

CHAPTER XX

THE COMING OF KALLIKRATES

AWHILE later we left the cave, Noot, Philo, and I, each of us bearing a lighted lamp. Clad in a dark cloak Noot led the way, his lamp in one hand and in the other a long staff such as herdsmen use upon the mountain side. Strange enough he seemed thus arrayed, with his thin, transparent face, his eyes grown large and luminous from staring at the darkness, and his long white beard showing like snow against the black texture of the cloak; more of a spirit than a man indeed, or like Charon leading shadows of the dead to that boat in which all—aye, even I, Ayesha—must embark at last. Never shall I forget his aspect as he searched for and found the stair that led to the rock-strewn slope which stretched downward for a furlong or more to the narrow passage at its end, through which presently we travelled into the infernal halls beyond.

Great were those halls or caverns; so great that we light-bearers were but as ants creeping through their vastness, so great that we could see neither their walls nor roof.

We passed through two of them, our footfalls echoing in their fearful silence, and came to a passage.

“Bide here,” said Noot to Philo, “and await us, since it is not lawful for you to look upon that which lies beyond. If perchance we should not return

within three hours so nearly as you can measure them, which may happen since we go to where there is danger for mankind, win your way back to the world and say that the gods have taken Noot the Prophet and Ayesha the High-Priestess to be of their company."

So Philo, out of whose eyes all the Grecian joyousness had fled, sat himself down upon a rock to wait, as I could see unwillingly enough, for he loved this adventure little and was troubled for the safety of me whom he loved much.

"Fear not," I whispered to him, "the hour is still far in which Ayesha must fall a ripe fruit from the Tree of Life."

"I pray so, Child of Isis," he answered, "since surely we have entered into Hades where I would not be left without so much as a fellow shade to comfort me. Yet beware! for I know not whither that old ghost is leading you," and he glanced at the tall shape of Noot striding into the tunnel in which this cave ended, the lamp held above his head.

I followed after him, also holding my lamp aloft, though presently it became needless since now the darkness of that hole grew alive with rosy light. On like a swift shadow glided Noot, and I followed him into the heart of the light, into a place, too, where thunder was imprisoned, like winds in the bag of Æolus, aye, a place filled with glories and with roarings, though whence these came I could not guess.

We entered yet another cavern, not so very large in size and carpeted with fine white sand.

It was empty save for one thing. On the sand lay a withered shape, a hideous little shape that once had been man or woman. Whose it was and how it came there I never learned, since in the

marvel of all that followed and afterward I forgot to ask it of Noot, if indeed he could have told me. Perchance some seeker of the Fire who lived a thousand or ten thousand years before had perished of terror at the sight of it, or perchance for his or her impiety that seeker had been sacrificed by gods or men. Yet even then I thought it dreadful and ominous that the first sight my eyes beheld in this terrible place should be this shrivelled, long-haired lump of death lying there in eternal solitude, while in front of and around it played the fierce essences of Life eternal.

This cavern was filled with a light like to that of some tempestuous Libyan dawn. Also it was filled with a muttering, thunderous sound, such sound as is caused by the iron wheels of a thousand chariots rushing to battle adown a rocky way. The light multiplied and was stabbed through as though by many coloured levins flashing hither and thither; the thunders gathered to an awful roar; those unearthly chariots were rolling down upon us.

"To your knees," cried Noot in my ear. "The Fire comes, the god is passing by!"

I knelt; my hand rested by chance upon that little shrivelled form, and lo! at my touch it crumbled into dust. It had been, it was not; the grinning twisted face was gone; nothing of it remained save a lock or two of curling hair—surely it must have been a woman's hair. Then the marvel happened. Before me appeared a turning column of glorious, many-coloured brightness, that roared and bellowed like a million maddened bulls. To my eyes it seemed to take the shape of a mighty man, and in its glowing crest I saw green eyes of emerald like to those of tigers, which eyes fixed themselves upon me. Arms it had also, blood-red, splendid arms that

stretched themselves toward me as though to clasp me to that burning breast. It was terrible and yet it was most beautiful. Never until I saw it had I known beauty, no not even in the dawn or in the sunset, or in the sight of the wild shock of battle.

This mighty god of Life seemed to call to the life within me, like a king to his subject, like a master to his slave; I longed to lose myself in that embrace of fire. Half I rose from my knees. Noot caught me by the arm.

"Enter not!" he cried sternly, and again I sank down and hid my face upon the sand.

How long I lay there I do not know, for exaltation seized me and made my senses drunk, so that I could take no count of time. It may have been for a minute or an hour; I say I do not know. When I looked up again, the Fire had gone by, the god was hidden in his secret sanctuary, though still the cavern glowed with rosy light.

Noot drew me from that place. Without we found Philo pale-lipped and trembling, and together, slowly and with labour, we climbed our upward course back to the hermitage beneath the swaying stone. Here we rested in silence until at last Noot drew me aside and spoke.

"Ayesha," he said, "you have seen as it was decreed that you must see. In that burning presence temptation took hold of you, so sharp a hold that had I not been there, perchance you would have yielded, forgetting my warnings and my prayers. Now I beseech you, guard the Fire in the days to come, but look on it no more for ever, since although in other matters you are so strong, in this I feel you frail. While I live indeed never

again shall you behold it with your eyes, since first I will call upon the goddess to cut your thread of life and take you to herself."

I bowed my head but made no answer, nor did he ask for any.

What happened then? Oh! I remember that we ate of food that was made ready doubtless by the gnome-like dwarf whom I saw no more. After this Noot looked from the door of his hermitage and called to us to come swiftly, since the moment of sunset that brought with it the falling ray was at hand and the bridge must be crossed and the narrowest of the stone spur travelled ere it departed. Holding lighted lanterns in our hands, he led us to the crest of the Trembling Stone whereon the timbers of the bridge creaked and swayed. Here he clasped me in his arms, blessing me and bidding me farewell, and though he said it not, I was certain that in his mind, as at the moment I did in mine, he believed that our spirits parted for ever upon this earth; yes, believed it so surely that tears coursed down his pale cheeks.

Then suddenly the sword-like ray of fire stabbed the darkness and by it I and Philo crossed the bridge and while it endured clambered swiftly along the spur of which, I know not why, all fear had left me.

As that ray began to fade I turned my head to look my last on Noot. There in the heart of it he stood, clothed as it were with fire, as our faith tells are the messengers of Isis, Queen of Heaven. Yes, there he stood with clasped hands and uplifted eyes like to one lost in prayer. Then the ray went out like a blown lamp and the darkness fell and swallowed him.

We gained the plain in safety and through the

night were borne back to Kôr. The litter swayed; the slaves whose shoulders bent beneath the pole sang their low, weird chant inviting to sleep, but its messengers would not touch my eyelids with their rod of slumber. I could not sleep whose soul burned with a fierce wakefulness. Oh! what was this wonder that I had seen? The very fount of Life that, hidden from mankind, burns in the womb of the world! But if it were this, why did Noot speak of it as though it were a fount of Death? Why did he forbid me to taste its cup? Perhaps because not Life but Death inhabited that flame, as the little withered thing which had crumbled at my touch, that once had been man or woman—woman, as I think—hinted to the mind.

I knew not, but what I did know was that henceforth I was plighted to this god of Fire and that in some day to come I must feel his burning marriage kiss upon my brow.

When we came to Kôr at the sunrise I beckoned Philo to me and made to him the sign of silence, which being initiated, he knew well, so that neither then nor at any other time should any word concerning these mysteries pass his lips. Nor indeed could it do so as he had not looked upon the greatest of them and only from afar had listened to the thunder of the wheeling flame.

Then with a new energy, as though inspired by the breath of that fiery god, I got me to my common daily task of rebuilding a perished faith and people. Let that business be. Why should I speak of it, since Destiny decreed that I must shape my work of water or of drifting sand, not of rock or fired clay. Oh! Fate, why didst thou fool me thus? Oh, Love the Destroyer, why didst thou make of me thy tool,

and with me thus bring Isis and her worship to the dust?

How long afterward was it that Kallikrates came? But a little while, I think, though to one who has lived over two thousand years Time loses its measure and significance.

I had sent Philo to the coast, purposing to prepare for the opening up of trade and converse with the outer world. For in this rich place, when its wild people were brought beneath my yoke, who already looked upon me as one half divine, as the spirit of their ancient goddess indeed, sent back to them from Heaven, I knew that we could produce much that the teeming tribes of Libya would seek and buy. One night he returned and was at once admitted to my presence. He told me of all that he had done, or failed to do, and I praised him, then made the signal of dismissal. He hesitated a while, then said,

"Child of Isis, be pleased to learn that I have not returned alone."

"That I know already, Philo, since there were many in your company."

"Be it understood, Child of Isis, that I have brought back with me some with whom I did not set forth."

"Doubtless envoys from the peoples of the coast," I answered indifferently.

"Nay," he replied, "travellers who have wandered long among those peoples and whom I found shipwrecked and in a desperate state. Travellers from Egypt."

"From Egypt! How many, Philo?"

"Nine in all, Prophetess, though the most of them are servants."

"Good, Philo. It will please me who must dwell so much alone to talk with strangers from Egypt. They may have news of what passes on the Nile. Give them hospitality such as we can command, and all they need, and to-morrow, after the morning ceremonies, bring them to me. To-night it is too late and doubtless they are weary."

Again he hesitated, then bowed, and went, leaving me wondering, for there was that in his manner which I thought strange. Still, having spoken my commands, I would not alter them. Yet as I laid me down to sleep terror took hold of me; yes, a terror of I knew not what. I felt that evil overshadowed me with its black wings; that I was about to look upon something or someone I did not desire to see; that a doom unknown had meshed me so that I lay helpless like a gladiator over whom the net-thrower has cast his web and who lies struggling vainly, the trident at his throat. Thus often does advancing peril cast its cold shadow upon our mortal hearts which shiver at the touch of that they feel but cannot discern.

I thought that perchance I was about to die, that already Death gripped me with his clasp of ice; that in the dark recesses of the chamber where I lay already some murderer fingered the dagger which should pierce my breast, as well might happen in this wild land among man-eating savages upon whose necks I had set my heel. Again I thought that the spirits of the ancient dead whose place I occupied, were hunting me, demanding that I should give them back their own, the rule I had usurped.

Next I remembered Tenes transfixed by the sword of vengeance and knowing now that mine was the hand that drove it, and Ochus Arta-

xerxes when the poison began to burn his vitals as presently the fire would burn his company, guessing at the last that I, the outraged priestess, had brewed the cup and lit the fire. Yea, all these memories gathered round me, rising like black clouds upon my sky of life and threatening its eclipse, I who was terrified of I knew not what.

Lastly there came into my mind this tale of Philo's of shipwrecked strangers whom he had rescued and led hither to be comforted. Who were these strangers, I wondered? Assassins perchance, hid under a disguise of want and desolation, men who sought to kill me and free my spirit with their dagger-points, that it might no longer watch them here on earth. Yet, and this was marvellous, showing how blind are the eyes of our mortal flesh, never did the thought come to me that those strangers might be Kallikrates the Greek and Amenartas, aforetime Royal Princess of Egypt, she whom her desire and hate had made my foe.

I slept at last, though feverishly, only to wake when the high sun was flooding the temple court with its fierce summer rays. I rose, and since the day was one of ceremony and festival, was arrayed by my women in the queenly garments of the high-priestess of Isis and hung about with the sacred jewels and emblems of my rank.

Thus splendidly attired, I was led to my seat of state that I had caused to be placed in the inmost pillared court before a wondrous veiled statue of Truth standing on the world, which some god-gifted artist of old Kôr had fashioned in the forgotten days. Here we celebrated our service with pomp and ritual, as once we were wont to do in Egypt, though alas! the heirophants and the singers were few in number. So was the outer congregation of

half-converted worshippers creeping back from the blackness of their barbarous rites to the holy fellowship of the goddess.

The office was ended, the ringing of the *sistrum* had ceased, the blessing was given and with it the absolution of offences.

The worshippers had dispersed, save here and there one who remained to pray. I too was about to depart when Philo came, saying, humbly and hastily like one who desires to be done with an unwelcome task, that those wanderers of whom he had spoken waited upon my pleasure.

"Admit them," I answered, wondering within myself upon whom I was about to look. Malefactors perchance, I thought, who had fled from justice into far lands, or merchants driven southward by the gales, or humble seamen escaped from some sunk ship.

They came, a little knot of them, winding in and out between the great columns of the ruined temple, advancing through the shadows. Idly I noted, as they passed an open space where fell a stronger light, that the two who walked first had a noble air, different from that of those who followed after them. Then once more the shadows veiled them, whence presently they emerged before me, seated beneath the statue, and stood there, the sun's rays pouring down upon them.

I glanced at them and saw that they were man and woman, perfect man and very beautiful woman. Then I lifted my head and looked them fully in the face, only to sink back terrified, amazed, overwhelmed! Did I dream? Had some mocking spirit tricked my eyes, or were these that stood before me Kallikrates, the Grecian warrior-priest, and Amenartas, the Royal Princess of Egypt?

Lifting my hand to hide my face, I studied them beneath its shade. Oh! who could be mistaken? There before me, splendid in beauty as of old, stood the god-like Kallikrates and at his side, dark, magnificent and as yet untouched by time, or perchance protected from its ravages by arts she learned from her sire, Nectanebes the sorcerer, was the imperial Amenartas. For a moment I kept silence, gathering up my strength, ordering my spirit. Then still holding my hand before my face, I spoke coldly as though without concern, saying,

“Whence come you, noble strangers? What are your names and why do you seek the hospitality of the Queen of this ruined land of Kôr?”

Bold as ever, it was Amenartas who answered me, not Kallikrates, who stood staring about him as men do when they are uneasy in their minds or wearied with ceremonies.

“We are wanderers, Priestess, in station neither mean nor great; traders, to tell the truth, from the far north, who having suffered shipwreck and many other things at length were rescued of this servant of yours who led us here,” and she pointed to Philo standing near by with a stupid smile upon his face.

“By race we are Phœnicians called——” and she gave some name that I forget. “As to the rest, being in extremity, for those over whom we ruled rebelled against us and cast us out, we ask shelter from you until Fortune smiles upon us again, who of late has dealt us naught but frowns.”

“It is granted, Lady. But tell me, what are you to each other? Brother and sister, perchance?”

“Aye, Priestess, brother and sister, as you have rightly guessed, seeing that our names are one name.”

“That is strange, Lady; indeed I think that you

throw mud upon your father or your mother, or both, since how could these have begotten one dark, a high-born daughter of the Nile, and another fair as Apollo and having Grecian Apollo's face and mien? Again, how comes it that the sister of a Phœnician merchant binds up her locks with the circlet of Egyptian royalty?" And I pointed to the uræus-twisted band of gold upon her brow.

"Blood plays strange tricks, Priestess, searching out now the likeness of one ancestor, and now of another, so that oftentimes one child is born dark and the other fair. As for the ornament, I bought it in trade from an Arab merchant, not knowing whence it came or its significance," she began to answer unabashed, when of a sudden Kallikrates checked her, muttering,

"Have done!" Then addressing me, he said, "O Queen and Priestess, take no heed of this lady's words, since of late, because of our misfortunes, we have been forced to tell many strange tales according to the conditions of the hour. We are not Phœnicians born of one House; we are by blood Greek and Egyptian, and by relation not brother and sister, but man and wife."

Now when I heard these words my heart stood still who hoped that Isis and their oaths might have held this pair apart. Yet I answered calmly,

"Is it so, Wanderer? Tell me then, of what faith are you twain and by whom were you wed? Did some minister of Zeus join your hands, or did you stand together before Hathor's altars?"

Then while he searched for some answer that he could not find, I went on, laughing a little,

"Perchance, O noble pair, you were not wed at all. Perchance you are not husband and wife but only lover and lover mated after Nature's fashion!"

He hung his head, confused, and even the bold eyes of Amenartas were troubled.

Now I could bear no more.

"O Grecian Kallikrates," I said, "aforetime captain of Pharaoh's guard, aforetime priest of Isis, and O Amenartas, daughter of Nectanebes, by birth Royal Princess of Egypt, why do you waste words, hoping to fool one who cannot be deceived? Doubtless you have bribed yonder Philo to hide the truth, as once you bribed him to hide a certain lady upon his ship and to set the two of you ashore upon a certain island."

"If so, he has betrayed us," stammered Kallikrates, the red blood rising to his brow.

"Nay, he has not betrayed you, being one who ever keeps faith with those who pay him well. Is it not so, Philo my servant?"

I waited for an answer, but none came, for Philo had gone. Then I continued,

"Nay, Philo did not betray you, nor was it needed. Royal Amenartas, whence had you that scarab ring upon your hand?"

"It was my lord's gift to me," she answered.

"Then tell me, Kallikrates, whence had you the ring, also if there be graven on its bezel in the Egyptian writing, signs that mean 'Royal Son of the Sun'?"

"Those signs are cut upon the ring, O Queen, which in bygone years was given to me as a talisman by a certain divine priestess whom I saved in battle, that its virtues might recover me of wounds which I received in the battle. This, as I was told afterward, it had the power to do because that ring was blessed, having been fashioned like to one which Isis the Mother set as her love gift upon the hand of dead Osiris ere she breathed his soul into him

again. Or perchance it was the very same that Osiris left upon the earth when he passed to Heaven; I know not."

Thus he spoke, stumbling at the words like an ill-bred mule upon a stony path till, wearying of the tale, I broke in,

"Therefore, O Kallikrates, you in your turn gave the enchanted ancient amulet to a woman you desired, or who desired you, hoping that its virtues might consecrate your unhallowed union. O priest forsworn, how did you dare this sacrilege—to set upon your lover's hand the ring, the very ring of Isis that once great Khaemuas wore, given to you by the Prophetess of Isis to lift you from the gates of death."

Then bending forward so that the shadow of the statue behind no longer hid me, I uncovered my face and looked him in the eyes.

"I thought it!" he said, "though who could have dreamed that here in this ruin——? It is the Oracle and the Prophetess. It is the Child of Isis, the Daughter of Wisdom herself whose voice I knew again through all her feigning," and he fell to the ground so that his brow was pressed upon its stones, muttering,

"Slay me, Queen, and have done, but spare this lady and send her back to her own land, since the sin is mine, not hers, who was no priestess."

Now Amenartas stared at me with her bold eyes, then cried with a hard laugh,

"Be not so sure, my Lord, for this is scarcely possible. Well do I remember looking upon her who was called *Isis-come-to-Earth* in the bygone days, especially at a certain feast that Pharaoh gave when she unveiled to show herself to Tenes, King of Sidon, who afterward took her as his slave. But that

seeress was a very fair woman, although perchance even then somewhat faded, or so I who but a little while before had bade farewell to childhood, judged of her. Therefore this ruler of ruins can scarcely be the same, seeing that none could name her fair. Look, she is old and withered, her neck has fallen in, her shape is flattened.

"The seeress I remember had a lovely mouth of coral, but this lady's lips are thin and pale; also she had large and beauteous eyes, but those of this lady are small and almost colourless. Moreover, they are ringed beneath with lines of black, such as are common to aged virgin priestesses who have never known the love of man, though of it, perchance, their holy souls still dream even in the midst of their customary, bead-checked prayers, while, like those of slaves, their knees harden upon the stones.

"Nay, my Lord, although time works strange changes in those who have passed the meridian of their days, this priestess who hides her gray hairs beneath the vulture cap of her persuasion can scarcely be the same as that glowing pythoress upon whom once we looked in Pharaoh's halls and who, as I recall, then looked much on you."

Now I listened to this vulgar venom, the common outpouring of a small-natured, jealous heart, and smiled. Yet it is true, for in these lines I write nothing which is not the truth, that some of those poisoned shafts went home. I knew well that all the beauty that once I had was no longer mine; that the passing of the years, that care and abstinence and the turning of my heart from things mortal to those divine, added to the weight of rule and wisdom and avengement which Destiny had laid upon my brow, had robbed me of my bloom and that imperial loveliness which once enthralled

the world. Also it was true that Amenartas was still a child when I was a woman grown and therefore had Nature's vantage of me, which indeed must increase from moon to moon.

Still I smiled, and as I smiled a great thought smote me, sowing a seed of daring in the kind soil of my breast where thenceforth it was doomed to grow, to blossom, and in an unborn hour of fulfilment to bear its fearful fruit. Oh! if I have sinned against high Heaven and the commands of its minister, my guide, the holy Noot, let the recording gods remember that it was the whip of this woman's bitter tongue which drove me to the deed.

Now very gently I spoke, saying,

"Rise, Kallikrates, such words as you have heard spoken of one who once was set above you in her office can scarcely be pleasing to your ears, nor will I answer them. I know well that in them there is something of the truth and I am proud that it has been granted to me to make sacrifice to the Queen of Heaven whom I adore of such small gifts of the flesh and comeliness as once were mine. It is but another offering which I heap upon her altar, one of many.

"Yet, Kallikrates, though as I think you can no longer bow the knee before that Majesty as once you did, I pray you, if you can, to hold this lady's lips from pouring scorn upon her, as she does upon me, her priestess. I pray you to bring it to her memory that once, clad in her veil of Isis, she also worshipped at that shrine, aye, that in a time of peril, often there, she and you and I have sent up our pure petitions, though not in the 'customary bead-checked prayers' of which she speaks. Yes, bring it to her memory that though the temple of Memphis has been given to the flames, Mother Isis

hears and watches not in Egypt, but in Heaven, and that though she be slow to wrath, yet she still can smite. Now, Kallikrates, go rest you, taking your love with you, and afterward we will talk alone since, although I can forgive, I am not minded to be stoned with such words as angry women of the people throw at their rivals in the marketplace."

