

## CHAPTER XIII

### BENEATH THE SHADOWING WINGS

One by one the terrified tribesmen crept away. When the last of them were gone the priest advanced to Leo and saluted him by placing his hand upon his forehead.

"Lord," he said, in the same corrupt Grecian dialect which was used by the courtiers of Kaloon, "I will not ask if you are hurt, since from the moment that you entered the sacred river and set foot within this land you and your companion were protected by a power invisible and could not be harmed by man or spirit, however great may have seemed your danger. Yet vile hands have been laid upon you, and this is the command of the Mother whom I serve, that, if you desire it, every one of those men who touched you shall die before your eyes. Say, is that your will?"

"Nay," answered Leo; "they were mad and blind, let no blood be shed for us. All we ask of you, friend--but, how are you called?"

"Name me Oros," he answered.

"Friend Oros--a good title for one who dwells upon the Mountain--all we ask is food and shelter, and to be led swiftly into the presence of her whom you name Mother, that Oracle whose wisdom we have travelled far to seek."

He bowed and answered: "The food and shelter are prepared and to-morrow, when you have rested, I am commanded to conduct you whither you desire to be. Follow me, I pray you"; and he preceded us past the fiery pit to a building that stood about fifty yards away against the rock wall of the amphitheatre.

It would seem that it was a guest-house, or at least had been made ready to serve that purpose, as in it lamps were lit and a fire burned, for here the air was cold. The house was divided into two rooms, the second of them a sleeping place, to which he led us through the first.

"Enter," he said, "for you will need to cleanse yourselves, and you"--here he addressed himself to me--"to be treated for that hurt to your arm which you had from the jaws of the great hound."

"How know you that?" I asked.

"It matters not if I do know and have made ready," Oros answered gravely.

This second room was lighted and warmed like the first, moreover, heated water stood in basins of metal and on the beds were laid clean linen garments and dark-coloured hooded robes, lined with rich fur. Also upon a little table were ointments, bandages, and splints, a marvellous thing to see, for it told me that the very nature of my hurt had been divined.

But I asked no more questions; I was too weary; moreover, I knew that it would be useless.

Now the priest Oros helped me to remove my tattered robe, and, undoing the rough bandages upon my arm, washed it gently with warm water, in which he mixed some spirit, and examined it with the skill of a trained doctor.

"The fangs rent deep," he said, "and the small bone is broken, but you will take no harm, save for the scars which must remain." Then, having treated the wounds with ointment, he wrapped the limb with such a delicate touch that it scarcely pained me, saying that by the morrow the swelling would have gone down and he would set the bone. This indeed happened.

After it was done he helped me to wash and to clothe myself in the clean garments, and put a sling about my neck to serve as a rest for my arm. Meanwhile Leo had also dressed himself, so that we left the chamber together very different men to the foul, blood-stained wanderers who had entered there. In the outer room we found food prepared for us, of which we ate with a thankful heart and without speaking. Then, blind with weariness, we returned to the other chamber and, having removed our outer garments, flung ourselves upon the beds and were soon plunged in sleep.

At some time in the night I awoke suddenly, at what hour I do not know,

as certain people wake, I among them, when their room is entered, even without the slightest noise. Before I opened my eyes I felt that some one was with us in the place. Nor was I mistaken. A little lamp still burned in the chamber, a mere wick floating in oil, and by its light I saw a dim, ghost-like form standing near the door. Indeed I thought almost that it was a ghost, till presently I remembered, and knew it for our corpse-like guide, who appeared to be looking intently at the bed on which Leo lay, or so I thought, for the head was bent in that direction.

At first she was quite still, then she moaned aloud, a low and terrible moan, which seemed to well from the very heart.

So the thing was not dumb, as I had believed. Evidently it could suffer, and express its suffering in a human fashion. Look! it was wringing its padded hands as in an excess of woe. Now it would seem that Leo began to feel its influence also, for he stirred and spoke in his sleep, so low at first that I could only distinguish the tongue he used, which was Arabic. Presently I caught a few words.

"Ayesha," he said, "Ayesha!"

The figure glided towards him and stopped. He sat up in the bed still fast asleep, for his eyes were shut. He stretched out his arms, as though seeking one whom he would embrace, and spoke again in a low and passionate voice--"Ayesha, through life and death I have sought thee long. Come to me, my goddess, my desired."

The figure glided yet nearer, and I could see that it was trembling, and now its arms were extended also.

At the bedside she halted, and Leo laid himself down again. Now the coverings had fallen back, exposing his breast, where lay the leather satchel he always wore, that which contained the lock of Ayesha's hair. He was fast asleep, and the figure seemed to fix its eyes upon this satchel. Presently it did more, for, with surprising deftness those white-wrapped fingers opened its clasp, yes, and drew out the long tress of shining hair. Long and earnestly she gazed at it, then gently replaced the relic, closed the satchel and for a little while seemed to weep. While she stood thus the dreaming Leo once more stretched out his arms and spoke, saying, in the same passion-laden voice--"Come to me, my darling, my beautiful, my beautiful!"

At those words, with a little muffled scream, like that of a scared night-bird, the figure turned and flitted through the doorway.

When I was quite certain that she had gone, I gasped aloud.

What might this mean, I wondered, in a very agony of bewilderment. This could certainly be no dream: it was real, for I was wide awake. Indeed, what did it all mean? Who was the ghastly, mummy-like thing which had guided us unharmed through such terrible dangers; the Messenger that all men feared, who could strike down a brawny savage with a motion of its

hand? Why did it creep into the place thus at dead of night, like a spirit revisiting one beloved? Why did its presence cause me to awake and Leo to dream? Why did it draw out the tress; indeed, how knew it that this tress was hidden there? And why--oh! why, at those tender and passionate words did it flit away at last like some scared bat?

The priest Oros had called our guide Minister, and Sword, that is, one who carries out decrees. But what if they were its own decrees? What if this thing should be she whom we sought, Ayesha herself? Why should I tremble at the thought, seeing that if so, our quest was ended, we had achieved? Oh! it must be because about this being there was something terrible, something un-human and appalling. If Ayesha lived within those mummy-cloths, then it was a different Ayesha whom we had known and worshipped. Well could I remember the white-draped form of She-Who-Must-Be-Obeded, and how, long before she revealed her glorious face to us, we guessed the beauty and the majesty hidden beneath that veil by which her radiant life and loveliness incarnate could not be disguised.

But what of this creature? I would not pursue the thought. I was mistaken. Doubtless she was what the priest Oros had said--some half-supernatural being to whom certain powers were given, and, doubtless, she had come to spy on us in our rest that she might make report to the giver of those powers.

Comforting myself thus I fell asleep again, for fatigue overcame even

such doubts and fears. In the morning, when they were naturally less vivid, I made up my mind that, for various reasons, it would be wisest to say nothing of what I had seen to Leo. Nor, indeed, did I do so until some days had gone by.

When I awoke the full light was pouring into the chamber, and by it I saw the priest Oros standing at my bedside. I sat up and asked him what time it was, to which he answered with a smile, but in a low voice, that it lacked but two hours of mid-day, adding that he had come to set my arm. Now I saw why he spoke low, for Leo was still fast asleep.

"Let him rest on," he said, as he undid the wrappings on my arm, "for he has suffered much, and," he continued significantly, "may still have more to suffer."

"What do you mean, friend Oros?" I asked sharply. "I thought you told us that we were safe upon this Mountain."

"I told you, friend----" and he looked at me.

"Holly is my name----"

"--friend Holly, that your bodies are safe. I said nothing of all the rest of you. Man is more than flesh and blood. He is mind and spirit as well, and these can be injured also."

"Who is there that would injure them?" I asked.

"Friend," he answered, gravely, "you and your companion have come to a haunted land, not as mere wanderers, for then you would be dead ere now, but of set purpose, seeking to lift the veil from mysteries which have been hid for ages. Well, your aim is known and it may chance that it will be achieved. But if this veil is lifted, it may chance also that you will find what shall send your souls shivering to despair and madness. Say, are you not afraid?"

"Somewhat," I answered. "Yet my foster-son and I have seen strange things and lived. We have seen the very Light of Life roll by in majesty; we have been the guests of an Immortal, and watched Death seem to conquer her and leave us untouched. Think you then that we will turn cowards now? Nay, we march on to fulfil our destinies."

At these words Oros showed neither curiosity nor surprise; it was as though I told him only what he knew.

"Good," he replied, smiling, and with a courteous bow of his shaven head, "within an hour you shall march on--to fulfil your destinies. If I have warned you, forgive me, for I was bidden so to do, perhaps to try your mettle. Is it needful that I should repeat this warning to the lord----" and again he looked at me.

"Leo Vincey," I said.



"Leo Vincey, yes, Leo Vincey," he repeated, as though the name were familiar to him but had slipped his mind. "But you have not answered my question. Is it needful that I should repeat the warning?"

"Not in the least; but you can do so if you wish when he awakes."

"Nay, I think with you, that it would be but waste of words, for--forgive the comparison;--what the wolf dares"--and he looked at me--"the tiger does not flee from," and he nodded towards Leo. "There, see how much better are the wounds upon your arm, which is no longer swollen. Now I will bandage it, and within some few weeks the bone will be as sound again as it was before you met the Khan Rassen hunting in the Plains. By the way, you will see him again soon, and his fair wife with him."

"See him again? Do the dead, then, come to life upon this Mountain?"

"Nay, but certain of them are brought hither for burial. It is the privilege of the rulers of Kaloon; also, I think, that the Khandia has questions to ask of its Oracle."

"Who is its Oracle?" I asked with eagerness.

"The Oracle," he replied darkly, "is a Voice. It was ever so, was it not?"

"Yes; I have heard that from Atene, but a voice implies a speaker. Is this speaker she whom you name Mother?"

"Perhaps, friend Holly."

"And is this Mother a spirit?"

"It is a point that has been much debated. They told you so in the Plains, did they not? Also the Tribes think it on the Mountain. Indeed, the thing seems reasonable, seeing that all of us who live are flesh and spirit. But you will form your own judgment and then we can discuss the matter. There, your arm is finished. Be careful now not to strike it or to fall, and look, your companion awakes."

Something over an hour later we started upon our upward journey. I was again mounted on the Khan's horse, which having been groomed and fed was somewhat rested, while to Leo a litter had been offered. This he declined, however, saying that he had now recovered and would not be carried like a woman. So he walked by the side of my horse, using his spear as a staff. We passed the fire-pit--now full of dead, white ashes, among which were mixed those of the witch-finder and his horrible cat--preceded by our dumb guide, at the sight of whom, in her pale wrappings, the people of the tribe who had returned to their village prostrated themselves, and so remained until she was gone by.

One of them, however, rose again and, breaking through our escort of priests, ran to Leo, knelt before him and kissed his hand. It was that young woman whose life he had saved, a noble-looking girl, with masses of red hair, and by her was her husband, the marks of his bonds still showing on his arms. Our guide seemed to see this incident, though how she did so I do not know. At any rate she turned and made some sign which the priest interpreted.

Calling the woman to him he asked her sternly how she dared to touch the person of this stranger with her vile lips. She answered that it was because her heart was grateful. Oros said that for this reason she was forgiven; moreover, that in reward for what they had suffered he was commanded to lift up her husband to be the ruler of that tribe during the pleasure of the Mother. He gave notice, moreover, that all should obey the new chief in his place, according to their customs, and if he did any evil, make report that he might suffer punishment. Then waving the pair aside, without listening to their thanks or the acclamations of the crowd, he passed on.

As we went down the ravine by which we had approached the village on the previous night, a sound of chanting struck our ears. Presently the path turned, and we saw a solemn procession advancing up that dismal, sunless gorge. At the head of it rode none other than the beautiful Khania, followed by her great-uncle, the old Shaman, and after these came a company of shaven priests in their white robes, bearing between them a bier, upon which, its face uncovered, lay the body of the Khan, draped

in a black garment. Yet he looked better thus than he had ever done, for now death had touched this insane and dissolute man with something of the dignity which he lacked in life.

Thus then we met. At the sight of our guide's white form, the horse which the Khania rode reared up so violently that I thought it would have thrown her. But she mastered the animal with her whip and voice, and called out--"Who is this draped hag of the Mountain that stops the path of the Khania Atene and her dead lord? My guests, I find you in ill company, for it seems that you are conducted by an evil spirit to meet an evil fate. That guide of yours must surely be something hateful and hideous, for were she a wholesome woman she would not fear to show her face."

Now the Shaman plucked his mistress by the sleeve, and the priest Oros, bowing to her, prayed her to be silent and cease to speak such ill-omened words into the air, which might carry them she knew not whither. But some instinctive hate seemed to bubble up in Atene, and she would not be silent, for she addressed our guide using the direct "thou," a manner of speech that we found was very usual on the Mountain though rare upon the Plains.

"Let the air carry them whither it will," she cried. "Sorceress, strip off thy rags, fit only for a corpse too vile to view. Show us what thou art, thou flitting night-owl, who thinkest to frighten me with that livery of death, which only serves to hide the death within."

"Cease, I pray lady, cease," said Oros, stirred for once out of his imperturbable calm. "She is the Minister, none other, and with her goes the Power."

"Then it goes not against Atene, Khania of Kaloon," she answered, "or so I think. Power, forsooth! Let her show her power. If she has any it is not her own, but that of the Witch of the Mountain, who feigns to be a spirit, and by her sorceries has drawn away my guests"--and she pointed to us--"thus bringing my husband to his death."

"Niece, be silent!" said the old Shaman, whose wrinkled face was white with terror, whilst Oros held up his hands as though in supplication to some unseen Strength, saying--"O thou that hearest and seest, be merciful, I beseech thee, and forgive this woman her madness, lest the blood of a guest should stain the hands of thy servants, and the ancient honour of our worship be brought low in the eyes of men."

Thus he prayed, but although his hands were uplifted, it seemed to me that his eyes were fixed upon our guide, as ours were. While he spoke, I saw her hand raised, as she had raised it when she slew or rather sentenced the witchdoctor. Then she seemed to reflect, and stayed it in mid air, so that it pointed at the Khania. She did not move, she made no sound, only she pointed, and, the angry words died upon Atene's lips, the fury left her eyes, and the colour her face. Yes, she grew white and silent as the corpse upon the bier behind her. Then, cowed by that

invisible power, she struck her horse so fiercely that it bounded by us onward towards the village, at which the funeral company were to rest awhile.

As the Shaman Simbri followed the Khania, the priest Oros caught his horse's bridle and said to him--"Magician, we have met before, for instance, when your lady's father was brought to his funeral. Warn her, then, you that know something of the truth and of her power to speak more gently of the ruler of this land. Say to her, from me, that had she not been the ambassadress of death, and, therefore, inviolate, surely ere now she would have shared her husband's bier. Farewell, tomorrow we will speak again," and, loosing the Shaman's bridle, Oros passed on.

Soon we had left the melancholy procession behind us and, issuing from the gorge, turned up the Mountain slope towards the edge of the bright snows that lay not far above. It was as we came out of this darksome valley, where the overhanging pine trees almost eclipsed the light, that suddenly we missed our guide.

"Has she gone back to--to reason with the Khania?" I asked of Oros.

"Nay!" he answered, with a slight smile, "I think that she has gone forward to give warning that the Hesea's guests draw near."

"Indeed," I answered, staring hard at the bare slope of mountain, up which not a mouse could have passed without being seen. "I

understand--she has gone forward," and the matter dropped. But what I did not understand was--how she had gone. As the Mountain was honeycombed with caves and galleries, I suppose, however, that she entered one of them.

All the rest of that day we marched upwards, gradually drawing nearer to the snow-line, as we went gathering what information we could from the priest Oros. This was the sum of it--From the beginning of the world, as he expressed it, that is, from thousands and thousands of years ago, this Mountain had been the home of a peculiar fire-worship, of which the head heirophant was a woman. About twenty centuries before, however, the invading general named Rassen, had made himself Khan of Kaloos. Rassen established a new priestess on the Mountain, a worshipper of the Egyptian goddess, Hes, or Isis. This priestess had introduced certain modifications in the ancient doctrines, superseding the cult of fire, pure and simple, by a new faith, which, while holding to some of the old ceremonies, revered as its head the Spirit of Life or Nature, of whom they looked upon their priestess as the earthly representative.

Of this priestess Oros would only tell us that she was "ever present," although we gathered that when one priestess died or was "taken to the fire," as he put it, her child, whether in fact or by adoption, succeeded her and was known by the same names, those of "Hes" or the "Hesea" and "Mother." We asked if we should see this Mother, to which he answered that she manifested herself very rarely. As to her appearance and attributes he would say nothing, except that the former changed from

time to time and that when she chose to use it she had "all power."

The priests of her College, he informed us, numbered three hundred, never more nor less, and there were also three hundred priestesses. Certain of those who desired it were allowed to marry, and from among their children were reared up the new generation of priests and priestesses. Thus they were a people apart from all others, with distinct racial characteristics. This, indeed, was evident, for our escort were all exceedingly like to each other, very handsome and refined in appearance, with dark eyes, clean-cut features and olive-hued skins; such a people as might well have descended from Easterns of high blood, with a dash of that of the Egyptians and Greeks thrown in.

We asked him whether the mighty looped pillar that towered from the topmost cup of the Mountain was the work of men. He answered, No; the hand of Nature had fashioned it, and that the light shining through it came from the fires which burned in the crater of the volcano. The first priestess, having recognized in this gigantic column the familiar Symbol of Life of the Egyptian worship, established her altars beneath its shadow.

For the rest, the Mountain with its mighty slopes and borderlands was peopled by a multitude of half-savage folk, who accepted the rule of the Hesea, bringing her tribute of all things necessary, such as food and metals. Much of the meat and grain however the priests raised themselves on sheltered farms, and the metals they worked with their own hands.



This rule, however, was of a moral nature, since for centuries the College had sought no conquests and the Mother contented herself with punishing crime in some such fashion as we had seen. For the petty wars between the Tribes and the people of the Plain they were not responsible, and those chiefs who carried them on were deposed, unless they had themselves been attacked. All the Tribes, however, were sworn to the defence of the Hesea and the College, and, however much they might quarrel amongst themselves, if need arose, were ready to die for her to the last man. That war must one day break out again between the priests of the Mountain and the people of Kaloon was recognized; therefore they endeavoured to be prepared for that great and final struggle.

Such was the gist of his history, which, as we learned afterwards, proved to be true in every particular.

Towards sundown we came to a vast cup extending over many thousand acres, situated beneath the snow-line of the peak and filled with rich soil washed down, I suppose, from above. So sheltered was the place by its configuration and the over-hanging mountain that, facing south-west as it did, notwithstanding its altitude it produced corn and other temperate crops in abundance. Here the College had its farms, and very well cultivated these seemed to be. This great cup, which could not be seen from below, we entered through a kind of natural gateway, that might be easily defended against a host.

There were other peculiarities, but it is not necessary to describe them further than to say that I think the soil benefited by the natural heat of the volcano, and that when this erupted, as happened occasionally, the lava streams always passed to the north and south of the cup of land. Indeed, it was these lava streams that had built up the protecting cliffs.

Crossing the garden-like lands, we came to a small town beautifully built of lava rock. Here dwelt the priests, except those who were on duty, no man of the Tribes or other stranger being allowed to set foot within the place.

Following the main street of this town, we arrived at the face of the precipice beyond, and found ourselves in front of a vast archway, closed with massive iron gates fantastically wrought. Here, taking my horse with them, our escort left us alone with Oros. As we drew near the great gates swung back upon their hinges. We passed them--with what sensations I cannot describe--and groped our way down a short corridor which ended in tall, iron-covered doors. These also rolled open at our approach, and next instant we staggered back amazed and half-blinded by the intense blaze of light within.

Imagine, you who read, the nave of the vastest cathedral with which you are acquainted. Then double or treble its size, and you will have some conception of that temple in which we found ourselves. Perhaps in the beginning it had been a cave, who can say? but now its sheer walls, its

multitudinous columns springing to the arched roof far above us, had all been worked on and fashioned by the labour of men long dead; doubtless the old fire-worshippers of thousands of years ago.

You will wonder how so great a place was lighted, but I think that never would you guess. Thus--by twisted columns of living flame! I counted eighteen of them, but there may have been others. They sprang from the floor at regular intervals along the lines of what in a cathedral would be the aisles. Right to the roof they sprang, of even height and girth, so fierce was the force of the natural gas that drove them, and there were lost, I suppose, through chimneys bored in the thickness of the rock. Nor did they give off smell or smoke, or in that great, cold place, any heat which could be noticed, only an intense white light like that of molten iron, and a sharp hissing noise as of a million angry snakes.

The huge temple was utterly deserted, and, save for this sybilant, pervading sound, utterly silent; an awesome, an overpowering place.

"Do these candles of yours ever go out?" asked Leo of Oros, placing his hand before his dazzled eyes.

"How can they," replied the priest, in his smooth, matter-of-fact voice, "seeing that they rise from the eternal fire which the builders of this hall worshipped? Thus they have burned from the beginning, and thus they will burn for ever, though, if we wish it, we can shut off their

light.[\*] Be pleased to follow me: you will see greater things."

[\*] This, as I ascertained afterwards, was done by thrusting a broad stone of great thickness over the apertures through which the gas or fire rushed and thus cutting off the air. These stones were worked to and fro by means of pulleys connected with iron rods.--L. H. H.

So in awed silence we followed, and, oh! how small and miserable we three human beings looked alone in that vast temple illuminated by this lightning radiance. We reached the end of it at length, only to find that to right and left ran transepts on a like gigantic scale and lit in the same amazing fashion. Here Oros bade us halt, and we waited a little while, till presently, from either transept arose a sound of chanting, and we perceived two white-robed processions advancing towards us from their depths.

On they came, very slowly, and we saw that the procession to the right was a company of priests, and that to the left a company of priestesses, a hundred or so of them in all.

Now the men ranged themselves in front of us, while the women ranged themselves behind, and at a signal from Oros, all of them still chanting some wild and thrilling hymn, once more we started forward, this time along a narrow gallery closed at the end with double wooden doors. As our procession reached these they opened, and before us lay the crowning

wonder of this marvellous fane, a vast, ellipse-shaped apse. Now we understood. The plan of the temple was the plan of the looped pillar which stood upon the brow of the Peak, and as we rightly guessed, its dimensions were the same.

At intervals around this ellipse the fiery columns flared, but otherwise the place was empty.

No, not quite, for at the head of the apse, almost between two of the flame columns, stood a plain, square altar of the size of a small room, in front of which, as we saw when we drew nearer, were hung curtains of woven silver thread. On this altar was placed a large statue of silver, that, backed as it was by the black rock, seemed to concentrate and reflect from its burnished surface the intense light of the two blazing pillars.

It was a lovely thing, but to describe it is hard indeed. The figure, which was winged, represented a draped woman of mature years, and pure but gracious form, half hidden by the forward-bending wings. Sheltered by these, yet shown between them, appeared the image of a male child, clasped to its bearer's breast with her left arm, while the right was raised toward the sky. A study of Motherhood, evidently, but how shall I write of all that was conveyed by those graven faces?

To begin with the child. It was that of a sturdy boy, full of health and the joy of life. Yet he had been sleeping, and in his sleep some terror

had over-shadowed him with the dark shades of death and evil. There was fear in the lines of his sweet mouth and on the lips and cheeks, that seemed to quiver. He had thrown his little arm about his mother's neck, and, pressing close against her breast, looked up to her for safety, his right hand and outstretched finger pointing downwards and behind him, as though to indicate whence the danger came. Yet it was passing, already half-forgotten, for the upturned eyes expressed confidence renewed, peace of soul attained.

And the mother. She did not seem to mock or chide his fears, for her lovely face was anxious and alert. Yet upon it breathed a very atmosphere of unchanging tenderness and power invincible; care for the helpless, strength to shelter it from every harm. The great, calm eyes told their story, the parted lips were whispering some tale of hope, sure and immortal; the raised hand revealed whence that hope arose. All love seemed to be concentrated in the brooding figure, so human, yet so celestial; all heaven seemed to lie an open path before those quivering wings. And see, the arching instep, the upward-springing foot, suggested that thither those wings were bound, bearing their God-given burden far from the horror of the earth, deep into the bosom of a changeless rest above.

The statue was only that of an affrighted child in its mother's arms; its interpretation made clear even to the dullest by the simple symbolism of some genius--Humanity saved by the Divine.

While we gazed at its enchanting beauty, the priests and priestesses, filing away to right and left, arranged themselves alternately, first a man and then a woman, within the ring of the columns of fire that burned around the loop-shaped shrine. So great was its circumference that the whole hundred of them must stand wide apart one from another, and, to our sight, resembled little lonely children clad in gleaming garments, while their chant of worship reached us only like echoes thrown from a far precipice. In short, the effect of this holy shrine and its occupants was superb yet overwhelming, at least I know that it filled me with a feeling akin to fear.

Oros waited till the last priest had reached his appointed place. Then he turned and said, in his gentle, reverent tones--"Draw nigh, now, O Wanderers well-beloved, and give greeting to the Mother," and he pointed towards the statue.

"Where is she?" asked Leo, in a whisper, for here we scarcely dared to speak aloud. "I see no one."

"The Hesea dwells yonder," he answered, and, taking each of us by the hand, he led us forward across the great emptiness of the apse to the altar at its head.

As we drew near the distant chant of the priests gathered in volume, assuming a glad, triumphant note, and it seemed to me--though this, perhaps was fancy--that the light from the twisted columns of flame grew

even brighter.

At length we were there, and, Oros, loosing our hands, prostrated himself thrice before the altar. Then he rose again, and, falling behind us, stood in silence with bent head and folded fingers. We stood silent also, our hearts filled with mingled hope and fear like a cup with wine.

Were our labours ended? Had we found her whom we sought, or were we, perchance, but enmeshed in the web of some marvellous mummery and about to make acquaintance with the secret of another new and mystical worship? For years and years we had searched, enduring every hardness of flesh and spirit that man can suffer, and now we were to learn whether we had endured in vain. Yes, and Leo would learn if the promise was to be fulfilled to him, or whether she whom he adored had become but a departed dream to be sought for only beyond the gate of Death. Little wonder that he trembled and turned white in the agony of that great suspense.

Long, long was the time. Hours, years, ages, aeons, seemed to flow over us as we stood there before glittering silver curtains that hid the front of the black altar beneath the mystery of the sphinx-like face of the glorious image which was its guardian, clothed with that frozen smile of eternal love and pity. All the past went before us as we struggled in those dark waters of our doubt. Item by item, event by event, we rehearsed the story which began in the Caves of Kor, for our thoughts, so long attuned, were open to each other and flashed from soul



to soul.

Oh! now we knew, they were open also to another soul. We could see nothing save the Altar and the Effigy, we could only hear the slow chant of the priests and priestesses and the snake-like hiss of the rushing fires. Yet we knew that our hearts were as an open book to One who watched beneath the Mother's shadowing wings.