



By VIRNA SHEARD

*It was the Angel Azrael the Lord God sent below
At midnight, into every house in Egypt, long ago—
O long, and long ago.*

All day the wife of Pharaoh had paced the palace hall
Or the long white pillared court that was open to the sky,
A passion of wild restlessness ensnared her in its thrall
While she fought a fear within her,—a thing that would not die.

The mighty gods had failed her,—the river-gods and the sun,
And the little gods of brass and stone,—who stared but made no
sign,
So she pled with them no longer, her prayers were said and done,
And now she neither bowed her head, or knelt at any shrine.

Her hair was blown upon the wind like wreathes of golden flame,
And the sea-blue of her eyes cast blue shadows on her face,
For she was not of Egypt,—but unto the King she came
A captive—yet a princess—from a northern sea-bound place.

She had sent away her maidens, their weeping vexed her ears;
Their pallid faces filled her with impatient pitying scorn;—
But she kept one time-worn woman, who long had outgrown fears,
The old brown nurse who held her son the day that he was born.

She watched the fiery wheel roll down behind the level land,
One small hand curled above her eyes, and one above her heart,
But when the ruby afterglow crept up and stained the sand
Turned she and gazed toward Goshen, where Israel dwelt apart.



Nine plagues had wasted Egypt with their tortures grim and slow;
The earth was desolated, and scarred by hail and fire;
Still even yet her Lord refused to let his bondsmen go
To worship in the wilderness, the God of their desire.

The yellow Nile had turned to blood before her watching eyes,—
It was branded into memory—a haunting death-strewn sight;—
The very dust upon the street the rod had made to rise
In a living moving horror, of atoms leprous-white.

The frogs had come as things bewitched; an army without fear
They had broken through the rushes their upward way to take;
And each one followed steadily a voice no man could hear,—
While poisoned wind and pestilence came swiftly in their wake.

Then oh, the little flies that swarmed from out the earth and air!
And the murrain of the camels, and cattle in the field!
She prayed the King for love of her to hear the people's prayer
And send the slaves far hither;—but for love he would not yield.

His face was like the carven face upon the basalt door;—
Her beauty could not charm him, her voice had lost its power;
So she wrapped a veil about her and entreated him no more
But sat alone and watched, from out her window in the tower.

She saw the Hebrew leader with uncovered silvery hair
Come with the priest at daybreak to the outer palace gate,
And the rod of woe and wonder they carried with them there,
Yet Pharaoh bid them enter,—for he dared not bid them wait.

But naught prevailed, for sore disease had scourged the low and high,
And the hail of God had fallen and crushed the growing grain,
And a fire no hand had kindled in searing wrath swept by,—
Such fire as none had seen before—as none would see again.

Then came the pirate locusts, with a sea-song free and bold;—
The spent and broken people lacked the strength to force them
back,
But watched them take the last green blades that never would be
gold,—
And shut their doors against the foe that turned the meadows
black.

Then Pharaoh wavered—more—he called the Hebrews in his haste
Imploring respite,—pleading his repentance bitterly,—
For there was death on every side, and all the land was waste;—
So the western wind of God blew the locusts out to sea.

Yet not enough. Once more the King denied his given word;
He dared the wrath of Heaven, and he made his heart as steel;
Then all the lights of God went out, and no man even stirred,—
But stayed companioned by his fear, in darkness he could feel.

So had each dreadful day gone by, each slow departing night,
And the queen stood now at sunset alone with grief and shame,
When one came running towards her through the failing crimson
light,
A little lad, with Egypt's eyes—but hair like golden flame.

"Thou hast been long, Beloved!" she cried, and frowned all tenderly,
"Indeed I have not seen thee since the burning noon took wing."
"Mother of mine," he answered, "I have been where I should be
These burdened times of Egypt,—beside my Lord the King."

"'Twill take the country many days to gain its old time peace,
But thou shalt suffer nothing;—I, myself, will care for thee
And see that naught doth harm thee—until all these troubles cease;—
These sad and magic doings that no man can solve," said he.

"Ay! That thou wilt," she said. "But tell me, how doth fare the
King?"

Doth he relent? Or is his face forbidding—dark and cold?—
Or hath he sent thee hither but some word of me to bring
As he cannot leave the council, and now the day grows old?"

He shook his head. "I came because I longed to see thee so;—
And Pharaoh reads the chart of stars while time goes creeping by;
Or he sits in weary silence—or paceth to and fro.
Since he banished the magicians, all fear him—all save I."

