

CHAPTER XV

THE PLOT AND THE VOICE

THE weary years went by. Ochus returned to Persia, bearing his spoils with him and leaving one Sabaco, a brutal fellow, to rule Egypt and wring tribute from her.

All this while I, Ayesha, sat alone, quite alone, in the temple of Isis at Memphis whose walls I never left, for the command of Ochus was obeyed and whatever happened to those of other gods, the shrine of Isis was left inviolate. Here, then, surrounded by a dwindling company of priests and priestesses, I remained, as Noot, my Master, had commanded me to do, awaiting a word that never came, and carrying on the ceremonies of the temple in such humble fashion as our poverty allowed.

What did I through all that slow and heavy time? I dreamed, I communed with Heaven above, I studied the ancient lore of Egypt and of other lands, growing ever wiser and as full of knowledge as a new-filled jar with perfume or with wine. Yet of what use was this knowledge to me? As it seemed, of none. Yet it was not so, since my heart fed on it like a bee upon its winter store of honey, and without it I should have died, as the bee must die. Moreover, now I understand that this space of waiting was a preparation for those long centuries which afterward I was doomed to pass in the tombs of Kôr. It was a training and a discipline of the soul.

Thus forgotten of the world I brooded and endured, I who had thought to rule the world.

So moon added itself to moon, and, still filled with a divine patience, I abode within those temple walls till the appointed hour, which I knew would dawn at last. Of Nectanebes I heard nothing; he had vanished away—I doubted not to the doom which I had foreseen. Of Amenartas, his daughter, I heard nothing, she also had vanished away, as I supposed with him. Of Kallikrates, the soldier priest, I heard nothing. Doubtless he was dead and that beauty of his had turned to evil-odoured dust as my own must do, a thought from which I shrank.

Much I wondered why this man alone upon the earth should have stirred my soul and awakened the longings of my woman's flesh. I knew not, unless it was agreed that when the gates were passed I should meet him in a world that lies beyond, if such there were. For from the beginning I was sure that it had been laid upon me to lift up his spirit to the level of my own, perchance because in some far-off star or state I had sinned against it and him and dragged them down.

Indeed is not this the common lot of the great, that with toil and tears and bitter disappointment they must strive to draw the spirits of others to that high peak upon which themselves they stand? And amongst all the sins of our vile condition, is there one blacker than to cast back some soul that struggles toward the pure and good into the seething depths of ill?

Thus in those days I thought of that lost Kallikrates whose lips alone had touched my own. I thought, too, with a sad wonderment, how strange it was that I to whose feet men had crept by scores,

I the most beautiful of women and the most learned, had been rejected, or at the least turned from by this man, the favourer of another, who although she was fair and bold of heart, still shone with a smaller light, as does the pale moon when compared with the glory of the sun.

Indeed, now that all was over and done, as I believed, and that nought remained of these fires of folly save a pinch of burnt-out ash, I smiled to myself as I remembered them. Yet to tell truth, I smiled sadly, who here alone at the dear feast of love which, to a woman, means more than all other feasts, had been served with the cups of defeat and shame by the grinning varlet, Destiny. Yet I was well served, for what had I, Wisdom's Daughter, the vowed to eternal glory, to do with such matters of our common flesh?

Oh! I was glad to have done with the gray-eyed Kallikrates, who could wield a sword so manly-well in battle, and yet, when remorse took hold of him, could pray with the best of priests. Now at least once more I was the mistress of my own soul with leisure to shape it to the likeness of the gods and, in those days of holy contemplation, truly its wings beat against their bars, struggling to be free. Would that they had burst them, but Fate had built that cage too strong.

At length news came to me, for Isis still had eyes and ears in Egypt and all that these saw or heard I learned, news that Ochus, grown timid or weary in his Persian palace, had determined once more to drink the waters of the Nile, or perchance to check the accounts of his satrap Sabaco whose sum of tribute had fallen off of late.

So he came with all his Eastern pomp and at last

took up his abode in the palace of Memphis within two bowshots of the temple where I dwelt. The people received him with rejoicings; it was pitiful to see them decking themselves and the streets with flowers, spreading branches of palm for him to tread on, and flying banners from the lofty tops of the fire-scorched pylons—slaves welcoming their torturer and tyrant and grinning to hide the terror in their hearts. He came, and there was festival throughout the great town as though Osiris had returned to earth, accompanied by all the lesser gods.

Only in the temple of Isis there was none. No palm leaves decked its stark and ancient walls, no bonfires burned within its courts, and no lanterns hung in its window-places. Not thus would I, Ayesha, bow the knee to Baal or sacrifice to Moloch, though it is true that some of my servants looked askance when I forbade it and asked who would protect us from the wrath of the King of kings because of this neglect of his command.

"The goddess will protect us," I answered, "or if she does not, I will," and sent them to their tasks.

On the second night after the coming of Ochus, Bagoas waited on me and I commanded that he should enter, but alone. So his Eastern rabble of gorgeous servitors was turned back from the gates and he came in unattended, splendid in gold-embroidered silk and jewels. Where he had left me, there I received him, seated veiled in the chair of state before the alabaster statue of the goddess, at the entrance to the outer sanctuary that overlooked the great hall.

"Hail! Bagoas," I said, "how goes it with you? Has that amulet of power which I gave to you protected you from harm?"

"Prophetess," he answered, bowing, "it has protected me. It has lifted me up so that now, save for the King of kings, my master most august," he added with a sneer in every word, "I am now the greatest one in the whole world. I give life, I decree death. I lift up, I cast down; satraps and councillors crawl about my feet; generals beg my favour; gold is showered upon me. Yea, I might build my house of gold. There is nought left for me to desire beneath the sun."

"Except certain things to which, thanks to the cruelty of the King of kings, or those who went before him, you cannot attain? For example, children to inherit all this glory and all this gold, Bagoas, although you live among so many of those who might be mothers."

He heard, and his face, that I noted had grown thinner and more fierce since last I saw him, became like to that of the devil.

"Prophetess," he hissed, "surely you are one who knows how to pour acid into an open wound."

"That thereby it may be cleansed, Bagoas."

"Yet your words are true," he went on, unheeding. "All this splendour, all this wealth and power I would give, and gladly, to be as my fathers were before me, gently bred but humbly owners of a patch of land between Thebes and Philæ. There they sat for a score of generations with their women and their children. But where, thanks to the Persians, are *my* women and *my* children? In the western cliff yonder there is a sepulchre. In the chapel of that sepulchre above the coffins of those who lie beneath is an image of him who dug it. He lived some fourteen hundred years ago in the days of Aahmes, he who won back Egypt from the Hyksos kings, the invaders who held it as the Per-

sians do to-day. For he was one of the captains of the troops of Aahmes who, when he conquered, gave him that patch of land in guerdon for his service."

Here Bagoas paused like to one overwhelmed by unhappy memories, then continued,

"From age to age, Prophetess, it has been the custom for the children of the children of this soldier upon a certain day to make offerings to that statue, wherein, as we hold, dwells the *Ka* of him whose face and form it pictures; to set a golden crown, that of Osiris, upon its head, to wind a golden chain about its neck; to give it food, to give it flowers. Such is the sacred duty, from generation to generation, of the descendants of that captain who served Aahmes and helped to free Egypt from the barbarian foe. Myself I have fulfilled that duty, aye, when Ochus the Destroyer first came to Memphis, I travelled up Nile and placed the crown upon the head and wound the chain about the neck, and offered the flowers and the food. But, Prophetess, of this blood I am the last, for because of my beauty as a child the Persian seized me and made of me a dry tree, so that never again will there be one to make offering in the tomb of my forefather, the captain of Aahmes, or to read the story of his deeds that fourteen hundred years ago, while yet living, he caused to be recorded upon his funeral tablet."

I heard and laughed.

"A common tale," I said, "a very common tale in Egypt to-day, the Egypt of the Persians, as doubtless it was long ago in the Egypt of the Hyksos. But this ancestor of yours was a man who smote, or helped to smite, the Hyksos and lived to write his glorious deeds on stone to be an example to those who came after him. Well, the story is finished, is it not? Indeed I wonder that the glorious Bagoas,

slave of the Persian, Bagoas with his pomp and pleasures, thinks fit to waste time upon the tale of a forgotten warrior who in his hour struck for freedom. What are the flowers and the humble scents which for more than a thousand years have been offered to the spirit of that warrior, but now can never be offered again since there are none of his blood left to bring them, compared to the priceless balms, the jewels and the gold, that daily are poured upon the feet of Bagoas, the Chief Eunuch and Counsellor of the King of kings, who, did he know of those holy ones that sleep in the tomb of the race of Bagoas, doubtless would drag them out and cause Bagoas, the last of its blood, to fire them, that he might see a merry blaze? That would be a good sport for the King of kings, to force the great Bagoas to burn his ancestors and on their bones to cook a royal meal, as he forced the priests of Ptah to broil Apis for his feast."

The mighty Bagoas heard and understood me, as I could see well, for at every word he winced like a high-bred steed beneath the whip.

"Cease," he said hoarsely, "cease! I can bear no more. Why do you rub sand into my eyes, Prophetess?"

"To clear away their rheum that they may see the better, Bagoas. But let us be done with the tale of that honourable, long-lost ancestor of yours to whose spirit no more offerings will be made, and tell me of the wonders of the great estate of you in whom runs his blood, the last drops of it, that soon will be sucked up in the sands of Death. Seal that sepulchre, Bagoas, but first set it in another writing, graven on a tablet of emerald or gold, telling how he who hallowed it was by the gods given the glory of being the far forefather of Bagoas, Chief

Eunuch of the King of kings, Ochus, who burned the shrines of that forefather's gods."

"Cease, cease!" he moaned. "The hour is at hand."

"What hour, Bagoas?"

"The hour of vengeance which I swore to Isis."

"Does the Egyptian worshipper of the Persian holy Fire remember his vows to Isis? Be plain, Bagoas."

"Hearken, Prophetess. During all these years I have been seeking opportunity. Now of a sudden I see it to my hand. A thought came to me whilst you talked of the captain of Aahmes to whom no more of his blood can make offerings."

"Speak it, then, Bagoas."

"Prophetess, the King of kings is wrath with you, because alone of all the great places in Memphis, on the temple of Isis no welcoming banners hang to greet him at his royal coming and because no priest or priestess of Isis spread flowers before his conquering feet. So wrath is he that, were it not for his oath, which he fears to break, he would pull this sanctuary stone from stone, slaughter its priests, and give its priestesses to the soldiers."

"Is it so?" I asked indifferently.

"Aye, Prophetess. But by that oath you are saved, for ever I keep it before his mind and warn him of the fate of those who do violence to the Queen of Heaven. Only this morning I did this while he stood staring at these unbannered walls and muttered vengeance."

"And what said he then, Bagoas?"

"He laughed and answered that he would do the goddess not violence, but honour, thus. On the third night from this, the night of full moon, he will make a great feast in the inner court of this temple.

At that feast the King of kings and his women will sit upon a platform laid over the coffins of the royalties of Egypt dragged from their sepulchres, so that its kings and queens may be beneath his feet. This platform will be supported by the statues of the gods of Egypt which once they worshipped. In front of it will burn the holy Fire of Persia and that fire will be fed with the mortal remnants of priests and priestesses of those Egyptian gods. Ochus the king will be clad in the robes of Osiris, and at the end of the feast from behind her consecrated statue, that before which we sit, the goddess herself, dressed in the robes of Isis and wearing the holy emblems upon her head, will appear veiled, led by priestesses or by royal Persian women. *You will be that goddess, Prophetess.*"

"And then?" I asked.

"Then you will be brought up on to the platform and there this new Osiris will unveil you, embracing you as his wife in welcome before all that company. This he will do to make a mock of you because he believes you to be an ancient woman who goes veiled to hide her baldness and her wrinkles, for so the rumour runs among the Persians."

Now when I, Ayesha, heard these horrible words and my heart understood the height and depth of the sacrilege which this mad king would dare and all that it might mean to me, I trembled; yes, the bones seemed to melt within me so that almost I fell from the throne whereon I sat. Yet gathering up my strength I asked,

"Is this all, Bagoas?"

"Nay. At that feast, Prophetess, I myself as Vizier and the head of the world under him, must serve Ochus as his cup-bearer. While the priests of Osiris and the priestesses of Isis sing the ancient

chants of the awakening of Osiris from the tomb and of his reunion with Isis the Wife Divine, it will be my part to hand the jewelled goblet filled with the holy wine to Osiris-Ochus, King of Heaven and Earth. From it he will drink the marriage draught, and having drunk, will pour the dregs of the goblet upon your feet, or for aught I know will cast them in your face. Nay, I forgot. First the Persian women of the royal household will strip the coverings from you that Osiris may see his long-lost bride and the company may have sport, jeering at her withered age."

"And if she should prove to remain unwithered, if even she should chance to be passing fair, what then, Bagoas?"

"Then perchance, Prophetess, it is in the mind of Ochus to add Isis to the number of his queens, thinking thus to gain the favour of the Egyptians, if not of their gods. Oh! Prophetess, you are very wise, as all know, yet once your foot slipped—or rather your hand slipped, when in bygone days you stretched it out to touch the sceptre of the King of kings. Ochus has often spoken of the beauty of that hand and arm, and of how, more than all things, he desired to see the face above them and the form of which they are a part. Perchance, Prophetess, that is why he plans all this mummary."

"And if I refuse to act this play, what then, Bagoas?"

"Then since the command is lawful and designed to honour the goddess, the Great King's oath is at an end. Then the temple of Isis will be sacked and burned like others, then her priests will be murdered unless they make offerings to the holy Fire, and her priestesses be enslaved or find a home in the soldiers' tents or Persian households."

"Bagoas," I said, rising and standing over him, "know that the Curse of Isis hovers about your head. Show me a path out of this trouble or you die—not to-morrow or next year, but at once. How, it matters not, still you die; and for the rest, are the Sidonians the only ones who can fire their temples and perish in them?"

He cringed before me after the fashion of his unhappy kind, then answered,

"I waited for such words, Prophetess, and had I not been prepared against them, never would I have entered these gates alone. Did I not tell you that at this feast I shall be the King's cup-bearer? Now," he went on in a whisper, "I add that his own physician, who is in my pay, will mix the marriage wine, that his life is in the hollow of my hand; that the guards and captains are my servants; that the great lords are sworn to me, and that the hour for which I have waited through long years has come at last. Lady, you are not the only one who desires vengeance upon Ochus."

"Fine words," I said. "But how know I that they will be fulfilled? In Egypt Bagoas is called the King's Liar."

"I swear it by Isis, and if I fail you, may the Devourer take my soul."

"And I, who am her Mouth and Oracle, swear by Isis that if you fail me I will take your blood. Aye, though I die, a thousand will live on to avenge me, and the dagger or the shaft of one of them shall reach your heart at last. Or if they miss their aim then the goddess herself will smite."

"I know it, Prophetess, and I will not fail. After drinking of that cup sleep will fall upon the King of kings; yes, the new Osiris will return to his tomb and sleep sound, but *not in the arms of Isis.*"

Then for a while there was silence between us, till at length I motioned to him to begone.

The night of the feast came and all was prepared. I did not trust Bagoas and therefore I made a plan, a splendid and terrible plan. I determined to offer all those feasters, yes, the King of kings with his women, his generals, his chamberlains, his councillors, and his company, as one vast sacrifice to the outraged gods of Egypt, and with them if need were, myself and my servants, to guide them upon the road to hell.

Beneath that hall of the temple which Ochus had appointed for the feast was a vast vault for the storage of oil and fuel against times of want or tumult. This vault, as it chanced, was full to the roof, since in those troublous days I never knew from moon to moon when the place might be besieged. Also in it was much prepared papyrus with many written rolls that for centuries had been hidden there, great weight of bitumen such as the embalmers use, a stack of coffins prepared by the living to receive their bodies at the end; and lastly hundreds of bundles of dried reeds that served to strew the courts. What more was needed, save to open the air shafts to the hall above that the flames might find full play, and to set in the vault one who could be trusted with a lamp of which the light was hidden, commanded at a certain signal to cast it among the oil-soaked reeds and fly?

As it chanced such an instrument was to my hand, an old, fierce-hearted woman in whom ran royal blood, that for hard on seventy years had served as priestess of this temple.

That very night I summoned the priests and priestesses who remained and in the sanctuary under

the wings of Isis, I told them all: told them how I purposed to sweep this human dirt of Persians with the red besom of destruction out of the company of the living over the edge of the world into the Avenger's everlasting jaws.

This band of the faithful hearkened and bowed their cowed heads. Then the first of them, an old priest, asked,

"Is it decreed that we must eat fire with these swine? If so, we are ready."

"Nay," I answered, "the secret passage that runs from the back of the sanctuary of the ruined temple of Osiris will be unbarred, that passage by which in the old days the holy effigy of Osiris was brought at the great festival of the Resurrection to be laid upon the breast of Isis. By this passage at the first sign of fire, you must flee, as I will if I may. But if I come not you will know that the goddess has called me. At the water-steps of the temple of Osiris boats will be waiting manned by brothers of our faith. In the darkness and the tumult, those boats will pass down Nile to the secret shrine that is called *Isis-among-the-Reeds*, where once, the legend tells, the goddess found the heart of Osiris hidden there by Typhon, the shrine upon the isle that none dare visit, no, not even the Persians, because it is guarded by the ghosts of the dead, or by spirits sent from the Under-world fashioned like flames of fire. Thither fly and there lie hid until the word of Isis comes to you, as come it will."

Again they bowed their cowed heads in the gloomy sanctuary lit by a single lamp. Then the old priest said,

"Great is the deed that we shall do, and worthy. Surely the song of it shall echo through all the courts of Heaven and the gods themselves shall

crown our brows with splendour. Yet ere it is decreed, O Prophetess inspired, let us seek a sign from the Queen immortal that such is her command."

"Aye," I answered, "let us seek a sign."

So there in the half darkness we chanted the mystic ritual, hand in hand before the goddess we chanted it, bowing and swaying, weeping and praying, demanding that a sign be given to us who were prepared to die that her splendour might shine forth as a star.

Yet no sign came.

"O Oracle inspired," said the old priest, "it is not enough. Yet in your heart are locked the unutterable Words, the Words of Power, the Words of the Opening of the Mouth Divine, that may not be spoken save at the last extreme. Are not these words known to you, the Oracle inspired?"

"They are known to me," I answered. "From Noot I had them under the Seven Oaths when I was ordained prophetess; yea, under the Seven Curses if those words should be used unworthily, the seven dreadful curses, deer-footed, snake-headed, lion-maned with red fire, that shall hunt the betrayer's soul from star to star, till the black vault of space falls in and buries Time. Kneel now and bow your heads and stop your ears till they be spoken. Then open your ears and hearken."

They knelt in a double row and I, I the Oracle, clothed in the might of my Queen, I dared to draw near to her holy effigy gleaming white above us in the darkness of the shrine. Yes, this I dared, not knowing what would chance. I took the jewelled *sistrum* of my office; I laid it upon the lips of the goddess, I shook it till it chimed before her face, I clasped her feet and kissed them.

Then I rose and into her ear I whispered the

dreadful Words of Power, which even now, after so many ages, I dare not so much as shape in the halls of memory. I whispered them and returning to my company of kneeling worshippers, I motioned to them to unstop their ears and folding my arms upon my breast, I waited with downcast eyes.

Presently there was a stir in that sanctuary as of beating wings; a cold air blew upon us; then a voice spoke, the very voice of Noot my Master, Noot, the holy priest of priests. Said the voice:

"Fulfil! It is decreed. Fulfil and fear not!"

"Ye have heard," I said.

"We have heard," they answered.

"Whose voice did ye hear?" I asked.

"The voice of Noot, the holy priest of priests who has gone from us," they answered.

"Is it enough?" I asked.

"It is enough," they answered.

Then I departed rejoicing, who knew by this sign that Noot, who spoke with his human voice, still lived upon the earth, and that through him it had pleased Heaven to utter its decree.

