

CHAPTER VIII

THE KING OF SIDON

NEXT morning the sun came up in a sky of perfect blue and the *Hapi*, driven forward by the oars, since her mast was gone, passed northward over a quiet sea. Not a league away upon our right, gleaming like gold, were the roofs of the glorious city of Tyre, set like a queen upon her island throne, Tyre that as yet did not dream of evil days when her marble palaces should melt in flame and her merchant princes and citizens lie butchered by the thousand in her streets; Tyre the wanton, the beautiful, the wealthy, who sucked riches from all the lands.

Seeing our shattered state, a boat manned by red-capped seamen came out from the Egyptian harbour to learn if we needed help. But Philo shouted back to its officer that, save for the loss of a mast and some men, we had taken no harm in the gale and hoped ere night to be safe in Sidon.

So the boat returned and we rowed on.

By midday we caught sight of the towers of Sidon and within three more hours, the sea being calm, had dropped anchor in the southern harbour.

Now after we left Tyre Tenes the King came to visit me in my cabin. At the sight of him my gorge rose for I remembered that this dog of a Sidonian had consented to the demand of the sailors that I should be hurled into the deep as a sacrifice to his

gods. Yet I restrained my soul and received him smiling and unveiled.

"Hail, King Tenes," I said, "Isis has been very merciful to you in answer to my prayer; for know that never again did I think to look upon you living."

"You are great, Lady," he answered, staring at me with frightened yet devouring eyes. "I think that you are as great as that Isis whom you serve, if indeed you are not that Isis come to earth, as they name you in Egypt. Isis I know not who worship Ashtoreth, she who is also styled Tanith and Baaltis, and like your Isis, is an acknowledged Queen of Heaven, but you I know, and your power, for did you not cause the terrible tempest to cease last night and save us all from death upon the rocks of Carmel?"

"Aye, I did this, Tenes, having strength given to me, whence it matters not. It is strange to think, is it not?"—here I bent forward and stared him in the eyes—"that on board this ship there are men so cowardly and so evil that they took counsel to cast me to the deep as a sacrifice to their gods, and that had they done so, though me, had they known it, they could not harm, they themselves, every one of them, would have been that sacrifice."

Now he writhed and turned colour beneath my glance, but answered,

"Is it so, Lady? Name me those men and they shall be slain."

"Aye, King Tenes, without doubt they shall be slain, every one of them, since Isis does not forget a threat of murder against her priestess. Yet I name them not. Where is the need when already those names are written on the tablets of Heaven? Let them be till Fate finds them, since I would not

have you in your rage stain your hands with their vile blood. But what would you with me, King?"

"You know well," he answered thickly. "I worship you. I am mad with love of you. When I saw you standing by the broken mast and making prayer, even then upon the edge of doom, my heart melted for you. I say that there is a raging fire in my breast that only you can quench," and he made as though he would fall upon his knees before me.

I motioned to him to remain seated, and answered, "I remember, King, that you spoke in this same fashion before the storm and that, half in jest, I wrote certain terms upon which I would become your queen, namely, when you could give me rule over all the earth. Wisely, perhaps, to these terms you would not set your seal; indeed you asked me why you should not take me to be your toy, and to that question an answer came to you last night when the ship wallowed water-logged and on her lee you saw the billows spouting on the rocks of Carmel. Also the goddess has told me more of what would chance to you should you dare to lift a hand against her priestess. I tell you that it is horrible, so horrible that I spare you, since if you heard it, you would tremble. What need to talk of such a crime when such a judgment would follow hard upon its heels? So have done, Tenes, and learn that it is my pleasure to return to Egypt in this ship."

"Nay, nay!" he cried, "I cannot part with you; sooner would I lose my crown. I tell you that if I lost sight of you and hope of you, I should go mad——"

"Which perchance you may do yet, Tenes," I replied laughing, "if indeed you are not already mad after the fashion of tyrants who for the first time are robbed of that which they desire. You

have my commands, so have done. I would speak with Philo the captain as to when he can be ready to sail for Nile."

"Hearken, Lady, hearken!" he said thickly. "I have the writing here. I will sign it in your presence if you swear to abide by it."

"Is it so? Well, Tenes, I do not change my word. When you can crown me Queen of Phœnicia, Egypt, Persia, and the rest, as I can show you how to do, then I will take you for husband and reign as your sole wife. But until then never shall you dare so much as to touch me. Now I am weary, who last night slept so ill. Do you wish to seal the writing, for if so it shall be done before a witness whose life and welfare henceforth shall be as sacred to you as my own."

"Aye, aye, I will seal, I will seal," he said.

Then I clapped my hands and the slave who waited without appeared. I bade him summon Philo, the captain of the ship, and to bring wax. Presently Philo came and I told him what was needed of him. More, demanding the papyrus from Tenes, I read it to both of them, Philo listening with a stony stare of amazement. Then the wax was spread upon the papyrus and Tenes sealed it with his seal, which was a cylinder of lapis lazuli having images of gods upon it after the old Babylonian fashion. Also, beneath my own, he wrote his name in Phœnician letters which I could not read. Then Philo as witness wrote his, for being half a Greek, he knew this art, and sealed it with his seal, a scarab cut in cornelian by no mean artist, doubtless a Grecian, which scarab, he said, he had taken many years before from the finger of one whom he killed in battle. When I looked at what it left upon the wax, I laughed, for behold the

device was that of a Diana, or perchance a nymph, shooting with an arrow a brute-faced faun that had surprised her at the bath. To my mind the face of that faun or satyr was very like to the face of Tenes, and Philo thought it also for I saw him glance from one to the other, and heard him mutter, "An omen! An omen!" beneath his breath in the Egyptian tongue which Tenes did not understand.

When the roll was signed Tenes would have taken it, but I answered,

"Nay, on that day when its conditions are fulfilled it shall be yours. But till then it is mine."

Still I promised to give him a copy of the writing, and with this he was, or feigned to be, content.

When Philo had gone Tenes asked me how he was to become ruler of the world and thus to win me.

I answered that I would tell him later in Sidon after I had thought and prayed. But one thing he must swear, namely, to listen to no counsels save my own, since otherwise he might lose me and with me all. He did so by his gods, being at that time so bemused that he would have sworn anything if thereby he might keep near to me. Moreover, he told me that it was his purpose to set me in a palace near his own, or perchance in a part of his own, that there he might visit me daily and learn my counsels.

I bowed my head and said, the more often the better, so long as he came for counsel and no more. Then I dismissed him and he went like any slave.

When he had gone once more I summoned Philo and, "under the wings of the goddess," that is, under an oath of secrecy to break which is death, I told him, my brother-in-Isis, the meaning of this play, namely that I would be avenged upon Tenes who had affronted me and the goddess, who also,

in his cowardice, had proposed to sacrifice me in the deep, an offering to his false divinities. Moreover, I gave him that copy of the writing which I had made and, his charter being fulfilled, bade him get back to Egypt as soon as might be and deliver it to Noot, the high-priest of Isis, and with it all this story.

There at Memphis I bade him bide, having a great ship, this one or another, ready, manned with brave men, all of them followers of Isis, with whom Noot would furnish him, also with the moneys needful to hire or buy that ship. There he was to wait till my word came. How it would come I did not know as yet. Perchance this would be by messenger, or perchance I should talk with the spirit of Noot, by means at the command of those initiated in the highest mysteries of the goddess. At least when my word came he must sail at once and come to me at Sidon.

These things he swore to do. Moreover, I wrote a letter which afterward I gave to him to deliver to Noot.

We cast anchor in the harbour, hoisting the royal standard of Tenes as best we could on a tall pole at the prow. At once gilded barges, on board of which were generals and priests, put off from the quay, and watching from my cabin, I saw Tenes talk earnestly with these notables who from time to time glanced toward where I was hidden. Then a messenger came to pray me to be pleased to abide on board the ship till preparation had been made to receive me, a matter to which the king departed to attend. So I stayed there and spoke with Philo about many things, learning from him much concerning the Sidonians, their wealth and their strength in war.

Two hours later a barge arrived, the royal barge, I think, for it was glorious with silks and gold and the rowers wore blazoned uniforms. On board this barge was Tenes himself and with him, among others, priests who wore tall caps, also some priestesses. The king came and bowing, led me to a carpeted ladder by which I descended into the barge. As I went down its steps I said with a laugh,

"If some had won their way last night, O King, I should have left this ship in a very different fashion. Well, I forgive them, poor fools and cowards, but whether the goddess whom I serve will forgive them is another matter"—words at which I saw him wince.

Before I went also I stepped aside and again spoke to Philo who stood near the head of the ladder, cap in hand. That speech was short yet sufficient, being of but two words,

"Remember everything."

"To the death! Child of Wisdom," he answered.

"What says the mariner?" asked Tenes suspiciously.

"Naught, O King. That is, he only prays me to intercede with the goddess lest the fate of those who would have harmed me on this ship should overtake him also who is its captain."

Again Tenes winced and again I smiled.

We were rowed ashore, and there upon the quay waited a chariot drawn by milk-white horses in which chariot I was seated, splendidly apparelled men leading the horses. In front of me went the king in another chariot and behind followed an escort of guards.

Thus we proceeded through the glorious streets of Sidon and being moved thereto, I lifted my veil and stood up in the chariot as though I would see

these better. Already the fame of my coming had spread abroad, so that those streets and the flat roofs of the houses were crowded with thousands of the people. These, when they saw my beauty, gasped with wonder and cried in their own tongue, "No woman! No woman! A goddess indeed!"

Yet I thought that I heard others answer,

"Aye, a false goddess sent to Sidon to be her ruin."

True words indeed, though, as I think, inspired by hate and jealousy rather than from on high.

We came to a great and noble square, the Holy Place it was called, round which stood statues of those whom the Sidonians worshipped, Baal, Ash-toreth, and the rest of their dæmons. Moreover, with its back to a temple stood a huge and hideous god of brass, who in front of him, upon great hands which seemed to be discoloured with fire, held a curved tray whereof the inner edge rested on an opening in the belly of the figure. I asked of one who walked by the chariot what was the name of this god. He answered,

"Dagon whom some call Moloch, to whom the firstborn are sacrificed by fire. See, the priests are storing the hollow place beneath with wood. Soon, doubtless, there will be a great offering."

Thenceforward I hated this people, for what could one born in Arabia and a servant of Isis, the holy and gentle, think of a race that offered sacrifice of those born of them to a dæmon? Yes, I looked on their faces, keen, handsome, and cruel, and hated them, one and all.

We came to the door of the palace where slaves ran forward, assisting me from the chariot. By it stood Tenes surrounded with glittering nobles and white-robed priests who stared at me doubtfully.

"Be pleased to enter my house, Lady, fearing nothing, for there you shall be well lodged and given of the best that Sidon has to offer," said Tenes.

"I thank you," I answered, bowing and letting fall my veil, "and I doubt it not, for what less than her best could Sidon give to the Daughter of Isis, the Queen of Heaven?"

Yes, thus I answered proudly, I who played a great game and staked all upon a throw.

"Here we have another Queen of Heaven and she is not named Isis," I heard one of the dark-browed priests mutter to a companion, thinking that I did not understand his words.

They led me into a glorious dwelling wherein were chambers more splendid than any that I had seen in my journeys through the Eastern world. Gold and gems were everywhere and on the walls hung priceless trappings dyed with the Tyrian purple of that costly sort to use which is the prerogative of kings. The very carpets on the floors shone like silk and were woven to things of beauty, while the lamps seemed to be hollowed from great gems.

"Who lodges in this place?" I asked of a slave when I was alone.

"Who but the Queen Beltis, divine one," answered the slave, bowing low before me.

"Where then is the Queen Beltis? I see her not."

"Nay, divine one, she visits her father at Jerusalem, whence she should return shortly. Indeed, the King has issued orders that other chambers should be prepared for her against her coming."

"Is it so?" I replied indifferently, but within my heart I wondered what this queen would say when she came to find her palace inhabited by a stranger and a rival.

Then to the sound of sweet music I ate from

services of gold and drank out of jewelled cups, and afterward, being weary, who had rested little on that ship and was tempest-tossed, laid me down to sleep in a soft and scented bed guarded by women and by eunuchs.

"Easy enough," thought I to myself, "would it be for these to murder me, one unfriended and alone in a strange land," and because of this for a little felt afraid who at that time was but as other mortals are. On the ship I had feared nothing, for there was Philo, a brother of my faith, and with him some others who could be trusted. But here I was but as a lamb ringed round with wolves. Moreover, besides the wolves there was a lion, the king-brute Tenes, who sought to snare me, and whom I knew for a liar, not to be trusted whatever he might swear.

Yes, for a little while, perhaps for the first time in my life, and certainly for the last, that is, where my body was at stake, I felt somewhat afraid, so much so that I went to a window-place to watch the rising of the moon and to make my prayer to Isis of whom it was the symbol, that she would be pleased to protect me in this city whither by her will I had wandered.

This window looked out upon that flame-lit square which was called the Holy Place. There I noted that thousands of those of Sidon were gathered, some of them staring up at the palace to which it was known I had been taken, pointing and talking. The most of them, however, wandered round the great brazen statue, that hideous, devil-faced thing whereof I have written, and when they could, caught one of the priests by the arm and put questions to him.

Among these, I noticed, were many women, some

of whom from their mien seemed to be noble, whose faces were strange to see. Defiant they were, yet in a way proud, as might be the faces of those about to do some great deed. Moreover, many of these women led or carried children, which little ones they showed to the priests who smiled horribly and nodded approval, patting the children on the arm and even kissing them.

One lady, after her son had received such a kiss, wailed aloud and, clasping him to her breast, turned and fled away, whereon the priest cursed her and the other women shouted "Shame!" then strove to cover up the misery that peeped out of their eyes by singing some fierce song in honour of their gods.

Studying this scene, presently the meaning of it came home to me. Those children were doomed to be sacrificed to the brazen Dagon or Moloch whereof I remembered having heard in Jerusalem as a devil to whom the firstborn were passed through the fire. Yes, and these the mothers had brought them there that they might look upon the god and grow accustomed to the sight of him.

Oh! it was horrible, and my heart chilled at the thought of such iniquity. What reward from Heaven, I marvelled, for a people who practised such a faith?

As I marvelled an answer seemed to come to me. The sun had sunk but there were heavy clouds in the sky above upon which struck its departing rays. Thence they were reflected on to the city and chiefly upon this Holy Place, as it was called, and the brazen image that sat there before the temple. Yes, from those clouds came red light that filled the air and the city beneath and the Holy Place, as it were with a mist of blood. It was as though

everything were dyed with blood, and in the midst, ringed round with torches, glowed Moloch, a god of blood!

Then I knew that Sidon was doomed to be drowned in blood; that such was the decree of Heaven and that I, Ayesha, was the instrument appointed to loose this spear of death upon her beautiful, sinful breast. I shivered at the thought, I who love not cruelty or to spend the lives of men, though it was true that I would kill Tenes. Yet what was I but the lightning in the hands of Fate, and can the lightning choose where it will strike? Must it not fall whither it is drawn? To this end had I been sent to earth, namely that I might bring woe upon false Egypt and the peoples who clung to her.

Such was the burden of that dream by which my sleep was haunted, such too the command of Heaven which again and again Noot the prophet had whispered in my ear. I must destroy Egypt, or rather her apostate priests and rulers, and afterward once more build up the worship of Isis in some far land that should be revealed to me. Such was my mission, whereof it was decreed that I should fulfil the first part and because of my sin leave the rest undone.

Holly the learned tells me that the new faith he follows, to which I will not listen who am weary of religions and their changeful march toward a changeless end, writes it down that free will is given to man, that he is able to choose this path and reject the other; that he is the master of his own soul which he can guide here or there as the horseman guides his steed or Philo steered his ship.

And yet he read to me from the writings of one of the great apostles of that faith, a certain holy

one named Paulus, words which declared that man is predestined ere he was born to eternal life or eternal death, to the glory of the light or the unfathomed dark. To me these doctrines seem to war one upon the other, though for aught I know both may be true, seeing that within the circle of the starry spheres and the vast soul of That which made them, there is room for a multitude of truths whereof the shadows falling upon the gross earth take a thousand shapes of error.

Moreover, I hold that whatever is, is true because it is, and that men do but tangle themselves in seeming differences that are only varying lights darting from the eternal eyes of Truth. On all hearts shine those eyes, but none beholds them as his brother does, for to each they burn as a separate torch of different-coloured flame. Therefore it is that men worship many gods not knowing that these are the same God whose hands hold all things.

Thus I sum up the matter. At least through the millions of the ages and the multitudes of lives man may attain to freedom if his face be set that way of his own desire. Yet in his little hour on the earth, that falsely he believes his all, looking from birth to death and the blackness that bounds them both, he is not free but a part of Strengths that are greater than his own. Have I, Ayesha, been free, I who chose the holy path and fell from it into Nature's gulfs? Did I desire to fall? Did I not desire to climb that steep road to the heights of Heaven and sit enthroned upon the topmost snows of purity and peace? And yet another Might hurled me thence and now it is my fate to climb again; by slow and painful steps to climb eternally.

But of these things I will speak in their season, telling what is the price those pay who seek to over-

leap the bounds that hem us in and to match their pettiness against divine decrees.

These in the midst of the red light that filled Sidon like a bowl with blood and shone on me and all; on me, the priestess, on the brazen Dagon towering up against me, on fantastic, lamp-lit temples and palaces, on the great place about which they stood and the fierce-faced multitude that wandered on its marble pavements, there in the window-opening I knelt me down and prayed, lifting my face to the pure heavens above. To Isis did I pray, as an idolater prays to an image in a cave, because Isis was my symbol, or rather to That which is as far above Isis as Isis was above me. For I prayed to the Soul of that Universe whereof my eyes could see a part in the arching skies, and of this Soul what was Isis but as one golden thread in a glittering garment that wraps the majesty of God? And what then was I and what were those fierce-faced worshippers of Dagon?

Oh! in that hour of dedication, for such I felt it to be, these truths came home to my heart as never they had done before. And this was the sum of them, that I and all I could see and know were but as impalpable grains of dust, not sufficient to cause the delicately hung balance wherein the wilfulness of the world is poised against the decrees of the immortal Law to vary by a hair's breadth. Still I prayed and because that which is small yet ever contains that which is smaller, and the smaller finds a god in the small, as the small does in the great, from that prayer I won comfort.

My prayer finished I laid me down to rest in the golden bed of Beltis, the queen into whose place I had been thrust, bethinking me how many and near were the dangers by which I was surrounded. That

brute king desired me for a prey and here in his palace I lay in the hollow of his hand. He had the key to all my doors; the servants who stood about them were his creatures whom at a nod he could send to death. I was a stranger in a strange land, utterly unfriended, for Philo was far off upon his ship; there was nothing between me and him save the impalpable veil of fear which I had woven between us by the strength of my spirit. I was a prize to be taken, unarmoured, without javelin or arrow to protect me, with nothing, nothing save that veil of fear. If he chose to break through it, daring my curse and that of my goddess, he could do so. Then the curse would fall indeed, but it would be too late to save me, and I the proud and pure, must pass hence defiled, as pass I would. Still trusting to the goddess, or rather to the part of her which dwelt in me, or to That which was above us both, I laid me down and slept.

At midnight I awoke. The light of the moon flowing through the window-places flooded the splendid chamber, catching on the cornices of gold, the polished mirrors and the silver vessels. The door opened and through it wrapped in a dark cloak came Tenes. Though his face was hidden I knew him by his heavy shape and shambling step. He crept toward me like a wolf upon a sleeping lamb. There I lay in the golden bed illumined by the moon, and watched through the web of my outstretched hair, my hand upon the dagger that was buckled to my girdle. He drew near, he bent over me breathing heavily, and his eyes devoured my beauty. Still I feigned sleep and watched him, while my fingers closed upon the handle of the dagger. He unbuckled his cloak, revealing his hook-nosed visage,

and a draught of wind seemed to catch it, for it flapped and fell from his shoulders, though I felt no wind. He stooped as though to lift it, and it would seem came face to face with I know not what. Perchance it was the goddess invisible to me. Perchance it was some picture of his own death to come. I cannot say. At least his shifting eyes sank in till they seemed to vanish beneath the hairy brows, and his fat cheeks grew pallid as though the blood were draining from them by a mortal wound. Words came hissing from his thick lips and they were,

“Horrible! Horrible! She is indeed divine, for gods and ghosts protect her! Horrible! Death walks the air!”

Then he reeled from the room dragging the cloak after him, and knowing that I had no more to fear, I returned thanks to the guardian spirits and slept sweetly. The danger that I dreaded had drawn near and passed—to return no more.

