

## CHAPTER XXII

### BEWARE!

THE days went by and it was not long before Amenartas recovered from her sickness, long at least before she would appear out of the lodging, the best at our command, which had been given to her. It was an ancient, ruined house near to the temple, that doubtless once had been a splendid place inhabited by forgotten nobles of old Kôr. There were gardens round it, or rather what had been gardens, for now these were much overgrown, and in their shelter Amenartas hid herself and wandered, never leaving them to visit me.

Yet Kallikrates came often, though being unshriven and thrust out of our community by his own act, he did not share in the worship of the goddess. Often I would see him as our procession wound in and out of the columns of the great unroofed temple hall, standing afar off and gazing at it wistfully. Aye, and once when it passed near to him, I saw too, that there were tears upon his face, noting which my heart sorrowed for him who was outcast for a woman's sake.

When these ceremonies were ended he would visit me in my chambers where we talked long and of many things. I asked him why the Princess Amenartas, who it seemed was recovered of her fever since now she could wander in her garden ground, laid no offering on the altar of the goddess. He answered,



"Because she will have naught to do with the gods of Egypt who, she says, if they are at all, have ever been the enemies of her House and have dragged her father, the Pharaoh Nectanebes, from his throne and hurled him forth, a discrowned fugitive, to perish amidst strangers."

"Upon those who follow after spells and affront the gods, the gods will be avenged, Kallikrates. For every sin there is forgiveness, save for that of the denial of Divinity, and of the setting of Evil in its place to be propitiated by the arts of sorcerers. Moreover, did not this Nectanebes offer deadly insult to the Queen of Heaven when he gave me, her servant and secess, to be a slave to Tenes, the worshipper of her worst of foes, Baal and Ashtoreth and Moloch, that Tenes from whose grip you helped to save me, Kallikrates?"

"It is so," he answered sadly.

"And now," I went on, "the daughter follows in the father's steps. Oh! I am sure that yonder she spells out her charms, aiming her enchantments at my heart, whence they fall back harmless, as the bone-tipped arrows of wild men fall from a shield of Syrian bronze."

He hung his head who knew well that my words were true, and muttered,

"Alas! she loves you not, Lady, who from the first hour that she set her eyes upon you, as often she has told me, feared and hated you, because, she says, her spirit warns and has ever warned her that you will bring disaster upon her head and call up Death to keep her company."

"At least he would be a better guest, Kallikrates, than the dæmon that, like her father, she harbours in her breast. Oh! unhappy man, my heart bleeds for you, who are linked to this poisoned loveliness



that divorces you from hope and charity; to this royal infidel who in the end will bind your spirit's wings and drag you down into her own darkness. For your soul's sake I pray you, Kallikrates, seek out the holy Noot, confess your sins and hear his counsel, since this matter is beyond my strength and I have none to give. Seek him soon, nay, at once, ere perchance it be too late, for I learn that he grows feeble."

"That is my great desire, Priestess, yet how can I, who know not where to find him?"

"I will be your guide, Kallikrates. When the sun rises on the second day from now we will march to visit Noot in his secret dwelling."

"I will be ready," he answered and left me.

On the morrow he came again and we spoke together of the state of Kôr and of my plans for bettering it; also of certain savages who threatened us from without, man-eating tribes that it seemed were descended from the apostates who rejecting the worship of Truth or Lulala, as Isis was named by them in those times, had adopted that of a devil that, as they declared, inhabited the sun or some ill-omened star.

Kallikrates listened, he who at bottom was ever a soldier, for the tale awoke all his general's craft and courage. As a great captain does, he balanced the reasons for or against defence, for or against attack. He questioned me as to the numbers of my people and of their foes, as to their arms, and many other matters that have to do with war. Then having learned all that I could tell him, he set out the plan which he judged to be the best in our conditions, talking of it long and eagerly, he who for a while had forgot his woes. I listened to him, watching his bright and splendid face which seemed as that



of the Sun-god of the Greeks. Speaking a word here and a word there, I listened, thinking to myself the while that if only he and I, he with his skill and courage and I with my wisdom, could guide the destinies of Kôr, before our day was done we would drive them like the chariots of a conquering king from Egypt's borders to these of the uttermost southern seas, setting nation after nation beneath our feet, and building up such an empire as Libya had never known.

What had I dreamed? To Egypt's borders? Why should we stop at her borders? Why should we not hurl forth the foul Persian swarms and be crowned monarchs of the world at Susa and at Thebes? Yet it would take time, and life is short, and yonder, not so far away, burned the Fire of Immortality, and I, I held the key to its prison house, or soon should hold it when Noot had sought his rest. Almost these burning thoughts, these high ambitions, in whose fulfilment lay the seeds of peace attained through war and the promise of the welfare of the earth, burst from my lips in a torrent of hot words which I knew well would set his soul aflame. But I, Ayesha, refrained myself from myself, I wrapped myself in silence, I said to myself, "Wait, wait, the ripe hour has not dawned."

He rose to depart, then turned and said,

"At the sunrise I will be here, or rather," he added doubtfully, "we will be here, since Amenartas desires to accompany us upon this journey to visit the holy Noot."

"By whom I trust she will be well received, seeing the manner in which she parted from him upon the ship *Hapi*. Well, so be it; I rejoice to learn that the royal Amenartas again finds herself prepared



to travel. Yet remind her, Kallikrates, that the road we go is rough and dangerous."

"She shall be told, yet it will serve little, since who can turn Amenartas from her ends? Not I, be sure; nor could her father before me, nor any living man."

"Nay, nor any god, Kallikrates, since the ends she follows are those of neither man nor god, but of something that stands beyond them both, as was the case of Pharaoh Nectanebes who begot her. Each of us shoots at his chosen mark, Kallikrates, you at yours, I at mine, and Amenartas at her own; therefore what right have we to judge of one another's archery? Let her come to visit Noot and I pray that she may return the happier."

Next morning ere the dawn I stood at the temple porch awaiting Philo and the litters. Came Amenartas cloaked heavily, for the air was cold, yet splendid even in those wrappings.

"Greeting, Wisdom's Child," she said, bowing in her courtlike fashion. "I learn that you and my husband would make some strange journey, and therefore, as a wife should, I accompany him."

"That is so, royal Lady, though I knew not that you were wed to the lord Kallikrates."

"What is marriage?" she asked. "Is it certain words mumbled before an altar and a priest, a thing of witnessed ceremony, or is it the union of the heart and flesh according to Nature's custom and decree? But let that pass. Where my lord goes, there I accompany him."

"None forbids you, O Lady of Egypt."

"True, Prophetess. Yet my own heart forbids me. Know that but last night I was haunted by a



very evil dream. It seemed to me that my father Nectanebes stood before me in a sable robe that was shot through with threads of fire. He spoke to me saying: 'Daughter, beware of that witch who goes on a dreadful quest, taking with her one who is dear to you. At the end of that quest lies Doom for her, for him, for you, though each of these dooms be different!'

"It may be so, Princess," I answered coldly. "Then accompany me not and keep Kallikrates at your side."

"That I cannot do," she said in a sullen voice, "since now for the first time he will not listen to my pleading and crosses my will. You have laid your charm upon him as on others in the past, and where you lead, he follows."

"Mayhap as a slave follows one who can show him where he may loose his chains! But let us not bandy words, royal Amenartas. I depart. Follow if you will, or bide behind, one or both of you. See, here comes Kallikrates; agree together as it pleases you."

She turned and met him in the ruins of the ancient pylon, where they debated together in words I could not hear. Once she seemed to conquer, for both of them walked a little way toward their own home. Then Kallikrates swung round upon his heel and came back to me who stood by the litters. She hesitated awhile, ah! what mighty issues hung upon this trembling of the balance of her mind, but in the end she followed him.

After this, without more speech we entered the litters and began our journey.

As we went across the misty plain it came home to me, as many a time it has done during the long centuries that followed, how often the great de-



pends upon the little. Another bitter word from Amenartas, a trifle less of courage in Kallikrates, and how differently would Fate have fashioned the destinies of every one of us. For be it remembered that the choice lay with these two; I did naught save wait upon their wills. Had they so desired, never need they have entered those litters. Alone I should have departed; alone I should have looked upon the Fire and drunk of that Cup of Life, or perchance, as is probable, I should have left it untasted and gone down my way to death after the common fashion of mankind. But it was not so decreed; of their own desire they took the path to doom, though perchance that desire was shaped by some Strength above their own.

We reached the precipice and climbed it, Amenartas, Kallikrates, Philo, and I. We passed the cave by the light of lanterns, and we came to the trembling spur of rock that reaches out like a great needle thrust through the robe of darkness. When they looked upon it, Kallikrates and Amenartas shivered and drew back, seeing which I rejoiced, for it is true that at the moment I found no more heart for this adventure.

"Stay where you are," I cried, "and wait. I go to visit the holy Noot. I will return again, and if I return not within a round of the sun, then make your way back to Kôr and there abide. Or if it pleases you, seek the coast-land and the harbour of the Ethiopian's Head and depart with the help of Philo, if still he lives, or if not, otherwise. Farewell! I go."

"Nay," cried Kallikrates, "whither you lead, Prophetess, thither I follow."

"If so," said Amenartas, laughing in her royal



fashion, "you will not follow alone. What! Shall I not dare that which my lord can dare? Is this the first peril in which we twain have stood side by side? If it be the last, what of it?"

So we started down the spur, Philo coming at the end of our line, and though with many hazards, for once the brain of Amenartas swam so that almost she fell, reached its point in safety. Here we waited crouched upon the rough rock and clinging to it with our hands, lest its quick throbbing should hurl us into the gulf, or the fierce gusts should sweep us away like autumn leaves.

At length at the appointed moment the sword-like sunset ray appeared, striking full upon us and showing that the frail bridge of boards was still in the place, for it swayed and moved like the deck of a ship at sea.

"Be bold and follow," I cried, "since he who hesitates is doomed," and instantly I stepped across that perilous plank and took my stand upon the swaying stone beyond.

For a moment Kallikrates stood doubtful, as well he might, but Amenartas pushed past him and with a laugh crossed it as though she would teach me that I was not the only one to whom the gods had given courage. I caught her by the hand. Then Kallikrates followed because he must, and she caught him by the hand and after him Philo, the seaman, calmly enough, so that now all four of us stood together on the stone.

"Glad enough am I to be here, Prophetess," cried Kallikrates, though in that wailing wind his voice reached me only as a whisper. "Yet, I know not why, it comes into my mind that I go upon my last journey."

I made no answer because his fateful words



chilled my heart and choked my voice; only I looked at his face and noted that it was white as ice even in the red light of the ray and that his large eyes shone as though with the fires of fever.

Taking Kallikrates by the hand and motioning to Philo to do likewise with Amenartas, I led him to the little rough-hewn stair. By this stair we descended into the sheltered place that was in front of the hermitage of Noot and rejoiced was I to find myself and the others out of the reach of those raging winds and to see that lights burned within the cave beyond.

"Bide here, all of you," I said. "I will enter the cave and prepare the holy Noot for your coming."

I entered the place thinking to find that strange dwarf who was Noot's servant, but nowhere could he be seen. Yet I was sure that he must be near, since on the rough rock table were set food and wooden platters, four platters as though awaiting four guests. I thought to myself that doubtless the Master had seen us creeping down the spur, or perchance his spirit had warned him of our coming—who could say?

I gazed about me to find Noot, and at length in the deep shadow, out of reach of the lamp's rays, I perceived him kneeling before that image of Isis whereof I have told, and wrapt in earnest prayer. I drew near and waited a while who did not dare to break in upon his orisons. Still he did not stir or look up. So quiet was he that he might have been carved in ivory. I bent forward, examining his face. Lo! his eyes were fixed and open and his jaw had fallen.

Noot was *dead!*

"My Master, my most beloved Master! Too



late, too late!" I moaned, and bending down kissed him on his brow of ice.

Then I began to think and swiftly. Had he not warned me when I bade him farewell a while before that we spoke together for the last time? Where was my faith who had forgotten that the prophecies of Noot were always true? So he had gone to his rest in the bosom of Osiris, and on me had fallen his mantle. I, Ayesha, was the guardian of the Fire of Life whereof alone I knew the secrets and held the key! The knowledge struck me like a blow; I trembled and sank to the ground. I think that for a little while I swooned and in that swoon strange dreams took hold of me, half-remembered dreams, dreams not to be written.

Presently I rose and going to the doorway summoned the others, who stood there huddled together like sheep before a storm.

"Enter," I said, and they obeyed. "Now be seated and eat," I went on, pointing to the table on which the food was ready.

"Where is the master of the feast, Prophetess? Where is the holy Noot whom we have walked this fearful road to see?" asked Kallikrates, staring about him.

"Yonder," I answered, pointing to the depths of the shadow, "yonder—dead and cold. You tarried too long at Kôr, Kallikrates. Now you must seek his counsel and his absolution at another table—that of Osiris."

Thus I spoke, for something inspired the words, yet ere they had left my lips I could have bitten out the tongue that shaped them. Was *this* the place to talk of the Table of Osiris to the man I loved?



They went to that dark nook where the little sacred statue looked down upon its quiet worshipper. They stared in silence; they returned, Philo muttering prayers, Kallikrates wringing his hands, for he had loved and honoured Noot above any man that lived. Also—I read the question in his mind—to whom now should he confess his sins? Who now could loose their burden?

Only Amenartas pondered a space; then she spoke with a slow and meaning smile, saying,

“Perchance, my lord, it is as well that this old high-priest has gone to discover whether he dreamed true dreams for so many years upon the earth. I know not what you would have said to him, yet I can guess that it boded but little good to me, your wife, for so I am, whatever yonder priestess may tell you, who also bodes little good either to me or to you, my lord Kallikrates. Well, he is dead and even Wisdom’s Daughter there cannot bring him back to life. So let us rest a while and eat, and then return by that dread road which we have trodden, ere our strength and spirit fail us.”

“That you may not do, Princess Amenartas, until the sunset comes again and once more the red ray shows us where to set our feet, for to attempt it sooner is to die,” I answered, and went on:

“Hearken. By the death of this holy man, or half-god, I have become the keeper of a certain treasure over which he watched. It is hidden deep in the bowels of the earth beneath us. I must go to visit it and see that it is safe. This I shall do presently. Bide you here, if you will, till I return, and if I return not, wait till the ray strikes upon the point of rock, cross the bridge, climb the spur, and flee whither ye will. Philo can guide you.”



"Not so, Child of Isis," said Philo. "My oath and duty are to you, not to this pair. Whither you go, I follow to the end."

"I follow also," said Kallikrates, "who would not be left in this darksome place companied by death."

"Yet it might be wiser, Kallikrates," I answered, "since who can escape that company of death of which you speak?" for again dreadful and ominous words rushed unbidden from my heart.

"I care not. I go," he said almost sullenly.

"Then I go also," broke in Amenartas. "This Prophetess doubtless is wise and holy, yet I may be pardoned if I choose to share her fellowship with you upon a road unknown. Perchance it has another gate elsewhere that I might never find," she added in bitter jest.

Oh! had this fool but known that her coarse stabs at me did but harden the heart which she sought to pierce, and drive it whither she did not desire.

"As you will," I answered. "Now eat and rest till the hour of departure comes and I summon you."

So they ate, if not much, though for my part I touched no food, and laid them down in the inner cave as best they might, and there slept, or did not sleep. But I, I watched the hours away by the dead shell of the holy Noot, striving to commune with his spirit which I knew to be near to me. Yet it gave no answer to all my questions. Or at least there came one only which again and again seemed to shape itself to a single word,

*"Beware!"*

Strange, thought I to myself, that the prophet Noot my Master, who loved me better than any other living upon the earth, and knew the most of my lonely, wayward heart, now that he was justified



and made perfect, as doubtless he must be, if such a lot can be attained by man, should find no more to say to me than this one word, which indeed while in the flesh often he had said before. Therefore it seemed that in the flesh and out of it his counsel was the same; one certainly that I should take.

What did it mean? That I should look no more upon the Fire; that I should rise up and get me back to Kôr and there play such parts as I could compass, and wither and grow old and die, nurturing perchance the children of Kallikrates and Amernartas, should they seek the Shades before me; or, growing weary of barbarians and ruins, flee away from Kôr to find the fellowship of instructed men.

That is what this counsel meant. Well, what did that of my own heart promise me? Perhaps a swift death and after it punishment in some dim land beyond, because I had disobeyed the shadowy cautionings of the holy Noot and dared to make trial of a new Strength, against which as yet no man had matched himself. Or perhaps a glory greater than any man had ever dreamed, and a power far above that of emperors and a life longer than that of mountains. Also more—more, the love that I desired, to me a greater guerdon than all these boons added together and multiplied by the snowflakes upon Lebanon or the sands of the seashore. Surely, come what might of it, I would take my own counsel and let the other be.

The hour came; although I saw it not, I knew that it was that of dawn in the world without. I arose, I summoned the others; we departed down that darksome path of which I have written, climbing from rock to rock in the bowels of the earth by the dim light of the lanterns which we bore.



We came to the outer cavern; we passed the passage and reached the second cavern, halting at the mouth of another passage through which at intervals shot flickerings of light, and from time to time sounds as of muttering thunder reached our ears.

"The treasure on which I would look lies yonder. Bide ye here," I said.

"Nay," answered Kallikrates, "now as before I follow."

"Where my lord goes there go I also," said Amenartas.

Only Philo, the cautious Greek, bowed his head and answered,

"I obey. I bide here. If I am needed, summon me, O Child of Isis.

"Good," I cried, who at that moment thought little of Philo and his fate, though it is true that, cunning as he might be, I loved him well.

Then I went on and with me went Kallikrates and Amenartas.

