

CHAPTER II

OF THE COMING OF CHARMION; AND OF THE WRATH OF SEPA

That same night, while we sat at supper in the house, there came a knock upon the door. It was opened, and a woman passed in wrapped from head to foot in a large dark peplos or cloak in such fashion that her face could not be clearly seen.

My uncle rose, and as he did so the woman uttered the secret word.

"I am come, my father," she said in a sweet clear voice, "though of a truth it was not easy to escape the revels at the palace yonder. But I told the Queen that the sun and the riot in the streets had made me sick, and she let me go."

"It is well," he answered. "Unveil thyself; here thou art safe."

With a little sigh of weariness she unclasped the peplos and let it slip from her, giving to my sight the face and form of that beautiful girl who had stood to fan Cleopatra in the chariot. For she was very fair and pleasant to look upon, and her Grecian robes clung sweetly about her supple limbs and budding form. Her wayward hair, flowing in a hundred little curls, was bound in with a golden fillet, and on her feet were sandals fastened with studs of gold. Her cheeks blushed like a flower, and her dark soft eyes were downcast, as though with modesty, but smiles and dimples trembled about her lips.

My uncle frowned when his eyes fell upon her dress.

"Why comest thou in this garb, Charmion?" he asked sternly. "Is not the dress of thy mothers good enough for thee? This is no time or place for woman's vanities. Thou art not here to conquer, but to obey."

"Nay, be not wroth, my father," she answered softly; "perchance thou knowest not that she whom I serve will have none of our Egyptian dress; it is out of fashion. To wear it would have been to court suspicion--also I came in haste." And as she spoke I saw that all the while she watched me covertly through the long lashes which fringed her modest eyes.

"Well, well," he said sharply, fixing his keen glance upon her face, "doubtless thou speakest truth, Charmion. Be ever mindful of thy oath, girl, and of the cause to which thou art sworn. Be not light-minded, and I charge thee forget the beauty with which thou hast been cursed. For mark thou this, Charmion: fail us but one jot, and vengeance shall fall on thee--the vengeance of man and the vengeance of the Gods! To this service," he continued, lashing himself to anger as he went on till his great voice rang in the narrow room, "thou hast been bred; to this end thou hast been instructed and placed where thou art to gain the ear of that wicked wanton whom thou seemest to serve. See thou forget it not; see that the luxury of yonder Court does not corrupt thy purity and divert thy aim, Charmion," and his eyes flashed and his small form seemed to grow till it attained to dignity--nay, almost to grandeur.

"Charmion," he went on, advancing towards her with outstretched finger, "I say that at times I do not trust thee. But two nights gone I dreamed I saw thee standing in the desert. I saw thee laugh and lift thy hand to heaven, and from it fell a rain of blood; then the sky sank down on the land of Khem and covered it. Whence came the dream, girl, and what is its meaning? I have naught against thee as yet; but hearken! On the moment that I have, though thou art of my kin, and I have loved thee--on that moment, I say, I will doom those delicate limbs, which thou lovest so much to show, to the kite and the jackal, and the soul within thee to all the tortures of the Gods! Unburied shalt thou lie, and bodiless and accursed shalt thou wander in Amentil--ay, for ever and ever!"

He paused, for his sudden burst of passion had spent itself. But by it, more clearly than before, I saw how deep a heart this man had beneath the cloak of his merriness and simplicity of mien, and how fiercely the mind within him was set upon his aim. As for the girl, she shrank from him terrified, and, placing her hands before her sweet face, began to weep.

"Nay, speak not so, my father," she said, between her sobs; "for what have I done? I know nothing of the evil wandering of thy dreams. I am no soothsayer that I should read dreams. Have I not carried out all things according to thy desire? Have I not been ever mindful of that dread oath?"--and she trembled. "Have I not played the spy and told thee all? Have I not won the heart of the Queen, so that she loves me as a sister, refusing me nothing--ay, and the hearts of those about her? Why dost

thou affright me thus with thy words and threats?" and she wept afresh, looking even more beautiful in her sorrow than she was before.

"Enough, enough," he answered; "what I have said, I have said. Be warned, and affront our sight no more with this wanton dress. Thinkest thou that we would feed our eyes upon those rounded arms--we whose stake is Egypt and who are dedicated to the Gods of Egypt? Girl, behold thy cousin and thy King!"

She ceased weeping, wiping her eyes with her chiton, and I saw that they seemed but the softer for her tears.

"Methinks, most royal Harmachis, and beloved Cousin," she said, as she bent before me, "that we are already made acquainted."

"Yea, Cousin," I answered, not without shamefacedness, for I had never before spoken to so fair a maid; "thou wert in the chariot with Cleopatra this day when I struggled with the Nubian?"

"Assuredly," she said, with a smile and a sudden lighting of the eyes, "it was a gallant fight and gallantly didst thou overthrow that black brute. I saw the fray and, though I knew thee not, I greatly feared for one so brave. But I paid him for my fright, for it was I who put it into the mind of Cleopatra to bid the guards strike off his hand--now, knowing who thou art, I would I had said his head." And she looked up shooting a glance at me and then smiled.

"Enough," put in my uncle Sepa, "the time draws on. Tell thou thy mission, Charmion, and be gone."

Then her manner changed; she folded her hands meekly before her and spoke:

"Let Pharaoh hearken to his handmaiden. I am the daughter of Pharaoh's uncle, the brother of his father, who is now long dead, and therefore in my veins also flows the Royal blood of Egypt. Also I am of the ancient Faith, and hate these Greeks, and to see thee set upon the throne has been my dearest hope now for many years. To this end I, Charmion, have put aside my rank and become serving-woman to Cleopatra, that I might cut a notch in which thou couldst set thy foot when the hour came for thee to climb the throne. And, Pharaoh, the notch is cut.

"This then is our plot, royal Cousin. Thou must gain an entrance to the Household and learn its ways and secrets, and, so far as may be, suborn the eunuchs and captains, some of whom I have already tempted. This done, and all things being prepared without, thou must slay Cleopatra, and, aided by me with those whom I control, in the confusion that shall ensue, throw wide the gates, and, admitting those of our party who are in waiting, put such of the troops as remain faithful to the sword and seize the Bruchium. Which being finished, within two days thou shalt hold this fickle Alexandria. At the same time those who are sworn to thee in every city of Egypt shall rise in arms, and in ten days from the death of Cleopatra thou shalt indeed be Pharaoh. This is the counsel which has been taken, and thou seest, royal Cousin, that, though our

uncle yonder thinks so ill of me, I have learned my part--ay, and played it."

"I hear thee, Cousin," I answered, marvelling that so young a woman--she had but twenty years--could weave so bold a plot, for in its origin the scheme was hers. But in those days I little knew Charmion. "Go on; how then shall I gain entrance to the palace of Cleopatra?"

"Nay, Cousin, as things are it is easy. Thus: Cleopatra loves to look upon a man, and--give me pardon--thy face and form are fair. To-day she noted them, and twice she said she would she had asked where that astrologer might be found, for she held that an astrologer who could wellnigh slay a Nubian gladiator with his bare hands, must indeed be a master of the fortunate stars. I answered her that I would cause inquiry to be made. So hearken, royal Harmachis. At midday Cleopatra sleeps in her inner hall which looks over the gardens to the harbour. At that hour to-morrow, then, I will meet thee at the gates of the palace, whither thou shalt come boldly asking for the Lady Charmion. I will make appointment for thee with Cleopatra, so that she shall see thee alone when she wakes, and the rest shall be for thee, Harmachis. For much she loves to play with the mysteries of magic, and I have known her stand whole nights watching the stars and making a pretence to read them. And but lately she has sent away Dioscorides the physician, because, poor fool! he ventured on a prophecy from the conjunction of the stars, that Cassius would defeat Mark Antony. Thereon Cleopatra sent orders to the General Allienus, bidding him add the legions she had sent to Syria to help Antony to the army of Cassius, whose victory, forsooth,

was--according to Dioscorides--written on the stars. But, as it chanced, Antony beat Cassius first and Brutus afterwards, and so Dioscorides has departed, and now he lectures on herbs in the museum for his bread, and hates the name of stars. But his place is empty, and thou shalt fill it, and then we will work in secret and in the shadow of the sceptre. Ay, we will work like the worm at the heart of a fruit, till the time of plucking comes, and at thy dagger's touch, royal Cousin, the fabric of this Grecian throne crumbles to nothingness, and the worm that rotted it bursts his servile covering, and, in the sight of empires, spreads his royal wings o'er Egypt."

I gazed at this strange girl once more astonished, and saw that her face was lit up with such a light as I had never seen in the eyes of woman.

"Ah," broke in my uncle, who was watching her, "ah, I love to see thee so, girl; there is the Charmion that I knew and I bred up--not the Court girl whom I like not, draped in silks of Cos and fragrant with essences. Let thy heart harden in this mould--ay, stamp it with the fervid zeal of patriot faith, and thy reward shall find thee. And now cover up that shameless dress of thine and leave us, for it grows late. To-morrow Harmachis shall come, as thou hast said, and so farewell."

Charmion bowed her head, and, turning, wrapped her dark-hued peplos round her. Then, taking my hand, she touched it with her lips and went without any further word.

"A strange woman!" said Sepa, when she had gone; "a most strange woman,

and an uncertain!"

"Methought, my uncle," I said, "that thou wast somewhat harsh with her."

"Ay," he answered, "but not without a cause. Look thou, Harmachis; beware of this Charmion. She is too wayward, and, I fear me, may be led away. In truth, she is a very woman; and, like a restive horse, will take the path that pleases her. She has brain and fire, and she loves our cause; but I pray that the cause come not face to face with her desires, for what her heart is set on that will she do, at any cost she will do it. Therefore I frightened her now while I may: for who can know but that she will pass beyond my power? I tell thee, that in this one girl's hand lie all our lives: and if she play us false, what then? Alas! and alas! that we must use such tools as these! But it was needful: there was no other way; and yet I misdoubted me. I pray that it may be well; still, at times, I fear my niece Charmion--she is too fair, and the blood of youth runs too warm in those blue veins of hers.

"Ah, woe to the cause that builds its strength upon a woman's faith; for women are faithful only where they love, and when they love their faithlessness becomes their faith. They are not fixed as men are fixed: they rise more high and sink more low--they are strong and changeful as the sea. Harmachis, beware of this Charmion: for, like the ocean, she may float thee home; or, like the ocean, she may wreck thee, and, with thee, the hope of Egypt!"