

The Queen's
Tear-Bottle

VIRNA SHEARD

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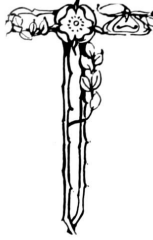
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The Queen's Tear-Bottle



A Fairy Story Told To
The Man-Who-Was-
Rich

By VIRNA SHEARD.
Illustrated by Norman
Price.

IN a country that is called new, there was a great new city, and in that city, among many others a high, white building, and in the building there was a room wherein sat a Man-Who-Was-Rich.

The room was most beautiful, though only in a stiff, uncomfortable sort of way, because it had been made for business, and not pleasure.

There was a heavy carved desk, and a heavy carved table, and a heavy carved chair upright and hard. The panelled walls were of mahogany.

The Man-Who-Was-Rich sat before his desk with his overcoat on, for the room was cold. He had turned the collar up to his ears, and his face wore an expression not pleasant. Bushy grey eyebrows drawn together, and a close-shut mouth accounted chiefly for the expression—that is outwardly, although his eyes were of a flinty-grey and inclined to be cynical at the best of times. But only extreme discomfort could loosen his tongue, and he was suffering from discomfort now.

A thin veil of grey lay over furniture and floor. It blurred the windows where a film of frost did not creep across them. It lay an impalpable thing on the gilded steam pipes; it showed faintly on ledger and day-book.

The Man-Who-Was-Rich glanced around with an exclamation of annoyance. At that moment the great office door opened and a brisk sort of little man stepped in.

“Didn’t hear me ring, so I just came along to see if you were down,” he said chirpily.

“Beastly weather—eh, what?—O yes, I know—I know. Weather doesn’t count with you. But conditions might, now?—Conditions. No coal—plumbing on the rocks—roads simply awful—trains blocked—everything on the bias! Might as well lock up, eh?—Blizzard going strong still—” glancing at the window.

“I shall stop down-town my usual hours, Jenkins,” answered the Man-Who-Was-Rich. Then as an afterthought—“Have you seen the woman who dusts?”

“Not for days,” he returned. “She hadn’t the sense to send a substitute either. So thoughtless. But I cheer myself with Wilde’s philosophy—Oscar Wilde, you know. You remember his classic? ‘Remove not Dust! It is the bloom of the Ages!’ Pretty thought, eh?”

The other smiled grimly. “That fakir!” he said.

“From my point of view, genius!” laughed Jenkins. “Well, good-bye till the weather becomes civilized. Horribly cold in here! Look out for pneumonia, old man. Horribly cold! Seem to be getting up a bit of steam though—bye-by.”

The door closed. A metallic clicking followed. A spasmodic symphony from the gilded pipes.

The Man-Who-Was-Rich rose and shook himself, as though from a sudden icy wave.

“Outrageous!” he said. “Outrageous—in such a building. There is absolutely no excuse!” He touched the bell; pushed it harder, waited. No one answered. Then he sat down heavily at the desk again. A quick step came along the hall. A knock.

“Come in!” he called.

An office-boy entered,—a boy in his early 'teens, with the quick movements, the keen face, and the sharp tongue of one who had learned early to fend for himself. He wore the blue clothes and brass buttons so beloved of his kind, and he carried a dust cloth that apparently he loathed.

Ducking his head with more deference than he usually accorded, he swept his eye around the neglected room.

“I come in to dust, sir,” he explained. “Don’t want to disturb you—but the dust-lady ain’t been round these three bad days.”

“What detains her?” questioned the man shortly.

“Couldn’t say, sir,” the boy replied, busy with the despised rag, “Coal is short on the East Side, I hear. Mebbe she ain’t had her share. The blizzard’s been sumptin’ fierce. Mebbe she jest couldn’t climb through.”

“Perhaps not,” admitted the other.

“Yes, sir,” said the boy

No sound followed but the disjointed clicking of the pipes.

“Where is the janitor?” queried the Man irritably, breaking in on the pipes.

“Got a swelled knee from somethin’,” said the boy. “In bed, sir.”

“Oh!” answered the Man.

“Yes, sir,” assented the boy. Then he volunteered a few words.

“Isn’t much doin’. Most of the offices closed to-day, sir—froze out. Bells on this flat on the blink. Some of the gentlemen couldn’t get down, I guess. Traffic blocked most everywhere.”

“I got down,” said the Man.

“Elevated?” inquired the boy, working briskly.

“Certainly not—My car,” was the reply.

“O, yes sir,” he answered.

About all the grey bloom was gone now, and the boy stood by the door. He grinned cheerfully.

“Anything else, sir?”

“No—” the Man said. “No, thanks.”

“I’ll look in about noon,” the boy volunteered. “Guess you expect your two clerks, don’t you, sir?”

“I have been expecting them all morning,” answered the Man-Who-Was-Rich. The words were bitten off.

“Yes, sir,” nodded the boy. “Too bad, sir—but—” hopefully, “mebby it’s a good day fer them to be off. All the mail trains delayed, you know. Electric an’ telephone wires jest naturally took this time to strike work too—ain’t no excuse I can see.”

“I wondered at the silence,” remarked the other, looking up. “Underground wiring too—perfectly absurd to have them out of order. Are they working at them, do you know?”

“Yes, sir,” answered the boy. “Cold work, too, sir,—down below zero.”

“I imagine so,” he assented.

“Yes, sir. Well, I’ll be in at noon to see if you need me.”

The Man-Who-Was-Rich heard the light steps swing along the hall. Silence returned. The pipes had ceased clicking, but accomplished little.

An hour passed. The Man decided to go home, then remembering his car was ordered for four, and that the telephone was useless, decided not to go. At best, he detested the Elevated, and the Elevated at noon, and on such a day, was anathema.

Lunch would be a break though. He concluded to take lunch early. There was a place two blocks away where he often dropped in.

Turning up his coat collar, he went out. An icy sleet stung his face, and the wind between the high buildings almost carried him off his feet. Drifts of snow swirled along the pavements, and where the asphalt was uncovered it was of a slipperiness unbelievable. A man going headlong across the street knocked against him heavily, and he fell.

When he got up he felt shaken from head to foot. With an exclamation of rage he retraced his steps slowly to the tall building. Every joint in his body seemed racked. He was dizzy from the fall, and now the beating sleet made him see red.

For a moment the Man-Who-Was-Rich clearly realized that he was no longer young. He took the elevator up to his office, shook himself free from snow and sat down again at his desk.

Presently came the quick steps of the office-boy, and his knock.

“Come in!” answered the man, rather eagerly.

The boy came in. He was a cheerful boy.

“Shall I fetch you some sandwiches, sir?” he asked.

“Why, yes—you may,” consented the Man.

“All right, sir,” he nodded.

When he returned he bore a small Japanese tray whereupon was a tumbler, a bottle of milk and a blue plate decorated with four good-sized sandwiches.

“Light fare, sir,” he grinned, “but jest better’n goin’ out in the blizzard ___”

“Much better—thanks,” assented the Man-Who-Was-Rich.

“Yes, sir. Shall I go now, sir—or is there anything else—”

“O, you may stop a moment,” said the other. “I will see, presently.”

He ate a sandwich. Another. Another. Then the last. Also he drank the milk.

“They are very good,” he remarked then, “these sandwiches. Better than any I remember for—for quite a while.”

The boy grinned. “Me mother made them, sir,” he explained. “There’s jest her an’ me. I got the milk by luck.”

“Your mother made them?” he questioned harshly. “Have I taken your lunch?”

“Oh, no, sir!” he laughed. “Only a bit of it. I got plenty left.”

“Well, it was decidedly good of you,” said the Man. Taking some coins from his pocket, he held them out. The boy shook his head.

“No—no thank you, sir,” he said. “Mother made them sandwiches, so I guess they were hers. She’s got queer ideas—on—on—on hospitalities.”

The Man-Who-Was-Rich slipped the coins back in his pocket. He looked the boy over.

“Where do you take your lunch?” he asked. “And are you sure you have enough left?”

“Sure? Yes, sir!” he replied. “Us office fellers get our lunch together all in one room. Bring it with us—you know. Say, we have a pretty gay time! We have an hour. We divvy up lunch mostly. Then we have shows. But I guess you wouldn’t be interested?”

“Go on,” said the Man.

“Half-hour shows, sir; any feller that can do a song or dance or give a monerlogue—”

“12.30 to 1.30.” He nodded. “It’s 12.20 now,” taking a Waterbury out of his pocket.

“Ah, indeed,” said the Man-Who-Was-Rich. “And to-day—what do you have to-day by way of entertainment, for instance?”

“The Egyptian,” he answered. “The Egyptian, sir.”

“I don’t understand exactly,” remarked the other. “I thought you gave these—these affairs yourselves. The office-boys;—talent might be developed that way, one would suppose.”

“O, yes, sir, we do give them,” he assented. “But the Egyptian blew in, an’ needed the coin, so we let him go ahead. He’s great, too!”

“What are his tricks,—this Egyptian?” questioned the Man-Who-Was-Rich, a slight vibration of interest in his voice. “Sleight-of-hand? Snake-charming—the Mango-flower or imitation of it—that sort of thing?”

“O, no, sir! He tells stories,” explained the office-boy.

“Quite likely,” acquiesced his listener. “Most of them do, the Orientals—and so on—”

The boy looked puzzled, then smiled.

“Y’re wrong, sir. It’s yarns he tells. Jest yarns, ye know. About things that sort of couldn’t be. Made up ones you wisht was true. ’Rabian-Nights stuff. He keeps you jumpy to know how they are goin’ to pan out.”

The Man-Who-Was-Rich raised his grey eyebrows.

“O, I see,” he said. “But to get such an effect from a lot of practical boys, why he must be an artist, one would say. Where does he come from—this Egyptian fellow?”

“Down round by the East River Side. He lives among the Turks an’ Armenians an’ Dagoes that wear turbans—when they get here, mostly, or fezzes.”

“Oh,” smiled the other. “In some foreign quarter.”

“Yes, sir, I’ve heard he works at beaten metal. I met him once with his old father. Taller’n him yet, sir, fer all his age. I bet you, sir, you would think that old man was a thousand years old! He’s got a white beard like—like Niagara Falls!”

The Man-Who-Was-Rich laughed. It was a long time since he had laughed that way.

“Indeed,” he nodded. “Quite an apt description. So this Egyptian, son of the ancient party, is coming to-day to tell you office-boys impossible yarns—is he?”

“Yes, sir,” he answered. Then as by inspiration. “Would you like to come along and hear him, sir? Kinder dull on this flat. Won’t you come along?”

The Man glanced around. It was dull. A silent telephone, frost-clouded windows. He turned to the office-boy.

“Why, thanks—I think I will,” he replied.

“We’ll be on our way, then, sir,” said the boy with alacrity.

They went down the echoing halls. The boy took the stairs, and the Man-Who-Was-Rich followed; after an almost incredible descent they entered a narrower passage and passed into a darkish room with court windows. About a dozen boys were gathered around an open grate fire. A coal fire, red and bright. The place was warm.

“They let us have the grate lit at noon, sir,” explained the boy, “for the pipes don’t do much business in this room.”

The Man seemed to find this satisfactory. They all rose and nodded to him, making way as he approached. His boy brought a chair for him over by the warmth. There were wooden chairs and a wooden table in the room.

An open fire was pleasant, the Man-Who-Was-Rich remarked to him as he sat down.

“Yes, sir,” he agreed. The others seemed over-awed, and their voices died to whispers.

“This sooth-sayer of yours?” questioned the Man. “Has he arrived?”

“O, the Egyptian?” grinned the boy. “I hear him outside a-shakin’ the snow off. We can take an extra bit of time to-day, most all the offices bein’ closed, but yours, sir.”

“I should consider mine closed also,” he answered.

The boy acquiesced. “Here comes Abydos Khon!” he said; then *sotto voce*: “It’s only when he’s up against it we can get him, sir. We mostly take up a collection before he begins an’ hand it in.”

“Ah, indeed!” said the Man-Who-Was-Rich.

The door swung open, and into the fire-lit room a man entered.

The boys all saluted him noisily, and he bowed to all collectively, but impressively.

“This is Mr. Mavor—John W. Mavor,” announced the office-boy to him. Then—“Mr. Mavor, meet Abydos Khon!”

The Egyptian saw a tall, heavy man, worn of face and grey of hair. A man of poise, a perfect product of his time.

The Man-Who-Was-Rich saw one who seemed to belong to other places and other days. His face, neither old nor young, was of an almost flawless beauty of feature. His eyes were strangely luminous, and his hair thick, but silvery white. He wore it cropped about his ears, as a child’s hair is often cropped. On his feet were high boots of brown leather—the uncouth boots of Russian peasants, and he wore a heavy cloak of coarse brown woollen stuff. This cloak was fastened about the waist by a leather belt with a silver buckle. It was hooded, and had wide sleeves. Almost it gave the impression of being the surtout of some holy order.

Having greeted all, the Egyptian sprang lightly onto the table. There he sat cross-legged in the old, old fashion of the East.

One boy took a cup from its peg and passed it around until twelve dimes were collected. Then he threw in his own. The Man-Who-Was-Rich held out his contribution, a large piece of silver.

The boy shook his head. "No, thank you, sir," he said. "You are a guest. We have one now and then—mostly boys from the other buildings. But it's understood. Abydos Khon is always satisfied."

Sweeping the silver into his hand, he gave it to the Egyptian, who placed it in some pocket of his surtout. No atom of his dignity was lost. He bowed, including all. Then the boys gathered closer to the table, their brass buttons twinkling with every movement of their restless young bodies. Settling down, they turned expectant faces towards Abydos Khon. They had overcome their first shyness of John W. Mavor, and he felt he had lost any formidable aloofness. Besides, the story-teller only was the man of the hour.

Abydos Khon sat very still. His face shone in the fire-light, as though cast in bronze. The silvery hair had a metallic glitter; the silver buckle on his belt gleamed against his rough cloak. His hands were folded together in a repose unspeakable, and his whole body was a thing set in perfect calm.

But though he might have posed for the figure of a graven image, from his eyes looked out a spirit as of living flame. When every face was turned towards him, the Egyptian spoke, and his voice was low, but clear as temple-bells at twilight.

There was no flaw in his English, but a cadence and rhythm separated it from all English the Man-Who-Was-Rich had hitherto heard.

He leaned forward in his chair to listen.

The Egyptian began slowly, his face rapt as in a dream.

"I will relate to you, my little ones," he said, "the story of the Queen's Tear-Bottle.

"It is a most ancient story, being handed down from the priests of the Temple of Amen-Ra—the Lord of the Sun and the Horizon—unto this day.

"It has been written upon the stones of the walls of palaces, and enrolled upon illuminated papyrus. It has been painted in imperishable colors on the Sarcophagus of a King. It has been told by word of mouth, and sung and chanted; and made into a dance also—a dance of death and tears—and it has

been played by players before light-hearted court people, and it has been woven into books of romance.

“But the time is short, and I cannot give it to you as it should be given, with flowers of speech and music of lute and string, and colored lights and golden tapestries and the scent of incense. Nay, with my poor voice only can the story be told. So of your kindness have patience if it unfolds not to your liking.

“Now, in the rich days of Egypt, before the gods of different strengths were dead; when the Pharaohs were on the throne, and Karnac was a city, when the Israelites were slaves, and the priests, my far-off kinsmen, made burnt-offerings to Amen-Ra and the littler gods, his satellites, there was a mighty King in Egypt.

“Great was this King, and greatly to be feared. Yet he was just, and well beloved of his people. His bow-men and spear-men and charioteers were as the sands of the sea, and his tame war-lions were many. Also he owned slaves from every country, and his camels and herds were legion. His palaces shone with amber and beaten silver, and his silken tents had walls of embroidery, while the arabesques upon the hangings were set in jewels, and there were golden bells above the curtained doors. Vast were his treasures and hidden in many places. Chests of gems, and bags of coin, and boxes of attar-of-rose and ointments of the Orient.

“But of all this mighty King’s possessions, he loved but one thing only, and that was his wife, Aureanta. Not in the East and not in the West had one been found so beautiful! In the South she knew no rival. But they had brought her captive to the King from the far North—so of the North one might not speak, for the Queen averred that others there had no less beauty than she.

“Now, although Aureanta had been brought captive to Egypt, she was the daughter of a northern Prince, whose army had been overthrown.

“So, although they called her but a beautiful barbarian, she was versed in many things, new and strange in the land of the desert, and looked and seemed a very princess even from the day she came bound to Egypt.

“When the King saw her, he marvelled at her white and gold beauty, for her skin was as the leaf of the white lotus, and her hair gold as a wheatfield in the sun.

“And the King loved her madly and made her his wife, against all the counsels of his wisest men and readers of the stars—as is the way of Kings.

“But the Queen Aureanta loved him as well; therefore, in spite of the wise men, there was joy and dancing at the wedding feast, and no shadow rested upon the land of Egypt for many days. It was the time of roses, and the young King and Queen were often seen walking in their garden beneath the palms. And the people, so seeing them, were happy, for it is a beautiful thing to look on youth and love and summer weather.



“As her tears fell they were caught and held within it.”

“Yet this is but earth, and so trouble approached. Dark as a cloud that blots out the sun, it came nearer and nearer on silent wings.

“For reasons no man could tell, the gods seemed angry, and sacrifices were offered to them in the temples, by day and by night. The smoke of them blackened the air incessantly; the sound of incantations and prayers

was never still. The temple-bells rang from dawn to dark. But it availed not. The gods were angry. It seemed they liked not to look upon too great joy. Rumors of wars were on the wind, and wars broke out. Little wars at first, and then those that were greater.

“From Asia came the Persians, hordes and mighty hordes of them, and the tribes of the Hittites, long the enemies of Egypt, and these banded together. Then also the Bedouins joined their train, and outlaw Arabs came who knew no ruler, but were beyond all grace.

“The King of Egypt gathered his bow-men and spear-men, and took his army of sworded chariots, and swiftly made dread battle upon these, the oncoming foes; and he pressed them back the way they had come, though the roads ran red with blood and were salted by the bones of the fallen.

“With bows and arrows and two-edged spears and catapults they fought, and also with liquid fire and the sworded chariots that mowed the battalions down as grain.

“The Great Gates of the walled city, wherein the Queen and the people remained, were fast closed.

“Outside the walls many smaller enemies camped, awaiting the day when perchance they might break in and pillage and kill and bear away slaves.

“Still to the borders of the sea the King pursued his enemies, and the battle raged by night and day.

“Throughout Egypt the wells had been poisoned, and the people on the little farms died by hundreds, and the food grew less and less, and pestilence was in the air.

“In the palace within the city walls, the young Queen from the North sat among her terrified maidens. She had put away her robes of beauty and wore a woollen mourning gown of white, girdled at the waist with a woollen cord only, and her golden hair was unbound.

“As they were there together, a sound of running came over the mosaic floors of the palace, and a youth entered, panting and spent, the dust thick upon him.

“He threw himself at the Queen’s feet. ‘What now, Cresta?’ she cried, trembling. ‘O, quickly! Tell me what news has brought you thus spent and troubled!’

“The battle still rages on the border, your Majesty, but to-day we lose and the King hath been wounded—yet not grievously. He sent me that you might not by chance hear worse report, and also to bear to you his love.’

“She stooped and touched the boy, ‘Rise,’ she said, ‘O dear runner. Return to the King. Tell him I catch my falling tears in the crystal bottle he gave to me. They fall through all the hours of his absence. Tell him I will lay them on the altar of the gods—as my sacrifice. Bear to him also my eternal love!’

“The runner departed, and the Queen sank back upon her floor-cushions. From beneath the woollen folds above her heart she took a crystal bottle, and as her tears fell, they were caught and held within it. Many and bitter were her tears, and long they fell. All through the day they fell ceaselessly and through the night—for she thought of the battle lost, and the King wounded and spent.

“But on the morning of the next day an old, old Minister of State came to the Queen.

“‘Your Majesty,’ he said, in his quavering voice, ‘the people need bread. There is, indeed, wheat in the city, but the people have no money wherewith to buy it.’

“Then the Queen called her maids-of-honor. ‘Bring all my jewels,’ she commanded, ‘and my golden ornaments, and all my coin stamped with the King’s seal.’

“This they did and laid them at her feet. The Queen gave them to the Minister of State, sealed in caskets and held in leathern bags—and she summoned her pages to help him bear them away.

“‘Take them,’ she said, ‘to the dealers in wheat that they may be paid. Give the wheat to the people, and deal fairly by them, every one.’

“So this was done, and again the Queen wept.

“Then once more came the Minister of State. ‘O, your sweet Majesty!’ he said. ‘The wells are empty—all save the royal wells. Where shall the people go for water?’

“‘Bid them come to the royal wells, O my friend,’ she answered. ‘Bid them fill their pitchers as long as water remains. See it is done in fairness to all—each one separately.’

“So he departed, and again the Queen wept.

“The little maids-of-honor, who were frightened, wept also, but could not take her for a moment from her grief.

“And once again the ancient man of State came to the Queen, and he said: ‘O, wonderful Queen, there is dread illness among the people. They fall upon the streets, the little children fall, and the old men and women. There are but few to nurse or care for them, so many are stricken.’

“Then the young Queen rose, and said: ‘Bring all within the palace that can be cared for here. My servants, being well, shall feed and wait upon them. I myself will go down into the city and help those whom I find, and with me I will take three of my pages to carry baskets of bread and wine and medicines, and fresh garments.’

“So she went abroad in the city, and by night and day forgot her grief in ministering to those who had fallen into the illness of death. And some mended and grew well again, and some died, but the Queen did not leave them.

“Then one day, having kept long watch by the dying, she herself fell into a faint, and the runner of the King came once more, and found her so.

“When she recovered, she looked up into his face and caught his hands. ‘O dear runner!’ she cried. ‘What news? What news of my Lord the King? Speak quickly!’ Her eyes shone, and color came once more into her face. But the young runner had no words. ‘Quickly!’ she commanded again. ‘O dear runner!’

“‘The battle is over and done,’ he told her, ‘and the day is ours!’

“She drew a deep breath of gladness. ‘Most glorious news!’ she cried. ‘But what of my Lord the King? What news of him?’

“The runner bowed his head. ‘The King has passed on and into the land of peace,’ he answered.

“For a little while she replied nothing. Then the boy, looking up, saw she smiled. ‘Now, O good runner,’ she said, ‘methinks all is told, indeed. Naught is left for me but to go out and meet my Master the King. Doth he return along the road of battles?’

“‘Ay!’ answered the runner. ‘By the very road he went. His scarred battalions and his war-lions come with him also—triumphant, and they bring with them the captives—in legions far as the eye can see.’

“Hearing this, the Queen called her tiring-women, and bade them array her in her robes of state, also she sent the heralds to trumpet the news of

victory from the city walls.

“But before she set out in her golden litter to meet those who returned from war, she went to the Temple of Amen-Ra, the Lord of the Sun and the Horizon.

“There the High Priests greeted her. She smiled upon them, even as she had smiled upon the young runner.

“‘I do not come to pray, O most high servants of the gods,’ she said. ‘I come but to lay my offering of tears upon the altar. I had forgotten when the people fell sick and died that I had promised my tears as an offering of sacrifice. I even forgot to weep, O Holy Ones. They were so pitiful, the little children and the old who fell ill—that if I wept at all, it was for them, and I forgot to catch the tears for the gods. I pray you, ask them to forgive me, and take you this crystal bottle—which, alas! is but half-way filled, for many tears were lost—and lay it at the feet of Amen-Ra. ’Tis now a thank-offering only—for the great war hath ended. A thank-offering, and not a sacrifice, as it should have been, O Holy Ones.’

“So the priests bowed and took from her hand the crystal tear-bottle, promising to present it to the God of the Sun, and she was satisfied. But again she spoke.

“‘Bless me, my fathers, and send thy blessing to the King of Egypt, for, having conquered, he returns.’

“With uplifted hands they blessed her, and she departed. But not knowing the King was dead, the priests wondered at the whiteness of her face and the glory of her robes—which were ceremonial robes and heavy with much gold.

“The litter-bearers bore the Queen onward until they met the triumphant legions of Egypt.

“At their head was carried the body of the King upon the linked shields of his guard, and beside the litter walked the greatest of the tame war-lions. They lowered the shields at the Queen’s approach, and she stepped from her litter and knelt in the sand beside it. The mighty warriors of the guard wondered at her that she did not weep.

“‘So you return to me—in triumph, O My Lord!’ she said, as though he heard. ‘ ’Tis joy to meet thee. Thy people have been sore beset and very pitiful. But all I could do, O most dear, I have done. It was but little, and I forgot to lay my sacrifice of tears upon the altar of Amen-Ra. Quite forgot, until word came of thy victory. Now it must serve but for a thank-offering.

The priests have promised to offer it thus with incantations and praise—that the gods may be content and not angry with us any more. Perchance we were too happy—and thereby forgot them in our hearts.’

“Gently she stooped and laid her lips against his face, that had still the dust of battle upon it. As she did not rise, and the moments passed, the guards looked into each other’s eyes, and were troubled, thinking she had fainted. Then one, bolder than the rest, lifted her up. And they saw her spirit was no longer in her body, but had hastened on to overtake that of her Lord the King of Egypt, so that it might journey with him into the land of Peace.

“The High Priests laid the tear-bottle on the altar at the feet of Amen-Ra, as they had promised. There it lay, O, my little ones, amid the daily offerings of fresh flowers, for many, many, many years.

“When the city, long afterwards, was burned and sacked, and the temples destroyed, an aged priest took the token from the desecrated altar of the Sun-God, to bear it away. And, behold! The tears within the crystal had, by some miracle, turned into a jewel, the wonder of which no tongue can tell.

“There it shone with serene rays of light, that all might see and marvel. Moreover, that time-worn priest secreted the token, and at his death gave it to another, and though the temples were laid waste, yet has the Queen’s Tear-Bottle been passed down from one to another of that priestly line unto this very day.”

In the fire-lit room there was silence, and one boy after another roused as from a spell. The Egyptian rose and stepped to the floor with the light spring of youth. He, too, was as one who had come out of a dream.

“Thanks, Abydos Khon!” the boys called. “That was a good story! Some story, Abydos Khon!” One after another, they registered their approval by word of mouth, and so scattered in different directions, shaking from them rather gladly, perhaps, the mystic impression of his words, and making for the world they belonged to. So youth can escape quickly from one condition to another. But age is not so.

The Man-Who-Was-Rich rose stiffly from his chair beside the hearth, and approaching the hooded figure of Abydos Khon, as he was about to depart, touched him on the arm.

The Egyptian turned and looked into the cynical eyes of John Mavor.

“Who are you, Abydos Khon?” he asked.

“Why should I think you would believe me if I told?” he questioned with a smile.

“Why not?” said the other.

“Because you do not easily believe,” returned the Egyptian.

“Are you, then, so extraordinary a man one could not give credit to your identity?” Mavor asked with cold politeness.

“That is as it may be,” said Abydos Khon. “But I will try your faith. I am of the old line of the Pharaohs!”

The Man-Who-Was-Rich gazed at the strong young figure before him, at the beautiful face that might have been cast in bronze; the eyes, from which shone out the flame of the soul within; the thick, white hair, white as a thing grief-stricken; the patrician hands of such vast repose.

No, it was not difficult to believe that he came of a race of kings. But the Pharaohs!

“What proof have you of what you claim to be?” questioned the Man-Who-Was-Rich.

Abydos Khon smiled—and the smile was like a light.

“Ah!” he returned “I was right. You have no faith. Well, what does it matter? Yet this much I will say. My people of Egypt do not aver their line of birth unless they have proof thereof. The birth records are sacred—but not for every idle and curious eye to see.” He waved his hands lightly, as though dismissing the subject. Then, bowing, turned to the door.

But the Man touched him on the arm again.

“Wait!” he said in his clear-cut voice. “Wait, Abydos Khon! I am not done with my questions—though, of course, you may not answer. Yet, I desire to know a thing or two regarding your statements in the little story. A strange story, Abydos Khon, and akin to those of the Bible we were bidden to believe in our childhood. No whit stranger than those most true stories, and very beautiful. Therefore, tell me—what of the Queen’s Tear-Bottle you assured your credulous audience had come down to this day? Was that truth or polite fiction? What of the jewel it held—a jewel compounded of tears, as you told us? Why go so far into particulars? Why drag in miracles or enchantments? It did not seem necessary.”

Abydos Khon regarded him steadily. Beneath the brown hood, that was like a friar’s hood, his eyes were as stars. About him clung the calm of the

East. It enfolded him as an intangible garment. For a moment he stood so; then bowed again.

“I admit your right to question,” he said, “and it is my pleasure to answer. The story, as I told it, is true—if we may believe any story so handed down. It has come with little variation through the priests of the temples that belong to days that are very far off. Some stories are so wondrous, so lovely, they carry the power of conviction. Nothing can be added to them or taken away that would not mar their perfection. This, every man that hears them acknowledges. Therefore, in the chronicles and repetitions they remain unchanged, and they seem to need no proof. Yet, of this story, I alone, of all the living, *have a proof*.” From the inner folds of his cloak, above his heart, he drew a crystal vial. In the dim room it shone with a soft radiance. He held it out.

“Look!” he said in his bell-like voice. “Look! It is the Queen’s Tear-Bottle!”

The Man-Who-Was-Rich started, his eyes fixed on the shining thing, then he reached out and took it with his own hand, but with an incredulous smile.

“Oh, come!” he exclaimed. “O, come now! You can hardly expect one to credit *this*—to accept it as genuine, you know, or connect it with your very wonderfully recited story?”

The Egyptian shook his silvery head. “One does not look for credence in the hard-to-believe. Not, at least, here, in the City-of-Money. It may be the boys believed while they listened. Perhaps they still believe. But you—you are different—a product of your time and city. Still, at the least, I will leave with you food for thought. Hold the bottle to the fire-light.”

The other did so, and looked long. It was a lovely thing he held, and made of a transparent crystal, luminous in places, as though flecked with phosphorus. The mouth of the bottle was wide and flaring, but the neck slender and long. Below it was delicately curved, and at the base so rounded it could not be set upright.

The stopper seemed made of a single opal, and was cut and threaded as a screw is threaded, so only by turning could it be fitted to its place. When once fitted, it held perfectly, and nothing could escape, not even vapor.

The Man-Who-Was-Rich turned the bottle a little this way and that, against the red fire-light, for, within, something rolled softly from side to side against the crystal.

“By all that is mysterious!” he exclaimed again. “There is a jewel within it! A pearl, perhaps! No, brighter than a pearl! A diamond? Not so brilliant. An opal—possibly an opal! How marvellous! For the jewel, or whatever it is, is far too large to have fallen into the bottle. Like the camel and the needle’s eye, there was no possibility of entrance. A curiosity certainly. A puzzle of some sort, no doubt, originally. A puzzle yet, for that matter.” He held it out to the Egyptian.

“What is this thing?” he questioned, a note of annoyance in his voice. “I want the truth.”

“I have told you,” Abydos Khon responded quietly. “It is the Queen’s Tear-Bottle—the Queen Aureanta. Within is the jewel—as far as man can see—made of her tears. By what magic or miracle or fairy charm, who can say? Upon the bottle also is engraved the King’s sign—but time has almost effaced this. From the priests of Amen-Ra the crystal was handed down. The brothers of the Pharaohs were often times the High Priests, and through many hands it has reached mine,” he said, as though stating a fact easy to believe. “But now—”

“Yes?” questioned the other.

“Now the time has come to part with it. The old temples are dust, but the God-of-Yesterday-To-day-and-To-morrow needs them not. As for this token of past sorrow, I must possess it no longer.”

“You mean?” again questioned the Man-Who-Was-Rich.

“I mean we have fallen on evil days, I and my people. All is gone that we called our own. My father is old and needs many things. My little sister—who is beautiful—must be cared for. My brothers, who are young, cannot be cast upon the world unprepared. This must be now our country—a gracious country to the friendless—but we cannot come to it as supplicants—as beggars. I have been a translator of books, but one may starve while one works. Also I have a trade of metal-working. But it brings one little. Little, also, have we to part with. Yet there is this one precious thing. I have thought the great Art Museum might take it from me, and give in return what my people need to set their feet firmly upon this new land.”

The Man-Who-Was-Rich looked down at the crystal thing. His grey eyes still held their half-sceptical smile, and yet—the story was haunting in its loveliness. The softly rolling unnamed jewel within the bottle held him—even sent a thrill to his heart—his heart—long unused to thrills. If the story should be true—he thought—if it should!

He turned to Abydos Khon.

“As this is for sale, I will buy it,” he said. “Come to my office.” They went together through the almost deserted building, and entered the cold room. The very air was charged with the business affairs of to-day. No touch of sentiment lay on anything.

Still holding the crystal, Mavor seated himself at his desk, drew out a cheque-book and lifted his pen to write.

“How much?” he asked the Egyptian shortly.

“That I do not know,” Abydos Khon said vaguely, shaking his young head. “Enough to bring my people comfort until the winter is past—to help them—a little—that will be enough.”

The Man-Who-Was-Rich smiled grimly. “You are no merchantman, Abydos Khon,” he said. “Unlike your kindred, you bring your wares to market, yet do not look for the highest bidder, nor set a price upon them. There is something lacking in you, my friend: But perhaps you are right. There is no price set upon tears—even tears that by some alchemy have been turned into a jewel. Also, there can be no established value placed upon the rare—the very old—the perishable that has persisted where all else has passed.

“It may be this antique would be worth a good deal more—or a good deal less to the Museum—but I want it, and will set my own price upon it—with your permission.”

He drew the book to him, wrote the cheque, and handed it to Abydos Khon. The Egyptian’s hand trembled as he took the piece of paper. For once his calm slipped away, he gave a low cry, and dropped to his knees. Lifting the hand that had written the cheque, he touched it with his lips.

“It is too great a sum!” he said brokenly.

“No,” said the Man-Who-Was-Rich. “I think not.”

The Egyptian looked up into the strong grey face, and understood that he was satisfied.

“I thank you!” he cried. “O most kind one! The winter has been long—the ways of the land are new, we have known grief, I and my people. There has been little money.—I thank you.”

Rising, he took the Queen’s Tear-Bottle, bowed before it, and touched it to his forehead solemnly. Then gave it back.

He pulled the cloak about him.

“Farewell,” he said. “Farewell.—Abydos Khon will not forget.”

The other smiled, but the smile was no longer hard.

“Farewell to you also, O Son of the Pharaohs!” he answered.

The heavy door opened, closed. Then the Man-Who-Was-Rich took the crystal bottle, slipped it into an inner pocket of his great-coat, reached for his hat and cane and went out.

The wind smote him like a whip as he reached the street. The snow drifted and swirled in white hillocks. The traffic was blocked.—No motor, he concluded, could get far.

He struggled against the storm. But he was not thinking of the wind, nor the people who buffeted it beside him. His thoughts were travelling back to an old beleaguered city and a woman who wept. He saw her with the tear-bottle against her face. He saw her white mourning robes—her unbound yellow hair. She seemed strangely real. He saw her in the temple bringing her offering of tears. He saw her in her robes of State upon the scarred road whither she went to meet the dead King.

Within his coat he felt the little precious crystal. His lips wore the old cynical expression for a moment. “I am a fool,” he said half-aloud. “A fool—a fool—” but his face again changed, softened, “if it should be true—” he whispered. “If it should.”

Raising his eyes he saw he was passing a shop of antiquities. A well-known place filled with the gleanings of centuries.

Entering, he sought out an old clerk, as well-known as the place. The snow melted upon his head and shoulders unnoticed. He took the crystal from his coat and handed it to the old clerk.

“Can you tell me what sort of curiosity this is?” he asked.

The clerk turned the crystal bottle about; held it to a strong light. Fastened upon his eye a powerful glass, and turned and returned the crystal before he spoke.

“It is a tear-bottle,” he said at last. “An Egyptian tear-bottle. Yes. Genuine. Of the Dynasty of the Rameses II—III—I do not know. The sign is cut upon it—diamond cut—but almost smoothed away by time. They are very rare—these—Oh, very. I have not seen quite such a one. What puzzles me is the jewel within—How did it come there? Oh, you cannot say? Ah!—

There is no flaw in the crystal—it could not have passed through that slender throat of glass.—Have you an explanation, sir? No? Strange.”

“I thank you for your opinion of the antique,” said the Man-Who-Was-Rich, placing the bottle again within his pocket, and fastening his coat.

“It has been a pleasure to see it,” answered the old clerk. “A great pleasure. Should you wish to part with it at any time, sir, we would be glad to consider—”

“No, thanks, no,” he answered, and went out again into the storm.

But still the words of the Egyptian sounded in his ears, insistently. “Then came an ancient minister of state to the Queen—‘Your Majesty,’ he said, ‘the people need bread, there is indeed wheat in the city—but they have no money wherewith to buy it.’ Then the Queen called her maids-of-honor. ‘Bring hither my jewels and golden ornaments’—she commanded—‘Take them to the dealers in wheat, that they may be paid; give the wheat to the people, and deal fairly by them everyone.’”

“Then came again the ancient Minister. ‘The wells are empty, O, Your Majesty,—where shall the people go for water to drink?’ ‘Bid them come to the royal wells,’ she answered, ‘and fill their pitchers so long as the water remains.’”

On and on through the storm pressed the Man-Who-Was-Rich. It beat against his body; but the words of the Egyptian beat still more against his soul—haunting him.

“And again the ancient Minister of State came, and he said, ‘O wonderful Queen—there is dread illness among the people!’ and, she commanded her servants to bring them into the palace, and she said, ‘I will go down into the city and help those whom I find.’ And she went abroad and by day and night forgot her own grief in ministering to those who had fallen.”

On and on the words pursued him, as though carried on the wind.

“Then came the runner of the King. ‘O dear runner!’ she cried. ‘What news? What news of my Lord the King?’ And the runner bowed his head. ‘The King has passed on—into the land of Peace—’”

“‘Now—methinks all is told—naught is left for me but to meet my Master, the King.’ But before she set out, she went to the Temple of Amen-Ra.

“‘I come not to pray—but to lay my offering of tears upon the altar.’”

So the words haunted him. He bent before the wind, and struggled onward. "If it were true," he thought. His hand went against the crystal lying near his heart.

Through the white smother of the snow he saw a wide frosted window, and upon the white banner of the frost a lighted cross of red.

Buffeted by the storm, he yet stopped and gazed at it.

And it grew to be a new and wonderful sign in his eyes. The old hard look vanished out of them.

"Little Queen," he said, softly. "O little Queen of the faithful heart—I would be worthy to follow you down into the city of the dead, and dying—worthy to be the keeper—even in this day—of the gift of tears you laid on the altar of the gods who are gone."

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Queen's Tear-Bottle* by Virna Sheard]