



## The anger of Ra

On the walls of royal tombs and on the golden shrine that protected the mummy of Tutankhamon, was inscribed 'The Book of the Divine Cow', a book which told the story of how the anger of the Sun God nearly destroyed mankind . . .

Ra was old and his bones were like silver, his skin like burnished gold and his hair like lapis-lazuli. When the people of Egypt saw how old and frail their king had become they murmured against him and the murmurs grew into plots to seize the throne of Ra. The plotters met in secret on the edge of the desert and thought themselves safe but as the Sun God watched over Egypt he saw the traitors and listened to their plotting.

Ra was so sad that he longed to sink back into the watery abyss but he was also more angry than he had ever been before. He spoke to the followers who stood about his throne: 'Summon my daughter, the Eye of Ra; send for mighty Shu and Tefenet; bring their children Geb and Nut; fetch the dark Ogdoad, the Eight who were with me in the watery abyss; raise Nun himself! But let them all come here secretly. If the traitors hear that I have summoned a council of the gods they will guess that they have been discovered and try to escape their punishment.'

The followers of Ra hurried to obey him. The message was taken to the great gods and goddesses and one by one they slipped into the palace. Bowing before the throne of Ra, they begged to know why they had been summoned with such haste and secrecy. Then the King of the Gods spoke to Nun, the Lord of the watery abyss and to the other deities: 'O oldest of living things and all you primeval gods, I wept and men sprang up from my tears. I gave them life but now they are tired of my rule and they plot against me. Tell me, what should I do to them? I will not destroy the children of my tears until I have heard your wise advice.'

Watery Nun spoke first. 'My son, you are older than your father, greater than the god who created you. May you rule forever! Both gods and men fear the terrible power of the Eye of the Sun; send it against the rebels.'

Ra looked out over Egypt and said, 'The plotters have already fled deep into the desert. They are afraid that I will learn about their plans

and punish them. How shall I pursue them?’

Then all the gods cried out with one voice: ‘Send the Eye of Ra to catch them! Send the Eye of the Sun to slaughter them! All of mankind is guilty, let the Eye go down as Hathor and destroy the children of your tears. Let not one remain alive.’

Hathor, the Eye of the Sun, most beautiful and terrible of goddesses, bowed before the throne and Ra nodded his head. Hathor went down into the desert, raging like a lioness. The plotters scattered this way and that but none of them escaped her. She siezed them and slaughtered them and drank their blood. Then merciless Hathor left the desert and raged through villages and towns, killing every man, woman and child she could find. Ra heard the prayers and screams of the dying and began to feel sorry for the children of his tears, but he remained silent.

When it was dark, Hathor returned triumphantly to her father. ‘Welcome in peace,’ said Ra. He tried to calm the fury of his daughter but Hathor had tasted the blood of men and found it sweet. She was eager for the morning when she could return to Egypt and complete the slaughter of mankind to avenge their treachery. Soon the power of Ra would be unquestioned, but he would have no subjects to rule.

The Sun God wondered how he could save the rest of mankind from his terrible daughter without going back on his royal word. Soon he had thought of a plan. Ra ordered his followers to run, swifter than shadows, to the city of Abu and bring back all the ochre they could find there. As soon as they had returned with baskets full of red soil he sent them out again to fetch the High Priest of Ra from Heliopolis and all the slave-girls who worked in his temple. Ra ordered the High Priest to pound the ochre to make a red dye and set the slave-girls to brewing beer. The High Priest pounded until his arms ached and the slave-girls worked desperately all through the night to brew seven thousand jars of beer. Just before dawn the red dye was mixed with the beer until it looked like fresh blood. The King of the Gods smiled. ‘With this sleeping potion I can save mankind from my daughter,’

he said. ‘The people have suffered enough.’

Then Ra had the jars carried to the place where Hathor would begin her killing and ordered the beer to be poured out to flood the fields with crimson.

As soon as it was light, Hathor came down into Egypt to sniff out and slaughter the few who were left alive. The first thing she saw was a great pool of blood. The goddess waded into it and was enchanted by her own reflection in the crimson surface. She stooped to lap up the blood and liked it so much that she drank the pool dry.

The beer was strong and the goddess soon became very happy. Her head whirled and she could not remember why she had been sent down to Egypt. Pleasantly drowsy, Hathor made her unsteady way back to the palace of Ra and sank down at her father’s feet to sleep for many days.

‘Welcome, gentle Hathor,’ said Ra gravely. ‘Mankind shall remember their escape from your fury by drinking strong beer at all your festivals.’ The men and women who were left did remember and always afterwards Hathor was known as The Lady of Drunkenness. At her festivals the people of Egypt could get as drunk as they liked in honour of the goddess and nobody would blame them.

But Ra was still angry and sad about the rebellion of mankind. Nothing could be the same as it had been in the golden age before their treachery. When Hathor finally woke, she felt as she had never felt before and Ra said, ‘Does your head ache? Do your cheeks burn? Do you feel ill?’ As he spoke, illness first came into being in Egypt.

Then Ra summoned a second council of the gods and said, ‘My heart is too sad and weary for me to remain as King in Egypt. I am weak and old, let me sink back into the watery abyss until it is time for me to be born again.’

Nun said quickly, ‘Shu, protect your father, Nut carry him on your back.’ ‘How can I carry the mighty King of the Gods?’ asked gentle Nut, and Nun told her to turn herself into a cow. Then Nut was transformed into a huge cow with golden flanks and long curved horns. Ra mounted the Divine Cow and rode away from Egypt.