

Wisdom's Daughter

CHAPTER I

THE HALLS OF HEAVEN

TO THE learned man, ugly of form and face but sound at heart, Holly by name, a citizen of a northern land whom at times I think that once I knew as Noot the Holy, that philosopher who was my master in a past which seems far to him and is forgot, but to me is but as yesterday, to this Holly, I say, I, who on earth am named Ayesha, daughter of Yarab the Arab chief, but who have many other titles here and elsewhere, have told certain stories of my past days and the part I played in them. Also I have told the same or other stories to my lord Kallikrates, the Greek, now named Leo Vincey, aforesaid a warrior after the habit of his race and his forefathers, who for religious reasons became a priest of Isis, the great goddess of Egypt and, once I believed, my mother in the spirit. Also I have told these or different tales to one Allan, a wandering hunter of beasts and a fighting man of good blood who visited me at Kôr, though of this I said nothing to Holly or to my lord Kallikrates, now known as Leo or the Lion, because as to this Allan I held it wiser to be silent.

All these stories do not agree together, since often I spoke them as parables, or in order to tell

to each that which he would wish to hear, or to hide my mind for my own purposes.

Yet in every one of them lay hid something of the truth, a grain of gold in the ore of fable that might be found by him who had the skill and strength to seek.

Now my spirit moves me to interpret these parables and set down what I am and whence I came and certain of the things that I have seen and done, or at the least such of them as I am permitted to reveal by those mightier than I of whom I am the servant, as they in their turn are the servants of others yet mightier than themselves.

Here in these Asian caves I sit, the Hesea of the Mountain, the last priestess of the worship of Mother Isis upon earth, as aforesaid I sat amid the ruins of Kôr in Libya.

At Kôr for two thousand years I watched and waited till at length reborn, Kallikrates, whom unwittingly I slew in a rage of jealousy, came back to me where I had slain him. There, because of the curse that is on me and him, I lost him again, for in this very place, too, I was slain most horribly, slain by an excess of life wherewith I thought to make myself more beautiful even than I was and in striving to overfill the vase, shattered it to the vilest dust. Thus once more Fate made a mock of me; once more I lost Kallikrates whom it is my doom to desire in the flesh and to raise up in the spirit through time untold.

My soul passed out and on and here for a little while it found a home masked in the withered shape of an ancient priestess of my worship.

As was foredoomed my lord came back to me and saw the shining soul within that hideous shape and claimed it with a kiss, as I think the bravest.

deed and the most faithful that was ever done by man. In the magic of that kiss as also was foredoomed, my beauty grew again before his eyes, so that once more I stand a glory upon earth. Now we are plighted, now, if all goes well, within a year we shall be wed, aye, within one short year after I have borne him back to Kôr and unsealed the hidden Fire of Life and plunged him in its essence, giving to him my own gift of undying days.

And yet and yet—who knows the end? He presses me sore, and the starved woman part of me is passionate and weak and I may yield, and if his lips touch mine, who can say but that the fire within me will destroy him, the unfortified, and bring all my plans to dust and nothingness? I am great, set far above mortals, yet I play against forces I cannot see, that are greater than I, and it may please them to snatch the cup from my lips, and once more to overthrow me; for even though the blood of gods runs in him, as it runs in all of us, who can stand against their master, Doom, and its decrees? Therefore I, named Wisdom's Daughter, named Child of Isis, to-night am as full of fears as any mortal maid craving her lover beneath the moon and not knowing but that war, or chance, or the vile breath of sickness may have borne him away into that gulf where all things must be lost—until they are found again.

From month to month Leo, my lord, hunts upon the mountain after the fashion of men, and I, Ayesha, brood within the caves after the fashion of women. Yes, I who am half a goddess still brood within the caves after the fashion of women who wait and watch. Holly, the instructed, who loves

me, as all men must do, bides here with me in the caves and we talk together of ancient things whereof the world has lost count, for he is a learned man skilled in the tongues of Greece and Rome, and one who thinks and, perchance, remembers.

But yesterday he said to me that I who seemed to know the past and to whom doors were opened that cannot be entered by human feet, should write down what I know and have experienced, that in time to come the world may be the wiser.

This the fancy has taken me to do, though whether I shall persevere to the end, I cannot say. He has given me that wherein I can write. 'Tis not the old papyrus, but it will serve, and I have pens of reed and can make ink of various colours, who in the bygone days was no mean scribe. Also I sleep but little, whose body, filled like a cup with life, needs small rest, and the long hours of the night pass wearily for me who lie and brood upon what has been and is to come, searching the darkness of the future with aching, fearful soul. Moreover, I am able to write in characters which, with all his learning, Holly cannot read, I who am not minded that he should know my thoughts and deeds and betray them to my lord whom they might cause to think the worse of me.

Why, then, should I write at all? For this reason: in certain matters I have foreknowledge and my spirit tells me that in a day to come, at the time appointed, some will guess the secret of my script and render it into tongues that all may read, so that when, soon or late, upon the circle of my eternal path, I pass hence to whence I came, and, like to the Fire-God in the caves of Kôr am hid awhile, this record will remain my monument. Ah! there peep^o out the mortal in me, for see! like any

common man or woman I would not be forgot even among the passing dwellers in a petty world.

Now to my task.

I have a vision of what chanced to my soul before it descended to dwell on earth, and with it I will begin. Maybe it is but a parable not to be strictly rendered, a token and a symbol rather than a truth. Yet of this I am sure that in it there is something of the truth, since otherwise why through the long centuries did it return to me again and yet again? Mayhap Greece and Egypt had no gods save those they fashioned for themselves. Holly tells me, as did the Wanderer, Allan, who also had some smattering of knowledge, that Zeus and Aphrodite and Osiris and Horus and Ammon are now dethroned with all their company and lie in the dust like the shattered columns of their temples, the mock of men who talk of them as the fables of the early world, so that of all the divinities that I knew, He of the Jews, although changed of character and countenance, alone is worshipped and remains.

Doubtless it is so, yet while man lives, always there is God, though his shapes be many. Always there is the eternal Good, as in a dream the holy Noot named the ultimate Divine, and behold! it is called Ammon or otherwise. Always there is Evil and behold! it is called Set or Baal, or Moloch, or otherwise. Always the stained soul of man seeks redemption, and he who saves is called Osiris or otherwise. Always Nature endures and she is called Isis or otherwise. Always the great world that will not die strains and pulses to new life, and the Life-bringer is called Aphrodite or otherwise. And so on continually. Where man is, again I

say, there was and is and will be God, or Good—the Spirit named by many names.

I go to my window-place in this cave-chamber and look out upon the stars shining countless in the frosty sky and lo! there I see God clad in one of the most glorious of His garments. I look at the moth flitting round my lamp or resting on the wall and, by the magic that is in it, summoning its mate from far, and lo! there I see God in another of His humbler garments. For God is in all things and everywhere, and from the great suns down, to Him who sent them forth and to Whom they return again, all that hath life must bow.

This is the vision wherein I read a parable of eternal truths.

I, Ayesha, daughter of Yarab, not yet of the flesh, but above and beyond the flesh inhabited the halls of that great goddess of the earth, a minister of That which rules all the earth (Nature's self as now I know), who in Egypt was named Isis, Mother of Mysteries. *Child*, she named me, and *Messenger*; and in that dream or parable, as a child was I to her, for I drank of the cup of her wisdom and something of her greatness was in my soul.

The goddess sat brooding in her sanctuary where Spirits came and went bearing tidings from all lands or emptying at her feet the cups of offered prayer. About her fell her robes, blue as the sky, and over the robes hung down her hair dusky as the night, and beneath her bent brows shone her eyes like stars of the night. In her hand was the rod of power and the footstool at her feet was shaped like the round world. There, canopied with light, she sat upon an ebon seat and brooded while round

her beat music like sea waves upon the shore, such music as is not known upon the earth.

I appeared. I stood before her, I abased myself, I bowed till my forehead lay upon the ground and my hair swept the dust of the ground. She touched me with her sceptre, bidding me arise.

"Speak, Child," she said. "What message dost thou bring from the shores of Nile? How goes my worship in the temples of Isis and are my servants faithful to my law?"

Then I made answer.

"O Mother divine, I have accomplished my embassy. Unseen, a spirit, I have wandered through the Land of Egypt. I have visited thy temples, I have hearkened to the councils of thy priests, I have watched thy worshippers and read their hearts. This is my report. Thy holy temples are empty; thy priests neglect thine altars; save a remnant who remain faithful, thy worshippers bow themselves before the shrines of another goddess."

"How is this goddess named, O Child of my love and wisdom?"

"She is named Aphrodite of the Greeks, a people who have flowed into Egypt, also other folk know her as Ashtoreth and Venus. Her sanctuary of sanctuaries is at Paphos in Cyprus, an island of the sea over against Egypt. She is the Queen of earthly love and love is the ritual of her worship, and she makes a mock of thee, O Mother, and of all the ancient gods, thy brothers and sisters, swearing that thy day and theirs is done and that she has risen from the sea to rule the world, and will rule it to the end. Here and there she reveals herself and conquers by her beauty, making all men to worship her and teaching all women to follow in her steps and beguile as she does, so that thy very

priests turn to her and thy priestesses break from their vows and wanton with them."

"All of this I have learned, O Child, and more; yet it was my desire to hear it from thy lips that cannot lie, since in thee dwells my spirit. Harken now! I am minded to be avenged upon these false Egyptians, and thou shalt be the sword of vengeance wherewith I will smite them, bringing their ancient glory to the dust and for ever setting the yoke of bondage on their necks. Aye, I am so minded and it shall be done, how, I will teach thee afterward. But first, as I have the power to do, I who under the Strength above me am regent of the ball of earth, will summon this Aphrodite to my presence here and now, and bid her speak out her heart to me.

"Hear me, Aphrodite, wherever thou art in earth or heaven. Aphrodite, I bid thee appear."

Then in my vision the Mother rose from her throne. Standing before it, terrible to see, she beckoned with her sceptre, north and south and east and west, uttering the secret words of power. Thrice she beckoned and thrice she spoke the secret words, and waited.

There was a stir at the end of the great hall and a sound of singing. Behold! floating between the long lines of the flame-clad guardians of that hall, attended by her subject gods, her mænads and her maidens, a shape of naked loveliness, came Aphrodite of the Greeks. Veiled in her curling locks and roped about with gleaming pearls for necklace and for girdle, she stood before the throne and bowed to the Majesty it bore, then asked in a laughing voice of music,

"I have heard thy summons, Mother of Mys-

teries, and I am here. What wouldst thou of me, Isis, Queen of the World? How can the Sea-born whose name is Beauty and whose gift is Love, serve thee, Isis, Queen of the World?

"Thus, thou who art shameless, thou born of the new gods and fashioned from the evil that is in the race of men—by lifting thy spell from off my worshippers. I know thy works. Drunken with desires they flock to thee in troops and for reward thou givest them the wages of their sin. Thou layest waste their homes; thou defilest their maidens, thou turnest men to beasts and makest a mock of them. Thy flowers fade; thy joys fill the mouth with ashes and those who drink of thy cup suck up poison in their souls. Thy fair flesh is a rottenness and thy perfumes are a stench and the incense of thine altars is the reek of hell. Therefore I command thee, go back to whence thou camest and leave the world in peace."

"Whither, then, should I go, Mother?" answered Aphrodite with her silvery laugh, "save into thy bosom, whence indeed I sprang, seeing that thou art Nature's self and I am thy child. Stern is thy law and sweet, yet without me thou wouldst have none over whom to rule. Aye, without me would no child be born and not even a flower would blow. Without me thou wouldst rule a wilderness with but the wisdom of which thou boastest to keep thee company. Harken! We are at war and in that war I shall be conqueror, for I am eternal and all life is my slave, because my name is Life. Get thee to thy heaven, Isis, and rule there with Osiris, Lord of Death, but leave me the living. Soon their day is done and they pass beyond my spells into thy dominion. There treat them as thou wilt and be content, for then I have no more need of them, nor

they of me. Why of a sudden art thou so wrath with me, whom thou hast known from the beginning? Is it because I take new names and set up my altars in thine own Egypt, altars wreathed with flowers, leaving all desolate thine where prayers are mumbled from starved hearts and cold hands make the offering of denial? Come now, Mother Isis, let us play a game and let Egypt be the stake. Thou hast the vantage there, seeing that for æons it has bowed to thy laws and thy yoke has been upon its neck."

"What, then, O Aphrodite, dost thou promise Egypt to which I and those who rule with me have given greatness, wisdom, and hope beyond the grave?"

"None of these high things, Mother. My gifts are love and joy; sweet love and joy in which for a little while all fears are forgot. Small gains thou mayest think, looking backward to the past and onward to the future, thou whose eyes are upon eternity. Yet they shall prevail. Isis, in Egypt thy day is done; there, as elsewhere, thy sceptre falls."

"If so, Wanton, with it falls Egypt that henceforth shall be the world's slave. When conqueror after conqueror sets his foot upon her neck, then let her think on Isis whom she has forsaken, and wailing, fill her soul with thy swine's food. Lo! I depart, leaving my curse on Egypt. Have thy little day till before the Judgment seat we settle our account. No more will I listen to thy falsehoods and thy blasphemies. Till then, Wanton, look on my majesty no more."

So in that vision spoke the Mother and was gone. With her, flashing like lightnings, went the flame-

clad guardians that attend the goddess, leaving the great place empty save for Aphrodite and her throng, and for the soul of me, Ayesha, who watched and hearkened, wondering. The Pathian looked around and laughed, then glided to the vacant throne and seating herself thereon, laughed again, till the music of her mockery echoing from pillar to pillar, filled all the temple's halls.

"It is an omen," she cried. "What Isis leaves I take; henceforth her seat and power are mine. See now my ministers, I queen it here, though I wear no vulture cap or symbols of the moon, whose brow is better graced by these abundant locks and whose sceptre is a flower whereof the odours make men mad. Yes, I queen it here as everywhere, though in this solemn melancholy fane I lack a subject."

She glanced about her till her glorious, roving eyes fell upon that spirit which was I.

"Come hither, thou," she said, "and do me homage."

Now in my dream I, that spirit who in the world am named Ayesha, came and stood before her, saying,

"Nay, I am the child of Isis and to her I bow alone."

"Thinkest thou so?" she answered, smiling and looking me up and down. "Well, I have another mind. It seems to me that soon thou wilt descend from this sad realm to the joyous fields of earth, that there thou mayest fulfil a certain purpose, for such is the fate decreed for thee. Now, I, Aphrodite, add to that fate and lighten it. Look behind thee, Spirit that shall be woman!"

I turned and looked, there to behold a shape of beauty that I knew for Man. So beautiful was he

that my breast rose and the life in me stood still. He smiled at me and I smiled back at him. Then he was gone, leaving his picture stamped upon my soul.

“This is what I add to that tragic fate of thine, O Spirit that shall be woman. Take him, the man appointed to thee, who from the beginning was always thine, and as perchance thou hast done before, in his kiss forget thy Mother Isis and thy crown of woes.”

Thus this vision ends, and though now I, Ayesha, have learned that Isis, as we knew and named her in the ancient time, is but a symbol of that eternal holiness which is set above all heavens and all earths, I say again that, as I believe, in its parable is hid something of the changeless truth.

