BAUM LYMAN FRANK

THE LAST EGYPTIAN

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The Last Egyptian

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Содержание

L. Frank Baum
The Last Egyptian / A Romance of the Nile

CHAPTER I
WHERE THE DESERT MEETS THE NILE

The sun fell hot upon the bosom of the Nile and clung there, vibrant, hesitating, yet aggressive, as if baffled in its desire to penetrate beneath the river's lurid surface. For the Nile defies the sun, and relegates him to his own broad domain, wherein his power is undisputed.

On either side the broad stream humanity shrank from Ra's seething disc. The shaduf workers had abandoned their skin-covered buckets and bamboo poles to seek shelter from the heat beneath a straggling tree or a straw mat elevated on stalks of ripe sugar-cane. The boats of the fishermen lay in little coves, where the sails were spread as awnings to shade their crews. The fellaheen laborers had all retired to their clay huts to sleep through this fiercest period of the afternoon heat.

On the Nile, however, a small steam dahabeah puffed lazily along, stemming with its slow motion the sweep of the mighty river toward the sea. The Arab stoker, naked and sweating, stood as far as possible from the little boiler and watched it with a look of absolute repulsion upon his swarthy face. The engineer, also an Arab, lay stretched upon the deck half asleep, but with both ears alert to catch any sound that might denote the fact that the straining, rickety engine was failing to perform its full duty. Back of the tiny cabin sat the dusky steersman, as naked and inert as his fellows, while under the deck awning reclined the one white man of the party, a young Englishman clothed in khaki knickerbockers and a white silk shirt well open at the throat.

There were no tourists in Egypt at this season. If you find a white man on the Nile in April, he is either attached to some exploration party engaged in excavations or a government employee from Cairo, Assyut or Luxor, bent upon an urgent mission.

The dahabeah was not a government boat, though, so that our Englishman was more likely to be an explorer than an official. It was evident he was no stranger to tropical climes, if we judged by his sun-browned skin and the quiet resignation to existing conditions with which he puffed his black briar and relaxed his muscular frame. He did not sleep, but lay with his head upon a low wicker rest that enabled him to sweep the banks of the Nile with his keen blue eyes.

The three Arabs regarded their master from time to time with stealthy glances, in which wonder was mingled with a certain respect. The foreigner was a fool to travel during the heat of the day; no doubt of that at all. The native knows when to work and when to sleep – a lesson the European never learns. Yet this was no casual adventurer exploiting his folly, but a man who had lived among them for years, who spoke Arabic fluently and could even cipher those hieroglyphics of the dead ages which abound throughout modern Egypt. Hassan, Abdallah and Ali knew this well, for they had accompanied Winston Bey on former expeditions, and heard him translate the ugly signs graven upon the ugly stones into excellent Arabic. It was all very wonderful in its way, but quite useless and impractical, if their opinion were allowed. And the master himself was impractical. He did foolish things at all times, and sacrificed his own comfort and that of his servants in order to accomplish unnecessary objects. Had he not paid well for his whims, Winston Bey might have sought followers in vain; but the Arab will even roast himself upon the Nile on an April afternoon to obtain the much-coveted gold of the European.

At four o'clock a slight breeze arose; but what matter? The journey was nearly done now. They had rounded a curve in the river, and ahead of them, lying close to the east bank, were the low mountains of Gebel Abu Fedah. At the south, where the rocks ended abruptly, lay a small grove of

palms. Between the palms and the mountains was the beaten path leading from the Nile to the village of Al-Kusiyeh, a mile or so inland, which was the particular place the master had come so far and so fast to visit.

The breeze, although hardly felt, served to refresh the enervated travelers. Winston sat up and knocked the ashes from his pipe, making a careful scrutiny at the same time of the lifeless landscape ahead.

The mountains of gray limestone looked very uninviting as they lay reeking under the terrible heat of the sun. From their base to the river was no sign of vegetation, but only a hardened clay surface. The desert sands had drifted in in places. Even under the palms it lay in heavy drifts, for the land between the Nile and Al-Kusiyeh was abandoned to nature, and the fellaheen had never cared to redeem it.

The water was deep by the east bank, for the curve of the river swept the current close to the shore. The little dahabeah puffed noisily up to the bank and deposited the Englishman upon the hard clay. Then it backed across into shallow water, and Hassan shut down the engine while Abdallah dropped the anchor.

Winston now wore his cork helmet and carried a brown umbrella lined with green. With all his energy, the transition from the deck of the dahabeah to this oven-like atmosphere of the shore bade fair to overcome his resolution to proceed to the village.

But it would never do to recall his men so soon. They would consider it an acknowledgment that he had erred in judgment, and the only way to manage an Arab is to make him believe you know what you are about. The palm trees were not far away. He would rest in their shade until the sun was lower.

A dozen steps and the perspiration started from every pore. But he kept on, doggedly, until he came to the oblong shadow cast by the first palm, and there he squatted in the sand and mopped his face with his handkerchief.

The silence was oppressive. There was no sound of any kind to relieve it. Even the beetles were hidden far under the sand, and there was no habitation near enough for a donkey's bray or a camel's harsh growl to be heard. The Nile flows quietly at this point, and the boat had ceased to puff and rattle its machinery.

Winston brushed aside the top layer of sand with his hands, for that upon the surface was so hot that contact with it was unbearable. Then he extended his body to rest, turning slightly this way and that to catch in his face the faint breath of the breeze that passed between the mountains and the Nile. At the best he was doomed to an uncomfortable hour or two, and he cast longing glances at the other bits of shade to note whether any seemed more inviting than the one he had selected.

During this inspection his eye caught a patch of white some distance away. It was directly over the shadow of the furthest tree of the group, and aroused his curiosity. After a minute he arose in a leisurely fashion and walked over to the spot of white, which on nearer approach proved to be a soiled cotton tunic or burnous. It lay half buried in the sand, and at one end were the folds of a dirty turban, with faded red and yellow stripes running across the coarse cloth.

Winston put his foot on the burnous and the thing stirred and emitted a muffled growl. At that he kicked the form viciously; but now it neither stirred nor made a sound. Instead, a narrow slit appeared between the folds of the turban, and an eye, black and glistening, looked steadfastly upon the intruder.

"Do you take me for a beast, you imbecile, that you dare to disturb my slumbers?" asked a calm voice, in Arabic.

The heat had made Winston Bey impatient.

"Yes; you are a dog. Get up!" he commanded, kicking the form again.

The turban was removed, disclosing a face, and the man sat up, crossing his bare legs beneath him as he stared fixedly at his persecutor.

Aside from the coarse burnous, sadly discolored in many places, the fellow was unclothed. His skin showed at the breast and below his knees, and did not convey an impression of immaculate cleanliness. Of slender build, with broad shoulders, long hands and feet and sinewy arms and legs, the form disclosed was curiously like those so often presented in the picture-writing upon the walls of ancient temples. His forehead was high, his chin square, his eyes large and soft, his cheeks full, his mouth wide and sensual, his nose short and rounded. His jaws protruded slightly and his hair was smooth and fine. In color the tint of his skin was not darker than the tanned cuticle of the Englishman, but the brown was softer, and resembled coffee that has been plentifully diluted with cream. A handsome fellow in his way, with an expression rather unconcerned than dignified, which masked a countenance calculated to baffle even a shrewder and more experienced observer than Winston Bey.

Said the Englishman, looking at him closely:

"You are a Copt."

Inadvertently he had spoken in his mother tongue and the man laughed.

"If you follow the common prejudice and consider every Copt a Christian," he returned in purest English, "then I am no Copt; but if you mean that I am an Egyptian, and no dog of an Arab, then, indeed, you are correct in your estimate."

Winston uttered an involuntary exclamation of surprise. For a native to speak English is not so unusual; but none that he knew expressed himself with the same ease and confidence indicated in this man's reply. He brushed away some of the superheated sand and sat down facing his new acquaintance.

"Perhaps," said he – a touch of sarcasm in his voice – "I am speaking with a descendant of the Great Rameses himself."

"Better than that," rejoined the other, coolly. "My forefather was Ahtka-Rā, of true royal blood, who ruled the second Rameses as cleverly as that foolish monarch imagined he ruled the Egyptians."

Winston seemed amused.

"I regret," said he, with mock politeness, "that I have never before heard of your great forefather."

"But why should you?" asked the Egyptian. "You are, I suppose, one of those uneasy investigators that prowl through Egypt in a stupid endeavor to decipher the inscriptions on the old temples and tombs. You can read a little – yes; but that little puzzles and confuses you. Your most learned scholars – your Mariettes and Petries and Masperos – discover one clue and guess at twenty, and so build up a wonderful history of the ancient kings that is absurd to those who know the true records."

"Who knows them?" asked Winston, quickly.

The man dropped his eyes.

"No one, perhaps," he mumbled. "At the best, but one or two. But you would know more if you first studied the language of the ancient Egyptians, so that when you deciphered the signs and picture writings you could tell with some degree of certainty what they meant."

Winston sniffed. "Answer my question!" said he, sternly. "Who knows the true records, and where are they?"

"Ah, I am very ignorant," said the other, shaking his head with an humble expression. "Who am I, the poor Kāra, to dispute with the scholars of Europe?"

The Englishman fanned himself with his helmet and sat silent for a time.

"But this ancestor of yours – the man who ruled the Great Rameses – who was he?" he asked, presently.

"Men called him Ahtka-Rā, as I said. He was descended from the famous Queen Hatshepset, and his blood was pure. Indeed, my ancestor should have ruled Egypt as its king, had not the first Rameses overthrown the line of Mēnēs and established a dynasty of his own. But Ahtka-Rā, unable

to rule in his own name, nevertheless ruled through the weak Rameses, under whom he bore the titles of High Priest of Āmen, Lord of the Harvests and Chief Treasurer. All of the kingdom he controlled and managed, sending Rameses to wars to keep him occupied, and then, when the king returned, setting him to build temples and palaces, and to erect monuments to himself, that he might have no excuse to interfere with the real business of the government. You, therefore, who read the inscriptions of the vain king wonder at his power and call him great; and, in your ignorance, you know not even the name of Ahtka-Rā, the most wonderful ruler that Egypt has ever known."

"It is true that we do not know him," returned Winston, scrutinizing the man before him with a puzzled expression. "You seem better informed than the Egyptologists!"

Kāra dipped his hands into the sand beside him and let the grains slip between his fingers, watching them thoughtfully.

"Rameses the Second," said he, "reigned sixty-five years, and – "

"Sixty-seven years," corrected Winston. "It is written."

"In the inscriptions, which are false," explained the Egyptian. "My ancestor concealed the death of Rameses for two years, because Meremptah, who would succeed him, was a deadly enemy. But Meremptah discovered the secret at last, and at once killed Ahtka-Rā, who was very old and unable to oppose him longer. And after that the treasure cities of Pithom and Raamses, which my ancestor had built, were seized by the new king, but no treasures were found in them. Even in death my great ancestor was able to deceive and humble his enemies."

"Listen, Kāra," said Winston, his voice trembling with suppressed eagerness; "to know that which you have told to me means that you have discovered some sort of record hitherto unknown to scientists. To us who are striving to unravel the mystery of ancient Egyptian history this information will be invaluable. Let me share your knowledge, and tell me what you require in exchange for your secret. You are poor; I will make you rich. You are unknown; I will make the name of Kāra famous. You are young; you shall enjoy life. Speak, my brother, and believe that I will deal justly by you – on the word of an Englishman."

The Egyptian did not even look up, but continued playing with the sand. Yet over his grave features a smile slowly spread.

"It is not five minutes," he murmured softly, "since I was twice kicked and called a dog. Now I am the Englishman's brother, and he will make me rich and famous."

Winston frowned, as if he would like to kick the fellow again. But he resisted the temptation.

"What would you?" he asked, indifferently. "The burnous might mean an Arab. It is good for the Arab to be kicked at times."

Possibly Kāra neither saw the jest nor understood the apology. His unreadable countenance was still turned toward the sand, and he answered nothing.

The Englishman moved uneasily. Then he extracted a cigarette case from his pocket, opened it, and extended it toward the Egyptian.

Kāra looked at the cigarettes and his face bore the first expression of interest it had yet shown. Very deliberately he bowed, touched his forehead and then his heart with his right hand, and afterward leaned forward and calmly selected a cigarette.

Winston produced a match and lighted it, the Egyptian's eyes seriously following his every motion. He applied the light to his own cigarette first; then to that of Kāra. Another touch of the forehead and breast and the native was luxuriously inhaling the smoke of the tobacco. His eyes were brighter and he wore a look of great content.

The Englishman silently watched until the other had taken his third whiff; then, the ceremonial being completed, he spoke, choosing his words carefully.

"Seek as we may, my brother, for the records of the dead civilization of your native land, we know full well that the most important documents will be discovered in the future, as in the past, by the modern Egyptians themselves. Your traditions, handed down through many generations, give to

you a secret knowledge of where the important papyri and tablets are deposited. If there are hidden tombs in Gebel Abu Fedah, or near the city of Al-Kusiyeh, perhaps you know where to find them; and if so, we will open them together and profit equally by what we secure."

The Egyptian shook his head and flicked the ash from his cigarette with an annoyed gesture.

"You are wrong in estimating the source of my knowledge," said he, in a tone that was slightly acrimonious. "Look at my rags," spreading his arms outward; "would I refuse your bribe if I knew how to earn it? I have not smoked a cigarette before in months – not since Tadros the dragoman came to Al Fedah in the winter. I am barefoot, because I fear to wear out my sandals until I know how to replace them. Often I am hungry, and I live like a jackal, shrinking from all intercourse with my fellows or with the world. That is Kāra, the son of kings, the royal one!"

Winston was astonished. It is seldom a native complains of his lot or resents his condition, however lowly it may be. Yet here was one absolutely rebellious.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because my high birth isolates me," was the reply, with an accent of pride. "It is no comfortable thing to be Kāra, the lineal descendant of the great Ahtka-Rā, in the days when Egypt's power is gone, and her children are scorned by the Arab Muslims and buffeted by the English Christians."

"Do you live in the village?" asked Winston.

"No; my burrow is in a huddle of huts behind the mountain, in a place that is called Fedah."

"With whom do you live?"

"My grandmother, Hatatcha."

"Ah!"

"You have heard of her?"

"No; I was thinking only of an Egyptian Princess Hatatcha who set fashionable London crazy in my father's time."

Kāra leaned forward eagerly, and then cast a half fearful glance around, at the mountains, the desert, and the Nile.

"Tell me about her!" he said, sinking his voice to a whisper.

"About the Princess?" asked Winston, surprised. "Really, I know little of her history. She came in a flash of wonderful oriental magnificence, I have heard, and soon had the nobility of England suing for her favors. Lord Roane especially divorced his wife that he might marry the beautiful Egyptian; and then she refused to wed with him. There were scandals in plenty before Hatatcha disappeared from London, which she did as mysteriously as she had come, and without a day's warning. I remember that certain infatuated admirers spent fortunes in search of her, overrunning all Egypt, but without avail. No one has ever heard of her since."

Kāra drew a deep breath, sighing softly.

"It was like my grandmother," he murmured. "She was always a daughter of Set."

Winston stared at him.

"Do you mean to say – " he began.

"Yes," whispered Kāra, casting another frightened look around; "it was my grandmother, Hatatcha, who did that. You must not tell, my brother, for she is still in league with the devils and would destroy us both if she came to hate us. Her daughter, who was my mother, was the child of that same Lord Roane you have mentioned; but she never knew her father nor England. I myself have never been a day's journey from the Nile, for Hatatcha makes me her slave."

"She must be very old, if she still lives," said Winston, musingly.

"She was seventeen when she went to London," replied Kāra, "and she returned here in three years, with my mother in her arms. Her daughter was thirty-five when I was born, and that is twenty-three years ago. Fifty-eight is not an advanced age, yet Hatatcha was a withered hag when first I remember her, and she is the same to-day. By the head of Osiris, my brother, she is likely to live until I am stiff in my tomb."

"It was she who taught you to speak English?"

"Yes. I knew it when I was a baby, for in our private converse she has always used the English tongue. Also I speak the ancient Egyptian language, which you call the Coptic, and I read correctly the hieroglyphics and picture-writings of my ancestors. The Arabic, of course, I know. Hatatcha has been a careful teacher."

"What of your mother?" asked Winston.

"Why, she ran away when I was a child, to enter the harem of an Arab in Cairo, so that she passed out of our lives, and I have lived with my grandmother always."

"I am impressed by the fact," said the Englishman, with a sneer, "that your royal blood is not so pure after all."

"And why not?" returned Kāra, composedly. "Is it not from the mother we descend? Who my grandfather may have been matters little, provided Hatatcha, the royal one, is my granddame. Perhaps my mother never considered who my father might be; it was unimportant. From her I drew the blood of the great Ahtka-Rā, who lives again in me. Robbed of your hollow ceremonial of marriage, you people of Europe can boast no true descent save through your mothers – no purer blood than I, ignoring my fathers, am sure now courses in my veins; for the father, giving so little to his progeny, can scarcely contaminate it, whatever he may chance to be."

The other, paying little heed to this discourse, the platitudes of which were all too familiar to his ears, reflected deeply on the strange discovery he had made through this unconventional Egyptian.

"Then," said he, pursuing his train of thought, "your knowledge of your ancestry and the life and works of Ahtka-Rā was obtained through your grandmother?"

"Yes."

"And she has not disclosed to you how it is that she knows all this?"

"No. She says it is true, and I believe it. Hatatcha is a wonderful woman."

"I agree with you. Where did she get the money that enabled her to amaze all England with her magnificence and splendor?"

"I do not know."

"Is she wealthy now?"

Kāra laughed.

"Did I not say we were half starved, and live like foxes in a hole? For raiment we have each one ragged garment. But the outside of man matters little, save to those who have nothing within. Treasures may be kept in a rotten chest."

"But personally you would prefer a handsome casket?"

"Of course. It is Hatatcha who teaches me philosophy to make me forget my rags."

The Englishman reflected.

"Do you labor in the fields?" he asked.

"She will not let me," said Kāra. "If my wrongs were righted, she holds, I would even now be king of Egypt. The certainty that they will never be righted does not alter the morale of the case."

"Does Hatatcha earn money herself?"

"She sits in her hut morning and night, muttering curses upon her enemies."

"Then how do you live at all?"

Kāra seemed surprised by the question, and considered carefully his reply.

"At times," said he, "when our needs are greatest, my grandmother will produce an ancient coin of the reign of Hystaspes, which the sheik at Al-Kusiyeh readily changes into piasters, because they will give him a good premium on it at the museum in Cairo. Once, years ago, the sheik threatened Hatatcha unless she confessed where she had found these coins; but my grandmother called Set to her aid, and cast a spell upon the sheik, so that his camels died of rot and his children became blind. After that he let Hatatcha alone, but he was still glad to get her coins."

"Where does she keep them?"

"It is her secret. When she was ill, a month ago, and lay like one dead, I searched everywhere for treasure and found it not. Perhaps she has exhausted her store."

"Had she anything besides the coins?"

"Once a jewel, which she sent by Tadros, the dragoman, to exchange for English books in Cairo."

"What became of the books?"

"After we had both read them they disappeared. I do not know what became of them."

They had shifted their seats twice, because the shadow cast by the palms moved as the sun drew nearer to the horizon. Now the patches were long and narrow, and there was a cooler breath in the air.

The Englishman sat long silent, thinking intently. Kāra was placidly smoking his third cigarette.

The rivalry among excavators and Egyptologists generally is intense. All are eager to be recognized as discoverers. Since the lucky find of the plucky American, Davis, the explorers among the ancient ruins of Egypt had been on the qui vive to unearth some farther record of antiquity to startle and interest the scholars of the world. Much of value has been found along the Nile banks, it is true; but it is generally believed that much more remains to be discovered.

Gerald Winston, with a fortune at his command and a passion for Egyptology, was an indefatigable prospector in this fascinating field, and it was because of a rumor that ancient coins and jewels had come from the Sheik of Al-Kusiyeh that he had resolved to visit that village in person and endeavor to learn the secret source of this wealth before someone else forestalled him.

The story that he had just heard from the lips of the voluble Kāra rendered his visit to Al-Kusiyeh unnecessary; but that he was now on the trail of an important discovery was quite clear to him. How best to master the delicate conditions confronting him must be a subject of careful consideration, for any mistake on his part would ruin all his hopes.

"If my brother obtains any further valuable knowledge," said he, finally, "he will wish to sell it to good advantage. And it is evident to both of us that old Hatatcha has visited some secret tomb, from whence she has taken the treasure that enabled her to astound London for a brief period. When her wealth was exhausted she was forced to return to her squalid surroundings, and by dint of strict economy has lived upon the few coins that remained to her until now. Knowing part of your grandmother's story, it is easy to guess the remainder. The coins of Darius Hystaspes date about five hundred years before Christ, so that they would not account for Hatatcha's ample knowledge of a period two thousand years earlier. But mark me, Kāra, the tomb from which your grandmother extracted such treasure must of necessity contain much else – not such things as the old woman could dispose of without suspicion, but records and relics which in my hands would be invaluable, and for which I would gladly pay you thousands of piasters. See what you can do to aid me to bring about this desirable result. If you can manage to win the secret from your grandmother, you need be her slave no longer. You may go to Cairo and see the dancing girls and spend your money freely; or you can buy donkeys and a camel, and set up for a sheik. Meantime I will keep my dahabeah in this vicinity, and every day I will pass this spot at sundown and await for you to signal me. Is it all clear to you, my brother?"

"It is as crystal," answered the Egyptian gravely.

He took another cigarette, lighted it with graceful composure, and rose to his feet. Winston also stood up.

The sun had dropped behind the far corner of Gebel Abu Fedah, and with the grateful shade the breeze had freshened and slightly cooled the tepid atmosphere.

Wrapping his burnous around his tall figure, Kāra made dignified obeisance.

"Osiris guard thee, my brother," said he.

"May Horus grant thee peace," answered Winston, humoring this disciple of the most ancient religion. Then he watched the Egyptian stalk proudly away over the hot sands, his figure erect, his

step slow and methodical, his bearing absurdly dignified when contrasted with his dirty tunic and unwashed skin.

"I am in luck," he thought, turning toward the bank to summon Hassan and Abdallah; "for I have aroused the rascal's cupidity, and he will soon turn up something or other, I'll be bound. Ugh! the dirty beast."

At the foot of the mountains Kāra paused abruptly and stood motionless, staring moodily at the sands before him.

"It was worth the bother to get the cigarettes," he muttered. Then he added, with sudden fierceness: "Twice he spurned me with his foot, and called me 'dog'!"

And he spat in the sand and continued on his way.

CHAPTER II
HATATCHA

The mountains of Abu Fedah consist of a low range about twelve miles long and from two to three hundred feet in height. These hills are wedge-shaped, and from a narrow, uneven ridge at the summit the sides slope downward at a sharp angle on either side, affording little apparent foothold to one who might essay to climb the steeps. At the south end are pits wherein were found numbers of mummified crocodiles, proving that these reptiles were formerly worshipped by the natives of Al-Kusiyeh, which is the ancient city of Qes of the hieroglyphic texts, and was afterward called Cusae by the Greeks. It was, in its prime, the capital of the fourteenth nome or province of Upper Egypt, and a favorite winter abode of the kings of the Middle Empire. The modern village, as before explained, lies a mile or two from the Nile bank, in a fertile valley watered by bubbling springs. The inhabitants are mostly Arabs, or a mixture of the Arab blood with that of the native fellaheen, which last, in common with the Copts, are direct descendants of the ancient Egyptians.

The early Egyptologists expected to find important tombs secreted in the limestone cliffs of Gebel Abu Fedah; but careful search only revealed the mummy crocodile pits and a few scattering and uninteresting cavities roughly hewn in the rocks, which might have contained mummies at one time, but had been rifled of their contents ages ago. The few inscriptions remaining in these rock tombs indicated that they were the burial places of ordinary citizens of Qes, and such cavities as were observed all faced the Nile. The opposite slopes of the mountains, facing the east, seemed never to have been utilized for tombs, fond as the Egyptians were of such opportunities to inter their dead in rocky places, above the reach of jackals or marauders.

Kāra skirted the south end of the mountain and passed around the edge of a bleak gray cliff. Here, close against the overhanging sandstone, was clustered a nest of wretched hovels, built partially of loose fragments of rock and partly of Nile mud baked in the sun. The place was called Fedah by the natives, and its scant dozen of inhabitants were those of pure Egyptian lineage, who refused to mingle with the natives of Al-Kusiyeh.

The most substantial of the dwellings was that occupied by Hatatcha and her grandson. It had been built against a hollow or cave of the mountain, so that the cane roof projected only a few feet beyond the cliff. A rude attempt on the part of the builders to make the front wall symmetrical was indicated by the fact that the stones bore quarry marks, and at the entrance arch, which had never been supplied with a door, but was half concealed by a woven mat, the stones were fully four feet in thickness.

The other huts, ranged beside and before this one, were far less imposing in construction; but all had the appearance of great antiquity, and those at the north and south edges of the huddle were unoccupied and more or less ruined and neglected. Tradition said that Fedah, in spite of its modern Arabic name, was as old as ancient Qes, and there was no reason to doubt the statement. Its location was admirable in summer, for the mountain shaded it during the long hot afternoons; but around it was nothing but sand and rock, and the desert stretched in front as far as the borders of Al-Kusiyeh.

Kāra, entering the short and narrow street between the hovels, pushed a goat from his path and proceeded calmly toward his dwelling. As he entered its one room, he paused to allow his eyes to grow accustomed to the gloom and then gazed around with an expression of mild surprise.

In one corner, upon a bed of dried rushes, lay the form of an old woman. Her single black cotton garment was open at the throat, displaying a wrinkled, shrunken bosom that rose and fell spasmodically, as if the hag breathed with great effort. Her eyes were closed and the scant, tousled locks of fine gray hair surrounding her face gave it a weird and witch-like expression. In spite of her

age and the clime in which she ad lived, Hatatcha's skin was almost as white as that of Europeans, its tint being so delicate as to be scarcely noticeable.

Upon a short wooden bench beside the rushes sat a girl with a palm branch, which she swayed back and forth to keep the flies from settling upon Hatatcha's face. She was, perhaps, fifteen years of age, but as fully matured in form as an English girl of twenty-five. Her face was remarkably handsome from the standpoint of regularity of contour, but its absolute lack of expression would render it uninviting to a connoisseur of beauty. Her dark eyes were magnificent, and seemed to have depths which were disappointing when you probed them. She wore the conventional black gown, or tunic, but because of the heat had allowed it to slip down to her waist, leaving her shoulders and breasts bare.

After a long and thoughtful look at his grandmother, Kāra sat down beside the girl and put his arm around her, drawing her close to his body. She neither resented the caress nor responded to it, but yielded herself inertly to the embrace while she continued to sway the palm branch with her free right arm.

"Ah, my Nephthys," said the man, lightly, in the Coptic tongue, "is our Hatatcha in the grip of the devils again?"

The girl made no reply, but at the sound of Kāra's voice the old woman opened her great eyes and gazed for an instant steadfastly upon her grandson. Her hands, which had been nervously clutching her robe, were raised in supplication, and she said in English, in a weak, hoarse voice:

"The draught, Kāra! Be quick!"

The man hesitated, but released the girl and stood up.

"It is the last, my Hatatcha. You know that no more can be procured," he said, in protest.

"I shall need no more," she answered, with much difficulty. "It is the last time. Be quick, Kāra!" Her voice died away in an odd gurgle, and her chest fluttered as if the breath was about to leave it.

Kāra, watching her curiously, as a dog might, was impressed by the symptoms. He turned to Nephthys.

"Go out," he commanded, in Coptic, and the girl arose and passed under the arch.

Then he went to a part of the wall and removed a loose stone, displaying a secret cavity. From this he took a small vase, smooth and black, which had a stopper of dull metal. Carrying it to Hatatcha, he knelt down, removed the stopper and placed the neck of the vase to her lips. The delicate, talon-like fingers clutched the vessel eagerly and the woman drank, while Kāra followed the course of the liquid down her gullet by watching her skinny throat.

When it was done, he carried the empty vase back to the crypt and replaced the loose stone. Then he returned to the bedside and sat down upon the bench. A bowl containing some bits of bread stood near. He stooped and caught a piece in his fingers, munching it between his strong teeth while he stared down upon Hatatcha's motionless form.

It was quite dark in the room by this time, for twilights are short in Egypt. But the pupils of the man's eyes expanded like those of a cat, and he could follow the slow rise and fall of the woman's chest and knew she was again breathing easily.

An hour passed, during which Kāra moved but once, to drink from a jar standing in the opposite corner. Hatatcha's condition disturbed him. If she died, he would be at a loss what to do. Unused to work and without resource of any sort, life would become a burden to him. He was, moreover, accustomed to be led by the strong old woman in all things, and she had been the provider during all the twenty-three years of his life. Kāra had been trained to think deeply upon many subjects, but here was one which had never occurred to him before because Hatatcha had never discussed it, and the matter of her death was until lately a thing that did not need to be considered. But her condition was serious to-night, and the precious life-giving elixir was gone to the last drop.

All the people around Abu Fedah deferred to Hatatcha, because she claimed, with some show of reason, to be of royal descent. But they did not know the story of Ahtka-Rā, and her escapades

in London years ago were all unsuspected by them. Hatatcha only confided such things to Kāra, and he would never dare breathe them to any except the Englishman, from whose lips the tales would never be liable to return.

But there was a great deal that Kāra himself did not know, and he realized this as he gazed uneasily upon his sick grandparent. She ought to tell him where the coins and jewels had come from, and if there were any left. He would need some trifles of that sort when she was gone. And the matter of her funeral – she had expressed strange desires, at times, regarding the disposition of her body after death. How was he to find means to carry out such desires?

A voice, low and clear, fell upon his ear and made him start. Hatatcha's big eyes were open and he caught their sparkle even in the darkness.

"Come nearer," she said.

He dropped upon the floor at her side and sat cross-legged near her head, bending over to catch her slightest whisper. She spoke in English to him.

"Anubis calls me, my son, and I must join his kingdom. My years are not great, but they have worn out my body with love and hatreds and plans of vengeance. You are my successor, and the inheritor of my treasures and my revenge and hates. The time is come when you must repay my care and perform a mission for which I have trained you since childhood. Promise me that you will fulfil my every wish to the letter!"

"Of necessity, Hatatcha," he responded, calmly. "Are you not my grandmother?"

She remained silent a moment.

"You are cold, and selfish and cruel," she resumed, her tone hardening, "and I have made you so. You are intelligent, and fearless, and strong. It is due to my training. Listen, then! Once I was young and beautiful and loving, and when I faced the world it fell at my feet in adoration. But one who claimed to be a man crushed all the joy and love from my heart, and left me desolate and broken. Like a spurned hind, I crept from the glare of palaces back to my mud hut, bearing my child in my arms, and here I mourned and suffered for years and found no comfort. Then the love that had destroyed my peace fell away, and in its place Set planted the seeds of vengeance. These I have cherished, and lo! a tree has sprouted and grown, of which you, my son, are the stalwart trunk. The fruit has been long maturing, but it is now ripe. Presently you, too, will face the world; but as a man – not like the weak woman I was – and you will accomplish my revenge. Is it not so, my Kāra?"

"If you say it, my Hatatcha, it is so," he answered. But he wondered.

"Then pay close attention to my words," she continued, "and store them carefully in your mind, that nothing shall be forgotten when it is needed to assist you. I will explain all things while I have the strength of the elixir, for when it leaves me my breath will go with it, and then your labors will begin."

Kāra leaned still lower. For once his heart beat faster than was its custom, and he felt a thrill of excitement pervading his entire being. The climax in his life had at last arrived, and he was about to discover what things he was destined to accomplish in the great unknown world.

Hour after hour Hatatcha's low voice continued to instruct her grandson. Occasionally she would question him, to be sure that he understood, and several names she made him repeat many times, until they were indelibly impressed upon his memory.

At last she took the forefinger of his right hand and with it made a mystic sign upon her naked breast, making him repeat after her a dreadful oath to obey her instructions in every way and keep forever certain grave secrets.

Then she fell back and lay still.

Daybreak came in time, and a streak of light crept under the arch and touched the group in the corner.

The aged hag, filthy and unkempt, lay dead upon her couch of rushes, and beside her sat Kāra, his face immobile, his eyes staring fixedly at the opposite wall.

He was thinking.

CHAPTER III
THE DRAGOMAN

Nephthys came from her mother's hut in the cool of early morning, bearing on her head an earthen jar. She was bound for the river, to carry from thence their daily supply of water.

As she passed Hatatcha's dwelling she found Kāra standing in the archway, and he drew the girl toward him and kissed her lips. They were cold and unresponsive.

"How is your grandmother?" she asked, indifferently.

"She is with Isis," he answered, holding her arm with one hand and feeling her brown cheek with the other.

The girl shuddered and glanced askance at the arch.

"Let me go," she said.

Instead, he folded an arm around her and kissed her again, while she put up a hand to steady the jar from falling.

Then Kāra experienced a sudden surprise. His body spun around like a top and was hurled with force against the opposite wall. At the same time the jar toppled from Nephthys' head and was shattered on the ground. The girl staggered back and leaned against the stones of the arch, staring at the path ahead.

In front of her stood a young man most gorgeously arrayed. A red fez, such as many wear in Egypt, was perched jauntily upon his head. Covering his breast was a blue satin jacket elaborately braided with silver, and where it parted in front a vest of white silk showed, with a line of bright silver buttons. His knee breeches were of saffron pongee, wide and flowing, like those of a Turk, and from there down to his yellow slippers his legs were bare. Add a voluminous sash of crimson silk and a flowing mantle suspended from his shoulders, and you can guess the splendor of the man's attire.

His person was short and inclined to stoutness, and his face, with its carefully curled black mustache, was remarkably regular and handsome. His eyes were nearly as large and black as Kāra's, and at the present moment they flashed fire, while an angry frown distorted his brow. He stood with his legs spread apart and his hands pressed upon his hips, regarding the girl with a glance of sullen fury.

Nephthys returned the look with one of stupor. Her face was quite as expressionless as before, but her nostrils dilated a little, as if she were afraid.

"Tadros!" she muttered.

Kāra lifted his tall form from the ground and stood scowling upon his assailant.

"The cursed dragoman again!" he exclaimed, with bitterness.

Tadros turned his head slightly to direct a look of scorn upon his enemy. Then he regarded the girl again.

"What of your promise to me, woman?" he demanded, sternly. "Are you the plaything of every dirty Egyptian when my back is turned?"

Nephthys had no reply. She looked at the pattern of the silver braid upon his jacket and followed carefully its curves and twists. The blue satin was the color of lapis lazuli, she thought, and the costume must have cost a lot of money – perhaps as much as fifty piasters.

"Your mother shall answer for this perfidy," continued the dragoman, in Arabic. "If I am to be toyed with and befooled, I will have my betrothal money back – every piaster of it!"

The girl's eyes dropped to her feet and examined the fragments of the jar.

"It is broken!" she said, with a wailing accent.

"Bah! there are more at Keneh," he returned, kicking away a bit of the earthenware. "It will cost old Sĕra more than the jar if she does not rule you better. Come!"

He waved his hand pompously and strutted past her to the door of her mother's hut, paying no heed to the evil looks of Kāra, who still stood motionless in his place.

The girl followed, meek and obedient.

They entered a square room lighted by two holes in the mud walls. The furniture was rude and scanty, and the beds were rushes from the Nile. A black goat that had a white spot over its left eye stood ruminating with its head out of one of the holes.

A little withered woman with an erect form and a pleasant face met Tadros, the dragoman, just within the doorway.

"Welcome!" she said, crossing her arms upon her breast and bending her head until she was nearly double.

"Peace to this house," returned Tadros, carelessly, and threw himself upon a bench.

Sĕra squatted upon the earthen floor and looked with pride and satisfaction at the dragoman's costume.

"You are a great man, my Tadros," she said, "and you must be getting rich. We are honored by your splendid presence. Gaze upon your affianced bride, O Dragoman! Is she not getting fat and soft in flesh, and fit to grace your most select harem?"

"I must talk to you about Nephthys," said the dragoman, lighting a cigarette. "She is too free with these dirty Fedahs, and especially with that beast Kāra."

His tone had grown even and composed by this time, and his face had lost its look of anger.

"What would you have?" asked old Sĕra, deprecatingly. "The girl must carry water and help me with the work until you take her away with you. I cannot keep her secluded like a princess. And there are no men in Fedah except old Nikko, who is blind, and young Kāra, who is not."

"It is Kāra who annoys me," said Tadros, puffing his cigarette lazily.

"Kāra! But he is the royal one. You know that well enough. The descendant of the ancient kings has certain liberties, and therefore takes others, and he merely indulges in a kiss now and then. I have watched him, and it does not worry me."

"The royal one!" repeated the dragoman scornfully. "How do we know old Hatatcha's tales are true?"

"They must be true," returned Sĕra, positively. "My mother served Hatatcha's mother, because she was the daughter of kings. For generations the ancestors of Kāra have been revered by those who were Egyptians, although their throne is a dream of the past, and they are condemned to live in poverty. Be reasonable, my Tadros! Your own blood is as pure as ours, even though it is not royal. What! shall we Egyptians forget our dignity and rub skins with the English dogs or the pagan Arabs?"

"The Arabs are not so bad," said Tadros, thoughtfully. "They have many sensible customs, which we are bound to accept; for these Muslims overrun our country and are here to stay. Nor are the simple English to be sneered at, my Sĕra. I know them well, and also their allies, the Americans and the Germans and French. They travel far to see Cairo and our Nile, and drop golden sovereigns into my pockets because I guide them to the monuments and explain their history, and at the same time keep the clever Arabs from robbing them until after I am paid. Yes; all people have their uses, believe me."

"Ah, you are wonderful!" ejaculated the old woman, with earnest conviction.

"I am dragoman," returned the man, proudly, "and my name is known from Cairo to Khartoum." He tossed a cigarette at Sĕra, who caught it deftly and put it between her lips. Then he graciously allowed her to obtain a light from his own cigarette.

Meantime, Nephthys, on entering the hut behind Tadros, had walked to the further side of the room and lifted the lid of a rude chest, rough hewn from eucalyptus wood. From this she drew a bundle, afterward closing the lid and spreading the contents of the bundle upon the chest. Then she turned her back to the others, unfastened her dusty black gown, and allowed it to fall to her hips. Over her head she dropped a white tunic, and afterward a robe of coarse gauze covered thickly with

cheap spangles. She now stepped out of the black gown and hung it upon a peg. A broad gilt belt was next clasped around her waist – loosely, so as not to confine too close the folds of spangled gauze.

Tadros, during his conversation with Sĕra, watched this transformation of his betrothed with satisfaction. When she had twined a vine of artificial flowers in her dark hair, the girl came to him and sat upon his knee. Her feet were still bare, and not very clean; but he did not notice that.

"I will speak to Hatatcha about Kāra," remarked the old woman, inhaling the smoke of her cigarette with evident enjoyment, "and she will tell him to be more careful."

"Hatatcha is dead," said Nephthys.

Sĕra stared a moment and dropped her cigarette. Then she uttered a shrill wail and threw her skirt over her head, swaying back and forth.

"Shut up!" cried the dragoman, jerking away the cloth. "It is time enough to wail when the mourners assemble."

Sĕra picked up her cigarette.

"When did Hatatcha go to Anubis?" she asked her daughter.

"Kāra did not say," returned the girl. "I was with her at the last sunset, and she was dying then."

"It matters nothing," said the dragoman, carelessly. "Hatatcha is better off in the nether world, and her rascally grandson must now go to work or starve his royal stomach."

"Who knows?" whispered Sĕra, with an accent of awe. "They have never worked. Perhaps the gods supply their needs."

"Or they have robbed a tomb," returned Tadros. "It is much more likely; but if that is so I would like to find the place. There is money in a discovery of that sort. It means scarabs, and funeral idols, and amulets, and vases and utensils of olden days, all of which can be sold in Cairo for a good price. Sometimes it means jewels and gold ornaments as well; but that is only in the tombs of kings. Go to Hatatcha, my Sĕra, and keep your eyes open. Henf! what says the proverb? 'The outrunner of good fortune is thoughtfulness.'"

The mother of Nephthys nodded, and drew the last possible whiff from her cigarette. Then she left the hut and hurried under the heavy arch of Hatatcha's dwelling.

Five women, mostly old and all clothed in deep black, squatted in a circle around the rushes upon which lay the dead. Someone had closed Hatatcha's eyes, but otherwise she lay as she had expired. In a corner Kāra was chewing a piece of sugar-cane.

Sĕra joined the circle. She threw sand upon her head and wailed shrilly, rocking her body with a rhythmical motion. The others followed her example, and their cries were nerve-racking. Kāra looked at them a moment and then carried his sugar-cane out of doors.

For a time he stood still, hesitating. There was work for him to do, and he had only delayed it until the mourners were in possession of the house. But the sun was already hot and a journey lay before him. Kāra sighed. He was not used to work.

He walked to the north end of the huddle and entered the house of the blind man, Nikko. A Syrian donkey, with a long head and solemn eyes, stood near the door, and its owner was seated upon the ground rubbing its feet with an old rag that had been dipped in grease. Kāra caught up a bridle and threw it over the donkey's head.

"Who is it?" asked Nikko, turning his sightless eyes upward.

Kāra made no reply, but swung the saddle across the animal's back and tried to strap the girth. The old man twined his thin legs around those of the donkey and reached up a hand to pull the saddle away.

"It is Hatatcha's brute of a grandson!" cried Nikko, struggling to resist. "No other would try to rob me of my dear Mammek. Desist, or I will call the dragoman, who arrived this morning!"

For answer Kāra dealt him a kick in his stomach and he doubled up with a moan and rolled upon the ground. Then the royal one led Mammek out of the door and lightly leaped upon the donkey's back.

"Oo-ah!" he cried, digging his heels into the animal's flanks; and away trotted Mammek, meek but energetic.

There was no path in the direction he went and the desert sands seemed interminable. Kāra sat sidewise upon the donkey and sucked his sugar-cane, keeping the beast at a trot at the same time. An hour passed, and another. Finally a heap of rocky boulders arose just ahead of him, with a group of date palms at its foot. The heap grew bigger as he approached, and resolved itself into a small mountain, seared by deep fissures in the rocks. But there was verdure within the fissures, and several goats lay underneath the trees. Kāra rode past them and up to the foot of the mountain, where there was an overhanging entrance to a cave.

Throwing himself from the donkey, he ran into the cave and knelt at a spring which welled sparkling and cool from the rocks. Mammek followed and thrust his nozzle into the water beside Kāra's face. They drank together.

Then the man stood up and called aloud:

"Hi-yah, Sebbet; hi-yah!"

Someone laughed behind him, and Kāra swung upon his heel. There stood confronting him a curiously misshapen dwarf, whose snowy hair contrasted strangely with his dark chocolate skin. He was scarcely as tall as Kāra's waist, but his body and limbs were so enormous as to convey the impression of immense strength. He wore a spotless white burnous, which fell from his neck to his feet, but his head was bare of covering.

While the young man stared the dwarf spoke.

"I know your mission," said he, in ancient Egyptian. "Hatatcha is dead."

"It is true," returned Kāra, briefly.

"She swore I would live long enough to embalm her," continued the dwarf, rubbing his nose reflectively; "and she was right. A wonderful woman was old Hatatcha, and a royal one. I will keep my compact with her."

"Can you do it?" asked Kāra, wondering. "Do you know the ancient process of embalming?"

"Why, I am no paraschites, you understand, for the trade is without value in these degenerate days. But I successfully embalmed her mother – your great-grandmother – and Hatatcha was greatly pleased with the work. Does not your great-grandmother look natural? Have you seen her?"

Kāra shook his head.

"Not yet," he said.

"And I have safely hoarded the store of aromatic gums and spices, the palm wine and myrrh and cassia, and the natron, with which Hatatcha long since entrusted me. The strips of fine linen for the bandages and the urns for the entrails are still in my storehouse, where they have remained since your grandmother gave them into my hands; so there is no reason why her wishes should not be carried out."

"You will return with me?" asked Kāra.

"Yes, and bring the dead to this desolate spot," replied the dwarf. "It is no longer Hatatcha, but the envelope which she used, and will use again. Therefore it must be carefully preserved. The process will require forty days, as you know. At the end of that time I will deliver Hatatcha's mummy into your hands. You must then give to me a flat, oblong emerald that is graven with the cartouch of the mighty Ahtka-Rā. Is not that the compact, my prince?"

"It is, my Sebbet."

"And you know where to find it?" asked the dwarf, anxiously.

"I know," said Kāra.

The dwarf seemed pleased, and retired to make preparations for his journey. Kāra fell asleep in the cave, for the sun had been terribly hot and the long ride had exhausted him. The blind man's donkey also lay down and slept.

In the middle of the afternoon Sebbet awakened the young Egyptian and gave him some cakes to eat and a draught of goat's milk. Then he brought out a stout donkey of a pure white color and mounted it with unexpected agility. Kāra noticed a large sack fastened to the saddle-ring.

A moment later they were riding together across the sands.

"We must not reach Fedah before sundown," remarked the dwarf, and Kāra nodded assent. So they went at a moderate pace and bore the blistering rays of the sun as none but natives of Egypt can.

At sundown they sighted Gebel Abu Fedah, and it was dark when they entered the narrow street of Fedah. Kāra dismounted from Mammek's back at its master's hut, and at a slap on the thigh the donkey bolted quickly through the doorway. Then the young man followed after the dwarf to the threshold of his own dwelling.

The mourners had gone home and Hatatcha lay alone; but someone had placed a coarse cloth over her face to keep the flies away.

The dwarf drew from his pocket a rush-candle and lighted it. Removing the face-cloth he gazed for several minutes earnestly upon the features of the dead woman. Then he sighed deeply, untied the sack from his saddle and blew out the flame of the candle.

Kāra stood in the archway, looking at the slender rim of the moon. In a short time the dwarf's white donkey paused beside him. The sack, now bulky and heavy, hung limply across the saddle. Kāra could see it plainly in the dim light.

He put his hand on the sack.

"Will it ride without tumbling off?" he asked.

"I will hold it fast," replied the dwarf, springing upon the donkey's back behind the burden. "Poor Hatatcha! She will not know we are taking our last ride together in Khonsu's company."

"Good-night," said Kāra.

"Good-night. In forty days, remember."

"In forty days."

"And the emerald?"

"You shall have it then."

The donkey hobbled out of the archway and passed silently down the little street. Presently it had faded into the night and was gone.

Kāra yawned and looked attentively at the huts. In only one, that of old Sĕra, a dim light burned. The man frowned, and then he laughed.

"Let the dragoman have his Nephthys," he muttered. "For me Cairo, London and the great world beckon. And women? Bah! There are women everywhere."

He entered the house and unrolled the mat that hung across the archway, fastening it securely to prevent intrusion.

CHAPTER IV
THE TREASURE OF AHTKA-RĀ

Kāra went to the cavity beside the arch and took from it a small bronze lamp. It was partly filled with oil, on the surface of which a cotton wick floated. The lamp itself was of quaint design, and the young man remembered it since the days of his childhood, but had rarely seen it in use.

Having lighted the wick and spread it with his fingers until it flamed up brightly, Kāra turned his back to the arch and carefully examined the rear wall of the room. The house, as has been explained, was built against a shallow cave of the mountains; but, owing to the irregularity of the hollow, part of the rear wall was of solid masonry, while the other part was formed by the cliff itself. Kāra had never before paid much attention to that fact, but now it struck him as very evident that the masonry had been constructed to shut off an orifice too deep or too irregular to be utilized as part of the dwelling. Otherwise, the continuation of the cliff would have rendered a wall unnecessary. The stones were of large size and were built up and cemented as far as the overhanging rock that formed the greater portion of the roof.

The Egyptian's eyes rested upon the third layer of these stones, and he counted from the corner to the seventh stone. In appearance this was not different from the others; but Hatatcha's directions had been exact, and she knew.

He walked to the spot and pressed hard against the right edge of the stone. It moved, and gradually swung inward, the left edge being supported by solid pivots of bronze at the top and bottom.

The opening disclosed was about four feet long by three feet in height, and Kāra at once crept through it, holding his lamp extended before him. Yes; his surmise had been correct – a low, but deep and irregular cavern was behind the wall.

His first care was to close up the entrance by pressing the block of stone back to its former position. There was a bronze handle on the inner side that would permit him to open it again easily.

The cavern felt damp and cool, and when he raised his lamp he saw some deep fissures leading far under the mountain. He selected the second from the left of these rifts and cautiously made his way along the rough floor. At first it seemed that he had made a mistake, for this way was less promising than several of the others; but when he stopped and thought upon Hatatcha's directions, he knew that he was right.

The rift made a sudden turn and sank downward; but the rocks under his feet were now more even and the way became easier to traverse. A hundred paces farther, the passage ended abruptly in a sharp point where the rock had originally split.

The young Egyptian walked to the extreme end and then carefully measured three paces back again. Raising his lamp, he examined the right wall of the tunnel closely. It contained many irregular cracks and hollows, but one indentation seemed, on observation, to be surrounded by a tiny circle of black, or a color darker than the other portions of the rock.

Kāra uttered an ejaculation of pleasure. He had feared he might not find this spot, in spite of his grandmother's assurances that it was plain to keen eyes.

Drawing a short, pointed dagger from the folds of his burnous – a weapon he had found in the crypt beside the arch of the living-room – the Egyptian thrust it into the orifice of the rock and pushed until it had sunk in to the very hilt. Then he turned the handle, and a sharp "click" was audible.

Kāra stepped back a pace, and a part of the rock, circular in shape, swung slowly out into the passage, revealing another tunnel running at right angles with the first. Unlike the other, this was no natural fissure of the rock, but an excavation cleverly made by the hands of man. The roof was arched and the floor level and smooth.

The man slipped through the opening and proceeded along the arched passage. He did not close this door behind him, for Hatatcha had warned him not to do so. The floor had a gradual slope and he knew that he was going still farther beneath the mountain at every step. The atmosphere now became hot and stifling and he found it difficult to breathe; but he continued steadily walking for a matter of five minutes – which seemed an hour – holding the lamp before him, until finally he noticed the blaze of the wick flicker, as if a breath of fresher air had reached it.

By this time his breast had seemed ready to burst, and his breathing was fitful and gasping; but he hurried forward and now found the air cooler and fresher and drew it into his lungs gratefully.

The path was no longer downward, and before him he presently discovered a huge pillar of rock, which at first sight seemed to block the tunnel. Rude hieroglyphics were graven upon it. Passing around this at the left, he found himself in a high, vaulted chamber, and stopped with a sigh of satisfaction.

The chamber was circular in shape, and not more than sixteen feet in diameter. An air-shaft in the dome evidently led to some part of the summit of the mountain, for Kāra found himself breathing naturally again.

"This," said he, "must be the library that Hatatcha mentioned."

All around the walls of the vault were niches, cut in regular rows and containing box-like receptacles covered with inscriptions and pictures in gaudy colors. In the center of the room stood a large round slab of granite, finely polished upon its upper surface.

Kāra drew a box from its niche and set it upon the granite slab beside his lamp. Then he took from it a roll of papyrus, which he examined with interest.

Yes; he had read it before. It was one of those so often mysteriously produced by his grandmother to assist in his education. He examined another roll, and a third, leisurely and with care. These also he knew well. There were two hundred and eighteen rolls of papyrus in this ancient library, and the knowledge they contained had all been absorbed by the young Egyptian years before. He read them easily, and knew at once from their context the different meanings of many signs that are yet puzzling less-favored students of the hieroglyphics.

The manuscripts dated from the fourth dynasty down to the days of the Ptolemies, and, in a large cavity below the rolls of papyrus, were ranged the earlier works of Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus, Manetho, Horapello, Strabo and others, as well as the volumes on modern Egyptian and European history that old Hatatcha had purchased in Cairo within the last few years. Several historical stelæ of the earlier kings of Egypt also leaned against the walls, arranged in chronological order, and this library, founded by Ahtka-Rā, which had been preserved and added to for so many centuries, was a veritable storehouse of the records of his remarkable country.

Kāra smiled queerly as he glanced around the room.

"Others argue concerning ancient Egypt," he muttered; "but I alone know the truth."

A pile of papyrus rolls in another cavity seemed of less importance than those so carefully arranged in boxes. Kāra brought an armful of them to the central slab, dusted them with his rope, and selected fifteen of their number after a cursory glance at their contents. The others he restored to their place. This being accomplished, he took up his lamp and returned to the passage, this time circling the pillar of rock to the right.

It led into an immense oblong chamber, so vast that the light of Kāra's bronze lamp seemed to penetrate the blackness but a few feet in advance. But other lamps were suspended from huge bronze brackets, and several of these the Egyptian proceeded to light, finding them nearly all supplied with oil.

Then, stepping backward, he gazed about him with an irrepressible sensation of awe. The huge chamber was filled with mummy-cases, arranged upon solid slabs of Aswan granite. Nearest to the entrance were a dozen or so slabs that were unoccupied. Then appeared a splendid case of solid ebony, elaborately carved upon every inch of its surfaces. This had been made for Hatatcha in London,

during her residence in that city, and secretly transported to this place by devices only known to her. The inscriptions were all in the sign language except the one word, "Hatatcha," which appeared in Roman letters upon the cover. It was empty, of course, and Kāra proceeded to the next slab. Upon it lay the mummy of his great-grandmother, Thi-Aten, the one so naturally embalmed by the dwarf Sebbet. Her limbs were bandaged separately and the contour of her face might be clearly seen through the thin and tightly-drawn linen that covered it. Kāra sighed and made a profound obeisance to the mummy before proceeding up the chamber.

As he advanced, the mummies increased in age and also in the magnificence of their cases and the importance of their inscriptions. Some of the slabs were covered thickly with hieroglyphics relating the life history of their occupants, while on them were crowded curious ushabtiu figures, amulets and scarabs. Finally Kāra reached the end of the chamber and paused beside the mummy of the great Ahtka-Rā, who, while not king in name, had nevertheless ruled Egypt during his lifetime through the weak Rameses II, whom men ignorantly call "the Great."

Long the Egyptian knelt before the remains of his great ancestor. Rameses himself, and Seti his father, and many other kings of Egypt were lying in the museum at Cairo, to be impudently stared at by crowds of curious modern tourists; but this famous one had wisely provided for his own seclusion and that of his posterity. It was Ahtka-Rā who had constructed this hidden tomb during his lifetime, and he kept the secret so well that no painted or graven record of it existed to guide a meddling foreign race to its discovery in the years that were to come.

Kāra's eyes fairly gloated upon the mummy case of his wonderful ancestor. It was studded thick with precious stones, any of which might be deemed a fortune to one who, like himself, had existed so long in a lowly condition. But he did not disturb these gems. Instead, he touched a spring in the slab, a portion of which slid forward and revealed an opening.

Kāra took his lamp and crept into the aperture. There were seventeen steps leading downward; then came a short passage, and he entered another large chamber hewn from the solid rock.

Here was the treasure house of Ahtka-Rā, its contents doubtless primarily rifled from the treasure cities of Pithom and Raamses, which after his death were found to have been despoiled.

The entire room was faced with polished granite, and around the walls were granite tables to hold the treasure, as well as immense wide-mouthed vases of porphyry, malachite, lapis lazuli, carnelian and bronze. Upon the tables were heaps of chains, bracelets, ornaments and utensils of pure gold. In the center of the room stood twelve alabaster pedestals, two rows of six each, and each pedestal supported a splendid vase containing gems of various sorts. On the floor were numerous other vases and receptacles for jewels and golden ornaments, and one of these Kāra noticed was yet more than half filled with the precious coins of Darius Hystaspes, some of which his grandmother had used to provide herself with necessities because they were of a comparatively modern date and would arouse no suspicion that the source of their supply was the ancient tomb of Ahtka-Rā.

Indeed, it was easy to be seen that many of Ahtka-Rā's successors had added to this treasure house instead of pilfering from it. The original store, contained in the twelve great malachite vases, was practically untouched, although Hatatcha must have drawn upon it at one time. All the treasure littering the tables and floor had been added since Ahtka-Rā had lain in his tomb.

Kāra's face was unmoved, but his eyes glistened brightly. He thrust his hand into a jar and drew it out filled with rubies. They were of all sizes and shades of coloring and were polished in flat surfaces instead of being cut into rose facets according to modern methods. Some of the stones had small characters graven upon them, but usually they were smoothly polished.

The Egyptian now turned to the wall tables. Here were also rubies, diamonds, amethysts and emeralds, set in golden ornaments of many designs. Some of the stones were of so great a size as to be extremely valuable. A casket of dark wood inlaid with silver hieroglyphics attracted Kāra's attention. He threw back the lid and took from it a massive chain of gold, which he threw over his head. Each link was finely engraved with characters relating the name of some king and a deed he

had accomplished. Kāra read some of the inscriptions and was amazed. The chain had originally been made in twelve links by Bā-en-nĕter, the twelfth king dating from Mēnēs, during whose reign the Nile flowed honey for eleven days. His successor, Uătch-nēs, took the chain and added another link, and so the chain had grown through succeeding ages down to the time of Ahtka-Rā. No wonder it was long and heavy!

Kāra did not like to replace this marvelous chain. He dropped its links inside his burnous and left it hanging around his neck.

After an hour or more devoted to the inspection of these treasures, which the young man naturally regarded as his own, forgetting that Hatatcha had warned him he but held them in trust, Kāra reluctantly prepared to leave the chamber. First, however, he selected twenty-three great diamonds from a jar and concealed them in the folds of his turban. The turban is called the Egyptian's pocket, because a burnous seldom has pockets, and many things can be secreted in the voluminous cloth of a turban.

"Here is one diamond for every year I have lived," said Kāra. "Surely I am entitled to that many."

But it did not satisfy him. He thrust his hand into the jar of rubies again and took all that his fingers could clutch. He loved the color of the rubies. They appealed to him.

Then he crept up the stairs, reëntered the mummy chamber, and closed the secret slide in the malachite slab upon which lay the mighty Ahtka-Rā.

Who, not initiated, would ever suspect the enormous wealth lying so close at hand? Kāra sighed deeply and held himself proudly erect. He was just beginning to realize his own importance.

Extinguishing the lights of the lamps he had kindled in this chamber, he retraced his steps to the library, where he gathered up the fifteen rolls of papyrus, carrying them in the front breadth of his burnous while he held fast to the hem. In this way he returned along the arched passage until he came to the rock door which he had left ajar. He climbed through the opening and thrust the rock back into place, listening while the heavy bolt fastened itself with a sharp click.

He was now in the natural fissure of the mountain cavern, and it did not take him long to reach the stone wall which alone separated him from Hatatcha's dwelling.

He paused a moment, with his ear to the wall; but hearing no sound, he extinguished his light and then caught the handle imbedded in the stone and swung the block upon its pivots. In a moment he was in the living-room, and the wall through which he had passed seemed solid and immovable.

He must have been absent for several hours during his exploring expedition into the mountain, and the night was now far advanced.

Kāra flung the papyri into a corner, covered them with loose rushes from his grandmother's couch, and then threw himself upon his own bed to sleep. He had been awake the better part of two nights, and his eyelids were as heavy as if weighted with lead.

CHAPTER V
A ROLL OF PAPYRUS

At daybreak the dragoman thrust his head stealthily through the arch and looked at Kāra's sleeping form with suspicion. He had visited the young man's house in the evening and found him absent and Hatatcha's body also gone. He came again later, and once more at midnight, and still Hatatcha's dead form and her grandson's quick one were alike missing.

Then the dragoman, wishing to know to what secret place the old woman's remains had been taken, and from which direction Kāra returned, and having a fair share of oriental shrewdness, had stretched two threads across the narrow street – one on either side the arch – and afterward returned to his couch in the house of old Sĕra to sleep.

Daybreak found him awake and stirring. He discovered both his threads unbroken, yet the young Egyptian was sound asleep within the room. The dragoman scratched his left ear in perplexity and shook his head. Kāra was doubtless clever, but his unusual actions led Tadros to believe there was something important afoot. And that matter of the coins and the ancient jewel of old Hatatcha was well worth investigating.

He sat down cross-legged in the cool arch and waited. Kāra slept on. The girl Nephthys brought the dragoman a cake for his breakfast, silently placed it in his hand, and carried her jar to the river. On her return she paused to allow her master to drink and then left him again.

Tadros lighted a cigarette and smoked it to the end. Then he pushed aside the mat and looked into the room long and steadily. Kāra lay like one dead; in some strange manner the lazy one must have exhausted his strength – perhaps in carrying his grandmother's corpse to some far-away tomb. Ah, that was the secret place, doubtless, from whence the coins and the jewel had come. Kāra must know of it, and therefore it would be well for Tadros to win his confidence. What was that heap of rushes in the corner, and why had they been taken from Hatatcha's former couch? The dragoman was suddenly interested. He unfastened a portion of the mat and crept into the room. Kāra did not hear him. Softly he advanced on hands and knees to the corner. He felt among the rushes and drew out a roll of papyrus.

For a moment the dragoman sat still, his heart beating wildly. Here was a find, indeed! He knew of a dozen scholars who would willingly bankrupt themselves to discover a new papyrus roll.

He crawled slowly back to the arch and seated himself where a ray of light came between the mat and the gray stones. Here he unrolled the manuscript and examined it eagerly. He did not claim to be much of a student, but he could read hieroglyphics a little and was a judge of ancient picture-writing. Here was doubtless a scroll of great antiquity and value, relating incidents of the war of Rameses against the Kheta, and its state of preservation was wonderful. In this place was a list of captives brought back to Thebes; in that was the expense account of the army. Here was told the —

"Henf!"

The sharp, quick cry was followed by a sudden rustle of the rushes, and with a spring like that of a panther, Kāra was upon the impudent intruder into his domain. Before Tadros could rise, his assailant was kneeling upon his body and with lithe, delicate fingers clutching viciously at his throat. The dragoman struggled to free himself, but could not. He tried to breathe, without effect. The skin of his bronzed face grew black, and his eyes protruded from their sockets with a look of horror and fear.

Seeing this, Kāra's set face suddenly relaxed and lost its look of murderous determination. He released his hold of the dragoman and pushed away the mat to allow more air to get to him.

Slowly the other, gasping and uttering low moans, recovered his breath. Kāra's fingers had left great discoloured blotches upon his neck; but that did not matter. From certain death he was coming

back to life, and the transition was one to evoke gratitude and joy. Life was sweet to the dragoman – the sweetest thing he possessed.

Kāra, standing erect, looked down upon him with arms folded in repose and a countenance very thoughtful. Two reasons had stayed his vengeful hands. To murder Tadros would get him into trouble with the authorities, and so cause him great annoyance at this critical juncture, when liberty of action and freedom from espionage was important. In the second place, his half-formed plans included the use of the dragoman for his own advantage. Tadros was both clever and well known. He would become a good servant when he knew it would further his personal interest to be faithful, and so it was best that the dragoman should live – for a time.

He had now almost recovered from the shock of Kāra's assault, and began to grow angry.

"What do you mean, you dog, by felling me like a wild beast and trying to throttle me?" he demanded, with his first breath.

"What do you mean by stealing into my house and prying into my private affairs?" returned Kāra brusquely.

The dragoman's eyes fell upon the papyrus at his feet, and his face changed its expression.

"Where did you get it?" he asked, quickly. "Are there more of them? Is it a tomb or a temple? Tell me, Kāra, tell me all about it."

The Egyptian smiled, grimly.

"There are more of them," he said. "Look! in that corner are fourteen other rolls; but whether they came from a tomb or a temple I do not know. They are my inheritance from Hatatcha. Where she found them she alone could have told; but she carried the secret to the nether world."

Tadros mused for a time.

"Where have they been kept all these years?" he asked in a tone of disbelief.

"Hidden underneath the rushes of her bed. I dragged them all out last night, as you can see."

"Were there any more of the coins?"

"A few." He showed some in his hand.

"Ah!"

The dragoman drew a deep breath.

"You are rich, my prince," said he. "Fifteen papyri of the ancient days! – they are worth a fortune in any event."

"How much?" asked Kāra, amused.

"This one," said Tadros, picking it up and partly unrolling it to glance again at the writing, "I could sell in Cairo for five hundred piastres – perhaps a thousand. It is wonderfully clear and well preserved."

"You may keep it for yourself," said Kāra.

Tadros stared.

"I will exchange it for the girl Nephthys," continued the young man, coolly. "For her you have paid to old Sĕra two hundred and fifty piastres already. You must pay a like sum to take the girl away with you, and afterward you must pay for her support. Very well; I will relieve you of the burden. You will not only save your money, but you will get a papyrus worth four times what you have invested."

Tadros frowned and looked glum.

"But the girl is mine!" he exclaimed.

"And the papyrus is mine," returned Kāra. "Perhaps I could buy two or three like Nephthys with it; but never mind, it shall be yours in the way of exchange."

Tadros moved uneasily and cast a longing glance at the roll.

"I like not this barbaric traffic in womankind," he muttered, with indecision.

"Nor I," agreed Kāra. "It is Sĕra who is to blame. If she has a fat daughter, she will want a fat price for her. Otherwise, how can she be recompensed for the girl's keep? But five hundred is too much for Nephthys. I would have to give her mother the other two hundred and fifty piastres

myself – and you would have the roll. By Isis, 'tis a bad bargain! Here; let us say no more about it. Give me the papyrus."

"Wait – wait!" cried Tadros. "Why are you so unjust in your conclusions? The bargain is made. No one but a sneaking Arab goes back on his word."

"It is as you say," replied Kāra, stretching his long arms and yawning. "But it is a fine papyrus, Tadros – all about the Kheta and King Rameses."

"I know; I know!" returned the dragoman, nervously tucking his prize under his arm. "Come with me at once. I will inform Sĕra of the transfer of my property."

He rose to his feet a little unsteadily, because his throat still hurt him, and led the way.

Kāra quietly followed.

In Sĕra's hovel mother and daughter were weaving upon a rude cane loom.

"See here," announced the dragoman; "this Nephthys is too free with her favors, and I cannot be coming forever to this forsaken village to look after her. Besides, I must get back to Cairo to attend to my business, so I have sold the girl to my friend Kāra here, and when he takes her away from you, if ever he does, he is to pay the other two hundred and fifty piastres I promised."

Sĕra seemed surprised, but nodded her head cheerfully.

"It is all the same to me," she replied. "If the royal one has the money to satisfy you, it is none of my business, I am sure. An alliance with the descendant of the great Ahtka-Rā is something to be proud of."

The girl had broken a thread. As she prepared to retie it, she glanced from one to the other of the two men with a look of indifference.

"I do not promise to make Nephthys a wife," said Kāra, slowly, "although, of course, it may come to that. My plans are not formed for the future. But I have acquired the girl in betrothal through my compact with Tadros, and his rights are hereafter mine."

"She grows plumper every day," said Sĕra, glancing at Nephthys critically. "You will seek long, my Kāra, before you find a more desirable wife. Yet I am in no hurry to lose my daughter, believe me, even for the money she will bring. Take your time about deciding the matter."

"I will," responded Kāra, briefly.

"And now, tell me, what has become of your grandmother, Hatatcha?"

"I have carried her into the desert to be embalmed."

And then, to avoid further questioning, he went away.

CHAPTER VI
KĀRA BATHES IN THE NILE

Tadros followed him into the street again.

"Those other papyri," he said – "do you wish me to sell them for you?"

"They are already sold," replied Kāra, regardless of truth.

"Indeed! To whom?"

"Winston Bey, the Englishman."

Tadros uttered an exclamation of annoyance.

"Where have you met him?" he asked.

"Here, at the Nile landing. His boat will come to-night for the papyrus rolls."

Many thoughts passed rapidly through the dragoman's mind. Here was bad news, indeed. He had planned on getting all those wonderful rolls into his own hands, and his disappointment was keen to find that this isolated Egyptian of an out-of-the-way rock village had already been approached and bought up by one of those rascally scientists, before he, the clever dragoman, had even known of the existence of the treasures.

"He will rob you," he ventured to suggest.

"Very well," replied Kāra, indifferently.

Tadros was in despair. Yet one thing was plainly evident – if Winston Bey was about to unload fourteen newly found rolls of papyrus upon the directors of the museum in Cairo, it would be well for him, the dragoman, to get his one roll in first, at the highest possible price. That could easily be accomplished. Winston's dahabeah would consume four or five days on the downward voyage. Tadros could cross the Nile in a small boat and catch the railway on the other bank, which would land him in Cairo the next day. He promptly decided to take the railway.

"I expect," said Kāra, "to be in Cairo myself shortly. If you are there, I would like to hire your services as dragoman."

Tadros, aroused from his meditations, gave a start, and wonderingly examined the speaker from his dirty bare feet all the way up his soiled burnous to his strong, calm face and faded turban. He had been a native of Fedah himself, and had known "the royal one," as he scornfully called Kāra, from boyhood. Until now he had regarded him as a permanent fixture of the little village; a listless, lazy do-nothing, supported in some mysterious way by his grandmother and destined to grow old amid his solitary surroundings.

Some slight importance Kāra had doubtless acquired through his inheritance of the papyri; but that he should think of visiting Cairo and employing the brilliantly appareled dragoman was a marvel that fairly astounded Tadros. Yet, why not? He would have money. Tadros could assuredly teach him how to spend it. Kāra might become an incident in his career – an element in his future prosperity.

"Call upon me at any time," he said, condescendingly. "You shall have the advantage of my experience and knowledge of the world."

"That is what I want," returned the Egyptian, "and I will pay you liberally for it."

He passed into his dwelling, and the dragoman, watching him go, decided to make speedy preparation for his own departure.

He felt much easier in his mind than at first. What if Winston Bey purchased the papyrus rolls? Would not Tadros be the young man's guide? Very good. Very good, indeed!

Kāra lay down again and slept until after noon. Then he went to the hut of Nefert, who baked the bread for the village, and bargained with her for a loaf and a bowl of milk. Also he acquired from her a large, coarse sack. In exchange he gave her Hatatcha's water jar, which had come from Keneh, and an old scarf his grandmother had worn over her head.

He ate the loaf and drank the milk, feeling much refreshed. Then he carried the sack to his dwelling and placed the papyrus rolls in it.

From the secret cavity beside the arch he took the bronze vase with the metal stopper, a scarab ring that his grandmother had sometimes worn, and a slender dagger with a steel blade. The bronze dagger that served as a key to the rock door he left in the cavity, as well as the lamp.

Having replaced the stone, he glanced around to see whether there was anything that might be disturbed or stolen during his absence; but the room was bare of anything to tempt a thief or a despoiler. So he swung the sack over his shoulder and walked out and around the end of the mountain on his way to the Nile.

Winston Bey had kept his word. On the chance that the strange Egyptian he had encountered would manage to secure either valuable information or some ancient relics from his mysterious grandmother, he had kept his dahabeah in the neighborhood, ignoring the protests of his unhappy Arab crew. The afternoon following his interview with Kāra, he landed near the group of palms an hour before sunset, and waited until darkness fell without obtaining a sight of the Egyptian. Then he dropped down the stream to Tel El Armana, where the dahabeah remained until the next noon.

To-day he figured on another disappointment; but when Gerald Winston had an object in view he pursued it with dogged determination, and he had resolved to keep his appointment each day for a week at least before considering his future actions. There was no question but he was on the track of an important discovery, and he did not intend to abandon the quest lightly.

On this second day, therefore, when he approached the grove and saw a white-robed figure sitting in the shade, his heart gave a joyful bound. He hurried forward and recognized Kāra, who remained motionless until the Englishman had saluted him. Then he bowed his head gravely.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.