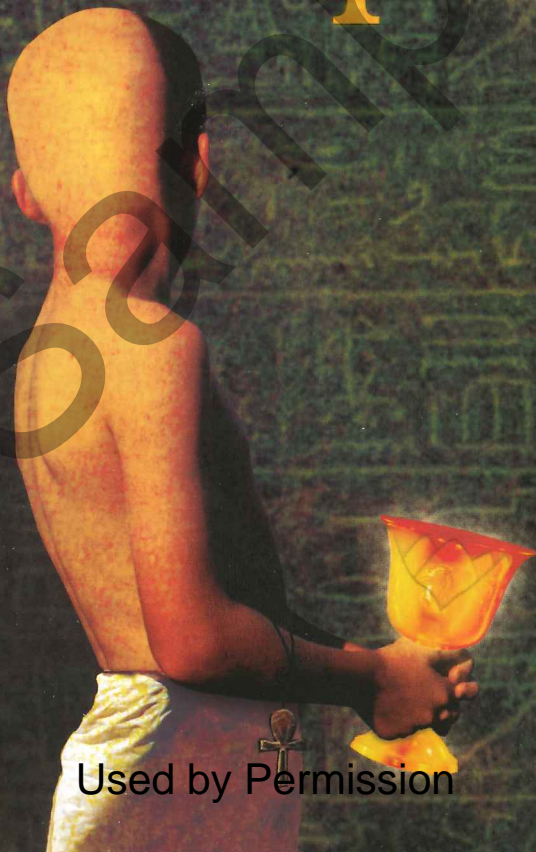


Eloise Jarvis McGraw

The Golden Goblet



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Goblet

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Chapter I

THE stream of molten gold flowed smoothly from the crucible, reflecting in its surface the cloudless blue of the Egyptian sky. The boy Ranofer slowly tightened his grip on the two stones between which he held the crucible as he tilted it farther and farther, devotion in every careful movement of his hands and bare brown shoulders. Presently the last drop of flame-colored liquid had run without splash or bubble into the hollowed stone.

With a sigh of satisfaction the boy set stones and crucible aside, and wiped the sweat from his hands upon his cotton kilt. It was a good ingot; the goldsmith would be able to find no fault with it. Already the metal was setting, the brilliant red-yellow fading to scarlet, then to cherry. In half a minute it could be turned out and the mold oiled for the next pouring.

Dreamily Ranofer watched the colors dull. Splendid images drifted through his mind, golden forms and shapes, any one of which might be the destiny of this very small ingot that he, Ranofer the son of Thutra, had poured. It might become part of a wide and glittering collar, or the inlay on a fine dagger for some nobleman's tomb—or

better, a cup fit for Pharaoh himself, shaped like a flower and hammered to fragile thinness.

Well, perhaps not the cup, Ranofer admitted to himself after a little reflection.

It was only a small ingot, after all. Besides, such a cup as he had pictured could never come from this particular goldhouse. No one here had the skill to fashion it, not even Rekh the goldsmith himself. Only Zau, the greatest gold-worker in all Thebes, could make such a cup. Zau the Master could make anything. From his artist's fingers sprang objects of such wonderful beauty—cups, bowls, boxes, necklaces, daggers, great golden collars, bracelets, exquisite amulets—that Pharaoh himself would be served by no other smith.

To think I might have been his pupil someday, if my father had lived, Ranofer thought. He all but said he would accept me. *Ai!* If my father had not died! If I had never had to go and live with Gebu! If I had never even heard of Gebu!

The unwelcome picture of Gebu's face broke through Ranofer's preoccupation, scattering his daydreams and rousing him to present reality, in which Zau the Master had no place. He was aware again of voices, of the clang of tools around him in the mud-walled courtyard, and the sharp, hot odor of metal mingling with the soft afternoon breeze off the Nile. It was the month of Hathor in the Season of Growing, and the air was cool despite the heat from the hooded furnaces that lined the courtyard. Even Lord Ra, the sun, did not scorch and burn in this pleasant wintertime, but shed his radiant light beneficently upon the brown backs of the men bent to their work, striking blue gleams from their ink-black hair and snowy kilts,

glancing with blinding intensity off gold ingots and gold wire coils and the scraps and bits of gold that littered the low worktables. Instead of an answering sense of peace Ranofer felt only the sore and familiar longing for other days, when he could have rejoiced in a gentle sun and work he loved—when both his father Thutra and Zau the Master were a part of his life, a large part, and his half brother Gebu the stonemason no part at all.

Do not ruin the day by thinking of Gebu! the boy told himself. Do you not see enough of him and his heavy hand at home? That ingot has set, and here you stand idle.

He turned the ingot out and tried to lose himself again in his tasks; but the thought of Gebu, like the ache of a tooth, was hard to lose. Besides, his tasks were those of a hireling; no matter how expertly he did them, he could not hope to progress to anything better, as even the most stupid apprentice did. No matter what illustrious futures he imagined for the ingots he poured, his own future remained the same—pouring more ingots, making charcoal, sweeping off the jewelers' benches—while others engraved the daggers and hammered the cups. All because of Gebu.

Why can I not be apprenticed? Ranofer asked himself for the hundredth time. Because Gebu does not wish it! But why does he not wish it, the pig, the son of Set the Devil? Why must he place me here in the goldhouse if I am never to learn anything?

No matter—it was useless to try to fathom the ways of that Accursed One. His reasons were his own, and to protest brought only beatings, as Ranofer had found out long ago. Here he was and here he would stay until Gebu ordered otherwise.

Ranofer picked up the ingot, which was now cool

enough to handle, and carried it to the nearby workbench on which the drawplate stood. It was a circular slab of stone, held upright in a vise and pierced with a ring of holes of diminishing sizes. One of the apprentices stood there drawing wire, his shoulder muscles bunched with the effort of pulling a greased, reed-slim ingot through a hole just too small for it. It would be slimmer yet when it had passed through the hole. Then it would be passed through the one just smaller, and so through every hole in turn, growing longer and slimmer all the time, until it changed from an ingot into wire. On the bench beside the apprentice lay a coil of wire, finished and ready for its last annealing. Beside the coil lay a row of three thin ingots waiting to be drawn. Ranofer added his own, the thinnest of all. Perhaps by evening it would be wire, rounded and tempered, ready to fashion into a linked collar for some lovely lady's neck. Somewhat comforted by the thought, he returned to oil his empty mold.

Too late he saw a familiar hunched figure emerging from the rear door of the shop, directly next the pouring table. It was Ibni the Babylonian porter, already bobbing and grinning at sight of Ranofer. Wishing Rekh the goldsmith would suddenly send him on an errand to the other side of Thebes, Ranofer turned his back on the man and reached for the oil jar. Ibni only edged closer, ducked his head even farther between his shoulders, and scrubbed his hands together ingratiatingly.

"Ah, greeting! And how is little Ranofer today?" he asked. His voice was like the sound of a badly made flute, and sibilant with his Babylonian accent.

"I am well enough," Ranofer mumbled.

"Indeed! This worthless one rejoices that it is so. And

what of my revered friend, your half brother and protector, Gebu the stonecutter? Is he also well?"

"Aye." Ranofer smeared oil into the mold, keeping his frowning gaze directly on his work. He could not have said why his dislike of Ibni was so intense. The man's servility disgusted him, and so did his cheese-white hands with their dirty nails, and the stained teeth he revealed in his constant grin. But it was more than that; there was something slimily questionable about the Babylonian that always sent prickles up Ranofer's spine. Why Gebu permitted his occasional visits to their house was a mystery Ranofer had never cared to probe into. Gebu and Ibni were certainly not friends. They were more like master and dog.

"And the honored Gebu, did he enjoy my little gift of date wine last week? Did he find it as tasty as ever, young Ranofer?"

"He did not say otherwise."

"What did he say, little one? Did he speak not at all when you handed the wineskin to him? For indeed you *did* hand it to him, did you not, in his own hand, as you have done before?"

"Aye, in his own hand, exactly as I have always done!" Ranofer threw an impatient glance at Ibni and encountered the sharp glint he had often surprised in the other's usually vacant eyes. It vanished instantly, and the Babylonian's smile spread wider than ever. Ranofer's distrust deepened accordingly. What does he want, the sneaking serpent? thought the boy. Aloud he said, "How can I remember what he said, now, nine days later?"

"Ah, well, it is of no matter. Doubtless my poor gift is not worthy of comment, though he honored me by en-

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Ranofer wants only one thing in the world: to be a master goldsmith like his beloved father was. But how can he when he is all but imprisoned by his evil half brother, Gebu? Ranofer knows the only way he can escape Gebu's abuse is by changing his destiny. But can a poor boy with no skills survive on the cutthroat streets of ancient Thebes?

Then Ranofer finds a priceless golden goblet in Gebu's room and he knows his luck—and his destiny—are about to change....



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