

## CHAPTER IV

### THE KISS OF FATE

THERE came a man to Philæ. Watching from a pylon top whither I had gone to pray alone, I saw him land upon the island and from far off noted that he was a godlike man, clad in armour such as the Grecians used, over which was thrown a common cloak, hooded as though to disguise him; one who had the air of a warrior. At a distance from the temple gate he halted and looked upward as though something drew his glance to me standing high above him upon the pylon top. I could not see his face because of the shadow thrown by the great walls behind which the sun was sinking, but doubtless he could see me well enough, whose shape was outlined against the veil of golden light that must have touched me with its glory, though, as that light was behind me, my face also would be hidden from him. At least he stood a little while as though amazed, staring upward steadily, then bowed his head and passed into the temple, followed by men bearing burdens.

Some pilgrim to the shrine, I thought to myself, then turned my mind to other matters, remembering that with men I had no more to do. Thus for the first time here in the body, all unknowing, I looked upon Kallikrates and he looked on me, but often afterward I have thought that there was a veiled lesson or a parable in the fashion of this meeting.

For did I not stand far above him, clothed in the



glory of heaven's gold, and did he not stand far beneath in the gloom of the shadows that lay upon the lowly earth, so that between us there was space unclimbable? And has it not been ever thus throughout the centuries, for am I not still upon the pylon top clad in the splendour of the spirit, and is he not still far beneath me wrapped with the shadows of the flesh? And since as yet the secret of the pylon stair is hidden from him, must I not descend to earth if we would meet, leaving the light and my pride of place that I may walk humbly with him in the shadow? And is it not often so between those that love, that one is set far above the other, though still this rope of love draws them together, uplifting the one, or dragging down the other?

The man passed into the temple and that night I heard he was a Grecian captain of high blood, one who though young had seen much service in the wars and done great deeds, Kallikrates by name, who had come to seek the counsel of the goddess, bringing precious gifts of gold and Eastern silks, the spoil of battles in which he had fought.

I asked why such an one sought the wisdom of Isis, and was told that it was because his heart was troubled. It seemed that he had been dwelling at Pharaoh's court as a captain of the Grecian guard, and that there he had quarrelled with and slain one who was as a brother to him, if indeed he were not his very brother. This ill deed, it was said, preyed upon his soul and drove him into the arms of Mother Isis, seeking for pardon and that comfort which he could not find at the hand of any of the gods of the Greeks.

Again I asked idly enough why this Kallikrates had killed his familiar friend or his brother, which-



ever it might be. The answer was—because of some highly placed maiden whom both of them loved, so that they fought from jealousy, after the fashion of men. For this reason the life of Kallikrates was held to be forfeit according to the stern military law of the Grecian soldiers, and he must fly. Also the deed had tarnished that great lady's name; also his heart was broken with remorse and hither he came to pray Isis to mend it of her mercy, he who had forsaken the world.

The tale moved me a little, but again I cast it from my mind, for are not such things common among men? Always the story is the same: two men and a woman, or two women and a man, and bloodshed and remorse and memories which will not die and the cry for pardon that is so hard to find.

Yes, I cast it from my mind, saying lightly—oh! those evil-omened words—that doubtless his own blood in a day to come would pay for that which he had spilt.

For a while, some months indeed, this Grecian Kallikrates vanished from my sight and even from my thoughts, save when, from time to time, I heard of him as studying the Mysteries among the priests, having, it was said, determined to renounce the world and be sworn to the service of the goddess. Noot told me that he was very earnest in this design and made great progress in the faith, which pleased the priests who desired above all things to convert those that served Grecian gods with whom the deities of Egypt, and above all Isis, were at war. Therefore they hastened his preparation so that as soon as might be he should be bound to the Heavenly Queen by bonds that could not be loosed.

At length his fasts and instruction were com-



pleted; his trials had been passed and the hour came when he must make his last confession to the goddess and swear the awful oaths to her very self.

Now since Isis did not descend to earth to stand face to face with every neophyte, it was needful in this great ceremony that one filled with her spirit should take her place and as may be guessed, that one was I, Ayesha the Arab. To speak truth, in all Egypt, because of my beauty, my learning, and the grace that was given to me, there was none so fitting to wear her mantle as myself. Indeed afterward this was acknowledged when, with a single voice, the Colleges of her servants throughout the land, men and women together, promoted me to be her high-priestess, and gave me, who aforetime among them was known by the title of Wisdom's Daughter, the new name of *Isis-come-to-earth*, or in shorter words, *The Isis*. For my own name of Ayesha I kept hid lest it should be discovered that I was that chieftainess, the child of Yarab, who had defeated the army of Nectanebes.

Therefore at a certain hour of the night, draped in the holy robes, wearing on my brow the vulture cap and the bent symbol of the moon, holding in my hand the *sistrum* and the cross of Life, I was conducted to the pillared sanctuary and seated alone upon the throne of blackest marble, with the round symbol of the world for my footstool.

Thus, having learned my part and the ancient hallowed words that I must say, I sat awhile wondering in my heart whether Isis herself could be more glorious or more fair. So indeed did the priests and priestesses who saw me thus arrayed and bent the knee to me as though I were the very goddess, which in truth many of the humbler among them half believed.



Thus I sat in the moonlight that flowed from the unroofed hall beyond, while the carven gods watched me with their quiet eyes.

At length I heard the sound of footsteps whereon there came a priestess and flung over me the white veil of innocence sewn with golden stars that until the appointed moment must hide Isis from her worshipper. The priestess withdrew and, wrapped in the dark, hooded robe that signified the stained flesh about to be cast away, which hid all of him so that his face could not be seen, came that tall neophyte led by two priests who held his right hand and his left. I noted those hands because they were so white against the blackness of the robe, and even by the moonlight saw that they were beautiful, long and thin and shapely, though the palm of one, the right, was somewhat broadened as though by long handling of the tools of war.

The priests led him to the entrance of the shrine and in hushed whispers bade him kneel upon a footstool and make his sacrifice and confession to the goddess as he had been taught to do. Then they departed leaving us alone.

There followed silence which at length I broke, whispering,

"Who is this that comes to visit the Mother in her earthly shrine and what is his prayer to the Queen of Heaven and Earth?"

Though I spoke so gently and so low, perhaps because of their very sweetness, my words seemed to frighten him, or perhaps he believed that he stood in the very presence of the goddess; at least he answered in a voice that trembled,

"O holy Queen adored, in the world I was named Kallikrates the comely. But the priests, O Queen, have given me a new name, and it is, *Lover-of-Isis.*"



"And what have you to say to Isis, O Lover-of-Isis?"

"O Queen eternal, I have to tell my sins and ask her pardon for them, I who have passed the Trials and am accepted by her servants. If it is granted, then to her I must make the oath, binding myself eternally to love and serve her, her and no other in heaven or on earth."

"Set out those sins, O Lover-of-Isis, that my Majesty may judge of them, whether they can be forgiven or are beyond forgiveness," I answered in the words of the appointed ritual.

Then he began and told a tale that made me redden behind my veil, for all of it had to do with women, and never before had I learned what wantons those Greeks could be. Also he told of men whom he had slain in war, one of them in the battle against my tribe, in which strangely enough it seemed he had fought as a lad, for this man was a great warrior. Of these killings, however, I took no account, because they had been of those who were the enemies of himself or of his cause.

In stern silence I listened, noting that save for these matters of light love and fightings, the man seemed innocent enough, for in his story there was naught of baseness or of betrayal. Moreover, it seemed that he was one in whom the spirit had striven against the flesh, and who, however much his feet were tangled in the poisonous snares of earth, from time to time had set his eyes on Heaven.

At length he paused and I asked of him,

"Is the black count finished? Tell now the truth and dare to hold nothing back from the goddess who notes all."

"Nay, O Queen," he answered, "the worst is yet



to come. I came to Egypt as a captain of the Grecian guard that watches the House of Pharaoh at Sais. With me came another man, my half-brother, for our father was the same, with whom I was brought up and loved as never I loved any other man, and who loved me. He was a glorious warrior, though some held that I was more handsome in my person, Tisisthenes by name, that in my Grecian tongue in which I speak means the Avenger. Thus was he called because my father, whose first-born he was, desired that he might grow up to work vengeance upon the Persians who slew his father named like myself, Kallikrates, the most beautiful Spartan that was ever born. Foully they slew him before the battle of Platæa, whilst he was aiding the great Pausanius to make sacrifice to the gods. This Tisisthenes my brother I killed with my own hand."

"For what cause did you kill him?"

"There was a royal maiden at that court, one fairer than any woman has been, is, or will be—ask not her name, O Mother, though doubtless it is known to you already. This lady both of us saw at the same time and by the decree of Aphrodite both of us loved. As it chanced it was I who won her favour, not my brother. We were spied upon; the tale was told; trouble fell upon that royal maiden who, when she should be old enough, was sworn in marriage to a distant king. To save her name she made denial, as she must do. She swore there was naught between her and me, and to prove it turned her face from me and toward my brother. I came upon them together in a garden. She had plucked a flower which she gave to him and he kissed the hand that held the flower. She saw me and fled away. I, maddened with jealousy, smote my



beloved brother in the face and forced him to fight with me. We fought. He guarded himself but ill, as though he cared nothing of the end of that fray. I cut him down. He lay before me dying, but ere he died, he spoke :

“ ‘This is a very evil business,’ he said. ‘Know, Kallikrates, my most beloved brother, that what you saw in the garden between that royal maid and myself was but a plot to save you both, since thereby I purposed to take on to my own head the weight of your transgression against the law of this land, because she prayed it and it was my wish. This I have done, and for this reason I suffered you to slay me, though during that fight twice I could have pierced you, because you were blinded with rage and forgot your swordsmanship. Now it will be said that you found me pursuing this royal maiden and rightly slew me according to your duty and that it was I who loved her and not you, as has been commonly reported. Yet in truth I love her well and am glad to die because it was to you that her heart turned and not to me; also because thereby I save both her and you. Yet, Kallikrates, my brother, the gods give me wisdom and foresight in this the hour of my death, and I say that you will do well to have done with this lady and all women, and to seek rest in the bosom of the gods, since, if you do not, great trouble will come upon you, and through this same curse of jealousy such a death as mine shall be yours also. Now let us who are the victims of Fate kiss each other on the brow as we used to do when we were children, playing together in the happy fields of Greece, from whom death was yet a long way off, forgiving each other all and hoping that we may meet once more in the region of the Shades.’



"So we embraced, and my brother Tisisthenes gave up his spirit in my arms and looking on him I wished that I were dead in his place. Then as I turned to go the soldiers of our company found me and seeing that I had slain my brother, would have brought me to trial, not because we had fought together, but because he was my superior in rank and therefore I who, being under his command, drew sword on him, by the law of the Greeks, must die. Yet before I could be put upon my trial, some of those who loved me and guessed the truth of the business thrust me out of our camp disguised, with all the treasure that I had won in war, bidding me hide myself awhile till the matter was forgotten. O Queen, I did not desire to go; nay, I desired to stay and to pay the price of my sin. But they would not have it so. I think indeed that there were others behind, great ones of Egypt, moving in this matter; at least I was thrust forth, all being made easy for me, and all eyes growing blind."

Again he paused, and I, Ayesha, clothed as the goddess, asked,

"And what did you then, you who could slay your brother for the sake of woman?"

"Then, Divine One, I fled up Nile where, because of the trouble that was in the land, Pharaoh's arm could not reach me, nor the arm of the commander of the Greeks. Tarrying not and without speech with that high maiden who was the cause of my sin, I fled up Nile."

"Why did you fly up Nile and not back to your own people, O most sinful man?"

"Because my heart is broken, Queen, and I desired to seek the mercy of Isis whose law I had learned already and to become her priest. I knew that those who bow themselves to her may look no



more on woman, but thenceforth must live virgin to the death, and it was my will to look no more on woman, since woman had stained my hands with a brother's blood, and therefore I hated her."

Now I, Ayesha, asked,

"What gods did you worship before your heart was turned to Isis, Queen of Heaven?"

"I worshipped the gods of Greece and first among them Aphrodite, Lady of Love."

"Who has paid you well for your service, making of you a murderer of one of your own blood who, before she blinded your eyes, was more to you than any on the earth. Do you then renounce this wanton Aphrodite?"

"Aye, Queen, I renounce her for ever. Never more will I offer at her altars or look on woman in the way of love. If I may have pardon for my sins, here and now I vow myself to Isis as her faithful priest and servant. Here and now I blot the name of Aphrodite from my heart; yea, I reject her gifts and tread down all her memories beneath my aspiring feet that at last shall bear my soul to peace."

Thus the man spoke in a quivering and earnest voice, and was silent. Yes, deep silence reigned in that holy place, whilst I, Ayesha, although it is true that as a woman I misdoubted me of such rash oaths, as the minister of the goddess, prepared myself to grant pardon to this seeker in the hallowed, immemorial words, and to open to his troubled heart the doors of purity and rest eternal.

Then suddenly in that silence clearly I heard the sound of silvern laughter, soft, sweet laughter that seemed to come from the skies above and though it was so low to fill the shrine and all the hall beyond. I looked about me but could see naught. It would



seem, too, that the Greek heard also, for he turned his head and looked behind him, then once more let it fall upon his hands.

Whence came that sound? Could it be that she of Paphos——? Nay, it was impossible, and not thus would I be turned from my office, I who was clothed with the robe and for that hour wielded the might of Isis.

“Hearken, O man, in the world named Kallikrates,” I said. “On behalf of Isis, the All-Mother, goddess of virtue and of wisdom, speaking with her voice, hearing with her ears, and filled with her soul, I wash you clean of all your sins and accept you as her priest, promising to you light burdens on the earth and beyond the earth great rewards for ever. First swear the oath that may not be broken, and then draw near that I may kiss you on the brow, accepting you as the slave and lover of Isis, from this day until the moon, her heavenly throne, shall crumble into nothingness.”

Having spoken thus, letting the words fall one by one, slowly as the tears of the penitent fell upon the ground, I uttered the oath, the form of which even now I must not write.

It was a dreadful oath covering all things, and binding him who took it to Isis alone, an oath that if it were forgot wrought upon the traitor the age-long doom of death in this world and woe in the worlds to come, till by slow steps, with pierced heart and bleeding feet, the holy height from which he had fallen should be climbed again.

At length it was finished and he said faintly,

“I swear! With fear and trembling still I swear!”

Then I beckoned to him with the *sistrum* of which the little shaken bells made a faint compelling music that already he had learned to follow, and



he came and kneeled before me. There I laid the Cross of Life upon his head and gave him blessing, laid it upon his lips and gave him wisdom, laid it upon his heart and gave him existence for thousands upon thousands of years. All these things I did in the name and with the strength of Isis the Mother.

Came the last rite, the greeting of the Mother to her child new-born in spirit, the rite of the Kiss of welcome. At that moment supreme a light fell on me from above: perchance it came from Heaven, perchance it was an art of the watching priests; I do not know. At least it fell upon me illumining my glittering robes and jewelled head-dress with a soft splendour in the darkness of that shrine. At that moment, too, at a touch my veil fell down, so that the moonlight struck full upon my face making it mystical and lovely in the frame of my flowing hair.

The priest new-ordained lifted his bent head that I might consecrate his brow with the Kiss of welcome, and his hood fell back. The moonlight shone on his face also, his beautiful face like to that of a sculptured Grecian god, shapely, fine-featured, large-eyed, and crowned with little golden curls—for as yet he was unshorn; yes, a face more beautiful than that which I had seen on any man, set above a warrior's tall and sinewy form.

By Isis! I knew this face; it was that which had haunted me from childhood, that which often I had seen in a dream of halls beyond the earth, that of a man who in this dream had been sworn to me to complete my womanhood. Oh! I could not doubt, it was the same, the very same, and looking on it, the curse of Aphrodite fell upon me and for the first time I knew the madness of our mortal flesh. Yea, my being was rent and shattered like a cedar



beneath the lightning stroke; I was smitten through and through. I, the priestess of Isis, proud and pure, was as lost as any village maid within her lover's arms.

The man, too! He saw me and his aspect changed; the holy fervour went out of his eyes and into them entered something more human, something more fateful. It was as though he, too, remembered—I know not what.

With a mighty effort of the will, aware that the eyes of the goddess and perchance of her priests also were upon me, I conquered myself and with beating heart and heaving breast bent down to touch his brow with the Kiss of ceremony. Yet, I know not how—I know not if the fault were his or mine or perchance of both of us—it was his *lips* I touched, not his brow, just touched them and no more.

It was nothing, or at any rate but a little thing, in one instant come and gone, and yet to me it was all. For in that touch I broke my holy vows, and he, new-sworn to the worship of the goddess, broke his, yes, in the very act of sacrifice. What drove us to it? I do not know, but once again I thought I heard that low, triumphant laughter, and it came into my mind that we were the sport of an indomitable power greater than ourselves and all the oaths that mortals swear to gods or men.

I waved my sceptre. The new-made priest arose, bowed and withdrew, I wondering of whom he was the priest—of Isis or of Aphrodite. The singing of a distant choir broke out upon the silence, the hierophants came and led him away to be of their company till his death: the ceremony was ended. My attendants, arrayed as the goddesses Hathor and Nut, conducted me from the shrine. I was unrobed



of my sacred panoplies and once more from a goddess became a woman, and as a woman I sought my couch and wept and wept.

For had I not at the first temptation in my heart broken the law and betrayed the trust of her who, as then I believed, is and was and shall be; her whose veil no mortal man had lifted, the Mother of the sun and all its stars?

