

CHAPTER XIII

ALLAN HEARS A STRANGE TALE

For some minutes I remained before those curtains until, had it not been for something electric in the air which got into my bones, a kind of force that, perhaps in my fancy only, seemed to pervade the place, I should certainly have grown bored. Indeed I was about to ask my companion why he did not announce our arrival instead of standing there like a stuck pig with his eyes shut as though in prayer or meditation, when the curtains parted and from between them appeared one of those tall waiting women whom we had seen on the previous night. She contemplated us gravely for a few moments, then moved her hand twice, once forward, towards Billali as a signal to him to retire, which he did with great rapidity, and next in a beckoning fashion towards myself to invite me to follow her.

I obeyed, passing between the thick curtains which she fastened in some way behind me, and found myself in the same roofed and sculptured room that I have already described. Only now there were no lamps, such light as penetrated it coming from an opening above that I could not see, and falling upon the dais at its head, also on her who sat upon the dais.

Yes, there she was in her white robes and veil, the point and centre of a little lake of light, a wondrous and in a sense a spiritual vision, for in truth there was something about her which was not of the world,

something that drew and yet frightened me. Still as a statue she sat, like one to whom time is of no account and who has grown weary of motion, and on either side of her yet more still, like caryatides supporting a shrine, stood two of the stately women who were her attendants.

For the rest a sweet and subtle odour pervaded the chamber which took hold of my senses as hasheesh might do, which I was sure proceeded from her, or from her garments, for I could see no perfumes burning. She spoke no word, yet I knew she was inviting me to come nearer and moved forward till I reached a curious carved chair that was placed just beneath the dais, and there halted, not liking to sit down without permission.

For a long while she contemplated me, for as before I could feel her eyes searching me from head to foot and as it were looking through me as though she would discover my very soul. Then at length she moved, waving those two ivory arms of hers outwards with a kind of swimming stroke, whereon the women to right and left of her turned and glided away, I know not whither.

"Sit, Allan," she said, "and let us talk, for I think we have much to say to each other. Have you slept well? And eaten?--though I fear that the food is but rough. Also was the bath made ready for you?"

"Yes, Ayesha," I answered to all three questions, adding, for I knew not

what to say, "It seems to be a very ancient bath."

"When I last saw it," she replied, "it was well enough with statues standing round it worked by a sculptor who had seen beauty in his dreams. But in two thousand years--or is it more?--the tooth of Time bites deep, and doubtless like all else in this dead place it is now a ruin."

I coughed to cover up the exclamation of disbelief that rose to my lips and remarked blandly that two thousand years was certainly a long time.

"When you say one thing, Allan, and mean another, your Arabic is even more vile than usual and does not serve to cloak your thought."

"It may be so, Ayesha, for I only know that tongue as I do many other of the dialects of Africa by learning it from common men. My own speech is English, in which, if you are acquainted with it, I should prefer to talk."

"I know not English, which doubtless is some language that has arisen since I left the world. Perhaps later you shall teach it to me. I tell you, you anger me whom it is not well to anger, because you believe nothing that passes my lips and yet do not dare to say so."

"How can I believe one, Ayesha, who if I understand aright, speaks of having seen a certain bath two thousand years ago, whereas one hundred

years are the full days of man? Forgive me therefore if I cannot believe what I know to be untrue."

Now I thought that she would be very angry and was sorry that I had spoken. But as it happened she was not.

"You must have courage to give me the lie so boldly--and I like courage," she said, "who have been cringed to for so long. Indeed, I know that you are brave, who have heard how you bore yourself in the fight yesterday, and much else about you. I think that we shall be friends, but--seek no more."

"What else should I seek, Ayesha?" I asked innocently.

"Now you are lying again," she said, "who know well that no man who is a man sees a woman who is beautiful and pleases him, without wondering whether, should he desire it, she could come to love him, that is, if she be young."

"Which at least is not possible if she has lived two thousand years. Then naturally she would prefer to wear a veil," I said boldly, seeking to avoid the argument into which I saw she wished to drag me.

"Ah!" she answered, "the little yellow man who is named Light-in-Darkness put that thought into your heart, I think. Oh, do not trouble as to how I know it, who have many spies here, as he guessed

well enough. So a woman who has lived two thousand years must be hideous and wrinkled, must she? The stamp of youth and loveliness must long have fled from her; of that you, the wise man, are sure. Very well. Now you tempt me to do what I had determined I would not do and you shall pluck the fruit of that tree of curiosity which grows so fast within you.

Look, Allan, and say whether I am old and hideous, even though I have lived two thousand years upon the earth and mayhap many more."

Then she lifted her hands and did something to her veil, so that for a moment--only one moment--her face was revealed, after which the veil fell into its place.

I looked, I saw, and if that chair had lacked a back I believe that I should have fallen out of it to the ground. As for what I saw--well, it cannot be described, at any rate by me, except perhaps as a flash of glory.

Every man has dreamed of perfect beauty, basing his ideas of it perhaps on that of some woman he has met who chanced to take his fancy, with a few accessories from splendid pictures or Greek statues thrown in, plus a garnishment of the imagination. At any rate I have, and here was that perfect beauty multiplied by ten, such beauty, that at the sight of it the senses reeled. And yet I repeat that it is not to be described.

I do not know what the nose or the lips were like; in fact, all that I

can remember with distinctness is the splendour of the eyes, of which I had caught some hint through her veil on the previous night. Oh, they were wondrous, those eyes, but I cannot tell their colour save that the groundwork of them was black. Moreover they seemed to be more than eyes as we understand them. They were indeed windows of the soul, out of which looked thought and majesty and infinite wisdom, mixed with all the allurements and the mystery that we are accustomed to see or to imagine in woman.

Here let me say something at once. If this marvellous creature expected that the revelation of her splendour was going to make me her slave; to cause me to fall in love with her, as it is called, well, she must have been disappointed, for it had no such effect. It frightened and in a sense humbled me, that is all, for I felt myself to be in the presence of something that was not human, something alien to me as a man, which I could fear and even adore as humanity would adore that which is Divine, but with which I had no desire to mix. Moreover, was it divine, or was it something very different? I did not know, I only knew that it was not for me; as soon should I have thought of asking for a star to set within my lantern.

I think that she felt this, felt that her stroke had missed, as the French say, that is if she meant to strike at all at this moment. Of this I am not certain, for it was in a changed voice, one with a suspicion of chill in it that she said with a little laugh,

"Do you admit now, Allan, that a woman may be old and still remain fair and unwrinkled?"

"I admit," I answered, although I was trembling so much that I could hardly speak with steadiness, "that a woman may be splendid and lovely beyond anything that the mind of man can conceive, whatever her age, of which I know nothing. I would add this, Ayesha, that I thank you very much for having revealed to me the glory that is hid beneath your veil."

"Why?" she asked, and I thought that I detected curiosity in her question.

"For this reason, Ayesha. Now there is no fear of my troubling you in such a fashion as you seemed to dread a little while ago. As soon would a man desire to court the moon sailing in her silver loveliness through heaven."

"The moon! It is strange that you should compare me to the moon," she said musingly. "Do you know that the moon was a great goddess in Old Egypt and that her name was Isis and--well, once I had to do with Isis? Perhaps you were there and knew it, since more lives than one are given to most of us. I must search and learn. For the rest, all have not thought as you do, Allan. Many, on the contrary, love and seek to win the Divine."

"So do I at a distance, Ayesha, but to come too near to it I do not

aspire. If I did perhaps I might be consumed."

"You have wisdom," she replied, not without a note of admiration in her voice. "The moths are few that fear the flame, but those are the moths which live. Also I think that you have scorched your wings before and learned that fire hurts. Indeed, now I remember that I have heard of three such fires of love through which you have flown, Allan, though all of them are dead ashes now, or shine elsewhere. Two burned in your youth when a certain lady died to save you, a great woman that, is it not so? And the third, ah! she was fire indeed, though of a copper hue. What was her name? I cannot remember, but I think it had something to do with the wind, yes, with the wind when it wails."

I stared at her. Was this Mameena myth to be dug up again in a secret place in the heart of Africa? And how the deuce did she know anything about Mameena? Could she have been questioning Hans or Umslopogaas? No, it was not possible, for she had never seen them out of my presence.

"Perhaps," she went on in a mocking voice, "perhaps once again you disbelieve, Allan, whose cynic mind is so hard to open to new truths. Well, shall I show you the faces of these three? I can," and she waved her hand towards some object that stood on a tripod to the right of her in the shadow--it looked like a crystal basin. "But what would it serve when you who know them so well, believed that I drew their pictures out of your own soul? Also perchance but one face would appear and that one strange to you. [Lady Ragnall perhaps?--JB]

"Have you heard, Allan, that among the wise some hold that not all of us is visible at once here on earth within the same house of flesh; that the whole self in its home above, separates itself into sundry parts, each of which walks the earth in different form, a segment of life's circle that can never be dissolved and must unite again at last?"

I shook my head blankly, for I had never heard anything of the sort.

"You have still much to learn, Allan, although doubtless there are some who think you wise," she went on in the same mocking voice. "Well, I hold that this doctrine is built upon a rock of truth; also," she added after studying me for a minute, "that in your case these three women do not complete that circle. I think there is a fourth who as yet is strange to you in this life, though you have known her well enough in others."

I groaned, imagining that she alluded to herself, which was foolish of me, for at once she read my mind and went on with a rather acid little laugh,

"No, no, not the humble slave who sits before you, whom, as you have told me, it would please you to reject as unworthy were she brought to you in offering, as in the old days was done at the courts of the great kings of the East. O fool, fool! who hold yourself so strong and do not know that if I chose, before yon shadow had moved a finger's breadth, I

could bring you to my feet, praying that you might be suffered to kiss my robe, yes, just the border of my robe."

"Then I beg of you not to choose, Ayesha, since I think that when there is work to be done by both of us, we shall find more comfort side by side than if I were on the ground seeking to kiss a garment that doubtless then it would delight you to snatch away."

At these words her whole attitude seemed to change. I could see her lovely shape brace itself up, as it were, beneath her robes and felt in some way that her mind had also changed; that it had rid itself of mockery and woman's pique and like a shifting searchlight, was directed upon some new objective.

"Work to be done," she repeated after me in a new voice. "Yes, I thank you who bring it to my mind, since the hours pass and that work presses. Also I think there is a bargain to be made between us who are both of the blood that keeps bargains, even if they be not written on a roll and signed and sealed. Why do you come to me and what do you seek of me, Allan, Watcher-in-the-Night? Say it and truthfully, for though I may laugh at lies and pass them by when they have to do with the eternal sword-play which Nature decrees between man and woman, until these break apart or, casting down the swords, seek arms in which they agree too well, when they have to do with policy and high purpose and ambition's ends, why then I avenge them upon the liar."

Now I hesitated, as what I had to tell her seemed so foolish, indeed so insane, while she waited patiently as though to give me time to shape my thoughts. Speaking at last because I must, I said,

"I come to ask you, Ayesha, to show me the dead, if the dead still live elsewhere."

"And who told you, Allan, that I could show you the dead, if they are not truly dead? There is but one, I think, and if you are his messenger, show me his token. Without it we do not speak together of this business."

"What token?" I asked innocently, though I guessed her meaning well enough.

She searched me with her great eyes, for I felt, and indeed saw them on me through the veil, then answered,

"I think--nay, let me be sure," and half rising from the couch, she bent her head over the tripod that I have described, and stared into what seemed to be a crystal bowl. "If I read aright," she said, straightening herself presently, "it is a hideous thing enough, the carving of an abortion of a man such as no woman would care to look on lest her babe should bear its stamp. It is a charmed thing also that has virtues for him who wears it, especially for you, Allan, since something tells me that it is dyed with the blood of one who loved you. If you have it, let

it be revealed, since without it I do not talk with you of these dead you seek."

Now I drew Zikali's talisman from its hiding-place and held it towards her.

"Give it to me," she said.

I was about to obey when something seemed to warn me not to do so.

"Nay," I answered, "he who lent me this carving for a while, charged me that except in emergency and to save others, I must wear it night and day till I returned it to his hand, saying that if I parted from it fortune would desert me. I believe none of this talk and tried to be rid of it, whereon death drew near to me from a snake, such a snake as I see you wear about you, which doubtless also has poison in its fangs, if of another sort, Ayesha."

"Draw near," she said, "and let me look. Man, be not afraid."

So I rose from my chair and knelt before her, hoping secretly that no one would see me in that ridiculous position, which the most unsuspecting might misinterpret. I admit, however, that it proved to have compensations, since even through the veil I saw her marvellous eyes better than I had done before, and something of the pure outline of her classic face; also the fragrance of her hair was wonderful.

She took the talisman in her hand and examined it closely.

"I have heard of this charm and it is true that the thing has power," she said, "for I can feel it running through my veins, also that it is a shield of defence to him who wears it. Yes, and now I understand what perplexed me somewhat, namely, how it came about that when you vexed me into unveiling--but let that matter be. The wisdom was not your own, but another's, that is all. Yes, the wisdom of one whose years have borne him beyond the shafts that fly from woman's eyes, the ruinous shafts which bring men down to doom and nothingness. Tell me, Allan, is this the likeness of him who gave it to you?"

"Yes, Ayesha, the very picture, as I think, carved by himself, though he said that it is ancient, and others tell that it has been known in the land for centuries."

"So perchance has he," she answered drily, "since some of our company live long. Now tell me this wizard's names. Nay, wait awhile for I would prove that indeed you are his messenger with whom I may talk about the dead, and other things, Allan. You can read Arabic, can you not?"

"A little," I answered.

Then from a stool at her side she took paper, or rather papyrus and a reed pen, and on her knee wrote something on the sheet which she gave to

me folded up.

"Now tell me the names," she said, "and then let us see if they tally with what I have written, for if so you are a true man, not a mere wanderer or a spy."

"The principal names of this doctor are Zikali, the Opener-of-Roads, the 'Thing-that-should-never-have-been-born,'" I answered.

"Read the writing, Allan," she said.

I unfolded the sheet and read Arabic words which meant, "Weapons, Cleaver-of-Rocks, One-at-whom-dogs-bark-and-children-wail."

"The last two are near enough," she said, "but the first is wrong."

"Nay, Ayesha, since in this man's tongue the word 'Zikali' means 'Weapons'; intelligence at which she clapped her hands as a merry girl might do. "The man," I went on, "is without doubt a great doctor, one who sees and knows things that others do not, but I do not understand why this token carved in his likeness should have power, as you say it has."

"Because with it goes his spirit, Allan. Have you never heard of the Egyptians, a very wise people who, as I remember, declared that man has a Ka or Double, a second self, that can either dwell in his statue or

be sent afar?"

I answered that I had heard this.

"Well the Ka of this Zikali goes with that hideous image of him, which is perhaps why you have come safe through many dangers and why also I seemed to dream so much of him last night. Tell me now, what does Zikali want of me whose power he knows very well?"

"An oracle, the answer to a riddle, Ayesha."

"Then set it out another time. So you decide to see the dead, and this old dwarf, who is a home of wisdom, desires an oracle from one who is greater than he. Good. And what are you, or both of you, prepared to pay for these boons? Know, Allan, that I am a merchant who sells my favours dear. Tell me then, will you pay?"

"I think that it depends upon the price," I answered cautiously. "Set out the price, Ayesha."

"Be not afraid, O cunning dealer," she mocked. "I do not ask your soul or even that love of yours which you guard so jealously, since these things I could take without the asking. Nay, I ask only what a brave and honest man may give without shame: your help in war, and perhaps," she added with a softer tone, "your friendship. I think, Allan, that I like you well, perhaps because you remind me of another whom I knew long

ago."

I bowed at the compliment, feeling proud and pleased at the prospect of a friendship with this wonderful and splendid creature, although I was aware that it had many dangers. Then I sat still and waited. She also waited, brooding.

"Listen," she said after a while, "I will tell you a story and when you have heard it you shall answer, even if you do not believe it, but not before. Does it please you to listen to something of the tale of my life which I am moved to tell you, that you may know with whom you have to deal?"

Again I bowed, thinking to myself that I knew nothing that would please me more, who was eaten up with a devouring curiosity about this woman.

Now she rose from her couch and descending off the dais, began to walk up and down the chamber. I say, to walk, but her movements were more like the gliding of an eagle through the air or the motion of a swan upon still water, so smooth were they and gracious. As she walked she spoke in a low and thrilling voice.

"Listen," she said again, "and even if my story seems marvellous to you, interrupt, and above all, mock me not, lest I should grow angry, which might be ill for you. I am not as other women are, O Allan, who having conquered the secrets of Nature," here I felt an intense desire to ask

what secrets, but remembered and held my tongue, "to my sorrow have preserved my youth and beauty through many ages. Moreover in the past, perhaps in payment for my sins, I have lived other lives of which some memory remains with me.

"By my last birth I am an Arab lady of royal blood, a descendant of the Kings of the East. There I dwelt in the wilderness and ruled a people, and at night I gathered wisdom from the stars and the spirits of the earth and air. At length I wearied of it all and my people too wearied of me and besought me to depart, for, Allan, I would have naught to do with men, yet men went mad because of my beauty and slew each other out of jealousy. Moreover other peoples made war upon my people, hoping to take me captive that I might be a wife to their kings. So I left them, and being furnished with great wealth in hoarded gold and jewels, together with a certain holy man, my master, I wandered through the world, studying the nations and their worships. At Jerusalem I tarried and learned of Jehovah who is, or was, its God.

"At Paphos in the Isle of Chitim I dwelt a while till the folk of that city thought that I was Aphrodite returned to earth and sought to worship me. For this reason and because I made a mock of Aphrodite, I, who, as I have said, would have naught to do with men, she through her priests cursed me, saying that her yoke should lie more heavily upon my neck from age to age than on that of any woman who had breathed beneath the sun.

"It was a wondrous scene," she added reflectively, "that of the cursing, since for every word I gave back two. Moreover I told the hoary villain of a high-priest to make report to his goddess that long after she was dead in the world, I would live on, for the spirit of prophecy was on me in that hour. Yet the curse fell in its season, since in her day, doubt it or not, Aphrodite had strength, as indeed under other names she has and will have while the world endures, and for aught I know, beyond it. Do they worship her now in any land, Allan?"

"No, only her statues because of their beauty, though Love is always worshipped."

"Yes, who can testify to that better than you yourself, Allan, if he who is called Zikali tells me the truth concerning you in the dreams he sends? As for the statues, I saw some of them as they left the master's hand in Greece, and when I told him that he might have found a better model, once I was that model. If this marble still endures, it must be the most famous of them all, though perchance Aphrodite has shattered it in her jealous rage. You shall tell me of these statues afterwards; mine had a mark on the left shoulder like to a mole, but the stone was imperfect, not my flesh, as I can prove if you should wish."

Thinking it better not to enter on a discussion as to Ayesha's shoulder, I remained silent and she went on.

"I dwelt in Egypt also, and there, to be rid of men who wearied me with

their sighs and importunities, also to acquire more wisdom of which she was the mistress, I entered the service of the goddess Isis, Queen of Heaven, vowing to remain virgin for ever. Soon I became her high-priestess and in her most sacred shrines upon the Nile, I communed with the goddess and shared her power, since from me her daughter, she withheld none of her secrets. So it came about that though Pharaohs held the sceptre, it was I who ruled Egypt and brought it and Sidon to their fall, it matters not how or why, as it was fated that I must do. Yes, kings would come to seek counsel from me where I sat throned, dressed in the garb of Isis and breathing out her power. Yet, my task accomplished, of it all I grew weary, as men will surely do of the heavens that they preach, should they chance to find them."

I wondered what this "task" might be, but only asked, "Why?"

"Because in their pictured heaven all things lie to their hands and man, being man, cannot be happy without struggle, and woman, being woman, without victory over others. What is cheaply bought, or given, has no value, Allan; to be enjoyed, it must first be won. But I bade you not to break my thought."

I asked pardon and she went on,

"Then it was that the shadow of the curse of Aphrodite fell upon me, yes, and of the curse of Isis also, so that these twin maledictions have made me what I am, a lost soul dwelling in the wilderness waiting the

fulfilment of a fate whereof I know not the end. For though I have all wisdom, all knowledge of the Past and much power together with the gift of life and beauty, the future is as dark to me as night without its moon and stars.

"Hearken, this chanced to me. Though it be to my shame I tell it you that all may be clear. At a temple of Isis on the Nile where I ruled, there was a certain priest, a Greek by birth, vowed like myself to the service of the goddess and therefore to wed none but her, the goddess herself--that is, in the spirit. He was named Kallikrates, a man of courage and of beauty, such an one as those Greeks carved in the statues of their god Apollo. Never, I think, was a man more beautiful in face and form, though in soul he was not great, as often happens to men who have all else, and well-nigh always happens to women, save myself and perhaps one or two others that history tells of, doubtless magnifying their fabled charms.

"The Pharaoh of that day, the last of the native blood, him whom the Persians drove to doom, had a daughter, the Princess of Egypt, Amenartas by name, a fair woman in her fashion, though somewhat swarthy. In her youth this Amenartas became enamoured of Kallikrates and he of her, when he was a captain of the Grecian Mercenaries at Pharaoh's Court. Indeed, she brought blood upon his hands because of her, wherefore he fled to Isis for forgiveness and for peace. Thither in after time she followed him and again urged her love.

"Learning of the thing and knowing it for sacrilege, I summoned this priest and warned him of his danger and of the doom which awaited him should he continue in that path. He grew affrighted. He flung himself upon the ground before me with groans and supplications, and kissing my feet, vowed most falsely to me that his dealings with the royal Amenartas were but a veil and that it was I whom he worshipped. His unhallowed words filled me with horror and sternly I bade him begone and do penance for his crime, saying that I would pray the goddess on behalf of him.

"He went, leaving me alone lost in thought in the darkening shrine. Then sleep fell on me and in my sleep I dreamed a dream, or saw a vision. For suddenly there stood before me a woman beauteous as myself clad in nothing save a golden girdle and a veil of gossamer.

"'O Ayesha,' she said in a honeyed voice, 'priestess of Isis of the Egyptians, sworn to the barren worship of Isis and fed on the ashes of her unprofitable wisdom, know that I am Aphrodite of the Greeks whom many times thou hast mocked and defied, and Queen of the breathing world, as Isis is Queen of the world that is dead. Now because thou didst despise me and pour contempt upon my name, I smite thee with my strength and lay a curse upon thee. It is that thou shalt love and desire this man who but now hath kissed thy feet, ever longing till the world's end to kiss his lips in payment, although thou art as far above him as the moon thou servest is above the Nile. Think not that thou shalt escape my doom, for know that however strong the spirit, here upon

the earth the flesh is stronger still and of all flesh I am the queen.'

"Then she laughed softly and smiting me across the eyes with a lock of her scented hair, was gone.

"Allan, I awoke from my sleep and a great trouble fell upon me, for I who had never loved before now was rent with a rage of love and for this man who till that moment had been naught to me but as some beauteous image of gold and ivory. I longed for him, my heart was racked with jealousy because of the Egyptian who favoured him, an eating flame possessed my breast. I grew mad. There in the shrine of Isis the divine I cast myself upon my knees and cried to Aphrodite to return and give me him I sought, for whose sake I would renounce all else, even if I must pour my wisdom into a beauteous, empty cup. Yes, thus I prayed and lay upon the ground and wept until, outworn, once more sleep fell upon me.

"Now in the darkness of the holy place once more there came a dream or vision, since before me in her glory stood the goddess Isis crowned with the crescent of the young moon and holding in her hand the jewelled sistrum that is her symbol, from which came music like to the melody of distant bells. She gazed at me and in her great eyes were scorn and anger.

"'O Ayesha, Daughter of Wisdom,' she said in a solemn voice, 'whom I, Isis, had come to look upon rather as a child than a servant, since in none other of my priestesses was such greatness to be found, and whom

in a day to be I had purposed to raise to the very steps of my heavenly throne, thou hast broken thine oath and, forsaking me, hast worshipped false Aphrodite of the Greeks who is mine enemy. Yea, in the eternal war between the spirit and the flesh, thou hast chosen the part of flesh. Therefore I hate thee and add my doom to that which Aphrodite laid upon thee, which, hadst thou prayed to me and not to her, I would have lifted from thy heart.

"Hearken! The Grecian whom thou hast chosen, by Aphrodite's will, thou shalt love as the Pathian said. More, thy love shall bring his blood upon thy hands, nor mayest thou follow him to the grave. For I will show thee the Source of Life and thou shalt drink of it to make thyself more fair even than thou art and thus outpace thy rival, and when thy lover is dead, in a desolate place thou shalt wait in grief and solitude till he is born again and find thee there.

"Yet shall this be but the beginning of thy sorrows, since through all time thou shalt pursue thy fate till at length thou canst draw up this man to the height on which thine own soul stands by the ropes of love and loss and suffering. Moreover through it all thou shalt despise thyself, which is man's and woman's hardest lot, thou who having the rare feast of spirit spread out before thee, hast chosen to fill thyself from the troughs of flesh.'

"Then, Allan, in my dream I made a proud answer to the goddess, saying, 'Hear me, mighty mistress of many Forms who dost appear in all that

lives! An evil fate has fallen upon me, but was it I who chose that fate? Can the leaf contend against the driving gale? Can the falling stone turn upwards to the sky, or when Nature draws it, can the tide cease to flow? A goddess whom I have offended, that goddess whose strength causes the whole world to be, has laid her curse upon me and because I have bent before the storm, as bend I must, or break, another goddess whom I serve, thou thyself, Mother Isis, hast added to the curse. Where then is Justice, O Lady of the Moon?'

"'Not here, Woman,' she answered. 'Yet far away Justice lives and shall be won at last and mayhap because thou art so proud and high-stomached, it is laid upon thee to seek her blinded eyes through many an age. Yet at last I think thou shalt set thy sins against her weights and find the balance even. Therefore cease from questioning the high decrees of destiny which thou canst not understand and be content to suffer, remembering that all joy grows from the root of pain. Moreover, know this for thy comfort, that the wisdom which thou hast shall grow and gather on thee and with it thy beauty and thy power; also that at the last thou shalt look upon my face again, in token whereof I leave to thee my symbol, the sistrum that I bear, and with it this command. Follow that false priest of mine wherever he may go and avenge me upon him, and if thou lose him there, wait while the generations pass till he return again. Such and no other is thy destiny.'

"Allan, the vision faded and when I awoke the lights of dawn played upon the image of the goddess in the sanctuary. They played, moreover,

upon the holy jewelled thing that in my dream her hand had held, the sistrum of her worship, shaped like the loop of life, the magic symbol that she had vowed to me, wherewith goes her power, which henceforth was mine.

"I took it and followed after the priest Kallikrates, to whom thenceforward I was bound by passion's ties that are stronger than all the goddesses in this wide universe."

Here I, Allan, could contain myself no longer and asked, "What for?" then, fearing her wrath, wished that I had been silent.

But she was not angry, perhaps because this tale of her interviews with goddesses, doubtless fabled, had made her humble, for she answered quietly,

"By Aphrodite, or by Isis, or both of them I did not know. All I knew was that I must seek him, then and evermore, as seek I do to-day and shall perchance through æons yet unborn. So I followed, as I was taught and commanded, the sistrum being my guide, how it matters not, and giving me the means, and so at last I came to this ancient land whereof the ruin in which you sit was once known as Kôr."

CHAPTER XIV

ALLAN MISSES OPPORTUNITY

All the while that she was talking thus the Lady or the Queen or the Witch-woman, Ayesha, had been walking up and down the place from the curtains to the foot of the dais, sweeping me with her scented robes as she passed to and fro, and as she walked she waved her arms as an orator might do to emphasise the more moving passages of her tale. Now at the end of it, or what I took to be the end, she stepped on to the dais and sank upon the couch as if exhausted, though I think her spirit was weary rather than her body.

Here she sat awhile, brooding, her chin resting on her hand, then suddenly looked up and fixing her glance upon me--for I could see the flash of it through her thin veil--said,

"What think you of this story, Allan? Do you believe it and have you ever heard its like?"

"Never," I answered with emphasis, "and of course I believe every word. Only there are one or two questions that with your leave I would wish to ask, Ayesha."

"By which you mean, Allan, that you believe nothing, being by nature without faith and doubtful of all that you cannot see and touch and