

"Apuleius – The Golden Ass"

Book XI

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Book XI: 1–4 The vision of Isis

A few hours later I woke in sudden terror and saw the moon's orb at the full, shining with dazzling brilliance, emerging from the sea. I knew that cloaked in the silent mysteries of nocturnal darkness, the supreme Goddess exercises her greatest power; her guidance governs human affairs; not only cattle and wild creatures but even lifeless things being quickened by her power and her light's divine favour; all individual bodies on land, in sea or air, waxing with her as she waxes, and waning in obedience to her waning. Now fate seemed sated with the magnitude and frequency of my sufferings, and offered me hope, though late, of deliverance, and I determined on praying to the powerful image of the Goddess before me. I swiftly shook off sluggish sleep and rose happy and eager. Wishing to purge myself I ran at once to the sea to bathe, plunging my head seven times under the waves since divine Pythagoras declared that number especially fitting for religious rites. Then, my face wet with tears, I prayed to the Great Goddess:

‘Queen of Heaven, whether you are known as bountiful Ceres, the primal harvest mother, who, delighted at finding your daughter Proserpine again, abolished our primitive woodland diet, showed us sweet nourishment, and now dwell at Eleusis; or heavenly Venus, who at the founding of the world joined the sexes by creating Love, propagating the human race in endless generation, and worshipped now in the sea-girt sanctuary of Paphos; or Diana, Apollo's sister, you who relieve the pangs of countless childbirths with your soothing remedies, venerated now at Ephesus; or dread Proserpine herself, she of the night-cries, who triple-faced combats the assault of spirits shutting them from earth above, who wanders the many sacred groves, propitiated by a host of rites; oh, light of woman, illuminating every city, nourishing the glad seed with your misty radiance, shedding that light whose power varies with the passage of the sun; in whatever aspect, by whatever name, with whatever ceremony we should invoke you, have mercy on me in the depths of my distress, grant good fortune, give me peace and rest after cruel tribulation. Let the toil, the dangers I've endured suffice. Rid me of this foul four-footed form, restore me to the sight of my own people; make me the Lucius I once was. Or if I may not live, if I have offended some deity who hounds me with inexorable savagery, grant me the gift of death.’

When I had poured out my prayers, ending them in pitiful lamentation, my fainting spirit sank back, once more engulfed in sleep. I had scarcely closed my eyes when a divine apparition appeared, rising from the depths of the sea, her face worthy to be adored by the gods themselves. Slowly she rose, till her whole body was in view, shaking her self free of the

brine to stand before me, a radiant vision. If the poverty of human speech allows me, if the goddess herself grants me a wealth of verbal inspiration, I shall try to describe her marvellous beauty to you.

Firstly her long thick hair in tapering ringlets was loosely spread over her divine neck and shoulders, and her head was crowned with a complex garland of interwoven flowers of every kind. At the centre, over her brow, a flat disc like a mirror or rather a moon-symbol shone with brilliant light. Coiled vipers reared from the right and left of her coronet which was bristling with erect ears of corn. Her multi-coloured robe was of finest linen, gleaming here pure white, here a saffron yellow, there flaming rose-red, with a woven border flowing with flowers and fruit, and what dazzled me most of all was her jet-black cloak with its full sheen, wrapped gleaming about her, slung from the left shoulder, knotted at the breast, and sweeping over her right hip. It hung in sweetly undulating complex folds down to a tasselled fringe, and along its borders and over its surface fell a scatter of glittering stars, round a full moon at the centre breathing fiery rays. And she bore a host of emblems.

In her right hand she held the *sistrum*, a strip of bronze curved in a loop, with small rods across its width that made a tinkling noise as her forearm shook to a triple beat. From her left hand hung a boat-shaped vessel of gold, an asp with tumescent neck rearing to strike from the outer point of its handle. Her ambrosial feet wore slippers woven from palm-leaves, emblems of victory. And in such guise, exuding all the sweet scents of Arabia, she deigned to address me with celestial voice:

Book XI: 5–6 The Goddess commands

‘Behold, Lucius, here I am, moved by your prayer, I, mother of all Nature and mistress of the elements, first-born of the ages and greatest of powers divine, queen of the dead, and queen of the immortals, all gods and goddesses in a single form; who with a gesture commands heaven’s glittering summit, the wholesome ocean breezes, the underworld’s mournful silence; whose sole divinity is worshipped in differing forms, with varying rites, under many names, by all the world. There, at Pessinus, the Phrygians, first-born of men, call me Cybele, Mother of the Gods; in Attica, a people sprung from their own soil name me Cecropian Minerva; in sea-girt Cyprus I am Paphian Venus; Dictynna-Diana to the Cretan archers; Stygian Proserpine to the three-tongued Sicilians; at Eleusis, ancient Ceres; Juno to some, to others Bellona, Hecate, Rhamnusia; while the races of both Ethiopias, first to be lit at dawn by the risen Sun’s divine rays, and the Egyptians too, deep in arcane lore, worship me with my own rites, and call me by my true name, royal Isis. I am here in pity for your misfortunes, I am here as friend and helper. Weep no more, end your lamentations. Banish sorrow. With my aid, your day of salvation is at hand. So listen carefully to my commands.

From time immemorial the day born of this night has been dedicated to my rites: on this coming day the winter storms cease, the ocean’s stormy waves grow calm, and my priests launch an untried vessel on the now navigable waters, and dedicate it to me as the first offering of the trading season. You must await this ceremony with a mind neither anxious nor irreverent. The high-priest, at my command, will carry in procession a garland of roses fastened to the *sistrum* in his hand. Don’t hesitate to join the crowd and, trusting in my protection, push your way towards the priest, then as if you wished to kiss his hand pluck gently at the roses with your mouth, and so at once throw off that wretched form of the most detestable of creatures.

And have faith in my power to oversee the execution of my orders, for at this very moment when I am here with you I am with my priest too telling him, in dream, what he must do. When I wish, the heaving crowd will part before you, and amidst the joyous rites and wild festivity no one will shrink from your unseemly shape, nor treat your sudden change of form as sinister and level charges at you out of spite.

Remember one thing clearly though, and keep it locked deep within your heart: the life that is left to you, to the final sigh of your last breath, is pledged to me. It is right that all your days be devoted to she whose grace returns you to the world of men. Under my wing, you will live in happiness and honour, and when your span of life is complete and you descend to the shades, even there, in the sphere beneath the earth, you will see me, who am now before you, gleaming amidst the darkness of Acheron, queen of the Stygian depths; and dwelling yourself in the Elysian fields, you will endlessly adore me and I will favour you. Know too that if by sedulous obedience, dutiful service, and perfect chastity you are worthy of my divine grace, I and I alone can extend your life beyond the limits set by fate.'

Book XI: 7–11 The festival begins

So the holy revelation ended, and the invincible Goddess withdrew into her own being. Instantly I was freed from sleep and leapt up, bathed in sweat, with feelings of fear and joy. Filled with utter amazement at this clear manifestation of the Great Goddess's presence, I splashed myself with sea-water, reviewing intently her series of potent commands. Soon the dark shades of night were dispelled, a golden sun arose, and at once a crowd of triumphant believers thronged the streets. Not only was I, in my secret joy, but the whole world seemed filled with such happiness that the creatures, the skies, the very houses themselves seemed to radiate joy from their shining faces. For now a serene and sunlit morning, on the heels of yesterday's frost, with its spring warmth enticed the birds to sing in sweet harmony, and charm with their happy greetings the Queen of the Stars; the Mother of the Seasons, the Mistress of the Universe. Even the trees, both the orchard trees that bear fruit and those simply content to give shade, gleaming with buds and roused by the southerly breeze, waved their branches gently, murmuring with a soft rustling sound, for the winter gales had ceased, the angry swell of the waves had subsided, and a calm sea now lapped the shore. The heavens too, free of the cloudy night, shone clear and naked with the splendour of their true light.

Now the vanguard of the grand procession slowly appeared, its participants in holiday attire each in finery of their choosing. One wore a soldier's belt; another's boots, spear and cloak proclaimed him a huntsman; another was dressed as a woman in a silk dress with gilded sandals and curly wig, and walked in a mincing manner; yet another looked like a gladiator in helmet and greaves with shield and sword. There was a magistrate it seemed with the purple toga and rods of office; and there a philosopher with a goatee beard, in a cloak with a staff and woven sandals. Here were a brace of long poles, one a fowler's with his bird-lime, the other a fisherman's with line and hooks. Behold a tame bear dressed as a housewife, borne in a sedan chair; and look, an ape in a Phrygian straw hat and saffron robe, dressed as the shepherd lad Ganymede and waving a golden cup. And lastly an ass, wings glued to its shoulders, with a decrepit old man on its back, a Bellerophon and his Pegasus, enough to split your sides.

But behind these laughter-loving crowd-pleasers wandering all over the place, the procession proper was readying itself to celebrate the Goddess who saves. At its head went women in gleaming white, garlanded with the flowers of spring, rejoicing in their varied burdens, scattering blossoms along the path where the sacred gathering would pass; others had shining

mirrors fastened to their backs to show their obedience to the goddess who would follow; or they bore ivory combs and feigned to shape and dress the Goddess's royal hair; while others sprinkled the streets with pleasant balsam and fragrances. There followed a throng of men and women, carrying every means of shedding light, such as torches, lamps and wax-candles to honour the source of the celestial stars.

Now, musicians with pipes and flutes appeared, playing pure melodies, pursued by a fine choir of chosen youths, gleaming in their snow white holiday robes and singing a delightful hymn, composed by a talented poet aided by the Muses, whose words acted as prelude to the Greater Vows to come. Here were the temple pipers of the great god Serapis too, playing their traditional anthem on slanting flutes extending close to the right ear. And then the heralds passed, warning the people openly to clear a path for the holy procession.

A mighty throng of men and women of every age and rank, initiates of the sacred mysteries, poured on behind, their linen robes shining radiantly, the women's hair in glossy coils under transparent veils, the men's heads closely shaved and glistening, the earthly stars of the great rite. And each one shook a sistrum of bronze or silver or sometimes gold, giving out a shrill tinkling sound. The foremost priests of the cult came next, in white linen, drawn tight across their chests and hanging to their feet, carrying the distinctive emblems of the powerful gods.

The first held a glittering lamp, not like the lamps we use to light our nocturnal feasts but shaped like a golden boat with a tall flame flaring from its central vent. The second priest carried an altar-top, that is, a source of help, its name *auxilia* derived from the auxiliary aid the Great Goddess brings. Then the third approached, holding on high a branch of palm its leaves of fine gold, and a caduceus, like Mercury. A fourth showed a cast of a left hand with fingers extended, a symbol of justice, since the left hand's natural clumsiness, lack of quickness and dexterity, is more appropriate to justice than the right; and he carried a little golden vessel shaped like a woman's breast, from which he poured milk as a libation. The fifth held a winnowing fan woven from twigs of gold not willow, and a sixth priest bore an amphora.

Behind them came the gods deigning to walk on human feet, firstly Anubis that dread messenger between the powers above and the powers beneath the earth, with a face one side black the other gold, his jackal's neck erect, bearing a caduceus in his left hand, and a green palm-branch in his right. In his footsteps a priest with proud and measured step carried a statue on his shoulders, a cow seated upright; the cow being a fruitful symbol of the divine Mother of all. Another bore a basket containing secret implements, concealed objects of great sanctity, while a third fortunate priest carried an ancient image of the Great Goddess in the lap of his robe, not in the shape of any beast wild or tame, or bird or human being, but inspiring reverence in its skilled working by its very strangeness, being the ineffable symbol somehow of a deeper sacredness, to be cloaked in awful silence, formed as it was of gleaming gold after this manner: it took the form of a little hollow urn, its surface engraved with Egyptian hieroglyphics, with a rounded base, an extended spout opened slightly like a beak, and a broad curving handle at the opposite side extending backwards deeply from which an asp, coiled in a knot, reared its scaly swollen neck on high.

Book XI: 12–15 The ass transformed

And now the blessing the ever-kindly Goddess had promised me drew near, and the priest appeared the keeper of my fate, my true salvation. He carried in his right hand, adorned as she had commanded, a sistrum for the goddess with a garland of roses for me, a fitting garland of victory indeed, since after enduring such toils, and escaping such perils, I would now conquer that Fortune who had savaged me so cruelly. But though filled with sudden joy I refrained from galloping forward in unrestrained delight, since I rightly feared that the peaceful onward movement of the procession might be halted at the fierce onrush of a quadruped. So, with unhurried, near-human steps, I slowly and gently wriggled through the crowd which made way, doubtless due to divine intervention, and thus moved softly within.

Now the priest, who I could see remembered the orders he had received in dream, though he still marvelled at the actual event that fulfilled the prophecy, halted at once and of himself stretched out his hand, and held the rose-garland level with my lips. My heart leapt with a rapid beat, and I trembled as I tore with eager mouth at the glistening wreath woven of lovely roses, which greedy for the outcome promised I greedily devoured. Nor did the Goddess' divine promise fail, for on the instant my ugly bestial form slipped from me. First the coarse hair fell from my body then my dense hide grew thin, my sagging paunch grew trim, the soles of my feet sprouted toes through their hooves, my hands were no longer feet but reached out in a proper manner, my long neck shrank, my head and face rounded, my huge ears shrank back to their former size, my craggy teeth reduced to a human scale, and what had tormented me most of all, my tail, existed no more.

The onlookers marvelled, and the priests paid reverence to the evident power of the mighty Goddess, to her magnificence which confirmed my nocturnal vision, and to the ease of my transformation. They stretched their arms towards heaven, and clearly, with one voice, bore witness to her wondrous beneficence.

As for me, I stood speechless, utterly dumfounded, rooted to the spot, unable to grasp with my mind so sudden and great a joy, lost for what I might begin to say, where to find utterance for this rediscovered voice, what auspicious speech might serve to inaugurate use of my re-found tongue, what fine words could express my gratitude to so powerful a goddess. But the high-priest, through some divine revelation, had learnt of all my miseries, and though he himself was moved by the strangeness of the miracle swiftly signalled for me to be given a piece of linen to cover myself, for once the ass's wretched hide had vanished from me, I had clenched my thighs together and covered myself with my hands, to grant as much decent natural protection as a naked man can find. Now one of the faithful swiftly doffed his outer tunic and covered me hastily, while the high-priest, still startled, gazed at me with a kindly and exalted expression, saying:

'Lucius, after suffering many labours, buffeted by Fortune's mighty tempests, by the fierce winds of fate, you reach at last the harbour of Peace, the altar of Mercy. Neither your birth and rank, nor your fine education, brought you any aid, as on youth's rash and slippery paths you plunged into servile pleasures and reaped the perverse rewards of ill-starred curiosity. Yet blind Fortune while tormenting you with imminent danger, has brought you from the throes of evil chance to blessed happiness. Let her vent her rage and fury now on some other object of her cruelty, for hostile fate finds no opening against those whose lives our royal Goddess renders free to serve her. How could those bandits, wild beasts, servitude, the windings of savage journeys that ended where they began, the fear of death renewed each day, how could all they serve Fortune's evil turn, for now you are under the wing of an all-seeing Providence,

who with the splendour of her light illumines all the gods. Wear a happier face, to match the white robe you wear now, and join the procession of the saving Goddess with a joyful and conquering step. Let the unbelieving bear witness, and understand their errant ways. Behold, Lucius, freed from his former troubles, delighting in the favour of mighty Isis, triumphing over fate. And to be more secure, enlist in the protection of this holy cadre, to whose oath of obedience you were but now summoned, Dedicate yourself to the commands of our sect, accept the burden of your own free will; for once you begin to serve the Goddess, you will know the fruits of freedom more completely.'

Book XI: 16–19 Lucius regained

Drawing a deep breath after this inspired utterance, the high-priest fell silent, while I joined the sacred procession and marched along behind the holy emblems, famous now to all, and conspicuous, the subject of their nods and pointing fingers. The whole crowd spoke of me: 'There's the man who was turned back into a human being by the august powers of the omnipotent goddess. How happy he is, by Hercules, thrice blessed, who no doubt through the purity and loyalty of his past life has earned such astounding favour from heaven that he was, as it were, reborn and accepted at once into her holy service.'

Meanwhile amidst the tumult of the festive celebrations we had slowly progressed towards the seashore, and arrived at the very place where as an ass I had been stabled the previous day. There, once the emblems of the gods had been properly disposed, the high-priest consecrated a finely-crafted ship decorated with marvellous Egyptian hieroglyphics. Taking a lighted torch, an egg, and some sulphur, he uttered solemn prayers with reverent lips, and purified the ship thoroughly, dedicating it, and naming it for the Goddess. The shining sail of this happy vessel bore an inscription, its letters woven in gold, the text of a prayer for prosperous sailing throughout the new season. The mast of smooth pine was raised now, tall and splendid, the flag at its tip conspicuous from afar; gold-leaf glittered from the stern which was shaped like Isis' sacred goose; while the whole hull of highly-polished citron-wood gleamed pale. Then the crowd of priests and laity alike vied in loading the vessel with winnowing fans spread with spices and the like and poured libations of milk and grain over the waves. Once the ship had received a wealth of gifts and auspicious prayers, the mooring ropes were loosed and she was given to the waters, accompanied by a gentle breeze that rose in greeting. And when she was so far out to sea we could no longer see her clearly, the priests took up their burdens again and set out joyfully for the shrine, in the same fine and orderly procession as before.

Arriving at that place, the high-priest and the bearers of the holy emblems, and those initiates privy already to the sacred inner sanctuary of the Goddess, were admitted into that hidden chamber, where the lifelike statues were arranged in proper order. Then one of the throng, whom they all called the Secretary, standing by the door, summoned the shrine-bearers, the *pastophori*, as that sacred college were named, as if calling them to an assembly. Then from a high dais he read aloud from a book, Latin prayers for the mighty Emperor's health, for the Knights, the Senate and the Roman People, the ships, and mariners, under the sway of our world-wide Empire. Then in Greek, according to the Greek ritual, he uttered the formula '*ploeaphesia*', meaning that ships could now be launched. That his words were well-received by all was confirmed by the ensuing acclamation of the crowd. Then, filled with joy, the people bearing green twigs, sacred branches, and garlands they had gathered, kissed the feet of the goddess, whose statue made of silver stood on the temple steps, before scattering to their own homes. As for me, my thoughts would not allow me to stray a finger's breadth from that place, but meditating on my past misfortunes, I gazed intently on that image of the Goddess.

Meanwhile winged Rumour had not tarried in her swift flight, but spread the news, of the beneficent Goddess's notable kindness to me and my own good fortune, everywhere, even throughout my own city. At once my servants, friends, blood-relatives ceased mourning for my supposed death and, delighted at the unexpected tidings and bringing various gifts, hastened to see one risen from the darkness to the light. I too was cheered at meeting with those again whom I'd relinquished hope of ever seeing, receiving their kind offerings gratefully, since they'd brought enough in their generosity to relieve me of any want.

I spoke with each of them in turn, as I should, narrating my former troubles and present joy, then swiftly returned to that meditation on the Goddess which was my chief delight. I took a room in the temple precincts, and set up house there, and though serving the Goddess as layman only, as yet, I was a constant companion of the priests and a loyal devotee of the great deity. No moment of rest, not a night, passed without some admonishing visitation from her. She urged me again and again to become an initiate to her rites for which I had long been destined, but though willing and eager to obey I was held back by religious awe, since I knew from careful study that the rules of her order were harsh, those regarding abstinence and chastity demanding, and how one must always, with care and circumspection, guard against the countless vicissitudes of life. Despite my sense of urgency, and though I thought again and again of these matters, somehow I still delayed.

Book XI: 20–23 Preparations for initiation

One night I dreamed the high-priest appeared to me, his arms full of gifts. When I asked the meaning of these offerings he replied that they were things of mine from Thessaly, and that my servant Candidus was here too. On waking I reflected on my vision for hours, wondering what it portended, having no servant of that name. Yet, whatever the dream might presage, I felt certain from the gifts I would know profit, and so was happily expectant of some fortunate event as I waited for the doors of the shrine to open. The bright white sanctuary curtains were drawn, and we prayed to the august face of the Goddess, as a priest made his ritual rounds of the temple altars, praying and sprinkling water in libation from a chalice filled from a spring within the walls. When the service was finally complete, at the first hour of the day, just as the worshippers with loud cries were greeting the dawn light, the servants I had left behind me in Hypata after Photis condemned me to my sad wanderings, suddenly appeared. Hearing the news they had even brought my horse, sold to various buyers but identifiable by the markings on his back and regained. And then it was that I marvelled at my prophetic dream, whose promise of good had not only been confirmed but also the retrieval of my white horse, foretold in the dream-servant's name of Candidus.

From then on I became ever more solicitous in my constant attendance on the deity, believing that my present blessings were a guarantee of future good. Moreover, day by day, my desire for holy orders intensified, and time and again I entreated the high-priest to hasten my initiation into the mysteries of the sacred night. But he, being a grave man, remarkable for his close observance of the strictest religious discipline, restrained my insistence gently and kindly, as parents will restrain their children's unripe urges, calming my natural eagerness with a comforting expectation of good to come. He told me the proper day for a person's initiation is always marked by a sign from the Goddess, that the officiating priest was likewise indicated by her, and even the costs of the ceremony to be defrayed. He advised me to suffer the delay with reverence and patience, since over-eagerness and disobedience were faults to be guarded against assiduously, and neither to hang back when called nor advance myself when not. None of his order had been so wrong-minded, so determined on their own destruction, as to dare to take office rashly or sacrilegiously, and without the Goddess' direct

command, and thereby to commit a deadly sin. The gates of the underworld and the guardianship of life are both in her hands, he said, and the rites of initiation are akin to a willing death and salvation through her grace. Indeed, those whose term of life was drawing to its close, who already stood on the last threshold of light, if the sect's unspoken mysteries could be safely entrusted to them, were often summoned by the power of the Goddess to be in a manner reborn through her grace and set again on a path of renewed life. I too, he suggested, should bow likewise to heavens' decree, even though I had been destined for and called long since to the blessed service of the Goddess by clear and evident signs of that great deity's favour. And I should, as the priests did, abstain from unholy and forbidden foods, so as to enter more deeply into the secret mysteries of the purest of faiths.

Thus spoke the high-priest, and, patient in my obedience, I performed my tasks each day at celebrations of the holy rites, zealously, diligently, in calm tranquility and laudable silence. Nor did the Great Goddess's saving goodness fail me, nor did she torment me with long delay. One dark night, in commands as clear as day, she proclaimed that the hoped-for time had arrived, when she would grant me my dearest wish. She told me what resources must be found for the ceremony, and decreed that her high-priest, Mithras, who she explained was linked to me celestially by a certain conjunction of the planets, would himself perform the rite.

These and other kind decrees of the Great Goddess raised my spirits, and before the light of day shone I shook off sleep and hastening to the high-priest's rooms I met and greeted him at the entrance. I was set on demanding my initiation more vigorously than ever, believing it was now my due, but the instant he saw me he pre-empted my plea, saying: 'Ah, Lucius, how blessed, how fortunate you are, that the august deity so strongly favours you in her benevolence. Why do you linger here in idleness when the day has come which you've longed and prayed for endlessly, when at the divine command of the many-titled Goddess these very hands of mine will introduce you to the most sacred mysteries of her religion.'

Then that most generous of men took my arm and led me to the doors of the vast temple, and when he had opened them according to the ritual prescribed, and then performed the morning sacrifice, he brought from the inner sanctuary various books written in characters strange to me. Some shaped like creatures represented compressed expressions of profound concepts, in others the tops and tails of letters were knotted, coiled, interwoven like vine-tendrils to hide their meaning from profane and ignorant eyes. From these books he read aloud for me the details of what was needed for my initiation.

At once I set about acquiring those things myself or procuring them zealously through friends, while sparing no expense. Then the high-priest escorted by a band of devotees led me to the nearest baths, saying the occasion required it. When I had bathed according to the custom, he asked favour of the gods, and purified me by a ritual cleansing, sprinkling me with water. Then in the early afternoon he led me to the shrine again, and placed me at the Goddess' feet. He gave me certain orders too sacred for open utterance then, with all the company as witnesses, commanded me to curb my desire for food for the ten days following, to eat of no creature, and drink no wine.

I duly observed all this with reverence and restraint, and now came the evening destined for my appearance before the Goddess. The sun was setting, bringing twilight on, when suddenly a crowd flowed towards me, to honour me with sundry gifts, in accord with the ancient and sacred rite. All the uninitiated were ordered to depart, I was dressed in a new-made robe of linen and the high-priest, taking me by the arm, led me into the sanctuary's innermost recess.

And now, diligent reader, you are no doubt keen to know what was said next, and what was done. I'd tell you, if to tell you, were allowed; if you were allowed to hear then you might know, but ears and tongue would sin equally, the latter for its profane indiscretion, the former for their unbridled curiosity. Oh, I shall speak, since your desire to hear may be a matter of deep religious longing, and I would not torment you with further anguish, but I shall speak only of what can be revealed to the minds of the uninitiated without need for subsequent atonement, things which though you have heard them, you may well not understand. So listen, and believe in what is true. I reached the very gates of death and, treading Proserpine's threshold, yet passed through all the elements and returned. I have seen the sun at midnight shining brightly. I have entered the presence of the gods below and the presence of the gods above, and I have paid due reverence before them.

Book XI: 24–27 The initiate of Isis

When dawn came and the ceremony was complete, I emerged wearing twelve robes as a sign of consecration, sacred dress indeed though nothing stops me from speaking of it, since a host of people were there and saw me. As instructed, I stood on a wooden dais placed at the centre of the holy shrine, before the statue of the Goddess, conspicuous in my fine elaborately embroidered linen. The precious outer cloak hung from shoulder to ankle, so that I was wrapped around with creatures worked in various colours: here Indian serpents, there Hyperborean gryphons, winged lions of that distant region of the world. The priests call this garment the Olympian Stole. I held a burning torch in my right hand, and my head was gracefully garlanded with a wreath of gleaming palm leaves projecting outwards like rays of light. Adorned thus in the likeness of the Sun, and standing there like a statue, the curtains suddenly being opened, I was exposed to the gaze of the crowd who strayed around me. That day my initiation into the mysteries was marked, as a festive occasion, by a splendid feast among a convivial gathering. On the next day, the third, a similar ritual ceremony was performed, with a sacred breakfast bringing an official end to the proceedings.

I stayed at the temple a few days longer, enjoying the ineffable pleasure of gazing on the Goddess's sacred image, bound to her by an act of beneficence I could never repay. But finally, as instructed by her, for it was only with immense difficulty that I could sever the ties born of my fervent longing for her, I paid my debts of gratitude at last, in accordance with my small means if not in full, and began to prepare for my journey home. I ended my stay by prostrating myself before her, washing the Goddess' feet with my welling tears, as I prayed to her, gulping my words, my voice broken by repeated sobbing:

'O holy and eternal saviour of humankind, ever-bountiful in cherishing mortal beings, bringing a mother's sweet affections to the miseries of the wretched. No day, no night, not even an instant passes empty of your beneficence, you who protect men on land and sea, who extend your saving hand and dispel life's tempests, quelling Fortune's storms, untwisting the inextricable windings of Fate, restricting the planets' harmful aspects. The powers above adore you, the powers below pay you reverence. You set the globe spinning, fuel the sun, command the universe and press Tartarus beneath our feet. You the stars obey; for you the seasons turn, in you the deities rejoice, and you it is that all the elements serve. At your order breezes sigh, clouds yield nourishment, seeds quicken and seedlings grow. The birds flying in the sky, the wild beasts that prowl the mountains, the serpents that lurk underground, the very monsters of the deep tremble at your power. But my eloquence is unfit to sing your praises; my wealth of words too meagre to render proper sacrifice, my voice too weak to express my reverence for your majesty, nor would a thousand tongues in as many mouths and an eternal flow of inexhaustible speech suffice. I must therefore try to do the sole thing the poor but

devout can do, and keep the memory of your divine face always in my thoughts, and the vision of your sacred presence forever in my heart.’

Ending this prayer to the power on high, I embraced Mithras my priest and now my spiritual father, and clasping his neck and kissing him again and again begged him to forgive my inability to repay his great kindnesses to me as he deserved. Then, after lingering a long while in renewed expressions of thanks, I at last set out to re-visit my ancestral home after so long away, yet hastily, for after a few days stay I swiftly gathered my things and, at the Great Goddess’s command, took ship for Rome . Blown by favouring winds, I soon arrived safely at *Portus Augustus*, near Ostia, and taking a fast carriage reached the holy city, in the evening of December the 13th, the Ides of December. My most pressing business was to visit the temple of royal Isis, the Great Goddess, in the Campus Martius where she was worshipped with utmost reverence under the name of Isis Campensis, and pray to her there daily. A newcomer to that shrine, but an initiate of her sect, I was a constant presence there.

When the mighty Sun had circled the zodiac and a year had gone, the ever-vigilant Goddess who kindly watched over me, once more troubled my sleep and spoke again of rites and initiation. Since I had long been hers, I wondered what new task she was prompting, what new future she foretold, yet while I was debating in my own mind, and searching my conscience with the help of the priests, I suddenly realised that I had not yet been introduced to the mysteries of invincible Osiris, the great god who is the mighty father of the gods. Though his rites of initiation were still quite distinct, his godhead and worship were linked, even joined, to that of Isis . I should thus have realised that I was being sought after as a servant of his great divinity as well.

The issue was not long in doubt, for the following night I had a vision in which an initiate dressed in white linen brought ivy-wreaths and thyrsi, with things that must be nameless, and placed these various objects on my household altar then, seated in my chair, ordered me to arrange a sacred feast. In order evidently to help me know him again by a sure sign of identity, his left ankle was slightly twisted, and he walked with a hesitant limp. My cloud of doubt was lifted by this clear manifestation of the god’s own wishes, and after the morning prayers for the Goddess were complete, I at once began to ask about me, with utmost zeal, as to whether any there exactly resembled him of my dream. Confirmation came immediately, when I caught sight of one of the *pastophori* who not only limped like the man in my vision, but also was alike in his dress and appearance. I later learned he was called Asinius Marcellus, a name not inappropriate to my own transformation. Without pausing for an instant I approached him, and indeed he was not surprised by our ensuing conversation since he himself had been ordered in a similar manner to preside over my initiation. In his dream, the previous night, he had been arranging garlands for Osiris when he heard from the great god’s own oracular mouth, which speaks each man’s fate, that a man of Madauros was being sent to him, that the man was poor but the priest must perform his rites of initiation, since by the god’s aid, the man would win fame by his studies and the priest himself a fine recompense.

Book XI: 28–30 And of Osiris

Though pledged to initiation, the meagreness of my funds delayed the ceremony, much to my disappointment. The cost of my voyage had consumed my modest legacy, and Rome proved much more expensive than the provinces. Hindered by dire poverty, I felt tormented, like a sacrificial victim caught, as the proverb says, ‘between the altar-stone and the knife.’ Yet the god’s insistence weighed on me, and after suffering his troublesome and frequent promptings which ended in a peremptory command, I sold the shirt from my back and scraped together

the sum required. 'Surely,' the god said, when issuing his final order, 'you'd not hesitate to pawn your rags to fund your idle pleasures, so why now, on the brink of a vital act, do you brood on a state of poverty which will bring not a single regret?'

I made my preparations, again went without meat for a ten day period, and shaved my head, after which I was initiated into the nocturnal mysteries of the supreme god, and confidently enacted the holy rites of his worship too. Thus I was consoled for my enforced stay in Rome, and since I practised law, pleading in Latin not Greek, my small funds were favourably increased by the warming breath of Success.

Not long afterwards, I was again presented in a dream with the sudden and startling demand from the deities for a yet a third initiation. Greatly surprised and puzzled, I pondered their orders in my mind. What did the gods mean by this new and strange design? What was it that, despite my two previous initiations, still remained to be accomplished? Perhaps the priests had erred or omitted something in those ceremonies. I even began to hold misgivings as to their good faith. But while tossed on this stormy sea of speculation, anxious in the extreme, a kindly apparition, in a midnight visitation, instructed me as follows,:

'Fear nothing from this long train of ceremonies, for nothing previously was done in error. Rather be happy, rejoice that the deities think you worthy, and exult that you will experience thrice what others scarcely dream of undergoing once, and so consider yourself eternally blessed. Moreover in your case a third performance of the rites is essential, since the garments of the goddess you wore in the provinces are stored in her temple, and you lack them here in Rome to perform your worship on holy days, or don those sacred robes when commanded. Therefore to enjoy health, happiness and good fortune, delight in divine instruction and be initiated once more.'

Once the persuasive force of this divine dream had registered with me, I neither ignored the matter nor procrastinated, but swiftly told the priest of my vision. Then I once more submitted to the abstention from meat required, adding of my own will to the ten days prescribed by the enduring tradition, and met the cost of all the preparations and equipment required with no regard for my actual resources, rather without stint from pure religious zeal. Yet I felt not a moment's regret for all the effort and expense, since heaven favoured me through its beneficent grace with a steady income from my practice of the law.

Finally, a few days later, Osiris, greatest of the gods, highest among the greatest, mightiest among the highest, lord of the mightiest, appeared to me in dream, and not in some semblance other than his own, but greeting me face to face, in sacred utterance urging me to win fame as now in the courts through my advocacy, without fear of the slanders provoked by my assiduous study of the laws of Rome. Furthermore, I was not to serve him as a minor member of the flock, but as one his college of *pastophori*, the shrine-bearers, and a member of the quinquennial council.

Once again then I shaved my head completely, and not hiding my baldness covertly, but displaying it proudly wherever I passed, I performed with joy the duties of that venerable priesthood, founded in the days of Sulla.