

be. Were I to show mercy to these wolves, your lives would not be safe among this people for a day. Thou knowest them not. They are tigers to lap blood, and even now they hunger for your lives. How thinkest thou that I rule this people? I have but a regiment of guards to do my bidding, therefore it is not by force. It is by terror. My empire is of the imagination. Once in a lifetime mayhap I do as I have done but now, and slay a score by torture. Believe not that I would be cruel, or take vengeance on anything so low. What can it profit me to be avenged on such as these? Those who live long, my Holly, have no passions, save where they have interests. Though I may seem to slay in wrath, or because my mood is crossed, it is not so. Thou hast seen how in the heavens the little clouds blow this way and that without a cause, yet behind them is the great wind sweeping on its path whither it listeth. So is it with me, O Holly. My moods and changes are the little clouds, and fitfully these seem to turn; but behind them the great wind of my purpose blows ever. Nay, the men must die; and die as I have said." Then, suddenly turning to the captain of the guard, she added:—

"As my word is, so be it!"

## XVI.

### THE TOMBS OF KÔR.

AFTER the prisoners had been removed Ayesha waved her hand, and the spectators, turning round, began to crawl away down the cave like

a scattered flock of sheep. When they were at some distance from the dais, however, they rose and walked, leaving their Queen and myself alone, with the exception of the mutes and a few guards, for the most of these had departed with the doomed men.

Thinking this a good opportunity, I asked *She* to come to visit Leo, telling her of his serious condition; but she would not, saying that he certainly would not die before the evening, as people never died of that fever except at nightfall or the dawn. Also she said it would be better that the sickness should spend its course as much as possible before she cured it. Accordingly, I was rising to leave, when she bade me follow her, as she would talk with me, and show me the wonders of the caves.

I was too much involved in the web of her fascinations to say her no, even had I wished it, so I bowed in assent; whereon she rose from her chair, and, making some signs to the mutes, descended from the dais. As she came four of the girls took lamps, and ranged themselves two in front of and two behind us, but the others went away, as also did the guards.

"Now," she said, "wouldst thou see some of the wonders of this place, O Holly? Look upon this great cave. Sawest thou ever its like? Yet was it, and many others, hollowed out by the hands of the dead race that once lived here in the city of the plain. A great and a wonderful people they must have been, those men of Kôr, but, like the Egyptians, they thought more of the dead than of the living. How many men, thinkest thou, working for how many years, did it need to the hewing of this cave and all its endless galleries?"



"Tens of thousands," I answered.

"So, O Holly. This people was an old people before the Egyptians were. A little can I read of their inscriptions, having found the key to them—and, see thou here, this was one of the last of the caves that they fashioned," and, turning to the rock beside her, she motioned the mutes to hold up the lamps. Carven over the dais was the figure of an old man seated in a chair, with an ivory rod in his hand, and it struck me that his features were exceedingly similar to those of the man whose embalmment was represented in the chamber where we took our meals. Beneath the chair, that, by the way, was shaped exactly like the one in which Ayesha had sat to give judgment, was a short inscription in the extraordinary characters whereof I have already spoken, but which I do not remember sufficiently to reproduce. It looked more like Chinese writing than any other that I am acquainted with. This inscription, with some difficulty and hesitation, Ayesha proceeded to read aloud and to translate. It ran as follows:—

*"In the year four thousand two hundred and fifty-nine from the founding of the City of Imperial Kôr was this cave (or burial place) completed by Tisno, King of Kôr, the people thereof and their slaves having laboured thereat for three generations, to a tomb for their citizens of rank who shall come after. May the blessing of the heaven above the heaven rest upon their work, and make the sleep of Tisno, the mighty monarch, the likeness of whose features is graven above, a sound and happy sleep till the day of awakening,\* and also the sleep of his servants, and of those of*

*his race who, rising up after him, shall yet lay their heads as low."*

"Thou seest, O Holly," she said, "this people founded the city, of which the ruins yet cumber the plain yonder, four thousand years before this cave was finished. Yet, when first mine eyes beheld it two thousand years ago, it was even as it is now. Judge, therefore, how old must that city have been! And now, follow thou me, and I will show thee after what fashion this great people fell when the time was come for it to fall." Then she led the way to the centre of the cave, stopping at a spot where a round rock had been let into a kind of large manhole in the flooring, accurately filling it just as the iron plates fill the holes in the London pavements down which the coals are thrown. "Thou seest," she said. "Tell me what is it?"

"Nay, I know not," I answered; whereon she crossed to the left-hand side of the cave (looking towards the entrance) and signed to the mutes to hold up the lamps. On the wall was something painted with a red pigment in similar characters to those hewn beneath the sculpture of Tisno, King of Kôr. This long inscription Ayesha translated to me, the pigment still being quite fresh enough to show the form of the letters. It ran as follows:—

*"I, Junis, a priest of the Great Temple of Kôr, write this upon the rock of the burying-place in the year four thousand eight hundred and three from the founding of Kôr. Kôr is fallen! No more shall the mighty feast in her halls, no more shall she rule the world, and her navies go out to commerce with the world. Kôr is fallen, and her mighty works, and all the cities of Kôr, and all the harbours*

\* This phrase is remarkable, as seeming to indicate a belief in a future state. EDITOR.



that she built and the canals that she made, are for the wolf and the owl and the wild swan, and the barbarian who comes after. Twenty and five moons ago did a cloud settle upon Kôr, and the hundred cities of Kôr, and out of the cloud came a pestilence that slew her people, old and young, one with another, and spared not. One with another they turned black and died—the young and the old, the rich and the poor, the man and the woman, the prince and the slave. The pestilence slew and slew, and ceased not by day or by night, and those who escaped from the pestilence were slain of the famine. No longer could the bodies of the children of Kôr be preserved according to the ancient rites, because of the number of the dead, therefore were they hauled into the great pit beneath this cave, through the hole in the floor of the cave. Then, at last, a remnant of this the great people, the light of the whole world, went down to the coast and took ship and sailed northwards; and now am I, the Priest Junis, who write, the last man left alive of this great city of men, but whether there be any yet left in the other cities I know not. This do I write in misery of heart before I die, because Kôr the Imperial is no more, and because there are none to worship in her temple, and all her palaces are empty, and her princes and her captains and her traders and her fair women have passed off the face of the earth for ever.”

I sighed in astonishment—the utter desolation depicted in that rude scrawl was overpowering. It was terrible to think of this solitary survivor of a mighty people recording its fate before he too went down into darkness.

\* The name of the tribe, “Ama-hagger,” would seem to indicate a curious mingling of races such as might easily have occurred in the neighbourhood of the Zambesi. The prefix “Ama” is common to the Zulu and “hagger” is an Arabic word meaning a stone.—EDITOR.

What must the old man have felt as, in ghastly terrifying solitude, by the light of one lamp feebly illuminating a little space of gloom, in a few brief lines he daubed the history of his nation's death upon the cavern wall? What a subject for the moralist, or the painter, or indeed for anyone who can reflect!

“Dost thou not think, O Holly,” said Ayesha, laying her hand upon my shoulder, “that those men who sailed north may have been the fathers of the first Egyptians?”

“Nay, I know not,” I answered; “it seems that the world is very old.”

“Old? Yes, it is old indeed. Time after time have nations, ay, and rich and strong nations, learned in the arts, been, and passed away to be forgotten, so that no memory of them remains. This is but one of several; for Time eats up the works of man, unless, indeed, he digs in caves like the people of Kôr, and then mayhap the sea swallows them, or the earthquake shakes them in. Who knows what hath been on the earth, or what shall be? There is no new thing under the sun, as the wise Hebrew wrote long ago. Yet these people were not utterly destroyed, as I think. Some few remained in the other cities, for their cities were many. But the barbarians from the south, or perchance my people, the Arabs, came down upon them, and took their women to wife, and the race of the Amahagger that is now is a bastard brood of the mighty sons of Kôr, and behold it dwelleth in the tombs with its fathers' bones.” But I know not: who can know? My arts cannot pierce so far into the blackness of Time's night. They were



a great people. They conquered till none were left to conquer, and then they dwelt at ease within their rocky mountain walls, with their manservants and their maidservants, their minstrels, their sculptors, and their concubines, and traded and quarrelled, and ate and hunted and slept and made merry till their time came. But come, I will show thee that great pit beneath the cavern whereof the writing speaks. Never shall thine eyes witness such another sight." *Dolina*

Accordingly I followed her to a side passage opening out of the main cave, then down a great number of steps, and along an underground shaft which cannot have been less than sixty feet beneath the surface of the rock, and was ventilated by curious borings that ran upward, I do not know where. Suddenly the passage ended, and Ayesha halted, bidding the mutes hold up the lamps, and as she had prophesied, I saw a scene such as I am not likely to behold again. We were standing in an enormous pit, or rather on the brink of it, for it went down deeper—I do not know how much—than the level on which we stood, and was edged in with a low wall of rock. So far as I could judge this pit was about the size of the space beneath the dome of St. Paul's in London, and when the lamps were held up I saw that it was nothing but one vast charnel-house, being literally full of thousands of human skeletons, which lay piled up in an enormous gleaming pyramid, formed by the slipping down of the bodies at the apex as others were dropped in from above. Anything more appalling than this jumbled mass of the remains of a departed race I

cannot imagine, and what made it even more dreadful was that in this dry air a considerable number of the bodies had become desiccated with the skin still on them, and now, fixed in every conceivable position, stared at us out of the mountain of white bones, grotesquely horrible caricatures of humanity. In my astonishment I uttered an ejaculation, and the echoes of my voice, ringing in that vaulted space, disturbed a skull which had been accurately balanced for many thousands of years near the apex of the pile. Down it came with a run, bounding along merrily towards us, and of course bringing an avalanche of other bones after it, till at last the whole pit rattled with their movement, even as though the skeletons were rising up to greet us.

"Come," I said, "let us go hence. These are the bodies of those who died of the great sickness—is it not so?" I added, as we turned away.

"Yea. The children of Kôr ever embalmed their dead, as did the Egyptians, but their art was greater than the art of the Egyptians, for, whereas the Egyptians disembowelled and drew the brain, the people of Kôr injected fluid into the veins, and thus reached every part. But stay, thou shalt see," and she halted at haphazard by one of the little doorways opening out of the passage along which we were walking, and motioned to the mutes to light us in. We entered a small chamber similar to that in which I had slept at our first stopping-place, only instead of one there were two stone benches or beds in it. On the benches lay figures covered with yellow linen,\* on which a fine

\* All the linen that the Amahagger wore was taken from the tombs, which accounted for its yellow hue. If it was well washed, however, and properly rebleached, it acquired its former snowy whiteness, and was the softest and best linen I ever saw.—L. H. H.



and impalpable dust had gathered in the course of ages, but to nothing like the extent that might have been anticipated, for in these deep-hewn caves there is no material to turn to dust. About the bodies on the stone shelves and floor of the tomb were many painted vases, but I saw very few ornaments or weapons in any of the vaults.

"Withdraw the cloths, O Holly," said Ayesha, but when I put out my hand to obey I drew it back again. It seemed a sacrilege, and, to speak the truth, I was awed by the dread solemnity of the place, and of the presences before us. Then, with a laugh at my fears, she removed them herself, only to discover other and yet finer wrappings lying over the forms upon the stone bench. These also she withdrew, and for the first time for thousands upon thousands of years did living eyes look upon the face of that chilly dead. It was a woman; she might have been thirty-five years of age, or perhaps a little less, and certainly had been beautiful. Even now her calm clear-cut features, marked out with delicate eyebrows and long eyelashes, which threw upon the ivory face little lines of shadow in the lamplight, were wonderfully beautiful. There, robed in white, down which her blue-black hair was streaming, she slept her last long sleep, and on her arm, its face pressed against her breast, there lay a little babe. So sweet was the sight, although so awful, that—I confess it without shame—I could scarcely withhold my tears. It took me back across the dim gulf of the ages to some happy home in dead Imperial Kôr, where this winsome lady girl about with beauty had lived and died, and dying had taken her last-born with

her to the tomb. There they slept before us, mother and child, the white memories of a forgotten human history speaking more eloquently to the heart than could any written record of their lives. Reverently I replaced the grave-clothes, and, with a sigh that in the purpose of the Everlasting flowers so fair should have bloomed only to be gathered to the grave, I turned to the body on the opposite shelf, and gently unveiled it. It was that of a man in advanced life, with a long grizzled beard, also robed in white, and probably the husband of the lady, who, after surviving her many years, came at the last to sleep once more for good and all beside her.

We left the place and entered others. It would be too long to describe the many things I saw in them. Each one had its occupants—for evidently the five hundred and odd years that had elapsed between the completion of the cave and the destruction of the race had sufficed to fill these catacombs, numberless as they were—and all appeared to have been undisturbed since the day when they were placed there. I could fill a book with the description of them, but to do so would only be to repeat what I have said with variations.

Nearly all the bodies, so masterly was the art with which they had been treated, were as perfect as on the day of death thousands of years before. Nothing came to injure them in the deep silence of the living rock: they were beyond the reach of heat and cold and damp, and the aromatic drugs with which they had been saturated were, it seems, practically everlasting in their effect. Here and there, however, we saw an exception, and in these cases, although the flesh



looked sound enough externally, if touched it fell in, and revealed the fact that the figure was but a pile of dust. This arose, Ayesha told me, from these particular bodies, either owing to haste in the burial or other causes, having been soaked in the preservative,\* instead of its being injected into the substance of the flesh.

About the last tomb we visited I must, however, say a word, for its contents spoke even more eloquently to the human sympathies than those of the first. It had but two occupants, and they lay together on a single shelf. I withdrew the grave-cloths, and there, clasped heart to heart, were a young man and a blooming girl. Her head rested on his arm, and his lips were pressed against her brow. I opened the man's linen robe, and found over his heart a dagger-wound, while beneath the girl's fair breast was a like cruel stab, through which her life had ebbed away. On the rock above was an inscription in three words. Ayesha translated it. It read, "*Wedded in Death.*"

What was the life-history of these two, who, of a truth, were beautiful in their lives, and in their death were not divided?

I closed my eyes, and imagination, taking up the thread of thought, shot its swift shuttle back across the ages, weaving a picture on their blackness so real and vivid in its detail that I could almost for a

moment think I had triumphed over Time, and that my vision had pierced the mystery of the Past.

I seemed to see this fair girl's form—the yellow hair streaming down her, glittering against her garments snowy white, and the bosom that was whiter than her robes, even dimming with its lustre the ornaments of burnished gold. I seemed to see the great cave filled with warriors, bearded and clad in mail, and, on the lighted dais whence Ayesha had given judgment, a man standing, robed, and surrounded by the symbols of his priestly office. Now up the cave there came one clad in purple, and before and behind him marched minstrels and fair maidens, chanting a wedding song. White stood the maid against the altar, fairer than the fairest there—purer than a lily, and more cold than the dew that glistens in its heart. But as this man drew near she shuddered. Then out of the press and throng there sprang a dark-haired youth, and put his arm about this long-forgotten girl, and kissed her pale face, in which the blood shot up like lights of the red dawn across the silent sky. Next there was turmoil and uproar, and a flashing of swords, and they tore the youth from her arms, and stabbed him, but with a cry she snatched the dagger from his belt, and drove it into her snowy breast, home to the

\* Ayesha afterwards showed me the tree from the leaves of which this ancient preservative was manufactured. It is a low bush-like tree, that to this day grows in wonderful plenty upon the sides of the mountains, or rather upon the slopes leading up to its rocky walls. The leaves are long and narrow, a vivid green in colour, but turning a bright red in the autumn, and not unlike those of a laurel in general appearance. They have little smell when green, but if boiled the aromatic odour from them is so strong that one can hardly bear it. The best mixture, however, was made from the roots, and among the people of Kôr there was a law alluded to on some of the inscriptions which Ayesha showed me, to the effect that on pain of heavy penalties no one under a certain rank was to be embalmed with the drugs prepared from these roots. The object and effect of this law was, of course, to preserve the trees from extermination. The sale of the leaves and roots was a Government monopoly, and from it the Kings of Kôr derived a large proportion of their private revenue.—L. H. H.



heart, and down she fell. Then, with cries and wailing, and every sound of lamentation, the pageant rolled away from the arena of my vision, and once more the Past shut its book.

Let him who reads forgive the intrusion of a dream into a history of fact. But it came so home to me—I saw it all so clearly in a moment, as it were; moreover, who shall say what proportion of fact, past, present or to come, may lie in the imagination? What is imagination? Perhaps it is a shadow of the intangible truth, perhaps it is the soul's thought?

In an instant the picture had passed through my brain and *She* was addressing me.

"Behold the lot of man!" said the veiled Ayesha, as she drew the winding-sheets back over the dead lovers, speaking in a solemn, thrilling voice, which accorded well with the dream that I had dreamed: "to the tomb, and to the forgetfulness that hides in the tomb, must we all come at last! Ay, even I who live so long. Even for me, O Holly, thousands upon thousands of years hence; thousand of years after thou hast gone through the gate and been lost in the mists, a day will dawn whereon I shall die, and be even as thou art and these are. And then what will it avail that I have lived a little longer, holding off death by the knowledge I have wrung from Nature, since at last I too must die? What is a span of ten thousand years, or ten times ten thousand years, in the history of time? It is as naught—it is as the mists that roll up in the sunlight; it fleeth away like an hour of sleep or the melting winter snows. Behold the lot of man! Certainly it shall overtake us, and we shall sleep. Certainly, too, we shall awake and

live again, and again shall sleep, and so on and on, through periods, spaces, and times, from æon unto æon, till the world is dead, and the worlds beyond the world are dead, and naught liveth save the Spirit that is Life. But for us twain and for these dead ones shall the end of ends be Life, or shall it be Death? As yet Death is but Life's Night, but out of the Night is the Morrow born anew, and doth again beget the Night. Only, when Day and Night, and Life and Death, are ended and swallowed up in that from which they came, what shall be our fate, O Holly? Who can see so far? Not even I!"

Then she added, with a sudden change of tone and manner—

"Hast thou seen enough, my stranger guest, or shall I show thee more of the wonders of these tombs that are my palace halls? If thou wilt, I can lead thee to where Tisno, the mightiest and most valorous King of Kôr, in whose day these caves were ended, lies in a pomp that seems to mock at nothingness, and bid the empty shadows of the past do homage to his sculptured vanity!"

"I have seen enough, O Queen," I answered, "for my heart is overwhelmed by the power of this present death. Mortality is weak and easily oppressed in the company of that dust which waits upon its end. Take me hence, O Ayesha!"

## XVII.

### THE BALANCE TURNS.

FOLLOWING the lamps of the deaf mutes, which, held out from their bodies as a bearer holds water in a



vessel, had the appearance of floating along by themselves, we came presently to a stair which led us to *She's* anteroom, the same that Billali had travelled upon all fours on the previous day. Here I wished to bid the Queen adieu, but she would not suffer it.

"Nay," she said, "enter with me, O Holly, for of a truth thy talk pleases me. Think, Holly; for two thousand years I have found none to speak with save slaves and my own soul, and though of all this thinking hath much wisdom come, and many secrets been made plain, yet I am weary of my thoughts, and have come to loathe mine own society, for surely the food that memory gives to eat is bitter to the taste, and it is only with the teeth of hope that we can bear to chew it. Now, though thy brain is green and tender, as becometh a man so young, yet is it that of one who thinks. In truth thou dost bring back to my mind certain of those old philosophers with whom in days bygone I have disputed at Athens, and at Becca in Arabia, for thou hast the same crabbed air and dusty look, as though thou hadst passed thy days in reading ill-writ Greek and been stained dark with the grime of manuscripts. So draw the curtain, and sit here by my side, and we will eat fruit and talk of pleasant things. See, I will again unveil to thee. Thou hast brought it on thyself, O Holly; I have warned thee straightly—and thou shalt call me beautiful as even those old philosophers were wont to do. Fie upon them, forgetting their philosophy!"

And without more ado she stood up and shook the white wrappings from her, and came forth shining and splendid like some glittering snake when it has cast its slough; ay, and

fixed her wonderful eyes upon me—more deadly than any Basilisk's—and pierced me through and through with their beauty, and sent her light laugh ringing down the air like chimes of silver bells.

A new mood was on her, and the colour of her fathomless mind had changed beneath it. It was no longer torture-torn and hateful, as I had seen it when she was cursing her dead rival by the leaping flames, no longer icily terrible as in the judgment hall; no longer rich, and sombre, and splendid, like to a Tyrian cloth, as in the dwellings of the dead. No, her mood now was that of Aphrodite triumphing. Life—radiant, ecstatic, wonderful—seemed to flow from her and around her. Softly she laughed and sighed, and swift her glances flew. She shook her heavy tresses, and their perfume filled the place; she struck her little sandalled foot upon the floor, and hummed a snatch of some old Greek epithalamium. All the majesty was gone, or it did but lurk and flicker faintly through her laughing eyes, like lightning seen through sunlight. She had cast off the terror of the leaping flame, the cold power of judgment that even now was being done, and the wise sadness of the tombs—cast them off and put them behind her, like the white shroud she wore, and now she stood out an incarnation of lovely tempting womanhood, made more perfect—and in a way more spiritual—than ever woman was before her.

"So, my Holly, sit there where thou canst see me. It is by thine own wish, remember—again I say, blame me not if thou dost wear away thy little span with such a sick pain at the heart that thou wouldst fain have died before ever thy curious eyes were set upon me. There, sit so, and



tell me, for in truth now I desire praises—tell me, am I not beautiful? Nay, speak not so hastily; consider well the point; take me feature by feature, forgetting not my form, and my hands and feet, and my hair, and the whiteness of my skin, and then say truly, hast thou ever known a woman who in aught, ay, in one little portion of her beauty, in the curve of an eyelash even, or the modelling of a shell-like ear, is justified to hold a lamp before my loveliness. Now, my waist! Perchance thou thinkest it too large, but of a truth it is not so; it is this golden snake that is too large, and doth not bind it as it should. It is a wise snake, and knoweth that it is ill to tie in the waist. But see, give me thine hands—so—now press them round me: There, with but a little force, thy fingers almost touch, O Holly."

I could bear it no longer. I am but a man, and she was more than a woman. Heaven knows what she was—I do not! But then and there I fell upon my knees before her, and told her in a sad mixture of languages—for such moments confuse the thoughts—that I worshipped her as never woman was worshipped, and that I would give my immortal soul to marry her, which at that time I certainly would have done, and so, indeed, would any other man, or all the race of men rolled into one. For a moment she looked a little surprised; then she began to laugh, and to clap her hands in glee.

"Oh, so soon, my Holly!" she said. "I wondered how many minutes it would need to bring thee to thy knees. I have not seen a man kneel before me for so many ages, and, believe me, to a woman's heart the sight is sweet—ay, wisdom and

length of days take not from that dear pleasure which is our sex's only right.

"What wouldst thou?—what wouldst thou? Thou dost not know what thou doest. Have I not told thee that I am not for thee? I love but one, and thou art not the man. Ah, Holly, for all thy wisdom—and in a way thou art wise—thou art but a fool running after folly. Thou wouldst look into mine eyes—thou wouldst kiss me! Well, if it pleaseth thee, *look!*" and she bent herself towards me, and fixed her dark and thrilling orbs upon my own; "aye, and *kiss* too, if thou wilt, for, thanks be given to the scheme of things, kisses leave no scars, except upon the heart. But if thou dost kiss, I tell thee of a surety thou wilt eat out thy breast with love of me and die!" and she bent yet further towards me till her soft hair brushed my brow, and her fragrant breath played upon my face, and made me faint and weak. Then of a sudden, even as I stretched out my arms to clasp, she straightened herself, and a quick change passed over her. Reaching out her hand, she held it over my head, and it seemed to me that something flowed from it which chilled me back to common sense, and a knowledge of propriety and the domestic virtues.

"Enough of this wanton play," she said, with a touch of sternness. "Listen, Holly. Thou art a good and honest man, and I fain would spare thee; but, oh! it is so hard for woman to be merciful. I have said I am not for thee, therefore let thy thoughts pass by me like an idle wind, and the dust of thy imaginings sink again into the depths—well, of despair, if thou wilt. Thou dost not know me, Holly. Hadst thou seen



me but ten hours past, when my passion seized me, thou hadst shrunk from me in fear and trembling. I am of many moods, and, like the water in that vessel, I reflect many things; but they pass, my Holly; they pass, and are forgotten. Only the water is the water still, and I still am I, and that which maketh the water maketh it, and that which maketh me maketh me, nor can my quality be altered. Therefore, pay no heed to what I seem, seeing that thou canst not know what I am. If thou troublest me again I will veil myself, and thou shalt behold my face no more."

I rose, and sank on the cushioned couch beside her, yet quivering with emotion, though for a moment my mad passion had left me, as the leaves of a tree quiver still, although the gust be gone that stirred them. I did not dare to tell her that I *had* seen her in that deep and hellish mood, muttering incantations to the fire in the tomb.

"So," she went on, "eat of this fruit; believe me it is the only true food for man. Now tell me of the philosophy of that Hebrew Messiah, who came after me, and who, thou sayest, to-day doth rule Rome, and Greece, and Egypt, and the barbarians beyond. It must have been a strange philosophy that He taught, for in my time the peoples would have naught of our philosophies. Revel and lust and drink, blood and cold steel, and the shock of men gathered in the battle—these were the canons of their creeds."

I had recovered myself a little by now, and, feeling bitterly ashamed of the weakness into which I had been betrayed, I did my best to expound to her the doctrines of Christianity, to which, however, with the single exception of our theory of Heaven and Hell,

I found that she paid but faint attention, her interest being all directed towards the Man who taught them. Also I told her that among her own people, the Arabs, another prophet, one Mohammed, had arisen, preaching a new faith, to which many millions of mankind now adhered.

"Ah!" she said; "I understand—two new religions! I have known so many, and doubtless there have been others since I knew aught beyond these caves of Kôr. Mankind asks ever of the skies to vision out what lies behind them. It is terror for the end, and but a subtler form of selfishness—this it is that breeds religions. Mark, my Holly, each religion claims the future for its followers; or, at the least, the good thereof. The evil is for those benighted ones who will have none of it; seeing that light which the true believers worship, as the fishes see the stars, but dimly. The religions come and the religions pass, and civilisations come and pass, and naught endures but the world and human nature. Ah! if man would but see that hope is from within, and not from without—that he himself must work out his own salvation! He is there, and within him is the breath of life and a knowledge of good and evil, as good and evil are to him. Thereon let him build and stand erect, and not cast himself before the image of some unknown God, modelled like his poor self, but with a larger brain to think the evil thing, and a longer arm to do it."

I thought to myself—which shows how old such reasoning is, being, indeed, one of the recurring quantities of theological discussion—that her argument sounded very like some that I have heard in the nineteenth century, and in other places than



the caves of Kôr—with which, by the way, I totally disagree—but I did not care to try to discuss the question with her. To begin with, my mind was too weary with all the emotions through which I had passed, and, in the second place, I knew that I should get the worst of it. It is weary work enough to argue with an ordinary materialist, who hurls statistics and whole strata of geological facts at your head, whilst you can only buffet him with deductions and instincts and the snow-flakes of faith, that are, alas! so apt to melt in the hot embers of our troubles. How little chance, then, should I have against one whose brain was supernaturally sharpened, and who had two thousand years of experience, besides all manner of knowledge of the secrets of Nature at her command! Feeling that she would be more likely to convert me than I should to convert her, I thought it best to leave the matter alone, and so sat silent. Many a time since then have I regretted bitterly that I did so, for thereby I lost the only opportunity I can remember of ascertaining what Ayesha *really* believed, and what was her “philosophy.”

“Well, my Holly,” she continued, “and so those people of mine have also found a prophet—a false prophet thou sayest, for he is not thine own, and, indeed, I doubt it not. Yet in my day it was otherwise, for then we Arabs had many gods. Allât there was, and Saba, the Host of Heaven; Al Uzza, and Manah the stony one, for whom the blood of victims flowed; and Wadd and Sawâ, and Yaghûth the Lion of the dwellers

in Yaman; and Yâuk, the Horse of Morad; and Nasr the Eagle of Hamyar; ay, and many more. Oh, the folly of it all, the shame and the pitiful folly! Yet when I rose in wisdom and spoke thereof, surely they would have slain me in the name of their outraged gods. Well, so it hath ever been;—but, my Holly, art thou weary of me already, that thou dost sit so silent? Or dost thou fear lest I should teach thee my philosophy?—for know I have a philosophy! What would a teacher be without her own philosophy? And if thou dost vex me overmuch, beware! for I will have thee learn it, and thou shalt be my disciple, and we twain will found a faith that shall swallow up all others. Inconstant man! But half an hour since thou wast upon thy knees—the posture does not become thee, Holly—swearing that thou didst love me. What shall we do?—Nay, I have it! I will come and see this youth, the Lion, as the old man Billali calls him, who came with thee, and who is so sick. The fever must have run its course by now, and if he is about to die I will recover him. Fear not, my Holly; I shall use no magic. Have I not told thee that there is no such thing as magic, though there is such a thing as mastering and commanding the forces which are in nature? Go now, and presently, when I have made the drug ready, I will follow thee.”

Accordingly I went, only to find Job and Ustane in an excess of grief, declaring that Leo was in the throes of death, and that they had been searching for me everywhere. I rushed to the couch, and glanced at

\* Ayesha was a great chemist; indeed, chemistry appears to have been her only amusement and occupation. One of the caves was fitted up as a laboratory, and although her appliances were necessarily rude, the results that she attained, as will become clear in the course of this narrative, were sufficiently surprising.—L. H. H.



him; clearly he was dying. He was senseless, and breathing heavily, but his lips were quivering, and every now and again a little shudder ran down his frame. I knew enough of doctoring to see that in another hour he would be beyond the reach of earthly help—perhaps in another five minutes. How I cursed my selfishness and the folly that had kept me lingering by Ayesha's side while my dear boy lay dying! Alas and alas! how easily the best of us are lighted down to evil by the gleam of a woman's eyes! What a wicked wretch was I! Actually, for the last half-hour I had scarcely thought of Leo—and this, be it remembered, of the man who for twenty years had been my dearest companion, and the chief interest of my existence. And now, perhaps, it was too late!

I wrung my hands, and glanced round. Ustane was sitting by the couch, and in her eyes burnt the dull light of despair. Job was blubbering—I am sorry I cannot name his distress by any more delicate word—audibly in the corner. Seeing my eye fixed upon him, he went outside to give way to his grief in the passage. Obviously the only hope lay in Ayesha. She, and she alone, could save him—unless, indeed, she was an impostor, which I did not believe. I would go and implore her to come. As I started on this errand, however, Job came flying into the room, his hair literally standing on end with terror. "Oh, God help us, sir!" he ejaculated in a frightened whisper, "here's a corpse a-coming sliding down the passage!"

For a moment I was puzzled, but presently, of course, it struck me that he must have seen Ayesha, wrapped in her grave-like garment, and been deceived by the extraordinary undu-

lating smoothness of her walk into a belief that she was a white ghost gliding towards him. Indeed, at that very moment the question was settled, for Ayesha herself appeared in the apartment, or rather cave. Job turned, and saw her sheeted form; then, with a convulsive howl of "Here it comes!" he sprang into a corner, and hid his head against the wall; while Ustane, guessing whose the dread presence must be, prostrated herself upon her face.

"Thou comest in a good time, Ayesha," I said, "for my boy lies at the point of death."

"So," she said softly; "if he be not dead, it is no matter, for I can bring him back to life, my Holly. Is that man there thy servant, and is that the fashion wherewith the servants greet strangers in thy country?"

"He is frightened of thy garb—it has a death-like air," I answered.

She laughed.

"And the girl? Ah, I see now. It is she of whom thou didst speak to me. Well, bid them both to leave us, and we will see to this sick Lion of thine. I love not that underlings should perceive my wisdom."

Thereon I told Ustane in Arabic and Job in English both to leave the room; an order which the latter obeyed readily enough, and was glad to obey, for he could not in any way subdue his fear. But it was otherwise with Ustane.

"What does *She* want?" she whispered, divided between her dread of the terrible Queen and her anxiety to remain near Leo. "It is surely the right of a wife to be with her husband when he dies. Nay, I will not go, my lord the Baboon."

"Why doth not that woman depart,



my Holly?" asked Ayesha from the other end of the cave, where she was engaged in examining some of the sculptures on the wall.

"She is not willing to leave Leo," I answered, not knowing what to say. Ayesha wheeled round, and, pointing at the girl Ustane, said one word, and one only, but it was quite enough, for the tone in which she uttered it meant volumes.

"Go!"

Then Ustane crept past her on her hands and knees, and went.

"Thou seest, my Holly," said Ayesha, with a little laugh, "it was needful that I should give these people a lesson in obedience. That girl went nigh to disobeying me, but then, she did not learn this noon how I treat the disobedient. Well, she has gone; now let me see the youth," and she glided towards the couch on which Leo lay, with his face in the shadow and turned towards the wall.

"He has a noble shape," she said, as she bent over him to look upon his face.

The next second her tall and willowy form was staggering back across the room as though she had been shot or stabbed, staggering back till at last she struck the cavern wall, and then there burst from her lips the most awful and unearthly scream that it has ever been my lot to hear.

"What is it, Ayesha?" I cried. "Is he dead?"

She turned, and sprang towards me like a tigress.

"Thou dog!" she said, in her terrible whisper, which sounded like the hiss of a snake, "why didst thou hide this from me?" And she stretched out her arm, so that I thought she was about to slay me.

"What?" I ejaculated, in the most lively terror; "what?"

"Ah!" she said, "perchance thou didst not know. Learn, my Holly, learn: there—there lies my lost Kallikrates. Kallikrates, who has come back to me at last, as I knew he must, as I knew he must!" and she began to sob and laugh, and, indeed, to conduct herself like any other lady who is overcome, murmuring, "Kallikrates, Kallikrates!"

"Nonsense," I thought to myself, but I did not dare to say it; and, indeed, at the moment I was thinking of Leo's life, having forgotten everything else in that terrible anxiety. What I feared now was that he might die while Ayesha was unnerved by hysteria.

"Unless thou art able to help him, Ayesha," I suggested humbly, "thy Kallikrates will soon be far beyond thy calling. Surely he dies even now."

"True," she said, with a start. "Oh! why did I not come before? I am shaken—my hand trembles, even mine—and yet it is very easy. Here, thou Holly, take this phial," and she produced a tiny jar of pottery from the folds of her garment, "and pour the liquid in it down his throat. It will cure him if he be not dead. Swift, now! Swift! The man dies."

I glanced towards him; it was true enough—Leo was in his death-struggle. I saw his poor face turning ashen, and heard the breath begin to rattle in his throat. The phial was stoppered with a little piece of wood. I drew it with my teeth, and a drop of the fluid within flew out upon my tongue. It had a sweet flavour, and for a second caused my head to swim, and a mist to gather before my eyes, but happily the effect passed away as quickly as it had arisen.

When I reached Leo he was on the point of expiring—his golden head



turned slowly from side to side, and his mouth was slightly open. I called to Ayesha to hold his head, and this she managed to do, although the woman was quivering from head to foot, like an aspen-leaf or a startled horse. Then, forcing the jaws a little further open, I poured the contents of the phial into his mouth. Instantly some vapour arose from it, as happens when one disturbs nitric acid, and this sight did not increase my hopes, already faint enough, of the efficacy of the treatment.

One thing, however, was certain, the death-throes ceased—at first I thought because he had gone beyond them, and crossed the awful river. His face turned to a livid pallor, and his heart-beats, which had been feeble enough before, seemed to die away altogether—only the eyelids still twitched a little. In my doubt I looked up at Ayesha, whose head-wrapping had slipped back in her excitement when she reeled across the room. She was still holding Leo's head, and, with a face as pale as his own, watched his countenance with such an expression of agonised anxiety as I had never seen before. Clearly she did not know if he would live or die. Five minutes passed slowly, and I saw that she was abandoning hope; her lovely oval face seemed to fall in and visibly grow thinner beneath the pressure of a mental agony whose pencil drew black lines about the hollows of her eyes. The coral faded even from her lips, till they were as white as Leo's face, and quivered pitifully. It was shocking to see her; even in my own grief I felt for hers.

"Is it too late?" I gasped.

She hid her face in her hands, and made no answer, and I also turned away. But as I turned I heard a

deep-drawn breath, and looking down perceived a line of colour creeping up Leo's face, then another and another, and, wonder of wonders, the man whom we had thought dead rolled over on his side.

"Thou seest," I said in a whisper.

"I see," she answered hoarsely.

"He is saved. I thought we were too late; another moment—one little moment more—and he had been gone!" and she burst into an awful flood of tears, sobbing as though her heart would break, and yet looking lovelier than ever as she wept. At last she ceased.

"Forgive me, my Holly—forgive me for my weakness," she said. "Thou seest after all I am a very woman. Think—now think of it! This morning thou didst speak of the place of torment appointed by this new religion of thine. Hell or Hades thou didst call it—a place where the vital essence lives and retains an individual memory, and where all the errors and faults of judgment, and unsatisfied passions, and the unsubstantial terrors of the mind wherewith it hath at any time had to do, come to mock and haunt and gibe and wring the heart for ever and for ever with the vision of its own hopelessness. Thus, even thus, have I lived for full two thousand years—for some six-and-sixty generations, as ye reckon time—in a Hell, as thou callest it—tormented by the memory of a crime, tortured day and night with an unfulfilled desire—without companionship, without comfort, without death, and led on only down my dreary road by the marshlights of Hope, which, though they flickered here and there, and now glowed strong, and now were not, yet, as my skill foretold, would one day lead me to my deliverer.

"And then—think of it still, O



Holly, for never shalt thou hear such another tale, or see such another scene, nay, not even if I give thee ten thousand years of life—and thou shalt have them in payment if thou wilt—think: at last my deliverer came—he for whom I had watched and waited through the generations—at the appointed time he came to seek me, as I knew that he must come, for my wisdom could not err, though I knew not when or how. Yet see how ignorant I was! See how small my knowledge, and how faint my strength! For hours he lay here sick unto death, and I felt it not—I who had waited for him for two thousand years—I knew it not! And then at last I see him, and behold! my chance has gone but for a hair's breadth even before I win it, for he is in the very jaws of death, whence no power of mine can draw him. And if he die, surely must the Hell be lived through once more—once more I must face the weary centuries, and wait and wait till time in its fulness shall bring my Beloved back to me. And then thou gavest him the medicine, and that five minutes passed before I knew whether he would live or die, and I tell thee that all the sixty generations that are gone were not so long as that five minutes. But they passed at length, and still he showed no sign, and I knew that if the drug worked not then, so far as I have had knowledge, it would not work at all. Then I thought that once more he was dead, and all the tortures of all the years gathered themselves into a single venomous spear, and pierced me through and through, because again I had lost Kallikrates! And then, when all was done, behold! he sighed, behold! he lived, and I was sure that he would live, for none die on whom the drug takes hold. Think of it

now, my Holly—think of the wonder of it! He will sleep for twelve hours, and then the sickness will have left him—will have left him to life and me!”

She ceased, and laid her hand upon the golden head, then she bent down and kissed his brow with a chastened abandonment of tenderness that would have been beautiful to behold had not the sight cut me to the heart—for I was jealous.

# XVIII.

“GO, WOMAN!”

THEN followed a silence of a minute or so, during which, if one might judge from the almost angelic rapture of her face—for she looked angelic sometimes—*She* appeared to be plunged in a happy ecstasy. Suddenly, however, a new thought struck her, and her expression became the very reverse of angelic.

“Almost had I forgotten,” she said, “that woman, Ustane. What is she to Kallikrates—his servant, or—” and she paused, and her voice trembled.

I shrugged my shoulders. “I understand that she is wed to him according to the custom of the Amahagger,” I answered; “but I know not.”

Her face grew dark as a thundercloud. Old as she was, Ayesha had not outlived jealousy.



"Then there is an end," she said; "she must die, even now!"

"For what crime?" I asked, horrified. "She is guilty of nothing that thou art not guilty of thyself, O Ayesha. She loves the man, and he has been pleased to accept her love; where, then, is her sin?"

"Truly, O Holly, thou art foolish," she answered, almost petulantly. "Where is her sin? Her sin is that she stands between me and my desire. I know well that I can take him from her—for dwells there a man upon this earth, O Holly, who could resist me if I put out my strength? Men are faithful for so long only as temptations pass them by. If the temptation be but strong enough, then will the man yield, for every man, like every rope, hath his breaking strain, and passion is to men what gold and power are to women—the weight upon their weakness. Believe me, ill will it go with mortal women in that heaven of which thou speakest if only the spirits be more fair, for their lords will never turn to look upon them, and their Heaven will become their Hell. For man can be bought with woman's beauty, if it be but beautiful enough; and woman's beauty can be ever bought with gold, if only there be gold enough. So was it in my day, and so it will be to the end of time. The world is a great mart, my Holly, where all things are for sale to him who bids the highest in the currency of our desires."

These remarks, which were as cynical as might have been expected from a woman of Ayesha's age and experience, jarred upon me, and I answered, testily, that in our heaven there was no marriage or giving in marriage.

"Else would it not be heaven, dost

thou mean?" she put in. "Fie upon thee, Holly, to think so ill of us poor women! Is it, then, marriage that marks the line between thy heaven and thy hell? But enough of this. Now is no time for disputing and the challenge of our wits. Why dost thou always dispute? Art thou also a philosopher of these latter days? As for this woman, she must die; for, though I can take her lover from her, yet, while she lived, he might think tenderly of her, and that I cannot suffer. No other woman shall dwell in my lord's thoughts; my empire must be all my own. She has had her day, let her be content; for better is an hour with love than a century of loneliness—now night shall swallow her."

"Nay, nay," I cried, "it would be a wicked crime; and from a crime naught comes but what is evil. For thine own sake do not this deed."

"It is, then, a crime, O foolish man, to put away that which stands between us and our ends? Then is our life one long crime, my Holly; for day by day we destroy that we may live, since in this world none save the strongest can endure. Those who are weak must perish; the earth is to the strong, and the fruits thereof. For every tree that grows a score shall wither, that the strong one may take their share. We run to place and power over the dead bodies of those who fail and fall; ay, we win the food we eat from out the mouths of starving babes. It is the scheme of things. Thou sayest, too, that a crime breeds evil, but therein thou dost lack experience; for out of crimes come many good things, and out of good grows much evil. The cruel rage of the tyrant may prove the blessing of thousands who come after him,



and the sweetheartedness of a holy man may make a nation slaves. Man doeth this and doeth that from the good or evil of his heart; but he knows not to what end his sense doth prompt him; for when he strikes he is blind to where the blow shall fall, nor can he count the airy threads that weave the web of circumstance. Good and evil, love and hate, night and day, sweet and bitter, man and woman, heaven above and the earth beneath—all these things are needful, one to the other, and who knows the end of each? I tell thee that there is a Hand of Fate who twines them up to bear the burden of his purpose, and all things are gathered in that great rope to which all things are requisite. Therefore doth it not become us to say this thing is evil and that good, or the dark is hateful and the light lovely; for to other eyes than ours the evil may be the good and the darkness more beautiful than the day, or all alike be fair. Hearest thou, my Holly?"

I felt that it was hopeless to argue against casuistry of this nature, which, if it were carried to its logical conclusion, would absolutely destroy all morality, as we understand it. But Ayesha's talk gave me a fresh thrill of fear, for what may not be possible to a being who, unconstrained by human law, is also absolutely unshackled by a moral sense of right and wrong, which, however partial and conventional it may be, is yet based, as our conscience tells us, upon the great wall of individual responsibility that marks off mankind from the beasts?

Still I was most anxious to save Ustane, whom I liked and respected, from the dire fate that overshadowed her at the hands of her mighty rival. So I made one more appeal.

"Ayesha," I said, "thou art too subtle for me; but thou thyself hast told me that each man should be a law unto himself, and follow the teaching of his heart. Has thy heart no mercy towards her whose place thou wouldst take? Bethink thee, as thou sayest—though to me the thing is incredible—he whom thou desirest has returned to thee after many ages, and but now thou hast, as thou sayest also, wrung him from the jaws of death. Wilt thou celebrate his coming by the murder of one who loved him, and whom perchance he loved—one, at the least, who saved his life for thee when the spears of thy slaves would have made an end of it? Thou sayest also that in past days thou didst grievously wrong this man, that with thine own hand thou didst slay him because of the Egyptian Amenartas whom he loved."

"How knowest thou that, O stranger? How knowest thou that name? I spoke it not to thee," she broke in with a cry, catching at my arm.

"Perchance I dreamed it," I answered; "strange dreams do hover about these caves of Kôr. It seems that the dream was, indeed, a shadow of the truth. What came to thee of thy mad crime. Two thousand years of waiting, was it not? And now wouldst thou repeat this history? Say what thou wilt, I tell thee that evil will come of it; for to him who doeth, at the least, good breeds good and evil evil, even though in after days out of the evil cometh good. Offences must needs come; but woe to him by whom the offence cometh. So said that Messiah of whom I spoke to thee, and it was truly said. If thou slayest this innocent woman, I say unto thee that thou shalt be



accursed, and pluck no fruit from thine ancient tree of love. Also, what thinkest thou? How will this man take thee red-handed from the slaughter of her who loved and tended him?"

"As to that," she answered, "I have already answered thee. Had I slain thee as well as her, yet should he love me, Holly, because he could not save himself therefrom any more than thou couldst save thyself from dying, if by chance I slew thee, O Holly. And yet maybe there is truth in what thou dost say; for in some way it presses on my mind. If it may be, I will spare this woman; for have I not told thee that I am not cruel for the sake of cruelty? I love not to see suffering or to cause it. Let her come before me—quick now, ere my mood changes," and she covered her face hastily with its gauzy wrapping.

Well pleased to have succeeded even to this extent, I passed out into the passage and called to Ustane, whose white garment I caught sight of some yards away, huddled up against one of the earthenware lamps that were placed at intervals along the tunnel. She rose, and ran towards me.

"Is my lord dead? Oh, say not he is dead!" she cried, lifting her noble-looking face up to me, all stained as it was with tears, with an air of infinite beseeching that went straight to my heart.

"Nay, he lives," I answered. "She hath saved him. Come."

She sighed deeply, entered, and fell upon her hands and knees, after the custom of the Amahagger people, in the presence of the dreaded *She*.

"Rise," said Ayesha, in her coldest voice, "and come hither."

Ustane obeyed, standing before her with bowed head.

Then came a pause, which Ayesha broke.

"Who is this man?" she said, pointing to the sleeping form of Leo.

"The man is my husband," she answered in a low voice.

"Who gave him to thee for a husband?"

"I took him, according to the custom of our country, O *She*."

"Thou hast done evil, woman, in taking this man, who is a stranger. He is not of thine own race, and the custom fails. Listen: perchance thou didst this thing through ignorance, therefore, woman, do I spare thee, otherwise hadst thou died. Listen again. Go hence back to thine own place, and never dare to speak with or to set thine eyes upon this man again. He is not for thee. Listen a third time. If thou breakest this my law, that moment thou diest. Go!"

But Ustane did not move.

"Go, woman!"

Then Ustane looked up, and I saw that her face was torn with passion.

"Nay, O *She*, I will not go," she answered in a choked voice: "the man is my husband, and I love him—I love him, and I will not leave him. What right hast thou to command me to leave my husband?"

I saw a quiver pass down Ayesha's frame, and shuddered myself, fearing the worst.

"Be pitiful," I said in Latin; "it is but Nature working."

"I am pitiful," she answered coldly in the same language; "had I not been pitiful she had been dead even now." Then, addressing Ustane: "Woman, I say to thee, go before I destroy thee where thou art!"

"I will not go! He is mine—mine!" she cried in anguish. I took him, and I saved his life! Destroy me, then, if thou hast the power! I will



not give thee my husband—never—never!”

Ayesha made a movement so swift that I could scarcely follow it, but it seemed to me that she struck the poor girl lightly upon the head with her hand. I looked at Ustane, and staggered back in horror, for there upon her hair, straight across her bronze-like tresses, appeared three finger-marks *white as snow*. As for the girl herself, she lifted her hands to her head like one who is dazed.

“Great heavens!” I said, aghast at this most dreadful manifestation of inhuman power; but *She* did but laugh a little.

“Thou thinkest, poor ignorant fool,” she said to the bewildered woman, “that I have not power to slay. Look, there lies a mirror,” and she pointed to Leo’s round shaving-glass that had been arranged by Job with other things upon his baggage; “give it to this woman, my Holly, and let her learn that which lies across her hair, and whether or no I have power to slay.”

I took the glass, and held it before Ustane’s eyes. She gazed, felt at her hair, and then gazed again, and presently sank upon the ground with a stifled sob.

“Now wilt thou go, or must I strike a second time?” asked Ayesha, in mockery. “See, I have set my seal upon thee, so that I may know thee till thy hair is all as white as it. If I behold thy face again, be sure, too, that thy bones shall soon be whiter than my stamp upon thy hair.”

Utterly awed and broken down, the poor creature rose, and, marked with that awful mark, she crept from the room, sobbing bitterly.

“Look not so frightened, my Holly,” said Ayesha, when she had gone. “I

tell thee I deal not in magic—there is no magic. ’Tis only a force that thou dost not understand. I marked her to strike terror to her heart, else must I have slain her. And now I will bid my servants bear my lord Kallikrates to a chamber near my own, that I may watch over him, and be ready to greet him when he wakes; and thither, too, shalt thou come, my Holly, and the white man, thy servant. But one thing remember at thy peril. Naught shalt thou say to Kallikrates as to how this woman went, and as little as may be of me. Now, I have warned thee!”

And she glided away to give her orders leaving me more absolutely confounded than ever. Indeed, so bewildered was I, so racked and torn with such a succession of various emotions, that I began to think that I must be going mad. However, perhaps fortunately, I had but little time to reflect, for presently the mutes arrived to carry the sleeping Leo and our possessions across the central cave, so for a while all was bustle. Our new rooms were situated immediately behind what we named Ayesha’s boudoir—that curtained space where I had first seen her. Where she herself slept I did not then know, but it was close at hand.

That night I passed in Leo’s room, but he slumbered through it like the dead, never once stirring. I also slept well, as, indeed, I needed to do, but my sleep was full of dreams of all the horrors and wonders I had undergone. Chiefly, however, I was haunted by that frightful piece of *diablerie* by which Ayesha left her finger-marks upon her rival’s hair. There was something so terrible about her swift, snake-like movement, and the instantaneous blanching of that threefold line, that, if the



results to Ustane had been much more one by one they flung themselves in unending files through the hole into the pit of death, and I would have impressed me so deeply. To this day I often dream of that awful scene, and see the weeping woman, bereaved, and marked like Cain, cast a last look at her lover, and creep from the presence of her dread Queen.

Another dream which troubled me originated in the huge pyramid of bones. I dreamed that they all arose and marched past me in thousands and tens of thousands—in squadrons, companies, and armies—with the sunlight shining through their hollow ribs. On they rushed across the plain to Kôr, their imperial home; I saw the drawbridges fall before them, and heard their skeletons clank beneath the brazen gates. On they went, up the splendid streets, on past fountains, palaces, and temples such as the eye of mortal never saw. But there was no man to greet them in the market-place, and no woman's face appeared at the windows—only a bodiless voice went before them, calling: "*Fallen is Imperial Kôr!—fallen!—fallen!—fallen!*" On, through the city, marched those gleaming phalanxes, and the rattle of their bony tread echoed in the silent air as they pressed grimly forward. They passed through the city and clomb the wall and strode along the great roadway that was made upon the wall, till at length once more they reached the drawbridge. Then, as the sun was sinking, they returned again towards their sepulchre, and his light shone luridly in the sockets of their empty eyes, throwing gigantic shadows of their bones, that stretched away, and crept and crept like huge spiders' legs as their armies wound across the plain. Now they came to the cave, and once

After this I slept again, soundly this time, till morning, when I awoke much refreshed, and rose. At last the hour drew near when, according to Ayesha, Leo was to awake, and with it came the veiled *She* herself. "Thou shalt see, O Holly," she said: "Presently he will awake in his right mind, the fever having left him."

Hardly were the words out of her mouth when Leo turned round and, stretching out his arms, yawned, opened his eyes, then, perceiving a female form bending over him, threw his arms about her and kissed her, in mistake, perhaps, for Ustane. At any rate, he said, in Arabic, "Hullo, Ustane! why have you tied your head up like that? Have you got the toothache?" and then in English, "I say, I'm awfully hungry. Why, Job, you old son of a gun, where the deuce have we got to now—eh?"

"I am sure I wish I knew, Mr. Leo," said Job, suspiciously edging past Ayesha, whom he still regarded with the utmost disgust and horror, being by no means sure that she was not an animated corpse; "but you mustn't talk, Mr. Leo, you've been very ill, and given us a great deal of anxiety, and if this lady," looking at Ayesha, "would be so kind as to move, I'll bring you your soup."

This turned Leo's attention to the "lady," who was standing by in perfect silence. "Why?" he said, "that is not Ustane—where is Ustane?"

Then, for the first time, Ayesha



spoke to him, and her first words were a lie. "She has gone from hence upon a visit," she said; "and behold! I am here in her place as thine handmaiden."

Ayesha's silver notes seemed to puzzle Leo's half-awakened intellect as much as did her corpse-like wrappings. However, he said nothing in answer, but, drinking off his soup greedily, turned over and slept again till the evening. When he woke for the second time he saw me, and began to question me as to what had happened, but I put him off as best I could till the morrow, when he awoke miraculously better. Then I told him something of his illness and of my doings, but as Ayesha was present I could not tell him much, except that she was the Queen of the country, and well disposed towards us, and that it was her pleasure to go veiled; for though of course I spoke in English, I was afraid that she might understand what we were saying from the expression of our faces; besides, I remembered her warning.

On the following morning Leo rose almost entirely recovered. The flesh wound in his side was healed, and his constitution, naturally a vigorous one, had shaken off the exhaustion consequent on his terrible fever with a rapidity that I can only attribute to the effects of the wonderful drug which Ayesha had given to him, and perhaps to the fact that his illness had been too short to reduce him very much. With his returning health came back full recollection of all his adventures up to the time when he had lost consciousness in the marsh, and of course of Ustane also, to whom I discovered he had grown considerably attached. Indeed, he overwhelmed me with questions about the poor girl, which I did

not dare to answer, for after Leo's first awakening *She* had sent for me, and again warned me solemnly that I was to reveal nothing of the story to him, delicately hinting that if I did it would be the worse for me. Further, for the second time, she cautioned me not to tell Leo anything more than I was obliged about herself, saying that she would reveal all to him in her own hour.

Indeed, her whole manner changed. After all that I had learned I expected that she would take the earliest opportunity of claiming the man whom she believed to be her old-world lover, but this, for some reason of her own, which at the time was quite inscrutable to me, she did not do. All that she did do was to attend to his wants quietly and with a humility which was in striking contrast to her former imperious bearing, addressing him always in a tone of something very like respect, and keeping him with her as much as possible. Of course his curiosity was as much excited about this mysterious woman as my own had been, and he was particularly anxious to see her face, which, without entering into particulars, I had told him was as lovely as were her form and voice. This in itself was enough to raise the expectations of any young man to a dangerous pitch, and, had it not been that he was still suffering from the effects of his illness, and much troubled in mind about Ustane, of whose tenderness and brave devotion he spoke in touching terms, I have no doubt but that he would have entered into Ayesha's plans, and fallen in love with her by anticipation. As it chanced, however, he was merely curious, and also, like myself, somewhat awed, for, though no hint had been given to him by *She* of her extraordinary age, not



unnaturally he came to identify her with the woman spoken of on the potsherd. At last, quite driven into a corner by his continual questions, which he showered on me while he was dressing on this third morning, I referred him to Ayesha, saying with perfect truth, that I did not know where Ustane was. Accordingly, after Leo had eaten a hearty breakfast, we adjourned into *She's* presence, for her mutes had orders to admit us at all hours.

As usual, she was seated in what, for want of a better term, we called her boudoir, and on the curtains being drawn she rose from her couch and, stretching out both hands, came forward to greet us, or rather Leo; for, as may be imagined, I was now left quite in the cold. It was a pretty sight to see her veiled form gliding towards the sturdy young Englishman, dressed in his grey flannel suit; for, though he is half a Greek by blood, with the exception of his hair, Leo is one of the most English-looking men I ever saw. He has nothing of the supple form or slippery manner of the modern Greek about him, though I presume that he inherits his personal beauty from his foreign mother, whose portrait he resembles not a little. He is very tall and broad-chested, and yet not awkward, as so many big men are, and his head is set upon him in such a fashion as to give him a proud and vigorous air, which was well described by his Amahagger name of "Lion."

"Greeting to thee, my lord and guest," Ayesha said in her softest voice. "Right glad am I to see thee standing upon thy feet. Believe me, had I not saved thee at the last, never wouldst thou have stood upon those feet again. But

the danger is done, and it shall be my care"—she flung a world of meaning into these words—"that it returns no more."

Leo bowed; then, in his best Arabic, he thanked her for all her kindness and courtesy in tending an unknown stranger.

"Nay," she answered softly, "ill could the world spare such a man. Beauty is too rare upon it. Give me no thanks, who am made happy by thy coming."

"Humph! old fellow," said Leo aside to me in English, "the lady is very civil. We seem to have tumbled into clover. I hope that you have made the most of your opportunities. By Jove! what a pair of arms!"

I signed to him to be quiet, for I had caught a suspicious gleam from Ayesha's veiled eyes, which were watching me curiously.

"I trust," she went on, "that my servants have attended thee well; if there can be comfort in this poor place, be sure it waits on thee. Is there aught else that thou desirest?"

"Yes, O *She*," answered Leo, hastily. "I would learn whither the woman who was with me has vanished."

"Ah!" said Ayesha: "the girl—yes, I saw her. Nay, I know not; she said that she would go, I know not where. Perchance she will return, perchance not. It is wearisome waiting on the sick, and these savage women are fickle."

Leo looked both puzzled and distressed at this intelligence.

"It's very odd," he said to me in English; and then, addressing *She*, he added: "I cannot understand; the young lady and I—well—we had a regard for each other."

Ayesha laughed a little, very musically, and changed the subject.



## XIX.

"GIVE ME A BLACK GOAT!"

THE conversation after this was of so desultory an order that I do not quite recollect it. For some reason, perhaps from a desire to keep her identity and character in reserve, Ayesha did not talk freely, as was her custom. Presently, however, she informed Leo that she had arranged a dance that night for our amusement. I was astonished to hear this, imagining that the Amahagger were much too gloomy a folk to indulge in any such frivolity; but, as will presently appear more clearly, it proved that an Amahagger dance has little in common with these fantastic festivities in other countries, savage or civilised. Then, as we were about to withdraw, she suggested that Leo might like to see some of the wonders of the caves, and accordingly thither we departed, accompanied by Job and Billali.

To describe our visit would only be to repeat a great deal of what I have already said. The tombs we entered were different indeed, for the whole rock is a honeycomb of sepulchres,\* but their contents varied but little. Afterwards we visited the pyramid of bones that had haunted my dreams on the previous night, and thence went down a long passage to one of the great vaults occupied by the remains of the poorer citizens of Imperial Kôr. These bodies were not nearly so well preserved as were those of the wealthier classes. Many of them had no linen covering on them; also, from five hundred to one thousand of them were buried in a single large vault, the corpses in

some instances being piled thickly one upon another, like a heap of slain.

Of course Leo was intensely interested in this stupendous and unequalled sight, which, indeed, was enough to awaken into the most active life all the imagination a man possessed. But to poor Job it did not prove attractive. As may be imagined, his nerves, already seriously shaken by what he had undergone since we had reached this terrible country, were yet further disturbed by the spectacle of these masses of departed humanity, whereof the forms still remained perfect before his eyes, though their voices were for ever lost in the eternal silence of the tomb. Nor was he comforted when old Billali, by way of soothing his evident agitation, informed him that he should not be frightened of these dead men, as he would soon be like them himself.

"That's a nice thing to say of a man, sir," he ejaculated, when I translated this little remark; "but there, what can one expect of an old cannibal savage? Not but what I dare say he's right," and Job sighed.

When we had finished inspecting the caves we returned and ate our meal, for it was now past four in the afternoon, and we all needed food and rest—especially Leo. At six o'clock, together with Job, we waited on Ayesha, who proceeded to terrify our poor servant still more by showing him pictures on the pool of water in the font-like vessel. She learnt from me that he was one of seventeen children, and then bid him think of all his brothers and sisters, or as many of them as he could, gathered

\* For a long while it puzzled me to know how the enormous quantities of rock that must have been dug out of these vast caves had been disposed of; but I discovered afterwards that it was, for the most part, built into the walls and palaces of Kôr. Also it was used to line the reservoirs and sewers.—L. H. H.



together in his father's cottage. Next she told him to look into the water, and there, reflected on its stilly surface, appeared that dead scene of many years gone by, as it was recalled to our retainer's brain. Some of the faces were clear enough, but some were mere blurs and blotches, or had one feature grossly exaggerated; the fact being that, in these instances, Job was unable to recall the exact appearances of the individuals, or recollected them only by a peculiarity of his tribe, and the water could but reflect what he saw with his mind's eye. It must be remembered, indeed, that *She's* power in this matter was strictly limited; since, except in very rare instances, she could merely photograph upon the water what was in the mind of someone present, and then only through his will. But if she was personally acquainted with a locality, as in the case of ourselves and the whale-boat, she could throw its reflection upon the water, and also, it seems, the reflection of anything extraneous that was passing there at the time. This power, however, did not extend to the minds of others. For instance, she could show me the interior of my college chapel, as I remembered it, but not as it was at the moment of vision; since, where other people were concerned, her art was limited strictly to the facts or memories present to *their* consciousness at the moment. So much was this the case that when we tried, for her amusement, to show her pictures of noted buildings, such as St. Paul's, or the Houses of Parliament, the result was most imperfect; for, of course, though we had a general idea of their appearance, we were unable to recall the architectural details, and therefore the minutiae necessary to a perfect

reflection were wanting. But Job could not be made to understand this, and, so far from accepting a natural explanation of the matter which, though strange enough in all conscience, was nothing more than an instance of glorified and perfected telepathy, he set the phenomenon down as a manifestation of the blackest magic. I shall never forget the howl of terror which he uttered when he saw the more or less perfect portraits of his long-scattered brethren staring at him from the quiet water, or the merry peal of laughter with which Ayesha greeted his consternation. Nor did Leo altogether like the performance, but ran his fingers through his yellow curls, and remarked that it gave him "the creeps."

After about an hour of this amusement, in the latter part of which Job did not participate, the mutes indicated by signs that Billali was waiting for an audience. Accordingly he was told to "crawl up," which he did as awkwardly as usual, and announced that the dance was ready to begin if *She* and the white strangers would be pleased to attend. Shortly afterwards we all rose, and, Ayesha having thrown a dark cloak over her white wrappings (the same, by the way, that she had worn when I saw her cursing by the fire), we started. The dance was to be held in the open air, on the smooth rocky plateau in front of the great cave, and thither we made our way. About fifteen paces from the mouth of the cave we found three chairs placed, and here we sat and waited, for as yet no dancers were to be seen. The night was almost, but not quite, dark, the moon not having risen as yet, which made us wonder how we should be able to see the dancing.

"Thou wilt understand presently,"



said Ayesha, with a little laugh, when Leo questioned her.

Scarcely were the words out of her mouth when from every point we saw dark forms rushing along, each of them bearing what at first we took to be an enormous flaming torch. Whatever these were, they burned furiously, for the flames stood out a yard or more behind their bearers. On came the men, fifty or more of them, carrying their blazing burdens and looking like so many devils from hell. Leo was the first to discover what these burdens were.

"Great heavens!" he said, "they are corpses on fire!"

I stared and stared again. He was perfectly right—the torches that were to light our entertainment were human mummies from the caves!

On rushed the bearers of the flaming corpses, and, meeting at a spot about twenty paces in front of us, built their ghastly loads crossways into a huge bonfire. Heavens! how they roared and flared? No tar barrel could have burnt as did those mummies. Nor was this all. Suddenly I saw one great fellow seize a flaming human arm that had fallen from its parent frame, and rush off into the darkness. Presently he stopped, and a tall streak of fire shot up into the air, illumining the gloom, and also the lamp from which it sprang. That lamp was the mummy of a woman tied to a stout stake let into the rock, and he had fired her hair. On he went a few paces and touched a second, then a third, and a fourth, till at last we were surrounded on all three sides by a great ring of bodies flaring furiously, the material with which they were preserved having rendered them so inflammable that literally the flames would spout out of the ears and

mouth in tongues of fire a foot or more in length.

Nero illuminated his gardens with living Christians soaked in tar, and we were now treated to a similar spectacle, probably for the first time since his day, only happily our lamps were not alive.

But although, fortunately, this element of horror was wanting, to describe the awful and hideous grandeur of the spectacle thus presented to us is, I feel, so absolutely beyond my poor powers that I scarcely dare attempt it. To begin with, it appealed to the moral as well as to the physical susceptibilities. There was something very terrible, and yet most fascinating, about this employment of the remote dead to illumine the orgies of the living; in itself the thing was a satire, both on the living and the dead. Caesar's dust—or is it Alexander's?—may stop a bunghole, but the office of these dead Cæsars of the past was to light a savage fetish dance. To such base uses may we come, of so little account may we be in the minds of the eager multitudes that we shall breed, many of whom, so far from revering our memory, will live to curse us for begetting them into such a world of woe.

Then there was the physical side of the spectacle, and a wild and splendid one it was. Those old citizens of Kôr burnt as, to judge from their sculptures and inscriptions, they had lived, very fast, and with the utmost liberality. What is more, there were plenty of them. So soon as a mummy was consumed to the ankles, which happened in about twenty minutes, the feet were kicked away, and another was put in its place. The bonfire was fed on the



same generous scale, and its flames shot up, with a hiss and a crackle, twenty or thirty feet into the air, throwing great flashes of light far out into the gloom, through which the dark forms of the Amahagger flitted to and fro like devils replenishing the infernal fires. We all stood and stared aghast—shocked, and yet fascinated at so strange a spectacle, and half expecting to see the spirits those flaming forms had once enclosed come creeping from the shadows to work vengeance on their desecrators.

"I promised thee a strange sight, my Holly," laughed Ayesha, whose nerves alone did not seem to be affected; "and, behold! I have not failed thee. Also, it hath its lesson. Trust not to the future, for who knows what the future may bring! Therefore, live for the day, and endeavour not to escape the dust which seems to be man's end. What thinkest thou that those long-forgotten nobles and ladies would have felt had they known that in an age to be their delicate bodies should flare to light the dance of savages? But see, here come the mummers; a merry crew—are they not? The stage is lit—now for the play."

As she spoke we perceived advancing round the human bonfire two lines of figures, one of males and the other of females, to the number of about a hundred, each arrayed only in the usual leopard and buck skins. They formed up, in perfect silence, facing each other between us and the fire, and then the dance—a sort of infernal and fiendish cancan—began. To describe it is quite impossible, but, though there was a good deal of tossing of legs and double-shuffling, it seemed

to our untutored minds to be a play rather than a dance, and, as is usual among this dreadful people, whose character takes its colour from the caves wherein they live, and whose jokes and amusements are drawn from the inexhaustible stores of preserved mortality with which they share their homes, the subject was most ghastly.

In the first place it represented an attempted murder, then the burial alive of the victim and his struggling from the grave; each act of the abominable drama, which was carried on in perfect silence, being rounded off and finished with a furious and very revolting dance about the supposed victim, who writhed upon the ground in the red light of the bonfire.

Suddenly, however, this pleasing piece was interrupted. There was a slight commotion, and a large powerful woman, whom I had noted as one of the most vigorous of the dancers, made mad and drunken with unholy excitement, bounded and staggered towards us, shrieking out as she came:—

"I want a Black Goat, I must have a Black Goat, bring me a Black Goat!" and down she fell upon the rocky floor, foaming and writhing, and shrieking for a Black Goat, affording as hideous a spectacle as can be conceived.

Instantly most of the dancers assembled themselves round her, though some still continued their capers in the background.

"She has a Devil," called out one of them. "Run and get a black goat. There, Devil, keep quiet! keep quiet! You shall have the goat presently. They have gone to fetch it, Devil."

"I want a Black Goat, I must have



a Black Goat!" shrieked the foaming rolling creature again.

"All right, Devil, the goat will be here presently! keep quiet, there's a good Devil!"

And so on till the goat, taken from a neighbouring kraal, arrived at last, being dragged bleating to the scene by its horns.

"Is it a Black One? is it a Black One?" shrieked the possessed.

"Yes, yes, Devil, as black as night!" then aside, "keep it behind thee, don't let the Devil see that it has got a white spot on its rump and another on its belly. In one minute, Devil. There, cut its throat, quick. Where is the saucer?"

"The Goat! the Goat! the Goat! Give me the blood of my black goat! I must have it, don't you see I must have it? Oh! oh! oh! give me the blood of the goat."

At this moment a terrified *bah!* announced that the poor animal had been sacrificed, and presently a woman ran up with a saucer full of the blood. This the possessed creature, who was then raving and foaming her wildest, seized and *drank*, and was instantly recovered, and without a trace of hysteria, or fits, or possession, or whatever dreadful thing it was from which she suffered. She stretched out her arms, smiled faintly, and walked back to the dancers, who then withdrew in a double line as they had come, leaving the space between us and the bonfire deserted.

I thought that the entertainment was now over, and, feeling sickened, was about to ask *She* if we could rise, when suddenly what at first I took to be a baboon came hopping round the fire, to be met upon the other side by a lion, or rather by a human being dressed in a lion's skin. Then

appeared a goat, then a man wrapped in an ox-hide, with the horns swinging ludicrously to and fro. After him followed a blesbok, then an impala, then a koodoo, then more goats, and many other animals, including a girl sewn up in the shining scaly skin of a boa constrictor, several yards of which trailed along the ground behind her. When all the maskers had collected they began to dance about in a lumbering, unnatural fashion, and to imitate the sounds produced by the respective animals they represented, until the air was alive with roars and bleating and the hissing of snakes.

This went on for a long time, till, tiring of the pantomime, I asked Ayesha if Leo and myself could walk round to inspect the human torches, and, as she did not object, we started, turning to the left. After looking at one or two of the flaming bodies, we were about to return, thoroughly disgusted with the grotesque weirdness of the spectacle, when our attention was attracted by one of the dancers, a particularly active leopard, that had separated itself from its fellow-beasts, and was whisking about in our immediate neighbourhood, but gradually drawing towards a spot where the shadow was darkest, equidistant between two of the burning mummies. Led by curiosity, we followed it, when suddenly it darted past us into the gloom beyond, and as it went erected itself and whispered, "Come," in a voice which we both recognised as that of Ustane. Without waiting to consult me Leo turned and followed her into the outer darkness, and, filled with fear, I hurried after them. The leopard crawled on for about fifty paces—a sufficient distance to be quite beyond the light of the fire and torches—and then Leo overtook it, or rather Ustane.



"Oh, my lord," I heard her whisper, "at length I have found thee! Listen. I am in peril of my life from '*She-who-must-be-obeyed*.' Surely the Baboon has told thee how she drove me from thee? I love thee, my lord, and thou art mine according to the custom of this country. I saved thy life; then canst thou cast me off, my love, my love!"

"Of course not," ejaculated Leo; "I have been seeking thee, Ustane. Let us go and explain to the Queen."

"Nay, nay, she would slay us. Thou knowest not her power—the Baboon there, he knoweth, for he saw. Harken! There is but one way; if thou wilt cleave to me, thou must flee with me across the marshes this very hour, and then perchance we may escape."

"For Heaven's sake, Leo," I began, but she broke in—

"Nay, listen not to him. Swift—be swift—death is in the air we breathe. Even now, mayhap, *She* hears us," and without more ado she proceeded to enforce her arguments by throwing herself into his arms. As she did so the leopard's head slipped from her hair, and I saw the three white finger-marks upon it, gleaming faintly in the starlight. Terrified by the desperate nature of the position, once more I was about to interpose, for I knew that Leo is not too strong-minded where women are concerned, when I heard a little silvery laugh behind me. I turned round, and—oh, horror!—there was *She* herself, and with her Billali and two male mutes. I gasped and nearly fell, for I was certain that such a situation must result in some dreadful tragedy, of which it seemed exceedingly probable that I should be the first victim. As for Ustane, loosing her lover, she covered her

eyes with her hands, while Leo, not knowing the full terror of the position, merely coloured, and looked foolish, as a man caught in such a trap would naturally do.

## XX.

## TRIUMPH.

THEN followed a moment of the most painful silence that I ever endured. It was broken by Ayesha, who addressed herself to Leo.

"Nay, now, my lord and guest," she said in her softest tones, which yet had the ring of steel about them, "look not so bashful. Surely the sight was a pretty one—the leopard and the lion!"

"Oh, bother!" said Leo, in English.

"And thou, Ustane," she went on, "in truth I should have passed thee by, had not the light fallen on the stripes across thy hair," and she pointed to the bright edge of the rising moon which was now appearing above the horizon. "Well! well! the dance is done—see, the tapers have burnt down, and all things end in silence and in ashes. So thou thoughtest it a fit time for love, Ustane, my servant—and I, dreaming not that I could be disobeyed, deemed thee already far away."

"Play not with me," moaned the wretched woman; "kill me, and let there be an end."

"Nay, why? It is not well to go so swift from the hot lips of love



down to the cold mouth of the grave," and Ayesha motioned to the mutes, who instantly stepped up and caught the girl by either arm. With an oath Leo sprang upon the nearest, and hurled him to the ground, and then stood over him with his face set and his fist ready.

Again Ayesha laughed. "It was well thrown, my guest; thou hast a strong arm for one who so late was sick. But now of thy courtesy I pray thee let that man live and do my bidding. He shall not harm the girl; the night air grows chill, and I would welcome her in mine own place. Surely she whom thou dost favour shall be favoured of me also."

I took Leo by the arm, dragging him from the prostrate mute, and, half bewildered, he yielded and left the man. Then we set out for the cave across the plateau, whence the dancers had vanished, and where a pile of white human ashes was all that remained of the fire which had lit their dancing.

In due course we gained Ayesha's boudoir—all too soon it seemed to me, having a sad presage of what was to come lying heavy on my heart.

Ayesha seated herself upon her cushions, and, having dismissed Job and Billali, by signs she bade the mutes tend the lamps and retire—all save one girl, who was her favourite personal attendant. We three remained standing, the unfortunate Ustane a little to the left of the rest of us.

"Now, O Holly," Ayesha began, "how came it that thou who didst hear my words bidding this evil-doer"—and she pointed to Ustane—"to go hence—thou at whose prayer I weakly spared her life—how came it. I say, that thou hadst part in

what I saw to-night? Answer, and for thine own sake, I say, speak all the truth, for I am not minded to hear lies upon this matter!"

"It was by accident, O Queen!" I answered. "I knew nothing of it."

"I believe thee, Holly," she answered coldly, "and well it is for thee that I do. Then does the whole guilt rest upon her?"

"I do not find any guilt herein," interrupted Leo. "She is no other man's wife, and it seems that she has married me according to the custom of this awful place, so who is harmed? Any way, madam, whatever she has done I have done, so if she is to be punished let me be punished also; and I tell thee," he went on, working himself up into a fury, "that if thou biddest one of those deaf and dumb villains to touch her again I will tear him to pieces!"

Ayesha listened in icy silence, and made no remark. When he had finished, however, she addressed Ustane.

"Hast thou aught to say, woman? Thou silly straw, thou feather, who didst think to float towards thy passion's petty ends, even against the great wind of my will! Tell me, for I fain would understand, why didst thou this thing?"

Then I think that I saw the most wonderful example of moral courage and intrepidity which it is possible to conceive. For this poor doomed girl, knowing what she had to expect at the hands of her terrible Queen, knowing, too, from bitter experience, how great was her adversary's power, yet stood unshaken, and out of the very depths of her despair drew the strength to defy her.

"I did it, O *She*," she answered, drawing herself up to the full of her stately height, and throwing back the



panther skin from her head, "because my love is deeper than the grave. I did it because my life without this man whom my heart chose would be but a living death. Therefore I risked my life, and now, when I know that it is forfeit to thine anger, still am I glad that I risked it, and must pay it away in the risking, ay, because he embraced me once, and told me that he loved me yet."

Here Ayesha half rose from her couch, and then sank down again.

"I have no magic," went on Ustane, her rich voice ringing strong and full, "and I am not a Queen, nor do I live for ever: but a woman's heart is heavy to sink through waters, however deep, O Queen! and a woman's eyes are quick to see—even through thy veil, O Queen!

"Listen: I know it, thou dost love this man thyself, and therefore wouldst thou destroy me who stand across thy path. Ay, I die—I die, and go into the darkness, nor know I whither I go. But this I know. There is a light shining in my breast, and by that light, as by a lamp, I see the truth, and the future that I shall not share, unroll itself before me like a scroll. When first I knew my lord," and she pointed to Leo, "I knew also that death would be the bridal gift he gave me—it rushed upon me of a sudden, but I turned not back, being ready to pay the price, and, behold, death is here! And now, even as I knew this, so, standing on the steps of doom, do I know that thou shalt not reap the profit of thy crime. Mine he is, and, though thy beauty shine like a sun among the stars, mine he shall remain for thee. Never here in this life shall he look thee in the eyes and call thee spouse. Thou too art doomed, I see"—and her voice rose

like the cry of an inspired prophetess; "ah, I see——"

Then there rang an answering cry of rage and terror. I turned my head. Ayesha had risen, and was standing with her outstretched hand pointing at Ustane, who had suddenly become silent. I gazed at the poor woman, and as I gazed there fell upon her face that same woful, fixed expression of terror which I had seen before when she broke into her wild chant. Her eyes grew large, her nostrils dilated, and her lips blanched.

Ayesha said nothing, she made no sound, she only drew herself up, stretched out her arm, and, her tall veiled frame quivering like an aspen leaf, appeared to look fixedly at her victim. Even as she looked Ustane put her hands to her head, uttered one piercing scream, turned round twice, and then fell backwards with a thud—prone upon the floor. Both Leo and myself rushed to her. She was stone dead—blasted into death by some mysterious electric agency or overwhelming will-force whereof the dread *She* had command.

For a moment Leo did not quite understand what had happened. But, when it came home to him, his face was awful to see. With a savage oath he rose from beside the corpse, and, turning, literally sprang at Ayesha. But she was watching, and, seeing him come, stretched out her hand again, and he went staggering back towards me, and would have fallen had I not caught him. Afterwards he told me that he felt as though he had suddenly received a violent blow in the chest, and, what is more, utterly cowed, as if all the manhood had been taken out of him.

Then Ayesha spoke. "Forgive



me, my guest," she said softly, addressing him, "if I have shocked thee with my justice."

"Forgive thee, thou fiend!" shouted poor Leo, wringing his hands in his rage and grief. "Forgive thee, thou murderess! By Heaven, I will kill thee if I can!"

"Nay, nay," she answered in the same soft voice, "thou dost not understand—the time has come for thee to learn. *Thou art my love, my Kallikrates, my Beautiful, my Strong!* For two thousand years, Kallikrates, I have waited for thee, and now at length thou hast come back to me; and as for this woman," pointing to the corpse, "she stood between me and thee, therefore have I laid her in the dust, Kallikrates."

"It is a lie!" said Leo. "My name is not Kallikrates! I am Leo Vincey; my ancestor was Kallikrates—at least, I believe he was."

"Ah, thou sayest it—thine ancestor was Kallikrates, and thou, even thou, art Kallikrates reborn, come back—and mine own dear lord!"

"I am not Kallikrates, and as for being thy lord, or having aught to do with thee, I had sooner be the lord of a fiend from hell, for she would be better than thou."

"Sayest thou so—sayest thou so, Kallikrates? Nay, but thou hast not seen me for so long a time that no memory remains. Yet am I very fair, Kallikrates!"

"I hate thee, murderess, and I have no wish to see thee. What is it to me how fair thou art? I hate thee, I say."

"Yet within a very little space shalt thou creep to my knee, and swear that thou dost love me," answered Ayesha, with a sweet, mocking laugh. "Come, there is no time like the present time. Here, before this

dead girl who loved thee, let us put it to the proof.

"Look now on me, Kallikrates!"

and with a sudden motion she shook her gauzy covering from her, and stood forth in her low kirtle and her snaky zone, in her glorious radiant beauty and her imperial grace, rising from her wrappings, as it were, like Venus from the wave, or Galatea from her marble, or a beatified spirit from the tomb. She stood forth, and fixed her deep and glowing eyes upon Leo's eyes, and I saw his clenched fists unclasp, and his set and quivering features relax beneath her gaze. I saw his wonder and astonishment grow into admiration, then into longing, and the more he struggled the more I saw the power of her dread beauty fasten on him and take hold of

his senses, drugging them, and drawing the heart out of him. Did I not know the process? Had not I—who was twice his age—gone through it myself? Was I not going through it afresh even then, although her sweet and passionate gaze was not for me? Yes, alas! I was. Alas! that I should have to confess that at this very moment I was rent by mad and furious jealousy. I could have flown at him, shame upon me! This woman had confounded and almost destroyed my moral sense, as indeed she must confound all who looked upon her superhuman loveliness. But—I do not know how—I mastered myself, and once more turned to see the climax of the awful tragedy.

"Oh, great Heaven!" gasped Leo, "art thou a woman?"

"A woman in truth—in very truth—and thine own spouse, Kallikrates!" she answered, stretching out her rounded ivory arms towards him, and smiling, ah, so sweetly!

He looked and looked and slowly



I perceived that he was drawing nearer to her. Suddenly his eye fell upon the corpse of poor Ustane, and he shuddered and stood still.

"How can I?" he said hoarsely. "Thou art a murderess; she loved me."

Observe, he was already forgetting that he had loved her.

"It is nothing," Ayesha murmured, and her voice sounded sweet as the night wind passing through the trees. "It is naught at all. If I have sinned, let my beauty answer for my sin. If I have sinned, it is for love of thee: let my sin, therefore, be put away and forgotten;" and once more she stretched out her arms and whispered "*Come.*" Then in a few seconds it was over.

I saw him struggle—I saw him even turn to fly; but her eyes drew him more strongly than iron bonds, and the magic of her beauty and concentrated will and passion entered into him and overpowered him—ay, even there, in the presence of the body of the woman who had loved him well enough to die for him. It sounds horrible and wicked indeed, but he should not be too greatly blamed, and be sure his sin has found him out. The temptress who drew him into evil was more than human, and her beauty was greater than the loveliness of the daughters of men.

I looked up again, and now her perfect form lay in his arms, and her lips were pressed against his own; and thus, with the corpse of his dead love for an altar, did Leo Vincey plight his troth to her red-handed murderess—plight it for ever and a day. For those who sell themselves into a like dominion, paying down the price of their own honour, and throwing their soul into the balance to sink the scale to the level of their

lusts, must win deliverance hardly. As they have sown, so shall they reap and reap, even when the poppy flowers of passion have withered in their hands, and their harvest is but bitter tares, garnered in satiety.

Suddenly, with a snake-like motion, she seemed to slip from his embrace, and again she broke out into her low laugh of triumphant mockery, and said, pointing to the dead Ustane:

"Did I not tell thee that within a little space thou wouldst creep to my knee, O Kallikrates? Surely the space has been no great one!"

Leo groaned in shame and misery; for though he was overcome and stricken down, he was not so lost as to be unaware of the depth of the degradation to which he had sunk. On the contrary, his better nature rose up in arms against his fallen self, as I was to learn that night.

Ayesha laughed a third time, then, veiling herself quickly, she made a sign to the mute, who had been watching the strange scene with curious startled eyes. The girl left, and returned presently, followed by two male mutes, to whom the Queen made another sign. Thereon they all three seized the body of poor Ustane by the arms, dragging it heavily down the cavern and away through the curtains at the end. Leo watched it for a little while, then he covered his face with his hand. To my excited fancy, the glazing eyes of dead Ustane also seemed to watch us as they went.

"There passes the dead past," said Ayesha solemnly, as the curtains shook and fell back into their places, when the ghastly procession had vanished behind them. Then, with one of those wild changes of mood of which I have already spoken, again she threw off her veil, and, after the



ancient and poetic fashion of the dwellers in Arabia,\* broke into a psalm of triumph, or epithalamium that, rich and beautiful as it was, is most difficult to render into English; that ought, indeed, to be sung to music rather than written and read. It was divided into two parts—one descriptive, the other personal; and, as nearly as I can remember, it ran as follows:—

*Love is like a flower in the desert.*

*It is like the aloe of Arabia, that blooms but once and dies; it blooms in the salt emptiness of Life, and the brightness of its beauty is set upon the waste as a star is set upon a storm.*

*It hath the sun above that is the Spirit, and about it blows the air of its divinity.*

*At the echoing of a step Love blooms, I say; I say Love blooms, and bends her beauty down to him who passeth by.*

*He plucketh it, yea, he plucketh the red cup that is full of honey, and beareth it away; away across the desert, away till the flower be withered, away till the desert is done.*

*There is only one perfect flower in the wilderness of Life.*

*That flower is Love!*

*There is only one fixed light in the mists of our wandering.*

*That light is Love!*

*There is only one hope in our despairing night.*

*That hope is Love!*

\* Among the ancient Arabians the power of poetic declamation, either in verse or prose, was held in the highest honour and esteem, and he who excelled in it was known as "Khāteb," or Orator. Every year a general assembly was held, at which the rival poets repeated their compositions, and, so soon as the knowledge of the art of writing became general, those poems which were judged to be the best were inscribed on silk in letters of gold, and publicly exhibited, being known as "Al Modnahabāt," or "golden verses." In the chant given above by Mr. Holly, Ayesha evidently followed the traditional poetic manner of her people, which was to embody their thoughts in a series of somewhat disconnected sentences, each remarkable for its beauty and the grace of its expression.—EDITOR.

*All else is false. All else is shadow moving upon water. All else is wind and vanity.*

*Who shall say what is the weight or the measure of Love?*

*It is born of the flesh, it dwelleth in the spirit. From each doth it draw its comfort.*

*For beauty it is as a star.*

*Many are its shapes, but all are beautiful, and none know whence that star rose, or the horizon where it shall set.*

Then, turning to Leo, and laying her hand upon his shoulder, Ayesha went on in a fuller and more triumphant tone, speaking in balanced sentences that gradually grew and swelled from romantic prose into pure and majestic verse:—

*Long have I loved thee, O, my love; yet has my love not lessened.*

*Long have I waited for thee, and behold my reward is at hand—is here!*

*Far away I saw thee once, and thou wast taken from me.*

*Then in a grave sowed I the seed of patience, and shone upon it with the sun of hope, and watered it with tears of repentance, and breathed on it with the breath of my knowledge.*

*And now, lo! it hath sprung up, and borne fruit. Lo! out of the grave hath it sprung. Yea, from among the dry bones and ashes of the dead.*

*I have waited and my reward is with me.*



*I have overcome Death, and Death  
has brought back to me him that was  
dead.*

*Therefore do I rejoice, for fair is  
the future.*

*Green are the paths that we shall  
tread across the everlasting meadows  
The hour is at hand. Night hath  
fled away into the valleys.*

*The dawn kisseth the mountain-tops.  
Soft shall we live, my love, and  
easy shall we go.*

*Crowned shall we be with the diadem  
of Kings.*

*Worshipping and wonder-struck all  
peoples of the world,*

*Blinded, shall fall before our beauty  
and our might.*

*From time unto times shall our  
greatness thunder on,*

*Rolling like a chariot through the  
dust of endless days.*

*Laughing shall we speed in our  
victory and pomp,*

*Laughing like the Daylight as he  
leaps along the hills.*

*Onward, still triumphant, to a  
triumph ever new!*

*Onward, in our power, to a power  
unattained!*

*Onward, never weary, clad with  
splendour for a robe!*

*Till accomplished be our fate, and  
the night is rushing down.*

She paused in her strange and most thrilling allegorical chant, of which, unfortunately, I am only able to give the burden, I fear but feebly. Then she said :—

“Perchance thou dost not believe my word, Kallikrates — perchance thou thinkest that I do delude thee, that I have not lived these many years, and that thou hast not been born again to me. Nay, look not thus — put away that pale cast of doubt, for oh, be sure, herein can

error find no foothold ! Sooner shall the suns forget their course and the swallow miss her nest, than my soul shall swear a lie and be led astray from thee, Kallikrates. Blind me, take away mine eyes, and let the darkness utterly fence me in, and still mine ears would catch the sound of thine unforgotten voice, striking more loud against the portals of my sense than can the call of brazen throated clarions :—Stop up mine hearing also, and let a thousand touch me on the brow, and I would name thee out of all :—Yea, rob me of every sense, and see me stand deaf, and blind, and dumb, and with nerves that cannot weigh the value of a touch, yet would my spirit leap within me like a quickening child and cry unto my heart : ‘Behold Kallikrates ! Behold thou watcher, the watches of thy night are ended ! Behold, thou who seekest in the night season, thy morning Star ariseth.’”

She ceased awhile, and presently continued, “Stay : if thy heart is yet hardened against the mighty truth, and thou seekest some outward pledge of that which thou dost find too strange to understand, even now it shall be given to thee, and to thee also, O my Holly. Take a lamp each one of you, and follow after me whither I shall lead you.”

Without pausing to think—indeed, speaking for myself, I had almost abandoned the attempt in circumstances which seemed to render it futile, since thought fell hourly helpless against a black wall of wonder—we took the lamps and followed her. Gliding to the end of her chamber, Ayesha raised a curtain and revealed a little stair of the sort that is so common in these dim caves of Kôr. As we hurried down this stair I



observed that the steps were worn in the centre to such an extent that some of them had been reduced from seven and a half inches, at which I guessed their original height, to about three and a half inches. Now, the other steps that I had seen in the caves were quite unworn, as might be expected, since the only traffic which ever passed upon them was that of those who bore a fresh burden to the tomb. Therefore this fact struck my notice with the curious force with which little things do strike us when our minds are absolutely overwhelmed by a sudden rush of powerful sensations, beaten flat, as it were, like a sea beneath the first burst of a hurricane, so that each small object on its surface starts into an unnatural prominence.

At the foot of the stairway I halted and stared at the worn steps, and Ayesha, turning, saw me.

"Dost thou wonder whose are the feet that have worn away this rock, my Holly?" she asked. "They are mine—even my own light feet! I can remember when yonder stairs were new and level, but for two thousand years and more have I passed hither day by day, and see, my sandals have eaten out the solid stone!"

I made no answer, but I do not think that anything which I had heard or seen brought home to my limited understanding so clear a sense of this being's overwhelming antiquity as the sight of this hard granite hollowed out by her soft feet. How many hundreds of thousands of times must she have glided up and down that stair to bring about such a result?

The steps led to a tunnel, and a few paces from its mouth opened a curtain-hung doorway; a glance

at which told me that it was the same whence I had witnessed that terrible scene by the leaping flame. I recognised the pattern of the curtain, and the sight of it brought that dread event vividly before my eyes, and made me tremble even at its memory. Ayesha entered the tomb, for it was a tomb, and we followed her—I, for one, rejoicing that the mystery of the place was about to be cleared up, and yet afraid to face its solution.

## XXI.

### THE DEAD AND LIVING MEET.

"SEE now the place where I have slept for these two thousand years," said Ayesha, taking the lamp from Leo's hand and holding it above her head. Its rays fell upon a hollow in the floor, where I had seen the obedient leaping flame, but now the fire was out. They fell upon the white form stretched there beneath its wrappings upon a bed of stone, upon the fretted carving of the tomb, and upon another shelf of stone opposite to the one on which the body lay, and separated from it only by the breadth of the cave.

"Here," went on Ayesha, resting her hand upon the rock—"here have I slept night by night for all these generations, with but a cloak to cover me. It did not become me that I should lie soft when my spouse yonder," and she pointed to the rigid



form, "lay stiff in death. Here night by night I have slept in his cold company—till, as thou seest, this thick slab, like the stairs down which we came, has worn thin with the tossing of my form—so faithful have I been to thee even in thy space of sleep, Kallikrates. And now, my lord, thou shalt see a wondrous thing—living, thou shalt behold thyself dead—for well have I tended thee during all these years, Kallikrates. Art thou prepared?"

We made no answer, but gazed at each other with frightened eyes, the scene was so awful and so solemn. Ayesha advanced, and laid her hand upon the corner of the shroud. Then once more she spoke.

"Be not affrighted," she said; "though the thing seem wonderful to thee—all we who live have thus lived before; nor are the very shapes that hold us strangers to the sun! Only we know it not, because memory writes no record, and earth hath gathered in the earth she lent us, for none have saved our glory from the grave. But I, by my arts and by the arts of those dead men of Kôr which I have learned, have held thee back, O Kallikrates, from the dust, that the waxen stamp of beauty on thy face should ever rest before mine eye. 'Twas a mask that memory might fill, serving to summon forth thy presence from the past, and give it strength to wander in the habitations of my thought, clad in a mummery of life that stayed my appetite with visions of dead days.

"Behold now, let the Dead and Living meet! Across the gulf of Time they still are one. Time has no power against Identity, though Sleep the merciful hath blotted out the tablets of our mind, and with oblivion sealed the sorrows that else would

hound us down from life to life, stuffing the brain with gathered griefs till it burst in the madness of uttermost despair. Still are they one, for the wrappings of our rest shall roll away as thunderclouds before the wind; the frozen voices of the past shall melt in music like mountain snows beneath the sun; and the weeping and the laughter of the lost hours shall be heard once more most sweetly echoing up the cliff of the innumerable years.

"Therefore have no fear, Kallikrates, when thou—living, and but lately born—shalt look upon thine own departed self, who breathed and died so long ago. I do but turn one page in thy Book of Being, and show thee what is writ thereon.

"Behold!"

With a sudden motion she drew the shroud from the cold form, and let the lamplight play upon it. I looked, and shrank back terrified; since, say what she might, the sight was an uncanny one—for her explanations were beyond the grasp of our finite minds, and when stripped from the mists of vague esoteric philosophy, and brought into conflict with cold and horrifying fact, they did not do much to break its force. For stretched upon the stone bier before us, robed in white and perfectly preserved, was what appeared to be the body of Leo Vincey. I stared from Leo, standing *there* alive, to Leo lying *there* dead, and could see no difference between them; except, perhaps, that the body on the bier looked older. Feature for feature they were the same, yes, to the crop of little golden curls, which was Leo's most uncommon beauty. It even seemed to me, as I looked, that the expression on the dead man's face resembled that which I had sometimes seen



upon Leo's when he was plunged in profound sleep. I can only sum up the closeness of the resemblance by saying that I never saw twins so exactly similar in appearance as were that dead and living pair.

I turned to see what effect was produced upon Leo by the sight of his dead self, and found it to be that of partial stupefaction. He stood for two or three minutes staring in silence, and when at last he spoke it was only to ejaculate :—

"Cover it up, and take me away."

"Nay, wait, Kallikrates," said Ayesha, who resembled an inspired Sibyl rather than a woman, as she stood, the lamp raised above her head flooding with its light her own rich beauty and the cold wonder of the death-clothed form upon the bier, and rolled out her majestic sentences with a grandeur and a freedom of utterance which, alas ! I cannot render.

"Wait. I would show thee something, that no tittle of my crime may be hidden from thee. Do thou, O Holly, open the garment on the breast of the dead Kallikrates, for perchance my lord may fear to touch his perished self."

I obeyed with trembling fingers. It seemed a desecration and an unhallowed thing to handle that sleeping image of the living man at my side. Presently the cold breast was bare, and there upon it, over the heart, appeared a wound, evidently inflicted with a spear or dagger.

"Thou seest, Kallikrates," she said.

"Know, then, that it was *I* who slew thee : in the place of Life *I* gave thee death. I slew thee because of the Egyptian Amenartas, whom thou didst love, for by her wiles she held thy heart, and her I could not smite as but now I smote yon woman, for she was too strong for me. In my

haste and bitter anger I slew thee, and now for all these ages I have lamented thee, and waited for thy coming. And thou hast come, and naught can stand between thee and me, and of a truth now for death I will give thee life—not life eternal, for that none can give, but days and youth that shall endure for thousands upon thousands of years, and with them pomp, and power, and wealth, and all things that are good and beautiful, such as have been to no man before thee, nor shall be to any man who comes after. But one thing more, and thou shalt rest and make ready for the day of thy new birth. Thou seest this body, which was thine own. For all these centuries it hath been my cold comfort and my companion ; now I need it no more, for I have thy living presence, and it can but serve to stir up memories of that which I would fain forget. Therefore let it go back to the dust whence I have held it.

"Behold ! I have prepared against this happy hour !" Then, from the other shelf or stone ledge, which Ayesha said served her for a couch, she took a large vitrified double-handed vase, the mouth of which was covered with a bladder. This she loosed, and, having first bent down and gently kissed the white forehead of the dead man, she undid the vase, and sprinkled its contents carefully over the corpse, taking, I observed, the greatest precautions against any drop of them touching us or herself ; then poured out what remained of the liquid upon the chest and head. Instantly a dense vapour arose, and the cave was filled with choking fumes, which prevented us from seeing anything while the deadly acid did its work, for I presume it was some powerful preparation of the



sort. From the spot where the body lay came a fierce fizzing and crackling sound, which ceased, however, before the fumes had cleared away. At last they were all gone, except a little cloud that still hung over the corpse. In two or three minutes more this had vanished also, and, wonderful as it may seem, it is a fact that on the stone bench which had supported the mortal remains of the ancient Kallikrates for so many centuries there was now nothing to be seen but a few handfuls of smoking white powder. The acid had utterly destroyed the body, and even in places eaten into the stone. Ayesha stooped down, and taking a handful of this powder, she threw it into the air, saying at the same time, in a voice of calm solemnity:—

"Dust to dust!—the past to the past!—the lost to the lost!—Kallikrates is dead, and is born again!"

The ashes floated about us and fell to the rocky floor, while in awed silence we watched them fall, too overcome for words.

"Now leave me," she said, "and sleep if ye may. I must watch and think, for to-morrow night we go hence, and the time is long since I trod the path that we shall follow."

Accordingly we bowed, and left her.

As we passed to our own apartment I peeped into Job's sleeping-place, to see how he fared, for he had gone away, just before our interview with the murdered Ustane, quite prostrated by the terrors of the Amahagger festivity. He was sleeping soundly, good honest fellow that he was, and I rejoiced to think that his nerves, which—like those of most uneducated people—were far from strong, had been spared the closing scenes of this dreadful day. Then we entered our own chamber, and here at

last poor Leo, who, ever since he had looked upon that frozen image of his living self, had been in a state not far removed from stupor, burst out into a torrent of grief. Now that he was no longer in the presence of the dread *She* his sense of the awfulness of all that had happened, and more especially of the wicked murder of Ustane, who was bound to him by ties so close, broke upon him like a storm, and lashed him into an agony of remorse and terror which was painful to witness. He cursed himself—he cursed the hour when we had first seen the writing on the sherd, which was being so mysteriously verified, and bitterly he cursed his own weakness. Ayesha he dared not curse—who would dare to speak evil of such a woman, whose spirit, for aught we knew, was watching us at the very moment?

"What am I to do, old fellow?" he groaned, resting his head against my shoulder in the extremity of his grief. "I let her be killed—not that I could help that, but within five minutes I was kissing her murderess over her body. I am a degraded brute, but I cannot resist this," and here his voice sank—"awful sorceress. I know I shall do the same to-morrow; I know that I am in her power for always; if I never saw her again I should think of no other woman during all my life; I must follow her as a needle follows a magnet; I would not go away now if I might; I could not leave her, my legs would not carry me, but my mind is still clear enough, and in my mind I hate her—at least, I think so. It is all so horrible; and that—that dead man! What can I make of it? It was I! I am sold into bondage, old fellow, and she will take my soul as the price of herself!"



Then, for the first time, I told him that I was in but a very little better position; and I am bound to say that, notwithstanding his own infatuation, he had the decency to sympathise with me. Perhaps he did not think it worth while to be jealous, seeing that he had no cause so far as the lady was concerned. I went on to suggest that we should try to run away; but we soon rejected the project as futile, and, to be perfectly honest, I do not believe that either of us would really have left Ayesha, even if some superior power had suddenly offered to convey us from these gloomy caves and set us down in Cambridge. We could no more have left her than a moth can leave the light that destroys it. We were like confirmed opium-eaters: in our moments of reason we well knew the deadly nature of our pursuit, but certainly we were not prepared to abandon its terrible delights.

No man who once had seen *She* unveiled, and heard the music of her voice, and drunk in the bitter wisdom of her words, would willingly give up that joy for a whole sea of placid

pleasure. How much more, then, was this likely to be so when, as in Leo's case, to put myself out of the question, this extraordinary creature declared her utter and absolute devotion, and gave to him what appeared to be proofs of its endurance through some two thousand years?

No doubt she was a wicked person, and no doubt she had murdered Ustane when she stood in her path; but then, she was very faithful, and by a law of nature man is apt to think but lightly of a woman's crimes, especially if that woman be beautiful, and the crimes are committed for the love of himself.

For the rest, when had such a chance ever come to a man before as that which now lay in Leo's hand? True, in uniting himself to this dread woman he would place his life under the influence of a mysterious creature of evil tendencies,\* but then, that would be likely enough to happen to him in any ordinary marriage. On the other hand, however, no ordinary marriage could bring him such awful beauty—for awful is the only word that can describe it—such divine

\* After some months of consideration of this statement I am bound to confess that I am not quite satisfied of its truth. It is perfectly true that Ayesha committed a murder, but I suspect that, were we endowed with the same absolute power, and if we had the same tremendous interest at stake, we should be very apt to do likewise under parallel circumstances. Also, it must be remembered that she looked on it as an execution for disobedience under a system which made the slightest disobedience punishable by death. Putting aside this question of the murder, her evil-doing resolves itself into the expression of views and the acknowledgment of motives which are contrary to our preaching, if not to our practice. Now at first sight this might be fairly taken as a proof of an evil nature, but when we come to consider the great antiquity of the individual, it becomes doubtful if it was anything more than the natural cynicism which arises from age and bitter experience, and the possession of extraordinary powers of observation. It is a well-known fact that very often, putting the period of boyhood out of the argument, the older we grow the more cynical and hardened we become; indeed, many of us are only saved by timely death from moral petrification, if not from moral corruption. No one will deny that a young man is on the average better than an old one, for he is without that experience of the order of things which in certain thoughtful dispositions can hardly fail to produce cynicism, and that disregard of acknowledged methods and established custom which we call evil. Now the oldest man upon the earth was but a babe compared to Ayesha, and the wisest man upon the earth was not one-third as wise. And the fruit of her wisdom was this, that there is but one thing worth living for, and that is Love in its highest sense, and to gain that good thing she was not prepared to stop at trifles. This is really the sum of her evil doings, and it must be remembered, on the other hand, that, whatever may be thought of them, she had some virtues developed to a degree very uncommon in either sex—constancy, for instance.—L. H. H.



devotion, such wisdom, and command over the secrets of nature, and the place and power which they must win, or, lastly, the royal crown of unending youth, if indeed she could give that. No, on the whole, it is not wonderful, though Leo was plunged in bitter shame and grief, such as any gentleman would have felt under the circumstances, that he was not ready to entertain the idea of running away from his extraordinary fortune.

My own opinion is that he would have been mad if he had done so. But then, I confess, my views on the matter must be accepted with qualifications. I am in love with Ayesha myself to this day, and I would rather have been the object of her affection for one short week than that of any other woman's in the world for a whole lifetime. And let me add that if anybody who doubts this statement, and thinks me foolish for making it, could have seen Ayesha draw her veil and flash out in beauty on his gaze, his view would exactly coincide with my own. Of course, I am speaking of any *man*. We never had the advantage of a lady's opinion of Ayesha, but I think it quite possible that she would have regarded the Queen with dislike; would have expressed her disapproval in some more or less pointed manner, and ultimately have been "blasted."

For two hours or more Leo and I sat with shaken nerves and frightened eyes, and talked over the miraculous events through which we were passing. It seemed like a dream or a fairy tale, instead of solemn, sober fact. Who would have believed that the writing on the potsherd was not only true, but

that we should live to verify it, and that we two seekers should find her who was sought patiently awaiting our coming in the tombs of Kôr? Who would have thought that in the person of Leo this mysterious woman should, as she believed, discover the being whom she awaited from century to century and whose former earthly tenement she had till this very night preserved? But so it was. In the face of all we had seen it was difficult for us as ordinary reasoning men any longer to doubt its truth. Therefore at last, with humble hearts and a deep sense of the impotence of human knowledge, and the insolence of the assumption which denies the possibility of that whereof it has no experience, we laid ourselves down to sleep, leaving our fates in the hands of the watching Providence which had chosen thus to allow us to draw the veil of human ignorance and to reveal to us for good or evil a glimpse of the potentialities of life.

## XXII.

## JOB HAS A PRESENTIMENT.

It was nine o'clock on the following morning when Job, who still looked scared and tremulous, came in to call me, and at the same time to breathe his gratitude at finding us alive in our beds, which, it appeared, was more than he had expected. When I told him of the awful end of poor Ustane he was even more thankful for our survival, and much shocked; though, indeed,



Ustane had been no favourite of his, or he of hers. She called him "pig" in bastard Arabic, and he called her "hussy" in good English, but these amenities were forgotten in face of the catastrophe that had overwhelmed her at the hands of her Queen.

I don't want to say anything as mayn't be agreeable, sir," said Job, when he had finished exclaiming at my tale, "but it's my opinion that that there *She* is Old Nick himself, or perhaps his wife, if he has one, which I suppose he has, for he couldn't be so wicked all alone. The Witch of Endor was a fool to her, sir: bless you, she would make no more of raising every gentleman in the Bible out of these here musty tombs than I should of growing cress on a bit of flannel! It's a country of devils, this is, sir, and she's the master one of the lot; and if ever we get clear it will be more than I expect to do. I don't see no way out of it. That witch isn't likely to let a fine young man like Mr. Leo go."

"Come," I said, "at any rate she saved his life."

"Yes, and she'll take his soul to pay for it. She'll make him a witch, like herself. I say it's wicked to have anything to do with those sort of people. Last night, sir, I lay awake and read in my little Bible that my poor mother gave me about what is going to happen to sorceresses and them sort, till my hair stood on end. Lord, how the old lady would stare if she saw where her Job had got to!"

"Yes, it's a queer country, and a queer people, too, Job," I answered, with a sigh, for, though I am not superstitious like Job, I admit to a natural shrinking, which will not

bear investigation, from the things that are above nature.

"You are right, sir," he answered, "and if you won't think me very foolish, I should like to say something to you now that Mr. Leo is out of the way"—(Leo had risen early and gone for a stroll)—"and that is, that I know it is the last country as ever I shall see in this world. I had a dream last night, and I dreamed that I saw my old father with a kind of night-shirt on him, something like these folk wear when they want to be in particular full-dress, and a bit of that feathery grass in his hand, which he may have gathered on the way, for I saw lots of it yesterday about three hundred yards from the mouth of this beastly cave.

"'Job,' he said to me, solemn like, and yet with a kind of satisfaction shining through him, more like a Methody elder when he has sold a neighbour a marked horse for a sound one and cleared twenty pounds by the job than anything I can think on—'Job, time's up, Job; but I never did expect to have to come and hunt you out in this 'ere place, Job! Such ado as I have had to nose you up; it wasn't friendly to give your poor old father such a run, let alone that a wonderful lot of bad characters hail from this place Kôr.'"

"Regular cautions," I suggested.

"Yes, sir—of course, sir, that's just what he said they was—'cautions, downright scorchers'—sir, and I'm sure I don't doubt it, seeing what I know of them and their hot-potting ways," went on Job, sadly. "Anyway, he was sure that time was up, and went away saying that we should see more than we cared for of each other soon, and I suppose he was a-thinking of the fact that father and I never



could hit it off together for longer nor three days, and I daresay that things will be similar when we meet again."

"Surely," I said, "you don't think that you are going to die because you dreamed you saw your old father; if one dies because one dreams of one's father, what happens to a man who dreams of his mother-in-law?"

"Ah, sir, you're laughing at me," said Job; "but, you see, you didn't know my father. If it had been anybody else—my Aunt Mary, for instance, who never made much of a job—I should not have thought so much of it; but my father was that idle, which he shouldn't have been with seventeen children, that he would never have put himself out to come here just to see the place. No, sir; I know that he meant business. Well, sir, I can't help it; I suppose every man must go some time or other, though it is a hard thing to die in a hole like this, where Christian burial isn't to be had for its weight in gold. I've tried to be a good man, sir, and do my duty honest, and if it wasn't for the supercilious kind of way in which father carried on last night—a sort of sniffing at me as it were, as though he hadn't no opinion of my references and testimonials—I should feel easy enough in my mind. Anyway, sir, I've been a good servant to you and Mr. Leo, bless him!—why, it seems but the other day that I used to lead him about the streets with a penny whip;—and if ever you get out of this place—which as father didn't allude to you, perhaps you may—I hope you will think kindly of my whitened bones, and never have anything more to do with Greek writing on flower-pots, sir, if I may make so bold as to say so."

"Come, come, Job," I said seriously,

"this is all rubbish, you know. You mustn't be so silly as to get such ideas into your head. We've lived through some queer things, and I hope that we may go on doing so."

"No, sir," answered Job, in a tone of conviction that jarred on me unpleasantly, "it isn't rubbish. I'm a doomed man, and I feel it, and a wonderful uncomfortable feeling it is, sir, for one can't help wondering how it's going to come about. If you are eating your dinner you think of poison, and it goes against your stomach, and if you are walking along these dark rabbit-burrows you think of knives, and Lord, don't you just shiver about the back! I ain't particular, sir, provided its sharp, like that poor girl, who, now that she's gone, I am sorry to have spoke hard on, though I don't approve of her morals in getting married, which I consider too quick to be decent. Still, sir," and poor Job turned a shade paler as he said it, "I do hope it won't be that hot-pot game."

"Nonsense," I broke in angrily, "nonsense!"

"Very well, sir," said Job, "it isn't my place to differ from you, sir, but if you happen to be going anywhere, sir, I should be obliged if you could manage to take me with you, seeing that I shall be glad to have a friendly face to look at when the time comes, just to help one through as it were. And now, sir, I'll be getting the breakfast," and he went, leaving me in a very uncomfortable state of mind.

I was deeply attached to old Job, who was one of the best and honestest men I have ever had to do with in any class of life, really more of a friend than a servant, and the mere idea of anything happening to him brought a lump into my throat. Beneath all his ludicrous talk I could see that



he himself was quite convinced that something was going to happen, and though in most cases these convictions turn out to be utter moonshine—and this particular one especially was to be amply accounted for by the gloomy and unaccustomed surroundings in which its victim was placed—still it did more or less carry a chill to my heart, as any dread that is obviously a genuine object of belief is apt to do, however absurd that belief may be.

Presently the breakfast arrived, and with it Leo, who had been taking a walk outside the cave—to clear his mind, he said; and very glad I was to see both, for they gave me a respite from my gloomy thoughts. After breakfast we went for another walk, and watched some of the Amahagger sowing a plot of ground with the grain from which they make their beer. This they did in scriptural fashion—a man with a bag made of goat's hide fastened round his waist striding up and down the plot and scattering seed as he went. It was a positive relief to see one of these dreadful people do anything so homely and pleasant as sow a field, perhaps because it seemed to link them with the rest of humanity.

As we were returning Billali met us, and informed us that it was *She's* pleasure that we should wait upon her. Accordingly we entered her presence, not without trepidation, for Ayesha was certainly an exception to the accepted rule: familiarity with her might and did breed passion and wonder and horror, but it certainly did not breed contempt.

As usual we were shown in by the mutes, and after they had retired Ayesha unveiled, and once more bade Leo embrace her, which, his heart-searchings of the previous night not-

withstanding, he did with more alacrity and fervour than in strictness courtesy required.

She laid her white hand upon his head, and looked him fondly in the eyes. "Dost thou wonder, my Kallikrates," she said, "when thou shalt call me all thine own, and when we shall of a truth be for one another and to one another? I will tell thee. First must thou be even as I am, not immortal indeed, for that I am not, but so cased and hardened against the attacks of Time that his arrows shall glance from the armour of thy vigorous life as the sunbeams glance from water. As yet I may not mate with thee, for thou and I are different, and the very brightness of my being would burn thee up, and perchance destroy thee. Thou couldst not even endure to look upon me for too long a time, lest thine eyes should ache and thy senses swim, therefore"—with a little nod—"shall I presently veil myself again." (This, by the way, she did not do.) "No: listen. Thou shalt not be tried beyond endurance, for this very evening, an hour before the sun goes down, we will start hence, and by to-morrow's dark, if all goes well, and the road is not lost to me, which I pray it may not be, we shall stand in the place of Life, and thou shalt bathe in the fire, and come forth glorified, as no man ever was before thee, and then, Kallikrates, thou mayst call me wife, and I will call thee husband."

Leo muttered something in answer to this astonishing statement, I do not know what, and she laughed a little at his confusion, and went on:

"And thou, too, O Holly; to thee also I will grant this boon, and then of a truth thou shalt be evergreen, and this I will do—well, because thou hast pleased me, Holly, for thou art



not altogether a fool like the most of the sons of men, and because, though thou hast a school of philosophy as full of nonsense as those of the old days, yet hast thou not forgotten how to turn a pretty phrase about a lady's eyes."

"Hulloa, uncle!" whispered Leo, with a return of his former cheerfulness, "have you been paying compliments? I should never have thought it of you!"

"I thank thee, Ayesha," I replied, with as much dignity as I could command; "but if there be such a place as thou dost describe, and if in this strange place there may be found a fiery virtue that can hold off Death when he comes to pluck us by the hand, yet I seek none of it. For me, O Ayesha, the world has not proved so soft a nest that I would lie in it for ever. A stony-hearted mother is our earth, and stones are the bread she gives her children for their daily food. Stones to eat and bitter water for their thirst, and stripes for tender nurture. Who would endure this for many lives? Who would so load up his back with memories of lost hours and loves, and of his neighbour's sorrows which he cannot lessen, and with wisdom that brings not consolation? It is hard to die, because our delicate flesh shrinks back from the worm it will not feel, and from that Unknown which the winding sheet curtains from our view. But harder still, to my thought, would it be to live on, green in the leaf and fair, but dead and rotten at the core, and to feel that other secret worm of memory gnawing ever at the heart."

"Bethink thee, Holly," she said; "yet do long life and strength and beauty beyond measure give power and all things that are dear to man."

"And what, O Queen," I answered, "are those things that are dear to man? Are they not bubbles? Is not ambition but an endless ladder by which no height is ever climbed till the last unreachable rung is mounted? For height leads on to height, and there is no resting-place upon them, and rung doth grow upon rung, and there is no limit to the number. Does not wealth satiate and become nauseous, and no longer serve to satisfy or pleasure, or to buy an hour's ease of mind? And is there any end to wisdom that we may hope to win it? Rather the more we learn shall we not thereby be able only to better compass our ignorance? Did we live ten thousand years could we hope to solve the secrets of the suns, and of the space beyond the suns, and of the Hand that hung them in the Heavens? Would not our wisdom be but as a gnawing hunger calling our consciousness day by day to a knowledge of the empty craving of our souls? Would it not be but as a light in one of these great caverns, that, though bright it burn, and brighter yet, doth but the more serve to show the depth of the gloom around it? And what good thing is there beyond that we may gain by length of days?"

"Nay, my Holly, there is love—love, which makes all things beautiful, yes, and breathes divinity into the very dust we tread. With love shall life roll on gloriously from year to year, like the voice of some great music that has power to hold the hearer's heart poised on eagles' wings above the sordid shame and folly of the earth."

"It may be so," I answered; "but if the loved one prove a broken reed to pierce us, or if the love be loved in vain—what then? Shall a man



grave his sorrows upon a stone when he has but need to write them on the water? Nay, O *She*, I will live my day and grow old with my generation, and die my appointed death, and be forgotten. For I do hope for an immortality to which the little span that perchance thou canst confer will be but as a finger's length laid against the measure of the great world; and, mark this! the immortality to which I look, and which my faith doth promise to me, shall be free from the bonds that here must tie my spirit down. For, while the flesh endures, sorrow and evil and the scorpion whips of sin must endure also; but when the flesh has fallen from us, then shall the spirit shine forth clad in the brightness of eternal good, and for its common air shall breathe so rare an ether of most noble thoughts that the highest aspiration of our manhood, or the purest incense of a maiden's prayer, would prove too gross to float therein."

"Thou lookest high," answered Ayesha, with a little laugh, "and speakest clearly as a trumpet, and with no uncertain sound. And yet methinks that but now thou didst talk of 'that Unknown' from which the winding-sheet doth curtain us. Well, perchance thou seest with the eye of Faith, gazing on this brightness, that is to be, through the painted glass of thy imagination. Strange are the pictures of the future that mankind can thus draw with this brush of faith and these many-coloured pigments of the imagination! Strange, too, that no one of them tallies with another! I could tell thee—but there, to what end—why rob a fool of his bauble? Let it pass, and I pray, O *Holly*, that when thou shalt feel old age creeping

slowly over thee, and the dull edge of old working havoc in thy brain, thou mayest not bitterly regret that thou didst cast away the imperial boon I would have given to thee. But so it has always been; man can never be content with that which his hand may pluck. If a lamp shines for him to light him through the darkness, straightway he casts it down because it is no star. Happiness dances ever a pace before his feet, like the marsh-fire in the swamps, and he must catch the fire, and he must win the star! Beauty is naught to him, because there are lips more honey-sweet; and wealth is poverty, because others can weigh him down with heavier shekels; and fame is emptiness, because there have been greater men than he. Thyself thou saidst it, and I turn thy words against thee. Well, thou dreamest that thou shalt clasp the star. I believe it not, and I name thee fool, my *Holly*, to throw away the lamp."

I made no answer, for, especially before *Leo*, I could not tell her that since I had seen her face I knew it must always be before my eyes, and that I had no wish to prolong an existence which must be ever haunted and tortured by her memory, and by the last bitterness of unsatisfied love. But so it was, and so, alas, is it to this hour!

"And now," went on *She*, changing her tone and the subject together, "tell me, my *Kallikrates*, for as yet I know it not, how came ye to seek me here? Yesternight thou didst say that *Kallikrates*—him whom thou sawest dead—was thine ancestor. How was it? Tell me—thou dost not speak overmuch!"

Thus adjured, *Leo* told her the wonderful story of the casket and



of the potsherd that, written on by his ancestress, the Egyptian Amenartas, had been the means of guiding us to her. Ayesha listened intently, and, when he had finished, spoke to me.

"Did I not tell thee once, while we talked of good and evil, O Holly—it was when my beloved lay so ill—that out of good came evil, and out of evil good—that they who sowed knew not what the crop should be, nor he who struck where the blow should fall? See, now: this Egyptian Amenartas, this royal child of the Nile, who hated me, and whom even now I hate, for in a measure she prevailed against me—see, I say, she herself hath been the guide to lead her lover to mine arms! For her sake I slew him, and now, behold, through her he has come back to me! She would have done me evil, and sowed her seeds that I might reap tares, and behold she hath given me more than all the world can give, and there is a strange square for thee to fit into thy circle of good and evil, O Holly!

"And so," she went on after a pause—"and so she bade her son destroy me if he might, because I slew his father. And thou, my Kallikrates, art the father, and in a sense thou art likewise the son; and wouldst thou avenge thy wrong, and the wrong of that far-off mother of thine, upon me, O Kallikrates? See," and she slid to her knees, and opened the white robe upon her ivory bosom—"see, here beats my heart, and there by thy side is a knife, heavy, and long, and sharp, the very knife to slay an erring woman with. Take it now and be avenged. Strike, and strike home!—so shalt thou be satisfied, Kallikrates, and go through life a happy man, because

thou hast paid back the wrong, and obeyed the mandate of the past."

He looked at her; then he stretched out his hand and lifted her to her feet.

"Rise, Ayesha," he said sadly; "thou knowest well that I cannot harm thee, no, not even for the sake of her whom thou slewest but last night. I am in thy power, and a very slave to thee. How can I kill thee?—sooner should I slay myself."

"Almost dost thou begin to love me, Kallikrates," she answered, smiling. "And now tell me of thy country—'tis a great people, is it not? with an empire like that of Rome! Surely thou wilt return thither, and it is well, for I would not that thou shouldst dwell in these caves of Kôr. Nay, when once thou art even as I am we will go hence—fear not but that I shall find a path—and then will we journey to this England of thine, and live as it becometh us to live. Two thousand years have I waited for the day when I should see the last of these hateful caves and this gloomy-visaged folk, and now it is at hand, and my heart bounds up to meet it like a child's towards its holiday. For thou shalt rule this England—"

"But we have a queen already," interrupted Leo hastily.

"It is naught, it is naught," said Ayesha; "she can be overthrown."

At this we both broke out into exclamations of dismay, and explained that we should as soon think of overthrowing ourselves.

"But here is a strange thing," said Ayesha, in astonishment—"a queen whom her people love! Surely the world must have changed since I dwelt in Kôr."

Again we explained that it was the



character of monarchs that had changed, and that the sovereign under whom we lived was venerated and beloved by all right-thinking men in her vast realms. Also, we told her that real power in our country rested in the hands of the people; that, in fact, we were ruled by the votes of the lower and least educated classes of the community.

"Ah," she said, "a democracy—then surely there is a tyrant, for I have long since seen that democracies, having no clear will of their own, in the end set up a tyrant, and worship him."

"Yes," I said, "we have our tyrants."

"Well," she answered resignedly, "we can at any rate destroy these tyrants, and Kallikrates shall rule the land."

I instantly informed Ayesha that in England "blasting" was not an amusement that could be indulged in with impunity, and that any such attempt would meet with the consideration of the law, and probably end upon a scaffold.

"The law!" she laughed with scorn—"the law! Canst thou not understand, O Holly, that I am above the law, and so shall Kallikrates be also? All human law will be to us as the north wind to a mountain. Does the wind bend the mountain, or the mountain the wind?"

"And now leave me, I pray thee, and thou, too, my own Kallikrates, for I would make me ready against our journey, and so must ye both, and your servant also. But bring no great store of garments with thee, for I trust

that we shall be but three days gone. Then must we return hither, and I will make a plan whereby we can bid farewell for ever to these sepulchres of Kôr. Yea, surely thou mayst kiss my hand!"

So we went, I, for one, meditating deeply on the awful nature of the problem that now opened out before us. Evidently the terrible *She* had determined to go to England, and it made me shudder to think what would be the result of her arrival there. What her powers were I knew, and I could not doubt but that she would exercise them to the full. It might be possible to control her for a while, but her proud, ambitious spirit would be certain to break loose and to avenge itself for the long centuries of its solitude. If necessary, and if the unaided power of her beauty did not prove sufficient for her purpose, she would blast her way to any end she set before her, and, as she could not die, and for aught I knew could not even be killed,\* what was there to stay her? In the end, I had little doubt, she would assume absolute rule over the British dominions, and probably over the whole earth, and, though I was sure that she would speedily make ours the most glorious and prosperous empire that the world has ever seen, it must be at the cost of a terrible sacrifice of life.

The story sounded like a dream or some extraordinary invention of a speculative brain, and yet it was a fact—a wonderful fact—of which the universe would soon be called on to take notice. What was the meaning

\* I regret to say that I was never able to ascertain if *She* was invulnerable against the accidents of life. Presumably this was so, else some misadventure would have been sure to put an end to her in the course of so many centuries. True, she suggested to Leo that he should kill her, but very probably this was only an experiment to try his temper and mental attitude towards herself. Ayesha never gave way to impulse without some valid object.—L. H. H.



of it all? After much thinking I could only conclude that this marvellous creature, whose passion had kept her for so many centuries chained as it were, and comparatively harmless, was now about to be used by Providence as a means to change the order of the world, and possibly, by the building up of a power that could no more be rebelled against or questioned than the decrees of Fate, to change it materially for the better.

## XXIII.

## THE TEMPLE OF TRUTH.

"OUR preparations did not take us very long. We packed a change of clothing apiece and some spare boots into my hand-bag; also we took our revolvers and an Express rifle each, together with a good supply of ammunition, a precaution to which, under Providence, we subsequently owed our lives over and over again. The rest of our gear, together with our heavy rifles, we left behind us.

A few minutes before the appointed time we were summoned to Ayesha's "boudoir," and found her also ready, the dark cloak thrown over her corpse-like wrappings.

"Are ye prepared for the great venture?" she said.

"We are," I answered, "though for my part, Ayesha, I have no faith in it."

"Of a truth, my Holly," she said, "thou art like those old Jews—of whom the memory vexes me so sorely—unbelieving, and slow to accept that which thou hast not known. But thou shalt see: for unless my mirror

yonder lies," and she pointed to the font of crystal water, "the path is yet open as it was of old time. And now let us away, to begin the new life which shall end—who knoweth where?"

"Ah," I echoed, "who knows where?" and we passed down into the great central cave, and out into the light of day. At the mouth of the cave we found a single litter waiting, with six bearers, all of them mutes; and with these I was relieved to see our old friend Billali, for whom I had conceived a sort of affection. It appeared that, for reasons not necessary to explain at length, Ayesha had thought it best that, with the exception of herself, we should proceed on foot. This we were nothing loth to do after our long confinement in the caves, which, however suitable they might be to serve as the last home of the dead, were depressing habitations for breathing mortals like ourselves. Either by accident or by the orders of *She*, the space in front of the cave where we had witnessed that awful dance was empty of spectators. Not a man could be seen, and consequently I do not believe that our departure was known to anyone, except, perhaps, to the mutes in attendance upon *She*, who were necessarily in the habit of keeping what they saw to themselves.

In a few minutes' time we were stepping out sharply across the great cultivated plain or lake bed, framed like a vast emerald in its setting of frowning cliff. Here we found fresh opportunity to wonder at the extraordinary nature of the site chosen by these old people of Kôr for their capital, and at the marvellous amount of labour, ingenuity, and engineering skill that must have been brought into requisition by the



founders of the city to drain so huge a sheet of water, and to keep it free from subsequent accumulations. So far as my experience goes, it is, indeed, an unequalled instance of what man can do in the face of Nature, for in my opinion such achievements as the Suez Canal, or even the Mont Cenis Tunnel, do not approach this ancient undertaking in magnitude and grandeur of conception.

When we had been walking for about half an hour, enjoying ourselves exceedingly in the delightful cool which at this time of the day always appeared to descend upon the great plain of Kôr, and that in some degree atoned for the want of any land or sea breeze—for all wind was kept off by the rocky mountain wall—we began to distinguish clearly the buildings which, as Billali had informed us, were the ruins of the great city.

Even from that distance we could see how wonderful those ruins were, a fact which became more evident at every step. The town was not very large if compared to Babylon or Thebes, or other cities of remote antiquity; perhaps its outer ditch contained some twelve square miles of ground or a little more. Nor had the walls, so far as we could judge when we reached them, been very high, probably not more than forty feet, which was about their present height where, through the sinking of the ground, or some such cause, they had not fallen into ruin. The reason of this, no doubt, was that the people of Kôr, being protected from outside

attack by far more tremendous ramparts than any that the hand of man could rear, only required walls for show and to guard against civil discord. But, on the other hand, they were as broad as they were high, built entirely of dressed stone, hewn, probably, from the vast caves, and surrounded by a great moat some sixty feet in width, many reaches of which were still filled with water. About ten minutes before the sun sank finally we reached this moat, and passed down and through it, clambering across what evidently were the piled-up fragments of a great bridge in order to do so, and then with some little difficulty over the slope of the wall to its summit. I wish that it lay within the power of my pen to give an idea of the grandeur of the sight which met our view. There, all bathed in the red glow of the sinking sun, were miles upon miles of ruins—columns, temples, shrines, and the palaces of kings, varied with patches of green bush. Of course, the roofs of these buildings had long since fallen into decay and vanished, but owing to the extreme massiveness of the masonry, and to the hardness and durability of the rock employed, most of the party walls and great columns still remained standing.\*

Straight before us stretched away what evidently had been the main thoroughfare of the city, for it was very wide and regular—wider than the Thames Embankment. Being, as we afterwards discovered, paved, or rather built, throughout of blocks

\* In connection with the extraordinary state of preservation of these ruins after so great a lapse of time—at least six thousand years—it must be remembered that Kôr was not burnt or destroyed by an enemy or an earthquake, but deserted, because of the ravages of a terrible plague. Consequently the houses were left unharmed; also the climate of the plain is remarkably fine and dry, with very little rain or wind. As a result these unique relics have only to contend against the unaided action of time, that works but slowly upon such massive blocks of masonry.—L. H. H.



of dressed stone, such as were employed in the walls, even now it was but little overgrown with grass and shrubs, that could find no depth of soil to live in. What had been the parks and gardens, on the contrary, had become dense jungle. Indeed, it was easy even from a distance to trace the course of the various roads by the burnt-up appearance of the scanty herbage that grew upon them. On either side of this great thoroughfare were vast blocks of ruins, each block separated from its neighbour by a space of what had once I suppose, been garden-ground, but was now thick and tangled bush. They were all built of the same coloured stone, and most of them had pillars, which was as much as we could see in the fading light as we passed swiftly up the main road, that, I believe I am right in saying, no human foot had pressed for thousands of years.\*

Presently we came to an enormous pile, covering at least eight acres of ground, that we rightly took to be a temple, which was arranged in a series of courts, each one of them enclosing another of smaller size, on the principle of a Chinese nest of boxes, these courts being separated by rows of huge columns. While I think of it, I may as well describe the remarkable shape of these columns, which resembled none that I have ever seen or heard of, being fashioned to a narrow central waist, and swelling above and below it. At first we thought that this shape was meant roughly to symbolise or suggest the female form, after the common fashion

of the ancient religious architects of many creeds. On the following day, however, as we climbed the slopes of the mountain, we discovered a large quantity of stately palms, whereof the trunks grew thus, and I have now no doubt but that the first designer of those columns drew his inspiration from the graceful bends of those very palms, or rather of their ancestors, that some eight or ten thousand years ago beautified the slopes of the mountain which formed the shores of the ancient volcanic lake.

At the *façade* of this huge temple, which, I should imagine, is almost as large as that of El-Karnac, at Thebes (some of the largest columns which I measured being between eighteen to twenty feet in diameter at the base, by about seventy feet in height), our little procession was halted, and Ayesha descended from her litter.

"There was a chamber here, Kallikrates," she said to Leo, who had gone to help her to alight, "where one might sleep. Two thousand years ago thou and that Egyptian asp rested therein, but since then I have not set foot here, and perchance it has fallen." Then, followed by the rest of us, she passed up a vast flight of broken steps into the outer court, and looked round into the gloom. Presently she seemed to recollect, and, walking a few paces along the wall to the left, she halted.

"It is here as of old," Ayesha said, beckoning to the two mutes, who were loaded with provisions and our few packages, to advance. One of them came forward, and, producing

\* Billali told me that the Amahagger believe that the site of the city is haunted, and could not be persuaded to enter it upon any consideration. Indeed, I could see that he himself did not at all like defying the custom, and was only consoled because he was under the direct protection of *She*. It struck Leo and myself as very curious that a people which has no objection to living amongst the dead, with whom their familiarity has perhaps bred contempt, and even to using their bodies as fuel, should be terrified at approaching the habitations that these very departed had occupied when alive. However, this is only a savage inconsistency.—L. H. H.



a lamp, lit it from his brazier, for the Amahagger when on a journey always carried with them a little lighted brazier, from which to provide fire. The tinder of this brazier was made of broken fragments of mummy carefully damped, and if the admixture of moisture is properly managed, this unholy compound will smoulder for many hours." So soon as the lamp was lit we entered the place before which Ayesha had halted. It proved to be a cell hollowed in the thickness of the wall, and, from the fact of its containing a massive stone table, I should imagine that it had served as a living-room, perhaps for one of the door-keepers of the great temple.

Here we camped, and after cleaning the place out and making it as comfortable as circumstances and the darkness would permit, we ate some cold meat—at least Leo, Job, and I did, for Ayesha, as I think I have said elsewhere, never touched anything except cakes of flour, fruit and water. While we were still eating, the moon, which was at her full, rose above the mountain-wall, and began to flood the place with silver rays.

"Know ye why I have brought you here to-night, my Holly?" said Ayesha, leaning her head upon her hand and watching the great orb as she rose, a very queen of heaven, above the solemn pillars of the temple. "I brought you—nay, it is strange, but knowest thou, Kallikrates, that thou liest at this moment upon that same spot where thy dead body lay when I bore thee back to those caves of Kôr so many years ago? The scene springs to my mind again. I can see it, and it is horrible to my sight!" and she shuddered.

Here Leo jumped up hastily and

changed his seat. However the reminiscence might affect Ayesha, clearly it had few charms for him.

"I brought you," she went on presently, "that ye might look upon the most wonderful sight that ever the eye of man beheld—the full moon shining over ruined Kôr. When ye have done your eating—I would that I could teach thee to eat naught but fruit, Kallikrates, but that will come after thou hast washed in the fire; once I, too, ate flesh like a brute beast—when ye have done, I say, we will go out, and I will show you this great temple and the god whom men once worshipped there."

Of course we rose at once, and started. And here again my pen fails me. To give a string of measurements and details of the various courts of the temple would only be wearisome, supposing that I had them; and yet I know not how I am to describe what we saw, magnificent as it was even in its ruin, almost beyond the power of realisation. Court upon dim court, row upon row of mighty pillars—some of them, especially at the gateways, sculptured from base to capital—space upon space of empty chambers that spoke more eloquently to the imagination than any crowded streets. And over all a dead silence of the dead, a sense of utter loneliness, and the brooding spirit of the Past! How beautiful it was, and yet how drear! We did not dare to speak aloud. Ayesha herself was awed in the presence of an antiquity compared to which even her length of days was but a little thing; we only whispered, and our whispers seemed to run from column to column, till they were lost in the

\* After all we are not much in advance of the Amahagger in these matters. "Mummy," i.e., pounded ancient Egyptian, is, I believe, a pigment much used by artists, and especially by those of them who direct their talents to the reproduction of the works of the old masters.—EDITOR.



quiet air. Bright fell the moonlight on pillar and court and shattered wall, hiding all their rents and imperfections in its silver garment, and clothing their hoar majesty with the peculiar glory of the night. It was a wonderful sight to see the full moon looking down on this ruined fane of Kôr. It was a wonderful thing to think for how many thousands of years the dead orb above and the dead city below had gazed thus upon each other, and in the utter solitude of space poured forth each to each the tale of their lost life and long-departed glory. The white light fell, and minute by minute the slow shadows crept across the grass-grown courts like the spirits of old priests haunting the habitations of their worship—the white light fell, and the long shadows grew, till the beauty and grandeur of the scene and the untamed majesty of its present death seemed to sink into our very souls, and to speak more loudly than the shouts of armies concerning the pomp and splendour that the grave had swallowed, and even memory had forgotten.

"Come," said Ayesha, after we had gazed and gazed, I know not for how long, "and I will show you the stony flower of Loveliness and Wonder's very crown, if yet it stands to mock time with its beauty and fill the heart of man with longing for that which is behind the veil," and, without waiting for an answer, she led us through two more pillared courts into the inner shrine of the ancient fane.

And there, in the midst of the inmost court, that might have been some fifty yards square, or a little more; we stood face to face with what is perhaps the grandest allegorical work of Art that the genius of her children has ever given to the world. For in the exact centre of the court, placed upon a thick square

slab of rock, was a huge ball of dark-hued stone, about twenty feet in diameter, and standing on the ball was a colossal winged figure of a beauty so entrancing and divine that when first I gazed upon it, illuminated and shadowed as it was by the soft light of the moon, my breath stood still, and for an instant my heart ceased its beating.

This statue was hewn from marble so pure and white that even now, after all those ages, it shone as the moonbeams danced upon it; and its height, I should say, was over twenty feet. It represented the winged figure of a woman of such marvellous loveliness and delicacy of form that the size seemed rather to add to than to detract from its so human and yet more spiritual beauty. She stood bending forward and poising herself upon her half-spread wings as though to preserve her balance as she leant. Her arms were outstretched like those of some woman about to embrace one she dearly loved, while her whole attitude gave an impression of the tenderest beseeching. Her perfect and most gracious form was naked, save—and here is the extraordinary thing—the face, which was thinly veiled, so that we could only distinguish the outline of her features. A gauzy veil was thrown round and about the head, and of its two ends one fell down across her left breast, which swelled beneath it, and one, now broken, streamed out upon the air behind her.

"Who is she?" I asked, so soon as I could take my eyes off the statue.

"Canst thou not guess, O Holly?" answered Ayesha. "Where, then, is thy imagination? It is Truth standing on the World, and calling to its children to unveil her face. See what is written upon the pedestal.



Without doubt it is taken from the book of the Scriptures of these men of Kôr," and she led the way to the foot of the statue, where an inscription of the usual Chinese-looking hieroglyphics was so deeply graven as to be still quite legible, at least to Ayesha. According to her translation it ran thus :

*"Is there no man that will draw my veil and look upon my face, for it is very fair? Unto him who draws my veil shall I be, and I will give him peace, and sweet children of knowledge and good works."*

And a voice cried, "Though all those who seek after thee desire thee: Behold! Virgin art thou, and Virgin thou shalt go till Time be done. There is no man born of woman who may draw thy veil and live, nor shall be. By Death only can thy veil be drawn, O Truth!"

And Truth stretched out her arms and wept, because those who wooed her might not win her, nor look upon her face to face.

"Thou seest," said Ayesha, when she had finished translating, "Truth was the goddess of these people of old Kôr, and to her they built their shrines, and her they sought; knowing that they should never find, still they sought."

"And so," I added sadly, "do men seek to this very hour, but they find not; and, as this Scripture saith, nor shall they; for in Death only is Truth found."

Then, with one more look at this veiled and spiritualised loveliness—which was so perfect and so pure that almost we might fancy that the light of a living spirit shone through the marble prison to lead man on to high and ethereal thoughts—this poet's dream of beauty frozen into stone, which I never shall forget while I live—we turned and retraced our steps through the vast moonlit courts. I did not see the statue again, which I regret the more,

because about the great ball of stone representing the World whereon the figure stood lines were drawn that, had there been light enough, probably we should have discovered to be a map of the Universe as it was known to the people of Kôr. It is at any rate suggestive of some scientific knowledge that these long-dead worshippers of Truth had recognised the fact that the globe is round.

## XXIV.

### WALKING THE PLANK.

NEXT day the mutes woke us before the dawn. By the time that we had rubbed the sleep out of our eyes, and refreshed ourselves by washing at a spring which still welled up into the remains of a marble basin in the centre of the north quadrangle of the vast outer court, we found *She* standing near the litter ready to start, while old Billali and the two bearer-mutes were busy collecting the baggage. As usual, Ayesha was veiled like the marble Truth, and it struck me then that she might have taken the idea of covering up her beauty from that statue. I noticed, however, that she seemed very depressed, and had none of that proud and buoyant bearing which would have betrayed her among a thousand women of the same stature, even if they had been veiled like herself. She looked up as we came—for her head was bowed—and greeted us. Leo asked her how she had slept.

"Ill, my Kallikrates," she answered, "ill! This night strange and hideous dreams have come creeping through my brain, and I know not what they may portend. Almost do I feel as though some evil overshadowed me; and yet, how can evil touch me? I wonder," she went on with a sudden outbreak of womanly tenderness, "I



wonder, should aught happen to me, so that I slept awhile and left thee waking, if thou wouldst think gently of me? I wonder, my Kallikrates, if thou wouldst tarry till I came again, as for so many centuries I have tarried for thy coming?"

Then, without waiting for an answer, she went on: "Let us be setting forth, for we have far to go, and before another day is born in yonder blue we should stand in the place of Life."

In five minutes we were once more on our way through the ruined city, which loomed on either side through the grey dawning in a fashion at once grand and oppressive. Just as the first ray of the rising sun shot like a golden arrow athwart this storied desolation we gained the further gateway of the outer wall. Here, having given one more glance at the hoar and pillared majesty through which we had journeyed, and—with the exception of Job, for whom ruins had no charms—breathed a sigh of regret that we lacked time to explore it, we passed through the encircling moat, and on to the plain beyond.

As the sun rose so did Ayesha's spirits, till at length they had regained their normal level, and she laughingly attributed her sadness to the associations of the spot where she had slept.

"These barbarians swear that Kôr is haunted," she said, "and of a truth I believe their saying, for never did I know so ill a night save once. I remember it now. It was on that very spot, when thou didst lie dead at my feet, Kallikrates. Never will I visit it again; it is a place of evil omen."

After a very brief halt for breakfast we pressed on with such good will that by two o'clock in the day we were at the foot of the vast wall of rock forming the lip of the volcano, which at this point towered up precipitously above us for fifteen hundred

or two thousand feet. Here we halted, certainly not to my astonishment, for I did not see how it was possible that we should advance any farther.

"Now," said Ayesha, as she descended from her litter, "our labours but commence, for here we part with these men, and henceforward must we bear ourselves." Then she added, addressing Billali, "do thou and these slaves remain here, and abide our return. By to-morrow at the midday we shall be with thee—if not, wait."

Billali bowed humbly, and said that her august bidding should be obeyed if they stopped there till they grew old.

"And this man, O Holly," said she, pointing to Job; "it is best that he should tarry also, for if his heart be not high and his courage great, perchance some evil might overtake him. Also, the secrets of the place whither we go are not fit for common eyes."

I translated this to Job, who instantly and earnestly entreated me, almost with tears, not to leave him behind. He said he was sure that he could see nothing worse than he had already seen, and that he was terrified to death at the idea of being left alone with those "dumb folk," who, he thought, would probably take the opportunity to "hot-pot" him.

I translated what he said to Ayesha, who shrugged her shoulders, and answered, "Well, let him come, it is naught to me; on his own head be it. He will serve to bear the lamp and this," and she pointed to a narrow board, some sixteen feet in length, which had been bound above the long bearing-pole of her hammock, I had thought to give the curtains a wider spread, but, as it now appeared, for some unknown purpose connected with our extraordinary undertaking.

Accordingly the plank, which, though tough, was very light, was given to Job to carry, and also one



of the lamps. I slung the other on to my back, together with a spare jar of oil, while Leo loaded himself with the provisions and some water in a kid's skin. When this was done *She* bade Billali and the six bearers to retreat behind a grove of flowering magnolias about a hundred yards away, and there to remain under pain of death till we had vanished. They bowed humbly, and went. As he departed, old Billali gave me a friendly shake of the hand, and whispered that he had rather that it were I than he who was going on this wonderful expedition with "*She-who-must-be-obeyed*," a view with which I felt inclined to agree. In another minute they were gone; then, having briefly asked us if we were ready, Ayesha turned and gazed at the towering cliff.

"Great heavens, Leo," I said, "surely we are not going to climb that precipice!"

Leo, who was in a state of half-fascinated, half-expectant mystification, shrugged his shoulders, and at that moment Ayesha with a sudden spring began to scale the cliff, whither of course we must follow her. It was almost marvellous to see the ease and grace with which she sprang from rock to rock, and swung herself along the ledges. The ascent, however, was not so difficult as it seemed, although we passed one or two nasty places where it was unpleasant to look back; for here the rock still sloped, and was not absolutely precipitous, as it became above.

In this way, with no great toil—for the only troublesome thing to manage was Job's board—we mounted to the height of some fifty feet beyond our last standing-place, and in so doing drew sixty or seventy paces to the left of our starting-point, for we ascended as crabs walk, sideways. Presently we reached a ledge, narrow enough

at first, but which widened as we followed it, and sloped inwards, moreover, like the petal of a flower, so that we sank gradually into a kind of rut or fold of rock that grew deeper and deeper, till at last it resembled a Devonshire lane in stone, and hid us perfectly from the gaze of persons on the slope below, had anybody been there to gaze. This lane, which appeared to be a natural formation, continued for some thirty or forty yards, then suddenly ended in a cave, also natural, running at right angles to it. That it was not hollowed by the labour of man I am sure, because of its irregular, contorted shape and course, which gave it the appearance of having been blasted in the thickness of the mountain by some frightful eruption of gas following the line of the least resistance. All the caverns hollowed by the ancients of Kôr, on the other hand, were cut out with a symmetrical and perfect regularity.

At the mouth of this cave Ayesha halted, and bade us light the two lamps, which I did, giving one to her and keeping the other myself. Then, taking the lead, she advanced down the cavern, picking her way with great care, as indeed it was necessary to do, for the floor was most irregular—strewn with boulders like the bed of a stream, and in some places pitted with deep holes, in which it would have been easy to break a limb.

This cavern we pursued for twenty minutes or more. It was about a quarter of a mile long, so far as I could form a judgment, which, owing to its numerous twists and turns, was not an easy task.

At last, however, we halted at its further end, and whilst I was still trying to accustom my eyes to the twilight without a great gust of air came tearing down the cave, and extinguished both the lamps.



Ayesha called to us, and we crept up to her, for she was a little in front, to be rewarded with a view that was positively appalling in its gloom and grandeur. Before us was a mighty chasm in the black rock, jagged, torn, and splintered through it in a far past age by some awful convulsion of nature, as though it had been cleft by stroke upon stroke of the lightning. This chasm, which was bounded by precipices, although at the moment we could not see that on the farther side, may have measured any width across, but from its darkness I do not think it can have been very broad. It was impossible to make out much of its outline, or how far it ran, for the simple reason that the point where we were standing was so far from the upper surface of the cliff, at least fifteen hundred or two thousand feet, that only a very dim light struggled down to us from above. The mouth of the cavern that we had been following gave on to a most curious and tremendous spur of rock, which jutted out through mid air into the gulf before us for a distance of some fifty yards, coming to a sharp point at its termination, and in shape resembling nothing that I can think of so much as the spur upon the leg of a cock. This huge spur was attached only to the parent precipice at its base, which was, of course, enormous, just as the cock's spur is attached to its leg. Otherwise it was utterly unsupported.

"Here must we pass," said Ayesha. "Be careful lest giddiness overcome you, or the wind sweep you into the gulf beneath, for of a truth it has no bottom;" and, without giving us further time to grow frightened, she began to walk along the spur, leaving us to follow her as best we might. I was next to her, then came Job, painfully dragging his plank, while Leo

brought up the rear. It was a wonderful sight to see this intrepid woman gliding fearlessly along that dreadful place. For my part, when I had gone but a very few yards, what between the pressure of the air and the awful sense of the consequences that a slip would entail, I found it necessary to drop on to my hands and knees and crawl, and so did the others.

But Ayesha never condescended to this humble expedient. On she went, leaning her body against the gusts of wind, and not seeming to lose either her head or her balance.

In a few minutes we had crossed some twenty paces of this awful bridge, which grew narrower at every step, when of a sudden a great gust tore along the gorge. I saw Ayesha lean herself against it, but the strong draught forced itself beneath her dark cloak, wrenching it from her, and away it went down the wind flapping like a wounded bird. It was dreadful to see it go, till it was lost in the blackness.

I clung to the saddle of rock, and looked about me, while, like a living thing, the great spur vibrated with a humming sound beneath us. The sight was truly awesome. There we were poised in the gloom between earth and heaven. Beneath us stretched hundreds upon hundreds of feet of emptiness that gradually grew darker, till at last it was absolutely black, and at what depth it ended is more than I can guess. Above were measureless spaces of giddy air, and far, far away a line of blue sky. And down this vast gulf in which we were pinnacled the great draught dashed and roared, driving clouds and misty wreaths of vapour before it, till we were nearly blinded, and utterly confused.

Indeed, the position was so tremendous and so absolutely unearthly, that I believe it actually lulled our sense of terror; but to this hour I



often see it in my dreams, and at its mere phantasy wake up dripping with cold sweat.

"On! on!" cried the white form before us, for now that her cloak had gone *She* was robed in white, and looked more like a spirit riding down the gale than a woman; "On, or ye will fall and be dashed to pieces. Fix your eyes upon the ground, and cling closely to the rock."

We obeyed her, and crept painfully along the quivering path against which the wind shrieked and wailed as it shook it, causing it to murmur like some gigantic tuning-fork. On we went, I do not know for how long, only gazing round now and again when it was absolutely necessary, until at last we saw that we had reached the very tip of the spur, a slab of rock, but little larger than an ordinary table, that throbbed and jumped like any over-engined steamer. There we lay, clinging to the stone, and stared round us, while, absolutely heedless of the hideous depth that yawned beneath, *Ayesha* stood leaning out against the wind, down which her long hair streamed, and pointed before her. Then we saw why the narrow plank had been provided, which *Job* and I had borne so painfully between us. In front yawned an empty space, on the other side of which was something, as yet we could not see what, for here—either owing to the shadow of the opposite cliff, or from some other cause—the gloom was that of a cloudy night.

"We must wait awhile," called *Ayesha*; "soon there will be light."

At that moment I could not imagine what she meant. How could more light than there was ever come to this dreadful spot? While I was still wondering, suddenly, like a great sword of flame, a beam from the setting sun pierced the Stygian

gloom, and smote upon the point of rock whereon we lay, illumining *Ayesha's* lovely form with an unearthly splendour. I only wish I could describe the wild and marvellous beauty of that sword of fire, laid across the darkness and rushing mist-wreaths of the gulf. How it came there I do not to this moment know, but I presume that there was some cleft or hole in the opposing cliff, through which light flowed when the setting orb was in a direct line with it. All I can say is, the effect was the most wonderful that I ever saw. Right through the heart of the darkness that flaming sword was stabbed, and where it lay the light was surpassingly vivid, so vivid that even at a distance we could see the grain of the rock, while outside of it—yes, within a few inches of its keen edge—was naught but clustering shadows.

And now, by this vast sunbeam, for which *She* had been waiting, and timed our arrival to meet, knowing that at this season for thousands of years it had always struck thus at eve, we saw what was before us. Within eleven or twelve yards of the very tip of the tongue-like rock whereon we stood there arose, presumably from the far bottom of the gulf, a sugarloaf-shaped cone, of which the summit was exactly opposite to us. But had there been a summit only it would not have helped us much, for the nearest point of its circumference was some forty feet from where we were. On the lip of this summit, however, which was circular and hollow, rested a tremendous flat boulder, something like a glacier stone—perhaps it was one, for all I know to the contrary—and the end of the boulder approached to within twelve feet of us. This huge mass was nothing more nor less than a gigantic rock-



ing-stone, accurately balanced upon the edge of the cone or miniature crater, like a half-crown set on the rim of a wine-glass; for, in the fierce light that played upon it and us, we could see it oscillating in the gusts of wind.

"Quick!" said Ayesha; "the plank—we must cross while the light endures; presently it will be gone."

"Oh Lord, sir! Surely she don't mean us to walk across this here place on that there thing," groaned Job, as in obedience to my directions he thrust the long board towards me.

"That's it, Job," I holloed in ghastly merriment, though the idea of walking the plank was no pleasanter to me than to him.

I passed the board to Ayesha, who ran it deftly across the gulf so that one end of it rested on the rocking-stone, the other remaining upon the extremity of the trembling spur. Then, placing her foot upon it to prevent it from being blown away, she turned to me.

"Since last I was here, O Holly, she called, "the support of the moving stone hath lessened somewhat, so that I am not sure whether it will bear our weight. Therefore I must cross the first, because no hurt will overtake me," and, without further ado, she trod lightly but firmly across the frail bridge, and in another second had gained the heaving stone.

"It is safe," she called. "See, hold thou the plank! I will stand on the farther side of the rock, so that it may not overbalance with your greater weights. Now come, O Holly, for presently the light will fail us."

I struggled to my knees, and if ever I felt terrified in my life it was then; indeed, I am not ashamed to say that I hesitated and hung back.

"Surely thou art not afraid," cried this strange creature, in a lull of the gale, from where she stood poised

like a bird on the highest point of the rocking-stone. "Make way, then, for Kallikrates."

This decided me; it is better to fall down a precipice and die than be laughed at by such a woman; so I clenched my teeth, and in another instant I was on that narrow, bending plank, with bottomless space beneath and around me. I have always hated a great height, but never before did I appreciate the full horrors of which such a position is capable. Oh, the sickening sensation of that yielding board resting on the two moving supports. I grew dizzy, and thought that I must fall; my spine *crept*; it seemed to me that I was falling, and my delight at finding myself stretched upon the stone, which rose and fell beneath me like a boat in a swell, cannot be expressed in words. All I know is that briefly, but earnestly enough, I thanked Providence for preserving me thus far.

Then came Leo's turn, and, though he looked rather white, he ran across like a rope-dancer. Ayesha stretched out her hand to clasp his own, and I heard her say, "Bravely done, my love—bravely done! The old Greek spirit lives in thee yet!"

And now only poor Job remained on the farther side of the gulf. He crept up to the plank, and yelled out, "I can't do it, sir. I shall fall into that beastly place."

"You must," I remember answering with inappropriate facetiousness—"you must, Job; it's as easy as catching flies." I suppose that I must have said this to satisfy my conscience, because, although the expression conveys a wonderful idea of facility, as a matter of fact I know no more difficult operation in the whole world than catching flies—that is, in warm weather, unless, indeed, it is catching mosquitoes.



"I can't, sir—I can't indeed."

"Let the man come, or let him stay and perish there. See, the light is dying! In a moment it will be gone!" said Ayesha.

I looked. She was right. The sun was passing below the level of the hole or cleft in the precipice through which the ray reached us.

"If you stop there, Job, you will die alone," I called; "the light is going."

"Come, be a man, Job," shouted Leo; "it's quite easy."

Thus adjured, with a most awful yell, the miserable Job precipitated himself face downwards on the plank—he did not dare, small blame to him, to try to walk it—and commenced to draw himself across in little jerks, his poor legs hanging down on either side into the nothingness beneath.

His violent jerks at the frail board caused the great stone, which was only balanced on a few inches of rock, to oscillate in a most dreadful manner, and, to make matters worse, when he was halfway across the flying ray of lurid light suddenly went out, just as though a lamp had been extinguished in a curtained room, leaving the whole howling wilderness of air black with darkness.

"Come on, Job, for God's sake!" I shouted in an agony of fear, while the stone, gathering motion with every swing, rocked so violently that it was difficult to cling on to it. It was a truly awful position.

"Lord have mercy on me!" cried poor Job from the darkness. "Oh, the plank's slipping!" and I heard a violent struggle, and thought that he was gone.

But at that moment his outstretched hand, clapping in agony at the air, met my own, and I tugged—ah! how I did tug, putting out all the strength that it has pleased Providence to give me in such abundance—till to my joy in another minute

Job was gasping on the rock beside me. But the plank! I felt it slip, and heard it knock against a projecting knob of rock. Then it was gone.

"Great heavens!" I exclaimed. "How shall we get back?"

"I don't know," answered Leo out of the gloom. "Sufficient to the day is the evil thereof." I am thankful enough to be here."

But Ayesha merely called to me to take her hand and follow her.

## XXV.

### THE SPIRIT OF LIFE.

I DID as I was bidden, and in fear and trembling felt myself guided over the edge of the stone. I thrust my legs out, but could touch nothing.

"I am going to fall!" I gasped.

"Fall then, and trust to me," answered Ayesha.

Now, if the position is considered, it will be easily understood that this was a heavier tax upon my confidence than was justified by my knowledge of Ayesha's character. For all I knew she might be in the very act of consigning me to a horrible doom. But in life we must sometimes lay our faith upon strange altars, and so it was now.

"Let thyself fall!" she cried again, and, having no choice, I did.

I felt myself slide a pace or two down the sloping surface of the rock, and then pass into the air, and the thought flashed through my brain that I was lost. But no! In another instant my feet struck against a rocky floor, and I knew that I was standing on something solid, out of reach of the wind, which I could hear singing overhead. As I stood there thanking Heaven for these small mercies, there was a slip and a scuffle, and down came Leo alongside of me.

"Hulloa, old fellow!" he exclaimed



"are you there? This is interesting, is it not?"

Just then, with a terrific howl, Job arrived right on the top of us, knocking us both down. By the time that we had struggled to our feet again Ayesha was standing among us, bidding us light the lamps, which fortunately remained uninjured, and with them the spare jar of oil.

I found my box of wax matches, and they struck as merrily there, in that awful place, as they could have done in a London drawing-room.

In another minute both lamps were alight, and they revealed a curious scene. We were huddled together in a rocky chamber, some ten feet square, and very scared we looked; that is, with the exception of Ayesha, who stood calmly, her arms folded, waiting for the lamps to burn up. This chamber appeared to be partly natural and partly hollowed out of the top of the crater. The roof of the natural part was formed by the swinging stone, and that over the back of the chamber, which sloped downwards, was hewn from the live rock. For the rest, the place was warm and dry—a perfect haven of rest compared to the giddy pinnacle above, and the quivering spur that shot out to meet it in mid air.

"So!" said *She*, "safely have we come, though once I feared that the rocking stone would fall with you, and hurl you into the bottomless deeps beneath, for I do believe that yonder cleft goes down to the very womb of the world, and the rock whereon the boulder rests has crumbled beneath its swinging weight. But now that he," nodding towards Job, who was seated on the floor, feebly wiping his forehead with a red cotton pocket handkerchief, "whom they rightly call the 'Pig,' for as a pig is he stupid, hath let fall the plank, it will not be easy to return across the gulf,

and to that end I must make some plan. Rest you a while, and look upon this place. What think ye that it is?"

"We cannot say," I answered.

"Wouldst thou believe, O Holly, that once a man did choose this airy nest for a daily habitation, and here he dwelt for many years, leaving it but one day in every twelve to seek food and water and oil that the people brought, more than he could carry, and laid as an offering in the mouth of that tunnel through which we passed hither?"

I looked at her in question, and she continued—

"Yet so it was. There was a man—Noot, he named himself—who, though he lived in the latter days, had of the wisdom of the sons of Kôr. A hermit, and a philosopher, greatly skilled in the secrets of Nature, he it was who discovered the Fire that I shall show you, which is Nature's blood and life, and that the man who bathes therein and breathes thereof shall live while Nature lives. But like unto thee, O Holly, this Noot would not turn his knowledge to account. 'Ill,' he said, 'was it for man to live, for man is born to die.' Therefore he told his secret to none, and therefore he did abide here, where the seeker after Life must pass, and was revered of the Amahagger of that day as holy, and a hermit.

"Now, when first I came to this country—knowest thou how I came, Kallikrates? Another time I will tell thee; it is a strange tale—I heard of this philosopher, and waited for him when he sought his food yonder, and returned with him here, though I greatly feared to tread the gulf. Then did I beguile him with my beauty and my wit, and flatter him with my tongue, so that he led me down to the home of the Fire, and told me the secrets of the Fire; but



he would not suffer me to step therein, and, fearing lest he should slay me, I refrained, knowing that the man was very old, and soon would die. So I returned, having learned from him all that he knew of the wonderful Spirit of the World, and that was much, for this man was wise and very ancient, and by purity and abstinence, and the contemplations of his innocent mind, had worn thin the veil between that which we see and those great invisible truths, the whisper of whose wings we hear at times as they sweep through the gross air of the world. Then—it was but a very few days after—I met thee, my Kallikrates, who hadst wandered hither with the beautiful Egyptian Amenartas, and I learned to love for the first and last time, once and for ever, so that it entered into my mind to come hither with thee, and receive the gift of Life for thee and me. Therefore came we, with that Egyptian who would not be left behind, and, behold! we found the old man Noot lying but newly dead. *There he lay, and his white beard covered him like a garment,* and she pointed to a spot near to which I was sitting; “but surely he has long since crumbled away, and the wind hath borne his ashes hence.”

Here I put out my hand and felt in the dust, till presently my fingers touched something. It was a human tooth, very yellow, but sound. I held it up and showed it to Ayesha, who laughed.

“Yes,” she said, “it is his without

\* It will be observed that Ayesha's account of the death of Kallikrates differs materially from that written on the potsherd by Amenartas. The writing on the sherd says, “Then in her rage did she smite him *by her magic*, and he died.” We never ascertained which was the correct version, but it will be remembered that the body of Kallikrates showed a spear-wound in the breast, which seems conclusive, unless, indeed, it was inflicted after death. Another thing that we never ascertained was *how* the two both loved across the dread gulf and down the shaking spur. What a spectacle the two distracted creatures must have presented in their grief and loveliness as they toiled along that awful place with the dead man between them! Probably, however, its passage was easier then.—L. H. H.

a doubt. Behold what remains of Noot and the wisdom of Noot—one little tooth! Yet that man had all life at his command, but for his conscience's sake he would have none of it. Well, he lay there newly dead, and we descended whither I shall lead you, and then, gathering up all my courage, and courting death that I might perchance win so glorious a crown of life, I stepped into the flames, and behold! Life such as ye can never know until ye feel it also flowed into me, and I came forth undying, and lovely beyond imagining. And I stretched out mine arms to thee, Kallikrates, bidding thee take thine own immortal bride, and behold! blinded by my naked beauty, thou didst turn from me, to hide thine eyes upon the breast of Amenartas. Then a great fury filled me, making me mad, and I seized the javelin that thou didst bear, and stabbed thee, so that, at my feet, in the very place of Life, thou didst groan and go down into death. I knew not then that I had strength to slay with mine eyes and by the power of my will, therefore in my madness I slew with the javelin.\*

“And when thou wast dead, ah! I wept, because I was undying and thou wast dead. I wept there in the place of Life so that had I been mortal any more my heart had surely broken. And she, the swart Egyptian—she cursed me by her gods. By Osiris did she curse me and by Isis, by Nephthys and by Anubis, by Sekhet, the cat-headed, and by Set, calling down evil



on me, evil and everlasting desolation. Ah! I can see her dark face now lowering o'er me like a storm, but she could not harm me, and I—I know not if I could harm her. I did not try; it was naught to me then; so together we bore thee hence. Afterwards I sent her—the Egyptian—away through the swamps, and it seems that she lived to bear a son and to write the tale that should lead thee, her husband, back to me, her rival and thy murderess.

"Such is the tale, my love, and now the hour is at hand that shall set a crown upon it. Like all things on the earth, it is compounded of evil and of good—more of evil than of good, perchance; and writ in a scroll of blood. It is the truth; I have hidden nothing from thee, Kallikrates. And now, one thing before the moment of thy trial. We go down into the presence of Death, for Life and Death are very near together, and—who knoweth—that might happen which shall separate us for another space of waiting? I am but a woman, and no prophetess, and I cannot read the future. But this I know—for I learned it from the lips of the wise man Noot—that my life is but prolonged and made more bright. It cannot endure for aye. Therefore, ere we go, tell me, O Kallikrates, that of a truth thou dost forgive me, and dost love me from thy heart. See, Kallikrates: much evil have I done—perchance it was evil but two nights since to strike that girl who loved thee cold in death, but she disobeyed me and angered me, prophesying misfortune to me, and I smote. Be careful when power comes to thee also, lest thou too shouldst smite in thine anger or thy jealousy, for unconquerable strength is a sore weapon in the hands of erring man. Yea, I have sinned—out of the bitterness born of a great love have I sinned—yet

do I know the good from the evil, not is my heart altogether hardened. Thy love, Kallikrates, shall be the gate of my redemption, even as aforetime my passion was the path down which I ran to ill. For deep love unsatisfied is the hell of noble hearts, and a portion for the accursed, but love that is mirrored back more perfect from the soul of our desired doth fashion wings to lift us above ourselves, and make us what we might be. Therefore, Kallikrates, take me by the hand, and lift my veil with no more fear than though I were some peasant girl, and not the wisest and most beauteous woman in this wide world, and look me in the eyes, and tell me that thou dost forgive me with all thine heart, and that with all thine heart thou dost worship me."

She paused, and the infinite tenderness in her voice seemed to hover round us like some memory of the dead. I know that it moved me more even than her words, it was so very human—so very womanly. Leo, too, was strangely touched. Hitherto he had been fascinated against his better judgment, somewhat as a bird is fascinated by a snake, but now I think that all this passed away, and he knew that he really loved this strange and glorious creature, as, alas! I loved her also. At any rate, I saw his eyes fill with tears as, stepping swiftly to her, he undid the gauzy veil, and taking her by the hand, gazed into her sweet face, saying—

"Ayesha, I love thee with all my heart, and so far as forgiveness is possible I forgive thee the death of Ustane. For the rest, it is between thee and thy Maker; I know nothing of it. I know only that I love thee as I never loved before, and that, be it near or far, I will cleave to thee to the end."



"Now," answered Ayesha, with proud humility—"now, when my lord doth speak thus royally, pardoning with so rich a hand, it becomes me not to lag behind in gifts, and thus be beggared of my generosity. Behold!" and she took his hand and, placing it upon her shapely head, she bent herself slowly down till one knee for an instant touched the ground—"Behold! in token of submission do I bow me to my lord! Behold?" and she kissed him on the lips, "in token of my wifely love do I kiss my lord. Behold!" and she laid her hand upon his heart, "by the sin I sinned, by my lonely centuries of waiting wherewith it was wiped out, by the great love with which I love, and by the Spirit—the Eternal Thing that doth beget all life, from Whom it ebbs, to Whom it must return again—I swear :

"I swear, even in this first most holy hour of completed Womanhood, that I will cherish Good and abandon Evil. I swear that I will be ever guided by thy voice in the straightest path of duty. I swear that I will eschew Ambition, and through all my length of endless days set Wisdom over me as a ruling star to lead me unto Truth and a knowledge of the Right. I swear also that I will honour and will cherish thee, Kallikrates, who hast been swept by the wave of time back into my arms, ay, till my day of doom, come it soon or late. I swear—nay, I will swear no more, for what are words? Yet shalt thou learn that Ayesha hath no false tongue.

"So I have sworn, and thou, my Holly, art witness to the oath. Here, too, are we wed. my husband, with the gloom for bridal canopy—wed till the end of all things, here do we write our marriage vows upon the rushing winds, which shall bear them

up to heaven, and round and continually round this rolling world.

"And for a bridal gift I crown thee with my beauty's starry crown, and enduring life, and wisdom without measure, and wealth that none can count. Behold! the great ones of the earth shall creep about thy feet, and its fair women shall cover up their eyes because of the shining glory of thy countenance, and its wise ones shall be abased before thee. Thou shalt read the hearts of men as an open writing, and hither and thither shalt thou lead them as thy pleasure listeth. Like that old Sphinx of Egypt thou shalt sit aloft from age to age, and ever shall they cry to thee to solve the riddle of thy greatness, that doth not pass away, and ever shalt thou mock them with thy silence!

"Behold! once more I kiss thee, and with that kiss I give to thee dominion over sea and earth, over the peasant in his hovel, over the monarch in his palace halls, and cities crowned with towers, and all who breathe therein. Where'er the sun shakes out his spears, and the lone-some waters mirror up the moon, where'er storms roll, and Heaven's painted bows arch in the sky—from the pure North clad in snows, across the middle spaces of the world, to where the amorous South, lying like a bride upon her blue couch of seas, breathes in sighs made sweet with the odour of myrtles—there shall thy power pass and thy dominion find a home. Nor sickness, nor icy-fingered fear, nor sorrow, and pale waste of flesh and mind hovering ever o'er humanity, shall so much as shadow thee with the shadow of their wings. As a God shalt thou be, holding good and evil in the hollow of thy hand, and I, even I, humble myself before thee. Such is the power of Love, and such is the



bridal gift I give unto thee, Kallikrates, my Lord and Lord of All.

"And now it is done; now for thee I loose my virgin zone; and come storm, come shine, come good, come ill, come life, come death, it never, never can be undone. For, of a truth, that which is, is, and, being done, is done for aye, and cannot be changed. I have said—Let us hence, that all things may be accomplished in their order"; and, taking one of the lamps, she advanced towards the end of the chamber that was roofed in by the swaying stone, where she halted.

We followed her, and perceived that in the wall of the cone there was a stair, or, to be more accurate, that some projecting knobs of rock had been so shaped as to form a good imitation of a stair. Down these Ayesha began to climb, springing from step to step like a chamois, and after her we followed with less grace. When we had descended some fifteen or sixteen steps we found that they ended in a long rocky slope, shaped like an inverted cone or funnel.

This slope was very steep and often precipitous, but it was nowhere impassable, and by the light of the lamps we climbed down it with no great difficulty, though it was gloomy work enough travelling on thus, none of us knew whither, into the dead heart of a volcano. As we went, however, I took the precaution of noting our route as well as I could; and this was not so very difficult, owing to the extraordinary and most fantastic shapes of the rocks that were strewn about, many of which in that dim light looked more like the grim faces carved upon mediæval gargoyles than ordinary boulders.

For a considerable time we travelled on thus, half an hour I should say, till, after we had descended many hundreds of feet, I perceived that

we had reached the point of the inverted cone, where, at the very apex of the funnel, we found a passage, so low and narrow that we were forced to stoop as we crept along it. After some fifty yards of this creeping the passage suddenly widened into a cave, so huge that we could see neither the roof nor the sides. Indeed, we only knew that it was a cave by the echo of our tread and the perfect quiet of the heavy air. On we went for many minutes in absolute awe and silence, like lost souls in the depths of Hades, Ayesha's white and ghost-like form flitting in front of us, till once more the place ended in a passage which opened into a second cavern much smaller than the first. We could clearly distinguish the arch and stony banks of this second cave, and, from their rent and jagged appearance, we judged that it had been torn in the bowels of the rock by the terrific force of some explosive gas, like that first long passage through the cliff down which we had passed before we reached the quivering spur. At length this cave ended in a third tunnel, where gleamed a faint glow of light.

I heard Ayesha utter a sigh of relief as this light dawned upon us, which flowed we knew not whence.

"It is well," she said; "prepare to enter the very womb of the Earth, wherein she doth conceive the Life that ye see brought forth in man and beast—ay, in every tree and flower. Prepare, O Men, for here ye shall be born anew!"

Swiftly she sped along, and after her we stumbled as best we might, our hearts filled like a cup with mingled dread and curiosity. What were we about to see? We passed down the tunnel; stronger and stronger grew the glow, reaching us



now in great flashes like rays from a lighthouse, as one by one they are thrown wide upon the darkness of the waters. Nor was this all, for with the flashes came a soul-shaking sound like that of thunder and of crashing trees. Now we were through the passage, and—oh heavens!

We stood in a third cavern, some fifty feet in length by perhaps as great a height, and thirty wide. It was carpeted with fine white sand, and its walls had been worn smooth by the action of fire or water. This cavern was not dark like the others—it was filled with a soft glow of rose-coloured light, more beautiful to look on than anything that can be conceived. But at first we saw no flashes, and heard no more of the thunderous sound. Presently, however, as we stood in amaze, gazing at the marvellous sight, and wondering whence the rosy radiance flowed, a dread and beautiful thing happened. Across the far end of the cavern, with a grinding and crashing noise—a noise so dreadful and awe-inspiring that we all trembled, and Job actually sank to his knees—there flamed out an awful cloud or pillar of fire, like a rainbow many-coloured, and like the lightning bright. For a space, perhaps forty seconds, it flamed and roared thus, turning slowly round and round; then by degrees the terrible noise ceased, and with the fire it passed away—I know not where—leaving behind it the same rosy glow that we had first seen.

"Draw near, draw near!" cried Ayesha, with a voice of thrilling exultation. "Behold the Fountain and the Heart of Life as it beats in the bosom of this great world. Behold the substance from which all things draw their energy, the bright Spirit of this Globe, without which it cannot live, but must grow cold and

dead as the dead moon. Draw near, and wash you in those living flames, and take their virtue into your poor bodies in all its virgin strength—not as now it feebly glows within your bosoms, filtered thereto through the fine strainers of a thousand intermediate lives, but as it is here in the very fount and source of earthly Being."

We followed her through the rosy glow up to the head of the cave, till we stood before the spot where the great pulse beat and the great flame passed. And as we went we became sensible of a wild and splendid exhilaration, of the glorious sense of such a fierce intensity of Life that beside it the most buoyant moments of our strength seemed flat and tame and feeble. It was the mere effluvium of the fire, the subtle ether that it cast off as it rolled, entering into us, and making us strong as giants and swift as eagles.

We reached the head of the cave, and gazed at each other in the glorious glow, laughing aloud in the lightness of our hearts and the divine intoxication of our brains—even Job laughed, who had not smiled for a week. I know that I felt as though the mantle of all the genius whereof the human intellect is capable had descended upon me. I could have spoken in blank verse of Shakesperian beauty; inspired visions flashed through my mind; it was as though the bonds of my flesh had been loosened, and had left the spirit free to soar to the empyrean of its unguessed powers. The sensations that poured in upon me are indescribable. I seemed to live more keenly, to reach to a higher joy, to sip the goblet of a subtler thought than ever it had been my lot to taste before. I was another and most glorified self, and all the avenues of the Possible were for a while laid open to my mortal footsteps.



Then, suddenly, whilst I rejoiced in this splendid vigour of a new-found self, from far away there came the dreadful muttering noise, that grew and grew to a crash and a roar, which combined in itself all that is terrible and yet splendid in the possibilities of sound. Nearer it came, and nearer yet, till it was close upon us, rolling down like all the thunder-wheels of heaven behind the horses of the lightning. On it travelled, and with it the glorious blinding cloud of many-coloured light, and stood before us for a space, slowly revolving, as it seemed to us; then, accompanied by its attendant pomp of sound, it passed away I know not whither.

So astonishing was the wondrous sight that one and all of us, save *She*, who stood up and stretched her hands towards the fire, sank down before it, and hid our faces in the sand.

When it was gone Ayesha spoke.

"At length, Kallikrates," she said, "the moment is at hand. When the great flame comes again thou must bathe in it; but throw aside thy garments, for it will burn them, though thee it will not hurt. Thou must stand in the fire while thy senses will endure, and when it embraces thee suck the essence down into thy very heart, and let it leap and play around thy every limb, so that thou lose no moiety of its virtue. Hearest thou me, Kallikrates?"

"I hear thee, Ayesha," answered Leo, "but, of a truth—I am no coward—but I doubt me of that raging flame. How know I that it will not utterly destroy me, so that I lose myself and lose thee also? Nevertheless I will do it," he added.

Ayesha thought for a minute, and then said—

"It is not wonderful that thou shouldst doubt. Tell me, Kallikrates: if thou seest me stand in the flame

and come forth unharmed, wilt thou enter also?"

"Yes," he answered, "I will enter even if it slay me. I have said that I will enter now."

"And that will I also," I cried.

"What, my Holly!" she laughed aloud; "methought that thou wouldst naught of length of days. Why, how is this?"

"Nay, I know not," I answered, "but there is that in my heart which calleth to me to taste of the flame, and live."

"It is well," she said. "Thou art not altogether lost in folly. See now, I will for the second time bathe me in this living bath. Fain would I add to my beauty and to my length of days, if that be possible. If it be not possible, at the least it cannot harm me.

"Also," she continued, after a momentary pause, "there is another and a deeper cause why I would once again dip me in the fire. When first I tasted of its virtue my heart was full of passion and of hatred of that Egyptian Amenartas, and therefore, despite my strivings to be rid of them, passion and hatred have been stamped upon my soul from that sad hour to this. But now it is otherwise. Now is my mood a happy mood, and I am filled with the purest part of thought, and thus I would ever be. Therefore, Kallikrates, will I once more wash and make me pure and clean, and yet more meet for thee. Therefore also, when in turn thou dost stand in the fire, empty all thy heart of evil, and let contentment hold the balance of thy mind. Shake loose thy spirit's wings, muse upon thy mother's kiss, and turn thee toward the vision of the highest good that hath ever swept on silver wings across the silence of thy dreams. For from the seed of what thou art in that dread



moment shall grow the fruit of what thou shalt be for all unreckoned time.

"Now prepare thee, prepare ! even as though thy last hour were at hand, and thou wast about to cross through Death to the Land of Shadow, and not by the Gates of Glory into the realm of Life made beautiful. Prepare, I say, Kallikrates !"

## XXVI.

## WHAT WE SAW.

THEN followed a few moments' pause, during which Ayesha seemed to be gathering up her strength for the fiery trial, while we clung to each other, and waited in utter silence.

At last, from far, far away, came the first murmur of sound, that grew and gathered till it began to crash and bellow in the distance. As she heard it Ayesha swiftly threw off her gauzy wrapping, and loosened the golden snake from her kirtle. Then, shaking her lovely hair about her like a garment, beneath its cover she slipped off the white robe and replaced the snaky belt around her outside the masses of her falling locks. There she stood before us as Eve might have stood before Adam, clad in nothing but her abundant hair, held round her by the golden band ; and no words of mine can tell how sweet she looked—and how divine. Nearer and nearer drew the thunder wheels of fire, and as they came she pushed one ivory arm through the dark masses of her hair and wound it about Leo's neck.

"Oh, my love, my love !" she murmured, "wilt thou ever know how I have loved thee ?" and she kissed him on the forehead, hesitated a little as though in doubt, then advanced and stood in the pathway of the flame of Life.

There was, I remember, something

very touching to my mind about her words and that embrace upon Leo's forehead. It was like a mother's kiss, and seemed to carry a benediction with it.

On came the crashing, rolling noise, and the sound of it was as the sound of a forest being swept flat by a mighty wind, to be tossed up again like so much grass, and hurled in thunder down a mountain-side. Nearer and nearer it approached ; now flashes of light, forerunners of the revolving pillar of flame, were passing like arrows through the rosy air ; and now the edge of the pillar itself appeared. Ayesha turned towards it, and stretched out her arms to greet it. On it rolled very slowly and lapped her round with fire. I saw the essence run up her form. I saw her lift it with both hands as though it were water, and pour it over her head. I even saw her open her mouth and draw it down into her lungs, and it was a dread and wonderful sight.

Then she paused, and, stretching out her arms, she stood quite still, a heavenly smile upon her face, as though she were the very Spirit of the Flame.

The mysterious fire played up and down her dark and rolling locks, twining and twisting itself through and around them like threads of golden lace ; it gleamed upon her ivory breast and shoulder, from which the hair had slipped aside ; it slid along her pillared throat and delicate features, and seemed to find a home in the glorious eyes that shone and shone, more brightly even than the burning spiritual ether.

Oh, how beautiful she looked there in the flame ! No angel out of heaven could have worn a greater loveliness. Even now my heart faints before the recollection of it, as naked in the



naked fire she stood and smiled at our awed faces; and I would give half my remaining time upon this earth thus to see her once again.

But suddenly—more suddenly than I can tell—an indescribable change came over her countenance, a change which I could not define or explain, but none the less a change. The smile vanished, and in its stead there crept a dry, hard look; the rounded face seemed to grow pinched, as though some great anxiety was leaving its impress there. The glorious eyes, too, lost their light, and, as I thought, the form its perfect shape and erectness.

I rubbed my eyes, thinking that I was the victim of some hallucination, or that the radiance of the intense light produced an optical delusion; and, as I marvelled, the flaming pillar slowly twisted and thundered on to whithersoever it passes in the bowels of the great earth, leaving Ayesha standing where it had been.

So soon as it was gone she stepped forward to Leo's side—it seemed to me that there was no spring in her step—and stretched out her hand to lay it upon his shoulder. I gazed at her arm. Where was its wonderful roundness and beauty? It looked thin and angular. And her face—by Heaven—*her face was growing old before my eyes!* I suppose that Leo saw it also; certainly he recoiled a little.

"What is it, my Kallikrates?" she said, and her voice—what was wrong with those deep and thrilling notes? They sounded high and cracked.

"Why, what is it—what is it?" she said confusedly. "I am dazed. Surely the quality of the fire hath not altered. Can the principle of Life alter? Tell me, Kallikrates, is there aught wrong with my eyes? I see not clear," and she put her hand to her head and touched her hair—

and oh, *horror of horrors!*—it all fell upon the floor.

"*Look!—look!—look!*" shrieked Job, in a shrill falsetto of terror, his eyes starting from his head, and foam upon his lips. "*Look!—look!—look!*" she's shrivelling up! she's turning into a monkey!" and down he fell upon the ground, foaming and gnashing in a fit.

True enough—I faint even as I write it in the living presence of that terrible recollection—Ayesha was shrivelling up; the golden snake that had encircled her gracious form slipped over her hips and to the ground. Smaller and smaller she grew; her skin changed colour, and in place of the perfect whiteness of its lustre it turned dirty brown and yellow, like to an old piece of withered parchment. She felt at her head; the delicate hand was nothing but a claw now, a human talon resembling that of a badly preserved Egyptian mummy. Then she seemed to understand what kind of change was passing over her, and she shrieked—ah, she shrieked!—Ayesha rolled upon the floor and shrieked.

Smaller she grew, and smaller yet, till she was no larger than a monkey. Now the skin had puckered into a million wrinkles, and on her shapeless face was the stamp of unutterable age. I never saw anything like it; nobody ever saw anything to equal the infinite age which was graven on that fearful countenance, no bigger now than that of a two-months' child, though the skull retained its same size; and let all men pray they never shall, if they wish to keep their reason.

At last she lay still, or only moving feebly. She, who but two minutes gone had gazed upon us—the loveliest, noblest, most splendid woman the world has ever seen—she lay still



before us, near the masses of her own dark hair, no larger than a big ape, and hideous—ah, too hideous for words! And yet, think of this—at that very moment I thought of it—it was the same woman!

She was dying: we saw it, and thanked God—for while she lived she could feel, and what must she have felt? She raised herself upon her bony hands, and blindly gazed around her, swaying her head slowly from side to side as does a tortoise. She could not see, for her whitish eyes were covered with a bony film. Oh, the horrible pathos of the sight! But she could still speak.

"Kallikrates," she said in husky, trembling tones. "Forget me not, Kallikrates. Have pity on my shame; I die not. I shall come again, and shall once more be beautiful, I swear it—it is true! Oh—h—h—" and she fell upon her face, and was still.

Yes, thus, on the very spot where more than twenty centuries before she had slain Kallikrates the priest, Ayesha herself fell down and died.

Overcome with the extremity of horror, we too sank to the sandy floor of that dread place, and swooned away.

I know not how long we remained thus. Many hours, I suppose. When at last I opened my eyes the other two were still outstretched upon the floor. The rosy light yet beamed like a celestial dawn, and the thunder-wheels of the Spirit of Life yet rolled upon their accustomed track, for as I awoke the great pillar was passing away. There, too, lay the hideous little monkey frame, covered with crinkled yellow parchment, that once had been the glorious *She*. Alas! it was no hideous dream—it was an awful and unparalleled fact!

What had chanced to bring about this shocking change? Had the

nature of the life-giving fire varied? Did it, perhaps, from time to time send forth an essence of Death instead of an essence of Life? Or was it that the frame once charged with its marvellous virtue could bear no more, so that were the process repeated—it mattered not at what lapse of time—the two impregnations neutralised each other, and left the body on which they acted as it was before ever it came into contact with the very spring of Being. This, and this alone, would account for the sudden and terrible ageing of Ayesha as the whole length of her two thousand years took effect upon her. I had not the slightest doubt myself but that the shape now lying before me was just what the frame of a woman would be if by any extraordinary means life could be preserved in her till at length she died at the age of some two-and-twenty centuries.

But who can tell what happened? There was the fact. Often since this awful hour I have reflected that it requires no great stretch of imagination to see the finger of Providence in the matter. Ayesha locked up in her living tomb, waiting from age to age for the coming of her lover, worked but a small change in the order of the World. But Ayesha strong and happy in her love, clothed with immortal youth, godlike beauty and power, and the wisdom of the centuries, would have revolutionised society, and even perchance have changed the destinies of Mankind. Thus she opposed herself to the eternal law, and, strong though she was, by it was swept back into nothingness—swept back with shame and hideous mockery!

For some minutes I lay, faintly turning these terrors over in my mind, while my physical strength came back to me, which it did quickly in that buoyant atmosphere. Then



I bethought me of the others, and staggered to my feet, to see if I could arouse them. But first I took up Ayesha's kirtle and the gauzy scarf with which she had been wont to hide her dazzling loveliness from the eyes of men, and, averting my head so that I might not look upon it, I covered up that dreadful relic of the glorious dead, that shocking epitome of human beauty and human life. This I did hurriedly, fearing lest Leo should recover, and see it again.

Then, stepping over the perfumed masses of dark hair that were scattered upon the sand, I went to Job, who was lying upon his breast, and turned him over. As I lifted him his arm fell back in a way that I did not like—which sent a chill through me, indeed—and I glanced sharply at his face. One look was enough. Our old and faithful servant was dead. Already shattered by all he had seen and undergone, his nerves had utterly broken down beneath this last dire sight, and he had died of terror, or in a fit brought on by terror. I had only to look at his features to be assured of it.

This was another blow; but it may help people to understand how overwhelmingly awful was the experience through which we had passed when I say that we did not feel it much at the time. It seemed quite natural that the poor old fellow should be dead. When Leo came to himself, which he did with a groan and trembling of the limbs about ten minutes afterwards, and I told him that Job was dead, he merely said, "Oh!" And, mind you, this was from no heartlessness, for he and Job were much attached to each other; and he often talks of him now with the deepest regret and affection. It was only that his mind would bear no more. A harp can give out but a

certain quantity of sound, however heavily it is smitten.

Well, I set myself to recovering Leo, who, to my infinite relief, I found was not dead, but only fainting, and in the end I succeeded, as I have said, and he sat up. Then I saw another dreadful thing. When we entered that awful place his curling hair had been of the ruddiest gold; now it was turning grey, and by the time we gained the outer air it was snow white. Besides, he looked twenty years older.

"What is to be done, old fellow?" he said in a hollow, dead sort of voice, when his brain cleared a little, and a recollection of what had happened forced itself upon him.

"Try and get out, I suppose," I answered; "that is, unless you would like to go in there," and I pointed to the column of fire, which was once more rolling by.

"I would if I were sure that it would kill me," he said with a little laugh. "It was my cursed hesitation that did this. If I had not been doubtful *She* might never have tried to show me the road. But I am not sure. The fire might have the opposite effect upon me. It might make me immortal; and, old fellow, I have not the patience to wait a couple of thousand years for her to come back again as she did for me. I had rather die when my hour comes—and I should fancy that it isn't far off either—and go my ways to look for her. Do you try it, if you like."

But I merely shook my head; my excitement was as dead as ditch-water, and my distaste for the prolongation of our mortal span had come back upon me more strongly than ever. Besides, we neither of us knew what the effects of the essence might be. The result upon *She* had not been of an encouraging



nature, and of the exact causes which produced that result we were, of course, ignorant.

"Well, my boy," I said, "we cannot stop here till we follow those two," and I pointed to the little heap under the white garment and to the stiffening corpse of poor Job. "If we are going we had better go. But, by the way, I expect that the lamps have burnt out," and I took one up to look at it, and sure enough it had.

"There is some more oil in the vase," said Leo indifferently—"if it is not broken, at least."

I examined the vessel in question—it was intact. With a trembling hand I filled the lamps—luckily there was still some of the linen wick unburnt. Then I lit them with one of our wax matches. While I did so we heard the pillar of fire approaching again as it went on its never-ending journey, if, indeed, it was the same pillar that passed and repassed in a circle.

"Let us see it come once more," said Leo; "we shall never look upon its like again in this world."

It seemed but idle curiosity, yet somehow I shared it, and so we waited till, turning slowly upon its own axis, the burning cloud had flamed and thundered by; and I remember wondering for how many tens of thousands of years this phenomenon had recurred in the bowels of the earth, and for how many more thousands it would continue to recur. I wondered also if any mortal eyes would ever again mark its passage, or any mortal ears be thrilled and fascinated by the swelling volume of its majestic sound. I do not think so; I believe that we are the last human beings who will ever see that unearthly sight. Presently it had gone, and we too turned to go.

\* What a terrifying reflection it is, by the way, that nearly all our deep love for women who are not our kindred depends—at any rate in the first instance—upon their personal appearance. If we lost them, and found them again dreadful to look on, though otherwise they were the very same, should we still love them?—L. H. H.

But before we went each of us took Job's cold hand and shook it. It seemed a ghastly ceremony, but it was the only means in our power of showing our respect to the faithful dead and of celebrating his obsequies. The heap beneath the white garment we did not uncover. We had no wish to look upon that terrible sight again. But we went to the pile of rippling hair that had fallen from her in the agony of the hideous change which was worse than a thousand natural deaths, and each of us drew from it a shining lock. These locks we still have, the sole memento that is left to us of Ayesha as we knew her in the fulness of her grace and glory. Leo pressed the perfumed hair to his lips.

"She called to me not to forget her," he said hoarsely; "and swore that we should meet again. By Heaven! I never *will* forget her. Here I swear that, if we live to escape from this, I will not for all my days have aught to do with any other living woman, and that wherever I go I will wait for her as faithfully as she waited for me."

"Yes," I thought to myself, "if she comes back as beautiful as we knew her. But supposing she came back *like that!*"

And then we went. We went, and left those two in the presence of the secret well and fount of Life, but gathered to the cold company of Death. How lonely they looked as they lay there, and how ill assorted! That little heap had been for two thousand years the wisest, loveliest, proudest creature—I can hardly call her woman—in the whole universe. She was wicked, too, in her way; but, alas! such is the frailty of the human



heart, her wickedness had not detracted from her charm. Indeed, I am by no means certain that it did not add to it. After all it was of a grand order; there was nothing mean or small about Ayesha.

And poor Job! His presentiment had come true, and there was an end of him. Well, he has a strange burial-place—no Norfolk hind ever had a stranger, or ever will; and it is something to lie in the same sepulchre with the poor remains of the imperial *She*.

We looked our last upon them and the indescribable rosy glow in which they lay; then with hearts far too heavy for words we left them, and crept thence broken-down men—so broken down that we renounced the chance of practically immortal life, because all that made life valuable had gone from us, and we knew even then, that to prolong our days indefinitely would only be to prolong our sufferings. For we felt—yes, both of us—that having once looked Ayesha in the eyes, we could not forget her for ever and ever while memory and identity remained. We both loved her now and for all time; she was stamped and carven on our hearts, and no other woman or interest could ever raze that splendid die.

And I—there lies the sting—I had and have no right to think thus of her. As she told me, I was nothing to her, and never shall be through the unfathomed depth of Time, unless, indeed, conditions alter, and a day comes at last when two men may love one woman, and all three be happy in the fact. It is the only hope of my broken-heartedness, and a somewhat faint one. Beyond it I have nothing. I have paid down this heavy price, all that I am worth here and hereafter, and that is my sole

reward. With Leo it is different, and often and often I bitterly envy him his happy lot, for if *She* was right, and her wisdom and knowledge did not fail her at the last, which, arguing from the precedent of her own case, I think most unlikely, he has some future to look forward to. But I have none, and yet—mark the folly and the feebleness of the human heart, and let him who is weak learn wisdom from it—yet I would not have it otherwise. I mean that I am content to give what I have given and must always give, and to take in payment those crumbs that fall from my mistress's table: the memory of a few kind words, the hope one day in the far undreamed future of a sweet smile or two of recognition, a little gentle friendship, and a little show of thanks for my devotion to her—and Leo.

If this does not constitute true love, I do not know what does, and all I have to say is, that it is a very bad state of mind for a man on the wrong side of middle age to fall into.

## XXVII.

## WE LEAP.

WE passed through the caves without trouble, but when we came to the slope of the inverted cone two obstacles stared us in the face. The first of these was the laborious nature of the ascent, and the next the extreme difficulty of finding our way. Indeed, had it not been for the mental notes that I had fortunately taken of the forms of various rocks, I am sure that we never should have managed it at all, but have wandered about in the dreadful womb of the volcano—for I suppose it must once have been something of the sort—until we died of exhaustion and



despair. As it was we went wrong several times, and once nearly fell into a huge crack or crevasse. It was terrible work creeping about in the dense gloom and awful stillness from boulder to boulder, and examining them by the feeble light of the lamps to see if I could recognise their shapes. We rarely spoke; our hearts were too heavy for speech. We simply stumbled along in a dogged fashion, falling sometimes and cutting ourselves. The fact was that our spirits were utterly crushed, and we did not greatly care what happened to us. Only we felt bound to try to save our lives whilst we could, and indeed a natural instinct prompted us to it. So we blundered on for some three or four hours, I should think—I cannot tell exactly how long, for we had no watch left that would go. During the last two hours we were completely lost, and I began to fear we had wandered into the funnel of some subsidiary cone, when at length I suddenly recognised a very large rock which we had seen shortly after we began our descent. It is a marvel that I should have known it; indeed, we had already passed it going at right angles to the proper path, when something about it struck me, and I turned back and examined it in an idle sort of way, and, as it happened, this accident proved our salvation.

After this we gained the rocky natural stair without much difficulty, and in due course found ourselves again in the little chamber where the benighted Noot had lived and died.

But now a fresh terror confronted us. It will be remembered that owing to Job's fear and awkwardness the board upon which we walked from the huge spur to the rocking-stone had been whirled off into the tremendous gulf below.

How were we to cross without the plank?

There was only one answer—we must try and *jump* it, or else perish where we were. The distance in itself was not so very great, between eleven and twelve feet I should think, and I have seen Leo jump over twenty when he was a young fellow at college; but then, think of the conditions! Two weary worn-out men, one of them on the wrong side of forty, a rocking-stone to take off from, a trembling point of rock some few feet across to land upon, and a bottomless gulf to be cleared in a raging gale! It was bad enough, God knows; but when I pointed out these things to Leo, he put the whole matter in a nutshell by replying that, merciless as the choice was, we must choose between the certainty of a lingering death in the chamber and the risk of a swift one in the air.

There was no gainsaying this argument, but it was clear that we could not attempt to leap in the dark; the only thing to do was to wait for the ray of light which pierced through the gulf at sunset. How near to or how far from sunset we might be neither of us had the faintest notion; all we did know was, that when at last the light came it would not endure for more than two minutes at the outside, so that we must be prepared to meet it. Accordingly, we made up our minds to creep on to the top of the rocking-stone and lie there in readiness. We were the more easily reconciled to this course by the fact that our lamps were once more nearly exhausted—indeed, one had gone out bodily, and the other was jumping up and down as the flame of a lamp does when the oil is done. So, by the aid of its dying light, we hastened to crawl out of the little chamber and clamber up the side of the great stone.



At this moment the lamp expired.

The change in our situation was sufficiently remarkable. Below, in the little chamber, we had only heard the roaring of the gale overhead—here, lying face downwards on the swinging stone, we were exposed to its full force and fury, as the great draught drew first from this direction and then from that, howling against the mighty precipice and through the rocky cliffs like ten thousand despairing souls. We lay there hour after hour in terror and misery of mind so deep that I will not attempt to describe them, and listened to the wild storm-voices of that Tartarus, while, set to the deep undertone of the spur opposite, whereon the wind hummed as through some awful harp, they called to each other from precipice to precipice. No nightmare dreamed by man, no dark invention of the romancer can ever equal the living horror of that place, and the weird crying of those voices of the night, as we clung like shipwrecked mariners to a raft, and tossed on the black, unfathomed wilderness of air. Fortunately the temperature was not a low one; indeed, the wind was warm, or we should have perished. So we clung and listened, and while we were stretched out upon the rock a thing chanced which was so curious and suggestive in itself, though doubtless a mere coincidence, that it added to, rather than lightened, the burden on our nerves.

It will be remembered that when Ayesha was standing on the spur, before we crossed to the stone, the wind tore her cloak from her, and whirled it away into the darkness of the gulf, we could not see whither. Well—I hardly like to tell the story; it is so strange—as we lay there upon the rocking-stone, this very cloak came floating out of the black space,

like a memory from the dead, and fell on Leo—so that it covered him almost from head to foot. At first we could not imagine what it was, but soon discovered by its texture, and then, for the first time, poor Leo gave way, and I heard him sobbing there upon the stone. No doubt the cloak had been caught upon some pinnacle of the cliff, and thence was blown hither by a chance gust; at the least, it was a most curious and touching incident.

Shortly after this, suddenly, without the slightest previous warning, the red knife of light appeared stabbing the darkness through and through—struck the swaying stone on which we were, and rested its lurid point upon the spur opposite.

“Nor for it,” said Leo “now or never.”

We rose and stretched ourselves, looking first at the cloud wreaths stained the colour of blood by that scarlet ray as they tore through the sickening depths beneath, then at the empty space between the swaying stone and the quivering rock, and, in our hearts, despaired, preparing for death. Surely we could not clear it—desperate though we were.

“Who is to go first?” said I.

“Do you, old fellow,” answered Leo. “I will sit upon the other side of the stone to steady it. You must take as much run as you can, and jump high; and may God have mercy on us!”

I acquiesced with a nod, and then I did a thing I had never done since Leo was a little boy. I turned and put my arm round him, and kissed him on the forehead. It sounds rather French, but I was taking my last farewell of a man whom I could not have loved more if he had been my own son twice over.

“Good-bye, my boy, I said; “I hope we shall meet again, wherever it is that we go to.”



The fact was I did not expect to live another two minutes.

Next I retreated to the far side of the rock, and waited till one of the chopping gusts of wind got behind me; then I ran the length of the huge stone, some three or four and thirty feet, and sprang wildly into the dizzy air. Oh! the sickening terrors which I felt as I launched myself at that little point of rock, and the horrible sense of despair which shot through my brain as I realised that I had *jumped short!* But so it was; my feet never touched the point, they went down into space, only my hands and body came in contact with it. I gripped at it with a yell, but one hand slipped, and I swung right round, holding by the other, so that now I faced the stone from which I had sprung. In agony I clutched with my left hand, and this time managed to grasp a knob of rock, and there I hung in the fierce red light, with thousands of feet of empty air beneath me. My hands were holding to either side of the under part of the spur, so that its point was touching my head. Therefore, even had I found the strength, I could not have pulled myself up. The most that I could do would be to hang for about a minute, and then drop down into the bottomless pit. If any man can imagine a more hideous position, let him speak! All I know is that the torture of that half minute nearly turned my brain.

I heard Leo give a cry, and then suddenly I saw him in mid air springing up and out like a chamois. It was a splendid leap that he took under the influence of his terror and despair. Clearing the horrible gulch as though it were nothing, and landing well on to the rocky point, he threw himself upon his face, to avoid pitching off into the depths. I felt

the spur above me shake beneath the shock of his impact, and as it shook I saw the huge rocking-stone, that had been violently depressed by him as he sprang, fly back when relieved of his weight till, for the first time during all these centuries, it swung beyond its balance, falling with a most awful crash right into the rocky chamber which had once served the philosopher Noot for a hermitage, and, I have no doubt, for ever sealing the passage that leads to the Place of Life with some hundreds of tons of rock.

All this happened in a second, and, curiously enough, notwithstanding my terrible plight, I noted it, involuntarily as it were. I even remember thinking that no human being would go down that dread path again.

Next instant I felt Leo seize me by the right wrist with both hands. By lying flat on the point of rock he could just reach me.

"You must let go and swing yourself free," he said in a calm and collected voice, "and then I will try and pull you up, or we will both fall together. Are you ready?"

By way of answer I loosed the rock, first with my left hand, and then with the right, and, as a consequence, swayed out clear of the overshadowing point, my weight hanging upon Leo's arms. It was a dreadful moment. He was a very powerful man, I knew, but would his strength be equal to lifting me up till I could get a hold on the top of the spur, when owing to his position he had so little purchase?

For a few seconds I swung to and fro, while he gathered himself for the effort, and then I heard his sinews cracking above me, and felt myself lifted up as though I were a little child, till I hooked my left arm round the rock, and my body was supported by it. The rest was easy; in two or



three more seconds I was up, and we lay panting side by side, trembling like leaves, with the cold perspiration of terror pouring from our skins.

Then, as before, the light went out like a lamp.

For some half-hour we rested thus without speaking a word, but at length we began to creep along the great spur as best we might in the dense gloom. As we drew towards the face of the cliff, from which the spur sprang out like a spike from a wall, the light increased, however, though only very little, for it was night overhead. After this the gusts of wind lessened, and we made better progress, and at last reached the mouth of the first cave or tunnel. But now a fresh trouble awaited us: our oil was gone, and the lamps, no doubt, were crushed to powder beneath the fallen rocking-stone. We were even without a drop of water to stay our thirst, for we had drunk the last in the chamber of Noot. How were we to see to make our way through this boulder-strewn cavern?

Clearly all that we could do was to trust to our sense of touch, and attempt the passage in the dark; so in we crept, fearing that if we delayed to do so our exhaustion would overcome us, and we should probably lie down and die where we were.

Oh, the horrors of that last tunnel! The place was strewn with rocks, and we fell over them and knocked ourselves up against them till we were bleeding from a score of wounds. Our only guide was the side of the cave, which we kept touching, and so bewildered did we grow in the darkness that thrice we were seized with the terrifying thought that we had turned, and were travelling the wrong way. On we went, feebly, and still more feebly, for hour after hour, stopping every few minutes to rest,

for our strength was spent. Once we fell asleep, and, I think, must have slept for some hours, for, when we woke, our limbs were quite stiff, and the blood from our blows and scratches had caked, and was hard and dry upon the skin. Then we dragged ourselves on again, till at last, when despair was entering into our hearts, we saw the light of day once more, and found ourselves outside the tunnel in the rocky fold or lane that, it will be remembered, led into it from the outer surface of the cliff.

It was early morning—that we could tell by the feel of the sweet air and the look of the blessed sky, which we had never hoped to see again. We entered the tunnel, so near as we knew, an hour after sunset, so it followed that it had taken us the entire night to crawl through this dreadful place.

"One more effort, Leo," I gasped, "and we shall reach the slope where Billali is, if he has not gone. Come, don't give way," for he had cast himself upon his face. He rose, and, leaning on each other, we scrambled down that fifty feet or so of cliff—I have not the least notion how. I only remember that we found ourselves lying in a heap at the bottom, and then once more began to crawl along upon our hands and knees towards the grove where *She* had told Billali to wait her return, for we could not walk another foot. We had not gone forty yards in this fashion when suddenly one of the mutes emerged from some trees on our left, through which, I presume, he had been taking a morning stroll, and ran to us to see what strange animals we were. He stared, and stared, then held up his hands in horror, and nearly fell to the ground. Next, he started as fast as he could go for the grove, which was some two hundred yards away. Small



wonder that he was horrified at our appearance, for we must have been a shocking sight. To begin with, Leo, his golden curls turned to a snowy white, his clothes nearly rent from his body, his worn face, and his hands a mass of bruises, cuts, and blood-encrusted filth, was a sufficiently alarming spectacle, as he painfully dragged himself along the ground, and I have no doubt that I was little better to look on. I know that two days afterwards, when I inspected my face in some water, I scarcely recognised myself. I have never been famous for beauty, but there was something besides ugliness stamped upon my features that I have not lost to this day, something resembling that wild look with which a startled person awakes from deep sleep. And really it is not to be wondered at. What I do wonder at is that we escaped at all with our reason.

Presently, to my intense relief, I saw old Billali hurrying towards us, and even then I could scarcely help smiling at the expression of consternation on his dignified countenance.

"Oh, my Baboon! my Baboon!" he cried, "my dear son, is it indeed thou and the Lion? Why, his mane that was as ripe corn is white like the snow. Whence come ye? and where is the Pig, and where, too, is *She-who-must-be-obeyed*?"

"Dead, both dead!" I answered; "but ask no questions; help us, and give us food and water, or we too shall die before thine eyes. Seest thou not that our tongues are black for want of water? How, then, can we talk?"

"Dead!" he gasped. "Impossible! *She* who never dies—dead, how can it be?" Then, perceiving, I think, that his face was being watched by the mutes who had hastened to us, he checked himself, and motioned to

\* Curiously enough, lately Leo's hair has to say, it is now a yellowish grey, and I am not without hopes that in time it will quite

them to carry us to the camp, which they did.

Fortunately when we arrived some broth was boiling on the fire, and with this Billali fed us—for we were too weak to feed ourselves—thereby, I firmly believe, saving us from death by exhaustion. Then he bade the mutes wash the blood and grime from us with wet cloths, and after that we were laid down upon piles of aromatic grass, and instantly fell into the dead sleep which follows absolute prostration of mind and body.

## XXVIII.

### OVER THE MOUNTAIN

THE next thing I recollect is a feeling of the most dreadful stiffness, and a curious, vague idea passing through my half-awakened brain that I was a carpet that had just been beaten. I opened my eyes, and the first object they fell on was the venerable countenance of our old friend Billali, who was seated by the side of the improvised bed upon which I was sleeping, and stroking his long beard thoughtfully. His presence at once brought back to my mind a memory of all that we had recently endured, which was accentuated by the vision of poor Leo lying opposite to me, his face black with bruises, and his beautiful curling hair turned from yellow to white.\* At that sight I shut my eyes again and groaned.

"Thou hast slept long, my Baboon," said old Billali.

"How long, my father?" I asked.

"A round of the sun and a round of the moon, a day and a night hast thou slept, and the Lion also. See, he sleepeth yet."

"Blessed is sleep," I answered, "for it swallows up recollection."

to some extent regained its colour—that is not without hopes that in time it will quite



"Tell me," he said, "what has befallen you, and what is this strange story of the death of Her who dieth not. Bethink thee, my son : if this be true, then is thy danger and the danger of the Lion very great—nay, almost is the pot red wherewith ye shall be potted, and the stomachs of those who shall eat you are already hungry for the feast. Knowest thou not that these Amahagger, my children, these dwellers in the caves, hate you? They hate you as strangers, and they hate you more because of their brethren whom *She* put to the torment for your sake. Assuredly, if once they learn that there is naught to fear from Hiya, from the terrible One-who-must-be-obeyed, they will slay you by the pot. But let me hear thy tale, my poor Baboon."

Thus adjured I began, and told him—not everything, indeed, as I did not think it desirable to do so, but sufficient for my purpose, which was to make him understand that *She* was in fact no more, having fallen into a volcanic fire, and—as I put it—been consumed therein; for the truth would have been incomprehensible to him. I also told him some of the horrors we had undergone in effecting our escape, which impressed him deeply. But I saw clearly that he did not believe in the report of Ayesha's death. He believed, indeed, that we thought that she was dead, but his explanation was that it had suited her to disappear for a while. Once, he said, in his father's time, she had vanished for twelve years, and there was a tradition in the country that many centuries back no one had seen her during a whole generation, when she re-appeared suddenly, and destroyed a woman who had assumed the position of Queen. I said nothing to this, but only shook my head sadly. Alas! I knew too well that Ayesha would return no more, or at any rate that Billali would never see her

again. Elsewhere we may find her, and, as I believe, shall find her, but not here.

"And now," concluded Billali, "what wouldst thou do, my Baboon?"

"Nay," I said, "I know not, my father. Can we not escape from this country?"

He shook his head.

"It is very difficult. By Kôr you cannot pass, for you would be seen, and so soon as those fierce ones found that you were alone—well," and he smiled significantly, lifting his hand as though he were placing a hat upon his head. "But there is that way over the cliff whereof once I spoke to thee, by which they drive the cattle out to pasture. Beyond these pastures are marshes, in width three days' journey, and after that I know not, but I have heard that seven days' march thence runs a mighty river, which flows down to the black water. If you could reach its banks, perchance you might escape, but how can you comethither?"

"Billali," I said, "once, thou knowest, I saved thy life. Now pay back the debt, my father, and save me mine and that of my son, the Lion. It shall be a pleasant thing for thee to think of when thine hour comes, and something to set in the scale against the evil doing of thy days, if perchance thou hast done any evil. Also, if thou art right, and if *She* does but hide herself, surely when she comes again she will reward thee."

"My son the Baboon," answered the old man, "think not that I have an ungrateful heart. Well do I remember how thou didst rescue me when those dogs stood by to see me drown. Measure for measure I will repay, and if thou canst be saved, surely I will save thee. Listen: by dawn to-morrow be prepared, for litters shall be here to bear you away across the mountains, and through the marshes beyond. This I will do, saying it is the word of *She* that



it be done; and he who obeyeth not the word of *She*, food is he for the hyenas. Then, when you have crossed the marshes, must you strike with your own hands, so that perchance, if good fortune go with you, you may live to come to that black water whereof you told me. And now, see, the Lion wakes, and you must eat the food I have made ready for you."

Leo's condition when once he was thoroughly aroused proved not to be so bad as might have been expected from his appearance, and we both of us made a good meal, which, indeed, we needed sadly. After this we limped down to the spring and bathed, and then came back and slept again till evening, when once more we ate heartily. Billali was absent all that day, no doubt making arrangements about litters and bearers, for we were awakened in the middle of the night by the arrival of a considerable number of men in the little camp.

At dawn the old man himself appeared, and told us that by using *She's* dreaded name, though with some difficulty, he had succeeded in impressing the necessary men, and with them two guides to conduct us across the swamps. Also he urged us to start at once, at the same time announcing his intention of accompanying us, to protect us against treachery. I was much touched by this act of kindness on the part of that wily old barbarian towards two utterly defenceless strangers. A journey through those deadly swamps which, allowing for his return, would occupy six days was no light undertaking for a man of his age, but he consented to it cheerfully in order to promote our safety. This proves that even among those dreadful Amahagger—who with their gloom and their devilish and ferocious rites are certainly by far the most terrible savages

that I ever heard of—there are people with kindly hearts. Of course self-interest may have had something to do with it. Billali may have thought that *She* would reappear suddenly and demand an account of us at his hands. Still, with all deductions, it was a great deal more than we could expect under the circumstances, and I can only say that for so long as I live I shall cherish a most affectionate remembrance of my nominal parent, Billali.

Accordingly, having breakfasted, we started in the litters, feeling, physically, almost recovered after our long rest and sleep. The condition of our minds I must leave to the imagination.

Then followed a terrible pull up the cliff. Sometimes the ascent was natural, more often it was a zigzag roadway, cut in the first instance, no doubt, by the old inhabitants of Kôr. The Amahagger say they drive their spare cattle over it once a year to pasture beyond; but if this is so, those cattle must be unusually active on their feet. Of course the litters were useless here, so we were obliged to walk.

By midday, however, we reached the great flat top of that mighty wall of rock, and grand indeed was the view from it, with the plain of Kôr, in the centre of which we could clearly discern the pillared ruins of the Temple of Truth, to the one side, and on the other the boundless and melancholy marsh. This wall of rock, which no doubt had once formed the lip of the crater, proved to be about a mile and a-half thick, and was still covered with clinker. Nothing grew upon it; but here and there, wherever there was a little hollow, the eye was relieved by the sight of occasional pools of water, for rain had lately fallen. We clambered over the flat crest of this mighty rampart, and then came our downward march, which, if not so



difficult a matter as the ascent, was still sufficiently break-neck, and took us till sunset to accomplish. That night, however, we camped in safety upon the wide slopes that rolled away to the marsh beneath.

On the following morning, about eleven o'clock, began our dreary journey across those awful seas of swamp which I have already described.

For three whole days, through stench and mire, and the all-prevailing flavour of fever, did our bearers struggle along, till at length, beyond that most desolate, and without guides utterly impracticable, district we came to open rolling ground, covered with game of all sorts, but quite uncultivated, and mostly treeless. And here on the following morning, not without some regret, we bade farewell to old Billali, who stroked his white beard and blessed us solemnly.

"Farewell, my son the Baboon," he said, "and farewell to thee too, O Lion. I can do no more to help you. But if ever you come to your country, be advised, and venture not again into lands that you know not, lest you never should return, but leave your white bones to mark the limit of your journeyings. Farewell once more; often shall I think of you; nor wilt thou forget me, my Baboon, for though thy face is ugly thy heart is true." Then he turned and went, and with him went the tall and sullen-looking bearers, and this was the last that we saw of the Amahagger. We watched them winding away with their empty litters like a procession bearing dead men from a battle, till the mists of the marsh gathered round them and hid them, and then, left utterly desolate in the vast wilderness, we turned and gazed around us and at each other.

Three weeks ago four men had entered the swamps of Kôr, and

now two of us were dead, and we who lived had suffered adventures and experiences so strange and terrible that Death himself hath not a more fearful countenance. Three weeks—and only three weeks! Truly time should be measured by events, and not by the lapse of hours. It seemed like thirty years since we were captured in our whale-boat.

"We must strike out for the Zambesi, Leo," I said, "but God knows if we shall ever get there."

Leo nodded; he had become very silent of late. So we started with nothing but the clothes we stood in, a compass, our revolvers and Express rifles, and about two hundred rounds of ammunition, and thus ended the history of our visit to the ancient ruins of mighty and imperial Kôr.

As for the accidents and dangers that subsequently befell us, strange and varied though they were, after deliberation I have determined not to record them here. In these pages I give only a short and clear account of an occurrence which I believe to be unprecedented, and this I do, not with a view to immediate publication, but merely to put on paper, while they are yet fresh in my memory, the details of our journey and its result, which will, I believe, prove interesting to the world if ever we decide to make them public. It is not, however, our present intention that this should be done during our joint lives.

For the rest, it is of no public interest, resembling as it does the experience of more than one Central African traveller. Suffice it to say that, after incredible hardships and privations, we did reach the Zambesi, which proved to be about a hundred and seventy miles south of the spot where Billali left us. There for six months we were imprisoned by a



savage tribe, who believed us to be supernatural beings, chiefly on account of Leo's youthful face and snow-white hair. From these people we escaped, and, crossing the Zambezi, wandered southwards, where, when on the point of starvation, we were sufficiently fortunate to fall in with a half-caste Portuguese hunter who had followed a troop of elephants farther inland than he had ever been before. This man treated us most hospitably, and, after innumerable sufferings and adventures, ultimately, through his assistance, we reached Delagoa Bay, more than eighteen months from the time when we emerged from the marshes of Kôr, and on the next day were so fortunate as to catch one of the steamboats that trade round the Cape to England. Our journey home was prosperous, and we set foot on the quay at Southampton exactly two years from the date of our departure upon our wild and seemingly ridiculous quest. Now I write these last words with Leo leaning over my shoulder in the old room in my college, the same into which some two-and-twenty years ago my poor friend Vincey stumbled on the memorable night of his death, bearing with him the iron chest.

Here ends this history so far as it concerns science and the outside world. What its end will be as regards Leo and myself is more than I

can guess. But we feel that is not reached yet. A story that began more than two thousand years ago may stretch a long way into the dim and distant future.

Is Leo really a reincarnation of that ancient Kallikrates of whom the inscription tells? Or was Ayesha deceived by some strange hereditary resemblance? And, another question: In this play of reincarnations, had Ustane ought to do with the Amenartas of long ago? The reader must form his own opinion on these as on many other matters. I have mine, which is that, as regards Leo, *She* made no mistake.

Often I sit alone at night, staring with the eyes of my mind into the blackness of unborn time, and wondering in what shape and form the great drama will be finally developed, and where the scene of its next act will be laid. And when, ultimately, that *final* development occurs, as I have no doubt it must and will occur, in obedience to a fate that never swerves and a purpose which cannot be altered, what will be the part played therein by that beautiful Egyptian Amenartas, the Princess of the royal race of the Pharaohs, for the love of whom the Priest Kallikrates broke his vows to Isis, and, pursued by the inexorable vengeance of the outraged Goddess, fled down the coast of Lybia to meet his doom at Kôr?

THE END.

### SHE.

To H. R. H.

Not in the waste beyond the swamps and sand,  
The fever-haunted forest and lagoon,  
Mysterious Kôr thy walls forsaken stand,  
Thy lonely towers beneath the lonely moon—  
Not there doth Ayesha linger, rune by rune—  
Spelling strange scriptures of a people banned.  
The world is disenchantèd; over soon  
Shall Europe send her spies through all the land.  
Nay, not in Kôr, but in whatever spot,  
In town, or field, or by the insatiate sea,  
Men brood on buried loves, and unforget,  
Or break themselves on some Divine decree,  
Or would o'erleap the limits of their lot—  
There, in the tombs and deathless, dwelleth SHE!

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