

CHAPTER XIV

OF THE TENDER CARE OF CHARMION; OF THE HEALING OF HARMACHIS; OF THE SAILING OF THE FLEET OF CLEOPATRA FOR CILICIA; AND OF THE SPEECH OF BRENNUS TO HARMACHIS

Cleopatra went, and for a while I lay silent, gathering up my strength to speak. But Charmion came and stood over me, and I felt a great tear fall from her dark eyes upon my face, as the first heavy drop of rain falls from a thunder cloud.

"Thou goest," she whispered; "thou goest fast whither I may not follow! O Harmachis, how gladly would I give my life for thine!"

Then at length I opened my eyes, and spoke as best I could:

"Restrain thy grief, dear friend," I said, "I live yet; and, in truth, I feel as though new life gathered in my breast!"

She gave a little cry of joy, and I never saw aught more beautiful than the change that came upon her weeping face! It was as when the first lights of the day run up the pallor of that sad sky which veils the night from dawn. All rosy grew her lovely countenance; her dim eyes shone out like stars; and a smile of wonderment, more sweet than the sudden smile of the sea as its ripples wake to brightness beneath the kiss of the risen moon, broke through her rain of tears.

"Thou livest!" she cried, throwing herself on her knees beside my couch.
"Thou livest--and I thought thee gone! Thou art come back to me! Oh!
what say I? How foolish is a woman's heart! 'Tis this long watching!
Nay; sleep and rest thee, Harmachis!--why dost thou talk? Not one
more word, I command thee straitly! Where is the draught left by
that long-bearded fool? Nay thou shalt have no draught! There, sleep,
Harmachis; sleep!" and she crouched down at my side and laid her cool
hand upon my brow, murmuring, "Sleep! sleep!"

And when I woke there she was still, but the lights of dawn were peeping
through the casement. There she knelt, one hand upon my forehead, and
her head, in all its disarray of curls, resting upon her outstretched
arm.

"Charmion," I whispered, "have I slept?"

Instantly she was wide awake, and, gazing on me with tender eyes, "Yea,
thou hast slept, Harmachis."

"How long, then, have I slept?"

"Nine hours."

"And thou hast held thy place there, at my side, for nine long hours?"

"Yes, it is nothing; I also have slept--I feared to waken thee if I
stirred."

"Go, rest," I said; "it shames me to think of this thing. Go rest thee, Charmion!"

"Vex not thyself," she answered; "see, I will bid a slave watch thee, and to wake me if thou needest aught; I sleep there, in the outer chamber. Peace--I go!" and she strove to rise, but, so cramped was she, fell straightway on the floor.

I can scarcely tell the sense of shame that filled me when I saw her fall. Alas! I could not stir to help her.

"It is naught," she said; "move not, I did but catch my foot. There!" and she rose, again to fall--"a pest upon my awkwardness! Why--I must be sleeping. 'Tis well now. I'll send the slave;" and she staggered thence like one overcome with wine.

And after that, I slept once more, for I was very weak. When I woke it was afternoon, and I craved for food, which Charmion brought me.

I ate. "Then I die not," I said.

"Nay," she answered, with a toss of her head, "thou wilt live. In truth, I did waste my pity on thee."

"And thy pity saved my life," I said wearily, for now I remembered.

"It is nothing," she answered carelessly. "After all, thou art my cousin; also, I love nursing--it is a woman's trade. Like enough I had done as much for any slave. Now, too, that the danger is past, I leave thee."

"Thou hadst done better to let me die, Charmion," I said after a while, "for life to me can now be only one long shame. Tell me, then, when sails Cleopatra for Cilicia?"

"She sails in twenty days, and with such pomp and glory as Egypt has never seen. Of a truth, I cannot guess where she has found the means to gather in this store of splendour, as a husbandman gathers his golden harvest."

But I, knowing whence the wealth came, groaned in bitterness of spirit, and made no answer.

"Goest thou also, Charmion?" I asked presently.

"Ay, I and all the Court. Thou, too--thou goest."

"I go? Nay, why is this?"

"Because thou art Cleopatra's slave, and must march in gilded chains behind her chariot; because she fears to leave thee here in Khem; because it is her will, and there is an end."

"Charmion, can I not escape?"

"Escape, thou poor sick man? Nay, how canst thou escape? Even now thou art most strictly guarded. And if thou didst escape, whither wouldst thou fly? There's not an honest man in Egypt but would spit on thee in scorn!"

Once more I groaned in spirit, and, being so very weak, I felt the tears roll adown my cheek.

"Weep not!" she said hastily, and turning her face aside. "Be a man, and brave these troubles out. Thou hast sown, now must thou reap; but after harvest the waters rise and wash away the rotting roots, and then seed-time comes again. Perchance, yonder in Cilicia, a way may be found, when once more thou art strong, by which thou mayst fly--if in truth thou canst bear thy life apart from Cleopatra's smile; then in some far land must thou dwell till these things are forgotten. And now my task is done, so fare thee well! At times I will come to visit thee and see that thou needest nothing."

So she went, and I was nursed thenceforward, and that skilfully, by the physician and two women-slaves; and as my wound healed so my strength came back to me, slowly at first, then most swiftly. In four days from that time I left my couch, and in three more I could walk an hour in the palace gardens; another week and I could read and think, though I went no more to Court. And at length one afternoon Charmion came and bade me make ready, for the fleet would sail in two days, first for the coast of

Syria, and thence to the gulf of Issus and Cilicia.

Thereon, with all formality, and in writing, I craved leave of Cleopatra that I might be left, urging that my health was so feeble that I could not travel. But a message was sent to me in answer that I must come.

And so, on the appointed day, I was carried in a litter down to the boat, and together with that very soldier who had cut me down, the Captain Brennus, and others of his troop (who, indeed, were sent to guard me), we rowed aboard a vessel where she lay at anchor with the rest of the great fleet. For Cleopatra was voyaging as though to war in much pomp, and escorted by a fleet of ships, among which her galley, built like a house and lined throughout with cedar and silken hangings, was the most beautiful and costly that the world has ever seen. But I went not on this vessel, and therefore it chanced that I did not see Cleopatra or Charmion till we landed at the mouth of the river Cydnus.

The signal being made, the fleet set sail; and, the wind being fair, we came to Joppa on the evening of the second day. Thence we sailed slowly with contrary winds up the coast of Syria, making Cæsarea, and Ptolemais, and Tyrus, and Berytus, and past Lebanon's white brow crowned with his crest of cedars, on to Heraclea and across the gulf of Issus to the mouth of Cydnus. And ever as we journeyed, the strong breath of the sea brought back my health, till at length, save for a line of white upon my head where the sword had fallen, I was almost as I had been. And one night, as we drew near Cydnus, while Brennus and I sat alone together on the deck, his eye fell upon the white mark his sword had

made, and he swore a great oath by his heathen Gods. "An thou hadst died, lad," he said, "methinks I could never again have held up my head! Ah! that was a coward stroke, and I am shamed to think that it was I who struck it, and thou on the ground with thy back to me! Knowest thou that when thou didst lie between life and death, I came every day to ask tidings of thee? and I swore by Taranis that if thou didst die I'd turn my back upon that soft palace life and then away for the bonny North."

"Nay, trouble not, Brennus," I answered; "it was thy duty."

"Mayhap! but there are duties that a brave man should not do--nay, not at the bidding of any Queen who ever ruled in Egypt! Thy blow had dazed me or I had not struck. What is it, lad?--art in trouble with this Queen of ours? Why art thou dragged a prisoner upon this pleasure party? Knowest thou that we are strictly charged that if thou dost escape our lives shall pay the price?"

"Ay, in sore trouble, friend," I answered; "ask me no more."

"Then, being of the age thou art, there's a woman in it--that I swear--and, perchance, though I am rough and foolish, I might make a guess. Look thou, lad, what sayest thou? I am weary of this service of Cleopatra and this hot land of deserts and of luxury, that sap a man's strength and drain his pocket; and so are others whom I know of. What sayest thou: let's take one of these unwieldy vessels and away to the North? I'll lead thee to a better land than Egypt--a land of lake and mountain, and great forests of sweet-scented pine; ay, and find thee a

girl fit to mate with--my own niece--a girl strong and tall, with wide blue eyes and long fair hair, and arms that could crack thy ribs were she of a mind to hug thee! Come, what sayest thou? Put away the past, and away for the bonny North, and be a son to me."

For a moment I thought, and then sadly shook my head; for though I was sorely tempted to be gone, I knew that my fate lay in Egypt, and I might not fly my fate.

"It may not be, Brennus," I answered. "Fain would I that it might be, but I am bound by a chain of destiny which I cannot break, and in the land of Egypt I must live and die."

"As thou wilt, lad," said the old warrior. "I should have dearly loved to marry thee among my people, and make a son of thee. At the least, remember that while I am here thou hast Brennus for a friend. And one thing more; beware of that beauteous Queen of thine, for, by Taranis, perhaps an hour may come when she will hold that thou knowest too much, and then----" and he drew his hand across his throat. "And now good night; a cup of wine, then to sleep, for to-morrow the foolery----"

[Here several lengths of the second roll of papyrus are so broken as to be undecipherable. They seem to have been descriptive of Cleopatra's voyage up the Cydnus to the city of Tarsus.]

"And--[the writing continues]--to those who could take joy in such things, the sight must, indeed, have been a gallant one. For the stern

of our galley was covered with sheets of beaten gold, the sails were of the scarlet of Tyre, and the oars of silver touched the water to a measure of music. And there, in the centre of the vessel, beneath an awning ablaze with gold embroidery, lay Cleopatra, attired as the Roman Venus (and surely Venus was not more fair!), in thin robes of whitest silk, bound in beneath her breast with a golden girdle delicately graven over with scenes of love. All about her were little rosy boys, chosen for their beauty, and clad in naught save downy wings strapped upon their shoulders, and on their backs Cupid's bow and quiver, who fanned her with fans of plumes. Upon the vessel's decks, handling the cordage, that was of silken web, and softly singing to the sound of harps and the beat of oars, were no rough sailors, but women lovely to behold, some robed as Graces and some as Nereids--that is, scarce robed at all, except in their scented hair. And behind the couch, with drawn sword, stood Brennus, in splendid armour and winged helm of gold; and by him others--I among them--in garments richly worked, and knew that I was indeed a slave! On the high poop also burned censers filled with costliest incense, of which the fragrant steam hung in little clouds about our wake."

Thus, as in a dream of luxury, followed by many ships, we glided on towards the wooded slopes of Taurus, at whose foot lay that ancient city Tarshish. And ever as we came the people gathered on the banks and ran before us, shouting: "Venus is risen from the sea! Venus hath come to visit Bacchus!" We drew near to the city, and all its people--everyone who could walk or be carried--crowded down in thousands to the docks, and with them came the whole army of Antony, so that at length the

Triumvir was left alone upon the judgment seat.

Dellius, the false-tongued, came also, fawning and bowing, and in the name of Antony gave the "Queen of Beauty" greeting, bidding her to a feast that Antony had made ready. But she made high answer, and said, "Forsooth, it is Antony who should wait on us; not we on Antony. Bid the noble Antony to our poor table this night--else we dine alone."

Dellius went, bowing to the ground; the feast was made ready; and then at last I set eyes on Antony. He came clad in purple robes, a great man and beautiful to see, set in the stout prime of life, with bright eyes of blue, and curling hair, and features cut sharply as a Grecian gem. For he was great of form and royal of mien, and with an open countenance on which his thoughts were so clearly written that all might read them; only the weakness of the mouth belied the power of the brow. He came attended by his generals, and when he reached the couch where Cleopatra lay he stood astonished, gazing on her with wide-opened eyes. She, too, gazed on him earnestly; I saw the red blood run up beneath her skin, and a great pang of jealousy seized upon my heart. And Charmion, who saw all beneath her downcast eyes, saw this also and smiled. But Cleopatra spoke no word, only she stretched out her white hand for him to kiss; and he, saying no word, took her hand and kissed it.

"Behold, noble Antony!" she said at last in her voice of music, "thou hast called me, and I am come."

"Venus has come," he answered in his deep notes, and still holding his

eyes fixed upon her face. "I called a woman--a Goddess hath risen from the deep!"

"To find a God to greet her on the land," she laughed with ready wit.

"Well, a truce to compliments, for being on the earth even Venus is ahungered. Noble Antony, thy hand."

The trumpets blared, and through the bowing crowd Cleopatra, followed by her train, passed hand in hand with Antony to the feast.

[Here there is another break in the papyrus.]