

THE MUMMY'S CURSE

“We’re broke, sir.” Ronald said as he stood fidgeting in front of the big mahogany desk. Sir Nigel Penhallow glared back at him from beneath his green eyeshades. His face was framed by two cherubic Roman statues on either side of the desk and the oversized bronze name plate that proclaimed “Director” in an ornate typeface Sir Nigel had created and named after himself. No one dared mention that his desk plaque was the only known example in use.

“You know how I hate these American expressions. The British Museum is not broke, broken, or in any other sort of disrepair. Explain yourself in unadulterated English.”

“I mean to say, sir, we are insolvent, impecunious, out of money, exposed to the wrath of our creditors.” Conversations with Sir Nigel tended to set Ronald rapidly oscillating between fear and rage.

“And precisely how has this been allowed to occur? I examined our accounts for 1911 in October and they were in excellent order. Five months have elapsed, It is now April, 1912, and you can tell me our ship is foundering? Explain.”

Ronald collected himself. “Well, sir, two circumstances have converged. One, as you know, is that Exchequer cut our funds again.”

Sir Nigel exploded. “Those damned Germans and their damned dreadnoughts! Admiralty sucks up every loose pence to fund their delusional battleship race. You’d think the Spanish Armada happened the day before yesterday!”

“Yes sir. And so income is reduced. The other issue is our recent very large Chinese acquisition. Government pressured us to purchase a great number of items brought back by officers involved in suppressing the Boxer Rebellion. The idea is to pad out their retirements. None dare call it looting.”

Sir Nigel frowned. “And the British Museum shan’t either. Rather we shall call it introducing the art of the moribund East to prime the artistic imagination of the flourishing West. Those jades and lacquers! The pottery and paintings! The Chinese should be grateful to us for bringing these wonders out of the shadows.”

“I’m sure they are, sir.”

Sir Nigel's frown deepened. "Do I detect sarcasm? Ronald, are you still hanging about with those Russian anarchist chaps? Gulping up faulty ideas? Bad for the career! Spend more time at your club and avoid all these radicals and theosophists and suffragettes." Ronald felt it was perhaps as well not to mention that he could not afford a club membership on his salary and that his wife had been twice arrested in street demonstrations. Fortunately, Theosophy did not interest him and the Russians didn't like him. He had not the courage to express all his views on the Empire to Sir Nigel, but lost in his own thoughts he reflected that a Higher Power just might take a critical view of arrogant redcoats and their acquisitive habits.

Sir Nigel stroked his carefully trimmed black mustache. "So, messenger bearing ill tidings, have you a course to recommend?"

Ronald shuffled from one foot to the other with his hands in his pockets, a habit that emerged when he was confronted by his wife or Sir Nigel. "It occurs to me that we have holdings from throughout the Empire stowed away in basement storage that we can't possibly bring up for display. We could sell a few things . . ."

Sir Nigel winced. "I hate to give up on things that might have future vogue. But we do have stacks and stacks of Athenian amphorae and rooms jammed up with things chiseled off the walls of pyramids. I suppose some of it wouldn't be missed. But who'd buy? The Victoria and Albert must be in the same state we are and private collectors haven't been very active recently."

Ronald said, "Actually, the Americans are crawling all over Europe with pots of money. Their girls are angling for bankrupt counts and earls and their semi-literate fathers will pay astonishing sums for any sort of canvas with bright daubs on it to hang on their walls. I hear the French are cleaning up."

Sir Nigel bestowed a kindly smile on Ronald. There might yet be hope for the boy with opinions like these. If only his red hair didn't protrude in all directions like a chimney sweep's brush and his suits didn't look slept in. "And how might we connect ourselves with one of these roving gold mines? Had you an heiress in mind to marry?"

Ronald blushed. "I think the present wife might exercise a veto. But in fact there is a fellow named Klausberg who's been prowling around the Victoria and Albert and the art museums trying to buy this and that for a museum he's starting up in some city in the center of

America. St. Louis, I believe it is. Made his pile brewing beer. They call him Cashbox at the Vic.”

“Arrange an introduction and we’ll think on what we might unload.”

An evil smile flitted across Ronald’s face. “I have one thing in mind we might like to see gone. Remember the mummy? The one that caused all that trouble some years ago?”

Sir Nigel pursed his lips in distaste. “That thing hasn’t gone to the dustbins? Oh yes, I remember it very well.”

“I’m told it’s packed away down below in a back room behind stacks of marbles. No one goes there. Would you refresh me on what happened, sir? It was all before I came.”

Sir Nigel folded his hands under his chin and his expression became serious. “It came to us, I’m remembering, in the Spring of 1897, from an excavation in Upper Egypt. Everything about it was shifty. It was identified as from the beginning of the Old Kingdom, about three thousand BC, but no name, nothing exact. Sir Timothy Ashton had directed the operation but died in an accident in Cairo. The ship bringing it to England ran aground off the coast of Tunisia and the mummy case floated to shore. It was about the only thing saved from the wreck. It was reclaimed and eventually reached us.” Sir Nigel stood up and paced the floor with his hands behind his back.

“We installed it as a centerpiece in the Egyptian section, and right away it began to attract the most unfortunate attention. Visitors noticed that if they went to the other side of an adjacent glass case and looked through it at the mummy, it would seem to disappear - some unexplained optical trick.

Then the complaints began. Visitors claimed that merely spending time in the presence of the mummy invited illness or a fall beneath carriage wheels - all sorts of unexpected misfortunes. Naturally, since this is a house of science, we dismissed these claims as unfortunate coincidences. Others did not. Madame Blavatsky visited the museum and wrote some rubbish in the *Times* about connecting with a malevolent spirit. It drew attention from Parliament.” By now Sir Nigel was thoroughly agitated, something Ronald rarely saw.

“What happened then, Sir?”

“I was in the inventory section at the time and not involved with major decisions. Nevertheless I stormed into meetings and advocated removal of the thing in the strongest terms. There had been incidents involving the staff. No one wanted to work in the Egyptian Room. I presented it as a practical matter, not a question of yielding to superstitions.” He raised the crippled right arm he was always at pains to conceal. “This happened to me one night when I stayed late to sweep out the Egyptian Room. The janitors had refused to go in there. When I left the building, I slipped on the front steps and tumbled down to the street. I was lucky to escape with only a bad arm. My mind has never been easy about that mummy and I’d be pleased to see it out of this building. And out of this country, if that is a possibility.”

Two days later Ronald was ushering William Klausberg into Sir Nigel’s office. Klausberg was a bull of a man stuffed into an ugly outdated brown suit. The bowler he clutched in his big hand looked to have been repeatedly mangled in moments of impatience. He began examining Sir Nigel’s framed degrees and credentials that were hung on the wall as though seeking defects.

“Your assistant here tells me you have some things I might use.” He glanced down at the nameplate on Sir Nigel’s desk and gestured with the hat. “Wherever did you find that odd-looking name tag thing? What a strange scrawl.”

Ronald looked on in alarm as Sir Nigel gathered himself for a moment, his back like a ramrod, but then there emerged one of the smooth, practiced smiles reserved for visiting royalty. “It’s a special font called Penhallow. Can’t just have the ordinary at the British Museum.” He adjusted the heavy brass piece lovingly on the desk and went on. “Yes, we had heard you were shopping about to stock your own museum and we thought we might spare a few pieces to assist you.”

“Your young man here mentioned a mummy. Like to see that! Wouldn’t need the case, though. Too expensive to ship. We’re good at woodwork in St Louis - make barrels, pianos, you name it. I’ll have a look to see if the old fellow stinks or has visible rot. Your cellar aint the Sahara. If I like it, we’ll settle on a figure.”

Two hours later workmen were busy crating a variety of vases and statuary that had been hastily selected from below. Klausberg looked on, beaming with satisfaction. “Now this will

make a stir back home! They sent the right man for this job! Now don't forget to just wrap that mummy in canvas. Too precious for the hold. He's going in style with my man, Ralph in second class."

Sir Nigel and Ronald exchanged looks. Sir Nigel said, "I'm sure he'll be more comfortable that way. Now let's discuss how we'll receive our ten thousand pounds."

"I can have it for you in American dollars cash tomorrow."

Sir Nigel gave him a sharp look. "I'm terribly sorry, Mr. Klausberg, but as a government institution we can only accept pounds sterling."

"What! You think our money's no good? Day'll come when you John Bulls are fumbling around under your sofa cushions for a good American dollar. We're on the way up and you're on the way down and that's a known fact!"

Sir Nigel visibly contained himself. "Yes. Well. I'm sure that view circulates on your side of the Atlantic. Unfortunately I must insist."

"Oh, all right." Klausberg made his best effort at a sly look. "Say! There's a story I've heard that this mummy's haunted, some kind of curse. Anything to that?"

Sir Nigel paled. He could hear the sound of money evaporating. "Oh no, no. That's one of those myths the public loves to invent. Overactive imaginations among the uneducated."

Klausberg looked disappointed. "Too bad. They love stuff like that back in St. Louis. I'll probably say there's a curse anyhow. I was hoping for a certificate." As he left the room he gripped the doorjamb with his big hand and leaned back in. "Say! You don't have a vampire in a coffin do you?" Sir Nigel and Ronald wordlessly shook their heads.

Klausberg and Ralph reached Southampton with the purchases in a reserved baggage car on April 9. "All right, Ralph, here's the thing: J.P Morgan is a drinking buddy and he has a company that owns our boat. This is the first voyage of the biggest ship ever built and I've got myself a cabin in first class! I got you one in second class. Now I don't want anything happening to that mummy so he's going to ride with you in your cabin."

"What! I gotta sleep with a dead guy? No way, boss."

"Look, his brains have been sucked out and he's been dead for five thousand years. You think he's gonna wake you up tomorrow and ask for coffee?" After some back and forth and the

promise of a large bonus, Ralph carried the mummy into his cabin muttering expletives under his breath.

The ship sailed the next day for Cherbourg and then backtracked to Cork, picking up emigrants to fill out third class. Then on April the tenth she set sail for New York, boilers ablaze. Klausberg was having the time of his life, playing poker and hobnobbing with the rich. But five days out, at about two am. a jolt was felt throughout the ship and alarm bells sounded. Klausberg had been in the dining room at his poker game and dashed up on deck. He rapidly appraised the situation and ran to Ralph's cabin. He emerged with the mummy over his shoulder and used his powerful frame to push his way through the crowd. The crew was busy trying to get passengers into the lifeboats and lower them from the davits. When he tried to force his way into one of the lifeboats, a crew member stopped him. "Sorry, sir, women and children first, you'll have to wait." Klausberg produced some of his poker winnings and handed them to the man.

"Just let me have a talk with one of these ladies and we'll see if I can make a place for myself and my sick friend." The sailor shrugged and pocketed the money. Klausberg scanned the women and picked out a middle-aged lady who clearly was not wealthy.

"Excuse me, madame. It's urgent that I get my unfortunate brother into the lifeboat. He's very ill and I'm taking him back to America to our mother. We have a good deal of money and I can give you some cash now, and a guaranteed check for \$10,000 for your place in this boat. I have it on good authority that a rescue ship is on the way and will reach us shortly." The shivering woman looked at him suspiciously, glanced around at the milling mob and down at the unfriendly black sea. She decided quickly. She grabbed the outthrust bills.

"Make it Twenty thousand, and that check had better be good," she said putting her chin in his face. Klausberg cursed and wrote the check. He waved up at the forlorn Ralph as the life boat dropped into the water.

A week later he was reading the newspaper on the train to St Louis. The headlines read "Titanic Death Toll Reaches 1502". He smiled at his heavily bandaged companion. "Close call."

The installation in the new St. Louis Museum of Art and Culture was a sensation. A vertical case was hastily constructed and painted. One critic of the project mentioned that it looked like a Kwakiutl totem pole, but no one really cared. Klausberg gave numerous speeches accompanied by generous offerings of free beer from the Klausberg Breweries. These drew large crowds of bib overalled, stein wielding art lovers. Shoes mandatory. But it was not long before incidents began to occur at the new St Louis Museum resembling those that had plagued the British Museum in the '90's. Klausberg was not around to be troubled because he himself had fallen victim to an unfortunate accident. While he was inspecting one of his beer warehouses, a stack of barrels collapsed and came bounding across the floor, crushing him against a wall. Witnesses puzzled over his last words, "THE UNGRATEFUL . . .!"

The museum's board of directors put up with the increasing criticism for a time and then tried the British Museum's approach of storing the thing away in a basement. This time it didn't work as well, and after a few years, the decision was made to return it to England at no charge. As the chairman put it, "Let's get that thing out of here before the Mississippi drowns St Louis or the whole country gets dragged into the World War."

The mummy was placed in an unmarked wooden crate and shipped to New York. There it was loaded into the hold of a ship with many other unmarked wooden crates later discovered to have contained ammunition and empty artillery shell casings. The ship sailed on May 1st, 1915 and by improbable ill luck happened to cross the path of a lone German submarine. She was sunk on May 5th by a single torpedo striking near the bow and causing a second explosion that flooded the coal bunkers along one side of the ship, causing her to list to such an extent that only six of the 48 lifeboats could be launched.

Ronald was still re-adjusting to work after his discharge from the military hospital two weeks earlier. He limped into Sir Nigel's office carrying a newspaper in his remaining hand. "The bad news is endless, sir."

Sir Nigel slowly read aloud, "1,195 Dead in Sinking of RMS Lusitania." He shook his head sadly, his patrician hauteur long vanished with his two sons at the Somme. "You'd think we were cursed."

