

SECRET PROJECTS

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Sometimes a vacation trip can have adventurous aspects. That happened to Elizabeth Hillcrest back in the mid-60s. Elizabeth, her husband Reginald, and their three children lived in Larchmont on New York's Long Island. Reg was trained as a geologist at the University of Chicago, where he also played varsity football under the legendary Alonzo Stagg. After graduation and a Master's Degree from Columbia, he worked for a few years for the United States Geological Survey. During that time, he gradually developed an unusual ability to predict where in an area drilling for water would produce the largest supply. His techniques involved not only geologic data, but also

geographical features, vegetation, soil composition, and soil color. Reg gradually became known throughout the United States and then the world for his expertise, so much so that he left the Survey and started his own, highly successful, consulting company.

Elizabeth meanwhile was a typical, middle class housewife of the 30s through the early 60s, watching over the children in their school years, worrying about the son who was old enough to go into the navy during the last two years of WWII, and doing some substitute teaching of high school math. For a while, she also taught math to soldiers in the ASTP program at Columbia. The ASTP, or Army Specialized Training Program, was advertised as a way of becoming an army officer by going to college. In fact, when the Normandy invasion loomed, the ASTP students suddenly found themselves converted into infantry privates.

In 1963, Reg retired from day to day supervision of his company. He turned the job over to a younger geologist who had in effect grown up in the firm under Reg's tutelage. Reg continued to do consulting. He could hardly avoid it. His reputation was such that about half of the potential clients demanded Cresthill himself. Late in 1963, two special projects by coincidence came together. First, in mid-August of 1964, an International Congress of Geology was meeting in, of all places, Varna, Bulgaria. The organizers invited Reg to give a paper on his methods as part of the Water Resources section of the Congress. Reg was reluctant to venture behind the Iron Curtain and hence initially refused, citing an ignorance of Russian, which he presumed would be the official language of the proceedings. The excuse didn't work; it turned out that German, English, and Russian would all be official languages. Papers could be written and delivered in any one of the three. Provision would be made to translate each paper into the two languages not originally used; and the translations would be read over separate audio systems as the original was delivered. The organizers, sensing Reg's real worry,

indirectly gave assurances, that east-west international relations would be completely forgotten in the welcome to western geologists. Besides, they said, Varna has the Golden Sands which make the city the most desirable holiday location on the Black Sea.

Reg finally gave in to the persuasion and agreed to participate in the Congress. In fact, the idea turned rather agreeable in view of the other project to which came his way. The government of Turkey wanted him to spend three months there helping locate water for expanding NATO installations and neighboring villages which were expected to undergo rapid population growth. The summer months were the best time for Reg to come, given his use of vegetation as evidence for and against water. Reg realized that, if he spent May, June, and July in Turkey, he could combine Turkey and Bulgaria in one foreign journey.

Elizabeth immediately saw other possibilities. For years, she had wanted to visit some foreign country. There had never seemed to be an opportunity. Back in the Depression days, when Reg was just getting started, they couldn't afford to go anywhere unless somebody else paid their way; and that happened only for Reg on consulting trips. Then she was tied down while the children were growing up. Now that she and Reg were well off financially and the children had all graduated from college and departed to their separate lives, Elizabeth was free to travel. She could join Reg at the end of his work in Turkey, go with him to Varna, and the two together could then do some sight-seeing in other parts of Europe on the way home. With the help of a Larchmont travel agency, she worked out an even more ambitious itinerary. The travel agency located a tour which started with a flight from New York to Athens. After a couple of days in that city, the tour group would board a cruise ship for Alexandria, Egypt. Then five days of sight-seeing and shopping in that county, and on via the ship to Istanbul. After another three days of tourist activity

there, the tour group would fly home, while Elizabeth would meet Reg and they would go to Varna.

All went as planned, with one variation. Among Elizabeth's friends, there were two late middle-aged sisters, refuges from Egypt. They belonged to a family of Alexandria which had been closely connected with the government of King Farouk. When Farouk was overthrown, the sisters fled Egypt for America. Their parents, who stayed, fell into poverty from an affluence which had included a mansion with servants. The father was imprisoned for a while and died shortly after being released. Communication between the U.S. and Egypt was difficult because the Egyptian authorities monitored their mail. When the sisters heard that Elizabeth was going to Alexandria, they asked if she would try to visit their mother. It would be as close to a personal contact as they could get. Elizabeth took down the mother's address and promised to do all she could to see her.

The port of Piraeus was a lot closer to Athens than Elizabeth had imagined, and the sea, though dark, didn't remind her of wine, at least not of the wine available in New York. The late July temperature in Athens was in the 90's with a bright sun every day. The tour group drank a lot of orange juice supplied by the itinerant vendors who seemed to be everywhere. In 1964, the Parthenon was open to tourists who wanted to prowl around in it; and air pollution was so minor that people still climbed the Acropolis to contemplate that most classic of buildings in the moonlight, or to witness the *Son et Lumière* performance projected against its façade. Elizabeth felt vaguely guilty at not experiencing deep, romantic thrills on the Acropolis either in daylight or moonlight. She worried a bit that she had wasted Athens.

At dinner aboard ship the night before docking in Alexandria, the captain warned the passengers that some of the taxi drivers who would crawl around seeking fares the next morning were not to be trusted. The

captain said that the drivers would be allowed to come onto the ship, and he asked that the passengers check out any driver with him before entering a cab. There was more than the usual hubbub the next morning as people negotiated with taxi men, got the captain's certification, and gradually went off to see the city. Elizabeth's group was scheduled for a bus tour followed by afternoon shopping. She, however, had her promised visit to make and excused herself from the tour. She asked the two taxi drivers at random whether they could find the address she had been given. Neither driver said yes. Elizabeth didn't know whether the place she sought was too obscure, whether it was politically unwise for locals to go there, or whether the drivers didn't understand enough English to comprehend addresses that weren't usual tourist destinations. As she turned away from the second rebuff, a third driver who was standing nearby said, in perfect English, "I can take you there." Elizabeth's first thought was for the captain, who was nowhere to be seen. Having to make a quick decision, she chose to disregard caution and warnings, and accepted the offer.

The drive was certainly not through touristy parts of Alexandria. Rather it was along the docks and then through narrow streets hemmed in by old, decrepit, often vacant buildings. The driver finally stopped beside a wall, opened the door for Elizabeth and told her to follow him. He led the way down an alley filled with debris to a door opening into what might once have been a warehouse. Elizabeth was beginning to have third and fourth thoughts about the driver and her safety; but she could see no alternative to going on. Inside the door there were some stairs. The driver went up one flight with Elizabeth behind him and knocked on another door. There was a pause until a female voice from inside said something in Egyptian. The driver answered, also in Egyptian, whereupon the door opened. An elderly lady emerged, and she and the driver embraced with words which were incomprehensible to Elizabeth but seemed to have overtones of joy and fondness.

When the situation settled down and all three were sitting in a tastefully but cheaply furnished set of rooms, it turned out that the taxi driver had been the family chauffeur in the old days. He had kept track of the family and occasionally visited, surreptitiously and infrequently for fear of being noticed by the new government. The visit was a pleasant one, with Elizabeth providing information about the two sisters in the United States, and getting firsthand information about their mother to carry back there. As the time approached for Elizabeth to leave, the mother suddenly changed the tenor of the conversation by asking for a favor. Would Elizabeth carry back to the States the few pieces of remaining family jewelry, mostly consisting of diamonds with some sapphires and rubies. The mother pleaded that it was the only way to get the jewelry out of the country and into the possession of her daughters. Elizabeth was momentarily bewildered by conflicting thoughts of being a friend in a situation of need and becoming a smuggler with dangerously valuable contraband. She chose smuggling. The jewelry took the form of a necklace, three bracelets, two pendants, and a brooch. Elizabeth put it all on, with one of the pendants worn down her back inside her dress. She thus carried it back to the ship, in effect concealing it by its very obviousness. Once aboard, she hid it in the middle of her dirty underwear. The taxi driver-ex chauffeur refused to take any money for the round-trip journey. Elizabeth forced a moderate sum on him by telling him to spend it somehow for the mother's benefit.

During the next four days, the tour group was shepherded to the usual Egyptian attractions: the pyramids and Sphinx, Karnak, the Valley of the Kings, the King Tut collection, etc. In Cairo, Elizabeth finally succumbed to the conventional expectation that all tourists buy things. In a tourist level shop, she picked out three, small, very Egyptian looking items, which in the 1960's were probably actually made in Egypt rather than Sri Lanka or Thailand. The items were a stone replica of the Sphinx, a wooden pyramid,

and a miniature, imitation embalmed body. The Sphinx was heavy enough at five inches in length. The pyramid, some four plus inches on an edge, was designed to travel light but eventually become a paper weight. The inside was hollow with a pencil-sized hole in the bottom through which sand could be inserted with a plug to keep it in. The miniature embalmed body, a couple of inches high, was an unintended purchase. Elizabeth originally looked at small, imitation mummies. The shopkeeper intervened, however, pushing the embalmed item. He asserted that it was a replica of the body of Alexander the Great. Notice the face, the shopkeeper urged. Is it not finely formed? Without waiting upon an answer, he continued, when Augustus Caesar visited Alexander's tomb in Alexandria, he admired the features and praised the work of the embalmers three hundred years earlier. Elizabeth let herself be switched from mummies to Alexander, though she suspected that the profit on Alexander was larger than that on the run of the mill mummy figurine.

The shopkeeper seemed pleased either to have made a good sale or to have somebody to talk to. His English was surprisingly good, but of course he had grown up during the British occupation of Egypt. "Had Madam heard the riddle of the Sphinx?" he asked. Elizabeth said she had known it since grade school. "But what about the secret of the Sphinx?" came the question. Elizabeth professed ignorance of that. "It's not surprising," the shopkeeper said. "The British dismissed it as too silly to tell each other. Maybe Madam would like to hear it though, it concerns Alexander." Elizabeth acquiesced, having decided from trying to fathom the jokes in Punch that the English mind is badly warped. The shopkeeper began: "When Alexander died in Babylon, a military convoy with his embalmed body set out for Macedonia. Ptolemy bribed the soldiers to turn south when they reached the Mediterranean coast. The body lay in a Golden Tomb on the shore of Alexandria harbor until some time after Augustus came. Then the tomb disappeared. It probably sank into the sea during the earthquake which brought

down the great lighthouse of Alexandria. But on the eve of the disappearance, the Sphinx left its place in the desert, ran swiftly on its great lion's feet to Alexandria, removed Alexander's body from the tomb, carried it back into the desert, and hid it in one of the pyramids. There the body still lies, but exactly where nobody knows. And why did the Sphinx do that? In gratitude, because Alexander had sacrificed and burned incense before the Sphinx, treating it as a god."

"How did the Sphinx get the body into a pyramid," Elizabeth asked. "Did it break a hole in the wall and wouldn't somebody have seen the hole?" She intended the question to show interest; but, in retrospect, she was afraid it went across as sarcasm instead. The shopkeeper replied seriously that no pyramid had any hole in the side, and how the body was inserted was unknown. Elizabeth opined that the shopkeeper was right; very few people had ever heard of that secret of the Sphinx-probably nobody but the shopkeeper, she thought.

As she turned to go, the shopkeeper said, "May Isis and Osiris look with favor upon Madam." Elizabeth, with King Tut and his father-in-law in mind, responded, "I'd rather have the favor of Aton." There was a pause, and the shopkeeper said politely, "Perhaps Madam is wise." Then he added, "But where is Aton now? He was not welcome here after his Pharaoh died; so he went away with the Moses group. When he was up on Mt. Sinai with their unnamable god, which god dictated to Moses? Or did the two merge? There are some theological mysteries." Not quite catching the spirit of the turn in conversation, Elizabeth burst forth with a couple of verses she had learned in Sunday School.

Did Moses know the need sublime
For chisels on his mountain climb?

The bush that burned for his instruction,
What was its average heat production?

The shopkeeper's impassive expression made Elizabeth feel immediately the future advisability of leaving things well enough alone with Isis and Osiris. Before she was obliged to say anything, however, the shopkeeper went back to business. "Would Madam like a head of Nefertiti? I have an excellent copy, at a special, low price only for her." Elizabeth declined with thanks and left.

The tour group came to an Istanbul which was different in atmosphere from today's city. In the 60's, a thick pall of dust filled the air, churned up by the multitude of vehicles and people. Pedestrians overflowed into the streets for lack of room on the sidewalks. Cars parked and drove on the sidewalks for lack of room in the streets. Of the two bridges over the Bosphorus, only one was open, with a mile long backup of traffic on both sides, creeping across day and night. The tour group stayed on the European side, and took buses to visit the conventional sites on the Asian side. Given the time consumed at the bridge, they could have walked there more quickly; but tour groups don't walk. Elizabeth was properly impressed by the two great mosques, but the so-called Topkapi Palace struck her as being more like a collection of well-built storage sheds. And, in old Constantinople, Hagga Sophia was a clutter of scaffolding, tools, and plaster dust, with wall decorations so faded as to be almost invisible. The Turkish government, suddenly recognizing a potentially major tourist attraction, had just started to restore the former mother church of Greek orthodoxy after half a millennium of vandalism and decay.

Elizabeth stayed with the group for the first day of sight-seeing and the night following. She then moved to the Park Hotel, where she met Reg who arrived from Ankara at about the same time. Their schedule called for another full day and most of a second in Istanbul before leaving for Bulgaria. At dinner that evening, Reg introduced Elizabeth to Mr. A, a member of the Turkish Geological Survey with whom Reg had been

working. A had some personal business to care for in Istanbul and had come along with Reg from Ankara. It developed that he also intended to be helpful. Reg had not had time to finish a report on his work. He needed the next day to complete the job. A, who was familiar with the city, had volunteered to spend the day showing Elizabeth places of interest which were not on the usual tourist agenda, provided of course that Elizabeth was willing. Though she would have preferred to do something with Reg, she recognized A's generosity and accepted the offer.

They started out at nine the next morning. By noon, Elizabeth had seen a couple of small, but beautiful, mosques, the interior of an ornately decorated government building, a park with statues, and a tiny, family restaurant where they guided her to the vast, underground reservoir, which the Byzantine emperors had built to supply water should Constantinople be besieged. The reservoir was lost for centuries and had just been re-discovered a couple of years before Elizabeth's trip. The entrance was inconspicuous and unintended; and there no other visitors. At the bottom of some stairs, was a small platform, beyond which an underground lake stretched into the black distance as far as one could see. Great stone columns supported the roof at intervals; their bases under the water. An apparently abandoned and aging rowboat was moored to the platform.

"It looks like Charon's boat waiting to ferry dead souls across to the underworld realm of Pluto," remarked A. "Where I just came from," Elizabeth said, "it's supposed to be Osiris who rules the underworld." Then she added, "But with gods merging with each other all over the place, I suppose Pluto and Osiris eventually melted into one another." "I do not know that myth." A said. "Is it Egyptian?" "Oh, no," Elizabeth responded. "There's no Pluto-Osiris myth that I know of. I was thinking of an oddity I heard at a shop in Cairo." She told A the shopkeeper's imaginative addition to theology which had Aton fusing

with the Hebrew God of Sinai. "Aton of Sinai," A said in an amused tone." It's a nice phrase, quite high-sounding, something that should attract attention in dull conversations. Yes, it should attract attention. Well, shall we go? I do not think we ought to try rowing." Elizabeth concurred, and they went off to wander through the Grand Bazaar. A made a point of visiting a corridor where stalls offering Egyptian artifacts were clustered. Nothing for sale was of much interest. The usual mummy figures prompted Elizabeth to relate the other shopkeeper story of Alexander and the Sphinx. Catching the spirit of the tale, A opined that the account could be embroidered by supposing that the Sphinx recruited a crocodile to gather Alexander's body in its jaws and swim with it up the Nile to Cairo. In a light-hearted mood, Elizabeth and A returned to the hotel for dinner with Reg.

Most of the next day was taken up by a boat trip along the Bosphorus. As evening approached, A took Reg's completed report to deliver back to Ankara. Elizabeth and Reg went to the train station to board the Orient Express, or what passed for that train east of Vienna in the 60's. Their destination was Sophia. The trip was a miserable mistake. Their coach was not heated; and, when the train passed over the mountains, the temperature dropped to near freezing. At 2 AM, the train stopped at the Bulgarian border where a contingent of soldiers appeared demanding to see passports and tickets. The soldiers informed Reg that he and Elizabeth could not get off in Sophia, but would have to go on to Vienna. The squad leader claimed that there was an outbreak of hoof and mouth disease in Turkey, and no one boarding the train in that country could get off in Bulgaria. Fortunately, Reg had a document confirming his presence on the Geology program in Varna. The document had several signatures and many seals. The squad leader dared not contravene an obvious directive from the central government. Hoof and mouth disease suddenly became irrelevant.

A bus took the couple from Sophia to the large tourist enclave along the Varna shore. The sand was indeed golden, as well as fine-grained and extensive. From a moderate distance it appeared that sand had somehow gotten piled up into round humps all over the beach. Closer viewing revealed that the humps were the stomachs of well-fed east German tourists lying in the sun, probably all Communist Party officials. The enclave contained a number of restaurants, and, once having paid for hotel accommodations, tourists were entitled to eat wherever they chose at no additional charge. However, communist theory forbid tipping the servers, and consequently one was more likely to be simply ignored than waited on. Reg and Elizabeth had that problem at lunch the second day, when they tried a restaurant outside their hotel. Though the place had several waiters doing nothing, fifteen minutes passed without any of them so much as glancing toward the couple. The inattention was made more galling because a lady, who arrived shortly after Reg and Elizabeth, had been waited on almost immediately, apparently because she had announced herself as Russian. As the Americans were about to give up, the lady, who was eating alone at a nearby table and who had apparently heard and understood some of their English conversation, came over and said, "I will help you." She shouted something in Russian which had an explosive effect upon the lounging serving staff. Two solicitous waiters were immediately at the table. Reg and Elizabeth ordered chicken a la Kiev. One waiter regretted (in English) that there was no chicken a la Kiev that day, but chicken a la Moskva was available. That was quite satisfactory to two people who had grown rather hungry.

Reg and Elizabeth invited the helpful lady to join them, which she did. Her English was good enough that the three could carry on a slow conversation. She described herself as the wife of a Russian geologist. He had some sort of administrative meeting that day which eliminated his lunch time. The lady showed great interest in what Reg and Elizabeth had been doing

before coming to Varna and where they were planning to visit afterward. Reg mentioned his work in Turkey and Elizabeth spoke of Egypt and her souvenirs, but not of the odd stories associated with them by the shopkeeper. She was on the point of describing their future itinerary, when Reg interrupted by expressing interest in the lady's background and everyday life in Russia. Her response was disappointingly uninformative. She said that she came from Leningrad, that she had been married for 17 years, and that she had two children back home. And she talked about standing in lines at stores and crowded subway trains. In answer to the question, how had she learned English, she replied vaguely that she had opted for it in school, a possibility which seemed questionable. After lunch and the lady, thanked for her help, went her way, Reg pointed out to Elizabeth the one-sided nature of the information exchange. And he suggested that anyone they met could be a Russian intelligence agent. Though he and Elizabeth presumably knew nothing that such an agent might find useful, they should be reticent with strangers, especially about their continued trip. The last point made Elizabeth vaguely uneasy. She wondered whether there was any way a would-be thief could find out about the Egyptian jewels and set up a robbery at a hotel where they had reservations. She also searched her mind for any hint of the jewels she might inadvertently have dropped in conversation with Reg. She intended to keep them secret from him until they got home. She was sure that, if he knew, he would be so nervous at customs checkpoints that he would immediately activate the baggage inspection instinct of the most lackadaisical inspector.

On the third and final evening of the Congress, there was a gala reception for all of the delegates and their spouses. The random circulation of the crowd by accident brought Elizabeth and Reg together with the lady of the lunch and her husband. The husband, who can be called Mr. X, shook hands with Reg, saying in Russian translated by his wife, that he had heard Reg's excellent paper and would like to have a copy so as to

study Reg's methods. Then shaking Elizabeth's hand, he remarked that he had heard that she had recently visited Egypt. A fascinating land, he thought, both historically and geologically, what with the widening Red Sea rift breaking the Sinai Peninsula off the main part of the country and causing periodic earthquakes. Incidentally, had Elizabeth run into the curious speculation about Aton of Sinai?

Elizabeth was taken aback. She noticed Reg almost imperceptibly stiffen. He relaxed quickly and, with apparent nonchalance said to Elizabeth, "Tell that story of how the Sphinx stole Alexander." "Helped out by a crocodile, of course," Reg added sardonically. The expression on Mr. X's face could have been interpreted as incompatible with his professed eagerness to hear the tale. Elizabeth had to focus her mind to relate it. Mr. X was gallantly fascinated. Shortly thereafter, both couples thought they ought to continue circulating. They parted after Reg arranged to bring Mr. X a copy of his paper at the closing session the next morning.

Elizabeth was upset. How did Mr. X come to use the phrase "Aton of Sinai", which Elizabeth thought Reg's friend A had invented on the spur of the moment in Istanbul? Had some international gang of thieves been shadowing her ever since she so openly carried the jewelry to the ship in Egypt? How well did Reg really know A? Was he part of the gang, as was X? Hadn't A remarked that "Aton of Sinai" was an attention getting conversation piece? Was X trying to get her attention? Was he indirectly warning her, or was he taunting her? She remarked to Reg that it was odd of X to ask about the Aton story. Reg said that the tale was probably recently invented and people were trying to impress others by being the first to tell it. People always try to be the first to impart the latest gossip, whether it's irrelevant to anything or not. Elizabeth's worry about the jewelry increased anyway.

At the end of the Congress, Reg and Elizabeth flew from Sophia to Vienna and then on to Paris. Three nights in Paris, three in London, and home to New York constituted the remainder of the agenda. The departure from Sophia was delayed for a couple of hours because, they were told, of a difficulty in loading the checked baggage. An English geologist who was leaving on the same flight said cynically that the difficulty probably consisted of Bulgarian agents looking over the baggage of the western travelers. Just what anybody could find poking locked suitcases was beyond him.

Be that as it may, a nasty apparent attempt to go through their belongings did occur one morning or afternoon at the Paris hotel. Upon returning from a day of sight-seeing, Elizabeth found her opened suitcase in disarray, with what seemed to be blood on some of her underwear and on the Alexander effigy which was beside it. Elizabeth in panic felt for the jewels. They were still there. In fact, nothing appeared to be missing. Reg called the manager on duty who came up in short order. He made notes of what he found and promised to try to ascertain who was responsible. He offered to see that the underwear and the doll, as he called it, were cleaned, an offer which Elizabeth declined. He also stated that of course there would be no charge for the hotel stay or for meals which Reg and Elizabeth ate in house. Would they perhaps be interested in a full course dinner via room service that evening? They would, answered Reg.

As they were finishing dinner, the manager called and asked permission to return to the room. He reported that the maid on the floor had come to her supervisor in mid-afternoon for first aid in connection with a gash on her hand. Confronted that evening by the manager, the maid confessed that she had started rummaging through Elizabeth's things and had encountered something sharp which drew blood. The maid was immediately fired. She had been with the hotel for less than a week, having been sent by one of the agencies devoted to assisting escapees from behind the

Iron Curtain. The manager apologized several times, expressed the opinion that the culprit deserved getting wounded, and assured the Hillcrests that every precaution would be taken to make the rest of their stay uneventful. It was.

Elizabeth was quite sure by then that some thief of thieves had found out that she was traveling with something valuable, and that the hotel occurrence had been planned, with a pretend maid planted for the purpose. Elizabeth couldn't detail her thoughts to Reg because he still didn't know about the jewelry. She did express uneasiness, which Reg said was natural in the circumstances. But no doubt the incident was an opportunistic act by a woman who presumed that Americans are all rich and she could make off with enough of value to make possibly sacrificing her job worthwhile. Elizabeth thought she sensed less assurance in Reg than his words conveyed.

She was puzzled over what could have slashed the maid's hand. Though she couldn't think of anything in the suitcase, she went through all the contents. Nothing turned up. The only possibility seemed to be a latch on the suitcase, which, brushed in precisely the right way, might conceivably cut an extraordinarily clumsy person.

The incident indirectly resulted in the loss of the Alexander figure. It was missing when Elizabeth unpacked in London. Apparently, she had laid it aside in the confusion and failed to put it back in her suitcase. She momentarily considered calling the French hotel, but immediately thought that enlarging the furor for the sake of a stained souvenir was too much. Besides, it probably went into the trash when the room was cleaned.

Nothing untoward happened in London.

It did at La Guardia airport, however. When the presented their passports to the Customs Agent, instead

of examining their declaration form, the agent asked them to wait for a moment. She left the booth and returned a couple of minutes later with a man of obvious official standing. He greeted the Hillcrests by name and asked them to please accompany him with their baggage. Elizabeth's heart began an unusual cadence. She was sure that she had been caught. The official led the way to a small, private room. After closing the door, he said, "Mr. Hillcrest, we are glad to see you. I hope that you had an uneventful trip." Reg replied, "Aton of Sinai saw that it was." Without the least surprise or hesitation, the official came back with, "Helped out by a crocodile, of course." Reg smiled and extended his hand to the official, who shook it warmly. Reg then turned to Elizabeth and said, "I have to ask a favor of you." Elizabeth's heart thumped warningly at the word "favor". One favor per trip was quite enough. Reg continued, "Remember that Russian geologist at the reception in Varna. He gave me a microfilm to deliver to a U.S. official in New York. I don't know what's on the microfilm. All I do know is that the agent would identify himself by responding, "Helped out by a crocodile," after I used the phrase "Aton of Sinai". I stuck the microfilm inside the pyramid you brought from Egypt. It was a perfect hiding place. But it'll never come back out through that little hole. The only way to get it is to break open the pyramid. SO, the favor is, would you give the pyramid to this gentleman?" Elizabeth recognized a request which she could not refuse. Besides, her heart was seriously considering going back to normal. She took the pyramid out of her suitcase and received the agent's thanks for her understanding. He conducted Elizabeth and Reg out past customs, even carrying her suitcase for her. And he led them to a chauffeured car which took them back home to Larchmont.

Reg had to clear up a couple of loose ends for Elizabeth, of course. A in Istanbul was really arranging for Reg to receive the microfilm and deliver it to New York. A didn't say who in Varna would hand it over. But Reg was to wait for somebody to say "Aton

of Sinai", whereupon Reg would reply with the return password, "Helped out by a crocodile". Reg now believed that Z's wife in Varna had been assigned to do a preliminary checkout on himself and Elizabeth. Her appearance at lunch was probably not fortuitous. But what Reg wondered about was the attempted robbery in Paris by a temporary maid from behind the Iron Curtain. Maybe the Russian or Bulgarian intelligence service got wind of the microfilm and planted an agent to obtain it. Secret projects in the international context could be perilous, Reg thought.

He thought so even more when Elizabeth told him of her secret smuggling project and her fear that the robbery was set up by jewel thieves. Reg urged her to deliver the jewelry immediately to her friends, the two Egyptian sisters. Elizabeth did, receiving many expressions of undying appreciation from the sisters, both for the jewelry and for the news of their mother. No robbers ever showed up later looking for the gems.

About a month after getting home, Elizabeth received a small package with an innocuous federal government return address. There was a note attached to the package which read as follows: "There were two items inside the wooden pyramid you so kindly gave us. One was the enclosed figurine of an embalmed body. The figure is a bit stained by what we ascertained to be blood. We do not know how it could have been hidden inside the pyramid unless the maker of the latter put it there. In any case, we are sending the figurine to you as a substitute for the pyramid as a souvenir of Egypt. Thank you again."

Recalling the gash on the hotel maid's hand, Elizabeth asked Reg, "Lions have claws, don't they?" "Of course," said Reg, "they're a kind of cat." Elizabeth put the Alexander figure on the mantel up against the feet of her replica of the Sphinx.
