

CHAPTER VIII

THE DEATH-HOUNDS

It may have been ten o'clock on the following morning, or a little past it, when the Shaman Simbri came into my room and asked me how I had slept.

"Like a log," I answered, "like a log. A drugged man could not have rested more soundly."

"Indeed, friend Holly, and yet you look fatigued."

"My dreams troubled me somewhat," I answered. "I suffer from such things. But surely by your face, friend Simbri, you cannot have slept at all, for never yet have I seen you with so weary an air."

"I am weary," he said, with a sigh. "Last night I spent up on my business--watching at the Gates."

"What gates?" I asked. "Those by which we entered this kingdom, for, if so, I would rather watch than travel them."

"The Gates of the Past and of the Future. Yes, those two which you entered, if you will; for did you not travel out of a wondrous Past towards a Future that you cannot guess?"

"But both of which interest you," I suggested.

"Perhaps," he answered, then added, "I come to tell you that within an hour you are to start for the city, whither the Khania has but now gone on to make ready for you."

"Yes; only you told me that she had gone some days ago. Well, I am sound again and prepared to march, but say, how is my foster-son?"

"He mends, he mends. But you shall see him for yourself. It is the Khania's will. Here come the slaves bearing your robes, and with them I leave you."

So with their assistance I dressed myself, first in good, clean under-linen, then in wide woollen trousers and vest, and lastly in a fur-lined camel-hair robe dyed black that was very comfortable to wear, and in appearance not unlike a long overcoat. A flat cap of the same material and a pair of boots made of untanned hide completed my attire.

Scarcely was I ready when the yellow-faced servants, with many bows, took me by the hand and led me down the passages and stairs of the Gate-house to its door. Here, to my great joy, I found Leo, looking pale and troubled, but otherwise as well as I could expect after his sickness. He was attired like myself, save that his garments were of a finer quality, and the overcoat was white, with a hood to it, added, I

suppose, to protect the wound in his head from cold and the sun. This white dress I thought became him very well, also about it there was nothing grotesque or even remarkable. He sprang to me and seized my hand, asking how I fared and where I had been hidden away, a greeting of which, as I could see, the warmth was not lost upon Simbri, who stood by.

I answered, well enough now that we were together again, and for the rest I would tell him later.

Then they brought us palanquins, carried, each of them, by two ponies, one of which was harnessed ahead and the other behind between long shaft-like poles. In these we seated ourselves, and at a sign from Simbri slaves took the leading ponies by the bridle and we started, leaving behind us that grim old Gate-house through which we were the first strangers to pass for many a generation.

For a mile or more our road ran down a winding, rocky gorge, till suddenly it took a turn, and the country of Kaloon lay stretched before us. At our feet was a river, probably the same with which we had made acquaintance in the gulf, where, fed by the mountain snows, it had its source. Here it flowed rapidly, but on the vast, alluvial lands beneath became a broad and gentle stream that wound its way through the limitless plains till it was lost in the blue of the distance.

To the north, however, this smooth, monotonous expanse was broken by

that Mountain which had guided us from afar, the House of Fire. It was a great distance from us, more than a hundred miles, I should say, yet even so a most majestic sight in that clear air. Many leagues from the base of its peak the ground began to rise in brown and rugged hillocks, from which sprang the holy Mountain itself, a white and dazzling point that soared full twenty thousand feet into the heavens.

Yes, and there upon the nether lip of its crater stood the gigantic pillar, surmounted by a yet more gigantic loop of virgin rock, whereof the blackness stood out grimly against the blue of the sky beyond and the blinding snow beneath.

We gazed at it with awe, as well we might, this beacon of our hopes that for aught we knew might also prove their monument, feeling even then that yonder our fate would declare itself. I noted further that all those with us did it reverence by bowing their heads as they caught sight of the peak, and by laying the first finger of the right hand across the first finger of the left, a gesture, as we afterwards discovered, designed to avert its evil influence. Yes, even Simbri bowed, a yielding to inherited superstition of which I should scarcely have suspected him.

"Have you ever journeyed to that Mountain?" asked Leo of him.

Simbri shook his head and answered evasively.

"The people of the Plain do not set foot upon the Mountain. Among its slopes beyond the river which washes them, live hordes of brave and most savage men, with whom we are oftentimes at war; for when they are hungry they raid our cattle and our crops. Moreover, there, when the Mountain labours, run red streams of molten rock, and now and again hot ashes fall that slay the traveller."

"Do the ashes ever fall in your country?" asked Leo.

"They have been known to do so when the Spirit of the Mountain is angry, and that is why we fear her."

"Who is this Spirit?" said Leo eagerly.

"I do not know, lord," he answered with impatience. "Can men see a spirit?"

"You look as though you might, and had, not so long ago," replied Leo, fixing his gaze on the old man's waxen face and uneasy eyes. For now their horny calm was gone from the eyes of Simbri, which seemed as though they had beheld some sight that haunted him.

"You do me too much honour, lord," he replied; "my skill and vision do not reach so far. But see, here is the landing-stage, where boats await us, for the rest of our journey is by water."

These boats proved to be roomy and comfortable, having flat bows and sterns, since, although sometimes a sail was hoisted, they were designed for towing, not to be rowed with oars. Leo and I entered the largest of them, and to our joy were left alone except for the steersman.

Behind us was another boat, in which were attendants and slaves, and some men who looked like soldiers, for they carried bows and swords. Now the ponies were taken from the palanquins, that were packed away, and ropes of green hide, fastened to iron rings in the prows of the boats, were fixed to the towing tackle with which the animals had been reharnessed. Then we started, the ponies, two arranged tandem fashion to each punt, trotting along a well-made towing path that was furnished with wooden bridges wherever canals or tributary streams entered the main river.

"Thank Heaven," said Leo, "we are together again at last! Do you remember, Horace, that when we entered the land of Kor it was thus, in a boat? The tale repeats itself."

"I can quite believe it," I answered. "I can believe anything. Leo, I say that we are but gnats meshed in a web, and yonder Khania is the spider and Simbri the Shaman guards the net. But tell me all you remember of what has happened to you, and be quick, for I do not know how long they may leave us alone."

"Well," he said, "of course I remember our arrival at that Gate after

the lady and the old man had pulled us out of the river, and, Horace, talking of spiders reminds me of hanging at the end of that string of yak's hide. Not that I need much reminding, for I am not likely to forget it. Do you know I cut the rope because I felt that I was going mad, and wished to die sane. What happened to you? Did you slip?"

"No; I jumped after you. It seemed best to end together, so that we might begin again together."

"Brave old Horace!" he said affectionately, the tears starting to his grey eyes.

"Well, never mind all that," I broke in; "you see you were right when you said that we should get through, and we have. Now for your tale."

"It is interesting, but not very long," he answered, colouring. "I went to sleep, and when I woke it was to find a beautiful woman leaning over me, and Horace--at first I thought that it was--you know who, and that she kissed me; but perhaps it was all a dream."

"It was no dream," I answered. "I saw it."

"I am sorry to hear it--very sorry. At any rate there was the beautiful woman--the Khania--for I saw her plenty of times afterwards, and talked to her in my best modern Greek--by the way, Ayesha knew the old Greek; that's curious."

"She knew several of the ancient tongues, and so did other people. Go on."

"Well, she nursed me very kindly, but, so far as I know, until last night there was nothing more affectionate, and I had sense enough to refuse to talk about our somewhat eventful past. I pretended not to understand, said that we were explorers, etc., and kept asking her where you were, for I forgot to say I found that you had gone. I think that she grew rather angry with me, for she wanted to know something, and, as you can guess, I wanted to know a good deal. But I could get nothing out of her except that she was the Khania--a person in authority. There was no doubt about that, for when one of those slaves or servants came in and interrupted her while she was trying to draw the facts out of me, she called to some of her people to throw him out of the window, and he only saved himself by going down the stairs very quickly.

"Well, I could make nothing of her, and she could make little of me, though why she should be so tenderly interested in a stranger, I don't know--unless, unless--oh! who is she, Horace?"

"If you will go on I will tell you what I think presently. One tale at a time."

"Very good. I got quite well and strong, comparatively speaking, till the climax last night, which upset me again. After that old prophet,

Simbri, had brought me my supper, just as I was thinking of going to sleep, the Khania came in alone, dressed like a queen. I can tell you she looked really royal, like a princess in a fairy book, with a crown on, and her chestnut black hair flowing round her.

"Well, Horace, then she began to make love to me in a refined sort of way, or so I thought, looked at me and sighed, saying that we had known each other in the past--very well indeed I gathered--and implying that she wished to continue our friendship. I fenced with her as best I could; but a man feels fairly helpless lying on his back with a very handsome and very imperial-looking lady standing over him and paying him compliments.

"The end of it was that, driven to it by her questions and to stop that sort of thing, I told her that I was looking for my wife, whom I had lost, for, after all, Ayesha is my wife, Horace. She smiled and suggested that I need not look far; in short, that the lost wife was already found--in herself, who had come to save me from death in the river. Indeed, she spoke with such conviction that I grew sure that she was not merely amusing herself, and felt very much inclined to believe her, for, after all, Ayesha may be changed now.

"Then while I was at my wits' end I remembered the lock of hair--all that remains to us of her," and Leo touched his breast. "I drew it out and compared it with the Khania's, and at the sight of it she became quite different, jealous, I suppose, for it is longer than hers, and not

in the least like.

"Horace, I tell you that the touch of that lock of hair--for she did touch it--appeared to act upon her nature like nitric acid upon sham gold. It turned it black; all the bad in her came out. In her anger her voice sounded coarse; yes, she grew almost vulgar, and, as you know, when Ayesha was in a rage she might be wicked as we understand it, and was certainly terrible, but she was never either coarse or vulgar, any more than lightning is.

"Well, from that moment I was sure that whoever this Khania may be, she had nothing to do with Ayesha; they are so different that they never could have been the same--like the hair. So I lay quiet and let her talk, and coax, and threaten on, until at length she drew herself up and marched from the room, and I heard her lock the door behind her. That's all I have to tell you, and quite enough too, for I don't think that the Khania has done with me, and, to say the truth, I am afraid of her."

"Yes," I said, "quite enough. Now sit still, and don't start or talk loud, for that steersman is probably a spy, and I can feel old Simbri's eyes fixed upon our backs. Don't interrupt either, for our time alone may be short."

Then I set to work and told him everything I knew, while he listened in blank astonishment.

"Great Heavens! what a tale," he exclaimed as I finished. "Now, who is this Hesea who sent the letter from the Mountain? And who, who is the Khania?"

"Who does your instinct tell you that she is, Leo?"

"Amenartas?" he whispered doubtfully. "The woman who wrote the Sherd, whom Ayesha said was the Egyptian princess--my wife two thousand years ago? Amenartas re-born?"

I nodded. "I think so. Why not? As I have told you again and again, I have always been certain of one thing, that if we were allowed to see the next act of the piece, we should find Amenartas, or rather the spirit of Amenartas, playing a leading part in it; you will remember I wrote as much in that record.

"If the old Buddhist monk Kou-en could remember his past, as thousands of them swear that they do, and be sure of his identity continued from that past, why should not this woman, with so much at stake, helped as she is by the wizardry of the Shaman, her uncle, faintly remember hers?"

"At any rate, Leo, why should she not still be sufficiently under its influence to cause her, without any fault or seeking of her own, to fall madly in love at first sight with a man whom, after all, she has always loved?"

"The argument seems sound enough, Horace, and if so I am sorry for the Khania, who hasn't much choice in the matter--been forced into it, so to speak."

"Yes, but meanwhile your foot is in a trap again. Guard yourself, Leo, guard yourself. I believe that this is a trial sent to you, and doubtless there will be more to follow. But I believe also that it would be better for you to die than to make any mistake."

"I know it well," he answered; "and you need not be afraid. Whatever this Khania may have been to me in the past--if she was anything at all--that story is done with. I seek Ayesha, and Ayesha alone, and Venus herself shall not tempt me from her."

Then we began to speak with hope and fear of that mysterious Hesea who had sent the letter from the Mountain, commanding the Shaman Simbri to meet us: the priestess or spirit whom he declared was "mighty from of old" and had "servants in the earth and air."

Presently the prow of our barge bumped against the bank of the river, and looking round I saw that Simbri had left the boat in which he sat and was preparing to enter ours. This he did, and, placing himself gravely on a seat in front of us, explained that nightfall was coming on, and he wished to give us his company and protection through the dark.

"And to see that we do not give him the slip in it," muttered Leo.

Then the drivers whipped up their ponies, and we went on again.

"Look behind you," said Simbri presently, "and you will see the city where you will sleep to-night."

We turned ourselves, and there, about ten miles away, perceived a flat-roofed town of considerable, though not of very great size. Its position was good, for it was set upon a large island that stood a hundred feet or more above the level of the plain, the river dividing into two branches at the foot of it, and, as we discovered afterwards, uniting again beyond.

The vast mound upon which this city was built had the appearance of being artificial, but very possibly the soil whereof it was formed had been washed up in past ages during times of flood, so that from a mudbank in the centre of the broad river it grew by degrees to its present proportions. With the exception of a columned and towered edifice that crowned the city and seemed to be encircled by gardens, we could see no great buildings in the place.

"How is the city named?" asked Leo of Simbri.

"Kaloon," he answered, "as was all this land even when my fore-fathers, the conquerors, marched across the mountains and took it more than two

thousand years ago. They kept the ancient title, but the territory of the Mountain they called Hes, because they said that the loop upon yonder peak was the symbol of a goddess of this name whom their general worshipped."

"Priestesses still live there, do they not?" said Leo, trying in his turn to extract the truth.

"Yes, and priests also. The College of them was established by the conquerors, who subdued all the land. Or rather, it took the place of another College of those who fashioned the Sanctuary and the Temple, whose god was the fire in the Mountain, as it is that of the people of Kaloon to-day."

"Then who is worshipped there now?"

"The goddess Hes, it is said; but we know little of the matter, for between us and the Mountain folk there has been enmity for ages. They kill us and we kill them, for they are jealous of their shrine, which none may visit save by permission, to consult the Oracle and to make prayer or offering in times of calamity, when a Khan dies, or the waters of the river sink and the crops fail, or when ashes fall and earthquakes shake the land, or great sickness comes. Otherwise, unless they attack us, we leave them alone, for though every man is trained to arms, and can fight if need be, we are a peaceful folk, who cultivate the soil from generation to generation, and thus grow rich. Look round you. Is it

not a scene of peace?"

We stood up in the boat and gazed about us at the pastoral prospect. Everywhere appeared herds of cattle feeding upon meadow lands, or troops of mules and horses, or square fields sown with corn and outlined by trees. Village folk, also, clad in long, grey gowns, were labouring on the land, or, their day's toil finished, driving their beasts homewards along roads built upon the banks of the irrigation dykes, towards the hamlets that were placed on rising knolls amidst tall poplar groves.

In its sharp contrast with the arid deserts and fearful mountains amongst which we had wandered for so many years, this country struck us as most charming, and indeed, seen by the red light of the sinking sun on that spring day, even as beautiful with the same kind of beauty which is to be found in Holland. One could understand too that these landowners and peasant-farmers would by choice be men of peace, and what a temptation their wealth must offer to the hungry, half-savage tribes of the mountains.

Also it was easy to guess when the survivors of Alexander's legions under their Egyptian general burst through the iron band of snow-clad hills and saw this sweet country, with its homes, its herds, and its ripening grass, that they must have cried with one voice, "We will march and fight and toil no more. Here we will sit us down to live and die." Thus doubtless they did, taking them wives from among the women of the people of the land which they had conquered--perhaps after a single

battle.

Now as the light faded the wreaths of smoke which hung over the distant Fire-mountain began to glow luridly. Redder and more angry did they become while the darkness gathered, till at length they seemed to be charged with pulsing sheets of flame propelled from the womb of the volcano, which threw piercing beams of light through the eye of the giant loop that crowned its brow. Far, far fled those beams, making a bright path across the land, and striking the white crests of the bordering wall of mountains. High in the air ran that path, over the dim roofs of the city of Kaloon, over the river, yes, straight above us, over the mountains, and doubtless--though there we could not follow them--across the desert to that high eminence on its farther side where we had lain bathed in their radiance. It was a wondrous and most impressive sight, one too that filled our companions with fear, for the steersmen in our boats and the drivers on the towing-path groaned aloud and began to utter prayers. "What do they say?" asked Leo of Simbri.

"They say, lord, that the Spirit of the Mountain is angry, and passes down yonder flying light that is called the Road of Hes to work some evil to our land. Therefore they pray her not to destroy them."

"Then does that light not always shine thus?" he asked again.

"Nay, but seldom. Once about three months ago, and now to-night, but before that not for years. Let us pray that it portends no misfortune to

Kaloon and its inhabitants."

For some minutes this fearsome illumination continued, then it ceased as suddenly as it had begun, and there remained of it only the dull glow above the crest of the peak.

Presently the moon rose, a white, shining ball, and by its rays we perceived that we drew near to the city. But there was still something left for us to see before we reached its shelter. While we sat quietly in the boat--for the silence was broken only by the lapping of the still waters against its sides and the occasional splash of the slackened tow-line upon their surface--we heard a distant sound as of a hunt in full cry.

Nearer and nearer it came, its volume swelling every moment, till it was quite close at last. Now echoing from the trodden earth of the towing-path--not that on which our ponies travelled, but the other on the west bank of the river--was heard the beat of the hoofs of a horse galloping furiously. Presently it appeared, a fine, white animal, on the back of which sat a man. It passed us like a flash, but as he went by the man lifted himself and turned his head, so that we saw his face in the moonlight; saw also the agony of fear that was written on it and in his eyes.

He had come out of the darkness. He was gone into the darkness, but after him swelled that awful music. Look! a dog appeared, a huge, red

dog, that dropped its foaming muzzle to the ground as it galloped, then lifted it and uttered a deep-throated, bell-like bay. Others followed, and yet others: in all there must have been a hundred of them, every one baying as it took the scent.

"The death-hounds!" I muttered, clasping Leo by the arm.

"Yes," he answered, "they are running that poor devil. Here comes the huntsman."

As he spoke there appeared a second figure, splendidly mounted, a cloak streaming from his shoulders, and in his hand a long whip, which he waved. He was big but loosely jointed, and as he passed he turned his face also, and we saw that it was that of a madman. There could be no doubt of it; insanity blazed in those hollow eyes and rang in that savage, screeching laugh.

"The Khan! The Khan!" said Simbri, bowing, and I could see that he was afraid.

Now he too was gone, and after him came his guards. I counted eight of them, all carrying whips, with which they flogged their horses.

"What does this mean, friend Simbri?" I asked, as the sounds grew faint in the distance.

"It means, friend Holly," he answered, "that the Khan does justice in his own fashion--hunting to death one that has angered him."

"What then is his crime? And who is that poor man?"

"He is a great lord of this land, one of the royal kinsmen, and the crime for which he has been condemned is that he told the Khania he loved her, and offered to make war upon her husband and kill him, if she would promise herself to him in marriage. But she hated the man, as she hates all men, and brought the matter before the Khan. That is all the story."

"Happy is that prince who has so virtuous a wife!" I could not help saying unctuously, but with meaning, and the old wretch of a Shaman turned his head at my words and began to stroke his white beard.

It was but a little while afterwards that once more we heard the baying of the death-hounds. Yes, they were heading straight for us, this time across country. Again the white horse and its rider appeared, utterly exhausted, both of them, for the poor beast could scarcely struggle on to the towing-path. As it gained it a great red hound with a black ear gripped its flank, and at the touch of the fangs it screamed aloud in terror as only a horse can. The rider sprang from its back, and, to our horror, ran to the river's edge, thinking evidently to take refuge in our boat. But before ever he reached the water the devilish brutes were upon him.

What followed I will not describe, but never shall I forget the scene of those two heaps of worrying wolves, and of the maniac Khan, who yelled in his fiendish joy, and cheered on his death-hounds to finish their red work.