



#### IV The Tragedy of Queen Dido

QUEEN Dido had no idea that in her heart she bore a dangerous, festering wound, the sly work of Cupid's invisible arrow. She knew only that she shook with fever all night, and dreamt confused and frightening dreams.

The next morning she spoke to her sister, Anna. As Queen, Dido had few people she could trust. Now she sat on her bed, her face strangely flushed and her palms pressed to her knees. Her words tumbled out unsteadily.

"I had fearful dreams last night, Anna. Do you believe they mean disaster? Did you notice our guest at dinner? He has the broadest shoulders – you can tell he's the son of a goddess. I keep thinking about his terrible suffering. Anna, do you know, if I hadn't sworn to love Sychaeus forever, if I could ever be free to marry again – what am I saying? Anna, don't listen to me, I must be going mad. I swore a public oath before Sychaeus' tomb. Everyone heard me, including the almighty gods. I am still married to Sychaeus, as much now as on our wedding day. If I ever betrayed him, I should deserve to die!" Dido's final words were lost in an outburst of sobbing.

Anna reached out to her sister in sympathy, and waited for the tears to subside. She chose her words carefully; Anna was not clever, but a lifetime as Dido's sister had

taught her a kind of wisdom. "Dido," she said, "we all know how you value honour. Of course you could spend the rest of your life married to a tomb, but aren't you being selfish? You have refused the love of all the African chieftains, even Iarbas, the grandest of them all. You've proved your loyalty to Sychaeus. Now you should think of your people."

"What do you mean?" The Queen was looking up now.

"Here we are, in a strange land, surrounded by hostile tribes. You've done wonders, Dido, but what if there's a war? What if our brother Pygmalion comes after us? Isn't it time Carthage had a strong man to lead her army? Have you thought what a mighty nation we could become if the Trojans joined us and settled here?"

Anna paused long enough to look at Dido's flushed face and trembling, clutching fingers. Confidently now, she went on: "Pray to the gods to release you from your vow. They are not cruel, and Juno has always favoured you. You have served her long enough to prove your devotion. This stormy weather is just what we need; the Trojans won't be sailing till the spring."

Dido had heard enough. Within the hour the Queen's orders were ringing through the palace – a special day of offerings and prayers to the heavenly gods, with particular devotion to Juno. The courtiers remarked on the Queen's excellent sense of piety, and bustled about with preparations, selecting perfect beasts for sacrifice and decking the altars with flowers.

It seemed to Dido that the ceremonies calmed her spirit. She arranged a tour of the city for her guests, and chattered gaily and long to Aeneas about the splendid plans for great temples, public squares, impenetrable walls and lofty

towers. She hardly heard her own words, knowing only what her heart was speaking.

With friendly good-byes they returned to their own quarters. But Dido found herself inventing empty messages to be delivered to Aeneas urgently, and then cancelled them in shame. She showered gifts on the delighted Iulus, and then locked herself away to cry on her bed. The business of Carthage was forgotten; impatient officials were told that the Queen was unable to see them; the people wondered at her absence from state ceremonies. Left without instructions, workmen abandoned the building-sites: the shadows of half-finished towers grew long across the city.

High in the home of the gods, Juno was well aware of the change in her favourite city. She approached Venus directly. "Well done!" Juno began, "You have managed to overwhelm a poor mortal with your divine power! What now? Why don't we make a bargain, you and I? Let us arrange a marriage: then Dido can enjoy that love you know so much about, and my Carthage can flourish with a strong king by the Queen's side."

Venus smiled: "I'm sure you know best. As Jupiter's mighty queen, you must know what the Fates intend. If it is decreed that Trojans and Carthaginians must rule a joint kingdom, then go ahead."

Juno replied quickly: "You can leave all that to me. My proposal is this: tomorrow Dido and Aeneas are planning a hunting-party in the woods. While they are out, I shall arrange a sudden cloudburst. Everyone will scatter for cover and our happy couple will make for the same cave. A perfect setting for a wedding. As goddess of marriage, I shall see that everything is done properly – if you have no objection."

Venus bit back another smile, and nodded.

Day came, and a laughing, gaily-dressed crowd gathered for the hunt. Barking hounds frisked about, slaves clattered to and fro with spears and nets, and young men showed off their keen horses, proud and anxious to prove their courage. Iulus, astride his first real mount, galloped back and forth, rehearsing fearsome war-cries for the lion and wild boar he hoped to meet. Dido's horse stood pawing the ground, a magnificent beast with harness of purple and gold. The Queen's outfit was also purple and gold, down to the buckle in her hair and the quiver of arrows slung over her shoulder. As for Aeneas, his rich garments suited his graceful, godlike figure.

The rumbling began when they were quite some way from the city. Gay laughter turned to cries of alarm as the sky darkened, and hailstones struck fiercely and rapidly at unprotected heads and bodies. "Run!" came the general call, and people made for bushes, huts, overhanging rocks, any shelter they could reach. The Queen of Carthage and the Trojan leader took refuge in a nearby cave.

Then Mother Earth herself gave a signal; Juno appeared as matron-of-honour. In the sky lightning flared like wedding-torches, and a choir of mountain-nymphs wailed an eerie hymn. Aeneas looked out and saw only a storm, but Dido's distorted mind formed everything into a ceremony of marriage. No need now, she thought, to fret about her reputation. Her vow was forgotten. It was marriage she lived in now, not sin.

Almost at once, Rumour began to fly about. Rumour is a dreadful monster, full of feathers, and eyes, and tongues and ears. It screams through the world at night, and watches from roof-tops by day, never silent, always



squawking a mixture of truth and lies. This Rumour spread swiftly through the tribes of North Africa, crying: "A Trojan wanderer, Aeneas, has come visiting Carthage. Dido has given up everything for him. They're spending all winter wallowing in disgusting orgies, never giving a thought to their royal duties. What a shocking scandal!"

Among the African chieftains who heard the spiteful words of Rumour was Iarbas, richest and most powerful of them all, and, some said, a son of Jupiter himself. Iarbas, whose own proposals to Dido had received hardly a polite reply, cursed in jealous rage, and cried out to the mighty King of heaven, "Is this all I get for my life-long devotion to the gods? Is that Trojan pansy going to make a fool of me? If so, I'll call Jupiter's power nothing but empty rumour!"

His words were heard. Almighty Jupiter turned his gaze to the walls of Carthage, and at once beckoned Mercury, the quicksilver messenger of the gods: "Fly down to Carthage, my son, and deliver these words to the Trojan leader. This is not the future he was born to have; this is not why he survived the ruin of Troy. His race is destined to rule Italy, a nation bursting with power and exulting in war, and to conquer the world and unite it under one law. If such a glorious destiny is nothing to him, does he mean to deprive his son of its splendour? Why is he wasting his time with a nation which is to be no friend of his? That is all; give him this message from me."

Mercury slipped on his winged sandals, and picked up the staff that was his token as herald of the gods. It assured him safe passage anywhere, even to the dreaded kingdom of the dead. His journey to Carthage took only a moment.

Aeneas, richly cloaked and wearing a jewelled sword

that was Dido's gift, was discussing plans for the building of Carthage. Round him Trojan and Carthaginian officers were absorbed in argument. Only Aeneas noticed the shimmering figure. His ears alone heard the taunting words: "Well, then, here we are, busy building a city for our lady-friend! What about your own work? The father of gods and men has noticed a little – shall we say – slackness? I have been sent to tell you this: even if you have forgotten all about your own glorious future, how about giving some thought to your son's? You owe him an Italian kingdom and a place called Rome."

The silvery form of Mercury never stood quite still, and before Aeneas could fully grasp its presence, it was gone. The Carthaginians, deep in discussion, did not notice Aeneas' pale, horrified stare. They barely heard his muttered apology and abrupt departure.

Aeneas struggled to master himself. His first impulse was to rush to Dido, and pour out to her all his shock and guilt. But what would Dido say? How could he explain to her that he must leave at once? She would never believe that he had heard a command from heaven. How could he expect her to accept such a story?

He summoned his trusted captains. "Men, there's been a change of plan," he said briskly, "We're sailing at once. Get your ships ready, and rouse the crew. But do it quietly – no alarm. The less the locals know, the faster we can sail." He hoped for some protest, some word of regret from one of them, some request for more time. But they were clearly delighted, and hurried away to obey.

All he had to do now was to tell Dido. He practised phrase after phrase in his mind, and made his way slowly to the palace.

In the end, however, he had no need to say anything. Rumour, swiftest of all creatures, had reached the palace well before him. The Queen was waiting.

“Did you think you could just slip away?” she screamed as he entered. The shrill voice belonged to a woman betrayed, not to the Queen of Carthage. “Never mind your wife! Never mind your marriage vows! Are you so desperate to leave that you’ll set sail in this winter weather? And for an unknown land! Would you even sail back to Troy in this season? Is it something I have done? See, I’m begging you now – for the sake of everything we’ve been to each other, if I’ve ever helped you in the slightest way, change your mind. Think what fate you’re leaving me to suffer: because of you, all the tribes of Africa hate me, and even my own people resent me now. I gave up for you the dearest thing I had – my vow to Sychaeus. My reputation is gone. You’re leaving me to my murderous brother. Or would you prefer me to beg for the mercy of some savage chief? What can I call you – deserter? husband? guest? If only, if only we could have had a son, a little Aeneas who could remind me of you . . .” Dido’s words faded into the silence of despair.

Aeneas had to speak. His voice showed little emotion. “Your majesty, I would never deny nor forget what you have done for me and my people. As long as I live, I shall speak your name with honour. But let me, madam, make a few points about this matter: you are mistaken. I have not been planning a secret escape. I am not your husband; we have never been married. If the Fates had been kind to me, I should still be living in Troy with my family. But instead, I am summoned to Italy. Apollo’s oracles, visions and dreams every night, the ghost of my father Anchises,

and now a heavenly messenger – all of them cry the same word: ‘Italy’. You, of all people, should understand what drives a man to seek his own land. Please stop tormenting me. Italy is my destiny, not my choice!”

Aeneas bowed formally as he finished. Avoiding the Queen’s unbelieving stare, he turned to go.

“Stop!” It was a Queen’s anger that commanded him now. “I have something to say to you before you go. You have shown not a moment of human compassion, so how can I believe your claims to divine or noble parentage? No, you were born of stone, nursed by the heartless cliffs and brought up by wild beasts. I have been too trusting. I saved you and your crew from death and raised you to a high place in my kingdom. And, in return, what is my reward? The gods command you to depart? Well, I will not detain you. Off you go, chase your Italian kingdom. I only hope that one day you will regret this, that when it is too late, you will call out my name. You can be sure that I will come. My spirit will be there to taunt you as you die in agony. Your punishment is waiting.”

Dido did not stay for any reply. Her departure was regal. She swept through the doorway, stopped, and suddenly fainted. Her horrified ladies carried her to the bedroom.

Aeneas stood alone for a few moments, desperate to offer her comfort, his heart melting with love. Then, sighing deeply, he left the palace. He went down to the harbour and sharply ordered the men to be speedier. The slightest delay was impossible.

Anna came from the palace with a message for him: the Queen was asking the Trojan leader to re-consider the hazards of winter sailing; a short delay would ensure a safe journey. The Queen reminded the noble Trojan prince that

she was guilty of no crimes against his people, and that he had no cause to vent his anger against her. The Queen promised the royal hero that she would never again mention marriage; she only requested a few days to calm her troubled spirit.

Aeneas heard all these requests without expression or comment. "Thank the Queen for her concern, but our arrangements cannot be altered now," he said eventually.

Dido now spent all her time before the altars of the gods, performing the sacred rites, and examining the offerings. When she saw the wine turn to blood, she was not even surprised. She hung decorations on the memorial to Sychaeus, and listened for long hours to the voice she could hear calling from the tomb. Finally she spoke, no longer frantic, to her sister:

"Anna, I remember once meeting a witch who told me how to destroy the spell of an evil love. She taught me the ritual – what words to say and what herbs to mix. You must help me: it is very important to prepare a bonfire in secret and burn up everything that could remind me of that man: his clothes, his armour, and especially our bed. Once they are all gone, I shall be free of him forever."

Anna, in great relief, hurried away to make preparations. Dido approached the altars once more and called on the gods – but now she was not praying to the heavenly powers. She invoked Darkness and Chaos, Hecate the witch-queen, and the pale Moon-maiden. She mixed herbs plucked by moonlight with poisonous syrup, and prayed for death.

The night was peaceful. All the country slept, all creatures of the fields, of air and water. Dido alone struggled with her final questions, "Should I become the bride of a

nomad chief? Should I sail after the Trojan fleet? Better die; it's what I deserve for betraying Sychaeus."

On the Trojan flagship, Aeneas slept, all preparations made for an early departure, but his dreams were invaded roughly by the shining figure of Mercury. "How can you sleep? Can't you hear the friendly breezes? Get moving! She's plotting some new form of torture for you. You can't trust a woman."

Aeneas started. He was fully awake, but there was no one with him; Mercury had vanished. He roused his officers and crew. "Man the oars! We're sailing!" There was a general cheer. Each sailor took his appointed place. Aeneas cut the mooring-rope with a single blow of his sword. The ships began to slip out of the harbour. No lanterns shone. Aeneas stood on the prow, his arm around his son, and prayed with all his heart, "Lead on, you heavenly powers. Protect us from harm and grant us safe passage."

The first rays of dawn revealed the empty harbour, and the open sea dotted with sails. No one needed to tell Dido the news; she saw it for herself from the palace window. Was this man going to make a fool of her? She rushed to the door, ready to order the fastest ships of Carthage to give chase. But she did not speak the words of command; instead, she sank to the floor, a hopeless and bitter figure of a Queen, and addressed her own reflexion in the marble paving which glinted at her in cold mockery:

"It's too late, Dido. You should have thought more clearly before you handed him your kingdom. Too bad that you believed his stories of faith and devotion. You could have had him torn to pieces when he landed.

You could have slaughtered his son and carved up his corpse for the table. That would have been more fitting."

She rose unsteadily and crossed to the window. The spreading sails could still be seen, but they were smaller now. Dido raised her eyes to the sky: "Mighty Sun, Juno my guardian, goddesses of the night and avenging Furies, hear my final prayers. If Fate has decreed that he must reach land safely, then let him never enjoy it in peace. Let him be torn by wars and the loss of his dearest friends, and send him an early, dishonourable death. This is my last prayer – I offer it with my blood."

Dido's gaze turned now to the rooftops of the city she had loved: "People of Carthage, hate his race forever! Bring forth a hero to avenge my wrongs, to beat them low, and destroy them with fire and sword. Fight them, my people, father and son, enemies to the end of time!"

Dido called an old servant, and sent her to tell Anna that it was time to begin the solemn ritual of purification. The woman bustled away importantly, and Dido flung open the doors of the inner courtyard.

Anna had, as usual, carried out her instructions faithfully. A large wood-heap had been prepared, and piled on top were some clothes Aeneas had left, his armour, and the royal bed.

Dido paused no longer. She pulled herself up onto the pyre, and grasped Aeneas' sword. "I have accomplished a little. My city walls stand firm, my husband's death is avenged. I could have been happy, but the Fates were against me."

Her ladies, wearing holy garlands on their heads, stood ready with torches flaming. Dido motioned them to set the pyre alight, and they, cowed by the look in the Queen's

eyes, obeyed. Dido raised the sword, "Look hard at this smoke, Aeneas," she cried, "and bear forever the curse of my death!"

The shriek of women echoed from the walls. At once Rumour careered about the palace, till all was spinning in commotion. Anna burst into the courtyard. Ignoring the flames, she plucked her sister from the pyre and pressed her robes against the flowing wound. She repeated Dido's name, staunching the blood, hugging her to her own breast, calling for water, cursing her own stupidity.

Dido made a last effort to speak, but could only gasp. Her eyes were rolling wildly, taking in the sky, the walls, the pyre, her sister's face.

It was great Juno who took pity on Dido's final agony, and sent her servant Iris to bring Dido relief. Iris flew down in a sweeping arc, leaving a trail of rainbow hues in her wake, and whispered soothing words to the dying Queen. Then she cut a lock of Dido's hair, and set her spirit free.