

## CHAPTER XVI

### OF THE PLAN OF CHARMION; OF THE CONFESSION OF CHARMION; AND OF THE ANSWER OF HARMACHIS

For some while I sat with bowed head, and the last bitterness of shame sank into my soul. This, then, was the end. For this I had betrayed my oaths; for this I had told the secret of the pyramid; for this I had lost my Crown, my Honour, and, perchance, my hope of Heaven! Could there be another man in the wide world so steeped in sorrow as I was that night? Surely not one! Where should I turn? What could I do? And even through the tempest of my torn heart the bitter voice of jealousy called aloud. For I loved this woman, to whom I had given all; and she at this moment--she was----Ah! I could not bear to think of it; and in my utter agony, my heart burst in a river of tears such as are terrible to weep!

Then Charmion drew near me, and I saw that she, too, was weeping.

"Weep not, Harmachis!" she sobbed, kneeling at my side. "I cannot endure to see thee weep. Oh! why wouldst thou not be warned? Then hadst thou been great and happy, and not as now. Listen, Harmachis! Thou didst hear what that false and tigerish woman said--to-morrow she hands thee over to the murderers!"

"It is well," I gasped.

"Nay: it is not well. Harmachis, give her not this last triumph over

thee. Thou hast lost all save life: but while life remains, hope remains also, and with hope the chance of vengeance."

"Ah!" I said, starting from my seat. "I had not thought of that. Ay--the chance of vengeance! It would be sweet to be avenged!"

"It would be sweet, Harmachis, and yet this--Vengeance is an arrow that in falling oft pierces him who shot it. Myself--I know it," and she sighed. "But a truce to talk and grief. There will be time for us twain to grieve, if not to talk, in all the heavy coming years. Thou must fly--before the coming of the light must thou fly. Here is a plan. To-morrow, ere the dawn, a galley that but yesterday came from Alexandria, bearing fruit and stores, sails thither again, and its captain is known to me, but to thee he is not known. Now, I will find thee the garb of a Syrian merchant, and cloak thee, as I know how, and furnish thee with a letter to the captain of the galley. He shall give thee passage to Alexandria; for to him thou wilt seem but as a merchant going on the business of thy trade. Brennus is officer of the guard to-night, and Brennus is a friend to me and thee. Perhaps he will guess somewhat; or, perhaps, he will not guess; at the least, the Syrian merchant shall safely pass the lines. What sayest thou?"

"It is well," I answered wearily; "little do I reckon the issue."

"Rest thou, then, here, Harmachis, while I make these matters ready; and, Harmachis, grieve not overmuch; there are others who should grieve more heavily than thou." And she went, leaving me alone with my agony

which rent me like a torture-bed. Had it not been for that fierce desire of vengeance which from time to time flashed across my tormented mind as the lightning over a midnight sea, methinks my reason had left me in that dark hour. At length I heard her footstep at the door, and she entered, breathing heavily, for she bore a sack of clothing in her arms.

"It is well," she said: "here is the garb with spare linen, and writing-tablets, and all things needful. I have seen Brennus also, and told him that a Syrian merchant would pass the guard an hour before the dawn. And though he made pretence of sleep, I think he understood, for he answered, yawning, that if they but had the pass-word, 'Antony,' fifty Syrian merchants might go through about their lawful business. And here is the letter to the captain--thou canst not mistake the galley, for she is moored along to the right--a small galley, painted black, as thou dost enter on the great quay, and, moreover, the sailors make ready for sailing. Now I will wait here without, while thou dost put off the livery of thy service and array thyself."

When she was gone I tore off my gorgeous garments and spat upon them and trod them on the ground. Then I put on the modest robe of a merchant, and bound the tablets round me, on my feet the sandals of untanned hide, and at my waist the knife. When it was done Charmion entered once again and looked on me.

"Too much art thou still the royal Harmachis," she said; "see, it must be changed."

Then she took scissors from her tiring-table, and, bidding me be seated, she cut off my locks, clipping the hair close to the head. Next she found stains of such sort as women use to make dark the eyes, and mixed them cunningly, rubbing the stuff on my face and hands and on the white mark in my hair where the sword of Brennus had bitten to the bone.

"Now thou art changed--somewhat for the worse, Harmachis," she said, with a dreary laugh, "scarce myself should I know thee. Stay, there is one more thing," and, going to a chest of garments, she drew thence a heavy bag of gold.

"Take thou this," she said; "thou wilt have need of money."

"I cannot take thy gold, Charmion."

"Yes, take it. It was Sepa who gave it to me for the furtherance of our cause, and therefore it is fitting that thou shouldst spend it. Moreover, if I want money, doubtless Antony, who is henceforth my master, will give me more; he is much beholden to me, and this he knows well. There, waste not the precious time in haggling o'er the pelf--not yet art thou all a merchant, Harmachis;" and, without more words, she thrust the pieces into the leather bag that hung across my shoulders. Then she made fast the sack containing the spare garments, and, so womanly thoughtful was she, placed in it an alabaster jar of pigment, with which I might stain my countenance afresh, and, taking the broided robes of my office that I had cast off, hid them in the secret passage. And so at last all was made ready.

"Is it time that I should go," I asked.

"Not yet a while. Be patient, Harmachis, for but one little hour more must thou endure my presence, and then, perchance, farewell for ever."

I made a gesture signifying that this was no time for sharp words.

"Forgive me my quick tongue," she said; "but from a salt spring bitter waters well. Be seated, Harmachis; I have heavier words to speak to thee before thou goest."

"Say on," I answered; "words, however heavy, can move me no more."

She stood before me with folded hands, and the lamp-light shone upon her beautiful face. I noticed idly how great was its pallor and how wide and dark were the rings about the deep black eyes. Twice she lifted her white face and strove to speak, twice her voice failed her; and when at last it came it was in a hoarse whisper.

"I cannot let thee go," she said--"I cannot let thee go unwitting of the truth.

"Harmachis, 'twas I who did betray thee!"

I sprang to my feet, an oath upon my lips; but she caught me by the hand.

"Oh, be seated," she said--"be seated and hear me; then, when thou hast heart, do to me as thou wilt. Listen. From that evil moment when, in the presence of thy uncle Sepa, for the second time I set eyes upon thy face, I loved thee--how much, thou canst little guess. Think upon thine own love for Cleopatra, and double it, and double it again, and perchance thou mayst come near to my love's mighty sum. I loved thee, day by day I loved thee more, till in thee and for thee alone I seemed to live. But thou wast cold--thou wast worse than cold! thou didst deal with me not as a breathing woman, but rather as the instrument to an end--as a tool with which to grave thy fortunes. And then I saw--yes, long before thou knewest it thyself--thy heart's tide was setting strong towards that ruinous shore whereon to-day thy life is broken. And at last that night came, that dreadful night when, hid within the chamber, I saw thee cast my kerchief to the winds, and with sweet words cherish my royal Rival's gift. Then--oh, thou knowest--in my pain I betrayed the secret that thou wouldst not see, and thou didst make a mock of me, Harmachis! Oh! the shame of it--thou in thy foolishness didst make a mock of me! I went thence, and within me were rising all the torments which can tear a woman's heart, for now I was sure that thou didst love Cleopatra! Ay, and so mad was I, even that night I was minded to betray thee: but I thought--not yet, not yet; to-morrow he may soften. Then came the morrow, and all was ready for the bursting of the great plot that should make thee Pharaoh. And I too came--thou dost remember--and again thou didst put me away when I spake to thee in parables, as something of little worth--as a thing too small to claim a moment's weighty thought. And, knowing that this was because--though thou knewest

it not--thou didst love Cleopatra, whom now thou must straightway slay, I grew mad, and a wicked Spirit entered into me, possessing me utterly, so that I was myself no longer, nor could control myself. And because thou hadst scorned me, I did this, to my everlasting shame and sorrow!--I passed into Cleopatra's presence and betrayed thee and those with thee, and our holy cause, saying that I had found a writing which thou hadst let fall and read all this therein."

I gasped and sat silent; and gazing sadly at me she went on:

"When she understood how great was the plot, and how deep its roots, Cleopatra was much troubled; and, at first, she would have fled to Sais or taken ship and run for Cyprus, but I showed her that the ways were barred. Then she said she would cause thee to be slain, there, in the chamber, and I left her so believing; for, at that hour, I was glad that thou shouldst be slain--ay, even if I wept out my heart upon thy grave, Harmachis. But what said I just now?--Vengeance is an arrow that oft falls on him who looses it. So it was with me; for between my going and thy coming Cleopatra hatched a deeper plan. She feared that to slay thee would only be to light a fiercer fire of revolt; but she saw that to bind thee to her, and, having left men awhile in doubt, to show thee faithless, would strike the imminent danger at its roots and wither it. This plot once formed, being great, she dared its doubtful issue, and--need I go on? Thou knowest, Harmachis, how she won; and thus the shaft of vengeance that I loosed fell upon my own head. For on the morrow I knew that I had sinned for naught, that the burden of my betrayal had been laid on the wretched Paulus, and that I had but ruined

the cause to which I was sworn and given the man I loved to the arms of wanton Egypt."

She bowed her head awhile, and then, as I spoke not, once more went on:

"Let all my sin be told, Harmachis, and then let justice come. See now, this thing happened. Half did Cleopatra learn to love thee, and deep in her heart she bethought her of taking thee to wedded husband. For the sake of this half love of hers she spared the lives of those in the plot whom she had meshed, bethinking her that if she wedded thee she might use them and thee to draw the heart of Egypt, which loves not her nor any Ptolemy. And then, once again she entrapped thee, and in thy folly thou didst betray to her the secret of the hidden wealth of Egypt, which to-day she squanders to delight the luxurious Antony; and, of a truth, at that time she purposed to make good her oath and marry thee. But on the very morn when Dellius came for answer she sent for me, and telling me all--for my wit, above any, she holds at price--demanded of me my judgment whether she should defy Antony and wed thee, or whether she should put the thought away and come to Antony. And I--now mark thou all my sin--I, in my bitter jealousy, rather than I would see her thy wedded wife and thou her loving lord, counselled her most strictly that she should come to Antony, well knowing--for I had had speech with Dellius--that if she came, this weak Antony would fall like a ripe fruit at her feet, as, indeed, he has fallen. And but now I have shown thee the issue of the scheme. Antony loves Cleopatra and Cleopatra loves Antony, and thou art robbed, and matters have gone well for me, who of all women on the earth to-night am the wretchedest by far. For when I

saw how thy heart broke but now, my heart seemed to break with thine, and I could no longer bear the burden of my evil deeds, but knew that I must tell them and take my punishment.

"And now, Harmachis, I have no more to say; save that I thank thee for thy courtesy in hearkening, and this one thing I add. Driven by my great love I have sinned against thee unto death! I have ruined thee, I have ruined Khem, and myself also I have ruined! Let death reward me! Slay thou me, Harmachis--I will gladly die upon thy sword; ay, and kiss its blade! Slay thou me and go; for if thou slayest me not, myself I will surely slay!" And she threw herself upon her knees, lifting her fair breast toward me, that I might smite her with my dagger. And, in my bitter fury, I was minded to strike; for, above all, I thought how, when I was fallen, this woman, who herself was my cause of shame, had scourged me with her whip of scorn. But it is hard to slay a fair woman; and, even as I lifted my hand to strike, I remembered that she had now twice saved my life.

"Woman! thou shameless woman!" I said, "arise! I slay thee not! Who am I, that I should judge thy crime, that, with mine own, doth overtop all earthly judgment?"

"Slay me, Harmachis!" she moaned; "slay me, or I slay myself! My burden is too great for me to bear! Be not so deadly calm! Curse me, and slay!"

"What was it that thou didst say to me just now, Charmion--that as I had sown so I must reap? It is not lawful that thou shouldst slay thyself;

it is not lawful that I, thine equal in sin, should slay thee because through thee I sinned. As thou hast sown, Charmion, so must thou also reap. Base woman! whose cruel jealousy has brought all these woes on me and Egypt, live--live on, and from year to year pluck the bitter fruit of crime! Haunted be thy sleep by visions of thy outraged Gods, whose vengeance awaits thee and me in their dim Amenti! Haunted be thy days by memories of that man whom thy fierce love brought to shame and ruin, and by the sight of Khem a prey to the insatiate Cleopatra and a slave to Roman Antony."

"Oh, speak not thus, Harmachis! Thy words are sharper than any sword; and more surely, if more slowly, shall they slay! Listen, Harmachis," and she grasped my robe: "when thou wast great, and all power lay within thy grasp, thou didst reject me. Wilt reject me now that Cleopatra hast cast thee from her--now that thou art poor and shamed and with no pillow to thy head? Still am I fair, and still I worship thee. Let me fly with thee, and make atonement for my lifelong love. Or, if this be too great a thing to ask, let me be but as thy sister and thy servant--thy very slave, so that I may still look upon thy face, and share thy trouble and minister to thee. O Harmachis, let me but come and I will brave all things and endure all things, and nothing but Death himself shall stay me from thy side. For I do believe that the love that sank me to so low a depth, dragging thee with me, can yet lift me to an equal height, and thee with me!"

"Wouldst tempt me to fresh sin, woman? And dost thou think, Charmion, that in some hovel where I must hide, I could bear, day by day, to look

upon thy fair face, and seeing, remember that those lips betrayed me?  
Not thus easily shalt thou atone! This I know even now: many and heavy  
shall be thy lonely days of penance! Perchance that hour of vengeance  
yet may come, and perchance thou shalt live to play thy part in it. Thou  
must still abide in the Court of Cleopatra; and, while thou art there,  
if I yet live, I will from time to time find means to give thee tidings.  
Perhaps a day may dawn when once more I shall need thy service. Now,  
swear that, in this event, thou wilt not fail me a second time."

"I swear, Harmachis!--I swear! May everlasting torments, too hideous to  
be dreamed--more hideous, even, by far, than those that wring me now--be  
my portion if I fail thee in one jot or tittle--ay, though I wait a  
lifetime for thy word!"

"It is well; see that thou keep the oath--not twice may we betray. I go  
to work out my fate; abide thou to work out thine. Perchance our divers  
threads will once more mingle ere the web be spun. Charmion, who unasked  
didst love me--and who, prompted by that gentle love of thine, didst  
betray and ruin me--fare thee well!"

She gazed wildly upon my face--she stretched out her arms as though to  
clasp me; then, in the agony of her despair, she cast herself at length  
and grovelled upon the ground.

I took up the sack of clothing and the staff and gained the door, and,  
as I passed it, I threw one last glance upon her. There she lay, with  
arms outstretched--more white than her white robes--her dark hair

streaming about her, and her fair brows hidden in the dust.

And thus I left her, nor did I again set my eyes upon her till nine long  
years had come and gone.

[Here ends the second and largest roll of papyrus.]