

CHAPTER IX

DAGON TAKES HIS SACRIFICE

THE sun arose on Sidon and drove away the terrors of the dark. I too arose and was led to the bath by slaves. Then those slaves clothed me in the silks of Cyprus, over which I threw a new veil bordered with the purple of Tyre. More, they brought me gifts from the King, priceless jewels, pearls with rubies and sapphires set in gold. Those I laid aside who would not wear his gems. Then, in another chamber, I ate as before of meats delicately served by bowing maidens. Scarce had I finished my meal of fish from the sea and fruit and snow-cooled water drunk from a crystal cup, when a eunuch came saying the King Tenes craved audience of me.

"Let him enter," I answered.

Presently he stood before me, making salutation, and asked me with feigned carelessness whether I had rested well.

"Aye, great King," I answered, "well enough, save for a single, very vivid dream. I dreamed that Set, the god of Evil, rose out of the darkness of hell wearing the shape of a man whose face I could not see, and that this fiend would have seized me and dragged me down into the pit of hell. I was afraid, and while I lay as one in a net, there came to me a vision of the divine Isis who said,

"Where is thy faith, Daughter? If I saved thee on the ship, giving thee the lives of all her

company, cannot I save thee now and always? Fiends shall not harm thee, nor men; swords shall not pierce thee nor fires burn, and if any would lay hands on thee, on them I give thee power to call down my vengeance and to cast them to the jaws of the Devourer who, awaiting evil-doers, watches ever in the black depth of death.'

"Then in my dreams the Mother whispered into the ears of that fiend shaped like a man, and passing her hand before his eyes, showed him certain visions, though what these were I know not. At the least they caused him to wail aloud with terror, also to my sight to fall as from a precipice and, like some foul vulture pierced by an archer's shaft, go whirling down, down, and down, into gulfs that had no bottom. It was a very evil dream, King Tenes, and yet sweet, because it told me that though I should journey to the ends of the earth, still I shall not pass out of the shelter of the circling arms of Isis."

"Evil indeed, Lady," he said hoarsely, biting his lips to still the quaver in his voice. "Yet it ended well, so what of dreams?"

"Very well, O King—for me. And as for dreams, I, who by gifts and training am skilled in their interpretations, hold that for the most part they are a shadow of the Truth. I know that certainly no harm can come to me in your palace over which one day I must rule, or in your city where I am a guest. Yet doubtless some peril of the spirit did threaten me last night, and by the help of Heaven was brought to nothing."

"Doubtless, doubtless! though of such matters I know nothing, who deal with the things of earth, not with those of Heaven. But, Lady, I came to tell you that this day there is a great sacrifice on

the Holy Place yonder, and that from these windows you will be able to watch it well. It is to propitiate our gods that they may give us victory in the war against the Persians."

"Is it so, King? But where are the victims? I see no kine, nor sheep, nor doves, such as are offered in Rome and in Jerusalem, or even flowers and fruit such as in Egypt we lay upon our gentler altars."

"Nay, Lady; here we make more costly offerings, tithing our own blood. Yes, here Moloch claims the fruit of our bodies, taking them to his purifying fires so that their innocent breath may rise as a sweet savour to the nostrils of the devouring and protecting gods."

"Do you, perchance, mean children, King?"

"Aye, Lady, children, many children, and among these to-day one of my own, the son of a certain Beltis who is of my household. He is a child of promise, yet I grudge him not to the god if thereby my people may be benefited."

"And does this Beltis not grudge him, King?"

"I know not," he answered sullenly. "She is a woman of the royal House of Israel and is absent on a journey. Therefore I know not, and when she returns the boy will have joined the gods and it will be too late for her to make trouble concerning him, should she be so minded."

Now horror took hold of me, Ayesha, and my soul sickened.

"King Tenes," I said, "bethink you of that mother's heart and, I pray you, spare this child."

"How can I, Lady? Must not the king bear that yoke which is laid upon the necks of his people? If I spare him, would not the mothers of Sidon whose young have passed into the fire spit at me and curse me—aye, and tear me to pieces if

they might? Nay, he must die with the rest. The priests have so decreed."

"On your head be it, King," I said and choked in my loathing of him. Then a thought took me, and I cried to those who were gathered about the door of the chamber, captains of the guard, eunuchs, slaves, scribes, and a priest or two,

"Come hither, ye of Sidon, and hearken to the words of her who in Egypt is named *Oracle-of-Isis*."

They came, drawn by wonder, or perchance because my strength compelled them.

"Take note of my words and record them," I said, while they stared on me. "Take note and forget it not, that I, the daughter of Isis, have made prayer to King Tenes of Sidon, that he will spare the life of his son and the son of a lady named Beltis, and that he has refused my prayer. Ye have heard me. It is enough. Go!"

They went, looking at each other, the scribes, as I saw, writing down what I had said upon their tablets. Tenes also stared at me curiously.

"You are an Arab by birth, born of an Egyptian mother, and wholly Egyptian in your faith and mind, though the Arab courage still strikes through these qualities," he said. "Therefore I forgive you who do not understand our customs. Yet, know, Lady, that those of Sidon whom it pleases you to call as witnesses will think you mad."

"Doubtless, Tenes, before all is done, those of Sidon will think many things of me, as you will also. But what will this lady Beltis think?"

"I neither know nor care who weary of Beltis and her moods," he answered, scowling. "Beauteous one, I sent you jewels. Why do you not wear them?"

"The daughter of Isis wears no jewels save those the goddess gives her, King. Yet yours shall go to enrich her shrines when I return to Egypt, and in her name I thank you for them, bounteous King."

"Aye, when you return to Egypt. But how can you return if you bide here as my wife?"

"If I bide here as your wife, then I shall bide as the Queen of Egypt as is written in our bond, and from time to time the Queen of Egypt must visit her dominions, King, and give thanks to the goddess for her advancement. Do you understand?"

"I understand that you are a very strange woman, so strange that I would I had never set eyes on you and your accursed beauty," he answered in a rage.

"What! So soon?" I said, laughing. "That this should be so in the beginning makes me wonder what you will wish in the end. Why not take your eyes off me and have done, King Tenes?"

"Because I cannot. Because I am bewitched," he answered furiously, and rising left me, while I laughed and laughed.

He departed and I went to the window-place to breathe air free from the poison of his presence. There I saw that the Holy Place beneath was already filled with tens of thousands of the Sidonians. I saw, moreover, that priests were engaged in lighting fire at the foot of the great brazen image of Dagon, which fire seemed to burn within the image, since smoke poured out far above from an opening in his head. Moreover, by degrees the copper plates of which its vast and hideous bulk was built up grew red with heat, so that the upper part of it became one glowing furnace.

White-robed priests, gathered in troops, began to offer prayers and celebrate rites of which I did not

know the meaning. They bowed themselves to the image, they gashed their arms with knives and catching the blood that fell from them in shallow shells of the sea, cast it into the fire. Orators made speeches, prophets uttered prophecies. Bands of fair women appeared naked to the middle and having their breasts gilded, who danced wildly before the god.

Then suddenly there was a great silence and from the mouth of some gateway that I could not see, because it lay almost beneath the balconies of the palace, appeared the King Tenes clad in gorgeous, sacerdotal robes, those, I think, of the high-priest of Baal. With him was a woman who led by the hand a little boy who perhaps had seen three summers, dressed in white with a garland of flowers about his neck. Tenes bowed to the glowing image and cried in a loud voice,

"People of Sidon, I the King make sacrifice of my son to Dagon the great god, that Dagon may be propitiated and Sidon may conquer in this war. O Dagon, take my son that his spirit may pass through the flames and be gathered to thy spirit and that thine appetite may feed upon his blood."

At these words a great and joyous shout went up from the tens of thousands of people, and in the midst of the shout Tenes bent down and kissed his son, which was the only kindly, human thing that ever I saw him do. The child, affrighted, clung to his robes, but the woman at his side snatched the boy away and ran with him, struggling, to a priest who stood by the foot of a little iron ladder of which the top rested against the outstretched giant hands of the glowing image.

The priest took the child from the woman, holding him aloft that the multitude might see him and

know him for the very son of the king. Oh! never shall I forget the look upon that child's face as he was thus held aloft in the hands of the brutal priest who stood upon the lower rungs of the ladder. He had ceased to scream, but his ruddy cheeks were blanched, his black eyes seemed to start from his head, and his little hands grasped emptily at the air or were lifted up to heaven, which indeed was near to him, as though in supplication for deliverance from the cruelty of man.

The priest climbed the ladder, bearing the child, and I noted a kind of metal covering upon his breast and head, set there to shield him from the heat of the fiery idol.

He reached the platform of the outstretched hands. The child's fingers clung to his garments, but he tore them free and with a cry of triumph let fall the little body into the hollow of the hot hands. Then, to drown the victim's cries, priests standing below began to play upon instruments of music, as they played, singing some hymn to the god. I saw the little arms tossed aloft above the edge of the hollow of the brazen hands. Then I saw those arms lift themselves, feebly for the last time, and that poor, tortured, innocent babe rolled slowly into the red abyss beneath, while the savage multitude screamed its delight to heaven.

This royal sacrifice was accomplished, yet it was but the first of many, for woman after woman brought her child, or sometimes it was a man who brought it, and babe after babe was thrown upon the red-hot hands and rolled thence into the flames beneath. All the while the priests played upon their instruments and sang their songs while the shameless priestesses, and others, those with the gilded breasts, danced lewdly, tossing up their white

arms, and the thousands of the people of Sidon, filled with the lust of blood, roared aloud in their drunken joy, and the poor mothers, now that the deed was done, crept thence, laughing and crying both together, back to their desolated homes, there to stare at the cots emptied into "the bosom of the god."

At length I could bear no more of this scene of hell, and departing to my sleeping-chamber, caused women to draw curtains over the window-places and having dismissed them, sat myself down and thought.

A great rage filled me, Ayesha, who have ever loved children—will a day come when I shall nurse one upon my breast, I wonder, and if so in what star will it be born?—and a mighty hate of those accursed Sidonians. All pity left my heart, even for the young who would grow up to be as were those who begat them. These sharks and tigers loved blood. Good. They should be filled with blood, their own blood. All of them were guilty, all, all were murderers. Hearken to their horrible rejoicings! Old men and maidens, young men and matrons, the toothless crone and the budding girl, the great lords and ladies, the toilers on the deep and the traders of the city, the bond and the free, from the king down to the meanest slave, all of them screamed with hideous rejoicing as babe after babe was swallowed by the glowing gorge of the dæmon they named a god. Therefore I vowed by Isis that all of them should pay the price of this innocent blood and go down to find their god in hell. Yes, I swore it by the Mother and by my own outraged soul!

The next day Beltis came. The King Tenes was in my outer chamber fawning on me and watching

me out of his crafty eyes, as I saw through the veil that I had let fall over my face, and my flesh crept at the sight of him. Trained though I was and wise though I was, who knew well that the hour had not come to strike, scarce could I bear him near me who longed to drive my dagger through his lying throat. Yet I sat still and listened to his flattery and answered him with double-edged and mocking words of which he could not read the meaning. He told me that already the great sacrifice had borne good fruit, since tidings had come of a new victory over the vanguard of the Persians, in which five thousand of the men of Ochus had perished.

I answered that I doubted not it would bear yet better fruit, then asked him how many of his folk dwelt in Sidon.

He answered, some sixty thousand.

"Then, O King," I said, "I who am filled with the spirit of the Mother, make a prophecy to you. I prophesy that in reward of the piety of this people of yours who do not grudge their own children to the gods, the gods will take sixty thousand lives from among the wicked of the earth who worship fire—as I am told these Persians do."

"That is a good saying, Lady," he said, rubbing his fat hands, "though it is true that some might say that we Sidonians also worship fire, or rather Moloch whose belly is filled with flame as we saw yesterday."

Now while we were speaking and this brute bemused was talking thus almost at hazard, for his mind was set on me only, I noted that those who attended him slipped from the place, taking with them the waiting women and closing the carven doors behind them, so that he and I were now alone. Guessing that this was done by order, I knew that I

must prepare for some outburst of the man's passion and took counsel with myself. What it was does not matter because of that which followed.

Already he had begun, for the words, "O most beauteous!" had passed his lips when the door burst open and through it came a noble-looking woman. She was tall, dark, and handsome with swift-glancing, tragic eyes, as I knew at once, a Jewess, since I had seen others like her in Jerusalem. She glanced at me as though wondering what my veil hid, and advancing, stood before Tenes. He had not heard her come or seen her, his mind being full of other matters and his back toward the doorway. At the sound of her feet he turned and, coming face to face with her, stepped backward three paces with a frightened face and uttering some Phœnician curse.

"Have you returned so soon, Beltis?" he asked. "What has brought you here before the appointed time?"

"My heart, O Tenes, king and husband. Yonder in Jerusalem a prophet of Jehovah said words to me that caused me to return and swiftly. Tell me, Tenes, where is our son? On my path to this chamber I passed through those where he should be and found him not. All I found was his nurse weeping; aye, so choked with tears that she could not answer my question. Where is our son, Tenes?"

Now he cast his eyes about him like one who finds himself in a snare, and answered thickly,

"Alas! Lady, the gods have taken our son."

She gasped and clasped her hands upon her heart, saying, or rather moaning,

"How did they take him, Husband?"

He looked through the window-place at the hideous brazen image dulled with heat and blackened

by smoke; he looked at the lady with the white face and the terrible eyes. Then he strove to speak, but as it seemed, could not, for the mumbled words choked each other in his throat.

"Answer!" she said coldly, but he could not, or would not answer.

Then my spirit moving me, I played a part in this ineffable tragedy. Yes, I, Ayesha, threw back my veil, saying,

"Queen, if it pleases you to listen I will tell you how your son died."

She looked at me wondering, and asked like one who dreams,

"Is this a woman or a goddess, or perchance a spirit? Speak on, woman, or goddess, or spirit."

"Queen," I said, "look through the window-place and tell me what you see."

"I see the image of Dagon, the brazen image towering to the housetops, blackened with fire and staring at me with empty eyes, and beyond it the temple and above it Heaven."

"Queen, yesterday I looked from this window-place and saw that image of Dagon, only then from those empty eyes came flame. Also I saw King Tenes lead out a beauteous, black-eyed boy of three summers or so, which boy he declared to be his son. This boy he gave to a woman, although the child clung wailing to his robe. The woman gave him to a priest. The priest climbed a ladder—look, there it stands—and laid him upon the red-hot hands of the idol whence he rolled amidst the plaudits of the people into a womb of fire, to be perchance reborn in Heaven."

Beltis heard, and as she heard her face seemed to freeze into a mask of ice. Then she stared at Tenes and asked almost in a whisper,

"Are these things so, O dog of a Sidonian, that like a dog can devour your own flesh?"

"The god claimed him," he mumbled, "and like others I must give when the god claims, that victory may crown our arms. Who can deny the god? Rejoice, O mother, that he has been pleased to accept that which was born of you."

So he mumbled on as priests patter to their idols, till at length in that cold silence his voice died away.

Then Beltis the Queen began to hiss a curse at him, such a curse as, save once only, I have never heard come from the lips of woman. In the Name of Jehovah, God of the Jews, she cursed him, calling down woe and desolation upon his head, consigning him to a death in blood and appointing Gehenna, as she named hell, as a resting-place for his soul, where devils fashioned as children should tear him eternally with hooks of flame. Yes, she cursed him living and dead, but always in that low, whispering voice, that inhuman voice which did not seem to come from the throat of woman, such a voice as the gods or spirits use when from time to time they speak to their servants in the inmost sanctuaries.

He cowered before her. Once even he sank to his knees, holding his hands above his head as though to ward off her words of evil omen. Then, as she would not cease, he sprang up, shouting,

"You also shall be a sacrifice, you worshipper of the God of the Jews. Dagon is greater than the God of the Jews. Be you a sacrifice to him, O Sorceress of Israel!"

He drew the sword at his side and shook it. She did not stir, only with her hands she tore upon the robes upon her breast, saying,

"Smite on, dog of a Sidonian, and complete the

circle of your crimes. Where the son went, there let the mother follow!"

Now in madness, or in rage, or in terror, he lifted the sword and was about to do the deed, when I stepped between him and her. Loosing the veil I wore I threw it over her head, and turning, said to Tenes,

"Now, King, touch her who is hid in the veil of Isis if you dare. Of Isis I think you have learned something on a certain ship when the breakers called for you off Carmel, yes, of Isis and her prophetess. Know then that she who could save can also slay, and give you over to such dreams as came to you, Tenes, at midnight by a bed in yonder room. Aye, she can slay, and swiftly. Strike then through the Veil of Isis and learn whether her prophetess speaks truth."

He looked at me; he looked at Beltis standing still and ghostlike beneath the veil. Then he cast down the sword and fled.

When he had gone I went to the door and shot its bolt. I returned, I lifted the veil from about that queen.

"Who and what are you?" she asked, "that can brave Tenes in his palace and save one whom he would slay, though for that I thank you not. So little do I thank you that——" And she stooped to grasp the sword.

Moving swiftly as a swallow flies, I flitted between her and it. Before her fingers could touch it, I had snatched it away who understood her purpose.

"Be seated, Lady, and listen," I said.

She sank into a chair and, resting her head upon her hand, regarded me with a cold and curious look.

"Queen," I went on, "I am one whom Heaven

has sent to this land to destroy Tenes and the Sidonians."

"Then I welcome you, Stranger. Speak on."

So briefly I told her all my tale, and in proof of it read to her the writing in which I promised myself to Tenes when he could crown me queen of the world.

"So you desire my place and this man?"

"Aye," I answered, "as much, or as little, as life desires death. Study the conditions. Can he crown me queen of all the earth, and under them until he does so, can he take me? Do you not understand that I would lead the fool on to his ruin?"

She nodded her head.

"Then will you not help me?"

"Aye, Lady, but how?"

"I will show you how," and bending forward, I whispered in her ear.

"It is good," she said when I had finished. "By Jehovah my God, and by the blood of my son, with you I stand or fall, and when all is done take Tenes if you will."