

CHAPTER XXI

THE TRUTH AND THE TEMPTATION

NOT that day but on the morrow Kallikrates asked audience of me. Learning that he was alone, I received him in my private chamber and bade him be seated. He obeyed, and for awhile I watched him, the light from the window-place falling upon his golden head and upon his shining armour, battered with storm and war. For now he was clad in his soldier's garb, perchance the very same that years ago he had worn on board the *Hapi*, and thus attired looked like a king of men.

"The lady Amenartas is somewhat sick after all our journeyings," he said, "I think that the disorder which is common on the coast lands has fallen upon her, since her face is flushed and her hands are hot. Therefore she cannot wait upon you, Prophetess. Yet she bids me thank you for your hospitality, and say that she asks your pardon for any bitter words she may have spoken yesterday, since these sprang, not from her heart, but from a fever burning in her blood."

"It is granted. I know this sickness though myself I have been protected from it, and will send her medicine and with it a skilled woman to wait upon her. Bid her not to fear; it is seldom dangerous. Now, my guest Kallikrates, if it pleases you, let me hear your story; you must have much to tell since we parted in the sanctuary at Memphis. Then, you will remember, your purpose was to accompany the

holy Noot upon his mission, because you thought it best for reasons of your own to depart from Memphis for awhile. Yet I think it was in your mind to go alone, not accompanied by that royal lady who is your companion."

"This is true, Prophetess," he answered heavily, "nor did I know that the lady of whom you speak was aboard the *Hapi* until, to escape capture at the hands of the Persians, we had fled from the Nile out toward the open sea."

"I understand, Kallikrates, nor can it be denied that Fate dealt hardly, or perchance I should say kindly, with you when it caused the lady Amenartas to embark in error upon the ship *Hapi*, which sailed down Nile, instead of that of her father, Nectanebes, which set its course for Thebes and Ethiopia."

"Mock me not, Child of Wisdom. As the lady Amenartas would tell you to your face, she knew well enough upon what ship she sailed, though I knew nothing who believed that I had said farewell to her for ever. Aye, abandoning her hope of royalty and all else, and taking every risk, she embarked upon the *Hapi*, setting some other woman tricked out to her likeness to fill her place awhile among the company of Nectanebes."

"That at least was bold, and I love courage, Kallikrates. Yet—what was her purpose?"

"Is that a question that you should ask me, Lady, who know well that great-hearted women will dare much for love?"

"Whether I should ask or not, at least I have the answer to my question, Kallikrates. Of a truth, you should love and honour one who for your sake abandoned all to win what she thought more than all, even at the cost of her own shame and the ruin of your soul."

"I do love and honour her," he answered hoarsely. "When she was still a child I loved her and because of that love I slew my brother, believing that on reaching womanhood she had come to favour him, which, it seems, she did only to draw me closer to her."

"It would appear, Kallikrates, that this lady brings no good fortune to your race, since first she works the death of one of you, making a murderer of his own brother, and then of that brother fashions an apostate to his faith, yea, a traitor accursed of God and man."

"It is so," he said humbly. "Yet she loves me much, so much that whether I will it or not, I must love her, since if the woman loves enough what can the man do but follow on the path she leads? Tell me, Prophetess, you who are wise, had you been a man and sat in my place there upon the ship *Hapi*, which is a narrow prison, what would you have done, being a man I say—as I am?"

"Perhaps just what you did, Kallikrates, and therefore have become accursed, as you are, Kallikrates, seeing that the lady was sweet and loving, and that man must remain man however great the oaths he has sworn to goddesses who do not throw their arms about him or kiss him on the lips."

"Once I thought that a goddess did kiss me on the lips, Oracle of Isis, and the memory of that kiss is sweet and holy."

"Is it so?" I answered. "Well, since you are no more of our communion, I may tell you now that in the shrine at Philæ I played the part of the goddess and gave that ceremonial kiss."

Now he stared at me, reddening, then muttered, "Always I guessed it who could not quite believe

that a goddess would kiss so sweetly," and again he started like one who would ask a question that his lips do not dare to frame.

I remained silent, watching him, till presently he broke out,

"You tell me that I am accursed, Priestess. Tell me also why Isis is so wrath with me?"

"Did you not swear yourself to her alone and break your oath, Kallikrates? Do you not know that if women can be jealous, goddesses who are set far above them can be more greatly so of those who are bound to them in the mystic marriage? Have you not heard that to turn from them to a daughter of man is to offer them the most terrible of insults?"

"Isis herself was wed to Osiris, Prophetess, and I have heard of priests and priestesses who served her who were also wed."

"Perchance, Kallikrates, after absolution given by one upon whom authority is conferred to strain vows for some high end. But who gave you authority to marry, you, who indeed are not married but only a woman's lover? Did you mayhap seek it from the holy Noot upon the ship *Hapi*?"

"Nay," he answered, "that thought never came to me. Or if it came I believed that he would but heap curses upon me, or mayhap call down the vengeance of Isis upon another. You have heard, Prophetess, of what fate sometimes awaits those who tempt the feet of priests or priestesses from the strait path of their vows."

"Aye, Kallikrates, they die by fire, or they starve, or they perish shut up in some narrow, airless hole; each worship works its own vengeance for that unmeasured crime. Yet you were foolish not to make your prayer of Noot, by whom alone it could be

granted, since who knows what he would have answered."

"Is it too late?" he asked eagerly. "For every sin there is forgiveness, why not for mine? Only who could grant it; since now I know not where to look for Noot, if indeed he lives."

"For every sin there is forgiveness, Kallikrates, but only at a price. First the sin itself must be laid upon the altar as a sacrifice. For dead sins there may be forgiveness; for those that live and are continued there is none, but only stripe added to stripe and remorse piled upon remorse. As for Noot it chances that he does live and not so far away. Would you lay your case before him and hear his judgment?"

"I do not know," he answered slowly. "Hearken, Child of Wisdom. I am in a strange strait. I love this lady with my body and am bound to her, but it is not so with my spirit. Our souls, I think, are far apart. Oh! bear me witness that my heart is set on higher things; it would sail into far seas unvisited of man, but always there is this anchor of the flesh chaining it to its native shore. Amenartas does not think thus, she loves to lie bound in life's pleasant harbour, or to wander to its green banks, wafted thither by the fitful breath of common things, there to deck her brow with the wreaths of passion.

"'Let Heaven be!' she says, 'here is the happy earth beneath our feet, and round us murmur the waters of delight and I am very beautiful and I love you well. If there be gods and they are vengeful, at least their hour is not yet. This moment is ours to enjoy and to our lips it holds a glorious cup. If all the wine be drunk and the cup is shattered, at least there will remain with us their memories.

What are these gods whom you seek so madly? What do they give to man save many curses—deaths and separations, sicknesses and sorrows, adding to these promises of woe to follow when they have worked their worst on earth? Are there any gods save those that man fashions from his own terrors? man who will not be content with Nature's food, but needs must sour it with an alien poison, and even when the sun shines round him, shivers in some cold shadow that superstition casts upon his heart.'

"Thus she reasons, and such ever were her arguments."

"Tell me, Kallikrates, has any child been born to you?"

"Aye, one, a very lovely child; he died of hardships that caused his mother's milk to fail."

"And when the royal Amenartas looked upon him dead, did she still reason in this fashion, saying that there are no gods and for man there is no hope beyond the grave?"

"Not altogether, since she cursed the gods, and who curse that in which they do not believe? Also I remember that she wept and prayed those gods to give him back to her while his little heart still beat, and like a moth new-crept from its chrysalis, he yet hung to the edge of the world, drying his soul's crinkled wings in the dawning lights of Heaven. But afterward she forgot and made sacrifice to her familiar Spirit, asking it to send her another child, which prayer she tells me is in the way of fulfilment."

"So Amenartas practices magic like her father Nectanebes?"

"Aye, Lady, and it would seem not without avail, though of this matter of dealing with dæmons I neither know nor want to know anything. I think

it comes to her with her Egyptian blood, also that the Pharaoh taught her these arts in her childhood, and what is learnt then is never quite forgotten. At least I know that when we have been in trouble or in danger during our long wanderings, with secret rites upon which I do not pry, she calls upon some Familiar and that thereafter, in this way or in that, our pathway has been straightened. Indeed she did this just before Philo found us starving."

"As the path of your babe was straightened from this world to the next, Kallikrates; as the devious path of Pharaoh Nectanebes was straightened to a road which led from the throne of Egypt—but pray the lady Amenartas to ask of her dæmon whither it led, since here my wisdom fails me and I am not sure. Well, we have spoken long and so stands the case, one that might puzzle Thoth himself. Is it your pleasure, Kallikrates, to visit the divine Noot and take his counsel upon all these matters? I think that he alone upon the earth can give you guidance in them. Yet do as you will."

Kallikrates thought a while brooding, then he answered,

"Yes, it is my pleasure. When Amenartas is recovered of her sickness, we will go."

"The holy Noot is very ancient and the royal Amenartas may be sick for a long while. Therefore might it be wise to go at once, Kallikrates."

"Nay, Prophetess, I cannot. Amenartas has strange fancies and will not be left alone; she thinks that she may be poisoned; indeed that already she has tasted poison."

"Then let her make richer sacrifices to her dæmon and pray him to protect her. Certainly they will not be without avail since I can swear that here in

THE TRUTH AND THE TEMPTATION 319

Kôr no poison shall pass her lips, nor any harm come to her—save perchance from those gods whom she denies. Farewell, Kallikrates.”

He bowed to me humbly and turned to go, then after a step or two came back and said,

“The gods! The gods! who for you and me in their sum are one god, Isis, Queen of Heaven. Tell me now, I pray you that are named Wisdom’s Daughter, who and what is Isis?”

I thought a while since the question was a great one, a problem that as yet I had never tried to solve in words. Then I answered,

“By my soul I do not know. East and west and north and south, men in their millions worship this god or that. Yet is there one among them who save in dreams or ecstasies has ever seen his god, or if he tries to fashion him out before his mortal eyes, can do more than carve some effigy of wood or stone?”

Then I pointed to the veiled statue of Truth behind me, saying,

“Lo! there is Isis, a beauteous thing with a hidden face ruling o’er the world. She is one of Divinity’s thousand forms. Aye, she is its essence, frozen to the shape we know in this world’s icy air, and having a countenance chiselled differently from age to age by the changeful thought of man. She lives in every soul, yet in no two souls is she the same. She is not, yet eternally she is. Invisible, intangible; ever pursued and ever fleeing; never seen and never handled, yet she answers prayer and her throne is not in the high heavens but in the heart of every creature that draws the breath of life. One day we shall behold her and not know her. Yet she will know us. Such is Isis: formless, yet in every form; dead, yet living in all that breathes; a priest-bred phantasy, yet the one great truth.”

"If Isis be thus, what of the world's other gods?"

"They all are Isis and Isis is them all. The thousand gods men worship are but one god wearing many faces. Or rather they are two gods, the god of good and the god of evil; Horus and Typhon^o who war continually for the souls of things created by that Divine, unseen, unknown yet eternally existent, who reigns beyond the stars alone in fearful glory and from his nameless habitation looks down both on gods and men, the puppets of his hands; on the rolling worlds that bear them, on the seas of space between and on the infusing spirit whose operation is the breath of life. So it was in the beginning, is now and shall be eternally. At least, Kallikrates, thus I have been taught by the wisdom of Noot my Master, and following his path, thus my searching soul has learned. Again farewell."

He looked at me muttering,

"Child of Isis, oh! well-named Child of Isis, and Wisdom's Daughter!" and there was awe in his eyes and voice.

Now as ever he is afraid of me, I thought to myself, and how can a man come to love that of which he is afraid, since love and fear are opposites and there is no bridge between them. Oh! why did I speak to him of these high things which as yet his spirit can scarce weigh or understand? Perhaps because I am so lonely and having naught into which I can pour my mind, no vase of gold and alabaster, my deep o'erflowing thought must fill the first coarse cup of clay that chance offers to my hand, like to the storing of priceless wine in some tarry bottle which it will burst.

Surely I should learn a lesson from yonder Amenartas who knows well how to deal with such a one as he; one who still stands at thought's be-

THE TRUTH AND THE TEMPTATION 321

ginnings, looking dismayed at the steep upward path studded with sharp stones, wreathed in cruel thorns, strewn with quicksands and with pitfalls, and bordered by precipices from whose gulfs there is no return, that path which his feet long to tread yet dare not, lacking any guide.

She leads him by a different road, the road of mortal passion, bidding him to cease from staring at the stars; bidding him weave crowns of its heavy-scented flowers to set upon her brow and his. She prattles to him of daily doings, of the joy of yesterday and the promise of to-morrow, aye, even of the food he eats. And all the time she twists the spells her father taught her to strong ropes of charm, purposing by these to tie him to her everlastingly. Aye, like a gilded spider, that black-browed, bounteous-breasted witch meshes him in her magic web, binding him fast and yet more fast, till at length he lies there staring at her stirless as a mummy in its wrappings.

Thus I mused, clothing my musings finely yet knowing in my heart that what prompted them was the vilest of all causes and the most common, naught indeed but the jealousy of one woman of another. For now I knew the truth, it could no more be hidden, no longer could I blind my eyes, for it had come home to me while he told me his sad story. I loved this man; yes, and had always loved him since first I looked upon him far away at Philæ, or certainly since, veiled in the wrappings of the goddess, I had yielded to Nature's promptings and kissed him upon the lips.

Oh! I had beaten down that truth, I had buried it deep, but now it arose like a ghost from the grave and frightened me with its stern, immortal eyes. I loved this man and must always love him and no

other, and he—he feared yet adored me, as some high spirit is adored at its appearing—but love me he did not who was set so far above him.

Yes, I was jealous, if the great can be truly jealous of that which is small, for though we were wide apart as continent from continent, yet we both were women desirous of one man. With my spirit I was not jealous, for that I knew must conquer in the end, being so strong, so armoured against all the shafts of mortal change. Yet with my flesh I was jealous. He told me Amenartas had borne a son to him; that she hoped to bear another son, and—I too yearned to be the mother of his son. For is it not true that by a fixed unchanging law, whereas the man loves the woman for herself, the woman loves the man most of all because he may become the father of her child, and thus by the marvel of creation, even in the dust preserve her from perpetual death?

So, so, let me think. I loved this man and would take him for myself and would lift him up and would make him my equal, if that could ever be, and would teach him glorious things, and would show him the secret light that burned within my heart, and would guide him onward by the rays of my own peculiar star. How could it be brought about? Yonder woman, wrapped round with the twice-dipped Tyrian purple of kings, which purple, be it admitted, she wore well although now she lacked a throne whereon to drape it, thought in her folly that I had poisoned or would poison her. Yes, she knew Ayesha so little that she believed that like a Persian eunuch she would stoop to call deadly venom to her aid and thereby rid her of a rival. Never! If I could not win by my own strength in a fair fight for favour, then let me fail, who

deserved defeat. Were her life so utterly in my hands that I could destroy it with a wish, that wish would never form itself within my mind, and certainly never shape itself to deeds.

What then could be done? She was right. I began to grow old; Time's acid was gnawing at me so that my beauty was no more what it had been. Aye, I grew spare and old, while on her still shone the full glory of her womanhood. *If I would conquer I must cease from growing old!*

The Fire of Life! Ah! that Fire of Life which gave, it was said, the gift of undying days and of perfect youth and loveliness such as Aphrodite herself might envy. Who said so? Noot the Master who knew all things. Yet Noot had never entered into that fire, therefore how did he know, unless it were by revelation? At least he had forbidden me to taste its cup, perhaps because he was sure that it would slay me whom he desired to be his successor and to establish here a great kingdom whereof the people should accept Isis as their god.

Still the story might be true, for otherwise why did Noot sit in that melancholy hermitage watching the pathway to the Fire? There had been other tales of the same sort told in the world. Thus the old Chaldean legend spoke of a Tree of Life that grew in a certain garden whence the parents of mankind were driven lest they should eat of it and become immortal, which legend was expounded to me more fully by the Jewish rabbis in Jerusalem, and afterward by Holly the learned man. Therefore it seemed that there was a Tree of Life, or a Fire of Life, jealously guarded of the gods lest the children of men should become their equals. And I, I knew where that Tree grew, or rather where that Fire burned. Yet Noot forbade it to me, and

could I disobey Noot my Master, Noot the half divine? Well, Noot was very old and near his end, and when he died, I, by his own appointment, should be the guardian of the Fire, and may not a guardian taste of that he guards?

The gods decreed otherwise, he said. Mayhap, but what if in this matter where I had so much to gain, I chose to match myself against the gods? If the gods give knowledge, can they be wrath with those who use it? Yet if they are wrath—well, let them be wrath and set their worst against my best. Sometimes I grew weary of the gods and all the fantastical decrees which they—or their priests—heaped upon the heads of the sufferers of this earth. Were not life's curse and death's doom enough to satisfy their appetites, that they must load the toilful days between with so much of the lead of misery, denying this, denying that; strowing the path of men with spikes and crowning their heads with thorns?

If Noot's tale were true, what then? I should enter the Fire, I should emerge ever-glorious, beautiful beyond imagining, and ever young, having left death far behind me. I should need but to wait a while until Amenartas died, and when she was dead, or having grown weary of dull life in an ancient place, had departed to seek some other. Nay, for then in the first case Kallikrates also would be dead or ancient, and in the second, certainly she would take him with her.

Ah! now I had it; if I entered the Fire and came forth unharmed, Kallikrates must enter it after me, for then we should be fitly mated, even if we must wait until a little pinch of the sand of time had run out from between our fingers. Yet supposing that Amenartas chose to enter it also, as being so fond

THE TRUTH AND THE TEMPTATION 325

of magic and so determined to cling to that which she had won, perchance she might do, would my case be bettered? The play would be set upon a larger stage, that is all. Well, should I not be the Guardian of the Fire and would it not be in my hand to determine who should taste or who should be denied its glories? Let that matter decide itself when the hour came, since the decision would be such as I and not as Amenartas willed.

Here then was my plan. And yet—one thought more. What if the Fire slew? If so, had I found life so sweet that I should be afraid to die, as in any case within some few years die I must? Let me take my chance of death who was ready to fade away into a land where Kallikrates and Amenartas and all earthly miseries and all baulked desires and ambitions, and all hopes and fears and sufferings must be forgot. Only would they be forgot? Perchance there they might be remembered and pierce the soul eternally with an even keener edge. Noot believed that we were made of an immortal stuff, and so at heart did I. It must be risked. What is life but a long risk, and why should we fear to add to its tremendous count? I at least did not fear.

So all was summed up and balanced. Yet from my reckoning I left out the largest charge, that which Fate makes against those who play at dice with the Unknown. The gods may smile at courage and pass a venture by, but who can tell how blind Fate will avenge the forcing of his rule decreed and the rape of knowledge from his secret store?

This problem I forgot, I who was doomed to learn its answer.