

CHAPTER XI

THE ESCAPE FROM SIDON

ALL was over and done. Within that royal chamber was silence, though without the flames roared and the cries of the Sidonians went up to Heaven. I, Ayesha, and Beltis the Queen, faced each other in the gloom and between us lay the body of Tenes, on whose white, distorted face flickered the light of the fires that burned without.

"What now, Queen?" I said.

"Death, I think," she answered in a quiet voice, for all her rage seemed to have left her. "Why cheat his jaws of their richest morsel?"

"I have still work to do, my hour has not yet come, Queen."

"Aye, I forgot. Follow me, Daughter of Isis; Beltis does not forsake those who have served her. Look your last upon this carrion that hoped to call you wife, and follow me."

As we passed from that chamber I glanced through the window and saw that, although darkness now had fallen, the Holy Place beneath was bright as noon with the flames of the burning temple, and that in them the vast graven image of Moloch glowed as it had done upon the day of sacrifice when the child of Beltis was swallowed in its red-hot jaws. There it sat hideous; grinning as though in unholy triumph over this greatest of all sacrifices.

Then suddenly a pinnacle from the temple fell upon it, grinding it to powder. This was the end of Moloch, since, although Sidon, as I have learned, was rebuilt in the after years, never more was sacrifice made to that devil within its walls. This at least I, Ayesha, brought to pass—the end of the worship of Moloch at Sidon.

We passed through my sleeping-chamber, and as we went I seized the cabinet of priceless gems that Tenes from time to time had heaped upon me, since these were sworn to Isis and no goddess loves to be robbed of her offerings. At the back of the chamber was a passage leading to a door by which a lighted lamp had been set in readiness. At this door stood a man whom I knew for one of the Jewish servants sworn to the service of Beltis.

"You are late, royal Lady," he exclaimed. "So late that I was about to flee, for look, the palace burns beneath us," and he pointed to little wreaths of smoke that forced themselves up between the boards of the flooring of the bedchamber that we had passed.

"Late, but not too late," she answered. "The King detained us and has gone another way. You have his orders and here is his ring," and she pointed to the royal signet upon my hand. "Obey it and lead on."

The man held up the lantern and glanced at the ring. Then he bowed and beckoned to us to follow him.

We went down passages, long passages with many turnings, and at length came to another door which he opened with a key. Passing it, we found ourselves in a vaulted place beneath which was water, where floated the royal barge, the same in which I had been rowed to the shore of Sidon. Oarsmen

sat waiting within this barge, and guarding it were two Grecian soldiers, who commanded us to halt.

"This boat awaits King Tenes," said one of them "and none else may enter it."

"I am the Queen," answered Beltis.

"With whom I hear the King has quarrelled," broke in the Greek with a sneer. "Queen or no, Lady, you cannot enter that boat without the King, or an order under his signet."

Then I held up my hand, saying,

"Here is the signet itself. Let us pass."

He stared at it by the light of the lamp, then said something to the other Greek and very doubtfully they obeyed. It was certain that these guards standing in that vaulted place did not know what was passing in the city. Moreover, I think it had come into their minds to rob us, or worse. At the least this is sure, that unless we could have killed those two Greeks, without the signet never should we have won to the boat.

We went on twelve paces or so and reached the barge, which was manned with sailors who wore the uniform of the King's bodyguard, men who knew the Queen and saluted her by raising their oars. Beltis motioned first to me and afterward to the Jew who had been our guide from the palace, to enter the barge, then suddenly she said to the steersman who commanded the sailors,

"Go now whither this lady shall direct you, and know that if harm comes to her your lives shall pay the price of it, for she is no woman, but a goddess whom Death obeys."

Now I stared at her and asked,

"Do you not come also, Queen Beltis?"

"Nay," she whispered. "I choose another road to safety. Fear not for me, I will tell you all when

we meet again. For a while farewell, Child of Wisdom and my friend. May the gods with whom you commune be your shield upon earth and receive you when you leave the earth, you who strove to save a certain one and cast your mantle over Beltis when a sword that now is set in another's heart was at her own. Give way, sailors," she cried, "and if you would look once more upon the sun, obey."

Then with her own hands she thrust at the stern of the boat, causing it to move into the channel. Next moment Beltis had shrunk back into the darkness and was gone.

Now I would have returned to seek for her, but the Jew at my side called out,

"Give way! Give way and question not the word of the Queen who doubtless has work elsewhere. Be swift; doom is behind you."

For a moment they hesitated, then bent them to their oars while I wondered what might be the meaning of the part that Beltis played. Did she perchance plan some trap for me? I did not know, but this I knew, that behind was the burning city, whereas in front lay the open sea. Whatever its perils I would face the sea, trusting to destiny to be my guide. As for Beltis, doubtless she took some other road to freedom. Mayhap after all she would shelter with Mentor, or Ochus had promised her deliverance in payment for the blood of Tenes.

So I sat silent, and presently the channel took a turn; the swinging water-gates that hid its mouth were thrust open with an oar by a man who stood at the barge's prow, and we passed into the southern harbour.

Yes, out of the darkness we passed into a blaze of light, and out of the silence into a hideous tumult of

sound. For all around us the city burned furiously and from it rose one horrible wail of woe.

The rowers saw and understood who until now had known nothing in the silence of the secret harbour cave. They hung upon their oars. Then they brought round the barge's prow seeking to return into the cave, but could not because those doors had swung to behind them and, having locked themselves by some device, could only be opened from within. Nor indeed could I tell where these were since they seemed to form part of the harbour wall.

The helmsman looked back and from side to side at the hell of fire which raged behind and around him. He looked at the jutting pier upon our right and noted that already its timbers were ablaze. Then he looked in front and cried,

"Now I see why the Queen left us! Well, there is but one chance. Onward to the open sea."

"Aye," I echoed, "onward to the open sea. Here you must die; there I will lead you to safety. I swear it by the Queen of Heaven."

"'Tis well to talk," said one, "but how shall we gain the sea? Look, the Persians are barring the harbour mouth and slaying those who strive to escape."

It was true. Many of the miserable inhabitants of Sidon had found boats of this sort or of that, or even were swimming upon logs or barrels. For these the Persians or those in their pay waited at the mouth of the harbour and with mocking words and laughter butchered them as they came. Yes, from their smaller ships they slew them with spears and arrows or by throwing stones that drove out the bottoms of the boats.

"Keep in the shadow of the jetty," I said, "where the wind-driven smoke hangs thick and near which

the triremes dare not come because of the rocks whereon it is built, and row, row fast."

They heard and obeyed. On we went beneath an arching canopy of smoke laced with bursts of flame from the kindling timbers, till at length we reached the head of the jetty on which stood a wooden tower where a light burned at night to be a guide to mariners entering the harbour. Here we waited a while, clinging to one of the piers, for although the wind was rising, in this sheltered place the sea remained calm.

Rowing across the head of the jetty was a Persian trireme, and until she had gone by we dared not attempt the sea. At length she passed, leisurely, and our chance came. At a muttered word the oarsmen gave way with all their strength and we shot clear of the mole into the open deep. As we did so, I looked back and perceived behind and above me a sight that after more than two thousand years still haunts me in my sleep.

Upon the end of this timber-crested mole, as I have said, there was a wooden tower from which in times of peace a beacon burned. Now this tower was blazing like the pierway behind it and no beacon shone there. Only where it should be stood a woman on whose face the strong light beat, since the wind swept away the smoke and revealed her like a statue on a column that rises above mist. I looked at this shape and this face and saw that they were those of Beltis the Queen of Sidon. How she had come there, I do not know, but I think that she had run along the burning mole before it was too late, being well acquainted with the path, and had climbed the stairway of the tower, that from its crest she might look her last upon Sidon and on life.

There, at least she stood, royal-looking, silent,

with her arms crossed upon her breast, while the purple cloak that marked her rank floated behind her like a banner on the breeze.

She saw the barge that bore us shoot out of the gloom and reek into the deep sea. I know that she saw because she stretched out her arm as though to bless us. Then she turned and lifted her hands toward the burning city as though to curse it. Lastly, once more she folded her arms upon her breast and stood motionless, her white face raised to the heavens.

Thus she remained while one might count an hundred, till suddenly the timbers of the tower, gnawed through by the flames, fell in and she vanished in a roaring gulf of fire.

Such was the end of that great and ill-fated woman, the royal Beltis, Queen of Sidon, whom, mayhap in expiation of sin done in another star, the gods gave to the arms of perchance the vilest man that ever lived upon the earth. Greatly she died, a sacrifice, as her son had been a sacrifice, but not before she had wrought a fitting vengeance upon the murderer of her child and the betrayer of his people. Moloch, god of fire, took her as he took them all, but now she was beyond the reach of Moloch, Moloch who was but molten metal, an offering to himself.

In the great flame of the fallen tower the trireme that bore the banner of Ochus saw our boat escaping out to sea and put about to pursue it.

"Row on!" I cried, "row into the darkness," and knowing that their lives hung on the issue, since, as we had already seen, the Persians spared none whom they overtook in the boats but drove the triremes over them, shooting any who swam with arrows, those sailors rowed sturdily. Yet our progress was,

but slow and that of the three-banked ship behind us fast; moreover, the fires of burning Sidon lit up the sea for miles.

Could we reach the darkness before we were overtaken? We came to its edge with the great trireme not a hundred paces from our stern—so near indeed that the soldiers on board of her began to shoot at us, though in the gathering gloom and because of the rolling platform on which they stood, their shafts went wide. She was right upon us; her hull had vanished in the shadows but the light from the fires still gleamed upon her gilded masthead, while her great oars beat the sea with a sound like thunder.

“Put about,” I cried, “or she will sink us.”

Very skilfully the steersman obeyed so that we doubled like a hunted hare and the Persian shot past us. Then once more we turned and rowed on into the night. When it wrapped us round, the sailors, exhausted, rested on their oars. Again we heard the thunder of the great slave-manned sweeps, and again the brazen prow of the tall ship, cruel, enormous, hung almost over us. Only by an ell or two did the broad blades of the oars miss us, the eddies that they made causing our little craft to rock dangerously. But this time that huge sea-hound was blinded by the darkness and not seeing us, nor hearing anything, for we sat silent as the grave, she rushed upon her way, and for a time we saw her no more.

All was quiet upon the breast of ocean. Far off burned Sidon like a gigantic beacon fire, but there came to us no whisper of her agony. Yes, all was quiet, save for the sighing of the night wind that, to my strange fancy, seemed like to such a sound as might be made by the rush of ten thousand spirits passing from the cruel earth upward to the peace

above. Slowly the wearied oarsmen drove the boat still farther out to sea; then their captain said,

"Whither away, Lady? It is in my mind to change our course and run for the coast northward, where perchance there are no Persians."

"Nay," I answered, "we stay where we are, I search for a ship."

"Mayhap we shall find one," he said with a hoarse laugh, "a ship of the fleet of Ochus."

They began to dispute as to what course they should take.

"Obey me," I said, "or obey me not, as you will. Only then I, who have the counsel of the gods, tell you that save I only, by sunrise to-morrow every-one of you will be dead."

They whispered together, for my words frightened them. At length the captain spoke, saying,

"The great Queen Beltis who is gone told us that this woman is a goddess and that what she commanded, that we must do. Let us remember the words of the great Queen Beltis who is dead and doubtless watches us from the sky."

So this danger passed also, and all that night we floated, keeping the boat's stern to burning Sidon while the most of the oarsmen slept in their places. So weary were they that not even the horror behind them and the loss of their kinsfolk, or even their own fears, could hold them back from sleep.

But I, Ayesha, did not sleep; nay, I watched and thought. If Philo had fled away, or if his ship had been sunk, what then? Then all was finished. Nay, not so, since it could not be that I should die with but half my task accomplished. I was friendless among strange men, yet in my breast there dwelt the greatest of friends, that spirit whose name is Fate. I threw out my soul to my master, Noot the

Seer, and lo! it seemed to me that his soul answered, saying,

"Fear nothing, Daughter of Isis, for the wings of Isis shadow thee."

It drew near to the dawn; I knew it by the stars which I was wont to watch and by the smell of the air. I rose in my seat and stared into the darkness. Behold! not four furlongs from our prow suddenly there sprang into life a fire of green flame.

"Awake," I cried, "and row on swiftly, for if you would live you must reach the ship upon which yonder fire burns before the breaking of dawn."

They obeyed, wondering, who knew not what this fire might mean. We sped forward, and as the first light gleamed saw almost above us the bulk of the great trireme named *Hapi*.

"Hail her!" I cried, and the captain did so. One appeared by her bulwark rail, holding a lantern. Its light shone upon his face and I saw that it was that of Philo the Greek.

"Ye are saved," I said quietly, "for yonder is the vessel that awaits me."

"Of a truth this is a goddess!" muttered the captain of the barge.

Now Philo saw us in the growing light, and cried to us to come swiftly, pointing to something which he could discover but we could not. We were alongside, eager hands dragged us from the boat. We were aboard, I still carrying the casket of jewels though at the time I did not know I held it fast. Philo bowed the knee to me as to one divine, at which our oarsmen stared. Then he shouted a command and again pointed behind us.

Lo! there, scarce two bowshots away, was the great Persian ship which we had escaped in the gloom of the night.

Our oars struck the water, we leapt forward like an unleashed hound, and after us came the trireme like a lion springing on the hound. Trireme have I called her? Nay, as we saw now, she was a quinquereme, one of the new five-banked ships built by Ochus, a mighty monster. For a little while she hesitated as though wondering whether to attack or let us be. Then as the light strengthened the eyes of her watchmen caught sight of our abandoned boat and by its gilding and emblems knew it for the royal barge of Tenes.

A great shout arose, a shout of
"The King escapes. The King and Queen Beltis escape. After them!"

Then the quinquereme leapt forward in pursuit. Because of her bulk she was slow in gathering speed and we who had the start of her drew away quickly, especially after a shift of wind which seemed to miss the *Holy Fire*, for so Philo, who knew her, said the Persian was named, filled our great sail.

Seeing this and hoping that our danger was past, I went to that same cabin which had been mine when as the captive of Tenes I sailed upon this ship, which seemed to be just as I had left it. This I did without speech to Philo, save a word to commend to his care the Jew and those others who had been my companions upon the barge.

For now that all was over, it seemed to me as though I must rest or die; moreover, I was foul with travel and needed food. This indeed I found ready upon a table which caused me to wonder, though dully, which I did even more when I saw clean woman's garments such as I was accustomed to use spread out upon the cabin couch. So I cleansed and clothed myself and ate a little, drinking some wine, which I did rarely, then lay down upon the couch

and for a space, an hour perhaps, slept as though I were dead.

I woke, I knew not why who could have slumbered on for hours, yet feeling as though the most of my weariness had rolled off me. The place was very dim for the curtained door was shut and at first I could see nothing. Presently, however, I became aware that I was not alone in the cabin. For as my eyes grew accustomed to such light as reached it, I discovered the shape of a man, an old, white-bearded man, kneeling at its far end as though in prayer, and wondered whether I dreamed, for what could such a one be doing there? Soon indeed I was sure that I dreamed, since this shape was that of the high-priest Noot, my Master, whom I supposed to be far away in Egypt. Or perchance Noot was dead and this was his spirit that visited me in my sleep. Spirit or dream or man, words came from the lips of that vision spoken in the very voice of Noot; such words as these,

“O Mother Isis, and Thou without a name whom Isis and all the gods serve and obey, I thank ye that ye have been pleased to bring this maiden in safety through her appointed tasks, throwing over her the shield of a strength divine. I thank ye that ye have led her back to me, her father in the spirit, that defilement has not touched her, that fire has not burned her, that water has not drowned her, and that the foeman's spears have not pierced her heart. I pray ye, O Mother Isis and O Thou without a name in the hollow of whose hand lie the world and all that live thereon, that as has been the beginning, so may be the end, and that this chosen woman may return safe to whence she came, there to accomplish those tasks that she was created to fulfil.”

Thus that voice prayed on, the holy, well-remembered voice, till at length I brought its supplications to an end, saying,

“Tell me, Noot my father, why do you still fear in this hour of deliverance?”

He rose, he came to me, and drawing aside a curtain on a little window-place, scanned me with kind and gentle eyes. Then he took my outstretched hand, kissed it, and answered,

“Alas! there is still much to fear, O my daughter, but of that you shall learn presently. First tell me the story of what has chanced to you since we parted.”

Briefly, omitting much, I told him that tale.

“It is as my spirit showed me,” he said when I had finished. “Heaven has not deceived its servant. Your messenger reached us, Daughter, but had he died upon the road it would have mattered little, since long ere he had set foot in Egypt my soul had heard your soul and made all things ready. Yet last night, when Sidon burned, I confess that my faith failed me and this soul of mine shook with fear. Indeed an hour after sunset I thought that your ghost passed me, crying that all was done.”

“Perchance it was the ghost of Beltis that passed. But of these things we will talk afterward. I see fear in your eyes. Of what are you afraid?”

“Rise and look through that window-place, Daughter.”

I did so and behold! but a little distance away the great quinquereme named the *Holy Fire* sped upon our track, so fast that her five banks of oars lashed the sea to foam.

“Father divine,” said a voice without, a voice that I seemed to know, “I have words to say.”

“Enter and speak,” answered Noot.

The door was opened and the curtain drawn, admitting a rush of sunlight. Lo! there before me stood a warrior clad in such armour as the Greeks wear and, thus attired, the most beautiful and glorious-looking man that ever my eyes beheld.

It was *Kallikrates*, *Kallikrates himself*, only now in place of the priest's robe his great form was clad in bronze; in place of a chaplet a helm was on his head and in place of the *sistrum* his hand gripped a sword hilt. Yes, it was Kallikrates, he whose lips in past days had met mine in the holy shrine, but as he had been before he had vowed himself to Isis because of a certain crime. For now again he was a man and a captain of men, not one who with bent brows and humble mien from hour to hour mutters prayers to an unseen divinity.

Oh! I will tell truth. When I saw him thus I liked him well. Yes, though for long he had been nothing to me save a fellow servant of the goddess, once more I was thrilled with a cup of that same wine which I had seemed to drink when our lips met far away in Egypt; once again that fire which I had stamped to ashes beneath my feet sprang to life and scorched my heart.

Mayhap it was his beauty, as great perhaps as that of any man who ever lived, or mayhap it was the light of battle that shone in his gray eyes which thus stirred the woman in me. At least I who had sickened at the sight of Tenes and all other men, I who had given myself to higher things and, rejecting the flesh, followed the spirit only, was stirred like any common maid who finds her lover at the moon-rise. Moreover, Noot, who could read hearts and above all my heart, noted it for I saw him smile and heard him sigh.

Perchance Kallikrates also noted something, for

the colour came to his brow—I saw it redden beneath the plumed helm of bronze, and he dropped those bold and beautiful eyes. More, he sank upon his knee, saluting me with the secret sign and saying,

“Pardon, Child of Wisdom, High-priestess of the Queen of Heaven, that once again, if only for a little while, I have put on the harness which I used to wear. It is done to save you, Child of Wisdom. It is done by command.”

“Aye,” said Noot, “it is the command of Her we serve that this priest should lift sword on behalf of Her and us, her slaves.”

I bowed my head, but answered—naught.

