

The Strato Shooters



PHARAOH FIGURED WRONG

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

International Air Control Was In Firm Authority Over the Post War World

BLOUNT was in Bagdad, settling the terms of an agreement between Stratolines and the English Imperial Airways, when the sudden order came sending him to Cairo. Of course, Stratolines was not concerned with mail or passenger or any local service. Its huge

six-engined Planetoid transports handled long-haul freight exclusively. But the British line, following the war, had operated a Cairo-Bagdad-Teheran freight extension and when it took this into the stratosphere, it threatened to clash with Stratolines.

Blount was glad an amicable adjustment could be reached. Neither London nor New York wanted any hostilities. The terrific battle for the air lanes that started even before the peace treaties were signed, had been a lesson to all concerned. Now that the International Air Control was in firm authority over the world's skyways, everybody could relax and attend to business.

What took him to Cairo, Blount neither knew nor cared. Some loose screw, of course. He was one of the best—and knew it—in the whole corps of strata-shooters, as the Stratolines trouble-shooters called themselves. And the corps itself, a couple of dozen in all, was composed of picked men who could do anything from argue with a parliament to milk a cow. During the war Blount had flown a Thunderbolt, coming out a major, but a 4F at home had copped his wife and she divorced him. This, instead of proving that she was no-account, soured him, hardened him, turned him into a tough customer. Stratolines used him where the going was bad, as a rule. He saw trouble ahead in Cairo.

During the flight over the Mesopot flatlands, the Airways pilot came and sat with him. An old, grizzled R.A.F. man, Carruthers had been out here since World War I. Preening his dipped mustache, Carruthers sent his keen hawk-gaze over the desert below.

"I came out here as a kid in the '20's," he said, "and helped start the Cairo-Bagdad line. Imagine! We had to plow a line in the sand with a Ford tractor from here to Palestine! It was the only thing we could follow. No radio, no nothing, in those days—not yet thirty years ago. And look at the world now! I'm glad we lived to see it."

"Yeah," said Blount. He was hawk-faced too, thin and spare and pleasant enough when he wanted to be. "You're not

yet fifty yourself. Why, we'll live to see a freight line put through to the moon, one of these days!"

"It's not so impossible," Carruthers said, laughing. "You Stratolines people are frightfully keen on freight, aren't you? See here, if you're at any loose ends over in Cairo, give me a buzz. I'll be knocking about the country somewhere on leave; I've a month's leave due. Usually go up-country—I love Egypt, and know it pretty well. So if I can be of any service, drag me in."

"Thanks," said Blount. "I've no idea why I'm going; trouble, of course. I expect in connection with the Cape to Cairo extension; we've taken over the freight nonstop runs, you know."

Carruthers nodded and they exchanged cards. They liked each other; they were birds of a feather. And this, of course, was destiny at work.

Blount did not have to wait; the Airways steward came bringing him a portable radio-phone and word that Mr. Upshott was on the line. Upshott was the president of Stratolines. A few years earlier it would have been thought a miracle for a man overlooking the Jersey meadows to contact a man over the Arabian Desert in a plane; now it was ordinary usage, thanks to the shrinkage of the world in the Air-age that stumbled over the heels of the war.

"Hello, Blount!" came the rasping bark of Upshott. "I've had a hell of a time getting you. Just got a call from London about the settlement you wangled; good work. You get a bonus on it. There's a man somewhere in Egypt named Mustafir Pasha. The (unprintable) is holding us up, on the Cairo-Cape extension. Seems to be blackmail of the rankest sort. See Dodd at Cairo for details."

"Okay," said Blount, refusing to get excited. "So what?"

“Keep your eye peeled; they tell me this guy is bad medicine. And remember,” said Upshott in his usual parting admonition to his strato-shooters, “the sky is the limit and Stratolines backs you up all the way!”

Blount laid by the radiophone with a grunt. Some hush-hush affair, eh? A little later when Carruthers came through the aisle, Blount halted him.

“My Egyptian errand has something to do with a guy named Mustafir Pasha. Know anything about him?”

Carruthers looked down at him, electric-blue eyes suddenly alight.

“Plenty, Mister, plenty! And none of it good,” he said softly. “You’d better cut me in. I have reasons. Yes?”

“It’s a deal.”

“Right. I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

ON arrival, Blount went to the magnificent hostelry that had replaced the old historic Shepherds Hotel, and was lucky enough to get a room. The place was crowded. Cairo was packed, all Egypt was jammed, for it was the tourist season. The tourist rush that set in after the war had never slackened.

The North African battlefields tour, the tremendous and cheap air travel, and the development of Africa consequent on letting the sea into the Sahara and turning it into a vast lake, all contributed to the prosperity of Egypt. There were comparatively few American tourists, naturally. The terrific race riots and the bloody economic war following the repression of the labor racketeers by President Brownlee had pretty well extinguished the leisure class in the United States. The confiscation of great fortunes, too, was a factor, and the new fortunes now being piled up were still in the formative stage.

Blount was tickled over meeting Carruthers. He liked this airman with the steel-blue eyes. They talked each other’s language. And he sniffed trouble ahead. He sniffed it more strongly when he contacted Dodd, the Cairo agent for Stratolines, that same evening.

“This Mustafir,” said Dodd, “gambled heavily on the Allies to win the war, and came out of the mess with enormous wealth. He had plenty to begin with. Wealth means power in Egypt. Mustafir is shrewd enough to stay out of politics and sit back with his cards; he can make or break anyone, they say.”

“Not Stratolines,” grunted Blount. The other shrugged.

“He can give Stratolines a hell of a headache, and is doing it. Our Cairo-Cape line goes straight up the Nile valley to Khartoum, and no great divergence of course is possible. Well above the Cataracts where the new cotton country has been developed, is Mustafir’s country; he owns a lot of the land. Further, he’s of Coptic blood and claims descent from one of the last Pharaohs; the Copts recognize him as the descendant of the ancient rulers. And he was smart enough to get his claim legalized by the Egyptian parliament—he can pass any bill he wants, of course.”

“That’s got nothing to do with Stratolines.”

“More’n you’d think, Blount. The man’s a born gambler, and no piker. He wants ten million dollars from Stratolines, and wants it right away.”

Blount sat up. “He wants—whew! For what? Blackmail, Upshott said.”

“Correct. He has a bill ready to put through now, claiming that air traffic damages the Coptic country—”

“Traffic six miles up damages his damned cotton?”

“No. The susceptibilities of his people;

the tombs of their dead, for instance, are profaned and violated by air traffic—and so forth. All eyewash, of course. But if the bill is passed and air traffic prohibited, and the matter is taken up with the International Air Control, it'll mean a fight that may take years to settle, with the Cairo-Cape line meantime forbidden to run. And Air control, as you know, is tremendously careful about infringing on the rights of nationals."

Blount scowled. The skunk in the woodpile began to show itself.

"Easier to change the line's course," he said. "Bypass him."

"Nix. Our Egyptian franchise for the Cairo-Cape run stipulates that all traffic must keep within a two-mile-wide lane at any height. He got that innocent clause slipped in, of course. It's a raw holdup, and we're helpless, until we get a waiver over his own signature."

"Got the waiver made out?"

Dodd handed over a fat envelope. "Here it is, with copies. Either he signs it, and we hand him ten million fish, or we quit business in this country. And watch your step; anybody who gets tough with him, turns up missing. The guy is poison."

"I'm a rattlesnake myself if anybody steps on me. And an officer."

THIS was true. Blount was a deputy inspector of the International Air Control, as were all the strato-shooters; it gave them an official background in case of need, but no real powers. That was why they had to be sworn and bonded, lest they overstep their authority.

When Carruthers walked into the hotel next morning, Blount laid the situation before him, and the lean Briton absorbed it, then chuckled.

"You're not the first sucker he's caught, by a long shot! Let's see—Mustafir spent the summer on the Riviera.

He's one of the new lessees of Monte Carlo and has a palatial villa there. Just now, he's at his place upcountry, beyond the First Cataract, almost to Abu Simbel. He doesn't spend much time in Cairo but stays behind the scenes."

"My first job is to see him. Is it far?"

"Over seven hundred miles—seven hundred and eleven, to be exact," Carruthers said drily. "I have a little helicopter of my own that I knock around in. Can land you there tomorrow evening, if we get off at a good hour. Better send him word in advance."

"Are you sure you want to get drawn into this thing? May be bad medicine."

"I want it," said Carruthers earnestly, "more than anything else in the world. Why? Tell you sometime. Meet you here for tiffin in a couple of hours; going after a bit of information. Cheerio! The name of our destination, by the way, is Kasr Ibrim."

He departed. Something in the background, thought Blount; something hot!

It was clear to Blount that he had been handed a tough package. His job was apparently straightforward; go at the pasha direct, get a direct yes or no—a simple and hopeless waste of time. Somewhere along the line he had to get a new angle, open up a new approach, find some fulcrum for a lever that would pry Mustafir loose from a painless signature.

He got a map, and discovered that Kasr Ibrim lay directly on the flight-line from Cairo to Khartoum—directly. He discovered nothing else. He was fuming vainly when Carruthers showed up and they went to lunch in the Rommel Room, decorated with trophies of the Nazi marshal who had so nearly changed Egypt's history during the war. Once settled at a table, Carruthers became briskly informative.

“Our man’s at Kasr Ibrim, all right; picturesque place on a hill. Since the war, the seas of air travel has changed the face of Egypt. Helicopters have altered everything. A chap can perch on a mountain-top now and enjoy life. Well, I’ve an angle of approach for you, if you want it; but it means practically certain trouble of the worst kind.”

“Gimme,” said Blount grimly.

“Right-o! Long before the war, back in 1930, there was a woman.” The steel-blue eyes flickered slightly. “She had a post in the Sudan Administration. Mustafir was kicking up some bobbery and she was put on his trail. She disappeared—just vanished. Was never heard of or found or anything. But she wrote me a letter telling what she had uncovered. I’ve kept it all these years, waiting; I’m good at waiting. You can have it if you like. I should add that there’s no proof of her statements; what existed has been removed from the archives. I’ve looked. And if you try to play poker with those chips, they’re dynamite.”

“Dynamite needs a cap to be dangerous,” said Blount and held out his hand for the faded, dog-eared envelope Carruthers passed him.

He knew what it meant; here was the dark depth of Carruthers’ life, this woman who had vanished. This was why the man haunted the back districts of Egypt—he was good at waiting. More than anything in the world, he wanted a chance at Mustafir Pasha, for this reason. Blount could guess at the love-story involved, and the heartbreak.

Without comment, he read the letter. That it should be thus offered him was indeed a token of trust and liking, because it was a love-letter. It was also a statement of things learned, and Blount made certain penciled notations before returning the missive.

“Thanks,” he said simply. “I’d like to photostat that third page, and use her name.”

Carruthers beamed. “Splendid! She’d like that. If you care to phone Mustafir, I have his private number; but don’t speak with any Gypsy secretary or you’ll lose face with him.”

A little later, they called Kasr Ibrim by radiophone. There was no trouble in getting Mustafir; the screen showed him as a man of fifty, but not the portly personage Blount had imagined. He was, instead, lean and dark as a desert hawk, with white mustache and piercing gaze. He was very affable and asked only one question—whether Blount were fully empowered to deal on behalf of Stratolines. Assured of this, he smiled.

“Good! It’ll be a pleasure to have you here. I’ll send a plane for you.”

“Thanks. I have one here; my secretary pilots it. We’ll be along tomorrow afternoon.”

“Splendid!” rejoined Mustafir heartily, and rang off.

Carruthers grimaced. “One hears no end of odd things about his place; interesting to see it. He goes in for some ancient Egyptian customs. I gather, in his role as descendant of the Pharaohs. The natives think he’s a regular god. Don’t under-estimate him.”

“Don’t under-estimate Stratolines,” said Blount, and they grinned at each other, and went off to the Televis Theatre near the Bulak Bridge.

Bright and early in the morning Carruthers’ machine was brought over from the Heliopolis field to the hotel roof-landing. It was a beautiful little two-seater of silver plastic, impervious to the short burning-rays of the sun. Their bags and lunch-basket were put in; and, with Carruthers at the controls, they lifted to the local southbound passenger lane at five

thousand feet, and were okayed by the Air Control.

They started. The citadel and city, the river, the Pyramids and western desert, flowed beneath; the lower lanes were filled with flitting private planes, police helicopters, tourist busses, occasional peddlers. Freighters and produce carriers were at other levels. On into the stratosphere ran the traffic lanes, Air Control markers dotting the sky and huge passenger ships of half a dozen lines flashing along.

Carruthers' machine had no great speed. It did not follow the curving Nile southward, but took the bee-line course set by the Air Control office over hill and valley, leaving the river near Sohag and heading straight across the desert west of the cataracts. With the gyroscope robot holding the course, there was nothing to do except smoke, talk, and enjoy the keen high electric air of Egypt.

BLOUNT learned a good bit about their destination. Kasr Ibrim had been a strategic point from very ancient times; it was a fortified hill-top overlooking the Nile, guarding the caravan routes to the Sudan. Mustafir Pasha had turned the castle ruins into a magnificent palace, restoring some of the ancient buildings and spending money lavishly.

In Egypt as elsewhere, distance or location was of no consequence, thanks to the air-age. The upper reaches of the Nile were now dotted by luxurious villas, sanitariums and tourist hotels, while the replacement of camel caravans by truck and air freight was opening up the whole of interior Africa in a remarkable fashion.

The afternoon sun was still high when their destination came in sight. The Nile was narrow between rocky hills and cliffs. Carruthers took over the controls while Blount called Kasr Ibrim. The answer

came at once.

"The helicopter landing is in the palace courtyard, marked by large white circle."

Blount acknowledged, exchanged greetings with a loafing Air Control patrol, then the Helicopter dropped and hovered above the buildings and gardens and green patches that had replaced the old fortalice ruins. The white circle was plain to see; they came down inside it, and servants came running to take their things. A huge Nubian in snowy robes greeted them.

"Welcome, Blount Effendi. A room is awaiting you, gentlemen. My master desires that you join him on the lotus-terrace when you are refreshed. I shall guide you."

They glimpsed the beautifully carved peristyle of a small temple which ran into the cliff, before turning into the corridors of a cool rock-built structure that required no air-conditioning, and so to the large and luxurious room awaiting them. Everything was as modern as though in Paris.

After a wash and a quick change, they rejoined the Nubian and were led to a terrace on the very brink of the cliff; Blount caught his breath at the sheer beauty of it. Overhead was stretched a glass-fibered canopy to break the sun; fountains jetted, and pools were filled with lilies and delicate papyrus-fans. Far below flowed the Nile; eastward lay the rugged peaks of the Nubian hills; westward, over the gray houses of villages and the low pyramidal hills, the tawny desert stretched away to infinity.

In a nest of outspread rugs and cushioned leather scats, Mustafir Pasha dismissed a pair of secretaries and rose to receive his guests, shaking hands and greeting them most cordially. His was the same face Blount had seen on the radiophone screen; but the man wore a diaphanous, loose robe of flowing white, and about his head was a golden fillet

which held the uraeus, the royal symbol of ancient Egypt. In effect, Mustafir was in his chosen role as Pharaoh—contrasting somewhat with his long aromatic cigarette.

He made his guests at ease, chatting lightly of this and that; he displayed distinct charm, but behind this Blount was aware of keen and acute mentality. Those piercing eyes held power; the sharply carven features held no kindness, but a driving energy.

“Will you pardon me if I put off any discussion of business until morning?” he said, smiling. “Here we have revived certain of the ancient customs, which are very wise. For example, it is almost time now for the sunset rituals in the temple; then dinner; then an hour or two with the Televis. I am rather anxious to watch the ceremonies in London, where the King is to receive the Dominions delegates to the Imperial Conference. Following the sunrise ritual and breakfast in the morning, we may talk business.”

Blount assented very gladly, feeling the need of getting shaken down. This luxurious environment tended to throw him off balance a trifle.

Drinks and tiny delicious cakes were served. Mustafir, displaying a keen knowledge of world affairs, talked freely; Blount sized him up as intelligent and highly dangerous. When at length he left them, they sat looking out across the western desert, sipping their drinks and listening to a slow drift of music and chants lifting from the temple.

THE sun was setting; now, as at sunrise, the marvelous quality of this air, as nowhere else on earth, made itself felt—life, pulsing and vibrating along the level light-rays from the horizon.

“Easy to see why they worshipped the sun, and still do,” said Carruthers. “Our friend does himself well here, eh? Nice to

be a multi-millionaire, these frabjous days!”

Blount yawned. “Maybe. To him, I’m just a small time agent of a distant American crowd. I like being despised. I like the other guy to have delusions of grandeur. He’d never guess that I’ve got a couple of Lehighs locked in my bag.”

The Briton whistled softly, as well he might. Invented for use in the savage trench fighting at the close of the war when the desperate Japs took to gas, the Lehigh tube had become a myth of fabulous horror. It had figured in the labor and racial troubles in the United States and Canada, particularly in the Chicago massacre; and authority had banned it.

It was now used only by the International Police forces. This plastic tube that almost without sound threw its tiny glass bubbles of highly compressed vapor, was the most murderous weapon ever devised by man. Its manufacture was strictly supervised; every weapon was numbered and accounted for; mere possession was a felony that carried a ten-year penalty. Blount had a pair of these deadly tubes by special license of the Air Control.

LATER, they dined alone with their host, and afterward accompanied him into a large room where the ceremonies from London were thrown on the Televis screen. Carven lattices hid a balcony whence came the scent of perfumes, the flutter of robes and voices, to denote female watchers, but only a pair of Nubian servants appeared when the program ended. Mustafir took them to their room, wished them a hearty good-night, and went his way.

Blount rummaged in his bag, found the locked steel case intact, and was content.

Twice he wakened in the night, to hear faint music and a soft voice singing. A

custom of the ancient kings, said Carruthers; through the night until dawn a singer voiced hymns to the gods. Blount was lulled to sleep again by the hypnotic sounds.

Dawn wakened them. Their open windows faced the desert across the river; but the room was filled with voices chanting in unison a weirdly simple melody. This, obviously, was being broadcast from the rock temple; now a voice in English sounded upon the room, coming from some concealed orifice.

“You are hearing a hymn from the Theban ritual of Horus,” it said gravely, “composed by the priest Abo-haten and sung by the priests of Horus at dawn. Join with it in your thoughts and in your hearts, for the sun-god Ra is the one great Deity of all men.”

The English words were recited against the background of men’s voices:

“Go at dawn to the river bank,
With a glad heart to greet the day;
The east is clearing, and we have seen
the night
Perishing upon the western hills.

“At dawn, the world comes to greet the
god Horus

For his finger is upon the lips of time
And the day rejoices to hear his
praises;

In the sunrise is a song, and in all
created things,

For the day comes to give a new birth
by grace of Ra.

“The light from on high is preserved to
men;

The hymns sung to him, the praises
that ascend,

Have but one purpose—thanks to the
god,

Thanks for his works and his gifts to
men.”

Light struck down from the eastern
hills. The outstretched desert passed from
blue to gold; the day was come. Carruthers
rose and stretched.

“Still going through with it?”

“This is the big day,” said Blount. He
went to his grip, reached in, and unlocked
the steel case. Mindful of possible hidden
watchers, he carried the grip into the closet
and closed the door. Taking out one of the
flat plastic tubes, he slipped its cord about
his neck and let it lie against his spine,
beneath his shirt.

Carruthers understood. He, too, visited
the closet. They shaved, finished dressing,
and sauntered forth. A Nubian, squatting
outside their door, rose and salaamed, and
conducted them to a charming breakfast-
nook. Mustafir appeared and shook hands
warmly.

“American style breakfast!” he
exclaimed. “In your honor, Mr. Blount.
From grapefruit to ham and eggs. Then
we’ll adjourn to the lotus terrace and settle
down to our discussion.”

“It may prove shorter than you think,”
said Blount, pleasantly. With the crisis at
hand, he felt relieved and attuned to meet
it squarely, without compromise.

During breakfast they chatted, listened
to the tele-radio news, and their host
promised them a morning visit to the rock
temple. A most curious place, he said,
constructed on the ancient plans; only
honored guests were allowed access to it.
Blount asked if he had a family, and
Mustafir nodded.

“A boy of twelve, named for King
Faruk. He is now at school in Switzerland;
his mother is, at the moment, visiting there
to be near him. I am hoping to join them in
a fortnight—if no unfinished business

detains me. Shall we go to the terrace and enjoy the morning coolness?"

He rose. The moment was at hand.

The three men sought the terrace, where mint tea awaited them, served by Nubians. The two secretaries were present; they remained seated beyond earshot. Mustafir relaxed easily on the cushions, cigarettes were lighted, then he smiled at the American.

"Well, Mr. Blount? You're acquainted with my price for signing the waiver demanded by your company?"

"I believe ten million dollars is the figure."

"Eleven," said Mustafir coolly. "It rises a million every hour."

Carruthers sat and smoked, inscrutable. Blount sipped his tea. The die was cast.

"But I have a counter proposal, if you'll hear it."

"One can always listen," Mustafir said affably. "I warn you, however, that there can be no compromise, no lowering of the terms."

"Oh, none whatever!" assented Blount. "Stratolines never compromise, indeed. Our proposal is that you sign the waiver before noon today, your highness."

Mustafir smiled. He enjoyed the battle with all his oriental blood, and was obviously set for a prolonged session. Blount was not. He knew this man was a gambler, a great one; he intended to smash home with unexpected rapidity. Mustafir would not be bluffed, but might well be thrown off balance.

"And in return," prompted the Egyptian, "you offer a lump sum – of how much?"

"Not a red cent," Blount said calmly. "In return, we'll withdraw a press release which goes to publication at noon, unless Stratolines pulls it back."

The dark brows drew down above the

darkly brilliant eyes.

"A press release?" Mustafir repeated. "A story for the American press, you mean?"

"For the worldwide press, and chiefly for the Egyptian press. About you. A verified story, with full proofs."

"Indeed! You astonish me. I'd be interested to learn its nature."

Carruthers pressed out his cigarette and sat in tense waiting. Blount shrugged.

"As your guest, I regret to mention details, but I must," he said. Without scruple he began to embroider the notes he had taken from Carruthers' letter. "First, that your lineage has been misrepresented. That, instead of being descended from the Pharaohs, you are the son of a fellahin farmer named Mudir Ani, of Rosetta, who died in prison. That you were adopted by the man whom the world knows as your father, as the result of a clever ruse on your part. A ruse in which, I'm sorry to say, forgery figures strongly."

He paused. Mustafir Pasha had laid down his cigarette; he sat as though frozen, a deathly pallor growing in his features, his dark eyes dilating and fastened upon Blount in a sort of fascinated horror. Blount continued quietly.

"Other details touch upon your financial operations in the late twenties. I might mention the scandal of the Delta lands, and your connection with the Hashish Syndicate, as the most prominent. The evidence regarding all these matters came to us as a result of the researches of an Englishwoman, a Miss Simms. You will remember her. The secret of her sudden disappearance has recently been solved, after many years of effort. I'm sure you will appreciate the significance of the fact—to you."

He had finished.

THE momentary agitation of Mustafir had vanished. He picked up his cigarette and looked down at it, heavy lids veiling his eyes. The color returned to his cheeks; not a muscle of his poker-face moved. His breathing was slow and steady. After a moment he shot one eloquent glance at Carruthers, then looked at Blount; a smile twitched at his lips.

"You overwhelm me, upon my word!" he said with faint sarcasm. Again his eyes darted to Carruthers, then he lifted the cigarette to his lips and inhaled slowly. "Really, Mr. Blount, these charges are most disturbing and unexpected. Publicity of this sort, even if totally unfounded or unproven, could not be compensated by a libel suit. You mentioned a waiver; did you bring such a document for my signature?"

Blount produced the papers. Mustafir took them and nodded.

"Thank you. Perhaps you'll give me a little time to consider the matter—say, half an hour. You might employ it by looking over the temple of Horus. I'll send a guide with you who speaks English. The sculptures are highly interesting. They were done by the same artist who, in an early incarnation, did the 19th Dynasty colossi at Abu Simbel, and who was later reborn as the Greek sculptor Pheidias." He clapped his hands. The same giant Nubian who had first welcomed the two guests, came into sight and stepped forward, saluting. "Show our guests the temple carvings, and return with them in half an hour."

Blount rose, not half sorry for Mustafir's iron self-control. He knew only too well that he had played his ace and had not a single card to back it up; he could but trust that something might come of it to force a compromise.

"There's no hurry; noon is far away," he rejoined lightly. "And I know so little

of ancient Egypt that I'll be glad to have a peep at it. See you later."

With the silent Carruthers, he followed the big black, who led them through the building to the courtyard. Letting the Nubian get a bit ahead, Carruthers murmured at his ear.

"Did you see that devil look at me? Your yarn didn't fool him for a minute. No doubt he knows I've hunted Frances Simms up and down Egypt for years. He can guess that I'm responsible for your bluff—and that it's no more than a bluff."

"Maybe," Blount admitted. "If it opens up some door, I'll be satisfied. We were a bit previous in anticipating trouble, too; he's not pulling any rough stuff."

The Briton grunted skeptically.

They came into the courtyard. The helicopter still stood within the white circle; Carruthers looked pleased, because a cloth cover had been pulled over the entire machine as a protection against sun and dew. The Nubian led them on to the temple, whose sculptured portal was fifty feet wide. At the entrance, however, he was halted by a tall, spare old man in a white robe, and a violent altercation arose. Finally the black turned and spoke in English.

"This is the priest Seken, Effendi. He refuses to let me guide you; he is afraid I will show you too much. He will conduct you himself, but he speaks no English."

"That's all right," said Carruthers. "I know a bit of Arabic and Coptic."

The priest beckoned, and they followed into a courtyard studded with columns, covered with painted sculptures. Seken strode straight on without pause; beyond the courtyard was the usual wide entrance hall, excavated from the cliff itself, containing more sculptured columns. In a wall-niche were several tiny figures of the hawk-headed god Horus, to which Seken pointed as he broke silence.

Carruthers translated.

“He says these are carried to dying people, who kiss them and are given absolution for their sins. On ahead is the sanctuary itself; apparently we’re going in. No telling how far these caves extend.”

They went on. The sunlight that pierced the entrance hall died there. The sanctuary beyond was a small chamber containing nothing except an altar and an image of Horus, before which stood two oil lamps. Seken picked up one of these and pointed to the walls around, which were covered with more sculptures, and uttered a few words.

“He says these are ancient,” Carruthers translated. “He has mummies to show us.”

From the rear of the sanctuary, corridors ran into the rock. The priest headed into one of these, his lamp revealing paintings on the walls; they followed single file. The passage seemed interminable. Evidently they were far under the cliff.

Suddenly the corridor widened into a large chamber upheld by columns carved from the rock; the one light did not pierce the dim recesses. Blount had a glimpse of empty mummy-cases lying open on the floor or standing by the columns, and tools lay scattered about. Seken led them along the wall, passing other corridors branching out, and turned into an alcove or recess, just large enough to hold a rock pedestal on which a mummy-case lay flat.

The priest reached up his lamp to a shelf inside the narrow entrance, left it there, and turned with a few words.

“He says to open the case and look at the mummy,” said Carruthers. “No room for three in there. Come along.”

Blount pressed in beside him. The mummy-case was gilded and painted ornately; it looked surprisingly new.

“Might be just finished,” commented Blount. “Remarkably preserved, eh? Open

it up.”

Carruthers obeyed; the upper lid came off. It escaped from his hands and fell with a clatter. From Carruthers burst a low but terrible cry, so poignant, so filled with heart-wrung emotion, that it went through Blount like a knife. Then, without a word, the Briton crumpled up and fell forward on his face, and lay still.

Blount’s first thought was that Carruthers had been stabbed or injured. He knelt, found no hurt, and realized that his friend had fainted—but why? The priest had disappeared; Blount called his name without reply. Then, rising, the horrible truth struck home to him as he sighted the mummy in its case.

A mummy indeed, but with the face and head bare. It was the face of a woman, a face so lovely and lifelike that Blount touched it before he realized it held no life. About the close-wrapped neck was a little gold chain with pendant heart. Letters were engraved on the heart, and he leaned over to read them—“R. C. to F. S. 1930.” Robert Carruthers to Frances Simms—this was the woman Carruthers had been searching across the years. No wonder the hard-bitten pilot had collapsed! The blow had been acute. He had found her—lying here.

The sheer wanton cruelty of it, the infernal diabolism of it, shocked Blount. He took down the lamp and went into the large chamber; it was empty. Coming back he freed his own weapon and that of Carruthers. The pilot opened his eyes, caught Blount’s hand, and rose. A deep groan came from him; nothing more. Blount caught up the mummy lid and covered the face.

A voice sounded—so close that both men jumped. It came from some opening in the rock, and carried the metallic timbre of a microphone. It was the voice of Mustafir Pasha.

“You need not trouble to return for my answer, Mr. Blount. I trust Mr. Carruthers was gratified by the conclusion of his search? It was not wise of him to supply you with all that information about me—now both of you must join the charming young woman who dug it up in the first place. I have had an eye on Mr. Carruthers for a long time. You have a few minutes, gentlemen, in which to pick out your own mummy cases from the empty ones at hand. Your wishes will be scrupulously followed, I assure you.”

On this note of faint mockery the voice ended, with a metallic click.

BLOUNT found Carruthers staring at him. The Briton looked old and haggard; he had aged twenty years. The steel-blue eyes were hard and defiant as ever, none the less.

“We’re nipped,” said he quietly. “Sorry I made a fool of myself. Where’s that priest?”

“Skipped out,” said Blount. “There’s your Lehigh; grab it. Let’s find the passage out.”

He took the lamp, and together they retraced their steps—how far? Neither man knew which of the passages that came into the big chamber was the one they had followed. Carruthers decided on one, Blount on another. They looked at each other, uncertainly.

“What’s his game?” Blount asked, scowling. “If he means to bump us off, why didn’t he do it before we got here?”

“I think it’s obvious, old chap. He’s playing very safe. Those Gypsies who worship him will come along to finish us. Some of these passages must connect with a village. This light will make us easy victims, too.”

“All right. Perk up and fight! I see several other lamps standing around. Light a couple and put ‘em all on the other side,

while I test these passages.”

He went from one to another of the openings; all seemed to carry currents of air, and therefore must connect with the outside world. Satisfied of this, he came back to find three lamps going, clustered on the far side of the chamber. He joined Carruthers and beckoned him back into one of the openings—that which he himself thought the right one.

“Now, look,” he said briskly. “A gambler takes no chances; Mustafir’s angle is simple, safe and sure. His natives know all the passages. If they fail to drop us and we run for it, they either take after us or go around and wait outside. Meantime, any passages running back to the temple and house are guarded by Mustafir’s Nubians. Get me?”

“Sounds about like it,” assented Carruthers. “And at the first shot, they’d all close in. We’d be lost no matter what we did or where we went.”

Blount patted the Lehigh tube. “Yeah. But this is something nobody would figure on. I’d say to let ‘em come, hand it to them proper, then take a chance on this passage leading us back. What say?”

“Right,” said Carruthers. “Lie down to it.”

They stretched out on the cold rock floor of the passage and waited. The little plastic tubes, each charged with its half-dozen glass bubbles of compressed Lehigh gas, were ready. Before them, the large chamber was dark; its opposite side was dimly lit by the oil lamps, which glinted dully from the ornate mummy cases.

Blount knew how shaken Carruthers must be from that terrible shock; he was thinking of this when suddenly Carruthers nudged him. A whitish object appeared across the big chamber; a man, seeming to float silent and only dimly visible. Others appeared, shunning the lighted space. They held rifles. A voice called out

something, sharply.

“By gad, they can see us!” burst out Carruthers in chagrined dismay. “They’re earth-dwellers—they can see in the dark—”

“Let ‘em have it,” said Blount. At the same instant, half a dozen rifles blazed. The roaring explosions were deafening under the rock roof.

Blount felt the plastic tube jump twice in his hand. Bullets winged all around him, hitting the rock and screaming in ricochet; one kicked rock-dust into his very face. But all was quiet in the rock-chamber. Two of the lamps went out, the third flickered and died, as the horrible Lehigh vapor expanded, poisoning and smothering the very air. Everything human, across there, had died with the light.

“Let’s move, quick!” snapped Blount. There was no answer. He reached out and touched Carruthers, who lay quiet. His fingers felt warm blood. Cursing desperately, aware of their own danger from the deadly spreading vapor, he dragged the limp body away, after rescuing the plastic tube. It was empty; there was enough poison expanding in the big chamber to kill a city!

Once away, he struck a match. Carruthers had been hit by a bullet that gashed the back of his skull and scored a red rip along his thigh; he sat up, cursing luridly, then scrambled to his feet when Blount mentioned the gas.

Together they advanced blindly in the pitch blackness, holding hands and following one wall. It was chancery work; there was no knowing what they might come upon at any step.

“May find some more of those beggars here,” said Carruthers. “I know there were colonies of earth-dwellers in Upper Egypt—should have thought of it before. They see like cats at night and never come into the daylight—”

He cursed again and fell silent, for his

voice rumbled along the rock passage in echoes.

With each step a fresh nervous tension, they advanced cautiously, and time dragged. Blount was worried. The passage would certainly be guarded; his tube still contained four shells, but to use one would cut off their own escape, since they could not pass on through the deadly vapor, tenfold deadly in this confined passage.

He was in the lead, Carruthers following; abruptly they both stopped, quivering in every nerve. The sound of a laugh traveled along the passage to them. A full-throated black man’s laugh. Then silence.

Blount pressed on, stepping cautiously. The passage angled; a glimmer of light showed ahead. It grew. It became a lamp set in a wall-holder, and beside the lamp, talking together, stood two men, rifles under arm. Nubian guards, white-clad, wearing red tarbooshes. And, just past them, was a short flight of half a dozen steps.

A nudge from Carruthers; the same thought was in both minds. This was not the passage by which they had come. They had encountered no steps there. Blount reached down and slid off his shoes. The two blacks were deep in laughing talk. They stood on the top step; their backs were turned. . . .

SILENT as a ghost, Blount sidled along. That light would reveal him most fatally. The two Nubians broke into laughter together, and one slapped the other heartily on the back. Blount whipped into a run—all or nothing!

They heard his movement, if not his feet. They swung around, they saw him—but he was already upon them. Before either could fire, he hurtled full into them, clutching at them, his weight sending them down the steps like ninepins. He fell with

them, but atop of them, and knew what he was doing. He went limp, rolled over, caught the rifle from one and gained his feet, and let drive with the iron-shod butt. One fell; the other was up and grappling him, dragging him down—and just then came Carruthers, luckily.

The Nubians lay sprawled and stunned.

“I’ll get the light,” grunted Carruthers, and did so. They each had a rifle, now, and the lamp sped their way along the passage. Not far; sunlight appeared ahead. They left the light and made for the opening. But, as they approached it, the sunlight blinded them. Blount was forced to halt, holding his companion back, knuckling his eyes.

IT GREW upon them by degrees. There was the white-hot sunlight of Egyptian noon, and the opening debouched upon the courtyard of the palace. Something white moved there. It was the figure of Mustafir Pasha, and he was approaching the glowing plastic shape of the helicopter, whose cloth covering had been removed. Tall, erect, sinewy, he moved toward it; then, perhaps feeling the eyes upon him, he swung around.

Blount sensed what was coming, and did not move. He heard a gasp beside him,

he heard the voice of Carruthers lift hoarsely.

“Mustafir! You hound of hell!”

The Egyptian saw them. He lifted an arm, he uttered a cry—then the rifle beside Blount exploded. The tall figure was knocked backward.

“Hop it!” croaked Carruthers, and led the way. Blazing sun-hot stones in stockinged feet, the dead face of Mustafir grinning at the sky, shouts from near and far—then they were at the cab of the helicopter. Blount hurled himself in just as the blades whirred overhead, and was flung to the floor with the upward lift. He lay there panting, then hauled himself up. Carruthers grinned at him. The world had fallen away below.

“This,” said the Briton cheerfully, “will raise holy hell! I’m glad of it, even if I get cashiered.”

“You should worry,” said Blount. “You have done a good day’s work for Stratolines, Limited. That blackmailing effort has gone haywire—the boy in Switzerland isn’t going to play any such game, you can bet! And Stratolines knows how to reward good work.”

That was true. Carruthers, who told me the story at St. Moritz, was enjoying life. He had it coming, too, as you’ll agree. No? Yes!