

Ba,
Guardian
of the Dead

BURTON CRANE

THE MUMMY sat bolt upright on the operating table and cursed bitterly in ancient Coptic.

"Damn your blundering fingers!" she snarled. "By Thoth! Rats shall gnaw your vitals while your loved ones watch and weep!"

Marsden stepped back, the syringe in his hand.

Jean screamed, a half-choked, frantic little sound.

I laughed, nervously. I sounded to myself as if I were scared to death. I was. Unless you've been in the old workshop of our museum's Egyptian wing, I'm afraid I can't give you a decent picture of the scene, but try to visualize the three of us in a sharp cone of light over a regulation hospital operating table, gathered to unwrap a mummy. We had been curious because this mummy, newly arrived from Egypt, had seemed unusually heavy.

Michael Marsden is our curator, a big rough-hewn guy who looks more like a retired pugilist than an authority on archaeology. Huge hands and feet, a rat's nest of yellow hair, a bent nose, souvenir of a vicious battle with an Arab thief at the Tell Nebireh excavation. I'd say he was about 35.

I'm only the assistant curator, a bit younger.

Jean is our No. 3, a tall, long-legged female with a tawny mane, a spring-steel body and an incurable drunkard's thirst for life. For a time, while Marsden was still in Yucatan at the Mayan diggings, she was mine. There's a couch in the corner of the workshop, despite the building code, for those who have to work late. Jean and I worked late. Then Marsden came back and she wasn't mine any more. Marsden did the late working.

One thing about Jean: Her dad, an Egyptologist, held nobody could actually learn a dead language. He taught her ancient Coptic, which is absurdly simple, a sort of stylized baby talk, as if it were a living tongue. Handy for the work she was in.

For a full minute the mummy sat there, cursing. I didn't get much of it, merely an occasional reference to tortures which sounded as if they might be painful.

Marsden's voice was shaky but he tried to put a laugh into it. "Calm down, baby," he said. "We're doing the best we can."

Jean spoke in Coptic, soothingly. The cursing stopped.

We worked with blunt scissors, cutting away the crisp wrappings. What we uncovered was obviously a woman, crusted with dead skin and unkempt, straggly black hair, with a silk dress hanging to her in rotten strips. Only her eyes seemed alive. She didn't move.

"Rub her arms and legs," said Marsden. "Get her circulating going." The mummy groaned and I heard her gritting her teeth as the blood pumped back into

disused veins but finally she was able to move toes and fingers. Marsden and I carried her to the women's washroom and left her with Joan.

"Poe certainly did some good guessing," said Marsden.

I didn't get it and said so.

He went on: "Don't you remember that kidding yarn about a method of embalming which suspended animation, so that an Egyptian historian might return to life every couple of hundred years to check up on the records? Poe thought he was joking. Apparently he wasn't."

"You think this is genuine?"

"What else can it be? The girl speaks ancient Coptic." For the first time he grew really excited. "God! Think of the possibilities! Think of the possibilities! Think how many gaps in our knowledge we're going to be able to fill!"

Joan came back from the washroom, as excited as Marsden.

"Listen," I said, still the doubter, "is that really Coptic, good Coptic?"

"It's a hell of a lot better than mine," said Joan.

"But how can you understand it at all? We've had to guess at so many pronunciations. Take Thothismos. For all we know, that was pronounced Thotmosis or Tutmosis."

"Some of it I don't get and have to ask her to repeat," said Joan. "It's like an Italian trying to understand a Spaniard. Some of it she wrote for me, and that was the most amazing part of all. She says she's been asleep for three thousand four hundred years--and is Makara."

"Makara!" exclaimed Marsden. "Makara? Cut it out, Joan. This is no time for nonsense."

"Nothing of the kind. That's what she claims. I believe her."

Makara was the birth-name of Queen Hatasu, who lived about 1500 B.C. She was ruler or co-ruler in the reigns of Thotmes I, II and III, spending seventeen years on the throne, starting when she was just a kid. Although she was the greatest woman in Egyptian history until Cleopatra, she dropped completely out of sight and her tomb has never been discovered.

"Look," said Marsden. "Thotmes III erased her name from every monument he could find. Did she tell you why?"

"Yes, I asked her. It was because she never died and accordingly couldn't be treated with the respect due the dead. She'd decided to go in for the new embalming method and wake up a couple of hundred years later."

"What happened after that?"

"You know more about it than she does. Apparently neglect or politics or something prevented her being brought to life again. She slept on and on until you stuck her with the syringe."

Marsden shrugged. "I don't blame them for letting her sleep," he said. "Suspended animation certainly didn't do anything for her beauty. She's a wreck."

Joan looked at him with a funny smile. Then she went to her locker, pulled out an armful of clothes and a box of cosmetics and disappeared down the hall.

"Clothes," mused Marsden. "That brings up a question. What do you do with a queen of ancient Egypt when she drops into your lap? Can she get a job from the United States Employment Service?"

"Maybe she can sell her reminiscences to some Sunday supplement," I said.

"People I have tortured to death and how they died." That would be a good one. Or, "How I'd solve the American labor problem."

Nervously, not making much sense, we stood there talking. It was like waiting around while the workmen are breaking down the last door into the inner funerary chamber, the one which didn't get touched, by some miracle.

Then we heard steps in the hall and turned.

Makara came in first. Apparently she hadn't thought much of American fashions, for she was wearing only the skirt of Joan's outfit, with a broad red sash about her waist, below her breasts. Her hair had been cut in a long bob, with the ends turned in.

Scraped off and given a touch of rouge, she was the most thrillingly beautiful woman I had ever seen. Her skin was a living olive, with a warm blush beneath it. Her nose was patrician, faintly arched, and her eyes were deep and liquid, almost black. Her mouth looked like crushed roses, with that slackness about the corners that you generally find in women too passionate for normal living.

"Men," she said, and I could understand her easily, "are bigger and stronger than they were in my day. That is good."

We sent out for some food and got down to business. While she ate, we questioned her, making complete notes. She remembered the exact formula of the drug which had suspended animation. It's here in my papers somewhere.....No, I can't find it. Later, if you're still interested, I'll try to dig it up.

"We experimented first on slaves," she said. "We used a device such as that"—she indicated the syringe—"and put them to sleep for varying periods, starting with a week and gradually rising to ten years. We discovered that the length of the sleep was in direct proportion to the size of the dose."

"How did you happen to submit yourself to it?" I asked.

She smiled. "I was married to my brother, the third Tutmosis, which was not very satisfactory. I had just killed my three lovers because they no longer amused me. I believed that some future age might produce more entertaining times—and men." She looked me square in the eyes. "I see that I was right!"

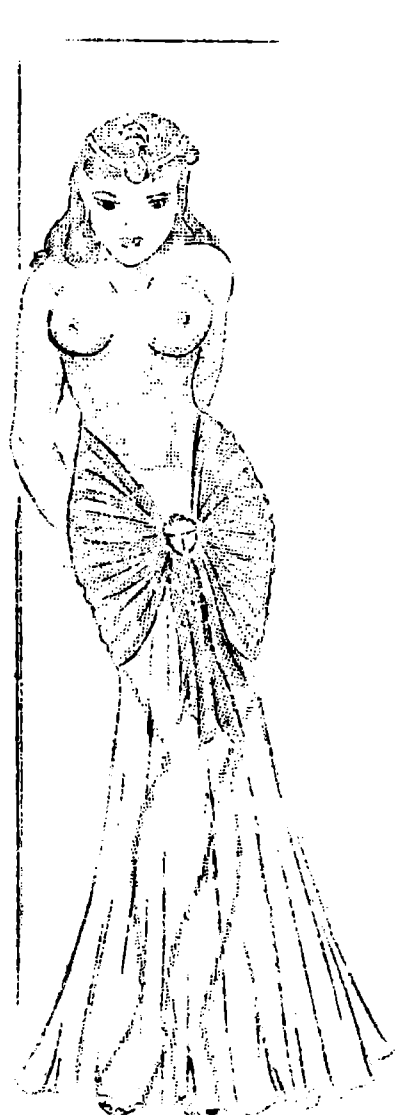
As she talked, I found myself better and better able to follow her. I had always been good at Coptic and had been in the habit of using it off and on for conversations with Joan. Soon, almost without thinking, I found myself asking questions, not depending on translation. Makara told us much that we did not know about the politics of that period, cleared up one or two doubtful points about the succession to the Egyptian Throne—and did it all as if she were talking about the events of yesterday. For her, it was yesterday. She had awakened as if from an overnight sleep.

Makara yawned. It was midnight.

"Time to call a halt for tonight," said Marsden. "Makara had better go back with me to my apartment. I can put her up easily." He tried to say it casually.

Joan was just as casual in her reply. "Oh, no, dear! Your place is much too far and Makara isn't dressed for our American winter. I'll go home with you and Makara can go with Billy. His apartment is only just across the street. And besides, Billy understands her language much better than you do."

There it was. Joan had thrown down the challenge. Marsden was here and she wasn't giving him up. Marsden hesitated for a long moment. His eyes on Makara were greedy. I know that I should have stepped in at that moment with the suggestion that Joan and Makara take my apartment, while I went home with Marsden, but damn it, what would you have done in my place? Makara had thrown herself down on the couch with her



arms behind her head. I think she must have sensed what we were discussing, for her amused eyes went from Marsden to me, calculating, estimating, appraising.

Finally Marsden shrugged his shoulders. "All right," he said, "let's do it that way." His eyes on me were hot. "But be careful, Billy," he said.

"I'll be very careful. Don't worry." I put my overcoat around Makara and my galoshes on her bare feet. Joan let us out the side door of the museum and I carried the Egyptian queen across the street to my apartment.

The desk clerk hardly looked up when we went in. "Not too much noise this time, please, Mr. French," he said. "We've had complaints."

"We'll be very, very quiet," I promised.

I had to show Makara how to work the shower.



For two weeks she stayed with me. Rather than attract attention at the museum, we all worked in my rooms, questioning Makara and taking copious notes. She knew her history, and although her knowledge of the common people of her time was confined to how they might be killed most amusingly, she was an encyclopedia on the court and the priesthood. I can let you have a copy of my monograph on her revelations before you go. The illustrated chapters on the rites and arts of love were made possible.... But I must get on with my story!

After two weeks of intense research into the life and knowledge of ancient Egypt, Makara left me. I had gone out to buy her some lengths of scarlet silk and a broad golden girdle--for she still fancied the ancient style of dressing, with bare bosom, when in my apartment. When I returned I found Joan, weeping. She clung to me.

"She's gone off with Marsden," she said. "I tried to stop them but neither one would listen to reason. What can we do, Billy? I can't let him go like this. I love him so! What can we do?"

I didn't like it, either.

Neither Marsden nor Makara turned up at the museum or at my place for the next several days and Central said that his phone had been disconnected. Joan tried to get in several times but he didn't answer the doorbell. We went back to work at the museum and gradually, because we were so often alone together, something of our old-time intimacy was restored. Joan was not Makara, of course, but Makara had taught me much and Joan was an eager pupil.

And then Joan had her idea. For days I had suspected that something was up, because she went singing about her work and was much more than usually companionable in her hours with me. Finally she showed me. It was a small bottle of a yellowish-green liquid.

"It's the formula, Billy," she said. "I had it made up. Now, look! We'll go up there about dawn tomorrow and put them both to sleep. Not kill them, of course, but merely suspend animation for a time."

"About ten years?" I asked.

"No. Of course not! I don't want them around enjoying life and youth when I'm too old for it. Eighty years! I have a key to Marsden's apartment. I can get in without making any noise. Are you with me?"

"You bet! I'll get a couple of flashlights."

It worked just as Joan had planned it. The key turned in the lock, soundlessly. We slipped inside, each holding in one hand a small flashlight and in the other a syringe with just enough of the liquid to suspend animation for about eighty years. Silently, in rubber-soled shoes, we tip-toed into the bedroom.

Makara and Marsden were there, all right. A street-light outside showed them clearly, in attitudes of complete exhaustion, sprawled across the bed.

Joan went first. She knelt at Marsden's side, inserted the needle of the syringe in his arm and pressed the plunger. He jerked spasmodically but never woke up.

Then I went forward.

Well, sir, that's the story. And that's how it happens that a former curator of this museum and a very beautiful woman are among our prize exhibits. We keep them here in the new workshop, of course, and only show them to connoisseurs, such as you. Would you like to see them? They're in the standing mummy cases, over there in the corner, and there they'll remain until about 2026 AD, when Michael Marsden should be ready to resume his old job here.

There! Aren't they a handsome couple? One thing about suspended animation is that the hair seems to keep right on growing for a while. And do you know, I never suspected for a moment that Joan bleached and dyed her hair?

Yes, that's Joan. I wasn't going to let her double-cross me again. When she straightened up from dealing with Marsden, I simply jabbed her with the needle and pressed the plunger home.

Makara? Yes, of course she came back to me and I was able to finish my monograph, but she only stayed for a month or two. The last I heard of her, she'd married a Brooklyn subway contractor named William T. Phillips and had a child named Aloysius Tutankhamen Phillips.

I'm afraid those ancient women weren't very dependable.
