

# Messenger and Visitor

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## The Sphinx's Riddle.

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A parchment, written first in Arabic  
By Abou Kel, the Sage of old Seville,  
Ere Ferdinand arose and drove the Moor  
Southward, till fair Granada was his own,  
And Spain was all one realm, and he its king—  
This parchment, found within a palace wall,  
Clothed with the dust of seven centuries,  
And superscribed with many a mystic sign,  
At last fell to the hands of one who turned  
Into his native tongue the Eastern words  
That all who would might read and think thereon:  
That which was written on the scroll, in part  
Is here set forth, but much hath been destroyed.

When Creon ruled in Seven-Gated Thebes,  
A cruel monster ravaged all that land,  
Descending from its lair on Phycium's Mount  
Or from Cithaeron's frowning fastnesses;  
It was a creature passing strange of form—  
A winged lion with a woman's face,  
Which spoke aloud in weirdly human voice—  
The Thebans called their enemy the Sphinx.  
And, ever in some dark and lonely spot,  
To every ill-starred one who passed that way  
A riddle it propounded, and the fate  
Of him who could not answer it was death:  
Though many passed upon the seven roads  
That led unto the seven golden gates  
Of Thebe, set into her wondrous walls  
Whose stones danced to their places at the sound  
Of sweetest chords from young Amphion's lyre,  
Yet none could read the riddle of the Sphinx,  
And none escaped who left it still unread.  
But men of Thebes who tell the ancient tale  
Relate how once there came a stranger by  
Who solved the riddle—whereupon the Sphinx  
Plunged headlong from the steep Acropolis  
And never more was seen in all that land—  
Wherefore the people in their gratitude  
Crowned Oedipus, the stranger, as their King.  
Another legend, of more ancient days  
Would make the story of the Theban Sphinx  
A Greek corruption of an older tale  
Told by tradition of that world-old Sphinx  
Which lies half-buried on the banks of Nile  
And scorns the scars of all the centuries.  
Ere Cheops built his mighty pyramids,  
Or any Pharaoh ruled in Egypt's land—  
When all the world was young, and men appeared  
For the first time upon the virgin Earth,  
And learned the use of tools that carve and hew—  
Then was the Sphinx cut from the solid rock,  
A symbol of the mystery of God,  
And worshipped by the dwellers in that land  
As Harmakhu, god of the Setting Sun.  
Huge, human-headed, lion-bodied thing,  
At rest, it gazed upon the lazy Nile  
As if in thought, and in the thought, contempt,  
And in its eyes a dull and stony stare,  
And on its lips a cold and cruel smile.  
Ere long, among the dwellers by the Nile  
A whisper started, strange and wonderful—  
The Sphinx had spoken! Many came to hear,  
And some heard nothing, and returned again,  
And others, listening, thought they heard a sound,  
But one, when he returned, praying, amazed,  
Said that the Sphinx had spoken, riddling thus:

"Breath in a house of Dust—  
Whither, and whence, and why?  
Life—Death—Flies the Breath,

Bird in a boundless sky.  
Read the Sphinx's Riddle, Man,  
Man, so soon to die!"

And so the story spread through all the land,  
And into other lands beyond the Sea,  
And far beyond the deserts of the East,  
And many came and stood before the Sphinx,  
And many heard the riddle that it put,  
But none could answer what the riddle was.

That graven monster by the pyramids  
Is but a symbol of Philosophy,  
Which asks of man these very words of fate.—  
The Sphinx's Riddle.—Whither, Whence, and Why?  
And since the wheel of Ages first began  
Its turning, started by the Master Hand,  
Those who are called the wisest of mankind  
Have pondered o'er that riddle—but in vain,  
For all the cycles of Philosophy  
Follow the Wheel, and end where they began;  
Like wanderers in the Cretan Labyrinth  
They wend through many a secret passage way,  
Only to lose themselves within the Maze.  
Circling on their own steps—since they do lack  
The little golden thread, which, following,  
Perchance their wanderings might lead to light.  
Since men began to think upon their fate  
Fool many a man has made his little guess,  
And tho' he missed the clue, has won—a Name,  
And other men have followed from afar,  
Chasing that Name whose guess seemed nearest  
Truth;  
Worshipping Storm-clouds, mighty Thunderbolts,  
Or counting as the Whither, and the Whence,  
Water, or Air, or finest Atmosphere,  
Warm Breath, Cold Earth, or Fiery Elements,  
Or making gods of Discord and of Love—  
The warring causes of the Universe.  
To some, Man has no End nor Origin,  
No reason for existence, and no God:  
The Universe a game, and men the pawns,  
So others say, and there be some who hold  
God is a Potter, and all men his clay:  
One asks, and will the Potter spare at last  
The perfect vessels, pleasing to His eye,  
The pots he marred in making, hurl away?  
Many there be who, when the fatal words  
Come to an answer, say, "I do not know,"  
And others boldly shout, "I do not care!"  
And some there be who answer with a laugh:  
"Come, let us eat and drink and dance Today,  
For when Tomorrow cometh, we must die.  
Think not upon the Whither and the Whence,  
And thou shalt find an answer to the Why.  
Here is the Present, which is all we know—  
Crowded with pleasure—the mere joy of Life,  
The flush of Beauty and the lust of Love,  
The pride of Power and the gleam of Gold.  
Oh let us grasp and taste them ere they fade,  
And hail sweet Pleasure as our sovereign good."  
But others, sighing, answer, "Nay, not so,  
For Pleasure is a vain and empty thing  
Which fadeth soon, to leave an aching heart.  
Wherefore be brave, and cherish in the soul  
Visions of life beyond this prison-house  
Which holds the unwilling spirit for a time;  
Soon comes sweet Death, which opens the prison  
door—  
Permission to return into the Light,  
And to the purer air where once we dwelt  
With Him who sent us here—we know not why."

So, many thousands since the world began  
Into the Sybel Cave of Destiny  
Have called, and there has come no answer back  
Save their own echo. When all these have failed,  
How shall I read the meaning of my life

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To give account of Yesterday, or how,  
The Tangle of Tomorrow to untie?  
Is life a forward and a backward look,  
And then—a step into the Deep Unknown?  
A guest for shadows while the Light remains,  
And with the Dark to go where shadows go?  
Has Life no more than this to offer me?  
No great and plain Solution to it all?  
Why trouble with the Riddle? Would that I  
Need make no answer! But the questions ring  
Into my ears, and haunt me night and day.  
I am a slave to every mystery,  
I am not free until I understand.  
As one who, dreaming, finds himself alone,  
Standing upon the vast mid-ocean's wave,  
Nor land, nor log, nor any sail in sight,  
And knows his puny steps toward any land  
Would be as naught on those long leagues of Sea  
That touch the empty sky on every side,  
So, many a time I find myself alone  
Upon the strange and all mysterious Sea  
Of this existence—wondering whence I came,  
And whither I shall go—in fear the while  
Lest the waves whereon I stand should suck me  
down.  
And then I think this, too, is but a dream,  
And I shall wake at last, and know the Truth  
I seek in happiness the Why of Life.  
To find my quest is all in vain, for what  
Is happiness but that beyond our reach?  
I look to Nature for Man's destiny,  
And there I learn that like the little flower  
He fades and perishes, his season o'er,  
Or passes like a drifting summer cloud  
Which leaves no mark upon the Heaven's blue.  
And yet again the answer comes to me:  
As when beneath a woodland waterfall  
Bubbles are formed, to float upon the pool,  
Some sparkling in the sunshine down, and some  
Drifting within the shadow of a bank—  
So men are bubbles from God's waterfall,  
Floating upon the cool, dark stream of Life.  
We dance our little distance in the sun,  
Or hurry through the shadows—then behold,  
We are no more, but still the stream flows on,  
And other bubbles come—and follow us.

The parchment ended—and I raised my eyes:  
I stood before the Sphinx on Ghizeh's plain,  
And suddenly a voice within myself  
Said: "Thou canst solve the Riddle, wherefore,  
Speak!"

And I, obedient to the voice within me, spoke:  
"Grim monster, I defy thee to thy face,  
And thus thy dreaded riddle I will read—  
Wast thou not graven by the hands of men?  
But I was fashioned by the hand of God.  
Yet a few years and thou, the mighty Sphinx,  
Shall join the dust of those that carved thee forth—  
Be blown about the desert on the wind,  
And form a part of Earth, which other men  
Will plough with iron, sow, and tread upon:  
But I return to him from whence I came—  
My life—to do his will a season he'll,  
Then I shall live through ages unto which  
Thy lifetime is as but a single day.  
For He who came and took the form of Man,  
And solved thy riddle—He hath promised this  
To all who with the heart and soul believe.  
But like an echo from those lips of stone  
In mocking tones a question seemed to come:  
"And dost thou in thy very heart believe?"  
I strove within myself to answer "Yea."  
The word refused to come—those grim stone eyes  
My soul's most cherished secrets pierced and read:  
I bowed my head before them in the sand,  
And answered, whispering, "I do not know."  
"Then thou hast failed!" they answered, and I fled.  
When far away I turned me and beheld  
That face upreared against the setting sun,  
Methought a sound came floating down the wind,  
A sound as of a hollow, scornful laugh,  
And I bethought me of these mystic words:  
Breath in a house of Dust,  
Whither, and Whence, and Why?  
Life—Death—Flies the Breath,  
Bird in a boundless sky.  
Read the Sphinx's Riddle, Man,  
Man so soon to die.  
I turned away forever from the Sphinx,  
But still I seemed to hear that hollow laugh  
Borne far across the desert on the wind  
And still I thought upon those mystic words,  
And still the Sphinx's Riddle was unread.