

CHAPTER XII

THE SEA BATTLE

THE great Persian ship was on us. Strive as we would, we could not escape her. She raced upon our beam not a spear's cast away. I stood upon the high poop of the *Hapi* and saw it all, for the old Arab blood was on fire in me, as it had been when I charged in the battle where my father fell, and I would play no woman's part. Moreover, my spirit told me that I had not escaped from the hands of Tenes and out of the burning hell of Sidon, to die there upon the sea.

Standing thus upon the poop by the side of Philo the cunning captain, I noted this strange thing, that no arrow was shot and no spear thrown from the Persian's decks. She raced alongside of us, that was all. I looked at Philo, a question in my eyes, and he answered the question briefly between his set lips.

"They think the King and Queen are aboard and would take us living. Hark! They shout to us to surrender."

Again I looked at him, wondering what he would do.

He issued an order and presently our speed slackened so that we fell a little behind the Persian. He issued another order and we leapt forward again under a changed helm. Now I saw that he was minded to ram the *Holy Fire*. The Persian saw it

also and sheered off. We ran alongside of her, shipping our oars as we came on that side which was nearest to her. But the Persian had no time to ship hers. Our sharp prow caught her fivefold line of sweeps, smashing the most of them as though they were but twigs, and casting the rowers in a broken, tumbled heap within her deep hold.

"That was worthy of Philo," I said, but he, ever a humble man, as are all masters of their trade, shook his head and answered,

"Nay, Lady, I missed my mark and now we must pay for it. Ah! I thought so."

As he spoke, from sundry places on the *Holy Fire* grapnels flew out which caught in the rails, ropes and rowing benches of the *Hapi*, binding the two ships together.

"They are about to board us," said Philo. "Now, Lady, pray to Mother Isis to give us aid."

Then he blew two blasts upon his whistle. Instantly rose up upon our deck a band of men, nigh a hundred of them, perhaps, clad in armour and captained by the Greek, Kallikrates. Also behind these I saw the crew of the royal barge, armed with such weapons as they could find, and the sailors of the *Hapi*.

The Persians thrust out boards or ladders from one ship to the other, across which their boarders, most of them Greeks, came on in swarms. The fighting began and it was very fierce. Our men cut down many of the foe and drowned others by casting off the boards and ladders, so that those on them fell into the sea. Still a great number of them won on board of us, and oh! fierce was that fray. Always in the thickest of it I saw Kallikrates towering a head above the others, and who now would have dreamed that he was a priest of Isis? For he

smote and smote and man after man went down before him, while as his sword rose and fell he shouted out some old Greek battle cry, such as once his fathers used.

On a space of deck ringed round with dead and dying, he came face to face with the captain of the boarders, a great and burly man, also, as I think, a Greek. They fought terribly, whilst others paused to watch that fray which Homer might have sung. Kallikrates was down and my heart stood still. Nay, he was up again but his bronze sword had broken on the foemen's mail.

That foeman had an axe; he swung it up to make an end. Kallikrates, rushing beneath it, seized him in his arms and they wrestled there upon the slippery deck. The ship lurched; together they staggered to the bulwarks. The foeman loosed one arm and drew a dagger; with it he smote Kallikrates again and again. Kallikrates bent, and with his freed hand seized the man beneath the knee. By a mighty effort he lifted him to the bulwark's edge and there they clung awhile. Then Kallikrates with that same freed hand smote the other on the brow. Thrice he smote and his blows were as those of a hammer falling on an anvil.

The grip of the captain of the boarders loosened and his head hung back. Once more Kallikrates smote and behold! his foe rolled down and was crushed to powder between the swelling sides of the two great ships as they ground one against the other, while the servants of Isis cheered and the sullen Persian hordes gave back.

I caught sight of Philo thrusting his way along the bulwarks. He held an axe in his hand but he was not fighting. Nay, he avoided those who fought. Once indeed he stood still and gave an

order, noting, as I had done, that of a sudden the wind had begun to blow. Certain sailors who heard this order ran to the mast and I saw the great sail rising slowly.

Meanwhile Philo slipped along those bulwarks, taking cover beneath them like a jackal beneath a wall. But whenever he came to one of the grapnels he stopped and smote with his axe, severing the rope that held it. Three of them did he sever thus, so that the prows of the vessels swung apart.

Now the great sail was up and filled. The *Hapi* forged ahead, dragging round the stern of the *Holy Fire* by those grapnels that remained. The Persians understood and grew frightened. Those who were still alive upon our decks rushed to the planks and ladders, but few gained them, for Kallikrates and the men of Isis were on their heels. They were cut down; they fell from the sliding planks and ladders, or they leapt into the sea and for the most part drowned there. Very soon not one of them was left upon our deck.

The grapnels were torn away, or the ropes broke. We were free. Yet the Persian was not beaten, for she was full of men of whom those who had been killed were but a tithe.

She, too, hoisted her sail and thrust out fresh sweeps to continue the pursuit. Her captain, standing on her prow, roared out,

“Dogs of Egyptians, I’ll hang you yet.”

Philo heard and took up his bow. Now we were sweeping across the bow of the *Holy Fire*; mayhap it was a hundred paces away. Philo aimed and shot. So truly did he shoot that his arrow struck the Persian captain beneath his helm and down he went.

His fall seemed to bewilder the crew, of the

Holy Fire. They hung upon their oars shouting at each other, as though they knew not what to do. Then their sail began to rise and I saw that they were putting about.

Philo at my side laughed, a hard little laugh.

"Mother Isis is good to us," he said. "See, the hunter has become the hunted!"

Then he gave orders and we came round so that our great sail taken aback flapped against the mast.

"Down with the sail and row," he shouted, "row as never ye rowed before!"

Those at the sweeps obeyed. Oh! it was splendid to see them bending their broad backs and tugging at the oars till these also bent like bows in the water. Here was no slave work, for they were servants of Isis and free men, every one of them. Philo rushed to the steering gear and with the aid of another man took charge of it himself. We leapt forward like a panther on its prey. The *Holy Fire* saw and strove to escape. Too late, too late! For presently the sharp prow of the *Hapi* crashed into her side with such a shock that all who stood upon the deck were thrown down, I among them. I struggled to my feet again and heard Philo screaming,

"Back water! Back! lest she take us with her."

We backed. Slowly the prow appeared again from where it was buried three paces deep in the foeman's flank.

The *Holy Fire* reeled over; the water rushed in through the gap. Crippled and helpless she wallowed; aye, she began to sink. From her swarming decks went up a yell of terror and dismay. Still the water rushed in with an ever-gathering flood and still she sank and sank. Men threw up their arms, praying for mercy; men sprang into the sea. Then suddenly the *Holy Fire* reared her glittering

prow into the air and stern foremost vanished into the deep. It was finished!

The Persians swam about us, or clung to wreckage, praying to be taken aboard. But we rowed on coming to the wind again. I know not how it is in the world to-day, but then in time of war there was little mercy. Egypt alone was merciful because age had mellowed her and because of her gentle worship of her gentle gods. But now Egypt was fighting for her life against the Persian. So we rowed on, and those barbarians were abandoned to drown and in the world below seek the warmth of the Fire they worshipped.

Philo left the helm and came to where I stood. I noted that he was white and shaken and called to one to bring him wine. He drank of it thankfully, not forgetting first to pour a libation at my feet, or rather at those of the goddess to whom I was so near.

"Bravely done!" I said. "You understand your trade, Philo."

"Not so ill, Lady, though it might have been better. Had I been at the helm we should have rammed that swarming hulk before the boarding and saved some lives. Well, Set has her now and Ochus lacks his finest ship."

"It might have been far otherwise," I said.

"Aye, Lady. Had I commanded the *Holy Fire* it would have been otherwise, for she had two oars and three men to our one, but her captain was wanting in sea-craft, and when my arrow found him, there was none to take his place. They should have swept us with their boarders, but that tall Greek captain called Kallikrates, who they tell me was once a priest, handled his soldiers well. He is a gallant man and I grieve that we are like to lose him."

"Why?" I asked.

"Oh! because in his fight with a fellow whom he flung over the bulwarks, he took a knife-thrust in the vitals, which they think will be mortal. See, they are bearing him to my cabin," and he pointed to Kallikrates being carried forward by four men—a sight that stirred my heart.

Then Philo was summoned away, for it seemed that when the *Hapi* rammed, she sprang a leak and the carpenters called Philo to consult with them as to how it might be stopped.

When they had gone I followed after Kallikrates and found him laid in Philo's cabin. They had taken off his armour and the leech, an Egyptian, was cleaning a cut in his thigh whence the blood ran down his ivory skin.

"Is it mortal?" I asked.

"I know not, Lady," answered the leech, "I cannot tell the depth of the thrust. Pray Isis for him, for he has lost much blood."

Now I who was skilled in medicine and in the treatment of wounds which I had learned from a great master in my youth among the Arabs, helped that physician as best I might, staunching the blood flow and stitching up the cut with silk before we bandaged it.

Moreover, taking from my hand a charmed and ancient amulet that gave health and had the power, so it was said, to cause the sick or wounded to recover, I set it on the finger of Kallikrates that it might cure him. This amulet was a ring of brown stone on which were graven certain hieroglyphics that meant *Royal Son of the Sun*. He who gave it to me told me that it had been worn by that greatest of all healers and magicians, Khaemuas, the eldest son of the mighty Rameses. Once only did I see

this ring again as shall be told. Then of it I lost sight and knowledge till, after more than two thousand years, I beheld it on the hand of Holly in the caves of Kôr.

As I worked thus the pain of the needle awoke Kallikrates from his swoon. He opened his eyes, looked up and saw me, then muttered in Greek so low that only I who was bending over him heard his words. They were:

"I thank thee, Beloved. I thank thee and the gods who have granted that like my forefathers I should die no priest, but a soldier and a man. Yea, I thank thee, *O royal and beautiful Amenartas.*"

Then he swooned again and I left him quickly, having learned that it was of the Egyptian he dreamed, and doubtless that it was for the sake of this same Egyptian that he had changed his sacred robe for mail, yes, the Egyptian Amenartas for whom he had mistaken me, Ayesha, in the wanderings of his weakness.

Well, why not? What had I to do with him or any man? Yet of a sudden I grew weary of the world and almost wished that the *Holy Fire* had rammed the *Hapi* and not the *Hapi the Holy Fire*.

Yonder behind us a thousand men were now at peace beneath the sea. Being overwrought with all that I had endured and seen, almost I could have wished that I, too, was at peace beneath the sea, sleeping for ever, or perchance to wake again nursed in the holy arms of Isis.

In the cabin sat my master, the prophet Noot, staring through the open doorway at the infinite blue of heaven above, as I knew that he had done during all that fearsome fight.

He smiled when he saw me and asked,

"Whence come you, Daughter, and why do your eyes shine like stars?"

"I come from the sight of the death of men, my Father, and my eyes shine with the light of battle."

"With other lights also, I think, Daughter. O Ayesha, beauty is yours, wisdom is yours, and you are filled with spirit like a cup with wine. But what of the cup? What of the cup? I fear me that those fair feet of yours have far to travel before they reach their home."

"What is their home, Father?"

"Do you not know it after these many years of learning? Harken. I will tell you. Your home is God, not this god or that god called by a hundred names, but the God beyond the gods. Doubtless you will love and you will hate, as you have loved and hated. And doubtless you are destined to draw up what you love and to come to peace with what you hate. Yet know that above all mortal loves there is another love in which they must be both lost and found. God is the end of man, O Ayesha, God or—death. All sin, all stumble on the path, but only those who continue on that path or who, having lost it, with tears and broken hearts seek it again and, like the Sisyphus of fable, thrust before them their frozen load of fleshly error, till at length it melts in the light that shines above; only those, I say, attain to the eternal peace."

So solemnly did he speak, uttering the slow words one by one, and so deep and holy was the lesson that they hid, that I, Ayesha, grew afraid.

"What have you seen and what do you know, my Father?" I asked humbly.

"Daughter, I have seen you yonder in Sidon rejoicing in vengeance for vengeance's sake; aye, glad when the vile hound who would have gripped you,

gasped out his life before your eyes. You did not slay him, Ayesha, but it was your counsel that gave cunning to the thought that planned and strength to the arm that dealt the blow."

"It was so fated, O my father, and otherwise——"

"Yes, it was so fated; yet you should not have rejoiced in the hour of your triumph. Nay, you should have sorrowed as the gods sorrow when they fulfil the decrees of Destiny. Again I have seen you burning with the flame of battle, your heart filled with songs of victory when Philo's skill and the Grecian courage of Kallikrates sent those mad brutes of Persians to their account. And lastly unless I dream—— What did you but now in Philo's cabin, Daughter?"

"I tended a wounded man, my Father, as I have the skill to do. Also I gave him an amulet which it is said has virtue to heal the sick."

"Aye, that was right and kind and the just reward of courage. Did he thank you, Daughter? I thought that in the quiet I heard thanks come from his lips."

"Nay," I answered sullenly, "his mind wandered and he thanked——another woman who was not there."

Again Noot smiled a little, and answered,

"Was it so? Then let her name be. Yet remember that from such wanderings of a mind distraught oftentimes springs the truth, like water from a shattered rock. Oh! Daughter, Daughter, if this man forgets his vows, must you do the same? For him there is excuse who is a soldier——can we doubt it who have looked upon his deeds to-day? He became a priest for love's sake and the shed blood which it brought. But for you there is none——at least none upon the earth," he added hastily. "I pray

you, therefore, let this man be, for if you do not, my gift of wisdom tells me that you will bring much trouble on your head and his. Why will you seek after vanity? Is it because in the pride of your beauty you cannot bear that another should be preferred before you and that a fruit which it is not lawful for you to pluck, should fall into some other woman's lap? I say to you, Daughter, that this beauty is your curse, because to it you demand obedience night and day, although of it you should think nothing, remembering its end. You are too proud, you are too puffed up. Look upon the stars and learn to be humble, lest you should be humbled by that which is stronger."

"I am still a woman, Father, a woman whose mission it is to love and to bear babes."

"Then learn to love that which is above and let the babes you bear be those of wisdom and good works. Is it your part to suckle sinners like any hedge-side troll, you to whom the heavens stretch out their hands? Is it for you in whose breast springs the tree of life to root it up and in its place to sow the seed of a woman's common arts, that by their aid you may snatch her lover from a rival? Because he sins, if sin he does, should you cease from being holy? Where is your greatness? Where are your purity and pride? I pray to you, beloved daughter of my spirit, swear to me by Heaven which we serve, that with this man you will have no more to do. Twice have you sinned—once in the sanctuary yonder at Philæ when his kiss met yours, and now again not an hour gone upon this ship, when your heart was torn with jealous rage because the name of another woman escaped from lips that you thought were about to shape your own. Twice have you sinned and twice has the goddess

turned her head and shut her eyes. But if for a third time you should walk into this pit dug of your own hands, then know that escape will be hard indeed. I tell you"—here his face and his low voice hardened—"I tell you that from age to age shall you strive unceasingly to wash the stain of blood from off those hands and that all your breath shall become a sigh and your every heart-beat shall be an agony. Swear then, swear!"

I looked at his eyes and saw that they were alight and unearthly, yes, that some spirit shining from within caused them to glow like alabaster lamps. I looked at the thin hand which he stretched out toward me and saw that it trembled in his passion.

I looked and was moved to obey. Yet ere I did so I asked,

"Were *you* ever young, my Father? Did *you* ever suffer from this eternal curse which Nature lays on men and women because she would not die? Did *you* ever take the bribe of sweet madness with which she baits her hook? Or, as once I think you told me in bygone years, were you always holy and apart?"

He covered his eyes with those thin hands, then answered,

"I was young. I suffered from that curse. Whatever I may have said to you in the past when you were but a child, I gorged that bait, not once but many times, and I have paid the price. Because I have paid it to my ruin, I pray you whom I love not to empty your heart of its purest virgin gold and fill the void with pain and penitence. Easy is it to fall, Daughter, but hard, very hard to rise again. Will you not swear?"

"Aye," I answered, "I swear by Isis and by your spirit, O Purified."

"You swear," he said, whispering, "but will you keep the oath? I wonder, aye, I wonder greatly, will you keep that oath, O high-hearted woman whose blood runs with so red and strong a stream?"

Then bending forward he kissed me on the brow, and rising left me.

Kallikrates did not die. Under the care of that cunning leech or of something above the leech, Death was cheated of him, since it seemed that the knife-thrust had not reached his vitals, or at least had not pierced them beyond repair. Still he was sick for a long while, for his whole body was drained of blood, so that had he been older, or less vigorous, Osiris would have taken him. Or perchance not in vain had I set upon his finger that scarab-talisman once charmed by Khaemuas. I visited him no more, and thus it was not until we were passing up the Nile and drew near to Memphis that I saw him again. Then, very pale and wasted, yet to my fancy more pleasing than he had been, since now his face had grown spiritual and his eyes were those of one that had looked close into those of Death, he was carried in a bed on to the deck. There I spoke with him, thanking him in the name of our goddess for the great deeds that he had done. He smiled and his white face took a little tinge of red as he answered,

"I fear me, O Mouth-of-Isis, that it was not of the goddess that I thought in that fray, but rather of the joy of battle which I, a priest, had never hoped to feel again. Nay, nor was it for the goddess that I smote as best I could, since in the extremities of war the gates of heaven, which are then in truth so near, seem very far away, but rather that after all which you had passed, you, with the rest of us,

might not fall into the hands of the heathen fire-worshippers."

Now I smiled back, for the words, if false, were courteous, and replied that doubtless also he, who was still young, desired to go on living.

"Nay," he answered earnestly, "I think that I desire to die rather than to live, and to pass hence as often my forefathers have done, sword in hand and helm on head. Life is no boon to a shaven priest, Lady, one who by his vows is cut off from all its joys."

"What is a man's joy in life?" I asked.

"Look at yourself in a mirror, Lady, and you will learn," he answered, and there was that in his voice which caused me to wonder whether it was possible after all that the wrong name came from his lips in the wanderings of his mind.

For then I did not know that a man may love two women and at the same time; one with his spirit and the other with his flesh, since through all things runs this war between the spirit and the flesh. The spirit of Kallikrates was always mine, having been given to me from the beginning, but with his flesh it was otherwise, and perchance while he is in the flesh it will so remain.

Before we reached Memphis a signal was made for us to anchor. Then a barge, flying the standard of Pharaoh, came off to us from the shore. On board of it was Nectanebes himself and with him his daughter, the Princess of Egypt, the lady Amernartas; also certain councillors and Grecian captains in his service.

The Pharaoh and the others came aboard to learn tidings of what had chanced at Sidon, and were received by Philo and by Noot. Presently they demanded to be led to me and I met them on

the deck outside my cabin, noting that the eyes of Nectanebes were troubled and that his fat cheeks had fallen in.

"So you are returned to us, Oracle-of-Isis," he said in a hesitating voice, scanning my form, for my face he could not see because it was veiled.

"I am returned, O Pharaoh," I answered, bowing before his Majesty. "It has pleased Her whom I serve to deliver me out of the hands of King Tenes of Sidon, to whom Pharaoh offered me as a gift."

"Aye, I remember. It was at that feast when the water in the cup you held turned to blood. Well, if all I hear is true, there has been blood enough out yonder."

"Yes, Pharaoh, the Sidonian seas run red with it. Tenes, Egypt's ally, surrendered the city to Ochus the Persian, thinking to find great advancement, which he won by death, whereon the Sidonians burned themselves in their houses with their wives and children. So it comes about that all Phœnicia is in the hands of Ochus who advances upon Egypt with a mighty host."

"The gods have deserted me!" moaned Nectanebes, waving his arms.

"Aye, Pharaoh," I answered in a cold voice, "for the gods are very jealous and seldom forgive those who forsake them and betray their servants into the hands of enemies that hate them."

He understood and answered in a low, babbling voice,

"Be not angry with me, Oracle-of-Isis, for what else could I do? That Sidonian dog, whom may Set devour eternally, was mad for you. Always I mistrusted him and I was sure that if I refused you to him, he would make his peace with Ochus and bite me in the back, as indeed he threatened at the feast.

Also I knew well that Mother Isis would protect you from all harm at his hands, which it seems that she has done."

Now when I heard these words rage filled me and I answered,

"Aye, Pharaoh, Mother Isis has done this and more. Have you heard how your poison worked? Nay? Then I will tell you. Having sacrificed her only son to Dagon, Tenes would have put away Beltis, his queen, to give her place to me. Mad with hate, Beltis led him into the arms of the Persian and afterward when his treachery was accomplished, slew him with her own hand, for I saw the deed. And now, Pharaoh, Sidon has fallen and with it all Phœnicia, and soon, Pharaoh, Egypt will follow Sidon. Aye, I, the Oracle, tell you that because you were pleased to throw the high-priestess of Isis into the arms of Tenes as though she were some singing woman of whom you had wearied, these things have come about. Therefore too soon there will no longer be a Pharaoh in Egypt and the Persian will take the Land of Nile and defile the altars of its gods."

He heard. He trembled. He had naught to say. But there was another who heard also. As I had noted, the Princess Amenartas, when she came on to the ship, went straight to where Kallikrates lay upon a couch beneath an awning on the deck, and there talked with him earnestly. What they said I could not hear for they spoke together beneath their breath. But their faces I could see, and watching them I grew sure that the Greek had made no error of a mind distraught when he spoke this royal lady's name as I tended his wounds. For those faces were the faces of lovers who met after long separation and the passing of great dangers.

Leaving Kallikrates this Amenartas had returned to her father and stood at his side listening to our talk. Now she broke in fiercely,

"Surely, Priestess, you were ever a bird of evil omen croaking of disaster. You fly to Sidon and lo! Sidon burns, yet you escape with wings unscorched. Now you flit back to Egypt and again wail of woe like a night owl of the desert. How is it, O Isis-come-to-Earth, as it pleases you to call yourself, that you alone escape from Sidon and return here to curdle the blood of men with prophecies such as those you uttered at the feast when by a trick you turned the water into blood? Have you perchance made friends with Ochus?"

"Ask it of Philo the captain of this ship, Lady," I answered in a quiet voice. "Or stay. Ask it of yonder priest which perchance will please you better, the Grecian who in the world was named Kallikrates. Ask them how I showed friendship to Ochus by so working through the strength of Isis and their skill and valour that the Persian's finest ship of war with a multitude of his sailors and fighting men lies to-day at the bottom of the deep."

"Perchance because a captain was skilled and a certain priest, or soldier, was brave, that ship is sunk with all she bore, but not, I think, through you or your prayers, O Oracle. I say to you, Pharaoh, my father, that if I held your sceptre I would send this *Isis-come-to-Earth* to seek Isis in Heaven ere she bring more sorrows on us and Egypt."

"Nay, nay," muttered Nectanebes, rolling his big eyes, "speak not so madly, Daughter, lest the Mother should hear and once more smite me. Harken. Last night I, who have skill, consulted my spirit, the Dæmon who obeys me. He came, he

spoke. I heard him with my ears. Yes, he spoke of this propheticess. He said that she drew near to Memphis on a ship. He said that she was great, almost a goddess, that she must be cherished, that to you and me she would be a shelter from the storm, that in her is the power of One who sits above. O Oracle, O Isis-come-to-Earth, O Wisdom's Daughter, forgive the wild words of this royal child of mine who is distraught with fear, and know that, to the last, Pharaoh is your friend and your protector."

"As mayhap, if this Dæmon of yours speaks truth, before all is done I shall be the protector of Pharaoh and of the Princess of Egypt whom it pleases to revile me," I replied.

Then bowing to him I turned and sought my cabin.

