

## CHAPTER XV. THE SUMMONS

Now at the gates of the City of the Grasshopper we were royally received. The priests came out to meet us, pushing a colossal image of their god before them on a kind of flat chariot, and I remember wondering what would be the value of that huge golden locust, if it were melted down. Also the Council came, very ancient men all of them, since the Ethiopians for the most part lived more than a hundred years. Perhaps that is why they were so glad to welcome Bes since they were too old to care about retaining power in their own hands as they had done during his long absence. For save Bes there was no other man living of the true royal blood who could take the throne.

Then there were thousands of women, broad-faced and smiling whose black skins shone with scented oils, for they wore little except a girdle about their waists and many ornaments of gold. Thus their earrings were sometimes a palm in breadth and many of them had great gold rings through their noses, such as in Egypt are put in those of bulls. My mother laughed at them, but Karema said that she thought them hideous and hateful.

They were a strange people, these Ethiopians, like children, most of them, being merry and kind and never thinking of one thing for more than a minute. Thus one would see them weep and laugh almost in the same breath. But among them was an upper class who had great learning and much ancient knowledge. These men made their laws wherein there was

always sense under what seemed to be folly, designed the temples, managed the mines of gold and other metals and followed the arts. They were the real masters of the land, the rest were but slaves content to live in plenty, for in that fertile soil want never came near them, and to do as they were bid.

Thus they passed from the cradle to the grave amidst song and flowers, carrying out their light, allotted tasks, and for the rest, living as they would and loving those they would, especially their children, of whom they had many. By nature and tradition the men were warriors and hunters, being skilled in the use of the bow and always at war when they could find anyone to fight. Indeed when we came among them their trouble was that they had no enemies left, and at once they implored Bes to lead them out to battle since they were weary of herding kine and tilling fields.

All of these things I found out by degrees, also that they were a great people who could send out an army of seventy thousand men and yet leave enough behind them to defend their land. Of the world beyond their borders the most of them knew little, but the learned men of whom I have spoken, a great deal, since they travelled to Egypt and elsewhere to study the customs of other countries. For the rest their only god was the Grasshopper and like that insect they skipped and chirruped through life and when the winter of death came sprang away to another of which they knew nothing, leaving their young behind them to bask in the sun of unborn summers. Such were the Ethiopians.

Now of all the ceremonies of the reception of Bes and his re-crowning as Karoon, I knew little, for the reason that the tooth of the crocodile poisoned my blood and made me very ill, so that I remained for a moon or more lying in a fine room in the palace where gold seemed to be as plentiful as earthen pots are in Egypt, and all the vessels were of crystal. Had it not been for the skill of the Ethiopian leeches and above all for the nursing of my mother, I think that I must have died. She it was who withstood them when they wished to cut off my arm, and wisely, for it recovered and was as strong as it had ever been. In the end I grew well again and from the platform in front of the temple was presented to the people by Bes as his saviour and the next greatest to him in the kingdom, nor shall I ever forget the shoutings with which I was received.

Karema also was presented as his wife, having passed the Ordeal of the Matrons, but only, I think, because it was found that she was in the way to give an heir to the throne. For to them her beauty was ugliness, nor could they understand how it came about that their king, who contrary to the general customs of the land, was only allowed one wife lest the children should quarrel, could have chosen a lady who was not black. So they received her in silence with many whisperings which made Karema very angry.

When in due course, however, the child came and proved to be a son black as the best of them and of perfect shape, they relented towards her and

after the birth of a second, grew to love her. But she never forgave and loved them not at all. Nor was she over-fond of these children of hers because they were so black which, she said, showed how poisonous was the blood of the Ethiopians. And indeed this is so, for often I have noticed that if an Ethiopian weds with one of another colour, their offspring is black down to the third or fourth generation. Therefore Karema longed for Egypt notwithstanding the splendour in which she dwelt.

So greatly did she long that she had recourse to the magic lore which she had learned from the holy Tanofir, and would sit for hours gazing into water in a crystal bowl, or sometimes into a ball of crystal without the water, trying to see visions therein that had to do with what passed in Egypt. Moreover in time much of her gift returned to her and she did see many things which she repeated to me, for she would tell no one else of them, not even her husband.

Thus she saw Amada kneeling in a shrine before the statue of Isis and weeping: a picture that made me sad. Also she saw the holy Tanofir brooding in the darkness of the Cave of the Bulls, and read in his mind that he was thinking of us, though what he thought she could not read. Again she saw Eastern messengers delivering letters to Pharaoh and knew from his face that he was disturbed and that Egypt was threatened with calamities. And so forth.

Soon the news of her powers of divination spread abroad, so that all the Ethiopians grew to fear her as a seeress and thenceforth, whatever they

may have thought, none of them dared to say that she was ugly. Further, her gift was real, since if she told me of a certain thing such as that messengers were approaching, in due course they would arrive and make clear much that she had not been able to understand in her visions.

Now from the time that I grew strong again and as soon as Bes was firmly seated on his throne, he and I set to work to train and drill the army of the Ethiopians, which hitherto had been little more than a mob of men carrying bows and swords. We divided it into phalanxes after the Greek fashion, and armed these bodies with long lances, swords, and large shields in the place of the small ones they had carried before. Also we trained the archers, teaching them to advance in open order and shoot from cover, and lastly chose the best soldiers to be captains and generals. So it came about that at the end of the two years that I spent in Ethiopia there was a force of sixty thousand men or more whom I should not have been afraid to match against any troops in the world, since they were of great strength and courage, and, as I have said, by nature lovers of war. Also their bows being longer and more powerful, they could shoot arrows farther than the Easterns or the Egyptians.

The Ethiopian lords wondered why their King and I did these things, since they saw no enemy against which so great an army could be led to battle. On that matter Bes and I kept our own counsel, telling them only that it was good for the men to be trained to war, since, hearing of their wealth, one day the King of kings might attempt to invade their country. So month by month I laboured at this task, leading armies into

distant regions to accustom them to travelling far afield, carrying with them what was necessary for their sustenance.

So it went on until a sad thing happened, since on returning from one of these forays in which I had punished a tribe that had murdered some Ethiopian hunters and we had taken many thousands of their cattle, I found my mother dying. She had been smitten by a fever which was common at that season of the year, and being old and weak had no strength to throw it off.

As medicine did not help her, the priests of the Grasshopper prayed day and night in their temple for her recovery. Yes, there they prayed to a golden locust standing on an altar in a sanctuary that was surrounded by crystal coffins wherein rested the flesh of former kings of the land. To me the sight was pitiful, but Bes asked me what was the difference between praying to a locust and praying to images with the heads of beasts, or to a dwarf shaped as he was like we did in Egypt, and I could not answer him.

"The truth is, Brother," he said, for so he called me now, "that all peoples in the world do not offer petitions to what they see and have been taught to revere, but to something beyond of which to them it is a sign. But why the Ethiopians should have chosen a grasshopper as a symbol of God who is everywhere, is more than I can tell. Still they have done so for thousands of years."

When I came to my mother's bedside she was wandering and I saw that she could not live long. In a little while, however, her mind cleared so that she knew me and tears of joy ran down her pale cheeks because I had returned before she died. She reminded me that she had always said that she would find a grave in Ethiopia, and asked to be buried and not kept above ground in crystal, as was the custom there. Then she said that she had been dreaming of my father and of me; also that she did not think that I need fret myself overmuch about Amada, since she was sure that before long I should kiss her on the lips.

I asked if she meant that I should marry her and that we should be happy and fortunate. She replied that she supposed that I should marry her, but of the rest would say nothing. Indeed her face grew troubled, as though some thought hurt her, and leaving the matter of Amada she bade Karema bring me the rose-hued pearls, blessed me, prayed for our reunion in the halls of Osiris, and straightway died.

So I caused her to be embalmed after the Egyptian fashion and enclosed in a coffin of crystal with a scarab on her heart that Karema had discovered somewhere in the city, for always she was searching for things that reminded her of Egypt, whereof many were to be found brought from time to time by travellers or strangers. Then with such ceremony as we could without the services of the priests of Osiris, Karema and I buried her in a tomb that Bes had caused to be made near to the steps of the temple of the Grasshopper, while Bes and his nobles watched from a distance.

And so farewell to my beloved mother, the lady Tiu.

After she was gone I grew very sad and lonely. While she lived I had a home, but now I was an exile, a stranger in a strange land with no one of my own people to talk to except Karema, with whom, as there were gossips even in Ethiopia, I thought it well not to talk too much. There was Bes it was true, but now he was a great king and the time of kings is not their own. Moreover Bes was Bes and an Ethiopian and I was I and an Egyptian, and therefore notwithstanding our love and brotherhood, we could never be like men of the same blood and country.

I grew weary of Ethiopia with its useless gold and damp eternal green and heat, and longed for the sand and the keen desert air. Bes noted it and offered me wives, but I shrank from these black women however buxom and kindly, and wished for no offspring of their race whom afterwards I could never leave. To Egypt I had sworn not to return unless one voice called me and it remained silent. What then was I to do, being no longer content to discipline and command an army that I might not lead into battle?

At length I made up my mind. By nature I was a hunter as much as a soldier; I would beg from Bes a band of brave men whom I knew, lovers of adventure who sought new things, and with them strike down south,



following the path of the elephants to wherever the gods might lead us. Doubtless in the end it would be to death, but what matter when there is nothing for which one cares to live?

While I was brooding over these plans Karema read my mind, perhaps because it was her own, perhaps by help of her strange arts, which I do not know. At least one day when I was sitting alone looking at the city beneath from one of the palace window-places, she came to me looking very beautiful and very mystic in the white robes she always loved to wear, and said,

"My lord Shabaka, you tire of this land of honey and sweetness and soft airs and flowers and gold and crystal and black people who grin and chatter and are not pleasant to be near, is it not so?"

"Yes, Queen," I answered.

"Do not call me queen, my lord Shabaka, for I weary of that name, as we both do of the rest. Call me Karema the Arab, or Karema the Cup, which you will, but by the name of Thoth, god of learning, do not call me queen."

"Karema then," I said. "Well, how do you know that I tire of all this, Karema?"

"How could you do otherwise who are not a barbarian and who have Egypt

in your heart, and Egypt's fate and----" here she looked me straight in the eye's, "Egypt's Lady. Besides, I measure you by myself."

"You at least should be happy, Karema, who are great and rich and beloved, and the wife of a King who is one of the best of men, and the mother of children."

"Yes, Shabaka, I should be but I am not, for who can live on sweetmeats only, especially when they like what is sour? See now how strangely we are made. When I was a girl, the daughter of an Arab chief, well bred and well taught as it chanced, I tired of the hard life of the desert and the narrow minds about me, I who longed for wisdom and to know great men. Then I became the Cup of the holy Tanofir and wisdom was all about me, strange wisdom from another world, rough, sharp wisdom from Tanofir, and the quiet wisdom of the dead among whom I dwelt. I wearied of that also, Shabaka. I was beautiful and knew it and I longed to shine in a Court, to be admired among men, to be envied of women, to rule. My husband came my way. He was clever with a great heart. He was your friend and therefore I was sure that he must be loyal and true. He was, or might be, a king, as I knew, though he thought that I did not. I married him and the holy Tanofir laughed but he did not say me nay, and I became a queen. And now I wish sometimes that I were dead, or back holding the cup of the holy Tanofir with the wisdom of the heavens flowing round me and the soft darkness of the tombs about me. It seems that in this world we never can be content, Shabaka."

"No, Karema, we only think that we should be if things were otherwise than they are. But how can I help you, Karema?"

"Least of all by going away and leaving me alone," she answered with the tears starting to her eyes.

Looking at her, I began to think that the best thing I could do would be to go away and at once, but as ever she read my thought, shook her head and laughed.

"No, no, I have put on my yoke and will carry it to the end. Have I not two black children and a husband who is a hero, a wit and a mountebank in one, and a throne and more gold and crystal than I ever wish to see again even in a dream, and shall I not cling to these good things? If you went I should only be a little more unhappy than before, that is all. Not for my sake do I ask you to stay, but for your own."

"How for my own, Karema? I have done all that I can do here. I have built the army afresh from cook-boys to generals. Bes needs me no longer who has you, his children and his country, and I die of weariness."

"You can stop to make use of that army you have built afresh, Shabaka."

"Against whom? There are none to fight."

"Against the Great King of the East. Listen. My gift of vision has grown

strong and clear of late. Only to-day I have seen a meeting between Pharaoh, the holy Tanofir and the lady Amada. They were all disturbed, I know not at what, and the end of it was that Amada wrote in a roll and gave the writing to messengers, who I think even now are speeding southward--to you, Shabaka. Nay, do not look doubtfully on me, it is true."

"Then you did well to tell me, Karema, for within a moon of this day I should have been where perhaps no messengers would have found me. Now I will wait and let it be your part to prepare the mind of Bes. Do you think that he would give me an army to lead to Egypt, if there were need?"

She nodded and answered,

"He would do so for three reasons. The first is because he loves you, the second because he too wearies of Ethiopia and this rich, fat life of peace, and the third, because I shall tell him that he must."

"Then why trouble to speak of the other two?" I said laughing.

So I stayed on in the City of the Grasshopper, and busied myself with the questions of how to transport and feed a great army that must hold the field for six months or a year; also with the setting of hundreds of skilled men to the making of bows, arrows, swords and shields. Nor did Bes say me no in these matters. Indeed he helped them forward by issuing

the orders as his own, wherein I saw the hand of Karema.

Three months went by and I began to think that Karema's power had been at fault, or that her vision was one that came from her lips and not from her heart, to keep me in Ethiopia. But again she read my mind and smiled.

"Not so, Shabaka," she said. "Those messengers have come to trouble and are detained by a petty tribe beyond our borders over some matter of a woman. Ten days ago the frontier guards marched to set them free."

So again I waited and at length the messengers came, three of them Egyptians and three men of Ethiopia who dwelt in Egypt to learn its wisdom, reporting that as Karema had said, through the foolishness of a servant they had been held prisoner by an Arab chief and thus delayed. Then they delivered the writings which they had kept safe. One was from Pharaoh to the Karoon of Ethiopia; one from the holy Tanofir to Karema; and one from the lady Amada to myself.

With a trembling hand I broke the silk and seals and read. It ran thus:

"Shabaka, my Cousin,

"You departed from Egypt saying that never would you return unless I, Amada the priestess, called you, and I told you that I should

never call. You said, moreover, that if you came at my call you would demand me in guerdon, and I told you that never would I give myself to you who was doubly sworn to Isis. Yet now I call and now I say that if you come and conquer and I yet live, then, if you still will it, I am yours. Thus stands the case: The Great King advances upon Egypt with an army countless as the sands, nor can Egypt hope to battle against him unaided and alone. He comes to make of her a slave, to kill her children, to burn her temples, to sack her cities and to defile her gods with blasphemies. Moreover he comes to seize me and to drag me away to shame in his House of Women.

"Therefore for the sake of the gods, for Egypt's sake and for my own, I pray you come and save us. Moreover I still love you, Shabaka, yes, more a thousand times, than ever I did, though whether you still love me I know not. For that love's sake, therefore, I am ready to break my vows to Isis and to dare her vengeance, if she should desire to be avenged upon me who would save her and her worship, praying that it may fall on my head and not on yours. This will I do by the counsel of the holy Tanofir, by command of Pharaoh, and with the consent of the high priests of Egypt.

"Now I, Amada, have written. Choose, Shabaka, beloved of my heart."

Such was the letter that caused my head to swim and set my soul on fire. Still I said nothing, but thrust it into my robe and waited. Presently Bes, who had been reading in his roll, looked up and spoke, saying,

"Are you minded to see arrows fly and swords shine in war, Brother? If so, here is opportunity. Pharaoh writes to me above his own seal, seeking an alliance between Egypt and Ethiopia. He says that the King of kings invades him and that if he conquers Egypt he has sworn to travel on and conquer Ethiopia also, since he learns that it is now ruled by a certain dwarf who once stole his White Signet, and by a certain Egyptian who once killed his Satrap, Idernes."

"What says the Karoon?" I asked.

Bes rolled his eyes and turning to Karema, asked,

"What says the Karoon's wife?"

Karema laid down the roll she had been studying and answered,

"She says that she has received a command from her master the holy Tanofir to wait upon him forthwith, for reasons that he will explain when she arrives, or to brave his curse upon her, her children, her country and her husband, and not only his but that of the spirits who serve him."

"The curse of the holy Tanofir is not a thing to mock at," said Bes, "as I who revere him, know as well as any man."

"No, Husband, and therefore I leave for Egypt as soon as may be. It seems that my sister is dead, this year past, and the holy Tanofir has no one to hold his cup."

"And what shall I do?" asked Bes.

"That is for you to say, Husband. But if you will, you can stay here and guard our children, giving the command of your army to the lord Shabaka."

Now, for we were alone, Bes twisted himself about, rolling his eyes and laughing as he used to do before he became Karoon of Ethiopia.

"O-ho-ho! Wife," he said, "so you are to go to Egypt, leaving me to play the nurse to babes, and my brother here is to command my armies, leaving me to look after the old men and the women. Nay, I think otherwise. I think that I shall come also, that is if my brother wishes it. Did he not save my life and is it not his and with it all I have? Oh! have done. Once more we will stand side by side in the battle, Brother, and afterwards let Fate do as it will with us. Tell me now, what is the tale of archers and of swordsmen with which we can march against the Great King with whom, like you, I have a score to settle?"



"Seventy and five thousand," I answered.

"Good! On the fifth day from now the army marches for Egypt."