

THE END OF ATLANTIS

Atlantis! Atlantis! I see again the depths of the ages...
(*La Terre tremblante*)

THE FIRST DAY: THE FESTIVAL OF THE SPHINX

A great people can only die by its own hand.

Scene I The Herald of Glory

The Palace of the Empire, adjacent to the terrace of the Sphinx, has lost the majesty of its grandiose lines; for, following the custom adopted for the day of the festival. Several rows of scaffolding have been erected between the tall pillars of somber marble, the wooden framework of which is dissimulated beneath red curtains with golden fringes. And this time, the ladies of the Apostles' Quarter, those of the Egyptian peninsula where the soldiers' leaders are accommodated, and even those of the great mercantile port, have come in such great numbers that the architect Barkas, the steward of the festival, has been obliged to erect in the intervals of the columns, a day in advance, as many as five tiers of superimposed balconies. Crowded together, the assembled aristocratic ladies are spread out joyfully in the pleasure of gazing and appearing.

The immense Esplanade seems small today. And yet, from one minute to the next, the avenues opening into the square from all points of the city are projecting new human waves, and the people who arrived first have already slid along the vast parapet from which the view overlooks the city and the harbor, wondering anxiously whether the incessantly increasing swell of people is not going to break against the bronze balustrades.

"Fortunately," grumbles a fat man recognizable by this embroidered tunic as a merchant from the low quarters, "care was taken last night to close the public elevators and forbid people the use of all rapid transport machines. Otherwise, I think the entire plebeian population would be crammed into the square!"

"And why shouldn't we be here too?" replies a tall, thin sailor from the port. "Are we not molded of the same material?"

"So much so, my friend, that if the pressure continues to build we'll be molded for a second time."

A loud burst of laughter greets the jovial shopkeeper's quip.

"And all this," a young woman puts in, "to see the pale-hued Barbarians from a savage land where there are houses made of compressed earth."

"And you, Beauty? Have you come for something else?"

"Pooh! White men! They no longer even have the charm of novelty for us. A quarter of Atlantis will soon be populated by those moonfaces!"

"These, it appears, have invented ineffable melodies."

"And it's said that they're very handsome."

"Aha! Atlantean sirs, that will change our views somewhat."

“Since you need handsome men, slut, you’re well-served. Here comes the herald of glory with a cortege of giants.

Indeed, on the perron of the Palace, dominating the entire Esplanade from the top of its red marble steps, the traditional herald of glory advances, borne on a pavis garnished with crimson, maintained on the shoulders of Nubians of colossal form. Around the pavis, Egyptian cavaliers with gilded lances allow their breastplates to glisten in the sun.

The herald speaks into a loudhailer with a copper funnel. Every grand Esplanade will hear a herald today, but the first of them speaks to the Square of the Empire.

“People of Atlantis,” he proclaims, “our brothers from the red Occident, and our young allies from the Oriental lands, greetings in the name of the Empire of the Waters. Now commence the great days of celebration in which, every five years, Atlantis celebrates its wealth and the immortality of its immortal prestige. But this year, Atlanteans, in accordance with the will of the Apostles of the Sun, two further days of public rejoicing will be added to the three ancient festivals of the Sphinx, the Waters and Gold. The Apostles of the Sun, your lords and protectors...”

“The Atlanteans aren’t protectors!”

“Nor lords!”

“Silence! Silence!”

“Let the herald speak!”

Impassively, the herald resumes: “So, the Apostles of the Sun have decided that two new celebrations will complete the three consecrated feasts; on the fourth day there will be the festival of the Occident, and on the fifth, the festival of the Orient...”

A stir of surprise.

“Atlanteans, know in what these two new festivals will consist. That of the Occident will be consecrated to the venerated people of the Toltec continent, from which almost all of us originated; we shall exalt the primitive hearth of our glorious red race, from which the founders of the Queen of the Waters departed thousands and thousands of years ago.”

“Very good! Very just!” the crowd applaud.

“The festival of Mellena!” barks the voice of a student.

“Silence! Enough!”

“I shall conclude. We shall go in a body on the fourth day to the great Occidental port, to receive and greet the delegates of Palanque the Holy, Uxmal the Magnificent and Panuco the Rich, and those who come from Tiahuanaco, those from Idaho and those from the Great Cascades. And we shall show them by means of our urgency that Atlantis has not forgotten its ancestors.”

“Atlantis is still beautiful!”

“And it will be even more beautiful, citizens, when, on the fifth day, we shall go to the great Gaelic port to the east of the city, to salute our young white colonists of the Oriental lands, who all owe it to the Queen of Waters that they no longer resemble the errant savages that our ancestors once discovered.”

“Welcome to the Gaels and the Ligurians!”

“Greetings to the Etruscans!”

“And the Cantabrians and the Iberians!”

“And the men of Biscay and Basconia!”

“And those of Ys and those of Thule!”

“And the bards of Armor that we are about to applaud!”

“For,” the herald adds, “if the gods have placed us in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, it is because they wanted our beneficent and necessary Empire...”

“Yes, yes, necessary!”

“...to expand similarly over all the terrestrial continents and that the Sphinx of our Holy Terrace should become, for all peoples, the symbolic image of the Sun.”

“Glory to the Sphinx!”

“And more than ever, my friends, let us repeat and meditate, in accordance with custom, the sacred words of Manou, the meaning of which appears to us henceforth unveiled: *Atlantis can only die by its*

own hand. And as we know now that no people will ever desire or be able to make Atlantis die, one might as well proclaim its eternity!"

"Atlantis, eternal!"

"Eternal! Eternal!"

And the cry reverberates over the entire Esplanade, while the herald, borne on his pavis and surrounded by his Egyptian cavaliers, slowly descends the red marble steps in order to go away and recommence elsewhere.

Scene II
Hermos

But now cries ring out in the vicinity of the merchant of the low city who was deploring the access of the plebeians to the Empire Square a little while ago. The tumult of a brawl agitates the crowd; a formidable pressure, departing from the Palace of the Empire, has just thrown the last rank of frightened spectators against the balustrade.

“Clear the square!” the merchant shouts. “Have all the soldiers perished in the land of the Pelasges then?”

“Hellas, bring back Hellas!” howls a sailor. “There’s nothing but disorder and riots at all festivals nowadays!”

“Or for want of Hellas, bring back Hermos!” declares a student

“Truly, I admire you,” says the merchant. “It’s you who are demanding Hellas, then? You who once forced him to quit the city?”

“It wasn’t us! It was the rich...”

“You aided them!”

At that moment, a new pressure causes the crowd to undulate.

“A man carried in triumph!” brays a student. “He’s being taken toward the Golden Gate!”

“An Apostle of the Sun. He’s wearing the crimson mantle...”

“...and the crown of foliage.”

“An Apostle? Impossible! They all climbed up to the Sacred Terrace a long time ago for the election of the new Prince, and the Golden Gate is no longer open.”

“Who, then? Hellas and Hermos are absent, and Oreus as if dead.”

“Hermos! Hermos!” cries a student, who has just climbed on to his comrade’s shoulders.

At the same moment, in fact, the man borne in triumph appears facing the people, and everyone recognizes the poet Hermos, the son of Hermes, the idol of the young.

“Hermos! Glory to Hermos!”

Meanwhile, the young people edge toward the enthusiastic group by whom Hermos is lifted up. They advance thus, after many undulations, all the way to the Golden Gate, before and behind which the cavaliers of the Egyptian column are on watch. Motionless on their immobile mounts, they have orders that no one profane should go through the Gate. So, when Hermos arrives borne on the shoulders of the crowd, the Egyptian cavaliers do not flinch any more than they have blinked all day long at the supplications of women, the joyful sarcasms of young men or invectives launched from a distance by the marine populace.

“Open the Gate, then!” people cry, from all parts. “You can see that he’s one of the Apostles!”

“The great Hermos! Our poet!”

At those words, a few cavaliers cannot suppress a quiver of surprise and embarrassment. Without quitting their position, they consult with a sign of the head a giant in a laminated gold helmet and armor sparkling with gems, who is standing alone a few paces in front of them. He is their chief, Knephao, nicknamed “the Handsome Black” by the people, although born in High Egypt, a colony of the pure Atlantean race, at the very place where the Nile was once diverted from its former course in order to direct it toward the northern plain. But the rude soldier’s face, baked by the Sun of distant battles and dried by the wind of deserts, has lost the beautiful red gleam of which the pure Atlanteans and their Egyptian colonists are so proud.

The chief of the cohorts is reputed to be invincible and a halo of heroic legends floats above his name in the imagination of the crowd: the mountains of Libya cleaved by the blows of his ax; barbaric peoples traversed on horseback, to the sound of trumpets, with an escort of only a few men, amid the amazement of the subjugated populations...

The men who are pressing against the Gate, therefore, almost under the hooves of the horses, experience some anxiety.

“Don’t push! It’s futile! You can see that they’re not going to open up!”

Indeed, the impassive Knephao sends the order to his troops by means of an imperceptible signal, not to budge.

The members of the crowd know full well that the Golden Gate will remain closed; but a breath passes over them

“The Gate! The Gate! Open it, then!”

“Glory to Hermos!”

And now, in the crowd, Hermos, carried by an eddy of the people, finds himself face to face with the Egyptian warrior.

“Knephao,” asks Hermos, “reply to me without rudeness or anger. I have just arrived from the kingdom of Saba; I have traversed lands and seas in order not to miss the arch-holy festival of the Sphinx. Are you going to leave me on the threshold for the sake of a few lost minutes?”

At that enveloping voice, the colossus lifts his head and gazes curiously at his unexpected interlocutor. Then, resuming his air of indifference: “You know full well that I cannot infringe the orders of your brothers.”

“It’s impossible, then, even for me?”

“Impossible, indeed.”

“As impossible as opening a passage for the river Nile, which was spreading disorder in the plain?”

This time, Knephao’s curiosity changes into a contained emotion.

“What are you saying? Where have you come from? Who told you about the adventures of yore? It seems to me, also, that your voice reminds me...”

“Of the song that I modulated in the evening, when you were on watch on the bank of the river...”

“And when the lions were prowling around our paltry huts! Oh, by thrice holy Horus! So it’s you that they call today the famous Hermos?”

Around the two men a circle of silence begins enlarging. In the distance, uncomprehending and believing it to be an altercation, the crowd is agitating, dividing into contrary parties.

“Well, Knephao, can you open the Gate for me now? You know what place I occupied out there, alongside the great Oreus, our Master, and why I am so ardent to go and celebrate the rites of the Sun.”

“May the spirits protecting the river Nile and the Sun, father of Atlantis, attest here how much I admire the great Oreus and wish him long life, and what joy I have in seeing you again, my former companion; but by the redoubtable powers that I invoke, I swear that I cannot, even for you, open the Gate to the Sacred Hill...”

A murmur of astonishment runs through the surrounding crowd. Without paying any attention to it, Knephao says: “I will be killed here, I promise you, rather than break my word, and you know...”

“Yes, I know that you’re not afraid of death.”

“Nor you either, Hermos! But listen. Time is pressing. Would you like to follow me to the Palace? Perhaps there are still other hopes.”

And Knephao, pushing his horse, passes through the mob. The admirers of Hermos follow him, carrying the Apostle with the red cloak, and as the Golden Gate is placed at the extreme right of the square, the unexpected cortege has to traverse half the Esplanade.