

CHAPTER IX

OF THE FAREWELL OF CHARMION; OF THE DEATH OF CHARMION; OF THE DEATH OF THE OLD WIFE, ATOUA; OF THE COMING OF HARMACHIS TO ABOUTHIS; OF HIS CONFESSION IN THE HALL OF SIX-AND-THIRTY PILLARS; AND OF THE DECLARING OF THE DOOM OF HARMACHIS

Charmion unclasped my arm, to which she had clung in terror.

"Thy vengeance, thou dark Harmachis," she said, in a hoarse voice, "is a thing hideous to behold! O lost Egypt, with all thy sins thou wast indeed a Queen!

"Come, aid me, Prince; let us stretch this poor clay upon the bed and deck it royally, so that it may give its dumb audience to the messengers of Cæsar as becomes the last of Egypt's Queens."

I spoke no word in answer, for my heart was very heavy, and now that all was done I was weary. Together, then, we lifted up the body and laid it on the golden bed. Charmion placed the uræus crown upon the ivory brow, and combed the night-dark hair that showed never a thread of silver, and, for the last time, shut those eyes wherein had shone all the changing glories of the sea. She folded the chill hands upon the breast whence Passion's breath had fled, and straightened the bent knees beneath the broidered robe, and by the head set flowers. And there at length Cleopatra lay, more splendid now in her cold majesty of death than in her richest hour of breathing beauty!

We drew back and looked on her, and on dead Iras at her feet.

"It is done!" quoth Charmion; "we are avenged, and now, Harmachis, dost follow by this same road?" And she nodded towards the phial on the board.

"Nay, Charmion. I fly--I fly to a heavier death! Not thus easily may I end my space of earthly penance."

"So be it, Harmachis! And I, Harmachis--I fly also, but with swifter wings. My game is played. I, too, have made atonement. Oh! what a bitter fate is mine, to have brought misery on all I love, and, in the end, to die unloved! To thee I have atoned; to my angered Gods I have atoned; and now I go to find a way whereby I may atone to Cleopatra in that Hell where she is, and which I must share! For she loved me well, Harmachis; and, now that she is dead, methinks that, after thee, I loved her best of all. So of her cup and the cup of Iras I will surely drink!" And she took the phial, and with a steady hand poured what was left of the poison into the goblet.

"Bethink thee, Charmion," I said; "yet mayst thou live for many years, hiding these sorrows beneath the withered days."

"Yet I may, but I will not! To live the prey of so many memories, the fount of an undying shame that night by night, as I lie sleepless, shall well afresh from my sorrow-stricken heart!--to live torn by a love I cannot lose!--to stand alone like some storm-twisted tree, and, sighing

day by day to the winds of heaven, gaze upon the desert of my life,
while I wait the lingering lightning's stroke--nay, that will not I,
Harmachis! I had died long since, but I lived on to serve thee; now no
more thou needest me, and I go. Oh, fare thee well!--for ever fare thee
well! For not again shall I look again upon thy face, and there I go
thou goest not! For thou dost not love me who still dost love that
queenly woman thou hast hounded to the death! Her thou shalt never win,
and I thee shall never win, and this is the bitter end of Fate! See,
Harmachis: I ask one boon before I go and for all time become naught to
thee but a memory of shame. Tell me that thou dost forgive me so far as
thine is to forgive, and in token thereof kiss me--with no lover's kiss,
but kiss me on the brow, and bid me pass in peace."

And she drew near to me with arms outstretched and pitiful trembling
lips and gazed upon my face.

"Charmion," I answered, "we are free to act for good or evil, and yet
methinks there is a Fate above our fate, that, blowing from some strange
shore, compels our little sails of purpose, set them as we will, and
drives us to destruction. I forgive thee, Charmion, as I trust in turn
to be forgiven, and by this kiss, the first and the last, I seal our
peace." And with my lips I touched her brow.

She spoke no more; only for a little while she stood gazing on me with
sad eyes. Then she lifted the goblet, and said:

"Royal Harmachis, in this deadly cup I pledge thee! Would that I had

drunk of it ere ever I looked upon thy face! Pharaoh, who, thy sins
outworn, yet shalt rule in perfect peace o'er worlds I may not tread,
who yet shalt sway a kinglier sceptre than that I robbed thee of, for
ever, fare thee well!"

She drank, cast down the cup, and for a moment stood with the wide eyes
of one who looks for Death. Then He came, and Charmion the Egyptian fell
prone upon the floor, dead. And for a moment more I stood alone with the
dead.

I crept to the side of Cleopatra, and, now that none were left to see,
I sat down on the bed and laid her head upon my knee, as once before
it had been laid in that night of sacrilege beneath the shadow of the
everlasting pyramid. Then I kissed her chill brow and went from the
House of Death--avenged, but sorely smitten with despair!

"Physician," said the officer of the Guard as I went through the gates,
"what passes yonder in the Monument? Methought I heard the sounds of
death."

"Naught passes--all hath passed," I made reply, and went.

And as I went in the darkness I heard the sound of voices and the
running of the feet of Cæsar's messengers.

Flying swiftly to my house I found Atoua waiting at the gates. She drew me into a quiet chamber and closed the doors.

"Is it done?" she asked, and turned her wrinkled face to mine, while the lamplight streamed white upon her snowy hair. "Nay, why ask I--I know that it is done!"

"Ay, it is done, and well done, old wife! All are dead! Cleopatra, Iras, Charmion--all save myself!"

The aged woman drew up her bent form and cried: "Now let me go in peace, for I have seen my desire upon thy foes and the foes of Khem. La! la!--not in vain have I lived on beyond the years of man! I have seen my desire upon thy enemies---I have gathered the dews of Death, and thy foe hath drunk thereof! Fallen is the brow of Pride! the Shame of Khem is level with the dust! Ah, would that I might have seen that wanton die!"

"Cease, woman! cease! The Dead are gathered to the Dead! Osiris holds them fast, and everlasting silence seals their lips! Pursue not the fallen great with insults! Up!--let us fly to Abouthis, that all may be accomplished!"

"Fly thou, Harmachis!--Harmachis, fly--but I fly not! To this end only I have lingered on the earth. Now I untie the knot of life and let my spirit free! Fare thee well, Prince, the pilgrimage is done! Harmachis, from a babe have I loved thee, and love thee yet!--but no more in this

world may I share thy griefs--I am spent. Osiris, take thou my Spirit!"
and her trembling knees gave way and she sank to the ground.

I ran to her side and looked upon her. She was already dead, and I was
alone upon the earth without a friend to comfort me!

Then I turned and went, no man hindering me, for all was confusion in
the city, and departed from Alexandria in a vessel I had made ready.
On the eighth day, I landed, and, in the carrying out of my purpose,
travelled on foot across the fields to the Holy Shrine of Aboutis. And
here, as I knew, the worship of the Gods had been lately set up again
in the Temple of the Divine Sethi: for Charmion had caused Cleopatra to
repent of her decree of vengeance and to restore the lands that she had
seized, though the treasure she restored not. And the temple having been
purified, now, at the season of the Feast of Isis, all the High Priests
of the ancient Temples of Egypt were gathered together to celebrate the
coming home of the Gods into their holy place.

I gained the city. It was on the seventh day of the Feast of Isis. Even
as I came the long array wended through the well-remembered streets.
I joined in the multitude that followed, and with my voice swelled the
chorus of the solemn chant as we passed through the pylons into the
imperishable halls. How well known were the holy words:

"Softly we tread, our measured footsteps falling
Within the Sanctuary Sevenfold;
Soft on the Dead that liveth are we calling:

'Return, Osiris, from thy Kingdom cold!

Return to them that worship thee of old!'"

And then, when the sacred music ceased, as aforetime on the setting of the majesty of Ra, the High Priest raised the statue of the living God and held it on high before the multitude.

With a joyful shout of

"Osiris! our hope, Osiris! Osiris!"

the people tore the black wrappings from their dress, showing the white robes beneath, and, as one man, bowed before the God.

Then they went to feast each at his home; but I stayed in the court of the temple.

Presently a priest of the temple drew near, and asked me of my business. And I answered him that I came from Alexandria, and would be led before the council of the High Priests, for I knew that the Holy Priests were gathered together debating the tidings from Alexandria.

Thereon the man left, and the High Priests, hearing that I was from Alexandria, ordered that I should be led into their presence in the Hall of Columns--and so I was led in. It was already dark, and between the great pillars lights were set, as on that night when I was crowned Pharaoh of the Upper and the Lower Land. There, too, was the long

line of Dignitaries seated in their carven chairs, and taking counsel together. All was the same; the same cold images of Kings and Gods gazed with the same empty eyes from the everlasting walls. Ay, more; among those gathered there were five of the very men who, as leaders of the great plot, had sat here to see me crowned, being the only conspirators who had escaped the vengeance of Cleopatra and the clutching hand of Time.

I took my stand on the spot where once I had been crowned and made me ready for the last act of shame with such bitterness of heart as cannot be written.

"Why, it is the physician Olympus," said one. "He who lived a hermit in the Tombs of Tâpé, and who but lately was of the household of Cleopatra. Is it, then, true that the Queen is dead by her own hand, Physician?"

"Yea, holy Sirs, I am that physician; also Cleopatra is dead by my hand."

"By thy hand? Why, how comes this?--though well is she dead, forsooth, the wicked wanton!"

"Your pardon, Sirs, and I will tell you all, for I am come hither to that end. Perchance among you there may be some--methinks I see some--who, nigh eleven years ago, were gathered in this hall to secretly crown one Harmachis, Pharaoh of Khem?"

"It is true!" they said; "but how knowest thou these things, thou Olympus?"

"Of the rest of those seven-and-thirty nobles," I went on, making no answer, "are two-and-thirty missing. Some are dead, as Amenemhat is dead; some are slain, as Sepa is slain; and some, perchance, yet labour as slaves within the mines, or live afar, fearing vengeance."

"It is so," they said: "alas! it is so. Harmachis the accursed betrayed the plot, and sold himself to the wanton Cleopatra!"

"It is so," I went on, lifting up my head. "Harmachis betrayed the plot and sold himself to Cleopatra; and, holy Sirs--I am that Harmachis!"

The Priests and Dignitaries gazed astonished. Some rose and spoke; some said naught.

"I am that Harmachis! I am that traitor, trebly steeped in crime!--a traitor to my Gods, a traitor to my Country, a traitor to my Oath! I come hither to say that I have done this. I have executed the Divine vengeance on her who ruined me and gave Egypt to the Roman. And now that, after years of toil and patient waiting, this is accomplished by my wisdom and the help of the angry Gods, behold I come with all my shame upon my head to declare the thing I am, and take the traitor's guerdon!"

"Mindest thou of the doom of him who hath broke the oath that may not be

broke?" asked he who first had spoken, in heavy tones.

"I know it well," I answered; "I court that awful doom."

"Tell us more of this matter, thou who wast Harmachis."

So, in cold clear words, I laid bare all my shame, keeping back nothing. And ever as I spoke I saw their faces grow more hard, and knew that for me there was no mercy; nor did I ask it, nor, had I asked, could it have been granted.

When, at last, I had done, they put me aside while they took counsel. Then they drew me forth again, and the eldest among them, a man very old and venerable, the Priest of the Temple of the Divine Hatshepu at Tápé, spoke, in icy accents:

"Thou Harmachis, we have considered this matter. Thou hast sinned the threefold deadly sin. On thy head lies the burden of the woe of Khem, this day enthralled of Rome. To Isis, the Mother Mystery, thou hast offered the deadly insult, and thou hast broken thy holy oath. For all of these sins there is, as well thou knowest, but one reward, and that reward is thine. Naught can it weigh in the balance of our justice that thou hast slain her who was thy cause of stumbling; naught that thou comest to name thyself the vilest thing who ever stood within these walls. On thee also must fall the curse of Menkau-ra, thou false priest! thou forsworn patriot! thou Pharaoh shameful and discrowned! Here, where we set the Double Crown upon thy head, we doom thee to the doom! Go to

thy dungeon and await the falling of its stroke! Go, remembering what thou mightest have been and what thou art, and may those Gods who through thy evil doing shall perchance ere long cease to be worshipped within these holy temples, give to thee that mercy which we deny! Lead him forth!"

So they took me and led me forth. With bowed head I went, looking not up, and yet I felt their eyes burn upon my face.

Oh! surely of all my shames this is the heaviest!