

THE SUPREME AMULET

AN EGYPTIAN TALE*

Little Ahmed, the new-born son of Rosheda, wife of Mahmoud Ahmed of Fayoum City, stared solemnly out on his strange new world in a village that lay a few miles from the city itself, deep among tall millet fields. The low mud houses straggled along a dusty street that climbed a hill, and behind them were tangled bits of mud-walled gardens backing on to a steep wooded valley through which a canal ran, deep and full as a river between grassy, tree-bordered banks. Day and night the eternal water wheels of the Fayoum sang to her children. Day and night winds from the desert beyond fluted through the steep wooded valleys, the miniature hills, the long shaded roads. But all the baby saw of life was the narrow dusty street, each house blindly facing the roadway and built to betray as little as possible of the life within. And there, when he was seven days old, the village women met to fulfil every ceremony love could devise to shield him from that terror of all such simple hearts—the Evil Eye of the Envious. They wrapped him in an embroidered shawl and Rosheda, his little fifteen-year-old mother sitting on the gaily decorated Chair of Birth that had done similar duty for scores and generations of village mothers, held him in her arms while his grandmother struck a brass mortar close to his ears that the music by-and-by might not frighten him. The baby blinked but did not weep, and, this being an excellent omen, they shrilled and chattered with delight. They shook him up in a sieve to strengthen his poor little stomach, and they carried him into every part of the house to familiarize his soul with

*[This accurate interpretation of village life is reprinted from *The Egyptian Gazette* by special permission of the author.—ED.]

every corner of it while they sprinkled salt before him and the midwife cried, "The foul salt be in the Eye of the Envious." And each woman carried a gay little colored candle, stuck in a lump of henna, and later when they laid the baby on a mattress and carried him round for each guest to see they each gave him a bright colored handkerchief with a few milliemes knotted in one corner, and laid another coin beside the *goolah* or water-pot, that was hung with bright rags and borrowed jewelry, all to bring him luck. And then just as the village midwife, an old gossip hag, was gathering up these coins, which were always her share of the day's entertainment, and the women were preparing the feast to follow, there entered, as in all good fairy tales there should enter—the Wicked Fairy.

In this case it was Hamida, the childless, one-eyed wife of Mahmoud Hosein, the *gaffir*, or village watchman. Hamida's face with its hungry mother-love and bitter jealousy burned into Rosheda's heart, so that, in sudden terror she snatched up the boy and hid him in her breast, at which Hamida, insulted, left the house again, laughing mockingly, without paying the customary *nukoot* to child or nurse. The women all made the sign against the Evil Eye hastily and buzzed like a hive disturbed, and the midwife devised a cunning charm to secure the baby against it. But the little passing incident planted deep in Rosheda's heart a terrible fear that no after security could remove. For though Ahmed grew to be a sturdy happy-go-lucky child in conditions that would have killed any self-respecting English baby in a week, Rosheda never could feel safe about him while Hamida yet walked the village street and laughed as she went by. She kept him spotlessly clean and clad in gay coloured clothes and the other women, wise in their age-old superstitions, shook their heads over her inordinate vanity as a direct invitation to the dreaded Evil Eye, even though the child was a walking museum of charms and amulets. Poor Rosheda, too proud of his beauty to let him go ragged and dirty like

the other children, spent all her time devising yet stronger spells. She toiled among the ruins of dead cities for the antique beads so highly esteemed among village folk. She sold her best copper pot, and thereby earned a beating from her husband, just to buy a little gold tassel, that, matted to his tiny forelock with a lump of alum should dangle between the child's mischievous black eyes and ward off the threatened peril. Sometimes at night she slipped away to sleep under the great gnarled thorn trees that line the road to the city, and are credited with magic powers.

Ahmed was a fat, laughing boy of two, whose steps led him into mischief twenty times a day to her mingled pride and terror, when the summer came down on them, claiming its yearly toll of child-life from the narrow dusty streets. No other child had been born to Rosheda, and Ahmed was her idol. And now he was wilting visibly in the heat, and not all her powers could help him one little bit. And it was common talk in the village that Hamida had said that the boy should yet some day be hers, a vague threat that filled the mother's heart with blind terror. When evening came Rosheda would carry the ailing child up the road beyond the village to where the great ancient water wheels droned out their eternal song, raising their dripping crown of earthen pots to fill the irrigation channels, day in day out, just as they had done for hundreds of years since hands long dead had set them there. All day and night from babyhood their cry wove into the simple web of village life, a *leit-motif*, scarce heard after a while, yet as much a part of every day as the scent of jasmine, or the beat of a tom-tom, or the date palms and thorn trees that shadowed the fields of millet that, like a waving green forest, grew for miles all about the village. Rosheda could no more imagine a land without the cry of the wheel than she could dream of the desert, the sea or cold lands far away where the gorgeous Eastern sun never shone. And here by the wheel one day her enemy found her. She came to repeat her offer to adopt the child, an

offer made half in jest, half earnest, always refused with scorn, yet this time presented with a scarcely suppressed excitement that Rosheda's watchful eyes did not miss. It was an insult to her motherhood to dream she would give up her darling, the light of her eyes, and she turned furiously on the daring speaker, although a moment later fear lent her sufficient cunning to refuse the offer quietly. Hamida laughed, tossing her head.

"You will think differently soon. That child is ill * * * only I can cure him. If you keep him he will die—like his father."

"What, oh you accursed woman! May you burn in hell," flamed out Rosheda savagely, "have you dared to touch my man too? Or are you only lying to torture me?"

"Not I—not I," crowed Hamida, "he is dead—for the great wheels beyond the village took him, and even now they are mourning for him outside your house."

Gathering up her flying black veil with swift, graceful gesture, Rosheda fled away from Hamida's evil, following laughter, down the long road that lay between her and the village. A sharp corner to be turned. A little hill to climb. Then the long, arrow-straight street, filled with the blood-red glow of the sunset and the trooping shadows that heralded the twilight. On her ears fell the high broken wailing of the women keening for the dead. In front of her house a crowd was gathered, the men gazing gloomily before them, the women wailing and sobbing, flinging their arms aloft with wild and tragic gestures. Rosheda broke through them and someone took the weeping baby from her arms as she flung herself down on her husband's body and gave herself up to wild and undisciplined grief, while all about her the women redoubled their cries, tearing their hair, casting dust on their heads, shrieking in growing frenzy. Mahmoud had slipped and been horribly crushed under the relentless iron swathes of the old wheel. All her life Rosheda had listened to its mournful song and never dreamed for what tragic omen it stood to her. All her life to the day she

died she would hear it yet, threaded with her sorrow. She did not realize that Hamida had merely seen the men carrying Mahmoud past the house and used her knowledge to try to frighten Rosheda. To the little widow it was all Black Magic, since Hamida was an All-Powerful One, and through her genuine passion of grief for the husband who had loved her after his fashion there ran a terrible fear of what might yet befall her son, than whom there was none dearer in earth or heaven.

After Mahmoud was buried she returned to her father's house till the days of her *eddeh* be accomplished. Life narrowed in for her and was filled with petty cares.

Her child ailed more visibly day by day. It was inevitable, according to her simple faith, if Hamida willed it so, and the doctor in the hospital in the city shook his head over him, for he seemed to be suffering from one of those curious wasting diseases that afflict childhood in the East and for which there seems so little chance of diagnosis or cure. Rosheda sought in vain for an amulet powerful enough to meet the case. And Hamida lost no chance of impressing on her that the only hope of cure was to give her up the child. And this idea of adoption, common enough as it is in the East, seemed more cruel to Rosheda than death itself. Soon however there came another factor into play. Rosheda's parents arranged a very satisfactory match for her with a rich and elderly widower in a neighbouring village. He already had three sons, so though he wanted the pretty seventeen-year-old widow for his wife he did not want her child, and it seemed an easy solution of all difficulties for her to give up the boy to Hamida. But Rosheda with unusual obstinacy held out against all their prayers and threats until she realized that all other methods of saving his life seemed futile. The baby wilted visibly in the heat and no charm nor amulet nor any medicine the doctor gave her could avail.

There remained only the supreme amulet of her love and her sacrifice and that Rosheda now gave her child.

She told her parents to arrange the necessary witnesses and joyfully Hamida came in haste to take possession. In the presence of half the village women she formally adopted him slipping him under her *galabieh* against her starving heart.

"Born again, he is mine," said Hamida, "he shall be called Mahmoud Hosein after his new father."

Scornfully she cast aside the clothes Rosheda had made for him, and the amulets her love had provided. Naked and weeping she bore him out, wrapped in her veil, while Rosheda in the inner room bit her hair and her hands in an effort to hush her cries lest her rival should hear and be glad. The stifling day died. The heat was tempered by a fitful breeze. In the tender light of a young new moon Rosheda crept out of her house, over the low mud wall of the courtyard to the valley behind. A delicate tracery of palms stood black against a sky as pale as milk, and the olive trees gathered together about her as if to hide her agony from the too inquisitive moon. By swinging herself into the branches of a giant lebbak tree she could peer down into Hamida's garden. Rank grass and the coarse, pale flowers of the *bdingan* rioted there. High stalks of silvery-bearded grasses swayed in the wind. Framed in the black outline of the house the open doorway stood out as if cut from gold paper, and Hamida, the One-Eyed, Hamida, the Childless One, sat there full in the light with a little, crowing, naked baby on her lap. She stooped and cuddled his soft yellow body, his little feet, his laughing black-lashed eyes. She rubbed him with oil and herbs, massaging him with cunning touch. Already he seemed brighter and better, turning to her, the stranger, for comfort in his loneliness.

In the moonlight and the silence, Rosheda listened while her enemy lulled her child to sleep. Another home was to be hers. Other children maybe would lie within her arms. Yet always her soul would be there, out in the dusty roadway of life—alone.

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