

CHAPTER II

OF THE LAST MISERY OF HARMACHIS; OF THE CALLING DOWN OF THE HOLY
ISIS BY

THE WORD OF FEAR; OF THE PROMISE OF ISIS; OF THE COMING OF ATOUA,
AND OF

THE WORDS OF ATOUA

I crouched upon the floor gazing at the dead body of my father, who had lived to curse me, the utterly accursed, while the darkness crept and gathered round us, till at length the dead and I were alone in the black silence. Oh, how tell the misery of that hour! Imagination cannot dream it, nor words paint it forth. Once more in my wretchedness I bethought me of death. A knife was at my girdle, with which I might cut the thread of sorrow and set my spirit free. Free? ay, free to fly and face the last vengeance of the Holy Gods! Alas! and alas! I did not dare to die. Better the earth with all its woes than the quick approach of those unimagined terrors that, hovering in dim Amenti, wait the advent of the fallen.

I grovelled on the ground and wept tears of agony for the lost unchanging past--wept till I could weep no more; but no answer came from the silence--no answer but the echoes of my grief. Not a ray of hope! My soul wandered in a darkness more utter than that which was about me--I was forsaken of the Gods and cast out of men. Terror took hold upon me crouching in that lonely place hard by the majesty of the awful Dead. I rose to fly. How could I fly in this gloom?--And where should I fly who

had no place of refuge? Once more I crouched down, and the great fear grew on me till the cold sweat ran from my brow and my soul was faint within me. Then, in my last despair, I prayed aloud to Isis, to whom I had not dared to pray for many days.

"O Isis! Holy Mother!" I cried; "put away Thy wrath, and of Thine infinite pity, O Thou all-pitiful, hearken to the voice of the anguish of him who was Thy son and servant, but who by sin hath fallen from the vision of Thy love. O throned Glory, who, being in all things, hast of all things understanding and of all griefs knowledge, cast the weight of Thy mercy against the scale of my evil-doing, and make the balance equal. Look down upon my woe, and measure it; count up the sum of my repentance and take Thou note of the flood of sorrow that sweeps my soul away. O Thou Holy, whom it was given to me to look upon face to face, by that dread hour of commune I summon Thee; I summon Thee by the mystic word. Come, then, in mercy, to save me; or, in anger, to make an end of that which can no more be borne."

And, rising from my knees, I stretched out my arms and dared to cry aloud the Word of Fear, to use which unworthily is death.

Swiftly the answer came. For in the silence I heard the sound of the shaken sistra heralding the coming of the Glory. Then, at the far end of the chamber, grew the semblance of the horned moon, gleaming faintly in the darkness, and betwixt the golden horns rested a small dark cloud, in and out of which the fiery serpent climbed.

My knees waxed loose in the presence of the Glory, and I sank down before it.

Then spake the small, sweet Voice within the cloud:

"Harmachis, who wast my servant and my son, I have heard thy prayer, and the summons that thou hast dared to utter, which on the lips of one with whom I have communed, hath power to draw Me from the Uttermost. No more, Harmachis, may we be one in the bond of Love Divine, for thou hast put Me away of thine own act. Therefore, after this long silence I come, Harmachis, clothed in terrors, and, perchance, ready for vengeance, for not lightly can Isis be drawn from the halls of Her Divinity."

"Smite, Goddess!" I answered. "Smite, and give me over to those who wreak Thy vengeance; for I can no longer bear the burden of my woe!"

"And if thou canst not bear thy burden here, upon this upper earth," came the soft reply, "how then shalt thou bear the greater burden that shall be laid upon thee there, coming defiled and yet unpurified into my dim realm of Death, that is Life and Change unending? Nay, Harmachis, I smite thee not, for not all am I wroth that thou hast dared to utter the awful Word which calls Me down to thee. Hearken, Harmachis; I praise not, and I reproach not, for I am the Minister of Reward and Punishment and the Executrix of Decrees; and if I give, I give in silence; and if I smite, in silence do I smite. Therefore, I will add naught to thy burden by the weight of heavy words, though through thee it has come to pass that soon shall Isis, the Mother-Mystery, be but a memory in Egypt. Thou

hast sinned, and heavy shall be thy punishment, as I did warn thee, both in the flesh and in my kingdom of Amenti. But I told thee that there is a road of repentance, and surely thy feet are set thereon, and therein must thou walk with a humble heart, eating of the bread of bitterness, till such time as thy doom be measured."

"Have I, then, no hope, O holy?"

"That which is done, Harmachis, is done, nor can its issues be altered. Khem shall no more be free till all its temples are as the desert dust; strange Peoples shall, from age to age, hold her hostage and in bonds; new Religions shall arise and wither within the shadow of her pyramids, for to every World, Race, and Age the countenances of the Gods are changed. This is the tree that shall spring from thy seed of sin, Harmachis, and from the sin of those who tempted thee!"

"Alas! I am undone!" I cried.

"Yea, thou art undone; and yet shall this be given to thee: thy Destroyer thou shalt destroy--for so, in the purpose of my justice, it is ordained. When the sign comes to thee, arise, go to Cleopatra, and in such manner as I shall put into thy heart do Heaven's vengeance upon her! And now for thyself one word, for thou hast put Me from thee, Harmachis, and no more shall I come face to face with thee till, cycles hence, the last fruit of thy sin hath ceased to be upon this earth! Yet, through the vastness of the unnumbered years, remember thou this: the Love Divine is Love Eternal, which cannot be extinguished, though it be

everlastingly estranged. Repent, my son; repent and do well while there is yet time, that at the dim end of ages thou mayest once more be gathered unto Me. Still, Harmachis, though thou seest Me not; still, when the very name by which thou knowest Me has become a meaningless mystery to those who shall be after thee; still I, whose hours are eternal--I, who have watched Universes wither, wane, and, beneath the breath of Time, melt into nothingness; again to gather, and, re-born, thread the maze of space--still, I say, I shall companion thee. Wherever thou goest, in whatever form of life thou livest, there I shall be! Art thou wafted to the farthest star, art thou buried in Amenti's lowest deep--in lives, in deaths, in sleeps, in wakings, in remembrances, in oblivions, in all the fevers of the outer Life, in all the changes of the Spirit--still, if thou wilt but atone and forget Me no more, I shall be with thee, waiting thine hour of redemption. For this is the nature of Love Divine, wherewith it loves that which partakes of its divinity and by the holy tie hath once been bound to it. Judge then, Harmachis: was it well to put this from thee to win the dust of earthly woman? And, now, dare not again to utter the Word of Power till these things are done! Harmachis, for this season, fare thee well!"

As the last note of the sweet Voice died away, the fiery snake climbed into the heart of the cloud. Now the cloud rolled from the horns of light, and was gathered into the blackness. The vision of the crescent moon grew dim and vanished. Then, as the Goddess passed, once more came the faint and dreadful music of the shaken sistra, and all was still.

I hid my face in my robe, and even then, though my outstretched hand could touch the chill corpse of that father who had died cursing me, I felt hope come back into my heart, knowing that I was not altogether lost nor utterly rejected of Her whom I had forsaken, but whom I yet loved. And then weariness overpowered me, and I slept.

I woke, the faint lights of dawn were creeping from the opening in the roof. Ghastly they lay upon the shadowy sculptured walls and ghastly upon the dead face and white beard of my father, the gathered to Osiris. I started up, remembering all things, and wondering in my heart what I should do, and as I rose I heard a faint footfall creeping down the passage of the names of the Pharaohs.

"La! La! La!" mumbled a voice that I knew for the voice of the old wife, Atoua. "Why, 'tis dark as the House of the Dead! The Holy Ones who built this Temple loved not the blessed sun, however much they worshipped him. Now, where's the curtain?"

Presently it was drawn, and Atoua entered, a stick in one hand and a basket in the other. Her face was somewhat more wrinkled, and her scanty locks were somewhat whiter than aforesaid, but for the rest she was as she had ever been. She stood and peered around with her sharp black eyes, for as yet she could see nothing because of the shadows.

"Now where is he?" she muttered. "Osiris--glory to His name--send that he has not wandered in the night, and he blind! Alack! that I could not return before the dark. Alack! and alack! what times have we fallen on, when the Holy High Priest and the Governor, by descent, of Abouthis, is left with one aged crone to minister to his infirmity! O Harmachis, my poor boy, thou hast laid trouble at our doors! Why, what's this? Surely he sleeps not, there upon the ground?--'twill be his death! Prince! Holy Father! Amenemhat! awake, arise!" and she hobbled towards the corpse. "Why, how is it! By Him who sleeps, he's dead! untended and alone--dead! dead!" and she sent her long wail of grief ringing up the sculptured walls.

"Hush! woman, be still!" I said, gliding from the shadows.

"Oh, what art thou?" she cried, casting down her basket. "Wicked man, hast thou murdered this Holy One, the only Holy One in Egypt? Surely the curse will fall on thee, for though the Gods do seem to have forsaken us now in our hour of trial, yet is their arm long, and certainly they will be avenged on him who hath slain their anointed!"

"Look on me, Atoua," I cried.

"Look! ay, I look--thou wicked wanderer who hast dared this cruel deed! Harmachis is a traitor and lost far away, and Amenemhat his holy father is murdered, and now I'm all alone without kith or kin. I gave them for him. I gave them for Harmachis, the traitor! Come, slay me also, thou wicked one!"

I took a step toward her, and she, thinking that I was about to smite her, cried out in fear:

"Nay, good Sir, spare me! Eighty and six, by the Holy Ones, eighty and six, come next flood of Nile, and yet I would not die, though Osiris is merciful to the old who served him! Come no nearer--help! help!"

"Thou fool, be silent," I said; "knowest thou me not?"

"Know thee? Can I know every wandering boatman to whom Sebek grants to earn a livelihood till Typhon claims his own? And yet--why, 'tis strange--that changed countenance!--that scar!--that stumbling gait! It is thou, Harmachis!--'tis thou, O my boy! Art come back to glad mine old eyes? I hoped thee dead! Let me kiss thee?--nay, I forget. Harmachis is a traitor, ay, and a murderer! Here lies the holy Amenemhat, murdered by the traitor, Harmachis! Get thee gone! I'll have none of traitors and of parricides! Get thee to thy wanton!--it is not thou whom I did nurse."

"Peace! woman; peace! I slew not my father--he died, alas!--he died even in my arms."

"Ay, surely, and cursing thee, Harmachis! Thou hast given death to him who gave thee life! La! la! I am old, and I've seen many a trouble; but this is the heaviest of them all! I never liked the looks of mummies; but I would I were one this hour! Get thee gone, I pray thee!"

"Old nurse, reproach me not! Have I not enough to bear?"

"Ah! yes, yes!--I did forget! Well; and what is thy sin? A woman was thy bane, as women have been to those before thee, and shall be to those after thee. And what a woman! La! la! I saw her, a beauty such as never was--an arrow pointed by the evil Gods for destruction! And thou, a young man bred as a priest--an ill training--a very ill training!

'Twas no fair match. Who can wonder that she mastered thee? Come, Harmachis; let me kiss thee! It is not for a woman to be hard on a man because he loved our sex too much. Why, that is but nature; and Nature knows her business, else she had made us otherwise. But here is an evil case. Knowest thou that this Macedonian Queen of thine hath seized the temple lands and revenues, and driven away the priests--all, save the holy Amenemhat, who lies here, and whom she left, I know not why; ay, and caused the worship of the Gods to cease within these walls. Well, he's gone!--he's gone! and indeed he is better with Osiris, for his life was a sore burden to him. And hark thou, Harmachis: he hath not left thee empty-handed; for, so soon as the plot failed, he gathered all his wealth, and it is large, and hid it--where, I can show thee--and it is thine by right of descent."

"Talk not to me of wealth, Atoua. Where shall I go and how shall I hide my shame?"

"Ah! true, true; here mayst thou not abide, for if they found thee, surely they would put thee to the dreadful death--ay, to the death by the waxen cloth. Nay, I will hide thee, and, when the funeral rites of

the holy Amenemhat have been performed, we will fly hence, and cover us from the eyes of men till these sorrows are forgotten. La! la! it is a sad world, and full of trouble as the Nile mud is full of beetles. Come, Harmachis, come."