

## CHAPTER IV

OF THE MEETING OF CHARMION WITH THE LEARNED OLYMPUS; OF HER SPEECH WITH HIM; OF THE COMING OF OLYMPUS INTO THE PRESENCE OF CLEOPATRA; AND OF THE COMMANDS OF CLEOPATRA.

Clad in my plain black robe, I sat in the guest-chamber of the house that had been made ready for me. I sat in a carven lion-footed chair, and looked upon the swinging lamps of scented oil, the pictured tapestries, the rich Syrian rugs--and, amidst all this luxury, bethought me of that tomb of the Harpers which is at Tápé, and of the nine long years of dark loneliness and preparation. I sat; and crouched upon a rug near to the door, lay the aged Atoua. Her hair was white as snow, and shrivelled with age was the wrinkled countenance of the woman who, when all deserted me, had yet clung to me, in her great love forgetting my great sins. Nine years! nine long years! and now, once again, I set my foot in Alexandria! Once again in the appointed circle of things I came forth from the solitude of preparation to be a fate to Cleopatra; and this second time I came not forth to fail.

And yet how changed the circumstance! I was out of the story: my part now was but the part of the sword in the hands of Justice; I might no more hope to make Egypt free and great and sit upon my lawful throne. Khem was lost, and lost was I, Harmachis. In the rush and turmoil of events, the great plot of which I had been the pivot was covered up and forgotten; scarce a memory of it remained. The curtain of dark night was closing in upon the history of my ancient Race; its very Gods were

tottering to their fall; I could already, in the spirit, hear the shriek of the Roman eagles as they flapped their wings above the furthest banks of Sihor.

Presently I roused myself and bade Atoua go seek a mirror and bring it to me, that I might look therein.

And I saw this: a face shrunken and pallid, on which no smile came; great eyes grown wan with gazing into darkness looking out beneath the shaven head, emptily, as the hollow eye-pits of a skull; a wizened halting form wasted by abstinence, sorrow, and prayer; a long wild beard of iron grey; thin blue-veined hands that ever trembled like a leaf; bowed shoulders and lessened limbs. Time and grief had done their work indeed; scarce could I think myself the same as when, the royal Harmachis--in all the splendour of my strength and youthful beauty--I first had looked upon the woman's loveliness that did destroy me. And yet within me burned the same fire as of yore; yet I was not changed, for time and grief have no power to alter the immortal spirit of man. Seasons may come and go; Hope, like a bird, may fly away; Passion may break its wings against the iron bars of Fate; Illusions may crumble as the cloudy towers of sunset flame; Faith, as running water, may slip from beneath our feet; Solitude may stretch itself around us like the measureless desert sand; Old Age may creep as the gathering night over our bowed heads grown hoary in their shame--yea, bound to Fortune's wheel, we may taste of every turn of chance--now rule as Kings, now serve as Slaves; now love, now hate; now prosper, and now perish. But still, through all, we are the same; for this is the marvel of Identity.

And as I sat and thought these things in bitterness of heart, there came a knocking at the door.

"Open, Atoua!" I said.

She rose and did my bidding; and a woman entered, clad in Grecian robes. It was Charmion, still beautiful as of old, but sad faced now and very sweet to see, with a patient fire slumbering in her downcast eyes.

She entered unattended; and, speaking no word, the old wife pointed to where I sat, and went.

"Old man," she said, addressing me, "lead me to the learned Olympus. I come upon the Queen's business."

I rose, and, lifting my head, looked upon her.

She gazed, and gave a little cry.

"Surely," she whispered, glancing round, "surely thou art not that----"  
And she paused.

"That Harmachis whom once thy foolish heart did love, O Charmion? Yes, I am he and what thou seest, most fair lady. Yet is Harmachis dead

whom thou didst love; but Olympus, the skilled Egyptian, waits upon thy words!"

"Cease!" she said, "and of the past but one word, and then--why, let it lie. Not well, with all thy wisdom, canst thou know a true woman's heart, if thou dost believe, Harmachis, that it can change with the changes of the outer form, for then assuredly could no love follow its beloved to that last place of change--the Grave. Know thou, learned Physician, I am of that sort who, loving once, love always, and being not beloved again, go virgin to the death."

She ceased, and having naught to say, I bowed my head in answer. Yet though I said nothing and though this woman's passionate folly had been the cause of all our ruin, to speak truth, in secret I was thankful to her who, wooed of all and living in this shameless Court, had still through the long years poured out her unreturned love upon an outcast, and who, when that poor broken slave of Fortune came back in such unlovely guise, held him yet dear at heart. For what man is there who does not prize that gift most rare and beautiful, that one perfect thing which no gold can buy--a woman's unfeigned love?

"I thank thee that thou dost not answer," she said; "for the bitter words which thou didst pour upon me in those days that long are dead, and far away in Tarsus, have not lost their poisonous sting, and in my heart is no more place for the arrows of thy scorn, new venomed through thy solitary years. So let it be. Behold! I put it from me, that wild passion of my soul," and she looked up and stretched out her hands as

though to press some unseen presence back, "I put it from me--though forget it I may not! There, 'tis done, Harmachis; no more shall my love trouble thee. Enough for me that once more my eyes behold thee, before sleep seals thee from their sight. Dost remember how, when I would have died by thy dear hand, thou wouldst not slay, but didst bid me live to pluck the bitter fruit of crime, and be accursed by visions of the evil I had wrought and memories of thee whom I have ruined?"

"Ay, Charmion, I remember well."

"Surely the cup of punishment has been filled. Oh! couldst thou see into the record of my heart, and read in it the suffering that I have borne--borne with a smiling face--thy justice would be satisfied indeed!"

"And yet, if report be true, Charmion, thou art the first of all the Court, and therein the most powerful and beloved. Does not Octavianus give it out that he makes war, not on Antony, nor even on his mistress, Cleopatra, but on Charmion and Iras?"

"Yes, Harmachis, and think that it has been to me thus, because of my oath to thee, to be forced to eat the bread and do the tasks of one whom so bitterly I hate!--one who robbed me of thee, and who, through the workings of my jealousy, brought me to be that which I am, brought thee to shame, and all Egypt to its ruin! Can jewels and riches and the flattery of princes and nobles bring happiness to such a one as I, who am more wretched than the meanest scullion wench? Oh, I have often wept

till I was blind; and then, when the hour came, I must arise and tire me, and, with a smile, go do the bidding of the Queen and that heavy Antony. May the Gods grant me to see them dead--ay, the twain of them!--then myself I shall be content to die! Thy lot has been hard, Harmachis; but at least thou have been free, and many is the time that I have envied thee the quiet of thy haunted cave."

"I do perceive, O Charmion, that thou art mindful of thy oaths; and it is well, for the hour of vengeance is at hand."

"I am mindful, and in all things I have worked for thee in secret--for thee, and for the utter ruin of Cleopatra and the Roman. I have fanned his passion and her jealousy, I have egged her on to wickedness and him to folly, and of all have I caused report to be brought to Cæsar. Listen! thus stands the matter. Thou knowest how went the fight at Actium. Thither went Cleopatra with her fleet, sorely against the will of Antony. But, as thou sentest me word, I entreated him for the Queen, vowing to him, with tears, that, did he leave her, she would die of grief; and he, poor slave, believed me. And so she went, and in the thick of the fight, for what cause I know not, though perchance thou knowest, Harmachis, she made signal to her squadron, and, putting about fled from the battle, sailing for Peloponnesus. And now, mark the end! When Antony saw that she was gone, he, in his madness, took a galley, and deserting all, followed hard after her, leaving his fleet to be shattered and sunk, and his great army in Greece, of twenty legions and twelve thousand horse, without a leader. And all this no man would believe, that Antony, the smitten of the Gods, had fallen so deep in

shame. Therefore for a while the army tarried, and but now to-night comes news brought by Canidius, the General, that, worn with doubt and being at length sure that Antony had deserted them, the whole of his great force has yielded to Cæsar."

"And where, then, is Antony?"

"He has built him a habitation on a little isle in the Great Harbour and named it Timonium; because, forsooth, like Timon, he cries out at the ingratitude of mankind that has forsaken him. And there he lies smitten by a fever of the mind, and thither thou must go at dawn, so wills the Queen, to cure him of his ills and draw him to her arms; for he will not see her, nor knows he yet the full measure of his woe. But first my bidding is to lead thee instantly to Cleopatra, who would ask thy counsel."

"I come," I answered, rising. "Lead thou on."

And so we passed the palace gates and along the Alabaster Hall, and presently once again I stood before the door of Cleopatra's chamber, and once again Charmion left me to warn her of my coming.

Presently she came back and beckoned to me. "Make strong thy heart," she whispered, "and see that thou dost not betray thyself, for still are the eyes of Cleopatra keen. Enter!"

"Keen, indeed, must they be to find Harmachis in the learned Olympus!

Had I not willed it, thyself thou hadst not known me, Charmion," I made answer.

Then I entered that remembered place and listened once more to the plash of the fountain, the song of the nightingale, and the murmur of the summer sea. With bowed head and halting gait I came, till at length I stood before the couch of Cleopatra--that same golden couch on which she had sat the night she overcame me. Then I gathered my strength, and looked up. There before me was Cleopatra, glorious as of old, but, oh! how changed since that night when I saw Antony clasp her in his arms at Tarsus! Her beauty still clothed her like a garment; the eyes were yet deep and unfathomable as the blue sea, the face still splendid in its great loveliness. And yet all was changed. Time, that could not touch her charms, had stamped upon her presence such a look of weary grief as may not be written. Passion, beating ever in that fierce heart of hers, had written his record on her brow, and in her eyes shone the sad lights of sorrow.

I bowed low before this most royal woman, who once had been my love and destruction, and yet knew me not.

She looked up wearily, and spoke in her slow, well remembered voice:

"So thou art come at length, Physician. How callest thou thyself?--Olympus? 'Tis a name of promise, for surely now that the Gods of Egypt have deserted us, we do need aid from Olympus. Well, thou hast a learned air, for learning does not with beauty. Strange, too, there is



that about thee which recalls what I know not. Say, Olympus, have we met before?"

"Never, O Queen, have my eyes fallen on thee in the body," I answered in a feigned voice. "Never till this hour, when I come forth from my solitude to do thy bidding and cure thee of thy ills!"

"Strange! and even in the voice--Pshaw! 'tis some memory that I cannot catch. In the body, thou sayest? then, perchance, I knew thee in a dream?"

"Ay, O Queen; we have met in dreams."

"Thou art a strange man, who talkest thus, but, if what I hear be true, one well learned; and, indeed, I mind me of thy counsel when thou didst bid me join my Lord Antony in Syria, and how things befell according to thy word. Skilled must thou be in the casting of nativities and in the law of auguries, of which these Alexandrian fools have little knowledge. Once I knew such another man, one Harmachis," and she sighed: "but he is long dead--as I would I were also!--and at times I sorrow for him."

She paused, while I sank my head upon my breast and stood silent.

"Interpret me this, Olympus. In the battle at that accursed Actium, just as the fight raged thickest and Victory began to smile upon us, a great terror seized my heart, and thick darkness seemed to fall before my eyes, while in my ears a voice, ay, the voice of that long dead

Harmachis, cried 'Fly! fly, or perish!' and I fled. But from my heart the terror leapt to the heart of Antony, and he followed after me, and thus was the battle lost. Say, then, what God brought this evil thing about?"

"Nay, O Queen," I answered, "it was no God--for wherein hast thou angered the Gods of Egypt? Hast thou robbed the temples of their Faith? Hast thou betrayed the trust of Egypt? Having done none of these things, how, then, can the Gods of Egypt be wroth with thee? Fear not, it was nothing but some natural vapour of the mind that overcame thy gentle soul, made sick with the sight and sound of slaughter; and as for the noble Antony, where thou didst go needs must that he should follow."

And as I spoke, Cleopatra turned white and trembled, glancing at me the while to find my meaning. But I well knew that the thing was of the avenging Gods, working through me, their instrument.

"Learned Olympus," she said, not answering my words; "my Lord Antony is sick and crazed with grief. Like some poor hunted slave he hides himself in yonder sea-girt Tower and shuns mankind--yes, he shuns even me, who, for his sake, endure so many woes. Now, this is my bidding to thee. To-morrow, at the coming of the light, do thou, led by Charmion, my waiting-lady, take boat and row thee to the Tower and there crave entry, saying that ye bring tidings from the army. Then he will cause you to be let in, and thou, Charmion, must break this heavy news that Canidius bears; for Canidius himself I dare not send. And when his grief is past, do thou, Olympus, soothe his fevered frame with thy draughts of value,

and his soul with honeyed words, and draw him back to me, and all will yet be well. Do thou this, and thou shalt have gifts more than thou canst count, for I am yet a Queen and yet can pay back those who serve my will."

"Fear not, O Queen," I answered, "this thing shall be done, and I ask no reward, who have come hither to do thy bidding to the end."

So I bowed and went and, summoning Atoua, made ready a certain potion.