

CHAPTER V

OF THE COMING OF CLEOPATRA TO THE CHAMBER OF HARMACHIS; OF THE THROWING FORTH OF THE KERCHIEF OF CHARMION; OF THE STARS; AND OF THE GIFT BY CLEOPATRA OF HER FRIENDSHIP TO HER SERVANT HARMACHIS

"At length thou art come, Charmion," I said. "It is over-late."

"Yea, my Lord; but by no means could I escape Cleopatra. Her mood is strangely crossed to-night. I know not what it may portend. Strange whims and fancies blow across it like light and contrary airs upon a summer sea, and I cannot read her purpose."

"Well, well; enough of Cleopatra. Hast thou seen our uncle?"

"Yes, royal Harmachis."

"And hast thou the last lists?"

"Yes; here they are," and she drew them from her bosom. "Here is the list of those who, after the Queen, must certainly be put to the sword. Among them thou wilt note is the name of that old Gaul Brennus. I grieve for him, for we are friends; but it must be. It is a heavy list."

"It is so," I answered conning it; "when men write out their count they forget no item, and our count is long. What must be must be. Now for the next."

"Here is the list of those to be spared, as friendly or uncertain; and here that of the towns which will certainly rise as soon as the messenger reaches their gates with tidings of the death of Cleopatra."

"Good. And now"--and I paused--"and now as to the manner of Cleopatra's death. How hast thou settled it? Must it be by my own hand?"

"Yea, my Lord," she answered, and again I caught that note of bitterness in her voice. "Doubtless Pharaoh will rejoice that his should be the hand to rid the land of this false Queen and wanton woman, and at one blow break the chains which gall the neck of Egypt."

"Talk not thus, girl," I said; "thou knowest well that I do not rejoice, being but driven to the act by deep necessity and the pressure of my vows. Can she not, then, be poisoned? Or can no one of the eunuchs be suborned to slay her? My soul turns from this bloody work! Indeed, I marvel, however heavy be her crimes, that thou canst speak so lightly of the death by treachery of one who loves thee!"

"Surely Pharaoh is over-tender, forgetting the greatness of the moment and all that hangs upon this dagger-stroke that shall cut the thread of Cleopatra's life. Listen, Harmachis. Thou must do the deed, and thou alone! Myself I would do it, had my arm the strength; but it has not. It cannot be done by poison, for every drop she drinks and every morsel that shall touch her lips is strictly tasted by three separate tasters, who cannot be suborned. Nor may the eunuchs of the guard be trusted.

Two, indeed, are sworn to us; but the third cannot be come at. He must be cut down afterwards; and, indeed, when so many men must fall, what matters a eunuch more or less? Thus it shall be, then. To-morrow night, at three hours before midnight thou dost cast the final augury of the issue of the war. And then thou wilt, as is agreed, descend alone with me, having the signet, to the outer chamber of the Queen's apartment. For the vessel bearing orders to the Legions sails from Alexandria at the following dawn; and alone with Cleopatra, since she wills that the thing be kept secret as the sea, thou wilt read the message of the stars. And as she pores over the papyrus, then must thou stab her in the back, so that she dies; and see thou that thy will and arm fail thee not! The deed being done--and indeed it will be easy--thou wilt take the signet and pass out to where the eunuch is--for the others will be wanting. If by any chance there is trouble with him--but there will be no trouble, for he dare not enter the private rooms, and the sounds of death cannot reach so far--thou must cut him down. Then I will meet thee; and, passing on, we will come to Paulus, and it shall be my care to see that he is neither drunk nor backward, for I know how to hold him to the task. And he and those with him shall throw open the side gate, when Sepa and the five hundred chosen men who are in waiting shall pour in and cast themselves upon the sleeping legionaries, putting them to the sword. Why, the thing is easy so thou rest true to thyself, and let no womanish fears creep into thy heart. What is this dagger's thrust? It is nothing, and yet upon it hang the destinies of Egypt and the world."

"Hush!" I said. "What is that?--I hear a sound."

Charmion ran to the door, and, gazing down the long, dark passage, listened. In a moment she came back, her finger on her lips. "It is the Queen," she whispered hurriedly; "the Queen who mounts the stair alone. I heard her bid Iras to leave her. I may not be found alone with thee at this hour; it has a strange look, and she may suspect. What wants she here? Where can I hide?"

I glanced round. At the further end of the chamber was a heavy curtain that hid a little place built in the thickness of the wall which I used for the storage of rolls and instruments.

"Haste thee--there!" I said, and she glided behind the curtain, which swung back and covered her. Then I thrust the fatal scroll of death into the bosom of my robe and bent over the mystic chart. Presently I heard the sweep of woman's robes and there came a low knock upon the door.

"Enter, whoever thou art," I said.

The latch lifted, and Cleopatra swept in, royally arrayed, her dark hair hanging about her and the sacred snake of royalty glistening on her brow.

"Of a truth, Harmachis," she said with a sigh, as she sank into a seat, "the path to heaven is hard to climb! Ah! I am weary, for those stairs are many. But I was minded, my astronomer, to see thee in thy haunts."

"I am honoured overmuch, O Queen!" I said bowing low before her.

"Art thou now? And yet that dark face of thine has a somewhat angry look--thou art too young and handsome for this dry trade, Harmachis. Why, I vow thou hast cast my wreath of roses down amidst thy rusty tools! Kings would have cherished that wreath along with their choicest diadems, Harmachis! and thou dost throw it away as a thing of no account! Why, what a man art thou! But stay; what is this? A lady's kerchief, by Isis! Nay, now, my Harmachis, how came this here? Are our poor kerchiefs also instruments of thy high art? Oh, fie, fie!--have I caught thee, then? Art thou indeed a fox?"

"Nay, most royal Cleopatra, nay!" I said, turning; for the kerchief which had fallen from Charmion's neck had an awkward look. "I know not, indeed, how the frippery came here. Perhaps, some one of the women who keeps the chamber may have let it fall."

"Ah! so--so!" she said dryly, and still laughing like a rippling brook. "Yes, surely, the slave-women who keep chambers own such toys as this, of the very finest silk, worth twice its weight in gold, and broidered, too, in many colours. Why, myself I should not shame to wear it! Of a truth it seems familiar to my sight." And she threw it round her neck and smoothed the ends with her white hand. "But there; doubtless, it is a thing unholy in thine eyes that the scarf of thy beloved should rest upon my poor breast. Take it, Harmachis; take it, and hide it in thy bosom--nigh thy heart indeed!"

I took the accursed thing, and, muttering what I may not write, stepped

on to the giddy platform whence I watched the stars. Then, crushing it into a ball, I threw it to the winds of heaven.

At this the lovely Queen laughed once more.

"Nay, think now," she cried; "what would the lady say could she see her love-gauge thus cast to all the world? Mayhap, Harmachis, thou wouldst deal thus with my wreath also? See, the roses fade; cast it forth," and, stooping, she took up the wreath and gave it to me.

For a moment, so vexed was I, I had a mind to take her at her word and send the wreath to join the kerchief. But I thought better of it.

"Nay," I said more softly, "it is a Queen's gift, and I will keep it," and, as I spoke, I saw the curtain shake. Often since that night I have sorrowed over those simple words.

"Gracious thanks be to the King of Love for this small mercy," she answered, looking at me strangely. "Now, enough of wit; come forth upon this balcony--tell me of the mystery of those stars of thine. For I always loved the stars, that are so pure and bright and cold, and so far away from our fevered troubling. There I would wish to dwell, rocked on the dark bosom of the night, and losing the little sense of self as I gazed for ever on the countenance of yon sweet-eyed space. Nay--who can tell, Harmachis?--perhaps those stars partake of our very substance, and, linked to us by Nature's invisible chain, do, indeed, draw our destiny with them as they roll. What says the Greek fable of him who

became a star? Perchance it has truth, for yonder tiny sparks may be the souls of men, but grown more purely bright and placed in happy rest to illumine the turmoil of their mother-earth. Or are they lamps hung high in the heavenly vault that night by night some Godhead, whose wings are Darkness, touches with his immortal fire so that they leap out in answering flame? Give me of thy wisdom and open these wonders to me, my servant, for I have little knowledge. Yet my heart is large, and I would fill it, for I have the wit, could I but find the teacher."

Thereon, being glad to find footing on a safer shore, and marvelling somewhat to learn that Cleopatra had a place for lofty thoughts, I spoke and willingly told her such things as are lawful. I told her how the sky is a liquid mass pressing round the earth and resting on the elastic pillars of the air, and how above is the heavenly ocean Nout, in which the planets float like ships as they rush upon their radiant way. I told her many things, and amongst them how, through the certain never-ceasing movement of the orbs of light, the planet Venus, that was called Donaou when she showed as the Morning Star, became the planet Bonou when she came as the sweet Star of Eve. And while I stood and spoke watching the stars, she sat, her hands clasped upon her knee, and watched my face.

"Ah!" she broke in at length, "and so Venus is to be seen both in the morning and the evening sky. Well, of a truth, she is everywhere, though she best loves the night. But thou lovest not that I should use these Latin names to thee. Come, we will talk in the ancient tongue of Khem, which I know well; I am the first, mark thou, of all the Lagidæ who know it. And now," she went on, speaking in my own tongue, but with a little

foreign accent that did but make her talk more sweet, "enough of stars, for, when all is said, they are but fickle things, and perhaps may even now be storing up an evil hour for thee or me, or for both of us together. Not but what I love to hear thee speak of them, for then thy face loses that gloomy cloud of thought which mars it and grows quick and human. Harmachis, thou art too young for such a solemn trade; methinks that I must find thee a better. Youth comes but once; why waste it in these musings? It is time to think when we can no longer act. Tell me how old art thou, Harmachis?"

"I have six-and-twenty years, O Queen," I answered, "for I was born in the first month of Shomou, in the summer season, and on the third day of the month."

"Why, then, we are of an age even to a day," she cried, "for I too have six-and-twenty years, and I too was born on the third day of the first month of Shomou. Well, this may we say: those who begot us need have no shame. For if I be the fairest woman in Egypt, methinks, Harmachis, that there is in Egypt no man more fair and strong than thou, ay, or more learned. Born of the same day, why, 'tis manifest that we were destined to stand together, I, as the Queen, and thou, perchance, Harmachis, as one of the chief pillars of my throne, and thus to work each other's weal."

"Or maybe each other's woe," I answered, looking up; for her sweet speeches stung my ears and brought more colour to my face than I loved that she should see there.

"Nay, never talk of woe. Be seated here by me, Harmachis, and let us talk, not as Queen and subject, but as friend to friend. Thou wast angered with me at the feast to-night because I mocked thee with yonder wreath--was it not so? Nay, it was but a jest. Didst thou know how heavy is the task of monarchs and how wearisome are their hours, thou wouldst not be wroth because I lit my dulness with a jest. Oh, they weary me, those princes and those nobles, and those stiff-necked pompous Romans. To my face they vow themselves my slaves, and behind my back they mock me and proclaim me the servant of their Triumvirate, or their Empire, or their Republic, as the wheel of Fortune turns, and each rises on its round! There is never a man among them--nothing but fools, parasites, and puppets--never a man since with their coward daggers they slew that Cæsar whom all the world in arms was not strong enough to tame. And I must play off one against the other, if maybe, by so doing, I can keep Egypt from their grip. And for reward, what? Why, this is my reward--that all men speak ill of me--and, I know it, my subjects hate me! Yes, I believe that, woman though I am, they would murder me could they find a means!"

She paused, covering her eyes with her hand, and it was well, for her words pierced me so that I shrank upon the seat beside her.

"They think ill of me, I know it; and call me wanton, who have never stepped aside save once, when I loved the greatest man of all the world, and at the touch of love my passion flamed indeed, but burnt a hallowed flame. These ribald Alexandrians swear that I poisoned Ptolemy, my

brother--whom the Roman Senate would, most unnaturally, have forced on me, his sister, as a husband! But it is false: he sickened and died of fever. And even so they say that I would slay Arsinoë, my sister--who, indeed, would slay me!--but that, too, is false! Though she will have none of me, I love my sister. Yes, they all think ill of me without a cause; even thou dost think ill of me, Harmachis.

"O Harmachis, before thou judgest, remember what a thing is envy!--that foul sickness of the mind which makes the jaundiced eye of pettiness to see all things distraught--to read Evil written on the open face of Good, and find impurity in the whitest virgin's soul! Think what a thing it is, Harmachis, to be set on high above the gaping crowd of knaves who hate thee for thy fortune and thy wit; who gnash their teeth and shoot the arrows of their lies from the cover of their own obscurity, whence they have no wings to soar; and whose hearts' quest it is to drag down thy nobility to the level of the groundling and the fool!

"Be not, then, swift to think evil of the Great, whose every word and act is searched for error by a million angry eyes, and whose most tiny fault is trumpeted by a thousand throats, till the world shakes with echoes of their sin! Say not: 'It is thus, 'tis certainly thus'--say, rather: 'May it not be otherwise? Have we heard aright? Did she this thing of her own will?' Judge gently, Harmachis, as wert thou I thou wouldst be judged. Remember that a Queen is never free. She is, indeed, but the point and instrument of those forces politic with which the iron books of history are graved. O Harmachis! be thou my friend--my friend and counsellor!--my friend whom I can trust indeed!--for here, in this

crowded Court, I am more utterly alone than any soul that breathes about its corridors. But thee I trust; there is faith written in those quiet eyes, and I am minded to lift thee high, Harmachis. I can no longer bear my solitude of mind--I must find one with whom I may commune and speak that which lies within my heart. I have faults, I know it; but I am not all unworthy of thy faith, for there is good grain among the evil seed. Say, Harmachis, wilt thou take pity on my loneliness and befriend me, who have lovers, courtiers, slaves, dependents, more thick than I can count, but never one single friend?" and she leant towards me, touching me lightly, and gazed on me with her wonderful blue eyes.

I was overcome; thinking of the morrow night, shame and sorrow smote me. I, her friend!--I, whose assassin dagger lay against my breast! I bent my head, and a sob or a groan, I know not which, burst from the agony of my heart.

But Cleopatra, thinking only that I was moved beyond myself by the surprise of her graciousness, smiled sweetly, and said:

"It grows late; to-morrow night when thou bringest the auguries we will speak again, O my friend Harmachis, and thou shalt answer me." And she gave me her hand to kiss. Scarce knowing what I did, I kissed it, and in another moment she was gone.

But I stood in the chamber, gazing after her like one asleep.