

S A SIDOR

THE INSTITUTE FOR SINGULAR ANTIQUITIES

*Fury from the Tomb*



*Dear Rom*

*New Year's Eve, 1919*

*Manhattan, New York City*

Sand.

For someone who has spent the better part of the last four decades digging, burrowing like a scarab, day and night it seemed, into mountains of dry, golden trickling, windswept tombs, I have never gotten comfortable with the stuff. Indeed, the sight of dunes often causes me a great explosion of nervous trembling. I must force my mind elsewhere. An excess of thought, my wife would say, as she often does. *You think too much, Rom.*

I am certain she is correct.

After an unfortunate childhood incident with a top-heavy traveling trunk, I will admit to more than a touch of claustrophobia, but the idea of being buried alive – in sand particularly – has haunted my dreams these last few weeks. Strangely, I wake some mornings, gasping, and taste crystalline grit on my lips. Haunted my dreams *once more* would be closer to the facts. I have suffered nightmares of smothering sands in the past, triggered by the actual experience of nearly drowning and witnessing others drown in waterless seas, the whirlpools and crushing waves of granular yellow death all around. I cannot help but think those long-ago events in the Sonoran Desert are at the core.

I received a letter at the beginning of last week.

The envelope.

Fine, creamy paper. Signs of travel evident on the creased packet. Rain had fallen upon it, but my hazy name and address remained readable. It could have been from anyone, anywhere. But somehow, I knew who wrote it. And with equal certitude I apprehended what news the pages inside would convey. I put off reading the letter as long as I could – two nights (*You think too much...*) – and then I swept it from the nightstand.

*Dear Rom,*

*I regret to be the one who must tell you...*

I stopped reading.

To my students, colleagues, and acquaintances I am Dr Romulus Hugo Hardy,

Egyptologist, employed by the Montague P Waterston Institute for Singular Antiquities of New York City. The institute is a private research library and ancient history museum. Finest of its kind in the world, despite the unsavory rumors of its origins... all true by the way and then some, oh, the stories I could add...

Only my oldest friends call me Rom.

*Dear Rom,*

*I regret to be the one who must tell you the great man is among us no more. He has gone to the stars. That was his wish, he confided, as I sat him up on his horse only two evenings ago, and we walked around the corral. Our world is more desolate for his having left it. I remind myself the bottomless grief I feel at this moment too shall pass. At least he did not suffer. I happily took away his pain during these final twilit days. My medical training proved worthy of the years I spent in study if only to accomplish this task. The opium tinctures made him sleepy yet inclined to conversation. We talked about old times! About Mexico, and the "bandaged bastards" as he still called them. To the end he slept with loaded pistols hanging from the bedpost, saying he saw the raggedy, gauze-bound corpses lurching forward in his dreams. Going through his night chest, I discovered a newspaper cutting of Miss Evangeline I had never seen before. Does an art song recital in San Francisco ring any bells? It was sweet of him to keep it for so long. Would you not agree? I hope this subject is not too tender to broach. I am aware your last parting was not on the best of terms, and in recent years no communication passed between you, the great rift only widening. Yet history – beginning with our dangerous ride south and the ill-fated Mexico expedition! – will always bind you together. So, I was wondering if...*

I could not read another word.

The onrush of emotions was too strong. They trampled me, left me dazed. With them came memories like a parade of spirits marching before my eyes. I decided to go for a walk. The street life of Manhattan wields the power to distract even my most troubled state of mind. Not so this day. Through a flurry of snow, I gazed vacantly into shop windows. I saw every person on the street, including myself, doubled in ghostly reflections.

We are all transient.

This life is but a dream we dream together.

Some dreams are better left undreamt. I speak of living terrors that most people would

never believe. But I believe. Though I am a scholar, a man of science, and a skeptic by nature, I cannot entertain doubts on this subject.

For I have witnessed them with my own eyes.

When I looked up I saw I was at the Institute. Bodies follow habits. My legs took me where they did six mornings a week. Dark hallways greeted me on this holiday afternoon. I locked the front door behind me and climbed three flights of stairs to my office and its adjoining state-of-the-art laboratory. I have come to prefer the lab over the field, choosing to toil in the stuffiness of classrooms rather than the dank and ruinous graveyard of ancient civilizations.

But this predilection was not always the case.

In my youth, I yearned for exotic travel.

One place called to me above all others: Egypt. Land of the pharaohs. The Great Sphinx of Giza. Khufu's Pyramid. And the *Book of the Dead*.

If I had been a farmer like my father, and loved the land the way he did, then I would have missed out on many wondrous adventures, and the curses that have accompanied them, and were, some might speculate, their price.

I have no regrets.

A clot of shadows inhabited the lab, and I did nothing to banish them. Work was far from my intention during this unplanned visit. I opened the shutters beside my desk; in dull steel daylight, I crouched and built a small fire in the fireplace. I felt old and cold and I wanted a whisky. These Prohibition advocates hope to make Methodists of us all. Soon they will have their law. Thank heavens I live in New York City. I keep a bottle hidden in the cabinet behind my personal collection of ushabti. Mummiform figurines – my favorites are those made from chiseled stone or faience whose aquamarine glazes are splendid to contemplate while sipping Kentucky bourbon. I set four of the funerary statuettes on my desk top. They were the size of tin soldiers I played with as a child. I uncorked the bottle and filled a cut-crystal glass.

My desk remains barren when I am not working at it.

I balanced the glass in my lap.

The four figures stood alone on a mahogany plateau. I could almost imagine they were the four of us lost in the Sonoran – or the Gila Desert, if you prefer. Death advanced from every direction.

Four seekers in deep over our heads...

We knew nothing. The tip of the tip of the iceberg was all we saw. (Mixing talk of

deserts and icebergs – I could blame the snow. Or the cursed sand still in my blood.)

I drained the glass. Then went to the cabinet and poured another, bringing the bottle along. I set it beside the leg of the chair.

The electric winds of memory lifted the hairs off my collar. These stirrings of the past were strong enough to make me feel physical sensations. The blazing Mexican heat slapped my face red (*though it might have been the whisky*). I breathed alkaline dust. My eyes squinted at the forge of a molten sun. I could swear I was traveling back in time, merging with my younger self. How did we get there? How did I survive? What catalyst, what driver, took hold and propelled me as if I had no free will, not then, and not now?

*Egypt.*

Egypt was how I got to Mexico.