

Le Queux William

Her Royal Highness: A Romance of the Chancelleries of Europe



William Le Queux

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Chapter One. The Nile Travellers

The mystic hour of the desert afterglow.

A large, square wooden veranda covered by a red and white awning, above a wide silent sweep of flowing river, whose huge rocks, worn smooth through a thousand ages, raised their backs about the stream, a glimpse of green feathery palms and flaming scarlet poinsettias on the island opposite, and beyond the great drab desert, the illimitable waste of stony, undulating sands stretching away to the infinite, and bathed in the blood-red light of the dying day.

On the veranda sat a crowd of chattering English men and women of wealth and leisure – taking tea. The women were mostly in white muslins, and many wore white sun-helmets though it was December, while the men were mostly in clean suits of “ducks.” An orchestra from Italy was playing Musetta’s waltz-song from “La Bohème,” and the same people one meets at the opera, at supper at the Savoy or the Ritz, were chattering over tea and pastries served by silent-footed, dark-faced Nubians in scarlet fezes and long white caftans.

The Cataract Hotel at Assouan is, at five o’clock, when the Eastern desert is flooded by the wonderful green and crimson of the fading sun, the most select yet cosmopolitan circle in all the world, the meeting-place of those seekers after sunshine who have ascended the Nile to the spot where rain has never fallen within the memory of man.

The poor old played-out Riviera has still its artificial attractions, it is true. One can, for once in one’s life, enjoy the pasteboard of the Nice carnival, the irresponsible frolic of the Battle of Flowers, the night gaiety of *Ciro’s*, breathe the combined odour of perspiration and perfume in the rooms at Monte, eat the *gâteaux* at Vogarde’s, play the one-franc game of *boule* at the Casino Municipal, or lunch off the delicious trout from the tanks at the Reserve at Beaulieu. But the Cote d’Azur and its habitués, its *demi-mondaines* and its *escrocs* soon pall upon one; hence Society nowadays goes farther afield – to Egypt, the land of wonders, where there is ever-increasing charm, where the winter days amid those stupendous monuments of a long-dead civilisation are rainless, the land where Christmas is as warm as our English August, where all is silent and dreamy beside the mighty Nile, and where the brown-faced sons of the desert kneel Mecca-wards at sunset and praise the name of Allah the One. Allah is just; Allah is merciful. There is no God but Allah!

Some winter idlers go to Cairo, and there indulge in the gaieties of Shepherd’s, the Savoy, or the Gezireh Palace, or the teas and dances at Mena House, or the breath of freedom at Heliopolis. But Cairo is not Egypt. To see and to know Egypt one must ascend the Nile a farther eight hundred miles to Luxor – the town where once stood ancient Thebes, the City of a Hundred Gates, or to Assouan, the Aswan of the days of the Pharaohs.

It is there, on the borders of the glowing desert of Nubia, far removed from the stress of modern life, that one first begins to experience the new joy of existence – life in that limitless wilderness of sky and sand, life amid the relics of a mighty and wonderful age long since bygone and forgotten.

On that afternoon of early December a merry party of four young people – two girls and two men – sat at one of the small tables on the veranda.

The gay quartette, waited upon by Ahmed, an erect bronze statue, picturesque in his white caftan and red sash, were laughing merrily as the elder of the two men recounted the amusing progress of a party whom he had accompanied on camels into the desert that afternoon.

Around them everywhere was loud chatter and laughter, while the orchestra played dreamily, the music floating across the slowly darkening river which flowed on its course from unexplored regions of Central Africa away to the far-distant Mediterranean.

"I went across to Philae this morning to see the temples – Pharaoh's Bed, and the rest. Hardy pulled me out of bed at six o'clock," exclaimed the younger of the two men – a tall, clean-shaven Englishman of a decided military type. "But I must confess that after flogging the Nile for nearly three weeks and Mahmoud taking us to see every temple along its banks, I'm getting just a bit fed up with antiquities and ruins."

"Oh, my dear fellow," cried the elder man in quick reproach, "you must never admit such a thing in Upper Egypt. It's horribly bad form. Mademoiselle will agree – eh?"

And the broad-shouldered, handsome man of thirty-five or so in a clean white linen suit leaned back in his chair and laughed at the pretty, dark-haired vivacious French girl he had addressed. She was not more than twenty, with a refined oval face, wonderfully expressive eyes, and a small delicate mouth which parted as she shrugged her shoulders and smiled back at him in assent.

"Ah, Waldron, but you're a diplomat, you know!" replied the younger man. "You fellows always say the right thing in the right place. We chaps in the Service, however, have a habit of speaking bluntly, I fear."

"It is just as easy to be diplomatic, my dear Chester, as to be indiscreet," replied the Honourable Hubert Waldron, M.V.O., who was second secretary at His Britannic Majesty's Embassy at Madrid, and was now on leave for a winter holiday.

Not yet forty, a smart, well-groomed, athletic, clean-cut Englishman, he nevertheless possessed the distinct Foreign Office air, and was, at the same time, a cosmopolitan of cosmopolitans. Essentially a ladies' man, as every good diplomat should be, he was, in addition, decidedly handsome, with pale, refined features, a strong face with straight nose, a pair of dark, deep-set, thoughtful eyes, and a dark, well-trained moustache.

At Court functions, balls, receptions, official dinners and such-like festivities when, with his colleague, he was bound to be on show in his perfect-fitting diplomatic uniform, women always singled him out as a striking figure, as, indeed, he was, and at Stockholm, Brussels, and Lima, where he had respectively served as attaché he had attained great popularity among the *corps diplomatique*, and the gay, giddy world of Society which, in every capital, revolves about it.

The quartette had made each other's acquaintance since leaving Cairo, having found themselves fellow-passengers on board the fine new river-steamer, the *Arabia* – members of a smart party of wealthy idlers which included two of America's most famous millionaires. The party numbered thirty, all told, and during the three weeks they had travelled together and had all spent a time which each declared to be the most delightful of their lives.

The younger Englishman was Chester Dawson, son of Sir Forbes Dawson, M.P., and a lieutenant in the 19th Hussars, who, like Waldron, was on leave, while of the two ladies the younger was French, though she spoke English perfectly, and the other, ten years her senior, was slightly angular and decidedly English.

Mademoiselle Lola Duprez had attracted Hubert Waldron from the first moment when they had met on the upper deck an hour after leaving Cairo. She was bright, vivacious, and extremely *chic*, possessing all the daintiness of the true Parisienne without her irritating mannerisms. Slightly *petite*, with an extremely pretty and refined face, big eyes, a perfect complexion and a slim, erect figure, she was – judged from the standpoint of a connoisseur of female beauty as Hubert Waldron undoubtedly was – unusually beautiful and attractive. On many of the excursions into the desert

when the party had landed to visit the ancient monuments, the pyramid of Sakkâra, the Tomb of Thi, the temples of Abydos Denderah and the rest, Hubert had ridden a donkey at her side, or spent the long, idle, sunny afternoon hours on deck, lolling in the padded cane-chairs sipping coffee and gossiping as the steamer, with its Arab *reis* or pilot squatting in the bow smoking cigarettes, made her way up the broad stream.

Thus, in the three delightfully lazy weeks which had gone, they had become most excellent friends, while Chester Dawson had, with all the irresponsibility of the young cavalry officer, admired a striking go-ahead American girl named Edna Eastham who, with her father, had come from Chelsea, Massachusetts. Mother, father, and daughter were a loud-speaking, hard-faced trio who bought all the false antiques offered to them by Arab pedlars.

Mademoiselle's companion, a Miss Gabrielle Lambert, was a woman of quite a different stamp. She was nearly thirty, with a rather sad, thoughtful face, but unmistakably a lady by birth and breeding, half English, half French, though she never spoke much of herself. Travelling with the two girls was an old and peculiarly shrewd grey-haired Frenchman, an uncle of mademoiselle named Jules Gigneux, a good type of the dandified though elderly Parisian, yet to Hubert – a student of men – he was from the first something of a mystery.

Ahmed, the silent dignified servant with the face of bronze, handed mademoiselle a small plate of bon-bons. She took one, and then turning to the diplomat, exclaimed in her pretty broken English:

"I've at last persuaded uncle to take us up to Wady Haifa! I'm longing to see the Second Cataract. We have booked berths by the steamer next Monday."

"Next Monday!" Waldron echoed. "Why then we shall be fellow-passengers again, mademoiselle. I booked my berth a month ago. I've been up there before. You will be much impressed by the rock-hewn Temple of Abu Simbel, the finest and most remarkable sight on the Nile."

"I read all about it in the guide-books on board the *Arabia*," she said with her pretty French accent. "It is to see the wonderful temple that I want to go there, although my uncle has been trying all day to put obstacles in the way. It takes a fortnight, and he seems to want to get back to Paris – whatever for, I fail to imagine."

"He's tired of the Nile, like our young friend Chester," laughed Waldron mischievously. "I really believe Chester prefers a motor-run to Brighton with lunch at Crawley and tea at the Métropole."

"All this jargon about Rameses, the great god, Osiris, good old Horus, Amen Ra, and all those gods with weird heads of birds and horned animals, the cartouches which the Pharaohs stuck upon everything – oh, it becomes so horribly boring," declared the young fellow with a yawn. "And everywhere one goes some Arab appears from nowhere pestering you to buy an imitation scarab or some blue beads made in Birmingham a few weeks ago. Why on the *Prince Luitpold Regent* from Marseilles we had a man bringing over a fresh consignment of Egyptian antiques for the season! He showed me some!"

"Ah!" laughed Lola, "I see you are not held by the spell of Egypt, as we all are. Personally, I love it, and enjoy every moment of the day. It is all so very different to everything else I have seen."

"You have travelled a good deal, eh, mademoiselle?" asked Waldron, his tea-cup in his hand.

"Ah, yes; a good deal. I've seen most of the capitals of Europe," was her rather vague reply. "But there is nothing like Egypt – nothing half so interesting as life up here, away from modern civilisation and yet so full of up-to-date comfort. I marvel at everything – even at this hotel. They tell me all the food – even the fish and poultry – comes from Europe. All that we eat is brought a couple of thousand miles!"

"Yes," Miss Lambert agreed. "The English have done marvels in Egypt without a doubt."

Waldron glanced at Lola, and thought he had never seen her looking so indescribably charming. She was slightly flushed after riding that afternoon, but in her neat, clean linen gown, with her green-lined sun-helmet set slightly back on her head she presented a delightful picture of feminine daintiness and charm.

At that moment Edna Eastham, a tall, well-built girl of twenty-two, crossed the veranda laughing loudly over to two ladies of the party who sat near, and took a vacant table for tea, whereupon Chester Dawson, with a word of excuse, rose quickly and, crossing, joined her.

“Chester seems quite fed up,” declared Waldron when the young fellow had gone.

“Yes. But he’s coming with us up to Wady Haifa,” said mademoiselle.

“Because Miss Eastham is going,” remarked the diplomat with a sarcastic smile.

“Perhaps so. But do you know,” she went on, “I’ve had such awful trouble to persuade uncle to take me on. He is anxious to get back to Europe – says he has some pressing business and all that.”

“The heat affects him, I believe; it is trying to one not used to it,” the man replied.

“Yes. But I think it would be a shame to turn back now that we have got up here so far. He was saying only last night that the trip up from Shellal to Wady Haifa was not over-safe – that the Nubians are hostile, and we might be attacked and murdered!”

“Not much fear of that nowadays,” Waldron laughed. “Our rule here has straightened things out. I admit, however, that there is a good deal of hostility about here, and I believe there are arms on board the Shellal steamers in case of trouble. But we anchor each night in mid-stream and a good watch is kept, while all the crew, though they are Arabs, have been in the service of the Steamboat Company for many years, and are quite loyal. So don’t be nervous in the least, mademoiselle, for I assure you there is really no necessity.”

“Uncle Jules is always fond of discovering dangers where none exist,” she laughed. “I haven’t given the matter a second thought. We are going on Monday – and that is sufficient.”

The broad-shouldered, rather dandified old Frenchman, Jules Gigneux, sauntered out from the hotel and joined them a few moments later. He was rather stout, grey-haired – with a small, well-clipped moustache, and a pair of sharp beady eyes which seemed to search everywhere – a man who, though burly and apparently easy-going, was nevertheless remarkably shrewd and sly.

These latter traits in Monsieur Gigneux’s character had aroused Hubert’s suspicions. He seemed ever watchful and curiously distrustful and shiftily – a man who, though he made pretence of being open and straightforward and easy-going, was full of craft and deep cunning.

“Well, uncle,” exclaimed Lola, dropping into French as the man seated himself in the chair vacated by young Dawson, “we’ve just been discussing the possibility of all of us being murdered by Arabs on our way up to Wady Haifa!” and she laughed mischievously.

“It is not very safe,” snapped the old gentleman in French. “I hear that the Egyptian police have a great deal of trouble to keep the country in order between Shellal and Wady Haifa.”

“Ah!” Waldron exclaimed, “I fear, m’sieur, you are somewhat misinformed. That portion of the Nile runs through Upper Nubia, and the people are more loyal to the British than they are even in Cairo.”

“Cairo,” sniffed the old man. “Why, trouble is expected there every day. Sedition is rife all over Egypt. If your Kitchener had not taken such a strong hand a year ago the country would now be in open revolt. The British are not loved in Europe. I say that,” he added quickly, “without disrespect of your country, m’sieur, please understand.”

“Perfectly,” was the diplomat’s reply. “But while I admit what you say is the truth, and, further, that there is a growing discontent, yet I still feel that, as far as we are concerned, though a little handful of Europeans and a great country peopled by Nubians, we are nevertheless quite safe. I was up there two years ago, and we did not even have a police escort when we landed at Kalabsha or Abu Simbel – indeed, we never saw a policeman.”

“Ah, that was two years ago,” remarked Monsieur Gigneux, quite unconcerned.

“Oh, we shan’t come to any harm, Uncle Jules,” his niece assured him. “I intend to have a real good time, M’sieur Waldron,” added the girl, who, having finished her tea, rose and went to the balcony, where she stood alone watching the magnificent glories of the desert sunset.

Below, around the great grey boulders in the river came very slowly a small Arab boat gaily painted in light green, with only just sufficient wind to stretch its pointed lateen sail. The three fisher lads which constituted its crew were singing one of those weird, plaintive songs of the Nile to the accompaniment of a big earthenware tom-tom – that same tuneful invocation of Allah to assist them which one hears everywhere upon the Nile from Alexandria up to Khartoum.

That strange, rhythmic song, the chorus of which is “Al-lal-hey! Al-lal-hey!” is the song of the Nile and rings always in one’s ears at sundown – the reminder that Allah is great, Allah is merciful; there is no other God but Allah.

But does that gay, Christian, tango-dancing, bridge-playing world of Society, who in winter occupy that great white hotel opposite Elephantine Island, ever heed that call of the black, half-naked, and, alas! often starving Arab? The call to Allah!

Chapter Two. Arouses Certain Suspicions

The great *salle à manger* of the Cataract is built like an Eastern mosque. Its interior is high domed, with old blue glass in the long narrow windows, and walls striped in yellow and dull red.

At night the scene is gay and animated – a replica of the supper-room at the Savoy – for over the thickly carpeted floor of the mosque, Society, clad in the latest *mode*, dines and makes merry at many little tables bright with electric lights and flowers, while the orchestra is just near enough to be present.

Waldron and Chester had been invited to old Gigleux's table on their arrival at Assouan; therefore on that evening the party was, as usual, a merry one. After dinner, however, the little party dispersed – Miss Lambert to the reading-room, the old Frenchman to smoke, and Chester to find Edna Eastham, leaving Waldron and Lola together.

The night was perfectly clear, with a bright and wonderful moon.

"Let's take a boat over to the Savoy?" Waldron suggested. "It's so hot here."

Mademoiselle, who was in a simple, dead-white gown, with a touch of pale salmon at the waist, was instantly agreeable, for a stroll through the beautiful gardens of the Savoy Hotel, over on Elephantine Island, was always delightful after dinner.

So she clapped her hands, summoning one of the Arab servants named Hassan, and sent him to her room for her wrap. Then when he had brought it in his big brown hands and placed it upon her shoulders, the pair descended through the garden of the hotel, where some boats were waiting in the moonlight to take parties out for a sail in the light zephyr which always rises on the Nile about nine o'clock each night.

"Good evenin', laidee," exclaimed the Arab boatman, salaaming, as the pair stepped into his boat, for the man had often taken them out on previous occasions; then two young Arabs followed, the boat was pushed off, and the big heavy sail raised.

Waldron told the man where they wished to go.

"Ver gud, gen'leman," the big, brown-faced giant replied, salaaming, and soon they were speeding across the face of the wonderful river into which the moon and the lights of the town were reflected as in a mirror, while the only sound was the faint ripple of the water at the bows.

"How delightfully refreshing after the heat," Lola exclaimed, pulling her wrap about her and breathing in the welcome air to the full.

"Yes," replied her companion, lolling near her, smoking his cigarette. He had on a light coat over his dinner clothes, and wore a straw hat. "There is nothing in Europe like this, is there?"

"Nothing," she admitted.

And what he said was true. The moon shone with that brilliancy only witnessed in the East, and the dead silence of the river and the limitless desert beyond was wonderfully impressive after that gay and reckless circle which they had just quitted.

Presently the two young Arabs, who had been conversing with each other in an undertone, spoke to their master – who apparently gave consent.

Waldron had offered each a cigarette from his case, receiving a pleased grin and a salaam, and all were now in the full enjoyment of smoking. They smoked on gravely until they had finished their gifts.

"Merican steamer, he come from Cairo to-night," the boatman announced as they approached the quay at Assouan.

“He means the new Hamburg-America passenger service,” Waldron remarked, and then, turning to the Arab who was busy with their sail, preparing to tack, he asked him some questions regarding the steamer.

“He big steamer, gen’leman. *Reis*, he know me – he know Ali.” And so the Arab wandered on in his quaint English, for in Upper Egypt they are all inveterate gossips.

Then the operation of tacking concluded, one of the younger men produced a great cylinder of sun-baked clay, across the top of which was stretched a piece of parchment, and placing it across his knees began strumming upon it dexterously with his thumb, finger, and palm, after which the dark-faced trio set up that long-drawn, plaintive song of the Nile boatmen, in which Allah is beseeched to protect their beloved town, which has existed ever since the Pharaohs – the town of Aswan.

The weekly steamer from Cairo, gaily lit and filled with Europeans, was lying at the landing-stage. Hearing the song which the trio in rhythmic unison took up, a dozen or so Europeans in evening dress crowded to the side to see who was passing.

Lola, delighted, hailed them in English. They shouted back merry greetings, and then Ali, their boatman, tacked again, and they were soon sailing straight for the long, dark river-bank, where one or two lights showed like fireflies among the palms, until they reached the darkly-lit landing-stage on Elephantine, that little island whence, in the dim ages of the Sixth Dynasty, sprang the Kings of Egypt, where the ancient gods, Khnemu, Sati, and Anuquet were worshipped, and where the Pharaoh, Amenophis III, built a temple. Upon the site where the orgies of Hathor were enacted is to-day the modern Savoy, where one can obtain a whisky-and-soda or a well-mixed “Martini.” Other times, other manners.

On landing, Waldron and Lola strolled together along the moonlit, gravelled path beside the river, and presently sat beneath a great flowering oleander amid the thousand perfumes of that glorious tropical garden with its wealth of blossom.

He noted that she had suddenly grown grave and silent. Some people were sitting upon a seat near, laughing gaily and chattering in English, though in the deep shadow of the perfumed night they could not be seen. At their feet the broad Nile waters lapped lazily, while from a native boat in mid-stream came the low, rhythmic beating of a tom-tom as the rowers bent to their oars.

“You seem very melancholy,” remarked her companion suddenly. “Why?”

“I – melancholy?” she cried in her broken English, suddenly starting. “I – I really did not know, m’sieur. Oh, please forgive me.”

“No, I will not,” he said with mock reproach.

“You mustn’t be sad when I am with you.”

“But I’m not sad, I assure you,” she declared. And then, noticing that he was taking a cigarette from his case, she begged one.

Lola seldom, if ever, smoked in public, nevertheless she was passionately fond of those mild aromatic cigarettes which one gets in such perfection in Egypt, and often when with her friend, the cosmopolitan diplomat, she would indulge in one.

She hated the conventions which so often she set at naught – thus earning the reputation of a tomboy, so full of life and vivacity was she.

“Uncle is such a dreadful bore sometimes,” she sighed at last, dropping into French. “I rather wish we were, after all, going back to Paris.”

“He disagrees with you sometimes, eh?” laughed the man at her side. “All elderly people become bores more or less.”

“Yes. But there is surely no reason for such constant watching.”

“Watching!” exclaimed Waldron in feigned surprise. “Is he annoyed at this constant companionship of ours?”

“Well,” she hesitated; “he’s not exactly pleased. He watches me like a cat watches a mouse. I hate his crafty, stealthy ways. To-day I told him so, frankly.”

Waldron was considerably surprised at her sudden outburst of confidence, for through all the weeks of their close acquaintanceship she had told him but very little concerning herself. But from what she had said he gathered that she was entirely dependent upon her uncle, whose strictness and eccentricities so often irritated her.

"Yes," she went on, "I've really grown tired of being spied upon so constantly. It is most annoying. Gabrielle, too, is always telling tales to him – telling him where I've gone, and how long I've been away, and all that."

The man at her side paused.

"In that case," he said at last, "had we not better keep apart, mademoiselle – if it would render your life happier?"

"I only wish I could get rid of that old beast," she cried wistfully. "But, unfortunately, I can't. I'm entirely and utterly in his hands."

"Why?" asked her companion slowly.

But she remained silent, until he had repeated his question.

"Why? Well, because I am," was her vague, mysterious reply.

"Then he often complains of me?" Waldron asked.

For answer she laughed a nervous little laugh.

"He doesn't like me, I suppose. Well, there's no love lost between us, I assure you, mademoiselle. But if you think it best, then we will exercise a wiser discretion in future."

"No, no," she replied hastily. "You quite misconstrue my meaning, M'sieur Waldron. You have been exceedingly kind to me, but –" and then she sighed without concluding her sentence.

Again a silence fell between them.

From across the broad dark waters, in the bosom of which the stars were reflected, came the low, strident voices of the Arab boatmen chanting their monotonous prayer to Allah to give them grace. The still air was heavy with a thousand sweet scents, while about them the big nocturnal insects flitted and buzzed.

A peal of English laughter broke from out the deep shadows, and from somewhere in the vicinity came the twanging of a one-stringed instrument by an Arab, who set up one of those low, haunting refrains of the Nile bank – the ancient songs handed down through the Pagan ages before the birth of Christendom.

Waldron was reflecting deeply. Old Gigueux had always been a mystery. That he was a crafty, cunning old fox was undoubted, and yet he had, he remembered, always treated him with marked friendliness. It was surprising that he should, on the other hand, object to his niece being so frequently in his company.

Lola's companion questioned her regarding the mysterious old fellow, but all she would reply was:

"There are certain matters, M'sieur Waldron, which I would rather not discuss. That is one of them."

With this chilly rebuff her companion was compelled to be content, and no amount of diplomatic cross-examination would induce her to reveal anything further.

"Ah," she cried at last, clenching her small hands and starting to her feet in a sudden frenzy of despair which amazed him, "if you only knew the horror of it all – ah! if you only knew, m'sieur, you would, I am sure, pity me."

"Horror of it!" he gasped. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing – nothing," she said hastily, in a voice thick with emotion. "Let us return. We must get back. He will be so angry at my absence."

"Then you really fear him!" Waldron exclaimed in surprise.

She made no reply. Only as he laid his hand lightly upon her arm to guide her back along the dark path to where the native boat was moored, he felt her shudder.

He walked in silence, utterly bewildered at her sudden change of demeanour. What could it mean? In his career as a diplomat in the foreign capitals he had met thousands of pretty women of all grades, but none so sweet or so dainty as herself; none with a voice so musical, not one whose charm was so ineffable.

Yes, against his own inclination he had become fascinated by her, and already he felt that her interests were his own.

They stepped into the boat, being greeted by salaams from the black-faced crew, and then began to row back.

She uttered not a word. Even when one of the boys brought out the big tom-tom from beneath the seat, she signed to him to put it away. Music jarred upon her nerves.

Waldron sat in wonder, uttering no word, and the black-faced crew were in turn surprised at the sudden silence. Ali spoke some low, soft words in Arabic to his companions which, had the pair been acquainted with that language, would have caused them annoyance. "They are lovers," he remarked wisely. "They have quarrelled – eh?" And to that theory the two boys agreed.

And so there was silence in the boat until it touched the landing-steps opposite the great hotel, rising dark in the white desert moonshine.

On returning to his room Hubert Waldron found a telegram from Madrid awaiting him. It was from an intimate friend of his, signed "Beatriz."

He flung himself into a cane chair and re-read the long and rather rambling message. Then he rose, lit a cigarette savagely, and stood gazing across the broad moonlit waters. That telegram was a disquieting one. Its sender was Beatriz Rojas de Ruata, of the Madrid Opera, the tall, thin, black-haired dancer, who had of late been the rage in Petersburg and Paris, and who was now contemplating a season in London.

From life in the slums of Barcelona, where her father was a wharf labourer, she had in three short years risen to the top of her profession, and was now the idol of the *jeunesse dorée* of Madrid; though, be it said, the only man she really cared for was the calm-faced English diplomat who had never flattered her, and who had always treated her with such profound and courtly respect.

But that message had sorely perturbed him. It was an impetuous demand that he should return from Egypt and meet her in London. A year ago he had promised to show her London, and now that she had accepted a most lucrative engagement she held him to his promise.

"Yes," he murmured to himself as he paced the room with its bed enshrouded in mosquito curtains, "I've been a confounded fool. I thought myself more level-headed, but, like all the others, I suppose, I've succumbed to the bright eyes and sweet smiles of a pretty woman."

For a full twenty minutes or so he pondered, uncertain what reply to send. In any case, even if he left for London on the following morning, he could not arrive at Charing Cross for fully ten days.

At last he took up his cane and hat, and descending in the lift, crossed the great hotel garden, making his way down the short hill towards the town. It was then nearly eleven o'clock, and all was silent and deserted except for the armed Arab watchman in his hooded cloak. On his right as he walked lay a small public garden, a prettily laid out space rising on the huge boulders which form the gorge of the Nile – a place filled by high feathery palms, flaming poinsettias, and a wealth of tropical flowers.

But as he passed the entrance in the shadow there suddenly broke upon his ears a woman's voice, speaking rapidly in Italian – a language with which he was well conversant.

He halted instantly. The voice was Lola's! In the shadow he could just distinguish two forms, that of a man and a woman.

He drew back in breathless amazement. Mademoiselle's eagerness to return across from Elephantine was now explained. She had kept a secret tryst.

As he watched, he heard her speaking quickly and angrily in an imperative tone. The man was standing in the full moonlight, and Waldron could see him quite plainly – a dark, short-bearded man of middle-age and middle-height, wearing a soft felt Tyrolese hat.

He made no response, but only bowed low at his unceremonious dismissal.

The stranger was about to leave her when suddenly, as though on reflection, she exclaimed, still speaking in perfect Italian:

“No. Return here in half an hour. I will go back to the hotel and write my reply. Until then do not be seen. Gigueux must never know that you have been here – you understand? I know that you will remain my friend, though everyone’s hand is now raised against me, but if Gigueux suspected that you had been here he would cable home at once – and then who knows what might not happen! I could never return. I would rather kill myself?”

“The signorina may rely upon my absolute discretion,” declared the man in a low, intense voice.

“*Benissimo*,” was her hurried response. “Return here in half an hour, and I will give you my answer. It is hard, cruel, inhuman of them to treat me thus! But it is, I suppose, only what I must expect. I am only a woman, and I must make the sacrifice.”

And with a wave of her small, ungloved hand she dismissed him, and took a path which led through the public garden back to the hotel by a shorter cut.

Meanwhile Waldron strode on past the railway station to the quay, glanced at his watch, and then, half an hour later, after he had dispatched his telegram he was lurking in the shadows at that same spot.

He watched Lola hand a letter to the stranger, and wish him “*Addio e buon viaggio!*”

Then he followed the bearded man down to the station, where, from a European official of whom he made a confidential inquiry, he learnt that the stranger had arrived in Assouan from Cairo only two hours before, bearing a return ticket to Europe by the mail route via Port Said and Brindisi.

With curiosity he watched the Italian leave by the mail for Cairo ten minutes later, and then turned away and retraced his steps to the Cataract Hotel, plunged deep in thought.

There was a mystery somewhere – a strange and very grave mystery.

What could be that message of such extreme importance and secrecy that it could not be trusted to the post?

Who was old Gigueux of whom Mademoiselle Duprez went in such fear? Was she really what she represented herself to be?

No. He felt somehow assured that all was not as it should be. A mystery surrounded both uncle and niece, while the angular Miss Lambert remained as silent and impenetrable as the sphinx.

Diplomat and man of the world as was Hubert Waldron – a man who had run the whole gamut of life in the gay centres of Europe – he was naturally suspicious, for the incident of that night seemed inexplicable.

Something most secret and important must be in progress to necessitate the travelling of a special messenger from Europe far away into Upper Egypt, merely to deliver a letter and obtain a response.

“Yes,” he murmured to himself as he passed through the portals of the hotel, which were thrown open to him by two statuesque Nubian servants, who bowed low as he passed. “Yes; there are some curious features about this affair. I will watch and discover the truth. Lola is in some secret and imminent peril. Of that I feel absolutely convinced.”

Chapter Three. In the Holy of Holies

Five days later.

Boulos, the faithful Egyptian dragoman, in his red fez and long caftan of yellow silk reaching to his heels, stood leaning over the bows of the small white steamer which was slowly wending its way around the many curves of the mighty river which lay between the Island of Philae and the Second Cataract at Wady Haifa, the gate of the Sudan.

No railway runs through that wild desert of rock and sand, and the road to Khartoum lies by water over those sharp rocks and ever-shifting shoals where navigation is always dangerous, and progress only possible by daylight.

Boulos, the dark, pleasant-faced man who is such an inveterate gossip, who knows much more of Egyptology than his parrot-talk to travellers, and who is popular with all those who go to and fro between Cairo and Khartoum, stood chatting in Arabic with the white-bearded, black-faced *reis*, or pilot.

The latter, wearing a white turban, was wrapped in a red cloak though the sun was blazing. He squatted upon a piece of carpet in the bows, idly smoking a cigarette from dawn till sundown, and navigating the vessel by raising his right or left hand as signal to the man at the helm.

A Nile steamer has no captain. The Nubian *reis* is supreme over the native crew, and being a man of vast experience of the river, knows by the appearance of the water where lie the ever-shifting sand-banks.

“Oh yes,” remarked the *reis* in Arabic; “by Allah’s grace we shall anchor at Abu Simbel by sunset. It is now just past the noon,” added the bearded old man – who looked like a prophet – as he glanced upward at the burning sun.

“And when shall we leave?” asked the dragoman.

“At noon to-morrow – if Allah willeth it,” replied the old man. “To-night the crew will give a fantasia. Will you tell the passengers.”

“If it be thy will,” responded Boulos, drawing at his excellent cigarette.

“How farest thou this journey?”

“Very well. The Prophet hath given me grace to sell several statuettes and scarabs. The little American hath bought my bronze of Isis.”

“I congratulate thee, O wise one among the infidels,” laughed the old man, raising his left hand to alter the course of the vessel. “Thy bronze hath lain for many moons – eh?”

“Since the last Ramadan. And now, with Allah’s help, I have sold it to the American for a thousand piastres.”

Old Melek the *reis* grunted, and thoughtfully rolled another cigarette, which he handed unstuck to his friend, the sign of Arab courtesy. Boulos ran his tongue along it, and raising his hand to his fez in thanks, lit it with great gusto, glancing up to the deck where his charges were lolling beneath the awning.

Lola, in white, and wearing her sun-helmet, leaned over the rail and called in her broken English:

“Boulos, when do we arrive at Abu Simbel?”

“At ze sunset, mees,” was the dragoman’s smiling reply. “To-morrow morning, at haf-pas tree we land, and we watch ze sun rise from inside ze gr-reat Tem-pel of Rameses.” Then raising his voice, so that all could hear, as is the habit of dragomans: “Ze gr-reat Tem-pel is cut in ze rock and made by Rameses to hees gr-reat gawd, Ra, gawd of ze sun. In ze front are fo-our colossi – gr-reat carved statues of Rameses seated. Zees, la-dees and gen’lemens, you will be able to see first

as we come round ze bend of ze Nile about seex o'clock. To-morrow morning we land at haf-pas tree, and ze sight is one of ze grandest in all our Egypt."

"Half-past three!" echoed Chester Dawson, who was sitting in a deck-chair at Edna's side. "I shall still be in my berth, I hope. No Temple of Rameses would get me up before sunrise."

"Say, you're real lazy," declared the buxom American girl. "I'll be right there – you bet."

"But is the old ruin worth it? We've seen the wonderful works of Rameses all up the Nile."

"Waal – is it worth coming to Egypt at all?" she asked in her native drawl. "Guess it is – better than Eu-rope – even if you're fed up by it."

"Oh, I don't know. This beastly heat makes me sick," and he gave a vigorous stroke with his horsehair fly-whisk with which each traveller was provided. Beelzebub assuredly lived in Egypt, for was he not the god of flies. Everything has a god in Egypt.

Boulos had resumed his comfortable chat with Melek, the *reis*. His thousand piastre deal of that morning had fully satisfied him. Not that he ever overcharged the travellers for any antiques which he sold them. As everyone on the Nile knows – from Cairo to far Khartoum – Boulos the laughing, easy-going though gorgeously attired dragoman, is a scrupulously honest dealer. He is a friend of the greatest Egyptologists in the world and, unlike the common run of dragomans, has studied Egyptian history, and possesses quite a remarkable knowledge of hieroglyphics. Many a well-known European professor has sat at the knee of Boulos, and many an antique is now in one or other of the European national collections which originally passed through the hands of the ever-faithful Boulos.

Waldron was sipping an innocuous drink composed of Evian water with a lime squeezed into it, and chatting in French with old Jules Gigueux, passing one of those usual mornings of laziness, away from the worries of letters and newspapers, which are so delightful up the Nile.

Beneath the wide awning the soft, hot breeze pleasantly fanned them, while away on the banks rose the feathery palms on the tiny green strip of cultivated mud, sometimes only a few feet in width, and then the desert – that great glaring waste of brown sand – stretching away to the horizon where the sky shone like burnished copper.

Mademoiselle, as full of mischief as ever, was the very life and soul of that smart party of moneyed folk which included two English peers, three American millionaires, an Austrian banker, a wealthy Russian prince, and two Members of Parliament who had paired. It had been whispered that she was daughter of Duprez, the millionaire sugar-refiner of Lyons; and, as everyone knows, the sugar of the Maison Duprez is used in nearly every household throughout France.

Yet Waldron had heard quite a different story from her own lips while they had been seated together on deck the previous evening drinking coffee.

"Ah?" she had sighed, "if I were only wealthy like the several other girls of this party, it would be different. Perhaps I could break away from uncle, and remain independent. But, alas! I cannot. I owe everything to him – I am dependent upon him for all I have."

This surprised Hubert considerably. Hitherto he had believed her to be the daughter of a wealthy man, because Miss Lambert showed her such marked deference. But such apparently was not the fact. Indeed she had declared later on to Waldron that she was very poor, and to her eccentric old uncle she was indebted for everything she received.

Hers was a curious, complex character. Sometimes she would sit and chat and flirt violently with him – for by her woman's intuition she knew full well that he admired her greatly – while at others she would scarcely utter a word to him.

Hubert Waldron detested old Gigueux. Even though he sat chatting and laughing with him that morning, he held him in supreme contempt for his constant espionage upon his niece. The old fellow seemed ubiquitous. He turned up in every corner of the steamer, always feigning to take no notice of his niece's constant companionship with the diplomat, and yet his sharp, shrewd eyes took in everything.

On more than one occasion the Englishman was upon the point of demanding outright why that irritating observation was so constantly kept, nevertheless with a diplomat's discretion, he realised that a judicious silence was best.

That long, blazing day passed slowly, till at last the sun sank westward over the desert in a flame of green and gold. Then the thirty or so passengers stood upon the deck waiting in patience till, suddenly rounding the sharp bend of the river, they saw upon the right – carved in the high, sandstone cliff – the greatest and most wonderful sight in all Nubia.

Lola was at the moment leaning over the rail, while Waldron stood idly smoking at her side.

"See!" he cried suddenly. "Over there! Those four colossal seated figures guarding the entrance of the temple which faces the sunrise. That is Abu Simbel."

"How perfectly marvellous!" gasped the girl, astounded at the wonderful monument of Rameses the Great.

"The temple is hewn in the solid rock – a temple about the size of Westminster Abbey in London. In the Holy of holies are four more seated figures in the darkness, and to-morrow as we stand in there at dawn, the sun, as it rises, will shine in at the temple door and gradually light up the faces of those images, until they glow and seem to become living beings – surely the most impressive sight of all the wonders of Egypt."

"I am longing to see it," replied the girl, her eyes fixed in fascination at the far-off colossi seated there gazing with such calm, contented expression over the Nile waters, now blood-red in the still and gorgeous desert sunset.

On the arid banks there was no sign of life, or even of vegetation. All was desert, rock, sand, and desolation. Where was the great, palpitating civilisation which had existed there in the days of Rameses, the cultured world which worshipped the great god, Ra, in that most wonderful of all temples? Gone, every trace save the place where the sun god was worshipped, swept out of existence, effaced, and forgotten.

Over the vessel a great grey vulture hovered with slowly flapping wings. Then from the bows came a low chant, and the passengers craning their necks below, saw that the black-faced crew had turned towards Mecca and sunk upon their knees, including even the gorgeous Boulos himself, and with many genuflexions were adoring Allah.

"Allah is great. Allah is merciful. He is the One," they cried in their low, musical Arabic. "There is no god but Allah!"

The sun sank and twilight came swiftly, as it does in the glowing, mystic East. And the white-bearded *reis*, his prayers finished, pushed on the steamer more quickly so as to anchor opposite Abu Simbel before darkness fell. The excitement among the passengers grew intense, for, on the morrow, ere the first pink of the dawn, the travellers were to stand within that rock-hewn temple, the most wonderful of all the works of the Pharaohs.

The evening proved a merry one, for after dinner, with the vessel anchored in mid-stream – to obviate thieves – opposite the great temple, the Nubian crew gave a fantasia, or native song and dance, for the benefit of the travellers.

On each trip from Shellal to Wady Haifa this was usual, for European travellers like to hear the weird native music, and the crooning desert songs in which Allah is praised so incessantly. Besides, a collection is made afterwards, and the sturdy, hard-working crew are benefited by many piastres.

On the lower deck, beneath the brilliant stars the black-faced toilers of the Nile beat their tom-toms vigorously and chanted weirdly while the passengers stood leaning over, watching and applauding. The crew squatted in a circle, and one after the other sprang up and performed a wild, mad dance while their companions kept time by clapping their hands or strumming upon their big earthenware tom-toms.

Then at eleven, the hour when the dynamos cease their humming and the electric light goes out, the concert ended with all the crew – headed by the venerable, white-bearded old pilot – standing up, salaaming and crying in their broken English:

“Gud nites, la-dees and gen’lemens. Gud nites?”

It was just before three on the following morning when the huge gong, carried around by an Arab servant, aroused everyone, and very soon from most of the cabins there turned out sleepy travellers who found the black giant Hassan ready with his little cups of delicious black coffee.

Boulos was there, already gorgeous in a pale green silk robe, while the steamer had half an hour before moved up to the landing-place.

“La-dees and gen’lemens!” cried the dragoman in his loud, drawling tone, “we no-ow go to see ze gree-at tem-pel of ze gawd, Ra – gawd of ze sun – ze tem-pel of ze sun-rise and ze greatest monument in all our Eg-eept. We shall start in fif mineets. In fif mineets, la-dees. Monuments tick-eets ve-ry much wanted. No gallopin’ donkeys in Abu Simbel!”

Whereat there was a laugh.

Then the under-dragoman, a person in a less gorgeous attire, proceeded to make up a parcel of candles, matches, and magnesium wire, and presently the travellers, all of whom had hastily dressed, followed their guide on shore, and over the tiny strip of cultivated mud until they came to the broad stone steps which led from the Nile bank to the square doorway of the temple.

Here a number of candles were lit by the under-dragoman; and Waldron, taking one, escorted Lola and Miss Lambert. Within, they found a huge, echoing temple with high columns marvellously carved and covered by hieroglyphics and sculptured pictures.

Through one huge chamber after another they passed, the vaulted roof so high that the light of their candles did not reach to it. Only could it be seen when the magnesium wire was burned, and then the little knot of travellers stood aghast in wonder at its stupendous proportions.

At last they stood in the Holy of holies – a small, square chamber at the extreme end.

In the centre stood the altar for the living sacrifices, the narrow groves in the stones telling plainly their use – the draining off of the blood.

All was darkness. Only Boulos spoke, his drawling, parrot-like voice explaining many intensely interesting facts concerning that spot where Rameses the Great worshipped the sun god.

Then there was a dead silence. Not one of that gay, chattering company dared to speak, so impressive and awe-inspiring was it all.

Suddenly, from out of the darkness they saw before them slowly, yet distinctly, four huge figures seated, their hands lying upon their knees, gradually come into being as the sun’s faint pink rays, entering by the door, struck upon their stone faces, infusing life into their sphinx-like countenances until they glowed and seemed almost to speak.

Expressions of amazement broke from everyone’s lips.

“Marvellous!” declared Lola in an awed whisper. “Truly they seem really to live. It is astounding.”

“Yes,” answered Waldron. “And thus they have lived each morning in the one brief hour of the sunrise through all the ages. From Rameses to Cleopatra each king and queen of Egypt has stood upon this spot and worshipped their great gods, Ra and the all-merciful Osiris. Such a sight as this surely dwarfs our present civilisation, and should bring us nearer to thoughts of our own Christian God – the Almighty.”

Chapter Four. Contains a Bitter Truth

When Hubert returned on board the *Arabia* and entered his deck-cabin, one of a long row of small cubicles, he started back in surprise, for Gigueux was there.

The Frenchman was confused at his sudden discovery, but only for a second. Then, with his calm, pleasant smile, he said in French:

“Ah, m’sieur, a thousand pardons! I was looking for the book I lent you the other day – that book of Maspero’s. I want to refer to it.”

Waldron felt at once that the excuse was a lame one.

“I left it in the *fumoir* last night, I believe.”

“Ah! Then I will go and get it,” replied the white-haired old fellow fussily. “But I hope,” he added, “that m’sieur will grant pardon for this unwarrantable intrusion. I did not go to the temple. It was a trifle too early for me.”

“You missed a great treat,” replied the Englishman bluntly, tossing his soft felt hat upon his narrow little bed. “Mademoiselle will tell you all about it.”

“You took her under your charge – as usual, eh?” sniffed the old fellow.

“Oh, yes. I escorted both her and Miss Lambert,” was the diplomat’s reply. “But look here, M’sieur Gigueux,” he went on, “you seem to have a distinct antipathy towards me. You seem to be averse to any courtesy I show towards your niece. Why is this? Tell me.”

The old man’s eyes opened widely, and he struck an attitude.

“*Mais non, m’sieur!*” he declared quickly. “You quite misunderstand me. I am old – and perhaps I may be a little eccentric. Lola says that I am.”

“But is that any reason why I should not behave with politeness to mam’zelle?”

The old man with the closely cropped white hair paused for a few seconds. That direct question nonplussed him. He drew a long breath, and as he did so the expression upon his mobile face seemed to alter.

In the silence Hubert Waldron was leaning against the edge of the little mosquito-curtained bed, while the Frenchman stood in the narrow doorway, for, in that little cabin, there was only sufficient room for one person to move about comfortably.

“Yes,” responded the girl’s uncle. “Now that you ask me this very direct question I reply quite frankly that there is a reason – a very strong and potent reason why you, a man occupying an official position in the British diplomacy should show no undue courtesy to Mademoiselle Lola.”

“Why?” asked Hubert, much surprised.

“For several reasons. Though, as I expect she has already explained to you, she is a penniless orphan, daughter of my sister, whose wealthy husband lost every *sou* in the failure of the banking firm of Chenier Frères of Marseilles. I have accepted the responsibility of her education and I have already planned out her future.”

“A wealthy husband, I suppose,” remarked the Englishman in a hard voice.

“M’sieur has guessed the truth.”

“And she is aware of this?”

“Quite,” was the old man’s calm reply. “Therefore you now know the reason why I am averse to your attentions.”

“Well, at least you are frank,” declared the other with a laugh. “But I assure you, M’sieur Gigueux, that I have no matrimonial intentions whatsoever. I’m a confirmed bachelor.”

Gigueux shook his head wisely.

“When a girl of Lola’s bright and irresponsible disposition is thrown hourly into the society of a man such as yourself, my dear friend, there is danger – always a grave danger.”

“And is she fond of this man whom you have designated as her husband?”

“Nowadays girls marry for position – not for love,” he grunted.

“In France, yes – but scarcely so in England,” Waldron retorted, his anger rising.

“Well, m’sieur, you have asked me a question, and I have replied,” the Frenchman said. “I trust that this open conversation will make no difference to our friendship, though I shall take it as a personal favour if, in the future, you will not seek Lola’s society quite so much.”

“As you wish, m’sieur,” replied the diplomat savagely. He hated the crafty, keen-eyed old fellow and took no pains now to conceal his antipathy.

The blow which he had for the past fortnight expected had fallen. He intended at the earliest moment to seek Lola, and inquire further into the curious situation, for if the truth be told, he had really fallen deeply in love with her, even though she might be penniless and dependent upon the old man.

When old Gigueux had passed along the deck he sat down upon the bed and lighting a cigarette, reflected. He was a younger son with only seven hundred a year in addition to his pay from the Foreign Office. Madrid was an expensive post. Indeed, what European capital is not expensive to the men whose duty it is to keep up the prestige of the British Empire abroad? Diplomacy, save for the “plums,” is an ill-paid profession, for entertaining is a constant drain upon one’s pocket, as every Foreign Office official, from the poverty-stricken Consul to the Ambassador, harassed by debt, can, alas! testify.

Many an Ambassador to a foreign Court has been ruined by the constant drain of entertaining. Appearances and social entertainments are his very life, and if he cuts down his expenses Britain’s prestige must suffer, and at Downing Street they will quickly query the cause of his parsimony. So the old game goes on, and the truth is, that many a man of vast diplomatic experience and in a position of high responsibility is worse off in pocket than the average suburban tradesman.

Hubert Waldron bit his lip. After all, he was a fool to allow himself to think of her. No diplomat should marry until he became appointed Minister, and a bachelor life was a pleasant one. Curious, he thought, that he, a man who had run the whole gamut of life in the capitals, and who had met so many pretty and fascinating women in that gay world which revolves about the Embassies, should become attracted by that merry little French girl, Lola Duprez.

Breakfast over, the party went ashore again, now in linen clothes and sun-helmets, to wander about the temple till noon, when they were to leave for Wady Haifa.

He saw Lola and Edna Eastham walking with Chester Dawson, so, following, he joined them and at last secured an opportunity of speaking with Lola alone.

They were strolling slowly around the edge of the sandstone cliff, away from the colossal façade of the temple, and out of sight of the steamer, for the old Frenchman had fortunately still remained on board – the blazing heat being too much for him.

“Lola,” her companion exclaimed, “I have spoken to your uncle quite openly this morning. I know that he hates me.”

She turned quickly and looked straight at him with her wonderful dark eyes.

“Well – ?” she asked.

“He has told me the truth,” Waldron went on seriously. “He has explained that the reason he objects to our companionship is because you are already betrothed.”

“Betrothed?” she echoed, staring at him.

“Yes. To whom? Tell me, mam’zelle,” he asked slowly.

She made no response. Her eyes were downcast; her cheeks suddenly pale. They were standing beneath the shadow of an ancient wide-spreading tree which struggled for existence at the edge of the Nile flood.

“He has said that I am betrothed – eh?” she asked, as though speaking to herself.

“He has told me so. Your future husband has been already chosen,” he said in a low, mechanical tone.

Her teeth were set, her sweet, refined countenance had grown even paler.

“Yes,” she admitted at last, drawing a deep breath. “My past has been bright and happy, but, alas! before me there now only lies tragedy; and despair. Ah! if I were but my own mistress – if only I could escape this grip of evil which is ever upon me!”

“Grip of evil! What do you mean?” he inquired eagerly.

“Ah! you do not know – you can never tell!” she cried. “The evil hand of Jules Gigueux is ever upon me, a hard, iron, inexorable hand. Ah! M’sieur Waldron, you would, if you only knew the truth, pity a woman who is in the power of a man of that stamp – a man who has neither feeling, nor conscience, neither human kindness nor remorse.”

“He’s a confounded brute – that I know. I feel sure of it,” her companion declared hastily. “But look here, mam’zelle, can’t I assist you? Can’t I help you out of this pitfall into which you seem to have fallen. Why should you be forced to marry this man whom your uncle has chosen – whoever he may be?”

She shook her head mournfully, her lips quite white.

“No,” she sighed. “I fear your efforts could have no avail. It is true that I am betrothed – pledged to a man whom I hate. But I know that I cannot escape. I must obey the decree which has gone forth. Few girls to-day marry for love, I fear – and true love, alas! seems ever to bring poverty in its wake.”

“That’s the old sentimental way of looking at it,” he declared. “There’s many a rich marriage in which Cupid plays the principal part. I’ve known lots.”

“In my case it cannot be,” the girl declared hopelessly. “My future has been planned for me, and admits of no alteration,” she went on. “To me, love – the true love of a woman towards a man – is forbidden. My only thought is to crush it completely from my heart and to meet my future husband as I would a dire misfortune.”

“Not a very cheerful outlook, I fear.”

“No, my future can, alas! be only one of tragedy, M’sieur Waldron, so the less we discuss it the better. It is, I assure you, a very painful subject,” and again she sighed heavily, and he saw hot tears welling in those splendid eyes which he always admired so profoundly.

Her face was full of black tragedy, and as Waldron gazed upon it his heart went out in deepest sympathy towards her.

“But surely this uncle of yours is not such an absolute brute as to compel you to wed against your will!” he cried.

“Not he alone compels me. There are other interests,” was her slow reply, her voice thick with suppressed emotion. “I am bound, fettered, hand and foot. Ah! you do not know!” she cried.

“Cannot I assist you to break these fetters?” he asked, bending to her earnestly. “I see that you are suffering, and if I can do anything to serve your interests I assure you, mademoiselle, I will.”

“I feel certain of that,” was her answer. “Already you have been very good and patient with me. I know I have often sorely tried your temper. But you must forgive me. It is my nature, I fear, to be mischievous and irresponsible.”

At that instant the recollection of the night in Assouan crossed Waldron’s mind – of that mysterious messenger who had come post-haste from Europe, and had as mysteriously returned. He had never mentioned the affair, for had he done so she would have known that he had spied upon her. Therefore he had remained silent.

They stood together beneath the shade of that spreading tree with the heat of the desert sand reflected into their faces – stood in silence, neither speaking.

At last he said:

“And may I not know the identity of the man who is marked out to be your husband?”

“No; that is a secret, M’sieur Waldron, which even you must not know. It is my affair, and mine alone,” she replied in a low tone.

“I’m naturally most curious,” he declared, “for if I can assist you to extricate yourself from this impasse I will.”

“I thank you most sincerely,” was her quick response, as she looked up at him with her soft, big eyes. “If at any time I require your assistance I will certainly count upon you. But, alas! I fear that no effort on your part could avail me. There are reasons – reasons beyond my control – which make it imperative that I should marry the man marked out for me.”

“It’s a shame – a downright sin!” he cried fiercely. “No, mademoiselle,” and he grasped her small hand before she could withdraw it; “I will not allow you to sacrifice yourself to your uncle’s whim.”

She shook her head slowly, answering:

“It is, alas! not within your power to prevent it! The matter has already been arranged.”

“Then you are actually betrothed?”

“Yes,” she replied in a hoarse voice. “To a man I hate.”

“Then you must let me act on your behalf. I must – I will?”

“No. You can do nothing to help me. As I have already explained, my life in future can only be one of tragedy – just as yours may be, I fear,” she added in a slow, distinct voice.

“I hardly follow you,” he exclaimed, looking at her much puzzled.

She smiled sadly, turning her big eyes upon his.

“Probably not,” she said. “But does not half Madrid know the tragedy of your love for the dancer, Beatriz Rojas de Ruata, the beautiful woman whose misfortune it is to have a husband in the person of a drunken cab-driver?”

“What!” he gasped, starting and staring at her in amazement. “Then you know Madrid?”

“Yes, I have been in Madrid,” was her answer. “And I have heard in the *salons* of your mad infatuation for the beautiful opera-dancer. It is common gossip, and most people sigh and sympathise with you, for it is known, too, that Hubert Waldron, of the British Embassy, is the soul of honour – and that such love as his can only bring tragedy in its train.”

“You never told me that you had been in Madrid!”

“Because you have never asked me,” was her calm reply. “But I know much more concerning you, M’sieur Waldron, than you believe,” she said with a mysterious smile. Then, her eyes glowing, she added: “I have heard you discussed in Madrid, in Barcelona, and in San Sebastian, and I know that your love for the beautiful Beatriz Rojas de Ruata is just as fraught with tragedy as the inexorable decree which may, ere long, bind me as wife to the one man whom I hate and detest most in all the world!”

Chapter Five. A Surprise

Egypt is the strangest land, the weirdest land, the saddest land in all the world.

It is a land of memories, of monuments, and of mysticism; a land of dreams that never come true, a land of mystery, a great cemetery stretching from ancient Ethiopia away to the sea, a great grave hundreds of miles long in which is buried perhaps as many millions of human beings as exist upon our earth to-day.

Against the low-lying shore of the great Nile valley have beaten many of the greatest waves of human history. It is the grave of a hundred dead Egypts, old and forgotten Egypts, that existed and possessed kings and priests and rules and creeds, and died and were succeeded by newer Egypts that now, too, are dead, that in their time believed they reared permanently above the ruins of the past.

The small white steamer lay moored in the evening light at the long stone quay before the sun-baked town of Wady Haifa, close to the modern European railway terminus of the long desert-line to Khartoum.

On board, dinner was in progress in the cramped little saloon, no larger than that of a good-sized yacht, and everyone was in high spirits, for the Second Cataract, a thousand miles from Cairo, had at last been reached.

Amid the cosmopolitan chatter in French, English, Italian and German, Boulos, arrayed in pale pink silk – for the dragoman is ever a chameleon in the colour of his perfumed robes – made his appearance and clapped his hands as signal for silence.

“La-dees and gen’lemens,” he cried in his long-drawn-out Arab intonation, “we haf arrived now in Wady Haifa, ze frontier of Sudan. Wady Haifa in ze days of ze khalifa was built of Nile mud, and one of ze strongholds of ze Dervishes. Ze Engleesh Lord Kig’ner, he make Wady Haifa hees headquarter and make one railroad to Khartoum. After ze war zis place he be rebuilt by Engleesh engineer, as to-morrow you will see. After dinner ze Engleesh custom officer he come on board to search for arms or ammunition, for no sporting rifle be allowed in ze Sudan without ze licence, which he cost fifty poun’ sterling. To-morrow I go ashore wiz you la-dees and gen’lemens at ten o’clock. We remain here, in Wady Haifa, till noon ze day after to-morrow to take back ze European mail from Khartoum. Monuments teeckets are not here wanted.”

There was the usual laugh at the mention of “monuments tickets,” for every Nile traveller before leaving Cairo has to obtain a permit from the Department of Antiquities to allow him to visit the excavations. Hence every dragoman up and down the Nile is ever reminding the traveller of his “monument ticket,” and also that “galloping donkeys are not allowed.”

“Monuments teeckets very much wanted; gallopin’ don-kees not al-owed,” is the parrot-like phrase with which each dragoman concludes his daily address to his charges before setting out upon an excursion.

Dinner over, many of the travellers landed to stroll through the small town, half native, half European, which has lately sprung up at the head of the Sudan railway.

As usual, Chester Dawson escorted Edna and went ashore laughing merrily. Time was, and not so very long ago, when Wady Haifa was an unsafe place for the European, even by day. But under the benign British influence and control it is to-day as safe as Brighton.

Hubert Waldron lit a cigar, and alone ascended the long flight of steps which led from the landing-stage to the quay. On the right lay the long, well-lit European railway station, beyond, a clump of high palms looming dark against the steely night sky. The white train, with its closed sun-shutters, stood ready to start on its long journey south, conveying the European mail over the desert with half a dozen passengers to the capital of the Sudan.

He strolled upon the platform, and watched the bustle and excitement among the natives as they entered the train accompanied by many huge and unwieldy bundles, and much gesticulation and shouting in Arabic. Attached to the end of the train was a long car, through the open door of which it could be seen that it contained living and sleeping apartment.

At the door stood a sturdy, sunburnt Englishman in shirt and trousers and wide-brimmed solar topee. With him Waldron began to chat.

“Yes,” the English engineer replied, “I and my assistant are just off into the desert for three weeks. The train drops us off two hundred miles south, and there we shall remain at work. The track is always requiring repair, and I assure you we find the midday heat is sometimes simply terrible. The only sign of civilisation that we see is when the express passes up to Khartoum at daybreak, and down to Haifa at midnight.”

“Terribly monotonous,” remarked the diplomat, used to the gay society of the capitals.

“Oh, I don’t know,” replied the Englishman, with a rather sad smile. “I gave up London five years ago – I had certain reasons – and I came out here to recommence life and forget. I don’t expect I shall ever go back.”

“Ah! Then London holds some painful memory for you – eh?” remarked Waldron with sympathy.

“Yes,” he answered, with a hard, bitter look upon his face. “But there,” he added quickly, “I suppose I shall get over it – some day.”

“Why, of course you will,” replied the diplomat cheerfully. “We all of us have our private troubles. Some men are not so lucky as to be able to put everything behind them, and go into self-imposed exile.”

“It is best, I assure you,” was the big, bronzed fellow’s reply. Then noticing the signals he shouted into the inner apartment: “We’re off, Clark. Want anything else?”

“No,” came the reply; “everything is right. I’ve just checked it all.”

“We have to take food and water,” the engineer explained to Waldron with a laugh. “Good night.”

“Good night – and good luck,” shouted Hubert, as the train moved off, and a strong, bare arm waved him farewell.

Then after he had watched the red tail-light disappear over the sandy waste he turned, and wondering what skeleton of the past that exile held concealed in his cupboard, strode along the river-bank beneath the belt of palms.

How many Englishmen abroad are self-exiles? How full of bitterness is many a man’s heart in our far-off Colonies? And how many good, sterling fellows are wearily dragging out their monotonous lives, just because of “the woman”? Does she remember? does she care? She probably still lives her own life in her own merry circle – giddy and full of a modern craving for constant excitement. She has, in most cases, conveniently forgotten the man she wronged – forgotten his existence, perhaps even his very name.

And how many men, too, have stood by and allowed their lives to be wrecked for the purpose of preserving a woman’s good name. But does the woman ever thank him? Alas! but seldom – very seldom.

True, the follies of life are mostly the man’s. But the woman does not always pay – as some would have us believe.

Waldron, puffing thoughtfully at his cigar, his thoughts far away from the Nile – for he was recalling a certain evening in Madrid when he had sat alone with Beatriz in her beautiful flat in the Calle de Alcalá – had passed through the darkness of the palms, and out upon the path which still led beside the wide river, towards the Second Cataract.

From the shadows of the opposite shore came the low beating of a tom-tom and the Arab boatman's chant – that rather mournful chant one hears everywhere along the Nile from the Nyanza to the sea, and which ends in "Al-lah-hey! Al-lah-hey!" Allah! Always the call to Allah.

The sun – the same sun god that was worshipped at Abu Simbel – had gone long ago, tired Nubia slept in peace, and the stars that gazed down upon her fretted not the night with thoughts of the creeds of men.

Again Hubert Waldron reached another small clump of palms close to the water's edge, and as he passed noiselessly across the sand he suddenly became conscious that he was not alone.

Voices in French broke the silence, and he suddenly halted.

Then before him, silhouetted against the blue, clear light of the desert night, rose two figures – Europeans, a man and a woman.

The woman, who wore a white dress, was clasped in the arms of the man, while he rained hot, passionate kisses upon her brow.

Waldron stood upon the soft sand, a silent witness of that exchange of passionate caresses. He feared to move lest he should attract their attention and be accused of eavesdropping.

From where he was, half concealed by the big trunk of a date-palm, he could distinctly hear the words uttered by the man.

"I have been here for three days awaiting you, darling. I travelled by Port Sudan and Khartoum, and then on here to meet you."

"And I, too, Henri, have been wondering if you would arrive here in time," was the girl's response, as her head lay in sweet content upon her lover's shoulder. "Imagine my delight when the Arab came on board and slipped your note into my hand."

"Ah, Lola darling, how I have longed for this moment! – longed to hold you in my arms once again," he cried.

Lola!

Hubert Waldron held his breath, scarce believing his own ears.

Yes, it was her voice – the voice he knew so well. She had met her lover there – in that out-of-the-way spot – he having travelled by the Red Sea route to the Sudan in order to keep the tryst.

Waldron stood there listening, like a man in a dream.

It was all plain now. The man who had been marked out as Lola's husband she hated, because of her secret love for that young Frenchman in whose arms she now stood clasped.

He was telling her how he had left Brindisi three weeks before, and going down the Red Sea had landed at Port Sudan, afterwards taking sail to Khartoum and then post-haste across the desert to Haifa.

"Had I not caught the coasting steamer I could not have reached here until you had left," he added.

"Yes, Henri. But you must be most careful," she urged. "My uncle must never suspect – he must never dream the truth."

"I know, darling. If I travel back to Cairo with you I will exercise the utmost discretion, never fear."

"Neither by word nor by look must the truth ever be betrayed," she said. "Remember, Henri, my whole future is in your hands."

"Can I ever forget that, my darling?" he cried, kissing her with all the frantically amorous passion of a Frenchman.

"It is dangerous," she declared. "Too dangerous, I fear. Gigueux is ubiquitous."

"He always is. But leave it all to me," the man hastened to assure her, holding her ungloved hand and raising it fervently to his lips. "I shall join your steamer as an ordinary passenger just before you sail."

"But you must avoid me. Promise me to do that?" she implored in a low, earnest tone.

“I will promise you anything, my darling – because I love you better than my life,” was his low, earnest answer, as he tenderly stroked the soft hair from her brow. “Do you recollect our last evening together in Rome, eh?”

“Shall I ever forget?” was her reply. “I risked everything that night to escape and come to you.”

“Then you really do love me, Lola – truly?” For answer she flung her long arms around his neck and kissed him fondly. And she then remained silent in his strong embrace.

Chapter Six. More Concerning the Stranger

At their feet, winding its way for thousands of miles between limitless areas of sand, its banks lined for narrow distances with green fields and the habitations of men, flowed dark and wondrous the one thing that makes human life possible in all the lands of the Sudan and of Egypt – flowed from sources that for ages were undiscovered, and which even in this day of boasted knowledge are yet incompletely known – the Nile.

In the lazy indolence of that sun-baked land of silence, idleness and love, affection is quickly cultivated, as the fast-living set who go up there each winter know well. Hubert Waldron, man of the world that he was, had watched and knew. He stood there, however, dumbfounded, for there was now presented a very strange and curious state of affairs. Lola, the dark-eyed girl who had enchanted him and held him by the great mystery which surrounded her, was now revealed keeping tryst with a stranger – a mysterious Frenchman who had come up from the blazing Sudan – a man who had come from nowhere.

He strained his eyes in an endeavour to distinguish the stranger's outline, but in vain. The man was standing in the deep shadow. Only the girl's familiar form silhouetted against the starlit sky.

"We must be very careful of my uncle," the girl urged. "The slightest suspicion, and we shall assuredly be parted, and for ever."

"I will exercise every discretion, never fear, dearest," was his reassuring reply, and again he took her soft, fair face in both his hands and kissed her passionately upon the lips.

"But, Henri," she exclaimed presently, "are you quite sure they suspect nothing at home – that you have never betrayed to anyone your affection for me? Remember, there are spies everywhere."

"Surely you can trust me, my darling?" he asked in reproach.

"Of course, dear," she cried, again raising her lips and kissing him fondly. "But, naturally, I am full of fear lest our secret be known."

"It cannot be known," was his confident reply. "We can both keep the truth from others. Trust me."

"And when we return to Europe. What then?" she asked in a low, changed tone.

"Then we shall see. Why try and look into the future? It is useless to anticipate difficulties which may not, after all, exist," he said cheerfully, again stroking her hair with tenderness.

He spoke in French in a soft, refined voice, and was evidently a gentleman, though he still stood in the shadow and was therefore undistinguishable. He was holding the girl in his arms and a silence had fallen between them – a silence only broken by the low lapping of the Nile waters, and that rhythmic chant now receding: "Ah-lal-hey! Al-lal-hey?"

"My darling!" whispered the stranger passionately. "My own faithful darling. I love you – ah! so much more than you can ever tell. And, alas! I am so unworthy of you."

She, in return, sighed upon his breast and declared that she loved but one man in all the world – himself.

"Since that night we first met, Lola – you remember it," he said, "my only thought has been of you."

"Ah, yes," was her reply. "At my aunt's ball in Vienna. I recollect how the Baron von Karlstadt introduced us, and how you bowed and invited me to dance. Shall I ever forget that evening, Henri – just over a year ago."

"And old Gigueux? Is he still quite as troublesome as ever?"

"Just. He has eyes in the back of his head."

"And Mademoiselle Lambert – is she loyal to you?"

"I fear not, alas!" was Lola's reply. "She is paid to spy upon me. At least that has latterly become my impression. I have wanted to become her friend, but she is unapproachable."

"Then we must exercise every discretion. On board I shall avoid you studiously. We can, of course, meet again in Cairo, for it is a big city, and you will sometimes be free."

"Yes. Till then, adieu, Henri. But," she added, "it will be so hard to be near you for the next three weeks and never speak."

"It must be. Gigueux is no fool, remember," the man replied.

"I must be getting back. They will miss me," she said wistfully. "How shall I be able to pass you by dozens of times a day, Henri, maybe sit down at the same table with you, and betray no sign of recognition? I really don't know."

"But you must, darling! You must – for both our sakes," he argued, and then he once again clasped her in his strong arms and smothered her with his fierce passionate caresses.

Hubert Waldron witnessed it all. He held his breath and bit his lip. Who could be this mysterious Henri – this secret lover whom Lola had met by appointment in that far-off, out-of-the-world place?

He recollected that Lola had flirted with him and that she had amused herself by allowing him to pay her compliments. Yet the existence of one whom she loved so devotedly in secret was now revealed, and he stood aghast, filled with chagrin at the unexpected revelation.

The pair, locked in each other's arms, moved slowly forward in his direction.

She was urging him to allow her to get back, but he was persuading her to remain a little longer.

"Think of all the long weeks and months we have been parted, sweetheart!" he was saying. "Besides we must not speak again until we get to Cairo. I shall remain at the little hotel over tomorrow. But it would be far too dangerous for us to meet. One or other of the passengers might discover us."

"Yes," she sighed; "we shall be compelled to exercise the greatest caution always. All my future depends on the preservation of our secret."

Waldron slipped from his hiding-place and away behind another tree, just before the pair passed the spot where he had been standing.

He watched them as they went forth into the light, and at last realised that the man was tall and slim, though, of course, he could not see his face.

He watched their parting, a long and tender farewell. The ardent lover kissed her upon the lips many times, kissed her cheeks, kissed her soft white hands, and then at last reluctantly released her and stood watching as she hurried on to the next belt of palms back to the landing-stage.

Afterwards he strode leisurely on behind her, and was soon lost to view in the black shadows.

A fortnight – fourteen lazy days of idleness and sunshine – had gone by.

The white double-decked steamer descending the Nile had left modern Luxor, with its gorgeous Winter Palace Hotel on the site of ancient Thebes. It had passed the wonderful temple standing upon the bank, and was steering due northward for Cairo, still a week's journey distant.

In the west a great sea of crimson spread over the clear sky, and shafts of golden light fell upon the sand-dunes that barred the view in that direction. Away in the farther distance to the west the steel-like rim of the utter desert also seemed somewhat softened by that mellow light which diffused all the face of nature. During all the full hours of the day that rigid desert ruin, where lay the valley of the tombs of the kings, had seemed to repel, to warn back, to caution that there lay the limit beyond which the human being might not go. But in the falling light it had surrendered, and in its softer appearance it seemed to promise that it, like destiny and death, would surrender its uttermost secrets to those whose hearts were brave enough to approach it without fear.

The tea interval was over, and it was the lazy hour before dinner. Most of the travellers were in their cabins dressing, for the European ever clings to the dinner-jacket or evening blouse. On

board that small steamer were men – Englishmen, Frenchmen, and Americans – whose wealth could be reckoned at over a hundred millions sterling, men who wore bad hats and rather shabby clothes, but whose women-kind were always loud-speaking and bizarre. Truly the winter world of Egypt is a strange one of moneyed leisure, of reckless extravagance, and of all the modern vices of this our twentieth-century world.

The white steamer, with its silent, pensive reis squatting in the bows with his eternal cigarette, ever watchful of the appearance of the broad grey-green waters, puffed onward around the sudden bend.

To the east, the Arabian Desert – beautiful beyond words, but where, save in a few narrow oases, Nature forbade the habitation of man – stretched away to the Red Sea and far on into Asia. And to the west, frowning now as though in hatred of the green Nile with its fertility, lay the Libyan Desert, which, with its great mother the Sahara, held so much of Africa in its cruel grasp, and which was as unlovely and repelling as its sister of Arabia was bright and beautiful.

And Egypt – the Egypt of life and fertility, of men and history, tradition, and of modern travel – lay a green and smiling land between the two deserts as a human life lies between the two great eternities before birth and after death; or as a notable writer once put it: as the moment of the present lies between the lost past and the undiscovered future.

Waldron had already dressed, and was lying back in a long deck-chair enjoying a cigarette, and gazing away at the crimson sunset, when a tall, thin-faced man of thirty passed along the deck. He, too, was in the conventional dinner-jacket and black cravat, but to his fellow-travellers he was a mystery, for ever since joining them at Wady, Haifa he had kept himself much to himself, and hardly spoken to anyone.

His name was Henri Pujalet, and he was from Paris. His father, Henri Pujalet, the well-known banker of the Rue des Capucines, had died two years before, leaving to his eldest son his great wealth. That was all that was known of him.

Only Hubert Waldron knew the truth – the secret of Lola's love.

"Ah, my dear friend!" he cried in his enthusiastic French way as he approached the Englishman. "Well – how goes it?"

"Very well, thanks," responded the diplomat in French, for truth to tell he had cultivated the stranger's acquaintance and had watched with amused curiosity the subtle glances which Lola sometimes cast towards him.

The secret lover sank into a chair at the diplomat's side and slowly lit a cigarette.

He was a good-looking – even handsome – man, with refined and regular features, a smiling, complacent expression, and a small, well-trimmed moustache. But his cheek-bones were high, and his eyes rather narrowly set. To-day no young Frenchman – as was the fashion ten years ago – wears a beard. Time was when the beard was carefully oiled, perfumed, trimmed and curled. But to-day the fashion in France is a hairless face – as in America and in England.

Waldron examined his companion for the hundredth time. Yes, he was a mystery. He had given the name of Pujalet to the steward, but was that his real name? Was he the son of Pujalet, the dead banker of the Rue des Capucines?

Old Gigeux often chatted with him, for were they not compatriots? But the white-headed old fellow apparently held no suspicion that he was his niece's secret lover who had travelled those many miles from Europe in order to be near her.

The situation was not without its humours. Of all the persons on board that gay crowd returning to Cairo to spend New Year's Day, only Hubert Waldron knew the truth. And as a diplomat he stood by and watched in silence, aware that the looker-on always sees most of the game.

He had had many amusing chats on deck and in the smoking-room with Henri Pujalet, whom he had found to be a much more cosmopolitan person than he had at first imagined. He seemed to know Europe well – even Madrid – for he spoke of certain dishes at the Lhardy and the excellence

of the wines at the Tournié in the Calle Mayor, of the “Flamenco” at the Gate Nero, and the smart teas in the ideal room in the Calle de Alcata; all of which were familiar, of course, to Waldron.

Equally familiar to him was Petersburg, with Cubat’s and such-like resorts; he knew the gay Boulevard Hotel in Bucharest, and the excellence of its sterlet, the Nazionale and “Father Abraham’s” in Rome; the Hungaria in Budapest, the Adlon in Berlin, the Pera Palace in Constantinople, as indeed most of the other well-known resorts to which the constant traveller across Europe naturally drifts at one time or another.

That Henri Pujalet was a cosmopolitan was perfectly clear to his companion. Yet he was, as certainly, a man of mystery.

Hubert Waldron, a shrewd observer and a keen investigator of anything appertaining to mystery, watched him daily, and daily became more and more interested.

His suspicions were aroused that all was not quite right. Pujalet’s attitude towards Lola was quite remarkable. Not by the slightest glance or gesture did he give away his secret. To all on board he was to mademoiselle a stranger, and, moreover, perfectly oblivious to her very existence.

The two men chatted idly until suddenly the dinner-gong was sounded by a black-faced, grinning Nubian, who carried it up and down the deck beating it noisily.

Then he descended to the big white-and-gold saloon, where a few moments later there assembled a merry, chattering, and laughing crowd.

In the midst of dinner Waldron rose from the table and ascended to the upper deck and got his handkerchief. As he approached his cabin, however, he saw someone leave it, and disappear round the stern of the vessel. The incident instantly impressed itself upon his mind as a curious one, and in his evening slippers he sped lightly to the end of the deck and gazed after the receding figure of the fugitive.

It was Henri Pujalet!

Waldron returned instantly to his cabin in wonder why the Frenchman had intruded there.

As far as he could see nothing had been disturbed. All was in order, just as he had left it after dressing.

Only one object had been moved – his small, steel, travelling dispatch-box, enclosed in its green canvas case. This, which had been upon a shelf, was now lying upon the bed. The green canvas cover had been unfastened, displaying the patent brass lock by the famous maker.

It had been examined and tampered with. An attempt had, no doubt, been made to open it, and the person who had made that attempt was none other than the tall, good-looking man who had so swiftly and silently descended to the saloon and now, unnoticed, retaken his place at dinner.

“Well,” gasped Waldron, taking out his keys and unlocking the steel box to reassure himself that his private papers were intact, “this is curious – distinctly curious, to say the least!”

Chapter Seven. The Night of the Golden Pig

It wanted thirty minutes to midnight.

The New Year's Eve fun at Shepherd's Hotel in Cairo was fast and furious.

Ministerial officers and their women-folk, British officers of the garrison, officials and their wives from all parts of Egypt, Society from the other hotels, and a sprinkling of grave, brown-faced Egyptian gentlemen in frock coats and fezes, all congregate here to dine, to dance, to throw "serpentes," and to make merry by touching the golden pig – a real pig covered with gold paint – at the coming of the New Year.

That night was no exception, for the *salons* were crowded to overflowing, champagne flowed freely, and everyone laughed heartily at the various antics of the great assembly. Cosmopolitan it was, in every sense of the word, for most European languages could be heard there. In the ballroom a great dance was in progress, while the supper-room was crowded to suffocation, and in the big *salons* one could hardly move about so dense was the well-dressed crowd.

Upon this scene Hubert Waldron gazed when he arrived in a cab from the Savoy. Though Lola, her uncle, and Miss Lambert had, on landing, obtained rooms at Shepherd's, the Englishman had failed to do so, and had therefore gone to the Savoy, whither Henri Pujalet had also gone, as well as Chester Dawson, the Easthams, and several other members of the party.

Already they had been in Cairo three days, and though Waldron had watched Pujalet continuously, the lovers had not held any clandestine meeting.

As he elbowed his way through that New Year's Eve crush in the big Oriental lounge, however, he suddenly – came upon the pair. Lola, her face beaming with supreme pleasure, was dressed in simple, yet becoming taste in turquoise blue, with a touch of the same colour in her dark hair, while the Frenchman, erect and well-groomed, presented a particularly smart appearance. Neither noticed the diplomat, so engrossed were they in their conversation. The opportunity of meeting was, of course, a unique one, for even if her uncle discovered her how could he reprove her for dancing with a man who had been their fellow-traveller for nearly three weeks?

The girl's face was flushed with excitement and pleasure now that she hung upon her lover's arm as he led her back to the ballroom.

Hubert Waldron watched them, then sighed and turned away.

He had not gone far up the long *salon* before he was accosted by a rather thick-set, clean-shaven Englishman of about thirty-five, with blue eyes, rather fair hair, and whose clothes fitted perfectly.

"Hulloa, Waldron! By Jove! Who'd have dreamt of meeting you here! Why, I thought you were still in Madrid!"

"Jerningham!" gasped the diplomat. "My dear old Jack, how are you?" he cried, grasping his hand warmly.

"Oh, so-so," replied the other, nonchalantly. "I've been travelling about a lot of late. And you?"

"Been on leave up to Wady Haifa, and now on my way back to Madrid."

"And to the Teatro Real – eh?" added his friend with a sly grin.

"No. She's in London. An engagement there."

"And you're not in London! Why?"

"Can't get my leave extended, or, you bet, I'd be back in town like a shot. What would I give for a bit dinner at the St. James's Club and a stroll along Piccadilly."

"Of course. But how's the lady?"

“Very well – I believe. I had a wire yesterday telling me of her great success at the Palace. The newspapers are full of her photographs and all that.”

“And all the nuts in town running madly after her – eh? Beatriz likes that.”

Waldron did not reply for a few moments, then, changing the subject, he said:

“Let’s go along to the bar. This crowd is distinctly unpleasant.”

Five minutes later, when the pair were seated in a quiet corner, Waldron asked in a low, confidential tone:

“What’s the latest? I’ve been away from the Embassy for nine weeks.”

“Oh, the political situation remains about the same. I’ve been mostly in Germany and Russia, since I was last in Madrid. I had a rather good scoop about a fortnight ago – bought the designs of the new Krupp aerial gun.”

“By Jove, did you?”

“Yes. It has taken me three months to negotiate, and the fellow who made the deal tried to back out of it at the last moment.”

“Traitors always do,” remarked the diplomat.

“Yes,” admitted the British secret-service agent, as Jack Jerningham actually was. “They usually lose heart at the crucial moment. But in this case the new invention of our friends is simply a marvellous one. It’s a feather in my cap in the department, I’m glad to say.”

“You’ve had a good many feathers in your cap during the past five years, my dear Jack,” Waldron replied. “Your successes since you left the navy have been phenomenal – especially when a year ago you obtained a copy of the secret treaty signed by Austria regarding the partition of the Balkans. That was an amazing feat – never before equalled by any secret agent, I should think.”

“Bah! Nothing really very wonderful,” was Jerningham’s modest reply. “More by good luck than anything else. I’m here in Cairo to report on the growing unrest. At home the Chief suspects German influence to be at work.”

“And what’s the result of your inquiries?”

“Our friends are, no doubt, at the bottom of it all. Across the North Sea they mean business; and the ‘day’ must come very soon.”

“You’ve made that prophecy for several years now.”

“Because I happen to know, my dear boy. If one man should know the truth, surely it’s my unimportant self. My Chief has always agreed with me, although it is the fashion in the House to laugh at what is called ‘the German bogey.’ But that’s exactly what they desire in Berlin. They don’t want the British public to take our warnings too seriously. But if you doubt the seriousness of the present situation, ask anybody at the Berlin Embassy. They’ll tell you the truth – and they ought surely to know.”

Jack Jerningham and Hubert Waldron had been friends ever since their youth. The estate near Crowhurst, in Sussex, which Waldron’s father owned, though his diplomatic duties had kept him nearly always abroad, adjoined that of the Jerninghams of Heatherset, of whom Jack was the second son.

After Dartmouth he had passed into the navy, had become a full lieutenant, and afterwards had joined the Intelligence Department, in which capacity he was constantly travelling about the world as the eyes and ears of the Embassies, and ever ready to purchase out of the secret-service fund any information or confidential plan which might be advantageous to the authorities at Whitehall.

A typical, round-faced, easy-going naval officer of a somewhat careless and generous disposition, nobody outside the diplomatic circle ever suspected his real calling. But by those who did know, the ambassadors, ministers, and staffs of the embassies and legations, he was held in highest esteem as a thoroughgoing patriot, a man of great discretion and marvellous shrewdness, in whom his Chief at home placed the most complete confidence.

“There’ll be trouble here in Cairo before long, I fear,” he was whispering to his friend. “Kitchener will have a very rough time of it if the intrigues of our friends at Berlin are successful. They are stirring up strife every day, and the crisis would have arrived long ago were it not for Kitchener’s bold firmness. They know he won’t stand any nonsense from the native opposition. Britain is here to rule, and rule she will. Hence our friends the enemy are just a little afraid. I’m going back home next week to report upon the whole situation.”

“I’m getting pretty, sick of the humdrum of diplomacy,” Hubert declared wearily, between the puffs of his excellent cigarette. Though the big American bar was crowded by men, in the corner where they sat upon a red plush settee they could not be overheard, the chatter and noise being so great. “We at the Embassies are only puppets, after all. It is such men as you who shape the nation’s policy. We’re simply the survival of the old days when kings exchanged courtesies and views by means of their ambassadors, and we, the frills of the Embassy, merely dress up, dance attendance at every function, and pretend to an importance in the world which we certainly do not possess.”

“My dear Hubert, you never spoke truer words than those. Everything nowadays is worked from Downing Street, and the ambassador is simply the office boy who delivers the message. Your father was one of the brilliant men of the old regime. The Empire owes much to him, especially for what he did at Rome.”

“Yes, those days have passed. In this new century the world has other ways and other ideas. It is the age of advertisement, and surely the best advertisement manager which the world has ever known is the Kaiser William.”

“Oh, that’s admitted,” laughed the secret agent. “Why, he can’t go to his castle at Corfu for a week – as he does each spring – without some wonderful relic of Greek antiquity being unearthed in his presence. It is whispered that they sow them there in winter, just as the brave Belgians sow the bullets on the battlefield of Waterloo. To-day we are assuredly living on the edge of a volcano,” Jerningham went on. “When the eruption takes place – and who knows when it will – then, at that hour, the red-tape must be burst asunder, the veil torn aside, and the bitter truth faced – the bubble of British bombast will, I fear, be pricked.”

“You are always such a confounded pessimist, my dear Jack,” laughed Waldron.

“Ah, Hubert, I’m a pessimist because I am always on the move from capital to capital and I learn things as I go,” was Jerningham’s quick reply. “You fellows at the Embassies sit down and have a jolly good time at balls, dinners, tea-fights, and gala performances. Why? Because you’re paid for your job – paid to remain ignorant. I’m paid to learn. There’s the little difference.”

“I admit, my dear fellow, that without your service we should be altogether a back number. To your department is due the credit of knowing what is going on in the enemy’s camps.”

“I should think so. I don’t pay out ten thousand a year, more or less, without getting to know something, I can tell you.”

Chapter Eight. The Great Ghelardi

While Waldron and his friend were discussing matters, shouts suddenly arose everywhere – the golden pig had entered and was being touched for luck by everyone, and men raised their glasses to each other, to wish one another “A Happy New Year.” The Christian year had opened, but the Egyptians in fezes only smiled and acknowledged the compliment. Their year had not yet commenced.

“Well,” exclaimed Jack Jerningham at last. “You haven’t told me much about Beatriz.”

“Why should I, my dear fellow, when there’s nothing to tell?”

“Ah, I’m glad to hear that,” was his friend’s quick response, apparently much relieved, for the fascination of the handsome ballerina for Hubert Waldron was the gossip of half the Embassies of Europe. Hubert was a rising man, the son of a great diplomat, but that foolish infatuation would, if continued, most certainly stand in the way of his advancement. Many of his friends, even the Ambassador’s wife, had given him broad hints that the friendship was a dangerous one. Yet, unfortunately, he had not heeded them.

Every man who is over head and ears in love thinks that his adored one is the perfect incarnation of all the virtues. Even when Waldron had heard her discussed in the Casino, that smart club in the Calle de Alcala, he refused to credit the stories told of her, of the magnificent presents she received from admirers, and more especially from the favoured one, the septuagenarian Duke of Villaneuva y Geltru.

“Why are you so glad to hear it?” Hubert asked, his brow slightly knit, for after all it was a sore subject.

“Well, to tell you the truth, because there is so much gossip flying about.”

“What gossip?”

“Of course you know quite well. Why ask me to repeat it, old chap?”

“But I don’t,” was the other’s reply.

“Well,” exclaimed Jerningham after a pause, “perhaps you are, after all, like most men – you close your ears to the truth because you love her.”

“Yes, Jack, I admit it. I do love her.”

“Then the sooner you realise the actual truth, the better,” declared the other with almost brutal abruptness.

“What truth?”

“My dear fellow, I know – nay, everybody knows – your foolish, quixotic friendship with the girl. You love her, and naturally you believe her to be all that is your ideal. But I assure you she’s not.”

“How in the name of Fate can you know?” asked the diplomat, starting up angrily.

“Well – I’ve been in Spain a lot, remember. I’ve seen and heard things. Why, only a week ago in this very hotel I met old Zeigler, of the German Embassy at Madrid, and he began to discuss her.”

“And what did he say, pray?”

“What everybody else says, that – well, forgive me for saying so – but that you are a fool to continue this dangerous friendship with a woman whose notoriety has now become European.”

“Why should people interest themselves in my affairs?” he cried in angry protest.

“Who knows? It’s the same the world over. But I suppose you know that Beatriz has gone to London with the old Duke?”

“It does not surprise me. She asked me to accompany her and to introduce her, but I couldn’t get back from here in time.”

“She asked you, well knowing that you were tied by the leg – eh?” laughed Jack. “Well, my dear fellow,” he sighed, “I think you’re terribly foolish to continue the acquaintanceship. It can only bring you grief and sorrow. Think of what she was, and what she is now. Can any girl rise from obscurity in such a short time without the golden ladder? Ask yourself.”

“You need not cast ugly insinuations,” was Hubert’s angry retort, yet truth to tell, that fact had ever been in his mind – a suspicion the first seeds of which had been sown one night in the Casino Club, and which had now grown within his heart.

“Please forgive me if I’ve hurt your feelings, but we’re old friends and you know how very blunt I am. It’s my failing,” he said in a tone of apology. “But the name of the fair Beatriz has of late been coupled with half a dozen admirers. When I was in Madrid four months ago I heard that Enrique de Egas, the director of the opera, was her very intimate friend, and also that young Juan Ordonez had given her a pearl necklace worth eighteen thousand pounds, while there were whispers concerning Pedro de Padras, Conrado Giaquinto, Sanchez Ferrer and several other nuts of the Spanish nobility with whom you are acquainted. They laugh at you behind your back.”

“Yes,” Hubert responded, quite undisturbed. “But surely you know that it gratifies the vanity of those young bloods of Madrid if their names are coupled with that of a pretty woman. It is the same in Vienna, the same in Rome.”

“Ah, my dear fellow, I see you are hopelessly in love,” declared the other. “I was – once. But the scales fell from my eyes just in time, as I sincerely hope they will fall from yours.”

Waldron remained silent. In his pocket lay a letter which he had received only that morning from Beatriz, dated from the Carlton Hotel in London, a letter full of expressions of undying affection, and of longing to be again at his side.

Were those her true sentiments, he wondered? Had Jack Jerningham, on the other hand, told him the bitter truth? He had first met her a couple of months after her arrival in Madrid when she, poor and simply dressed, was dancing at the Trianon, and as yet unknown. Young Regan, one of the attachés, had introduced her, and the trio had had supper together at Lhardy’s, in the Carrera de San Jeronimo, and on the following day he had taken her for a drive in the El Retero, the beautiful park of Madrid, and afterwards to the Plaza de Toros where the famous Sevillian Espada Ricardo Torres, known to all Spain as “Bombita,” dispatched five bulls after some marvellous *pases de pecho, redondos* and *cambiados* before giving the *estocada*, or death-blow.

He remembered the hot afternoon and the breathless tension of the multitude as “Bombita” with his red cloth met the rush of the infuriated bull, stepped nimbly aside and then plunged his sword downwards through the animal’s neck into its heart. Then came the roar of wild applause in which his dark-haired companion joined with such enthusiasm that her cheeks glowed red with excitement.

In that crowded bar, thick with tobacco smoke and noisy with the laughter of well-dressed men, the beautiful face of the dancer who, since that blazing well-remembered day, had won fame all over Europe, rose before him in the mists. Did he really love her, he asked himself as Jack Jerningham sat at his side, now smoking in silence. Yes he did, alas! he did.

And yet how strange – how very foolish, after all. He, Hubert Waldron, who for years had lived the exotic social life of diplomacy, who, being a smart, handsome man, had received the smiles and languishing glances of a thousand women of all ages, had fallen in love with that girl of the people – the daughter of a drunken dock labourer.

His friend Jerningham watched him covertly and wondered what was passing in his mind.

“I hope I haven’t offended you, Waldron,” he ventured to exclaim at last. “Perhaps I ought not to have spoken so frankly.”

“Oh, you haven’t offended me in the least, my dear old chap,” was the other’s open reply. “I may have been a fool. Probably I am. But tell me frankly are you really certain that all these stories concerning Beatriz have any foundation in fact?”

“Any foundation?” echoed the other, staring at him with his blue eyes. “You have only to go about the capital with your ears open, and you will hear stranger and more scandalous stories than those. There is the husband, you know, the cab-driver, who threatened the Duke with divorce, and has been paid a hundred thousand pesetas as hush-money.”

“Is that a fact?” gasped his friend. “Are you quite certain of it? I can’t really believe it.”

“I’m quite certain of it. Ask Carreno, the advocate in the Calle Mayor. He made the payment, and told me with his own lips. The story is common property all over Madrid.”

Waldron’s countenance changed, but he made no reply.

“The woman and her husband are making a very substantial harvest out of it, depend upon it, Hubert. Therefore I do, as your old pal, beg of you to reconsider the whole situation. Is it really judicious for you to be associated any longer with her? I know I have no right to dictate to you – or even to make the suggestion. But I venture to do so for your own sake.”

“I know! I know!” was his impatient reply. “Yes. I’ve been a fool, no doubt, Jack – a damned idiot.”

“No; don’t condemn yourself until you have made your own inquiries. When you get back to the Embassy look around and learn the truth. Then I hope you will become convinced of the foundation of my allegations. When you are, let me know, old chap, won’t you?”

At that moment a stout, elderly man, accompanied by another a trifle his junior, who wore the button of the Legion d’Honneur in the lapel of his dress-coat, elbowed their way laboriously up to the bar.

Jack Jerningham’s quick eyes discerned them, whereupon in amazement he ejaculated in a low whisper the somewhat vulgar expression:

“Good God!”

Hubert looked up and saw old Jules Gigueux.

“What?” he asked in surprise.

“Why, look at the elder man – that old fellow with the white, close-cropped hair. Don’t you know him?” he asked in a low voice, indicating Lola’s uncle.

“Know him? Yes. He’s been up the Nile with us. He is a Frenchman named Gigueux.”

“Gigueux!” echoed his friend. “By Gad! and a rather good *alias*. No, my dear fellow. Look at him well. He is the greatest and most cunning secret agent Germany has ever possessed – the arch-enemy of England, the Chief of the German Secret Service – an Italian whose real name is Luigi Ghelardi, though he goes by a dozen *aliases*. It is he who controls the whole service of German espionage throughout the world, and he is the unscrupulous chief of the horde of spies who are infesting the Eastern counties of England and preparing for ‘the day.’”

At that second the man referred to glanced across and nodded pleasant recognition with Waldron, though he apparently had no knowledge of his companion.

“Is that really true?” gasped Hubert, utterly astounded and aghast, staring open-mouthed at Lola’s uncle.

“Most certainly. I know him by sight, only too well.”

“Then that accounts for the fact that I found him prying into my belongings in my cabin up the Nile!” exclaimed his friend, to whom the truth had come as an astounding and staggering revelation. And so the dainty Lola – the girl of mystery – was niece of the chief spy of England’s enemies.

Chapter Nine. At Downing Street

Hubert Waldron mounted the great staircase of the Foreign Office in Downing Street full of trepidation.

The Earl of Westmere, His Majesty's principal Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, desired to see him.

On New Year's night, an hour after his conversation with Jack Jerningham, he had found in his room at the Savoy an urgent telegram from the Embassy recalling him home at once. He had, therefore, left Port Said by the Indian mail next day, and had travelled post-haste to London.

He had arrived at Charing Cross at four o'clock, driven to the St. James's Club, and after a wash, had taken a taxi to Downing Street.

The uniformed messenger who conducted him up the great staircase halted before a big mahogany door, tapped upon it, and next second Hubert found himself in that big, old-fashioned, rather severe room wherein, at a great littered writing-table, sat his white-haired Chief.

"Good afternoon, Waldron," exclaimed the tall, thin-faced statesman rising briskly and putting out his hand affably, an action which at once set the diplomat at his ease. He had feared that gossip regarding the opera-dancer had reached his ears, and that his reception might be a very cool one.

"I didn't expect you until to-morrow. You've come from Cairo, haven't you?"

"I came straight through by Brindisi," was the other's reply, seating himself in the padded chair which his Chief indicated.

"A gay season there, I hear – eh?"

"Quite. But I've been on leave in Upper Egypt."

"And a most excellent spot during this horrible weather we're having in London. Wish I were there now."

And the Earl, a rather spare, refined man whose clean-shaven features were strongly marked, and who wore the regulation morning coat and grey striped trousers, crossed to the big fireplace and flung into it a shovelful of coals.

That room in which Hubert had only been once before he well-remembered. Its sombre walls that had listened to so many international secrets were painted dark green; upon one side was an old painting of Palmerston who had once occupied that selfsame room, while over the black marble mantelshelf hung a fine modern portrait of His Majesty, King George V.

The old Turkey carpet was dingy and worn, and about the place where the director of Great Britain's foreign policy so often interviewed the ambassadors of the Powers, was an air of sombre, yet dignified gloom.

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