

XIII

AYESHA UNVEILS

"There," said She, "he has gone, the white-bearded old fool! Ah, how little knowledge does a man acquire in his life. He gathereth it up like water, but like water it runneth through his fingers, and yet, if his hands be but wet as though with dew, behold a generation of fools call out, 'See, he is a wise man!' Is it not so? But how call they thee? 'Baboon,' he says," and she laughed; "but that is the fashion of these savages who lack imagination, and fly to the beasts they resemble for a name. How do they call thee in thine own country, stranger?"

"They call me Holly, oh Queen," I answered.

"Holly," she answered, speaking the word with difficulty, and yet with a most charming accent; "and what is 'Holly'?"

"'Holly' is a prickly tree," I said.

"So. Well, thou hast a prickly and yet a tree-like look. Strong art thou, and ugly, but if my wisdom be not at fault, honest at the core, and a staff to lean on. Also one who thinks. But stay, oh Holly, stand not there, enter with me and be seated by me. I would not see thee crawl before me like those slaves. I am aware of their worship and their terror; sometimes when they vex me I could blast them for very sport,

and to see the rest turn white, even to the heart." And she held the curtain aside with her ivory hand to let me pass in.

I entered, shuddering. This woman was very terrible. Within the curtains was a recess, about twelve feet by ten, and in the recess was a couch and a table whereon stood fruit and sparkling water. By it, at its end, was a vessel like a font cut in carved stone, also full of pure water. The place was softly lit with lamps formed out of the beautiful vessels of which I have spoken, and the air and curtains were laden with a subtle perfume. Perfume too seemed to emanate from the glorious hair and white-clinging vestments of She herself. I entered the little room, and there stood uncertain.

"Sit," said She, pointing to the couch. "As yet thou hast no cause to fear me. If thou hast cause, thou shalt not fear for long, for I shall slay thee. Therefore let thy heart be light."

I sat down on the foot of the couch near to the font-like basin of water, and She sank down softly on to the other end.

"Now, Holly," she said, "how comest thou to speak Arabic? It is my own dear tongue, for Arabian am I by my birth, even 'al Arab al Ariba' (an Arab of the Arabs), and of the race of our father Yárab, the son of Káhtan, for in that fair and ancient city Ozal was I born, in the province of Yaman the Happy. Yet dost thou not speak it as we used to speak. Thy talk doth lack the music of the sweet tongue of the tribes of

Hamyar which I was wont to hear. Some of the words too seemed changed, even as among these Amahagger, who have debased and defiled its purity, so that I must speak with them in what is to me another tongue."[*]

[*] Yárab the son of Káhtan, who lived some centuries before the time of Abraham, was the father of the ancient Arabs, and gave its name Araba to the country. In speaking of herself as "al Arab al Ariba," She no doubt meant to convey that she was of the true Arab blood as distinguished from the naturalised Arabs, the descendants of Ismael, the son of Abraham and Hagar, who were known as "al Arab al mostáraba." The dialect of the Koreish was usually called the clear or "perspicuous" Arabic, but the Hamaritic dialect approached nearer to the purity of the mother Syriac.--L. H. H.

"I have studied it," I answered, "for many years. Also the language is spoken in Egypt and elsewhere."

"So it is still spoken, and there is yet an Egypt? And what Pharaoh sits upon the throne? Still one of the spawn of the Persian Ochús, or are the Achæmenians gone, for far is it to the days of Ochús."

"The Persians have been gone for Egypt for nigh two thousand years, and since then the Ptolemies, the Romans, and many others have flourished and held sway upon the Nile, and fallen when their time was ripe," I

said, aghast. "What canst thou know of the Persian Artaxerxes?"

She laughed, and made no answer, and again a cold chill went through me. "And Greece," she said; "is there still a Greece? Ah, I loved the Greeks. Beautiful were they as the day, and clever, but fierce at heart and fickle, notwithstanding."

"Yes," I said, "there is a Greece; and, just now, it is once more a people. Yet the Greeks of to-day are not what the Greeks of the old time were, and Greece herself is but a mockery of the Greece that was."

"So! The Hebrews, are they yet at Jerusalem? And does the Temple that the wise king built stand, and if so what God do they worship therein? Is their Messiah come, of whom they preached so much and prophesied so loudly, and doth He rule the earth?"

"The Jews are broken and gone, and the fragments of their people strew the world, and Jerusalem is no more. As for the temple that Herod built----"

"Herod!" she said. "I know not Herod. But go on."

"The Romans burnt it, and the Roman eagles flew across its ruins, and now Judæa is a desert."

"So, so! They were a great people, those Romans, and went straight to

their end--ay, they sped to it like Fate, or like their own eagles on their prey!--and left peace behind them."

"Solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant," I suggested.

"Ah, thou canst speak the Latin tongue, too!" she said, in surprise. "It hath a strange ring in my ears after all these days, and it seems to me that thy accent does not fall as the Romans put it. Who was it wrote that? I know not the saying, but it is a true one of that great people. It seems that I have found a learned man--one whose hands have held the water of the world's knowledge. Knowest thou Greek also?"

"Yes, oh Queen, and something of Hebrew, but not to speak them well. They are all dead languages now."

She clapped her hands in childish glee. "Of a truth, ugly tree that thou art, thou growest the fruits of wisdom, oh Holly," she said; "but of those Jews whom I hated, for they called me 'heathen' when I would have taught them my philosophy--did their Messiah come, and doth He rule the world?"

"Their Messiah came," I answered with reverence; "but He came poor and lowly, and they would have none of Him. They scourged Him, and crucified Him upon a tree, but yet His words and His works live on, for He was the Son of God, and now of a truth He doth rule half the world, but not with an Empire of the World."

"Ah, the fierce-hearted wolves," she said, "the followers of Sense and many gods--greedy of gain and faction-torn. I can see their dark faces yet. So they crucified their Messiah? Well can I believe it. That He was a Son of the Living Spirit would be naught to them, if indeed He was so, and of that we will talk afterwards. They would care naught for any God if He came not with pomp and power. They, a chosen people, a vessel of Him they call Jehovah, ay, and a vessel of Baal, and a vessel of Astoreth, and a vessel of the gods of the Egyptians--a high-stomached people, greedy of aught that brought them wealth and power. So they crucified their Messiah because He came in lowly guise--and now are they scattered about the earth? Why, if I remember, so said one of their prophets that it should be. Well, let them go--they broke my heart, those Jews, and made me look with evil eyes across the world, ay, and drove me to this wilderness, this place of a people that was before them. When I would have taught them wisdom in Jerusalem they stoned me, ay, at the Gate of the Temple those white-bearded hypocrites and Rabbis hounded the people on to stone me! See, here is the mark of it to this day!" and with a sudden move she pulled up the gauzy wrapping on her rounded arm, and pointed to a little scar that showed red against its milky beauty.

I shrank back, horrified.

"Pardon me, oh Queen," I said, "but I am bewildered. Nigh upon two thousand years have rolled across the earth since the Jewish Messiah

hung upon His cross at Golgotha. How then canst thou have taught thy philosophy to the Jews before He was? Thou art a woman and no spirit. How can a woman live two thousand years? Why dost thou befool me, oh Queen?"

She leaned back upon the couch, and once more I felt the hidden eyes playing upon me and searching out my heart.

"Oh man!" she said at last, speaking very slowly and deliberately, "it seems that there are still things upon the earth of which thou knowest naught. Dost thou still believe that all things die, even as those very Jews believed? I tell thee that naught dies. There is no such thing as Death, though there be a thing called Change. See," and she pointed to some sculptures on the rocky wall. "Three times two thousand years have passed since the last of the great race that hewed those pictures fell before the breath of the pestilence which destroyed them, yet are they not dead. E'en now they live; perchance their spirits are drawn towards us at this very hour," and she glanced round. "Of a surety it sometimes seems to me that my eyes can see them."

"Yes, but to the world they are dead."

"Ay, for a time; but even to the world are they born again and again. I, yes I, Ayesha[*]--for that, stranger, is my name--I say to thee that I wait now for one I loved to be born again, and here I tarry till he finds me, knowing of a surety that hither he will come, and that here,

and here only, shall he greet me. Why, dost thou believe that I, who am all-powerful, I, whose loveliness is more than the loveliness of the Grecian Helen, of whom they used to sing, and whose wisdom is wider, ay, far more wide and deep than the wisdom of Solomon the Wise--I, who know the secrets of the earth and its riches, and can turn all things to my uses--I, who have even for a while overcome Change, that ye call Death--why, I say, oh stranger, dost thou think that I herd here with barbarians lower than the beasts?"

[*] Pronounced Assha.--L. H. H.

"I know not," I said humbly.

"Because I wait for him I love. My life has perchance been evil, I know not--for who can say what is evil and what good?--so I fear to die even if I could die, which I cannot until mine hour comes, to go and seek him where he is; for between us there might rise a wall I could not climb, at least, I dread it. Surely easy would it be also to lose the way in seeking in those great spaces wherein the planets wander on for ever. But the day will come, it may be when five thousand more years have passed, and are lost and melted into the vault of Time, even as the little clouds melt into the gloom of night, or it may be to-morrow, when he, my love, shall be born again, and then, following a law that is stronger than any human plan, he shall find me here, where once he knew me, and of a surety his heart will soften towards me, though I sinned against him; ay, even though he knew me not again, yet will he

love me, if only for my beauty's sake."

For a moment I was dumbfounded, and could not answer. The matter was too overpowering for my intellect to grasp.

"But even so, oh Queen," I said at last, "even if we men be born again and again, that is not so with thee, if thou speakest truly." Here she looked up sharply, and once more I caught the flash of those hidden eyes; "thou," I went on hurriedly, "who hast never died?"

"That is so," she said; "and it is so because I have, half by chance and half by learning, solved one of the great secrets of the world. Tell me, stranger: life is--why therefore should not life be lengthened for a while? What are ten or twenty or fifty thousand years in the history of life? Why in ten thousand years scarce will the rain and storms lessen a mountain top by a span in thickness? In two thousand years these caves have not changed, nothing has changed but the beasts, and man, who is as the beasts. There is naught that is wonderful about the matter, couldst thou but understand. Life is wonderful, ay, but that it should be a little lengthened is not wonderful. Nature hath her animating spirit as well as man, who is Nature's child, and he who can find that spirit, and let it breathe upon him, shall live with her life. He shall not live eternally, for Nature is not eternal, and she herself must die, even as the nature of the moon hath died. She herself must die, I say, or rather change and sleep till it be time for her to live again. But when shall she die? Not yet, I ween, and while she lives, so shall he who hath

all her secret live with her. All I have it not, yet have I some, more perchance than any who were before me. Now, to thee I doubt not that this thing is a great mystery, therefore I will not overcome thee with it now. Another time I will tell thee more if the mood be on me, though perchance I shall never speak thereof again. Dost thou wonder how I knew that ye were coming to this land, and so saved your heads from the hot-pot?"

"Ay, oh Queen," I answered feebly.

"Then gaze upon that water," and she pointed to the font-like vessel, and then, bending forward, held her hand over it.

I rose and gazed, and instantly the water darkened. Then it cleared, and I saw as distinctly as I ever saw anything in my life--I saw, I say, our boat upon that horrible canal. There was Leo lying at the bottom asleep in it, with a coat thrown over him to keep off the mosquitoes, in such a fashion as to hide his face, and myself, Job, and Mahomed towing on the bank.

I started back, aghast, and cried out that it was magic, for I recognised the whole scene--it was one which had actually occurred.

"Nay, nay; oh Holly," she answered, "it is no magic, that is a fiction of ignorance. There is no such thing as magic, though there is such a thing as a knowledge of the secrets of Nature. That water is my glass;

in it I see what passes if I will to summon up the pictures, which is not often. Therein I can show thee what thou wilt of the past, if it be anything that hath to do with this country and with what I have known, or anything that thou, the gazer, hast known. Think of a face if thou wilt, and it shall be reflected from thy mind upon the water. I know not all the secret yet--I can read nothing in the future. But it is an old secret; I did not find it. In Arabia and in Egypt the sorcerers knew it centuries gone. So one day I chanced to bethink me of that old canal--some twenty ages since I sailed upon it, and I was minded to look thereon again. So I looked, and there I saw the boat and three men walking, and one, whose face I could not see, but a youth of noble form, sleeping in the boat, and so I sent and saved ye. And now farewell. But stay, tell me of this youth--the Lion, as the old man calls him. I would look upon him, but he is sick, thou sayest--sick with the fever, and also wounded in the fray."

"He is very sick," I answered sadly; "canst thou do nothing for him, oh Queen! who knowest so much?"

"Of a surety I can. I can cure him; but why speakest thou so sadly? Dost thou love the youth? Is he perchance thy son?"

"He is my adopted son, oh Queen! Shall he be brought in before thee?"

"Nay. How long hath the fever taken him?"

"This is the third day."

"Good; then let him lie another day. Then will he perchance throw it off by his own strength, and that is better than that I should cure him, for my medicine is of a sort to shake the life in its very citadel. If, however, by to-morrow night, at that hour when the fever first took him, he doth not begin to mend, then will I come to him and cure him. Stay, who nurses him?"

"Our white servant, him whom Billali names the Pig; also," and here I spoke with some little hesitation, "a woman named Ustane, a very handsome woman of this country, who came and embraced him when she first saw him, and hath stayed by him ever since, as I understand is the fashion of thy people, oh Queen."

"My people! speak not to me of my people," she answered hastily; "these slaves are no people of mine, they are but dogs to do my bidding till the day of my deliverance comes; and, as for their customs, naught have I to do with them. Also, call me not Queen--I am weary of flattery and titles--call me Ayesha, the name hath a sweet sound in mine ears, it is an echo from the past. As for this Ustane, I know not. I wonder if it be she against whom I was warned, and whom I in turn did warn? Hath she--stay, I will see;" and, bending forward, she passed her hand over the font of water and gazed intently into it. "See," she said quietly, "is that the woman?"

I looked into the water, and there, mirrored upon its placid surface, was the silhouette of Ustane's stately face. She was bending forward, with a look of infinite tenderness upon her features, watching something beneath her, and with her chestnut locks falling on to her right shoulder.

"It is she," I said, in a low voice, for once more I felt much disturbed at this most uncommon sight. "She watches Leo asleep."

"Leo!" said Ayesha, in an absent voice; "why, that is 'lion' in the Latin tongue. The old man hath named happily for once. It is very strange," she went on, speaking to herself, "very. So like--but it is not possible!" With an impatient gesture she passed her hand over the water once more. It darkened, and the image vanished silently and mysteriously as it had risen, and once more the lamplight, and the lamplight only, shone on the placid surface of that limpid, living mirror.

"Hast thou aught to ask me before thou goest, oh Holly?" she said, after a few moments' reflection. "It is but a rude life that thou must live here, for these people are savages, and know not the ways of cultivated man. Not that I am troubled thereby, for behold my food," and she pointed to the fruit upon the little table. "Naught but fruit doth ever pass my lips--fruit and cakes of flour, and a little water. I have bidden my girls to wait upon thee. They are mutes, thou knowest, deaf are they and dumb, and therefore the safest of servants, save to those

who can read their faces and their signs. I bred them so--it hath taken many centuries and much trouble; but at last I have triumphed. Once I succeeded before, but the race was too ugly, so I let it die away; but now, as thou seest, they are otherwise. Once, too, I reared a race of giants, but after a while Nature would no more of it, and it died away. Hast thou aught to ask of me?"

"Ay, one thing, oh Ayesha," I said boldly; but feeling by no means as bold as I trust I looked. "I would gaze upon thy face."

She laughed out in her bell-like notes. "Bethink thee, Holly," she answered; "bethink thee. It seems that thou knowest the old myths of the gods of Greece. Was there not one Actæon who perished miserably because he looked on too much beauty? If I show thee my face, perchance thou wouldst perish miserably also; perchance thou wouldst eat out thy heart in impotent desire; for know I am not for thee--I am for no man, save one, who hath been, but is not yet."

"As thou wilt, Ayesha," I said. "I fear not thy beauty. I have put my heart away from such vanity as woman's loveliness, that passeth like a flower."

"Nay, thou errest," she said; "that does not pass. My beauty endures even as I endure; still, if thou wilt, oh rash man, have thy will; but blame not me if passion mount thy reason, as the Egyptian breakers used to mount a colt, and guide it whither thou wilt not. Never may the man

to whom my beauty has been unveiled put it from his mind, and therefore even with these savages do I go veiled, lest they vex me, and I should slay them. Say, wilt thou see?"

"I will," I answered, my curiosity overpowering me.

She lifted her white and rounded arms--never had I seen such arms before--and slowly, very slowly, withdrew some fastening beneath her hair. Then all of a sudden the long, corpse-like wrappings fell from her to the ground, and my eyes travelled up her form, now only robed in a garb of clinging white that did but serve to show its perfect and imperial shape, instinct with a life that was more than life, and with a certain serpent-like grace that was more than human. On her little feet were sandals, fastened with studs of gold. Then came ankles more perfect than ever sculptor dreamed of. About the waist her white kirtle was fastened by a double-headed snake of solid gold, above which her gracious form swelled up in lines as pure as they were lovely, till the kirtle ended on the snowy argent of her breast, whereon her arms were folded. I gazed above them at her face, and--I do not exaggerate--shrank back blinded and amazed. I have heard of the beauty of celestial beings, now I saw it; only this beauty, with all its awful loveliness and purity, was evil--at least, at the time, it struck me as evil. How am I to describe it? I cannot--simply I cannot! The man does not live whose pen could convey a sense of what I saw. I might talk of the great changing eyes of deepest, softest black, of the tinted face, of the broad and noble brow, on which the hair grew low, and delicate, straight

features. But, beautiful, surpassingly beautiful as they all were, her loveliness did not lie in them. It lay rather, if it can be said to have had any fixed abiding place, in a visible majesty, in an imperial grace, in a godlike stamp of softened power, which shone upon that radiant countenance like a living halo. Never before had I guessed what beauty made sublime could be--and yet, the sublimity was a dark one--the glory was not all of heaven--though none the less was it glorious. Though the face before me was that of a young woman of certainly not more than thirty years, in perfect health, and the first flush of ripened beauty, yet it had stamped upon it a look of unutterable experience, and of deep acquaintance with grief and passion. Not even the lovely smile that crept about the dimples of her mouth could hide this shadow of sin and sorrow. It shone even in the light of the glorious eyes, it was present in the air of majesty, and it seemed to say: "Behold me, lovely as no woman was or is, undying and half-divine; memory haunts me from age to age, and passion leads me by the hand--evil have I done, and from age to age evil I shall do, and sorrow shall I know till my redemption comes."

Drawn by some magnetic force which I could not resist, I let my eyes rest upon her shining orbs, and felt a current pass from them to me that bewildered and half-blinded me.

She laughed--ah, how musically! and nodded her little head at me with an air of sublimated coquetry that would have done credit to a Venus Victrix.

"Rash man!" she said; "like Actæon, thou hast had thy will; be careful lest, like Actæon, thou too dost perish miserably, torn to pieces by the ban-hounds of thine own passions. I too, oh Holly, am a virgin goddess, not to be moved of any man, save one, and it is not thou. Say, hast thou seen enough!"

"I have looked on beauty, and I am blinded," I said hoarsely, lifting my hand to cover up my eyes.

"So! what did I tell thee? Beauty is like the lightning; it is lovely, but it destroys--especially trees, oh Holly!" and again she nodded and laughed.

Suddenly she paused, and through my fingers I saw an awful change come over her countenance. Her great eyes suddenly fixed themselves into an expression in which horror seemed to struggle with some tremendous hope arising through the depths of her dark soul. The lovely face grew rigid, and the gracious willowy form seemed to erect itself.

"Man," she half whispered, half hissed, throwing back her head like a snake about to strike--"Man, whence hadst thou that scarab on thy hand? Speak, or by the Spirit of Life I will blast thee where thou standest!" and she took one light step towards me, and from her eyes there shone such an awful light--to me it seemed almost like a flame--that I fell, then and there, on the ground before her, babbling confusedly in my terror.

"Peace," she said, with a sudden change of manner, and speaking in her former soft voice. "I did affright thee! Forgive me! But at times, oh Holly, the almost infinite mind grows impatient of the slowness of the very finite, and am I tempted to use my power out of vexation--very nearly wast thou dead, but I remembered----. But the scarab--about the scarabæus!"

"I picked it up," I gurgled feebly, as I got on to my feet again, and it is a solemn fact that my mind was so disturbed that at the moment I could remember nothing else about the ring except that I had picked it up in Leo's cave.

"It is very strange," she said with a sudden access of womanlike trembling and agitation which seemed out of place in this awful woman--"but once I knew a scarab like to that. It--hung round the neck--of one I loved," and she gave a little sob, and I saw that after all she was only a woman, although she might be a very old one.

"There," she went on, "it must be one like to it, and yet never did I see one like to it, for thereto hung a history, and he who wore it prized it much.[*] But the scarab that I knew was not set thus in the bezel of a ring. Go now, Holly, go, and, if thou canst, try to forget that thou hast of thy folly looked upon Ayesha's beauty," and, turning from me, she flung herself on her couch, and buried her face in the cushions.

[*] I am informed by a renowned and learned Egyptologist, to whom I have submitted this very interesting and beautifully finished scarab, "Suten se Ra," that he has never seen one resembling it. Although it bears a title frequently given to Egyptian royalty, he is of opinion that it is not necessarily the cartouche of a Pharaoh, on which either the throne or personal name of the monarch is generally inscribed. What the history of this particular scarab may have been we can now, unfortunately, never know, but I have little doubt but that it played some part in the tragic story of the Princess Amenartas and her lover Kallikrates, the forsworn priest of Isis.--Editor.

As for me, I stumbled from her presence, and I do not remember how I reached my own cave.