

# The Ninth Lif

The Ninth Life

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(\_as Jack Mann\_)

An Epic Novel of Ageless Evil

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# CHAPTER 1

## The Smile of Eternity

ALTHOUGH more than two years had passed since Gregory George Gordon Green—known as “Gees” for obvious reasons—had established his confidential agency, he still gave himself an occasional mental pat on the back over his choice of a secretary. She was not only useful, but decorative too, a tall girl with blue eyes and brown hair with reddish lights in it, and a face attractive more through its expressiveness of eyes and lips than through regularity of feature.

She faced him, this mid-morning of January, from the doorway of his office, and dropped her bomb calmly enough. “Inspector Tott would like to see you, Mr. Green.”

He took his well-shaped but unduly large hands from his pockets, and stared at her incredulously. “Tott?” he echoed. “All right, Miss Brandon,” he said at last. “I’ll see him.”

Presently she ushered in a well-set-up, alert-looking man who might have been a stockbroker or a shopkeeper—but who actually was a trusted officer of the Special Branch of the C.I.D. For a few seconds the two men gazed at each other in silence. At the conclusion of Gees’ last case, they had agreed to bury a certain hatchet, but their expressions indicated that part of the handle still stuck out.

“Come in, Inspector.”

“Before I do, Mister Green—” the inspector laid a heavy emphasis on the *Mister*—“I’d like to be sure that microphone of yours is not working. Because I’m speaking unofficially.”

“Whatever you say, Inspector,” Gees assured him blandly, “will not be used as evidence against you.”

“I wish we had you back in uniform again,” Tott observed, rather wistfully.

Gees shook his head. “My fee for an initial consultation is two guineas. I wouldn’t get that in uniform.”

“I know what you’d get from me,” Tott replied grimly.

“We both know,” Gees assured him.

For a few seconds the inspector simply glared. “You remember that Kestwell case?” he asked eventually.

Gees nodded. “You wanted to arrest *me*.”

“Yes—that’s the point,” Tott said. “You got Mr. Briggs to come along and prevent that arrest.” Tott paused. “I believe they think a lot of Mr. Briggs at the Foreign Office.” Again Tott paused. Finally, as if the words were torn from him, he blurted: “I suppose you’ve heard that Mr. Briggs has got engaged to be married?”

“I have, now. From you. Who is the lady? I must ring up Tony and congratulate him.”

“It’s because he’s not to be congratulated that I’m sitting here,” Tott said slowly. “You’ve heard of Lady Benderneck, I expect?”

“There is also a Buckingham Palace,” Gees observed pensively.

“Yes, I thought you had. Well she sponsored this Miss Kefra—Cleo Kefra. Mr. Briggs met her and—well, lost his head over her. And the engagement was announced day before yesterday.”

“The old hag would sponsor anything, at a price,” Gees remarked. “Cleo Kefra. Sounds a bit exotic.”

“Is, I assure you,” Tott said, and made a grim comment. “Well, I’ve got a great respect for Mr. Briggs, and I’ve seen the lady,” Tott told him. “I’d hate to see a gentleman like him trapped.”

“What is wrong with Miss Kefra?” Gees asked.

Tott shook his head. “You’d better see her for yourself,” he answered. “Mr. Briggs is a friend of yours, I know. There’s nothing wrong with her—nothing that I can put a finger on, but—”

“Inspector, Briggs is pretty levelheaded, and I don’t see any possibility of interfering, even if I felt like it.”

“Well, I’ve got it off my chest,” Tott said, and stood up.

Gees delayed him with a gesture. “Who is Cleo Kefra? The name isn’t English, for a start.”

“SHE looks Eastern to me,” Tott said. “She’s got a passport issued by the British consulate in Alexandria describing her as a British subject aged twenty-three; and apparently she’s very wealthy. No relatives, as far as I can gather. Came to this country five months ago, and she’s leased Barnby-under Hedlington Grange, furnished—that’s in the Cotswolds. Also runs a swagger flat in Gravenor Mansions.”

“It sounds as if Mr. Briggs is to be congratulated,” Gees remarked.

“The flat is number thirteen,” Tott added.

“My grandmother died of pneumonia,” Gees said.

“What’s that got to do with it?” Tott almost barked.

“As much as the number of the flat, I think,” Gees told him. “Don’t get peeved. I appreciate your interest, and I shall certainly make a point of seeing the lady as soon as I can. But what is your grievance against Miss Kefra?”

Tott shook his head. “I can’t pin it down,” he answered. He turned toward the door. “Thank you for listening to me,” he added. “It’s not—as I said—a matter over which I can do anything.”

“Thank you for talking,” Gees said. “I’m glad you feel like that about Mr. Briggs, Inspector, though I don’t see—”

“No,” Tott remarked in the pause. “But I must get along.”

After closing the outer door, Gees went into his secretary’s room, seated himself on the end of her desk, and produced the inevitable cigarette case. He said, “If Tott were a fool he wouldn’t be where he is.” The girl waited.

“And yet,” he went on, “it’s apparently possible for Tott, even, to acquire a wacky notion. About Briggs. Foreign Office. He’s just got engaged. The girl it seems, exotic, slinky, and hails from Egypt. Also appears possessed of a healthy wad of dough. And Tott wants me to break the engagement since he can’t do anything about it himself.”

“But that’s absurd,” she said.

“Quite. Now I suggest we lunch at the Berkeley, Miss Brandon. I’ll fix it for Tony to bring Cleo Kefra along. A woman’s view of another woman is always worth having.”

“So is a lunch at the Berkeley,” she remarked. “But what name was that you called her?”

“Exactly, Miss Brandon—it hit me just like that. Cleo Kefra—something to do with the great pyramid, by the sound of it. Not an alias, either—she’d have chosen something less conspicuous.”

Tony Briggs, over the phone, said he’d be delighted to bring his fiancée to lunch on Wednesday. No, he had not seen Tott recently—not for over a fortnight, in fact.

“And when is the wedding?” Gees inquired.

“Oh, we haven’t got as far as that yet,” Tony protested.

“Just as well. I’d better pass judgment first.”

“Oho!” And Tony laughed. “I’ve no fear of anybody’s judgment.”

“Probably another Tony said that about another Cleopatra, old son,” Gees observed.

He hung up, and went along to Miss Brandon’s room again. She looked up from her typing at him. “It just occurred to me that history is doing another of its repetitions,” he said.

“History—?”

“Anthony Briggs—and apparently Cleopatra Kefra,” he explained.

“I thought of that some time ago,” she said.

“Well, the other one threw the world away, but I expect chucking the Foreign Office will be this one’s limit.”

“Sacred mackerel!” Gees ejaculated, as he entered the Berkeley lounge on Wednesday with Miss Brandon. “The old man’s getting gay.”

The white-haired, soldierly-looking man, seated with another of his kind over two dry sherries, got on his feet and came toward them. There was enough facial likeness to declare the relationship between him and Gees—though his father was better looking and had neatly proportioned hands and feet, while Gees had large hands and very large feet.

“How d’you do, Miss Brandon?” he said courteously. “How are you, Gordon? Lunching here?”

“Meeting Tony Briggs and the girl he’s going to marry, Father,” Gees explained. “You know Tony, of course. Would you and—and that friend of yours care to join our party?”

General Sir George Green shook his head. “Thank you, Gordon, but—”

He broke off to stare toward the entrance, where Briggs and a tall, very slim girl were poised. “Gordon,” he said, hurriedly, “I met that girl, exactly as she is now, when I was on my honeymoon in Egypt. A Miss Kefra.”

“Mother to this one—no, though—it’s the same name,” Gees said. “An aunt—father’s sister, probably. You’ll be introduced?”

“Not now. No, I must get back to Farebrother.”

With a slight bow he turned away—turned his back almost pointedly on Tony Briggs and his companion. Past question the girl’s appearance had disconcerted him.

SHE was wearing a coat of undyed black panther fur, the five-group markings showing distinctly in its satiny gloss, and under it a closely fitted frock of

shining gray, with a moonstone set in platinum pinned at her breast. Except for her fiancé's ring, she wore no other jewelry. A little black hat fitted closely to the red-brown of her hair, and under it her unusually pale face was perfect in feature.

Her eyes were amber flecked with green, and the pupils appeared almost abnormally small—yet they were very lovely eyes. She was bizarre, un-English—and queenly. Tott had said that her passport declared her as twenty-three, but in poise and dignity she appeared far beyond that age.

Unusually slender, she was sinuous, too; she flexed in movement to an unusual degree. His first thought as she neared them was that Tony had won a first prize out of life; his second that, before she spoke a word, he disliked the girl—or woman. Beside him Miss Brandon made an utter contrast, as of normality facing the almost-impossible he felt that he had never liked Miss Brandon quite so well, and trusted her so fully, as in this moment—and the green-flecked, amber eyes read all his thoughts and feelings, he realized, while their pupils dilated suddenly, rendering them darkly lustrous as she gazed at him.

“We’re a trifle late, I’m afraid,” Tony Briggs began. “Cleo, my two very good friends, Miss Brandon, and Mr. Green—”

The strange girl’s hand, Gees realized as he held it for a moment, was very cold. She smiled at him, confidently—as might a duellist coming on guard. “I have been looking forward to meeting you, Mr. Green.”

Perfect English, with no trace of accent. And a perfect voice, low-pitched, soft, and yet resonant. Her smile was the smile of—Gees faltered—of eternity.



## CHAPTER 2

### The Lady of the Lion

AT THE corner table, Gees faced Tony Briggs with Cleo Kefra on his right, and Miss Brandon facing her. Some dozen tables away, he could see his father and Colonel Farebrother, and noticed that the general kept staring at them, uneasily.

Cleo Kefra talked well, with the assurance of a woman of the world; Tony Briggs' gaze at her proved him hopelessly, fatuously in love—Gees felt rather grimly that he had never seen a worse case. Miss Brandon appeared divided between nervousness and amusement.

A mention of Egypt, toward the end of the meal, evoked from Gees the remark that he had never been there, and Cleo's dark eyebrows lifted in slight surprise.

"I gathered from Tony that you had been everywhere," she said.

"I was going to Egypt the year I joined the police force," he answered. "As it is, I haven't been there in this incarnation."

"Then you believe we live more than once?" she asked.

"An open mind," he answered, "is always useful."

"What do you do—your work, I mean," she asked. "Tony said something about an agency, but he was terribly vague about it."

"I've got a four-roomed flat within shouting distance of the Haymarket, and half of it is my office. I started by advertising that I'd tackle anything from mumps to murder."

"And how many cases of mumps have you attended?" she asked.

"I've had one murder—two murders, in fact," he said. "The others—the ones worth considering, that is—have been worse."

"Do go on," she begged. She spoke lightly enough, but Gees heard a challenge

in her tone.

“Well,” he said slowly, “there was a man who made shadows.”

Her fine brows drew down. Then she smiled and nodded. Every movement, every gesture, was graceful.

“I know,” she said. “I saw it once at a party, a man who made shadows of ducks and giraffes and all sort of things with his hands.”

“Not that, Miss Kefra,” he said. “I mean that old shadow magic—older than Egypt, even. Each shadow’s a life.”

“I—” She began, and stopped. Again he saw the pupils of her eyes dilate, and knew he had, as he had intended, roused fear in her. “You—what did you do?” she asked, after a pause in which the other two, silent and listening, sensed the tension.

“That man will make no more shadows,” he said, rather grimly.

“How very thrilling!” She had recovered her composure, and even managed a laugh. Tony Briggs drew an audible breath of relief, and scowled fiercely at Gees, but said nothing.

“Mr. Green is very mysterious about that case,” Miss Brandon observed. “It’s the only one of which I don’t know the end.”

“How do you mean a man made shadows, Gees?” Tony fired out with abrupt harshness. “And each one a life?”

“He took lives to prolong his own,” Gees said seriously. “It was old magic, the sort of thing nobody believes nowadays. No more credible than—well, someone told me today that he saw Miss Kefra exactly as she is now, thirty-five—no, thirty-eight years ago.”

“Which is quite possible,” Cleo said calmly.

“Quite—darling, what *do* you mean?” Tony demanded.

“Merely time-traveling,” she explained. “The man’s sight might have gone

forward thirty-eight years, just as memory can go back to childhood—or even beyond, in some cases.”

“This is much too deep for me,” Tony remarked glumly. “I’d say the man saw somebody like you, except that there’s nobody like you.”

“Who is the man Mr. Green?” Cleo asked abruptly.

“It happens to be my father,” Gees answered. “Thirty-eight years ago he was on his honeymoon in Egypt—so he tells me—and saw you just as you are now—with the same name, Miss Kefra. I told him an aunt, probably. It’s a more likely explanation. People don’t go time-traveling on their honeymoons. At least, I wouldn’t.”

She smiled once more, her perfect lips triangular.

“It appears that you and I are interested in the same subjects,” he remarked. “Will you get Tony to bring you round to my place for tea some time?”

“Willingly,” she assented. “I should very much like to hear more about this shadow magic you mentioned.”

“The man who practiced it,” he said, slowly and looking full into her strange lovely eyes, “was very old. There were many shadows.”

“I don’t understand.” But Gees knew beyond any doubt that she did understand.

“I’m sorry to seem like breaking up the party,” Tony cut in abruptly, “but being a wage-slave under the Government I ought to be back in time for tea. And if I’m to take you along first, Cleo—”

With Tony holding the door of a taxi outside, a little later, the girl gave Gees her hand and gazed full at him.

“I’m so glad we have met,” she said. “Tony must bring you to see me, next time. For tea, one of his free afternoons.”

“It will be a great pleasure,” he assured her.

With Miss Brandon beside him, he watched the taxi go, and saw how its two

occupants sat well apart from each other in their corners.

“We’ll walk back, I think, Miss Brandon,” he said.

“Just as you wish,” she assented. “It’s a beautiful afternoon.”

“On second thoughts—” he lifted a crooked finger at a taxi-driver—“you take this and charge it to petty cash, while I run along to the British Museum for an hour or two.”

She gave him an inquiring look as the taxi drew beside them.

“Never mind. I’m probably crazy. Both of us—Tott and I...”

THE winter dusk was well advanced when, returning to his flat in Little Oakfield Street, Gees let himself in and entered Miss Brandon’s office. She looked up.

“You have been a long time,” she said. “I have been thinking, since coming back here, Mr. Green. In over two years here, I have done about two months’ real work,” she explained. “You don’t really need me—a girl in from an agency occasionally could take your dictation and—”

“You mean you want to give notice?” he interrupted incredulously.

“I might even go as far as that,” she admitted, smiling.

He reached out to flick an ash into the tray beside her typewriter. “Finding it monotonous?” he suggested.

“Not that. But my being here like this, filling in time by reading novels, is not fair to you. This—your agency—is a one-brain enterprise.”

“What about that lunch today?” he demanded abruptly, without hesitation.

“Well, what about it?” she echoed.

“I arranged it,” he said slowly, “because of Tott’s visit here—because of Tott’s notion. And I had an idea, while I was groveling in the dust of the British Museum, that it might have struck you too. Instead, you brood over this preposterous idea of yours—it *is* preposterous, my girl! I’ve got used to your

being here, a wall to throw my thoughts against and watch ‘em bounce, and I’d hate to lose you.”

“For one thing, Mr. Green,” she retorted rather acidly, “I am not your girl. For another, the wall feels itself as the end of a cul-de-sac. The hours I waste here—waste!”

“Then to you,” he asked, “that lunch was a mere social function?”

“Hardly,” and she shrugged slightly. “It was most uncomfortable.”

“Oh! Now we’re getting somewhere! Carry on, Miss Brandon.”

“That—that Miss Kefra was afraid of you.”

“I meant her to be, on sight. What about Tony?”

“He won’t be your friend much longer, if she has her way over it.”

“No? Well, do you think I could get any girl from an agency that I could take to the Berkeley on a footing of equality, and count on the sense you showed with those two remarks? Moreover, I’ve been doing some thinking too. I’m going to make a case of this Miss Kefra, turn myself into a purely honorary and unsolicited nuisance as far as Tony Briggs is concerned—for his good, of course—and to drag you in and give you all the work you want.”

“I don’t understand, Mr. Green,” she said, after a pause.

“No. I’ve got to explain. You know, of course, that I’ve dabbled a little in the occult.”

“Then you consider Mr. Briggs—or Miss Kefra—an occult problem.”

“When did it strike you that she was afraid of me?” he countered.

“When you talked about the shadow-maker,” she answered, after a brief pause.

“Exactly. Miss Brandon, Cleo Kefra is a *lamia* of some sort—uncanny in some way,” he said. “Tony Briggs is my friend, and I’d go a long way to keep him out of trouble. And that girl—woman, rather—spells trouble for him.”

“She is—unusual,” she conceded thoughtfully, “but what have you against her? What is there to justify interference?”

He stubbed out his cigarette, and lit another.

“I don’t know. She hails from Egypt. She’s paid old lady Benderneck to get her an entry into the circles Tony frequents, but she’s—she’s no background, really. At the best, an adventuress, and at the worst—but I want more than the mere impression I got at lunch before saying anything about that. Did you like her?”

She smiled. “We detested each other on sight,” she answered.

“There you are! Intuition—on both sides.”

“I don’t understand any of it, yet,” she said, “except that you seem determined to do exactly what you tell me Inspector Tott asked, merely because Mr. Briggs has—well, because he’s in love with her rather than loves her. You see, I must discount my own dislike of her.”

“Trying to be fair—yes, but—”

The telephone interrupted him. It was his father’s voice he heard.

“Oh, it is you, Gordon? Can you dine with me tonight?”

“With all the pleasure in life, Father.”

“Good. I’ll expect you at seven-thirty.”

“Thank you very much, Father. I’ll be there.”

He replaced the receiver, and nodded thoughtfully.

“May get a line on the lady,” he said. “That was my father, asking me to dinner.”

“And you think—yes—over his having met a relative of hers.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” he dissented slowly. “In fact, I’m not sure about anything. But I want you to do some scouting for me, round Gravenor Mansions. A little work for a change.”

“Not to interview Miss Kefra?” she asked quickly, doubtfully.

“Far from it. No. Just nosing around. Maybe there’s a caretaker with a thirsty wife, or a man on the lift who’d take you to the pictures in his off time— anything, as long as you find somebody with a waggly tongue. And then— anything at all about Miss Kefra. People who come to see her, the establishment she keeps, how she impresses the underlyings—but don’t run the risk of meeting her. She’s seen you once—had you sitting facing her, and those eyes of hers would look through anyone.”

“When do you want me to go?” she asked.

“Well, unless you’re doing anything this evening—”

“I hope to have something to report tomorrow morning,” she said.

“And don’t talk any more about giving notice,” he said emphatically. “I’d never get another secretary to fit my ways as you do.”

“My dear—” she whispered it to the closed door after he had gone out—“I wonder which is the greater, my folly or your blindness.”

“WELL, Father, it’s good to see you again, and it must be quite a while since I had the honor of putting my feet in the family trough.”

The general frowned, heavily. “I detest this modern slang, Gordon, as I think you know,” he said.

“I’m sorry, Father,” Gees apologized, with—for him—unusual meekness.

The old man stared uncomfortably at his plate, puffed out his cheeks, raised his eyes to his son’s face. “Gordon,” he began abruptly, “I wanted a word with you about that luncheon party of yours today. Perhaps you may be able to tell me something about that—er, that remarkable resemblance I noticed. About the lady with Mr. Briggs, I mean.” He cleared his throat loudly, and Gees held grimly on to his own patience. “I have the highest regard for Anthony Briggs, as I think you know,” the old man went on.

“You have given me that impression,” Gees admitted.

“Yes. Yes. And—er, on thinking the matter over, after ringing you this afternoon—but was today your first meeting with the lady?”

“My first sight of her. Yes.”

“Ah! Then probably, as far as she herself is concerned, you know little more than I do. As I was saying, on thinking it over, I decided to tell you the story of my meeting with the one who resembled her so very strongly. Not that there is anything to be done, as far as I can see, but knowing Anthony Briggs as you do, you might show by your attitude—”

“Yes. But show what, Father?” Gees inquired, after waiting vainly for the end of the sentence. He had never seen his father less at ease over anything than over this thirty-eight-year-old meeting with somebody who, then, had resembled Cleo Kefra and bore the same name.

“Disapproval of the entanglement,” the general said with asperity.

“And make him more set on it than ever,” Gees pointed out.

“I am not thinking only of Anthony Briggs,” the general said. “I have in mind his—er, his position, and his access to things not in the knowledge of the public. I may be entirely wrong in anticipating—I may be doing him a grave injustice in suggesting that he is capable, under any circumstances, of—er—”

“Spilling the beans,” Gees suggested, after waiting in vain.

“Confound those slang phrases!” the general snorted. “I was going to say, of disclosing confidential matters even to those whom he felt he could trust implicitly.”

What amounted, Gees thought but did not say, to exactly the same thing. He waited for his father to go on.

“But, as I said,” the general continued, “I decided to tell you my story, which concerns, beyond any question in my mind, a member of this lady’s family. You will then do what you choose—probably nothing, I gather.”

He was getting more and more ponderous, Gees reflected, and made no comment. All the signs pointed to embarrassment over the story he had



determined to tell.

“I think I told you I—er, I was on my honeymoon when the incident occurred,” the general said. “I had got my captaincy over a year before, and had been seconded for Intelligence, which, let me tell you, was not then what it is now.”

“I can well believe it,” Gees remarked gravely.

The general gave him a long look, but decided not to pursue that angle of the subject. “It was a starved service,” he said. “The South African war was in being, and Omdurman was still a remembered campaign. Egypt, then, was what today would be called a propaganda center, Cairo especially, and you may or may not know that an intelligence officer is never off duty, even for one hour in a year.”

“Then why take a honeymoon in Egypt?” Gees murmured.

“Why? My dear boy, my marriage formed an ostensible reason for going there, rendered the real reason inconspicuous. Your mother knew what she was doing—it was that or wait another year or more for marriage, and neither of us wanted to wait. Neither of us regretted it, either. My work—even now I do not intend to define it—left us the greater part of our time, and—well, I need say no more on that head.

“We had been there six weeks and then your mother developed some gastric trouble which I understand is rather common there in the spring months.”

“I’ve heard of it. Commonly known as ‘Egyptian tummy,’” Gees said.

“Vulgarly known, you mean,” the general reproved him. “Your mother became so ill as to need a nurse, though the doctor assured me there was no real danger. She ran high temperatures, and needed careful attention, that was all.

“One night the nurse assured me I was better out of the way, as my wife was sleeping and ought not to be disturbed, and I went for a walk in the Kasr-el-Nil direction and met—well, even at this length of time I will withhold his name.

“Another Intelligence man, say, who was very glad to see me, since my connection with that service was far less suspected than his own—not suspected at all, in fact.

“It was then between ten and eleven o’clock, and we agreed that I should go out to Mena House, which is almost under the Pyramids. To find and bring in a—well, I will say a dangerous person. An *agent provocateur*, whose capture would eliminate a very great part of our troubles. I was to make contact with a woman who had been put on his track, and arrest him.”

“So you had women in Intelligence, then?” Gees asked.

“I cannot tell you what or whom we had,” his father retorted stiffly. “Only that this woman, whom I had never seen before, would be at Mena House, dressed in a certain way, and I was to assure myself of her identity by a series of pass words.

“I got to the gardens of Mena House and found her, as I thought, alone at one of the tables. I joined her with an apology—which was a part of the passwords. In all, I remember, we had six sentences each to say and she made no mistake whatever in her replies. I was fully satisfied.”

He sat silent for so long, then, that Gees ventured a: “Well?”

“SHE said we must wait, and we did.” the general resumed. “It was very late, then. I—I had all the confidence in myself that one loses with experience, and—this part I doubt if you can understand—I found that woman very attractive. She seemed so utterly sincere, and dependent on me for the ultimate outcome of the night’s work—\_”\_

“And she was the living image of Cleo Kefra,” Gees said in the pause.

“What made you suspect that?” his father demanded.

He shrugged. “I don’t know. But she was, eh?”

“She even gave me that name—Kefra, not the other. Colonel—the man who had sent me there had not told me her name, I realized later. In that service, we used not to deal very largely in names among ourselves. Perhaps she and I sat there an hour, talking on various subjects, and then one of the waiters came and spoke to her, in Arabic. Then she told me it was time to go, to make the capture, and we went to my \_gharri.\_

“She showed me a small revolver she carried in her bag, and insisted on coming

with me, for my safety, she said.

“And that is very nearly all I can tell you, except that I was taken to Sherhard’s two days later, in a complete amnesia, and the woman I should have met was found dead on the bank of the Nile with her throat torn to pieces as if a tiger had mangled it. Oh, and the *agent provocateur* we should have captured made a clear escape.”

“Drugged,” Gees observed thoughtfully. “And that is all?”

“Nearly. For the period of amnesia, I shall never be sure whether dreams came back to my mind, or whether—but they must have been dreams.

“One I’m certain was a dream—a woman with the head of a lioness, purring like a cat. Another of the woman who told me her name was Kefra, with her arms round me, holding me back from something—or holding me to keep something off from me. And another of my being intensely grateful to her—heaven only knows why!—and embracing her passionately.

“I would not have told you that last one, except that when I saw your Miss Kefra today it was forced back into my mind as a reality, not as a dream, and I’m so far away from youth and all it means, now, as to confess that it may have been real. For I’m perfectly certain that girl could tempt Saint Anthony himself, if she wished.”

“And is tempting the Anthony without the Saint,” Gees commented.

“Undoubtedly! But now you see. The amazing, perfect likeness, as if that girl who fooled me—oh, she fooled me completely!—as if she had been resurrected exactly as she was then. Gordon, she’s no wife for your friend, whatever her own record may be. With the same name, she belongs to a family that only a generation back consorted with your country’s enemies, and belonged in a gang which could kill another woman by mauling her as might a tiger. No, it’s a tainted source.”

“And if the taint persists, Tony Briggs is in no state to perceive it,” Gees added. “A woman with the head of a lioness, purring like a cat. Yes. Yes, I see.”

“That was obviously a dream, though a vivid one,” the general said.

“One that you were not meant to remember,” Gees told him.

“You mean—confound it, boy, what do you mean?”

“I mean this is the most interesting thing I’ve struck since Hector was a pup,” Gees answered with sudden and incautious enthusiasm. “If I told you, you wouldn’t believe it. Father, my confidential agency is going to work free gratis and all for nothing—it’s started already, as a matter of fact. What you’ve told me convinces me that this engagement has got to be smashed, though I started by thinking it a fool idea. It isn’t.”

“Then what do you intend doing?” his father inquired interestedly.

“I’ll hear what Eve Madeleine has to say in the morning.”

“Eve Madeleine? And who in the world is Eve Madeleine?”

“She’s only that when she’s absent. To her face, she’s Miss Brandon. She’ll have a report of some sort for me tomorrow.”

“You’re not going to tangle her in an affair like this?”

“She’s in it up to the neck already, Father, and glad of the chance. She’s no fool, I assure you.”

“She’s a very charming girl, Gordon.”

“Quite. I often pat myself on the back over choosing her.”

“Yes, you showed good taste,” the general said dryly. “In view of my experience with this Miss Kefra’s relative, though, you had better be careful not to expose Miss Brandon to any risks.”

“Such as a woman with the head of a lioness, purring like a cat.”

“Don’t talk balderdash, Gordon! I merely told you that to illustrate the impossibility of separating dreams from reality, while in a state of amnesia. To show that all may have been dreams.”

“Quite so, Father—and is life anything else?”

“You mean—you attach importance to those fantastic visions?”

“I mean, for any man to tell his own son things like that takes courage, and though I’ve never doubted yours this is my first chance of seeing it. You’re playing high for Tony’s sake, Father, and I’ve got a liking for him, too. On top of which, the cow in the fairway is my special meat, so what have you?”

“I don’t know,” Sir George Green confessed solemnly, as if the final sentence had been a real question.

“No. Nor me, either.” They spoke no more about it until Gees was about to go. Then the old man gripped Gees’ arm tightly.

“Good night, Father.”

“Good night, my boy, and take care of your Eve Madeleine.”

## CHAPTER 3

### Lost Little Ernie

“SWAGGER,” Miss Brandon whispered to herself. “Oh, very swagger! But why the police inspector?” She loitered by the railings of the square gardens, just across the road from the high, bronze-and-plate-glass entrance to Gravenor Mansions. By moving a few steps in ether direction, she could see nearly all of the spacious, high-ceiled entrance hall, decorated in mauve and silver, marble-floored, with a sort of Grecian-urn frieze high up on the walls, and here and there plaques of classic design.

There were two elevators. By one of the two massive pairs of outer doors, just inside the hall, stood an obvious police inspector, talking earnestly to a six-foot attendant in a silver-braided mauve uniform.

Miss Brandon moved on a few steps, halted, and turned, wishing the police inspector out of the way.

Rough lipstick and powder, skilfully used, had made wondrous changes in her face; she looked, as she had intended, rather down on her luck; an ancient fox-fur coat showed bare patches on its deep lapels and cuffs; she had bought it earlier in the evening at a Berwick Market stall. Her shoes were good, but both silk stockings were badly laddered, as her short woollen skirt revealed.

When the police inspector emerged, she began walking away from her post, in the direction that he took, until he had got far enough ahead to disregard her. Then she faced about and, crossing the road, went to Gravenor Mansions’ entrance, where the tall attendant in uniform swung the door and looked down at her hat rather sourly.

“And what might you be wanting, miss?” he inquired.

“Could I see the caretaker, please?” she asked in reply.

“About little Ernie, is it?” he demanded, with a change to eagerness.

“Little Ernie?” she echoed. “No, it ain’t about little Ernie, it’s about meself.

Who is this little Ernie, anyhow—uh?”

“He’s the caretaker’s little boy, an’ he’s lorst,” the attendant informed her, with a return to cold aloofness.

“Well, could I see the caretaker?” she persisted, after a pause.

“You couldn’t,” he answered decidedly. “‘E’s hout—I mean, he’s out. Nigh off his rocker about the kid, too.”

“Ow,” she said dubiously.

“What chew want the caretaker for?” her interlocutor demanded.

“I thought—” she gave him a swift, coquettish glance and lowered her gaze again—“you see, Lucy Parker—she’s a friend of mine—she told me they sometimes want maids here, and I thought—” She broke off and twisted her gloved fingers together in apparent nervousness.

He moved away to swing the heavy door for a couple entering—a couple on whom Miss Brandon instantly turned her back. Mauve-and-silver solemnly escorted Cleo Kefra and Tony Briggs to one of the automatic elevators. The attendant returned to her.

“You can’t stand about in ‘ere, you know,” he said, not unkindly.

“Why, what’s the harm if I do?” she demanded, smiling saucily.

“Well, y’know, this place is clarss, that’s what it is.”

“An’ I ain’t clarss. Is that what chew mean?”

“I dunno about that.” He looked uncomfortable at her half-smiling, satiric gaze.

“I come off at ten,” he said.

“Ow! An’ it’s only a little after nine, now. I could do with a little refreshment, too. D’you know anywhere round here?”

“Baker’s Arms—private bar,” he answered, with a certain eagerness. “It’s quiet, an’ quite refined. Sid’ll serve you, an’ if you tell him you’re a friend o’ Phil

Vincent's, he'll look after you."

"Ow," she said again, rather solemnly.

"You will be there, won't you?" he asked anxiously.

"Ten o'clock ain't long," she answered.

"I told you my name—you ain't told me yours," he pointed out.

"Grace Pottert—that's me. An' you're sure there ain't no places goin' here? I was parlormaid in me last place."

"It ain't no use your lookin' for the caretaker. Mr. Katzenbaum hisself engages all the staff, an' you'd have to go to his office. But will I see you at Baker's Arms? You'll be there?"

"I'm going there now." She moved toward the door.

But then she halted, for the door in the corner almost crashed open, and Tony Briggs strode, even clattered, across the marble floor toward the entrance. Hurrying, Phil Vincent got the door swung open for him, and received no reply to his: "Taxi, sir?"

Phil turned back to Miss Brandon as the door swung slowly and silently into its place. He said—"She ain't 'arf combed 'is hair for 'im. I reckon she ain't, by the look of it."

"Why, who are they?" she asked, with evidently intent interest.

"Now, look 'ere," he said persuasively. "If I was to be ketched, talkin' 'ere with you for hours an' hours like this, Mr. Katzenbaum'd ring up the Labor Exchange. I'll tell you all about 'im an' 'er, if you want, round at the Baker's Arms, but not in 'ere, see?"

He held the door for her, as she passed out and remembered to turn to the left.

SO FAR, she reflected, the intuition which she had let guide her had produced a possible source of information, but she had got little out of it. Phil Vincent, too, might prove of more trouble than use, but fully three-quarters of an hour, at least,



remained before she would see him again, and she determined to try the Baker's Arms.

She found the private bar door on the first corner, and entered to a clatter of voices. A shirt-sleeved, red-nosed man behind the glass-shuttered bar leaned toward her.

"Any sandwiches?" she inquired.

"Course we got sandwiches, ducky. Wadger like?" he asked.

"I'd like a little politeness, being a friend of Phil Vincent," she told him icily. "And if you've got sandwiches—ham."

"Sus-certainly, miss," he said, with a complete change of manner, "I didn't know you was one o' the Gravenor bunch. Anything to drink?"

"A small port, please." Previous experience had taught her it was the least noxious compound she could order in a place of this sort. So she always had it.

She reflected, as she seated herself on a leather-covered bench against the wall opposite the bar, that the Gravenor people demanded, or in any case obtained, respectful service. A flaming-haired damsel moved a half-empty stout glass to make room for her and said, "Pardon, ducks," and Sid—if it were Sid—came from behind the bar with a wet rag with which he scrubbed off the area of long table in front of her.

"Nice evening, ain't it?" said the red-haired girl.

"Quite mild for the time of year," Miss Brandon responded pleasantly.

"We don't have the winters they used to get," the other pursued.

"It ought to be snowing, this time of year," Miss Brandon said.

"Yes, and we don't seem to get no snow, do we?"

Miss Brandon leaned forward and began innocently: "What's this about the caretaker's little boy round at the Gravenor? I've been away, and only just heard about it."

Red-hair was evidently astonished. “Why, it oughter be in all the papers! Little Ernie kidnapped—anyhow, he’s lorst. Four o’clock today. You see, Miss—” She paused, invitingly.

“Oh, just Gracie,” Miss Brandon said recklessly.

“And I’m Eileen. Well, you see—do you know Gravenor Mansion, though?”

“I’ve only been there once, to make an appointment with Phil.”

“Then you don’t know the Parkoots—the caretaker and his wife?”

“I believe Phil did mention some name like that,” Miss Brandon lied gravely. “But I didn’t know they were the caretakers.”

“Oo, yes! They *are!* And little Ernie—well, you wouldn’t believe! That kid ain’t only just over two, but—” She lifted her glass, tilted it, and gurgled once.

“As I was sayin’,” she went on, “little Ernie’s the apple of his mother’s eye. She do look after that kid. But little Ernie’s lorst, an’ the pleece is on it now, an’ Parkoot is ravin’ distracted, runnin’ up an’ down since four o’clock today. You’d think half London was lorst, the way he’s carryin’ on.”

“How did it happen?” Miss Brandon asked, and, taking another bite at her sandwich, realized that she had a long way to go.

“Happen?” Eileen echoed, in high treble. “Why, there wasn’t any happen about it! Mrs. Parkoot left the door on the jar—they’re basement, but the door is top of the steps, leadin’ into the vestibule—where you go in—you know! An’ little Ernie must of got out. Sweet kid, he is. Why, they all make a fuss of him. There’s the Earl of Batwindham in number three. There’s him, and that Slugger Potwin—him which used to be the heavy champ, which has the flat opposite the earl’s—he’d lay down his life for little Ernie, if it wasn’t too expensive. And that Miss Kefra, which they say got so much money she don’t know what to do with it—why, Mrs. Parkoot herself told me in here Miss Kefra took that kid up in her arms an’ kissed him. An’ since four o’clock today little Ernie is lorst, nobody knows where.”

Another bite—the ham was delicious, but the bread was thick—and Miss Brandon put down the wreckage of the sandwich, finally. “But somebody must

know where,” she said, as soon as she could speak.

“That’s just *it!*” Eileen declared, with some excitement. “Phil is on all this afternoon, as I reckon *you* know! Little Ernie must’ve come up into the vestibule with the door on the jar, like it was, an’ Phil must’ve seen the kid—but he didn’t. And you know, being a friend of Phil’s—you know he’d see if as much as a mouse come into that vestibule—couldn’t *help* seeing. And yet he didn’t see Ernie, which has disappeared.”

“Supposing Mrs. Parkoot left a window open?” Miss Brandon suggested.

“My dee-ear!” Eileen’s negative was final. “In a basement well with a twenty-foot wall, an’ no way out! An’ the kid not three yet!”

“It all sounds very mysterious,” Miss Brandon said, and, perforce, moved a few inches nearer her companion. For Phil Vincent, although it was not yet ten o’clock, loomed on her other side, and crowded down into the small available space beside her, grinning widely.

“Darlin’, I knew you was a sport!” he said. And, with no more preface, in sight of all the habitues of the private bar, he thrust out an arm, snatched her close, and kissed her full on the lips, platantly, vigorously—and sickeningly.

She thrust free of his hold, and stood up. Struggling, she got past Eileen, and, unresponsive to Phil’s—“‘Ere, I say!” got clear and made her way out to the street. There, lest Phil should follow, she ran until she reached the security of the square in which Gravenor Mansions radiated respectability, and thrust out a hand at a crawling taxi. Somebody came out of the shadows to halt beside her and take her arm.

“I say!” he said sympathetically.

She turned on him, tigress-wise. “I’ve been kissed!” She exclaimed. “Do you hear?”

He asked, unemotionally, “Do you wish to lay a charge, Miss Brandon. The name, I conjecture, is Philip Vincent.”

“The name! I want to go home—do you hear? Nothing else, but to go home! If I’d known!”

Inspector Tott opened the door of the taxi, which had stopped beside them. Still holding her arm, he helped her in, and then gave the driver her address. Then, before closing the door, he looked in on her.

He said, “Green ought to have known better—tell him so. And he’ll get nothing on the Kefra woman this way. If he wants to know anything about that kidnapping, tell him I’ve got the whole story. Except—there ain’t any, apart from the kid’s disappearance.”

“Oh, tell him to go on!” she begged desperately.

“Righty-ho, miss.” He closed the door on her, and the taxi moved away, leaving him at the pavement edge, a melancholy, unperturbed figure of a man.

## CHAPTER 4

### The Gravenor's Doorman

A SLIGHT shudder marked the end of Miss Brandon's recital. Gees, perched on the end of her desk with a folded newspaper under his arm, eyed her sympathetically, and offered his open cigarette case.

"No, thank you. I don't feel like smoking."

"Philip Vincent, eh?" he reflected. "Well, Philip Vincent is going to get it and get it good. Oh, yes! I'll attend to him myself, shortly. I'm very sorry, Miss Brandon."

"And all of it so absolutely futile!" she exclaimed bitterly.

"I'd say, very far from futile!" he dissented. "Two things stick out, to me. One, that Tony and Cleo Kefra had a peach of a row, from what you tell me of his exit. The other—well, I don't know, quite. But the evening papers may tell."

She gazed up at him, questioningly. "Tell what, Mr. Green?"

"Little Ernie, you say, was missing since four o'clock, with only one available way out from the caretaker's quarters. They'd have their own entrance somewhere round the side or at the back, naturally, and he might have got out that way, but on the scrappy evidence you got it's not likely. Apparently that door 'on the jar' let him into the entrance hall, where this Philip Vincent was on duty."

"And therefore must have seen him, if he had gone that way," she pointed out. "The entrance hall is absolutely bare, and it was quite impossible for the child to appear in it without Vincent seeing him."

"The child is so small that Miss Kefra took him up in her arms and kissed him. Just over two years old, according to your Eileen. Could a toddler like that push one of those metal and glass doors open?"

"No," she said decidedly. "But somebody might have—"

“Let him out, you were going to say,” Gees finished for her. “One of the tenants there? They all know the child, apparently, and the worst sort of moron would not let a two-year-old into the street alone.

“Even then, kidnapping in the street is practically out of the question—small kids aren’t such valuable commodities in these days that people risk picking ‘em up on sight and running off with ‘em. Also, that square in the middle of the afternoon has got taxis on a rank nearly opposite the Gravenor entrance, I happen to know, and there are chauffeurs with cars waiting about—somebody would have seen the child if he had been snatched up in the street, and since the police are on to it they’d have got information about it.”

“You mean—little Ernie is somewhere in the building?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Not now,” he said very gravely, and, unfolding his newspaper, put it down before her. “Take a look at that.”

He put a finger on a staring headline and, after a glance up at him, she read:

#### GHASTLY DISCOVERY ON WIMBLEDON COMMON

Shortly after midnight, P. C. Ambrose Wright discovered a fiber suitcase, half-hidden among some gorse bushes on Wimbledon Common, nearly opposite the pond beside the Kingston Road. On opening the case, he was horrified to discover the nude and terribly mutilated body of a male child, apparently about two years of age. The child’s throat was fearfully lacerated, and this and other injuries made it appear that the tragedy was due to an attack by some large, carnivorous animal of the cat species.

P. C. Wright, at the time of the discovery, was patrolling from Kingston toward the top of Putney Hill. The point at which he found the case is within a dozen yards of the main road, which, even at that late hour, is far from deserted. Three cars, Wright states, passed him, going in the direction of the Kingston by-pass, between the entrance to the cemetery and the top of the hill, a distance of about four hundred yards—more or less. Rime on the grass went to prove that the case had been thrown toward the bushes from the road, since it had fallen into position after the ground-frost had whitened the grass, and there were no footprints, except for those made by the constable himself, in the vicinity. In all probability the case was thrown from a passing car, since, if a pedestrian had been carrying it, he would almost certainly have attracted notice from others

using this road.

A far greater number of people, both children and adults, is missing at any given time than is generally supposed, and, so far, no clue is available as to the identity of this unfortunate infant. The suitcase, a cheap, figer-and-cane article, well worn, bears no labels or distinguishing marks by which it might be traced. There is a possibility that a child belonging to some traveling menagerie might have strayed too near the cages containing savage beasts, and that the parents disposed of the body in this way to avert inquiries and subsequent trouble. Against this is the fact that no menageries are known to have been on the roads in this district for weeks past.

Medical examination will, of course, reveal more fully the way in which the child came by his death, but it already appears certain that no human agency is responsible.

MISS BRANDON looked up. She said, "Very—badly—written," rather shakily, and Gees saw that she had lost color.

"I'd dissent, by the effect it's had on you," he said. "But with this—the ability to connect up these two things before any others make the connection, your trip last night was very far from futile, you see. It enables me to get on to Tony Briggs before *he* can connect up."

"But—but what on earth do you mean?" she asked fearfully.

"I don't know myself." he confessed. "Between the British Museum and my father, and what I already knew—and this Cleo Kefra herself—I'm utterly puzzled. Only—it's all wrong—all wrong!"

Abruptly he snatched up the telephone receiver from its rest on her desk, put it to his ear, and dialled. "Mr. Briggs—Mr. Anthony Briggs, please," he said, when he got his response. Then—"Mr. Green."

After a pause, "Hullo, Tony. Gees speaking. I suppose you're not available for lunch today?" He frowned. "No, I thought you wouldn't be. Too bad. Well, look here. The nearest Lyons to the Parliament end of Whitehall—blow in and look for me in about twenty minutes, and I'll buy the coffee. Right?"

Miss Brandon watched him nod and smile at the response he got.

“Ah! Yes, I see! Leaving you desolate, is she? Well, that accounts for it. Yes. In twenty minutes.”

He replaced the receiver, and again took out his cigarette case Miss Brandon took one this time. He said, “I can walk it in ten minutes, from here,” and lighted one up for her and himself.

“She ought to have been dark,” she said abruptly.

“I believe the mummies go to show they were not all dark,” he dissented. “The early dynasties. Besides—” he broke off, thoughtfully. “Probably in all Egypt today there are not more than half a dozen families—maybe not more than one or two—of the pure-blooded race that was, in the days of the Pharaohs. The present race is mongrel, more Arab than anything else, and she’s got no Arab blood in her, by my reckoning.”

“Mr Green, you’re not thinking of connecting *her* with the murder of that child?” she asked, with sudden fear.

“I tell you I don’t know a thing!” he exclaimed, with equally sudden irritation. “Sorry, Miss Brandon—I didn’t mean to bark. I’ll get along, now, and—do forgive me for landing you with that mess last night, won’t you?”

“Why, of course, Mr. Green! It wasn’t your fault in the least.”

Two minutes later, with his hat in his hand, he paused again in the doorway. “I may have another commission for you, Miss Brandon,” he said. “Tony Briggs tells me *she*’s going away for a few days, and I may want you to keep track of her. I’ll know better after I’ve seen him, though. I’ll be back in an hour or so.”

Tony Briggs was prompt and unruffled. There was just a suggestion of pouter pigeon in his bearing, and his pink-and-white face wore the expression of virtue rewarded.

“Quite a cheery party yesterday, wasn’t it?” he said, patting the tablecloth. “I thought your Miss Brandon was looking remarkably attractive. Have you fallen for her yet?”

“With you an object lesson in falling, I’m keeping on my feet,” Gees said gravely. “And to anticipate your next remark—she is.”



“What?” Tony asked.

“All that, and then some. Did you take her back after lunch?”

“Well, naturally!”

“Took the whole of the afternoon off, huh?”

“I did not! I took her as far as the Gravenor and then came back to work—in the same taxi. You seem to think I never work!”

“Didn’t even go up to her flat with her for a quiet good-by? Tony, don’t strain my credulity too far!”

“Honestly, old man! I saw her to the lift, and left her.”

“I must have independent evidence on that. Get the one-headed Cerberus in that entrance hall to testify to it on oath.”

“Oh, cut it out! Besides, he was nowhere in sight—we had the entrance hall to ourselves.”

“Oho! Let me see... Three o’clock or thereabouts when you left the Berkeley, quarter of an hour to Gravenor Mansions, and call it twenty minutes from there to your office. Bet you a bob, Tony, with that entrance hall to yourselves, you weren’t back before half past four.”

“Hand over,” and Tony stretched out his hand. “I was well settled at my desk when I heard Big Ben chime a quarter past. Fast and honor, Gees. One shilling, please.”

With apparent reluctance Gees took a shilling from his pocket and handed it over. He said, “Even allowing for traffic holdups, that gives you twenty minutes to say good-by in that entrance hall.”

“What the blazes is it to you if it does?” Tony demanded irritably.

“Sorry, Tony—you know I was only clowning. But you said on the phone she’s going away today. Where’s she off to—back to Egypt?”

“If she were,” Tony said decidedly, “I’d find some excuse for going there too. No, she’s got a place she rented, furnished down in Gloucestershire, and I’m seeing her off for Cheltenham after lunch. Staying there till Tuesday week, and I go down for two long weekends and come back with her after the second.”

“Uh-huh! What’s your lady mother say about it?”

“Oh, blast it, Gees, you’ve got a nasty mind! And this isn’t the Victorian age, either. Besides, she’s having Lady Benderneck to stay with her, and other people as well, probably.”

“Cheltenham, eh? Sleepy place. I don’t care for it.”

“BUT she’s not *in* Cheltenham,” Tony said “Her place is miles out—Barnby-under-something Grange, it’s called, but if she didn’t take an express through to Cheltenham she’d be pottering about half the day at wayside stations on a slow train. Her man meets her there with the car—meets me, too, tomorrow evening when I go down. So there you are. Do I step down from the witness box, or do you cross-examine further?”

“M’lud, no further questions.”

Tony smiled. “You haven’t told me what you thought of Cleo.”

“What could I tell you?” Gees countered. “You had only to see the way other people took her entry to realize you had far the most interesting woman—girl—in the place. She’s got a brain like—like a linotype machine, which they say is seven men’s brains, and she dresses as well as you do, which is saying much. I’ve never seen such eyes, and her voice is a revelation in perfection of tone. Anymore?”

“That’s quite enough,” Tony said, rather grimly.

“What’s more important to me is her opinion of me.”

“To be absolutely frank,” Tony told him, “you did not make a good impression. In fact—well—never mind, though.”

Back to Gees’ recollection came Miss Brandon’s account of the way in which Tony had charged through that entrance hall and out from the block of mansions

the night before. He nodded, gravely. "I won't," he said, and drank the last of his coffee.

"I thought you were rather bristly, somehow," Tony said. "Not quite your usual self, when you were talking to her."

Gees said nothing and presently they finished their coffee, paid up and separated.

Gees meandered thoughtfully along Whitehall, came to a full stop and made for a telephone booth, inserted two pennies, and dialed. After a brief delay he got Inspector Tott, who demanded very irritably what he wanted.

"To stand you lunch at the Junior Nomads, Inspector," he answered. "Today, one-fifteen. Can do?"

"Can *not* do, thanking you all the same, *Mister Green*," Tott snapped at him. "I told you when I came to see you that this was not an affair for any official action, and that's that."

"Then why were you hanging around the Gravenor last night?" Gees demanded.

"None of your business."

Gees laughed softly into the transmitter. "Don't hang up for a second, Inspector. You heard about the missing child, of course?"

"Being investigated by that division."

"Has Parkoot—I believe that is the name—has he been to Wimbledon yet to see if he can identify the body found last night?"

"Here! What on earth are you getting at?" Tott demanded sharply.

"One-fifteen, at the Junior Nomads. Change your mind, Inspector," Gees suggested. "I really need official backing for something I want to do in *that* case, not the other."

"All—right, Mr. Green," Tott answered, after a long pause. "But if you *are* thinking of leading me up on some blasted—"

Gees mumbled his entire innocence of subtlety, hung up and emerged from the booth to gaze at a “Lunch Edition” poster, sight of which prompted him to buy a copy. The late news column gave him:

### SUITCASE MYSTERY

The body of a male child found in a suitcase just after midnight on Wimbledon Common has been identified by Mr. Edwin Parkoot, of Gravenor Mansions, as that of his son Ernest, whose disappearance was reported to the police yesterday afternoon. It is understood that figures on the suitcase indicate that it was purchased recently, and inquiries are being pursued with a view to tracing the purchaser.

“Bah!” said Gees to himself. He handed it back to the man from whom he had bought it.

“Finished with it,” he said. “You can have it.”

He walked on toward Charing Cross. “Oh, Lord, be good to them, somehow!” he murmured. “It must be hell to lose a child any way, but that way—be good to them somehow!”

“This is Mr. Green, Crampton.” Tott introduced the quietly dressed man who joined them after lunch. “Inspector Crampton, Mr. Green. And I might tell you, Crampton, that what he’s got to say might be worth hearing, though he’s got no official standing. He was in the Force for two years some while ago, and a damned nuisance he was, too, but he’s got an indirect line on this kidnapping business that neither you nor I has a chance of getting. It’s your case, so I’m handing him over to you, as he asked.”

“Yes, I know your agency,” Crampton said. “And you think you might be able to give us a helping hand over this Parkoot business?”

“Well, thank you very much, Mr. Green, for my good lunch, and I’ll leave you to Crampton,” Tott put in. “See you soon, Crampton.”

“I don’t know that I can give you much, Inspector,” Gees said, “but I may clear up a point or two. Is it possible to have a word with Parkoot, or is he—”

“He’s cold fury,” Crampton said, “and only too anxious to get his hands on

whoever did it, poor chap. *She's* down and out—you can't see her. But you want \_\_\_”

“To find out things,” Gees finished. “Can you come along with me and see Parkoot? He'll be at the Gravenor?”

“We'll go right along,” Crampton promised. “But—” as they went toward the street—“do you mind telling me where you come in? I mean—what's your angle on a case like this?”

“A possible lead to an inquiry of my own,” Gees answered, “and since my inquiry couldn't possibly be a police affair—at least, for the present—I shall have to ask you to leave it at that.”

“What's good enough for Inspector Tott is good enough for me,” Crampton said.

MISS BRANDON'S description was enough to convince Gees that it was Philip Vincent who swung the heavy door for them when they reached the Gravenor; and he noted Vincent's respectful salute to the inspector. He halted just inside the door to watch it slowly close against the pneumatic cushioning cylinder, and then, grasping the handle, swung it open again.

“You see, Inspector,” he said, “that child couldn't have opened it. It's a sixty-pound pull, at least.”

“They're kept open in the warm weather, sir,” Vincent put in.

“Was any door left open yesterday afternoon?” Gees asked him.

He shook his head. “No, sir,” he answered with finality. “Never, in the winter months. Them cylinders have to be taken off, for that.”

“And they're all on.” Gees gave the man a steady, appraising look, and then turned to the inspector again. “Let's go. Best to get it over with.”

But when Parkoot, a middle-aged, heavily-built and tall man, faced them in the doorway, Gees saw that he had no uncontrolled victim of a tragedy to face. The man was grimly impassive.

“This is Mr. Green, Parkoot,” Crampton told him. “He thinks he may be able to

help in—well, our investigation.”

“If that’s so, Mr. Green,” Parkoot said slowly, “God will bless you. I know you can’t give him back to us, but—Pleased to meet you, sir.”

Gees shook his hand heartily, and felt respect for the man’s courage. “A few questions, if you don’t mind,” he said.

Parkoot came out into the basement corridor, and closed the door softly behind him. “The missus is asleep,” he explained.

The cigarette case appeared as Gees leaned against the polished marble wall. Gees lighted up. “As good here as anywhere,” he said. “A first question, Mr. Parkoot. That entrance hall is in charge of an attendant. Is he supposed to leave it?”

“No, sir.”

“Meal times?” Gees asked laconically.

“Relief,” Parkoot answered.

“Then that’s that. What sort of man is Vincent?”

“Oh, quite reliable, sir, if that’s what you mean. He was on yesterday afternoon, when—when it happened, and what I can’t make out is *how* it happened that Ernie got out, because the missus was lying down, and our own door at the side was locked. And the door at the top of the stairs was on the jar, but Vincent’ll take his dyin’ oath the kid never went that way. So—well!”

“Not well,” and Gees shook his head, while Crampton maintained an interested silence. “Not much doing up there in mid-afternoon, as a rule, is there, Parkoot?” he asked casually.

“I’d say it’s a dull job, but—” He broke off, gloomily.

“How many flats are there in the block?”

“Twenty-two, sir. But if you think—” Again he broke off.

“We’ve got to prove, not think,” Gees told him, and Crampton nodded. “Service here, or do the tenants keep their own servants?”

“Either way, sir. There’s accommodations for one servant in each flat—two at a pinch—and our own restaurant and staff.”

“I see. Tell me this, then. Why was Vincent absent from that hall for at least twenty minutes, between three-thirty and four yesterday afternoon?”

“That’s impossible, sir,” Parkoot said firmly. “He wasn’t—and he knows it’d cost him his job, too. No, he wasn’t.”

“Very well, he wasn’t. How many of the tenants have their own attendants—living in the flats, I mean?”

“Very few, sir. The trouble of getting servants makes most of ‘em rely on our staff for everything. There’s—let me see. Lord Batheum—they say that’s how you ought to pronounce his name—he’s got a maid: that boxer chap, Potwin, keeps an old army man to look after him, and Miss Kefra in number thirteen’s got a foreigner, sort of chauffeur and houseman and everything else—but they’re away. So is Lord Batheum, as far as that goes, though his maid is still here.”

“And the rest depend on your staff, eh? Do the staff have rooms here, or live out? I’ve a reason for asking.”

“The chef and his two kitchen lads live in—not the others,” Parkoot answered. “Though I don’t see how they—”

“Come into it—no. But now I want to take a long chance—a very long chance—and I wish you two’d come with me while I take it. Up to Lord Batheum’s flat, if you will.”

“I *get* it,” Crampton said quietly. “Yes—let’s go.”

The caretaker led them along the corridor to the foot of the stairway and pressed a button beside a door. A lift descended almost inaudibly, and stopped. He opened the door, ushered the two in, and followed them. The lift went up, stopped, and they emerged to a carpeted corridor.

“That’s his door, sir.” Parkoot pointed as he spoke, and Gees advanced and

pressed a bell beside the door.

He pressed again after a long interval, and the door swung open to reveal a tall, pert-looking, rather attractive girl in a black silk uniform.

“His lordship is notatome,” she said, sharply, before Gees spoke.

“So I understand.” He slipped his foot into the door-opening. “You are, I see, just as you were yesterday afternoon. But quite on your own, I take it, today. Are you all alone?”

“Mr. Parkoot, are you going to stand there and see him insult me?” she demanded shrilly. “Let me shut this door, you! I—” Then he caught sight of Inspector Crampton, and stopped, open-mouthed.

“How long was Vincent in here with you yesterday?” Gees drawled.

“Oo-h! You liar!” she cried, and, reddening, gulped.

“Was it one hour, or two?”

“It wasn’t half an hour—” she began—and stopped.

“That’s enough, Sir,” Parkoot said, and turned toward the lift. Inspector Crampton said, “Here!” and went to follow him, but he slid the door closed and went down alone. Gees and the inspector made for the stairs and raced down: but they knew the lift would beat them.

They came to the main floor just in time to see Parkoot swing Vincent about. From a half crouch he landed one tremendous blow with his right on the point of the jaw, with plenty of weight to back it. Lifted off his feet, Vincent crashed to the marble floor, and Parkoot stood over him. The other two came beside the caretaker, and all three stood waiting until Vincent opened his eyes.

“Get up!” Parkoot’s admonition was an almost animal growl. “Get up! Strip that uniform off, and get out, before I kill you!”

“Again they waited. Presently Vincent managed to get on his feet, and staggered uncertainly toward the basement stairs and down them.



“Will he come out this way, Parkoot?” Gees asked.

“No, sir. By the side door—it’s spring-latched.” He held up his hand to look at his skinned knuckles, and even smiled.

“I’d like you to come along with me, Inspector, if you will,” Gees said. “I haven’t finished with Vincent, yet.”

## CHAPTER 5

### Angry Lady

“YOU said you were taking a long chance,” Inspector Crampton remarked as he followed Gees down to the basement. “You did, too, with that girl. A longer one than I’d care to take.”

“And yet it wasn’t so very long,” Gees told him. “She squealed before she was hurt, gave herself away hopelessly before I accused her of anything. Besides, it was acting on information received—from two entirely independent sources.”

“That’s his locker room, sir.” Parkoot pointed at a door along the corridor. “D’you want me to stay?”

“I think not, Parkoot.” Crampton answered, and smiled slightly. “You might kill him, if we didn’t hold you back.”

“Then I’ll go along and ring up the agency to send a man in at once to replace him,” Parkoot said, and entered his own quarters, closing his door gently. Crampton pointed at a half-glazed door at the end of the corridor.

“That’s the only other way the kid could have got out,” he said. “Been taken out, rather, for you can see he couldn’t have opened that door himself—couldn’t have reached up to that Yale knob to turn the latch.”

“How did the child get into this corridor?” Gees asked.

“Mrs. Parkoot left her door open so he could play about in it—he couldn’t come to any harm,” Crampton explained, and somehow that door at the top of the stairs, leading to the entrance hall, happened to be left ajar. But how he got out of that hall—”

Gees almost said, “He didn’t,” but thought better of it. They waited, and finally Vincent, sullen and tight-lipped, appeared in street clothes.

“We want a word or two with you, Vincent,” Crampton said.

“Oh, do you? Well, for a start, I want you to arrest Parkoot for assault. And I’m goin’ to get damages out of him, too.”

“Quite a good idea,” Gees cooed softly. “Oh, quite a good idea! And don’t forget to call that girl in his lordship’s flat as evidence.”

“So she spilt, did she, the—”

“Stow it!” Gees barked. “What time was it when you left the hall to go up to that flat yesterday afternoon?”

“Whatever *she* told you,” Vincent mumbled, “I was in the hall till over a quarter past three, and I was down again by four o’clock.”

“Contradicting each other already, you see,” Gees observed.

“I don’t care *what* she told you!” Vincent almost shouted. “I’ll take oath on it—I wasn’t away more’n forty minutes at the outside.”

“Three fifteen to four o’clock, call it,” Crampton commented. “The period in which the child disappeared.”

“Nobody asked *me* to keep an eye on the kid,” Vincent said sullenly.

“Many people in and out during the afternoon, as a rule?” Gees asked him.

“Hardly anyone, between three and five,” he answered.

“Did you stay in the entrance hall all the rest of the time yesterday?”

“Yes, I did, except when I give Miss Kefra’s man a hand with her trunks, because he was takin’ ‘em down to her car, so’s to be there to meet her today. An’ goin’ outside to get taxis for people. Her, for one, when she went out to dinner.”

“Did you leave the hall to help with the trunks before or after getting a taxi for Miss Kefra?”

“Before—no, it was after, a good quarter an hour after. Why—what’s that got to do with it? The kid wasn’t in the trunks—the police was lookin’ for ‘im, by that

time. After eight, it was.”

“Now what gave you the idea of connecting the child with the trunks, I wonder?” Gees mused.

“I didn’t do nuthin’ o’ the sort!” Vincent protested indignantly. “I said he *wasn’t* in the trunks, that’s all. I seen Miss Kefra pick that kid up an’ kiss him, one day when the door was left on the jar before an’ he happened to stray up into the hall when she was comin’ down in the lift, an’ that old dofferer of a man of hers couldn’t swat a fly if he tried. An’ the kid was snatched away out of here.”

“Yes, snatched away out of here,” Gees mused aloud again. “I expect you’ll see the suitcase at the inquest, and be able to tell if it went out of here yesterday while you *were* in the hall.”

“No suitcase of *any* sort went out!” Vincent protested. “An’ that kid was snatched out alive, not took out dead in a case. Kidnappers, that’s what it was.”

They left the man to himself and ascended to the empty entrance hall. There Gees paused.

“Do you happen to have any list of the people here?” he asked.

Crampton felt in his breast pocket and brought out a small, folded, white sheet.

In silence Gees looked down the list. Beside *No. 13* he saw the names of *Miss Cleo Kefra* and *Saleh ibn Nahor, personal attendant*. He refolded the paper and handed it back.

“Thank you,” he said. “No, it couldn’t be anyone here.”

“Well, I’m much obliged to you, Mr. Green,” Crampton said. “Now do you wish to make any more inquiries?”

Gees shook his head. “Not now, thanks,” he answered. “If—\_if\_ the business that’s interesting me just now should happen to cross any of your line, I know where to get in touch with you.”

As he went on his way, he murmured to himself: “Saleh ibn Nahor—” Then he took out an envelope and pencil, and wrote the name down. Then he hailed a taxi

to take him to Little Oakfield Street for tea with Miss Brandon.

BUT tea with Miss Brandon was not the peaceful function Gees anticipated. He had just seated himself on the corner of her desk when the doorbell began a peal that suggested a desire to run the battery down. Gees got on his feet.

“I’ll go, Miss Brandon.” He went to the door and opened it. “Easy, man,” Gees admonished, ignoring the ominous expression on Tony Briggs’ face.

“I want to know,” Tony began coldly, “why you—”

“Not here,” Gees interrupted. “Come inside.”

In angry silence Tony followed him to his room. He pointed to the deep-seated, leather-upholstered chair.

“I don’t want to sit down,” Tony said stubbornly.

“I do,” Gees observed, and did. “Now, go ahead.”

“I want to know what you—” Tony paused to correct himself, and went on with meticulous care—“what was the idea of Miss Brandon, in obvious disguise, masquerading in the entrance hall of Gravenor Mansions last night. Spying there, in fact. By your orders?”

“Oh, the Parkoot business,” Gees said. “That missing kid. Yes. Wait a second—I’ll get Miss Brandon herself along to explain.” He pressed the buzzer on his desk, and offered his cigarette case.

“No! Not now!” said Tony savagely.

Gees took one for himself. “Oh, Miss Brandon,” he said as she entered, “You’ve met Briggs. He wants to know what you mean by being at Gravenor Mansions last night. I’m just back from my talk with Crampton, and you’d better tell him how we’re interested in this case of the missing child—and the finding of the body out at Wimbledon, and all the rest of it.” He gave her a long look.

“I went to Gravenor Mansions last night, Mr. Briggs,” Miss Brandon said coolly, “and obtained some information about the missing child—long before it was connected with the Wimbledon tragedy—which Mr. Green was good enough to

say was very useful. Is that all, Mr. Green?"

Gees got on his feet. "You see, Tony? There's no connection between Miss Brandon's visit to the Gravenor and you or anyone you know there. Now what's the trouble?"

"I—well—Miss Kefra recognized Miss Brandon, obviously disguised, last night —" Tony broke off.

"And chalked another dark stroke against my already unattractive name," Gees finished for him. "You ought to realize, Tony, that my agency goes in for all sorts of investigations. So there you are, Tony, blaming me for a sheer coincidence. Why?"

"Miss Kefra thought—" Tony began, and stopped.

"Supposing *I* started thinking?" Gees exclaimed with angry energy. "Supposing I alleged that one of Miss Kefra's trunks, taken out of her flat last night by her man, had inside it the suitcase which held the body of that child—No, shut up, Tony! I've got just as much right to allege an absurdity like that as you have to come here and accuse me of setting Miss Brandon on to spy on Miss Kefra. Now you can either apologize and stay for a cup of tea, or get out."

"I apologize humbly to you both," Tony said. "But I mustn't stay now."

"Look here, Tony, what time do you go to her country place tomorrow?"

"By the same train she took today," Tony said. "Cleo's meeting me at Cheltenham with her car, and Lady Benderneck is traveling down with me."

"Well, then—when do you start back? Monday?"

Tony nodded.

"Well, look here. I shall be down Shropshire way myself on Sunday. Suppose I pick you up at ten Monday morning? Then I could have a word with Miss Kefra and wipe this blot off my scutcheon."

"Ye-es," Tony assented, very dubiously.

“Fine!” Gees exclaimed. “Now what’s the address?”

“It’s the Grange, Barnby-under-Hedlington. I’ve never been there, so I can’t tell you anything about the road—”

“Leave it to me,” Gees interposed, “and count on seeing me somewhere round ten on Monday morning.”

“I really must go now, Gees,” Tony said, glancing at his wristwatch. “Awfully sorry about this misunderstanding—”

“I’ll clear it all up before I fetch you away on Monday morning,” Gees interrupted, accompanying him out into the corridor.

“But if you’re looking into this affair of the missing child—” Tony half-questioned, pausing in his stride.

“Oh, my part in that is finished, now—I’ve handed it over to Inspector Crampton.”

He went into Miss Brandon’s room after closing the door on Tony. She said: “So I was futile, after all.”

“On the other hand, Miss Brandon, this bee in the lady’s bonnet—the one that fetched Tony here with murder in his eyes as soon as he had said good-by to her—it clinches things. People don’t imagine they’re being shadowed like that unless there’s some reason for shadowing them.”

“You suspect—what?” she asked. “Not that she had anything to do with the disappearance of that child, surely?”

“An open mind,” he answered, “is as useful as a pocket corkscrew.” He held one up as he spoke. “I might be able to tell you more when I get back next Tuesday.”

“But I thought it was to be Monday.”

“You’d be surprised. Meanwhile, Miss Brandon, Vincent took the count in the Gravenor entrance hall today, and is now one of the unemployed, thanks to me.”

She put the teapot down on the tray and stared at him, silently.

“Well—that’s something,” she said nervously. “But—but I wish you’d tell me—about Miss Kefra—”

“I assure you there’s absolutely nothing to tell—yet,” he said. He smiled at her, but she found no smile of her own with which to answer.



## CHAPTER 6

### The Cats of Sekhmet

SLENDERER, even, than she normally appeared, and to Tony Briggs bewilderingly alluring, Cleo Kefra let him hold her close for almost a minute, and then drew away.

“Your friend will be here at any moment,” she said. “Have you had breakfast—” she glanced at the table—“or did you wait for me?”

“Of course I waited, darling,” he told her. “As if—but there’s a wire from him. I shall have to ask you to turn the car out to take me to Cheltenham, after all. He’s broken down. He may get here this afternoon. There’s the wire.”

Glancing at the top of the message, she saw it had been handed in at Ludlow at 8:38 A. M., and put it down to turn to Tony.

“I will order the car for you, dear,” she said, and, advancing one slippered, tiny foot, set it on a bellpush in front of her. After that, she seated herself, and gestured him to the place opposite her.

“So—I must tell him you have gone,” she said. “Or leave word for him, perhaps. Darling, get me one kidney, and no bacon.”

Going to the sideboard, he uncovered the dish, and hesitated.

“They look badly underdone, to me, Cleo,” he said dubiously.

“But they are not, really,” she said. “One, please.”

Carefully, even distastefully, he transferred two halves of kidney from the dish to a warmed plate, which he put down before her. The service gave him opportunity to lean down and kiss her.

“You’re so lovely, Cleo! I hoped you’d have been down sooner, since it’s my last morning here.”

She laughed. “Until Friday—five days! Darling, this is very early for me. I come alive at night, not with the morning.”

A wizened, wrinkled, five-foot-nothing, white-haired, clean-shaven man, with startlingly youthful blue eyes entered noiselessly. He said: “You rang, madam?”

“Quite five minutes ago, Saleh,” Cleo Kefra answered. “You will be ready with the car to take Mr. Briggs to Cheltenham in half an hour. That is all.”

“Thank you, madam,” and he closed the door, leaving them alone again. Whereupon Tony bent down for another kiss, but her hand restrained him. She said, “No, darling. Else, you would go back starved.”

“I do,” he said significantly. But—

He went to the sideboard, and chose a slice of cold ham and a poached *egg*. She poured his tea, and coffee for herself. The halves of kidney showed crimson and dripped redly as she cut them, but the coffee urn and spirit kettle masked her eating from Tony’s sight. He caught her glance at him, and sighed.

“Five days, darling,” he said. “Why must you come here?”

“But such days!” she told him, and laughed.

“Cleo, how soon will you marry me?” he asked abruptly, leaning toward her across the table.”

She laughed softly. “Is it not yet a week since we became engaged.”

“I know, but—how soon, darling?”

She shook her head. “I cannot tell you yet.”

“Is there—you have only yourself to consider?” he asked, anxiously.

“Only myself,” she answered slowly. “I am quite alone.”

“Then why—?” he began, and broke off.

“Not yet—I cannot tell you yet,” she repeated, and rose to come and stand beside him. “Do not insist, Tony—let it wait for a time. We can be together, as now.”

“I want all of you, Cleo,” he said rather indistinctly.

“So?” She spoke the monosyllable softly, thoughtfully. One less blind than was he might have said that she was quite unimpressed. But he lifted the hand she had laid on his shoulder, and put it to his lips.

“Your friend—when will he arrive?”

“My—Oh, you mean Gees! I’ve no idea, darling. Too late to get me to London in time, or he wouldn’t have sent that wire. He says four o’clock, but since he’s had some sort of breakdown it may be later.”

“Does a Rolls-Bentley break down?” she asked thoughtfully.

“He may have hit something. But—Did he tell you he drives a Rolls-Bentley, darling?” he inquired, gazing at her with surprise.

She nodded. “When we lunched with him,” she said.

“I don’t remember—” He was frowning in an effort at recalling any mention of Gees’ car when Cleo drew her hand away and stood back from him as the door opened to admit a tall, elderly woman. Tony rose to his feet. “Good morning, Lady Benderneck,” he said.

“Morning, Tony. Cleo, my dear, I must go back to town. I’m very sorry—a case of illness in the family. Can you arrange for me to be driven to the station?”

“If you must go, Sarah,” Cleo said, “Tony is being driven to Cheltenham in half an hour or a little less. Perhaps you could go with him—or would that be too soon?”

“It would suit me admirably—the sooner I can get back, the better. I’m so sorry to leave you here alone, darling.”

“Why not come back with us?” Tony asked, rather eagerly. “Being alone in a place like this in the middle of winter is not too good.”

Cleo shook her head. “I shall stay,” she said. “You can come down again for next weekend, Sarah?”

“I hope so,” Lady Benderneck said dubiously. “I will let you know, dear, as soon as I know myself. But must you stay here?”

“I shall not go back with you,” Cleo answered, a trifle coldly.

When they were alone, Tony gazed out from the window at the stretch of moat, which extended all around the old house. Its surface was blackly sullen in the light of the clouded morning.

“You can’t stay alone in a place like this, Cleo,” he said.

“I have to, Tony,” she said, and shivered. “When you come back Friday, I may be able to answer the question you ask so persistently.”

“You mean it, Cleo?” He faced about and took her in his arms.

“I may. I am not sure.”

“Darling, I love you so terribly!”

“Is it terrible, my Tony? Now let me go—I must dress to see you off. Five minutes—ten minutes at most, and I shall be with you again.”

A HALF hour later, with baggage loaded on the car, Tony sat in beside Lady Benderneck and heard her sigh of relief as Sahel, wizened and brown and competent, drove over the bridge that spanned the moat.

“Why she chose such a place I cannot think,” Lady Benderneck remarked rather acidly. “Such an eerie, ghostly place. And those cats!”

“Cats?” he asked, surprised. “I didn’t see any cats.”

“Two—more like small tigers than cats, except that they were not striped. Big, tawny things—I heard a noise outside my room last night, and looked out—they were in the corridor. I shut the door at once. The one that I saw clearly had china-blue eyes, like a Siamese, but they were too large for Siamese. Much too large!”

“I must ask Cleo about them,” he said. “I never saw any cats.” Leaning forward, he slid open the glass partition separating them from the driver. “Saleh, her

ladyship tells me she saw two big cats outside her room last night. Are they yours?"

Momentarily, the car swayed, as if for an instant the man had let the steering wheel swing in his hands. Then it steadied.

"There are no cats, sir," he said.

"But I saw them, outside my room!" Lady Benderneck insisted.

"Then they must have been prowling in the night and got in, your ladyship," he answered her, without looking around, "for Miss Kefra has no cats at the Grange, nor have I, nor the maids."

"It's very mysterious," Lady Benderneck said with emphatic disapproval. "I saw two—large, dangerous-looking cats, in the middle of the night. It's *most* mysterious."

"I wish Cleo hadn't insisted on staying on there alone," Tony said.

... The still, dull winter's day was near its end when Gees got his first view of the boxlike, Georgian outline of the Grange, and saw, too, three sides of the oblong moat which surrounded house and grounds—an area of nearly two acres.

The place looked neglected; the parapets of the gray stone bridge over which he must drive to come at the house needed repair; shrubs and trees looked unkempt; and last year's grass lay lank and dead on the borders of flower beds and round the edges of the lawn.

The house was set on a massive substructure of darker, more aged-looking stone than its upper part, indicating that an eighteenth-century builder had set his edifice on the foundations of an earlier structure.

He entered the portico and pressed an incongruous bellpush—its bright newness emphasized the need of paint on its surroundings. The opening door revealed Cleo Kefra herself.

"Ah! Mr. Green," she said coolly. "All but one of my servants have fled today, and that one has gone, to Hedlington for provisions. So I welcome you myself. Will you come in?"

“Thank you,” he answered, with equal lack of warmth, and stepped inside.

He followed her into a high-ceilinged drawing room crowded with ugly Victorian furniture.

“I expected you about this time,” Cleo remarked. “Won’t you take your coat off? This room is rather warm.”

He took off his coat and turned to put it on the bench behind him.

As Cleo Kefra looked up at him, he noted that the pupils of her eyes were dilated in the dim light of the room, rendering them dark and softly lustrous.

“This must be very inconvenient for you, Miss Kefra,” he said. “No servants, I mean.”

“It will not be inconvenient, since my guests left this morning,” she said. “Saleh—he is the man who attends to me in the flat when I am in London—can attend to all my own needs. But draw up a chair.”

“But why are you left like this, servantless?” he inquired. “Isn’t it sudden?”

“Some nonsense about ghostly cats, as nearly as I can gather,” she answered. “Or *real* cats, trespassing from some nearby farm. I expect—” she smiled slightly —“the village is buzzing with excitement over them, by this time. My three maids all marched away before lunch, and a boy arrived with a hand-cart an hour later to take their belongings. But why—why do you nod your head like that, Mr. Green?”

“Just—” he paused to think hard for a reply—“your excellent English. Not a trace of accent in it.”

“Why should there be? I have known it... it is my language.”

The pause was significant, he felt. She had intended a different end to the sentence. “And Tony couldn’t wait for me?” he remarked, stirring his tea.

“He went by train—Saleh drove him to Cheltenham,” she said. “And he has already explained what he said you wished to see me about—Miss Brandon, I mean, and that you were interested in the child’s disappearance. I am sorry I

misconstrued her presence at the Gravenor.”

“I am still interested in that child’s disappearance,” he said slowly, and saw her eyes darken still more.

“I understood it had been found,” she said half-questioningly.

“The body—not the living child,” he answered her. “Terribly mauled and clawed as if by—” he drank the last of his tea, and put the cup back on the tray—“cats,” he ended, looking full at her.

“How very strange!” she remarked, with incisive irony.

“And they must pay—all nine lives,” he stated with finality.

OUTSIDE the room the light had so far failed that leafless trees had grown shadowy beyond the uncurtained window. Here, they sat in a dimness mitigated only by the firelight, and Cleo’s face was all in shadow, since it was turned toward him and away from the fire. But her eyes glowed at him, dark fires in themselves.

“I do not understand,” she said.

“Sekhmet herself shall not save them,” he said again, somberly.

“Still I do not understand,” she repeated in a very low and beautiful tone.

“Eight-and-thirty years ago, it was a woman’s throat that was torn and clawed,” he went on deliberately. “Now it is a child’s.”

“Ah-h!” She breathed rather than uttered the exclamation.

She threw her cigarette end in among the coals of the fire, and then they sat for a long time in silence, each watchful and waiting on the other.

“You are strong, I know,” she said at last, “but the stream will bear you away, while I stand on the bank and watch its flowing.”

“I shall win, though. Not because I am strong, but because any deviation from the norm has its price, and in the end that price is exacted to the uttermost.”

“You threaten?” she asked, with a challenging note in the question.

“Say that I warn,” he answered quietly, gravely. “You must pay.”

“You know that, if I willed it, you would not leave this house?” she asked, after another lengthy silence.

“Then we should both be dead,” he retorted grimly.

“No—Oh, no! Look out through the window, toward the bridge.”

He stood up to look. Light enough remained outside to reveal to his gaze the shapes of two great cats, tawny things that sat on their haunches, faced toward the house, just clear of the bridge parapets.

Then he blinked, for the two shapes dissolved to nothingness as he gazed at them, and he knew the effort of maintaining the vision she had imposed on his retinae had been too much for her. The knowledge gave him intense satisfaction as he seated himself again.

“We are quite alone in this house,” she said. “You can prove nothing to others, no matter what you see or hear, alone here with me.”

“Admitted, but I have proof for myself, now,” he told her.

She laughed softly. “You needed none,” she said, “as I knew the moment I first saw you. We are very old, you and I.”

“Even if this be my ninth life, I know only one,” he dissented.

“Nine lives, the ninth life—you harp on it!” she exclaimed with evident anger.

“I too know only one. But we are very old.”

“Leaving me out of it, I’d be interested to know exactly how you reach that conclusion,” he said. “Especially since—well, as I see it, you are not likely to get much older.”

“I should be very much interested to know how you reach that conclusion,” she retorted with satiric amusement.



“You want that put plainly?” he demanded.

“We are quite alone here,” she said. “You may say what you will.”

“Plainly, then, the last night you spent in London, the body of a child—identified later by the caretaker at Gravenor Mansions as that of his son—was found on Wimbledon Common after midnight, mauled and clawed as if those two vanishing cats of yours had got at it.”

“And I tell you—” she spoke with an earnest sincerity that he could not doubt —“I know nothing of the death of that child.”

He sat puzzled, silenced for the time. He had been so sure, but truth sounded in her words: there is an intonation that compels belief, and it was hers then.

Sue turned her head a little, and the glow in the grate reflected from her eyes, rendering them as depths of visible, velvet darkness.

“Nothing,” he echoed. It was an affirmation, not a question. “Yet I wonder—you know old magic. That trick of the cats was on a level with the rod that turned into a serpent—”

“That?” she broke in contemptuously. “I could fill this room so full of serpents that the hissing would drown your words. It is no more than a child, if instructed, could summon out by his will.”

“And you, with powers like those, aim to marry Tony Briggs!”

“Had I known that you were his friend, I would have chosen elsewhere,” she retorted, with a trace of bitterness. “The friendship must end.”

“Or the engagement,” he answered harshly. “Since you speak of it like that, why marry him? Obviously not for love.”

“No,” she said, after a long, long silence, “but because you were right in one thing you said. I have begun the ninth life.”

“I begin to understand,” he remarked, after another interminable interval. “Eight and thirty years ago, you began the eighth. That would make you—eight times thirty-eight, now—”

“Not so,” she interposed. “I was sure the moment we met that you knew much. But not all. How could you, not being initiate?”

“The night has hardly begun,” he observed coolly, “and I never intended to reach London till tomorrow. Let me crave another hour, say, of your hospitality, and ask why it is—not so.”

“Why should I tell you?” she demanded.

“Because you are afraid of me,” he answered, and made of the sentence a statement of inescapable fact.

## CHAPTER 7

### Firelight for Fools

AGAIN they sat in silence. The red mass of coals in the fire basket fell and shrank with a rustling sound: so long was it since fresh coal had been put on that now there remained only smokeless, flameless embers. The glow in the room was fading.

“It is true,” Cleo Kefra said. “Because you are of those who see beyond words to the thoughts they conceal. And of those who know.”

“As are you.” He rose. He lifted a big hod from the tiling of the fireplace and emptied its contents into the iron basket. For a few seconds the fire appeared almost blacked out, and then tiny flames thrust up into the new fuel. He went to the window, drew the curtains over it, and returned. “Presently,” he said, “that fire will light the room again. Do you wish for other light, though?”

If I did, I could summon Saleh,” she answered.

“So you are not alone here now?” he suggested.

“I heard the car when you drew the curtains,” she explained, but he will not come near this room unless I summon him. Do you wish to go?”

“No. I wish to know,” he said bluntly.

A little flame shafted up above the mass of coals, stood for seconds like a sword blade, lighting her grave face and almost black eyes in each of which only a faint circle of iris remained, and abruptly vanished. Seen thus, she was witchlike, uncanny, but very lovely too.

“Why should you not be told?” The query was little more than a whisper. “For I am a woman of today, and if you told this tale of my yesterdays it would be no more than the babbling of a fool, an unbelievable fantasy that I need not even deny. For today believes only what it can see and explain by measure and rule, and the things of the spirit are no more.”

He waited, in silence. She broke out with sudden intensity: “*Why* do you wish to know. What is it to you, after what you accused?”

He shrugged.

“You have answered the accusation,” he said, “so I withdraw it. But there was a—an admission. Briggs is madly in love with you—anyone could see it, and you are not in love with him. Which means disaster for him.”

“Does it?” she questioned with angry irony. “Have I not—?”

She broke off with odd abruptness. Again a flame broke through the coals, and, this time, lived and flickered, casting on the walls of the room shadows that danced as if the inanimate things that outlined them moved and had life.

“And *still* you don’t deny it!” he said. “You were going to ask whether you had not proved the contrary to my suggestion, in some one of your lives.”

“So!” she said, as she took a cigarette. “You too are very old.”

“But I want to know why—all of it. There is an explanation somewhere, and I want it. That’s my hand, every card of it face upward. So what?”

She said: “I question—may you leave this place alive?”

“As to that, I’m absolutely indifferent,” he drawled in reply. “If I don’t, you won’t get much older. I telephoned a telegram to Tony Briggs here this morning, and they’d drag the moat for the bones your cats can’t crack. But aren’t we rather talking in circles?”

She laughed softly. “I like you—Oh, I like you, you Gees! Tony speaks of you by that name. Take care that I do not will you to desire me as I willed him. For then—” She did not end it.

“Ah!” he breathed. “We appear to be getting somewhere, now. And that magic must be very old. As old as—well, as old as your cats, say.”

“That a man should desire me?” she asked derisively.

“That a man should not,” he contradicted. “You, being what you are, have roused

intense dislike in three men, to my knowledge, and Tony Briggs, whom you own you willed to desire you, is—well, nothing but desire of you, by all that I’ve seen. Yes, very old magic.”

“How old?” she asked again, with not less irony.

“That is for you to tell me—the—what was it? Yes, the unbelievable fantasy that you need not even deny, and at the same time an explanation which will finally extinguish my accusation—or not.”

“I answered you,” she said coldly.

“Again we talk in circles,” he complained. “A very ugly and terrible fact remains unexplained. Full explanation of yourself may lead me to the solution of my problem, just as you and Tony bidding each other a tender farewell in the entrance hall of the Gravenor solved another problem—by proving that the man who should have been on duty wasn’t. This is not an accusation, but a request.”

“From one of the three men who dislike me,” she pointed out.

“I did, but I don’t now,” he said bluntly. “I have even—well, call it a kindness for you.”

“I do not understand that,” she declared slowly.

“Because—I realize—” he spoke still more slowly—“that you once saved my father’s life. Thirty-eight years ago.”

Flames leaped and danced over the fire basket and he could see all the sinuous grace of her as she sat leaned toward him—could see how her night-dark eyes softened as the meaning of his words struck on her sense. She said: “So he told you! I am glad I saved him.”

She leaned back and, whether by her will or by the intensity of the firelight, her eyes so changed that he saw them as amber jewels, a difference that transformed her from tender, dawning womanhood to complete maturity. He told himself then that she must not marry Tony Briggs. If only Tony could see her like this—

“What makes you suddenly old?” he asked bluntly, even rudely.

“Sight,” she answered, without resentment. “I have stood beside and out of time for so long that I will not even call it memory. Sight that you by your questioning put before my eyes.”

Again he took out his cigarette case and offered it.

SHE said, abruptly: “There is too much light,” and stretched out her right hand toward the fire. Instantly the leaping flames died down until they were no larger than the flames of thin candles; over the kindling coals.

“More magic. Creating an atmosphere, say, to fit the story.”

He sat in a stillness such as he had never known, a remoteness from ordinary being in which time might have ceased to exist—it was as if he were bodiless in the void of space between the universes.

When she spoke again her voice came to him in a thin, faint sound, like that of one who spoke from a measureless distance: yet every word was clear, because the silence into which it fell was infinite. She said, “Wait! I seek myself in the pattern woven of all that has been or shall be in all the world, and I am but one little thread in the fabric we call life. Do you hear my voice?”

He answered: “I hear.”

“We are very old, you, and I,” he heard, and each word as it reached his consciousness was clear and sweet and hushed, like a note from a shaken sistrum—but, as the analogy came to his mind, he knew he had never heard a shaken sistrum.

Verily she had created an atmosphere, and in some occult way thrust her knowledge of things past into his own mind.

Again the tiny, bell-like notes impinged on his brain, and he was aware that the distance across which he heard them was that of time, not of space. She had moved along time to speak from the far past into this present, to look again on what she told...

I WAS a child (she began) a small girl-child, when my father took me to the temple that was then close by Abydos, dedicating me as a priestess there. My father, a merchant in whose sight I was nothing, gave me to the priests, bidding

me serve the goddess, and I saw him no more. This was in the first year of the reign of Menkau-Ra the wise.

(Gees stirred himself to interpolate—“Builder of the third pyramid,” and saw or imagined that as he spoke the fire came momentarily to life. But then again it appeared still, and her small voice spoke on.)

... Not a stone of that pyramid was hewn from the quarries when I began my service and learned many things. So many, that I ceased to long for the world, the play and laughter of small lives, the embraces of a man, and even the bearing of children. I was apt to my tasks, and soon was set high in the service of the goddess, initiate to the mysteries about her. She with the form of a woman and the head of a lioness—Sekhmet.

So I became a woman, instructed and initiate, and priests desired my beauty, but I laid hold on the goddess through my knowledge, and no one of them prevailed to win me to thought of him. No, not one.

Ten years I served the goddess, and Menkau-Ra the wise came from holding a court in the upper land, came to the temple and set eyes of desire on me, Kefra, priestess and dedicate, yet subject to the will of him, the divine Menkau-Ra.

The high priest of Sekhmet bade me put on attire fitting for the chosen of our lord, and await his messengers. But I knew that the desire of Menkau-Ra was but for an hour, or until some other beauty should appear to his sight.

I went into the temple at the close of a day and called on the goddess I served, as only those in dire need may call.

In a great darkness she came to me, and I laid hold on the ears of the altar, and a voice breathed words into my heart, still, small words, deeply graven, to endure always while I endure, unforgotten as true.

There was a great darkness, and a voice. These were the words the voice spoke to me from above the altar:

My servant, high in this my worship, I who am created by the service of all who truly obey and make sacrifice to me, I who am mother and guardian and lover to all my servants.

I have heard a prayer, I who see far into time, and view a day when my servants shall be few and even cease from this worship. If the prayer prayed here before my altar be that of one dedicate in every thought to me, I will make a covenant with my servant Kefra.

Then in fear, I asked what should be the substance of the covenant, and again the voice spoke in the darkness—

The divine Menkau-Ra shall cease from desiring my servant Kefra, and no man shall desire her against her will. She shall not fail from her beauty while one is left alive to make sacrifice to me, even if she be that one and no other is left.

So long shall she endure as I endure through the will of all who have created me and given me my strength, set up altars and made sacrifice to me, and I will be as a shield between her and all harm.

For these my gifts, nine times shall she render up herself to me, each time a renewal through which her beauty shall not fail, and until the nine times are accomplished this my covenant shall endure.

I asked: “O, holy one, after I have rendered up myself nine times, is this covenant no longer a shield to me?” And the voice answered:

So long as the gods of Egypt are known of men, and an altar is served in Egypt, so long shall the covenant endure.

Then I, knowing how all the altars of the gods were served in the upper and lower lands, and not yet seeing far into time, nor having any thought other than that Osiris would judge the dead till the last man died on earth, said: “It is well, O holy one.” Because the voice spoke no more, and the darkness passed away, I went out and back to my place, and before day came again I was changed, knew myself set free of time.

WHEN the messengers of the divine Menkau-Ra came to summon me, I went without fear, knowing that not even he who sent them could desire me against my will.

They led me before him, but I had no will toward him, I who knew I should see him carried to the pyramid he had begun to build. He looked on me, and sent me away, back to the service of the goddess, since he desired me no more.



And Menkau-Ra passed and was laid in his tomb in the pyramid, while to me, in the temple of the Abydos, a year was as a day and a day as a year, for I stood aside to watch time, nor travelled with it to age and weariness. I sought knowledge, not as they who are bound in time seek it, but with the patience of one to whom all time is given.

When certain years had been woven into the fabric we call life, the tale was told of a priestess of Abydos who had conquered age, and I became a wonder—all that tale was written by the scribes on the wall of the tomb that held Nitocris the beautiful. She summoned me before her to learn how she might keep her beauty as I kept my own, but I could not tell her, and so her loveliness passed. She passed, as did Hatshepsu who also summoned me to ask the secret of enduring life, and I could not tell her. They passed, and I remained, a wonder beyond belief—so far beyond that men said I was my own daughter, age after age.

In all that time of service before the altar and in the cloisters by Abydos, no man desired me, because my will was toward none. Age by age I increased my knowledge of the mysteries, adding stone to stone to build up such an edifice as the world has never known, until I grew weary of its weight upon my mind.

King after king ruled and passed, until there came one Ptolemy Auletes, in whose reign the worship of Sekhmet at Abydos ceased, and the temple in which I had served from age to age was deserted, to become a ruin.

But before that came to pass, I laid hold on the ears of the altar and called on the goddess, seeking release, I, virgin inviolate, whose will was toward no man. Again the darkness came about me, and again the voice spoke above the altar:

*I, mother of all who have created me, made a covenant with my servant Kefra, by which she should render herself up to me nine times. Until the nine times are accomplished, the covenant must endure. Ask no more.*

Then I, knowing that not once had she called on me to render myself to her, nor knowing what should be the form or purpose of this rendering, went from Abydos to Thebes, very weary of unending living, though a woman young and beautiful to outward seeming.

There was a world I did not know, a new Egypt, and the gods that to me at the beginning had been changeless and beyond question eternal were changed, weakened, passing from the regard of men, as all gods change and pass.

The gods of Egypt, once powerful above all gods, grew weak and were made to pass, because belief and sacrifice failed. There in Thebes I saw dimly the purpose of the covenant great Sekhmet had made with me in the days of her strength, though I did not see the way in which she would accomplish her purpose, nor how I should be rendered to her at her call. And there in Thebes, priestess no longer, I willed a man to desire me. I, virgin inviolate, from age to age, at last sought love, having known all else.

I drew him to me, and knew my will resistless. His name, his place—they are nothing now. In a night that should set a crown on love I waited as ever a bride waits for her bridegroom, faint through great desire, and a darkness that I knew came about me, a voice I knew spoke out of the darkness, bidding me remember the covenant I had made, and claiming this night of my desire that I should render myself to her, who had given me length of days and knowledge beyond human compass.

I would have pleaded, but she bound me in a black forgetfulness deep as death itself, to release me at the beginning of the new day. Then, waking, I saw my lover dead at my feet, knew from his wounds she had claimed him as a sacrifice while I lay as dead, and thus had gained renewal of her strength. The lion-headed had torn him, drained his blood, and then had left him.

In that day, fleeing lest I should be accused of his death, I first cursed her, though by the knowledge the ages had given me I knew the covenant was now sealed by a life, and I knew, beyond a doubt, I might not break it.

(“The first of nine lives,” Gees thought but did not say.)

I fled to the city Alexander founded at the seaward end of the delta, and there, though I was out of time and beyond its power, time gave me peace. I had many great jewels, gifts and bribes for my wisdom while I served at Abydos—the twin pearls of which Cleopatra drank one before Antony, were once in my possession. She was last and most evil of the evil race of the Lagidae, and I knew the city in the days of her fall, when Octavian, man of ice that he was, rounded off his conquest of the world.

One night I walked alone, and a drunken Laestrygon of Cimmeria took me up and carried me off, desiring me against my will, and I thought then that the goddess no longer had power, and that the covenant was ended. But before he

could harm me I felt the darkness and heard the voice claiming that I render myself up a second time, and again I knew a blackness like death, to waken and find the Laestrygon dead—as the man of my desire had died.

Then I who had cursed the goddess blessed her, remembering her words of the covenant when she said she would be a shield between me and all harm. This was the second time, the second life, and out of that death she gave me new life as she gained it for herself, a renewed youth—because I blessed her, it may have been.

FATE or the goddess bade me go to Ephesus, and there I saw the great temple to Artemis and knew they worshiped Isis in different guise, as they worshiped Hathor when they made sacrifice to Aphrodite, who again laid hold on me, there in Ephesus. A man strong and gentle, whom I willed to love me as I loved him. For six weeks—six little weeks!—he was mine and I his, and then she laid the darkness on me and took him, killed him as a lioness kills. I looked on him torn and bloodless and cursed the covenant, knowing her all evil now, who once had been mother to her servants. This was the third time of my rendering up, the third life.

In a little while, a new life stirred within me—it was given to me, timeless, to bear a child who must be bound by time. I thought what it would be to see the child of my loving grow old and go down to death, I remaining changeless and young, since by the covenant six lives remained to be taken. Yet even so at the first faint cry of the born child I knew life completed and perfect. But this too she took, laying the darkness on me while she slew it, a babe not yet come to speech, and I was alone.

In the madness of that grief I told myself that I had known all of life, and would make an end, since for her own purpose the goddess could so torture me, though she had said she would be a shield between me and all harm. In that day your Lord taught in Galilee, but no word of His teaching had reached my ears.

I took my jewels, and poison that I bought, and with them went to a cave that I knew beyond the walls of Ephesus. I had a hope that by the poison I might travel to join the man I had loved, and the babe to whom I had given life.

So, having taken the poison, I slept—for an hour, I would have said, to wake naked and see shepherds in the cave, amazed at what they saw. Being simple

men, and kind, they gave me clothing, the rough clothes of a shepherd boy, and I put them on and came out from the cave, not forgetting the jewels that fate had bidden me keep by me even when I sought death.

I came out to a new world, for while I slept, Rome had been ravished, Charlemagne's paladins had died at Roncesvalles.

Now see how a legend grows. I, found naked among the rotted rags of clothing that had been, came out from the cave dressed as a shepherd boy, a sleeper awakened. The tale passed from man to man, and in the telling grew, changed—one became two, more than two, and to this day there is a legend of seven sleepers of Ephesus, because I, Kefra of Abydos, took poison in the cave and the goddess who had need of me kept life in me and wakened me in her own time.

He said: "This goes too far." He stared at her ironically.

She said: "You who know, test me with any question you choose to ask. Of any happening, any name, between the time of Menkau-Ra and this."

Unhesitatingly he asked: "What was the name of the woman whose place you took at Mena House, thirty-eight years ago?"

"Sadie Hillman, an American by birth," she answered instantly. "The goddess laid the darkness on me and took her—the eighth life."

"And how did you save my father?" he persisted.

"Stood between him and Saleh—between him and the man he would have arrested, and who would have killed him," she answered.

He ignored the slip that had revealed another name. "How was it that he saw your goddess, or dreamed he saw her—a woman with the head of a lioness, purring like a cat?" he demanded.

She frowned in sudden, entire perplexity. "No—that I cannot answer," she said. "Unless, in the hypnosis I put on him, the semblance of the goddess was thrown from my mind to his. If that were so, it was not by my volition. When they would have killed him, I stood between and saved him, because—because his bride waited for him, as I had once waited in Ephesus. So I saved him; took away his memory of the time, and sent him back to her, unharmed."

“And forgot to take away his memory of yourself,” he pointed out.

“I had no thought of seeing him again—no thought of coming to this country again, then,” she said. “It is chance—fate, perhaps.”

“Then you have been in England before?” he suggested.

She smiled. “When Barnby Grange was the castle under Hedlington, in the year that Poitiers was fought, *she* laid the darkness on me here in this keep for the sixth time and renewed her strength by a young girl’s life. Of all who were tried for sorcery in that age, I think I am the only one who was not sentenced to drowning or the stake. At least, I know of no other, but there was the shield between me and harm, as promised in the covenant she made with me.”

She paused an instant.

“I have told you a series of the maddest, most fantastic impossibilities. But—one thing. To you, if you think of me after you go from here, as—Kefra, my own name as my mother gave it. Not the other. Kefra, given me because she was descended from Khefru himself, though not by his chief wife.”

“And he, I believe, built the great pyramid,” Gees observed.

“You sound sceptical, even, of that,” she said. Then, abruptly: “Dine with me before you go.”

He shook his head, as if to protest.

“Your place is already laid,” she persisted. “Not courtesy, but my wish.”

He looked full into her eyes, night-dark, now. He said: “Then I thank you, and accept.”

“Kefra,” she reminded him.

“I thank you, and accept—Kefra.”

She laughed, very softly. “Wasn’t it a mad story I told you?”

He answered: “I am not sure that it was—Kefra.”

## CHAPTER 8

### Time Stands Moveless

GEES followed the silent little man up the wide staircase, and into a lighted room of which the half-open door faced him as he gained the first-floor level. An ordinary bedroom, he saw, furnished as the drawing room with a heavy Victorian type suite: it might have been a bedroom in an old-fashioned hotel, by the look of it. On a stand at the foot of the bed he saw the suitcase he had left in the back of his car. He turned to face Saleh, angered by the obsequious service for which he had given no authorization.

But, for nearly a minute, perhaps, he did not speak, and Saleh, facing him, stood in the anticipatory silence of the well-trained serving man. A little man, Gees saw, no darker in complexion than a southern Italian, with close-cropped, grizzled hair, and as many wrinkles in the skin of his face and neck, apparently, as there were hairs on his head. A very old man, until he looked Gees straight in the face, when his blue eyes appeared amazingly youthful: yet his face and hands and body were those of an old man; those blue eyes did not fit with the rest of him, and their incongruity made Gees forget his annoyance in curiosity.

“Did Miss Kefra tell you to bring this stuff up?” Gees demanded.

“There was no need, Sir,” Saleh answered calmly, “since you are dining with her. The case is locked, or I would have laid out the clothes. Shall I now, sir?”

“I can manage, thank you.”

Saleh inclined his head, turned, and went out, closing the door silently.

Gees frowned at the case, and then opened it, to take out his dinner jacket. A quarter of an hour later he found Saleh waiting to conduct him to a small room lighted only by shaded candles on the small, circular table laid for two. On a side table he saw a cocktail shaker and two small, stemless glasses of a curious opalescence. Saleh said: “Madam will join you here, sir,” and went out.

There was a big coal fire in an old-fashioned grate, and on the mantel over it a black marble clock, stopped at a quarter to six. With a thought that, since he had

to change back into day clothes before taking to the road again, he would not be in London till the small hours, Gees looked at his wrist watch, and saw that it, too, oddly enough, registered the time as a quarter to six. Very odd, that; the watch had never let him down before, but, putting it to his ear, he found it had stopped.

He took it off, shook it, and put it to his ear again, to hear half a dozen faint ticks, and then no more. He had just finished strapping it back on his wrist when his hostess entered the room, slender in a closely fitting dinner frock of shining gray, with the moonstone on her breast as her only ornament.

“My watch has stopped,” he said. “I wonder—we must have talked a long while before I left you—do you know what the time actually is?”

She shook her head and smiled. “Time?” she echoed. “No. Need we think of it? I hope I have not kept you waiting.”

He took up the shaker and, giving it a twist, heard the tinkle of ice. Then, beside him, she took up one of the two glasses on the tray, held it between herself and the light, and stooped to lay it on its side on the carpet. She put her foot on the rim, and as Gees said, “Why break it?” pressed the edge of the glass.

He saw it go flat, and then spring back to its normal shape as she released the pressure and took up the glass undamaged.

“More magic?” he asked ironically.

Again she shook her head. “There were four,” she answered. “One was lost, one I gave away, and these two I have kept in all my wanderings.” Again, taking up the glass, she inverted it, and showed him a series of lines graven in the underside. “The name of the man who made them,” she explained. “Nefer-An, a craftsman who lived and worked in the street of the silversmiths in Thebes, in the days of Hatshepsu. His secret of tempering glass died with him—he was a secret man. There are vessels like these in the tomb of Nitocris the beautiful—vessels of this glass that bends, wrought to hold her unguents.”

“And you know where that tomb is?” He took up the other glass, and with a finger and thumb on opposite edges of the rim pressed it; the glass yielded as if it were paper, became oval, and sprang back to its circular form as he released it.

“You see, no magic,” she said. “Just one little facet of the knowledge that this world of yours has not discovered. And the tomb—yes, pour the drinks—what if I do know where Nitocris lies?”

He filled the glasses: the mixture foamed up and stilled to clarity, and Kefra took up her glass. He said: “You might cause a sensation by revealing it—upset accepted theories about Nitocris.”

She said, very coldly, “That I, Kefra, a priestess of Abydos, should cause the desecration of the dead of Egypt!”

“You are right, of course,” he said, very soberly.

She smiled, her brief anger at an end. “So we drink,” she said, and raised her glass, “to the kindly mystery that men miscall death, life unending beyond time.”

He said—“Since I don’t feel quite like that, I drink to you, Kefra,” and emptied the little glass at a draught, as she too drank.

SHE put down her empty glass beside his on the tray, and pointed him to one of the two chairs at the table. An odd tingling went through his body, an almost momentary sensation of fiery heat, yet it was not unpleasant. Again he had the sense of an intense stillness that he had known before the fire in her drawing room, a stillness as of the cessation of all life about him—so still it was, except for the movements she made, that all the world might have been brought to a pause. He asked: “What was that we drank?” rather suspiciously.

“If I told you, you would be no wiser,” she said, as Saleh, entering, served them with oysters packed in crushed ice, and stayed to fill them a glass each of a dry, still, white wine.

“That man of yours,” Gees said, when he had gone out again, “if you don’t mind my asking—is he old, or young?”

“Neither.”

“He killed—what was her name—Sadie Hillman.”

“No, he did not,” she said quietly. “She was the eighth life.”



He said: “I suppose, if I asked you to explain—” and stopped.

Saleh entered to serve them again, and she kept silence till he had gone. Later, Gees realized that he had eaten and enjoyed the food, but with no awareness.

She said: “If you, at the beginning of your life as a man, had been offered all that was offered me when I accepted the covenant, life and beauty enduring, desire of me only as I willed, and a shield between me and harm—if these had been offered you—”

“Placed as you were, you could only accept.”

“I told you a story—I did not ask your belief,” she said coldly.

“I admit that you could only accept,” he insisted.

“Desiring to keep myself inviolate from Menkau-Ra,” she added. “It was not for me, then, to know the price I must pay. I have told you how once, when the man of my love and the child of my body had been claimed as parts of that price, I sought death and found it denied me. Again in a later day—in this place here!—I sought it, and again it was not for me. For Sekhmet, seeing into this far future, made the covenant not for my good, but for her own, and I must pay all the price of what I gained, as and when she has need of that price.”

“I begin to understand,” he said—and again Saleh, entering, made a pause in which he thought over her explanation.

“That for long ages she had no need of me,” Kefra went on when they were alone again, “and made no demand that I should render up myself to her. When she had need, she took, and thus renewed herself—for accursed she is, now, and all evil, no good remaining to her. This I, who was once her priestess, know.”

He sat silent, holding back a question. That a goddess of old Egypt could pack the mutilated corpse of a child in a second-hand fiber suitcase and throw it away on Wimbledon Common—no! There was a limit, even, to fantasy.

She said: “I did not know of the child’s death till Tony told me.”

“It was the ninth life,” he asserted, gravely.

The stillness grew heavy about them again. He glanced at the fire, on his right as he sat, and saw that it was quiescent as had been the fire in the drawing room: it appeared not to have shrunk or changed since he had filled the two elastic, unbreakable glasses. Kefra said: "Now you will understand why I was afraid of you."

"Was?" he asked. To his hearing his voice was a faint, thin likeness of itself—the word a tiny sibilance let fall into an infinite stillness.

"Was, because now you begin to understand. *She* has taken as and when she willed—taken among others men I loved and the child I carried under my heart! And held me, who desired death, from my desire; bound me in the bonds of life and set me to watch, untouched by time, while time went by—because of her own need. I have no longer any fear of you who know me free of all guilt, as I have ever been, since the wisdom I have bought of time has bidden me keep heart and hands unstained. On *her* the guilt—to *her* the doom!"

"What doom?" he asked.

"Darkness, and to cease from being. Evil cannot serve her any more, since I am now free of her. She must pass to the darkness without end—as all gods fashioned of men's minds must pass. No, I do not fear you any more."

Again Saleh, entering, made a pause, and it seemed to Gees that while the man was in the room he was back in normality. Habit rather than thought caused him to glance at his wrist watch, and he saw that the hands now marked the time as a quarter past six. The door closed on Saleh, and he put the watch to his ear, but heard no ticking.

"I don't understand this," he said. "It's still stopped, but the hands have moved twenty-five minutes since I looked at it last."

"It is you who have stopped, not the watch," Kefra said.

"Eh?" He stared at her, and knew that on his right the fire, which had flickered in burning while Saleh was in the room, had stilled again.

"You, whom I have willed to stand aside from time," she said.

He looked at the watch again, and saw that the second hand did not move. "This

is altogether fantastic.”

She shook her head. “No,” she dissented. “For a hundredth—for a thousandth part of all that men spend on means to kill each other, they might have rediscovered this—to you a miracle—that was known to the initiates of old time. To stand aside from time and let it pass, live untouched by it for a space, as is in my power to live and as I cause you to live here with me. Because I will you to understand fully that neither the blood of the child nor any other blood stains my hands.

“FOR you, here with me, time is not. To you the watch seemed stopped, as the fire seems still, because for this space you are outside time’s passing. If you had looked at the watch while Saleh was in the room, you would have seen that the hands moved, for I released you, then.”

“Then—that fire in the drawing room didn’t stop burning?” he asked. “When you reached out and seemed to stop it, I mean.”

“I made the illusion,” she answered.

Kefra smiled; and proved that she read his thoughts: “Your breakdown enabled you to see me alone.”

“Why, yes,” he answered, and put down his fork on the empty plate. “I wanted to know why you chose Tony Briggs.”

She shook her head. “Wanted to prevent me from choosing him,” she amended. “And now you know—what is your wish?”

“Does it make any difference to you?” he asked in reply. “And what, after all, do I know? Nothing within normal belief.”

“Nothing,” she assented, “nor does your wish make any difference to me. But—” she pushed back her chair and stood up—“there is a difference. We will go back to the drawing room, and Saleh will bring us coffee there.”

“I must go, very soon,” he said, and looked at the watch again. The hands, he saw, had moved on five minutes, and the seconds hand was moving normally. He said, irritably: “What is the time?”

“Your watch, and the clock there, tell it,” she answered.

And the clock, he saw, indicated twenty minutes past six. Kefra said, coolly: “Will you have your coffee here alone?”

He opened the door for her and followed her to the drawing room, where, as when he had left it, there was no light but that of the fire. She faced him by it, and he saw her face clearly. She said: “There is light enough, unless you wish for more.”

“It is as you wish,” he answered. “Yes—light enough.”

She laughed, softly. “Tell me—what does a woman ask of a man?” she demanded.

He shrugged again, but differently. “The man who can tell that isn’t born, and never will be,” he answered emphatically.

“No? Then I will tell you. Strength, and the insight that makes for identity of desire. That even in yielding to her will he shall be master of her, not her subject. That even in his tenderness she shall sense dominance, and in giving as a king gives he shall take as from a slave. Yet, having regard for her need, he shall give to her only as long as he had need of her, and in giving shall demand all.”

She went on quite coolly: “Yes, you are right,” and took off Tony’s engagement ring—the only one she had been wearing—to lay it on the high mantel.

“You mean that?” he asked incredulously.

“I will him *not* to desire me,” she said with quiet intensity.

“Then why on earth did you ever will the contrary?”

“Because it was little to me whom I chose,” she answered. “I said, in a little time I shall be free of that evil covenant, as I have been free since the day I first met you. I should have waited a little longer, I know now, but I knew the freedom must be very near, and that it would set me back in time, to live and grow old and pass as do all others, the long bondage at an end. I said, I will choose me a man that I may have his love when I am old. I said, he shall be a man of whom I am not ashamed, and more I will not ask, because I have only to will him to

desire me, and he is bound to me—mine completely. I said, somewhere on the earth there may be a man who could give all that a woman asks, but I have not found him, and with that saying I chose this man, your friend. Now I will him *not* to desire me!”

He drank a little coffee and put the cup on the mantel, close by the ring. Doggedly he held back another question.

But she answered it: “Because it is your wish.”

“*Will* you leave my mind alone!” he exclaimed harshly.

She said: “No.”

The hands of his watch pointed at half past six in the firelight. He said: “Now, I think, it is time to go.”

“In time,” she said, “it is ninety minutes since you entered this house. I set you with me outside time, because I willed to fight you, strip away from you all you had believed of me, and beat you down to acceptance of truth, sight of me as I am. And I willed, too—”

She did not end it. He looked up from the fire and saw her eyes in its light, twin darknesses, yet lighted in a way he had not seen before. He reached up and gripped the edge of the mantel—sent his coffee cup flying to shatter on the tiles before the fire.

“I have faced and beaten magic before,” he said, almost savagely.

“Is my magic so terrible to face?”

“Kefra, take back what else you willed. Don’t will it—I tell you, don’t will it! I don’t know what or why—it may be these tricks you have played with time, but I see—no good will come of it. Harm—perhaps death itself. Don’t will me to—” He tried to end the sentence, but could not.

“Tricks I have played with time,” she repeated musingly. “Tricks. I have taken nothing from you, but rather have given—a space of living in which time was not. Else, another day had broken on us. Through how much of emotion, how much of change of purpose and how much of clearer sight, have you lived since

you entered this house?”

“Oh, an age or two,” he answered, half wearily. “In—yes, in less than two hours. And we talked here for the first of them, and then I dressed and we had dinner—an hour over that—what is the time?”

“And now—” she disregarded the question—“you speak of harm, perhaps death. I accept what may be, but I do not change my will again. I accept what may come of it, and have no fear. And I too see, clearly as you see. Whatever I may gain or lose, no harm will come to you.”

BEHIND her, in the shadow where the firelight did not reach, he imagined a tawny lioness’ head outlined, with the lips drawn back from white teeth in a fierce, fearsome grin—it could have been only imagination, he knew. But he said: “Your goddess hears you.”

She said: “Let her hear and accept this challenge, no longer my goddess nor I her priestess, as I heard and accepted her covenant, to gain nothing more than life that I could not end and find her more cruel than ever. I, Kefra, am free of her now the nine lives are yielded up, and though she destroy this body and beauty I have worn so long, the vital self that animates it she may not touch. I will go down to Amenti and stand before the assessors free of her. And if *she* send me down, still I shall stand free of her, and thus buy you freedom of her power.”

He imagined that the tawny head on the darkness snarled derision, and found voice to ask: “Buy *my* freedom?”

She smiled, and with that the head shrank to littleness and vanished, if it had ever been. She said: “With life itself, at need.”

He shook his head. “Let me stand on my own feet,” he bade.

“So I would have you stand,” she said, and still smiled at him.

She leaned toward him with her trick of movement—a graceful, sinuous inclination that brought her eyes near and beneath his own. She asked, softly: “Say now, is my magic strong?”

“Very strong, Kefra.”

“Yet, it could not save me. In all my knowledge, all the prevision with which it was given me to look into time, was no sight of this pit before my feet. For what I have willed and cannot change is not—can you comprehend—not by my own will, but by a stronger force.”

“No. I cannot comprehend.”

“A force that shall keep you free of harm—” she almost whispered the words—“strongest of all forces on earth or beyond earth, and it shall be a shield between you and all harm from *her*.”

She stood erect again, separate from him, waiting. He said, whispering: “But this is altogether beyond belief.”

“It is not by my own will,” she said, rather piteously. “Here I am woman, and nothing more.”

“You say that! You, claiming—what? Fifty centuries?”

“Oh, I have stood apart from the years and seen them fall as drops of water fall and are lost in the flow of a river! Now with my covenant fulfilled I am free to be borne on by the river. But not alone! I ask not to pass alone, being now woman and no more.”

“Then—” by an effort he kept his voice steady—“you had better put on that ring again.”

“No. For should I be less alone? What is humble adoration that waits on my will to me? I would have strength greater than my own to hold me. Not to look down into eyes that pray to me while they tell their worship. For tell me, what is that to me?”

He made no answer. The clock on the mantel chimed thrice, and glancing at it, he made out the time as a quarter to seven. Then all sound ceased, even the ticking, and again he felt silence as an immensity.

“For a space I take you from time again,” she said. “Now see! This is *her* vengeance on me, Kefra, who cursed her and her covenant.”

“Her vengeance?” he echoed uncomprehendingly.

Again she leaned toward him, and he saw the red sheen of her hair in the firelight, the white intensity of her face, and her eyes as pools of dark tenderness smiling at him.

“Love, such as no woman of a day ever gave.” Her words sounded on the stillness like the music of bells very far away. “Unwished, unsatisfied, a fire to torture always without release—her beastly vengeance!”

He said—unsteadily, stammeringly: “And if—Kefra—if it were not—not unwished? If I—I too—”

Again he heard the ticking of the clock on the mantel, a cinder from the fire tapped rustlingly on the tiles of the hearth. Close in his hold Kefra reached up her hands to caress his face and hair—and then his lips.

“For a time—for a little time—before she found some other way to strike! At me—for you this love of mine shall be a shield!”

“I have no fear—Kefra—”

“But I know! I was her priestess and cursed her—I know!”

He said, soberly, with his lips on hers: “I will not go back tonight, Kefra. I don’t want to leave you. You’re too beautiful, too lovely to let go.”

“No. Oh, but I knew the folly of all my wisdom when I first saw you! Now am I slave to my kind—make me one with time and you!”



## CHAPTER 9

### Before the Storm

GEES sat at the steering wheel, and Kefra stood beside him, her hand on his. The morning was gray and still. He looked into her eyes, with grave content in his own.

“Why do you stay, instead of coming back with me?” he asked.

“Why do you go?” she asked in reply.

“That’s easy,” he answered, and smiled. “To make your place ready for you. This—you have changed all my life, Kefra.”

She said, very softly: “And I have now no life but you.”

“You told me—such love as no woman of a day ever gave. I love you, Kefra.”

She bent, quickly, to touch his hand with her lips. “I have no life but you.”

“There’s Tony,” he reflected; “and many other things to be done, but by next week it must be one life. Kefra, let me tell Tony.”

She shook her head. “In all else, I ask only to yield. But in that one thing you have no part—I must tell him. No other.”

“Then come back with me—now—and tell him.”

“Not yet. I too have many things to do, and three days is all too short. But on Saturday I shall be with you again, if—” Her eyes grew somber.

“Why the if?” he asked. “And you said—‘If we come to the one life,’ as though you had some doubt in your mind. Why?”

“Because, though I am one with you and one with time since yesterday, still I have sight—the knowledge I stored has not gone from me. *You* are safe—that I have bought and know. But for myself I do not know. Only—” she laid both hands on his—“if the little time I craved and won be all, still I am glad.”

He said: "I hate leaving you here."

She smiled. "You leave very little here. All of me that may go will be with you, all I have given I give forever. As this Kefra you see is yours to take and hold so is my spirit given to you, woven into your life. Take that with you for my last spoken thought, until I hear your voice and know your strength holding me again. It will not be long—you'll see."

Very gradually the intensity of her gaze ceased to have power over his consciousness, and his recollections of the night became incredibilities—impossibilities.

*The little time I have craved and won ... so is my spirit given to you, woven into your life ... my last spoken thought, until ...*

The tender radiance of her eyes, the cadenced sweetness of her voice—bear left for the Oxford road, pull in at the wayside garage to refill. Twelve and eight-pence—"Give me the silver and keep the coppers. Good day and thank you." Fifty centuries old—more than fifty centuries! Yet alive with all the sweetness of youth, with beauty unmarked by time, inspiring and yielding to ecstasy beyond dreams. A priestess of Sekhmet in Abydos, in the days of the Menkau-Ra!

Madness! He had dreamed that part of it.

A long dream—it could not be that he had driven to Barnby Grange only yesterday afternoon...

Sadie Hillman. He must spring that name on his father and watch the reaction. Not that it would be proof of anything. For the story Kefra had told there was no proof available anywhere on earth: one could not prove a fantastic impossibility anything but impossible. Yet, Sadie Hillman, and Saleh—how would the old chap react to that name, too? If—*If* there were anything in what Kefra had told him, then she, not an aunt nor any relative, had been allied with his country's enemies. Kefra, descendant of the divine Khefru, and a priestess in Abydos more than fifty centuries ago!

This *was* the Oxford road, and he had just passed a five-ton truck. That was an aeroplane high up and small over him, drifting northward like a blown leaf. Tony Briggs—well, anyhow, he had saved old Tony—had he, though?

Cats, big, tawny cats, sitting on their haunches by the bridge parapets. *If I willed it, you would not leave this house.* The head of a lioness tawny on the darkness, its fangs showing in snarling derision, and then shrinking as if the beast drew back from a strength greater than its own. *I was her priestess and cursed her ...* When she had spoken that sentence, her lips had been barely free of his, and her hands had reached up like flower petals caressing his face and hair.

“This will not do!” he said aloud, sternly.

Leaving the car by the curb in Little Oakley Street, he went up the stairs and let himself into his flat, to find Miss Brandon’s room empty and a sheet of quarto paper laid on her desk bearing the typed statement:

Return from lunch at 1:30. E.M.B.

He left it lying and went along to his own room to see a small pile of letters opened and waiting his attention, and, on them, an unopened telegram. With a momentary chill of fear—causeless, as he found—he opened it and read:

ONE WITH TIME AND YOU FOREVER

It was enough—the letters could wait. He took off the telephone receiver and dialed—it was not quite one o’clock.

“Gordon speaking, Father. If you’re not otherwise fixed, can I invite you to lunch with me at the Junior Nomads?”

“Why, certainly, Gordon—certainly! What time—it’s just on one now?”

“Oh, about one-thirty.”

“Suits me admirably. Very nice indeed of you, Gordon.”

Gees replaced the receiver, and for a few seconds stood looking down at the instrument, Kefra’s telegram still in his hand.

“I wish I’d cultivated the old boy a bit more while I had the chance,” he mused.

He was in the entrance hall of the club when his father appeared. They took chairs in the lounge for a dry sherry apiece, and General Green looked with

satisfaction at his son as he put his glass down after a first sip.

“Very good idea,” he observed, “and a far more healthy preface to a meal than all those poisonous cocktails. And how did you find things on the estate? Is Carter keeping things in good order?”

“In my opinion, the best man you have ever had there,” Gees answered. “But before we come to that, Father, there was a question I wanted to ask you about that story you told me the other day.”

“Ah! About that Kefra woman’s antecedents, you mean?”

Gees refrained from squirming. He said: “Yes, and the other people in the story. The man in it—the one you said was an *agent provocateur*. Was he ever caught, do you know?”

The general shook his head. “He vanished completely.”

“Did you ever see him?”

“No. I had his description given me.”

“THEN I suggest,” Gees said slowly, that he was a small man, with a not very dark complexion, and remarkably young-looking blue eyes. Very striking eyes, incongruous in such a face as his, though I can’t describe his face as it was thirty-eight years ago, naturally. I suggest further that his name was Saleh.” He spelled the name out.

“Ah!” his father exclaimed softly.

“There was another woman in it, you told me,” Gees said. “One who was killed in a particularly brutal way. You knew her name?”

“Not till after she was dead,” the general answered. “In that service, we do not deal largely in names, which anyone may assume.”

“Does it matter about revealing the dead woman’s name now, at this length of time?” Gees inquired after a pause. “Sadie Hillman, wasn’t it?—American.”

“Gordon, you *have* got access to records in some way!” the general barked at

him. “That is—there is a leakage—I must—”

“I assure you, Father, there has been no leakage. You can rely on my keeping absolutely still, Father,” Gees assured him rather earnestly, “especially since the story concerns you in the way it does.” He drank the rest of his sherry.

“Yes. Certainly Gordon—certainly. But—well, you have amazed me. That you should know *both* those names!”

In turn he put down an empty glass and rose to his feet.

“I must say, Gordon, my opinion of your activities in that office of yours has changed considerably since—er—since you dropped that infernally vulgar advertisement about mumps to murder,” his father, said, over their lunch. “The cases in which your name has come to public notice, and now this present instance of unexpected knowledge, go to show that your work has a certain efficiency about it. Ah! I suppose you would not—er—disclose any of the sources from which you obtain information? Such as those names, for instance?”

“Since you were once in intelligence, you ought to know anything of that sort is quite impossible,” Gees told him.

“Yes—yes, of course, and I cannot resent your discretion. No. And although it may sound a strange thing to say to one’s own son, it gratifies me exceedingly that you and I get on together so much better than we did a year or two ago. In fact, at times I begin to feel almost proud of you, Gordon.”

“Sentiment entirely reciprocated, Father,” Gees said, and managed a smile. “Let me give you a hand with your coat.”

The general adjusted the coat collar carefully, and took his gloves from its pocket. “I want you to come and dine with me one evening next week,” he remarked, “and bring that Miss Brandon of yours.”

The inference was altogether too plain, Gees reflected as he went on his way. Since the old boy had discovered that Eve Madeleine was well connected, niece of one of his friends of service days and daughter of another military man he had known, he had not been sparing of these hints, though he had never gone as far as this before. But, Gees told himself, that dinner would be eaten without him; on Saturday Kefra would return to London—before the definite invitation

materialized, he hoped.

His yale key proved sticky in the lock of the outer door of his flat, as it often did, and he cursed it softly, volubly, fiercely, with more intense irritation than ever before. Entering, he closed the door, shied his hat viciously to the far end of the corridor, and entered Miss Brandon's room to find her looking up from her chair at the desk with a sort of questioning surprise. He said—"I'm sorry, Miss Brandon—that infernal lock annoyed me."

Refraining from reply, she noted that the hitherto inevitable cigarette case did not appear. Presently she moved some papers on the desk and observed: "I put all the worthwhile inquiries on your desk, Mr. Green, and disposed of the rest as usual. There is one—"

"You can fetch 'em all back and inform the inquirers that I am too occupied to undertake any more investigations," he interrupted.

"One," she persisted coldly, "which I felt sure would interest you, in which you are asked to try what the police have given up."

It ought to have been a matter of eager interest to him, she knew, but he shook his head and frowned—at her persistence, she felt.

"Turn it down with the rest, Miss Brandon," he said curtly, and, taking out the cigarette case, selected one for himself but failed—for the first time in their acquaintance—to offer the case to her.

"Then I will come and fetch them now," she said coldly.

When she had taken the letters away, leaving him alone at his desk, he leaned back in his chair and reflected.

"Oh, Kefra! Kefra!" he whispered.

Again he might have been out of time, for it seemed that no time at all had passed when Miss Brandon, entering, put a cup of tea down on the desk before him, and stood to say: "If you wish for a second cup, Mr. Green, you have only to ring," with an icy aloofness.

He stared at her, with a flashing thought of how, usually, he ambled into her

room and sat on the desk for tea. He wanted to ask what on earth was wrong, but instead said: "Thank you, Miss Brandon, this will be enough," with just as frigid politeness as she had handed him.

A half hour later, with the tea untouched and cold on the desk, he got up, grim and angry, and went to Miss Brandon's room.

"I want—that inquiry you spoke about, Miss Brandon. If you'll let me have it I'll see if it's worth investigation." Just as well look at it, though he had no intention of doing anything about it.

"I have already declined it for you, Mr. Green."

"Already?" he snapped. "But how could you?"

"By telephone, as the inquiry requested. The—Fothergill, the name is. He states—here is the inquiry—he was most anxious to lose no time, and would you telephone as quickly as possible."

"But—yes—well, telephone where? I can telephone again if I like the look of it. Whereabouts—what's his number?"

"He was at Brown's Hotel, which is all the address there was on the notepaper. You see, Mr. Green, this inquiry came in yesterday morning, and Mr. Fothergill expected some reply by this morning at the latest—so he told me. I caught him just before he left the hotel for Paddington, he said, so we have no address. You could trace him through Brown's, I expect, if you feel like taking up the case. This is the inquiry."

He shook his head, and did not take the letter she offered. "No," he said. "I felt a bit curious, that's all, thank you."

He went back to his own room, reflecting that you could not get just such a note as was in her voice for that reply by rubbing one slab of ice against another. And even the interest he might have got out of perusing that inquiry, over a case the police had given up, was denied him! Ah, well! Only four days to wait.

## CHAPTER 10

### The Cat Purrs

THE CLASP of her arms warm about him, the sweetness of her lips on his, the wonderful, unearthly fragrance that was one with her as a breath about him, and the caressing tenderness of her voice—

“I come to kiss you in the night—” Wakening, he knew it was a dream and no more, yet, it seemed to him that the fragrance lingered. Then at a sound somewhere in the flat he sat up: a steady, persistent, softish sound—in this room, was it? It went on and on, softly, ominously—Ah! Not in the room at all, of course; he must have left the water running in the bathroom.

He got out of bed and, without troubling to switch on the light in his room went to the bathroom and switched on there, to see that all four taps were closed, not even dripping, let alone running. Into his sitting room—nothing there, and still, faintly, the noise went on, a pulsing, steady sound, though fainter now than when he had first heard it. If only he could locate it!

He tried his office, and it was a little louder, but did not emanate from any point in that room, he felt sure. Then, as he came into the corridor again, he knew it must have come from the one room in which he had not yet turned on the light, his own bedroom. There was no doubt about it; the sound came from some point beyond that half-opened door.

Reaching up before he went in, he switched on the light, and as he entered the sound ceased altogether. But now he had placed it, recognized it as one thing and one only, unquestionably.

The purring of a cat. And he knew there was no cat anywhere in the place; all windows except that in the bedroom were closed and fastened, and, since there was a biting southeast wind blowing, he had allowed that one window only an inch slit of opening at the top. He went all over the flat again, with the negative result he had anticipated. There was no cat.

Again, as he entered the bedroom after that second tour, he smelled the scent that was Kefra's and hers only. Smelt it very faintly—or imagined it. What were the



words he had dreamed of hearing?

“I come to kiss you in the night—”

A sentence broken off, not completed—because the intense impression of reality the dream had given had wakened him, perhaps. Yet it had been a dream and no more, could have been nothing more.

The purring had not been a dream; he had heard it.

So sure was he that he had heard it, in this room, that he got out his Webley and, placing it under his pillow, left the light on when he got back into bed. If any cat showed up, he told himself, purring or yowling, or silent, London would be a cat short in the morning. Not that he expected—

Oh, blast the thing! Some acoustic oddity, letting the purr into his room from the flat above or the one below, probably. But just let that cat show itself, long enough for him to get a line on it!

It did not.

He smoked five cigarettes, and dozed off with the first dawn. His charwoman's entrance with tea awakened him, and as he drank the tea he recollected that he had not given Kefra his address, so she could not write to him. Wait a bit, though—she knew the address, somehow, for she had sent that telegram.

Perhaps Tony had told her, at some time or other. Yet it was unlikely that Tony had recited: “Thirty-seven Little Oakfield Street, S.W. One,” or that she had memorized it. Anyhow, she had the address, and with that as a certainty he got out of bed and padded barefooted in his pyjamas into Miss Brandon's office, where the charwoman had already placed the morning's sheaf of letters on the desk. The top one of all bore the postmark: *Hedlington-cum-Carnworth*, and, opening it, he took out a single sheet of paper, and read:

*I will come to kiss you in the night—*

No signature—none needed. Just the incomplete sentence, and, faintest of emanations, the scent that was one with her.

He put the telephone receiver to his ear. A woman's voice asked: “Is this Gees’

Confidential Agency, please?” and he answered with a very short, “Yes, it is.”

“Can I speak to Mr. Green, please?”

“Speaking.”

“Mr. Green, I’m calling for Miss Brandon. She’s got a slight chill, and will not be able to come to work today. She hopes to be quite recovered and back at the usual time tomorrow.”

“Oh, well, tell her there’s nothing to do, as usual—and what inquiries there are will take no harm by waiting, even if she takes tomorrow off as well. Give her my best wishes for a quick recovery.”

It was the first time since he had engaged her that she had been absent like this, he reflected as he hung up. If she stayed away for any length of time, the place would seem cold. Altogether different, lacking her friendly presence—

Then he remembered: He was giving her notice, and closing down. Everything finished—Kefra only—so it would be, from now on.

He took an envelope from his breast pocket, extracted the single sheet of paper, and again read the nine words on it. How much had been dream, how much reality, before he had wakened in the night to hear a cat purring? As to that, how much had been dream and how much reality since he had entered Barnby Grange as daylight began to fail?

HE MIGHT as well open the rest of the letters and look them over, assure himself that there was nothing requiring immediate reply. With that intent he rose from his chair, and sat down again at the summons of the telephone bell. He assured his caller that he was Mr. Green, and was asked to wait just one moment. Then a voice he knew: Inspector Tott, speaking.

“Good morning, Mr. Green. Are you busy?”

“Desperately,” Gees answered. “So much to do I don’t know which way to turn. What do you want?”

“Are you still interested in the Gravenor Mansions affair—the death of the Parkoot boy?”

“Nope. Not a little bit. Why—are you?”

“To some extent. There has been another case of exactly the same sort, with a girl of twelve as the victim, this time. No sign of assault or outrage, but the throat and breast torn by claws, just as in the case of that poor little Parkoot child. And no clawed beasts reported loose anywhere in the country. No tracks, either.”

“Well, that sort of thing is not quite in your line, I should think. Why tell me about it?”

“For one thing,” Tott said, “I don’t like handing it direct to Mr. Briggs. For another, I thought it might interest you.”

“What has Mr. Briggs got to do with it?” Gees growled.

“Nothing, directly. Quite possibly nothing indirectly.”

“D’you want me to go and recite it all to him, then?”

“No, I don’t think I’d ask you to do that,” Tott answered slowly.

“Well, what made you think it might interest me?” Gees demanded.

“Because,” Tott answered, very deliberately indeed, “although Mr. Briggs has naturally nothing to do with such a crime, as I see things it might possibly—I do not say it will—but it might possibly affect him. Indirectly, but then it would certainly interest you, his friend.”

“Well, until it does, I’m not interested. And as nearly as I can see, there’s not the slightest chance of a thing like that affecting Mr. Briggs in any way whatever. None of his friends have claws.”

“This second case,” Tott persisted, “is not in any of the papers yet. The body was discovered last night, and the discovery reported to an intelligent police inspector who had read about the Gravenor Mansions affair and noted the similarity of the cause of death. He got in touch with Crampton by telephone—”

“Why weigh all this out to me?” Gees interrupted harshly.

“Because—” Tott sounded quite ruffled—“and this is where Mr. Briggs *may* come in, indirectly—this body was found at a place called Barnby-under-Hedlington, in Gloucestershire. I’ll put that no more plainly, but you see what I’m driving at, possibly.”

“Don’t be such a fool over a simple coincidence!” Gees shouted savagely into the receiver.

“Not coincidence, Mr. Green,” Tott answered steadily. “However, since you choose to be nasty about it—”

“No—hold on—I apologize,” Gees broke in desperately, “I’ve got a rotten head after a sleepless night, and—Crampton, you said. Is he going down there to consult about it?”

“No. He told me he’s going to see if he can get Parkoot to let him have a master key to make search of—well, of a certain flat at Gravenor Mansions. Failing that, he’s applying for a search warrant. But seeing how this *might* hit Mr. Briggs, and being able to spare the time, I’m going down to this Barnby-under-Hedlington to assure myself that the police down there don’t jump too quickly at too many conclusions—for Mr. Briggs’ sake.”

“Stout feller—when are you starting?”

“Somewhere about twelve. I must look up a train—”

“Don’t! I’ll call for you at twelve and run you down by car.”

“Well... yes, I could do that,” Tott assented, rather dubiously. “But I thought you said you were busy.”

“I am. I shall have to make holes in the atmosphere before twelve, but I’ll call for you then. Must get a move on here, now. See you at twelve, and beat any train you can catch to the nearest station.”

HE COULD not beat the *Cheltenham Flyer*, he knew, but, if Tott went by it, he would still be three-quarters of an hour or more distant from Barnby when he got out at Cheltenham. Half-past ten, now—he had an hour and twenty minutes before going to pick up Tott.

Of course that second case was a coincidence! It could be nothing else. But, strive as he would to convince himself of this, a second passenger arrived with him in the taxi at Gravenor Mansions, and his name was Fear.

In the entrance hall of the Mansions he faced Parkoot, just emerging from one of the lifts, and asked: "Inspector Crampton? Have you seen anything of him yet?"

"I've just taken him up, Mr. Green," the man answered.

"Then, if you will, take me up too."

They went up, and emerged to go along the spacious corridor to a door which Parkoot opened with his key. A uniformed constable faced them, in the luxuriously furnished lounge which gave access to the other rooms of the flat, and he forestalled his query.

"I understand Inspector Crampton is here. Will you tell him Mr. Green would like to see him for a moment?"

"Just hold on a minute—I'll see."

"You needn't wait, Parkoot," Gees said, and inwardly reflected that it was unusual, to say the least, for the caretaker of the place to let even a police inspector make a search of one of the tenants' apartments without witnessing his operations. But, with no demur, Parkoot retired and closed the door again, just as Crampton appeared, with yet another uniformed man looking over his shoulder.

"Ah! Good morning, Mr. Green. Got another line for us?"

Gees shook his head. "No more than to tell you this is a waste of time," he answered. "What do you expect to find here?"

Crampton's mouth closed, trapwise. Then he opened it again to ask, stiffly: "I conclude you have got wind of the second case?"

"Why should that second case bring you in here?" Gees countered.

"Because both the man and woman who were in this flat at the time Parkoot's child was abducted went to Barnby-under-Hedlington, and the second case followed on their arrival. Which may be a coincidence, and may not. I prefer not

to take any chances on it.”

“And as I asked before—what do you expect to find here?”

Over his shoulder Crampton spoke an answer to a question—“Yes, carry on, Sergeant.” Then, with chill quietness: “I understand, Mr. Green, you spent some considerable time on the Force. That being so, your own common sense ought to tell you the answer to that question.”

“Ah! Yes, I suppose it ought,” Gees admitted equally coolly. “Have you any objection to my knowing—as a decidedly interested party, I may tell you—to my knowing the result of your search?”

“Interested? In what way interested?” Crampton demanded sharply.

“I must refer you to Inspector Tott for an answer to that.”

“Well—” Crampton glanced at his wrist watch—“you may wait here till we have finished, if you like considering—” he appeared to relent slightly from his stiffness—“the line on the case you gave to us—just a little while back.”

“Then I will wait,” Gees said, in turn glancing at his watch. Not quite eleven o’clock—he could afford half an hour, and still be able to pick up Tott at the appointed time.

Crampton left him in company with the uniformed man guarding the door, and as the minutes dragged he heard the voices of the searchers, but could not distinguish what they said. Finishing on one side of the entrance lounge, they crossed it to tackle the rooms opposite. The man on the door occupied himself in an inspection of prints on the walls of the lounge, and Gees noted that every one was a picture of either ruins of old Egypt or some aspect of, evidently, the Nile. Kefra herself had chosen them—or had Saleh ibn Nahor been responsible?

Now, forced against his will to question whether the two deaths were in any way connected, and sure (he told himself he was absolutely sure) that Kefra was in no way connected with either tragedy, he felt that he wanted to know more about the blue-eyed little man who was neither old nor young, and yet looked both.

He served Kefra now, it appeared, yet equally it appeared that in the time of her meeting with Gees’ father she had served him, or at least been in league with

him. Combining Kefra's admitted association with the man thirty-eight years ago, and her slip which revealed his name as that of the wanted man, with what his father had told him, Gees felt justified in assuming that Saleh ibn Nahor he had encountered was the Saleh of his father's story. Yet here he was with Kefra, free and unsuspected!

So far changed, in nearly four decades, of course, that he bore no likeness to the Saleh who had either killed Sadie Hillman or instigated her death.

Yet, if that death were as Kefra had said one of an appointed nine due to other than human agency, how did Saleh come into it? As agent, perhaps, but not as instigator.

Again, if the tale of nine had been completed, how account for this tenth in Gloucestershire, except by regarding its likeness to the others as entirely coincidental?

Now, reviewing Kefra's story of a covenant which called for nine sacrifices, three at least of them being dear to her, he wanted to dismiss the whole thing as utter fantasy, and could not. She had made it too vivid, too real, as he had heard her tell it in the firelight.

BUT Saleh—Saleh had had certain trunks loaded on to the car, the evening of the day the Parkoot child had been kidnapped—by Saleh? He had set out with the car for Barnby Grange, some time that evening, and should have left London by a west road, headed for either Maidenhead or Aylesbury.

But, with any modern car, he might have gone out by Putney and Kingston, thrown out the suitcase with its grim contents, and then gone over Kingston bridge and borne northwest to come to Maidenhead by Windsor and Slough.

Yes, why—what possible motive was there? Was Kefra unwittingly employing a homicidal maniac? If so, how account for the claw-marks on the murdered child? Saleh's hands were normal enough—Gees had seen them as he waited at table, and—but the cats that had frightened the three maids away from the Grange! Had Saleh got those cats concealed somewhere. Were they—

Kefra had conjured up two great tawny cats to sit by the parapets of the moat bridge—or had she? Illusions, lasting a minute or less while Gees had gazed at them, and then ceasing to be when the strain of throwing the pictures of them on

his brain became too much for her.

Great cats, small lionesses—the goddess Sekhmet had been portrayed as a woman with the head of a lioness. But suppose Kefra had shaped those illusions as guards for the bridge because there were real cats like them somewhere about the Grange. Supposing the real ones had got loose and killed that girl?

Had those real ones in like fashion killed the Parkoot child, after which Saleh had packed the body in the suitcase and disposed of it on his drive to Barnby Grange? If so, how had the cats got at the child in Gravenor Mansions? Some servant or attendant would have known if any such animals had been housed there; an animal, even of the cat tribe, big enough to kill a two-year-old child could hardly exist unseen in a place like that. Alternatively, had such an animal existed unseen in Kefra's flat, it could not have got at the child down on the ground floor, or could it, in Vincent's absence?

\_Is my magic strong?

—

The half-mocking question came back to his mind as he waited there with the placid, unimaginative constable. All his life he had made a hobby rather than a study of old religions and cults, always keeping the open mind he found so useful.

Of a truth her magic had been strong. Was Saleh a partner in it, master of or servant to her, or was he the agent and human vehicle of that still stronger magic of Sekhmet?

At that point Crampton appeared in the entrance hall, followed by his sergeant, who carried a rather soggy-looking roll of carpet under his arm. Gees looked a question.

“Found it in the bathroom, hung up to dry,” Crampton explained. “Somebody washed it out and hung it there, but didn't wash quite hard enough. I'm taking it to see if tests will tell us whether what's left of the stains is human blood.”

“It would have been burnt, if that were so,” Gees said.

Crampton shook his head. “These flats are all-electric,” he pointed out. “You



couldn't burn anything here without leaving traces."

"Finding a carpet in the bathroom doesn't prove it was ever laid," Gees remarked. "I don't see this getting you much farther."

"This isn't a carpet, but a rug," Crampton said, "and—well, since you seem rather dubious, come and have a look here."

Gees followed him to a large room opening directly on to the entrance lounge, one in which, except for a low divan immediately opposite the door, and three little octagonal tables of ebony, inlaid with silver and ivory, was no furniture as the western mind regards it.

On a pile carpet of delicate, greenish blue were heaped cushions of crimson, blue of a slightly deeper shade than the carpet, and silver tissue, two heaps to each of the low tables.

One picture, a distant view of the island of Philae in sunset light, hung over the divan. The almost empty simplicity of the room had an effect of sensuousness. Then, looking where Crampton's finger pointed, Gees saw an oblong, about eight feet by six, in front of the divan, within which the heavy pile of the carpet was flattened down smoothly as if by continuous pressure on it.

"That's where the rug was taken from," Crampton said, with satisfaction in his tone. "It's exactly the size of that flat patch."

"Is that so?" Gees managed to keep all concern of every kind out of the comment. "Well, thank you for my look-see, Inspector, and now I must hit the trail. But I think, if there were any chance of your finding what you expect on that rug, you'd have found something of the same sort on either cushions or carpet in here."

"Did you read the account of the postmortem?" Crampton asked.

"'Fraid I didn't," said Gees, and shook his head.

"The child's body was practically bloodless—something hellish about the whole thing," Crampton told him. "Drained dry of blood. I don't know—anyhow, I'm going to get that rug tested, even though we can't find a sign of anything else in the place."

“Good luck to you. I’m off, now. Got to hurry to keep an appointment with Inspector Tott. He’ll be interested to hear about this. See you later, perhaps.”

He went with no further word—a glance at his wrist watch showed him that he had less than twenty minutes in which to go back to his flat and get what he needed, and go on to pick up Tott.

A promise of an extra half-crown to a taxi driver shortened his transit to Little Oakfield Street, and he saw his car awaiting him before he hurried up the stairs.

Inside his own door he halted and stood gazing along the corridor, tensed for long seconds of anticipation, half-incredulous, half-fearful.

Kefra’s scent was in the place, unmistakable though faint. And again he could hear, just hear, the purring of a cat!

He went along the corridor to his bedroom and entered, for there, as before, the purring seemed loudest. As he thrust the door open the sound ceased utterly, and, search as he would, he could find nothing in the room to account for it.

For a moment or two he stood there, staring around helplessly.

He got his automatic pistol out of the wardrobe, and with a round in the chamber and the safety catch off went all over the flat, vainly as far as accounting for the purring sound was concerned. Then, knowing that Tott was waiting, he slipped the pistol into his hip pocket, stuffed into an attache-case pyjamas and what else he would need, and added two spare magazines for the pistol, loaded with eight rounds apiece, before closing the case and bearing it down the stairs to his car.

# CHAPTER 11

## The Red Sea

INSPECTOR Tott climbed in and took the seat in the Rolls-Bentley next to Gees. “I was just giving you up!” he exclaimed, and sat paralyzed as Gees’ car darted into movement, shot past a taxi, dived between a big Daimler and a truck, and came out ahead of the three miraculously—in Tott’s opinion—unscathed.

“Whew,” Tott breathed, after an eventless two hundred yards or so, “I haven’t had any experience of your driving, till now.”

“I thought you were in a hurry,” Gees told him equably.

Again Tott held his breath—and the side of the car as well. He said, a little later, “There is a thirty-mile limit for *all* London.”

“With you aboard, I can forget it,” Gees told him, “and I’ve got to make up that fifteen minutes I kept you waiting.”

Tott said: “You’d better—” and then exchanged speech for silent prayer, knowing that the truckload of iron girders bearing down on them would grind him so small that eggspoons would be needed for scraping him off the street. When another miracle had put the truck behind them Gees said: “That’s what I am doing—can’t you see?”

“Bum-bub-better keep that limit!” Tott fairly shouted. “If you don’t, I’ll run you in and charge you myself.”

Not another word was exchanged between them until, far beyond Uxbridge and its speed limits, Tott said, “Eighty-five. Suppose a car shot out of any of those crossroads we’ve passed?”

Gees answered: “How did you manage to get posted to this case? Did Gloucestershire ask for a Scotland Yard man to give it the once-over?”

Tott glared at him

“I’m *not* posted to it. I’m on leave, till next Monday.”

Gees slowed for the long, long speed limit through Wycombe, and asked, casually: “What’s your view of the whole business?”

“What’s yours?” Tott snapped “Amateur deductions are always interesting.”

“Well, I told you you’d be surprised, but I’d better go back first. A very long way back of this case. From the earliest ages, from long before the beginnings of history, man has made gods for himself,” Gees said. “Gods within his comprehension, most of the time. Created them, say, out of belief and sacrifice. The belief gave them influence over the mass of their worshippers, and the sacrifices gave them a sort of semi-material strength. You get an example of this—in the tenth plague as recorded in Genesis, the slaughter of all the firstborn of Egypt.”

“I would very much like to know what you think you’re talking about,” Tott observed, very sourly indeed.

“The beginning of one,” Gees answered “Yes. It must be obvious that that slaughter of the firstborn of Egypt wasn’t the work of the universal Power we are beginning today to recognize as the source and ruler of all life. The real God wouldn’t go in for wholesale murder of his creatures and bring mourning into thousands of homes just to let a horde of Israelites loose to go and do more wholesale slaughter in their promised land. Oh, no!

“By belief in their Jehovah, the collective belief of many thousands of people, and by sacrifices to him, those same Israelites created an actual Jehovah and gave him tremendous power. And you’ll find lots of tales in the Old Testament of how the said Jehovah got angry and ran amok, as long as their collective belief and continual sacrifices kept him strong enough for manifestations. It’s the old idea.”

“What about skipping all that bilge and coming to the case?” Tott interrupted. “Those lights are against you, too.”

Gees stopped the car gently and smoothly, dead on the traffic line. “As I was saying—but that’s all about the Hebrew Jehovah, anyhow. He’s only one instance of how gods were made. Other instances—well, from Easter Island images to the distortion of belief that set the Inquisition torturing and burning.

And one big crowd of gods of all sorts in Egypt.”

The car moved on. “As I was saying,” Gees went on, “Egypt was stacked high with gods, some of them developed and adopted from the days before Menes—if Menes ever existed, which is denied today. Some of them won enough belief to come to great power, mostly of a fairly benevolent sort, and I don’t think any record of human sacrifice to any one of them has yet been discovered. But that’s not to say that some of them didn’t demand human sacrifices—and get them, too, especially the ones adopted from older races to fit Egyptian needs. One of them particularly I have in mind.”

“YOU’RE out of my depth,” Tott said, “and though I’ve got a glimmering idea of what you may be getting at, I don’t see how you can fit it on to either of these two cases. Can you see counsel for the prosecution opening his case with a lecture of how the Hebrews got across the Red Sea and Pharaoh and his little lot struck a wet patch?”

“Leaving all that for a bit,” Gees said, “I wonder whether you ever heard of secret societies among the tribes of central Africa, calling themselves leopard-men, and lion-men, and using skins of various specimens of the cat tribe to inspire terror and work a sort of magic?”

“I have,” Tott admitted. “Lots of explorers and people have written about that leopard society.”

“Have you also heard of Sekhmet, the lioness-headed goddess of Egypt?”

“No. She’s a new one on me. There was a cat goddess, though.”

“There was,” Gees assented. “Bubastes, a much later creation. I have an idea Sekhmet came north from central Africa to Egypt—I mean, belief in her came to Egypt with the coming of invaders from central Africa, and the race that made Egyptian civilization seized on her and developed her. Built up a priesthood around her, sacrificed to her, shaped her to fit the Egyptian character, and gave her real power.”

“You mean—the images of her had power?” Tott asked.

“No. I mean there was a live creation, made up of thoughts and prayers and sacrifices, which within certain limits had powers. The old Egyptians, were

wonderful magicians, and they could create such a being to serve their own ends. And just like Jehovah and the other old gods, Sekhmet would not cease to exist as long as belief in her and sacrifices to her persisted—especially if she could get human sacrifices.”

“M’lud—” Tott sounded utterly derisive—“I submit that my learned friend has utterly failed to sustain his case. Evidence for the defence, M’lud, not only shows but proves that this unfortunate child was chewed up by an Egyptian goddess, and this Crown prosecution of my unfortunate client is more than an utter farce.”

“Your gibe may be very near the truth,” Gees remarked coolly.

Tott digested that in silence until they had curved on the western end of the Oxford by-pass. The car did not so much gather pace, on the straight again, as leap easily into a smooth and quiet swiftness. Presently Gees slowed again.

“We ought to have hit several things, but we haven’t,” Tott said.

A small car had shot out of a side turning, and the powerful brakes of the Rolls-Bentley had pulled it to a stop so suddenly that the driver of the small car was just able to miss the front bumper and get going Londonward.

Gees drove on.

Tott looked around, and saw no sign of the small car along the road. He drew a rueful, tragic breath. “That absolute balderdash you were talking a little while ago. I was thinking—here are two cases of murder, almost certainly, and by the look of things both of them are the work of the same homicidal maniac. Places and times give us a pretty good idea of—well, I’ll say good reason to suspect where that maniac may be found, and—”

“And what?”

“I had a pretty extensive experience of criminal work before I was posted to my present job, and I got my promotion through dealing in facts I could prove. If I’d gone all bats over lion-headed goddesses and things like that, I’d still be in uniform regulating traffic—or else in a padded cell.

“I came to you a few days ago and told you I didn’t like a certain person, and I

couldn't say why—which I own was not dealing in facts. Now I've got grounds for suspecting—I won't put that more definitely—grounds for suspecting that there *is* a reason for my dislike, and that certain person or someone connected with her is involved in this business. Grounds for suspecting it, I say, and therefore satisfying myself about it one way or the other.

“But I haven't and I know I never will have grounds for worrying myself about lion-headed goddesses. And you can't believe any of that foolery about old gods being able to commit murders, any more than I do. Why! It's utterly fantastic and absurd.”

“An open mind,” Gees said, “is as useful as a spare collar-stud. I always travel with both. We'll pull in at that pub on the bend, and you can pay for the drinks.”

“I will, with pleasure.”

“You know—” Gees stopped the car in front of the Inn—“down in the back of my mind somewhere I've got rather a liking for you.”

“Which is why you try to pull my leg, I suppose,” Tott rejoined in his sarcastic but good-humored way.

“Not exactly.” Gees got out and went round by the radiator, while Tott descended from his side. “I was merely salting the ground, in case any of your digging turns up what I see is in it. Just don't be too surprised.”

“But you don't mean to say you believe—” Tott began, and stopped. No point in pursuing the subject.

“Now haven't I just told you the value of an open mind?” Gees remonstrated. “Let's hustle after those drinks—it's about five minutes to closing time for this part of the world.”

## CHAPTER 12

### Not of This Earth

THE Hedlington police sergeant was respectful, almost worshipful, in the presence of the great Inspector Tott. “Our own inspector, Mr. Perry, will be here in about half an hour, sir, if you care to wait,” he said.

“Half an hour, eh?” Tott consulted his watch.

“Maybe less, sir.”

“Well, sergeant, I may tell you and him too that I have no official connection with this case—my looking in on you today is a busman’s holiday, if you know what that is. I’m well—rather interested in such an unusual crime.”

“Unusual is right, sir—and pretty horrible, too. If it was a crime. Mr. Perry is inclined to think it was some animal, like that one in London the other day. We don’t know quite what to make of it.”

“Umm-m!” Reflecting, Tott decided to wait for the local inspector. “And the body—what had been done with it?” he inquired.

“Taken to the *Rest and Be Thankful*—that’s our village inn, sir,” the sergeant answered. “The parents’ll take it after the inquest, tomorrow morning, but it’s there till then.”

“If possible, I’d like to see it, sergeant. You can wait here, Mr. Green.”

“On the other hand?” Gees said gently, but persuasively.

“I’ll take you along sir,” the sergeant offered.

Gees said: “Thank you very much,” before Tott could speak.

Leaving the car outside the sergeant’s house, the three of them walked along the village street to the inn, closed at this hour. The sergeant led them to the padlocked door of a brick-and-tile barn before which a constable kept guard. He



handed the key to the sergeant.

The body lay on a narrow trestle table, covered by a sheet. Tott drew down the sheet as far as the waist, revealing the body of a girl who in death appeared much less than twelve years old. There were deep, terrible lacerations across the breast and the left side of the throat was fearfully torn. Forcing himself to it, Tott leaned over the body to look closely at the right arm and shoulder. He drew back again, white of face; he turned to Gees. He said: "Two of them, and one at least was human."

In turn Gees leaned over the corpse and then drew back. "Yes, two of them," he assented. "No animal made those marks That's the grip of a hand without claws on it."

Tott lifted the corner of the sheet. "I've seen enough—haven't you?" he asked. "Those wounds—quite bloodless."

"Cover it," Gees urged. "This feels like sacrilege to me. They'll have photographs and measurements, if you want them. I don't."

Tott replaced the sheet, and they emerged from the shed to face the sergeant as the constable replaced the padlock and turned the key. "The whole village has gone into a huddle over it, sir," the sergeant said, "and I reckon you've seen enough not to wonder at it."

"I don't," Tott agreed. "Anything bearing on it yet?"

The sergeant shook his head gloomily "Not a thing, sir. Not a pad mark, not a footprint. Nothing. Pretty much every man in the village that's got a gun is out beating the woods. Mr. Perry warned 'em of the danger, because if it is a leopard or a tiger as they reckon, shot guns'll be precious little use. But they reckon if they keep together they'll be all right, and I suppose they will, too."

"Woods?" Tott echoed. "Was the body found in these woods, then?"

"No, sir—it was on the open ground betwixt here and Barnby, at the top of the hill, and the woods are t'other side of Hedlington from there. But they reckon it's the only part where anything like that'd lay up after a kill. I don't see it that way myself, nor does Mr. Perry, because them animals don't just, drain away all the blood like this one did. From all I've heard of 'em, they go for flesh food."

Tott nodded in sober thoughtful agreement. “The girl was out alone, of course,” he suggested after a pause.

“Children go all over the place here alone, sir,” the sergeant answered. “Not now, of course—not since this happened. But they did. She went down to Barnby with some friends of hers after school.

Then she set off to come back home, up here, and they were the last to see her alive.”

“Found—when and how?” Tott asked.

“By me, sir. I’d walked my bicycle up the hill and the light from the lamp showed me something a good twenty yards back from the road, on the grass. So I wheeled the bike across, and found her. No tracks, no anything And next to no blood, either!”

“Do you know what time she left the other children?”

“Somewhere close on five, sir. They say it was beginning to get dark, and she ran off in a hurry because she’d be late for tea. And I found out they were all late for tea, all five of ‘em.”

“And the time when you found her?” Tott persisted.

“Three minutes to eight by my watch, sir. I checked it at once.”

Listening, Gees reflected that at about that time, the evening of the Parkott child’s disappearance, the Gravenor doorman must have been helping Saleh ibn Nahor to get his trunks out to the car in front of Gravenor Mansions.

FOR a little while Tott brooded. “Well, sergeant, I think we’ll go along and wait for your Inspector Perry to turn up. I suppose he’ll go back to your house?”

“Yes, sir, and I wouldn’t wonder if he’s got there by now.”

They went back. The group in the road fell silent as they passed. They had almost reached the garden gate of the sergeant’s house when Tott spoke again, to nobody in particular:

“Absolutely real and solid, whatever it was.”

The sergeant said: “I beg your pardon, sir?”

“I was thinking,” Tott said, “that fancies and foolishness don’t fit into any case of this sort. Finding what or who did it can only be done by sticking to hard, everyday facts.”

“Why, yes, sir, and that’s what the inspector and me are doing.”

A gravely cheerful, middle-aged man, Inspector Perry, and rather above the average of a provincial police officer, in Gees’ opinion. Rather more a man of the world. “I had a long talk over the phone with Inspector Crampton,” he said, “and by what he had to tell me there’s a similarity about both deaths. Except—in his case there appear to be no holding marks.”

Tott nodded comprehension. “I’ve seen the body here,” he admitted. “And my first conclusion—my main conclusion, I should say—was that there were two—somethings. It doesn’t look human.”

“Quite so—quite so,” Perry agreed. “By what Crampton had to say, claw, and fang only, there. But here—the only sort of beast that could have made those grip marks on the shoulder would be one of the ape tribe, ourang or chimpanzee or possibly baboon, and none of them hunt with members of the cat family. In the same way, no member of the cat family, as far as I know, can grip to cause a bruise. I should say bruises. That awful tear in the throat might have been caused by any sort of beast, but when you add on the claw marks, it’s feline and nothing else. I make it a pretty big feline, too.”

“An ordinary house cat can scratch deeply,” Tott observed.

“But couldn’t leave its prey as bloodless as that poor child’s body was when it was found,” Perry pointed out. “And that reminds me. Down under Hedlington—literally down under it, by two hundred feet or so—is Barnby, named Barnby-under-Hedlington, from its position. To get there, you wind down the side of the hill—the body was found at the top of that hill. About halfway down the hillside becomes cliff, and the road is cut in and railed for safety. If you stop at that point and stand with your back to the hillside, you can look straight over Barnby hamlet and see what is known as the Grange.”

“I see. And this Grange?”

“Was let furnished at the beginning of last autumn—the owner went abroad—to a Miss Kefra. She’s got a sort of chauffer-personal-man, and he’s Egyptian, and she had three servants there all the time—the man went backward and forward to London with her. Pretty well-to-do, I understand. Well, the day before yesterday, the three maids all quit, and said it was because they couldn’t stand the cats.”

Tott said, quite calmly: “That sounds relevant. Might be worth looking into.”

“I thought the same,” Perry assented. “Two of the three were engaged through a Cheltenham agency, and I’ve still got to trace them—if I think it worthwhile. The third is a Mrs. Bell, a widow who had been at the Grange as cook and lives here in Hedlington with her brother. She says her reason for leaving was that she wouldn’t stay on in the house alone with Miss Kefra’s man—Sally something-or-other, his name appears to be.”

“Saleh,” Gees put in, “Saleh ibn Nahor—which means son of Nahor.”

“Sally—yes,” Perry agreed. “Only one of the other two actually saw any cats, it seems, and she rushed into the other one’s bedroom in the middle of the night, too scared to stay alone in her own room. According to her, she’d heard a noise and gone out to look for the source—mind, I get this only at third hand from Mrs. Bell—gone out wondering about it, thinking there was a stray kitten or something of the sort outside her room, and found herself face to face with two enormous cats, smooth-coated, yellowish beasts, she described them.

“She managed to shoo at them—this is the tale she told the other girl and Mrs. Bell—and one of them growled at her. It didn’t miaow or spit as an ordinary cat does, but growled.

“Then both of them came at her and penned her against the wall of the corridor outside her room, one crouched as if to spring at her, and she gave herself up for lost—too paralyzed with terror even to scream, she said. And then they weren’t there, either of them.”

“Somnambulistic nightmare,” Tott said.

“IN THE morning,” Perry went on, she summoned up courage enough to go to her own room to dress, and swore to the other girl and Mrs. Bell that she saw the

hindquarters and waving tail of one of those ghost cats as it went into this Miss Kefra's own room—Miss Kefra was in the room at the time.

“So she waited till the other girl was dressed, and then went along with her to get dressed herself. When all three of them got together in the kitchen, she asked Mrs. Bell whether the place was supposed to be haunted, but without saying anything about what she had just seen.

“Mrs. Bell owned that there were stories about it, and then the girl told what she'd seen and said she couldn't stop another hour in a place like that. She'd infected the other girl with her fright, and they both packed and quit. Then Mrs. Bell had a word with Miss Kefra, and *she* packed and quit, to some extent because of the panic of those two girls and this tale of ghost-cats, but more, she says, because of this Mr. Sally.”

“It sounds like a queer business,” Tott observed.

“If you ask me,” Perry said, “the look of that Sally chap is enough to give any girl the jitters, and that place is too far from cinemas and the boys to pay for the tickets, and girls like those two know they can get posts anywhere, with the shortage of domestics there is nowadays, especially in villages and small towns.

“I went to the Grange this morning,” Perry went on, “and this Sally let me in. He's a weird-looking specimen with a face a million years old, but he was quite respectful. I told Miss Kefra why I was there—the possibility of cats about the place. She was most sympathetic over the death of the girl, and assured me there were no cats of any sort at the Grange.

“And she as good as insisted on my satisfying myself about it, went all over it with me, from attic to cellar, in case, as she said, any strays had got in without her knowledge. We went over all the buildings, too. I'd gathered from Mrs. Bell that Miss Kefra was a bit of a terror, but I found her perfectly charming, a real lady in every way, and anxious to do everything she could to help me.”

“What was that you said the girl said—that the cats suddenly weren't there when they first frightened her?”

“According to Mrs. Bell, they were her words. Not that the cats vanished, but that they weren't there, just as one of them was going to spring at her. But nobody else in that house ever saw any—and if there was a cat there, Mrs. Bell

would have known about it. I see no reason to disbelieve her telling me that she never saw a cat in or near the house, all the while she was there.”

“You acquit the Grange of cats?” Tott suggested.

“Absolutely. I’ve never seen a ghost myself, but that girl may have thought she saw something—may even have seen something, for all I know, because it seems that some people can see apparitions, if they are to be believed. But apparitions, even ghost-cats, haven’t got material claws and fangs. They can’t rend and kill physically.”

“Have you any theory at all of the cause of this?” Gees asked.

Perry shook his head.

“We can’t get away from the fact that two people, this Miss Kefra and her man Saleh, were at Gravenor Mansions or thereabouts when the Parkoot child was killed in this—well, I might almost say this unique way—and then they move down here and another death of almost exactly the same sort happens,” Tott explained.

“Which was why I had my talk with Crampton over the telephone, to get all the particulars he could give me,” Perry pointed out. “The cases are similar, but there is this difference of the bruises.”

“A child of two wouldn’t struggle long enough for the attacker to cause any bruises. A child of twelve might,” Tott observed. “And you say—the place where the body was found—”

“You mean you’d like to give it a once over? Because there’s absolutely nothing to be seen. There are no footprints of any sort—that grass wouldn’t register any—and there’s nothing but the very faint impress made by the body, and the equally faint tracks left by Sergeant Willis and his bicycle—and Willis was as careful not to obliterate anything as I should have been myself. My trouble though, is that there was nothing to obliterate.”

Tott looked at his watch. “It’s getting rather late, but I think I’d like to look at that spot while the light holds.”

“I’ll drive you there, if you like,” Gees offered.

“And I’ll come along too,” Perry said. “If you, Mr. Tott, can make any suggestions, I shall be only too pleased to have them, because I’ve got to own that up to the present—unless those chaps out beating the woods find something, that is—I’m absolutely at sea.”

They went to Gees’ car, and Tott seated himself in the back so that Perry, beside Gees, could guide them. But Gees needed no great amount of guiding, having come up from the Grange and through Hedlington when he had left Kefra at the Grange the day before. It came to him as something of a shock that only thirty hours or so had passed since he had last seen her.

He drove past the last house of the village, which was set in a depression along the height which rose over Barnby. The road curved westward, over the highest part of the ridge; and then a gentle descent brought them to a point where the low stone wall bounding the road on their right receded to take in over an acre of tussocky grass land, on which grew a few hawthorn bushes.

As Perry called a halt, Gees saw a uniformed constable midway between two of the bushes.

Perry got out of the car as it stopped. “This is all that’s left of what used to be Hedlington Common,” he observed. “The rest of it has been enclosed.”

“And the child came up that hill,” Tott suggested, nodding at the steep descent toward which the car was heading.

“MUST have come that way,” Perry assented. “And—you can see the Grange chimneys over there—” he pointed as he spoke—“while Barnby itself, what there is of it, is down under us, under the side of this hill. By which I mean—anyone coming from the Grange—”

“Yes,” Tott said, as the sentence remained incomplete, “but—it’s not my case, and I don’t intend to take any hand in it. But—no offense intended—you seem to me almost anxious to acquit the Grange people.”

“I don’t see it as possible to do anything else,” Perry pointed out. “After that talk with Miss Kefra—my estimate of her—” Again he broke off, frowning as if resentful of Tott’s insistence.

“I believe,” Tott said very slowly, “in their normal moments people who suffer

from a homicidal mania can be absolutely charming.”

“Did you ever hear of anyone afflicted with homicidal mania who made use of cats?” Perry asked. “Or leopards or lions or tigers, or whatever this thing or these things might be? Because I’ll put my life against a stick of celery that nothing human caused the wounds that brought that poor child to her death. That’s impossible.”

“You may remember—” Gees, still seated in the car, spoke to Tott—“I sketched a bare outline of a theory on the drive here.”

“And when I attach any importance to that theory,” Tott answered sourly, “it’ll be time for me to apply for long leave and spend it in a lunatic asylum. Are you going to wait here for us?”

Gees shook his head. “I’m going on a bit. I wonder—Mr. Perry, if I feel like staying the night round here, do you think I could get a decent room at the *Rest And Be Thankful* spot?”

“Sure of it, Mr. Green. They’ve nobody staying there this time of year, but they’ve got three or four rooms.”

“I expect I’ll come back, then,” Gees said, as he released his hand brake to let the car forward on the slope. “If I go on to Cheltenham instead, many thanks for admitting me to your council.”

“He’s a clever chap,” Tott observed to Perry as they advanced toward the constable who came to attention as he faced them, “but batty about ghosts and the supernatural generally. That theory he talked about was no more than leg-pulling—all about the plagues of Egypt and old gods and goddesses. Interesting, but utterly ridiculous tripe as far as this case of yours is concerned—or the one in London either.”

Thus he pronounced judgment, while Gees let the car’s own weight take it engineless down the slope, until where stout iron railing fenced the road on his right, he stopped and got out, to go to the railings and stand with his back to the car, looking down into the valley toward which this road tended.

A bitter wind struck on him from the northwest; already there was a shade less light in the leaden sky. He looked over the railings, downward, and saw that he



stood at the brink of an almost vertical cliff, with the cottages and two or three larger houses that made up Barnby so near its foot that he could have tossed stones on to most of their roofs with very little effort.

A mile or so beyond them, slightly above the general level of the valley, showed Barnby Grange with its surrounding moat and few trees masking it not at all at this leafless season. He reflected that the castle which had preceded this present building on the site must have been a very strong place in the days before artillery could threaten it from the height above him. Now, the square, gray, building appeared somber in the failing light; he could see no smoke over any of its chimneys, nor any sign of life about it.

He remembered a part of Kefra's fantastic story of herself: *When Barnby Grange was the castle under Hedlington, in the year that Poitiers was fought. SHE laid the darkness on me here in this keep for the sixth time and renewed her strength by a young girl's life.*

One had either to accept that story of hers in its entirety, or reject it altogether—it was not a recital of which one could believe parts and dismiss the rest.

He might have dismissed it, as practical sanity dictated, had it not been for his father's story of her and her knowledge of the names in that story. Then he remembered his father's words: "I'm perfectly certain that girl could tempt Saint Anthony himself, if she wished." And the way she had won Inspector Perry to believe in her justified the estimate—he was a very long way from Tott's distrust of her. But then, she had had no chance to win Tott over.

Abruptly Gees found himself facing the completeness with which she had won him over.

He had come all this way for no other reason than to see her and aid her if need arose over the preposterous suspicion that she could be in any way connected with these murders.

But now, gazing toward that grim, lonely grange in the middle distance, he felt reluctant to go on. The spell she had laid on him ceased to have power; his practical self demanded resumption of normal aims. The glamor with which for a brief while she had conquered him was not of this earth: it was unreal...

The minute of resistance passed. Consciousness of all that she had asked and

given, of all that she had promised—“one with time and you for ever—”  
submerged him like a leaping wave. He got back into the car and went on.

He told himself: “At least I must see her.”

## CHAPTER 13

### The Hell Cats Purr

FRAMED in the doorway of the Grange, waiting for Gees to enter, Kefra stood outlined against the dimness of the entrance hall. When he had stepped over the threshold she closed the door and turned to him; for a minute, perhaps, she gave herself up to his hold, clung to him with a strength he had not thought she possessed, and he felt her trembling.

“I prayed—knew you would come to me,” she said, almost sobbing.

Here, he realized, was no mistress of strong magic, but a frightened woman—yet the renewed strength of her spell over him was greater for this weakness in which she told her need of him. He asked: “Where is Saleh? Are you alone here?”

“Saleh has gone to Cheltenham,” she answered. “This morning a police inspector came to see me, and we thought it better that he should go to Cheltenham instead of the village for things I needed. They—these people here—think that I—Come into the drawing room.” She stood back from his hold. “Your coat here. I must—”

She did not end it. He followed her into the room, and saw the heaped fire in the iron basket on the hearth—the bitter wind made it a welcome sight. Standing before it, Kefra faced him, and he heard her long, tremulous sigh—of relief?

“I know,” she said. “You counted the cost, and felt you must be free of me. You could not believe—” She left it at that.

“I could not believe,” he echoed. “Not being with you, it was all different. And reason rejects—”

“And now you are with me?”

“You are Kefra. There is nobody like you.”

Her eyes, all darkness in the firelight, looked full into his own, and he had the

sense—justifiable, for once—that all this had been before. Yet this was different, for she was wielding no magic.

“You see it is impossible,” she said. “You took and controlled the strength of a thousand men to bring you to me. If you choose to turn a switch, you may hear a man talking or a woman singing on the other side of the world. You might have taken the strength of ten thousand men and come through the air to me. You might have lifted a toy and held it to your ear while you talked to me across the distance. And because I, Kefra, use no toys nor any strength but the knowledge I have gained, you say that reason rejects what I have told you.”

“Cold reason,” he said. “With you, I don’t retain cold reason. But—I’m keeping all of it that I can talk like this, and I own it isn’t much. Still—will you understand, I wonder?—I want to be free of you while I find out—it’s a brutal thing to say, but I don’t mean it to be brutal. Kefra, if I’m to throw aside everything else for you, as I see must be done, I’ve got to know more than I know now. I hate to say this, but—I can’t join my life to one who depends on illusion to hold me. I’d rather end it, and seek the final reality than begin, then have it end.”

SHE sat down in the old-fashioned armchair before the fire, and pointed him to its fellow—the one he had occupied when she had made magic in this room. She said: “That was very bravely spoken, and I honor your courage. If I am—if I am a little less than when you went away, still I think, enough remains to answer you.”

“I think there is more of you,” he answered. “Less of illusion and more of you. Then, you were a whirlwind that swept me up and made me less than myself. Now, you are a woman, worth holding.”

He did not attempt to hold her, but sat down, facing her across the firelight. She said: “I let your cold reason guide you, and believe it will impel you to me more surely than if I willed your desire. Because I can give as no woman of a day ever gave—but I must give answer to all you would ask, before that may be. You do not come to me, today. You come to one who may have had part in the deaths of two children, and ask if I am that one.”

“What I ask, Kefra, is for your own sake. You must see it so.”

She brooded a while. As, when he had sat here with her before, he waited; the

last of the daylight faded out. She asked: “*Would* you join your life to mine?”

He answered: “You need not will my desire, Kefra. Now I see you again, I know—will you join *your* life to mine?”

She said: “Woven into your life—do you remember? I asked you to keep that as my last spoken thought, when you left me. And now you come as a judge—what is it you would judge?”

Her gaze was compassionate. “You think you have learned all you know of old wisdom in the span of one life, and ask me to express my knowledge in terms of that one life. I said: ‘One with time and you for ever,’ and thus all that you ask of me, I give. How shall I tell you—what shall I tell you?”

“About these cats. What is this tale a servant girl is telling about two big yellowish cats? I saw those two cats myself, under your hypnotism, or whatever it may have been—and then I didn’t see them. Here’s a servant girl talking about seeing them, and very nearly being attacked by them. What’s the truth about their existence?”

“When I made that illusion,” she cried, “I wanted to show you that I have power as strong as any you could use against me. It *was* an illusion. But of what the girl saw, what caused her fear, I know nothing,” she said. “They were not of my devising.”

“Kefra—you ask me to believe that?”

She shook her head. “I ask you to believe nothing,” she answered.

“But I want it reduced to normality,” he persisted desperately. “What power is it, in terms of today? What knowledge is it?”

At that she smiled, just such a smile as might appear on a grown woman’s face over the question of a child. “I won it in ten times the length of life you have lived,” she said, “and you think I could tell it in an hour. Yet one part of it I showed you plainly.”

“And that?” he asked.

“YOU called it tricks with time. I will try to explain it in terms of today. Let us

say—” she paused to think for a while—“say that you enter on a road, bounded on each side by a wall that compels you to travel only along the road, and once you have entered on it you must travel to its end without pause. Is that clear to you?” She leaned forward.

“Quite clear,” he answered. “But—”

“Wait!” she interrupted. “Keep the picture—a road from which there is no egress, and on which you may not pause until you reach a certain point, beyond which you cannot see. The point at which you enter is the beginning of your life, the point beyond which you cannot see is its end, the road itself is time. The distance you travel along time is your life, from birth to death. It is not difficult to comprehend?”

“Easy,” he assented. “And you—”

“Know it possible to pass outside the walls that confine you to the road,” she completed for him. “To live in a space between two moments, so completely outside time that when you put a watch to your ear it seems to have stopped, because you are in a space between the last sound of its movement and the next. I took you into that state with me, and in it you lived through a change that would have carried us through days and nights, if you had been bound in time, moving along it. When the change was completed as I planned, we stepped back within the walls, and now travel with the rest of humanity, with time.”

“And that, you mean, is how this story you told me of yourself may be true,” he suggested. “Outside time from age to age—”

“No.” Again she interrupted him. “The covenant I made gave me no power to stand apart from time, but I gained that power myself, to use only in great need, since it drains away strength in a way you could only understand by using it. I see, now the covenant is fulfilled and no longer binds me, that my long continuing in time—not outside it—was not designed for my gain, as I thought when the covenant was offered me. She promised—remember as I remember—that I should not fail from my beauty while one is left alive to make sacrifice to her.”

“That is, one priest—or priestess,” he said, and with the consciousness of all that the last word implied shrank from her.

Slight though the movement was, she noted it. “One other than me,” she said. “I cursed her and ceased from serving her long ago. Am I one who would have killed my own child as the child you saw today was killed? Or the man by whom I bore that child? Tell me—am I?”

He said—“No.” And again, with the energy of conviction—“No!”

The clock on the mantel before and over them struck six, and momentarily his thoughts reverted to Tott, to whom all she had told him would be preposterous nonsense.

She asked wearily—“What else?”

He said: “Somewhere, then, a priest of Sekhmet is left.”

She echoed it. “Somewhere, a priest of Sekhmet is left.”

“And his name,” he added, “is Saleh ibn Nahor.”

“The goddess herself, not Saleh, claimed her sacrifices,” she said.

“How can a goddess take material shape and do material harm?”

“I am no goddess, but a woman,” she answered, “yet by my single will I could impose on your sight two beasts that appeared to guard the bridge—impose it for a little while. Thousands on thousands believed in Sekhmet, willed her to being, and since my single could bring those shapes to being for your sight, what must be the power and reality of one shaped by a thousand wills? A priest remains—Sekhmet *is!*”

“No goddess, but a fiend from hell,” he said.

“And what else are more than half the old deities of human belief?” she questioned in reply.

“That may be,” he said, “but this Saleh—whatever he may be. When I asked you, you told me he was neither young nor old. Which means—what?”

“When I answered that question, you faced me as an enemy,” she said. “Saleh comes of a family of *fellahin* near Luxor, one of the very, very few families of

pure Egyptian blood. They were great people once, though now they live in squalid poverty and some spark of old ambition stirred in this Saleh, Nahor's son—drew him out from his hut by the *shadoof* and set him on a way that crossed mine. Because he was apt I taught him—some few things.”

Frank though the answer sounded, he heard in it reserve, a complete withdrawal of herself from him, that marked a vast change in her since he had entered the room with her.

This was not Kefra who had told him she was one with him and time, but Cleo Kefra as he had first seen her. He felt doubt, now, of all that she had told him, and felt, too, a little trepidant in facing this strange, amber-eyed woman. For she *had* grown strange.

“Yes, taught him how to evoke beasts when he wanted to frighten away anyone he didn't wish to remain in this place.”

“Taught him more than was wise,” she said somberly. “Say rather that I renewed in him knowledge that had been his in past lives, so that in some things the pupil outran the teacher. But—” she stood up, and he too rose to face her—“no more—I will tell you no more. You must go—leave me.”

“You mean it, Kefra?”

“For your own sake—go now,” she bade. “Remember—against all that holds me as you see me now I force myself to call it back to your mind—I said, no harm should come to you. Thus, you must go now.”

He wanted to speak, but could not. There was that in the gaze of her amber eyes, with no more than points of darkness for pupils, that which compelled his silence.

After a long pause he turned away and went to the door, to look back for a moment and see her immobile before the fire, no more than a tall, slender, graceful outline.

Then he went out and closed the door between himself and her, to take up his coat and hat in the entrance hall and let himself out of the house. In his mind the sentence: “So that is that—” repeated itself over and over, foolishly, until he asked himself: “That was what? What was that?”



There was no answer to the question, but—were there two Kefras in the one shape? For surely this one who had bidden him go and reminded him that no harm should come to him was not the Kefra who had compelled him to believe in such a tale as no woman ever told before.

The moon, near the full, was hidden by the cloud-curtain that masked all the sky, but enough light was over the earth to silver it to gray indistinctness in place of darkness. Getting into the car, Gees switched on the ignition and pressed the starter, to hear the instant, purring response of the engine.

He gazed past the edge of his windscreen toward the stretch of moat on the south side of the house and grounds. There was—yes, it must be a reek rising from the water. Nothing but a faint mist rising, but to his sight or fancy it wreathed into shapes that went slinking, crouching, pantherwise through the dim grayness of night.

It was the purring of the engine that caused him to think that he was seeing such things.

Purring, purring... he reached out and switched off, and for nearly a minute *the purring went on!*

With a shudder, he started his engine again and drove away, toward the *Rest And Be Thankful* at Hedlington.

## CHAPTER 14

### When the Goddess Destroys

HE HAD the dining room of the inn to himself, and a deft, silent maid to wait on him. He moved to an armchair by the fire to drink his coffee, and try to reduce the muddle of incompatibilities that puzzled him to some sort of order. Miss out all the fantasy, try to regard the problem of these two deaths as Tott would regard it, and what conclusion resulted?

First, the Gravenor Mansions affair. Crampton had found and taken away a rug from which somebody, Saleh, perhaps, had tried to wash certain stains. If enough of the stains remained for Crampton to have them identified as caused by human blood and no more, then Crampton would be exactly where he had been before.

Saleh might have bumped something and made his nose bleed—the blood might have got on the rug in any one of a dozen different ways. To render those stains of any significance, Crampton had to prove that they were caused by human blood of the same group classification as that of the dead child. With that, of course, he would have grounds for a case, though even then scarcely enough for a conviction.

He might believe that Saleh was the one who had disposed of the body, but proof, not mere belief, was needed for production before a jury.

For the present, then, he might be utterly unjust to connect the Parkoot child's death with Kefra's flat or anyone who had been in it on the day of the child's disappearance. Was unjust, on the face of it, since Saleh had neither claws nor fangs.

Similarly, there was no connection between this second death and either Kefra or Saleh; all that had stirred Tott was the coincidence, which he refused to see as one, of Kefra and Saleh having been within reach of both victims when the two tragedies happened. Stranger coincidences happened every day, and passed unnoted.

A question Kefra had spoken drifted into Gees' mind then: "Nine lives—the ninth life—why do you harp on it?"

Following on that, the reflection that she had spoken of a covenant which involved nine lives, and of which she was free, now, because all the nine had been taken. If that were so, then this tragedy here was a tenth life, outside the covenant—

Abruptly he put down his coffee cup beside the chair and got to his feet. He was trying to bring ugly, material happenings into line with material cases. For that, he must put the fantastic story she had told altogether out of his mind—and, when he did so, the whole thing became inexplicable.

Tott had derided his theory, but neither he nor Perry nor Crampton had suggested a tenable alternative; they had first to find a fanged and clawed homicidal maniac, and one capable of producing bruises as well as rending.

There was a possibility that they had found something, or some fact had come to light, since he had left Tott and Perry at the top of the hill to drive down to the Grange.

With that thought he went out from the dining room and along to the bar at the other end of the inn, on the chance of finding Tott. Three men sat round a table under the saloon bar window, and three double-barreled guns leaned against the window sill. Each man had a drink before him, and each gave Gees a curious glance as he went to the bar and ordered a whiskey and soda.

Turning after he had paid for his drink, Gees gave them a cordial: “Good evening,” and won three muttered, “Evenin’s” in response.

They maintained silence among themselves—probably because of his presence. All three were middle-aged, solemn-looking men, and Gees ranked them as small farmers in the locality. He was about to finish his drink when the outer door opened to admit a younger man who gave the trio a cheerful: “Evenin’ all” which somehow managed to exclude Gees, and, ordering himself a pint, joined them at their table, fetching a chair for himself.

“Tractor all right now?” one of the three inquired.

“Aye. An’ a rare old job, drivin’ it all the way from Cheltenham. But I reckon it’ll do me another two seasons, now.”

A pause. All four eyed Gees almost furtively, and he sensed that they resented

his presence. The newcomer spoke:

“Well, did ye find anything today in them woods?”

“Aye,” said one of the three, dryly, and left it at that.

“You mean—that you got what done for poor little Letty?” the younger man asked.

One of the three said: “I reckon we did,” and another put far more of certainty into his somberly uttered: “Aye.”

The tractor-man glanced at Gees, hesitated, and then asked: “What was it, then—a tiger broke loose?”

“No. It were a cat. Just a cat, an’ *not* a tiger.” Gees heard a definite satisfaction in that denial of the surmise.

“But a cat could never—” the younger man began, and stopped.

“It were a she,” his more emphatic informant said. “Laid up in a holler tree wi’ three kittens—well, near on half-grown, they was. An’ the mother was the biggest I ever see. Must ha’ weighed not far short of a stone—ten or twelve pound, I’d put it at. A great yeller brute, an’ it come at us like a ragin’ lion—wild as Hell, it were, an’ savage, too.

“Fred here let it have both barrels, an’ we shot the kittens too. Put the carcasses in a sack an’ took ‘em along to the sergent. An’ if you git along to the inquest tomorrow an’ see them claws, you’ll see whether it could do or couldn’t do—what was done.”

“Then it was livin’ in them woods?” his questioner asked.

“We reckoned it come there not long back, maybe before the kittens was born, an’ maybe arter. Not so long back, anyhow. An’ it’d be the one which Mrs. Bell said scared that gal at the Grange—”

“But she said there was two,” the younger man objected.

“ON WHAT Mrs. Bell said,” the one referred to as Fred observed, “the gal was

so scared she'd hardly know what she did see. An' a she-cat wi' young kittens gener'ly lay up alone, like this one. There ain't no doubt i' my mind it's what got poor little Letty.

"You'd only got to see the way it come at us, like a ragin' lion. I'd pity the grown man who had to stand up against a thing like that with no gun, let alone a child her size. Them claws'd make a rare mess of him, I reckon."

"Well," the tractor-man observed, "that gal said she seen two, an' I ain't lettin' my youngster go about alone till I hear t'other one's been put paid to. It looks too risky to me."

"It'll be some while afore any kids dast run about alone i' these parts, I reckon." The one of the first three who, up to that point, had maintained silence delivered judgment with slow emphasis. "Kids may be venturesome some ways, but not after a thing like that, I reckon."

"How d'you make it hadn't been there long?" the young man asked.

"If it had," Fred said, "there'd been more tracks an' signs round the place where it'd made the nest for the kittens—some sorter reg'lar track the way it come an' go when it went huntin'. More'n that, it'd been seen or heard around here. It'd been out huntin', an' people'd missed fowls an' ducks an' things, before now."

The four of them ceased their discussion and looked toward the door as a fifth patron entered. He was a bulkily built, middle-aged, bearded man in tweed coat, breeches and gaiters, with a heavily-bandaged right hand, and he made his way to the bar and called for a double brandy, putting down a ten-shilling note clumsily with his left hand. Then he turned and nodded at the group.

"Lo, Arthur," Fred greeted him. "Whatcher been doin' to that hand? Ketched it in somethin'?"

"Claws," said Arthur, and turned to the bar with: "Thanks."

"Claws?" Fred inquired. "You ain't come across t'other one, by no chance, did you? I mean another wild cat, like the one we shot."

"It was my own cat, gone mad, I reckon," Arthur said. "Else, I dunno what come to it. It was asleep on the hearthrug, an' my little Millie was at the table doin' of

her home lessons. She got down off her chair an' come to ask me somethin', an' all at once Frosty—that's the cat—woke up an' started spittin' an' swearin' like all possessed.

“Then it sprung straight at the child, lookin' more like a davle'n a tame little cat, an' I managed to put my hand out in time to stop it landin' on her neck. An' this is what I got—my hand tore to ribbons so I had to go to the doctor to get it dressed an' bandaged. An' that cat the tamest, best-tempered little thing you ever see—you know my cat, Ted? That little orange-colored one I got.”

“I know that cat,” the tractor-driver admitted.

“Well, it went stark, starin' mad. Hid under the couch—I made the child go right off to bed, an' then tried to get that cat out, but not ti—till I opened the door. Then it tore off before I could do a thing, went up the tree in front o' my house an' sat up there with its eyes glarin' at me like fires. So I reckoned *this ain't safe*, an' went an' got my gun an' shot it outer the tree before I went along to the doctor'd to get my hand dressed. I dasn't leave it there alive.”

In the following silence, Gees ordered and obtained another drink. Arthur said: “I reckon it got near that one you chaps got in the woods today, an' got infected somehow—drove him murderous like that one was. Because a gentler an' sweeter-tempered little beast'n our Frosty never lived, till tonight.”

“Your Milly didn't stamp on Frosty's tail, nor anything?” Fred inquired.

“Warn't nowhere near it, any more'n I was, settin' where I was,” Arthur insisted. “No, it was pure madness took the cat, all at once.”

“Then I reckon it was like you say—that wild thing give it some disease what drove it mad,” Ted averred. “An' most likely your Frosty was the other cat that gal at the Grange got frightened at—she said the pair of 'em was yellerish, an' Frosty was yeller, an' you chaps say the wild one was yeller, an' the state that gal was in she'd reckon they was both as big as houses. That's how it was.”

Arthur lifted his bandages to look at them. “Tore my hand to ribbons, it did, an' my missis ain't half wild—there's blood all over the room where I tried to get that cat out. I felt I wanted that brandy—all shook up, I feel. Sorter faintish, now it's all over.”

“I felt like that, ‘thout bein’ clawed nor nuthin’, arter we’d put that wild one up i’ the woods an’ shot it,” Fred declared. “But there warn’t no brandy anywhere about. Else, I’d had some, I would.”

“An’ I reckon, wi’ all the blood I lost outer these here scratches, another double ain’t goin’ to do me no harm,” Arthur remarked. “Gimme another double, Jim.”

Since, probably because of the presence of a stranger among them, they exchanged the subject of mad cats for that of—apparently—equally violent and antisocial farm tractors, Gees finished his second drink and went back to the fire in the dining room. He had heard enough to get him to considering the problem of Ernest Parkoot’s death from a new angle, and this bar talk threatened to prove more of an irritant than an aid to reflection.

And still, no matter how he viewed the problem, nothing fitted—nothing made sense.

## CHAPTER 15

### The Second Beast

AT TEN o'clock, while Gees sat brooding by the fire, Inspector Tott entered, and observed with disapproval—"So you came back here. I really didn't expect to see you."

Gees said: "No? I climbed a tree and wrapped myself around the trunk. What's up?"

"That sergeant of Perry's had a nasty sort of experience, and I stopped to give a hand with him."

"Anything special?" Gees asked, with faint interest.

"I was just saying goodnight to Perry outside the sergeant's house," Tott explained. "And the sergeant's front door opened and he came out tearing at his neck and yelling like all-possessed. It was a cat—his wife told us it was a little pet cat they'd had for a couple of years, and somehow it had gone quite mad and sprung at the sergeant. Fastened on his neck, teeth and claws, and he couldn't pry it loose. We got it off, and Perry killed it, and then we had to help Willis back indoors and get him to bed, and get the local doctor to him. And that doctor told us he'd just had a similar case, one of the farmers round here had been to him with his hand all torn to shreds by a pet cat that had gone mad. Some disease attacking the cats, by the look of things."

"It might be," Gees observed, "and again might not. Is Sergeant Willis very badly hurt?"

"Out of action for a day or two, I should say," Tott answered. "So it looks as if this case has nothing to do with the one in London. At least, that's Perry's view."

"And Perry considers his case closed?" Gees half-questioned.

"Considers it closed?" Tott echoed irritably. "It *is* closed! With what that ordinary little cat did to Willis—what a thing that size was able to do before we got it off him, and the size and weight of the thing they destroyed in the woods



today, there's only one thing for a coroner to do at the inquest on the girl."

"And the bruises we saw?" Gees inquired thoughtfully.

"Caused while she was playing with the other children—caused by any one of a dozen means," Tott insisted. "What's in your mind?"

"You'd be surprised," Gees answered, and left it at that. "I suppose, if that wild cat hadn't turned up to provide Inspector Perry with his solution of the mystery, you'd have been calling at the Grange?"

"I might have called, but I shouldn't have stayed the night," Tott said, and took a briar pipe out of his pocket and looked at it.

"Have one of my cigarettes." Gees' case flew open as he offered it. "A village like this, of course, is hell for scandal."

"I won't smoke any more just now, thank you," Tott said, and put his pipe back in his pocket. "It's quite true—in places like this, people will talk, and it's unlikely that anyone else would have left a Rolls-Bentley standing out there all night. Same colors, too."

"I take it," Gees suggested, "your interest in the fact is what you might call academic—or is it?"

"My interest—" Tott began, and broke off to gaze toward the opening door.

Gees looked over his shoulder, and saw a small, swarthy, blue-chinned man, apparently in the late twenties or early thirties, a frail-looking being whose eyes appeared distorted behind horn-rimmed lenses of, evidently, very high corrective strength. Even with those aids to vision he peered, craning his neck in Tott's direction, after he had closed the door and faced toward the fireplace again. He said, in a deep, booming voice which ought to have emanated from a giant: "Why, Mr. Tott! Well, well!"

Tott snapped out: "Mr. Green, this is a presshound who goes by the name of Drake."

"How-de-do, Mr. Green?" Drake said, and smiled, quite unabashed. "The inspector will have his little jokes, of course. I don't mind! But if there's any

story going, Mr. Tott—well, you know me.”

“You’re barking up a fruitless tree. It’s no more than a provincial and perfectly simple tragedy—

“And no connection with any other tragedy, huh?” Drake boomed, interrupting. “Because I covered another case before I left London.”

“I’d advise you to forget that when you tackle this,” Tott said.

The pressman swung a chair round from the nearest table and planted it at the edge of the hearthrug, midway between the two in their armchairs. “I’ve got all there is to be had in the bars, about cats going mad and all that, and still—y’see, Mr. Tott, I’ve got a pretty good idea of what Inspector Crampton went after—and got!—at Gravenor Mansions.

“I’d advise you not to make use of that idea,” Tott said ominously.

“Oh, quite! I’m not fool enough to weigh in any story I can’t stand for.”

He took off his horn-rimmed spectacles, wiped his eyes with a silk handkerchief, polished the lenses of the glasses, and put them on again to gaze at Tott with an expression of smug satisfaction.

“The information,” Gees observed, and Drake turned his head with a start toward the speaker, “is as welcome as it is unexpected. What did you say was the name of the man on duty in the Gravenor entrance?”

“I—I didn’t say anything about him,” Drake answered, rather taken aback by the query. “I didn’t mention him. Why?”

“BECAUSE both Inspector Tott and myself know that Crampton is not such a fool as to talk,” Gees answered. “And now, on what you’ve said and the way you’ve said it, I think it should be possible to get that man hoofed out of the place, like the one who preceded him.”

“I haven’t said a thing about him, Mr.—Mr. Green, isn’t it?” Drake protested earnestly. “I assure you—” he broke off, and again looked toward Tott, as if he would appeal to authority against this stranger.

“Tomorrow,” Tott said, “the coroner down here will record a verdict of death by misadventure, or thereabouts, and with that the case will be closed. As far as your agency is concerned, there’s not enough in it to justify putting out a paragraph—it isn’t worth tuppence as a sensation. If I were you, Mr. Drake, I’d go back to London.”

“No hurry,” Drake assured him calmly.

Neither Gees nor Tott spoke for a while, for they both knew that nothing they could say would lift Drake’s nose from this trail now.

“Y’know,” Drake said complacently, “I was talking to our society man yesterday about this and that, and he’s just pushed out a stick or two about a recent engagement. I couldn’t quite make out why one of the special branch should turn on to anything of this sort—”

“I know I’ll wring your blasted neck if you don’t shut up!” Tott growled fiercely. “Blast your dirty suspicions, and you too!”

Drake got to his feet. He said, “I think I’ll go along to the bar and get me a drink. I don’t like this atmosphere, somehow.”

“I hope it poisons you,” Gees said gravely. “The drink, I mean, since you seem perfectly able to survive the atmosphere.”

Alone again, Tott and Gees looked at each other. Tott said—“I think that’s just about torn it, Mr. Green.”

“Except that he’s got no story,” Gees pointed out.

“I’ll feel happier when I’m sure of that,” Tott said moodily.

“When you can—yes, though, I see. Coming round to my theory?”

Tott gave him a withering look, and was about to reply when the door’s opening stopped him. The waitress who had served dinner entered, and held out to Gees a salver on which was an addressed and unstamped envelope. As he took it, she said: “The messenger said there was no reply, sir,” and went out as he opened the envelope to take out the card it contained. He read:

\_At the top of the hill, on the road by which you came to me today. NOW.

—

He thrust both card and envelope in his pocket, and yawned.

“It must be the open air makes me feel so sleepy,” he remarked. “I think I’ll go off to bed. Goodnight, Inspector.”

“Sleep well, Mr. Green.”

But, when he had left the room, Tott went to the window, which gave on to the road before the inn. Enfolding himself in one of the full-length, heavy curtains, and being thus screened from the light in the room, he drew aside just enough of the blind to assure himself that Gees had not gone to bed.

... All the clouds of early evening had cleared away when Gees emerged from the inn to the village street. A little breeze had sprung up, biting cold; a few stars showed, and the moon, high in the sky now, silvered the road, while shadows of walls and trees were sharply defined.

He hurried round to the garage, slid back the door just enough for entry, and took up the coat he had left on the driving seat. As he put it on he remembered the Webley automatic in the pocket of the off-side door. He took the pistol, slipped it in the right-hand pocket of the coat, and went out to the road.

Walking quickly, he passed the last house and faced the curving rise over which he had driven with Tott and Perry in the car. When he topped the rise, he saw a lone figure by the stone wall ahead of him, just where the widening to unenclosed grass land began: in the clear moonlight he knew it as the figure of a man, taller than Kefra—tall as himself. A little nearer, and Inspector Perry moved forward from the wall with “ah, Mr. Green!”

“A constitutional before turning in,” Gees observed casually as he halted. “Necessary, after the dinner they gave me.”

“It’s a wonderful night,” Perry said, rather constrainedly.

“It is,” Gees assented, “and only us out to enjoy it.”

“I wasn’t exactly enjoying it,” Perry confessed. “I came along here to save myself trouble tomorrow, pace the distance between the road and the spot where Willis found the body. I’m still asking myself why the child went all that distance off the road, when she was obviously hurrying home for tea, by what the other children had to say.”

“Running away from what attacked her, possibly,” Gees surmised.

“It may have been—what was that?”

He swung abruptly to face toward the crest of the rise over which Gees had come. Both men gazed in that direction, and Gees, putting his hand in his coat pocket, got a grip on the pistol and slid the safety catch off with his thumb. Something or somebody had appeared for a fraction of a second, either on or beside the wall, and too far off for them to note it as more than an indistinct movement, since neither had been looking in that direction.

Perry relaxed after a few seconds.

“I caught it out of the corner of my eye,” he said. “Something—”

“Have you seen anyone about here?” Gees asked.

“Only that little foreigner from the Grange, going down the hill a few minutes ago,” Perry answered. “Coming from Hedlington.”

Saleh returning, after delivering the envelope at the inn, Gees thought. And Kefra, who had meant to meet him here, and seen the police inspector as she ascended the hill—was she waiting, out of sight beyond the curve? Or had she gone back—

HE SHOUTED: “Look out, man!” and Perry, who had turned his back to the wall again, half turned his head and sprang aside as Gees’ hand came out from his pocket.

On top of the wall a cat crouched to spring, its back undulating, its eyes dull red—a shot crashed and the echoes went bellowing simultaneously with the animal’s leap, and it fell within a yard of Gees’ feet, wriggling convulsively. A moment’s pause, and he stepped forward, put the pistol to the beast’s ear, and fired again. One final convulsion in which it stretched to full length, and then it

lay still. Reaching down, Gees lifted the carcass by the tail.

“My God!” Perry almost whispered. “So there were two!”

“Enormous,” Gees said. “Ten or twelve pounds weight.”

The smooth fur was a dirty yellow, covering a gaunt, starved-looking form. Perry said—“Look at those claws!” and suddenly shivered as if stricken by intense cold. He put his hands to his face momentarily.

“Man,” he muttered, “if it hadn’t been for you and that revolver of yours, it’d have got me. And a brute that size—”

“A Webley automatic, not a revolver,” Gees observed.

“And there were two—that girl at the Grange saw two!”

“It looks as if there were two,” Gees agreed quietly.

Quietly, but within him was black rage. The card in his pocket said: “At the top of the hill, on the road by which you came to me today.” If Perry had not been here at the top of the hill, and if he, Gees, had not thought to slip the Webley in his pocket before coming to meet her—if a beast like that had caught him unaware—

“I don’t know how to thank you,” Perry said. “It looks as if Providence sent you to save me.”

Gees reflected that another agency than Providence had sent him to this spot. But, since Perry appeared rather unstrung, he put aside his own deductions, and asked, “Where are you staying?”

“Staying? Oh, Mrs. Willis is putting me up for the night. Why—yes, there’s no object in stopping here. But I’ll take this along.” He grasped the tail of the dead beast and lifted it. “I believe it’s heavier than the one they shot in the woods today! I’ve never seen cats this size before.”

“I believe wild cats grow as big,” Gees remarked, as they started to ascend the rise toward Hedlington. “But I never heard of wild cats south of the Tweed, and they’re not that color, in any case.”

“Well, thank heaven they’re both done for,” Perry observed fervently. “That clears up everything—unless more tame cats go wild.”

“That, I think, is very unlikely,” Gees prophesied.

They came to the crest of the rise, and along the road before them saw a little group of men advancing. Foremost among them showed Inspector Tott, and Gees recognized the man with a bandaged hand from the saloon bar. They grouped around Perry, gazing at the carcass he carried.

“Who did the shooting?” Tott asked coolly. “It sounded like a field gun back at the inn, and I thought I’d come and investigate.”

He glanced at Gees.

“Mr. Green, here—” Perry began to explain, but Gees broke in, “I’ll bid you all goodnight, and get along now if you don’t mind.”

He left them, and made long strides toward the inn, feeling in no mood for reciting his part in the adventure. And, lest Tott should see fit to ask for his story, he went straight up to his room, and shut and locked the door after switching on the light. Then for a while he stood gazing at his reflection in the wardrobe mirror.

“You damned idiot!” he told it. “You complete fool!”

Then he withdrew the card from his pocket, and looked at the fine, small writing of the message on it. Kefra—Sekhmet—one corner of the card was slightly crumpled, and he smoothed it out. Then, staring incredulously at the card, he took it across to the dressing table to get more light on it from the electric bulb directly over the table, and, putting it down, went on staring, questioning—

From his breast pocket he took the message that had reached him in London, withdrew it from its envelope, and put it down beside the card. Its scent—her scent!—was still faintly perceptible, and the writing, like that on the card, was fine and small—

But, past all question, some other hand than hers had written the message on the card. He was meant to be deceived, and had been.

## CHAPTER 16

### The Empty Room

THE cheerful greeting with which the newspaper man welcomed Gees in the inn dining room on Thursday morning proved that, as he had said, getting a pressman's goat is a difficult business. Drake was disposing of his last mouthful and grinned ironically as Gees joined Inspector Tott.

"Well, gentlemen, I expect I shall see you at the inquest."

When he had gone out, Tott shook his head solemnly. "I don't know where he put it," he said. "Porridge, and haddock and *eggs* and bacon—two eggs! He didn't feed—he stoked!"

"These low forms of life take a deal of sustenance," Gees observed. "I've forgotten how many times its own weight a caterpillar eats in a day. See us at the inquest, eh? He might see you, of course.

Tott shook his head. "With the whole thing cleared up—and your shooting the second of those beasts last night clinches it—no dodgers lose."

"Clinches it too much for my liking," Gees said moodily.

Tott's hand, stretched toward the marmalade pot, stayed halfway. "You're implying—what?"

"The herring is too red for my taste," Gees answered.

"Blast it, man! What do you mean?"

"Simply that four cats, two wild and two tame, have been used to make sure of the verdict that will be passed today."

"But that's ridiculous."

"Yes, I know—it's all ridiculous. But that beast springing at me last night—"

"At Perry, you mean," Tott interrupted.



“All right, at Perry,” Gees said. “I only imagined it was headed straight at me when it took that leap off the wall. If I hadn’t had a gun and Perry hadn’t been there, you’d have stood a very good chance of another inquest in this village today—or tomorrow. I am not popular.”

“I’d like to know just what you do mean.”

“Ah, but it’s all part of my theory—Moses and the Hebrews and all that, though I never mentioned Moses. You dragged him in. You didn’t know it.”

“And what in all perdition have mad cats to do with it?” Tott demanded. “Since I’ve nothing to do—and apparently neither have you—what is this fool theory of yours, reduced to practical terms?”

“That’s just what you can’t do—reduce it to practical shape,” Gees told him. “What do you think would happen to a coroner, if he recorded as his verdict that the deceased met her death by means of a particularly evil sort of ancient goddess, who maintains her existence by the sacrifices of human lives at intervals, said sacrifices being procured for her when possible by her only surviving priest?”

“Said coroner would get what ought to happen to you,” Tott responded. “Medical examination, and a long rest in a mental institution.”

He took out his pipe, filled and lighted it, and Gees went on eating. “You’re trying to tell me those mad cats were planted to fog the issue,” Tott accused. “Never mind about your fool goddess.”

“They appear to have fogged it pretty thoroughly.”

“And who planted ‘em—and how?”

“I’d have to revert to my theory to tell you,” Gees answered, “and if I do, evidently you’ll start walking up the wall.”

“Go on, man, revert to anything you like!” Tott said savagely, “Were the two wild ones and their three kittens fetched here as a sort of smoke screen in front of this goddess of yours?”

“Not mine, fortunately,” Gees answered, “but I’d say you’ve struck the bull’s-

eye. Well, not quite, because the goddess doesn't need any smoke screen. The priest does."

"And where did he get 'em?" Tott persisted satirically.

Gees shook his head. "He might be able to tell you. Do you know anything about time as a fourth dimension?"

"An! Now I've got you!" Tott exclaimed. "Because the Einstein theory interested me, and I read up all I could about it. If you try to tell me your priest raked those cats out of the fourth dimension, I *will* walk up the wall—and throw things at you!"

"I was thinking, last night. About getting into what may be a fifth dimension, a space altogether out of time, a state in which you live and act and feel between two moments, so that as far as your consciousness is concerned the whole world appears to have stopped. You're so utterly removed from time that even a watch seems to have stopped ticking. In time, of course, it's going on as usual, but you're quite outside time, not moving with it."

"I've no idea what you're getting at," Tott said seriously, "but—well, theoretically, I suppose, it might be possible. But to keep between two moments you'd have to travel back along time."

"That's just what you don't," Gees contradicted. "You're merely outside it, and it goes static while you retain the power of movement. That way, everything around you appears fixed; all sound ceases, and even a fire appears to have stopped burning. And thinking over it as I lay in bed, it suddenly occurred to me that you yourself, if you were in that state outside time, would be invisible to anyone who was in and traveling with time—carried on by it."

"OBVIOUSLY," Tott's interest was fully aroused now. "Because, if you were living in that state between two moments, and the static people round you were in reality moving along time as usual, you'd be no more than a flash on their sight as your fraction of a second passed by them."

"One way of accounting for ghosts," Gees remarked. "They stand still outside time while you pass them as you travel along it, and when you've passed the point where they happen to be standing, they naturally aren't there any more. And suppose this priest got his wild cats and doctored the tame ones that way?"

Just moved himself out of time and out of visibility, and came back into time when he'd—”

“Oh, cut it out!” Tott interrupted, in angry disgust. “I enjoy speculating along the lines of a fourth dimension, but if you're going to bring your damned goddess into it, I quit.”

“Umm-yah!” Half-yawning, Gees got on his feet and went to the hearth rug to stand before the fire. “Inspector,” he went on deliberately, “you're deriding my theory, as any practical man naturally would, because it's based on things and causes that neither I nor anyone else can prove by practical means. But inside a week, two terrible and very similar tragedies have occurred—”

“Similar, but that's all,” Tott interposed. “Obviously, on what we now know about these cats, they're not connected with each other.”

“You mean you don't want them to be connected.”

“Enough has come to light to show that the two tragedies are separate and unrelated occurrences, and not due to a single cause. Similar, yes. I said at first the similarity was not a coincidence, but now I say it is. Obviously.”

“I said at first it was a coincidence, and now I say it isn't,” Gees retorted imperturbably. “More than that, if a third case of the kind occurs, you may begin to think my theory isn't all fooling.”

“Well, then,” Tott snapped, “let's have the whole thing as you see it. However silly it sounds, I'll listen.”

“Very well. On Monday night, as you remarked yesterday, I did not garage my car, but forgot about it and left it standing—”

“Half a second,” Tott interrupted. “You are, as I thought, bringing that Miss Kefra into this theory of yours?”

“Merely to exonerate her,” Gees answered. “But that night she told me some things quite outside your range of belief, so I won't drag them in. I already had the knowledge on which the part of them essential to this theory of mine is based, and what she told me no more than confirmed it. You remember my exposition on the way down here, about the nature and quality of old gods?”

“Some of it,” Tott said. “You’re not going over it again, are you?”

Gees shook his head. “I am merely telling you that it’s possible the old goddess you refuse to credit survives, and demands human sacrifice at intervals. Why she demands and gets two sacrifices within so short a time of each other I don’t know, and probably never will. Whether the next tragedy of the kind will happen today or tomorrow, or in twenty years’ time, I don’t know either. But I do know, after last night, that I am looked on as knowing too much, and that cat I killed was meant to kill me before I could make use of what I know.”

“That’s a bit too much to believe,” Tott said.

Gees took a step forward and laid on the table the card he had received the night before. “Take a look at that. It’s the note that took me out to the spot where I killed that cat last night!”

Tott gave the card a cursory inspection, and then looked up again. “Yes, I remember,” he said. “From—from that Miss Kefra?”

“Exactly what I was meant to think, and I fell for it,” Gees answered. “But I didn’t fall for it as eagerly as I was meant to do. That *Now* underlined should have given me the impression that Miss Kefra was waiting and I mustn’t lose a minute, instead of which I went round to my car to get a coat, and put my automatic in my pocket, fortunately. I’d seen Miss Kefra’s handwriting only in one specimen, and that consisted of no more than nine or ten words. I didn’t question that writing on the card, but accepted it as hers, and went. Perry’s being there, and my having the gun, spoiled the game.”

“What game?” Tott asked stubbornly.

“For a full answer to that,” Gees said, “you’d have to go to the blue-eyed little man who poses as Miss Kefra’s personal attendant, Saleh ibn Nahor. Actually, as priest and minister to Sekhmet of old Egypt, and the human link between her and material activity who provides her with sacrifices. There’s my theory, in plain English, as you asked.”

“You’re accusing this Saleh of two murders, then?” Tott queried.

“And of an attempted third. Not that I see any possibility whatever of proving it. Further, I’m inclined to think that those cats were material manifestations of

Sekhmet. That she animated them, drove them to attack human beings, and that in some way outside my knowledge this Saleh is able to prepare these animal—habitations, call them—and so give her shape in which to accomplish material acts. Murders, from our point of view. Human sacrifices, from his.”

“And why should any man on earth risk his neck over any such madness?”

Tott asked with the same stubbornness.

“SO FAR,” Gees answered deliberately, “Saleh’s neck doesn’t appear to me to be in any danger. My telling you that about him is no more nor less than criminal slander, if a third person were here to hear it. As to the why of it, he gets profit of some sort. I don’t mean financial profit, but increase of vitality, perhaps—something of that sort. An old saying comes to me—\_the blood is the life.\_ In that, you have the basic idea behind all sacrifice in the old religions.”

“You needn’t put that into any plainer English,” Tott said. “It’s too utterly hellish. And so’s all of it, to my mind.”

“In other words, you don’t believe a word of it.”

Tott’s brows drew down and together. “You’ve got a gift of words,” he said. “On top of that, once before I wouldn’t believe you, and got badly bitten over it. Do *you* believe all this?”

“I’ll go further, and say I know it,” Gees answered emphatically.

“It’s too mad—too incredible altogether,” Tott said. “No!” He shook his shoulders, as if to free himself from the belief Gees had almost imposed on him for a little while. “Things like that don’t happen. If the man had been anything of the sort, he’d have been locked away in a criminal lunatic asylum, long ago.”

Gees, making no reply, lighted himself a cigarette and gazed toward the window, thoughtfully. Tott, standing by the table eyed him.

“If you had any evidence at all, now—” he said, and paused.

“I’m going back to London,” Gees observed, “but I think I’ll drive down to the Grange first. Someone may have been there with news of what happened to that second cat last night, but I’d like to watch Saleh’s face when he sees me alive, in

case it reveals anything.”

“Have you—is there room for a passenger?”

“Come along by all means,” Gees invited. “I’m going to ask to see Miss Kefra, though, and if I do see her you’ll have to walk back or wait for me.”

“Suits me.”

“Then I’ll get the car out and pick you up in front of the inn.”

The pale winter sunshine gave no heat as Gees drove off. They passed the crest of the rise, curved down the steep hill toward Barnby, and, glancing across the valley, Gees saw the Grange clear-cut in the sunlight which, striking on its eastern frontage, intensified its neglected appearance. Tott, who had not spoken since entering the car, said: “That place looks haunted.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in that sort of thing,” Gees observed.

“I said it looks haunted, not that it is haunted,” Tott retorted. “Not but what—Oh, I don’t know!”

They passed through Barnby hamlet, and followed the westward-trending road to the Grange gateway, where two stone posts indicated that a barrier had once existed. Along the quarter-mile of neglected driveway, with dead and rotting boughs lying under the infrequent trees, and the rutted, pot-holed roadway plashy with puddles, with its worst indentations mended by loosely-shoveled flints, Gees drove slowly for the sake of his tires.

“What on earth made the woman pick on a place like this?” Tott demanded irritably. “It’s—it’s suicidal, enough to make a man drown himself to look at it. And to live here!”

“But this is a woman, not a man,” Gees observed, “and I have an idea there was some sort of old association with it to influence her.”

“You mean she’d been here before?” Tott asked.

“It may have been in better repair, then,” Gees half-answered.

“Then she arrived in a baby carriage,” Tott surmised as they crossed the bridge over the moat. “There’s been nothing done, by the look of it, for the best part of my lifetime, let alone hers.”

The car stopped before the entrance, and as Gees got out Tott said: “That door’s ajar. Someone forgot to fasten it.”

“I’ll call his attention to it,” Gees promised, and, entering the portico, pressed the bellpush. They heard the ringing somewhere within, but no other sound, and after a minute or so Gees pressed again and evoked a long peal, but still won no attention.

He said: “I wonder,” doubtfully, and lifted the old-fashioned knocker on the door to rap sharply, raising echoes from within. Tott got out of the car and came to stand beside him.

“Peculiar,” he observed. “People don’t leave their front doors open when they go out. It looks as if—”

Gees gave the door a push, and it swung inward slowly, heavily. He pressed the bellpush again and the sharp, harsh tin-tinabulation of the bell clanged out loudly.

“They’d hear that anywhere in the house,” Tott said. “There may be something wrong. More cats, or something of the sort.”

“That being so—” Gees ended the sentence by stepping into the hall, and Tott followed him. For a few seconds they stood, listening, and then, seeing that the drawing room door was not closed, Gees pushed it wide. The room was untenanted; in the fire-basket on the hearth was a little mass of ash and cinders from which bluish smoke still rose. Tott said: “It’s not so long since somebody was here.” The clock on the mantel ticked noisily—far more noisily, to Gees’ hearing, than when he had been in this room with Kefra. Then he saw that a stamped and addressed envelope was placed before the clock face, and crossed the room to take it down, for the name and address on it, as he saw when he approached, were his own.

“Why wasn’t it posted?” Tott, beside him, asked.

WITHOUT replying, he tore the envelope open, and at that Tott, with innate

courtesy, went to the window and stood looking out. Gees took out the letter and recognized Kefra's handwriting:

*When I gave, and in giving asked, it was in the certainty that I was free. Now, I have equal certainty of being still bound, and the bonds are so terrible that I shall not see you again. They held me back from you yesterday. I would have you know that it was not I who held back, but I myself was held.*

*Though the little time I craved and won is all, still I am glad, for though this executric of Typhon, whom I believed, long ago in Abydos, subject to the will of Osiris—\_though she bind and hold me after I have fulfilled my part, yet she cannot take from me what has been. And though Saleh\_—*

Typhon, Gees knew, was in old Egyptian belief the very essence of evil, as Osiris was the source of all good. He stood looking at the unfinished letter—had Saleh come to her as she wrote, and given her no opportunity of finishing it?—until Tott faced about. Then Gees crumpled the sheet and thrust it into his pocket, and the envelope with it.

“It tells nothing, as far as finding anyone—goes,” he said.

“It looks as if you know Miss Kefra fairly well,” Tott observed.

“It's that devil Saleh I want to find,” Gees said.

Tott said: “There's nothing against him—or against Miss Kefra either. I think I'll go out to the car and wait there. Rummaging over a private house while the occupants are away doesn't appeal to me. And they *are* away.”

“What makes you so certain?” Gees asked.

“Just a feeling.” Tott moved toward the door. “But just in case there should be any more cats, have you got your gun?”

Gees took it out from his overcoat pocket and pushed off the safety catch. “Yes,” he said. “I'm going to make sure.”

But when, ten minutes or so later, he went out to where Tott waited by the car, he shook his head.



“No sign of anyone, and no clothes nor anything left about,” he remarked. “It looks as if they didn’t mean to come back.”

“But they left the door open,” Tott pointed out.

Gees gave him no answer. It was in his mind that Saleh was the cause of her letter being unfinished, and that she had left the door ajar in case he, Gees, should come to the Grange and find the letter, which, because Saleh was with her, she would not take out to post in the ordinary way. Or perhaps she had hoped that anyone else, entering, would take and post it.

“And you’re going back to London?” Tott asked, as Gees started the car and turned it toward the bridge over the moat.

“Yes. Get lunch along the road—hullo!”

A small sports car, approaching the Grange, appeared ahead of them as Gees drove over the bridge. So narrow was the drive that he felt his rear wheels drag in the soft turf as he swung the steering wheel to give the other driver room to pass. But that driver did not pass. He came to a standstill beside the Rolls-Bentley, and Gees too stopped.

“Nobody at home, Tony,” Gees said calmly, and blessed the thought with which he had securely closed the front door on emerging from the house, while at the same time he cursed the luck that revealed both his presence and Tott’s to the man who glared at him. “We’ve just called, but the house seems empty.”

“And what the devil are you two doing here?” Tony Briggs demanded wrathfully.

## CHAPTER 17

### By Saleh's Hand

GEES took out his cigarette case, unhurriedly, and selected one, while Tott sat beside him, looking straight ahead, and Tony stared at them, angrily.

"I asked you a question!" Tony said impatiently.

"Well, then, for answer—what the hell are *you* doing here?"

"That's my business."

"Now listen for the echo," Gees said, and lighted his cigarette.

"Stop fooling!" Tony was a wrathful man. "I asked you—"

"And I told you to listen for the echo to your answer to me," Gees interrupted. "Take it as my answer to you."

"Inspector—" Tony changed to frigid politeness—"may I ask what you are doing here?"

"You may, sir," Tott answered imperturbably. "I am on leave till next Monday, and Mr. Green was good enough to drive me this far on my way to Hereford. I'm staying here till the afternoon to see a coin collector like myself, and since Mr. Green was going for a drive before he goes back to London, I came with him to see a bit of the country."

"So this is the way to Hereford, is it?"

"What do you want him to do—go round by Skegness?" Gees asked before Tott could speak. "You heard him say he's only got till Monday."

Tony opened his mouth, but shut it again. Then he said, "I want a word with you, Gees."

"Then you can turn about on the other side of that bridge and follow me up to Hedlington," Gees answered equally coldly. "I'm getting an early lunch there,

and then heading back to London.”

He drove on, giving Tony no chance to reply. Glancing in the rear-view mirror, he saw Tony get out by the entrance and go to the door. Then the curve of the drive prevented further sight. Tott said: “Bad luck.”

“He’ll draw conclusions, of course,” Gees remarked. “But then, he won’t be the only one to do that.”

“I’ve as much right to my conclusions, Mr. Green, as you have to yours,” Tott retorted. “And about us, he’ll draw the right ones.”

“Don’t worry,” Gees urged. “I think I see a way to put him off questioning about you. In fact, I think he’s got too much else on his mind just now to brew over what you do with your leave.”

“But he’s already put two and two together,” Tott insisted. “You could tell that by the way he spoke, and the way he looked—”

“Quite—quite,” Gees interrupted. “If he should as much as buttonhole you at the end of your leave, just ask him to look up records of forty to thirty-five years back, and see what there is about an *agent provocateur* named Saleh, operating in Cairo and thereabouts at the time. But don’t quote me on it—tell him anything you like about how you got on to it, as long as you leave me out.”

“You mean—this Saleh?” Tott asked incredulously.

“I mean this identical Saleh—probably quite young, but snakes don’t take long to develop poison fangs. And I have an idea Mr. Briggs will find enough in records to make him acquit you of anything he might resent, as far as your being here goes. But, as I said, don’t mention me.”

“What happened thirty-five to forty years ago can’t be dragged up now,” Tott objected. “Mr. Briggs knows I wouldn’t be such a fool as to try dragging it up. Everything’s changed since then—”

“Murder or accessory to it can be dragged up at any time,” Gees said, as he opened out for the hill leading up to the small, rustic town of Hedlington.

“If you knew about that—” Tott began, and did not end it.

“I don’t. Records are not accessible to me, and nobody told me anything about it. I dreamed it. Nightmares are a hobby of mine.”

Tott said: “I wish we had you back in uniform,” rather wistfully.

They were halfway up the hill, and Gees looked across at the Grange. “He’s given it up and started back,” he said. “It took him a long while to convince himself the house was empty, the sceptical devil!”

“What made you tell me there was nobody at the Grange, Gees?” Striding across the dining room to stand over Gees as he sat at lunch, Tony Briggs fired out the question. For long seconds Gees made no reply. Then he said, “I told you what I believed was the truth.”

Tony took a long, sharp breath, checked it. He stuck both hands into his trouser pockets. “I’m sorry,” he said quietly, coldly. “But your being here like this—Tott, too, with his ridiculous explanation about coin collecting and going on to Hereford—You here—and him! Why?”

Gees maintained a frosty silence, and Tony said: “Gees?” miserably.

Gees looked up, and saw between Tony’s thumb and finger the ring he had last seen when Kefra removed it from her finger and laid it down.

“I don’t quite get that,” he said—untruthfully.

“I got it back from her—from Cleo—this morning,” Tony explained. “That’s why I’m here. And she wouldn’t see me.”

“Who did see you, then?” Gees asked, after a pause for thought.

“Her man—Saleh. He left me at the door while he went to ask her, and came back to tell me she had nothing to say to me. When I tried to insist, he shut the door on me before I could get my foot inside.”

“I’m sorry to hear this.” He realized he had been mistaken about Kefra’s letter on the mantel. *His* approach to the house, not an interruption by Saleh, had caused her to leave the letter unfinished, and place it for him to find leaving the door ajar in the certainty that he would enter and see his own name on the envelope. But where had she and Saleh hidden?

“And then—you here,” Tony said. “Gees, I don’t want to bark, or—or ask too much, but did she tell you—?” he broke off doubtfully.

“When could she tell me—anything about you?” Gees asked in reply.

“You were calling on Monday—your wire to me said so. Did you see her then?”

“I called. You’d gone. She told me you’d already explained how Miss Brandon happened to be at Gravenor Mansions. Miss Kefra very kindly invited me to tea with her, and I think that’s all,” Gees said, jesuitically meaning that it was all he meant to reveal.

“Have you—have you seen her since?” Tony asked.

“I drove down there yesterday afternoon—being in the neighborhood. I’d have felt it rather rude of me not to make a call.”

“And—and she said nothing about me, or about sending this ring back?” Tony pursued.

“Now look here, Tony,” Gees remonstrated. “Would any girl talk about a thing like that to a third party? I just called, being as I say in the neighborhood, and she didn’t so much as mention you or anything about you, to the best of my recollection. Neither did I.”

“No, I suppose she wouldn’t,” Tony admitted dubiously. “But I can’t understand it. We parted as—as I hoped to meet her again, as we’d arranged. And then this—with no explanation. Why?”

“Miss Kefra is the only person who can tell you,” Gees said.

“But still—now don’t be offended at my asking, Gees. Why are you here—why this place? Is it—not because of her, is it?”

“Strictly for your ear, Tony,” Gees said with an air of imparting a solemn secret, “I’m here because there has been another death almost exactly like that of the child at Gravenor Mansions, and if there’s going to be an epidemic of things of that sort all over the country—well! As for its being in the neighborhood of Barnby Grange, it might have happened anywhere. It just happened to happen here. As far as Tott is concerned, you ought to know that he’s no longer

associated with the work of the ordinary criminal branch.”

Tony thought it over, and put his ring back into his pocket. “I suppose I have rather jumped to conclusions about you,” he confessed.

“Naturally,” Gees admitted in the pause, “but I’d have thought you—”

He broke off abruptly, remembering Drake. The reporter had drawn quite enough conclusions already; if he saw Tony here, in addition to Gees and Tott, there would be no holding him.

“I’d go back to town, if I were you,” Gees said. “You’ll be more likely to learn something that way—when Miss Kefra gets back to London, I mean—than by hanging around here. Yes, in your place I’d go back.”

“Are you going back too?”

“Since you’ve got your own car, I needn’t offer to drive you,” Gees said. He avoided direct reply because of a doubt as to whether he would go back, knowing as he did from Tony that Saleh was still at the Grange. He wanted a word with Saleh, in Kefra’s presence, if possible, about the message on the card he had received the night before.

“Yes, I’ll start back after lunch,” Tony decided.

“If Tott should happen back for lunch,” Gees observed, “both he and you might feel a bit awkward.” All he wanted was to get Tony out of sight before Drake appeared.

“I don’t see—” Tony began—and left it incomplete.

“Considering how early it is, you could make Witney in time for lunch,” Gees said.

“I hate going back without seeing her,” Tony said irresolutely.

“You’d hate it still more if the door is slammed in your face a second time,” Gees pointed out.

He left the room and made for the staircase. Pausing on the landing, he saw Tony

go along toward the entrance, and a minute or so later heard the grinding of a self-starter. Then he went downstairs again, and Tott over-took him on the way.

“Gone, thank heaven! Mr. Green, supposing that Drake had spotted him, too. Steam cranes wouldn’t have pried him loose from this place.”

“The reason he stayed so long down at the Grange,” Gees said, taking no notice of the remark, “was that he saw Saleh there.”

“You mean—Saleh must have been there when you went over the house?” Tott paused grasping the dining room door handle to ask.

“Somewhere—or hiding out at the back. Mr. Briggs saw him and asked for Miss Kefra. Whether or not she was there too we have no means of knowing. But I’m going looking for Saleh again.”

“With all respect for your brains, Mr. Green—” Tott opened the door, and stood back for Gees to precede him into the dining room—“I can’t subscribe to this theory of yours. I’ve thought it over, and I just can’t.”

“THEN *why* did Saleh bring that card to get me out last night?” Gees interrupted him. “Why was that develish animal just where the card asked me to wait? Why was a rug taken up in that room at Gravenor Mansions and scrubbed to get rid of stains? Why was a man named Saleh just outside Cairo? Oh, I know that last is a new one on you, but it’s gospel.”

“If you’re definitely accusing Saleh of murder, you’ve got to produce evidence,” Tott insisted. “And evidence is what that card isn’t.”

Gees turned toward the door and said: “Evidence or no evidence—” Then he had passed the doorway, and Tott failed to catch the end of the sentence, but the tone of those first four words gave him a good idea of what the rest would be.”

Tott saw the Rolls-Bentley pass the window, headed for Barnby, and saw, too, grim determination on Gees’ face.

“It’s a pity,” he said to himself. “Fine intellect, too. But if you let yourself get tangled up believing in things of that sort you lose all sense of proportion—which is what he’s done.”

Outside Hedlington Village Hall Drake waited, realizing that he had come up from Barnby a quarter of an hour too soon. Others waited with him until the door of the hall, opening, revealed Inspector Perry already inside. Then Drake moved forward, and exhibited a card.

“Ah!” Perry sounded unimpressed.

“Well, I’d never have thought a London agency would send a man down, but—he gave the undersized, goggle-eyed man a disapproving look—“I suppose they felt they could spare you.”

“You think—today finishes it, Inspector?”

“I’ve nothing whatever to tell you,” Perry answered stiffly.

“Well, if you feel like that, that’s how you feel,” Drake observed quite cheerfully. He began polishing his glasses. “I dunno why,” he added, “but my specs will fog, down here. Something in the air.”

Perry glanced at the bulging lenses. “Your sight must be in a pretty bad way, to need things like those,” he said less coldly.

“It’s in a bad way,” Drake said. “I’m utterly helpless without these. Now I haven’t got ‘em on—” he turned directly toward the inspector—“you’re no more than a fuzzy line to me. That is, I can see you’re a man, but not where your neck leaves off and your head begins.”

He replaced them on his nose. “This show won’t last long, will it?”

“I have no idea how long,” Perry answered, stiffening.

“Well, it seems you’ve everything all set, cause of death absolutely plain, and no complications—especially since that Mr. Green bagged the second of the two wild cats last night.”

“Since you know all about it, you don’t need information from me,” Perry remarked.

“And the tie-up with the Gravenor Mansions affair falls to the ground,” Drake observed, carefully watching the inspector’s face.



“What affair was that?” Perry asked casually. “There’s the coroner, though—excuse me.” He hurried across the hall, glad to get away, and Drake nodded to himself before taking off those troublesome spectacles to give them another rub. As he rubbed, a voice beside him said: “Blessed if it ain’t young George Drake!” and he hastily replaced the glasses to recognize a boyhood acquaintance.

“Bill!” he exclaimed, and offered his hand. “How are you?”

“Oh, able to take nourishment, y’know,” Bill admitted. “What’s fetched you down here, George? I thought you were in London?” But it sure is nice to catch a glimpse of you again.”

“I represent the press. Sent down to cover this inquest. D’you still live around this way?”

“Yes, I got a little place—maybe you’ll remember it. The farm Taylor used to have, down in Barnby. Mostly dairy pasture.”

“Oh, yes, I remember it all right. And the Grange—I heard from somebody it was let, a little while back. All done up, I suppose?”

“No—look like fallin’ down any minute, like it allus did. Damp old place—any place’d be damp with five-and-twenty foot of water all around it. If it was mine, I’d drain that old moat, right off.”

“Ah!” Drake made the monosyllable sound appreciative. “What sort of people were they who hired it, do you know anything about them?”

“It were a woman,” Bill told him, “an’ not people at all. Except she got an odd sorter man to drive her big car. Foreigner, he is. We don’t see much of her or him—they’re in London, mostly. An’ the three maids she had there all run off an’ left, because them big cats which was the cause o’ this inquest turned up there an’ scared ‘em. Didn’t do ‘em no harm, but scared one gal most outer her wits.”

Which was no news to Drake, but, having led the talk in the way he wanted, he hoped for better things. “You mean,” he suggested, “the cats belonged there—they belonged to this woman?”

“Nobody’ll go so far as to say that,” Bill hinted darkly. “This gal reckoned she see ‘em upstairs i’ the middle o’ the night, though. Reckoned they was ghosts,

she did, an' cleared off next mornin'."

"They might not have been the same cats," Drake conjectured.

"A pair, big an' yellerish, she said—an' the two which was killed like that—big an' yellerish. There wouldn't be two pair like that round here."

"Well, I'd like a talk with you later on, Bill, for the sake of old times," Drake said. "I'd find you down at your place round about six, would I?"

"Yes, I'll be there—"

"Silence, please!"

Drake took out his notebook—to be ready to write.

## CHAPTER 18

### The Net Is Closing

AS GEES left the car and stepped toward the portico he saw Kefra in the doorway. He realized that she had admitted him each time he had come here, and momentarily wondered if Saleh wanted to avoid him? It was no more than a second's reflection, driven out by the sound of Kefra's voice.

"Why?" she asked, with no word of greeting for preface. "After what I wrote."

He answered: "Saleh—where is he?"

He saw the moonstone on her breast rise and fall with her breath. "He will come back soon."

"I want to see him—I came back here to find him."

"Then will you come in?" she asked. "He will not be long."

He followed her into the drawing room. The fire had been replenished; it was now a red mass, radiating heat that he felt halfway across the room, and crowned by little bluish flames. Kefra reached up to lay her hand on the mantel, and faced him.

"What is it?"

"This." He took from his pocket the card he had received.

She took it from him, read its brief message, and then, still holding it, shook her head. "No, it is not from me," she said.

"As I knew when I got back from where it asked me to go," he told her. "Saleh delivered it—only Saleh could have written it, since you did not. And going there was meant to kill me, horribly."

She bent her head to gaze down at the fire, and laid her arm on the mantel, with the card pendant in her hand. Then her foot on the guard slipped, and as she

started to recover her balance the card fluttered from her fingers. Gees started forward to clutch at it, but merely knocked it away, down into the flames; the paper flared up, crumpled, and was gone. Gazing down at it, he laughed—not a pleasant laugh.

She said, very quietly and evenly: “It makes no difference, and you need not even see him. Very soon, he will be called to account for far more than this. Far, far more than this!”

“Without it, seeing him would be useless,” he answered. “But—called to account?”

She pointed at the armchair behind him. “Will you sit there for a little while?” she asked. “In my letter I told you I should not see you again, but now—I wish it.”

Half reluctantly he seated himself, and she took her place on the rug at his feet, leaned against his knees with her face turned from him and toward the fire. “So—like any woman of a day, for this last time of all,” she said. “As for some few hours out of all my hours. I dreamed I might rest at day’s end. Before I knew.”

For a moment she looked up at him, and he read in her eyes that she was no longer remote, but desiring his nearness. “You knew—?”

“That I am no less bound from you than I was before the ninth life was taken,” she answered somberly. “Freedom was an illusion, given for the little time I knew with you to make the bonds more cruel—a vengeance designed by Typhon’s own minister, Sekhmet the accursed.”

In the stillness that followed he listened, still and tensed; and heard a faint, purring sound—so faint that he could not determine its source. It might have been in the room, outside the house, or even close here beside him. Then Kefra said: “Yes, I too hear it. She is content, but nothing can take from me the time we two knew.” She looked up at him again. The sound had ceased. “No power can take it away. Nor this—this interval of peace.”

Again she turned toward the fire, and leaned her head down on her knee. The red coals rustled, shrinking down behind their bars. He laid his hand on her hair. “All this is illusion, Kefra,” he said. “Surely it is all illusion. Forget it—come back to London with me—”

“I have seen,” she interrupted him. “Since I wrote the letter you took away, I have seen. Else, I would not be here with you again, as now. And Saleh—you asked of him. He will not see another day.”

He tried to frame a question, but could find no words. She answered the question as if he had spoken it.

“No, not through me. Nor do I know in what way. But I have seen, and know that even now the assessors wait to judge him in Amenti. There is no escaping.”

“The last priest of Sekhmet,” he said. “Then—you will be free.”

“I shall be free,” she assented quietly.

“Then—” he began, and did not end it.

She reached up, grasped the hand he had withdrawn, and again laid it on her head. “For every day that you remember, I have known ten times a thousand days,” she said. “I have stored knowledge grain by grain, as a man might store corn against a time of need. And I know—from the day when I stood before Nitocris the beautiful to this hour, through all the ages I have known, the spirit that is man has lifted itself no higher above the beasts than it was when I first saw altars in Abydos.”

“A hard saying,” Gees said. “But what of it?”

“A thought, no more. That when I was a child kings went out to conquer and bring back slaves, and today the whole world stores arms for no other purpose. In all the ages between they have learned nothing. A thought, no more. And though I have stored knowledge, though I am old in all the ways of life, and have experienced all things, I have found no greater good than this I know now.”

“This—?”

“Peace, and a hand laid on my head.”

They sat in silence, while thoughts came and passed in his mind: if Saleh, who, she had said, would not see tomorrow; of Tony Briggs, driving back to London perplexed and with a sense of the uselessness of his effort; of Tott, determined and practical; of this woman who, twice during this long silence, nestled more

closely to him and once reached up to lay her hand over his on her head.

She rose to her feet with effortless grace, and turned to face him. Abruptly leaned, laid both hands on his shoulders, and drew him toward her to kiss him on the forehead.

“For the last time,” she said. “The last time of all.”

“But—I want to ask you—”

She shook her head. “Nothing—no more. I shall see you no more. Time—a very little time—will tell all you ask.”

She drew back from him and motioned with her head toward the door. He wanted to question, to protest, but found that he could not even speak. Her eyes were all darkness, all tenderness, yet they compelled him to turn away from her and go out...

BEYOND the bridge across the moat he choked the car, realizing that he had not seen Saleh, that Kefra had told him nothing of all he would have learned. But then he drove on. Some force, perhaps emanating from her, compelled him to. And her words—“I shall see you no more,” went with him, unquestionable and final.

People were coming out from Hedlington Village Hall as he passed on his way toward the inn. He felt unaccountably tired; there would be time for tea before the fire at the *Rest And Be Thankful*, and then he could set out for London.

...Waiting outside the village hall, Inspector Tott saw Perry emerge, and moved forward to fall into step with him, going toward the inn.

“I wouldn’t come inside, because of that worm Drake,” he said. “He’s got it in his mind that I’m in this case with you, and I want to discourage him.”

“He can forget it,” Perry said. “There isn’t any more case, after that verdict. Though he hustled off as if he thought there might be, directly he’d got the verdict. Gone to see where the body was found, by the look of him.”

“How do you get back home?” Tott inquired.

“There’s a bus every half hour—it stops outside the *Rest And Be Thankful*,” Perry answered. “One’s just gone, but if we catch the next it’ll get us to my home before dark. I can put you up for the night, if you like, or you can come back here or go on to Cheltenham.”

“Cheltenham, I think—many thanks for the offer, all the same.”

“That’s a fine car your Mr. Green runs.” They were abreast of the car, outside the inn, as Perry made the comment.

“Yes,” Tott admitted reflectively, “but he’s not my Mr. Green. If he were, I might l’arn him a few things.”

He paused in the doorway of the inn to look back at the car.

“We’ve got plenty of time,” Perry remarked. “More than two hours of daylight, yet, and half an hour for the bus.”

“Then I think a cup of tea wouldn’t damage either of us,” Tott suggested. “You order it, and tell ‘em to put it on my bill, while I go for that telephone call before I forget it.”

Tott found the apparatus, and called his number. Minutes of waiting, and then he asked to be put through to Inspector Crampton, only to be informed that he was not in.

“Well, who is in, then?” Tott demanded.

“Who wants Inspector Crampton?”

“Inspector Tott.”

“Oh, that’s different, of course. Carroll speaking, Mr. Tott—Detective-sergeant Carroll.”

“Where is Crampton?” Tott rasped out.

“Well, sir, I understood him to say he was going to a place called Gees Confidential Agency, to get some particular information he wanted.”

“What particular information—can you tell me that?”

“No, Mr. Tott, I’m afraid I can’t. But you might get him there.”

“Can you give me the number?”

“Just a moment, sir.”

Tott penciled the number on the pad before him, depressed the receiver hook, and dialed again.

“Miss Brandon?”

“Who is speaking, please?”

“Inspector Tott, Miss Brandon. I wonder if you could tell me—”

“Just one moment, Inspector, and perhaps you could help me first,” she interrupted him. “I have somebody here asking for Mr. Green—can you tell me where to find him? I was away yesterday, and came back this morning to find him gone, leaving no address.”

“I rather think your caller’s name is Crampton. If so, Mr. Green is here, tell him. It’s Hedlington-cum-Carnworth, Gloucestershire, but Mr. Green’s starting back to London almost at once, I understand. Now can you let me speak to Inspector Crampton, please, Miss Brandon?”

“Just a moment.”

A few seconds of silence, and then Crampton’s voice. “Hullo, Mr. Tott. They told me you were on leave, and couldn’t say where, so I came along here on the chance of getting what I wanted. But now I’ve found you, I wonder if you can tell me. Have you any idea what’s become of that Miss Kefra and her man Saleh? I don’t know where you’re speaking from, but if you can’t tell me I’ve got to make it a routine inquiry about that place of hers in Gloucestershire.”

“That’s exactly where they are. At least—” he remembered what Gees had told him—“Saleh was here up to three or four hours ago, and probably still is. About Miss Kefra, I’m not so sure, but probably she’s at Barnby Grange.”



“The man is our bird, I think—all right, Miss Brandon, you need not go. I want both of them held for questioning. The man in charge of the case down there—Perry, I think his name is—could you get a message through to him for me? It’s important.”

“Easily,” Tott answered. “What have you got, Crampton—not some concrete evidence?”

“A rug I took out of her flat—a stained rug. I’ve had it tested, with the idea that blood might have caused the stains—somebody had tried to wash ‘em out. But there was enough left to declare that they are bloodstains, and enough, too, to prove them the same group classification as the slides stained from the body of the child Ernest Parkoot. Which body Saleh jammed into a suitcase and threw out of Miss Kefra’s car on Wimbledon Common, the same night the child was killed. It’s enough to justify holding both Miss Kefra and the man, and I’ll get a car turned out and come right down.”

“You have no more than the evidence of the rug, I take it?”

“I only got that half an hour ago—the report of the analysis,” Crampton answered. “Now, I’ve got a squad of searchers going over that flat with fine-tooth combs and microscopes.”

“What you have is enough to justify questioning,” Tott said. “I’ll tell Perry at once—I’m not on the case, as you know, but there’s nothing to prevent my giving you and him a hand. You can leave that part of it to me, and probably I’ll see you when you arrive here. You don’t want to speak to Mr. Green now, I take it, Inspector Crampton?”

“No—Oh, no! I know I can leave it to you—see you soon, probably.”

Tott replaced his receiver and hurried down the stairs.

## CHAPTER 19

### The Mask That Vanished

ENTERING the dining room, Tott saw Gees sitting by the fire with a cigarette, gazing at Inspector Perry. Tott said: "We shall not wait for tea, waitress," and Perry turned toward him. "And you, Mr. Green—Oh, well, you've been in it all along." The waitress went out with the tray.

"I've just been talking to Crampton, and he's tied up the Ernest Parkoot murder with Miss Kefra's flat. He wants her and the man Saleh held for questioning—I told him I'd give you the message, Perry."

"Not arrest?"

"Questioning first. I expect arrest will follow."

"Crampton's coming here, then?" Gees put in.

"At once—he'll arrive in about three hours' time, I expect. Meanwhile it's up to you, Perry, to see that those two don't move elsewhere."

"I'd better get going," said Perry. "It's a good three miles—"

"I'll drive you," Gees offered. He remembered Kefra's prophecy regarding Saleh, and felt that he must see if it won to fulfillment. "Your inquest verdict goes west, now," and, dropping his cigarette butt in the fire, lighted another, while Perry shook his head emphatically.

"Oh, no!" he said. "You think it was Saleh both times?"

"No," Gees answered, unenlighteningly.

"Miss Kefra?"

"No," Gees said again.

"Then if it was that cat, the verdict was correct."

“No,” Gees told him for the third time.

“Then what on earth are you talking about?” Perry demanded.

“Offering to drive you to Barnby Grange.”

Perry looked at his watch. “Very good of you,” he said. “You’ll come along, Mr. Tott? Crampton can take over when he gets here.”

Gees led the way toward the door. “Half a minute—my coat is up in my room. I’ll run up and get it.”

“Just as well to let him drive us,” Perry observed to Tott as they went out to the Rolls-Bentley. “Miss Kefra’s got a big black sedan that looks as if it could move, and if that Saleh got going in it he might take some finding. The sooner I pin him down for Crampton, the better—and I’ve done enough today without walking to the Grange.”

The still, sunlit afternoon was nearing its end as Gees drove off; not more than an hour of daylight remained. They passed out from the village and went up over the rise, to begin the long descent to Barnby.

“I hope that worm Drake doesn’t spot us,” Tott murmured; and Perry, beside Gees, suddenly pointed ahead.

“Her car!” he exclaimed. “Ahead there.”

It was drawn up beside the road, nearly opposite the place on the grassy open land where the dead girl’s body had been found. From that place, a man walked toward the black limousine, and beside him was someone in a black fur coat who held him by the shoulder.

Gees peered intently through the windshield as he neared them, and saw that the man walked stumbingly: it seemed that his companion almost held him up, and impelled him toward the car.

They were fifty yards or so away from the limousine when suddenly a flock of sheep began surging into the road by way of an opening in the high brick wall, and beyond the wall they could hear a dog barking as he rounded up his charges, and the voice of a shepherd urging both him and the sheep.

With the road completely blocked by the crowding animals, Gees pulled to a standstill some thirty yards from the stationary car before him. And now he could see, with the light from the setting sun striking on that black fur coat, five-grouped markings on its—black panther skin, that he had seen once before. He could see, too, the head that rose above the coat collar, tawny, furred—it turned toward him, and he saw the great, bared and pointed teeth, its very fierce, yellow eyes.

Tott stood up in the back of the car with a shout that was almost a shriek. The thing in the panther fur coat was hurrying the stumbling man toward the car, whose side door swung open. Sheep crowded, surging past the Rolls-Bentley, while more sheep poured out from behind the high wall. They clanked against the wings, scraped past, *baa*-ing in fright, and Tott yelled:

“Get on! Drake—she’s got Drake—get on!”

It was impossible to move the car with the mass of sheep driving at it. Short of leaping out, he could do nothing. Perry tried to get the door on his side open, but the pressure of the crowding sheep prevented it, and if he got over it on to the runningboard the animals would have swept him off his feet with their rush, driven on as they were by the pressure of others following them.

And Gees saw that Drake, his spectacles missing, stumbled toward the sedan in the grip of whatever it was, like a man senseless, already half dead. His black-furred captor urged him on, almost lifting him from his feet.

Gees reached down to the pocket beside him and got out his automatic. Reaching over the side he fired, and the bullet starred the oblong glass in the back of the limousine. He tried for a second shot, but the pistol had jammed, and he drew it back to tug desperately and vainly at the recoil casing.

But, with the report, the black-furred figure released its hold on Drake, who fell in a crumpled heap, while it leaped to disappear within—and the sedan began to move down the hill.

“Oh, blast these sheep!” Perry shouted.

The last of them surged past the car as the shepherd and his dog appeared in the opening by which they had emerged to the road. Perry got out, over the side of the car, and ran to the man, who stood staring, and lifted a hand to scratch his

head. Perry shook a fist at him, and then pointed to Drake's still, crumpled figure.

"See to that man, you!" he commanded fiercely.

Without waiting for reply, he ran back to the car and climbed in again. "Get on, Mr. Green—get on!" he ordered. "We've got to catch that car."

"Before they can get inside the Grange, too," Tott said sharply. "Remember how you looked for 'em there this morning,

Mr. Green? They've got secret hiding places in that old house. My God, I'd never have believed—it was a mask, though. A lioness-head mask."

"Yes," Perry said, as the Rolls-Bentley shot at the descent, "it must have been a mask; but why?"

Gees spared one glance at Drake as he passed, and saw that he lay crumpled and ominously inert.

The tires ground, half-skidding, on the curve of the hill, and the car swung out so menacingly that Gees had to slow down for an instant. Coming to straight road again, Gees saw the car ahead take the right-hand turn at the foot of the hill on two wheels. He almost held his breath for the crash seemed inevitable, but the black car straightened out and disappeared, hurtling toward the Grange.

"You'll lose them—you'll lose them!" Tott moaned.

Slow, a little slower—that turn at the foot of the hill was dangerous. Open out—now brake strongly with the steering wheel hard over. Tott emitted a long, "Aah-h-h!" as the back wheels swung in a dry skid, and with the brake released the car shot swiftly forward in its new direction.

Past the last cottage of the hamlet, and on. Turning in with another dry skid between the posts where once a gate had marked the entrance to the drive, and now no more than fifty yards divided the two cars.

Tott leaned forward. "You've got 'em. Pull up sharp, and we'll have 'em before they can get inside and hide that mask. We'll jump out after them as he stops, Perry."

The car ahead was almost leaping on the rutted, flinty way. Almost on to the moat-bridge, it lurched and swerved as the report of a bursting front tire, cut by the flints on the drive, reached their hearing. Lurched, swerved—crashed on the crumbling parapet, and, for a moment that lasted interminably, hung, toppling, dropping, to plunge thunderously. Only the ripples remained when Gees braked the Rolls-Bentley to a standstill.

Perry, out on the bridge, laid a hand on the cracked and partly shattered parapet to look over. Great bubbles came to the surface, and more ripples rayed out from them on the ominously black water.

“Twenty-five feet deep,” he said. “We’ve got to help to get it up. No hope—no chance for them.”

“The mask will be inside the car,” Tott said. “Evidence.”

Again, seated at his steering wheel, Gees remembered Kefra’s prophecy as he gazed on its fulfillment.

## CHAPTER 20

### When Gods Must Die

THE shepherd bent over Drake's limp figure on the grass. Then he knelt and heard Drake's breathing. He tried to rouse him by saying louder and louder, "Heer! Heer, mister! Wake up!"

But, since Drake showed no sign of wakening, the shepherd took him under the armpits and lifted him to a sitting posture, while the old dog that had rounded the sheep out to the road stood by with hanging tongue. Then Drake, leaning against the shepherd's hold, stirred and put his hand to his face, slowly and uncertainly.

"My—my glasses," he said. "I want my glasses."

"Where are they, mister?" the shepherd asked. "What glasses?"

"I was wiping 'em. They—they fogged. Somebody grabbed my shoulder—I couldn't see. And then—my God! I know what a mouse must feel like when a cat gets it! The glasses—who are you? Where are they?"

"If I let go, mister, kin you set up?" the shepherd asked.

Drake put his two hands on the ground and got to his feet, clumsily. "Wait—I remember," said he, more coherently. "I've got my spare pair." He felt in his pocket and, producing a case, opened it and put on a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles. He looked at the shepherd.

"Who was it?" he asked. "Did you see who caught me?"

The shepherd shook his head. "Didn't see nobody, mister," he answered. "I were herdin' my sheep inter the road. That there p'leece inspector what been nosin' round here about that gal gittin' killed—he said I gotter look arter you. You all right now? You're sort of shaken up."

"I—I suppose so." Drake put a hand to his shoulder. "Cut, somehow—all sticky and painful." He pushed back the coat lapel, and blood showed on the shoulder of his shirt. "Wait a bit—don't go for a minute." He slipped the coat off, dropped

it on the grass, and opened the front of his shirt and undervest “Look—what do you make of it?” he asked. “I can’t see, myself, but I can feel it.”

“Looks like you been clawed, mister, like they say the gal were clawed,” the shepherd decided. “The shirt’s all tore too—look! It mean there’s another o’ them great cats about somewhere. I gotter go an’ see it don’t git at my sheep, I reckon.” He gazed along the road toward the crest of the rise, where the sheep, with nobody to urge them, had taken to the grass. Drake looked round too.

“That’s my handkerchief over there—the glasses’ll be there too,” he announced. “The pair I dropped. Look here—Don’t go! If there’s another of those beasts about I’m not safe alone—nor are you. It’s less likely to go for two of us, and there’s your dog.”

“Well, mister, you git them glasses, an’ then come along o’ me, so be you kin walk alone all right now. I got to look arter my sheep, and since I got to drive ‘em through Hedlin’gon, you kin come along.”

Drake went to retrieve the glasses and handkerchief. When he returned to where the shepherd waited, he said: “Whoever grabbed me must have had some sort of knife or something—it wasn’t a cat or any animal made those cuts in my shoulder. It was the hand that held on to me and dragged me along—somebody—I think there was a car, but I could see nothing without my glasses. Something in the hand holding me that sunk in, tore—not an animal of any sort.”

“It looks like claws done it, to me,” the shepherd insisted.

“If you want to get along, I’ll go with you to Hedlington,” Drake said. “Find somewhere to get the cuts dressed—they may be septic. But I know how a mouse must feel, helpless, awful!”

“It were a cat done it,” the shepherd said with decision. “A great big cat, like that one they shot. I gotter go after my sheep, mister. Can’t leave them alone.”

They set off, and the old dog followed.

The Grange frontage was no mare than a dark oblong against the night sky when the gang of men whom Perry had fetched, together with tackle from a builder’s yard, finally got the large car out from the moat and righted it, little damaged except for its driven-in radiator. They dragged it toward the portico, into the ray



of Gees' headlamps, and the light, too, of the two lorries on which the tackle had been fetched under Perry's direction. Tott, who had remained on guard all the time, reached out to open the door, but then stood back and turned to Crampton, who by that time had arrived to take part.

"It's your case," Tott said. "Not that there's much of a case left for you, except for the mask I told you about."

"It'll be in there," Crampton decided. "All windows up and unbroken—it'll be in there. Somebody give a hand here!"

He turned the handle and tugged at the car door. It yielded stiffly; in the fall, the body of the car had been strained, probably. As the door came open, water gushed out. Men reached in and took out the body of Cleo Kefra, and Gees standing back, held his breath as the light of a big electric torch that Tott held fell on the still figure, and on her face. *Her* face, he saw, and with that turned away, for a drowned face is not pretty.

"NOW some of you get that body out from the driver's seat," Crampton ordered. "Let me have that light, Mr. Tott. The glass between her and the driver was closed, she was all shut in. The mask will be in the back, I expect, where she was."

He directed the strong light into the back of the car, rayed it slowly from floor to roof. Then, getting inside, he threw out the sodden rug, the seat, and even a movable floor-board, while men carried the two bodies into the Grange. Crampton got out again.

"You're sure about that mask, Mr. Tott?" he asked.

"It'll be somewhere in front," Tott answered. "We should have seen if they'd thrown it out while we were chasing them—at least, they were in sight a good part of the way. A mask like a lion's head—like a lioness' head, I mean. I saw it quite plainly while she had hold of that man Drake. Covering all her head and neck as far down as the collar of the fur coat. Look in front."

They stripped the driving compartment as Crampton had already stripped the back, but with no more result. Tott, standing beside Gees, observed—"That's funny. They must have thrown it out."

Gees said, “They didn’t throw it out.”

“It’s not there!” Tott protested.

“No,” Gees agreed tonelessly, “it’s not there.”

Sentences from Kefra’s story were back in his mind. “When she had need, she took—so much of my life that I was as one dead until she had her will...and thus renewed her accursed self.”

And now at last he knew. There was no mask—for none had been worn. Gees realized that at the end, Kefra had known too. That was what she had meant this afternoon. Her own body, during those moments of blackness, those “renderings-up of myself to the goddess,” had been the instrument of Sekhmet’s hideous, bloody-hungry cruelty. And as once long ago, Sekhmet had killed the man whom Kefra had loved—so last night in jealousy she had tried to kill him, Gees.

But who would believe these tales—an ancient goddess of wrath and murder, coming to earth to destroy; making of her priestess a changeling—a clawing, snarling lion-woman; giving that priestess timeless and destructive life, using her to procure the blood of mortals—the blood so necessary to sacrifice and belief—No, these things would not be believed.

But no matter. Sekhmet was dead now. For Saleh, her only living worshipper, lay lifeless in the car. There was no one to believe in her any more; and without belief she perished, as must all the gods whose cult has passed from the minds and hearts, the fear and worship, of men. And with Sekhmet dead, then Kefra—her priestess, her instrument, and her victim—was at last released from the long bondage—“the closer bond,” she had called it.

So they were dead—all three. Goddess, priestess, devotee. Gone from the earth. And none would remember. Time had claimed them at last.

Gees knew though, with a pang of misery, that time would never take from him the memory of Kefra’s burning amber eyes, nor that moment of utter peace they had known this afternoon... Was it only this afternoon? It seemed centuries...

“They must have thrown it out!” Tott insisted. He was still fuming about the mask.

“Very well, then, they threw it out. In that case, you’ll find it somewhere on the way here—but you won’t,” Gees told him. “Further, you won’t want me any more—Crampton has got his car here—”

“Hold on a minute,” Tott interrupted. “What do you know?”

“Nothing that you would believe—nothing that would be the slightest use to you. I’m going back to London.”

He turned to go to his car. Tott called—“Here—Mr. Green?” and he faced about again.

“Well?” he asked, coolly.

“Oh, nothing!” Tott said, in a tone of weary irritation.

Gees turned again, got into his car and, backing to turn, drove away.

THE END