

CHAPTER IX

OF THE IMPRISONMENT OF HARMACHIS; OF THE SCORN OF CHARMION; OF THE SETTING FREE OF HARMACHIS; AND OF THE COMING OF QUINTUS DELLIUS

For a space of eleven days I was thus kept prisoned in my chamber; nor did I see anyone except the sentries at my doors, the slaves who in silence brought me food and drink, and Cleopatra's self, who came continually. But, though her words of love were many, she would tell me nothing of how things went without. She came in many moods--now gay and laughing, now full of wise thoughts and speech, and now passionate only, and to every mood she gave some new-found charm. She was full of talk as to how I should help her make Egypt great, and lessen the burdens on the people, and fright the Roman eagles back. And, though at first I listened heavily when she spoke thus, by slow advance as she wrapped me closer and yet more close in her magic web, from which there was no escape, my mind fell in time with hers. Then I, too, opened something of my heart, and somewhat also of the plans that I had formed for Egypt. She seemed to listen gladly, weighing them all, and spoke of means and methods, telling me how she would purify the Faith and repair the ancient temples--ay, and build new ones to the Gods. And ever she crept deeper into my heart, till at length, now that every other thing had gone from me, I learned to love her with all the unspent passion of my aching soul. I had naught left to me but Cleopatra's love, and I twined my life about it, and brooded on it as a widow over her only babe. And thus the very author of my shame became my all, my dearest dear, and

I loved her with a strong love that grew and grew, till it seemed to swallow up the past and make the present a dream. For she had conquered me, she had robbed me of my honour, and steeped me to the lips in shame, and I, poor fallen, blinded wretch, I kissed the rod that smote me, and was her very slave.

Ay, even now, in those dreams which still come when Sleep unlocks the secret heart, and sets its terrors free to roam through the opened halls of Thought, I seem to see her royal form, as erst I saw it, come with arms outstretched and Love's own light shining in her eyes, with lips apart and flowing locks, and stamped upon her face the look of utter tenderness that she alone could wear. Ay, still, after all the years, I seem to see her come as erst she came, and still I wake to know her an unutterable lie!

And thus one day she came. She had fled in haste, she said, from some great council summoned concerning the wars of Antony in Syria, and she came, as she had left the council, in all her robes of state, the sceptre in her hand, and on her brow the uræus diadem of gold. There she sat before me, laughing; for, wearying of them, she had told the envoys to whom she gave audience in the council that she was called from their presence by a sudden message come from Rome; and the jest seemed merry to her. Suddenly she rose, took the diadem from her brow, and set it on my hair, and on my shoulders her royal mantle, and in my hand the sceptre, and bowed the knee before me. Then, laughing again, she kissed me on the lips, and said I was indeed her King. But, remembering how I had been crowned in the halls of Abouthis, and remembering also that

wreath of roses of which the odour haunts me yet, I rose, pale with wrath, and cast the trinkets from me, asking how she dared to mock me--her caged bird. And I think there was that about me which startled her, for she fell back.

"Nay, Harmachis," she said, "be not wroth! How knowest thou that I mock thee? How knowest thou that thou shalt not be Pharaoh in fact and deed?"

"What meanest thou?" I said. "Wilt thou, then, wed me before Egypt? How else can I be Pharaoh now?"

She cast down her eyes. "Perchance, love, it is in my mind to wed thee," she said gently. "Listen," she went on: "Thou growest pale, here, in this prison, and thou dost eat little. Gainsay me not! I know it from the slaves. I have kept thee here, Harmachis, for thy own sake, that is so dear to me; and for thy own sake, and thy honour's sake, thou must still seem to be my prisoner. Else wouldst thou be shamed and slain--ay, murdered secretly. But I can meet thee here no more! therefore to-morrow I shall free thee in all, save in the name, and thou shalt once more be seen at Court as my astronomer. And I will give this reason--that thou hast cleared thyself; and, moreover, that thy auguries as regards the war have been auguries of truth--as, indeed, they have, though for this I have no cause to thank thee, seeing that thou didst suit thy prophecies to fit thy cause. Now, farewell; for I must return to those heavy-browed ambassadors; and grow not so sudden wroth, Harmachis, for who knows what may come to pass betwixt thee and me?"

And, with a little nod, she went, leaving it on my mind that she had it in her heart to wed me openly. And of a truth, I believe that, at this hour, such was her thought. For, if she loved me not, still she held me dear, and as yet she had not wearied of me.

On the morrow Cleopatra came not, but Charmion came--Charmion, whom I had not seen since that fatal night of ruin. She entered and stood before me, with pale face and downcast eyes, and her first words were words of bitterness.

"Pardon me," she said, in her gentle voice, "in that I dare to come to thee in Cleopatra's place. Thy joy is not delayed for long, for thou shalt see her presently."

I shrank at her words, as well I might, and, seeing her vantage, she seized it.

"I come, Harmachis--royal no more!--I come to say that thou art free! Thou art free to face thine own infamy, and see it thrown back from every eye which trusted thee, as shadows are from water. I come to tell thee that the great plot--the plot of twenty years and more--is at its utter end. None have been slain, indeed, unless it is Sepa, who has vanished. But all the leaders have been seized and put in chains, or driven from the land, and their party is broken and scattered. The storm has melted before it burst. Egypt is lost, and lost for ever, for her last hope is gone! No longer may she struggle--now for all time she must bow her neck to the yoke, and bare her back to the rod of the

oppressor!"

I groaned aloud. "Alas, I was betrayed!" I said. "Paulus betrayed us."

"Thou wast betrayed? Nay, thou thyself wast the betrayer! How came it that thou didst not slay Cleopatra when thou wast alone with her? Speak, thou forsworn!"

"She drugged me," I said again.

"O Harmachis!" answered the pitiless girl, "how low art thou fallen from that Prince whom once I knew!--thou who dost not scorn to be a liar! Yea, thou wast drugged--drugged with a love-philtre! Yea, thou didst sell Egypt and thy cause for the price of a wanton's kiss! Thou Sorrow and thou Shame!" she went on, pointing her finger at me and lifting her eyes to my face, "thou Scorn!--thou Outcast!--and thou Contempt! Deny if it thou canst. Ay, shrink from me--knowing what thou art, well mayst thou shrink! Crawl to Cleopatra's feet, and kiss her sandals till such time as it pleases her to trample thee in thy kindred dirt; but from all honest folk shrink!--shrink!"

My soul quivered beneath the lash of her bitter scorn and hate, but I had no words to answer.

"How comes it," I said at last in a heavy voice, "that thou, too, art not betrayed, but art still here to taunt me, thou who once didst swear that thou didst love me? Being a woman, hast thou no pity for the

frailty of man?"

"My name was not on the lists," she said, dropping her dark eyes. "Here is an opportunity: betray me also, Harmachis! Ay, it is because I once loved thee--dost thou, indeed, remember it?--that I feel thy fall the more. The shame of one whom we have loved must in some sort become our shame, and must ever cling to us, because we blindly held a thing so base close to our inmost heart. Art thou also, then, a fool? Wouldst thou, fresh from thy royal wanton's arms, come to me for comfort--to me of all the world?"

"How know I," I said, "that it was not thou who, in thy jealous anger, didst betray our plans? Charmion, long ago Sepa warned me against thee, and of a truth now that I recall----"

"It is like a traitor," she broke in, reddening to her brow, "to think that all are of his family, and hold a common mind! Nay, I betrayed thee not; it was that poor knave, Paulus, whose heart failed him at the last, and who is rightly served. Nor will I stay to hear thoughts so base. Harmachis--royal no more!--Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, bids me say that thou art free, and that she waits thee in the Alabaster Hall."

And shooting one swift glance through her long lashes she curtsied and was gone.

So once more I came and went about the Court, though but sparingly, for my heart was full of shame and terror, and on every face I feared to see the scorn of those who knew me for what I was. But I saw nothing, for all those who had knowledge of the plot had fled, and Charmion had spoken no word, for her own sake. Also, Cleopatra had put it about that I was innocent. But my guilt lay heavy on me, and made me thin and wore away the beauty of my countenance. And though I was free in name, yet I was ever watched; nor might I stir beyond the palace grounds.

And at length came the day which brought with it Quintus Dellius, that false Roman knight who ever served the rising star. He bore letters to Cleopatra from Marcus Antonius, the Triumvir, who, fresh from the victory of Philippi, was now in Asia wringing gold from the subject kings with which to satisfy the greed of his legionaries.

Well I mind me of the day. Cleopatra, clad in her robes of state, attended by the officers of her Court, among whom I stood, sat in the great hall on her throne of gold, and bade the heralds admit the Ambassador of Antony, the Triumvir. The great doors were thrown wide, and amidst the blare of trumpets and salutes of the Gallic guards the Roman came in, clad in glittering golden armour and a scarlet cloak of silk, and followed by his suite of officers. He was smooth-faced and fair to look upon, and with a supple form; but his mouth was cold, and false were his shifting eyes. And while the heralds called out his name, titles, and offices, he fixed his gaze on Cleopatra--who sat idly on her throne all radiant with beauty--as a man who is amazed. Then when the heralds had made an end, and he still stood thus, not stirring,

Cleopatra spoke in the Latin tongue:

"Greeting to thee, noble Dellius, envoy of the most mighty Antony, whose shadow lies across the world as though Mars himself now towered up above us petty Princes--greeting and welcome to our poor city of Alexandria. Unfold, we pray thee, the purpose of thy coming."

Still the crafty Dellius made no answer, but stood as a man amazed.

"What ails thee, noble Dellius, that thou dost not speak?" asked Cleopatra. "Hast thou, then, wandered so long in Asia that the doors of Roman speech are shut to thee? What tongue hast thou? Name it, and We will speak in it--for all tongues are known to Us."

Then at last he spoke in a soft full voice: "Oh, pardon me, most lovely Egypt, if I have thus been stricken dumb before thee: but too great beauty, like Death himself, doth paralyse the tongue and steal our sense away. The eyes of him who looks upon the fires of the mid-day sun are blind to all beside, and thus this sudden vision of thy glory, royal Egypt, overwhelmed my mind, and left me helpless and unwitting of all things else."

"Of a truth, noble Dellius," answered Cleopatra, "they teach a pretty school of flattery yonder in Cilicia."

"How goes the saying here in Alexandria?" replied the courtly Roman:

"The breath of flattery cannot waft a cloud, [*] does it not? But to

my task. Here, royal Egypt, are letters under the hand and seal of the noble Antony treating of certain matters of the State. Is it thy pleasure that I should read them openly?"

[*] In other words, what is Divine is beyond the reach of human praise.--Editor.

"Break the seals and read," she answered.

Then bowing, he broke the seals and read:

"The Triumviri Reipublicæ Constituendæ, by the mouth of Marcus Antonius, the Triumvir, to Cleopatra, by grace of the Roman People Queen of Upper and Lower Egypt, send greeting. Whereas it has come to our knowledge that thou, Cleopatra, hast, contrary to thy promise and thy duty, both by thy servant Allienus and by thy servant Serapion, the Governor of Cyprus, aided the rebel murderer Cassius against the arms of the most noble Triumvirate. And, whereas it has come to our knowledge that thou thyself wast but lately making ready a great fleet to this end. We summon thee that thou dost without delay journey to Cilicia, there to meet the noble Antony, and in person make answer concerning these charges which are laid against thee. And we warn thee that if thou dost disobey this our summons it is at thy peril. Farewell."

The eyes of Cleopatra flashed as she hearkened to these high words, and I saw her hands tighten on the golden lions' heads whereon they rested.

"We have had the flattery," she said; "and now, lest we be cloyed with sweets, we have its antidote! Listen thou, Dellius: the charges in that letter, or, rather, in that writ of summons, are false, as all folk can bear us witness. But it is not now, and it is not to thee, that We will make defence of our acts of war and policy. Nor will We leave our kingdom to journey into far Cilicia, and there, like some poor suppliant at law, plead our cause before the Court of the Noble Antony. If Antony would have speech with us, and inquire concerning these high matters, the sea is open, and his welcome shall be royal. Let him come thither! That is our answer to thee and to the Triumvirate, O Dellius!"

But Dellius smiled as one who would put away the weight of wrath, and once more spoke:

"Royal Egypt, thou knowest not the noble Antony. He is stern on paper, and ever he sets down his thoughts as though his stylus were a spear dipped in the blood of men. But face to face with him, thou, of all the world, shalt find him the gentlest warrior that ever won a battle. Be advised, O Egypt! and come. Send me not hence with such angry words, for if thou dost draw Antony to Alexandria, then woe to Alexandria, to the people of the Nile, and to thee, great Egypt! For then he will come armed and breathing war, and it shall go hard with thee, who dost defy the gathered might of Rome. I pray thee, then, obey this summons. Come to Cilicia; come with peaceful gifts and not in arms. Come in thy beauty, and tricked in thy best attire, and thou hast naught to fear from the noble Antony." He paused and looked at her meaningly; while I, taking his drift, felt the angry blood surge into my face.

Cleopatra, too, understood, for I saw her rest her chin upon her hand and the cloud of thought gathered in her eyes. For a time she sat thus, while the crafty Delliuss watched her curiously. And Charmion, standing with the other ladies by the throne, she also read his meaning, for her face lit up, as a summer cloud lights in the evening when the broad lightning flares behind it. Then once more it grew pale and quiet.

At length Cleopatra spoke. "This is a heavy matter," she said, "and therefore, noble Delliuss, we must have time to let our judgment ripen. Rest thou here, and make thee as merry as our poor circumstances allow. Thou shalt have thy answer within ten days."

The envoy thought awhile, then replied smiling: "It is well, O Egypt; on the tenth day from now I will attend for my answer, and on the eleventh I sail hence to join Antony my Lord."

Once more, at a sign from Cleopatra, the trumpets blared, and he withdrew bowing.