

SCRIBES CLUB brings you...

FOLLOWING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF



FELUDA

Satyajit Ray, a name that needs no introduction, was born on 2 May, 1920, exactly a hundred years ago. One of the most well-known Bengalis and a pioneer of parallel cinema, he inspires admiration, awe and respect a hundred years after his birth. He has left a huge impact not only in the field of Indian and world cinema but also in the fields of literature, design, book illustration, and musical composition, especially for film. To date his films and books are still widely watched, read, discussed, and appreciated all over the world for their lyrical appeal, realism and humaneness.

One of Ray's most popular characters is "Feluda", the evergreen detective Prodosh C. Mitter. Modern Bengali cinema and television have several adaptations of the Feluda books, not least because detective fiction is one of the most fascinating genres amongst readers, young and old alike.

To commemorate the centenary year of Satyajit Ray's birth, Scribes Club decided to write our own detective stories. We present four stories here, as a small tribute to this versatile genius.

Shailaja Yasmine Das – President, SCRIBES

I

The Eyes of Truth

March 8th. 2000

The man sat with his eyes closed, reclining on his rocking chair, as if he had sat the same way all his life. The assemblage talked in muffled voices and paused now and then, as the chilly wind barked in through the window. The crackling light from the fireplace flickered golden. It made the house warm, warm enough to arouse excitement, covering the room in a dull golden hue.

The younger members in the assembly of researchers from across the world almost perspired at the anticipation of what was to follow. Things at hand were out of the ordinary, and such out of ordinary things did not happen every day.

“So, gentleman, we’ve gathered here today to tell you of the outcome of our research. As you all know, the International Institute of Oriental Research had undertaken an initiative to track ancient oriental Paganism. Paganism is the – ”

“Yes we know.”

James Rutherford was cut off, mid-sentence, by one of the younger researchers.

“Paganism represents a wide variety of traditions that emphasize reverence for nature and revival of ancient polytheistic and animistic religious practices.”

“Yes, that’s the thing. We would appreciate if we are not interrupted midway again.”

Kurt replied. Disruptions disgusted him as much as this research did.

“Well, as I was saying, our organization had excavated an ancient scroll from one of the peat bogs in Northern Ireland. We had found it in the hands of a mutilated dead body, well preserved, thanks to the bog. That’s where our story begins.....”

March 8th. 199

“Holy cow!!”

“What? Haven’t you seen an ancient scroll before?” James asked, critical of the over-bewilderment bubbling in the eyes of the young scholar.

“Uh-huh. No. Have you noticed the writing over here? It’s ...”

“Gaelic. Ancient Gaelic.”

The two men looked up. They were accompanied by a golden-haired, bespectacled man. His demeanour spoke of scholarly wit.

“My name’s Kurt. And you are?”

“Arya.”

“James Rutherford.” Added James, quickly, in fear of being left out.

“You are a letter less than Germany’s miscalculated tragedy.” A smirk played across Kurt’s face. Arya laughed as James looked on, bluntly confused.

“Anyway,” said James, “this ancient Gaelic text is somewhat weird. I don’t think this has anything to do with our field of research.”

“How do you decipher this?”

“Kurt, what even is there to decipher?” James showed the scroll. On a parchment of the yesteryears, the text of the ancient spoke to the trio:

*Fada san taobh an ear
Gheibheadh tu an tabartair,
Am beathaiche, an slayer.
An fhìrinn.*

“Simply talks about an ancient Irish recipe. A recipe to make, say, by the look of it, something of a wine. ‘Fada’ means an alcoholic drug, that tasted really good I guess, hence the name ‘Fada’, that is, ‘touched by the fairies.’”

James could not help feel proud of himself as Kurt’s jaw slightly dropped. “I don’t think this scroll is worth wasting our time for.”

As they went out of the room, they noticed Arya, still bent over the scroll, pensive. Kurt chuckled. “Hey kiddo! Good ol’ James here has solved the mystery. Mind joining us over a cup of tea?”

Arya kept on peering at the scroll. “Are you sure that this is just an Irish recipe?”

“What else d’you reckon it can be?” James asked, rather impatient.

“Irish Gaelic and Scottish Gaelic, even though they sound same, mean totally different at times. What if this scroll contains Scottish Gaelic?”

“Why would Ireland house a Scottish scroll?”

“No wait, kid’s got a point. There were at least fifteen wars fought between the two from 1350 to 1380. This bogged body we got is approximately 600 years old. Kind of makes sense.” said Kurt, his eyebrows jutting together.

James coughed. “But this scroll’s at least 5000 years old.”

“Exactly!” said Arya, “That’s exactly what’s fishy.”

“What’s fishy?”

“What this scroll says. The man probably found this age-old scroll, and it might be that this scroll is what provoked his tribesmen to kill him. A mutilated body of this sort doesn’t go up for sacrifices.”

“And what do you make of this text?” James asked, still in doubt.

Arya looked up. With boyish excitement shivering in his voice, he said, “Far in the East would you find the Creator, the Nourisher, the Slayer. The Truth. The Truth of Existence. Far in the East, beyond the Calm Seas.”

March 8th. 1998

A year had passed since the trio, Kurt, James and Arya had begun their journey towards the “Far East.” They had had a heated argument over those two words. Kurt had asked “How far?” to which James had said, “It says ‘beyond the calm seas’, to which Kurt looked on hopelessly until Arya said, “Must be beyond the Pacific, which means America,” to which James burst out, “It a huge damn continent!” to which Kurt added, “Since everything we are dealing with is of the ancient era, our destination should be the Mayan Civilisation,” to which Arya skipped in delight, “Let’s head to Mexico.”

And there rested the matter.

The Temple of Xmucane dated back to 1000 BC. Situated in the ancient Mayan city of Uxmal, the temple was built in honour of the Mayan Goddess of day and night.

“They also call it ‘Templo le Invocación Iéddula’.” said James as he fiddled with the entry ticket.

“Temple of Untimed Invocation?” asked Arya, looking once at Kurt, next at the steps in front of him that led to the ancient Mayan sanctorum.

Inside the temple the temperature seemed to lower down. A cool air presided over the looming darkness. Within the comfort of the temple, the three scholars gaped at the Pagan Goddess of Light, ornamented with intricacies, a fine example of Mayan expertise of architecture. The walls of the temple were lined with carvings of animals, birds, human hands among few other indiscernible yet intricate designs.

“Ladies and Gentleman, here stands before you the Goddess of Day and Night, Xmucane.” A stout man of forty addressed the congregation of tourists. “It’s believed that Xmucane, wife of King Eadrich, had caught her husband with his mistress Sacniete Xoc, Goddess of White Flowers on a Black Stone. In a fit of fury, she had cursed Eadrich, and herself turned into a statue of stone. This!” The man pointed towards the stone sculpture.

“And Sacniete?” asked Kurt.

“She is said to have forever transformed herself into white flowers, and out of guilt, had decided to be of service to Xmucane, awaiting her forgiveness.”

“Quite a cute story ... helps us in no way with our research.” said James, disappointed.

The three of them did not speak much on the way back to the hotel. The night sparkled with stars in a clear sky.

“James,” said Kurt, his eyes beyond the window. “Kid hasn’t said a word since morning.”

“Arya? What’s worrying you?”

“Don’t you guys think something is missing in the folklore?” said Arya, speaking for the first time in eight hours.

“I know something’s missing. I can’t quite place it, though.” said Kurt, turning to look back at Arya, who kept on scratching on his notebook.

“The guide never said what Xmucane’s curse was about, is that what you’re referring to?” James asked, visibly concerned.

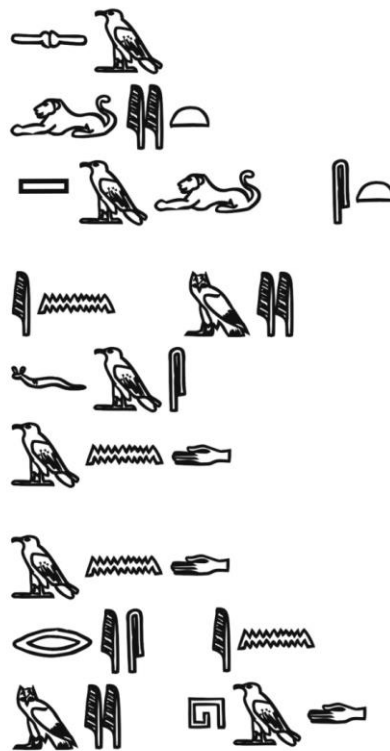
“The guide never said a word about the curse. In fact, no books tell us about the Curse of Xmucane. Yet it’s there right in front of us, for everyone to see.” said Arya. “Did you notice the carving on the temple walls?” he added, as the trio now sat together, two of them with their usual excitement.

“The temple walls had carvings of animals, birds among various other distinctive marks.” said Arya, almost whispering. “There is only one language that speaks in pictures.”

“H-Hieroglyphics?” Kurt asked, eyes wide. James gaped.

“The carvings in the temple aren’t just carvings. They are messages. The same message again and again. The curse of Xmucane.”

With that, Arya showed his notebook. The designs of the walls of the temple was drawn with a half-chewed off pencil.



“What does it say?”

Arya breathed. “*Za lyt salst inhe fas, und ris inhe had;*’ which means, ‘The light of my face shall set for you, and rise opposite to where you belong.’”

The three fell silent.

“Why couldn’t these people be a wee-bit less ridiculous and talk in complete sentences and not make a riddle of every damn word that comes out of their heavenly mouth?”

Kurt kicked the chair in front of him in frustration.

“Patience, mate. Patience.” Arya said, a childish smile playing on his lips. “Decode the curse, can you? If you do we’ll know of our final destination.”

“How can you be so sure of its decoding?” asked James, still overwhelmed with the monstrosity of the discovery.

“Because I already have.”

Both James and Kurt looked at Arya, half-smiling, half-questioning. “You have?”

“Xmucane, the Goddess of Light, thus controlling day and night, shall set in Uxmal, and rise opposite to where Eadrich, her husband and the king of Uxmal stays. That’s the curse. Think again. The light over here shall set, and rise opposite to this place. The light shall rise in the opposite face of the earth. The light shall rise in India.” Arya smiled.

“BLIMEY!!!” screamed Kurt so suddenly it made both James and Arya jumped where they sat.

“Kid, kid I get you! If you draw a line from here exactly through the globe, the exact opposite is India!” Kurt jumped up and down on the floor. “OWW!” came the sound of his leg hitting the chair.

“To be more precise, a line drawn from Uxmal would lead directly to,” said James, peering over a map of the world, as his forefinger glided across the map in a straight line towards the Indian subcontinent. “Here,” his finger stopped at Mushtang, a district in Nepal. “Here,” he repeated, beating the map with his finger.

“What’s so important about this district?” asked Kurt.

“Geographically, Mushtang is the source of the river Gandaki that carves a gorge on the Himalayas. Historically, the last king of the Mushtang dynasty was called King Chitravake, never fought a single war all his life. Anthropologically, it is home to Muktinath, even a temple of that name is situated there in Mushtang. Geologically, it is home to the remnants of the Jurassic Age, where there is a plenty of Ammonite Shells fossilized. These black fossils, called ‘Shalgram Shila’ are even worshipped as the ‘Nourisher’ – Narayana. According to Prakriti Khand of Brahma Puran :

*'Ahancha shailarupi cha Gandakiteer sannidhhau,
Adhishthanang karishyami Bharate tava shapatah.'*

Politically - ”

“That’ll do.” said Kurt as he yawned and fell headlong on his bed.

James chuckled. “Why would we even need an encyclopedia when you got a genius like Arya with you?”

March 8th. 1999

A year had gone by in search for ‘The Creator, the Nourisher, the Slayer. The Truth.’ of the Gaelic scroll. It’s often funny how far the search for something you do not even know can lead you to.

“Hey kid! Want some biscuits?”

Arya smiled. Taking a biscuit, he said, “Guess I’ve been wrong all this while.”

“Don’t be silly. If clues are squeezed down in various corners of the earth there has to be a reason for men to put them up.”

“Did you guys think why would some random Egyptian notch down curses on a Mayan temple?” Kurt said, biscuit in his mouth.

“Reason one : Mayans Knew Hieroglyphics.

Reason two : Story of Bastet, daughter of Egyptian Sun God, Ra, is in similar veins to that of Xmucane.

Reason three : Religion and culture from all across the world began as one unit from one place.” Arya let out a prolonged breath.

“Guess the text books always lied didn’t they?” James looked at the sky, a strange expression on his face.

Next day was a day of celebration in Mushtang. It was the celebration of Chitravake, the birthday of the last king of Mushtang. The king was worshipped as a deity in the village.

“Cool guy, this Chitravake. Suddenly dreams that their worshipped God is captivated in a stone, legit pulls up an entire gorge to find that stone, finds a random stone out of nowhere and deifies it. Happy guy, happy people, happy God.” Kurt smirked.

“I was thinking, we’ve searched through every single temple of this district with zero results. I think we should start searching other places out.” said James.

“What places?” Kurt stared at him, as James opened his mouth and spontaneously closed it shut, lacking suitable words to form an answer.

“Chitravake began worshipping that stone before it was the annual time for worship isn’t it?” Arya looked at Kurt.

“Yeah, something of that sort. I reckon we should check in that main temple of Muktinath before we think of searching elsewhere. A last check never hurts.”

“I guess Kurt’s right Arya. What do you think?”

Arya nodded. “Sounds like a plan. Do you remember the exact words told to Chitravake in his dream?”

“Folklores say that Chitravake heard a prophecy in his dream. ‘Whoever finds out the Truth of the Trinity shall be destroyed. The curse of the stone shall befall the bull-eyed intruder of Truth.’” said James.

“Why bull-eyed?”

“Probably red-eyed, Kurt. I guess that’s the curse – the one whom the ‘curse’ befalls would apparently have a change in their eye colour. Red, like that of a fiery bull.”

“This prophecy... this prophecy... rings a bell does it not?” said Arya, out of breath.

James and Kurt looked on, waiting.

“THE SCROLLLLL!” Arya leaped on his feet. “The Gaelic Scroll! *‘Far in the East would you find the Creator, the Nourisher, the Slayer.’* Remember now? The Trinity! The Truth of the Trinity.” Arya clapped his hands in glee. “We are still on the right track,” he added, smiling at the bewildered two.

Arya could not sleep that night. He tossed and turned in his bed. Something was not right. They were missing out on something. It was this thought that kept him awake until 3 o’ clock in the morning when he exclaimed, “Chitravake’s untimed worship. Templo le Invocación Iéddula. Temple of Untimed Invocation!”

The clock struck 3:30 am. Arya headed out.

March 8th. 2000

James drew a long breath. “In the morning, Arya said that the famous temple of Muktinath wasn’t the place we had been searching for.

‘We need to head to the temple of Chitravake. There is the place the *truth* or whatever it is, is hidden.’ That’s what Arya told us. When we asked him how he knew, Arya said that the story of Chitravake gave him the idea of ‘Untimed Worship,’ much like the Temple of Untimed Invocation we saw in Mexico. We headed towards that temple.”

Kurt continued, “Upon reaching, we found an ancient mound on which was situated a temple, on the left bank of the Kali Gandaki. Arya was right. The temple was built on black stones, on which bloomed white fragarias. These are flowers found only in those regions of the Himalayas. Arya had it figured out : Xmucane had cursed that she would rise in the opposite face of the earth, and Sacniete Xoc, the Goddess of White Flowers on a Black Stone, would, out of guilt, accept Xmucane’s servitude. Those flowers, black stones, and the temple said we were right.”

“We had heard that the temple was cursed.” said James. “There were no guards or priests in the temple. Arya walked straight up to the altar. ‘There,’ he said, ‘there, in the eye of the deity’s idol, lies the truth. *Yatha Salagrame Harihe.*’ Kurt and I were confused. Arya said, ‘I too was. Xmucane cleared my doubts. Untimed Invocation. The deity shall reveal the *truth* with Untimed Invocation – *Akal Bodhan* . If we remove the eye of the idol, the truth shall be revealed, the same manner in which, Rama tried removing his eye, and the truth of the 108th. lotus was revealed to him.”

“We removed the eye. We removed it and...” Kurt paused, “and there was a little palm leaf. It definitely had some inscriptions, but...” Kurt stopped.

“But? But what?” One of the researchers in the room almost shouted.

“Someone had been there before us. The Inscription was destroyed.” James answered. A veil of silence engulfed the congregation.

“We were disheartened. While returning, Arya had an accident. He slipped down the gorge, and hurt his head rather badly. Doctors said the case was hopeless, but he survived. Reports said Arya had received an injury in the left inferior frontal cortex of the brain, rendering him mute for life.”

With muffled voices and soft goodnights, the assembly of scholars slowly dissolved. They departed one by one, muttering their goodbyes to the man on the rocking chair.

James sighed. "Tell him I'll meet him again, Kurt. Tomorrow evening." and he went out.

"Hey kid," Kurt knelt down beside the man, "Everything's going to be okay. You'll talk again. I promise. We are trying, aren't we?"

Arya nodded, eyes still closed, as a smile spread on his lips. His soft curls fell on his bandaged forehead.

"Goodnight, Arya." Kurt squeezed his shoulders, left the house in silence.

The fire flamed an amazing red. Slowly, Arya opened his eyes. The light from the fireplace blazed bright on his eyes, dark red, like that of a bull.

The opening of the front door broke the constant silence, broken otherwise by the soft falling embers. Arya smiled.

"Welcome, my old friend." He said.

The blazing fire died out all of a sudden.

Somoshree Palit
ISC Batch 2020



II



"There hasn't been an interesting case for at least five months now." groaned Agent Ethan Johnson of the FBI. "Just stupid pickpockets and petty thieves who keep getting caught. Miller, since when has New York become so crime free?"

His partner, Agent Alistair Miller, a man in his late thirties, was drinking a cup of black coffee. He looked at Ethan, who was a man of around thirty five years or so and above six feet tall, with an amused smile and replied, "The way you say it, it sounds like a terrible thing. I find it rather comforting to be honest, Agent Johnson."

Ethan sighed and said, "I know, but it is so tedious, just sitting at a desk all day long. Right now, the NYPD has more work than us."

Just as he finished talking Alistair's phone rang and he listened intently for a minute or so, then replied, "Got it." Putting his phone in his pocket he said, "Looks like your prayers have been answered, Agent Johnson".

"What do you mean, Miller?" asked Ethan.

Alistair replied, "the CEO of one of the biggest software companies 'Mirage,' is missing and the case has been assigned to us."

The office is huge, a ninety story building with tall glass doors leading inside. A police

officer takes them to the elevator. The CEO's office is on the ninetieth floor. On each floor, there are huge rooms with hundreds of people typing away on computers. At last, they reach the topmost level. The floor is completely empty except for young, well built guard standing outside and a young woman with wavy brown hair and dark brown eyes, working on a computer. A thick battered volume of 'Plays by Shakespeare' and a cup of tea are the only other things on her desk. On seeing the two men, the woman stands up and looks at them.

"Agent Johnson from the FBI", Ethan says, while showing his ID. "And this is Agent Miller." The woman smiles at them and says, "I'm Mr. James' secretary and the young man standing there is Lucas Jones, his personal bodyguard." Ethan nods and says, "you have to answer a few standard questions Miss....." he checks her ID "Taylor."

"Call me Raven." the woman replies, "Oh and before you ask, let me tell you that Lucas and I were the only two people who saw Mr. James today."

"So are you sure no one else was here except the two of you today?" Ethan asks Raven.

"I sit outside his office", she replies. "Pretty difficult for me to miss anyone entering or leaving."

Ethan sighs and stands up.

Agent Miller had goes back to the FBI Office and is working on finding out more about the company. Everything seems relatively normal until a small detail catches his eye. He decides to call Ethan.

Ethan receives the call and asks, " So did you get any leads on the case?"

"Just one", Alistair replies. "And it's not exactly a lead either. The company is around three years old. The bank accounts seem mostly fine, but a few months back, James started funding an obscure charity called 'Help for God's Gifts' which collects money to help orphans."

"Honestly Miller", says Ethan, "the man just wanted to be noble. These people earn millions. He might have wanted to help this charity. What's wrong with that?"

"That maybe, but Mr. Johnson, I think we need to visit this charity tomorrow", Alistair says, before disconnecting the call.

Ethan is about to leave when he suddenly turns around and asks Raven, "How was your boss, Ms. Taylor?"

Raven answered, "He was a good man but terrible at hiding secrets."

"So then you must know about his.....charitable actions?" Ethan questions.

"It's like I said," Raven says with a smile. "He's a good man."

The next day, Ethan and Alistair go to 'Help for God's Gifts.' The building is small and dingy, with a tired looking man sitting at the reception, in front of a worn down computer.

"Agent Johnson and Agent Miller from the FBI," Ethan announce to the receptionist who quickly stands up.

"Please take us to your Director", says Ethan.

The receptionist takes them inside, to a small office with whitewashed walls where an old man is working on some files.

The receptionist says, "Mr. Thomas, FBI agents have come to meet you," and leaves.

The Director, Mr. Davis Thomas, a middle aged, bespectacled man, looks at them carefully and says, "How can I help you, gentlemen?"

Ethan and Alistair sit down and Ethan proceeds to ask, "Do you know a man called Mr. James?"

"Of course, I do", Mr. Thomas replied. "He was extremely generous to our charity. We could finally buy proper books for our children."

He shows Ethan an account book for the past year. Ethan looks at it and says, "He started paying this money five months ago, with a partner, Harper Smith. Miller, did Raven tell you anything about Mr. Smith?"

Alistair does not reply. Instead he says, "The amounts from James's accounts and these ones don't match. James paid much more than this." He stands up and says, "Mr. Johnson, I have to get back and I need you go back to James's office and check if Harper Smith visited him today."

"But Raven said....." Ethan starts.

Miller said, "I know what Raven said. I need you to check the office register. Let's go."

Back at the FBI Office, Alistair checks through James's and Raven's accounts. Then he checks for Harper Smith. After some more research, he finds what he has already guessed. He decides to call Ethan.

"Miller, Smith did visit James today. The office records say that he signed in but James' main office has no cameras to check", said Ethan.

Alistair commented, "I thought so. James is too clever to be caught on camera, but I think I know where he is."

"Where?"

"First arrest Mr. Smith. He is probably at the airport right now, boarding a flight to Switzerland."

"But how could you possibly know?" asked Ethan.

Harper Smith also known as Mr. James had been arrested and was awaiting trial.

Alistair answered, "This morning, when I was searching for Mr. Smith, I could find no leads. All of a sudden I came across a few bank transactions to the Swiss bank under the name of Harper Smith. When I saw his picture, I realised that he was a fake identity under whose name Mr. James put half of the charity money into the Swiss bank, probably to run away to, later. He had escaped being indicted in Australia before using the same method - transferring large amounts of amounts of money along with a fake partner and then disappearing. You caught him just before he escaped."

"But Miller", asked Ethan, looking confused, "how did you know to suspect James? Was it the accounts record at that charity home?"

Alistair smiled. "The person who put me on the correct track and gave me two clues to the case is waiting outside."

Then raising his voice, he says, "You may come in Ms. Taylor."

The young woman entered the room and said, "Call me Raven."

"She gave you two clues?" Ethan asked puzzled.

"Quite right Mr. Johnson. The first clue, when she told me that nobody but she and the bodyguard, Mr. Jones had seen Mr. James since morning. But Smith had clearly visited as per the office register. This led me to thinking that if James and Smith was the same person, he couldn't possibly meet himself."

"Very good", says Raven, smiling. I was hoping you'd catch on."

"But if you knew, then why didn't you just tell us?" Ethan asked her, looking annoyed.

Raven laughed and said, "Where's the fun in that? Besides, James was generous to me. The least I could do was to keep his secret."

Ethan looked away. Then after a few moments he said, "Miller, you said that there were two clues. You told me one. What was the other?"

"The second clue, Mr. Johnson, was given to you by Raven."

At this, Raven smiled to herself.

Alistair suddenly asked Raven, "You were reading Shakespeare today, if I'm not mistaken?"

Raven nodded.

Alistair continued, "You, Mr. Johnson, told me quite unknowingly, that Raven called Mr. James 'a good man'. The first thing these words reminded me of was Mark Antony's speech."

"From Julius Caesar?" asked Ethan.

"Exactly", replied Alistair. "Antony called Caesar's murderers 'honourable men', suggesting quite the opposite. I thought that maybe Raven had done the same thing....."

Aadrita Gupta

Class - XI B

III

EVIL IN THE AIR

Hard upon Lord Carnavaron's discovery of the Tomb of Men-her-Ra, (one of those shadowy kings of the Eighth Dynasty when the Old Kingdom was falling to decay), Sir John Willard, excavating in the vicinity of the Pyramids of Giza, came unexpectedly across a series of funeral chambers. The greatest interest was aroused by their discovery, which was reported in detail in the newspapers.

Shortly thereafter an event occurred which took a profound hold on the public mind. Sir John Willard died quite suddenly of heart failure.

The more sensational newspapers immediately took the opportunity of reviving all the old superstitious stories connected with the ill luck of certain Egyptian treasures. The unlucky Mummy at the British Museum, that hoary old chestnut, was dragged out and debated and discussed with renewed zest.

A fortnight later Mr Bleibner, another Egyptologist, died of acute blood poisoning, and a few days afterwards a nephew of his shot himself in New York. The 'Curse of Men-her-Ra' was the talk of the day, and the magic power of dead-and-gone Egypt was exalted to a fetish point.

It was around this time that Martha received a brief note from Lady Willard, widow of the dead archaeologist, asking her to meet her at her house in Kensington Square. I accompanied her.

'It is kind of you to have come so promptly, Martha.'

'I am at your service, Lady Willard. You wished to consult me?' Said Martha.

'You are, I am aware, a detective, but it is not only as a detective that I wish to consult you. You are a woman of original views, you have imagination, experience of the world...So tell me, Martha, what are your views on the supernatural?'

Martha hesitated for a moment before she replied. Finally she said:

'Let us not misunderstand each other, Lady Willard. It is not a general question that you are asking me here. It has a personal application, has it not? You are referring obliquely to the death of your late husband?'

'That is so,' she admitted.

'You want me to investigate the circumstances of his death?'

‘I want you to ascertain for me exactly how much is newspaper chatter, and how much may be said to be founded on fact? Three deaths, Martha—each one explicable taken by itself, but taken together surely an almost unbelievable coincidence, and all within a month of the opening of the tomb! It may be mere superstition, it may be some potent curse from the past that operates in ways undreamed of by modern science. The fact remains—three deaths! And I am afraid, Martha, horribly afraid. It may not yet be the end.’

‘For whom do you fear?’ asked Martha.

‘For my son, I am afraid. Supposing that the spirit of the dead King is not yet appeased? Perhaps to you I seem to be talking nonsense—’

‘No, indeed, Lady Willard,’ said Martha quickly. ‘I, too, believe in the force of superstition, one of the greatest forces the world has ever known.’

I looked at her in surprise. I should never have credited Martha with being superstitious. But the little woman was obviously in earnest.

The charm of Egypt had engulfed me. Not so Martha. Dressed precisely the same as in London, she carried a small clothes-brush in her pocket and waged an unceasing war on the dust which accumulated on her dark apparel.

‘And my boots,’ she wailed. ‘Regard them. My boots, of the neat patent leather, usually so smart and shining. See, the sand is inside them, which is painful, and outside them, which outrages the eyesight. Also the heat, it causes my body to become limp—but limp!’

‘Look at the Sphinx,’ I urged. ‘Even I can feel the mystery and the charm it exudes.’

Martha looked at it discontentedly.

‘It has not the air happy,’ she declared. ‘How could it, half-buried in sand in that untidy fashion. Ah, this cursed sand!’

We had several chats with Dr Ames, who had investigated all the cases. A friendly, congenial man, and very mannered. He sympathised with the widow, and Martha approved of his detailed descriptions of the murders.

We decided to spend the night in the tent in which the two deaths had occurred.

As we entered the tent which had been assigned to us, for a wash before the evening meal, a tall dark figure in white robes stood aside to let us pass with a graceful gesture and a murmured greeting in Arabic. Martha stopped.

‘You are Hassan, the late Sir John Willard’s servant?’

'I served my Lord Sir John, now I serve his son.' He took a step nearer to us and lowered his voice. 'You are a wise one, they say, learned in dealing with evil spirits. Let the young master depart from here. There is evil in the air around us.'

And with an abrupt gesture, not waiting for a reply, he strode away.

'Evil in the air,' muttered Martha. 'Yes, I feel it.'

Our meal was hardly a cheerful one. The floor was left to Dr Ames, who discoursed at length upon Egyptian antiquities. We kept on until darkness had gathered...

Just as we were preparing to retire, Dr Ames caught Martha by the arm and pointed. A shadowy figure was moving amidst the tents. It was no human one: I recognized distinctly the dog-headed figure I had seen carved on the walls of the tomb.

My blood froze at the sight.

'Oh dear !' murmured Martha , crossing herself vigorously. 'Anubis, the jackal-headed, the god of departing souls.'

'Someone is hoaxing us,' cried Dr Ames, rising indignantly to his feet.

'No,' said Martha, shaking his head. 'No.'

The doctor stared at her incredulously - then, repeating his words, he cried, 'Someone is hoaxing us. Come, we'll soon catch the fellow.'

He dashed energetically in pursuit of the shadowy apparition. I followed him, but, search as we would, we could find no trace of any living soul having passed that way. We returned, somewhat disturbed in mind, to find Martha taking energetic measures, in her own way, to ensure our personal safety. She was busily surrounding our tent with various diagrams and inscriptions which she was drawing in the sand. I recognized the five-pointed star or Pentagon many times repeated. Finally, we decided to take some rest.

As though in answer to outer prayer, the flap of the tent was lifted and Hassan appeared, bearing a steaming cup which he offered to Martha. It proved to be camomile tea, a beverage of which she was inordinately fond. Having thanked Hassan and refused his offer of another cup for myself, we were left alone once more. I stood at the door of the tent sometime after undressing, looking out over the desert.

'What a wonderful place,' I said aloud, 'and what wonderful work. I can feel the fascination. This desert life, this probing into the heart of a vanished civilization. Surely, Martha, you, too, must feel the charm?'

I got no answer, and I turned, a little annoyed. My annoyance was quickly changed to concern. Martha was lying back across the rude couch, her face horribly convulsed. Beside her was the empty cup. I rushed to her side, then dashed out and across the camp to Dr Ames's tent.

'Dr Ames!' I cried. 'Come at once.'

'What's the matter?' said the doctor, appearing in pajamas.

'My friend! She's ill... dying...the camomile tea...don't let Hassan leave the camp!' I gasped hysterically.

Like a flash the doctor ran to our tent. Martha was lying as I left her.

'Extraordinary,' cried Ames. 'Looks like a seizure—or—what did you say about something she drank?' He picked up the empty cup.

'Only I did not drink it!' said a placid voice.

We turned in amazement. Martha was sitting up on the bed. She was smiling.

'No,' she said gently. 'I did not drink it. While my good friend was apostrophizing the night, I took the opportunity of pouring it, not down my throat, but into a little bottle. That little bottle will go to the analytical chemist. No'—as the doctor made a sudden movement—as a sensible man, you will understand that violence will be of no avail. During your absence to fetch you, I have had time to put the bottle in safe keeping. Ah, quick, hold him!'

'Dr Ames?' I cried, stupefied. 'But I thought you believed in some occult influence?'

'You misunderstood me. What I meant was that I believe in the terrific force of superstition. Once get it firmly established that a series of deaths are supernatural, and you might almost stab a man in broad daylight, and it would still be put down to the curse, so strongly is the instinct of the supernatural implanted in the human race. I suspected from the first that a man was taking advantage of that instinct. The idea came to him, I imagine, with the death of Sir John Willard. A fury of superstition arose at once. As far as I could see, nobody could derive any particular profit from Sir John's death. Mr Bleibner was a different case. Young Bleibner wrote plainly enough: "I am a leper", but nobody realized that he shot himself because he believed that he contracted the dread disease of leprosy.'

'What?' I ejaculated.

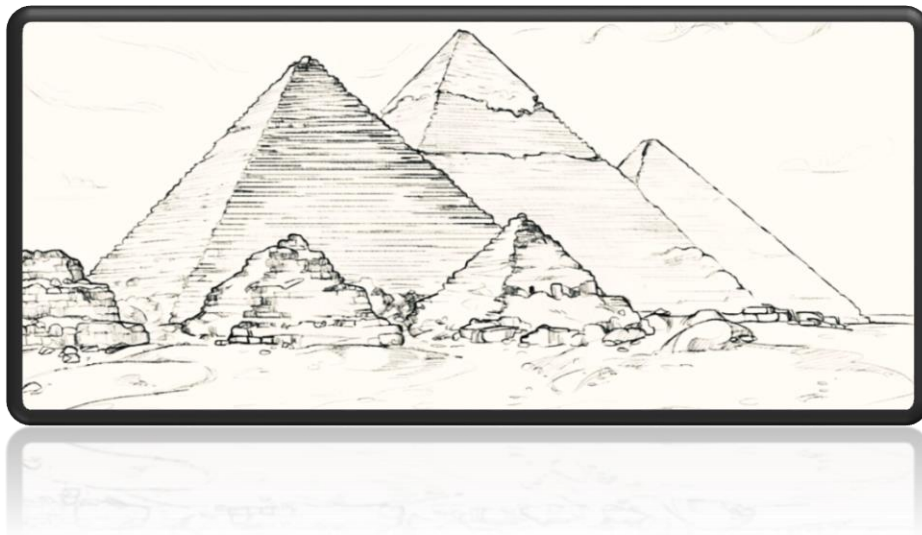
It was the clever invention of a diabolical mind. Young Bleibner was suffering from some minor skin trouble; he had lived in the South Sea Islands, where the disease is common enough. Ames was a former friend of his, and a well-known medical man, he would never dream of doubting his word. When I arrived here, my suspicions were not

really about Dr Ames. But I soon realized that only the doctor could have perpetrated and concealed the crimes, and I learnt that he was previously acquainted with young Bleibner. He was the one who investigated the murders, told people that the archaeologists had died of so and so disease. Doubtless Bleibner at some time or another had made a will or had insured his life in favour of the doctor. The latter saw his chance of acquiring wealth. It was easy for him to inject Mr Bleibner with the deadly germs. Then his companion, John Willard, overcome with despair at the dread news his friend had conveyed to him, shot himself.'

'Furthermore, I will tell you an interesting psychological fact. A murderer has always a strong desire to repeat his successful crime, the performance of it grows upon him. Hence my fears for young Willard. The figure of Anubis you saw tonight was Hassan dressed up by my orders. I wanted to see if I could frighten the doctor. But it would take more than the supernatural to frighten him. I could see that he was not entirely taken in. He pretended to believe in supernatural things.

Martha proved to be perfectly right! Young Bleibner, some years ago, in a fit of drunken merriment, had made a jocular will, leaving 'my cigarette-case you admire so much and everything else of which I die possessed which will be principally debts to my good friend Robert Ames who once saved my life from drowning'.

The case was hushed up as far as possible, and, to this day, people talk of the remarkable series of deaths in connection with the Tomb of Men-her-Ra as a triumphal proof of the vengeance of a bygone king upon the desecrators of his tomb—a belief which, as Martha pointed out to me, is contrary to all Egyptian belief and thought.



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Class - XI A

IV

THE CASE OF THE AUSTRIAN PRINCESS

"Oh my God!"

Kane heard a shout from outside. He immediately got up and went to see.

He saw his friend, Wayne, the owner of the luxury train brands standing there, a shocked expression on his face. Kane was a detective and he was on his way to vacation on Switzerland. He had boarded his friend's train the previous morning.

"There are two pieces of bad news. One, the train has had to stop due to a broken bridge ahead. The second, there has been a murder," Wayne said mournfully.

"Who was the victim?" Kane asked, standing up straighter.

"It was the rich businessman, Hector Miller," Wayne said, leading Kane to the compartment where he was found dead.

Kane took out a napkin to examine the body which was laid on the bed, untouched. He observed the stab wounds. There were precisely nine stab wounds. The stab wounds were frenzied and violent. Kane took a look at the surroundings. The window was latched shut. There was a handkerchief with a small flower embroidered in one corner. There was a small bottle of morphine, a cigar, and a blank piece of paper. The placement of the objects seemed off. The person was very clever and seemed to know that there was a detective on board. This also further confirmed suspicions of the murder being planned out ahead.

"Make sure to lock up this compartment so that no one fiddles with anything here," Kane said after looking around and examining every single detail of the compartment. He walked out of it, closely followed by Wayne.

"I would like to speak to all the passengers on the train, right after breakfast. Please inform them," Kane said and headed to the dining carriage. There was a gloomy atmosphere onboard the train. Every passenger was obviously shocked by the horrendous crime. Everyone dined in complete silence. After having some breakfast, Kane went into an empty compartment and sat down with his small notebook.

The first passenger came in. She was an elderly woman, who was dressed very elegantly and was wearing expensive pieces of jewellery.

"I feel greatly disturbed by this horrible crime that took place," she said in a thick Russian accent. Kane nodded, pulling his pen out.

"So do I, Miss Era, but we must not grieve too long and get to the bottom of who did this before anyone else is harmed. I must ask you some questions. Firstly, please show me your passport."

"Of course."

"Please tell me what you were doing last night?" Kane asked.

"Since I am quiet old, I have to take a lot of medication due to my illnesses and that makes me sleep soundly. I went to bed at 10:00."

"What were you doing before you went to bed?"

"I had just returned from dinner and I was reading a book. By the time it was ten o'clock I had finished the book. So I took my medication and went to bed."

"Does your medication, by any chance, contain morphine? Or do you take morphine separately?"

"Yes, in fact. That is one of the medicines I need to take. So that I can sleep well."

Kane noted down every single word she said and she left.

The second passenger was a young man, a very lean and fragile looking one. He sat down and showed his passport.

"What were you doing last night?" Kane asked.

"After dinner, I went to my compartment that I was sharing with Monsieur Chevrolet. I had changed into my pajamas and was lying in my bed, trying to fall asleep. After a while, when I couldn't sleep, I went to the restroom. Soon after I came back, I was able to sleep," the nervous young man named Jeff said.

"When was this?"

"Around 11 o'clock."

"Did you hear anything when you crossed Mr. Hector's compartment?"

"No sir. Nothing at all."

"What was Monsieur Chevrolet doing?"

"He was looking through what seemed like bills."

Soon, it was time for the third passenger. Monsieur Chevrolet came in and sat down, showing his passport. Kane could smell the strong tobacco on his breath from a distance.

"What were you doing last night, Monsieur?"

"After dinner, I went back to my compartment. Jeff was lying there, tossing and turning. I had to look through some bills. After a while, Jeff got up and went to the washroom. It was at about 11 o' clock. He came back and soon fell asleep. I did my work for some while and soon went to sleep."

Kane had no questions for him and asked for the penultimate passenger to come in. A young woman came in through the door and sat down at the table.

"Hello, Detective Kane. I'm Mary Jane, I've heard a lot about you."

"Thank you, Mary. I would love to talk more but you know we have to get this done as quickly as possible. So what did you do last night?" Kane looked at her and thought that she looked extremely familiar for some reason but shook it off.

"After dinner, I sat in my shared compartment and wrote in my journal. I was just absentmindedly going through my things. Soon, I noticed it was quite late. I went to the bathroom and while coming back I heard a loud noise from Mr. Hector's compartment. I knocked and asked if everything was alright. He replied that everything was. I left, not thinking too about it."

"What time was this?"

"Around midnight."

"Thank you. I will see you outside."

Finally, it was the turn of the last remaining passenger, Lady Alexandera. She was part of the British royal family and was a kind and gentle woman, the most unlikely to commit a murder.

"Hello Sir," she inclined her head and sat down.

"Good afternoon Madam. I must ask you some questions. What were you doing last night?"

"Last night, I was in my compartment with Mary. She is a very sweet girl. I was writing a letter back home. After I finished, I went to sleep."

"Thank you, Madam." Kane nodded.

He did not find out much, except the noise Mary said she heard. It was rather strange because the walls of the compartments were quite thick and the floors were covered with thick carpets.

He went back to examine the compartment. On looking at the evidence and dusting powder on them he found absolutely no trace of fingerprints. He put them in separate bags and took them outside. He got everyone to examine them and see if anything

belonged to them. Nobody claimed anything which was, of course, quite typical. He went back to his room and was examining the furniture when he came across a loose floorboard under the bed. He lay down on his stomach and pulled it up and saw a number of letters. He took them out and went back to his compartment, calling Wayne. They read the letters and found out about Hector Miller's past.

Hector Miller, wasn't who he had he was. His real name was Michael McQuoid. He was responsible for the most infamous and horrifying murders in Europe, the murder of a member of Austria's royal family. Most of the other letters were threats. They were not signed and were printed out.

"We need to find out more about these people." Kane said and walked out with Wayne.

"But how do we make them speak?"

"Quite simple. We tell them about who Hector Miller was and ask if they know anything about the Austrian princess's murder. We also watch their reactions."

So they did. They spent about two hours talking to everyone in detail. They all knew about the murder and were very shocked and upset that they had been in the train with the murderer. Mary Jane seemed less upset than the rest, which was really strange. She did not even seem shocked when he said that Hector was McQuoid.

Kane spent the entire night thinking about the murder. Why were there so many random things? Why was there a piece of paper? Why was he stabbed multiple times, specifically nine? Why? Kane had no answers and he just could not wrap his head around this mystery. It was so frustrating! While he was engrossed in his thoughts, Wayne burst through the door, panting.

"I just found out something! Come with me!" Kane hurried to Wayne's compartment.

"I was looking at the blank paper, and I took it out to examine it. I accidentally dropped it into the fire and words appeared. It said 'You are a dead man, McQuoid. Just like my sister is. And it is signed. Look...the initials A.S. That could only mean one thing. The only person with the first initial letter is Lady Alexandra."

"But it couldn't be. Although she is married, her maiden name was Addington. It couldn't be her. Unless..." Kane trailed off. "We need all the passports right now."

Kane was presented with all the passports in front of him. He took a small and slender pocket knife and observed all the passports at an angle. When he came to Lady Alexandra's passport, he noticed nothing 'fake' about it. When he came to Mary Jane's passport, he was shocked. He found a piece of paper carefully stuck on top of the name and he careful removed it. Beneath it was her real name. Adriane Southwark. Then it struck him why 'Mary' looked so familiar. She was the sister of Carlotta Southwark, the Austrian princess who was murdered.

"It was you, wasn't it?"

Adriane knew she had been caught. "Yes. It was me. Before you ask anything let me

explain. My parents hated me, and the only one I had was my sister. When she died, I was devastated. I wanted the killer hunted down. Instead of being hanged, he was just given a sentence for ten years. A few weeks ago, I came across a list of the people going on board the train. I found the name Hector Miller. I was suspicious and had him searched up. I found out it was McQuoid. I immediately knew I had to do it. To get the revenge and justice my sister never did. I shouldn't have done that, I know. I left the paper because I wanted to be caught. Immediately after I did it, I felt horribly guilty." She explained, tears shining in her eyes

Kane listened patiently. "What about the nine stab wounds?" he asked softly.

"It was the same number of times my sister was stabbed," she hung her head low.

"As much I would hate to do this to a person who only wanted justice for her sister, you have to go to jail. I'm really sorry, miss," Kane stood up and bowed his head in respect. He left her out of the room and made some urgent calls.

Soon, the police came through the snow. They also brought the people to fix the bridge and remove the snow and the body too. Adriane had been taken away and so had the body. The bridge was fixed in a day and the snow was shovelled out of the way. The next night, the train arrived in Switzerland.

"Thank you Wayne, for making my vacation extremely intriguing and honestly, interesting," Kane smiled.

"My pleasure Kane," Wayne smiled back.

"We'll meet soon Wayne," Kane bid his friend goodbye.

Wayne nodded, "We will, my friend."



This story was inspired by "Murder on the Orient Express", by Agatha Christie

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