

THE BLACK MADONNA.

The blood-red sunset turns the dark fringes of the forest into a wave of flame. A hot river of light streams through the aisles of the ancient trees, and, falling over the shoulder of a vast, smooth slab of stone that rises solitary in this wilderness of dark growth and sombre green, pours in a flood across an open glade and upon the broken columns and inchoate ruins of what in immemorial time had been a mighty temple, the fane of a perished god, or of many gods. As the sun rapidly descends, the stream of red light narrows, till, quivering and palpitating, it rests like a bloody sword upon a colossal statue of black marble, facing due westward. The statue is that of a woman, and is as of the Titans of old-time.

A great majesty is upon the mighty face, with its moveless yet seeing eyes, its faint inscrutable smile. Upon the triple-ledged pedestal, worn at the edges like swords ground again and again, lie masses of large white flowers, whose heavy fragrances rise in a faint blue vapour drawn forth with the sudden suspiration of the earth by the first twilight-chill.

In the great space betwixt the white slab of stone—hurled thither, or raised, none knoweth when or how—is gathered a dark multitude, silent, expectant. Many are Arab tribesmen, the remnant of a strange sect driven southward; but most are Nubians, or that unnamed swarthy race to whom both Arab and Negro are as children. All, save the priests, of whom the elder are clad in white robes and the younger girt about by scarlet sashes, are naked. Behind the men, at a short distance apart, are the women; each virgin with an ivory circlet round the neck, each mother or pregnant woman with a thin gold band round the left arm. Between the long double-line of the priests and the silent multitude stands a small group of five youths and five maidens; each crowned with

heavy drooping white flowers; each motionless, morose; all with eyes fixt on the trodden earth at their feet.

The younger priests suddenly strike together square brazen cymbals, deeply chased with signs and letters of a perished tongue. A shrill screaming cry goes up from the people, followed by a prolonged silence. Not a man moves, not a woman sighs. Only a shiver contracts the skin of the foremost girl in the small central group. Then the elder priests advance slowly, chanting monotonously,

CHORUS OF THE PRIESTS:

*We are thy children, O mighty Mother!
We are the slain of thy spoil, O Slayer!
We are thy thoughts that are fulfilled, O Thinker!
Have pity upon us!*

And from all the multitude cometh as with one shrill screaming voice:

*Have pity upon us! Have pity upon us! Have pity
[upon us!]*

THE PRIESTS:

*Thou wast, before the first child came through the dark
[gate of the womb!]*

Thou wast, before ever woman knew man!

*Thou wast, before the shadow of man moved athwart
[the grass!]*

Thou wast, and Thou art!

THE MULTITUDE:

*Have pity upon us! Have pity upon us! Have pity
[upon us!]*

THE PRIESTS:

*Hail, thou who art more fair than the dawn, more dark
[than night!]*

Hail thou, white as ivory or veiled in shadow!

Hail, thou of many names, and immortal!

*Hail, Mother of God, Sister of the Christ, Bride of the
[Prophet!]*

THE MULTITUDE:

*Have pity upon us? Have pity upon us! Have pity
[upon us!]*

THE PRIESTS:

*O moon of night, O morning star! Consoler! Slayer!
 Thou, who lovest shadow, and fear, and sudden death!
 Who art the smile that looketh upon women and children!
 Who hath the heart of man in thy grip as in a vice;
 Who hath his pride and strength in thy sigh of yestereve;
 Who hath his being in thy breath that goeth forth, and
 [is not!*

THE MULTITUDE:

*Have pity upon us! Have pity upon us! Have pity
 [upon us!*

THE PRIESTS:

*We knew thee not, nor the way of thee, O Queen!
 But we bring thee what thou loved'st of old, and for ever!
 The white flowers of our forests and the red flowers of
 [our bodies!*

*Take them and slay not, O Slayer!
 For we are thy slaves, O Mother of Life,
 We are the dust of thy tired feet, O Mother of God!*

As the white-robed priests advance slowly towards the Black Madonna, the younger tear off their scarlet sashes, and seizing the five maidens, bind them together, left arm to right, and hand to hand. Therewith the victims move slowly forward till they pass through the ranks of the priests, and stand upon the lowest edge of the pedestal of the great statue. Towards each steppeth, and behind each standeth, a naked priest, each holding a narrow irregular sword of antique fashion.

THE ELDER PRIESTS:

O Mother of God!

THE YOUNGER PRIESTS:

O Slayer, be pitiful!

THE VICTIMS:

O Mother of God! O Slayer! be merciful!

THE MULTITUDE (*in a loud screaming voice*):

*Have pity upon us! Have pity upon us! Have pity
 [upon us!*

The last blood-red gleam fades from the Black Madonna, and flashes this way and that for a moment from

the ten sword-knives that cut the air and plunge between the shoulders and to the heart of each victim. A wide spirt of blood rains upon the white flowers at the base of the colossal figure; where also speedily lie, dark amidst welling crimson, the swarthy bodies of the slain.

THE PRIESTS :

*Behold, O Mother of God,
The white flowers of our forests and the red flowers of
[our bodies !*

*Have pity, O Compassionate,
Be merciful, O Queen !*

THE MULTITUDE :

*Have pity upon us ! Have pity upon us ! Have pity
[upon us !*

But at the swift coming of the darkness, the priests hastily cover the dead with the masses of the white flowers; and one by one, and group by group, the multitude melteth away. When all are gone save the young chief, Bihr, and a few of his following, the priests prostrate themselves before the Black Madonna, and pray to her to vouchsafe a sign.

From the mouth of the carven figure cometh a hollow voice, sombre as the reverberation of thunder among barren hills.

THE BLACK MADONNA :

I hearken.

THE PRIESTS (*prostrate*):

Wilt thou slay, O Slayer ?

THE BLACK MADONNA :

Yea, verily.

THE PRIESTS (*in a rising chant*):

Wilt thou save, O Mother of God ?

THE BLACK MADONNA :

I save.

THE PRIESTS :

Can one see thee, and live ?

THE BLACK MADONNA :

At the Gate of Death.

Whereafter, no sound cometh from the statue, already dim in the darkness that seems to have crept from the

forest. The priests rise, and disappear in silent groups under the trees.

The thin crescent moon slowly rises. A phosphorescent glow from orchids and parasitic growths shimmers intermittently in the forest. A wavering beam of light falls upon the right breast of the Black Madonna; then slowly downward to her feet; then upon the motionless figure of Bihr, the warrior-chief. None saw him steal thither: none knoweth that he has braved the wrath of the Slayer; for it is the sacred time, when it is death to enter the glade.

BIHR (*in a low voice*):

Speak, Spirit that dwelleth here from of old . . .
 Speak, for I would have speech with thee. I fear thee
 not, O Mother of God, for the priests of the Christ who
 is thy son say that thou wert but a woman . . .
 And it may be—it may be—what say the children of
 the Prophet: that there is but one God, and he is Allah.

(Deep silence. From the desert beyond the forest
 comes the hollow roaring of lions.)

BIHR (*in a loud chant*):

To the north and to the east I have seen many figures
 like unto thine, gods and goddesses: some mightier than
 thee—vast sphinxes by the flood of Nilus, gigantic faces
 rising out of the sands of the desert. And none spake,
 for silence is come upon them; and none slays, for the
 strength of the gods passes even as the strength of men.

(Deep silence. From the obscure waste of the forest
 come snarling cries, long-drawn howls, and the
 low moaning sigh of the wind.)

BIHR (*mockingly*):

For I will not be thrall to a woman, and the priests shall
 not bend me to their will as a slave unto the yoke. If
 thou thyself art God, speak, and I shall be thy slave to
 do thy will. . . . Thrice have I come hither at
 the new moon, and thrice do I go hence un comforted.
 . . . What voice was that that spoke ere the
 victims died? I know not; but it hath reached mine
 ears never save when the priests are by. Nay (*laughing*
low), O Mother of God, I—

(Suddenly he trembles all over and falls on his knees,
for from the blackness above him cometh a voice:)

THE BLACK MADONNA :

What would'st thou ?

BIHR (*hoarsely*) :

Have mercy upon me, O Queen !

THE BLACK MADONNA :

What would'st thou ?

BIHR :

I worship thee, Mother of God ! Slayer and Saver !

THE BLACK MADONNA :

What would'st thou ?

BIHR (*tremulously*) :

Show me thyself, thyself, even for this one time, O
Strength and Wisdom !

Deep silence. The wind in the forest passes away
with a faint wailing sound. The dull roaring of lions
rises and falls in the distance. A soft yellow light
illumes the statue, as though another moon were rising
behind the temple.

A great terror comes upon Bihr the Chief, and he
falls prostrate at the base of the Black Madonna,

His eyes are open, but they see not, save the burnt
spikes of trodden grass, sere and stiff save where damp
with newly-shed blood ; and deaf are his ears, though
he waits for he knoweth not what sound from above.

Suddenly he starts, and the sweat mats the hair on
his forehead when he feels a touch on his right shoulder.
Looking slowly round he sees beside him a woman, tall,
and of a lithe and noble body. He seeth that her skin
is dark, yet not of the blackness of the south. Two
spheres of wrought gold cover her breasts, and from the
serpentine zone round her waist is looped a dusky veil
spangled with shining points. In her eyes, large as
those of the desert-antelope, is the loveliness and the
pathos and the pain of twilight.

BIHR (*trembling*) :

Art thou—Art thou——

THE BLACK MADONNA :

I am she whom thou worshippest.

BIHR :

(looking at the colossal statue, irradiated by the strange light that cometh he knows not whence ; and then at the beautiful apparition by his side.)

Thou art the Black Madonna, the Mother of God ?

THE BLACK MADONNA :

Thou sayest it.

BIHR :

Thou hast heard my prayer, O Queen !

THE BLACK MADONNA :

Even so.

BIHR :

(Taking heart because of the sweet and thrilling humanity of the goddess.)

O Slayer and Saver, is the lightning thine and the fire that is in the earth ? Canst thou whirl the stars as from a sling, and light the mountainous lands to the south with falling meteors ? O Queen, destroy me not, for I am thy slave, and weaker than thy breath : but canst thou stretch forth thine hand and say yea to the lightning, and bid silence unto the thunder ere it breeds the bolts that smite ? For if——

THE BLACK MADONNA :

I make and I unmake. This cometh and that goeth, and I am——

BIHR :

And thou art——

THE BLACK MADONNA :

I was Ashtaroth of old. Men have called me many names. All things change, but I change not. Know me, O Slave ! I am the Mother of God. I am the Sister of the Christ. I am the Bride of the Prophet.

BIHR *(with awe)* :

And thou art the very Prophet, and the very Christ, and the very God ! Each speaketh in thee, who art older than they——

THE BLACK MADONNA :

I am the Prophet.

BIHR :

Hail, O Lord of Deliverance !

THE BLACK MADONNA :

I *am* the Christ, the Son of God.

BIHR :

Hail, O most Patient, most Merciful !

THE BLACK MADONNA :

I *am* the Lord thy God.

BIHR :

Hail, Giver of Life and Death !

THE BLACK MADONNA :

Yet here none is ; for each goeth or each cometh as I will. I only am eternal.

BIHR :

(Crawling forward, and kissing her feet.)

Behold, I am thy slave to do thy will : thy sword to slay : thy spear to follow : thy hound to track thine enemies. I am dust beneath thy feet. Do with me as thou wilt.

THE BLACK MADONNA :

(Slowly, and looking at him strangely.)

Thou shalt be my High Priest. . . . Come back to-morrow an hour after the setting of the sun.

As Bihr the Chief rises and goeth away into the shadow she stareth steadily after him ; and a deep fear dwells in the twilight of her eyes. Then, turning, she standeth awhile by the slain bodies of the victims of the sacrifice ; and having lightly brushed away with her foot the flowers above each face, looketh long on the mystery of death. And when at last she glides by the great statue and passes into the ruins beyond, there is no longer any glow of light, and a deep darkness covereth the glade. From the deeper darkness beyond comes the howling of hyenas, the shrill screaming of a furious beast of prey, and the sudden bursting roar of lion answering lion.

When the dawn breaks, and a pale, wavering light glimmers athwart the great white slab of stone that, on the farther verge of the forest, faces the Black Madonna, there is nought upon the pedestal save a ruin of bloodied trampled flowers, though the sere yellow grass is stained in long trails across the open. The dawn withdraws again, but ere long suddenly wells forth, and

it is as though the light wind were bearing over the forest a multitude of soft grey feathers from the breasts of doves. Then the dim concourse of feathers is as though innumerable leaves of wild-roses were falling, falling, petal by petal uncurling into a rosy flame that wafts upward and onward. The stars have grown suddenly pale, and the fires of Phosphor burn wanly green in the midst of a palpitating haze of pink. With a great rush, the sun swings through the gates of the East, tossing aside his golden, fiery mane as he fronts the new day.

And the going of the day is from morning silence unto noon silence, and from the silence of the afternoon unto the silence of the eve. Once more, towards the setting of the sun, the multitude cometh out of the forest, from the east and from the west, and from the north and from the south: once more the Priests sing the sacred hymns: once more the people supplicate as with one shrill screaming voice, *Have pity upon us! Have pity upon us! Have pity upon us!* Once more the victims are slain, of little children who might one day shake the spear and slay, five; and of little children who would one day bear and bring forth, five.

Yet again an hour passeth after the setting of the sun. There is no moon to lighten the darkness and the silence; but a soft glow falleth from the temple, and upon the man who kneels before the Black Madonna. But when Bihr, having no sign vouchsafed, and hearing no sound, and seeing nought upon the carven face, neither tremour of the lips nor life in the lifeless eyes, suddenly seeth the goddess, glorious in her beauty that is as of the night, coming towards him from out of the ruins, his heart leapeth within him in strange joy and dread. Scarce knowing what he doth, he springeth to his feet, trembling as a reed that leaneth against the flank of a lioness by the water-pool.

BIHR (*yearningly, with supplicating arms*):
Hail, God! . . . Goddess, Most Beautiful!

She draws nigh to him, looking at him the while out of the deep twilight of her eyes.

THE BLACK MADONNA:
What would'st thou?

BIHR :

(*Wildly, stepping close, but halting in dread.*)
Thou art no Mother of God, O Goddess, Queen, Most
Beautiful !

THE BLACK MADONNA :

What would'st thou, O blind fool that is so in love with
death ?

BIHR (*hoarsely*) :

Make me like unto thyself, for I love you !

Deep silence. From afar, on the desert, comes the
dull roaring of lions by the water-courses ; from the
forest a murmurous sound as of baffled winds snared
among the thick-branched ancient trees.

BIHR :

(*Sobbing as one wounded in flight by an arrow.*)
For I love thee ! I—love—thee ! I——

Deep silence. A shrill screaming of a bird fascinated
by a snake comes from the forest. Beyond, from the
desert, a long, desolate moaning and howling, where the
hyenas prowled.

THE BLACK MADONNA :

When . . . did . . . thy folly . . . this madness
. . . come upon thee . . . O Fool ?

BIHR (*passionately*) :

O Most Beautiful ! Most Beautiful ! Thou—Thou—
will I worship !

THE BLACK MADONNA :

Go hence, lest I slay thee !

BIHR :

Slay, O Slayer, for thou art Life and Death ! . . .
But I go not hence. I love thee ! I love thee ! I love
thee !

THE BLACK MADONNA :

I am the Mother of God.

BIHR :

I love thee !

THE BLACK MADONNA :

God dwelleth in me. I am thy God.

BIHR :

I love thee !

THE BLACK MADONNA :

Go hence, lest I slay thee !

BIHR :

Thou tremblest, O Mother of God ! Thy lips twitch,
thy breasts heave, O thou who callest thyself God !

THE BLACK MADONNA :

(raising her right arm menacingly.)

Go hence, thou dog, lest thou look upon my face no more.

Then suddenly, with bowed head and shaking limbs, Bihr the Chief turneth and passes into the forest. And as he fades into the darkness, the Black Madonna stareth a long while after him, and a deep fear broodeth in the twilight of her eyes. But by the bodies of the slain children she passes at last, and with a shudder looks not upon their faces, but strews the heavy white flowers more thickly upon them.

The darkness cometh out of the darkness, billow welling forth from spent billow on the tides of night. On the obscure waste of the glade nought moves, save the gaunt shadow of a hyena that crawls from column to column. From the blackness beyond swells the long thunderous howl of a lioness, echoing the hollow blasting roar of a lion standing, with eyes of yellow flame, on the summit of the great slab of smooth rock that faces the carven Madonna.

And when the dawn breaks, and long lines of pearl-grey wavelets ripple in a flood athwart the black-green sweep of the forest, there is nought upon the pedestal but red flowers that once were white, rent and scattered this way and that. The cool wind moving against the east ruffles the opaline flood into a flying foam of pink, wherefrom mists and vapours rise on wings like rosy flames, and as they rise their crests shine as with blazing gold, and they fare forth after the Morn that leaps towards the Sun.

And the going of the day is from morning silence unto noon silence, and from the silence of the afternoon unto the silence of eve. Once more towards the setting of the sun, the multitude cometh out of the forest, from the east and from the west, and from the north and from the south. Once more the priests sing the sacred

hymns: once more the people supplicate as with one shrill screaming voice, *Have pity upon us! Have pity upon us! Have pity upon us!* Once more the victims are slain: five chiefs of captives taken in war, and unto each chief two warriors in the glory of youth.

Yet an hour after the setting of the sun. Moonless the silence and the dark, save for the soft yellow light that falleth from the temple, and upon the man who, crested with an ostrich-plume bound by a heavy circlet of gold, with a tiger-skin about his shoulders, and with a great spear in his hand, standeth beyond the statue and nigh unto the ruins, where no man hath ventured and lived.

BIHR (*with loud triumphant voice*):
Come forth, my Bride!

Deep silence, save for the sighing of the wind among the upper branches of the trees, and the panting of the flying deer beyond the glade.

BIHR:
(*Striking his spear against the marble steps.*)
Come forth, Glory of my eyes! Come forth, Body of my Body.

Deep silence. Then there is a faint sound, and the Black Madonna stands beside Bihr the Chief. And the man is wrought to madness by her beauty, and lusteth after her, and possesseth her with the passion of his eyes.

THE BLACK MADONNA:
(*Trembling, and strangely troubled.*)
What would'st thou?

BIHR:
Thou!

THE BLACK MADONNA (*slowly*):
Young art thou, Bihr, in thy comeliness and strength to be so in love with death.

BIHR:
Who giveth life, and who death? It is not thou, nor I.

THE BLACK MADONNA (*shuddering*):
It cometh. None can stay it.

BIHR:
Not thou? Thou can'st not stay it, even?

THE BLACK MADONNA (*whisperingly*):
Nay, Bihr; and this thing thou knowest in thy heart.

BIHR (*mockingly*):
O Mother of God! O Sister of Christ! O Bride of the Prophet!

THE BLACK MADONNA:
(*putting her hand to her heart.*)
What would'st thou?

BIHR:
Thou!

THE BLACK MADONNA:
I am the Slayer, the Terrible, the Black Madonna.

BIHR:
And lo, thy God laugheth at thee, even as at me, and mine. And lo, I have come for thee; for I am become His Prophet, and thou art to be my Bride!

As he finisheth he turns towards the great Statue of the Black Madonna and, laughing, hurls his spear against its breast, whence the weapon rebounds with a loud clang. Then, ere the woman knows what he has done, he leaps to her and seizes her in his grasp, and kisses her upon the lips, and grips her with his hands till the veins sting in her arms. And all the sovereignty of her lonely godhood passeth from her like the dew before the hot breath of the sun, and her heart throbs against his side so that his ears ring as with the clang of the gongs of battle. He sobs low, as a man amidst baffling waves; and in the hunger of his desire she sinks as one who drowns.

Together they go up the long flat marble steps: together they pass into the darkness of the ruins. From the deeper darkness beyond cometh no sound, for the forest is strangely still. Not a beast of prey comes nigh unto the slain victims of the sacrifice, not a vulture falleth like a cloud through the night. Only, from afar, the dull roaring of the lions cometh up from the water-courses on the desert.

And the wind that bloweth in the night cometh with rain and storm, so that when the dawn breaks it is as a sea of sullen waves grey with sleet. But calm cometh out of the blood-red splendour of the east.

And on this, the morning of the fourth and last day of the Festival of the Black Madonna, the multitude of her worshippers come forth from the forest, singing a glad song. In front go the warriors, the young men brandishing spears, and with their knives in their left hands slicing the flesh upon their sides and upon their thighs: the men of the north clad in white garb and heavy burnous, the tribesmen of the south naked save for their loin-girths, but plumed as for war.

But as the priests defile beyond them upon the glade, a strange new song goeth up from their lips; and the people tremble, for they know that some dire thing hath happened.

THE PRIESTS (*chanting*):

Lo, when the law of the Queen is fulfilled, she passeth from her people awhile. For the Mother of God loveth the world, and would go in sacrifice. So loveth us the Mother of God that she passeth in sacrifice. Behold, she perisheth, who dieth not! Behold, she dieth, who is immortal!

Whereupon a great awe cometh on the multitude, as they behold smoke, whirling and fulgorant, issuing from the mouth and nostrils of the Black Madonna. But this awe passeth into horror, and horror into wild fear, when great tongues of flame shoot forth amidst the wreaths of smoke, and when from forth of the Black Madonna come strange and horrible cries, as though a mortal woman were perishing by the torture of fire.

With shrieks the women turn and fly; hurling their spears from them, the men dash wildly to the forest, heedless whither they flee.

But those that leap to the westward, where the great white rock standeth solitary, facing the Black Madonna, see for a moment, in the glare of sunrise, a swarthy, naked figure, with a tiger-skin about the shoulders, crucified against the smooth white slope. Down from the outspread hands of Bihr the Chief trickle two long wavering streamlets of blood: two long streamlets of blood drip, drip, down the white glaring face of the rock, from the pierced feet.

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