

Sensa

by Mabel Collins and Maud Hoffman

ACT I

Scene i - The Adolescent

PERIOD *Ancient Egypt.*

TIME *Dawn.*

PLACE *A broad green plain outside a massive Temple on the banks of the Nile. The river can be seen winding away in the distance. The Morning Hymn to Ra at the Rising of the Sun, is just dying away within the Temple.*

[*Enter an Egyptian peasant woman, and Sensa, a young Egyptian fellah.*]

Sensa What a glorious sunrise! I am longing to go into the city streets and hear the noise, and be among the crowds. It is a feast day, Mother. I hear the cries of the men already, selling sweets and flowers and holy water. Let us go there, Mother.

Mother No, Sensa, that cannot be! You have been at my side since your baby feet first learned to run, but that is all over now, for here is the gate of the Temple which you are to enter.

Sensa At last!

Mother Yes, at last -- and we must part.

Sensa Do not go, Mother. Do not leave me yet. Let me spend the day in the city with you, first.

Mother No, Sensa, no. It is not now that you can enter the city and look upon its pleasures. You are still a child, a pupil, and have to enter upon your noviciate.

Sensa Oh, I have always longed for the haunts of men! I do so want to know all things.

Mother And so you shall, Sensa, but now you have to enter upon your destiny, through the gate of that Temple.

Sensa But, Mother, I need not enter the Temple till the day is ended. I long for the hours of the feast day in the city.

Mother You have first to become a man, and if you desire to enter the city then, you will be a part of it. Now you would be but a child, lost and helpless. For I could not guide you as I have done hitherto. The moment has come. The hour has struck which parts us. You have to enter upon the great ordeal of manhood, and I must go back to my other children who will follow you to this gate, ever pressing into life and longing for manhood.

Sensa Go? You are going, Mother! You will not leave me alone in this strange place? I am only a boy -- I am not able to go on alone.

Mother You will not be alone, for you will at once find yourself with others on the great pilgrimage through life to immortality.

Sensa Dare I enter this mysterious gate! What strong walls -- what a fast-closed door! Mother, I am afraid!
[*Draws back from the Temple and clings to her.*]

Mother Have no fear. Shake it from you! Be bold!
[*Puts off his clinging hands, and makes him stand alone.*]
For so soon as you have become a man, you will be in possession of powers such as belong to neither angel or demon. When man is afraid, it is because he is ignorant and does not realize himself. Be you a learner, my son, and discover your own great gifts. For great they are indeed. And greatest of all is the power to control your own destiny! Through this gate, and by the joy and pain which the soul finds within it, alone can you attain to immortality. Go! Pass bravely in. Experience all things which sensation can give you. Taste to the full all the mystery and joy of life, and having tasted them, pass beyond them -- free!

Sensa The joy of life?

Mother [*Passionately*] The unutterable, inexpressible joy of human life. Take it, glory in it, and free yourself from it.

Sensa Your words rouse me from my dreams! Yes, Mother, it is true!
[*Approaches the closed gate as he speaks.*]
The joy of life! I feel it rising within me with the strength of a great serpent uncoiling itself.

As he approaches the gate, it slowly opens, and a black-robed Novice looks out. Seeing Sensa, he opens the gate wide. Sensa hastens forward as if to enter at once, but is stayed by the sight of Agmahd within. He retreats a little towards his Mother.

Mother! Who is that? That splendid priest! How tall and stately he is, and how calm! He might be a beautiful statue. How slowly he walks -- like some great being far removed from men. His dress is all white, embroidered with gold, and his beard that lies upon it, might be cut in gold.

Mother [*Also looking in*] That is Agmahd, the High Priest of the Temple. He is very great and ambitious, and would rule all Egypt.

Sensa How common and mean my dress is! Oh, to wear a robe like his!
[*Sensa goes forward towards the gate.*]

Mother Would you wear the robe of the High Priest? Does Ambition already call you?

Sensa Yes, Yes! I want to be like him -- great and strong! Above all others! To rule Egypt! He is fitted to rule not only Egypt, but the whole world. See how he keeps his

eyes upon the ground. Thought holds him. Mother, [*Turns back a little*] I dread the raising of those drooping lids!

Mother You need not fear his gaze. You can conquer him.

Sensa [*Incredulously*] I?

Mother Yes. If you are a true learner, you can control all things.

[*To the Waiting Novice.*]

Admit the youth. It is his time to enter.

Sensa Mother!

Mother [*With an imperious gesture*] Go!

Sensa Yes, I obey!

[*He crosses the threshold. As he steps within the Temple, the Mother drops a dim grey veil before her face. Sensa turns. Holds out his arms.*]

Mother!

[*She does not move.*]

Let me see your face once more before I go!

Mother [*Firmly*] It is too late. Go. Look not back. Farewell.

[*The great gate of the Temple closes.*]

Sensa, you have at last fully entered into the world of mortals. But no mortal has yet removed the veil that shades my divinity from human eyes. Thou terrible Temple! Place of suffering, place of joy, place of experience and sensation, how it draws my children from me, from me, the Mother and the lover of the souls of men. I bring all mortals hither, but I do not suffer them to look back from that inexorable gate which, once closed, Destiny alone can open! Oblivion of his mysterious past has now fallen on the soul of *Sensa*; he will know only that he is man!

CURTAIN

ACT I

Scene ii - The Novice

A large and beautiful room in the Interior of the Temple, with pillars. It is circular in shape, and very dim. The walls and pillars are covered with hieroglyphs.

A row of 5 pillars extends across R. The pillars begin at wall up back R. of Center, and extend down R. the last being against wall just above Orchestra Pit. Between these 5 pillars are hung 4 curtains. The pillars, beginning with the lowest down R. are indigo, green, red, violet, blue, symbolical of the Five Senses. The curtains symbolize the four principal elements, and, beginning down R. are green, red, violet, blue.

Behind the curtains is the Sanctuary of The Dark Goddess of the Temple. In the Center at Back, 3 steps lead up to a closed door. Opposite the Sanctuary is an Exit leading out

through pillars. Above the Sanctuary, R. is a couch. Below the center door L., sits The Old Priest and two Neophytes, bending over the papyri on their knees. Sensa is standing with his hand on the wall, reading from the hieroglyphs. He is dressed in the black robe of the Novice. The Neophyte's robes are white, stitched with black. The Old Priest's robe is white, embroidered with blue. The High Priest, Kamen-baka, stands just below the Sanctuary, R. His robe is white, delicately embroidered with golden characters. He is tall and stately, with dignified but kindly look. His beard is light brown.

Five young Priests and five young Priestesses, softly twanging musical instruments, stand grouped about the Sanctuary. Their robes are of different colors, with vari-colored embroidery. They are known throughout the Play as "The Ten."

Two young Priests and two young Priestesses stand, two on either side of the steps, Center. Their robes are yellow and blue.

Incense issues from the Sanctuary.

Priests [Chanting]

[On Stage] Queen Mother!

[Within Sanctuary] Queen Mother!

[On Stage] Great Goddess of the Temple!

[Within] Great Goddess of the Temple!

[On Stage] Hear us!

[Within] Hear us!

[This alternating refrain is chanted three times.]

Priests [On Stage, speaking] We demand a spell! We demand a word of power. We demand a spell!

The re-iterated chanting continues inside the Sanctuary. Sensa, with his hand upon the wall, and finger indicating one of the hieroglyphs, turns and gazes with large, fascinated eyes at the Sanctuary, deeply inhaling the incense, and listening while the chanting proceeds. As the chanting pauses, the Old Priest glances up.

Old Priest [In a dull, level voice of reprimand] Sensa! Have you found the sign you were bidden to look for?

[Sensa does not hear. Louder.]

Sensa!

Sensa [Starts slightly] My lord?

[Continues to gaze dreamily.]

Old Priest Why do you gaze, as one charmed, at the Sanctuary?

Sensa I know not. The Incense. [Inhales deeply] How strange and subtle it is! It draws me, yet it sickens me. And the chanting -- it thrills me with a strange, new ecstasy!

Old Priest Return to your task. You have much to learn. The service of the Sanctuary is not for you. You have this work to do.

An uproar of many voices can be heard in the distance. Every one listens apprehensively. The Old Priest shakes violently, becoming greatly agitated.

Sensa It is the people! Are they coming again to attack the Temple?

Old Priest Yes! Yes! They come to demand the Spell to cure the blindness of the Lord Hesepti. The Spell for which we search. It must be here. Do not lose your place, or the work of the whole morning will be lost.

The curtains of the Sanctuary are slowly drawn aside, and Agmahd appears. He looks utterly downcast. The Priests rise. Sensa looks on.

Agmahd I have placed the jewels of the lady of Hesepti at the feet of the Goddess. But all is dark. All is silent. No word. No sign. We have no Seer in the Temple. No one who can speak to her or see her.

Kamen-baka It is because we have no Seer that we have fallen into the power of the seven destroying spirits.

The Ten [Intoning] Seven are they. Seven are they. In the abyss of the deep -- seven are they. Law and order know they not. Prayer and supplication hear they not. Evil are they. Baleful are they.

Sensa turns to his task. All is still, save for the soft chanting within the Sanctuary. Sensa again becomes distracted.

Sensa [Passionately] Oh, I cannot stay here always, poring over these signs. This is not life! These dim letters mean nothing to me. There can be no spell of power in these pictures of a dead past.

Old Priest Patience, child; you have much to learn. Each one of those signs that you look upon contains a meaning which you will understand when you have read the whole, and another meaning which I shall understand, and yet another mysterious inner meaning which only the High Priest himself can unravel. Resume your task.

Sensa turns again to the writing on the wall. The chanting law ceased. A deep silence reigns. Only the musical sound of running water can be heard, coming from behind the door, Center.

Sensa [Starts] What is that sound of water? Water, falling?

[Turns listening towards the door. "The Ten" change their positions and look apprehensively from Sensa to the door.]

How beautiful it is! It is behind that door. All the time I have been here, I have never seen behind that closed door. Why is it always closed?

Old Priest It is only the Garden where the flowers grow that we use for the days of feasting.

Sensa A garden where the flowers grow! Why, the sun must shine there! Is it in the Temple?

Old Priest [Indifferently] Yes. Oh, yes, it is in the Temple -- but, see -- you have lost the place.

Enter Neophyte. Kamen-baka comes out of the Sanctuary.

Neophyte The household of Hesepti! And people from the city are at the Gate! They clamor for a spell. A spell to remove the blindness of the Lord Hesepti.

Old Priest [Tremblingly] We cannot find it.

Kamen-baka It is useless to ask the Goddess for it. All is dark within the Sanctuary. Go! tell the people they must be patient. *[Exit Neophyte]* If no word of power is given to the High Priest in the Sanctuary, we are lost! The Temple will be destroyed! *[The Priests fall on their knees, horror-stricken.]*

Sensa [Exultantly] And I shall be free from these hateful tasks! *[The chanting within Sanctuary is softly resumed.]*

Priests Queen Mother! Save the Temple. If the Temple falls, we are lost!

Agmahd re-enters the Sanctuary. The Old Priest crosses tremblingly to Sensa.

Old Priest Child, do not rebel. Have you kept the place?

Sensa [Indicating] It is here. *[The Old Priest peers closely at signs then returns to his place, shaking his head.]*

Old Priest There is no mention of the spell of power.

Shouting and the noise of a tumult become more distinct, drawing nearer, and the sound of running feet is heard in the Corridor.

[Enter two Neophytes, Agmahd comes out of the Sanctuary.]

1st Neophyte The Lord Hesepti himself is at the Gate. He demands admission.

2nd Neophyte He asks, is there no life in the Temple? He says, 'Are we all dead, that he gets no answer.'

Agmahd He must be admitted. Open the gate. *[Exeunt Neophytes.]*

Kamen-baka [To Agmahd] What shall we say to him? If we can not appease him, we shall starve. The kitchens are waiting now for cattle from his fields.

Agmahd We must make him promises.

Kamen-baka Can we make him believe us? We cannot risk losing the jewels of the Lady Hesepti. They are priceless. What must we do? *[Priests groan at each sentence.]*

Agmahd Promises. Promises. We must promise that if not now, it shall be done later, even if we have to descend into the uttermost depths to obtain the spell.

[The Priests draw back to the sides.]

Enter Hesepti, a Nobleman in the prime of life, but crushed by his affliction. He is totally blind, and is supported by two Neophytes. His manner, though feeble, is regal.

Hesepti *[Anxiously]* Is the High Priest here?

Agmahd *[Steps forward]* I am, my lord.

Hesepti *[With a gesture of salutation]* Life! Health! Strength!

Agmahd *[Raising his hand]* Peace to the Lord Hesepti. Peace. Peace. Will you not sit, my lord?

Hesepti *[Trembling]* I cannot sit. I am aflame with rage. I, Hesepti, Chief of the Signet Bearers of the great king, the king of the world, the King of Egypt, I -- I -- *[He is speechless: then breaks out.]*

That offering! My wife's jewels! Those precious stones I gave her! I must have them back.

The Ten Back! Back! *[Sullenly]* He cannot have them back! No! No! We need them.

[Agmahd silences them with a gesture. They draw back, but look ugly.]

Agmahd Be calm, most noble Hesepti. The Casket is safe at the feet of the Goddess who is ready to befriend you. Has other evil befallen you besides the curse of blindness?

Surely the offering is true; surely the lady of Hesepti is greatly devoted, to make so rich an offering.

Hesepti Devoted! She, that has taken advantage of the evil spell which has fallen upon me, to betray me in my very presence! While she was actually with me, she gave gifts into the hand of her hire-woman for a young soldier and bade her fetch him; and he came into my presence and looked on her and she on him, with favor -- I, not knowing, because I could not see!

[He becomes speechless from rage.]

Agmahd What is it you ask of me?

Hesepti That my enemy shall taste death to the full, in torture and shame. I demand that he lie in chains in the Underworld and have fetters fastened upon him. Do this, and I will give you untold gold. Do this, and I will have driven into your yards great herds of cattle.

Agmahd Your demand is just. Your enemy shall be destroyed.

Hesepti Swear it. Swear it on this Amulet of the Pillow which is to be placed beneath my head when I am dead.

[Holds out Amulet.]

Agmahd [Placing hand on Amulet] I swear it. Your sight shall be restored, and your enemy trampled under foot. Go in confidence. All shall be done as you desire.

Hesep-ti [With strength] From the country of Magan, rare stones I shall cause to be brought. Gold dust from the mountains of Gharghum. In the Interior of this Temple, a Sanctuary of cedarwood I shall cause to be built, to the Goddess. At the feet of the Sun God seven times seven shall I prostrate myself!

Agmahd 'Tis well. Go then in peace.

Hesep-ti [Trembling and bowed] Lead me back to my own place -- where I, Hesep-ti, Chief of the Signet Bearers to the King, my Lord, will sit and wait for my sight to be restored, and my enemy destroyed.

[Exit, accompanied by two Neophytes. Agmahd paces up and down. "The Ten" strike sad, dirge-like chords, and there is a general air of dejection.]

The Ten [Intoning] Oh, Great Goddess, pronounce Thy blessing upon our works. Command our prosperity.

Agmahd What is to be done? I have promised. I have promised a spell. And I have no spell. I have no power to speak with the Goddess. *[Turns angrily to Old Priest]* You --

Old Priest [Turns tremblingly] My lord?

Agmahd You! -- and you students of the Ancient Writings --

[They rise and bow humbly.]

Have you not been searching? Can you not find the spell that I need?

[They look hopelessly at the Old Priest.]

Old Priest The characters are difficult, my lord, and my eyesight is faded: -- I --

Agmahd [Sternly] And these? These students who have worked with you so long: -- are they not capable of searching for the spell?

Old Priest My lord, they, too, are losing the strong sight needed to read these difficult characters. They --

Agmahd Then have we no student fitted to do our work?

Old Priest This Novice, my lord *[Indicating Sensa]* is young, and his eyesight is strong. He --

Agmahd Bid him search, then. Keep him close here until he has found what I need.

Sensa [Starts] Keep me close here! What! Closer than I have been kept? I shall go mad! *[Agmahd gives him a cold stare and Exits.]*

Old Priest How dare you speak before the High Priest thus? You are greatly honored. But be not over-proud. It is your youth which has marked you out for this honor.

Sensa [Starting up] My youth! I want my youth for myself! I do not want to spend it in the study of these crabbed signs. I want to use it for beauty and joy and life -- not to waste it within these dead walls!

Old Priest Child, you will make your lot the harder. The High Priest can command you. Stand you here and continue your task. We will leave you in quiet to accomplish it.

He pushes Sensa back into his place and lifts from his own stool the faded manuscripts, and Exits, followed by the Neophytes. Sensa, left with "The Ten," leans his head upon his arms against the wall. "The Ten" are by the pillars in front of the Sanctuary.

Two of The Ten [Chant rhythmically] Oh, light of the Sun! Oh, light of Moon!. Oh, glory of the fields and the flowers!

[Sensa half turns to them.

Two Others [Chant in rising cadence] The voice of the birds! The music of the dance! The cries from the city!

[Sensa takes a step towards them.

Two Others [Ecstatically] Oh, the ripe fruit from the wall! And the honey of the bees! Oh, the sweetness of the honey!

The Ten [In unison] Oh, the joy and the pride of the earth, and the life of the earth!

Sensa [Moving dreamily towards them] Yes! Yes! It is sweet! How sweet!

Pause and a little silence. The sound of the running water is again heard. Sensa stops. The Four Priests by the door of the Garden chant softly but clearly with uplifted expression.

The Four Priests Do you not hear the waters of Life and Truth? They flow! They flow!

Sensa Yes! Yes, I hear! 'Tis the mystic sound! Oh, how it enters into my soul!

["The Ten" begin to chant.]

Hush! [Lifts his hand] I must find this musical voiced water. *[At the steps]* It eases my longing. I must drink of that water!

[He mounts the steps and knocks. "The Ten" come forward with menacing gestures.]

The Ten Go not that way! Go not that way! We cannot follow you there. Go not! Go not!

[They murmur angrily.]

The Four Priests step forward and stand between "The Ten" and Sensa, who knocks again. "The Ten" threaten and snarl. Sensa knocks a third time, and steps back.

Sensa Oh, open to me, thou Mystery Gate!

The Gate opens, and a great shaft of light streams into the dim room. "The Ten" recede before it, and withdraw behind the curtains of the Sanctuary. The Four resume their places on either side of the gate.

The Two on The Right Come out of the darkness. Make the entrance on Light. Tell me my name -- what am I? Tell me my name.

Sensa [*Gazing at them*] Surely you are that which is True!

The Two on The Right [*Strike a strong chord*] It is well!

The Two on The Left Come out of the Darkness! Make the entrance on Light! Tell me my name -- what am I? Tell me my name.

Sensa [*Gazing at them*] Surely you are that which is Just!

The Two on The Left [*Strike a chord*] It is well!

All Together Enter through the hidden Lintel. Enter!

The Gate opens. Sensa steps back enraptured. A most exquisite Garden is revealed, full of light and color, glancing birds, and a great Lotus tank, fed by a rill of running water from a fountain. The Garden is full of exquisite blossoms and delicate young, pale-green foliage of Spring. The Lotus tank is in the center of the Garden. The Lotuses are in bloom, one large blossom stands high above the green leaves.

Sensa stands speechless for some seconds and then Seboua appears.

Seboua What do you seek?

Sensa The mystery that is hidden here. How beautiful it is! Light and air! And the flowers -- how sweet they smell!

Seboua Ah, you perceive their fragrance. The dull Priests care nothing for it. This garden is wasted upon them, poor fools.

Sensa Do they not come here?

Seboua Never. All they desire from this garden is fruit for their table, and the gratification of their appetites.

[*Turns fiercely to Sensa.*]

Are you like them? Do you desire to learn only the mystery of the growth of sin and deceit?

Sensa What is sin? What is deceit?

Seboua What? You are ignorant of the meaning of those words?

Sensa Must I, then, learn these things?

Seboua Not if you stay here with the spirits of the flowers.

Sensa Have they spirits?

Seboua How else could they be beautiful?

[*Sensa looks at him in amazement.*]

Nay, ponder my words, and by and bye, you will understand them. Sit here while I water my plants.

Seboua takes Sensa by the hand and leads him towards the tank. Then he takes a water jar and fills it at the rill of running water.

[Clasps his hands and leans toward the water.]

Sensa Oh, how delicate-voiced is that water!

Seboua Yes. It flows only to feed the Queen of Flowers.

[Looks at the Lotus. Then all round the Garden and back at the Lotus.]

Sensa Thou art indeed the Queen of Flowers. And is there a spirit in this flower, too?

Seboua Yes. But no mortal eyes have seen her since I have been in this garden. That flower is her home -- and it is from her that all Wisdom comes.

Sensa Perhaps I may see her!

Seboua What? A youth like you, -- when the High Priest himself cannot see her!

Sensa Why not? I am not so young. I have become a man since I entered the Temple. I do so long to know the truth of things.

Seboua The Priests are ignorant, because none in this Temple can see or hear our Lady of the Lotus.

Sensa But do they watch for her here, beside her home?

Seboua No. They are killing the cattle of Hesepti for the table -- or counting the coins of the offerings at the Gate.

[Goes on watering the plants.]

They have not time to wait and watch for her.

Sensa *[Earnestly]* Oh, I will see her! I must see her! I shall demand to see her! I tell you, Gardener, I shall watch and wait here for ever, until I do see her!

Seboua You are a strange youth! But I cannot linger here with you. I have my work to do.

[Exits with empty water jar.]

Sensa moves about and examines the flowers. Returns Center. Raises his arm.

Sensa I tremble before Thee.

[Crosses his arms on his breast.]

Oh, glorious Flower with thy soft, gold-dusted heart, open! Open that heart that I may see the Truth! Give me of thy Wisdom! I demand that the spirit within thee shall speak to the Spirit within me!

As he stands gazing in ecstasy, a fair and glorious woman appears. Sensa, amazed, strives to move. After a moment's pause, he holds out his arms, makes a step or two

forward as though to go to her, but his strength failing him, he falls forward unconscious, his arms outstretched towards her.

The Lady of The Lotus [Rises. Stands over Sensa in a pitying attitude.]

Poor little human being. Little child of Time! Unconscious of Eternity, not knowing of your own great future, and all that I have for you in the day when you shall pass out of this imprisonment. Grow strong in the crucible of human life and experience. Prepare for the splendid Immortality to which I shall lead you. I, the Spirit of the Sacred Flower of Egypt, will give you the wisdom you ask when you are able to take it, but your strength has failed you. Alas! Farewell.

She vanishes. The leaves and branches rustle and sway and there is a murmur, as of a slight breeze. Seboua appears, and seeing Sensa lying prostrate on the ground, hurries towards him, lifts his head, and bathes his face with water from the jar he carries.

Seboua Was the heat too much for you? You look a strong lad to faint for the heat, and that, too, in this cool place!

Sensa [Reviving, murmurs] Where is she?

[He attempts to rise on his elbow and points towards the Lotus bed.

Where is she?

[Enter Agmahd and Kamen-baka.]

Seboua [Excitedly] What? What have you seen, boy? Quickly! Speak!

Sensa I have seen the Queen. The Queen of the Garden. The Lady of the Lotus. She is most fair, and her hair is like gold, that runs upon her shoulders.

Seboua It was not your fancy? You did not dream it?

[Raising Sensa, he moves to the gate with him.]

Come -- Come with me!

Sensa [Standing on the top step] She was real! She was more real than you. I stood and gazed upon the flower -- and as I gazed, it seemed to change in form to expand and rise towards me -- and, lo, drinking at the stream -- stooping to take its drops upon her lips, I saw a woman with fair skin, and hair like dust of gold. I tried to go to her, but my strength failed me, and I fell.

Seboua [Falls on his knees before Sensa] You have seen her. You have seen her! All Hail! For you are destined to be a Teacher amongst us -- a help to the people! You are a Seer!

[Seboua turns, sees the two High Priests who have witnessed this scene.]

Agmahd My lords! My lords! This novice! This novice! He has seen! He has heard! He is a Seer. He is the one we have waited for. We are saved.

CURTAIN
