

CHAPTER XVI

THE CHANGE

She ceased, and there was a long, long silence. Leo and I looked at each other in dismay. We had hoped against hope that this beautiful and piteous prayer, addressed apparently to the great, dumb spirit of Nature, would be answered. That meant a miracle, but what of it? The prolongation of the life of Ayesha was a miracle, though it is true that some humble reptiles are said to live as long as she had done.

The transference of her spirit from the Caves of Kor to this temple was a miracle, that is, to our western minds, though the dwellers in these parts of Central Asia would not hold it so. That she should re-appear with the same hideous body was a miracle. But was it the same body? Was it not the body of the last Hesea? One very ancient woman is much like another, and eighteen years of the working of the soul or identity within might well wear away their trivial differences and give to the borrowed form some resemblance to that which it had left.

At least the figures on that mirror of the flame were a miracle. Nay, why so? A hundred clairvoyants in a hundred cities can produce or see their like in water and in crystal, the difference being only one of size. They were but reflections of scenes familiar to the mind of Ayesha, or perhaps not so much as that. Perhaps they were only phantasms called up in our minds by her mesmeric force.

Nay, none of these things were true miracles, since all, however strange, might be capable of explanation. What right then had we to expect a marvel now?

Such thoughts as these rose in our minds as the endless minutes were born and died and--nothing happened.

Yes, at last one thing did happen. The light from the sheet of flame died gradually away as the flame itself sank downwards into the abysses of the pit. But about this in itself there was nothing wonderful, for as we had seen with our own eyes from afar this fire varied much, and indeed it was customary for it to die down at the approach of dawn, which now drew very near.

Still that onward-creeping darkness added to the terrors of the scene. By the last rays of the lurid light we saw Ayesha rise and advance some few paces to that little tongue of rock at the edge of the pit off which the body of Rassen had been hurled; saw her standing on it, also, looking like some black, misshapen imp against the smoky glow which still rose from the depths beneath.

Leo would have gone forward to her, for he believed that she was about to hurl herself to doom, which indeed I thought was her design. But the priest Oros, and the priestess Papave, obeying, I suppose, some secret command that reached them I know not how, sprang to him and seizing his

arms, held him back. Then it became quite dark, and through the darkness we could hear Ayesha chanting a dirge-like hymn in some secret, holy tongue which was unknown to us.

A great flake of fire floated through the gloom, rocking to and fro like some vast bird upon its pinions. We had seen many such that night, torn by the gale from the crest of the blazing curtain as I have described. But--but--"Horace," whispered Leo through his chattering teeth, "that flame is coming up against the wind!"

"Perhaps the wind has changed," I answered, though I knew well that it had not; that it blew stronger than ever from the south.

Nearer and nearer sailed the rocking flame, two enormous wings was the shape of it, with something dark between them. It reached the little promontory. The wings appeared to fold themselves about the dwarfed figure that stood thereon--illuminating it for a moment. Then the light went out of them and they vanished--everything vanished.

A while passed, it may have been one minute or ten, when suddenly the priestess Papave, in obedience to some summons which we could not hear, crept by me. I knew that it was she because her woman's garments touched me as she went. Another space of silence and of deep darkness, during which I heard Papave return, breathing in short, sobbing gasps like one who is very frightened.

Ah! I thought, Ayesha has cast herself into the pit. The tragedy is finished!

Then it was that the wondrous music came. Of course it may have been only the sound of priests chanting beyond us, but I do not think so, since its quality was quite different to any that I heard in the temple before or afterwards: to any indeed that ever I heard upon the earth.

I cannot describe it, but it was awful to listen to, yet most entrancing. From the black, smoke-veiled pit where the fire had burned it welled and echoed--now a single heavenly voice, now a sweet chorus, and now an air-shaking thunder as of a hundred organs played to time.

That diverse and majestic harmony seemed to include, to express every human emotion, and I have often thought since then that in its all-embracing scope and range, this, the song or paeon of her re-birth was symbolical of the infinite variety of Ayesha's spirit. Yet like that spirit it had its master notes; power, passion, suffering, mystery and loveliness. Also there could be no doubt as to the general significance of the chant by whomsoever it was sung. It was the changeful story of a mighty soul; it was worship, worship, worship of a queen divine!

Like slow clouds of incense fading to the bannered roof of some high choir, the bursts of unearthly melodies grew faint; in the far distance of the hollow pit they wailed themselves away.

Look! from the east a single ray of upward-springing light.

"Behold the dawn," said the quiet voice of Oros.

That ray pierced the heavens above our heads, a very sword of flame. It sank downwards, swiftly. Suddenly it fell, not upon us, for as yet the rocky walls of our chamber warded it away, but on to the little promontory at its edge.

Oh! and there--a Glory covered with a single garment--stood a shape celestial. It seemed to be asleep, since the eyes were shut. Or was it dead, for at first that face was a face of death? Look, the sunlight played upon her, shining through the thin veil, the dark eyes opened like the eyes of a wondering child; the blood of life flowed up the ivory bosom into the pallid cheeks; the raiment of black and curling tresses wavered in the wind; the head of the jewelled snake that held them sparkled beneath her breast.

Was it an illusion, or was this Ayesha as she had been when she entered the rolling flame in the caverns of Kor? Our knees gave way beneath us, and down, our arms about each other's necks, Leo and I sank till we lay upon the ground. Then a voice sweeter than honey, softer than the whisper of a twilight breeze among the reeds, spoke near to us, and these were the words it said--"Come hither to me, Kallikrates, who would pay thee back that redeeming kiss of faith and love thou gavest me but now!"

Leo struggled to his feet. Like a drunken man he staggered to where Ayesha stood, then overcome, sank before her on his knees.

"Arise," she said, "it is I who should kneel to thee," and she stretched out her hand to raise him, whispering in his ear the while.

Still he would not, or could not rise, so very slowly she bent over him and touched him with her lips upon the brow. Next she beckoned to me. I came and would have knelt also, but she suffered it not.

"Nay," she said, in her rich, remembered voice, "thou art no suitor; it shall not be. Of lovers and worshippers henceforth as before, I can find a plenty if I will, or even if I will it not. But where shall I find another friend like to thee, O Holly, whom thus I greet?" and leaning towards me, with her lips she touched me also on the brow--just touched me, and no more.

Fragrant was Ayesha's breath as roses, the odour of roses clung to her lovely hair; her sweet body gleamed like some white sea-pearl; a faint but palpable radiance crowned her head; no sculptor ever fashioned such a marvel as the arm with which she held her veil about her; no stars in heaven ever shone more purely bright than did her calm, entranced eyes.

Yet it is true, even with her lips upon me, all I felt for her was a love divine into which no human passion entered. Once, I acknowledge to

my shame, it was otherwise, but I am an old man now and have done with such frailties. Moreover, had not Ayesha named me Guardian, Protector, Friend, and sworn to me that with her and Leo I should ever dwell where all earthly passions fail. I repeat: what more could I desire?

Taking Leo by the hand Ayesha returned with him into the shelter of the rock-hewn chamber and when she entered its shadows, shivered a little as though with cold. I rejoiced at this I remember, for it seemed to show me that she still was human, divine as she might appear. Here her priest and priestess prostrated themselves before her new-born splendour, but she motioned to them to rise, laying a hand upon the head of each as though in blessing. "I am cold," she said, "give me my mantle," and Papave threw the purple-broidered garment upon her shoulders, whence now it hung royally, like a coronation robe.

"Nay," she went on, "it is not this long-lost shape of mine, which in his kiss my lord gave back to me, that shivers in the icy wind, it is my spirit's self bared to the bitter breath of Destiny. O my love, my love, offended Powers are not easily appeased, even when they appear to pardon, and though I shall no more be made a mockery in thy sight, how long is given us together upon the world I know not; but a little hour perchance. Well, ere we pass elsewhere, we will make it glorious, drinking as deeply of the cup of joy as we have drunk of those of sorrows and of shame. This place is hateful to me, for here I have suffered more than ever woman did on earth or phantom in the deepest hell. It is hateful, it is ill-omened. I pray that never again may I

behold it.

"Say, what is it passes in thy mind, magician?" and of a sudden she turned fiercely upon the Shaman Simbri who stood near, his arms crossed upon his breast.

"Only, thou Beautiful," he answered, "a dim shadow of things to come. I have what thou dost lack with all thy wisdom, the gift of foresight, and here I see a dead man lying----"

"Another word," she broke in with fury born of some dark fear, "and thou shalt be that man. Fool, put me not in mind that now I have strength again to rid me of the ancient foes I hate, lest I should use a sword thou thrustest to my hand," and her eyes that had been so calm and happy, blazed upon him like fire.

The old wizard felt their fearsome might and shrank from it till the wall stayed him.

"Great One! now as ever I salute thee. Yes, now as at the first beginning whereof we know alone," he stammered. "I had no more to say; the face of that dead man was not revealed to me. I saw only that some crowned Khan of Kaloon to be shall lie here, as he whom the flame has taken lay an hour ago."

"Doubtless many a Khan of Kaloon will lie here," she answered coldly.

"Fear not, Shaman, my wrath is past, yet be wise, mine enemy, and prophesy no more evil to the great. Come, let us hence."

So, still led by Leo, she passed from that chamber and stood presently upon the apex of the soaring pillar. The sun was up now, flooding the Mountain flanks, the plains of Kaloon far beneath and the distant, misty peaks with a sheen of gold. Ayesha stood considering the mighty prospect, then addressing Leo, she said--"The world is very fair; I give it all to thee."

Now Atene spoke for the first time.

"Dost thou mean Hes--if thou art still the Hesea and not a demon arisen from the Pit--that thou offerest my territories to this man as a love-gift? If so, I tell thee that first thou must conquer them."

"Ungentle are thy words and mien," answered Ayesha, "yet I forgive them both, for I also can scorn to mock a rival in my hour of victory. When thou wast the fairer, thou didst proffer him these very lands, but say, who is the fairer now? Look at us, all of you, and judge," and she stood by Atene and smiled.

The Khania was a lovely woman. Never to my knowledge have I seen one lovelier, but oh! how coarse and poor she showed beside the wild, ethereal beauty of Ayesha born again. For that beauty was not altogether human, far less so indeed than it had been in the Caves of Kor; now it

was the beauty of a spirit.

The little light that always shone upon Ayesha's brow; the wide-set, maddening eyes which were filled sometimes with the fire of the stars and sometimes with the blue darkness of the heavens wherein they float; the curved lips, so wistful yet so proud; the tresses fine as glossy silk that still spread and rippled as though with a separate life; the general air, not so much of majesty as of some secret power hard to be restrained, which strove in that delicate body and proclaimed its presence to the most careless; that flame of the soul within whereof Oros had spoken, shining now through no "vile vessel," but in a vase of alabaster and of pearl--none of these things and qualities were altogether human. I felt it and was afraid, and Atene felt it also, for she answered--"I am but a woman. What thou art, thou knowest best. Still a taper cannot shine midst yonder fires or a glow-worm against a fallen star; nor can my mortal flesh compare with the glory thou hast earned from hell in payment for thy gifts and homage to the lord of ill. Yet as woman I am thy equal, and as spirit I shall be thy mistress, when robbed of these borrowed beauties thou, Ayesha, standest naked and ashamed before the Judge of all whom thou hast deserted and defied; yes, as thou stoodest but now upon yonder brink above the burning pit where thou yet shalt wander wailing thy lost love. For this I know, mine enemy, that man and spirit cannot mate," and Atene ceased, choking in her bitter rage and jealousy.

Now watching Ayesha, I saw her wince a little beneath these evil-omened

words, saw also a tinge of grey touch the carmine of her lips and her deep eyes grow dark and troubled. But in a moment her fears had gone and she was asking in a voice that rang clear as silver bells--"Why ravest thou, Atene, like some short-lived summer torrent against the barrier of a seamless cliff? Dost think, poor creature of an hour, to sweep away the rock of my eternal strength with foam and bursting bubbles? Have done and listen. I do not seek thy petty rule, who, if I will it, can take the empire of the world. Yet learn, thou holdest it of my hand. More--I purpose soon to visit thee in thy city--choose thou if it shall be in peace or war! Therefore, Khania, purge thy court and amend thy laws, that when I come I may find contentment in the land which now it lacks, and confirm thee in thy government. My counsel to thee also is that thou choose some worthy man to husband, let him be whom thou wilt, if only he is just and upright and one upon whom thou mayest rest, needing wise guidance as thou dost, Atene. Come, now, my guests, let us hence," and she walked past the Khania, stepping fearlessly upon the very edge of the wind-swept, rounded peak.

In a second the attempt had been made and failed, so quickly indeed that it was not until Leo and I compared our impressions afterwards that we could be sure of what had happened. As Ayesha passed her, the maddened Khania drew a hidden dagger and struck with all her force at her rival's back. I saw the knife vanish to the hilt in her body, as I thought, but this cannot have been so since it fell to the ground, and she who should have been dead, took no hurt at all.

Feeling that she had failed, with a movement like the sudden lurch of a ship, Atene thrust at Ayesha, proposing to hurl her to destruction in the depths beneath. Lo! her outstretched arms went past her although Ayesha never seemed to stir. Yes it was Atene who would have fallen, Atene who already fell, had not Ayesha put out her hand and caught her by the wrist, bearing all her backward-swaying weight as easily as though she were but an infant, and without effort drawing her to safety.

"Foolish woman!" she said in pitying tones. "Wast thou so vexed that thou wouldst strip thyself of the pleasant shape which heaven has given thee? Surely this is madness, Atene, for how knowest thou in what likeness thou mightest be sent to tread the earth again? As no queen perhaps, but as a peasant's child, deformed, unsightly; for such reward, it is said, is given to those that achieve self-murder. Or even, as many think, shaped like a beast--a snake, a cat, a tigress! Why, see," and she picked the dagger from the ground and cast it into the air, "that point was poisoned. Had it but pricked thee now!" and she smiled at her and shook her head.

But Atene could bear no more of this mockery, more venomous than her own steel.

"Thou art not mortal," she wailed. "How can I prevail against thee? To Heaven I leave thy punishment," and there upon the rocky peak Atene sank down and wept.

Leo stood nearest to her, and the sight of this royal woman in her misery proved too much for him to bear. Stepping to her side he stooped and lifted her to her feet, muttering some kind words. For a moment she rested on his arm, then shook herself free of him and took the proffered hand of her old uncle Simbri.

"I see," said Ayesha, "that as ever, thou art courteous, my lord Leo, but it is best that her own servant should take charge of her, for--she may hide more daggers. Come, the day grows, and surely we need rest."