

CHAPTER III.

THE BATTLE AND THE FLIGHT

IN THE end trouble came upon us thus. As I have said already, my beauty was the talk of men throughout Arabia, and of women also, who were jealous of it, since those who travelled in caravans bore its fame from tribe to tribe and those who sailed upon the sea took up the report and carried it to distant shores. But now to this tale was added another, namely that the wearer of so much loveliness was also a vessel into which the gods had poured all their wisdom, so that there were few marvels which she could not work and little or nothing that she did not know. It was added, truly enough, that the channel through which this wisdom flowed into her heart was a certain Noot who aforesaid had been *Kherheb* in Egypt and high-priest of Isis.

Presently this tale, carried by the mariners, came to the ears of the Pharaoh Nectanebes in his city of Sais, who knew well enough that Noot was the prophet whom he had driven from the land and whom by now he desired to have back again, for his inspired counsel's sake.

The end of it was that the Pharaoh sent an embassy to my father, Yarab, demanding that I should be given to him or to his son, the young Nectanebes, I know not which, in marriage, and that Noot should return to Egypt as my guardian, and there be reinstated in all his offices.

My father answered, speaking with my voice, that

least of anything did I desire to become one of the women of Pharaoh, a man already near the grave, or even of Pharaoh's son, I who was a free-born Arabian, and that as for Noot, his head felt safer on his shoulders in Ozal where he was an honoured guest, than it would at Pharaoh's court.

These words Nectanebes took ill, so ill indeed that, for this and other reasons of policy, he sent an army to invade Yaman the Happy, and to capture me and kill Noot, or drag him away to Egypt in chains. Of all these plans we had warnings, partly through the priests of Isis in Egypt who still acknowledged Noot as their head, although another had been raised up in his place and filled his office, and partly through dreams and revelations that came to him from Heaven. Therefore we made ready and gathered in great strength to fight against Pharaoh.

At length his hosts came, borne for the most part in ships of Cyprus and of Sidon whereof at that time the kings were his allies, or rather vassals.

They landed upon a plain by the seashore and watching from our hills beyond, we suffered them to land. But that night, or rather just before the following dawn when their camp was still unfortified, we poured down upon them from our hills. Great was the fray! for they fought well. I led the horsemen of our tribe in this, my first battle, and by the light of the rising sun charged again and yet again into the heart of the hosts of Pharaoh, having no fear since I knew well that none could harm me.

There was a certain company of Greeks, two thousand of them perhaps, who served Pharaoh, and in the centre of them was his general, which company stood firm when the others fled. Thrice we

attacked it with the horsemen and thrice were beaten back. Then my father came to my aid with his picked kinsmen mounted upon camels. Again we charged and this time broke through. Those about Pharaoh's general saw me and strove to make me captive, hoping to carry me back to him, whatever happened to the host. They surrounded me, one caught the bridle of my horse. Him I slew with a javelin, but others snatched at me. Then I cried to Isis and I think that she clothed me in some garment of her majesty, since foes fell away in front of me, calling out—

“This is a goddess, not a woman!”

Yet I was cut off, ringed round by them, for all my companions were slain or driven back.

They pressed in on me to take me living, till I was hedged in with a ring of swords. My father appeared mounted on his swift white dromedary that was called Desert Wind, followed by others. They broke through the ring and there was a fierce fight. My father fell, pierced by the spear of the general of the Egyptians. I saw it and, filled with madness, I charged at that general and drove my javelin through his throat, so that he fell also. Then a cry went up and the host of Pharaoh melted away, flying for the ships. Some gained them, but the most remained dead upon the shore or were taken captive.

Thus ended that battle and such was the answer that we of Ozal sent to Pharaoh Nectanebes. Therefore it was also that because of the death of my beloved father at their hands I hated Egypt, and not only Egypt but Cyprus and Sidon in whose ships her hosts had been borne to attack us, yes, and swore to be avenged upon them all, which oath I kept to the full.

Now my father being dead, I, the daughter of Yarab, became ruler of our tribe in his place with Noot for my counsellor. For certain years I ruled it well. Yet troubles arose—in this fashion. By now the fame of my glory and loveliness had spread through all the earth, so that, more even than before, I was beset with demands for my hand from chiefs and kings who went well-nigh mad when I refused them. In the end, being brothers in their grief because I would have none of them, I whom they called by the names of Hathor and Aphrodite and other goddesses famed for beauty according to their separate worships, they made a great conspiracy together and sent envoys bearing a message. This was the message:—

That unless my people would give me up so that my husband might be chosen from among their number by the casting of lots, they would join their armies together and fall upon us and kill out our tribe so that not one remained to look upon the sun, save myself alone, who should then be the reward of him who could take me.

Now when I heard this I was filled with rage and having caused those messengers to be scourged before me, sent them back to their masters bearing my defiance. But when they were gone, the elders of the tribe came to me and said through their spokesman,

“O Daughter of Yarab, O Ayesha the Wise and Lovely, we adore you as one beyond price. Yet it is true that we love our wives and children and desire to live, not to die. How can we who are but few stand against so many kings? We pray you, therefore, Ayesha, to choose one of them to be your husband, for then because of jealousy doubtless they will destroy each other and we, your ser-

vants, shall be left in peace. Or if you will not marry, then we pray you to hide your beauty elsewhere for a while, so that the kings do not come to seek it here."

I hearkened and was angry because of the cowardice of this people who set their own welfare above my will and refused to fight with those who threatened me. Still, being politic, I hid my mind and said that I would consider and give them an answer on the third day. Then I took counsel of Noot and together we made divinations and prayed to the gods, but most of all to Isis.

The end of it was that before the dawn on the second day a small caravan of five camels might have been seen, had there been any to watch, leaving the city of Ozal and heading for the sea.

On the first of those camels sat an old merchant. On the second his wife or his daughter, or his woman, heavily veiled. On the three others was his merchandise. Woven carpets it seemed to be, though if opened, those carpets would have proved to be filled with a very great treasure in gold and pearls and sapphires and other gems, which for generations had been gathered together by my father, Yarab, and those who went before him out of the profits of their trade and of their flocks and herds, and hid away against the time of need.

That merchant was Noot the priest and prophet, and that woman was I—Ayesha. That treasure was mine and the camels were led by certain men who had served my father and now served me, being sworn to me by secret oaths that might not be broken.

We gained the sea and took ship to Egypt in a vessel that I had caused to be prepared. Yes, before we were missed the coast of Arabia was behind

us, since I had given it out that I had gone to a secret place to consider of my answer to the elders of the people. As I heard afterward, when it was known that I had turned my back on them, there were woe and lamentations in every household of the tribe. Understanding what they had lost the men among them beat their breasts and wept, though it is said that some of the women rejoiced, because I outshone them all and they were jealous of me.

Afterward the kings and chiefs of whom I have spoken descended upon them to seek me, whereupon my people swore that I had been changed into a goddess and gone up into heaven. Some believed this, declaring that they had always held me to be more than mortal, but others of a coarser, common mind declared that I had been hidden away, and falling on the tribe, dispersed it, seizing many and selling them into slavery.

Thus then did the children of Yarab pay the price of their treachery to me, though I have heard that afterward once more they became a people under the rule of some baseborn grandson of my father, and worshipped me as a guardian goddess from generation to generation, having come to believe that I was not a woman, but a spirit whom the gods sent to dwell with them for a while.

So Noot and I came safely to Naukratis, a Grecian city upon the Canopic mouth of the Nile, and there abode disguised as a merchant and his daughter trading in precious stones and other costly wares, and thus adding to my wealth, though of this there was little need, since already it was great.

It was here that for the first time I went veiled in the Eastern fashion, in order to hide my beauty from the eyes of men.

Under cover of this trade I and Noot lived for two years or more while I studied the lore and language of the Egyptians, learning to read their picture-writing which the Greeks called heiroglyphs, and mastering their history. Also I perfected myself in the Grecian tongue and read the works of their great writers as well as those of the Romans. Moreover, I learned other things, since at the beginning of the second year Nectanebes, the Pharaoh who had sought me in marriage, being now dead, and Egypt for a while in the hands of the usurper Zehir, who some say was his son born of a concubine, we travelled up the Nile disguised and came to the ancient city of Thebes. This we did slowly, stopping at every great town, where we received the hospitality of the head priests of the various gods, Ammon, Ptah, and the rest, since to these priests Noot by secret signs revealed himself. Indeed the news of our coming was passed on before us so that always we found some waiting to welcome us who, once within the temple walls, were treated like the greatest, although we were garbed as humble travellers. All of these priests we found full of rage, both because the gods of the Greeks, and even of the Persians and Sidonians, were being set above their own, and still more for the reason that their revenues were seized and used to pay Grecian mercenaries, so that they who had been very rich were now poor and the gods lacked their offerings, nor could their holy temples be repaired.

Of all these things I took note whose heart was set upon one thing only,—to bring about the fall of the Egyptians and their allies that had slain my father whom I loved, as indeed I was fated to do. Therefore by a word here and a word there I blew the anger[?] that smouldered in them to flame, hinting

of rebellion and the setting up of a new dynasty in Egypt, of which at that time I thought to be the first, a priestess-queen, Isis-come-to-Earth. Of this plan I hinted also through the mouth of Noot, nor was it ill received, since already those priests to whom he had told my history and the revelations that had come to him concerning me, looked on me as something more than woman. Could a mortal maid, they asked, have so much beauty and so much learning; was I not in truth a goddess clothed in woman's flesh?

Only on the road I purposed to tread there was this stumbling block, that each of those high-priests desired that he himself, or at least one who worshipped *his* god, were it Ammon or Osiris or Ptah, or Khonsu, should be the Pharaoh of that new dynasty. For they were jealous each of the other and could not agree together, as is common among rival priests.

We passed on to Thebes where I saw the wonders of the mighty temples which stood there reared by a hundred kings, which Holly tells me now are but ruins, though the great hall of columns among which I used to wander still stands in part. Also I crossed the Nile and visited the tombs of the Pharaohs.

Standing beneath the moon in that desolate Valley of Dead Kings, for the first time, I think I came to know all the littleness of Life and of the vanities of earth. Life, I saw, was but a dream; its ambitions and its joys were naught but dust. Those kings and those queens, some of them had been very great in their day; the people worshipped them as gods and when they stretched out their sceptres, the world trembled. And now what were they? But names, if so much as a name remained of them.

I saw a great queen whose tomb some while before,

had been broken into by robbers, Persians or Greeks I was told. They had unrolled her mummy and stripped her of her royal ornaments and there she lay, she in whom had centred all the world's pomp, a little black and withered thing, grinning at us from the dust, like a dead ape, a sight so strange and unhuman that the priest who guided us, a coarse fellow, broke into laughter. I remembered that laugh and afterward paid him back for it, though he never knew whence his misfortune came.

I, Aysha, have many sins to my count and at that time was full of faults, as perchance still I am to-day. Thus I was proud of my beauty and my genius which were given to me above any other woman; passionate and revengeful, too, and led on by ambitions. Yet this I swear by all the gods of all the heavens, that ever in my secret self I have set the spirit above the flesh and desired to attain to another glory than that of earth. From the flesh came my sins, because it was begotten of other flesh and the flesh is sin incarnate. Yet my soul sins not, because it comes from that which is sinless and, its tasks accomplished here, laden with knowledge and purified by suffering, to this holy fount at last it shall return again. At the least such are my faith and hope.

So it came about that there in the Valley of Dead Kings I swore myself to the worship of God (since all the gods are one God) and to use the world as a ladder whereby I might climb nearer to His throne.

Thus I swore with old Noot for witness, noting that he shook his wise head and smiled a little at the oath. For if I forgot Aphrodite and the flesh, he remembered them, or perchance he to whom the Future spoke already guessed something of my

fate which it was not lawful that he should tell. Also at that time I knew nothing of that everlasting King of Fire who dwells in majesty beneath the rocks of Kôr, nor of his evil gifts. Least of all did I know that Noot himself was by inheritance and appointment the guardian of the Fire.

From Thebes we passed up Nile to Philæ on the Isle of Elephantine, where Mother Isis had her holy sanctuary, and Nectanebes, the first of that name, he who had sought me as a wife and now was not long dead, had begun to build a temple of surpassing beauty to the goddess, which temple was completed in my time by his son, the second Nectanebes, he with whom I had to do and brought to nothingness.

Here I abode a year making final preparations utterly to vow myself to the goddess. I kept the fasts, I purified my heart, I passed the trials and at length alone I seemed to die and descended into the gulf of death and fled through the Halls of Death pursued by terrors, till I saw, or dreamed I saw, the goddess in her glory and fell swooning at her feet. More I may not say, even now that over two thousand years have passed since that holy hour of fears and victory, save this one thing which indeed has come to pass. When I arose from that swoon certain words were written on my mind, though whether the goddess whom I seemed to see or some spirit spoke them to me I do not know. These were the words:—

“Far to the south in this land of Libya beyond the region of Punt, is an ancient city, whence my worship came ere Egypt had a people. Thither, Daughter of Isis, shalt thou bear it back and there shalt thou blow upon it with thy breath and keep alive the holy spark that at last is doomed to die

upon the earth amidst those snows which as yet no southern foot has trod. There, Daughter, in that fallen and deserted land, my prophet Noot shall welcome thee. There shall he guard the Door of Life which of mortal women thou alone shalt pass. There shalt thou stain thy hands with blood, and there in solitude amidst the tombs, with tears from thy repentant eyes, shalt thou wash thy sin away. Yet of the seed that thou sowest in fire in the womb of the world, thou shalt reap the harvest upon the mountain tops amidst the snows."

Such were the words branded upon my memory when I awoke from the swoon after the night of trial. Later I repeated them to Noot, my Master, praying him to read their meaning, which either he could not or would not do. He said, however, it was true that far to the south there stood a great city, now a ruin sparsely peopled, whence came the first forefathers of the Egyptians thousands of years before the pyramids were built. He said also that he knew the road to that city by sea and by land, though how he knew it he would not tell. Nor would he interpret the rest of those dream words. Yet, when I harassed him with questions he said carelessly, as one who hazards a guess, that perchance the goddess meant that it would be my lot after its fall or corruption in Egypt, to bear back her worship to this its earlier home and there establish a great nation of her servants. As to the "Door of Life" that I alone could pass, of which he was named the Guardian, and the "northern snows," he declared that he knew not what was meant by them, but doubtless these things would be made clear in their season.

So he spoke somewhat lightly, like one who humours a frightened child, as though he would

make me think that I had but dreamed a dream. This indeed I came to believe, as is the fashion of mankind concerning things that they cannot see or handle, however real those things may appear in the hour of their experience. For these in the end always we write down as dreams, such as haunt us by the thousand in our sleep.

Yet now that two thousand years have gone by, I know that this dream was true. For is there not a city called Kôr and was I not there doomed to find the Door of Life whereof Noot was guardian? And did I not sin there and from generation to generation wash the shed blood from off my hands with tears of bitterest repentance, and afterward expiate that sin in loss and shame and agony? And lastly do I not reap that harvest of tears upon the mountain tops amidst the northern snows whither the spirit bore me, still holding in those hands the embers of the worship of that regnant Good who to us of the ancient world was known as the Universal Mother to whom I swore myself in Philæ's temples?

But enough of these things now; let them be spoken of in their season.

