

CHAPTER XVI. TANOFIR FINDS HIS BROKEN CUP

March we did, but on the fifteenth day, not the fifth, since there was much to make ready. First the Council of the Ethiopians must be consulted and through them the people. In the beginning there was trouble over the matter, since many were against a distant war, and this even after Bes had urged that it was better to attack than wait to be attacked. For they answered, and justly, that here in Ethiopia distance and the desert were their shields, since the King of kings, however great his strength, would be weary and famished before he set foot within their borders.

In the end the knot was cut with a sword, for when the army came to learn of the dispute, from the generals down to the common soldiers, every man clamoured to be led to war, since, as I have said, these Ethiopians were fighters all of them, and near at hand there were none left with whom they could fight. So when the Council came to see that they must choose between war abroad and revolt at home, they gave way, bargaining only that the children of the Karoon should not leave the land so that if aught befell him, there would be some of the true blood left to succeed.

Also the Grasshopper was consulted by the priests who found the omens favourable. Indeed I was told that this great golden locust sat up upon its hind legs upon the altar and waved its feelers in the air, which only happened when wonderful fortune was about to bless the land. The

tale reminded me of the nodding of the statues of our own gods in Egypt when a new Pharaoh was presented to them, and of that of Isis when Amada put up her prayer to the divine Mother. To tell the truth, I suspected Karema of having some hand in the business. However, so it happened.

At length we set forth, a mighty host, Bes commanding the swordsmen and I, under him, the archers, of whom there were more than thirty thousand men, and glad was I when all the farewells were said and we were free of the weeping crowds of women. At first Bes and Karema were somewhat sad at parting from their children, but in a little while they grew gay again since the one longed for battle and the other for the sands of Egypt.

Now of our advance I need say little, except that it was slow, though none dared to bar the road of so mighty an array. Since we must go on foot, we were not able to cover more than five leagues a day, for even after we reached the river boats could not be found for so many, though Karema travelled in one with her ladies. Also cattle and corn must always be sent forward for food. Still we crept on to Egypt without sickness, accident, or revolt.

When we drew near to its frontiers messengers met us from Pharaoh bearing letters in answer to those which we had sent with the tidings of our coming. These contained little but ill news. It seemed that the Great King with a countless host had taken all the cities of the Delta and, after a long siege, had captured Memphis and put it to the sack,

and that the army of Egypt, fighting desperately by land and upon the Nile was being driven southwards towards Thebes. Pharaoh added that he proposed to make his last stand at the strong city of Amada, since he doubted whether the troops from Lower Egypt would not rather surrender to the Easterns than retreat further up the Nile. He thanked and blessed us for our promised aid and prayed that it might come in time to save Egypt from slavery and himself from death.

Also there was a letter for me from Amada in which she said,

"Oh! come quickly. Come quickly, beloved Shabaka, lest of me you should find but bones for never will I fall living into the hands of the Great King. We are sore pressed and although Amada has been made very strong, it can stand but a little while against such a countless multitude armed with all the engines of war."

For Karema, too, there were messages from the holy Tanofir of the same meaning, saying that unless we appeared within a moon of their receipt, all was lost.

We read and took counsel. Then we pressed forward by double marches, sending swift runners forward to bid Pharaoh and his army hold on to the last spear and arrow.

On the twenty-fifth day from the receipt of this news we came to the great frontier city which we found in tumult for its citizens were mad with fear. Here we rested one night and ate of the food that was gathered there in plenty. Then leaving a small rear-guard of five thousand men who were tired out, to hold the place, we pressed onwards, for Amada was still four days' march away. On the morning of the fourth day we were told that it was falling, or had fallen, and when at length we came in sight of the place we saw that it was beleaguered by an innumerable host of Easterns, while on the Nile was a great fleet of Grecian and Cyprian mercenaries. Moreover, heralds from the King of kings reached us, saying:

"Surrender, Barbarians, or before the second day dawns you shall sleep sound, every one of you."

To these we answered that we would take counsel on the matter and that perhaps on the morrow we would surrender, since when we had marched from Ethiopia, we did not know how great was the King's strength, having been deceived as to it by the letters of the Pharaoh. Meanwhile that the King of kings would do well to let us alone, since we were brave men and meant to die hard, and it would be better for him to leave us to march back to Ethiopia, rather than lose an army in trying to kill us.

With these words which were spoken by Bes himself, the messengers departed. One of them however, who seemed to be a great lord, called in a loud voice to his companions, saying it was hard that nobles should

have to do the errands, not of a man but of an ape who would look better hanging to a pole. Bes made no answer, only rolled his yellow eyes and said when the lord was out of hearing,

"Now by the Grasshopper and all the gods of Egypt I swear that in payment for this insult I will choke the Nile with the army of the Great King, and hang that knave to a pole from the prow of the royal ship." Which last thing I hope he did.

When the embassy had gone Bes gave orders that the whole army should eat and lie down to sleep.

"I am sure," said he, "that the Great King will not attack us at once, since he will hope that we shall flee away during the night, having seen his strength."

So the Ethiopians filled themselves and then lay down to sleep, which these people can do at any time, even if not tired as they were. But while they rested Bes and I and Karema, with some of the generals consulted together long and earnestly. For in truth we knew not what to do. But a league away lay the town of Amada beset by hundreds of thousands of the Easterns so that none could come in or out, and within its walls were the remains of Pharaoh's army, not more than twenty thousand men, all told, if what we heard were true. On the Nile also

was the great Grecian and Cyprian fleet, two hundred vessels and more, though as we could see by the light of the setting sun the most of these were made fast to the western bank where the Egyptians could not come at them.

For the rest our position was good, being on high desert beyond the cultivated land which bordered the eastern bank. But in front of us, separating us from the southern army of the King, stretched a swamp hard to cross, so that we could not hope to make an attack by night as there was no moon. Lastly, the main Eastern strength, to the number of two hundred thousand or more, lay to the north beyond Amada.

All these things we considered, talking low and earnestly there in the tent, till it grew so dark that we could not see each other's faces while behind us slumbered our army that now numbered some seventy thousand men.

"We are in a trap," said Bes at length. "If we await attack they will weigh us down with numbers. If we flee they have camels and horses and will overtake us; also ships of which we have none. If we attack it must be without cover through swamp where we shall be bogged.

"Meanwhile Pharaoh is perishing within yonder walls of Amada which the engines batter down. By the Grasshopper! I know not what to do. It seems that our journey is vain and that few of us will see Ethiopia more; also that Egypt is sped."

I made no answer, for here my generalship failed me and I had nothing to say. The captains, too, were silent, only woman-like, Karema wept a little, and I too went near to weeping who thought of Amada penned in yonder temple like a lamb that awaits the butcher's knife.

Suddenly, coming from the door of the tent which I thought was closed, I heard a deep voice say,

"I have ever noted that those of Ethiopian blood are melancholy after sundown, though of Egyptians I had thought better things."

Now about this voice there was something familiar to me, still I said nothing, nor did the others, for to speak the truth, all of us were frightened and thought that we must dream. For how could any thing that breathed approach this tent through a triple line of sentries? So we sat still, staring at the darkness, till presently in that darkness appeared a glow of light, such as comes from the fire-flies of Ethiopia. It grew and grew while we gasped with fear, till presently it took shape, and the shape it took was that of the ancient withered face, the sightless eyes, and the white beard of the holy Tanofir. Yes, there not two feet from the ground seemed to float the head of the holy Tanofir, limned in faint flame, which I suppose must have been reflected on to it from the light of some camp-fire without.

"O my beloved master!" cried Karema, and threw herself towards him.

"O my beloved Cup!" answered Tanofir. "Glad am I to know you well and unshattered."

Then a torch was lit and lo! there before us, wrapped in his dark cloak sat the holy Tanofir.

"Whence come you, my Great-uncle?" I asked amazed.

"From less far than you do, Nephew," he answered. "Namely out of Amada yonder. Oh! ask me not how. It is easy if you are a blind old beggar who knows the path. And by the way, if you have aught to eat I should be glad of a bite and a sup, since in Amada food has been scarce for this last month, and to-night there is little left."

Karema sped from the tent and presently returned with bread and wine of which Tanofir partook almost greedily.

"This is the first strong drink that I have tasted for many a year," he said as he drained the goblet; "but better a broken vow than broken wits when one has much to plan and do. At least I hope the gods will think so when I meet them presently. There--I am strong again. Now, say, what is your force?"

We told him.

"Good. And what is your plan?"

We shook our heads, having none.

"Bes," he said sternly, "I think you grow dull since you became a king--or perhaps it is marriage that makes you so. Why, in bygone years schemes would have come so fast that they would have choked each other between those thick lips of yours. And Shabaka, tell me, have you lost all your generalship whereof once you had plenty, in the soft air of Ethiopia? Or is it that even the shadow of marriage makes you dull? Well, I must turn to the woman, for that is always the lot of man. Your plan, Karema, and quickly for there is no time to lose."

Now the face of Karema grew fixed and her eyes dreamy as she spoke in a slow, measured voice like one who knows not what she says.

"My plan is to destroy the armies of the Great King and to relieve the city of Amada."

"A very good plan," said holy Tanofir, "but the question is, how?"

"I think," went on Karema, "that about a league above this place there is a spot where at this season the Nile can be forded by tall men without the wetting of their shoulders. First then, I would send five thousand swordsmen across that ford and let them creep down on the navy of the Great King where the sailors revel in safety, or sleep sound, and

fire the ships. The wind blows strongly from the south and the flames will leap fast from one of them to the other. Most of their crews will be burned and the rest can be slain by our five thousand."

"Good, very good," said the holy Tanofir, "but not enough, seeing that on the eastern bank is gathered the host of over two hundred thousand men. Now how will you deal with them, Karema?"

"I seem to see a road yonder beyond the swamp. It runs on the edge of the desert but behind the sand-hills. I would send the archers of whom there are more than thirty thousand, under the command of Shabaka along that road which leads them past Amada. On its farther side are low hills strewn with rocks. Here I would let the archers take cover and wait for the breaking of the dawn. Then beneath them they will see the most of the Eastern host and with such bows as ours they can sweep the plain from the hills almost to the Nile, and having a hundred arrows to a man, should slaughter the Easterns by the ten thousand, for when these turn to charge a shaft should pierce through two together."

"Good again," said Tanofir. "But what of the army of the Great King which lies upon this side of Amada?"

"I think that before the dawn, believing us so few, it will advance and with the first light begin to thread the swamp, and therefore we must keep five thousand archers to gall it as it comes. Still it will win through, though with loss, and find us waiting for it here shoulder to

shoulder, rank upon rank with locked shields, against which horse and foot shall break in vain, for who shall drive a wedge through the Ethiopian squares that Shabaka has trained and that Bes, the Karoon, commands? I say that they shall roll back like waves from a cliff; yes, again and again, growing ever fewer till the clamour of battle and the shouts of fear and agony reach their ears from beyond Amada where Shabaka and the archers do their work and the sight of the burning ships strikes terror in them and they fly."

"Good again," said the holy Tanofir. "But still many on both fronts will be left, for this army of Easterns is very vast. And how will you deal with these, O Karema?"

"On these I would have Pharaoh with all his remaining strength pour from the northern and the southern gates of Amada, for so shall they be caught like wounded lions between two wild bulls and torn and trampled and utterly destroyed. Only I know not how to tell Pharaoh what he must do, and when."

"Good again," said the holy Tanofir, "very good. And as for the telling of Pharaoh, well, I shall see him presently. It is strange, my chipped Cup which I had almost thrown away as useless, that although broken, you still hold so much wisdom. For know, wonderful though it may seem, that just such plans as you have spoken have grown up in my own mind, only I wished to learn if you thought them wise."

Then he laughed a little and Karema stretched her arms as one does who awakes from sleep, rubbed her eyes and asked if he would not eat more food.

In an instant Tanofir was speaking again in a quick, clear voice.

"Bes, or King," he said, "doubtless you will do your wife's will.

Therefore let the host be aroused and stand to its arms. As it chances I have four men without who can be trusted. Two of these will guide the five thousand to the ford and across it; also down upon the ships. The other two will guide Shabaka and the archers along the road which Karema remembers so well; perhaps she trod it as a child. For my part I return to Amada to make sure that Pharaoh does his share and at the right time. For mark, unless all this is carried through to-night Amada will fall to-morrow, a certain priestess will die, and you, Bes, and your soldiers will never look on Ethiopia again. Is it agreed?"

I nodded who did not wish to waste time in words, and Bes rolled his eyes and answered,

"When one can think of nothing, it is best to follow the counsel of those who can think of something; also to hunt rather than to be hunted. Especially is this so if that something comes from the holy Tanofir or his broken Cup. Generals, you have heard. Rouse the host and bid them stand to their arms company by company!"

The generals leapt away into the darkness like arrows from a bow, and presently we heard the noise of gathering men.

"Where are these guides of yours, holy Tanofir?" asked Bes.

Tanofir beckoned over his shoulder, and out of the gloom, one by one, four men stole into the tent. They were strange, quiet men, but I can say no more of them since their faces were veiled, nor as it chanced, did I ever see any of them after the battle, in which I suppose that they were killed. Or perhaps they appeared after--well, never mind!

"You have heard," said Tanofir, whereupon all four of them bowed their mysterious veiled heads.

"Now, my Brother," whispered Bes into my ear, "tell me, I pray you, how did four men who were not in the tent, hear what was said in this tent, and how did they come through the guards who have orders to kill anyone who does not know the countersign, especially men whose faces are wrapped in napkins?"

"I do not know," I answered, whereon Bes groaned, only Karema smiled a little as though to herself.

"Then, having heard, obey," said the holy Tanofir, whereon the four veiled ones bowed again.

"Will you not give them their orders, O most Venerable?" inquired Bes doubtfully.

"I think it is needless," said Tanofir in a dry voice. "Why try to teach those who know?"

"Will you not offer them something to eat, since they also must be hungry?" I asked of Karema.

"Fool, be silent," she replied, looking on me with contempt. "Do the--friends--of Tanofir need to eat?"

"I should have thought so after being beleaguered for a month in a starving town. If the master wants to eat, why should not his men?" I murmured.

Then a thought struck me and I was silent.

A general returned and reported that the orders had been executed and that all the army was afoot.

"Good," said Bes. "Then start forthwith with five thousand men, and burn those ships, according to the plan laid down by the Queen Karema, which you heard her speak but now," and he named certain regiments that he should take with him, those of the general's own command, adding: "Save some of the ships if you can, and afterwards cross the Nile in them with

your men, and join yourself either to my force or to that of the lord Shabaka, according to what you see. May the Grasshopper give you victory and wisdom."

The general saluted and asked,

"Who guides us to and across the ford of the great river?"

Two of the veiled men stepped forward whereon the general muttered into my ear,

"I like not the look of them. I pray the Grasshopper they do not guide us across the River of Death."

"Have no fear, General," said the holy Tanofir from the other end of the tent. "If you and your men play their parts as well as the guides will play theirs, the ships are already burned together with their companies. Only take fire with you."

So that general departed with the two guides, looking somewhat frightened, and soon was marching up Nile at the head of five thousand swordsmen.

Now Bes looked at me and said,

"It seems that you had better be gone also, my Brother, with the

archers. Perchance the holy Tanofir will show you whither."

"No, no," answered Tanofir, "my guides will show him. Look not so doubtful, Shabaka. Did I fail you when you were in the grip of the King of kings in the East, and only your own life and that of Bes were at stake?"

"I do not know," I answered.

"You do not know, but I know, as I think do Bes and Karema, since the one received the messages which the other sent. Well, if I did not fail you then, shall I fail you now when Egypt is at stake? Follow these guides I give you, and----" here he took hold of the quiver of arrows that lay beside me on the ground, and as certainly as though he could see it with his blind eyes, touched one of them, on the shaft of which were two black and a white feather, "remember my words after you have loosed this arrow from your great black bow and noted where it strikes."

Then I turned to Bes and asked,

"Where do we meet again?"

"I cannot say, Brother," he answered. "In Amada if that may be. If not, at the Table of Osiris, or in the fields of the Grasshopper, or in the blackness which swallows all, gods and men together."

"Does Karema come with me or bide with you?" I asked again.

"She does neither," interrupted Tanofir, "she accompanies me to Amada, where I have need of her and she will be more safe. Oh! fear nothing, for every hermit however poor, still carries his staff and his cup, even if it be cracked."

Then I shook Bes by the hand and went my way, wondering if I were awake or dreaming, and the last thing I saw in that tent was the beautiful face of Karema smiling at me. This I took to be a good omen, since I knew that it was the heart of the holy Tanofir which smiled, and that her eyes were but its mirror.

Already my thirty thousand archers were marshalling, and having made sure that there was ample store of arrows and that all their gourds were filled with water, I set myself at their head while in front of me walked the two veiled guides. I looked upon them doubtfully, since it seemed dangerous to trust an army to unknown men who for aught I knew, might lead us into the midst of our foes. Then I remembered that they were vouched for by the holy Tanofir, my own great-uncle whom I trusted above any man on earth, and took heart again.

How had he come into our tent, I wondered, and how, blind as he was, would he get back into Amada with Karema, if he took her? Well, who could account for the goings or the comings of the holy Tanofir, who was more of a spirit than a man? Perhaps it was not really he whom we had

seen, but what we Egyptians called his Ka or Double which can pass to and fro at will. Only do Kas eat? Of this matter I knew only that offerings of food and drink are made to them in tombs. So leaving the holy Tanofir to guard himself, I turned my mind to our own business, which was to surprise the army of the Great King.

Skirting the swamp we came to rough and higher ground and though I could see little in that darkness, I knew that we were walking up a hill.

Presently we crossed its crest and descending for three bowshots or so, I felt that my feet were on a road. Now the guides turned to the left and after them in a long line came my army of thirty thousand archers. In utter silence we went since we had no beasts with us and our sandalled feet made little noise; moreover orders had been passed down the line that the man who made a sound should die.

For two hours or more we marched thus, then bore to the left again and climbed a slope, by which time I judged we must be well past the town of Amada. Here suddenly the guides halted and we after them at whispered words of command. One of them took me by the cloak, led me forward a little way to the crest of the ridge, and pointed with his white-sleeved arm. I looked and there beneath me, well within bowshot, were thousands of the watchfires of the King's army, flaring, some of them, in the strong wind. For a full league those fires burned and we were opposite to the midmost of them.

"See now, General Shabaka," said the guide, speaking for the first time

in a curious hissing whisper such as might come from a man who had no lips, "beneath you sleeps the Eastern host, which being so great, has not thought it needful to guard this ridge. Now marshal your archers in a fourfold line in such fashion that at the first break of dawn they can take cover behind the rocks and shoot, every man of them without piercing his fellow. Do you bide here with the centre where your standard can be seen by all to north and south. I and my companion will lead your vanguard farther on to where the ridge draws nearer to the Nile, so that with their arrows they can hold back and slay any who strive to escape down stream. The rest is in your hands, for we are guides, not generals. Summon your captains and issue your commands."

So we went back again and I called the officers together and told them what they were to do, then despatched them to their regiments.

Presently the vanguard of ten thousand men drew away and vanished, and with them the white-robed guides on whom I never looked again. Then I marshalled my centre as well as I could in the gloom, and bade them lie down to rest and sleep if they were able; also, within thirty minutes of the sunrise, to eat and drink a little of the food they carried, to see that every bow was ready and that the arrows were loosened in every quiver. This done, with a few whom I trusted to serve me as messengers and guard, I crept up to the brow of the hill or slope, and there we laid us down and watched.