

## CHAPTER XIII

### OF THE REPROACH OF HARMACHIS; OF THE STRUGGLE OF HARMACHIS WITH THE GUARDS; OF THE BLOW OF BRENNUS; AND OF THE SECRET SPEECH OF CLEOPATRA

And at length, all being gone, I, too, turned to go, when a eunuch struck me on the shoulder and roughly bade me wait on the presence of the Queen. An hour past this fellow would have crawled to me on his knees; but he had heard, and now he treated me--so brutish is the nature of such slaves--as the world treats the fallen, with scorn. For to come low after being great is to learn all shame. Unhappy, therefore, are the Great, for they may fall!

I turned upon the slave with so fierce a word that, cur-like, he sprang behind me; then I passed on to the Alabaster Hall, and was admitted by the guards. In the centre of the hall, near the fountain, sat Cleopatra, and with her were Charmion and the Greek girl Iras, and Merira and other of her waiting-ladies. "Go," she said to these, "I would speak with my astrologer." So they went, and left us face to face.

"Stand thou there," she said, lifting her eyes for the first time. "Come not nigh me, Harmachis: I trust thee not. Perchance thou hast found another dagger. Now, what hast thou to say? By what right didst thou dare to break in upon my talk with the Roman?"

I felt the blood rush through me like a storm; bitterness and burning

anger took hold of my heart. "What hast thou to say, Cleopatra?"

I answered boldly. "Where is thy vow, sworn on the dead heart of Menkau-ra, the ever-living? Where now thy challenge to this Roman Antony? Where thy oath that thou wouldest call me 'husband' in the face of Egypt?" and I choked and ceased.

"Well doth it become Harmachis, who never was forsworn, to speak to me of oaths!" she said in bitter mockery. "And yet, O thou most pure Priest of Isis; and yet, O thou most faithful friend, who never didst betray thy friends; and yet, O thou most steadfast, honourable, and upright man, who never bartered thy birthright, thy country, and thy cause for the price of a woman's passing love--by what token knowest thou that my word is void?"

"I will not answer thy taunts, Cleopatra," I said, holding back my heart as best I might, "for I have earned them all, though not from thee. By this token, then, I know it. Thou goest to visit Antony; thou goest, as said that Roman knave, 'tricked in thy best attire,' to feast with him whom thou shouldst give to vultures for their feast. Perhaps, for aught I know, thou art about to squander those treasures that thou hast filched from the body of Menkau-ra, those treasures stored against the need of Egypt, upon wanton revels which shall complete the shame of Egypt. By these things, then, I know that thou art forsworn, and I, who, loving thee, believed thee, tricked; and by this, also, that thou who didst but yesternight swear to wed me, dost to-day cover me with taunts, and even before that Roman put me to an open shame!"

"To wed thee? and I did swear to wed thee? Well, and what is marriage?  
Is it the union of the heart, that bond beautiful as gossamer and than  
gossamer more light, which binds soul to soul, as they float through the  
dreamy night of passion, a bond to be, perchance, melted in the dews of  
dawn? Or is it the iron link of enforced, unchanging union whereby if  
sinks the one the other must be dragged beneath the sea of circumstance,  
there, like a punished slave, to perish of unavoidable corruption?[\*]  
Marriage! I to marry! I to forget freedom and court the worst  
slavery of our sex, which, by the selfish will of man, the stronger,  
still binds us to a bed grown hateful, and enforces a service that love  
mayhap no longer hallows! Of what use, then, to be a Queen, if thereby I  
may not escape the evil of the meanly born? Mark thou, Harmachis: Woman  
being grown hath two ills to fear--Death and Marriage; and of these  
twain is Marriage the more vile; for in Death we may find rest, but in  
Marriage, should it fail us, we must find hell. Nay, being above the  
breath of common slander that enviously would blast those who of  
true virtue will not consent to stretch affection's links, I love,  
Harmachis; but I marry not!"

[\*] Referring to the Roman custom of chaining a living felon  
to the body of one already dead.--Editor.

"And yesternight, Cleopatra, thou didst swear that thou wouldst wed me,  
and call me to thy side before the face of Egypt!"

"And yesternight, Harmachis, the red ring round the moon marked the  
coming of the storm, and yet the day is fair! But who knows that the

tempest may not break to-morrow? Who knows that I have not chosen the easier path to save Egypt from the Roman? Who knows, Harmachis, that thou shalt not still call me wife?"

Then I no longer could bear her falsehood, for I saw that she but played with me. And so I spoke that which was in my heart:

"Cleopatra!" I cried, "thou didst swear to protect Egypt, and thou art about to betray Egypt to the Roman! Thou didst swear to use the treasures that I revealed to thee for the service of Egypt, and thou art about to use them to be her means of shame--to fashion them as fetters for her wrists! Thou didst swear to wed me, who loved thee, and for thee gave all, and thou dost mock me and reject me! Therefore I say--with the voice of the dread Gods I say it!--that on thee shall fall the curse of Menkau-ra, whom thou hast robbed indeed! Let me go hence and work out my fate! Let me go, O thou fair Shame! thou living Lie! whom I have loved to my doom, and who hast brought upon me the last curse of doom! Let me hide myself and see thy face no more!"

She rose in her wrath, and she was terrible to see.

"Let thee go to stir up evil against me! Nay, Harmachis, thou shalt not go to build new plots against my throne! I say to thee that thou, too, shalt come to visit Antony in Cilicia, and there, perchance, I will let thee go!" And ere I could answer, she had struck upon the silver gong that hung near her.

Before its rich echo had died away, Charmion and the waiting-women entered from one door, and from the other, a file of soldiers--four of them of the Queen's bodyguard, mighty men, with winged helmets and long fair hair.

"Seize that traitor!" cried Cleopatra, pointing to me. The captain of the guard--it was Brennus--saluted and came towards me with drawn sword.

But I, being mad and desperate, and caring little if they slew me, flew straight at his throat, and dealt him such a heavy blow that the great man fell headlong, and his armour clashed upon the marble floor. As he fell I seized his sword and targe, and, meeting the next, who rushed on me with a shout, caught his blow upon the shield, and in answer smote with all my strength. The sword fell where the neck is set into the shoulder, and, shearing through the joints of his harness, slew him, so that his knees were loosened and he sank down dead. And the third, as he came, I caught upon the point of my sword before he could strike, and it pierced him and he died. Then the last rushed on me with a cry of "Taranis!" and I, too, rushed on him, for my blood was aflame. Now the women shrieked--only Cleopatra said nothing, but stood and watched the unequal fray. We met, and I struck with all my strength, and it was a mighty blow, for the sword shore through the iron shell and shattered there, leaving me weaponless. With a shout of triumph the guard swung up his sword and smote down upon my head, but I caught the blow with my shield. Again he smote, and again I parried; but when he raised his sword a third time I saw this might not endure, so with a cry I hurled my buckler at his face. Glancing from his shield it struck him on the

breast and staggered him. Then, before he could gain his balance, I rushed in beneath his guard and gripped him round the middle.

For a full minute the tall man and I struggled furiously, and then, so great was my strength in those days, I lifted him like a toy and dashed him down upon the marble floor in such fashion that his bones were shattered so that he spoke no more. But I could not save myself and fell upon him, and as I fell the Captain Brennus, whom I had smitten to earth with my fist, having once more found his sense, came up behind me and smote me upon the head and shoulders with the sword of one of those whom I had slain. But I being on the ground, the blow did not fall with all its weight, also my thick hair and broidered cap broke its force; and thus it came to pass that, though sorely wounded, the life was yet whole in me. But I could struggle no more.

Then the cowardly eunuchs, who had gathered at the sound of blows and stood huddled together like a herd of cattle, seeing that I was spent, threw themselves upon me, and would have butchered me with their knives. But Brennus, now that I was down, would strike no more, but stood waiting. And the eunuchs had surely slain me, for Cleopatra watched like one who watches in a dream and made no sign. Already my head was dragged back, and their knife-points were at my throat, when Charmion, rushing forward, threw herself upon me and, calling them "Dogs!" desperately thrust her body before them in such fashion that they could not smite. Now Brennus with an oath seized first one and then another and cast them from me.

"Spare his life, Queen!" he cried in his barbarous Latin. "By Jupiter, he is a brave man! Myself felled like an ox in the shambles, and three of my boys finished by a man without armour and taken unawares! I grudge them not to such a man! A boon, Queen! spare his life, and give him to me!"

"Ay, spare him! spare him!" cried Charmion, white and trembling.

Cleopatra drew near and looked upon the dead and him who lay dying as I had dashed him to the ground, and on me, her lover of two days gone, whose wounded head rested now on Charmion's white robes.

I met the Queen's glance. "Spare not!" I gasped; "væ victis!" Then a flush gathered on her brow--methinks it was a flush of shame!

"Dost after all love this man at heart, Charmion," she said with a little laugh, "that thou didst thrust thy tender body between him and the knives of these sexless hounds?" and she cast a look of scorn upon the eunuchs.

"Nay!" the girl answered fiercely; "but I cannot stand by to see a brave man murdered by such as these."

"Ay!" said Cleopatra, "he is a brave man, and he fought gallantly; I have never seen so fierce a fight even in the games at Rome! Well, I spare his life, though he is weak of me--womanish weak. Take him to his own chamber and guard him there till he is healed or--dead."

Then my brain reeled, a great sickness seized upon me, and I sank into the nothingness of a swoon.

Dreams, dreams, dreams! without end and ever-changing, as for years and years I seemed to toss upon a sea of agony. And through them a vision of a dark-eyed woman's tender face and the touch of a white hand soothing me to rest. Visions, too, of a royal countenance bending at times over my rocking bed--a countenance that I could not grasp, but whose beauty flowed through my fevered veins and was a part of me--visions of childhood and of the Temple towers of Abouthis, and of the white-haired Amenemhat, my father--ay, and an ever-present vision of that dread hall in Amenti, and of the small altar and the Spirits clad in flame! There I seemed to wander everlastingly, calling on the Holy Mother, whose memory I could not grasp; calling ever and in vain! For no cloud descended upon the altar, only from time to time the great Voice pealed aloud: "Strike out the name of Harmachis, child of Earth, from the living Book of Her who Was and Is and Shall Be! Lost! lost! lost!"

And then another voice would answer:

"Not yet! not yet! Repentance is at hand; strike not out the name of Harmachis, child of Earth, from the living Book of Her who Was and Is and Shall Be! By suffering may sin be wiped away!"



I woke to find myself in my own chamber in the tower of the palace. I was so weak that I scarce could lift my hand, and life seemed but to flutter in my breast as flutters a dying dove. I could not turn my head; I could not stir; yet in my heart there was a sense of rest and of dark trouble done. The light from the lamp hurt my eyes: I shut them, and, as I shut them, heard the sweep of a woman's robes upon the stair, and a swift, light step that I knew well. It was that of Cleopatra!

She entered and drew near. I felt her come! Every pulse of my poor frame beat an answer to her footfall, and all my mighty love and hate rose from the darkness of my death-like sleep, and rent me in their struggle! She leaned over me; her ambrosial breath played upon my face: I could hear the beating of her heart! Lower she leaned, till at last her lips touched me softly on the brow.

"Poor man!" I heard her murmur. "Poor, weak, dying Man! Fate hath been hard to thee! Thou wert too good to be the sport of such a one as I--the pawn that I must move in my play of policy! Ah, Harmachis! thou shouldst have ruled the game! Those plotting priests could give thee learning; but they could not give thee knowledge of mankind, nor fence thee against the march of Nature's law. And thou didst love me with all thy heart--ah! well I know it! Manlike, thou didst love the eyes that, as a pirate's lights, beckoned thee to shipwrecked ruin, and didst hang doting on the lips which lied thy heart away and called thee 'slave'! Well; the game was fair, for thou wouldst have slain me; and yet I grieve. So thou dost die? and this is my farewell to thee! Never may we meet again on earth; and, perchance, it is well, for who knows, when my

hour of tenderness is past, how I might deal with thee, didst thou live? Thou dost die, they say--those learned long-faced fools, who, if they let thee die, shall pay the price. And where, then, shall we meet again when my last throw is thrown? We shall be equal there, in the kingdom that Osiris rules. A little time, a few years--perhaps to-morrow--and we shall meet; then, knowing all I am, how wilt thou greet me? Nay, here, as there, still must thou worship me! for injuries cannot touch the immortality of such a love as thine. Contempt alone, like acid, can eat away the love of noble hearts, and reveal the truth in its pitiful nakedness. Thou must still cling to thee, Harmachis; for, whatever my sins, yet I am great and set above thy scorn. Would that I could have loved thee as thou lovest me! Almost I did so when thou slewest those guards; and yet--not quite.

"What a fenced city is my heart, that none can take it, and, even when I throw the gates wide, no man may win its citadel! Oh, to put away this loneliness and lose me in another's soul! Oh, for a year, a month, an hour to quite forget policy, peoples, and my pomp of place, and be but a loving woman! Harmachis, fare thee well! Go join great Julius whom thy art called up from death before me, and take Egypt's greetings to him. Ah well! I fooled thee, and I fooled Cæsar--perchance before all is done Fate will find me, and myself I shall be fooled. Harmachis, fare thee well!"

She turned to go, and as she turned I heard the sweep of another dress and the light fall of another woman's foot.

"Ah! it is thou, Charmion. Well, for all thy watching the man dies."

"Ay," she answered, in a voice thick with grief. "Ay, O Queen, so the physicians say. Forty hours has he lain in stupor so deep that at times his breath could barely lift this tiny feather's weight, and hardly could my ear, placed against his breast, take notice of the rising of his heart. I have watched him now for ten long days, watched him day and night, till my eyes stare wide with want of sleep, and for faintness I can scarce keep myself from falling. And this is the end of all my labour! The coward blow of that accursed Brennus has done its work, and Harmachis dies!"

"Love counts not its labour, Charmion, nor can it weight its tenderness on the scale of purchase. That which it has it gives, and craves for more to give and give, till the soul's infinity be drained. Dear to thy heart are these heavy nights of watching; sweet to thy weary eyes is that sad sight of strength brought so low that it hangs upon thy weakness like a babe to its mother's breast! For, Charmion, thou dost love this man who loves thee not, and now that he is helpless thou canst pour thy passion forth over the unanswering darkness of his soul, and cheat thyself with dreams of what yet might be."

"I love him not, as thou hast proof, O Queen! How can I love one who would have slain thee, who art as my heart's sister? It is for pity that I nurse him."

She laughed a little as she answered, "Pity is love's own twin,

Charmion. Wondrous wayward are the paths of woman's love, and thou hast shown thine strangely, that I know. But the more high the love, the deeper the gulf whereinto it can fall--ay, and thence soar again to heaven, once more to fall! Poor woman! thou art thy passion's plaything: now tender as the morning sky, and now, when jealousy grips thy heart, more cruel than the sea. Well, thus are we made. Soon, after all this troubling, nothing will be left thee but tears, remorse, and--memory."

And she went forth.