

THE BURNING OF MELCARTH

BY MARK WELLS

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 travelled 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 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 smoldering effigy of a monstrous man, seated astride a sea-horse proportionately 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