

CHAPTER XIX

THE HERMITAGE OF NOOT

"TELL me of what has passed in Egypt since Ochus conquered and Nectanebes fled away. Does Ochus still live, Daughter?" asked Noot after a pause during which both of us had sat staring at the ground.

"Nay, Father, Ochus is dead and by my hand, or through it," and I told him all that story of the burning of the temple of Isis at my command and of the Persians who defiled it.

"A great deed such as you alone could have planned," he muttered, "but terrible, terrible!"

"Then your soul must bear its burden, Prophet, since it was your voice that we heard in the sanctuary, when in our extreme we prayed for guidance, and it told us to go forward. There are those with me who can bear witness that they heard your very voice, as I do."

"Mayhap, Daughter. It is true that on a certain day not so many moons ago, I seemed to hear you calling to heaven in great trouble and danger, also that by direction which came I know not whence, I answered in my spirit that you must 'fulfil and fear not.' What you were to fulfil I did not know, though it came to my mind that the business had something to do with the burning of a temple."

"As it had indeed. Well, I fulfilled, as Ochus Artaxerxes and some hundreds of his Persian

ravagers can testify before all the gods until the end of time, for those dogs at least have ceased to pollute the earth and to-day are enriching hell. There let them lie with Tenes and Nectanebes also, if in truth he has joined them, and many another false priest and king. Afterward we will talk of them and all their deeds of shame. But first tell me why I am here. For what end did you summon me from Egypt? Was it to save me from death?"

"Nay, Ayesha, from more than that. Why should I wish to hold you back from the great boon of death in which so soon I must have joined you? I summoned you because I was commanded so to do, that now when Isis has passed from Egypt, you should cause her worship to re-arise at Kôr which was her ancient home. It is willed that here you should abide and once more build up this people and make it great by the help of the Queen of Heaven who then will lead it on to triumph and to glory."

"That is a mighty task, Prophet. Still perchance with your aid it may be done if the gods give me life and wisdom."

He shook his head and answered,

"Look not to my aid, for at length my day is finished. Has not Philo told you that I mix no more with matters of the world, I who for years past have dwelt a hermit in a terrible place, sheltered only by a cave and lost in the contemplation of holy things?"

"No, Father, he has told me little or nothing—by your will, or so he said," I replied, amazed.

"Yet it is so; moreover, presently I must return to that prison whence I came, there to await the change called death. I have played my part, but your work still remains to do; Philo will aid you in it."

"Why do you live in that place, Father, leaving me without the guidance of your wisdom?"

"Because there I guard a great secret, that was revealed to me long ago, it matters not how, the greatest secret in the whole world—that of how men may escape from death and live on eternally upon the earth."

Now I stared at him, thinking that age and abstinence had made him mad. Then, to test the matter, I asked,

"If it be so great a secret, why do you tell it to me, Master?"

"Because I must. Because I know well that if I do not, you would discover it for yourself, and being unwarned, would fall into the trap, and still living beneath the sun, dare to clothe yourself with this garment of immortality. It was for this reason that until twice the command had come to me, I would not summon you to Kôr."

Now a new thought thrilled my soul. If this strange tale were true; if indeed here on earth there could be found such a door leading to the divine, why should I not pass it and become as are the gods? Only I did not believe that it was true.

"Surely you have dreamed in your loneliness, my Father," I said. "But know that if you did not dream, if it were true, I, Ayesha, should be minded to wear that robe of life eternal. Why not, O Prophet?"

"Because, Ayesha, the man or woman who dared to eat of this fruit forbidden to their race here on earth, where death is decreed for all, would be a man or woman who dared to enter into hell."

"I think otherwise, Prophet Noot, I think that this man or woman would enter into glory and become the ruler of the world," I answered, and as I

spoke the words my eyes flashed and my breast heaved.

"Not so, Ayesha, since from that fatal peak of pride Heaven will beat back all human feet. Oh, hearken to me and purge your soul of the madness of this desire by which I see already it is possessed. It was laid upon me to reveal this secret to you, which I think was given me for that very purpose, so that you might show your greatness by rejecting it, the deadliest bribe that the god of Ill ever offered to mortal woman."

"Or perchance by accepting it, Master!"

"Nay, nay! Bethink you. Is the world a fit place for the undying? Moreover, this secret that I guard is but the world's spirit, not that of immortality; the hidden force from which our earth draws its strength, but which will perish with the earth, as it must do upon a day still hidden in the deeps of time. The drinker of that cup therefore would become, not eternal, but long-lived only, destined to perish at last with this passing star. For him death would not be destroyed, it would only be delayed, waiting ever to snare him in the end. Meanwhile he must endure desolate and alone, watching the generations pass one by one to their appointed rest; while, filled perchance with fearful appetites which he must know eternally and yet remain unsatisfied, he stands but as a frozen rock upon the plain, wearing a human shape, yet alien to mortality, though still torn by its ambitions, its loves, its hates, its hopes, its fears, and waiting terrified for that predestined moment when this globe shall crumble and death shall devour it and him.

"I am old, I am feeble, my hour is well nigh done, I pass to my repose in Heaven. Ayesha, I have no strength to stay your feet, if you elect to drink

this cup my weak hand cannot dash it from your lips. Yet as one who has taught and loved you, as one to whom the gods have given wisdom, I pray you to thrust aside this great temptation. As our faith teaches truly, already your spirit is immortal and has its home prepared above. Desire not, therefore, to perpetuate your flesh, since if you do, Ayesha, I tell you that you will become but as a painted mummy in a tomb, simulating life, yet dead and cold within. Swear to me, Daughter, that you will lock this knowledge in your heart and thrust the poison from your lips."

"You speak wisely," I answered, "aye, as one inspired by the truth, and though I take no oaths, it is my purpose to do your will. Yet, Father, what is this secret? Having told me so much, tell all, lest I should go to discover it for myself."

"Daughter, near to this ancient city, amid the mountain cliffs, deep in the bowels of the rocks burns a travelling fire which is the very soul of the world, the flaming heart that gives it life. Yet this fire is no fire, but rather the essence of existence, and he who bathes in it will be filled with that essence and endure while it endures."

"Perchance such a one might be destroyed by that fire," I answered doubtfully.

"Daughter, I would that I could leave you thinking thus, for then a great fear would pass from me. But we who are the chief servants of Isis dare not hide the truth one from another, since to do so is to break our oaths. Moreover, in this matter I do not speak with my own voice, but with that of a Strength which is greater than I, to whom now I stand so near that almost it and I are one. Therefore to your eyes I must withdraw all veils, showing you what is, as it is, and not as I would have it be. Yonder fire

will not destroy the mortal who finds the courage to stand in its raging path; it will give him life, and with it such strength, such beauty, and such wisdom as have never been the lot of man born of woman. Also it will give him such passions, such despairs, such enending woes as hitherto no mortal heart has known.

"There is the truth. Ask me not how it comes into my keeping and what that voice may be which is speaking it through my lips. A minute gone this truth was mine alone, or perchance mine and one other's. Now it is yours also, and being yours, I pray to that Divine from which we come and whither we return again, that it may give you strength and the true wisdom, knowing all, to reject all, and turning aside from this glittering guerdon of enduring life, patiently to walk your human path to the end appointed to our human feet."

"Will you show me this fire, Prophet?"

"Aye, if you will, for so I am commanded," he answered faintly; "yet why look upon that which must excite desire?"

Then weariness overcame him and he sank down swooning, so that had I not caught him, he would have fallen.

Noot abode three days at Kôr and talked with me of many things, but at that time of the wonderful Secret of Life he spoke no more. As though by consent both of us let that matter lie awhile. For the rest there was much to say. I told him everything that had passed in Egypt and the outer world since long years before he had left me to sail down Nile, never to return. I told him how I had obeyed his last commands to the letter, and surrounded though I was by foes, had preserved the

worship of Isis in her temple from season to season, celebrating her festivals in their appointed course, though I never dared to leave its walls.

"So, Ayesha," he said when I had done, "while I have been a hermit here at Kôr, you have been a hermit at Memphis. Well, each of us has served the goddess as best might be, so may she reward us both according to our deserts, which doubtless are but small. And now my task is finished, but yours lies before you, seeing that you still have strength, even if your youth has gone."

"Yes," I answered somewhat bitterly, "mid-age has overtaken me, my youth has passed in the service of Heaven, and what has Heaven given to me after all my wars and strivings? Just this—that in a savage, desolate land among ruins and barbarians I must begin anew. I must restore a faith decayed, collect those barbarians into armies and order them, enact laws and cause them to be obeyed, fight battles, till lands, build ships and carry on commerce, collect revenues and spend them wisely, labour without cease day by day, finding but little rest at night because of the troubles that await the morrow. I must be at once a high-priestess, an oracle, a general, a law-giver, a judge, an architect, a land-tiller and a queen beneath an alien sky; without counsel, without friends, without love, without children to tend me in my age or to pile the earth upon my bones. Such is the lot that the goddess has given to her priestess Ayesha in payment of all her strivings."

Thus I spoke bitterly enough, but Noot answered with a gentle smile,

"At least, Daughter, it might have been more evil. You have a planning and a thoughtful mind and here you can shape all things afresh to your de-

sire. You love power and here you will be absolute, a very queen, you who cannot brook denial. Here there will be none to say you nay. You hate rivals who would rule alone. Here they will be lacking. You desire to remain celibate who are wed to the spirit. Here no more kings or others will come to trouble you, plotting to win your beauty. It has ever been your wish to commune with Nature and that Divine from which it springs; here in this deserted place is Nature's very home and in solitude the Divine draws near to empty souls.

"Truly you should be thankful, therefore, whose prayers have been fulfilled, who have attained to all you sought, whose ambitions are satisfied and who in the holy calm and the healthful weariness that follows upon long-continued labours, at last when your task is done, will sink gently to the grave to seek their reward elsewhere. Soon, very soon, you will be as I am and when that day comes there will be an empty hermitage yonder where in darkness and in contemplation you can patiently await the end and those new endeavours which, after it, may be appointed to you elsewhere. For be sure of this, Ayesha—all existence is a ladder up which painfully and with many slips we must climb step by step."

"And when we reach the top, what then, Master?"

"I do not know, Daughter, but I do know that if we fall to the bottom, all those steps must be climbed again, only this time the rungs of the ladder will be wreathed with thorns."

"It seems that yonder hermitage of yours is no home of joy, my Father."

"Nay, Daughter. It is a home of grief and of repentance. The joy lies beyond. Such are the philosophy of life and the teachings of all religion.

Be sorrowful and afterward you will rejoice. Rejoice and afterward you will be sorrowful."

"A sad philosophy, Prophet, and such lessons as slaves learn beneath the whip."

"Aye, Ayesha, but one that must be endured, as, if they could speak, Tenes and Ochus and Nectanebes would tell you to-day."

So he droned on who grew weak and senile, having become but the dry shell of a man, whence the sap had withered, like to a sterile nut indeed, from which, if it were sown, no shoot would spring. At length wearying of his melancholy talk, I fell to the thought of that Fire of Life raging in its eternal vigour beneath his hermitage, which, as he swore, would give unending beauty, youth, glory, and dominion to him who could find faith and courage to dare its terrors.

On the following day I accompanied Noot back to his hermitage for the quiet of which he seemed to yearn, so much so indeed that even for my sake whom he loved more than anything on earth and in whose fellowship he delighted, he would not be separated from it for another hour.

It was a rough journey that we made borne in litters to the foot of the great precipice which surrounds the plain of Kôr like to a measureless wall chiselled by Titans at the shaping of the world. We climbed up a cleft in that wall and entered a hidden fold of rock, invisible from below. Following this fold we came to the mouth of a cave. Here I noted that food was set in plenty by the dwellers in this land who revered Noot as a prophet and thus supplied him with his sustenance. Here also were torches which were lit by those who accompanied us to give us light upon our journey through

the cave that was long and rough. At length we came to its end to find before us a terrible chasm. Thousands of feet above us was a line of blue sky and beneath lay a gulf of darkness. Out into this chasm down which winds raved and howled, ran a giant spur of rock of which the end was lost in darkness. I looked at it doubtfully and said,

"Where then is your habitation, Noot, and by what road is it reached?"

"It lies yonder in the darkness, Daughter," he answered, smiling, "and this is the road that those who would visit me must travel," and he pointed to the spur of rock that trembled in the roaring gale, adding, "To my feet it is familiar; moreover, I know that on it as elsewhere I am protected from harm. But if you fear to walk such a path, turn back while there is still time. Perhaps it would be better that you should turn back."

Now I looked at the trembling rock and then I looked at Noot, my Master.

"What," thought I to myself, "shall I, Ayesha, who dread neither man nor devil, be afraid to follow where this frail old priest can lead? Never will I blench from peril though in it lies my death."

So I stared him in the face and answered,

"To the task, Father, and swiftly, for here the wind blows chill. I go first; Philo, follow me close."

Now Philo, who was my companion upon this adventure, glanced at me with questioning eyes, but being a brave man and one who as a sailor was accustomed to perilous heights, said nothing.

For a moment Noot paused, looking upward, perchance to pray or perchance for other reasons. Then having asked Philo how long it was to the time of sunset and been answered it lacked between the half and the fourth part of an hour before Ra

sank behind the western cliff, he started, walking boldly down the spur. I followed next, and last came Philo.

Very terrible was that journey in the uncertain light which as we progressed into the gulf grew ever fainter, till at last we were wrapped about with gloom. Moreover, always the spur of rock narrowed, and the raving gusts of wind which blew about that hideous gorge buffeted us more fiercely.

Still we went on leaning our weight against them, and as we went a kind of exaltation seized me, as it does always in moments of great danger, so that my heart grew bold and feared no more. I would match myself against these elemental strengths as I had matched myself against those of hostile and desiring kings, and conquer them. Or perchance it was the breath from the divine fire that burned below that already had entered into me. I cannot say, but this I remember, that before I had reached the point of that fearful rock I was filled with a wild joy and could laugh at Philo crawling after me with hesitating steps and breathing prayers now to Isis and now to the Grecian gods that he had worshipped as a child.

At length we came to the end of that long needle which thrust itself thus into the dark stuff of space, and as we did so all light went out of the sky above, leaving us plunged in blackness. I seated myself upon the throbbing point of rock, clinging to Philo who had done likewise, and cried into the ear of Noot, kneeling at our side,

"What now? Show us and be swift, lest we should be thrown from this place like stones from a sling."

"Hold fast and wait," answered Noot.

We did so, grasping the roughness of the rock

with our hands. Then suddenly a marvel happened, since from somewhere, I know not whence and have never learned, a fierce red ray of light, cast doubtless by the setting sun, struck us through some hole in the opposing cliffs. Aye, it struck like a blazing sword, showing all things that could be seen. They were these: ourselves crouched upon that point of rock; infinite space beneath us, infinite space above reaching up to a single star that shone upon the sky, and we three hemmed in by two black precipices. Moreover, they showed, not four paces from the point, a huge trembling stone that was joined to that fearsome spar by a little bridge of wood laid from the one to the other by the hand of man, which bridge rose and fell and rocked as the great stone trembled on its farther side.

"Follow me swiftly before the light dies," cried Noot as he stepped across this bridge and, reaching the crest of the trembling stone, stood there like a ghost illumined with fire; like also to that figure which I had seen watching from the brow of the Ethiopian's head when we entered the harbour from the sea.

I obeyed and joined him, and after me came Philo.

By the last rays of that fleeting light we descended a rough stairway cut on the farther side of the Trembling Stone and of a sudden found ourselves in shelter. Light sprang up and I saw that it was held in the hand of a dwarf, a curious, solemn dwarf. Whence this creature came and who he was I do not know, but I think that he must have been a spirit, some gnome from the Under-world appointed by the Powers which ruled in that dark place to attend to the wants of the holy Noot, their Master and mine.

This I noted at least, and so did Philo, that we could never see this creature's face. Even when he moved about us, always it seemed to be hidden either by shadows or something that hung in front of it like a veil. Yet man, or gnome, or ghost, he was a good servant, since in that hermit's cave, or rather caves, for there were several of them, joined one to the other, all things were made ready. Thus a fire burned, food was prepared upon a table, and in the inner caves beds were spread, each in a little separate chamber.

The outer cave also was furnished in a fashion and I noted that in a niche stood the small statue of Isis which I remembered well, since wherever Noot my Master went in the past years when we journeyed together, that statue went with him and now still it was his companion. Indeed the tale was that it could speak and gave him counsel in all hours of doubt and trouble, and that from this enchanted thing he gathered his great wisdom. Whether or no this tale were true, I do not know, since I never heard it utter words, nor would Noot tell me when I asked him. Yet it is true that it was his custom to pray to it; also that it was very ancient and valued by him more than all the gold and jewels on the earth. Now it stood here as it had done in my Father's house at Ozal, as it had done at Philæ in his chamber, at Memphis, on the ship *Hapi* and elsewhere when we journeyed together throughout the world, and it was strange to me to behold its familiar face again in this dreadful habitation.

"Eat," said Noot, "then sleep, for you are weary."

Philo and I did as he commanded. We ate, we laid ourselves down upon the beds in the inner caves, and slept. The last thing that my eyes saw before

slumber closed them was Noot my Master, now become more of a spirit than a man, kneeling in solemn prayer before the hallowed effigy of Isis.

I know not for how long we slept, but it must have been many hours, for when we woke it was to see that dwarf whose face was always hidden, setting another meal upon the table in the outer cave. There, too, by the lamplight, I perceived Noot still praying to the statue of Isis as though he had never risen from his knees, which perchance he had not done who no longer was as are other men. It was a strange sight in that dread place and one that affrighted Philo, as he told me, and left me not unmoved, who felt that here we stood upon the edge of mortal things.

I went to him, and seeing me come, he rose from his knees to greet me, asking me whether I had rested well.

"Neither well nor ill," I answered. "I slept, yet my sleep was full of dreams, very strange dreams that boded I know not what. They told me both of the past and of the future, and the burden of them was that I seemed to see myself living alone from generation to generation in caves as you do to-day."

"May the gods defend you from such a fate, Daughter," he answered as though the thought disturbed him.

"They have not defended you, Father. Oh! how can you bear to dwell in the darkness of this dreadful place round which the winds howl eternally, companioned only by your thoughts and a dwarf who never speaks? How did you find it, how came you here, and what put into your mind the thought of choosing this burrow for a hermitage? Tell me truly, who as yet, I think, have hidden half the truth

even from me, for I am devoured with wonder and would understand."

"Hearken, Ayesha. When first we met in Arabia I was already very old, was I not, I who now long have passed the tale of man's allotted days? Before that time for many years I had been a head-priest and prophet of Isis in Egypt, also the chief Magician of that land. Yet I was not born an Egyptian nor did my eyes so much as look upon the Nile until I had counted over sixty summers."

"Where then were you born, Father?"

"Here in Kôr. I am the last descendant of the king-priests who ruled in Kôr before the great apostasy and the falling of the Sword of God. To the holy men who were my fathers had descended their knowledge of that secret of secrets whereof I have spoken to you, and ever it was their custom when age took a hold of them to withdraw into this living sepulchre and there as guardians of the Fire, to await the end. Also under many oaths each of them passed on to his descendants the knowledge of the secret.

"Thus, Daughter, it came into my keeping, for my grandsire told my father, and my father whispered it to me. Then, while my grandsire still lived, the goddess for her own ends of which now I think I see the purpose, called me from this desolate land away to Egypt, there to serve her as I have done. Again she called me to Arabia that there you might be given into my keeping, as you were for certain years. A third time she called me back to Kôr, whither I came with Philo. Here I found my grandsire dead and his son, my father, dead after him, leaving the hermitage of the Watcher of the Fire untenanted. Therefore setting Philo to command the savage tribes who dwell around the

ruins of haunted Kôr, hither I came, as for generations my forbears have done, to fill the office that they filled, and—to die.”

“Forgetting me upon whose head you left a heavy burden, my Father in Isis,” I said bitterly.

“Nay, Ayesha, I forgot you not, who knew well that at the appointed time we should meet once more, as met we have. Always in my prayers I have watched over you and many of your troubles and dangers have been made known to me in dreams. It was in a dream that I heard you calling for guidance, and sent the answer that was commanded. Aye, and before that already I had despatched Philo to Egypt to bring you to me, as also I was commanded. And now you stand here before me in my hermitage and I tell you all these things because last night I learned, while I prayed and you were lost in sleep, that we shall speak no more together. My hour is at hand and since I have no child of my body, to you, my child in the Spirit, I pass on the great secret as to you already I have passed on my high office and my wisdom. When the breath has left me, Ayesha, then to you will descend the guardianship of the Fire, and here, doubtless, when age has overtaken you, you also will end your days.”

“Is it so?” I asked, dismayed, staring around me at the rocky walls and listening to the tempest that raged eternally without.

“Aye, Ayesha, it is so, since that is the high duty laid upon your soul, whereby it shall find wings to fly to Heaven. Know that no Guardian of the Fire enters into the Fire. He watches it—no more—and if it is threatened he seals it for ever from the sight of man. Listen, I will tell you how,” and leaning forward he whispered certain words into my ear and showed me certain hidden things.

I heard, I saw, I bowed my head. Then I asked, "And if the Guardian of the Fire entered into the Fire, what then, Watcher of the Fire?"

"Daughter, I know not," he answered, horror-struck. "But then I think the Fire would become *his* guardian, a terrible guardian that at the last would also be the destroyer of its false servant. More I cannot tell, because though some have breathed its essence, none of them has dared this deed."

"Two nights ago you told me, O Noot, that this fire gives youth and beauty and uncounted days to those who bathe therein. If none has ever entered it, how know you this?"

"Because it is so, Ayesha. Moreover, I did not say that none had ever entered it. Perchance there are beings now known to the world as gods or dæmons, who, by accident rather than design, have tasted of this cup. Perchance that shape you saw standing on the Ethiopian's head, in some bygone age stood for an instant in its path. At least I repeat that it is so. Believe or disbelieve as you will, but ask me no more, and above all do not venture to solve the mystery in your mortal flesh."

"At least, Prophet, let me look upon that which I must guard," I said.

"Aye, you shall look," he answered. "It is for that reason that I have brought you here, Priestess and Daughter of Wisdom, for having looked, I do not think that you will desire to bathe in that red flame. Eat now and make ready."