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*Wisdom's  
Daughter*



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*Wisdom's  
Daughter*

In bygone years the books *She* and *Ayesha* were dedicated to Andrew Lang. Now, when he is dead, this, the last romance that will be written concerning 'She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed', is offered as a tribute to his beloved and honoured memory.

Ditchingham, 1922

—The Editor



## EDITOR'S NOTE

What was the greatest fault of Ayesha, *She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed*? Surely a vanity so colossal that, to take one out of many examples, it persuaded her that her mother died after looking upon her, fearing lest, should she live, she might give birth to another child who was less fair.

At least, as her story shows, it was vanity, rather than love of the beauteous Greek, Kallikrates, that stained the hands of She with his innocent blood and, amongst other ills, brought upon her the fearful curse of deathlessness while still inhabiting a sphere where death is lord of all. Had not Amenartas taunted her with the waning of her imperial beauty, eaten of the tooth of time, never would she have disobeyed the command of her master, the prophet Noot, and entered that Fire of Immortality which she was set to guard.

Thus it seems that by denial she would have escaped the net of many woes in which, perchance, she is still entangled and of Ayesha, Daughter of Wisdom yet Folly's Slave, there would have been no tale to tell and, from her parable of the eternal war of flesh and spirit there would have been no lesson to be learned. But vanity – or was it fate? – led her down another road.

–The Editor



## INTRODUCTION

The manuscript of which the contents are printed here was discovered among the effects of the late L. Horace Holly, though not until some years after his death. It was in an envelope on which had been scribbled a direction that it should be forwarded to the present editor 'at the appointed time', words that at first he did not understand. However, in due course it arrived without any accompanying note of explanation, so that to this hour he does not know by whom it was sent or where from, since the only postmark on the packet was London, W., and the address was typewritten.



When opened the package proved to contain two thick notebooks, bound in parchment, or rather scraped goat or sheepskin, and very roughly as though by an unskilled hand, perhaps in order to preserve them if exposed to hard usage or weather. The paper of these books is extremely thin and tough so that each of them contains a great number of sheets. It is not of European make, and its appearance suggests that it was manufactured in the east, perhaps in China.

There could be no doubt as to who had owned these notebooks, because on one of them, the first, written in red ink upon the parchment cover in block letters, appears the name of Mr Holly himself. Also on its first pages are various memoranda of travel evidently made by him and no one else. After these follow sheet upon sheet of apparently indecipherable shorthand mixed up with tiny Arabic characters. This shorthand proved to belong to no known system, and though every effort was made to decipher it, for over two years it remained unread.

At length, when all attempts had been abandoned, almost by chance, it was shown to a great Oriental scholar, a friend



of the Editor, who glanced at it and took it to bed with him. Next morning at breakfast he announced calmly that he had discovered the key and could read the stuff as easily as though it were a newspaper leader. It seemed that the writing was an ancient form of contracted Arabic, mixed in places with the Demotic of the Egyptians – a shorthand Arabic and a shorthand Demotic, difficult at first, but once the key was found easily decipherable by some six or eight living men, of whom, as it chanced, the learned scholar into whose hands it had thus fallen accidentally was one.

So it came about that with toil and cost and time, at length those two closely written volumes were transcribed in full and translated. For the rest, they speak for themselves. Let the reader judge of them.

There is but one thing to add. Although it is recorded in notebooks that had been his property, clearly this manuscript was *not* written by Mr Holly. For reasons which she explains it was written with the hand of *She* herself, during the period of her second incarnation when at last Leo found her in the mountains of Tibet, as is described in the book called *Ayasha*.

–The Editor





# 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 aforetime I sat amid the ruins of Kôr in Libya.

At Kôr for 2,000 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 great 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, tonight 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 can 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 peeps 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? Maybe 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 the 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 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. Hearken 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 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 maenads 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 Mysteries, 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. Hearken! 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 heavens, 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 aeons 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 Judgement 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 Paphian 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.



*Noot the Prophet  
Comes to Ozal*

Such is the vision, such the dream that has haunted me through the centuries, and brooding over it from age to age, I, Ayesha, doubt not that in its substance it is true, though its trappings may be fancy-wrought. At least this I know, that my spirit is the child of immortal Wisdom, such as once men believed that Isis held, as my undying shape is born of the beauty that is fabled Aphrodite's gift. At least it is certain that even before I dipped me in the Fire of Life, the most of learning and all human loveliness were mine. I know also that it was my mission to bring Egypt to the dust, and did I not bring it to the dust, smiting to its heart through proud Sidon, and Cyprus, Aphrodite's home? And have I not for these deeds borne Aphrodite's curse, as, because of Aphrodite's yoke laid upon my helpless neck, I have borne and bear the curse of Isis, I whose destiny it is thus at once to be the instrument and sport of rival powers whose battle-ground is the heart of every one of us.

Alas! were my tale known, the world in its haste might judge me hardly and think that I, who by burning its Phoenician props overturned an ancient empire, am cruel-natured, or that because I sought the love of a certain man and in my anger slew him when he turned from me, which in truth I did not desire to do, that I am wanton and ungoverned. Yet these things are not so, seeing that it was fate, not I, that gave Egypt to the Persian dog (whom in his turn I overthrew) and made of its people slaves, and my flesh, not I, which after I had tasted of the fire that is nature's Soul, cursed me with passion and its fruits, perchance because I hated it

and would never bow myself to it wholly, I who followed after purity, desiring not man's love but Wisdom's gifts and a crown of spiritual gold.

Moreover, I had earthly and righteous warrant to bring about Sidon's fall and through it that of Egypt, seeing that their kings would have put me to utter shame and robbed my father of his life, as shall be told. So, too, I had the warrant of a woman's heart to worship the man I sought and for the death I brought upon him in my jealous madness my soul has paid full measure in remorse and tears. Still, since justice is hard to come by here on the earth, or even in the heaven above, I know that some would judge me harshly and must bear it with the rest. Even Holly, and at times my Lord Leo who once was named Kallikrates, have cherished such thoughts, though their lips dare not utter them, for I read it in their minds which to me are as an open book. Therefore never shall Holly, nor my lord either, look upon this written truth, lest therefrom they might distil some poison of mistrustful doubt, for it is sure that all men stain the whiteness of pure verity to the colour of their twisted minds. Therefore, too, I write it in tongues and symbols that they do not understand, which yet shall be deciphered in their season.

As I taught Holly long ago in the caves of Kôr, and truly, though afterward for some forgotten reason of my own or to give him food for thought, I may perhaps have changed my tale, puzzling him with stories of great Alexander and the rest, by my mortal birth I am an Arabian of the purest and most noble blood, born in Yaman the Happy and in the sweet city of Ozal. My father was named Yarab after the great ancestor of our race, and I, his only child, was named Ayesha after my highborn mother. Of her, whom I never knew, for she was gathered to the bosom of whatever god she worshipped but one moon from my birth, this is said.

At first she would not look upon me, being angered because I was not a son, but at length at my father's pleading

she was prevailed upon to command that I should be brought to her. When she saw how fair a babe Heaven had given her, such a babe as had not been known or told of among our people, she was amazed and put up a prayer that she might die. This, those who knew her declared, she did for two reasons: first because, foreseeing my greatness, she desired that I alone should hold my father's heart and that of all our tribe, and secondly because she feared lest, should she live, she might bear other children whom she would hate when she compared them to my perfectness.

So it came about as, amongst others, my father told me often, that her prayer was granted and having kissed and blessed me, for a while she entered into rest.

This is the true story of her end, not the other, which those who envied me put about in after days, that owing to certain revelations which came to her at the time of my birth, as to the deeds which I was doomed to do and the loves and hates which I was doomed to earn, my mother thought it better to ask death from her gods rather than to continue in a life which she must live out at my side. This tale, my father often swore to me when I asked him of it, was as false as the changeful pictures which are seen at sunset on the desert, and sometimes at noonday also.

For the rest this beloved father of mine took no other wife while I was yet a child, fearing lest for her own sake, or her children's, she should be jealous and maltreat me, and afterward when I became a maiden, because I would not suffer that another woman should share the rule of his household with me. As I showed to him, he had servants in plenty and these should be enough, to which he bowed his head and answered that without doubt my will was that of God.

Thus it came about that I grew up with my noble father, his adviser and his strength, and through him, or rather with him, ruled all his great tribe, who always worshipped me. Be it admitted that from the first, or at least from the time that I

came to womanhood, I brought him trouble as well as blessing, though through no fault of my own, but because of the beauty with which, as in those days I believed, Isis, or Aphrodite, or both of them, had endowed me for their own divine purposes. Very soon this beauty of mine, also my wit and knowledge, were noised abroad through all Arabia, so that princes came from far to court me, and afterward quarrelled and fought, for, being gentle-hearted, I said a kind word to every one of them and left them to reason out which was the kindest.

This, for the most part, they did with spears and arrows after the fashion of violent and insensate men, so that there was much fighting on my account, which made my father some enemies, because the people of certain of the princes who were killed swore that I had promised myself in marriage to them. This, however, I had never done, who desired to marry no man that I might become a slave, cooped up in a fortress to bear children that I did not desire with some jealous tyrant for their father. Nay, being higher-hearted than any of my time, already I sought to rule the world, and if I must have any lover, to choose one whom I wished, and, when I wished, to have done with him.

But at that time I asked no lover who myself was in love – with wisdom. Knowledge, I saw, was strength, and if I would rule, first I must learn. Therefore I studied deeply, taking for masters all the wisest in Arabia who were proud to teach Ayesha the Beautiful, daughter and heiress of Yarab the great chief who could call 10,000 spears to his standards, all of his own tribe; and 10,000 more sworn to us but not of our blood.

I learned of the stars, a deep learning this that taught my soul its littleness, though it is true that while I studied I wondered, as still I wonder now, in which of them I was destined to rule when my day on earth was done. For always from the beginning I knew that wherever I am, there I must be the first and reign.

Perchance I had learned this aforetime in the halls of Isis who then to me had seemed so great, though afterward contemplating those stars in the silence of the desert night, I came to understand that even the Universal Mother, as men named her in those far days, was herself but small, one who must fight for sovereignty with Aphrodite and other gods.

Holly has told me much of what the astronomers in these latter years have won of nature's secrets: of how they number and weigh the stars, and measure to a mile their infinite distance from the earth, and how assuredly that each of them, even the furthest, is a sun as great or greater than our own, round which revolve worlds unseen. He has been astonished also, and affected to disbelieve, when I answered him, that we of Arabia guessed all these things over 2,000 years ago, and indeed knew some of them. Yet, so it was.

Thus communing with greatness, my soul grew ever greater.

Moreover, I sought other and deeper lore. There wandered a certain strange man to our town, Ozal, where my father kept his court, if so it may be called, that is when we were not camping with our great herds in the desert, as we did at certain seasons of the year after the rains had caused the wilderness to throw up herbage. This man, named Noot, was always aged and white-haired, ugly to look on, with a curious wrinkled face of the colour of parchment, much such a face as that of Holly will be should he attain to his years. Indeed in this and other ways he was so like to Holly that often I think that in him dwells something of Noot's spirit now returned again to earth, as that of Kallikrates has returned to Leo.

Now this Noot, who came to Egypt none knew whence, for by birth he was not Egyptian, had been the high-priest of Isis and *Kherheb* or Chief Magician in Egypt, one who had much power on earth and still more beyond the earth, since he was in touch with things divine. Moreover, he was an honest magician and told the truth even to the kings, as the gods and his wisdom showed it to him, and this was the cause

of his downfall, for woe betide those who tell the truth to kings or to any who wield the sceptre of their might. On a certain day Nectanebes, the first of that name, the pharaoh of Egypt whom others called Nekht-nebf, after a victory he had gained over the Persians, was filled with pride and took counsel with Noot, his Chief Magician, bidding Noot search out the future and tell him of glories to come to Egypt and to the royal house, after he had been gathered to Osiris, that thereon he might feed his soul.

Noot answered that it was wiser to leave the future to care for itself and to satisfy his heart with the present and its joys and greatness.

Then the pharaoh grew wrath and bade him fulfil his command.

So Noot bowed and went, and alone in some tomb or sanctuary drew the circles, uttered the words of power, and called upon the gods he served to show him such things as should befall to Egypt and to Pharaoh's House.

The magic sleep fell upon him and in it appeared the Spirit of Truth and spoke to him dreadful words of fate and doom. These she bade him deliver to Pharaoh, but when they were spoken to fly for his life's sake from Egypt and seek out a maiden called Ayesha, the daughter of Yarab, the Sheik of Ozal, and with her take refuge since she was an appointed instrument of heaven. Moreover, this spirit commanded him to consult the maiden Ayesha in everything and impart to her all his gathered learning and the very secrets of the gods that had been revealed to him, that to any other it would be death to speak.

Now in the morning Noot went into the presence of Pharaoh who rejoiced to see him, and cried,

'Be welcome, *Kherheb*, the first of all magicians, you that men say were born beyond the earth, you in whom lives the spirit of Maat, goddess of Truth. Tell me now what the gods have revealed to you as to the glories they prepare for the

ancient land of Egypt, and the House of me the pharaoh who have made her great again, driving out the dogs of Persians!’

‘Life! Blood! Strength! O Pharaoh!’ answered Noot, saluting in the ancient form. ‘I have heard the word of Pharaoh who commanded me against my counsel to make divination and to seek to learn of the future from the gods. Behold! the gods hearkened. Behold! by the mouth of Maat, Lady of Truth, the goddess of the land where I was born, they spoke to me in the silence of the night. Thus they spoke. “Say to Nectanebes who impiously dares to lift the veil of time, that because he has fought for Egypt against the Barbarians who worship other gods, it is granted to him to die in his bed which shall chance ere long. Say that after him shall come a usurper whom the Barbarians shall defeat, so that he dies a slave in the land of Persia. Say that after him the son of Pharaoh shall wear the Double Crown and be called by the name of Pharaoh, the last of the true Blood of Egypt who shall ever sit upon its throne. Say that this son of his is accursed because he is in league with evil spirits and has worked apostasy, putting about his neck the chain of Aphrodite of the Greeks and the chains of Baal and of Moloch which never can be broken. Therefore, though he make many false offerings, yet is he accursed and the Barbarians shall overcome him, so that he flees away, nor shall all his magic be a shield to him. Because of him Egypt shall fall and her cities shall be burned and her children slaughtered and her temples desecrated, and never more shall one of her pure and ancient blood hold her sceptre.” Such is the oracle that the gods have commanded me to speak, O Pharaoh.’

Now when Nectanebes heard these awful decrees of fate upon him and upon his son, he trembled and rent his robes. Then rage took him and he reviled Noot the Prophet, calling him a liar and a traitor, and saying that he would make an end of him and his prophecies together. But because they were alone together within a chamber, before he could summon guards to kill him, Noot, helped of heaven, fled away out of the palace

and as darkness was falling, mingled with the throng and could not be found by the soldiers who sought him.

Ere daylight he was far from the city and, disguised, escaped from Egypt, bringing with him only his *Kherheb's* staff of power, also the ancient sacred books of spells or words of strength that were hidden in his robes. With these he brought, moreover, a little ancient image of Isis which he made use of in his divination and prayed before by day and night.

Thus it came about a while later, one eve when I, the young maiden Ayesha, stood alone in the desert communing with my soul and drawing wisdom from the stars, that there appeared before me a withered, ancient man who, when he saw me, knelt down and bowed to me. I looked on him and asked,

'Why, aged One, do you kneel to me who am but a mortal?'

'Are you indeed a mortal?' he asked. 'Methought that I who am the head-priest of Isis saw in you the goddess come to earth, and indeed, Lady, I seem to see the holy blood of Isis coursing in your veins.'

'It is true, Priest, that of this goddess whom my mother worshipped I have dreams and memories and that sometimes she seems to speak with me in sleep, yet I tell you that I am but a mortal, the daughter of Yarab the far-famed,' I answered to him.

'Then you are that maiden whom I am commanded to seek, she who is named Ayesha. Know, Lady, that great is your destiny, greater than that of any kind, and that it is revealed to me that you will become immortal.'

'All who believe in the gods trust to find the pearl, Immortality, beneath death's waters, O Priest.'

'Yes, Lady, but the immortality that is foretold for you is different and begins upon the earth, and I confess that I understand it not, though perhaps it may be an immortality of fame.'

'Nor I, Priest. But meanwhile, what would you of me?'

'Shelter and food, Lady.'

'And what can you offer for these, Priest?'

'Learning, Lady.'

'That I think I have already.'

'Nay, Lady Ayesha, not such learning as I can give; the knowledge of the secrets of the gods; spells that will sway the hearts of kings, magic that will show things afar and call ghosts from the grave, power that will set him who wields it upon the pinnacle of worship –'

'Stay!' I broke in. 'You are old and ugly! you are tired, your foot bleeds, you seek protection, and it seems to me that you need food. How comes it that one who can command so much lore and power is in want of such things as these that the humblest peasant does not lack, and must seek to purchase them with flatteries?'

When he heard these words, of a sudden the aspect of that old man changed. To me his shrunken body seemed to swell, his face grew fierce and set, and a strange light shone in his deep eyes.

'Maiden,' he said in another voice, 'I perceive that you are in truth in need of such a teacher as I am. Had you the inner wisdom, you would not judge by the outward appearance and you would know that oftentimes the gods bring misfortunes upon those they love in order that thereby they may work their ends. Beauty is yours, wit is yours, and a great destiny awaits you, though with it, as I think, great sorrow. Yet one thing is lacking to you – humility – and that you must learn beneath the rods of destiny. But of these matters we will talk afterward. Meanwhile, as you say, I need food and shelter, which are necessary to all while still they labour in the flesh. Lead me to your father!'

Without more talk though not without fear, I guided this strange wanderer to our tents, for at the time we were camping in the desert, and into the presence of my father, Yarab, who gave him hospitality after the Arab fashion, but

save for the common words of courtesy, held no converse with him that night.

On the following morning before we struck our camp, however, they had much speech together, and at the end of it I was summoned to the great tent.

‘Daughter,’ said my father, pointing to the wanderer who was sitting cross-legged on a carpet before him after the fashion of an Egyptian scribe, ‘I have questioned this learned man, our guest. I discover from him that he is the First Magician of Egypt, the head-priest also of the greatest goddess of that land, she whom your mother worshipped. At least, he says he was these things – but now, having quarrelled with Pharaoh, that he is nothing but a beggar, which is a strange state for a magician. Also, according to his tale, Pharaoh seeks his life, as he declares, because of certain prophecies that he made to him concerning the fate of Egypt and of Pharaoh’s House. It seems that he desires to abide here with us and to impart his wisdom to you, which wisdom, it is evident, has brought him to an evil case. Now I ask you, as one gifted with discretion beyond your years, what answer shall I return to him? If I keep this Noot here, for that he tells me, is his name, though of his race and country he will say nothing, perchance Pharaoh, whose arm is long, will come to seek him and bring war upon us, and if I sent him away, perchance I turn my back upon a messenger from the gods. What then shall I do?’

‘Ask him, my Father; seeing that one who prophesies evil to the pharaoh to his own ruin must be a truthful man.’

Then my father stroked his long beard, being perplexed, and inquired of the wanderer whether he should keep him or send him away.

Noot replied that he thought that my father would do well to send him away, but better to keep him. He said that he had no revelation on the matter, though if it were wished he would seek one, but he believed that although his presence

might bring trouble, from his dismissal would come yet worse trouble. He added that in a vision he had been commanded by the goddess Isis to find out a certain lady Ayesha and become her instructor in mysteries that the purposes of heaven might be fulfilled, and that it was ill to flout goddesses whose arms were even longer than those of Pharaoh.

Now for the second time my father who did nothing great or small without my counsel, asked my judgement on the matter after I had heard the words of Noot. I pondered, remembering what the wanderer had promised to me in the desert, namely, knowledge and the secrets of the gods, also spells that would sway the hearts of kings, with the gifts of magic and of power. At length I answered,

‘To what end is all this empty talk, my Father? Has not this stranger eaten of your bread and salt and is it the custom of our people to drive away from their doors for no fault those to whom they have given hospitality?’

‘True,’ said my father. ‘If he were to be sent hence, it should have been done at once. Abide in my shadow, Noot, and pray your gods to bring a blessing on me.’

So Noot, the priest and prophet, remained with us and from the first day of his coming, opened out to my eager eyes all the scrolls of his secret lore. Still it is true that he brought to my father, not blessing but death, as shall be told, though this did not come for many moons.

Meanwhile he taught and I learned, for his knowledge flowed into my soul like a river into the desert and filled its thirsty sand with life. Of all that I learned from him, because of the oaths I swore, even now it is not lawful that I should write, but it is true that in those years of study I grew near to the gods and wrested many a secret from the clenched hands of nature.

Moreover, though as yet I did not take the vows, I became a votary of Isis, as Noot, her high-priest, had authority to make me, and one of the inner circle. Yes, I determined even then

that I would forswear marriage and all fleshly joys and make to Isis the offering of my life, while she through her priest vowed to me in return such power and wisdom as had scarce been given to any woman before me.

Thus the time went by till at length fell the blow and I – for all my wisdom – never heard Aphrodite laughing behind her veil. Nor indeed did Noot, but then he was an old man, who, as I drew out of him, save those of his mother, had not once touched a woman's lips. All learning was his, but it seemed that in his search for it there were some things he had passed by. At least so I believed, or rather half-believed, at this time, but as I learned afterward, there are matters upon which even the most holy think it no shame to lie, since in the end Noot confessed to me that in his youth he had been as are other men. Also I think that he heard the laughter of Aphrodite, though I did not. However these things may be, as I was to discover afterward, Mother Isis is a stern mistress to whoever looks the other way.

Also, although Noot told me much, he hid more. Not for many a year was I to learn that he was a citizen of the ancient, ruined land of Kôr, and the only one who knew the fearful mystery it hid, which in a far day to come he was commanded to reveal to me, Ayesha, and to no other man or woman. Nor did he tell me that it was the purpose of heaven that under her other shape and name of Truth I should again establish the worship of Isis in that land and once more make of it a queen of the world. Yet these things were so and therefore was he sent to me and for no other reason. Therefore was he commanded to reveal the doom of Egypt to Nectanebes, that this pharaoh in his wrath might drive him, a wanderer, to our tents at Ozal there to dwell for years and instruct me, the chosen, in all things that I must learn, so that when at last the appointed hour dawned, I might be fitted for my mighty task.

But all this while Aphrodite laughed on behind her veil!