

CHAPTER VI

OF THE INITIATION OF HARMACHIS; OF HIS VISIONS; OF HIS PASSING TO THE CITY THAT IS IN THE PLACE OF DEATH; AND OF THE DECLARATIONS OF ISIS, THE MESSENGER

In silence we passed into the Shrine of Isis. It was dark and bare--only the feeble light from the lamp gleamed faintly upon the sculptured walls, where, in a hundred effigies, the Holy Mother suckled the Holy Child.

The priest closed the doors and bolted them. "Once again," he said, "art thou ready, Harmachis?"

"Once again," I answered, "I am ready."

He spoke no more; but, having lifted up his hands in prayer, led me to the centre of the Holy, and with a swift motion put out the lamp.

"Look before thee, Harmachis!" he cried; and his voice sounded hollow in the solemn place.

I gazed and saw nothing. But from the niche that is high in the wall, where is hid that sacred symbol of the Goddess on which few may look, there came a sound as of the rattling rods of the sistrum.[*] And as I listened, awestruck, behold! I saw the outline of the symbol drawn as with fire upon the blackness of the air. It hung above my head, and

rattled while it hung. And, as it turned, I clearly saw the face of the Mother Isis that is graven on the one side, and signifies unending Birth, and the face of her holy sister, Nephthys, that is graven on the other, and signifies the ending of all birth in Death.

[*] A musical instrument peculiarly sacred to Isis of which the shape and rods had a mystic significance.--Editor.

Slowly it turned and swung as though some mystic dancer trod the air above me, and shook it in her hand. But at length the light went out, and the rattling ceased.

Then of a sudden the end of the chamber became luminous, and in that white light I beheld picture after picture. I saw the ancient Nile rolling through deserts to the sea. There were no men upon its banks, nor any signs of man, nor any temples to the Gods. Only wild birds moved on Sihor's lonely face, and monstrous brutes plunged and wallowed in his waters. The sun sank in majesty behind the Libyan Desert and stained the waters red; the mountains towered up towards the silent sky; but in mountain, desert, and river there was no sign of human life. Then I knew that I saw the world as it had been before man was, and a terror of its loneliness entered my soul.

The picture passed and another rose up in its place. Once again I saw the banks of Sihor, and on them crowded wild-faced creatures, partaking of the nature of the ape more than of the nature of mankind. They fought and slew each other. The wild birds sprang up in affright as the fire

leapt from reed huts given by foemen's hands to flame and pillage. They stole and rent and murdered, dashing out the brains of children with axes of stone. And, though no voice told me, I knew that I saw man as he was tens of thousands of years ago, when first he marched across the earth.

Yet another picture. Again I beheld the banks of Sihor; but on them fair cities bloomed like flowers. In and out their gates went men and women, passing to and fro from wide, well-tilled lands. But I saw no guards or armies, and no weapons of war. All was wisdom, prosperity, and peace. And while I wondered, a glorious Figure, clad in raiment that shone as flame, came from the gates of a shrine, and the sound of music went before and followed after him. He mounted an ivory throne which was set in a market-place facing the water: and as the sun sank called in all the multitudes to prayer. With one voice they prayed, bending in adoration. And I understood that herein was shown the reign of the Gods on earth, which was long before the days of Menes.

A change came over the dream. Still the same fair city, but other men--men with greed and evil on their faces--who hated the bonds of righteous doing, and set their hearts on sin. The evening came; the glorious Figure mounted the throne and called to prayer, but none bowed themselves in adoration.

"We are aweary of thee!" they cried. "Make Evil King! Slay him! slay him! and loose the bonds of Evil! Make Evil King!"

The glorious Shape rose up, gazing with mild eyes upon those wicked men.

"Ye know not what ye ask," he cried; "but as ye will, so be it! For if I die, by me, after much travail, shall ye once again find a path to the Kingdom of Good!"

Even as he spoke, a Form, foul and hideous to behold, leapt upon him, cursing, slew him, tore him limb from limb, and amidst the clamour of the people sat himself upon the throne and ruled. But a Shape whose face was veiled passed down from heaven on shadowy wings, and with lamentations gathered up the rent fragments of the Being. A moment she bent herself upon them, then lifted up her hands and wept. And as she wept, behold! from her side there sprang a warrior armed and with a face like the face of Ra at noon. He, the Avenger, hurled himself with a shout upon the Monster who had usurped the throne, and they closed in battle, and, struggling ever in a strait embrace, passed upward to the skies.

Then came picture after picture. I saw Powers and Peoples clad in various robes and speaking many tongues. I saw them pass and pass in millions--loving, hating, struggling, dying. Some few were happy and some had woe stamped upon their faces; but most bore not the seal of happiness nor of woe, but rather that of patience. And ever as they passed from age to age, high above in the heavens the Avenger fought on with the Evil Thing, while the scale of victory swung now here now there. But neither conquered, nor was it given to me to know how the battle ended.

And I understood that what I had beheld was the holy vision of the struggle between the Good and the Evil Powers. I saw that man was created vile, but Those who are above took pity on him, and came down to him to make him good and happy, for the two things are one thing. But man returned to his wicked way, and then the bright Spirit of Good, who is of us called Osiris, but who has many names, offered himself up for the evil-doing of the race that had dethroned him. And from him and the Divine Mother, of whom all nature is, sprang another spirit who is the Protector of us on earth, as Osiris is our justifier in Amenti.

For this is the mystery of the Osiris.

Of a sudden, as I saw the visions, these things became clear to me. The mummy cloths of symbol and of ceremony that wrap Osiris round fell from him, and I understood the secret of religion, which is Sacrifice.

The pictures passed, and again the priest, my guide, spoke to me.

"Hast thou understood, Harmachis, those things which it has been granted thee to see?"

"I have," I said. "Are the rites ended?"

"Nay, they are but begun. That which follows thou must endure alone! Behold I leave thee, to return at the morning light. Once more I warn thee. That which thou shalt see, few may look upon and live. In all my

days I have known but three who dared to face this dread hour, and of those three at dawn but one was found alive. Myself, I have not trod this path. It is too high for me."

"Depart," I said; "my soul is athirst for knowledge. I will dare it."

He laid his hand upon my shoulder and blessed me. He went. I heard the door shut to behind him, the echoes of his footsteps slowly died away.

Then I felt that I was alone, alone in the Holy Place with Things which are not of the earth. Silence fell--silence deep and black as the darkness which was around me. The silence fell, it gathered as the cloud gathered on the face of the moon that night when, a lad, I prayed upon the pylon towers. It gathered denser and yet more dense till it seemed to creep into my heart and call aloud therein; for utter silence has a voice that is more terrible than any cry. I spoke; the echoes of my words came back upon me from the walls and seemed to beat me down. The stillness was lighter to endure than an echo such as this. What was I about to see? Should I die, even now, in the fulness of my youth and strength? Terrible were the warnings that had been given to me. I was fear-stricken, and bethought me that I would fly. Fly!--fly whither? The temple door was barred; I could not fly. I was alone with the Godhead, alone with the Power that I had invoked. Nay, my heart was pure--my heart was pure. I would face the terror that was to come, ay, even though I died.

"Isis, Holy Mother," I prayed. "Isis, Spouse of Heaven, come unto me, be

with me now; I faint! be with me now."

And then I knew that things were not as things had been. The air around me began to stir, it rustled as the wings of eagles rustle, it took life. Bright eyes gazed upon me, strange whispers shook my soul. Upon the darkness were bars of light. They changed and interchanged, they moved to and fro and wove mystic symbols which I could not read. Swifter and swifter flew that shuttle of the light: the symbols grouped, gathered, faded, gathered yet again, faster and still more fast, till my eyes could count them no more. Now I was afloat upon a sea of glory; it surged and rolled, as the ocean rolls; it tossed me high, it brought me low. Glory was piled on glory, splendour heaped on splendour's head, and I rode above it all!

Soon the lights began to pale in the rolling sea of air. Great shadows shot across it, lines of darkness pierced it and rushed together on its breast, till, at length, I was only a Shape of Flame set like a star on the bosom of immeasurable night. Bursts of awful music gathered from far away. Miles and miles away I heard them, thrilling faintly through the gloom. On they came, nearer and more near, louder and more loud, till they swept past, above, below, around me, swept on rushing pinions, terrifying and enchanting me. They floated by, ever growing fainter, till they died in space. Then others came, and no two were akin. Some rattled as ten thousand sistras shaken all to tune. Some rank from the brazen throats of unnumbered clarions. Some pealed with a loud, sweet chant of voices that were more than human; and some rolled along in the slow thunder of a million drums. They passed; their notes were lost in

dying echoes; and the silence once more pressed in upon me and overcame me.

The strength within me began to fail. I felt my life ebbing at its springs. Death drew near to me and his shape was Silence. He entered at my heart, entered with a sense of numbing cold, but my brain was still alive, I could yet think. I knew that I was drawing near the confines of the Dead. Nay, I was dying fast, and oh, the horror of it! I strove to pray and could not; there was no more time for prayer. One struggle and the stillness crept into my brain. The terror passed; an unfathomable weight of sleep pressed me down. I was dying, I was dying, and then--nothingness!

I was dead!

A change--life came back to me, but between the new life and the life that had been was a gulf and difference. Once again I stood in the darkness of the shrine, but it blinded me no more. It was clear as the light of day, although it still was black. I stood; and yet it was not I who stood, but rather my spiritual part, for at my feet lay my dead Self. There it lay, rigid and still, a stamp of awful calm sealed upon its face, while I gazed on it.

And as I gazed, filled with wonder, I was caught up on the Wings of Flame and whirled away! away! faster than the lightnings flash. Down I fell, through depths of empty space set here and there with glittering crowns of stars. Down for ten million miles and ten times ten million,

till at length I hovered over a place of soft, unchanging light, wherein were Temples, Palaces, and Abodes, such as no man ever saw in the visions of his sleep. They were built of Flame, and they were built of Blackness. Their spires pierced up and up; their great courts stretched around. Even as I hovered they changed continually to the eye; what was Flame became Blackness, what was Blackness became Flame. Here was the flash of crystal, and there the blaze of gems shone even through the glory that rolls around the city which is in the Place of Death. There were trees, and their voice as they rustled was the voice of music; there was air, and, as it blew, its breath was the sobbing notes of song.

Shapes, changing, mysterious, wonderful, rushed up to meet me, and bore me down till I seemed to stand upon another earth.

"Who comes?" cried a great Voice.

"Harmachis," answered the Shapes, that changed continually. "Harmachis who hath been summoned from the earth to look upon the face of Her that Was and Is and Shall Be. Harmachis, Child of Earth!"

"Throw back the Gates and open wide the Doors!" pealed the awful Voice.

"Throw back the Gates and open wide the Doors; seal up his lips in silence, lest his voice jar upon the harmonies of Heaven, take away his sight lest he see that which may not be seen, and let Harmachis, who hath been summoned, pass down the path that leads to the place of the Unchanging. Pass on, Child of Earth; but before thou goest, look up that

thou mayest learn how far thou art removed from Earth."

I looked up. Beyond the glory that shone about the city was black night, and high on its bosom twinkled one tiny star.

"Behold the world that thou hast left," said the Voice, "behold and tremble."

Then my lips and eyes were sealed with silence and with darkness, so that I was dumb and blind. The Gates rolled back, the Doors swung wide, and I was swept into the city that is in the Place of Death. I was swept swiftly I know not whither, till at length I stood upon my feet. Again the great Voice pealed:

"Draw the veil of blackness from his eyes, unseal the silence on his lips, that Harmachis, Child of Earth, may see, hear, and understand, and make adoration at the Shrine of Her that Was and Is and Shall Be."

And my lips and eyes were touched once more, so that my sight and speech came back.

Behold! I stood within a hall of blackest marble, so lofty that even in the rosy light scarce could my vision reach the great groins of the roof. Music wailed about its spaces, and all adown its length stood winged Spirits fashioned in living fire, and such was the brightness of their forms that I could not look on them. In its centre was an altar, small and square, and I stood before the empty altar. Then again the

Voice cried:

"O Thou that hast been, art, and shalt be; Thou who, having many names, art yet without a name; Measurer of Time; Messenger of God; Guardian of the Worlds and the Races that dwell thereon; Universal Mother born of Nothingness; Creatrix uncreated; Living Splendour without Form, Living Form without Substance; Servant of the Invisible; Child of Law; Holder of the Scales and Sword of Fate; Vessel of Life, through whom all Life flows, to whom it again is gathered; Recorder of Things Done; Executrix of Decrees--Hear!

"Harmachis the Egyptian, who by Thy will hath been summoned from the earth, waits before Thine Altar, with ears unstopped, with eyes unsealed, and with an open heart. Hear and descend! Descend, O Many-shaped! Descend in Flame! Descend in Sound! Descend in Spirit! Hear and descend!"

The Voice ceased and there was silence. Then through the silence came a sound like the booming of the sea. It passed and presently, moved thereto by I know not what, I raised my eyes from my hands with which I had covered them, and saw a small dark cloud hanging over the Altar in and out of which a fiery Serpent climbed.

Then all the Spirits clad in light fell upon the marble floor, and with a loud voice adored; but what they said I could not understand. Behold!

the dark cloud came down and rested on the Altar, the Serpent of fire stretched itself towards me, touched me on the forehead with its forked tongue and was gone. From within the cloud a Voice sweet and low and clear spoke in heavenly accents:

"Depart, ye Ministers, leave Me with my son whom I have summoned."

Then like arrows rushing from a bow the flame-clad Spirits leapt from the ground and sped away.

"O Harmachis," said the Voice, "be not afraid, I am She whom thou dost know as Isis of the Egyptians; but what else I am strive not thou to learn, it is beyond thy strength. For I am all things, Life is my spirit, and Nature is my raiment. I am the laughter of the babe, I am the maiden's love, I am the mother's kiss. I am the Child and Servant of the Invisible that is God, that is Law, that is Fate--though myself I be not God and Fate and Law. When winds blow and oceans roar upon the face of the Earth thou hearest my voice; when thou gazest on the starry firmament thou seest my countenance; when the spring blooms out in flowers, that is my smile, Harmachis. For I am Nature's self, and all her shapes are shapes of Me. I breathe in all that breathes. I wax and wane in the changeful moon: I grow and gather in the tides: I rise with the suns: I flash with the lightning and thunder in the storms. Nothing is too great for the measure of my majesty, nothing is so small that I cannot find a home therein. I am in thee and thou art in Me, O Harmachis. That which bade thee be bade Me also be. Therefore, though I am great and thou art little, have no fear. For we are bound together

by the common bond of life--that life which flows through suns and stars and spaces, through Spirits and the souls of men, welding all Nature to a whole that, changing ever, is yet eternally the same."

I bowed my head--I could not speak, for I was afraid.

"Faithfully hast thou served Me, O my son," went on the low sweet Voice; "greatly thou hast longed to be brought face to face with Me here in Amenti; and greatly hast thou dared to accomplish thy desire. For it is no small thing to cast off the tabernacle of the Flesh and before the appointed time, if only for an hour, put on the raiment of the Spirit. And greatly, O my servant and my son, have I, too, desired to look on thee there where I am. For the Gods love those who love them, but with a wider and deeper love, and under One who is as far from Me as I am from thee, mortal, I am a God of Gods. Therefore I have caused thee to be brought hither, Harmachis; and therefore I speak to thee, my son, and bid thee commune with Me now face to face, as thou didst commune that night upon the temple towers of Abouthis. For I was there with thee, Harmachis, as I was in ten thousand other worlds. It was I, O Harmachis, who laid the lotus in thy hand, giving thee the sign which thou didst seek. For thou art of the kingly blood of my children who served Me from age to age. And if thou dost not fail thou shalt sit upon that kingly throne and restore my ancient worship in its purity, and sweep my temples from their defilements. But if thou dost fail, then shall the eternal Spirit Isis become but a memory in Egypt."

The Voice paused; and, gathering up my strength, at length I spoke

aloud:

"Tell me, O Holy," I said, "shall I then fail?"

"Ask Me not," answered the Voice, "that which it is not lawful that I should answer thee. Perchance I can read that which shall befall thee, perchance it doth not please Me so to read. What can it profit the Divine, that hath all time wherein to await the issues, to be eager to look upon the blossom that is not blown, but which, lying a seed in the bosom of the earth, shall blow in its season? Know, Harmachis, that I do not shape the Future; the Future is to thee and not to Me; for it is born of Law and of the rule ordained of the Invisible. Yet thou art free to act therein, and thou shalt win or thou shalt fail according to thy strength and the measure of thy heart's purity. Thine be the burden, Harmachis, as thine in the event shall be the glory or the shame. Little do I reckon of the issue, I who am but the Minister of what is written. Now hear me: I will always be with thee, my son, for my love once given can never be taken away, though by sin it may seem lost to thee. Remember then this: if thou dost triumph, thy guerdon shall be great; if thou dost fail, heavy indeed shall be thy punishment both in the flesh and in the land that thou callest Amenti. Yet this for thy comfort: shame and agony shall not be eternal. For however deep the fall from righteousness, if but repentance holds the heart, there is a path--a stony and a cruel path--whereby the height may be climbed again. Let it not be thy lot to follow it, Harmachis!

"And now, because thou hast loved Me, my son, and, wandering through the

maze of fable, wherein men lose themselves upon the earth, mistaking the substance for the Spirit, and the Altar for the God, hast yet grasped a clue of Truth the Many-faced; and because I love thee and look on to the day that, perchance, shall come when thou shalt dwell blessed in my light and in the doing of my tasks: because of this, I say, it shall be given to thee, O Harmachis, to hear the Word whereby I may be summoned from the Uttermost, by one who hath communed with Me, and to look upon the face of Isis--even into the eyes of the Messenger, and not die the death.

"Behold!"

The sweet Voice ceased; the dark cloud upon the altar changed and changed--it grew white, it shone, and seemed at length to take the shrouded shape of a woman. Then the golden Snake crept from its heart once more, and, like a living diadem, twined itself about the cloudy brows.

Now suddenly a Voice called aloud the awful Word, then the vapours burst and melted, and with my eyes I saw that Glory, at the very thought of which my spirit faints. But what I saw it is not lawful to utter. For, though I have been bidden to write what I have written of this matter, perchance that a record may remain, thereon I have been warned--ay, even now, after these many years. I saw, and what I saw cannot be imagined; for there are Glories and there are Shapes which are beyond the reach of man's imagination. I saw--then, with the echo of that Word, and the memory of that sight stamped for ever on my heart, my spirit failed me,

and I sank down before the Glory.

And, as I fell, it seemed that the great hall burst open and crumbled into flakes of fire round me. Then a great wind blew: there was a sound as the sound of Worlds rushing down the flood of Time--and I knew no more!