

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE FLIGHT AND THE SUMMONS

WE GAINED the hidden passage, bearing with us the treasures and the holy books of the Sanctuary that to this day lie buried in the caves of Kôr. We came safely to the ruined temple of Osiris that the Persians had destroyed, and through it to the water-gate where the boats waited. None noting us, we embarked upon the boats and glided away down Nile. If any saw us pass, they thought us country-folk, or perchance Egyptians who fled from the Persians in Memphis. But I think that none did see us, since all eyes were bent upon the flaming temple of Isis and all ears were filled with the rumours that flew from mouth to mouth, telling that the goddess had descended in fire and made an end of the tyrant Ochus, his generals, his councillors, and his court.

Thus did I bid farewell to white-walled Memphis which never again my eyes should see, though often my spirit shows it to me in visions of the night, and often I seem to hear the last wild agony of those upon whom I executed the decree of Heaven.

What happened afterward? Of that I know little, though rumours which Philo brought in the later years told me that Bagoas and the physician let fall or flung away the corpse of Ochus. These rumours said that it was found devoured by cats and jackals, so that had it not been for the rent Osiris



wrappings, none would have known that here lay all that was left of the King of kings who desolated Egypt and made her as a widow. They told also that Bagoas set Arses, the son of Ochus, upon the throne of Persia, and later poisoned him and all his children save one. Then it seems that he made Darius king, and this Darius Codomannus, knowing that Bagoas would poison him also, smote the first, forcing him to drink of the drugged cup that he had given to so many.

Such, it appears, was the end of Bagoas whom I used as the artist uses a tool, harnessing him to the chariot of my wrath and, like the *Erinnyes* of the Greeks, making of him a sword wherewith I, or Heaven working through me, stabbed Persia to the heart, as through Tenes I had stabbed Sidon and through Sidon, Egypt. For such were the dooms that I was commanded to bring about. Thus Bagoas walked the road down which, aforesaid, he drove his victims, and save for an evil name that echoes through the ages, this was the end of him and all his crimes.

Ere dawn our company came to the great reed-bed and through it by channels known only to our pilots, reached the secret shrine named *Isis-among-the-Reeds*, where all had been made ready for our coming by the priests who watched there. Worn out, as well I might be, I laid me down and slept in a tiny cell, fearing no harm, since I knew surely that none would come to me or to those with me. Why I knew it I cannot say, but it was so. I knew further that I had done with Egypt; my work there was finished; henceforth we were divorced.

All that day I slept and through most of the night which followed, lulled by the whispering of the tall, surrounding reeds. I suppose that it must have



been during those night hours that I dreamed a strange dream. In it I stood upon the desert, a vast waste of sand bordered in the distance by the Nile. I was alone in this desert save for the sun that sank in the west and the moon that rose in the east, and between them, shone upon by sun and moon, by Ra and by Isis, crouched a mighty Sphinx of stone with a woman's breasts and head, which Sphinx I knew was Egypt. There she sat, immemorial, unchanging, stern, beautiful, and stared with brooding eyes toward the east whence morn by morn arose the sun.

Appeared before her, one by one, each adorned with its own sacred emblems, all the gods of Egypt, a grim, fantastic crowd such as a brain distraught might fashion in its madness. Beast-headed and human-shaped, human-headed and beast-shaped; dogs and hawks, crocodiles and owls; swamp-birds, bulls, rams, and swollen-bellied dwarfs, came this rout of gods and bowed before the stern and beautiful Sphinx that wore a woman's head.

The Sphinx opened its mouth and spoke.

"What would ye of me who have sheltered you for long?" it asked.

One shaped like a man but from whose shoulders rose the beaked head of an ibis crowned with a crescent moon on which stood a feather, and holding in his hand the palette of a scribe; he whom the Egyptians named Thoth the Measurer, the Recorder, stood forward and made answer.

"We would bid thee farewell, Mother Egypt, our shelterer for thousands upon thousands of years. Out of thy mud we were created, into thy mud we return again."

"Is it so?" answered the Sphinx. "Well, what of it? Your short day is done. Yet tell me, who



gave you these monstrous shapes and who named you gods?"

"The priests gave them to us and the priests named us gods," answered the ibis-headed man. "Now the priests are slain and we perish with the priests, because we are but gods made of thy mud, O Egypt."

"Then get you gone back into the mud, ye gods of mud. But first tell me, where is my Spirit that in the beginning, when the world was young, I sent forth that it might be a Soul divine to rule Egypt and the world?"

"We know not," answered Thoth the Recorder. "Ask it of the priests who made us. Perchance they have hidden it away. Farewell, O Egypt, farewell, O Sphinx, farewell, farewell!"

"Farewell!" echoed all that monstrous throng and then faded miserably away.

There was silence and with it solitude; the Sphinx stared at Nothingness and Nothingness stared at the Sphinx, and I, the watcher, watched. At length out of the nothingness arose something, and its shape was the shape of woman. It stood before the Sphinx and said,

"Behold me! I am thy lost spirit, but thou, O Egypt, didst not create me, for I created thee by a divine command. I am she whom men know as Isis here upon the Nile, but whom all the world, and all the worlds beyond the world know as Nature, the visible garment of the Almighty God. Gone are those phantasies, man-nurtured and priest-conceived. Yet I remain and thou remainest, aye, and though we be called by many names in the infinite days to come as we have been called in the infinite days that are gone, ever shall we remain until this little floating globe of earth ceases from



its journeyings and melts back into that from which it came, the infinite arms of the infinite God."

Then the human-headed Sphinx rose from the rock whereon it had lain from the beginning. It reared its giant bulk, it went upon its knees and bowed to the woman-shape, the tiny woman-shape that was Isis, that was Nature, that was the Executrix of God. Thrice it bowed—and vanished.

The Spirit was left and I, Ayesha, was left. The Spirit turned and looked on me and lo! to my sight it was shaped as I am shaped. Sadly it looked, with grieving eyes, but never a word it spoke.

"Mother. My mother," I called, "speak to me, my mother!"

But never a word it answered, only it pointed to the skies and suddenly was gone. Then I, Ayesha, I stood alone in the immeasurable desert looking at the setting sun, looking at the rising moon, looking at the evening star that shone between, and wept and wept and wept because of my loneliness. For what company is there for a human soul in sun and moon and evening star when the spirit that formed it and them has departed, leaving them to gaze one upon the other, voiceless in the void?

Such was my dream upon which I have pondered from year to year, asking an answer to its riddle from sun and moon and evening star, and finding none. Only the spirit can interpret its own problems, and to me, because of my sins, because, like the gods of Egypt I am fashioned of mud that veils my soul's dim lamp within, as yet that spirit is choked and dumb. Still, one day the Nile of death that I have dammed from me for so long will burst its barriers and wash away the mud. Then the lamp will shine out again; then the spirit will



come and refresh it with its holy oil and breathe upon it with its breath, and in that breath perchance I shall understand my dream and learn the answer to its riddle.

Indeed already Time lays its foundations bare, for does not Holly tell me that for nigh upon two thousand years her gods have been dead in Egypt? For awhile they lingered on beneath the Greeks and Romans, changed masks of what once they were; for awhile their effigies were still painted upon the coffins of her people. Then the star of a new Faith rose, a bright and holy star, and in its beams they withered and crumbled into dust. Only the old Sphinx remains staring at the Nile and mayhap in the silence of the night holds commune with Isis the Mother, telling of dead kings and wars forgot, for being Nature's self, Isis alone can never die although from age to age her vestments change.

Yea, when I, Ayesha, fired the hall and burned those foul Persian feasters, with them I slew the gods of Egypt, and their sad and solemn statues stared a farewell to me through that wavering wall of flame. Nay, it was not I who did it, nor was it I who brought its doom on Sidon and his death on Ochus, but Destiny that used me as its sword, as I used Bagoas, me, Fate's doom-driven daughter.

When I awoke it was still dark save for the light of the sinking moon, and in the night-wind, with a faint continual voice, the tall reeds whispered their prayer to Heaven. For though we know it not, all that has life must pray or die. From the great star rushing through space on its eternal journey to the humblest flower nestling beneath a stone, everything must pray, for prayer is the blood of the spirit that is in them and if that blood freezes, then



they are resolved to matter that cannot grow and, knowing neither hope nor fear, is lost in the blind gulf of darkness.

I hearkened to those whispering reeds telling of the mysteries below to the mysteries above, and on the wings of their sweet petitions, sent up my own to Heaven.

For in truth I was troubled and knew not what to do. Here I could not bide for long, since surely, soon or late the Persians would seek me out and surely Bagoas, to cover his own crimes, would slay me as the destroyer of his king. This did not affright me who was weary of the world with all its horrors and in a mood to walk the gate of death, hoping that beyond it I might find a better. But there were those with me, my fellow servants to whom I had sworn safety and who put their faith in me, as though in truth I were the goddess herself, and if I died, certainly they would die also.

Therefore I must save them if I could. Yet how? I had no ship in which to flee from Egypt, and if it were to hand, whither should I fly now that all the earth was Persian? Oh! that Noot were here to counsel me. That he lived somewhere I was sure, since had not his voice spoken in the shrine and this by no priestly trick, for when I put up that prayer for guidance, I knew not how it would be answered or by whom, or if indeed it would but fall upon the deaf ears of the winds, and like a dead leaf, in their breath be blown away and lost.

Yes, he still lived, yet how could I know that it was here he lived? Mayhap he spoke from far beyond this stormy air of earth. Even so he who had counselled me once might counsel me again.

"O whispering reeds," I cried in my heart, "with all your million tongues, pray east and west and



north and south, that Ayesha in her need may be helped of the wisdom of the holy Noot."

Yes, thus I prayed like a little, bewildered child who sees God in a cloud and thinks that flowers open for her joy and that the great Pleiades look down from the sky and love her. Yes, toil and grief and terror had made me like a little child.

Well, it is to such, rather than to the proud and learned, the rulers of the earth and the challengers of Heaven, that answers oftenest come and with them knowledge of the truth. At least to me, emptied of strength and wisdom and in that weak hour, forgetful even of my beauty, my great deeds, and the lore that I had won, swiftly there came an answer.

Of a sudden, at the first blush of dawn upon night's pale cheek, a priestess stood by my pallet, "Awake, O Isis-come-to-Earth," she said, bowing. "A man stands without who would have speech with you. He came here in a boat and when he was challenged answered with all the signs, aye, and even spoke the secret words known to few, those words that open the sanctuary's door. The priests questioned him of his business. He answered that he could tell it only to her who bore the jewelled *sistrum*, to her who veiled her head with cloud like a mountain-top, to that Prophetess who in all shrines is known as Child-of-Wisdom, but who among men was named Ayesha, Daughter of Yarab."

Doubting me of this man and scenting treachery, I caused that instructed priestess to repeat one by one the mystical words that he had spoken. At last she uttered a certain syllable of which even she did not know the meaning. But I knew it and knew also who had its custody.



Filled with a great hope I rose and wrapped myself in a dark garment.

"Lead me to this man," I said, "but first make sure that three priests stand round him with drawn swords."

She went and presently returned again, saying that the man awaited me in the fore-court of the little temple, guarded as I had bidden. To this court I followed her. It was but a small place, like to a large room. I entered it from the sanctuary to the west. Through the eastern door poured the first rays of the rising sun, that struck upon a man who stood waiting in the centre of the court, guarded by three priests with lifted swords.

I could not see his face, though perhaps even beneath my cowl he could see mine upon which those rays also struck. At least I saw him start, then fall to his knees, raising his hand in salute with a quick and curious motion. It was enough. I knew him at once. This man was Philo and no other. With a word I bade the armed priests leave us and the priestess who had accompanied me bide in the shadow. Then I went forward, saying,

"Rise, Philo, for whom I have looked so long that I began to think you were no more to be found beneath the sun. Whence come you, Philo, and for what purpose?"

"O Prophetess, O adored, O Lady divine," he answered in a voice of joy, "I, your slave in the flesh and your fellow servant in the goddess, greet you whom never I hoped to see again after all that has passed in Egypt. Suffer that I may kiss your hand and thereby learn that you are still a woman and not a ghost."

I stretched out my hand and reverently he touched it with his lips.



"Now tell your tale, friend Philo," I said. "Whence come you, most welcome Philo, and by what magic do you find me here?"

"I come from far to the south, Prophetess, out of an ancient land of which you shall learn afterward. For three moons have I struggled over difficult seas driven by contrary winds, to reach the mouths of Nile and to find you, if still you lived."

"And who sent you, friend Philo?"

"A certain Master who is known to both of us, he sent me."

"Is he perchance named Noot?" I asked in a low voice, "and if so, did you sail hither over mortal seas, or over those through which Ra travels in the Under-world?"

This I said wondering, for it came into my mind that he who knelt before me might perchance be not a man but a shadow sent to summon me to the halls of Osiris."

"Mortal seas I sailed; those of the Under-world still await my prow, O Wisdom's Daughter. Here is the proof of it," and drawing a roll from his bosom, with it he touched his brow in token of reverence, then gave it to me.

I broke the seals, I opened that roll, and by the light of the rising sun I read. It ran thus:

"From Noot, the son of Noot, the high-priest, the guardian of Secrets, to Ayesha, Child of Isis, Wisdom's Daughter, the Instructed, the Oracle: Thus saith Noot.

"I live, I do not sleep in my eternal house. My spirit shows me that which passes upon the Nile. I know that you have obeyed my commands which I gave to you before we parted in the bygone years, O my begotten in the goddess. I know that you have waited patiently in faith through many tribu-



lations. I know also that this writing will find you in an hour of great peril when for the second time you have escaped from fire, leaving behind you the ashes of your foes. Come to me now and at once, Philo the beloved brother and the consecrated *sistrum* that is the sceptre of your office being your guides. Philo shall lead you; through all dangers the *sistrum* shall be your shield. I write no more.

"Obey, Mouth of Isis, bringing with you those that are left to the service of the goddess. Read the seal of Noot, high-priest and prophet, and tarry not."

I read and hid away the roll. Then I asked, "Upon what wings do we fly to Noot who is so far from us, friend Philo?"

"Upon those of a ship that is known to you, Prophetess, the ship named *Hapi*, upon which already you have passed many perils. She lies yonder fully manned in the outer fringe of this sea of reeds."

"How did you find those reeds, and how did you know that I was hidden among them?" I asked curiously.

"Noot marked them on a chart he gave me and told me that in them, where, as the story runs, Isis discovered the heart of Osiris, there I should find the child of Isis. Prophetess, inquire no more."

I heard and returned thanks in my heart. Truly what I whispered to the whispering reeds had been borne to the ears of Heaven.

The trireme *Hapi*, with her mast struck, lay hidden in shallow water midst beds of tall bulrushes and papyrus plants, into which Philo had worked her by the moonlight. All that day we laboured lading her with the treasures of the temple of Isis



and those of the secret shrine, which were many, for during these times of trouble much gold and priceless furnishing of precious metals had been hidden here among the reeds. Also with them were some of the most ancient and hallowed statues of the goddess fashioned in gold and ivory and alabaster stone.

All of these together with my own great wealth of jewels and other gear were borne in boats to the *Hapi* and stored within her hold where they lay hid beneath much merchandise that Philo had purchased at the ports of Nile. Hither he had come disguised as a merchant from the south, having his ship laden with the produce of Punt such as ivory and rare woods. These he sold at the ports where he gathered tidings of all that passed in Egypt, and having purchased other goods in place of them, passed unsuspected up the Nile to the secret Isle of Reeds where Noot had bidden him make inquiry for me at the time of full moon in this very month. It was not difficult for him to find this isle as it seemed that, being an initiate of Isis, once in bygone days he had visited it on the business of the goddess.

While we were at this work we saw boats full of Persian soldiers pass down Nile, as though they searched for someone, and toward the evening saw them return up Nile again, heading for Memphis. I knew for whom they sought and noted that they did so very idly, since all believed that I and my company had perished with the Persians in the burning temple.

At nightfall I gathered the priests and priestesses, in all they were thirty and three in number, and spoke to them, saying,

“Here in Egypt we who are the servants of the goddess can stay no more. The gods of Khem are



fallen, their shrines are desolate, and death by sword and fire, or by the torturer's hooks, is the lot of those that worship them. Noot, the high-priest, the Master, the Prophet, summons us from afar, bidding us bear the worship of the goddess to new lands that lie I know not where. Philo, our brother, is his messenger and here is the message written in this roll; read it if you will. I, the Oracle and Prophetess, obey the summons; this very night I sail setting my course for seas unknown, and trusting to the goddess to be my guide, mayhap into the gates of death. Noot the high-priest bids you to accompany me. Yet I give you choice. Bide on here if you will and live out your lives disguised as scribes or peasants, for in the temples you can no longer find a home. Mayhap thus you shall escape the vengeance of the Persians. Or come with me if you will, knowing that I promise you nothing. Let each speak as the Spirit directs the heart within."

They consulted together; then one by one they said that it was their mind to be of my company since they held it better to die with me and pass pure to the arms of the goddess rather than to live on defiled, or perchance to perish miserably beneath the stripes of the executioners, having first been forced to do sacrifice to the Persian god of Fire. So man by man and woman by woman they swore the oath that might not be broken by those who would escape the jaws of the Devourer, and in token kissed the holy *sistrum* that I held to the lips of each. Then for the last time we celebrated the rites of Isis in a temple of Isis on the Nile and with weeping and with woe sang the psalm of farewell, such as is chanted over the dead of our fellowship.

This done we went to the boats and were rowed on board the *Hapi*.



When the moon was bright the mariners, fierce, foreign men most of them, such as I had never seen before, who wore great earrings of gold and had rings thrust through their noses, poled the vessel out from among the reeds into the deep waters of the Nile. Here they hoisted the mast and set the sails which presently filled before the strong wind blowing from the upper land, and bore us forward swiftly.

Passing out of the Nile by a little-used mouth, as we could do now that the river was in flood, we entered the canal that joins the seas, which canal the old Pharaohs dug and the Persians had caused to be cleared of drifting sand. By it, though not easily, for in places it was both narrow and shallow, at length we came safely into the Red Sea and bade farewell to Egypt. None hindered us on this journey, and, having crossed the lakes, only once did we stay at a little unravaged town at the far mouth of the canal, to buy bread, fresh fish, and meat wherewith to stock our ship.

This town we found to be full of rumours, for the news of the death of Ochus had reached it and many tales were told of the manner of his end. That which these coast-dwellers favoured was that Set the god had appeared in person at a feast, and seizing Ochus, had set him upon a winged Apis, that very Apis bull which he had sacrificed and eaten, and borne him away to hell. At this fable I smiled, though indeed in it there was a seed of truth, since without doubt, if there be a hell, the blood-soaked Ochus was its inhabitant that day.

Now of all that journey I, who grow weary of writing, will omit the story. Most marvellously it prospered, so much so that I think, unseen by us,



spirits from the Under-world must have stood upon our prow. From day to day a strong and steady wind blowing from the north drove us forward swiftly. No storm smote us nor did we strike upon any rock, and when we made land for water, either it was uninhabited, or the folk who dwelt there, strange barbarous folk, were friendly.

So the time went by creeping from moon to moon and ever we sailed on southward. Nor was the time unhappy, since there I sat in that same cabin which had been mine when Pharaoh gave me as a bribe to Tenes and that therefore was familiar to me, having something of the aspect of a home. Indeed with a certain taste of acid pleasure, from time to time I recalled all that had happened to me upon this ship and in that very cabin. For instance where I had wrung the writing from the passion-maddened Tenes; where he had stood and knelt; where his shadow had struck upon the cedar walls. There, too, in the wood was an arrow hole, which arrow should have drunk my life.

Then in the waist of the ship was the place where the boarders from the *Holy Fire* had won aboard, whence Kallikrates, the Grecian captain turned heirophant, had beat them back so gallantly. Aft, also, was the shelter where I had visited him and dressed his wounds that were almost to the death. Here I placed upon his finger the charmed scarab ring of Khæmuas, the Magician, whereon were cut symbols with a secret meaning, though they seemed to read only as "Son of Ra," that this ring might raise him from the darkness of death, as Osiris rose and as Ra rises from the Under-world.

Here, too, it was that I heard him mistake me for another woman and to that woman give his thanks, thus opening my eyes to all the folly of my heart.



Years ago these things had chanced to me, and now when they were dead things, I say that I could dream of them with that soft grief which is like to the tenderness of eve after the promise of the morning and the burning noonday heat have become but memories buried beneath the dust of time. Yet it is true that now and again those memories renewed their life, especially within the shrines of sleep.

Oh! it was all so long ago. Had not Philo's beard, that I remembered brown and rich, since then grown gray, and were not his curling locks thinned upon his temples? And I who then was young, had I not grown to middle-age, though still I remained more lovely than any other woman in the world, and was not my soul burdened with much learning, and had not the sorrows I had passed pierced it with a thousand spears? Now, too, doubtless Kalikrates was dead, and all the dreams to which he alone among men had given birth within me had gone wherever dreams may go, perchance to be lost in the vast unknown, or perchance after the change called death, there to be found again?

Yet I, I wandered forward on my path, Fate-driven as of old, to what end I knew not and did not greatly care to know. For now it seemed my part was played; the world and its stirrings were left behind me and the last shreds of my web must be spun of poor stuff in petty, unknown places, where I should patter prayers beneath an alien sky till it pleased death to enfold me in its wings and bear me to the depths of its enormous habitations.

Well, so let it be, since, as I have said, I was weary of the world; its toils, its bloody issues, and its perpetual strivings to grasp that which man or woman may not hold—except in dreams.

With Philo I talked much, but always of the past;



of those things which we had experienced together, or of other events of his earlier, adventurous life, or of my own. A most pleasant companion was this Philo, of a shrewd wit and some learning also, a brave citizen of the world who had seen much, and yet one who revered the gods, whatever the gods might be, and had thoughts of that which lies beyond the world, whatever this may be. But of the present or of what had happened to him since he sailed away with Noot, my Master, when Ochus invaded Egypt, and least of all of the future and whither we went or why, I did not talk at all.

For when these matters came to my lips, as they did even before we were clear of Nile, Philo made a certain sign to me which being interpreted meant that he was under an oath, a very solemn oath, not to speak of any of them, which oath I respected, as indeed I was bound to do. Therefore I asked no more and sailed on careless as a child that recks not of what is to come and from whom death is still very far away.

