

CHAPTER XX

AYESHA'S ALCHEMY

It was shortly after this incident of the snow-leopard that one of these demon familiars of Ayesha's, her infinite ambition, made its formidable appearance. When we had dined with her in the evening, Ayesha's habit was to discuss plans for our mighty and unending future, that awful inheritance which she had promised to us.

Here I must explain, if I have not done so already, that she had graciously informed me that notwithstanding my refusal in past years of such a priceless opportunity, I also was to be allowed to bathe my superannuated self in the vital fires, though in what guise I should emerge from them, like Herodotus when he treats of the mysteries of old Egypt, if she knew, she did not think it lawful to reveal.

Secretly I hoped that my outward man might change for the better, as the prospect of being fixed for ever in the shape of my present and somewhat unpleasing personality, did not appeal to me as attractive. In truth, so far as I was concerned, the matter had an academic rather than an actual interest, such as we take in a fairy tale, since I did not believe that I should ever put on this kind of immortality. Nor, I may add, now as before, was I at all certain that I wished to do so.

These plans of Ayesha's were far reaching and indeed terrific.

Her acquaintance with the modern world, its political and social developments, was still strictly limited; for if she had the power to follow its growth and activities, certainly it was one of which she made no use.

In practice her knowledge seemed to be confined to what she had gathered during the few brief talks which took place between us upon this subject in past time at Kor. Now her thirst for information proved insatiable, although it is true that ours was scarcely up to date, seeing that ever since we lost touch with the civilized peoples, namely, for the last fifteen years or so, we had been as much buried as she was herself.

Still we were able to describe to her the condition of the nations and their affairs as they were at the period when we bade them farewell, and, more or less incorrectly, to draw maps of the various countries and their boundaries, over which she pondered long.

The Chinese were the people in whom she proved to be most interested, perhaps because she was acquainted with the Mongolian type, and like ourselves, understood a good many of their dialects. Also she had a motive for her studies, which one night she revealed to us in the most matter-of-fact fashion.

Those who have read the first part of her history, which I left in England to be published, may remember that when we found her at Kor, She horrified us by expressing a determination to possess herself of

Great Britain, for the simple reason that we belonged to that country. Now, however, like her powers, her ideas had grown, for she purposed to make Leo the absolute monarch of the world. In vain did he assure her most earnestly that he desired no such empire. She merely laughed at him and said--"If I arise amidst the Peoples, I must rule the Peoples, for how can Ayesha take a second place among mortal men? And thou, my Leo, rulest me, yes, mark the truth, thou art my master! Therefore it is plain that thou wilt be the master of this earth, aye, and perchance of others which do not yet appear, for of these also I know something, and, I think, can reach them if I will, though hitherto I have had no mind that way. My true life has not yet begun. Its little space within this world has been filled with thought and care for thee; in waiting till thou wast born again, and during these last years of separation, until thou didst return.

"But now a few more months, and the days of preparation past, endowed with energy eternal, with all the wisdom of the ages, and with a strength that can bend the mountains or turn the ocean from its bed, and we begin to be. Oh! how I sicken for that hour when first, like twin stars new to the firmament of heaven, we break in our immortal splendour upon the astonished sight of men. It will please me, I tell thee, Leo, it will please me, to see Powers, Principalities and Dominions, marshalled by their kings and governors, bow themselves before our thrones and humbly crave the liberty to do our will. At least," she added, "it will please me for a little time, until we seek higher things."

So she spoke, while the radiance upon her brow increased and spread itself, gleaming above her like a golden fan, and her slumbrous eyes took fire from it till, to my thought, they became glowing mirrors in which I saw pomp enthroned and suppliant peoples pass.

"And how," asked Leo, with something like a groan--for this vision of universal rule viewed from afar did not seem to charm him--"how, Ayesha, wilt thou bring these things about?"

"How, my Leo? Why, easily enough. For many nights I have listened to the wise discourses of our Holly here, at least he thinks them wise who still has so much to learn, and pored over his crooked maps, comparing them with those that are written in my memory, who of late have had no time for the study of such little matters. Also I have weighed and pondered your reports of the races of this world; their various follies, their futile struggling for wealth and small supremacies, and I have determined that it would be wise and kind to weld them to one whole, setting ourselves at the head of them to direct their destinies, and cause wars, sickness, and poverty to cease, so that these creatures of a little day (ephemeridae was the word she used) may live happy from the cradle to the grave.

"Now, were it not because of thy strange shrinking from bloodshed, however politic and needful--for my Leo, as yet thou art no true philosopher--this were quickly done, since I can command a weapon which

would crush their armouries and whelm their navies in the deep; yes, I, whom even the lightnings and Nature's elemental powers must obey. But thou shrinkest from the sight of death, and thou believest that Heaven would be displeased because I make myself--or am chosen--the instrument of Heaven. Well, so let it be, for thy will is mine, and therefore we will tread a gentler path."

"And how wilt thou persuade the kings of the earth to place their crowns upon thy head?" I asked, astonished.

"By causing their peoples to offer them to us," she answered suavely.

"Oh! Holly, Holly, how narrow is thy mind, how strained the quality of thine imagination! Set its poor gates ajar, I pray, and bethink thee.

When we appear among men, scattering gold to satisfy their want, clad in terrifying power, in dazzling beauty and in immortality of days, will they not cry, 'Be ye our monarchs and rule over us!'"

"Perhaps," I answered dubiously, "but where wilt thou appear?"

She took a map of the eastern hemisphere which I had drawn and, placing her finger upon Peking, said--"There is the place that shall be our home for some few centuries, say three, or five, or seven, should it take so long to shape this people to my liking and our purposes. I have chosen these Chinese because thou tellest me that their numbers are uncountable, that they are brave, subtle, and patient, and though now powerless because ill-ruled and untaught, able with their multitudes to

flood the little western nations. Therefore among them we will begin our reign and for some few ages be at rest while they learn wisdom from us, and thou, my Holly, makest their armies unconquerable and givest their land good government, wealth, peace, and a new religion."

What the new religion was to be I did not ask. It seemed unnecessary, since I was convinced that in practice it would prove a form of Ayesha-worship, Indeed, my mind was so occupied with conjectures, some of them quaint and absurd enough, as to what would happen at the first appearance of Ayesha in China that I forgot this subsidiary development of our future rule.

"And if the 'little western nations' will not wait to be flooded?" suggested Leo with irritation, for her contemptuous tone angered him, one of a prominent western nation. "If they combine, for instance, and attack thee first?"

"Ah!" she said, with a flash of her eyes. "I have thought of it, and for my part hope that it will chance, since then thou canst not blame me if I put out my strength. Oh! then the East, that has slept so long, shall awake--shall awake, and upon battlefield after battlefield such as history cannot tell of, thou shalt see my flaming standards sweep on to victory. One by one thou shalt watch the nations fall and perish, until at length I build thy throne upon the hecatombs of their countless dead and crown thee emperor of a world regenerate in blood and fire."

Leo, whom this new gospel of regeneration seemed to appall, who was, in fact, a hater of absolute monarchies and somewhat republican in his views and sympathies, continued the argument, but I took no further heed. The thing was grotesque in its tremendous and fantastic absurdity; Ayesha's ambitions were such as no imperial-minded madman could conceive.

Yet--here came the rub--I had not the slightest doubt but that she was well able to put them into practice and carry them to some marvellous and awful conclusion. Why not? Death could not touch her; she had triumphed over death. Her beauty--that "cup of madness" in her eyes, as she named it once to me--and her reckless will would compel the hosts of men to follow her. Her piercing intelligence would enable her to invent new weapons with which the most highly-trained army could not possibly compete. Indeed, it might be as she said, and as I for one believed, with good reason, it proved, that she held at her command the elemental forces of Nature, such as those that lie hid in electricity, which would give all living beings to her for a prey.

Ayesha was still woman enough to have worldly ambitions, and the most dread circumstance about her superhuman powers was that they appeared to be unrestrained by any responsibility to God or man. She was as we might well imagine a fallen angel to be, if indeed, as she herself once hinted and as Atene and the old Shaman believed, this were not her true place in creation. By only two things that I was able to discover could she be moved--her love for Leo and, in a very small degree, her friendship for

myself.

Yet her devouring passion for this one man, inexplicable in its endurance and intensity, would, I felt sure even then, in the future as in the past, prove to be her heel of Achilles. When Ayesha was dipped in the waters of Dominion and Deathlessness, this human love left her heart mortal, that through it she might be rendered harmless as a child, who otherwise would have devastated the universe.

I was right.

Whilst I was still indulging myself in these reflections and hoping that Ayesha would not take the trouble to read them in my mind, I became aware that Oros was bowing to the earth before her.

"Thy business, priest?" she asked sharply; for when she was with Leo Ayesha did not like to be disturbed.

"Hes, the spies are returned."

"Why didst thou send them out?" she asked indifferently. "What need have I of thy spies?"

"Hes, thou didst command me."

"Well, their report?"

"Hes, it is most grave. The people of Kaloon are desperate because of the drought which has caused their crops to fail, so that starvation stares them in the eyes, and this they lay to the charge of the strangers who came into their land and fled to thee. The Khania Atene also is mad with rage against thee and our holy College. Labouring night and day, she has gathered two great armies, one of forty, and one of twenty thousand men, and the latter of these she sends against the Mountain under the command of her uncle, Simbri the Shaman. In case it should be defeated she purposes to remain with the second and greater army on the plains about Kaloon."

"Tidings indeed," said Ayesha with a scornful laugh. "Has her hate made this woman mad that she dares thus to match herself against me? My Holly, it crossed thy mind but now that it was I who am mad, boasting of what I have no power to perform. Well, within six days thou shalt learn--oh! verily thou shalt learn, and, though the issue be so very small, in such a fashion that thou wilt doubt no more for ever. Stay, I will look, though the effort of it wearies me, for those spies may be but victims to their own fears, or to the falsehoods of Atene."

Then suddenly, as was common with her when thus Ayesha threw her sight afar, which either from indolence, or because, as she said, it exhausted her, she did but rarely, her lovely face grew rigid like that of a person in a trance; the light faded from her brow, and the great pupils of her eyes contracted themselves and lost their colour.

In a little while, five minutes perhaps, she sighed like one awakening from a deep sleep, passed her hand across her forehead and was as she had been, though somewhat languid, as though strength had left her.

"It is true enough," she said, "and soon I must be stirring lest many of my people should be killed. My lord, wouldst thou see war? Nay, thou shalt bide here in safety whilst I go forward--to visit Atene as I promised."

"Where thou goest, I go," said Leo angrily, his face flushing to the roots of his hair with shame.

"I pray thee not, I pray thee not," she answered, yet without venturing to forbid him. "We will talk of it hereafter. Oros, away! Send round the Fire of Hes to every chief. Three nights hence at the moonrise bid the Tribes gather--nay, not all, twenty thousand of their best will be enough, the rest shall stay to guard the Mountain and this Sanctuary. Let them bring food with them for fifteen days. I join them at the following dawn. Go."

He bowed and went, whereon, dismissing the matter from her mind, Ayesha began to question me again about the Chinese and their customs.

It was in course of a somewhat similar conversation on the following night, of which, however, I forget the exact details, that a remark of

Leo's led to another exhibition of Ayesha's marvellous powers.

Leo--who had been considering her plans for conquest, and again combating them as best he could, for they were entirely repugnant to his religious, social and political views--said suddenly that after all they must break down, since they would involve the expenditure of sums of money so vast that even Ayesha herself would be unable to provide them by any known methods of taxation. She looked at him and laughed a little.

"Verily, Leo," she said, "to thee, yes; and to Holly here I must seem as some madcap girl blown to and fro by every wind of fancy, and building me a palace wherein to dwell out of dew and vapours, or from the substance of the sunset fires. Thinkest thou then that I would enter on this war--one woman against all the world"--and as she spoke her shape grew royal and in her awful eyes there came a look that chilled my blood--"and make no preparation for its necessities? Why, since last we spoke upon this matter, foreseeing all, I have considered in my mind, and now thou shalt learn how, without cost to those we rule--and for that reason alone shall they love us dearly--I will glut the treasuries of the Empress of the Earth.

"Dost remember, Leo, how in Kor I found but a single pleasure during all those weary ages--that of forcing my mother Nature one by one to yield me up her choicest secrets; I, who am a student of all things which are and of the forces that cause them to be born. Now follow me, both of

you, and ye shall look on what mortal eyes have not yet beheld."

"What are we to see?" I asked doubtfully, having a lively recollection of Ayesha's powers as a chemist.

"That thou shalt learn, or shalt not learn if it pleases thee to stay behind. Come, Leo, my love, my love, and leave this wise philosopher first to find his riddle and next to guess it."

Then turning her back to me she smiled on him so sweetly that although really he was more loth to go than I, Leo would have followed her through a furnace door, as indeed, had he but known it, he was about to do.

So they started, and I accompanied them since with Ayesha it was useless to indulge in any foolish pride, or to make oneself a victim to consistency. Also I was anxious to see her new marvel, and did not care to rely for an account of it upon Leo's descriptive skill, which at its best was never more than moderate.

She took us down passages that we had not passed before, to a door which she signed to Leo to open. He obeyed, and from the cave within issued a flood of light. As we guessed at once, the place was her laboratory, for about it stood metal flasks and various strange-shaped instruments. Moreover, there was a furnace in it, one of the best conceivable, for it needed neither fuel nor stoking, whose gaseous fires, like those of the

twisted columns in the Sanctuary, sprang from the womb of the volcano beneath our feet.

When we entered two priests were at work there: one of them stirring a cauldron with an iron rod and the other receiving its molten contents into a mould of clay. They stopped to salute Ayesha, but she bade them to continue their task, asking them if all went well.

"Very well, O Hes," they answered; and we passed through that cave and sundry doors and passages to a little chamber cut in the rock. There was no lamp or flame of fire in it, and yet the place was filled with a gentle light which seemed to flow from the opposing wall.

"What were those priests doing?" I said, more to break the silence than for any other reason.

"Why waste breath upon foolish questions?" she replied. "Are no metals smelted in thy country, O Holly? Now hadst thou sought to know what I am doing--But that, without seeing, thou wouldst not believe, so, Doubter, thou shalt see."

Then she pointed to and bade us don, two strange garments that hung upon the wall, made of a material which seemed to be half cloth and half wood and having headpieces not unlike a diver's helmet.

So under her directions Leo helped me into mine, lacing it up behind,

after which, or so I gathered from the sounds--for no light came through the helmet--she did the same service for him.

"I seem very much in the dark," I said presently; for now there was silence again, and beneath this extinguisher I felt alarmed and wished to be sure that I was not left alone.

"Aye Holly," I heard Ayesha's mocking voice make answer, "in the dark, as thou wast ever, the thick dark of ignorance and unbelief. Well, now, as ever also, I will give thee light." As she spoke I heard something roll back; I suppose that it must have been a stone door.

Then, indeed, there was light, yes, even through the thicknesses of that prepared garment, such light as seemed to blind me. By it I saw that the wall opposite to us had opened and that we were all three of us, on the threshold of another chamber. At the end of it stood something like a little altar of hard, black stone, and on this altar lay a mass of substance of the size of a child's head, but fashioned, I suppose from fantasy, to the oblong shape of a human eye.

Out of this eye there poured that blistering and intolerable light. It was shut round by thick, funnel-shaped screens of a material that looked like fire-brick, yet it pierced them as though they were but muslin. More, the rays thus directed upwards struck full upon a lump of metal held in place above them by a massive frame-work.

And what rays they were! If all the cut diamonds of the world were brought together and set beneath a mighty burning-glass, the light flashed from them would not have been a thousandth part so brilliant. They scorched my eyes and caused the skin of my face and limbs to smart, yet Ayesha stood there unshielded from them. Aye, she even went down the length of the room and, throwing back her veil, bent over them, as it seemed a woman of molten steel in whose body the bones were visible, and examined the mass that was supported by the hanging cradle.

"It is ready and somewhat sooner than I thought," she said. Then as though it were but a feather weight, she lifted the lump in her bare hands and glided back with it to where we stood, laughing and saying--"Tell me now, O thou well-read Holly, if thou hast ever heard of a better alchemist than this poor priestess of a forgotten faith?" And she thrust the glowing substance up almost to the mask that hid my face.

Then I turned and ran, or rather waddled, for in that gear I could not run, out of the chamber until the rock wall beyond stayed me, and there, with my back towards her, thrust my helmeted head against it, for I felt as though red-hot bradawls had been plunged into my eyes. So I stood while she laughed and mocked behind me until at length I heard the door close and the blessed darkness came like a gift from Heaven.

Then Ayesha began to loose Leo from his ray-proof armour, if so it can be called, and he in turn loosed me; and there in that gentle radiance we stood blinking at each other like owls in the sunlight, while the

tears streamed down our faces.

"Well, art satisfied, my Holly?" she asked.

"Satisfied with what?" I answered angrily, for the smarting of my eyes was unbearable. "Yes, with burnings and bedevilments I am well satisfied."

"And I also," grumbled Leo, who was swearing softly but continuously to himself in the other corner of the place.

But Ayesha only laughed, oh! she laughed until she seemed the goddess of all merriment come to earth, laughed till she also wept, then said--"Why, what ingratitude is this? Thou, my Leo, didst wish to see the wonders that I work, and thou, O Holly, didst come unbidden after I bade thee stay behind, and now both of you are rude and angry, aye, and weeping like a child with a burnt finger. Here take this," and she gave us some salve that stood upon a shelf, "and rub it on your eyes and the smart will pass away."

So we did, and the pain went from them, though, for hours afterwards, mine remained red as blood.

"And what are these wonders?" I asked her presently. "If thou meanest that unbearable flame----"

"Nay, I mean what is born of the flame, as, in thine ignorance thou dost call that mighty agent. Look now;" and she pointed to the metallic lump she had brought with her, which, still gleaming faintly, lay upon the floor. "Nay, it has no heat. Thinkest thou that I would wish to burn my tender hands and so make them unsightly? Touch it, Holly."

But I would not, who thought to myself that Ayesha might be well accustomed to the hottest fires, and feared her impish mischief. I looked, however, long and earnestly.

"Well, what is it, Holly?"

"Gold," I said, then corrected myself and added, "Copper," for the dull, red glow might have been that of either metal.

"Nay, nay," she answered, "it is gold, pure gold."

"The ore in this place must be rich," said Leo, incredulously, for I would not speak any more.

"Yes, my Leo, the iron ore is rich."

"Iron ore?" and he looked at her.

"Surely," she answered, "for from what mine do men dig out gold in such great masses? Iron ore, beloved, that by my alchemy I change to gold,

which soon shall serve us in our need."

Now Leo stared and I groaned, for I did not believe that it was gold, and still less that she could make that metal. Then, reading my thought, with one of those sudden changes of mood that were common to her, Ayesha grew very angry.

"By Nature's self!" she cried; "wert thou not my friend, Holly, the fool whom it pleases me to cherish, I would bind that right hand of thine in those secret rays till the very bones within it were turned to gold. Nay, why should I be vexed with thee, who art both blind and deaf? Yet thou shalt be persuaded," and leaving us, she passed down the passages, called something to the priests who were labouring in the workshop, then returned to us.

Presently they followed her, carrying on a kind of stretcher between them an ingot of iron ore that seemed to be as much as they could lift.

"Now," she said, "how wilt thou that I mark this mass which as thou must admit is only iron? With the sign of Life? Good," and at her bidding the priests took cold-chisels and hammers and roughly cut upon its surface the symbol of the looped cross--the crux ansata.

"It is not enough," she said when they had finished. "Holly, lend me that knife of thine, to-morrow I will return it to thee, and of more value."

So I drew my hunting knife, an Indian-made thing, that had a handle of plated iron, and gave it her.

"Thou knowest the marks on it," and she pointed to various dents and to the maker's name upon the blade; for though the hilt was Indian work the steel was of Sheffield manufacture.

I nodded. Then she bade the priests put on the ray-proof armour that we had discarded, and told us to go without the chamber and lie in the darkness of the passage with our faces against the floor.

This we did, and remained so until, a few minutes later, she called us again. We rose and returned into the chamber to find the priests, who had removed the protecting garments, gasping and rubbing the salve upon their eyes; to find also that the lump of iron ore and my knife were gone. Next she commanded them to place the block of gold-coloured metal upon their stretcher and to bring it with them. They obeyed, and we noted that, although those priests were both of them strong men they groaned beneath its weight.

"How came it," said Leo, "that thou, a woman, couldst carry what these men find so heavy?"

"It is one of the properties of that force which thou callest fire," she answered sweetly, "to make what has been exposed to it, if for a little

while only, as light as thistle-down. Else, how could I, who am so frail, have borne yonder block of gold?"

"Quite so! I understand now," answered Leo.

Well, that was the end of it. The lump of metal was hid away in a kind of rock pit, with an iron cover, and we returned to Ayesha's apartments.

"So all wealth is thine, as well as all power," said Leo, presently, for remembering Ayesha's awful threat I scarcely dared to open my mouth.

"It seems so," she answered wearily, "since centuries ago I discovered that great secret, though until ye came I had put it to no use. Holly here, after his common fashion, believes that this is magic, but I tell thee again that there is no magic, only knowledge which I have chanced to win."

"Of course," said Leo, "looked at in the right way, that is in thy way, the thing is simple." I think he would have liked to add, "as lying," but as the phrase would have involved explanations, did not. "Yet, Ayesha," he went on, "hast thou thought that this discovery of thine will wreck the world?"

"Leo," she answered, "is there then nothing that I can do which will not wreck this world, for which thou hast such tender care, who shouldst keep all thy care--for me?"

I smiled, but remembering in time, turned the smile into a frown at Leo, then fearing lest that also might anger her, made my countenance as blank as possible.

"If so," she continued, "well, let the world be wrecked. But what meanest thou? Oh! my lord, Leo, forgive me if I am so dull that I cannot always follow thy quick thought--I who have lived these many years alone, without converse with nobler minds, or even those to which mine own is equal."

"It pleases thee to mock me," said Leo, in a vexed voice, "and that is not too brave."

Now Ayesha turned on him fiercely, and I looked towards the door. But he did not shrink, only folded his arms and stared her straight in the face. She contemplated him a little, then said--"After that great ordained reason which thou dost not know, I think, Leo, that why I love thee so madly is that thou alone art not afraid of me. Not like Holly there, who, ever since I threatened to turn his bones to gold--which, indeed, I was minded to do," and she laughed--"trembles at my footsteps and cowers beneath my softest glance.

"Oh! my lord, how good thou art to me, how patient with my moods and woman's weaknesses," and she made as though she were about to embrace him. Then suddenly remembering herself, with a little start that somehow

conveyed more than the most tragic gesture, she pointed to the couch in token that he should seat himself. When he had done so she drew a footstool to his feet and sank upon it, looking up into his face with attentive eyes, like a child who listens for a story.

"Thy reasons, Leo, give me thy reasons. Doubtless they are good, and, oh! be sure I'll weigh them well."

"Here they are in brief," he answered. "The world, as thou knewest in thy--" and he stopped.

"Thy earlier wanderings there," she suggested.

"Yes--thy earlier wanderings there, has set up gold as the standard of its wealth. On it all civilizations are founded. Make it as common as it seems thou canst, and these must fall to pieces. Credit will fail and, like their savage forefathers, men must once more take to barter to supply their needs as they do in Kaloon to-day."

"Why not?" she asked. "It would be more simple and bring them closer to the time when they were good and knew not luxury and greed."

"And smashed in each other's heads with stone axes," added Leo.

"Who now pierce each other's hearts with steel, or those leaden missiles of which thou hast told me. Oh! Leo, when the nations are beggared and

their golden god is down; when the usurer and the fat merchant tremble and turn white as chalk because their hoards are but useless dross; when I have made the bankrupt Exchanges of the world my mock, and laugh across the ruin of its richest markets, why, then, will not true worth come to its heritage again?

"What of it if I do discomfort those who think more of pelf than of courage and of virtue; those who, as that Hebrew prophet wrote, lay field to field and house to house, until the wretched whom they have robbed find no place left whereon to dwell? What if I proved your sagest chapmen fools, and gorge your greedy moneychangers with the gold that they desire until they loathe its very sight and touch? What if I uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed against the ravening lusts of Mammon? Why, will not this world of yours be happier then?"

"I do not know," answered Leo. "All that I know is that it would be a different world, one shaped upon a new plan, governed by untried laws and seeking other ends. In so strange a place who can say what might or might not chance?"

"That we shall learn in its season, Leo. Or, rather, if it be against thy wish, we will not turn this hidden page. Since thou dost desire it, that old evil, the love of lucre, shall still hold its mastery upon the earth. Let the peoples keep their yellow king, I'll not crown another in his place, as I was minded--such as that living Strength thou sawest burning eternally but now; that Power whereof I am the mistress, which

can give health to men, or even change the character of metals, and in truth, if I so desire, obedient to my word, destroy a city or rend this Mountain from its roots.

"But see, Holly is wearied with much wondering and needs his rest. Oh, Holly! thou wast born a critic of things done, not a doer of them. I know thy tribe for even in my day the colleges of Alexandria echoed with their wranglings and already the winds blew thick with the dust of their forgotten bones. Holly, I tell thee that at times those who create and act are impatient of such petty doubts and cavillings. Yet fear not, old friend, nor take my anger ill. Already thy heart is gold without alloy, so what need have I to gild thy bones?"

I thanked Ayesha for her compliment, and went to my bed wondering which was real, her kindness or her wrath, or if both were but assumed. Also I wondered in what way she had fallen foul of the critics of Alexandria. Perhaps once she had published a poem or a system of philosophy and been roughly handled by them! It is quite possible, only if Ayesha had ever written poetry I think that it would have endured, like Sappho's.

In the morning I discovered that whatever else about her might be false, Ayesha was a true chemist, the very greatest, I suppose, who ever lived. For as I dressed myself, those priests whom we had seen in the laboratory, staggered into the room carrying between them a heavy burden, that was covered with a cloth, and, directed by Oros, placed it upon the floor.

"What is that?" I asked of Oros.

"A peace-offering sent by the Hesea," he said, "with whom, as I am told, you dared to quarrel yesterday."

Then he withdrew the cloth, and there beneath it shone that great lump of metal which, in the presence of myself and Leo, had been marked with the Symbol of Life, that still appeared upon its surface. Only now it was gold, not iron, gold so good and soft that I could write my name upon it with a nail. My knife lay with it also, and of that too the handle, though not the blade, had been changed from iron into gold.

Ayesha asked to see this afterwards and was but ill-pleased with the result of her experiment. She pointed out to me that lines and blotches of gold ran for an inch or more down the substance of the steel, which she feared that they might weaken or distemper, whereas it had been her purpose that the hilt only should be altered.[*]

[*] I proved in after days how real were Ayesha's alchemy, and the knowledge which enabled her to solve the secret that chemists have hunted for in vain, and, like Nature's self, to transmute the commonest into the most precious of the metals. At the first town that I reached on the frontiers of India, I took this knife to a jeweller, a native, who was as clever as he proved dishonest, and asked him to test the

handle. He did so with acids and by other means, and told me that it was of very pure gold, twenty-four carats, I think he said. Also he pointed out that this gold became gradually merged into the steel of the blade in a way which was quite inexplicable to him, and asked me to clear up the matter. Of course I could not, but at his request I left the knife in his shop to give him an opportunity of examining it further. The next day I was taken ill with one of the heart-attacks to which I have been liable of late, and when I became able to move about again a while afterwards, I found that this jeweller had gone, none knew whither. So had my knife.--L.
H. H.

Often since that time I have marvelled how Ayesha performed this miracle, and from what substances she gathered or compounded the lightning-like material, which was her servant in the work; also, whether or no it had been impregnated with the immortalizing fire of Life that burned in the caves of Kor.[*] Yet to this hour I have found no answer to the problem, for it is beyond my guessing.

[*] Recent discoveries would appear to suggest that this mysterious "Fire of Life," which, whatever else it may have been, was evidently a force and no true fire, since it did not burn, owed its origin to the emanations from radium, or some kindred substance. Although in the year 1885, Mr. Holly would have known nothing of the properties of these

marvellous rays or emanations, doubtless Ayesha was familiar with them and their enormous possibilities, of which our chemists and scientific men have, at present, but explored the fringe.--Editor.

I suppose that, in preparation for her conquest of the inhabitants of this globe--to which, indeed, it would have sufficed unaided by any other power--the manufacture of gold from iron went on in the cave unceasingly.

However this may be, during the few days that we remained together Ayesha never so much as spoke of it again. It seemed to have served her purpose for the while, or in the press of other and more urgent matters to have been forgotten or thrust from her mind. Still, amongst others, of which I have said nothing, since it is necessary to select, I record this strange incident, and our conversations concerning it at length, for the reason that it made a great impression upon me and furnishes a striking example of Ayesha's dominion over the hidden forces of Nature whereof we were soon to experience a more fearful instance.