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ELIZABETH PETERS

AN AMELIA PEABODY MYSTERY

CROCODILE ON
THE SANDBANK



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ELIZABETH PETERS

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To my son Peter

The love of my beloved is on yonder side
A width of water is between us
And a crocodile waiteth on the sandbank.

—Ancient Egyptian Love Poem

Author's Note

Although my major characters are wholly fictitious, certain historic personages make brief appearances in these pages. Maspero, Brugsch and Grebaut were associated with the Egyptian Department of Antiquities in the 1880's, and William Flinders Petrie was then beginning his great career in Egyptology. Petrie was the first professional archaeologist to excavate at Tell el Amama and I have taken the liberty of attributing some of his discoveries—and his "advanced" ideas about methodology—to my fictitious archaeologists. The painted pavement found by Petrie was given the treatment I have described by Petrie himself. Except for discrepancies of this nature I have attempted to depict the Egypt of that era, and the state of archaeological research in the late nineteenth century, as accurately as possible, relying on contemporary travel books for details. In order to add verisimilitude to the narrative, I have used the contemporary spelling of names of places and pharaohs, as well as certain words like "dahabeeyah." For example, the name of the heretic pharaoh was formerly read as "Khuenaten." Modern scholars prefer the reading "Akhenaten." Similarly, "Usertsen" is the modern "Senusert."

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WHEN I first set eyes on Evelyn Barton-Forbes she was walking the streets

of Rome—(I am informed, by the self-appointed Critic who reads over my shoulder as I write, that I have already committed an error. If those seemingly simple English words do indeed imply that which I am told they imply to the vulgar, I must in justice to Evelyn find other phrasing.)

In justice to myself, however, I must insist that Evelyn was doing precisely what I have said she was doing, but with no ulterior purpose in mind. Indeed, the poor girl had no purpose and no means of carrying it out if she had. Our meeting was fortuitous, but fortunate. I had, as I have always had, purpose enough for two.

I had left my hotel that morning in considerable irritation of spirits. My plans had gone awry. I am not accustomed to having my plans go awry. Sensing my mood, my small Italian guide trailed behind me in silence. Piero was not silent when I first encountered him, in the lobby of the hotel, where, in common with others of his kind, he awaited the arrival of helpless foreign visitors in need of a translator and guide. I selected him from amid the throng because his appearance was a trifle less villainous than that of the others.

I was well aware of the propensity of these fellows to bully, cheat, and otherwise take advantage of the victims who employ them, but I had no intention of being victimized. It did not take me long to make this clear to Piero. My first act was to bargain ruthlessly with the shopkeeper to whom Piero took me to buy silk. The final price was so low that Piero's commission was reduced to a negligible sum. He expressed his chagrin to his compatriot in his native tongue, and included in his tirade several personal comments on my appearance and manner. I let him go on for some time and then interrupted with a comment on *his* manners. I speak Italian, and understand it, quite well. After that Piero and I got on admirably. I had not employed him because I required an interpreter, but because I wanted someone to carry parcels and run errands.

My knowledge of languages, and the means which enabled me to travel abroad, had been acquired from my late father, who was a scholar and antiquarian. There was little else to do but study, in the small country town

where Papa preferred to live, and I have an aptitude for languages, dead and alive. Papa preferred his languages dead. He was a devoted student of the past, and emerged from it only occasionally, when he would blink at me and express surprise at how I had grown since he last noticed my existence. I found our life together quite congenial; I am the youngest of six, and my brothers, being considerably older, had left the nest some time before. My brothers were successful merchants and professional men; one and all they rejected Father's studies. I was left, then, to be the prop of my father's declining years. As I have said, the life suited me. It allowed me to develop my talents for scholarship. But let not the Gentle Reader suppose that I was ill equipped for the practical necessities of life. My father was disinclined toward practicalities. It was left to me to bully the baker and badger the butcher, which I did, if I may say so, quite effectively. After Mr, Hodgkins the butcher, Piero gave me no trouble.

My father died, eventually— if one may use so precise a word for the process that took place. One might say that he gradually shriveled up and ran down. The rumor, put about by a pert housemaid, that he had actually been dead for two days before anyone noticed, is a complete exaggeration. I must admit, however, that he might have passed away at any point during the five hours I spent with him in his study on that particular afternoon. He was leaning back in his big leather chair, meditating, as I assumed; and when, warned by some premonition, I hurried to his side, his wide-open eyes held the same expression of mild inquiry with which they had always regarded me. It seemed to me quite a respectable and comfortable way in which to pass on.

It came as no surprise to anyone to discover that he had left his property to me, the aforesaid prop, and the only one of his children who had not an income of its own. My brothers accepted this tolerantly, as they had accepted my devoted service to Papa. They did not explode until they learned that the property was not a paltry sum, but a fortune of half a million pounds. They had made a common mistake in assuming that an absentminded scholar is necessarily a fool. My father's disinclination to argue with

Mr. Hodgkins the butcher was due, not to lack of ability, but to disinterest. He was very much interested in investments, " 'change," and those other

mysterious matters that produce wealth. He had conducted his business affairs with the same reticence that marked his habits in general; and he died, to the surprise of all, a wealthy man.

When this fact became known, the explosion occurred. My eldest brother James went so far as to threaten legal proceedings, on the basis of unsound mind and undue influence. This ill-considered burst of temper, which was characteristic of James, was easily stopped by Mr. Fletcher, Papa's excellent solicitor. Other attempts ensued. I was visited by streams of attentive nieces and nephews assuring me of their devotion— which had been demonstrated, over the past years, by their absence. Sisters-in-law invited me, in the most affectionate phrases, to share their homes. I was warned in the strongest terms against fortune hunters.

The warnings were not unselfish; they were, however, unnecessary. A middle-aged spinster— for I was at that time thirty-two years of age, and I scorned to disguise the fact— who has never received a proposal of marriage must be a simpleton if she fails to recognize the sudden acquisition of a fortune as a factor in her new popularity. I was not a simpleton. I had always known myself to be plain.

The transparent attempts of my kin, and of various unemployed gentlemen, to win my regard, aroused in me a grim amusement. I did not put them off; quite the contrary, I encouraged them to visit, and laughed up my sleeve at their clumsy efforts. Then it occurred to me that I was enjoying them too much. I was becoming cynical; and it was this character development that made me decide to leave England—not, as some malicious persons have intimated, a fear of being overborne. I had always wanted to travel. Now, I decided, I would see all the places Father had studied— the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome; Babylon and hundred-gated Thebes.

Once I had made this decision, it did not take me long to prepare for the journey. I made my arrangements with Mr. Fletcher, and received from him a proposal of marriage which I refused with the same good humor that had characterized the offer. At least he was honest.

"I thought it worth a try," he remarked calmly.

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained," I agreed.

Mr. Fletcher studied me thoughtfully for a moment.

"Miss Amelia, may I ask— in my professional capacity now— whether you have any inclinations toward matrimony?"

"None. I disapprove of matrimony as a matter of principle." Mr. Fletcher's pepper-and-salt eyebrows lifted. I added, "For myself, that is. I suppose it is well enough for some women; what else can the poor things do? But why should any independent, intelligent female choose to subject herself to the whims and tyrannies of a husband? I assure you, I have yet to meet a man as sensible as myself!"

"I can well believe that," said Mr. Fletcher. He hesitated for a moment; I fancied I could see him struggle with the desire to make an unprofessional statement. He lost the struggle.

"Why do you wear such frightful clothes?" he burst out. "If it is to discourage suitors— "

"Really, Mr. Fletcher!" I exclaimed.

"I beg your pardon," said the lawyer, wiping his brow. "I cannot think what came over me."

"Nor can I. As for my clothes, they suit the life I lead. The current fashions are impractical for an active person. Skirts so tight one must toddle like an infant, bodices boned so firmly it is impossible to draw a deep breath ----- And bustles! Of all the idiotic contrivances foisted upon helpless womankind, the bustle is certainly the worst. I wear them, since it is impossible to have a gown made without them, but at least I can insist on sensible dark fabrics and a minimum of ornament. What a fool I should look in puffs and frills and crimson satin— or a gown trimmed with dead

birds, like one I saw!"

"And yet," said Mr. Fletcher, smiling, "I have always thought you would look rather well in puffs and frills and crimson satin."

The opportunity to lecture had restored my good humor. I returned his smile, but I shook my head.

"Give it up, Mr. Fletcher. You cannot flatter me; I know the catalogue of my faults too accurately. I am too tall, I am too lean in some regions and too amply endowed in others. My nose is too large, my mouth is too wide, and the shape of my chin is positively masculine. Sallow complexions and jetty black hair are not in fashion this season; and I have been informed that eyes of so deep a gray, set under such forbidding black brows, strike terror into the beholder even when they are beaming with benevolence— which my eyes seldom do. Now, I think I have dealt with that subject. Shall we turn to business?"

At Fletcher's suggestion I made my will. I had no intention of dying for a good many years, but I realized the hazards of travel in such unhealthy regions as I proposed to visit. I left my entire fortune to the British Museum, where Papa had spent so many happy hours. I felt rather sentimental about it; Papa might just as well have passed on in the Reading Room, and it would possibly have taken the attendants more than two days to realize he was no longer breathing.

My last act before departing was to engage a companion. I did not do this for the sake of propriety. Oppressed as my sex is in this supposedly enlightened decade of 1880, a woman of my age and station in life can travel abroad alone without offending any but the overly prudish. I engaged a companion because— in short, because I was lonely. All my life I had taken care of Papa. I needed someone, not to look after me, but the reverse. Miss Pritchett was a perfect companion. She was a few years my senior, but one never would have supposed it from her dress and manner. She affected dainty frilled gowns of thin muslin which hung awkwardly on her bony frame, and her voice was a preposterous high-

pitched squeal. She was clumsy; her stupidity was so intense it verged on simplemindedness; she had a habit of fainting, or, at least, of collapsing into a chair with her hand pressed to her heart, whenever the slightest difficulty occurred. I looked forward to my association with Miss Pritchett. Prodding her through the malodorous streets of Cairo and the deserts of Palestine would provide my active mind with the distraction it needed.

After all, Miss Pritchett failed me. People of that sort seldom fall ill; they are too busy pretending to be ill. Yet no sooner had we reached Rome than Miss Pritchett succumbed to the typhoid, like the weak-minded female she was. Though she recovered, she delayed my departure for Egypt for two weeks, and it was manifest that she would not be able to keep up with my pace until after a long convalescence. I therefore dispatched her back to England in the care of a clergyman and his wife, who were leaving Rome. Naturally I felt obliged to pay her salary until she was able to secure another post. She left weeping, and trying, as the carriage left, to kiss my hand.

She left a vacuum in my carefully laid plans, and she was the cause of my ill humor when I left the hotel that fateful day. I was already two weeks behind schedule, and all the accommodations had been arranged for two persons. Should I try to find another companion, or resign myself to solitary travel? I must make my decision soon, and I was musing about it as I went for a final visit to the desolate Cow Pasture which was the seat of the ancient Forum of Rome.

It was a brisk December afternoon; the sun was intermittently obscured by clouds. Piero looked like a cold dog, despite the warm jacket I had purchased for him. I do not feel the cold. The breezy day, with its alternating shadow and sunshine, was quite appropriate to the scene. Broken columns and fallen stones were obscured by tumbled masses of weeds, now brown and brittle. There were other visitors rambling about. I avoided them. After reading a few of the broken inscriptions, and identifying, to my satisfaction, the spots where Caesar fell and where the senators awaited the arrival of the Goths, I seated myself on a fallen column.

Piero huddled at my feet with his knees drawn up and his arms wrapped around the basket he had been carrying. I found the hard, cold seat

comfortable enough; there is something to be said for a bustle, in fact. It was compassion for Piero that made me order him to open the basket the hotel kitchen had provided. However, he refused my offer of hot tea with a pitiful look. I presume he would have accepted brandy.

I was drinking my tea when I noticed that there was a cluster of people some distance away, who seemed to be gathered around an object that was concealed from me by their bodies. I sent Piero to see what it was, and went on drinking my tea.

After an interval he came bounding back with his black eyes gleaming. Nothing delights these gentry quite so much as misfortune; I was therefore not surprised when he reported that the "turisti" were gathered around a young English lady who had fallen down dead upon the ground. "How do you know that she is English?" I inquired. Piero did not reply in words; he went through an extraordinary series of grimaces to indicate a certainty so profound it requires no evidence. His eyes rolled, his hands flew about, his shoulders rose and fell. What else should the lady be but English.

English or not, I doubted that the lady was dead. That was only Piero's Latin love of the dramatic. But so far as I could see, no one in the crowd was doing anything except stare. I rose to my feet, therefore, and after brushing off my bustle, I approached the group. My parasol proved useful in passing through it; I had to apply the ferrule quite sharply to the backs of several gentlemen before they would move. Eventually I penetrated to the center of the circle. As I had surmised, no one was behaving with sense or compassion. Indeed, several of the ladies were pulling their escorts away, with comments about infection and criticism of the fallen lady's probable character.

She was so pitiful as she lay there on the cold, damp ground that only a heart of stone could have been unmoved. There are many hearts of that composition, however.

I sat down upon the ground and lifted the girl's head onto my knee. I regretted very much that I had not worn a cloak or mantle. However, that