

CHAPTER V

THE SUMMONS

NONE knew my fault. Yet I knew, and what is known to one soul is known to all souls, since one is all and all are one. Moreover, it was known to That which begets souls, That from which they come and to which they return again, again to come, as Plato, the great philosopher, who died before my day, has taught us in his writings. Also it was known to that accursed priest who was the cause and partner of my crime. I was overcome; I was eaten up with shame, I who thought myself purer than the mountain snows, as indeed I was and, in the flesh, to this hour have remained.

Soon I could no longer bear my torment. To Noot I went, Noot the high-priest, my counsellor and master, and in a secret place kneeling on my knees, there I told him all.

He hearkened with a little smile upon his withered face, then answered,

“Daughter, in your honesty you do but reveal that which I knew—how I knew it matters not. And now take comfort, since the blame is not altogether yours, or even that of this new-made priest, whose foot was caught in the same snare. You worship Isis, as I do, but what is Isis whom we portray on earth as a woman glorious above all women? Is she not Nature’s self, the universal Mother, the Supreme in whom all gods and god-

desses have a part? She wars on Aphrodite, it is true, yet does not that mean that in verity she wars upon herself? And are we not as Isis is, not one but many poured into a single mould, for do we not all war upon ourselves? Believe me, Daughter, the human heart is a great battleground where the higher and the lower parts of us fight with spiritual spears and arrows, till one side or the other wins victory and hoists the banner of good or evil, of Isis or of Set. Only out of struggle comes perfectness; that which has never struggled is a dead creature from whom little may be hoped. The ore must be melted in the fire and lo! the most of it is dross, refuse to be thrown away. Had it never known the fire, there could be no pure gold to adorn the brows of Heaven, nor even copper and iron to shape the swords of men. Rejoice, then, that you have felt the hurt of fire."

"Master," I answered, "Lord of Wisdom to whom alone Ayesha bows the knee, your words are true and comfortable, yet bethink you, and if it is permitted, interpret me this riddle. I dreamed a dream of the time before my earthly days—you know it well for I have told it to you. I dreamed of a place in Heaven and of two goddesses matched against each other and of a command that was laid upon me to bring woe upon those who had deserted the one and turned to the other. Now if they were parts of a single whole, why should this command be laid upon me?"

"Daughter, in your dream you were ordained to be a Sword of Vengeance, not because the Egyptians turned from one part of the holy Unity to another part of that Unity, but because they have become corrupt and faithless, worshipping no gods save themselves and following after that which is low,

not that which is high. Such is my answer, yet of the truth or the falsehood of that dream I say nothing. Perchance it was but a dream."

"Perchance, Master. Yet in that dream, true or false, I saw a face, and lo! a few nights gone I, draped as Isis in the shrine, I saw that face again and knew it; knew also that with it my fate is intertwined. What of this?"

"Daughter, who are we that we should read the mysteries of Fate, we who know not whence we come nor whither we go, nor what we have been, nor why we are? It may be that you have some mission toward the spirit that is clothed in the flesh of yonder man. It may be that you are destined to uplift that spirit, and in so doing yourself to be trodden down. If so, I say that in the end you shall rise again and bear him upward with you."

He paused, and I knelt silent, pondering the prophecy, for such I knew it well to be. Then again he spoke,

"You heard a laughter in the shrine, yet there was no laughter save that of the evil in your own heart, mocking and triumphant. Such laughter mayhap you will often hear, but while you can hear it and repent, be not dismayed. When the ears of the soul grow deaf then utter loss is near; while they are open, hope remains. Those who still strive can never wholly fall. Fate rules us every one, yet within the circle of that Fate power is given to us to work out our redemption. I have finished. Ask me no more."

"What punishment, Master?" I asked.

"Daughter, this. For a while look no more upon that man. I say for a while, since with you I hold that his destiny and yours are intertwined. I have a command for you: that presently you accom-

pany me hence to lands beyond the seas. Now, go rest, and in rest find forgetfulness."

So I went, wondering yet comforted, though I knew well that Noot the Holy had not told me all, no, nor yet the half of what he knew. For often those to whom the gods give vision are forbid to speak it, lest, as in the old Hebrew parable, men should eat of the tree of knowledge and grow like to them. Or perchance they cannot speak it, since it comes to them in a tongue which may not be rendered in the words that the passer-by would understand. So indeed it is with me to-day.

Thus it came about that soon I and my master, Noot, left Philæ and as before travelled the Nile disguised. Never since then have my eyes looked upon that island and its holy fane which Holly, who has visited it, tells me is now a ruin with stark, Hathor-headed columns standing here and there amongst the tumbled stones. He says, moreover, that his people who rule the land to-day purpose to sink it beneath the Nile that the lands below may be enriched and multiplied. Herein I see an allegory; the temples of Isis are drowned and the learning they held is lost in order that more food may grow to feed the common and the ignorant. Yet to what end, seeing that if there is more food, more men will come to eat it, all of them common and ignorant, while Isis and her wisdom are swallowed in the slime. Thus has it ever been in Egypt, and doubtless elsewhere, for such is Nature's law. Food breeds multitudes and where carrion is, there are flies, while in the deserts both are lacking. Yet I think that the deserts and the few that wander on them beneath the sun and stars are nearer far to God.

Once more disguised as merchants, I and Noot, my master, took ship and visited far lands to see their state and gather wisdom. We visited Rome, then breaking her shackles and rising to her greatness. They were a great people, those Romans that Noot out of his foresight told me would one day rule the world. Or perhaps it was I who told Noot, judging them by their qualities; I am not sure. At least I loved them not, because of their rude natures, their lack of arts and their love of power and gain. Therefore when I had studied their language and their politics I passed on.

We came to Greece and tarried there awhile, studying philosophies and other things. The Greeks I did love, because they were beautiful and called forth beauty from all they touched. Also they were brave who defied the Persian might and had they but stood together, might have queened it on the earth. But they would not, for ever State tore out the throat of State, so that in the end all were undone and overwhelmed by a multitude of commoner folk who held Greece before them, for such was their destiny. Moreover, they worshipped gods made like themselves, with all the faults of men grown greater and more vile, and told fables concerning them fit to please children, which I thought strange in a people that could produce such philosophers and poets. Yet those gods had come down to them from their fathers, and it is hard to shake off the yoke of gods until some greater god appears and breaks it with the hammer of war.

Here in Greece it was that I posed to its most famous sculptor for a statue of Aphrodite, or rather it was as a mould of perfect Womanhood that I posed, desiring that this sculptor, who pleased me, should have one flawless model to copy in his future

work, for which he blessed me, naming that statue "Beauty's Self." Yet when I visited him a while afterward I found that he had changed this name to Aphrodite.

I was angered who did not desire that my loveliness should be accredited to mine enemy and that of Isis whom I served, and asked him why this had been done.

He answered, humbly enough, because of a dream in which the Paphian had appeared to him and threatened him with blindness unless he gave her own name to so divine a face and form. Moreover, being in the thrall of superstition he prayed me, even with tears, that thus it might remain, since otherwise he must break that statue and as he thought, be blinded as well. So out of pity I let him have his way and even gave him my hand to kiss in token of forgiveness.

Thus it comes about that Aphrodite unashamed throughout the ages has taken the tribute of a million eyes, clothed in a borrowed loveliness. So be it, since what she has stolen is but a fraction of the truth. No sculptor, however great, can mould the perfect out of frozen stone.

From Greece, still disguised as a merchant and his daughter, we wandered to Jerusalem, feigning to trade in pearls and gems, since there I would study the religion of the Jews whereof I had heard so much. The "City of Peace" it was called among the Egyptians of old times, or so they interpreted its name, but never found I one in which there was less of peace. Fierce-faced were those Jews and quarrelsome; revengeful too and ever waging war, public and private, upon one another. A peculiar people, as they name themselves, full of hate, particularly of the stranger within their gates. To

trade with them was scarcely possible, because he who sold them wares was always left the loser, though for this I who sought their philosophy, not their gold, cared nothing.

So I turned myself to the study of their faith, and found that God, as they interpreted Him, was well-nigh as fierce as were his worshippers. Yet this I will say, that He was one God, not many, and a true God also, since otherwise how could his prophets have written so gloriously concerning Him? Moreover, it was their belief that He would come to earth and lead them to the conquest of the world. This, Holly tells me, has chanced though not in the shape they hoped, since the King who came would have led them but to the conquest of the evil that is in the hearts of men and to the knowledge of a life to be, in which they had small faith. Therefore they persecuted and slew Him as a malefactor after their cruel fashion, and what is now accepted by millions, so says Holly, they still reject.

I preached to them, for my heart burned in me at the sight of their sacrifices. Yes, I preached to them against the shedding of blood, telling them of a higher philosophy of gentleness and mercy. For a while they listened, then took up stones and stoned me, so that had I and Noot not been protected by Heaven, we should have been slain. After this affront I turned my back upon Jerusalem and its hook-nosed, fierce-eyed people, and went to Cyprus where I debated with the lewd priests of Aphrodite at Paphos. Thence I got me back to Egypt whence I had been absent many years.

At Naukratis priests of Isis who knew of our coming, how I cannot tell, perchance Noot had told them by messenger, or in a dream as he could do, met us and conducted us up the Nile to the temple

of Isis at Memphis. Here we were received in state in the great hall of the temple and lo! at the head of those who welcomed us was the Greek Kallikrates, now by his holiness and zeal risen high in the service of the goddess.

When I saw him, beauteous as of old, my heart stood still and the blood rushed to my brow.

Yet I gave no sign, treating him as a stranger on whom my eyes had never fallen until that hour. He for his part stared at me with a puzzled air, then shook his head as one does who sees a face that he believes he has met in dream and yet is doubtful. For be it remembered, this man had looked on me but once, when robed as Isis I received him into the company of her priests at Philæ, and then but for a moment in the light of the moon. Perchance he still thought that it was the goddess herself whom he saw thus and not a mortal. At the least he did not know that I, the beauteous prophetess who came to Memphis after wandering through the world, was the same as she who had sat upon the throne of Isis at Philæ and whom by chance he had kissed upon the lips. Mayhap even he did not remember the kiss, or if he remembered, set it down as part of the ceremonial. Thus, if I knew him but too well, to him I was a stranger.

I bethought me of flight, knowing in my heart that to me this man was as the fabled sword that hung above the head of Damocles, though what harm I had to fear from him, I did not know.

Again I sought the counsel of Noot who smiled and answered,

“Have I not told you, Daughter, that perils must be faced since those from which we flee will be swift to overtake us? If Destiny has brought you and this man together, be certain that it is for its

own purposes. Surely you have learned your lesson and steeled your soul against all fleshly vanities."

"Yes, my Father," I answered proudly, "I have learned my lesson and steeled my soul. Moreover, your thought is my thought, nor will I turn my back on any man. Here I bide, defying woman's weakness and all the wiles of evil gods."

"Well spoken," answered Noot, and blessed me in the ancient words. Yet as he did so I noted that he sighed and shook his head.

For many a moon, I know not how many who, having all time at my command, seem to have lost its petty count, I remained there in the temple at Memphis of which soon I became the prophetess and the head of the priestesses. Ere long the fame of my divinations spread far and wide, so that from all the land those who sought wisdom or knowledge of the future would come to consult me, bringing great gifts to the goddess, though not one gem or piece of gold did Noot or I keep for ourselves, who indeed had no need of such common dross.

So I sat in a carven chair in the sanctuary, my diviner's bowl at my side, and uttered dark sayings like to those of the famous oracles of the Greeks at Delphi, many of which fulfilled themselves. For in truth, I think that there was a spirit in me—whether it came from the Heavens or elsewhere I do not know—which enabled me to read much that was passing upon the earth and even sometimes that which had not yet happened upon the earth. So the renown of the Lady Isis spread till I became a power in the land. Moreover, thus I learned many things, for those who consult an oracle, like those who seek the help of a physician, lay bare their souls, keeping no secret back.

Now at this time Egypt and all the countries round seethed with war like a pot boiling on the flames. For years Egypt had beaten off the attacks of the Persians, but now the Pharaoh Nectanebes, the second of that name who then sat upon the throne, the last native king who reigned upon the Nile, was threatened by Artaxerxes, that one of this accursed race who was named Ochus. This Persian Ochus had gathered a mighty force to subdue Egypt, hundreds of thousands of men, tens of thousands of horsemen, hundreds of triremes and of transport ships.

The last act of the tragedy had begun of which the end was to be the crushing of Egypt who never more should know a Pharaoh of her own blood and choosing. Of all these things I learned through those who came to consult the oracle of Isis, and much did I talk of them with Noot.

Now of myself during these long years of quiet and preparation for great events, I will say that ever my spirit grew in purity and strength. I put the things of earth behind me, I grew nearer to the Divine, and in the night time I communed with my soul which seemed to have become a part of that which is above the world. The Greck, Kallikrates, I saw continually, but no word passed between us save such as had to do with matters of our faith and of the worship of Isis in whose service he now stood high. Never did we interchange a touch or a look of love. He was apart from me and I from him. And yet always in my heart I feared this man, this beautiful man, the warrior who had become a priest, for some prescience told me that he would bring disaster on my head, or I should bring it upon his, I knew not which.

So there we sat in the sanctuary, Noot the wise

and aged, who yet never seemed to change, Kallikrates the priest, and I, and alone or together gave counsel to kings and captains, or uttered oracles. Clear seemed our sky and free from trouble, yet on the far horizon in my spirit I discerned the tempest clouds arising, the terrible clouds in which the lightnings played like the swords of Destiny that in a day to come were doomed to overwhelm and pierce us through.

Nectanebes the second, the Pharaoh, came to his palace at Memphis to gather troops from Upper Egypt and made great offerings to the gods, seeking their favour in the coming war. Now I saw him for the first time, a gray-haired, fat, heavy-jowled man, bald-headed, large-nosed, with great eyes like to those of an ox. Such was Nectanebes, the magician, the consorter with familiar spirits, named the Destroyer, a title which the gods who hated him must have given him in irony since himself he was doomed to be destroyed. But one good thing can I say of this Nectanebes, that he was a lover of the arts and raised glorious buildings to the gods. Learning that I, the high-priestess, had dwelt at Philæ, he came to consult me as to the beautiful temple with the Hathor-headed columns which he built there and through my counsel it was made perfect, for I drew its plans, or at least those of its adornments. Holly tells me that even as a ruin, although so small, there is no lovelier building in all Egypt.

Now this Pharaoh thought me a Greek and did not know that I was Arab and the daughter of him of Ozal in Yamen, whom his father, the first Nectanebes, had brought to his death because once long ago I had been refused as a wife to himself or to this son of his who now had succeeded him.

Of these things doubtless he remembered little or nothing, since that was one of the smallest of Egypt's wars. But I, I remembered and swore that in payment for my father's blood I would bring his accursed House to ruin. Always also I received him veiled since I did not desire that he should look upon my beauty and inquire concerning my history; therefore, as a prophetess had a right to do, I received the Pharaoh veiled.

Often he came to visit me because he had learned that I was a mistress of Magic and he who practised magic much hoped that I would teach him secrets he did not know, and show him how to lay spells upon his enemies. This indeed I did, but the secrets that I taught him were evil and the spells were spears that when he threw them would fall back upon his head.

So the scene was set, and at length came the summons to begin the play with the watching world for audience.

A writing sealed with Pharaoh's seal was brought to the temple of Isis, commanding Noot the high-priest, and me, Ayesha, who now was named *Oracle-of-Isis*, and the Greek Kallikrates, Chief of the Ceremonies, whose office it was to assist me in my divinations, to attend the court of Pharaoh and there declare to him the future of the war as it should be revealed to us by the great goddess whom we served. At first we refused to go, whereon there came another message which said that if we continued to refuse, we should be brought. The Pharaoh wished to offer no affront to Isis, the messenger declared, but the matter was urgent, as great things hung upon the revelations which we alone could make, and some of the kings and generals who were gathered in the temple as allies of

Nectanebes, being the worshippers of other gods, could not set foot in the holy shrine of Isis.

Then, there being no help for it, we answered that we would come that very night at the rising of the moon.

Hastily consulting together we planned the words of an oracle, double-edged words that yet prophesied good to Nectanebes and encouraged him to war; for thus we believed we should most quickly bring about his downfall.

Yet as those words were never spoken I will not write them down.

