

## CHAPTER VIII

OF THE LAST SUPPER OF CLEOPATRA; OF THE SONG OF CHARMION; OF THE DRINKING OF THE DRAUGHT OF DEATH; OF THE REVEALING OF HARMACHIS; OF THE SUMMONING OF THE SPIRITS BY HARMACHIS; AND OF THE DEATH OF CLEOPATRA

On the morrow Cleopatra, having sought leave of Cæsar, visited the tomb of Antony, crying that the Gods of Egypt had deserted her. And when she had kissed the coffin and covered it with lotus-flowers she came back, bathed, anointed herself, put on her most splendid robes, and, together with Iras, Charmion, and myself, she supped. Now as she supped her spirit flared up wildly, even as the sky lights up at sunset; and once more she laughed and sparkled as in bygone years, telling us tales of feasts which she and Antony had eaten of. Never, indeed, did I see her look more beautiful than on that last fatal night of vengeance. And thus her mind drew on to that supper at Tarsus when she drank the pearl.

"Strange," she said; "strange that at the last the mind of Antony should have turned back to that night among all the nights and to the saying of Harmachis. Charmion, dost thou remember Harmachis the Egyptian?"

"Surely, O Queen," she answered slowly.

"And who, then, was Harmachis?" I asked; for I would learn if she sorrowed o'er my memory.

"I will tell thee. It is a strange tale, and now that all is done it may

well be told. This Harmachis was of the ancient race of the Pharaohs, and, having, indeed, been crowned in secret at Abydus, was sent hither to Alexandria to carry out a great plot that had been formed against the rule of us royal Lagidæ. He came and gained entry to the palace as my astrologer, for he was very learned in all magic--much as thou art, Olympus--and a man beautiful to see. Now this was his plot--that he should slay me and be named Pharaoh. In truth it was a strong one, for he had many friends in Egypt, and I had few. And on that very night when he should carry out his purpose, yea, at the very hour, came Charmion yonder, and told the plot to me; saying that she had chanced upon its clue. But, in after days--though I have said little thereon to thee, Charmion--I misdoubted me much of that tale of thine; for, by the Gods! to this hour I believe that thou didst love Harmachis, and because he scorned thee thou didst betray him; and for that cause also hast all thy days remained a maid, which is a thing unnatural. Come, Charmion, tell us; for naught matters now at the end."

Charmion shivered and made answer: "It is true, O Queen; I also was of the plot, and because Harmachis scorned me I betrayed him; and because of my great love for him I have remained unwed." And she glanced up at me and caught my eyes, then let the modest lashes veil her own.

"So! I thought it. Strange are the ways of women! But little cause, methinks, had that Harmachis to thank thee for thy love. What sayest thou, Olympus? Ah, and so thou also wast a traitor, Charmion? How dangerous are the paths which Monarchs tread! Well, I forgive thee, for thou hast served me faithfully since that hour.

"But to my tale. Harmachis I dared not slay, lest his great party should rise in fury and cast me from the throne. And now mark the issue. Though he must murder me, in secret this Harmachis loved me, and something thereof I guessed. I had striven a little to draw him to me, for the sake of his beauty and his wit; and for the love of man Cleopatra never strove in vain. Therefore when, with the dagger in his robe, he came to slay me, I matched my charms against his will, and need I tell you, being man and woman, how I won? Oh, never can I forget the look in the eyes of that fallen prince, that forsworn priest, that discrowned Pharaoh, when, lost in the poppied draught, I saw him sink into a shameful sleep whence he might no more wake with honour! And, thereafter--till, in the end, I wearied of him, and his sad learned mind, for his guilty soul forbade him to be gay--a little I came to care for him, though not to love. But he--he who loved me--clung to me as a drunkard to the cup which ruins him. Deeming that I should wed him, he betrayed to me the secret of the hidden wealth of the pyramid of Her--for at the time I much needed treasure--and together we dared the terrors of the tomb and drew it forth, even from dead Pharaoh's breast. See, this emerald was a part thereof"--and she pointed to the great scarabæus that she had drawn from the holy heart of Menkau-ra.

"And because of what was written in the tomb, and of that Thing which we saw in the tomb--ah, pest upon it! why does its memory haunt me now?--and also because of policy, for I would fain have won the love of the Egyptians, I was minded to marry this Harmachis and declare his place and lineage to the world--ay, and by his aid hold Egypt from the

Roman. For Dellius had then come to call me to Antony, and after much thought I determined to send him back with sharp words. But on that very morning, as I tired me for the Court, came Charmion yonder, and I told her this, for I would see how the matter fell upon her mind. Now mark, Olympus, the power of jealousy, that little wedge which yet has strength to rend the tree of Empire, that secret sword which can carve the fate of Kings! This she could in no wise bear--deny it, Charmion, if thou canst, for now it is clear to me!--that the man she loved should be given to me as husband--me, whom he loved! And therefore, with more skill and wit than I can tell, she reasoned with me, showing that I should by no means do this thing, but journey to Antony; and for that, Charmion, I thank thee, now that all is come and gone. And by a very little, her words weighed down my scale of judgment against Harmachis, and I went to Antony. Thus it is through the jealous spleen of yonder fair Charmion and the passion of a man on which I played as on a lyre, that all these things have come to pass. For this cause Octavian sits a King in Alexandria; for this cause Antony is discrowned and dead; and for this cause I, too, must die to-night! Ah! Charmion! Charmion! thou hast much to answer, for thou hast changed the story of the world; and yet, even now--I would not have it otherwise!"

She paused awhile, covering her eyes with her hand; and, looking, I saw great tears upon the cheek of Charmion.

"And of this Harmachis," I asked; "where is he now, O Queen?"

"Where is he? In Amenti, forsooth--making his peace with Isis,

perchance. At Tarsus I saw Antony, and loved him; and from that moment I loathed the sight of the Egyptian, and swore to make an end of him; for a lover done with should be a lover dead. And, being jealous, he spoke some words of evil omen, even at that Feast of the Pearl; and on the same night I would have slain him, but before the deed was done, he was gone."

"And whither was he gone?"

"Nay; that know not I. Brennus--he who led my guard, and last year sailed North to join his own people--Brennus swore he saw him float to the skies; but in this matter I misdoubted me of Brennus, for methinks he loved the man. Nay, he sank off Cyprus, and was drowned; perchance Charmion can tell us how?"

"I can tell thee nothing, O Queen; Harmachis is lost."

"And well lost, Charmion, for he was an evil man to play with--ay, although I bettered him I say it! Well he served my purpose; but I loved him not, and even now I fear him; for it seemed to me that I heard his voice summoning me to fly, through the din of the fight at Actium. Thanks be to the Gods, as thou sayest, he is lost, and can no more be found."

But I, listening, put forth my strength, and, by the arts I have, cast

the shadow of my Spirit upon the Spirit of Cleopatra so that she felt the presence of the lost Harmachis.

"Nay, what is it?" she said. "By Serapis! I grow afraid! It seems to me that I feel Harmachis here! His memory overwhelms me like a flood of waters, and he these ten years dead! Oh! at such a time it is unholy!"

"Nay, O Queen," I answered, "if he be dead then he is everywhere, and well at such a time--the time of thy own death--may his Spirit draw near to welcome thine at its going."

"Speak not thus, Olympus. I would see Harmachis no more; the count between us is too heavy, and in another world than this more evenly, perchance should we be matched. Ah, the terror passes! I was but unnerved. Well the fool's story hath served to wile away the heaviest of our hours, the hour which ends in death. Sing to me, Charmion, sing, for thy voice is very sweet, and I would soothe my soul to sleep. The memory of that Harmachis has wrung me strangely! Sing, then, the last song I shall hear from those tuneful lips of thine, the last of so many songs."

"It is a sad hour for song, O Queen!" said Charmion; but, nevertheless, she took her harp and sang. And thus she sang, very soft and low, the dirge of the sweet-tongued Syrian Meleager:

Tears for my lady dead,  
Heliodore!  
Salt tears and strange to shed,

Over and o'er;  
Go tears and low lament  
Fare from her tomb,  
Wend where my lady went,  
Down through the gloom--  
Sighs for my lady dead,  
Tears do I send,  
Long love remembered,  
Mistress and friend!  
Sad are the songs we sing,  
Tears that we shed,  
Empty the gifts we bring--  
Gifts to the dead!  
Ah, for my flower, my Love,  
Hades hath taken,  
Ah, for the dust above,  
Scattered and shaken!  
Mother of blade and grass,  
Earth, in thy breast  
Lull her that gentlest was,  
Gently to rest!

The music of her voice died away, and it was so sweet and sad that Iras began to weep and the bright tears stood in Cleopatra's stormy eyes. Only I wept not; my tears were dry.

"'Tis a heavy song of thine, Charmion," said the Queen. "Well, as thou

saidst, it is a sad hour for song, and thy dirge is fitted to the hour.  
Sing it over me once again when I lie dead, Charmion. And now farewell  
to music, and on to the end. Olympus, take yonder parchment and write  
what I shall say."

I took the parchment and the reed, and wrote thus in the Roman tongue:

"Cleopatra to Octavianus, greeting.

"This is the state of life. At length there comes an hour when, rather  
than endure those burdens that overwhelm us, putting off the body we  
would take wing into forgetfulness. Cæsar, thou hast conquered: take  
thou the spoils of victory. But in thy triumph Cleopatra cannot walk.  
When all is lost, then we must go to seek the lost. Thus in the desert  
of Despair the brave do harvest Resolution. Cleopatra hath been great  
as Antony was great, nor shall her fame be minished in the manner of  
her end. Slaves live to endure their wrong; but Princes, treading with a  
firmer step, pass through the gates of Wrong into the royal Dwellings of  
the Dead. This only doth Egypt ask of Cæsar--that he suffer her to lie  
in the tomb of Antony. Farewell!"

This I wrote, and having sealed the writing, Cleopatra bade me go find a  
messenger, despatch it to Cæsar, and then return. So I went, and at the  
door of the tomb I called a soldier who was not on duty, and, giving him  
money, bade him take the letter to Cæsar. Then I went back, and there in  
the chamber the three women stood in silence, Cleopatra clinging to the  
arm of Iras, and Charmion a little apart watching the twain.



"If indeed thou art minded to make an end, O Queen," I said, "the time is short, for presently Cæsar will send his servants in answer to thy letter," and I drew forth the phial of white and deadly bane and set it upon the board.

She took it in her hand and gazed thereon. "How innocent it seems!" she said; "and yet therein lies my death. 'Tis strange."

"Ay, Queen, and the death of ten other folk. No need to take so long a draught."

"I fear," she gasped--"how know I that it will slay outright? I have seen so many die by poison and scarce one has died outright. And some--ah, I cannot think on them!"

"Fear not," I said, "I am a master of my craft. Or, if thou dost fear, cast this poison forth and live. In Rome thou mayst still find happiness; ay, in Rome, where thou shalt walk in Cæsar's triumph, while the laughter of the hard-eyed Latin women shall chime down the music of thy golden chains."

"Nay, I will die, Olympus. Oh, if one would but show the path."

Then Iras loosed her hand and stepped forward. "Give me the draught, Physician," she said. "I go to make ready for my Queen."

"It is well," I answered; "on thy own head be it!" and I poured from the phial into a little golden goblet.

She raised it, curtsied low to Cleopatra, then, coming forward, kissed her on the brow, and Charmion she also kissed. This done, tarrying not and making no prayer, for Iras was a Greek, she drank, and, putting her hand to her head, instantly fell down and died.

"Thou seest," I said, breaking in upon the silence, "it is swift."

"Ay, Olympus; thine is a master drug! Come now, I thirst; fill me the bowl, lest Iras weary in waiting at the gates!"

So I poured afresh into the goblet; but this time, making pretence to rinse the cup, I mixed a little water with the bane, for I was not minded that she should die before she knew me.

Then did the royal Cleopatra, taking the goblet in her hand, turn her lovely eyes to heaven and cry aloud:

"O ye Gods of Egypt! who have deserted me, to you no longer will I pray, for your ears are shut unto my crying and your eyes blind to my griefs! Therefore, I make entreaty of that last friend whom the Gods, departing, leave to helpless man. Sweep hither, Death, whose winnowing wings enshadow all the world, and give me ear! Draw nigh, thou King of Kings! who, with an equal hand, bringest the fortunate head of one pillow with the slave, and by thy spiritual breath dost waft the bubble of our life

far from this hell of earth! Hide me where winds blow not and waters  
cease to roll; where wars are done and Cæsar's legions cannot march!  
Take me to a new dominion, and crown me Queen of Peace! Thou art my  
Lord, O Death, and in thy kiss I have conceived. I am in labour of a  
Soul: see--it stands new-born upon the edge of Time! Now--now--go, Life!  
Come, Sleep! Come, Antony!"

And, with one glance to heaven, she drank, and cast the goblet to the  
ground.

Then at last came the moment of my pent-up vengeance, and of the  
vengeance of Egypt's outraged Gods, and of the falling of the curse of  
Menkau-ra.

"What's this?" she cried; "I grow cold, but I die not! Thou dark  
physician, thou hast betrayed me!"

"Peace, Cleopatra! Presently shalt thou die and know the fury of the  
Gods! The curse of Menkau-ra hath fallen! It is finished! Look upon  
me, woman! Look upon this marred face, this twisted form, this living  
mass of sorrow! Look! look! Who am I?"

She stared upon me wildly.

"Oh! oh!" she shrieked, throwing up her arms; "at last I know thee! By

the Gods, thou art Harmachis!--Harmachis risen from the dead!"

"Ay, Harmachis risen from the dead to drag thee down to death and agony eternal! See, thou Cleopatra; I have ruined thee as thou didst ruin me! I, working in the dark, and helped of the angry Gods, have been thy secret spring of woe! I filled thy heart with fear at Actium; I held the Egyptians from thy aid; I sapped the strength of Antony; I showed the portent of the Gods unto thy captains! By my hand at length thou diest, for I am the instrument of Vengeance! Ruin I pay thee back for ruin, Treachery for treachery, Death for death! Come hither, Charmion, partner of my plots, who betrayed me, but, repenting, art the sharer of my triumph, come watch this fallen wanton die!"

Cleopatra heard, and sank back upon the golden bed, groaning "And thou, too, Charmion!"

A moment so she sat, then her Imperial spirit burnt up glorious before she died.

She staggered from the bed, and, with arms outstretched, she cursed me.

"Oh! for one hour of life!" she cried--"one short hour, that therein I might make thee die in such fashion as thou canst not dream, thou and that false paramour of thine, who betrayed both me and thee! And thou didst love me! Ah, there I have thee still! See, thou subtle, plotting priest"--and with both hands she rent back the royal robes from her bosom--"see, on this fair breast once night by night thy head was

pillowed, and thou didst sleep wrapped in these same arms. Now, put away their memory if thou canst! I read it in thine eyes--that mayst thou not! No torture which I bear can, in its sum, draw nigh to the rage of that deep soul of thine, rent with longings never, never to be reached! Harmachis, thou slave of slaves, from thy triumph-depths I snatch a deeper triumph, and conquered yet I conquer! I spit upon thee--I defy thee--and, dying, doom thee to the torment of thy deathless love! O Antony! I come, my Antony!--I come to thy own dear arms! Soon I shall find thee, and, wrapped in a love undying and divine, together we will float through all the depths of space, and, lips to lips and eyes to eyes, drink of desires grown more sweet with every draught! Or if I find thee not, then I shall sink in peace down the poppied ways of Sleep: and for me the breast of Night, whereon I shall be softly cradled, will yet seem thy bosom, Antony! Oh, I die!--come, Antony--and give me peace!"

Even in my fury I had quailed beneath her scorn, for home flew the arrows of her winged words. Alas! and alas! it was true--the shaft of my vengeance fell upon my own head; never had I loved her as I loved her now. My soul was rent with jealous torture, and thus I swore she should not die.

"Peace!" I cried; "what peace is there for thee? Oh! ye Holy Three, hear now my prayer. Osiris, loosen Thou the bonds of Hell and send forth those whom I shall summon! Come Ptolemy, poisoned of thy sister Cleopatra; come Arsinoë, murdered in the sanctuary by thy sister Cleopatra; come Sepa, tortured to death of Cleopatra; come Divine Menkau-ra, whose body Cleopatra tore and whose curse she braved for

greed; come one, come all who have died at the hands of Cleopatra! Rush from the breast of Nout and greet her who murdered you! By the link of mystic union, by the symbol of the Life, Spirits, I summon you!"

Thus I spoke the spell; while Charmion, affrighted, clung to my robe, and the dying Cleopatra, resting on her hands, swung slowly to and fro, gazing with vacant eyes.

Then the answer came. The casement burst asunder, and on flittering wings that great bat entered which last I had seen hanging to the eunuch's chin in the womb of the pyramid of Her. Thrice it circled round, once it hovered o'er dead Iras, then flew to where the dying woman stood. To her it flew, on her breast it settled, clinging to that emerald which was dragged from the dead heart of Menkau-ra. Thrice the grey Horror screamed aloud, thrice it beat its bony wings, and lo! it was gone.

Then suddenly within that chamber sprang up the Shapes of Death. There was Arsinoë, the beautiful, even as she had shrunk beneath the butcher's knife. There was young Ptolemy, his features twisted by the poisoned cup. There was the majesty of Menkau-ra, crowned with the uræus crown; there was grave Sepa, his flesh all torn by the torturer's hooks; there were those poisoned slaves; and there were others without number, shadowy and dreadful to behold! who, thronging that narrow chamber, stood silently fixing their glassy eyes upon the face of her who slew them!

"Behold! Cleopatra!" I said. "Behold thy peace, and die!"

"Ay!" said Charmion. "Behold and die! thou who didst rob me of my honour, and Egypt of her King!"

She looked, she saw the awful Shapes--her Spirit, hurrying from the flesh, mayhap could hear words to which my ears were deaf. Then her face sank in with terror, her great eyes grew pale, and, shrieking, Cleopatra fell and died: passing, with that dread company, to her appointed place.

Thus, then, I, Harmachis, fed my soul with vengeance, fulfilling the justice of the Gods, and yet knew myself empty of all joy therein. For though that thing we worship doth bring us ruin, and Love being more pitiless than Death, we in turn do pay all our sorrow back; yet we must worship on, yet stretch out our arms towards our lost Desire, and pour our heart's blood upon the shrine of our discrowned God.

For Love is of the Spirit, and knows not Death.