

CHAPTER XII

OF THE COMING BACK OF HARMACHIS; OF THE GREETING OF CHARMION;
AND OF THE ANSWER OF CLEOPATRA TO QUINTUS DELLIUS, THE
AMBASSADOR OF ANTONY THE TRIUMVIR

Presently I lifted myself, and, laying the head of Egypt's Queen upon my knee, strove to call her back to life. How fair she seemed, even in her disarray, her long hair streaming down her breast! how deadly fair she seemed in the faint light--this woman the story of whose beauty and whose sin shall outlive the solid mass of the mighty pyramid that towered over us! The heaviness of her swoon had smoothed away the falseness of her face, and nothing was left but the divine stamp of Woman's richest loveliness, softened by shadows of the night and dignified by the cast of deathlike sleep. I gazed upon her and all my heart went out to her; it seemed that I did but love her more because of the depth of the treasons to which I had sunk to reach her, and because of the terrors we had outfaced together. Weary and spent with fears and the pangs of guilt, my heart sought hers for rest, for now she alone was left to me. She had sworn to wed me also, and with the treasure we had won we would make Egypt strong and free her from her foes, and all should yet be well. Ah! could I have seen the picture that was to come, how, and in what place and circumstance, once again this very woman's head should be laid upon my knee, pale with that cast of death! Ah! could I have seen!

I chafed her hand between my hands. I bent down and kissed her on the

lips, and at my kiss she woke. She woke with a little sob of fear--a shiver ran along her delicate limbs, and she stared upon my face with wide eyes.

"Ah! it is thou!" she said. "I mind me--thou hast saved me from that horror-haunted place!" And she threw her arms about my neck, drew me to her and kissed me. "Come, love," she said, "let us be going! I am sore athirst, and--ah! so very weary! The gems, too, chafe my breast! Never was wealth so hardly won! Come, let us be going from the shadow of this ghostly spot! See the faint lights glancing from the wings of Dawn. How beautiful they are, and how sweet to behold! Never, in those Halls of Eternal Night, did I think to look upon the blush of dawn again! Ah! I can still see the face of that dead slave, with the Horror hanging to his beardless chin! Bethink thee!--there he'll sit for ever--there--with the Horror! Come; where may we find water? I would give an emerald for a cup of water!"

"At the canal on the borders of the tilled land below the Temple of Horemkhu--it is close by," I answered. "If any see us, we will say that we are pilgrims who have lost our way at night among the tombs. Veil thyself closely, therefore, Cleopatra; and beware lest thou dost show aught of those gems about thee."

So she veiled herself, and I lifted her on to the ass which was tethered near at hand. We walked slowly through the plain till we came to the place where the symbol of the God Horemkhu,[*] fashioned as a mighty Sphinx (whom the Greeks call Harmachis), and crowned with the royal

crown of Egypt, looks out in majesty across the land, his eyes ever fixed upon the East. As we walked the first arrow of the rising sun quivered through the grey air, striking upon Horemkhu's lips of holy calm, and the Dawn kissed her greeting to the God of Dawn. Then the light gathered and grew upon the gleaming sides of twenty pyramids, and, like a promise from Life to Death, rested on the portals of ten thousand tombs. It poured in a flood of gold across the desert sand--it pierced the heavy sky of night, and fell in bright beams upon the green of fields and the tufted crest of palms. Then from his horizon bed royal Ra rose up in pomp and it was day.

[*] That is, "Horus on the horizon"; and signifies the power of Light and Good overcoming the power of Darkness and Evil incarnate in his enemy, Typhon.--Editor.

Passing the temple of granite and of alabaster that was built before the days of Khufu, to the glory of the Majesty of Horemkhu, we descended the slope, and came to the banks of the canal. There we drank; and that draught of muddy water was sweeter than all the choicest wine of Alexandria. Also we washed the mummy dust and grime from our hands and brows and made us clean. As she bathed her neck, stooping over the water, one of the great emeralds slipped from Cleopatra's breast and fell into the canal, and it was but by chance that at length I found it in the mire. Then, once more, I lifted Cleopatra onto the beast, and slowly, for I was very weary, we marched back to the banks of Sihor, where our craft was. And having at length come thither, seeing no one save some few peasants going out to labour on the lands, I turned the

ass loose in that same field where we had found him, and we boarded the craft while the crew were yet sleeping. Then, waking them, we bade them make all sail, saying that we had left the eunuch to sojourn a while behind us, as in truth we had. So we sailed, having first hidden away the gems and such of the ornaments of gold as we could bring to the boat.

We spent four days and more in coming to Alexandria, for the wind was for the most part against us; and they were happy days! At first, indeed, Cleopatra was somewhat silent and heavy at heart, for what she had seen and felt in the womb of the pyramid weighed her down. But soon her Imperial spirit awoke and shook the burden from her breast, and she became herself again--now gay, now learned; now loving, and now cold; now queenly, and now altogether simple--ever changing as the winds of heaven, and as the heaven, deep, beautiful, and unsearchable!

Night after night for those four perfect nights, the last happy hours I ever was to know, we sat hand in hand upon the deck and heard the waters lap the vessel's side, and watched the soft footfall of the moon as she trod the depths of Nile. There we sat and talked of love, talked of our marriage and all that we would do. Also I drew up plans of war and of defence against the Roman, which now we had the means to carry out; and she approved them, sweetly saying that what seemed good to me was good to her. And so the time passed all too swiftly.

Oh those nights upon the Nile! their memory haunts me yet! Yet in my dreams I see the moonbeams break and quiver, and hear Cleopatra's

murmured words of love mingle with the sound of murmuring waters. Dead are those dear nights, dead is the moon that lit them; the waters which rocked us on their breast are lost in the wide salt sea, and where we kissed and clung their lips unborn shall kiss and cling! How beautiful was their promise, doomed, like an unfruitful blossom, to wither, fall, and rot! and their fulfilment, ah, how drear! For all things end in darkness and in ashes, and those who sow in folly shall reap in sorrow. Ah! those nights upon the Nile!

And so at length once more we stood within the hateful walls of that fair palace on the Lochias, and the dream was done.

"Whither hast thou wandered with Cleopatra, Harmachis?" Charmion asked of me when I met her by chance on that day of return. "On some new mission of betrayal? Or was it but a love-journey?"

"I went with Cleopatra upon secret business of the State," I answered sternly.

"So! Those who go secretly, go evilly; and foul birds love to fly at night. Not but what thou art wise, for it would scarce beseem thee, Harmachis, to show thy face openly in Egypt."

I heard, and felt my passion rise within me, for I could ill bear this fair girl's scorn.

"Hast thou never a word without a sting?" I asked. "Know, then, that I went whither thou hadst not dared to go, to gather means to hold Egypt from the grasp of Antony."

"So," she answered, looking up swiftly. "Thou foolish man! Thou hadst done better to save thy labour, for Antony will grasp Egypt in thy despite. What power hast thou to-day in Egypt?"

"That he may do in my despite; but in despite of Cleopatra that he cannot do," I said.

"Nay, but with the aid of Cleopatra he can and will do it," she answered with a bitter smile. "When the Queen sails in state up Cydnus stream she will surely draw this coarse Antony thence to Alexandria, conquering, and yet, like thee, a slave!"

"It is false! I say that it is false! Cleopatra goes not to Tarsus, and Antony comes not to Alexandria; or, if he come, it will be to take the chance of war."

"Now, thinkest thou thus?" she answered with a little laugh. "Well, if it please thee, think as thou wilt. Within three days thou shalt know. It is pretty to see how easily thou art fooled. Farewell! Go, dream on Love, for surely Love is sweet."

And she went, leaving me angered and troubled at heart.

I saw Cleopatra no more that day, but on the day which followed I saw her. She was in a heavy mood, and had no gentle word for me. I spake to her of the defence of Egypt, but she put the matter away.

"Why dost thou weary me?" she said with anger; "canst thou not see that I am lost in troubles? When Dellius has had his answer to-morrow then we will speak of these matters."

"Ay," I said, "when Dellius has had his answer; and knowest thou that but yesterday, Charmion--whom about the palace they name the 'Keeper of the Queen's secrets'--Charmion swore that the answer would be 'Go in peace, I come to Antony!'"

"Charmion knows nothing of my heart," said Cleopatra, stamping her foot in anger, "and if she talk so freely the girl shall be scourged out of my Court, as is her desert. Though, in truth," she added, "she has more wisdom in that small head of hers than all my privy councillors--ay, and more wit to use it. Knowest thou that I have sold a portion of those gems to the rich Jews of Alexandria, and at a great price, ay, at five thousand sestertia for each one?[*] But a few, in truth, for they could not buy more as yet. It was rare to see their eyes when they fell upon them: they grew large as apples with avarice and wonder. And now leave me, Harmachis, for I am weary. The memory of that dreadful night is with me yet."

[*] About forty thousand pounds of our money.--Editor.

I bowed and rose to go, and yet stood wavering.

"Pardon me, Cleopatra; it is of our marriage."

"Our marriage! Why, are we not indeed already wed?" she answered.

"Yes; but not before the world. Thou didst promise."

"Ay, Harmachis, I promised; and to-morrow, when I have rid me of this Dellius, I will keep my promise, and name thee Cleopatra's Lord before the Court. See that thou art in thy place. Art content?"

And she stretched out her hand for me to kiss, looking on me with strange eyes, as though she struggled with herself. Then I went; but that night I strove once more to see Cleopatra, and could not. "The Lady Charmion was with the Queen," so said the eunuchs, and none might enter.

On the morrow the Court met in the great hall one hour before mid-day, and I went thither with a trembling heart to hear Cleopatra's answer to Dellius, and to hear myself also named King-consort to the Queen of Egypt. It was a full and splendid Court; there were councillors, lords, captains, eunuchs, and waiting-women, all save Charmion. The house

passed, but Cleopatra and Charmion came not. At length Charmion entered gently by a side entrance, and took her place among the waiting-ladies about the throne. Even as she did so she cast a glance at me, and there was triumph in her eyes, though I knew not over what she triumphed. I little guessed that she had but now brought about my ruin and sealed the fate of Egypt.

Then presently the trumpets blared, and, clad in her robes of state, the uræus crown upon her head, and on her breast, flashing like a star, that great emerald scarabæus which she had dragged from dead Pharaoh's heart, Cleopatra swept in splendour to her throne, followed by a glittering guard of Northmen. Her lovely face was dark, dark were her slumbrous eyes, and none might read their message, though all that Court searched them for a sign of what should come. She seated herself slowly as one who may not be moved, and spoke to the chief of the heralds in the Greek tongue:

"Does the Ambassador of the noble Antony wait?"

The herald bowed low and made assent.

"Let him come in and hear our answer."

The doors were flung wide, and, followed by his train of knights, Dellius, clad in his golden armour and his purple mantle, walked with cat-like step up the great hall, and made obeisance before the throne.

"Most royal and beauteous Egypt," he said, in his soft voice, "as thou hast graciously been pleased to bid me, thy servant, I am here to take thy answer to the letter of the noble Antony the Triumvir, whom to-morrow I sail to meet at Tarsus, in Cilicia. And I will say this, royal Egypt, craving pardon the while for the boldness of my speech--bethink thee well before words that cannot be unspoken fall from those sweet lips. Defy Antony, and Antony will wreck thee. But, like thy mother Aphrodité, rise glorious on his sight from the bosom of the Cyprian wave, and for wreck he will give thee all that can be dear to woman's royalty--Empire, and pomp of place, cities and the sway of men, fame and wealth, and the Diadem of rule made sure. For mark: Antony holds this Eastern World in the hollow of his warlike hand; at his will kings are, and at his frown they cease to be."

And he bowed his head and, folding his hands meekly on his breast, awaited answer.

For a while Cleopatra answered not, but sat like the Sphinx Horemkhu, dumb and inscrutable, gazing with lost eyes down the length of that great hall.

Then, like soft music, her answer came; and trembling I listened for Egypt's challenge to the Roman:

"Noble Dellius,--We have bethought us much of the matter of thy message from great Antony to our poor Royalty of Egypt. We have bethought us much, and we have taken counsel from the oracles of the Gods, from the

wisest among our friends, and from the teachings of our heart, that ever, like a nesting bird, broods over our people's weal. Sharp are the words that thou has brought across the sea; methinks they had been better fitted to the ears of some petty half-tamed prince than to those of Egypt's Queen. Therefore we have numbered the legions that we can gather, and the triremes and the galleys wherewith we may breast the sea, and the moneys which shall buy us all things wanting to our war. And we find this, that, though Antony be strong, yet has Egypt naught to fear from the strength of Antony."

She paused, and a murmur of applause of her high words ran down the hall. Only Dellius stretched out his hand as though to push them back. Then came the end!

"Noble Dellius,--Half are we minded there to bid our tongue stop, and, strong in our fortresses of stone, and our other fortresses built of the hearts of men, abide the issue. And yet thou shalt not go thus. We are guiltless of those charges against us that have come to the ears of noble Antony, and which now he rudely shouts in ours; nor will we journey into Cilicia to answer them."

Here the murmur arose anew, while my heart beat high in triumph; and in the pause that followed, Dellius spoke once more.

"Then, royal Egypt, my word to Antony is word of War?"

"Nay," she answered; "it shall be one of Peace. Listen; we said that we

would not come to make answer to these charges, nor will we. But"--and she smiled for the first time--"we will gladly come, and that swiftly, in royal friendship to make known our fellowship of peace upon the banks of Cydnus."

I heard, and was bewildered. Could I hear aright? Was it thus that Cleopatra kept her oaths? Moved beyond the hold of reason, I lifted up my voice and cried:

"O Queen, remember!"

She turned upon me like a lioness, with a flashing of the eyes and a swift shake of her lovely head.

"Peace, Slave!" she said; "who bade thee break in upon our counsels? Mind thou thy stars, and leave matters of the world to the rulers of the world!"

I sank back shamed, and, as I did so, once more I saw the smile of triumph on the face of Charmion, followed by what was, perhaps, the shadow of pity for my fall.

"Now that yon brawling charlatan," said Delliuss, pointing at me with his jewelled finger, "has been rebuked, grant me leave, O Egypt, to thank thee from my heart for these gentle words----"

"We ask no thanks from thee, noble Delliuss; nor lies it in thy mouth to

chide our servant," broke in Cleopatra, frowning heavily; "we will take thanks from the lips of Antony alone. Get thee to thy master, and say to him that before he can make ready a fitting welcome our keels shall follow in the track of thine. And now, farewell! Thou shalt find some small token of our bounty upon thy vessel."

Dellius bowed thrice and withdrew, while the Court stood waiting the Queen's word. And I, too, waited, wondering if she would yet make good her promise, and name me royal Spouse there in the face of Egypt. But she said nothing. Only, still frowning heavily, she rose, and, followed by her guards, left the throne, and passed into the Alabaster Hall. Then the Court broke up, and as the lords and councillors went by they looked on me with mockery. For though none knew all my secret, nor how it stood between me and Cleopatra, yet they were jealous of the favour shown me by the Queen, and rejoiced greatly at my fall. But I took no heed of their mocking as I stood dazed with misery and felt the world of Hope slip from beneath my feet.