

Then the priests came forward, and slowly and solemnly, amid the profoundest silence, performed the sacred rites.

As the last words fell from the lips of the priest, a strange thing happened. Suddenly a mighty shout of fear went up from the spectators. The king himself, startled by the tumult, forgot his dignity and stood up on his chair that he might see the better. And as he looked, his face paled as the moon before the rising sun, and a great wave of fear swept over him, causing his knees to tremble beneath his weight. For below him the people were falling back in terror to make way for a huge leopard which came trotting toward him.

A sudden silence fell upon the crowd, and all eyes turned toward the royal party, expecting to see a horrible tragedy enacted before them. But they were destined to be disappointed.

Straight to the feet of the terror-stricken queen strode the lithe animal; and then, wonder of wonders, it crouched before her and gently licked her hand. Then, as quickly as it had come, it turned and trotted away toward the desert, while none dared to lift a hand to destroy it.

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Not many days thereafter, a sad event occurred to mar the happiness of the newly-wedded princess. Her father, morose and senile, died suddenly at his noon-day meal. Of course the ruling of the kingdom fell upon Meneptah. But from the very hour of his accession to power, Mercade noticed a strange change in his manner towards her. He became cross and surly, and even cruel to her. Oft times he would curse her in his rage. Yet, woman-like, she attributed it all to the many worries of his duties as king, and continued to love him as blindly as ever.

But soon there came a rude awakening. It was growing dark in the little city of Khabad, the capital of the empire. In the east a full moon was just rising. Mercade and Meneptah sat together in the gathering dusk and watched the silvery orb. To Mercade it seemed the friendly eye of Kaloumis kindly beaming down upon her. Strangely enough, Meneptah also saw in it the eye of Kaloumis, but in the slightly reddish tinge he thought he detected an omen of vengeance about to fall and his conscience sorely troubled him.

"Why art thou so silent, my lord?" asked Mercade, in a tone of anxiety. "Come with me," she said, touching him gently on the arm. "Let us walk out upon the desert. Mayhap I can charm away thy ill-humor."