

The Idyll of the White Lotus

By Mabel Collins

Mabel Collins: The Idyll of the White Lotus

Mabel Collins, 1890
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Bird Publisher
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*TO THE TRUE AUTHOR,
THE INSPIRER OF THIS WORK,
IT IS DEDICATED.*

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PREFACE

The ensuing pages contain a story which has been told in all ages and among every people. It is the tragedy of the Soul. Attracted by Desire, the ruling element in the lower nature of Man, it stoops to sin; brought to itself by suffering, it turns for help to the redeeming Spirit within; and in the final sacrifice achieves its apotheosis and sheds a blessing on mankind.

PROLOGUE

Behold I stood alone, one among many, an isolated individual in the midst of a united crowd. And I was alone, because, among all the men my brethren who knew, I alone was the man who both knew and taught. I taught the believers at the gate, and was driven to do this by the power that dwelleth in the sanctuary. I had no escape, for in that deep darkness of the most sacred shrine, I beheld the light of the inner life, and was driven to reveal it, and by it was I upheld and made strong. For indeed, although I died, it took ten priests of the temple to accomplish my death, and even then they but ignorantly thought themselves powerful.

BOOK I.

CHAPTER I.

Ere my beard had become a soft down upon my chin I entered the gates of the temple to begin my noviciate in the order of the priesthood.

My parents were shepherds outside the city. I had never but once entered within the city walls until the day my mother took me to the gate of the temple. It as a feast day in the city, and my mother, a frugal and industrious woman thus fulfilled two purposes by her journey. She took me to my destination, and then she departed to enjoy a brief holiday amid the sights and scenes of the city.

I was enthralled by the crowds and noises of the streets. I think my nature was always one that strove to yield itself to the great whole of which it was such a small part - and by yielding itself, to draw back into it the sustenance of life.

But out of the bustling throng we soon turned. We entered upon a broad, green plain upon the further side of which ran our sacred, beloved river. How plainly I behold that scene still! On the banks of the water I saw the sculptured roofs and glittering ornaments of the temple and its surrounding buildings shining in the clear morning air. I had no fear, for I had no definite expectations. But I wondered much whether life within those gates was as beautiful a thing as it seemed to me it must be.

At the gate stood a black-robed novice speaking to a woman from the city, who carried flasks of water which she urgently prayed one of the priests to bless. She would then have for sale a precious burden - a thing paid dearly for by the superstitious populace.

I peeped through the gate as we stood waiting for our turn of speech, and beheld a sight that struck me with awe. That awe lasted a long time, even when I had entered into almost hourly familiarity with the figure which so impressed me.

It was one of the white-robed priests, pacing slowly down the broad avenue towards the gate. I had never seen one of those white-robed priests before, save on the single occasion when I had before visited the city. I then had seen several upon the sacred boat in the midst of a river procession.

But now this figure was near me, approaching me - I held my breath.

The air was indeed very still, but those stately white garments looked, as the priest moved beneath the shadow of the avenue, as if no earthly breeze could stir them. His step had the same equable character. He moved, but it seemed scarcely as though he walked in the fashion that other and impetuous mortals walk. His eyes were bent on the ground, so that I could not see them; and, indeed, I dreaded the raising of those drooping lids. His complexion was fair, and his hair of a dull gold color. His beard was long and full, but it had the same strangely immovable, almost carven look, to my fancy. I could not imagine it blown aside. It seemed as though cut in gold, and made firm for eternity. The whole man impressed me thus - as a being altogether removed from the ordinary life of man.

The novice looked around, his notice attracted probably by my intense gaze, for no sound reached my ears from the priest's footfall. "Ah!" he said, "here is the holy priest Agmahd, I will ask him."

Closing the gate behind him, he drew back, and we saw him speak to the priest, who bowed his head slightly. The man returned, and taking the water flasks from the woman carried them to the priest, who laid his hand for a second upon them.

She took them again with profuse thanks, and then we were asked our business.

I was soon left alone with the black-robed novice. I was not sorry though considerably awed. I had never cared much for my old task of tending my father's sheep, and of course I was already filled with the idea that I was about to become something different from the common herd of men. This idea will carry poor human nature through severer trials even than that of leaving one's home forever and entering finally upon a new and untried course of life.

The gate swung to behind me, and the black-robed man locked it with a great key that hung to his waist. But the action gave me no sense of imprisonment, - only a consciousness of seclusion and separateness. Who could associate imprisonment with a scene such as that which lay before me?

The temple doors were facing the gate, at the other end of a broad and beautiful avenue. It was not a natural avenue formed by trees planted in the ground, and luxuriating in a growth of their own choosing. It was formed by great tubs of stone, in which were planted shrubs of enormous size, but evidently trimmed and guided most carefully into the strange shapes they formed. Between each shrub was a square block of stone, upon which was a carved figure. Those figures nearest the gate I saw to be sphinxes and great animals with human heads but afterwards I did not dare raise my eyes to gaze curiously upon them; for I saw again approaching us, in the course of his regular walk to and fro, the golden-bearded priest Agmahd.

Walking on by the side of my guide, I kept my eyes upon the ground. When he paused I paused, and found that my eyes fell upon the hem of the priest's white robe. That hem was delicately embroidered with golden characters: it was enough to absorb my attention and fill me with wonder for a while.

"A new novice?" I heard a very quiet and sweet voice say. "Well, take him into the school; he is but a youth yet. Look up, boy; do not fear."

I looked up, thus encouraged, and encountered the gaze of the priest. His eyes, I saw, even then in my embarrassment, were of changing color - blue and gray. But, soft-hued though they were, they did not give me the encouragement which I had heard in his voice. They were calm indeed: full of knowledge: but they made me tremble.

He dismissed us with a movement of his hand, and pursued his even walk down the grand avenue; while I, more disposed to tremble than I had been before, followed silently my silent guide. We entered the great central doorway of the temple, the sides of which were formed of immense blocks of uncut stone. I suppose a fit of something like fear must have come upon me, after the inquisition of the holy priest's eyes; for I regarded these blocks of stone with a vague sense of terror.

Within I saw that from the central doorway, a passage proceeded in a long direct line with the avenue through the building. But that was not our way. We turned aside and entered upon a network of smaller corridors, and passed through some small bare rooms upon our way.

We entered at last a large and beautiful room. I say beautiful, though it was entirely bare and unfurnished, save for a table at one corner. But its proportions were so grand, and its structure so elegant, that even my eye, unaccustomed to discern architectural beauties, was strangely impressed, with a sense of satisfaction.

At the table in the corner sat two other youths, copying or drawing, I could not quite see what. At all events I saw they were very busy, and I wondered that they scarcely raised their heads to observe our entrance. But, advancing, I perceived that behind one of the great stone projections of the wall, there sat an aged white-robed priest, looking at a book which lay upon his knee.

He did not notice us until my guide stood deferentially bowing right in front of him.

"A new pupil?" he said, and looked keenly at me out of his dim, bleared-looking eyes. "What can he do?"

"Not much I fancy," said my guide, speaking of me in an easy tone of contempt. "He has been but a shepherd lad."

"A shepherd lad," echoed the old priest; "he will be no use here, then. He had best work in the garden. Have you ever learned to draw or copy writing?" he asked, turning upon me.

I had been taught these things as far as might be, but such accomplishments were rare, except in the priestly schools and among the small cultivated classes outside the priesthood.

The old priest looked at my hands, and turned back to his book.

"He must learn some time," he said; "but I am too full of work now to teach him. I want more to help me in my work; but with these sacred writings that have to be closed now, I cannot stay to instruct the ignorant. Take him to the garden for a while at least, and I will see about him by-and-by."

My guide turned away and walked out of the room. With a last look around, at its beautiful appearance, I followed him.

I followed him down a long, long passage, which was cool and refreshing in its darkness. At the end was a gate instead of a door, and here my guide rang a loud bell.

We waited in silence after the bell had rung. No one came, and presently my guide rang the bell again. But I was in no hurry. With my face pressed against the bars of the gate, I looked forth into a world so logical, that I thought to myself, "It will be no ill to me if the bleared-eyed priest does not want to take me from the garden yet a while!"

It had been a dusty hot walk from our home to the city, and there the paved streets had seemed to my country-bred feet infinitely wearisome. Within the gates of the temple I had as yet only passed down the grand avenue, where everything filled me so deeply, with awe, that I scarce dared look upon it. But here was a world of delicate and refreshing glory. Never had I seen a garden like this. There was greenness, deep greenness; there was a sound of water, the murmuring of gentle water under control, ready to do service for man and refresh in the midst of the burning heat which called the magnificence of color and grand development of form into the garden.

A third time the bell rang - and then I saw, coming from among the great green leaves, a black-robed figure. How strangely out of place did the black dress look here! and I thought with consternation that I should also be clothed in those garments before long, and should wander among the voluptuous beauties of this magical place like a strayed creature from a sphere of darkness.

The figure approached, brushing, with its coarse . . . , like the delicate foliage. I gazed with a sudden awakening of interest upon the face of the man who drew near, and into whose charge I supposed I was to be committed. And well I might; for it was a face to awake interest in any human breast.

CHAPTER II.

"What is it?" asked the man querulously, as he looked at us through the gate. "I sent fruit and to spare into the kitchen this morning. And I can give you no more flowers today; all I have to pluck will be wanted for the procession tomorrow."

"I am not wanting your fruit or your flowers," said my guide, who seemed fond of adopting a lofty tone. "I have brought you a new pupil, that's all."

body lay a broken flower, fair as a lily when first it opens its bloom on the surface of the clear water.

I felt that my Queen Mother held me fast in her tender grasp, that I might not escape from the scene of horror.

"Return to your work," she said; "it is yet unfinished. This is the new robe that you will wear, which will be your covering while you teach my people. This body is sinless, unstained and beautiful, although the soul that inhabited it is lost. But thou art my own. To come to me is to live through eternity in truth and knowledge. This is thy new garment."

I found that I was yet strong, not only in the spirit, but in physical life. New vigor came to me, my weariness was forgotten. I rose from the place, where but a minute since I had lain prostrate and lifeless. I rose, and standing hidden under the eyes of my Queen looked in horror at the scene around me.

"Go, Malen go in safety," she said. "Thou art to live in the hearts of the people, thou wilt be to them an image and symbol of the glory. Thou wilt be again a martyr to my cause, one who will forever be remembered with love by the dusky children of Chemi. Yet, though thou diest in my service, thou shalt teach for ages to come among the ruins of this temple; and though thou diest for me a hundred deaths, yet shalt thou live to teach my truths from the adytum of the new fane that shall arise in the distance of time."

I hurried away, and passed unnoticed through the surging, furious crowd. The statues in the avenue were thrown down; the temple gates were broken and destroyed.

My soul was sad and yearned for peace. I looked with longing eyes to the quiet country where my peasant mother dwelled; but she believed her son was dead. She would not know me in this new shape. I turned towards the city, now deserted by the maddened people.

A wild shout from a thousand throats tore the air. I paused, and looking back, saw that the unchecked vengeance of a generation betrayed by its teachers, had indeed fallen upon the glorious old temple. Already it was desecrated, and its sinful inmates sacrificed. Soon it would be a ruin.

I wandered through the empty streets of the city, and knew that here where I had drunk of pleasure, I must taste the joy of the worker. Here my voice must be heard unceasingly. The truth, long driven from the degraded temple, must find its home in the heart of the people, in the streets of the city. Long time must pass before my sin should fall from me, and leave me stainless, pure, prepared for the perfect life towards which I labor.

Since then, I live, change form, and live again; yet know myself through the long ages as they pass.

Egypt is dead, but her spirit lives, and the knowledge that was hers is still cherished in those souls who have remained true to the grand and mysterious past. They know that out of the profound blindness and inarticulateness of an age of unbelief shall arise the first signs of the splendor of the future. That which is to come is grander, more majestically mysterious than the past. For as the whole life of humanity rises upward, by slow and imperceptible progress, its teachers drink their life from purer founts, and take their message from the soul of existence. The cry has sounded through the world. The truths are uttered in words. Waken dark souls of the earth, who live with eyes upon the ground, raise those dim eyes and let perception enter. Life has in it more than the imagination of man can conceive. Seize boldly upon its mystery, and demand, in the obscure places of your own soul, light with which to illumine those dim recesses of individuality to which you have been blinded through a thousand existences.

Though a land of dusky forms, Egypt stands as a white flower among other races of the earth, and the hieroglyph readers of the old heretic writings, the professors, and the thinkers of the day will be unable to stain the petals of that grand lily blossom of our planet. They do not see the stem of the lily, and the sunlight shining down through the petals. They can see nothing of the real blossom, neither can they disfigure it by modern gardening, because it is out of their reach. It grows above the stature of man and its bulb drinks deep from the river of life.

It flowers in a world of growth to which man can only attain in his absolute moments of inspiration when he is indeed more than man. Therefore, though its lofty stem lifts itself from our world, it is not to be beheld or adequately described, save by one who is in truth so much above the stature of man that he can look down into the face of the flower, wherever it blossoms, whether in the East or the dark West. He will there read the secrets of the controlling forces of the physical plane, and will see, written within it, the science of mystic strength. He will learn how to expound spiritual truths and to enter into the highest self, and he can learn also how to own in life for of that higher self, and yet to retain life upon this planet so long as it shall last, if need be; to retain life in the vigor of manhood, till his entire work is completed, and he has taught the three truths to all who look for light.