

H. Rider Haggard

Elissa: or The Doom of Zimbabwe

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Генри Райдер Хаггард

Elissa: or The Doom of Zimbabwe

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In Elissa Henry Rider Haggard takes his readers to the Phoenician city in South Central Africa the mysterious ruins of which have been the subject of so much speculation and research in the recent past. A trading town, protected by vast fortifications and adorned with many temples dedicated to the gods of the Sidonians, was built by civilized men in the heart of Africa may not be accurately known, but there is ample room for speculation as to the life of the ancient city, and in this romance the author has tried to picture incidents such as might have accompanied the first extinction of Zimbabwe.

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To the Memory of the Child

Nada Burnham, who «bound all to her» and, while her father cut his way through the hordes of the Ingobo Regiment, perished of the hardships of war at Buluwayo on 19th May, 1896, I dedicate these tales – and more particularly the last, that of a Faith which triumphed over savagery and death.

H. Rider Haggard.

Ditchingham.

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Author'S Note

Of the three stories that comprise this volume, one, «The Wizard,» a tale of victorious faith, first appeared some years ago as a Christmas Annual. Another, «Elissa,» is an attempt, difficult enough owing to the scantiness of the material left to us by time, to recreate the life of the ancient Phœnician Zimbabwe, whose ruins still stand in Rhodesia, and, with the addition of the necessary love story, to suggest circumstances such as might have brought about or accompanied its fall at the hands of the surrounding savage tribes. The third, «Black Heart and White Heart,» is a story of the courtship, trials and final union of a pair of Zulu lovers in the time of King Cetywayo.

Note

The world is full of ruins, but few of them have an origin so utterly lost in mystery as those of Zimbabwe in South Central Africa. Who built them? What purpose did they serve? These are questions that must have perplexed many generations, and many different races of men.

The researches of Mr. Wilmot prove to us indeed that in the Middle Ages Zimbabwe or Zimboe was the seat of a barbarous empire, whose ruler was named the Emperor of Monomotapa, also that for some years the Jesuits ministered in a Christian church built beneath the shadow of its ancient towers. But of the original purpose of those towers, and of the race that reared them, the inhabitants of mediæval Monomotapa, it is probable, knew less even than we know to-day. The labours and skilled observation of the late Mr. Theodore Bent, whose death is so great a loss to all interested in such matters, have shown almost beyond question that Zimbabwe was once an inland Phœnician city, or at the least a city whose inhabitants were of a race which practised Phœnician customs and worshipped the Phœnician deities. Beyond this all is conjecture. How it happened that a trading town, protected by vast fortifications and adorned with temples dedicated to the worship of the gods of the Sidonians – or rather trading towns, for Zimbabwe is only one of a group of ruins – were built by civilised men in the heart of Africa perhaps we shall never learn with certainty, though the discovery of the burying-places of their inhabitants might throw some light upon the problem.

But if actual proof is lacking, it is scarcely to be doubted – for the numerous old workings in Rhodesia tell their own tale – that it was the presence of payable gold reefs worked by slave labour which tempted the Phœnician merchants and chapmen, contrary to their custom, to travel so far from the sea and establish themselves inland. Perhaps the city Zimboe was the Ophir spoken of in the first Book of Kings. At least, it is almost certain that its principal industries were the smelting and the sale of gold, also it seems probable that expeditions travelling by sea and land would have occupied quite three years of time in reaching it from Jerusalem and returning thither laden with the gold and precious stones, the ivory and the almug trees (1 Kings x.). Journeying in Africa must have been slow in those days; that it was also dangerous is testified by the ruins of the ancient forts built to protect the route between the gold towns and the sea.

However these things may be, there remains ample room for speculation both as to the dim beginnings of the ancient city and its still dimmer end, whereof we can guess only, when it became weakened by luxury and the mixture of races, that hordes of invading savages stamped it out of existence beneath their blood-stained feet, as, in after ages, they stamped out the Empire of Monomotapa. In the following romantic sketch the writer has ventured – no easy task – to suggest incidents such as might have accompanied this first extinction of the Phœnician Zimbabwe. The pursuit indeed is one in which he can only hope to fill the place of a humble pioneer, since it is certain that in times to come the dead fortress-temples of South Africa will occupy the pens of many generations of the writers of romance who, as he hopes, may have more ascertained facts to build upon than are available to-day.

Chapter I

The Caravan

The sun, which shone upon a day that was gathered to the past some three thousand years ago, was setting in full glory over the expanses of south-eastern Africa – the Libya of the ancients. Its last burning rays fell upon a cavalcade of weary men, who, together with long strings of camels, asses and oxen, after much toil had struggled to the crest of a line of stony hills, where they were halted to recover breath. Before them lay a plain, clothed with sere yellow grass – for the season was winter – and bounded by mountains of no great height, upon whose slopes stood the city which they had travelled far to seek. It was the ancient city of Zimboe, whereof the lonely ruins are known to us moderns as Zimbabwe.

At the sight of its flat-roofed houses of sun-dried brick, set upon the side of the opposing hill, and dominated by a huge circular building of dark stone, the caravan raised a great shout of joy. It shouted in several tongues, in the tongues of Phœnicia, of Egypt, of the Hebrews, of Arabia, and of the coasts of Africa, for all these peoples were represented amongst its numbers. Well might the wanderers cry out in their delight, seeing that at length, after eight months of perilous travelling from the coast, they beheld the walls of their city of rest, of the golden Ophir of the Bible. Their company had started from the eastern port, numbering fifteen hundred men, besides women and children, and of those not more than half were left alive. Once a savage tribe had ambushed them, killing many. Once the pestilential fever of the low lands had taken them so that they died of it by scores. Twice also had they suffered heavily through hunger and thirst, to say nothing of their losses by the fangs of lions, crocodiles, and other wild beasts which with the country swarmed. Now their toils were over; and for six months, or perhaps a year, they might rest and trade in the Great City, enjoying its wealth, its flesh-pots, and the unholy orgies which, among people of the Phœnician race, were dignified by the name of the worship of the gods of heaven.

Soon the clamour died away, and although no command was given, the caravan started on at speed. All weariness faded from the faces of the wayworn travellers, even the very camels and asses, shrunk, as most of them were, to mere skeletons, seemed to understand that labour and blows were done with, and forgetting their loads, shambled unurged down the stony path. One man lingered, however. Clearly he was a person of rank, for eight or ten attendants surrounded him.

"Go," said he, "I wish to be alone, and will follow presently." So they bowed to the earth, and went.

The man was young, perhaps six or eight and twenty years of age. His dark skin, burnt almost to blackness by the heat of the sun, together with the fashion of his short, square-cut beard and of his garments, proclaimed him of Jewish or Egyptian blood, while the gold collar about his neck and the gold graven ring upon his hand showed that his rank was high. Indeed this wanderer was none other than the prince Aziel, nick-named the Ever-living, because of a curious mole upon his shoulder bearing a resemblance to the *crux ansata*, the symbol of life eternal among the Egyptians. By blood he was a grandson of Solomon, the mighty king of Israel, and born of a royal mother, a princess of Egypt.

In stature Aziel was tall, but somewhat slimly made, having small bones. His face was oval in shape, the features, especially the mouth, being fine and sensitive; the eyes were large, dark, and full of thought – the eyes of a man with a destiny. For the most part, indeed, they were sombre and over-full of thought, but at times they could light up with a strange fire.

Aziel the prince placed his hand against his forehead in such fashion as to shade his face from the rays of the setting sun, and from beneath its shadow gazed long and earnestly at the city of the hill.

"At length I behold thee, thanks be to God," he murmured, for he was a worshipper of Jehovah, and not of his mother's deities, "and it is time, since, to speak the truth, I am weary of this travelling. Now what fortune shall I find within thy walls, O City of Gold and devil- servers?"

"Who can tell?" said a quiet voice at his elbow. "Perhaps, Prince, you will find a wife, or a throne, or – a grave."

Aziel started, and turned to see a man standing at his side, clothed in robes that had been rich, but were now torn and stained with travel, and wearing on his head a black cap in shape not unlike the fez that is common in the East to-day. The man was past middle age, having a grizzled beard, sharp, hard features and quick eyes, which withal were not unkindly. He was a Phœnician merchant, much trusted by Hiram, the King of Tyre, who had made him captain of the merchandise of this expedition.

"Ah! is it you, Metem?" said Aziel. "Why do you leave your charge to return to me?"

"That I may guard a more precious charge – yourself, Prince," replied the merchant courteously. "Having brought the child of Israel so far in safety, I desire to hand him safely to the governor of yonder city. Your servants told me that by your command they had left you alone, so I returned to bear you company, for after nightfall robbers and savages wander without these walls."

"I thank you for your care, Metem, though I think there is little danger, and at the worst I can defend myself."

"Do not thank me, Prince; I am a merchant, and now, as in the past, I protect you, knowing that for it I shall be paid. The governor will give me a rich reward when I lead you to him safely, and when in years to come I return with you still safe to the court of Jerusalem, then the great king will fill my ship's hold with gifts."

"That depends, Metem," replied the prince. "If my grandfather still reigns it may be so, but he is very old, and if my uncle wears his crown, then I am not sure. Truly you Phœnicians love money. Would you, then, sell me for gold also, Metem?"

"I said not so, Prince, though even friendship has its price"

"Among your people, Metem?"

"Among all people, Prince. You reproach us with loving money; well, we do, since money gives everything for which men strive – honour, and place, and comfort, and the friendship of kings."

"It cannot give you love, Metem."

The Phœnician laughed contemptuously. "Love! with gold I will buy as much of it as I need. Are there no slaves upon the market, and no free women who desire ornaments and ease and the purple of Tyre? You are young, Prince, to say that gold cannot buy us love."

"And you, Metem, who are growing old, do not understand what I mean by love, nor will I stay to explain it to you, for were my words as wise as Solomon's, still you would not understand. At the least your money cannot bring you the blessing of Heaven, nor the welfare of your spirit in the eternal life that is to come."

"The welfare of my spirit, Prince? No, it cannot, since I do not believe that I have a spirit. When I die, I die, and there is an end. But the blessing of Heaven, ah! that can be bought, as I have proved once and again, if not with gold, then otherwise. Did I not in bygone years pass the first son of my manhood through the fire to Baal-Sidon? Nay, shrink not from me; it cost me dear, but my fortune was at stake, and better that the boy should die than that all of us should live on in penury and bonds. Know you not, Prince, that the gods must have the gifts of the best, gifts of blood and virtue, or they will curse us and torment us?"

"I do not know it, Metem, for such gods are no gods, but devils, children of Beelzebub, who has no power over the righteous. Truly I would have none of your two gods, Phœnician; upon earth the god of gold, and in heaven the devil of slaughter."

"Speak no ill of him, Prince," answered Metem solemnly, "for here you are not in the courts of Jehovah, but in his land, and he may chance to prove his power on you. For the rest, I had sooner follow after gold than the folly of a drunken spirit which you name Love, seeing that it works its

votary less mischief. Say now, it was a woman and her love that drove you hither to this wild land, was it not, Prince? Well, be careful lest a woman and her love should keep you here."

"The sun sets," said Aziel coldly; "let us go forward."

With a bow and a murmured salute, for his quick courtier instinct told him that he had spoken too freely, Metem took the bridle of the prince's mule, holding the stirrup while he mounted. Then he turned to seek his own, but the animal had wandered, and a full half hour went by before it could be captured.

By now the sun had set, and as there is little or no twilight in Southern Africa it became difficult for the two travellers to find their way down the rough hill path. Still they stumbled on, till presently the long dead grass brushing against their knees told them that they had lost the road, although they knew that they were riding in the right direction, for the watch-fires burning on the city walls were a guide to them. Soon, however, they lost sight of these fires, the boughs of a grove of thickly-leaved trees hiding them from view, and in trying to push their way through the wood Metem's mule stumbled against a root and fell.

"Now there is but one thing to be done," said the Phœnician, as he dragged the animal from the ground, "and it is to stay here till the moon rises, which should be within an hour. It would have been wiser, Prince, if we had waited to discuss love and the gods till we were safe within the walls of the city, for the end of it is that we have fallen into the hands of king Darkness, and he is the father of many evil things."

"That is so, Metem," answered the prince, "and I am to blame. Let us bide here in patience, since we must."

So, holding their mules by the bridles, they sat down upon the ground and waited in silence, for each of them was lost in his own thoughts.

Chapter II

The Grove of Baaltis

At length, as the two men sat thus silently, for the place and its gloom oppressed them, a sound broke upon the quiet of the night, that beginning with a low wail such as might come from the lips of a mourner, ended in a chant or song. The voice, which seemed close at hand, was low, rich and passionate. At times it sank almost to a sob, and at times, taking a higher note, it thrilled upon the air in tones that would have been shrill were they not so sweet.

"Who is it that sings?" said Aziel to Metem.

"Be silent, I pray you," whispered the other in his ear; "we have wandered into one of the sacred groves of Baaltis, which it is death for men to enter save at the appointed festivals, and a priestess of the grove chants her prayer to the goddess."

"We did not come of our own will, so doubtless we shall be forgiven," answered Aziel indifferently; "but that song moves me. Tell me the words of it, which I can scarcely follow, for her accent is strange to me."

"Prince, they seem to be holy words to which I have little right to hearken. The priestess sings an ancient hallowed chant of life and death, and she prays that the goddess may touch her soul with the wing of fire and make her great and give her vision of things that have been and that shall be. More I dare not tell you now; indeed I can barely hear, and the song is hard to understand. Crouch down, for the moon rises, and pray that the mules may not stir. Presently she will go, and we can fly the holy place."

The Israelite obeyed and waited, searching the darkness with eager eyes.

Now the edge of the great moon appeared upon the horizon, and by degrees her white rays of light revealed a strange scene to the watchers. About an open space of ground, some eighty paces in diameter, grew seven huge and ancient baobab trees, so ancient indeed that they must have been planted by the primæval hand of nature rather than by that of man. Aziel and his companion were hidden with their mules behind the trunk of one of these trees, and looking round it they perceived that the open space beyond the shadow of the branches was not empty. In the centre of this space stood an altar, and by it was placed the rude figure of a divinity carved in wood and painted. On the head of this figure rose a crescent symbolical of the moon, and round its neck hung a chain of wooden stars. It had four wings but no hands, and of these wings two were out-spread and two clasped a shapeless object to its breast, intended, apparently, to represent a child. By these symbols Aziel knew that before him was an effigy sacred to the goddess of the Phœnicians, who in different countries passed by the various names of Astarte, or Ashtoreth, or Baaltis, and who in their coarse worship was at once the personification of the moon and the emblem of fertility.

Standing before this rude fetish, between it and the altar, whereon lay some flowers, and in such fashion that the moonlight struck full upon her, was a white-robed woman. She was young and very beautiful both in shape and feature, and though her black hair streaming almost to the knees took from her height, she still seemed tall. Her rounded arms were outstretched; her sweet and passionate face was upturned towards the sky, and even at that distance the watchers could see her deep eyes shining in the moonlight. The sacred song of the priestess was finished. Now she was praying aloud, slowly, and in a clear voice, so that Aziel could hear and understand her; praying from her very heart, not to the idol before her, however, but to the moon above.

"O Queen of Heaven," she said, "thou whose throne I see but whose face I cannot see, hear the prayer of thy priestess, and protect me from the fate I fear, and rid me of him I hate. Safe let me dwell and pure, and as thou fillest the night with light, so fill the darkness of my soul with the wisdom that I crave. O whisper into my ears and let me hear the voice of heaven, teaching me that which I

would know. Read me the riddle of my life, and let me learn wherefore I am not as my sisters are; why feasts and offerings delight me not; why I thirst for knowledge and not for wealth, and why I crave such love as here I cannot win. Satisfy my being with thy immortal lore and a love that does not fail or die, and if thou wilt, then take my life in payment. Speak to me from the heaven above, O Baaltis, or show me some sign upon the earth beneath; fill up the vessel of my thirsty soul and satisfy the hunger of my spirit. Oh! thou that art the goddess, thou that hast the gift of power, give me, thy servant, of thy power, of thy godhead, and of thy peace. Hear me, O Heaven-born, hear me, Elissa, the daughter of Sakon, the dedicate of thee. Hear, hear, and answer now in the secret holy hour, answer by voice, by wonder, or by symbol."

The woman paused as though exhausted with the passion of her prayer, hiding her face in her hands, and as she stood thus silent and expectant, the sign came, or at least that chanced which for a while she believed to have been an answer to her invocation. Her face was hidden, so she could not see, and fascinated by her beauty as it appeared to them in that unhallowed spot, and by the depth and dignity of her wild prayer, the two watchers had eyes for her alone. Therefore it happened that not until his arm was about to drag her away, did either of them perceive a huge man, black as ebony in colour, clad in a cloak of leopard skins and carrying in his right hand a broad-bladed spear who, following the shadow of the trees, had crept upon the priestess from the farther side of the glade.

With a guttural exclamation of triumph he gripped her in his left arm, and, despite her struggles and her shrill cry for help, began half to drag and half to carry her towards the deep shade of the baobab grove. Instantly Aziel and Metem sprang up and rushed forward, drawing their bronze swords as they ran. As it chanced, however, the Israelite caught his foot in one of the numerous tree-roots, which stood above the surface of the ground and fell heavily upon his face. In a few seconds, twenty perhaps, he found his breath and feet again, to see that Metem had come up with the black giant who, hearing his approach, suddenly wheeled round to meet him, still holding the struggling priestess in his grasp. Now the Phœnician was so close upon him that the savage could find no time to shift the grip upon his spear, but drove at him with the knobbed end of its handle, striking him full upon the forehead and felling him as a butcher fells an ox. Then once more he turned to fly with his captive, but before he had covered ten yards the sound of Aziel's approaching footsteps caused him to wheel round again.

At sight of the Israelite advancing upon him with drawn sword, the great barbarian freed himself from the burden of the girl by throwing her heavily to the ground, where she lay, for the breath was shaken out of her. Then snatching the cloak from his throat he wound it over his left arm to serve as a shield, and with a savage yell, rushed straight at Aziel, purposing to transfix him with the broad-headed spear.

Well was it for the prince that he had been trained in sword-play from his youth, also, notwithstanding his slight build, that he was strong and active as a leopard. To await the onslaught would be to die, for the spear must pierce him before ever he could reach the attacker's body with his short sword. Therefore, as the weapon flashed upward he sprang aside, avoiding it, at the same time, with one swift sweep of his sword, slashing its holder across the back as he passed him.

With a howl of pain and rage the savage sprang round and charged him a second time. Again Aziel leapt to one side, but now he struck with all his force at the spear shaft which his assailant lifted to guard his head. So strong was the blow and so sharp the heavy sword, that it shore through the wood, severing the handle from the spear, which fell to the ground. Casting away the useless shaft, the warrior drew a long knife from his girdle, and before Aziel could strike again faced him for the third time. But he no longer rushed onward like a bull, for he had learnt caution; he stood still, holding the skin cloak before him shield fashion, and peering at his adversary from over its edge.

Now it was Aziel's turn to take the offensive, and slowly he circled round the huge barbarian, watching his opportunity. At length it came. In answer to a feint of his the protecting cloak was dropped a little, enabling him to prick its bearer in the neck, but only with the point of his sword.

The thrust delivered, he leapt back, and not too soon, for forgetting his caution in his fury, the savage charged straight at him with a roar like that of a lion. So swift and terrible was his onset that Aziel, having no time to spring aside, did the only thing possible. Gripping the ground with his feet, he bent his body forward, and with outstretched arm and sword, braced up his muscles to receive the charge. Another instant, and the leopard skin cloak fluttered before him. With a quick movement of his left arm he swept it aside; then there came a sudden pressure upon his sword ending in a jarring shock, a flash of steel above his head, and down he went to the ground beneath the weight of the black giant.

"Now there is an end," he thought; "Heaven receive my spirit." And his senses left him.

When they returned again, Aziel perceived dimly that a white-draped figure bent over him, dragging at something black which crushed his breast, who, as she dragged, sobbed in her grief and fear. Then he remembered, and with an effort sat up, rolling from him the corpse of his foe, for his sword had pierced the barbarian through breast and heart and back. At this sight the woman ceased her sobbing, and said in the Phœnician tongue:

"Sir, do you indeed live? Then the protecting gods be thanked, and to Baaltis the Mother I vow a gift of this hair of mine in gratitude."

"Nay, lady," he answered faintly, for he was much shaken, "that would be a pity; also, if any, it is my hair which should be vowed."

"You bleed from the head," she broke in; "say, stranger, are you deeply wounded?"

"I will tell you nothing of my head," he replied, with a smile, "unless you promise that you will not offer up your hair."

"So be it, stranger, since I must; I will give the goddess this gold chain instead; it is of more worth."

"You would do better, lady," said the shrill voice of Metem again, who by now had found his wits again, "to give the gold chain to me whose scalp has been broken in rescuing you from that black thief."

"Sir," she answered, "I am grateful to you from my heart, but it is this young lord who killed the man and saved me from slavery worse than death, and he shall be rewarded by my father."

"Listen to her," grumbled Metem. "Did I not rush in first in my folly and receive what I deserved for my pains? But am I to have neither thanks nor pay, who am but an old merchant; they are for the young prince who came after. Well, so it ever was; the thanks I can spare, and the reward I shall claim from the treasury of the goddess."

"Now, Prince, let me see your hurt. Ah! a cut on the ear, no more, and thank your natal star that it is so, for another inch and the great vein of the neck would have been severed. Prince, if you are able, draw out your sword from the carcase of that brute, for I have tried and cannot loosen the blade. Then perhaps this lady will guide us to the city before his fellows come to seek him, seeing that for one night I have had a stomach full of fighting."

"Sirs, I will indeed. It is close at hand, and my father will thank you there; but if it is your pleasure, tell me by what names I shall make known to him you whose rank seems to be so high?"

"Lady, I am Metem the Phœnician, captain of the merchandise of the caravan of Hiram, King of Tyre, and this lord who slew the thief is none other than the prince Aziel, the twice royal, for he is grandson to the glorious King of Israel, and through his mother of the blood of the Pharaohs of Egypt."

"And yet he risked his life to save me," the girl murmured astonished; then dropping to her knees before Aziel, she touched the ground with her forehead in obeisance, giving him thanks, and praising him after the fashion of the East.

"Rise, lady," he broke in, "because I chance to be a prince I have not ceased to be a man, and no man could have seen you in such a plight without striking a blow on your behalf."

"No," added Metem, "none; that is, as you happen to be noble and young and lovely. Had you been old and ugly and humble, then the black man might have carried you from here to Tyre ere I risked my neck to stop him, or for the matter of that, although he will deny it, the prince either."

"Men do not often show their hearts so clearly," she answered with sarcasm. "But now, lords, I will guide you to the city before more harm befalls us, for this dead man may have companions."

"Our mules are here, lady; will you not ride mine?" asked Aziel.

"I thank you, Prince, but my feet will carry me."

"And so will mine," said Aziel, ceasing from a prolonged and fruitless effort to loosen his sword from the breast-bone of the savage, "on such paths they are safer than any beasts. Friend, will you lead my mule with yours?"

"Ay, Prince," grumbled Metem, "for so the world goes with the old; you take the fair lady for company and I a she-ass. Well, of the two give me the ass which is more safe and does not chatter."

Then they started, Aziel leaving his short sword in the keeping of the dead man.

"How are you named, lady?" he said presently, adding "or rather I need not ask; you are Elissa, the daughter of Sakon, Governor of Zimboe, are you not?"

"I am so called, though how you know it I cannot guess."

"I heard you name yourself, lady, in the prayer you made before the altar."

"You heard my prayer, Prince?" she said starting. "Do you not know that it is death to that man who hearkens to the prayer of a priestess of Baaltis, uttered in her holy grove? Still, none know it save the goddess, who sees all, therefore I beseech you for your own sake and the sake of your companion, say nothing of it in the city, lest it should come to the ears of the priests of El."

"Certainly it would have been death to you had I *not* chanced to hear it, having lost my way in the darkness," answered the prince laughing. "Well, since I did hear it I will add that it was a beautiful prayer, revealing a heart high and pure, though I grieve that it should have been offered to one whom I hold to be a demon."

"I am honoured," she answered coldly; "but, Prince, you forget that though you, being a Hebrew, worship Him they call Jehovah, or so I have been told, I, being of the blood of the Sidonians, worship the lady Baaltis, the Queen of Heaven the holy one of whom I am a priestess."

"So it is, alas!" he said, with a sigh, adding:

"Well, let us not dispute of these matters, though, if you wish, the prophet Issachar, the Levite who accompanies me, can explain the truth of them to you."

Elissa made no reply, and for a while they walked on in silence.

"Who was that black robber whom I slew?" Aziel asked presently.

"I am not sure, Prince," she answered, hesitating, "but savages such as he haunt the outskirts of the city seeking to steal white women to be their wives. Doubtless he watched my steps, following me into the holy place."

"Why, then, did you venture there alone, lady?"

"Because, to be heard, such prayers as mine must be offered in solitude in the consecrated grove, and at the hour of the rising of the moon. Moreover, cannot Baaltis protect her priestess, Priest, and did she not protect her?"

"I thought, lady, that I had something to do with the matter," he answered.

"Ay, Prince, it was your hand that struck the blow which killed the thief, but Baaltis, and no other, led you to the place to rescue me."

"I understand, lady. To save you, Baaltis, laying aside her own power, led a mortal man to the grove, which it is death that mortal man should violate."

"Who can fathom the way of the gods?" she replied with passion, then added, as though reasoning with a new-born doubt, "Did not the goddess hear my prayer and answer it?"

"In truth, lady, I cannot say. Let me think. If I understood you rightly, you prayed for heavenly wisdom, but whether or not you have gained it within this last hour, I do not know. And then you

prayed for love, an immortal love. O, maiden, has it come to you since yonder moon appeared upon the sky? And you prayed"

"Peace!" she broke in, "peace and mock me not, or, prince that you are, I will publish your crime of spying upon the prayer of a priestess of Baaltis. I tell you that I prayed for a symbol and a sign, and the prayer was answered.

"Did not the black giant spring upon me to bear me away to be his slave – his, or another's? And is he not a symbol of the evil and the ignorance which are on the earth and that seek to drag down the beauty and the wisdom of the earth to their own level? Then the Phœnician ran to rescue me and was defeated, since the spirit of Mammon cannot overcome the black powers of ill. Next you came and fought hard and long, till in the end you slew the mighty foe, you a Prince born of the royal blood of the world" and she ceased.

"You have a pretty gift of parable, lady, as it should be with one who interprets the oracles of a goddess. But you have not told me of what I, your servant, am the symbol."

She stopped in her walk and looked him full in the face.

"I never heard," she said, "that either the Jews or the Egyptians, being instructed, were blind to the reading of an allegory. But, Prince, if you cannot read this one it is not for me, who am but a woman, to set it out to you."

Just then their glances met, and in the clear moonlight Aziel saw a wave of doubt sweep over his companion's dark and beautiful eyes, and a faint flush appear upon her brow. He saw, and something stirred at his heart that till this hour he had never felt, something which even now he knew it would trouble him greatly to escape.

"Tell me, lady," he asked, his voice sinking almost to a whisper, "in this fable of yours am I even for an hour deemed worthy to play the part of that immortal love embodied which you sought so earnestly a while ago?"

"Immortal love, Prince," she answered, in a new voice, a voice low and deep, "is not for one hour, but for all hours that are and are to be. You, and you alone, can know if you would dare to play such a part as this – even in a fable."

"Perchance, lady, there lives a woman for whom it might be dared."

"Prince, no such woman lives, since immortal love must deal, not with the flesh, but with the spirit. If a spirit worthy to be thus loved and worshipped now wanders in earthly shape upon the world, seeking its counterpart and its completion, I cannot tell. Yet were it so, and should they chance to meet, it might be happy for such brave spirits, for then the answer to the great riddle would be theirs."

Wondering what this riddle might be, Aziel bent towards her to reply, when suddenly round a bend in the path but a few paces from them came a body of soldiers and attendants, headed by a man clad in a white robe and walking with a staff. This man was grey-headed and keen-eyed, thin in face and ascetic in appearance, with a brow of power and a bearing of dignity. At the sight of the pair he halted, looking at them in question, and with disapproval.

"Our search is ended," he said in Hebrew, "for here is he whom we seek, and alone with him a heathen woman, robed like a priestess of the Groves."

"Whom do you seek, Issachar?" asked Aziel hurriedly, for the sudden appearance of the Levite disturbed him.

"Yourself, Prince. Surely you can guess that your absence has been noted. We feared lest harm should have come to you, or that you had lost your path, but it seems that you have found a guide," and he stared at his companion sternly.

"That guide, Issachar," answered Aziel, "being none other than the lady Elissa, daughter of Sakon, governor of this city, and our host, whom it has been my good fortune to rescue from a woman-stealer yonder in the grove of the goddess Baaltis."

"And whom it was my bad fortune to try to rescue in the said grove, as my broken head bears witness," added Metem, who by now had come up, dragging the two mules after him.

"In the grove of the goddess Baaltis!" broke in the Levite with a kindling eye, and striking the ground with his staff to emphasise his words. "You, a Prince of Israel, alone in the high place of abomination with the priestess of a fiend? Fie upon you, fie upon you! Would you also walk in the sin of your forefathers, Aziel, and so soon?"

"Peace!" said Aziel in a voice of command; "I was not in the grove alone or by my own will, and this is no time or place for insults and wrangling."

"Between me and those who seek after false gods, or the women who worship them, there is no peace," replied the old priest fiercely.

Then, followed by all the company, he turned and strode towards the gates of the city.

Chapter III

Ithobal the King

Two hours had gone by, and the prince Aziel, together with his retinue, the officers of the caravan, and many other guests, were seated at a great feast made in their honour, by Sakon, the governor of the city. This feast was held in the large pillared hall of Sakon's house, built beneath the northern wall of the temple fortress, and not more than a few paces from its narrow entrance, through which in case of alarm the inhabitants of the palace could fly for safety. All down this chamber were placed tables, accommodating more than two hundred feasters, but the principal guests were seated by themselves upon a raised dais at the head of the hall. Among them sat Sakon himself, a middle-aged man stout in build, and thoughtful of face, his daughter Elissa, some other noble ladies, and a score or more of the notables of the city and its surrounding territories.

One of these strangers immediately attracted the attention of Aziel, who was seated in the place of honour at the right of Sakon, between him and the lady Elissa. This man was of large stature, and about forty years of age; the magnificence of his apparel and the great gold chain set with rough diamonds which hung about his neck showing him to be a person of importance. His tawny complexion marked him of mixed race. This conclusion his features did not belie, for the brow, nose, and cheek-bones were Semitic in outline, while the full, prominent eyes, and thick, sensuous lips could with equal certainty be attributed to the Negroid stock. In fact, he was the son of a native African queen, or chieftainess, and a noble Phœnician, and his rank no less than that of absolute king and hereditary chief of a vast and undefined territory which lay around the trading cities of the white men, whereof Zimboe was the head and largest. Aziel noticed that this king, who was named Ithobal, seemed angry and ill at ease, whether because he was not satisfied with the place which had been allotted to him at the table, or for other reasons, he could not at the time determine.

When the meats had been removed, and the goblets were filled with wine, men began to talk, till presently Sakon called for silence, and rising, addressed Aziel:

"Prince," he said, "in the name of this great and free city – for free it is, though we acknowledge the king of Tyre as our suzerain – I give you welcome within our gates. Here, far in the heart of Libya, we have heard of the glorious and wise king, your grandfather, and of the mighty Pharaoh of Egypt, whose blood runs also within your veins. Prince, we are honoured in your coming, and for the asking, whatever this land of gold can boast is yours. Long may you live; may the favour of those gods you worship attend you, and in the pursuit of wisdom, of wealth, of war, and of love, may the good grain of all be garnered in your bosom, and the wind of prosperity winnow out the chaff of them to fall beneath your feet. Prince, I have greeted you as it behoves me to greet the blood of Solomon and Pharaoh; now I add a word. Now I greet you as a father greets the man who has saved his only and beloved daughter from death, or shameful bondage. Know you, friends, what this stranger did since to-night's moonrise? My daughter was at worship alone yonder without the walls, and a great savage set on her, purposing to bear her away captive. Ay, and he would have done it had not the prince Aziel here given him battle, and, after a fierce fight, slain him."

"No great deed to kill a single savage," broke in the king Ithobal, who had been listening with impatience to Sakon's praises of this high-born stranger.

"No great deed you say, King," answered Sakon. "Guards, being in the body of the man and set it before us."

There was a pause, till presently six men staggered up the hall bearing between them the corpse of the barbarian, which, still covered with the leopard skin mantle, they threw down on the edge of the dais.

"See!" said one of the bearers, withdrawing the cloak from the huge body. Then pointing to the sword which still transfixed it, he added, "and learn what strength heaven gives to the arms of princes."

Such as the guests as were near enough rose to look at the grizzly sight, then turned to offer their congratulations to the conqueror. but there was one of them – the king Ithobal – who offered none; indeed, as his eyes fell upon the face of the corpse, they grew alight with rage.

"What ails you, King? Are you jealous of such a blow?" asked Sakon, watching him curiously.

"Speak no more of that thrust, I pray you," said Aziel, "for it was due to the weight of the man rushing on the sword, which after he was dead I could not find the power to loosen from his breast-bone."

"Then I will do you that service, Prince," sneered Ithobal, and, setting his foot upon the breast of the corpse, with a sudden effort of his great frame, he plucked out the sword and cast it down upon the table.

"Now, one might think," said Aziel, flushing with anger, "that you, King, who do a courtesy to a man of smaller strength, mean a challenge. Doubtless, however, I am mistaken, who do not understand the manners of this country."

"Think what you will, Prince," answered the chieftain, "but learn that he who lies dead before us by your hand – as you say – was no slave to be killed at pleasure, but a man of rank, none other, indeed, than the son of my mother's sister."

"Is it so?" replied Aziel, "then surely, King, you are well rid of a cousin, however highly born, who made it his business to ravish maidens from their homes."

By way of answer to these words Ithobal sprang from his seat again, laying hand upon his sword. But before he could speak or draw it, the governor Sakon addressed him in a cold and meaning voice:

"Of your courtesy, King," he said, "remember that the prince here is my guest, as you are, and give us peace. If that dead man was your cousin, at least he well deserved to die, not at the hand of one of royal blood, but by that of the executioner, for he was the worst of thieves – a thief of women. Now tell me, King, I pray you, how came your cousin here, so far from home, since he was not numbered in your retinue?"

"I do not know, Sakon," answered Ithobal, "and if I knew I would not say. You tell me that my dead kinsman was a thief of women, which, in Phœnician eyes, must be a crime indeed. So be it; but thief or no thief, I say that there is a blood feud between me and the man who slew him, and were he great Solomon himself, instead of one of fifty princelets of his line, he should pay bitterly for the dead. To-morrow, Sakon, I will meet you before I leave for my own land, for I have words to speak to you. Till then, farewell!" – and rising, he strode down the hall, followed by his officers and guard.

* * *

The sudden departure of king Ithobal in anger was the signal for the breaking up of the feast.

"Why is that half-bred chief so wrath with me?" asked Aziel in a low voice of Elissa as they followed Sakon to another chamber.

"Because – if you would know the truth – he set his dead cousin to kidnap me, and you thwarted him," she answered, looking straight before her.

Aziel made no reply, for at that moment Sakon turned to speak with him, and his face was anxious.

"I crave your pardon, Prince," he said, drawing him aside, "that you should have met with such insults at my board. Had it been any other man who spoke thus to you, by now he had rued his words, but this Ithobal is the terror of our city, for if he chooses he can bring a hundred thousand savages upon us, shutting us within our walls to starve, and cutting us off from the working of the mines whence we win gold. Therefore, in this way or that, he must be humoured, as indeed we have humoured him and his father for years, though now," he added, his brow darkening, "he demands a

price that I am loth to pay," and he glanced towards his daughter, who stood watching them at a little distance, looking most beautiful in her white robes and ornaments of gold.

"Can you not make war upon him, and break his power?" asked Aziel, with a strange anxiety, guessing that this price demanded by Ithobal was none other than Elissa, the woman whom he had rescued, and whose wisdom and beauty had stirred his heart.

"It might be done, Prince, but the risk would be great, and we are here to work the mines and grow rich in trade – not to make war. The policy of Zimboe has always been a policy of peace."

"I have a better and cheaper plan," said a calm voice at his elbow – that of Metem. "It is this: Slip a bow-string over the brute's head as he lies snoring, and pull it tight. An eagle in a cage is easy to deal with, but once on the wing the matter is different."

"There is wisdom in your counsel," said Sakon, in a hesitating voice.

"Wisdom!" broke in Aziel; "ay, the wisdom of the assassin. What, noble Sakon, would you murder a sleeping guest?"

"No, Prince, I would not," he answered hastily; "also, such a deed would bring the Tribes upon us."

"Then, Sakon, you are more foolish than you used to be," said Metem laughing. "A man who will not despatch a foe, whenever he can catch him, by means fair or foul, is not the man to govern a rich city set in the heart of a barbarous land, and so I shall tell Hiram, our king, if ever I live to see Tyre again. As for you, most high Prince, forgive the humblest of your servants if he tells you that the tenderness of your heart and the nobility of your sentiments will, I think, bring you to an early and evil end;" and, glancing towards Elissa as though to put a point upon his words, Metem smiled sarcastically and withdrew.

At this moment a messenger, whose long white hair, wild eyes and red robe announced him to be a priest of El, by which name the people of Zimboe worshipped Baal, entered the room, and whispered something into the ear of Sakon which seemed to disturb him much.

"Pardon me, Prince, and you, my guests, if I leave you," said the governor, "but I have evil tidings that call me to the temple. The lady Baaltis is seized with the black fever, and I must visit her. For an hour, farewell."

This news caused consternation among the company, and in the general confusion that followed its announcement Aziel joined Elissa, who had passed on to the balcony of the house, and was seated there alone, looking out over the moonlit city and the plains beyond. At his approach she rose in token of respect, then sat herself down again, motioning him to do likewise.

"Give me of your wisdom, lady," he said. "I thought that Baaltis was the goddess whom I heard you worshipping yonder in the grove; how, then, can she be stricken with a fever?"

"She is the goddess," Elissa answered smiling; "but the *lady* Baaltis is a woman whom we revere as the incarnation of that goddess upon earth, and being but a woman in her hour she must die."

"Then, what becomes of the incarnation of the goddess?"

"Another is chosen by the college of the priests of El, and the company of the priestesses of Baaltis. If that lady Baaltis who is dead chances to leave a daughter, it is usual for the lot to fall upon her; if not, upon such one of the noble maidens as may be chosen."

"Does the lady Baaltis marry, then?"

"Yes, Prince, within a year of her consecration, she must choose herself a husband, and he may be whom she will, provided only that he is of white blood, and does public sacrifice to El and Baaltis. Then after she has named him, this husband takes the title of Shadid, and for so long as his wife shall live he is the high priest of the god El, and clothed with the majesty of the god, as his wife is clothed with the majesty of Baaltis. But should she die, another wins his place."

"It is a strange faith," said Aziel, "which teaches that the Lord of Heaven can find a home in mortal breasts. But, lady, it is yours, so of it I say no more. Now tell me, if you will, what did you

mean when you said that this barbarian king, Ithobal, set the savage whom I slew to kidnap you? Do you know this, or do you suspect it only?"

"I suspected it from the first, Prince, and for good reasons; moreover, I read it in the king's face as he looked upon the corpse, and when he perceived me among the feasters."

"And why should he wish to carry you away this brutally, lady, when he is at peace with the great city?"

"Perchance, Prince, after what passed to-night you can guess," she answered lowering her eyes.

"Yes, lady, I can guess, and though it is shameful that such an one should dare to think of you, still, since he is a man, I cannot blame him overmuch. But why should he press his suit in this rough and secret fashion instead of openly as a king might do?"

"He may have pressed it openly and been repulsed," she replied in a low voice. "But if he could have carried me to some far fortress, how should I flout him there, that is, if I still lived? There, with no price to pay in gold or lands or power, he would have been my master, and I should have been his slave till such time as he wearied of me. That is the fate from which you have saved me, Prince, or rather from death, for I am not one who could bear such shame at the hands of a man I hate."

"Lady," he said bowing, "I think that perhaps for the first time in my life I am glad to-night that I was born."

"And I," she answered, "who am but a Phœnician maiden, am glad that I should have lived to hear one who is as royal in thought and soul as he is in rank speak thus to me. Oh! Prince," she added, clasping her hands, "if your words are not those of empty courtesy alone, hear me, for you are great, a Lord of the Earth whom none refuse, and it may be in your power to give me aid. Prince, I am in a sore strait, for that danger from which I prayed to be delivered this night presses me hard. Prince, it is true that Ithobal has been refused my hand, both by myself and by my father, and therefore it was that he strove to steal me away. But the evil is not done with, for the great nobles of the city and the chief priests of El came to my father at sunset and prayed him that he would let Ithobal take me, seeing that otherwise in his rage he will make war upon Zimboe. When a man placed as is my father must choose between the safety of thousands and the honour and happiness of one poor girl, what will his answer be, think you?"

"Now," said Azriel, "save that no wrong can right a wrong, I almost grieve that I cried shame upon the counsel of Metem. Sweet lady, be sure of this, that I will give all I have, even to my life, to protect you from the vile fate you dread – yes, all I have – except my soul."

"Ah!" she cried with a sudden flash of her dark eyes, "all except your soul. If we women could find the man who would risk both life and soul for us, then, were he but a slave, we would worship him as never man was worshipped since Baaltis mounted her heavenly throne."

"Were I not a Hebrew you would tempt me, lady," Azriel answered smiling, "but being one I may not risk my soul even were such a prize within my reach."

"Nay, Prince," she broke in, "I did but jest; forget my words, for they were wrung from a heart torn with fears. Oh! did you know the terror of this half-savage Ithobal which oppresses me, you would forgive me all – a terror that to-night lies upon me with a tenfold weight."

"Why so, lady?"

"Doubtless because it is nearer," Elissa whispered, but her beautiful pleading eyes and quivering lips seemed to belie her words and say, "because *you* are near, and a change has come upon me."

For the second time that day Azriel's glance met hers, and for the second time a strange new pang that was more pain than joy, and yet half-divine, snatched at his heart-strings, for a while numbing his reason and taking from him the power of speech.

"What was it?" he wondered vaguely. He had seen many lovely faces, and many noble women had shown him favour, but why had none of them stirred him thus? Could it be that this stranger Gentile maiden was his soul-mate – she whom he was destined to love above all upon the earth, nay, whom he did already love, and so soon?

"Lady," he said, taking a step towards her, "lady" and he paused.

Elissa bowed her dark head till her gold-bedecked and scented hair almost fell upon his feet, but she made no answer.

Then another voice broke upon the silence, a clear, strident voice that said:

"Prince, forgive me, if for the second time to-day I disturb you; but the guests have gone; your chamber is made ready, and, not knowing the customs of the women of this country, I sought you, little guessing that, at such an hour, I should find you alone with one of them."

Aziel looked up, although there was no need for him to do so, for he knew that voice well, to see the tall form of the Levite Issachar standing before them, a cold light of anger shining in his eyes.

Elissa saw also, and, with some murmured words of farewell, she turned and went, leaving them together.

Chapter IV

The Dream of Issachar

For a moment there was silence, which Aziel broke, saying:

"It seems to me, Issachar, that you are somewhat over zealous for my welfare."

"I think otherwise, Prince," replied the Levite sternly. "Did not your grandsire give you into my keeping, and shall I not be faithful to my trust, and to a higher duty than any which he could lay upon me?"

"Your meaning, Issachar?"

"It is plain, Prince; but I will set it out. The great king said to me yonder in the hall of his golden palace at Jerusalem, 'To others, men of war, I have given charge of the body of my grandson to keep him safe. To you, Issachar the Levite, who have fostered him, I give charge over his soul to keep it safe – a higher task, and more difficult. Guard him, Issachar, from the temptation of strange doctrines and the whisperings of strange gods, but guard him most of all from the wiles of strange women who bow the knee to Baal, for such are the gate of Gehenna upon earth, and those who enter by it shall find their place in Tophet.'"

"Truly my grandsire speaks wisely on this matter as on all others," answered Aziel, "but still I do not understand."

"Then I will be more clear, Prince. How comes it that I find you alone with this beautiful sorceress, this worshipper of the she-devil, Baaltis, with whom you should scorn even to speak, except such words as courtesy demands?"

"Is it then forbidden to me," asked Aziel angrily, "to talk with the daughter of my host, a lady whom I chanced to save from death, of the customs of her country and the mysteries of worship?"

"The mysteries of worship!" answered Issachar scornfully. "Ay! the mysteries of the worship of that fair body of hers, that ivory chalice filled with foulness – whereof, if a man drink, his faith shall be rotted and his soul poisoned. The mysteries of that worship was it, Prince, that caused you but now to lean towards this woman as though to embrace her, with words of love burning in your heart if not between your lips? Ah! these witches of Baaltis know their trade well; they are full of evil gifts, and of the wisdom given to them by the fiend they serve. With touch and sigh and look they can stir the blood of youth, having much practice in the art, till it seethes within the veins and drowns conscience in its flood."

"Nay, Prince, hear the truth," continued Issachar. "Till moonrise you had never seen this woman, and now your quick blood is aflame, and you love her. Deny it if you can – deny it on your honour and I will believe you, for you are no liar."

Aziel thought for a moment and answered:

"Issachar, you have no right to question me on this matter, yet since you have adjured me by my honour, I will be open with you. I do not know if I love this woman, who, as you say, is a stranger to me, but it is true that my heart turns towards her like flowers to the sun. Till to-day I had never seen her, yet when my eyes first fell upon her face yonder in that accursed grove, it seemed to me that I had been born only that I might find her. It seemed to me even that for ages I had known her, that for ever she was mine and that I was hers. Read me the riddle, Issachar? Is this but passion born of youth and the sudden sight of a fair woman? That cannot be, for I have known others as fair, and have passed through some such fires. Tell me, Issachar, you who are old and wise and have seen much of the hearts of men, what is this wave that overwhelms me?"

"What is it, Prince? It is witchery; it is the wile of Beelzebub waiting to snatch your soul, and if you hearken to it you shall pass through the fire – through the fire to Moloch, if not in the flesh, then in the spirit, which is to all eternity. Oh! not in vain do I fear for you, my son, and not without reason

was I warned in a dream. Listen: Last night, as I lay in my tent yonder upon the plain, I dreamed that some danger overshadowed you, and in my sleep I prayed that your destiny might be revealed to me. As I prayed thus, I heard a voice saying, 'Issachar, you seek to learn the future; know then that he who is dear to you shall be tried in the furnace indeed. Yes, because of his great love and pity, he shall forswear his faith, and with death and sorrow he shall pay the price of his sin.'

"Then I was troubled and besought Heaven that you, my son, might be saved from this unknown temptation, but the voice answered me:

"Of their own will only can they who were one from the beginning be held apart. Through good and ill let them work each other's woe or weal. The goal is sure, but they must choose the road.'

"Now as I wondered what these dark sayings might mean, the gloom opened and I saw you, Aziel, standing in a grove of trees, while towards you with outstretched hands drew a veiled woman who bore upon her brow the golden bow of Baaltis. Then fire raged about you, and in the fire I beheld many things which I have forgotten, and moving through it was the Prince of Death, who slew and spared not. So I awoke heavy at heart, knowing that there had fallen on me who love you a shadow of doom to come."

In these latter days any educated man would set aside Issachar's wild vision as the vapourings of a mind distraught. But Aziel lived in the time of Solomon, when men of his nation guided their steps by the light of prophecy, and believed that it was the Divine pleasure, by means of dreams and wonders and through the mouths of chosen seers, to declare the will of Jehovah upon earth. To this faith, indeed, we still hold fast, at least so far as that period and people are concerned, seeing that we acknowledge Isaiah, David, and their company, to have been inspired from above. Of that company Issachar the Levite was one, for to him, from his youth up, voices had spoken in the watches of the night, and often he had poured his warnings and denunciations into the ears of kings and peoples, telling them with no uncertain voice of the consequences of sin and idolatry, and of punishment to come. This Aziel, who had been his ward and pupil, knew well, and therefore he did not mock at the priest's dream or set it aside as naught, but bowed his head and listened.

"I am honoured indeed," he said with humility, "that the destiny of my poor soul and body should be a thing of weight to those on high."

"Of your poor soul, Aziel?" broke in Issachar. "That soul of yours, of which you speak so lightly, is of as great value in the eyes of Heaven as that of any cherubim within its gates. The angels who fell were the first and chiefest of the angels, and though now we are clad with mortal shape in punishment of our sins, again redeemed and glorified we can become among the mightiest of their hosts. Oh! my son, I beseech you, turn from this woman while there yet is time, lest to you her lips should be a cup of woe and your soul shall pay the price of them, sharing the hell of the worshippers of Ashtoreth."

"It may be so," said Aziel; "but, Issachar, what said the voice? That this, the woman of your dream and I were one from the beginning? Issachar, you believe that the lady Elissa is she of whom the voice spoke in your sleep and you bid me turn from her because she will bring me sin and punishment. In truth, if I can, I will obey you, since rather than forswear my faith, as your dream foretold, I would die a hundred deaths. Nor do I believe that for any bribe of woman's love I shall forswear it in act or thought. Yet if such things come about it is fate that drives me on, not my will – and what man can flee his fate? But even though this lady be she whom I am doomed to love, you say that because she is heathen I must reject her. Shame upon the thought, for if she is heathen it is through ignorance, and it may be mine to change her heart. Because I stand in danger shall I suffer her who, as you tell me, was one with me from the beginning, to be lost in that hell of Baal of which you speak? Nay, your dream is false. I will not renounce my faith, but rather will win her to share it, and together we shall triumph, and that I swear to you, Issachar."

"Truly the evil one has many wiles," answered the Levite, "and I did ill to tell you of my dream, seeing that it can be twisted to serve the purpose of your madness. Have your will, Aziel, and reap

the fruit of it, but of this I warn you – that while I can find a way to thwart it, never, Prince, shall you take that witch to your bosom to be the ruin of your life and soul."

"Then, Issachar, on this matter there may be war between us!"

"Ay! there is war," said the Levite, and left him.

* * *

The sun was already high in the heavens when Aziel awoke from the deep and dreamless sleep which followed on the excitements and exhaustion of the previous day. After his servants had waited upon him and robed him, bringing him milk and fruit to eat, he dismissed them, and sat himself down by the casement of his chamber to think a while.

Below him lay the city of flat-roofed houses enclosed with a double wall, without the ring of which were thousands of straw huts, shaped like bee-hives, wherein dwelt natives of the country, slaves or servants of the occupying Phœnician race. To Aziel's right, and not more than a hundred paces from the governor's house in which he was, rose the round and mighty battlements of the temple, where the followers of El and Baaltis worshipped, and the gold refiners carried on their business. At intervals on its flat-topped walls stood towers of observation, alternating with pointed monoliths of granite and soapstone columns supporting vultures, rudely carved emblems of Baaltis. Between these towers armed soldiers walked continually, watching the city below and the plain beyond, for though the mission of the Phœnicians here was one of peaceful gain it was evident that they considered it necessary to be always prepared for war. On the hillside above the great temple towered another fortress of stone – a citadel deemed to be impregnable even should the temple fall into the hands of an enemy – while on the crest of the precipitous slope, stretching as far to right and left as the eye could reach, were many smaller detached strongholds.

The scene that Aziel saw from his window was a busy one, for beneath him a market was being held in an open square in the city. Here, sheltered from the sun by grass-thatched booths, the Phœnician merchants who had been his companions in their long and perilous journey from the coast were already in treaty with numerous customers, hoping, not in vain, to recoup themselves amply for the toils and dangers which they had survived. Beneath these booths were spread their goods; silks from Cos, bronze weapons and copper rods, or ingots from the rich mines of Cyprus, linens and muslins from Egypt; beads, idols, carven bowls, knives, glass ware, pottery in all shapes, and charms made of glazed faience or Egyptian stone; bales of the famous purple cloth of Tyre; surgical instruments, jewellery, and objects of toilet; scents, pots of rouge, and other unguents for the use of ladies in little alabaster and earthenware vases; bags of refined salt, and a thousand other articles of commerce produced or stored in the workshops of Phœnicia. These the chapmen bartered for raw gold by weight, tusks of ivory, ostrich feathers, and girls of approved beauty, slaves taken in war, or in some instances maidens whom their unnatural parents or relatives did not scruple to sell into bondage.

In another portion of the square, provisions and stock, alive and dead, were being offered for sale, for the most part by natives of the country. Here were piles of vegetables and fruits grown in the gardens, sacks of various sorts of grain, bundles of green forage from the irrigated lands without the walls, calabashes full of curdled milk, thick native beer and trusses of reed for thatching. Here again were oxen, mules and asses, or great bucks such as we now know as eland or kudoo, carried in on rough litters of boughs to be disposed of by parties of savage huntsmen who had shot them with arrows or trapped them in pitfalls. Every Eastern tribe and nation seemed to be represented in the motley crowd. Yonder stalked savages, naked except for their girdles, and armed with huge spears, who gazed with bewilderment on the wonders of this mart of the white man; there moved grave, long-bearded Arab merchants or Phœnicians in their pointed caps, or bare-headed whiterobed Egyptians, or half-bred mercenaries clad in mail. Their variety was without end, while from them came a very babel of different tongues as they cried their wares, bargained and quarrelled.

Aziel gazed at this novel sight with interest, till, as he was beginning to weary of it, the crowd parted to right and left, leaving a clear lane across the market-place to the narrow gate of the temple. Along this lane advanced a procession of the priests of El clad in red robes, with tall red caps upon their heads, beneath which their straight hair hung down to their shoulders. In their hands were gilded rods, and round their necks hung golden chains, to which were attached emblems of the god they worshipped. They walked two-and-two to the number of fifty, chanting a melancholy dirge, one hand of each priest resting upon his fellow's shoulder, and as they passed, with the exception of certain Jews, all the spectators uncovered, while some of the more pious of them even fell upon their knees.

After the priests came a second procession, that of the priestesses of Baaltis. These women, who numbered at least a hundred, were clad in white, and wore upon their heads a gauze-like veil that fell to the knees, and was held in place by a golden fillet surmounted with the symbol of a crescent moon. Instead of the golden rods, however, each of them held in her left hand a growing stalk of maize, from the sheathed cob of which hung the bright tassel of its bloom. On her right wrist, moreover, a milk-white dove was fastened by a wire, both corn and dove being tokens of that fertility which, under various guises, was the real object of worship of these people. The sight of these white-veiled women about whose crescentdecked brows the doves fluttered, wildly striving to be free, was very strange and beautiful as they advanced also singing a low and melancholy chant. Aziel searched their faces with his eyes while they passed slowly towards him, and presently his heart bounded, for there among them, clasping the dove she bore to her breast, as though to still its frightened strugglings, was the Lady Elissa. He noticed, too, that as she went beneath the palace walls, she glanced at the window-place of his chamber, but without seeing him for he was seated in the shadow.

Presently the long line of priestesses, followed by hundreds of worshippers, had vanished through the tortuous and narrow entrance of the temple, and Aziel leaned back to think.

There, among the principal votaries of a goddess, the wickedness of whose worship was a scandal and a by-word even in the ancient world, walked the woman to whom he felt so strangely drawn and with whom, if there were any truth in the visions of Issachar and the mysterious warnings of his own soul, his fate was intertwined. As he thought of it a sudden revulsion filled his heart. She was wise and beautiful, and she seemed innocent, but Issachar was right; this girl was the minister of an abominable creed; nay, for aught he knew, she was herself defiled with its abominations, and her wisdom but an evil gift from the evil powers she served. Could he, a prince of the royal blood of the House of Israel and of the ancient Pharaohs of Khem, desire to have anything to do with such an one, he a child of the Chosen People, a worshipper of the true and only God? Yesterday she had thrown a spell upon him, a spell of black magic, or the spell of her imperial beauty, which, it mattered not, but to-day he was the lord of his own mind, and would shake himself free of it and her.

* * *

In the market-place below, the Levite Issachar also had watched the passing of the priests and priestesses of El and Baaltis.

"Tell me, Metem," he asked of the Phœnician who stood beside him, his head respectfully uncovered, "what mummery is this?"

"It is no mummery, worthy Issachar, but a ceremony of public sacrifice, which is to be offered in the temple yonder, for the recovery from her sickness of the Lady Baaltis, the high-priestess."

"Where then is the offering. I see none, unless it be those doves that are tied to the wrists of the women?"

"Nay, Issachar," answered Metem smiling darkly, "the gods ask nobler blood than that of doves. The offering is within, and it is the first-born child of a priestess of Baaltis."

"O Lord of Heaven!" said Issachar lifting up his eyes, "how long will you suffer that this murderous and accursed race should defile the face of earth?"

"Softly, friend," broke in Metem, "I have read your Scriptures, and is it not set out in them that your great forefather was commanded to offer up his first-born in such a sacrifice?"

"Blaspheme not," answered the Jew. "He was commanded indeed, that his heart might be proved, but his hand was stayed. He Whom I worship delights not in the blood of children."

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