

I

When I'd been in Cairo a week, I was taken to the pyramids; it was there that I saw Frances for the first time. It was January 1922, and Miss Mackenzie, *in loco parentis*, my guardian for our travels in Egypt, planned our visit with great care. She believed that if I could see the pyramids, 'One of the greatest wonders of the ancient world, remember, Lucy, dear,' and see them in the most powerful way possible – at sunrise – they would effect a change. They would stimulate; they would enthral; they would *snap* me back to life, and persuade me to re-engage with the world. For six days she had postponed this visit: I wasn't yet strong enough. On the seventh day, the great moment finally arrived.

Miss Mack, who had been a nurse in the war, believed in timetables as well as pyramids. She was convinced regimes were therapeutic. So the day of our expedition was planned with zeal. The list she drew up in her neat looped handwriting went like this:

5 a.m.: The Pyramids at Giza. Departure prompt.

Noon: Picnic luncheon at the Sphinx, in the shade of her paw.

2.30 p.m.: Return Shepherd's Hotel. Obligatory REST period.

4 p.m.: Tea on the celebrated hotel terrace. An opportunity for *conversazione*.

5 p.m.: Attendance, by invitation from the great lady herself, at Madame Masha's legendary dancing class. Duration, one hour. Benefits, inestimable.

'You see, Lucy,' Miss Mack said, 'if truth be told, and although I am an old Egypt hand, my contacts in Cairo are just a little bit rusty.'

What we need is an *entrée*. Friends, dear.’ She regarded the list sadly. ‘Fun.’

I had forgotten what ‘fun’ was. It had disappeared into the fume and smoke that afflicted my mind then. But I was an obedient child, grateful to Miss Mack for her vigour – her ‘pep’, as she called it. I knew that my listlessness alarmed her; I knew that behind all her exhaustive planning lay anxiety, even fear. So I tried to reassure her: I rose early, in the Cairo dark. I endured the dousing with eau de cologne that kept flies at bay, and the sand shoes and the long socks; I accepted the cotton gloves: ‘Never insert your fingers into crevices, Lucy. The pyramid stones are notorious – beware of scorpions *at all times*.’ I submitted to the panama hat: that was to protect me from the fierce Egyptian sun – at least, that was the ostensible reason, the one Miss Mack always gave. Costuming complete, she turned me to the cheval glass, and we both inspected me. Should I snatch the hat off, expose the tragic state of my hair? The small girl in the glass met my gaze. Eleven years old, and she looked seven: thin as a reed, pinched around the nostrils, wary about the eyes. *What a little nothingness*: she was no one I recognised.

I turned my back on the girl and followed Miss Mack downstairs to the palace of hubbub that was the lobby of Shepherd’s Hotel. Escorted by a flurry of flunkies in ballooning white trousers and red boleros, I crept out in her wake to the flaring torches, the hotel steps and the eddying darkness beyond. A fracas ensued. Miss Mack, American, fiercely republican and principled, believed in frugality but was a woman of generosity. She scattered *baksheesh* like manna from the heavens: she bestowed her bounty on everyone, the beggars who swarmed throughout Cairo, the fake and the genuinely afflicted alike, the ragged half-starved children, the street vendors, jasmine-sellers and snake-charmers, the touts who, crying, ‘*Antika, sweet lady, first class, very ancient*,’ produced from their sleeves scarabs manufactured the previous day. Her soft heart had been spotted within days of our arrival, and the instant she appeared on the hotel step she was surrounded by an importunate horde.

I waited in the entrance as the inevitable turmoil commenced, then, feeling the familiar faintness, sank down on the stone steps between the sphinxes either side. Below me, the hotel’s *sfragis* were reminding Miss Mack that there was unrest in Cairo, that she must



not contemplate setting off without a dragoman. When this appeal failed – as an old Egypt hand Miss Mack scorned guides – the hotel servants, clustering around her and shouldering the beggars aside, began insisting she hire a motorcar: a line of gleaming tourist cars now waited outside the hotel where, in her youth, a multitude of donkey boys had plied their trade. I saw Miss Mack hesitate: the night before she had been loud in her condemnation of automobiles – *dust, gasoline fumes, speed, convenience*, where was the romance, the poetry there? Now she glanced towards my seated figure, and I saw her reconsider. There was a risk in overtiring me . . . The hired cars were expensive, and all her thrifty instincts argued against them. But on the other hand my maternal grandparents, American grandees, formerly estranged and unknown to me beyond their handwriting, were now languidly assisting, wiring top-up funds, paying Miss Mack a ‘retainer’ and insisting money was no object – as indeed, in their case, it was not. They had insisted that on this voyage no expense should be spared.

‘Perhaps an automobile might be advisable after all, Lucy,’ Miss Mack said, fighting her way past the encircling *safragis*, and returning to the steps. ‘We must not exhaust you. Maybe this wasn’t wise – such an early start . . .’

I rose to my feet, and held on firmly to the hotel balustrade. If I concentrated hard, I could banish that smoky confusion from my mind for brief periods. I knew Miss Mack’s plans and it seemed cruel to disappoint her. I said, ‘Oh, please – not a car. I was looking forward to the carriage – and look, Hassan is there as usual, across the road.’

Miss Mack wheeled about. Beyond the shrieking crowd of hawkers and professional beggars forever on duty on the hotel steps, she glimpsed her paragon. There he sat, on the far side of Ibrahim Pasha Street, bent over the reins of his carriage, waiting for custom that was, these days, infrequent and poorly paid. His attitude was one of stoic resolve; on glimpsing Miss Mack, he lifted his hand in salute. In an instant she was resolute again. Out came her purse; munificent tips were conferred. Hassan was whistled across; bags, baskets, rugs, stools were transferred in seconds; the carriage hood was drawn up; and I was installed, Miss Mack beside me, confident once more and ready for anything in hand-made tweeds. Hassan’s horse pricked its ears and neighed; the sound startled a pair of red





kites, tireless scavengers that roosted in the palm trees of the Ezbekieh Gardens opposite.

They rose up with a clatter of wings, circled overhead, and gave us a fly-past. ‘Now, Lucy,’ said Miss Mack in a hopeful tone, ‘now your great adventure begins.’

Hassan was Miss Mack’s paragon for many reasons: he was a kind, knowledgeable man and he cared for his elderly horse in an exemplary way; his carriage was resplendent with shining trinkets, powerful amulets and charms. He spoke English, French, Turkish and Arabic, and in his youth had served in the British army under Lord Kitchener . . . Miss Mack sang his praises for the expedition’s first half-hour. I was tired from all the dressing and packing and loading and *talk*. I examined the dark sky and the fantastic glitter of the low-slung Egyptian stars. I breathed in the sweet talcum scent of the lebbek trees. Cairo, which I thought of as a city of consternation, was strangely quiet at this hour.

‘How well I remember the first time I made this journey to the pyramids, Lucy,’ Miss Mack was saying. She wiped a tear from her eye. ‘We took a carriage just like this one. I was only a child, a little older than you are now. Just twelve, and it was the first time I’d ever left Princeton. Why, it must have been 1878 – can it really be that long ago? The excitement! “Now, Myrtle, prepare yourself,” my dear father, God rest him, said to me. But I was screwed up to such a pitch of excitement that I could *not* stop fidgeting. I was hopping about like a bug on a blanket – and then, on the horizon, as the sun rose, I saw . . .’

I made no comment. We had now crossed the Nile; the towers and minarets, the jasmine and sewage scents of the city were behind us. Far in the distance I heard the rumble of a tram, the cough of a car engine. The dark of the desert enveloped us; I breathed in its antiseptic air. With a low muttered imprecation, Hassan turned the horse’s head, and we entered the narrow road that Miss Mack referred to as the Allée des Pyramides. Abandoning reminiscence, she was now attempting another approach. A history lesson, I realised, had been continuing for some while. I felt a passing sympathy for her: in the face of my silences, she was indefatigably well-meaning; she did *try* . . .





‘What I want you to remember, Lucy,’ she was saying, ‘is that for the ancient Egyptians, sunrise was a resurrection. They believed that – that after the heartache of death, there would be a rebirth. It was as predictable as the rising of the sun each day . . . ’ Clasp my hand, she added: ‘Try to think of that, Lucy. It might strengthen you. I trust it will, dear.’

I did not reply. After a polite interval, I extricated my hand from hers. Miss Mack, perhaps discouraged, fell silent. How cold the air was! How regular the clip-clop of the horse’s hooves. Hassan’s charms and trinkets jingled. I could dimly see the avenue of acacia trees either side of the road; they had been planted, the guidebooks said, in honour of the beautiful Empress Eugénie of France – but when? In some other century, some other world . . . Smoke coiled in my brain: I watched the lovely Eugénie dance a graceful if unlikely gavotte on the desert sands with Napoleon Bonaparte; they both turned to bow obeisance to a pharaoh who’d died three thousand years before. This pharaoh was wrapped in a swaddling of death bandages. As I watched, his *ka* detached itself from his body, turned to beckon us sternly towards the perils of the underworld, then stalked off down the *allée* ahead. We followed. A bird cried out forlornly from the branches of the acacias. Somewhere in the darkness a jackal howled.

I crept closer to Miss Mack’s reassuring warmth and bulk. She hesitated, then put a comforting arm around my shoulders. If I fell asleep, I knew what dreams would come. I resisted for as long as I could, but after a brief fight the tiredness and darkness claimed me. Fast as anaesthetic, equally irresistible: I went under within a quarter of a mile.



2

‘Lucy, dear – you’re looking exhausted,’ said Miss Mack, later that morning. ‘Perhaps all three pyramids were too ambitious? After all, one pyramid is much like another, and we’ve done Cheops most thoroughly. Maybe we should have our luncheon a little earlier? You’re so pale and washed out. I think I’ll park you by the Sphinx, dear – just for a second while I tell Hassan our change of plan. If you stay in the shade, here behind her left paw . . . There’s no better place for a picnic than the Sphinx’s paws. Some people favour the tail area, but I cannot agree.’

I sat down obediently on the camp-stool provided. The pyramids, a dark sapphire when I’d first glimpsed them against the citron of the desert sky at dawn, were now glittering painfully. Groups of camel touts were arguing at a distance; an intrepid male tourist, assisted by Arab guides, was clambering up the Great Pyramid to laughter and cries of encouragement from a group of smartly dressed young Englishwomen standing below. ‘Keep going, Bertie,’ one of them called, her voice carrying clearly across the sand. ‘Nearly there, darling one. Only another eighty thousand feet to go . . .’

‘The water flask, Lucy,’ Miss Mack said, inspecting me intently. ‘I’ll leave it with you – are you feeling thirsty? You’re very *white*. Are you sure you’re all right, dear?’

‘Truly, I’m fine. I’ll just sit here and read the guidebook.’

‘Very well. I’ll be two ticks, and I’ll stay in sight all the time.’

Miss Mack scurried off across the sand towards the palm trees in whose shade Hassan had laid out a mat and was praying; it was two



hundred yards away. Such guardianship! I considered the flask, which I knew contained water that was absolutely *safe*: Miss Mack had supervised its purification, its boiling, cooling, filtering and bottling – ever-vigilant, she left nothing to chance. I unscrewed and uncorked it, took a swallow of water, felt nauseous at once and spat it out on the ground.

Nine months previously, walking across fields in Norfolk on a hot perfect May day, my mother and I had stopped to ask for directions and glasses of water at a remote farm. We had been visiting my father's sister, Aunt Foxe, and exploring the area on the coast still famous as 'Poppyland'; wandering inland, we'd become lost. The farmer's wife had brought the glasses of water to us on a tray, and we drank thankfully, sitting in the shade of her apple orchard. The trees were in blossom, hens pecked at the grass: my mother Marianne, revived by our holiday, had lost the careworn look she so often had at home in Cambridge; she looked pretty and young again. 'This is idyllic, Lucy,' she said. 'Isn't this the most marvellous place to have happened upon? How clever of you to spot it, darling. And isn't this the *best* water? How pure it tastes. So cold and refreshing – it must be straight from their well.'

And so it was – that was established later, when enquiries were made. By then, my mother was dead of typhoid and I was expected to share her fate; but Miss Mack had been there to nurse me and, by some quirk that my father described as merciful, I survived. Now here I was, teleported to a desert, sitting in the shade of the Sphinx's massive paw. I inspected its weathered crumbling stones. No scorpions that I could see.

'The word "typhoid" is taken from the Greek *typhos*, Lucy,' my classicist father had explained. 'It means "stupor", but the term was also used to describe a hazy state of mind. This disorientation, or "smokiness" as you insist on calling it, is a well-documented symptom of the disease. It's known to linger on, after the illness has apparently run its course. It will pass, I promise you. But you must learn to be patient, and give it time.'

Eight months since my alleged 'recovery', and the fogginess had not cleared. My father really should not make promises he could not keep, I felt. Yet that seemed disloyal: those remarks had been made when we'd just spent our first Christmas without my mother, a





period that had been painful for both of us. All I could remember of those weeks were walks around a cold, foggy, deserted Cambridge, and one terrible expedition along the banks of the Cam towards Grantchester, in the course of which my silent father broke down. Turning away from me, hiding his face, he'd left me there by the riverside. Walking at a brisk pace towards the town, he disappeared. After an interval, I too set off and reached home without incident: *no harm done* . . . I decided I'd write my father a letter that very night: I would describe the pyramids and the Sphinx and Hassan. I'd describe the further delights of the day, as laid out in Miss Mack's master plan. I'd say nothing of Empress Eugénie; nothing of a hallucinatory pharaoh. I'd make everything *lucid*, including my improving health and gratitude. Yes: a lucid letter from daughter Lucy. I began to word it, stopped at *Dear Father*, and scanned the sands.

The heat of the morning was pleasant, still bearable, and just sufficient to make the light bend, waver and deceive. In the distance, Miss Mack was supervising the unloading of baskets, a small folding table and snow-white napery. I took another swallow of water and forced it down. I turned my gaze towards the Great Pyramid, where the man called Bertie had finally reached the summit. He removed his tweed cap and shouted, 'Huzzah!' Loud cheers came from the spectators below. Bertie, it seemed, had come prepared: from inside his Norfolk jacket he produced a small flag and waved it victoriously. I raised the field glasses and focused them. The flag was a Union Jack. Bertie fixed it between the stones at the pyramid's summit where it fluttered briefly. There were more cheers, then groans as the flag blew away.

Behind this group, I saw, a large car was approaching, bumping its way across the sand. It described a circle, made for the Sphinx, reconsidered, and finally came to a halt in the shade of some palm trees about fifty yards away. I watched as its occupants climbed from the car: first, a young but portly man, balding and with a markedly high, prominent forehead, wearing a flamboyant bow tie; then a woman, festooned with scarves; and finally a girl of around my own age, who jumped from the car, ran a few yards, and then performed a cartwheel. I watched as she followed it up with a somersault, and then reached into the car and fetched out desert gear. A fly-switch, a pair





of dark glasses. I stared in astonishment as she put them on. Such sophistication, dark glasses for a child, how I envied her this protection from the punitive light; how free she looked, how her dark hair, almost black, shone.

‘Hot, hot, *hot*,’ she called to her mother – was it her mother? They were the first words I heard her say. ‘Daddy, it’s *baking*. I told you it would be.’

Her voice was light, discernibly American. Her father shrugged. ‘Sure it’s hot if you insist on gymnastics. Try sitting down.’

‘May I climb a pyramid before lunch?’

‘Don’t be fresh, Frances. That’s not funny and no, you may not. Neither before lunch, nor after it. It’s vandalism, as you very well know. Now sit down and eat your sandwiches. I’ll test you on your hieroglyphs when you’ve finished. Did you learn the six I set you?’

‘Kind of.’

‘Kind of won’t do. Accuracy is all. Helen, is that confounded picnic ready or not? This was a damn-fool idea – I’m due back in Cairo in an hour . . .’

Their voices faded; they withdrew out of sight behind the palm trees. I was wondering dreamily if they too were apparitions, when Miss Mack, followed by Hassan, rejoined me. The table was unfolded, a cloth spread upon it; baskets were opened, and the bounty of a Shepherd’s packed lunch was revealed. Cold roast quails and a pilaff; sweet quince pastries, dates and greengages. Miss Mack and I ate in state at the folding table, with plates and knives and forks and linen napkins; Hassan, who, at Miss Mack’s insistence, shared this plenty, squatted on the ground. He had brought with him some flat Egyptian bread, which he unwrapped from a cloth bundle. He then shinned up the Sphinx’s foot, placed the bread carefully in full sun on the paw-knuckles, allowed it to warm through, and shinned down again. Explaining that his wife had made it for him, he offered it to us to share. Miss Mack froze: seeing I was about to accept some, she shook her head at me.

‘Excellent bread,’ Hassan said, somewhat mournfully: I felt he was used to such offerings being refused. ‘*Shamsi*, you see? Sun bread. You will like it – that is sure.’

‘Indeed we would, Hassan,’ Miss Mack said firmly. ‘But my friend Lucy has been ill, you see, so we have to be very careful what we eat.’





That is tremendously kind, but we have so much already, and we wouldn't dream of depriving you.'

Hassan gave up with melancholy grace. He seemed saddened – I hoped not affronted. I scraped at my plate, pushing the food back and forth into little piles. I could eat very little. The meal took an age. We were still scarcely halfway through when I heard voices, then a car engine. The acrobat girl was departing. I watched her disappear in a shimmer of light and a cloud of dust – and she couldn't have been an apparition since Miss Mack also registered the exodus.

'Automobiles,' she remarked, with a frown. 'At the pyramids! Some people have no sense of respect. They might remember – this is a holy place. It's a *burial* ground.'

We inspected the burial ground again when lunch was finally finished. Miss Mack was reinvigorated, determined to evoke *some* spark. All three pyramids and no escaping them: kingdoms, dynasties, reigns; probable building methods; alignment with compass points and stars; number of pharaonic wives and daughters buried in adjoining necropolis . . . The sun was now directly overhead. I squinted at the wives' section of the necropolis. It was only partly excavated, and the sands were encroaching on its rough jumble of stones. Any decoration or inscriptions they might once have had, had been long scoured and obliterated by millennia of desert storms.

Wandering away, I leaned over one of the burial pits. Miss Mack, reading from her guidebook, had informed me it was an unknown princess's tomb, stocked with wine, fruit, and grain to sustain her in the afterlife. Now it was about ten feet deep – a dazzle of debris. An emerald-green lizard darted for a wall crevice. A faint breeze brushed my skin. I watched the sands shiver beneath my feet – and realised that this burial place was not deserted after all: moving in the shadows below me was a girl. She was about my own age, thin, wiry and alert. I could see she was trying to escape the pit. She made a series of nervous runs at its encircling walls, as if meaning to climb or jump them. She advanced on its boundaries, then backed off again. After a while, she seemed to sense my presence: she raised a hand to shield her eyes from the sun's glint, lifted her transparent face and turned to look at me. We stared at each other, hard and long. I raised my small box camera to capture her on film, and at once, as swiftly as she had manifested, she disappeared.





Should I inform Miss Mack of this interesting mirage? I knew if I did I'd be dosed up with aspirin and confined to base again. I said nothing. Miss Mack was gathering up our belongings: time to return to the hotel. She looked dispirited; I think she felt the pyramids had been woefully ineffective, and was now pinning her hopes on the afternoon's dancing class.



3

The young man paid his first visit to me today. He had come to interrogate me on the subject of a tomb – a very famous tomb. His name is Dr Ben Fong. He is an American scholar, formerly of Berkeley, California, now a Fellow of University College London. He is writing a book (*another* book!) about the most famous discovery ever made in the Valley of the Kings. A television documentary, a co-production jointly funded by the BBC and some American channel, perhaps HBO, is also being planned. Its working title is *Tutankhamun's Tomb: The Truth*. Laid-back, photogenic Dr Fong will be fronting this alliterative, high-budget, four-part marvel. The book and the TV series, he informed me, are 'linked in' and interest in them is 'awesome'. He dropped this information early on in our interview, when still under the illusion that I'd find this prospect impressive, even flattering. He's quick on the uptake, however, and unlikely to make that mistake again.

This first visit was preceded by a polite letter, citing Dr Fong's impressive academic qualifications, his previous books, and his Egyptologist contacts and friends, including the one who recommended approaching me, who had provided my address. That man, an expert on the transcription of papyri, is an acquaintance I've not seen in twenty years. The letter was followed by several emails. Dr Fong expressed gallant surprise that a woman of my great age should be 'computer-savvy'. In view of that unpromising start, I have no idea why I agreed to see him: was my curiosity aroused? I doubt it. I think it's simply that in winter my arthritis can be vicious, I don't get out

as much as I'd like and can experience cabin fever even here in London. Loneliness, of course, had nothing to do with it – no, I agreed to see the man because he pressed me, and I was bored.

These days I tend to spend winters in England, and summers either in America or elsewhere. Where I go and when I go now depends on no one but myself: this, as I'm always telling people, is a pleasant state of affairs. My journeyings depend on the current state of my arthritis – also on mood. Since it was January when we met, and the arthritis was in its winter ascendancy, Dr Fong came to my house in Highgate. It is an old and beautiful house, if overburdened with stairs, and it is set at the top of the highest hill above London. It has a fine view across the famous Highgate Cemetery, where people as diverse as Karl Marx and George Eliot are buried; I find this stupendous view, over burial crosses and guardian angels towards the towers of the new London, very useful. I can usually divert my guests' attention with its wonders for at least ten minutes, which gives me ample time to assess them. Dr Fong proved impatient, however. I hadn't got beyond early thirties, keen-eyed, modish hair, wearing a wedding ring, pity about his shoes, when, four minutes in, I found myself installed in my chair by the fire, Fong opposite me, notebook in hand and pencil poised. Between us, on a small table, lay a tape recorder. Without preamble, Dr Fong switched it on.

'Just say something, Miss Payne, so I can check sound levels . . . Great, that's fine. What an incredible room you have here! So many books, quite a library of them. And amazing paintings, I mean like *seriously* amazing. Is that a . . . could it be . . .? Wow, yes it is. Professor Yates did warn me, but even so. I see you keep a *shabti* figure on your desk. A very beautiful one too. Would it be—'

'A fake?'

'Genuine, surely?'

'The bazaar in Cairo. Bought in 1922, the year I first went to Egypt. One of the more unscrupulous dealers. I was a child. Eleven years old. Green in judgement. So, alas, no.'

I was not warming to this interviewer. *Game on*, I thought. I suspect Dr Fong came to the same conclusion – but then the *shabti* in question, one of the small faience figures made to serve an Egyptian king in the afterlife and placed in his tomb for an eternity of servitude, was genuine. I knew that, and Dr Fong knew I knew.



We fenced around for forty-five minutes. I may have divorced two husbands, buried a third, and generally led what has been described as a rackets life, but for the past two decades I've lived alone. I've reverted to the solitude of my childhood, and reacquired old habits, one of which is caution. I'm nervous with strangers and suspicious of them. I dislike taking others into my confidence and avoid doing so. As I've outlived most of the friends who *had* gained my trust, there are precious few confidantes these days. Dr Fong did not fail to point this out: he ran through a roll-call of eminent men, including all those involved in the astonishing discovery and excavation of Tutankhamun's tomb, all those that I first met in Cairo, as a child; those I knew at Luxor and the Valley of the Kings. Every last one of them was dead as a dodo. Drawing breath, he then described me as a unique living witness to the greatest archaeological discovery ever made, and to the extraordinary and historic events that galvanised Egyptology in the decade from 1922 to 1932 . . .

'No, 1935.' My mind had strayed elsewhere. The words were out before I could stop myself.

'Nineteen-thirty-five?' He gave me a puzzled look. 'Sorry – I don't follow. Howard Carter discovered Tutankhamun's tomb in November 1922. It was opened in the presence of his patron, Lord Carnarvon, later that same month. It took ten years to document, conserve and remove all the artefacts. The last of them left for the Egyptian Museum in Cairo in February 1932, Miss Payne. All done and dusted well before 1935.'

'Of course. Memory failure. I apologise.'

'Your memory seems fantastically good to me. If mine's in such good shape when I get to your age – *if* I do, of course – well, I reckon I'll be pleased.'

'You're too kind.'

'Am I missing something here? Nineteen-thirty-five? I'm not aware that . . . Could you be thinking of 1939, when Howard Carter died? I guess that must have been a significant date for you: the end of an era? You went to his funeral, I hear. Not too many people did. *Not* a well-attended departure. I was going to ask whether—'

'Another time, Dr Fong.'

'Hey, no need to be so formal. Call me Ben. Everyone calls me Ben.'



It took me a further half-hour to curtail the interview. As far as Dr Fong was concerned, I was merely a source of what journalists call ‘colour’, I’m sure; an old woman who might provide the odd anecdote or *aperçu* he could use. I could tell he was on the lookout for evidence of Alzheimer’s, or some other depressing variant of mental decay. He cannot have expected any revelations of significance, not from someone who’d been a mere child at the time. And if he had been expecting revelations, I intended to disappoint him: I’m still bound by ancient loyalties – he’d learn nothing of significance from me.

But I should have remembered how remorseless scholars can be: the questions were interminable. I tried everything – hauteur, old-lady vagueness, silence, even incipient tears; none of it washed. When he inserted a new tape in his machine, inspiration came at last. I produced my photograph albums. They are numerous and large. I felt sure that page upon page of faded sepia snaps would ensure a quick exit. They were taken with the Kodak box camera Miss Mack bought me in Cairo, first used on our pyramids expedition, then taken on to Luxor and the Valley of the Kings. It’s many years since I last looked at these photographs, and they tug at my heart.

I turned the pages of the first album. There were all the distinguished men whom I had known in another country, another era, another life, acquaintance with whom explained Dr Fong’s presence now. There were their wives and children. There were the places so central to my existence then: the Winter Palace Hotel on the banks of the Nile where Miss Mack and I stayed when we travelled on from Cairo to Luxor; Howard Carter’s house in the desert; and, just a mile or so away, the house where I stayed with Frances. It had been built by the Metropolitan Museum of Art shortly before the Great War. Its purpose was to house the team of archaeologists excavating in Egypt for the Met, several of whom were co-opted to work for the Earl of Carnarvon and Howard Carter, once the astonishing discovery of Tutankhamun’s tomb had been made.

The Metropolitan House – or the ‘American House’, as it was usually known – was at the centre of social life in the Valley area at that time; it was a hive of gossip and intrigue. But the photographs I’d taken conveyed nothing of the house’s immense size, or the magnificent desolation of its position, facing out across the desert, with



the crags of the Theban hills directly behind it, and behind them, hidden from view, the Valley of the Kings. My pictures had been taken from too close a perspective: all you could see were meaningless angles of walls, a fragment of window, a little segment of dome. The photographs were small, often poorly lit or slightly out of focus – yet they brought a lost world back to me. They unleashed a clamour so loud I was surprised Dr Fong could not hear it. Silently, I passed the album across. How the dead pester and beseech the living! How importunate they are.

‘Fascinating,’ said Dr Fong, turning the pages rapidly. ‘You know, I can never get over the clothes the archaeologists wore. Ninety degrees Fahrenheit at least, more in the Valley, and much more inside Tut’s tomb – and they’re kitted out in tweed suits, vests, neckties – how did they stand it? Is that Lord Carnarvon?’

‘It is.’

‘Thought I recognised the hat – you can’t exactly miss it.’

‘It’s a wide-awake hat.’

‘You’re kidding – I must make a note of that. Gives him the look of a Mississippi river-boat gambler I’ve always thought – was Carnarvon a bit of a dandy? Kind of vain, maybe? Autocratic, would you say?’

‘He could play the English milord when it suited him. Much of the time his manner was diffident. Are you asking me to describe him?’

‘I guess I am.’

‘He was – debonair.’

There was a silence. The tape faintly whirred. Dr Fong betrayed signs of impatience.

‘That’s *it*? Debonair?’ He peered at the tiny picture. ‘And the young girl next to him? It’s kind of hard to make people out – the pretty one, arm in arm with Howard Carter?’

‘Lady Evelyn Herbert. Lord Carnarvon’s daughter. She always accompanied her father to Egypt then, as you’ll know.’

‘Oh, right. Okay.’ Dr Fong glanced at his watch, and turned the page. He was now looking at a larger group portrait, a bevy of archaeologists lounging against the stone walls erected around the entrance to Tutankhamun’s tomb. He perked up at once. ‘Ah, now I recognise most of *these*. The Metropolitan Museum men. That’s Herbert Winlock – the one at the back, very high forehead, flamboyant bow tie? No mistaking *him*. I really admire his work: a



great archaeologist and a great writer too . . . That's Mace, and Lythgoe . . . and the man wearing breeches is Harry Burton? What a photographer! Magnificent. How he contrived those pictures in such appalling conditions, inside Tut's tomb, cramped conditions, inadequate light – it's astonishing.' He paused. When I didn't respond, I saw puzzlement again. 'You have *seen* Burton's photographs, right?'

'I was there when he took them. So, yes.'

'And these?' He flipped a page, scanned the images, and shook his head. 'No. This is new to me. I don't recognise anyone here . . .'

I leaned across to examine the picture. It had been taken on the steps outside the American House. Mrs Lythgoe, the senior wife, was speaking to one of the servants. Harry Burton's wife, Minnie, was wearing a long woolly garment designed to flatter her hips. Helen Winlock, who was dear to me, had been caught in a hand gesture I remembered her making a score of times a day: it indicated she had lost something and was in search of it: sometimes her spectacles, or her watercolours, sometimes a missing child.

'Wives,' I said. 'Living at the Metropolitan House those first seasons. Several of the archaeologists brought their families with them to Egypt.'

Dr Fong glanced down at the photograph. Mrs Winlock and her fellow Metropolitan wives merited twenty seconds. He turned a page. 'And these two children. Who are they?'

'The dark-haired girl on the right is Frances, the Winlocks' daughter . . .'

'And the one on the left?'

'That is me.'

There was a silence. Dr Fong muttered an expletive. 'You look – I guess I wasn't expecting . . . what's with the hair?'

'I was recovering from an illness. Long story. Not of any interest to you.'

'Sorry if I sounded rude – it caught me by surprise, that's all. You look—'

'I know how I looked, Dr Fong.'

Reaching across, I took the album from him and handed him a different one. 'Let me show you the pictures I took of the pyramids,' I said warmly. 'They'll be of interest, I know. Most people find them absolutely fascinating. A lost world, Dr Fong.'



If faded out-of-focus pictures of the pyramids in the 1920s did not dislodge him, nothing would. They are, in my experience, a soporific that's guaranteed. Add in a few animated old lady anecdotes inducing terminal ennui, and most visitors discover a pressing appointment. In less than five minutes Dr Fong again checked his watch; in another five, he produced his BlackBerry, consulted its screen and announced he must be going – forgotten a meeting, so interesting to hear my reminiscences, would make use of the invaluable insights I'd provided, privilege to meet me, would try to be in touch again, felt sure there was more I could contribute, but unfortunately had to leave . . .

Result. Within minutes he was hastening down my front steps and I was able to close the door on him. I stood in the shivery hall; it was still only mid-afternoon, but in London in January on an overcast day, with snow threatening, my house exists in a permanent and sepulchral twilight. I could feel the ghosts gathering. They're now as familiar with my house as I am. They like to cluster, especially by the stairs. Today their mood seemed amicable; it is not always so.

I returned to my sitting room. There, too, I could sense movement, excitement: something, perhaps Dr Fong's questions, perhaps the photographs, had caused disturbance. Sharp as the crack of a whip: electricity in the air.

