

CHAPTER XXIV

THE COUNSEL OF PHILO

ROARING like a whirlwind, shouting triumphantly, once more the wheel of fire rolled on its tremendous course. I watched it come, I watched it go, while in it I thought I saw grinning, elf-like faces that gibbered at me and thrust out tongues of derision. It departed on its secret journey through the bowels of the world. Its thunder sank to mutterings, its mutterings to silence, while I said to my heart that could I be sure that it would slay, I would cast myself beneath its chariot wheels.

To what purpose? Since then, as I believed in those days, in the flames I should find but added life — I who could not die.

It was gone. Naught remained save the cave carpeted with white sand and the rosy light playing on the body of the dead Kallikrates. Nay, Amernartas remained also, and I became aware that she was cursing me by all her gods, or rather by those who had been her gods before she turned her face from them, seeking the counsel of familiar spirits.

Bravely she cursed and long, calling down upon my head every evil that can be found in heaven above or earth beneath; she who did not know that this was needless, for already the winged Furies had made it their resting-place and before they could be uttered all her imprecations were fulfilled.

"Have done!" I said when at length she grew

weak and weary, "and let us summon Philo to help us bear this noble clay to some fitting sepulchre."

"Nay, Witch," she answered, "use your magic on me also, if you can. Slay the wife as you have slain the husband, and here let us rest eternally. What tomb can be better for both of us than that which saw our murder."

"Have done!" I repeated. "You know well that I have no desire to kill you and that it was my madness, not my will, that brought doom on Kallikrates, whom we loved; I who had not learned that henceforth my spirit is a bow winged with deadly shafts."

I went down the cave and through the passage that lay beyond and from its mouth called to Philo to follow me.

He came, and perceiving my new loveliness as I stood awaiting him in the rosy light, fell to the ground, kissing my feet and the hem of my robe, and muttering,

"O Isis-come-to-Earth! O Queen divine!"

"Rise up and follow me," I said, and led him to where lay Kallikrates, by whom knelt the widowed Amenartas weeping bitterly.

"Overwhelmed with the sight of glory, alas! this lord has slain himself," I said, and pointed to the wound in the dead man's breast whence still the blood oozed drop by drop.

"Nay, this witch slew him," moaned Amenartas, but if Philo heard her words, he took no heed of them.

Then at my command the three of us lifted Kallikrates and bore him thence up the difficult ways, which never could we have done had I not discovered that now in my woman's shape that seemed so frail and weak was hid unmeasured strength.

So through the caves and up the winding slopes and stairs we bore the dead Kallikrates, bringing him back to the hermitage of Noot but a little before the hour of sunset. Here I commanded Amenartas and Philo to eat and drink, though myself I needed neither food nor wine. While they did so, aided of this new strength of mine, I lifted the body of Noot from where it knelt and laid it down, crossing the hands upon the breast, and having covered it with a robe, left him to his last sleep.

These things finished, we carried Kallikrates to the crest of the Swaying Stone, and waited the coming of the ray. Suddenly it shone out, and in its fierce light we dared the shifting bridge. Beneath a weight which it was ill designed to bear, the frail thing broke just as Amenartas and Philo, bearing the feet of the dead man, had found footing upon the point of the spur beyond. It seemed that I should have fallen, yet I fell not, who, I know not how, found myself at their side still supporting Kallikrates in my arms.

Then it was that first I learned that as I was protected from the gnawings of the tooth of Time so also I was armoured against all the strokes of chance. This indeed became very clear to me in the after days. Thus once when the roof of a cave fell upon me and others they were slain but I remained unbruised, and again, when a deadly snake bit me, its poison harmed me not at all. But what of these things which are not worthy to be chronicled, seeing that if I could die, in the passing of two thousand years and more, what men call mishap must long since have brought me to my end.

We bore Kallikrates down the spur and through the cavern whence it springs, till at length we found

the litters waiting for us, and in one of these we laid his quiet form.

Thus at length we came back to Kôr at the hour of the dawn.

Again we lifted up the corpse of Kallikrates and carried it to the chamber where I slept. A thought came to me.

"Philo," I said, "did you not tell me that among those who serve us in this temple are certain aged medicine-men who declare that knowledge of the arts whereby the people of old Kôr preserved their dead from corruption has come down to them, which arts they still practise from time to time?"

"It is so, O Queen," for so he named me now. "There are three of them."

"Good. Summon them, Philo, and bid them bring with them their instruments and spices."

Awhile later the three appeared, very aged, cunning-looking men who had upon their hook-nosed faces the stamp of high and ancient blood. I pointed to the body of Kallikrates and asked,

"Are ye able to hold back this holy flesh from the foul fingers of decay?"

"If he be not more than forty hours dead," answered one of them, "we can do so in such fashion that when five thousand years have passed it will seem as it does at this hour, O Queen."

"Then to your office, Slaves, and know that if ye do as ye have promised ye shall receive great reward. But if ye lie to me, ye die."

"We do not lie, O Queen," he said.

Forthwith they lit a fire outside the chamber and thereon set a large earthen pot. In this pot, mixed with water, they placed dried leaves of a certain shrub, in shape long and narrow, and boiled them to a broth, whereof the pungent odour seemed to

fill all the air about. While the pot was boiling they took the corpse of Kallikrates, and, having washed it, brushed it everywhere with some secret stuff that gave to it the aspect of white and shining marble. Then they brought a funnel of clay with a curved point, and having opened the great artery of the throat, inserted the point into the artery.

This done, they stood the stiff corpse on its feet and while two of them held it thus, the third brought the pot into which they poured stuff that looked like glass when it is molten, mixing all together with a rod of stone. Then he set a ladder, perhaps four paces in length, against the wall, and carrying the pot, climbed to the top of it, whence slowly he poured the brew into the funnel beneath so that its weight forced it through all the dead man's veins. When the most of it was gone he descended and the three of them finished their work in some way that I did not stay to watch, for the sight of this grim preparation for the tomb and the scent of these spicy drugs overcame me.

At length they summoned me and showed me Kallikrates lying like to one in a deep sleep, calm and beautiful as he had been in life.

"O Queen," said their spokesman, "by to-morrow at the sunrise the flesh of this man will be as marble, and so everlastingly remain. Then bear him where you will, but till then let him rest untouched."

I bade that they should be rewarded, and they went their ways. But first I asked them where the inhabitants of old Kôr were wont to lay their royal dead. They answered that it was in the great caves at a little distance across the plain, and I commanded that on the morrow they should guide me thither, bearing the body of Kallikrates.

Philo came and said that the priests and priestesses of Isis would have speech with me and that they were gathered in the inmost court of the great temple before the veiled statue of the goddess Truth. I bade him lead on, but he wavered a little and said,

"O Queen, there is trouble. The royal lady, Amenartas, has told a tale in the ears of those priests and priestesses. She has sworn to them that you are not a woman but a dæmon; aye, a witch risen from the Under-world, and that you murdered the lord Kallikrates because he would not give himself to you. Also she swore that you strove to murder her who, being protected by the magic which her father Nectanebes, the great wizard, taught her, was too strong for you and therefore escaped alive."

"As to the last, she lies," I answered carelessly.

We came to the inmost court. It was the hour of sunset and the place was filled with glowing light. I took my seat upon the throne-like chair beneath the statue and the light beat full upon me, a glory on a glory.

The priests and priestesses who were standing still with folded arms and bowed heads looked up and saw me. A murmur of astonishment rose from them and I heard one say to the other,

"The Princess has told us truth."

At first I did not understand; then I remembered that I was no longer as mortal women are, but rather, as my mirror told me, an incarnate splendour, a very goddess to the sight.

"Speak," I said, and they shook at the new rich note of power in my voice, as leaves vibrate at the sudden swell of music.

The first of the priests, a large man of middle

age, Rames by name, stood forward and fixing his round eyes upon my face, said,

O Prophetess, O Daughter of Wisdom, O Isis-come-to-Earth, we know not what to say, since we have heard that you have changed your shape, now as is evident to us. Prophetess, you are not the same high-priestess who ruled over us in the temple at Memphis and whom we followed to this desolate land. Some magic has been at work with you."

"If so," I answered, "is it an evil magic? Tell me, Rames, am I changed for better or for worse?"

"You are beautiful," he answered, "so beautiful that madness must take all men who look on you. But, Prophetess, your loveliness is not such as mortal woman wears. Nay, it is such as Typhon might give to one who had sold her soul to him. Also, there is more. We learn that you murdered that Grecian, Kallikrates, who once was of our fellowship, because he refused his love to you; yes, that you, the high-priestess of Isis, murdered a man because he turned from your arms to those of his wife, the royal Amenartas, and that if you could, you would have murdered her also."

"Who tells this tale?" I asked slowly.

"The Princess herself," Rames answered. "See, she is here. Let her speak."

Amenartas appeared from among the throng, and cried,

"It is true, it is most true. Here before the statue of Truth herself, I swear it in the face of Heaven and to all the listening earth. There is a wound on the breast of my dead lord, Kallikrates. Ask yonder witch how that wound came there. Clothed only in her hair, she entered into a fire, a fire of hell. She came forth beautiful with a beauty

that is not human. She called my lord to embrace her. Yes, this shameless one, she named herself his spouse. This she did before the eyes of his own wife and in the hearing of her ears. She bade him enter the Fire of Hell, and when he would not, when he turned to seek refuge in my arms, she sent him down the path of death by her words of power. She said:

“I call down death upon thee, Kallikrates. Death be thy portion and the grave thine home. Die, Kallikrates, that thy face may torment me no more and that I may learn to mock thy memory.’

“These were her very words. Let her deny them if she can. I say, moreover, that always she has desired to lead astray the lord Kallikrates, and that when she could not do so of her woman’s strength, then she made a pact with Typhon and strove to mesh him in her magic, but strove in vain. Therefore she slew him in her rage.”

When the priests and priestesses heard these words they turned pale and trembled. Then they called to me to answer. But I said,

“I answer not. Who are you that I should render account to you of what I have or have not done? Think what you will and do what you will. I answer not, save this, that what has chanced, has chanced by the decree of Fate who sits above all gods and goddesses, throned beyond heaven’s remotest star.”

They drew apart, they talked together. Then Rames came forward and, still staring at me, said:

“Whether you yet serve Isis, O Ayesha, daughter of Yarab, we do not know. But we who are her children, sworn to her obedience for which we have suffered many things, reject you from your place of rule in which you were set above us by the holy

Noot, whom we learn has passed to the keeping of Osiris. No more are you our high-priestess, Ayesha, or Evil Spirit, and no longer shall you stand with us before the altars of the Queen of Heaven."

"Be it as you will," I answered. "Go and leave me to make mine own peace with Isis, who now and henceforward am her equal, I who have learned what Isis is, and been clothed with that same majesty. I see that you believe me to blaspheme; the horror upon your faces tells me so. Yet I do not; here in the shadow of Truth—if it were but known, the only goddess—I speak with the voice of Truth. Farewell. I wish you good fortune, and in all things will aid you if I can. Tell me, Philo, do you desert me like these others?"

"Nay, O Queen," he answered, "we are old comrades, you and I, who have gone through too much together to separate at last. I am a Greek who entered into the company of Isis chiefly after I met you, fair Daughter of Wisdom, and noted the deeds you did upon the ship *Hapi*, and to be short—whatever road you take is a good road for me. I know not whether you slew this Kallikrates, or whether he slew himself with his own sword, of which I noted the mark upon him, but if you offered him your love and he refused it then I hold that he deserved to die.

"For the rest, I am a merchant who take my gain where I can find it, and I know that you pay well. Therefore I follow your banner to the end, whether it lead me to the Heaven of Isis or to the Hades of my forefathers, where doubtless I shall meet Achilles and Hector and Odysseus and many another gallant seafaring warrior of whom our Homer sings. That place whither you wend is home enough for me, for in your palace I shall always find

a chamber, and on your ship of state I shall always stand upon the poop, however far the voyage."

Thus spoke that gay and cunning Greek, hiding the loyalty of his heart beneath his jesting words, and truly in that hour of deserted loneliness my gratitude went out toward him, as still it does to-day and will do for evermore. For though Philo would take a bribe where he could find it, as is the way of those who serve Fortune and must earn bread, still he was ever loyal to those he loved, and he loved me in that high fashion which is born of long service and of fellowship. When at length I come into my great inheritance, and rule elsewhere—as rule I shall—my first care shall be to reward Philo as he deserves, although once or more he did fill his pouch with the gold of Amenartas, or so I believe.

Yet at this time I only smiled at him and asked, "These things being done, what of the Princess of Egypt? Let her speak her desire that I may fulfil it, if I can."

"It is simple," answered Amenartas, "that I may be rid of you, no less and no more. I would go hence to bear my child and to rear him to wreak vengeance on you for his father's blood, O Witch of the Under-world, and until I die, to work and pray that the Furies may be your bedfellows, O murderess and thief of love."

"Let these things befall as they are fated," I answered very quietly. "The stage of doom is set and on it throughout the ages until the play ends at last, we, the puppets of Destiny, must act our appointed parts to a consummation that we cannot foresee. But how will it end, Lady Amenartas? You know not; nor do I, though already some master's hand has writ the last scene upon his roll.

Philo, it is my command that you lead Pharaoh's child to the coast, or wherever she would go, that thence she may find her way to Greece or Egypt as Fortune may direct her. That done, return and make report to me. Farewell, Amenartas."

"Fare ill, Witch," she cried. "We part, but as I think, to meet again elsewhere, seeing that between you and me there is a score to settle."

"Aye," I answered gently enough. "Yet boast not, Amenartas, and be not too sure of anything, since when at length that sum is added up, who knows on which side the balance will be struck."

"At least I know that the count will be long and that murder is a heavy weight in any scale," she answered.

Then she went; they all went and left me alone brooding there upon the chair of state, in which I sat for the last time. The darkness closed about me, then came the twilight of the rising moon in whose soft rays I saw the figure of a man creeping toward me as a thief creeps.

"Who comes?" I asked.

"Beauteous Queen," answered a thick voice, "it is I, Rames, the priest."

"Speak on, Rames."

"O most fair among women, if indeed you may be named woman, hear me. Those fools of priests and priestesses have thrown you from your place."

"So you told me but now, Rames, nor can they be blamed."

"So I told you because I must, not of my own will, and that which is done, cannot be undone. You are cast out and here in Kôr the worship of Isis is at an end, since who is there that can fill your throne? Yet, hearken, hearken! I cling to you, I worship you. I desire you to be my wife, O most

lovely. Here together we will rule in Kôr and you shall be its Queen and goddess, and I will be its Captain. It is most wise that you should consent, O Lady divine."

"Why is it wise, Rames?"

"Because, Lady, I can protect you. You know the sentence that goes out against those who break the rule of Isis. I say that it is already uttered against you. I say that those bigots seek to murder you. But if you take me as husband, then we will be beforehand with them and kill or drive them away. Yea, now that you are lonely and deserted, I shall be your sure shield."

I heard and laughed aloud, and I think that this madman interpreted that laugh in a strange fashion. At least he threw himself upon me. He seized my hand and lifted it toward his lips, though by those lips it was never touched. For now rage took hold of me, such rage as had possessed my soul in the cave of the Fire of Life; rage and the desire of destruction, that with other evil gifts had come to me in the breath of the Fire.

"Accursed one!" I cried, "vile and insolent thief! Do you dare to touch me with your hand? Away with you to Set! Let the world know you no more!"

As the words passed my lips it seemed to me that from some strength within a withering flame leapt out of me and smote that man as the lightning smites. At the least he lifted his hands to his head; he reeled back, he fell, he groaned—he died.

Looking at him lying there in the moonlight, still and bereft of life, at the last I came to know full surely that henceforward I could slay with a thought, that I was the Lady of Death, and that such wrath as others express in words went forth from me with

all the might of Heaven; moreover, that now this wrath rose suddenly and swiftly in me, easy to unchain, hard to hold. Yea, I was both a fury and a terror whom no man might cross or vex if he would continue to look upon the sun.

Philo came. He stared at me and at the dead Rames, then questioned me with his eyes.

"He would have laid hands on me, Philo, and I slew him," I said.

"Then what he has earned, he has been paid," answered Philo. "Yet, Queen, how did you slay him? I see no bruise or wound."

"By a power that has come to me, Philo. I desired him dead and he died. That is all the tale."

"A strange and a terrible power, Queen. Often when we are angry we wish that this one or that were dead—yet that they should forthwith die—! Henceforth you must watch your moods well, Daughter of Wisdom, since otherwise I think that you and I will soon be parted for, as I know, at times you are angry with me, and when next that chances I shall be sped."

"Aye, Philo, so I have learned. I must watch my moods very well. Yet fear nothing, since never could I wish you dead."

"Are you sure, Ayesha? Hearken. What was the crime of this poor wretch? Was it not that he, who hitherto had been a virtuous man, a good and earnest priest who never turned to look at woman, of a sudden went mad for love of you, and in his madness urged his suit—well, as men do when they have lost hold of the reins of reason, whereon you slew him? Now if men must die for such a crime, who is there that would live to grow old? I think that all of them would soon be driven to dwell in such a hermitage as that wherein the holy Noot

sleeps to-night. Is it not true? I ask you who know the world."

"It is true," I answered.

"If so, Lady, I would ask another question. What was it that sent this man mad? Was it not the sight of such beauty as has never yet been known upon the earth? Which beauty, Ayesha, if I look upon it much longer, I think will send me mad also, or any other man. Daughter of Wisdom, such loveliness as you wear to-day is the greatest curse that the gods can grant to woman, because being above Nature, all Nature must obey its might. Daughter of Wisdom, henceforward you must veil your face from the eyes of men, or become the murderess of more ill-fated ones."

"It seems that this is so," I answered heavily. "I have desired beauty and beauty has come to me, but however great, all gifts are not good."

"So I have heard philosophers preach in Greece, Lady, yet never did I know one of them to turn his back on any gift. Ayesha, hide those eyes of yours, hide them swiftly. While Rames lies there dead, love is frightened, but once his clay is gone, who knows? But I forgot, I came to warn you that a certain decree has been uttered against you, the same, Queen, that you have uttered against Rames, also to protect you, if I can."

Now I laughed outright.

"Foolish man," I said, "do you not yet understand that I cannot be killed or even harmed?"

"Ye Gods!" said Philo, holding up his hands in amazement. Then he was silent.

That night I slept by the cold shape of Kalikrates and oh! it was the most fearful of all nights that ever I had passed upon the earth. Evil, very

evil were the dreams that came to me, if dreams they were. In them it seemed that Noot spoke with me. Nay, not Noot, but a flickering tongue of fire which I knew to be the spirit of Noot. Naught could I see save that burning tongue, and from it came terrible words.

"Daughter," it said, "you have cast my counsels to the winds, you have betrayed your trust, you have broken my commands that I gave to you out of the wisdom that was given to me. You have entered the Fire that you were set to watch. You have been embraced by the Fire and received its gifts. Behold the first fruits of them. The man whom you would have taken lies dead at your side, and yonder in the temple court another lies dead also, who was good until your hell-granted beauty made him evil. The worship of Isis is destroyed in this land that now nevermore will become a nation great and strong and pure. The heart of Amenartas is broken, yet she will live on to beget avengers, one of whom will overtake you at the appointed time. In loneliness, in remorse, in utter desolation you must endure till the Fire dies that cannot die while the world is; seeking yet never finding, or finding but to lose again. Henceforth you are an alien to the kindly race of men, a beautiful terror that all must desire and yet all fear and hate. Ever that which you seek will flit before you like a wandering star which you may never overtake, and in following it you will bring death to thousands. Daughter, you are accursed."

"Is there then no redemption?" I asked of Noot in my dream.

"Aye, Ayesha, when the world is redeemed, then perchance you may find your part in that great forgiveness. Harken. There is a vision which

throughout your life has haunted you. In that vision Aphrodite and the evil gods, those gods that she had led into Egypt to destroy its higher faith, were summoned before the throne of Isis. In it also a fate and a command were laid upon you—that you should war against those gods and bring its punishment on Egypt that received and welcomed them.”

“It is but a fantasy,” I answered. “Now I know that there are no evil gods; there lives no Aphrodite; even no Isis.”

“Daughter, you err. True, there is no Isis who was shaped only by the faith of earth and in the dreams of men. Yet there is that which they name Isis, as the highest that they know and can fashion in their thought. There is the eternal Good and that Good is God. Throughout the countless ages man, warring against Nature, has lifted up his heart till almost he seems to look upon the face of that almighty, regnant Good. Thus it was with you, Daughter, and now whither have you wended? You have fled down the backward path. You have undone all, you have gone back to Nature. Henceforth you are Nature’s self, shining with her false and passing beauty, inspired with her law of death, you who once drew near to the new law of Life that awaited you beyond the grave, which now you may not seek.”

“Whate’er I did, I did for Love and Love shall save me,” I seemed to answer in my agony.

“Aye, Ayesha, doubtless in the end Love will save you, as it saves all things that without its grace must perish everlastingly. Yet for you that salvation is now far away, and ere it can be found, one by one you must conquer those passions that found you in the Fire. You who sought undying beauty,

must see your fair body more hideous and more horrible than the leper of the streets. You who are filled with rage and strength must grow gentle as a dove and weak as a little child. By suffering you must learn to soothe the sufferings of others. By expiation you must atone your crimes, by faith once more you must lift up your soul. By the knowledge you shall win you must come to understand your own blind pettiness through time untold. Ayesha, this is your doom."

Such was the substance of that dream and when I awoke from it, oh! how bitterly I wept. For now I understood. I was fallen—fallen! All that I had gathered through the long years of prayer and abstinence and service had been reft from me, and I who stood near to joy had sunk into a hell of unending sorrow. There was no Isis, so I had dreamed Noot to say, and so my new knowledge told me. Yet there was the eternal Good which in Egypt men knew as Isis, and in other lands by many a different name, and from that Good I was excommunicate.

Now like my savage ancestors of a million years before, I was but a part of Nature as we see her upon the earth and feel her in our blood and—this was the most dreadful of my punishments—my wisdom and my lost faith had become rules by which I could mete out the measure of my fall, for ignorance can smile at that which to knowledge is a hell. All Nature's gifts were mine; all her beauty, all her desires, all her fierceness, all her hates, and one by one, through countless time I must weed her every evil growth from the garden of my poisoned soul. The curse with which she was accursed had smitten me also, and in the end her death would be my death. Such was the doom that I had brought

upon my head when I had listened to the calling of that god of Fire.

Oh! looking upon the cold corpse of Kallikrates and feeling the primeval passions surging in my breast, little wonder that I, the rejected of Heaven, wept as still I weep to-day.

For such is the lot of those who trample on all good as they run to seize the glittering gauds that the tempter spreads before their lusting eyes. Perchance Noot never broke his holy rest to speak to me in dreams; perchance it was the strength in my own soul that spoke to my heart, as that strength, of which now I knew the power, in the old days wrought marvels that then I believed to be done by the invisible hand of Isis. At least the lesson taught is true.

