

CHAPTER XIV

THE COURT OF DEATH

Now the curtains were open. Before us appeared a chamber hollowed from the thickness of the altar, and in its centre a throne, and on the throne a figure clad in waves of billowy white flowing from the head over the arms of the throne down to its marble steps. We could see no more in the comparative darkness of that place, save that beneath the folds of the drapery the Oracle held in its hand a loop-shaped, jewelled sceptre.

Moved by some impulse, we did as Oros had done, prostrating ourselves, and there remained upon our knees. At length we heard a tinkling as of little bells, and, looking up, saw that the sistrum-shaped sceptre was stretched towards us by the draped arm which held it. Then a thin, clear voice spoke, and I thought that it trembled a little. It spoke in Greek, but in a much purer Greek than all these people used.

"I greet you, Wanderers, who have journeyed so far to visit this most ancient shrine, and although doubtless of some other faith, are not ashamed to do reverence to that unworthy one who is for this time its Oracle and the guardian of its mysteries. Rise now and have no fear of me; for have I not sent my Messenger and servants to conduct you to this Sanctuary?"

Slowly we rose, and stood silent, not knowing what to say.

"I greet you, Wanderers," the voice repeated. "Tell me thou"--and the sceptre pointed towards Leo--"how art thou named?"

"I am named Leo Vincey," he answered.

"Leo Vincey! I like the name, which to me well befits a man so goodly. And thou, the companion of--Leo Vincey?"

"I am named Horace Holly."

"So. Then tell me, Leo Vincey and Horace Holly, what came ye so far to seek?"

We looked at each other, and I said--"The tale is long and strange. O--but by what title must we address thee?"

"By the name which I bear here, Hes."

"O Hes," I said, wondering what name she bore elsewhere.

"Yet I desire to hear that tale," she went on, and to me her voice sounded eager. "Nay, not all to-night, for I know that you both are weary; a little of it only. In sooth, Strangers, there is a sameness in this home of contemplations, and no heart can feed only on the past, if

such a thing there be. Therefore I welcome a new history from the world without. Tell it me, thou, Leo, as briefly as thou wilt, so that thou tell the truth, for in the Presence of which I am a Minister, may nothing else be uttered."

"Priestess," he said, in his curt fashion, "I obey. Many years ago when I was young, my friend and foster-father and I, led by records of the past, travelled to a wild land, and there found a certain divine woman who had conquered time."

"Then that woman must have been both aged and hideous."

"I said, Priestess, that she had conquered time, not suffered it, for the gift of immortal youth was hers. Also she was not hideous; she was beauty itself."

"Therefore stranger, thou didst worship her for her beauty's sake, as a man does."

"I did not worship her; I loved her, which is another thing. The priest Oros here worships thee, whom he calls Mother. I loved that immortal woman."

"Then thou shouldst love her still. Yet, not so, since love is very mortal."

"I love her still," he answered, "although she died."

"Why, how is that? Thou saidst she was immortal."

"Perchance she only seemed to die; perchance she changed. At least I lost her, and what I lost I seek, and have sought this many a year."

"Why dost thou seek her in my Mountain, Leo Vincey?"

"Because a vision led me to ask counsel of its Oracle. I am come hither to learn tidings of my lost love, since here alone these may be found."

"And thou, Holly, didst thou also love an immortal woman whose immortality, it seems, must bow to death?"

"Priestess," I answered, "I am sworn to this quest, and where my foster-son goes I follow. He follows beauty that is dead----"

"And thou dost follow him. Therefore both of you follow beauty as men have ever done, being blind and mad."

"Nay," I answered, "if they were blind, beauty would be naught to them who could not see it, and if they were mad, they would not know it when it was seen. Knowledge and vision belong to the wise, O Hes."

"Thou art quick of wit and tongue, Holly, as----" and she checked

herself, then of a sudden, said, "Tell me, did my servant the Khania of Kaloon entertain both of you hospitably in her city, and speed you on your journey hither, as I commanded her?"

"We knew not that she was thy servant," I replied. "Hospitality we had and to spare, but we were sped from her Court hitherward by the death-hounds of the Khan, her husband. Tell us, Priestess, what thou knowest of this journey of ours."

"A little," she answered carelessly. "More than three moons ago my spies saw you upon the far mountains, and, creeping very close to you at night, heard you speak together of the object of your wanderings, then, returning thence swiftly, made report to me. Thereon I bade the Khania Atene, and that old magician her great-uncle, who is Guardian of the Gate, go down to the ancient gates of Kaloon to receive you and bring you hither with all speed. Yet for men who burned to learn the answer to a riddle, you have been long in coming."

"We came as fast as we might, O Hes," said Leo; "and if thy spies could visit those mountains, where no man was, and find a path down that hideous precipice, they must have been able also to tell thee the reason of our delay. Therefore I pray, ask it not of us."

"Nay, I will ask it of Atene herself, and she shall surely answer me, for she stands without," replied the Hesea in a cold voice. "Oros, lead the Khania hither and be swift."

The priest turned and walking quickly to the wooden doors by which we had entered the shrine, vanished there.

"Now," said Leo to me nervously in the silence that followed, and speaking in English, "now I wish we were somewhere else, for I think that there will be trouble."

"I don't think, I am sure," I answered; "but the more the better, for out of trouble may come the truth, which we need sorely." Then I stopped, reflecting that the strange woman before us said that her spies had overheard our talk upon the mountains, where we had spoken nothing but English.

As it proved, I was wise, for quite quietly the Hesea repeated after me--"Thou hast experience, Holly, for out of trouble comes the truth, as out of wine."

Then she was silent, and, needless to say, I did not pursue the conversation.

The doors swung open, and through them came a procession clad in black, followed by the Shaman Simbri, who walked in front of a bier, upon which lay the body of the Khan, carried by eight priests. Behind it was Atene, draped in a black veil from head to foot, and after her marched another company of priests. In front of the altar the bier was set down and the

priests fell back, leaving Atene and her uncle standing alone before the corpse.

"What seeks my vassal, the Khania of Kaloon?" asked the Hesea in a cold voice.

Now Atene advanced and bent the knee, but with little graciousness.

"Ancient Mother, Mother from of old, I do reverence to thy holy Office, as my forefathers have done for many a generation," and again she curtseyed. "Mother, this dead man asks of thee that right of sepulchre in the fires of the holy Mountain which from the beginning has been accorded to the royal departed who went before him."

"It has been accorded as thou sayest," answered the Hesea, "by those priestesses who filled my place before me, nor shall it be refused to thy dead lord--or to thee Atene--when thy time comes."

"I thank thee, O Hes, and I pray that this decree may be written down, for the snows of age have gathered on thy venerable head and soon thou must leave us for awhile. Therefore bid thy scribes that it be written down, so that the Hesea who rules after thee may fulfil it in its season."

"Cease," said the Hesea, "cease to pour out thy bitterness at that which should command thy reverence, oh! thou foolish child, who dost not know

but that to-morrow the fire shall claim the frail youth and beauty which are thy boast. I bid thee cease, and tell me how did death find this lord of thine?"

"Ask those wanderers yonder, that were his guests, for his blood is on their heads and cries for vengeance at thy hands."

"I killed him," said Leo, "to save my own life. He tried to hunt us down with his dogs, and there are the marks of them," and he pointed to my arm. "The priest Oros knows, for he dressed the hurts."

"How did this chance?" asked the Hesea of Atene.

"My lord was mad," she answered boldly, "and such was his cruel sport."

"So. And was thy lord jealous also? Nay, keep back the falsehood I see rising to thy lips. Leo Vincey, answer thou me. Yet, I will not ask thee to lay bare the secrets of a woman who has offered thee her love. Thou, Holly, speak, and let it be the truth."

"It is this, O Hes," I answered. "Yonder lady and her uncle the Shaman Simbri saved us from death in the waters of the river that bounds the precipices of Kaloon. Afterwards we were ill, and they treated us kindly, but the Khania became enamoured of my foster-son."

Here the figure of the Priestess stirred beneath its gauzy wrappings,

and the Voice asked--"And did thy foster-son become enamoured of the Khania, as being a man he may well have done, for without doubt she is fair?"

"He can answer that question for himself, O Hes. All I know is that he strove to escape from her, and that in the end she gave him a day to choose between death and marriage with her, when her lord should be dead. So, helped by the Khan, her husband, who was jealous of him, we fled towards this Mountain, which we desired to reach. Then the Khan set his hounds upon us, for he was mad and false-hearted. We killed him and came on in spite of this lady, his wife, and her uncle, who would have prevented us, and were met in a Place of Bones by a certain veiled guide, who led us up the Mountain and twice saved us from death. That is all the story."

"Woman, what hast thou to say?" asked the Hesea in a menacing voice.

"But little," Atene answered, without flinching. "For years I have been bound to a madman and a brute, and if my fancy wandered towards this man and his fancy wandered towards me--well, Nature spoke to us, and that is all. Afterwards it seems that he grew afraid of the vengeance of Rassen, or this Holly, whom I would that the hounds had torn bone from bone, grew afraid. So they strove to escape the land, and perchance wandered to thy Mountain. But I weary of this talk, and ask thy leave to rest before to-morrow's rite."

"Thou sayest, Atene," said the Hesea, "that Nature spoke to this man and to thee, and that his heart is thine; but that, fearing thy lord's vengeance, he fled from thee, he who seems no coward. Tell me, then, is that tress he hides in the satchel on his breast thy gage of love to him?"

"I know nothing of what he hides in the satchel," answered the Khania sullenly.

"And yet, yonder in the Gatehouse when he lay so sick he set the lock against thine own--ah, dost remember now?"

"So, O Hes, already he has told thee all our secrets, though they be such as most men hide within their breasts;" and she looked contemptuously at Leo.

"I told her nothing of the matter, Khania," Leo said in an angry voice.

"Nay, thou toldest me nothing, Wanderer; my watching wisdom told me. Oh, didst thou think, Atene, that thou couldst hide the truth from the all-seeing Hesea of the Mountain? If so, spare thy breath, for I know all, and have known it from the first. I passed thy disobedience by; of thy false messages I took no heed. For my own purposes I, to whom time is naught, suffered even that thou shouldst hold these, my guests, thy prisoners whilst thou didst strive by threats and force to win a love denied."

She paused, then went on coldly: "Woman, I tell thee that, to complete thy sin, thou hast even dared to lie to me here, in my very Sanctuary."

"If so, what of it?" was the bold answer. "Dost thou love the man thyself? Nay, it is monstrous. Nature would cry aloud at such a shame. Oh! tremble not with rage. Hes, I know thy evil powers, but I know also that I am thy guest, and that in this hallowed place, beneath yonder symbol of eternal Love, thou may'st shed no blood. More, thou canst not harm me, Hes, who am thy equal."

"Atene," replied the measured Voice, "did I desire it, I could destroy thee where thou art. Yet thou art right, I shall not harm thee, thou faithless servant. Did not my writ bid thee through yonder searcher of the stars, thy uncle, to meet these guests of mine and bring them straight to my shrine? Tell me, for I seek to know, how comes it that thou didst disobey me?"

"Have then thy desire," answered Atene in a new and earnest voice, devoid now of bitterness and falsehood. "I disobeyed because that man is not thine, but mine, and no other woman's; because I love him and have loved him from of old. Aye, since first our souls sprang into life I have loved him, as he has loved me. My own heart tells me so; the magic of my uncle here tells me so, though how and where and when these things have been I know not. Therefore I come to thee, Mother of Mysteries, Guardian of the secrets of the past, to learn the truth. At least thou

canst not lie at thine own altar, and I charge thee, by the dread name of that Power to which thou also must render thy account, that thou answer now and here.

"Who is this man to whom my being yearns? What has he been to me? What has he to do with thee? Speak, O Oracle and make the secret clear. Speak, I command, even though afterwards thou dost slay me--if thou canst."

"Aye, speak! speak!" said Leo, "for know I am in sore suspense. I also am bewildered by memories and rent with hopes and fears."

And I too echoed, "Speak!"

"Leo Vincey," asked the Hesea, after she had thought awhile, "whom dost thou believe me to be?"

"I believe," he answered solemnly, "that thou art that Ayesha at whose hands I died of old in the Caves of Kor in Africa. I believe thou art that Ayesha whom not twenty years ago I found and loved in those same Caves of Kor, and there saw perish miserably, swearing that thou wouldst return again."

"See now, how madness can mislead a man," broke in Atene triumphantly.

"'Not twenty years ago,' he said, whereas I know well that more than eighty summers have gone by since my grandsire in his youth saw this

same priestess sitting on the Mother's throne."

"And whom dost thou believe me to be, O Holly?" the Priestess asked, taking no note of the Khania's words.

"What he believes I believe," I answered. "The dead come back to life--sometimes. Yet alone thou knowest the truth, and by thee only it can be revealed."

"Aye," she said, as though musing, "the dead come back to life--sometimes--and in strange shape, and, mayhap, I know the truth. To-morrow when yonder body is borne on high for burial we will speak of it again. Till then rest you all, and prepare to face that fearful thing--the Truth."

While the Hesea still spoke the silvery curtains swung to their place as mysteriously as they had opened. Then, as though at some signal, the black-robed priests advanced. Surrounding Atene, they led her from the Sanctuary, accompanied by her uncle the Shaman, who, as it seemed to me, either through fatigue or fear, could scarcely stand upon his feet, but stood blinking his dim eyes as though the light dazed him. When these were gone, the priests and priestesses, who all this time had been ranged round the walls, far out of hearing of our talk, gathered themselves into their separate companies, and still chanting, departed also, leaving us alone with Oros and the corpse of the Khan, which remained where it had been set down.

Now the head-priest Oros beckoned to us to follow him, and we went also. Nor was I sorry to leave the place, for its death-like loneliness--enhanced, strangely enough, as it was, by the flood of light that filled it; a loneliness which was concentrated and expressed in the awful figure stretched upon the bier, oppressed and overcame us, whose nerves were broken by all that we had undergone. Thankful enough was I when, having passed the transepts and down the length of the vast nave, we came to the iron doors, the rock passage, and the outer gates, which, as before, opened to let us through, and so at last into the sweet, cold air of the night at that hour which precedes the dawn.

Oros led us to a house well-built and furnished, where at his bidding, like men in a dream, we drank of some liquor which he gave us. I think that drink was drugged, at least after swallowing it I remembered no more till I awoke to find myself lying on a bed and feeling wonderfully strong and well. This I thought strange, for a lamp burning in the room showed me that it was still dark, and therefore that I could have rested but a little time.

I tried to sleep again, but was not able, so fell to thinking till I grew weary of the task. For here thoughts would not help me; nothing could help, except the truth, "that fearful thing," as the veiled Priestess had called it.

Oh! what if she should prove not the Ayesha whom we desired, but some

"fearful thing"? What were the meaning of the Khania's hints and of her boldness, that surely had been inspired by the strength of a hidden knowledge? What if--nay, it could not be--I would rise and dress my arm. Or I would wake Leo and make him dress it--anything to occupy my mind until the appointed hour, when we must learn--the best--or the worst.

I sat up in the bed and saw a figure advancing towards me. It was Oros, who bore a lamp in his hand.

"You have slept long, friend Holly," he said, "and now it is time to be up and doing."

"Long?" I answered testily. "How can that be, when it is still dark?"

"Because, friend, the dark is that of a new night. Many hours have gone by since you lay down upon this bed. Well, you were wise to rest you while you may, for who knows when you will sleep again! Come, let me bathe your arm."

"Tell me," I broke in----"Nay, friend," he interrupted firmly, "I will tell you nothing, except that soon you must start to be present at the funeral of the Khan, and, perchance, to learn the answer to your questions."

Ten minutes later he led me to the eating-chamber of the house, where I found Leo already dressed, for Oros had awakened him before he came to

me and bidden him to prepare himself. Oros told us here that the Hesea had not suffered us to be disturbed until the night came again since we had much to undergo that day. So presently we started.

Once more we were led through the flame-lit hall till we came to the loop-shaped apse. The place was empty now, even the corpse of the Khan had gone, and no draped Oracle sat in the altar shrine, for its silver curtains were drawn, and we saw that it was untenanted.

"The Mother has departed to do honour to the dead, according to the ancient custom," Oros explained to us.

Then we passed the altar, and behind the statue found a door in the rock wall of the apse, and beyond the door a passage, and a hall as of a house, for out of it opened other doors leading to chambers. These, our guide told us, were the dwelling-places of the Hesea and her maidens. He added that they ran to the side of the Mountain and had windows that opened on to gardens and let in the light and air. In this hall six priests were waiting, each of whom carried a bundle of torches beneath his arm and held in his hand a lighted lamp.

"Our road runs through the dark," said Oros, "though were it day we might climb the outer snows, but this at night it is dangerous to do."

Then taking torches, he lit them at a lamp and gave one to each of us.

Now our climb began. Up endless sloping galleries we went, hewn with inconceivable labour by the primeval fire-worshippers from the living rock of the Mountain. It seemed to me that they stretched for miles, and indeed this was so, since, although the slope was always gentle, it took us more than an hour to climb them. At length we came to the foot of a great stair.

"Rest awhile here, my lord," Oros said, bowing to Leo with the reverence that he had shown him from the first, "for this stair is steep and long. Now we stand upon the Mountain's topmost lip, and are about to climb that tall looped column which soars above."

So we sat down in the vault-like place and let the sharp draught of air rushing to and from the passages play upon us, for we were heated with journeying up those close galleries. As we sat thus I heard a roaring sound and asked Oros what it might be. He answered that we were very near to the crater of the volcano, and that what we heard through the thickness of the rock was the rushing of its everlasting fires. Then the ascent commenced.

It was not dangerous though very wearisome, for there were nearly six hundred of those steps. The climb of the passages had reminded me of that of the gallery of the Great Pyramid drawn out for whole furlongs; that of the pillar was like the ascent of a cathedral spire, or rather of several spires piled one upon another.

Resting from time to time, we dragged ourselves up the steep steps, each of them quite a foot in height, till the pillar was climbed and only the loop remained. Up it we went also, Oros leading us, and glad was I that the stairway still ran within the substance of the rock, for I could feel the needle's mighty eye quiver in the rush of the winds which swept about its sides.

At length we saw light before us, and in another twenty steps emerged upon a platform. As Leo, who went in front of me, walked from the stairway I saw Oros and another priest seize him by the arms, and called to him to ask what they were doing.

"Nothing," he cried back, "except that this is a dizzy place and they feared lest I should fall. Mind how you come, Horace," and he stretched out his hand to me.

Now I was clear of the tunnel, and I believe that had it not been for that hand I should have sunk to the rocky floor, for the sight before me seemed to paralyse my brain. Nor was this to be wondered at, for I doubt whether the world can show such another.

We stood upon the very apex of the loop, a flat space of rock about eighty yards in length by some thirty in breadth, with the star-strewn sky above us. To the south, twenty thousand feet or more below, stretched the dim Plain of Kaloon, and to the east and west the snow-clad shoulders of the peak and the broad brown slopes beneath.

To the north was a different sight, and one more awesome. There, right under us as it seemed, for the pillar bent inwards, lay the vast crater of the volcano, and in the centre of it a wide lake of fire that broke into bubbles and flowers of sudden flame or spouted, writhed and twisted like an angry sea.

From the surface of this lake rose smoke and gases that took fire as they floated upwards, and, mingling together, formed a gigantic sheet of living light. Right opposite to us burned this sheet and, the flare of it passing through the needle-eye of the pillar under us, sped away in one dazzling beam across the country of Kaloön, across the mountains beyond, till it was lost on the horizon.

The wind blew from south to north, being sucked in towards the hot crater of the volcano, and its fierce breath, that screamed through the eye of the pillar and against its rugged surface, bent the long crest of the sheet of flame, as an ocean roller is bent over by the gale, and tore from it fragments of fire, that floated away to leeward like the blown-out sails of a burning ship.

Had it not been for this strong and steady wind indeed, no creature could have lived upon the pillar, for the vapours would have poisoned him; but its unceasing blast drove these all away towards the north. For the same reason, in the thin air of that icy place the heat was not too great to be endured.

Appalled by that terrific spectacle, which seemed more appropriate to the terrors of the Pit than to this earth of ours, and fearful lest the blast should whirl me like a dead leaf into the glowing gulf beneath, I fell on to my sound hand and my knees, shouting to Leo to do likewise, and looked about me. Now I observed lines of priests wrapped in great capes, kneeling upon the face of the rock and engaged apparently in prayer, but of Hes the Mother, or of Atene, or of the corpse of the dead Khan I could see nothing.

Whilst I wondered where they might be, Oros, upon whose nerves this dread scene appeared to have no effect, and some of our attendant priests surrounded us and led us onwards by a path that ran perilously near to the rounded edge of the rock. A few downward steps and we found that we were under shelter, for the gale was roaring over us. Twenty more paces and we came to a recess cut, I suppose, by man in the face of the loop, in such fashion that a lava roof was left projecting half across its width.

This recess, or rock chamber, which was large enough to shelter a great number of people, we reached safely, to discover that it was already tenanted. Seated in a chair hewn from the rock was the Hesea, wearing a brodered, purple mantle above her gauzy wrappings that enveloped her from head to foot. There, too, standing near to her were the Khania Atene and her uncle the old Shaman, who looked but ill at ease, and lastly, stretched upon his funeral couch, the fiery light beating upon his stark form and face, lay the dead Khan, Rassen.

We advanced to the throne and bowed to her who sat thereon. The Hesea lifted her hooded head, which seemed to have been sunk upon her breast as though she were overcome by thought or care, and addressed Oros the priest. For in the shelter of those massive walls by comparison there was silence and folk could hear each other speak.

"So thou hast brought them safely, my servant," she said, "and I am glad, for to those that know it not this road is fearful. My guests, what say you of the burying-pit of the Children of Hes?"

"Our faith tells us of a hell, lady," answered Leo, "and I think that yonder cauldron looks like its mouth."

"Nay," she answered, "there is no hell, save that which from life to life we fashion for ourselves within the circle of this little star. Leo Vincey, I tell thee that hell is here, aye, here," and she struck her hand upon her breast, while once more her head drooped forward as though bowed down beneath some load of secret misery.

Thus she stayed awhile, then lifted it and spoke again, saying--"Midnight is past, and much must be done and suffered before the dawn. Aye, the darkness must be turned to light, or perchance the light to eternal darkness."

"Royal woman," she went on, addressing Atene, "as is his right, thou

hast brought thy dead lord hither for burial in this consecrated place, where the ashes of all who went before him have become fuel for the holy fires. Oros, my priest, summon thou the Accuser and him who makes defence, and let the books be opened that I may pass my judgment on the dead, and call his soul to live again, or pray that from it the breath of life may be withheld.

"Priest, I say the Court of Death is open."