

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE FEAST OF THE KING OF KINGS

IT WAS the night of the great feast. All day long artificers by scores had toiled in the court of the temple. Adown its length tables had been set up and by them couches and benches upon which hundreds of the feasters would lie or sit according to their degree. Near to the head of the court a platform had been built, of which the foundation beams were supported by the statues of gods dragged from a score of temples where they had stood in solemn peace for ages. Yes, there were Ptah, Ammon, Osiris, Mut, Khonsu, Hathor, Maat, Thoth, Ra, Horus, and the rest, bearing on their sacred brows and headdresses the eating-table of a heathen horde. But they bore more than this, since around and between them and the platform upon which stood this table were laid the coffins of long-dead kings or queens, and other great ones, torn, it was said, from the pyramids or their surrounding tombs. Dark with the dust of ages there they lay, some of them uncovered, so as to reveal the grim shapes that slept within.

Above these again was placed the wide platform carpeted with purple cloth of Tyre, and on it stood the board and gilded furniture of the feast. Here, too, was a golden throne at the back of which was a peacock fan of jewels, while to its front was set a table fashioned of black wood inlaid with ivory, and



around it other smaller thrones and tables. These were the seats of the King of kings and some of his favoured women.

Nor was this all, for in an outer court but within the pylon gates, cooks and scullions had built fires whereon they dressed meats, and butlers set out their store of wines. Never before within the memory of man had so strange and rich a feast been seen in Egypt as that which was now preparing in the courts of Isis, to defile which with the smell of flesh was a sacrilege and the eating of it there an abomination.

When the sun had turned toward the west came Bagoas with other eunuchs and chamberlains, and being admitted to the inner courts, summoned our company and issued his commands as to the ceremonial that we must keep. We hearkened meekly, saying that we were the slaves of the King of kings, we and our goddess together, and in all things would obey his words.

Then they went away, but as he passed me, affecting to stumble, he whispered in my ear,

"Be not afraid, Prophetess. All is well and the end shall be good."

"I am not afraid, Eunuch," I answered, "who know that all is well and that the end will be good."

The night fell; great flares of light set upon stands of bronze were lit adown the hall, and with them countless lamps placed at intervals along the tables. The feasters gathered; they came by scores and hundreds; Persian lords in their rich robes, generals and captains in their armour, merchants of many lands, Egyptian apostates, and I know not who besides, men, all of them, whom it pleased the King of kings to honour. They were marshalled in their



appointed places by the stewards and butlers, and there waited in silence, or speaking only in low voices.

From behind the curtains of the outer sanctuary I and my company watched it all. These were clad in their festal garments of white, garlanded with flowers. But I, according to command, wore the glorious robes of Isis beneath my veil, and on my head the vulture cap of Isis, the golden Uræus, the earrings and the crescent of the moon. Moreover, about my bosom were hung the sacred necklaces and the other jewelled emblems of the goddess, while in my hands I held the *sistrum* and the Cross of Life.

Trumpets blew announcing the advent of the King of kings. Up the long hall he marched, clad in the mummy wrappings of Osiris, somewhat widened at the feet so that he might walk in them, wearing on his head the tall feathered crown and holding in his hands the Crook of Dominion and the Scourge of Rule. His chamberlains and great officers led him by a stairway to the platform that was built above the bodies of ancient kings, where was set a tiny altar upon which burned the Holy Persian Fire. There for a while he stood in pride, waving the scourge with which he flogged the world, while all that company fell upon their faces and adored him as a god, after which they lay still as corpses in the grave.

It was strange to see them lying on their faces like dead men, who indeed soon were to be dead, every one of them, and adoring this human image, this dressed-up doll, fashioned in their own likeness, to be the plaything of the gods and about to be broken by them and cast upon the rubbish heap of time.



I, Ayesha, watching through the veil and alive with that spirit which in the hour of great events comes to such as I am, thought it very strange; so strange that I could have laughed. For there in this mime, this puppet king upon the platform, with the tame tiger, Bagoas, that was about to tear out his throat, crouching at his feet, I saw the very type of all grandeur that is built of clay and not of spirit, since assuredly there is one grandeur of the earth and another of the spirit. Whether by the poison of Bagoas or by the fire of Isis, yonder man who stood triumphing over the mighty monarchs that lay confined beneath his feet, like a wind-filled toad upon a consecrated altar, was about to die and then what of his triumph and what of his pomp?

His cup of blood was full, and when the blast of doom overturned it into the sands of Death, what tongues would it take, I wondered, in which to urge a million accusations against his trembling soul? Lastly, what mocking devil had persuaded him to don the robes of Osiris, that in them he might do insult to Isis who, whate'er she may not be, at least under her royal name of Nature is the mighty vassal of the Most High, forgetting that Osiris is the god of Death and that Isis-Nature ever avenges herself upon those who violate her laws? Little wonder then that I who laughed but seldom in those days did so in my heart, while my eyes took their fill of the tinselled panoply of this lost madman.

Ochus-Osiris waved his sceptre, and the seeming dead who lay around him, as they had been drilled to do by those who planned this play, came to life in a grim mockery of ghosts called from the grave. They rose up and each, according to his degree, took his place at this Table of Osiris brought to earth.

The feast went on; they ate much; they drank



more, till their brains were bemused with wine and scarce could they stand upon their feet. At length the climax came; the coping-stone was set upon this black pyramid of mortal sin against the spirit of Divinity.

Ochus rose, waving the Crook of Dominion.

"Osiris is risen again in Egypt!" he cried. "Let his wife, the divine Isis, be brought forth that he may drink with her the cup of marriage and embrace her as her husband."

Thereon that ribald company shouted,

"Yea, the god Osiris is risen again in Egypt. Bring out Queen Isis. Bring her out, that we may see her drink with him and be kissed!"

Guards summoned us. We came forth from the curtained sanctuary, white-robed in simple state. Singing the ancient hymn of Reunion to the music of harps and of shaken *sistra*, our company came forth into the great hall, I at the head of them. We walked into the hall, a solemn troop at whom the drunken feasters forgot to mock; indeed some of them bowed their heads as though in awe. We came to the dais that was supported by the statues of the gods of Egypt and platformed with her ancient royalties, and here we halted. Guards led me up a stairway so that I stood upon the platform, facing Ochus-Osiris. He spoke, saying, mockingly,

"Hail! Queen of Heaven. Behold Osiris re-arisen on the Nile has found you at last. Unveil, Queen of Heaven, that he may look upon your glory, for as goddesses do not grow old, doubtless you are glorious."

At these words of insult the company broke into coarse laughter. I waited till it had died away, then answered,

"O King wrapped in the robes of a greater king, yea, in the robes of Death, have you not heard that



it is very dangerous to draw the veil of Isis, that none, indeed, has drawn it and lived? You think me but a woman, but know that here in the shrine of Isis, aye, here in her holy House which you desecrate with revellings and with the flesh of butchered beasts, I, her Prophetess and Oracle, am the very goddess and clothed with her divinity. I pray you, therefore, think again ere you bid me to draw my veil."

For a moment he seemed to grow afraid, as did that company, for they were silent. Then rage took hold of him who was full of wine and pride.

"What?" he shouted. "Am I, the King of the world, to be defied and threatened by an old hag who calls herself a priestess, or a goddess, or both? Woman, once before I listened to your prayer and left you wrapped in that rag, but now when I come both as your king and as your god, why I claim the privilege of the god. Off with that veil or I will bid my women strip you stark."

Again the silence fell, and for a little while I looked about me. I looked at the feasters illumined by the strong flares of the essence of bitumen; I looked at the blue heaven above in which the great moon floated royally; I turned and looked at the white statue of the goddess showing faint and pure between the curtains in the darkness of the distant shrine beyond. Then I lifted my head and prayed aloud, saying,

"O Thou, that from thy moon-throne watchest all things passing on the earth, O Thou, great Spirit of the world whom men name Isis, Thou that canst spare; Thou that canst avenge; Thou that knowest both life and death; Thou that rulest hearts and destinies; Thou to whose equal sight the king is as the slave, since both kings and slaves are but dust



beneath thine immortal feet, hear me, thy priestess and thine Oracle. Thou knowest my strait and that of these thy servants over whom I rule beneath thee. Protect me and them, if thou wilt, or if thou wilt not, then take us to thyself. I ask nothing of thee; I seek not to turn the chariot wheels of Fate; judge thou of my cause who with thy judgment am content. In thine hands hang the scales of doom and the great worlds are thy weights. Who then am I that I should seek to press upon thy balances? Judge now between me, O Mother Isis, and this death-attired king who mocks thee, the Queen of Heaven, in mocking me, thy servitor on earth."

"Have done, woman!" mocked Ochus. "Cease your whimperings to a goddess sitting in the moon, for she is far away from you—and unveil. Bagoas, give me the Marriage Cup, that I may drink to this new wife of mine, who thinks herself divine."

Bagoas beckoned and a dark-faced, black-bearded man whom I knew for the king's physician came forward with a golden goblet on which were vile carvings of the loves of satyrs. This he tasted, or affected to taste, with much ceremony, and as he did so, though save I none noted it, let fall the poison into the wine. Then with humble steps, lifting the cup thrice, lowering it again thrice, doubtless to mix the venom with the wine, he came to the Presence and kneeling, presented the goblet to his master, the King of kings, the King of the world.

"Now," said the drink-besotted Ochus as he grasped the goblet, "now, Priestess, will you unveil or must I call the women?"

"It is not needful," I answered. "Yet, O most glorious monarch, yet, O conqueror of all things, first I would add one word. Even a king so great



that he dares to clothe himself in the raiment of the Lord of Death perchance may err from time to time. Thus, Mighty One, do you err when you say that Isis is far from me, for Isis is here and *I am Isis.*"

Then at a word two priestesses sprang to my side and loosed me of my veil. It fell to the ground and there I stood before them clad in all the splendid pomp of Isis, beautiful as Isis, with the terrible eyes of Isis, and holding in my hands the emblems of Isis and the sceptre with which Isis ruled the world.

They saw, and from that crowded hall there went up a sigh of wonder—or was it of fear? Ochus saw also; his eyes started, his mouth opened.

"By the holy Fire!" he muttered, "here is one worth wedding, be she goddess or woman."

"Then drink the cup, O Ochus-Osiris, and take her, be she goddess or woman," I answered, pointing at him with the Cross of Life.

He drank, he drank deep, and forgetting to offer the wine to me, loosed the goblet from his hand so that it fell upon the little altar where burned the holy Fire, extinguishing it, and thence rolled from the platform to the ground. I glanced at Bagoas and read in his eyes such a look as I had never seen upon the face of man. Oh! it was cruel, that look—cruel yet triumphant, this cold stare of the victim who had become a conqueror. All hell was in that look.

The feasters murmured at the omen of the death of the Fire, but that draught seemed to sober Ochus, who took no heed of it. The wildness left his eyes; they grew cunning as those of a merchant. Merchant-like he appraised my loveliness seen through the gauzy wrappings such as are used to deck the painted effigy of the goddess.



"I look before I take," he said. "'Twas good to win Egypt; it will be better to win you, O Divine in flesh if not in spirit. Now I understand why in the past you would not suffer me to draw your veil."

Thus he spoke slowly, savouring the words upon his tongue as his greedy eyes savoured my beauty. Then he rose to pass the small altar and advance upon me.

In that fierce moment of time I considered all. It came into my mind that Bagoas had tricked me; that his cup lacked poison, or at least that the plan had failed, and that if I was to be saved it must be by myself. Yet I paused ere I did that which would cause the death of hundreds.

"Stay!" I said to him. "Lay no finger on me lest you shall call the curse of Isis upon your head."

"Nay," he answered, "it is the blessing of Isis that I am about to call upon my lips, O most Beautiful, O Loveliness incarnate!"

He came on. He was past the marble altar. His fierce, bestial face glared into mine and he gripped me; his hot arm was about me, he dragged me to his embrace, while all the beasts of his company shouted in vile joy.

I let fall the *sistrum* that I held. The moment of mercy had gone by. That shout had sealed the doom of all those dogs and satyrs. It was the signal!

By the arts known to us instantly the command was passed on to her who waited below. Instantly this fierce-souled destroyer was at her work with lamp and torch. Never did lover run so swiftly to her lover's side as she did from pile to pile, firing the oil, firing the reeds.

Now that brute-king had me! He pressed his



hot kisses upon my breast, upon my lips. I stood still. I struggled not. I stood like the statue of the goddess. This cold calm of mine seemed to frighten him.

"Are you woman?" he asked, hesitating.

"Nay," I hissed back, "I am Isis. Woe to them who lay hands upon Isis!"

He unloosed. He stood staring at me, and as he stared I saw his face change.

"What is in your eyes?" he asked. "All the devils in Egypt are looking out of your eyes."

"Nay," I answered, "all the devils of hell look out of my eyes. Isis commands the devils of hell and unchains them, O death-clothed king."

"What do you mean? What do you mean?" he asked.

"That you will learn presently—in hell. Therefore bid farewell to the world, O Corpse of a king!"

He glowered at me. He swayed to and fro. Then suddenly down he went like one pierced through the heart with an arrow. There he lay upon his back across the altar staring up at the moon.

"Isis is in the moon!" he cried. "She threatens me from the moon. Persians, be afraid of Isis the Moon-dweller. Bagoas! Physician! Physician! Bagoas! protect me from Isis. She is wringing my heart with her hands. Witch! Witch! loose my heart from your hands."

Thus he wailed in a horrible voice and these were his last words, for having spoken them he lifted his head, glaring about him with a twisted mouth, then let it fall heavily, rolled to the platform, and was still.

Bagoas and the physician ran to him.

"The Curse of Isis has fallen upon the King of kings," cried Bagoas.



"He who bestrode the world is dead, smitten by Isis of the Egyptians!" cried the physician.

From the royal women and all that company there went up a wail of:

"Ochus is dead! Artaxerxes is dead! The King of kings is dead!"

Bagoas and the physician, helped by the wailing women of Ochus, lifted the body. They carried it from the platform, they bore it down the hall, they vanished with it into the darkness, and presently in the utter silence I heard the gates of the courts and the outer gates of the pylon clang behind them and the clashing of the bolts as they were shot by the guards of the gates.

Still for awhile the silence held, for all were like dead men with terror. Then a voice cried,

"The witch has killed the king with her kiss! Slay her. Tear her to pieces. Slay her and her company!"

The spell-bound mob began to stir; I heard swords rattling in their scabbards. They rose like waves on a quiet sea, and like a wave began to flow toward the platform on which I now stood alone. I stooped down, lifted the *sistrum* from the platform, and held it toward them.

"Be warned!" I cried. "Stay still lest the Curse of Isis fall on you also."

"Witch! Witch! Witch!" they screamed, hesitating awhile, and again swayed forward.

I waved my arm, and as though in answer to it from the grating of stone beyond the platform suddenly arose dense smoke followed by bursts of flame. I waved it a second time, and from the gratings at the end of the hall arose smoke followed by bursts of flame. They looked, they saw, they understood.



"The Curse of Isis!" they screamed. "The Curse of Isis is upon us! Fire rises from hell."

"Nay," I answered, "fire falls from Heaven sent by the outraged gods!"

Now between me and them flared a fence of flame which the boldest dared not face. They paused, one hurled a sword at me which passed above my head. Then they turned, flying for the gateways of the hall, and there were met by another fence of flame. Some of the boldest leapt through it only to find that the gates were shut and that the terror-stricken guards had fled. They rushed back, burning, yea, their silken robes and their oil-anointed hair turned them, yet living, into torches. Now they took another counsel. They dragged the tables together, piling them each on each and striving thus to climb the walls of the hall. This, perhaps, they might have done, some of them, had not every man pulled down his neighbour, so that they fell in tumbled heaps upon the stone flooring where the life was trampled out of them.

I turned and behind the veil of smoke fled from the platform, none seeing me, back behind the hangings that hid the outer sanctuary, where all the company of Isis was gathered, save only that fierce old priestess who yet with lamp and torch lit fire upon fire in the vaults beneath and, at last, doubtless, passed to Heaven on the chariot wheels of flame.

Here my servants stripped off my sacred trappings, wrapping me in dark garments and a hooded cloak. While they did so I looked back. The hall was filled with spouts of fire. The platform upon which Ochus had feasted was burning and the royal dead beneath blazed merrily. Only the stone gods by whom it was upborne still stared silent and dread-



ful through the vesture of smoke and fire, emblems of vengeance and eternal doom.

I could see no more but above the roaring flames I heard the mad screams of those trapped feasters who had come to see their king make a mock of Isis and her priestess, and these were terrible to hear. Then the floor gave way and down they went into the furnace pit beneath. Yes, they who worshipped fire were devoured of their own god.

Thus did I, Ayesha, Child-of-Wisdom, daughter of Yarab according to the flesh, work the vengeance of Heaven upon the Persians and their King of kings. By fire I wrought it, I whose path ever was and ever shall be marked by fire; I, Ayesha, who grew undying in the breath of fire and who, in the caverns of Kôr, clasped it to my breast and was wedded to its secret Soul.

