

CHAPTER XVIII

THE THIRD ORDEAL

An hour, two hours passed, while we strove to rest in our sleeping place, but could not, for some influence disturbed us.

"Why does not Ayesha come?" asked Leo at length, pausing in his walk up and down the room. "I want to see her again; I cannot bear to be apart from her. I feel as though she were drawing me to her."

"How can I tell you? Ask Oros; he is outside the door."

So he went and asked him, but Oros only smiled, and answered that the Hesea had not entered her chamber, so doubtless she must still remain in the Sanctuary.

"Then I am going to look for her. Come, Oros, and you too, Horace."

Oros bowed, but declined, saying that he was bidden to bide at our door, adding that we, "to whom all the paths were open," could return to the Sanctuary if we thought well.

"I do think well," replied Leo sharply. "Will you come, Horace, or shall I go without you?"

I hesitated. The Sanctuary was a public place, it is true, but Ayesha had said that she desired to be alone there for awhile. Without more words, however, Leo shrugged his shoulders and started.

"You will never find your way," I said, and followed him.

We went down the long passages that were dimly lighted with lamps and came to the gallery. Here we found no lamps; still we groped our way to the great wooden doors. They were shut, but Leo pushed upon them impatiently, and one of them swung open a little, so that we could squeeze ourselves between them. As we passed it closed noiselessly behind us.

Now we should have been in the Sanctuary, and in the full blaze of those awful columns of living fire. But they were out, or we had strayed elsewhere; at least the darkness was intense. We tried to work our way back to the doors again, but could not. We were lost.

More, something oppressed us; we did not dare to speak. We went on a few paces and stopped, for we became aware that we were not alone. Indeed, it seemed to me that we stood in the midst of a thronging multitude, but not of men and women. Beings pressed about us; we could feel their robes, yet could not touch them; we could feel their breath, but it was cold. The air stirred all round us as they passed to and fro, passed in endless numbers. It was as though we had entered a cathedral filled with the vast congregation of all the dead who once had worshipped

there. We grew afraid--my face was damp with fear, the hair stood up upon my head. We seemed to have wandered into a hall of the Shades.

At length light appeared far away, and we saw that it emanated from the two pillars of fire which had burned on either side of the Shrine, that of a sudden became luminous. So we were in the Sanctuary, and still near to the doors. Now those pillars were not bright; they were low and lurid; the rays from them scarcely reached us standing in the dense shadow.

But if we could not be seen in them we still could see. Look! Yonder sat Ayesha on a throne, and oh! she was awful in her death-like majesty. The blue light of the sunken columns played upon her, and in it she sat erect, with such a face and mien of pride as no human creature ever wore. Power seemed to flow from her; yes, it flowed from those wide-set, glittering eyes like light from jewels.

She seemed a Queen of Death receiving homage from the dead. More, she was receiving homage from dead or living--I know not which--for, as I thought it, a shadowy Shape arose before the throne and bent the knee to her, then another, and another, and another.

As each vague Being appeared and bowed its starry head she raised her sceptre in answering salutation. We could hear the distant tinkle of the sistrum bells, the only sound in all that place, yes, and see her lips move, though no whisper reached us from them. Surely spirits were

worshipping her!

We gripped each other. We shrank back and found the door. It gave to our push. Now we were in the passages again, and now we had reached our room.

At its entrance Oros was standing as we had left him. He greeted us with his fixed smile, taking no note of the terror written on our faces. We passed him, and entering the room stared at each other.

"What is she?" gasped Leo. "An angel?"

"Yes," I answered, "something of that sort." But to myself I thought that there are doubtless many kinds of angels.

"And what were those--those shadows--doing?" he asked again.

"Welcoming her after her transformation, I suppose. But perhaps they were not shadows--only priests disguised and conducting some secret ceremonial!"

Leo shrugged his shoulders but made no other answer.

At length the door opened, and Oros, entering, said that the Hesea commanded our presence in her chamber.

So, still oppressed with fear and wonder--for what we had seen was perhaps more dreadful than anything that had gone before--we went, to find Ayesha seated and looking somewhat weary, but otherwise unchanged. With her was the priestess Papave, who had just unrobed her of the royal mantle which she wore in the Sanctuary.

Ayesha beckoned Leo to her, taking his hand and searching his face with her eyes, not without anxiety as I thought.

Now I turned, purposing to leave them alone, but she saw, and said to me, smiling--"Why wouldst thou forsake us, Holly? To go back to the Sanctuary once more?" and she looked at me with meaning in her glance. "Hast thou questions to ask of the statue of the Mother yonder that thou lovest the place so much? They say it speaks, telling of the future to those who dare to kneel beside it unaccompanied from night till dawn. Yet I have often done so, but to me it has never spoken, though none long to learn the future more."

I made no answer, nor did she seem to expect any, for she went on at once--"Nay, bide here and let us have done with all sad and solemn thoughts. We three will sup together as of old, and for awhile forget our fears and cares, and be happy as children who know not sin and death, or that change which is death indeed. Oros, await my lord without. Papave, I will call thee later to disrobe me. Till then let none disturb us."

The room that Ayesha inhabited was not very large, as we saw by the hanging lamps with which it was lighted. It was plainly though richly furnished, the rock walls being covered with tapestries, and the tables and chairs inlaid with silver, but the only token that here a woman had her home was that about it stood several bowls of flowers. One of these, I remember, was filled with the delicate harebells I had admired, dug up roots and all, and set in moss.

"A poor place," said Ayesha, "yet better than that in which I dwelt those two thousand years awaiting thy coming, Leo, for, see, beyond it is a garden, wherein I sit," and she sank down upon a couch by the table, motioning to us to take our places opposite to her.

The meal was simple; for us, eggs boiled hard and cold venison; for her, milk, some little cakes of flour, and mountain berries.

Presently Leo rose and threw off his gorgeous, purple-broidered robe, which he still wore, and cast upon a chair the crook-headed sceptre that Oros had again thrust into his hand. Ayesha smiled as he did so, saying--"It would seem that thou holdest these sacred emblems in but small respect."

"Very small," he answered. "Thou heardest my words in the Sanctuary, Ayesha, so let us make a pact. Thy religion I do not understand, but I understand my own, and not even for thy sake will I take part in what I hold to be idolatry."

Now I thought that she would be angered by this plain speaking, but she only bowed her head and answered meekly--"Thy will is mine, Leo, though it will not be easy always to explain thy absence from the ceremonies in the temple. Yet thou hast a right to thine own faith, which doubtless is mine also."

"How can that be?" he asked, looking up.

"Because all great Faiths are the same, changed a little to suit the needs of passing times and peoples. What taught that of Egypt, which, in a fashion, we still follow here? That hidden in a multitude of manifestations, one Power great and good, rules all the universes: that the holy shall inherit a life eternal and the vile, eternal death: that men shall be shaped and judged by their own hearts and deeds, and here and hereafter drink of the cup which they have brewed: that their real home is not on earth, but beyond the earth, where all riddles shall be answered and all sorrows cease. Say, dost thou believe these things, as I do?"

"Aye, Ayesha, but Hes or Isis is thy goddess, for hast thou not told us tales of thy dealings with her in the past, and did we not hear thee make thy prayer to her? Who, then, is this goddess Hes?"

"Know, Leo, that she is what I named her--Nature's soul, no divinity, but the secret spirit of the world; that universal Motherhood, whose

symbol thou hast seen yonder, and in whose mysteries lie hid all earthly life and knowledge."

"Does, then, this merciful Motherhood follow her votaries with death and evil, as thou sayest she has followed thee for thy disobedience, and me--and another--because of some unnatural vows broken long ago?" Leo asked quietly.

Resting her arm upon the table, Ayesha looked at him with sombre eyes and answered--"In that Faith of thine of which thou speakest are there perchance two gods, each having many ministers: a god of good and a god of evil, an Osiris and a Set?"

He nodded.

"I thought it. And the god of ill is strong, is he not, and can put on the shape of good? Tell me, then, Leo, in the world that is to-day, whereof I know so little, hast thou ever heard of frail souls who for some earthly bribe have sold themselves to that evil one, or to his minister, and been paid their price in bitterness and anguish?"

"All wicked folk do as much in this form or in that," he answered.

"And if once there lived a woman who was mad with the thirst for beauty, for life, for wisdom, and for love, might she not--oh! might she not perchance----"

"Sell herself to the god called Set, or one of his angels? Ayesha, dost thou mean"--and Leo rose, speaking in a voice that was full of fear--"that thou art such a woman?"

"And if so?" she asked, also rising and drawing slowly near to him.

"If so," he answered hoarsely, "if so, I think that perhaps we had best fulfil our fates apart----"

"Ah!" she said, with a little scream of pain as though a knife had stabbed her, "wouldst thou away to Atene? I tell thee that thou canst not leave me. I have power--above all men thou shouldst know it, whom once I slew. Nay, thou hast no memory, poor creature of a breath, and I--I remember too well. I will not hold thee dead again--I'll hold thee living. Look now on my beauty, Leo"--and she bent her swaying form towards him, compelling him with her glorious, alluring eyes--"and begone if thou canst. Why, thou drawest nearer to me. Man, that is not the path of flight.

"Nay, I will not tempt thee with these common lures. Go, Leo, if thou wilt. Go, my love, and leave me to my loneliness and my sin. Now--at once. Atene will shelter thee till spring, when thou canst cross the mountains and return to thine own world again, and to those things of common life which are thy joy. See, Leo, I veil myself that thou mayest not be tempted," and she flung the corner of her cloak about her head,

then asked a sudden question through it--"Didst thou not but now return to the Sanctuary with Holly after I bade thee leave me there alone? Methought I saw the two of you standing by its doors."

"Yes, we came to seek thee," he answered.

"And found more than ye sought, as often chances to the bold--is it not so? Well, I willed that ye should come and see, and protected you where others might have died."

"What didst thou there upon the throne, and whose were those forms which we saw bending before thee?" he asked coldly.

"I have ruled in many shapes and lands, Leo. Perchance they were ancient companions and servitors of mine come to greet me once again and to hear my tidings. Or perchance they were but shadows of thy brain, pictures like those upon the fire, that it pleased me to summon to thy sight, to try thy strength and constancy.

"Leo Vincey, know now the truth; that all things are illusions, even that there exists no future and no past, that what has been and what shall be already is eternally. Know that I, Ayesha, am but a magic wraith, foul when thou seest me foul, fair when thou seest me fair; a spirit-bubble reflecting a thousand lights in the sunshine of thy smile, grey as dust and gone in the shadow of thy frown. Think of the throned Queen before whom the shadowy Powers bowed and worship, for that is I.

Think of the hideous, withered Thing thou sawest naked on the rock, and flee away, for that is I. Or keep me lovely, and adore, knowing all evil centred in my spirit, for that is I. Now, Leo, thou hast the truth. Put me from thee for ever and for ever if thou wilt, and be safe; or clasp me, clasp me to thy heart, and in payment for my lips and love take my sin upon thy head! Nay, Holly, be thou silent, for now he must judge alone."

Leo turned, as I thought, at first, to find the door. But it was not so, for he did but walk up and down the room awhile. Then he came back to where Ayesha stood, and spoke quite simply and in a very quiet voice, such as men of his nature often assume in moments of great emotion.

"Ayesha," he said, "when I saw thee as thou wast, aged and--thou knowest how--I clung to thee. Now, when thou hast told me the secret of this unholy pact of thine, when with my eyes, at least, I have seen thee reigning a mistress of spirits good or ill, yet I cling to thee. Let thy sin, great or little--whate'er it is--be my sin also. In truth, I feel its weight sink to my soul and become a part of me, and although I have no vision or power of prophecy, I am sure that I shall not escape its punishment. Well, though I be innocent, let me bear it for thy sake. I am content."

Ayesha heard, the cloak slipped from her head, and for a moment she stood silent like one amazed, then burst into a passion of sudden tears. Down she went before him, and clinging to his garments, she bowed her

stately shape until her forehead touched the ground. Yes, that proud being, who was more than mortal, whose nostrils but now had drunk the incense of the homage of ghosts or spirits, humbled herself at this man's feet.

With an exclamation of horror, half-maddened at the piteous sight, Leo sprang to one side, then stooping, lifted and led her still weeping to the couch.

"Thou knowest not what thou hast done," Ayesha said at last. "Let all thou sawest on the Mountain's crest or in the Sanctuary be but visions of the night; let that tale of an offended goddess be a parable, a fable, if thou wilt. This at least is true, that ages since I sinned for thee and against thee and another; that ages since I bought beauty and life indefinite wherewith I might win thee and endow thee at a cost which few would dare; that I have paid interest on the debt, in mockery, utter loneliness, and daily pain which scarce could be endured, until the bond fell due at last and must be satisfied.

"Yes, how I may not tell thee, thou and thou alone stoodst between me and the full discharge of this most dreadful debt--for know that in mercy it is given to us to redeem one another."

Now he would have spoken, but with a motion of her hand she bade him be silent, and continued--"See now, Leo, three great dangers has thy body passed of late upon its journey to my side; the Death-hounds,

the Mountains, and the Precipice. Know that these were but types and ordained foreshadowings of the last threefold trial of thy soul. From the pursuing passions of Atene which must have undone us both, thou hast escaped victorious. Thou hast endured the desert loneliness of the sands and snows starving for a comfort that never came. Even when the avalanche thundered round thee thy faith stood fast as it stood above the Pit of flame, while after bitter years of doubt a rushing flood of horror swallowed up thy hopes. As thou didst descend the glacier's steep, not knowing what lay beneath that fearful path, so but now and of thine own choice, for very love of me, thou hast plunged headlong into an abyss that is deeper far, to share its terrors with my spirit. Dost thou understand at last?"

"Something, not all, I think," he answered slowly.

"Surely thou art wrapped in a double veil of blindness," she cried impatiently. "Listen again:

"Hadst thou yielded to Nature's crying and rejected me but yesterday, in that foul shape I must perchance have lingered for uncounted time, playing the poor part of priestess of a forgotten faith. This was the first temptation, the ordeal of thy flesh--nay, not the first--the second, for Atene and her lurings were the first. But thou wast loyal, and in the magic of thy conquering love my beauty and my womanhood were re-born.

"Hadst thou rejected me to-night, when, as I was bidden to do, I showed thee that vision in the Sanctuary and confessed to thee my soul's black crime, then hopeless and helpless, unshielded by my earthly power, I must have wandered on into the deep and endless night of solitude. This was the third appointed test, the trial of thy spirit, and by thy steadfastness, Leo, thou hast loosed the hand of Destiny from about my throat. Now I am regenerate in thee--through thee may hope again for some true life beyond, which thou shalt share. And yet, and yet, if thou shouldst suffer, as well may chance----"

"Then I suffer, and there's an end," broke in Leo serenely. "Save for a few things my mind is clear, and there must be justice for us all at last. If I have broken the bond that bound thee, if I have freed thee from some threatening, spiritual ill by taking a risk upon my head, well, I have not lived, and if need be, shall not die in vain. So let us have done with all these problems, or rather first answer thou me one. Ayesha, how wast thou changed upon that peak?"

"In flame I left thee, Leo, and in flame I did return, as in flame, mayhap, we shall both depart. Or perhaps the change was in the eyes of all of you who watched, and not in this shape of mine. I have answered. Seek to learn no more."

"One thing I do still seek to learn. Ayesha, we were betrothed to-night. When wilt thou marry me?"

"Not yet, not yet," she answered hurriedly, her voice quivering as she spoke. "Leo, thou must put that hope from thy thoughts awhile, and for some few months, a year perchance, be content to play the part of friend and lover."

"Why so?" he asked, with bitter disappointment. "Ayesha, those parts have been mine for many a day; more, I grow no younger, and, unlike thee, shall soon be old. Also, life is fleeting, and sometimes I think that I near its end."

"Speak no such evil-omened words," she said, springing from the couch and stamping her sandalled foot upon the ground in anger born of fear. "Yet thou sayest truth; thou art unfortified against the accidents of time and chance. Oh! horrible, horrible; thou mightest die again, and leave me living."

"Then give me of thy life, Ayesha."

"That would I gladly, all of it, couldst thou but repay me with the boon of death to come.

"Oh! ye poor mortals," she went on, with a sudden burst of passion; "ye beseech your gods for the gift of many years, being ignorant that ye would sow a seed within your breasts whence ye must garner ten thousand miseries. Know ye not that this world is indeed the wide house of hell, in whose chambers from time to time the spirit tarries a little while,

then, weary and aghast, speeds wailing to the peace that it has won.

"Think then what it is to live on here eternally and yet be human; to age in soul and see our beloved die and pass to lands whither we may not hope to follow; to wait while drop by drop the curse of the long centuries falls upon our imperishable being, like water slow dripping on a diamond that it cannot wear, till they be born anew forgetful of us, and again sink from our helpless arms into the void unknowable.

"Think what it is to see the sins we sin, the tempting look, the word idle or unkind--aye, even the selfish thought or struggle, multiplied ten thousandfold and more eternal than ourselves, spring up upon the universal bosom of the earth to be the bane of a million destinies, whilst the everlasting Finger writes its endless count, and a cold voice of Justice cries in our conscience-haunted solitude, 'Oh! soul unshriven, behold the ripening harvest thy wanton hand did scatter, and long in vain for the waters of forgetfulness.'

"Think what it is to have every earthly wisdom, yet to burn unsatisfied for the deeper and forbidden draught; to gather up all wealth and power and let them slip again, like children weary of a painted toy; to sweep the harp of fame, and, maddened by its jangling music, to stamp it small beneath our feet; to snatch at pleasure's goblet and find its wine is sand, and at length, outworn, to cast us down and pray the pitiless gods with whose stolen garment we have wrapped ourselves, to take it back again, and suffer us to slink naked to the grave.

"Such is the life thou askest, Leo. Say, wilt thou have it now?"

"If it may be shared with thee," he answered. "These woes are born of loneliness, but then our perfect fellowship would turn them into joy."

"Aye," she said, "while it was permitted to endure. So be it, Leo. In the spring, when the snows melt, we will journey together to Libya, and there thou shalt be bathed in the Fount of Life, that forbidden Essence of which once thou didst fear to drink. Afterwards I will wed thee."

"That place is closed for ever, Ayesha."

"Not to my feet and thine," she answered. "Fear not, my love, were this mountain heaped thereon, I would blast a path through it with mine eyes and lay its secret bare. Oh! would that thou wast as I am, for then before tomorrow's sun we'd watch the rolling pillar thunder by, and thou shouldst taste its glory."

"But it may not be. Hunger or cold can starve thee, and waters drown; swords can slay thee, or sickness sap away thy strength. Had it not been for the false Atene, who disobeyed my words, as it was foredoomed that she should do, by this day we were across the mountains, or had travelled northward through the frozen desert and the rivers. Now we must await the melting of the snows, for winter is at hand, and in it, as thou knowest, no man can live upon their heights."

"Eight months till April before we can start, and how long to cross the mountains and all the vast distances beyond, and the seas, and the swamps of Kor? Why, at the best, Ayesha, two years must go by before we can even find the place;" and he fell to entreating her to let them be wed at once and journey afterwards.

But she said, Nay, and nay, and nay, it should not be, till at length, as though fearing his pleading, or that of her own heart, she rose and dismissed us.

"Ah! my Holly," she said to me as we three parted, "I promised thee and myself some few hours of rest and of the happiness of quiet, and thou seest how my desire has been fulfilled. Those old Egyptians were wont to share their feasts with one grizzly skeleton, but here I counted four to-night that you both could see, and they are named Fear, Suspense, Foreboding, and Love-denied. Doubtless also, when these are buried others will come to haunt us, and snatch the poor morsel from our lips.

"So hath it ever been with me, whose feet misfortune dogs. Yet I hope on, and now many a barrier lies behind us; and Leo, thou hast been tried in the appointed, triple fires and yet proved true. Sweet be thy slumbers, O my love, and sweeter still thy dreams, for know, my soul shall share them. I vow to thee that to-morrow we'll be happy, aye, to-morrow without fail."

"Why will she not marry me at once?" asked Leo, when we were alone in our chamber. "Because she is afraid," I answered.