

CHAPTER XXIII

THE DOOM OF THE FIRE

WE stood in the third cave that was carpeted with white sand and alive with rosy light. Making a dark stain upon that snowy sand was a black patch of dust. I knew it again; when last I had seen it, it bore the withered shape of one long dead. The rolling many-coloured fire approached from afar; its muttering grew to a roar, its roar grew to such a thunder as shakes the mountain peaks and splits the walls of citadels. It appeared, blazing with a thousand lights; for a while it hovered, twisting like a spun top. Then it departed upon its eternal round in the unknown entrails of the earth, and the tumult sank to silence.

Kallikrates, terrified, flung himself upon his face; even the proud Amenartas fell to her knees, covering her eyes with her hands: only I stood erect and laughed, I who knew that I was betrothed to that fire and that it ill became the bride-to-be to shrink from her promised lord.

Kallikrates rose, asking,

"Where is the treasure which you seek, Prophetess? If it be hidden here, in this awful house of a living god, look on it swiftly, and let us begone. I, a mortal man, am terrified."

"As well you may be," broke in Amenartas, "since such wizardries as these have not been told of in the earth. I say it, who know something of wizardries, and like my father have stood face

to face with spirits summoned from the Underworld, giving them word for word of power."

"My treasure lies in the red heart of yonder raging flame, and presently I go to pluck it thence," I answered in a quiet voice. "Whether I shall return I do not know. Perchance I shall abide in the fire and be borne away upon its wings. Stay if you will, or if you will, while there is yet time, depart, but trouble me no more with words, who must steel my soul to its last trial."

They stared at me, both of them, and remained silent.

For a space I stood still pondering. It seemed to me that I was the plaything of two great Strengths that dragged me forward, that dragged me back. The spirit of the Fire cried,

"Come, O Divine! Come, be made perfect, and queen it in this red heart of mine. Come, drink of that full cup of mysteries which no mortal lips have drained. Come, see those things that are hidden from mortal eyes. Come, taste of joys wherewith no mortal heart has ever throbbed. Haste, haste to the fiery bridal and in the glory of my kiss learn what delight can be. Oh! doubt no more but take Faith by the hand and let her lead thee home. Doubt no more! Be brave, lay down mortality: put on the spirit and as a spirit sit enthroned beyond the touch of time and with immortal eyes, robed in eternal majesty, watch the generations pass, marching with sad feet from darkness into darkness. Behold there he stands who is appointed to thee, who was thine from the beginning, who shall be thine until the end of ends. Thy new-born loveliness shall chain him fast and he shall grow drunken in the breath of thy perfumed sighs who for ever and for ever and for ever shall

be thy very own, turning the winter of thy widowed heart to summer of perpetual joy."

Thus spake the spirit of the Flame, but to it there answered another spirit that wore the shape of Noot, yea, of Noot grown stern and terrible.

"Turn back, O Wisdom's Daughter, ere thou art wrapped in the robe of madness and repentance comes too late," it seemed to say. "Always the tempter tempts and when bribe after bribe is scorned, at last he pours his richest jewels at the feet of her whom he would win. Woe, woe to her who, charmed of their false glitter, clasps them upon brow and breast, for there they shall change to scorpions and through the living flesh gnaw to the brain and heart within. Departing, have I not set thee to watch the Fire and wilt thou steal the Fire, therewith to make thyself a god? Do so and this I swear to thee: that the godhead which thou shalt put on will be that of hell. Thy love shall be snatched away; undying, through all the earth, through all the stars, thou shalt follow after him and never find, or, if thou findest, it will be but to lose again. Dost thou dare to wrest thy destiny out of the hand of Fate and fashion it to thy desire with the instrument of thy blind and petty will? Do so, and dæmons shall possess it that from age to age shall drive thee on, torn by the furies of remorse, choked with bitter, unavailing tears, frozen by the icy blasts of sorrow; desolate, alone, unfriended, till at last thou standest before the Judgment-seat hearkening with bowed head to a doom that can never be undone. Daughter of Wisdom, art thou sunk so low that thou wilt forget thine oaths and break thy trust to rob another woman of her lover?"

Those visions passed and I grasped denial's

robes. I would not do this thing. I would live out my life upon the earth, I would die—oh! might it be soon—to pass to whatever place had been prepared for me, or to sink into the deep abysm of that rich and boundless sleep which no dreams haunt.

Aye! renouncing joy and renounced of hope, already I turned to go and climb my upward path back to the bitter world.

Then, from far, far away came the faint music of the chant of the advancing god of Fire. Low and sweet it sang at first, soft as a mother's lullaby, and lo! I dreamed of happy childhood's day. It swelled and grew and now I had entered into womanhood and strange, uncomprehended longings companioned me. It took a fiercer note and I be-thought me of the beating of the hoofs of horses as, mounted on my crested stallion, I rushed across the desert like the wind. Louder yet, and behold! once more I was in the battle at my father's side; behind me the wild tribesmen surged and shouted; in front of me my foes were beaten down to death. Ah! bright flashed my javelin, ah! free flowed my hair among the flapping pennons. "The Daughter of Yarab! Follow the daughter of Yarab!" cried the thousands of my kin, and on we went, like sun-loosed snows down mountains, on upon the marshalled host beneath. We broke them, for who could stand before the Daughter of Yarab and her kin? We trampled them, Egyptian and Syrian and Mede and the men from Chittim's Isle; down they went before that wild charge, and see! my bright spear was red.

Deeper yet and more solemn grew that mighty music. Now I was alone in the wilderness beneath the stars, and from the stars knowledge and

beauty fell upon my heart like dew. Now I was a ruler of men, and kings who would be my lovers bent at my feet and were the puppets of my hands. I cast them down and broke them; I saw Sidon go up in flames and filled my soul with vengeance. Hark! It is the footstep of the goddess, the Queen of Heaven sets her kiss upon my brow; she names me Daughter, her Appointed. Knowledge is mine, out of my lips flow prophecies, a spirit guides my feet. I, I hold my own against the Persian, when all else have fled I cast him from his throne. I give his pomp to the tongues of Fire. Oh! how they cry, those mockers of Egypt's gods, as I watch them scorch and perish.

I am lonely. Where is my love? I wend toward the grave and none are born of me. I seek my love. "There stands thy love—not far away, but at thy side. Take him, take him, take him!" Thus said the Fire.

Now its voice is the voice of trumpets that blare and echo around the hills. They call, those trumpets call: "Where is the captain of our hosts? Where is our Queen? Come forth, O Queen, crowned with wisdom, diademed with power, holding in thine hand the gift of days. No longer would we be left leaderless, we who would march to victory and hold the world in thrall."

The King of Fire is at hand. He opens the gateways of the dark. Behind him march the legions: he comes with splendour, he comes with glory, he comes to take his bride. "Unrobe, unrobe! Prepare thyself, O Bride! The King of Fire calls!"

I unloosed my garments, I unbound my hair that covered me like to a sable robe.

"Art mad?" cried the Greek, Kallikrates, wringing his hands.

"Art mad?" echoed the royal Amenartas with a slow smile as she waited to see mine end.

"Nay, I am wise," I answered back, "I who weary of tame days and common things, I who seek death or triumph."

I ran. I stood in the pathway of the Fire. It saw; it stretched out its arms to me. Lo! it wrapped me round and in my ears I heard the shoutings of the stars.

Oh! what was this? I did not burn. The blood of the gods flowed through my veins. The soul within me became as a lighted torch. The Fire possessed me, I was the Fire's and in a dread communion the Fire was mine. By that lit torch of my heart I saw many visions; veils rolled up before my eyes revealing glory after glory, glories that cannot be told. Death shrank away from before my feet; pale and ashamed he shrank away. Pain departed, weakness was done. I stood the Queen of all things human.

Lo! mirrored in that Fire as in water I saw myself, a shape of loveliness celestial. Could this form be the form of woman? Could those orbs divine be a woman's eyes?

Then a great silence and in the silence a silvery tinkling sound that I knew well—the sound of the laughter of Aphrodite!

The pillar of flame had rolled away, its thousand blinding lights had ceased to shine, and there I stood triumphant, conquering, never to be conquered. I came forth speaking with a voice of music, knowing that I had inherited another soul. What now to me was Isis or any other goddess, to me who stood victorious, the equal of them all? Oh! I saw now that Isis was but Nature and henceforth Nature was my slave. I thought no more of sin

or of repentance, I who from this day forth would fashion my own laws and be to myself a judge. That which I desired, that I would take. That which was hateful to me that would I cast away. Yea! I was Nature's very self. I felt all her springs stirring in my blood; it glowed with the heats of all her summers. I was kind with the kindness of her fruitful autumns; I was terrible with her winter wrath.

Look! There stood the man whom I desired. Somewhat coarse and poor he seemed to me; I smelt death upon him. To be my mate he must be my equal; he too must taste of the Fire; then we would talk of love. As he was, my love was not for him, nay, it would destroy him as the lightning blasts.

"Look on me, Kallikrates," I cried, "and tell me, in all your days have you seen aught so fair?"

"Fair, yes, fair!" he gasped, "but terrible in beauty. No woman, no woman! A very spirit. Oh! let me shut mine eyes. Let me flee!"

"Be still and wait," I answered, "for soon I shall show you how they may be opened. Look on me, Daughter of Pharaoh, and tell me, has that stamp of age of which you spoke to me not long ago departed from my face and form, or is it yet apparent?"

"I look," she answered, still bold, "and I see before me no child of man, but a very witch. Away from us, accursed witch! Clothe yourself, shameless one, and begone, or let us begone, leaving you to commune with your witch's fire."

I cast my robes around me and oh! they hung royally. Then once more I turned to Kallikrates, considering him. As I looked I became aware that a great change had fallen upon me. I was no

longer the Ayesha of old days. That Ayesha had been spirit-driven; her soul had aspired to the heavens; it glistened with the dews of purity. True, I had loved this man, little at the first, and more a hundred times after Noot had suffered me to look upon the Fire, since with the sight and the sound and the odours of it the great change began.

That Ayesha was one who dreamed of heavenly things; one with whom prayer was a constant habit of the mind; yes, all her thoughts were mixed with the leaven of prayer, so that the humblest deed and the most common of imaginings were by it sanctified! She knew that here was not her home, but that far away and out of sight, beyond the seas and mountains of the world, her everlasting house rose white and stately and that with her earthly toil and sufferings she built it stone by stone, filling its halls and porticoes with ivory statues of the gods, making it pure with clouds of incense that their perfected souls brooding on her soul drew from it, as at dawn the sun draws mist from rivers.

With grief and toil, with bleeding feet; buffeted by the winds of circumstance, wet with the rain of tears, washed by the waters of repentance, she climbed the stony upward path that led to the Peak of Peace. She believed in she knew not what, for always to her those gods were man-shaped symbols. Still day and night she struggled on, lit by the rays of the lamp of faith, sure that in the end the veils would be withdrawn and that she would look upon the Face Divine and hear its voice of welcome. She was obedient to the Law; she knew that time was not her own and that of every moment she must give account. Aye, she was in the way of holiness and before her shone the golden guerdons of redemption.

But now. What was Ayesha now when she had known the embrace of the Spirit of Fire, when she had dared the deed and wrung the secret from his burning heart? Aye, when on the earth she had attained to immortality, since even then a voice cried in her ears:

“Behold! thou shalt not die. Behold while the world lives, with it thou shalt live also, because thou hast drunk of the wine of Earth’s primeval Soul that cannot be spilled until its mighty fabric is dissolved into the nothingness whence it sprang!”

What was she now? She was that very Earth. She was that Soul poured into the white vase of a woman’s form; aye, she was its essence. Its lightnings and its hurricanes lay chained within her, ready to leap out when she was wrath, and who could abide before their strength? She knew all Earth’s glory as alone it swung through space, kissed of the light of the Sun its father, or dreaming in the arms of darkness. The planets were her sisters, the bright, blazing stars acknowledged her as kin. Aye; with this mother-world she symbolled she was numbered among the multitude of that hierarchy of heaven.

Nor was this all, for in her reigned and glowed every power and passion of the Earth. Thenceforth all things were at her command, but, like that Earth, *she was alone and could no more speak with Heaven!*

In a flash, in a twinkling, all this mighty truth came home to me, and with it other truths. I did not doubt, I did not dream, I knew, I knew, I *knew!*

There stood the man and I would take him. He was wed according to Nature’s law, and now I owned no other. But what of that? The wine that I desired I would drink. I would mate me as

the wild things mated, by strength and capture, since I was very strong and who could stand against my might? I, the reborn Ayesha, had commanded. It should be done.

"Kallikrates," I said in my new voice of honeyed sweetness, "behold your spouse, one of whom you need not be ashamed. Make ready, Kallikrates. Go stand in the path of the Fire when it returns, and then let us hence to reign eternally."

"What, Witch," cried Amenartas, "would you rob me of my lord? It shall not be. If you are mighty, so am I, although I remain a woman. Kallikrates, look on me, your wife, she who has borne your child, that lost child who binds us yet with bonds that may not be broken. Have done with this fair dæmon ere she enchant you. Away! Away from this haunted, mocking hell."

"I come. Surely I come," said Kallikrates, glancing at me fearfully. "I am afraid of her, and of that fire I will have none. Surely it is Set himself wrapped about with flames."

"Nay, you go not, Kallikrates. Let Amenartas go if she desires. Here you abide with me until all is accomplished. I command, and when I command, you must obey."

He wheeled about; he flung himself into the arms of Amenartas. They closed around him and held him fast. Then I threw out my will. Saying nothing I laid my strength upon him, so that he was dragged from out those arms and with slow steps drew near to me, as the bird draws near to the snake that charms it with its baleful eyes. Amenartas leapt between us and from her lips flowed words in torrents.

All she said I do not know; it is forgot; but very

sore she pleaded and very bitterly she wept. Yet my heart, new steeled in yonder fire, felt no pity for her. An hour past I should have bade him go his way and to look upon my face no more, but now it was otherwise. I was cruel, cruel as Death, King of the world. The wild beast does not spare its rival, neither would I.

Still I drew him with my strength; still Amenartas clung and pleaded, till at last madness took hold of that tormented man. He raved, he cursed us both, he cursed himself who had left the quiet halls of Isis, who had spurned the love divine to seek the arms of woman. He prayed to Isis to be pitiful, to forgive, to receive his soul and shrive it.

Then suddenly from his belt he snatched his short Grecian sword and stabbed at his own heart.

Swift as a snake that strikes, or a falcon stooping at its prey, I sprang. I seized his arm, I dragged it back, and such might was there in my grasp, aye, the might of Hercules himself, that the sword flew far, and the strong man who held it reeled round and round and fell.

We stood aghast, thinking that he was sped. Yet he rose, the red blood running from his breast, and in a quiet voice, a little laugh upon his lips, said to Amenartas, not to me,

"Fear nothing, Wife. Alas! it is but a cut—skin deep, no more."

"Then let the fire heal it, O Kallikrates. Make ready to enter the fire that must soon retravel its circling path," I answered.

"Nay, nay, Husband," cried Amenartas. "By that blood of yours, the blood that flowed in our dead son and flows in that of the child to be, I adjure you turn from this witch and temptress and break her enchanted bonds."

"By our dead son," he repeated after her in a strange and heavy voice. "With what holier words could you conjure, O my wife? With that name of power I am new-armoured. Daughter of Wisdom, I reject your proffered gifts, nor will I enter your charmed fire though it should give to me eternal strength and gloriousness, and with these your shining beauty and your love. Child of the gods, farewell! I go to seek peace and pardon if it may be found. Yes, pardon for you and me, and for Amenartas, the mother of my child. Daughter of Wisdom, fare you well for ever!"

I heard, and it seemed to me that I stood alone in the midst of a great silence while those cruel words, divorcing me from hope, fell one by one upon me like ice-drops from the sky, cutting to brain and heart and freezing me to stone. Then of a sudden rage possessed me, such rage as Nature knows in her fiercest moods, and I spoke as it gave me words, saying.

"I call down death upon thee, Kallikrates the Greek. Death be thy portion and the grave thy home. Because thou hast rejected me, because thou hast offered me insult to my face, it is my will that thou mayest die; it is my desire that thy name be blotted out from the roll of Life. Die, then, Kallikrates, that thine eyes may torment me no more and that I may learn to mock thy memory."

Thus I spoke those words of doom in my madness, though what conceived them in my heart I do not know. There they sprang up suddenly at the touch of the wand of Evil, such evil as until now I had never dreamed. Lo! in a moment they fulfilled themselves. There before my eyes the man *died*, smitten of the dominion over Death that was the Fire's fatal gift to me, as now, all unpre-

pared, instantly I learned. Yes, the first service that I made of my dread majesty was to hurl that awful doom at the heart of the man I loved.

He died! Kallikrates died there before our eyes. Yet being dead, still he stood upon his feet and spoke, though even then I knew that it was not he who spoke, but some spirit possessing his perished flesh. His lips did not move, his eyes were glassed, his voice was not the voice of Kallikrates, nay, nor the voice of mortal man. Yet he spoke, or seemed to speak, and these were the words he said,

"Woman, known on earth as Ayesha, daughter of Yarab, but in the Under-world by many another name, hearken to thy fate. Here, where thou hast betrayed thy trust, here where thou didst slay the man of thy desire, here through long ages shalt thou abide undying, until in the fulness of time he returns to thee, O Ayesha, in lonely bitterness shalt thou abide; tears shall be thy drink and remorse thy bread. The power that thou didst crave shall be but a blunted, unused sword within thine hand. Thy kingdom shall be a desolation, thy subjects barbarians, and from century to century thy companions shall be the dead."

The voice ceased and I answered it, asking, "And when the returning tide of Time bears this man back to me, what then, O Spirit? Is all hope passed from me, O Spirit?"

No answer came, but that which had been Kallikrates sank in a huddled heap upon the sand.