

CHAPTER VIII

OF THE AWAKING OF HARMACHIS; OF THE SIGHT OF DEATH; OF THE COMING OF CLEOPATRA; AND OF HER COMFORTABLE WORDS

Once more I woke; it was to find myself in my own chamber. I started up. Surely, I, too, had dreamed a dream? It could be nothing but a dream? It could not be that I woke to know myself a traitor! That the opportunity had gone for ever! That I had betrayed the cause, and that last night those brave men, headed by my uncle, had waited in vain at the outer gate! That Egypt from Abu to Athu was even now waiting--waiting in vain! Nay, whatever else might be, this could not be! Oh, it was an awful dream which I had dreamed! a second such would slay a man. It were better to die than face such another vision sent from hell. But, though the thing was naught but a hateful phantasy of a mind o'er-strained, where was I now? Where was I now? I should be in the Alabaster Hall, waiting till Charmion came forth.

Where was I? and O ye Gods! what was that dreadful thing, whose shape was the shape of a man?--that thing draped in bloodstained white and huddled in a hideous heap at the foot of the couch on which I seemed to lie?

I sprang at it with a shriek, as a lion springs, and struck with all my strength. The blow fell heavily, and beneath its weight the thing rolled over upon its side. Half mad with terror, I rent away the white covering; and there, his knees bound beneath his hanging jaw, was the

naked body of a man--and that man the Roman Captain Paulus! There he lay, through his heart a dagger--my dagger, handled with the sphinx of gold!--and pinned by its blade to his broad breast a scroll, and on the scroll, writing in the Roman character. I drew near and read, and this was the writing:

HARMACHIDI.SALVERE.EGO.SUM.QUEM.SUBDERE.NORAS
PAULUS.ROMANUS.DISCE.HINC.QUID.PRODERE.PROSIT.

"Greeting, Harmachis! I was that Roman Paulus whom thou didst suborn. Learn now how blessed are traitors!"

Sick and faint I staggered back from the sight of that white corpse stained with its own blood. Sick and faint I staggered back, till the wall stayed me, while without the birds sang a merry greeting to the day. So it was no dream, and I was lost! lost!

I thought of my aged father, Amenemhat. Yes, the vision of him flashed into my mind, as he would be, when they came to tell him his son's shame and the ruin of all his hopes. I thought of that patriot priest, my uncle Sepa, waiting the long night through for the signal which never came. Ah, and another thought followed swift! How would it go with them? I was not the only traitor. I, too, had been betrayed. By whom? By yonder Paulus, perchance. If it were Paulus, he knew but little of those who conspired with me. But the secret lists had been in my robe. O Osiris! they were gone! and the fate of Paulus would be the fate of all the patriots in Egypt. And at this thought my mind gave way. I sank and

swooned even where I stood.

My sense came back to me, and the lengthening shadows told me that it was afternoon. I staggered to my feet; the corpse of Paulus was still there, keeping its awful watch above me. I ran desperately to the door. It was barred, and without I heard the tramp of sentinels. As I stood they challenged and grounded their spears. Then the bolts were shot back, the door opened, and radiant, clad in royal attire, came the conquering Cleopatra. She came alone, and the door was shut behind her. I stood like one distraught; but she swept on till she was face to face with me.

"Greeting, Harmachis," she said, smiling sweetly. "So, my messenger has found thee!" and she pointed to the corpse of Paulus. "Pah! he has an ugly look. Ho! guards!"

The door was opened, and two armed Gauls stepped across the threshold.

"Take away this carrion," said Cleopatra, "and fling it to the kites. Stay, draw that dagger from his traitor breast." The men bowed low, and the knife, rusted red with blood, was dragged from the heart of Paulus and laid upon the table. Then they seized him by the head and body and staggered thence, and I heard their heavy footfalls as they bore him down the stairs.

"Methinks, Harmachis, thou art in an evil case," she said, when the sound of the footfalls had died away. "How strangely the wheel of

Fortune turns! But for that traitor," and she nodded towards the door through which the corpse of Paulus had been carried, "I should now be as ill a thing to look on as he is, and the red rust on yonder knife would have been gathered from my heart."

So it was Paulus who had betrayed me.

"Ay," she went on, "and when thou camest to me last night, I knew that thou camest to slay. When, time upon time, thou didst place thy hand within thy robe, I knew that it grasped a dagger hilt, and that thou wast gathering thy courage to the deed which thou didst little love to do. Oh! it was a strange wild hour, well worth the living, and I wondered greatly, from moment to moment, which of us twain would conquer, as we matched guile with guile and force to force!

"Yea, Harmachis, the guards tramp before thy door, but be not deceived. Did I not know that I hold thee to me by bonds more strong than prison chains--did I not know that I am hedged from ill at thy hands by a fence of honour harder for thee to pass than all the spears of all my legions, thou hadst been dead ere now, Harmachis. See, here is thy knife," and she handed me the dagger; "now slay me if thou canst," and she drew near, tore open the bosom of her robe, and stood waiting with calm eyes.

"Thou canst not slay me," she went on; "for there are things, as I know well, that no man--no man such as thou art--may do and live: and this is the chief of them--to slay the woman who is all his own. Nay, stay thy hand! Turn not that dagger against thy breast, for if thou mayst not

slay me, by how much more mayst thou not slay thyself, O thou forsworn Priest of Isis! Art thou, then, so eager to face that outraged Majesty in Amenti? With what eyes, thinkest thou, will the Heavenly Mother look upon Her son, who, shamed in all things and false to his most sacred vow, comes to greet Her, his life-blood on his hands? Where, then, will be the space for thy atonement?--if, indeed, thou mayest atone!"

Then I could bear no more, for my heart was broken. Alas! it was too true--I dared not die! I was come to such a pass that I did not even dare to die! I flung myself upon the couch and wept--wept tears of blood and anguish.

But Cleopatra came to me, and, seating herself beside me, she strove to comfort me, throwing her arms about my neck.

"Nay, love, look up," she said; "all is not lost for thee, nor am I angered against thee. We did play a mighty game; but, as I warned thee, I matched my woman's magic against thine, and I have conquered. But I will be open with thee. Both as Queen and woman thou hast my pity--ay, and more; nor do I love to see thee plunged in sorrow. It was well and right that thou shouldst strive to win back that throne my fathers seized, and the ancient liberty of Egypt. Myself as lawful Queen had done the same, nor shrunk from the deed of darkness to which I was sworn. Therein, then, thou hast my sympathy, that ever goes out to what is great and bold. It is well also that thou shouldst grieve over the greatness of thy fall. Therein, then, as woman--as loving woman--thou hast my sympathy. Nor is all lost. Thy plan was foolish--for, as I hold,

Egypt could never have stood alone--for though thou hadst won the crown and country--as without a doubt thou must have done--yet there was the Roman to be reckoned with. And for thy hope learn this: I am little known. There is no heart in this wide land that beats with a truer love for ancient Khem than does this heart of mine--nay, not thine own, Harmachis. Yet I have been heavily shackled heretofore--for wars, rebellions, envies, plots, have hemmed me in on every side, so that I might not serve my people as I would. But thou, Harmachis, shalt show me how. Thou shalt be my counsellor and my love. Is it a little thing, Harmachis, to have won the heart of Cleopatra; that heart--fie on thee!--that thou wouldst have stilled? Yes, thou shalt unite me to my people and we will reign together, thus linking in one the new kingdom and the old and the new thought and the old. So do all things work for good--ay, for the very best: and thus, by another and a gentler road, thou shalt climb to Pharaoh's throne.

"See thou this, Harmachis: thy treachery shall be cloaked about as much as may be. Was it, then, thy fault that a Roman knave betrayed thy plans? that, thereon, thou wast drugged, thy secret papers stolen and their key guessed? Will it, then, be a blame to thee, the great plot being broken and those who built it scattered, that thou, still faithful to thy trust, didst serve thee of such means as Nature gave thee, and win the heart of Egypt's Queen, that, through her gentle love, thou mightest yet attain thy ends and spread thy wings of power across the land of Nile? Am I an ill-counsellor, thinkest thou, Harmachis?"

I lifted my head, and a ray of hope crept into the darkness of my heart;

for when men fall they grasp at feathers. Then, I spoke for the first time:

"And those with me--those who trusted me--what of them?"

"Ay," she answered, "Amenemhat, thy father, the aged Priest of Abouthis; and Sepa, thy uncle, that fiery patriot, whose great heart is hid beneath so common a shell of form; and----"

I thought she would have said Charmion, but she named her not.

"And many others--oh, I know them all!"

"Ay!" I said, "what of them?"

"Hear now, Harmachis," she answered, rising and placing her hand upon my arm, "for thy sake I will show mercy to them. I will do no more than must be done. I swear by my throne and by all the Gods of Egypt that not one hair of thy aged father's head shall be harmed by me; and, if it be not too late, I will also spare thy uncle Sepa, ay, and the others. I will not do as did my forefather, Epiphanes, who, when the Egyptians rose against him, dragged Athisis, Pausiras, Chesuphus, and Irobasthus, bound to his chariot--not as Achilles dragged Hector, but yet living--round the city walls. I will spare them all, save the Hebrews, if there be any Hebrews; for the Jews I hate."

"There are no Hebrews," I said.

"It is well," she said, "for no Hebrew will I ever spare. Am I then, indeed, so cruel a woman as they say? In thy list, Harmachis, were many doomed to die; and I have but taken the life of one Roman knave, a double traitor, for he betrayed both me and thee. Art thou not overwhelmed, Harmachis, with the weight of mercy which I give thee, because--such are a woman's reasons--thou pleasest me, Harmachis? Nay, by Serapis!" she added with a little laugh, "I'll change my mind; I will not give thee so much for nothing. Thou shalt buy it from me, and the price shall be a heavy one--it shall be a kiss, Harmachis."

"Nay," I said, turning from that fair temptress, "the price is too heavy; I kiss no more."

"Bethink thee," she answered, with a heavy frown. "Bethink thee and choose. I am but a woman, Harmachis, and one who is not wont to sue to men. Do as thou wilt; but this I say to thee--if thou dost put me away, I will gather up the mercy I have meted out. Therefore, most virtuous priest, choose thou between the heavy burden of my love and the swift death of thy aged father and of all those who plotted with him."

I glanced at her and saw that she was angered, for her eyes shone and her bosom heaved. So, I sighed and kissed her, thereby setting the seal upon my shame and bondage. Then, smiling like the triumphant Aphrodité of the Greeks, she went thence, bearing the dagger with her.

I knew not yet how deeply I was betrayed; or why I was still left to

draw the breath of life; or why Cleopatra, the tiger-hearted, had grown merciful. I did not know that she feared to slay me, lest, so strong was the plot and so feeble her hold upon the Double Crown, the tumult that might tread hard upon the tidings of my murder should shake her from the throne--even when I was no more. I did not know that because of fear and the weight of policy only she showed scant mercy to those whom I had betrayed, or that because of cunning and not for the holy sake of woman's love--though, in truth, she liked me well enough--she chose rather to bind me to her by the fibres of my heart. And yet I will say this in her behalf: even when the danger-cloud had melted from her sky she kept faith, nor, save Paulus and one other, did any suffer the utmost penalty of death for their part in the great plot against Cleopatra's crown and dynasty. But they suffered many other things.

And so she went, leaving the vision of her glory to strive with the shame and sorrow in my heart. Oh, bitter were the hours that could not now be made light with prayer. For the link between me and the Divine was snapped, and Isis communed with Her Priest no more. Bitter were the hours and dark, but ever through their darkness shone the starry eyes of Cleopatra, and came the echo of her whispered love. For not yet was the cup of sorrow full. Hope still lingered in my heart, and I could almost think that I had failed to some higher end, and that in the depths of ruin I should find another and more flowery path to triumph.

For thus those who sin deceive themselves, striving to lay the burden of their evil deeds upon the back of Fate, striving to believe their wickedness may compass good, and to murder Conscience with the sharp

plea of Necessity. But it can avail nothing, for hand in hand down the path of sin rush Remorse and Ruin, and woe to him they follow! Ay, and woe to me who of all sinners am the chief!