Tomb of the Golden Bird

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Extract

Chapter One

'RAMSES!'

Seated on the terrace of Shepheard's Hotel, I watched with interest as a tall young man stopped and turned, as if in response to the calling of his name. Yet this was not the fourteenth century BC, but the year of our Lord 1922; and the tall man was no ancient pharaoh. Though his bronzed skin and black hair resembled those of an Egyptian, his height and bearing proclaimed him for what he was – an English gentleman of the finest quality. He was also my son, 'Ramses' Walter Peabody Emerson, who was better known in Egypt by his sobriquet.

He raised his hand to his brow, and realized that (as usual) he was not wearing a hat. In lieu of removing that which was not present he inclined his head in greeting, and one of his rare, attractive smiles warmed his thin face. I craned my neck and half rose from my chair in order to see the individual who had occasioned this response, but the crowds that filled the street blocked my view. Cairo traffic had grown worse since my early days in Egypt; motor cars now mingled with donkeys and camels, carts and carriages, and the disgusting effluvia their engines emitted offended the nostrils more than the odours of the

above-mentioned beasts – to which, admittedly, I had become accustomed.

I deduced that the person my son addressed was of short stature, and most probably female (basing this latter assumption on Ramses's attempt to remove his hat and the affability of his smile). A portly person wearing a very large turban and mounted on a very small donkey passed in front of my son, and by the time he had gone by Ramses was wending his way towards the steps of the hotel and the table where I sat awaiting him.

'Who was that?' I demanded.

'Good afternoon to you too, Mother.' Ramses bent to kiss my cheek.

'Good afternoon. Who was that?'

'Who was whom?'

'Ramses', I said warningly.

My son abandoned his teasing. 'I believe you are not acquainted with her, Mother. Her name is Suzanne Malraux, and she studied with Mr Petrie.'

'Ah yes', I said. 'You are mistaken, Ramses, I heard of her last year from Professor Petrie. He described her work as adequate.'

'That sounds like Petrie.' Ramses sat down and adjusted his long legs under the table. 'But you must give him credit; he has always been willing to train women in archaeology.'

'I have never denied Petrie any of the acclaim that is his due, Ramses.'

Ramses's smile acknowledged the ambiguity of the statement. 'Training is one thing, employment another. She has been unable to find a position.'

I wondered if Ramses was implying that we take the young woman on to our staff. She might have approached him rather than his father or me. He was, I admit, more approachable,

particularly by young ladies. Let me hasten to add that he did not invite the approaches. He was devoted to his beautiful wife Nefret, but it might be asking too much of a lady who is approaching a certain time of life to allow her husband close association with a younger female. Miss Malraux was half French. And she was bound to be attracted to Ramses. Women were. His gentle manners (my contribution) and athletic frame (his father's), his somewhat exotic good looks, and a certain *je ne sais quoi* (in fact I knew perfectly well what it was, but refused to employ the vulgar terms currently in use . . .).

No, despite our need for additional staff, it might not be advisable.

'Have you had any interesting encounters?' Ramses asked, looking over the people taking tea on the terrace. They were the usual sort – well dressed, well groomed, and almost all white – if that word can be used to describe complexions that ranged from pimply pale to sunburned crimson.

'Lord and Lady Allenby stopped to say hello', I replied. 'He was most agreeable, but I understand why people refer to him as the Bull. He has that set to his jaw.'

'He has to be forceful. As high commissioner he is under fire from the imperialists in the British government and the nationalists in Egypt. On the whole, I can only commend his efforts.'

I did not want to talk politics. The subject was too depressing.

'There is your father', I said. 'Late as usual.'

Ramses looked over his shoulder at the street. There was no mistaking Emerson. He is one of the finest-looking men I have ever beheld: raven locks and eyes of a penetrating sapphirine blue, a form as impressive as it had been when I first met him, he stood a head taller than those around

him and his booming voice was audible some distance away. He was employing it freely, greeting acquaintances in a mixture of English and Arabic, the latter liberally salted with the expletives that have given him the Egyptian sobriquet of Father of Curses. Egyptians had become accustomed to this habit and replied with broad grins to remarks such as 'How are you, Ibrahim, you old son of an incontinent camel?' My distinguished husband, the finest Egyptologist of this or any era, had earned the respect of the Egyptians with whom he had lived for so many years because he treated them as he did his fellow archaeologists. That is to say, he cursed all of them impartially when they did something that vexed him. It was not difficult to vex Emerson. Few people lived up to his rigid professional standards, and time had not mellowed his quick temper.

'He's got someone with him', said Ramses.

'Well, well', I said. 'What a surprise.'

The individual who followed in Emerson's mighty wake was none other than Howard Carter.

Perhaps I should explain the reason for my sarcasm, for such it was. Howard was one of our oldest friends, an archaeologist whose career had undergone several reversals and recoveries. He was presently employed by Lord Carnarvon to search for royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings. Searching for royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings was Emerson's great ambition – one he could not fulfil until Carnarvon gave up his concession. Rumour had it that his lordship was about to do so, having come to the conclusion – shared by most Egyptologists – that the Valley had yielded all it ever would.

Emerson did not share that conclusion. At the end of the previous season he had admitted to me that he believed there was at least one more royal tomb to be found – that

of the little-known king Tutankhamon. He had done his best, without actually lying, to conceal this belief from Howard. One of the reasons why we had come to Egypt so much earlier than was our custom was to discover what plans Howard and his patron had made for the coming season.

One look at Emerson's expressive countenance told me what I wanted to know. Despite the heartiness of his vociferous greetings, his sapphirine eyes were dull, his well-cut lips set in a downward curve. Carnarvon had not abandoned his concession.

However, Howard Carter appeared no more cheerful. Nattily dressed as was his habit in a tweed suit and bow tie, a cigarette holder in his hand, he addressed me with a rather stiff bow before assuming the seat I indicated.

'How nice to see you, Howard', I said. 'We tried several times this summer to communicate with you, but without success.'

'Sorry', Howard muttered. 'I was in and out, you know. Busy.'

'I ran into him by accident at the office of the director', said Emerson, who had been haunting that spot for two days. He relapsed into gloomy silence. Ramses gave me a meaningful look and tried to revive the conversation.

'Like ourselves, you are out early this year, Carter.'

'Had to be.'

The waiter approached with a tray. He had, with the efficiency one expects at Shepheard's, noted our number and brought cups and biscuits for all.

'The area where I mean to excavate is very popular with tourists', Howard resumed. 'Want to get it over before they arrive in full force.'

'Ah', said Ramses. 'So Lord Carnarvon has decided on

another season. We had heard he was thinking of giving up the firman.'

Emerson made a soft growling sound, but Howard perked up a trifle. 'One more season, at least. I persuaded him we must examine that small triangle we left unexcavated near Ramses VI before we can claim we have finished the job we set out to do.' He glanced at Emerson, and added, 'I have the Professor to thank for that. Initially his lordship was of the opinion that another season in the Valley would be a waste of time, but when I told him that Professor Emerson had offered to take over the concession and my services, Carnarvon had second thoughts.'

'Naturally', I said, managing not to look at Emerson. 'Well, Howard, we wish you good fortune and good hunting. When are you off to Luxor?'

'Not for a while. I want to visit the antiquities dealers. Though I don't suppose I will come across anything as remarkable as that statuette you found last year.'

'I doubt you will', said Emerson, cheering up a bit.

Howard asked about our own plans, and we thanked him for allowing us to continue working in the West Valley, which was properly part of his lordship's concession. After we had finished tea and Howard had taken his leave, I turned to Emerson.

'Don't say it', muttered my husband.

'Emerson, you know I would never reproach you for failing to follow my advice. I did warn you, however, that making that offer to Lord Carnarvon would have an effect contrary to what you had hoped. Given your reputation, your interest was bound to inspire a spirit of competition in –'

'I told you –' Emerson shouted. People at a nearby table turned to stare. Emerson glared at them, and they found other objects of interest. With a visible effort he turned the

glare into a pained smile, directed at me. 'I beg your pardon, my dear Peabody.'

That brief moment of temper was the most encouraging thing I had seen for months. Ever since my near demise the previous spring Emerson had treated me as if I were still on my deathbed. He hadn't shouted at me once. It was very exasperating. Emerson is never more imposing than when he is in a rage, and I missed our animated discussions.

I smiled fondly at him. 'Ah, well, it is water under the bridge. We will not discuss it further. Ramses, when are Nefret and the children due back from Atiyeh?'

Ramses consulted his watch. 'They ought to have been here by now, but you know how difficult it is to extract the twins from their admirers in the village.'

'You ought to have gone with them', said Emerson, still looking for someone to quarrel with.

'Nonsense', I said briskly. 'Selim and Daoud and Fatima went with them, which was only proper, since they wanted to visit their friends and kinfolk. They ought to be able to keep two five-year-olds from taking harm.'

'It would take more than three or four people to keep Charla from doing something harmful, to herself or others', said Emerson darkly.

In this assumption he was justified, since his granddaughter had a more adventurous spirit than her brother, and an explosive temper. However, it was not Charla who returned cradled in the muscular arms of Daoud. We had returned to our sitting room in the hotel, and when Emerson saw David John limp as a dead fish and green-faced as a pea, he sprang up from his chair with a resounding oath.

'Hell and damnation! What is wrong with the boy? Daoud, I trusted you to –'

'He's drunk', shouted David John's twin sister, her black

eyes shining and her black curls bouncing as she jumped up and down with excitement. 'The boys gave him beer and dared him to drink it.' She added regretfully, 'They wouldn't let me have any, they said it was only for men.'

David John, who was as fair as his sister was dark, raised a languid head. 'I wanted to know what it felt like.'

'Well, now you know', I said, for of course I had immediately diagnosed the cause of the boy's malaise. 'It doesn't feel very nice, does it? Put him to bed, Daoud, and let him sleep it off.'

'I'll do it', said Ramses, taking the limp little body from Daoud, whose face was a picture of guilt. Daoud is a very large man with a very large face, so the guilt was extensive. Ramses gave him a slap on the back. 'It wasn't your fault, Daoud.' From the quirk at the corner of his mouth I knew he was remembering the time he had returned from the village after a similar debauch, though not in a similar condition. He had prudently rid himself of the liquor all over the floor of Selim's house before leaving the village.

'Are Selim and Fatima downstairs?' I asked. 'They were afraid to come up, I suppose. Tell them it's all right, Daoud. I expect you were all busy watching Charla.'

'But I was good', Charla informed us. She ran to her mother, who had sunk into a chair. 'Wasn't I, Mama? Not like David John.'

In a way I couldn't blame her for gloating a trifle. Usually she was the one who got in trouble.

Nefret patted the child's dusty curls. 'No, you weren't. Climbing the palm tree was not a good plan. She got halfway up before Daoud plucked her down', she informed us.

'But I didn't get drunk, Mama.'

'You must give her that', said Emerson, chuckling. 'Come and give Grandpapa a kiss, you virtuous young creature.'

'She is absolutely filthy, Emerson', I said, catching hold of Charla's collar as she started to comply. 'Come along, Charla, we will have a nice long bath and then Grandpapa will come in to kiss you good night. No, Nefret, you sit still. You look exhausted.'

The advantage of having the children spend the day with Selim and Daoud's kin at the nearby village of Atiyeh was that the enterprise usually left them so tired they went to bed without a fuss. David John was already asleep when I turned Charla over to Fatima, assured the latter that we did not consider she had neglected her duty, and returned to the sitting room to join my husband and son. Emerson was pouring the whisky.

Owing in part to our early departure from England, we four were the only members of our staff in Egypt. In fact, we were currently the only members of the staff. Ramses's best friend David, our nephew by marriage, had finally admitted he would prefer to spend the winter in England with his wife, Lia, and their children, pursuing his successful career as an artist and illustrator. (He had admitted this under pressure from me, and over Emerson's plaintive objections.) Emerson's brother Walter and his wife, my dear friend Evelyn, who had been out with us before, had given up active careers in the field; Walter's chief interest was in linguistics, and Evelyn was fully occupied with grandmotherhood. She had quite a lot of grandchildren (to be honest, I had rather lost track of the exact number), from Lia and their other sons and daughters.

Other individuals whom we had hoped to employ the previous season had turned out to be murderers or victims of murder – a not uncommon occurrence with us, I must admit. Selim, our Egyptian foreman, was as skilled an excavator as most European scholars, and his crew had learned

Emerson's methods. Still, in my opinion we needed more people, particularly since I was determined to carry out my scheme of allowing Ramses and Nefret to spend the winter in Cairo instead of joining us in Luxor. I hadn't proposed this to Emerson as yet, since I knew he would howl. Emerson is devoted to his son and daughter-in-law, as they are to him, but he tends to regard them as extensions of himself, with the same ambitions and interests. The dear children had given us loyal service for many years, and they were now entitled to pursue their own careers.

I assumed that Emerson and I would be going on to Luxor, though I wasn't certain of that. Emerson had reverted to his infuriating habit of keeping his plans secret, even from me, until the last possible moment.

That moment, in my opinion, had come.

'Very well, Emerson', I said, after a few refreshing sips of whisky. 'The moment has come. You have had several interviews with the director of the Antiquities Service, and since you did not return from them in a state of profane exasperation I presume M Lacau was agreeable to your request. What site has he allotted to us?'

'You know', Emerson said. 'I told you before.'

'No, you did not.'

'The West Valley?' inquired Ramses.

Emerson, who had been anticipating the prolongation of suspense, looked chagrined. 'Er . . . yes. Quite right.'

'What about Carter and Carnarvon?' I persisted. 'If their dig in the East Valley comes up empty, won't they want to move to the West Valley? It is properly part of their firman.'

'If – that is to say, when – they give up the East Valley, Carnarvon may decide to end the season', Emerson said. 'If they do continue, it will most likely be in the tomb of

Amenhotep III. Carter made a very cursory excavation there in 1919. It's at the far end of the West Valley from the area in which we would be working. There's room for half a dozen expeditions.'

I seized my opening. 'It would make better sense for us to join forces with Cyrus Vandergelt at the tomb of Ay. We are short on staff, and Cyrus has –'

A timid tap at the door interrupted me.

'Now who the devil can that be?' Emerson demanded. 'I am ready for dinner. Where's Nefret?'

'She'll be here directly', Ramses said. 'She wanted to bathe and change.'

'Answer the door, Emerson', I said impatiently.

The suffragi on duty outside bowed low and handed Emerson a slip of pasteboard. 'The gentleman is waiting, Father of Curses.'

'He can damn well go on waiting', said Emerson, inspecting the card. 'Of all the impertinence. It's that rascal Montague, Peabody. I won't see him.'

Emerson seldom wants to see anyone, but he had a particular animus against Sir Malcolm Page Henley de Montague. He was a wealthy collector of antiquities, a category to which my spouse objects on principle, and a very irritating man in his own right. I doubted that he had called upon us from motives of friendship. However, it is advantageous to discover the motives of such persons in order to guard oneself against their machinations.

'Now, Emerson, don't be rude', I said. 'We can't go down to dinner until Nefret is ready, so we may as well hear what he has to say. Show him in, Ali.'

Sir Malcolm carried a silver-headed stick, not for support but for swatting at the unfortunate Egyptian servants he employed. Carefully doffing his hat so as not to disturb his

coiffeured mane of white hair, he bowed and greeted us all in turn.

'It is good to see you back in Egypt', he began.

'Bah', said Emerson. 'What do you want?'

'Pray take a chair, Sir Malcolm', I said, frowning at Emerson. 'We were about to go down to dinner, but we can spare you a few minutes.'

The door, which Ali had closed behind Sir Malcolm, opened again to admit Nefret. Her eyes widened at the sight of our visitor, but she extended her hand and let him bow over it. His look of admiration was justified; she looked very lovely, although the styles of that year were not nearly so pretty as they had been in my youth. The frock, of a soft blue that matched her eyes, had no sleeves, only narrow straps supporting a beaded bodice, and the skirt reached just below her knees. At least she had not given in to the fad of cutting her hair short; its red-gold locks were swept into a knot atop her head.

'I apologize for coming at an inopportune time', said Sir Malcolm. 'Since I know the Professor dislikes social conventions, I will come straight to the point. May I ask where you intend to work this season?'

'The West Valley of the Kings', said Emerson shortly.

'Not the East Valley?'

'No.'

'Then Carnarvon has not abandoned the concession?'

'No.'

I was surprised that Emerson had not informed Sir Malcolm at the outset that it was none of his (expletive) business where we intended to excavate. He can control his temper when it is to his advantage to do so, and I realized that, like myself, he was curious about the gentleman's motives.

'Ah', said Sir Malcolm. 'I would give a great deal to have the firman for that area.'

Emerson shrugged and took out his watch. Sir Malcolm persisted. 'I believe you are of the same mind. You attempted to persuade Carnarvon to give up the concession to you, did you not?'

'Good Gad', said Emerson, his colour rising. 'Is there no end to gossip in this business? Where did you hear that?'

'From an unimpeachable but necessarily anonymous source', said Sir Malcolm smoothly. 'Come, Professor, let us not fence. You believe Carter will find a tomb – specifically, that of Tutankhamon. So do I.'

Emerson returned his watch to his pocket and stared fixedly at Sir Malcolm. After waiting in vain for a verbal reaction, Sir Malcolm was forced to continue.

'Evidence of such a tomb exists. You know it and I know it. Theodore Davis believed he had found it, but he was wrong; that cache of miscellaneous objects was clearly left-over materials from Tutankhamon's burial. The statuette that was in your possession last year obviously came from his tomb. Tomb 55, the only other East Valley tomb of the same period, is directly across the way from the area Carter means to investigate.'

'I do know that', said Emerson impatiently. 'But the evidence, such as it is, is irrelevant. Carnarvon has the concession, and that is that.'

Sir Malcolm leaned forwards. 'What if Lacau could be persuaded to revoke it?'

There was a moment of silence. Then Emerson said softly, 'By you?'

'There are ways', Sir Malcolm murmured. 'He wouldn't award it to me, but he could hardly deny an excavator of your reputation.'

'Supposing you could accomplish that', Emerson said, fingering the cleft in his chin. 'What would you want in return?'

'Only the right to share the expenses and the . . . er . . . rewards', Sir Malcom said eagerly.

'Emerson', I cried, unable to contain myself. 'You would not enter into such an immoral –'

'Hush, Peabody.' Emerson raised a magisterial hand. 'It seems to me, Sir Malcolm, that you are risking your influence on a very slim hope. Even if such a tomb exists, even if it is in the area in question, the likelihood is that it was looted in antiquity, like all the other royal tombs.'

'It's not much of a financial risk', Sir Malcolm declared. He thought he had won his case; his eyes shone with poorly concealed excitement. 'You, of all men, know it doesn't cost all that much to excavate here. Wages are low and one can manage quite well without expensive equipment. Carnarvon may complain about getting a low return on his investment, but the return can't be measured in terms of objects found. It's the thrill of the hunt, the gamble!'

For a moment Emerson's expressive countenance mirrored the enthusiasm that had transformed that of our visitor. Then he shook his head. 'The return is in terms of knowledge gained. Your protestations would be more convincing, Sir Malcolm, if you were not known as a rabid collector. I cannot participate in such a scheme. I bid you good evening.'

Sir Malcolm rose to his feet. 'I am staying here at the hotel and I can be reached at any time.'

'Good evening', said Emerson.

Sir Malcolm smiled and shrugged, and started for the door. 'Oh', he said, turning. 'It nearly slipped my mind. It is common knowledge that you are short-handed this year. I know a well-qualified fellow who –'

'Good evening!' Emerson shouted.

'Well', I exclaimed, after Ali had shown the gentleman out. 'What effrontery! Does the man never know when to give up?'

'He is a collector', said Emerson, in the same tone in which he might have said, 'He is a murderer.' 'And he is still smarting about losing the statuette to Vandergelt.'

The little golden statue, which had been temporarily in our hands the year before, was certainly enough to inspire the lust of any collector. An exquisitely fashioned image of a king, it had been identified (by us) as that of the young Tutankhamon, stolen from his tomb shortly after his burial by a thief whose confession had miraculously survived among the papyri found (by us) at the workmen's village of Deir el Medina. Tutankhamon's tomb was one of the few that had never been located, and Ramses's translation of the papyrus had led Emerson to believe it yet lay hidden in the royal valley. He was not the only one to think so, as Sir Malcolm's offer proved.

'Do you suppose Sir Malcolm really has that much influence?' I asked.

Ramses said thoughtfully, 'It's possible. But of course any collaboration with a man like that is out of the question. It would ruin your reputation, Father.'

'I am not such a fool as to be unaware of that', Emerson retorted.

'Besides', I added, 'you said last spring that you would leave the matter in the hands of Fate. Fate appears to have made up her mind. It would be dishonourable to do anything more.'

'I am not such a fool as to be unaware of that, either', said Emerson somewhat reproachfully. 'As for taking on a staff member recommended by him, I would as soon hire a – a damned journalist. Where did he get the notion that we need more people?'

I was about to tell him when Nefret jumped up. 'I'm ravenous! Shall we go down to dinner now?'

Emerson had had a trying day, what with one thing and another, so I attempted to keep the dinner conversation light and cheerful. (It is a well-known fact that acrimony at meal-time adversely affects the digestion.) Finding a neutral topic was not easy; any mention of archaeology would remind Emerson of his failure to obtain the concession for the Valley, and a discussion of family matters might start him complaining about David's absence.

After we retired to our room I assumed my most becoming dressing gown and settled myself at the toilet table to give my hair its usual one hundred strokes. Emerson likes to see my hair down, but even this did not rouse him from his melancholy mood. Instead of preparing for bed, he sat down in an armchair and took out his pipe.

'I wish you wouldn't smoke in our bedroom', I said. 'The smell permeates my hair.'

'What's wrong with that?' Emerson demanded. 'I like the smell of pipe smoke.'

But he laid the pipe aside without lighting it. I put down my brush and turned to face him. 'I am sorry, my dear, that Lord Carnarvon refused to yield to you.'

'Don't rub it in', Emerson grumbled.

The matter was more serious than I had supposed. More drastic methods were required. I went to him and sat down on his lap, my arms round his neck.

'Hmmm', said Emerson, his dour expression lightening. 'That is very pleasant. What are you up to now, Peabody?'

'Must I always have an ulterior motive when I invite my husband's attentions? In fact I was about to thank you again for keeping your vow. You said last year, when I was so ill –'

'That I would give up every damned tomb in Egypt if you were spared to me.' Emerson's strong arms enclosed me. 'You are right to remind me, Peabody. I have been behaving badly. I shall not err in that fashion again.'

I felt quite certain that he would, but I gave him credit for good intentions, and gave him a little something else besides.

From Manuscript H

Insofar as Ramses was concerned, the sooner they left for Luxor, the better. Despite his claim of disinterest, Emerson was obviously up to no good. He spent more time than usual at the Museum and the office of the Service des Antiquités, and he cultivated Howard Carter in a highly suspicious manner. The city itself had an uneasy feel. The official declaration of independence in February had satisfied no one. The high commissioner, Lord Allenby, was vilified by the imperialists in the British government for giving too much power to Egypt; the Egyptian nationalists were furious with Britain for exiling their revered leader Saad Zaghlul; the king, Fuad, wanted to be an absolute monarch instead of being bound by the limits allowed him by the proposed constitution. Ramses was glad his friend David had not come out that year. David had been involved with one of the revolutionary groups before the war, and although his service to Britain since had won him a pardon, he was still devoted to the cause of independence. Some of his former associates held a grudge against him for what they considered his betrayal of their cause; others wanted nothing more than to involve him in their plots and counterplots.

His mother was plotting too. Ramses began to get an idea

of what she was up to when she announced she meant to give 'one of my popular little dinner parties'. It had been a habit of hers to meet with their archaeological colleagues soon after their arrival in Egypt, to catch up on the news, as she put it. The war had interrupted this pleasant custom because so many of their friends were on the front lines or engaged in work for the War Office. When she announced her intentions Emerson grumbled but gave in without a struggle. Howard Carter was to be one of the guests.

When they gathered in the elegant dining salon at Shepheard's it was something of a shock to see so many new faces. The Quibells were friends from the old days, as was Carter, but many of the guests were of the new generation. Among them was Suzanne Malraux. She had come alone, and when he saw her standing in the doorway Ramses went to welcome her. She was a wispy-looking little thing, with large protuberant blue eyes and silvery fair hair so fine, the slightest breeze lifted it around her small head. She made Ramses think of an astonished dandelion. He presented her to his wife and parents. Nefret's greeting was warm; she must have taken Suzanne's hesitation for shyness, and she always went out of her way to encourage career-minded young women. She was only too well aware of the difficulties they faced, after the trouble she herself had had in obtaining her medical degree and in starting a woman's hospital in Cairo. His mother was pleasant but less effusive. After subjecting Suzanne to a searching stare she drew the girl aside and began to talk about her studies with Petrie.

She managed to have private conversations with some of the other younger guests as well, and Ramses began to wonder what she was up to. His father was too busy with old friends to notice. Emerson objected to his wife's social engagements as a matter of form, but he generally had a roaring good

time once they were under way. All in all, it was a successful affair, with champagne flowing freely and tongues wagging just as freely.

Next day Ramses managed to get his mother alone. She had taken up embroidery again, and was stabbing at a grubby scrap of cloth when he joined her in the sitting room. Putting it aside with evident relief, she invited him to take a chair.

'A pleasant evening, was it not?' she inquired.

'Yes.'

'Your father was impressed by Miss Malraux. I thought she stood up to his quizzing admirably.'

'She's not the shrinking violet I had believed her to be', Ramses admitted. 'Coming alone took some courage.'

'It was a declaration of her desire to be judged for herself, without the support of a man. Nefret liked her too.'

'Yes. Mother, you are scheming again. What is it this time?'

'There is a very nice house to let in Roda. It has a large walled garden, servants' quarters, even a nursery.'

'I see.' He only wondered why he hadn't foreseen it. Watching him, she picked up the embroidery again and waited.

'Have you taken the place?' he inquired.

'Goodness no, I would never venture to do that without Nefret's and your approval.'

'Mother –'

'My dear boy.' She leaned forwards and fixed him with those steely grey eyes. 'It is time the children were in school. Time for Nefret to carry on her work at the hospital. Time for you to have . . . er . . . time to concentrate on your interest in philology. Several of the young people we met last night are admirably qualified, including Miss Malraux. They can never replace you and Nefret, but they deserve a chance, and you two deserve the opportunity to pursue your own careers.'

'Have you broached this scheme to Father?' Ramses's thoughts were in a whirl. He had a pretty fair idea of how Nefret would react. She missed the hospital and the chance to practise surgery, and although she adored his parents, their constant presence was bound to be a burden at times. As for himself . . .

'I don't know', he said slowly. 'It would be such a change. I have to get used to the idea.'

'Talk it over with Nefret. You needn't decide immediately. It is early in the year and there are always houses to let.' She smoothed out the scrap of embroidery and frowned at it. 'And it may take a while to convince your father.'

'We can at least start out the season as usual', Ramses said.

'In Luxor, you mean?' She smiled with perfect understanding. 'Of course. You will want to revisit your old haunts and see old friends.'

'The children won't like living in Cairo.'

'I don't suppose they will, not at first. They have become accustomed to being the centres of their little universe – not so little a universe at that', she amended. 'For it includes most of Luxor. They are becoming spoiled. The change will be good for their characters.'

Emerson might have lingered in Cairo had not two untowards events changed his mind. The first occurred when the entire family had gone to Giza for the day. The tourist season had barely begun, and the site was relatively uncrowded, but it offered innumerable opportunities for an adventurous child to get in trouble, with its open tomb pits and temptingly climbable pyramids. David John, who was developing a taste for Egyptology, stuck close to his grandfather, peppering him with questions, while the rest of them tried to keep close on Charla's heels. It took all three of them.

'We ought to have brought Fatima', Ramses said to his

mother, after he had plucked Charla from the first step of the Great Pyramid. How she had got up there he couldn't imagine; he had only turned his back for a minute, and the steplike blocks were almost three feet high.

'Fatima is no longer a young woman', said his mother. 'She cannot keep up with Charla. Charla, do not climb the pyramid. It is dangerous.'

'Then you take me up', Charla pleaded, wrapping her arms round her father's waist. Her big black eyes, fringed with long lashes, were hard to resist, but Ramses shook his head. The idea of being responsible for his peripatetic daughter on that steep four-hundred-foot climb made his hair stand on end.

'When you are older, perhaps.'

They returned in time for tea and handed the children over to Fatima for intensive washing. Ramses and Nefret were about to follow their example when his mother burst into the room without so much as a knock.

'I beg your pardon', she said, seeing him shirtless and Nefret unlacing her boots. 'But this is important. Our rooms have been searched. What about yours?'

Ramses gazed helplessly round the room. Nefret stepped out of her boots and went to the bureau.

'He wouldn't notice unless his precious papers had been disturbed', she said. 'I think . . . Yes, Mother, someone has been looking through this drawer. The paper lining is askew and my underwear isn't folded as neatly.'

'Perhaps it was the maid', Ramses suggested. His mother was prone to melodramatic fantasies.

'The maids don't go into drawers', his mother said. 'Is anything missing, Nefret?'

'I don't think so.' She opened her jewellery case. 'It's all here. What about you?'

His mother sat down and folded her hands. 'Emerson of course claims he is missing several important papers, but he is always losing things.'

Ramses had gone through the documents piled on his desk. 'Nothing is missing. But you're right, someone has looked through them. Looking for what, do you suppose?'

'Something small enough to be concealed under the drawer lining or in among one's – er – personal garments. That suggests a letter or paper.'

'I can't imagine what it could be', Nefret said. 'You haven't received any strange messages or threatening letters, have you, Mother?'

'Not so much as a mysterious treasure map. Dear me, how odd. Could it have been Sir Malcolm?'

Ramses slipped back into his shirt. His mother clearly had no intention of leaving immediately; her eyes were bright and her brow furrowed with thought.

'There's no reason to assume that', Ramses said. 'You only want to catch him doing something illegal.'

'Yes, certainly. I know he was responsible for several dirty tricks last year, though I wasn't able to pin anything on him.' She looked immensely pleased with herself for working in these bits of modern slang.

Ramses sympathized with her feelings – he didn't trust Sir Malcolm either – but he felt obliged to protest. 'What could he hope to find? Father hasn't any secret information about . . .' A horrible thought struck him. 'Has he?'

'If so, he has concealed it well.' His mother didn't even look abashed at this implicit confession. In her opinion Emerson had no business concealing anything from her, so she was entitled to use any means possible to discover what he was hiding. 'Let us see what information Ali can contribute.'