

CHAPTER II

NOOT THE PROPHET COMES TO OZAL

SUCH is the vision, such the dream that has haunted me through the centuries, and brooding over it from age to age, I, Ayesha, doubt not that in its substance it is true, though its trappings may be fancy-wrought. At least this I know, that my spirit is the child of immortal Wisdom, such as once men believed that Isis held, as my undying shape is born of the beauty that is fabled Aphrodite's gift. At least it is certain that even before I dipped me in the Fire of Life, the most of learning and all human loveliness were mine. I know also that it was my mission to bring Egypt to the dust, and did I not bring it to the dust, smiting to its heart through proud Sidon, and Cyprus, Aphrodite's home? And have I not for these deeds borne Aphrodite's curse, as, because of Aphrodite's yoke laid upon my helpless neck, I have borne and bear the curse of Isis, I whose destiny it is thus at once to be the instrument and sport of rival powers whose battle-ground is the heart of every one of us.

Alas! were my tale known, the world in its haste might judge me hardly and think that I, who by burning its Phœnician props overturned an ancient empire, am cruel-natured, or that because I sought the love of a certain man and in my anger slew him when he turned from me, which in truth I did not desire to do, that I am wanton and ungoverned. Yet these

things are not so, seeing that it was Fate, not I, that gave Egypt to the Persian dog (whom in his turn I overthrew) and made of its people slaves, and my flesh, not I, which after I had tasted of the Fire that is Nature's Soul, cursed me with passion and its fruits, perchance because I hated it and would never bow myself to it wholly, I who followed after purity, desiring not man's love but Wisdom's gifts and a crown of spiritual gold.

Moreover, I had earthly and righteous warrant to bring about Sidon's fall and through it that of Egypt, seeing that their kings would have put me to utter shame and robbed my father of his life, as shall be told. So, too, I had the warrant of a woman's heart to worship the man I sought and for the death I brought upon him in my jealous madness my soul has paid full measure in remorse and tears. Still, since justice is hard to come by here on the earth, or even in the heaven above, I know that some would judge me harshly and must bear it with the rest. Even Holly, and at times my Lord Leo who once was named Kallikrates, have cherished such thoughts, though their lips dare not utter them, for I read it in their minds which to me are as an open book. Therefore never shall Holly, nor my lord either, look upon this written truth, lest therefrom they might distil some poison of mistrustful doubt, for it is sure that all men stain the whiteness of pure verity to the colour of their twisted minds. Therefore, too, I write it in tongues and symbols that they do not understand, which yet shall be deciphered in their season.

As I taught Holly long ago in the caves of Kôr, and truly, though afterward for some forgotten reason of my own or to give him food for thought, I may perhaps have changed my tale, puzzling him

with stories of great Alexander and the rest, by my mortal birth I am an Arabian of the purest and most noble blood, born in Yaman the Happy and in the sweet city of Ozal. My father was named Yarab after the great ancestor of our race, and I, his only child, was named Ayesha after my highborn mother. Of her, whom I never knew, for she was gathered to the bosom of whatever god she worshipped but one moon from my birth, this is said.

At first she would not look on me, being angered because I was not a son, but at length at my father's pleading she was prevailed upon to command that I should be brought to her. When she saw how fair a babe Heaven had given her, such a babe as had not been known or told of among our people, she was amazed and put up a prayer that she might die. This, those who knew her declared, she did for two reasons:—first because, foreseeing my greatness, she desired that I alone should hold my father's heart and that of all our tribe, and secondly because she feared lest, should she live, she might bear other children whom she would hate when she compared them to my perfectness.

So it came about as, amongst others, my father told me often, that her prayer was granted and having kissed and blessed me, for a while she entered into rest.

This is the true story of her end, not the other, which those who envied me put about in after days, that owing to certain revelations which came to her at the time of my birth, as to the deeds which I was doomed to do and the loves and hates which I was doomed to earn, my mother thought it better to ask death from her gods rather than to continue in a life which she must live out at my side. This tale, my father often swore to me when I asked him of

it, was as false as the changeful pictures which are seen at sunset on the desert, and sometimes at noon-day also.

For the rest this beloved father of mine took no other wife while I was yet a child, fearing lest for her own sake, or her children's, she should be jealous and maltreat me, and afterward when I became a maiden, because I would not suffer that another woman should share the rule of his household with me. As I showed to him, he had servants in plenty and these should be enough, to which he bowed his head and answered that without doubt my will was that of God.

Thus it came about that I grew up with my noble father, his adviser and his strength, and through him, or rather with him, ruled all his great tribe, who always worshipped me. Be it admitted that from the first, or at least from the time that I came to womanhood, I brought him trouble as well as blessing, though through no fault of my own, but because of the beauty with which, as in those days I believed, Isis, or Aphrodite, or both of them, had endowed me for their own divine purposes. Very soon this beauty of mine, also my wit and knowledge, were noised abroad through all Arabia, so that princes came from far to court me, and afterward quarrelled and fought, for, being gentle-hearted, I said a kind word to everyone of them and left them to reason out which was the kindest.

This, for the most part, they did with spears and arrows after the fashion of violent and insensate men, so that there was much fighting on my account, which made my father some enemies, because the people of certain of the princes who were killed swore that I had promised myself in marriage to them. This, however, I had never done, who de-

sired to marry no man that I might become a slave, cooped up in a fortress to bear children that I did not desire with some jealous tyrant for their father. Nay, being higher-hearted than any of my time, already I sought to rule the world, and if I must have any lover, to choose one whom I wished, and, when I wished, to have done with him.

But at that time I asked no lover who myself was in love—with wisdom. Knowledge, I saw, was strength, and if I would rule, first I must learn. Therefore I studied deeply, taking for masters all the wisest in Arabia who were proud to teach Ayesha the Beautiful, daughter and heiress of Yarab the great chief who could call ten thousand spears to his standards, all of his own tribe; and ten thousand more sworn to us but not of our blood.

I learned of the stars, a deep learning this that taught my soul its littleness, though it is true that while I studied I wondered, as still I wonder now, in which of them I was destined to rule when my day on earth was done. For always from the beginning I knew that wherever I am, there I must be the first and reign.

Perchance I had learned this aforetime in the halls of Isis who then to me had seemed so great, though afterward contemplating those stars in the silence of the desert night, I came to understand that even the Universal Mother, as men named her in those far days, was herself but small, one who must fight for sovereignty with Aphrodite and other gods.

Holly has told me much of what the astronomers in these latter years have won of Nature's secrets: of how they number and weigh the stars, and measure to a mile their infinite distance from the earth, and how assuredly that each of them, even the

farthest, is a sun as great or greater than our own, round which revolve worlds unseen. He has been astonished also, and affected to disbelieve, when I answered him, that we of Arabia guessed all these things over two thousand years ago, and indeed knew some of them. Yet, so it was.

Thus communing with greatness, my soul grew ever greater.

Moreover, I sought other and deeper lore. There wandered a certain strange man to our town, Ozal, where my father kept his court, if so it may be called, that is when we were not camping with our great herds in the desert, as we did at certain seasons of the year after the rains had caused the wilderness to throw up herbage. This man, named Noot, was always aged and white-haired, ugly to look on, with a curious wrinkled face of the colour of parchment, much such a face as that of Holly will be should he attain to his years. Indeed in this and other ways he was so like to Holly that often I think that in him dwells something of Noot's spirit now returned again to earth, as that of Kallikrates has returned as Leo.

Now this Noot, who came to Egypt none knew whence, for by birth he was not Egyptian, had been the high-priest of Isis and *Kherheb* or Chief Magician in Egypt, one who had much power on earth and still more beyond the earth, since he was in touch with things divine. Moreover, he was an honest magician and told the truth even to kings, as the gods and his wisdom showed it to him, and this was the cause of his downfall, for woe betide those who tell the truth to kings or to any who wield the sceptre of their might. On a certain day Nectanebes, the first of that name, the Pharaoh of Egypt whom others called *Nekht-nebf*, after a victory

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he had gained over the Persians, was filled with pride and took counsel with Noot, his Chief Magician, bidding Noot search out the future and tell him of glories to come to Egypt and to the Royal House, after he had been gathered to Osiris, that thereon he might feed his soul.

Noot answered that it was wiser to leave the future to care for itself and to satisfy his heart with the present and its joys and greatness.

Then the Pharaoh grew wrath and badé him fulfil his command.

So Noot bowed and went, and alone in some tomb or sanctuary drew the circles, uttered the words of power, and called upon the gods he served to show him such things as should befall to Egypt and to Pharaoh's House.

The magic sleep fell upon him and in it appeared the Spirit of Truth and spoke to him dreadful words of fate and doom. These she bade him deliver to Pharaoh, but when they were spoken to fly for his life's sake from Egypt and seek out a maiden called Ayesha, the daughter of Yarab, the Sheik of Ozal, and with her take refuge since she was an appointed instrument of Heaven. Moreover, this spirit commanded him to consult the maiden Ayesha in everything and impart to her all his gathered learning and the very secrets of the gods that had been revealed to him, that to any other it would be death to speak.

Now in the morning Noot went into the presence of Pharaoh who rejoiced to see him, and cried,

"Be welcome, *Kherheb*, the first of all magicians, you that men say were born beyond the earth, you in whom lives the spirit of Maat, goddess of Truth. Tell me now what the gods have revealed to you as to the glories they prepare for the ancient

land of Egypt, and the House of me the Pharaoh who have made her great again, driving out the dogs of Persians."

"Life! Blood! Strength! O Pharaoh!" answered Noot, saluting in the ancient form. "I have heard the word of Pharaoh who commanded me against my counsel to make divination and to seek to learn of the future from the gods. Behold! the gods hearkened. Behold! by the mouth of Maat, Lady of Truth, the goddess of the land where I was born, they spoke to me in the silence of the night. Thus they spoke. 'Say to Nectanebes who impiously dares to lift the veil of Time, that because he has fought for Egypt against the Barbarians who worship other gods, it is granted to him to die in his bed which shall chance ere long. Say that after him shall come a usurper whom the Barbarians shall defeat, so that he dies a slave in the land of Persia. Say that after him the son of Pharaoh shall wear the Double Crown and be called by the name of Pharaoh, the last of the true Blood of Egypt who shall ever sit upon its throne. Say that this son of his is accursed because he is in league with evil spirits and has worked apostasy, putting about his neck the chain of Aphrodite of the Greeks and the chains of Baal and of Moloch which never can be broken. Therefore, though he make many false offerings, yet is he accursed and the Barbarians shall overcome him, so that he flees away, nor shall all his magic be a shield to him. Because of him Egypt shall fall and her cities shall be burned and her children slaughtered and her temples desecrated, and never more shall one of her pure and ancient blood hold her sceptre.' Such is the oracle that the gods have commanded me to speak, O Pharaoh."

Now when Nectanebes heard these awful decrees

of Fate upon him and upon his son, he trembled and rent his robes. Then rage took him and he reviled Noot the Prophet, calling him a liar and a traitor, and saying that he would make an end of him and his prophecies together. But because they were alone together within a chamber, before he could summon guards to kill him, Noot, helped of Heaven, fled away out of the palace and as darkness was falling, mingled with the throng and could not be found by the soldiers who sought him.

Ere daylight he was far from the city and, disguised, escaped from Egypt, bringing with him only his *Kherheb's* staff of power, also the ancient sacred books of spells or words of strength that were hidden in his robes. With these he brought, moreover, a little ancient image of Isis which he made use of in his divinations and prayed before by day and night.

Thus it came about awhile later, one eve when I, the young maiden Ayesha, stood alone in the desert communing with my soul and drawing wisdom from the stars, that there appeared before me a withered, ancient man who, when he saw me, knelt down and bowed to me. I looked on him and asked,

"Why, aged One, do you kneel to me who am but a mortal?"

"Are you indeed a mortal?" he asked. "Methought that I who am the head-priest of Isis saw in you the goddess come to earth, and indeed, Lady, I seem to see the holy blood of Isis coursing in your veins."

"It is true, Priest, that of this goddess whom my mother worshipped I have dreams and memories and that sometimes she seems to speak with me

in sleep, yet I tell you that I am but a mortal, the daughter of Yarab the far-famed," I answered to him.

"Then you are that maiden whom I am commanded to seek, she who is named Ayesha. Know, Lady, that great is your destiny, greater than that of any king, and that it is revealed to me that you will become immortal."

"All who believe on the gods trust to find the pearl, Immortality, beneath Death's waters, O Priest."

"Yes, Lady, but the immortality that is foretold for you is different and begins upon the earth, and I confess that I understand it not, though perhaps it may be an immortality of fame."

"Nor I, Priest. But meanwhile, what would you of me?"

"Shelter and food, Lady."

"And what can you offer for these, Priest?"

"Learning, Lady."

"That I think I have already."

"Nay, Lady Ayesha, not such learning as I can give; the knowledge of the secrets of the gods; spells that will sway the hearts of kings, magic that will show things afar and call ghosts from the grave, power that will set him who yields it upon the pinnacle of worship——"

"Stay!" I broke in. "You are old and ugly! you are tired, your foot bleeds, you seek protection, and it seems to me that you need food. How comes it that one who can command so much lore and power is in want of such things as these that the humblest peasant does not lack, and must seek to purchase them with flatteries?"

When he heard these words, of a sudden the aspect of that old man changed. To me his shrunken

body seemed to swell, his face grew fierce and set, and a strange light shone in his deep eyes.

"Maiden," he said in another voice, "I perceive that you are in truth in need of such a teacher as I am. Had you the inner wisdom, you would not judge by the outward appearance and you would know that ofttimes the gods bring misfortunes upon those they love in order that thereby they may work their ends. Beauty is yours, wit is yours, and a great destiny awaits you, though with it, as I think, great sorrow. Yet one thing is lacking to you—humility—and that you must learn beneath the rods of destiny. But of these matters we will talk afterward. Meanwhile, as you say, I need food and shelter, which are necessary to all while still they labour in the flesh. Lead me to your father!"

Without more talk though not without fear, I guided this strange wanderer to our tents, for at the time we were camping in the desert, and into the presence of my father, Yarab, who gave him hospitality after the Arab fashion, but save for the common words of courtesy, held no converse with him that night.

On the following morning before we struck our camp, however, they had much speech together, and at the end of it I was summoned to the great tent.

"Daughter," said my father, pointing to the wanderer who was seated cross-legged on a carpet before him after the fashion of an Egyptian scribe, "I have questioned this learned man, our guest. I discover from him that he is the First Magician of Egypt, the head-priest also of the greatest goddess of that land, she whom your mother worshipped. At least, he says he was these things—but now, hav-

ing quarrelled with Pharaoh, that he is nothing but a beggar, which is a strange state for a magician. Also, according to his tale, Pharaoh seeks his life, as he declares, because of certain prophecies that he made to him concerning the fate of Egypt and of Pharaoh's House. It seems that he desires to abide here with us and to impart his wisdom to you, which wisdom, it is evident, has brought him to an evil case. Now I ask you, as one gifted with discretion beyond your years, what answer shall I return to him? If I keep this Noot here, for that he tells me, in his name, though of his race and country he will say nothing, perchance Pharaoh, whose arm is long, will come to seek him and bring war upon us, and if I send him away, perchance I turn my back upon a messenger from the gods. What then shall I do?"

"Ask him, my Father; seeing that one who prophecies evil to the Pharaoh to his own ruin must be a truthful man."

Then my father stroked his long beard, being perplexed, and inquired of the wanderer whether he should keep him or send him away.

Noot replied that he thought that my father would do well to send him away, but better to keep him. He said that he had no revelation on the matter, though if it were wished he would seek one, but he believed that although his presence might bring trouble, from his dismissal would come yet worse trouble. He added that in a vision he had been commanded by the goddess Isis to find out a certain Lady Ayesha and become her instructor in mysteries that the purposes of Heaven might be fulfilled, and that it was ill to flout goddesses whose arms were even longer than those of Pharaoh.

Now for the second time my father who did noth-

ing great or small without my counsel, asked my judgment on this matter after I had heard the words of Noot. I pondered, remembering what the wanderer had promised to me in the desert, namely, knowledge and the secrets of the gods, also spells that would sway the hearts of kings, with the gifts of magic and of power. At length I answered, "To what end is all this empty talk, my Father? Has not this stranger eaten of your bread and salt and is it the custom of our people to drive away from their doors for no fault those to whom they have given hospitality?"

"True," said my father. "If he were to be sent hence, it should have been done at once. Abide in my shadow, Noot, and pray your gods to bring a blessing on me."

So Noot, the priest and prophet, remained with us and from the first day of his coming, opened out to my eager eyes all the scrolls of his secret lore. Still it is true that he brought to my father, not blessing but death, as shall be told, though this did not come for many moons.

Meanwhile he taught and I learned, for his knowledge flowed into my soul like a river into the desert and filled its thirsty sand with life. Of all that I learned from him, because of the oaths I swore, even now it is not lawful that I should write, but it is true that in those years of study I grew near to the gods and wrested many a secret from the clenched hands of Nature.

Moreover, though as yet I did not take the vows, I became a votary of Isis, as Noot, her high-priest, had authority to make me, and one of the inner circle. Yes, I determined even then that I would forswear marriage and all fleshly joys and make to

Isis the offering of my life, while she through her priest vowed to me in return such power and wisdom as had scarce been given to any woman before me.

Thus the time went by till at length fell the blow and I—for all my wisdom—never heard Aphrodite laughing behind her veil. Nor indeed did Noot, but then he was an old man who, as I drew out of him, save those of his mother, had not once touched a woman's lips. All learning was his, but it seemed that in his search for it there were some things he had passed by. At least so I believed, or rather half-believed, at this time, but as I learned afterward, there are matters upon which even the most holy think it no shame to lie, since in the end Noot confessed to me that in his youth he had been as are other men. Also I think that he heard the laughter of Aphrodite, though I did not. However these things may be, as I was to discover afterward, Mother Isis is a stern mistress to whoever looks the other way.

Also, although Noot told me much, he hid more. Not for many a year was I to learn that he was a citizen of the ancient, ruined land of Kôr and the only one who knew the fearful mystery it hid, which in a far day to come he was commanded to reveal to me, Ayesha, and to no other man or woman. Nor did he tell me that it was the purpose of Heaven that under her other shape and name of Truth I should again establish the worship of Isis in that land and once more make of it a queen of the world. Yet these things were so and therefore was he sent to me and for no other reason. Therefore was he commanded to reveal the doom of Egypt to Nectanebes, that this Pharaoh in his wrath might drive him, a wanderer, to our tents at Ozal there to dwell for years and instruct me, the chosen, in all

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things that I must learn, so that when at last the appointed hour dawned, I might be fitted for my mighty task.

But all this while Aphrodite laughed on behind her veil!

