

CHAPTER X

IN THE SHAMAN'S CHAMBER

One night Simbri asked us to dine with him in his own apartments in the highest tower of the palace--had we but known it, for us a fateful place indeed, for here the last act of the mighty drama was destined to be fulfilled. So we went, glad enough of any change. When we had eaten Leo grew very thoughtful, then said suddenly--"Friend Simbri, I wish to ask a favour of you--that you will beg the Khania to let us go our ways."

Instantly the Shaman's cunning old face became like a mask of ivory.

"Surely you had better ask your favours of the lady herself, lord; I do not think that any in reason will be refused to you," he replied.

"Let us stop fencing," said Leo, "and consider the facts. It has seemed to me that the Khania Atene is not happy with her husband."

"Your eyes are very keen, lord, and who shall say that they have deceived you?"

"It has seemed, further," went on Leo, reddening, "that she has been so good as to look on me with--some undeserved regard."

"Ah! perhaps you guessed that in the Gate-house yonder, if you have not forgotten what most men would remember."

"I remember certain things, Simbri, that have to do with her and you."

The Shaman only stroked his beard and said: "Proceed!"

"There is little to add, Simbri, except that I am not minded to bring scandal on the name of the first lady in your land."

"Nobly said, lord, nobly said, though here they do not trouble much about such things. But how if the matter could be managed without scandal? If, for instance, the Khania chose to take another husband the whole land would rejoice, for she is the last of her royal race."

"How can she take another husband when she has one living?"

"True; indeed that is a question which I have considered, but the answer to it is that men die. It is the common lot, and the Khan has been drinking very heavily of late."

"You mean that men can be murdered," said Leo angrily. "Well, I will have nothing to do with such a crime. Do you understand me?"

As the words passed his lips I heard a rustle and turned my head. Behind us were curtains beyond which the Shaman slept, kept his instruments of

divination and worked out his horoscopes. Now they had been drawn, and between them, in her royal array, stood the Khania still as a statue.

"Who was it that spoke of crime?" she asked in a cold voice. "Was it you, my lord Leo?"

Rising from his chair, he faced her and said--"Lady, I am glad that you have heard my words, even if they should vex you."

"Why should it vex me to learn that there is one honest man in this court who will have naught to do with murder? Nay, I honour you for those words. Know also that no such foul thoughts have come near to me. Yet, Leo Vincey, that which is written--is written."

"Doubtless, Khania; but what is written?"

"Tell him, Shaman."

Now Simbri passed behind the curtain and returned thence with a roll from which he read: "The heavens have declared by their signs infallible that before the next new moon, the Khan Rassen will lie dead at the hands of the stranger lord who came to this country from across the mountains."

"Then the heavens have declared a lie," said Leo contemptuously.

"That is as you will," answered Atene; "but so it must befall, not by my hand or those of my servants, but by yours. And then?"

"Why by mine? Why not by Holly's? Yet, if so, then doubtless I shall suffer the punishment of my crime at the hands of his mourning widow," he replied exasperated.

"You are pleased to mock me, Leo Vincey, well knowing what a husband this man is to me."

Now I felt that the crisis had come, and so did Leo, for he looked her in the face and said--"Speak on, lady, say all you wish; perhaps it will be better for us both."

"I obey you, lord. Of the beginning of this fate I know nothing, but I read from the first page that is open to me. It has to do with this present life of mine. Learn, Leo Vincey, that from my childhood onwards you have haunted me. Oh! when first I saw you yonder by the river, your face was not strange to me, for I knew it--I knew it well in dreams. When I was a little maid and slept one day amidst the flowers by the river's brim, it came first to me--ask my uncle here if this be not so, though it is true that your face was younger then. Afterwards again and again I saw it in my sleep and learned to know that you were mine, for the magic of my heart taught me this.

"Then passed the long years while I felt that you were drawing near to

me, slowly, very slowly, but ever drawing nearer, wending onward and outward through the peoples of the world; across the hills, across the plains, across the sands, across the snows, on to my side. At length came the end, for one night not three moons ago, whilst this wise man, my uncle, and I sat together here studying the lore that he has taught me and striving to wring its secrets from the past, a vision came to me.

"Look you, I was lost in a charmed sleep which looses the spirit from the body and gives it strength to stray afar and to see those things that have been and that are yet to be. Then I saw you and your companion clinging to a point of broken ice, over the river of the gulf. I do not lie; it is written here upon the scroll. Yes, it was you, the man of my dreams, and no other, and we knew the place and hurried thither and waited by the water, thinking that perhaps beneath it you lay dead.

"Then, while we waited, lo! two tiny figures appeared far above upon the icy tongue that no man may climb, and oh! you know the rest. Spellbound we stood and saw you slip and hang, saw you sever the thin cord and rush downwards, yes, and saw that brave man, Holly, leap headlong after you.

"But mine was the hand that drew you from the torrent, where otherwise you must have drowned, you the love of the long past and of to-day, aye, and of all time. Yes, you and no other, Leo Vincey. It was this spirit that foresaw your danger and this hand which delivered you from death, and--and would you refuse them now--when I, the Khania of Kaloon, proffer them to you?"

So she spoke, and leaned upon the table, looking up into his face with lips that trembled and with appealing eyes.

"Lady," said Leo, "you saved me, and again I thank you, though perhaps it would have been better if you had let me drown. But, forgive me the question, if all this tale be true, why did you marry another man?"

Now she shrank back as though a knife had pricked her.

"Oh! blame me not," she moaned, "it was but policy which bound me to this madman, whom I ever loathed. They urged me to it; yes, even you, Simbri, my uncle, and for that deed accursed be your head--urged me, saying that it was necessary to end the war between Rassen's faction and my own. That I was the last of the true race, moreover, which must be carried on; saying also that my dreams and my rememberings were but sick phantasies. So, alas! alas! I yielded, thinking to make my people great."

"And yourself, the greatest of them, if all I hear is true," commented Leo bluntly, for he was determined to end this thing. "Well, I do not blame you, Khania, although now you tell me that I must cut a knot you tied by taking the life of this husband of your own choice, for so forsooth it is decreed by fate, that fate which you have shaped. Yes, I must do what you will not do, and kill him. Also your tale of the decree of the heavens and of that vision which led you to the precipice

to save us is false. Lady, you met me by the river because the 'mighty' Hesea, the Spirit of the Mountain, so commanded you."

"How know you that?" Atene said, springing up and facing him, while the jaw of old Simbri dropped and the eyelids blinked over his glazed eyes.

"In the same way that I know much else. Lady, it would have been better if you had spoken all the truth."

Now Atene's face went ashen and her cheeks sank in.

"Who told you?" she whispered. "Was it you, Magician?" and she turned upon her uncle like a snake about to strike. "Oh! if so, be sure that I shall learn it, and though we are of one blood and have loved each other, I will pay you back in agony."

"Atene, Atene," Simbri broke in, holding up his claw-like hands, "you know well it was not I."

"Then it was you, you ape-faced wanderer, you messenger of the evil gods? Oh! why did I not kill you at the first? Well, that fault can be remedied."

"Lady," I said blandly, "am I also a magician?"

"Aye," she answered, "I think that you are, and that you have a mistress

who dwells in fire."

"Then, Khania," I said, "such servants and such mistresses are ill to meddle with. Say, what answer has the Hesea sent to your report of our coming to this land?"

"Listen," broke in Leo before she could reply. "I go to ask a certain question of the Oracle on yonder mountain peak. With your will or without it I tell you that I go, and afterwards you can settle which is the stronger--the Khania of Kaloon or the Hesea of the House of Fire."

Atene listened and for a while stood silent, perhaps because she had no answer. Then she said with a little laugh--"Is that your will? Well, I think that yonder are none whom you would wish to wed. There is fire and to spare, but no lovely, shameless spirit haunts it to drive men mad with evil longings;" and as though at some secret thought, a spasm of pain crossed her face and caught her breath. Then she went on in the same cold voice--"Wanderers, this land has its secrets, into which no foreigner must pry. I say to you yet again that while I live you set no foot upon that Mountain. Know also, Leo Vincey, I have bared my heart to you, and I have been told in answer that this long quest of yours is not for me, as I was sure in my folly, but, as I think, for some demon wearing the shape of woman, whom you will never find. Now I make no prayer to you; it is not fitting, but you have learned too much.

"Therefore, consider well to-night and before next sundown answer.

Having offered, I do not go back, and tomorrow you shall tell me whether you will take me when the time comes, as come it must, and rule this land and be great and happy in my love, or whether, you and your familiar together, you will--die. Choose then between the vengeance of Atene and her love, since I am not minded to be mocked in my own land as a wanton who sought a stranger and was--refused."

Slowly, slowly, in an intense whisper she spoke the words, that fell one by one from her lips like drops of blood from a death wound, and there followed silence. Never shall I forget the scene. There the old wizard watched us through his horny eyes, that blinked like those of some night bird. There stood the imperial woman in her royal robes, with icy rage written on her face and vengeance in her glance. There, facing her, was the great form of Leo, quiet, alert, determined, holding back his doubts and fears with the iron hand of will. And there to the right was I, noting all things and wondering how long I, "the familiar," who had earned Atene's hate, would be left alive upon the earth.

Thus we stood, watching each other, till suddenly I noted that the flame of the lamp above us flickered and felt a draught strike upon my face. Then I looked round, and became aware of another presence. For yonder in the shadow showed the tall form of a man. See! it shambled forward silently, and I saw that its feet were naked. Now it reached the ring of the lamplight and burst into a savage laugh.

It was the Khan.

Atene, his wife, looked up and saw him, and never did I admire that passionate woman's boldness more, who admired little else about her save her beauty, for her face showed neither anger nor fear, but contempt only. And yet she had some cause to be afraid, as she well knew.

"What do you here, Rassen?" she asked, "creeping on me with your naked feet? Get you back to your drink and the ladies of your court."

But he still laughed on, an hyena laugh.

"What have you heard?" she said, "that makes you so merry?"

"What have I heard?" Rassen gurgled out between his screams of hideous glee. "Oho! I have heard the Khania, the last of the true blood, the first in the land, the proud princess who will not let her robes be soiled by those of the 'ladies of the court' and my wife, my wife, who asked me to marry her--mark that, you strangers--because I was her cousin and a rival ruler, and the richest lord in all the land, and thereby she thought she would increase her power--I have heard her offer herself to a nameless wanderer with a great yellow beard, and I have heard him, who hates and would escape from her"--here he screamed with laughter--"refuse her in such a fashion as I would not refuse the lowest woman in the palace.

"I have heard also--but that I always knew--that I am mad; for,

strangers, I was made mad by a hate-philtre which that old Rat," and he pointed to Simbri, "gave me in my drink--yes, at my marriage feast. It worked well, for truly there is no one whom I hate more than the Khania Atene. Why, I cannot bear her touch, it makes me sick. I loathe to be in the same room with her; she taints the air; there is a smell of sorceries about her.

"It seems that it takes you thus also, Yellow-beard? Well, if so, ask the old Rat for a love drink; he can mix it, and then you will think her sweet and sound and fair, and spend some few months jollily enough. Man, don't be a fool, the cup that is thrust into your hands looks goodly. Drink, drink deep. You'll never guess the liquor's bad--till to-morrow--though it be mixed with a husband's poisoned blood," and again Rassen screamed in his unholy mirth.

To all these bitter insults, venommed with the sting of truth, Atene listened without a word. Then, she turned to us and bowed.

"My guests," she said, "I pray you pardon me for all I cannot help. You have strayed to a corrupt and evil land, and there stands its crown and flower. Khan Rassen, your doom is written, and I do not hasten it, because once for a little while we were near to each other, though you have been naught to me for this many a year save a snake that haunts my house. Were it otherwise, the next cup you drank should still your madness, and that vile tongue of yours which gives its venom voice. My uncle, come with me. Your hand, for I grow weak with shame and woe."

The old Shaman hobbled forward, but when he came face to face with the Khan he stopped and looked him up and down with his dim eyes. Then he said--"Rassen, I saw you born, the son of an evil woman, and your father none knew but I. The flame flared that night upon the Fire-mountain, and the stars hid their faces, for none of them would own you, no, not even those of the most evil influence. I saw you wed and rise drunken from your marriage feast, your arm about a wanton's neck. I have seen you rule, wasting the land for your cruel pleasure, turning the fertile fields into great parks for your game, leaving those who tilled them to starve upon the road or drown themselves in ditches for very misery. And soon, soon I shall see you die in pain and blood, and then the chain will fall from the neck of this noble lady whom you revile, and another more worthy shall take your place and rear up children to fill your throne, and the land shall have rest again."

Now I listened to these words--and none who did not hear them can guess the fearful bitterness with which they were spoken--expecting every moment that the Khan would draw the short sword at his side and cut the old man down. But he did not; he cowered before him like a dog before some savage master, the weight of whose whip he knows. Yes, answering nothing, he shrank into the corner and cowered there, while Simbri, taking Atene by the hand, went from the room. At its massive, iron-bound door he turned and pointing to the crouching figure with his staff, said--"Khan Rassen, I raised you up, and now I cast you down. Remember me when you lie dying--in blood and pain."

Their footsteps died away, and the Khan crept from his corner, looking about him furtively.

"Have that Rat and the other gone?" he asked of us, wiping his damp brow with his sleeve; and I saw that fear had sobered him and that for awhile the madness had left his eyes.

I answered that they had gone.

"You think me a coward," he went on passionately, "and it is true, I am afraid of him and her--as you, Yellow-beard, will be afraid when your turn comes. I tell you that they sapped my strength and crazed me with their drugged drink, making me the thing I am, for who can war against their wizardries? Look you now. Once I was a prince, the lord of half this land, noble of form and upright of heart, and I loved her accursed beauty as all must love it on whom she turns her eyes. And she turned them on me, she sought me in marriage; it was that old Rat who bore her message.

"So I stayed the great war and married the Khania and became the Khan; but better had it been for me if I had crept into her kitchen as a scullion, than into her chamber as a husband. For from the first she hated me, and the more I loved, the more she hated, till at our wedding feast she doctored me with that poison which made me loathe her, and thus divorced us; which made me mad also, eating into my brain like

fire."

"If she hated you so sorely, Khan," I asked, "why did she not mix a stronger draught and have done with you?"

"Why? Because of policy, for I ruled half the land. Because it suited her also that I should live on, a thing to mock at, since while I was alive no other husband could be forced upon her by the people. For she is not a woman, she is a witch, who desires to live alone, or so I thought until to-night"--and he glowered at Leo.

"She knew also that although I must shrink from her, I still love her in my heart, and can still be jealous, and therefore that I should protect her from all men. It was she who set me on that lord whom my dogs tore awhile ago, because he was powerful and sought her favour and would not be denied. But now," and again he glowered at Leo, "now I know why she has always seemed so cold. It is because there lived a man to melt whose ice she husbanded her fire."

Then Leo, who all this while had stood silent, stepped forward.

"Listen, Khan," he said. "Did the ice seem like melting a little while ago?"

"No--unless you lied. But that was only because the fire is not yet hot enough. Wait awhile until it burns up, and melt you must, for who can

match his will against Atene?"

"And what if the ice desires to flee the fire? Khan, they said that I should kill you, but I do not seek your blood. You think that I would rob you of your wife, yet I have no such thought towards her. We desire to escape this town of yours, but cannot, because its gates are locked, and we are prisoners, guarded night and day. Hear me, then. You have the power to set us free and to be rid of us."

The Khan looked at him cunningly. "And if I set you free, whither would you go? You could tumble down yonder gorge, but only the birds can climb its heights."

"To the Fire-mountain, where we have business."

Rassen stared at him.

"Is it I who am mad, or are you, who wish to visit the Fire-mountain? Yet that is nothing to me, save that I do not believe you. But if so you might return again and bring others with you. Perchance, having its lady, you wish this land also by right of conquest. It has foes up yonder."

"It is not so," answered Leo earnestly. "As one man to another, I tell you it is not so. I ask no smile of your wife and no acre of your soil. Be wise and help us to be gone, and live on undisturbed in such

fashion as may please you."

The Khan stood still awhile, swinging his long arms vacantly, till something seemed to come into his mind that moved him to merriment, for he burst into one of his hideous laughs.

"I am thinking," he said, "what Atene would say if she woke up to find her sweet bird flown. She would search for you and be angry with me."

"It seems that she cannot be angrier than she is," I answered. "Give us a night's start and let her search never so closely, she shall not find us."

"You forget, Wanderer, that she and her old Rat have arts. Those who knew where to meet you might know where to seek you. And yet, and yet, it would be rare to see her rage. 'Oh, Yellow-beard, where are you, Yellow-beard?' he went on, mimicking his wife's voice. 'Come back and let me melt your ice, Yellow-beard.'"

Again he laughed; then said suddenly--"When can you be ready?"

"In half an hour," I answered.

"Good. Go to your chambers and prepare. I will join you there presently."

So we went.