

CHAPTER XXV

IN UNDYING LONELINESS

ERE the dawn, guided by those old embalmers and bearing with me the dead Kallikrates, I departed from that hateful Kôr. As I think, none saw me go, for, forgetful of their promised vengeance, the priests and priestesses were gathered trembling about the corpse of Rames in the inmost court of the Temple of Truth, though it is true that I felt the baleful eyes of Amenartas watching me. Or perhaps it was her pursuing hate I felt, and not her eyes.

Veiled so that no man might look upon my deadly beauty, I crossed the plain and came to the vast cave-sepulchres. Here those old embalmers lit lamps and showed me a deep and empty tomb. It had two shelves or niches, on one of which I laid my dead, choosing the other to be my couch. Thus then I took up my abode in the Sepulchres of Kôr that for some two thousand years were to be my home.

At my command Philo led the royal Amenartas from the haunted land of Kôr, and returning three moons later, told me, truly or not, that she had passed the swamps and departed on a wandering ship, sailing north, whither he knew not. I asked him no more who did not desire to learn of her words and curses, though as it chanced this I must

do after long ages had gone by. Some of the priests and priestesses went with her. Others remained in Kôr and, if they were young enough, took wives or husbands and ruled there. Indeed, the last of their descendants whom I could trace before their blood was utterly swallowed up in that of the barbarians, died after five hundred years or more had passed away.

Philo, too, lived on at Kôr, making trading journeys to the coast and along it in his ship and grew rich and, after a fashion, great. For Philo would never leave me whom he loved, though no more would he look upon my unveiled face. At length, very old, he died in my arms, he who would have none of the Fire and its gifts. When his breath left him, for the first time since that night at Kôr, I wept. For now I was quite alone.

While he lay dying he prayed me to unveil, saying that now, when no harm could come of it, he would look upon my face once more. I did so and he studied me long and earnestly with his hollow eyes.

"You are wondrous beautiful," he said, "nor during these past forty years or more, since last I beheld you unveiled in the sanctuary of the Temple of Truth, has your loveliness lessened by one wit. Indeed, I think that it has gathered. What is the meaning of this, fair Daughter of Wisdom?"

"It means what I have told you before, Philo, that I do not die until the world dies, although I may change and seem to pass away."

"Yet I die. Do we then part for ever?" he asked.

"Nay, I think not, Philo, for at last Death overtakes everything and in its halls we may meet again. Moreover, the world lives long and to it, ere its

end, you may return once, or often, and if so, perchance you will be drawn to me."

"I trust so, O Wisdom's Daughter. They call you witch, and doubtless such you are, who can slay with a glance, whom age does not touch, and whom Death scorns. Yet, witch or woman, or both, there lives none, no, not even wife or child, whom I so desire to meet hereafter."

So Philo died, and since those medicine-men who had embalmed Kallikrates now were dead also, leaving behind them none who had knowledge of their art, I buried him unpreserved in the great sepulchres.

Awhile ago the fancy took me to go to look upon him, but alas! after the passing of some sixteen hundred years, save for the skull, his naked bones had crumbled into dust.

What more is there to tell? All died and came again in their children: generation after generation of them did I watch arise, flourish in their wild fashion, and go their ways down the path of Death. I ruled those barbarians, if rule it can be called. They were my slaves who feared me as a spirit, and I was kind to them, but if they angered me, then I slew them, for thus only could they be held in a due subjection even to one that they believed to be an ancient goddess whom their forefathers worshipped, Lulala by name, whose throne was in the moon.

For these Amahagger were a terrible people, barbarians who loved the night because their deeds were evil, and who, if strangers wandered among them, slew them by the setting of red-hot pots upon their heads, and afterward ate their flesh. Yet among them were some of a nobler sort, descended, as I think, either from the unmixed blood of the

ancients of old Kôr, or perchance from those priests and priestesses of Isis who had been my companions. Such a one was a certain Billali whom my lord Leo and Holly knew. But for the most part they were hook-nosed, treacherous, dark-haunting savages, and as such they must be handled.

In the course of those long ages, to divert myself in my loneliness and for the purposes of study, I reared certain of these savages up to this and that. I stunted them to dwarfs, I bred them to giants. Musicians of a kind I made of some of them, though to do so took ten of their generations. Then I grew weary of the game and all these variants died back into the common stock; that fundamental type to which, if left alone, every species that springs on earth returns in time, and this more quickly than might be thought. The last breed that I created, or caused to create itself, was one of mutes evolved from a faithful strain who had served me well, since I found these mutes more docile and less wearisome than the rest.

But enough of that people with which I have done for ever.

What did I do through all those awful ages? At first, as I found I had the power, I threw my watching eyes across the world, and learned all that happened there. Thus I saw the battles of Alexander, his conquests and his death, and the rise of the Ptolemies in Egypt; also many other things in the countries with which I have had to do. But soon I tired of it all.

Men arose of whom I knew nothing. Peoples changed, and ever the play repeated itself afresh, though with new actors. I had naught in common with them and their petty aims and passions, I who watched as a god might watch those that served him

not, or as an idle child watches the labours of colony after colony of ants. Yea, I tired of them and took no more heed of what they did or did not do upon their short journey to that forgetfulness wherewith the dust of Time would bury them. I was dead to the world, and the world was dead to me.

In the ages that followed I sent out my soul to seek kindred souls and found some with whom I communed, though they never knew who it was that talked to them. With wise men throughout the earth I held this converse, and from them gathered knowledge, giving them in return something of my wisdom, which doubtless they presented to the generations as their own. If so, the world was the gainer, and if Truth comes, what matters it whence it comes?

I did more. I sought out the dead in their habitations beyond the stars, aye, and found not a few of them. Always they were eager to learn of the world and in return paid me with the coin of their unearthly lore. They told me of those other worlds and I made acquaintance with their princes and their rulers: I gathered up the broken fragments from the feasts that were spread upon these alien tables and drank of the dregs of their new wine. But, and here was the mystery, here was the grief: never once could I grasp the robe of any whom I had known upon the earth. I found not my father, I found not Noot, I found not Kallikrates, I found not Philo, I found not Beltis or Amenartas. In all that countless multitude I discovered no single soul to whom my mortal lips had spoken in its little day. Of friend or foe I found not one. Perchance all of them were still asleep and resting in their sleep.

I looked into the secrets of Nature and they opened themselves to me like flowers beneath the sun. I inhaled their perfume, I admired their beauty, so that at length little was hid from me. I learned how to turn clay to gold and how to harness the lightning to my service, aye, and many another thing. Yet what was the use of all of it to me, the dweller in a tomb?

Knowledge, the lord, is a barren grant unless it can also be a servant; aye, a slave at command to work good for man.

For the rest, what did I do? Without the caves I sowed the seed of trees. I watched them spring, I watched them grow to saplings and, in the slow progression of the centuries, swell to great timbers with far-stretching arms beneath whose shade I rested. Thus they stood for many a hundred years. Then for many another hundred they decayed, grew hollow, rotted to dust and fell, their long day done at last. And I, I sowed me others.

To mark the passage of those years lest I should lose count of them, in a certain cavern I laid me stones, a stone for every one as from the hand of Time it fell ripe into the bosom of Eternity. As on their rosaries, here and there, priests set larger beads to mark the tale of their completed prayers, so when ten years had gone I set a larger stone, and when a hundred had passed by, one larger yet and white in colour, while the thousandth year I marked with a little pyramid, two of which now stand in the Caves of Kôr. It was a good plan whereby I could reckon easily, only some of the softer stones that lay near to the mouth of that cavern where sun and rain could reach them at length crumbled into sand.

“Why did I stay at Kôr? Why did I not wander

forth through the world? Because I *could not*, because of the curse that had been laid upon me, that here I must wait until Kallikrates came again, as come I knew he would. Therefore no captive 'ever was more chained and fettered in his dungeon than I, Ayesha, by that compelling curse in the Sepulchres of Kôr, where night by night I laid me down to rest in the cold company of the dead. From time to time, once in a generation mayhap, I would lift the cloths that covered him and look upon his pale beauty (for those old embalmers did not lie), and kiss his brow of ice and weep and weep. Then once more I laid the shroud, or a new shroud, upon him and went my weary way.

Oh! it is terrible in this world where all is change, where even the stones grow and die to re-form again, to be the one thing that changeth not for ever. Yet, that was my lot, such was the gift of the Fire-lord whom I had wedded and embraced. There I sat in my eternal beauty which I was doomed to hide, lest brute men should be maddened at the sight of it, so that I must slay them with the lightning of my will. There I brooded, gathering to my breast all that wisdom of Mother Nature of whom now I was a part, all the useless wisdom whose weight at length clogged my sense and cramped my soul. There I sat, eaten of desire for one dead and burning with jealous hate of that woman who had borne his child and who, as I knew well, wandered with him, greater than I perhaps and still more fair, in some Elysium that even my spirit could not reach, taking the place that I might fill, if only I could attain to the boon of death which is everlastingly denied to me, until the old world itself shall die. There, I say, I sat while the slow fire of the torturer Time, burning in my breast, ate

its path through all my being, till the hot soul within me turned to the bitter ash of hopelessness.

Oh! why did he not come? Why did he not come? Surely the circle must be complete and the time fulfilled. Surely he must weary of those unknown heavenly fields and of the coarse love of Egypt's Lady. Surely he would come and soon. Only then, what if here, as there, she still companioned him?

At length one came, and when I learned of it my heart flamed up with hope as a torch flames in these dark caves. Alas! it was not he. So soon as my eyes fell on him afar, I knew it, yonder in the temple of Kôr whither I had gone upon the matters of some petty savage trouble, such as had arisen thrice since the days of Philo. I saw and grew sick with hope destroyed, so sick that had he but known it, this little, wizened wanderer at that moment stood near to the world's edge. Yet afterward I came to like him well, perchance because he reminded me so much of Philo that once or twice almost I thought—— But let this matter be.

He was a strange man, that wanderer; very shrewd, but one who believed nothing which he could not see or touch or handle. Thus when I told him tales concerning myself and my length of days and why I sat at Kôr in beauty, yet like one who is dead in a desert, openly he mocked at them, which angered me. Not all of these were true, be it admitted, because, being a part of Nature as I am, how can I always speak the truth?

Nature shows many faces to those who court her; Nature has desert-phantasies wherewith the traveller is oft deceived, thinking he sees that which he does not see, though in some shape or form of a surety it exists elsewhere. Nature also keeps her

secrets close and ever instructs in parables that yet hold the seed of perfect verity.

So, being a part of Nature's self, did I with that wanderer, as indeed I do to this day with Holly the learned, who followed after him. Yet here the example has its flaw, for this man who was called *Watcher-in-the-Night*, a name that fitted him well enough, did not court me, as her watchers court Nature the beautiful. Nay, he turned his back upon me saying he was not one who loved, moth-like, to singe his wings in a flame, however bright; I think because often he had singed them already.

Still, I found this so strange that almost I began to wonder whether once more my beauty was on the wane and whether it needed longer to be hidden beneath a veil, or whether perchance men had grown wiser than they used to be. Therefore, once for a little moment I put out my strength and brought him to his knees and having taught him certain lessons, I laughed at him and let him go. Yet be it said that I held and hold him dear, and look onward to the day when we shall meet again, as perchance we had met in those that are long past. So enough of this brave and honest man, gently born also, and instructed in his fashion. Doubtless he died many years ago.

I tire of this long, sad task; let the end of my tale be short.

At last, at last, came Kallikrates reborn, lacking memories, changed in spirit, and yet in face and form the very same. Holly brought him hither, or he brought Holly, because of an ancient, lying screed that Amenartas wrote upon a sherd, which from age to age had passed down in his race, urging some descendant of her blood to find me out and slay me,

for this Egyptian fool thought that I could be slain.

He came, and by Heaven! I knew not that he was here until the crabbed Holly led me to the couch whereon he lay fever-stricken and at the very point of death. By my arts I dragged him back from between those doors of doom, that almost once again had closed behind him, and afterward, revealing to him my beauty and my burning love, caused him to worship me. Yet, mark! He came not alone; as I feared would chance, something of Amenartas prisoned in a savage woman's breast came with him, and already he was her lover.

I slew that woman who was obstinate and would not leave him; though the deed grieved me, I slew her because I must. It mattered little, for soon she was forgot, and I held him fast.

Of the rest little need be said, for Holly knows it all and tells me that he has written it in a book. Because I might not wed with mortal man I led Kallikrates, he who now was known as Leo, down the perilous ways to that hid cavern where ever the bright Spirit of Life, clad in flame and thunder, marches on his endless round. Behold! as it had been over two thousand years before, so it was now. Again Kallikrates feared to enter the flames and, putting on majesty, to become undying king of all the world. Aye, even though the prize of my glory lay to his hand, his flesh shrank from the Fire.

Therefore that he might learn courage, once more I gave myself to the embrace of the god, and lo! this time he slew me. Yes, in utter shame and hideousness before my lover's eyes, there I died, or rather seemed to die; an ancient, shrivelled, ape-like thing. Yet dying, my unconquerable spirit gave me strength to mütter in his ear that I should come again and once more be beautiful.

Nay, I did not die. Far away again I became incarnate in this distant Asian land, which after all is my own, since in a part of it first I saw the light. Here in this cavern-monastery where still lingers some shadow of the worship of the moon and of the great Principle that in the old days was named Isis, Queen of Heaven, once more I was clothed with mortal flesh.

The years went by, but two or three of them, and I found the power to search out Kallikrates, or Leo Vincey, still living on the earth, and in a vision showed him the mountains that I inhabit. He was faithful. Yes, like Holly he was faithful, and together they followed that vision. For twice ten years they searched, and then at last they found me. They passed the perils and the tests; Kallikrates, or Leo Vincey, escaped the web spun by the Queen Atene, she in whom Amenartas once more shows herself upon the earth. They endured the appointed trials. Aye, when I unveiled before him on the mountain peak, my Love, my eternal Love, my doom and my desire, found strength and faith to kiss my hideous, withered brow. Then was that faith rewarded. Then before his very eyes I changed into the flower of all beauty, into the glory of all power, and he worshipped, worshipped, worshipped!

Now soon we shall be wed. Now soon the curse shall fall from us, like to a severed chain. Now soon my sin will be forgiven, and side by side we shall tread the endless path of splendour, no longer two but one, that path which leads through perfect joy—oh! whither does it lead? Even to-day I know not.

But this cannot be yet awhile. First he must

bathe him in the Fire, since mortal man may not mix with my immortality and live as man. For while this world endures—have I not said it?—I who have drunk of the very Cup of its Spirit, aye, twice drunk deep, must also endure, and I think the world is still far away from the gates of Death. Aye, though I change a thousand times, still I shall be the same in other shapes, and though I seem to vanish, yet I must appear again.

Where I go, also, thither Kallikrates must follow me, or I must follow him, since he and I are one, and on me is laid the burden of the uplifting of the soul of him whose body once I slew.

And yet, and yet—oh! he is still human and death dogs the heels of man. As I write a horror seizes me. Aye, my hand trembles on the scroll and my spirit quakes. What if some chance, some sickness, some fate should strike him down, leaving me once more desolate and divorced, so that elsewhere all this dark tragedy must be played afresh?

Away with that hell-born thought! There are no gods and, Fate, I defy thee who am myself a Fate and thine equal. I will conquer thee, O Fate; thou shalt not conquer me. There is naught but that eternal Good whereof the fiery tongue which was the soul of Noot spoke, or seemed to speak, to me in my haunted sleep at Kôr, and to that Good I, Ayesha, make my prayer.

Lo! I have suffered. Lo! I have paid the count to its last coin. Lo! I have endured. Through the long ages I have sown in tears, and my hour of harvest is at hand; aye, the night of sorrow dies, and already on the peak of heavenly Peace shines the dawn of joy. . . . My lord hunts upon the mountain after the fashion of men, and I brood within the caves after the fashion of women. . . .

“ . . . Holly, Holly! Awake! Look yonder! What is this? I seem to see my lord struggling on the snow and the spotted beast has him by the throat— . . . ”

Here ends Ayesha's manuscript. Its last words are almost illegible and are written by one whose agitation was evidently great; indeed their appearance suggests that they were set down in some half-automatic fashion while the writer's mind was occupied with other matters. With them Ayesha ends her tale of which in outline the rest is to be found elsewhere—in the book that is named after her. Suddenly she appears to have tired of her task. Perhaps, heralded and induced by the incident of the snow-leopard that went near to ending the life of Leo Vincey, the presage of terrible woes to come, to which she alludes and not obscurely, paralyzed Ayesha's mind or filled it with forebodings that rendered her incapable of further effort of the kind, or at least unwilling to endure its labour, of which, it is clear, already she was wearying.

EDITOR.

THE END