

The Burning of Melcarth

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I.

The Herald of the King of Tyre, borne upon a chariot with six white horses, made his way through the busy street.

In the name of the great god Melcarth, and in the King's name, he commanded that all strangers should leave the city upon pain of death.

It was two weeks before the winter solstice, but in that glorious climate many a flower bloomed already in the gardens of the inhabitants.

Cleon, the Greek merchant of Corinth, was prepared for the warning of the herald, but he was none the less annoyed. He had the commercial spirit, and it enraged him to find his business interrupted by a mere festival. He would not so much have minded had Dodeh, his beloved for the period of his residence, agreed to accompany him. A holiday visiting the islands of the coast would have been agreeable if he had some one to play the flute to him, and dance for him upon the deck in the glow of sunset. But Dodeh had refused positively; "her religion came first in her life" — and Cleon, who was rather a sceptic, sighed over the stupidity of fanaticism. He was angry, too, for a somewhat contradictory reason. Since festivals must be, he liked to see them. He fancied himself as a traveled man, and he would have liked to bring back a great story to Corinth in the spring. Still there was nothing for it but compliance; so he made a feast for Dodeh, bade her guard his merchandise in his absence, and in particular to beware of the advances of a certain saucy youth named

Ramman, one of those vagabonds who from all time has infested Eastern cities, living no one knows quite how.

"He shall not be called Ramman for nothing," frowned the Greek, "if he comes about my house in my absence." This was a joke, for Ramman is derived from the verb "ramamu," meaning to bellow.

Dodeh naturally assured the merchant of her eternal truth, and very likely believed what she said; women usually do, at the time. Their deceptions are successful because they are unconscious. They are all faithful, so far as they know; but when it comes to action, it is the "troll" that rules them.

So Cleon took his men and his ship and put to sea; and cruised among the islands till the period of the festival had elapsed. By some error of calculation the ship master arrived off Tyre some hours too soon.

The city lay in utter darkness; but on the beach a flame shone out as if it were a beacon. Dawn broke, and they saw that it was the smouldering effigy of a monstrous man, seated astride a sea-horse proportionally enormous. When the pilot came out with the official who represented the city, in order to see that all was in conformity with Tyrian law, Cleon asked the latter what this might mean and was solemnly assured that "the god had struck him with a thunderbolt." The strange sight and stranger explanation struck the fancy of the Greek; and he more than ever regretted that he was not entitled to witness the wonders about which the people of the city made such mystery.

Dodeh received him with exceeding joy, which her demure demeanor would not hide, for once. She was a woman of twenty years old, of subtle loveliness. Rather short and plump, she was built strong and sturdy; her round face was rosy through its olive, and the effect was heightened by faint blue tattooings on the cheeks and lips. Her eyes were fiery glints beneath dark eyebrows blackened and drawn out with kohl. On her upper lip a fine moustache — the merest hint — betrayed a

passionate temperament. She was silky and sullen and swift and perverse, loving to tease her master with pretended indifference, only to overwhelm him with the greater vehemence at the end, like a cat playing with a mouse. She had all the stealth and self-possession of a cat, moreover; and Cleon thought himself lucky to be beloved of one so skilled in every art of pleasing and exciting. In short, she ended by winning him wholly; for not content with the mere art of love, she had made herself indispensable to his business, teaching him all the tricks of the Tyrians, how they imitated ivory, and adulterated purple, and mixed silk and wool so that no ordinary eye could distinguish the fraud. The result was that he carried her off to Corinth with him when his business was done, and the smiles of Grecian maids failed to disturb him; he had found the one woman of the world. She presided in his house with perfect dignity and charm; the philosophers whose company Cleon affected were more than pleased with her modesty and her education; for she could recite the poems of Sappho, and of Alcaeus, and of Stesichorus and Pittacus and Hermesianax, as well as she could play the flute and dance; while even sterner subjects were familiar to her. She was well acquainted with the philosophy of Pythagoras and of Heraclitus, and had even studied Plato; while, to crown all, she possessed a very pretty gift of divination by throwing handfuls of dried leaves into a fire made of cedarwood and beeswax. She was not a mere priestess of pleasure, it must be understood; she had been brought up from infancy in the temple, and trained and consecrated to the service of the god.

Presently Cleon had to return to Tyre, and this time his voyage was so successful that he determined to establish a regular branch of his business in the city at the end of the summer. It was July when he and Dodeh reached Corinth for the second time, and so devoted was the lover that he made a great festival and married

her. She readily acquiesced in the Greek ceremony, but made a single stipulation, that she should be allowed to hold in her hand some of the sacred fire from the altar during the whole ceremony; for such, she said, was the custom of her people, that the sun, the father of all fire and the giver of all life on earth, might witness to her fidelity on the one hand and make her fertile on the other. But she said this laughingly, and Cleon thought that she cared little for her religion, but yet was half-consciously afraid to fail to carry out its observances.

A month after the marriage they sailed once more for Tyre, where Cleon purchased a large shop for his merchandise, and a house with a garden in the suburbs. All autumn they lived and loved in peace and in prosperity; then Cleon remembered that he was still technically a stranger, and would have to leave the city for the festival. He was much more annoyed than on the previous occasion; for he had "settled down" with Dodeh, and become fat and lazy; besides, he was all on fire to see the ceremony of which he had only witnessed the aftermath. He expressed his feelings in the plainest words to Dodeh. It was the nearest approach to ill-temper he had ever shown.

She laughed in her most fascinating way. "Dear baby," she said, "what a fuss about nothing! All you need do is to leave the city openly and lie off shore a few miles out to sea; I will get a little boat and come for you at night. You shall come back here; I will disguise you, and we will see the ceremony together — except the last day, when women are not allowed to participate. But I will tell you exactly what to do, and you shall see everything." Cleon was enchanted at her ready compliance, and her quick solution; when the time came he left Tyre in great state, taking a most affecting public farewell of his wife, to throw as much dust as possible in the eyes of the world. That night Dodeh did as she had said; they got back to the villa without being observed, and though it was all dark without, within

were lights and flowers and a splendid banquet ready. Never had Dodeh been so hilarious as she was that night; the slightest incidents seemed to amuse her, and in consequence she was equally amusing. They really behaved like two silly children; one would have said they had been parted for a year instead of a bare fraction of a day.

II.

For the next three days the happy couple remained quietly at home, save for an hour or so in the morning, when Dodeh went to the market and the temple in order not to arouse comment in the city. On the fourth day the festival was to begin.

That morning Dodeh came home with quantities of live quails, which Cleon had not seen before the festival. The explanation was that Asteria, the mother of Melcarth, was a quail, and these birds might therefore not be eaten until the birth of Melcarth, which was to be celebrated that night. Shortly after sunset Dodeh dressed Cleon in the disguise of a slave and made him carry the quails; and they went forth together to a part of the city where they were not known. At every place where four streets met a bale-fire blazed. Around these fires the people were assembled, in great solemnity, every one with bright clothes, and most of them carrying one or more live quails, each according to his rank and wealth. Priests walked up and down the street in twos and threes, chanting:

Rejoice! Rejoice!
O men of Tyre, rejoice!
O women of Tyre, clap hands!
Asteria your goddess is ill at ease.
She is bowed upon the arms of her handmaidens.
Cry aloud that Asteria may be delivered from her pain!
Let a man child be born unto Asteria, even the great god

Melcarth, Lord of Tyre.
Rejoice! Rejoice!

Presently the song changed. It became surpassing slow and sad. One priest began:

"Now is the hour of the tribulation of Asteria."

Another answered:

"Whence came Asteria?"

"From the fire of the sun."

"What shall avail her to purge her of her tribulation?"

"The fire of the sun."

Then rose the voices of the priests in chorus:

"Arise, ye people, let strength and beauty be born of Asteria, mother of Melcarth, Lord of Tyre!"

At that all the people shouted together, and began to leap joyously across the flames, dropping the live quails into them as they sprang. Cleon, following his wife's direction, imitated them. As the quails began to roast, they were recovered from the fire, and every one plucked and ate one then and there. When every one had had his fill, the dance began; but Cleon and Dodeh soon slipped away to the quieter pleasures of the flute.

On the following day, it was evident that Melcarth had indeed been born; for there he stood in the great square that was in the center of the city, in effigy, twenty feet high, upon a seahorse. Around him was a regular scaffolding of logs, with sheaves of straw; in preparation, as Dodeh explained to her husband, for the final bonfire. But this day was to be devoted to the drama of the life of the great God. Dodeh had procured a priest's dress for Cleon, as through her association with the temple she could easily do. They found a secluded station in that part of the temple which was allotted to the priests and priestesses — and this was the only day in the year when women were permitted to

enter the holy place. This enabled them to see perfectly without attracting any special attention.

At high noon the herald entered the temple and bade all men mark the coming of the king. A minute later the rest of the procession arrived. Cleon could see it through the open door of the sacred building. First came a solid phalanx of guards, in white tunics and buskins, with shields, corslets, and helmets of carved and polished brass. They carried spears which had been gilded in honor of the occasion. Next came a company of horsemen, their trappings covered with fans of peacock's feathers. After them came many priests; then the company of the actors of the sacred drama, in the various disguises necessary; then other priests. Next came six gigantic men of swarthy stature, bearing a gilded pole carved with representations of the deeds of Melcarth, and tipped with the image of a pine-cone.

Last came the king, in a chariot of chased ivory and gold. The car was swathed with a great curtain of true Tyrian purple, against which the king showed marvellously, for he wore silks of the richest blue over his golden armor, and in his helmet with its crenellated circlet were seven white ostrich feathers. In his hand he carried the sacred rod of office, for he was high priest as well as king. About him the high ministers of state bore each the symbol of his office.

At the temple the king descended, and did sacrifice at the great altar where burned the perpetual fire. Only the priests and the actors entered with him.

The king gave the signal, and the sacred play began. With every detail the great legend of Melcarth was commemorated; his conquest of the lion and of the dragon, of the Rivers of Destruction and of the Untameable Sea-horse. They represented his cleansing of the land by rain, his fertilizing of the desert by rivers; they showed how he had won the golden fruit from the gardens of the Sunset, and how he had dragged back his friend Mazib from the very heart of hell.

This was the climax of the mystery, for no sooner had the rescued man embraced his savior than the king himself, leaving his throne, stepped forward as though to interrupt the proceedings. He lifted his staff, crying "Woe, woe to the city of Tyre! Melcarth saved Mazib, for Melcarth is a god, the strong, the bountiful. But who shall save Melcarth? For Melcarth goeth down into the grave!" With that he cast his staff upon the ground; he tore his blue robes from his shoulders; he unbuckled his golden armor, and let it clang upon the marble. Appearing only in a loose robe of black without any ornament, he cast dust upon his head from a box presented by the priest who acted as master of the ceremonies, and uttered a long lament, full of terrible predictions as to what would happen to the city when Melcarth was dead, ending every phrase with the woeful question "Who shall save Melcarth? Who shall save the city of Tyre?"

Presently all present began to join in this refrain; it spread without the temple, all down the city streets through the ranks of the assembled people. All tore their robes, all threw dust upon their heads, all beat their foreheads. But now the youngest of all the priests came forward. He alone had not joined in the lamentations; he had stood silent before the fire of the altar as if lost in meditation, from time to time reaching his hand out over the fire, or leaning his head towards it. He was dressed, differently to the other priests, in a short tunic of purple with a skirt to the knee, and a golden cord bound seven times about his waist. On his head he wore a conical cap of carved ivory, ornamented with horns like a bull's. He bore a bow and seven small blunt arrows. Standing before the king he shot the arrows one by one into the air, while all stood silent. Then he spoke.

"An oracle of the god, O King!

"The word of Melcarth to the City of Tyre!

"Melcarth must die, but he must live again!"

The king answered with the old phrase: "Who shall save Melcarth? Who shall save the City of Tyre?"

The young man answered: "An oracle of the god, O king! A man that is a stranger shall save the City of Tyre!"

The king lifted his voice, as if appealing to the people: "Is there any stranger in the City of Tyre?"

Immediately confusion arose, every man pretending to examine his neighbor. After a few moments the king repeated his question, and again the pretended search was made. For the third time the king asked: "Is there any stranger in the City of Tyre?" and this time the answer rolled back, a dirge of utter woe, from every part of the whole city, and even from the suburbs and the surrounding fields and hills, where men had been specially stationed for this part of the ritual, the idea being to include the whole dominion in the sacred formula. With one voice the priests and the people cried aloud: "There is no stranger in the City of Tyre!" At that the entire population gave themselves up to frenzies of affected woe, dispersing gradually to their homes, where they were to abstain from food and from the kindling of any fire, until the morrow. Cleon and Dodeh, profoundly moved by the significance of this strange rite, returned to their villa, and sat, as the ritual prescribed, by the dead ashes of the hearth, lamenting till the dawn.

The critical moment for Cleon was to arrive on the third day of the feast, for no women might accompany the men, so his wife said. Every man must wear a particular disguise, and she had been at pains to prepare one and conceal it in the house of a friend who lived in the great street which led to the center of the city. Cleon would thus have only about half a mile to walk to see the burning of the effigy of Melcarth, and there would be little chance of detection. So a little before noon they reached the house appointed. The street was already lined with guards for the ceremony,

but Dodeh giving a sign to the officer, she was allowed to enter with Cleon. Here she removed his slave's dress, which she had made him wear to explain his presence with her, and proceeded to adorn him for the ceremony. She produced a jar of some sticky substance like resin, stained purple with the famous dye, and covered him from head to foot with it. Over this she threw a lion's skin, and in his hand she put a club. "We must wait till the procession comes," she said, "then you can glide out of the house and mingle with it; no one will notice you. Walk up to the great square with them, but do not speak to any one. Your accent — though it's delightful, heart of my heart! — would give you away at once, and it would be terribly dangerous for you to be recognized as a stranger. We don't like our mysteries spied on; only, I love you!"

Minutes passed by; Cleon began to find this costume extremely hot and the sacred paint peculiarly irritating; but it was worth it. Presently a noise of chanting down the street told them that the procession was near; Cleon, trying hard not to scratch, slipped out of the door. The street was now full of people, many of them in fantastic attire. The sun blazed down upon the scene, and Cleon felt hotter and more uncomfortable than ever. But he was full of strange excitement; the fierce atmosphere of the festival seemed to have communicated itself to him.

In a few moments the head of the procession appeared. It was formed by priests, all wearing the masks of various wild beasts and bearing flaming torches. As he turned to look, the street suddenly cleared; the people had all moved to the side behind the steel-clad line of guards. He realized that he was alone; but instead of retiring among the others, he felt that that was the one thing he could not do. He felt a kind of madness surging in his brain, and at the same moment he realized that the procession was no longer chanting, but roaring and howling in imitation of the wild

beasts whose masks they wore, and that they were charging him. He bounded madly up the street toward the square; the crowd joined in at his heels, and above the cries he heard the jubilant call of the people: "Melcarth shall live again! Tyre shall be saved!"

He reached the square; it was full of men and women with flaming torches on every side. His blood boiled with the frenzy of excitement; he knew that he was shouting in mad glee mingled with horror. Suddenly a flash of sanity came to him; he saw that he was in danger. He dashed at an opening of the square, but the flaming torches closed upon him. The agony of the poisoned paint was now insufferable; he bounded to and fro, raving he knew not what. Ever the torches seemed to hem him in.

And then the darkness fell from his eyes; a great illumination seized him; he must take refuge with Melcarth, with Melcarth who must die and live again. In an ecstasy he bounded upon the pyre; he climbed over the great logs; he caught the stirrup of the god, and hoisted himself on to the shoulders of the sea-horse. As he did so a thousand torches were plunged into the straw, and the flames roared up to heaven. But through them he saw one thing with the last flash of sanity and life; it was Dodeh, in her harlot's dress, lying back in the arms of Ramman, laughing and clapping her hands.