

CHAPTER VI

THE DIVINATION

ACCOMPANIED by the priests and priestesses of Isis clad in their robes and chanting the holy songs, I was borne veiled to the palace of the Pharaoh in a litter, with its curtains drawn. On my right hand walked Noot the high-priest, white-bearded, venerable; and on my left the Greek Kallikrates, Master of the Rites.

Thus we came to the palace of which the outer courts were filled with Grecian soldiers of the guard, some of whom in past years Kallikrates had once commanded, although as a shaven priest of Isis, disguised in his white robes, they knew him no more. These men stared at us, ready to mock and yet afraid, as did Phœnicians, Sidonians, men of Cyprus, and others who were gathered in the courts as though awaiting some great event.

In an outer hall a captain of the guard bade our escort of priests and priestesses to await our return, but we three, that is I, Ayesha, Noot, and Kallikrates, were summoned to the small banqueting chamber where Nectanebes with a few of the most highly placed of his guests sat at their feast. Among these were the King of Sidon, two more kings from Cyprus, three Grecian generals, some great nobles of Egypt, and others. Also certain royal ladies were present, and among them one who instantly drew my eyes to her. She was younger than I—

perchance there may have been ten years between us, tall, slender, and lovely in her dark fashion, with a strong, quiet face and large brooding eyes, soft as a deer's and rather blue than black in colour.

Suddenly as we entered I, who note all, saw these eyes grow frightened like to those of one who sees some spirit returned from the halls of Death; saw also the rich-hued face turn pale, then grow red again as the blood flowed back; saw the breast heave beneath the jewelled robes, so sharply that a flower fell from them, and the lips of coral part as though to utter some remembered name.

Wondering what had thus disturbed this beautiful royalty since I, being veiled, it could not have been the vision of myself, I glanced round and perceived that Kallikrates, who was on my left, but a little behind me, had become pale as a dead man and stood like one frozen into stone.

"Who is that royal woman?" I whispered to Noot through my veil, for royal I knew her to be by the Uræus circlet she wore upon her raven hair.

"Pharaoh's daughter, Amenartas," he whispered back, "whom the Greeks call *The Maiden* because she will take no man in marriage."

Then I remembered a certain confession that once I had heard sitting on the throne of the goddess Isis at Philæ, of how the penitent had loved a girl of the royal House of Egypt, and for her sake killed his own dear brother; remembered also that this penitent was none other than the priest Kallikrates. Now I understood all, and though Kallikrates was naught to me save a fellow servant of the goddess, I hated that Amenartas and became aware that between her and me there was war unending, though how and why I knew not.

Next I looked at a man clad in kingly robes who

sat on Pharaoh's right. He was a large man of about five and forty years of age with dark, handsome face and shifting eyes; one with a jovial aspect which yet I felt to be but a mask covering a heart full of evil schemes. From his purple robe sewn with pearls and the style of his attire and head-dress I guessed that this must be Tenes the Phœnician, King of the city of Sidon that was reported the wealthiest in the world, which city, having revolted, had joined Egypt in its war against the Persians. Instantly I weighed that man in the balance of my mind and wrote him down as an ambitious rogue who was also a coward and, as I judged from the many charms he wore, full of superstition.

The others I had no time to study for at once the Pharaoh began to speak.

"Greeting, Prophetess," he said, rising from his chair and bowing to us, or rather to me, "Greeting, High-priest of Isis, Queen of Heaven, Mistress of the World; greeting also, Priest, Master of the Rites of Isis. Pharaoh thanks you all for thus promptly answering to his summons, since this night Egypt needs your wisdom more perchance than ever before in all the ages of its history."

"Be pleased, O Pharaoh, to set out what you desire of us, the servants of the eternal goddess," said Noot.

"This, High-priest: that you should declare the future to us. Harken! As you know, the great war has begun. The mighty Tenes here, King of Sidon, my ally, by the help of the Greeks I sent him, has defeated the Persians and against these Cyprus also is in revolt. But now Artaxerxes Ochus has seized the throne of Persia, having murdered all who stood between it and him, with the help of Bagoas the eunuch, his counsellor and general. He

has raised a countless host and is pouring down upon Sidon and upon Egypt. Therefore we would learn how the war shall go and to what gods we must sacrifice to secure the victory."

"O Pharaoh," answered Noot, "in bygone years when your father sat upon the throne and I was the *Kherheb*, yes, the first magician of Egypt, he asked me such questions as these; and having prayed to my goddess, I answered him in the words that she commanded. None heard those words save your father himself, for he and I were alone together. Yet there was that in them which made him wroth so that he sought to kill me, and to save my life I fled out of Egypt, going whither the goddess led me. Afterward I was called back to Egypt where once more I am high-priest of Isis though the office of *Kherheb* is filled by another. How know I, Pharaoh, if I obey you as I obeyed your father, and again the goddess should utter prophecies which are not pleasing to the ears of kings, that once more my life may not be sought in payment?"

"I swear, High-priest," answered Nectanebes eagerly, "that whatever may be revealed by the goddess, you shall take no harm. I swear it by the name and throne of the holy Isis, to whom I will make great gifts, and all this company are witnesses of the oath. If it be broken, may the curse of Isis and of all the gods of Egypt fall upon the head of me and mine. Draw nigh now that I may touch you with my sceptre, thereby forgiving all that you have said or shall say against me or my House, and restoring to you your office of *Kherheb* of Egypt, whereof my father, who to-day is gathered in Osiris, robbed you."

So Noot drew near and Pharaoh touched him with his sceptre, a cedar wand surmounted with a

little golden image of Horus, which he always carried because of his throne-name which signified "*Horus-of-Gold.*" Moreover, he re-created him *Kherheb* and in token of it set upon his shoulders the gold chain from his own neck, and swore to him his place and power for life and the gift of an alabaster coffin wherein to lie after life was done. This sarcophagus, however, Noot refused, saying darkly that it was fated that he should sleep his last sleep far away from Egypt. Then he, Noot, drew back and as he went I saw Pharaoh's daughter rise and whisper awhile in her father's ear. He listened and nodded. Then he said,

"Come hither, priest who is named 'Lover-of-Isis' and Master of her rites, the royal Lady of Egypt says to me that in bygone days when she was scarce a woman, she thinks that before you were a priest, you held some command amongst the Greeks of my guard, as from your stature and bearing I can well believe. She says also that if her memory serves her, you slew some man in a quarrel and for this reason fled away and sought refuge with Isis. If such things happened I have forgotten them, nor do I ask concerning them. Let them lie. Yet, lest you should be afraid that old tales may be told against you or vengeance wrought upon you, come hither also and receive pardon for the past, and protection and advancement for the future and with these a gift from Pharaoh."

Now I marvelled at this lady's foresight and cunning which showed her how to take advantage of Pharaoh's mood and safeguard one who once had loved her, all of which told me that she must be a wise woman as well as beautiful. Also it told me that the worship of this man had been pleasing to her. Then Kallikrates drew near and

was touched with the sceptre. Moreover, Pharaoh spoke to him in like words that he had spoken to Noot, pardoning him all and promising him much. Moreover, in token of his favour he gave him a gold cup of Grecian workmanship having two handles, that was chased about with the story of the loves of Aphrodite and Adonis, and bordered with a wreath of those anemones which were fabled to have sprung from his blood. This glorious, flower-like cup from which the guests, when we entered, were pledging themselves in wine of Cyprus, Pharaoh lifted from the board and sent to Kallikrates, a great gift which made it clear to me how deeply he desired to propitiate the goddess in the persons of her servants.

Lastly the private scribe was commanded to write down these decrees that he had spoken, which he did forthwith, sealing them with Pharaoh's seal and giving one copy to Noot whilst keeping the other to be filed among the records.

Thus Noot and Kallikrates were protected from all things, but to me, the Prophetess, nothing was said, as I thought for two reasons, first because I was known to Pharaoh, who as I have told, had often consulted me upon matters of magic, and secondly because as the "voice of the goddess" I was holy and above reward or punishment at the hands of man. Thus I thought, with how much truth shall be seen.

The gifts were received, the papyrus had been hidden away in the robe of Noot, and there was silence in the chamber. To me, Ayesha, this heavy silence was full of omen. My soul, made keen and fine with ceaseless contemplation of things that are above the earth, in that silence seemed to hear the breath of the watching gods of Egypt. To me it was as though they had gathered there to listen to

the fate of this their ancient home on earth. Yes, I felt them about me; or at the least I felt a spirit stirring.

The company at the table drank no more wine and ceased from speech. They sat still staring in front of them and notwithstanding the glitter of the ornaments that proclaimed their royalty or rule, to me they were as dead men in a tomb. Only the Princess of Egypt, Amenartas, seemed to be alive and outside the circle of this doom, for I noted that her splendid eyes sought the face, the perfect, carven face of the priest Kallikrates and that though he stood with folded arms and gaze fixed upon the ground, he knew it, for now and again covertly he glanced back at her.

At length one of those guests could bear no more, and spoke. He was a close-lipped, war-worn Grecian general who afterward I learned was named Kleinios of Cos, the commander of Pharaoh's mercenary forces.

"By Zeus!" he cried, "are we men or are we stones, or are we shades in Hades? Let these diviners divine and have done, for I would get me to my wine again."

"Aye," broke in Tenes, King of Sidon. "Bid them divine, Pharaoh, since we have much to agree upon ere I sail at dawn."

Then all the company cried, "*Divine! Divine!*" save Amenartas only, who searched the face of Kallikrates with her eyes, as though she would learn what lay behind its cold and priestly mask.

"So be it," said Noot, "but first I pray Pharaoh to bid all mean men depart."

Pharaoh waved his sceptre and the butlers and attendants bowed and went. Then Noot motioned to Kallikrates, who thereon shook the *sistrum* that

he bore and, in his rich, low voice, uttered a chant to the goddess, that which was used to summon her presence.

He ended his chant and Noot began to pray.

"Hear me, thy prophet, O thou who wast and art and shalt be, thou in whose bosom is locked all the wisdom of heaven and earth," he prayed. "These kings and great ones desire knowledge, declare it unto them according to thy will. They desire truth—let them learn the truth in such fashion as thou shalt decree."

Then he was silent. None spoke, yet it seemed that a command came to the three of us, for suddenly Noot looked at the priest Kallikrates, a very strange look. Next the priest Kallikrates, rising from his knees, laid down the *sistrum* and taking the beautiful cup that Pharaoh had given him, went to the table and washed it with pure water from a silver ewer, then filled it to the brim from the ewer and brought it to me, Ayesha. Now I knew that I was commanded to gaze into that cup and to say what things I saw.

So I set it on the ground in front of me and kneeling, threw my veil over it and gazed into the water in the shallow golden cup.

For a little while I saw nothing, till presently a face formed in the water, the face of the royal lady, Amenartas, which stared up at me out of the cup. Yes, it stared hard and seemed to threaten me, for in its eyes were hate and vengeance. Then another face came and covered it, the face of Kallikrates the priest, and in its eyes were trouble and desire.

Now I knew that the goddess Isis, or perchance another, she of the Greeks, spoke to me of matters that had to do with myself and not with the fate of

Egypt. In my heart I prayed to the Queen of Heaven to rid me of these visions, though to give me others I did not pray her, since it was my design to speak certain politic words which we had prepared.

Yet other visions came unsought, for some spirit possessed me, a spirit of truth and destiny. They were many and all of them terrible. I saw battle-fields; I saw men fall in thousands, I saw cities in flames. I saw that false-eyed king, Tenes, dead. I saw the General, Kleinios of Cos, also dead, lying on a heap of Grecian slain. I saw the Pharaoh Nectanebes flying up Nile upon a boat—I knew it was up Nile because the current rippled against the prow of his ship, I saw him seized by black savages and throttled with a rope till his tongue hung out and the great round eyes started from his head. I saw the temples of Egypt burning and a fierce-faced, drunken king hacking at the statues of the gods with a Persian sword and butchering the priests upon the altar. Then I saw no more but a voice called in my ears,

“Death to Egypt! Death and desolation! Death to her king, death to her priests, death to her gods! Finished, finished, all is finished!”

I cast the bowl from me. It overset but lo! there flowed from it not water but blood, or dark-hued wine, staining the white marble of the pavement. I stared at it! All stared at this god-sent horror!

“A trick!” cried the Princess Amenartas. “She has coloured the water behind the shelter of her veil.”

The others too, especially the Greeks, took up the cry, echoing,

“A trick, a brazen trick!”

Only I noted that Pharaoh was silent, Pharaoh who knew that Ayesha, named *Isis-come-to-Earth*, did not deal in tricks; Pharaoh who himself practised magic and had seen such omens sent by Set. Lo! Pharaoh looked afraid and spoke no word, only glared with his great eyes at the stain upon the marble.

"What answer did the goddess give to your prayer, Prophetess," asked Amenartas, sneering at me.

"This answer, royal Lady of Egypt," and I pointed to the marble, "the answer of blood."

"Blood! Whose blood? That of the Persians?"

"Nay, Lady, that of many who sit at this feast and who ere long shall sit at the table of Osiris, and of thousands who cling to them. Yet be comforted, Lady, not your blood. I think that you have much mischief to work ere you sit also at the table of Osiris, or mayhap at that of Set," I added, giving thrust for thrust.

"Declare then their names, Seeress."

"Nay, I declare them not. Go, seek them for yourself, Lady, or let Pharaoh your father seek, for is he not a magician? though what god gives him vision I do not know. You name me cheat, or rather you name the goddess cheat. Therefore the goddess is dumb and her prophetess is dumb."

"Aye, I name you cheat," she cried, who in her heart was mad with fear, "and cheat you are. Now let this temple hag who hides her hideousness behind a silken screen unveil that we may see her as she is, and let her be searched and the vase of dye be taken from her bosom or her robes."

"Aye, let her be searched," shouted the guests who were also afraid.

"No need to search, high lords," I said in a quav-

ering voice, as though I too were overcome with fear. "I will obey the Princess. I will unveil, yet I beseech you all, make not a mock of me when you see me as I am. Once I was perchance as fair as that royal Lady who commands, but years of abstinence and the sleepless search for wisdom mar the features and wither the frame. Moreover, time touches the locks, such of them as remain to me, since these too grow thin with age. Yet I will unveil and the vase of precious dye shall be the prize of him who first can snatch it from my bosom or my robe."

"Aye," said one of them, it was the king Tenes, "and in payment for her trick we will make her drink what remains of it to give colour to her poor old carcase."

"Aye," I answered, "and I will drink what remains of it for I think the stuff is harmless. Oh! be not angry because a poor conjurer plays her tricks."

Now Noot stared at me as though he were about to speak. Then his face changed like to that of a man who of a sudden receives a command that others cannot hear. He let fall his eyes, remaining silent, and I, watching, knew that it was the will of the goddess, or at least Noot's will, that I should unveil.

I glanced at the priest Kallikrates but he stood still, looking like Apollo's self frozen into stone.

During this play I had loosened the fastenings of my veil and hood and now of a sudden I cast them from me, revealing myself clad as Isis, that is in little save a transparent, clinging robe fastened about my middle. On my breast, hanging from a chain of pearls, were her holy symbols carved in gems and gold, and on my head her vulture cap beneath which

my tresses hung almost to my feet, having the golden feathers of the cap adorned with sapphires and with rubies and the uræus rising from it fashioned of glittering diamonds.

Aye, I unveiled and stood before them, my arms folded upon the jewelled girdle beneath my breast.

"Behold! Kings and Lords," I said, "the temple hag stands before you in such poor shape as it has pleased the gods to fashion her. Now let him who can see it, come, take the vase that hides this unveiled trickster's dye."

For a moment there was silence while those brutal men devoured my white loveliness with their eyes, taking count of every beauty of my perfect face and form. Amenartas stared at me and her ruddy cheeks went pale; yes, even the coral faded from her rich lips. Then from between those lips there burst these words:

"This is not a woman! This is the very goddess. Beware of her, ye men, for she is terrible."

"Nay, nay," I answered humbly, "I am but a poor mortal, not even royal like to yourself, Lady—but a poor mortal with some wits and wisdom, though perchance Isis for a while to your sight has touched me with her splendour. Come, take the vase ere I veil myself again."

Then those men went mad, all save Pharaoh, who sat brooding.

"Goddess or woman," they cried, "give her to us who henceforward can never look upon the beauty of another."

King Tenes rose, his coarse face afire and his shifting eyes fixed upon me greedily.

"By Baal and by Ashtoreth!" he cried, "goddess or woman, never have I seen such an one as this prophetess of Isis. Harken, Pharaoh, before the

feast we disputed together concerning a great sum of gold and in the end it was confessed by you that it was due to me in aid of my costs of war although, so you said, it could not be found in Egypt save by raiding the rich treasury of Isis. Perchance the goddess learned of this design of yours and by way of answer sent us an evil oracle. I know not, but this I do know, that she sent you also a means to pay the debt without cost to yourself or the robbing of her sacred treasury. Give me this fair priestess to comfort me with her wisdom and otherwise"—here the company laughed coarsely—"and I will talk no more of the matter of that gold."

Pharaoh listened without raising his head, then looked on me with rolling eyes and answered:

"Which would anger the goddess most, King Tenes—to lose her gold or her prophetess?"

"The former as I think, Pharaoh, seeing that gold is scarce, and prophetesses—true or false—are many. Give her to me, I say."

"I cannot for my oath's sake, King Tenes."

"You swore an oath to yonder high-priest and to yonder man, who looks like a Grecian god clad in a priest's robe and is called Master-of-the-Rites, but to this lady you swore none."

"I swore the oath to Isis, King Tenes, and if I break it doubtless she will be avenged upon me. Go your way; the gold shall follow you to the last ounce, but the prophetess is not mine to give."

Now Tenes stared at me again and I, who hated him with all my soul, gave him back his stare with interest, though this did but seem to inflame him the more. Then he turned on Pharaoh furiously and answered in a cold voice,

"Hear me, Pharaoh. It is but a small matter, yet my mind is set upon this woman who knows the

heart of the gods and can pour their wisdom into my ears. Therefore make your choice:

"In Sidon there are two factions of almost equal strength. One of them says 'Make an alliance with Egypt and fight the Persian Ochus whom already you have defeated once.' The other says 'Make an alliance with Ochus and as reward in a day to come sit on Pharaoh's throne!' I have taken the first counsel as you know. Yet it is not too late to change that counsel for a second which perchance would prove the wiser, if there be aught in yonder divination," and he pointed to the blood-stain upon the marble floor. Then he went on:

"Moreover, I have my captains about me at this board and those that serve me wait without with all my fleet, and therefore should it be changed I need not fear to tell you so and to your face. So I say to you that if you will not please me in this small matter, presently my ambassadors go forth to Susa with a message for the ear of Ochus to which it would rejoice you to listen, seeing that without the strong aid of Sidon and her fleets Egypt cannot conquer in this war."

Thus Tenes spoke and laid his hand upon the pommel of his short Phœnician sword.

Now the face of Pharaoh, bearded thus in his own city and at his own board, grew red with rage and I saw that he was about to answer this outland king, defying him as many of the great monarchs who filled his throne before him would have done. But ere he could speak his royal daughter Aménartas whispered in his ear and although I could not hear her words, I read their purport in her face. They were—"Tenes speaks truth. Without Sidon you cannot stand against the Persians and Egypt is lost. Let the woman go. Isis, understanding, will

forgive, who otherwise must see the Persian Holy Fire burning on her altars."

Pharaoh heard and the anger written in his eyes was changed to trouble. Rolling them in his fashion he looked on Noot and said to him as one who asks a question,

"I swore an oath to you, *Kherheb*, and to yonder priest, but to the prophetess I swore no oath and perchance Egypt's fate hangs upon this business."

The old high-priest paused awhile like a man who awaits a message. If so, it seemed to come, for presently he answered in a quiet voice,

"Pharaoh is right; Egypt's fate hangs upon this business; also Pharaoh's fate; also that of King Tenes and many others. The only fate which is not touched, whether it be finished in this way or in that, is the fate of yonder seeress who is named *Isis-come-to-Earth*, since the goddess will protect her own. Settle the matter as you will, Pharaoh. Only settle it swiftly, because under our rule it is time that I and my company who wait without should return to the temple to make our nightly prayer and offerings to the goddess, the Queen of all the earth, the Queen of Pharaoh and of Egypt; the Queen of the King of Sidon, and in the end the Queen also of Artaxerxes Ochus, the Persian, as one day surely he shall learn."

Thus spoke Noot unconcernedly and hearing him, I laughed, for now I was sure that I had nothing to fear from Tenes or from any other man upon the earth. Therefore I laughed, which that company thought strange in one who was about to be borne away a slave, and bade Kallikrates give me my veil and hood, also the cloak that I had thrown off when I entered the banqueting hall.

He obeyed, and while he was assisting me to cover

up my beauty in the folds of that veil, I noted that alone among all the men here present, this beauty did not seem to stir him at all. Had he been clothing a marble or an ivory image of the goddess, as every day it was his duty to do at sunrise, anointing it with perfumes and garlanding it with flowers, he could not have been less moved. Or perhaps so truly had the priest in him overcome the man that he had learned to cloak all the feelings of a man. Or perhaps it was because that royal Amenartas watched his every movement with her eyes. I know not, but this I do know, that his calm angered me and it came into my mind that were I not the head-priestess of Isis and sworn to her, there should be a different tale to tell. Yes, even in that moment of destiny this came into my mind, which shows that in my soul I had not forgotten the meeting of our lips in yonder shrine at Philæ. At least I have often thought so since, I, who have had much time for thought.

"Priestess, you are mine," cried King Tenes in triumph. "Make ready to sail with me for Sidon within an hour."

"Do you think that I am yours, King Tenes?" I asked in a musing voice as I fastened the folds of my veil and arranged the hood. "If so, I hold otherwise. I hold that I, Ayesha, a free-born lady of the ancient Arab blood, am not the slave of any Phœnician who for a little while chances to be a king, but of her who is the Queen of kings, Isis the Mother. Nay, Tenes, I am more, I am Isis herself, *Isis-come-to-Earth*. It seems that go with you I must, since such is the will of the goddess, but, Phœnician, take heed. Should you dare to befoul me even with a touch, I tell you that I have strength at my command and that ere long Sidon shall lack

a king and Set shall gain a subject. For your own sake therefore and for that of Sidon, think again and let me be!"

Now the great jaws of Tenes fell and he stared at me open-mouthed.

"Yet you shall go with me," he muttered thickly, "and for the rest Ashtoreth rules in Sidon, not Isis, for know that there are two Queens of Heaven."

"Aye, Tenes, a false queen and a true, and let the false beware of the true."

Then I turned to Nectanebes and said,

"Is it still your command, O Pharaoh, that I accompany this ally of yours to Sidon? Bethink you ere you answer, since much hangs upon your words."

"Yea, Priestess, it must be so. I have spoken and my decree is recorded. The fate of Egypt is more than that of any priestess and doubtless King Tenes will treat you well. If not, you say that you have strength to defend yourself against him."

Now as I answered, I laughed lightly and the sound of my laughter was like the tinkle of falling silver.

"So be it, Pharaoh. To me it is nothing; indeed I would see Sidon, the glorious city, while she still is Sidon, home of merchants, mistress of the seas. Still ere I go, shall I tell you something, Pharaoh, of what was shewn to me in yonder bowl before its water was turned to blood—by dye from that vase which none of you has found? If I remember right, for as you who practise magic, know, Pharaoh, such visions fade quickly like dreams at dawn—I say that if I remember right, it had to do with the fate of a great king. Have you ever seen a king, O Pharaoh, when in place of the chain of royalty a collar of rope is set about his throat and drawn hard till the tongue is thrust from the royal

mouth and the royal eyes start from their sockets? Nay? Then shall I draw his picture? Perchance in days to come you would know it again?"

"Witch, accursed witch!" shouted Pharaoh. "Take her, Tenes, and begone, though sooner would I nurture a viper in my bosom," and rising from the board, he turned and fled away.

Again I laughed as I answered,

"I must go, but it seems that Pharaoh has gone first. Royal Amenartas, watch the good god, your father, for I think that he is too superstitious and that which men believe fulfils itself upon them."

Then I went to Noot and spoke with him—few words for already the guards were advancing upon me.

"Fear nothing, Daughter," he said, "you are safe."

"I know that I am safe, Master, yet be ready to come to my aid when I call, as my spirit tells me that call I shall."

He bent his head and the guards came up. As I went I glanced at the priest Kallikrates, who taking no note of me or of my fate, still stood staring at the royal Amenartas like a statue cut in stone, while she stared back at him.