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AKHNATON

by Agatha Christie

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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CHARACTERS

FIRST WOMAN

FIRST MAN

SECOND WOMAN

SECOND MAN

OLD WOMAN

THE HIGH PRIEST OF AMON

ENVOY - to the king of Mitanni

HOREMHEB

A HERALD

QUEEN TYI - queen to Pharaoh Amenhotep III

AKHNATON - Pharaoh Amenhotep IV

ROYAL SCRIBE

NUBIAN SERVANT

AY - a priest of Aton

NEFERTITI - queen to Akhnaton

NEZZEMUT - Nefertiti's sister

PARA - an Ethiopian dwarf

BEK - chief sculptor and architect

PTAHMOSE - a young priest of Amon

TUTANKHATON - afterwards called Tutankhamun

CAPTAIN OF SOLDIERS

SOLDIERS

ATTENDANTS

YOUNG ARTISTS

TRIBUTARIES

FIRST STONEMASON

SECOND STONEMASON

PEASANTS

SETTING

ACT I

Scene One: The great courtyard of the royal palace of Amenhotep III in the city of No-Amon.

Scene Two: A room in the palace.

Scene Three: The bank of the Nile three hundred miles below Thebes.

ACT II

Scene One: A bank of the Nile in the city of No-Amon.

Scene Two: The king's pavilion in the City of the Horizon.

Scene Three: Horemheb's apartments in the City of the Horizon.

ACT III

Scene One: The king's pavilion.

Scene Two: A street in the city of No-Amon.

Scene Three: A room in the high priest's home.

Scene Four: A room in the palace of the City of the Horizon.

TIME

ACT I

Scene One: Thebes

Scene Two: Three years later

Scene Three: One month later

ACT II

Scene One: Eight years later

Scene Two: Six months later

Scene Three: One year later

ACT III

Scene One: Three years later

Scene Two: Six months later

Scene Three: The same day

Scene Four: One month later

AUTHOR'S NOTES

Akhnaton reigned in Egypt from 1375 to 1358 BCE.

Agatha Christie LTD has great faith in the ingenuity of companies to devise means of reducing the very large cast of *AKHNATON* in order to make it possible to perform.

It is advised that the large number of supporting roles and supernumeraries be collated and played by a small ensemble of actors.

There are some suggestions below however all doubling options should be approved by ACL before performance. NOTE: It is advised that caution is exercised when doubling **PTAHMOSE**, the young priest of Amon in case audiences think it is 'plot' which of course it is not.

HERALD may double with **NUBIAN SERVANT**

FIRST MAN may double with **FIRST STONEMASON**

SECOND MAN may double with **SECOND STONEMASON**

ROYAL SCRIBE may double with **CAPTAIN OF SOLDIERS**

AY may double with **BEK**

NEFERTITI may double with **FIRST WOMAN**

NEZZEMUT may double with **SECOND WOMAN**

QUEEN TYI may double with **OLD WOMAN**

TUTANKHATON may double with **ENVOY**

NOTES ON SENSITIVE TERMINOLOGY

Language used by the author in her stage directions and by her characters to describe religion, gender, sexuality, race and class is of the period in which the play was first performed. We are confident that the author's intention was to be neutral within the stage directions – not to convey anything other than the facts of the characteristics relevant to a character's portrayal. The dialogue, however, is the embodiment of the character speaking and must express his or her intentions at that point in the play. This means that the author will have chosen terminology to be spoken with varying degrees of precision, sensitivity and, possibly, deliberate insensitivity according to the character and the circumstances in which he or she is speaking.

In our published version, therefore, we have applied the following logic:

- In stage directions, we have used terminology which is as neutral and factual as can be conceived, knowing that this will sometimes still fail.
- In dialogue, we have preserved the author's words as originally written.

We license this play on the basis that terms used in dialogue relevant to the religion, gender, sexuality, race and class may be changed in production to whichever best convey the author's intention for the audience. Sometimes this will be a neutral term, sometimes it will be a term which reflects the character's personality and/or the context in which they are speaking. Which of these applies is for directors and actors to interpret.

ACT I

Scene One

(The forecourt of the palace of Amenhotep III, the city of No-Amon. The facade of the palace is painted with bright colours and adorned with flagstaves bearing tufts of parti-coloured pennants. There is a grand entrance leading into the palace, over which hangs a ceremonial balcony with columns and steps on one side leading down to the forecourt. There is also a small entrance to the lesser apartments and a grand set of steps leading to the street below. TWO SOLDIERS stand guard. A murmur of voices is heard from the street. They swell to excited shouts and cries as a crowd draws near. There is a commotion outside and some of the crowd are forced into the forecourt. They chatter eagerly, craning their necks to see.)

FIRST WOMAN. They are coming this way –

FIRST MAN. Who is it?

SECOND WOMAN. The foreigners. The Syrians.

FIRST WOMAN. How hideous they are!

FIRST MAN. Look at their hair! And their caps.

FIRST WOMAN. They *are* ugly! How disgusting foreigners are – so dirty looking!

FIRST MAN. Oh well, it takes all sorts to make a world, as they say.

SECOND MAN. What is it? What's happening?

FIRST WOMAN. (*Eagerly.*) They are bringing the goddess Ishtar to cure our king of his sickness.

FIRST MAN. Ishtar of Nineveh is very powerful.

OLD WOMAN. I've heard of miracles happening.

FIRST WOMAN. Who knows, her passing may bring me luck. I may bear a son.

CROWD. (*Offstage.*) Ishtar, Ishtar! Ishtar of Nineveh!

SOLDIER. Outside there, you.

(The TWO SOLDIERS clear the forecourt. The HIGH PRIEST of Amon, a tall commanding man of great dignity, appears in the main entrance. His head is closely shaven and he wears a linen robe. With him is HOREMHEB, a young officer. Taking in the scene, the HIGH PRIEST raises a hand with authority.)

HIGH PRIEST. Peace. What is this tumult?

SOLDIER. It is the embassy from Mitanni, your holiness.

HIGH PRIEST. Let them enter.

(An ENVOY enters from the street, followed by four others bearing a shrine of the goddess Ishtar of Nineveh.)

ENVOY. Greetings to you, my lord, and to your master, the great king of Egypt, from Dushratta, king of Mitanni. My master, Dushratta, is sick at heart to hear of the condition of his dear brother and son-in-law the Egyptian king, son of Ra, king and emperor. He sends therefore the statue of Ishtar that she, the miracle-working goddess, may exorcise the evil spirit which causes the king's infirmity, as she has done before.

HIGH PRIEST. The peace of Amon go with you. Enter and you shall be brought to the presence of the great queen, the royal wife.

ENVOY. I thank you.

(The HIGH PRIEST turns to the FIRST SOLDIER.)

HIGH PRIEST. Lead the noble servants of Dushratta to where food and drink is prepared for them.

(The ENVOY and his party follow the SOLDIER, exiting to the lesser apartments. The HIGH PRIEST turns to the second SOLDIER.)

Go acquaint the great queen with the news of the arrival of Ishtar.

(The SOLDIER bows his acknowledgment then exits into the palace. HOREMHEB, stands respectfully waiting for orders. He is very much a soldier, simple and straightforward.)

HOREMHEB. Holy Father?

HIGH PRIEST. What is your opinion concerning the Syrians, Horemheb?

HOREMHEB. They are marvellous riders. They ride so well they might be part of the horse. Some of them are good sportsmen, too.

HIGH PRIEST. Yes. Wild fellows, but not unlikeable.

HOREMHEB. *(Condescendingly.)* Of course they're absolute barbarians.

(There is a silence. The HIGH PRIEST is lost in thought.)

(Timidly.) Is it true, Holy Father, that this Ishtar of Nineveh has been sent once before to the great king?

HIGH PRIEST. That is so, my son.

HOREMHEB. And she effected a cure?

HIGH PRIEST. *(Indulgently.)* The Syrian barbarians think so.

HOREMHEB. These foreign gods and goddesses seem a very crude lot to me.

HIGH PRIEST. We who are steeped in the wisdom of Amon know that Ishtar of Nineveh is only another manifestation of our Egyptian goddess Hathor.

HOREMHEB. Is she? I'm afraid I'm very ignorant. There are so many things I don't know.

HIGH PRIEST. It is not necessary that you should. Egypt requires different gifts from her sons. Of her priests she requires wisdom and learning.

(He lays a hand on HOREMHEB's shoulder.)

Of her soldiers, a strong right arm.

HOREMHEB. *(Gloomily.)* My arm is little occupied, nor likely to be – Egypt has conquered the world. Throughout the empire there is peace.

HIGH PRIEST. And that does not suit you, my son?

HOREMHEB. One has to think of one's promotion.

HIGH PRIEST. There can only be peace where there is strength. Remember that, my son. We have a great empire, but we can only hold it by constant vigilance. The first sign of weakness and we should have trouble from these turbulent Syrians and their like.

HOREMHEB. They're good fighters, I'll say that for them.

HIGH PRIEST. *(Approvingly.)* That is well, my son. A wise conqueror is he who does not despise the conquered.

HOREMHEB. A fair fight and no ill feeling. It's all the fortune of war, that's what I say. And don't kick a man when he's down.

HIGH PRIEST. Such sentiments are what have made Egypt great. Never forget that we rule these people for their own good. Without our strong hand, they would destroy themselves in a hundred petty tribal fights.

HOREMHEB. They're hopelessly uncivilised, of course. Even the princes, who've been educated in Egypt, soon relapse into native customs when they get back. Do you not think, my lord, that sometimes...

(HOREMHEB hesitates.)

HIGH PRIEST. Speak, my son.

HOREMHEB. Well – it just occurred to me, you don't think that all this education is a mistake? One wonders sometimes if it's much use trying to civilise them. They might be – well – happier without it.

HIGH PRIEST. (*Sententiously.*) It is our aim to improve all the subject people under our care. The great empire of Amenhotep III must be one of culture and progress.

HOREMHEB. Yes sir, of course you're right.

(*He pauses.*)

You know, I don't see why our empire shouldn't be extended even further, beyond the land of the two rivers.

HIGH PRIEST. (*Sighing.*) You are young. You look forward with confidence.

HOREMHEB. Am I wrong?

HIGH PRIEST. I see the clouds gathering. The great king Amenhotep lies near to death. When he goes to Osiris, a woman will reign.

HOREMHEB. (*Respectfully.*) The great queen.

HIGH PRIEST. Queen Tyi is a great queen. She is the consort of the god, divine consort of Amon. She is the first queen who has not been of royal birth.

HOREMHEB. True.

HIGH PRIEST. Yuan, her father, was a wise and far-seeing noble. He had great power in the land. A less ambitious man might have been satisfied to see his daughter married to the pharaoh, but Yuan's daughter was not only a wife, she was proclaimed great queen, royal wife. She was associated with the king on public documents. That has never been done before.

HOREMHEB. That's true. These innovations are rather dangerous. I don't think I like them.

HIGH PRIEST. It is easier to pull down than to build up. To break with tradition is unwise.

HOREMHEB. (*Thoughtfully.*) Women. You never quite know where you are with women.

HIGH PRIEST. They can do much harm.

HOREMHEB. Still, my father, the queen will rule jointly with her son, the prince.

HIGH PRIEST. The young prince is sickly. He dreams dreams and sees visions. He is the beloved of Ra Harakte, who is the lord of visions. I fear that the prince will dream and not rule. The power will be always in the hands of his mother. It is already she who has ruled Egypt for the last six years.

HOREMHEB. When his highness grows to a man's estate –

HIGH PRIEST. (*Vexed.*) I do not know, he is so strange at times in his manner. He looks at me – at *me*, Meriptah, the high priest of Amon, as though – as though I was not there. He laughs sometimes for no reason, as though he saw some jest that no one else perceived. It may be that his mind is affected. (*Doubtfully.*) My son, these are very secret matters of which I speak. They must be kept behind closed lips.

HOREMHEB. Holy Father, you can trust me.

HIGH PRIEST. That I believe. You are young, and as yet unknown, but if you are faithful to Amon, you may go far. I believe in youth.

(*He smiles graciously at HOREMHEB.*)

Amon needs young blood, he needs soldiers as well as priests – and it has been told to me that you have the makings of a very pretty soldier.

HOREMHEB. (*Flushing.*) You are too kind, my lord. Rest assured, my loyalty to the crown and to Amon will not waver. When the great king goes to Osiris, I will fight for his highness the prince with the same enthusiasm.

HIGH PRIEST. I have spoken as I have because I believe that we have troubled days ahead. When Tyi rules –

HOREMHEB. (*Quickly.*) The empire will feel unrest, it will look for signs of weakness in us – but if it finds none, my father?

HIGH PRIEST. You speak as a soldier should speak.

HOREMHEB. What we have, we hold. There shall be no weakness.

(*A HERALD enters from the palace.*)

HERALD. The great queen, divine consort of Amon, royal wife of the great king, greets the messengers of the king of Mitanni.

*(The **HIGH PRIEST** exits quickly into the palace. The **ENVOY** and his party file in from the lesser apartments and stand to attention. **HOREMHEB** watches with interest. Finally with all due ceremony, **QUEEN TYI** appears on the balcony, richly dressed, **ATTENDANTS** with her. She is middle-aged, with a handsome and striking countenance. She is magnificently dressed and wears an elaborately dressed wig. Everyone prostrates in respect. The **HIGH PRIEST** enters onto the balcony and stands by her side. **AKHNATON**, her son, stands on the other. He is a fragile looking boy with intelligent eyes. By contrast to his mother, he is simply attired. He has a bird perched on his wrist to which he pays more attention than the proceedings around him.)*

QUEEN TYI. Greeting to the envoys of Dushratta, our brother of Mitanni. Approach. My son and I bid you welcome.

ENVOY. Greeting to the great queen, royal wife, divine consort of the god Amon. Thus says Dushratta, king of Mitanni, smiter of lions. Let Ishtar, the great goddess, once again exorcise the evil spirit which causes the sickness of his brother the great king of Egypt.

QUEEN TYI. The great king awaits the coming of Ishtar. Let the shrine of the goddess be brought into his presence.

*(The **HIGH PRIEST** raises his hand in ceremony.)*

HIGH PRIEST. In the name of Amon, welcome to the wonder-working goddess.

*(The **ENVOY** and his party exit into the palace. **QUEEN TYI** and the **HIGH PRIEST** follow, disappearing off the balcony. **AKHNATON** comes down the balcony steps to the forecourt.)*

HOREMHEB *stands to attention.* **AKHNATON**
notices him and approaches.)

HOREMHEB. Your highness.

AKHNATON. Who are you?

HOREMHEB. My name is Horemheb, highness. I came here with the high priest of Amon.

AKHNATON. You are a priest?

HOREMHEB. No, I am a soldier.

AKHNATON. (*Ironically.*) Of course. If you are not a priest you must be a soldier.

HOREMHEB. (*Enquiringly.*) Highness?

AKHNATON. I have studied our latest census reports. There are only four divisions. Priests, soldiers, royal serfs, and, of course, the craftsmen. All other classes have been abolished.

HOREMHEB. Were there other classes?

AKHNATON. You are not a student of history. Why should you be?

(He looks at HOREMHEB appraisingly.)

You are strong. Your body is a delight to you. But I – I am not strong. So I read and ponder over the past. I read of the time when Egypt was free, and happy, and glorious.

HOREMHEB. (*Amazed.*) In the dark ages? It is true, the great pyramids were built then, but look at all the inventions and the discoveries since. Even horses and chariots were unknown to us then. But now, we are advanced. Egypt leads the world in progress, in enlightenment. We have an empire –

AKHNATON. On which the sun never sets! That is the current saying, is it not? On the whole, of all our discoveries and acquisitions, I prefer the horse.

HOREMHEB. The horse is a noble animal.

AKHNATON. It is more than noble, it is beautiful.

(His expression changes.)

AKHNATON. (*Ironically.*) Have you ever thought of beauty?

HOREMHEB. (*Startled.*) Beauty?

AKHNATON. I see you have not.

HOREMHEB. I am only a plain soldier, I know nothing about art. But I know the temples built to Amon are very beautiful.

AKHNATON. (*Bitterly.*) To Amon!

HOREMHEB. (*Proudly.*) They are the wonder of the universe!

AKHNATON. Built by foreign slaves! Men exiled far from their country.

(**HOREMHEB** *misses the implication.*)

HOREMHEB. They work quite intelligently, I believe.

(**AKHNATON** *looks at him enquiringly.*)

AKHNATON. You are dedicated to the service of Amon. You are a protégé of the high priest. Of what family are you?

HOREMHEB. Of the monarchical house of Alabastronopolis.

AKHNATON. One of our best families. I might have guessed it.

HOREMHEB. Meriptah, the high priest of Amon, has been good to me. He condescends to take an interest in my career.

AKHNATON. Yes, indeed. Amon knows how to reward them that serve him! A soldier could have no better allegiance. Did not a certain noble, in the days gone by, stand in the temple on the feast day of the god, when the priests bore the image of Amon aloft amongst the shouts of the populace? The god stopped before the young noble, raised him up and had him brought to the station of the king in the temple, indicating thereby that he chose him as pharaoh.

HOREMHEB. (*Reverently.*) That was the great Tutmose III.

AKHNATON. Yes. So you see, it is wise to serve Amon. Who knows where *you* may end?

HOREMHEB. I am a soldier, not a priest.

AKHNATON. (*Musingly.*) Four divisions of people. Priests, soldiers, royal serfs – and quite as an afterthought, the craftsmen. But above all priests! Do you know, that of the people buried at Abydos last year, a quarter of them – a quarter of them, mark – were priests. Very soon all Egypt will be priests. Then there will be nobody left to buy indulgences and heart scarabs from them – the temple revenues will fall.

HOREMHEB. You could not have only priests. There must always be serfs.

AKHNATON. True. The land must be tilled, and the vines planted, and the honey taken, and the cattle brought out to graze.

(His face lights up.)

Are you a poet?

HOREMHEB. Oh, no, your highness.

AKHNATON. I would like to make things in words – beautiful words. Here is a poem I have made to Ra Harakte, the sun god.

All cattle rest upon the herbage,
All trees and plants flourish,
The birds flutter in the marshes,
Their wings uplifted in adoration to thee,
All the sheep dance upon their feet,
All winged things fly,
They live when thou hast shone upon them.

(He lifts his head to the sun.)

How beautiful the sun is, Horemheb. It gives life. (*Sharply.*) But I forget. You prefer destruction!

HOREMHEB. My lord! Your highness! I smite only the enemies of Egypt.

AKHNATON. (*Ironically.*) This is the song, is it not, that was made to Tutmose III?

(He quotes savagely.)

I have come giving thee to smite those who are in the marshes,
 The lands of Mitanni tremble under fear of thee,
 I have made them see thy majesty as a crocodile,
 Lord of fear in the water unapproachable,
 I have come giving thee to smite those who are in the islands,
 Those who are in the midst of the great sea hear thy roarings,
 I have made them see thy majesty as an avenger,
 Rising upon the back of his slain victim,
 I have come giving thee to smite the Lybians,
 The isles of the Utenty belong to the might of thy prowess,
 I have made them see thy majesty as a fierce-eyed lion,
 Whilst thou makest them corpses in their valleys.

(He repeats lingeringly.)

Corpses in their valleys...

HOREMHEB. *(Confidently.)* Tutmose III was a great king, a great and mighty conqueror.

(AKHNATON looks at him hard.)

AKHNATON. I like you, Horemheb. I love you. You have a true, simple heart without evil in it. You believe what you have been brought up to believe. You are like a tree.

(He considers HOREMHEB's physical prowess.)

How strong your arm is. How firm you stand. Yes, like a tree. And I – I am blown upon by every wind of heaven. *(Wildly.)* Who am I? What am I?

(He sees HOREMHEB staring.)

I see, my good Horemheb, that you think I am mad.

HOREMHEB. *(Embarrassed.)* No, indeed, highness. I realise that you have great thoughts – too difficult for me to understand.

AKHNATON. You are too modest. If thought is not translated into action, what is the good of thought? (*Sharply.*) Has the high priest of Amon spoken to you of me? What did he say?

HOREMHEB. He said, highness, that you were beloved of Ra Harakte.

AKHNATON. (*Musingly.*) A dreamer. Yes, that is true – I dream of the past. Sometimes I dream of the future – but the past is safer. Before the days of the Hyksos, Horemheb, Egypt was very different. There were people then who lived!

HOREMHEB. (*Puzzled.*) Lived?

AKHNATON. That is what I said. They had houses and gardens, and they walked and talked and exchanged thoughts with each other.

HOREMHEB. (*Scornfully.*) An idle life.

AKHNATON. They were not afraid of being idle. Leisure did not fill them with dismay. They had thoughts in their heads and took trouble to express them.

HOREMHEB. But highness, one cannot eternally be thinking and talking. There must be action.

(**AKHNATON** *suddenly withdraws from him.*)

AKHNATON. How true! One must kill foreigners. Or fashion scarabs in the temples to place on the breasts of the dead to deceive Osiris. The sale of them increases the temple revenues and is highly pleasing to Amon. (*Bitterly.*) Amon. Amon. Amon –

(**HOREMHEB** *looks at him in surprise.*)

HOREMHEB. Amon is good to the poor.

AKHNATON. Yes, yes, it is one of his titles, “Vizier of the poor, who does not accept the bribes of the guilty.” An amusing idea and the poor believe it! Ha!

HOREMHEB. (*Gravely.*) My lord, I do not understand you.

AKHNATON. It is true, you look puzzled.

HOREMHEB. You speak as though – as though –

AKHNATON. Go on.

HOREMHEB. No.

AKHNATON. You are wise, perhaps. It is always wise to be silent – till the moment comes. I have said too much to you.

HOREMHEB. No, no.

AKHNATON. Yes, for you belong to the service of Amon.

HOREMHEB. No, I serve Egypt.

AKHNATON. My father is Egypt.

HOREMHEB. Yes, highness.

AKHNATON. And, soon, perhaps I shall be Egypt.

HOREMHEB. Yes, highness.

AKHNATON. Will you serve me then, Horemheb?

HOREMHEB. I will serve you.

AKHNATON. Will you be true?

(HOREMHEB speaks with deep emotion.)

HOREMHEB. I swear it. I will lay down my life for you, highness.

AKHNATON. But that is not what I want. It is not my will that my servants should die for me. I would prefer them to live!

HOREMHEB. Grant that it may be so. But a man must always be prepared to die.

AKHNATON. For what?

HOREMHEB. For his country. For his king, for the gods.

AKHNATON. *(Frenziedly.)* Death, death – always death! I do not want men to die for me.

HOREMHEB. Yet, if need arises, they will be ready to do so.

AKHNATON. What need?

HOREMHEB. The need of your great inheritance, highness.

AKHNATON. *(Ironically.)* The empire?

HOREMHEB. Yes.

AKHNATON. Tutmose III, Tutmose IV, Amenhotep III. Those are your heroes. What were they all?

HOREMHEB. (*Reverently.*) They were great conquerors.

AKHNATON. Conquerors, conquerors, do you know what that word means to me?

(He speaks slowly, as though seeing a vision.)

I hear the groaning of dying men. I see a heap of festering corpses. I see women who weep and wail for their dead husbands – and children who are fatherless. And the groans of the dying and the stink of festering corpses, and the curses of women and the sobs of children ascend to heaven, ascend to Ra saying, “Why – why are these things done?” And the answer that comes – listen, Horemheb, listen – the answer is very simple. It is in order that a king may set up a stela and engrave on it a list of his conquests!

HOREMHEB. (*Gravely.*) But highness, we rule a conquered country wisely and well. We do not oppress the people or keep them in subjection to us. It is really better for them that way.

AKHNATON. What a comfortable belief.

HOREMHEB. These people are not fit to rule themselves.

AKHNATON. I see that you will have a most successful career!

HOREMHEB. (*Simply.*) You do not understand war, highness. I have never killed a man in anger.

AKHNATON. No, only in the service of your country. That is what is so terrible.

HOREMHEB. But one does not think of it that way. It is war.

AKHNATON. It is related of Amenhotep II, that when he returned as a conqueror from Syria and approached Thebes, he had with him the seven kings of Takshi whom he had hung, head downwards on the prow of the royal barge. He personally sacrificed them in the presence of Amon, hanging six on the walls of the city, reserving the body of the seventh king which he sent to Nubia and hung up on the walls of Napatha as a hint. What do you think of that?

HOREMHEB. It probably had a salutary effect.

AKHNATON. The thought of that senseless cruelty does not fill you with horror?

HOREMHEB. You do not understand the necessities of war.

AKHNATON. It is *you* I do not understand! Your glance is kind, you are simple and unassuming. There is no cruelty in you, and yet, I am afraid of you.

HOREMHEB. Afraid of me? My lord!

AKHNATON. We are so far from each other, you and I.

HOREMHEB. You are a great prince and I am only one of a thousand soldiers.

AKHNATON. That was not my meaning. We speak a different language, you and I. And yet – and yet, there is a bond between us.

HOREMHEB. You are too gracious, highness.

AKHNATON. Between your strength and my weakness, between your simple direct mind and my conflicting visions. To accept, as you do! I wish I could.

(He pauses and looks at HOREMHEB.)

You shall be my friend, Horemheb.

HOREMHEB. My lord, I am yours utterly.

AKHNATON. When I come to my kingdom, you shall help me rule.

HOREMHEB. *(Passionately.)* I will make you the greatest king that ever lived.

AKHNATON. And what can I be that is greater than those who have gone before me?

HOREMHEB. A wider empire still. An empire that stretches beyond the land of the two rivers.

AKHNATON. More lands, more subject peoples, bigger palaces, still greater temples to Amon, thousands of beautiful women where my father had hundreds? No, Horemheb, listen to my dream. A kingdom where men dwell in peace and brotherhood, foreign countries given back to rule themselves, fewer priests, fewer sacrifices.

Instead of many women – one woman. A woman so beautiful that after thousands of years men shall still speak of her beauty.

(There is a pause.)

(Softly.) That is my dream.

(A commotion is heard, voices raised in lamentation. The HIGH PRIEST enters from the palace.)

HIGH PRIEST. Highness!

AKHNATON. My lord.

HIGH PRIEST. The great king, son of Ra, beloved of Amon, has gone to Osiris.

AKHNATON. *(Dazed.)* My father is dead?

(He turns his head to heaven. The sun shines down on him. Slowly he raises his hands, seeking its rays.)

Who is my father? My father is Ra. Thou art my father, whom we call the Aton. O sun, when thou risest in the horizon, the darkness is banished. When thou sendest forth thy rays, the lands awake. Though thou art afar, thy rays are on earth, though thou art high, thy footprints are the day. Thy dawning is beautiful in the horizon of heaven. O living Aton, beginning of life.

Scene Two

(Three years later. A room in the palace. The room is hung with woven tapestries of bright colours. QUEEN TYI and AKHNATON sit on gold chairs. The HIGH PRIEST sits a little to one side. The ROYAL SCRIBE holds a roll of papyrus. There is an entrance that leads to the rest of the palace and a set of parted curtains that leads to the royal quarters. AKHNATON looks bored and inattentive. QUEEN TYI addresses the ROYAL SCRIBE.)

QUEEN TYI. Continue.

ROYAL SCRIBE. Thus writes Dushratta of Mitanni further, “With thy son’s father I was on friendly terms. Let thy son now make our friendship ten times closer. May it be well with him, with his house, his chariots, his horses, his chief men, his land and all his possessions – may it be well indeed. His father sent me much gold, let this, my brother, send me more gold still. For in my brother’s land of Egypt, gold is as common as dust.”

(QUEEN TYI turns to the HIGH PRIEST.)

QUEEN TYI. What say you, my lord?

HIGH PRIEST. The king of Mitanni writes us in friendship. A friendly answer should be sent.

QUEEN TYI. And gold?

HIGH PRIEST. Ten talents of gold.

(QUEEN TYI looks to AKHNATON.)

QUEEN TYI. What say you, my son?

AKHNATON. I have not listened.

(QUEEN TYI addresses the ROYAL SCRIBE again.)

QUEEN TYI. Read the letter again to the king.

AKHNATON. There is no need.

QUEEN TYI. But, my son –

AKHNATON. It is not written to me.

QUEEN TYI. It is written to me, as regent, but it is meant for you.

AKHNATON. Consult the high priest. Has he not control of all that goes on in Egypt?

HIGH PRIEST. I endeavour to serve you.

AKHNATON. Your disinterested nobility fills me with admiration!

HIGH PRIEST. (*Coldly.*) I advise that fair words should be written to Dushratta and ten talents of gold.

AKHNATON. Can the god spare all that gold? Would it not be best to give the gold to the temples of Amon?

HIGH PRIEST. This is no question of temple money.

AKHNATON. No, what goes into the treasury of Amon does not come out again! Your holiness is the treasurer, I believe.

HIGH PRIEST. That is part of my sacred office.

QUEEN TYI. What would you that we reply to Dushratta?

AKHNATON. Reply as you please. I am making a poem. Would you like to hear it?

HIGH PRIEST. Let your servant hear the words of the Pharaoh.

AKHNATON. When the chicken crieth in the eggshell,
 Thou givest him breath therein to preserve him alive,
 When thou hast perfected him,
 That he may pierce the egg,
 He cometh forth from the egg,
 To chirp with all his might,
 He runneth about upon his two feet,
 When he hath come forth therefrom.

(He smiles indulgently. The HIGH PRIEST is not quite sure what to make of it.)

HIGH PRIEST. A – a charming poem, I am sure, your highness.

AKHNATON. But naturally you prefer the classics. The god Amon, if I remember rightly, addressed some stirring lines to my great-great-grandfather, that mighty fighter Tutmose III.

(He declaims.)

Crete and Cyprus are in terror,
Those who are in the midst of the sea hear thy roarings,
I have made them see thy majesty as an avenger,
Rising upon the back of his slain victims.

(He shakes his head.)

I apologise. My chicken hatching from his eggshell is of no importance whatsoever.

QUEEN TYI. *(Decisively.)* Have we any other business to discuss?

HIGH PRIEST. Nothing of pressing importance.

QUEEN TYI. *(Rising.)* Then, my lord, we will excuse you, knowing that you have many matters of importance to transact.

(The HIGH PRIEST takes his leave. The ROYAL SCRIBE follows. QUEEN TYI turns angrily to AKHNATON.)

Why do you behave in this foolish way?

AKHNATON. In what way, Mother?

(He repeats his poem with content.)

To chirp – with all its might.

QUEEN TYI. Why do you antagonise Meriptah? He has great power.

AKHNATON. He has too much power.

QUEEN TYI. Hush, Amon is a great god. He has brought Egypt to greatness.

AKHNATON. And his priests to riches!

QUEEN TYI. All men desire riches.

AKHNATON. Not all men.

QUEEN TYI. Why must you behave like a child? To deal with these priests one must use craft – guile. Not this foolish outspoken rudeness!

AKHNATON. You do not love priests either, Mother.

QUEEN TYI. I do not behave like a fool.

AKHNATON. (*Thoughtfully.*) No, you are a clever woman – a woman of great power. My father loved you. He made you the royal wife, the great queen. And yet you, the great queen, the royal wife, stoop to use guile with the priests.

QUEEN TYI. Because they are stronger than I.

AKHNATON. You hate the tyranny of Amon. You taught me that hatred when I was a child. You dedicated me – not to Amon – but to Ra Harakte, the god of Heliopolis. And yet you use soft words, you smile, you conceal your hate!

QUEEN TYI. The cunning of the serpent accomplishes more than the roaring of the lion!

AKHNATON. Lies! Always lies! I am sick of lies. I would live in truth. Truth is beautiful.

QUEEN TYI. What is truth?

AKHNATON. That is an interesting question.

(He mutters to himself.)

What is it? Why am I? Who am I? From whence?
Whither?

QUEEN TYI. (*Anxiously.*) Child – child –

AKHNATON. I am no child.

QUEEN TYI. You will always be a child to me.

AKHNATON. That is why you are my enemy.

QUEEN TYI. (*Wounded.*) I – your enemy!

AKHNATON. The bird sings in the cage, but he would sing better in the free air. Between you and the priests I am bound fast.

QUEEN TYI. That is not so. I seek only to guard you. O my son, my son, be guided by me, by my wisdom that has

been bitter in the learning, but which has not failed me. My wisdom has brought me, a woman of the people, to be great queen. The priests fear me, but they dare not offend me. Leave your destiny with me. I will make you a greater king than your father.

AKHNATON. (*Mystically.*) Only I know my father's will concerning me. I must do as he commands.

QUEEN TYI. Your father was ever guided by me.

AKHNATON. I don't mean my father the king, I mean my father, Ra.

(He stretches up his hands.)

Ra, the Aton, whose light illumines the world, whose heat is joy, whose fire is in my secret heart.

QUEEN TYI. I do not understand.

AKHNATON. (*Ironically.*) It is the title, is it not, of the pharaohs of Egypt. Sons of Ra? Sons of the sun?

QUEEN TYI. Of course.

AKHNATON. But it means nothing. It is a form of words. (*Brooding.*) For once, perhaps, it is no form, but very truth. Tell me again, Mother, of the days before my birth.

QUEEN TYI. The children I had borne were dead. I began to grow old. There was fear in me that I should bear no son to inherit the throne of Egypt. I fancied that the priests of Amon were glad of my barrenness. Then I went to the shrine of Ra Harakte, lord of visions and dreams. I swore to him that if I bore a son, that son should be dedicated to him.

(AKHNATON becomes drunk with exaltation.)

AKHNATON. To Ra Harakte, lord of visions. And I was born!
I! I! I!

QUEEN TYI. (*Frightened.*) My son – my son.

(AKHNATON suddenly controls himself.)

AKHNATON. It is nothing. Leave me, Mother. Let Ay, the priest, be sent to me.

QUEEN TYI. Ay? You are always sending for Ay. What do you want with him?

AKHNATON. He is a man very learned in theology. He instructs me in the history of the gods of Egypt.

QUEEN TYI. That is well. Stick to your studies of the past.

AKHNATON. (*Ironically.*) And leave present rule to you, Mother?

QUEEN TYI. It is on your behalf I rule. All that I do is done for you.

AKHNATON. A convenient belief!

QUEEN TYI. What is in your mind?

AKHNATON. You have ruled so long, you have schemed so craftily for many years it is in your blood now – this lust for power.

QUEEN TYI. You are cruel – unjust.

AKHNATON. Send me Ay.

*(QUEEN TYI exits to the royal quarters.
AKHNATON is left alone and goes over his poem.)*

When the chicken crieth in the eggshell,
Thou givest him breath therein to preserve him alive.
(Musingly.) Breath...

(He breathes deep.)

Sweet breath...

(AY enters. He is a middle-aged priest, a man of simplicity and learning. He prostrates himself.)

You have come speedily – that is well.

AY. I am at your command always.

AKHNATON. You love me, Ay?

AY. I love the truth which is in you.

AKHNATON. Truth. Once again – truth. Tell me, Ay, is truth important?

AY. It is the only thing that matters.

AKHNATON. Then tell me more of the gods of Egypt.

(AY obliges with great pleasure.)

AY. There is great confusion there, but in the midst of confusion, truth. In the minds of the people, the simple people who till the soil, there is only sufficient capacity to appreciate the outer form of truth. With them, there is only birth and death and the fecundity of the earth. There is also fear. Sekhmet, the crocodile goddess; Hathor, the goddess of reproduction; Osiris, the god who speaks for the dead; Set, the destroyer! These are all gods from the beginning of human understanding.

AKHNATON. Go on. What of the mind?

AY. There is Ptah of Memphis, who speaks through the mind and the tongue of man.

(AKHNATON speaks with difficulty.)

AKHNATON. What of Amon?

AY. *(Scornfully.)* Amon is but a trumpery little river god. As an upstart he has risen to power!

AKHNATON. Who then is the greatest god in Egypt?

(He is excited.)

AY. Ra. Ra Harakte of Heliopolis. Is it not the first title of the pharaoh, son of Ra? Does not Amon, in order to maintain his title, call himself Amon Ra? Ra is the ruler of the world.

AKHNATON. And Ra is the Aton – the sun!

AY. The sun's disc is his outward expression.

(AKHNATON's fervour mounts with growing exultation.)

AKHNATON. Yes, I have felt that – I know it. It is not the sun that must be worshipped, it is the heat which is in the sun! The light that illumines the sun. It is that – that – that inner force, that divine fire! I feel it, I feel it now!

(His eyes roll in vision, he reels and clutches at his chair. There is a pause. The ecstasy)

passed, he composes himself and speaks quietly, in an almost business like manner.)

There shall be no more bowing down to images carved in stone. There shall be no more exploitation of the weak, no more indulgences and amulets and heart scarabs sold by the priests to extort money from the poor. Instead there shall be freedom and love – the love of the Aton. In one month, I attain manhood. My mother will be no longer regent. I shall rule alone. And I will no longer be called Amenhotep – meaning Amon rests. I will be called Akhnaton – spirit of Aton.

(He rises, his hands spread to heaven.)

I am the son of Ra – no empty title – the very truth!

Thou art in my heart,
There is no other that knoweth thee,
Save thy son Akhnaton.

(There is a pause.)

Is it well, old friend?

AY. It is well. The land groans under the extortions of the haughty priests of Amon. They grind down the poor. Deliver them, my son, bring peace and rest to the humble who till the earth and bring forth food.

AKHNATON. There shall be peace for all. Happiness. Men shall dwell side by side in love – the love of my Father, Aton.

AY. It is well said.

AKHNATON. And I will build a new city. The City of the Horizon. There shall be birds and flowering trees and streams of water. I will live simply – not as a king. There shall be laughter there, and love, and the happy cries of children. There shall be beauty again in Egypt. Beauty.

AY. *(Moved.)* My son – my son.

AKHNATON. There shall be truth.

(There is a long pause.)

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