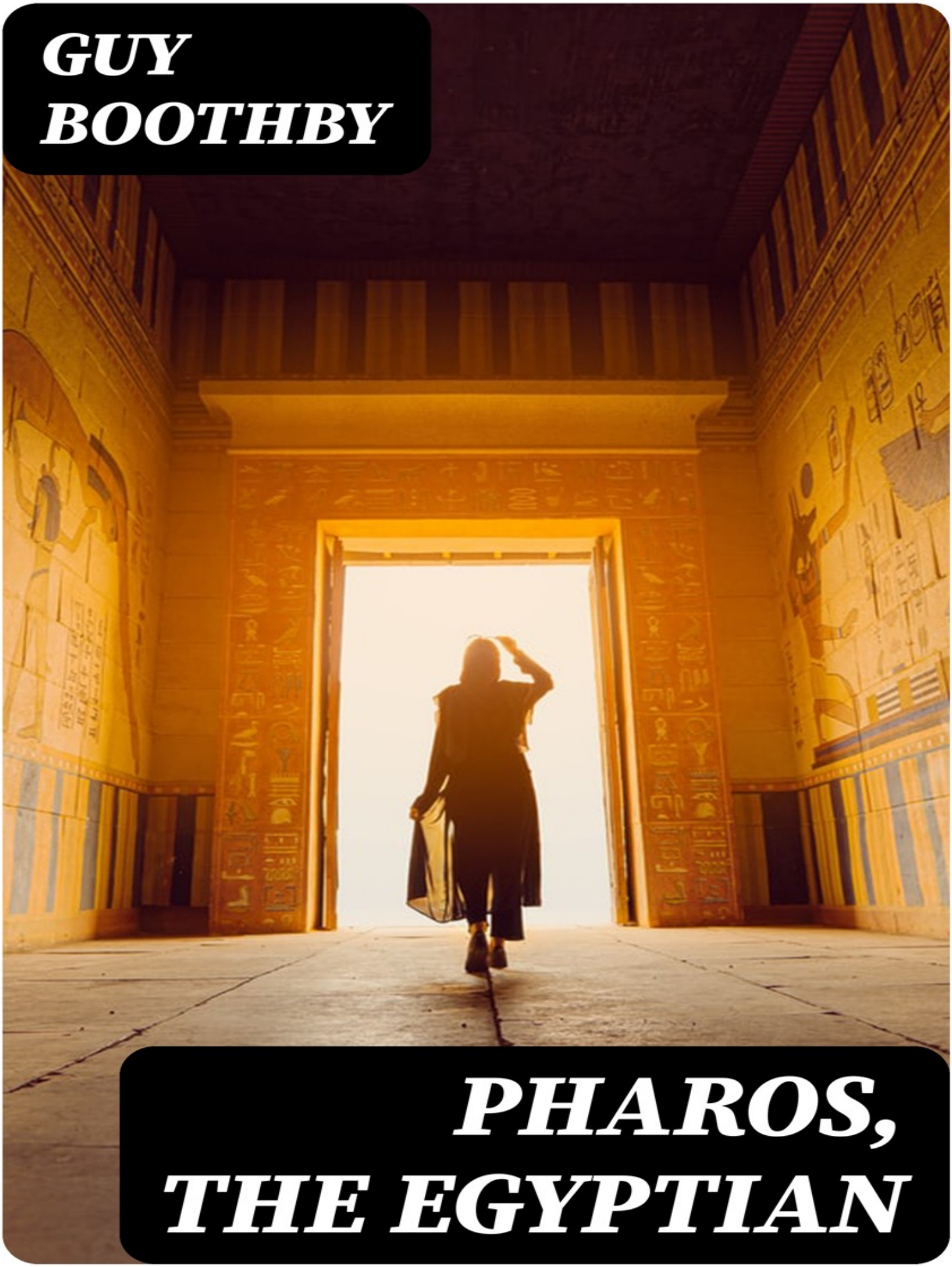
GUY BOOTHBY



PHAROS, THE EGYPTIAN

Guy Boothby

Pharos, The Egyptian

A Romance

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PREFACE.

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

"My dear Trevelyan: Never in my life have I been placed in such an awkward, not to say invidious, position. I am, as you know, a plain man, fond of a plain life and plain speaking, and yet I am about to imperil that reputation by communicating to you what I fancy you will consider the most extraordinary and unbelievable intelligence you have ever received in your life. For my own part I do not know what to think. I have puzzled over the matter until I am not in a position to judge fairly. You must, therefore, weigh the evidence, first for us both. For pity's sake, however, do not decide hastily. *In dubiis benigniora semper sunt præferenda*, as they used to say in our school days, must be our motto, and by it we must abide at any hazards. As far as I can see, we are confronted with one of the saddest and at the same time one of the most inexplicable cases ever yet recorded on paper. Reduced to its proper factors it stands as follows: Either Forrester has gone mad and dreamed it all, or he is sane and has suffered as few others have done in this world. In either case he is deserving of our deepest pity. In one way only are we fortunate. Knowing the man as we do, we are in

a position to estimate the value of the accusations he brings against himself. Of one thing I am convinced—a more honourable being does not walk this earth. Our acquaintance with him is of equal length. We were introduced to him, and to each other, on one and the same occasion, upward of twelve years ago; and during that time I know I am right in saying neither of us ever had reason to doubt his word or the honour of a single action. Indeed, to my mind he had but one fault, a not uncommon one in these latter days of the nineteenth century. I refer to his somewhat morbid temperament and the consequent leaning toward the supernatural it produced in him.

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

leave the matter in your hands, confident that you will do him justice, and will proceed to describe how the pathetic record of our friend's experiences came into my possession.

"I had been hunting all day and did not reach home until between half-past six and seven o'clock. We had a house full of visitors at the time, I remember, some of whom had been riding with me, and the dressing-gong sounded as we dismounted from our horses at the steps. It was plain that if we wished to change our attire and join the ladies in the drawing-room before dinner was announced, we had no time to lose. Accordingly we departed to our various rooms with all possible speed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

to call in the morning, I will see him.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"'I have brought you a packet,' he said, 'which Mr. Forrester was most anxious I should personally deliver to

your hands. There is a letter inside which he said would explain everything. I was also instructed to obtain from you a receipt, which I am to convey to him again.'

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

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

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

> "'The Grange, Bampton St. Mary,
> "'*December 14, 18—.*
> "'Dear Forrester: This evening I have been surprised by a visit from a man named——'

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

"'Honoré de Silva,' he replied.

> "'——from a man named Honoré de Silva, who has handed me a packet for which he desires this letter shall be a receipt. I have endeavoured to elicit your address from him, but on this point he is adamant. Is it kind to an old friend to let him hear from you, but at the same time to refuse to permit him to communicate with you? Why all this

mystery? If you are in trouble, who would so gladly share it with you as your old friend? If you need help, who would so willingly give it? Are the years during which we have known each other to count for nothing? Trust me, and I think you are aware that I will not abuse your confidence.

"Your affectionate friend,

"'WILLIAM BETFORD.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Needless to say, my demeanour during dinner was not marked with any great degree of gaiety. The interview with De Silva had upset me completely; and though I endeavoured to play the part of an attentive host, my

attempt was far from being successful. I found my thoughts continually reverting to that curious interview in the study, and to the packet which had come into my possession in such a mysterious manner, the secret contained in which I had still to learn.

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

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

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

> "'My dear old Friends: In company with many other people, you must have wondered what the circumstances could have been that induced me to leave England so suddenly, to forfeit the success I had won for myself after so much up-hill work, and, above all, to bid farewell to a life and an art I loved so devotedly, and from which, I think I may be

excused for saying, I had such brilliant expectations. I send you herewith, Betford, by a bearer I can trust, an answer to that question. I want you to read it, and, having done so, to forward it to George Trevelyan, with the request that he will do the same. When you have mastered the contents, you must unitedly arrange with some publishing house to put it before the world, omitting nothing, and in no way attempting to offer any extenuation for my conduct. We were three good friends once, in an age as dead to me now as the Neolithic. For the sake of that friendship, therefore, I implore this favour at your hands. As you hope for mercy on that Last Great Day when the sins of all men shall be judged, do as I entreat you now. How heavily I have sinned against my fellow-men—in ignorance, it is true—you will know when you have read what I have written. This much is certain—the effect of it weighs upon my soul like lead. If you have any desire to make that load lighter, carry out the wish I now express to you. Remember me also in your prayers, praying not as for a man still living, but as you would for one long since dead. That God may bless and keep you both will ever be the wish of your unhappy friend,

"'Cyril Forrester.

"'P. S.—Matthew Simpford, in the Strand, is keeping two pictures for me. They were once considered among my best work. I ask you each to accept one, and when you look at them try to think

as kindly as possible of the friend who is gone from you forever.'

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

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

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

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

"Believe me ever your friend,

"William Betford."

Six months later.

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

CHAPTER I.

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

read my story. With the writing of it I have severed the last link that binds me to the civilized world. Henceforth I shall be a wanderer and an outcast, and but for one reason could wish myself dead. But that is enough of regret; let me commence my story.

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

I date my misery from a wet, miserable night in the last week of March—a night without a glimpse of the moon, which, on that particular evening, was almost at its full. There had been but one solitary hour of painting-light all day; short as it was, however, it was sufficient for my purpose. My picture for the Academy was finished, and now

all that remained was to pack it up and send it in. It was, as you remember, my eighth, and in every way my most successful effort. The subject I had chosen had enthralled me from the moment it had first entered my head, and the hours of thought and preparation it had entailed will always rank among the happiest of my life. It represented Merenptah, the Pharaoh of the Exodus, learning from the magicians the effect of his obstinacy in the death of his first-born son. The canvas showed him seated on his throne, clad in his robes of state. His head was pushed a little forward, his chin rested in his hand, while his eyes looked straight before him as though he were endeavouring to peer into the future in the hope of reading there the answer to the troubled thoughts inside his brain. Behind him stood the sorcerers, one of whom had found courage to announce the baneful tidings.

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

As I have said, it was a miserable night, dark as the pit of Tophet. A biting wind whistled through the streets, the pavements were dotted with umbrella-laden figures, the kennels ran like mill-sluices, while the roads were only a succession of lamp-lit puddles through which the wheeled traffic splashed continuously. For some reason—perhaps because the work upon which I had been so long and happily engaged was finished and I felt lonely without it to occupy my mind—I was stricken with a fit of the blues.

Convinced that my own company would not take me out of it, I left my studio in search of more congenial society. This was soon forthcoming; and you will remember, Betford and Trevelyan, that we dined together at a little restaurant in the neighbourhood of Leicester Square, and followed the dinner up with a visit to a theatre. As ill-luck would have it, I was in the minority in the choice of a place of entertainment. The result was disastrous. Instead of ridding myself of my melancholy, as I had hoped to do, I intensified it, and when, at the end of the evening, I bade you farewell in the Strand, my spirits had reached a lower level than they had attained all day. I remember distinctly standing beneath a gas-lamp at the corner of Villiers Street, as the clocks were striking midnight, feeling disinclined to return to my abode and go to bed, and yet equally at a loss to know in what manner I should employ myself until there was some likelihood of slumber visiting my eyelids. To help me make up my mind I lit a fresh cigar and strolled down toward the river. On the pavement, at the foot of the steps leading to Hungerford Bridge, a poor tattered creature, yet still possessing some pretensions to gentlemanly address, came from beneath the archway and begged of me, assuring me most solemnly that, as far as he was concerned, the game was played out, and if I did not comply with his request, he would forthwith end his troubles in the river. I gave him something—I can not now remember what—and then, crossing the road, made my way along the Embankment toward Cleopatra's Needle. The rain had ceased for the moment, and in the north a few stars were shining. The myriad lights of the Embankment were reflected in the river like lines of dancing

fire, and I remember that behind me a train was rolling across the bridge from Charing Cross with a noise like distant thunder. I suppose I must have been thinking of my picture, and of the land and period which had given me the idea. At any rate, I know that on this occasion the ancient monument in front of which I soon found myself affected me as it had never done before. I thought of the centuries that had passed since those hieroglyphics were carved upon the stone, of the changes the world had seen since that giant monolith first saw the light of day. Leaning my elbows on the parapet, I was so absorbed in my own thoughts that when a sudden cry of "Help, help!" rang out from the river it was with a sensible shock that I returned to the commonplace and found myself standing where I was. A moment later I was all action. The cry had come from the other side of the Needle. I accordingly hastened to the steps farthest from me, shouting, as I went, in my excitement, that a man was drowning. It might have all been part of some evil dream—the long line of silent Embankment on either side, the swiftly-flowing river, and that despairing appeal for help coming so suddenly out of the black darkness. Then I became aware that I was not alone on the steps. There was another man there, and he stood motionless, peering out into the dark stream, scarcely a dozen paces from me.

I had reached the top of the steps and was about to descend them in order to accost him, when something occurred which stopped me and held me spell-bound. The moon had emerged from its pall of cloud and was now shining clear and bright across the river. Thirty seconds must have elapsed since we had heard the cry for

assistance, and now, as I looked, the drowning man was washed in at the foot of the steps upon which we stood. It would have needed but the least movement on the part of the man below me to have caught him as he swept by and to have saved him from a watery death. To my amazement, however—and even now, after this lapse of time, my gorge rises at the very thought of it—the other did not offer to help, but drew himself back. Before I could return my eyes, the wretched suicide had passed out of sight and had vanished into the darkness again. As he did so a pronounced chuckle of enjoyment reached me from the man below—a burst of merriment so out of place and so detestable that I could scarcely believe I heard aright. I can not hope to make you understand how it affected me. A second later a fit of blind fury overtook me, and, under the influence of it, I ran down the steps and seized the murderer—for such I shall always consider him—by the arm.

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

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

Then the other turned his head and looked at me; and, as he did so, a great shudder, accompanied by an indescribable feeling of nausea, passed over me. What occasioned it I could not tell, nor could I remember having felt anything of the kind before. When it departed, my eyes fixed themselves on the individual before me. Connecting him in some way with the unenviable sensation I had just

experienced, I endeavoured to withdraw them again, but in vain. The others gaze was riveted upon me—so firmly, indeed, that it required but small imagination to believe it eating into my brain. Good Heavens! how well I recollect that night and every incident connected with it! I believe I shall remember it through all eternity. If only I had known enough to have taken him by the throat then and there, and had dashed his brains out on the stones, or to have seized him in my arms and hurled him down the steps into the river below, how much happier I should have been! I might have earned eternal punishment, it is true, but I should at least have saved myself and the world in general from such misery as the human brain can scarcely realise. But I did not know, the opportunity was lost, and, in that brief instant of time, millions of my fellow-creatures were consigned unwittingly to their doom.

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

His height was considerably below the average, his skull was as small as his shoulders were broad. But it was not of his stature, his shoulders, or the size of the head which caused the curious effect I have elsewhere described. It was his eyes, the shape of his face, the multitudinous wrinkles that lined it, and, above all, the extraordinary colour of his skin, that rendered his appearance so repulsive. To

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

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

heel and hurried from the place with all the speed at my command.

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

CHAPTER II.

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

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

On a certain Friday early in June, I was sitting in my studio, after lunch, wondering what I should do with myself

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

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

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

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

"Now, look here," said the squire, as he spoke producing an enormous gold repeater from his pocket, which by sheer force of habit he held in his hand, though he never once looked at it, during the time he was speaking. "I'll tell you what we're going to do. In the first place you're to take us to the Academy to see your picture, which every one is talking about, and at the same time to act as showman and tell us who's who. After that you'll dine with us at the Langham, and go to the theatre afterward. No, no, it's not a bit of use you're pretending you've got another engagement. We don't come up to town very often, but when we do we enjoy ourselves, and—why, man alive! just consider—I haven't seen you since last autumn, and if you think I am going to

let you escape now, you're very much mistaken. Such a thing is not to be thought of—is it, mother?"

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

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

In the light of all that has happened since, I can only regard my behaviour on that occasion with a contemptuous sort of pity. The minutest details connected with that afternoon's amusement are as clearly photographed upon my brain as if they had occurred but yesterday. If I close my eyes for a moment, I can see, just as I saw it then, the hawkers selling catalogues in the busy street outside, the great courtyard with the lines of waiting carriages, the fashionable crowd ascending and descending the stairs, and inside the rooms that surging mass of well-dressed humanity so characteristic of London and the season. When we had fought our way to the vestibule, I was for doing the round of the rooms in the orthodox fashion. This, however, it

appeared, was by no means to George Merridew's taste. He received my suggestion with appropriate scorn.

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

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

Whether the work was good, bad, or indifferent, the public at least paid me the compliment of bestowing their attention upon it, and their behaviour on this occasion was no exception to the rule. I hope I shall not be considered more conceited than my fellows; at the risk of it, however, I must confess to a feeling of pride as I glanced, first at the crowd wedged in before the rail, and then at the party by my side. George Merridew's face alone was worth the

trouble and time I had spent upon the canvas. His eyes were opened to their fullest extent: his lips were also parted, but no sound came from them. Even the face of my formidable friend, the tennis champion, betrayed a measure of interest that, in the light of her previous behaviour, was more than flattering. For some moments we stood together on the outskirts of the throng. Then those who were directly in front moved away, and my friends immediately stepped into the gap and took their places. As there was no reason why I should follow their example, I remained outside, watching the faces and noting the different effects the picture produced upon them.

I had not been alone more than a few seconds, however, before I became sensible of a curious sensation. It was accompanied by a lowering of the pulse that was quite perceptible, followed by an extraordinary feeling of nausea. I battled against it in vain. The room and its occupants began to swim before me. I tottered, and at length, being unable any longer to support myself, sat down on the seat behind me. When I looked up again I could scarcely credit the evidence of my senses. Approaching me from the crowd, leaning upon his stick, just as I remembered him on the previous occasion, and dressed in the same extraordinary fashion, was the old man whose personality had given me such a shock at the foot of Cleopatra's Needle. His face was as thin and as wrinkled as I had seen it then, and I also noticed that he wore the same indescribable look of cruelty and cunning that I remembered so well. One thing was quite plain, however profoundly I may have been affected by my proximity to this singular being: I was not the only one who