



From out of the forgotten past of once mighty Egypt came an evil curse—and with it the dread symbol of this . . .



The Curse of Ra

by H. B. Hickey



The Egyptian's long and evil curse and the horror of the end of it ruled German street . . .

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THIS MORNING I went out into the field with my daughter and as the full blast of the sun's rays hit me I shivered.

"Why are you cold, Daddy?" she asked. "The sun is so nice and warm!"

What could I say to her? That from now until the day I die those same rays that to her seem so warm and cheerful will to me be a source of darkest fear?

Could I say that the dank vault of the forgotten past has opened and that the fetid breath of the thing which is Death within Life still surrounds us?

I might have said: "Darling little Anna, you are only four years old and your hair is gold and curly, and in your dancing blue eyes there is no fear. But as you grow older there

will be times when those eyes will be doubtful. Memories which should have been severed with the umbilical cord that bound you to your mother will return; and though you will doubt those memories you will not be able to banish them."

How foolish! What could that mean to a four year old child?

Or suppose I had said: "No, destiny is not blind. There is a force that directs us: we may travel willingly or unwillingly, knowing or unknowing, but the road is laid out and the end is foredoomed."

Those are things which a man can hardly say to other grown men. And he would say them at the risk of being thought a lunatic.

I had pushed everything but the hint of that dark fear from my mind. When I wrote

the report which brought James Vernor a posthumous Nobel Prize it was a coldly scientific report. I reported his discoveries for what they were: monumental additions to our knowledge of ancient Egyptian mythology.

Mythology! I tried to believe that, tried to believe that Pta-hotep was but the forerunner of later and better known story tellers. I almost *did* believe it.

But yesterday I saw Meyerson.

WHEN the call came from the sanitarium I didn't want to go. For years now I have been a farmer. I almost succeeded in becoming one of those solid, practical men who sees what he sees and knows what he knows, and no foolishness about it. You put seeds in the ground and the rains come and the sun shines and the seeds sprout, and that's enough for any man.

But the older Anna had something to say:

"You'll have to go, George. Meyerson may have saved our lives that day. According to the doctor this may be the chance to save Meyerson's life, to make him whole again."

So I went to see Meyerson. I put on my only suit and washed as much of the imbedded grime off my hands as I could and I drove the hundred and fifty miles to the sanitarium.

"It's very good of you to come," the man in the white coat said.

"Not at all. I realize that even the most tenuous connection with past reality may be sufficient to bridge the gap."

The doctor stared at me. I couldn't blame him. The discrepancy between my appearance and my speech is great.

"I thought Meyerson had been given up," I went on. "It seems in the nature of a minor miracle that you've brought him to the point where any hope could be entertained."

He was still staring at me but when he saw I was waiting for a reply he snapped out

of his reverie.

"Oh, yes. Well, electric shocks, you know. We're not certain just how they work or just why they work in some cases and not in others. In Meyerson's case they seem to have had a halfway effect."

"And you're hoping that the sight of me may finish the job?"

"Yes. Yours has been the only name he's spoken so we may assume that you are in some way connected with the cause of his illness. I suggest you let him talk if he feels like it. Talking may bring his fear out into the open where we can examine it."

"Suppose it's not the kind of fear which can be approached rationally?"

"What? How do you mean?"

I wasn't going to explain. It would only have confused him.

"Or suppose," I went on, "that instead of helping Meyerson, talking to me brings back his fear stronger than ever? Suppose it produces a relapse?"

"That is a chance we'll have to take."

He was quite cool about the thing. Why not? It was just another case to him. Not that he was uninterested in Meyerson. Quite the contrary. I was certain that he had done and would do everything within his power to help Meyerson recover. It was simply that he operates on one side of the fence. What I could have told him is on the other side, the dark side.

"I'm ready to see him," I said.

He nodded and led me to a door at the back of his cheerful, homelike office. As I stepped through into the corridor the doctor stopped me.

"One thing more. You haven't seen Meyerson in some years. He has changed a good deal. Please do not show any surprise at his appearance or at anything he says. Be matter of fact and friendly."

"Of course."

We walked down that long corridor

with its rooms on both sides. Some of the rooms had tiny doors with only a small, barred opening. The whole place had a clean and efficient appearance. We stopped before one of the small doors and the doctor unlocked it.

"You'd better go in alone. He may feel more comfortable with just you there." Then he added: "It's not dangerous."

WHEN the door swung shut behind me and I was in the room. And the doctor was right; there was no danger.

The last time I had seen Meyerson he had stood at least six feet tall and must have weighed close to two hundred pounds. He was then about thirty-five years old.

Now—

Fear and horror had shrunk and shriveled him. A small clump of damp gray hair lay uncombed on his damp and bony skull. He had been kept physically clean but it was a surgical cleanliness, not human. Meyerson was beyond that.

"Hello, Meyerson," I said inanely. "Remember me? I'm Dick Enderly."

He remembered me. His half open mouth worked strangely and his watery and bulging eyes blinked. He pulled up slightly from his fearful crouch in the corner of the cot that was against the wall.

"*Enderly. Dick Enderly,*" he croaked.

His voice had not been used in years except for purely animal sounds. Probably my name was the first he had uttered in all those years. He said it over and over.

"That's right," I said.

It made no impression on Meyerson. He kept repeating it. But as he went on and on and on his voice gained strength. Then suddenly he was off the cot and his thin, birdlike hands were on my shoulders. I wanted to run and could not. Like claws those hands perched on my shoulders.

"*You were there, Enderly. You were*

there," he croaked.

"Yes, I was there."

Spittle ran down Meyerson's chin and the horror was in his eyes.

"*I didn't really hear it. I didn't. Did I?*"

"What?"

"*The wings beating! But you weren't in the room? Were you?*"

"Yes. I was in the room with you," I lied. "What about the wings?"

"*They were beating! Flying! Fighting! Feet of birds scratching on the floor. In the darkness there were wings!*"

"No," I said. "There were no wings."

"*There weren't?*"

"No."

"*Then I only dreamed it! I must have dreamed it!*"

"Yes. You dreamed it."

There was no more to say. Meyerson was going to be all right, as all right as he could ever be. He was sitting on the cot and crying. I didn't say goodbye.

He will finish his existence in that place because he can never again care for himself. But Meyerson will be all right. I lied to him and saved him. But how about myself? I can't lie to myself.

Now I know that Pta-hotep was right. Now I know for certain what happened in that locked room. Because I thought I knew I gave up my career and became a farmer. But now I am certain!

Pta-hotep wrote his account in the days before Egypt became great, before the pyramids, when the Sahara was yet green. This is the end of the story, as it happened in our time...

IT WAS a tall man who pushed open the door and entered the offices of the Greater Nile Export-Import Company. He was thin and walked with a slight stoop. His hair was

black except for a silver streak at each temple, and his skin was dark and with an underlying pallor. His black eyes were large, luminous, and vague.

"You wish to see someone?" the girl at the desk asked.

"Yaiss," he said. But he sounded doubtful.

"Whom is it you wish to see?" she asked carefully.

"I—I am not sure."

"Well," she hesitated, "would Mr. Gorman be all right?"

"Yaiss." He drew the word out as though not certain it was the right one.

"And whom shall I say is calling?"

"Amen-ankh—" He hesitated, shook his head. "No. That is not right. Fesir Hamid."

Mr. Gorman came bustling out of his office. He was short, pudgy, and well groomed. His small plump hand shook the taller man's long bony one.

"Mr. Hamid. Won't you come into my office?"

"Thank you."

When they were seated in Gorman's comfortable office he allowed his cheerful eyes a moment's study of the dark man. But the silence was uncomfortable.

"Hamid, eh? We may assume you are an Egyptian then," Gorman said.

"Yaiss."

"And you have some business with Greater Nile?"

"I—I don't know."

"Eh? You don't know?"

"I am sorry. This is very strange."

"Yes, I should say it is. Are you sure you're in the right place?"

"Yaiss. That is, I think so." He saw that Gorman was growing impatient and stretched out an imploring hand.

"Please. It is as strange for me as for you. I am told to come here. Yet I cannot know why."

"Told? You mean a business acquaintance sent you?" Gorman sought common ground.

"No. I was told inside. Inside here." Hamid pointed to his head.

"Eh?"

"Yaiss. No, I am not insane. It is not a voice which tells me. I don't know. Maybe I am. But it is something inside me which does it, something which seems to reach me from far back. When I was a child, maybe? Maybe as far as that?"

"I'm sure I wouldn't know," Gorman said glumly. Hamid was becoming more confused and more vague.

"Please listen."

"Go ahead."

"Yaiss. One month ago I was a merchant in Cairo. Married. No children. My name is Fesir Hamid. Upper class. Educated."

"Effendi," Gorman said.

"Yaiss. Then one day I say to myself: 'Amen-ankh, you must go to America. New York.' But my name is not Amen-ankh. Such a name has not been used in Egypt for who knows how long. Still I take all my money, say goodbye to wife, and here I am in New York in Greater Nile Export-Import Company. Why?"

"Eh? That would seem to be the question, wouldn't it? Well, I'm sorry I can't help you."

GORMAN waved his hands at some papers on his desk as though to show how much work he had. He picked up several of the papers and shuffled them nervously. When he looked up Hamid was still there.

"Now, really," Gorman said. "Amen-ankh, or Mr. Hamid, or whatever your name is, you'll have to leave."

"No. Something is here."

"The police are going to be here if you don't leave. I can tell you that."

Gorman reached for the phone on his

desk but Hamid was paying no attention to him. The Egyptian's eyes darted wildly about the room, in search of the mysterious something which had brought him all the way from Cairo.

"Well?" Gorman gave him his last chance.

"Wait! I see something!"

The chunky man behind the desk followed Hamid's eyes to a spot on the wall. A photograph hung there, a picture of a man with studious, deep-set eyes and a white spade beard. The man in the picture wore a pith helmet.

"*That man!*" Hamid gasped. "What is he doing here?"

Gorman relaxed and leaned back. The danger seemed over. Hamid was not going to become violent.

"That one with the beard?" Gorman asked with a faint smile. "I should think you'd know his picture. It must have been in Cairo papers often enough. That's James Vernor, famous archeologist and Egyptologist. We always handled his transport."

"I have never laid eyes on him before," Hamid half whispered.

"Say!" Gorman grunted. "There's something damned odd about this. Vernor was last in this office one month ago! Just about the time you decided to leave Cairo."

"But why? Why?"

"Simple enough reason. To get a crate we'd had delivered to the office instead of to his home."

"And now? Where is he now?" Hamid was trembling in a fever of excitement.

Gorman leaned back in his chair. His eyes had grown sad and he twined his fingers nervously.

"Where? To a well deserved rest, I should say. James Vernor died two weeks ago."

If he had expected Fesir Hamid to

show any signs of disappointment he was wrong. Hamid had seemingly come thousands of miles to see Vernor, yet news of his death was no shock. The Egyptian's eyes still burned.

"It must be the packing case," he whispered. "Yes, the case. Where is that?"

"At his home, I imagine," Gorman said. "He took it with him so I wouldn't know for sure. But that seems the most likely place."

"Yes. Something tells me that is where it is. And now you will tell me, and quickly please, where is his home? I must go there!"

"I don't have his address handy," Gorman shrugged. "But I can get it for you."

He lifted his phone and asked the girl in the outer office to look up the address of James Vernor and bring it to him. She came in a moment later with a slip of paper which she set down before Gorman.

"Let me have it," Hamid said eagerly.

HE REACHED out a bony hand that was like a claw. The nails at the finger ends were long and pointed and slightly curved. Like a bird's, Gorman thought. Altogether Hamid reminded him of a large bird. He sat as though on a perch, and when he walked it was stiff-legged, like one of the larger wading birds.

"Just a minute," German muttered as he pulled back the slip of paper. "What the devil do you want? Exactly what?"

"Never mind. Just give me that paper."

"Not so fast. Vernor was a nice old boy, and even if he's gone I wouldn't want his possessions tampered with. How do I know you don't intend to steal that case you're so interested in?"

Instead of answering Hamid acted. His hand shot out and snatched the slip from German's fingers. Then the Egyptian turned to run.

But Gorman, smaller though he was,

had no lack of courage. He sprang from behind his desk. Now he was convinced he was dealing with either a madman or a crook. As Hamid reached the door and paused to open it Gorman grabbed his arm.

“Give me that slip!” he demanded as he swung Hamid around.

Black eyes that had grown small and beady stared at Gorman over a beak of a nose. Gorman’s grip loosened slightly as betook a half step backward. He stared to cry out.

His cry was smothered by the raucous sound which came from Hamid’s throat. Then the Egyptian’s long arm swung out and the talons at the end of it ripped down across German’s jaw, tore through his throat. Blood spurted as the chunky man fell.

Then Hamid was out of the door. The girl looked up and screamed as she saw his reddened hand and the figure of Gorman behind him. From another office a man dashed. He was too late to stop Hamid before the stiff-legged run took him out of the office and into the corridor.

“Call the police!” he ordered the girl.

For an instant he wavered, then ran to German’s office and bent over the fallen man. Gorman was alive but bleeding profusely, a pool of red already around him.

It was Detective Lieutenant Bill Meyerson who led a squad into the office five minutes later. A doctor who had an office in the building was already there and fighting to stop the flow of blood.

It was no use. Vital arteries had been severed. Gorman lived only a little longer, but it was long enough for him to tell Meyerson what had happened.

JAMES VERNOR’S study was like one of the ancient crypts from which he had dug so many of his treasures. It was a huge paneled room in his rambling house, and in that room the wide windows were all barred. I couldn’t blame him, but it made the place like

a great cell, and I was happy when my morning’s work was done and I could go into the garden for a walk before lunch.

For a week I had been working in that room, and as always I was uneasy. Not that I hadn’t wanted to come. Vernor’s will had left all his treasures to the University, and when I was given the chance to do the cataloging and the consolidation of his notes I jumped at it.

He had been my instructor when I was a student. More than that, he had let me assist him in the preparation of his books on ancient Egypt. I could read his hurried scrawl with ease. It was through James Vernor that I had my full professorship, although the youngest man in the department.

Vernor had independent means, and when university regulations grew too confining he gave up his chair. For three years he had been conducting his own excavations. From muttered hints we knew he was on to something big, but that was all. Vernor was not one to talk until he was certain of his facts.

And then, just when we were awaiting an announcement of some new discovery, Vernor died. He died mysteriously, without any warning. One day he was alive, the next he was dead. Just that simply. And the doctors could give no cause.

After the funeral I went back to that big house and set to work. The room was light and airy enough, and I was used to working in mustier places. But I was still uneasy. Occasionally I lifted my eyes from Vernor’s notes and it seemed as though the ibis in the alcove near the window was watching me.

It was a huge bird, at least three feet high and solid black. Vernor had brought it back from Egypt just before he died. There was something strange about it.

I have seen the ibis in its native habitat. I have seen it stuffed and mounted. I have seen it carved in semiprecious stone and I have seen it hewn on the walls of the crypts of Egypt.

This one was different. It was full life size. If human hands had made it they were the hands of genius. For the bird seemed almost alive. Every detail was perfect, from its long talons to its great bill. Every feather seemed ready to quiver for flight. If a bird had been petrified that was how it would look.

I found myself nodding to it as I got up from the library table on which Vernor's notes were strewn.

"If you don't mind, I'll leave now," I whispered.

I didn't smile, although it had been a faint attempt at humor. The ibis didn't blink. I hadn't quite expected it to. I went out and locked the door behind me.

"**T**HROUGH for the morning?" Anna Vernor asked.

She was sitting under a tree in the garden and the sunlight came through the leaves to glint in her golden hair. We'd known each other for years. For my part I more than just liked her. I wasn't sure how she felt.

"Through for the morning, anyway, and happy to be out here with you," I smiled.

"It's a lonely work, isn't it?"

"Not so bad. I'm used to digging about in the musty past. I'm afraid I'm getting kind of musty myself."

I sat down beside her and for the first time I saw something in her eyes which told me I might have a chance.

"You're not musty, Dick, You'll never be. Dad always said you were a lot like him, that for both of you the past was only the headwaters of the river of Tune, and that knowing more about the past kept you closer to the present."

"He once said that to me," I recalled. "He said the past never died."

I shook my head sadly. "He was a great man. When it came to unraveling tangles and cutting through obscurities there was no

one like him."

"He was greater than that," Anna smiled. "He could see through the obvious."

I almost jumped from the bench.

"What's the matter, Dick?" Her eyes widened and I felt myself flushing.

"Sorry. But it happens that remark about seeing through the obvious keeps running through his notes. I almost felt as though he himself were speaking."

"Maybe he is, Dick."

"What do you mean?" I wanted to know. "You sound as though you're serious."

"I am. He was on the trail of something big. I know that much. I've never seen him so secretive as when he came back from the last excavations. He brought some things with him that he wouldn't let even me see. And when he came out of his study the night before he died his eyes were burning. He'd found the answer to something."

"I wish I knew what," I grunted.

"Haven't you gone through all his things yet?" she asked.

"No. There's one fireproof box I haven't opened. Can't find the key. Is it all right if I break the lock?"

"Certainly."

The way she said the word made it a declaration of trust. I looked at her quickly but she turned her eyes. But when I dropped my hand on hers she made no effort to pull away.

"Anna—" I started to say.

"Yes?"

"Nothing. Nothing now, anyway. When I'm through with this job I'll have something to say."

SHE was staring at me and I forced myself to meet her eyes.

"What's wrong, Dick?" she asked. "Is it something about Dad?"

"Yes. Did he act strange in any way—near the end, I mean?"

“No. More excited than ever, but that was all. Why?”

“Because there’s something queer about his notes. They sound like him and yet they don’t.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, there’s a big difference between Egyptology and mysticism. Your father was always pretty hard-headed. But the last bunch of notes read as though he were going overboard.”

“No. Not Dad. He wouldn’t go overboard unless he knew something.” She sounded sure. She almost convinced me.

“Maybe. When I’m finished I’ll know more. By the way, what about that ibis?”

“The big one? He brought it just before he died.”

“Something eerie about it,” I muttered. Her eyes narrowed.

“I know what you mean. I’ve seen it several times. The last time I noticed—” She broke off.

“Noticed what?”

“When he brought it there was something suspended from its neck by a chain. Something that looked like a large amulet. The night before he died I brought him a tray and the amulet was gone.”

“Seen it since then?”

“No.”

“Maybe it’s in the fireproof box.”

We got up and walked toward the house, our hands touching now and then and both of us very conscious of it. The Vernor housekeeper had lunch ready and waiting for us. Somehow my appetite wasn’t too good.

* * *

I looked up to find Anna watching me intently. For a moment I thought I’d dropped food on my vest, but it wasn’t that.

“Pta-hotep,” she said.

“What about him?” I must have looked

very startled because she smiled.

“I don’t know. You were staring into space instead of eating. And suddenly you said something that sounded like ‘Pta-hotep.’”

“Wouldn’t be surprised. That name keeps cropping up all through your father’s later notes. If he was an important old Egyptian personage it’s odd I shouldn’t ever have heard of him. And I haven’t.”

“Could he be connected with what my father was working on?”

“Of course. But how? Your father apparently expected a great deal from Pta-hotep.”

I stood up and pushed my chair back.

The food just wasn’t appetizing any longer, and even the fact that Anna was there couldn’t keep me at the table.

“I’m going back to work,” I announced.

She merely smiled. When you have a father like James Vernor you get to expect such things.

“See you later,” I said. Anna nodded and I went down the hall and into the study and shut the door behind me.

THE Ibis was still there. I started to say hello and changed my mind. It just kept staring at me. I tried to stare it down but I was at a slight disadvantage there.

On the table papers were piled high. To someone else it might have looked like a hopeless mess, but actually I had it in good shape. I’d winnowed out all the purely personal stuff and had gone through most of the pertinent material.

James Vernor had been a brilliant man and his sharp intelligence flashed everywhere in those notes of his. But in the later ones, those he’d written on his last trip to Egypt and after his return, he seemed to ramble off into wildest speculation.

My personal opinion was that Vernor had gone overboard. Maybe when a man gets

old he tends to seek the mystical. But I knew what I was going to do. I was going to compile those papers and I was going to leave out anything I thought would hurt Vernor's memory.

The last ones had been the worst. Some of the notions he expressed in the paper I had read that morning had set my head spinning. I shook myself, got out my pencil, and picked up a sheet from the few on my right. I began to read:

"So I was right; there was an Egypt before the Egypt we speak of now. And the answers I sought were buried there, buried with Pta-hotep. That I should have found them was more than mere fortune, I know that now. But what if I had not found them? A moment's thought should show any thinking man that those things must have existed.

"A moment's thought! How foolish to expect that in this age. What is—is. There is our present philosophy. Why part the curtain and try to see further? We think; therefore we are. Descartes said it and we follow.

"But what about that part of us which does not think? What about that part of us which merely knows, yet knows beyond doubt? What about the part whose roots are buried in the dim past?

"We have forgotten how to believe, to truly believe. What we choose to call research is nothing but rationalization. We believe what we choose to believe. We explain everything away that does not fit our beliefs.

"There came a time, the history of Egypt tells us, when famine stalked the land. Stores of food grew ever smaller and soon men began to die of starvation. So desperate became their plight that they were reduced to cannibalism. Yet while they ate each other—and to those civilized people it was as unthinkable as it would be to us—they did not eat the birds or animals which were considered sacred.

"How horrible! we say. They were benighted; they were ignorant; they were superstitious. How loathsome! Not even starvation could make them break the chains of superstition.

"There. We have explained everything. And all by calling names. That they may have been right we will not admit.

"Perhaps I am wrong to feel so superior. Yet I cannot deny that at least in my mind there was a doubt. I did not forget the rest of the evidence, the evidence which tells us that those people were not ignorant or benighted.

"And the answer stares us in the face! Those ancient days were closer to the headwaters of the past. Those ancient folk were no wiser than we, certainly not. But no more foolish either. There is only one real difference.

"They had not had time to forget!"

"They knew. They knew enough to take the lesser evil. They knew. And soon I too shall know. The parchment of Pta-hotep is almost deciphered, and the story is there."

THAT was all. But it was enough to set my head whirling again. What the devil was Vernor hinting at? That he thought the myths were true? But I had known him better than that. If he thought they were true then he must have had a reason, something more than logic.

I got up from the table. The ibis was staring at me. I looked across the room into those beady eyes and all the tales of the past gathered in the room to whisper in my ear.

You were one of the sacred birds, I thought. Or didn't they eat you because you were petrified? You could be easily that old. Perhaps older. As soon as I'm finished with these papers I'm going to have a better look at you.

I shook my head to clear it. Vernor had me going. He had me talking to a bird that had

been dead for quite a few thousand years.

But I was interested in something more than a petrified ibis. What Vernor had written about the parchment of Pta-hotep was more important. He had thought that parchment was ancient beyond anything ever discovered. And about that Vernor could not have been deceived.

There was only one place to search for the parchment. The fireproof box. I had gone through everything else. And it was just the place Vernor would have kept his most valuable possession.

The box was not large, but it was made of metal. It stood in a corner of the room. I went to it, bent to look at the lock once more. The lock was simple enough; there was no danger of theft. A screwdriver would be enough to pry it open.

I found a screwdriver quickly, a square-cut, solid thing that would not bend with even a good deal of pressure. Then I set to work. A few twists each way and the lock sprang open. I threw up the lid.

The parchment of Pta-hotep was before my eyes.

I knew it was what I was looking for even before I reached down with trembling hands and lifted it from the box. It was flat and yellow with age. Gently I carried it to the table and set it down.

OLD beyond belief. Older than any written thing in the world. I knew it the moment my eyes took in the ancient script. But how old?

Hieroglyphs are no mystery to me. I can decipher the most difficult if given a little time. But these were no hieroglyphs. Nor were they Coptic. Was it possible that Pta-hotep was one of the ancient Hamites from whom the Copts were descended?

I scanned the writing quickly. It had an Egyptian flavor, of that I was certain. And Vernor had found it in Egypt, or at least his

writing led me to believe so.

There was only one thing wrong. I could never decipher that parchment. I knew it on sight. I felt it was Egyptian or pre-Egyptian, but there was not a trace of a really familiar letter or symbol. Only James Vernor could have figured it out.

And he had! Suddenly I remembered that he *had* deciphered it!

I ran back to the metal box. It held only a single sheet of paper weighted down by a large amulet strung on a metal chain. The amulet held no interest for me. I knocked it aside and pulled out the sheet of paper covered with Vernor's handwriting.

HOW he had done it I would never know. It was as great a feat as the deciphering of the Rosetta stone. Of course once it was done I could easily follow it. I set the paper next to the parchment and settled back:

"To Ra, Giver of Life and Bestower of Death; Ra, who is Life after Death and is Death within Life; I, Pta-hotep, pray for mercy and beg that the radiance of Ra shall not blind me who set down these words.

"That those who follow after may know why the wrath of Ra, who is the Sun, has descended upon us; that they may know and not wonder why their condition has become lowly; why Ra, who is the Father, has ceased to smile; I, Pta-hotep, inscribe these words.

"For in our time these things have come to pass: that we have lived in harmony and peace, and all living things were separate and yet one in the sight of Ra, who is All Knowing; and the lion and the lamb were together in our streets and in our fields.

"And in our time these things are no more. The Earth yields not its bounty. The lamb fears the lion and the lion fears man. There is darkness on the face of the Earth and the Waters come and no man knows another. For Ra, who is the All Powerful, has frowned

upon us.

“And it came to pass that Osiris and Isis, who are brother and sister, joined as man and wife. And Ra, who is their Father, grew angry. And He banished them to a place of Darkness which He created. But they were Gods yet.

“And it came to pass that one among us, and his name is Amen-ankh, forever be it Cursed, wished to join the Gods. And he knew that each living thing was different and that only the Gods are truly All in One. Therefore did he this:

“That he joined unto an ibis, for in our time it was yet possible, and begot a child. And Ra, who is the Scourge, grew dark with anger and slew Amen-ankh, may his name be Cursed. And would have slain the ibis.

“But Osiris, with his Power of Darkness, entered the ibis and gave it Life Everlasting, though its appearance is Death, and put about its throat his seal, which even Ra may not profane. And only Amen-ankh could have slain the ibis, and Amen-ankh was dead.

“Therefore this Curse of Ra:

“That Amen-ankh shall live in his begotten son and in his son and so until the day shall come when the seal of Osiris shall be lifted. And then shall Amen-ankh kill the ibis who is his wife and his mother and she shall kill him.

“And until that day an ibis shall be Unclean. And until that day shall Ra hide his face from us. But the wrath of Ra shall never be assuaged, and his breath will be cold upon the Earth. And the lot of Man will be Fire and Flood, Death and Destruction; and the day when Ra looks again upon us will be but the beginning. And after that the end will come slowly, and it shall be Nameless.”

ISAT there for a while. There was no question but that the parchment was

genuine. And I couldn't doubt that Vernor's translations was perfect. At the bottom of his sheet of paper he had written the key to the script. I checked it against Pta-hotep's parchment.

This work alone would make James Vernor an immortal in the field of Egyptology. I was looking down at the oldest human work ever discovered, the parchment of Pta-hotep. And Vernor had found it and translated it.

His interpretation of it I could not and would not accept. Pta-hotep might have been a priest who was trying to frighten his flock into contributing more heavily to his temple.

No, that was no good. Pta-hotep claimed that the changes had come in his own time and that he had witnessed them. Then others would have witnessed the same events.

He might have been only a story teller using a device to gain added interest. That seemed more likely. It seemed likely enough to satisfy me.

For the rest, I was overjoyed. I could imagine the way this parchment was going to burst like a bombshell upon the scientific world. Beyond a doubt it proved that civilized man had inhabited the earth thousands of years before we had previously believed, perhaps even tens of thousands of years.

The ibis itself would be a mine of information. I had never seen one quite like it. After the biologists and geologists were through examining it we would have a more exact clue to its age.

I was still lost in a maze of thought and wonder when I heard Anna calling.

She was in the front hall talking to two men when I came up. One of the men was of medium build and rather nondescript. The other was tall and broad shouldered, with a sure manner and keen eyes. It was the big man who was doing the talking.

“I'm sorry to interrupt you, Dick,”

Anna said. She introduced me. The big man was Meyerson. He flashed his credentials but I didn't even bother to look.

"They've flown down here from New York," she went on. "It seems we may be in some sort of danger."

"I'm certain you are," Meyerson rumbled. "But we're here for more than that. I've got a hunch that the man we want is going to turn up soon. And when he does—" His big hands made a clutching motion.

"Man you want?" I asked. "For what?"

"Murder," he said calmly. My eyebrows shot up and he nodded.

"That's right, Mr. Enderly. A madman, we think. He's killed once and we believe he'd do it again. And all for a slip of paper that had James Vernor's name and address on it."

He went on to tell us the story of Fesir Hamid's visit to the office of Greater Nile. I think he was trying to impress us with the seriousness of the thing because he left out no detail—none at all.

"Any idea of who this Fesir Hamid might be?" he asked when he was finished.

Anna shook her head. I could only do the same. Meyerson nodded.

"Our hunch is that he's a crack-pot. He may have met Mr. Vernor in Egypt and developed a fixed idea that Mr. Vernor did him some harm."

Meyerson's eyes roved the hall and the rooms beyond. He didn't miss a thing in sight.

"On the other hand, he may be after something. Is there anything of great value in this house?"

"A priceless bit of parchment," I told him. "Probably the most valuable object of its kind in the world."

It was Meyerson's turn to look surprised.

"You don't say!" He looked at his companion. "Maybe this Hamid isn't a nut after all."

He turned back to Anna and me "Mind if we see it?"

WE LED the two of them into the paneled study. For a moment Meyerson stood in the doorway, his keen eyes taking in the wide windows with their rows of heavy bars. He started when he saw the ibis.

"Looks almost alive," he grunted. He turned and examined the heavy oak door with its bolts and locks.

"Almost burglar-proof. A man would have a job breaking in here," he said approvingly. "Now, where's that parchment you were talking about?"

When I showed it to them Meyerson shook his head doubtfully. His partner was even more skeptical. They had probably expected to see an illuminated manuscript.

One of the windows was open a crack and a breeze came in and fluttered the parchment. I walked over and closed the window and locked it. When I came back Meyerson was still shaking his head.

"You sure that thing is really so valuable?"

"It's beyond price," I smiled. "You're gazing on something that will literally take the scientific world by storm, that will force it to revise its whole conception of antiquity. This bit of parchment is so old that I cannot even hazard a guess as to its age."

"What do you know?" Meyerson's partner grunted.

It was the first thing he had said. Somehow I hadn't formed a high opinion of his intelligence, but I assumed he must be capable. Meyerson seemed more than that.

"If I were you I'd lock this room for a while," the big man said. "At least until we're pretty sure there's no danger."

I could have done some more work but decided to play safe. The study, as Meyerson had said, was almost burglar-proof. There was an old Egyptian sacrificial knife of Vernor's

which I had been using as a paper weight. I set it on top of the parchment before we went out.

“With both of you around I don’t suppose there’s really much danger,” Anna said as we walked to the living room.

“Can’t ever tell, with a nut on the loose,” Meyerson shrugged. “One man or a dozen, it don’t make any difference to them.”

“Then you still believe this Hamid is a homicidal maniac?”

Meyerson sat down in the big easy chair and crossed his right knee over his left and rubbed his jaw. Then he nodded.

“Yes, Miss Vernor, I do. For several reasons. First, because he murdered Gorman for such small cause. A sane man could have got the address without going to such lengths. And second, because he acted so queerly before that. The girl in the office said he didn’t seem to know his own name.”

I had been listening, but without really thinking of Meyerson’s words. Suddenly something had flashed across my mind. Vernor had removed that amulet from the neck of the ibis. And James Vernor had died soon after, mysteriously and quickly! Was there a curse? How about the men who died after opening the tomb of Tutankhamen?

“You look like you’d seen a ghost, Mr. Enderly,” Meyerson said.

I felt myself flush. To tell him what had been passing through my mind would have made me feel foolish. I changed the subject.

“What was that about Hamid not knowing his name?” I asked.

“That? Funny thing. She asked him his name and he started to say something like ‘Amenhank’. Then he changed his mind. But she didn’t believe he was kidding, just that he was really confused.”

“*Amen-ankh! No. He couldn’t have said that,*” I heard myself whisper.

“Huh? What do you mean, he

couldn’t?” Meyerson’s eyes bored through me.

“What’s the matter, Dick?” Anna asked anxiously. “You don’t look well. You’re awfully pale.”

“No. I’m all right,” I assured her.

“I still want to know why he couldn’t have said it,” Meyerson reminded me.

“Well,” I stammered, “I really don’t know that he couldn’t have. It’s just highly improbable. That type of name hasn’t been used in centuries.”

“Oh. So it’s like I said. He’s probably a nut. Thinks he’s someone who’s been dead for ages, maybe.”

“You should have seen what he did to Gorman,” his partner put in. “Like a hawk would do, or an eagle.”

“**O**R LIKE an ibis. Not a common American bird, so Meyerson and his partner wouldn’t think of that. But I did. My mind was whirling like a top.

“Ha,” Meyerson grunted. “He’d have to be a pretty fast bird to have beat us down here, Joe.” He turned to me. “We hopped the first and fastest plane out of New York.”

Mrs. Kemper came running into the room. The Vernor housekeeper was ordinarily a calm, motherly woman, but now her eyes were popping with fear and excitement.

“Someone’s trying to get in!” she gasped. “At the back door! I saw him coming and I put on the chain. But he’s trying anyway.”

Meyerson and his partner were on their feet before she was through speaking.

“You stay here with the women, Joe,” Meyerson barked. “You come with me, Enderly.”

From his pocket he hauled out a police revolver and from a hidden holster a much smaller gun. He thrust the small gun into my hand. My hand was trembling so I could

hardly hold it.

“You stick with me,” he ordered. “We’ll go around the front and sneak up on him.”

He was already running and I was on his heels. I had time to think of Anna. But she would be all right. I knew Joe would not hesitate to shoot.

Then we were out of the front door and going toward the side of the house. Big as Meyerson was he was fast and light on his feet. And he had sized up the situation perfectly. Our feet made no sound on the soft earth. Another man might have run to the back door and frightened the prowler away.

As we drew near the back we heard a scratching sound. Whoever was there had not left. On cat’s feet Meyerson swung around the corner. I was right behind him.

Some instinct warned the man at the door. He looked up and saw us.

“Stand or I shoot!” Meyerson shouted, but he did not stop running.

It was Hamid, all right. I recognized him by the description Meyerson had given us. And he had no intention of standing. With a sideward leap he was away from the door.

He ran in a queer, ungainly fashion, stiff-legged like a heron. But those long legs covered a lot of ground. In an instant he was half way across the back garden.

Meyerson had brought his gun down with his command to halt. But I saw now he did not want to shoot unless it was necessary. He was off after Hamid before I had even turned away from the house. And he gained ground quickly.

By the time Hamid had crossed the garden Meyerson was only two yards behind him. Another few steps and the detective was on his heels. Hamid started to turn.

And Meyerson left his feet in a flying tackle. Hamid was caught off balance and smashed to the ground, the breath driven from his body. Meyerson’s gun swung up and then

down against the back of Hamid’s head.

“Got him,” Meyerson grunted with satisfaction.

He kneeled beside the unconscious man. Working quickly he twisted Hamid’s hands behind him and snapped on a pair of handcuffs. Then he rose and hauled the Egyptian to his feet and held him upright.

“Bring them back alive,” Meyerson puffed happily. “That’s the idea.”

Together we hauled Hamid to the back door. I called through it to Anna and she and Joe came and released the chain. Mrs. Kemper hovered behind them. Then we carried Hamid through to the living room and sat him up in a corner of the couch.

HE CAME around rapidly. Meyerson’s blow had been delivered with professional accuracy, just hard enough to stun without killing. Hamid’s eyes fluttered. Meyerson shook him.

“Feel like talking?” the detective asked.

Hamid shook his head. His eyes were clear but vague.

“All right,” Meyerson said. “That’s your privilege. We’ve got the goods on you anyway.”

He turned to me. “Thought he might tell us what he came here for,” he explained. Then he looked down at Hamid.

“Got here kind of fast, didn’t you? How?”

Hamid shook his head again. It seemed rather a disclaimer of knowledge than a refusal to speak. I was watching his eyes. They were growing small and beady.

“Yaiss,” he said suddenly. “It is here.”

“What’s here?” Meyerson demanded.

Hamid shook his head again.

“Spill it,” Meyerson advised. “You came here for that parchment, didn’t you? That’s why you killed Gorman.”

“Gorman?” Hamid asked. His eyes

were blank.

“Crazy,” Joe said. “Like a bed-bug.”

“I guess so,” Meyerson sighed in agreement. “There’s no sense in letting him clutter up Miss Vernor’s place any longer.”

He hauled Hamid to his feet. “Let’s go.”

“Wait,” Hamid whispered. He was staring down the hall toward the door of the study. His eyes seemed to burn through that heavy oak door.

“What now?” Meyerson muttered.

He followed Hamid’s eyes. As he did so Hamid swung a foot up and aimed a kick at him. Meyerson was too fast. He swung on his heel so that Hamid’s foot shot past him. Then his broad palm smacked against the Egyptian’s cheek and sent him sprawling onto the couch.

There was nothing vicious about the slap but it turned Hamid’s cheek red. He was breathing hard as he struggled to a sitting position.

“But nuts,” Joe said. “He’s looking to get slapped around.”

“It is there,” Hamid whispered. “There in that room.” He had his eyes glued on the oak door again.

“And this is as close as you’re going to get to it,” Meyerson told him drily. He looked at Joe.

“How about calling the station here for a squad? We can hold him down there until we catch a train out.”

“You’ll have to keep him overnight,” I said. “There won’t be another train to New York until morning.”

“That’s what I thought. We’ll see that he’s on ice until then.”

WHILE Anna showed Joe where the phone was Meyerson and I watched Hamid. The Egyptian had spots of color in both cheeks now. His eyes were unnaturally

bright, almost feverish. And he refused to take them off the study door.

On a sudden hunch I spoke a few words of Coptic. Hamid showed no understanding of them. There was something queer about him. His few movements were jerky, as though controlled by an outside force. I was becoming uneasy.

Then Anna and Joe came back. Whatever the detective had told our police brought them in a hurry. Within minutes a squad car arrived. Meyerson greeted the police at the door, showed his badge and came back for Hamid.

“Thanks for your help, Enderly,” he said. I couldn’t help smiling, but Meyerson looked as though he meant it.

After they had left, Anna and I had a few minutes together. She was showing the effects of strain. Mrs. Kemper returned to her room upstairs. I watched Anna.

“What’s the matter?” I asked. She shrugged.

“That man Hamid. Something about him affected me. He seemed to be in a trance. As though he were an automaton. And the way he kept looking at the study door.”

“He’s not what we’d call normal,” I admitted.

“It’s not just that. I felt that he had some connection with something here in this house. That he came here for a purpose, and that the purpose wasn’t merely theft.”

“Nonsense. You’re nervous, and not without reason. It’s a trying thing to have an insane murderer around the house.”

I went to her and patted her shoulder.

“Why don’t you lie down on the couch and try to relax for a while?”

“Sure, Dick,” she smiled affectionately. “I’ll be all right in a few minutes. You go back to your work.”

“Sure you’ll be all right?”

“Of course.”

I left her on the couch and walked down the hall to the study. Before the oak door I hesitated. Apprehension gripped me and held me still.

I didn't want to go back into that room. Not for a while yet. Too many things had happened to shake me. Too many things that couldn't be explained. I wanted to break the spell that was weaving itself about me.

Foolish thoughts, I told myself. The whole thing probably had a completely rational explanation. More than one man has been a victim of dual identity. Perhaps James Vernor had known Hamid in Egypt. Somehow Vernor might have mentioned the name of Amen-ankh, and that name could have stuck in a disordered mind until it seemed Hamid's own.

It would have been entirely natural for Hamid to have associated Vernor with that name. And it would have been just as likely that Vernor had become fixed in Hamid's mind as a man who had wronged him in some way.

In that case Hamid's actions assumed a more logical aspect. Logical, that is, for a madman. At any rate, I told myself, we had seen the last of that Egyptian gentleman. Meyerson and the police had him, and the courts would see that he was properly disposed of.

I felt better as I put the key into the lock and went into the paneled study. Activity had purged me of some of my brooding uneasiness. It was not such a gloomy vault after all.

Sunlight streamed through the wide, barred windows and brought to sight the rich grain of the dark wood paneling. The ibis stood in its alcove, not such a sinister thing in my present mood. And the parchment of Pta-hotep still lay on the table under the old knife. It was just a bit of parchment, older than any other, but just parchment.

I SETTLED myself at the big table and drew the last of Vernor's papers toward me. The job was almost done, at least that part of it which I would do there.

The rest of it, the compilation of the notes and my report, could be done better at the University. My heart beat faster at the thought of what James Vernor's notes and the Pta-hotep parchment would do to old notions of the age of Egyptian civilization. What a stir it was going to make!

And then Anna screamed.

My chair crashed backward as I spun out of it. I flung the door open and raced down the hall. She was at the far end of it, and she was not alone.

It was Meyerson. As I drew up I saw that his coat was torn and his hat gone. He was bleeding slightly from a cut on his forehead. And he was puffing hard. He had been running.

"He isn't here?" he gasped. I knew whom he meant, and my heart sank.

"No," Anna said. She knew, too. "What happened?"

"The car," Meyerson panted. "Just a few blocks from here. Going down the middle of the street. Went out of control for no reason at all. Hit a tree and rolled over. One man dead. Hamid got away. Figured he'd head back here."

"You'd better sit down," I said.

"No. I'm all right. You haven't heard anything?"

Anna and I shook our heads in the negative.

"Good. Lock this door and we'll take a look in back. He may try to get in that way."

We bolted the door and ran through the living room and through the dining room into the kitchen. The chain was on again. Hamid could not get in that way. Meyerson grunted with satisfaction.

But we had forgotten the windows. There came a crash of shattering glass from

the living room. There were no bars on those. Then the sound of a body thudding on the floor, and then there were feet racing.

I beat Meyerson into the living room and into the long entrance hall that faced the study. He was right behind me. We were just in time to see Hamid's tall figure go through the study door.

Meyerson's revolver was in his hand. He grabbed my shoulder and flung me out of the way.

"I'll take him! He may have picked up a gun!" His big body hurtled down the hall toward the study.

I saw him go through that doorway. And as he did so the room beyond turned black!

The door slammed shut behind Meyerson.

"Call for help!" I shouted to Anna.

Disregarding Meyerson's warning I raced down the hall and flung myself at the heavy oak door. It was locked. With fumbling fingers I fitted keys into locks. No use.

The door was too heavy to break down. Panting, I pressed my ear to it and listened. Meyerson had a gun, but there were no shots. I pressed closer.

There were sounds. Strange raucous cries. Through the door there came a sound like the rushing of surf. Then silence.

BEHIND me I heard loud voices. I turned. It was Meyerson's partner and he had two uniformed men with him. At my call they ran toward me and we threw our combined weight against the oak door.

For a while it resisted us. And then suddenly it sprang open and we hurtled into the room and half way across it. The study was filled with light.

Meyerson sat on the floor in the far-corner, the unfired gun still in his hand. His eyes were open but the light of reason was

gone from them, and from his lips came a babbling, wailing sound.

Hamid lay next to the door. Blood welled from gashes on his cheek. But it was not that which had killed him. For he was dead. I forced myself to look at him.

In death his nose was more beak-like than before. And his left eye was small and beady and black. His right eye was gone. It had been pierced by some pointed thing that had gone into his brain killing him instantly.

The ibis stood across the room in its alcove. While the others tended to Meyerson, I crossed the room and looked at it. The ancient sacrificial knife which had lain on the table was buried in its side.

And at the point of its long bill blood dripped slowly!

* * *

The official investigation was unsatisfactory. Nothing was really explained. Meyerson was declared to be suffering from some shock which had deranged his mind.

Hamid? How had he died? The windows were all locked. Nothing could have entered the room. What about the blood on the bill of the ibis?

There was an explanation for that. Hamid had run across the room in a desperate attempt to escape. He had struck his eye directly on the bill. And then he had tottered back to the door.

But I saw the doctor after he read that part of his findings at the inquest. He was shaking his head. He knew even better than I that Hamid must have died instantly. Hamid should have been found beside the ibis.

And how about the knife that was buried to the hilt in something that was hard enough to resist strongest steel? Nobody was concerned about that except me. And I knew enough not to say what would not be believed.

I wrote the report coldly, and I turned over to the University the parchment of Pta-hotep and Vernor's translation of it. Everyone was too excited to think about a man's death in connection with the parchment. Or the ibis.

But I thought about it. And I wanted nothing more to do with things Egyptian. I told myself that I had not seen the room go black, that I had not heard those sounds.

I wanted to forget everything that might remind me of the parchment of Pta-

hotep and the curse of Ra. I gave up my chair at the University and Anna and I bought the farm. And after years the thing faded somewhat.

But yesterday I saw Meyerson.

I can no longer deny what happened in that room. The old gods are with us again, the forces of darkness are loose. Fire and flood. Death and Destruction. The End will come. And it will be nameless.

