Now I wish I had remained a Cup," she said, "and the servant of the holy Tanofir who at least taught me many secret things, instead of coming to dwell among black barbarians in the company of a dwarf who, even if he be a king, it seems has no power to protect the wife whom he has chosen."

"Why will women always grow wroth before there is need?" asked Bes humbly. "Surely it would be time to rate me when any of these things had happened."

"If any of them do happen, Husband, I shall say much worse things than that," she replied, but the talk went no further, for at this moment our boat grounded and singing a wild song, many of those who waited rushed into the water to drag it to the bank.

Then Bes stood up on the prow, waving his bow and there arose a mighty shout of, "Karooon! Karoon! It is he, it is he returned after many years!"

Twice they shouted thus and then, every one of them, threw themselves face downwards in the sand.

"Yes, my people," cried Bes, "it is I, Karoon, who having been miraculously preserved from many dangers in far lands by the help of the Grasshopper in heaven, and, as my messengers will have told you, of my

beloved friend, lord Shabaka the Egyptian, who has deigned to come to dwell with us for a while, have at length returned to Ethiopia that I may shed my wisdom on you like the sun and pour it on your heads like melted honey. Moreover, mindful of our laws which aforetime I defied and therefore left you, I have searched the whole world through till I found the most beautiful woman that it contained, and made her my wife. She too has deigned to come to this far country to be your queen. Advance, fair Karema, and show yourself to these my Ethiopians."

So Karema stepped forward and stood on the prow of the boat by the side of Bes, and a strange couple they looked. The Ethiopians who had risen, considered her gravely, then one of them said,

"Karooon called her beautiful, but in truth she is almost white and very ugly."

"At least she is a woman," said another, "for her shape is female."

"Yes, and he has married her," remarked a third, "and even a king may choose his own wife sometimes. For in such matters who can judge another's taste?"

"Cease," said Bes in a lordly way. "If you do not think her beautiful to-night, you will to-morrow. And now let us land and rest."

So we landed and while I did so I took note of these Ethiopians. They

were great men, black as charcoal with thick lips, white teeth and flat noses. Their eyes were large and the whites of them somewhat yellow, their hair curled like wool, their beards were short and on their faces they wore a continual smile. Of dress most of them had little, but their elders or leaders wore lion and leopard skins and some were clad in a kind of silken tunic belted about the middle. All were armed for war with long bows, short swords and small shields round in shape and made from the hide of the hippopotamus or of the unicorn. Gold was plentiful amongst them since even the humblest wore bracelets of that metal, while about the necks of the chieftains it was wound in great torques, also sometimes on their ankles. They wore sandals on their feet and some of them had ostrich feathers stuck in their hair, a few also had grasshoppers fashioned of gold bound on the top of their heads, and these I took to be the priests. There were no women in their number.

As the sun was sinking we were led at once to a very beautiful tent made of woven flax and ornamented as I have described, where we found food made ready for us in plenty, milk in bowls and the flesh of sheep and oxen boiled and roasted. Bes, however, was taken to a place apart, which made Karema even more angry than she was before.

Scarcely had we finished eating when a herald rushed into the tent crying, "Prostrate yourselves! Yea, be prostrated, the Grasshopper comes! Karoon comes."

Here I must say that I found that the title of Karoon meant "Great

Grasshopper," but Karema who did not know this, asked indignantly why she should prostrate herself to a grasshopper. Indeed she refused to do so even when Bes entered the pavilion wonderfully attired in a gorgeous-coloured robe of which the train was held by two huge men. So absurd did he look that my mother and I must bow very deeply to hide our laughter while Karema said,

"It would be better, Husband, if you found children to carry your robe instead of two giants. Moreover, if it is meant to copy the colours of a grasshopper, 'tis badly done, since grasshoppers are green and you are gold and scarlet. Also they do not wear feathers set awry upon their heads."

Bes rolled his eyes as though in agony, then turning, bade his attendants be gone. They obeyed, though doubtfully as though they did not like to leave him alone with us, whereon he let down the flap of the pavilion, threw off his gorgeous coverings and said,

"You must learn to understand, Wife, that our customs are different from those of Egypt. There I was happy as a slave and you were held to be beautiful as the Cup of the holy Tanofir, also learned. Here I am wretched as a king and you are held to be ugly, also ignorant as a stranger. Oh! do not answer, I pray you, but learn that all goes well. For the time you are accepted as my wife, subject to the decision of a council of matrons, aged relatives of my family, who will decide when we reach the City of the Grasshopper whether or not you shall be

acknowledged as the Queen of the Ethiopians. No, no, I pray you say nothing since I must go away at once, as according to the law of the Ethiopians the time has come for the Grasshopper to sleep, alone, Karema, as you are not yet acknowledged as my wife. You also can sleep with the lady Tiu and for Shabaka a tent is provided. Rest sweetly, Wife. Hark! They fetch me."

"Now, if I had my way," said Karema, "I would rest in that boat going back to Egypt. What say you, lord Shabaka?"

But I made no answer who followed Bes out of the tent, leaving her to talk the matter over with my mother. Here I found a crowd of his people waiting to convey him to sleep and watching, saw them place him in another tent round which they ranged themselves, playing upon musical instruments. After this someone came and led me to my own place where was a good bed in which I lay down to sleep. This however I could not do for a long while because of my own laughter and the noise of the drums and horns that were soothing Bes to his rest. For now I understood why he had preferred to be a slave in Egypt rather than a king in Ethiopia.

In the morning I rose before the dawn and went out to the river-bank to bathe. While I was making ready to wash myself, who should appear but Bes, followed, but at a distance, by a number of his people.

"Never have I spent such a night, Master," he said, "at least not since you took me prisoner years ago, since by law I may not stop those horns

and musical instruments. Now, however, also according to the law of the Ethiopians, I am my own lord until the sun rises. So I have come here to gather some of those blue lilies which she loves as a present for Karema, because I fear that she is angry and must be appeased."

"Certainly she is very angry," I said, "or at least was so when I left her last night. Oh! Bes, why did you let your people tell her that she was ugly?"

"How can I help it, Master? Have you not always heard that the Ethiopians are chiefly famous for one thing, namely that they speak nothing but the truth. To them she, being different, seems to be ugly. Therefore when they say that she is ugly, they speak the truth."

"If so, it is a truth that she does not like, Bes, as I have no doubt she will tell you by and by. Do they think me ugly also?"

"Yes, they do, Master; but they think also that you look like a man who can draw a bow and use a sword, and that goes far with the Ethiopians. Of your mother they say nothing because she is old and they venerate the aged whom the Grasshopper is waiting to carry away."

Now I began to laugh again and went with Bes to gather the lilies. These grew at the end of a mass of reeds woven together by the pressure of the current and floating on the water. Bes lay down upon his stomach while his people watched from a distance on the bank amazed into silence, and

stretched out his long arms to reach the blue lotus flowers. Suddenly the reeds gave way beneath him just as he had grasped two of the flowers and was dragging at them, so that he fell into the river.

Next instant I saw a swirl in the brown water and perceived a huge crocodile. It rushed at Bes open-mouthed. Being a good swimmer he twisted his body in order to avoid it, but I heard the great teeth close with a snap on the short leathern garment which he wore about his middle.

"The devil has me! Farewell!" he cried and vanished beneath the water.

Now, as I have said, I was almost stripped for bathing, but had not yet taken off my short sword which was girded round me by a belt. In an instant I drew it and amidst the yells of horror of the Ethiopians who had seen all from the bank, I plunged into the river. There are few able to swim as I could and I had the art of diving with my eyes open and remaining long beneath the surface without drawing breath, for this I had practised from a child.

Immediately I saw the great reptile sinking to the mud and dragging Bes with him to drown him there. But here the river was very deep and with a few swift strokes I was able to get under the crocodile. Then with all my strength I stabbed upwards, driving the sword far into the soft part of the throat. Feeling the pain of the sharp iron the beast let go of Bes and turned on me. How it happened I do not know but presently I

found myself upon its back and was striking at its eyes. One thrust at least went home, for the blinded brute rose to the surface, bearing me with him, and oh! the sweetness of the air as I breathed again.

Thus we appeared, I riding the crocodile like a horse and stabbing furiously, while close by was Bes rolling his yellow eyes but helpless, for he had no weapon. Still the devil was not dead although blood streamed from him, only mad with pain and rage. Nor could the shouting Ethiopians help me since they had only bows and dared not shoot lest their shafts should pierce me. The crocodile began to sink again, snapping furiously at my legs. Then I bethought me of a trick I had seen practised by natives on the Nile.

Waiting till its huge jaws were open I thrust my arm between them, grasping the short sword in such fashion that the hilt rested on its tongue and the point against the roof of its mouth. It tried to close its jaws and lo! the good iron was fixed between them, holding them wide open. Then I withdrew my hand and floated upwards with nothing worse than a cut upon the wrist from one of its sharp fangs. I appeared upon the surface and after me the crocodile spouting blood and wallowing in its death agonies. I remembered no more till I found myself lying on the bank surrounded by a multitude with Bes standing over me. Also in the shallow water was the crocodile dead, my sword still fixed between its jaws.

"Are you harmed, Master" cried Bes in a voice of agony.

"Very little I think," I answered, sitting up with the blood pouring from my arm.

Bes thrust aside Karema who had come lightly clothed from her tent, saying,

"All is well, Wife. I will bring you the lilies presently."

Then he flung his arms about me, kissed my hands and my brow and turning to the crowd, shouted,

"Last night you were disputing as to whether this Egyptian lord should be allowed to dwell with me in the land of Ethiopia. Which of you disputes it now?"

"No one!" they answered with a roar. "He is not a man but a god. No man could have done such a deed."

"So it seems," answered Bes quietly. "At least none of you even tried to do it. Yet he is not a god but only that kind of man who is called a hero. Also he is my brother, and while I reign in Ethiopia either he shall reign at my side, or I go away with him."

"It shall be so, Karoon!" they shouted with one voice. And after this I was carried back to the tent.

In front of it my mother waited and kissed me proudly before them all, whereat they shouted again.

So ended this adventure of the crocodile, except that presently Bes went back and recovered the two lilies for Karema, this time from a boat, which caused the Ethiopians to call out that he must love her very much, though not as much as he did me.

That afternoon, borne in litters, we set out for the City of the Grasshopper, which we reached on the fourth day. As we drew near the place regiments of men to the number of twelve thousand or more, came out to meet us, so that at last we arrived escorted by an army who sang their songs of triumph and played upon their musical instruments until my head ached with the noise.

This city was a great place whereof the houses were built of mud and thatched with reeds. It stood upon a wide plain and in its centre rose a natural, rocky hill upon the crest of which, fashioned of blocks of gleaming marble and roofed with a metal that shone as gold, was the temple of the Grasshopper, a columned building very like to those of Egypt. Round it also were other public buildings, among them the palace of the Karoon, the whole being surrounded by triple marble walls as a protection from attack by foes. Never had I seen anything so beautiful

as that hill with its edifices of shining white roofed with gold or copper and gleaming in the sun.

Descending from my litter I walked to those of my mother and Karema, for Bes in his majesty might not be approached, and said as much to them.

"Yes, Son," answered my mother, "it is worth while to have travelled so far to see such a sight. I shall have a fine sepulchre, Son."

"I have seen it all before," broke in Karema.

"When?" I asked.

"I do not know. I suppose it must have been when I was the Cup of the holy Tanofir. At least it is familiar to me. Already I weary of it, for who can care for a land or a city where they think white people hideous and scarcely allow a wife to go near her husband, save between midnight and dawn when they cease from their horrible music?"

"It will be your part to change these customs, Karema."

"Yes," she exclaimed, "certainly that will be my part," after which I went back to my litter.