

## CHAPTER VI

OF THE WORDS AND JEALOUSY OF CHARMION; OF THE LAUGHTER OF HARMACHIS; OF THE MAKING READY FOR THE DEED OF BLOOD; AND OF THE

I stood still, plunged in thought. Then by hazard as it were I took up the wreath of roses and looked on it. How long I stood so I know not, but when next I lifted up my eyes they fell upon the form of Charmion, whom, indeed, I had altogether forgotten. And though at the moment I thought but little of it, I noted vaguely that she was flushed as though with anger, and beat her foot upon the floor.

"Oh, it is thou, Charmion!" I said. "What ails thee? Art thou cramped with standing so long in thy hiding-place? Why didst not thou slip hence when Cleopatra led me to the balcony?"

"Where is my kerchief?" she asked, shooting an angry glance at me. "I let fall my brodered kerchief."

"Thy kerchief!--why, didst thou not see? Cleopatra twitted me about it, and I flung it from the balcony."

"Yes, I saw," answered the girl, "I saw but too well. Thou didst fling away my kerchief, but the wreath of roses--that thou wouldst not fling away. It was 'a Queen's gift,' forsooth, and therefore the royal Harmachis, the Priest of Isis, the chosen of the Gods, the crowned

Pharaoh wed to the weal of Khem, cherished it and saved it. But my kerchief, stung by the laughter of that light Queen, he cast away!"

"What meanest thou?" I asked, astonished at her bitter tone. "I cannot read thy riddles."

"What mean I?" she answered, tossing up her head and showing the white curves of her throat. "Nay, I mean naught, or all; take it as thou wilt. Wouldst know what I mean, Harmachis, my cousin and my Lord?" she went on in a hard, low voice. "Then I will tell thee--thou art in danger of the great offence. This Cleopatra has cast her fatal wiles about thee, and thou goest near to loving her, Harmachis--to loving her whom to-morrow thou must slay! Ay, stand and stare at that wreath in thy hand--the wreath thou couldst not send to join my kerchief--sure Cleopatra wore it but to-night! The perfume of the hair of Cæsar's mistress--Cæsar's and others'--yet mingles with the odour of its roses! Now, prithee, Harmachis, how far didst thou carry the matter on yonder balcony? for in that hole where I lay hid I could not hear or see. 'Tis a sweet spot for lovers, is it not?--ay, and a sweet hour, too? Venus surely rules the stars to-night?"

All of this she said so quietly and in so soft and modest a way, though her words were not modest, and yet so bitterly, that every syllable cut me to the heart, and angered me till I could find no speech.

"Of a truth thou hast a wise economy," she went on, seeing her advantage: "to-night thou dost kiss the lips that to-morrow thou shalt

still for ever! It is frugal dealing with the occasion of the moment;  
ay, worthy and honourable dealing!"

Then at last I broke forth. "Girl," I cried, "how darest thou speak  
thus to me? Mindest thou who and what I am that thou loosest thy peevish  
gibes upon me?"

"I mind what it behoves thee to be," she answered quick. "What thou art,  
that I mind not now. Surely thou knowest alone--thou and Cleopatra!"

"What meanest thou?" I said. "Am I to blame if the Queen----"

"The Queen! What have we here? Pharaoh owns a Queen!"

"If Cleopatra wills to come hither of a night and talk----"

"Of stars, Harmachis--surely of stars and roses, and naught beside!"

After that I know not what I said; for, troubled as I was, the girl's  
bitter tongue and quiet way drove me wellnigh to madness. But this I  
know: I spoke so fiercely that she cowered before me as she had cowered  
before my uncle Sepa when he rated her because of her Grecian garb. And  
as she wept then, so she wept now, only more passionately and with great  
sobs.

At length I ceased, half-shamed but still angry and smarting sorely.  
For even while she wept she could find a tongue to answer with--and a

woman's shafts are sharp.

"Thou shouldst not speak to me thus!" she sobbed; "it is cruel--it is unmanly! But I forget thou art but a priest, not a man--except, mayhap, for Cleopatra!"

"What right hast thou?" I said. "What canst thou mean?"

"What right have I?" she asked, looking up, her dark eyes all afloat with tears that ran down her sweet face like the dew of morning down a lily's heart. "What right have I? O Harmachis! art thou blind? Didst thou not know by what right I speak thus to thee? Then I must tell thee. Well, it is the fashion in Alexandria! By that first and holy right of woman--by the right of the great love I bear thee, and which, it seems, thou hast no eyes to see--by the right of my glory and my shame. Oh, be not wroth with me, Harmachis, nor set me down as light, because the truth at last has burst from me; for I am not so. I am what thou wilt make me. I am the wax within the moulder's hands, and as thou dost fashion me so I shall be. There breathes within me now a breath of glory, blowing across the waters of my soul, that can waft me to ends more noble than ever I have dreamed afore, if thou wilt be my pilot and my guide. But if I lose thee, then I lose all that holds me from my worse self--and let shipwreck come! Thou knowest me not, Harmachis! thou canst not see how big a spirit struggles in this frail form of mine! To thee I am a girl, clever, wayward, shallow. But I am more! Show me thy loftiest thought and I will match it, the deepest puzzle of thy mind and I will make it clear. Of one blood we are, and love can ravel up our

little difference and make us grow one indeed. One end we have, one land we love, one vow binds us both. Take me to thy heart, Harmachis, set me by thee on the Double Throne, and I swear that I will lift thee higher than ever man has climbed. Reject me, and beware lest I pull thee down! And now, putting aside the cold delicacy of custom, stung to it by what I saw of the arts of that lovely living falsehood, Cleopatra, which for pastime she practises on thy folly, I have spoken out my heart, and answer thou!" And she clasped her hands and, drawing one pace nearer, gazed, all white and trembling, on my face.

For a moment I stood struck dumb, for the magic of her voice and the power of her speech, despite myself, stirred me like the rush of music. Had I loved the woman, doubtless she might have fired me with her flame; but I loved her not, and I could not play at passion. And so thought came, and with thought that laughing mood, which is ever apt to fashion upon nerves strained to the point of breaking. In a flash, as it were, I bethought me of the way in which she had that very night forced the wreath of roses on my head, I thought of the kerchief and how I had flung it forth. I thought of Charmion in the little chamber watching what she held to be the arts of Cleopatra, and of her bitter speeches. Lastly, I thought of what my uncle Sepa would say of her could he see her now, and of the strange and tangled skein in which I was inmeshed. And I laughed aloud--the fool's laughter that was my knell of ruin!

She turned whiter yet--white as the dead--and a look grew upon her face that checked my foolish mirth. "Thou findest, then, Harmachis," she said in a low, choked voice, and dropping the level of her eyes, "thou

findest cause of merriment in what I have said?"

"Nay," I answered; "nay, Charmion; forgive me if I laughed. It was rather a laugh of despair; for what am I to say to thee? Thou hast spoken high words of all thou mightest be: is it left for me to tell thee what thou art?"

She shrank, and I paused.

"Speak," she said.

"Thou knowest--none so well!--who I am and what my mission is: thou knowest--none so well!--that I am sworn to Isis, and may, by law Divine, have naught to do with thee."

"Ay," she broke in, in her low voice, and with her eyes still fixed upon the ground--"ay, and I know that thy vows are broken in spirit, if not in form--broken like wreaths of cloud; for, Harmachis--thou lovest Cleopatra!"

"It is a lie!" I cried. "Thou wanton girl, who wouldst seduce me from my duty and put me to an open shame!--who, led by passion or ambition, or the love of evil, hast not shamed to break the barriers of thy sex and speak as thou hast spoken--beware lest thou go too far! And if thou wilt have an answer, here it is, put straightly, as thy question. Charmion, outside the matter of my duty and my vows, thou art naught to me!--nor for all thy tender glances will my heart beat one pulse more fast!"

Hardly art thou now my friend--for, of a truth, I scarce can trust thee.  
But, once more: beware! To me thou mayest do thy worst; but if thou dost  
dare to lift a finger against our cause, that day thou diest! And now,  
is this play done?"

And as, wild with anger, I spoke thus, she shrank back, and yet further  
back, till at length she rested against the wall, her eyes covered with  
her hand. But when I ceased she dropped her hand, glancing up, and her  
face was as the face of a statue, in which the great eyes glowed like  
embers, and round them was a ring of purple shadow.

"Not altogether done," she answered gently; "the arena must yet be  
sanded!" This she said having reference to the covering up of the  
bloodstains at the gladiatorial shows with fine sand. "Well," she went  
on, "waste not thine anger on a thing so vile. I have thrown my throw  
and I have lost. Væ victis!--ah! Væ victis! Wilt thou not lend me  
the dagger in thy robe, that here and now I may end my shame? No? Then  
one word more, most royal Harmachis: if thou canst, forget my folly;  
but, at the least, have no fear from me. I am now, as ever, thy servant  
and the servant of our cause. Farewell!"

And she went, leaning her hand against the wall. But I, passing to  
my chamber, flung myself upon my couch, and groaned in bitterness of  
spirit. Alas! we shape our plans, and by slow degrees build up our house  
of Hope, never counting on the guests that time shall bring to lodge  
therein. For who can guard against--the Unforeseen?

At length I slept, and my dreams were evil. When I woke the light of the day which should see the red fulfilment of the plot was streaming through the casement, and the birds sang merrily among the garden palms. I woke, and as I woke the sense of trouble pressed in upon me, for I remembered that before this day was gathered to the past I must dip my hands in blood--yes, in the blood of Cleopatra, who trusted me! Why could I not hate her as I should? There had been a time when I looked on to this act of vengeance with somewhat of a righteous glow of zeal. And now--and now--why, I would frankly give my royal birthright to be free from its necessity! But, alas! I knew that there was no escape. I must drain this cup or be for ever cast away. I felt the eyes of Egypt watching me, and the eyes of Egypt's Gods. I prayed to my Mother Isis to give me strength to do this deed, and prayed as I had never prayed before; and oh, wonder! no answer came. Nay, how was this? What, then, had loosed the link between us that, for the first time, the Goddess deigned no reply to her son and chosen servant? Could it be that I had sinned in heart against her? What had Charmion said--that I loved Cleopatra? Was this sickness love? Nay! a thousand times nay!--it was but the revolt of Nature against an act of treachery and blood. The Goddess did but try my strength, or perchance she also turned her holy countenance from murder?

I rose filled with terror and despair, and went about my task like a man without a soul. I conned the fatal lists and noted all the plans--ay, in my brain I gathered up the very words of that proclamation of my Royalty which, on the morrow, I should issue to the startled world.



"Citizens of Alexandria and dwellers in the land of Egypt," it began,  
"Cleopatra the Macedonian hath, by the command of the Gods, suffered  
justice for her crimes----"

All these and other things I did, but I did them as a man without a  
soul--as a man moved by a force from without and not from within. And so  
the minutes wore away. In the third hour of the afternoon I went as by  
appointment fixed to the house where my uncle Sepa lodged, that same  
house to which I had been brought some three months gone when I entered  
Alexandria for the first time. And here I found the leaders of the  
revolt in the city assembled in secret conclave to the number of  
seven. When I had entered, and the doors were barred, they prostrated  
themselves, and cried, "Hail, Pharaoh!" but I bade them rise, saying  
that I was not yet Pharaoh, for the chicken was still in the egg.

"Yea, Prince," said my uncle, "but his beak shows through. Not in  
vain hath Egypt brooded all these years, if thou fail not with that  
dagger-stroke of thine to-night; and how canst thou fail? Nothing can  
now stop our course to victory!"

"It is on the knees of the Gods," I answered.

"Nay," he said, "the Gods have placed the issue in the hands of a  
mortal--in thy hands, Harmachis!--and there it is safe. See: here are  
the last lists. Thirty-one thousand men who bear arms are sworn to rise  
when the tidings come to them. Within five days every citadel in Egypt  
will be in our hands, and then what have we to fear? From Rome but

little, for her hands are full; and, besides, we will make alliance with the Triumvirate, and, if need be, buy them off. For of money there is plenty in the land, and if more be wanted thou, Harmachis, knowest where it is stored against the need of Khem, and outside the Roman's reach of arm. Who is there to harm us? There is none. Perchance, in this turbulent city, there may be struggle, and a counter-plot to bring Arsinoë to Egypt and set her on the throne. Therefore Alexandria must be severely dealt with--ay, even to destruction, if need be. As for Arsinoë, those go forth to-morrow on the news of the Queen's death who shall slay her secretly."

"There remains the lad Cæsarion," I said. "Rome might claim through Cæsar's son, and the child of Cleopatra inherits Cleopatra's rights. Here is a double danger."

"Fear not," said my uncle; "to-morrow Cæsarion joins those who begat him in Amenti. I have made provision. The Ptolemies must be stamped out, so that no shoot shall ever spring from that root blasted by Heaven's vengeance."

"Is there no other means?" I asked sadly. "My heart is sick at the promise of this red rain of blood. I know the child well; he has Cleopatra's fire and beauty and great Cæsar's wit. It were shame to murder him."

"Nay, be not so chicken-hearted, Harmachis," said my uncle, sternly.

"What ails thee, then? If the lad is thus, the more reason that he

should die. Wouldst thou nurse up a young lion to tear thee from the throne?"

"Be it so," I answered, sighing. "At least he is spared much, and will go hence innocent of evil. Now for the plans."

We sat long taking counsel, till at length, in face of the great emergency and our high emprise, I felt something of the spirit of former days flow back into my heart. At the last all was ordered, and so ordered that it could scarce miscarry, for it was fixed that if by any chance I could not come to slay Cleopatra on this night, then the plot should hang in the scale till the morrow, when the deed must be done upon occasion. For the death of Cleopatra was the signal. These matters being finished, once more we stood and, our hands upon the sacred symbol, swore the oath that may not be written. And then my uncle kissed me with tears of hope and joy standing in his keen black eyes. He blessed me, saying that he would gladly give his life, ay, and a hundred lives, if they were his, if he might but live to see Egypt once more a nation, and me, Harmachis, the descendant of its royal and ancient blood, seated on the throne. For he was a patriot indeed, asking nothing for himself, and giving all things to his cause. And I kissed him in turn, and thus we parted. Nor did I ever see him more in the flesh who has earned the rest that as yet is denied to me.

So I went, and, there being yet time, walked swiftly from place to place in the great city, taking note of the positions of the gates and of the places where our forces must be gathered. At length I came to that quay

where I had landed, and saw a vessel sailing for the open sea. I looked, and in my heaviness of heart longed that I were aboard of her, to be borne by her white wings to some far shore where I might live obscure and die forgotten. Also I saw another vessel that had dropped down the Nile, from whose deck the passengers were streaming. For a moment I stood watching them, idly wondering if they were from Abouthis, when suddenly I heard a familiar voice beside me.

"La! la!" said the voice. "Why, what a city is this for an old woman to seek her fortune in! And how shall I find those to whom I am known? As well look for the rush in the papyrus-roll.[\*] Begone! thou knave! and let my basket of simples lie; or, by the Gods, I'll doctor thee with them!"

[\*] Papyrus was manufactured from the pith of rushes. Hence Atoua's saying.--Editor.

I turned, wondering, and found myself face to face with my foster-nurse, Atoua. She knew me instantly, for I saw her start, but in the presence of the people she checked her surprise.

"Good Sir," she whined, lifting her withered countenance towards me, and at the same time making the secret sign. "By thy dress thou shouldst be an astronomer, and I was specially told to avoid astronomers as a pack of lying tricksters who worship their own star only; and, therefore, I speak to thee, acting on the principle of contraries, which is law to us women. For surely in this Alexandria, where all things are upside

down, the astronomers may be the honest men, since the rest are clearly knaves." And then, being by now out of earshot of the press, "royal Harmachis, I am come charged with a message to thee from thy father Amenemhat."

"Is he well?" I asked.

"Yes, he is well, though waiting for the moment tries him sorely."

"And his message?"

"It is this. He sends greeting to thee and with it warning that a great danger threatens thee, though he cannot read it. These are his words: 'Be steadfast and prosper.'"

I bowed my head and the words struck a new chill of fear into my soul.

"When is the time?" she asked.

"This very night. Where goest thou?"

"To the house of the honourable Sepa, Priest of Annu. Canst thou guide me thither?"

"Nay, I may not stay; nor is it wise that I should be seen with thee.

Hold!" and I called a porter who was idling on the quay, and, giving him a piece of money, bade him guide the old wife to the house.

"Farewell," she whispered; "farewell till to-morrow. Be steadfast and prosper."

Then I turned and went my way through the crowded streets, where the people made place for me, the astronomer of Cleopatra, for my fame had spread abroad.

And even as I went my footsteps seemed to beat Be steadfast, Be steadfast, Be steadfast, till at last it was as though the very ground cried out its warning to me.