

CHAPTER XV

THE SECOND ORDEAL

Oros bowed and left the place, whereon the Hesea signed to us to stand upon her right and to Atene to stand upon her left. Presently from either side the hooded priests and priestesses stole into the chamber, and to the number of fifty or more ranged themselves along its walls. Then came two figures draped in black and masked, who bore parchment books in their hands, and placed themselves on either side of the corpse, while Oros stood at its feet, facing the Hesea.

Now she lifted the sistrum that she held, and in obedience to the signal Oros said--"Let the books be opened."

Thereon the masked Accuser to the right broke the seal of his book and began to read its pages. It was a tale of the sins of this dead man entered as fully as though that officer were his own conscience given life and voice. In cold and horrible detail it told of the evil doings of his childhood, of his youth, and of his riper years, and thus massed together the record was black indeed.

I listened amazed, wondering what spy had been set upon the deeds of yonder man throughout his days; thinking also with a shudder of how heavy would be the tale against any one of us, if such a spy should companion him from the cradle to the grave; remembering too that

full surely this count is kept by scribes even more watchful than the ministers of Hes.

At length the long story drew to its close. Lastly it told of the murder of that noble upon the banks of the river; it told of the plot against our lives for no just cause; it told of our cruel hunting with the death-hounds, and of its end. Then the Accuser shut his book and cast it on the ground, saying--"Such is the record, O Mother. Sum it up as thou hast been given wisdom."

Without speaking, the Hesea pointed with her sistrum to the Defender, who thereon broke the seal of his book and began to read.

Its tale spoke of all the good that the dead man had done; of every noble word that he had said, of every kind action; of plans which he had made for the welfare of his vassals; of temptations to ill that he had resisted; of the true love that he had borne to the woman who became his wife; of the prayers which he had made and of the offerings which he had sent to the temple of Hes.

Making no mention of her name, it told of how that wife of his had hated him, of how she and the magician, who had fostered and educated her, and was her relative and guide, had set other women to lead him astray that she might be free of him. Of how too they had driven him mad with a poisonous drink which took away his judgment, unchained all the evil in his heart, and caused him by its baneful influence to shrink unnaturally

from her whose love he still desired.

Also it set out that the heaviest of his crimes were inspired by this wife of his, who sought to befoul his name in the ears of the people whom she led him to oppress, and how bitter jealousy drove him to cruel acts, the last and worst of which caused him foully to violate the law of hospitality, and in attempting to bring about the death of blameless guests at their hands to find his own.

Thus the Defender read, and having read, closed the book and threw it on the ground, saying--"Such is the record, O Mother, sum it up as thou hast been given wisdom."

Then the Khania, who all this time had stood cold and impassive, stepped forward to speak, and with her her uncle, the Shaman Simbri. But before a word passed Atene's lips the Hesea raised her sceptre and forbade them, saying--"Thy day of trial is not yet, nor have we aught to do with thee. When thou liest where he lies and the books of thy deeds are read aloud to her who sits in judgment, then let thine advocate make answer for these things."

"So be it," answered Atene haughtily and fell back.

Now it was the turn of the high-priest Oros. "Mother," he said, "thou hast heard. Balance the writings, assess the truth, and according to thy wisdom, issue thy commands. Shall we hurl him who was Rassen feet first

into the fiery gulf, that he may walk again in the paths of life, or head first, in token that he is dead indeed?"

Then while all waited in a hushed expectancy, the great Priestess delivered her verdict.

"I hear, I balance, I assess, but judge I do not, who claim no such power. Let the Spirit who sent him forth, to whom he is returned again, pass judgment on his spirit. This dead one has sinned deeply, yet has he been more deeply sinned against. Nor against that man can be reckoned the account of his deeds of madness. Cast him then to his grave feet first that his name may be whitened in the ears of those unborn, and that thence he may return again at the time appointed. It is spoken."

Now the Accuser lifted the book of his accusations from the ground and, advancing, hurled it into the gulf in token that it was blotted out. Then he turned and vanished from the chamber; while the Advocate, taking up his book, gave it into the keeping of the priest Oros, that it might be preserved in the archives of the temple for ever. This done, the priests began a funeral chant and a solemn invocation to the great Lord of the Under-world that he would receive this spirit and acquit it there as here it had been acquitted by the Hesea, his minister.

Ere their dirge ended certain of the priests, advancing with slow steps, lifted the bier and carried it to the edge of the gulf; then at a sign from the Mother, hurled it feet foremost into the fiery lake below,

whilst all watched to see how it struck the flame. For this they held to be an omen, since should the body turn over in its descent it was taken as a sign that the judgment of mortal men had been refused in the Place of the Immortals. It did not turn; it rushed downwards straight as a plummet and plunged into the fire hundreds of feet below, and there for ever vanished. This indeed was not strange since, as we discovered afterwards, the feet were weighted.

In fact this solemn rite was but a formula that, down to the exact words of judgment and committal, had been practised here from unknown antiquity over the bodies of the priests and priestesses of the Mountain, and of certain of the great ones of the Plain. So it was in ancient Egypt, whence without doubt this ceremony of the trial of the dead was derived, and so it continued to be in the land of Hes, for no priestess ever ventured to condemn the soul of one departed.

The real interest of the custom, apart from its solemnity and awful surroundings, centred in the accurate knowledge displayed by the masked Accuser and Advocate of the life-deeds of the deceased. It showed that although the College of Hes affected to be indifferent to the doings and politics of the people of the Plain that they once ruled and over which, whilst secretly awaiting an opportunity of re-conquest, they still claimed a spiritual authority, the attitude was assumed rather than real. Moreover it suggested a system of espionage so piercing and extraordinary that it was difficult to believe it unaided by the habitual exercise of some gift of clairvoyance.

The service, if I may call it so, was finished; the dead man had followed the record of his sins into that lurid sea of fire, and by now was but a handful of charred dust. But if his book had closed, ours remained open and at its strangest chapter. We knew it, all of us, and waited, our nerves thrilled, with expectancy.

The Hesea sat brooding on her rocky throne. She also knew that the hour had come. Presently she sighed, then motioned with her sceptre and spoke a word or two, dismissing the priests and priestesses, who departed and were seen no more. Two of them remained however, Oros and the head priestess who was called Papave, a young woman of a noble countenance.

"Listen, my servants," she said. "Great things are about to happen, which have to do with the coming of yonder strangers, for whom I have waited these many years as is well known to you. Nor can I tell the issue since to me, to whom power is given so freely, foresight of the future is denied. It well may happen, therefore, that this seat will soon be empty and this frame but food for the eternal fires. Nay, grieve not, grieve not, for I do not die and if so, the spirit shall return again.

"Hearken, Papave. Thou art of the blood, and to thee alone have I opened all the doors of wisdom. If I pass now or at any time, take thou the ancient power, fill thou my place, and in all things do as I have instructed thee, that from this Mountain light may shine upon the world.

Further I command thee, and thee also, Oros my priest, that if I be summoned hence you entertain these strangers hospitably until it is possible to escort them from the land, whether by the road they came or across the northern hills and deserts. Should the Khania Atene attempt to detain them against their will, then raise the Tribes upon her in the name of the Hesea; depose her from her seat, conquer her land and hold it. Hear and obey."

"Mother, we hear and we will obey," answered Oros and Papave as with a single voice.

She waved her hand to show that this matter was finished; then after long thought spoke again, addressing herself to the Khania.

"Atene, last night thou didst ask me a question--why thou dost love this man," and she pointed to Leo. "To that the answer would be easy, for is he not one who might well stir passion in the breast of a woman such as thou art? But thou didst say also that thine own heart and the wisdom of yonder magician, thy uncle, told thee that since thy soul first sprang to life thou hadst loved him, and didst adjure me by the Power to whom I must give my account to draw the curtain from the past and let the truth be known.

"Woman, the hour has come, and I obey thy summons--not because thou dost command but because it is my will. Of the beginning I can tell thee nothing, who am still human and no goddess. I know not why we three

are wrapped in this coil of fate; I know not the destinies to which we journey up the ladder of a thousand lives, with grief and pain climbing the endless stair of circumstance, or, if I know, I may not say.

Therefore I take up the tale where my own memory gives me light."

The Hesea paused, and we saw her frame shake as though beneath some fearful inward effort of the will. "Look now behind you," she cried, throwing her arms wide.

We turned, and at first saw nothing save the great curtain of fire that rose from the abyss of the volcano, whereof, as I have told, the crest was bent over by the wind like the crest of a breaking billow. But presently, as we watched, in the depths of this red veil, Nature's awful lamp-flame, a picture began to form as it forms in the seer's magic crystal.

Behold! a temple set amid sands and washed by a wide, palm-bordered river, and across its pyloned court processions of priests, who pass to and fro with flaunting banners. The court empties; I could see the shadow of a falcon's wings that fled across its sunlit floor. A man clad in a priest's white robe, shaven-headed, and barefooted, enters through the southern pylon gate and walks slowly towards a painted granite shrine, in which sits the image of a woman crowned with the double crown of Egypt, surmounted by a lotus bloom, and holding in her hand the sacred sistrum. Now, as though he heard some sound, he halts and looks towards us, and by the heaven above me, his face is the face of Leo

Vincey in his youth, the face too of that Kallikrates whose corpse we had seen in the Caves of Kor!

"Look, look!" gasped Leo, catching me by the arm; but I only nodded my head in answer.

The man walks on again, and kneeling before the goddess in the shrine, embraces her feet and makes his prayer to her. Now the gates roll open, and a procession enters, headed by a veiled, noble-looking woman, who bears offerings, which she sets on the table before the shrine, bending her knee to the effigy of the goddess. Her oblations made, she turns to depart, and as she goes brushes her hand against the hand of the watching priest, who hesitates, then follows her.

When all her company have passed the gate she lingers alone in the shadow of the pylon, whispering to the priest and pointing to the river and the southern land beyond. He is disturbed; he reasons with her, till, after one swift glance round, she lets drop her veil, bending towards him and--their lips meet.

As time flies her face is turned towards us, and lo! it is the face of Atene, and amid her dusky hair the aura is reflected in jewelled gold, the symbol of her royal rank. She looks at the shaven priest; she laughs as though in triumph; she points to the westering sun and to the river, and is gone.

Aye, and that laugh of long ago is echoed by Atene at our side, for she also laughs in triumph and cries aloud to the old Shaman--"True diviners were my heart and thou! Behold how I won him in the past."

Then, like ice on fire fell the cold voice of the Hesea.

"Be silent, woman, and see how thou didst lose him in the past."

Lo! the scene changes, and on a couch a lovely shape lies sleeping. She dreams; she is afraid; and over her bends and whispers in her ear a shadowy form clad with the emblems of the goddess in the shrine, but now wearing upon her head the vulture cap. The woman wakes from her dream and looks round, and oh! the face is the face of Ayesha as it was seen of us when first she loosed her veil in the Caves of Kor.

A sigh went up from us; we could not speak who thus fearfully once more beheld her loveliness.

Again she sleeps, again the awful form bends over her and whispers. It points, the distance opens. Lo! on a stormy sea a boat, and in the boat two wrapped in each other's arms, the priest and the royal woman, while over them like a Vengeance, raw-necked and ragged-pinioned, hovers a following vulture, such a vulture as the goddess wore for headdress.

That picture fades from its burning frame, leaving the vast sheet of fire empty as the noonday sky. Then another forms. First a great,

smooth-walled cave carpeted with sand, a cave that we remembered well. Then lying on the sand, now no longer shaven, but golden-haired, the corpse of the priest staring upwards with his glazed eyes, his white skin streaked with blood, and standing over him two women. One holds a javelin in her hand and is naked except for her flowing hair, and beautiful, beautiful beyond imagining. The other, wrapped in a dark cloak, beats the air with her hands, casting up her eyes as though to call the curse of Heaven upon her rival's head. And those women are she into whose sleeping ear the shadow had whispered, and the royal Egyptian who had kissed her lover beneath the pylon gate.

Slowly all the figures faded; it was as though the fire ate them up, for first they became thin and white as ashes; then vanished. The Hesea, who had been leaning forward, sank backwards in her chair, as if weary with the toil of her own magic.

For a while confused pictures flitted rapidly to and fro across the vast mirror of the flame, such as might be reflected from an intelligence crowded with the memories of over two thousand years which it was too exhausted to separate and define.

Wild scenes, multitudes of people, great caves, and in them faces, amongst others our own, starting up distorted and enormous, to grow tiny in an instant and depart; stark imaginations of Forms towering and divine; of Things monstrous and inhuman; armies marching, illimitable battle-fields, and corpses rolled in blood, and hovering over them the

spirits of the slain.

These pictures died as the others had died, and the fire was blank again.

Then the Hesea spoke in a voice very faint at first, that by slow degrees grew stronger.

"Is thy question answered, O Atene?"

"I have seen strange sights, Mother, mighty limnings worthy of thy magic, but how know I that they are more than vapours of thine own brain cast upon yonder fire to deceive and mock us?"[*]

[*] Considered in the light of subsequent revelations, vouchsafed to us by Ayesha herself, I am inclined to believe that Atene's shrewd surmise was accurate, and that these fearful pictures, although founded on events that had happened in the past, were in the main "vapours" cast upon the crater fire; visions raised in our minds to "deceive and mock us."--L. H. H.

"Listen then," said the Hesea, in her weary voice, "to the interpretation of the writing, and cease to trouble me with thy doubts. Many an age ago, but shortly after I began to live this last, long life of mine, Isis, the great goddess of Egypt, had her Holy House at Behbit,

near the Nile. It is a ruin now, and Isis has departed from Egypt, though still under the Power that fashioned it and her: she rules the world, for she is Nature's self. Of that shrine a certain man, a Greek, Kallikrates by name, was chief priest, chosen for her service by the favour of the goddess, vowed to her eternally and to her alone, by the dreadful oath that might not be broken without punishment as eternal.

"In the flame thou sawest that priest, and here at thy side he stands, re-born, to fulfil his destiny and ours.

"There lived also a daughter of Pharaoh's house, one Amenartas, who cast eyes of love upon this Kallikrates, and, wrapping him in her spells--for then as now she practised witcheries--caused him to break his oaths and fly with her, as thou sawest written in the flame. Thou, Atene, wast that Amenartas.

"Lastly there lived a certain Arabian, named Ayesha, a wise and lovely woman, who, in the emptiness of her heart, and the sorrow of much knowledge, had sought refuge in the service of the universal Mother, thinking there to win the true wisdom which ever fled from her. That Ayesha, as thou sawest also, the goddess visited in a dream, bidding her to follow those faithless ones, and work Heaven's vengeance on them, and promising her in reward victory over death upon the earth and beauty such as had not been known in woman.

"She followed far; she awaited them where they wandered. Guided by a

sage named Noot, one who from the beginning had been appointed to her service and that of another--thou, O Holly, wast that man--she found the essence in which to bathe is to outlive Generations, Faiths, and Empires, saying--"I will slay these guilty ones. I will slay them presently, as I am commanded.'

"Yet Ayesha slew not, for now their sin was her sin, since she who had never loved came to desire this man. She led them to the Place of Life, purposing there to clothe him and herself with immortality, and let the woman die. But it was not so fated, for then the goddess smote. The life was Ayesha's as had been sworn, but in its first hour, blinded with jealous rage because he shrank from her unveiled glory to the mortal woman at his side, this Ayesha brought him to his death, and alas! alas! left herself undying.

"Thus did the angry goddess work woe upon her faithless ministers, giving to the priest swift doom, to the priestess Ayesha, long remorse and misery, and to the royal Amenartas jealousy more bitter than life or death, and the fate of unending effort to win back that love which, defying Heaven, she had dared to steal, but to be bereft thereof again.

"Lo! now the ages pass, and, at the time appointed, to that undying Ayesha who, whilst awaiting his re-birth, from century to century mourned his loss, and did bitter penance for her sins, came back the man, her heart's desire. Then, whilst all went well for her and him, again the goddess smote and robbed her of her reward. Before her lover's

living eyes, sunk in utter shame and misery, the beautiful became hideous, the undying seemed to die.

"Yet, O Kallikrates, I tell thee that she died not. Did not Ayesha swear to thee yonder in the Caves of Kor that she would come again? for even in that awful hour this comfort kissed her soul. Thereafter, Leo Vincey, who art Killikrates, did not her spirit lead thee in thy sleep and stand with thee upon this very pinnacle which should be thy beacon light to guide thee back to her? And didst thou not search these many years, not knowing that she companioned thy every step and strove to guard thee in every danger, till at length in the permitted hour thou earnest back to her?"

She paused, and looked towards Leo, as though awaiting his reply.

"Of the first part of the tale, except from the writing on the Sherd, I know nothing, Lady," he said; "of the rest I, or rather we, know that it is true. Yet I would ask a question, and I pray thee of thy charity let thy answer be swift and short. Thou sayest that in the permitted hour I came back to Ayesha. Where then is Ayesha? Art thou Ayesha? And if so why is thy voice changed? Why art thou less in stature? Oh! in the name of whatever god thou dost worship, tell me art thou Ayesha?"

"I am Ayesha" she answered solemnly, "that very Ayesha to whom thou didst pledge thyself eternally."

"She lies, she lies," broke in Atene. "I tell thee, husband--for such with her own lips she declares thou art to me--that yonder woman who says that she parted from thee young and beautiful, less than twenty years ago, is none other than the aged priestess who for a century at least has borne rule in these halls of Hes. Let her deny it if she can."

"Oros," said the Mother, "tell thou the tale of the death of that priestess of whom the Khania speaks."

The priest bowed, and in his usual calm voice, as though he were narrating some event of every day, said mechanically, and in a fashion that carried no conviction to my mind--"Eighteen years ago, on the fourth night of the first month of the winter in the year 2333 of the founding of the worship of Hes on this Mountain, the priestess of whom the Khania Atene speaks, died of old age in my presence in the hundred and eighth year of her rule. Three hours later we went to lift her from the throne on which she died, to prepare her corpse for burial in this fire, according to the ancient custom. Lo! a miracle, for she lived again, the same, yet very changed.

"Thinking this a work of evil magic, the Priests and Priestesses of the College rejected her, and would have driven her from the throne. Thereon the Mountain blazed and thundered, the light from the fiery pillars died, and great terror fell upon the souls of men. Then from the deep darkness above the altar where stands the statue of the Mother of Men, the voice of the living goddess spoke, saying--"Accept ye her whom

I have set to rule over you, that my judgments and my purposes may be fulfilled.'

"The Voice ceased, the fiery torches burnt again, and we bowed the knee to the new Hesea, and named her Mother in the ears of all. That is the tale to which hundreds can bear witness."

"Thou hearest, Atene," said the Hesea. "Dost thou still doubt?"

"Aye," answered the Khania, "for I hold that Oros also lies, or if he lies not, then he dreams, or perchance that voice he heard was thine own. Now if thou art this undying woman, this Ayesha, let proof be made of it to these two men who knew thee in the past. Tear away those wrappings that guard thy loveliness thus jealously. Let thy shape divine, thy beauty incomparable, shine out upon our dazzled sight. Surely thy lover will not forget such charms; surely he will know thee, and bow the knee, saying, 'This is my Immortal, and no other woman.'

"Then, and not till then, will I believe that thou art even what thou declarest thyself to be, an evil spirit, who bought undying life with murder and used thy demon loveliness to bewitch the souls of men."

Now the Hesea on the throne seemed to be much troubled, for she rocked herself to and fro, and wrung her white-draped hands.

"Kallikrates," she said in a voice that sounded like a moan, "is this

thy will? For if it be, know that I must obey. Yet I pray thee command it not, for the time is not yet come; the promise unbreakable is not yet fulfilled. I am somewhat changed, Kallikrates, since I kissed thee on the brow and named thee mine, yonder in the Caves of Kor."

Leo looked about him desperately, till his eyes fell upon the mocking face of Atene, who cried--"Bid her unveil, my lord. I swear to thee I'll not be jealous."

At that taunt he took fire.

"Aye," he said, "I bid her unveil, that I may learn the best or worst, who otherwise must die of this suspense. Howsoever changed, if she be Ayesha I shall know her, and if she be Ayesha, I shall love her."

"Bold words, Kallikrates," answered the Hesea; "yet from my very heart I thank thee for them: those sweet words of trust and faithfulness to thou knowest not what. Learn now the truth, for I may keep naught back from thee. When I unveil it is decreed that thou must make thy choice for the last time on this earth between yonder woman, my rival from the beginning, and that Ayesha to whom thou art sworn. Thou canst reject me if thou wilt, and no ill shall come to thee, but many a blessing, as men reckon them--power and wealth and love. Only then thou must tear my memory from thy heart, for then I leave thee to follow thy fate alone, till at the last the purpose of these deeds and sufferings is made clear.

"Be warned. No light ordeal lies before thee. Be warned. I can promise thee naught save such love as woman never gave to man, love that perchance--I know not--must yet remain unsatisfied upon the earth."

Then she turned to me and said:

"Oh! thou, Holly, thou true friend, thou guardian from of old, thou, next to him most beloved by me, to thy clear and innocent spirit perchance wisdom may be given that is denied to us, the little children whom thine arms protect. Counsel thou him, my Holly, with the counsel that is given thee, and I will obey thy words and his, and, whatever befalls, will bless thee from my soul. Aye, and should he cast me off, then in the Land beyond the lands, in the Star appointed, where all earthly passions fade, together will we dwell eternally in a friendship glorious, thou and I alone.

"For thou wilt not reject; thy steel, forged in the furnace of pure truth and power, shall not lose its temper in these small fires of temptation and become a rusted chain to bind thee to another woman's breast--until it canker to her heart and thine."

"Ayesha, I thank thee for thy words," I answered simply, "and by them and that promise of thine, I, thy poor friend--for more I never thought to be--am a thousandfold repaid for many sufferings. This I will add, that for my part I know that thou art She whom we have lost, since,

whatever the lips that speak them, those thoughts and words are Ayesha's and hers alone."

Thus I spoke, not knowing what else to say, for I was filled with a great joy, a calm and ineffable satisfaction, which broke thus feebly from my heart. For now I knew that I was dear to Ayesha as I had always been dear to Leo; the closest of friends, from whom she never would be parted. What more could I desire?

We fell back; we spoke together, whilst they watched us silently. What we said I do not quite remember, but the end of it was that, as the Hesea had done, Leo bade me judge and choose. Then into my mind there came a clear command, from my own conscience or elsewhere, who can say? This was the command, that I should bid her to unveil, and let fate declare its purposes.

"Decide," said Leo, "I cannot bear much more. Like that woman, whoever she may be, whatever happens, I will not blame you, Horace."

"Good," I answered, "I have decided," and, stepping forward, I said: "We have taken counsel, Hes, and it is our will, who would learn the truth and be at rest, that thou shouldst unveil before us, here and now."

"I hear and obey," the Priestess answered, in a voice like to that of a dying woman, "only, I beseech you both, be pitiful to me, spare me your mockeries; add not the coals of your hate and scorn to the fires of a

soul in hell, for whate'er I am, I became it for thy sake, Kallikrates.
Yet, yet I also am athirst for knowledge; for though I know all wisdom,
although I wield much power, one thing remains to me to learn--what is
the worth of the love of man, and if, indeed, it can live beyond the
horrors of the grave?"

Then, rising slowly, the Hesea walked, or rather tottered to the
unroofed open space in front of the rock chamber, and stood there quite
near to the brink of the flaming gulf beneath.

"Come hither, Papave, and loose these veils," she cried in a shrill,
thin voice.

Papave advanced, and with a look of awe upon her handsome face began the
task. She was not a tall woman, yet as she bent over her I noted that
she seemed to tower above her mistress, the Hesea.

The outer veils fell revealing more within. These fell also, and now
before us stood the mummy-like shape, although it seemed to be of less
stature, of that strange being who had met us in the Place of Bones. So
it would seem that our mysterious guide and the high priestess Hes were
the same.

Look! Length by length the wrappings sank from her. Would they
never end? How small grew the frame within? She was very short now,
unnaturally short for a full-grown woman, and oh! I grew sick at heart.

The last bandages uncoiled themselves like shavings from a stick; two wrinkled hands appeared, if hands they could be called. Then the feet--once I had seen such on the mummy of a princess of Egypt, and even now by some fantastic play of the mind, I remembered that on her coffin this princess was named "The Beautiful."

Everything was gone now, except a shift and a last inner veil about the head. He waved back the priestess Papave, who fell half fainting to the ground and lay there covering her eyes with her hand. Then uttering something like a scream she gripped this veil in her thin talons, tore it away, and with a gesture of uttermost despair, turned and faced us.

Oh! she was--nay, I will not describe her. I knew her at once, for thus had I seen her last before the Fire of Life, and, strangely enough, through the mask of unutterable age, through that cloak of humanity's last decay, still shone some resemblance to the glorious and superhuman Ayesha: the shape of the face, the air of defiant pride that for an instant bore her up--I know not what.

Yes, there she stood, and the fierce light of the heartless fires beat upon her, revealing every shame.

There was a dreadful silence. I saw Leo's lips turn white and his knees begin to give; but by some effort he recovered himself, and stayed still and upright like a dead man held by a wire. Also I saw Atene--and this is to her credit--turn her head away. She had desired to see her rival

humiliated, but that horrible sight shocked her; some sense of their common womanhood for the moment touched her pity. Only Simbri, who, I think, knew what to expect, and Oros remained quite unmoved; indeed, in that ghastly silence the latter spoke, and ever afterwards I loved him for his words.

"What of the vile vessel, rotted in the grave of time? What of the flesh that perishes?" he said. "Look through the ruined lamp to the eternal light which burns within. Look through its covering carrion to the inextinguishable soul."

My heart applauded these noble sentiments. I was of one mind with Oros, but oh, Heaven! I felt that my brain was going, and I wished that it would go, so that I might hear and see no more.

That look which gathered on Ayesha's mummy face? At first there had been a little hope, but the hope died, and anguish, anguish, anguish took its place.

Something must be done, this could not endure. My lips clave together, no word would come; my feet refused to move.

I began to contemplate the scenery. How wonderful were that sheet of flame, and the ripples which ran up and down its height. How awesome its billowy crest. It would be warm lying in yonder red gulf below with the dead Rassen, but oh! I wished that I shared his bed and had finished

with these agonies.

Thank Heaven, Atene was speaking. She had stepped to the side of the naked-headed Thing, and stood by it in all the pride of her rich beauty and perfect womanhood.

"Leo Vincey, or Kallikrates," said Atene, "take which name thou wilt; thou thinkest ill of me perhaps, but know that at least I scorn to mock a rival in her mortal shame. She told us a wild tale but now, a tale true or false, but more false than true, I think, of how I robbed a goddess of a votary, and of how that goddess--Ayesha's self perchance--was avenged upon me for the crime of yielding to the man I loved. Well, let goddesses--if such indeed there be--take their way and work their will upon the helpless, and I, a mortal, will take mine until the clutch of doom closes round my throat and chokes out life and memory, and I too am a goddess--or a clod.

"Meanwhile, thou man, I shame not to say it before all these witnesses, I love thee, and it seems that this--this woman or goddess--loves thee also, and she has told us that now, now thou must choose between us once and for ever. She has told us too that if I sinned against Isis, whose minister be it remembered she declares herself, herself she sinned yet more. For she would have taken thee both from a heavenly mistress and from an earthly bride, and yet snatch that guerdon of immortality which is hers to-day. Therefore if I am evil, she is worse, nor does the flame that burns within the casket whereof Oros spoke shine so very pure

and bright.

"Choose thou then Leo Vincey, and let there be an end. I vaunt not myself; thou knowest what I have been and seest what I am. Yet I can give thee love and happiness and, mayhap, children to follow after thee, and with them some place and power. What yonder witch can give thee thou canst guess. Tales of the past, pictures on the flame, wise maxims and honeyed words, and after thou art dead once more, promises perhaps, of joy to come when that terrible goddess whom she serves so closely shall be appeased. I have spoken. Yet I will add a word:

"O thou for whom, if the Hesea's tale be true, I did once lay down my royal rank and dare the dangers of an unsailed sea; O thou whom in ages gone I would have sheltered with my frail body from the sorceries of this cold, self-seeking witch; O thou whom but a little while ago at my own life's risk I drew from death in yonder river, choose, choose!"

To all this speech, so moderate yet so cruel, so well-reasoned and yet so false, because of its glosses and omissions, the huddled Ayesha seemed to listen with a fierce intentness. Yet she made no answer, not a single word, not a sign even; she who had said her say and scorned to plead her part.

I looked at Leo's ashen face. He leaned towards Atene, drawn perhaps by the passion shining in her beautiful eyes, then of a sudden straightened himself, shook his head and sighed. The colour flamed to his brow, and

his eyes grew almost happy.

"After all," he said, thinking aloud rather than speaking, "I have to do not with unknowable pasts or with mystic futures, but with the things of my own life. Ayesha waited for me through two thousand years; Atene could marry a man she hated for power's sake, and then could poison him, as perhaps she would poison me when I wearied her. I know not what oaths I swore to Amenartas, if such a woman lived. I remember the oaths I swore to Ayesha. If I shrink from her now, why then my life is a lie and my belief a fraud; then love will not endure the touch of age and never can survive the grave.

"Nay, remembering what Ayesha was I take her as she is, in faith and hope of what she shall be. At least love is immortal and if it must, why let it feed on memory alone till death sets free the soul."

Then stepping to where stood the dreadful, shrivelled form, Leo knelt down before it and kissed her on the brow.

Yes, he kissed the trembling horror of that wrinkled head, and I think it was one of the greatest, bravest acts ever done by man.

"Thou hast chosen," said Atene in a cold voice, "and I tell thee, Leo Vincey, that the manner of thy choice makes me mourn my loss the more. Take now thy--thy bride and let me hence."

But Ayesha still said no word and made no sign, till presently she sank upon her bony knees and began to pray aloud. These were the words of her prayer, as I heard them, though the exact Power to which it was addressed is not very easy to determine, as I never discovered who or what it was that she worshipped in her heart--"O Thou minister of the almighty Will, thou sharp sword in the hand of Doom, thou inevitable Law that art named Nature; thou who wast crowned as Isis of the Egyptians, but art the goddess of all climes and ages; thou that leadest the man to the maid, and layest the infant on his mother's breast, that bringest our dust to its kindred dust, that givest life to death, and into the dark of death breathest the light of life again; thou who causest the abundant earth to bear, whose smile is Spring, whose laugh is the ripple of the sea, whose noontide rest is drowsy Summer, and whose sleep is Winter's night, hear thou the supplication of thy chosen child and minister:

"Of old thou gavest me thine own strength with deathless days, and beauty above every daughter of this Star. But I sinned against thee sore, and for my sin I paid in endless centuries of solitude, in the vileness that makes me loathsome to my lover's eyes, and for its diadem of perfect power sets upon my brow this crown of naked mockery. Yet in thy breath, the swift essence that brought me light, that brought me gloom, thou didst vow to me that I who cannot die should once more pluck the lost flower of my immortal loveliness from this foul slime of shame.

"Therefore, merciful Mother that bore me, to thee I make my prayer.

Oh, let his true love atone my sin; or, if it may not be, then give me death, the last and most blessed of thy boons!"