

CHAPTER VII

OF THE VEILED WORDS OF CHARMION; OF THE PASSING OF HARMACHIS INTO THE PRESENCE OF CLEOPATRA; AND OF THE OVERTHROW OF HARMACHIS

It was night, and I sat alone in my chamber, waiting the moment when, as it was agreed, Charmion should summon me to pass down to Cleopatra. I sat alone, and there before me lay the dagger that was to pierce her. It was long and keen, and the handle was formed of a sphinx of solid gold. I sat alone, questioning the future, but no answer came. At length I looked up, and Charmion stood before me--Charmion, no longer gay and bright, but pale of face and hollow-eyed.

"Royal Harmachis," she said, "Cleopatra summons thee, presently to declare to her the voices of the stars."

So the hour had fallen!

"It is well, Charmion," I answered. "Are all things in order?"

"Yea, my Lord; all things are in order: well primed with wine, Paulus guards the gates, the eunuchs are withdrawn save one, the legionaries sleep, and already Sepa and his force lie hid without. Nothing has been neglected, and no lamb skipping at the shamble doors can be more innocent of its doom than is Queen Cleopatra."

"It is well," I said again; "let us be going," and rising, I placed the dagger in the bosom of my robe. Taking a cup of wine that stood near, I drank deep of it, for I had scarce tasted food all that day.

"One word," Charmion said hurriedly, "for it is not yet time: last night--ah, last night--" and her bosom heaved, "I dreamed a dream that haunts me strangely, and perchance thou also didst dream a dream. It was all a dream and 'tis forgotten: is it not so, my Lord?"

"Yes, yes," I said; "why troublest thou me thus at such an hour?"

"Nay, I know not; but to-night, Harmachis, Fate is in labour of a great event, and in her painful throes mayhap she'll crush me in her grip--me or thee, or the twain of us, Harmachis. And if that be so--well, I would hear from thee, before it is done, that 'twas naught but a dream, and that dream forgot----"

"Yes, it is all a dream," I said idly; "thou and I, and the solid earth, and this heavy night of terror, ay, and this keen knife--what are these but dreams, and with what face shall the waking come?"

"So now, thou fallest in my humour, royal Harmachis. As thou sayest, we dream; and while we dream yet can the vision change. For the phantasies of dreams are wonderful, seeing that they have no stability, but vary like the vaporous edge of sunset clouds, building now this thing, and now that; being now dark and heavy, and now alight with splendour. Therefore, before we wake to-morrow tell me one word. Is that vision of

last night, wherein I seemed to be quite shamed, and thou didst seem to laugh upon my shame, a fixed phantasy, or can it, perchance, yet change its countenance? For remember, when that waking comes, the vagaries of our sleep will be more unalterable and more enduring than are the pyramids. Then they will be gathered into that changeless region of the past where all things, great and small--ay, even dreams, Harmachis, are, each in its own semblance, frozen to stone and built into the Tomb of Time immortal."

"Nay, Charmion," I replied, "I grieve if I did pain thee; but over that vision comes no change. I said what was in my heart and there's an end. Thou art my cousin and my friend, I can never be more to thee."

"It is well--'tis very well," she said; "let it be forgotten. And now on from dream--to dream," and she smiled with such a smile as I had never seen her wear before; it was sadder and more fateful than any stamp that grief can set upon the brow.

For, though being blinded by my own folly and the trouble at my heart I knew it not, with that smile, the happiness of youth died for Charmion the Egyptian; the hope of love fled; and the holy links of duty burst asunder. With that smile she consecrated herself to Evil, she renounced her Country and her Gods, and trampled on her oath. Ay, that smile marks the moment when the stream of history changed its course. For had I never seen it on her face Octavianus had not bestridden the world, and Egypt had once more been free and great.

And yet it was but a woman's smile!

"Why lookest thou thus strangely, girl?" I asked.

"In dreams we smile," she answered. "And now it is time; follow thou me. Be firm and prosper, royal Harmachis!" and bending forward she took my hand and kissed it. Then, with one strange last look, she turned and led the way down the stair and through the empty halls.

In the chamber that is called the Alabaster Hall, the roof of which is upborne by columns of black marble, we stayed. For beyond was the private chamber of Cleopatra, the same in which I had seen her sleeping.

"Abide thou here," she said, "while I tell Cleopatra of thy coming," and she glided from my side.

I stood for long, mayhap in all the half of an hour, counting my own heart-beats, and, as in a dream, striving to gather up my strength to that which lay before me.

At length Charmion came back, her head held low and walking heavily.

"Cleopatra waits thee," she said: "pass on, there is no guard."

"Where do I meet thee when what must be done is done?" I asked hoarsely.

"Thou meetest me here, and then to Paulus. Be firm and prosper.

Harmachis, fare thee well!"

And so I went; but at the curtain I turned suddenly, and there in the midst of that lonely lamplit hall I saw a strange sight. Far away, in such a fashion that the light struck full upon her, stood Charmion, her head thrown back, her white arms outstretched as though to clasp, and on her girlish face a stamp of anguished passion so terrible to see that, indeed, I cannot tell it! For she believed that I, whom she loved, was passing to my death, and this was her last farewell to me.

But I knew naught of this matter; so with another passing pang of wonder I drew aside the curtains, gained the doorway, and stood in Cleopatra's chamber. And there, upon a silken couch at the far end of the perfumed chamber, clad in wonderful white attire, rested Cleopatra. In her hand was a jewelled fan of ostrich plumes, with which she gently fanned herself, and by her side was her harp of ivory, and a little table whereon were figs and goblets and a flask of ruby-coloured wine. I drew near slowly through the soft dim light to where the Wonder of the World lay in all her glowing beauty. And, indeed, I have never seen her look so fair as she did upon that fatal night. Couched in her amber cushions, she seemed to shine as a star on the twilight's glow. Perfume came from her hair and robes, music fell from her lips, and in her heavenly eyes all lights changed and gathered as in the ominous opal's disc.

And this was the woman whom, presently, I must slay!

Slowly I drew near, bowing as I came; but she took no heed. She lay

there, and the jewelled fan floated to and fro like the bright wing of some hovering bird.

At length I stood before her, and she glanced up, the ostrich-plumes pressed against her breast as though to hide its beauty.

"What! friend; art thou come?" she said. "It is well; for I grew lonely here. Nay; 'tis a weary world! We know so many faces, and there are so few whom we love to see again. Well, stand not there so mute, but be seated." And she pointed with her fan to a carven chair that was placed near her feet.

Once more I bowed and took the seat.

"I have obeyed the Queen's desire," I said, "and with much care and skill worked out the lessons of the stars; and here is the record of my labour. If the Queen permits, I will expound it to her." And I rose, in order that I might pass round the couch and, as she read, stab her in the back.

"Nay, Harmachis," she said quietly, and with a slow and lovely smile.

"Bide thou where thou art, and give me the writing. By Serapis! thy face is too comely for me to wish to lose the sight of it!"

Checked in this design, I could do nothing but hand her the papyrus, thinking to myself that while she read I would arise suddenly and plunge the dagger to her heart. She took it, and as she did so touched my hand.

Then she made pretence to read. But she read no word, for I saw that her eyes were fixed upon me over the edge of the scroll.

"Why placest thou thy hand within thy robe?" she asked presently; for, indeed, I clutched the dagger's hilt. "Is thy heart stirred?"

"Yea, O Queen," I said; "it beats high."

She gave no answer, but once more made pretence to read, and the while she watched me.

I took counsel with myself. How should I do the hateful deed? If I flung myself upon her now she would see me and scream and struggle. Nay, I must wait a chance.

"The auguries are favourable, then, Harmachis?" she said at length, though this she must have guessed.

"Yes, O Queen," I answered.

"It is well," and she cast the writing on the marble. "The ships shall sail. For, good or bad, I am weary of weighing chances."

"This is a heavy matter, O Queen," I said. "I had wished to show upon what circumstance I base my forecast."

"Nay, not so, Harmachis; I have wearied of the ways of stars. Thou hast

prophesied; that is enough for me; for, doubtless, being honest, thou hast written honestly. Therefore, save thou thy reasons and we'll be merry. What shall we do? I could dance to thee--there are none who can dance so well!--but it would scarce be queenly. Nay, I have it. I will sing." And, leaning forward, she raised herself, and, bending the harp towards her, struck some wandering chords. Then her low voice broke out in perfect and most sweet song.

And thus she sang:

"Night on the sea, and night upon the sky,
And music in our hearts, we floated there,
Lulled by the low sea voices, thou and I,
And the wind's kisses in my cloudy hair:
And thou didst gaze on me and call me fair--
Enfolded by the starry robe of night--
And then thy singing thrilled upon the air,
Voice of the heart's desire and Love's delight.

'Adrift, with starlit skies above,
With starlit seas below,
We move with all the suns that move,
With all the seas that flow;
For bond or free, Earth, Sky, and Sea,
Wheel with one circling will,
And thy heart drifteth on to me,
And only time stands still.

Between two shores of Death we drift,
Behind are things forgot:
Before the tide is driving swift
To lands beholden not.
Above, the sky is far and cold;
Below, the moaning sea
Sweeps o'er the loves that were of old,
But, oh, Love! kiss thou me.

Ah, lonely are the ocean ways,
And dangerous the deep,
And frail the fairy barque that strays
Above the seas asleep!
Ah, toil no more at sail nor oar,
We drift, or bond or free;
On yon far shore the breakers roar,
But, oh, Love! kiss thou me.'

"And ever as thou sangest I drew near,
Then sudden silence heard our hearts that beat,
For now there was an end of doubt and fear,
Now passion filled my soul and led my feet;
Then silent didst thou rise thy love to meet,
Who, sinking on thy breast, knew naught but thee,
And in the happy night I kissed thee, Sweet;
Ah, Sweet! between the starlight and the sea."

The last echoes of her rich notes floated down the chamber, and slowly died away; but in my heart they rolled on and on. I have heard among the women-singers at Abouthis voices more perfect than the voice of Cleopatra, but never have I heard one so thrilling or so sweet with passion's honey-notes. And indeed it was not the voice alone, it was the perfumed chamber in which was set all that could move the sense; it was the passion of the thought and words, and the surpassing grace and loveliness of that most royal woman who sang them. For, as she sang, I seemed to think that we twain were indeed floating alone with the night, upon the starlit summer sea. And when she ceased to touch the harp, and, rising, suddenly stretched out her arms towards me, and with the last low notes of song yet quivering upon her lips, let fall the wonder of her eyes upon my eyes, she almost drew me to her. But I remembered, and would not.

"Hast thou, then, no word of thanks for my poor singing, Harmachis?" she said at length.

"Yea, O Queen," I answered, speaking very low, for my voice was choked; "but thy songs are not good for the sons of men to hear--of a truth they overwhelm me!"

"Nay, Harmachis; there is no fear for thee," she said laughing softly, "seeing that I know how far thy thoughts are set from woman's beauty and the common weakness of thy sex. With cold iron we may safely toy."

I thought within myself that coldest iron can be brought to whitest heat if the fire be fierce enough. But I said nothing, and, though my hand trembled, I once more grasped the dagger's hilt, and, wild with fear at my own weakness, set myself to find a means to slay her while yet my sense remained.

"Come hither, Harmachis," she went on, in her softest voice. "Come, sit by me, and we will talk together; for I have much to tell thee," and she made place for me at her side upon the silken seat.

And I, thinking that I might so more swiftly strike, rose and seated myself some little way from her on the couch, while, flinging back her head, she gazed on me with her slumbrous eyes.

Now was my occasion, for her throat and breast were bare, and, with a mighty effort, once again I lifted my hand to clutch the dagger-hilt. But, more quick than thought, she caught my fingers with her own and gently held them.

"Why lookest thou so wildly, Harmachis?" she said. "Art sick?"

"Ay, sick indeed!" I gasped.

"Then lean thou on the cushions and rest thee," she answered, still holding my hand, from which the strength had fled. "The fit will surely pass. Too long hast thou laboured with thy stars. How soft is the night air that flows from yonder casement heavy with the breath of lilies!

Hark to the whisper of the sea lapping against the rocks, that, though it is faint, yet, being so strong, doth almost drown the quick cool fall of yonder fountain. List to Philomel; how sweet from a full heart of love she sings her message to her dear! Indeed it is a lovely night, and most beautiful is Nature's music, sung with a hundred voices from wind and trees and birds and ocean's wrinkled lips, and yet sung all to tune. Listen, Harmachis: I have guessed something concerning thee. Thou, too, art of a royal race; no humble blood pours in those veins of thine. Surely such a shoot could spring but from the stock of Princes? What! gazest thou at the leafmark on my breast? It was pricked there in honour of great Osiris, whom with thee I worship. See!"

"Let me hence," I groaned, striving to rise; but all my strength had gone.

"Nay, not yet awhile. Thou wouldst not leave me yet? thou canst not leave me yet. Harmachis, hast thou never loved?"

"Nay, nay, O Queen! What have I to do with love? Let me hence!--I am faint--I am fordone!"

"Never to have loved--'tis strange! Never to have known some woman-heart beat all in tune to thine--never to have seen the eyes of thy adored aswim with passion's tears, as she sighed her vows upon thy breast!--Never to have loved!--never to have lost thyself in the mystery of another's soul; nor to have learned how Nature can overcome our naked loneliness, and with the golden web of love of twain weave one identity!"

Why, it is never to have lived, Harmachis!"

And ever as she murmured she drew nearer to me, till at last, with a long, sweet sigh, she flung one arm about my neck, and gazed upon me with blue, unfathomable eyes, and smiled her dark, slow smile, that, like an opening flower, revealed beauty within beauty hidden. Nearer she bent her queenly form, and still more near--now her perfumed breath played upon my hair, and now her lips met mine.

And woe is me! In that kiss, more deadly and more strong than the embrace of Death, were forgotten Isis, my heavenly Hope, Oaths, Honour, Country, Friends, all things--all things save that Cleopatra clasped me in her arms, and called me Love and Lord.

"Now pledge me," she sighed; "pledge me one cup of wine in token of thy love."

I took the draught, and I drank deep; then too late I knew that it was drugged.

I fell upon the couch, and, though my senses still were with me, I could neither speak nor rise.

But Cleopatra, bending over me, drew the dagger from my robe.

"I've won!" she cried, shaking back her long hair. "I've won, and for the stake of Egypt, why, 'twas a game worth playing! With this dagger,

then, thou wouldst have slain me, O my royal Rival, whose myrmidons even now are gathered at my palace gate? Art still awake? Now what hinders me that I should not plunge it to thy heart?"

I heard and feebly pointed to my breast, for I was fain to die. She drew herself to the full of her imperial height, and the great knife glittered in her hand. Down it came till its edge pricked my flesh.

"Nay," she cried again, and cast it from her, "too well I like thee. It were pity to slay such a man! I give thee thy life. Live on, lost Pharaoh! Live on, poor fallen Prince, blasted by a woman's wit! Live on, Harmachis--to adorn my triumph!"

Then sight left me; and in my ears I only heard the song of the nightingale, the murmur of the sea, and the music of Cleopatra's laugh of victory. And as I sank away, the sound of that low laugh still followed me into the land of sleep, and still it follows me through life to death.