

The Car of Phœbus

By

ROBERT JAMES LEES

**Author of: 'The Life Elysian', 'Through the Mists',
'The Heretic', 'An Astral Bridegroom', Etc.**

'Love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave.'

Solomon's Song:

'What is more powerful than the sway of death;

What note to music lends a sweeter breath;

What force can break the portals of the grave;

What may atone in hell, its lost to save?

Heaven answered – "Only love!"

Originally published by:

EVA LEES

'Rodona',

54, Fosse Road South,

Leicester

Contents

PAGE

	PROLOGUE	4
CHAPTER I	INTRODUCTORY NOTE	10
II	SLAVES	12
III	CASCA	18
IV	MORNING AND NIGHT	25
V	VEDRONA	29
VI	GLARCES	33
VII	THE ROYAL ASTRONOMER	38
VIII	THE STEWARDSHIP OF LOVE	41
IX	CONSPIRACY	46
X	FLOWERS AND LOVE	53
XI	MAPHIR	60
XII	A LOVE PHILTRE	68
XIII	THE ORDEAL OF THE ORACLE	77
XIV	AFTER THE TEMPEST	88
XV	CASCA PILLORIED	97
XVI	GLARCES AND TASHSA	104
XVII	DIPLOMACY	109
XVIII	MESHRAK AT FAULT	117
XIX	CHAMPION OF THE SPORTS	124
XX	THE TRAIL OF THE SERPENT	130
XXI	THE PRESCIENCE OF FATIGUE	136
XXII	WINE AND THE MAN	143
XXIII	IN THE COIL OF THE TEMPTRESS	153
XXIV	THE PHILTRE AT WORK	159
XXV	CAUTION	168

XXVI	TROUBLED DREAMS	170
XXVII	CONSTERNATION	176
XXVIII	SELF-CONDEMNED	181
XXIX	SUSPICION	185
XXX	A COMPACT	191
XXXI	A TEST OF FRIENDSHIP	197
XXXII	THE MASK FAILS	204
XXXIII	THE FUNERAL PYRE	213
XXXIV	RIVAL FURIES	222
XXXV	CRAFT	229
XXXVI	THE QUEEN AT BAY	232
XXXVII	LIGHT RENDS THE GLOOM	238
XXXVIII	GLARCES AND LAIS	248
XXXIX	THE PRINCE DISAPPEARS	254
XI	ZHAN SCORES A POINT	259
XLL	MAPHIR INVESTIGATES	268
XLIL	A LABOUR OF LOVE	270
XLIII	LAIS GROWS IMPATIENT	274
XLIV	CASCA AND MAPHIR	283
XLV	THE EUNUCH'S TABLETS	290
XLVI	GO!	300
XLVII	MAPHIR'S CONFESSION	310
XLVIII	THE CAR ASCENDS	318

The Car of Phœbus

PROLOGUE

Many years ago - more than I need attempt to recall with any degree of exactitude - when wandering wearily in the fantastic wilderness of sleep, I chanced most unexpectedly upon a valley of indescribable loveliness - a veritable fairyland of beauty and romance. It was the trysting bower of Love and Music, where indolent Rest stood janitor to guard against intrusion and the Ills of life had no power to disturb the reigning Content. With a pilgrim soul scarred, bruised and crushed in the unequal battle of life, I naturally hailed the discovery with jubilant congratulations, and, yielding only too willingly to the fascinations it exerted, I threw myself into its inviting arms and gave way to somnolent enjoyment.

It was good, if only for a little while, to be so much alone, so far away from the worries, distractions and annoyances of the daily grind of life - so pleasant to feel that for one brief space I was out of the reach and call of Care - so comforting to realise that for a time I was beyond all disturbance; therefore I threw myself down upon one of the natural couches, thoroughly reconciled to the idea of resting until such time as Energy or Circumstance should insist on the continuance of my journey.

It is impossible to say how long I lay rocking in the cradle of that blissful realm. I had found the ideal of happiness, and, drinking its full enjoyment, neither cared, thought, desired nor knew that aught beside existed. For once I was absolutely satisfied, and in the sense of it I lost the consciousness of everything except content. Nor should I even yet have made attempt to rouse myself to action had not some rough and sturdy marplot passed that way and put an end to my enjoyment.

“Good morrow, my son,” he cried, as he touched me none too gently with the point of his staff.

“Can it be possible for a morrow to be known in such a charming place as this?” I asked languidly.

“Yes; the morrow of Accountability will come to every man, and it is my duty to warn thee to be up and doing. Whither goest thou?”

“What is that to thee? Who gave thee authority to disturb my rest?” I asked with more energetic resentment.” I am Responsibility, the appointed custodian of the vale of Doubt,” he replied. “I may permit such as thee to tarry for needful rest and recuperation, after which I am commanded to offer counsel and direction. So now wake up and prepare

to continue thy way. Tell me also whither goest thou - what is thy quest? and I will give thee needful advice.”

“I seek Truth,” I answered, when I recognised his jurisdiction and goodwill.

“Thou hast set a most laudable and praiseworthy task before thine eyes, my son; but the path which leads thereto is sadly overgrown and full of difficulties from long neglect by those who profess to follow it. It lies down yon steep declivity,” pointing with his staff in the direction indicated.” I am afraid you will find your courage tried in the outset, what with the overgrowth of thorns and brambles through which you must push your way, while the loose stones beneath will offer you a very insecure footing. You will find the road has been so abandoned in favour of Fable and Tradition as to become practically obliterated at this end, and the tangled overgrowth is now so thick as to make the available light dull and uncertain. Still, if you have courage to push forward, you will find it grow better as you proceed; but be cautious not to follow the false lights that will play around and lead you astray. Take your bearings carefully, and in all doubtful places keep straight on, turning neither to the right nor the left, but overcome or penetrate all obstacles, no matter what their nature or how difficult you may find them. If you follow these instructions you will secure your wish, and, though your labours will be onerous and wearisome, you will meet with a worthy reward. But take heed, my son, by the experience I have gained in my acquaintance with many men who have asked my counsel and direction in starting out upon this self-same quest; they listen patiently and with gratitude to all I have to say, they hear my caution and promise to profit thereby, but no sooner do I set them on their way with a hearty ‘God speed you!’ than I see them begin to slacken their pace as the stones roll beneath their feet and the bramble thorns prove to be sharper and stronger than they expected. Few of them get out of sight before they come to a standstill. Do you see the path running up the hill yonder, straight as an arrow's flight before us?”

“Yes, I see it plainly.”

Most men presently come to the conclusion that yon is the continuation of this way, and at once turn aside to reach it by a nearer and easier course. You will see where they turn off. From that point they lose their road, and we hear no more of them. Therefore I advise you to be cautious; trust to no illusory appearances, but go straight forward in spite of everything, and all will be well.”

“I thank you for the candour of your advice and counsel, my father, and will try to profit by your timely cautions. I did not expect an easy path, and I think my courage and determination will carry me through.”

“You will find nothing in the way you may not overcome by patience and perseverance; all the revelations of God are accessible to whosoever will honestly toil to gain them, but it means work, energy, labour and courage to surmount difficulties which occasionally may seem to be absolutely insurmountable. But never be daunted. All things are possible if you only have the will; there is a way either through or over every obstacle you will meet. Don't forget that; and if you fail in one attempt, try again. Never give up; but always remember that the greater the difficulties you encounter and overcome, so much the more will be the compensation you will ultimately secure.”

Again I thanked him for his paternal interest and consideration, after which I braced myself for the journey and bade him farewell. I struck boldly into the road, to the point of which he had brought me, and speedily discovered that his description and admonitions concerning it were better founded than I at first imagined; but his assurances buoyed me up, and when I reached the points of divergence on either side, of which he had spoken, I merely glanced at them and passed onward, saying to myself as I did so, “Perhaps he is watching to see if I follow in the steps of those against whom he has warned me, and it will gladden his heart to know that I am determined to act upon his counsel.” So I pressed forward with what speed and steadiness the path allowed. Down and still down I went, compelled to pick my way, now here now there, for the sake of safety in the steep and slippery descent, even though I sometimes doubted whether I had not been turned somewhat from the way thereby, and the gloom was so pronounced as to preclude my consulting an indicator he had generously provided for my better guidance. Many and many a time did I pause to use every means I had at my disposal to assure myself that I was still in the right path; but at length I determined to proceed as best I might until the light should so far increase as to enable me to make sure of the course I was taking. If the difficulties I encountered were to be regarded as a satisfactory indication that I was right, I had no occasion to be alarmed, and, resting on such assurance, I continued to push on until a crowning obstacle interposed in the shape of an impenetrable jungle of interlacing shrubs, flanked by an apparently solid rock - or, at least, a wall far too high for me to attempt to scale and too substantial to penetrate unaided.

I prepared to make what observation was possible in the uncertain light at my disposal; but the peculiar phenomenon of my pilgrimage was that light appeared to proceed from myself and illuminate the path I had travelled, and this light only served to increase the gloom which reigned before me. In this uncertainty the dimensions of the rock or wall passed out of sight and estimation; neither could I reach it to ascertain its real nature, by reason of the interlacing jungle of undergrowth at my feet. All my previous experiences sank into insignificance in comparison with the task before me even in clearing the path so far as the wall, where I felt sure I should meet with a crowning failure. I was at length discouraged - lost heart, and looked very favourably upon the idea of returning. At that moment I distinctly recalled the singular fact that I was dreaming, and began to recount all the absurd terminations to such experiences. At this my hands fell helplessly down, and for the moment I definitely decided to give up my quixotic enterprise and wake up. On second thoughts, however, I judged it best, having come so far, to push my enquiries to an actual conclusion in some form. My habit of life rebelled against the cowardly act of renunciation, and I prepared to clear the path to the face of the wall, and then determine finally as to what should be done. It might be that I should discover something behind the overgrowth offering a new suggestion - perhaps a cave, a passage, a door; how could I say before making an investigation? So I set to work. But the long and undisturbed growth had so interlaced itself as almost to defy my progress, though by obstinate persistence I worked my way slowly forward until I reached the mass of ivy which mantled the face of the wall almost to a yard in thickness. To break through such a defence twig by twig - for it was impossible to do more when I had not so much as a knife to assist me - seemed a well-nigh hopeless task, especially when I discovered that the tendrils had joined each other in almost solid growth. But I laboured on. Centring my endeavours upon a limited space, I worked with indefatigable will to reach the stone and ascertain whether there was any hope of finding a passage or hidden method of access to the beyond. Hope lightened my labour, and a premonition of success encouraged me, until I found that a door actually did exist, exactly in a direct line with the way by which I had travelled. My heart gave a great bound of joy at the discovery, and I felt assured that the obstacle I had so far surmounted was the one great test of endurance and loyalty to which my guide had made such emphatic reference in his instructions.

My energies were now redoubled, and soon I stood before the massive door, clamped with powerful hinges branching to support it in every

direction, which had been strong enough to defy the rust of centuries, and still held the portal impregnable against assault. Not so the handle, which had fallen off and lay useless at my feet.

I had now discovered the way, but not the means by which it was possible to proceed, since having tried the door I found it bolted, barred or locked, and in itself a barrier equal in opposition to the wall.

Was it possible that on the other side a janitor was still in attendance? The condition in which I had found the entrance forbade such a hope, and yet not to leave a last attempt untried, I stooped, picked up the fallen handle, and smote the door therewith most vigorously.

The echo sounded as if through the empty dungeon of some mediaeval castle, but the thunder died away without eliciting any other reply.

Again I knocked, more long and loudly than before, determined that even though the seven sleepers of Ephesus were custodians of the gate, I would awake them all but what I would gain admission. Nor did I fail in my endeavour, since presently I heard the sound of the distant opening of some other door, then someone crossed the chamber, and, tapping cautiously, pleasantly enquired "Who knocks without?"

"A pilgrim from afar, seeking admission," I replied.

"For what purpose art thou come?"

"To satisfy a desire of my soul for which I have hitherto found no remedy, and in pursuit of which Responsibility has directed me hitherwards from the vale of Doubt."

"What is the nature of thy quest?"

"Truth."

"Will neither Curiosity nor Popularity satisfy thy need?"

"Had I been content with these I might have saved myself the toil and labour of my pilgrimage," I replied.

"Hast thou well cleared the path behind thee, and left a light by which others may follow?" he enquired.

"Yes! The way is straight and clear behind me into the valley where I left my friend."

"Are the tendrils cleared from before the door that all who come after thee may find their way hereto?"

"I cleared all difficulties and obstructions in my endeavour to find an entrance before I asked for your assistance." During the latter part of this

colloquy my interlocutor had been engaged preparing to open the door; first a chain was dropped, then bolts were withdrawn, and finally the key grated in the long unused lock, then guardedly opening the door sufficiently to see and visually examine me, he looked me up and down in silence until he was apparently satisfied.

“You may come in,” he said at length, and a moment later the chamber rang with a deafening echo, as the sister-door to Death, which opens into the Immortal from the realm of Sleep, closed behind me.

In my quest for Truth I had found my way to the old-time door through which the Hebrew prophets and the sages of the ancient world passed in and out of the Silent Land in the days when men were willing to accept the revelation and inspiration there obtainable, and conform their lives thereto rather than the dogmas, creeds, speculations, and policies by which modern life is so illogically and unphilosophically bamboozled.

But the way has now been indisputably reopened, and the great libraries of the Eternal, in the archives of which are stored the original and untampered-with editions of all the histories, biographies, plans, designs, poems, tragedies, comedies, and romances the world has ever known, open to inspection and study, with all successes and failures set forth for our guidance, reproof, and direction, by the aid of which we may correct the erroneous trend of present fallacies and secure the honest success of the future.

For many years have I been a reader in that International Library of the Immortals, from which I have ventured to make a transcript of the love-story of Glarces, Prince of Sahama, which illustrates the immutability of the law that love is strong as death, apart from the changing ideas and fashionable settings of religious creeds, and leaves the honest, faithful pagan to enjoy a reward of protection and ministry which many professing Christians have cause to sigh for as an actual experience.

I make no attempt to reproduce the wealth of poetry, imagery, and accessories with which I have been accustomed to hear the story garnished as I have listened to it from the lips of those who had a part to play therein, deeming it best to tell it in my own simple and unpretentious manner, and leave the more elaborate garniture, if desired, to the imagination of my readers.

My only object is to point out the working of a law, and if in this alone I am successful my one desire will be attained, and I shall be content.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

While the great powers of Babylon and Egypt were yet rising towards the zenith of their glory, the prophets and sages of Ind and Seres (China) struggling with the initial problem of their religio-philosophical systems, when Iran and Media were scarcely recognised, and Greece and Rome lay far away in an unknown future, nomadic tribes of the great Aryan family - not yet content to settle down into systematic vocations and orderly progress - wandered over the vast tablelands of Central Asia, willing to dwell in lazy indolence and indifference so long as food for man and beast could be found.

The forager of such a band, in search of the next desirable camping-ground for his tribe, one day struck a narrow pass leading into an upland valley, which track he at first followed more from curiosity than idea of utility. It was a happy inspiration revealing a wealth of pasturage and a permanent home naturally impregnable against invasion if only moderate care was taken to guard the road by which alone it could be reached. What need for his tribe - small and peaceably disposed - to remain longer at the mercy of belligerent and marauding foes, at whose hands they frequently suffered spoilation? Surely the tribal deities had guided him into such a desirable haven. And he hurried back to his family with the welcome news.

The glowing prospects warranted an unusual amount of exertion in order to obtain immediate possession. Tents were struck, flocks driven in, and a mild excitement animated the small community in its eager desire to reach such a land of promise. The report eventually proved to misrepresent the valley by minimising its value, which offered a home and riches beyond the estimation of the tribal sages as their practised eyes surveyed a pasturage for flocks and herds far in excess of their present or past possessions.

By command of the communal Mother - in whose hands all authority was vested - the pass and their own safety were at once secured, and thus a mere handful of men was all that was necessary to effectually guard against unwelcome intrusion.

From this time they were able to nurse their indolence with easy minds in the lap of prosperity. Their sheep, goats, cattle, asses, and camels increased abundantly, and every possible want and necessity was most liberally met. Save for milking, shearing, the preparation of their frugal food and the manufacture of such clothing as they adopted, there was

nothing to do but dream the days away singing love songs to the accompaniment of the rude instruments rustic genius had invented.

While thus crooning an original ditty to an equally improvised strain, inspired by the digging of his shepherd's crook into the rich and hitherto unbroken soil, a young lad one day met with a determined obstruction he presently discovered to be a broad, bright vein, to which he curiously called a companion's attention. It proved to be a mother-lode of practically pure gold, and from that instant pastoral ideas were superseded by brighter visions of wealth and greatness. Nor did the promise prove to be illusory; the fortunes of that people from that moment took a sudden and expansive turn; the whole valley appeared to be as prolific in gold as they had hitherto found it in pasturage, and in the mining of the precious metal a further and even more astounding discovery was made in the fact that the hills were only to be regarded as a vast storehouse of almost priceless gems, the inexhaustible extent and purity of which in after ages gave rise to the traditions of Aladdin's cave and the river and sands of Pactolus.

Notwithstanding the amazing and almost incredible change of fortune, the rural simplicity of these people appears to have been maintained in many of its most desirable features; perhaps the fact of the perfect plethora of wealth - raising all to a condition of affluence beyond the possibility of jealousy - had much to do with this, but certain it is that to the end of their history the old form of government was sustained, and the affairs of the tribe were vested in the representative Mother, even after their condition and pretensions demanded the assumption of a royal title.

The absolute loyalty which existed among these Sahamians towards communal interests was one of the most remarkable traits of character the world has ever witnessed. Progress demanded intercourse with the outside world, and frequent caravans of traders visited all the great centres of earth, in the course of time, exchanging and bartering their matchless gems and gold for the luxurious manufactures and products of other nations. Young men and maidens travelled far and received all the advantages of contemporary civilisation, and in not a few instances advisable immigrations were made of such as were able to assist in the development of the budding nation; yet for centuries was the secret of its whereabouts maintained, and the source of the precious wares for which Babylon, Thebes, Memphis, Susa, Ophir, and Ind opened their hands was an unsolved problem.

This people had occupied the valley for more than a thousand years before the date of my story, and their homes had become an epitome of all the treasures and luxurious ideals then to be attained. It has long since passed away, and the hand of time has succeeded in destroying even the possibility of identifying its site, we search our records in vain for a mention of its history, but still the love of Glarces is fresh and fragrant, and is told with all its old zest and interest as an ideal of fidelity, in the land of the Immortals.

CHAPTER II

SLAVES

The spring was still young, and answering to her coy invitation, the full-blooded Valley had decked himself in the soft, shimmering, festive garb so generously provided by an indulgent Year. Morning had scarcely lost sight of the retreating night, and over the distant snow-capped mountains the atmospheric tints were weaving combinations and effects such as only aerial nymphs can manipulate. The earth was carpeted with one vast floral design of beauty, in which the luxuriant and variegated foliage served to break an overpowering charm, and - strange paradox - by breaking give a finishing touch to perfect the landscape.

Standing upon the edge of a natural platform at the foot of the hills, midway along the valley, the full sweep of the panorama lies before us - the hills, the valley, and the vast theatre of the heavens, while the air is filled with the perfume matin chorus, rising as a grateful thank-offering from the heart of Nature.

Peeping like guilty trespassers in such a land of beauty, here and there may be discovered fragments of architecture lurking among the trees; but, except in two instances, builders - having ample means at their disposal - have thoughtfully refrained from any attempt to arrogantly insinuate their cumbrous products into the picture. The visible fragments, bright with vivid colourings, lend the suggestion of picturesque ruins, and as such, are most welcome and appropriate. But as yet architecture, borrowed from Egyptian and Babylonian styles, is crude, heavy, and disappointing, without the softening touch of over shadowing, half-concealing foliage, and defies the power of garish colouring to adequately relieve it of its sombre melancholy.

The two exceptions to this well-respected rule are the gymnasium and baths occupying the centre of the capital, and almost invisible, city of

Velia lying at our feet, and the palace of the Queen-mother on the platform behind us. This latter building may very appropriately be compared to a modern military fortification adapted to residential purposes gaining its right to be called a palace from its dimensions solely. On three sides it is approached by a long flight of broad steps, but at the rear its gardens stretch away to the hills and the artificial platform is lost sight of. The facade boasts of a cumbrous colonnade with a central porch formed by a line of cylindrical columns, decorated with brazen lotus-flower capitals, and painted in bands of vivid blue, yellow, and red; but every suggestion of the hieroglyph or artistic mural decoration has been rigorously eschewed. A broad tricolour band does duty for a cornice, and beneath this the whole building is painted in a monotonous buff, against which the columns of the portico stand out in striking contrast.

Between two of these ponderous monoliths stands a lady clad in white loosely flowing robes, her flaxen hair kissed into rippling sympathy with the sun, and her blue eyes sparkling with delight as she rejoices in the glories of the morning. Her petite figure is dwarfed out of all proportion in comparison with the wilderness of stone by which she is surrounded; but she takes a full and indisputable revenge by at once captivating and holding the attention, as a first-water gem will compel the admirer to forget the presence of its setting.

Still, the lady must not be mistaken for the Queen or Princess, neither, strictly speaking, may she be called a courtier, but a slave ! The trusted, honoured, confidential slave of her royal mistress - a slave at will and of her own free choice, since she refuses to accept her freedom - but yet a slave!

She had been purchased in the market of Susa when but little more than a child by the now dead consort of the Queen, as a present to his promised bride, and the nature of the girl being as pure and true as her face was handsome, she grew into the life of her royal mistress, and when the delicateness of youth developed into a continually increasing weakness of womanhood, it was to Tasha's care and confidence that the two children of the marriage were entrusted. The family was afterwards enlarged by the adoption of an orphaned niece; then the royal lady became a widow, from which time Tasha had been in more than name the foster-mother of the children. It was a strange, an anomalous position for a slave to fill, and freedom with honours was offered to her who had become more a friend than a servant, but Tasha would not have the existing relationship disturbed, fearful that it might lead to some dreaded separation in the future. Her wish was respected. In technical formality she remains a

slave, but her actual authority in the palace is only second to that of the Queen-mother.

Ever thoughtful and considerate for the meanest object upon which she could bestow her attention, it is one of the first pleasures of her day to visit the fish in the basin of the fountain in the atrium. Her slaves had already spread her couch of skins in their accustomed place when the unusual glories of the hills attracted her to the porch where we first behold her, the breezes playing with her sun-kissed hair. She is not now the undeveloped but promising beauty of Susa' though still winsomely attractive, in spite of her - but, no! why need we speak of that?

Enough that she has been able - more by the sweetness of her nature than by the subterfuges of the toilet - to evade the attentions of time, and when we find her presently in the company of her charges, she would prefer that we regard her as their humble and favourite companion. Why should we seek to disturb the illusion ?

Waiving these delicate allusions, therefore, let us ascend the steps and follow her as she turns into the atrium to visit her finny lovers. With what childish glee she throws herself upon the skins, and baring her arms, begins to dabble in the water in search of her first capture.

Suddenly a cloud of pain – horror - sweeps across her sunny face, a startled cry escapes her lips, and the alert slaves dart to her relief. She heeds them not, and seeing the cause of her alarm is in the fountain, the men retire silently as she brings forth the lifeless body of a fish.

“Poor little beauty,” she exclaims, turning it from hand to hand, to make sure it is past all aid. “Has the Gorgon slain thee in her jealousy, or has one of the immortal gods stolen thee as a present for his spouse?”

A shadow fell athwart the fountain at that moment, and the fish was tenderly laid upon the skins as Tasha rose to greet her other friends. The man was an Ethiopian, of bronze-black skin, tall, muscular, and with the dignified bearing of a monarch. He wore a short but elaborately embroidered dark tunic, and from his broad shoulders hung a leopard skin, suspended by a massive clasp and chain of gold. His head, arms, and legs were bare, save of jewellery, his feet alone being crossed with the crimson straps of his sandals. At his heels followed two scarcely full-grown lions, who no sooner saw the silent invitation of the lady than they bounded towards her for their morning salutation and caress. The magnificent brutes were the special pets of the Princess Vedrona, having been purchased for her by Glarces, her brother, in Nineveh, together with the hunter who had captured them.

“Peace to thee, Maphir,” exclaimed the lady, when she had freed herself from the attentions of the beautiful and innocent cats.

With a salaam equal to that he would have made to the Prince, he answered, “Peace, lady, peace.”

“I hope the lovely rogues have been allowed to enjoy themselves to the full in this most beautiful weather.” She had thrown herself again upon the skins and was playing with the animals as a child with kittens.

“We have made the best use of the morning, lady; we were up betimes and took good exercise before we broke bread.”

“Did you watch the beauty of the changing colours on the hills?” she enquired, leading the lions back towards the porch as she spoke. “I never remember seeing such marvellous effects before.”

The hunter shook his head mournfully.

“No, lady; I was conscious of nothing unusual. My thoughts wandered further than the mountains this morning.” Then turning his attention to the lions, of whose unwelcome nearness Tasha's slaves were nervously conscious at the moment, he cried, “Come here, Zhan! Down, Zhade!” and the two relieved menials at once retreated to the further side of the apartment.

I think you are a very strange man, and somewhat difficult to please,” she said, kindly, looking into the hard-set face so far above her; “you always look so sad and gloomy. You live so much alone, refuse to make friends, have no companions but the lions, while I imagine it is impossible to find a more beautiful home on earth than here in Velia, and as for masters - well! I know the equal of Glarces cannot be found. What is it ails thee?”

“What avails the city, lady, or the greatness of even the most noble Glarces so long as I am a slave?”

“Do you call this slavery?” she asked, with incredulous consternation.

“I cannot call it freedom.”

“Neither do I. Freedom as compared with the life we live is as the winter contrasted with this most glorious morning; it is full of disagreeables, cares, and dangers. Are not these most beautiful brutes better cared for, more safe, therefore, more content in their present condition than when free to roam, to hunger, to be hunted and slain? What more can we wish for than is already ours? Oh, Maphir, if we are not satisfied with what we have, I am afraid the gods will never be able to make us so. I wish you would try to think so, for it troubles me to see you so sad and gloomy day

after day, when I would have everyone to be as glad and happy as I am myself.”

“For your kind wishes and sympathy, I thank you, lady, and long may the gods continue to grant you the satisfaction you enjoy. But will you pardon the boldness of my reminding you that you were born a slave, and come of a race who have not known the sweets of freedom - who never knew the meaning of wife, husband, children, home! I have known such gifts, and the pleasures of freedom, and when I remember them, even these golden gifts of royal favour,” indicating the jewelled ornaments he wore, “mock me with their taunts of bondage.”

“I wish that I could understand you better, then I might be able to assist you to be as happy as I wish every slave within the house to be,” she replied, regretfully. “There are but two or three like unto yourself, and if I could only make you all contented and the dear Queen-mother strong again, then I should be as blessed as the immortals are.” The practical mind of Maphir saw how impossible it was that she could ever understand his feelings and position, so he at once availed himself of her reference to the Queen to change the subject.

“I hope our royal mistress is better to-day.”

“No, Maphir. She will never be better, I am sorry to say, though I have not seen her yet. She is going away from us - we know it, yet know not how, and therefore can do nothing to prevent it. I think she has a twin soul, as they say in Persia - that is, the other half of herself is in the land of the Immortals, and drawing her away.”

“I trust that you are right, for if she has been mated with the holy gods, she will be blest in her going.”

“I am persuaded that it must be so, and we shall have no power to keep her longer than her other-self determines. You do not know her, Maphir, but to be in her company, if only while one tale of the sand is told, is like to lying so long at the half-open gate of Paradise.” Then clasping her slender fingers around his brawny arms, and looking with surprising sympathy into his stolid face, she continued “I wish it were in my power to bring you to her presence just for once, my sorrowful Maphir; that one experience would banish all the grief from your after life.”

“For your kindly sympathy again I thank thee, lady, and I would your desire could receive its worthy answer; but since it cannot be, then I must try to bear my discontent. She is at home, among her children and her friends, surrounded by all that makes life worthy of endurance, and

capable of such enjoyment as the gods allow. I am a slave, away from all that heart and life can crave for; how is it possible for me to taste her happiness?"

The despairing pathos of his last utterance, spoken without resentment, touched Tasha more deeply than she had hitherto experienced, and made her understand how impossible it was for her in any way to succeed in her self-imposed mission along the lines she had so far pursued. She had generously ventured to alleviate a sorrow she did not understand, and lighten a burden she had ignorantly underestimated: the result was the discovery of a wound she had not anticipated, nor was her skill sufficient to suggest an antidote for the pain she unwittingly occasioned. What could she do? Others might turn away with the thought they had done their best, and take no further interest in the matter; but Tasha was not such an one - her joys were reached through the happiness of those around her, and from their sorrows was her grief distilled.

"I cannot tell you how sorry I am for the mistake I have made," she answered, with evident regret. "I ought not to have spoken thus with you when, as you say, I only know what it is to be a slave, and cannot understand how you must feel. But I was desirous of helping you - I wish to do so now, and am sure there is some way by which I may if I could only find it. Forgive me for the pain I have so innocently caused, and if you see or know how I can assist you, tell me plainly - freely, and I will do my best to make you, even as I am, happy."

"A thousand thanks, lady, for your good wishes and intent, but I would not have you accuse yourself of any share in reviving the memories which make me of sullen mien today. All that were done, as I have said, when I was far abroad, before my fast was broken. Had I not known how impossible it is for you to be other than kind and considerate I should not have spoken as I did, but since I have, and you would still help me, I beg of you to ask permission from the mighty Prince, or his most royal sister, to hear me tell the story of these lions' capture, for if they knew the truth their sense of justice would not let them keep me here."

"Will such a little thing help to make you happy, Maphir? Why, I will away to the Princess at once and tell her that you are already prepared to obey her special command."

"I do not understand you, lady."

"Why, you have suggested the very thing for which I was waiting to see you. The Princess is not well to-day - her dreams have troubled her. Perhaps this the gods have ordered for your advantage; and when I left

her but a little time ago, she bade me ask you to be prepared with some story of your hunter's life to interest and amuse her.”

“The Princess sends me this command?” he asked, incredulously.

“Indeed she did. So now may the gods assist you in the telling of your story, that you may prosper and receive your heart's desire.”

“I will do my best, lady, and may the gods give you peace!”

“Peace, Maphir, and success.”

CHAPTER III

CASCA

In a kingdom so arbitrarily limited in extent, with a population never exceeding half a million souls, having no political relationship with the outside world, and grounded so completely in communal interests that every native, except the Queen, stood on a common equality; with unknown wealth accessible to all, a code of unwritten and unchanging laws handed down from nomadic days, which had attained an almost divine authority; and a people almost as innocent of vice as poverty, the duties and functions of the Queen-mother were little more than a sinecure. In fact the office was nothing more than that of the ancient mother of the tribe under a more imposing title, assumed to honour their chief in accordance with the prosperity of the people, and to raise her to the dignity of the heads of other and less affluent nations.

This honest and appreciative motive was no doubt a laudable one, but in all essentials of pomp and regal state the court of Sahama never had any approach to existence; such an idea was as foreign to their natures as it would have proved destructive of their traditions, which were most tenaciously upheld; therefore the change of name and title was introduced, but the old regime rigorously maintained, and the new offices of state were simply the old distinctions conferred upon the more intimate circle of friends.

This will explain how the hopelessly prostrate Queen was prevailed upon to maintain her rule, especially when her daughter and successor naturally shrank from assuming the duties hitherto discharged with such wise consideration and tact by her mother, who was recognised and beloved as the wisest and best of Saham's long line of honoured rulers.

Among such a fortunate people, where labour was more a recreation than necessity, with a climate comparatively perfect, and their few simple

desires almost automatically supplied by a more than bounteous nature, the ardour and energy of youth found an innocent and manly expression in all kinds of athletic sports and pastimes, rather than intellectual development, by which physical more than mental excellence had been secured as a national and distinctive feature.

In these invigorating and laudable employments Sahama had never possessed a more enthusiastic patron, formidable competitor and champion, than was found in Glarces, the Incomparable, as he was universally designated by the people, who idolised him for the magnificent qualities of his mind and the considerate justice they were ever sure to receive at his hands.

After his return from Nineveh, when he became assured of the freedom of the lions from vice, the intrepid Prince conceived the idea of further developing his athletic ability by friendly contests with the brutes. Such exercise would contribute to greater flexibility of movement, agility, and strengthen his muscles beyond the usual work of the gymnasium. But a much more important thought, to him, was that it would create a new interest and pleasure for his sister, Vedrona, for whose welfare he had not only a brotherly anxiety, but also the concern of a prospective husband. Symptoms of her mother's weakness were not strictly absent from the daughter, and the only hope of evading development lay in cheerfulness and mild excitement uprooting the disposition to melancholy and lack of energy.

For this purpose Glarces held his morning combat with his pets in the presence of his sister, who acted as judge and umpire in a miniature arena in the gardens. But last night Vedrona's sleep had been disturbed, and she was not disposed to venture out of doors, but desired the lions to be brought into the peristyle and await her wish. It was in furtherance of this command that we have seen Maphir in the atrium.

Proceeding towards his appointed place on leaving Tasha, with his mind full of the thought that his long desired opportunity had at length arrived, he lost all consciousness of the presence of the lions, and for once gave himself up to the anticipation of his return home, under the influence of which he became so moved that his throat trembled and his eye grew dim.

The pleasant dream was rudely dispelled by a simultaneous growl from both the lions, and almost before he was fully aware of what he did, his powerful grip was on the mane of each, and he jerked them back as they essayed to spring.

“Quiet! How dare you! Down!” he cried. But his herculean strength had already compelled obedience, and the animals made no further attempt to dispute the point.

At the instant they were near the corner of the corridor, and as Maphir threw the lions backward, Casca, the Queen's chamberlain, confronted them with the short, quick, insolent step which so thoroughly indicated his character.

This man was the one masculine blot on the royal household. His presence was both a mystery and an uneasiness to all who knew him. As a boy he had in some way obtained an influence over the Prince which no one had been able to fathom or understand, neither had any carefully devised attempt to break it been successful. His conduct in the presence of his patron was always so specious and blameless as to disarm suspicion or reports of a doubtful character which had been more than once cautiously hinted at, and the Prince, generously estimating all men at his own incomparable standard of rectitude and fidelity, had intimated his unwillingness to allow any reflections to be cast upon his friend at the risk of his personal displeasure. In what peculiar virtue the infatuation arose, or by what perversion of moral judgment the certainty of this man's traitorous intent was concealed, could never be discovered, but certain it was that Glarces placed the most unbounded faith in his pretensions, which Casca knew and secretly profited by to its full extent.

It was the approach of this man against which the lions protested with that unerring instinct that enables them to discriminate between the true and false in individuals. In this case, however, both instinct and experience confirmed each other, for the despotic tyrant never failed to seize any opportunity of showing his contempt for all who were unfortunate enough to come within his power.

The lions gave a second defiant snarl as Casca stopped short almost within reach of their jaws, and nervously turned as if contemplating a retreat from such undesirable company; but knowing the hunter's strength as well as his command over the brutes, and dreading the ridicule to which such a course might subject him, he arrogantly composed himself as much as possible to order a withdrawal of the danger of which he always stood in such mortal dread.

“Did I not tell you to keep those objectionable beasts from this part of the palace?” he enquired.

“Your excellency did so, but -”

“Then remove them at once, and I will deal with you afterwards for this act of disobedience.”

“But the -”

“Take them away, I tell you, at once.”

“The Princess -”

“Will you remove those beasts, or by the gods, I will have your ears from your head.”

He made an unguarded step forward as he spoke, and in an instant the lions snarled and made as if to spring, at which Casca, in more consideration for his bodily welfare than maintaining his insolent dignity, retired to a safe distance during the rest of the negotiations.

“My instructions are to wait at yonder door with the lions until I hear further from the Princess,” Maphir replied with a calmness contrasting very favourably with the eunuch's perturbation.

“I am the authority here. Take those brutes away, or by the great gods I will have your life.”

“I would obey your excellency at once, but my duty to the great Princess forbids me.”

“S'death! and has it come to this, that I am to be openly defied by a slave?”

“I have no choice since you command me to disobey my mistress.”

“But you shall obey me.”

“I will always do so when possible; but I cannot do so now.”

“You shall take them to the terrace as I told you.” “Not unless the Princess commands it.”

“By the gods you shall or I will kill you where you stand.”

“That may be as your excellency may choose, and the lions allow, but I cannot move. Still, I would remind you that I am a slave, and the noble Glarces allows no interference with his slaves save through the Tabah.”

The reminder of this inviolable principle of government by which the Prince had insured that no punishment, however trivial, should be administered to slaves without full and complete enquiry, only tended to further exasperate the enraged Casca, who was also painfully aware of the fact that of all slaves none were so secure from the reach of his revenge as the keeper of the lions. The Princess, it was well known, had no possession she valued equally with her tawny pets, and the preservation

of their condition and innocence could only be assured through the careful management of Maphir, who not only understood their habits and moods so completely, but, by his recognised sympathy, maintained such desirable control over them. Casca hated the animals because, in the first place, he thought the Princess gave to them the affectionate consideration he was vain enough to hope he might otherwise have secured for himself, for it was no secret among a section of the court that he had designs in that direction, even though he knew of the arrangement otherwise made with Glarces. Still, he was scarcely fool enough to imagine that he would be allowed to interfere with their comfort and well-being with impunity, the Prince's favour for himself notwithstanding. This it was that gave an added sting to the hunter's timely reminder.

He knew not how to act in the unfortunate extremity to which his intolerant temper had forced him. Whatever might be the consequences the suggestion of bending to the inevitable could not possibly enter into his mind; better to be shattered at once into a thousand pieces, and by one blow to be cast into oblivion, than live to bear the taunts following such an ignominious defeat. Therefore with a sudden impulse he drew a pipe from his pouch and blew a shrill call for such assistance as might be available.

The unusual summons attracted the attention of others than the desired guards and slaves to the further discomposure of the excited Casca. Tasha was one of the first to appear, and from an opposite direction the still more unwelcome Zachra, the scribe, who would be certain to find in the incident a fund of humour for the delectation of Glarces.

“Call the Tabah instantly!” Casca cried to one of the slaves, and as the fellow hurried to do his bidding, he continued, for the information of the rest, “and I will warrant me these lions will soon be honoured, or cursed, with another keeper.”

“Can I do anything to help you?” enquired Tasha.

“No!” he answered furiously at the thought of a woman offering assistance to him, “I want a man, not a slave.” That unfortunate reply was the most serious blunder he had yet committed, and he was aware of it before the words were off his tongue, but it came too late to save himself. All who heard it knew that Tasha had but to report it to the Queen-mother or Glarces, and Casca's disgrace would be instant and irremediable. She, however, was not of the eunuch's disposition; her cheek tingled for the moment under the sting of the unwarranted insult, but beyond that she

felt capable of administering a rebuke such as was equal to her requirement for the occasion.

“I beg to crave forgiveness from the Eunuch Prince,” she replied, with the most profound satirical obeisance, “but I was wrong when I thought it was a man that had so disturbed your excellence; I had for the moment forgotten it was but a slave in the form of a man!”

Poor Casca! That musical sarcasm cut deep and took its merited revenge.

“The apology should be mine, most noble mistress,” he answered, clumsily, anxious to make what reparation he was justly bound to attempt, “but the insolence I have endured at the hands of this Edomite prevented my recognition of your gracious presence.”

Tasha gave him a sharp intelligent smile, but without further reply to his apology enquired,

“What is this I hear, Maphir?”

“His excellency demanded my instant removal of the lions.”

“But the Princess commanded you to await her orders here.”

“So I told my lord Casca ; but he insists that I take them back to the terrace, while he learns the will of my royal mistress.”

“And did you aught beside refuse to disobey her orders?”

“Nothing, lady, and my lord Casca can frame no other accusation.”

“You were quite right my friend,” and upon the epithet she laid an emphasis full of meaning to the discomfited eunuch, and then adopting a tone of authority she was warranted, but rarely ventured to assume, she continued, “I find it is still necessary for some persons to be instructed that the Tabah is the chief of the slaves, and I will take precaution that the same shall be made known. Yet, lest our presence should defile the precincts of my lord's jurisdiction, follow me, Maphir, and we will seek the Princess elsewhere.”

With that she swept past the crestfallen eunuch and led the hunter into the royal apartments at once.

The rebuke was a weighty one, and took to itself an additionally tormenting power, so far as the chamberlain was concerned, by the vague suggestion it made as to Tasha's future action concerning it. In all Casca's arrogant tyranny he had hitherto contrived to prevent any open breach with the Queen's great favourite, whom he secretly hated because of the power she had, even beyond himself, with the Prince. Had her near

presence been known, Maphir might have lodged his lions in the peristyle for a whole year without objection, and Casca would have waited quietly to obtain his secret revenge in discharge thereof. It was the discovery of this mistake which so exasperated him as to blunder into his first insult, just as it was the uncertainty of her meaning as to what future action she intended to take that made him oblivious to everything for the moment save the thought that he was not quite alone in his misfortune.

Yet, save for the Prince, there was no man in all Sahama who was more really isolated from his fellows than Casca. In heart an ambitious traitor, every freeman held him in most healthy contempt, and only consented to tolerate his company in the presence of Glarces; to slaves he was habitually, though secretly, cruel, even Shamer, the Tabah, being afraid to report his conduct, but assigning accident to the Prince to cover the inquiries occasioned by his treatment of the slaves who unfortunately were compelled to be near the heartless eunuch.

It may therefore readily be conceived how Tasha's action was appreciated by all who had been attracted to the spot by the unusual sound of Casca's pipe. Especially to the humorous Zachra did the occasion appear to be too fortuitous to slip without advantage, and no sooner had Tasha disappeared than he approached the chamberlain, addressing him with a mock commiseration Casca in his excitement disastrously misunderstood.

"I am afraid your well-known tact proved traitor to you in your emergency," he volunteered.

"That was more than your insolence could do" he replied. "Nay, Casca, do not misunderstand me. No man is more than mortal, and my wit has shown me wherein lies your mistake, and I would point it out in case another such necessity should arise."

"And you are not trying to fool me?"

"By the great gods I would as soon attempt to fool myself."

"The let me hear your counsel, Zachra, if you think it will assist me. But tell me also what you would advise should this Iranian devil carry this matter to the Queen."

"That will require thought, my noble Casca, and must be dealt with as the gods shall direct when the occasion arrives; but in this instance I saw your mistake at once, and wondered how your usually cool intelligence could so far forsake you."

“I was taken off my guard at the corner yonder, and had no time to consider what to do. But what is your counsel?”

“I think, upon reflection, it would perhaps be well not to mention it, so assured am I that in your calmness you will see it for yourself.”

“No, Zachra, be my friend, and in the future I will load you with plentiful reward therefor. Even the greatest of us are at fault sometimes.”

“Alas ! I know it now, since Casca can be taken at a disadvantage.”

“Then how much more yourself, my Zachra; so tell me, and thus lay levy on my aid when you may stand in need.”

“But the suggestion is so simple, I am sure you will see it for yourself, and hence for me to mention it will only be to add to your annoyance.”

“It is in that you fail to know me. I am always grateful for the counsel of a friend.”

“Then I will tell you if you will promise not to take it amiss.”

“I promise that before you speak.”

“Then why, when you saw the intruders, did you not first turn out the lions? It were easy then to deal with the hunter.”

The eunuch was smitten with a speechless fury at the cool impertinence of the merciless joke practised upon him at such a confusing juncture, and while an appreciative roar of laughter greeted the well-drawn-out point, the speaker turned merrily upon his heel, and Casca was left alone to recover as best he might.

CHAPTER IV

MORNING AND NIGHT

If the general appearance of the buildings from without were heavy and disappointing, in spite of garish colourings and loud embellishments, the interiors - probably in no small degree due to womanly influence and requirements - presented a striking and, at first, pleasing contrast. The ensemble of the royal apartments, to which our story now introduces us, has a truly overpowering effect from its weight of oriental magnificence breaking suddenly and unexpectedly upon us. Still, as we grow accustomed to the crowd of treasures, colours, perfumes, and our eyes are able to separate details in the soft rose-coloured light with which the vast apartment is bathed, we become regretfully conscious that the display is only semi-barbaric after all. It is an extravagantly bewildering

chaos, a wilderness of disordered treasures, whose value could only be worthily displayed in the separation of the appointments of the drawing-room from the servants' hall, the armoury from the boudoir, and the conservatory from the whole.

The room was of colossal dimensions, arranged for division into a series of apartments, if desired, by exquisitely worked screens of the royal pomegranate cunningly wrought in solid gold and studded with gems. The walls are pilastered alternately with alabaster and green-veined translucent marble quarried from the neighbouring hills; the cornices or mouldings which in Babylon or Memphis would have been of bronze or copper, are here, like the partition screens, of solid gold, and the panellings are of purple silk from Tyre, which are partially concealed by overhangings - not drapings - of amber embroideries of the same rich material from Ind. The sconces and screens are the work of Babylonian workmen, the furniture has exercised the inimitable skill of the Egyptians in ivory and perfumed woods, inlaid with gold, and occasionally upholstered in needlework from the great schools of Persia; Chaldea and Assyria have furnished vases and other accessories, and the wealth of plants and flowers are the productions of the most ingenious gardeners wealth can secure.

We may be pardoned amid so much to attract attention in so far neglecting to notice that the room is already occupied by two ladies, especially as the one is almost completely hidden in the embrasure of a window, and the other as effectually concealed in the soft cushions of a luxurious divan.

They are the two favourite personal slaves of the Princess Vedrona, also a present from Glarces, whose ever fanciful mind conceived the idea of associating them by reason of their strange contrast. Unfortunately, however, it transpired that the difference in temperament between the blonde and brunette was as marked as that of complexion, and in this respect the ideal wish of the Prince's present was somewhat marred.

The almost silver-haired Mna, handsome and young enough to be mistaken for a daughter of his faithful Tasha, first attracted the Prince by a suggestion of a bright and cloudless morning, and as she sang with the voice of a nightingale to the accompaniment of her lute as she sat in the market for sale, he at once secured her as a slave in whom his sister would take delight.

Near at hand, and in widest contrast, he espied the raven-haired Zillah, an Iberian by birth, who had been stolen by Persian traders as a specimen

of the lovely women to be found in the lands of the distant West. In every sense the contrast of Mna, in spite of her price, the Prince secured her without a thought of the impossibility of two such different natures agreeing as he would desire.

A trill of musical laughter floats from the window where the blonde beauty hides, and she dances into the room singing-

**“The sun - the sun is my lover free;
No Prince more fair can ever be;
In his golden wain
He rides again,
Yea, he rides abroad for the sight of me.
“The gates of the morning pass him by,
And he climbs the steep of the azure sky,
But he hears my thought
And I feel his kiss;
’Tis life, and love, and rapture-this!”**

“Silence, Æna!” cried Zillah querulously, “your senseless merriment annoys me.”

“How can I be quiet with the music of so much sunshine around me?” asked the perplexed girl. “Surely you do not wish me to weep.”

“That would be more congenial to me than your mocking laughter.”

“But I am a moth,” she answered gleefully, “and they can only dance and kiss the brightness.”

“They can sing their wings and destroy themselves,” replied Zillah, contemptuously. “I like to think and prepare my way beforehand.”

“But you only make yourself more miserable by doing so,” she answered, throwing herself beside the divan in an attempt to coax her companion into a more cheerful humour.

“Make myself miserable! Phew, there is no need to do that, when others have accomplished it so perfectly already.”

“But why grieve over that we have no power to change; why not try to make the best of it and be happy?” “Happy, girl! How can I possibly be happy when through the mirror of my tears I catch continual glimpses of a far-off pleasure you have neither known nor have the power to understand. It is a memory, Æna, which, though I do not love you, I will not speak of, lest I should recall such another to yourself, and thus kill all your life's happiness. No, no! you must never know the sorrow in which all my joys are drowned, but I must weep and bear my grief alone.”

Here the sorrowful and high-spirited girl gave way to the tears her memories started, and buried her head again in the cushions.

“Poor Zillah! Do let me try to understand your trouble. I shall not mind if it does cause me to weep, if by that means I can help to make you happy. I know I am not like you, but I am sure I can feel for you if you will only tell me your trouble.”

“No, Æna.” answered the despairing girl, “the infernal gods have ordained Night to be the handmaid of Sorrow, as Morning is the companion of Joy,” Then, as if an evil inspiration had seized her, she rose, dried her tears, and communed more with herself. “But sorrow need not, shall not be for myself alone! The wronged may sow its bitter seeds broadcast under cover of the night, and take a sweet revenge in the harvest of retribution which the oppressor shall reap.”

“What do you mean, Zillah? But, hush! There is the chime again. This is the third time the golden sand has run out, and yet the Princess is not here.”

This innocent reference to their absent mistress appeared to excite all the proud disgust of the Iberian's nature, and had Æna been more skilled in understanding she would have discovered in her companion's words and manner an indication that her loyalty to Vedrona was neither satisfactory nor conscientious.

“Perhaps the beautiful Virtue has been dreaming of love,” she replied, in supercilious disdain, “its warmth has caused her blood to tingle with strange and welcome sensations; and, perchance, she sleeps in an attempt to woo the dream again.” Then in an impassioned fervour of her own feelings she sprang from the couch, forgetful of her recent sorrow, and, pacing to and fro, again communed with herself. “Virtue, forsooth! it may be well as an imaginary attachment for the insipid gods, but for women! Pshaw, I am not a fool! The snow may lie white and unstained upon the sides of a volcano, or a fringe of ice may grow upon the edge of its crater, deceiving some idiots into the idea that the inherent fires are extinct, but I am not to be fooled by such appearances. Ah, well! sleep on and enjoy your dreams, my passionless Princess; no one can censure you for what is not known, and I can spare you without any sense of loss. Sleep on.”

Æna heard all that was said, but divined nothing from the words beyond a harmless reverie, at which she smiled. “Is it not possible to love without your blood being in a continual boil?” she enquired.

“Nonsense, girl! The natural temperature lies midway between boiling and freezing. But some people - and I think your pet Princess is one - appear to have milk running through their dainty and delicate veins in place of blood; her brother is also of the same order, only perhaps a trifle colder. Bah! I hate and despise such placid and emotionless creatures!”

“Cold and emotionless?” asked Æna, in horrified astonishment at such unheard-of estimation of her master and mistress. “Why Zillah, in all Sahama you could not find another but thinks they are the most perfect workmanship of the immortal gods.”

“Indeed! Then Sahama's opinion of ideal men and women is not a high one.”

“It is a good one, nevertheless.”

“Oh, you poor romantic, insipid child, what can you know of such things?”

“Quite as much as I desire, if the information will cause my blood to boil and destroy all the happiness of my life as it has done for you. But hush! The gong! Here comes the Princess and the fullness of the morning's glory.”

CHAPTER V

VEDRONA

Before Æna had finished her exclamation the hangings at the extreme end of the apartment were thrown aside, revealing a pretty but daring picture stepping out from the softened background of a corridor. It was the advent of the Princess, who with the fearless innocence of a child led the lions, one on either side, her delicate and fragile hands playfully caressing their huge heads or twisting in their shaggy manes. Close behind came the stalwart form of the hunter, with folded arms and restless, wary eyes, in spite of the perfect confidence he possessed in the brutes, ever ready to avert an accident. It was indeed a truly royal picture, wherein criticism would be at a loss to say in which feature lay the greater majesty, and the dim background of less confident attendants added the touch of distant homage to accentuate the group.

Vedrona's personality was remarkably attractive, though not a technically handsome lady. Her paramount and immediately captivating charms were spiritual rather than physical expressions; still, even in these latter qualities she would not be lost among the majority of her sisters. But

while others would use their natural favours and graces to more telling advantage, with the Princess there was a sense of lassitude and inertia regretfully suggesting the presence of her mother's weakness. On the other hand, her movements and bearing indicated a reserve of courage and resolution for use upon occasion, a latent fire smouldered in the hazel eye, and the bright gleams in her chestnut hair betokened spirit, determination and will, by which she resisted the influences of heredity and heroically refused to yield until absolutely compelled. Still, the haunting shadow was always present, and pleaded with melancholy pathos for consideration in all she did.

With the succession had been handed down from mother to daughter an ancient tradition that the welfare of the nation depended upon the Queen-mother governing by example rather than autocratic decree, and the popularity of the ailing Sazone was due in no small measure to the careful attention she had given to the maintenance of this rule.

Both Glarces and Vedrona had been instructed accordingly, and already the heir-apparent had given evidence in her private life of the determination to uphold the traditions which had done so much to preserve the simple and prosperous communal interests of her people.

If dress may really be taken as an index of personal character, we may safely leave it to speak in its eloquent simplicity for Vedrona, who was robed in some soft creamy airiness, which fell in undisturbed and graceful folds from shoulders to feet, being looped at the neck with knots of amethysts, leaving the arms mostly bare. Her wavy brown tresses were held in slender bondage by a fillet of gold, from which it fell in loose ripples far below her waist. Such was her morning toilet.

As she reached her favourite divan, where Æna and Zillah awaited her, her pleasant attention was diverted from the lions to salute her slaves, who prostrated themselves and kissed the hem of her robe. The careful interest she took in all around was at once apparent in the notice of the shadow that still rested on Zillah's face.

“Something troubles you, my child; what is it?”

“I was anxious, O Princess, when your coming was so delayed; but in your presence I am always happy,” she answered, her face beaming with a smiling mask.

“Not so, my Zillah. My eyes can see through the veil of your kindly laughter. You are not well, my child, and shall be freed from your services

to-day. Go, rest in the sunshine of the gardens, and let the flowers and birds charm away the poison of Medusa's serpents."

The suspicious jealousy of the girl misunderstood the considerate kindness, and her dark cheeks flushed crimson with rage as she took her unwilling departure.

"Now, Æna, reach your lute and play some soft and soothing music, for I, too, am disturbed to-day." Then, as the girl produced her instrument, the Princess turned to Maphir. "So you have fallen foul of my lord Casca this morning?" she enquired.

"For which I have to crave your pardon, O most noble Princess," he replied.

"Not so," she answered. "Tasha tells me the fault is not yours. How did it occur, Iasis?"

"I sent your commands to Casca," replied the lady appealed to, "but when the slave arrived the eunuch was not yet awake, and the message must have failed to reach him."

"Not yet awake, and the sun so high. Why so?"

"He attended the lady Lais to the marriage festivities at the house of Teresh last night, and did not return till the car of Phœbus had gone forth."

"With Lais again; he is mostly her companion now. Has my lord conceived a thought of marriage in that direction also?" she questioned, playfully hinting at Casca's well-known weakness.

"Not with Lais," Iasis ventured. And then, with a view of testing the truth of a rumour Casca had not interested himself to contradict, she added: "The eunuch would never be content with your royal sister until all other hopes had been dispelled."

"Iasis," spake the Princess, with far more warmth than she was wont to use, "let me hear no more of this man's mad dreaming concerning myself; and, if you share his confidence, tell him that his wild ambition is leading him along a dangerous path. Thrice have I heard these hints concerning him; but if I hear so much as another whisper, my voice may be added to those who already speak against him, and my first word will be a fatal one. I have heard of this mad folly until I am weary of it. As for you, Maphir, I will see Casca presently, and make such explanation as will clear you from any blame."

“I am but a slave, O Princess, and it is not meet that you should trouble on my behalf.”

“But slaves are also men,” she replied.

“If everyone had your consideration our fetters would be more light than they are,” he still dared to reply, anxious to push his opportunity as far as possible, in the hope that it would secure his heart's desire.

“Fetters!” she exclaimed. “My good Maphir, we allow no fetters here.”

“Not of iron, lady; but the heaviest bonds are those which no eye can see.” And the sincerity of his speech was attested by the sigh he was unable to suppress.

“What is this, Maphir?” she asked in pleasant surprise; “surely my gloomy son of Cush is not anxious to confess a love attachment. If so, be advised and defer your opportunity, since I am not in the mood to sympathise with love to-day. I am vexed, disturbed, defiant. Rather tell me how you captured these tawny brutes,” as she playfully buried her foot first in the mane of one and then the other, as they crouched before her. “Such a story will better suit my rebellious mind, and perhaps restore my mood.”

His dearest wish was granted, and in the command he was confident he could trace the influence of Tasha, the allusion of the Princess being only one of her kindly subterfuges by which she sought to conceal her gracious intentions.

Leaving the lions at her feet, he stepped before the royal divan and commenced his story, which needed no art of eloquence to attract her attention, nor simulated pathos to hold her rapt interest.

It was a simple hunter's story of an expedition lasting through several months to secure a brace of cubs, for which an unusual price was offered; of success, and return full of hope and congratulation; of capture, with his prizes, and transportation to a distant land, while wife and children waited, and perhaps were still waiting and longing for his coming.

All the sympathy and commiseration of Vedrona was awakened.

“But did you not go home?” she asked in consternation, as he finished his story.

“No, lady,” he replied sorrowfully; “when men are stolen for slaves, there is no time allowed for farewells.” “Oh! my poor Maphir, this is too horrible! Why did you not tell me this before? But fear not, I will not keep you long. I will speak to the Prince to-day, and, though I do not know how

the lions will do without you, you are more than they, and as soon as we can find another keeper, shall return by one of our caravans to Memphis, well rewarded for the wrongs you have suffered. From Memphis you will soon be able to reach home.”

The Nubian fell upon his knees and kissed her robe as he heard the promise, and for the first time in his life the strong and heroic Maphir gave way to tears.

“May the spirits of the great hunters and the immortals bless you, lady; and until that caravan shall leave, let me lay my life at your feet to do with it as you will.”

CHAPTER VI

GLARCES

“The friend of the gods, the most mighty Prince Glarces approaches.” So announced the herald as Maphir rose from his knees.

The Prince entered.

There was no necessity for the profound reverence with which he was received, no need for the acknowledgment accorded to him by the Princess, nor yet for the announcement of the chamberlain to tell us this was Glarces. He was a prince - not alone of royal blood, but of men, and the fact was so patent he could well dispense with all distinctive accessories and never be mistaken. Without the royal trappings and distinguishing regalia, Alexander, Nero, or Napoleon might have been lost among their subjects, but Glarces, in his simple grey tunic, with no other decoration than a modest amethyst over his heart, proclaimed himself and enforced the recognition.

He was a man absolutely moulded in physique and appearance by indomitable will and the inflexible determination of his mind. In crude material and appearance he was strikingly like his sister, but his soul had been sternly cultured and developed in that morality which first defies and then prostrates itself before the shrine of impersonal virtues. In every man and woman he found some possible potentiality of one or other of his gods, the protection and unfoldment of which had been, in a measure, entrusted to himself as a personal responsibility, the which he always attempted to guard with rigorous fidelity, especially against his own physical desires and appetites. This abnormally idealistic mysticism translated itself into all he did, rendering him an incomprehensible enigma to even his most intimate friends. Prompt in action, mostly

reticent in speech, but withal a sure haven of refuge for whoever was wronged or oppressed, and no man, neither free nor slave, could say that Glarces would take advantage of him.

Whatever of cloud or shadow had hitherto veiled the face of Vedrona, cleared at the coming of her august brother, and in the gleam of the light of adoring love with which she greeted him, the enchanting sweetness of her soul was fully revealed.

As Glarces - with an almost imperceptible recognition to the slaves and attendants, which he never deferred - approached the divan, upon which she had half risen to receive his morning salutation, she lifted her face and offered a tempting kiss, which trembled nervously upon her lips. For a moment the natural impulse of his love surprised him; his countenance beamed with a true recognition of the wealth of the prize he possessed, and his lips spasmodically anticipated the banquet for which they hungered - for which he hungered in his inmost soul; but habit, as a ruthless and inflexible janitor, crushed the natural impulse back again, and with hands cold as ice from the influence of the sharp momentary combat, he bent the tempting face downwards and answered her heart's petition by a chaste kiss upon the forehead.

With a disappointed sigh she fell back upon the cushion of her lounge.

“Peace, my beloved; may the peace of the mighty gods protect and clothe thee!” he murmured.

“Peace, my Glarces,” and her voice was eloquently rich with the regret still trembling round her eyes; “but I am not anxious for so much protection from the gods; I would rather have you to be - well, at least a brother, and not so much of a friend - a slave. I would dispense with all the services of the gods if Glarces would come a little nearer.”

“I am no slave, my sister, but since the holy gods take refuge within yourself, I dare but worship at their shrine.”

“Oh, you foolish, misguided dreamer; when will you understand that the love of one noble man is more to a woman than the protection of a thousand gods? The poetry of Paradise may satisfy the Immortals, but at present I am only mortal and refuse to eat of ambrosial dishes.”

“Oh!”

The exclamation was uttered in a soft, long-drawn musical key, which Vedrona knew intimated his termination of the argument. At once he turned to the Nubian and enquired:

“And how are the lions this morning, Maphir?” The hunter knelt and kissed the extended hand of his royal master; but knowing the enquiry was more in the way of a morning recognition of himself than a desire for information, he made no reply. The lions, however, were not so passive. Zhan was already upon his feet, and almost before the Prince was ready for him, reared and dropped his ponderous paws full upon his master's shoulders in a weighty but innocent embrace. It was a trying test for the strength of a man, but Glarces sustained it, and closed in a friendly wrestle with the superb beast, which afforded a splendid exhibition of the athletic powers of the one, and the magnificent temper of the other.

A romping tussle with a pair of playful lions is not a most desirable kind of entertainment for a royal reception room - that is, unless Glarces commands it, and then, of course, it is quite another matter, or has to be.

For a moment, as he feigned and fenced with his playful antagonist, the free and unrestrained spirit of the gymnasium possessed the Prince, and Vedrona watched with almost incredible astonishment that Glarces could be so hilarious. Then a pang of jealousy smote her as she saw the gleeful affection with which he seized the loose flesh of the lion's jaws and shaking the huge head from side to side exclaimed:

“Zhan, you beauty, you know I love you, don't you?” Still holding the unresisting brute firmly within his grip he laid his own head in a last caress upon the face of the lion, after which he planted a ringing kiss squarely upon his lips, and adroitly flung him to his full length upon the floor.

Vedrona envied the lion in that frank and unrestrained kiss; but Glarces had not bestowed it thoughtlessly. He never acted without premeditation, and though but rarely condescending to make an explanation in such matters, all who knew him were conscious he had a valid reason for his action. In this case he was moved by admiration for the sterling fidelity of the animal, mixed with pity, sympathy, and compassion, that its nobility should be divided by such an impassable gulf from himself. His generous soul could legitimately stoop and lavish all its wealth of endearments upon the brute, but his sister - she was as much above himself as he above the lion, and though, in her almost divine condescension, she might bend to consider him, as he stooped to caress the lion, his only rightful attitude towards her was that so admirably preserved by the brute towards himself. The watchful and unpretentious fidelity of the lion spoke to him in metaphors he interpreted by the signs of his own purity, and led him to

jealously guard the stewardship of his own sister's love rather than enter upon its possession.

The mimic battle having ended in the downfall of Zhan, Zhade at once bounded to the contest, after which the three rolled and gambolled on the floor, as a child will play with kittens, until both Prince and lions were out of breath with their exertions.

“That will do.” The lions at once understood him, and with a look almost bespeaking gratitude as well as pleasure, they turned to Maphir, conscious that their morning's play was over.

As soon as he had recovered his breath Glarces turned to the Princess, and with the innocent assurance of one who had been pleurably anticipating the order, enquired:

“Is it my sister's pleasure to dispense with her pets now?” “Oh, yes; let them go,” she answered, glad to get rid of her rivals. “I have no need of their presence this morning.” With the departure of the lions the whole company - with the exception of the favoured Æna - withdrew to a remote part of the room, but the trusted salve still lingered at her mistress's feet discoursing the soft music of her lute.

Throwing himself upon his favourite seat beside the divan, Glarces asked, “What is it that disturbs the pleasure of my love?”

“Everything!” she answered, gloomily. “The gods have turned the world into a scourge for me to-day.”

“You are not well. I will send at once for the good Machaon.”

“No, Glarces, no!” she cried, seizing his hand to detain him, as he moved to carry out his suggestion. “You may be a far better physician than he, if you will hear me.”

“Speak!”

“Have you seen Lais to-day?” she asked.

“No; I expected to see her here.”

“I received a message from her saying she was indisposed and would meet us in the fernery later on. Do you know where she was last night, and who accompanied her?”

“Yes. She attended the marriage festivities at the house of Teresh. Casca was with her.”

“Casca was with her,” she repeated, with significant emphasis. “Glarces, do you know that their continual association is not for good?”

“Hush, my sister; Lais is one of ourselves, and Casca is my friend.”

“And I am your sister and promised wife,” she answered. “Do not misunderstand me, my brother, but I am sure that the habit of concealment has grown upon her recently, and she only confides in us just so much as she pleases.”

“I think you are mistaken, dear; but let us send for her.” “No, no! Not so! You must hear me, then decide according as your wisdom and love dictate.”

“But if you cannot speak before her, your cause, at best, is but a doubtful one.”

“May I not speak to you of my suspicions in confidence?” she asked.

“But do you not see that this is the same mistake of which you accuse her?”

“Oh, Glarces, you are most unreasonable; so I suppose I must carry my doubt to our mother - and yet I would have saved her this.”

“No, you must not tell her. I will rather hear you.”

“You sadly misjudge me if you think I feel anything but the deepest love for her welfare, Glarces. But even you have thought that her confidence in us has declined of late, though I am willing to believe it may be more due to her Assyrian blood than actual intention. Still, we do know that she is wilful - somewhat daring - at times, and always susceptible to flatteries by which we have feared she may innocently be led into difficulties and probable complications. Knowing these things, for her own sake and our future happiness, I would save her from this too frequent company of Casca, for no matter how you may confide in him, I am assured that he is not to be trusted.”

“Be just, my sister. Have you any real grounds for such an opinion?”

“Yes, most serious grounds, which need not all be mentioned now. I will only ask you to enquire into his open defiance of my commands sent to Maphir this morning.”

“Open defiance of your commands ! Who has dared to do this ?”

“Your trusted friend Casca.”

“Surely there is some mistake. I will send for him at once.”

Vedrona made no objection to this proposal; but Casca however, was not to be found.

“Tell Maunus that I would speak with him.”

This Maunus was the confidential scribe and secret agent of the eunuch, a man in whom the Prince had reason to have but little faith, although his watching of the fellow had not disclosed anything against him.

“Where is the noble Casca?” quietly enquired the Prince, when the obsequious factotum arrived.

“He is absent, O Prince, upon a secret embassy.”

“There are no secrets from myself,” sternly replied the Prince. “Where is he?”

“He has been summoned by the lady Lais to a conference in the Golden Grottoes.”

“Go, but do not disturb them.”

Glarcés grew thoughtful for a moment as the scribe left them, then turning to Æna:

“Girl! Call Orasus hither,” he said.

When his personal slave arrived he commanded

“Summon Petronius, to attend me in my private room at once, and then find Meshrac and bid him wait upon me.” Then turning to the Princess he added

“This shall have my instant attention, my sister; there may be something I have not noticed, but it shall be enquired into at once.”

CHAPTER VII

THE ROYAL ASTRONOMER

“The Captain of the Guard awaits the Prince's commands.”

Glarcés at once left his sister and joined the officer.

“My good Petronius, instruct the guard on duty at the Fernery to note and report all persons who enter or leave from daylight till I shall go there.”

“And also what takes place?” enquired the officer. “No. I only wish to know who goes there.”

“It is done, O Prince.”

As the officer retired Glarcés touched a silver chime and asked:

“Has Meshrac arrived?”

“He enters with Orasus even now, great Prince.” “Send him to me at once.”

“May the gods grant a gracious peace to the mighty Glarces,” saluted Meshrac.

“Peace, Meshrac. And your salutation sounds almost like the answer of the gods to my enquiry.”

“I hope it will so prove.”

“Let us see whether it is so. What have the stars to say for my house today?”

“It is long since I had such a welcome enquiry from the Prince.”

“You have it now,” replied Glarces, in a tone which at once forbade any digression.

“The stars are silent towards the Prince.”

“And for my mother and sister?”

“Also silent.”

“Is it possible for the decrees of the immortal deities to be known to men without the stars declaring it?”

“Never, O Prince! The stars exist to voice the will of the gods to men, and form the only true means of communication between the immortals and ourselves.”

“Always?”

“Invariably. If Chryses the Priest is about to receive an inspiration, or Zaclas, the prince of all magicians, commanded their utterance, the stars would proclaim it beforehand.”

“And you say they are silent?”

“By which they speak of continued favour from the gods to their great Glarces.”

“I hope it is so, Meshrac, and that you read them well. I hear strange rumours, which I would prove to be baseless. Therefore I would have you read them afresh, and if possible, more carefully than you have yet done.”

“Orasus summoned me from their consultation even now,” he replied. “May I ask whence and of what nature are these rumours?”

“No. If they are true the stars will tell you of their nature and their agent; but if the heavens remain silent I shall know the rumours are false. Why should I make accusation until I am assured I have cause against the accused?”

“The peace of my royal master is ever my first consideration,” replied the astute astrologer. “By your wise indication I should be able to know where to begin to read and learn my answer without delay.”

“No, Meshrac; go and read the whole again, then tell me afterwards if anything can be found. If aught is necessary to increase your care, find it in that I have been disturbed. I myself am mortal, and know full well what frailties men are subject to. I have all confidence in your skill and integrity; I also know how truthful are the stars. But if I only echo the whisper I have heard, it might be that your wish, leaning one way or the other, would unconsciously tone the message and lead me to do an injustice.”

“Then I must ask for your indulgence towards me until night.”

“You have it, my good friend, at once. The matter is not of such pressing import.”

“But should I find the stars still refuse to speak?” he enquired.

The Prince reflected for a moment.

“If so,” he replied, “then summon Chryses and Zaclas the Egyptian, telling the magician that he must meet me and speak the words which will open the mouths of the gods, which Chryses will hear and interpret; for I will know the truth or error of these rumours. Should the magician doubt his power over the gods of Sahama, bid him be prepared to summon from the shades such names as I shall ask to consult.”

“Such is a most hazardous enterprise, O Prince, for one who, like yourself, has not been prepared therefor.”

“A true and honest man has nought to fear, my thoughtful Meshrac. An innocent soul is well armed, and need not shrink to meet either Zeus or Pluto. At all hazards I will know the right or wrong of these reports; therefore make all necessary arrangements, and I will be with you.”

“Your commands shall be faithfully obeyed, O Prince.” With that they parted.

CHAPTER VIII

THE STEWARDSHIP OF LOVE

Glarcés returned, and resumed his seat beside his sister.

“Now, having done everything at present possible to solve our doubts in that direction, have you any further trouble? If so, it must be at once dispelled.”

“Nothing more, my love,” she answered, for the cloud of jealousy had vanished in her desire for his return, and now that this was granted, she had no other wish. “I am sadly afraid I have troubled you with an unworthy imagination in my complaint; but I have paid the penalty in doing so in the unwelcome loss of your company for so long.”

“So long?” he queried, with surprise. “Why, I only left you to return.”

“But it was an absence, none the less.” And the languid pleading of her eyes told him how resentfully she had accepted it. “I wonder whether you will ever be able to understand that absence is in itself painful without reference to the time it represents.”

“Even then duty must ever be paramount, and love content to take the second place.”

“But when duty only amounts to a vague suspicion,” she reasoned, with coaxing and apologetic fondness, “surely then love has the prior claim.”

“In that case,” he replied, “love must still be content to wait upon the doubt. Duty, if only presented in an imaginary form, demands precedence and attention.”

“But petulance and peevishness are never the messengers of duty.”

“Are they not? I am not quite so sure about it. Meshrac has just assured me that it is always his first consideration to secure my peace. Would my Vedrona be content to receive a devotion at my hands inferior to that I find in a servant?”

“You know I would not - could not! But enough of this; I have you now, and wish to forget all else.” Then, either first noticing his amethyst or finding therein an apology for changing the conversation, she asked: “What induced you to wear this stone on such a tunic?”

“If anything is out of place, it is the tunic, not the stone. It is your gift, my love, and is always rightly placed above my heart, and, beside, it was most fortuitous that I should be wearing it to-day.”

“For why? What is the latest romantic idea in your mind?”

“Because it bears the powerful word which secures the protection of Apies, who watches over the welfare of individuals; and, further, the magicians and astrologers assure me it is a stone in peculiar sympathy with myself.”

“Yes-yes,” she answered, with increased animation, “Tell me what they say; I love to hear about their mystical and magical rites and interpretations. What is its meaning, or why do they say it has sympathy with you?”

“Of course, it is only a superstition,” he replied, indulgently, glad to see her roused into a semblance of activity. “The meaning they have been pleased to attach to it is ‘Deep and pure love, free from any admixture of intoxication.’”

“That is no superstition, Glarces. There is evidently a great deal more in their professions than I have been willing hitherto to believe. Yes, the amethyst is certainly your own stone, for there never has been, never will be, a man so absolutely free from love's intoxication as yourself. I shall now ask Meshrac or Zaclas to tell me which is my stone; but I will warrant you it will not be of your frigid temperament.”

“No. It will be a gem of more intrinsic value, of diviner lustre; but it cannot have a more godlike legend of its origin.”

“You are a veritable prince of imaginative romances, Glarces; but I would the gods had made you a little more so in practice,” she sighed despondently. “What is this new story you have to tell?”

“Have I not already told you of the poor prince who, to win the hand of a proud but beautiful queen, engaged to find his way to the boundary land of the Immortals, and bring from thence the priceless gems she coveted; how he necessarily failed, but by chance learning the legend of the ruby, in his determination to fulfil his desire he opened the casket he once had hoped to fill with treasure and poured therein the last rich blood of his heart, which was carried into the presence of the gods, who impressed the cooling life with the blue seal of heaven's pure truth? When the morning broke, and his knight came to attend his lord, he found him dead, and beside him stood the casket filled with a purple stone - the compound of love and truth.”

“Yes; I remember it now. That prince might have been my Glarces. I wish I had been that queen, to avert the cruel fate of such a love.”

“A cruel fate, my sister?” he asked, with incredulous astonishment. “Why, it is but in its final and unreserved sacrifice we can estimate the real value and fidelity of love.”

“And do you think the earth is so overcrowded with this kind of man that we can lightly spare one to gratify the proud ambition of a heartless monster?” she asked indignantly. Then her eyes met his, and she beheld the rapt devotion with which he silently, almost unconsciously worshipped her; at the recognition of this her soul took fire, and in the sudden frenzy of her unpent love she essayed to break down his foolish, maddening restraint and equanimity. “Oh! Glarces - Glarces, why will you be so untrue to your own heart, so blind, so stupid and ridiculously unmanly? Rouse yourself. Open your eyes. Listen to the natural cry of your better self. You have been a stone too long already. Let the love with which I cannot help regarding you, even while I hate the calm composure with which you thrust it back, warm you into life - into reciprocation. This cold complacency is unworthy of you. Its thousand invisible arms drive me from you, and keep us apart when I would take you to myself. Away with your boasted ideality, your poetic rhapsodies, your so-called divine ideas about women, and bring your understanding to recognise that as yet we are but flesh and blood, possessing reciprocative feelings with yourself. By what strange fallacy of imagination have you reached the idea that we are to be worshipped rather than accepted as companions? I tell you, as knowing my sex better than you will ever understand us, that when a woman is once assured of the true, honest love of a noble man, she needs and will tolerate no other protection than is to be found in the joy such love affords, in which she will lose herself and find the perfect mission of her life. The gods have given you, my brother, the great misfortune of an advanced soul; in its purity and godliness you already live within Elysium, and dream the holy dream of the Immortals. But you must awake and live. Our feet are not yet walking through the golden fields, and we shall be false to ourselves and the gods if we sleep and dream before the assigned work of life is over. You must first fulfil the duties of a man, my Glarces, before you can enter into the revels of the heroes. If you neglect the distinctive preparation, the gods will spurn you from their presence in the day when you hope for your reward, as an ascetic who has dreamed but never lived - as one who has falsely deceived himself and failed to fulfil his destiny. I know - have learned by a thousand evidences oft repeated - the pure nobility of your soul; I know, far better than in your generosity you would be willing to admit, the daily struggle by which you maintain the tyrannical despotism over yourself. In

your deep, loving eyes I read the true language of your heart, which you falsely think is hidden from my knowledge; and, knowing you better than you know yourself, I love you, Glarces, with all the powers and energies I have received from the gods. They have given us to each other. In the fields of purity and love, where they enjoy themselves, our souls were linked together, before even our mother knew of our existence. Why should these misconceptions keep us apart, or blight and dwarf the love the gods have blessed? Come, break these false barriers down, be my brother, and in that lesser joy I will rest satisfied until our souls shall drift together in a holier union.”

“Yes, it shall be so. I will be your brother; but I must also be your guardian. The gods have committed to my care an awful stewardship in watching over and protecting such a sister, and I should prove a foul traitor to their confidence did I not return my charge to their hands as pure as I received it. Hush, my beloved! I know the sweet and tender arguments you would use, and I fear for myself under the influence your eyes and soul would lend; but my duty demands truth, and I must save and protect you, even from yourself, if need be. This danger of your pleading grows in its subtle power with every repetition; it is too much for me, and by the love you bear me I entreat you not to tempt me further. You shall be mine; but not yet. Before my love can merit such a priceless gift I must be purified by resistance, be strengthened by endurance, gain a complete victory over all that is ignoble, and raise myself into a worthy companionship with the Immortal heroes by an untarnished fidelity to the will of the mighty gods. This I will do; and though all the love I have is yours, I dare not yield even to your temptation to violate my trust.”

“I cannot understand you, oh! my poor misguided brother; and I can only pray that the mighty gods would protect you, even as you would serve them in your mistaken fidelity. But hear me, Glarces. I must speak; for the shadow of an awful sorrow - worse than death, weighted with all the terrors of Hecate to torment you - rises before me. Some woman will come, who, shielding herself in your infatuation, will part us and destroy your illusion of my sex in the torture she will inflict upon you. Will you not be advised? Will you not let my love for you - great and strong as that you bear for me - save and protect you? Is not the vision of my fear and your helplessness also from the gods, who call upon me to prevent this needless sacrifice? Glarces, will nothing move you? Can no one save you from yourself?”

“I am safe, my beloved,” he answered, with unmoved composure. “So long as I am faithful to my charge the canopy of the gods will cover me,

and all must be well. Your love is the greatest gift the Immortals have power to bestow, and whatever comes, I must make myself worthy of it, or it will not be mine.”

“Not that, my brother, not that,” she answered ruefully, for the certainty of some coming sorrow had destroyed the last trace of the animation which had hitherto sustained her. “It is the gift which must be increased to be made worthy of the man. So you will not let me save you?” she added dejectedly. Then, as if under the influence of a new inspiration, she continued: “But, Glarces, if you will not hear my entreaties for yourself, in your character as steward and guardian I have a complaint to lay before you.”

“A complaint, my sister?”

“Yes. My position is a lonely one, and fosters the melancholy tendencies we wish to avoid. Think how I am isolated from all companionship. If my mother were well I should not notice this. But Lais is seldom with me now, and when we do meet we are no longer as we used to be to each other; Iasis is kind and attentive to her duties and all my requirements; but I cannot trust her with my confidences; Tasha does not seem to understand me as in the old days; and my life begins to grow burdensome for lack of companionship. I have no one but my brother, and you, Glarces, keep me at such a distance that I am very lonely; my days are wearisome and my nights sad, until at times I almost wish the gods would pity and take me to themselves.”

The touching pathos of her appeal had far more influence than all her argument; it came dangerously near destroying his reserve in the overpowering rush of his tender regard for her welfare. For one brief moment the brother - if not the lover - prevailed, and he caught her in his arms in one long, clinging embrace, the rapture and satisfaction of which gave her renewed strength and hope.

“This must not be, my sister - my love! Perhaps I have, as yet, misunderstood myself; but trust me. I will be your companion, and, if the gods will, all that you desire.”

CHAPTER IX

CONSPIRACY

The one supreme and entrancing beauty of the Palace of Velia was to be found in the indescribable magnificence of its matchless gardens. In the first original sketch nature had disposed this particular spot as an epitomised repository of the majestic and picturesque. A towering snow-capped mountain spread itself into a charmingly undulating plateau some two hundred feet above the level of the plain. The extremes rose in gracefully sweeping scollops defined by the miniature hills standing as guardians of its eastern and western limits, and presented from without the obstruction of a clear-cut precipice against intrusion. Those irresistible and poetic engineers, Sun and Snow, exhibited their ability in the construction of a foaming waterfall, springing from the invisible heights of cloudland, which thundered and roared in the air and afterwards broke into a thousand fantastic streams and cascades in which its terrors were transformed to beauties, and its voice fell like the distant echo of an angel chorus musically floating over the earth, while the sparkling waters added a semi-magical effect in festoons of silvered lace and embroidering foam to decorate the perspective of the mountain. The landscape, thus nourished, had contributed liberally from its museum of diversified effects; subterranean phenomena were ably represented by two huge and several smaller geysers; miniature dells and luxuriant retreats were delicately and artistically suggested; and a rich wealth of floral beauty pleaded for cultivation and attention. With such a sketch already suggested and prepared it was only natural that so favoured a spot should from the first be set apart as a desirable and central abode of the honoured mother and ruler of the people.

The one art in which perhaps the ancients achieved more real perfections than all others was gradually introduced to supplement and complete the outline of design which nature had thus so beautifully prepared. With the rising fortune of the community gardeners had been introduced from afar; ornaments, accessories, and characteristic features of other lands were continually and liberally imported. Slaves were constantly being multiplied to carry out new works, expenditure was a matter of secondary importance if only beauty and magnificence were secured. The ample grounds in time became a perfect labyrinth of oriental grandeur, in which the bright plumage of birds and water fowl vied with exquisite flowers; where gorgons and satyrs from the fountains and basins of a hundred ornamental pools peeped curiously through the heavy foliage of aromatic

shrubs; fantastic and unexpected arbours chided exertion; exquisite vignettes - each more daintily beautiful than its predecessor - pleaded for recognition; invisible songsters trilled their hymns of praise, more sweet in that words had never broke the rich melody of the music; and the whole scene - ever varying, bewitching and alluring - pressed with invitation to abandonment and forgetfulness to everything but happiness and careless enjoyment.

If in all this picture of indescribable loveliness there was one point more ravishingly enchanting than another it was the fernery. In the early days of this people, when the rich storehouse of their wealth was but newly discovered, several quarryings had been made in the hills on the royal demesne; these, however, were presently and wisely restricted on the surface, and mining operations were henceforth conducted by galleries leading to internal workings. One of these quarries was found to seriously interfere with the general effect of the design until a Babylonian expert determined to transform the scar into a beauty spot by the construction of a fernery. It was an artistic thought, carried out with consummate skill. The outlines of the workings were deftly obliterated by slender horizontal supports, over which a screen of creepers was carefully trained, dropping flowering or perfumed tendrils like a graceful curtain to subdue and mellow the light and heat. Beneath this a whole exhaustive forest of ferns was built up and arranged, overshadowing and hiding alcoves and retiring nooks which formed the favourite retreat of Glarces and his sister during the oppressive hours of the summer days.

It was towards this coveted and secluded spot that Zillah mechanically turned when her mistress so considerately bade her seek restoration from her indisposition in the garden. She had, however, no mind for the contemplation of beauty, no ear for music, or sense of appreciation for the ravishing diversions which would have tempted less persistent souls to forgetfulness. Zillah never forgot! Never for one instant since the moment she was surprised and stolen from her distant home had her proud, defiant, rebellious heart experienced an interval of peace. Kindness and consideration only served to infuriate her. She who had stood within measurable distance of a throne equal to that of Iran or Assyria, could not brook the patronage or favour of the gourd-like royalty of Sahama! Still, the haughty and rebellious beauty was a slave, compelled to serve and obey because the people who held her lived in nothing better than a cage - a prison - the single door of which was too well guarded for escape, and made it also impossible to send a messenger to carry her appeal for assistance to the father who would soon secure her

release. The only bitter solace available for her was solitude, where she could indulge her tormented spirit in imprecating wild anathemas upon the heads of all around her, and minister to her impotent rage by vain contemplations of the vengeance she would take could fortune be induced to smile upon her cause.

In such an unenviable frame of mind she presently reached her destination, flung herself down upon a rich mossy couch, rested her chin upon her upturned hands whereby her fingers could twitchingly grip her suffused cheeks, and abandoned herself to reverie. At first nothing but the restless movements of her body indicated the impetuosity of her thoughts, but soon her feelings became too strong for silence, and, all unconscious to herself, she began to tell her secret by recalling her former life, position, habits, and presently drifted into a review of her abduction and slavery. In the contemplation of these injuries her vehemence increased with the sense of her wrongs, until in her unguarded rage she cursed herself for the blind haughtiness which had at first deceived her, the men who had stolen her, the Prince who purchased and held her, the gods who had allowed the outrage, and then gave way to tears.

“But what am I doing?” she roused herself to exclaim. “Can I prepare myself for that which lies before me by repenting the past or mourning for the present? Would my father be proud of such conduct? No! Alcazar's daughter is a soldier's child, and such have no tears to shed! I will be worthy of the name he bears, and in the emulation of the soldier spirit regain by strategy that which I have lost through overpowering force. While my royal mistress humours her innocent imagination that I pair well with the soulless Æna, I will dissemble until I meet someone with whose interests I can link so much of my confidence as suits my purpose. Thus I shall make a way to send a message to Iberia that shall bring its hosts into this valley and take a terrible requital for the wrongs I have endured.”

“Ye gods,” she cried, as her fertile mind unfolded another idea, “what a service may I thus render to my country. Can it be possible that in the councils of the immortals this mission has been foreseen and I have been ordained and chosen to carry it out? From the days of my childhood I have resented the fate that denied me royal blood, and all the honours which have been crowded upon me have been overshadowed by my envy of an inaccessible throne. I have cursed the misfortune which brought me here, and wasted valuable time in the useless blindness of my rage with my oppressors, only to discover that everything is part of a foreordained

plan of the immortal gods to bring me with greater glory to the goal for which I have prayed and sighed. How mysterious, silent, and yet, withal, beneficent, are the gods. The half of Iberia had never heard my name, but by means of this wrong the whole nation will rise to receive me, and in return for the wealth which I shall be able to pour into its treasury they will award me a seat upon its throne.

“Oh! ye unconquerable and inscrutable gods! Now that my eyes have been opened to understand your wisdom and purpose, as well as the duty of the mission with which I have been entrusted, hear me! I acknowledge my ingratitude in murmuring at my lot. I have been weak and unworthy of my commission in the thoughts of penitence in which I have indulged, ungrateful in that I wished myself at home before I had come to understand your purpose; but now behold me humbled in shame at my infidelity, but swearing a future and unswerving allegiance to the commands of the immortals. I am now, and ever will be, the servant and handmaid of the gods alone. At the mandate of heaven I will rise superior to the powers and armies of all rulers; my life shall be sacred to the divine mission, my soul the bride of heaven, and my body bear a charmed existence until my work is accomplished.

“Iberia! of all thy sons and daughters none have been so honoured as Alcazar's daughter, whose name shall go down to future ages and never be forgotten. From this abyss of slavery I will arise to crown thee with wealth, glory, and honour above all the nations of the earth. When my bonds shall fall from my hands all the uncounted treasures of Sahama shall be laid at thy feet, and I will make the land I love the envy of all peoples and nations. I swear by all that is sacred that I will neither rest nor grow weary until the work is done. I will case my heart in armour, that pity shall not gain dominion over it, and every energy with which the gods have endowed me shall be consecrated to the service. Here, and until victory shall crown my efforts, do I unfurl the standard of my loyal cause! Beware, my Prince and Princess Gourd, for the foe is at thy gates.”

“And the foe a very dangerous one, girl?” asked a musical voice, rippling with incredulous laughter.

The slave turned, covered with confusion at the discovery that her enthusiasm had led to the betrayal of a secret she otherwise intended to guard so religiously. How much had she made known? How long had the intruder been hiding in the depths of the fernery? Her will and passion suggested safety by silencing the tongue of the unwelcome interloper, and her hand instinctively wandered to the secreted poniard in her first

thought of self-defence; but the instant recognition of the speaker made her halt, caused her heart to stand, and dispelled the cherished hope of liberation in the moment of its inception.

The courtly training of her mind, however, at once asserted itself and relieved her. In the lady Lais Zillah had long discovered a very divergent temperament to Vedrona, since the inbred instinct of her Assyrian father had defied the uprooting influences of Sahama's rustic simplicity. The proud Iberian had long watched and secretly commended the quiet contempt, with which Lais regarded her so-called sister, and her diplomatic mind somewhat recovered itself in the thought that by tact and adroitness the anticipated disaster might be averted. At least it was worth the trial.

“May the great gods forgive me, O Princess,” she answered, in well-feigned confused humility, as she knelt to kiss the royal robe, “but the great Vedrona, whom may the gods protect, released me from my duties for a time, and I was amusing myself by rehearsing a story I have often heard my noble father tell.”

Lais received the explanation with a soft, musical laugh, and then replied: “A very ingenious, if not exactly serviceable story, girl, and I commend you for its wit. Had I heard nothing but the apostrophe to your soliloquy I might have been deceived into believing you, but fortunately for myself - however it may prove for you - you did not notice my presence on your arrival, and I have heard the whole of your recital - far more, I imagine, than you intended to amuse me with.”

Lais was herself now playing the role of the romancer, but she had the advantage, and it was her policy to keep it. “Still, you need not trouble yourself about the discovery. You are in search of a friend such as I might be inclined to become, if it suited me, and I see no reason why we may not join issue in a common cause.”

“Will the lady Lais speak more plainly to her humble servant?”

“Yes! I will tell you, I have heard your story, and know your feelings and intentions towards my sister and her throne. Of course, such knowledge I can use according as it may suit my purpose.”

“Is this a menace or a threat?” asked Zillah, dropping the role of a slave and assuming an air of defiant equality, in which the chances of ultimate success were somewhat in her own favour. And as she spoke again her hand wandered towards the hidden poniard.

The Princess neither appeared to notice the tone or movement, but complacently assumed the lounge Zillah had previously vacated.

“What need have I for menace or the use of threats? I simply wish us to understand each other. You appear to have a just complaint in regard to your position and presence here; I have a desire I am anxious to realise. Now you are in a position to render me some assistance, which, if you are willing to do faithfully, I can presently reward by granting you freedom and restoration to your friends.”

“I am willing to accept your offer. In what can I assist you?”

“By carrying out my wishes as I may from time to time desire. For the rest my plans and objects do not concern you. I only ask your obedience and assistance whenever I may wish to command them.”

“I accept your offer entirely upon your own terms,” replied Zillah, without further question.

Lais glanced enquiringly at the girl as if somewhat confused by the ready acquiescence. Her wide experience of human nature - in the secret study of which she had made herself wonderfully proficient during her stay in Babylon and Egypt, as the companion and fellow-student of Vedrona - convinced her that in the Iberian she had found a woman artful and diplomatic as herself, and one who would need to be carefully dealt with to guard against surprise. Such an engagement, however, possessed a certain attractive piquancy for Lais, who had an unwavering faith in her own ability, and the face of Zillah, being most innocently free from any vicious suspicion, the former began to make enquiries, through which she hoped to find her way to some slight position of advantage.

“In order that I may be able to justly discharge my obligations towards you, it will be necessary that I thoroughly understand your case. Now, who are you and how came you here?”

“I thought you had heard the whole of my story,” she answered, with a disquieting look; then apologetically “but perhaps my feelings had not found expression at that time. Learn, then, that I am the only daughter of Alcazar, chief counsellor of the King of Iberia. I was in the mountains by the sea when my attendants and slaves were overpowered by a band of traders, who carried us to Susa, where Glarces purchased me.”

“Did no one make any attempt to rescue you?”

“We were overpowered, and before our absence could excite suspicion we were far out at sea.”

“Yours has been a great misfortune, but if you will faithfully serve me you shall be restored. Let that promise secure your perfect fidelity, but remember, I am able to take a full and complete revenge for any attempt to deceive me, and I can exact it without compunction.”

“What is my first duty?” she enquired, with calm indifference, the lambent smile so delicately playing across her features having a mysteriously doubtful significance, whether of defiance or assurance of fidelity.

“I shall need time to consider that,” Lais replied.”The offer of your assistance is so unexpected that I am scarcely prepared for it, but you shall hear from me through my lord Casca. You may leave me.”

The dismissal was with an air of imperious majesty, but Zillah did not bend or bow before it. With an equal dignity she acknowledged the termination of the interview and took her departure with far more satisfaction than Lais experienced.

“Casca!”

The eunuch at once approached from the hiding-place where she had previously left him.

“Have you heard?” she enquired. “Everything,” he replied.

“Do you still refuse to believe that the magician was right when he said to-day would be propitious to our enterprise?” “It may be for yourself, most noble lady, but I have heard nothing to assure me of the possession of Vedrona.” “Fool!” she cried; “do you expect to receive your reward before a move is made to secure it? If I succeed, how can you fail? Did you expect me to explain everything to this headstrong girl, before I am assured of her honesty?” “Such a beautiful creature cannot help but be honest.” “Pshaw, man!” she answered, petulantly; “what chance would there be for the success of any enterprise if it were left in your hands? A pretty face would steal your secret every hour and make you false even to your own mother.

However, I shall direct this scheme, and you will have the satisfaction of knowing that should Vedrona escape you, I can arrange that you shall have Zillah, who is a far more beautiful woman.”

“But she will have no throne,” he dolefully whined as the reason for his preference for Vedrona.

“No; I forgot that trifle. But you need have no fear. There is no doubt about you receiving my precious sister as your reward, if you will do my bidding and keep your own counsel.”

“All that you say shall be most faithfully carried out,” he cried, dramatically, “so long as my future wife and Queen of Sahama is not interfered with. But once let only one hair of her head be touched, and from that moment I shall become your most implacable enemy.”

“Nonsense, you idiot! Do you forget that in the case of Vedrona's death I should be Queen? Then I should reach my desire for position without binding myself to Glarces, and at once be free to marry you myself.”

“And would you do it, Lais?”

“Yes, in an instant, if you had been faithful to my plans.” “Would you, Lais, marry me - Casca?”

“Do I not tell you so?”

“Oh, Lais ! I would rather have you than a thousand Vedronas. Would you really have me?”

“I will swear it before all the gods.”

“Then I don't mind how soon she is out of the way.”

“That is the most sensible and businesslike remark you have made to-day. Now you may go. I wish to be alone.”

CHAPTER X

FLOWERS AND LOVE

While she is thus alone - oblivious of everything but the necessary rearrangements of her plan as to admit Zillah into the active working of her scheme, and so employ her to cause confusion by making her part appear to be at cross purposes with that of Casca, if the two should attempt collusion against herself - we may pause to become better acquainted with the lady to whom we have been introduced at, what she would consider, an inauspicious moment. In the drama of life, however, the great crowd of witnesses are not all confined to the orchestra stalls and dress circle, there are competent and lynx-eyed critics hiding in the shadows of unsuspected corners, whose testimony may have a damaging weight in the verdict of the future, and those who aim at high rewards must not forget that the secrets of the dressing room may be analysed and separated in the fierce glow of the footlights. Wherever there is a risk

detection is challenged. The care with which we guard our guilt most frequently betrays its presence, and Lais must take her chance. In the game of life she apprehends a prize—a goal, and takes her place to solve the problem how to successfully reach it. We are interested in watching the methods, of which we are justified in forming our own Opinion as they unfold.

In herself she has a most captivating personality. The orphan child of Queen Sazone's twin sister and an Assyrian general who forfeited his life and possessions as the penalty of real or supposed treason, she possessed more of her father's daring ambitious spirit than the quiet content of her mother. This was easily read from the soft, glossy profusion of raven hair, the coal black restless eyes, in which a determined green light flashed, as her enthusiastic blood rushed to tinge the olive cheeks. Slightly taller than her cousin, almost perfectly modelled, and a carriage at will either graciously majestic or imperiously despotic, at sight she was far more queenly than Vedrona.

But all the contrast was not to be found in her appearance. The souls of the two women possessed an equally marked dissimilarity. They touched in the matter of sex, only at once to separate and never meet again.

The gods, however, did not appear to favour the desire of Lais to reconstruct her plans, since Casca had not passed out of sight before the rippling laughter of Vedrona fell upon her ears, and an instant later brother and sister entered the fernery hand in hand, the latter still beaming with smiles as she regarded an assortment of mutilated flowers she displayed for the inspection of Lais.

“May the attendant gods grant all peace to my sister,” was the salutation of Glarces.

Lais turned over languidly as he greeted her. She had hurriedly thrown herself upon the soft bed of moss, and assumed a pose of abstracted meditation. “Is that you, Glarces?” she enquired, “I am afraid I had almost lost myself while waiting.”

“Why did you not join us in the garden?”

“For the same reason that prevented me meeting you at home. I am a woman, and were I in Vedrona's place should wish to have you to myself, at least occasionally. So, much as I esteem your company, I sacrificed myself this morning, and thought I would join you here.”

“And I did you the wrong to think you had a less noble cause,” apologised the easily satisfied Vedrona.

“Did you?” she replied airily. “Well, I am not surprised. I am not often in the self-immolating mood. So I can readily forgive you.”

“Still we have trespassed on generosity by leaving you so long alone,” said Glarces. “but Vedrona has been in one of her argumentative moods - I need not say any more.”

“Lais will never believe that.”

“I shall not trouble about it one way or the other, my children, since I have scarcely been alone so much as I suggested. In fact, perhaps, I was not quite so disinterested in my action as I have led you think. I had a second reason for what I did. The wedding last night proved to be a veritable bag of Fortunatus in its surprises, and before I saw you I was anxious to compare notes with Casca. I had not finished with him before your Iberian beauty walked into my net. Vedrona, do you know, I find we have misunderstood that girl. She turns out to be a sort of princess in disguise, able to tell a most romantic story of her capture. Not that I believe one word of it - but she really possesses the most remarkably inventive genius I ever met with. Can tell an impromptu tale perfectly, and unless you are warned against her ingenious art of fabrication will convince you of the truth of the most unheard-of things. Even I fell into her trap beautifully, until an unguarded word lifted the veil, and I convicted her. Now I understand the girl, I think. She is a most delightful companion when you have once conquered her reserve, but you must remember her stories are all invented, and I don't think she is capable of speaking the consistent truth.”

“Then our pity is wasted on your supposed loneliness?” queried Glarces.

“I only wish you had been present to share my enjoyment, and when the girl left I had scarcely time to compose myself before you arrived.”

“Then your waking astonishment and supposed weariness at waiting was an attempt to imitate her skill in deception. Don't try that, my sister; you will never succeed in that direction.”

“If ever I seriously contemplate such a hazard, my beloved brother, it will be undertaken when you are away on a long journey, or your keen perception would destroy all my hopes.”

“He is in a most captious mood, to-day, Lais. Don't humour him, or I shall never be able to tell you what he has done. At the expense of missing your own pleasure, I do wish you had been with us from the beginning. You are able to deal with him better than I”

“And has he been so very much himself as to be particularly noticeable?”

“No ! he has been unlike himself in an extraordinary degree this morning, and developed an entirely new and original character.”

“Does that surprise you? Why, I should be more concerned to see him consistently maintain an old one. Men cannot be consistent, my dear, no matter how honestly they attempt it; the virtue is absolutely foreign to masculine nature.”

“But Glarces is not ‘men’,” she appealed, in resentment of his being classed with the common herd.

“No! He is singular - very! More so, I am afraid, than we give him credit for.”

“I think I can divine that my sister's pleasant entertainment with Zillah took the form of a lesson in sarcasm.” Glarces volunteered, turning from the ferns which had attracted his attention.

“Your skill as a magician will never make you famous, if your power of divination fairly represents it,” Lais replied, somewhat elate in that she had been able to induce him to reply. “All women have been naturally endowed with the gift of sarcasm as a necessary protection against a man's possible brute force. But what is this new phase of his most complex character, Vedrona?”

“You will scarcely believe it, but he actually grew excited in an argument about flowers.”

Lais looked at him with quizzical incredulousness. “What! Glarces excited? Never!”

“I can assure you he did.”

“Glarces, can you hear such a charge and not deny it?” “Are you wishful for me to do so?”

“Not for the world - I would much rather hear you confess its truth.”

“And suppose I were to do that. I should only illustrate the truth of that for which I so often contend - that the best informed - whether it be man or woman - only know in part, and therefore we ought to be intellectually modest and open to instruction. There are yet more unfathomed secrets in nature and men than the wisest philosopher has dared to suspect.”

“What a tempting arena in which to fight an argumentative duel! but I am not to be drawn, my brother”

“Neither do I wish to tempt you,” he replied: “Your bag of Fortunatus is waiting, and I know how curious you are to discover its wealth to Vedrona.”

“Then Vedrona must be content to curb her curiosity for the present. My one chief attraction just now, as ever, is Glarces. Now, Vedrona, I will hear your story.”

“What if I forbid her to speak of such foolishness?” Lais laughed with unaffected glee; but the Princess looked doubtfully from one to the other, for Glarces' will was an inviolable law to her, and if he really forbade the continuance of the subject Lais might insist, but Glarces would have his way.

As for the Prince, he had but one idea in his mind that morning - to relieve his sister of all despondent feelings and doubts. In the pursuit of this desire he had more than once already deliberately astonished her, and was still prepared to continue his most unusual course, with greater zest than before, since he discovered that her serious suspicions regarding Lais were as ill-founded as the rest of her fears. He was happy - strangely, mysteriously happy - in this freedom to which he had abandoned himself. It was almost like a return to the old days the which his sister had been so sorrowfully lamenting. It did him good to see the two make common cause against himself. The scene was one to increase the pleasure of the gods, and he was loath to end it.

“Well, if you did forbid her to speak, I should at once be convinced that you had been truly guilty of some foolishness, and with the recognition that you had already committed one blunder in so doing, I should appeal to her by our joint love toward you to tell me, and so save you from the error of a second. Now, Vedrona, to your story.”

“You know his usual indifference to flowers?”

“Does he really know of the existence of such insignificant trifles?”

Glarces evidently had no further desire to take part in the discussion, but had turned his attention to some newly arrived ferns.

“He is scarcely so bad as that,” Vedrona gently remonstrated. “With all his faults he is not blind.”

“Well, have your way; I am not inclined to be too exacting. It is enough for me that you will admit he has any imperfections.”

“We were scarcely at the foot of the steps before he caught sight of something and bounded away like a hound chasing a hare. Then, in

an alarming excitement, for him, he called to me to follow, and all for - what do you imagine?"

"I should be afraid to surmise."

"To see a flower - a crocus! But that is not all. Before I actually understood what he wanted, he was away again, in his admiration of a chamomile, then an iris, a tulip and a lily; all of which he almost savagely tore from their roots - breaking, bruising, and destroying - and crushed them carelessly until he gave them to me in this condition." exhibiting the wretched confusion of petals, leaves, and stalks she carried in her hand.

"I thought you had an admiration for flowers," he replied from the depth of the retreat.

"Are these flowers?" she enquired; "or do you wish me to understand that I am only worthy of the wreckage and ruins of their original beauty?"

He returned from his study as she spoke.

"Not even the gardens of Velia are able to produce flowers worthy to lay at your feet, my beloved; earth has no possibility of growing such desirable beauty. But if so - if my spoiling these simple blooms grieves and surprises you, what shall be the feelings of the gods if I should hand back your love to them, crushed, maimed, and with the loss of its innocent purity."

"I see, I see!" exclaimed Lais. "At length, I begin to understand the mystery! All this is intended as another illustration - of what, Glarces?"

"That love is a stewardship entrusted to us by the gods to be protected and preserved, rather than appropriated, desecrated, and destroyed before perfection is attained."

Lais laughed long and heartily.

"What do you know of love, you splendid specimen of an iceberg? No, no! Glarces, I have told you a hundred times, and now I tell you again, that some subjects legitimately belong to man - philosophy, politics, war, science, and such things; others are the peculiar province of women - love, poetry, music, and kindred matters; and some few, such as magic, gardening, literature, and the arts, may be divided. In the baths and gymnasium you are at perfect liberty to indulge every fancy of your lordly mind, but when you attempt to introduce philosophy into love I object, and if necessary will rise in rebellion. Love and reason are like oil and water-unmixable."

"Are you not confusing love and passion?" he asked quietly.

“Passion!” she returned warmly, “why will you persist in calling every impulse passion, and love nothing but a frigid, stagnant, and placid insensibility? I hate the injustice of your false reasoning, and the metaphors, void of analogy, by which you have imposed upon Vedrona, to make your fallacies appear as the incarnate truth of all the gods in Elysium. I know different, and refuse to be deluded by your sophistries. Men and women are not flowers or trees, without conscious dependence one on the other. The one nature of humanity the gods have wisely divided into the two sexes, giving to each of us reasoning powers and responsibilities in the selection of suitable counterparts to complete our own selves, and afterwards produce an ever ascending type of being.”

“Perfectly true, my sister, but why do you refuse to recognise that there are two contrary influences at work in the selection of that suitable counterpart and completion of ourselves - love and passion? I do not deny the law nor the responsibility. I only insist on the desirability of assurance that the selection is made in accordance with love and not of passion - that the union may produce the higher type rather than hinder it.”

“But your desire is to produce nothing. Your preposterous ideas of love and women would result in universal suicide, and make a second generation impossible.”

“Now you arrogate to yourself the understanding of all the secrets of nature, and forget that she is able to accommodate herself to every possible necessity.”

“I suppose you would allow the gods to co-operate with nature.”

“In such a union you have the perfect desirability after which I aspire for the human race.”

“But we have already had that, and the result is man and woman as we find them to-day. Now, my dear Glarces, you can get no further, and for myself I am satisfied with things just as I find them, without troubling either the gods or nature again in the matter. If Vedrona is content to be worshipped at a distance - ah, well! I am not altogether an angel at present, and only wish to fill a woman's place and duties. But you may rest assured that the time and circumstance will come that will rouse you from your foolish dreams, and I love you both too well to allow the occasion to slip by without my assistance. Till then you may enjoy your childish ideas. Farewell.”

“Farewell, Lais, and peace.”

So they parted; Lais to congratulate herself upon the morning's work, Glarces and Vedrona to enter by the gates of romance into the silent land where such souls as theirs seek satisfaction at the fount of purity.

Is such a quest ever successful? Who shall say? Love is so subtle and mysterious - so unique and evasive - that they who have a superficial knowledge are often able to speak of and portray it with such eloquence of thought and feeling; but those who know it best are silent, constrained, reserved, and shrink from the attempt to dishonour the divine grace by any formality of words. Thus Love evades us, and it is best when left to the idealisation of the heart. To the pure all things are pure, and this may perhaps solve the reason of the difference of conception which existed between Lais and Glarces.

CHAPTER XI

MAPHIR

It no great distance from the fernery was a second, but more cavernous legacy of the old mining industry, from which the congeries of drifts, used in the later method, radiated. This spacious chamber had commended itself to Maphir as a suitable location for his lions, and under his direction most ample and comfortable quarters had been constructed. At the rear was a cave-snug, warm and silent - with accommodation for their sleeping such as nature in all her prodigality would never have placed at their disposal; and in the foreground the thoughtful hunter had most carefully considered the dispositions and predilections of the brutes. He understood animals almost better than they knew themselves, and, profiting by the suggestions of experience, had grasped the significant fact so often lost sight of in the present day, that kindness and consideration in dealing with the brute creation is a far more potent and efficient agent than force or the inspiration of fear. The Nubian's remedy for vice and protection against accident was to create a firm confidence in his own sympathy; never to allow any nervous excitement to overpower himself; and when - before the animals were fully grown - they betrayed any symptoms of unrest, to quietly sooth and comfort them till the irritation was over. By such means he cultivated their finest and noblest qualities. It was to assist towards this end he had laid out and arranged the larger apartment, where every provision for their comfort had been so thoughtfully made; and he spent no small amount of his time in their company.

In all the royal retinue of freemen and slaves, this Hercules - noble, courageous, and yet as innocent as his pets - had no other friends or acquaintances. There were others who knew him, loved him, whose hearts hungered for him as he pined for them; but they were far away. Only in dreams were they allowed to meet since the morning when he left them with such bright hopes of the result of his journey - the journey not yet over. Would it ever come to an end? Would fate ever allow them to meet again? It was in this overshadowing uncertainty he turned away from his kind, and found what content was possible in the silent sympathy of the lions.

In this desire for solitude, coupled with his inbred fidelity to duty, which even his captivity had no power to shake, he had also arranged his own lodgings within a corner of the cave; and when the craving of his heart refused to be satisfied by the only companionship available, he would turn aside to wander through the drifts of the mine, and by the light of a torch seek what distraction was possible in making himself acquainted with the almost interminable windings and connections of those subterranean cloisters. What a treasure of wealth, ready to hand and yet neglected, did these excursions discover! In the pursuit of such as this he had left his home, his wife, his children. For only a hope of a tithe of this he had sacrificed his freedom. Now, when he found it, it had no value, only to remind him how valueless gold at times became in purchasing the greater needs of life. Then he returned disconsolate. The only possible ease his life could grant lay in the transient lull of sleep - in the hope of the flickering vision of a dream.

In one of these early mining excursions, however, he explored an adit leading away from the general route. Its direction was more parallel than leading into the heart of the hill, and he was not much surprised when presently he saw a subdued light ahead. He threw his torch aside and went forward, his feet becoming buried in a growth of moss and leaves, creeping towards him from a vine-covered opening, which he found to be above, and commanding a full view of the fernery. This secluded spot became a favourite resort, having the greater attraction because its aperture looked away in the direction of his home, and by the mystic powers of the reveries he there indulged he came to foster the illusion that at such times he was nearer to his loved ones.

With the promise of the Princess, Maphir's heart was singularly elate today. Apart from his better judgment, he had become the victim of a trembling nervousness the lions could neither understand nor rouse him from. They were accustomed to frolicsome notice and congratulation

when returning from the palace; but this morning Maphir was absent-minded, and made no response to their solicitations or playful reminders of their presence. He hurried forward with a quick, impatient step, strangely at variance with his usual gait, oblivious of all and everything in his wish to see the animals safely housed, that he might send the good news, on the wings of his joyous soul, homeward.

The gates of the cave were hastily thrown open, and for the first time the lions were left without a word - even a look - of recognition or explanation.

The hunter turned away, and without waiting for a torch, or even the removal of his tiger skin or ornaments, sought his retreat to give his message flight.

Alas for intention! As Maphir threw himself down in his favourite position for reverie his trained ear caught the sound of an impassioned voice and carefully looking from his hiding-place, he saw Zillah, who at the moment was wildly giving utterance to her scheme of vengeance.

He forgot himself in his indignation at the treachery of the Iberian, and though the thought of eavesdropping was repugnant to every instinct he possessed, his sense of loyalty and duty demanded attention to enable him to render a necessary service to those Zillah would betray.

His purpose was taken without a second qualm of conscience, and, with keen ears devouring every word, he kept his ground and listened to all that passed until the moment when Glarces and Vedrona joined Lais. Then his duty ended, and, cautiously taking his departure, he began to consider how best to act for the frustration of the conspiracy.

On reaching the end of the adit his feet mechanically turned towards the lions rather than his own lodgings, and they, scenting or hearing his approach, gleefully awaited his return, as though expecting to hear some explanation and apology for his strange conduct towards themselves.

“Don't make me more ashamed of myself than I am already,” he said, as they vied with each other in expression of their glee at his return. “But steady, my boys, steady!” he commanded, as they betrayed a disposition to finish their interrupted romp. “You are getting older now, my beauties, and must learn to attend to business when required, and to-day we have serious matters to transact. There is treachery abroad. Our master and mistress are in danger. Do you hear that, Zhan? Zhade, are you listening to what I say? Come here, and let us see what is best to be done.”

Then he took his usual seat upon a large piece of rock with the lions crouching on either side of him, as two sage counsellors understanding all he said and able to advise him in his difficulty. All the restlessness of the brutes had disappeared, and with an arm of the hunter playfully, tenderly caressing each, as he communed with himself through them, they nestled beside him in a confirmation of their fidelity and support.

“I was just a bit thoughtless of you this morning, my tawny boys, in my own selfishness; but I am sorry for it now. Shall we kiss each other and make it up?” So far they understood at least one word, for each brute raised his head to receive the suggested peace overture. “It came about like this: while you were dozing at the feet of the Princess she asked me how I found you. You don't remember how that came about, do you? No, you were too young, and I won't recall it to your minds, because we have learned to love each other now, and you have been generous enough to forget the wrong I did to you; I am not so fortunate. But when I told the lady how, to bring you here, I had been compelled to leave my home and those I love - who are still waiting and looking for me every day till I return - she grew sorry for me, and said she would at once try to find someone who would be kind to you - someone you would love as well as you love me - to take my place for a little time, while I went home to see my wife and children. She was sure you would be willing to spare me for that purpose, and it was the thought of her unexpected kindness that made me forget you - or, rather, appear to forget you, for I only did it to see if you would really miss me when I went. You didn't like it, did you? I know it, my beauties. It will be hard to part; but, much as I love you, the other parting is a great deal harder.” He had to pause here for a sense of suffocation in his throat. It was only momentary; then he continued in a firmer voice: “But all this is very uncertain for the present, and we need not say anything more about it. We have other business to attend to, you and I. Secret business we must keep to ourselves So serious that I cannot go home until we have accomplished it; and if we are not able to prevent this threatened mischief, it may mean your lives and my own as well as others. Hush, my faithful lads. Make no noise; learn to control yourselves, for the secret I have discovered will try your tempers as you have never known before. The brute within you will rise in indignation against the man. Listen. I have overheard that Lais the sister, Casca the friend, and Zillah the slave of our master and mistress are conspiring to injure them. No, no! we must be quiet. I only know so much. How, why, in what way, and when, I have yet to find out; and I have none to help me but your selves. But we will save them, lads, won't we? I don't know how; but

if my own cunning deserts me, and I am unable to discover what I want, I shall watch, and as a last extremity I have already a scheme in my mind by which you can assist me. I don't want to do it, because it is a risk to yourselves; but you would run it for Glarces, wouldn't you, Zhan? Yes, I knew you would. So let me tell you all about it. If I can learn nothing of what is going on, I must carefully watch the movements of those nearest to the Prince and his sister. I have no doubt but that I shall be able to interpret the signs, and if the worst fear should arise shall learn the best time for you and I to take our exercise. We shall meet the one through whom the danger threatens; I will sprinkle him or her - I care not who for Glarces' or Vedorna's sake - with the juice of the taso plant. What is that? Ah ! I forgot for the moment. I have always been so careful you should not even see it, because the taste of the herb, or the smell of its juice as I can make it, would drive you mad; and Casca, or whoever I may sprinkle with it, would be torn to pieces in your uncontrollable rage. It will be painful to you, and destroy your reputation, for I shall not be able to explain the actual cause of your unexpected temper; but you will save the Prince and Princess, and that will be all you and I can ask in compensation. But you must not be afraid my beauties; whatever takes place I shall be with you, and as soon as you have well done your work I will drive the demon of your passion away. I know the antidote to the poison. The one is quite as powerful as the other. It will be in my wallet – see, here it is already. I am never without this” (he took from his pouch a phial to assure them of its presence),” and when you are quiet I shall point to your nervous trembling and swear that your temper was due to scenting treachery. I can tell lots of stories to show that you have this instinct. Then enquiries will be made, the truth will come out, and you will have all the credit. Are we to do it, Zhan? What do you say, Zhade? Yes, I knew you would say so. You and I will save our master and mistress yet.

“Now we have settled so much, I must leave you for awhile. I must find the taso root; but I know where it grows, and you need not be afraid. You shall not see it till it must be used, though it has to be prepared. So let us seal our compact with another kiss, then keep your own counsel till I come back again.”

He lingered with love-like fondness over his temporary adieu, then struck off through a seldom frequented part of the grounds towards a distant coppice. His path lay through a kind of wilderness, where nature was simply encouraged rather than supplanted, with the result that the wild beauties of the one part of the gardens contrasted pleasingly with the cultivation of the other. Maphir, however, had scarcely passed the

dividing line and settled down into his long, swinging stride before he saw Tasha in search of early wild flowers, which were the special favourites of the Queen. Such a meeting was to him a certain augury of good, and without the slightest hesitation he turned aside to ask her advice and assistance.

“I crave your pardon, lady, for my boldness in intruding upon you,” he said, “but I am in a difficulty, with immediate need of advice, without anyone from whom to ask it.”

“There is no need for any apology,” she answered, kindly, “if you think I am able to help you; though I am afraid you will not find me a very wise or competent counsellor.”

“I have accidentally learned a secret which may or may not be important, and I am at a loss what to do.”

“Forget it, Maphir, even before you tell me what it is, it is the secret of another, and should at once be forgotten by yourself.”

“Some secrets are better exposed than respected, lady; and I think you would agree with me if you knew the nature of this one.”

“You try to arouse my curiosity,” she answered, pleasantly “and so tempt me to consent to a breach of honour.” “There is little honour in this matter, lady, or I should have turned away. The first words I heard were of treachery - conspiracy. Therefore I listened, and feel in honour bound to prevent its success. But I am friendless!”

“Do you say conspiracy in the palace of Velia? Oh, my good Maphir! the promise of the Princess must have been too much for you. But speak; I will hear, though I may have to seek a friend for advice.”

Then without any comment or exaggeration he made known to her the substance of the conversation to which he had listened, leaving her to draw her own conclusions and interpret his communication as she would. The indignation she betrayed at Zillah's conduct, changed to apprehension, fear, alarm, and positive dismay as he disclosed the participation and action of Lais and Casca. The slave could easily be dealt with, but the chamberlain and Lais at once presented to Tasha a difficulty sufficient to tax the ingenuity of a far more acute mind than her own. Like everyone in the palace - even Glarces and Vedrona, as we have seen - she had heard whispers and rumours, and laughed at the jealousies by which they had been inspired. Now the storm of fear burst upon her in all its relentless fury. She could no longer doubt or turn away, but stood before

the hunter paralysed and speechless, until the torrent of her tears gave freedom to her tongue.

“Oh, Maphir, my friend! whatever shall we do?” she cried. “Where can we go, or who can help us in our trouble? I dare not tell Glarces, for he would first smile, then chide me, as he has treated others fifty times already. But I have also done the same. Others have seen it, but I have been as blind as he. The Queen has doubted Casca - has never liked him; but the Prince would trust him - is trusting him - with his life. As for Lais, I can see it now; she is far too cunning - too crafty for my innocent children, and I shall lose them because I have been too blindly confident, and persuaded myself that she was better than she is. I have tried to love her as I loved my own. Whenever the Queen has been doubtful about her, I have been her friend; when I have been surprised at her conduct, I have shut my eyes and been content to see her as Glarces saw her; when rumours have come to me, I have even spoken sharply in her defence. Now I find my conduct has been her refuge, and I am only able to understand it when it is too late - the fatal blow has almost fallen! Maphir, what shall I do - what can I do?”

The question was more than he could answer. He was only able to see the mistake he had made in making the communication. He could now recognise the danger which threatened his own success thereby, and wondered why he could have committed such an error. Certainly his native caution had this time forsaken him, and at least in one respect, Tasha had been correct - the promise of the Princess had made him untrue to himself. The cause for which he was willing to forego his emancipation for a time had been jeopardised by an inadvertence a child would have guarded against. Tasha was an artless, impulsive, confiding woman, transparent as air and innocent as snow. In her sorrow she would seek consolation by sharing her grief, and the secret would run like fire in summer grass. It would come to the ears of Lais and Casca, who would at once approach Glarces with the story as his own invention in retaliation for the scene in the peristyle that morning, and not only would his intended service to the Prince be prevented, but his freedom sacrificed.

All this Maphir plainly foresaw in the wild grief of Tasha, and silently cursed the misfortune into which he had fallen. It did seem as if the gods had committed themselves to the fortunes of the conspirators, and the spirits of the great hunters - who were far more potent powers than all the gods to Maphir - had forsaken him in the moment of his greatest need.

But had his conduct really been as culpable as he judged? Apart from Tasha, he had no soul to whom he could appeal for advice and assistance, and if he was to succeed, it was absolutely essential he should be in a position to know what part Zillah played in the presence of the Princess. Tasha was a broken reed upon the sea of his difficulty compared with the dangers he had to cope with; but there was no better support in sight, and duty demanded he should catch at the straw. She was true, if not strong. Many a thoughtful man before him had drawn important deductions from such simple indicators, and if he could only impress Tasha with the necessity for absolute secrecy she might yet become an admirable assistant in his scheme, so far as learning and reporting the movements of all the parties concerned.

“Maphir, why don't you tell me something?” she cried, presently. “What are we to do to save my children? I know! Teresh will tell me. I will find him at once, and whether Glarces consents or not, the Queen shall have the three arrested!”

“May I ask you, lady, not to do anything hurriedly in this matter? We cannot crush this thing apart from the approval of the mighty Glarces, and before we can appeal to him we must be able to make him see the justice of our cause. Neither the Queen nor my lord Teresh can do anything without the Prince, therefore we must be content to wait until we are in a position to safely appeal to him.

So far there is no immediate cause of danger. Lais has to re-arrange her plans, and Casca will tell Zillah what they are and the service Lais requires of her. That meeting is almost sure to take place in the fernery. Now if you can find out when this is to be, which you may easily do by keeping watch on the slave, I will undertake to do the rest. But we must not tell the secret to our dearest friend for the present. And, further, most noble lady, be careful that Æna is not removed by any pretence from attendance on the Princess. Any attempt in that direction will indicate danger, and if you can in any way secure that she shall report to you any conversation between Lais or Zillah with her mistress, and you will let me know, I shall be able to find my way to bring their plans to naught.”

“Yes, yes ! I will do all that, and more, if you wish it; but do you wish me not to say anything to Teresh?”

“Not at present, lady. I shall be glad of his assistance by and by, then I will ask you to bring us together.”

“I will be your slave in this, Maphir, and may the mighty gods aid you in saving my children. Shall I go at once?”

“Yes, lady; but as yet Lais is with the Prince and Princess in the fernery. So soon as she returns she will see Casca, and after that she or he will seek Zillah. I want to know what instructions she receives.”

“I will find that out and let you know. Farewell.” “Peace, lady, and success.”

Tasha had forgotten all about the flowers, and hastened homewards, determined to do her share in frustrating this treason.

Maphir saw the prospects brightening somewhat, and strode onward with a quickened step in order to secure his herb and return without delay.

CHAPTER XII

A LOVE PHILTRE

The position Tasha occupied in the royal household was for some years second only to that of the Queen, until Vedrona and Glarces matured and were constrained to come to her relief. But, even then, the unassuming and faithful friend found it no easy task to retire into a private capacity. Coming under the moulding influence of the Queen at the most impressionable moment of her life, all the finer qualities of womanhood had been carefully cultivated, softened by the modest consciousness of a fact never lost sight of she was still a slave. This ever visible admission contributed a rare and peculiar charm to a naturally beautiful character, adorned with unselfish devotion, artless simplicity, and transparent fidelity, which not only ensured her general respect, but also commanded the affection and loyalty of the circle among which she moved. Again, the positive refusal to accept her proffered manumission gave the slaves a deeper, stronger confidence in one who had ever been the guardian and surety of their interests. So long as Tasha lived, the yoke of bondage in Sahama could never be grievous. In her the well-being and goodwill of thousands of slaves were centred, and to be allowed to do her a personal service was equal to receiving a badge of honour.

Under such circumstances the information desired by Maphir was not difficult to obtain, and during the afternoon, while he was yet cogitating and contrasting various suggestions of procedure, a confidential slave from Tasha aroused him and presented her sealed tablets, upon which he read: “Fernery. Sunset.”

“Tell the noble Tasha I understand, and will obey her will,” he said.

Then the slave bowed and retired.

“As I thought,” murmured Maphir; “in the fernery during the evening meal. Now comes the question of my hearing what is said. Lais had no choice but to hear the girl where she found her; but she and Casca had held their parley in the cove, and there the amorous eunuch will propose to hold this interview. Nor do I know on which apartment he will fix his choice. It will not be where Lais suspects, lest she should be curious and conceal herself to overhear. What shall I do? But there is time, the sun has far to travel yet. The hunters will speak to me, and I shall be prepared before Casca and Zillah meet.”

So he threw open the gates and called his lions for their afternoon exercise, and with a lighter heart than they had seen before, he played with his gigantic cats to their delighted astonishment in compensation for his neglect of the morning. Then, as the sun began to touch the distant hill-tops, he led them back, fed, and made them safe for the night.

His own meal over, he brought from his room a small cauldron, still steaming, in which he had prepared a further supply of his antidote, and removing the lid, left it to cool where the steam and odour would be carried into the cave.

“There, my beauties, the smell of that will guard against all accidents, while I prepare the poison.”

Then carefully considering with himself for a few moments, he fetched a fire pan in which wood was still burning, and carried it to the foot of a bridge spanning a stream, where he placed it, not in the way of anyone passing, but where the wind would carry the smoke across the bridge.

“She is certain to come this way,” he meditated, as he carefully located the brazier, “and I will have such a reception ready as will ensure her stopping while I have a word or two.”

Then he brought another cauldron in which he had placed the noxious herb, filled the vessel with water from the stream, replenished the fire, and sat down to watch until the water boiled; then he carefully covered the pot and awaited developments. The fumes were carried directly from the cave, so the lions were safe from their effect; they were also borne across the bridge, slightly away from the direction in which Zillah was expected; she would therefore be ignorant of their unwelcome pungency till actually reaching the structure, when he trusted to her remonstrance opening a parley by which he hoped to turn her from her purpose. How this was to be accomplished lay, as yet, in a state of nebulous uncertainty in his mind. He would frustrate the design of Lais; on that he was fully determined, but he knew no more, and must rely upon the exigencies of

the moment at every step for success. There was, however, a strong undercurrent of natural sympathy for misfortune beneath his stern and morose exterior. The story Zillah had told to Lais was not unlike his own in its broad outline, and though her readiness to betray her mistress had caused his honest heart to revolt with an indignation which temporarily smothered his better feelings, the true nobility of his nature smouldered, and was invisibly burning through with a desire to save the slave, and point the way to a more safe and honourable freedom. He had not yet discovered this, but nevertheless it was there. The real man was struggling through the transient with the one noble desire to save both victim and dupe, leaving Lais and Casca for the time out of all consideration.

“I wish I knew the right way to get hold of this girl,” he deliberated with himself, as he watched the steaming cauldron. “There is a trail somewhere, if I could only strike it, by which I could reach and save her from the danger ahead. But what do I know about women, especially women of her kind? Lais had almost more than she could do to keep even with her, and made a very doubtful finish, after all. What can I expect? But then I don't think I would hurt her, if I could help it - why should I? She wants to get back home as much as I do, and if I were in her place, I suppose I should see things as she does, rather than as I do now. If I could tell her of my own success, promise her the assistance of Tasha, as I had it, and get her to see how much more she might expect from Vedrona than from Lais, I wonder whether she -”

“Do you hear me, slave?”

Maphir started perceptibly. Zillah was calling to him.

At the moment when his plans were assuming a more hopeful form her undesirable presence brought them down with a crash.

“Did you call, lady?”

She was but a slave; still, he could not be other than respectful.

“Have you nothing better to do than poison the air with such vile odours? Remove that pan at once, and let me pass?”

“I would do so, but to remove it now would only spoil it. Will you -”

“No, I will not. Remove that at once, and let me pass to the Princess.”

“The noble Vedrona is in the palace; but I have a message.”

“I have no wish to hear it. At your peril I command you to cover that poison and allow me to go by.”

Her imperious tone stung the man, who was momentarily more conscious of his desire to serve her. He rose to his feet, folded his arms, drew himself to his full height, looking every inch as majestic as herself, as he replied with a quiet sarcastic smile lighting his dusky face:

“Has Zillah, the slave, been raised to the office of Tabah, or has the mighty Glarces deposed Casca in your favour, that you have power to order with right to be obeyed? I have not heard it yet, and therefore must complete that which I know to be my duty. But I have a message -”

“And I an appointment.”

Maphir was now determined to proceed.

“When gathering those herbs I met -”

“Will you allow me to pass, or shall I raise an alarm?” “I met a man in a strange dress bearing unknown arms.” continued the hunter, as he stepped to the foot of the bridge, perfectly indifferent to the fumes of the herb.

“What care I for the man, or your insolence either?” she exclaimed as she stepped to the other end of the bridge and drew her dagger. “Stand aside and let me pass, or by all the gods of Iberia -”

“Iberia?” broke in Maphir, with well-feigned surprise. “Is it possible that you are the lady for whom he was enquiring?”

“Did he say Iberia, Maphir?” she enquired, and her cheeks blanched with the nervous excitement that seized her. “Yes, he was asking for me. I am from Iberia. What did he say? Where is he?”

Zillah had unconsciously come to his relief - had given him an idea by which to detain her. That was sufficient for the present; he would follow it up and trust to circumstances.

“You must wait a little, lady,” he answered, resuming his usual stolid manner, and turning his attention to the cauldron; “this potion for the lions needs all my attention for the present. You have wasted the time I had to give the message.”

She had crossed the bridge, conquered her haughtiness, and become an impatient suppliant now.

“Tell me what he said,” she cried; “keep me not in this cruel suspense. He comes from my home - my father! Tell me what he says - what news he brings; or the delay will choke me - I shall die!”

“This requires all my attention for the present, and the message is in some unknown tongue upon a leaf at my lodgings. You had better keep your appointment, and see me when you return.”

“I have no appointment worthy of consideration in comparison with your message.”

“I thought it was with the Princess.”

“I did say so, but it was only to deceive you into allowing me to pass.”

“Oh! I begin to understand - you do not fear to lie when it suits your purpose?”

“I was in haste, and did not stop to argue.”

“Then pray go on your way - I have no wish to keep you.” “But the message - I must have that if all the appointments in Sahama wait.”

“And you must also wait until this love philtre for the great Casca is finished.”

“What are love philtres to me! Haste! Give me the message, man.”

“And what is a slave to Casca?” he replied. “But if you told one lie about your appointment, how am I to know the message is for you?”

“Did I not mention Iberia before you told me aught about it?”

“Is there no other slave in Sahama from Iberia?”

“Not one.”

“That may be so, but I have to make sure about it. The lady who has this message has first to tell me the name and station of her father.”

“His name is Alcazar, chief counsellor to the king of Iberia.”

“That is something like it. Perhaps the message is for you, after all. I will let you have it when I have finished this for the great lord Casca.”

“Liar!”

Before Maphir could rise from stirring the cauldron he received a blow which made him stagger across the fire in danger of severely injuring himself.

It was Casca who uttered the exclamation and struck the hunter. Unknown to either Maphir or Zillah he had cautiously approached under shelter of the trees, until by a single step he was able to deal the blow.

“You cub of Cerberus,” hissed the infuriated chamberlain, “is this your gratitude for my clemency of this morning? Is this the – the - curse you! I

have had enough. I can endure no more. Now you shall know what it means to to ... You - you ... Where is my pipe?"

And forgetful of the confusion with which his previous summons covered him, he blew a long shrill note, calling for immediate assistance.

Maphir rose to his feet, more injured by the humiliation than the blow, and for an instant a dangerous suspicion of mischief trembled upon his face, which, fortunately for Casca, was almost instantly repressed. With a proud confidence in his own superiority he leisurely folded his arms, dismissed a contemptuous smile from his lips, and replied

"If I have done any wrong to the lady, I am at once prepared to answer it; but I claim the right granted to every slave to appeal to the Prince for having been struck without authority."

"Silence, you base born brute! Speak but one other word, and you shall see the Prince, but it shall be without your ears."

"Surely the great lord Casca has forgotten that he has no authority in the punishment of a slave. I appeal to the Tabah, and leave myself in his wise hands."

Shamer had just come upon the scene with such slaves as he could instantly command on hearing the summons. But much to the chagrin of Casca, the guard had also answered his call, together with several civilians and minor officers from the palace.

"What is the matter?" asked the Tabah, who made a shrewd guess at the cause of the quarrel. Casca had already made an elaborate report to him of the previous incident, which the Prince had disposed of very much to Maphir's credit; and the continual interference with the slaves by the ambitious chamberlain was an old-standing cause of complaint by Shamer.

"I am waiting to hear in what I have done any wrong," replied the hunter.

"In what you have done wrong," cried the excitable eunuch. "Oh! ye mighty gods, hear him! Take him away, guard-take him away. Throw him into the vilest hole in the guard-house, or I shall slay him where he stands."

Shamer waved the guards aside. "I can deal with the slave if necessary," he said.

As for Maphir an amused smile curled his lips as he looked down upon Casca and his threat. "Has it become a crime to deliver a message to a fellow slave?" he enquired.

“You lie, you black-faced thief!” cried the chamberlain. “You tried to lure the lady to your lodgings for a more dangerous purpose. She has told me of your insults before; but I have caught you now, and though your lying tongue has deceived the willing ear of the Prince, I will guard against his interference now. I will teach you how to defy me and insult my friends.”

“You must take a speedy retribution, Casca, or I fear you will be too late.”

It was the Prince himself who spoke, coming from the trees at the foot of the bridge across the stream.

Who is it that has so roused your serious displeasure?” “The Nubian, most mighty Glarces.”

“What, Maphir! Surely you have made some mistake, my lord.”

“I would I had, for his sake and the leniency with which you are pleased to regard him.”

“I have no friends, Casca, where justice is concerned, and my meanest slave has equal claims in that court with myself.”

“I was relying on your well-known justice, O Prince, when I ordered yon slave's arrest. Take him away, Shamer.”

“I am here, Casca,” sternly spoke the Prince, whose quick eye had noticed the eunuch's nervous anxiety to put an end to the scene. But Glarces' mind was busy with what he had heard from his sister respecting his friend, and this was the first time he had been able to investigate rumour at first hand. If a thousand Cascas fell as a result, and his own confidence was thereby shattered to fragments, Glarces would carry the inquiry to the end. “I wish to hear at once what has to be said in this matter.”

This was not what Casca hoped for. His case was not yet ready, even to be carried before Teresh, far less before the Prince.

“There are many reasons why this case cannot be disposed of now,” he answered in a perfect terror lest he was about to suffer another defeat. “When a regular court is formed, I will be there to prove the case against him.”

“Where I am is always a regular court to deal with my own slaves. What have you to charge against Maphir? Is his offence against yourself?”

“Yes - that is, partly. And against another.” “Was the offence against yourself first?”

“No. He first prevented this lady - .”

“Zillah is a slave, Casca,” the Prince reminded him. “Since when have you become so respectful as to call her lady? This is unusual, and makes me curious.”

The correction was made most affably, but Casca knew the Prince would not forget it. He had blundered in his excitement, but it was better to let it pass unanswered.

“He first refused to allow the Iberian to pass, then by artful tales attempted to induce her to visit him for a base and forbidden purpose, and when she resisted, was about to use force to compel her to his lodgings when I arrived.” “That is a serious charge.”

“Most serious, O Prince.” “Is it true, Maphir?”

“No, most mighty Glarces, it is not true. I did detain the lady by the perfumes from the cauldron, but the bridge divided us. She, like myself, is a slave, with none too many friends to advise her in a time of necessity. My custom is never to speak to anyone, but knowing she was in danger, I wished to warn her, and was feeling my uncertain way how best to do it, when -”

“It is false,” said Zillah, warmly interrupting his statement, and, choosing to link her fortunes with Casca, she seized upon his accusation, assuring the Prince that it was true, and but for the timely arrival of Casca, would have been carried out.

“This is still more serious, Maphir, in that you would deny it.”

“Because he relies on your clemency, O Prince,” Casca answered. “This is not his first offence of the kind, though it is the first I have been able to prove against him.”

“Have you heard of these other cases, Shamer?”

“No,” was the simple answer.

“That is strange; but of course if my lord Casca has done so we must accept his evidence.”

“Had you anyone with you, Maphir, who will say anything on your behalf?”

“No one, most noble Prince.”

“Then I can only say that Casca is right in thinking this a case for searching enquiry, and I shall not be unmindful of it. I am also deeply impressed with another thought which prompts a feeling of gratitude to the gods, in the assurance I have that watchful eyes guard the interests of

innocent men. There are witnesses of our lives and actions - unseen, unknown, and unsuspected - who are permitted to protect the right, and confound the wrong. It has been so in this case. Casca, Zillah, and Maphir are not the only witnesses of what transpired, but I have seen and heard everything from the beginning. I have also learned, from Casca's tatement of the incident, whispers of something I am not at present able to understand. Maphir, however, is innocent, and I am more than glad to be able to save him from the injury one who has been my friend sought to do him."

Casca, sobered from his excitement by the words of Glarces, was more than crestfallen. Around him stood a score of men who would delight in his downfall. Would their anxious expectancy be gratified, or would the enigmatical Glarces reserve his judgment until the enquiry he had hinted at was concluded. He could only hope. No man could answer for what the Prince would do, but, covered with confusion for this blow which he felt had irretrievably injured, if not positively destroyed him, he listened fearfully to hear what had yet to follow.

"Maphir, my faithful servant," continued Glarces, "you are free, and that in a far wider sense than a liberation from this unjust charge. My sister, the Princess, has reported to me the account of your capture as told to her this morning, with the request that you at once receive your liberty, with freedom to return home whenever you desire. Her wish is my law, and I was on my way to present you with this seal of our discharge when I saw Zillah approach, and stepped back into the trees until she had passed. Here is your nobly won freedom, and may the mighty gods protect you in your journey home. We shall be sorry to lose you, but wife and children have a claim upon you we dare not resist. Henceforth you are a free man; go when you choose, and I will see to it that your departure shall not be without fitting reward."

The hunter dropped upon his knees, and covered the hand that gave his freedom with tears and kisses, but his heart was too full for words.

Glarces was deeply touched, as he turned away with a silent sign to Casca to follow. Maphir cast on Zillah a glance full of sorrowful significance, as if he would appeal to her to notice the reward of fidelity, then lifted his cauldron and strode back to tell his lions.

CHAPTER XIII

THE ORDEAL OF THE ORACLE

The evening meal was over. Vedrona and Lais - the former with her doubts and suspicions quieted for the time - were keeping the Queen company; and Glarces, disinclined for society, had retired to his room. The day had not passed so evenly placid as usual, and his oversensitive mind was anxious to review and harmonise events. Further, he was expecting to hear from Meshrac, with a possibility of a visit to the oracle as a sequel in the background. In such a thought there was that thrill of nervous anticipation always associated with new, especially mysterious, subjects; and altogether it was not surprising that he should desire to be alone.

He touched the chime.

“Has Meshrac or any message from him arrived?” he enquired.

“None, O Prince.”

“Send for him at once.”

The astrologer, evidently awaiting the summons, immediately repaired to the palace.

“It is right, my good Meshrac. What message have the gods for me?”

“In answer to your august command, most noble Glarces, I have called into consultation the whole fraternity of the astrologers and magicians, who have assisted in reading the will of the gods as revealed through our divine mysteries. More than this, I have ventured to submit your wish to the wisdom of the mighty Rab-nag Rhea, who, in her desire to serve you, has unexpectedly come from her sacred retirement to preside over our solemn conclave.”

“Has the holy recluse so honoured my enquiry?” he asked, as if doubtful of having heard aright.

The Prince might well question the accuracy of this astounding communication. His surprise could not have been greater had Meshrac assured him that Asthia, the goddess of love, had arrived in Velia, for this remarkable woman was as sacred to the superstitions of Sahama and almost as mythical as any deity in the pantheon. Tradition assigned her an existence of more than two millenniums, the first half of which had been spent as high priestess in the temple of Tefnut, in Egypt, where she had learned the secret of immortality, to which the gods had added the endowment of continually increasing beauty as a reward of fidelity and

wisdom. It was equally owing to the fascination of her transcendent loveliness of form and feature as with the demands of her craft that she was compelled to hide herself, even in her earlier days.

By command of her patron deity she had retired from Egypt, and presented herself in Sahama, to preside over its destinies, soon after the occupation of the valley, where through all its history she had but twice secretly visited the capital, and only at great intervals, or in times of extreme necessity, did she allow even the master of the magicians to visit her mountain home. Under these circumstances we may understand with what positive consternation the Prince heard of her presence in answer to his enquiry.

“Not only is she with us,” returned Meshrac, “but when the stars again refused to speak more plainly than I have already reported, she erected the sacred tripod before the outer altar and commanded the oracle to speak.”

“May I know the answer?”

“I have the command of our sacred hierarch, O Prince, to give thee this scarab, bearing the name and securing the help of Apies, who guards all who by the wearing thereof are united to him, and with it I am to bestow the blessing and favour of Rhea, who heard the oracle reply:

‘When clouds arise within Sahama's cup,
The serpents' eyes shall see the shadows come;
The oracle is open, and the gods
Will guard the interests of Queen Sazone's throne.’”

With this he hung the sacred symbol and talisman around the neck of the Prince.

“For the undeserved honour of the blessing and the gift, I know not how to express my thanks, my good Meshrac. The knowledge that I am thus known and considered by the gods humbles and overpowers me, and for the future I will pay my gratitude in person at their altars. But for the present, in what I seek to know, not even the answer of the great Rhea is free from doubt. If she will pardon her most humble slave, I myself would dare to stand before the altar and make my own request.”

“She will be glad to have it so, but bids me caution thee, O Prince, of the terrors and risks attendant on such an ordeal. To stand within the presence of the gods, even when the brotherhood consult them, is not a choice for a novice to make lightly, but I myself should quake with fear in the presence of our Queen.”

“Why need I fear if I have done no wrong?”

“Only that the approach to the second altar is so closely guarded as to test the stoutest nerves, and she would have thee know it in advance, for there is no return when once the gods have been invoked.”

“In that case my nerves must learn to obey my will. I have no fear. When shall I present myself?”

“At midnight, O Prince.”

“I will await your summons; till then leave me.”

The magician withdrew, and Glarces in meditative solitude prepared himself for the mysterious ceremony. He was thus employed when a closely-veiled figure entered by other than the usual door, and in an unknown voice addressed him.

“The hour approaches, Glarces. Art thou ready to enter into the presence of the gods?”

“I am.”

“Then follow me; but speak not.”

The shrouded, unknown and silent conductor, the mysterious uncertainty of the experience before him, the darkness of the night, and his presence in a path always regarded with superstition, as the private road of the magicians, served to raise the temperature of his nervous expectation, The feeling increased as they passed into the grounds of the mystic college, where vague outlines of trees and shrubs assumed fantastic shapes, from which hungry eyes of green and red fire appeared to rush at him in anger; the gentle midnight breeze was like a wail of shivering agony from the far away; the hoarse croaking of frogs had an unnatural and irritating sound, from all of which he was glad to escape by reaching their destination.

He was challenged on the threshold of the college.

“Who comes to the house of the gods at the midnight hour?”

“The great Prince Glarces, to stand before the sacred altar,” responded his guide; and led him forward.

They turned at once away from the part of the building with which Glarces was familiar, and threaded a series of passages, where the light was gradually reduced, until at length his guide was compelled to take his hand, and brought him to a door, upon which he struck three loud and measured blows. The reverberations rolled in echoes, as if through some

illimitable despairing cavern, and a cold moisture started to the face of our hero in anticipation of the mysterious possibilities before him.

The summons was repeated, and the massive doors flew open as if thrown wide by invisible hands.

At a distance impossible to estimate there shone a bright pencil-point of light, but except for this - unless intermittent flashes of blue, and hence almost invisible flame, which played above, beneath, around, can be so called there was no illumination. No possible idea could be formed of the nature or extent of the place before him, and Glarces stood irresolute, knowing nothing but that he was in the presence of a revolting, nauseating odour.

His guide held him while he had time to watch the darkness belch its blue flame, now far down beneath his feet, then high above his head, and again in the distant right and left.

Would he be required to advance into such a black uncertainty? As if in answer to his thought a thousand eyes of ruby fire glared angrily from the darkness, then died as suddenly away.

The situation was certainly not a pleasant one; but it was time for action rather than indecision. A hoarse, stern voice addressed him.

“If thy hands are clear of blood, thy lips cleansed from lying, and thy soul pure, thou mayst come forward.”

“I have no fear,” he answered courageously, receiving strength from the sound even of so sepulchral a voice.

His guide led him forward, carefully feeling his way into the darkness. The doors closed behind them with a sonorous bang, again waking the dismal echoes of the place, at which Glarces breathed a regretful sigh at the cutting off of all possible retreat.

The conductor paused, and the Prince - glad to be relieved from shuffling his way forward under such conditions - at once stood still. The mute now loosed his hand, and, taking him by the shoulders, with laborious exactitude placed him in some desired position, which being accomplished, Glarces was left alone.

“Stand still!” commanded some authoritative voice far above him.

“Neither move nor speak on pain of instant death,” spake another from the depths beneath.

“Let the trial of Suspense begin,” a musical voice from the distance directed.

Then commenced the first real terror of the night. Hitherto anticipation had only waited upon a natural nervous excitement. Now he was alone, in darkness almost tangible, in a silence discordant with the voices of fear, doubt, and a frightful temptation to appeal at once to the mercy of death in a fatal shout. His limbs pleaded for rest in movement; his hands and arms were bearing him down with their leaden weight, yet he dare not move them to grasp the relief he felt was almost touching him: his brain had lost its power of balance, and in his doubt he had a sense of falling into the depths beneath his feet. A thousand torturing voices, speaking with tongues of suggestion, argued with him of the futility of his desire; nerves could not endure, courage had not strength, reason could not maintain the tension. The sickening odours of the place arose from the putrid bodies of others who had gone before him, and failed, as he must fail - died, as he must die. In seeking to satisfy his sister's doubts he had fallen into the cleverly constructed trap his enemies had spread to catch him, and when he fell - as he must fall in the end - lights would dance around him, and he would see Lais and Casca - perhaps even Vedrona - laughing at his folly, gloating over their victory, and making his death an exquisite torture abounding in every fiendish device.

Oh ! it was agony, the thought of it ! But he dare not speak - would not move, though he knew to do so would relieve him of the almost unendurable suffering. How long would it last? When would the end come? It must come soon, for the acuteness of the torment was beginning to give place to numbness, and in that at least he would find relief. But what relief? Would it not be the dreaded consummation? He started in an attempt to arouse himself, and had fallen, but at the instant the silence was broken, and a voice before him said:

“It is enough! Thy courage has stood the ordeal of Suspense; rest and prepare to pass through that of the Sacred Serpents.”

A seat was now offered him, of which he gladly availed himself, and several unseen attendants ministered to his necessities and restoration, but still no word was spoken.

After this he passed two other ordeals lying in his path to the altar of the sacred fire: first his innocence and purity were tested and satisfactorily established in a maddening experience among the sacred serpents, who in the darkness coiled hissing around him with the certainty of a horrible and torturing death overtaking him at any instant. Next, by wading through a stream haunted by crocodiles, to establish the proof of his friendship with the gods, to whom the voracious reptiles were taboo. But

we need not enlarge upon these horrors, in the endurance of which he lived through apparently interminable years of suffering, and left them, not with the youthful vigour and well-favoured appearance with which he had set out, but aged, haggard, and trembling, with nothing of his original self remaining but his love for Vedrona and an undaunted determination to know the truth concerning her.

In the mud of a shallow stream his feet soughed about heavily. In the darkness he knew not which way to turn or how to find his way; but every now and then the jaws of some hungry reptile snapped beside him, filling him with still increasing terror, which was rapidly giving place to the hopeless resignation of despair.

At length he heard the welcome declaration: "The gods are satisfied." And instantly the soft glow of a lamp shone to his left hand, toward which he made his way, and the ordeal was over.

Two veiled members of the brotherhood now conducted him to an ante-room, where he bathed, was anointed, and robed in accordance with the formalities of presentation before the inner altar. Then, with a weary gait, consequent upon the physical tax he had already sustained, he followed his guides up a long flight of steps, and was brought to the door of the temple.

He had secured his right of entry, therefore with only technical formalities the doors were opened, and with - for the first time - unmasked attendants he entered the apartment, in which his coming was awaited by the whole fraternity of magicians.

The immense hall - only dimly lighted, but still very welcome, after the experiences through which he had recently come - was arranged and decorated with the cabalistic and mysterious paraphernalia of the craft. Down the lower centre stood two long lines of emblematical figures of the gods recognised and invoked by the brotherhood, and before each was a miniature altar, upon which the attendant priest continually sprinkled sweet-smelling incense, while crooning their invocations in concert.

Between these lines of gods and altars Glarces was conducted to the upper part of the hall, where the main company of magicians received and formed a half-circle behind him. Before him stood the slab of sacrifice, presided over by Meshrac, whose hands were clasped around the handle of the sacrificial knife, with its point resting upon the table. Four assistants were in readiness to execute his commands. Behind these stood the great altar, and above this a dais, upon which was seated the one who not only invited his own attention from the moment he beheld

her, but was also the cynosure of all the eyes of the brotherhood - Rhea, the one mysterious being in whom the mortal and immortal states met and commingled, breaking down the boundary line between, creating her unique on earth and the great beyond.

In her, it was claimed, centred every existent force; to her was known every secret of the world and underworld, and by her alone these powers and mysteries of the gods were revealed to men.

No wonder, with such facilities and resources at her disposal, she had gathered together in her majestic form the peerless and superb embodiment of every perfect feature, trait, and attribute. Nearly two thousand years had passed since her wisdom had secured the gift of immortality, with all its concomitants. Through those vast ages she had, with the assistance of the gods, modelled, remodelled, experimented, revised and improved until she had outvied perfection in the indescribable beauty of her loveliness, wherein was blended, with faultless harmony, youth with wisdom, fragile delicacy with inflexible determination, and the seductive languishment of the maiden with the graceful bearing of a queen.

She was a vision of exquisite, yet awful, beauty, clothed in a full-flowing robe of some spotless white diaphanous material, through which the imaginary outlines of her form could be suggestively traced. The arms were bare, save for the coiling ruby serpents with golden heads at wrist and elbow; the wealth of rich chestnut hair was dressed with all a woman's pardonable pride, and held secure by pins and bands mounted with symbolic devices. Above her head was a canopy from which a coronet of brightly gleaming stars descended, a futile and partly adjunct to denote the sovereignty of such a woman.

As Glarces bent his knee in homage to this smiling but awe-inspiring miracle of humanity, he forgot for the moment the dangers and ordeals through which he had passed, also the purpose for which he was present. It was enough for him that he was in the presence of the bride and companion of the gods, and the price he had paid therefor was not to be considered in comparison with the reward.

When the invocation of the priests came to an end Rhea at once solved the problem of the musical voice he had already heard.

“I bid thee welcome, most excellent Prince, to the altar of sacred fire.”

She paused deliberately. A peal of thunder shook the place, and a flash of lightning caused a flame to leap from the altar, attesting the presence and also the favour of the gods.

“Thou hast well passed the trying ordeals by which thy courage, innocence, and friendship to the immortal powers has been established. Speak now and mention the request thou bringest into the presence of the gods.”

Again Glarces fell upon his knees in the same reverent attitude a slave would assume towards himself.

“I would ask thy forbearance, most awful Queen, companion of the gods and revealer of their wills, for daring to enter thy most sacred presence to enquire if there exists treason or conspiracy against my mother's throne or family?”

“All the forces of nature and the immortals are at the disposal of our faithful friends,” she replied; “that which is known to the council of the gods of the future of your house shall therefore be made known to you.”

Then to the brotherhood she commanded “Bring hither the bird!”

Two attendants carried forward a struggling, screaming peacock, which they laid upon the slab before Meshrac, who, seizing the neck of the bird in his right hand, with his left made passes over the body, mysteriously binding it to the table, where it lay trembling and giving utterance to stifled sobs of terror.

The brotherhood were now droning another invocation and as Meshrac stepped back from the table tiny but bright tongues of flame darted from the air towards the helpless fowl in every direction during the singing of the chant. As it ceased a long, clear shaft of fire descended, struck the bird, and laid it dead.

In an instant Meshrac's knife was buried in and tore open the body, which was thrown upon the fire of the altar, but the quivering intestines were spread upon the table, that Rhea might read the voice of the oracle thereon.

When she had made a careful study of the signs she spoke:

“Hear the declaration of the gods concerning thee, O Glarces, written in unmistakable language upon the intestines of the bird of their choice where none have power to change or alter the decree. The message says:

“So long as the royal house can furnish a queen to sit upon the throne its dynasty is safe; and, as for Glarces, he shall live to triumph over every foe that shall arise.”

The Prince listened carefully to all she said.

“The voice of the oracle grows more definite as I proceed,” he ventured to plead; “is there not yet another shrine before which I may be permitted to stand?”

The great Rab-nag smiled. She was gratified to find such determined and daring courage in the devotee but there was also a touch of pitiful commiseration in the look with which she regarded him.

“There is another altar standing on the threshold of the world of souls; but there are few who have the courage to break its awful silence.”

“May I attempt it?”

“I warn thee of its terrors! It is to brave and challenge death in its most painful and hideous form.”

“I had better die in struggling towards the truth than live in the vague uncertainty of doubt,” he answered, courageously.

“Is the possession of truth more to thee than the desire of life?”

“Is not knowledge of the truth the one supreme aim of life, and if I reach it, shall I not attain the goal?”

“Thou hast well spoken, Glarces; we will go forward.” With this she dismissed the brotherhood, the Prince being conducted by Meshrac and Chryses into a small apartment, where they robed in the yellow garments of mourning, and awaited the summons of Rhea to proceed. Even the magician and priest were unable to suppress their nervous excitement at the thought of the ceremony before them. Twice only during his long experience had Meshrac participated in such a consultation, and Chryses had never desired to renew the terrors of his initiation. Glarces was ignorant and though not unmindful of the warnings of Rhea or his recent ordeal, called all his courage into service and was calm.

Then the summons came.

Chryses, having assumed his sacred vestment bearing the scarab, heart, and emblem of life, passed on before; after him came Glarces, with hands crossed penitentially upon his breast, then Meshrac with his magician's staff, around which was coiled the golden serpent.

The door of the Chamber of Death was already open to receive them, and a short distance ahead a soft phosphorescent light, without any visible support or connection, quivered to guide them on. The door with a sepulchral sound closed mechanically as they passed through.

The priest and magician now began to recite, in low and solemn antiphone, the ritual for the dead, and presently the wailing dirge for the departed was chanted by invisible mourners on either side, to the shrieking, discordant accompaniment of instruments. Icy, fleshless hands reached out of the darkness and passed over the face and through the hair of the Prince; ghoulish eyes looked greedily upon him, shiny reptiles crossed his bare feet or coiled around his legs. The passage descended, growing more cold and noisome until he shivered at the fetid moisture but still the light went forward, though the sound of the piercing wail followed from afar like the haunting shriek of a band of despairing souls. Now they were compelled to stoop, then creep forward, through the sickening stench of decaying bones, upon the soft, putrid mass of which hands and knees were continually sinking, where worms appeared to be more plentiful than earth.

Still the light went forward, verily through the domain of the dead, until they emerged in the Hall of Souls, from which the departed take their flight, on liberation from the body, into the impenetrable gloom of Hades.

The hall was dimly lighted with a green mysterious glow, sufficient to create innumerable moving shadows, as of rebellious, restless spirits, malicious from their long detention, Skeletons more or less complete, and separate bones and skulls, lay everywhere. The roof was built, the walls decorated, the floor was strewn with bones. Here and there they were piled together, as if disconsolate and despairing ghosts had made seats or couches in an attempt to secure some impossible degree of comfort or repose. In fact, the great cavern was a huge, revolting charnel house.

Glarces surveyed the place with doubtful feelings of relief. Then the lights went out and he was alone. Even the bones shuddered together at the horror of such a loneliness tremblingly shuddered, with an involuntary movement, then set up a rattling protest, rising into mutinous riot and warfare against the fiendish terror of such diabolical association. The terrified bones crept close to him - caressed him in their hunger for sympathy, in their trembling appeal for protection. And he had no escape from this torturing affection of death. He could only tremble in sympathy

and pray for the flickering flame of life to take its flight, and find what refuge was possible in kinship of conditions.

He did not cry - not that he would not, but the power to do so had left him; and yet in that his agony was shortened for by his silence the measure of the ordeal was curtailed. The lights reappeared, and with them the half-unconscious Prince recovered somewhat of his courage, but the awful strain had left its marks upon his face and figure.

His guides returned, and without a word led him forward to where a yellow screen divided the cavern. Beyond this curtain they demanded admission, and having answered the requirements of the ritual, it parted in the middle, allowing them to pass forward to the altar - built entirely of human bones - which stood at the mouth of the Great Abyss.

Before and around the altar more - but still green - lights were burning, enabling him to recognise Rhea, who presided, with Zaclas as assistant.

“Thou hast done well,” was the commendation of the great magician, as he bowed before her. “Wouldst thou still have the fire upon this altar lighted?”

“I would know that for which I came, O Queen.”

His will was still as determined as ever. For the quaver of his voice, his flesh, rather than his soul, was answerable. “Then may the great gods nerve us all for what may happen.”

She took her place behind the altar, and with the sceptre of her office began to wave, at first a silent incantation, then an unintelligible invocation, commencing with a musical croon, but rising into an impassioned wail and a frenzy of excitement, in which Glarces saw her youth and beauty begin to fade, till presently all her comeliness was lost, and in its place a hideous repulsive hag remained, her tall and stately figure transformed into a decrepit monstrosity, and the once musical voice harsh and malignant in its blasphemous defiance. It was a revelation both horrible and repulsive - more terrifying than even the companionship of the dead, and for the first time in all that fearful night Glarces repented of that he had done. He looked to Zaclas, Meshrac, and Chryses, who, to his horror, appeared to be changed as Rhea, only in a less degree, and doubted not that upon himself the same blighting curse had fallen.

Retreat was now too late. Upon that hideous altar the answering fire now flamed. The gods had heard the invocation.

“With what Shade from out the region of the dead wouldst thou commune?” demanded Rhea.

“Neocles, my father,” he replied.

Another brief incantation, and then a voice from the blackness behind the altar asked, in a far-off, sepulchral tone:

“Who wakes the dead?”

“Rhea, the friend of the mighty gods, by whose consent I summon thee to answer the enquiry of Glarces, thy son.” “What does he ask?”

“Speak, Glarces,” said Rhea; “be not afraid and thy father will reveal the inner secret of the gods.”

With one tremendous effort the Prince roused himself for the final enquiry.

“Who is it that speaks to me from out the darkness and beyond the tomb?” he enquired.

“Neocles, the father.”

“I can neither see thee nor recognise thy voice. Swear to me by the eternal gods that thou art he and I will believe.” “I swear!”

“Now tell me, for the sake of those we jointly love, if there exists any scheme of conspiracy against the welfare of our house, and if so, how may I crush it?”

There was a moment's silence, then the voice replied:

“The welfare of my house is the interest of the nation, neither need Glarces fear, for he shall see the downfall of all his enemies.”

“I am -” but the Prince could say no more. The strain had been too much for him; his over-wrought nervous system had given way, and he fell unconscious to the floor as a tremendous thunder peal shook the place like a dry leaf in the wind of a tempest.

CHAPTER XIV

AFTER THE TEMPEST

Glarces woke in the strange room whither he had been carried, with a very vague remembrance of what had taken place. He was alone, in an unknown place, without the slightest clue to solve the difficulty. His memory was clouded, body numbed, and the only definite consciousness he had was the trembling, paralysing chill of a man left exposed to the full

influences of a winter's hoarfrost. But the sun is stronger than the rime, and youthful vitality rises superior to physical exhaustion. So the mind of Glarces woke from its stupor, enabling him to remember and reflect.

A mighty earthquake had opened a yawning, impassable chasm at his feet - dividing his yesterday from to-day - a cataclysm of experience which had wrecked the man his sister loved, and in his place had left a stranger so unlike his old self as to excite suspicion and doubt. All this he knew from the change he felt, but when he appealed to the witness of the mirror he started with an exclamation, not daring to perjure himself by recognition. Nothing but slowly returning memory remained faithful to him in that crisis, but by her friendly torch he was lighted back to successfully identify the new with the old Glarces.

In such a curious bewilderment he began to review the events of the night in the light of results obtained. Was he satisfied with his purchase at the price he was compelled to pay? Would the knowledge gained warrant the sacrifice he had made, or was there some other and more economical means of reaching the same end? Having consecrated and given himself so completely to his sister, had he any legal right to enter upon such an enquiry with all its risks and damaging effects without her knowledge and consent? He was not sure! These questions were practicable yesterday, when a choice was possible, but the alternative hour had now passed, and the result irrevocable, without the option of reconsideration.

He was not the only man who fails to estimate or attempts to forecast the possibilities of an act beforehand. How often do we leave our case unreservedly in the hands of Hope only to find our brief passed on to Regret at the crucial moment. We neglect to use the lorgnette "If" until we lose the features of Opportunity. Most men suffer from ophthalmic weakness in the sunshine of Expectation, but the shadow of Fulfilment speedily restores the vision.

Glarces, however, presently found another and more pleasant current in his reflection. What he had undertaken was not due to any idle curiosity, but at the dictate of his love to satisfy Vedrona's doubts. Rumour had disturbed her, and breathed slander upon the name of Lais; as the self-constituted but admitted guardian of both he was in duty bound to enquire into the matter, and what authority was to be found equal to the declaration of the oracle? What comparison could be instituted between any sacrifice he could make, and the service he thereby rendered to both his sisters? He might possibly have reached a doubtful satisfaction by a less energetic course, but such would be the policy of a man careful and

sparing of himself – not Glarces. Suspicion allowed to tarry always stains, which even in thought was an injustice to both his sisters, and he would wipe it away by the most unequivocal decision at once. When they first saw him the change might shock - even repel - them, but when they knew the reason, and understood his motive, the scars would form bonds of affection drawing each to the other more closely than before.

For himself? Well, such a consideration was always the last to occur to the mind of Glarces. He lived for and through others. His life was like a central cell receiving sympathetic vibrations from all around with an instant response and ministry to every call. So extremely sensitive was this connection that the welfare of each distant slave affected him, how much more, then, the nearer contact of his sisters? Vedrona's spasm and the blow at Lais had called to him. He had answered promptly - daringly. The alarm was a false one; all the conspiring appearances of yesterday were misleading, whispering of the caution required in forming opinions even in most apparent flagrancies. His sisters were safe. All was well. He suffered for the moment, but had discovered an unfailing court of appeal to guide him in the future. He had passed through an experience in which he lost much, but had gained more.

Having arrived at this conclusion he summoned assistance, and, disguising himself as a magician to avoid recognition, returned to the palace accompanied by Meshrac.

Reaching his own apartments he smiled at the consternation of his faithful Orasus, when at length he became persuaded of the Prince's identity. But he offered no explanation, simply refused to see any other attendant or officer, as was his custom, and at once prepared to attend his sister.

Then his heart smote him to think of the alarm with which she would notice his change of appearance.

Useless hesitation! Art might conceal the purple circles round his eyes, but it could not lift them from their sunken depths or extinguish their smouldering fires of fear; the pallor of his cheeks might be dismissed, but nothing could still the tremor of his nerves and body. She must needs sustain the blow, and he must prepare to aid her as necessity demanded.

He sent a message of apology for his delay on the ground of indisposition with the hope of preparing her in a measure, and at once followed the messenger. Before she had time to respond, his approach was announced, and he stepped across the threshold, but when Vedrona's exclamation of welcome died into a cry of horror, his fickle fortitude

forsook him. The new Glarces was not equal to the demand of love. His attempted reassuring smile only produced a ghastly grin, and when his sister fell weeping upon his neck he stood motionless and unresponsive as a statue.

“Help! Help!” she cried, “Give me help! Do you not see that the Prince is ill?”

Her alarm aroused him.

“No, my love, I am not ill - only tired. My sleep was full of troublesome dreams - experiences through which I lived and suffered, until they left these savage marks upon me.”

You cannot deceive me, Glarces, for did not I go with you in my dreams into some horror I have no power to recall? Did we not suffer together until some awful agony came between us? Then from the blackness, deep and cruel as death, I heard you cry for help, but I could not find you - you were lost to me for ever.”

In the rapport of their love she had caught a vibration of his experience, which in its action became translated to her consciousness as a hitherto forgotten dream.

Her grief produced a restorative effect on Glarces, and compelled him to offer her consolation.

“But your dream was false, dear. See, are we not together again with the return of the morning?” he asked assuringly. “Neither am I ill as you imagine, but rather well and happier than I was yesterday. I have news, my love; good and welcome news that would not keep, therefore I made haste to see you, rather than wait to rid myself of these marks of travel from the strange land in which I have sojourned for awhile. Can you dispense with your pets this morning that I may tell you at once?”

The lions, and with them all the attendants, save the two favourite slaves, at once retired. At Vedrona's request Glarces changed places, he taking her lounge and she his usual seat beside it. Zillah lay at Vedrona's feet, her chin resting upon her hands, and Æna seizing her lute, began to sing one of her soft soothing songs.

“Now rest! The message will wait while Æna sings to us. It will quiet you into a dreamless sleep. When you wake we will send for Machaon to attend you, and then I will hear the news.”

“Not so, my love, not so! My restoration is bound up in the message; and thy dear eyes contain more life and health than all Machaon's herbs.”

“Is it a message of love you bring?”

“Most truly so,” he answered, attempting to rise on his elbow, but she forbade it. Neither is it the love of yesterday with clouds of doubt or suspicion sailing across its sky, but with a clear blue heaven of steadfast truth reaching to its horizon, and making the heart rejoice in the assurance of the gods.”

“You were with the magicians last night?” she enquired, hastily connecting his reference with the conversation of yesterday.

“Yes! did you imagine I could be content to leave one doubt of yours unsolved?”

“But you have suffered, dear - needlessly suffered to gratify my foolishness! Now I begin to understand why you are so changed - so ill. Oh, Glarces, forgive me! It was wrong - inhuman; but I did not think that you would treat my foolish fears so seriously.”

“What have I done that so far exceeds your expectations?” he asked, with innocent surprise. “Should I be worthy even of your respect if I had hesitated to go to any length to prove the truth of falsehood of your doubts? I would do that much in my affection for Lais, and how much more for you! But do not speak of suffering or sacrifice in connection with love such as ours. My heart hungers for every new service you command, and the more you ask the more my joy increases. It is passion that counts by suffering and sacrifice, not love.”

“But I can see and recognise the sacrifice, and you must not - shall not do this thing again.” Then, rousing into a sudden vehemence she exclaimed, “By all the gods, if you attempt it I will hate you for your recklessness.”

“Why recklessness?”

“Because it is a risk you have no right to brave! Of what use would fidelity of friends or life itself be to me without my love - my other self? Do you think I am willing to endanger you though a thousand Lais should seek to betray or conspire against me? If you do you have much to learn before you understand how a woman loves the man who holds her heart.”

“I think I do know and try to appreciate the greatest, noblest love the gods have ever placed in woman's keeping; has not its sweet divinity taken my heart captive; strange man as I know myself to be, have I not found in you all that my exacting soul demands; and must not the captor be superior to the captive? So, dear, am I love's slave unworthy, undeserving, but still yours, and I am satisfied. But hear me, love, let us not speak again of

betrayals or conspiracies. Our doubts were all unfounded. The gods have spoken by the oracle, and we have been unjust.”

Zillah listened with every sense alert. The lovers had grown too accustomed to her presence to be conscious of it, and to-day they were doubly oblivious of the fact. But had the Prince once caught a glimpse of her unusually animated face, with eager sparkling eyes looking far away, it might have caused him to doubt the truth of the oracle, or, at least, dispense with the girl's presence. But she was careful he did not see it.

“Who made the consultation? Have you confidence in the accuracy of the answer?” Vedrona enquired, with a mixture of doubt and hope.

“Yes, I can trust the reply,” he replied reflectively. “I could not trust another in such an enquiry, so I dared to stand before the oracle myself.”

An involuntary exclamation of horror escaped the Princess as she heard this appalling announcement. It had long been the habit of professors of the mystic cult to surround personal consultation at the oracle with such prohibitive consequences and deterring dangers that the practice had entirely ceased in Sahama. The wish had been to encourage enquiry by proxy, with a view of reducing their own labours to a minimum. The success was too complete. A superstitious fear filled the minds of the people against all consultation, and, even by means of astrologers, it was seldom one found courage to seek for advice through the only religious means at their disposal. The cessation of the practice continually increased the dread and horror with which it was regarded, until the settled conviction prevailed that the risk entailed was almost certain death. This will account for Vedrona's alarm.

“You! . . . Glarces! . . . have you dared to join in those awful mysteries?” she gasped.

“Yes, my love,” he answered, as if he was only referring to a contest in the gymnasium,” I would dare the power of a hundred oracles, if need be, to learn the truth.”

“But you did it – to - satisfy my foolish jealousy!”

By this time the full force of the superstition had taken hold upon her. Her face was livid, and a cold clammy perspiration rolled in beads of terror down her forehead. She trembled as under the influence of a nightmare, and her passionless voice was hard and distant.

“No, no! It was no foolish idea, but an honest doubt, and the love I bear you compelled me to set it at rest for ever. There was nothing to cause you any alarm, dear. Besides, it is all over now, and I am back again!”

“Where did you go - what did you do?”

“When I bade Meshrac to read the stars again yesterday I told him if the message was not definite or clear, to make preparation for me to stand before the oracle, in the most sacred and solemn hour of midnight. The stars did not speak clearly, so he consulted his brethren, and it was decided to acquaint the great Rab-nag of my intention.”

“They told Rhea?”

“Yes! and she came to Velia to preside over the oracle.” “Did you see her?”

“Yes, dear; I saw and spoke with her, whose eyes alone have been permitted to look upon the mighty gods.”

“You saw her - took part in her awful incantations, and have come back to me alive?”

“I did think I had come back, and apart from the exhaustion it entailed, I did not find the experience so terrible as we have been led to imagine; but you almost make me doubt whether I am back and if the worst is over. Your fright almost makes me wonder if you have not found me in that blackness you spoke of, and question whether there is a more severe ordeal ahead. Wake up, dear; wake up! and he tenderly shook the icy hand he held to rouse her from her somnolence. “Rouse yourself and look upon me, then you will know that I am back again, and all the danger is over.”

He carried his point; by the overpowering force of his will, or love, he broke the spell of the fascination, and she slowly returned to a normal condition, much to his relief, He watched the transition patiently, with the determined look of a hypnotist compelling a subject to obey him, and when the doubt was over his eyes softened into a very tender solicitude. She met his gaze. They did not speak, but the mysteriously secret spring of life was touched, the one transcendent miracle of human experience wrought, and in the great revelation of love they knew as they were known. In that rebound from fear their souls reached the blissful heights of heaven's true Elysium, where none can linger but for one exquisite, and never-to-be-repeated dream, in which soul loses itself in soul, and nothing exists but love.

In that transfiguring revelation they lingered willingly, the silent language of their hearts rising into passionate eloquence and eyes making full and free confession where the tongue can find no power of speech. Then her head drooped - slowly, unconsciously. He saw it coming and

smiled, as he divined its welcome purpose. Not as at other times did he seek to evade it, but rather prepared to receive it with honour. Down, down, more tempting as it fell with pursing lips scarcely able so long to sustain their burden until they rested and exchanged that first full, free, and admitted kiss of love in which heart blends with heart and life with life without the intermixture of a base desire.

With that indescribable thrill of happiness which advises the termination of such moments of satisfaction, Vedrona presently recalled herself to hear the end of her brother's story.

“Yes, yes! You have come back - but not the old Glarces; you are the one I always wanted and could never find. Tell me what has worked so great a change and made my life so much happier than it has been heretofore.”
No, I must not frighten you again.”

“But it will not - cannot. See! I have overcome that, have found an antidote to fear - I even owe it a debt of gratitude - and want to know how it all came about.”

“Are you sure you can bear it?”

“I am confident of it, and since you are my slave, I command your obedience.”

“When Rhea arrived it appears she made the first consultation at the outer shrine, but I was not satisfied with the communication, and determined to proceed. They cautioned me of the dangers in the way, and advised that I should leave the enquiry in their hands, but I would not, and presently stood before the altar of sacred fire.”

Vedrona shuddered. “Was it very terrible?” she asked “Not more so than I was able to endure,” he replied evasively. “But I cannot tell you, neither could you understand. When all was over and the reply announced I was still not satisfied, and asked to go forward until I stood before the altar on the boundary of the underworld, where I spake with Neocles, our father, whose lips were unsealed for me by Zaclas.”

Whatever she had imagined the nature of these rites to be she was not prepared for such an announcement, but revolted in horror, not only at the thought that he had dared to risk the danger of such unnatural association, but also that one so dear - so essentially part of herself as she had discovered him to be - should be led into such a situation merely to satisfy her foolish ideas and doubts. The horrible background of the experience threw the value of her brother's love into striking relief to her tormented mind.

“Spake with our father!” she gasped.

“I did, my love! And from him whose voice would not break the silence of death to deceive me - whose shade watches in constant guardianship over the welfare of our house - I have been assured that all rumours and our fears are groundless, since the future is safe. Is not this enough to secure our happiness and contentment?”

“I am more than content; but oh, my poor, unselfish heroic brother, had I known my foolish fancies of yesterday would cost such a price to satisfy, I had not told you though they had been a thousand times more serious. By what right did I dare to trifle with the wealth of such a love? But I have been careless – blind - and failed to understand or appreciate you until, had it not been for the protecting care of the gods, I had lost you - thrown your love recklessly away and left my whole life a desolate ruin. Can you forgive me, dear? You, who are so much above all other men, whose eyes are clear with the vision of the immortals, can you understand the grief of my repentance? Can your heroic heart become so generous as to pardon this great wrong? Oh, my brother, say it can - it will, for the thought of my folly crushes me, and unless you will save me I must die.”

He attempted to rise and put an end to this wild expression of mistaken sorrow, but she had thrown herself upon his breast, and he was compelled to submit until the storm of her tears had produced the quiet of exhaustion.

“If there is aught of wrong, my own beloved,” he answered presently, “it lies with me - and I alone! Had I performed the duty that was clearly mine, I should have seen the clouds before their shadows fell across your path. It was I who was blind. If there has been folly and carelessness, it was on my part, and I need to be forgiven. But it is over now. The clouds have disappeared, and the future is all the brighter for the storm that has broken over us. We are nearer to-day than yesterday - know and understand each other better. If the experience was sharp its effect is sweet. If the step by which I have come nearer has been one of fire, it has only purified and left me a better man, I hope, than it found me. Come, my sister, we can be glad and rejoice, now that the clouds are gone. Let us to our mother and tell her of the message from Neocles. It will make her glad to know that I have spoken with him.”

He threw his arm round to support her, and with a chastened smile breaking through her storm-swept face they left the room.

“Poor infatuated, credulous fools,” cried the contemptuous Zillah, as the draperies fell behind them,” how proud the gods must be when they behold such handiwork.”

CHAPTER XV

CASCA PILLORIED

Next to the Prince the man possessing most influence and authority in the little community was Teresh, who, since the death of Neocles, had been Chief Counsellor to the Queen. Between the two men had existed a lifelong friendship, undisturbed by any marked divergence of opinion, and by a continual consultation of each other's wishes they naturally drew the bond closer with years. Plans, aims, and ambitions were equally shared, so that, when the loss fell upon the Queen, it was not to be wondered at that Teresh should, to an extent, be called upon to fill the vacant place. The arrangement was singularly fortunate for Glarces, who in his father's friend found a valuable successor in the tutorship so early and abruptly ended. To Teresh such a guardianship came as a sacred legacy, and much of the nobility of Glarces' character was due to the watchful guidance and unflagging zeal of his foster-father's devotion.

Since the night of the enquiry Glarces had been invisible, but the lying tongue of rumour had whispered how the gods, in disapprobation of his audacity, had changed him into a decrepit old man.

Lais had secretly encouraged the report, not by the things she had said, but rather by her evasions and what she did not say. She had found her work far more difficult than anticipated. The path before her refused to open, and compelled her to move with a caution both perplexing and irritating. Zachra had confided to Teresh his suspicions in relation to Casca and Zillah following upon the incident of the eunuch and Maphir, and Lais was unpleasantly certain that the searching eyes of Teresh were determined, if possible, to tear her secret from her keeping.

The man or woman who takes Guilt for a valet in a flight from justice is sure to be betrayed. Teresh had heard what Zachra had to say, but the man who had so carefully schooled Glarces in his own ideas of justice was not himself unjust. Experience taught him to doubt Casca, but as yet he had no reason to go further than this. That Glarces had for some unknown purpose - unquestionably out of the ordinary - visited the oracle, and that the mysterious and awe-inspiring Rhea had considered the occasion of sufficient importance to come to Velia and preside over

the ceremonies, was an open secret. The retirement of the Prince, and positive refusal even to see himself, gave a certain amount of colour to the wild floating rumours, but Teresh was too cautious to attempt the construction of any theory out of such fragments. He listened to and remembered all he heard, but reserved his judgment until such time as definite evidence was placed before him.

More than a week had passed and Glarces had not called the officers of the household together for such business as was necessary. He had been anxious to defer it until the traces of his magical experiences had disappeared. Such a desire was not to be realised, however, business demanded attention, and though by no means the hideous deformity many expected to behold, he was compelled to meet his friends in such an altered condition as to cause them no inconsiderable surprise and anxiety.

Still, Glarces was known too well for anyone to appear to notice it, much less to make any reference to the change - under the circumstances. The business was speedily discharged, and the council was dismissed. It was then that more intimate friends paired off, retired to the gardens, and compared notes in conference.

Teresh and Zachra were so engaged when they unexpectedly met Casca and Meshrac.

“By the gods, Meshrac, you went dangerously near making an end of the Prince the other night,” exclaimed Zachra.

“For that Glarces is himself responsible,” replied the astrologer. “He was cautioned before he began, and frequently during the consultation, but like so many others he appeared to treat the matter of standing before the oracle in a lighter manner than experience warrants.”

“But did not your interest in his welfare prompt you to suggest a pause before proceeding to such extremities?” enquired Teresh.

“Have you yet to learn, my noble Teresh, that Glarces has a will of his own?”

“My good Meshrac, some people have no desire to discover that he is anything but a boy,” returned Casca, who never missed the opportunity of a thrust at the man he so jealously regarded as his rival in the friendship of the Prince.

Teresh smiled, but said nothing.

“Oh-ho! Let me offer my apologies to the Queen's great Chamberlain,” said Zachra. “I have done you an unintentional wrong, my friend, in supposing that nothing would convince you that Glarces had passed that age of credubility but if the lesson of the other night has really convinced you of the fact all Sahama will gladly acknowledge the service the magicians therein rendered.” Casca writhed, but the scribe at once turned to the astrologer. “May I ask the nature of the enquiry which has brought such an unexpected revelation to Casca?”

Meshrac complacently stroked the curled false beard he wore by virtue of his profession, but frowningly resented the levity with which the oracle was treated.

“Such enquiries are of the gods, not men, and the servant of the altar never breaks his confidence even to Meshrac the counsellor.”

“But if Meshrac the counsellor has half the wisdom I have given him credit for, now that the cult has a chance of reviving, he will take lessons in divination from Meshrac the magician. For if the counsellor could only learn the secrets of the mystic he might become the most popular favourite the ladies ever had.”

“What care I for either men or women, for Queen, or Prince, or slave, in the performance of my sacred duty?” he asked, coldly.

“That is where your unnatural craft spoils good men,” replied the irrepressible scribe. “I think I shall start an oracle on my own account, and I'll warrant me it would be popular from the beginning. I should make my gods amenable to reason. There would always be a possibility of secrets leaking out. This would promote curiosity, and the oracle would be busy day and night, especially with ladies anxious to circulate their own or learn the private matters of others. Oh, Meshrac, you don't know how to work this business yet!”

“Has the cult of the gods become a jest, and the sacred altar a playground for jibbering fools?”

“Verily, my good friend, I am not jesting. Have you not heard that from my mother's breast I have been gifted with the power of divination? I'll warrant me that I can tell the nature of the Prince's quest as though I had stood beside him at the altar.”

“And you think that would prove - what?” enquired the astrologer.

“That in myself dwells the spirit of the holy gods, equally with yourself,” replied the daring humorist.

“The argument of an ass comes more forcibly from his heels than his throat.”

“ But are equally alarming at the same distance. So do I think my knowledge of the Prince's consultation would prove to be, if you only knew it.”

“Because he has told you,” volunteered Casca, whose curiosity had been at length aroused.

“Verily, no! If the Prince has mentioned the matter, surely it would be to yourself.”

“And why so?”

“Because it concerns yourself alone. Had he not that afternoon intercepted a love affair between your honourable self and the beautiful Iberian?”

“It is a lie!”

Fie, Casca, fie! Be courageous man, now you have lost your cunning mask - it has served you well; your contempt for slaves has been a masterpiece of hypocrisy - but now we have found you out, play the man and shield the lady.”

“I - I hate women.”

“We know it. So do we all, but we enjoy a flirtation all the same, especially with such a girl as Zillah. No, no! Don't interrupt me! The Prince thought there was a danger of losing one of his sister's favourite slaves, and knowing you would never confess the truth, he attempted to learn the secret from the oracle.”

“It's a lie, I tell you. The girl wanted - “

“Oh! the wicked woman. Then you had a most fortunate escape, and I most sincerely congratulate you,” at which he made a most profoundly mock obeisance.

“Surely I have the right - “

“To meet any lady where and when you wish, without interference,” interposed Zachra, who most thoroughly enjoyed the eunuch's discomfiture, hoping thereby to surprise him into useful or indicative admission. “So you have, and when I see - ah! here comes the Prince. Now if he is only in the humour I will speak to him at once, and your rights shall be respected.”

Glarcés had evidently lost the reticence he had maintained in the council chamber; the meditative smile upon his face, before he was aware of the presence of his friends, gave an indication that his thoughts had taken a lighter turn, which Teresh interpreted as a pleasant augury he hoped would not be dispelled in their greeting.

“Peace, Prince!”

The salutation caused him to start a trifle, but he returned it affably.

“Peace, friends. I hope the gods have made your hearts merry.”

“I would they had,” replied the garrulous scribe, “but we were just offering our condolences to Casca.”

“What misfortune has overtaken you, Casca?” “Nothing more than to meet with a braying ass.”

“And I have volunteered to carry him safely through his trouble,” added Zachra.

By this time the Prince had recognised the situation, so far as to appreciate the relief a little innocent badinage offered to the experience of the last few days, and he was quite prepared to accept the welcome change of his friends' companionship.

“From whence and whither would the patient beast bear him?” enquired the Prince.

“To keep his appointment with the beautiful Iberian, which the keeper of the lions prevented the other day.”

“But Casca would make no tryst with a slave.”

“Zillah is no ordinary slave,” returned Teresh.

“Yet still a slave. Is it true, Casca, that a pretty face has power to conquer your so strong aversion?”

“It is like the tales we have heard of yourself lately,” he answered with sullen daring.

“Were we speaking of myself?” asked the Prince, with significant calmness, so well understood as endangering his further participation in the conversation.

“I can assure you,” Zachra adroitly asserted, “whatever Casca may say to the contrary the appointment did exist.”

The momentary cloud passed from the Prince's face. Casca was present to defend himself, and under such circumstances Glarces never closed his eyes to what was going on around him.

“Am I to accept this assurance, Teresh?”

“I am afraid the evidence is too strong to be denied successfully,” he answered.

“It is a vile piece of calumny, O Prince,” Casca retorted. “Surely you know me well enough not to accept this lie.” “Did you not yourself hear Maphir say that the girl was in danger?” appealed Zachra.

“I certainly did hear that.”

“And the hunter had learned that Casca had been to Meshrac to procure a love philtre for the occasion.”

“That is false,” replied the astrologer, “Casca has never consulted me on such a subject.”

“I did not say he had consulted you, my friend; I was speaking of Meshrac the magician, who never tells his secrets to anyone.”

“Nor is such knowledge necessary to enable me to answer for Casca's ability to deal with a woman without assistance from any man,” said the magician, derisively.

The eunuch was in a most uncomfortable situation. The usual raillery he suffered at the hands of Zachra was in itself unendurable in the presence of the Prince, but when his new relationship with Zillah had so far been suspected or discovered as to become the subject of his criticism, the craven spirit of the chamberlain was in a perfect panic of fear at the certainty of some unguarded accident.

The Prince was quietly amused; the voice of the oracle disarmed his suspicion of any serious motive on the part of the scribe, who, he imagined, took the pleasant opportunity of retaliation for an easy advantage Casca had seized upon a recent occasion. These passages were not only amusing, but occasionally instructive, since Zachra invariably found a tender point in Casca's armour through which one or two flashes of unsuspected character had already been revealed. The question of women had always been carefully evaded in their intercourse, and Glarces was not averse to hearing his friend's real opinion, which was certain to come out in his perturbation.

Meshrac had offered the distracted man an opening for escape in his reference to women in the abstract, and he plunged into it without a

thought or care as to where it would lead, so long as he cleared the one danger.

“The best love philtre for a woman is the lash if a word will not suffice,” he answered wildly.

The Prince started, but it was Zachra who replied.

“Excellently spoken, Casca; but it is not well to use such brevity of speech were we not friends. Strangers might do you an injustice rather than appreciate your wit. We common dolts have been content to lead our ladies in Cupid's leash just as they lead a hound or ape; but not so Casca. His love walks on before, a queen whom he delights to honour, over whose shoulders he tenderly throws the silken love-lash to indicate the conquest he has made.”

The delicate sarcasm and mock flattery with which this was delivered was too ridiculous, and called a smile even to the lips of Meshrac by its extravagance.

Casca was livid.

“You fool,” he gasped.

“And is it not an honour to play fool to Cupid's friend? Now, Casca, don't deny it! We know your modesty; but that love philtre is a fact. Never mind, try again; but be careful that the hunter is engaged next time; and then poor Zillah!”

“Damn Zillah! Damn the whole tribe of women! The lot are not worth a single thought from an honest man!” and without seeking the Prince's permission he was gone before another word could be spoken.

“An honest man!” queried Teresh. “What do you know of such a being, Casca?”

“He has left us, Teresh; let him go,” said Glarces.”

“But if you knew - ”

“All that the gods deem it well for me to know they have told me. Casca has left us, let him alone.”

“Will you not hear one word from your father's friend?”

“To what purpose, since I have so recently spoken with my father himself?”

“To this purpose, O Prince: there are times when men may see even more than the gods themselves. I have no ill-will against Casca, but I have a duty to yourself for your father's sake as well as your own.”

“Then through your friendship to my father you may find means to reach him where he is. Speak to him, tell him of your doubts and fears, and I will visit the oracle again, if needs be, to learn the truth from lips that cannot be deceived.”

“O Glarces! You have learned your lessons too well. You have a soul too pure to dwell with men, and when we would save you from the errors of its innocence you cast suspicion on our fidelity and wrap your enemies around with charity.”

“You mistake me, my worthy friend, but while the gods watch over me I need not fear. Peace.”

Teresh and Zachra made a sorrowful salutation. Meshrac smiled, for the oracle had triumphed, and a moment later the Prince continued his walk alone.

CHAPTER XVI

GLARCES AND TASHA

The sensitive heart of Glarces was so delicately poised that in the gentle correction of Teresh all signs of his mild vivacity was lost. In touching the feelings of another he always dealt himself a heavy blow, and yet his stern sense of honour allowed him no alternative.

One ray of relief, however, broke through the cloud of his regret. Teresh had remembered their relationship of tutor and pupil, and that the stand he (Glarces) had taken was a practical application of his own instruction.

Still the Prince felt the smart of his self-inflicted wound; but a good physician was at hand.

“Oh! my dear Tasha, do we meet at last; and just when I most sorely needed you?”

She nestled to him in his usual filial embrace, her head lying with eloquent affection upon his breast. In his surprise he had forgotten they had not met since his visit to Meshrac; nor in her happiness did she wait to criticise his appearance. Vedrona had told her of the change in him, but the picture still upon the wall of her memory was the same as ever. When, however, she turned her eyes upon him she started and exclaimed at the haggard, drawn, and almost unknown face. Then he remembered, and drawing her head a little closer in a lingering caress, waited for her to break the silence.

“My poor boy! And I was not with him!”

“Why am I deserving of pity?” he asked with consoling solicitude. “Have I paid too much for the privilege of speaking with the gods and Neocles? Now that I know the way is really open I would pay it often to speak with Tasha if she were in the world of shades.”

Her heart was pure and true as his. She knew those words were not idly spoken, and felt that indescribable satisfaction only known to a woman in hearing them. He was her own boy, more completely, in a sense, than even Vedrona or his mother could claim, so she dropped her face, to forget the change, and crept still closer to him.

“Did you know that I was vexed and needed your comfort?” he asked.

“No, dear, not vexed. I can never believe that.”

“Well, then, disturbed; and like the good angel you have always been you are here at the opportune moment.” “Am I really your good angel?” and she raised her eyes, full of sweet, soft, devoted confidence.

“You are more than that, dear - are you not my mother?”

He stooped to kiss the smiling upturned lips.

She ran her fingers through his golden gleaming hair in a lingering caress, then breathed an almost inaudible sigh.” I would that every boy had such a mother as you have been to me, Tasha. He would needs grow into a happy man. But what is the matter, dear - does anything ail you?”

“No! I am only too happy now that I have you back again! It overpowers me. There is nothing more.”

“Yes! Something is troubling you. I can feel it; tell me what it is.”

“Your eyes and ears are too sharp, my boy; but can you not understand how I should worry about you when I have heard so many things, and you would not see me?”

“Yes, I can understand all that; but you have me now, and that trouble is over. What else remains?”

“I dare not tell you,” she added sorrowfully.

“It will be a sad day for me, Tasha, when you are afraid to tell me of your troubles. Have I in any way pained or offended you?”

“No, dear; but there is something I would save you from.”

“What is the danger?”

“There is a conspiracy at work to separate you from Vedrona, and then..”

He lifted the head still resting upon his breast; she saw his eyes brimming over with confident good humour, and speech failed her. His reply had no apparent connection with what she was saying.

“How long have you been in Sahama, dear?”

“Thirty years! But will you not hear what I wish to say?”

“Do you think our summers are very hot?” he asked, oblivious to her enquiry.

She looked at him with doubtful incredulity.

“What is the matter with you, Glarces? Did you hear what I was saying?”

“Perfectly!” Still as quiet and calm as ever. “Do you not think our summers are very hot sometimes?”

“Of course I do! But why do you talk so strangely - don't you know how you alarm me?”

“Tasha, can you see the very end of the valley?”

“Yes, but that has nothing to do with what is troubling me.”

“Do you see the mountain with its crown of snow?”

“Yes!” It was no use attempting to resist him further. “Did you ever see it without that diadem even in the hottest summer days?”

“No!”

“If any man told you he would climb that mountain and remove that snow cap, what would you say?”

“I should think he was mad.”

“So would he be mad who attempted to come between Vedrona and myself. The gods, who put that crown of snow upon yonder mountain, gave us to each other. I thank you for your watchful care, but you need not be alarmed.”

“All my life is bound up in you and your sister, Glarces; your mother is slipping away - I cannot keep her, and you are all the gods have left for me to love. Do you not understand how precious you are - how I take alarm at every fanciful shadow I see? Don't be impatient dear, but let me tell you of the sorrow that will not let me sleep.”

She was so tenderly-eloquently pathetic in her appeal as to compel him to grant her request.

“Do you think I can ever be unmindful of your devotion, Tasha? Ah, no! If so you do not know me yet! Whatever disturbs your rest is no matter of

indifference to me. Tell me, who are these conspirators, and I will at once unmask their plot, or assure you of your mistake.”

“Some demon has taken possession of Lais, and with the aid of Casca and Zillah she is plotting against your welfare.”

Glarcés smiled indulgently.

“It is as I thought. Teresh has only just gone away pained that I would not hear him tell me the same thing.” “ Does he know?”

“Certainly! Why all Velia knows - everybody is talking of it, so that had the thing been true its very publicity has already made it impossible. Did not Teresh tell you?”

“No! I heard it from Maphir, and he assured me that no one but he knew of it.”

“It is always so with secrets, Tasha; their privacy assures the widest circulation - how wide in this case you may judge when even the unsociable Maphir has heard it. But I think I can clear up all the mystery and restore your peace of mind.”

He gave her a seat, and then told her his story as we already know it. When he had finished she still shook her head, refusing to accept his assurance.

You may believe the magicians and the gods, Glarcés, if you choose, but I do not.”

“Nor Neocles?”

“How do you know the shade was that of your father - could you see and recognise him, or did the arch-priestess only tell you so?”

She had grown rebelliously indignant in her incredulity of the reliability of the oracle, and her unusually pointed vehemence surprised the Prince considerably. Such a doubt had never crossed his mind.

“Tasha! Do you think it possible for a woman like Rhea, in whom the spirits of the holy gods reside, to tell a lie in the presence of the holy altar on the threshold of the under-world?”

She made an exclamation of contempt.

“Phew! What are gods and altars, oaths and underworlds, princes or thrones to a woman with an object to gain? In the days gone by I have thanked the gods for the purity of your heart, but now I almost curse them for the trust and confidence you place in others, thinking they are as guileless as yourself! Oh, Glarcés, you are too good to understand the

common vileness of humanity. Why will you not listen to Teresh? let him be your adviser and confidant in an enquiry into this matter, and if our suspicion prove to be wrong, you will not injure anyone, but only strengthen your own safety.”

“Teresh has already a prejudice against Casca, at least,” he replied.

“Is he not in the habit of weighing evidence, and may not his opinion be well founded?”

He was thoughtfully – doubtfully - silent. A splendid tribute is here unconsciously paid to the moral rectitude of the man in the influence this artless woman - only a slave is able to wield over him, and the struggle it occasions with all the governing principles of his life. A short fierce contest raged between love and duty, but as must needs be in all such natures the tender self had to bow to inexorable habit, and he replied with nervous apology:

“You cannot understand the almost irresistible power of your slightest wish, but I know you would not have me be untrue to that which I feel to be right, even to please yourself. If I did consent to go to Teresh, as you advise, I must at once to accept his prejudice - or at least subject myself to its influence - at the opening of our enquiry; in that I should start with an injustice to Lais, Casca, and Zillah, and I cannot do that without some evidence that they are in the wrong.”

“But why not ask Teresh upon what ground he bases his opinion, and hear what he has to say?”

“Even that implies suspicion, for which at present I have no cause.”

“See Maphir, then, and let him tell you what he knows.” “That has precisely the same objection. No, dear, I cannot do it. But there is a way - so far as I can see, one only way - and I will take it. Between the holy gods and the soul of an upright man there must exist a means of communication apart from priest or magician. I will purify myself, and find that channel through which I can learn the truth, and trust myself to the protection of the gods till I discover it.”

“Don't say that, Glarces,” she pleaded; “for myself I have no more confidence in the gods than I have in Casca.”

“Then in whom shall we trust? If we can neither place confidence in gods nor men, what shall we do? You would not have me do you the wrong to doubt you - I could not, dear, and so the love I bear you compels me to deny your wish.”

“But you do doubt me, Glarces!”

“Not your love - your fidelity. I only fail to interpret very misleading and doubtful rumours in accordance with your fears. That is all. Neither do I believe it would be just to the accused for me to seek advice from another whose mind is equally made up against them. But I will watch for myself, and should I find any indication of the truth of your suspicion I will see Teresh at once. I can do no more. I know my decision will disappoint you, and believe me, that will pain me equally with yourself, but I must be true to what is right or even you would cease to love me. I cannot run that risk, Tasha; you have always been - are still so much to me. I have always been wilful - filled your life with care, but you have loved me - have let me come to you with all my troubles. I cannot spare you now! Age makes no difference to the need of a mother's love, and you are all the real mother the gods have allowed me to know. Don't leave me, dear, don't leave me! Kiss me and forgive me if I cause you to grieve, because I do not see this matter in the gloomy aspect your love forecasts. I shall weep with you in your disappointment; but while I hate myself for the wound I cause, I must - I will be true.”

CHAPTER XVII

DIPLOMACY

“Girl, you may go!”

As a child Lais had always assumed the superior position in her relationship with Vedrona, an attitude she ostensibly modified as the years went by; but her purpose and design were still the same. Never endangering her cause by precipitate action, content to wait for a whole year rather than take an uncertain step, complacently smiling if the way was difficult and roundabout by which she reached some trifling point, she never relinquished an advantage once secured. Vedrona had long been conscious of the usurpation of her rights and prerogatives, but they passed away by such an imperceptible, intangible process that she failed to apprehend it until too late, and Lais was found to be in quiet and apparently unconscious possession.

This unpreventable and mysterious deflection of authority - recognised and significantly smiled at by others long before the Prince had discovered it - at length began to vex and irritate Vedrona. Like an ever-present and invisible ghost it haunted and disturbed her peace of mind; it laid its death-like hand upon all her pleasures, embittered her love for

Lais, gave birth to doubt and distrust, until it became a kind of vampire feeling upon her blood. Nature demanded sleep, and while she slept the ghoul returned to feast.

Mathematical precision may possibly be attained, but the imperfection of humanity prevents its being maintained. In the most perfect model room may still be found for improvement. So in the progress of craft there is always one point where either the design is carelessly exposed or an excess of zeal is equally destructive of the plan.

It was so with Lais. She had passed the crisis that occasioned more anxiety than she was willing to allow with a success far beyond her anticipation. Glarces had practically recovered himself, and under his guidance the old relationship, which was so dangerously disturbed, had been renewed. In fact, the whole incident had apparently been forgotten, and Lais not only congratulated herself, but also prepared to take advantage of it. It was in this spirit and determination she exceeded all former encroachments of authority in the dismissal of Æna as she imperiously swept into the presence of the Princess.

“My dear Vedrona,” she added, with patronising grandiloquence, before the girl had time to depart, “I really cannot understand why you keep that girl so persistently at your side. She is insipid and dull past all endurance.”

Vedrona's cheeks crimsoned. For an instant she was uncertain whether to bid the slave remain: but she allowed her to go.

“You have at length surpassed yourself,” she replied, with an effort suppressing her indignation and speaking in a tone of quiet authority worthy of Glarces himself.” But I will not complain, since it affords a long-desired opportunity of our coming to an understanding. Will you for the future remember that in my own rooms, as well as in the palace generally, with my mother's approval the authority is mine.”

“What new folly is this, Vedrona?” she asked languidly, as if she had no interest in anything but a new flower she had taken from a vase.

“It has been a folly, but it shall be so no longer. For the future I will manage my own business.”

“Ha! ha! You really amuse me. I have had a doubt whether you had sufficient energy to be aroused, but my stratagem has succeeded beyond my expectation.”

“You are pleased to be vague.”

“Of course I am; and it will suit me to remain so if by that means I can bring out such unexpected queenly graces from my sister. Shall I play Glarces to your Majesty, that you may take a lesson in the management of him in your new character?”

Vedrona's eyes flashed with indignation.

“You play Glarces! Do you remember your Babylonian story of Tiamat and Marduk?”

“You say wisely, my sister; I think I might fail.” And then, with languid indifference: “Ah, well; it seems as if the gods have decreed failure as my lot for the day. I came to do you a kindness, and by a luckless move have destroyed my purpose.”

Vedrona was disarmed in a moment by this assumption of the penitential mood. Lais could play with her as a cat with a disabled bird. The purity and innocence of the one was no rival to, only at the mercy of, the Mephistophelian cunning of the other.

“Nay, you must not wrongfully blame the gods, when all the error is my own because I failed to understand your comedy.”

“But there was much of truth mixed up with my device,” replied Lais. “The presence of that girl really irritates me beyond all measure.”

“Then send me notice of your coming, and I will grant her freedom till you leave me.”

“Can you not understand that it is her influence on you that I fear more than for myself? It is you, not I, who have to look forward to being Queen; and I am only anxious that you should be so in its greatest, noblest sense. But with a stupid, soulless child for your chosen and constant companion, how can you hope to be more than a child yourself? Get rid of her. Put in her place a slave with the mind and spirit of a woman; then you may fit yourself to rule.”

Vedrona smiled and shook her head.

“You forget the difference between our natures, Lais; the woman that would please you would make my life unbearable.”

“But this girl has no intelligence. She is like a lily among flowers, void of everything save a colourless prettiness.”

“And does the purity of the lily excite your prejudice?” Vedrona had quite recovered her usual composure, and the childlike simplicity of her mind maddened Lais.

“You do not flatter me,” she answered scornfully, “if you imagine that I possess either favour or prejudice for any slave. As for your Morning, as you call her, she has not character sufficient to suggest an opinion.”

Vedrona laughed heartily.

“I thought you would fail in attempting to play the character of Glarces. He would say something like this: ‘Without a well-formed opinion, based upon evidence, it is impossible to arrive at any just estimate.’ Now, according to your own hero, you have not evidence to prosecute your cause, so we will dismiss Æna for the time.”

“With pleasure. And if you could do so as easily as myself there would soon be an end to her mischief.”

“Now, will you tell me what other changes you would advise in my surroundings; then I will say what I would do with yours.”

“You, indeed! Ha! ha! Has Zachra been giving you lessons in the art of humour? Are you serious in proposing such an undertaking? The establishment of Lais revised by Vedrona! I wonder what it would be like.”

The innocent idea had so surprised her as to completely throw her off guard, and she unadvisedly gave expression to her real feelings in reply. Her words of keen sarcastic contempt cut deeply, and were fully noted by the Princess.

“Yes; I suppose I should make a difference equal to that which divides us from each other,” she replied reflectively. Then, with growing dignity: “I never realised how great that was - never had any wish or thought to do so - until your words compel me to remember what you have so recently said, that I am Sahama's future Queen.”

Lais was undecided how to answer for an instant. Her usual tact had played her false in a trying emergency.

“Go on,” she said, determined to defy what could not be evaded; “remind me that I am only a homeless orphan.” “No, Lais, you will never be that so long as Glarces and I remain. But why do you so delight in vexing me every time we meet? Do you not remember the old days? Why may we not be now as then?”

“Because we are not children but women now; and have to bear the responsibilities of our positions. Do I vex you - and why is it? Simply that I take a sisterly regard in your welfare, and would help you in the duties

you are physically unable to undertake alone. For my reward I am reminded of my poverty and dependence.”

“What ungracious frenzy has bewitched you?” replied Vedrona, with an unusual amount of spirit. “Whatever misunderstanding or change of feeling has taken place, if any, is due to yourself. You avoid our company, preferring whom we know not, nor seek to know, lest you should think we attempt to touch your freedom of action, and when, once in a time, you choose to visit me, you arrogate to yourself the ordering of my slaves, and have me wait upon your bidding.”

“I have no wish to order your slaves nor control yourself; my hopes and desires for you have been of a far different nature. But while you and Glarces talk so much of your justice to others, you do not fail to wrong me in all I do.”

“You know we have no wish to do so.”

“But you do it. Now hear what I have to say, and you shall be your own judge. I know I have been much away from you, and in this have been suspected of many things. Now I will tell you why. For a whole year Casca and I have shared a secret. The feared loss of your mother so long ago first made me really think of you as Queen, and I began to work out a plan to make you the most popular of all your predecessors. Casca offered to aid me in this, which has been so far matured as to warrant us in now taking you into our confidence. This is the reason for my visit.”

“Then, dear, I have wronged you. But forgive me.”

“Hear what I have to say. Some time ago - you will remember, it was the day before Glarces went to Meshrac - I met your other girl, Zillah, in the fernery. She told me so much about herself as to lead me to enlist her help, since she is able to do more for you than even I can, and it was the thought of her being neglected by you in favour of that inanity that prompted me to send her away.”

“But she neither wins my confidence nor seeks to give me her own. In fact, she does not suit me. I shall ask Glarces to get me another ‘Night’ to take her place. Then if you wish, you may have Zillah.”

“Not for the world, much as I appreciate her. If you only knew her story and true value, you would not wish to part with her.”

“Has she a story? What is it?”

“She has; and the most interesting one you ever listened to, or she would not have won my ear. I don't generally seek my companions among slaves.”

“I will send for her at once, and hear what she has to say,” she answered, reaching towards her chime.

“Don't do that. The girl is naturally proud, and needs careful treatment. She knows that I intend to speak to you to-day, and to send for her would encourage the idea that you attach importance to her story, which would be suicidal to the scheme I have in my mind. I can tell you the whole history, which, when you know, in a week or month you may casually refer to in her presence, and gather the details at your convenience without betraying any great or unusual interest.” Then laying her hand significantly upon Vedrona's arm, she added: “It will be necessary for me to teach you that real success is not reached by over-kindness and morbid sympathy, but rather by tact and diplomacy.”

Vedrona shook her head incredulously. “Tell me her story.”

Lais had so far gained her point. Truth had been employed to the extent of decently robing and disguising her lie, by which the suspicion of the past had been completely destroyed, and its reappearance in the future almost certainly prevented. In the security this afforded she had now to manipulate the story of the Iberian to bring about the desirable dismissal of Æna and establish Zillah in her position of confidence. It was a difficult, a delicate task; but herein lay its chief zest to Lais. Vedrona, touched by her natural abhorrence of wrong, would send the girl home at once; Lais traced in the incident the hand of the gods to assist in making Sahama's future Queen greater than all those who had gone before her. The one was fearful of the vengeance of Iberia; the other laughed at the idea, if watch and guard was kept that Zillah did not communicate her whereabouts, and when she had fulfilled the will of the gods, such rewards could be made to her as to secure not only her contentment, but also ensure the favour of the king, which was her great desire.

“But if I granted her but half the freedom you advise, she would soon be my mistress and I her slave.”

“Oh, no! You are a woman. And that could never be.”

“And why?”

“Her first attempt to usurp your place would rouse that feeling in you - only to a greater extent - I tried to evoke when I dismissed your - musical genius (!) just now. It would make a true, active, energetic woman of you. But without some such provocation you will never have sufficient courage to oppose a grasshopper.”

“I am, and hope I shall continue to be, what the gods have made me. They have placed me where I am, and have given me the nature which in their wisdom was thought best. Why should I try to change it - why oppose their will by my imperfect one? No, Lais, I cannot grant your wish in this and be true. Æna has and must retain my confidence, and I cannot give it to Zillah.”

“To argue with the wind is always a useless folly,” Lais answered, with a despairing resignation, “so I suppose I must be content to let you have your own way. The years of womanhood are already upon you, and the duties and responsibilities of your position overshadow you; but you heed them not - prefer to remain a child. Where is your spirit, Vedrona? Why do you not come from your retirement and associate with men and women - take your part in the events of life, and so fit yourself for guiding and controlling the affairs which must so shortly be your own? Glarces is what he is, physically, because of his contests in the gymnasium, and mentally from his arguments at the baths. Why do you refuse to take him as your example in these things? The mysterious forces and powers of womanhood are not to be neglected and trifled with. Never try to deceive yourself with the idea that the gods make women, their efforts stop at children - women have to fashion and complete themselves. In the child is reposed the possibility, but we have to use and mould it, or by and by all the restrained energies of nature will overflow and wreck and ruin be the result. You cannot dam back all the waters of all the rivers without endangering a catastrophe.”

Glarces had quietly entered in time to hear his own name mentioned, and paused without interrupting her. When she finished Vedrona mutely raised her eyes to him in an appeal for assistance, so before Lais was aware of his presence he playfully laid his hands upon her shoulders and set himself to reply upon the fragment he had overheard without having any clear idea of the argument.

“Would not those mysterious forces be better compared with the sap of a tree?” he enquired. “And do not some trees bud early, others late, each being governed by habit and temperament? Yet in none do we see any sudden rush or carrying away in the fury of rising sap to which that unfoldment is due. Nature never hurries, my sister, but all the trees are clothed in due time.”

His advent just then was most inopportune to the cause of Lais. It destroyed her last hope in a scheme promising so well. With Vedrona conquest was only a matter of time, but she knew Glarces better. It was

the fortune of war, however, and had to be accepted, trusting to fortune for what might follow.

“But suppose the usual time for budding had passed, my eavesdropping philosopher, and the sap gave no sign of rising?”

“Then neither you nor I have power to make it do so.”

“We might induce it.”

“Perhaps; if we could only solve the secret - how?”

“And that secret I will solve, or die in the attempt.” Then with her face crimson from the inevitable frustration of her purpose she left the room.

Glarcés watched her departure in speechless consternation.

“What strange development is this, my sister?” he enquired.

She rose from her divan, and crossed the room to salute him.

“I am not sure that I know exactly what is the matter,” she replied. “One thing, I have unintentionally done her a serious wrong, for which I am most sincerely sorry; but she appears to be willing to accept my apology only on condition of her being allowed to order my conduct and companions for the future. I don't understand, but I think she wishes me to be a kind of second Lais, and I could never do that, could I? You would not care to be without me, would you?”

“Certainly not! But tell me what has passed.”

“She has explained to me that for more than a year past, she with the assistance of Casca, has been busy on some scheme designed to make me the most popular of all Sahama's Queens, but they have kept the secret until all the plans were complete. This is the point in which I have wronged her by my suspicions about her absence and reserve.”

“I thought she would clear that up, and am glad for all our sakes that she has done so.”

“Now comes the curious part,” she resumed. “You remember that unfortunate occurrence between Casca, Zillah, and Maphir?”

“Perfectly!”

“It appears that morning Lais overheard Zillah speaking of her capture by a band of traders who carried her to Susa. Lais questioned her, and learned the whole story of her being the only daughter of the chief counsellor to the King of Iberia, and at once our sister accepted her presence as a provision of the gods to assist in the carrying out of her

scheme, in pursuit of which she desires me to dismiss Æna and accept Zillah in her place.”

Glarces was listening intently to every word.

“I think the last mystery in that unfortunate event is clearing up. Did Casca know anything of that interview?”

“Yes, Lais told him all about it, and when Maphir intercepted Zillah she was on her way to meet Casca, so that the story, as told to both, might be compared.”

“I thank the gods for such an explanation. I was sure it would come, but scarcely expected it so soon. Yes, we have indeed done both Lais and Casca wrong. Come! We must find her at once. I must first ask her forgiveness, then we will hear of her future proposals. Whatever they are we may know they are intended for our good, and must now try to sacrifice ourselves to make atonement for the past.”

In their retirement they paused an instant to snatch a kiss, or the curtains would have parted in time to witness the hasty flight of Lais through the opposite door. She had stealthily returned, and listened to every word.

CHAPTER XVIII

MESHHRAC AT FAULT

Religious life, whether of the individual or community, is largely governed by circumstances. In days of prosperity we are quite capable of looking after our own affairs - too busy attending to pressing business to waste time upon matters vague and visionary; but when disaster, misfortune, and famine return, we remember our own weakness and insufficiency - with sighs and groans and penitential hymns we inaugurate days of humiliation, and cry, in fear and trembling, “Lord, save us, or we perish!” This is not altogether a modern development. The Church, at least in this respect, is right in the confession: “as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be.”

Sahama was prosperous - singularly so, hence its real religious life had ebbed almost to a vanishing point. On the ingathering of the harvest a day was given to national rejoicing, when an offering of grain and fruit was technically made to the gods and consumed upon the altar sufficiently early in the morning for the Car of Phœbus to carry the sweet smell thereof heavenward, as it passed on its daily course. For the rest no other religious demands were made for the year except a frequent reference to

the existence of the deities in ordinary conversation, such as we have already noticed.

This festival was always an occasion of most popular rejoicing, but the approaching celebration promised to be of a more brilliant character than any remembered by the younger generation. For years before her practical retirement from public life, the Queen was only able to be present for a brief space during the sports; then the royal dais was left vacant until such time as Lais was old enough to represent the beloved Sazone. Lais, however, never succeeded in winning the confidence of the people, and though homage was offered to her by virtue of her office, it was void of that spontaneity and enthusiasm which had previously been accorded.

The energies of Lais, however, in prosecution of her mythical scheme, had produced an unexpected - and to her, undesirable - result. Glarces had seized upon the idea, and, seconded by his mother's desire, had induced Vedrona to assume her place as Queen of the Festival at the service in the sacred grove, and also at the sports. In honour of this Glarces had added his name to the list of competitors in the races, and the whole community was wild with joy at the prospect of the coming celebration.

It was on the eve of the festival that Zillah, by virtue of her position as a personal slave of the Princess, ignored the authority of the guards keeping the pylon admitting to the grounds where stood the school of magicians - the cult was principally Egyptian, and its appointments were regulated accordingly - and passing through the avenue of mystic sphinxes, finally reached the top of the steps, where she was compelled to ask assistance.

“I would see Meshrac,” she announced, with the dignity of a royal despot.

The officer drew himself to his full height and bestowed upon her one of those glances of superb, half-amused, half-contemptuous nonchalance so peculiarly oriental.

“Bear you a message from the great Princess?” he enquired.

“Do I not tell you I would see Meshrac?” she retorted, without condescending to further explanation.

The janitor was perplexed; he could devise no reason for her presence save as the bearer of a royal message - no slave would dare to visit the august master without a reasonable warranty; he therefore deemed it best to refer the matter to Meshrac himself.

“I will bring my master word,” he answered. “Wait here till I return;” at which he left to send the request forward.

The astrologer was busily engaged working out an intricate celestial calculation.

“Who is it?” he asked sharply, having failed to catch the name.

“The Iberian slave of the Princess.” The adept pushed his work aside.

“What message does she bring?”

“Only that she desires to see my lord.”

“From the Princess?”

The slave smiled.

“She never explains. Shall she be admitted?”

The great interpreter of mysteries was now himself at fault. He knew the character of this girl sufficiently to be assured she was capable of defying all rules and regulations and coming direct to himself for a private and personal enquiry; but for him to give a consultation to a slave would bring the whole profession into contempt at a time when the prospects of its revival were so bright. Yet it was equally probable that the Princess, following the example of her brother, had determined to ask some direction as to the festival, and, if so, she could find no more secret and trusty messenger than the proud Iberian.

“Bring her before me.”

She entered with a salutation of a patron calling to make a purchase. Whether it was a camel or a favour from the gods was a matter of equal indifference - she was the person to be considered, and very plainly indicated what she expected.

He assumed his most frigid reserve in an attempt to overawe her. It was no use. She smiled, and with the most informal unconcern introduced her business.

“My lord Meshrac must pardon me if I offend, but I am ignorant of your practices, since in Iberia we have no magicians - our Druids act as priests, magicians, and judges combined.”

“Is your coming a personal matter, or are you a messenger from the Princess?” asked the great man.

“I am here myself,” she answered evasively, “and needing reliable assistance, have chosen to consult what I imagined was likely to be the best available source.”

“I am not at the service of slaves.”

He drew his work towards him, and was about to summon his attendant.

“Touch not the chime!” she commanded. “We are all slaves to a greater extent than we mostly care to admit. I am held in a bondage of body, but here is your master” (throwing him a well-filled purse)” holding you in a far more contemptible state of slavery than I can ever know. Now that I have paid your most avaricious price, give me what I ask.”

Had it been possible by any power of magic to secure her instant destruction Meshrac would have used it at that moment. But Zillah never employed the lash until she had a firm grip upon the curb. That purse belonged to Lais; Meshrac would recognise it, and she had carefully estimated its restraining power. She intended to offer no explanation. He might draw what inferences he chose - for such she was not responsible - and so long as nothing was said to compromise her, she would be in a position to deny anything, and as for the secrecy of her business, she was convinced that was beyond question.

She smiled as he took up the wallet, carefully examining its exterior to see he was not deceived, then emptying its contents upon the table to count the royal reward for the service required. The donation had a wonderfully soothing effect upon his feelings.

“It is not always slaves are in a position to pay so liberally. I am therefore willing to accept your presence as a messenger, and, without further enquiry, shall be glad to know your will.”

“Now that we understand each other, and you are willing to serve me for the sake of my gold, hear what I have to say,” said Zillah, taking a seat on the opposite side of the table. “ In Sahama I am a slave - in Iberia I was the destined bride of the king. I have been stolen - am determined to return. In my position here I have endured much that I would requite, but though my revenge is willing, time is short. There is, however, one insult that must not go unpunished. Taking advantage of my misfortune and the position he occupies, that viper, Casca, has, by exercise of his superior strength, dared to kiss me - breathed his vile breath upon my face, and laughed at my shame. For this he has to die! But it shall not be until I have made him serve my purpose in securing freedom. Therefore, I want from you a love philtre to mix in his wine to-morrow. I will bring him to my feet. He shall carry me away out of Sahama - free! and when he would take his sensuous reward, I will sheathe this poniard in his carrion heart.”

“Are you sure you can carry out such an ambitious scheme?”

She threw across the table a look of unutterable contempt. “Leave that to me; I am an Iberian!” as if that assured success.

“Of course I shall leave it to you. It is a matter you and Casca must arrange for yourselves. I have no interest in it beyond that your enthusiasm arouses.”

“You lie!” She had lost every trace of feeling, and looked at him with a quiet composure that was more astonishing in its assumption than his anger was fierce. “I have been here too long not to know how Casca is despised and feared by every man and woman around him, on account of his influence over your fool of a Prince.”

“Mind what you say - your language is rash and indiscreet.”

“It is the honest expression of my opinion, and, seeing that I am speaking into the ear of the gods, who read all hearts - and to them alone,” she added, with malicious significance - “I have nothing to fear. Shall I trouble you for the philtre?”

He hesitated professionally.

“Y-es! I can let you have one if you desire it.”

“Do I not tell you I desire it? And since its employment will also render you a service, I will ask you to make sure of its potency.” Then she added, reflectively, “Perhaps it might be well, in case of accident, that you should give me two.”

He crossed the room and opened a cabinet, from which he took two small phials.

“Either of these will do all you require with a much stronger minded man than Casca,” he said, handing her the innocent-looking instruments of destruction.

“That is all I want,” she answered, dropping the vials into her dainty wallet; and without a word, either of thanks or adieu, she was gone.

“Ye gods!” he exclaimed, as she left him. “If more vindictive furies are to be found in Pluto's kingdom, save me from going thence. But behind all this is something I have not yet divined. This bag belongs to Lais, and the gold is not the slave's. What does it mean?” The question raised a problem too dark for either his astrology or magic to solve. Only one thing was clear - mischief threatened for to-morrow, but how could he discover its nature and design, so as to make the stars foreshow it, and thus bring advantage to his craft? “The girl, or someone behind her, has

invented a plausible story, but it does not deceive me. Her hinted escape with Casca may be part of the plan, but why should Lais take any interest in it, or try to assist therein? It looks as if the absence of both were necessary to the Assyrian's cause and welfare - and if so, why? Can it be that Glarces was better informed than we, and there was a cause for the suspicions he brought before the oracle? This triune combination, no matter how or where it appears, is always Lais, Casca, and Zillah; yet their movements are so silent and secret that I have not been able to learn anything of them - so completely concealed as to leave no trace open to our keenest scrutiny. But we are not altogether foiled. It is not yet too late. The girl has said enough to make the stars eloquent with danger to the palace, a suggestion of which I must avail myself, and lay the message before the Prince for his guidance and caution during the festival."

With this Meshrac touched his chime, and at once called the fraternity of magicians to consider the inauspicious conjunctions of the heavenly bodies.

Meanwhile Zillah had reached the palace, having also communed with herself on the way.

"And is this the great Meshrac, prince of magicians, who in his secret wisdom directs the destinies of nations, and reads alike the minds of men and gods? S'death! I wonder how many gods and wise men are required to make the equal of one determined woman? Wisdom and gods, indeed - what an insult to intelligence! I could amuse myself with the joint congregations and smile at their undoing! But now for Lais! She is a woman, and holds the advantage over me. This I must secure at once, and my plan works well towards it. There is interest and pleasure in a contest with a deadly friend, where poison hides behind every smile, and pleasant considerations mask a fatal stab. There is an excitement in meeting craft with tact, and turning poisoned confidence aside with a smiling refusal to accept so great self-sacrifice. The anticipation of such a battle makes every nerve to tingle with the fore-taste of the joy of victory. One such encounter has more real merit than the conquest of all the gods, Sahama ever knew, and in this instance I think Iberia will not yield to either Babylon or Velia."

So she reached the palace, where Lais was anxiously awaiting her return.

"Welcome, my faithful Zillah, and what has been your measure of success?"

"There is the philtre," she answered scornfully, indignant at the doubt implied in the question.

“What did he say - did he refuse to see you.”

“No! The gods had told him you were sending a messenger, and he was expecting me.”

“That I was sending a messenger - surely you did not acknowledge that?”

“Do you think I am a fool? I told him my own story - wearied myself with the invention of details to deceive him; but he only smiled and refused to believe me. Then when I threw him your purse - “

“You never gave him that, when he already suspected me?”

“Why not? He did more than suspect he knew as if he had overheard your instructions. And when he gave me the potion he said: ‘Be careful to tell the lady Lais that only one-third of the contents of the vial will be sufficient to do what she requires.’”

“Does he know everything?”

“He knows enough to make our work more dangerous than I imagined, and had it not been for an Iberian device for which he was unprepared, our whole plans would have been placed in the hands of the Prince tonight.”

“What did you do?”

“For the moment I forgot I was not in Iberia, and spoke of things according to the custom of my land. When I recalled myself I noticed his confusion. I had deceived him; so, humouring the accident, I continued until he lost his confidence in the message of the gods, and I have drawn him away from his first intention and secured his help in a scheme peculiarly my own, of which you know nothing.” “What can I do?”

“Nothing! In your ignorance now lies all our safety. If Meshrac should come to you as I have suggested, say anything you choose, but you must know nothing. Continue your own plan, but I must not be with you - must not see you. I will only fool the magicians.” “But I must know what you are doing.”

“If anything is necessary you shall know it. But, if you hear nothing, pursue your own course. I see my way clearly, but it is too late for you to change your plans. Be content. If we succeed, what matter who directs the final blow? You must trust me now, as I have trusted you before.” Lais suspected the move, but could not prevent it. She was clearly outwitted, but it was inevitable, resistance was useless, and Zillah left the apartment triumphant.

CHAPTER XIX

CHAMPION OF THE SPORTS

From the picturesque and commodious grounds surrounding the baths and gymnasium a splendid avenue of the sweet-scented manna oak led up a gentle ascent to a natural amphitheatre set apart for the only religious observances known in Sahama - the thanksgiving festival, and the funeral pyre of the dead. These ceremonies were both celebrated at daybreak in order that the offerings to the gods, and the liberated souls of the departed, might be in readiness for the Car of Phœbus as it passed by on its daily course.

The festival, being an event of national importance, was always a time of general reunion, taxing Velia's powers of entertainment; but the promised appearance of the favourite Princess at the sports had proved an enormous attraction this year, and thousands of visitors had to be content to return to the primitive accommodation of tents during their brief visit to the capital.

It was an imposing spectacle in that crowded circle when Chryses, the high priest, followed by all his clerics, magicians, wise men, astrologers, and counsellors, entered the enclosure just as the first shafts of light touched the tops of the distant hills. Twenty thousand burning lamps were elevated to dispel the shadow of night, and as the sacred fire was kindled upon the forty altars surrounding the pyre upon which the offerings of fruit and grain were heaped, the vast congregation joined in the national hymn of worship and thanksgiving

“Hail, charioteer of all the gods!

Who through the heavens dost drive their regal car;

Putting to flight the alien powers of night!

Unconquered king in regions near and far

We worship thee!

“Thou crownest seasons with thy gifts!

Earth's lap is full with all thy blessings strewn;

Fruits, flowers, and grain leap into joyous birth,

And wine like rivers flows where thy bright car is driven;

We worship thee!

Vedrona was deeply moved at the impressive scene as she sat upon the royal dais behind the venerable archpriest, surrounded by her court gorgeously appalled in semi-barbaric splendour, the two most

noticeable features of which were Glarces on her right, and Maphir, near behind, in close attendance on the lions, who lay in calm composure at her feet.

The heroic morn, with cool and undisturbed majestic grace, removed the dark disguise in which he passed the outposts of the night, and light usurped the throne with a welcome pulseless glory, and by the time that Chryses applied his torch to the thanksgiving pyre, the full effect of the now brilliant gathering was visible. Then was the wild and costly splendour of Sahama's wealth fully displayed in the rich embroideries of many nations in which the ladies clothed, and afterwards garnished themselves; while men had striven to excel each other in the exorbitant treasures of colour and product they paraded. Slaves of every available nationality, dressed in costly and extravagant native costumes; magicians and astrologers in weird symbolic robes; the multicoloured garments of the priests, each according to the god at whose altar he officiated; and lastly the flower-wreathed, but otherwise spotless attire of the vestal virgins, who danced and sang around the pyre, all contributed to form a picture never to be forgotten.

Soon as the sun was visible above the tops of the hills, Chryses gave the sign, at which a mighty shout of "Hail! all hail!" broke forth in greeting, and the opening service of the festival was over.

The vast concourse having paid its annual acknowledgment to the gods they ignorantly worshipped, turned from the Grove. Many having their seats secured in the gymnasium, wended their ways homewards to breakfast, but more, not being so fortunate as their neighbours in their arrangements for the sports, hurried, with what haste the crowd allowed, towards the goal of all thoughts, quite content to accept whatever fare was there provided rather than risk the possibility of exclusion from the races.

The unappropriated space was speedily packed with a restless, struggling, excited throng, each determined to secure some point of better advantage. The habitual courtesy and consideration for others which formed such a striking characteristic of the people, was more noticeable by its absence to-day. Every other feeling went down before the wild enthusiasm to see Glarces carry away the champion's wreath, and next to catch a sight of the nation's idol - the future Queen.

A steady stream of expectant humanity poured into the reserved auditorium, if possible even more brilliantly attired than in the earlier

assembly, until every available inch of room was occupied, and the concourse below the bar almost rivalled the crush above.

Only the arena and the royal seats were empty now, and all attention was centred on the one doorway watching for the curtains to be withdrawn.

“Hush!”

The exclamation rushed through the electric atmosphere, and as Petronius, followed by two heralds, stepped on to the dais that mighty congregation rose by a spontaneous impulse, to receive Vedrona with a worthy demonstration of its welcome and good-will.

Glarces, not yet stripped for the contest, led her forward, and at the sight of her a shout rent the air as though the forces of nature had exploded in a reverberating roar, while the royal pair made their joint acknowledgments.

“Let the sports begin.”

Such was the device by which the smiling Princess terminated the acclamation.

Glarces at once retired, and at a sign from Petronius the doors of the arena were thrown wide, the heralds appeared, and with a fanfare upon their golden shepherd's horns, announced the opening of the contests.

The judges, directors, and officials at once paraded, made their obeisance to the Princess, and retired to their respective stations.

Now the competitors, stripped, and ready for their various contests, marched in review around the course, to the excited plaudits of the populace. It was a veritable pandemonium of encouragement, in which the name of every contestant found a place, but above the roar rose one name that caused Vedrona's cheeks to flush with pride, even though her heart somewhat misgave her, as she thought of his hurried training, and looked upon the sinewy muscular forms of those with whom he had to contend.

The preliminary heats of the long race stood first upon the list. The distance, sixteen times round the course - about two miles - for which thirty and two names had been entered, divided into four heats, only the first in each to contest the final.

When all was in readiness the heralds proclaimed:

“Let the runners stand with their feet to the line.” Eight advanced, amid a tumult of uncertain excitement as to how the ballot had resulted. Glarces had no place in the first contest, but the contestants appeared to be

splendidly matched, and it was at once certain from a comparison of the men that the opening struggle would be a fierce one.

The signal fell to a perfect start. The men bounded away with an unbroken front, and the excitement of those whose favourites were engaged grew silent under the influence of hope, fear, or doubt. The first struggle was to break the line, but no man appeared able to accomplish it. The outside man, by an almost superhuman effort, just managed to preserve it, and the inner one could do no more. Thus the third lap was completed. The pace was fast, almost too fast to hope for its maintenance, but only exhaustion would apparently break the column; and he who fell behind would certainly have no chance to recover his ground. Then shouts of encouragement were poured forth from throats already hoarse with fervour, as each man in the auditorium thought of the possibility of his favourite being cast in the first round. But the inspiration of applause was useless, every nerve was already strained to its utmost tension, when the tenth lap was called and scarcely a yard lay between the first and last athlete. Even this breach was closed again, and then another opened in different order. It was a fight for even an inch of advantage, and the judges became aware that their decision would have to be given upon the narrowest of margins, for the contest grew more fierce as each succeeding lap was told, and yet it was impossible to separate, in opinion, the first man from the last. So ended the fifteenth round. All now depended on whether any man had sufficient reserve to outstrip his fellows in the last bound, for nothing more could possibly be done until the final leap was made for victory. It was a moment of exciting tension in which silence was tyrant. The vast concourse of onlookers were upon their feet, but almost feared to breathe. The line closed on the last turn even with the precision of the start, until it seemed certain that a dead heat for every man would have to be declared. They are home! One man had thrown himself but a hand's breadth in advance and touched the goal.

The second heat was a splendid display of fleetness, but not so warmly contested, being almost a foregone conclusion from the start.

It was when the men drawn for the third heat came to the line, and Glarces was found to be in their number, that excitement reached its climax. There was also a murmur of disappointment. Next to the Prince stood Gelon, a young athlete of such well-known powers as to be the popular favourite before the name of Glarces was added to the list. It was naturally hoped that the two would be drawn in different heats, and thus both to the final, but fortune decreed it otherwise, and therefore the greater excitement attached to this decisive spin, since it was a foregone

conclusion that its winner would secure the oak wreath. They were drawn side by side in the centre of the line, with the advantage to Gelon, with whom Glarces took a trivial opportunity to show his feelings of amity and goodwill while awaiting the signal. It was nothing more than a friendly, perhaps unconscious trifle he whispered into the ear of his rival, but it was characteristic of the man, and not lost upon the people.

“We shall have a repetition of the first heat,” was the generally expressed opinion, as the men stood with bodies bent, muscles set, and waiting for the fall of the signal. The coveted wreath hung encouragingly before the eye of each of the eight men, and the determination of each almost seemed to touch it. Still, only one hand could reach the goal, and every heart was strong with hope.

The signal fell! The men were away, the Prince a trifle forward. It was evident that by an unexpressed consent it was determined to let it be so. Glarces was to set and sustain the pace - the rest would wait upon him. Gelon ran easily, beside and behind him, and the other six in a line upon the heels of the second. The pace was fast - scarcely equal to the second, though favourably comparable with the first heat - but as the fifth lap was called, Glarces, smiling and cool as at the outset, lengthened his stride a trifle, and left a little more space between himself and Gelon. The distance between the second and the rest now increased - the pace was telling, and from this point resolved itself into a contest between the favourites. Seven - eight - nine laps, and the pace was still creeping upward, both men being easy, though they were running now quite equal to the speed of the second heat. Ten - eleven - twelve, and still Glarces forced the pace, but Gelon showed no sign of giving way. Two men had already fallen, and the others were more than half a lap behind. The excitement of the people was at fever heat, but plaudits had exhausted themselves, and an intense suspense had given place to shouts of encouragement. Thirteen - fourteen - fifteen laps were now covered, and Glarces, though almost flying, was unable to increase his lead! The line was crossed in the final lap! He made another effort, but Gelon was equal to him. Yea, with a deafening yell of surprise and admiration breaking from the crowd, he had lessened the breach! Both men were now straining every nerve! Now the advantage swung one way, now the other! Could Glarces hold out? Half-way home and their feet scarcely touch the ground, but Gelon will not be shaken off, though frightfully distressed. Glarces spurts, but his rival answers. Another ten paces and Glarces wins! No! Gelon spurts in a final bound, and in a dead heat both cross the line!

An instant later, Gelon fell, and had to be carried out. It was a glorious race, and worthily recognised by the madly excited populace.

The remaining heat was watched with the same keen enthusiasm, and gave promise of a final never before equalled in Sahama.

After such prolonged tension, and with the prospect of a decisive effort yet before them, but comparatively little interest was manifested in the intervening items though as no man dare leave his place, and rest and attention to the competitors were absolutely necessary, the contests of putting the weight, wrestling, throwing the discus, and other events were more or less welcome breaks in the interval which had to be endured.

At last the herald sounded the wished-for summons, and a perfect pandemonium of applause hailed the appearance of the athletes, especially when it was discovered that the doubtful Gelon had recovered, and looked as fit as his fellows.

Glarcés and Gelon were the two names on every tongue, although it was more than doubtful as, to what positions the other three men would eventually claim. Popular favourites do not always answer to expectations, and in the contest now before them staying powers counted perhaps even more than fleetness. It was well known that at least two of the five men at the line relied upon this endurance for their hope of victory.

Gelon was first away as the signal fell, but Glarcés pressed him hard, and as the first lap was reached they ran together a good pace in front of the third man, who left his followers still more and more behind; but he vainly tried to reach the two before him. The popular forecast was verified; it was a struggle fierce and furious for victory between Glarcés and Gelon! As lap succeeded lap, the advantage swung in a fairly even balance. Now Glarcés was certainly first across the line, but on the next round Gelon's foot gave the signal for the lap to be declared. The unprecedented speed of the preliminary heats was forgotten in the ever-increasing flight of these two men, who, by the time of the tenth round only had the company of a badly exhausted third upon the track. Eleven – twelve - thirteen, and though dauntless courage was still written upon the faces of each, it was becoming certain that the crispness and spring of their action was failing. Fourteen, and the time was perceptibly slower. Would they be able to hold out, or would the wreath be unclaimed, for the third man had already given up? Fifteen - they were still running, and the announcement of the last round appeared to impart a new inspiration to Glarcés, and he bounded away again; but Gelon also caught it, and though

the Prince was leading by more than a pace, the indomitable youth did not despair, but answered the wild cheers of the people with a dash which closed half the distance. Half a lap, and the race would be won! The vast assemblage had risen yelling to its feet. Even Vedrona, unable to restrain herself, waved her scarf and shouted with the rest. There was only a quarter of a lap remaining, and Gelon could not recover himself. "Glarcès wins! Glarcès wins!" was the wild plaudit on every tongue. Gelon tried again, but failed! Three paces, and all would be over, when Glarcès deliberately threw himself aside and gave the race to the man whose courage and prowess was well worthy of the generous compliment it received.

It was a noble deed, and won a wilder acclamation than a victory! The coveted wreath was worn upon another brow that day, but Glarcès was conscious of having earned at the goal of his people's hearts a more valued trophy than that of the sacred oak.

CHAPTER XX

THE TRAIL OF THE SERPENT

The third part of the festival programme was purely convivial. The season was still in its softest, most genial mood, and the harvest moon at its full, hence the festal tables could safely be spread in the open air, as in the old nomadic days, and the night was made harmonic with the sound of songs and the music of dances, while the whole country in the neighbourhood of Velia became picturesque by reason of the illumination of ten thousand lamps and torches.

The one exception to this general rule was to be found in the palace, where the feast was always kept in the State apartments.

Strangely enough, this most colossal, grand and important adjunct of the royal home was not part of the residence itself, neither was its location ascertainable with any degree of certainty except by express permission.

When the mining operations, afterwards converted into the fernery, were in active process, a cave was discovered from which proceeded a mysterious sound, filling the miners with a superstitious fear, and for a time, no man or number of men could be induced to enter and examine the place, which all believed to be the habitation of malevolent sprites. But presently, no great catastrophe ensuing to the community, it was timorously suggested that the dark abyss might be the secret abode of the good genii of the valley. At this critical moment Rhea made her

appearance, confirming the latter suggestion, and declaring that the place would be found to be an abode such as only the mighty gods were able to fashion. The pronouncement was wisely ambiguous and splendidly vague, but it served its purpose, first in securing an explanation, and next in establishing the reputation of the great magician. The vast suite of apartments into which she led her astonished followers, as if well acquainted with every nook and corner - some having the dimensions of magnificent halls, others of more comfortable and social extent, possessing romantic alcoves or almost hidden retiring bowers - could only receive one designation, and were ever afterwards known as the Golden Caves. They formed a veritable dream of wealth, beauty and luxury. In the style of architecture nature had displayed the diversity of her artistic genius; unsculptured columns of sparkling feldspar crowned with crystal capitals, from which sprang rude but graceful arches, in the spandrels of which slept massive gorgons of virgin gold; screens of delicate tracery studded with huge and varicoloured gems; and the roof of stalactites like a thousand reversed pinnacles of translucent alabaster of different size. It was truly an Oriental dream of an enchanted palace, sketched in outline by the gods and left for man to fill in the furnishing details.

The people at once adopted the superstition, and every successive Queen had loyally done her share to complete the design and make the State apartments of Sahama worthy the favour of the gods.

From the palace a most ingeniously contrived and constructed series of apartments led to this subterranean annexe which was otherwise reached only from the fernery, at either approach to which the royal guard was continually on duty.

Just one other brief but necessary note. That awe-inspiring sound from which the miners fled was eventually discovered to be due to the roar of an abysmal stream rushing down a yawning chasm which abruptly terminated the gallery in that direction. What existed beyond had not yet been discovered, since a stout barrier had been erected for safety, and no man had so far possessed the courage to bridge the gulf for further exploration. The rush of that stream, however was not quite an unmixed evil; the sound was only faint, but the current had been utilised to keep the air in motion, and afforded a welcome ventilation throughout the caves.

With the exception of an accession, or the birth of a future Queen, all the State functions of Sahama resolved themselves into the festival banquet,

an invitation to which was the one pre-eminent honour and hope of the people. Then, and then only, was it possible to see what a unique gift the nation had inherited in the possession of the Golden Caves. Then were the fabulous treasures of unhewn gold displayed, the vast jewel caskets from which the gods enriched themselves thrown open, and many legends were told how the immortals occasionally joined in the revels of the night. In view of such honour and superstitious hopes it may be easily understood how a community to whom wealth was a secondary consideration, would encompass the earth in its search for superb and costly toilets in which to grace and, if possible, enrich the brilliant scene. Every wardrobe held its own secret jealously guarded, sometimes for years, in anticipation of the great event, and when at length each contributing feature and personality were combined it formed a tableau of magnificent splendour probably unparalleled in the history of the world.

The character of the revels had undergone a certain change during the last few years in the absence of the Queen and under the guiding hand of Lais. The latter had paid a rather lengthy visit to Babylon, where her receptive mind had received impressions in better accord with her passionate and daring nature than consistent with the simple ideas of her adopted home. She was too cautious to risk the consequences of openly introducing these innovations, but had no difficulty in finding congenial souls who speedily divined the hints she dropped, and at her first banquet covert departures were successfully made in the direction of Babylonian usages in honour of the new directress of the revels. No one objected - no one appeared to be aware of the change, though not a few referred to the additional interest of the occasion. With the years the innovations became more pronounced until, by Vedrona's year, liberty had reached a certain easy licence with many, and the freedom permitted for the night possessed a curious charm, though afterwards reflecting a sinister shadow upon the unprotesting representative of the unsuspecting Queen.

To all the proposals and arrangements for that day Lais had given willing, even enthusiastic consent. Vedrona, having conquered her prejudice to publicity, had presently caught the spirit of youthful impetuosity, and was full of ideas for the success of the festival. She had before her eyes a vision of pleasure in which there was no shadow of fatigue or prostration. Lais possessed the knowledge of experience, and inwardly smiled while agreeing with every new suggestion. She had finally completed her own forecast for the day, and so long as that was not endangered all went well; but when, after the sports, Vedrona found herself too fatigued to attend

the banquet and requested Lais to take her place, the latter genuinely protested on her own account. At whatever cost Vedrona must preside at the feast, or make an appearance of doing so, and Lais would release her when the revels began.

To this arrangement the Princess at length very wearily consented.

Gelon, as champion of the sports, completed the quartette at the royal table, the officials occupying positions just below, with Casca in close proximity to Glarces. Such times of unrestrained freedom were dear to the heart of the eunuch, since the Prince made it a rule to be generous towards the trivial weaknesses of the flesh - consented to lay aside his unapproachableness, and, setting an example of sociability, allowed the bibulous gourmet freely to indulge himself without fear of correction. The feast went on its merry course. The wine was doing its work well on every hand, while Casca's palate was certainly being most effectually lubricated.

Presently he replenished his very busy cup and, turning, addressed himself to Glarces "This is a day long to be remembered in Sahama, O Prince; a day in which every prejudice has, so far, been laid aside. Come, be with us, heart and soul, and drink to yet better days in a cup of noble wine."

"I am with you, my friend, heart and soul; but as for wine, I prefer new to old."

"But the old is strong, and we must have strong pledges to-night."

"And the new is pure," he answered, "so while you drink the one I will take the other, then our pledge shall be both strong and pure."

"No, no! there must be no divided cups to-night above all nights. I shall insist - "

"Insist!"

"No, not that; but you know what I mean. What is the good of objecting to my suggestion because you know when - when the one pledge comes, you will be compelled to join us, and one cup more or less is nothing?"

"Who will compel me?" he enquired, still smiling at his friend's somewhat clouded persistence.

"O, the Princess Lais will look after that."

"What is this I am expected to do?" she asked, hearing the mention of her own name.

“Insist that the Prince shall join us in our pledge to Sahama's future Queen,” replied the chamberlain. “Why, my lord Casca, what is this?” she gently remonstrated. “Is it possible you are so soon confused in your wits as to imagine Glarces will need pressure to discharge such a pleasant duty? Fie, my lord, fie!”

“No, no! It is the keenness not the confusion of my brain that is at fault - if fault it be. He will drink the pledge - no doubt of that; but he proposes to do it in new wine.”

“But you misunderstand my motive, Casca,” the Prince replied, generously regarding the evidences of the eunuch's increasing loquacity. “Wine sometimes proves to be stronger than the man, and if I am content to drink new wine I shall reserve my strength to assist you in the hour of weakness.”

“No, no! I shall petition the Queen not to allow any man to take a mean advantage. This night at least we must stand or fall together; and the cup of our pledge must be the same for every man.”

“I will see that is so,” replied Lais.

“That is the very thing I said; but Glarces said no!” “Then I shall pass the cup.”

“You will do nothing of the kind, my brother.”

“No! Certainly not,” interjected Casca, as he resumed his seat, perfectly satisfied to think he had carried his point. “You know the superstitions of the people even better than myself, and need not be told with what a premonition of misfortune they would regard such a proceeding. I have thought of your aversion to old wine, and for your sake would gladly have drank the pledge in new, but the superstitions of your too credulous nation again forbid it. I am sorry for you, but when it is a case of your private - I won't say, as I feel tempted, foolish - prejudice in conflict with the traditions of your people, I think you will acknowledge that the only practical way out of the difficulty is for you to give way.”

Glarces at once recognised the perplexing position, and he was not a man to hesitate or seek for excuses when he clearly saw his duty. Never before had his cherished principles come into direct opposition to the customs of his people. It was a moment of revelation showing that fortuitous circumstances do arise when exceptions demand recognition, and the sacrifice of principle becomes a duty to the common weal. There was, however, the echo of another voice appealing to him - the memory of the oracle first delivered to Rhea! He recalled its well remembered words:

“When clouds arise within Sahama's cup
The serpent's eyes shall see the shadows come;
The oracle is open, and the gods
Will guard the interests of Queen Sazone's throne.”

Certainly the reference to a cup might be purely a coincidence and he had the promise of the protection of the gods. How he wished he could have the satisfaction of an appeal to the oracle. This was impossible, therefore, he must act for the best and rely upon the assistance promised.

“Do you insist upon my compliance?” he asked of Lais. “If you can point out any possible alternative I will gladly accept it,” she answered.

“Alternatives have nothing to do with it,” urged Vedrona, who was really alarmed, both at the proposal and her brother's contemplated sacrifice of such a definite principle. “Rather than you shall drink strong wine the pledge shall be deferred.”

“That is impossible,” answered Lais.

“The pledge must be drunk, my love,” Glarces assented. “There is nothing to fear, and such a slight sacrifice is not worthy of considerations at such a time.”

Lais commanded all cups to be filled.

“Glarces! my life, my love! Listen to me!” pleaded Vedrona, as the cup-bearer handed him the brimming goblet. “As you love me and value our happiness, don't drink it! It is full of death and danger! Throw it down, my love - throw it down, and save yourself and me!”

She spoke in a kind of hysterical frenzy, attracting the attention of the neighbouring guests, who regarded her as overcome with the arduous duties of the day.

Zachra looked anxiously across the table at Teresh, who, sitting next to Casca, advised Glarces to heed his sister's alarm.

“It is only weariness, my friend,” he replied.

The Prince rose to his feet with the goblet in his hand. “Don't drink it,” murmured Vedrona, in an almost heart-breaking appeal.

“Don't drink it,” warningly echoed the voices within. He heeded them not.

“Friends and citizens of Sahama,” he cried in his clear, firm, ringing voice, “though I have hitherto steadfastly refused to drink strong wine, I recognise that unusual events sometimes make peculiar demands, and that the full unity of this occasion may in no wise be disturbed, I ask you

to join me, by drinking from the self-same cup, our loyal pledge to Vedrona, Sahama's future Queen.”

They drank the toast, then a mighty ringing cheer rent the silence, but the Princess did not hear it - she had fallen in a swoon.

CHAPTER XXI

THE PRESCIENCE OF FATIGUE

The experience acquired by Vedrona on that eventful day, was, so far, only varied from the usual experience of humanity by reason of her position. The neutral, colourless draperies of youthful innocence and reserve had been drawn aside from an uneventful life, and at the call of duty her reluctant feet stepped across the Rubicon of publicity to find a thousand unanticipated attractions appealing to her rising enthusiasm. Intoxicated with the revelation, she had thrown herself into the arms of tempting pleasures with an abandoned zest that took no thought of consequences, until the nightfall chill of exhaustion swept the field of her enjoyment, causing her to shiver with hysteria, then fall into the oblivious arms of coma.

It was only the natural penalty of youth's sweet extravagance, but it leaves behind a black shadow of melancholy, measured in its depth by the balance swing from the height of our enjoyment.

She was at once conveyed to the more favourable atmosphere of a withdrawing room, and left in charge of Machaon and Tasha, with Æna and Zillah in attendance.

Thread by thread the bands of unconsciousness were snapped under the influence of the physician's restoratives, and the baton of her pulse began to beat the quickening time of life's returning symphony.

Then the wise Machaon withdrew, lest his presence should militate against the resuscitating luxury of an unrestrained flood of tears.

How anxiously did the weeping Tasha watch the gradual return of life!

The Princess moved! “Hush-sh,” was the almost inaudible caution whispered to the slaves.

She endeavoured to turn. “It is all right, darling. I am here.” In the utterance of that pronoun there was a yearning strength of maternal affection sufficient to woo a doubtful soul back to earth from Paradise.

Vedrona sighed - a deep, heavy, reviving sigh! "That is better, dearie! Keep quiet; all is well!"

The head half turned, and the languid, wondering eyes half opened, recognising the well loved face.

"What is it, Tasha? What has happened?" she murmured.

"You are tired, dear; and the heat was too much for you. It is over now!"

"But Glarces! Where is he?"

"Not far away. You shall see him when you are a little better."

"He is not dead?" she enquired, a spasm of alarm exciting her as a sudden gust of wind strikes a dry leaf. "No, love! He is well - or will be when he hears that you are better."

"Send for him. I must see him."

"Presently. When you are a little stronger."

Again she shivered as if an icy blast swept across her sensitive frame. She convulsively grasped Tasha's hand.

"Take me home!" she exclaimed, wildly. "Take me home at once; I dare not stop here any longer."

"Zillah! order the chair to be in readiness at once; then go forward and await our coming at home," said Tasha. The Iberian frowned; such had not been her determination, but she must needs obey. She made no reply, though the vigour with which she drew aside the portiere was eloquent with anger, and in her haste she almost fell upon the statuesque form of Maphir, who, with folded arms, had placed himself on guard in case of need.

Zillah gone, Vedrona again requested "Let me see Glarces now."

"Find the Prince, Æna and let him know that the Princess would see him at once."

When they were quite alone, Vedrona crept still closer to her, and pleaded:

"Tell me, Tasha, what horrible thing has happened?"

"Nothing, dear, beyond your own weariness, which enabled the gods to seize and try to carry you away; but now you have returned all is well."

"You will not tell me," she answered, unable to accept the assurance. "But I know what it is: all the world has gone to pieces, and I have lost Glarces - everything."

Then her feelings found vent in a flood of tears, which Tasha made no attempt to control, neither did she contradict her assertion. Being a woman of somewhat kindred temperament she knew the silver streak of composure that would presently fringe the unwelcome cloud, and wisely allowed the storm to take its natural course. When its violence was over she ventured to speak.

“You are tired to-night, dear, as you sometimes used to be when you were only a child, and I took you on my knee to tell some pretty story before you went to bed. I remember, but you forget, how sometimes you would think the tales were awful because my voice disturbed your sleep. In the morning, when you were rested, you would come to me and ask to hear it again, then you would say, “Oh, how sweet, it was the tired last night, not me.’ Do you remember?”

“I think I do,” she answered, soothed by the ingenious harking back to childish memories.

“And that is just what you will think about to-night when to-morrow comes; but your fears are very real now.”

“I am sorry to be so much trouble to you,” she replied, with a truly penitential caress; “but I don't know how to help it.”

“Ah, my dear,” Tasha returned, with a deep drawn sigh, “you do not know me, even now, if you imagine that any service that I can render you is a trouble. The only trouble I have is to see you and your brother drifting away from me - knowing that others are taking my place and I am losing you.”

“No one can ever take your place with either Glarces or myself, Tasha. If we are not quite so demonstrative it is not because we love you less, or are in danger of forgetting, but rather that the stream of our affection runs deeper - beyond the reach of the surface influences of life.”

“And grows stronger and stronger as the days go by.” added Glarces, who had entered silently, and overheard both the regret and Vedrona's assurance. “But how is my love?” he asked anxiously, as he took his seat beside the couch. “No, Tasha, you must not go; we have no secrets from you, and I am not sure if you are not more necessary than I just now.”

“I am better now that I see you are safe;” and the lovelight that spread across her face almost eclipsed the last trace of her fear. “I am sorry I was so foolish, but I was so tired, and terribly afraid.”

“Afraid of what, dear?”

“I don't know. In that lies the greater part of my suffering. If the fear would only assume a definite form I might be able to conquer it; but while it remains a vague, intangible dread of some danger threatening you, I am powerless, except to endure its torment.”

He laughed- a short random, defiant laugh. Vedrona was perhaps too weary, or, it may be, too engrossed with her fear to notice it; but Tasha looked at him with startled surprise at such an unexpected demonstration of levity. It was so foreign to his nature that she refused to accept the evidence of her ears. Sharp as was her action she failed to catch the expression on his face, but she saw the flush upon the cheek, the almost fierce passion flashing from his eyes, the exhilaration that made him so unlike himself. She could see that he too was worn out by his exertions of the day, but beyond this she was alarmed to notice the undoubted influence of the cup he had drained in his enthusiastic loyalty to Vedrona, Lais, and his guests alike.

It was only a momentary glance, but it revealed all this and more - it brought her within the shadow of Vedrona's fear for his safety; filled her with a wild desire to do something! But what! She was not a resourceful woman. In that lay her weakness. She had no idea what to do.

“Phantoms of the imagination have neither strength, bone, nor muscle, my beloved; therefore you need have no fear. I can well protect myself; but you need rest.”

“I know it, and if I were only sure that you were safe, I would take Tasha's advice and go home.”

“Your fear is nothing but a creation of your weariness. Do as Tasha asks you. She is a wise woman, gifted with the prescience of the gods, and cannot make a mistake.”

“If you really think so, perhaps you will let me advise you as well,” she replied, promptly. “You need rest quite as much as Vedrona - why not take it?”

“Because it is impossible, welcome as I willingly admit it would be. Vedrona must needs retire, but I must remain to do my duty.”

“Hear me, my love,” pleaded the Princess. “Don't send me home. I will rest here, but I cannot go away.”

“Why not?”

“Because I know how much you will need me. Tasha, Æna - anyone you will shall keep me company if you will only consent to my remaining. But you will want me, dear, and if I go away I shall never see you again.”

“Have you not conquered your fear yet?” he asked, tenderly.

“No! Nor can I until this night is past. Don't laugh at me, but I am confident we are face to face with the most awful trouble of our lives. I can feel it though I cannot see it. My heart stands still; my blood grows cold, and my soul is filled with a nameless horror, to which even death would be preferable! If we meet it together we are safe; if we part all is lost! As you love me, my brother, don't drive me away.”

She had risen from her couch and was clinging to him with all the intensity of a maddening despair. Tasha was almost beside herself with grief; Æna was terrified and helpless; and Glarces utterly bewildered.

“What is this remorseless devil who seeks to poison the last hour of this day's happiness? Give it some name, my love, and let me slay it ere it effects its purpose.”

“No, no! I cannot - dare not tell you,” she answered, stealing a wild and furtive look behind her towards the entrance.

“It may be, as you say, only a shadow cast by my weariness, and if you wish it I will go home.” She had released him and taken one or two steps backward, speaking her last words almost like one in a dream. “Yes! I will go home! But”- with a piercing shriek she awoke, and again threw herself upon him – “I shall never see you again - never see you again.”

“If you love me you will tell me what this is,” he demanded.

She started, each hand gripping his tunic convulsively, her eyes glaring wildly, and her face ashen as that of a corpse.

“If I love you!” Her voice was hoarse and cold. “Ah, ye gods! If I had loved less my suffering were not so great!

But hear me, Glarces, then understand my sorrow! In the darkness into which you thrust me I can see one form - oh, how I have loved her - waiting to slay me; and a thousand warning voices cry on every side - 'Beware of Lais! Beware of Lais!’”

Glarces' cheeks flushed, and he had some difficulty in restraining his impatience. He was not ignorant of the effect the wine had produced upon him - felt the added impetus it gave to every turn of his mind, making him singularly unlike his normal self both in feelings and language. If either side of his nature had an advantage of the other in that critical moment it

was unfortunately the lighter, and the more solid part of him was consequently in repose. He could control himself, but it was always with a tendency towards buoyancy, and this naturally influenced him in favour of the stranger rather than the friend, the accused more than the accuser - Lais instead of Vedrona.

“This is unworthy of you after all that has passed,” he remonstrated; “and if I were sufficiently inconsiderate not to defend Lais against this injustice, prompted by fatigue, even you would despise me in the morning.”

The impetuous influence of the wine cut out of his remonstrance the usual endearing epithet which would have robbed it of its fatal sting, and the fretfulness of Vedrona's exhaustion fanned her rising jealousy by suggestive misrepresentation. O God, through wharf trifling crevices does ruin creep!

The correction - not quite so softly expressed as intended, not a tittle so harsh or unfeeling as imagined - roused hitherto unsuspected volumes of fury in the Princess, which for the instant conquered her weariness, and, under the strength its spasm lent, she made Glarces quail as he stood before her.

“I should at least be allowed to live till the morning in order to despise you,” she almost hissed, having stepped back a pace or two; “but you object to it, and order me away that I may go to death! I see it - know it now! At last my blinded eyes have been opened, and I am undeceived! Ye gods, what have I done - wherein have I transgressed that I deserve to be so treacherously betrayed? Is this the boasted climax of love - the apex of all joy - the great consummation of a woman's hopes? Is this the goal towards which I have so faithfully pressed forward? Ah! ha! I have solved the riddle - “ and she literally screamed with hysterical laughter - “I have possessed my self of the one enchantment of the gods!” Then turning fiercely upon him: “But I bid you beware, Glarces! You may despise me and throw me away, but I love you still - with a passion neither mankind, immortals, nor death have power to touch or modify, and though I die a thousand deaths I will come back again and take vengeance on Lais or any other fiend who dares to come between us!”

The spell of her vehemence was broken by this time, and her trembling, helpless body fell upon the couch nothing but a writhing mass of uncontrollable hysteria.

Glarces wisely left her to the tearful ministrations of Tasha and Æna who, with the powerful magic of woman's potent sympathy, exorcised the fury

and wooed the repentant peri back again. In a flood of bitter tears the storm of passion passed away, the convulsive sobs died into distant, almost inaudible murmurs, and she opened her eyes to see only the two faithful women beside her.

“Hold me, Tasha; hold me in your arms and let me die; for I am so weary - oh, so weary!”

With what eager response did the demonstrative Tasha answer the appeal. She was weeping equally tears of sorrow and of joy - the one at the painful scene through which her much beloved children had passed; the other that it had undone the work of years and brought them both back again to her embraces as in the former days. She knew not which feeling swayed her most, only that it was a sweet chastening.

“Yes, dearie, I know how tired you are, but you shall sleep and so die to your sorrow; when the morning comes you will wake refreshed, and begin another life of sweeter joy”

“Not unless Glarces loves me,” she replied.

“But Glarces does love you, my queen, my soul!” he answered, coming from behind her, where she had not seen him. “I love you as the perfume loves the rose, as the light is true to the sun, as stars are constant to heaven! Nothing can divorce these the one from the other, nor is there any power that can come between our hearts, and all the ages that are yet to come can only make us more completely one. Will you - can you not trust me and be content?”

Her hand wandered from Tasha's to his own; the old light returned to her eyes, the confidence to her heart; and she murmured:

“I think I can.”

“Then take our advice and go home at once.”

“And if I will sleep till you return may I see you then?” she asked pathetically.

It was love's hunger to see fear vanquished, not jealous doubt, that had found voice.

“Yes, dear, sleep and wait for me. I will send you word - will come to you when I return. Come, your chair is waiting. Let me see you away.”

CHAPTER XXII

WINE AND THE MAN

The unfortunate collapse of Vedrona at such a critical moment produced a scene of superstitious consternation among the guests, and nothing but the resourceful coolness of Lais prevented a regrettable termination of the banquet. She, however, who prided herself in being equal to any emergency, was not likely to be disconcerted when the anticipated occurred, and with ingenious tact speedily put an end to the excitement by the announcement that the Princess was so far prepared for what had taken place that she had specially requested that if her withdrawal, owing to exhaustion, should be necessary, the same should in no way interfere with the progress of the revels.

Teresh and Zachra exchanged a meaning and doubtful look, but at the moment Machaon returned with the assurance that there was no cause for anxiety, and the incident was mostly forgotten in favour of the entertainment.

In her arrangements for the banquet Lais had been careful to allocate to Casca a cup-bearer in whom she had special confidence, with instructions to encourage the eunuch in his cups, until it should be necessary to carry him from the table to sleep off the effects of the wine. But the indisposition of Vedrona had an undesirably restraining action, and Casca, refusing further drink, left the table more garrulous than incompetent, and Lais presently received the news of him being the talkative centre of a company of friends she was not particularly anxious for him to meet in his present communicative mood. She therefore sent a messenger to command his immediate presence.

When the slave arrived Casca was fast falling a victim to flattery, on the part of several who were desirous of knowing what had brought about the retirement of the Princess. "It's a capital story, and well worth listening to," he was saying. "Eh! What?" he enquired from the importunate slave at his elbow. "Ah! just as I expected. As I say, it's one of the funniest stories you ever heard. But you will have to wait for it. Lais wants me - can't get on without me! Only understands generalities - all the details are mine. But I'll come back, and I'll make Zachra's hair walk over his head."

"We want to hear it now - tell us before you go," half a dozen pleaded.

"Do you? Well, then there's no reason - " A second slave interrupted him.

"The Princess Lais commands my lord's immediate presence."

“D -- n the Princess!” he replied. “Does it take two of your cursed black brood to tell me that; or, does she think I am a slave?”

“Well spoken, Casca! Assert your independence!” his friends encouraged.

“Independence, indeed! I'll let her know that I am in possession of secrets that would make her my slave, if I cared to speak. I am neither slave nor servant to any woman.”

“Well said, Casca; but tell us this story.”

“I should think it was well said, and you would think so if you knew what I could tell you, had I the mind to do so. Why, gentlemen, before this very night is over - “

“The Princess awaits you instantly!” This time the messenger was one of the minor officials.

“What do you think of that for importance, eh! Look here - only three of 'em after me before I have time to count whether I have as many fingers on my right hand as on my left. Then some people have the idea that Velia could go on without Casca. Hallo! here comes another.”

“My lord Casca, the Princess requires your immediate attendance.”

“Does she! She's a good woman, but a little too impetuous. I must keep her waiting, then she will know how to appreciate me. Don't you wish you were so necessary gentlemen? Don't you wish you had such a mind and genius? But I want to tell you this story before I go, and I'll do it just to show you that I can be king of the castle at any time I make up my mind to be so.”

At this moment one of the officers of the guard entered the room, and addressing Casca, said “The Princess Lais commands me to bring you at once into her presence.”

“Well, well! I say, friends, do you hear that? Now this is carrying a joke too far! Did she, seriously, tell you to arrest me, Casca! the Queen's Chamberlain? By the gods, I'll let her know who I am. Gentlemen, I must ask your pardon for a little while. I'll not forget the story; but damme, I must let this woman know I won't stand any insolence.”

“The fates all work against us,” said Teresh, as the muddled chamberlain strutted off in company with the officer.

“It is generally said that the gods take care of their own,” replied Zachra, “but I'll be hanged if I think they do their work half as well as the furies. Do as we will we cannot get anything stronger than a suspicion to work upon.”

“I though we were certainly safe to hear something when he was so mellowed down,” said another.

“So we should, if we could have kept him quiet. He has just had enough to unloose his tongue, and would have told us everything.”

“We must keep our eye on him when he leaves Lais,” suggested Zachra.

“She will not let him go again so easily, my friend,” said Teresh. “All these hurried messengers tell me how anxious she is about his tongue. We shall not see Casca again tonight.”

Meanwhile the officer had conducted the loquacious eunuch to the apartment where the restless Lais awaited him “Now comes the crowning moment of our long sought victory,” grandiloquently exclaimed Casca, as he met the royal lady.

“Don't be a fool,” she returned, indignantly.

“A what?”

“A fool. I sent for you because I need some little advice; but look at your condition! I wanted a man - and I get a wine skin; a counsellor, and I find an idiot!”

“My dear lady, let me assure you that you never made such an unjust mistake before. I know the importance of to-night, and have taken the precaution just to make myself the equal of twenty men; but as for drinking - well, I have not had half enough to quench my first thirst.”

The loquacious bombast of the man was not a little irritating to Lais, especially as it suggested the probability of his having already said too much; but this was one of the risks she was compelled to run by association with him. Yet he was the only available puppet at her disposal. Without him, dangerous as he was, her cause would have been an impossible one, and she had taken every precaution to prevent his knowledge of her plans being either consistent or clear. He certainly knew she was doing something, but beyond that his ideas of her scheme were not even distantly related to her own. Still, she had to bear with him and keep his tongue silent until her coup was made, whatever might be the result. What he had already said under the influence of liquor she must be prepared to deal with; but she had the consolation of knowing he was henceforth safe, so could afford to humour him, while she went about her business.

“Well, perhaps I have done you a certain amount of injustice, but I am worried - anxious, and you must forgive me. But you are equally unjust to

me when you consider it necessary to tell me that you are worth twenty other men, as if I have not the discernment to discover that for myself. I don't generally associate myself with fools! Still we will say no more about it! We have to work now, and while I put matters in train for our final move I want you to remain here, where I can find you at any instant, in case I need your assistance.”

“I will be back before you can turn round twice, Lais; but I must have one other cup of wine.”

“You may have six if you choose, but must not go away. I will send you a special skin of such wine you have rarely tasted.”

“But I have left some friends who - “

“Are they of more importance to you than Vedrona is?” “Ah! Now that is something like talking. How soon shall she be mine?”

“To-morrow, without fail.”

“But that won't do, Lais; won't do at all. You said it should be to-night, and I shall hold you to your engagement.”

“But don't you know that she has gone home?”

“That has nothing to do with it. I insist on you keeping your promise.”

“So I can to-morrow, easily. I shall capture Glarces to-night, and then you can have Vedrona to-morrow, as a pleasant settlement of the difficulty.”

“Won't do, my dear lady - won't do. I am not half so good at waiting as you are, and it must be the other way about.”

“Well, if you insist, I suppose it must be so; but I always regarded you as a man careful of ordinary courtesy to a lady.”

“Certainly so - certainly so! That is in a general sense; but love and matrimony are always selfish, Lais. They care nothing about courtesies.”

“Have your own way. I will send your wine, then see how I can serve your purpose, and will return almost immediately.”

She was gone before he had time to reply, and almost at the instant a slave entered with the wine.

Men in the peculiarly half-and-half condition which Casca occupied just then are not always so easily deluded as may be imagined. Up to a certain point liquor occasionally stimulates a development of craft and cunning, in the individual, otherwise unsuspected. It was so with the chamberlain. The almost simultaneous entrance of the slave with the exit of Lais aroused a certain suspicion in his mind, and with that a determination

not to touch the drink but secure a retreat. The clumsy anxiety of the disingenuous menial strengthened this conclusion, until Casca saw that he was practically regarded as a prisoner. He did not protest nor claim his freedom, but with a specious craft, not possible to him in his sober moments, he presently outwitted his gaoler and found his way into the fernery, open air, and, as a natural consequence, complete intoxication.

Glarces had but a moment before bade his sister and Tasha “good-night;” then, taking a seat, was reviewing the incidents of the day and night, as also considering the effects produced upon himself by that first cup of old wine.

It was a strange and novel experience, and its influence would have been far greater than it was, had it so far changed the man as to make him forget to analyse and study the lessons to be derived therefrom. He was not slow to recognise the witchery of its exhilaration; under the pleasant buoyancy of spirits it encouraged, he had almost entirely lost the sense of fatigue, and was free to admit the overpowering temptation of just one other cup to make him completely happy. But he equally recognised the danger and the debasing cowardice of the sophistry. Prudence and loyalty had compelled him to drink that one cup, which he did not regret, but to drink again would be both untrue to himself, and ignoble, and Glarces could never be that.

Just then the thick guttural utterances of Casca broke upon his ear. He divined the situation in an instant, and the unwonted geniality of his own spirits at once suggested his studying the eunuch under the new aspect now presented.

The air and wine between them were fast reducing the chamberlain to a condition of helplessness, so Glarces went to his assistance.

“Well now,” chuckled Casca, in drunken enjoyment of what he considered to be a capital joke, “only to think of finding you here, and all alone too. Are you alone, Glarces?”

“Of course I am alone - and why not?” asked the Prince, assisting the uncertain chamberlain to a seat beside him. “Glarces, m'boy, lis'n to me an' doan make y'self ridic'lous. I ask you why you're here, then you ask me ‘why not.’ Now is that an intelligen' answer to my question?” “It is the most appropriate I can find at the moment.” “Then you're drunk, Glarces, an' I'm sorry for it. Some people are more fortunate than I am. I've been looking for wine all night, and can't find 'nough to wash the dust off my tongue.”

“Is that due to the lack of wine, or the quantity of dust, my friend?”

“Ah! Good-good! That reminds me what it was I wanted to see you for. Now, Glarces, answer me as one man ought to answer another. Am I your friend or am I not?” “Surely it is too late for us to argue a question like that.”

“Now, now; do be reasonable and sens'ble. This is the one quest'n that's never too late or out of place. Ask it oft'n, and don't let it be 'vaded. Am I your friend or am I not?”

“I hope you are.”

“Can't y' say yes or no? Well, never mind; p'raps y'can't, an' I don't want to be hard on you. Now lis'n to me. I'm older than you are, an' know things that would astonish you; so I want to give you a bit of advice.”

“I shall be glad to hear it,” replied the Prince, wondering what further revelations the philosopher of wine was about to disclose.

“Now, every wise man wants to do the best for himself, doesn't he?”

“Certainly.”

“The great quest'n is, how to do it.”

“And what do you suggest?”

“There is but one way - that's my way.”

“But what is it ?”

“Now, Glarces, do try to be patient, an' allow me a chance of speaking. 'Scuse me, but you don't happen to have a cup of wine handy, do you?”

“No!”

“Y'see it's hard to keep the sacred fire burning W'out oil. But I never grumble, Glarces, I never grumble.”

“But what about your method of success?”

“I'm getting to it, m'friend; I'm getting to it all the time, if y'wont interfere, an' int'rupt me. Now just look at the fairy snakes on them leaves in the moonlight, arn't they beau'ful?”

“I don't see them.”

“No, of course not. That's the penalty you have to pay for gettin' drunk. Don't never do it again, Glarces.” “Very well. But what about - “

“Lis'n to me! Now - what was I going to say?”

“You were about to tell me how to succeed in life.”

“I know all about it. But why won't you be quiet, and let me go on? Now, as I tell you, there are as many ways of doing it as there are days in the year, but there's only one right way.”

“And that is - “

“My way, of course; and that is by ‘the give and take’ process. Do y'understand?”

“Not quite clearly.”

“M'friend, I'm very much 'fraid you're too drunk to know what I'm telling you; and I'm grieved at it, Glarces - always sorry to see a man in your pos'tion forget himself. He looks such a fool.”

“So am I sorry, but go on, I will do my best to understand you.”

“That's bet'r. Now, if y'll only keep like that, p'raps I can do something with you. Let me see, what was we talkin' 'bout?”

“Your method of success.”

“Yes, that's right! I wanted to know if y'was conscious of what I was tellin' you. Now, what did I tell y'it was?”

“Give and take.”

“Yes, but what is give and take?”

“You did not explain.”

“Ah! y' getting bet'r; but if y' int'rupt me again I shall have to get a drink, I c'n hardly speak now.”

“I will not do so.”

“Now, let me 'splain. In give an' take you don't really give anything - an' yet you do; but you give it to take it back again, an' something else beside. Do you see what I mean?”

“Not quite, at present; but go on, I shall understand as you proceed.”

“Scuse me, Glarces, but you're a fool. That's what Lais said.”

“Lais told you that I am a fool?”

“No! She said I was a fool, an' I say you are - so, of course, you are.”

“Not of necessity, my friend,” replied the Prince, somewhat relieved to find there was no more behind the remark. “According to my process of reasoning a fool's fool would be a wise man.”

“So I am, but then y'see y're drunk, and y're reasoning is all wrong. That's why I w'nt to advise y' for y'r own good.”

“And I am waiting to hear what you have to say.”

“Well then, lis'n to me. Look at what I am, an' what I was. D' you want to be that?”

“What you were! Certainly not.”

“That's what I didn't say But see! I hold the confidence of the greatest livin' Prince, and by my shrewdness have come to be abs'lutely necess'ry to his well being. D' y' w'nt to be that?”

Certainly the wine was speaking rather than the man. Under its traitorous influence, and relying upon the traditional liberties of the day, Casca was unreservedly revealing his true character to his own undoing. All that Glarces had previously heard - and more - was being confirmed. The man he had placed such confidence in - for whose friendship he had in a measure slighted the well-tried counsel of Teresh - was at length witnessing against himself, and confirming more than others had yet laid to his charge.

The unintentional confession was serious, but none the less important. It was an opportunity which might not occur again readily, and since it had come unsought, Glarces received it as a guiding indication of the gods, that the time had arrived to know and truly understand the man. With this impression he continued to encourage the conversation. “I scarcely understand what you mean.”

“L'k 'ere, Glarces, would y' like t' have the best m'n on earth under y'r own thumb?”

“It would give me a certain amount of power, wouldn't it?”

“Power, m' boy; it makes y' a king - more! it makes y' almost a god. Great as the m'n is you are fooling' yr greater, because y' do fool him - see!”

“But you put it so vaguely before.” “No, Gl'ces! It's you that's drunk.” “Go on; I understand you now.”

“Yes! It's passin' off a bit.”

“Well, to return to your question - yes, I should like to be as you say.”

“Then you must learn to ‘give an' take’”

“May I not give without taking?”

“No, y' can't. It's imposs'ble - b'yond y'r power - outside human nature! Lis'n! The world's just like a woman if y' want to get on with either you mus' let them do as they like wi' you. One time they will run af'r you - call y' a hero, and pet you to death - that's when they want something When a

wom'n's got it she runs away - that's just to see if y' think enough about her to follow her. So she says; but it's really to see if she's gone too far with the liberty she's taken. Do you un'erstan' me now?"

"Go on, I am listening."

"Well, that's what I mean by 'give an' take.' You have to humour the woman, and let her think she does as she likes wi' you - "

"So she does."

"N't at all, m' dear fellow, n't at all."

"But she gets what she wants before she runs away."

"Right. Y'r gettin' bet'r now, so we'll proceed. She gets what she wants, but that's only for the moment. You're going to take it back again, with all you wanted at first as int'rest. You've only been foolin' her."

"Is that quite manly, Casca?" queried the Prince anxious not to miss the opportunity of sounding the depth of the speaker's morality.

"Manly!" he reiterated with vehement indignation. "There's nothing manly about a woman - they don't like it - can't un'erstand it. They were made to be fooled, an, they expect it - can't be happy w'out it. A moth is never happy till its wings are singed by the lamp, an' woman are only moths! They are on'y happy when in mischief, an' trying to injure themselves. You've got to humour an' amuse them, Glarces, or life will be a burden to them."

"But life ought to be more than amusement," he answered

"Of course it is, but that's the other side of the quest'n, to which I was just coming. When you've got all you want from the world - an' the women as well, for I always mean the woman, whether I say so or not - then you grow serious, an' make them un'erstand that no more f'miliarity is permissible for the pr'sent. In other words, when we've got all we want - far more than ev'r they had from us - we run away, and mustn't be spoken to n'r looked at unt'l we want the woman again. But b'lieve, Glarces-an' lis'n-for I'm going to tell you a secret you'll find to be quite true. Life's all play and make b'lieve! B'tween you an' me, the gods don't yet know how to make an honest man; an' him in whom you place most conf'dence is gen'rally the worst hyp'crite of the lot. Now, let m'see - what was I saying? Oh! I know - I was coming to the wom'n. Now, to help us lay aside our dignity, and b'come f'miliar, without inconsistency, the gods have arranged these festivals, when we can be our real selves, and meet the world on equal terms."

“And the women,” suggested the Prince, wondering whether there was anything more to be said in this connection. “Oh! of course; always the women, b'cause the world would be unbearable w'out them. Now you see how I unbend on these 'casions. You haven't known me like this b'fore, have you?”

“No, that I have not. I wish I had.”

“So d' I. But then, y' see, y'd never come to the festival. Now y're here y' must follow my example, and let me show you the c'rect thing t' do.”

“In what way?”

“In ev'ry way. Now lis'n: first. I always give the Queen's Chamberlain a hol'day on these 'casions; y'see he's too ceremonious. Has to be - can't help it - it's his duty. But ceremony's out of place here - won't do at all, so I let him go to begin with. Next, I have to put Casca out of the way. He's too d- - d proud and supercil'ous to speak to a women - thinks they're like slaves, only good'nough to put his feet on - “

“But Casca would not put his feet on slaves.”

“You don't know him, m' friend; he's too deep to let you, but at home he always sits with a slave un'er his feet.” This was another confirmation of an old rumour. “Well, you get rid of Casca.”

“Yes, an' then y' see, I can just be my own free an' easy self. Oh, an' pardon me, Glarces, but I quite forgot to intr'duce m'self b'fore. Now, I want you to let the Prince and Glarces go to the dev'l for t'night, and come wi' me an' be a man among men.”

“And women. Don't forget them.”

“Cer'nly not, y' poor in'cent; y'might as well think I should forget the wine as the women.”

“I am afraid I shall have to ask you to excuse me, though I have no doubt you would show me many surprising things; but I am not quite so free as you are, and must give Lais some little assistance.”

“Well, there you are, I've told you what to do, now you can practice on Lais. But, I say, Glarces, don't forget you owe a special duty to Vedrona to-night, the sweetest, best an' most lov'ble women - “

“Stop, Casca; please omit my sister's name from your drunken ravings.”

“Well, now - come, Glarces, you will go too far for me in a minute. P'raps I had bet'r tell you what Lais is going to do for me to-night.”

“Lais has my full permission to do anything she proposes, but my sister has already retired, and can be of no further interest to you, at least, to-night.”

“But a fellow can do as he likes with his own, can't he?” At that moment an officer approached, and saluting the Prince, enquired:

“Is my lord Casca engaged, O Prince?”

“Not now, and I think he needs to be looked after.” “The lady Lais has ordered his arrest until he recovers himself.”

“Eh! What!” enquired the eunuch. “It's very good of Lais, but tell her I don't want to rest, an' what's more, I won't rest till she has fulfilled her promise.”

“You had better take him away, guard, and save him from himself.”

So Casca was taken prisoner for the time being, and thus the Prince prevented the divulging of a secret which would have saved a world of trouble that night.

CHAPTER XXIII

IN THE COIL OF THE TEMPTRESS

The arrest of Casca was neither a matter of surprise nor suspicion. It was very exceptional for a man in Sahama to indulge himself to the extent the chamberlain had gone that night, but at the festival such relapses did occasionally take place, and it had become a recognised duty of the guard to take charge of any such until they recovered themselves. So it was that Glarces attached no importance to the authority of the officer, but allowed him to lead the garrulous eunuch away as a matter of course.

The revels sped on with a whirl of pleasure in which the incident of Vedrona had been most effectually obliterated from the minds of many. She had not yet become a recognised part of an established institution, and though her presence was hailed with delight, it necessarily exercised a certain restraint which passed away with her retirement, and allowed the old freedom and spontaneity to return.

As for Lais, she was always seen at her best on such occasions. Never for a moment forgetting she was the Queen's representative, she was equally mindful that it was customary to observe a gracious condescension for the time, and this rule she never failed to interpret with a Babylonian freedom, if not in the actual sanction and encouragement, at least in the permission of certain phases of sociability to which Sahama had hitherto

been a stranger. She was a queenly hostess, with perhaps a trifle less of the former than latter quality.

Midnight had long passed before she and Glarces met again. If they had seen each other, it was only at a distance, and her duties, equally with her design, prevented her speaking to him. When her time came they met accidentally, of course - just when and how she had predetermined. She was seeking a brief respite of rest, and was studiously careful that he should see her weariness.

“Have I discovered you at last? Surely this must be a mistake, my sister!” he remarked, in half-amused remonstrance, not suspecting the net she had spread for his capture. “I thought the night would end before we met again.”

“And would that have been so great a loss as to have caused you sorrow?” she enquired.

“Does it need that I should tell you so in order that you should know it? In the midst of such a great success - the which I wish Vedrona was here to see - should I be worthy of myself if I did not seek to express my gratitude?” “Does it please you, Glarces?”

“Please me, my sister? Why, Velia never saw such a festival before.”

“Then, so far as I have had anything to do with it, I am more than satisfied. Now let me run away, for we must not spoil it at the finish.”

“Not so, Lais. It is too late to speak of failure now and you must rest - must take some meed of pleasure from so much enjoyment. Come with me, and see the performance of these wondrous dancing girls you have brought from Ind.”

“And so neglect my duty. No, Glarces, much as I would like to be with you - much as I should like to see those girls - I cannot do that.”

“Your duty has been more than admirably performed towards our guests, now let me crave a little for myself. Your company, dear, will increase my own enjoyment. Come with me.”

“Are you so very lonely? Am I to be so highly honoured as to be requested to take Vedrona's place with Glarces for the remainder of the night?”

“Not Vedrona's, dear; but the next place with me has always been your own.”

“Has it really?” “You know it has.” “But suppose I crowd Vedrona out.”

Glarces looked at her with playful confidence. “Do you think you could?”

“I don't know,” she answered archly; “no one knows what they can do till they try.”

“Well, you have my permission, and I am sure she would not object to your making the attempt.”

“Then with that understanding I will go with you to see the dance. But I caution you I go only as Vedrona's representative.”

“I understand.”

They retired to an alcove reserved for Lais overlooking the platform, from which they could watch the performance in comparative seclusion.

“Now let some refreshment be brought,” he entreated. “No, thank you; I will try and content myself with my companion and the entertainment for the present. Yet, I don't know,” she added as an afterthought, “but that a sip of wine would relieve me.”

As soon as the slave left to bring the wine, Lais - who had thrown herself upon the lounge with Glarces by her side in the usual position he assumed when sitting with Vedrona - turned to him and said, with a voice full of sudden melancholy

“Forgive me for the mischievous remark I made about Vedrona.”

“What remark?”

“About my displacing her. I ought not to have made it, but it has taken its revenge already! It has awakened a memory and destroyed all my pleasure for the rest of the night.”

“No, no! that must not be; here is the wine - taste it, then you will be better.”

With a heavy sigh she took the cup and touched the liquor with her lips. Then, offering it to him, she asked doubtfully

“You will not join me, will you.”

It was a deadly move, carefully planned and executed with consummate skill. Towards this apparently accidental and undesigned request the whole events of the night had been directed with the firm, cool grip of a master hand, but its purpose was so cleverly disguised as to defy detection. It was the time-worn sheath - the most unsuspectingly powerful and audacious hell has been able to press into service - friendship and sympathy - in which the dagger of the traitress waited to do its work. It was the fore-gleam of the kiss of Jupas, robed in a garb of

inconsolable sorrow even the arch-traitor would have hesitated to assume.

His generous heart had trusted, loved and defended her; his pure soul had refused to recognise the clouds of suspicion others had so plainly and so often seen in the firmament of her conduct; his noble loyalty had been her tower of refuge and defence; his fidelity had been her shield and protection in which she had confidently perfected the plans for his destruction she was now about to bring into play.

Into such an extremity of impotent helplessness are the innocent driven at times by the machinations of remorseless fiends, and in the presence of the triumph of wrong over right there are men and women who doubt the existence of a court of inexorable justice. But let us not deceive ourselves; the very force of logic, the inherent insistence of truth, the insuperable demands of morality cry out against such an inhumanity, and the ten thousand times ten thousand tongues of past experience affirm the declaration of nature – “Be sure your sins will find you out.” The human vision oftentimes has only range sufficiently wide at present to behold the seeming triumph of the seed-sowing; in other scenes and more just surroundings we shall be enabled to watch the harvesting. Ye gods! what a revelation that will be!

The outpost of Glarces' objection to the wine had already been carried away, and the specious argument by which it had been effected was not altogether the thought of his sister, but also deference to the superstition of the guests. This latter now assumed a significance he had not before anticipated if he refused the request of Lais. She could turn upon him with the enquiry, whether, the superstition of the people were more to him than herself, after all she had done for the success of the festival, not to mention his profession that she stood next to Vedrona in his affection. Again, the conversation he had encouraged in reference to Vedrona had unintentionally aroused some memory of sorrow, and to refuse her suggestion would only further add to the pain. Glarces could never do that, especially at such a moment. Under the exceptional circumstances he had already seen it advisable to suspend his rule in regard to strong wine for the night. It was not over yet. With the morning the singular claim would be past, and he would naturally resume his old position, but for the night it was impossible for him to make the invidious distinction Lais might draw from his refusal.

With such a process of reasoning, which only caused him to waver for an instant, he took the cup and pledged his love to Lais.

It was not a draught so deep as that in which he had drunk to Vedrona, but its effect was greater, because the wine was older and more potent. Lais kissed his hand as she took the cup and passed it to her slave, but she did not speak. He dropped his head, for the wine had fired his blood and he felt unsteady.

She ran her fingers lightly through his golden hair, and tenderly caressed him while watching the dance begin. Another world of strangely pleasant and fascinating sensations was opening before him. He saw the dancers; felt the caressing hand of Lais, but they were part of the overpowering cream to which he wished to yield himself. It was a kind of somnolent ecstasy, in which he neither cared to think, remember or move - his only wish was to enjoy, and the longer it continued the more accentuated did the desire become. Only once was he conscious of a definite thought, and then he asked himself whether this condition was that to which Lais had so often referred as being love according to her own idea. If so she was quite right in her contention - she had understood it better than himself.

This thought, together with the cessation of the dance and music, aroused him, and he turned towards his cousin, who lay with her eyes closed, and but for the playful twisting of her fingers through his hair might have been asleep. "You are tired, dear."

"No, not particularly so," she replied; "but there was a certain melancholy strain in the music, growing restfully upon me, and I closed my eyes under its influence." Then, with more animation, she added, "But I must rouse myself now, for I understand this next part of the dance is something extraordinary. Zosine!"

"I am here, lady," answered the slave.

"Did not Machaon send me some remedy against fatigue?"

"I asked my lady to take it long ago," she replied, producing Meshrac's philtre.

"Silence, girl. How is it to be taken?" "A small quantity in a cup of wine."

"There are but a few drops in the whole phial," she answered, examining the bottle as if she had not seen it before. "Divide its contents in two cups of wine, and the Prince will join me."

"No! I have had sufficient already."

"With this dance the revels come to an end. We must pledge each other before we part, and this potion of the wise Machaon will chase away fatigue. You have to see Vedrona yet. Nay - don't deny me! I have heard all

about it, and I desire that she shall see how well I have looked after her interests in all respects. Come, now,” handing him the cup, in which the slave had emptied the whole contents of the philtre, “we will pledge each other and Vedrona's future happiness.”

“Do you insist on it?”

“Most assuredly I do.”

There was already more of willing consent than opposition in his enquiry. The memory of the pleasant dream from which he was but half awake wooed him too seductively to need the definite tone of her reply for submission. He drained the cup, only to discover it was more in the nature of liquid fire than wine coursing through his veins carrying him, in the fury of the passion it excited, past all self-restraint into the maddening intoxication of animal desire.

She watched the effect with a gleam of triumphant satisfaction, and quietly closed the curtains.

“Leave us, girl!” she commanded, then under her breath she murmured, “Now, oh, my beautiful sister, the sweet moment of my revenge has come! Now the model man is mine, and when I have done with him, you shall be welcome to what is left. Oh, ye mighty gods, such a sacrifice of myself is sweet, for it shall bring me possession of the incomparable Glarces when he wakes to know what has transpired. I have waited long for this, but the success is sweeter than even I anticipated. Come to me, Glarces - come, and let us drink our fill of love!”

He was bewildered in his frenzy, neither heeding her nor apparently conscious of her presence till she threw her arms around him in a wild, amorous embrace. Then he started back as if alarmed at her, and looking over her, cried, “See - see! What is that? Who calls me from the darkness?”

Then a shudder like a blast of ague swept over him. His eyes glared! His jaw fell! His hands clutched at space. “What is it, Glarces?” she cried, “I am here - do you not know me? Come, let me console and quiet your excitement.”

He only pushed her back, passed his hand across his face as if to clear the mist from his eyes to enable him to see the imaginary vision in the gloom.

His condition and appearance was indescribably awful. Even Lais shrank away in terror. She had been too successful. Five drops of the elixir would have served her purpose well, the half was enough to kill him, but the

whole, while for a time it reduced him to a confused state of madness, practically destroyed her hopes.

The fury of the spasms presently began to subside; the vision appeared to take a more definite shape; he stretched out his hands appealingly - imploringly, and crying, "Ye gods! What have I done?" turned and dashed through the portiere like a man flying from a legion of devils.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE PHILTRE AT WORK

The purpose of Lais had been foiled at the moment when victory was most confidently certain. Every move upon her unsuspecting quarry had been so artfully and hypocritically planned as to enable her to cast her net and entangle her victim before the design was suspected. With deliberate self-gratification she had dropped the curtains to secure privacy, had commanded her slave to retire, had even gone so far as to give expression to the first outburst of her triumphant boasting; when that mysterious, unanticipated, impossible 'Something' interposed and blasted everything. What is this subtle intervening force lying so completely hidden, and yet so close at hand, defying all estimate of its presence, yet possessing a dynamic power always equal to complete destruction? It is one of the natural and eternal qualities of that vaguely understood region of psychology impinging on the sensuous, but non-existent to the sensual except by demonstration. It is the co-relation of soul, which by spiritual contact brings into operation the eternal forces lying within the unseen, as a cable in the bed of an ocean binds continent to continent for mutual assistance. It is the secret service of truth armed with authority to work for righteousness, and destroy all works of the devil. It is no modern theory worked out as being analogous to wireless telegraphy, rather does the spiritual truth claim to be the suggestion pointing Marconi and his confreres to success. Millenniums before Franklin conceived the possibility of harnessing the lightning, the King of Syria discovered that it was not necessary to the frustration of his plans that a traitor should be in his retinue, but Elisha, the prophet, far away in Dothan, told the King of Israel the words spoken in the Syrian bedchamber.

When Lais drew the curtains she did not only secure privacy but also gloom, in the depth of which, behind her, Glarces by some means caught a vision of his sister waiting patiently for his coming; and as the strength of love forced its way through the torrent of passion, its mighty touch

prevailed to save him, in the perilous moment when he was helpless and undone.

Meanwhile Vedrona, having reached her apartments, had dismissed Zillah in her determination to be rid of everything calculated to recall the unpleasant connections of the night; then, with the single reservation that, come what would, she should see Glarces on his return, submitted herself to Tasha and Æna, whose joint services soon produced the welcome forgetfulness of slumber.

Then Æna was left alone. Not that Tasha wished to avoid her charge, but that the force of her anxious concern might not disturb the sleeper's rest. There was no fear that the faithful Æna would sleep, so commanding to be summoned in case of slightest necessity, the sympathetic foster-mother retired to prepare herself for taking a later watch.

Peacefully did the Princess sleep on, and - if the faint indications were read aright - her dreams were equally pleasant. Only once did she start as if alarmed, then the slave quietly seized her lute, and caused its strings to whisper dreamy harmonies of some reverie inspired by the moment. Vedrona turned her head, half-opening her eyes, as if not certain from whence such music proceeded - whether from earth or dreamland - but the slave took no further notice than to add the almost inaudible breathings of her rich contralto voice in a plaintive soothing song of love. It was nothing new, except, perhaps, the soul of the singer was intertwined more cunningly with her theme, until its intensity and sweetness produced the contrary to the desired effect. At this the song ceased, suddenly in the midst of a strain, and Æna laid aside her instrument.

“Go on, I am listening,” murmured Vedrona.

“It ends there,” replied the girl. “I was only humming a song I heard floating in the air, but it has gone too far away for me to hear it now.”

But the imaginative slave was not without resource and at once went on to invent a story sympathetic with the song. This she told in soft, musical cadence, artfully wooing back the slumber, and enticing her mistress again into the recuperative land of forgetfulness.

Again she started! This time leaping into a sitting posture and staring wildly round the room as if uncertain where she was.

“Glarces!” she gasped. “Glarces - where is he?”

“He has not yet returned. You have been dreaming. Shall I sing again?”

“No-no! He is in danger! I saw it! I must go to him.”

At that moment a slave announced the return of the Prince.

“It was only the gods who woke you at his coming, lady,” cried Æna gleefully, “and the sudden joy affrighted you.” Vedrona quieted herself and smiled.

“Let him know at once that I await him,” she answered the slave, and then to Æna, “now that he is here I can dispense with you, and may the gods bless you for your comfort of the night.”

“But you will need me when the Prince retires,” the girl reminded her.

“Not to-night, Æna. It is already late, and the Car of Phœbus will be travelling before the Prince has told me half the news.”

With this she offered her hand, which the girl affectionately kissed and left her.

Scarcely had she passed through the one door before the curtains of the other were torn aside and Glarces entered. “Come in, my love,” she cried, as she hurried to meet him; but catching sight of the wild, fierce look upon his face, she stood aghast and gasped, “But, oh! Glarces - Glarces! what is the matter - what has happened?”

He did not speak, but motioned her back to the couch, beside which he flung himself, clinging to both her hands as if for protection. His breath came in short hard snatches, his eyes wandered nervously from door to door, he trembled till the room shook, and he clutched at his sister like a despairing criminal.

“What is it, my love?” she pleaded. “Speak, and tell me what has happened.”

How she prayed that Æna might come back again, or that Tasha, hearing of his return, would come to see him and say “good-night.” She dare not loose him in his excitement and terror, even to reach the chime and call for help. She could only grip him in her arms and fold him more closely to her.

But he roughly tore her arms away and flung them rudely aside as if they burned him.

“Let me alone! Let me alone! Don't touch me!” “But I must do something,” she answered, making an effort to regain her feet. “Let me call for someone to help you.”

“No, no! Be still,” he cried, restraining her. “It's over now, and I have escaped.”

“Escaped, from what?”

“From her! She made me drink, but I divined her purpose before it was too late! I ran away, and came here. She poisoned the wine - set my blood on fire! But – I have drunk again. Orasus gave me pure wine to extinguish her fires. I shall be better presently, then I will rest – and after that, be revenged! Ah! ah! She has done her worst - but failed. I did not wrong you! No! I love you; but I hate her - yes, I hate her!”

Vedrona listened with one terrible conviction growing upon her - that something had produced a feverish aberration of his mind. But whether it had been caused by natural excitement and the heavy duties of the day, or whether he had really been induced to drink more wine, she could neither determine nor trust him to explain. She recalled her own experience earlier in the evening, and could readily understand how such a collapse would be more serious in his case, but it was only a temporary matter. He needed rest and such treatment as she had been subjected to, then he would soon recover himself. After the first shock was over, she saw no reason to summon further assistance - she was competent to do all that was necessary; and with no other companionship than hope and tears, she set about her ministry of love.

Having made such explanation he appeared to become less agitated, and when she made a second attempt to caress him did not resent it.

“Of course you love me,” she replied, “surely I do not, need to be convinced of that; and you are loved perhaps even more ardently in return. But we will speak of that presently. You need rest now, and if you could only get a little sleep you would be all the better. Don't you remember how excited and prostrate I was when you sent me home? Well, I have had a long rest; Æna has been telling me all kinds of wonderful stories about yourself, in listening to which I have recovered, and am able and ready to do just the same for you. Now, lay your head there,” pressing it to her bosom, “and listen while I try to tell you all the absurd things the people have been saying to-day; and if I can repeat her stories with half the force and vivacity she used, you will soon forget everything but the pleasure of being talked to, and go to sleep as I did. I don't think you quite deserve it, you know, for sending me home in the way you did, but you are tired now, and I shall return good for evil, and punish you by doing just what you want me to do, and show how wrong you were when I was tired.”

As she talked to him in all the simple, half-nonsensical language of her affection, she punctuated her sentences with the usual flourishes of endearment, little dreaming in her innocence of what had transpired, that she was adding oil to the flames of the passion he was so manfully, but hopelessly, trying to extinguish.

How many of the great tragedies of life owe their origin to the mistaken kindness of affection when more drastic methods would have saved the catastrophe.

Meshrac's diverted and fatal philtre might have been robbed of its sting that night but for the unfortunate assurance of Vedrona's closing words.

“Will you do what I ask you to do?” he demanded eagerly.

The strange, piercing, hungry look with which he accompanied the inquiry revived her fear and nervousness, and again she wished she had not dismissed Æna. “You know I will. Do you think it necessary to ask it.” “Will you do it as willingly as she would?”

“More - far more willingly than anyone would. Who can love you as I do? Am I not all, always, for ever yours? But if you will talk, my love, I must call someone else to be with you for the present, and I will see you afterwards.”

And again she essayed to leave him. “No, no! I cannot - must not let you go, or she will follow me! And I am yours - not hers!”

By this time he had grown even more excited than when he entered, and she could not help regarding him as dangerous and menacing. She had dexterously contrived to slip from the couch, which was now standing between them, but the gong was behind him, and she had no means of calling for the assistance she so sorely needed, but by screams, a method she was reluctant to employ except in an emergency.

“I have no wish to leave you alone, dear,” she answered, with but a faint attempt at composure, “but I do wish to ask for something.”

“No! We need nothing but each other, and no one must come just now. Come to me!”

“No, I cannot. I must see someone at once. I am afraid, and don't know what to do.”

“I can tell you. Come here!”

“But, dear, you don't know how strange you are; I don't understand you, and must call for someone.”

“You shall not! You are mine, and I will have you!” As he spoke he leaped the couch and caught her in his strong trembling arms.

“Stand back! Stand back!” she cried, fighting desperately to release herself; “you are not Glarces, but some devil who has possessed his form to ruin me. Back - back, I say! I hate, despise, and curse you. Out, out - begone.”

Her vehemence and strength, coupled with her anathema, struck him with bewildering force, under the spell of which he was unable to retain his hold and staggered backwards. “Hate me!” he ejaculated.

With that ready inspiration that comes to a woman in such moments of extremity, she saw the advantage she had gained, and prepared to follow up and if possible secure her escape.

“Hate you - yes! How dare you insult me by thinking I could love such as you are now. Out, I say; begone! And if you wish it, go back to the wanton who has made you what you are.”

In her fear and indignation she spoke without either thought or consideration, being only concerned for the safety of the moment, and altogether careless of the keen edge of the weapon she used so readily in her own defence. Her fury had a strength she did not estimate; produced a wound the pain of which exceeded the horrible passion born of the philtre, and under its forceful influence, combined with that of the wine, he fell violently to the floor. Too late she saw what had been undesignedly accomplished, and in her genuine penitence, without a thought of consequences, rushed to pour in the oil of remorse, but he gently, though firmly, put her aside.

By one of those sudden and unexplained revulsions of feeling which none can understand, though so often experienced, the fury of his physical passion broke and passed away, to give place to perhaps more inexorable jealousy, and in the lull between the two storms he for a brief instant recovered almost a normal condition. Even now he might have been saved had Vedrona but known the influences to which Lais had subjected him, but she did not know - had no indication to guide her in her solution of the problem, and had perforce to stand helpless while the last hope drifted by.

Glarces rose to his feet, still trembling in every muscle from the intensity of his expiring passion, and momentarily feeling the powerful grip which the succeeding jealousy was acquiring over him, but in spite of both, sufficiently himself to feel keenly the wrong under which he considered

himself to be suffering. For an instant he stood as if uncertain what to do, then turning he paced the room hurriedly as he made his piteous complaint.

“So this is my reward, the goal of all my hopes, the climax of the illusion which has so long fascinated me. The fires of this night's temptation have tried us both. They burned tortured, and consumed, until they maddened me with their suffering - their flames tossed, dashed, and boiled around me. In them I sank, rose, fought, and struggled, as if for life and existence against the combined forces of a thousand furies, and the one hope which gave me inspiration and courage to do it was that I might prove the sincerity of my love for you. The only incentive I had to attempt to conquer such an agony was that I might prove my worthiness of your love, for without that life will be a burden too heavy for me to bear. When my tortures were most exquisite I lost all consciousness of myself, but my eyes were watching the love that beckoned me forward, and to reach which I would have endured even more than I have already borne. But it is over now! I have, alas, come back from the furnace and the fires that have burned out for lack of fuel. My form is scarred and burned, my brain consumed in the more than fever heat, and my heart is shrivelled by the intensity of the trial. I know I am not the man I was when last you saw me, but I listened to her who told me the experience she had planned would perfect me in all that you desired - all that you would have me to be, and in her assurance she called to my remembrance words that I heard you say in the long ago, until I was willing, at any cost to myself, to secure for you, on this night of all nights, the consummation of the smallest unrealised wish of your heart's desire. It is all over now. I have done it, and it is too late to go back! The old Glarces has been destroyed - burned up; and I am but the hideous metamorphosis that has arisen from his ashes. But let me say this - pay this one tribute to the memory of him who is now no more - when I came up from the furnace in which he passed his ordeal, I knew that in all his anguish he preserved his love for you inviolate, and in the doing so, did not shrink from the sacrifice of himself. He has gone now, for ever, and in the shadow of such an heroic love I must remain content for you to hate me.”

“No, no, my love; you have misunderstood me. Let me explain - “

“It is unnecessary. I am not your love. Have I not told you that the old Glarces is dead - did you not say you hated me, and bade me go back to her who made me what I am? Why do you lie and wish to further deceive me now I begin to understand why you were willing for her to poison my life and happiness? You had not courage to tell me how false you had

been, therefore plotted with her to secure my infidelity that you might therein find excuse to brand and blast my name. But I have foiled you both, uncovered your lie, and come out of the trial as all true men will. But hear this, Vedrona, for the sake of the love you have so cruelly slain, I will still forgive you if you will tell me his name who has stolen more than my life. For, by all the mighty gods, I swear he shall never have you, but this dagger shall drink his blood before I go away. Who is he? Speak, that I may go and find him!”

“My brother - my beloved! Hear me - you are wrong!” “Who is he, I ask? Give me his name!” and his voice grew thick and husky in the fierceness of his almost uncontrollable wrath.

“There is no name to give, Glarces! Do calm yourself and allow me to explain.”

“Tell me his name, then.”

“I cannot! There is no name to tell.”

“You lie! Don't trifle with me and think you will be able to save him. You have sacrificed me, and you shall not have him. Who is he? Tell me?” and he seized her fiercely by the arm as if he would tear the secret out by force.

“Glarces, my brother,” she pleaded, adding her tears to entreaties. “Do consider yourself and save me from this wrong.”

“Think of your wrong to me,” he cried, “and tell me his name.”

“Will you hear me just one word?”

“No! I have heard too much already! Give me this traitor's name! Don't you see how your refusal is driving me mad? Tell me who he is that I may kill him.”

“Release me, for I will speak - I must speak to save you,” she gasped; for in her wrestling to gain her liberty she had already exhausted herself beyond her last hope of securing help from her screams.

“His name, then!” “I cannot!”

“Then - “ and he raised his dagger menacingly above her head.

“No, no! Glarces! Not that! But if you will, I am quite ready to die if you will only hear me first.”

“Not till I know his name!”

With one of those sudden frenzies of strength, which are sometimes experienced in the extremity of despair, she flung him headlong away

from her, not with the intention of escaping so much as a determination to clear herself from his baseless aspersion. They faced each other breathing laboriously from the exhaustion of their struggle, he with the determination of murder still gleaming from his eyes, and she perhaps too hastily coming to the conclusion that at last the victory was with her.

“You shall hear me now,” she cried, with injured defiance “even though my life may afterwards pay the penalty. What fury has taken possession of you I do not know, neither have I yet learned by whose dastardly act this charge has been wrought in you. But I will have you know that my love for you has not faltered nor wronged you as you have wronged me to-night.”

“It's a lie!” he hissed.

“How dare you speak like that to me!” she cried; then boldly sweeping past him she drew aside the curtains of the door. “Begone, at once,” she commanded, “or I will call the guard and order your arrest.”

He was for a moment confused by her majestic and defiant action, then making a courteous obeisance he strode towards the door.

“I obey,” he answered, “but when again you meet your lover, give him this,” and before she could move to save herself, he had buried his dagger in her heart.

While yet his hand was falling, he caught a look which flashed into her eyes as she divined his purpose - a look of forgiveness and devotion which told him more than words have power to speak and made more than sufficient explanation. But it reached him too late. She and the curtain fell together. He brushed it aside again, and came back and bent over the prostrate form, hoping to find his aim had missed its mark. False hope! The mists of death were fast gathering over her once bright eyes. She knew him, however, and across her face a feeble smile of recognition passed, and she whispered, almost inaudibly, “Kiss me!”

There was a sound of feet rushing along the corridor, and in his threefold bewilderment and grief he stooped to kiss her, then rising, fled with a broken heart.

As the curtain fell behind him, those on the opposite side of the room were hurriedly torn aside, and Lais entered. “Glarces! Glarces!” she cried.

Her eyes fell upon the prostrate form of Vedrona. What was the meaning of her lying alone in such a position? Cautiously she approached the scarcely dead girl, until she saw the blood, from which she at once guessed the awful fact. The recognition brought a triumphant smile of

satisfaction to her face, which gradually increased into an audible laugh, the sound whereof appeared to shock even herself in its inhuman barbarity. She rose from her contemplation of the body, and hastily lifted the draperies to ascertain if her indiscretion had betrayed her, but finding the secret was still her own, she prepared to realise all that the catastrophe portended to herself. Again she returned to the corpse, this time contemptuously touching it with her foot to see if any sign of life still remained.

“Poor deluded fool,” she exclaimed, in a voice no longer attempting to hide its hatred and contempt. “So this is the end of your blissful dream of love, of your confidence in Glarces, and rivalry to myself! Ah! well, sleep on; I have no wish to disturb your rest. But if the gods will permit it from the palace of your virgin dreams, you have my consent to look down and see what kind of man I will make of him you have so far spoiled! I will see to it that you have a royal pyre, and I will spare him till its fires die out, and the Car of Phœbus delivers you to the safe keeping of the gods; then will I teach Glarces how to love. Ah! ha! Glarces is mine without a rival now!” She broke out into a perfect furore of demoniacal laughter in which she appeared neither to fear nor care for being overheard. “Only to think that but a moment ago I was cursing the fates at the loss of a lover, and all the while they were hurrying my feet hither to see what they had given me; a husband, a fortune, and a throne! Ah, ha! Ah, ha! Who dare defy Queen Lais now?”

CHAPTER XXV

CAUTION

Her inhuman exultation over, Lais turned her attention to the consideration of the next advisable step. Events were moving more rapidly than anticipated, unforeseen developments were carrying the action beyond the limits of her own carefully prepared scheme, and caution was needed to avoid unpleasantness. More than ever now, the one great and dangerous uncertainty for which she had to prepare was Glarces. The effect produced upon him by the elixir had disturbed all her calculations. She was not unlearned in the use of philtres. In anticipation of her present move she had experimented more than once, and become skilled in the use of different doses. Glarces was not easily moved, and experience told her the whole contents of the usual phial would not more than serve her purpose even after the preparation of a cup of wine. She failed at the moment to recall the mysterious bearing of Zillah on her

return from Meshrac, and had no idea that she had induced him to give her a potion of triple strength in order to make sure of her triumph over Casca. It was from this counter-plotting device that the difficulty of Lais arose, surcharging the whole atmosphere with a danger against which she could not satisfactorily arm herself.

Was Vedrona really dead? She stooped to assure herself of the fact. Yes! that was beyond all doubt. And sickening at sight of the blood she turned aside, burying her face in her hands. Was it a case of murder or suicide? She returned again to the body, and drawing aside the curtains which half concealed it saw the handle of the knife she knew to have been in Glarces' possession only a short time before. She breathed more freely. That silent witness afforded a wonderful relief, and indicated an immediate course of action.

It was not for her to seek, at present, for the why and wherefore of the deed. Enough that Glarces had done it. He would therefore hide himself in his room or elsewhere until the morning, and so far she was safe.

She, too, must retire unobserved, and leave it to others to discover the tragedy. In her own rooms she would be able to think out a plan and prepare to meet the two men she had most reason to mistrust - Teresh and Zachra - by whom she was already more suspected than respected.

With this she stepped boldly into the corridor and reached her own apartments, which she entered noiselessly by a private door beyond the hearing of the slaves. Then, loosing the braiding of her hair, she shook it free, touched the chime, and threw herself upon her couch.

As the surprised slaves entered she appeared to be rousing from a slumber.

“Do you know if I have slept since I returned?” she enquired.

“We did not know you were here, O Princess,” answered Zosine, apologetically.

“I came by the other way - I was so weary. O dear, I think I must have slept. Do you know if the Prince has returned?”

“Yes, lady. Orasus told me he was back some time ago, and went at once to see the Princess Vedrona.”

“I am glad to hear that. He was really so tired when I left him that I thought he would remain in the grotto till morning.”

“I think something vexed him afterwards.” “Vexed the Prince, Zosine?”

“I think so, lady. Orais says he was in an awful temper when he reached his room. He asked for wine, and when he had drunk it threw the cup away, and went out without another word.”

“Out of the palace?”

“No. Oraisus followed and saw him go to the Princess's room.”

“Surely, Orais has made a mistake. No one ever saw the Prince in a temper before, and I am surprised you should repeat such a statement. Mind you mention it to no other person - do you hear me?”

“We have already forgotten that we have seen Oraisus, lady.”

“That is well; now you may go.”

The two girls at once retired, leaving Lais to think and scheme.

CHAPTER XXVI

TROUBLED DREAMS

The awful climax of Glarces' jealousy turned and smote him with a bewildering stupor as the curtain fell between him and the lifeless body of his sister. His fevered, outraged senses rebelled against the iniquitous tyranny to which they had been subjected, and hid themselves in the despairing caverns of oblivion.

The stroke had bereft him alike of memory, passion, reason and recognition. Having crossed the threshold he stood for an instant like one in a confused and distressing dream, neither knowing what to do nor where to go. He was cold, and all around him was a cruel impenetrable darkness, through which he had to find his unknown and lonely way somewhere; but why or where, or for what purpose, he could not tell. There was a vague sense of danger behind him, with a natural desire to escape from it, but his feet were heavy with weights he could not lift, though he feared the retribution which pursued him. His eyes were open, but they were of no service to him, having lost their sight and become balls of torturing fire, and he knew that Vedrona was compelled to watch the agony to which he had been condemned without the power to help him.

In spite of the fetters that bore him down he was thrust away from the door into the darkness, where he soon lost his way, and wandered aimlessly, mechanically around. The palace was now still. All had retired, and there was no one to take charge of or save him from the consequences of his aberration.

On, on, hopelessly forward - now shivering with the cold or writhing in the burnings which consumed him, but he had lost the power to speak or groan or murmur. Occasionally he would pause and search with his hands through the blackness if, perchance, he could reach one hand which waited somewhere, if he could only find it, to lead him into safety.

Again, he thought how Vedrona had induced him to drink something that had turned him to stone so that Lais should not win his love. Then, while Vedrona slept, Lais had carried him away to some horrible place where he would never be found again, but be compelled to live a whole stone life in his fearful prison. He never knew that stones could suffer so much and be tormented by such fears. At this he made desperate efforts to shout for help - to offer some fabulous reward he knew his people would be glad to pay for his restoration. He had forgotten that stones only possess the wish to speak but have not the power.

Oh ! it was horrible to realise that he was for ever beyond the reach of help, with no other power than to fear and suffer until, as a stone, he died. What had he done to deserve such a fate? To this enquiry his nightmare responded with a cruel, mocking, triumphant laugh, goading on his aimless, hopeless way.

In a remote quarter of the palace there was one suite of rooms from which the lights had not yet disappeared, where one watcher - growing more impatient as the night passed away - waited confidently for the coming of Glarces. No one knew him better, and, as a result, placed more reliance in him, than Tasha. The mild rebuke she had felt constrained to administer earlier in the evening might pardonably have passed into forgetfulness with most people, but not so with her. She understood him too well. As soon as the excitement of the revels was over his tender conscience would remind him of the circumstance, and when he left Vedrona he would come to her room, expecting to find her waiting to hear his apology and assure him of forgiveness, without which he would not sleep.

But why did he not come? The last of the guests had long ago departed, and the night was rapidly giving place to morning. He was too thoughtful and considerate to keep Vedrona from her rest, having once assured her of his safe return. It must be that some unforeseen circumstance had intervened; and her timid soul was alarmed at the thought. She would go to Vedrona's room and ascertain if he was still there.

She passed through the ante-chamber, where her two maids were comfortably dozing, and reached the corridor, down which, by the aid of

the distant night lamp, she saw him slowly approaching. Perhaps it was the telepathic quiver of his coming to which she responded and hastened to meet him. Who knows! When she saw him, however, she paused, and smiled to see how her confidence was honoured.

So far he had not discovered her. His mind was too full of all the pleasures of the day, and particularly of the final dissipation of Vedrona's fears. It would be time for him to turn his thoughts towards herself when he reached the door; but he should find her waiting for him. Nothing could have happened more fortunate than such a meeting. How surprised, how glad he would be.

He had nearly reached her now, and was still unconscious of her presence. Was it possible he might walk into her extended arms before he knew it? She spread them wide in the hope, but without the slightest sign of recognition he turned aside as if to pass on.

She was just a little disappointed.

“Whither away, my boy; whither away?” she enquired. He did not reply, though she noticed his lips were moving, his eyes were set and wistful, and his face wore a painful but abstracted expression.

“What is the matter, dear? Is it not time to wake from love dreams?”

Still no answer as he made to go forward. There was only one explanation now available. Overcome by fatigue he had somewhere fallen asleep, and his restless, unsatisfied mind was impelling him to carry out his determination. She, therefore, caught his hand, and gently shook him.

“Glarces, my boy, wake up; do you not see where you are?”

The touch had more effect than her voice. He snatched convulsively at her fingers, sighed heavily, and a momentary smile of satisfaction or relief passed across his face.

“Thank the gods, I have found her hand; I shall be safe now” he exclaimed with a strangely unfeeling murmur. “Of course you are safe now; but wake up, and tell me what dreams are troubling you.”

Again she shook him, but he made no intelligent answer. “Are you - are you - No! you are not Vedrona!” and dropping her hand he started back in affright.

“No, dear, I am only Tasha. But why are you so stupid? Wake up, and understand what you are doing.”

By this time she had faintly begun to doubt whether her first surmise sufficiently accounted for his lethargic condition, and with the suspicion

came that instinctive courage which so widely differentiates the woman from the man, and in the sudden crises of life gives to the former such a tremendous advantage over her lord. In normal conditions of life the feminine is the weaker, more timid and retiring nature, unable to compare with the sterner sex in grappling with the complex difficulties which loom ahead; but let some lightning calamity shatter our prospects, and the natural forces appear to instinctively reverse themselves - the weak become strong, the timid heroic, the nervous calm, and the retiring leaps forward to assume command! The man goes down, stupefied by the blow, but the woman rises superior to the crisis and finds some possible path to freedom. Heaven's omnipotence is thus made perfect in weakness, having discovered that such necessary reserve forces are more safely guarded, even more readily available, and are less liable to deterioration in woman than in man. We know it whether we admit it or not, and there are few indeed who, at some time or other, have not had occasion to be grateful for the provision.

Let me just breathe another thought in this suggestive interlude. Happy, thrice happy, is the man, irrespective of age, who, when face to face with a crisis in his life, can shrink back into the arms of a noble mother and become "her boy" once more. Motherhood is the one human need we can never outgrow. It is earth's grand harmonic response to God, and in its strong, full vibration though the soul indicates the way to eternal peace and rest.

Tasha had only been permitted to fill this office by proxy, but she had done it nobly. She was practically all the mother Glarces and Vedrona knew, and her affection had so intertwined itself around them as to compel the Prince to seek her, even in his delirium. It was really her hand his sense of need hungered for in the darkness. She was his refuge, his great saving power.

Whatever might prove to be the cause of his bewilderment, he certainly needed her affectionate care, and this at once became her first object. With the tender solicitude of a mother for a suffering child she led him into her room, and make him comfortable upon its softest couch, then sat down to console and learn what had disturbed him.

"What is it, dear? Now tell me all about it, then I shall know what to do."

As she spoke his eyes, for the first time, were turned upon her, with a quick flash of recognition, which, however, immediately died away. She saw it and was relieved. Love was already reaping its reward.

“What can I tell you?” he enquired, with dreamy bewilderment; then a cold shiver passed over him, and he went on: “I dropped it in the darkness somewhere! But never mind - don't go after it!” he cried, as a gleam of wild terror shot from his eyes. “Let it alone - let it alone! It is too horrible, and would drive me mad!”

“What is it, dear?”

“It was - oh, I can't remember,” and he started to his elbow. “Yes! now I know! It was a stone of burning ice! I opened it and hid myself when Vedrona tried to poison Lais - now I can't get out to tell Tasha that her boy is dead.”

“But I am Tasha!” She shook him violently, “Glarces! Wake up, and stop your absurd dreaming.”

Again he roused somewhat.

“I'm not dreaming, because - because I'm not asleep! Stones can't sleep! I shall never sleep again! Why does not Tasha come?”

“I am here! Glarces, my boy, what is the matter that you don't know me?”

The persistence of his bewilderment had by this time changed her curiosity to anxiety, and possessing a temperament characterised by extremes, her alarm speedily became forcible. The intensity of her distress appeared to add a more penetrating power to her affection, piercing his delirium and compelling recognition.

“Yes. Of course I know you,” he replied with vacant indecision. “Why do you ask that?” Then, with some return of his usual depth of feeling, he flung his arm around her, and eagerly enquired, “Oh, my mother, you don't think I could do anything wicked, do you?”

“No, dear; never.”

“Then why am I haunted by these fearful dreams?” He was better - more coherent now, and at once her agitation subsided in a determination to induce him to sleep. “I don't know, my boy, unless it comes from your being over tired. Try to get a little sleep, then you will be better.” He started, gripped her hand, and the wild, vacant stare came back to his eyes.

“Have you seen her?” he asked excitedly. “Who? Lais?”

“No! she poisoned me and died! But Vedrona - where is she?”

“In her room.”

“Have you seen her?”

“Not since you returned. I was going to her when Æna came to say you were home.”

“Have I seen her?”

“Yes; she sent for you. Don't you remember?”

“No! I am so cold - everything is so dark. Tasha, do you think it is all a dream?”

“I don't know what to think, you are so strange; I can't understand you. Let me send for Machaon.”

“No - no! Not him - not him! I know all about it now. Listen! Rhea has changed Vedrona into a hound, and she bit me. See! the blood is here!” He showed his wrist, where two or three drops of blood were to be seen. **“In my madness from the bite I was changing into a stone, when Lais came to save me. But it was too late. I fell asleep and came here.”** Suddenly he leaped from the couch. **“I must go back to her now, and let her see that you have saved me - that I found the hand in the darkness in spite of the daggers. I will tell her that your love is stronger than her wine - show her that you have set me free! But I can't go. My legs are stone yet! Poor Lais, it's all so fearful, and I'm not able to help her.”**

“I understand all about it now,” she replied, as she gently induced him to lie down again. **Why had she not thought before that he was simply under the influence of wine?**

“You have had more wine since we left you, and while waiting to see Vedrona you fell asleep and cannot understand yourself now, you are only half awake. Stop your talking and go to sleep again, while I go to her and make some excuse for you.”

“No - no! You must not go there; and as for sleep - Tasha, I shall never dare to sleep again.”

“Nonsense! You will make me quite cross with you if you talk like that! Why need you fear to sleep while I am here?”

“Because - because - don't you know that burning stones can never sleep?” The delirium had again overpowered him, and in its phantasy he murmured to himself, **“I wonder where she is now?”**

“Who - Vedrona? Why, like a sensible woman, she went to bed long ago, and I am glad to think she did not see you like this.”

“Will she wake again?”

“Glarcés, I am ashamed of you,” she returned sharply; “I can scarcely believe my own ears when you ask such stupid questions. She will be awake long before you are fit to see her.”

He turned to her with a look of indescribably agonising hope, but he had not time to speak before an equally awful shriek broke the silence, and caused both to leap to their feet. Again and again was the scream repeated, every instant drawing nearer! Neither had the power to move! With hands still clasped they stared with fascinated horror into each other's eyes, giving no more sign of life than a sympathetic shudder with each recurring scream, until the curtains were rudely dashed aside by Æna who cried “Come, Tasha, come! Vedrona has been murdered!”

CHAPTER XXVII

CONSTERNATION

The frantic announcement made by Æna produced a peculiar effect upon Tasha, who heard every word, but, failing to realise their import, felt half inclined to laugh at the absurd excitement of the girl. Then the sound of hurrying feet, the inrush of officers, members of the guard and slaves with enquiring consternation written upon every face; and the still but partially conscious Prince clinging to her for protection she alone could afford, served to rouse her stupefied senses to a painful appreciation of the circumstances. With the rapidity of a lightning flash she then grasped the situation - understood everything necessary for the moment. Vedrona was stricken, but it was impossible that any such blow could be fatal. Immediate help would yet save her, whatever might prove to be the nature of her injury; but Glarcés, whether he was actually guilty or not, must be looked after. Fortunately Orasus was there, so leaving his master to his charge she turned to the perplexed captain of the guard, who had just arrived. “The Princess, captain,” she gasped. “Yes, what about her?”

“Æna says – she - is dead.” “Dead! How? Where?” “Murdered! In her room,” replied the girl.

“Follow me, men,” and accompanied by Tasha and the whole crowd he hurried away to the fatal chamber. “Guard both doors; allow none to enter but members of the Council,” he commanded, and sending one swift messenger for Machaon, he entered.

He paused instinctively and drew Tasha back as his eye fell upon the prostrate, half-concealed form; then, hoping for the best, he started

forward and took the hand still grasping the curtain. Alas! it was quite cold! Hope was dead.

“Ye gods,” he cried, “we are too late!”

“No, no! We must save her - we must save her!” cried the heart-broken Tasha.

“I wish we could,” replied the sorrowful soldier; “but this is not my first sight of death. I know it too well to be deceived.”

“Call for help, Petronius! Call for help, and carry her to the bed! We must do something.”

“Touch her hand, lady! Look at the film over her eyes! We can do nothing but wait till Machaon comes.”

“My poor, dear child!” she sobbed, as she took the cold face between her hands, then bent and passionately kissed the unresponsive lips; “how gladly would I have given a thousand lives to save you from such a fate.”

“So would we all, lady; but when the gods command it none of us can find a substitute for this duty. Who, in the name of all the furies, can have done the deed, and why?”

He pushed the curtain back with his foot, and in doing so caught sight of the handle of the dagger.

“What!” he exclaimed, “the Princes' knife! What foul conspiracy is this? Is it not enough to take her life without trying to cast suspicion upon him? This is too damnable, and makes me blush to think so foul a fiend may be my countryman.”

As he spoke Machaon entered followed by several members of the Council. The sight of the physician revived Tasha's hopes.

“Save her, Machaon, save her!” she cried. “Oh! tell me it is not yet too late.”

A very cursory glance at the body satisfied him.

“Much too late, I am sorry to say.” Then, feeling how cold the body was, he added, “She has been dead well nigh a watch.”

“Where is Casca?” enquired Teresh, looking around for the absent chamberlain. “If I am not mistaken he will be able to throw some light upon this ugly business. Where is he?”

“I hope he may, but I doubt it,” replied the captain.

“He was so overcome with wine at the commencement of the revels that I ordered his arrest, and he is still sleeping under guard.”

“I don't say he did the deed, but I am persuaded he knew of its intent.”

“That must be for enquiry afterwards,” suggested Machaon. “Our first duty is to attend to the body. Where is the Prince?”

“He was with the lady Tasha when the alarm was given. The shock has so unnerved him that I left him there with Orasus, and guarded the door to prevent annoyance.”

“That is well. See that he is not disturbed. I will return presently.”

The absence of the Prince was a welcome relief for the time to the sorrow-stricken officials.

A messenger, however, arrived from the Queen asking for information as to the unusual disturbance in the palace, and it was deemed advisable to depute Chryses to make the most favourable communication he could devise. He had scarcely left for this melancholy purpose before Lais entered the outer room to which the officials had withdrawn. She was in the most hurried negligee attire, having, as she presently carefully explained, heard the commotion, but being unable to learn the cause, ventured to satisfy herself, convinced that nothing short of most alarming occurrences were responsible for what had disturbed her rest.

“What is this horrible thing I hear?” she asked excitedly, as she rushed to Machaon and Teresh. “Tell me it is not true.”

Teresh turned aside to Zachra, leaving the physician to answer the enquiry.

“Alas, lady; the truth is so bad I almost fear you have not heard the worst.”

“Where is she? Let me go to her at once, or I shall go mad.”

“Watch her, Zachra,” whispered the Chief Councillor. “Such a demonstration is scarcely consistent with her character.”

“Hush!” replied his friend. “We may watch in secret, but if we dare to think she will hear us.”

That was wise advice on Zachra's part, for beneath the veil of grief, Lais had every energy strained to note the doings of the two men she had most cause to fear.

“Calm yourself as much as possible,” said the doctor, with kindly persuasion; “this blow falls heavily upon us all, but the gods have spoken and we must needs submit.”

“This is no action of the gods,” she cried, with indignant vehemence. “It is some monster fiend who has hurled this shaft! Oh, that I knew where such fury found his ambush; I would torture him to death with my own hands.” Here she found relief in tears, to which the physician ministered faithfully, being ignorant of the suspicion which so exercised the minds of his two confreres. Having led her to a seat he sympathetically consoled her, until she anxiously enquired:

“Has the Queen been told?”

“She made enquiries, and as you entered Chryses left us to break the news.”

“Why did you not go? She may need your help.” “We thought the priest would be better than a physician. It is his duty to be up to greet the sunrise, and his presence would not, therefore, be so suggestive as my own.”

“But she will need someone to comfort her. I will go at once.”

She rose to take her departure, but he gently restrained her “If you will permit me,” he said, with considerate deference, “I think it better she should be left entirely in the hands of the priest and her maids for the present. Your own natural grief might rather add to than diminish her sorrow just now.”

She yielded to his wish, and resumed her seat to indulge in another spasm of weeping, during which Machaon was summoned into the adjoining room, deputing his charge of Lais to Teresh.

When she discovered his absence she enquired “Where is Machaon?”

“He will return immediately.”

“Where is he? I must see him at once,” she announced authoritatively.

“He signified his wish that you should await his return,” Teresh answered evasively.

“I cannot wait. I will go to the Queen at once.”

“I am sorry to oppose your wish, O Princess, but Machaon has forbidden anyone to visit either the Queen or Prince without his permission.”

“I fail to understand you.”

“Then I must humbly explain that in all cases of extremity such as the present it is usual for one of the Queen's Council to assume authority in her name and on her Majesty's behalf. That duty has been undertaken by Machaon, whose will must be obeyed.”

Lais unguardedly lost her sense of grief for the moment in the opposition she encountered. Had Machaon himself asserted the authority she might have brooked it, but for Teresh to do so was altogether intolerable. This unexpected assumption of control had never crossed her imagination, therefore was the last thing she had prepared to encounter, and being asserted in such an unwelcome quarter compelled her to make an unrehearsed move, during which she temporarily dropped her mask and endangered her success.

“Then I must consider myself a prisoner?” she answered, with haughty anger.

“No. We respectfully ask you to submit to these regulations our duty to the Queen and the dead Princess unfortunately force upon us.”

“It is a great relief to hear that you contemplate no further inconveniences. May I ask your permission to retire to my own room?”

Teresh took no visible notice of the bitter sarcasm contained in the request.

“Certainly!” and as he moved aside with a deferential salutation she swept past him with majestic pride, without deigning to make the slightest acknowledgment, almost encountering Chryses.

The priest stopped suddenly, and Lais, after paying her usual homage to his position, was about to enquire concerning the Queen, when she saw his hands spread above her in the act of blessing.

“May the mighty gods watch over and be merciful to you,” he said, in a voice broken by emotion. “The Queen, your royal mother, is no more.”

“The Queen dead!” she gasped. “No - no! not that!” “May the immortals help you, lady; but it is true!”

“Ye gods! What will come next? Sazone is dead! Then I am Queen.”

CHAPTER XXVIII

SELF-CONDEMNED

As the sun is to the springtime, so was Vedrona's presence to Æna. The pleasure and enjoyment of life was increased tenfold to the slave in the company of her royal mistress. The infatuation had become so complete that it was nothing unusual for the girl to steal from the side of the soundly-sleeping Zillah and creep noiselessly back to the room of the Princess, where she would sit in wrapt contemplation of the sleeper for a time, then return to enjoy her rest the more by reason of the tribute of her faithful devotion.

The thought that something might be required of her was always an antidote against sleep with Æna, and though she had been so confidently assured that there would be no further occasion for her presence to-night, she was pleased to hope that an unforeseen necessity might arise, therefore she waited until her wish began to give place to a sense of disappointment, then, like a guilty soul, she cautiously crept into the scene of death.

We know the result.

A sudden surprise will oftentimes produce almost miraculous effects. Just so the cyclone of horror with which Æna rushed into the presence of Glarces and Tasha cleft the stupor of the Prince far more effectually than all the affectionate treatment or the wounded suspicion of his foster-mother.

In her wild agony the girl neither anticipated nor had interest to notice his presence, and the crowd of excited followers who sought to learn the cause of the alarm naturally regarded his silence and confusion as the result of her injudicious announcement, therefore was he undesignedly shielded, and left to bear the first effects of the blow in the considerate care of his trusted valet. The guards without would protect him from intrusion until someone in authority could summon such courage as could minister to his sorrow.

But the brief respite Casca had counselled him to give to the old Glarces was over, and he had returned to find himself surrounded by the irreparable ruins of every fondly cherished hope. Principle, honour, love and life, all gone - shattered and irretrievably lost! His divine ideal broken, his reputation blasted, his sister cruelly murdered! And all by his own hand. Never had a more disastrous crisis fallen to the lot of man! The consummation was too horribly complete to be the creature or sport of

the imagination. The outrageous romance of nightmare was not equal to the creation of such a horror! It left no doubt about its reality if only by reason of its unparalleled enormity!

No wonder he was silent-dumbfounded! We can also excuse the crowd for mistaking his bewilderment for the paralysis of grief.

But did he not really suffer so? It was not the yielding, intoxicated victim and tool of Casca and Lais who stood before them. This new Glarces had been subdued by treachery, lured into the net spread for his unwary feet, had drunk the maddening draught, and, fired by its jealousy, had struck a double-edged blow reaching to the devastation of the kingdom, then hied away amid a chorus of fiendish applause to watch the consternation he had wrought. The old Glarces - with his inflexible sense of honour, justice and equity - was himself again, and at the tribunal of his own bar of inexorable rectitude he proceeded to arraign himself for judgment.

When the last of the excited crowd had gone, Orasus took him by the arm, and indicated the advisability of his lying down, but did not venture to speak.

“Let me alone, Orasus,” he replied, with a heart-broken, tremulous plea, “and if the gods have so much pity, or the furies have so much power as to slay me, make no attempt to interfere with either. It were better a thousand times that I should die than live to spread the poison of my presence. Yet, whither could I go?” he asked himself.

He had, however, thrown himself down while speaking, and the slave, not understanding his language, gave to it the most sympathetic interpretation, and was, so far as circumstances would permit, satisfied with the succeeding quiet which he hoped would lead to sleep.

With his arms folded tightly across his eyes Glarces lay, sternly prosecuting the charge against himself. We know something of his nature, how he was ever ready to depreciate himself in the generous confidence he placed in the goodness of others. It has already been hinted that the abnormal development of this trait in his character amounted almost to a deformity, but never hitherto had it so blinded him to the real appreciation of facts as at this fatal juncture of his history. His self-examination began with a recognition of his own guilt, and from the first he disdained the cowardice of seeking to find even the smallest contributing influence in the action of another. Harking back to his familiar habit of thought he recalled his frequent contention that once in the life of every man there comes a test of supreme importance, when every cherished ideal, principle and aspect of truth is cast into the

crucible of temptation and assayed in the discriminating presence of the gods. In such assize every secret motive is laid bare, every fibre of the man tested and strained, now in one direction, then in another, to discover if worthy to receive the divine approbation. How often had he, in the days gone by, taken pleasure in pointing out such weaknesses in the nature of others and counselled their correction; now the trial had come to himself, the censor, and it had not only brought one unexpected blemish to light, but the whole character had broken to pieces - the whole life was proved to be a worse than wretched hypocrisy. The moralist at heart was proved to be outrageously vicious, the judge was himself a criminal, and the man who talked of charity was discovered to have both hands steeped in innocent blood.

But in strict justice would it not be found that Lais was in a certain measure responsible, and that he, by so much, ought to be exonerated?

His soul rose in immediate rebellion against such an accusation. Had he hitherto been willing to allow that Lais possessed a clearer vision of the purposes of the gods than given to himself? If the first trial of his strength was ordained to be made in the subtle discrimination between old wine and new - for in this he plainly saw was to be found the origin of all that had taken place - was it to be expected that she should discern the closely veiled significance more than he? Had such been the case and she cautioned him, to have been apprised of the purpose of the gods would have robbed the trial of its force, and hence its merit if resisted. Rather did his failure prove his own neglect to watch, his infidelity and empty profession of all he had advocated. Had Lais only conceived the barest suspicion of the facts he was confident she would have cried aloud - have sacrificed herself, if need be, in order to save him. If but a suspicion of the part the gods had destined for her to play had crossed her mind she would have pointed it out to him, though she had braved the tortures of Tartarus in doing so. The bare thought of such a baseless and outrageous calumny towards her indicated the depth of the depravity which had existed - though unsuspected - in his mind; it revealed to him the horrible possibilities of hypocrisy which may lie concealed, even from ourselves, by the fallacious veneer of prejudice and self-deception.

So this excursus in search of extenuating circumstances ended by increasing the enormity of his crime. Vedrona was dead - there was no doubt of that; Lais was lost to him - how dare he hope to retain even a consideration at her hands; he could not look upon his mother again; and the people who had made so much of him would henceforth execrate his name.

Oh, what a relief it would be to die! But if such a coveted exit could be discovered would he find the promise of relief to be realised, or would it prove to be an *ignis fatum* luring him on to even greater suffering? How confidently had he expounded the idea that love is the brightest, noblest, purest altitude of immortality, while passion crashes the soul downward into the bottomless pit of love's antithesis. With the sweet divinity of such affection Vedrona had loved him, and while he had persuaded himself it was returned with equal, even stronger devotion, he now found the restraining influence she so often regretted was not his nobler ideal, but rather the incompetence of unsuspected hypocrisy. What an awful revelation was contained in that one look of unutterable forgiveness, but eternal farewell, from which he fled when falling into the abyss of despair! Only now did he begin to comprehend something of its fearful, unendurable portent! The vision of the impassable gulf which would henceforth keep them apart was beginning to rise upon him - the recognition that he was for ever separated from her for whom his heart hungered - without whom he could not live. But oh - horrible thought - he had sacrificed the power to die!

What could he do? Suppose his mother and Lais, by the memory of their former love for him, should in mistaken kindness, save him from the merited punishment of his inhuman act, where should he go? He must be a wanderer from home, friends, people and nation, with no companion save his ever-accusing and never silent conscience. The one desire of his pilgrimage would be death, from which his soul would be affrighted by the consciousness that it could only increase his agony. In hunger, thirst, cold and heat he must go on, footsore, sick and weary, but afraid to rest or sleep because the hands of men and the desire of beasts would be against him, seeking to exact the penalty he had incurred, and hurry him into the more exquisite torture of the beyond. And when, at length, the one great and irresistible demand was made upon him, in some unknown region, far away from home and friends, he would fall, with no one to whisper "Peace" or breathe a word of hope, and hungry brutes would turn away with sickening disgust, refusing to make a meal of such accursed flesh.

But after that? Now the supreme torture of his inexorable penalty rose before him in the long eternal night with out a single ray of hope. In comparison with this the suffering of his wandering was like the softening glow of a summer's twilight succeeded by the howling tempest of pitiless winter. It would begin in the lack of a funeral pyre to set his spirit free, and with every other sense merged into that of feeling he

would be compelled to linger, a powerless, un-befriended ghost, unresistingly carried hither and thither where earth could inflict the greatest pain upon him! Hope, desire, rest, promise - everything gone but pain! And yet there would be one desire left to him at intervals - coming when other circumstances failed to maintain the inevitable crescendo of his agony. It would be to catch only one brief glance of his sister - only to be assured that she was safe. He would not ask to speak to her, or that she should speak to him; but if the gods would grant him the knowledge of her peace it would strengthen him to endure his unending penance. Even though she might recall her forgiveness the thought of her happiness would comfort him! But at such a time fate would mock and remind him that he could not hope, since hope for him would be dead! In the feverish throes of such a sea of despair he was tossed from wave to wave, until the moaning pain-throbs surged with a suffocating, dreamy monotony, and his overstrained suffering died into unconsciousness, as the billows rolled him into the arms of sleep where outraged Nature took a long revenge.

CHAPTER XXIX

SUSPICION

“Then I am Queen!”

Human nature, when reaching its noblest and loftiest condition, never rises above the transitional state. There have been men - perhaps it might be possible even now to find representatives - who have fondly and earnestly laboured to secure its perfection; but alas! the macadamised road to that Utopia is still impracticable owing to the primeval bogs and marshes of despairing difficulties in which the flesh abounds. Cautious and cunning adventurers may creep from comparatively firm mound to mound until their intrepid souls begin to fancy they have found the royal road to the desired goal, but while they congratulate themselves their foot falls upon a spot where the centre of resistance unexpectedly varies, and with an exclamation of disappointment hope vanishes, and the universal axiom is maintained.

By the action of this inevitable law the cause of Lais was jeopardised in the moment of its final success. From the commencement of her enterprise she had carefully estimated and prepared for the active opposition of Teresh - Zachra was a man of secondary consideration altogether - which she knew must be encountered the moment her scheme began to produce visible effects; she had therefore diligently

studied the man and was fully prepared - whether developments allowed her thenceforth to continue upon the lines of the original design or force her to adopt an equally perfect alternative - to outwit and defeat him. In either of these schemes, however, she had provided for a considerable period of strategic skirmishing before conquest and it was in the failure of this expected delay, arising from the sudden death of the Queen, where she found the centre of resistance to have moved, and was thus unguardedly betrayed into the perilous exclamation which fell upon the ears of Teresh as she retired.

She made no attempt to deceive herself by the suggestion that he had not noticed it, and as she hurried back to her room hastily readjusted the mask of hypocritical grief in order that from its cover she could devise a plan to surmount the new difficulty she had to combat.

The tears with which her maids and attendants sympathised were the distillation of her happiness, and their consolation contributed to the increase of her secret laughter. As a cat can afford to play with mice past all possibility of escape, so she could afford to humour everyone, after she had spoken with Meshrac, from whom she made immediate enquiry as to the will of the gods concerning her, and promised a most generous contribution to their cause as a penitential and conciliatory offering.

In intrigue and diplomacy she stood head and shoulders above the combined nation of Sahama, who trusted in simple confidence and unsuspecting innocence. In whatever Teresh did she knew he would move with deliberate caution, to circumvent which she had to act with prompt decision, and in this she felt confident that Meshrac, in his devotion to his craft, after the interview, would act as a useful friend, while nothing that had transpired could in any way be interpreted to her disadvantage.

Casca was still sleeping in blissful ignorance of what had occurred, and in his absence the astrologer approached Machaon and made known to him the last request of the Queen that Lais should succeed her, suggesting that the council be immediately assembled in order that the wish should be communicated to her successor without delay, and in accordance with custom, together with a loyal expression of sympathy and fidelity to both herself and Glarces.

Every councillor, with the one exception, was already at hand, and though Teresh objected to the proceeding in the absence of the Prince, he was soon over-ruled, and after hearing the declaration of the Queen's wish as expressed to Chryses and Meshrac, the council at once hailed Lais as

successor appointing Teresh, Machaon, and Chryses as their representatives to make its decision known.

The simple proceedings were as mechanical as brief. The sudden misfortune had stupefied everyone until they appeared incapable of thinking or making any exertion to rouse themselves. When they had sanctioned Meshrac's suggestion they continued to look doubtfully from one to the other, as if wondering what next, but no one spoke until Teresh drew the physician aside for a private word.

"I am in doubt how to go about this business," he began.

"We may soon settle that," he replied; "let us confer with Chryses."

"Not yet. I wish to say one word to you." "Proceed, my friend; I am always at your service."

"I am very strongly of opinion that we shall do wrong if we see Lais before we know something more about the death of Vedrona."

"Why so?"

"Because I have a suspicion - I will not put it in a stronger form - that she and Casca know more about this matter than we imagine."

"Then why did you not tell the council before we came to our decision?"

"For the simple reason that no man can make a charge upon suspicion alone. We know that the knife of Glarces was used, but who used it?"

"That will no doubt be discovered in the enquiry." "But hear me, Machaon," urged Teresh, with considerable animation, "suppose for one moment that Glarces struck the blow himself - "

"Never, man; why I would rather believe that I did it!" So would any of us. But the supposition is no more impossible than the murder, and that, with all its impossibility, is only too true. Now, grant for one moment that Glarces has committed the deed - "

"But the thing is impossible," interposed Machoan again; "what could induce him to do such a thing?"

"That is the very question I was about to ask." "And what do you suggest?"

"I suggest nothing; but I tell you I have a suspicion that Lais and Casca could tell us something about it."

"Why do you think so?"

"I have been carefully watching these two since the incident between Maphir, Casca, and Zillah. The Prince accepted the assurances of the

oracle that all was well, but I have never felt so sure about it. After the banquet last night, when Casca had well oiled his tongue with wine, he began to speak to a few friends in his usual boasting language, giving hints of a secret shared by himself and Lais. This secret had reference to some astonishing event to take place before morning, and his knowledge of it gave him an advantage over her of which he was more than proud.”

“That was nothing more than his customary drunken vaunting.”

“Do you think so in the light of what has happened? I wish I could!”

“This calamity, my dear friend, I am persuaded has nothing but a coincidental connection with Casca's boasting. I should blush to think that Lais could take any part in such an atrocious crime; but even though she did, do you think she would be fool enough to take Casca into her confidence? Certainly not! We all know what he is, and I am surprised that you do not see a much more likely explanation of his mysterious hint.”

“In what?”

“In the closely guarded secret concerning those wonderful dancing girls from Ind. Of necessity he knew all about them, and that was quite enough to make him talk as he did.” “I wish I could think so.”

“But if you feel so certain about the other matter, why did you not speak to the council?”

“Because, as I tell you, I have no real evidence, but only a very strong suspicion to work upon.”

“Very well. Now let the matter rest where it is for awhile. I know your mind, and will promise to keep my eyes and ears open; but beyond that none of us are in a position to balance convictions with a steady mind. Events force us forward, but whatever happens we can keep our eyes open, and I think we can find others determined to see this matter through, who will be true as ourselves to the interests of Vedrona, Glarces, and Sazone.”

“And you think we must see Lais at once?”

“We have no alternative.”

“Will you promise to watch her?”

“You may depend upon that after what you have said.” At this they turned to Chryses, and despatching a messenger with a humble request for an immediate audience on urgent matters of state, prepared to execute the commission with which the Council had entrusted them.

Lais entered the audience chamber supported by one of her ladies. Genuine grief had ploughed its furrows upon the visage of the attendant, as well as upon all others who had yet heard of the tragedies, save her who ought to have been most deeply smitten. Here art had been requisitioned as a substitute for absent natural feelings, and most cunningly had the deceptive jade responded. In most branches of artifice Lais was thoroughly proficient, and given a moderate opportunity to dress, was equal to the assumption of any role. Such facilities she had secured in the present instance, and the occasion being critical, had taxed her most subtle ingenuity, making her entrance into the presence of the deputation in a guise so woebegone as to disarm suspicion by its very audacity, and compelling sympathy even at the hands of Teresh. Craft and the toilet had limned an angel of light on the black background of hell. If such sorrow were counterfeit, the gods had failed to bestow the power to appraise reality.

So Teresh was imposed upon, not having recognised the fact that where craft is linked with fraud, it must also be employed in association with judgment before the balance of justice can be maintained, and in his rectitude he disdained to use his chief defence.

The commissioners bowed with their foreheads to the earth, and Teresh, whose duty it was to speak, found it difficult to break the silence by which Lais apparently held her grief in check.

“With the deepest reluctance, most royal lady,” he began, adopting a tone quite inconsistent with his former language to Machaon,” we are compelled to intrude upon your privacy in the first moments of this profound sorrow, when none but the gods have the power to minister to the wounds which have so suddenly fallen upon your royal house and the sorrow-stricken nation. Still, even in the presence of such misfortune, the affairs of state are inexorable, and in the immediate presence of death we have no choice but to provide for the succession to our throne. The late Queen-mother, at the moment of her death, while deploring the untimely fate which has removed the great Princess, your royal sister, from among us, bequeathed her throne to your royal self, and at the wish of her Council, we are here to humbly pray that you will accede to her desire, and also to add the assurance of our faithful devotion to your sacred person.”

Of all the events of that disastrous night, this was almost the first she had been able to anticipate with any degree of certainty, but though until barely a moment since the idea of the throne had been far beyond the

wildest dream of her daring ambition, in the brief interval at her disposal she had made full arrangements to give all due impressment to the occasion. She did it admirably. It consisted of nothing but a pause, rendered painful by her dramatic and eloquent failure to reply, but she therein succeeded in placing the capstone to all her other efforts, and most splendidly saved herself.

“Our dear mother's wish has ever been my most sacred law,” she presently answered with tremulous difficulty. She would have added more, but the flood of grief choked her, and she fell upon the neck of Damophila, unable to finish her reply.

“Oh, Queen, live for ever.”

The councillors then kissed the border of her robe and the audience was over.

They had scarcely left the chamber before Machaon drew Teresh towards him and said,

“You have already been compelled to change your opinion.”

“For the moment, yes! But I am not so sure about it now. I will act on your advice, and not trust any impressions to-day.”

“Such grief needs no further evidence, my friend.” “It may be so, but I will wait awhile and see.”

“I think you are rather hard on her.”

“I have no wish to be so; but I cannot forget that I also have a duty towards Glarces, and I cannot waver in my loyalty to him. We must all know more than we do before we can say anything, and until then I am willing to preserve an open mind.”

“You can do no more than that, but I think you will see your suspicion is groundless.”

“I sincerely hope it may be so; but would it not be well for us to see if Glarces is awake?”

“We may enquire; but I scarcely expect it yet. His constitution is bound to take a full revenge for the strain it has undergone.”

The physician was right. Glarces still slept, and Teresh had to defer his desired interview.

CHAPTER XXX

A COMPACT

The paralysing consternation which had fallen upon the Council spread over the whole city when it awoke to learn the tidings, and the suspicion of Teresh was shared by not a few. This latter, however, had to be cherished in secret. There is no restraint equal to that of fear, and stalwart courage did not flourish in Velia. Lais had always been aware that the feeling extended to her was that of toleration rather than affection, and she had been careful to answer it by a delicately veiled, but none the less contemptuous indifference. To do her justice, this spirit of antagonism was perhaps to be found more consequent upon her foreign traits and tendencies than in actual intent - the difficulties in adapting herself to such comparative simplicity of life and conduct - more than a definite desire to outrage the feelings of her adopted countrymen at the outset. But the effect was all the same, and outside a very limited circle, Lais was not popular, in fact, had very few real friends.

This mistrusted woman had, between midnight and morning, seen the Queen-mother and the popular idol of the nation, who but yesterday was the hope and inspiration of every heart, thrust aside, and she - the unloved, the feared, who smiled at every tradition and time - honoured custom of the people - had taken Sazone's seat with power to establish a despotism against which there was no appeal. The Queen and Princess had fallen. Had the quiet traditions of Sahama also gone? Who could say! By what means or instrumentality had such a change been brought about?

Everyone wondered, but none dare ask. If one had but found the courage to enquire ten thousand echoes would have spread the question far and wide, but Teresh, with all his devotion to the Prince, shrank from the consequences, and thus the cause of right was lost.

Meanwhile the new Queen was certain of nothing but the fact of her own danger. She had succeeded to the throne by bequest of her predecessor and the wish of the Council, but of the three ministers who had so apprised her, the foremost, she knew, was actively opposed to her welfare, and of the other two she was in no way certain. For the time she had to feel her way carefully step by step, until she discovered in whom she could trust, then gradually strengthen her position and carefully inaugurate her own regime. In this course she was so far uncertain as to fear to approach any member of the Council - discovered herself to be so entirely friendless as to be without one adviser upon whom she could

confidently rely. Yet time was all-important. Teresh would not sleep, and if he once reached Glarces the truth would be out, and her cause lost even now.

This was her next step, to be taken at once, and she touched the chime as the thought occurred to her.

“Bid the captain of the guard attend me at once,” she commanded.

There was more of anxiety than sorrow in her tone, but she had no need to be scrupulously punctilious with Zosine, though she carefully adjusted herself to receive the stalwart officer who immediately answered her summons.

“My good Petronius,” she enquired with tremulous difficulty, “have you any news of my poor brother?”

“He sleeps, O Queen.”

“The gods be praised for so much mercy. See that he is not disturbed. And when he wakes, let no one see him but his slave, without my consent. I will break the remainder of this awful news to him myself.”

“I have already commanded that none must see him without my permission, O Queen.”

“That is thoughtful of you so to consider his good, but in my own sorrow it had not occurred to me before. I am so overpowered I know not what to do.”

“If the Queen can only indicate her wish to her most humble servant I shall most loyally serve her sacred person and cause.”

“Thanks, my trusted servant, this first assurance of loyalty shall neither be forgotten nor go unrewarded. Where is Casca?”

“He has not yet recovered from the effects of the banquet.”

“Does he still sleep?”

“Most soundly. The guard has never left him.”

“That is also well. And yet,” she added, as if from an afterthought, “he must be rested now. Go and bring him hither. Let no one speak to him, nor tell him anything of all our troubles.”

The soldier bowed, and retired to summon the chamberlain.

“So far, so good,” murmured Lais, as the curtain fell; “I have at last secured one partisan, nor is there need to fear the capture of the whole brood if I humour them and take my time. Bah! What danger can there

be? There is not one real man in all the country. My success has intoxicated and made me nervous. Vedrona has gone, the throne is securely mine, it only remains for me to bring Glarces to his senses, and every wish of my life will be attained. Surely, I have not come so far to be foiled at the last? No! the fates have been hitherto propitious; the stars in their courses have fought for me and brought me so near to the goal that I am able to compel the rest. Why need I consider Teresh or another man? At the first sign of opposition or disloyalty I have but to make an example of my foe, and the remainder of his friends will fall at my feet in fear and trembling. Men are plastic enough in the hands of a cool and skilful woman, but a whole nation of these creatures may be purchased with a smile, or conquered with a frown. But now, what shall I do with Casca? He will whine like a child when he hears what has happened, and what with disappointment and the effects of the wine, may allow his tongue to speak too freely to be convenient. I would silence him with an extra cup of liquor, and so put him out of temptation, but he may be useful, even necessary, to the orderly disposal of the funeral ceremonies. I would gladly avoid the danger of his presence, but caution demands it; too many such accidents cannot with safety be attributed to the gods, so I shall be compelled to guard him from all indiscretions, until the dead are disposed of, then perhaps the gods may think of him and remove him to Paradise and Vedrona.”

She had scarcely reached this conclusion when Petronius returned, half-leading, half-dragging the still incapable but protesting eunuch.

“I don't want to see th' Queen - won't see th' Queen. I w'nt Lais.” Then, resisting the somewhat rough handling necessitated by his incompetence, he cut a most ludicrous figure by trying to trip the captain while struggling for liberty. “Le' me alone,” he cried, “d' t' think I'm a dog, or a fool, or a - “ At that moment he recognised Lais. “Hello!” he cried, with a drunken hiccough, “here y' are, Lais, I thought I'd fin' y' here. Where's Vedrona? Y' said I should have her. Where's she?”

At a sign from the Queen, Petronius deposited his charge in a corner of a couch, where he propped him in with cushions.

“Now leave us,” commanded Lais, “perhaps I can find a means of waking his sleeping senses.”

“Yesh ! leave ush 'lone,” and in his energetic waving the captain off, he overbalanced and rolled to the floor.

It may be wondered that he should be so helpless after such a sleep, but the fact was, Casca found very congenial company in his guard, who, not

averse to accept his pressing invitation, being also instructed to serve him with all the liquor he required in order to render him helpless made a long night of their carousal, and the sleep had therefore been of short duration.

“Let the beast lie,” exclaimed the Queen, as the captain turned to pick him up, “I will make him find his feet presently.”

The officer at once retired, and she dropped upon her knee beside the now contended chamberlain.

“Casca! Casca!” giving him an energetic shake as she spoke. “Are you really so helpless, or are you only playing at it?”

“I wansh V'drona! Shesh mine, an' I wansh her now.” “Then wake up and hear what I have to tell you.”

“I won't wake till I getsh V'drona.”

“Then you will be quite sober when you do awake,” she murmured. Then, shaking him again, she enquired, “Casca! Will you hear what I wish to tell you?”

“Isht 'bout V'drona?” “Yes. Certainly!”

“Go on, then. I hear you.” “She is dead - murdered!”

She struck with deliberate and forceful purpose, not being inclined to waste time with one in his condition, and she was somewhat amused in watching the effect. The announcement penetrated deeper than the drink - it went straight through him and made a double exit for his drunkenness to escape. Sobered by the blow, he scrambled trembling to his feet and wiped the leering oblivion from his eyes.

“Eh! What? Vedrona what? Ye gods, where am I?”

Who are you - Lais. No! Yes! Then you are laughing at me! You are jesting because I fell asleep over my cup.

But I did what you wanted. Now my head is bad - don't jest with me - don't jest with me.”

“You of all men ought to know that I am not given to jesting. If you had only kept as far from the drink as I am now from humour, we should have saved her; but now she is dead, and you have lost her through your own folly.”

“No - no! Lais, this is not true, but it is a cruel revenge for my foolishness to perpetrate such a jest.”

“By the gods, I wish it were a jest.”

“It is a jest,” he cried. “She is not dead!” “She is dead, Casca.”

“Then you have killed her! Look to yourself, for, by all the gods, I swear that you shall die as well!”

His passionate vehemence alarmed and placed her at a disadvantage for the moment. Again the unexpected had transpired. It was impossible to anticipate such an outburst from Casca, and she knew not how to meet it. It was now too late to seek the assistance of the previously contemplated cup; her own dagger would cause too much suspicion; and to order his immediate execution would be equally injudicious, nor would it save him from bringing his threatened charge against her. This must not be. She must temporise, conciliate, and by flattery disarm him; pander to his arrogant ambition, and by promises, conquer and win him over until such time as it was safe to dispose of him. This purpose could be best secured by a preliminary display of heroics.

“It needs neither prophet, priest, nor magician to declare that fact, my lord; but if death is going to be dealt out with the liberal uncertainty we have seen to-night, wine-bibbers and fools can scarcely expect to escape. Every plan I devised has been frustrated, every intention ruined, and in place of this, all that I wished to avoid has happened. And why? For no other reason than that you had drowned your wits in wine, and when I needed help, you were wallowing like a beast in drunken helplessness. When I needed assistance I had to protect you - even save you, from those who sought to take your life, and in doing so I have lost every thing. Now you would show your gratitude by denouncing me. Would you rather I had saved Vedrona and let you be slain? If so, I must apologise, since I imagined you placed the highest estimation upon yourself.”

“What good would anything be to me if I were dead?” “So I reasoned with myself, and saved you; but in doing so I have lost far more than you think. Lost it because you were so horribly incapable. If you had been dead I could have saved myself and mine, but I was true to you even while my heart was broken, and now you would repay me by attempting to take my life.”

She had not only succeeded in rousing his curiosity, but had also considerably confused him by the pregnant references she made, but as carefully refrained from explaining, and having accomplished this, she adroitly touched up her accusation with an imitation shower of grief, the combined effect being the capitulation of Casca and a clear course for herself.

“I want nothing unreasonable,” he replied, in a very conciliatory tone. “When you left me, why did you send me more wine, unless you wanted me to drink!”?

“Because I gave you credit for possessing the control of a man, not the appetite of a beast.”

“Well, well; we will say no more about that. Tell me what has happened. Is it really true what you say about Vedrona?”

“Yes, and much worse than that - the whole country has gone to pieces, and here are you babbling about a single woman.”

“What do you mean? But tell me who killed her, for by all the gods that live I will kill him.”

“Glarces did it,” she answered briefly. “Glarces!”

“Did I not say so? Now you can understand how I am smitten equally with yourself. He was suddenly possessed by some foul fiend, and Vedrona had been long dead before the fact was discovered.”

“Where is the Prince?”

“He is hopelessly distraught, and so rejoices over what he has done that he laughed himself to sleep, from which, it may be, he will never wake again. But, hear me further - “

“No, no, Lais; this is too incredible. There can be nothing worse than this.”

“Of that you may judge afterwards. When Vedrona was discovered the alarm in the palace awoke the Queen, who was so affected by the news that she is also dead.” “The Queen dead! Vedrona murdered, and Glarces possessed of devils! Ye gods, what next?”

“There can be nothing worse, therefore what follows is of a more consoling nature. The Queen had time to express her wish that I should take her place, and already the Council have proclaimed me. Now you know all! You, with myself, can see how, in the short space of one night, the gods are able to change the fortunes not only of an individual but also of a nation. In this new position in which we so unexpectedly find ourselves, it is necessary that we at once consider our mutual interests, since we have men around us who are already full of suspicion, and, if possible, will even now rob us of our victory. For this reason I have sent for you, and beg of you to listen carefully to all I have to say.” “I am all attention.”

He might have added, "All fear," as well, for the reference to danger had recalled all his thoughts from Vedrona and Glarces, and centred them again upon himself.

"The share you were to receive, if our enterprise was successful, was Vedrona."

"But she is dead."

"I know it. But Glarces is just as irretrievably lost to me. In this I am the greater sufferer, because I loved Glarces as I can never love another man - loved him for himself alone; but you - it is no use denying it - only wanted Vedrona because she would have the throne. She will not now be Queen, Casca; but I have lost Glarces. Do you understand what I mean when I say that your desire is not now an impossibility?"

"Oh! Lais, you don't mean that?"

"Is it again necessary for me to remind you that I am not given to jesting? Now that I am in the position, I can afford, and am disposed to reward faithful service, and see to it that no man loses by devotion to my cause. Your future need not be a hopeless one; but be careful to remember that our arrangement is as secret as death. If I find you speak of it, or in any way presume upon your position until I give my full and free consent, I will kill you on the instant. We have craft and cunning to deal with; there are men around us and we do not know who they are - who are thirsting for our lives, therefore we must be wary. You must consult me at every step, let me know all you hear, carry out faithfully all I determine, and then we shall shortly succeed, and you may take your reward. But if you disobey me in the least particular, I will crush you as I would a scorpion, and show the world that you have lied in your boasting."

"I won't even think, unless you tell me to do so." "Then you understand what I mean, and consent?" "Implicitly."

"Then you had better go to your duties at once. You will find yourself busy to-day."

CHAPTER XXXI

A TEST OF FRIENDSHIP

As the day wore on Teresh realised more and more the difficulties he would be compelled to encounter in prosecuting his self-imposed task of avenging Vedrona, and securing justice for Glarces. Every move he made revealed the fact that Lais was well in advance of him, at each step he saw

how clearly she divined his purpose, and had carefully planned to frustrate it; this served to strengthen his suspicion and determination. Discarding the company of Machaon he had returned to the room where the Prince was still sleeping, and learned that none could gain admission except by the special permit of Petronius, and when he appealed to the Captain he discovered that the Queen forbade any intercourse without her special warrant. Foiled in this attempt he requested to see Orasus, but the interview was fruitless, as the Prince had said nothing in the hearing of his slave, except asking to be allowed to die without interference, if possible.

From all the wild and incoherent rumours floating about he later discovered that Glarces was with Tasha when the alarm was made, and away he went at once to question the grief-stricken foster-mother. Tasha and he so thoroughly understood and had confidence in each other that he was sure of being put into possession of all she knew. But, alas! it only amounted to the certainty that Glarces was suffering from an aberration of mind, in the wanderings of which nothing could be gleaned, unless there might be a substratum of truth in the assertion that Lais had given him something to drink; but all, he had said appeared to be so confused that Teresh feared to trust any inference, though he carefully noted the reference. This was the extent of the assistance he could gain from Tasha, since she had been forbidden to see the Prince again without the Queen's permission.

Having exhausted the means at his disposal without obtaining any definite information, Teresh now turned to his favourite place of study - the garden - to consult with himself, and devise some further course of procedure. The more he pondered on the drunken boast of Casca, together with the present action of Lais, and the confused utterance of Glarces, the more certain did he become that there was a connection to be discovered.

“Everything possible is accessible.”

“You may conceal the birth of truth, but it will grow and walk abroad, then all the powers of earth are useless to resist the justice of its claim.”

“Patience and watchfulness are the best keys to unlock the doors of wrong.”

“Success is the warden of justice, soothing the soul to rest, that in the nightmare of unconsciousness it may discover its true identity.”

These and other favourite aphorisms passed through his mind, and encouraged him as he meditated, but nothing practical presented itself.

Presently he met Machaon in conference with Meshrac. "What progress, Teresh?" lightly enquired the physician. "None. Have you done anything?"

"Nothing whatever; and the more I think of it the less I am inclined to share your opinions."

"And everything tends to drift my conviction in the opposite direction."

"There is nothing curious about that," said Meshrac, when we once adopt an idea we naturally colour every circumstance to harmonise with it. Our sense of the fitness of things compels that."

"You are right as a rule, but judicial minds are trained to be an exception, and that I have a right to claim." "Judicial minds are only human after all," he replied superciliously.

"I am sorry you have taken up this unfortunate idea, Teresh," remarked Machaon, who was of more conciliatory disposition than the astrologer, "because I am afraid it will not tend to your advantage."

"I am not anxious about advantage; it is justice I am wanting."

"I think loyalty should have the stronger claim to-day," said Meshrac.

"It is my loyalty that demands justice."

"I think our Queen would have but little confidence in it if she knew the suspicion from which it takes its rise." "Now I begin to understand you, Meshrac; but have the dead and Glarces no claims upon us?"

"Certainly they have, and the noble Sazone will receive an honoured burial; Vedrona, I have no doubt, will be accorded a funeral pyre such as seldom, if ever, seen before in Sahama; Glarces, I am sure, will be most considerately dealt with by the Queen. What more can we do?"

"Has the friendship of the Prince no further claim upon you?"

"My dear Teresh, you are most impractical in your ideas. Duty must always take precedence of friendship. I am the servant of the crown, not a person. How rigidly we obey this rule you have seen in our fidelity to Glarces, even while he ignored our existence and brought the ceremonies of the oracle into national disfavour. His reign is over now, and already I have received from the divine Lais an intimation and earnest of her favours in the restoration of our religion; how then can you expect me to set aside our rule in favour of one who has so ignored and injured us?"

When it is remembered that magician, priest, and doctor were only different degrees of the same cult, and Meshrac was the chief, it may readily be understood what position Machaon would henceforth assume.

“I understand you, Meshrac; and wish you both ‘Peace’.” His knowledge of Machaon had led him to hope for better success, but he was ignorant of the fact that in his craft the freewill of the man had to be sacrificed to the interests of his order. Neither was the tyrannical demand altogether a condition of the superstitious ages, but its iron hand is still retained in every professional combination which exists to-day. It is true we call it by other names, and have invented reasons and justifications to veil the nature of the despotism, but it exists all the same. It occupies the whole professional field of human life from paddock to pulpit, and social purity to politics.

Teresh had to accept the inevitable. He knew that the heart of Meshrac the man was better than that of the magician, but the obedience he had to yield to his profession he would exact also from Machaon, and the councillor could therefore hope for no assistance from either on behalf of the Prince. Only yesterday the whole weight and interest of the magical community were bound up in Glarces, but at the command of a foul conspiracy - a dastardly murder - of which the Prince was the sole remaining victim, the religious scientific, and medical fraternities had, in one night, changed their allegiance, and were now ready to grovel before the bloody hand that held the sceptre, in the hope of future favours. Of course, it could only be expected, since the hand from which they had received the favours of the past was helpless and empty now. And this is religion in practice - “the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever,” so long as it remains a system dominated by the minds and necessities of men rather than the immutable laws of God.

But I shall be reminded that neither magician nor physician knew more of the truth of the matter than Teresh himself. So Meshrac the man would tell us, and the astrologer would not answer if we asked him, but the mystery of Zillah's philtre was now cleared up to him, though the secret was safe if the revival of the oracle could be secured. He had a true regard for Glarces, but his profession was greater than his friendship. Principle and truth were secondary considerations to authority.

Teresh was not such a man, and though he should find himself alone he would continue to prosecute his quest until Glarces and Vedrona were avenged, or he had discovered the error of his suspicion.

He had continued his walk but a short distance when he met Zachra.

“Ah, Zachra,” he exclaimed, “I am glad to see you. Have you heard anything?”

“Nothing,” he answered gloomily.

“I have just left Meshrac and Machaon. We shall have no help from them.”

“I am not surprised at that. I never expected it. Still, it is well to know who are really friends.”

“What do you propose as the next step?”

“I have been wondering whether the hunter knows anything.”

“In what way?”

“I have an idea that if we knew the full story of that wrangle between him, Casca, and Vedrona's maid, we might get a useful suggestion.”

“That is rather far-fetched, I think. Besides, the fellow is so sullen you can never get a word out of him.”

“As a rule he is, I know. But I believe he would give his life for Glarces, any time. If we try him we can only fail.” “I have no faith, but every forlorn hope is worth a trial. Come; we will see him at once.”

They found Maphir fairly busy for the moment. The lions were in a fractious mood that morning, and failing an object upon whom to vent their temper, were threatening a fight between themselves. Maphir had carefully noted the preliminary indications of their restlessness, but thoroughly understanding the habits and natures of the beasts, never cared to interfere unless necessary. Once or twice he had ventured to speak to them, and they had turned away as if ashamed of their mutinous conduct; but at length a prolonged and vicious snarl caused him to leap to his feet, seize a whip, and rush to their cave in time to save an actual combat.

When his visitors arrived he was in the act of administering the first sound thrashing they had received at his hands, neither did he end it until he made them fully conscious who was master.

Having accomplished this, he threw his whip aside, and with the true magnanimity of his noble nature, returned to each crestfallen brute, patting his head and speaking a few words of regretful sympathy in the assurance that he had forgiven their misconduct.

“They appear to be restless this morning,” suggested Teresh, as he drew a step or two nearer.

“It would be a wonder if they weren't,” was the sullen reply.

“Why?”

“Why? Because they're brutes. If they were men I suppose they would be rubbing their hands in glee. But they're brutes, and faithful, that's why they're mad.” “Do you think they know it is past the time when they usually see the Princess?” asked Zachra.

“Do you think the lions are fools ?” he enquired. “Does a dog need to be told of his master's death? Is a cur better than a lion? Zhade knew of this weeks ago, and had I only let him go he would have made short work of one man, and spared us all the sorrow of to-day.”

“What man?” asked Teresh anxiously. “He who killed the Princess.”

“What, Glarces?”

“Glarces! No!” He was about to say more, but, casting a suspicious glance at his visitors he changed his mind, and added: “That is, I can't understand how he could do it; but I can't trust myself to think to-day, and I daren't speak.” “You can tell us who this man is you suspect.”

“No, I dare not do it to-day. I might strike a wrong trail, and the consequences would be serious. The death of the Princess means more to me than you think. You don't know why, but look at this, then perhaps you will understand why it is not safe for me to trust myself to-day.” As he spoke, he drew from his breast his document of release and handed it to Teresh to read. “The Princess gave me that on the day she heard the story of my capture, and I have only been waiting for a caravan to go to Mizraim with which I was to return. Much as my eyes hunger for the sight of my wife and children, I would gladly give my life for her. But she has gone - she is dead! And as I sit here thinking what I can do to avenge her and save her brother, you come along, when my heart is full, and tempt me to say more than I ought. No! I cannot do it. I know nothing.” “We grieve, Maphir, as truly, if not as deeply as yourself.” replied Zachra. “We cannot save the Princess, but we may, and are, determined to do something on behalf of Glarces. Will you not assist us?”

“The Prince is my master, and I am willing to serve him as best I may.”

“And we are his friends,” replied Teresh.

“How am I to know that, save from the Prince himself ?” “We will swear it on our honour.”

“So would the traitor who is responsible for the murder.”

“Tell us what we can do to assure you, and we will do it.” A sudden thought occurred to the keeper, and he started to his feet from between the lions, where he had been seated during the conservation.

“You see the lions,” he said, pointing to the still trembling brutes, “they are in a dangerous mood to-day, but it is only the enemies of the Prince or Princess who have cause to fear them. On the truth of their judgment I would risk my life. If you are friends of Glarces, and wish to serve him in this time of need, come inside, and I will join your cause; but if you fear to do so, go your way, we will do our own work.”

It was a test calculated to try the courage of any man at a time when the lions had shown such temper as they had witnessed. The two men looked enquiringly at each other, but neither moved.

“You are afraid to come,” said Maphir, after carefully watching their uncertainty. “Very well; I equally doubt your honesty, and have no more to say.”

Teresh was confident the man knew something; that something might be sufficient to save the future of Glarces, as well as avenge Vedrona, or it might prove to be nothing more than a similar suspicion to his own. The price demanded for this uncertainty was the risk of his life. Was his fidelity to Glarces equal to the risk? He decided that it was, and cautiously approaching the door, entered the cave. Zachra, with even more diffidence, followed, and the lions quietly approached as if to give them welcome.

Maphir was satisfied.

“That is enough,” he said. Now, if you will come with me, I think I can tell you something that will help you.” Having again admonished and secured the lions, he first led his visitors to his secret retreat, in which he had heard all that had passed between Zillah, Lais, and Casca, then he told them all we have learned.

Teresh and Zachra listened eagerly to everything.

“And Casca was to marry the Princess as his reward. Thanks, Maphir; now we can begin to work in earnest. We will see you again.”

“May the spirits of the mighty hunters help us; but I shall know nothing to anyone but in your presence.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE MASK FAILS

Machanon's anticipation was fully justified. Glarces, having fallen asleep, slept on till nature had taken a just revenge. Again and again did Petronius return, at ever shortening intervals, to assure himself that all was well; and also that he might be ready to discharge whatever service the Prince might require, but it was late in the afternoon before he could report to the Queen that his ward was awake.

Lais knew the announcement must come, however long it might be delayed, and that it would herald the interview between herself and Glarces from which she shrank. Events had now torn the mask from her face, and she must stand before him without a single redeeming quality to relieve the hideous deformity of the treachery to which he had succumbed.

She knew this with that same vague certainty a murderer contemplates the hour of doom. It must inevitably come, but deluding hope persists in the suggestion that something must occur to avert it; therefore the preparation for the crisis is thrust aside, and the blow falls with more crushing force when the fatal hour arrives.

Just so the unwelcome intimation of Petronius fell upon the guilty conscience of the Queen. Her heart stood still; all strength forsook her; with blanched cheeks, dry staring eyes, trembling and voiceless lips, she heard his words, and feared as she had never feared before. Her breath came in short hard gusts, and while her frightened gaze was rivetted upon the soldier, her cold clammy hand nervously wandered in search of that of Damophila if haply she might render some assistance in the extremity.

It was an awful instant in which an awakened conscience smote her guilty soul unmercifully, and if Teresh had beheld the sight he would have needed no other evidence to complete his case. The effect, however, was nothing more than a passing spasm - the nauseating reel caused by the unwelcome news - and by marvellous dexterity and presence of mind, she recovered herself, passing the incident off as a natural expression of grief.

"How is he?" she enquired, in a well-feigned outburst of tears.

"Like a man in a dream, O Queen. He neither hears nor notices anyone, but talks to himself as none can understand."

“My poor, crushed, broken brother! O Damophila, what shall I do - what can I do? This is the hardest task of all! How can I see him - how can I comfort him? Oh, the cruel, cruel fates. They have taken my mother and my sister, am I to lose my brother also?”

“No, no! responded the sympathetic attendant, “the gods are not malignant; they will not ask for such a sacrifice. I grieve for you in that which you alone can bear, but I know how empty and less than useless words and professions are at times like these. I have passed through the bitter experience, and can well understand how Glarces fails to hear or recognise the presence of his friends; but go to him yourself - you need not speak to him; the voice of your fellow-suffering will reach him better than words, and you will be able to comfort each other.”

“No, no! I dare not go to him! He has fallen under the spell of some foul demon and I am afraid of him.” “That can never be,” she answered, with firm confidence. “The soul of Glarces is too pure to fall a victim to such a power! The cause of Vedrona's death is an awful mystery, but when the Prince recovers he will clear up all the doubt and then we shall understand.”

“Do you really think so?”

“I am certain of it; and all who know him are of the same opinion. Won't you see him and do what you can to bring about his restoration?”

“How can I help him when I am so prostrate myself.” “The gods will tell you how if you will make the effort; and the instinct of love will guide you better than even experience can suggest.”

“Ah, my friend, that is where I feel my loneliness and inability. What do I know of the strength and comfort of love? Oh, if I only had your faith.”

“Let not the darkness of your grief deceive you. In your effort to help the afflicted Prince you will find both solace and companionship. In cheering him you will also comfort yourself. I do not speak from faith, I know because I have passed along this way of solitude and sorrow. I know its bitterness and pain - still carry the sensitive scars of its cruel wounds upon me. Take my assurance for it, if you will go, in the companionship of grief you will each divide sorrow and increase your strength. Go, and comfort yourself in your ministry to him.”

“Oh, ye gods, how can I do it - how can I meet such grief!”

“Who, then, shall tell him of his royal mother's death? He must know. Will you let him also bear this alone?” The suggestion fell upon the tragedienne's ears as an opportune inspiration. She was weary of being

on her knees, as she had thrown herself in her well-feigned expression of grief, and at the appeal rose in a tearless, half-defiant frenzy of despair, ready to make this last great sacrifice upon the altar of her affection.

“Yes, yes!” she cried. “I must tell him that. But, oh! what will it do - what will it do? I shall kill him as I speak the news. I know I shall! It will certainly kill him!”

Then I shall be alone! In one accursed day mother, sister, brother - all slain! O ye cruel gods, what have I done to merit such a fate?”

“May that ever be far from the purpose of the gods, O Queen,” replied the captain, when he saw Damophila's inability to answer. “I would venture to repeat that the noble Prince, as yet, neither recognises nor understands anyone. If the news were now made known it would not disturb him, but the knowledge would be with him when he wakes - broken gently by the gods as he has power to bear it.”

“Thanks, my good Petronius, thanks!” she returned, as she appeared to grasp the relief afforded by the timely suggestion. “Your thoughtfulness is merciful. Go! Bring the Prince at once to his own rooms. Let no one speak to or see him lest he should awake, then may the gods give me assistance to discharge my task.”

The soldier at once departed, and Lais, splendidly sustaining her part, flung herself back upon the divan and wept. Escorted by a guard sufficiently strong to secure the Queen's command, Glarces returned, without question or opposition, to his own apartments, where, after a moment of indecision, he dropped into the soft cushions of the couch which formed the favourite seat of Vedrona whenever she came to visit him. He neither spoke nor moved, but, burying his head in his arms and the cushions, lay as if asleep till the voice of Lais disturbed him.

He was, however, most painfully awake - struggling in the throes of the nightmare sleep had only power to interrupt because of its incompetence to continue. His long slumber had given a certain physical relaxation and recuperation, enabling conscience to string brain and nerve into more acute and accusing harmony with the condemnation he had passed upon himself. The nameless tortures of the black, impenetrable future were gradually closing upon him, and the gates of oblivion were for ever shut against even the hope of temporary relief.

Lais entered and waved the guard to leave them. Then, standing in the presence of the interview she feared, with all the cowardice of abject guilt, she paused, looked at the pitiable wreck of her victim, then anxiously

towards the door as if doubtful whether to escape. But the words of the captain – “He is like a man in a dream” - occurred to her, and his appearance confirmed the report. This decided her course. She would go forward, brave the ordeal, and get it over. Her fear gave fleetness to her feet, and in an instant she was on her knees beside him, her trembling fingers running through his unkempt locks.

“Glarces! My poor brother!” she murmured with nervously-feigned affection.

He neither moved nor made any sign of recognition of her presence. At this she took courage.

“My poor, broken-hearted brother! Let me comfort you - let us weep together.”

He raised his head and turned his eyes upon her. With an exclamation of horror she scrambled to her feet and fled! The havoc of that night when he stood before the oracle was as a shadow to the substance compared with his appearance now.

“By all the gods, who are you?” she cried. “You are not Glarces.”

“No, I am not,” he replied quietly, in a voice as unfamiliar as his face, “I am only the suffering remnant of him. All that was good, and true, and manly has been taken away, and what is left can only suffer, hate, revenge! Are you satisfied with the result of your work? If so, go leave me! I am like a tiger who has tasted blood - I thirst for more! Go! Leave me; or I will kill you as - I killed her!”

He had stealthily risen into a half-sitting position as he spoke, but with the reference to Vedrona he dropped back again overcome.

“You must not heed these thoughts which tempt you in your sorrow,” she replied, venturing to return to his side now that she had conquered her first alarm. “Are we not both bereaved? Yet I have come to comfort you.”

She fled again at his sudden start.

“You comfort me? Have you not already done enough? Begone, I say! All my comfort died with Vedrona!” “No, dear, not all. Your mind, like mine, is over powered in the presence of her loss. But time will heal our wounds, and I will stay to help you bear your sorrow.” “No, you will not! Get away, before I kill you,” he hissed with emphatic menace.

“I am not afraid. I know my brother better, perhaps, than he knows himself just now.”

“Are you more to me than she was? Can you escape when she fell; or has your infernal witchcraft power to protect you as successfully as it murdered her?”

If this was the language of his dreaming it was as dangerous to her cause as his waking could be, and she nervously turned to see if they were alone. It was only the fear of guilt she betrayed, for strict precautions had been taken to command the guard to await her summons within the outer or second room that nothing might be overheard. Having satisfied this needless alarm, by one of those marvellous efforts of will she could so successfully employ, she composed herself, and quietly prepared the further development of her scheme of self-protection. Petronius had mistaken the true mental condition of his ward - she had no thought that he had deceived her - and she was relieved to know, now that the fact had been ascertained, that Glarces was fully conscious. It was also equally certain that in spite of the long sleep, he was physically in a state bordering on collapse. In this she found a compensating advantage of which she would not neglect to avail herself.

It was inevitable that the contest of his accusation and recrimination should be fought, and better far to get it over at once, while matters were in a simple stage, and she held a reserve in her own hand to use with overpowering effect as occasion demanded, than defer the meeting, with a possible chance of an accumulation of evidence against her, and the after knowledge of Vedrona's death failing in its peculiar service to her cause. Fortune had, so far, been almost altogether in her favour, and she was still in a position to make an attempt to win rather than coerce him, which latter was, as yet, far from her wish and intention. Still, having succeeded to such an extent, she was determined to carry her purpose to a finish and make him her own - if not as a free man then she would compel him as a slave.

With this object she was willing to humour him until she succeeded or discovered its futility.

“No, dear. I know I can never be to you all that Vedrona was,” she answered, with genuine regret, “but I will do my best to fill her place - “

“And so you killed her!”

“No, Glarces, no! You do me an injustice. The gods know how my heart is broken at her death; how all the joy has gone out of my life, and were it not that I have a sister's love for yourself - that I know you suffer even more than I do; that you need help and comfort and support; that, she if

she could only speak, would ask me to do this for her dear sake - I believe that I should die from the weight of grief that crushes me.”

He had again buried his head deep within his folded arms in the cushions as if he would escape from the sight of her, but her words angered him; his muscles knotted with the restraint he had to put upon himself to prevent his hands administering the justice for which his soul clamoured. He lifted his head, turned his eyes upon her, full of the determination and strength of the old Glarces, but wanting the tempering softness and considerate assurance she had been wont to see. He was no longer a mediator anxious for reconciliation, but an avenger, eager for immediate and inexorable justice, and her guilty soul again took alarm, with nothing but fear of his damning and undeniable accusation preventing her from calling for assistance.

“May all the gods forgive me,” he began, with a suppressed indignation terrible by reason of its intense deliberation, “if the temptation of your lying hypocrisy proves to be more than I have strength to resist. If your black soul has not yet passed beyond the hope of all forgiveness, and if the gods can accept a gift so steeped with crime and treachery, I beg you kill yourself and rid the world of the poison of your presence. Do not misunderstand me, nor think I labour under some delusion born of my sorrow. I am at last awake, the spell of your deception has been broken, and I know you, shorn of all disguise, in your true character as hell's black forgery on womanhood. Perhaps it is well for all the generations that shall come after us that such a monstrous masterpiece of devilry as you represent should have been found incarnate; for your existence has made foulest fiends bankrupt in device of villainy, and earth has now nothing worse to fear. You have in this secured a certain immortality; your name shall be a well-known withering curse among all nations, and your pestiferous soul shall stand as the deep limit of hell's depravity. You need not tremble nor shrink away. If I can risk the vile contagion of your presence while I make known the character I read, I bid you make good use of this, your final opportunity, to catch a breath of some redeeming grace; and when you needs must seek for it in one so hopeless as myself, you may discover in what you see I am some trifling indication of the full reward which you have earned. Around your neck shall be hung every broken troth of womanhood, the sting of every temptation from virtue, the curse of every true love betrayed by passion. The souls of all who perish from lack of philanthropy, generosity or human kindness shall execrate thee; the homeless and the outcast shall effectually charge thee with their misfortunes ; the suffering of starving orphans shall be heaped

upon thee, and all the damned in hell shall find some consolation in their torture as they rejoice to see thy punishment! Close not your ears, nor make attempt to shut out what I tell you; the most I can say is like the sound of sweetest music compared with the experience it so feebly outlines. The gods will see to it that, in their sentence, they will excel the inventive power of fiends as far as hell in thee has dragged the name of woman down to degradation. Thou cursed of all the brood of Cerberus, shunned of the three-faced Hecate, and supreme monstrosity of treachery, I know thee now! And if by tearing off thy mask I shall have saved the world from falling victims to thy base hypocrisy and heartless craft, I may in some vast distant future find a grain of comfort in the torture you have brought upon me. Now go, while I can hold my itching fingers in their leash, or I will send your perjured soul at once into its doom.”

It was no use to dissemble further or make attempt to evade the purpose he had formed if once the opportunity was found. All, however, was not yet lost. In his strict retirement lay her safety, and she would mind he should not be disturbed before he learned to know the arts she would employ to make him change his mind, if not his feelings towards her.

“Ah, ah! my clever and aspiring assassin,” she laughed, with ringing but enforced bravado, “do we at length so well understand each other? Ah, well, perhaps it is best. But still be generous enough to admit that I have won in our first encounter. Now, name your own opening in the second contest, for the move by right is yours.”

“Silence, or I will kill you, I say!”

“Are you sure you can do so? If I was best in the game we played last night do you think you would be the more successful now?”

“I will call the guard and soon determine that.” At this he sought but could find no chime.

“They will only answer my summons,” she replied gaily. “Then I will away to the Queen.”

“You cannot leave these rooms without my consent.” “Without your consent? We will soon put a stop to the test.”

“Stop!” she commanded. “Have you not heard that your beautiful dagger had a double edge last night, and that I am Queen to-day?”

“What do you mean?” he gasped.

“Mean! Ah, ha! Have you gone to sleep again? Only a moment ago you were boasting how much had been revealed to you in your murderous vision concerning myself. Has this sweet morsel in the feast of inspiration escaped you? Have you something yet to learn? I will ask you a riddle, Glarces - one from the black unfathomable depths of hell to which you have so confidently consigned me. No, no! Don't grow impatient. Be now as you have counselled me to be - attentive to all that I would say. You did most admirably when I was at your mercy! Now the balance swings in favour of myself, and I would answer you in even terms. I want you to understand how bright the light of your vision is; how true are all its revelations; how cunning and wise you have been in your outspoken judgments; and then I want to ask you whether you or I are better circumstanced! But to my riddle, Glarces; hear now and answer it, then you will know just what I mean: -

' When wine brought from the deep abyss.'

I mean the region where my 'pestiferous soul shall stand as a limit of hell's depravity.' Ah, ha! you see I heard all you said:

'When wine brought from the deep abyss, In mystic fragrance fills the cup; When syren eyes with love-lorn looks First tempt a trusting fool to sup How many lives may he destroy Obedient to his new-found joy?

Canst answer that, my wise philosopher? If so I need not explain the meaning of your double-edged dagger.”

Her taunt was as deliberately playful as his denunciation had been intense, but from the difference of their positions the one was equally effective as the other. If she had writhed, he was crushed; where she shrank he was pierced! Long before she had finished - for she paused between each stroke to allow it to take its full effect - he had fallen back and hid himself as far as possible in the cushions. The effort he had made left him in a state of physical collapse in which he was unable to protect himself. Gladly would he have sought refuge from his mental torture in the arms of delirium, but the relief was denied him. He had reached the threshold of his self-conceived punishment, and at the hand of Lais it was ordained for him to receive the first bitter draught of his merciless sentence.

“Come, Glarces, answer my riddle; or is it too deep for you, and I must needs explain it?”

He only attempted to shrink further from her.

“Then I will make known to you the secret and interpretation thereof. In that one cup my love and wit suggested that you should drink in honour of Vedrona, I knew her downfall was concealed. Don't be so restless or impatient, and I will be candid with you. I did not know that it would prove her death - only that it would give me a long-sought victory over her, and that from thence you would be mine. But the gods were pleased to be more generous towards me than I had hoped. They nobly inspired you to clear her right away; and when our mother heard the news she gave the throne to me and died at once. Why do you tremble, Glarces? Are you not glad that I am Queen, with power to do with you as I will and none to come between us? You are mine now, and I am yours - that is if you will be reason able. Still, we will not speak further of these things now. You are always wise and thoughtful in all you do, and when your present weariness and nervousness are over, when we have disposed of the unpleasant reminders of the past by burial and the pyre, and I have forgotten the injustice you have done me in your very natural sorrow, we shall face our new life together and be happy. But you are not well now. You must rest, and in the meantime I will do everything that is required.”

“Lais!” he pleaded in broken utterances, in which there was no trace of passion or recrimination, “this is too much for me! I cannot tell if what you say is true or false - I only know that you can torture me beyond my power to bear it. But hear me this once, grant me one request, and then I will be satisfied - then you may do in all things as you will. When we were children, and I heard that you were motherless, I wept around my father's neck until he promised that you should come to us - should be our sister. Will you think back again to those first happy days, how in our childhood we loved each other, before we knew the difference of love and passion, as later years have taught us? Will you do this, and then in the strength of that pure love, take a knife-sharp and long - and kill me? Don't leave me to suffer all the untold agony of years to come. Be the means of granting my only wish, as I once was to you - kill me, and I will then forgive you everything!”

“For shame, Glarces! Is this the true spirit of the hero we always thought you? Men and women must not act like children, but we must face the penalties of our faults with courage. We have to gain our ends as best we may, and then accept the circumstances. I have loved you with a consuming passion you can never understand; but you were promised to another who was neither worthy of - “

“Stop!” he cried, leaping to his feet at a bound. “Stop! or by the gods above us, if you attempt to say another word it shall be your last!”

“Very well, I will say no more. It is perhaps unreasonable to expect you to hear my proposals before you understand the circumstances; but mind, I will be frank with you. You are a close prisoner at my will; no one can see you, nor will the guard carry messages to anyone but myself. I prescribe rest and quiet until you recover yourself, and I will see to it that I am obeyed.”

“And you are the homeless orphan for whom I have done so much.”

“No, I am the Queen of Sahama!” and without another word she left him.

“Oh, my father, my father!” he cried, “and is this the outcome of all your kindness to her?”

Then he fell in a paroxysm of despair.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE FUNERAL PYRE

The dual death in the royal family gave striking prominence to a curious superstition of the people in reference to the disposal of the dead. The bodies of Queens were carefully embalmed and laid to rest in the Hall of the Dead, where the remains of departed rulers were to be seen in an unbroken line, and various stages of disappearance, until it grew impossible to distinguish between the dust of the Queen-mother of the settlement and the earth to which the corpse had returned.

The body of Sazone would take its appointed place in this succession of death, but with respect to that of Vedrona, though so near to the throne, she had not actually ascended it, and hence must be cremated upon the funeral pyre, in order that her shade might be released from the influences of the earth. Lifted thus upon the wings of flame, she would be able to mount the Car of Phœbus as it rose above the mountain tops, and so be carried to the gardens of the blessed.

Whether Queens had power to snap the connection and secure liberty by their own divine right, or whether, owing to the inadvertent anomaly, they were condemned to remain earthbound, as would be the fate of ordinary individuals deprived of a funeral pyre, never appears to have suggested itself to the minds of the people. The priests and magicians had decreed the institutions, and they were supposed to know all about it. There the matter ended.

In accordance with another very deeply rooted superstition in the Orient, all funeral rites must be performed on the third day after decease. Before

that time the soul might obtain power to return, but with the third day, the fact of death was indisputably settled and the body had to be immediately disposed of.

This superstition of liberating the soul by fire demanded that the ceremonies should commence while it was yet dark in order that all preliminaries might be discharged and the pyre lighted before the appearance of the sun above the hills. To do this in the case of the loved and lamented Vedrona, meant a whole night of sorrowful demonstration and preparation for the sad farewell.

Before midnight every available position in the sacred amphitheatre had been appropriated. How different was this assembly from that gathered in the same place only three short days ago, when she for whom the pyre was now waiting, had so graciously recognised the enthusiastic plaudits of her people! In place of the thunder-roar of welcome by which she was then received, nothing but sighs, tears, and bitter lamentations could now be heard. The air was charged with magnetic sorrow, which rose in peculiarly dismal wails from the darkness around the pyre, and quivered along the road to the palace, only to be returned like the despairing moan of an astral seeking rest.

At length Meshrac appeared upon the steps of the palace holding high above his head the sacred torch, with which he performed certain magical evolutions, to summon the shade of the Princess from its wanderings in preparation for the funeral rites. These accomplished, the minor priests, who had outlined the circle of his operations, passed by, and each lit a similar brand from the magician's flame, then proceeded to light the first of the lamps produced by every person waiting along the route. From hand to hand on either side the weird uncanny bands of fire travelled, scarcely accomplishing more than adding jewel points to blackness and bringing into evidence a multitude of ghosts.

But while these two fiery serpents wriggled on their way, a strong detachment of the Queen's Guard passed down the steps and took up their position before the torch-bearers. Next came such representatives of the people as Casca had chosen to invite, followed by the slaves of the household, the lords and ladies in attendance, the officers and the Council. After these came the whole body of priests, magicians, and wise men, each separate group surrounding the particular altar at which they ministered, and clothed in all the mystical and magical honours pertaining to their positions. Meshrac, as master of the magicians, arrayed in cabalistic splendour, was borne in state upon the shoulders of

eight acolytes. Over the white robes of the priesthood Chryses wore the richly embroidered mantle and headgear of a patriarch in his ministry upon the golden altar. Hereon, protected by its crystal lantern, burned the lamp of sacred oil from which Glarces would presently be called upon to light the pyre.

Behind the altar came the couch with the form of Vedrona lying as if asleep. Dressed in the robes she had worn at the banquet, with her wealth of wavy golden hair covering her shoulders like a super-mantle, she looked as if, overcome with fatigue, she was stealing a refresher ere her maids disrobed her. It was a sweet - a peaceful sleep, without suspicion of uneasiness or troubled dreams.

The bier was reverently borne by the men of her own company of the guard, and attended by flower-wreathed virgins in white, who sang the melancholy dirge for the dead, within a circle of thurifers, burning incense to drive malicious spirits away.

Circumstances forbade more than a passing glance of sympathy and affection at the beautiful sleeper before the coming of Glarces attracted all attention. As chief mourner he was constrained to take his place. Never before had he feared to meet the people, but never in the history of humanity had any man so basely betrayed confidence, so heinously offended the traditions of morality, so criminally ruined the fondest hopes of a nation. He had spent the night endeavouring to find one redeeming excuse for himself, but had most miserably failed. Now the moment had arrived for the verdict of the people to be delivered, and with a crushing sense of the penalty he merited he took his place like a condemned man going to execution. His head was bare and bowed; across his chest his arms were folded as if in compact readiness to receive the blow. Again he seemed to lose himself, but now it was not in the merciful delirium of oblivion, but the horribly sickening sense of terror, in which the power to suffer was increased and only the strength of self-defence was lost. In the cold sweat of waking nightmare, without ability to resist, he took his place and moved forward to his doom.

But his judgments were always most severe upon himself. The confidence of his people was in this instance deeper than his own. That he had been the instrument of the murder was unfortunately beyond dispute, but that he was equally a victim with his sister was also as certainly believed. Where the guilt really lay no one knew at present, but suspicion, without any tangible or conceivable cause, generally turned in one direction. So it was that a great surprise awaited him, and the tender expression of

sorrowful sympathy by which he was greeted had a wonderful effect in strengthening him to perform the task before him.

Zhan and Zhade were the first to declare their unshaken confidence by mounting guard on either side of their master. This was not by arrangement or design, but much to the annoyance of the Queen, who had only consented to their presence out of deference to policy. Maphir had been commanded to take his place with the lions behind the personal slaves of the Princess, but while he waited, as the Prince passed by the brutes asserted their own choice, nor was Maphir able to change their determination. Lais protested, and vainly ordered their immediate return to quarters; royal edicts lack force in the animal world, and for once the authority was set at naught. An omen not without effect upon her superstitious mind.

The hunter was more than glad at the propitious incident, which was not altogether a surprise to him. It compelled him to keep in close attendance upon the Prince. Such a possibility having been previously considered between Teresh and himself, he speedily attempted to ascertain all the councillor desired to learn for the furtherance of his plans, but Glarces was determined to say nothing but what he was justly entitled to say in the public presence of his countrymen around the pyre. Maphir persisted, but the Prince was obdurate, and there it had to rest.

Lais made her first appearance as Queen in her own private chair carried by four slaves. It was not a time for State ceremonial, and in her anxiety for conciliation, as well as to disarm rumour and suspicion, which by an intangible but very real presence vexed and irritated her, she rather erred on the right side than otherwise. Still, the wish was abortive. She was received in ominous, sullen silence, which fell upon her hopes like a pall of death. The disquieting effect of her interview with Glarces had not yet been overcome, and the repudiation of the people added volume to her fears, increasing moment by moment as it became more and more certain that the feeling against her was deep-rooted and general. That she would be able to cope with it was never doubted, provided it could be held in check until the rites were over, but for the present she was compelled to bear its expression with the painful possibility upon her that the silence might at any moment break into hostile demonstration, and she be overpowered before measures to protect herself were possible. Never did the fortunes of a throne hang in such uncertain and dangerous jeopardy. The sword of Damocles was a tower of refuge in comparison. The attitude of the people made one thing certain to her mind- the day would be a fatal one to either herself or Glarces. Which would be the victim? Of that there

appeared at present to be little doubt; but she would not fall easily, and trusted to fortune and her own ingenuity to secure the advantage.

At length the pyre was reached, and while the bier with its sleeping burden was reverently placed in position, the virgins again took up the funeral dirge, this time joined by the vast concourse of weeping spectators. In the journey Glarces had gathered strength from the sympathy extended, and was far more like himself than when he started. Occasionally he ventured to raise his eyes for a moment, but they drooped again under their weight of sorrow, in which it was hopeless for him to look for any adequate companionship. The multitude reached towards him, but he was out of all practical help in the depths of his despair. Nevertheless, the certainty that - he had not sacrificed their loyalty and good - will comforted him somewhat in his terrible ordeal.

Around the pyre twenty-one altars formed a magical circle, within which stood Chryses presiding over the one on which burned the sacred flame. When all but the officials and virgins had withdrawn from the enclosure the altar fires were lighted and preliminary ceremonies began. Gifts and sacrifices to the gods on behalf of the deceased were received and burned to the chanting invocations of priests; while at alternate fires the magicians presided with incantations and incense calculated to drive away the powers of evil and purify the pathway by which the released spirit must reach the celestial car.

This fully assured the presence and protection of the holy gods, and all the immortals were invoked to welcome and accompany the departed; after which the singers, keeping time to their voices by a grotesquely sinuous dance, chanted earth's farewell, and finally committed Vedrona to the care and keeping of the gods.

Now the Archpriest approached Glarces, led him within the circle between the altar and the pyre, and bade him speak, in accordance with custom, such words as he desired, then set the soul of the Princess free.

It was a kindly invitation to a fearful ordeal - an unspeakable sacrifice. It was the one act that would for ever separate him from all he loved! By the application of that torch he would drop the curtain of oblivion between himself and his sister - how could he do it? The realisation of it sickened him; robbed him of energy, will, and all intelligent control of his actions, while duty impelled him forward to do that against which he vehemently protested.

So did he quietly follow the leading of the priest to his assigned position. He passed his hand bewilderingly across his eyes - and started. It was as if

Meshrac, by his magic art, had wrought a miracle, and transformed the Prince into his old confident, self-possessed self; as if the duty he had to discharge was to offer his sister the assurance of a nation's homage at the festival rather than say an eternal farewell at the pyre.

Superstitious humanity has been deftly educated at all times and in all nations, to accredit priests and magicians - they are really the same with different names - with miraculous powers. England is very much like Egypt in this respect, and nominal Christianity only next door to Paganism. Science and Reason, however, are now offering their discipleship to the Christ for the coming exodus, and the future morning is already bright with the daybreak of liberty. The magician has become the confrere of the jester and the clown in our entertainments; and the priest, who once was leader, is now on the outer edge of the rearguard of progress, vainly attempting to keep that position while the spluttering tallow-dips of his antiquated theology are burning.

Ignorance is no longer allowed to blind the eyes of justice, and the prophetic mantle is at length thrown around the shoulders of Reason and Intellect. The electric torch of Inspiration blazes in the hand of Science, and the world is marching back to God and righteousness along the highway of Knowledge and Logic, in the Röntgen rays of which we discover that all the working capital of priestly miracles are the stored up provisions of an all-wise Father for all necessities which can arise. Under this new guidance humanity, like the chrysalis, sheds the encumbering fetters of its lower stages and rises into the nobler atmosphere of spirituality combined with reason.

The experience of Glarces at that moment was no miracle, but the assertion of a law of nature which we are only just beginning to recognise. Edison has taught us how to preserve the voices of the dead; Marconi is demonstrating the fact of the tangibility of thought, and that wires may be laughed at in the presence of sympathetic attraction; but Glarces outstripped both these discoveries and found - given the sympathy of soul with soul - death itself can be annihilated, and the telegraphy of heart to heart is not only a fact from land to land but also from world to world.

It was this revelation that worked the so-called miracle. It was but a quiver - a lightning flash dying away into the blackness, but it was certain. He saw Vedrona, and was conscious that she recognised him! No wonder his face brightened! No wonder the stupendous fact was doubted but an instant later! It had its effect, however, giving him much needed strength for the present, and encouraging a hope for the future.

Lais was not so fortunate. For her the poise of destiny was dangerously unsteady, and the chances of success grew more and more uncertain. The only course upon which she could determine was to keep close to Glarces during the rites, so that, should her safety be imperilled, her dagger - which was carefully hidden, but ever ready - should first secure his death.

When Chryses conducted the Prince to the pyre she would have followed, but the priests restrained her, as none but the one to apply the torch was allowed within the circle. But when she saw the inexplicable, and, to her, appalling transformation come over him, her alarm banished all scruples, and she commanded her slaves to carry her forward.

Chryses hurriedly interposed.

“No one, O mighty Queen, save the Prince can enter here.”

“Am I not next of kin as well as Queen, O Priest?” she answered, with a defiance more threatening than sorrowful. “Forward, slaves!”

Chryses hesitated whether he should enforce his prerogative against such a contestant. It was only for an instant, but when he decided to maintain his authority it was too late. The slaves had passed the line of priests, and the muttered consternation of the people had also convinced Lais that she had made a mistake, but she would not go back.

Of this incident Glarces, in his ecstasy, knew nothing. The vision of enraptured immortality had passed across him and filled his soul with music vibrating in a hope too sweet even for the presence of Lais to disturb. It gave him all the needed strength for the duty he proceeded to discharge.

“Friends, citizens, and neighbours,” he began, in his usually calm, familiar voice; “nothing but my confidence in your desire for justice tempts me to speak to you in the presence of this awful witness. Whatever claim I have hitherto had to your confidence and sympathy has now been forfeited - “

“No, no!” was the sympathetic response.

“I thank you for such an evidence of your readiness to grant my request, but my time is short, and I pray you let me speak. It may be - I do not know - that this hand of mine has done the deed that brings the body of my sister, together with my happiness, my life, my hopes, here to be consumed. But if this be so, in the presence of the mighty gods, the yet unreleased spirit of my sister, and yourselves, I swear I am not conscious of it. The love existing between Vedrona and myself did not need to be spoken of before, you knew it; it was no selfish passion consuming itself

in uncontrolled desire; it was like a divine mantle thrown over us by the gods to clothe us for service to yourselves, and in the glory of its tenderness you all partook. Of all the blessings Sahama has received this promised to be the greatest in its results, and in its loss the nation's hopes, as well as my own, have been destroyed.

“But if you who saw her so rarely - who knew her so slightly and whose lives are taken up with a thousand additional interests - felt the fragrance and sweetness of her nature, how much more was it known to me who dwelt continually in its sacred presence - who had no other duty or ambition but to watch and feed its holy fire? Where your knowledge of her came to an end my own began - your feet were compelled to pause upon the threshold, but it was my privilege to minister within the shekinah, and of the rapture of that service it is alike impossible to speak or clearly think. In such sacred shrines, lying well within the suburbs of Elysium, no care nor disturbing thought can come. In its harmonious silence soul holds communion with soul, not with the slow and weary thread of words, but by the picture sphere of thought ensured against the danger of misunderstanding. The blight of jealousy and the frosts of suspicion never cross the boundary of that condition, but in the pleasant enchanting avenues of virgin content the favoured soul takes its first inspiration from the hills of delight which mark the boundary of the immortal land. In such a dream of love I have wandered since childhood with my sister; the fires of its sacred devotion have melted and blended our hearts in one; we have bathed in its sacred streams until each, lost within the other, cannot live apart.

“From such a dream what man would willingly awake - who would be anxious to put an end to such existence? What man would choose to sever such a bond and leave himself henceforth the legacy of a living death? Even with the slight acquaintance you have had of her we mourn, I ask - Do you think Sahama base enough to give birth to one who could strike the blow which lays my sister here?”

“Never! The gods forbid!” was the general response. “Then how can you think it possible that I, of deliberate choice and wish, should do the deed?”

“No one does think so,” answered Teresh, who stood just behind the circle of priests; and from the vast multitude like a thunder-peal came the cry, “Glarces is innocent!”

“Thanks, friends - a thousand thanks for such a priceless verdict! Not that I wish to escape the penalty which is justly mine; but to think that you will

patiently bear with me in what I have to say will always be some consolation in my punishment. Half my trouble, so far, has been to fear that you might hold me guilty.”

“Never, Glarces!” cried Teresh, forcing his way through the circle and throwing himself at the feet of the Prince. “Never, Glarces! The gods of Tartarus in their envy of thee have struck this blow, but the mighty gods and all Sahama love thee and share thy grief.”

“Amen!” cried all the people.

While the Prince was speaking Lais lay back hiding her head in the cushions of her litter in an endeavour to work out some feasible scheme of regaining the ground she had lost, but the words of Glarces fell upon her ears like the lashes of scorpions, exciting her fear - even terror - at the declaration of the truth, which she had hitherto flattered herself he only guessed at but never truly comprehended. She knew the superstition of the people, and had already gone too far in what she had done. To dare to interrupt him, whatever might be said, was only to hasten the penalty his accusation would secure, while to patiently endure might possibly lead to some fortuity of escape. If Glarces had suffered more than she was called upon to bear during that interval of uncertainty, even she could feel some touch of pity for him; but the instant Teresh entered the circle she was herself again - triumphant, and determined to take a full and complete revenge.

“Back! back!” she cried. “How dare you thus endanger our sister's peace? See you not that the car arises, and the fire has not yet been kindled to set her free?”

“There is time enough for that, my cousin,” responded Glarces, quietly, at the same time taking Teresh by the hand as if to bid him stay. “We are not impatient to rid the earth of so fair a soul as this, and if in the fullness of our love for her we pray she tarry for a little while, Phoebus will halt his car for such a traveller. She is of those immortals whose passage lends more glory to the path by the reflection of their purity. Behind her going will shine a brighter radiance, lighting all future souls along the way to Paradise. Let us be patient in our farewells while I recount the story of this accursed deed.”

“This is neither the time nor place for accusation,” she objected.

“Did I say accusation?” he replied. “If so I have soon forgotten it.”

“Proceed, most noble Prince,” counselled Chryses; “the car ascends and Phoebus cannot tarry.”

The Queen was saved. Glarces had to bow to the inevitable. His last chance was gone.

“I had desired to say much,” he proceeded, with a very noticeable tone of regret, “but I must wait, and trust you will yet demand my opportunity. Till then we all must be content to wait. The car ascends, and we must say farewell.”

He turned to take the flaming torch from the hands of the priest, but at the sight of it the physical appeared to gain ascendancy over the spiritual part of him, and in an instant all his calmness vanished, leaving him a victim to despair. He hesitated - but the sun was rising, again the fates hurled him brutally forward, and with a broken heart pouring out the libation of its life, he spoke:

“Now we set free the fairest soul that ever entered into the bowers of the blest. Farewell, thou hope and angel of Sahama! Farewell, thou light of Velia! Farewell, my sister - my peace - my life! In yonder bowers some more worthy shade than mine will claim thee - some more faithful heart will make thee all his own; and I must turn away, unloved, alone, to bear the penalty of my crime! In regions where the day will never break - where Charon will condemn me to wander unguided in despair - I shall travel through the eternal night, in which the only ray that can reach me will be the memory of your holy love, ever receding, receding beyond all reach and hope. Yet will I love thee still; and, if such a thing be possible, will even love the darkness of my punishment if it can only allow the light of your memory to remain - for that one ray will keep me company in the gloom, and I shall not be quite alone. Farewell! my life goes with you; but I have sacrificed it! Farewell, and yet again farewell! Oh, cruel Fate to part us thus! Now all I know of peace and rest, of joy and hope go with thee; and on thy pyre, my one beloved, I fling my broken heart!”

The flames shot up, and in agony too terrible and deep for tears Glarces stood and watched them.

CHAPTER XXXIV

RIVAL FURIES

The tide of circumstances had again been to the advantage of Lais. Once more had the common experience of mankind been verified-vice had triumphed, and truth was forsaken in the hour of its weakness and necessity. It always is so; was so from the beginning and will continue to the end. Or, rather, it seems to be so to those who judge of the river of life

from the short reach in view. There is vigour, force, success and impressment in the onward rush; it has gained a power by which it overcomes all obstruction and laughs contemptuously at the idea of failure. So it seems. But whence comes the energy, the force, the rush and irresistible power, are they not each and all evidence of descent? The beautiful rapids are children of the falls just round the bend, and the obstructions in the stream are unappreciated dams of mercy built up to save before it is too late.

Let us be wise and take heed when the stream begins to quicken its pace; there are no rapids in ascents, but the rising tide steadily lifts the soul upward, and, given time, will presently carry us over every difficulty into the fruitful pastures of divine accomplishment.

Brilliant and diamonds may equally flash in the false lights of ignorance, but the experts will divide them in the morning and then - oh, the disillusionment!

Lais, however, had drifted - or, rather, piloted her course - into the rapids, where every energy she possessed was requisitioned to avert immediate disaster. All her care was for present safety, she had no time to think of future consequences. By a series of hairbreadth escapes she had so far succeeded, but every miracle only brought her into contact with a new danger, and the struggle, though advantageous, was overpowering by reason of the impact which bore her forward.

For the immediate instant she had again escaped. The pyre was burning and Glarces had not publicly accused her. At the recognition of this she tried to breathe a sigh of relief; but was constrained to strangle it in its birth by the thought that he who had lighted the fire was expected to remain and replenish it until every possible fragment of the body was consumed. This would be the chance of which Teresh and his friends would avail themselves, and the accusation would then be made with more detailed force.

The crowd was already breaking up, for the volume of flame had hidden the body, and the nauseating fumes were heavy in the air. She stepped hurriedly from her chair to reach the Prince, intent on making a demonstration of sympathy, but Zhan and Zhade opposed with dangerous menace, and she was driven back defeated in that move at least.

In an instant she changed her tactics, and called the captain of the guard to her side.

“After all that has taken place, my good Petronius,” she began, “ you will understand how impossible it will be for my poor brother to maintain the traditions of these sad occasions and watch by the pyre till all shall be consumed; therefore I must ask you to choose such men as you can trust to assist our faithful Casca to perform the task. Let the fire be continually kept in motion, and well replenished until nightfall, with such additions of sweet-scented wood, spices and incense as may assist the shade of our dear sister in its departure. But of all this Casca knows my mind and wish, and I have confidence that he will faithfully discharge the duty. To you, personally, I entrust the care of my poor distracted brother, to whose comfort I would gladly minister were I not so overcome with grief. See to it, as you value your life, that he shall in no way be disturbed, not even to receive the sympathies and consolations of the many friends I know will wish to comfort him. For the present he must rest, and see no one without I give permission. For this I hold you responsible. Do you understand?”

“All that the mighty Queen commands shall be faithfully obeyed.”

By this last move Lais congratulated herself she had successfully weathered her final difficulty. Vedrona was gone: Glarces was in her power to be dealt with at her leisure and convenience; and whatever had been the designs of Teresh and his friends they were frustrated once and for all. The future course was now clear sailing. The decisive struggle had come suddenly and unexpectedly upon her, but the result had proved her to be equal to the demand, and the reward was a worthy one. The hostile attitude of the people was annoying, but one or two salutary examples would soon clear all such doubts away, and Sahama would contentedly settle down to its new regime.

With such a burst of April sunshine did the Queen resume her palanquin and start upon her homeward journey, followed by the closely-guarded Prince. A guilty conscience, however, is a rich hunting-ground for restless ghosts, and some possess a harrowing power only known by experience. Such tormentors may patiently bide their time, or fail to attract notice in the presence of the more physical combat she had hitherto sustained. Now the hour for conscience to assert itself had come, and she had scarcely thrown herself into her self-complacent pose before the indictment opened.

Did you say the course was clear sailing now? Alas, alas ! How prone we are to drop asleep in the false lull of a critical crisis! That moment of welcome quiet was only the delusive eddy as the doomed craft swept from

the rapids into the cataract. It was the final strain as the last strand of hope gave way. The torrent has thee at its mercy now. It can afford to play with thee - it may flatter and coquet - but beware, the stream is fooling thee!

The new trouble arose from the suggestive doubt as to what had passed between Glarces and Maphir. That the one would avail himself of such an unexpected opportunity to communicate with such friend as he might desire, and that the other would be equally glad to carry his message, was perfectly natural, and in this was to be found the reason of the Prince's silence concerning herself at the pyre. Such was the nature of the first invisible tormentor whose presence haunted her with all the terrors of uncertainty.

Upon the heels of this came another spectre, more pitiless and powerful than the last. What had Zillah been doing since the night of the feast? No thought of the proud Iberian had crossed her mind in the rush of events - the stress of self-preservation. The silence of the slave was more than ominous. Lais had good reason to know that the action of the girl depended entirely upon self-interest. She would accept the most favourable offer for her services, and if her lot was once thrown in with the enemy, even now the issue would be a disastrous failure for the aspirants cause.

Rocked in this torture cradle of guilty conscience, she was in a fury of alarm by the time she reached the palace, and when the gentle Damophila offered her ministry of condolence the Queen turned upon her with a perfectly savage retort.

“Do be quiet and take your sentiment away.” “Sentiment!” queried the astonished courtier.

“Sympathy or sentiment - call it which you will - both are equally objectionable. I want neither! Leave me, and tell the Iberian slave I would see her at once.”

Zillah had been expecting such a summons. Her watchful eye had taken note of all that had passed at the pyre, and she was able to draw conclusions far more satisfactory to herself than had fallen to the lot of Lais. When the slave brought the message Zillah was ready; not receiving the summons with the lowering, resentful frown with which she was accustomed to reply; but her mouth trembled into a coquettish smile, and she immediately followed her conductor.

The Queen in her dissemblance and uncertainty had thrown herself upon her divan in an attitude of grief, but carefully posing as to be able to take secret notice and form some plan for dealing with her doubtful confederate. Zillah gauged the device on the instant, and with a proud contempt of subterfuge at once proceeded to business.

“Allow me to offer, O Queen, my warmest congratulations upon the attainment of your desire,” she began, with the air and boldness of an equal.

The familiarity struck Lais just where it was intended. It increased her provocation, and gave the first advantage to the other.

“I caution you to be careful of your insolence, slave!” The epithet was hurled with a venom that caused Zillah's cheek to flush for the moment, but she recovered, and answered, with a biting sarcasm, as she made a profoundly mock obeisance:

“I am your sacred Majesty's most humble but dutiful servant. I offered my congratulation because I imagined the summons was to receive my reward. I am mistaken, and apologise.”

Lais bit her lip, but hesitated to reply. Whatever result was gained by this interview it would not be arrived at without a struggle, in which one or the other had to go down. This was inevitable. Both knew it, and each determined to conquer.

“What reward, girl?”

“For services rendered.” “To whom?”

“To whom?” - and the reiteration clothed itself in musical laughter – “I had almost forgotten! They were rendered to - Vedrona. How I wish I could have served you so faithfully!”

“But you did not so serve me.”

“N-no! Unfortunately not!” Then, with significant emphasis, “but now Vedrona has gone I can do so, and will not fail now that the occasion has come.”

“What do you mean, girl?” “Just what I say.”

Without any further reply she broke into a trill of laughter, carelessly turned on her heel and walked across the room.

“Do you forget that I am Queen, and hold your life in my hands?”

Another ripple of laughter.

“I forget nothing. Not even your murder of the Princess, nor the whereabouts of those who seek for information of the same. Had she not been the fool she was you would not now be ready for such another deed. But in your next attempt keep clear of me, or all the power of all your gods will not avail to keep your body from the pyre. I am speaking with you plainly as - friend to friend. I have no fear because your interest lies in my welfare. I am safe, and so long as I remain in Sahama you are at my mercy, and I can deal with the Queen-traitress as I will.”

“Traitor?”

“I said so. Perhaps it was not necessary since you know it so well, but I am not in a reticent mood to-day. Now, let us understand each other. Our interests are mutual - had we not better be friends?”

It was no use, Lais was powerless to protect herself. It was gall and wormwood to be compelled to submit, but Zillah was at present in the superior position, and the sagacious Queen would not imperil her final triumph by continuing a fruitless struggle. She had learned one thing - and that was really all she was anxious about for the moment - Zillah had kept her own counsel, therefore her own disturbing fears were groundless. This was enough, and the suggestion of the Iberian offered a plausible way of escape, while a secret but effectual revenge was planned.

“Have I not always been your friend since the day I learned your story?”

“Have you?” nonchalantly enquired the proud beauty, not in the least deceived by the modified tone of the Queen. “Perhaps you have. You Sahamans are so very naive and simple-minded that I mistake your innocence for craft, and do you an injustice. We will avert this in the future by speaking plainly to each other; then we shall avoid mistakes. I have a way of correcting second errors by a method which effectually prevents a third.”

It may have been a coincidence, but it was very suggestive that as Zillah delivered the last sentence she drew herself to her full height, resting her hands upon her hips, by which movement she disclosed the jewelled handle of the dagger in her girdle. Lais saw and noted the incident.

“If we are candid with each other there can be no misunderstanding, and there shall be none on my part.”

“Nor on mine. Why did you send for me?”

“To speak with you of our plans; but do not forget that I am Queen.”

“No! You have taken a throne as the result of a murder, I have lost a throne by reason of an outrage. Accident has favoured you and ruined me, otherwise we are much the same, and there is no circumstance in our connection requiring any recognition of distinction.”

“Still, I have the advantage.” “Have you! Try it!”

“I have no wish to do so; an armed friendship is never a safe one.”

“But one unarmed would probably be even more disastrous. The greatest hope of safety lies in readiness.”

“Then our friendship must be strained from now.” “I imagine it will be stronger so.”

“Well!” replied Lais resignedly, “if you will, I suppose it must be so.”

“Then why, if I am in a position to dictate terms, do you ask me to defer to your position?”

“We will not discuss that. Name your terms for the services you consider you have rendered.”

“Consider?”

“Well, then - services you have rendered.”

“That is better. First I demand instant freedom.” “You have it!”

“Next, a safe escort home with a substantial indemnity for the indignities I have suffered.”

“You shall also have this.”

“Within what period shall I set out on my return?”

“As soon as I can arrange for a caravan to visit Iberia, or reach the Great Sea. I should be glad if this could be to-morrow.”

“I believe that. But within what time will you make the arrangement?”

“Within a year.”

“It must not be more than half that time, and until then I must take the portion and privileges of Vedrona.”

“That you cannot do as a stranger.”

“No! Well, I will. That is as far as her possessions and position. Her titles and authority are of no value to me.”

“Perhaps you would like the throne?”

“The throne of Sahama? No, thank you! It is not worth even what you have done to gain it.”

“Are there any other requests you have to make? Will you also accept Vedrona's apartments and slaves?”

“Yes! It is perhaps best for us to be near each other.”

“Then all shall be arranged as you require.”

“I will see to that.”

“Will you now allow me to be alone?”

“If you will at once issue your commands to this effect I will go to my rooms.”

There was no escape. Casca was summoned, and an hour later important changes were despatching rumours in every direction - rumours dangerous to the new Queen, who, in all things touching the welfare of the Iberian, was henceforth the puppet of her deceased sister's slave.

CHAPTER XXXV

CRAFT

What was now the marketable value of the promises made to Lais by stars, oracles and wise men? It were better a thousand times for Vedrona to have lived than in her death for Lais to become vassal to the caprice of Zillah! Oh, the irony of fate! She was both Queen and slave; ascended the throne to find a cell, with a slave she had treated with contempt as jailer! Did ever Nemesis don such masquerade before?

The baffled Queen paced the room like an infuriated tigress. Why had her hand been restrained; why did her superstitions whisper that she would be the victim and not the victor? But better far to die than live upon such terms. She would not - could not live. And having arrived at this conclusion she sat down to discuss the method of suicide.

The excitement of her mind had been unconsciously sustained by physical exertions, and no sooner was she seated than the question arose - “But why die?” The ways by which Zillah might be unsuspectingly enabled to make her exit were numberless, simple, and expeditious. What need to trouble or entertain the idea of personal interference in the matter?

Details were soon arranged. All the personal attendants upon the dead Princess were summoned to the Queen's presence on the following morning. Such was the arrangement. At the assembly the non-appearance of Zillah would be enquired into, and her discovery - dead, would be satisfactory evidence of misconduct.

This was the design, but to the consternation of Lais it worked out somewhat differently. Zillah kept the appointment, with a meaning smile none but the Queen could understand. Æna was dead!

Meanwhile the adventuress, having calmed her fears, turned her thoughts towards Glarces. What had passed between him and Maphir? This she was determined to know, but her previous experience forbade her attempting to see the Prince. She smiled. With a little tact she might know everything.

She touched the chime.

“Tell the lady Tasha I would see her at once.”

No one understood better than Lais how easily the plastic foster-mother could be manipulated, especially where Glarces was concerned.

When hawks entertain doves the motive is not always pure, nor is the result likely to be to the advantage of the latter.

Lais very carefully prepared herself for the effect she determined to produce. Nothing touched Tasha so deeply as the sight of grief. It was an old and well worn experiment with Lais, but still effective as ever, and was now to be used for all it was worth. In the hands of such a consummate actress this meant much, but the risks were great - of vital importance - and the effect must needs be equal.

“Oh, Tasha, Tasha, what shall I do?” she exclaimed, as soon as the grief-stricken woman entered the room. “Do come and comfort me, or I shall go mad with my sorrow and loneliness.”

“Who is able to speak of comfort in such a trouble, my child? Oh, Vedrona, Vedrona! would that the gods had slain me in thy stead!”

“Don't say that, dear - don't say that. If the gods had been just I should have died in her place. But they have had their malignant will, and we must try to bear it. But what can we do for Glarces, dear? It is the thought of him that is killing me. And yet I dare not see him.”

“ And you won't allow me to do so.”

“Don't, Tasha, don't add your censure to all the slanders and suspicions I have to bear! I know how wilful I have been in the years gone by, but I have already reaped a heavy punishment. I want to be all that our dear mother was, but I know not whom to trust or who to ask to help me. Won't you pity me in my loneliness? I did not keep you from Glarces because I wished to do him wrong, but when I lost my parents I wanted to be alone. I desired to weep - to think - not talk or be distracted from my

grief. I judged he was like myself, and so I shielded him - even I would not see him. But if you think otherwise, go to him; comfort help him! Do anything - everything, that will assist to bring about his recovery. Say how my heart bleeds for him - that I can neither sleep nor rest until he comes to counsel me; that I know not what to do, or how to move without his advice; and, above all, ask him to trust me, according to his generous nature until he sees how wrong all these appearances and rumours are. If he will only do this all may yet be well, and with his help and your own I shall need no other counsellors, and my life shall ever be at his service. Will you tell him this?"

"I will do anything to help him bear this awful trouble; but oh, how I wish you had placed more confidence in me." "So do I, dear, now that it is too late. How different might everything have then been. But believe me, Tasha, it was not because I was wicked. I only wanted to be original - do things in my own way, with an air of mystery around them. If they were misunderstood, I laughed. I wished to be different to others - peculiar, if you will, and when people grew suspicious I was flattered at my success.

I never thought it would lead to this. It is a penalty too heavy for me to bear! If Glarces can understand you, tell him what I say; how disconsolate and heart-broken I am; ask him, for Vedrona's sake, to forgive me, and let me come to him that I may prove my penitence and do something for him!"

"Yes, I will tell him all about it, but how I wish I had understood you when Maphir - " Then she stopped short.

"When Maphir - what, dear?"

" Nothing, my child. I was thinking of Maphir's quarrel with Zillah just then."

"Maphir's quarrel with Zillah. What about it? Has it anything to do with Vedrona's death?"

"Ah, no! I only wish I could discover some clue to that. It was only my foolish habit of thinking of one thing while I am talking of another. But when shall I see Glarces?"

Lais was now quite as anxious to get rid of her as Tasha was to go.

"At once if you wish it. I will send for Petronius, and so instruct him. But before doing so, let me give you a word of caution. Your kind heart sometimes runs away with your head, and leads you into indiscretions. First, I hear that he is still labouring under all kinds of delusions, and imagines I am responsible for what has happened. Don't oppose him too

much if he accuses me. I deserve all he will say for the duplicity I have acknowledged to you; but I am in a position to clear myself as soon as we can hold an enquiry. Next, whatever he may say must not be repeated to anyone but myself. We have yet to discover who has to suffer for this crime, and until that is done I can place no confidence in anyone. Come straight to me when you leave him, and tell me all he says. Perhaps in some stray word you may not understand, he may give us a clue by which we may learn everything, and to clear up this horrible mystery would be the best way to secure his own recovery. Do you understand?"

"Yes, dear; I will come back to you."

"That is well. Now go, and assure him of my love and sympathy."

Petronius was already at the door, and she followed him at once.

"Poor fool of a moth," cried Lais, contemptuously, almost before the portiere had fallen; "she is one of the creatures called women! Bah! How nature must hate herself for the production of such imbeciles! Yet I have no reason to complain just now; she is the one necessary tool for the work in hand - a sort of afterthought by means of which the gods can correct the mistake for which I came so near to cursing them. But what is this about Maphir? Has he been talking already? I must make enquiries and find means to keep him quiet. It will serve to while away the time until her return."

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE QUEEN AT BAY

The atmosphere of feverish desire to do something not only troubled Lais, but also the whole of Velia that day; but as with Queen so with people, every effort seemed destined to end in failure. The aim of the one was to avert suspicion, crush opposition, and secure her own safety; that of the many to avenge Vedrona and defend Glarces. Both parties were, in their way, determined, but fortune, like the priests and magicians, halted between two opinions, in order to be able to stand well with the victors at the end. In all the city nothing was certain but Vedrona's death and doubt-distrust. Men were afraid to consult their most intimate friends, and received the confidence of suspicion in return. Apart from the magicians there were not half a dozen in the whole city who were not loyal to Glarces, but all were afraid to confess it. A single spark of moral courage would have set enthusiasm ablaze, and could but Teresh or Zachra have left the palace it would have been ill for the Queen; but

Glarcés had to be guarded, and both knew how Lais watched and hoped for their temporary absence in order to give her an opportunity to make an irretrievable move.

In all this uncertainty Maphir had a full, if not more than his legitimate share. No man was more determined than he that the consequences of all this trouble should rest upon the right shoulders, and from the first he had been fully persuaded that in some unforeseen way he and the lions would be able to accomplish it.

The events of the morning had, in a measure, destroyed this hope. The lions had never been favourites with Lais, because her presence always irritated them as in the case of Casca. More than once she had counselled Vedrona to have them confined, or even destroyed, and after their conduct of the morning Maphir had not much doubt as to their coming fate. The thought of this was not pleasant, not only on account of the brutes, but their destruction would dispense with his services, and much as he wished to see his home again he scorned the idea of leaving Velia until Glarcés had been avenged.

He was lost in a brown study over this perplexity when he received the Queen's summons. He knew what it meant, but the habits and experience of his life had taught him that calm courage is more valuable than physical strength in a deadly crisis, and under the circumstances he hoped that all the victory would not lie with the Queen. So far she had ignored him, the antipathy she entertained for the lions being extended to their keeper. But in his way Maphir was equally proud as the Assyrian, and until he was well upon his way he had not called to mind that this would be their first interview.

As he passed through the palace Teresh met him, and seeing his companion divined the meaning. They did not speak, but a suggestive look was exchanged, and the counsellor passed on.

Maphir entered the royal presence with the same calm bearing he always assumed when not actively engaged - the slow measured stride, arms folded across his chest, head erect and eyes leisurely but watchfully rolling. He neither paused nor waited for recognition, but approached the Queen, who, engaged with some triviality in her hair, did not for the moment notice him.

He bent his knee and bowed in graceful silence, then rose and waited.

The Queen was in her most condescending mood.

"I am afraid your lions were troublesome this morning," she began.

“They were better than I expected, lady.”

She did not appear to notice his mode of address. It was scarcely an occasion for exacting detail, especially from one naturally so rude and austere. The term he used was one of respect, and that was sufficient.

“Indeed! I though they were very defiant.”

“Lions are not to be gauged by the nature of camels or goats, lady. They have been very restless since the time the Princess died, and I am glad nothing more serious has happened of their going out.”

“But why did you take them if they were dangerous?” “My lord Casca commanded it.”

“But did you not explain to him?”

“No! I am neither Queen nor Prince, lady; my lord allows none other to explain.”

“That is unworthy of you and annoys me.” “It is none the less true.”

“But it annoys me, I say, and I will not hear it. What Casca did was in obedience to my wish, which had you observed so faithfully you had not now been here.”

Maphir bowed, but made no other reply.

“Why did you not take the place he gave you in the procession?”

“I dare not leave the lions, lady.” “Why not take them with you?”

“Because they are not to be argued with. They were with the Prince and would not leave him.”

“Had Vedrona told you, they would have been removed.” “But had they been in such dangerous temper I should have told the Prince, and he would not have run the risk.” “It is strange they should never show this vice before.” “It was the death of the Princess that disturbed them, lady.”

“Nonsense! What can they understand about such things? Say, rather, it was one of your clever excuses to get to the Prince.”

“Did it need any excuse, lady?”

The question came in such a natural tone of astonishment; it was the most inevitably certain enquiry to rise in the mind of one who knew the inner life of the palace as Maphir did, that Lais dare not resent it as impertinence, or place upon it the suggestion of suspicion. It was too clearly her own fault - a most annoying indiscretion, with probable serious consequences unless she could manage to cover it.

“You mistake me, I am afraid, in the use of a misleading word. Your attachment to the unfortunate Prince is well known to me, and, like the great multitude of his friends, who are so very anxious to do something for him, I imagined you were glad of the incident to be near his person and show your sympathy.”

“I was glad to be so near the mighty Prince, and yet I did my best to take the lions away.”

“I am pleased to hear you make that frank admission. Tasha has but just left me, and she suggested that what took place had been arranged beforehand that you might convey to the Prince some scheme of his pretended friends.”

“The lady Tasha has told you this?”

“Yes; she has told me a strange story of what has passed between you and herself; so strange that I am unable to believe it. That her own admissions are true, I know, but when she attempted to throw the full responsibility on you I began to doubt her, and called you hither that I might hear what you would say.”

“And will you recall the lady Tasha that I may hear her charge?”

“No! That were not well; but I would have you tell me all that has passed between you, then I shall be able to judge concerning you both.”

Maphir drew himself to his full height and answered:

“In her absence, lady, I have nothing to say. She has always been my friend, and unless I hear her deny it, she is the same now.”

“She denounces you as a traitor to the State and myself.” “Let me hear her make the accusation, then I will answer her.”

“No! You shall speak in her absence as she has spoken in yours, or pay the penalty we award to slaves who are slanderous and unfaithful.”

“How can I speak, lady, when I have nothing to say?”

“So you refuse - you defy me! Well, be prepared to take the consequences of your stubbornness. Machaon is in waiting to exact the penalty. If you wish to be silent you shall be - perhaps more so than you wish.”

She touched the gong.

Zosine answered the summons, and the irate Queen commanded her to call Machaon.

His reply was prompt, but his astonishment was great when he found no one but the hunter with the Queen. The situation was still more

incomprehensible to him when he observed the quiet composure of the one and the excitement of the other.

“Seize that slave,” cried Lais, as soon as she saw the doctor.

Machaon paused in doubt. It was a dangerous task to undertake if Maphir objected.

“Shall I not call the guard?” he suggested.

“Yes! I had forgotten that. Raise an alarm at once.”

“There is no need for that, lady. If you will give your command I am ready to obey.”

“I will see to that,” she replied, as the second officer of the guard and his men entered the apartment. “I will teach you the cost of defiance, and make you understand the reward of conspiracy.”

“Conspiracy!” cried the officer.

“Yes! I have discovered the perpetrator of the crime which has robbed Sahama of its Queen, and when I would deal leniently with him if he would but tell of his associates he dared to laugh at and defy me.”

“Shall we carry him away, O mighty Queen?”

“No, not for the present; through him I will teach a useful lesson to all who have been with him in this foul murder. He chooses not to speak, and he shall have his wish. I will help him to keep his resolution. Machaon, have you your knife?”

“It is at hand, O Queen.”

“Then bring it hither.” She had completely recovered herself by this time. The entrance of the guard and the sound of voices had attracted the ladies in attendance, and Lais was about to exercise her first prerogative - it was congenial, too, because it was one calculated to impress all who were halting between two opinions, and she rose to the occasion with a full sense of her royal authority.

The doctor returned with his knife.

“Now hear me, all who at some time may be tempted to prove unfaithful to the confidence reposed in you. In all this palace no son of Velia has received more kindness and consideration at the hands of the great Glarces and his murdered sister than this slave, whose heart, by the wise decree of the gods I have discovered to be more black than his sullen face. For the crime of murder he will answer to the tribunal of the land. It shall always be my best endeavour to uphold the traditions of the people over

whom the gods have placed me, therefore for this, his chief offence, I will leave him to your wise decrees. But it has been so ordained of them of olden time that any slave found guilty of defiance to the Queen-mother shall be liable to the forfeiture of his tongue. This same offence has he been guilty of, and I command that Machaon shall so mutilate him.”

A shudder passed round the room at the awful sentence, but Maphir stood calm and stoical, not attempting to reply. “Is that your will, O Queen?” asked the doctor.

“Let it be done at once,” she answered.

“I will instantly lay the tongue before you,” said Machaon, as he signed to the guard to remove the hunter. “Stay!” commanded the Queen. “Let it be done here.” “May the Queen forgive me, but I must have fire and irons at hand that I may staunch the blood.”

“Let the tiger skin from off his shoulders drink it up; or if he swallow it and die that perhaps were better.

She took her seat, and at her signal Maphir was seized, thrown down, bound and prepared for the ghastly operation. “Have you any word to say - will you not sue for mercy?” asked Machaon, as he drew his knife in readiness for its work. “How can I ask for mercy when I have done no wrong? The Queen says Tasha has accused me. Let her be brought - “

“Silence!” commanded the Queen. “Do my bidding, Machaon; I am Queen, and will be obeyed.”

“May the gods help you,” murmured the doctor. “Open your mouth.”

Maphir swallowed something, but made no further attempt to speak. Then opening his mouth, the tongue was already in Machaon's grasp when Teresh hastily entered the room.

“Hold!” he cried. “What crime is this with which you would stain your souls?”

“No crime,” replied the Queen imperiously. “We are dispensing justice in accordance with the traditions of Sahama. Proceed, Machaon.”

“Again I say - Hold!” interposed Teresh, as Machaon turned to the hunter. “This is not justice. Unbind the - !”

“Am I not Queen?” enquired Lais.

“True, most favoured of the gods,” replied Teresh, with a most humble obeisance, “but when this State was founded, by a wise decree it was provided that a Queen-mother should sit upon its throne who should

direct affairs with the assistance and consent of her counsellors. No Queen has power beyond the traditions of the nation. For the punishment of all crime in Velia I am responsible. What is this offence?"

"Have I not authority to avenge myself of the insult of a slave?"

"Full power, O most mighty Queen; but this man is not a slave. He holds his full and free discharge. For this reason I have dared to intrude upon your august presence, desiring to prevent an accident which would fan the smouldering fire of the people's doubt into a flame."

He worded his caution as delicately as possible, but Lais understood it. Again her purpose had been successfully baffled. In both the counts her guilty conscience had brought against her that morning she had miserably failed, and that of Maphir had been more disastrous than with Zillah, because she had incautiously placed herself in his power whenever he made his appeal to Tasha.

"If he is free, then let him leave the State at once, and I will pardon him."

"Will you consent to the Queen's condition?" he asked of Maphir.

"I cannot leave without the consent of the mighty Glarces," he responded.

"You shall have that formality discharged to-day," the Queen assured him, being too willing to escape an enquiry even to maintain a show of resentment. Safety was her one desire; all minor trivialities could be rectified afterwards, and in the extremity where she found herself at the moment any retreat was welcome.

So the affair ended in confused uncertainty. Each looked at the other, but no one seemed able to do anything. The Queen was perhaps more ill at ease than others; Machaon was mystified; the guard uncertain what to do; Maphir readjusted his tiger skin and waited; only Teresh appeared to know what had happened. He imagined he had found an end to the tangle, and was satisfied.

Presently the awkwardness of the situation compelled a separation, and all was over.

CHAPTER XXXVII

LIGHT RENDS THE GLOOM

Petronius attended the Prince to the door of his own apartments, at which he stationed two members of the guard, but allowed his illustrious ward to enter and be free within such limits.

Glarcus was not the same man as when he went forth; every circumstance of the morning had helped to change him - to bring him back towards himself. His energies and faculties were awaking, the clouds which for so long had hung over his senses were rent, and for the first time since the fatal night he appeared cognisant of all that was passing. He was beginning to feel the true weight of his bereavement, though not yet able to understand and really grasp its attendant circumstances. That momentary vision at the pyre - so startling in its revelation beyond all anticipation, beyond all the knowledge of their teachers and wise men - had reduced the chaos of his mind to order, and in the heaven of his black night of despair had set a star of hope by which he could shape his course to some far distant haven of refuge. As yet he knew no more than this; the music of the unexpected hope had continued to fill his soul, and he was not anxious to disturb it, but yielding to its influence was borne back to a position of mind from which he could recognise his true surroundings and appreciate the difficulties with which he must needs contend.

As he threw off his himation he wondered at the absence of Orasus - the thought of his slave had never suggested itself to him before - but seeing the preparation for his morning meal, concluded he was thus engaged, and took his seat. It did not occur to him that this was no duty of his trusty servant, but when a stranger entered to make ready the table, he looked up with surprise, and asked:

“Where is Orasus this morning?”

“His service has been changed by order of the Queen, O Prince.”

“By order of the Queen! That is strange! “Then recalling the change he had forgotten for the moment, he corrected himself: “Oh, yes! Lais! But I shall want him now - will you tell him?”

“I will tell the captain of the guard.”

“What have I to do with the guard? Tell Orasus I will see him.”

“By the great Queen's command, O Prince, I can only carry your message to the guard.”

“Ah, yes. I had forgotten. It must be so! But would you tell Petronius I would speak with him?”

The man bowed and left the room. A moment later the captain entered.

“My good Petronius, come and tell me what has happened, and what has yet to be, for I am as one just waking from a sleep, and know little - except the memory of an awful dream.”

“I can say nothing,” answered the soldier, coldly, without any attempt to return the Prince's recognition.

“Have I also lost your friendship in my trouble?”

“The Queen's commands must be obeyed,” was the curt and only reply.

“Then will you carry my respectful homage to the Queen and ask that I may see her?”

“I will do so at once, O Prince.”

The officer saluted and retired, and Glarces was left to reflect upon the position in which, for the first time, he found himself.

“A prisoner in my own rooms. That is what it all means. A prisoner awaiting punishment. Well, if my sentence is as I deserve all will soon be over, and I shall be on my way towards the reunion to which she called me. But will Sahama have no revenge to take of me? Will the people be content to suffer this loss of all their hopes - this ruin of the happiness Vedrona would have brought them - and allow me to escape my punishment? And yet their bearing toward me seemed to say so just now! Do they know better than myself the circumstances of the night through which I have passed? Have they been witnesses of the horrible dream of which I have lost so many details, and of the things I do remember know not which is true or false? What is this fear - this dread I have of Lais? Do the people share it, and think that she has in some way wrought this trouble, therefore they pity me! No, no! This is unworthy of me! And, yet, I was with her at the last, if I could but recall it! When I was speaking at the pyre it all passed before me, and I could see - could understand everything! But it has gone now! I can remember nothing - yes, I was with her! We were watching the dancers. She asked me to pledge her in a cup in which she mixed a draught to overcome fatigue. I remember that, but no more! I fell asleep, and all the rest is a dream! But I killed Vedrona! Did I? How do I know? Who told me? Why - Lais said so in my dream! But I would not have it so! It was she - not I! Yes, I remember now! That was part of the vision at the pyre. I did it, but she compelled me. The draught she induced me to drink gave me over to the furies that she might kill Vedrona and my mother! And I have lent myself to serve her purpose - have murdered love and fallen victim to her wiles! O, woe is me! Woe is me!”

In the unsatisfactory train of such vague uncertainties he lost himself, and wandered without a thought of the message he had sent to the Queen. In fact his reflection rather led him away from the desire to see her for

the present. His frame of mind was not that to solicit confidences from Lais or repose his own in her. Her conduct toward him at the rites, so far as he had noticed it, was capable of bearing a construction either for or against him, and he was altogether without a definite suggestion to guide him. If only he could reach Teresh! He would know what had taken place; how the Queen had been, and the mind of the people concerning everything. How could he reach his friend? Then the reticence of Petronius occurred to him. Perhaps Teresh would also be estranged. If so, that would be evidence that he was held to be guilty, and the people had deserted him. But their conduct towards him at the pyre did not confirm the thought. And in these doubts he became more and more hopelessly entangled, until a voice well known, but hitherto crowded from his thoughts, aroused him.

“Glarces!”

It was musical in its nervous apprehension, strong and resonant in its affection, and strangely sympathetic with his need, therefore it reached him. It was a sweeter voice than that of Teresh - there was no mistaking it. If forgotten she had not forgot. Its whisper of his name smote the gloom which encompassed him, and let the welcome sunshine through. He started with the welcome beaming from his face.

“Ah, my mother, the gods are good to send you here.” Such a greeting left no doubt as to the condition of his mind to Tasha. The caution of Lais vanished, and in a moment they were folded in each other's arms.

Hush! The occasion and circumstances of their reunion called for silence. It was granted because neither heaven nor earth has present power to speak at such a time. Only in the solemn hush of love can hearts breathe the deep utterances they needs must speak.

When she raised her head from his convulsive breast they were both strengthened.

“It was not the gods, my boy, but Lais who bade me come.”

“Then the gods had heard my prayer and moved her to answer it.”

“Why? Did you want to see me?”

A flutter of joy and pride took possession of her humble heart at the thought that she was so much to him as to be needed in such trouble.

“Yes - I did need you; more than I knew until this moment, but - don't be hurt, dear - the thought of you had never crossed my mind. I had thought of - and wished to see - others; but the one who could comfort most had

been forgotten. The gods knew best, and pitied me most when they sent you. But did you say Lais bid you come?"

"Yes, dear; she could not come herself, so she called for me."

"And you were glad to come, I know."

"Ah, my boy, you do not know how glad!"

"Yes, dear, I do. I can tell your feelings by my own. But, tell me, is Lais so distressed?"

"She is simply broken-hearted." "Is it from grief or fear?"

"Glarcés, my boy, what do you mean?"

"Forgive me if my enquiries pain you. But I would ask you to remember that I know nothing. I have but now awakened from a dream in the unconsciousness of which I know only too well what a deadly deed I have worked. How I know it I cannot say - and yet I do know it. I also have a memory that once, when half awake, Lais came to me and I accused her of being the cause of what I did; but I fell asleep again, and knew no more until I woke again this morning."

With the weariness of his endeavour to remember he dropped back again into the almost continuous attitude of his affliction - head buried in his arms and cushions - and she began to comfort him with true maternal solicitude.

"I am glad you have told me this, because I can understand you now, and will tell you everything. You must not think ill of Lais in this misfortune. I have done so, and everyone appears to do so-"

"Do they?"

"Yes, I believe so; but they do her an injustice." "Has she not planned all this?"

"No, my boy - a thousand times, no!"

"Then, Tasha," and he looked up with a wild, agonised look upon his face - "do you think I - I killed her myself?" "No! No! Glarcés, it was not that."

"Then what was it?"

"I don't know!" she cried distractedly. "That is a mystery we cannot fathom yet. But I am sure it was not Lais." "Yet you say everyone thinks so."

"No! Not that - not that! Everyone seems to be suspicious, that is all."

“What are they suspicious of?”

“I don't know. Everybody is afraid to speak.” “Why?”

“They are afraid.” “Of what?”

“I don't know - Lais, I think.”

“Have you not spoken to Teresh about it?”

“No. Everybody avoids everybody. No one seems to be able to trust even their dearest friend.”

“And still you have confidence in Lais?”

“I had not, until she sent for me, and I have seen her grief - heard all she said, and know how bitterly I have wronged her.”

“So have I wronged her, Tasha! So has she wronged me, and is doing the same to you in an attempt to clear her guilty soul of what she has done. If I had not been so blind - had I but listened to Vedrona, she and my mother had been living now, and this vile cockatrice had been defeated in her dark designs.”

“Hush, dear! It is not like my boy to speak so harshly.” “No! The greatest regret I now have is that I have been so long a boy - have so long permitted myself to have a boy's confidence until it has claimed so great a penalty. Now that it is, in the greatest sense, too late, I begin to see and understand the duty of a man, and I will discharge it, Tasha, to its utmost limit. It has been costly work to tear the mask from this vampire's face, but I have been made to pay the price, and by all the gods we worship, Vedrona and my mother shall be avenged.”

“Yes, dear, and I will give my life to help you,” Tasha answered him, for in his declamation he had grown so vehement as to recall the caution of his aberration, at which she grew nervous in spite of her affection.

“I know you will. Ah, that she had only been half as true as you are. Now, hear me, Tasha; I must see Teresh. When you leave me send him here. He will know what is going on, and we can take counsel together.”

“He will be able to help you a thousand times better than I, but you must not see him now. You must rest and recover yourself first.”

“There is no recovery but by avenging the wrong from which I receive all this trouble.

“I know it, but you must overcome the effects of the blow, dear, before you are in a position to do anything. I want to say so much to you about-”

“So do I, Tasha. But see, this hand has driven her away - robbed her of life; has put between us an awful division neither she nor I can pass. She may, by the favour of the gods, perhaps be able to look back and see what I am doing, and I must let her know that I am not content to leave her wrong unpunished.”

“She knows that already.”

“Yes, the love she has for me-” then he most sadly corrected himself - “or the love she did have for me before I slew it, will tell her so; but she must see my bitter penitence in my immediate effort to avenge her. I cannot let her look back and see me resting before I have done anything. I must work! So now, as you love me, go and bring Teresh to me.”

“Do you ask me to leave you so soon after an absence of three days - and such awful days - when I have so much to say?”

“Yes, my mother! Everything must now stand aside until Vedrona is avenged.”

“Then I shall lose you, too.”

“That loss is not worthy to be mentioned in the presence of Vedrona's. Then must my mother's death be forgotten also?”

“No! Nor do I ask you to forget them. Recover yourself, then I will help you with my life, if need be.”

“I wish to recover myself at once. Bring Teresh here, and I shall soon be well.”

“I cannot - you must not see him yet.”

“What prevents you?” he enquired, with the fixed determined gaze she knew it was fruitless to trifle with.

“Because it would not be well for you.” “Why not?”

He had come to an end of argument, having divined that she was actuated by a motive she was unwilling to acknowledge.

“He is sleeping now. His duties of last night kept him from his bed.”

“What has that to do with its not being well for me to see him? He would gladly wake a thousand times to serve me. That is not the reason, Tasha. Neither has he forsaken me.”

“You were assured of that, my boy, this morning.”

“Yes, if that had been necessary. But why may I not see him?”

Should she venture to tell him? Her doubt did not arise from her present distrust of Lais, but rather from the effect any reference to her appeared to produce upon him. If his thoughts were drawn away he remained calm and reasonable, but the slightest allusion to the one he now naturally loved the best at once disturbed him by exciting the rancour of his overbalanced mind. It was only this thought - so skilfully and warily engrafted - that restrained her, since, as we well know, Lais held no comparison with Glarces in her affection. But the one had so deftly represented and interpreted appearances, and poor Tasha was artless and unsuspecting, therefore love was victimised and led to play the traitor.

“Why may I not see him, Tasha?” he again enquired. “What mystery prevents you speaking?”

“Nothing but the love I bear you. You can see him tomorrow, dear; but to-day I want you for myself alone.” “Teresh will not disturb us. You shall stay to nurse me, but he shall be the physician to advise; and with two such ministers I shall soon be well.”

“Am I not enough, dear?”

“Yes, for myself; but Vedrona would have Teresh called if I desired it. Shall we not think of her to-day?”

“We will think of her - I wish to speak of her. I wonder where she is and what she is doing now?”

“If she knows and is doing anything it is grieving that she is away and my mother refuses to allow me to see Teresh.”

“Is he more to you than I am?”

“Not more, but he is equally necessary just now. Why may I not see him. Why will she not come to see me?”

“She? Who?”

“Lais!”

“She wishes to come, but she fears you would not see her.” “It is false! I sent for her at once on my return home and she has not answered me.”

“You sent for Lais?”

“I did.”

“Then she does not know it, or else refrained from coming because her grief was so uncontrollable. Perhaps that is why she bade me come.”

“Oh, Tasha, how long can she deceive you? Send to her now. Say I would see Teresh and see if she will send him.”

“No, I cannot.”

“Why?”

“She would not let him come.”

“I thought so. And still you trust her. Her safety lies in keeping us apart, but she can blind you by her sophistries, and even make your love for me contribute to her own success. Oh, my mother, help me - help me in my extremity. Be my one friend, and in spite of all she says - careless of what she threatens - carry my wish to Teresh to see him at once, and we will deal with this outcast from Inferna, and save Sahama from her future mischief.”

She had again become visibly afraid of his excitement. It was doubtful to the weeping woman whether she or Lais stood first in his affection, but willing to think it was the latter, the next step in his aberration would be to turn upon herself, and the thought of consequences made her anxious to divert his thoughts.

“Would Vedrona so counsel you?” she asked.

The mention of the beloved name acted as a charm upon him.

“What would I not give for the power to ask it?” he replied. “And yet after the experience I had this morning, I have a deep-seated and growing hope that if you fail me - and I have none but you to trust in now - the love that still exists, the love that cannot be destroyed between us, will find a way by which justice shall be satisfied, and Lais shall bear her share of the penalty of the crime. The revelation of her plan is beginning to break upon me. It is coming to me even while I speak! Someone is near me - unseen, but not unfelt; silent, yet speaking in a voice I can hear and understand - bidding me to hope, filling me with assurance that all will yet be well. I shall not escape, but I shall not be foresaken! Sin must be punished, but in the punishment I shall not be left alone! Even from Pluto's kingdom there is an escape for repentant souls when their penalty is paid, and the hand of love will carry the torch of hope to light me on my way. I see it, Tasha, and am satisfied. It neither depends on Teresh nor yourself! No power on earth or in Hades is able to frustrate the law of the gods, and they have decreed it. There is a presence with me speaking with a wisdom greater than that of Chryses or of Meshrac; it has a voice more definite than the oracle, and sweeter than that of Rhea - Love is greater than death; it is unconquerable and inextinguishable. Vedrona is more

and nearer to me now than ever. Yon smouldering pyre and the Car of Phœbus have no power to divide us! Henceforth where I am she must be; and where in yonder Elysian fields she shall find her home, she will also bring me by and by. No life, nor death, nor jealousy, nor hell has power to come between such love as ours.”

This new phase of his delirium was even more bewildering and terrifying to Tasha than the wild excitement. It was a repetition of the ecstasy witnessed at the pyre, but more pronounced. In the transformation it worked his face appeared to shine with a transparent softness, and filled the room with magnetic expectancy. Tasha feared, not so much for him as for herself, since the idea of an invisible and supernatural presence - apart from and beyond all acknowledged recognition and conception - had taken firm possession of her mind, and she trembled to think of the consequences.

“Poor Glarces - my poor boy!” she murmured.

“There is no need to pity me, my mother ; rather may we rejoice. Heaven is more generous than earth to suffering mortals, and the eternal gods are stronger than the prejudices of men! I am awake now! The morning of an unimagined revelation has broken upon me, and the affliction of my dream is over. Vedrona is safe beyond the reach of Lais! Death has not touched our love, and she will lead me, from above the clouds and shadows, to be with her where she is! She shall be now the minister and steward of the gods to guide me to a fairer Ambrosia than we have yet conceived. She is not lost! See! see! “ he cried, starting from his seat towards a corner of the room which lay in comparative shadow. “She is not gone, Tasha! She is not gone!”

Tasha turned under the impulse of his vehemence, and started to behold - Vedrona.

There was no room to doubt the vision: it was the same, yet not the same beloved one; in the world, still not of the world - the one stupendous miracle of heaven of which earth yet stands in incredible awe, hungering yet fearing to believe. She was not attired in the robes with which she vanished in the flames of the pyre, but in soft and flowing garments, white - blushing with alternate suggestion of pink and blue, with a supernatural haze surrounding her like a saintly aureole!

The two beholders gazed in mute astonishment across that narrow space which lay between themselves and the object of their love! So near, and yet so far beyond the mortal, in the region of eternal peace, she stood. The form, the features still the same, but the sweetness of her smile and

expression far more divine than even Glarces had been able to express in the olden days. Her lips were silent, but from her eloquent eyes her brother read the continuation of the message of hope which reached him before the vision broke, until, as the time had come, with one supreme endeavour she extended her inviting arms, and uttering the one word, "Come," she faded away.

Tasha and Glarces fell into each other's arms and wept the joy they could not speak.

"Yes, my life, and now immortal love," he responded, as soon as he could find voice; "I will come, and we will meet again. Till then - Peace! I shall be able to suffer now if need be."

CHAPTER XXXVIII

GLARCES AND LAIS

As Tasha left the Prince she found a messenger waiting to conduct her to the Queen. Lais could not afford to run the risk of accidents just now. The incidents of Zillah and Maphir were sufficiently disquieting, and if by any means Tasha slipped through her fingers, all would be lost. Nothing then would remain but to submit to the fates that had lured her on to betray and forsake her at the last. Lais was not the woman to accept such an alternative readily, especially so long as the trump card remained in hand.

Tasha had no wish to evade the interview, but if the opportunity occurred, she might have deferred it while she sought the advice of Teresh. She appreciated the difficult and delicate position in which she stood, and, knowing also the haughty spirit of the Queen, was afraid lest she might prejudice the cause of Glarces by some inadvertence in her honest endeavour to assist him.

She was ignorant of the fact that Lais had already foreseen this selfsame difficulty, and had most minutely studied it with a view of finding some means of turning it to personal advantage. Hence the messenger awaiting her, and the nervous anxiety with which she was received.

"How is he, Tasha - how is he? Tell me that, in this demon's power, he hates, curses, and wishes to destroy me! This is my only hope. For if he loathes me now in his madness, when he recovers he will love me, and I shall be his little sister once again."

"Would you really have him hate you so?"

“In this condition of his mind I would. Whom now he hates most bitterly, he presently will love the best, and if he loves me not when he recovers I had better die!”

“If such is your wish I think the gods have granted it. He has not exactly cursed you, but when he hears your name it so enrages him as to make me fear.”

“I thank the gods for that. It is the first grain of comfort I have found in all my sad affliction.”

“Is it? And I was fearful to tell you because I thought of the pain it would cause.”

“You are always so thoughtful of that, my dear mother. If you make a mistake it is always against yourself. Now what can we do to comfort him? Did he hint at anything he desires?”

“Nothing - except to see Teresh.” “Did he ask to see him?”

“Yes, he scarcely spoke of anything besides.” “Did you promise to send him?”

“No, but I promised to tell you.”

“I will send him at once. Will you touch the chime - and yet, no! Perhaps it will be better to wait till morning.” “I think it would.”

Tasha thought of the vision, and though something prevented her speaking of it to Lais, she felt confident Glarces would prefer to be left alone with the consolation it afforded him.

“It shall be so, but let me again remind you how advisable it is to keep your own counsel. We know not yet who are our friends or foes. The wildest rumours are passing round, and it is best at present to see no one. By the morning I shall know something; then I will send for Teresh, let him see Glarces, and take what instructions he has to give. So will I end this suspicion, and restore quiet once more. Now you may leave me. I am tired, and will at once seek my rest.”

“May your sleep be deep and your dreams sweet Peace.” “Peace, Tasha. It has been a weary day. I am glad it is over.”

Once more alone the disguise of weariness was flung aside, and Lais was full of energy and resolution.

“He would destroy me and see Teresh. It is well for me to know this - instructive and full of suggestion. I thought I knew the way to reach his

confidences. I will give him yet another - a final chance to save himself, and after that - well, perhaps the gods know, but I am not yet certain.”

Glarcés was in a half-sitting posture on the edge of a table from which he had taken the large amethyst Vedrona had given him. He had worn it upon his breast in the morning, and in the memory of his vision had taken it into his open palm, turning it over and over, recalling its beautiful legend. He was thus occupied when the Queen entered, unattended.

“What brings you here?” he asked quietly, without changing his position. “Leave me; I prefer to be alone.” “It is for me to command,” she replied, “if any such course be necessary. But why should this be so when you and I are all that is left to each other?”

She had not yet distracted his attention from the stone, from which he cursorily glanced towards her as he enquired, “Is not my trouble heavy enough in the loss of the murdered without becoming sport for their murderess?”

“Their murderess?” she gasped.

“I said so. If your soul is so black that this fiendish fact has not yet revealed itself, it is another reason for your retirement to give it a chance; but if - as I know to be the truth - you seek still further to impose upon my confidence, I caution you to beware. The restraint I once had upon myself you have destroyed, and now I only live for her to be avenged. Mind how far you provoke me.”

“Glarcés, my poor brother, what do you mean? Is it possible that Machaon is right in his suggestion, and that you are really possessed?”

“Yes, he is right - I am possessed with the determination to avenge so foul a crime. Therefore, I caution you. Leave me!”

“No, no! If there is any danger in being near you, I am willing to brave it. I have already left you too long alone, and love you too much to go away again.”

He replaced the stone and moved aside to avoid the embrace with which she attempted to throw herself upon him. “You love!” he reiterated with scornful incredulity.

“Ye gods, are you deaf or impotent to prevent the blasphemy of such a word being taken on the lips of hell? Lais loves! Surely the astounding lie has struck the furies dumb, or they would laugh at the audacity. Lais loves! Hear it, ye immortal scribes, and write the miracle on the Car of

Pheobus - in the blackest vale of hell is found the capstone of Elysian purity! Lais loves! Beside this the poet's dream and the philosopher's ideal sink into insignificance. Now shall the ice give birth to heat, from the womb of darkness brighter prisms than the sun shall spring, winter and summer shall nestle in each other's bosom, and wreaths of perfumed flowers shall deck the brow of frost; henceforth shall calm and storm be one, peace and strife go hand in hand, Pluto and Jove are bosom friends, and all the damned are gods, since Lais loves! "Then, as if some bewildering thought had suddenly risen to his mind, he drew his hand across his eyes, and continued - "But what shall take the place of the gods' omnipotence in this great transformation, for though it were yoked with all the lust and sensuality of hell, that power would be unequal to the task of producing such a passion as would gratify her bestial mind. Ye gods, what have ye done that Lais is able to love and oblivion not be borne?"

The declamation derived its greatest force from the calmness of its pronouncement. Her guilty soul was laid bare to the weighty lash of injured innocence, and she was powerless to escape the torture he measured with such patient deliberation. Only when he ceased did she in any way recover herself.

"My brother's malady appears to have developed the sense of flattery."

"I would I had but power to do you justice. If truth could only find a full expression there would be no room for flattery."

"It is not like Glarces to be at a loss for words; but there, my brother, is the proof of your affliction, and understanding this I will bear with you, and be generous."

"Generosity is only justice to one who is possessed. What is it you desire to say?"

"What can I wish to say but that these thoughts which trouble you are nothing but the creation of your own malady. I understand them, Glarces, and know that presently you will recover, and wish me to take the place of her-"

"Stand back, and keep her name or reference to her from your vile lips. To you, at least, she is dead! If you love yourself, let her name also be forgotten."

"I will do so until you bid me speak of her. But I cannot forget that I have always been your little sister-" "She is dead, too."

"No, Glarces, that I will not allow. Rather can I now see why the gods brought me here-"

“To murder Vedrona, and take her throne?”

“Yes, if you think so in your delirium. I will not anger you with contradictions, but rather bear with your suspicion until you recover; till then I will not leave you, but I claim my right to fill the vacant place, and nurse you back to health again.”

“To fill what?”

“Nothing, dear. You are not well enough to argue now.”

“Argument is alike useless and undesirable. Remember that I know you now - I see you without your mask, and caution you to be careful.”

“Of what, my brother?”

“How you attempt to delude yourself by trifling more with me and my affairs. Again I tell you that my eyes are opened, and the mask of your treacherous hypocrisy is torn away. Now that I have felt your sting I recognise that I have cherished and protected a viper in a woman's shape, a lustful fury under the guise of a sister, an insatiate wanton, who would not hesitate to ravish heaven in an attempt to glut her fiendish passion. I know you, I say, and so I caution you. Have gods or demons ever yet beheld your equal? Was ever aught in human form so dead to shame as you are now? My mother's corpse is not yet ready for its burial, my sister's pyre has not yet ceased to smoke, but you are here impatient to desecrate their love - proposing to take her place who yet is bride and queen of my heart, and love, and life! You have slain her body, and yet are not content, but would cross the rubicon of death, and rob her fair spirit of the only treasure Charon has no power to take away - you would send her into the bowers of the immortals stripped of the love the gods have given her. Do I make it clear how well I understand your base insinuation - how fruitless it is for you to hope for more success? I am not the Glarces of the days gone by; then I was mad - the victim of an all-too-confiding dream; but now I am awake! I thank the gods that the love which binds Vedrona and myself together bears the impress and seal of the immortals. It was not our own, nor the product of the earth. It may have been disturbed and shaken for the moment by the temptation I have suffered, but it is not broken. It binds us yet, and when the penalty of my sin is paid, it will bring us together again. Death has no power to touch it; my dagger could never sever it; yon pyre will not destroy it; nothing exists by which we can be separated. All that your scheme has accomplished is to remove her beyond the reach of your further molestation - she is safe! - and place an impassable gulf between your sensuous hopes and myself. Nothing more. You have taken the throne, but the one object of your

ambition has vanished - even what you had of me is lost, and henceforth we can only be associated in the retribution we must bear. Even in this we shall be divided, for you will be a Queen, finding your punishment upon a conscience-haunted, disappointed throne; I shall be your prisoner - you see I can now anticipate your designs - but mine will be the happier fate, for wherever you may send me - whatever you may devise - she will be with me. Neither your jealousy, nor hatred, nor possession of the throne has power to keep us apart. We are linked together, come what may; but you are left alone.”

In this deliverance - born of the inspiration of his recent vision - he quite recovered his old composure of mind. He was now able to suffer and endure because the coveted ideal took a more tangible and definite shape - Vedrona had gone before - had reached the goal, where she awaited his arrival, and the prospect of the interval between the now and then was radiated by the light of the revelation.

Lais listened to him with assumed indifference - amused contempt. But beneath the transparent disguise she was furious - in despair! The worst had happened and, when he spoke of a disappointed throne he gave expression to a conclusion at which she had just arrived. Full of the suggestion she had gained from Tasha, she had come to dictate terms and demand submission, but the result was only the culmination of the defeat presaged in the case of Zillah and Maphir. Further parley with him was now out of the question. Experience told her that she was no equal to him in his present state of mind. It would be necessary to devise some new expedient of reducing him to reason, and with that determination she proceeded to close the interview.

“When you choose to roam in the fields of idealistic romance rather than speak reasonably it is well to leave you. You had better enjoy your poetic dreams till the morning, when I shall perhaps be able to rouse you into a world of reality.”

“Yes, leave me; but I shall not dream alone. But if the dream should last, and I should wake with her - Farewell and Peace - that is if the gods can grant you such a favour.”

“If the gods will grant me such a favour as your absence I shall be satisfied.”

With that she left him.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE PRINCE DISAPPEARS

It was late, but the events of the last few days had completely disorganised the social system of Velia, and in the neighbourhood of the Baths and Gymnasium a crowd of restless, dissatisfied people still lingered, discussing the one engrossing subject, refusing to separate until some feasible scheme of action had been devised. They had lost the Queen and Vedrona, but they were determined to know how, by whom, and why. That Glarces was guilty they would not believe, but that he had fallen a victim to some inhuman conspiracy they were equally assured. As to the moving spirit in this act of treachery, they had no information, but, failing knowledge, they held a fairly vigorous suspicion, and a determination to see the mystery solved was hourly strengthening in the public mind. The intimations which had fallen from Glarces in the morning had encouraged confidence, and while the Queen had been too busily engaged with the affairs of the palace to take cognisance of, or interest in, matters outside, men and women had ventured to discuss opinions with their intimates, and circles had gradually widened until the whole city had practically congregated to command justice on behalf of the Prince and themselves.

It was after midnight, and the Queen, while waiting for Casca to answer her summons, stepped from her room to the porch of the palace to enjoy the cool night air. The murmur from the city and the lights at once attracted her attention. She had no need to question as to the meaning, but the thought was unpleasant - disquieting. Well might she assure Tasha of her inability to tell who were friends or foes, when it was possible for such a movement to arise and she not be apprised of its origin and progress.

At this moment Casca presented himself.

“What is the meaning of this commotion?” enquired the Queen.

“The people are finishing up the interrupted revels, most mighty Queen.”

“Have a care, my lord. I am in no mood for drollery or treachery - especially from you. Call Petronius.”

The captain was happily near at hand.

“What strange noise is this I hear from the city, my good Petronius?” she asked.

“Some one has roused them into discontent, O Queen, in an attempt to defend the Prince.”

“Against whom?”

“That I cannot learn.”

“But why was not their wish reported to me? In this you have been negligent, my trusty Casca. I am as anxious as themselves to have the Prince cleared of these unworthy rumours with which suspicion has accused him. The enquiry shall be held at once upon the morrow. Go, summon the Council to meet upon the second watch, and let the public be admitted. Bid them hide nothing - fear nothing! Let all who can give evidence be patiently heard, for I would have my brother's innocence established as I would have my own. Will this be enough to still this outrage on the night?” she asked of the officer.

“If the Queen will also command that the proclamation shall be made at once from the Baths,” he answered.

“Your advice is excellent. Let it be done forthwith. And after that Casca will return to learn my wishes in the matter.”

It was as the captain thought, the announcement at once satisfied the people, who retired in order to prepare for the enquiry which had been so hurriedly and unexpectedly commanded.

The great hall of the palace, in which the Queen had directed the court to be held, was already full, and eager crowds of disappointed citizens thronged the peristyle, atrium, and porch. Others found what gratification was obtainable in grouping themselves in the gardens to discuss this unforeseen concession by the Queen in the light of their previous suspicion concerning her.

For the moment the situation had assumed a most ludicrous aspect, and every man was trying to escape there-from with what show of dignity was possible. Yesterday an imaginary judicial tug-of-war was initiated between Queen and people, under the auspices of popular opinion. The day had been occupied by the community in securing firm and advantageous positions, and taking such a grip of the rope as would secure victory in a first determined tug. By night all was in satisfactory readiness, and a preliminary tightening of the rope was attempted to test its strength, when - lo! the Queen had not accepted the challenge - had no intention or thought of doing so, but, on the contrary, was at one with the community, the great majority of whom went down in a most grotesque sprawl.

The ceremony of regaining the feet was truly burlesque. But what necessity to describe a scene so familiar? We have all at some time been players in the self-same pantomime, and know the excuses, explanations, and arguments by which we attempted to make it clear that we did not fall with the crowd, but only slipped in company with our friend because we did not wish to desert him altogether in his erroneous position. Of course, we knew from the beginning that he was wrong, and should not have been present at the unfortunate occurrence, only we were interested in getting him away. All this while we are busy brushing the mud from our own attire. It was just the same that morning in Velia; the anticipated contest proved to be abortive, and with one consent the whole city entered into a competition of imaginative prevarication in an attempt to establish the fact that no one among them had ever thought of suspecting the Queen.

In the midst of all these animated assurances, both inside and outside the palace, a rumour presently found its way which put an end to argument, and caused a consternation equal, if not greater, to the announcement of Vedrona's death.

Glarcés was gone.

Where? Ah, that was the mystery!

The discovery had been made much earlier in the morning by the attendant who had taken the place of Orasus.

He had at once called in the guard, who summoned Petronius, and the information was sent to the Queen. The news instantly recalled to her mind the words of the Prince's farewell last night, and she understood them now in a sense she failed to realise then.

Absolute secrecy was commanded until the palace had been searched and the guard who had been on duty most rigorously examined. It was all of no avail. Glarcés had gone - vanished; in no other way was it possible for him to elude the guard.

When the fact was finally and indisputably established, it was pitiful to see the condition of the Queen, who took to herself all the blame and responsibility for this new and crowning catastrophe. Machaon, who had privately interviewed the Prince, had assured her that he was not responsible for his actions. This opinion was shared by Tasha, and her own experience had served to confirm it. The words of his farewell rung in her ears like an accusation from the gods; yet she had allowed him to

escape, and fling the gates of the future open to a thousand possibilities she could neither anticipate nor prepare for.

Presently the Council were in readiness to open the enquiry, and Casca - who was already acquainted with the secret - waited upon the Queen with a request for the Prince's presence.

She answered the summons in person. In her mingled grief and fear she threw aside all restraints of ceremony and formality; nothing but the wildest abandonment could afford her scope and room in the storm of feeling which by this time had broke upon her. If there was anything majestic to be found in her appearance as she burst into the hall, it was the majesty of terror with which she flung herself on her knees before the judges and cried - like an abject criminal suing for mercy

“There is no Prince! He's gone - he's gone!”

Then she dropped speechless, while the hush and pallor of death fell on all around.

Teresh was the first to recover himself.

“What is the meaning of this - do you understand? “ he enquired of the captain.

The officer then stood forth and made a full explanation of the affair so far as he could interpret it, adding that the Council had not been previously informed by the Queen's command, since it was impossible the Prince could have left the palace without observation, and it was anticipated that his hiding-place would be discovered in time to meet the enquiry.

Nothing more could be gathered from Petronius, but Machaon volunteered the information that the condition of the Prince was such as to cause the gravest alarm, and he suggested the advisability of recourse to the oracle as the readiest means of recovering him, since what had transpired was to his mind the work and influence of such agencies as only the gods have power to control.

Meshrac supported this advice. The night through which they had just passed was one singularly propitious to malignant shades with which the mind of Glarces might inadvertently be in peculiar sympathy. He, therefore, suggested an adjournment of the enquiry while the oracle should be consulted, during which time search parties should be sent to cover the whole valley and hills in every direction, if perchance the Prince might be found.

Teresh, having no sympathy with oracles or spirits - malignant or otherwise - nor being inclined to place much confidence in the ability of the mystic brotherhood to elucidate the mystery, turned his thoughts in an entirely different direction to which he attempted to draw the attention of the Council. The altogether unexpected attitude of overwhelming sorrow and despair with which the Queen had appealed for their assistance, however, had so influenced the whole court, as to render everyone susceptible only to first impressions, of which Machaon and Meshrac had seized the advantage against which the, perhaps wiser, counsels of Teresh were of no avail. The excitement into which they had been so suddenly lashed was beyond the control of reason - too violent to submit to direction or advice. It called for action - instant and energetic! If Teresh and his immediate friends were able to collect their thoughts sufficiently to devise any rational mode of procedure, let them do so, but the assembly was in a state of panic, and without any authoritative declaration the enquiry stood adjourned, and the people rushed out, moved with one enthusiastic impulse to find the Prince. Search parties were formed, and every new idea and suggestion eagerly seized upon and adopted, Lais working with most indefatigable energy, and by words of tremulous hope encouraging every new endeavour.

The whole fraternity of magicians were kept in constant consultation - astrologer, soothsayer, necromancer, and diviner, each in his own department worked incessantly. Meshrac, in their extremity, had dared again to approach Rhea, and the great Rab-nag was also most assiduous in her enquiries. A continual stream of oracular pronouncements flowed day and night into the palace, and were eagerly scanned by the members of the Council, which by a system of relays sat in continual session to meet any emergency. Runners and messengers from distant cities and search-parties brought in reports and waited for instructions, but no one bore the tidings for which all hearts were waiting. The days passed wearily by, but the sorrowful Queen received no consolation, save that of the sympathy of her people, which gradually but surely turned towards her. Presently the bands of explorers began to return - every hill, peak, grove, cave, and corner of the valley had been most diligently searched, but Glarces was not found. From the magicians came a final message - not even the gods were able to throw any light upon his disappearance. The inevitable had to be accepted - the broken-hearted Lais, at last, was left alone.

CHAPTER XL

ZHAN SCORES A POINT

Two whole moons had passed, and the third was rapidly waning, since the disappearance of Glarces. So long as he had been with them, and his influence and example were stamped upon everything associated with the life and welfare of the people, they had idolised him; in the misfortune which crushed and robbed him of his reason they sorrowed with him; in their loyalty they were ready to go as far as to be suspicious of their new Queen concerning him; but human nature in its most favourable aspect cannot bear a prolonged tension. Excitement enervates. Interest in the absent soon reduces itself to normal proportions. Complacency speedily knits up a broken heart, and shortly we jest as we plant flowers upon the grave where we thought the joy of life was buried. The strangers we loathed in the loss of a loved one, but a month ago, are now our friends, and presently we shall wonder at our old aversion.

It is strange how easily the idols in the niches of our hearts may be replaced. The tramp of life is ever hastening death into forgetfulness. The love of yesterday easily gives place to the suitor to-day. This is no new decree. It has been, and will continue until we realise the one great fact that there is no death.

It was so in Velia - in Sahama. With the vast majority of the people the memory of Glarces and Vedrona was already nothing more than a pleasant dream. In the sunlight of the reign of Lais, so admirably assisted by the Lady Zillah, they had discovered what golden opportunities had been missed in the past - what possibilities were within the reach of a truly energetic Queen. Unheard-of changes were already taking place. Sahama was no longer to remain unknown. The gates of the valley were to be thrown open. Life was to widen its horizon, and the great treasures of the land were to be displayed before a wondering world. This forward policy had created a new enthusiasm, and the rising fortunes consequent upon the reign of Lais had already overshadowed the simple affection of her predecessor. Now all men began to see that of which the new Queen had primarily been assured - the stars in their courses were fighting for the new order of things. The constellation of Sahama was in the ascendant, and the old life was fast sinking into oblivion.

And yet it is scarcely true to say that 'all men' shared these ideas. There were at least three who remained true in their allegiance to Glarces. To Teresh, Zachra, and Maphir the change and fickleness of public opinion made no difference. In their loyalty and devotion they were still

unchanged. In their hopes to solve the mystery of his fate they still confided.

Lais had not ventured as yet to gratify her desire to rid herself of the two councillors. She was far too cautious to run needless and unnecessary risks, and her success was sufficiently satisfactory to prevent any injury to her cause from their personal influence. Besides, so long as they remained near to her she was able to ascertain their movements if desirable. She had not forgotten their friendship for the Prince, and when the time came would reward it in her own way. Meanwhile an enemy in sight is robbed of half his strength.

As for the two friends they steadily kept one goal in view, and never varied from their first-formed conclusion, that Lais had carried her final point by a ruse which had deceived the whole nation by its dramatic audacity.

Night after night did they keep their secret tryst in the lodgings of the hunter, with whom they compared notes and devised schemes, and though the one proved to be as fruitless as the other, they did not lose courage or dream of giving up the quest. It is true the hope of finding Glarces alive was declining in the two, but Maphir was the better in that respect, and often cheered them on by his confidence in ultimate success.

This loyalty to the cause of the missing Prince had naturally produced a lack of confidence in their former friends, who had chosen to follow the multitude, and the twain gradually drew apart from their fellows in their desire to pursue the one theme which claimed their first attention. In this they had contracted a habit of strolling through the gardens of the palace for purposes of conference, where at first they were subjected to an unknown espionage in the interests of the Queen. But the information which came to hand was so very meagre and the eavesdropping so unproductive of result, that it was presently abandoned, and the friends were allowed to follow their harmless course with impunity. It was at night, however, after the usually early habits of the people had lured them to their slumbers, that the two councillors quietly found their way to the home of the hunter, and pursued their more serious work. Here, where the lions watched and would give alarm against intrusion, they were perfectly safe, and could speak with a freedom no other place afforded.

Maphir, either when exercising the brutes or in his own unattended journeys, had always been accustomed to visit the solitary and uninviting spots of the valley, therefore his systematic exploration of every available nook and cranny in a determination to find the Prince attracted no

attention. Teresh and Zachra heard, watched, thought, and pieced together every possible - ah, and many impossible - scraps of information or suspicions, and these were discussed with Maphir, who on the morrow made surprising journeys upon the most crude chance of gaining some shred of evidence. Teresh would often chide himself for the labour expended in order to satisfy some trivial uncertainty, but the hunter always contended that the key to success would be found in some such slender connection, and he would rather make a thousand useless visits than miss the one that would reward their labours.

Such an investigation had just been prosecuted, with the same unvarying result, and Maphir, who had returned, waited with signs of impatience for the coming of his visitors, having made a discovery at home which seemed to point towards a new trouble.

Fortunately his suspense was not of long duration. Interest is always punctual, and almost before Maphir had time to assure himself of what had occurred Teresh and Zachra were with him.

“Well, Maphir, any news?” enquired the former.

“Not of the Prince, but I have too much of another kind.”

“What is the matter?”

“I have lost Zhan while I have been away.” “Lost Zhan-how?”

“That's what I want to find out. He's gone as mysteriously as the Prince went.”

“When did you miss him?”

“He was here when I went away. He was gone when I came back.”

“Perhaps Casca has made friends with him, and taken him for a foot-stool in place of a slave,” facetiously suggested Zachra.

“He values his skin too much to come anyway near here,” replied Maphir.

“Zhan is playing with you, and hiding in the inner cave.”

“I wish he were; but I went in to find him when he didn't answer me.”

“Were all the fastenings secure?”

“Everything just as I left them.”

“Have they been fighting?”

“No, they would never do that. But even though they had Zhade would be the sufferer. He is as quiet as a sheep, but Zhan has been restless and excitable since yesterday.”

“Are you sure it is Zhan that has gone - for I can never understand how you know one from the other?”

“Perhaps not, but I wonder why you don't. They are as unlike as black and white.”

“I have an idea,” volunteered Zachra, who could always see a vein of humour in a tragedy; “Meshrac has wafted him away by magic to relieve Casca!”

“Pshaw!” answered Maphir, contemptuously. “Meshrac's magic may amuse eunuchs and children, but Zhan would make both he and his magic waff.”

“But where is he? If he has neither been eaten nor stolen, nor magically dissolved, where is he?”

“I believe,” said Teresh, “that he is playing the fox with Maphir. That inner cave is large enough for him to keep out of sight with only one light. Let us all go and search, and I'll warrant you we find him.”

Maphir was too anxious about the result to resist the offer, and each taking a lamp they set out to make assurance doubly sure.

The inner cave was a most commodious chamber, not only being liberally furnished with such bedding and comforts as the animals delighted in, but also abounding in huge rocks which had been dislodged during the mining operations, behind several of which the sagacious cat might easily take such advantage as Teresh suggested.

The three lamps were only sufficient to illuminate the darkness of the retreat, but patiently and cautiously they went to work with a view of driving their quarry into the further corner, where presently they came together face to face with the rock, but no Zhan was found. It was now certain that he was nowhere within the caves.

Where was he?

The councillors looked at each other in mute bewilderment. Zhade had kept one or the other company during the search, and his usual quiet demeanour forbade the thought that there had been anything in the nature of a feud between himself and Zhan, nor was there the slightest indication of it in the appearance of the place.

The mystery grew more serious to Teresh. His vigorous and well-balanced mind had no sympathy with the superstitious and easy-going credulity of his race, but here was a problem too deep for his philosophy and penetration to fathom, and it was set before him in such a limited area as

to keep every feature in view at the same time. The cave was hewn out of the solid rock, walls and roof and floor all parts of the undisturbed mountain; the opening safely guarded by a stout iron trellis work, of which the gate was most securely fastened. Within this enclosure two lions had been left, of which one had disappeared and his mate remained as quiet and complacent as if nothing had happened. The probabilities of the case narrowed the mystery still further. Had Zhan escaped into the grounds he must have been seen since his first destination would no doubt be the palace. This reflection shut up the problem to the cave, and Teresh was confronted by the question - how was it possible for a lion to escape from such surroundings? The enquiry recalled to him the thoughts which passed through his mind when the Queen appeared before the Council with the declaration that the Prince was missing. At that moment a conviction seized him which had never yet been disturbed, that she was simply playing a part in order to cover her final move in a criminal scheme. Here, however, an identical difficulty was presented under such circumstances as to preclude the Queen's connection. In some of its aspects the disappearance of the lion was even more astounding than that of the Prince. Yet here it was, and he had all the ascertainable facts before him almost at the moment of discovery.

“This is a riddle too hard for me to read,” Teresh said after a long reflection. “In a case like this I can understand what a comfort it is to be superstitious. It would be an easy way out of our difficulty to say that Meshrac had destroyed the lion by enchantments, and follow that up by adding - so also he made away with the Prince. And if this, why not with Vedrona and the Queen? It is clear, therefore, that the magicians are at the root of all our trouble, and the gods have permitted me, the Queen's chief councillor, to prove this by the destruction of Zhan. This being so, we have but to punish Meshrac and his friends, and justice will be done.”

“Why not do so?” asked Zachra.

“Because that would be the process of superstition and ignorance. It is swift and easy, but neither reasonable nor just. In such a case as this I would rather err by waiting than by haste. Let us search the cave again. It is possible we may have missed our cue.”

With more minute caution than before they began to retrace their steps, noting every rock and boulder, probing every crevice, and overturning the litter, to discover if there existed any outlet through which Zhan could make his escape.

It was no use. No place was found where an animal half the size of the missing beast could hide, and it was certain Maphir would be called upon to report the loss to Shamer in the morning.

Still, it was not so much the lion as the mystery surrounding it that troubled Teresh. His judicial mind refused to accept the idea that no explanation was possible. Experience had taught him that appearances are only the vesture of facts, and are often used to veil the identity of truth. It is by guarded intimacy with the ‘things that seem’ that we learn the secret of the ‘things that are.’

In reflective consultation with himself Teresh stood in the outer cave reviewing the situation preparatory to a continuance of the quest. Zachra was of opinion that the lion had detected some way of escaping into the grounds, and was busily examining the trellis work in the confidence of success. Maphir, who was more a man of instinct or intuition than philosophical, took his familiar seat with Zhade at his side, hoping thereby to find by his own way a solution to his new-found trouble. Each had grown silently engrossed in his own pursuit, but whatever progress the others made the cistern of inspiration was broken for Maphir, and one of his familiar sources had been cut off. He sighed wearily at the strangeness of his position. His left arm caressed naturally and his fingers mechanically twisted through the mane of Zhade, but his right hungered and ached for the absent Zhan; nor with all the power of his concentration could he persuade himself to be satisfied.

Suddenly an unguarded exclamation escaped him, and he leaped to his feet like a man bereft of his senses. Teresh and Zachra were both alarmed, but all rejoiced, for there, with the old composure and signs of affection, was Zhan, rubbing his great shaggy head against the hunter in his peculiarly familiar welcome.

“Why, Zhan, my beautiful boy, wherever have you been? Where did you come from?” cried Maphir, in a voice broken by emotion, and he fell upon his knees, embracing and kissing the lion as if he had been a brother.

Neither Teresh nor Zachra could speak from astonishment.

“What is this?” asked Maphir an instant later.

“Blood!” His hand was covered from a newly-made wound on the top of the lion's head. “What is this, my beauty - have you been in the wars? But where is your hiding-place, my boy - come, will you show it me?” Then, in the faint light, he caught sight of something attached to the mane - tied to it, and a more astonished exclamation escaped him.

“Come here, Zhan! Inside, my lords, what mystery is this?” and as he disappeared into the inner cave, his fingers were busy untying a shred of cloth from the hair of his pet. Then, holding it up to the light of the lamp, he cried, “By all the spirits of the hunters, it is a piece of the Prince's tunic. I know it in spite of its filthy condition. Zhan, my boy, where have you found him? Come, show us the way.”

“Don't deceive yourself, Maphir. Let us make sure, and proceed with caution.”

“Yes; how are we to know - even though this is part of a tunic of the Prince, that he wore this when he went away?” asked Zachra.

“What I want to know,” replied Maphir, “is, who tied the rag to Zhan's mane - and why ? This is the first enquiry we have to make; the rest will answer itself. To my mind Zhan's absence has solved our trouble, if we are careful how we proceed. One thing is pretty certain to begin with - wherever the Prince is he is alone.”

“How do you know?”

“By the lion being allowed to come away with a strip of cloth. But let me get some better lights - these lamps will be of no use. I am well prepared with everything we are likely to want.”

Without more ceremony he hurried to his rooms and returned with flambeaux better suited to his new purpose, for each of them had accepted the only tenable explanation of the facts, that - in spite of their endeavours to discover it there existed, somewhere in the inner cave, a passage or outlet known to Zhan, through which he had been in communication with some one, even though that some one was not the Prince.

On his part the lion appeared to understand and appreciate all that took place; in the brief absence of Maphir he transferred his signs of affectionate pleasure to Teresh and Zachra alternately, and the instant the hunter returned, with a purr of satisfaction, he moved into the deeper part of the chamber.

“Follow me, my lords,” said Maphir, “we have no time to waste. Pick your way carefully for the present - too much light might attract the attention of some one. Where are you, Zhan?”

The sharp, pleasurable panting of the lion could be distinctly heard in the distance, where Maphir presently caught sight of his head above a great rock.

He now lit one of the torches, and handing the rest to Zachra, advanced to find the lion squeezing his body between two boulders, above which he had to keep his head for the time. These rocks Maphir had previously examined, but failed to see an opening into which the liveness of the animal enabled him to struggle with great difficulty. This explained the wound upon his head, and at the same time convinced the hunter that the stones would need to be moved before Zhan could be followed.

Feeling that the lion was safe, though now out of sight, he found two levers, and by a united effort they moved one of the rocks sufficiently to enable them to pass into an unsuspected adit of the old workings, where Zhan was impatiently waiting for them.

It was now safe for each to bear his own torch, and thus equipped they followed Zhan down the narrow gallery. At a short distance the passage opened into a natural and commodious chamber, which was repeated again and again, both in and on either side of their path, until the mountain appeared to be honeycombed, as in the case of the golden caves, the connecting passages forming a perfect labyrinth requiring an education to thread intelligently. Zhan, however, went forward, turning now to the right, then to the left, without the slightest hesitation, until Maphir had become bewildered with his effort to remember the way, but he could trust to the guidance of the lion when he wished to return, therefore proceeded in confidence.

Presently the brute paused before the entrance to a cave on the left, and with a soft purr of satisfaction the hunter well understood, indicated that he had reached the end of the journey.

Other places by and through which they had passed were comparatively well-ventilated, dry and sweet, but having caught one breath from this dank and foul chamber they all turned away with nauseating disgust.

Maphir was the first to recover himself. "What is it, Zhan?" he enquired.

In answer the lion entered the apartment, then turned as if to invite him to follow.

"Wait here, my lords," said the hunter. "This is no place for you."

Then bidding Zhan go forward, he entered, and made his way through the horrible stench and foul filth upon the floor to the further side of the chamber, where his guide stood still above a heap of something which the hunter lowered his torch to examine.

He could make out nothing from its shape.

“What is it, Zhan?” he asked, not caring to touch it in his uncertainty. Then he started, with an exclamation “Ye gods! It moves! Come here, gentlemen! Give me some help to see what it is!”

The two friends were with him in an instant, and in a mass of vegetable corruption which had once served as a bed they made out the half-buried but breathing remnant of a man.

“Whoever can it be?” asked Teresh, as he looked upon the revolting sight.

“If it is not all that is left of Glarces, Zhan has made a mistake.”

It was only an inference. Under the circumstances recognition was impossible.

“No, no! Not that! Pluto himself would never devise such a torture as this would be to Glarces.”

“Bah! Pluto only keeps the keys of the gate of hell. He will have to wait for Lais to show him its resources. But whoever it is, let us carry him out of this.”

It was a loathsome task; for no sooner was the scarcely living body raised than it was found to be secured to the wall by leathern thongs. These soon yielded to the keen edge of the hunter's knife, and, lighted by Zachra, they carried the victim hence.

The first imperative necessity was to reach a dry place, where the body could be cleansed and something done to minister to the return of life. This was fortunately found in an adjoining chamber, where the light of a torch fell upon a quantity of litter, evidently the residue of the prisoner's first and only bed. Here Maphir left the two to do what they could while he, led by Zhan, returned with a fleetness he had never shown since he reached Sahama, to his lodgings for water and such clothing as his limited wardrobe could supply.

The water revealed the suspected secret. With the washing of the face - wasted, drawn, and tortured beyond all traces of recognition, with lips too feeble to speak, and hair which would be white when properly cleansed - a glance of gratitude flickered for an instant in the eyes, and the three men broke into tears.

It was the Prince!

CHAPTER XLI

MAPHIR INVESTIGATES

If humanitarian sympathy needed any reinforcement in such an extremity it found it in the sturdy friendship of Teresh and his co-workers. They were unable to refrain from tears at the emaciated and revolting state in which they had found their friend and master, but at the same time they rejoiced to know the worst, and be assured that, bad as it was, it was not too late. Assiduous attention, careful treatment, and such nursing as would be at his disposal now, would do much to restore if it could not redeem.

The time for consultation and formulation of plans, however, was not yet. The Prince's present comfort and the furnishing of such nourishment as was safe under the circumstances, was far more important than arranging details for the future, and while Teresh and Zachra performed the more personal duties, Maphir returned again and again to his rooms, which were emptied of everything that could be placed at such a welcome disposal.

After a time, when the change had been completed and the first nourishment was producing some signs of improvement, Glarces was carefully transferred to a hammock of skins and carried away into the labyrinth of caves, where a search would be necessary to discover him, when any visit on the part of his gaolers was attempted. Here Maphir had arranged a temporary abode, at about half the distance from his own, and also conveniently placed for contesting their possession of the prisoner if called upon to do so.

This successfully accomplished, the hunter, after arranging a signal of recall, should he be wanted, again disappeared, his object being to ascertain where the prison was situated and by what other means it had been reached. For this purpose he returned to the cave and carefully examined it. It told its own tale of a punishment too inhuman to narrate, of a fiendish determination to torture we will mercifully forbear to record. Maphir, however, noted with patience every peculiar feature it contained, careful to disturb nothing, for his mind was quietly anticipating a future service it might render. He had formulated a plan, over the details of which he occasionally smiled, but said nothing.

When satisfied with his observation of the cell he turned his attention to the corridor, assured that, where the arrangement of apartments was sufficiently intricate to confuse himself, there must be some guiding mark

for others. He was not wrong. In such a place where none but the initiated could gain admission, or if admitted would have the hardihood to venture, there was little need for secrecy, and Maphir, with his eyes now open to find the clue, at once saw the white marks on the passage walls at short intervals, or at the outlet of a chamber indicating which way he had to take. This trail he followed, the torch well above him and Zhan close upon his heels, until presently he came to a sudden halt - he stood upon the verge of a chasm upon the other side of which lay the golden caves.

He had suspected it almost from the outset. His ears had early caught the sound of the rushing waters, but whoever had selected the prison of the Prince had been cautious to locate it where the sound was lost, that it might not render any possible assistance in escape.

The deep fissure at this point was little more than a fathom in width, spanned by a light and portable gangway which might easily be removed if necessary. Caution, however, was not needed in such a case, and, the means being at hand, Maphir crossed to confirm his conclusions. On returning his first thought was to draw the bridge to his own side, but he abandoned it at once - it would divulge a secret he desired to keep for the present.

This being all he wished to know of the place and its location, for the time being, he went back to acquaint his friends with his discovery, and, the Prince being in a doze, they withdrew for a hasty consultation.

The prostration of Glarces, even though there proved to be no further reasons, rendered it imperative that, for the time, he should remain in or near his present quarters, both for convenience of nursing and also guarding the secret. Zachra was the responsible steward of the golden caves, from the storehouses of which he could not only comfortably, but luxuriously, furnish a suite of apartments for the Prince's use, and thus avoid any danger of discovery from without. Then, when health and strength were sufficiently recovered, Glarces could go to a distance and perfect his plans for justice and the punishment of Lais.

The one difficulty they now had to face was the discovery when the morning visit was paid to the cell, and this occasioned Teresh and Zachra more uneasiness than they were willing to confess. Maphir, on the contrary, regarded the matter with perfect equanimity, asking for it to be left in his hands. Should any assistance be wanted he would call on Zhan, and whatever occurred he was sure they would be equal to the occasion.

So the conference ended, and present arrangements were satisfactorily completed.

Through the night Glarces was only able to sleep in fitful snatches. Now that a tardy relief had come to his misfortunes, and his waking periods had been transformed into much needed consolations, his times of sleep - so welcome before, and yet so difficult to reach - had been changed into a modified form of his inhuman punishment. In his newly found relief he desired to keep awake, nor lose the vision of the faces which hovered over him, but the force of weakness closed his eyes, worn out nature reached hungrily towards recuperation, and he was compelled to sink back again into disquieting slumber.

Still, the short sleeps and intervening judicious administering of nourishment - such as Maphir's scant resources could produce - had a beneficial effect, and before the morning he showed material improvement.

He was yet too weak to speak, but the spark of life brightened in his eyes, and he was quite conscious of his surroundings.

When the morning had come Teresh took his hand, and for the first time ventured to speak to him. He had to leave for a while, duty called him away, but he would go straight to Tasha, tell her what had happened, and send her to nurse him.

At the mention of the beloved name he made an effort to turn his head, the suggestion of a smile was visible, then his eyes filled with tears.

So Teresh left him, arranging with Maphir to be in his lodging to receive the lady Tasha when the sun had travelled two degrees.

CHAPTER XLII

A LABOUR OF LOVE

When the councillor entered the palace he found Tasha, as he expected, engaged in her usual morning recreation at the fountain in the atrium.

“Peace, Tasha, and I would also give thee joy,” he saluted her.

“Peace, Teresh,” she answered, but not with the bright vivacity we have been accustomed to find in her. “As for joy, my friend, that has vanished long ago.”

“Oh come, it is not winter yet, and that should be the season of our melancholy. Have you seen how beautiful the hills are looking to-day?”

“No, I have no heart to look at the hills now. Their beauties would only recall sad memories.”

“Why should it be so?”

“Because I trace the source of all our trouble back to a morning when I stood there (pointing to the well-known spot) and grew enthusiastic over their beauty beyond anything I had seen before.”

“But the hills are not responsible for the trouble, Tasha ; they look to me, this morning, as if they stood as heralds of joy rather than sorrow. Let me persuade you to look, and I am sure you will admire the grandeur in which they are clothed.”

“I hope the gods will make them heralds of joy indeed, but it will not be so to me. Yet I will grant your wish that I should see them.”

He took her hand and assisted her to rise from the rugs, then led the way to the porch.

“Can you imagine such a morning not having a message of joy for every living soul?” he asked, as they stood with the lovely landscape full in view.

“Can you imagine it having such a message for me?” she responded sorrowfully.

“Yes, I can do that.”

“I wish I could.”

The bitterness of her despair touched him, and he answered her with sympathetic seriousness.

“I am no ardent believer in the existence of the gods, Tasha, as you know; or rather, I should say, in such gods as are willing to serve and become the puppets of Meshrac and his companions. Divinities who make any claim upon my allegiance must be superior to the very best of men. That is why I have no faith in, and neglect to run after, the so-called oracles of the land. What need have I to ask gods to do those things which I can do much better? Some men may like so to deceive themselves, but I am not of them. Apart, however, from magicians or any professional authorities, to whom religion is only another name for trade, I am convinced that gods exist, who govern in justice, though we may fail to understand them. They need no incantation nor other magical jumble to call attention to our presence, or to open their ears to our supplications. The sufferings and sorrows of afflicted souls reach them without the aid of any priestly rites, and their hearts are sufficiently merciful towards us not to turn away from our requests. They hear and answer all who call upon them in necessity. This is the faith and hope of my life - it comes from experience rather than the assurance of magicians; therefore I am able to trust and

not be afraid. This has upheld me and made me confident all through our trouble, and it also makes me feel that the morning is more sweetly laden with joy as the reward of this uncertainty, than you have yet discovered.”

“What do you mean, Teresh?” she asked, her old enthusiasm leaping suddenly through the incrustation of her sorrow.

“I mean all I say; perhaps even more than you can suspect, but mind - your slaves are near and we must be careful.”

“Have you heard of him?” she cried, her hope and mingled fear ignoring the caution he counselled.

“Hush! Yes! But dismiss your slaves.”

“Go!” she commanded in a tone of abrupt, impatient authority, more usual with Lais than herself. Then turning suddenly upon her friend she besought him piteously “Now! Tell me all you know! At once! Suspense will kill me.”

“Calm yourself for all our sakes. You will not be disappointed! The best has happened! We have found him!”

“Found Glarces! Who has found him? Where?”

“It was Zhan who really did it; then he led Maphir, Zachra and myself into what was simply a living grave. [Tasha shuddered.] But the whole story is too long to tell you now. We have been with him through the night, and I have only just left to bring you the news. Now calm yourself, and help me in such provision for his needs as is necessary.”

“Where is he? Can I see him?”

“Yes! You shall go to him presently. When the sun has travelled another degree you must be at Maphir's. He will take you to him. The place is close at hand. But not a soul must know of this - do you understand?”

“Do you think I love him less than you?”

“No, my friend; but we can afford to run no risks. You have Orasus with you, I think?”

“Yes.”

“Then he must also go. Further, it will be well to take two other men and one maid, who can be trusted, though they must not return till Glarces leaves. Have you three such among your slaves?”

“Yes. I can find more than that if I want them.”

“We do not want them. Caution is more necessary than numbers for the present. The next thing is to provide for his requirements. This you must do. He is ill - too ill to speak. But I think he only needs nursing and nourishment to bring him round. Send clothing also, for he has nothing but what Maphir could provide. These things you will attend to. Let the slaves who will remain convey them to Maphir's lodgings without attracting attention, or knowing what they do.”

“Trust me in all that.” Then, with her innocent and beautiful face wearing its old smile, she looked up at him and added: “You were right, and I was wrong. The morning had a message of joy for me, and I was not listening for it.”

Then she hurried away to discharge her happy commission, the thought of Glarces' illness sufficiently toning her elation to prevent it attracting undue attention.

It was a busy hour, but her woman's wit found a ready way through the task she had to discharge, and when she reached her rendezvous she was surprised to see the amount of supplies she had sent on.

Maphir was already in waiting, and, at his suggestion, the slaves were now made aware of the object of their coming. It was welcome news, for to his slaves the departure of Glarces had meant much more than to the free men who professed to be his friends, and their joy at the choice which had fallen upon them for this service was too spontaneous for simulation. Orasus was truly overcome at the unexpected tidings, his only regret hitherto being that he was not allowed to share his master's exile.

One necessary hint Maphir had to give from Zachra to Tasha. In her meeting with Glarces he requested there should be no demonstration on account of his condition. She was to take no notice that would disturb him, but let the recognition break gradually and its reviving influence give him strength to bear it.

The slaves hesitated for an instant, and Tasha wondered, when Maphir opened the door of the cave and bade them follow him quickly. But friends were able to pass that dozing guard in safety, and almost before confidence had been restored, Tasha was silently weeping as she looked upon the wasted features of “her boy,” while the slaves, in mute gratitude, beheld their long sought master.

Glarces was sleeping at the time, and Zachra stole away from his side to give place to a better nurse, but we must retire with the relief, leaving the

invalid to wake and recognise his mother without the criticism of curious eyes.

Thus reinforced, Zachra was at liberty to make more suitable arrangements for the patient's comfort. Maphir had already selected a group of caves which for capacity and situation commended themselves to his judgment, and, Zachra approving, proceeded to the distant store-rooms, where he gave the hunter carte blanche, subject to the direction of Tasha, for furnishing.

Maphir was also relieved, since he was able to post one of the slaves on constant watch at the gorge to prevent accident by surprise.

Then Zachra left them, it being near the Council hour, and Maphir set to work on his first venture of furnishing for the comfort and convenience of a Prince.

Tasha occasionally was reluctantly called away for consultation and advice, but by the time Teresh and Zachra were able to venture on returning the hunter had worked a transformation. A worthy sleeping apartment had been more than satisfactorily arranged, and Glarces, under the care and attention of Tasha, had been transferred to his new quarters, where, still stronger and brighter than in the morning, he was able to greet them by the whisper of their names.

CHAPTER XLIII

LAIS GROWS IMPATIENT

We are now able to make an enquiry as to how Glarces came into his deplorable condition, and in order to do this we must recall the very unsatisfactory position in which Lais found herself, on the night of his disappearance when she stepped on to the balcony of the palace and listened to the ominous murmur of the citizens.

Up to this point her mind swayed in a balance of indecision. Two courses of action were open to her, rivalling each other in the advantages they offered, and also the inexpediency of employment. She might stand upon her absolute authority as Queen, and without reference to the people keep Glarces a close prisoner in his own apartments, while by personal kindness and attention she conquered his prejudices and thus secured her ends. She knew every difficulty that stood in the way, but given the acquiescence of the people - of which there could be little doubt after some weak protest on the part of Teresh, or it might be some few others - there was a certain pleasurable pride in the idea of realising the dream of

years, and overpowering his inflexible will. The alternative scheme was based upon the idea that every attribute of manliness is, without exception, corruptible - that it only needs tact, firm treatment, and graduated pressure rightly directed, and the most stalwart individual may be moulded to order. The latter was undoubtedly the shorter method, but the force required to crush his spirit and make him amenable to reason was a very doubtful quantity, and if, in the result, he was either in mind or body brought to a level of other and inferior men, where would be the glory and gratification of success? Between these two perplexities she hesitated while time pressed. The outcome of her interviews with Zillah, Maphir, and Glarces warned her to act with promptitude. But what was it best to do? As a rule she had a most profound contempt for advice, but the rush of events had overpowered and bewildered her. Foresight was clouded and uncertain; tact was nervous; cunning and craft absent; in the crisis of her battle she was left impotent and alone.

For one trusty friend to counsel her aright what would she not now give?

Apart from Casca, however, she had absolutely no one to whom appeal was possible - in all the court, so ready to grovel for favours, there was none to whom she could seek with confidence. The eunuch was at best but a broken and uncertain reed. But he was her one and only forlorn hope, therefore he was sent for.

It was Petronius who cut the gordian knot and solved her perplexity by confirming the conclusion she had already arrived at concerning the voices in the city. Then it was that she intuitively conceived her dual scheme of pandering to the crowd in order to mislead them, and at the same time disposing of the Prince.

When Casca returned from the despatch of the proclamation she revealed and entrusted to him the carrying out of her newly conceived plan. Glarces must be secretly sent away. Their joint lives depended on this being done before the Council met. She was very careful to keep Casca's implication prominent as an incentive to fidelity, and with a well defined plan now clearly outlined, she used all her skill in manipulating her terrorised accomplice.

The chamberlain valued nothing on earth so highly as himself, and the one chief consideration of his life was to keep that precious treasure out of danger. Lais speedily convinced him that it was in anything but a secure position at that time, and every faculty he possessed was at once in arms on his own account.

Lais bade him find some place of concealment where the Prince would be safe but comfortable. She was willing for him to have two slaves, if necessary, such as could be trusted, to act as guard and servants, and for the space of three moons he should be subjected to a course of treatment which she would direct according as Casca was able to report. For the present she did not choose to know the place of his concealment, in order to justly plead her ignorance to the Council, but Casca would be safe from such enquiry by reason of his friendship with Glarces. Then she rehearsed the course she afterwards pursued, and shrewdly anticipated the effect it would produce upon the people, pointing out the way of escape they afterwards so completely realised.

Time makes one offer of success to every man, and as Casca listened to her plans he thought he saw his own. From that instant he began to gather himself together and consider the one advantage for which he had so long and impatiently waited.

If the Queen would leave the matter entirely in his hands every wish she had expressed should be faithfully carried out. He knew a place in the golden caves district where the Prince could be lodged at once. Easily and secretly accessible, comfortable and convenient, to which he could be removed by a secret passage leading from the palace without the knowledge of the guard and absolutely without fear of detection.

So it was decided, and a little later a secret door was silently opened in the Prince's bedroom, and Casca begged his friend, if he would save himself, to rise and follow him.

Glarces doubted for a moment what to do, but all things considered made up his mind to accept the opportunity of conference with those whom he could trust, though it led to no further advantage - for Casca assured him that Teresh and Zachra were awaiting his coming - and presently found himself in one of the rooms of the golden caves, which was reached by a subterranean passage from the palace.

Here the eunuch left him to apprise Teresh, and it was only when the doors closed, securely shutting him in, that Glarces suspected the trap.

On the morrow, when the escape had been discovered and the Queen had scored her great success, Casca leisurely returned to complete the deferred arrangements, though scarcely in accordance with the original design.

The promise of Lais that he might become the consort of a Queen, according to his own ambitious wish, had never been lost sight of, but he

clearly saw that the realisation would not come so long as Glarces blocked the way. This had grown into a settled conviction. Now the gods had come to his assistance. Glarces was in his own hands, Lais not knowing where to find him, and the necessities of the situation demanded that this arrangement should last till the popular feeling in favour of the Prince had died away. If Glarces did not live so long, the power he had now for the first time obtained over Lais would be equal to securing the fulfilment of her promise. Hence the Prince must not live, and the method of treatment was devised accordingly.

The chamberlain in his wanderings - innocent and otherwise - through the caves had discovered several quiet nooks and corners, in one of which Glarces had passed the night. Sometimes in these curious rambles he had even ventured to cross the superstitious chasm, having had a little gangway made and kept in readiness for such occasions.

On this particular morning, Casca, with two slaves, crossed the gulf, and made a careful reconnaissance of many places on the other side. He appeared to be most fastidious in his choice, but at length found a chamber which commended itself by reason of being more damp and chilly than its neighbours.

Here a crevice in the wall was plugged in order to secure a short chain to which was attached a leathern belt, then sending the slaves for a quantity of litter to serve as a bed, the apartment was ready for its occupant.

When the Prince recognised the intent he protested vigorously against the incarceration, but without avail. Casca had force at hand, which he did not fail to use with brutal rigour. Self-interest cast aside the hypocritical guise of friendship which had been so long and irksomely worn in anticipation of reward, and Glarces was riveted to the wall of his living grave, his chain allowing him to sit or lie, but not to stand.

The wretch who had received such favours and confidence at the hand of his victim, had now only to provide for the retention of his secret, and not only Glarces but also Lais would be in his hands with the power of dictating terms. This was the opportunity foreseen, and he was determined to make the most of it.

Such a precaution presented but a trifling difficulty to a man who held the lives of slaves as cheaply as he. Divide the men so as to deal with them singly, and it was an easy matter to commit them to the abyss. He did so. Nor was he required to account for their absence, since the Queen had authorised him to leave two for the service and guarding of the Prince.

Thus was Glarces left alone in a blackness and silence few men could have endured for a day and keep their reason. In such surroundings he had struggled through an interminable age, the duration of which he had no means of measuring. Death courted, tempted, fascinated, and tried by a hundred inducements to compel him to accept her help and welcome relief; but he would not die! He would suffer and endure, but willingly succumb - never! At times he had been weak enough to murmur - even to plead for pity from his ruthless torturer, but he refused to purchase it by the loss of his integrity.

His food from the first had been rough, coarse, and insufficient, and served but once a day. But as time went on and he refused to accept liberty in accordance with his gaoler's demand, the allowance was still further reduced in order to compel submission by a gradual process of starvation.

Casca had no thought for anything now beyond gaining his own terms. It was a matter of perfect indifference to him whether Glarces or Lais succeeded in the present struggle; if the former, he would have to give some solid guarantee that whoever sat upon the throne - and the nomination would be in the Prince's hands - should marry Casca. If this offer was refused and maintained in face of a gradual process of starvation, he would exact the same terms from Lais before he produced his ward, with the alternative of restoring him to the people, who would, of course, hold her responsible for what had taken place.

Towards this end Casca manipulated all his reports, and ingeniously prevented Lais from visiting her obdurate cousin, while she sanctioned such modified restrictions and curtailment of privileges as the eunuch from time to time suggested as a method of persuasion.

We know the rest.

While Teresh, Tasha, and Zachra were sitting with the Prince, who gradually revived under the restoration of long lost companionship, and Maphir uneasily waited and watched for the coming of his suspected gaoler, Lais was anticipating a visit from Casca to bring her the last report she would receive from Glarces before the expiration of his sentence, and she could see him without any appearance of desire to mitigate his punishment. Of late these reports had shown signs of relenting, hopes had been encouraged, Casca had displayed most surprising tact, and in the following of his advice hopeful progress had been made, pointing to a consummation of the dearest wish of the Queen.

She waited the certain communication of to-night with all the ardent nervousness of a love-sick maid. Every woman - every man - imagines that her or his love is irresistible, and Glarces was not more confident of its ultimate omnipotence than Lais, who, after so much disappointment and so many years of waiting, was now nearing the threshold of fruition, and picturing to herself the added lustre it would bring to her public and private life. The sweet experiences of such enviable uncertainty come once to most lives, but are never repeated. Some one will ask if they are possible to such a woman as Lais? Yes, I think so! Nature is generously blind as to character in this experience, and grants it even to the depraved if haply the one blissful glimpse of true love may lead on to repentance.

But the curtains are drawn aside for Casca.

“Come, my lord. Your feet are heavy when you bear good news.”

“It was because the message tarried, O Queen, not that I have lingered.”

“But you have brought his answer?” she asked anxiously. “I would I had.”

“Not brought it! Why? What does he say?”

“He has much to say on many things. I never knew him to be so talkative as he is to-night. Yet, with all his speech, he says but little.”

“Does he understand himself?”

“Perhaps not, altogether - and yet I think he does. But the thought that he will so soon be free appears to overpower him.”

“Does he speak of us?”

The Queen was always careful to maintain the royal plural with her chamberlain, much to his chagrin; and he on his part, never lost any opportunity he dare attempt to remind her of their past association, which was not altogether at an end while the fate of Glarces was undetermined.

“He speaks of little else - or rather though he begins to speak of other things it always ends in Lais. Never but once in all our talk did he mention Vedrona's name.”

“And how was that?”

“He asked me if I thought Vedrona would be pleased if he should marry you.”

“Really? And what did you say?”

“What could I say but that I was sure she would? It was like signing my own condemnation to do it, but I could not be untrue.”

“Poor Casca! We are truly sorry for you. But have we not always said how foolish you were in that respect?”

“Not if he had not lived.”

“No! Everything then would have been so different, and we would have married you if only for your devotion to our cause.”

“And if I am still content to wait?” he asked.

“No! we will not speak of that! It is unkind to cloud our joy almost before it is born.”

“Have I not assisted at its birth, even to my own disinheritance?”

“You have, my lord. But we would rather see you make another choice than waste your life.”

“A life in waiting for Sahama's Queen would be well spent if only at last I could call her mine.”

“Why, Casca, we never thought you could be so romantic.”

“You have not known me, then.”

“Then now we do know you, though our promise at this moment almost amounts to infidelity, let us assure you that if you care to risk the waiting we shall not forget you. But we pray the gods that Glarces may outlive yourself.”

“And I am willing to say ‘Amen’ with such a promise.”

“That is generous of you. Now tell us all he said.”

“He asks that you will allow him another week before he gives his final answer.”

“We cannot do that; the suspense of it would be too great to be borne.”

“There need be no suspense. His answer is already too well assured to be doubted. The delay need not defer the nuptials unless you desire it.”

“Not if he refuses?”

“He will not do that.”

“Do you think so?”

“I know it, but I have not his authority to say so.”

“Are you sure of it?”

“I wish for my own sake I was not so sure.”

“You are a noble fellow, Casca, but we will see to it that you are amply rewarded.”

“It is reward enough that I have done my duty and been permitted to serve my Queen.”

“Still, we are not disposed to forget such fidelity in a trying time. But we must find a means to secure our cousin's consent without delay. You must return and tell him how the uncertainty distresses us - how we only live to be his and to serve him. You have already done a great work, go back and persuade him to this, then ask what you will and we will grant it.”

“I ask no reward but to serve the Queen at whose feet I have laid my life; but to move the will of Glarces is a task the gods would fail in.”

“Not if they truly loved a woman, for love is stronger even than divine omnipotence - it is the sovereign power of all; not even death can claim its freedom from love's dominion. If, therefore, your love for us is as you profess, go and do as we require you, and for its reward we grant you any petition you may make before you ask it.”

“That is if I succeed.”

“If he has already assured you, you will - you must succeed. You have but to gain his consent to tell us what he has already made known to you.”

“But why not accept the assurance I have given?”

“We cannot unless he sends it to us himself. You think our royal mind is moved by some fastidious notion in this request, but there you err. Hear why we press this matter. Meshrac has been with us and made known that to-morrow is Sahama's most auspicious day in the whole year, and by a fortunate coincidence our own lines of destiny cross its course and will be influenced for weal or woe. Now do you understand how anxious we are to shape our future fortunately? Nothing must be left uncertain or to chance. You must away to the Prince at once, and make this known to him and bring us his reply.”

“Does the Queen forget how Glarces laughs at omens and days of fate?”

“Then he must laugh no longer,” she answered, rising in most serious determination. “Lead us to him, and we will find such arguments as will convince him if he determines to refuse.”

This was a most unexpected development, creating a sort of panic in Casca's mind, since he knew Lais could be equally resolute as the Prince upon occasion. He had unwarily touched her religious superstitions. It is a curious fact - the one great miracle of the ages - that the instant the

breath of doubt touches the robe of our saintliness it transforms it into the roaring furnace of a hell. Casca had

“Started such conflagration undesired,”

and in order to save himself he had to battle with and overcome it.

“That is impossible. The Prince has now retired.”

“Then we will rouse him.”

“And with that also excite his caution and determination not to yield.”

“You fear to take us to him - why is this?”

“I? Nay, I am ready. If the Queen will follow I will lead the way.”

“And we will soon decide the point whether Lais or Glarces rules.”

“Will it not also cast the die of destiny?”

She stopped suddenly.

“Yes! We had lost sight of that! We must move with caution, Casca, and your foresight has saved us from a disaster we had overlooked. See! You shall go to him.” Then taking from her neck a chain, attached to which was the great amethyst Vedrona had given to Glarces, she continued: “Give him this stone, so full of sacred memories to himself, and tell him we have sent it with a deeper, sweeter, purer love than he has ever known, and as he hopes for the mercy of the gods, entreat him to hear our prayer and grant our heart's request.”

“I will see him at once. But I know the task I have before me, therefore I ask you not to expect his answer before the morning. But doubt not, I will bring it with me, and if the Queen will give me her tablets he shall write it thereon in his own hand.”

She handed him her tablets and pen.

“Yes, yes! Casca, go! And may the gods prosper you.”

“They will! Glarces shall consent, and the Queen shall know the power of Casca's love.”

He was gone.

“Is it myself or he,” she questioned when once more alone, “that is so strangely altered? I never saw him as he appears to be to-night. It cannot be that he has changed so very wondrously! Then it must be I - myself! And love has worked the transformation. The love of Glarces in its inward flow has so far changed me that I even fail to recognise myself. This is the great dawning of every woman's heaven - to hear and be assured that her

love is treasured and returned by the one man who is nobler than all beside - the perfect model of the mighty gods on earth!”

CHAPTER XLIV

CASCA AND MAPHIR

Maphir stood with crossed legs and folded arms, leaning against the rugged natural arch forming a doorway to the inner cave. The curtains hid him from the pleasant little group he declined to join. He had lost his master once, he was determined to guard him now, though there was little occasion for watchfulness. Still, a double safety is always better than a doubtful one. Again, he was more at his ease and comfortable outside. He could hear all that passed, but had little interest save for the occasional monosyllable scarcely audible from the lips of Glarces, over which he smiled and nodded his head approvingly as he noticed the strength increase.

Zhan lay dozing and motionless at his feet, occasionally receiving playful recognition by the burying of the hunter's foot in his shaggy mane.

Maphir started, and the lion was up in an instant. The well trained ear had caught the distant sound of naked feet approaching. At the outer door he met a slave.

“There is a light in the golden caves!”

Maphir slipped his sandals and hurried away, followed by Zhan and the slave.

The notice was timely given, since the torch, borne by a man, not yet recognisable, was still at some distance. He was alone, at which Maphir smiled complacently, and gave a shrewd guess as to his identity.

“Come back,” he whispered, cautiously leading the way into a cave where the faintest glimmer of a light was yet uncovered. “Cover the lamp at once; then wait. When he has passed, follow me, silent as death, at a safe distance. When he stops, hide; but have lights and a cord in readiness. Zhan! Come here! Lie down!”

By this time, Casca - for it was he - was nearing the fissure, and the hunter kept well back while he watched his approach.

To his mortification, however, the chamberlain did not cross the bridge, but disappeared behind a rock, and an instant later there was a sound as of a closing door.

Maphir crossed the gangway with the stealth of a cat, and, having instinctively measured the distance with his eye, crept cautiously forward, round the rock into a secret passage, touched the door, passed on, and a few paces ahead caught the faint glimmer of a light. In a silence and blackness like that of death his feet pushed forward till he reached a crevice through which he could watch and hear all that transpired. It was a room luxuriously appointed opening into another apartment beyond - a cosy corner Casca knew well, and the one in which Glarces spent that first night of his imprisonment.

“Now, my beautiful birds of golden plumage,” Casca began, as he took his seat at a table and placed thereon a variety of articles drawn from his wallet. “So, to-morrow is to be the eventful day, is it? Well! Lais is the Queen, and as such her will must be obeyed, but I’ll warrant me not even Meshrac and all his crew, with the gods thrown in, could foretell what the events will be. The arrangements for these *particular* royal pleasures are altogether in *my* hands, and I think I can draw up a most wonderful and surprising list in every way. Now, let me see! How shall the sports begin? That is not difficult to answer. The Queen demands the Prince’s acceptance of her offer to marry him! The Prince’s! ah, ha! What a Prince! Well, such as he is, she shall have him - it’s the best that can be done. The message must be written by the Prince upon her own tablets. That was a very good thought - a most capital thought. But when I think of it the great and excellent Glarces is somewhat careless of late; his table is confused and scarcely fit to lay these dainty tablets on while he writes his tender reply; his fingers are at present stiff for want of exercise; and the light of his new palace has been softened somewhat - so, as his friend, I think I had better write the reply. Lais will not know - that is, she has not known though I have frequently done the same lately. Now, what shall I say?”

“ ‘To the beloved of the gods, the great and noble Queen Lais.’ That would please and flatter her, but it would be suspicious, for Glarces never flatters. Try again!

“ ‘To my well beloved Queen - cousin.’ That is better, and yet not quite the thing.

“ ‘To my little sister, Lais the Queen.’ That’s it! The gods could not improve on that! It is his old name for her, with a recognition of her true position. After that I can venture on anything without fear. Now for the rest:

“ ‘Casca has conquered me. I am yours.’ That is sufficient, and every word is true. It only remains to attach his seal and all is done. It is fortunate I did not leave the signet with him, or he would have lost it.”

Then affixing the signature he replaced the tablets in his pocket, leaving the ring upon the table as if but recently used. “This will bring her down at once, and, of course the bird will have flown. Now to arrange this.”

He now attended to the lamps, careful to see them well filled, and left ready to be lighted on his return. Personal effects of Glarces were scattered around, and Vedrona's amethyst suggestively laid beside the signet ring. Then surveying the whole aspect of the place

“Very satisfactory indeed,” he exclaimed. “It looks as if he had but just left it. Now for one or two indications as to what has happened.”

He tore one of the crimson straps from a sandal, and took up a favourite diadem such as worn by the Princes of Assyria, which he had surreptitiously brought for the purpose, it being a present from Lais. With a final look to make sure that all was in due order, he took the torch from its stand and left the room. On reaching the chasm he stopped, and lowering the light began to search it critically from side to side of the gallery.

Maphir's arms twitched to hurl him into the gulf as he divined the intent, but he restrained himself and watched. That entrance to the kingdom of Pluto, according to the popular superstition, had evidently not been constructed in anticipation of Casca's requirements, and it took time and thought to adjust his plans to circumstances. He worked it out, however, and, with a congratulatory chuckle, presently dropped the strap carefully over a fragment of rock he was able to reach by lying flat upon the floor. Again he was baffled, but leaving the sandal and head-dress on the ground he paid a brief visit to the cave, returning with a light rod, on which he placed the cap, then cautiously lowered it to a safe ledge on the other side of the fissure. Next he made an attempt to deposit the sandal lower still, but it slipped and was lost.

Content, however, with these suggestions as to a possible reason for the Prince's absence, he next loosened one end of the bottom rail of the barrier and passed over the gangway.

There was no real necessity to continue his tour, but under the circumstances he considered it wise to ascertain what the exact condition of Glarces was.

Maphir followed, keeping well out of the circle of light should the eunuch turn, and behind him came the two slaves with the lion yet in the rear.

Reaching the cave where Glarces lay, Casca paused to cover his feet and legs before attempting to cross the floor, during which operation he commenced to rally his prisoner.

“Glarces, my friend! Are you asleep? Glarces, wake up! I have come to summon you to your espousal. The Queen offers you her heart and hand and has sent me to command your acceptance of both. Do you hear me, or are you too wrapped up in your dreams of Vedrona to take any interest in flesh and blood? Perhaps you are sulky to-night - had too much supper it may be; but wait an instant while I find my ticklish little goad, and I will loose your tongue, I'll warrant me. Now, my fortunate but troublesome rival, where are you? By Pluto, you have such a fondness for this luxurious bed that I shall not be able to dig you out presently! I see what is the matter - I have given you too much liberty; I must shorten your love chain! Oh, that's a good thought. Where is the chain, then I can lift you up, or get a trace of the way you have burrowed! Here it is! Now, my cunning little fox, we are on your trail! “Then he exclaimed with alarm, as the chain offered no resistance to his vicious tug, and he was only saved from measuring his full length in the filth by reason of its shortness - “Ha! ye gods, what's this? The leather rotted! And when I thought to find him dead, he's gone! Gone from me as he vanished from the people and from Lais!” Then, recovering his assurance as he remembered the impossibility of escape, he went on : “But he is not far away,” and began to search around the cave. “He has lost his relish for long walks lately. Where are you, Glarces? Are you in your humorous mood and want to play at ‘you-hide-and-I-find’? Well, here I come, and I will find you even though you hide in - “ Here he caught sight of Maphir and fell, horrified and screaming, “Pluto. Help! Help!”

The hunter had taken up his position at the door of the chamber where, with arms folded and his figure drawn up to apparently gigantic proportions in the faint light, he waited until, in his search for Glarces, the chamberlain discovered him.

“Get up!” he said, in a voice of menacing authority the terrified eunuch dare not trifle with, but his teeth were chattering with fear.

“Yes, yes; I will, great Pluto, when I can find my feet. But have mercy upon me. I have lost Glarces.”

“He is with me.”

“Is he dead, then?”

“The game of ‘you-hide-I-find’ is at an end; let that suffice.”

“But Lais the Queen has sent me to bring him to her. What must I say?”

“Nothing.”

“But I am responsible for his safety - that is unless he is dead.”

“And I am now responsible for yours.”

So far the infernal deity was more conciliatory than Casca had imagined, therefore his confidence began to return.

“I am safe, great Pluto. Tell me that Glarces is dead, and I will never venture into your realm again.”

“He is not dead, but you will never leave this realm again.”

This not only recalled but immeasurably increased Casca's former panic, while Maphir was beginning to appreciate the retribution he had determined to administer without interference.

“No, no! great Pluto, not that-not that! I am not guilty, and I entreat your mercy.”

“You shall have mercy; I will see to that. Mercy measured liberally with your own reed; of the quality you have given to the Prince - your master and friend. Lift up your head and see who I am; then you will know I speak the truth - you will pray for Pluto to take you from my power.” As he spoke the hunter caught the torch from Casca's palsied hand and brought the light closer to his own face. “Maphir!”

“Yes, Maphir; and with me the day of vengeance!” This discovery was a quick restorative.

“Stand aside and let me pass, or by the gods I will slay you.”

Maphir laughed but moved not.

“Stand aside, I say, and let me pass; do you forget I am the Queen's chamberlain?”

“And I am Nemesis. It is your turn to vanish now as Glarces has done both from the people and Lais.”

Casca suddenly remembered that where he was authority lay in physical powers, and hence he was at the hunter's mercy.

“You don't mean that you are going to keep me prisoner, do you?”

“I don't know. That may depend upon yourself. Answer what I ask, and you will stop here till I know if you tell me the truth.”

“I will tell you everything.”

“Who besides yourself knows where the Prince was imprisoned?”

“No one.”

“Tell no lies.”

“By the gods I swear I speak the truth.”

“The Queen knows.”

“No. She did not want to know at first, and I have so managed it that she has never known.”

“Who brought the Prince here?”

“I did.”

“Who helped you?”

“Only two slaves.”

“Where are they?”

“They fell down the chasm in going back.”

“Does Shamer know of this?”

“No! The Queen has told him she has sent them on a mission.”

“Then the Queen knows of that?”

“No! She believes they are in attendance on the Prince.”

“Does she think he needs attendance in a place like this?”

“No! She believes he is in a secret room in the golden caves, and is to be liberated to-morrow.”

“Then how does he come to be here?”

“Oh – oh - he was violent.”

“Who ordered him to be kept in this state? Now, be careful, for I have Zhan near by. Who brought him here?”

“I did.”

“Does the Queen know he has been treated like this?”

“Not exactly. But she has instructed me to be very severe.”

“Then how does she imagine him able to write that message upon her tablets.”

“What tablets?”

“Her tablets in your pocket. Now speak the truth or I will give you to the lions.”

“I wrote that because - when she comes to see him I want her to think he has fallen down the abyss.”

“Oh! I see your scheme now. But we will change it. Clear off that message.”

Maphir was not to be trifled with and Casca tremblingly obeyed.

“Where are your own leaves?”

“Here!” answered the now half-dead wretch, producing them from the depth of his wallet.

“Now, take your pen and write upon your own:

“ ‘To the most noble Teresh - ’ “

“But Teresh has nothing to say to me.”

“Do as I tell you unless you wish to make a meal for the lions.”

It needed no further inducement to write the superscription, which being finished, Maphir continued:

“ ‘Tell the Queen at once that I have found the Prince.’ “

“But I have not found him.”

“Do as I tell you.”

He had to do it, and, adding his own signature, Maphir took possession of the tablets. Afterwards he had a second message inscribed on the Queen's tablets and a third upon a piece of skin, both of which he carefully appropriated.

“That will do for the present,” said the hunter. “Now you may go to bed.”

“Where?” enquired the chamberlain, in a new and added panic of fear.

“Oh, I will be good to you and let you have the Prince's bedroom.”

“This?”

“Yes! The Prince will not need it to-night.”

“But - Maphir! I am willing to do anything you ask me if you will have mercy! This will poison me.”

“I'm afraid it won't; still you can try it. You ought not to be so well cared for as Glarces, but you see I'm generous. You may have his bed.”

“What, that - oh! Maphir, do have mercy!”

“So I will - your own. Give me a cord.”

The two slaves had brought lights and been in attendance since he revealed himself. Now they produced a stout cord, and the struggling Casca was securely tucked into the Prince's bed.

“You know where the food is kept,” said the hunter when he had satisfied himself that his man was safe. “Make yourself comfortable for a few days, but mind you don't drink too much wine.”

“Maphir, for the god's sake don't leave me here alone.”

“You shall be entertained as a Prince, my lord; and after that I will show you what hunters' justice is.”

“Help, help!” screamed the terror-stricken chamberlain. “You may amuse yourself in any way you please for the time. Your crying for help will convince you how safe you kept the Prince from all his friends. It is only the lions who have liberty to visit this retreat. If you call loud enough they will answer you, and they are not over-fed since the Prince was lost.”

“Maphir! Hear me - have pity on me - “

“I have - as you had on Glarces.”

“But Lais compelled me - “

“You lie! You confessed that she does not know.”

“But what will you take as the price of my liberty?”

“Your life - piecemeal.”

“No - no! not that! You are not cruel.”

“No, but I am playful at times. Now I am going to leave you to burrow in your luxurious bed. Good night, and pleasant dreams.”

CHAPTER XLV

THE EUNUCH'S TABLETS

Maphir turned away from the miserable eunuch, not only without compunction, but with a gleam of satisfaction lighting up his dusky face. He was not cruel, but it had fallen to his lot to administer what justice was at hand in a case of brutal, barbarous inhumanity such as he had neither encountered nor conceived before. And this treatment had not been meted out to a tyrant nor an enemy, but by the man who had received

favours and consideration without parallel to the friend who had protected him.

This hardened Maphir's heart.

He had the gangway drawn to his side of the chasm and hidden for future use; then, being no longer necessary to keep up the watch, he dismissed the slaves for the night, and returned to his self-elected guard, where Teresh and Zachra found him a little later as they took their leave.

The hunter made anxious enquiries, but modestly refused to thrust himself into the presence of his royal master, even though the friends assured him of the pleasure it would afford the Prince. To him waiting was a small matter if he could only hear of an improvement, and since this had already begun, he was content. With an apologetic caution not to be surprised and lose Glarces again - at which Maphir smiled, but said nothing of what had taken place - he promised to watch, and the two councillors retired.

Tasha had been absent for a time during the day, and was now in charge for the night.

In the confidence of Casca's promise Lais slept and dreamed pleasantly, having also devised a secret scheme for the mortification of Zillah, which circumstances would allow to be put into operation without a suggestion of pre-meditation.

The position Zillah had assumed made her instrumental to a great extent in building up the popularity of Lais. Not that she desired to do so, but in her own self-interest the other was indispensable. Ostensibly they were inseparable friends; privately each kept a lynx-eyed watch upon the other, and maintained an armed neutrality. The advantage in this respect was always in favour of the Iberian, and Lais knew it. It irritated and added an ingredient of bitterness to the cup of her prosperity, which she was ever on the alert to remove, but it was useless. Every attempt failed. Zillah smiled pleasantly, but said nothing. Lais fumed.

At length, however, the Queen had a certain triumph she could enjoy to the chagrin of her insufferable companion; she, therefore, invited Zillah to breakfast, in the course of which she would undesignedly hear Casca's report. It would be full of news to her in many ways, and full of revenge for the Queen.

“What childish folly does she dream of now?” Zillah questioned of herself when the message was delivered. Then, turning to the slave - “Assure the Queen of my instant obedience to her gracious command,” and almost

before the reply was delivered she was making her most dutiful obeisance.

“Meshrac advises that today is to be full of significance to Sahama and myself,” explained Lais, “therefore, in order that it may begin well, I have desired your company.”

“Is it to be another of the astrologer’s special effects?” she enquired with smiling but pointed significance.

“In what sense special, my mystical Zillah?”

“Oh, surely he is able to devise that for himself. When he announced the day he had certainly arranged some great effect to be produced. Has he neglected to submit his programme?”

Lais laughed musically.

“How strangely our customs must differ from those of Iberia,” she replied; “I think you told me that you have no magicians there?”

“What use are they? What purpose do they serve?” It may be they are not useful in reality, if the enquiry is pressed too far, but they are absorbingly interesting.”

“Perhaps so - to children, but in Iberia we ask for service, not amusement.”

“How intensely laborious your life must be,” she replied languidly.

“Perhaps so; but you see the result of it in the kingdom. Iberia makes its influence felt among the nations; she is not like some countries I know - the creations of poetic dreams.”

“How very interesting! Do all her children possess your enthusiastic patriotism?”

“We all inherit energy and spirit. But our thoughts must be with Sahama to-day. What is this your great astrologer proposes?”

“How amusing you are, my Zillah, in your ignorance of these wise men.”

“Am I?”

“Most delightfully so! These people never propose anything - they only interpret.”

“What do they pretend to interpret.”

“The voices of the gods.”

“That is where we should differ from you again. In Iberia the gods would be required to speak in the common tongue. Further, every officer of the

country is expected to be original - not the interpreter of some other mind. But Sahama is not Iberia.”

“But you have no gods.”

“We have no use for them. That is until we can find such as can assert themselves.”

While Zillah was speaking Zosine entered and announced:

“My lord Meshrac desires immediate audience, O Queen.”

“Bid him approach.”

“I suppose he brings the programme for the day,” suggested Zillah as the girl retired.

“He brings me a message from the gods. Will you not wish it may prove auspicious?”

“Most heartily!”

The astrologer entered the royal presence with a marked absence of the profound reverence which had recently been demanded - more as in the days of the late Queen.

“O Queen, live for - “ then seeing Zillah, he paused.

“Proceed my lord, our faithful Zillah will remain.”

“May the Queen forgive her servant, but the stars have risen in an adverse house.”

“Are their influences opposed to me?” she asked anxiously.

Zillah was interested by reason of what had already passed.

“They are not actively opposed,” replied Meshrac; “still their indications are not according to my wish.”

“What do you advise?”

“Did not the Queen tell me that magicians never advise?” asked Zillah.

“Propose, I meant,” answered the Queen evasively.

“There is but slight difference. But I interrupt.”

“We have no power but to hear and interpret the voice of the gods.”

“Yes, I understand. Still, I remember when the lady Lais sent me to you for a philtre - “

“I sent you for a philtre - never!”

Will the Queen pardon me? I said the lady Lais. Meshrac will remember it, I think he then advised me concerning my enquiry. Will you allow me to make what may be a useful suggestion?"

"With the Queen's permission," replied the magician. The Queen was only too pleased to get a moment for quiet reflection. The inadvertence of Zillah's presence at such a time was even worse than the opposition of the stars, and yet she was too much in the Iberian's power to command her retirement. In the reference to the philtre she read an intimation of defiance, the development of which might be the evil prognosticated, while to submit might avert the danger.

To Zillah, however, a tilt with the magicians was always attractive. She had no superstitions about the gods, neither any faith in their fantastic interpreters. It must also be remembered that she was void of any idea of other than a pleasant ridicule of one of the Queen's pet fancies.

"Are the gods capricious, or do they work by fixed laws?" she enquired.

"The laws are fixed, but governed by the gods."

"Then, of course they change if desired."

"Certainly."

"What were the indications yesterday? Somewhat hopeful, I gather."

"So far as we are able to read; but other influences arise to-day controlling those of yesterday."

"Then the gods are capricious?"

"No, it is we who cannot always fully read."

"Are you sure you have read correctly now?"

"So far as the gods have revealed."

"Are the gods men?"

"They were mostly men."

"Then there is no need for the Queen to be discouraged at this prognostication. Were I but Queen I would soon make the gods repent of this fickleness."

"How may it be done? Speak, my Zillah, and give me peace."

"Do they accept your sacrifices?"

"Such as are prescribed," answered Meshrac.

“Then the Queen's course is easy. If the gods were ever men, send at once to the hills for two young kids, and when the gods shall smell the flavour of roasting flesh they will accept the sacrifice and come to terms.”

The effect of this scathing sarcasm was somewhat marred by the entrance of Zosine.

“My lord Teresh would lay an urgent message before the Queen.”

“Is he the bearer of more ill news?” she asked.

“Not so, O Queen, perhaps he is the prophet of the gods' repentance,” Zillah naively suggested.

“We will see him.”

The councillor did not enter as if he brought evil tidings. “May the Queen live for ever; the gods have made their servant to be the bearer of good news both to the Queen and nation.”

“We pray your message may be so.”

“I have just received, O Queen, at the hands of a fleet runner from the mountains the tablets of my lord Casca, bearing the tidings that he has found the Prince - Glarces!”

“Found the Prince! This is momentous news indeed. Where are the tablets?”

Before Teresh had time to reply Zillah cried –

“Help, gentlemen; the Queen is ill!”

“No. no!” she stammered. “We are better now. The unexpected joy overpowered us! Where are the tablets, Teresh? Are they surely those of Casca?”

“They are here, O Queen, with the seal of the chamberlain attached,” he replied, laying the indisputable evidence before her.

“This is the work of some conspiracy,” said Lais after carefully examining the tablets.

“A conspiracy to find the Prince?” asked Zillah.

“No!” she answered, in a cold, hollow voice, which betrayed her fear. “If that had been possible he would have been found long ago. This message is Casca's writing, but it is written with a trembling hand. Some one has tempted the fool to drink, and then, when full of wine, coaxed him to write this lie in a cruel attempt to mislead us. Where is Casca?”

A slave was instantly despatched to command the chamberlain's presence.

“No one must hear of this,” said Lais sternly.

“May the Queen forgive her servant,” answered Teresh, “but the tablets were handed to me in the Baths, and at my naturally joyful exclamation the people gathered round and read the message I could not yet believe. Then with a mighty shout the gods were praised. Men, slaves, and even ladies ran in all directions to spread the news, and Velia is now full of it.”

“That were most sadly inadvisable.”

At this moment Chryses entered unannounced.

“May long life and the favour of the gods be granted to the Queen.”

“It will be so indeed if the news that Teresh brings is true,” she answered, with a poor attempt at pleasantry. “But what brings the great Arch-priest to our Council so early?”

“Upon the altar in the sacred grove this morning I found a message weighted with a stone addressed to your sacred majesty.”

“Upon the sacred altar; then it should be an oracle. Give us the writing.”

He had laid upon the table a piece of folded parchment, which she took, saying:

“This, too, appears to be from Casca; we will profit by your experience, Teresh, and read before we make unguarded exclamations.”

Then she silently perused this message:

“I have been overpowered. Beware of treachery. I am in the hands of men speaking a language I do not know. Of all they say I only understand one word - Zillah. That may be of service. Protect yourself.”

Almost before she had finished reading, her hand dropped heavily upon the table. She spoke not! made no sign nor sound! The avalanche had struck her in all its force! Everything but torture had forsaken her.

“The way of transgressors is hard.”

This inexorable law had now asserted itself with a startling revelation to Lais. The hour had come. Payment for services rendered was due; and the Shylock of Hell had called to exact the ratification of the comfortably forgotten bond.

The fate of Vedrona was merciful in comparison with this sixty-fold demand! Had she known, contrived, and rejoiced over every detail, the

torture Glarces had passed through was humane beside this Nemesis, since he was upheld by a clear conscience! The Fates had decreed Casca to drink of the Prince's cup, but they allowed the veil of secrecy to hide his torment from a jibing world! Not so Lais! She had been constrained to ask her deadly rival's presence; Teresh, the one man above all others to be avoided, heralded her doom; a powerless priest and a charlatan magician, who had beguiled her with specious promises for the throne, rather than the individual, stood by in complacent inaction; and through the open windows floated the ominous murmur of a nation's retribution.

There was no escape.

Lais recognised this fact more forcibly than any of her visitors. Of the four Teresh was the best-informed as to the real situation, but even he failed to understand the true position as was so keenly appreciated by the Queen. She divined this by one of those abnormal intuitions of the mind which hold themselves in readiness for moments of dire extremity.

Her purpose was instantly formed. She would not surrender, but fall fighting. By an heroic act of will she calmed herself, and woke from the consternation with a musical laugh.

“Our abstraction makes us forgetful of the services you have rendered, for all of which receive our thanks and commendation. Casca has truly found our missing brother, but the circumstances are such as to require all our skill and consideration. The situation is full of such delicate difficulty that we would first briefly consult our faithful Zillah. You, gentlemen, we shall desire to wait in readiness to give what assistance we may shortly need.”

The three at once withdrew.

“Now, my friend, I am afraid all our tact and resources are to be put to a test to frustrate one of the most subtle conspiracies I have known.”

“A conspiracy - is it really so?”

“Yes! Casca has been overpowered and held prisoner. Now, I must tell you that he, and he alone, knows where the Prince is lodging. Therefore, we must find and release the one, or the other will be brought to death for want of food.”

“Then is the Prince not dead?”

“No! Casca has kept him in some secret residence.”

“It would not long be secret after Casca knew it. Why did I not know of this before?”

“I tell you that I am ignorant of where he is.”

“What a brilliant testimony to your - I suppose you would call it tact and wisdom.”

“At least it saved me from a lie when I protested my ignorance.”

“Bah! Are you scrupulous over one lie in such a business as this? And for the sake of it you consent to leave yourself at Casca's mercy.”

“At Casca's mercy?”

“I said so. Who knows but that all the child's play of this morning is but the prelude to his demand for his own terms.”

This was a new and hopeful idea to Lais, the significance of which she caught at once.

“By all the gods of Hades, if it prove so he shall die.”

“Unless he wins the game.”

“I do not fear! I have outwitted him before.”

“And then reposed new confidence in him? You compliment your own intelligence.”

“We are in no mood to receive congratulations, even from our privileged friends,” replied Lais, assuming her royal tone, which had so far been laid aside. “We already begin to see our way through this temporary misunderstanding. Will you tell the lady Tassa we would speak with her?”

Zillah touched the chime.

“It is better for you to bear the command, bringing her with you.”

Zillah made her salutation, and withdrew.

Immediately Lais drew a phial from her breast and emptied its contents into the Iberian's cup of wine.

“That will solve her part of the problem,” she exclaimed. “If I must fall I will not fall alone.”

The Queen was lost in contemplation when her friend returned.

“Tasha had a restless night, and sleeps with instructions not to be disturbed. Shall we wake her?”

“No! I am glad it is so. It is better to do this alone if possible. Now give me your advice.”

Her imperiousness had again disappeared.

“What do you propose?”

“I think it would be best to finish our interrupted meal.” “Yes! It may be the gods will charge our wine with inspiration.”

“We will hope so, and also for success.”

“Now, will you humour me, and let us drink this wish according to Iberian custom?”

“What is that?”

“Exchange our cups.”

“No! That is an evil omen in Sahama. Why do you ask it when you know our superstition in this respect?”

“Because,” and Zillah spoke with deliberate significance, “if Lais trusts Casca, I do not trust Lais,” and she threw the cup and its contents across the room.

“What is this insult?” cried the Queen, rising in her baffled fury.

“Nothing more than the caution of a thoughtful woman.”

“Would you - “

“I would do nothing. But was it not an inadvertence to leave that vial upon the table?” pointing to the philtre.

“Do you accuse me - “

“No, I pity you! You are not well to-day. I should advise you to rest. Casca and the Prince will be safe till tomorrow.”

She then retired, and left the Queen to indulge her fury and contemplate her helplessness.

Maphir visited the palace later in the day. He brought with him the Queen's tablets with the third message, but when he heard the news his heart relented, and he was content not to add another pang to the torture, so having secured a brief interview with Teresh, he went back to his quarters satisfied with the progress of events so far.

Velia, however, was working itself into a perfect storm of excitement; a thousand rumours of the Prince's return were already in circulation. The popularity of the Queen had fallen to zero, and a fierce determination to exact justice was hourly strengthening.

That night Zillah died most mysteriously in her sleep!

CHAPTER XLVI

GO!

Two days passed by. Days of excitement and expectation such as had never been known before in Sahama. The Queen, moved by considerations for herself alone, had recourse to every available artifice, secret and open, to divert the minds of the people, and relieve the tension, but they were obdurate. The conviction that Glarces had been found had taken root too firmly to be disturbed. It could not be denied that the message to Teresh was unsatisfactory and surrounded, in a sense, by mystery; still Casca was absent. Where was he? Why did he not come? Had he really fallen into evil hands, and been made a prisoner with the Prince? These and similar questions were being freely asked, and failure to answer them served to fan the flame of popular enthusiasm.

Then the secret leaked out that Chryses had found a second message on the altar, which was delivered to the Queen. Of its contents no one knew anything; in fact, its existence had been ignored, if not actually denied. This aroused a feeling of distrust against the palace, and the aspect of affairs became more ominous as the time passed, but no news arrived.

Suspense, expectancy, and determination prevailed everywhere. Each separate community throughout the valley had been brought into constant touch by the establishment of runners travelling in all directions. Slaves were relieved from regular duties to search for Glarces or Casca - one or both - with promises of freedom and large reward if successful, and every hour gave birth to new suggestions, none of which were too wild or extravagant to be heard and tried.

In the palace matters reached even a more acute stage, if possible, than in the city. The Queen was at the mercy of fears and torturing powers the people had not dreamed of. They were troubled, at most, by intangible doubts - illusory suspicions - such as she had hitherto exorcised by the magic of her presence; but she was in the coils of a guilty conscience, fascinated by the certainty of approaching retribution, nor able to help herself by reason of the paralysis of her mind.

Hitherto Casca had been a factor in her scheme, useful when needed, but altogether too mean to merit consideration. But Zillah's words revealed the fact that his true position was one of startling importance, and subsequent events had compelled the Queen to recognise that he was the actual key to her individual safety.

What had become of him - why did he not come?

In the fury of their tempest of appalling doubt, she was impotent, helpless, and forsaken.

The torture presently became unendurable, her will broke down, and she was compelled to speak to some one. She chose Meshrac as her confidant, telling him as little as possible, in order to commission him to undertake a search of the golden caves.

This, in company with two or three of the associates of his cult who could be implicitly trusted, he carried out, failing, however, to find any trace either of the Prince or chamberlain, and also without telling either of his co-searchers of one or two suggestive trifles he had discovered when peering down the haunted chasm.

That night the astrologer, in his deep sympathy with the welfare of the Queen, sat in long and close consultation with the stars, and presently deciphered a communication causing him to assemble the brotherhood for a solemn enquiry at the oracle. Here he invoked the shade of Glarces, and learned how considerably the Prince had been provided for during the period of his self-imposed imprisonment, to which Lais had at first stoutly objected, and only yielded in deference to his own determined will. He further cleared the Queen of all complicity in his crime, accepted the sole responsibility for silence as to his fate, and announced his consent to ratify this before the world in the acceptance of the Queen's hand in marriage. He next proceeded to eulogise Casca for the fidelity and consideration shown to him in his retirement, and spoke of the joy with which he had anticipated his speedy return to the people. This, however, the gods had wisely decreed was not to be. During his usual exercise he had incautiously ventured too near the edge of the chasm, where his foot slipped, and he was lost. His two slaves had made every effort to save him, in which both fell victims to their loyalty, evidences of which would still be seen upon examination of the place.

This most circumstantial communication was given to the Queen in due course, the place indicated was searched, and the truth of the oracle substantially confirmed.

This was the position of affairs three days after Casca's disappearance, as Teresh and Zachra conferred with each other in the garden drawing near to Maphir's lodgings.

The hunter had just returned from exercising the lions.

“I hope you have some good news to-day,” said Zachra.

“Nothing new,” he replied; “I met several runners, but they had heard nothing.”

“Did *you* tell *them* anything?” asked Teresh significantly.

“I had nothing to tell them.”

“Have you anything to tell us?”

“What can I tell you?”

“Much, if you will; of that I am certain. This secret about Casca is in your keeping.”

“I wish *he* was,” replied the hunter evasively.

“So do I, Maphir,” answered Zachra; “nothing would please me better.”

“If I could only once get hold of him, or any other man responsible for what the Prince has suffered, I would well feed him out of the same dish Glarces has fed from, before I allowed my dearest friend to know it.”

“And so far as I am concerned, you might continue so to feed him afterwards,” said Teresh, “and if I consent no other person has authority to interfere.”

“Then I only hope I may catch him.”

“Do you mean to say that no one has tried to visit the Prince since we found him?”

“No one has been to-day.”

“Perhaps not; but has no one been since we found him?”

Maphir smiled, but did not reply.

“You have already told us so,” said Zachra.

The hunter shook his head.

“I have never been asked that question before. When you left the lady Tasha here on that first night you did not ask me anything, but hoped I should not be surprised. Since then I have told you no one has come since you left.”

“And you had got the little fiend then?” asked the jubilant Zachra.

“Where do you suppose Casca's two messages came from?”

“Is that your work?” asked Teresh, rejoicing at the light that was now breaking upon him.

“Well, Casca helped me. When I had him I had at once to make sure that Zillah should not escape. I thought the message to the Queen would

secure that, but when I went to the palace I had another written on the Queen's own tablets if necessary, but I was satisfied, and brought that back again.”

“It was a clever move, and well carried out. But where is Casca?”

“In the Prince's old quarters.”

“Not in the cave we found him in?” asked Zachra, with an incredulous smile.

“Just as near as I could bind him to the self-same spot.”

“Oh, ye gods! This is too good! How does he like it?”

“I don't know. I have not seen him yet.”

“Not seen him for three days?”

“No! Why should I disturb him?”

“Has he had nothing to eat?”

“I told him to help himself from his own provision for the Prince.”

“Then you have killed him, man.”

“I hope not! Vermin ought to get fat in such a place. Will you see how he is?”

“Yes; I am responsible for the law, and I do not want you to get into trouble,” said Teresh.

“If I am allowed to avenge the Prince I am not particular about the consequences.”

“But there need be no consequences if I find him guilty.”

“And will you leave me to deal with him afterwards?”

“That I cannot say until I know whether he is guilty.”

“But if he is?”

“Then your wish shall be granted.”

“That is enough.”

With this Maphir led the way past the Prince's apartments towards the distant dungeon, but when he reached the cave where the two slaves found lodging he stopped and said

“I think I had better bring him here. The place is not fit for human beings.”

The two friends remembered their former experience, and having no wish to repeat it, fell in with the suggestion. Maphir, attended by the slaves, went forward, a grim smile lighting his dusky face as he determined to hail Casca as he had greeted the Prince.

“Casca! Casca! The Queen is asking for you!”

“O-o-oh!” was the only wailing response.

“Casca! Are you dreaming? Ah! you ate too much supper.”

“O-oh! Maphir! Mercy! Please have mercy!”

“So I will,” he answered, with mock compassion. **“Does the light disturb your sleep?”**

“Oh, Maphir, I am dying.”

“No, it is only a touch of nightmare. You have made your bed too easy and your food is too rich. I shall have to reduce your luxuries as you did with the Prince.”

“Don't mock and torture me. Kill me if you have any pity.”

“I have none. I am only a hunter, Casca. It is eunuchs of Queens and friends of Princes who have all the pity.”

“Take me out of this and kill me.”

“No, I shall not kill you, and Zhan would turn from your loathsome carcase in disgust. The only thing I can do is to leave you here till the devils find you!”

“Have you no pity?”

“I tell you - no! Not for you!”

“Then I am dead!”

“You will find yourself a lively corpse before I finish with you. Come, getup!”

At this he severed the cord which bound the eunuch to the wall, and lifted the miserable wretch to his feet. He could not stand, so the hunter half-dragged, half-carried him into the adjoining chamber, where one of the slaves roughly scrubbed him with straw, to give what appearance of decency was possible under the circumstances before being introduced to his judges.

The friction rendered him able to crawl by the help of the cord and leathern belt by which Maphir still held him. But his pitiable and woe-begone appearance disarmed the malicious intent of Zachra, nor was the

heart of Teresh proof against a touch of compassion. Maphir's first meed of justice had produced a terrible effect, and the unanticipated severity of it compelled both to forget for the moment that the victim was both designer and self-elected executor of the Prince's suffering.

Sympathies are oftentimes excited in spite of ourselves and rush to the aid of those who are unworthy of them. In this contrariety of action lies one of the psychological mysteries of our being. When he was found Glarces had been absent three months, during which time it was possible for almost any number of changes to have taken place in connection with him, hence there was a certain preparation even for the inhuman treatment he had received, so that, in the joy of his restoration, the shock consequent upon his condition was almost lost. But with Casca the case was different. The excitement occasioned by his disappearance was not yet over, his constitution was still waging a vigorous conflict with starvation, the pompous and bedraggled courtier was yet in stout revolt at his filthy environment, the traces of the palace were not yet buried beneath the abominations of the cell; between themselves and the appearance of their fellow associate they were able to mark the nature of the retribution which had overtaken him, and humanity sympathised, though their hearts were void of pity.

On the other hand, Maphir contemplated the result with composure and congratulation. His education had been in a ruder and far more severe school, where justice had no considerate temperings from sentiment, nor paused to take cognisance of class distinctions or degrees of sensitiveness. Men were men according to the hunter's standard, and if one was better than another he deserved the greater punishment - not consideration - if he sinned against the rights of his fellow. This was Maphir's rule of justice, in the administration of which he never for an instant lost sight of Glarces' punishment. He was only demanding that Casca should take back what he himself had given - who could grumble or object?

As for the ingrate who was called upon to eat the banquet he had provided, when brought into the presence of Teresh and Zachra, the desire for life naturally fired his hope, and on the strength of their former relationship to each other, he - willing to forget his own brutality - ventured to implore their assistance. Darting suddenly forward he threw himself at their feet, crying:

“Teresh-Zachra! Give me food! I die, I die!”

Maphir lifted him to his feet and drew him to a more welcome distance.

“Be quiet,” he said sternly. “You want no food. You have had all you brought for the Prince.”

“I did not bring him any,” whined the wretch. “It was not time.”

“So much the worse for you. When it does come you shall have it.”

“But there is no one to bring it. No one knows where I am.”

“Nor cares either.”

He had certainly no hope of anything from Maphir, so he turned again to Teresh.

“Have pity on me! Save me!” he pleaded.

“Why do you appeal to me?” he asked. “What right have you to expect help or pity who have been so merciless to your best and truest friend?”

“I know it - I feel it now, but - “

“If you feel it and repent of it, tell me what I want to know,”

“Won't you give me some food first, I'm dying!”

“Be quiet,” cried Maphir, with a sharp jerk of the cord. “If you ask for food again I will take you back to bed.”

“No, no, not that - anything but that!”

“Who was it hatched the conspiracy to murder the Princess Vedrona?” asked Teresh.

“No one thought of such a thing.”

“Mind what you say. We are not disposed to be trifled with.”

“I am not doing so - I am too hungry. The gods know I am speaking the truth.”

“Oh, we know that,” Zachra assured him. “You never did tell a lie.”

“What did you do then?”

“Lais was jealous about Glarces and wanted to take him away from the Princess.”

“How did she propose to do it?”

“She did not tell us till the day of the festival. Then I was to help her make Glarces drunk. Vedrona would go home tired. Lais would invite Glarces to see the girls from Ind, and put something Zillah had brought from Meshrac into a cup of wine.”

“From Meshrac! Is he in this too?”

“No! Zillah got it as for herself.”

“What for?”

“That I know not. Lais told me nothing more than she could help.”

“Did she give him this drink?”

“Yes! But she says Zillah deceived her. Brought it too strong and it made Glarces mad. Oh! Teresh, do give me some food.”

“When Lais had secured the Prince what reward were you to have?” asked Teresh, ignoring the plea.

“I was to marry Vedrona.”

“What!” cried Maphir, snatching the eunuch from his feet as if he would dash him to pieces. “By all the spirits of the hunters, if you say that again it will be your last.”

“Let him speak, Maphir; we wish to hear all that was done. Did you think the Princess would consent to such a proposal?”

“Why not?” This was just a touch of the old vanity rising.

“That is very well asked, Casca,” answered Zachra. “Such a chance does not come to a miserable Princess every day. Why not, indeed! And, of course, you thought it could all be arranged.”

“Lais said so.”

“If she said so it was all right.”

“What more did Zillah do?”

“She told Lais all the Princess said, and persuaded her as Lais wished.”

“You mean she was a spy for you?” asked Zachra.

“Not for me - for Lais.”

“And what reward was she to receive?”

“Her freedom.”

“When Vedrona was murdered you lost your reward.”

“Yes,” very mournfully.

“Why did you not speak to the Council then?”

“Because Lais promised to marry me if Glarces did not live.”

“This grows interesting,” remarked Zachra.

“Yes; I think the light begins to shine through,” replied Teresh. Then to Casca - “Who sent him here?”

“Lais asked me to find a place.”

“Did she say here?”

“No! She said anywhere - but did not want to know.”

“Why?”

“So as not to tell a lie to the Council.”

“Did she want him to die?”

“No! She wanted him to return and marry her.”

“Why did she have him kept in such a condition, then?”

“He had to be put there because he was so violent.”

“Then he was not in this vile place from the first?”

“No! He had two apartments in the golden caves.”

“How long was he there?”

“Two moons.” He hesitated before answering this, but he had progressed so far to be hopeful, and spoke boldly when his mind was made up.

“The Prince says he was only there one night.”

“Have you seen him?” cried the wretch, aghast. “Is he not dead?”

“No! he is not dead, and has told us all. We were willing to hear and give you what chance was possible so long as you spoke the truth; but your lie has sealed your fate. You may go back to your place.”

“No, no! Kill me, but keep me away from there.”

“The Prince asked you to kill him, but you had no such pity. Go back!”

“No, no!” he yelled, hoarse with his trembling terror. “Not back to that hell! not to that hell!”

“Where is the pitcher I gave you?” asked Maphir of one of the slaves.

It was handed to him from a corner, and the contents poured over the struggling eunuch's head, completely drenching him. It was not a very tempting draught to judge by the smell, but it was liquid, and he did his best to moisten his parched throat as it passed his lips.

“Come along,” said the hunter when the operation was over, “there are one or two more friends anxious to see how you are.”

“Not the Prince,” he cried.

“No, but Zhan and Zhade would like to - “No, no! ye gods - not the lions!”

But Maphir dragged him fighting and screaming into an adjoining cave, where he threw him as a log.

“What are you going to do?” asked Teresh.

“Give him a fright and my lions a bit of satisfaction.”

“Are you going to turn them loose upon him.”

“Yes! But they will not touch anything with that stuff on.”

“Are you sure?”

“You need not be afraid.”

He blew a peculiar whistle, and in an instant the two brutes came bounding from the den. They followed him into the cave, and for a brief space - though to Casca in his terror it must have seemed an eternity - they snarled and snapped around the half-dead fellow while Maphir looked on smiling.

“Down!” he cried presently, and the lions were instantly at his feet. Then he lifted Casca and dragged him away.

“Help me! Teresh! Zachra! Help, help! Ye gods!” he wailed.

“I should advise you to look more to the devils,” replied Maphir.

It became evident now that he was not destined to return to the original cave, and the two councillors followed to see what the hunter proposed to do. But whatever happened they had no intention of interfering; the conduct of Casca merited no interposition.

At the edge of the chasm Maphir stopped and lifted the chamberlain to his feet.

“Have you anything more to say?” he asked.

“Mercy! mercy!” he panted.

“You shall have it as you gave it to the Prince.”

“Let me go! Lais! Help! They are killing me!”

“What does Lais care for that? but you shall go directly.”

“Help! Save me, ye gods!”

“Be quiet and hear me,” said Maphir, as he thrust and shook him over the abyss. “There are not gods, nor devils, nor men enough, if all their forces were joined together, to save you now. If hell has one place vile enough to afford you shelter I will send you to it! Now, are you ready?”

“No, no! Good Maphir, hear me!”

“I will hear you and answer as you did when the Prince entreated. Come, spread your wings.”

As he spoke he seized and lifted Casca in his arms with the ease of a dog shaking a rat.

“Help! Save me, save me,” he yelled.

“Yes, as you saved the Prince! You have cursed the earth enough with your presence. Go!”

He dashed him into the gulf. There was one awful yell, and all was over. Maphir peered into the blackness and then turned away wiping the perspiration from his forehead.

“Earth is already sweeter and hell more foul for his going,” he said.

But neither Teresh nor Zachra replied.

CHAPTER XLVII

MAPHIR'S CONFESSION

Glarcés lay upon the softest and most luxurious divan the resources of Sahama could produce. Devoted love, courageous fidelity, tender sympathy, and anxious determination had converted his temporary abode into a veritable enchanted palace, in every feature carefully designed to encourage forgetfulness on the one hand and on the other to stimulate memories necessarily helpful to restoration.

It was like a lodge erected within the borderland where souls purified from even the suspicion of a stain in the whitened glow of hell's fierce torments, rest in order to be laved from the vibration of the memory of torture and adjust themselves to the soothing influences of the succeeding peace.

Hearts, hands, and heads had harmoniously united to arrange and furnish every detail of this strange but temporary abode as an expression of hopeful love and tender compensation for the awful past. Work is the spirit of effectual prayer, and they laboured until love could go no farther and devotion sighed to think it could do no more.

Teresh, Zachra, and Tasha each found in their own establishments slaves faithful as themselves who were available for service in this respect - men who were secretly drafted into the work, and rejoiced at the confidence which set them apart to such welcome duty. With the assistance of these Maphir had liberally supplied every hint or suggestion of Tasha, whose

maternal hands and heart had directed all the final and requisite arrangements.

In this dreamy grotto of pure affection, presided over by his one remaining angel, Glarces lay, while the two estates waged their friendly contest for possession. Sahama had heard that he was found, and the nation had joined its penitent importunity with Tasha's tearful determination to keep him still; but, to the light of her newly found heaven, the love of Vedrona had grown well-nigh omnipotent, and longed to lift him above the possibility of further suffering. Between these two the mangled, broken, crushed, but still dutiful Prince was doubtfully rocked. He wondering; Tasha hoping; Vedrona calling.

After the tempest the peace of the uncertainty was as heaven, and he was patiently content. All that earth retained of personal friendship had been restored to him. Orasus, Maphir, and the lions represented the best fidelity of his dependents. His retreat was far preferable to the palace with its vacant rooms and silent voices. The gods were good to him and he was - happy? Could he say so much? No! Not quite - Vedrona was absent; and with that consciousness one note in life's full chord was flat, rendering the perfect harmony required for happiness incomplete.

Still, he was not now the storm-tossed sufferer we saw lured so deceitfully to his imprisonment. Since that night he had passed through an ordeal few could have braved and lived. In blackness, loneliness, and poisonous starvation he had fought a battle with treachery and selfishness, in the which he had been maimed in nerve and muscle, sinew and bone; all that was physical had been shattered, if not irretrievably destroyed. But the beneficent power - call it what you please - which stands behind the physical - whispering in a voice we fail to understand, prompting with an aspiration we almost fear to accept as true - had revealed to him an unsuspected system of compensation which is only known to those who courageously shoulder life's cross, nor flinch to sink, if need be, beneath its weight. In the darkness of his torture this great and treasured experience had been brought to light. The gods had spoken to him, and he had found that the unrighteous gate of a persecutor's hell is but the masked side of the vestibule by which the faithful reach the halls of heaven.

This was the secret of Glarces' welcome content, and Tasha sat beside him ministering to the abundance of his peace.

“Should you miss me now if I had to go away again?” he asked, his eyes full of the longing to depart - his heart overflowing with affection for the friend who was so much to him.

“You are not going, dear. Now that we have recovered you we shall keep you.”

“Not if I wished to go, would you, Tasha?”

“Do you wish to go?” she asked sorrowfully.

“Do I?” he questioned of himself dreamily. Then his hand sought her's. He saw the tearful sorrow in her eyes, and went on: “I cannot say! Sometimes I feel as if I do, and I would - but you are here, Tasha, and I would not leave you. If I were with Vedrona in the fairest bower of the Elysian fields I think we should want you, my mother, to make it quite complete.”

“Would you, my boy?”

“I think so - I hope so! And I am sure Vedrona would think so too.”

Then, with an effort controlling the flood of feeling which threatened to overwhelm her, she tried to turn his mind into another channel.

“But these are dreams and speculations of the far distant future, Glarces. You must now begin to think of what the people are asking.”

“What is that?”

“They are wondering what you will do when they see you back again.”

“I am not back yet.”

“No; but you are growing stronger, and will soon be able to return.”

“I am not so sure about that. I think Vedrona would wish it otherwise.”

“She will never wish you to leave your work, dear.”

“Do you think so? Ah, Tasha!” he continued, with a smile full of confidence and pleasure, “you only knew her as a child - I know the strength and sacred selfishness of her woman's love.”

“The selfishness?”

“Yes, dear; true love is always selfish, even the perfection of maternal love with which you love me. And Vedrona is alone.”

“Shall I not be alone?”

“That is my difficulty; but have not the gods decreed that the mother's love must yield in such a case?”

“Would you like me to let you go?”

“No! I must not - cannot lose you, Tasha; the memory of what you always have been - what you are to me even now, forbids that! Do you think I can ever forget your coming to me in those awful days when I thought Vedrona's love was lost to me for ever? How you tried to console and encourage me, and almost made me hope?”

“But those dark days are gone now,” she rejoined anxious to draw him from the melancholy contemplation.

“Yes, they are gone,” he reflected. “It was you who cleft the clouds and let the first ray of light come through.”

“No, dear; the gods did that.”

“But they used you for the purpose,” and he drew her head tenderly down to kiss her. “From that time I have never been without a ray of hope.”

“Never?”

“No, never. You rent the gloom, and since then the light has been continually increasing, until I know that the love Vedrona and I have for each other can never be destroyed nor separated. Such love is not of earth, Tasha, it is the gift of the most mighty gods, implanted not in the body but in our immortal selves, therefore nothing that earth produces, experiences, or is subject to, has power to reach or otherwise disturb it. It is more than life - for life is only one form of its expression, and thus death, nor passion, nor hell, nor any other power can conquer or subdue it.”

Argument was not one of Tasha's strong points, especially with Glarces, whose opinions were always accepted by her as with oracular authority. In addition to this the animation with which he had spoke so exhausted him as to make her anxious to close the conversation.

“I hope it is so, dear; but you are tired and must rest now.”

As she spoke she rose with that tenderly graceful but authoritative tact by which a woman so irresistibly rules, and began to busy herself with important nothings, before passing to the inner room from whence she brought sweet and restorative perfumes to bathe his head and sprinkle the divan.

“I know it is so,” he resumed, as soon as she had taken her seat again.

“Then I am glad, dear; but you must not talk any more now.”

“Yes, Tasha, it will be too late if I do not speak to-night.”

“Why too late?” she asked, full of alarm.

“Don't be afraid. I know not why I feel so, but I do. I am not tired, but I feel a strange weariness to-night! It makes me glad rather than restless, brings a sense of freedom rather than oppression, and makes me want to speak with you. No, my mother - you must not weep! Hear me, and then if my thought of what is coming proves to be true, you will be glad that I have told you.”

“You must not talk like this, dear. I cannot bear it - it will break my heart!”

“Then I will say no more about it, but I have something to tell you about Vedrona. Will you hear that?”

“About Vedrona?”

“Yes! Do you remember how we saw her on the day I left you?”

“Yes.”

“Well, when my imprisonment became more intolerable than I could bear she came to me again. She spoke to me, cheered me, bade me hope, told me of many things - that the immortals are not far away, and how in such inhumanities as I was suffering they had the power to come and minister at times. It was her coming that gave me power to live through all I endured, and made it possible for you and I to meet again.”

“Are you sure it was her, dear?” asked the wondering, but now rejoicing woman.

“Are you sure that I am Glarces?” he replied.

“You need not ask me that.”

“Neither need you ask me the other. Yes, Tasha, I know Vedrona too well to be deceived. Ah! here is Teresh and Zachra! What is the news, gentlemen?”

“Excitement everywhere, and disappointment at your delayed return,” answered Teresh. “The magicians last night received from the oracle the account of your falling down the abyss in the golden caves, and their report was made to the Queen to-day. A search has revealed one of your head-dresses on a ledge of the chasm, so, of course, Lais accepts the message, and is mourning accordingly.”

The Prince smiled sadly.

“But where is Casca?” he asked.

“I should suggest you ask Maphir that question,” Zachra answered.

“Why?”

“It were better for him to answer you than that I should attempt it. Shall I call him?”

“Yes, let me see him.”

It was only by express command that the hunter would enter into his royal master's presence, though he had been many times assured how glad the Prince would be to see him. When Zachra called him, however, the stalwart champion of retribution was only too glad to answer.

“Come, my good Maphir, why should you desert me?” asked Glarces, with an effort at cheerfulness.

“My duty is not in your presence, most mighty Prince, but it has not been neglected.”

“I am confident of that; but I have asked for news of Casca, and my lord Zachra tells me that you are able to give the information.”

“I imagine Casca is busy just now,” he replied, as if more to himself than Glarces.

“Then you know where he is?”

“No! That is very doubtful. I know he is not with the gods, and I do not think the devils will care to have him.”

“What do you mean, Maphir?”

“I have just started him down the haunted gulf to see if he can find the two slaves who bound you to that wall.”

“Are they there?”

“Yes, Casca threw them in when they had finished his work, so I have sent him after them now he is no longer wanted.”

“You have thrown him there - no, Maphir, you are not so cruel.”

“It was not cruelty but justice, O Prince.”

“But it is an awful death,” and Glarces shuddered at the thought of it.

“It has been more merciful than I intended,” answered the hunter regretfully. “If my lords had not surprised me I meant to make hell far more welcome to him than it was.”

“Then I am grateful that you were so surprised.”

“And I am disappointed. Not that I would disobey your slightest wish, O Prince, but such as he deserve nor have any claim to pity. There is no

justice for such a crime as his, and to let him slip so free from punishment is enough to make the spirits of the hunters drive me from their company as a traitor and a coward.”

“They can never do that, my good friend. When did you meet with him?”

“The night we found you.”

“What has he done all this time?”

“Slept in the bed you left.”

“In all that filth?”

“He had to - I could find nothing worse.”

“Had you no pity for him?”

“More than he had for you. He kept you in that Tartarus for three months, I only left him for three days.”

“You gave him good food, I hope?”

“He was at liberty to have all I could not take away.”

“Did you not give him any?”

“I left him all he had brought for you.”

“Poor Casca!”

Maphir, however, showed no evidence of bending to the natural generosity of the Prince. It was a new trait in his character to place himself in such determined opposition, but it was prompted by the fidelity that was not willing to allow Glarces thus to suffer without exacting what atonement he had opportunity to enforce. The thought of extending commiseration to the eunuch excited a boldness of indignation which occasioned surprised to all who saw and heard it, but the strength and fulness of his loyalty won their admiration and acquiescence.

“Wherefore was he poor,” he asked, “or in what had he reason for complaint? His one desire since I have known him has been to take the place of the Prince. I have but helped him to it, and prevented anyone from disturbing his enjoyment of it. The place in which he lived he had himself provided; he made the bed in which he slept, and also furnished the table off which he ate. In everything he had his one desire - he stepped into the place he had provided for his friend the Prince. And I hope he liked it.”

“I would that you had not been quite such a merciless executioner,” said Glarces, sorrowfully.

“Forgive me, O mighty Prince,” and the hunter bent his knee beside his master, “but had I been the more than godlike Glarces, after suffering all that he has made you suffer, he would have been forgiven even now. Your kindly heart has not the courage to avenge a wrong done to yourself. The crime of Casca outraged the gods, and made the devils fear to see that he so far surpassed themselves. Had I been his victim and you had found me, you would not then have pardoned him - you would have cried for justice, and at any cost would wait to see it carried out. I have but done the thing you would have done for me, and if I have been wrong therein, I did it from a hunter's sense of justice and of duty.”

“You did no wrong, my friend, and I thank you for your faithful service.”

Maphir rose from his knee fully justified, and that was all the reward he asked apart from his own approbation.

“What do you counsel respecting Lais?” asked Glarces of Teresh, after a brief pause necessitated by exhaustion.

“I shall suggest nothing at present. The most necessary point is to see you stronger.”

“That is my idea also,” said Zachra. “It will do Lais no harm in the end to maintain the present state of uncertainty.”

“Nothing is worthy of consideration, dear, until you are better,” said Tasha.

“I can understand and appreciate all you say, but the time is short. If Lais and I are to meet again it must be to-morrow.”

“You are tired to-night; this affair of Casca's has been too much for you. Be advised and let the other matter stand. To-morrow you will be better.”

“No, Teresh, to-morrow I shall - “ he paused and tried to turn his face away, but his strength failed. He was deathly pale, and great beads of cold perspiration stood out upon his forehead.

The silent indication was its own interpreter. The morrow was not far off, and the only point in doubt was at what part of the day the abruptly announced but inexorable visitor would arrive.

The quartette were dumbfounded by the unexpected blow. Not even Tasha wept; the fountains of tears were scorched and dried up by the lightning flash. It could only be a little while their ministry would be required, then Glarces and Vedrona would be together again.

CHAPTER XLVIII
THE CAR ASCENDS

The end had come. Lais had miserably failed. There was now no uncertainty about it. The voice of the oracle had proclaimed the event, and the examination of the haunted chasm had confirmed it. Glarces was dead; her hopes destroyed; her anticipated career ruined! She no longer wept tears of hypocrisy to deceive the people, but the genuine grief of a defeated and disappointed woman consumed her. She had reached and held the throne just long enough to prepare for the consummation of her aspiration, then, touched by the magic wand of fate, it had vanished - an empty bauble - into thin air, and was no more. What other could it possibly be, in the absence of Glarces - and he was dead!

She had built her kingdom on the sand, and the floods had carried it away. The interminable watches of the night had been passed in the absorbing occupation of yesterday - reviewing the way by which she had travelled with its varying promises of success, hoping, even now, it was not too late to discover where she had taken the false step leading to defeat - and the morning found her haggard, wan, and crushed. Energy and even interest had deserted her. Life itself was a burden, respecting which she sat curiously and mechanically speculating when aroused by the announcement of Meshrac and Chryses.

“May the Queen live for ever,” was the usual salutation of the twain.

“The Queen has no desire to live another day,” she replied, “unless the gods can reverse the wheels of fate.”

“That is impossible,” answered the priest.

“And has the oracle nothing better to declare than its decree of yesterday?”

“The oracle is silent, as also are the stars,” replied the magician.

“Then what remains for us to do?”

We await the Queen's commands in that respect.”

“But what avail are our commands if the Fates oppose us? Has the turbulence in the city been suppressed?”

“Not Yet. The captain of the guard advises that we proclaim the Prince's death as revealed by the oracle. This, he thinks, will restore quiet to the city.”

“It were better not to do that,” she answered reflectively, “until the gods have either confirmed, or, let us hope, recalled it.”

Hope died hard in Lais, but the priests were highly indignant at such an aspersion on the arts they practised.

“Are the gods but men, O Queen, that they should be mistaken; or are they blind that they should thus declare a lie?” asked Meshrac.

“Have they not deceived us with false hopes, until we have lost all confidence both in gods and men?” she replied.

As the Queen spoke, Zosine entered and announced:

“The keeper of the lions comes with an urgent message for the Queen.”

“Bid him send it to us by your hand.”

“He carries it upon his tongue, O Queen.”

“Then let him approach us.”

Maphir entered with a vivid recollection of his last interview with the Queen. Drawn to his full height, with graceful, measured step, arms folded in easy dignity across his chest, and a smile playing mischievously over his face as he beheld the priests, he approached with majesty but without arrogance.

He bent his knee and waited for the Queen to speak.

“Whence comes the keeper of our lions on his urgent mission?”

“With a message from the most mighty Prince Glarces, O Queen.”

Lais was startled into a joyful exclamation, the priests frowned and retreated a step.

“Then your message is delayed, for the Prince is two days dead - perhaps more.”

“Casca is dead; but I am only now come from the presence of the Prince.”

“Casca dead? How know you this?”

“I was with him at the time.”

“And the Prince still lives?”

“He bade me bring the Queen to him if she will come.”

“What means this, Meshrac?” she inquired.

“We would advise the Queen to act with caution,” answered the astrologer. “The gods have long forewarned us of this son of Cush.”

Maphir turned upon the speaker with a look of amused contempt.

“Your gods are like their oracle of the Prince's death - a lie of your own wish and imagination.”

“This slander of the gods is worthy of instant death, O Queen,” appealed Meshrac.

“And I am ready to pay the forfeit if I speak not truth.”

“We know you speak a lie and ask for sentence now.”

“Is it not better first to see the Prince, then judge me afterwards? for if I die no other man can tell you where to find him.”

“What bond have you to give that this is true?” inquired the Queen, who had been carefully watching both hunter and priests.

“If the Queen will hear me, I will give such proof as will determine.”

“You may speak.”

“Two days ago the Queen's astrologer and his companions searched the golden caves in an attempt to find the Prince or Casca.”

“How know you this?”

“I watched them.”

“Go on.”

“Presently Meshrac reached the chasm, and by the light of his torch saw a strap from the Prince's sandal, as well as the head-dress lying upon the rocks where Casca had placed them. Here was a revelation, and I heard my lord say - being sure his friends were out of hearing - 'The oracle must tell of this, then it will bring us fame and favour.' He then called his men, and gave up the search. This opened the mouth of his gods, and they spoke - when Meshrac had told them what to say.”

“I went not near - “

“Silence!” commanded the Queen. “This is news indeed.” Then addressing the hunter, she asked, “How know you that Casca placed these where Meshrac saw them?”

“I saw it. It was the night he disappeared. He first wrote a message, as from the Prince, upon these tablets for the Queen (here he laid the royal leaves upon the table), then, having placed these articles where the god Meshrac found them, he passed the gulf and was arrested.”

“Arrested! By whom?”

“I was waiting for him for the purpose.”

“Have you detained him? Then you shall die!”

“Yes, you shall die! “ cried the priests, glad to find such a way of escape.

Maphir's composure was undisturbed.

“I have more to tell of Casca if the Queen will hear it.”

“No, we have heard enough.”

“Nor does the Queen desire to see the Prince again?” he asked quietly.

“Yes! If the Prince does live, you shall lead us to him at once; but we will call the guard that neither you nor the priests shall escape until we know the truth.”

Meshrac smiled. He knew the Queen, and also the strength of her superstition. He and his friend were safe.

Maphir submitted to the arrest very much as if he was the culprit in a game of childish make-believe. He had dealt a serious blow to the established religion, and must needs be content to accept some retaliation at the hands of the priests. The persecution of a heretic is always a sweet morsel to an ecclesiastic. This spirit is the differentiation between religion and theology - between the saint and professor. The hunter had no knowledge of such subtle distinctions; he worked according to his own crude ideas of right, justice, and duty, in the pursuit of which he was not hypercritical about trifles. If the arrest was a source of consolation to the astrologer and the priest, he was satisfied, since the action was a matter of perfect indifference to himself. The climax would be the same anyway.

The Queen retired, but her slave returned to learn what preparation was necessary for the visit, the destination of which had not yet been made known.

Where is this hiding-place of the Prince, slave?” asked the officer.

“Do you so soon forget that Glarces would never hide himself from any man?” he answered proudly.

“Are you not in jeopardy enough without adding insolence to that you have already shown?” asked Meshrac. “I am in no jeopardy, Sir Priest; if this amusement of your spite - “

“Will you answer the Queen's inquiry?” the captain demanded.

“When I have spoken to the priest.”

“But you shall tell me at once, or by the gods - “

“Meshrac is the chief god of Sahama, and I must answer him before the Queen.”

“You shall answer me.”

“When I am ready to do so,” he replied. “Till then, being neither slave nor traitor - but a messenger from the Prince to render a service to the Queen - I demand to be treated in accordance with my office. If you fail in this, I shall say and do - nothing; then the Prince will say to the city what he desires only to tell the Queen. May I speak now?”

“I only know you as my prisoner,” Petronius replied; “ but you may speak.”

“Then I would tell this priest - and yourself also - that I am in no jeopardy. If your amusement - this arrest - was any inconvenience, I should put an end to it at once.”

“Is that any inconvenience?” asked the irate astrologer as he struck the hunter a violent blow across the mouth.

“The blow is nothing,” he replied, carelessly wiping the blood away; “but the affront you will have to answer for.”

“You are on dangerous ground when you refuse to answer the Queen and use threats to her counsellor,” the captain cautioned him.

“I used no threat.” Then to Zosine, “Tell the Queen we can reach the Prince through the golden caves if she desires it. He is there.”

“It is false! The Prince is not there,” Meshrac affirmed. Maphir made no response.

“Did you hear what the chief magician declares?” asked Petronius.

“I have sent my answer to the Queen.”

“But I say he is not there.”

Maphir still paid no attention; but just then the Queen returned, and the incident ended without her knowledge of it.

With every wish to keep this visit as secret as possible, she preferred to proceed by way of the subterranean passage from the palace, taking with her only such attendants as required - Damophila and the salve Zosine, the two priests, and Petronius in charge of Maphir.

On reaching the gangway Lais exclaimed and refused to cross under the influence of the popular superstition regarding the place.

“We must cross to see the Prince,” said Maphir.

This assurance was all-potent, and the party passed over, the priests offering their protection to the Queen.

On reaching the Prince's domicile, the captain made as if to retain the hunter, but the lions were in evidence, and Maphir went through the ante-cave, opened the curtains, and announced:

“The Queen!”

Even then Lais had a lingering doubt if she would find the Prince, but the doubt had to be determined, and to do it she swept forward in her most imperiously regal mood.

“Teresh! Zachra! You here! - and Tasha too! This looks something like a conspiracy. But we will pardon it since we find our brother also.”

Glarcés, with the assistance of Tasha, had risen to his elbow to receive her. Through the night he had rested but fitfully, watched by his friends, and sustaining himself for this interview by the almost super-human effort of his will, in order to clear up the mystery the nation had a right to understand. Still, in case of accident, he had told everything he knew, and this, pieced with Maphir's story and Casca's confession was quite enough for Teresh and Zachra to act upon when the time came. Further, Glarcés was true to his old self even in this extremity, and had exercised his right, as sole representative of the royal house, to nominate Tasha as the future Queen, and committed her to the care of Teresh. To Maphir, he had bequeathed half his own possessions, with the request that he should hasten back to his home as soon as all was over. These matters arranged, he had nothing to do but await the interview, and Lais at last had come.

“Keep back,” he said, and Maphir interposed to enforce the command if necessary. “Time is short with me; we will not waste it in regrets, but in the presence of these witnesses - Ah, Chryses, Meshrac, I am glad for you to be here also - I am anxious for you to see and know that all your scheming, your perfidy, and your murders have failed to realise your one desire.”

“What madness is this that still deludes your mind? You are ill! Bid Petronius send, with all haste, for Machaon - “

“Such assistance is now too late,” answered Teresh.

“If so, we shall hold you responsible for it being so. Send for Machaon, I say, and we will have our brother taken to the palace, where he may have attention.”

“That decision is tardy in its arrival,” said Glarces. “It might have served its purpose sooner.”

“We did not know where to find you.”

“Casca could have told you.”

“But he did not.”

“For the reason that he was commanded not to do so,” replied Teresh in his desire to save the Prince as much as possible. “Casca has made a full confession of more than we asked him - more than we have made the Prince aware of.”

“But who can trust Casca?” she asked.

“Lais has done so,” replied Glarces.

“If he were here he should - “

“Shall I bring him?” inquired Maphir.

“Bring him!” gasped Lais, who had relied upon the report of the eunuch's death. “You told us he was dead.”

“That was more than I could knowingly declare. I was with Casca - kept him since the night of his disappearance; but I have not seen him die, nor have I seen him dead.”

“What is this folly, Maphir?” asked Teresh aside.

“It is no folly, my lord. The gods have told the magicians that Casca has escaped, and for doubting the truth of the oracle I have suffered this,” pointing to the wound on his lip.

“Then if he is not dead, go! Bring him here,” commanded the Queen.

“I will show the magician where I left him, then perhaps the gods will show where Casca hides.”

“We command you to produce him here.” Maphir drew himself to his full height.

“I am the servant of the Prince,” he replied.

“If you know where he is, bring him to me,” said Glarces.

“I can do no more, O Prince, than I have said. If the gods know better than myself, let the priest come and bring him. I will show my lord where I left Casca.”

“We will send Petronius.”

“Nothing short of the authority of the gods themselves could bring him here, and I will take no one to where I left him but those who can speak in the name of the gods.”

“And has my brother placed himself in the power of this base slave - has the once mighty Glarces fallen so low?”

By this time the Prince and his two friends had divined that the hunter had some reason for this strange conduct, the which, while they feared for the result, they would not attempt, in their ignorance of what had transpired in the palace, to frustrate. Zachra made a shrewd guess at the matter, and whispered the same to Teresh, with a suggestion to assist the hunter.

“If all my friends had been like him, I had not been as I am. He rescued, and made it possible for me to live so long.”

“Rescued you! What do you mean?”

“Let the Queen send to see the place and condition in which the Prince was kept by Casca,” advised Teresh, “the place from which the hunter brought him, then she will understand the gratitude we feel.”

“But has not this been our brother's abode?”

“Maphir, take the Queen and show her where you found me if she chooses to see it.”

“Not that,” interposed Teresh. “Let the Queen send Meshrac or Chryses to report.”

“Yes, Meshrac shall go; and when you return bring Casca with you, if he is not dead. No man shall disobey our will and escape.”

“Shall I take the officer of the guard, O Queen?” asked the reluctant priest.

“No. I have slaves at hand,” replied Maphir. Then the two departed.

There was a brief but painful silence as the curtains fell behind the astrologer. Glarces was very weak, his breath laboured; and Lais could find nothing to say. Tasha had no thought but for her charge, whose life was slipping away as sand through her fingers. Chryses had drawn Zachra aside to learn what was possible of the painful mystery. The course was therefore plain for Teresh to lead the way towards the inevitable climax, and save the Prince from all unnecessary fatigue.

“I had determined to say nothing here,” he began; “but the serious condition of the Prince demands that what has to be done must be

without delay, and my position leaves me no choice but to undertake the painful duty.”

“And what may that be?” she inquired haughtily.

“Simply and briefly to inform you that we are now in possession of sufficient details of this intrigue, from the time you met Zillah in the fernery and accepted her assistance - which interview was overheard by Maphir - down to the present moment, as to prove your connection with the murder of the Princess Vedrona and the misfortunes which have followed. In ignorance of these matters the Council made you Queen; but, now they are so fully made known to me, as the responsible officer of our lamented Queenmother, I have to order your arrest to answer for them.”

“That is a painful duty, Teresh. I could not do it; but I thank you. Still, ask the Council, for me, to be as merciful as may be.”

Lais turned faint as she heard the charge of the Councillor, and trembled backward until she fell helpless and speechless upon a divan, where Damophila and Zosine administered restoratives. The final bolt of the Fates had fallen. Escape was beyond all hope. The end had come.

Maphir's return came like a last straw, at which she grasped.

“Where is he? Have you found him?” she cried.

“Who? Casca? No, the gods are wrong again! I knew he was dead! But Meshrac has gone after him to make sure.”

The Queen dropped into the cushions, no doubt wishing she could so easily escape.

By one of those abnormal efforts some men are able to put forth in times of momentous crisis, Glarces roused himself to speak to her once again. How it pained him to do so was only too evident, but the ruling instinct of his life - at any cost to be true to his ideal of truth and duty - possessed him to the last.

“And is it so, my one-time little sister, that all our dreams of life must end? Is this how we must part? Is this the promised land of passion's rich fulfilment? How happy might we yet have been - Vedrona, you and I, had you but learned the truth of love - had you not chosen to kill it for yourself! Now, Lais - oh, my lonely sister - what will you do? Who will help you or guide you? Where will you be able to find rest or comfort? Every friend in whom you placed your confidence is gone! The love we gave you, you have murdered! Jealousy and passion now only mock you! The gods have deceived you and left you to your fate! I would help you –

but - I cannot. What an awful price you have to pay! And you have nothing to pay with. You have lost all, and have not touched the thing you would destroy. No, Lais, now you can understand that love has powers beyond the reach of everything - it is omnipotent; and hindrance, opposition, trials, and temptations are only agents to make it purer, nobler, stronger. All that you have done has not parted Vedrona and myself, but drawn us nearer to each other. In that awful hell where Casca kept me I was nearer to her heaven than when we were together in the palace. My body was poisoned and maimed, as you see; but I was not distressed, because the links of earth were breaking to let me escape to where she waits for me - where we shall be for ever one. Yes - yes! She waits for - me!"

He fell back, the effort had exhausted him. Tasha, alarmed at his weakness and pallor, called for perfumes, with which to bathe his face in order to revive him. Again he spoke, but this time he was standing beside his sister's pyre, the torch in hand, and Chryses was urging him to fire it.

"Farewell! thou fairest soul that ever entered the Elysian bowers - my sister! Yet I will love thee - farewell! My life goes with you - but I have sacrificed it! Farewell, farewell, and yet again farewell! Oh, cruel, cruel to part us so! But I will come! Yes, I will come! We must not part! Yet see! the car - the car! Farewell, farewell!"

It was all over!

As he uttered his last words the walls of his cave faded away, and behind him rose the Car of Phoebus, with Vedrona holding out her hands as if calling him to come.

"See! see!" cried Chryses, "the car - the car!"

"And the brave Prince has gone to meet it," exclaimed Teresh.

"Ye gods! Not that - not that," screamed Lais. "He must not, shall not go!"

The brightness of the vision blinded her as she rushed towards his divan. Maphir interposed; but in the flood of light she was compelled to hide her face in her upraised arm.

Vedrona smiled and still outstretched her hands, as from the couch a haze ascended which gradually took shape until the soul of the Prince, clad in the raiment of immortality, hailed and answered her invitation.

Then Lais, in a passion of wild despair, dashed towards the car, crying:

"She shall not have him - I will follow him, for he is mine!"

The vision faded as Lais forced herself forward and fell over the divan on which the body of Glarces lay, her dagger buried in her own heart.

She was borne aside, but it was too late - she was already dead.

Again the vision rose, the car ascending with the reunited pair. But as the weeping friends gazed upon the apotheosis, the sombre - clad soul of Lais stood in the golden light reaching out after the Prince. Then from beneath a fury appeared to drag her down.

It was an awe-inspiring scene - she sinking as she struggled upwards, and disappearing with an awful shriek "I have lost him - lost him for ever!"

THE END