

The Pennington Scarabs

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Frederick J. McGavran

It was a mistake to leave Uncle George in Grandfather's old room, the one with the Blakelock landscape over the Sheraton chest. When I brought him his midnight medications, he would stare at the painting in the glow of the nightlight and weep. The moon over the river reminded him of the moon over the Nile on his trip with Grandfather and my father to Egypt in 1938.

"If we changed rooms with him," Lillian said, "he would complain that the Bierstadt country scene reminded him of the family farm before your grandfather sold it to the strip miners."

I never understood her fascination with our family secrets. After all, she did not lose her father to a river borne infection, or have to listen to Grandfather and Uncle George's endless speculations about whether his death was somehow related to the scarabs. She was the only person who could explain to me why the ancient Egyptians made images of dung beetles out of precious stones and metals. They thought the larvae were spontaneously generated from the mud pellets the females always rolled towards the rising sun.

"Sarcasm does not translate well," I said to Lillian, repeating all Grandfather ever told me about his negotiations with Ahmet Bey.

So Lillian and I stayed in Grandmother's room, the one with the Bierstadt, so I could take him his medicine in the middle of the night, and smear him with hydrocortisone cream whenever the itching became unbearable. As a child I had wondered why Grandmother and Grandfather slept in separate bedrooms joined by a door with the lock on Grandfather's side. Years later I discovered that Grandmother, unlike Lillian, never really fit in. There were always servants in those days, so the old man needed to preserve his privacy. After one of the maids developed symptoms like my father's, however, it was much harder to find staff that would put up with his demands. If it had not been for Dorothy, I don't think that Uncle George could have managed my Grandfather's last illness.

Uncle George and I were the only living persons to have seen the Pennington scarabs. I saw them soon after Grandfather decided to give them, and the Childe Hassam and the Winslow Homers, and nearly everything else to the Art Museum, retaining only the Blakelock, the Bierstadt, and the two untitled Sargents in the living room. He did not think enough of the Bellows in the billiards room to give it away, and the Eakins portraits of himself and grandmother in the dining room were family and had to stay. The afternoon the men from the museum were to come, Dorothy escorted me to his room where he was sitting upright with a bed tray in his lap. She smelled of starch and wore a black dress with a white apron that concealed her figure like the drapery on a Sargent. Dorothy was about the same age my mother would have been if she had lived.

Uncle George was sitting beside Grandfather in the same chair I used when I sat with him four decades later.

“You have to let them go,” Uncle George was saying. “The only way to escape the curse is to let them go.”

“The boy is here,” Grandfather said to silence him.

Dorothy led me to him. On the tray was a black wooden case embossed with the figure of a man in a loincloth with the head of a beetle.

“You asked me to bring him to say goodbye,” Dorothy said softly.

“Here, Walter,” Grandfather said. “You have lost as much as any of us because of this. You must tell me what you think.”

“You’re not going to show him those,” Dorothy said, gripping my arm to take me away.

“He is a Pennington,” the old man said. “He will see them.”

He had a deeply lined face that to me had always appeared kind, especially after my parents’ deaths. When he spoke to Dorothy, however, his voice was sharp, and his gray eyes hard. She released me and stepped back. Grandfather unlatched the black box and raised the lid.

The sleeve of his robe fell away from his hand, and I could see the linen bandages they had wrapped him in to keep him from scratching himself raw. When the light touched the scarabs, I caught my breath. It was as if the sun had been separated into nine golden oblongs to shine for just one man. They glowed like molten gold spun into secret

crevices when the earth emerged from fire. In the center was a golden beetle about six inches long, surrounded by seven smaller beetles. At the top was another golden beetle, about twice the size of the smaller ones. I raised my hand to touch it.

“Ah, the ring,” the old man said, taking it out of the box and holding it up, so I could see the engraving on the bottom.

It was the man in the loincloth with the head of the beetle standing above several hieroglyphics.

“Do you know what that says? ‘Khepri Rameses!’ Yes, Rameses the Great, the Pharaoh of the Exodus! He knew what it was like to sacrifice a first born son.”

“You have told him enough,” Uncle George said, gesturing to Dorothy to take me away.

My uncle always wore English tweeds on winter afternoons. I had never seen him so upset.

“No, here, put it on. Then answer my question.”

I held out my hand, and he placed the ring on my right index finger. It was so heavy that it flipped over and hung from my hand like a weight.

“You, and I, and Pharaoh are the only ones who have ever worn that ring, and Pharaoh only after he was dead,” Grandfather said.

“What about the beetles?” I asked.

“This one, the large one, is placed over the heart, and the others are placed here, like a necklace, across your chest.”

He tapped the seven sacred points around my collarbone.

“Why don’t you put them on yourself?” I asked.

“Not yet,” the old man said. “They are the last things to be placed on the body before they seal the coffin.”

I think now that he was watching the gold gleam in my eyes, and wondering if I would leave them undisturbed.

“Would you give these away, if they could give you eternal life?”

“No,” I said. “I would keep them forever.”

“My God,” said Dorothy. “Now you’ve made the boy part of it.”

“Take him away,” Uncle George snapped. “He has seen enough.”

“I wish you had never met that awful Ahmet Bey,” she screamed at my Grandfather. “None of this would ever have happened.”

“A servant wiser than her master,” Uncle George said savagely.

“Sarcasm does not translate well,” Grandfather said. “That’s what the Turk said when you criticized me in front of him.”

She took my arm and led me from the room.

“Why must you blame me?” I heard Uncle George say as she hurried me down the hall.

“Just do what I tell you, or I will damn you from the grave.”

I do not know if it is possible to undo a curse, but it is possible to revoke a gift. When the men from the museum departed with the paintings, the scarabs remained with Grandfather. The next morning Mr. Torp, a lawyer nearly as old as Grandfather, arrived with more papers to sign. The door was open when I passed on my way from my room to my lessons in the library.

“As soon as I’m gone, give George the key,” I heard Grandfather say. “He will know what to do.”

I wonder now whether Rameses was more explicit.

In our family, deaths seem to come in pairs. Grandmother had died a year after my brother Lawrence was stillborn. Five years after my birth my father died, then a year later, my mother. Six months after Grandfather died, Dorothy fell ill. I had noticed the rash on her arms spreading to her hands before she started wearing long sleeves. Uncle George was now sleeping in Grandfather’s bedroom. He had all the bedding burned after Grandfather died.

Uncle George did not like Dorothy. It was as if each one knew something terrible about the other, something they could never disclose, for fear of their own secret being revealed. A few days before she died, one of the maids called me to her bedroom.

“You poor boy,” she said. “No mother, no father, everyone gone now but George. I would hug you, but . . .”

She raised her red arms helplessly.

The last time I had seen her so upset was in Grandfather's bedroom, when he showed me the scarabs just before he died.

"Who was Ahmet Bey?" I asked.

The name was as curious to me as the golden beetles.

"God, God, I should never have said that," she whispered. "Please, Walter, promise to forget you ever heard that name."

"Who was he?" I repeated. "One of Grandfather's friends?"

"Nothing can ever be called back. That's what he told your Grandfather."

"But who was he?"

"A Turk they met on the Nile steamer when they went to Egypt."

"Why is everyone so afraid of him?" I wondered.

And then I knew.

"He sold Grandfather the scarabs, didn't he?"

Her red hands were over her face. She was weeping. A child's most innocent question can be more painful than a knife.

"How much did Grandfather pay him?"

"Ask your Uncle," she said. "You will never hear that from me."

"Walter, what are you doing here?" Uncle George demanded from the doorway.

"I asked him to come to say goodbye," Dorothy said, sobbing.

"He has said it," Uncle George said, taking my hand in his hard fingers.

That was all I knew of Ahmet Bey and the transaction whereby my Grandfather acquired the scarabs for nearly thirty years: a Turk marooned in Egypt when the Ottoman Empire disintegrated, who sold souvenirs to rich foreigners traveling up the Nile to see the sacred cities. A man who had somehow acquired the most valuable treasure in all Egypt, and sold it for a promise Grandfather never thought he would have to keep.

The next year Uncle George sent me away to the same school in the East that he and my father had attended. In the summers he sent me to a camp to learn horsemanship and canoeing. Then off to his and my father's college and the Army. I did not stay in Grandfather's mansion again for more than a few days at Christmas and the beginning and end of summer vacations until I married Lillian.

When I returned from Vietnam, Uncle George suggested that I make an appointment with his banker to talk about my future. I had suspected that Grandfather left me something, because the trust department had paid tuition and even sent me a small allowance. After complimenting me on my survival, a silver haired trust officer bowed me into his office to talk about investment strategy. What he really wanted were assurances that I would not draw down all the income, so that it would accumulate and the bank could impose its fee on larger and larger sums.

“Of course not!” I laughed, full of the enthusiasm of youth. “I’m going to have some fun.”

Fun for me was Lillian. She was bright, she was beautiful, and she taught me all I ever needed to know about sex. I met her in California the summer I got out of the Army, and together we surfed until the sun dropped over the edge of the Pacific Ocean, and the continent went black behind us. Her hair was so dark that I used to accuse her of dying it.

“No,” she said. “It’s to set off my jewelry.”

She had a particular fondness for gold, and was the only girl I had met with any interest in the family legend about the scarabs. We met when she overheard me trying to pick up a girl in a bar by telling her stories about a secret treasure.

“Walter, this stuff really turns me on,” she said. “And no one knows what happened to the scarabs?”

“No one.”

“We’ll find out somehow,” she said, in a tone that I had only heard before in my Grandfather and senior military officers.

We were lying on the bed of her apartment in San Diego with the window open, looking at the moon over the water. When my separation pay ran out, I went home to the firm, but I spent every weekend and holiday I could get away with her. I asked her to marry me as soon as I heard about the trust. I could quit my job in accounting at the firm, and together we would surf and play across the endlessly sparkling waters that the world only offers to the rich. I did not yet know that bank trust officers earn their salaries by reporting indiscretions to elder members of the family. The summons to meet my uncle in his lawyer’s office came quickly and could not be disobeyed.

Grandfather's lawyer had died, and his son, "Young Mr. Torp," had succeeded his father as our family lawyer as smoothly as one shadow follows another. Along with our family's business, he had inherited his father's cavernous office with a huge mahogany desk and Chippendale guest chairs, to which only the wealthiest and most proper could aspire.

Uncle George rose from one of the chairs when I entered. Young Mr. Torp remained seated. He was tapping the edges of a thick document to keep the pages in line. Backlit by the window his features were indistinct, making his head appear something he might withdraw into his suit collar if threatened.

"Before I accept your resignation, I wanted you to be aware of a provision of your Grandfather's trust," my uncle said, nodding toward Mr. Torp's document.

"What is it?" I asked.

"It's a power of appointment," he said in the same tone I supposed Grandfather had used so long ago with Ahmet Bey. "It gives me the right to appoint who receives the balance of your Grandfather's estate after I die: the eldest male in the family, or the art museum. Isn't that correct, Mr. Torp?"

"That is correct."

When Mr. Torp spoke, his jaw moved from side to side, as if munching on something repellant.

The world dropped away from me again, as it had when my mother had come to my room to tell me my father had died.

"Why the art museum?" I said.

"Your Grandfather always wanted to have someone in the family in the firm. If you renounce your responsibilities, then he has no further obligation to you."

"Let me see that," I demanded, reaching for the papers.

Mr. Torp drew them back to his chest.

"You may not see it until . . ."

"Until I am dead, and your inheritance is either confirmed, or you are left with nothing," my uncle finished his sentence.

That is how I learned that a power of appointment is like a golden tentacle stretching out from a corpse to bind the living to the dead. When I told Lillian, she shook her head and laughed.

“Of course you must stay with the firm,” she said. “Uncle George will not last forever.”

That was the first time I saw that bright, frozen smile on her face, the smile that would uplift or destroy so many while we waited for Uncle George to die. She flashed the same smile to Uncle George the day after our honeymoon when we moved into the mansion, or “family home,” as he called it.

“After three generations, a Pennington cannot live anywhere else,” he said grandly.

“I was thinking of the mausoleum when he said that,” she told me that evening.

“So was I,” I replied.

Thirty years can seem like forever without any children and only the hope of another’s death to bring release. Like a sleepwalker I rose from accountant to auditor to Chief Financial Officer to Chief Executive Officer after Uncle George finally retired. But he would not die. Every evening he sat at the head of the table. No matter what delicacy the cook had prepared, it always tasted like the peas and potatoes in my first school in the East. So I passed the weekends at the club, the days on the golf course, the nights on the veranda or in the bar. Lillian amused herself with boards and charities and alcohol and, I suspect, an occasional ski instructor or personal trainer. Every Sunday evening we took Uncle George to the buffet at the club, where he drank two bourbons before dinner, piled his plate high with iced shrimp, and vomited copiously in the scented first floor lavatory before we lowered him into the car for the long ride back to the family home.

From bow tie to sockless loafers to Friday afternoon squash games at the club, Lewis Bracomb was the image of the modern museum man. I was off my game the first time we played; stretching to return my serve, he had a strained expression I had seen before on someone else. Then the ball shot past me, and the memory spun away in the

heat and excitement of the game. Lillian welcomed him as an old friend and invited him to dinner with several others whom the museum was courting for their competing collections of German and French expressionists.

Bracomb talked about the expressionists in the same tone as a hedge fund operator talks about stocks he is shorting. When he saw the Eakins portraits of my grandparents, however, he dabbed his eyes with a linen handkerchief. Such sensibility is contagious. If he had approached them then, our other guests would have gladly pledged well into seven figures for the new American wing at the museum.

Uncle George did not join us until eight, the proper hour for a gentleman to dine. Elegant in his tuxedo, he greeted each guest with the charm and condescension of a Hapsburg circulating amongst provincials. He was extending his pink hand to Lewis Bracomb when he froze

“You were never to enter this house,” the old man said.

The curator smiled and nodded, but he did not retreat.

“We must talk, Mr. Pennington,” he replied.

Lillian broke the spell by taking Bracomb by the elbow and escorting him to the far end of the table.

Uncle George was silent throughout dinner, staring at Bracomb until everyone was uncomfortable. Instead of eating, he kept picking at the left sleeve of his tuxedo. Lewis Bracomb touched his sleeve several times, too, as if it were a signal between them.

When we adjourned to the library after dinner for brandy and cigars, I offered to help Uncle George upstairs. He shook hands pleasantly enough with our guests at the bottom of the grand staircase, but when Bracomb approached, he turned away. Lillian stepped between them and kissed the old man to avoid a scene. I heard him lock the door as soon as he was in his bedroom.

I poured brandies from my Grandfather’s stock for the men, while Lillian slipped back into the dining room for another bottle of burgundy for the women.

“Yes,” I assured everyone. “The house is so old that we do allow smoking.”

Lighters flared, and Lillian swept back into the living room with a decanter and three crystal glasses on a silver tray for the women. Then Uncle George screamed from the second floor.

“He has come for the scarabs!”

Lillian dropped the tray, and the wine gurgled out of the decanter like blood onto the Persian carpet.

“Walter, do something!” Lillian said.

I hurried to the staircase. Uncle George was in his nightshirt, leaning over the banister on the landing. What do you do with a mad man, when the most prominent people in the city are watching?

“Whatever is the matter, Uncle George?” she said.

He relaxed like a baby at his mother’s voice. Together we led him to his room. I sat on the side of the bed, while Lillian rummaged through his medicine cabinet for a sedative. We stayed with him until it took effect.

When we went downstairs, our guests had excused themselves. Lillian was strangely quiet, as if something that had troubled her for years was suddenly clear.

“He’s much worse than we thought,” I said.

“Good,” she said. “It’s almost over.”

“Almost over” can take forever. Trips to the doctor and visits from therapists during the day, followed by the long, unending nights.

“Keep the door open,” he would say, so Lillian and I could share his agony from the next bedroom.

So we lay awake, listening to the groans and curses, hoping that the sedative would finally take hold. No one could live for weeks like that, as if we had all entered the mausoleum together, and were surviving on offerings for the dead. One evening I gave him an extra sedative at five, and took Lillian to the club for dinner. What a relief to see some people again, and assure them we had not all died or gone mad. Ever on alert for scandal, Lillian was relieved to find that the scene at our dinner for the new curator had not been spread all over the city.

“He was going to meet us here tonight,” one of her friends said. “I wonder what happened to him?”

We returned near midnight, time for Uncle George’s medications. We undressed and into bed hoping for a decent night’s sleep. Then I heard him talking in a normal

voice as if Grandfather had returned, and they were reviewing again that night he struck his bargain with Ahmet Bey.

“Someone’s in there with him,” Lillian whispered.

“No,” I said. “He’s just slipping back.”

I was going back to sleep, when I heard the second voice.

“Walter, do something,” she said.

I got up and opened the door to his room. He was sitting up in bed, staring across the room. There was just enough light from the nightlight to make the moon on the Blakelock glow. He did not look at me as I entered.

“He only called you ‘Effendi’ to flatter you,” he said.

He thought I was his father.

“‘Effendi’ is a lesser rank than ‘Bey,’” he continued.

“Sarcasm does not translate well,” I replied.

“You should never have promised him that,” he said bitterly.

“A promise is a promise.”

“When he told you the price, you should have stopped the bargaining.”

He was staring at me now, but his yellow eyes saw the upper deck of the Nile steamer lying off Luxor.

“When he said the price was your first born son, you laughed as if he were mad. Why didn’t you tell him to go to hell? None of this would ever have happened.”

I finally understood the bargain that my Grandfather had made with Ahmet Bey for the golden scarabs.

“What is your first born son compared to eternal life?” I said. “If he had made the same proposition to you, you would have accepted it.”

“I have,” the old man said.

I did not know if he were talking to Grandfather or to me. He leaned back on the pillows and shut his eyes.

Lillian was waiting when I returned to our room. She had thrown open the curtains so that the moon shone on her like the moon over Blakelock’s river. She was naked.

“At last we know the secret,” she said.

“It has killed everyone I ever loved,” I said.

“It will not kill me.”

When I touched her, her skin was as cool and sticky as if she had just stepped out of the river. It was the best sex in years, the way it used to be before Uncle George called me to his lawyer’s office and told me what I had to promise to inherit the Pennington fortune.

The next morning Uncle George could not get out of bed. A man from the nursing service had to bathe him. When he was back in bed, he called for me.

“You have been a good boy,” he said, patting my forearm. “As soon as I am gone, call Mr. Torp.”

“For the key?” I asked, remembering my Grandfather’s death so long ago.

“There is one last service that you must perform for me,” he said. “Mr. Torp will tell you everything.”

He died early in the afternoon, just as Lillian and I were finishing lunch.

“God,” she said. “I’ve never been so excited. It’s better than sex.”

I called young Mr. Torp right after I called the undertaker. His secretary said that he would make time for me in two days. Those days passed slower than the weeks waiting for Uncle George to die. Decency kept us at home, but the stress of not knowing whether I was the richest man in the city or just another hanger on at the club was worse than counting the days the last month before I left Vietnam. I could not have slept if it had not been for my uncle’s sedatives. Lillian, however, had no doubts. Every hour she was brighter and happier until, at night, she slept like a child.

I went to Mr. Torp’s office by myself. Nothing had changed in all those years, except that he had drawn the Venetian blinds to keep the sun off his neck. I took the chair that had once enthroned Uncle George, and watched him align the edges of Grandfather’s trust. Beside the papers was the key to the mausoleum.

“Your uncle executed the document exercising the power of appointment in your favor,” he said.

A page had been taken from the Book of Life, and I had been reprieved. I was ready to embrace the whole world.

“There is one more service he requires,” the lawyer added.

“Of course,” I said. “I must open the mausoleum for him after the funeral.”

“More than that. You must open your Grandfather’s sarcophagus and remove the scarabs. Then you must open your uncle’s coffin, and place them on him.”

“You’re out of your mind!” I exclaimed so loudly that his secretary opened the door.

The lawyer waived her away. In his profession, it was his duty to enforce without question the demands of the dead.

“I have another document that I will show you,” he said, holding up another paper. “Here, can you see it?”

“Exercise of Power of Appointment” was all I could read.

“Look closer. He also executed an Exercise in favor of the museum. Unless you carry out his wishes, I shall destroy yours and deliver the other to the museum.”

My chest was so tight I could hardly breathe.

“And how will you know that I have done it?” I said. “After the internment, only the eldest Pennington is allowed inside the vault.”

“At ten o’clock I will meet you outside the mausoleum. If you show me the golden ring, and I can see that the vault is open, I will know that you have fulfilled your trust, and I will burn the museum Exercise in front of you.”

What had Grandfather purchased that night on the Nile?

“It will all be yours then,” he continued in the same tone I suppose Ahmet Bey had used so long ago.

“Including eternal life?”

“I don’t deal with eternal life,” the lawyer said.

“How long shall we be in mourning?” Lillian asked that evening over cocktails in the library. “Is today too short?”

That’s when I told her about the scarabs. Oddly, she was not repulsed.

“You must bring them back here,” she said. “I have always wanted to see them.”

She was as excited as she had been after she overheard Uncle George tell me Grandfather’s bargain with the devil.

“After they have rested on a dead man’s chest for fifty years?” I said.

“They rested on another man’s chest even longer.”

So I drove to the cemetery that night with the key to the mausoleum in my pocket and the black box with the scarab-headed god on the seat beside me. Turning off my lights, I drove slowly along the road to the mausoleum. Mr. Torp had not yet arrived. The key rattled so loudly in the lock that I was afraid someone would hear it from the street a mile away.

I closed the door so only a crack remained and turned on the lights. One of the ancient bulbs popped, leaving the vault half lit. My chest froze. I did not have a first-born son, but I would give up anything for the Pennington fortune. I opened Uncle George’s niche. Grunting, cursing, I pulled the coffin out onto the ledge and opened it. There, in the dull light, was the finely groomed corpse of the man who had turned me into a grave robber. In death, the skin of his face was slowly drawing back in the same imperious smile I had endured for decades. I turned to Grandfather’s sarcophagus.

The lid was stuck; I didn’t think I could do it; the damned old man was holding it down. Then the seal broke, and it creaked open. Underneath, still shiny after nearly a half century, was his coffin. I held my breath. Would he be staring up at me through eyeless sockets like the ravaged corpse of Rameses the Great in the Cairo Museum? Would I have to touch that? That’s when I heard something rustling just out of my field of vision.

“Who’s there?” I said.

It stopped. Probably insects or worse, I thought. What can you expect in a fresh tomb? Now, damn it, just do it! I raised the lid, and the coffin glowed. Lips parted, he was staring at something beyond me, beyond the universe, as the seven golden orbs circled his neck. He was still alive. I ran to the door.

The lawyer was standing outside in the dark, holding a paper in his hand.

“I can’t do it,” I said.

“You were so close,” he said.

He started back to his car.

“No, wait!” I called after him.

Mr. Torp stopped. I suppose he had often seen the dead break the spirit of the living. I returned to my Grandfather’s corpse.

Perhaps he was seeing happy gods copulating along the River Nile to fertilize the new crop, or suns and galaxies sparking into being in the farthest regions of the universe. When I removed the large scarab from over his heart, it was warm. When I removed the seven suns from around his neck and put them in the black box, I saw a tear in his eye. When I reached for the golden ring, he gripped my hand.

“Damn you, let go!”

He was as strong as he had been when I was a child, and I was as weak.

“Let go!” I screamed.

His eyes fixed on me and froze, as if he saw something more terrible than death. Then the light in his eyes faded, and his hand turned cold. The old man was finally dead. I slipped the ring off his finger and opened the door.

“Here!” I held it up to Torp. “I have it!”

The lawyer stepped closer to the door to examine it. Then he looked inside at Grandfather and Uncle George’s open coffins.

“This is yours,” he said, handing me the Exercise of the power of appointment for the museum. I held it up to the light bulb. It was dated August 17, 1969, the day I returned from Vietnam, the same date that was on the exercise to me.

“You will be wanting this, too,” he said, reaching into his coat and removing a thick envelope. “It is the only copy of your Grandfather’s trust.”

From where he was standing, he could not see the black box on the ledge behind Uncle George’s coffin. As soon as he had driven away, I placed the ring in the black box, closed the two coffins and shoved Uncle George back into his niche. That’s when I heard the rustling again. What did the royal children do, when the tomb of the pharaoh was robbed? Did the stars set for them, too? Did they finally have to die? I grabbed the box, turned off the light and closed the door.

Lillian was in the library when I returned.

“I have it,” I said, showing her the appointment to the art museum.

While I burned it in the fireplace, she poured me a bourbon.

I placed the black box on the reading table and opened it. The scarabs gleamed in the firelight as if they had just come out of the forge.

“My life is complete,” she said.

“He gave me a copy of Grandfather’s trust, too,” I said, removing the ancient onionskin documents from the envelope.

“Let me see that,” she said, handing me the drink.

For the first time in my life I could relax. The house, the business, the paintings, the scarabs, everything now was mine. The curse was expiated. Lillian paged through the document and stopped.

“What was Dorothy’s last name?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I replied. “I never thought about it.”

““And to my faithful servant Dorothy Bracomb, I leave ten thousand dollars,”” she read.

“Dorothy Bracomb?” I repeated.

“He called tonight, Walter. He wants to talk to you.”

“What does he want?” I said.

“I don’t know. Call him.”

The bourbon turned rancid in my stomach. I picked up the phone and called the number he had left.

“We really have to talk,” he said, recognizing my voice.

“I can’t imagine why.”

“About the power of appointment,” he said.

“The appointment to the museum?” I said, laughing.

“No, Walter. About the appointment to me. May I drop by?”

I closed the black box and leaned back in my chair, sweating through my suit. A half hour later he was in the library, sipping absinthe and water and sparring with Lillian about a Duncanson he had been outbid on at Christies the month before.

“We simply don’t have the endowment to acquire a first class collection,” he concluded.

“Why are you here, Lewis?” I asked.

“Don’t pretend you don’t know who I am.”

I stared at him. Dorothy and someone else I had known stared back at me.

“Are you my cousin?”

“No, Walter. I am your uncle.”

Lillian stood up and went around the desk. I did not see her remove Grandfather’s silver letter opener from the silver tray.

“None of this will go to the museum. It will all go to me.”

He reached into his jacket pocket and removed an Exercise of the power of appointment. Lillian came up behind him to see it. It was dated six days earlier, the day we had gone to the club for dinner before Uncle George died. Everything was to go to Lewis Bracomb.

“I’ll make you a better offer,” I said, not recognizing my voice.

“What can possibly match the trust fund, the house and the paintings?” he said, tossing his head contemptuously like a Pennington.

“Look at these,” I said, standing up and going to the reading table

I opened the box and tilted it, so he could see the blazing scarabs. The light from the fire rolled their reflection across his face like the moon reflected from the river.

“The Pennington scarabs,” he whispered. “I never believed they existed.”

“This is the deal,” I said. “The scarabs for the Exercise. That’s fair.”

He hesitated.

“I’m not sure, Walter. When was the last time Christies raised more than ten million dollars for Egyptian scarabs?”

“It’s not the money, Uncle Lewis. They guarantee the owner eternal life.”

“Eternal life?” he said.

Lillian had stepped behind him to watch the auction. He turned to look at her, and she dropped her hand beside her dress.

“What do you think?” he said.

I thought he was going to add, “my dear.”

“You would be a fool to ever be separated from them,” she said.

“Alright, Walter. I agree. The exercise for the scarabs.”

I lowered the lid of the black box.

“There’s something more you must promise me,” I said.

He exhaled, as if he were becoming bored with the bargaining.

“What’s that?”

“The life of your firstborn son.”

He leaned back his head and laughed, the arrogant, sneering laugh that my Grandfather had laughed on the Nile steamer so long ago.

“Yes, of course,” he said. “But I don’t have a first born son.”

“Then you will serve as well,” Lillian said, driving the letter opener into his throat between his collarbone and his neck.

His mouth dropped open, but all that came out was blood. He tried to stand, but his knees buckled, and he fell forward onto the stone hearth before the fireplace.

“Don’t let him bleed on anything,” Lillian said.

While I held his head up so the blood would flow onto his shirt, she took the Exercise out of his hand and stuck it in the fire. The paper curled black in the flames. We left the letter opener in him like a stopper to contain the blood.

“I’ll get some paper towels,” she said. “We have to get him out of here.”

“Where, Lillian? Where?”

I was frantic. The victim and the suspects and the murder weapon, all in one room.

“The one place they will never look.”

When Lillian returned from the kitchen, she felt in his pockets for his car keys and his cell. She turned off the cell and put it back in his jacket. Packing his neck with paper towels, we stuffed him into his overcoat, and together we dragged him through the house to the garage.

“Follow me to the cemetery,” she said. “I’ll take his car.”

“What are we doing?” I pleaded.

“Just do it, Walter.”

So we lay him on the floor in the back of my car, his head propped up on the door so he would not soil the carpet.

“Wait,” she said. “There’s something else.”

She went back into the house and returned a few moments later with the black box.

“What are you going to do with those?” I wondered.

“Just trust me. I’ve done all this before.”

She kissed me on the cheek, then went down the driveway and got into Lewis Bracomb's car. I followed her to the parkway and across town to the cemetery. A few blocks from the entrance, she turned aside and parked. I stopped beside her, and she got into my car.

"What are we doing?" I said.

"That car won't be there in the morning," she said. "They'll cut it up into so many parts that no one will ever find it."

I got out of the car at the entrance to the cemetery, swung open the gate, then closed it again after we had driven through. Then down along that long, narrow road again to the mausoleum.

"Do you understand now?" she said, touching my hand.

I thought I did understand, and almost laughed out loud. We would deposit the body the one place the police would never look: the mausoleum. When was the last time you heard about the police getting a search warrant for a crypt? I got out of the car and unlocked the bronze door. It was so cold that there would be no vandals or lovers hiding amongst the tombstones. We lifted my Grandfather's third son out of the backseat, and dragged him into the family vault. Then I closed the door so only a crack was open and turned on the light. Lillian set the black box on the ledge beside Uncle George.

"Whose place shall we give him? Yours or mine?" she laughed.

"Mine," I said.

We had to bang on my panel to loosen it enough to drop down. The hardest part was raising him onto the ledge and into the space that my Grandfather had destined for me.

"He doesn't look very comfortable," I said, pushing a foot in so that the panel would close.

"He will be better in the spring," Lillian said. "Now help me with this other one."

It was much easier opening the niche that was to hold the wife of the scion of the Pennington fortune.

"Give me your handkerchief, Walter," she said. "It's so dusty."

I handed her my handkerchief, and she wiped off the sliding tray for the coffin.

"Now turn around. I have a surprise for you."

The last man who had turned his back on her was lying in my crypt.

“Come on now, don’t be silly,” she said.

I turned around, wondering if my cashmere overcoat would ward off a knife. Suddenly the cold was too much, and I shuddered uncontrollably. I could hear her dress rustling. The whole damned place was rustling as if slimy things were curling in the coffins, trying to escape.

“You can look at me now,” she said.

I turned around, and my heart nearly stopped. She was lying naked on the coffin tray, with the large scarab between her breasts, and the seven smaller one placed on the sacred points around her neck.

“Come here, Walter. Slide me in.”

“Lillian, I can’t.”

“You will do it,” she said, raising her right hand with the sacred ring in the ancient gesture of command.

“Lillian!” I cried.

“If you are ever lonely, you can come here and open my panel, and we can make love, and look at the stars together, and sail along the river to the dawn.”

I touched her arm. Despite the cold, she was as warm as if we had just made love. I pushed the tray into the niche.

“Goodbye for now,” she said.

I kissed her. She gasped and looked up in an ecstasy beyond sex. Was she seeing what my Grandfather had seen? What did the children of the Great Queen see, when they finally joined her in death in her chamber? The rustling from the other coffins was like madness rushing out to seize me. I closed the panel and turned off the light. I never returned to the Pennington crypt.

The next afternoon the cook asked if we would be dining in or going to the club.

“Ask Mrs. Pennington,” I said.

A half hour later, the cook returned to say that she couldn’t find her anywhere, and that her car was still in the garage.

“She’s probably gone out with one of her friends,” I said.

I picked up the phone and called her cell. A recording said that she had either turned it off or it was outside the service area.

“I’m sure she’ll be back in a little while,” the cook reassured me.

“Then just fix dinner for the two of us,” I said.

When she did not return by nine, I called the police.

“I wouldn’t do that,” the cook said.

“Why not?”

“She’s probably just out with someone.”

The two uniformed policemen who finally arrived seemed bored by the assignment. They asked me if any of her clothes were missing. I couldn’t tell. They acted like nothing was wrong until they saw the wine stain on the oriental carpet.

“Do you mind if we have that tested?” one of them asked.

“Of course not.”

They returned several days later to report that it was only wine. The older one took me aside and told me that Lillian and Lewis Bracomb had been having an affair. I was speechless. He left me in the library, a pathetic, foolish figure, whose wife had run away with another man. I called several months later to see if they had found anything else. He told me that Bracomb left a voice mail at the museum that he would not return.

I am sometimes tempted to accept Lillian’s invitation to sit beside her in the mausoleum and talk. What could she tell me now about living with the gods, and the great celebration at Thebes every year when Osiris returns to life? Isis cannot reign as Queen of Heaven unless her consort is dismembered when the river recedes. I only hope their son Horus does not appear to claim his lost inheritance.

When I am much older, and the skin on my arms turns red, I will burn this history, and place the ashes in my funeral urn. All the dead will have of me will be a whisper of what I was. Until then, I will live as I always have lived, spending my afternoons on the golf course, and the evenings on the veranda at the club. I will sleep in my Grandfather’s bed, sometimes alone, sometimes accompanied. If I have to get up in the night, I will see the moon reflected off the river in the Blakelock, and remember the legend of Ahmet Bey, who traded the golden scarabs of the Great Pharaoh for the life of the buyer’s first born son.