

Boothby Guy

Pharos, The Egyptian: A Romance



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PREFACE

BEING A LETTER FROM SIR WILLIAM BETFORD, OF BAMPTON ST. MARY, IN DORSETSHIRE, TO GEORGE TREVELYAN, OF LINCOLN'S INN FIELDS, LONDON

"My dear Trevelyan: Never in my life have I been placed in such an awkward, not to say invidious, position. I am, as you know, a plain man, fond of a plain life and plain speaking, and yet I am about to imperil that reputation by communicating to you what I fancy you will consider the most extraordinary and unbelievable intelligence you have ever received in your life. For my own part I do not know what to think. I have puzzled over the matter until I am not in a position to judge fairly. You must, therefore, weigh the evidence, first for us both. For pity's sake, however, do not decide hastily. *In dubiis benigniora semper sunt præferenda*, as they used to say in our school days, must be our motto, and by it we must abide at any hazards. As far as I can see, we are confronted with one of the saddest and at the same time one of the most inexplicable cases ever yet recorded on paper. Reduced to its proper factors it stands as follows: Either Forrester has gone mad and dreamed it all, or he is sane and has suffered as few others have done in this world. In either case he is deserving of our deepest pity. In one way only are we fortunate. Knowing the man as we do, we are in a position to estimate the value of the accusations he brings against himself. Of one thing I am convinced – a more honourable being does not walk this earth. Our acquaintance with him is of equal length. We were introduced to him, and to each other, on one and the same occasion, upward of twelve years ago; and during that time I know I am right in saying neither of us ever had reason to doubt his word or the honour of a single action. Indeed, to my mind he had but one fault, a not uncommon one in these latter days of the nineteenth century. I refer to his somewhat morbid temperament and the consequent leaning toward the supernatural it produced in him.

"As the world has good reason to remember, his father was perhaps the most eminent Egyptologist our century has seen; a man whose whole mind and being was impregnated with a love for that ancient country and its mystic past. Small wonder, therefore, that the son should have inherited his tastes and that his life should have been influenced by the same peculiar partiality. While saying, however, that he had a weakness for the supernatural, I am by no means admitting that he was what is vulgarly termed a spiritualist. I do not believe for an instant that he ever declared himself so openly. His mind was too evenly balanced, and at the same time too healthy to permit such an enthusiastic declaration of his interest. For my part, I believe he simply inquired into the matter as he would have done into, shall we say, the Kinetic theory of gases, or the history of the ruined cities of Mashonaland, for the purpose of satisfying his curiosity and of perfecting his education on the subject. Having thus made my own feelings known to you, I will leave the matter in your hands, confident that you will do him justice, and will proceed to describe how the pathetic record of our friend's experiences came into my possession.

"I had been hunting all day and did not reach home until between half-past six and seven o'clock. We had a house full of visitors at the time, I remember, some of whom had been riding with me, and the dressing-gong sounded as we dismounted from our horses at the steps. It was plain that if

we wished to change our attire and join the ladies in the drawing-room before dinner was announced, we had no time to lose. Accordingly we departed to our various rooms with all possible speed.

"There is nothing pleasanter or more refreshing after a long day in the saddle than a warm bath. On this particular occasion I was in the full enjoyment of this luxury when a knocking sounded at the door. I inquired who was there.

"Me, sir – Jenkins,' replied my servant. 'There is a person downstairs, sir, who desires to see you.'

"To see me at this hour,' I answered. 'What is his name, and what does he want?'

"His name is Silver, sir,' the man replied; and then, as if the information might be put forward as some excuse for such a late visit, he continued: 'I believe he is a kind of foreigner, sir. Leastways, he's very dark, and don't speak the same, quite, as an Englishman might do.'

"I considered for a moment. I knew of no person named Silver who could have any possible reason for desiring to see me at seven o'clock in the evening.

"Go down and inquire his business,' I said, at length. 'Tell him I am engaged to-night; but if he can make it convenient to call in the morning, I will see him.'

"The man departed on his errand, and by the time he returned I had reached my dressing-room once more.

"He is very sorry, sir,' he began, as soon as he had closed the door, 'but he says he must get back to Bampton in time to catch the 8.15 express to London. He wouldn't tell me his business, but asked me to say that it is most important, and he would be deeply grateful if you could grant him an interview this evening.'

"In that case,' I said, 'I suppose I *must* see him. Did he tell you no more?'

"No, sir. Leastways, that wasn't exactly the way he put it. He said, sir, "If the gentleman won't see me otherwise, tell him I come to him from Mr. Cyril Forrester. Then I think he will change his mind."

"As the man, whoever he was, had predicted, this *did* make me change my mind. I immediately bade Jenkins return and inform him that I would be with him in a few moments. Accordingly, as soon as I had dressed, I left my room and descended to the study. The fire was burning brightly, and a reading-lamp stood upon the writing-table. The remainder of the room, however, was in shadow, but not sufficiently so to prevent my distinguishing a dark figure seated between the two bookcases. He rose as I entered, and bowed before me with a servility that, thank God! is scarcely English. When he spoke, though what he said was grammatically correct, his accent revealed the fact that he was not a native of our Isles.

"Sir William Betford, I believe,' he began, as I entered the room.

"That is my name,' I answered, at the same time turning up the lamp and lighting the candles upon the mantelpiece in order that I might see him better. 'My man tells me you desire an interview with me. He also mentioned that you have come from my old friend, Mr. Cyril Forrester, the artist, who is now abroad. Is this true?'

"Quite true,' he replied. 'I do come from Mr. Forrester.'

"The candles were burning brightly by this time, and, as a result, I was able to see him more distinctly. He was of medium height, very thin, and wore a long overcoat of some dark material. His face was distinctly Asiatic in type, though the exact nationality I could not determine. Possibly he might have hailed from Siam.

"Having come from Mr. Forrester,' I said, when I had seated myself, 'you will be able to tell me his address, I have neither seen nor heard of or from him for more than a year past.'

"I regret exceedingly that it is impossible for me to give you the information you seek,' the man replied, civilly but firmly. 'My instructions were most explicit upon that point.'

"You come to me from him, and yet you are instructed not to tell me his address?" I said, with natural surprise. "That is rather extraordinary, is it not? Remember, I am one of his oldest, and certainly one of his firmest, friends."

"Nevertheless, I was instructed on no account to reveal his present residence to you," the man replied.

"What, then, can your business be with me?" I asked, more nettled at his words than I cared to show.

"I have brought you a packet," he said, "which Mr. Forrester was most anxious I should personally deliver to your hands. There is a letter inside which he said would explain everything. I was also instructed to obtain from you a receipt, which I am to convey to him again."

"So saying, he dived his hand into the pocket of his greatcoat, and brought thence a roll, which he placed with some solemnity upon the table.

"There is the packet," he said. "Now if you will be kind enough to give me a note stating that you have received it, I will take my departure. It is most necessary that I should catch the express to London, and if I desire to do so, I have a sharp walk in front of me."

"You shall have the receipt," I answered; and, taking a sheet of notepaper from a drawer, I wrote the following letter: —

"The Grange, Bampton St. Mary,

"December 14, 18 — .

"Dear Forrester: This evening I have been surprised by a visit from a man named — "

"Here I paused and inquired the messenger's name, which I had, for the moment, forgotten.

"Honoré de Silva," he replied.

"— from a man named Honoré de Silva, who has handed me a packet for which he desires this letter shall be a receipt. I have endeavoured to elicit your address from him, but on this point he is adamant. Is it kind to an old friend to let him hear from you, but at the same time to refuse to permit him to communicate with you? Why all this mystery? If you are in trouble, who would so gladly share it with you as your old friend? If you need help, who would so willingly give it? Are the years during which we have known each other to count for nothing? Trust me, and I think you are aware that I will not abuse your confidence.

"Your affectionate friend,

"William Betford."

"Having blotted it, I placed the letter in an envelope, directed it to Cyril Forrester, Esq., and handed it to De Silva, who placed it carefully in an inner pocket and rose to take leave of me.

"Will nothing induce you to reveal your employer's present place of residence?" I said. "I assure you I am most anxious to prove his friend."

"I can easily believe that," he answered. "He has often spoken of you in terms of the warmest affection. If you could hear him, I am sure you would have no doubt on that score."

"I was much affected, as you may imagine, on hearing this, and his assertion emboldened me to risk yet another question.

"Upon one point, at least, you can set my mind at rest," I said. "Is Mr. Forrester happy?"

"He is a man who has done with happiness such as you mean, and will never know it again," he answered solemnly.

"My poor old friend," I said, half to myself and half to him. And then added, "Is there no way in which I can help him?"

"None," De Silva replied. "But I can tell you no more, so I beg you will not ask me."

"But you can surely answer one other question,' I continued, this time with what was almost a note of supplication in my voice. 'You can tell me whether, in your opinion, we, his friends, will see him again, or if he intends to spend the remainder of his life in exile?'

"That I can safely answer. No! You will never see him again. He will not return to this country, or to the people who have known him here.'

"Then may God help him and console him, for his trouble must be bitter indeed!'

"It is well-nigh insupportable,' said De Silva, with the same solemnity; and then, picking up his hat, bowed, and moved toward the door.

"I must risk one last question. Tell me if he will communicate with me again?'

"Never,' the other replied. 'He bade me tell you, should you ask, that you must henceforth consider him as one who is dead. You must not attempt to seek for him, but consign him to that oblivion in which only he can be at peace.'

"Before I could say more he had opened the door and passed into the hall. A moment later I heard the front door close behind him, a step sounded on the gravel before my window, and I was left standing upon the hearthrug, staring at the packet upon the table. Then the gong sounded, and I thrust the roll into a drawer. Having securely locked the latter, I hastened to the drawing-room to meet my guests.

"Needless to say, my demeanour during dinner was not marked with any great degree of gaiety. The interview with De Silva had upset me completely; and though I endeavoured to play the part of an attentive host, my attempt was far from being successful. I found my thoughts continually reverting to that curious interview in the study, and to the packet which had come into my possession in such a mysterious manner, the secret contained in which I had still to learn.

"After dinner we adjourned to the billiard-room, where we spent the evening; consequently it was not until my guests bade me 'Good night,' and retired to their various rooms, by which time it was well after eleven o'clock, that I found myself at liberty to return to the study.

"Once there, I made up the fire, wheeled an easy-chair to a position before it, arranged the reading-lamp so that the light should fall upon the paper over my left shoulder, and having made these preparations, unlocked the drawer and took out the packet De Silva had handed to me.

"It was with a mixture of pain, a small measure of curiosity, but more apprehension as to what I should find within, that I cut the string and broke the seals. Inside I discovered a note and a roll of manuscript in that fine and delicate handwriting we used to know so well. After a hasty glance at it, I put the latter aside, and opened the envelope. The note I found within was addressed to you, Trevelyan, as well as to myself, and read as follows: —

"My dear old Friends: In company with many other people, you must have wondered what the circumstances could have been that induced me to leave England so suddenly, to forfeit the success I had won for myself after so much up-hill work, and, above all, to bid farewell to a life and an art I loved so devotedly, and from which, I think I may be excused for saying, I had such brilliant expectations. I send you herewith, Betford, by a bearer I can trust, an answer to that question. I want you to read it, and, having done so, to forward it to George Trevelyan, with the request that he will do the same. When you have mastered the contents, you must unitedly arrange with some publishing house to put it before the world, omitting nothing, and in no way attempting to offer any extenuation for my conduct. We were three good friends once, in an age as dead to me now as the Neolithic. For the sake of that friendship, therefore, I implore this favour at your hands. As you hope for mercy on that Last Great Day when the sins of all men shall be judged, do as I entreat you now. How heavily I have sinned against my fellow-men – in ignorance, it is true – you will know when you have read what I have written. This much is certain – the effect of it weighs upon my soul like lead. If you have any desire to make that load

lighter, carry out the wish I now express to you. Remember me also in your prayers, praying not as for a man still living, but as you would for one long since dead. That God may bless and keep you both will ever be the wish of your unhappy friend,

"Cyril Forrester.

"P. S. – Matthew Sempford, in the Strand, is keeping two pictures for me. They were once considered among my best work. I ask you each to accept one, and when you look at them try to think as kindly as possible of the friend who is gone from you forever.'

"So much for the letter. It is possible there may be people who will smile sarcastically when they read that, as I finished it, tears stood in my eyes, so that I could scarcely see the characters upon the paper.

"You, Trevelyan, I know, will understand my emotion better. And why should I not have been affected? Forrester and I had been good friends in the old days, and it was only fit and proper I should mourn his loss. Handsome, generous, clever, who could help loving him? I could not, that's certain.

"The letter finished, I replaced it in its envelope and turned my attention to the manuscript. When I began to read, the hands of the clock upon the chimney-piece stood at twenty minutes to twelve, and they had reached a quarter past five before I had completed my task. All that time I read on without stopping, filled with amazement at the story my poor friend had to tell, and consumed with a great sorrow that his brilliant career should have terminated in such an untoward manner.

"Now, having completed my share of the task, as required of me in the letter, I send the manuscript by special messenger to you. Read it as he desires, and when you have done so let me have your opinion upon it. Then I will come up to town, and we will arrange to carry out the last portion of our poor friend's request together. In the meantime,

"Believe me ever your friend,

"William Betford."

Six months later.

Trevelyan and I have completed the task allotted to us. We have read Forrester's manuscript, and we have also discovered a publisher who will place it before the world. What the result is to be it remains for time to decide.

CHAPTER I

If ever a man in this world had a terrible – I might almost go so far as to add a shameful – story to relate, surely I, Cyril Forrester, am the one. How strange – indeed, how most unbelievable – it is I do not think I even realised myself until I sat down to write it. The question the world will in all probability ask when it has read it is, why it should have been told at all. It is possible it may be of opinion that I should have served my generation just as well had I allowed it to remain locked up in my own bosom for all time. This, however, my conscience would not permit. There are numberless reasons, all of them important and some imperative beyond all telling, why I should make my confession, though God knows I am coward enough to shrink from the task. And if you consider for a moment, I think you will understand why. In the first place, the telling of the story can only have the effect of depriving me of the affection of those I love, the respect of those whose good opinion I have hitherto prized so highly, the sympathy of my most faithful friends, and, what is an equal sacrifice as far as I am personally concerned – though it is, perhaps, of less importance to others – the fame I have won for myself after so hard a struggle. All this is swept away like drift-wood before a rising tide, and as a result I retire into voluntary exile, a man burdened with a life-long sorrow. How I have suffered, both in body and mind, none will ever understand. That I have been punished is also certain, how heavily you, my two old friends, will be able to guess when you have read my story. With the writing of it I have severed the last link that binds me to the civilized world. Henceforth I shall be a wanderer and an outcast, and but for one reason could wish myself dead. But that is enough of regret; let me commence my story.

Two years ago, as you both have terrible reason to remember, there occurred in Europe what may, perhaps, be justly termed the most calamitous period in its history, a time so heart-breaking, that scarcely a man or woman can look back upon it without experiencing the keenest sorrow. Needless to say I refer to the outbreak of the plague among us, that terrible pestilence which swept Europe from end to end, depopulated its greatest cities, filled every burial-place to overflowing, and caused such misery and desolation in all ranks of life as has never before been known among us. Few homes were there, even in this fair England of ours, but suffered some bereavement; few families but mourn a loss the wound of which has even now barely healed. And it is my part in this dreadful business that I have forced myself with so much bitter humiliation to relate. Let me begin at the very beginning, tell everything plainly and straightforwardly, offer nothing in extenuation of my conduct, and trust only to the world to judge me, if such a thing be possible, with an unbiassed mind.

I date my misery from a wet, miserable night in the last week of March – a night without a glimpse of the moon, which, on that particular evening, was almost at its full. There had been but one solitary hour of painting-light all day; short as it was, however, it was sufficient for my purpose. My picture for the Academy was finished, and now all that remained was to pack it up and send it in. It was, as you remember, my eighth, and in every way my most successful effort. The subject I had chosen had enthralled me from the moment it had first entered my head, and the hours of thought and preparation it had entailed will always rank among the happiest of my life. It represented Merenptah, the Pharaoh of the Exodus, learning from the magicians the effect of his obstinacy in the death of his first-born son. The canvas showed him seated on his throne, clad in his robes of state. His head was pushed a little forward, his chin rested in his hand, while his eyes looked straight before him as though he were endeavouring to peer into the future in the hope of reading there the answer to the troubled thoughts inside his brain. Behind him stood the sorcerers, one of whom had found courage to announce the baneful tidings.

The land of Egypt has always possessed a singular attraction for me – a taste which, doubtless, I inherit from my poor father, who, as you are aware, was one of the greatest authorities upon the subject the world has ever known.

As I have said, it was a miserable night, dark as the pit of Tophet. A biting wind whistled through the streets, the pavements were dotted with umbrella-laden figures, the kennels ran like mill-sluiques, while the roads were only a succession of lamp-lit puddles through which the wheeled traffic splashed continuously. For some reason – perhaps because the work upon which I had been so long and happily engaged was finished and I felt lonely without it to occupy my mind – I was stricken with a fit of the blues. Convinced that my own company would not take me out of it, I left my studio in search of more congenial society. This was soon forthcoming; and you will remember, Betford and Trevelyan, that we dined together at a little restaurant in the neighbourhood of Leicester Square, and followed the dinner up with a visit to a theatre. As ill-luck would have it, I was in the minority in the choice of a place of entertainment. The result was disastrous. Instead of ridding myself of my melancholy, as I had hoped to do, I intensified it, and when, at the end of the evening, I bade you farewell in the Strand, my spirits had reached a lower level than they had attained all day. I remember distinctly standing beneath a gas-lamp at the corner of Villiers Street, as the clocks were striking midnight, feeling disinclined to return to my abode and go to bed, and yet equally at a loss to know in what manner I should employ myself until there was some likelihood of slumber visiting my eyelids. To help me make up my mind I lit a fresh cigar and strolled down toward the river. On the pavement, at the foot of the steps leading to Hungerford Bridge, a poor tattered creature, yet still possessing some pretensions to gentlemanly address, came from beneath the archway and begged of me, assuring me most solemnly that, as far as he was concerned, the game was played out, and if I did not comply with his request, he would forthwith end his troubles in the river. I gave him something – I can not now remember what – and then, crossing the road, made my way along the Embankment toward Cleopatra's Needle. The rain had ceased for the moment, and in the north a few stars were shining. The myriad lights of the Embankment were reflected in the river like lines of dancing fire, and I remember that behind me a train was rolling across the bridge from Charing Cross with a noise like distant thunder. I suppose I must have been thinking of my picture, and of the land and period which had given me the idea. At any rate, I know that on this occasion the ancient monument in front of which I soon found myself affected me as it had never done before. I thought of the centuries that had passed since those hieroglyphics were carved upon the stone, of the changes the world had seen since that giant monolith first saw the light of day. Leaning my elbows on the parapet, I was so absorbed in my own thoughts that when a sudden cry of "Help, help!" rang out from the river it was with a sensible shock that I returned to the commonplace and found myself standing where I was. A moment later I was all action. The cry had come from the other side of the Needle. I accordingly hastened to the steps farthest from me, shouting, as I went, in my excitement, that a man was drowning. It might have all been part of some evil dream – the long line of silent Embankment on either side, the swiftly-flowing river, and that despairing appeal for help coming so suddenly out of the black darkness. Then I became aware that I was not alone on the steps. There was another man there, and he stood motionless, peering out into the dark stream, scarcely a dozen paces from me.

I had reached the top of the steps and was about to descend them in order to accost him, when something occurred which stopped me and held me spell-bound. The moon had emerged from its pall of cloud and was now shining clear and bright across the river. Thirty seconds must have elapsed since we had heard the cry for assistance, and now, as I looked, the drowning man was washed in at the foot of the steps upon which we stood. It would have needed but the least movement on the part of the man below me to have caught him as he swept by and to have saved him from a watery death. To my amazement, however – and even now, after this lapse of time, my gorge rises at the very thought of it – the other did not offer to help, but drew himself back. Before I could return my eyes, the wretched suicide had passed out of sight and had vanished into the darkness again. As he did so a pronounced chuckle of enjoyment reached me from the man below – a burst of merriment so out of place and so detestable that I could scarcely believe I heard aright. I can not hope to make you understand how

it affected me. A second later a fit of blind fury overtook me, and, under the influence of it, I ran down the steps and seized the murderer – for such I shall always consider him – by the arm.

"Are you a man or a fiend," I cried in jerks, "that you could so allow another to perish when you might have saved him? His death is upon your conscience, brute and monster that you are!"

So extreme was my emotion that I trembled under it like a man with the palsy.

Then the other turned his head and looked at me; and, as he did so, a great shudder, accompanied by an indescribable feeling of nausea, passed over me. What occasioned it I could not tell, nor could I remember having felt anything of the kind before. When it departed, my eyes fixed themselves on the individual before me. Connecting him in some way with the unenviable sensation I had just experienced, I endeavoured to withdraw them again, but in vain. The others gaze was riveted upon me – so firmly, indeed, that it required but small imagination to believe it eating into my brain. Good Heavens! how well I recollect that night and every incident connected with it! I believe I shall remember it through all eternity. If only I had known enough to have taken him by the throat then and there, and had dashed his brains out on the stones, or to have seized him in my arms and hurled him down the steps into the river below, how much happier I should have been! I might have earned eternal punishment, it is true, but I should at least have saved myself and the world in general from such misery as the human brain can scarcely realise. But I did not know, the opportunity was lost, and, in that brief instant of time, millions of my fellow-creatures were consigned unwittingly to their doom.

After long association with an individual, it is difficult, if not impossible, to set down with any degree of exactness a description of the effect his personality in the first instance had upon me. In this case I find it more than usually difficult, for the reason that, as I came more under his influence, the original effect wore off and quite another was substituted for it.

His height was considerably below the average, his skull was as small as his shoulders were broad. But it was not of his stature, his shoulders, or the size of the head which caused the curious effect I have elsewhere described. It was his eyes, the shape of his face, the multitudinous wrinkles that lined it, and, above all, the extraordinary colour of his skin, that rendered his appearance so repulsive. To understand what I mean you must think first of old ivory, and then endeavour to realise what the complexion of a corpse would be like after lying in an hermetically sealed tomb for many years. Blend the two and you will have some dim notion of the idea I am trying to convey. His eyes were small, deeply sunken, and in repose apparently devoid of light and even of life. He wore a heavy fur coat, and, for the reason that he disdained the customary headgear of polite society, and had substituted for it a curious description of cap, I argued that he was a man who boasted a will of his own, and who did not permit himself to be bound by arbitrary rules. But, however plain these things may have been, his age was a good deal more difficult to determine. It was certainly not less than seventy, and one might have been excused had one even set it down at a hundred. He walked feebly, supporting himself with a stick, upon which his thin yellow fist was clutched till the knuckles stood out and shone like billiard balls in the moonlight.

Under the influence of his mysterious personality, I stood speechless for some moments, forgetful of everything – the hour, the place, and even his inhumanity to the drowning wretch in the river below. By the time I recovered myself he was gone, and I could see him crossing the road and moving swiftly away in the direction of Charing Cross. Drawing my hand across my forehead, which was clammy with the sweat of real fear, I looked again at the river. A police boat was pulling toward the steps, and by the light of the lantern on board I could make out the body of a man. My nerves, already strained to breaking pitch, were not capable of standing any further shock. I accordingly turned upon my heel and hurried from the place with all the speed at my command.

Such was my first meeting with the man whom I afterward came to know as Pharos the Egyptian.

CHAPTER II

As you are aware, my picture that year was hung in an excellent position, was favourably received by those for whose criticism I had any sort of respect, attracted its fair share of attention from the general public, and, as a result, brought me as near contentment as a man can well hope or expect to be in this world. Before it had been twenty-four hours "on the line," I had received several tempting offers for it; but as I had set my heart on obtaining a certain sum, and was determined not to accept less, you may suppose I did not give them much attention. If I received what I wanted, I promised myself a treat I had been looking forward to all my life. In that case I would take a long holiday, and, instead of spending the next winter in England, would start for Egypt in the autumn, taking in Italy *en route*, make my way up the Nile, and be home again, all being well, in the spring, or, at latest, during the early days of summer.

Ever since I first became an exhibitor at Burlington House, I have made it a rule to studiously avoid visiting the gallery after varnishing day. My reasons would interest no one, but they were sufficiently strong to induce me to adhere to them. This year, however, I was led into doing so in a quite unintentional fashion, and as that exception vitally concerns this narrative, I must narrate in detail the circumstances that led up to it.

On a certain Friday early in June, I was sitting in my studio, after lunch, wondering what I should do with myself during the afternoon, when a knock sounded at the door, and a moment later, after I had invited whoever stood outside to enter, my old friend, George Merridew, his wife, son, and three daughters, trooped into the room. They were plainly up from the country, and, as usual, were doing the sights at express speed. George Merridew, as you know, stands six feet in his stockings, and is broad in proportion. His face is red, his eyes blue, and he carries with him wherever he goes the air of a prosperous country squire, which he certainly is. Like many other big men, he is unconscious of his strength, and when he shakes hands with you, you have reason to remember the fact for five minutes afterward. His wife is small, and, as some folks declare, looks younger than her eldest daughter, who is a tennis champion, a golfer, and boasts a supreme contempt for Royal Academicians and, for that matter, for artists generally. The son is at Oxford, a nice enough young fellow with limpid blue eyes, who, to his father's disgust, takes no sort of interest in fox-hunting, racing, football, or any other sport, and has openly asserted his intention of entering the Church in the near future. There are two other girls, Gwendoline and Ethel – the latter, by the way, promises to be a second edition of her mother – who, at present, are in the advanced schoolroom stage, dine with their parents, except on state occasions, and play duets together on the piano with a conscientious regard for time and fingering that gives their father no small amount of pleasure, but with other people rather detracts from the beauty of the performance.

"Thank goodness we have got you at last!" cried Merridew, as he rushed forward and gripped my hand with a cordiality that made me suffer in silent agony for minutes afterward. "But, my dear fellow, what on earth induces you to live in a place that's so difficult to find? We have been all round the neighbourhood, here, there, and everywhere, making inquiries, and shouldn't have found you now had it not been for an intelligent butcher-boy, who put us on the right scent and enabled us to run you to earth at last."

"Such is fame, you see," I answered with a smile. "One should be humble when one reflects that the knowledge of one's address is confined to a butcher-boy. – How do you do, Mrs. Merridew? I am sorry you should have had so much difficulty in discovering my poor abode."

I shook hands with the rest of the family, and when I had done so, waited to be informed as to the reason of their visit.

"Now, look here," said the squire, as he spoke producing an enormous gold repeater from his pocket, which by sheer force of habit he held in his hand, though he never once looked at it, during

the time he was speaking. "I'll tell you what we're going to do. In the first place you're to take us to the Academy to see your picture, which every one is talking about, and at the same time to act as showman and tell us who's who. After that you'll dine with us at the Langham, and go to the theatre afterward. No, no, it's not a bit of use you're pretending you've got another engagement. We don't come up to town very often, but when we do we enjoy ourselves, and – why, man alive! just consider – I haven't seen you since last autumn, and if you think I am going to let you escape now, you're very much mistaken. Such a thing is not to be thought of – is it, mother?"

Thus appealed to, Mrs. Merridew was kind enough to say that she hoped I would comply with her husband's wishes. The daughters murmured something, which I have no doubt was intended to be a complimentary expression of their feelings, while the son commenced a remark, failed to make himself intelligible, and then lapsed into silence again.

Thus hemmed in, it remained for me to invent a valid excuse, or to fall in with their plans. I effected a compromise, informed them that I should be much pleased to accompany them to the Academy, but that it was quite impossible I should dine with them afterward, or even visit the theatre in their company, having, as was quite true, already accepted an invitation for that evening. Five minutes later the matter was settled, and we were making our way toward Piccadilly and Burlington House.

In the light of all that has happened since, I can only regard my behaviour on that occasion with a contemptuous sort of pity. The minutest details connected with that afternoon's amusement are as clearly photographed upon my brain as if they had occurred but yesterday. If I close my eyes for a moment, I can see, just as I saw it then, the hawkers selling catalogues in the busy street outside, the great courtyard with the lines of waiting carriages, the fashionable crowd ascending and descending the stairs, and inside the rooms that surging mass of well-dressed humanity so characteristic of London and the season. When we had fought our way to the vestibule, I was for doing the round of the rooms in the orthodox fashion. This, however, it appeared, was by no means to George Merridew's taste. He received my suggestion with appropriate scorn.

"Come, come, old fellow," he replied, "we're first going to see your picture. It was that which brought us here; and, as soon as I have told you what I think of it, the rest of the daubs may go hang as far as I am concerned."

Now, it is an indisputable fact that, whatever Nature may, or may not, have done for me, she has at least endowed me with an extremely sensitive disposition. My feelings, therefore, may be imagined when I tell you that my old friend spoke in a voice that was quite audible above the polite murmur of the crowd, and which must have penetrated to the farthest end of the room. Not content with that, he saluted me with a sounding smack on the back, bidding me, at the same time, consign my modesty to the winds, for everybody knew – by everybody, I presume he meant his neighbours in the country – that I was the rising man of the day, and would inevitably be elected President before I died. To avert this flood of idiotic compliment, and feeling myself growing hot from head to foot, I took him by the arm and conducted him hastily through the room toward that portion of the building where my picture was displayed.

Whether the work was good, bad, or indifferent, the public at least paid me the compliment of bestowing their attention upon it, and their behaviour on this occasion was no exception to the rule. I hope I shall not be considered more conceited than my fellows; at the risk of it, however, I must confess to a feeling of pride as I glanced, first at the crowd wedged in before the rail, and then at the party by my side. George Merridew's face alone was worth the trouble and time I had spent upon the canvas. His eyes were opened to their fullest extent: his lips were also parted, but no sound came from them. Even the face of my formidable friend, the tennis champion, betrayed a measure of interest that, in the light of her previous behaviour, was more than flattering. For some moments we stood together on the outskirts of the throng. Then those who were directly in front moved away, and my friends immediately stepped into the gap and took their places. As there was no reason why

I should follow their example, I remained outside, watching the faces and noting the different effects the picture produced upon them.

I had not been alone more than a few seconds, however, before I became sensible of a curious sensation. It was accompanied by a lowering of the pulse that was quite perceptible, followed by an extraordinary feeling of nausea. I battled against it in vain. The room and its occupants began to swim before me. I tottered, and at length, being unable any longer to support myself, sat down on the seat behind me. When I looked up again I could scarcely credit the evidence of my senses. Approaching me from the crowd, leaning upon his stick, just as I remembered him on the previous occasion, and dressed in the same extraordinary fashion, was the old man whose personality had given me such a shock at the foot of Cleopatra's Needle. His face was as thin and as wrinkled as I had seen it then, and I also noticed that he wore the same indescribable look of cruelty and cunning that I remembered so well. One thing was quite plain, however profoundly I may have been affected by my proximity to this singular being: I was not the only one who came within the sphere of his influence. Indeed, it was strange to notice the manner in which the polite crowd drew away from him, and the different expressions upon their faces as they stepped aside in order to give him room to pass. Had he been a snake, they could scarcely have shown a more unanimous desire to withdraw from his neighbourhood. On this occasion he was evidently not alone. I gathered this from the fact that, as soon as he had emerged from the crowd, he paused as if to wait for a companion. A moment later a woman came to his side – a woman who carried herself like a daughter of the gods; the most beautiful creature, I can safely assert, that I have ever seen either in this or any other country. If her companion's height was below the average, hers was at least several inches above it. But it was neither her stature, the exquisite symmetry of her figure, the beauty of her face, the luxuriance of her hair, nor the elegance of her attire that fascinated me. It was the expression I saw in her dark, lustrous eyes.

It is essential to my profession that I should be continually studying the human face, attempting to obtain from it some clew as to the character of the owner, and learning to read in it the workings of the mind within. And what I read in this woman's face was a sorrow that nothing could assuage, a hopelessness that was not limited to this earth, but was fast passing into the Eternal.

Having once freed herself from the crowd, who, you may be sure, turned and stared after her as if she were some rare and beautiful animal, she took her place at her companion's side, and they passed along the room together, finally disappearing through the archway at the farther end. A moment later the eldest of my friend's daughters joined me. I had never credited her with the possession of so much emotion as she displayed at that moment.

"Mr. Forrester," she said, "I want you to tell me if you have ever seen anything so awful as that old man's face?"

"I think I can safely say that I never have," I answered; and then, in an attempt to conceal the emotion I was still feeling, added, "I wonder who he can be?"

"I can not imagine," she continued, "but I'm certain of this, that I never want to see him again."

At that moment we were joined by the remainder of the family.

"By Jove! Forrester," said the squire, but without his usual heartiness, "I don't know what is coming to this place. Did you see that little chap in the fur coat and skullcap who came out of the crowd just now with that fine-looking woman behind him? You may scarcely credit it, but his face gave me quite a turn. I haven't got over it yet."

"The girl with him was very beautiful," murmured his wife gently; "but there was something about her face that struck me as being very sad. I should like to know what relationship she bears to him."

"His granddaughter, I should imagine," said Miss Merridew, who was still watching the entrance to the next room as if she expected them to return.

"Nonsense!" cried the squire impatiently. "His great-granddaughter, you mean. I'll stake my reputation that the old fellow is as old as Methuselah. What say you, Forrester?"

I can not now remember what answer I returned. I only know that we presently found ourselves on the pavement of Piccadilly, saying good-bye, and expressing our thanks in an aimless sort of fashion for the pleasure we had derived from each other's society.

Having seen them safely on their way toward Regent Street, I strolled along Piccadilly in the direction of my studio, thinking as I went of that terrible old man whose personality had twice given me such a shock, and also of the beautiful woman, his companion. The effect they had produced upon me must have been something out of the common, for I soon discovered that I could think of nothing else. It was in vain I looked in at my club and attempted to engage in conversation with friends, or that, when I reached home, I threw myself into an easy-chair and endeavoured to interest myself in a book. Out of the centre of every page peered that wicked old face, with its pallid, wrinkled skin, and lack-lustre eyes. For upward of an hour I wrestled with the feeling, but without success. The man's image was not conducive to peace of mind, and I knew very well that unless I found some distraction I should be dreaming of him at night. Accordingly I rose from my chair and crossed the room to a table on which stood a large Satsuma bowl, in which it was my custom to place the invitations I received. That evening fortune favoured me. I had the choice of four houses. Two I rejected without a second thought; between the others I scarcely knew how to decide. Though I was not aware of it, my evil destiny, for the second time that day, was standing at my elbow, egging me on to ruin. It appeared I had the choice of a dance in the Cromwell Road, another in Belgrave Square; private theatricals in Queen's Gate, and a musical "at home" in Eaton Square. I did not feel equal to dances or private theatricals, and, thinking music would soothe my troubled mind, I decided for Eaton Square, and in so doing brought about the misery and downfall of my life.

Nine o'clock that evening, accordingly, found me ascending the staircase of Medenham House, greeting my hostess in the anteroom, and passing thence into the great drawing-room beyond. There is not a more conspicuous power within the range of her hobby than her ladyship, and at her house one hears all that is newest and most likely to be famous in the musical world. Many now celebrated *artistes* owe much of what they have since achieved to the helping hand she held out to them when they were struggling up the rugged hill of fame.

On entering the room I looked about me in the hope of finding some one I knew, but for some moments was unsuccessful. Then I espied, seated in a corner, almost hidden by a magnificent palm, a man with whom I possessed some slight acquaintance. I strolled toward him, and after a few moments' conversation took my place at his side. He had himself achieved considerable success as an amateur violinist, and was a distant relative of our hostess.

"I suppose, like the rest of us, you have come to hear Lady Medenham's latest prodigy?" he said, after the usual polite nothings had been said.

"I am ashamed to confess I have heard nothing at all about him," I answered.

"*Her*, my dear sir," he replied, with a little laugh. "Our hostess says she is marvellous."

"A pianist?"

"Indeed, no! A violinist, and with, I believe, the additional advantage of being a very beautiful woman. Lady Medenham met her in Munich, and she has raved about her ever since. Needless to say, she invited her to visit her as soon as she reached London."

What the connection could have been it is impossible to say, but by some occult reasoning I instantly associated this new wonder with the magnificent creature I had seen at Burlington House that afternoon.

"You have already made her acquaintance, I presume?"

I said in a tone of mild curiosity.

"No such luck," he answered. "I have not been permitted that pleasure. From all accounts, however, she is really very wonderful. All the people I have met who have heard her declare they have never known anything like her playing. And the funniest part of it is, she is accompanied everywhere by a man who is as physically repulsive as she is beautiful."

"A little old man with an extraordinary complexion, deep-set, horrible eyes, who wears a fur coat and a peculiar cap in the height of the season, and looks at least a hundred years old?"

"From all accounts you describe him exactly. Where did you meet him?"

"I saw them both at the Academy this afternoon," I answered. "She is, as you say, very beautiful; but she scarcely struck me as being English."

"She is not. She is Hungarian, I believe, but she has travelled a great deal and speaks English perfectly."

"And her companion – what nation has the honour of claiming him as her son?"

"Ah, that I can not tell you! He is a mystery, for no one seems to know anything about him. Nor is it at all certain what relationship he bears to the woman. But see, here is Lord Medenham. The performance is evidently about to commence."

As he spoke there was a general turning of heads in the direction of the anteroom, and almost simultaneously my hostess entered the room, accompanied by the exquisite creature I had seen emerging from the crowd before my picture that afternoon. If she had looked beautiful then, she was doubly so now. Dressed to perfection, as on the previous occasion, she towered head and shoulders above Lady Medenham, who is generally considered tall for her sex, and carried herself with a more imperial grace than is boasted by any empress I have ever seen.

A few paces behind her followed the man who had been her companion that afternoon. On this occasion also he disdained the orthodox style of dress, wore a black velvet coat, closely buttoned beneath his chin, and upon his head a skullcap of the same material. As on the previous occasions, he walked with a stick, leaning upon it heavily like an old man of ninety. Reaching that portion of the room in which the piano was situated, he dropped into a chair, without waiting for his hostess to seat herself, and, laying his head back, closed his eyes as if the exertion of walking had been too much for him. A servant, who had followed close behind, wrapped a heavy rug about his knees and then withdrew. Meanwhile his beautiful companion stood for a moment looking down at him, and then, with a little gesture the significance of which I could not then interpret, accepted her hostess's invitation and seated herself beside her.

The first item on the programme was a nocturne rendered by the composer, a famous pianist who at the time was delighting all London. He seated himself at the piano and began to play. I am afraid, however, I spared but small attention for his performance. My interest was centred on that huddled-up figure under the fur rug and the beautiful creature at his side. Then a change came, and once more I experienced the same sensation of revulsion that had overwhelmed me twice before. Again I felt sick and giddy; once more a clammy sweat broke out upon my forehead, and at last, unable any longer to control myself, I rose from my seat.

"What on earth is the matter?" inquired my friend, who had been watching me. "Are you ill?"

"I believe I'm going to faint," I replied. "I must get into the air. But there is no necessity for you to come. I shall be all right alone."

So saying I signed him back to his seat, and, slipping quietly from the corner, made my way through the anteroom into the marble corridor beyond. Once there I leant against the balustrading of the staircase and endeavoured to pull myself together. A groom of the chambers, who was passing at the time, seeing there was something amiss, approached and inquired if he could be of service.

"I am feeling a little faint," I replied. "The heat of the drawing-room was too much for me. If you can get me a little brandy I think I shall be quite well in a few moments."

The man departed and presently came back with the spirit I had asked for. With the return of my self-possession I endeavoured to arrive at an understanding of what had occasioned the attack. I was not subject to fainting-fits, but was in every respect as strong as the majority of my fellow-creatures.

"It's all nonsense," I said to myself, "to ascribe it to that old fellow's presence. How could such a thing affect me? At any rate, I'll try the experiment once more."

So saying, I returned to the drawing-room.

I was only just in time, for, as I entered, the lady who had hitherto been seated by her hostess's side rose from her chair and moved toward the piano. As no one else stirred, it was plain that she was going to dispense with the services of an accompanist. Taking her violin from a table she drew her bow gently across the strings, and, when she had tuned it, stood looking straight before her down the room. How beautiful she was at that moment I can not hope to make you understand. Then she began to play. What the work was I did not then know, but I have since discovered that it was her own. It opened with a movement in the minor – low and infinitely sad. There was a note of unappeasable yearning in it, a cry that might well have been wrung from a heart that was breaking beneath the weight of a deadly sin; a weird, unearthly supplication for mercy from a soul that was beyond redemption or the reach of hope. None but a great musician could have imagined such a theme, and then only under the influence of a supreme despair. While it lasted her audience sat spell-bound. There was scarcely one among them who was not a lover of music, and many were world-famous for their talent. This, however, was such playing as none of us had ever heard before, or, indeed, had even dreamed of. Then by imperceptible gradations the music reached its height and died slowly down, growing fainter and fainter until it expired in a long-drawn sob. Absolute silence greeted its termination. Not a hand was raised; not a word was uttered. If proof were wanting of the effect she had produced, it was to be found in this. The violinist bowed, a trifle disdainfully, I thought, and, having placed her instrument on the table once more, returned to Lady Medenham's side. Then a young German singer and his accompanist crossed the room and took their places at the piano. The famous pianist, who had first played, followed the singer, and when he had resumed his seat the violinist rose and once more took up her instrument.

This time there was no pause. With an abruptness that was startling, she burst into a wild barbaric dance. The notes danced and leaped upon each other in joyous confusion, creating an enthusiasm that was as instantaneous as it was remarkable. It was a tarantella of the wildest description – nay, I should rather say a dance of Satyrs. The player's eyes flashed above the instrument, her lithe, exquisite figure rocked and swayed beneath the spell of the emotion she was conjuring up. Faster and faster her bow swept across the strings, and as before, though now for a very different reason, her audience sat fascinated before her. The first work had been the outcome of despair, this was the music of unqualified happiness, of the peculiar joy of living – nay, of the very essence and existence of life itself. Then it ceased as suddenly as it had begun, and once more she bowed, put down her violin, and approached her hostess. The programme was at an end, and the enthusiastic audience clustered round to congratulate her. For my own part I was curiously ill at ease. In a vague sort of fashion I had appropriated her music to myself, and now I resented the praise the fashionable mob was showering upon her. Accordingly I drew back a little and made up my mind to get through the crowd and slip quietly away. By the time I was able to emerge from my corner, however, there was a movement at the end of the room, and it became evident that the player and her companion were also about to take their departure. Accompanied by Lord and Lady Medenham they approached the spot where I was standing, endeavouring to reach the door. Had it been possible I would have taken shelter behind my palm again in order that my presence might not have been observed. But it was too late. Lady Medenham had caught my eye, and now stopped to speak.

"Mr. Forrester," she said, "we have been permitted a great treat to-night, have we not? You must let me introduce you to the Fräulein Valerie de Vocxqal."

I bowed, and, despite the fact that, regarded in the light of her genius, such a thing was little better than an insult, followed the example of my betters and murmured a complimentary allusion to her playing and the pleasure she had given us. She thanked me, all the time watching me with grave, attentive eyes, into which there had suddenly flashed a light that was destined to puzzle me for a long time, and the reason of which I could not understand. Then came the crucial moment when Lady Medenham turned to me again, and said:

"Mr. Forrester, Monsieur Pharos has expressed a desire to be introduced to you. I told him yesterday I thought you would be here to-night. May I have the pleasure of making you acquainted with each other?"

Those cold, dead eyes fixed themselves steadily on mine, and, under their influence, I felt as if my brain were freezing.

"I am indeed honoured, sir," he said, "and I trust I may be permitted to express a hope of enlarging our acquaintance. I understand you are the painter of that very wonderful picture I saw at the Academy this afternoon? Allow me to offer you my congratulations upon it. It interested me more deeply than I can say, and on some future date I shall be grateful if you will let me talk to you upon the subject. The knowledge it displayed of the country and the period is remarkable in these days. May I ask how it was acquired?"

"My father was a famous Egyptologist," I replied. "All that I know I learned from him. Are you also familiar with the country?"

"There are few things and fewer countries with which I am not familiar," he replied, somewhat conceitedly, but still watching me and speaking with the same peculiar gravity. "Some day I shall hope to offer you conclusive evidence on that point. In the meantime the hour grows late. I thank you and bid you farewell."

Then, with a bow, he passed on, and a moment later I, too, had quitted the house and was making my way homeward, trying to collect my impressions of the evening as I went.

CHAPTER III

To infer that my introduction that evening to the beautiful violinist and her diabolical companion, Monsieur Pharos, produced no effect upon me, would be as idle as it would misleading. On leaving Medenham House I was conscious of a variety of sensations, among which attraction for the woman, repugnance for the man, and curiosity as to the history and relationship of both could be most easily distinguished. What was perhaps still more perplexing, considering the small, but none the less genuine, antagonism that existed between us, by the time I reached my own abode I had lost my first intense hatred for the man, and was beginning to look forward, with a degree of interest which a few hours before would have surprised me, to that next meeting which he had prophesied would so soon come to pass. Lightly as I proposed to myself to treat it, his extraordinary individuality must have taken a greater hold upon me than I imagined, for, as in the afternoon, I soon discovered that, try to divert my thoughts from it how I would, I could not dispel his sinister image from my mind. Every detail of the evening's entertainment was vividly photographed upon my brain, and without even the formality of shutting my eyes, I could see the crowded room, the beautiful violinist standing, instrument in hand, beside the piano, and in the chair at her feet her strange companion, huddled up beneath his rug.

By the time I reached home it was considerably past midnight; I was not, however, the least tired, so, exchanging my dress coat for an old velvet painting jacket, for which I entertained a lasting affection, I lit a cigar and began to promenade the room. It had been a fancy of mine when I first took the studio, which, you must understand, was of more than the usual size, to have it decorated in the Egyptian fashion, and, after my meeting with Pharos, this seemed to have a singular appropriateness. It was as if the quaint images of the gods, which decorated the walls, were watching me with almost human interest, and even the gilded countenance upon the mummy-case, in the alcove at the farther end, wore an expression I had never noticed on it before. It might have been saying: "Ah, my nineteenth century friend, your father stole me from the land of my birth, and from the resting-place the gods decreed for me; but beware, for retribution is pursuing you and is even now close upon your heels."

Cigar in hand, I stopped in my walk and looked at it, thinking as I did so of the country from which it had hailed, and of the changes that had taken place in the world during the time it had lain in its Theban tomb, whence it had emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century, with colouring as fresh, and detail as perfect, as on the day when the hieroglyphs had first left the artist's hand. It was an unusually fine specimen – one of the most perfect, indeed, of its kind ever brought to England, and, under the influence of the interest it now inspired in me, I went to an ancient cabinet on the other side of the room, and, opening a small drawer, took from it a bulky pocketbook, once the property of my father. He it was, as I have already said, who had discovered the mummy in question, and it was from him, at his death, in company with many other Egyptian treasures, that I received it.

As I turned the yellow, time-stained pages in search of the information I wanted, the clock of St. Jude's, in the street behind, struck one, solemnly and deliberately, as though it were conscious of the part it played in the passage of time into eternity. To my surprise the reference was more difficult to find than I had anticipated. Entries there were in hundreds; records of distances travelled, of measurements taken, evidence as to the supposed whereabouts of tombs, translations of hieroglyphics, paintings, and inscriptions, memoranda of amounts paid to Arab sheiks, details of stores and equipments, but for some time no trace of the information for which I was searching. At last, however, it struck me to look in the pocket contained in the cover of the book. My diligence was immediately rewarded, for there, carefully folded and hidden away, was the small square of parchment upon which my father had written the name once borne by the dead man, with a complete translation of the record upon the *cartonnage* itself. According to the statement here set forth, the coffin contained the mortal

remains of a certain Ptahmes, Chief of the King's Magicians – an individual who flourished during the reign of Menptah (Amenepthes of the Greeks, but better known to the nineteenth century as the Pharaoh of the Exodus). For all I knew to the contrary, my silent property might have been one of that band of conjurors who pitted their wits against Moses, and by so doing had caused Pharaoh's heart to be hardened so that he would not let the Children go. Once more I stood looking at the stolid representation of a face before me, guessing at the history of the man within, and wondering whether his success in life had equalled his ambition, or was commensurate with his merits, and whether in that age, so long since dead, his heart had ever been thrilled by thoughts of love.

While wrapped in this brown study, my ears, which on that particular occasion were for some reason abnormally acute, detected the sound of a soft footfall on the polished boards at the farther end of the room. I wheeled sharply round, and a moment later almost fell back against the mummy-case under the influence of my surprise. (How he had got there I could not tell, for I was certain I had locked the door behind me when I entered the house.) It is sufficient, however, that, standing before me, scarcely a dozen feet away, breathing heavily as though he had been running, and with what struck me as a frightened look in his eyes, was no less a person than Monsieur Pharos, the man I had met at the foot of Cleopatra's Needle some weeks before, at the Academy that afternoon, and at Medenham House only a couple of hours since. Upward of a minute must have elapsed before I could find sufficient voice to inquire the reason of his presence in my room.

"My dear Mr. Forrester," he said in a conciliatory tone, "while offering you ten thousand apologies for my intrusion, I must explain that it is quite by accident I am here. On reaching home this evening I pined for a breath of fresh air. Accordingly I went for a stroll, lost my way, and eventually found myself in this street, where, seeing an open door, I took the liberty of entering for the purpose of inquiring the way to my hotel. It was not until you turned round that I realised my good fortune in having chanced upon a friend. It is plain, however, that my presence is not as welcome as I could have desired."

From the way he spoke I gathered that for some purpose of his own he had taken, or was pretending to take, offence at my reception of him. Knowing, therefore, that if I desired to see anything further of his beautiful companion, an idea which I will confess had more than once occurred to me, I must exert myself to conciliate him, I hastened to apologise for the welcome I had given him, explaining that any momentary hesitation I might have shown was due more to my surprise than to any intended discourtesy toward himself.

"In that case let us agree to say no more about it," he answered politely, but with the same expression of cunning upon his face to which I have referred elsewhere. "You were quite within your rights. I should have remembered that in England an impromptu visit at one in the morning, on the part of an acquaintance of a few hours' standing, is scarcely likely to be well received."

"If you will carry your memory back a few weeks," I said, as I wheeled a chair up for him, "you will remember that our acquaintance is not of such a recent date."

"I am rejoiced to hear it," he replied, with a sharp glance at me as he seated himself. "Nevertheless, I must confess that I fail for the moment to remember where I had the pleasure of meeting you on that occasion. It is not a complimentary admission, I will admit; but, as you know, age is proverbially forgetful, and my memory is far from being what it once was."

Could the man be pretending, or had the incident really escaped his memory? It was just possible, of course, that on that occasion my face had failed to impress itself upon his recollection; but after the hard things I had said to him on that memorable occasion, I had to confess it seemed unlikely. Then the remembrance of the drowning man's piteous cry for help, and the other's demoniacal conduct on the steps returned to me, and I resolved to show no mercy.

"The occasion to which I refer, Monsieur Pharos," I said, standing opposite him and speaking with a sternness that in the light of all that has transpired since seems almost ludicrous, "was an

evening toward the end of March – a cold, wet night when you stood upon the steps below Cleopatra's Needle, and not only refused help to, but, in a most inhuman fashion, laughed at, a drowning man."

I half expected that he would offer a vehement denial, or would at least put forward the plea of forgetfulness. To my surprise, however, he did neither.

"I remember the incident perfectly," he answered, with the utmost composure. "At the same time, I assure you, you wrong me when you declare I laughed – on my word, you do! Let us suppose, however, that I *did* do so; and where is the harm? The man desired death; his own action confessed it, otherwise how came he there? It was proved at the inquest that he had repeatedly declared himself weary of life. He was starving; he was without hope. Had he lived over that night, death, under any circumstances, would only have been a matter of a few days with him. Would you therefore have had me, knowing all this, prolong such an existence? In the name of that humanity to which you referred just now, I ask you the question. You say I laughed. Would you have had me weep?"

"A specious argument," I replied; "but I own to you frankly I consider the incident a detestable one."

"There I will meet you most willingly," he continued. "From your point of view it certainly *was*. From mine – well, as I said just now, I confess I view it differently. However, I give you my assurance, your pity is undeserved. The man was a contemptible scoundrel in every way. He came of respectable stock, was reared under the happiest auspices. Had he chosen he might have risen to anything in his own rank of life; but he would not choose. At fifteen he robbed his father's till to indulge in debauchery, and had broken his parents' hearts before he was five-and-twenty. He married a girl as good as he was bad, and as a result starved not only himself but his wife and children. Though employment was repeatedly offered him, he refused it, not from any inability to work, but from sheer distaste of labour. He had not sufficient wit, courage, or energy to become a criminal; but throughout his life, wherever he went, and upon all with whom he came in contact, he brought misery and disgrace. Eventually he reached the end of his tether, and was cast off by every one. The result you know."

The fluency and gusto with which he related these sordid details amazed me. I inquired how, since by his own confession he had been such a short time in London, he had become cognisant of the man's history. He hesitated before replying.

"Have I not told you once before to-night," he said, "that there are very few things in this world which are hidden from my knowledge? Were it necessary, I could tell you circumstances in your own life that you flatter yourself are known to no one but yourself. But do not let us talk of such things now. When I entered the room you were reading a paper. You hold it in your hand at this moment."

"It is a translation of the inscription upon the mummy-case over yonder," I replied, with an eagerness to change the subject that provoked a smile in Pharos. "At his death many of his Egyptian treasures came into my possession, this among them. For some reason or another I had never read the translation until to-night. I suppose it must have been my meeting with you that put the idea into my head."

"I am interested in such matters, as you know. May I, therefore, be permitted to look at it?"

With a parade of indifference that I could easily see was assumed, Pharos had extended his withered old hand and taken it from me before I realised what he was doing. Having obtained it, he leaned back in his chair, and stared at the paper as if he could not remove his eyes from it. For some moments not a word passed his lips. Then, muttering something to himself in a language I did not recognise, he sprang to his feet. The quickness of the action was so different from his usual enfeebled movements that I did not fail to notice it.

"The mummy?" he cried. "Show me the mummy!"

Before I could answer or comply with his request, he had discovered it for himself, had crossed to it and was devouring it with his eyes.

Upward of three minutes must have elapsed before he turned to me again. When he did so, I scarcely recognised the man. So distorted was his countenance that I instinctively recoiled from him in horror.

"Thy father, was it, wretched man," he cried, shaking his skeleton fist at me, while his body trembled like a leaf in the whirlwind of his passion, "who stole this body from its resting-place? Thy father, was it, who broke the seals the gods had placed upon the tombs of those who were their servants? If that be so, then may the punishment decreed against the sin of sacrilege be visited upon thee and thine for evermore!" Then, turning to the mummy, he continued, as if partly to it and partly to himself: "Oh, mighty Egypt! hast thou fallen so far from thy high estate that even the bodies of thy kings and priests may no longer rest within their tombs, but are ravished from thee to be gaped at in alien lands? But, by Osiris, a time of punishment is coming. It is decreed, and none shall stay the sword!"

If I had been surprised at the excitement he had shown on reading the paper, it was nothing to the astonishment I felt now. For the first time since I had known him, a suspicion of his sanity crossed my mind, and my first inclination was to draw away from him. Then the fit, as I deemed it, passed, and his expression changed completely. He uttered a queer little laugh, that might have been one of shame or annoyance.

"Once more I must crave your forgiveness, Mr. Forrester," he said, as he sank exhausted into a chair. "Believe me, I had not the least intention of offending you. Your father was, I know, an ardent Egyptologist, one of that intrepid band who penetrated to every corner of our sacred land, digging, delving, and bringing to light such tombs, temples, and monuments as have for centuries lain hidden from the sight of man. For my own part, as you may have gathered from my tirade just now, my sympathies do not lie in that direction. I am one who reverences the past, and would fain have others do so."

"At the same time, I scarcely see that that justifies such language toward myself as you used a few moments since," I replied, with a fair amount of warmth, which I think it will be conceded I had every right to feel.

"It does not justify it in the least," he answered, with ready condescension. "The only way I can hope to do so is on the plea of the exuberance of my emotion. My dear Mr. Forrester, I beg you will not misunderstand me. I would not quarrel with you for the wealth of England. Though you are not aware of it, there is a bond between us that is stronger than chains of steel. You are required for a certain work, and for that reason alone I dare not offend you or excite your anger, even if I otherwise desired to do so. In this matter I am not my own master."

"A bond between us, Monsieur Pharos? A work for which I am required? I am afraid I do not understand what you mean."

"And it is not in my power to enlighten you. Remain assured of this, however, when the time is ripe you will be informed."

As he said this the same light that I have described before came into his eyes, causing them to shine with an unnatural brilliance. To use a fishing simile, it made me think of the gleam that comes into the eyes of a hungry pike as he darts toward his helpless prey. Taken in conjunction with the extraordinary language he had used toward me, I felt more than ever convinced of his insanity. The thought was by no means a cheerful one. Here I was, alone with a dangerous lunatic, in the middle of the night, and not a soul within call. How I was to rid myself of him I could not see. Under the circumstances, therefore, I knew that I must humour him until I could hit upon a scheme. I accordingly tried to frame a conciliatory speech, but before I could do so he had turned to me again.

"Your thoughts are easily read," he began, with a repetition of that queer little laugh which I have described before; and as he uttered it he leaned a little closer to me till I was sick and faint with the mere horror of his presence. "You think me mad, and it will require more than my assurance to make you believe that I am not. How slight is your knowledge of me! But there, let us put that

aside for to-night. There is something of much greater importance to be arranged between us. In the first place, it is necessary both for your sake – your safety, if you like – and for mine, that yonder mummy should pass into my possession."

"Impossible!" I answered. "I could not dream of such a thing! It was one of my poor father's greatest treasures, and for that reason alone no consideration would induce me to part with it. Besides, despite your assertion that it is for our mutual safety, I can not see by what right you ask such a favour of me."

"If you only knew how important it is," he repeated, "that that particular mummy should become my property, you would not know a single minute's peace until you had seen the last of it. You may not believe me when I say that I have been searching for it without intermission for nearly fifteen years, and it was only yesterday I learned you were the owner of it. And yet it is the truth."

If I had not had sufficient proof already, here was enough to convince me of his madness. By his own confession, until that evening he had had no notion of my identity, much less of the things I possessed. How, therefore, could he have become aware that I was the owner of the remains of Ptahmes, the King's magician? Under the influence of the momentary irritation caused by his persistence my intention of humouring him quite slipped my memory, and I answered sharply that it was no use his bothering me further about the matter, as I had made up my mind and was not to be moved from it.

He took my refusal with apparent coolness; but the light which still lingered in his eyes warned me, before it was too late, not to rely too much upon this. I knew that in his heart he was raging against me, and that any moment might see his passion taking active shape.

"You must excuse my saying so, Monsieur Pharos," I said, rising from my chair and moving toward the door, "but I think it would perhaps be better for both of us to terminate this most unpleasant interview. It is getting late and I am tired. With your permission, I will open the door for you."

Seeing that I was determined he should go, and realising, I suppose, that it was no use his staying longer, he also rose, and a more evil-looking figure than he presented as he did so Victor Hugo himself could scarcely have imagined. The light of the quaint old Venetian hanging-lamp in the middle of the room fell full and fair upon his face, showing me the deep-set gleaming eyes, the wrinkled, nut-cracker face, and the extraordinary development of shoulder to which I have already directed attention. Old man as he was, a braver man than myself might have been excused had he declined the task of tackling him, and I had the additional spur of knowing that if he got the better of me he would show no mercy. For this reason alone I watched his every movement.

"Come, come, my foolish young friend," he said at length, "in spite of my warning, here we are at a deadlock again! You really must not take things so seriously. Had I had any idea that you were so determined not to let me have the thing, I would not have dreamed of asking for it. It was for your own good as well as mine that I did so. Now, since you desire to turn me out, I will not force my presence upon you. But let us part friends."

As he said this he advanced toward me with extended hand, leaning heavily upon his stick, according to his custom, and to all intents and purposes as pathetic an example of senile decrepitude as a man could wish to see. If he were going off like this, I flattered myself I was escaping from my horrible predicament in an easier manner than I had expected. Nevertheless, I was fully determined, if I could but once get him on the other side of the street door, no earthly consideration should induce me ever to admit him to my dwelling again. His hand was deathly cold – so cold, in fact, that even in my excitement I could not help noticing it. I had scarcely done so, however, before a tremor ran through his figure and, with a guttural noise that could scarcely be described as a cry, he dropped my hand and sprang forward at my throat.

If I live to be a hundred I shall not forget the absolute, the unspeakable, the indescribable terror of that moment. Till then I had never regarded myself in the light of a coward; on the contrary, I had on several occasions had good reason to congratulate myself upon what is popularly termed my

"nerve." Now, however, it was all different. Possibly the feeling of repulsion, I might almost say of fear, I had hitherto entertained for him had something to do with it. It may have been the mesmeric power, which I afterward had good reason to know he possessed, that did it. At any rate, from the moment he pounced upon me I found myself incapable of resistance. It was as if all my will power were being slowly extracted from me by the mere contact of those skeleton fingers which, when they had once touched my flesh, seemed to lose their icy coldness and to burn like red-hot iron. In a dim and misty fashion, somewhat as one sees people in a fog, I was conscious of the devilish ferocity of the countenance that was looking into mine. Then a strange feeling of numbness took possession of me, an entire lack of interest in everything, even in life itself. Gradually and easily I sank into the chair behind me, the room swam before my eyes, an intense craving for sleep overcame me, and little by little, still without any attempt at resistance, my head fell back and I lost consciousness.

CHAPTER IV

When I came to myself again it was already morning. In a small square behind the studio the sparrows were discussing the prospects of breakfast, though as yet that earliest of all birds, the milkman, had not begun to make his presence known in the streets. Of all the hours of the day there is not one, to my thinking, so lonely and so full of dreariness as that which immediately precedes and ushers in the dawn; while, of all the experiences of our human life, there is, perhaps, not one more unpleasant than to awake from sleep at such an hour to find that one has passed the entire night in one's clothes and seated in a most comfortable armchair. That was my lot on this occasion. On opening my eyes I looked around me with a puzzled air. For the life of me I could not understand why I was not in my bed. It was the first time I had ever gone to sleep in my chair, and the knowledge that I had done so disquieted me strangely. I studied the room, but, to all intents and purposes, everything there was just as when I had closed my eyes. I only was changed. My brain was as heavy as lead, and, though I did my best to recall the events of the previous evening, I found that, while I could recollect the "at home" at Medenham House, and my return to my studio afterward, I could remember nothing that followed later. I was still pursuing this train of thought when I became aware of a loud knocking at the street door. I immediately hastened to it and drew the bolts. My feeling of bewilderment was increased rather than diminished on discovering an inspector of police upon the threshold, with a constable behind him.

"Mr. Forrester, I believe?" he began; and as soon as I had answered in the affirmative, continued: "You must excuse my disturbing you, sir, at this early hour, but the reason is imperative. I should be glad if you would permit me the honour of five minutes' conversation with you, alone."

"With pleasure," I answered, and immediately invited him to enter.

Having shut the door behind him, I led the way to the studio, where I signed him to a chair, taking up a position myself on the hearthrug before him. The constable remained in the passage outside.

"It is, as you say, rather an early hour for a call," I remarked, making a mental note as I spoke of the man's character as I read it in his large, honest eyes, well-shaped nose, and square, determined-looking chin. "What can I do for you?"

"I believe you are in a position to furnish me with some important information," he replied. "To begin with, I might inform you that a diabolical murder was committed at the old curiosity shop at the corner of the next street, either late last night or during the early hours of this morning, most probably between midnight and one o'clock. It is altogether a most remarkable affair, and, from the evidence we have before us, though no cries were heard, the struggle must have been a desperate one. From the fact that the front door was still locked and bolted when we forced our way in, it is plain that the murderer must have effected his escape by the back. Indeed, a man *was* seen entering the alley behind the house between one and two o'clock, though this circumstance excited no suspicion at the time. The witness who saw him reports that he came along on this side of the street, in the shadow, and, though he is not at all certain on this point, believes that he entered one of the houses hereabouts. That on your right is empty, and the doors and windows are securely fastened. He could not, therefore, have gone in there. That on the left is a boarding-house. I have called upon the landlady, who asserts most positively that her front door was not opened to any one after ten o'clock last night. She informs me, however, that a light was burning in your studio all night, and I see for myself that you have not been to bed. May I ask, therefore, if you saw anything of such a man, or whether you can furnish me with such particulars as will be likely to help us in our search for him."

Like lightning, while he was talking, the memory of everything connected with the visit Pharos had paid me flashed across my mind. I glanced involuntarily toward that part of the room where the mummy had hitherto stood. To my amazement – I might almost say to my consternation – it was no

longer there. What had become of it? Could Pharos, after disposing of me as he had done, have stolen it and transported it away? It seemed impossible, and yet I had the best of evidence before me that it was no longer there. And then another question: had Pharos had any connection with the murder? The time at which it was supposed to have been committed, between midnight and one o'clock, was precisely that at which he had made his appearance before me. And yet what reason had I, but my own terrible suspicions, to lead me to the conclusion that he was the author of this fiendish bit of work? I saw, however, that my continued silence was impressing the inspector unfavourably.

"Come, sir," he said, this time a little more sharply than before, "I must remind you that my time is valuable. Am I to understand that you are in a position to help me, or not?"

God knows, if I had been my own master I should have instantly loosed my tongue and revealed all I knew. I should have told him under what terrible circumstances I had met Pharos on the Embankment that wet night toward the end of March, and have commented on his inhuman conduct on that occasion. I should have informed him of the appearance the other had made in my studio early this morning, not only with a frightened look in his eyes, but breathing heavily, as though he had been running, a thing which would have seemed impossible in a man of his years. Then I should have gone on to tell how he had attempted to induce me to part with something upon which I placed considerable value, and, being disappointed, had hypnotised me and made off with the article in question. All this, as I say, I should have narrated had I been my own master. But God knows I was not. An irresistible force was at work within me, compelling me, even against my will, to screen him, and to tell the first deliberate lie to which, I think, I had ever given utterance in my life.

It is a poor excuse to offer, and I am aware that a world so censorious as our own will not, in all probability, believed this statement, but upon my hopes of forgiveness at the Last Great Day, at that dread moment when the sins of all men shall be judged and punishment awarded, I declare it to be true in every single particular: and what is more, I further say that even if my life depended on it I could not have done otherwise.

Though it has taken some time to place these thoughts on paper, the interval that elapsed between the inspector's last question and my answer, which seemed to me so halting and suspicious, to the effect that I had neither seen nor heard anything of the man he wanted, was scarcely more than a few seconds.

Having received my assurance, the officer apologised for troubling me and withdrew, and I was left alone with my thoughts. Deep down in my heart there was the desire to hasten after him and to tell him that not only I had lied to him, but that it was possible for me to make amends by putting him on the track of the man who, I felt morally certain, was the criminal. The wish, however, was scarcely born before it was dragged down and stifled by that same irresistible force I have described a few lines since. It seemed to me I was bound hand and foot, powerless to help myself and incapable of doing aught save carry out the will of the remorseless being into whose power I had fallen so completely. But had I really so fallen? Could it be possible that such power was permitted to a human being? No, no – a thousand times no! If he had that influence he must be an agent of the Evil One, whose mission it was to draw to perdition the souls of helpless men. Filled with shame, I sank into a chair and covered my face with my hands, as if by so doing I could shut out the horrible thoughts that filled my brain. Could it be true that I, who had always regarded a liar as the most despicable of men, had sunk so low as to become one myself? God help me! God pity me! Of all the bitter hours my life has known, I think that moment was the worst.

For some time after the inspector had taken his departure I sat, as I have said, my face covered with my hands, trying to think coherently. Twenty-four hours before I had been one of the happiest men in England. Nothing had troubled me. I had lived *for* my art and *in* my art, and I believe I can confidently say that I had not an enemy in the world. Now, in a single hour, my whole life was changed. I had been drawn into the toils of a fiend in human shape and I was paying the awful penalty.

Hour after hour went by. My servant arrived and presently brought in my breakfast, but I put it aside; I had too much upon my mind to eat. It was in vain I tried to force myself. My food stuck in my throat and defied me. And all the time I was oppressed by the diabolical picture of that murder. The shop in which it had occurred was one with which I was familiar. In my mind's eye I saw the whole scene as clearly as if I had been present at the time. I saw the shop, filled to overflowing with bric-a-brac, the light of the single gas-lamp reflected in a hundred varieties of brass and pottery work. At a desk in the corner sat the dealer himself, and before him, holding him in earnest conversation, the extraordinary figure of Pharos the Assassin. How he came to be there at such an hour I could not tell, but from what I knew of him I was convinced it was with no good purpose. I could imagine how off his guard and totally unprepared for attack the other would be; and, even if he had entertained any suspicions, it is extremely doubtful whether he would have credited this deformed atom with the possession, either of such malignity or of such giant strength. Then that same cruel light that had exercised such an influence upon me a few hours before began to glisten in the murderer's eyes. Little by little he moved his right hand behind him until it touched an Oriental dagger lying on a table beside which he stood. Then, with that cat-like spring which I had good reason to remember, he leaped upon his opponent and seized him by the throat, driving the blade deep in below the shoulder. His victim, paralyzed with surprise, at first offered no resistance. Then, with the instinct of self-preservation, he began to struggle with his devilish opponent, only to discover the strength that seemingly attenuated form possessed. Little by little his power departed from him, and at last, with a crash, he fell back upon the floor. I pictured Pharos stooping over him to see if he were dead, chuckling with delight at the success he had achieved. When he had convinced himself on this head, he abstracted a key from the dead man's pocket and approached a safe, built into the wall. The handle turned and the door swung open. A moment later he had taken a ring set with a scarabæus from a drawer and dropped it into his pocket. After that he paused while he considered in which direction it would be safest for him to make his escape. A policeman's step sounded on the pavement outside, and as he heard it he looked up, and his thin lips drew back, showing the wolfish teeth behind. His horrible cunning pointed out to him the danger he would incur in leaving by the front. Accordingly he made his way through the sitting-room behind the shop and passed out by the gate in the yard beyond. A few seconds later he was in my presence, but whether by accident or design was more than I could say.

So vivid was the picture I had conjured up that I could not help believing it must be something more than mere conjecture on my part. If so, what course should I pursue? I had been robbed. I had given a murderer shelter at the very moment when he stood most in need of it, and, when the law was close upon his heels, I had pledged my word for his innocence and perjured myself to ensure his salvation. His presence had been repulsive to me ever since I had first set eyes on him. I hated the man as I had hitherto deemed it impossible I could hate any one. Yet, despite all this, by some power – how real I can not expect any one to believe – he was compelling me to shield and behave toward him as if he had been my brother, or at least my dearest friend. I can feel the shame of that moment even now, the agonising knowledge of the gulf that separated me from the man I was yesterday, or even an hour before.

I rose from the table, leaving my breakfast untouched, and stood at the window looking out upon the dismal square beyond. The sunshine of the earlier morning had given place to a cloudy sky, and, as I watched, a heavy shower began to fall. It was as if Nature were weeping tears of shame to see a Child of Man brought so low. I went to the place where, until a few hours before, the mummy had stood – that wretched mummy which had been the cause of all the trouble. As I had good reason to know, it weighed a considerable amount, more, indeed, than I should have imagined an old man like Pharos could have lifted, much less carried. I examined the floor, to see if the case had been dragged across it, but, highly polished as the boards were, I could detect no sign of such a thing having taken place. The wainscoting of the hall next received my attention, but with a similar result. And it was at this juncture that another curious point in the evening's story struck me. When I had admitted the

inspector of police, I had unlocked and unchained the door. I was the sole occupant of the building. How, therefore, had Pharos conveyed his burden outside, and locked, chained, and bolted the door behind him? Under the influence of this discovery I returned with all speed to the studio. Perhaps he had not gone out by the front door at all, but had made his escape by the windows at the back. These I carefully examined, only to find them safely bolted as usual. The riddle was beyond me. I had to confess myself beaten. Was it possible I could have dreamed the whole thing? Had I fallen asleep in my chair and imagined a meeting with Pharos which had really never taken place? Oh, if only it could be true, what a difference it would make in my happiness! And yet, staring me in the face, was the damning fact that the mummy was gone. When I rose from my chair my mind was made up. I would seek Pharos out, accuse him not only of the theft, but of the murder, and make him understand, with all the earnestness of which I was master, that justice should be done, and that I would no longer shield him from the consequences of his villainy. It was only then I remembered that I had no knowledge of the man's whereabouts. I considered for a moment how I could best overcome this difficulty. Lady Medenham was, of course, the one person of all others to help me. Since she had invited the man to her house, it was almost certain that she would be able to furnish me with his address. I would go to her without further waste of time. Accordingly I made the necessary changes in my toilet and left the studio. The rain had ceased and the streets were once more full of sunshine. It was a pleasant morning for walking, but so urgent did my business seem that I felt I could not even spare the time for exercise. Hailing a hansom, I bade the man drive me with all possible speed to Eaton Square. To my delight Lady Medenham was at home, and I was shown forthwith to her boudoir. A few moments elapsed before she joined me there, and then her first remark was one of astonishment.

"Why, Mr. Forrester, what is the matter with you?" she cried. "I have never seen you look so ill."

"It is nothing," I answered, with a forced laugh. "I have had some bad news this morning, and it has upset me. Lady Medenham, I have come to beg a favour at your hands."

"If it is within my power, you know it is already granted," she said kindly. "Won't you sit down and tell me what it is?"

"I want you to furnish me with the address of that singular old gentleman who was at your 'at home' last evening," I replied, as I seated myself opposite her.

"London would say that there were many singular old gentlemen at my 'at home,'" she answered with a smile; "but my instinct tells me you mean Monsieur Pharos."

"That, I believe, is his name," I said, and then, as if to excuse the question, I added, "he is, as I think you heard him say, an ardent Egyptologist."

"I do not know anything about his attainments in that direction," Lady Medenham replied, "but he is certainly a most extraordinary person. Were it not for his beautiful ward, whose case I must confess excites my pity, I should not care if I never saw him again."

"She is his ward, then?" I said, with an eagerness that I could see was not lost upon my companion. "I had made up my mind she was his granddaughter."

"Indeed, no," Lady Medenham replied. "The poor girl's story is a very strange and sad one. Her father was a Hungarian noble, a brilliant man in his way, I believe, but a confirmed spendthrift. Her mother died when she was but six years old. From a very early age she gave signs of possessing extraordinary musical talent, and this her father, perhaps with some strange prevision of the future, fostered with every care. When she was barely fifteen he was killed in a duel. It was then discovered that his money was exhausted and that the home was mortgaged beyond all redemption to the Jews. Thus the daughter, now without relations or friends of any sort or description, was thrown upon the world to sink or swim just as Fate should decree. For any girl the position would have been sufficiently unhappy, but for her, who had seen nothing of life, and who was of an extremely sensitive disposition, it was well-nigh insupportable. What her existence must have been like for the next five years one scarcely likes to think. But it served its purpose. With a bravery that excites one's admiration she supported herself almost entirely by her music; gaining in breadth, power, and knowledge of technique

with every year. Then – where, or in what manner I have never been able to discover, for she is peculiarly sensitive upon this point – she became acquainted with the old gentleman you saw last night, Monsieur Pharos. He was rich, eccentric, and perhaps what most attracted her, passionately fond of music. His extreme age obviated any scandal, even had there been any one to raise it, so that when he proposed to adopt the friendless but beautiful girl, and to enable her to perfect her musical education under the best masters, no one came forward to protest against it. She has, I believe, been with him upward of seven years now."

I shuddered when I heard this. Knowing what I did of Pharos I could not find it in my heart to credit him with the possession of so much kindly feeling. But if it were not so, what could the bond between them be?

"What you tell me is extremely interesting," I remarked, "and only adds to my desire to see the old gentleman once more. If you could let me have his address I should be more grateful than I can say."

"I am very much afraid it is not in my power," she replied. "It is one of the least of Monsieur Pharos's many peculiarities to take extraordinary precautions to prevent his whereabouts becoming known; but stay, I think I can tell you of some one who may be of more service to you. You know Sir George Legrath, do you not?"

"The Director of the Egyptian Museum?" I said. "Yes, I know him very well indeed. He was an old friend of my father's."

"To be sure he was," she answered. "Well, then, go and see him. I think it is probable that he may be able to assist you. Monsieur Pharos is an acquaintance of his, and it was to Sir George's care that I sent the invitation to my 'at home' last night."

"I can not thank you enough for your kindness, Lady Medenham," I replied, as I rose from my chair. "I will go and see Sir George at once."

"And I hope you may be successful. If I can help you in any other way be sure I will do so. But before you go, Mr. Forrester, let me give you another piece of advice. You should really consult a doctor without delay. I do not like your appearance at all. We shall hear of your being seriously ill if you do not take more care of yourself."

I laughed uneasily. In my own heart I knew my ailment was not of the body but of the mind, and until my suspicions concerning Pharos were set at rest it was beyond the reach of any doctor's science to do me good. Once more I thanked Lady Medenham for her kindness, and then left her and made my way back to the cab.

"To the Egyptian Museum," I cried to the driver, as I took my seat in the vehicle, "and as quickly as you can go!"

The man whipped up his horse, and in less than ten minutes from the time the butler closed the front door upon me at Medenham House I was entering the stately portico of the world-famous Museum. For some years I had been a constant visitor there, and as a result was well known to the majority of the officials. I inquired from one, whom I met in the vestibule, whether I should find Sir George in his office.

"I am not quite certain, sir," the man replied. "It's only just gone half past ten, and unless there is something important doing, we don't often see him much before a quarter to eleven. However, if you will be kind enough, sir, to step this way, I'll very soon find out."

So saying he led me along the corridor, past huge monuments and blocks of statuary, to a smaller passage on the extreme left of the building. At the farther end of this was a door, upon which he knocked. No answer rewarded him.

"I am very much afraid, sir, he has not arrived," remarked the man, "but perhaps you will be good enough to step inside and take a seat. I feel sure he won't be very long."

"In that case I think I will do so," I replied, and accordingly I was ushered into what is perhaps the most characteristic office in London. Having found the morning paper and with unconscious irony placed it before me, the man withdrew, closing the door behind him.

I have said that the room in which I was now seated was characteristic of the man who occupied it. Sir George Legrath is, as every one knows, the most competent authority the world possesses at the present time on the subject of ancient Egypt. He had graduated under my own poor father, and, if only for this reason, we had always been the closest friends. It follows as a natural sequence that the walls of the room should be covered from ceiling to floor with paintings, engravings, specimens of papyrus, and the various odds and ends accumulated in an Egyptologist's career. He had also the reputation of being one of the best-dressed men in London, and was at all times careful to a degree of his appearance. This accounted for the velvet office-coat, a sleeve of which I could just see peeping out from behind a curtain in the corner. Kindly of heart and the possessor of a comfortable income, it is certain that but few of those in need who applied to him did so in vain; hence the pile of begging letters from charitable institutions and private individuals that invariably greeted his arrival at his office. I had not been waiting more than five minutes before I heard an active step upon the stone flagging of the passage outside. The handle of the door was sharply turned, and the man for whom I was waiting entered the room.

"My dear Cyril," he cried, advancing toward me with outstretched hand, "this is indeed a pleasure! It is now some weeks since I last saw you, but, on the other hand, I have heard of you. The fame of your picture is in every one's mouth."

"Every one is very kind," I replied, "but I am afraid in this instance the public says rather more than it means."

"Not a bit of it," answered my friend. "That reminds me, however, that there is one point in the picture about which I want to talk to you."

"At any other time I shall be delighted," I replied, "but to-day, Sir George, I have something else to say to you. I have come to you because I am very much worried."

"Now that I look at you I can see you are not quite the thing," he said. "But what is this worry? Tell me about it, for you know if I can help you I shall be only too glad to do so."

"I have come to seek your advice in a rather strange matter," I replied, "and before I begin I must ask that everything I say shall remain in the strictest confidence between us."

"I will give you that promise willingly," he said, "and I think you know me well enough to feel certain I shall keep it. Now let me hear your troubles."

"In the first place I want you to tell me all you know of an extraordinary individual who has been seen a good deal in London society of late. I refer to a man named Pharos."

While I had been speaking Sir George had seated himself in the chair before his writing-table. On hearing my question, however, he sprang to his feet with an exclamation that was as startling as it was unexpected. It did not exactly indicate surprise, nor did it express annoyance or curiosity; yet it seemed to partake of all three. It was his face, however, that betrayed the greatest change. A moment before it had exhibited the ruddiness of perfect health, now it was ashen pale.

"Pharos?" he cried. Then, recovering his composure a little, he added, "My dear Forrester, what can you possibly want with him?"

"I want to know all you can tell me about him," I replied gravely. "It is the greatest favour I have ever asked of you, and I hope you will not disappoint me."

For some moments he paced the room as if in anxious thought. Then he returned to his seat at the writing-table. The long hand of the clock upon the mantelpiece had made a perceptible movement when he spoke again. So changed was his voice, however, that I scarcely recognised it.

"Cyril," he said, "you have asked me a question to which I can return you but one answer, and that is – may God help you if you have fallen into that man's power! What he has done or how he has treated you I do not know, but I tell you this, that he is as cruel and as remorseless as Satan himself."

You are my friend, and I tell you I would far rather see you dead than in his clutches. I do not fear many men, but Pharos the Egyptian is to me an incarnate terror."

"You say Pharos the Egyptian. What do you mean by that?"

"What I say. The man is an Egyptian, and claims, I believe, to be able to trace his descent back at least three thousand years."

"And you know no more of him?"

As I put the question I looked at Sir George's hand, which rested on his blotting-pad, and noticed that it was shaking as if with the palsy.

Once more a pause ensued.

"What I know must remain shut up in my own brain," he answered slowly and as if he were weighing every word before he uttered it; "and it will go down to my grave with me. Dear lad, fond as I am of you, you must not ask any more of me, for I can not satisfy your curiosity."

"But, Sir George, I assure you, with all the earnestness at my command, that this is a matter of life and death to me," I replied. "You can have no notion what it means. My honour, my good name – nay, my very existence itself – depends upon it."

As if in answer to my importunity, my friend rose from his chair and picked up the newspaper which the attendant had placed on the table beside me. He opened it, and, after scanning the pages, discovered what he was looking for. Folding it carefully, he pointed to a certain column and handed it to me. I took it mechanically and glanced at the item in question. It was an account of the murder of the unfortunate curiosity dealer, but, so far as I could see, my name was not mentioned. I looked up at Sir George for an explanation.

"Well?" I said, but the word stuck in my throat.

"Though you will scarcely credit it, I think I understand everything," he replied. "The murdered man's shop was within a short distance of your abode. A witness states that he saw some one leave the victim's house about the time the deed must have been committed and that he made his way into your street. As I said, when you first asked me about him, may God help you, Cyril Forrester, if this is your trouble!"

"But what makes you connect Pharos with the murder described here?" I asked, feigning a surprise I was far from feeling.

"That I can not tell you," he replied. "To do so would bring upon me – But no, my lips are sealed, hopelessly sealed."

"But surely you are in a position to give me that man's address? Lady Medenham told me you were aware of it."

"It is true I was, but I am afraid you have come too late."

"Too late! What do you mean? Oh, Sir George, for Heaven's sake do not trifle with me!"

"I am not trifling with you, Forrester," he replied seriously. "I mean that it is impossible for you to find him in London, for the simple reason that he left England with his companion early this morning."

On hearing this I must have looked so miserable that Sir George came over to where I sat and placed his hand upon my shoulder.

"Dear lad," he said, "you don't know how it pains me to be unable to help you. If it were possible, you have every reason to know that I would do so. In this case, however, I am powerless, how powerless you can not imagine. But you must not give way like this. The man is gone, and in all human probability you will never see his face again. Try to forget him."

"It is impossible. I assure you, upon my word of honour, that I shall know neither peace nor happiness until I have seen him and spoken to him face to face. If I wish ever to be able to look upon myself as an honourable man I *must* do so. Is there no way in which I can find him?"

"I fear none; but stay, now I come to think of it, there is a chance, but a very remote one. I will make inquiries about it and let you know within an hour."

"God bless you! I will remain in my studio until your messenger arrives."

I bade him good-bye and left the Museum. That he did not forget his promise was proved by the fact that within an hour a cab drove up to my door and one of the attendants from the Museum alighted. I took in the note he brought with him at the door, and, when I had returned to the studio, tore open the envelope and drew forth a plain visiting card. On it was written:

***"Inquire for the man you seek from Carlo Angelotti, Public
Letter-writer, In the arches of the Theatre San Carlo, Naples."***

CHAPTER V

If there is one place more than another for which I entertain a dislike that is akin to hatred, it is for Naples in the summer time – that wretched period when every one one knows is absent, all the large houses are closed, the roads are knee-deep in dust, and even the noise of the waves breaking upon the walls of the Castello del' Ovo seems unable to alleviate the impression of heat and dryness which pervades everything. It is the season when the hotels, usually so cool – one might almost say frigid – have had time to grow hot throughout, and are in consequence well-nigh unbearable; when the particular waiter who has attended to your wants during each preceding visit, and who has come to know your customs and to have survived his original impression that each successive act on your part is only a more glaring proof of your insular barbarity, is visiting his friends in the country, or whatever it is that waiters do during the dull season when the tourists have departed and their employers have no further use for them. It was at this miserable period of the year that I descended upon Naples in search of Monsieur Pharos.

Owing to a breakdown on the line between Spezia and Pisa, it was close upon midnight before I reached my destination, and almost one o'clock before I had transported my luggage from the railway station to my hotel. By this time, as will be readily understood by all those who have made the overland journey, I was in a condition bordering upon madness. Ever since I had called upon Sir George Legrath, and had obtained from him the address of the man from whom I hoped to learn the whereabouts of Pharos, I had been living in a kind of stupor. It took the form of a drowsiness that nothing would shake off, and yet, do what I would, I could not sleep. Times out of number during that long journey I had laid myself back in the railway carriage and closed my eyes in the hope of obtaining some rest; but it was in vain. However artfully I might woo the drowsy god, sleep would not visit my eyelids. The mocking face of the man I had come to consider my evil angel was always before me, and in the darkness of the night, when the train was rolling southward, I could hear his voice in my ears telling me that this hastily-conceived journey on my part had been all carefully thought out and arranged by him beforehand, and that in seeking him in Naples I was only advancing another step toward the fulfilment of my destiny.

On reaching my hotel I went straight to bed. Every bone in my body ached with fatigue. Indeed, so weary was I that I could eat nothing and could scarcely think coherently. The proprietor of the hotel was an old friend, and for the reason that whenever I visited Naples I made it a rule to insist upon occupying the same room, I did not experience the same feeling of loneliness which usually assails one on retiring to rest in a strange place. In my own mind I was convinced that as soon as my head touched the pillow I should be asleep. But a bitter disappointment was in store for me. I laid myself down with a sigh of satisfaction and closed my eyes; but whether I missed the rocking of the train, or was overtired, I can not say – at any rate, I was soon convinced of one thing, and that was that the longer I lay there the more wakeful I became. I tried another position, but with the same result. I turned my pillow, only to make it the more uncomfortable. Every trick for the production of sleep that I had ever heard of I put into execution, but always with entire absence of success. At last, thoroughly awake and still more thoroughly exasperated, I rose from my couch, and dressing myself, opened the window of my room and stepped out on to the balcony. It was a glorious night, such a one as is seldom, if ever, seen in England. Overhead the moon sailed in a cloudless sky, revealing with her exquisite light the city stretching away to right and left and the expanse of harbour lying directly before me; Vesuvius standing out black and awesome, and the dim outline of the hills toward Castellamare and Sorrento beyond. For some reason my thoughts no longer centred themselves on Pharos. I found the lovely face of his companion continually rising before my eyes. There was the same expression of hopelessness upon it that I remembered on the first occasion upon which I had seen her; but there was this difference, that in some vague, uncertain way she seemed now to be

appealing to me to help her, to rescue her from the life she was leading and from the man who had got her, as he had done myself, so completely in his power. Her beauty affected me as no other had ever done. I could still hear the soft accents of her voice, and the echo of her wild, weird music, as plainly as if I were still sitting listening to her in Lady Medenham's drawing-room; and, strange to relate, it soothed me to think that it was even possible we might be in the same town together.

For upward of an hour I remained in the balcony looking down at the moonlit city and thinking of the change the last few days had brought about in my life. When I once more sought my couch, scarcely five minutes elapsed before I was wrapped in a heavy, dreamless sleep from which I did not wake until well nigh nine o'clock. Much refreshed, I dressed myself, and having swallowed a hasty breakfast, to which I brought a better appetite than I had known for some days past, donned my hat and left the hotel in search of Signor Angelotti, who, as the card informed me, carried on his profession of a public letter-writer under the arches of the San Carlo Theatre.

In all the years which have elapsed since Don Pedro de Toledo laid the foundation of the magnificent thoroughfare which to-day bears his name, I very much doubt if a man has made his way along it on a more curious errand than I did that day. To begin with, I had yet to discover what connection Angelotti could have with Monsieur Pharos, and then to find out how far it was in his power to help me. Would he forsake his business and lead me direct to the Egyptian's abode, or would he deny any knowledge of the person in question and send me unsatisfied away? Upon these points I resolved to satisfy myself without delay.

Of all the characteristic spots of Naples surely the point at which the Via Roma joins the Piazza San Ferdinando, in which is situated the theatre for which I was making, is the most remarkable. Here one is permitted an opportunity of studying the life of the city under the most favourable auspices. My mind, however, on this occasion was too much occupied wondering what the upshot of my errand would be to have any time to spare for the busy scene around me. Reaching the theatre I took the card from my pocket and once more examined it. It was plain and straightforward, like Sir George Legrath's own life, and, as I have already said, warned me that I must look for this mysterious Angelotti, who carried on the trade of a public letter-writer under the arches of the famous theatre. As I glanced at the words "Public Letter-writer" another scene rose before my mind's eye.

Several years before I had visited Naples with a number of friends, among whom was a young American lady whose vivacity and capacity for fun made her the life and soul of the party. On one occasion nothing would please her but to stop in the street and engage one of these public scribes to indite a letter for her to an acquaintance in New York. I can see the old man's amusement now, and the pretty, bright face of the girl as she endeavoured to make him understand, in broken Italian, what she desired him to say. That afternoon, I remember, we went to Capri and were late in reaching home, for which we should in all probability have received a wiggling from the elder members of the party, who had remained behind, but for the fact that two important engagements, long hoped for, were announced as resulting from the excursion. I could not help contrasting the enjoyment with which I had made a bet of gloves with the young American, that she would not employ the letter-writer as narrated above, with my feelings as I searched for Angelotti now. Approaching the first table I inquired of the man behind it whether he could inform me where I should be most likely to find the individual I wanted.

"Angelotti, did you say, signore?" the fellow replied, shaking his head "I know no one of that name among the writers here." Then, turning to a man seated a little distance from him, he questioned him, with the same result.

It began to look as if Legrath must have made some mistake, and that the individual in whose custody reposed the secret of Pharos's address was as difficult to find as his master himself. But, unsuccessful as my first inquiry had been, I was not destined to be disappointed in the end. A tall, swarthy youth, of the true Neapolitan loafer type, who had been leaning against a wall close by

smoking a cigarette and taking a mild interest in our conversation, now removed his back from its resting-place and approached us.

"Ten thousand pardons, Eccellenza," he said, "but you mentioned the name of one Angelotti, a public letter-writer. I am acquainted with him, and with the signore's permission will conduct him to that person."

"You are sure you know him?" I replied, turning upon him sharply, for I had had dealings with Neapolitan loafers before, and I did not altogether like the look of this fellow.

"Since he is my uncle, Eccellenza, it may be supposed that I do," he answered.

Having said this he inhaled a considerable quantity of smoke and blew it slowly out again, watching me all the time. I do not know any being in the world who can be so servile, and at the same time so insolent at a moment's notice, as a youth of the Neapolitan lower classes. This fellow was an excellent specimen of his tribe.

"Since you know Angelotti, perhaps you will be good enough to tell me his address?" I said at last. "I have no doubt I shall then be able to find him for myself."

Seeing the advantage he held, and scenting employment of not too severe a kind, the young man made a gesture with his hands as if to signify that while he was perfectly willing to oblige me in so small a matter, business was business, and he must profit by his opportunity. He would be perfectly willing, he said, to act as my guide; but it must be remembered that it would occupy some considerable portion of his valuable time, and this would have to be paid for at a corresponding rate.

When I had agreed to his terms he bade me follow him, and leaving the precincts of the theatre struck out in the direction of the Strada di Chiaia. Whatever his other deficiencies may have been, he was certainly a good walker, and I very soon found that it took me all my time to keep up with him. Reaching the end of the street he turned sharply to the right, crossed the road, and a few seconds later dived into an alley. Of all the filthy places of Naples, that in which I now found myself was undoubtedly the dirtiest. As usual, the houses were many stories high; but the road was so narrow, and the balconies projected so far from the windows that an active man might have leaped from side to side with perfect safety. For the most part the houses consisted of small shops, though here and there the heavily-barred lower windows and carved doorways proclaimed them private residences. Halfway down this objectionable thoroughfare a still smaller and dirtier one led off to the right, and into this my guide turned, bidding me follow him. Just as I was beginning to wonder whether I should ever find my way out alive, the youth came to a standstill before a small shop, in which a number of second-hand musical instruments were displayed for sale.

"This, Eccellenza, is the residence of the most illustrious Angelotti," he said, with a wave of his hand toward the shop in question.

"But I understand that he was a letter-writer," I answered, believing for the moment that the youth had tricked me.

"And it was quite true," he replied. "Until a month ago the Signor Angelotti had his table at the theatre; but his cousin is dead, and now he sells the most beautiful violins in all Italy."

As he said this the young man lifted his hand and gently waved it in the air, as if it were impossible for him to find words sufficiently expressive to describe the excellence of the wares I should find within. It is probable he considered me an intending purchaser, and I do not doubt he had made up his mind, in the event of business ensuing, to return a little later in order to demand from his avuncular relative a commission upon the transaction. Rewarding him for the trouble he had taken, I bade him be off about his business and entered the shop. It was a dismal little place and filthy to an indescribable degree. The walls were hung with musical instruments, the ceiling with rows of dried herbs, and in a corner, seated at a table busily engaged upon some literary composition, a little old man, with sharp, twinkling eyes and snow-white hair. On seeing me he rose from his chair and came forward to greet me, pen in hand.

"I am looking for the Signor Angelotti," I said, by way of introducing myself, "whom I was told I should find among the public letter-writers at the Theatre San Carlo."

"Angelotti is my name," he answered, "and for many years I received my clients at the place you mention; but my cousin died, and though I would willingly have gone on writing my little letters – for I may tell you, Eccellenza, that writing letters for other people is a pleasurable employment – business is business, however, and here was this shop to be attended to. So away went letter-writing, and now, as you see, I sell violins and mandolins, of which I can show you the very best assortment in all Naples."

As he said this he put his little sparrow-like head on one side and looked at me in such a comical fashion that I could scarcely refrain from laughing. I had no desire, however, to offend the little man, for I did not know how useful he might prove himself to me.

"Doubtless you miss your old employment," I said, "particularly as it seems to have afforded you so much interest. It was not in connection with your talents in that direction, however, that I have called upon you. I have come all the way from England to ask you a question."

On hearing this he nodded his head more vigorously than before.

"A great country," he answered with enthusiasm. "I have written many letters for my clients to relatives there. There is a place called Saffron Hill. Oh, Eccellenza, you would scarcely believe what stories I could tell you about the letters I have written to people there. But I am interrupting you. I am an old man, and I have seen very many things, so it is only natural I should like to talk about them."

"Very natural, indeed," I answered; "but in this instance all I have come to ask of you is an address. I want you to find a person for me who left England a few days since."

"And came to Naples? A countryman, perhaps?"

"No, he is no countryman of mine, nor do I even know that he came to Naples; but I was told by some one in England, from whom I made inquiries, that if I came here and asked for one Angelotti, a public letter-writer, I should, in all probability, be able to learn his whereabouts."

As if convinced of the importance of the part he was to play in the affair, the old man laid his pen carefully down upon the table, and then stood before me with his hands placed together, finger-tip to finger-tip.

"If your Excellency would condescend to mention the individual's name," he said softly, "it is just possible I might be able to give him the information he seeks."

"The name of the person I want to find is Pharos," I replied. "He is sometimes called Pharos the Egyptian."

Had I stated that I was in search of the Author of all Evil, the placid Angelotti could scarcely have betrayed more surprise. He took a step from me and for a moment gazed at me in amazement. Then the expression gradually faded from his face, leaving it as devoid of emotion as before.

"Pharos?" he repeated. "For the moment it does not strike me that I know the individual."

I should have believed that he really had not the power to help me had I not noticed the look which had come into his face when I mentioned that fatal name.

"You do not know him?" I said. "Surely you must be making some mistake. Think again, Signor Angelotti. See, here is the card I spoke of. It has your name and address upon it, and it was given me by Sir George Legrath, the head of the Egyptian Museum in London, of whom I think you must at least have heard."

He shook his head after he had examined the card.

"It is my name, sure enough," he said, handing it back to me, "but I can not understand why you should have supposed that I know anything of the person you are seeking. However, if you will write your name and address upon the card, and will leave it with me, I will make inquiries, and, should I discover anything, will at once communicate with your Excellency. I can do no more."

I saw then that my suppositions were correct, and that the old fellow was not as ignorant as he desired me to believe. I accordingly wrote my name, with that of the hotel at which I was staying, at

the top of the card, and handed it to him, and then, seeing that there was nothing further to be done, bade him good-morning, and left the shop. Fortunately, the road home was easier to find than I had expected it would be, and it was not very long before I was once more in the Piazza S. Ferdinando.

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