

THE RING OF THE GREAT WISH

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KNEPH was making the first man, clumsily, for the clay was coarse and the god's hands fumbled. But at last he leaned back from his potter's wheel with an air of fatuous pride. Then up came Isis holding a corner of her veil to her lips, like a woman who laughs behind her apron secretly; yet—there were tears in her slanting black eyes. She took the ugly little creature from the wheel and held it to her great breast, singing under her breath while Kneph, pleased with his artistic success, blundered ahead with another bit of clay, like a bad artist who cannot possibly be stopped from spoiling good material; and he turned out rams and bulls and apes. And these were really not so bad. He seemed to have forgotten that first experiment, but Isis looked down upon it forebodingly as it lay within her veil.

A vague wind was blowing through the tremendous hall of the Underworld. Sometimes it was sharp like the crying of women and children, sometimes it snarled with the noise of fighting, and again it would be sweet like the talk of lovers.

And always the great gods moved softly about their business, taking thousands of years to some trifle like the levelling of a mountain or the turning of a river; but no one paid much attention to the wind, and Kneph sat contentedly at his wheel making one thing after another, until Isis spoke:

"Kneph, Kneph, you bungler! This will never do. He is like us."

The great horned head lifted and the ram's face wrinkled comically with perplexity.

"Eh? Who is it? Oh, that. Yes. That was a little idea of mine. Rather clever, what?"

"Clever! Oh, it will never do at all! He is finding out how to love, and he so little and weak!"

"Well, now, I'm afraid there's nothing I can do about it. You can turn him over to Anubis if you like. He was only an experiment." A lean black shadow crept out from under the

Potter's wheel. "Get away!" said Isis. But Anubis stood his ground, looking up wistfully with dripping jaws.

Kneph yawned, pushed his wheel aside and turned to stone, which was his way of going to sleep.

"Osiris!" called Isis, softly. A tender pink light grew in the temple as if sunrise were shining right down through the rocks and sand into the Underworld. Everything grew soft and warm and alive, as a beautiful giant stood beside Isis and kissed her. Then, and not till then, Anubis slunk back under the Potter's wheel and went to sleep with Kneph.

"So many things have been happening to-day," said she, leaning her head against Osiris's shoulder. "Kneph has made a man. I knew it would turn out badly and it has. The little thing has learned how to love. Think of it. Do you remember how when they killed you, I hunted everywhere and found you and put you together again? What I suffered!"

"But love is good," smiled Osiris.

"For us who never die. But this little creature that fades so quickly—that *he* should endure the great pains of it——"

Osiris looked mysteriously upward toward the sun and stars among which he had been busy when his wife called him.

"It may turn out all right," said he.

"It must!" She held the Man very tightly to her great warm bosom. "I'll not have his heart broken altogether just for a whim of Kneph's. Anubis, indeed!"

Osiris passed his arm about her waist and drew aside her veil which lay across the man's face, and the god's eyes were so bright that it was as if the sun were shining hot and strong.

"Love," pronounced Osiris, "needs no help of the gods. It is strong enough in itself."

"Perhaps—and yet, I should like to help. . . . Kneph! Oh, he is asleep again." She put an imperative hand on the stone shoulder and shook it. The great Ram yawned and became a god again.

"I wanted to sleep," he complained. "What has happened? Has Osiris let the sun go out? I told him to keep it alight for a million years yet, at least. Or was it more? I forget."

"There's nothing the matter with the sun. But if you will

make experiments you must carry them to a decent conclusion. You are not going to leave him thinking and hoping and feeling and loving just for nothing—are you?"

Kneph scratched his horn and looked foolish.

"Come," said she impatiently. "Finish your work. He must have a soul."

"What, you wouldn't——"

"Continuance like us; yes."

So Kneph sulkily gave him a soul, and it is because of the unpleasant mood in which he did so that various troubles came with it. Indeed he hung back for several thousand years, while Isis argued. But one thing he flung into her hand, with a somewhat quizzical smile as a man humors a woman.

"You may give him that if you like," said he. It was the Ring of the Great Wish.

So that is the way man was made. How long afterward he returned the compliment and made the gods is only guesswork. Perhaps a million or two of years; such are the terms of geological guesses. It took him a long time to become skilled enough for that, it is certain.

And when he had built them very tall and grand in stone—Kneph and Isis and Osiris and Anubis, and Hathor and Thoth and as many more as he could think of and had time for—he forgot about the sand of the Libyan desert and how it kept sifting—sifting—sifting through the crevices of the rock exactly like the sand running from one half of an hour glass into another. So that in a very short time—not more than six thousand years—all his gods were so covered that their chins were level with the desert.

It was upon this indignity that Abram Parmalee was commenting under the Egyptian stars as he and little Professor Hanner, the Great, sat out upon the sand above their great trench. For they had come to dig the gods out again.

Abram Parmalee was a young man, and very sorrowful. He had been clenching a cold pipe in his teeth for long, before Hanner, having missed him in the dining tent, limped out among the yawning excavations to find him.

"There they sit!" said Abram, pointing with the stem of his cold pipe to vague blots near and far upon the sand. "There are the gods that men believed in and prayed to. Think of the slaves who died in making them—you estimate a man's life for every stone in the pyramids, don't you?"

Hanniver nodded. "About that, probably——"

"The mere pity of their making," cried Abram, "should have been enough to create stone hearts in their bosoms and set them beating! Why do we patch and potter to increase man's knowledge of how the world and the race came about? We should be doing better services in trying to find out some method for derailing it all. . . ."

"There they sit, the fools! grinning at us with their chins resting on the desert. I saw a vulture to-day in the coil of Kneph's horn, and a lion had tucked some bones under Isis's head-dress."

Hanniver smiled.

"And the crow's nest in the plumes of Osiris. What then? They smile at the sun as pleasantly as when they were quarried, and will keep it up when our trenches are full of Libyan sand again and the Museum to which we shall consign our mummies is itself a lost item of a dead city. . . . The sand should be level over their heads by then. And yet I do not quite gather the reason for your discontent. Are you vexed by the contrast between the stability of stone and the instability of flesh?"

"That is it—I suppose."

Hanniver hitched closer along the mound. His eyes, relieved of the dark glasses which he wore by day, shone deep and liquid in the starlight.

"You are very young," said little Hanniver. "And your trouble is a very great one. But Isis, over there, is six thousand years old. Presently she will be six thousand more. I was a young man once—and greatly troubled. One that I knew—married—as unhappily as you can possibly imagine. She—died within a year. I should have killed him before their wedding day. . . . I didn't. I went on my first exploration. . . ."

"Digging up dead cities is very absorbing. Certain anaesthetics are necessary at times if life is to be preserved; by life I

mean, somewhat narrowly, the power to direct one's brain force. I should place archæology in the first rank of such anæsthetics."

"Lucky man!" said Abram. "She died. You had not the agony of the one-chance-in-a-thousand hope."

"No. That is true. But she suffered greatly. Miss Armand, I understand, does not suffer?"

"How do we know? She lies as still as one of your mummies, but what proof can they give that she does not dream.

. . . And—I did it. I killed her——

"'The patient's condition is unchanged,'" muttered Abram. He took out a book from his inner coat pocket and from its leaves extracted a sheaf of cable forms.

"Do you know how many times I've had that same message?" he said.

"Two months—one a day," calculated Hanniver. "Do you keep the sixty in your pocket?"

Abram tore the sheaf in two and flung the tatters into the depths of the trench.

"It was the wild asters," he said musingly. "They grow so high you can't see over them. She had spoken about wanting some, so when I saw them up a little lane I turned my machine in to get them. The road was filled from fence to fence. It looked as if it would be a short cut to the river road, too—that was why I turned the car in instead of leaving it on the main road. But she had already found her asters and was sitting down among them like a bird in the nest. She was reading—this is the book—there's a bloodstain by this line—

'So shalt thou feed on death that feeds on men.
And Death once dead, there's no more dying then.'

"Queer it should be those lines, don't you think?"

"Death once dead," he repeated consideringly, looking out over the plain of ancient death.

He kept the book in his hand, finger between the pages.

"After taking her to the hospital I took the car up to the quarry and sent it over. They told me she might live, you see, or I'd have gone over with it."

Hanniver austerely dissented. "A man should keep his life

as long as there is anything left to find out, or anything beautiful to look at, or any creature weaker than himself to be helped."

"Well, she wasn't dead, so I didn't go over. But——" Abram glanced over his shoulder, then took Hanniver by the elbow fiercely—

"There was an empty steamer chair beside mine on the deck as we came over. I was half asleep and I thought some woman was in it and wanted to speak to me. And I turned and no one was there. But when I drew my cap over my eyes and settled down again . . . she was there and wanting to speak, and—couldn't. It happened every day. Then I saw her in the Cairo bazaars. I would see her not six feet away—the very hat she wore, an iridescent feather in it, like those scarabs—the little gold bar pin at the back of her neck, and one wisp of curl that always stuck out over the right ear no matter how she did her hair—and when I got closer it would be a fat dowager or a Cook's tourist (once it was a veiled Egyptian woman)—some one without the least possible resemblance to her. . . . And my eyes are of the best. She—she mocks me so. . . ." His voice broke dismally.

"Just now she stood behind me trying to whisper something—trying so hard . . . I almost understood. It's not that she's unhappy, for she laughs, like a girl that is teasing one. In earnest, too, though. Oh, certainly in earnest. Can one believe nowadays that there is anything—you know—anything to hope for, once you're gone out of the body? For—she isn't in the body—she can't be. Her body doesn't decay—that's about all you can say of it. There's hardly more life in it than in one of your mummies."

Hanniver indicated the dead city with a sweep of his hand. "They believed it. At heart all men believe the same—always have. It is a natural law. . . . I was looking over a papyrus this afternoon—come to my tent and I'll show you. . . . Hearts have broken ever since the world began. The game is: to live on without them. It can be done. And I'll tell you a secret. You can't learn hope before you've learned despair. This," said Hanniver, with the calm air of one discussing an important matter, "is not generally known."

Their shadows preceded them to a small tent that stood slightly aloof. In front of its buttoned flap the shadow of a Bedouin sitting cross-legged with rifle upon his knee rose and saluted. In the darkness of the tent as Hanniver struck a match odd shapes flared up and wavered against the canvas walls: things that had been in the tomb yesterday, dragged suddenly into sunlight and air, then jumbled into strange companionship. One fancied them to have been holding startled conclave. The wakeful enamel eyes of the latest mummy made the brightest point of the dusky huddle. Being without focus they stared at and through one, as if contemplating things of another time and place altogether. But the eyeless princess within the shell had been dead so long that one fancied the period of death to have been past and this state to be something else—like the inertia of stones.

Hanniver, holding a match over his head while searching for his candle, heard a choking sound behind him and turned to see Abram's face, white and pleading, his eyes fixed upon the grotesquely smiling mummy.

"Here too!" he said in a shaken voice. "See, Hanniver! Wouldn't you call her real? And that bunch of asters in her hands—you see *those*, don't you?"

He touched the mummy case as a man snatches at a woman's hand, and the illusion broke and dissolved. He threw an arm across his eyes with a sob.

"You see, Hanniver!" he groaned. "That's what she does."

Hanniver lit an alcohol lamp and warmed a can of broth. "Drink that," he said. When Abram had obeyed, he continued: "If I were you I should try to make a serious study of something. Take up archæology seriously instead of making an adventure of it. You acquire merit by financing us here—enormous merit; but you're missing the cream of it that you might have. I shouldn't have thought when I was your age that I could ever feel the pleasure I feel now and again at some new discovery. There's juice in the world to be got at even when a man's heart has gone dry—but you have to work for it. . . ."

"I will read the translation I spoke of. It's rather interest-

ing because from what I can make out yonder lady"—he pointed at the new mummy—"is no other than the Lady Bekta herself. To-morrow we'll take a look at her jewellery. Odd if she should still be wearing the ring. That *would* be a prize, eh?" Then he read:

"And when the potter Kneph had made the gods he made the beasts, and when he had made the beasts he made man: and man was a very little thing. But Isis looked upon him and Osiris looked upon him and they two had compassion. For, behold, he had love in his heart even as they had the one for the other. And so they asked of Kneph and he made them that talisman which is called even to this day the ring of Kneph of the Great Wish: by which, if any dead man wearing it upon his finger shall wish to come forth by day again into the world he may do so. . . . But no man being dead desired to live again until the Lady Bekta, because she was young and the smell of the lotos was yet sweet in her nostrils, and because the sound of the weeping of Ankheteḫep, her husband, was bitter in her ears, she could not be at ease in the Underworld; and Ankheteḫep placed the Ring of the Great Wish upon her finger. Wherefore, when she had been dead six days, she returned and rose and saluted her husband, and great was their rejoicing. And thereafter Bekta and Ankheteḫep lived for an hundred and ten years. And because they loved even with the love of Isis and Osiris, life was sweet between their lips even into their very old age. Nevertheless they were contented to lay it down. Since that time none having descended to the Underworld had returned thence. Wherefore it is understood that Kneph destroyed the ring. But this is not certainly known.'

"And there," concluded the Professor respectfully regarding the mummy, "she stands, and not improbably wears the ring by which she might, even to-day, reënter the world. Unless, as the story suggests, Kneph destroyed it."

"Because she was young . . . and the tears of Ankheteḫep were bitter!" repeated Abram softly. He buried his face in his arms, and his tears were no less bitter than the prehistoric ones of Ankheteḫep.

Hanniver watched him until the big shoulders heaved no

longer and the body relaxed into sleep, which is said to be the best gift of all—save one—in the gods' bestowal. After a little Hanniver himself slept. And he dreamed strangely and pleasantly about one who had been dead for many years.

He woke to the noise of the falling mummy case. In the darkness was the sharp sound of ripping wood. When he struck a light he saw Abram taking a ring from the hand of the mummy. For as long as the flicker of the match he seemed to see the dead hand revealed by the torn wrappings, resist and clutch like a living one. By the time the lamp was burning steadily it disintegrated like a puff of dust, and case-wrapping and all collapsed into such ruin that Hanniver was never able to reshape it sufficiently to verify his suspicion that it was the mummy of that Lady Bekta mentioned in the papyrus.

Abram held up the ring—a marvel of blue and gold, that flashed like blue flame,—shouting that it was the Ring of the Great Wish. . . .

After that he became quite ill—and Hanniver sadly let the great work slip from his fingers to take him home. And throughout the weeks of that journey Abram kept the ring shut within his hand.

"This remarkable ring," runs Professor Hanniver's account of it (on page 512 of his *Report of the Excavations of the Parmalee Expedition*, in a foot-note), "now most unfortunately lost, was as perfect as if made yesterday, even to the veinings on the beetle's wings; the iridescence of the glaze had all the range of a peacock's feather. I had no opportunity to study it with exactness, but the inscription—so far as I could judge—was an archaic form of the 'Coming Forth by Day' hymn to Ra: 'Hymn of praise to thee, O Ra! Thou keeper of secret gates which are on the brow of the god Seb. . . . In very truth I have thrust through the earth. Grant that I may go forward and arrive at the stage of old age.'"

Kneph and Isis, looking down into the bright streets of the city, as you put your eye to a stereopticon, towered like pillars of smoke.

"Is that really my man down there?" said Kneph. "Well,

I must say for a little experiment, he's not turning out so badly. Changed a good bit, isn't he!"

But Isis was looking not at the big iron buildings nor at the astonishing traffic contrivances, trolleys, subways, automobiles, but at various large plain quiet buildings standing here and there about the city. Her eyes grew bright. ("How bright the stars are!" said two lovers strolling in the Park.) Then she said: "He *has* changed! He is kinder. The black places"—and her great eyes looked here and there with sad comprehension—"are not so many nor so black as they were when a slave died for every stone that was placed upon a silly pyramid. He is kinder. Those buildings"—she pointed to the hospitals—"are for making the pain of the world less. What would the Pharaohs have said to that!"

"They may have grown wise, but they're still using my ring," said Kneph, with some gratification.

The gods all hurried to see, for they *had* been feeling a little like back numbers. To find a man believing in one of their talismans was as good as one of the old burnt offerings. They crowded about Abram as pleased as children as the carriage drove up to the hospital.

Abram opened his palm and stared at the ring. "It is alive," he said to Hanniver. "It burns my hand."

Dr. Barnes, the camp physician who had made the voyage with them, made a pass with his cane. "That cur has been following us," said he. "How like a jackal it looks!" He struck at it and his stick encountered no substance, but he merely thought he had missed.

"Jackal!" said Hanniver, looking back. He saw no jackal. For an instant he fancied he saw a woman in Arab dress, a woman with very brilliant eyes. However, he suspected no more than the doctor that the old gods were making one of their infrequent visits to the world.

The hospital corridors are very long. They might be narrow, clean white streets with house-door after house-door, shut and silent and numbered. It was very much, thought Hanniver, like the way the doors of tombs open into the underground streets

of the dead—but different, with the exact difference between the world of then and the world of now, for then it was the dead man who was honored and had fortunes spent upon him, but to-day we try to do better by our living.

Isis said something of this to Kneph as the gods softly fell into step behind Hanniver and Abram and Dr. Barnes and the starched nurse. And Kneph retorted (he still is Kneph in spite of stupidity), "Nevertheless you see they take my ring with them"; which was vanity, pure and simple. Had it not been for Abram and his ring, Kneph would not have enjoyed his visit very much.

The gods, so used to tombs, felt old and embarrassed before that miracle of airy cleanness. The figure on the bed, however, was as still as a mummy. If it was dead, why then, things would seem more like Pharaoh's time, as all the dead are of the same age. They fixed their ancient eyes upon the still face expectantly.

The physician at the foot of the bed recognized young Parmalee with a grave face.

"You did not announce your coming, Mr. Parmalee, therefore my cables have not forewarned you. There has been a change."

"She is worse?"

"In a condition like this it is best not to hope too much, as I warned you in the beginning. The blood clot may absorb. Or there may be further lesions. Modern surgery can go far—but we cannot"—his voice twanged peevisly, for he had hoped much both as a man and a physician—"we cannot work miracles."

Something strange in Abram's manner called an attentive professional gleam to the physician's eye. He flung a questioning glance at Dr. Barnes, who nodded slightly. The great man lifted an eyebrow and did not leave the room as he had intended, for brains were the food and drink of his mind, and any new vagary of one was a gem for his great and precious collection.

Abram stood looking down at the girl with the strangest smile. A smile at such a time was not normal—not at all.

Abram, still smiling, put the ring on the dead finger, and kissed the dead mouth.

The physicians exchanged glances—then bent over the bed with excited faces.

The lips which had been no more than a grey line flashed red, and parted in a deep breath. The head turned ever so slightly, as if seeking an easier position, and then—the eyes opened.

The doctor stepped quickly to the patient's side, but some one caught at his arm and drew him roughly back. It was neither Hanniver nor Dr. Barnes nor the nurse, nor Abram. He looked about dazed. The room was singularly dark. Who was that Oriental-looking person at the bed's head? And what was it that shone so on the girl's hand? Or was it anything at all, for it seemed a light that flickered out—as if the Oriental person touched it and it went.

The electric lights were burning, but lighting the darkness no more than stars. "Who let that dog in here?" said the doctor angrily, for he thought a great hairy head pushed up beside the cot, and that animal eyes—more sad than fierce—glimmered down at the girl. And then a woman's hand—could it be the nurse's?—thrust it aside. And the lights flared up and now the patient was smiling at them, wanly—but awake, surely awake!

The moment's trouble with the lights, the doctor thought, had meant something wrong at the power house only. And when he looked about for the dog it was gone. . . .

"You see we still have power," said Kneph complacently, as the gods drifted out again among the unsubstantial city vapors. The night was very dark. Isis looking upward shuddered to see that the hugest cloud of all those heaped against the moon was shaped like the head of a jackal.

"We!" said she. "We are shadows and have never been. It was the kiss. He has learned how to love with the love that forgets self and if any miracle worth the name can be wrought it is only by that means. We may go, Kneph; the world needs little gods like us no longer."

Kneph seemed hardly pleased at her interpretation, but he yawned to cover any embarrassment he might feel.

"I believe I'm sleepy again," said he. "Suppose we go back to Egypt. . . ."

"Osiris!" called Isis, and the night which had deepened during the passing of Anubis, paled and broke into a pink flush behind the solid roofs of the city. The birds in the Park stretched their wings, stropped their beaks, and burst into formal salutations, "*O Amen Ra, O Amen*"—quite as correctly as Egyptian birds six thousand years ago.

On one of the benches sat a young man with a face as bright as that of Osiris himself. The doctors and nurses had hustled him away, not realizing it was he that had cured her. . . .

"Osiris!" said Isis. And the sun rose.

The two gods stood behind Abram's bench. Isis leaned her head against her husband's shoulder just like any other contented woman.

"That is Kneph's man," said she. "He has really learned something about love, and I shouldn't be surprised if he did very well after all. . . . Do you suppose Kneph meant it that way?"