

CHAPTER XXIV

THE PASSING OF AYESHA

I heard Ayesha say presently, and the words struck me as dreadful in their hopeless acceptance of a doom against which even she had no strength to struggle.

"It seems that my lord has left me for awhile; I must hasten to my lord afar."

After that I do not quite know what happened. I had lost the man who was all in all to me, friend and child in one, and I was crushed as I had never been before. It seemed so sad that I, old and outworn, should still live on whilst he in the flower of his age, snatched from joy and greatness such as no man hath known, lay thus asleep.

I think that by an afterthought, Ayesha and Oros tried to restore him, tried without result, for here her powers were of no avail. Indeed my conviction is that although some lingering life still kept him on his feet, Leo had really died at the moment of her embrace, since when I looked at him before he fell, his face was that of a dead man.

Yes, I believe that last speech of hers, although she knew it not, was addressed to his spirit, for in her burning kiss his flesh had perished.

When at length I recovered myself a little, it was to hear Ayesha in a cold, calm voice--her face I could not see for she had veiled herself--commanding certain priests who had been summoned to "bear away the body of that accursed woman and bury her as befits her rank." Even then I bethought me, I remember, of the tale of Jehu and Jezebel.

Leo, looking strangely calm and happy, lay now upon a couch, the arms folded on his breast. When the priests had tramped away carrying their royal burden, Ayesha, who sat by his body brooding, seemed to awake, for she rose and said--"I need a messenger, and for no common journey, since he must search out the habitations of the Shades," and she turned herself towards Oros and appeared to look at him.

Now for the first time I saw that priest change countenance a little, for the eternal smile, of which even this scene had not quite rid it, left his face and he grew pale and trembled.

"Thou art afraid," she said contemptuously. "Be at rest, Oros, I will not send one who is afraid. Holly, wilt thou go for me--and him?"

"Aye," I answered. "I am weary of life and desire no other end. Only let it be swift and painless."

She mused a while, then said--"Nay, thy time is not yet, thou still hast work to do. Endure, my Holly, 'tis only for a breath."

Then she looked at the Shaman, the man turned to stone who all this while had stood there as a statue stands, and cried--"Awake!"

Instantly he seemed to thaw into life, his limbs relaxed, his breast heaved, he was as he had always been: ancient, gnarled, malevolent.

"I hear thee, mistress," he said, bowing as a man bows to the power that he hates.

"Thou seest, Simbri," and she waved her hand.

"I see. Things have befallen as Atene and I foretold, have they not? 'Ere long the corpse of a new-crowned Khan of Kaloon,'" and he pointed to the gold circlet that Ayesha had set on Leo's brow, "'will lie upon the brink of the Pit of Flame'--as I foretold." An evil smile crept into his eyes and he went on--"Hadst thou not smote me dumb, I who watched could have warned thee that they would so befall; but, great mistress, it pleased thee to smite me dumb. And so it seems, O Hes, that thou hast overshot thyself and liest broken at the foot of that pinnacle which step by step thou hast climbed for more than two thousand weary years. See what thou hast bought at the price of countless lives that now before the throne of Judgment bring accusations against thy powers misused, and cry out for justice on thy head," and he looked at the dead form of Leo.

"I sorrow for them, yet, Simbri, they were well spent," Ayesha answered

reflectively, "who by their forewritten doom, as it was decreed, held thy knife from falling and thus won me my husband. Aye and I am happy--happier than such blind bats as thou can see or guess. For know that now with him I have re-wed my wandering soul divorced by sin from me, and that of our marriage kiss which burned his life away there shall still be born to us children of Forgiveness and eternal Grace and all things that are pure and fair.

"Look thou, Simbri, I will honour thee. Thou shalt be my messenger, and beware! beware I say how thou dost fulfil thine office, since of every syllable thou must render an account.

"Go thou down the dark paths of Death, and, since even my thought may not reach to where he sleeps tonight, search out my lord and say to him that the feet of his spouse Ayesha are following fast. Bid him have no fear for me who by this last sorrow have atoned my crimes and am in his embrace regenerate. Tell him that thus it was appointed, and thus is best, since now he is dipped indeed in the eternal Flame of Life; now for him the mortal night is done and the everlasting day arises. Command him that he await me in the Gate of Death where it is granted that I greet him presently. Thou hearest?"

"I hear, O Queen, Mighty-from-of-Old."

"One message more. Say to Atene that I forgive her. Her heart was high and greatly did she play her part. There in the Gates we will balance

our account. Thou hearest?"

"I hear, O Eternal Star that hath conquered Night."

"Then, man, begone!"

As the word left Ayesha's lips Simbri leapt from the floor, grasping at the air as though he would clutch his own departing soul, staggered back against the board where Leo and I had eaten, overthrowing it, and amid a ruin of gold and silver vessels, fell down and died.

She looked at him, then said to me--"See, though he ever hated me, this magician who has known Ayesha from the first, did homage to my ancient majesty at last, when lies and defiance would serve his end no more. No longer now do I hear the name that his dead mistress gave to me. The 'Star-that-hath-fallen' in his lips and in very truth is become the 'Star-which-hath-burst-the-bonds-of-Night,' and, re-arisen, shines for ever--shines with its twin immortal to set no more--my Holly. Well, he is gone, and ere now, those that serve me in the Under-world--dost remember?--thou sawest their captains in the Sanctuary--bend the head at great Ayesha's word and make her place ready near her spouse.

"But oh, what folly has been mine. When even here my wrath can show such power, how could I hope that my lord would outlive the fires of my love? Still it was better so, for he sought not the pomp I would have given him, nor desired the death of men. Yet such pomp must have been his

portion in this poor shadow of a world, and the steps that encircle an usurper's throne are ever slippery with blood.

"Thou art weary, my Holly, go rest thee. To-morrow night we journey to the Mountain, there to celebrate these obsequies."

I crept into the room adjoining--it had been Simbri's--and laid me down upon his bed, but to sleep I was not able. Its door was open, and in the light of the burning city that shone through the casements I could see Ayesha watching by her dead. Hour after hour she watched, her head resting on her hand, silent, stirless. She wept not, no sigh escaped her; only watched as a tender woman watches a slumbering babe that she knows will awake at dawn.

Her face was unveiled and I perceived that it had greatly changed. All pride and anger were departed from it; it was grown soft, wistful, yet full of confidence and quietness. For a while I could not think of what it reminded me, till suddenly I remembered. Now it was like, indeed the counterpart almost, of the holy and majestic semblance of the statue of the Mother in the Sanctuary. Yes, with just such a look of love and power as that mother cast upon her frightened child new-risen from its dream of death, did Ayesha gaze upon her dead, while her parted lips also seemed to whisper "some tale of hope, sure and immortal."

At length she rose and came into my chamber.

"Thou thinkest me fallen and dost grieve for me, my Holly," she said in a gentle voice, "knowing my fears lest some such fate should overtake my lord."

"Ay, Ayesha, I grieve for thee as for myself."

"Spare then thy pity, Holly, since although the human part of me would have kept him on the earth, now my spirit doth rejoice that for a while he has burst his mortal bonds. For many an age, although I knew it not, in my proud defiance of the Universal Law, I have fought against his true weal and mine. Thrice have I and the angel wrestled, matching strength with strength, and thrice has he conquered me. Yet as he bore away his prize this night he whispered wisdom in my ear. This was his message: That in death is love's home, in death its strength; that from the charnel-house of life this love springs again glorified and pure, to reign a conqueror forever. Therefore I wipe away my tears and, crowned once more a queen of peace, I go to join him whom we have lost, there where he awaits us, as it is granted to me that I shall do.

"But I am selfish, and forgot. Thou needest rest. Sleep, friend, I bid thee sleep."

And I slept wondering as my eyes closed whence Ayesha drew this strange confidence and comfort. I know not but it was there, real and not assumed. I can only suppose therefore that some illumination had fallen on her soul, and that, as she stated, the love and end of Leo in a way

unknown, did suffice to satisfy her court of sins.

At the least those sins and all the load of death that lay at her door never seemed to trouble her at all. She appeared to look upon them merely as events which were destined to occur, as inevitable fruits of a seed sowed long ago by the hand of Fate for whose workings she was not responsible. The fears and considerations which weigh with mortals did not affect or oppress her. In this as in other matters, Ayesha was a law unto herself.

When I awoke it was day, and through the window-place I saw the rain that the people of Kaloon had so long desired falling in one straight sheet. I saw also that Ayesha, seated by the shrouded form of Leo, was giving orders to her priests and captains and to some nobles, who had survived the slaughter of Kaloon, as to the new government of the land. Then I slept again.

It was evening, and Ayesha stood at my bedside.

"All is prepared," she said. "Awake and ride with me."

So we went, escorted by a thousand cavalry, for the rest stayed to occupy, or perchance to plunder, the land of Kaloon. In front the body of Leo was borne by relays of priests, and behind it rode the veiled Ayesha, I at her side.

Strange was the contrast between this departure, and our arrival.

Then the rushing squadrons, the elements that raved, the perpetual sheen of lightnings seen through the swinging curtains of the hail; the voices of despair from an army rolled in blood beneath the chariot wheels of thunder.

Now the white-draped corpse, the slow-pacing horses, the riders with their spears reversed, and on either side, seen in that melancholy moonlight, the women of Kaloon burying their innumerable dead.

And Ayesha herself, yesterday a Valkyrie crested with the star of flame, to-day but a bereaved woman humbly following her husband to the tomb.

Yet how they feared her! Some widow standing on the grave mould she had dug, pointed as we passed to the body of Leo, uttering bitter words which I could not catch. Thereon her companions flung themselves upon her and felling her with fist and spade, prostrated themselves upon the ground, throwing dust on their hair in token of their submission to the priestess of Death.

Ayesha saw them, and said to me with something of her ancient fire and pride--"I tread the plain of Kaloon no more, yet as a parting gift have I read this high-stomached people a lesson that they needed long. Not for many a generation, O Holly, will they dare to lift spear against the College of Hes and its subject Tribes."

Again it was night, and where once lay that of the Khan, the man whom he had killed, flanked by the burning pillars, the bier of Leo stood in the inmost Sanctuary before the statue of the Mother whose gentle, unchanging eyes seemed to search his quiet face.

On her throne sat the veiled Hesea, giving commands to her priests and priestesses.

"I am weary," she said, "and it may be that I leave you for a while to rest--beyond the mountains. A year, or a thousand years--I cannot say. If so, let Papave, with Oros as her counsellor and husband and their seed, hold my place till I return again.

"Priests and priestesses of the College of Hes, over new territories have I held my hand; take them as an heritage from me, and rule them well and gently. Henceforth let the Hesea of the Mountain be also the Khania of Kaloon.

"Priests and priestesses of our ancient faith, learn to look through its rites and tokens, outward and visible, to the in-forming Spirit. If Hes the goddess never ruled on earth, still pitying Nature rules. If the name of Isis never rang through the courts of heaven, still in heaven, with all love fulfilled, nursing her human children on her breast, dwells the mighty Motherhood where of this statue is the symbol, that Motherhood which bore us, and, unforgetting, faithful, will receive us

at the end.

"For of the bread of bitterness we shall not always eat, of the water of tears we shall not always drink. Beyond the night the royal suns ride on; ever the rainbow shines around the rain. Though they slip from our clutching hands like melted snow, the lives we lose shall yet be found immortal, and from the burnt-out fires of our human hopes will spring a heavenly star."

She paused and waved her hand as though to dismiss them, then added by an after-thought, pointing to myself--"This man is my beloved friend and guest. Let him be yours also. It is my will that you tend and guard him here, and when the snows have melted and summer is at hand, that you fashion a way for him through the gulf and bring him across the mountains by which he came, till you leave him in safety. Hear and forget not, for be sure that to me you shall give account of him."

The night drew towards the dawn, and we stood upon the peak above the gulf of fire, four of us only--Ayesha and I, and Oros and Papave. For the bearers had laid down the body of Leo upon its edge and gone their way. The curtain of flame flared in front of us, its crest bent over like a billow in the gale, and to leeward, one by one, floated the torn-off clouds and pinnacles of fire. By the dead Leo knelt Ayesha, gazing at that icy, smiling face, but speaking no single word. At length she rose, and said,--"Darkness draws near, my Holly, that deep darkness which foreruns the glory of the dawn. Now fare thee well for one little

hour. When thou art about to die, but not before, call me, and I will come to thee. Stir not and speak not till all be done, lest when I am no longer here to be thy guard some Presence should pass on and slay thee.

"Think not that I am conquered, for now my name is Victory! Think not that Ayesha's strength is spent or her tale is done, for of it thou readest but a single page. Think not even that I am today that thing of sin and pride, the Ayesha thou didst adore and fear, I who in my lord's love and sacrifice have again conceived my soul. For know that now once more as at the beginning, his soul and mine are one."

She thought awhile and added,

"Friend take this sceptre in memory of me, but beware how thou usest it save at the last to summon me, for it has virtues," and she gave me the jewelled Sistrum that she bore--then said,

"So kiss his brow, stand back, and be still."

Now as once before the darkness gathered on the pit, and presently, although I heard no prayer, though now no mighty music broke upon the silence, through that darkness, beating up the gale, came the two-winged flame and hovered where Ayesha stood.

It appeared, it vanished, and one by one the long minutes crept away until the first spear of dawn lit upon the point of rock.

Lo! it was empty, utterly empty and lonesome. Gone was the corpse of Leo, and gone too was Ayesha the imperial, the divine.

Whither had she gone? I know not. But this I know, that as the light returned and the broad sheet of flame flared out to meet it, I seemed to see two glorious shapes sweeping upward on its bosom, and the faces that they wore were those of Leo and of Ayesha.

Often and often during the weary months that followed, whilst I wandered through the temple or amid the winter snows upon the Mountain side, did I seek to solve this question--Whither had She gone? I asked it of my heart; I asked it of the skies; I asked it of the spirit of Leo which often was so near to me.

But no sure answer ever came, nor will I hazard one. As mystery wrapped Ayesha's origin and lives--for the truth of these things I never learned--so did mystery wrap her deaths, or rather her departings, for I cannot think her dead. Surely she still is, if not on earth, then in some other sphere?

So I believe; and when my own hour comes, and it draws near swiftly, I shall know whether I believe in vain, or whether she will appear to be my guide as, with her last words, she swore that she would do. Then, too, I shall learn what she was about to reveal to Leo when he died, the purposes of their being and of their love.

So I can wait in patience who must not wait for long, though my heart is broken and I am desolate.

Oros and all the priests were very good to me. Indeed, even had it been their wish, they would have feared to be otherwise, who remembered and were sure that in some time to come they must render an account of this matter to their dread queen. By way of return, I helped them as I was best able to draw up a scheme for the government of the conquered country of Kaloon, and with my advice upon many other questions.

And so at length the long months wore away, till at the approach of summer the snows melted. Then I said that I must be gone. They gave me of their treasures in precious stones, lest I should need money for my faring, since the gold of which I had such plenty was too heavy to be carried by one man alone. They led me across the plains of Kaloon, where now the husbandmen, those that were left of them, ploughed the land and scattered seed, and so on to its city. But amidst those blackened ruins over which Atene's palace still frowned unharmed, I would not enter, for to me it was, and always must remain, a home of death. So I camped outside the walls by the river just where Leo and I had landed after that poor mad Khan set us free, or rather loosed us to be hunted by his death-hounds.

Next day we took boat and rowed up the river, past the place where we had seen Atene's cousin murdered, till we came to the Gate-house. Here

once again I slept, or rather did not sleep.

On the following morning I went down into the ravine and found to my surprise that the rapid torrent--shallow enough now--had been roughly bridged, and that in preparation for my coming rude but sufficient ladders were built on the face of the opposing precipice. At the foot of these I bade farewell to Oros, who at our parting smiled benignantly as on the day we met.

"We have seen strange things together," I said to him, not knowing what else to say.

"Very strange," he answered.

"At least, friend Oros," I went on awkwardly enough, "events have shaped themselves to your advantage, for you inherit a royal mantle."

"I wrap myself in a mantle of borrowed royalty," he answered with precision, "of which doubtless one day I shall be stripped."

"You mean that the great Ayesha is not dead?"

"I mean that She never dies. She changes, that is all. As the wind blows now hence, now hither, so she comes and goes, and who can tell at what spot upon the earth, or beyond it, for a while that wind lies sleeping? But at sunset or at dawn, at noon or at midnight, it will begin to blow

again, and then woe to those who stand across its path.

"Remember the dead heaped upon the plains of Kaloon. Remember the departing of the Shaman Simbri with his message and the words that she spoke then. Remember the passing of the Hesea from the Mountain point. Stranger from the West, surely as to-morrow's sun must rise, as she went, so she will return again, and in my borrowed garment I await her advent."

"I also await her advent," I answered, and thus we parted.

Accompanied by twenty picked men bearing provisions and arms, I climbed the ladders easily enough, and now that I had food and shelter, crossed the mountains without mishap. They even escorted me through the desert beyond, till one night we camped within sight of the gigantic Buddha that sits before the monastery, gazing eternally across the sands and snows.

When I awoke next morning the priests were gone. So I took up my pack and pursued my journey alone, and walking slowly came at sunset to the distant lamasery. At its door an ancient figure, wrapped in a tattered cloak, was sitting, engaged apparently in contemplation of the skies. It was our old friend Kou-en. Adjusting his horn spectacles on his nose he looked at me.

"I was awaiting you, brother of the Monastery called 'the World,'" he

said in a voice, measured, very ineffectually, to conceal his evident delight. "Have you grown hungry there that you return to this poor place?"

"Aye, most excellent Kou-en," I answered, "hungry for rest."

"It shall be yours for all the days of this incarnation. But say, where is the other brother?"

"Dead," I answered.

"And therefore re-born elsewhere or perhaps, dreaming in Devachan for a while. Well, doubtless we shall meet him later on. Come, eat, and afterwards tell me your story."

So I ate, and that night I told him all. Kou-en listened with respectful attention, but the tale, strange as it might seem to most people, excited no particular wonder in his mind. Indeed, he explained it to me at such length by aid of some marvellous theory of re-incarnations, that at last I began to doze.

"At least," I said sleepily, "it would seem that we are all winning merit on the Everlasting Plane," for I thought that favourite catchword would please him.

"Yes, brother of the Monastery called the World," Kou-en answered in

a severe voice, "doubtless you are all winning merit, but, if I may venture to say so, you are winning it very slowly, especially the woman--or the sorceress--or the mighty evil spirit--whose names I understand you to tell me are She, Hes, and Ayesha upon earth and in Avitchi, Star-that-hath-Fallen----"

(Here Mr. Holly's manuscript ends, its outer sheets having been burnt when he threw it on to the fire at his house in Cumberland.)