

Chapter XII

FOR several days Ranofer did not go near the little green room in the thicket. He dared not tell Heqet anything about the goblet. Heqet would become wildly excited, he would make elaborate spying plans, there was no telling what he would do. Whatever he did, Ranofer feared he might overdo it; then the gods alone knew what trouble would descend upon them both.

On the other hand he did not see how he could sit and talk with Heqet and meet his eyes, unless he did tell him what had happened. I should trust him, Ranofer argued with himself. I trusted him before, about the wineskins, and think how he stood by me then. He knows how to keep his tongue from flapping. His father taught him, and he proved it was so.

The arguments had no effect. He could not tell anyone about that goblet. Not Heqet, not anyone. The only solution was to stay away from the thicket.

It did not occur to him that Heqet might finally come and find him; however, that was precisely what Heqet did. He was standing outside the shop one evening as Ranofer emerged to start for home.

"Ast! What are you doing here?" Ranofer stammered.

"Waiting for you, of course." Heqet's snub-nosed face had lighted with relief at sight of him. Now he stood gazing at him in such a puzzled, questioning way that Ranofer felt sweaty and hot with guilt.

"Where were you, all these days?" Heqet asked. "I feared that Gebu of yours had done one of those awful things he's always threatening. The Ancient and I, we didn't know what had happened."

"Nothing has happened," Ranofer mumbled, with a hasty glance over his shoulder. Gebu was only a few paces away, inside the shop. "Come, let's get away from here." As they started in the direction of the thicket he added, "I have been—very busy, that is all. Pai has kept me working until late, and—and sometimes at midday too, and—"

He swallowed and gave up trying to find an explanation that would sound reasonable. However, Heqet quickly began to chatter about Setma and the conversation the Ancient had overheard, and when that was exhausted he launched into a story about the Ancient's donkey, who had gone lame in one foot a few days before, and had required much rubbing with castor-bean oil and daubing with cool mud. Listening, Ranofer cautiously began to relax, and once they had reached the little green room in the thicket, had greeted the Ancient and examined Lotus's foot, which was well again now, and sat a while together in the old way, he decided that it was not, after all, impossible to be with Heqet and still keep silence about the goblet. Heqet was as full of talk as ever, and either failed to notice that Ranofer said little, or tactfully ignored the fact. As for the Ancient, though his one bright eye rested

searchingly on Ranofer several times he asked no questions.

Only once did they approach the dangerous subject, so suddenly that Ranofer had a very bad moment indeed before he realized he was safe. Without warning, Heqet said, "Ranofer, I have had an idea. About this tomb affair."

"Tomb af-fair?" Ranofer stammered.

"The drawing. You remember. The little room you did not understand."

"Oh." Relief washed over Ranofer like cold water. He did remember now, about the scroll and Gebu's anger, though he had not thought of the incident since the day it occurred. The goblet had driven everything else from his mind.

"In my opinion," Heqet was saying in his craftiest manner, "they are going to use that room themselves, Gebu and Wenamon."

"Use it *themselves*?"

"Aye! For meeting in secret, and for hiding the gold they steal. Now that Setma will not take it away for them—"

The Ancient gave his high-pitched chortle of laughter. "Ast! young one, you should be a tale spinner in the market place. You'd soon be rich, with the coppers folk would pay to hear such fine, unlikely stories. Do you think even thieves are going to share a Departed One's dwelling with him? Of their own accord?"

"But the tomb is not occupied yet," Heqet argued. "It is not even finished, is it, Ranofer? They could make a separate entrance."

"The tomb is not even begun," Ranofer said more abruptly than he intended.

"Oh. Not even begun?"

Heqet sounded so disappointed that Ranofer was ashamed of his curtness. Anxious though he was to leave the subject of tombs, he went on. "They will not start work on it until floodtime, after the High Nile Festival. That is three weeks away yet. Then it will be months in building, with workmen in and out every day. They would not dare hide anything there."

"Nay, they would not," Heqet said sadly.

"It was a fine idea, anyway," the Ancient chuckled.

"Fine if it had worked, as the fish said when it tried to take a walk." Heqet grinned. "Never mind. I'll think of something else."

Ranofer wanted to tell him not to try, not to think or speak of tombs again. Instead, he changed the subject hastily. "Just think, three weeks, and it will be the Festival."

It was a good choice; all three began to talk of the greatest feast day of the year, when the waters of the great river would rise at last above their banks, and all the canals would be thrown open to receive the life-giving flood. There would be no work that day for anyone. All Egypt would make holiday in the streets, and the lowliest water carrier would feast at Pharaoh's expense and drink barley beer free. The prospect of honey cakes and dates, and all the dried fish he could eat, lifted even Ranofer's spirits. He agreed with enthusiasm to spend the feast day with his two friends, from dawn to dark, and thought no more of tombs or goblets until they parted on the thoroughfare.

On the way home, though, his troubles came back like *khefts* overtaking him on silent wings. The tomb drawing

clung in his mind, and so did Hequet's idea that there was some thieves' plan connected with that little room. Ranofer was sure it had nothing to do with a meeting place, or stealing gold from goldsmiths, or anything Hequet had imagined. But could it have something to do with robbing tombs? He did not see how. Not only was this tomb not finished, not even begun, but its owner, Pharaoh's Master of Storehouses, was still very much alive. There might be no burial, and thus no treasure in the tomb, for years. There could be no connection between that drawing and the goblet. Gebu had simply been short-tempered that day because he knew the goblet was hidden in his room and his guilt weighed heavy on him. And now it was hidden in the scroll room, where it weighed upon Ranofer. Search as he might, every time he had a chance, he had not found it yet.

Gebu must have *khefts* in league with him! Ranofer thought in despair. No mortal could hide a thing so well. Perhaps he has taken it away again after all, some time when I could not see. Perhaps late at night? But I have not heard the hinges for a long time now. Nay, it is still there, it must be. Then why can't I find it?

Day followed day; the river rose steadily toward its banks, growing broader, fuller, swifter. Ranofer's life remained a narrow routine of worry, occasional beatings, and work, varied only by the hour at midday or evening with his friends in the marsh. He was glad he no longer felt it necessary to avoid them, but it was still necessary to avoid telling them what he knew, and he often wished powerfully that this were not so, because it became more and more obvious that their meetings were not quite as successful as before. The thing he could not speak of hung

over the little green room like an invisible presence, ruining, it seemed to Ranofer, everything he did speak of. Once, when the Ancient was not with them, Heget brought the matter into the open.

"Ranofer, something troubles you. Something has happened. Why do you not tell me? Perhaps I could do something."

"Nay, there is nothing," Ranofer said as casually as he could.

"You mean nothing I could do?"

"I mean nothing has happened. Let us talk some more about the Festival."

"We *have* talked about it, only a few moments ago. Then I began telling you the new idea I had about that little room in the drawing, and you went back into your shell, and now suddenly you want to talk about the Festival again."

"Aye, I do. It is more pleasant, is it not? Than tombs, and rooms, and . . ." Ranofer's voice trailed off into a sulky mutter and he sat scowling at his toes and feeling miserable.

After a long, uncomfortable silence, Heget said wryly, "Do I make myself unpleasant, as the viper said to the asp?"

Ranofer grinned in spite of himself, and in a moment they were laughing together, though still uncomfortably.

"I did not mean to be poisonous," Ranofer said.

"Nor I. I am sorry. It is only that you seem so different."

"Different?" Ranofer raised his eyes in alarm. Did the secret show so plainly?

"Perhaps not different . . ." Heget studied him thoughtfully. "You seem more as you were when I first knew

you at the goldhouse. When questions angered you, and you wanted only to be left alone."

"I do not want to be left alone," Ranofer said miserably.

"Or perhaps I do. Just for a while. I cannot explain."

"No matter," Heqet said. After a moment he smiled.

"Perhaps we had better talk about the Festival."

Everyone talked about it these days, made plans about it and thought of little else. Ranofer tried hard to do the same, but the goblet lurked always at the edge of his thoughts. More than ever he hated Gebu and his heavy fist, and the evil thing he had done. He hated most the feeling that the evil had spread like a plague to himself. With every day that passed the secret he knew weighed heavier and guiltier on his mind. A criminal walked free in the streets because Ranofer the son of Thutra was afraid to tell the crime. Still, in Amon's name, what would it do to get himself murdered or imprisoned by babbling such a tale without proof?

If I had taken the goblet when I had the chance! he thought. If I were sure it was in the scroll room now! I wish I knew what to do, and how to do it!

Then suddenly, on the day before the Festival, his wish came devastatingly true. At midday he went to the thicket to make final plans with his friends for the holiday. Heqet arrived late, full of news and bursting to tell it.

"Sit down quickly, Ranofer. Here, have this cheese. You'll never guess what has happened."

"What?" Ranofer asked warily. He had learned not to expect too much from Heqet's enthusiasms.

"Well, I have been spying again, only by chance this time, to be truthful. I was coming to meet you, just *now*, just a few moments ago, and I saw Wenamon ahead of

me, so I thought I would follow him just for a while. He turned into the Street of the Potters—you know, at that corner where Abba's shop stands. Well, there is a big shed next to it, only a roof really, with poles to support it, where Abba dries his pots and jars."

"I know, I know. Go on." Something about this story was making Ranofer exceedingly uneasy. Surely Gebu would not hide treasure in pots and jars, but—

"Well, Gebu was waiting there. He was pretending to look at the pots, strolling about idly, you know, but really he was waiting. Wenamon made as if he would pass right by, then pretended to see Gebu—oh, quite by accident!—and stopped to greet him. Anyone watching, except *me*, of course," Heget's eyes narrowed craftily, "would have thought they strolled into the shed merely to find shade while they exchanged a few civilities. Oh, it was cleverly done! But I was cleverer."

"What did they say? Could you hear them? Tell me quickly!"

Heget would not be hurried. "I'm coming to that. I slipped into the shed too, and crept among the benches and tables where the pots are put to dry, and found a place quite close to them where I could hide behind a stack of new-made water jars. It took me some time, of course, because I dared not make *any* noise, so I did not hear the first of what they said."

"What *did* you hear? Please hurry!"

"I heard Gebu's voice first. He spoke very low, but it made a chill go up my spine, the way he spoke. He said, 'A curse on the Festival! Fancy anyone cursing the High Nile Feast.'"

"Go on," Ranofer begged.

"I am. 'A curse on the Festival' he said. 'The Nile can flood without us. Meet me at daybreak beside the broken tree. It is safe enough now.'"

Everything in Ranofer seemed to stop—heart, breath, thoughts. It was like the stonecutting shop at midday when the clatter suddenly died to silence all at once. Heqet must have been satisfied with the effect he had created, for his eyes glistened.

"Then Wenamon said, 'It would be safer a year hence.' And Gebu growled at him low, like a vicious dog. 'Or never! I've waited long enough,' he said. 'I made the plan. Now I want my reward, before I am too old to enjoy it. Do as I bid you!'"

I must get hold of myself, Ranofer thought. I must think of something very fast that will make Heqet forget all this. But what? What?

"And then?" he said in as calm a tone as he could manage.

"Then Wenamon said, 'And what of afterwards?' At first I did not know what he meant, but soon I did, for Gebu smiled in a *very* unpleasant way and said, 'I have attended to that, only an hour ago. Setma is not the only captain on the river, as I told him at the time.'"

So Gebu had found a new smuggler and the goblet would soon be gone, if it were not already.

"Go on," said Ranofer, swallowing.

"That is all. Gebu turned without another word and went off down the street, putting his feet down like chunks of stone. In a moment Wenamon left too."

Ranofer was silent, concentrating on keeping his expression casual while his mind spun furiously.

"Well?" Heqet said. "What do you think of it? I do not

know what broken tree they mean, but if they are meeting tomorrow, should we not spy on them again, and—”

“And miss the feasting?”

“We can feast later, when we have found out where they go. Surely you would not miss this chance.”

“I do not think it is a chance,” Ranofer said. Suddenly, out of sheer necessity, inspiration came. “Gebu is going to Abydos today. We cannot follow him there.”

Heqet’s face fell ludicrously. “To Abydos?”

“Aye. I heard him tell Pai so.”

“Then why would he . . . Oh. I suppose the broken tree is *there*. No doubt Wenamon is going, too.”

“Aye, very likely.”

Ranofer nibbled on his cheese, attempting to seem thoughtful and even disappointed, looking anywhere but at Heqet. Heqet was silent for some minutes. “It does seem strange,” he said at last in a puzzled voice, “that they would make their plans *here*, where they are known and might be overheard. Why not on the boat, going down the river?”

“Perhaps they are going on different boats.”

Where do I find these explanations so fast? Ranofer thought, disgusted with himself. I am becoming as good a liar as that Babylonian.

“That is it, of course.” Heqet sounded disgusted with himself too, for not seeing something so apparent. “Naturally they would not travel together, it might seem suspicious. Doubtless they will pretend not to know each other at all when they get to Abydos. *Ast!* I wish we had a friend who sails a Nile boat. I would give my new *shenti* to see what they do tomorrow. There’s no doubt some goldsmith will be the poorer for it.”

"Aye, I'm afraid you are right." Ranofer gave a sigh that Heqet need not know was one of relief instead of disappointment.

Heqet sighed too and got to his feet. "It's clear we can do nothing about it this time. I am sorry. It was *such* a good bit of spying. I will meet you tomorrow, as we planned. At least we have the Festival to console us."

With a grin he led the way out through the curtain of reeds, and Ranofer followed. He had not tasted a bite of the good cheese he had eaten, and the Festival had dwindled to nothing in his mind. He knew quite well that only one thing could lure Gebu from the prospect of free barley beer: the gold of the tombs. If he and that vulture who was his friend did not mean to join the merrymaking tomorrow, they were almost certainly going to the Valley of the Tombs of the Kings, in broad daylight this time, while all Thebes was occupied with feasting.

Profoundly disturbed, Ranofer scarcely knew what he did all afternoon at the shop. When work ended for the day he wandered through the scorching streets, blind and deaf to the spirit of holiday already sweeping the crowds around him. He had no desire to go home but no reason for going anywhere else. He found himself at last pushing through the rustling stiff reeds of the papyrus marsh, with the water lapping almost to his knees. The deep mud of the shallows was cool and soothing to his bare feet, but he could take no pleasure in it. Over and over in his mind appeared the image of the familiar mummy-shaped outline of the western hills, and the sheer red cliffs that hid the Valley of the Tombs of the Kings.

How could he feast tomorrow, knowing with every bit

of honey cake what was happening yonder? He would choke on the food.

"Ai! Look, my Lotus, we have a visitor," cried a familiar voice almost at his elbow. He spun around to see the Ancient and his donkey splashing through the tall reeds. The old man stopped and looked at him curiously. "What ails you, young one? Did you think I was a *kheft*?"

"Nay," Ranofer muttered, but his heart still pounded from the nervous start he had given. To cover it he waded a little farther, pushed aside the last fringe of papyrus, pretending to study the bright colored sails that dotted the river. The Ancient followed, talking cheerfully.

"It's a fine sight, isn't it, to see the river full to its brim again? Makes a man work with a will. I've a good load today, by the grace of Osiris. I'll wager the sailmakers will greet me with shouts of joy, and load me with coppers. Oh, aye, aye, certainly. May Set take their stingy hides! They'll give me as little as I'll take." The Ancient chuckled and loosed his donkey to drink. "But why worry, tomorrow everyone will have cakes and beer. Aye," he mused, "Great Osiris is ready to loose his flood over the land once more. Seen any hangings lately?"

For a moment the noisy sucking of the donkey was the only answer to the familiar joke. Then Ranofer said, "Nay." The word came out so choked that the old man turned to peer at him.

"What ails you, young one?" he asked again.

"Nothing." Ranofer's bare toes dug convulsively into the mud. "I—I was only thinking of those wicked ones we saw hanging there that day. Ancient, how was their crime found out?"

He could feel the old man still watching him, though he kept his own eyes on the sails.

"Why," the Ancient answered slowly, "they were followed."

"Followed to the Valley?" Startled out of his nervousness, Ranofer turned to stare at him.

"Aye, to the Valley, to the tomb itself. And into the tomb."

"Into the tomb! But—but who would dare—"

"One who loved his pharaoh and the gods of Egypt—he dared," the Ancient said simply. His one eye was shrewd and very thoughtful. "Why do you ask me, young one? What do you know of tomb thieves, save what I tell you?"

"Nothing! Nothing at all," Ranofer said quickly. "I am merely curious."

"Aye, curious. I know the ways of boys. They are like cats who thrust their noses into everything and oftentimes are sorry. You had best save your curiosity, young one, for safer subjects."

Ranofer swallowed and did not answer. The Ancient was still studying him as if trying to see straight through his eyes into his heart, and Ranofer was beginning to feel alarmingly transparent.

"Well, I—must take my leave," he stammered, edging away.

"We will meet tomorrow, at daybreak? The three of us?"

"Aye. Aye, of course."

"And you are—nothing ails you?"

"Nay!"

Ranofer turned and left abruptly, forgetting to mumble so much as a "Live forever" in his haste to get away.

Only after he was well beyond the thicket and emerging into the dusty lane did he call down Amon's protection on the old man, and on himself, who needed it far more; for when Gebu set out tomorrow for the Valley of the Tombs of the Kings, he knew he must follow.

Chapter XIII

THE stars still spangled the sky when Ranofer woke to the pad of Gebu's footsteps crossing the courtyard next morning. Memory swept over him, and with it a chilling knowledge of the thing in store for him today. He lay still, eyes tight shut against reality, but he could not shut out the whine of the storeroom door, the footsteps coming out again a little later, and finally the soft click of the gate.

Gebu was gone, and he must not get away this time. Ranofer rose from his mat and ran across the pavement and into the storeroom. A splash of water on his face, a thirsty swallow or two, and he was searching hastily for food. There was half a loaf and a couple of onions. Ranofer started on the bread as he left the room, trying not to picture the coming feasting in the streets of Thebes. The chances were slim that he would ever taste another honey cake.

He walked quickly across the courtyard, everything in him wanting to run the other way. At the gate he paused, his hand already on the latch, and suddenly leaned his head forward against the worn, familiar wood. He was

shaking all over. I wish I were someone else! he thought. Heqet or the Ancient, or Kai the baker's boy, or even a cat or a dog! Then I would not know any secrets, I would be going out to feast today instead of to some dark and fearful tomb.

He was not someone else, though. He was Ranofer the son of Thutra, who loved his pharaoh and the gods of Egypt, and wanted to be free. He took a deep breath and opened the gate.

Gebu's *shenti* was only a faint glimmering in the dark street ahead, but Ranofer waited until it almost disappeared before he ventured out. Keeping the pale blur just in sight, he followed it through the winding, narrow alleyways of the City of the Dead and across the barren land beyond, while the sky above him turned faintly gray and the stars vanished one by one. By the time the high western cliffs were stained with the first pink of dawn, he was moving along directly below them, with the city, the flower fields, and the strip of desert all behind. Presently Gebu vanished into a cleft in the rock face, and when Ranofer arrived at the same spot a few moments later, he saw a winding pathway, strewn with boulders and hardly wider than a man's body, leading upward into the hills.

He moved up it nervously, not liking the sharp curves which prevented him from keeping Gebu in sight in order to assure a safe distance between them, not liking at all the walls that pressed in on either hand with no crevices in which a boy might hide.

He had passed the seventh curve and was still climbing when he heard a mutter of voices ahead. Gebu must have arrived at the meeting place and found Wenamon waiting.

Or had he encountered a guard? Ranofer crept closer, listening.

"... may regret this day, impatient one!" It was Wenamon's murmuring voice, that was certain. Gebu's lashed back at once.

"Fool! Who would follow us? Even the guards of the Valley will be feasting in Thebes."

There was another murmur, then Gebu snapped, "You are witless and a coward. Go look back down the path if you must."

Ranofer went numb. As a footstep crunched just around the curve ahead, he whirled and scrambled straight up the rocky wall, seizing at cracks, minute tufts of grass, whatever he could get hold of, and expecting every instant to feel a rough hand grasp his *shenti*. There was a narrow shelf formed by an outthrust boulder, just above the height of a man's head; Ranofer rolled himself onto it and lay as still as death. The next instant Wenamon's cloak-wrapped figure appeared around the bend.

The mason stopped, his bright, suspicious eyes darting every way but upward. He advanced soundlessly, passing so close under the shelf that Ranofer could have touched the black plaits of his hair. He padded down to the lower curve, peered around it and listened a long moment, while Ranofer lay rigid and sweating in plain sight above him. Then he turned, retraced his steps and vanished around the rocks ahead.

It was some time before Ranofer could gather strength to slide down to the path, and when he did, his legs were almost too weak to support him. Nevertheless he forced them to move in the direction Wenamon had taken. In

view of the miracle just past, he could almost believe the gods were protecting him.

The next bend disclosed the "place of the broken tree," a wide spot in the canyonlike path, where a scrawny, strange-looking tree grew out of a cleft between boulders. Beyond, Gebu's hulking back and Wenamon's stooped, narrow one were just disappearing over a last rise. Ranofer could see now that the rise formed the summit of the western cliffs, up the furrowed and craggy face of which they had been climbing. To the east lay Thebes, spread on both sides of the swollen river like a many-colored carpet, stained in a hundred delicate colors by the morning light. Beyond the rise, to the west, the way opened out and the path descended into the Valley.

Ranofer paused a moment, looking back upon the spread-out city. As he watched, seven red and white pennants rose simultaneously on the palace walls, and he caught the faint, squealing notes of a trumpet. It was the signal for the Festival to begin. Soon the great procession would burst from the gates of the Temple of Amon far across the river. Later, at midday, Pharaoh would come from his palace to throw open the first canal with his own hand, and the streets of Thebes would be full of food-laden tables and joyful people and spilled barley beer. And he would not be there. Perhaps he would never be there again. Ranofer wanted nothing more, in that moment, than to be back in the Street of the Crooked Dog, or even in the stonecutting shop scrubbing at some block of granite with his sandstone, or chipping at a coffin lid. He bit his lip hard, turned abruptly away from the city that was his world and started down the stony path into a world inhabited only by the dead.

It stretched before him, a wasteland of glaring red hills rising from a giant's block pile of tumbled boulders—desolate, barren and ominously still. Nowhere was there a single sprig of green.

The sun had cleared the horizon now. By the time he reached the Valley floor it was beating fiercely upon his naked shoulders, reheating rocks and sands not yet cooled from yesterday, wrapping the whole Valley of the Tombs in shimmering, burning heat. Ranofer, threading his way among the scorching rocks, wondered in panic if he would ever be able to find his way out again. Every pile of boulders looked like every other; the cool, flooding Nile and the familiar streets of Thebes seemed as far away as stars. High above him in the brazen sky a lone falcon wheeled; far ahead the figures of Gebu and Wenamon were dwarfed by their surroundings to mere swatches of black and white. Two thieves, a falcon, and himself. Except for these not a living thing stirred in all this burning, silent world.

Other things stirred, though, wraithlike things, unseen, unheard, but present in their hordes even in this glaring daylight. The *bas* of the dead could roam by day as well as by night, if they so chose, and would they not often wing about this lonely city of their mansions, assuring themselves that all was safe and undisturbed? Surely a footstep, sounding faintly in their dwellings far below, would bring them fluttering in anger up their shafts into this hot, still air, set them searching this way and that for the intruder.

Licking his parched lips, Ranofer tiptoed nervously across the sands, wondering if even now he was treading over the hidden chambers of some long-dead pharaoh and

rousing his outraged *ba*. He jumped as he heard the faint, seven-noted cry of the falcon and stood with pounding heart, watching it soar away toward the south. When he turned back, the two figures ahead of him had vanished without a trace.

In consternation he scanned the cluster of rocks where he had seen them only a moment before, then broke into a run. Even their dubious company was preferable to the death-haunted emptiness which surrounded him now.

Apprehensive and breathless, he arrived at the rock pile, stopped short, and sprang back behind it. Not three paces away on the other side of the rocks were the two he followed, working busily at something he had not time to make out. He stood flattened against a hot boulder, trying to control his jerky breathing. He could hear crunching and scraping, an occasional guttural curse. Then the noises stopped and all was still.

Moments later he dared peer out around the boulder. What he saw was an irregular black crevice in the rocks ahead, and a scattering of small stones around a large one which had evidently been rolled aside. Was this the entrance to the tomb, then? It looked barely large enough to admit a man's body, much less the huge coffin that must lie somewhere below. Ranofer crept out of hiding and stood peering fearfully into the crevice. It did not look like any tomb entrance he had ever seen or heard of. Casting a nervous glance over his shoulder at the desolate Valley, in which he was now utterly alone, he lay down flat on the hot sand and lowered his head into the dark, irregular hole. He could see nothing for a moment; then a dimly glimpsed surface made him stretch an arm down to explore it. It was a narrow projection. Perhaps a step?

Wriggling forward, he eased more of himself over the edge until he was hanging head-downward into the hole with the edge cutting his waist. His groping hand touched a second projection not quite an arm's length below the first. Another step. It was certainly an entrance of some sort. This flight of crude and uneven steps, hacked out of the rock and earth, led down the shaft. At the bottom a passage must tunnel away toward the tomb.

Ranofer wriggled backward again and got to his feet, threw another uneasy glance around him and turned back to the crevice. He could not make it out. Never could a huge coffin have been carried down that shaft. It must be a second entrance to the tomb, a secret one.

A secret one, of course! He stood transfixed by a flash of understanding. The whole of Gebu's plot was suddenly clear to him. He had heard tales of such tunnels, dug out during the construction of a tomb by scheming workers. They would hack through the wall of a tomb chamber secretly, and tunnel as far as time allowed toward the surface of the earth, adding the rock chips to the other debris from the excavation of the tomb. The hole in the chamber wall would then be plastered over like the other walls, so that no passage showed at all. A few years, or perhaps months, later, when the funerary visits of the surviving family became infrequent, they had only to dig a shaft down from the surface to meet their tunnel. When this was done they could enter the tomb at their leisure and cart away the gold, undetected by the guards at the real entrance, which might be a quarter of a league away and out of sight behind some rocky hillock.

Gebu was a stonecutter, Wenamon a mason. They had done this thing. It would be easy for them to arrange it.

Ranofer caught his breath as another realization struck him. The little room in the tomb drawing, the one for Pharoah's Master of Storehouses. It was no room at all. It was a passage like this, disguised so that the workmen could hack it out without knowing it was anything but another storage chamber. Small wonder Gebu had flown into a rage when he was asked about it! Ranofer went cold all over with fright as he saw himself calmly pointing to that very place on the drawing, recklessly asking the most dangerous of all questions. It was like crawling straight into a crocodile's jaws and only finding out later that you had done it.

Shaken as much by the past danger as by the present one, he huddled beside the crevice trying to gather his scattered wits. Poor Master of Storehouses, he thought distractedly. When the old man finally dies, he will not have long to rest.

A sudden queer noise made him swing around. What was it? He saw no one, nothing, only the same glaring, lifeless wasteland with its tumbled piles of boulders stretching all around him. His eyes went slowly to the rock pile near at hand, behind which he had hidden a few moments ago. Was Something Else hidden there now?

He edged closer to the crevice, still staring at the rock pile. Once more, even Gebu and Wenamon seemed companions fervently to be desired. At least they were human, they were alive.

But I do not want to go into a tomb! Ranofer thought desperately. I do not want to follow them clear into that dark and awful place. Surely it is enough that I know they are there. I can run now and give the alarm.

Run past that ominous rock pile? Through all that ter-

rible, empty Valley again, alone? His flesh crawled, he shrank another step toward the crevice, and as he did so he heard the sound again, eerily distinct and close. It was the dry rustling of wings. A cold moisture chilled Ranofer's forehead, as if an icy hand had been laid there. At that moment a gust of wind swept across the sands, there was a loud clapping and beating, and from behind the rock pile a huge black form with outstretched wings rose cumbersomely, tilting and flapping directly toward him.

With a cry, Ranofer leaped for the crevice and slid feet-first into the dark.

At dawn Heqet and the Ancient had arrived at the fish dock, dressed in their best and eager for the day ahead. For a time they talked together happily, admiring each other's finery, teasing, laughing from sheer excitement, and glancing up the thoroughfare from time to time to see if Ranofer was in sight.

"What a lazy clod!" Heqet said finally. "Still on his mat, today of all days! Let's go rouse him."

"Do you know where he lives?" inquired the Ancient.

"Nay, I thought you might."

"Well, I do not. We'll have to wait."

They busied themselves watching more and more holidaymakers emerge from houses and side streets as the sky pinkened above. The sound of voices and laughter swelled, and the thoroughfare grew crowded as the inhabitants of the City of the Dead streamed into it and hurried toward the ferry landings. Still Ranofer did not come. Many other boys passed by, with their parents and their sisters and their aunts and cousins and grandfathers. Gilded palanquins and chariots, preceded by runners and followed by

retinues of servants, began to appear from the direction of the noblemen's villas. Ferryboats and private barques were now putting out from every dock as fast as they could be loaded. Many had already reached the opposite bank, and others were strung across the river like a gala chain. The two friends waiting on the fish dock began to get restive. When the seven pennants rose high on the palace walls and the trumpet squealed its joyful signal, Heqet turned impatiently to the Ancient.

"Surely he will hear *that*," Heqet said. "Though he be sleeping like a rock, *that* sound will rouse him. He must come soon."

"Aye," the Ancient said in a somewhat dubious voice. "But I do not understand why he is not here already."

"Well, anyone can oversleep."

"On a festival day? An always-hungry boy?"

Heqet shrugged, but his face was puzzled as he peered down the crowded thoroughfare in the direction from which Ranofer must come.

Ten minutes later the crowds had noticeably diminished as they drained from the thoroughfare into the ferries and sailed across the river. Heqet and the Ancient were now frowning and uneasy.

"We will miss our ferry!" Heqet exclaimed. "They will all be gone soon. Did he not *say* he would meet us? I know he said it. We spoke of it a hundred times. Of course, I did not see him after midday yesterday."

"I did," said the Ancient.

"And did he not mention any change of plans?"

"Nay, he—" The Ancient's face altered suddenly. He turned and stared down the street as if staring alone would make Ranofer appear.

"What is wrong, Ancient?" Heqet asked anxiously.

"Perhaps nothing. Perhaps a great deal! Tell me, young one, did he seem disturbed, when you saw him at midday? Did he act a little strange, as if . . ."

"As if what?" Heqet prompted as the Ancient's voice trailed off.

"I do not know," the old man admitted. "I know only that when I saw him, at the day's end, I asked three times what ailed him. He was troubled about something, very troubled."

"It was that brother of his, no doubt," Heqet said. "He is always troubled about that brother and his thieving."

"Nay, he kept talking about tomb robbers. He—"

The Ancient broke off with his mouth still open. For a moment he and Heqet stared aghast at each other.

"Tomb robbers!" Heqet whispered. "Could he have found out Gebu is a tomb robber?"

"He had found out nothing at all, so far as I know," the Ancient said agitatedly. "He *told* me nothing, but then perhaps he would not."

"Surely he would have told you *that*! Still, he keeps his thoughts to himself, especially the bad ones, the ones that make him afraid. . . ." Heqet's voice trailed off too.

"Now what?"

"Yesterday, at midday, I was telling him something. I had overheard a conversation. I *thought* he was frightened. But then he spoke so calmly, told me it all meant nothing."

The Ancient seized his arm. "What conversation? What was it you overheard?"

Swiftly Heqet repeated the tale of his eavesdropping behind the potter's new-made jars, and what Ranofar had said of it later. When he mentioned the "place of the

broken tree" the Ancient's one eye sharpened suddenly but he did not interrupt, though his face grew grimmer and paler as he listened.

"So you see," Heget finished, "it could have nothing to do with Ranofer. Gebu is not even in Thebes today. No doubt those two Cursed Ones are meeting, but at that place of the tree, and if that is in Abydos—"

"It is not in Abydos," said the Ancient softly. "I know the place of the broken tree. It is an old, old landmark. And it is not in Abydos." His bony hand stretched out, a finger pointing toward the western cliffs. "It is there, near the summit, on the path to the Valley of the Tombs." As Heget eyed him in frozen silence, he added, "That young one knew it too, or guessed it. He asked me how those thieves were caught, the ones we saw hanging from the palace wall one day. Aye, and I told him. I told him!"

"What did you tell him? How *were* they caught?"

"They were followed. Straight through the Valley and into the tomb. And I told him about it! I'll wager that's where he is this minute, trailing those villains across that place, with never a charm or an amulet to keep the *khefts* away."

"We must go after him," Heget cried. "We can catch him, Ancient, bring him back."

The Ancient was already hobbling down the steps of the fish dock, his one eye fixed on the distant cliffs. "Aye, we'll catch him if we can. You're too young and I'm too old for such a venture, little one, but he's got nobody else."

"The guards?" puffed Heget as they ran into the thoroughfare.

"Feasting yonder, across the river, with everyone else." The Ancient pointed bitterly toward midstream, where

the last crowded ferryboat was bobbing toward the opposite bank. The thoroughfare was deserted. All the streets were deserted, and the shops and houses empty. It really did seem a City of the Dead now.

At its outskirts they were forced to slacken their pace; both were breathless, as much from anxiety as from their haste. The Ancient signaled for a halt, and they stood puffing, the eyes of both following the road across the desert. As soon as their breathing quieted the Ancient glanced at Heget and nodded. Without a word they started toward the western cliffs.

Half an hour later they rounded a bend on the steep, narrow path and saw the strange, stunted tree thrusting out of the cleft in the boulders. Beside it the path broadened, and Heget caught up to walk beside the Ancient. Together they topped the last rise and paused, gazing in silence out over the vast red wasteland that spread below. Heget shivered slightly and moved toward the Ancient until their arms were touching.

"How can we find him, in that place?" he whispered. "Do you think we can find him, Ancient?"

"I don't know, young one. We must try."

"I thought—we might see him. But I see nothing. Nothing *alive*."

"One thing is alive," the old man said grimly. He pointed far across the boulder-strewn sands, where from a distant rock pile a great black vulture at that moment rose clumsily, tilting, flapping, and finally wheeling upward in a soaring glide. When it was high in the air, circling lazily against the blue, the two on the cliff path tore their eyes from it and started downward to the Valley floor.

Chapter XIV

RANOFER'S plunge into the crevice sent him half falling, half jumping, from one to another of the crude, wide-spaced steps. After a moment he missed one altogether and simply tumbled, striking his knees and wildly waving arms on every rough projection he passed. He landed at the bottom feeling bruised, dazed, and as terrified of the inky blackness around him now as he was of the great winged thing from which he had fled. He got to his feet and stumbled about blindly, hands outstretched, until he located the opening of the passage he had guessed was there. It sloped gently downward as it led away into the unknown dark. As he hesitated, eyes stretched wide in a futile effort to see something, anything, a dim glow of light shone far ahead of him. Gebu and Wenamon must have kindled a torch; that glow was its faint reflection on some distant curve of the passage wall.

Ranofer fixed his gaze on it, licking his trembling lips. He could not stay here shivering and dreading, he must follow—or else climb back to the surface and be carried off to some unthinkable Land of Khefts by that great

winged thing. He was still weighing bad against worse when the dim glow ahead faded and disappeared.

Setting his teeth hard, Ranofer started along the passage.

It sloped gently at first, then more steeply, leading ever deeper into the earth, growing blacker and still blacker until Ranofer was seized by the conviction that he was moving along a slim bridge over vast empty space, and repeatedly clutched in panic at the walls while his bare toe fearfully explored the step ahead. The floor was strewn with sharp fragments that hurt his feet. The air was hot and close, and so dry it seemed to shrivel his very flesh. It *was* shriveling, he was sure of it. Was it from the breath of that great black creature, still after him, or the deathly, withering wind of its wings? He moved faster, scrambling blindly forward, longing for another glimpse of that light. Once his head struck sharply against something hard and rough-edged, and he sank into a terrified heap, whispering prayers to the vengeful spirits and spells against them. He was too weak to run, too frightened to stay where he was. Stumbling to his feet, arms locked about his head, he bumped the same hard thing again and realized it was the ceiling of the passage, pressing so low that from here on he would have to crawl.

He crawled, his teeth chattering and his whole body shaking so uncontrollably that it felt as if it belonged to someone else. He had never felt so small, so alone, so outnumbered, as in this terrible black place haunted by Beings he could not see or hear or feel but only knew were there. Worse, every inch he moved forward took him nearer to an even more terrible place, the citadel of death itself, the dwelling of the outraged Departed One whose mere sentries these other creatures were. Now and then

he caught sight of the torch glow ahead and flung himself recklessly toward it, though the faint, far-off gleam only intensified the blackness that enclosed him. Any living human—thieves and murderers included, Gebu included—would seem a friend and rescuer now.

After what seemed an eternity he realized that the blackness around him was no longer entirely black; it had turned to the lesser dark of night. Presently it became almost grayish, so that he could see faintly the hacked-out walls on either side. Obviously the torch had stopped moving, and he was drawing closer to the light.

There was a sudden sound of chipping, followed by the noise of falling plaster. Ranofer halted, his desire for Gebu's companionship abruptly vanishing. Even the fear of bodiless devils gave way before the sudden clear picture of this all-too-solid one up ahead. Gebu was still Gebu, human or not; and he was at this moment breaking through the plastered wall of a tomb. Ranofer waited until all sounds had ceased and the torch glow moved on before he cautiously crept ahead. Around a bend in the passage he was suddenly dazzled by a patch of golden light. He flung up his hand, blinking until his eyes grew accustomed to what seemed a brilliant glare, though it was only the torchlight, shining directly through an irregular hole in the wall. Even as his vision adjusted, the glare dimmed; the torch was being carried farther into the interior of the tomb. He could see now that, as he had expected, the opening ahead of him was jagged with broken plaster.

He eyed it fearfully, rubbing his cold hands against his thighs. For the first time he wondered who the man had been that now lay buried here. Some Great One, for the tomb was large. The torch had receded into what was ap-

parently a second chamber, and the thieves' footsteps came echoing back to Ranofer eerily, as though in a vast space. His flesh crawled and the little hairs prickled on the back of his neck as he edged slowly toward the hole in the wall.

Shivering, he rose to his feet before it, peered fearfully in, and found himself staring into a pair of strange, glazed eyes not two paces from his own.

With a gasp he flung himself backward, eyes tight shut against the horror that was sure to strike him dead. At the same moment, a voice growled, "What was that?"

"Ancient," Heget said in a weary voice. "Perhaps he is not even in this valley."

"Perhaps not," said the old man in a voice even wearier.

"Perhaps he followed Gebu somewhere on a boat, or to the stonecutting shop, or—" Heget sighed and did not bother to finish.

"It is possible," said the Ancient.

They were leaning against a huge boulder near a heap of rubble that spoke silently of the entrance to a tomb somewhere nearby. They had investigated a dozen such rubble heaps, prowled and searched until they had located a few of the tomb entrances themselves, though all were well camouflaged behind rocks and piled-up sand. Not one had shown a sign of having been disturbed or even visited in years, and the few actual doors they had glimpsed after careful peering between the rocks had revealed the necropolis priest's seal unbroken upon the jamb.

They had located this near one too, and it too had disappointed and discouraged them. It was beginning to seem useless to keep up a search so futile, in a place so

vast. They had wandered far north of the rock pile from which they had seen the vulture rise; no doubt there were just as many tombs to the south of it. There were tombs all over the Valley, dozens, perhaps hundreds of them.

"Surely we would have caught sight of him before now, if he is here," Heqet said. "Unless he has—" He turned to the Ancient with startled eyes. "Unless he has actually gone *into* a tomb."

"If he has done that, I fear it is too late for any help of ours," the Ancient said grimly.

"Do you think he *would* have, Ancient?"

"Nay, surely not," the old man muttered. He moved away from the boulder and glanced around him uneasily. "This Valley itself is bad enough, with a *kheft* watching from behind every rock, as like as not, to see what we are up to. I do not care overmuch for it myself."

"Nor I," Heqet agreed with feeling.

"And to enter a tomb, with those two for company, that would be worse by far. I cannot believe he would do it. Come, boy, let us go back to Thebes. Perhaps we will find him waiting."

Heqet nodded, but his nod carried no more conviction than did the Ancient's voice. They started drearily back the way they had come, through the sand and glaring rocks, each one radiant with heat.

Heqet stumbled and put both hands up to shade his eyes a little from the blinding light. "Ancient," he said in a small and dismal voice, "how do we know that brother of his has not done something to him? Maybe hours ago? Maybe even last night?"

"We do not know," said the Ancient. He too shaded his one eye for a moment to locate the distant cleft in the hill

that marked the path back to Thebes. Then he lowered his head and hobbled on.

There was a silence that seemed as long as time itself to Ranofer, who lay in a tight ball, dizzy with fright, on the floor of the passage. Then he heard Gebu's voice in the second room, sounding unconcerned as ever.

"It was nothing, son of the jackal, son of a pig! You're afraid of your own shadow."

"I tell you I heard a sound," the voice of Wenamon insisted.

"There is no one here but us and the dead. Make haste with those boxes, now."

Slowly, uncertainly, Ranofer rose to his knees, then stood. No one here? But what was that face he had seen? Trembling, he peered again through the opening, and met the same pair of eyes. This time, though he shrank back involuntarily, he realized that they did not move, did not live. They were the inlaid glass eyes of a life-sized wooden statue, and he saw now that they had been partially smashed, as if from the blow of a dagger hilt. Gebu and Wenamon had wanted no gaze upon them as they went about their evil work, especially the gaze of this watchful *ushabti* placed here as servant and guardian of the dead.

Nervously Ranofer examined the figure more closely, and his fear of its vengeance changed to an unexpected pity. It was the statue of a slim and lovely servant girl, wearing a painted white dress and a painted gilt necklace, steadying a box on one shoulder and carrying a painted wooden duck by its feet in her other hand. Her expression was one of serenity and joy, and the sculptor who carved

her had been a master. Now her clear, wide eyes were cloudy and blinded by the blow that had splintered them; her beauty was marred and her usefulness as a watchful guardian ended. It was like seeing some innocent, happy creature lying murdered, victim of Gebu's callous greed.

Ranofer's gaze turned from her to move in wonder about the rest of the chamber, which was dimly illumined by the glow of the torch from the next room. As he looked a strange emotion took possession of him. Beyond and around the graceful statue were articles of household furniture, arranged as in a beautiful home. There were armchairs and beds of carved wood decorated with gold, there were alabaster honey jars, painted boxes resting on delicately wrought ivory legs. There was a wicker trunk ventilated by little slatted openings, through which the fragrance of the perfumed garments within escaped into the room. There were winecups arranged on shelves, there were scent jars and jeweled collars and arm bands. Everywhere was the gleam of gold.

It was not the gold, however, that held Ranofer's gaze and drew him slowly through the jagged entrance to stand, silent and awed, within the Precious Habitation. It was the garlands of flowers, only a little withered, as if placed here in love and grief only yesterday, and the sight of a worn oaken staff leaning against the wall, of two pairs of sandals, a new and an old, of favorite joints of meat placed neatly in boxes as if for a journey. Whatever he had expected, it was not this intimate look of home, of a well-loved room to which its owner might at any moment return. Whatever horrors haunted the passage, they were not here, in this quiet sanctuary.

Who was the owner? Ranofer's eyes searched farther,

and halted in surprise. There were two owners. Slowly, soundlessly, he crossed the chamber to the pair of silver-inlaid coffins, on the lids of which were sculptured in gold the figures of their occupants, a man and a woman. They lay as if sleeping, side by side, their folded hands eloquent of the same defenseless trust that had caused them to order a sweet-faced servant girl as their only guardian. As Ranofer looked into their quiet golden faces the stealthy sounds of plundering in the next room became horrible to him. For the first time he fully understood this crime.

He straightened, all his fear gone and in its place hot fury. Those merciless and wicked ones!—to break into this sacred place and steal the treasures meant to comfort this old couple through their Three Thousand Years! Whether rich gold or worn-out sandals, these things belonged to them, no living human had a right to set foot in this chamber, not even the son of Thutra, who meant no harm. Almost, he could hear the helpless fluttering of these Old Ones' frightened *bas*. So strong was the sensation that he dropped to his knees in profound apology for his own intrusion. As he did so he saw something else, a stack of wine jars just beyond one of the coffins. They were capped with linen and sealed with clay, and pressed into the clay was a mark as well known to Ranofer as it was to everyone else in Egypt. It was the personal seal of the great noble, Huaa, only two years dead, the beloved father of Queen Tiy.

Shocked to his very toes, Ranofer scrambled up and retreated a few respectful steps, involuntarily stretching out his hands toward the coffins in the gesture of homage. Here lay Huaa and his cherished wife Tuaa, the parents of the queen of Egypt. And here he stood, an insignificant

nobody, daring to gaze into their faces! He was acutely, desperately embarrassed; he felt like a dusty urchin trespassing in a palace, which he was. Worse, at any moment those thieves would be in here to wreck and pillage, to tear the gold trim from chairs and chests, to snatch the jewel boxes, to break open the beautiful coffins and even strip the wrappings from the royal mummies themselves in search of golden amulets. It must not happen. These Old Ones should have someone grand and fierce to protect them.

They have only me, Ranofer thought. I must do something—anything—go fetch help—

He turned and started swiftly toward the entrance hole, too swiftly, for his elbow grazed a little inlaid table and tilted the alabaster vase upon it. He clutched at it wildly but it fell, shattering on the stone floor with a crash that echoed like the very sound of doom.

The small noises in the chamber beyond ceased instantly. Ranofer breathed a prayer to Osiris and flung himself behind the coffins, which was all he had time to do before the torch and Gebu's murderous face appeared in the doorway.

"*Ast!*" came Wenamon's hiss. "I told you we were not alone!"

"We will be soon," Gebu answered in tones that turned Ranofer cold. He could see their two shadows on the wall, black and clear-cut: Gebu's bulky one, Wenamon's, thin and vulture-shaped, behind it. The shadows moved, rippled in deadly silence along the wall, leaped crazily to the rough ceiling and down again as the two began methodically to search the room. The dancing black shapes advanced relentlessly toward the coffins, looming huge as

giants as they came nearer. Ranofer's hand groped out blindly and closed on a small heavy object that felt like a jewel box. At that instant Gebu's rage-distorted face was thrust over the coffin.

Ranofer lunged to his feet and hurled the box with all his strength.

There was a glittering shower of gems as the box struck Gebu full in the eyes, jarring the torch from his hand. He gave a hoarse cry and staggered backward into Wenamon, who began to scream and curse as he fought the flame that was licking upwards into his cloak. In that one instant of confusion Ranofer saw his chance. He seized the nearest wine jar and aimed it straight at the blaze. There was a splattering crash and the torch hissed out, plunging the chamber into darkness. With the reek of wine and scorched cloth rising strong about him, Ranofer leaped for the far wall, feeling frantically along it for the entrance hole. Behind him the dark was hideous with yells and curses, with the sounds of splintering wood and jewelry crushed under foot as the two thieves plunged this way and that over the wine-slippery floor in search of him.

Where, in the name of all the gods, was the hole?

His fingers met a jagged bit of plaster and, beside it, empty space. In an instant he was through the hole and stumbling along the black passage, bent double under its crowding roof, banging and bumping into its roughhewn walls, but running, flying away from the death behind him. The sounds of rage faded as he ran, grew fainter with every bend, then suddenly grew louder. The thieves had found the wall opening, too, and were after him, in the passage. He scrambled around a curve, almost fell, dashed

on again and brought up with a stunning impact against solid wall. Walls on three sides of him? Was he trapped? He wasted precious moments seeking a way around the obstruction; then his hand touched a rough shelf of stone. A step! He had reached the bottom of the entrance shaft much sooner than he had expected, for his headlong flight back had consumed far less time than his first cautious, crawling journey.

He clawed at the wall, found step after narrow step and hoisted his trembling body up them one by one. As he put his weight on the last one it crumbled under him. In a panic he flung both arms over the top of the shaft and for a terrible moment hung there, then wriggling, straining, pushing, he was over the top and through the crevice in the rocks.

The sunlight hit him like a blow. Half blind and shaking all over, he could think only of that last crumbled step and what it could mean to him. The thieves might climb past by jumping and then wriggling as he had done, but they could not get out if the top of the shaft were solidly blocked. They would have nothing to stand on to shove away the stones. He could hear stumbling, rapid footsteps approaching the bottom of the shaft, and Gebu's enraged voice bellowing his name; but already he was grabbing up rocks as fast as he could move, his eyes squinted tight against the glare of day. He hurled a few into the shaft and felt a fierce joy at the roar of pain below, and the thud of someone falling. Quickly he wedged some larger stones into the crevice, then began to shove and strain at the biggest, a boulder three times the size of his head, which had originally blocked the entrance.

It would not budge. He put his shoulder to it, dug his

toes into the hot sands, and shoved with all his strength. It stirred a little, tilted. He heard more scrambling sounds below and gave one last desperate thrust. The boulder tipped and rolled across the opening.

For a moment he could do nothing but lean upon the boulder and gasp for breath. There was still space behind it, but he could push it no closer. Amon willing, it would delay them a little while, but that was all.

He turned and started running across the red wasteland of the Valley in the direction of the Nile. After the closeness of the tomb the hot, free wind of the desert poured over him like the breath of life itself, but he could take no joy in it. If only the stone had rolled closer, there would be time to plan, to act in safety; but there was no time, there was nothing but more and more danger. Gebu was strong as Set himself. Sooner or later the stone would be tilting, moving, rolling free.

Chapter XV

HEQET and the Ancient had reached the path that led up to the cliffs. Tired, sweaty and weighted with fear for their friend, they paused a moment to rest, then started with dragging feet up the stony trail. At the first bend, where the path crooked about on itself and led behind a jagged outcrop of rock, Heqet stopped again, to look out across the empty red expanse which had defeated them. One hopeless glance, and he turned to follow the old man. Then suddenly he turned back, squinted, shaded his eyes with cupped hands. An instant later he let out a yell of excitement.

"Ancient, Ancient, Ancient—look yonder!" As the old man whirled and hurried back to him Heqet grabbed his arm and pointed. "There, beyond that line of rocks that looks like a crocodile. Isn't it someone running? Isn't it?"

"It is!" said the Ancient.

They stood motionless, peering toward the distant figure, which vanished behind boulders, reappeared briefly in clear stretches of sand, only to be hidden from them

again. Presently, however, it was close enough for them to be certain it was a boy, and not a man.

"It's Ranofer, it must be!" Heqet cried. He turned and plunged recklessly down the path, with the Ancient behind him. A moment later he was running across the sands toward the place he had last seen the figure, shouting Ranofer's name and waving his arms like banners. At the second shout the figure emerged from behind an outcrop, stared, then almost flew the remaining distance between them.

"Heqet! Heqet!" Ranofer reached his friend and fell upon him. "How did you get here? What are you doing in this place? Oh, Ancient!"

As the old man came hobbling up, Ranofer flung his arms around him and burst into tears.

"Aii, young one." The Ancient groaned and hugged him hard. "We guessed you had come here. We've been searching and searching."

"But where were you hiding?" Heqet broke in. "What have you been doing? Look at you, all dirt and scratches."

"I've been in the tomb, after those Cursed Ones! They're still there, I've trapped them, but I doubt it will hold them long, I could not push the boulder tight enough. Oh, Ancient, it is the tomb of the queen's father and mother, Honored Huua and Tuua."

"You trapped the thieves, you say?" The Ancient pushed him away and seized his shoulders. "Trapped them where? Speak quickly!"

As coherently as he could Ranofer panted out his story. "Do you see? The two of them dug that passage long ago, they've been biding their time, stealing from Rekh and breaking into other tombs, too. Aye, I found a goblet that

proves it. It's in the scroll room at the shop this minute, but I can't find it. I can't find it *anywhere*."

"Never mind the goblet, where is this stone? I'll wager Heqet and I together can make it move."

"Aye, and we'll guard the place, while you fetch help." Heqet's eyes were shining. He looked as if he had never been tired in his life. "Make haste, show us!"

"It is yonder." Ranofer pointed, then scrambled to the top of a massive boulder and beckoned Heqet up beside him. "You can see it from here. Look, that pile of rocks with the slanted flat one balanced on top. Do you see it?"

"Ancient, it is the place where that vulture flew up."

"Vulture?" Ranofer gazed at him, wide-eyed, then with an expression so peculiar that Heqet frowned and caught his arm.

"What ails you? Take care, Ranofer, don't fall!"

"I won't. Vulture! Well, no matter. I am glad he flew. Otherwise I never would have known. . . . Come, hurry. Did you note the way well? There is a crevice behind that rock pile, with stones before it."

"We'll find it," Heqet said as they jumped to the ground. "Won't we, Ancient? You can depend on us."

"Farewell, then, but be careful. Those two devils, they have knives, I think. Nay, I will come with you."

"What use would that be? Go, go! Fetch help!"

Heqet gave him a shove and turned away. Reluctantly Ranofer started toward the hill, then whirled back, stricken. "Aye, but where shall I go to fetch it? Oh, Mother of Amon, everybody will be across the river watching the procession, and no one would listen anyway. It is the same as before!"

The others frowned, then came back to him. "They must

listen!" the Ancient said. "Tell them you have been into the tomb."

"Tell who? And how can I get them to believe me? They will think I am spinning tales."

"You brought nothing from the tomb, no proof?"

"Nay, nothing, nothing!"

"The goblet!" Heget said. "If you showed the goblet—"

"I told you, I cannot find it. Perhaps it is not even there! Oh, if Zau were at his house today, or Rekh."

"Nay, Rekh is not, that I know. But Zau might be," Heget exclaimed. "He is an old man, Ranofer, he might not have gone across the river."

"I will try. It is all I can do. Farewell, Osiris guard you!"

"And you!" the Ancient's voice came floating after him as he sped away.

I should not leave them here with those two devils, Ranofer thought as he forced his tired legs over the sands and up into the hill trail. A glance back, at the first bend in the path, showed him their small figures hurrying along in the distance, straight for the rock pile. What if Gebu had pushed that stone away already? What if they had to face him and that *kheft* of a Wenamon as they crawled out of the shaft? They would never survive it, not an old man and a boy inexperienced at dodging blows.

Oh, I must go back, go back, cried one part of Ranofer. But the rest of him said, Nay, go on!

On he went, trying to forget the danger in which he had placed his dearest and only friends. Pain tore at his side and his lungs felt as if they would burst by the time he reached the summit of the hill. He hurried past the place of the broken tree, past the shelf that had saved his life, and down the narrow, winding cleft up which he had

crept so fearfully an hour or so ago. It seemed more like a year ago; he himself felt a different person from the boy who had started out this morning. That boy had been an infant, a know-nothing, a frightened fool, thinking he had real troubles. He had not even known what troubles were.

Reflecting bitterly on that ignorant morning self, Ran-fer emerged at last into the open sands at the foot of the cliffs. He stopped, leaned against the rocks and gulped for breath. There before him lay Egypt, green and familiar, with the Nile glinting beyond the houses of the City of the Dead.

Zau will not be home, he thought with hopeless certainty. He will be feasting with all the others. If there were a boat at the docks . . . but even if I found one, and some paddles inside it, and got across the river somehow . . . *At!* Foolishness! I could not paddle a boat across the Nile now, not all alone, it is too high and swift. And even if I could, how would I find Zau in the crowds? All Thebes is over there, and all half drunk by now, I'll wager. I will go to his house, I must try that at least.

He set out across the strip of desert, running until the pain in his side returned, walking until it went away, then running again. At the outskirts of the City of the Dead he turned southward on the first street to the area of villas and gardens near the palace, then eastward toward the river until he recognized the Street of Good Fortune curving off to his right. A few minutes later he was trying Zau's gate, rattling it frantically when it resisted him, and finally pounding and pounding on it.

He gave up at last, let his hands drop heavily to his sides

and stood with tears in his eyes gazing at the gold sign worked into the grill and the purple vine spilling over it.

He turned away and started aimlessly along the empty street. All he had accomplished was to place his friends in mortal danger, then run away and leave them. There was no one even to hear his tale, much less listen and believe. All these houses were as empty as the street, the whole city was deserted. His gaze traveled sadly over the blank, deaf walls, the closed gates and indifferent trees, and reached the palace looming far ahead at the street's end. There it suddenly riveted. The palace! *It* was not deserted. Not until midday, at the height of the Festival, would the royal procession embark for Thebes and the Temple of Amon.

Even as he broke into a trot he knew it was hopeless, worse than hopeless. How could he get into the palace? The guards would never let him pass, he would never be allowed to tell what he knew. He would die at the gates or else later, when Gebu escaped and found him.

He did not turn back. His mind filled again with the memory of a quiet chamber deep under the earth, now wrecked and looted, with its helpless occupants still in danger of destruction. Renewed fury drove away the last shreds of his caution. He ran down the empty street, forbidding himself to think of anything but covering the distance he had to cover. At last he arrived, breathless, at the palace wall and glared at it. So I am to die, he thought furiously. So be it, I will die now, at once, and not wait for Gebu's help. But first I will yell out some of it, some of it!

Discarding all thought of approaching the main gates, he ran in the opposite direction along the wall until he

found a tall palm growing near it. After a moment's inspection he leaped to its rough trunk and crawled up it like a cat, swayed precariously outward on a thick frond and dropped to the top of the wall. Beneath him, inside the wall, he saw a courtyard edged with sheds and stables. There were three chariots glittering with gold, and a dozen grooms who were bedecking horses with plumes and flowers for the coming procession. None of them looked up.

Crouching, Ranofer crept along the top of the wall to the next courtyard. This one was lined with the stalls of the palace weavers and basketmakers and potters and bakers, but there was no one in sight. After a moment's intent listening, Ranofer could hear no movement from inside the workshops. This was the place to enter. Swallowing, he hesitated, then dropped to the palm-thatched roof of one of the stalls and from there to the pavement.

His heart was thundering so that he felt sure someone would hear it. With a quick glance around he started across the open space toward a gate in the opposite wall, which seemed likely to bring him closer to the palace itself. Suddenly a voice bellowed out behind him.

"Hail! Halt, there! Who is that? Stop, I say!"

Without waiting to look around, Ranofer sprinted for the gate and tugged it open. Next instant he had burst into an open-air kitchen, full of ovens and fresh-plucked fowl and the fragrance of new bread, and swarming with cooks and kitchen slaves. With a dismayed gasp he plunged straight through them, ignoring their startled cries and outstretched hands, while the voice behind him bellowed, "Catch him! Catch him!"

A dozen yelling cooks were after him by the time he had clambered up a vine on the nearest wall of the courtyard, flung his feet over and landed, running, in the kitchen garden on the other side. As his pursuers burst through a gate behind him he fled up a red graveled path between rows of onions and beans, into a grape arbor and presently out the other end. He was panting, stumbling, and by now utterly confused. The angry cries seemed to come from everywhere, and he had lost all sense of direction. He could see no other wall to climb, no way out, no place to hide, and he did not know which way the palace was, which way the street he had come from. He found himself confronted suddenly by a thick hedge and swerved away from it, only to see a burly gardener emerge into the path ahead and run straight toward him. Whirling, Ranofer plunged into the hedge. It was dense and tough; by the time he had managed to wriggle through it, his flesh was scratched and torn and his *shenti* in rags. Exhausted, he tumbled onto the velvet grass on the other side and tried to scramble up. At once he was pinned hand and foot.

"Now then, you river scum!" panted a voice beside him.

The gardener and a shaggy-headed slave were holding him fast, glaring down at him. Beyond them he caught a glimpse of lawns and shade trees, a pool blue with lotus blossoms, a pavilion set among flower beds—and a group of people staring in his direction. One of them, a soldier with a drawn sword, had started toward him. He struggled helplessly, tried to speak but could only gulp for breath.

"Great Bast's whiskers! It's only a boy!" the slave said disgustedly. "Say something, you! What are you doing in the royal grounds?"

"The tomb!" Ranofer croaked. "I must warn Queen Tiy—"

A heavy hand slammed across his face. "Insolent!" the gardener roared. "Who are you to speak the name of the Sun's Daughter?"

"I must warn her, I tell you! I saw them—I followed—"

"Hathor's mercy, he's mad!" the slave exclaimed, backing away a little, though without loosening his grip on Ranofer's arm, and making a gesture to ward off the Evil Eye.

"I'm not, I'm not!" Ranofer struggled frantically, his eyes on the drawn sword of the approaching soldier and his mind full of that desecrated underground chamber. "May Set destroy you!" he screamed at his captors. "The queen herself will, unless you listen to me! The tomb is plundered—"

"Silence!" The soldier arrived, brandishing his curved sword at all three of them. "Out of here, riffraff! How dare you set foot in the queen's own pleasure garden?"

"We followed this urchin," cried the slave, ducking away from the sword. "It is a mad boy who came over the wall and through the courtyards babbling of tombs and the queen."

"Silence! Return to your duties. *You* stay." The soldier yanked Ranofer to one side and waved the others out of sight into the kitchen garden. "Now, then! I'll deal with you."

He made a swift, expert movement and Ranofer found himself stumbling along a path with one arm twisted behind him. It did not hurt until he tried to break away, then pain like fire shot from wrist to shoulder. He rapidly decided not to struggle.

"Please, captain—honored general—" he began.

"Silence."

The fire shot up his arm again. There was nothing to do but keep still and go where he was taken, which was, he realized, to the pool and the group of people gathered near it, who were watching his approach. At a respectful distance from them the soldier halted and murmured in quite a new voice, "A thousand pardons, Excellency! I will remove this blemish from your sight with all haste. It is but a mad boy who . . ."

During the brief, apologetic narrative Ranofer managed to twist into a position where he could study these new people. Foremost among them was a tall, cold-faced man with a massive gold chain about his neck. Behind him clustered a few scandalized palace servants, a gardener to whom the Excellency had evidently been issuing instructions, and a strange little man no more than four feet high, wearing a silver headcloth and two enormous rings of silver dragging at his ear lobes.

Ranofer forced his eyes away from this astonishing little personage and back to the tall man, who he guessed must be the palace overseer. "Excellency, listen to me, I pray you!" he begged, cutting through the soldier's mumblings. "There are robbers this very minute in the sacred tomb of the—"

He broke off with a cry as the soldier gave a sharp jerk to his arm, snapping, "Hold your tongue, scum!"

"Very well, Captain. Remove him," the overseer said indifferently.

The Great One turned away, and Ranofer sagged with discouragement in the soldier's grasp. "In the name of Amon," he pled. "In the name of the queen—" But already

he was being marched relentlessly across the grass toward a wooden gate and oblivion.

Then a curious, piping voice behind him called, "Captain! Wait!" and the dwarf in the silver headcloth came pattering up on his stubby legs. "Free his arms, I want to look at him," the little man ordered in a tone fully as haughty as the overseer's.

Loosed at once, Ranofer straightened dazedly, rubbing his numbed arm and staring at his deliverer. Could this strange little man be someone of importance? "Live forever, Master," the boy faltered.

The dwarf thrust forward his head with a movement that set the huge earrings bobbing. "Who are you, Mad One?" he demanded.

"Master, I am Ranofer the son of Thutra the goldsmith, and indeed, I am not mad! I—"

"Silence! Do you know who I am?"

"Nay, Master."

"Tell him, Captain."

"His Excellency is Qa-nefer of Abydos, favorite pet of Her Sublime Majesty the Daughter of the Sun, the Divine Consort Ti, may she live forever!" the soldier rattled off stiffly. Ranofer glanced at him and saw that his face had turned purple with rage. Obviously he did not like taking orders from a person half his size. Just as obviously Qa-nefer, whose name meant "Tall and Beautiful," enjoyed giving them enormously. He smiled like a cat with a particularly tasty mouse, strutted up and down a time or two to make his earrings sway gaudily, then waved an arrogant and much-bejeweled hand.

"Dismissed, Captain," he piped. "I will take charge of the prisoner."

"But Your Excellency!" the soldier roared.

"Dismissed!" the dwarf roared back at him.

The soldier turned on his heel and stalked through the wooden gate. Instantly Qa-nefer seized Ranofer's wrist. "Now, speak. Quickly. What is this babble of tombs and thieves?"

Dizzy with sudden hope, the boy sank to his knees. "Master," he stammered. "I—I—I—" He forced himself to be coherent. "There are robbers in the tomb of the Royal Parents! I saw them enter! I followed and they had smashed the eyes of the guardian statue, and they were stealing the gold from the two Old Ones who lay there so quiet."

"Fool!" The dwarf gave his wrist a yank. "You did not see these things! You babble!"

"I swear it, I swear it!" Desperately Ranofer poured out the story, how he had knocked over the vase and they had searched for him, how he had flung the box and then the wine jar, and escaped and rolled a stone over the crevice. "But Master, I could not push it tight and they will come out of there. I left two friends to guard the place but one is an old man and the other only a boy like me, and I do not know if they can keep the stone in place. Perhaps those Cursed Ones have killed them by now—"

Another yank at his wrist cut off the rest. "What Cursed Ones? Who are these robbers? Come, are you not making the whole tale up? You do not know their names, I'll wager my earrings."

"I do! They are Wenamon the mason, and Gebu the stonecutter! I know them well. Too well," added Ranofer bitterly. "Gebu is my half brother. I live in his house, and eat his bread."

The dwarf's expression underwent a change. He examined Ranofer's face minutely for a moment, then turned and started along the graveled path, pulling Ranofer after him with surprising strength.

"We will see, we will see," he muttered as he flung open a gate. "If you are lying to me—"

"I am not lying, Master!"

Joy rushed through Ranofer. He wanted to thank this strange little man, to heap praises upon him, but Qa-nefer was pattering along so fast he had scarcely breath enough to keep up. They hurried through a flowery arbor, down another walk and up a flight of stairs that climbed the side of a huge building.

The palace! Ranofer thought. I am going into the palace of Pharaoh—I!

The door at the top of the stair opened into a vast hallway down which the dwarf pulled him without slackening his rapid, half-trotting walk. Ranofer caught confused glimpses of shining walls and pavements painted in glowing colors. Then suddenly he was dragged through a doorway and given a final shove.

"Stay here!" the dwarf hissed fiercely, and vanished into the hall.

Chapter XVI

BEWILDERED and suddenly uneasy, Ranofer stared about him at a room luxurious beyond his wildest imaginings. On its polished floor was a rug of many colors. Chairs made of fragrant cedarwood adorned with gold stood here and there; their cushions were fine linen stuffed with down, light as bubbles and incredibly soft to the touch. In one corner there was a folding stool with a leopard pelt thrown over it; it was made of ebony inlaid with ivory, and its legs were carved into the shape of a leopard's clawed feet. On a low table in the center of the room stood a flower-twined wine jar and a goblet bluer than the sky; beside them a basket was heaped with fruit and honey cakes.

Ranofer's empty stomach growled dismally; saliva flooded his mouth and he swallowed, turning away from the food. Where had the dwarf gone? Had his haste meant nothing but disbelief, after all? Perhaps he had decided Ranofer was lying, had been frightened at his own interference with the overseer's orders, and had simply abandoned the project, leaving Ranofer to be discovered by the

next servant to step into this room, whereupon the alarm would be raised again and the chase start all over.

Aghast at this new danger, Ranofer was still trying to decide whether to flee or hide when he heard hurrying footsteps in the hall. An instant later Qa-nefer appeared in the doorway.

"Come, Rash One," the little man said grimly. "We are going to see the queen. And may the gods of Egypt help you and me if you are lying."

He pulled a dazed and awe-struck Ranofer out into the hall and down it a few paces to a broad, square archway through which they passed into another chamber. A soldier, but not Ranofer's enemy the captain, stood erect beside a doorway in the far wall. Ignoring him completely, the dwarf opened the door and pushed Ranofer through a small anteroom with a shining floor and linen-hung walls, which was occupied by two more sentries. One of these stepped forward and opened double doors, through which Ranofer and Qa-nefer stepped into a spacious room radiant with light and thronged with people.

After the first instant, Ranofer saw none of them except one, a woman. She was small and slender, with wide, carven cheekbones, eyebrows like black wings, and a full, downward-curving mouth. She stood tense and still in the very center of the room, and on her forehead reared the golden cobra of Egypt.

Ranofer's knees gave under him; he knelt and touched his head to the floor. As he did so he heard the queen's voice, abrupt and husky, with a peculiar timbre, like a young boy's.

"Is *this* the one, Qa-nefer?"

"Aye, Your Radiance."

"I thought you meant a big boy. This is only a child!"

"Nevertheless, Your Majesty—"

"Hush. Tell him to rise."

"Rise!" hissed the dwarf, nudging Ranofer with his toe. Almost paralyzed with awe, Ranofer managed to obey.

The queen studied him a moment.

"What is your name?" she asked.

"Ranofer the son of Thutra, Majesty," he whispered.

"Come here, Ranofer."

Again he obeyed, on quaking legs. The queen seized him by the shoulders, peering into his face.

"You told my dwarf there are thieves in the tomb of my parents. Why do you say this thing?"

"It is true, Your Majesty. They are there!"

"How do you know, then?"

"I followed them, Majesty! I saw them! They have dug a secret entrance—"

"So you say," the queen said softly. She was searching his face with a fierce intensity, and her fingers had tightened on his shoulders.

The gruff voice of a noble behind her spoke. "Your Majesty, I beg you, calm yourself. It is extremely unlikely that this boy was anywhere near the Precious Habitation. Boys are given to inventing wild tales with themselves as heroes. It is really too difficult to believe—"

"I know all that." The queen straightened and loosed Ranofer's shoulders without taking her eyes off his agitated face. "Still, it is not impossible. I must be sure he is lying, if he is."

"Oh, please, I am not," Ranofer broke in. "I know—"

"Silence!" the dwarf hissed from somewhere behind him. "Wait till you are questioned."

"Nay, let him speak." The queen obliterated the dwarf with a gesture and nodded to Ranofer. "Go on."

"I know the men," Ranofer finished in a humbler tone. "I *know* them. One is my half brother, the other his friend. They have been stealing before this. I found a golden goblet in my brother's clothes chest. It bore the name of Thutmose the Conqueror."

He stopped as a strange sound swept the room, as if everyone in it had drawn a sharp breath at once. The queen's eyes had widened; she leaned forward and grasped his shoulders again.

"Where is the goblet now?" she demanded. As Ranofer hesitated, aghast at the trap he had made for himself, she gave him a sudden little shake. "Where is it? Speak!"

"It is—in my brother's stonecutting shop—in the scroll room—but it is hidden. I do not know where he has put it, I cannot find it! That is why I had to wait, and follow. . . . Oh please, believe me! Send someone to the Valley, they will see it is true, let them test everything I have said."

"Hush, let me think." The focus of the queen's eyes changed; she looked into space a moment, then abruptly back at Ranofer. Her fingers dug fiercely into his shoulders, but her strange, boyish voice was quieter than before. "Ranofer the son of Thutra, I will test your memory instead. I am going to ask you a question. If your tale is true you will be able to answer it. Do you understand?"

"Aye, Your Majesty," Ranofer breathed.

"Very well. *What was the object leaning against the north wall of my parents' burial chamber?*"

Ranofer's brain whirled helplessly. The north wall? North? He had lost all sense of direction in that crooked black passage. He groped for some starting point, some

means of getting his bearings. The crevice. Was the eastern hill at his back or to one side of him when he plunged down that hole? He had no notion. The rock pile? His attention had all been on Gebu—and later, on that vulture; he had not given a thought to north or south.

All around him he could feel the skeptical glances, hear the unbelieving silence, as a roomful of Great Ones—nobles, courtiers, the Daughter of the Sun herself—waited for proof of his tale. And he could not give it, he had failed. He would be dragged off to the darkest prison in Egypt, and the good little dwarf along with him.

Suddenly something burst open in his memory, and his mind cleared. The coffins! he thought. How can I be so stupid? Do not all coffins point west, toward the Land of the Gods? Stay, now, get it straight! If the coffins faced west, then the north wall would be . . .

He raised his eyes to the probing, fierce ones of the queen. "Majesty," he whispered, "it was your father's oaken staff."

There was an instant of profound stillness. Then the queen's hands slid from his shoulders and flew up to cover her face.

"He speaks truth!" she cried. "Fetch soldiers, send them to the Valley! Make haste, make haste!"

There was a swirl of movement in the room; voices rose in excitement, the gruff-voiced noble strode swiftly to the door, jerked it open and went out, followed by several others. A graceful young man wheeled and began giving orders to three servants who stood along the rear wall. When they had bowed and hurried through a different doorway, he turned back to the queen. She had sunk into a chair someone had placed for her, bowing her head in

her hands; several exquisitely clad ladies were already bending over her, as well as an old man with a rich gold collar around his neck.

Everyone seemed to have forgotten Ranofer. He had forgotten himself. He was standing exactly where the queen had left him, watching with wide eyes the hasty goings and comings of these Great Ones, which he himself had set in motion. He might have remained where he was for hours had he not felt a touch on his arm and turned to find Qa-nefer at his side.

"Come. It is not fitting for us to be here now."

The dwarf jerked his head toward the antechamber, and Ranofer went with him hastily, turning hot with embarrassment at his own presence, a blemish of rags and dirt and unsightly scratches, in this beautiful, shining room. They had almost reached the door when a peremptory voice stopped them.

"Wait, Qa-nefer!"

They looked around to see the graceful young man coming toward them.

"Go to Her Majesty," he told the dwarf. "She has a command for you." As Qa-nefer pattered away on his short legs, the young man turned to Ranofer. His manner was impassive and assured, his bearing a noble's; but his eyes were warm and intent. "I am Count Zobek, chief cupbearer to the queen," he said. "Come with me, I wish to ask you a question."

He led Ranofer into the antechamber, and across it to a bench standing by one of the linen-hung walls. There he motioned Ranofer to take a seat, and after a glance toward the door of the outer passage, through which people were still rushing in and out, he sat down beside him.

"Now. Tell me all you know about this goblet," he said.

"It was gold," Ranofer began timidly. He was very awed by this splendid young man. "With a silver rim and stem. It had the name of the Conqueror inscribed on the bowl. I saw it."

"You are sure? You can read?"

"Only a little, Excellency. But I am sure. I will write the pictures for you, if you wish me to, then you can summon a scribe."

"Nay, you have proved yourself truthful. If you are sure, I believe you." Count Zobek glanced again toward the passage; he seemed to be impatiently awaiting someone. "And you found this treasure in your brother's clothes chest? Why did you not take it then?"

Ranofer explained, and under the count's close questioning described how he had returned next day to find it gone, later following Gebu to the shop only to lose track of the bundle of *shentis* entirely.

"So you believe it is still there, hidden somewhere in the shop?"

"I do. In the scroll room. But I have looked and looked for it. There are only shelves and a cupboard. I do not know where he could have put it, Excellency."

"Perhaps we can find out," the count said softly. This time when he glanced toward the passage, he beckoned quickly to two men who had just come in. Ranofer recognized one of the servants the count had sent on some errand earlier, the huskier one, a man with thick shoulders and a heavy neck. The other was a burly fellow in a helmet who carried a chariot whip dangling from one hand.

"These men," the count said to Ranofer, "are of my

household retinue. I want you to tell them exactly how to find your brother's stonecutting shop."

Ranofer's heart beat fast with joy. The beautiful goblet was to be rescued, it would never be melted or smuggled away downriver in some smelly ship's hold, or sold in the market places of Crete or Mycenae to ignorant barbarians, if it were still there, wherever Gebu had put it.

"You must go to the Street of the Stonecutters," he told the men, stammering a little with eagerness. "Walk west from the wide road that runs beside the Nile, and after a time you will pass a wineshop with a wooden pig's head hung before it. The stonecutting shop is only a little way farther, on the opposite side. You will know it by a great chunk of black granite standing beside the door. Aye, and the thatch on the left side is loose, it flaps in the wind. But the door will be latched and sealed."

"That need not trouble us, little one," remarked Count Zobek. "And the scroll room? Where is that?"

"At the rear of the shop."

The count rose and faced his men. "There is a roll of old linen in the scroll room, with a goblet inside. I want it found. Tear the room apart brick by brick if necessary. Pay close attention to a cupboard against one wall. You had best pry it loose first of all, it may have a false back. Go now. Make haste, but do not return without that goblet."

The men bowed and left, almost running. Ranofer did not see them go; he was gazing up at the count's calm face.

"What is it, boy? Why do you look so?"

"A false back to the cupboard. Aii, it is just like Gebu! Why did I never think of it before!"

The count looked at him a moment, then smiled. "Per-

haps because you have never had a fortune to hide," he said. "Or a greater one to gain." His smile twisted slightly, in a way Ranofer did not quite understand, and he turned away, motioning for Ranofer to wait where he was. At that moment Qa-nefer appeared in the door of the queen's room and approached them, strutting.

"You have finished with this boy, Excellency?"

"I have, Qa-nefer."

"Then come with me, Ranofer." The dwarf smiled and puffed out his cheeks importantly. "I have orders concerning you."

Some hours later Ranofer stood on a balcony of the palace, watching the sun sink and the long day draw to a close. The flooded Nile was once more dotted with ferry-boats bringing the weary merrymakers back to their homes in the City of the Dead. Ranofer no longer envied them their day of feasting. He himself had feasted on roasted waterfowl and honey cakes. He had rested on down-filled cushions in a beautiful room, he had had his scratched legs bandaged by the finest surgeon in Egypt. Now, freshly bathed, reeking with scented oils and dressed in a *shenti* of fine linen and a snowy headcloth, he waited, as he had been told to do, for a summons from the queen.

The sky was flaming when the door of the room behind him opened and Qa-nefer beckoned him imperiously. The little man wore golden earrings this evening, even larger than the silver ones, and he was swaggering with pride.

"The thieves were captured," he announced. "In the shaft, below the crevice, just where you said they would be. The gold and jewels they carried were brought back to the Precious Habitation, and all has been set in order. It

was a great thing we did for Egypt this day, Reckless One—you and I, Qa-nefer of Abydos—for if I had not listened to your tale, all would have come to nothing. Is it not so?"

"It is so, Master. Oh, I thank you for listening! Her Majesty will thank you."

"Her Majesty has already thanked me," the dwarf said with a broad grin, gesturing toward the enormous earrings. "Now she wishes to thank you. Come."

Ranofer followed him through the shining halls, wondering what Heqet would say if he could see him now. Heqet! The Ancient! He caught Qa-nefer's arm.

"My friends, Qa-nefer, those I left to guard the tomb! Are they safe? They were not harmed by those Cursed Ones?"

Qa-nefer looked at him blankly. "I do not know. I did not go to the Valley. I saw no friends."

"Oh, please! Will you ask Her Majesty? Will you speak to her for me? She will listen to you."

"In the queen's presence, one speaks when one is addressed," said Qa-nefer in a chilly tone. "Come along, don't stand there. The court is waiting."

"But the goblet? Did Count Zobek find the—"

"Make haste, I said!"

Ranofer made haste, but he was still bursting with questions when he entered the shining room and the presence of the queen.

She bade him rise from his knees at once and come near her. The old man in the gold collar stood at her right elbow; Count Zobek now stood at her left. She was smiling radiantly. Around her throat was the necklace of golden bees Ranofer had seen Zau making, and beside her on a

low, carved table stood the golden goblet. Its beauty seemed to light the room.

Ranofer's breath escaped in a long-drawn, joyful sigh as he raised a face more radiant than hers.

"It is found. It is safe," he whispered.

"It is found and safe, thanks to His Excellency, my new High Chamberlain." The queen glanced at Count Zobek, who bowed serenely. "It will be returned to the Precious Habitation of my ancestor at daybreak tomorrow."

"And my friends? They are—" Ranofer faltered. He had not been addressed. He spoke anyhow. "Your Majesty, are *they* safe too?"

The queen seemed puzzled. "Your friends?"

"Aye, a boy and an old man. They came in search of me and I left them to guard the shaft. Oh, please, were they harmed? I—"

He broke off as the queen turned to speak to the old noble on her right. He turned away, too, and spoke to someone else, who crossed the room swiftly and opened the door to the antechamber. After a moment this last personage returned and hurried back to the old noble, who listened to an instant's murmuring and turned back to the queen.

"Your Majesty, the captain of the guard reports that he saw a boy and an old man at the tomb, both sitting on the stone that blocked the shaft. They climbed down when they saw the soldiers coming. He did not see them after that. He assumes they returned to Thebes."

The noble bowed low; the personage bowed lower, and retired to his place. The queen smiled at Ranofer. "Your friends are safe," she said. "When you leave the palace you

shall take a gift to them. Tell me, are your wounds more comfortable?"

"Aye, Your Majesty!" Heget was safe, they were both all right. He would see them soon.

"And did my servants feed you well?"

"Oh, aye, Your Majesty!" No doubt they were waiting for him somewhere now, the two of them. Heget would be dancing with excitement. Suddenly Ranofer could scarcely wait to go to them.

"Then all my wishes have been carried out," the queen was saying. "Excepting one." She paused and leaned forward; her tone changed a little. "Ranofer the son of Thutra, all is well in the tomb of my beloved parents because of you and your courage. I wish to reward you. Tell me, what do you crave most in all the world? You have only to ask for it."

Ranofer lifted wide, incredulous eyes. He could ask for anything? *Anything?* Visions of golden collars and vast palaces flashed through his mind, and then out again. He knew what he wanted.

"Your Majesty," he said tremulously, "could I have a donkey?"

The queen's eyebrows rose in astonishment. "*A donkey?*" she repeated.

"Aye, Majesty. If I had a donkey, I could cut papyrus stalks in the marshes and the donkey would carry them to the sailmaker's for me, and the sailmaker would give me coppers to buy bread, and I could make myself a little house on the edge of the desert and then I could be a pupil of Zau the goldsmith and then *I* would become a master goldsmith and grow rich and famous and someday perhaps make necklaces for Your Majesty, and—"

He stopped, hot with confusion because all the elegant courtiers in the room were laughing. It was not scornful laughter, though, he realized an instant later. It was the laughter of surprise and pleasure. As for the queen, she was not laughing at all; her long eyes glistened as if they had tears in them. She beckoned to the stately old man who stood near her.

"Lord Merya," she said softly. "Give this boy the finest donkey in all Egypt. And tell Zau the goldsmith that the first necklace made by the hands of his new pupil must belong to no one but Queen Tiy."

Half an hour later Ranofer walked through the City of the Dead in his new, soft leather sandals—with buckles—blissfully unaware of the crowds that jostled and passed him in the fading crimson light. In his sash nestled two fine finger rings set with greenstone amulets, one for Heqet, one for the Ancient, both inscribed with the name of the queen. In his hand were six of the finest goldsmith's hammers, each of a different shape and use. And at his side walked a veritable pharaoh of a donkey—long-eared, strong, beautiful, and in the prime of life. His head still rang with the music of the queen's praises, and his heart swelled with the knowledge that he could go tomorrow to Zau the Master and say, "I have done as you told me. I have reshaped my life into another form."

He rounded a corner into the thoroughfare and saw ahead of him two familiar figures leaning side by side against the fish docks. At sight of him Heqet gave a shout and flung up one hand, and the Ancient started hobbling toward him as fast as he could come. Ranofer gripped his donkey's rope and began to run.

Eloise Jarvis McGraw

(1915–2000) was a writer for more than fifty years and was the author of more than twenty children's books. She has won many honors and awards for her books, including the Newbery Honor, which she was given for her books *Moccasin Trail* (1952), *The Golden Goblet* (1962), and *The Moorchild* (1997). Eloise Jarvis McGraw died at the age of 84 in Portland, Oregon, on November 30, 2000.