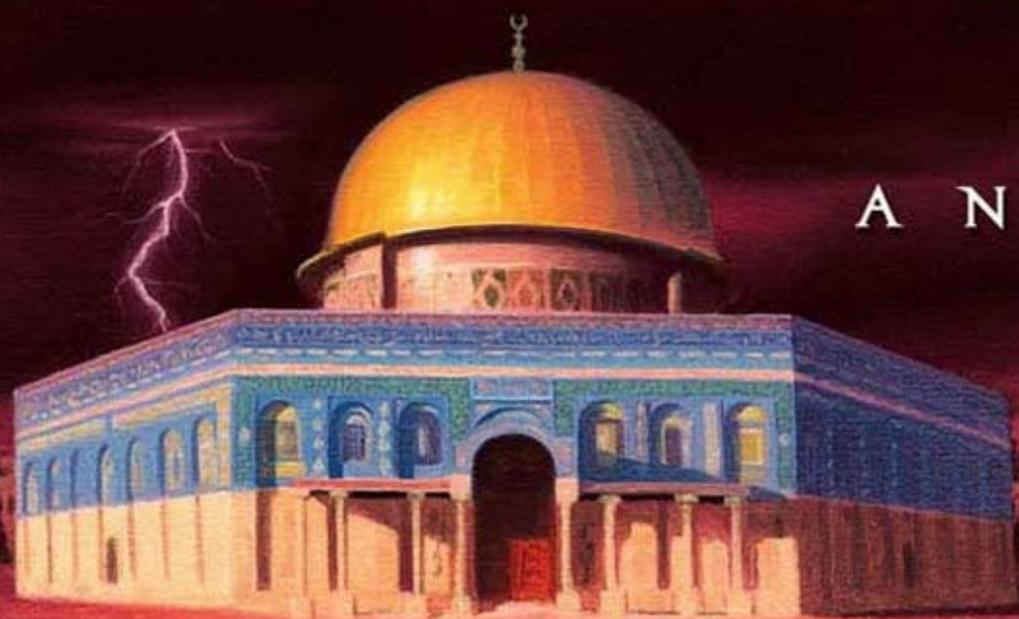


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ELIZABETH
PETERS



A NOVEL

A RIVER
IN THE SKY

A River in the Sky

Elizabeth Peters

 HarperCollins e-books

To Pat and Allen Ahearn

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FOREWORD

Thanks to recent negotiations with the heirs of Mrs. Emerson, the editor is able to present another volume of her memoirs. (If the reader is curious about the chronological placement of this particular volume, the editor notes that *A River in the Sky* chronicles events that occurred in 1910, and thus follows *Guardian of the Horizon* [1907–1908] and precedes *The Falcon at the Portal* [1911].) In this case Mrs. E. has gone to greater lengths than usual to conceal the identities of various persons mentioned. This may be attributed in part to the delicacy of the political situation at that time and in part to Mrs. Emerson's wish to avoid lawsuits. Students of this somewhat obscure period may be reminded of actual events and/or individuals. The editor does not feel it is her responsibility to verify or deny such theories.

Chapter One

Emerson looked up from the book he was reading.

“The Old Testament,” he remarked, “is a tissue of lies from start to finish.”

As I have said before, and never tire of repeating, my husband is the greatest Egyptologist of this or any other century. It cannot be denied, however, that he holds somewhat unorthodox opinions on certain subjects. Prejudiced he is not; his critical comments are applied indiscriminately to all the major world religions, and not a few of the minor ones. Ordinarily I do not bother to protest, since contradiction only inspires him to more outrageous flights of rhetoric. However, I had become bored with my own reading material—an article on negative verb forms in the latest issue of the *Zeitschrift für Aegyptische Sprache*—and considered what response was most likely to result in a refreshing discussion.

The weather was unusually warm even for August in Kent, and the roses in the garden outside Emerson’s study drooped dustily. This chamber, the library in point of fact, is one of the most comfortable rooms in the house, a pleasant clutter of books and papers sprinkled with the ashes from Emerson’s pipe and the hair shed by cats of various colors. We all tend to gather there; Emerson’s attempts to claim it as his own are sporadic and ineffectual. He only does it to stir up an argument when other sources fail.

The only other member of the family present that morning was Nefret, our adopted daughter. My son was presently on an archaeological excavation in Palestine; his Egyptian friend David, whom we regarded as one of us, had betaken himself to Yorkshire in order to be with his affianced bride, my niece Lia.

If I had been looking for support—which I was not, since I do not require assistance in my discussions with Emerson—I would have known I could expect no agreement from Nefret.

To look at her, one would have assumed Nefret to be a classic English beauty, fair-skinned and blue-eyed, with a glorious crown of golden-red hair. Yet her formative years had been spent in a remote spot in the western desert of Egypt, where the old gods were still worshipped, and she had served as High Priestess of Isis before we rescued her and brought her back to the land of her ancestors. Though I had endeavored to instruct her in the faith of those ancestors, I harbored no illusions as to my success. Early impressions are difficult to erase and from time to time she would say or do something that indicated she was more in sympathy with Emerson’s views than with mine. Her frequent visits to the little pyramid we had caused to be built in honor of a young man who had perished in her service might have been occasioned by respect and fond remembrance; but it would not have surprised me to learn that she sometimes addressed a prayer to one of the pagan deities mentioned in the

inscriptions. Curled up on the sofa, playing with one of the cats, she looked at me with an anticipatory smile.

I returned my attention to Emerson, whose smile was not so much anticipatory as provocative. I had decided on a flank attack rather than a direct assault.

“Good heavens, Emerson, are you reading the Bible? Are you feeling quite well?”

Emerson’s smile broadened into a grin that displayed a set of large white teeth.

“Nicely done, my dear. I assure you, my health has never been better.”

As if to verify the statement he rose to his feet and stretched. Muscles rippled across the breadth of his chest and along his arms. They were admirably displayed by his costume; his shirt was open at the throat and his sleeves rolled above the elbows. His thick black hair was becomingly disheveled and his blue eyes shone with sapphirine brilliance. The sight of Emerson’s splendid physical endowments never fails to stir strong emotions, but on this occasion I resisted the distraction since I was genuinely curious.

“Why are you reading the Bible, Emerson?”

“The answer to that question will become evident in due course, Peabody. Have you no comment to make on my original statement?”

“Well, as to that,” I replied, settling myself more comfortably, “you know as well as I do that the statement is, to say the least, inaccurate and exaggerated. Don’t tell me you have read the entire Old Testament. How far had you got?”

Emerson glanced down at the volume open on his desk. “Genesis and Exodus,” he admitted. “It gets damnably boring after that.”

“One does not read the Bible to be entertained, Emerson,” I said severely.

“Than why the devil does one read it?”

Before I could reply, an emphatic knock at the door preceded the appearance of Rose, who announced that luncheon was ready. Our very efficient housekeeper is allowed in Emerson’s study only when it reaches a stage of questionable hygiene; she gave it a critical look, pursed her lips, and shook her head.

Emerson saw the look. Rising in haste, he said, “Coming, Rose, coming at once.”

A formal meal, in such warm weather and when there were only three of us, was in my opinion a waste of time. Gargery, our butler, did not share this opinion, primarily because he seized every opportunity to listen and contribute to our conversation. (I do not encourage this, but Emerson has not the least notion of proper behavior with servants.) After serving cold ham and salad, Gargery inquired, “May I ask, sir and madam, whether you have had a letter from Master Ramses recently?”

As I had often told Gargery, our son had reached an age at which that childish title was inappropriate. The name was equally inappropriate, but Ramses had been given that appellation in infancy because of his imperious manner and the fact that his swarthy complexion and dark eyes and hair appeared more Egyptian than English. (I have sometimes been asked to account for this resemblance. I see no reason why I should.)

I replied with a rather curt negative, and Emerson, who had finished his ham and salad, asked, “What do you know about the Old Testament, Gargery?”

“It’s been a while since I dipped into the Good Book, sir,” Gargery admitted. “I remember David and Goliath, and the parting of the Red Sea, and a few other stories.”

“Stories is the word,” said Emerson. “There is not a jot of historical evidence for

any of them.”

This was aimed at me, not at Gargery, so of course I responded. “If it is history you want, you had better skip on to the books of Kings and Chronicles. The historical validity of the Exodus has been much debated—no, Emerson, I do not care to debate it now—but the lives of the kings of Israel and Judah are based on solid historical evidence.”

Emerson pushed his plate away and planted his elbows on the table—a deplorable habit of which I have not succeeded in breaking him. “Is that so, Peabody? Perhaps you would care to cite a few examples.”

Though I would never have admitted it to Emerson, it had been some time since I had dipped into the Old Testament. I promised myself I would do so immediately after luncheon. “Do your own research, Emerson. You wouldn’t take my word anyhow. Nefret, my dear, you haven’t eaten a thing. You seem a trifle out of sorts these days. Is something worrying you?”

The disingenuous attempt to change the subject succeeded. Emerson, who adores his adopted daughter, glanced at her in alarm.

“No. Well...I miss the boys. Not that you and the professor aren’t splendid company,” she added quickly. “But with David in Yorkshire and Ramses off in the wilds of Palestine...”

“You have no one to play with,” I suggested.

Nefret returned my smile. “I suppose that was how it sounded. Oh, it is perfectly understandable that David would rather be with Lia; they’re madly in love and it will be some time before they can be married. But why did Ramses go haring off to Palestine? He might at least have the decency to write.”

“Mr. Reisner’s offer to work with him at Samaria was a splendid opportunity,” I said. “And you know Ramses has never been a good correspondent.”

“Well, sir and madam, I don’t understand it either,” Gargery declared, serving plates of custard. “Egypt is where we always work. Why did Master Ramses go off to that heathenish place?”

“The adjective is singularly inappropriate, Gargery, since we are speaking of the Holy Land, sacred to three great world religions. And,” I added, “I cannot remember inviting your comments on the matter.”

Unperturbed by my rebuke, for he had heard similar remarks so often they had ceased to make an impression, Gargery declared, “I worry about him, madam, and that’s a fact. You know how he is.”

I did know how he was. Ramses had a habit, a propensity, one might say, for getting into trouble. It would take too many pages of this journal to compile a list of his adventures, which included being kidnapped off the top of a pyramid, being temporarily entombed in another, stealing a lion...But as I have said, the list is long.

Candor compels me to admit that certain of Ramses’s escapades were due in part to the activities of his father and myself, for our dedication to truth and justice had occasionally brought us into contact with various criminal elements—tomb robbers, forgers, a murderer or two, and even a Master Criminal. To do myself justice, I must add that I had done my best to protect him as only a mother can. Certain of his narrow escapes were unquestionably the result of his own recklessness, and although he had settled down a bit as he approached the official age of maturity—which he had

reached this past month—I had been forced to the conclusion that I was no longer in a position to control his actions. At least not when he was in a place where I could not get at him. It had occurred to me, upon occasion, to wonder whether Ramses had deliberately selected a place where I could not get at him.

“For your information, Gargery,” I said, “the site of Samaria was once the capital of the kings of Israel, after the united kingdom broke into two parts following the death of Solomon, Israel being the northern and Judah the southern. The city was subsequently conquered by...er...various conquerors, ending with the Romans. The Roman temple on the summit of the tell—as such sites are called, being the remains of one settlement atop another...”

As I had expected, my lecture succeeded in boring Gargery to such an extent that he cleared the table and removed himself. It also bored Nefret, who asked to be excused, and Emerson, who declared he knew that, Peabody, and left the room. I knew he was going to the library to look up the information I had given in the hope of finding me wrong. He would not. I had been careful to stick to generalities.

As a rule it is not difficult for me to read Emerson’s mind. However, speculate as I might, I was unable to account for his sudden interest in a subject that had hitherto roused only derision. I found time that day to refresh my memory of the biblical books I had mentioned. I did not doubt Emerson was reading them too, and I intended to be ready for him.

He did not refer to the subject again. When he informed me, the following morning, that he had invited two guests to join us for tea, my attempts to ascertain more information about them were met with evasion and, when I persisted, a flat-out refusal to say more. Rather than give him the satisfaction of demonstrating further interest, I did not pursue the matter, but I felt a certain foreboding. Emerson’s acquaintances include Arab sheikhs, Nubian brigands, thieves of various nationalities, and one or two forgers.

I was therefore pleasantly surprised when the guests proved to be unarmed and harmless. They were an odd pair, however. Major the Honorable George Morley appeared to be in his late thirties or early forties. Of medium height, with thinning brown hair, he carried himself like the soldier he had been, but his well-tailored clothes failed to conceal the fact that the life of a country gentleman had thickened his waistline and certain other parts of his anatomy.

In contrast to the solidity of Morley, the other man gave the impression that a strong gale would blow him off his feet and send him floating across the landscape. His receding hair might have been white or very fair. His beard was of the same indeterminate shade, so that his face looked as if it were framed by a halo that had slipped its moorings. His eyes were of that pale shade of blue that, if physiognomists are to be believed, are characteristic of mystics and fanatics.

His name was equally remarkable. Morley presented him as the Reverend Plato Panagopolous. His garments were of somber black and he wore a clerical collar. I asked, with my usual tact, to which particular church or denomination he belonged. I had to repeat the question before he replied: “I serve the Lord God of Hosts in all his manifestations.”

He contributed little to the conversation after that, except for murmurs of vague agreement when someone commented on the beauty of the August weather or the

prospect of rain, but from time to time his gaze focused on me or Nefret, and a singularly sweet smile warmed his thin face.

Pouring tea and offering plates of biscuits and cucumber sandwiches, I wondered what the devil Emerson was up to now. As a rule he avoided English squires and otherworldly eccentrics like the plague. Nefret, as puzzled as I—and as bored—gave me a questioning look. I smiled and gave my head a little shake. “Be patient,” was my unspoken message. “Emerson is bound to burst out before long.”

I confess, however, that I was not prepared for the precise nature of the outburst.

“The Old Testament,” said Emerson, fixing Morley with a piercing stare, “is a tissue of lies from start to finish.”

“Really, Emerson,” I exclaimed. “That is very rude to our guests, who probably take quite a different view of Scripture.”

Morley laughed and waved a plump pink hand. “Not at all, Mrs. Emerson. I fully expected some such view from the Professor. I am here to change his views, if possible.”

“Proceed,” said Emerson, folding his arms.

But before Mr. Morley could do so, Panagopolous leaped to his feet and began speaking in tongues.

Genuine, actual languages, that is to say. I recognized Hebrew and Latin, and what sounded like Greek; but his speech was so disjointed and his voice so high-pitched I understood only a few words. He might have been the reincarnation of one of the Old Testament prophets: eyes blazing, hair and beard bristling, arms flailing.

“What the devil,” Emerson exclaimed. “He is about to have a seizure.”

“Don’t touch him,” Morley said. “He is not ill. It will pass.”

Sure enough, the spate of speech stopped as suddenly as it had come on. The reverend’s bristling hair and beard settled back into place. He resumed his chair, and took a biscuit.

“Did you understand what he said?” Morley asked coolly.

“Gibberish,” Emerson said, even more coolly.

I realized I was staring rudely (if understandably) at the reverend, who was placidly munching his chocolate biscuit.

“Languages are not my husband’s specialty,” I said, getting a grip on myself. “I recognized a few words—names, rather. He referred, I believe, to the city of David and the conquest of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.”

“Very good, Mrs. Emerson.” Morley beamed at me and patted his hands together in applause.

Emerson glowered at the reverend, who was working his way through the plate of biscuits with calm concentration.

“And is this your evidence?” Emerson demanded. “The ravings of a religious fanatic?”

The parlor door opened a few inches. Expecting to find that Gargery, frustrated in his attempt to hear through a heavy wooden panel, had eased it open, I was disconcerted to see Horus squeeze through the opening.

We have a good many cats, too many, as some might say. They were all descendants of a pair of Egyptian felines we had brought back with us from Egypt, and they had bred true to type, being handsomely brindled animals with large ears and a

high degree of intelligence. Horus was undoubtedly one cat too many. He was a bully and a philanderer, whose contempt for us was matched by our detestation of him. For some unaccountable reason Nefret doted on him.

Apparently he had learned how to open doors. After an insolent survey of the persons present he sauntered across the room and jumped up onto the sofa next to Nefret, shoving her aside so he could sprawl out.

“What a handsome cat,” said the reverend, whose chair was beside the sofa. “Here, puss, puss, good puss. Would you like a biscuit?”

“Chocolate is not good for cats,” I said. The comment came too late; with a sudden lunge, Horus snatched the biscuit from the reverend’s fingers and crunched it up, sprinkling damp crumbs over the crimson velvet upholstery of the sofa.

Emerson had had enough. Breathing heavily through his nose, he fixed Morley with a hard stare. “I agreed to listen to your proposition, Mr. Morley—against my better judgment—because you claimed to have solid documentary evidence supporting it. Thus far that evidence has not been forthcoming.”

“This prospectus,” said Morley, removing a handsomely bound booklet from his breast pocket, “contains a photograph of the scroll I mentioned when we last—”

“Photograph, bah,” said Emerson. “I would have to see the scroll itself.”

“It is in extremely fragile condition, Professor, and cannot be carried about. Several learned authorities have inspected it and pronounced it genuine. You may communicate directly with them if you like.”

“Well, I don’t like,” Emerson declared. “So-called experts can be hoodwinked as easily as other men. Anyhow, I have no interest whatsoever in biblical legends, or in the Israelites, who were treacherous, bloodthirsty sinners, turning on one another whenever they ran out of Amalekites, Jebusites, Philistines, and Moabites to slaughter. Furthermore, the scheme you propose is unacceptable on several grounds.”

“What scheme?” I asked.

I might as well have saved my breath. Having regained his, after his long diatribe, Emerson continued. “You cannot be unaware of the unsettled state of the area in question. Your scheme may—almost certainly will—inflame conditions that endanger the peace of the entire region.”

I got one word out—“What”—before Morley interrupted. The narrowing of his orbs indicated rising temper but—I do him credit—though his voice was a trifle loud, his speech was measured.

“With all due respect, Professor Emerson, that is only your opinion. I have permission from the authorities to carry out my scheme.” He sipped genteelly at his tea.

“What scheme?” I demanded.

I can, when occasion demands, raise my voice to a pitch that is difficult to ignore. Morley started and burst into a fit of coughing—having, I deduced, swallowed the wrong way. Emerson, who knew the futility of ignoring it, replied in a tone almost as vehement as mine.

“The damned fool is mounting an expedition to Jerusalem, to look for the Ark of the Covenant.”

THE ENSUING SILENCE WAS broken by Nefret's melodious chuckle. "I do beg your pardon," she murmured, trying to keep a straight face.

"Your derision is justified," said Emerson. "People have been looking for the damned thing for centuries. They are welcome to keep on looking for it, insofar as I am concerned; it is a harmless enough fantasy. That is not my point. My point is—"

"You have made it, Professor." Morley placed his cup carefully on the table and rose to his feet. "I will take no more of your time."

Though as a rule I deplore Emerson's bad manners, I was as anxious as he to get our visitors out of the house. I had fully expected the reverend to fall writhing to the floor during his initial outburst. His present look was almost as disconcerting; looking up from his pensive contemplation of the (empty) biscuit plate, he inquired, "Are we going now?"

I accompanied our guests into the hall. Morley took his hat from Gargery, who was hovering, and turned to me.

"If the Professor should change his mind—"

"He will be sure to inform you," I said. "Good afternoon."

We shook hands, and I offered mine to the reverend. He met it with a surprisingly firm grip and a sweet, childlike smile.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Emerson. Those were excellent biscuits!"

Gargery followed me back to the parlor, so closely he was almost treading on my heels, and began clearing away the tea things with glacial slowness.

Emerson went to the sideboard and poured the whiskey.

"Here you are, Peabody. We both deserve it, I believe, after that interview."

"He can't have been serious," Nefret exclaimed. "Why on earth did you bother listening to such an absurd proposal?"

"I had my reasons," said Emerson. He gave me a sidelong glance. "They were excellent reasons. That is all I can tell you."

"Can, or will?" I inquired. A few sips of the genial beverage had restored my composure and a few ideas were simmering in my head.

"Can," said Emerson, with considerable emphasis.

"Sworn to secrecy, were you?"

"Quite," said Emerson, giving me a meaningful look.

"Ah," I said.

"What on earth are you two talking about?" Nefret asked.

"I am waiting for your Aunt Amelia to tell ME what I am talking about," said Emerson.

"Oh, very well," I said. "Far be it from me to make you break your sworn word. You will not be guilty of that error if *I* tell *you*."

"Precisely," said Emerson, no longer attempting to conceal his smile.

"Please do, madam," Gargery exclaimed. "I can't stand the suspense much longer."

There was no use ordering Gargery out of the room; he would only listen at the door.

"Confound it," I muttered. "Why can't they leave us alone? I suppose the meeting occurred last week, when you said you went up to London to work at the British Museum. What were you given this time? I don't want any more cursed emeralds."

“I was given nothing, Peabody. Not even the threat of a title. Apparently the royal family only pays on delivery.”

“Royal family,” said Gargery in dying tones. “Madam...”

I addressed Nefret instead of Gargery. She had been courteous enough to refrain from questions, though her wide blue eyes indicated her interest. “Some years ago we were able to be of service to her late Majesty in a delicate family matter. Upon its successful conclusion she summoned Emerson to Windsor and offered him a knighthood—which of course he refused.”

I ignored the groan from that consummate snob Gargery and went on. “She then presented him with that vulgarly ostentatious emerald ring which you may have seen in my jewel box. Apparently she passed on the story to her heirs, in case another delicate situation arose. This delicate situation, one may deduce, inspired the otherwise inexplicable visit today from Mr. Morley. Now, Emerson, it is your turn. I hope His Majesty doesn’t expect you to go looking for the Ark yourself.”

One of the kittens wandered in and jumped onto Nefret’s lap. Stroking it, she remarked, “Does it exist? As I recall, from my studies at the vicarage, the Ark contained the tablets given to Moses on Mount Sinai.”

“The Ten Commandments,” I said helpfully.

“Yes, Aunt Amelia. But I thought the Professor didn’t believe in Moses. Or the Exodus. Or—”

“That doesn’t mean the fabled Ark is pure fiction,” Emerson replied, taking, as was his habit, the opposing side. “We know that Jerusalem was besieged and overrun by the Babylonians, who carried away its residents into captivity. There was time—”

“So you admit that not all the Old Testament is a tissue of lies,” I said. “The fall of Jerusalem is mentioned in Second Kings, if my memory serves.”

“It is also described in the Babylonian annals,” Emerson retorted. “An historical source, Peabody. As I was saying, there was time during the siege for the inhabitants to conceal their greatest treasures. The Ark was only one of them, though the most important. There were vessels of gold—an altar, candelabra, incense vessels, and so on. Who is to say they may not still lie hidden under the ruins of the Temple?”

“Do you believe that, Emerson?”

“Certainly not,” said Emerson, tiring of his teasing. “Jerusalem was taken and sacked many times. If the Babylonians didn’t seize the temple treasures, somebody else did. The Arch of Titus in Rome shows Roman soldiers carrying away some of the treasures, including a menorah. The Ethiopians claim the Ark was taken there by the son of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. People have looked for it in Ireland, at Mount Sinai, and for all I know in Birmingham. Even if I believed there were the possibility of such a discovery, I would not countenance an expedition by an untrained amateur in a particularly sensitive part of the world.”

“Gargery,” I said in some exasperation. “Will you please finish clearing the tea things away? The kitten is about to knock over the cream jug.”

Nefret removed the cat, and Gargery, who had abandoned all pretense of carrying out his duties, exclaimed, “Then why don’t you and madam go looking for the treasure, sir? You’d do a proper job of it.”

“Kindly stay out of this, Gargery,” I said. “It is difficult enough to keep this family on track without your digressions. I cannot imagine what the Ark of the Covenant has

to do with any of this, or why the British government should take an interest in the plans of an adventurer like Morley.”

“Would you care to have me explain, Peabody?” Emerson inquired in a devastatingly mild voice.

“That is what I have been asking you to do, Emerson.”

“Hmph,” said Emerson. “I presume you are familiar with the present uneasy political situation in the Middle East?”

“I am not, sir,” Gargery said eagerly.

“Nor am I,” Nefret admitted.

“You really ought to make an attempt to keep up with modern history,” I said. Emerson, who had opened his mouth, closed it.

“Palestine is of course part of the once-mighty Ottoman Empire, which during the sixteenth century of the Christian era controlled the entire Middle East, North Africa, and parts of eastern Europe,” I explained. “Like all empires founded on conquest and injustice, it could not endure; gradually its territories were lost and at the present time only the support of Britain and France, who fear the collapse of the aging giant would open the doors of the East to Germany and Russia, keeps the sultan on his throne in Constantinople.”

“Very poetically expressed,” said Emerson, who had been waiting for my breath to give out. “To look at it another way, Nefret and Gargery, the aging giant is rotten at the core. Provinces like Syria and Palestine are racked with poverty and corruption. Britain and France don’t give a curse about the misery of the people; what concerns them is that in the past decade or so, German influence in the region has increased enormously. When Wilhelm the Second visited Istanbul and Jerusalem, he was greeted as a conquering hero. The Germans are constructing a railroad line from Damascus to Mecca, and one is entitled to assume that they aren’t doing it for altruistic reasons. If war should break out—”

“War!” Nefret cried. “And Ramses is there, in the thick of it?”

“Stop worrying about your brother,” Emerson said impatiently. “There won’t be a war, not for a few more years. But it’s coming, and Germany is already making preparations—such as that railroad. Very useful for moving troops and supplies.”

This speech was presumably an attempt to reassure Nefret. Not surprisingly it failed. “War or no war, if there is any way Ramses can get in trouble, he will,” she said vehemently. “If the situation is so unstable—”

“Nonsense,” I said. “Samaria—the modern Sebaste—is nowhere near the area where the Germans are working, and Mr. Reisner is a responsible individual. Emerson considers him one of the most qualified of the younger generation of Egyptologists.”

“Hmph.”

“Or would, if he considered any other Egyptologists qualified,” I emended.

“He’s not so bad,” Emerson admitted. “Though one would suppose he had enough on his plate with his excavations at Giza and in the Sudan, without taking on another responsibility in an area he knows nothing about—”

“Reisner would argue that the basic techniques of excavation are the same in all parts of the world,” I said.

“Well, well,” said Emerson. “Hmph.”

The ambiguity of this response ought to have raised alarm bells. It is not like

Emerson to be ambiguous. In my defense I must say that I was more concerned with calming Nefret. “George Reisner is a mature, dedicated individual who lives only for his work. Not even Ramses can get in trouble while he is in Reisner’s charge.”

FROM MANUSCRIPT H

Ramses had been aware for some time that he was being followed. The night sky was overcast and the grove of olive trees through which he walked cast heavy shadows, but the faint sounds were unmistakable. He had been listening for them. He slowed his pace, ears pricked. When it happened, the attack was sudden and unexpected, for it came not from behind him but from close ahead. A slight stirring of the air and a change in the shape of the shadow across the path gave him just enough warning to duck. It turned out to be a bad move; instead of hitting him in the chest or shoulder, the missile struck the side of his head, hard enough to make him lose his balance and fall to hands and knees. Though dizzy and disoriented, he knew better than to stay where he was. He crawled off the path and among the gnarled trunks of the trees, where he lay still, listening and waiting for his head to clear.

Not a sound, except for the normal night noises.

“Damn,” Ramses said softly.

The pattern was like that of the last attack—a missile flung, a hasty withdrawal. The only difference was that this time there had been two of them, one following, to distract his attention, the other waiting in hiding. He had hoped this time to lay hands on the assailant, or at least get a look at him.

He returned to the path and switched on his torch. His lips pursed in a silent whistle when he saw the size of the stone that had struck him. It was as large as his head. If it had hit him full in the face...A deliberate attempt at murder?

Probably not, he decided. The fellow’s aim wasn’t very good, and if he had homicide on his mind he would have chosen more lethal weapons. The first stone had hit him in the back, hard enough to get his attention but doing little damage.

He picked up the stone and went on his way without encountering any living creature except a few of the village dogs. When he emerged from the trees he saw the lights in the houses of the village of Sebaste. There weren’t many lighted windows; people in this part of the world went to bed early to save costly lamp oil. The brightest lights came from the house the Samaria crew had rented for the season. Reisner was still at work. Ramses stopped outside the door and after searching his pockets found a grubby handkerchief with which he wiped the blood off his cheek.

When he went in, his superior didn’t look up.

“You’ve been a while,” he remarked, adding a note to one of the papers on the table before him.

“Sorry.”

Clarence Fisher, Reisner’s second in command, was lying on the divan. He sat up, stretching. “What’s that you’ve got there?”

I might have known, Ramses thought, that he’d focus on an artifact instead of asking, “What happened to you?” The cut had stopped bleeding, but his cheek was smeared with dried blood, his clothes were dusty, and his hair was festooned with

dried leaves. He handed Fisher the stone and sank into a chair.

“It’s from the dig,” Fisher said, examining the remains of ornamentation on one side of the stone. “Why were you there at this time of night?”

“I wasn’t. Someone pitched that at me a few minutes ago, when I was walking through the olive grove on my way here.”

Reisner put his pen down and leaned back in his chair. His eyes moved over Ramses’s disheveled form. “Not again!” he said.

“Sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry.” Reisner’s sudden grin bared a large number of teeth. “The remark sounded somewhat callous. Were you injured?”

“Oh dear,” Fisher exclaimed. “I fear I was also negligent in failing to inquire.”

The two of them converged on Ramses. Reisner pushed the matted hair away from Ramses’s temple and ran expert fingers over the area. Most field archaeologists had to know something about medical treatment; accidents on a dig were not uncommon.

“You’ll have a nice big lump tomorrow,” Reisner said coolly. “How many fingers am I holding up?”

“I don’t have a concussion, sir.”

“I expect you are only too familiar with the symptoms.”

Ramses couldn’t tell from his superior’s expression whether that had been meant as criticism, sarcasm, or a simple statement of fact.

“Yes, sir,” he said.

“You don’t have to keep calling me sir.”

“Habit,” Ramses said. “Hard to break.”

He got another of those toothy grins. “I understand. I still have to fight the tendency to address your dad that way.”

Reisner went back to his makeshift desk, took out his pipe, and began filling it. Fisher, clucking remorsefully, handed Ramses a glass, which the latter accepted with a nod of thanks. Unlike his parents, who celebrated the end of the workday with a whiskey and soda—or two—his current supervisor kept a scanty supply of liquor for medicinal purposes only. Not very good liquor, either, Ramses thought, sipping.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, while Reisner fussed with his pipe and Fisher rummaged in the box of medical supplies. The small shabby room, the best the village had to offer, was illumined only by two flickering oil lamps. The gloom hid the ramshackle furnishings, such as they were, and the evidence of what his mother would have described as typical male untidiness—a pair of stockings draped over a chair, papers spilling out of the rough boxes they used for filing documents.

Reisner lit his pipe and puffed contentedly. “You went out tonight in the hope of provoking another attack.”

“Well—yes, in a way. But I only wanted—”

“To find out whether the first attack was an aberration or part of a pattern. Fair enough. If there is trouble brewing we need to know. Have you any idea what could be behind this?”

“No. Perhaps you would prefer that I resign,” Ramses said.

“What the hell do you want from me, an apology?” Reisner clamped his teeth down on the stem of his pipe. Then he said suddenly, “You probably think I’ve been a little hard on you these past weeks.”

“No, sir.” The question almost surprised him into a truthful answer. Ramses was used to criticism. His father was a hard taskmaster; his frequent outbursts of temper had earned him the Egyptian title of Father of Curses. But Emerson doled out praise as readily as blame, and his shouts of laughter were as frequent as his curses.

Fisher let out a whinny of amusement. “Don’t take it the wrong way, Ramses. George is afraid your mother will scold him if anything happens to you.”

Ramses’s jaw dropped. “What does my mother have to do with this?”

“He promised her he’d keep you out of mischief,” Fisher said, with a smile that held a certain amount of malice.

It would have been hard to say who was more outraged, Reisner or Ramses. Ramses was too infuriated to speak, which was just as well. Reisner gave Fisher a hard stare. Then he let out a sudden bark of laughter.

“The truth is,” he said, “your father intimidates me, but your mother absolutely terrifies me.”

Fisher joined in his laughter. Ramses was not amused. “With all respect, sir, I am not a child.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, don’t be so touchy,” Reisner said irritably. “If I had any complaints about you or your work you would have heard them. All I’m trying to do is find out what the hell is going on. We had no such problems last year. You are the only one of us who has been physically attacked. It smacks of a personal vendetta.”

“But I was here last year too,” Ramses pointed out. “And I’ll be damned if I can think of anything I’ve done lately to arouse resentment.”

“I can’t think of anything either,” Reisner admitted. “You’re as familiar with the mores and sensibilities of Middle Easterners as I am.”

“More so,” Fisher murmured.

Reisner acknowledged the truth of the statement with a wry smile. “Have you any suggestions, Ramses?”

Ramses shrugged. “Somebody doesn’t like my face. I’m not trying to make light of the situation,” he added. “It’s just that I haven’t any sensible explanation.”

They sat in silence for a time. Finally Reisner said with a sigh, “Neither have I. Just avoid solitary strolls from now on, will you? And—er—you needn’t mention these incidents when you write the family.”

“I’ve no intention of doing so.”

“Good. Put some alcohol on that cut before you go to bed.”

It was a dismissal, which Ramses was happy to accept. Lying awake on the hard cot, he went over the conversation and began to see the humor in it. He wasn’t the only one under his mother’s metaphorical thumb. It was a large thumb attached to a very long arm.

Something else struck him now that he had leisure to think rationally. A personal vendetta implied a personal enemy, but it needn’t be a new one. He had acquired a few over a short and misspent life; his parents had acquired even more. Did one of them bear a grudge strong enough to follow him here? He began going over the list but fell asleep before he had got halfway through.

I DID NOT DOUBT that Nefret's concern for her brother was genuine, if unfounded, but I suspected she was exaggerating her distress in order to get her own way. Owing to Emerson's obduracy we had not settled on our plans for the winter season. Having been banned from the Valley of the Kings by the Antiquities Service, Emerson refused to accept any other site, though several had been offered him. He had spoken vaguely of returning to Nubia, where we had excavated before. Nefret did not want to go back to Nubia. (Neither did I.)

"Well," she declared, "I don't really give a curse about the Ark of the Covenant or Major Morley. I am worried about Ramses. You know how he—"

"Yes," I said, with a sigh. "I do know."

"I am going to write to him at once." Nefret's chin set in an expression I knew only too well. "And demand that he reply by return mail."

"That may take weeks," I said.

"Then the sooner someone gets at it, the better."

She closed the door behind her with ominous softness.

"Now then," I said, fixing Emerson with a stern look. "Out with it. You have not told me everything."

"I didn't want Nefret to hear."

"Why not?"

Emerson got up from his desk and tiptoed to the door. That is to say, he was under the impression that he was tiptoeing. Seizing the handle, he flung the door open, peered suspiciously into the hall, and closed the door before returning to his chair.

"What you know of the matter thus far, Peabody, might be deduced by any informed person. What I am about to tell you is a state secret, known only to a few. It must go no further."

Emerson's is not a countenance that lends itself to deception. The furrowing of his noble brow, the slight compression of his well-cut lips, and, most particularly, the movement of his hand to his chin, which he is wont to stroke when in thought, indicated that he was in deadly earnest.

"You have my word, Emerson," I replied, as earnestly. "And may I add that the confidence you have displayed in me...I will say no more."

"Indeed?" The sobriety of Emerson's countenance relaxed into a smile. "Well, my dear, I take you at your word. To answer your question: Morley is an additional complication to a witches' brew of a situation. If he starts digging around the Temple Mount he is likely to stir up trouble with the Jews and the Moslems, both of whom consider that a holy site. Someone needs to keep an eye on him and try to prevent him from doing something stupid."

"And that someone is you?"

"I have a legitimate excuse for protesting his activities, Peabody, on purely professional grounds. He's bound to make a mess of the excavation, but until he does so there is no legal way of preventing him from going out there. What concerns the government is another matter entirely. The fact is, I spent only a few minutes with His Majesty. After the usual exchange of courtesies he left me to the Director of Military Intelligence and another individual, whose name was never mentioned."

"How extraordinary."

"It was a most extraordinary conversation, Peabody. These intelligence people—"

well, you know how they are, seeing plots and conspiracies all over the place. It seems there have been rumors of an uprising—not a violent affair like the Mahdist Revolt in the Sudan, but a carefully planned long-range project that may be years in the making. The object is the expulsion of foreigners from the Middle East and the creation of an Islamic state in Syria-Palestine.”

“Expulsion?” I repeated. “That is a rather tame word. Are you talking about a jihad?”

“It may come to that eventually, Peabody. At the present time, military intelligence is chiefly concerned with the part Germany is playing in the region. It has been ten years since the All-Highest, as his fawning subjects call the Kaiser, visited Damascus and Jerusalem and declared himself the defender of Islam. The Turks aren’t naive enough to believe his high-flown rhetoric, but they will use him to serve their own purposes. German agents are swarming all over the region, thinly disguised as explorers, engineers—”

“And archaeologists?”

Emerson nodded, and I exclaimed, “We are doing the same, of course. Archaeologists make excellent spies. Please don’t tell me that George Reisner is secretly working for British intelligence.”

“Then I won’t. Come now, Peabody. In the first place, Reisner is American, with no loyalties to Britain. In the second place, he is the least likely individual of my acquaintance to let politics distract him from his work. Speaking of distraction, Peabody, you’ve done it again. Do you want to know why the War Office is interested in Major Morley?”

“I suppose they suspect him of being a German spy,” I said with a sniff.

Emerson’s superior smile vanished. “Curse it, Peabody, how did you know that?”

“Logical deduction, Emerson. The War Office instigated Morley’s visit to us; the War Office doesn’t give a curse about inept excavations; the War Office is obsessed with spies; ergo, the War Office suspects Morley of being one. A spy, that is to say. Utter nonsense, of course. I trust you informed them to that effect?”

“I haven’t had a chance to do so as yet. I had planned to go up to London tomorrow.”

“I will go with you.”

“You have not been invited, Peabody.”

“Nevertheless, I will go.”

“Logical deduction informed me that you would say so,” said Emerson.

WE CAUGHT AN EARLY TRAIN next morning. Finding ourselves alone in a first-class carriage, Emerson took advantage of the opportunity to explain to me the organization of the military intelligence services, and the meaning of various confusing initials. The DMO was the Director of Military Operations, which had, at the present time, several subsidiary branches. MO2 was the branch assigned to cover Europe and the Ottoman Empire, and the only one that concerned us. Emerson would have gone on to tell me about the other branches, but fortunately several passengers got into the carriage at our next stop and refused to listen to Emerson’s strong hints that they go away. In fact I

had heard all I needed to hear. Men like to create unnecessary organizations and give them impressive or mysterious names; this usually ends in increased confusion, and should therefore be ignored.

The new War Office building was on an imposing height in Whitehall, across from the old Admiralty. Emerson was expected, for he had telegraphed earlier. I was not expected. There was some little discussion, which I ignored. I had worn my second-best summer hat, trimmed with roses, and a new costume of crimson silk (crimson being Emerson's favorite color), and I suppose I made a rather unusual figure in that bastion of male supremacy. The men, even the clerks, might have ordered their somber black suits and their gray cravats from the same tailor and haberdasher.

Since Emerson refused to budge a step without me, MO2, and even the DMO, were forced to concede. An extremely nervous young person escorted us to an impressive office on the second floor, where we were met by an equally nervous young secretary. He began twittering at us but was almost instantaneously replaced by the DMO himself, General David Spencer, who came bursting out of his office.

"Mrs. Emerson, I presume," he said, with a (very) slight bow. "I was not expecting you."

I studied him with some interest, since I had never met a DMO before. A long, sagging chin was more or less balanced by an unusually high forehead. Under heavy brows a pair of muddy brown eyes regarded me without plea sure.

"I believe I can provide a useful viewpoint," I explained, switching my parasol from my right hand to my left and offering the former. "I felt it my duty as a loyal servant of the Crown to be present."

A poorly suppressed gurgle of amusement from Emerson rather destroyed the solemnity of my statement and wrung a critical look from Spencer.

"Come in, then," he said grudgingly.

There was another person in the office, a slight, unimposing young man with protuberant blue eyes and a brown mustache. He rose when I entered and politely held a chair for me. I assumed he was the unnamed gentleman to whom Emerson had referred. By that time I had become a trifle impatient with unnecessary mystery, so I introduced myself.

"Mrs. Emerson. How do you do?"

"This," said Spencer, forced into feeble civility, "is Mr. Smith."

"No, it isn't," I said, arranging my skirts and my parasol. "His name is Tushingham, and I met him two years ago following a lecture he gave at the Royal Academy of Science. How are your botanical studies progressing, Mr. Tushingham?"

Over a chorus of snorts from Spencer and chuckles from Emerson, Tushingham said, "I did not presume to assume that you would remember me, Mrs. Emerson. Our encounter was fleeting, to say the least."

"You mean you hoped I would not remember you. Never fear, Mr. Tushingham. My discretion is well known. Now let us not waste time, you probably have other matters to attend to and I mean to do a little shopping while I am in town. Major Morley is not a German agent."

The general dropped heavily into a chair and stared at me. Tushingham seated himself and stared at Emerson.

"Does the Professor agree?"