

CHAPTER XVII

THE BETROTHAL

Together we descended the multitudinous steps and passed the endless, rock-hewn passages till we came to the door of the dwelling of the high-priestess and were led through it into a hall beyond. Here Ayesha parted from us saying that she was outworn, as indeed she seemed to be with an utter weariness, not of the body, but of the spirit. For her delicate form drooped like a rain-laden lily, her eyes grew dim as those of a person in a trance, and her voice came in a soft, sweet whisper, the voice of one speaking in her sleep.

"Good-bye," she said to us. "Oros will guard you both, and lead you to me at the appointed time. Rest you well."

So she went and the priest led us into a beautiful apartment that opened on to a sheltered garden. So overcome were we also by all that we had endured and seen, that we could scarcely speak, much less discuss these marvellous events.

"My brain swims," said Leo to Oros, "I desire to sleep."

He bowed and conducted us to a chamber where were beds, and on these we flung ourselves down and slept, dreamlessly, like little children.

When we awoke it was afternoon. We rose and bathed, then saying that we wished to be alone, went together into the garden where even at this altitude, now, at the end of August, the air was still mild and pleasant. Behind a rock by a bed of campanulas and other mountain flowers and ferns, was a bench near to the banks of a little stream, on which we seated ourselves.

"What have you to say, Horace?" asked Leo laying his hand upon my arm.

"Say?" I answered. "That things have come about most marvellously; that we have dreamed aright and laboured not in vain; that you are the most fortunate of men and should be the most happy."

He looked at me somewhat strangely, and answered--"Yes, of course; she is lovely, is she not--but," and his voice dropped to its lowest whisper, "I wish, Horace, that Ayesha were a little more human, even as human as she was in the Caves of Kor. I don't think she is quite flesh and blood, I felt it when she kissed me--if you can call it a kiss--for she barely touched my hair. Indeed how can she be who changed thus in an hour? Flesh and blood are not born of flame, Horace."

"Are you sure that she was so born?" I asked. "Like the visions on the fire, may not that hideous shape have been but an illusion of our minds? May she not be still the same Ayesha whom we knew in Kor, not re-born, but wafted hither by some mysterious agency?"

"Perhaps. Horace, we do not know--I think that we shall never know. But I admit that to me the thing is terrifying. I am drawn to her by an infinite attraction, her eyes set my blood on fire, the touch of her hand is as that of a wand of madness laid upon my brain. And yet between us there is some wall, invisible, still present. Or perhaps it is only fancy. But, Horace, I think that she is afraid of Atene. Why, in the old days the Khania would have been dead and forgotten in an hour--you remember Ustane?"

"Perhaps she may have grown more gentle, Leo, who, like ourselves, has learned hard lessons."

"Yes," he answered, "I hope that is so. At any rate she has grown more divine--only, Horace, what kind of a husband shall I be for that bright being, if ever I get so far?"

"Why should you not get so far?" I asked angrily, for his words jarred upon my tense nerves.

"I don't know," he answered, "but on general principles do you think that such fortune will be allowed to a man? Also, what did Atene mean when she said that man and spirit cannot mate--and--other things?"

"She meant that she hoped they could not, I imagine, and, Leo, it is useless to trouble yourself with forebodings that are more fitted to my years than yours, and probably are based on nothing. Be a philosopher,

Leo. You have striven by wonderful ways such as are unknown in the history of the world; you have attained. Take the goods the gods provide you--the glory, the love and the power--and let the future look to itself."

Before he could answer Oros appeared from round the rock, and, bowing with more than his usual humility to Leo, said that the Hesea desired our presence at a service in the Sanctuary. Rejoiced at the prospect of seeing her again before he had hoped to do so, Leo sprang up and we accompanied him back to our apartment.

Here priests were waiting, who, somewhat against his will, trimmed his hair and beard, and would have done the same for me had I not refused their offices. Then they placed gold-embroidered sandals on our feet and wrapped Leo in a magnificent, white robe, also richly worked with gold and purple; a somewhat similar robe but of less ornate design being given to me. Lastly, a silver sceptre was thrust into his hand and into mine a plain wand. This sceptre was shaped like a crook, and the sight of it gave me some clue to the nature of the forthcoming ceremony.

"The crook of Osiris!" I whispered to Leo.

"Look here," he answered, "I don't want to impersonate any Egyptian god, or to be mixed up in their heathen idolatries; in fact, I won't."

"Better go through with it," I suggested, "probably it is only something

symbolical."

But Leo, who, notwithstanding the strange circumstances connected with his life, retained the religious principles in which I had educated him, very strongly indeed, refused to move an inch until the nature of this service was made clear to him. Indeed he expressed himself upon the subject with vigour to Oros. At first the priest seemed puzzled what to do, then explained that the forthcoming ceremony was one of betrothal.

On learning this Leo raised no further objections, asking only with some nervousness whether the Khania would be present. Oros answered "No," as she had already departed to Kaloon, vowing war and vengeance.

Then we were led through long passages, till finally we emerged into the gallery immediately in front of the great wooden doors of the apse. At our approach these swung open and we entered it, Oros going first, then Leo, then myself, and following us, the procession of attendant priests.

As soon as our eyes became accustomed to the dazzling glare of the flaming pillars, we saw that some great rite was in progress in the temple, for in front of the divine statue of Motherhood, white-robed and arranged in serried ranks, stood the company of the priests to the number of over two hundred, and behind these the company of the priestesses. Facing this congregation and a little in advance of the two pillars of fire that flared on either side of the shrine, Ayesha herself was seated in a raised chair so that she could be seen of all, while to

her right stood a similar chair of which I could guess the purpose.

She was unveiled and gorgeously appavelled, though save for the white beneath, her robes were those of a queen rather than of a priestess. About her radiant brow ran a narrow band of gold, whence rose the head of a hooded asp cut out of a single, crimson jewel, beneath which in endless profusion the glorious waving hair flowed down and around, hiding even the folds of her purple cloak.

This cloak, opening in front, revealed an undertunic of white silk cut low upon her bosom and kept in place by a golden girdle, a double-headed snake, so like to that which She had worn in Kor that it might have been the same. Her naked arms were bare of ornament, and in her right hand she held the jewelled sistrum set with its gems and bells.

No empress could have looked more royal and no woman was ever half so lovely, for to Ayesha's human beauty was added a spiritual glory, her heritage alone. Seeing her we could see naught else. The rhythmic movement of the bodies of the worshippers, the rolling grandeur of their chant of welcome echoed from the mighty roof, the fearful torches of living flame; all these things were lost on us. For there re-born, enthroned, her arms stretched out in gracious welcome, sat that perfect and immortal woman, the appointed bride of one of us, the friend and lady of the other, her divine presence breathing power, mystery and love.

On we marched between the ranks of hierophants, till Oros and the priests left us and we stood alone face to face with Ayesha. Now she lifted her sceptre and the chant ceased. In the midst of the following silence, she rose from her seat and gliding down its steps, came to where Leo stood and touched him on the forehead with her sistrum, crying in a loud, sweet voice--"Behold the Chosen of the Hesea!" whereon all that audience echoed in a shout of thunder--"Welcome to the Chosen of the Hesea!"

Then while the echoes of that glad cry yet rang round the rocky walls, Ayesha motioned to me to stand at her side, and taking Leo by the hand drew him towards her, so that now he faced the white-robed company. Holding him thus she began to speak in clear and silvery tones.

"Priests and priestesses of Hes, servants with her of the Mother of the world, hear me. Now for the first time I appear among you as I am, you who heretofore have looked but on a hooded shape, not knowing its form or fashion. Learn now the reason that I draw my veil. Ye see this man, whom ye believed a stranger that with his companion had wandered to our shrine. I tell you that he is no stranger; that of old, in lives forgotten, he was my lord who now comes to seek his love again. Say, is it not so, Kallikrates?"

"It is so," answered Leo.

"Priests and priestesses of Hes, as ye know, from the beginning it has

been the right and custom of her who holds my place to choose one to be her lord. Is it not so?"

"It is so, O Hes," they answered.

She paused a while, then with a gesture of infinite sweetness turned to Leo, bent towards him thrice and slowly sank upon her knee.

"Say thou," Ayesha said, looking up at him with her wondrous eyes, "say before these here gathered, and all those witnesses whom thou canst not see, dost thou again accept me as thy affianced bride?"

"Aye, Lady," he answered, in a deep but shaken voice, "now and for ever."

Then while all watched, in the midst of a great silence, Ayesha rose, cast down her sistrum sceptre that rang upon the rocky floor, and stretched out her arms towards him.

Leo also bent towards her, and would have kissed her upon the lips. But I who watched, saw his face grow white as it drew near to hers. While the radiance crept from her brow to his, turning his bright hair to gold, I saw also that this strong man trembled like a reed and seemed as though he were about to fall.

I think that Ayesha noted it too, for ere ever their lips met, she

thrust him from her and again that grey mist of fear gathered on her face.

In an instant it passed. She had slipped from him and with her hand held his hand as though to support him. Thus they stood till his feet grew firm and his strength returned.

Oros restored the sceptre to her, and lifting it she said--"O love and lord, take thou the place prepared for thee, where thou shalt sit for ever at my side, for with myself I give thee more than thou canst know or than I will tell thee now. Mount thy throne, O Affianced of Hes, and receive the worship of thy priests."

"Nay," he answered with a start as that word fell upon his ears. "Here and now I say it once and for all. I am but a man who know nothing of strange gods, their attributes and ceremonials. None shall bow the knee to me and on earth, Ayesha, I bow mine to thee alone."

Now at this bold speech some of those who heard it looked astonished and whispered to each other, while a voice called--"Beware, thou Chosen, of the anger of the Mother!"

Again for a moment Ayesha looked afraid, then with a little laugh, swept the thing aside, saying--"Surely with that I should be content. For me, O Love, thy adoration for thee the betrothal song, no more."

So having no choice Leo mounted the throne, where notwithstanding his splendid presence, enhanced as it was by those glittering robes, he looked ill enough at ease, as indeed must any man of his faith and race. Happily however, if some act of semi-idolatrous homage had been proposed, Ayesha found a means to prevent its celebration, and soon all such matters were forgotten both by the singers who sang, and us who listened to the majestic chant that followed.

Of its words unfortunately we were able to understand but little, both because of the volume of sound and of the secret, priestly language in which it was given, though its general purport could not be mistaken.

The female voices began it, singing very low, and conveying a strange impression of time and distance. Now followed bursts of gladness alternating with melancholy chords suggesting sighs and tears and sorrows long endured, and at the end a joyous, triumphant paeon thrown to and fro between the men and women singers, terminating in one united chorus repeated again and again, louder and yet louder, till it culminated in a veritable crash of melody, then of a sudden ceased.

Ayesha rose and waved her sceptre, whereon all the company bowed thrice, then turned and breaking into some sweet, low chant that sounded like a lullaby, marched, rank after rank, across the width of the Sanctuary and through the carven doors which closed behind the last of them.

When all had gone, leaving us alone, save for the priest Oros and the

priestess Papave, who remained in attendance on their mistress, Ayesha, who sat gazing before her with dreaming, empty eyes, seemed to awake, for she rose and said--"A noble chant, is it not, and an ancient? It was the wedding song of the feast of Isis and Osiris at Behbit in Egypt, and there I heard it before ever I saw the darksome Caves of Kor. Often have I observed, my Holly, that music lingers longer than aught else in this changeful world, though it is rare that the very words should remain unvaried. Come, beloved--tell me, by what name shall I call thee? Thou art Kallikrates and yet----"

"Call me Leo, Ayesha," he answered, "as I was christened in the only life of which I have any knowledge. This Kallikrates seems to have been an unlucky man, and the deeds he did, if in truth he was aught other than a tool in the hand of destiny, have bred no good to the inheritors of his body--or his spirit, whichever it may be--or to those women with whom his life was intertwined. Call me Leo, then, for of Kallikrates I have had enough since that night when I looked upon the last of him in Kor."

"Ah! I remember," she answered, "when thou sawest thyself lying in that narrow bed, and I sang thee a song, did I not, of the past and of the future? I can recall two lines of it; the rest I have forgotten--"

"Onward, never weary, clad with splendour for a robe!

Till accomplished be our fate, and the night is rushing down.'

"Yes, my Leo, now indeed we are 'clad with splendour for a robe,' and now our fate draws near to its accomplishment. Then perchance will come the down-rushing of the night;" and she sighed, looked up tenderly and said, "See, I am talking to thee in Arabic. Hast thou forgotten it?"

"No."

"Then let it be our tongue, for I love it best of all, who lisped it at my mother's knee. Now leave me here alone awhile; I would think. Also," she added thoughtfully, and speaking with a strange and impressive inflexion of the voice, "there are some to whom I must give audience."

So we went, all of us, supposing that Ayesha was about to receive a deputation of the Chiefs of the Mountain Tribes who came to felicitate her upon her betrothal.