

THE
**MAMUR
ZAPT**
AND



THE
GIRL
IN THE
NILE



MICHAEL PEARCE

Michael Pearce

The Mamur Zapt and the Girl in Nile

«HarperCollins»

Pearce M.

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A classic historical mystery from award-winning Michael Pearce, in which the body of a young woman washes up in the Nile and the Mamur Zapt is drawn into the seedy world of Egyptian politics. Egypt, 1908. A young woman has drowned in the Nile, her body washed up on a sandbar. Apparently she had fallen off a boat. Owen, as Mamur Zapt, British head of Cairo's secret police, deems it a potential crime. But when the poor girl's body suddenly vanishes from its resting place, Owen begins a puzzling search for the truth that will take him from Cairo's sophisticated cafes through its dingiest slums – and into the seething waters of Egyptian politics.

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CHAPTER 1

‘But,’ said Owen, ‘where is the body?’

‘Ah yes,’ said the watchman, rubbing one horny foot up and down his shin.

‘Ah yes,’ said the corporal, shuffling uneasily:

Owen waited.

‘Well,’ said the corporal at last, looking out over the river to where a low mud shoal raised its back above the water, grey and wrinkled like a hippopotamus, ‘it *was* there.’

‘Well,’ said Owen, ‘it’s not there now.’

It had been a long, hot, fruitless morning. And now this!

He boiled over.

‘If this is some joke—’

The watchman looked as if he was about to burst into tears.

‘But, effendi, it *was there*, I saw it.’

‘Or thought you did.’

‘Foolish man!’ said the corporal, swiftly switching sides. ‘It was all a dream.’

He gave the watchman a push. The watchman pushed him back.

‘It was no dream!’ he insisted. ‘I saw it with my own two eyes. A woman, on the sandbank.’

‘A woman!’ said the corporal. ‘There, what did I tell you! It is time you got another wife, Abu. Then you would stop having these foolish dreams.’

‘I saw it plainly. On the sandbank.’

‘You saw something plainly,’ said Owen.

‘It was a woman,’ insisted the watchman doggedly.

‘A heap of camel dung!’ scoffed the corporal.

‘In the middle of the river?’ said the watchman angrily.

‘Anyway,’ said Owen, ‘it’s not there now.’

‘It was there.’

‘Then what has happened to it?’

‘Perhaps,’ suggested the corporal, ‘the river has washed it away?’

Owen looked up and down the river. It stretched, broad and placid, to the horizon on both sides. Further on down, near to the city, a single felucca was gliding gracefully in towards the bank. It came to rest and then there was nothing else moving in the intense heat of the late morning Egyptian sun.

He scanned the water’s edge carefully. At this time of year, with the flood still some weeks off, the Nile had shrunk back into its bed, uncovering a wide strip of mud, now baked hard and dry and cracked like crazy paving. Far away he thought he could see some goats grazing. But there was no suspicious heap lying grounded in the shallows, no flotsam or jetsam at all. Anything that came ashore would be snatched up at once by thrifty beachcombers.

Under his feet a little floating clump of Um Suf, Mother of Wool, papyrus reed, torn loose from its moorings hundreds of miles to the south, nestled along the bank and came to rest against the shoal. Nestled and stuck. The current was not even sufficient to tug it loose again.

‘It can’t have!’ said the watchman angrily. ‘It was lying right up on the shoal.’

‘How did it get there, then?’ asked the corporal. ‘Did it jump up there like a fish?’

This was exactly the kind of non-issue that Owen didn’t want to get involved in. In fact, he didn’t want to get involved in any of this at all.

‘This isn’t anything to do with me,’ he said. ‘This is not for the Mamur Zapt.’

‘Quite right, effendi!’ said the corporal smartly. ‘Only a woman.’

That was not what he had meant.

‘This is a matter for the Parquet,’ he said.

This was an ordinary crime if ever he'd seen one. And ordinary crimes were handled by the Parquet, the Department of Prosecutions of the Ministry of Justice. The Egyptian legal system was like the French. Conduct of a criminal investigation was the responsibility of a prosecuting lawyer, not of the police. The police worked under his direction. And, of course, when a crime was reported they were the ones who had to notify the Parquet in the first place.

'Has the Parquet been notified?' he said sternly.

The corporal scratched his head.

'I expect so,' he said.

'*Expect so?*' Owen boiled over with fury. 'I should bloody well expect so, too. And I'd expect them to be here. I'd expect them to be wasting their time on this foolish nonsense and not me. Whose idea was it to send for the Mamur Zapt anyway?'

'I don't know anything about it,' said the corporal hurriedly.

'One said that you were near, effendi,' said the watchman forlornly, 'and the Chief thought—'

Owen knew damned well what the District Chief had thought. He had thought, here was somebody senior he could pass responsibility to without having to do anything about it himself. Right on the spot, too! He wouldn't even have to stir out of the cool of his office. While he, Owen, was tearing around all over the place like a bloody lunatic!

'Tell the Chief,' he said ominously, 'that I'll be wanting a word with him.'

This was ridiculous. He couldn't afford to be spending his time here. He had a dozen men on the other side of town waiting for him. They had been about half way through when the message had come from the District Chief. He had dropped everything and left. And you could bet that the moment he'd left they'd sat down in the shade.

He set off back up the bank.

After a moment's hesitation the other two ran after him.

'Effendi! Effendi!'

'You stay here. Wait for the Parquet. You can tell it all to them.'

He reached the top of the bank, lizards scattering out of the way in front of him. He was just about to plunge back into the streets when he saw someone running towards him. It was one of the men he had left.

'Effendi!' he gasped. 'A message! From the Bimbashi!'

'Yes?'

'You are to go to the river.'

Owen looked round. Behind him the river sparkled placidly in the sun. Apart from the corporal and the watchman, there wasn't a soul in sight. Nothing moved on the bank or out on the water. The mud shoal and its hump dozed tranquilly in the heat.

'Well,' said Owen, 'I'm at the river. But why on earth ...?'

The Bimbashi arrived shortly afterwards.

He was in a motor-car. This was impressive since there were relatively few cars in Cairo in 1909 and the police force itself did not boast one. Normally it went about its business either on foot or in an arabeah, the horse-drawn cab distinctive to the city. If it needed a car it borrowed the Army's one.

But that was battered and sober: this one was new and, well, spectacular.

'Green,' said the driver of the car, noting with satisfaction Owen's interest. 'There was a bit of a fuss about that. The Mufti complained. But I said: "It's almost the family colour, isn't it?"'

The Bimbashi, McPhee, pink and fair and anxious, rushed forward.

'This is Captain Owen, Prince. Owen, Prince Narouz.'

'Ah!' said the Prince. 'The Mamur Zapt. You got here quickly. Efficient of you. But then—' he smiled ambiguously—'we know the Mamur Zapt to be efficient, don't we?'

He was perhaps in his late, perhaps in his early thirties. All the males of the Khedive's family tended to thicken out and age suddenly as they approached middle age. Owen knew from the title

that this was a member of the Egyptian Royal Family but which of the Khedive's numerous progeny it was escaped him for the moment.

The third person in the car was another Egyptian, definitely about thirty, slim and dressed, like the Prince, in a smart, European-style suit but with the usual pot-like tarboosh of the Egyptian professional on his head.

Owen knew who this one was. His name was Mahmoud el Zaki and he was one of the Parquet's rising stars. They embraced warmly in the Arab fashion. They had worked together often and got on well.

The Prince and McPhee had walked on to the top of the bank and were standing looking down at the river.

'What's all this about?' whispered Owen.

'Don't know. Someone else was going to do this one and then they suddenly switched me on to it.'

They joined the others.

'What's going on?' Owen asked.

McPhee turned a concerned face towards him.

'Something absolutely frightful has happened,' he said. 'The Prince was on a dahabeeyah last night coming back from Karnak and someone fell overboard.'

'A woman?'

McPhee nodded.

'As soon as we got the report we suspected—well, we knew, I suppose. She couldn't swim.'

'You got the report?'

'The Prince phoned Garvin first thing this morning.'

Garvin was the Commandant of the Cairo Police force. McPhee was his deputy.

'What about the Parquet?'

'We got the report in the ordinary way,' said Mahmoud. 'At that stage it was just that a body had been found. I imagine,' he said to the Prince, 'that you yourself rang up later?'

'After I had spoken to Garvin.' The Prince hesitated. 'You see, I didn't want this to be ... clumsily handled.'

'Oh, of course not!' said McPhee sympathetically. 'The poor girl! And the family, of course!'

'Yes. And the Khedivial connection.'

'Of course. Of course.'

'It could be embarrassing, you see. Politically, I mean.'

'For you?' asked Owen.

The Prince looked at him coolly.

'For the Khedive. There is no particular reason why it should be. There is nothing, shall I say, to be embarrassed *about*. But you know what the Press is and people are. It could be used. Turned against the Khedive. Used to discredit him. Would the British Government want that, Captain Owen?'

'Assuredly not. The Khedive is a valued friend and ally.'

Not only that. He was the façade which concealed the realities of British power in Egypt.

For while the Khedive was the apparent ruler of Egypt, the country's real ruler, in 1909, was the British Consul-General. His rule was indirect and unobtrusive. The Khedive had his Prime Minister, his Ministers and his Ministries. But at the top of each Ministry, alongside each Minister, was a British 'Adviser' and all the key public posts were occupied by Englishmen.

Like the Commandant and Deputy Commandant of the Cairo Police.

Like the Mamur Zapt.

'That's what the Consul-General thought too,' said the Prince. 'I spoke to him this morning.'

'We are to give whatever help we can,' McPhee told Owen.

'How far does the help extend?' asked Owen.

The Prince smiled.

‘Not as far as you are evidently supposing,’ he said. ‘I appreciate that someone has died. The matter must be investigated and will be most ably, I am sure, by Mr el Zaki, here. If a crime has been committed—oh, negligence, say—those responsible must be punished. It’s all straight and aboveboard, Captain Owen, and Mr el Zaki’s involvement should be a guarantee of that.’

‘I have complete confidence in Mr el Zaki.’

‘Quite. But, you see, there is the other dimension too. The political one. The case needs to be handled from that point of view too. It needs to be ... managed.’

‘I see. And you would like me to provide that management?’

‘Who better?’

Owen could think of lots of people he would prefer to see handling this particular case. Most people, in fact.

The Prince was watching his face.

‘It’s not as bad as all that,’ he said. ‘We’re not asking you to do anything you shouldn’t. It’s mainly a matter of controlling the Press.’

‘It’s not easy to control the Press on something like this. It’s bound to get out. In a foreign newspaper, perhaps.’

In cosmopolitan Cairo with its three principal working languages and at least a dozen other widely used ones people turned as readily to the overseas press as they did to the native one. More readily, for the former wasn’t censored.

‘That’s why I spoke of ... management.’

‘I see.’

‘Good!’ said the Prince briskly. ‘Then that’s all sorted out.’

He looked down at the river bed below him.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘I suppose we ought to go down. You’ll be needing an identification.’

‘There’s just one thing,’ said Owen.

‘Not there?’ said the Prince incredulously.

‘Not there?’ echoed McPhee.

Mahmoud did not say anything but started immediately down the slope.

By the time they got there he was already talking to the watchman.

‘I don’t understand,’ said the Prince. ‘Are you saying that this is all a mistake?’

‘A body *was* reported,’ said Owen.

‘A false report?’

Owen shrugged.

The watchman fell on his knees.

‘It was *true*, effendi,’ he protested vehemently. ‘I saw it. I swear it. On my father’s ...’

‘I begin to doubt,’ said the Prince coldly, ‘whether you had a father.’

The watchman swallowed.

‘It was there, effendi,’ he said, pointing to the shoal. ‘There! I swear it.’

‘Then where is it?’

The watchman swallowed again.

‘I don’t know, effendi,’ he said weakly. ‘I don’t know.’

‘The river, effendi,’ insinuated the corporal *sotto voce*. ‘It could be the river.’

But the Prince had already turned away.

‘This is awkward,’ he said.

‘It could have been somebody else,’ said Owen. ‘It needn’t have been the girl.’

‘The report was of a woman’s body.’

‘Another woman, perhaps.’

The Prince shrugged.

‘Unlikely, I would have thought. Unless you have women’s bodies floating down this part of the river all the time.’

‘Oh no, effendi,’ said the corporal hastily.

‘Awkward,’ said the Prince again. ‘It would have been much more convenient ... Well, it must be somewhere. You’ll have to find it, that’s all.’

‘I’ll get on to it right away,’ promised McPhee. ‘I’ll alert all the police stations—’

‘Quietly,’ said the Prince. ‘If that’s possible with the police.’

‘There’s a bend below the city,’ said Mahmoud. ‘It will probably turn up there.’

‘Have someone looking out for it,’ ordered the Prince. ‘This needs to be handled discreetly.’ He looked at Owen. ‘You’re managing this. Remember?’

Owen and Mahmoud were left on the river bed.

‘Like it?’ said Owen.

‘No,’ said Mahmoud. ‘But then, there’s quite a lot I don’t like.’

He called the watchman over.

‘Come here,’ he said. ‘You saw the body. Describe it.’

‘It was a woman.’

‘Clothed?’

‘Of course!’ said the watchman, shocked.

‘It mightn’t have been. What was she wearing?’

The watchman looked down at his feet, embarrassed.

‘Shintiyani,’ he muttered.

‘Trousers?’ said the corporal, unable to restrain himself. ‘Oh ho, Abu, this is the stuff of dreams!’

‘Colour?’

‘Pink,’ muttered the watchman.

‘She was not a village woman, then?’

‘No, effendi.’ The watchman shook his head definitely.

‘What else was she wearing? A tob?’

The watchman hesitated.

‘I think so, effendi. It was hard to tell.’

The corporal guffawed.

‘He only saw the shintiyani!’

‘She wore something, though, apart from the shintiyani?’

‘Oh, yes, effendi. It was just the way she was lying,’ he said aside to the corporal. ‘That’s how I came to see them.’

The shintiyani were ordinary trousers, not undergarments, and came right down to the ankle.

‘How was she lying?’ asked Mahmoud.

The watchman lay down on the sand and put his arms together over his head. His body formed a kind of crescent.

‘There’s a hump on the shoal,’ he said. ‘She was lying round that.’

‘Show me.’

They splashed out to the shoal. The water was shallow and hardly came up their knees.

The shoal was some twenty feet long, and about four feet wide. At the downstream end it rose into a little hump.

‘She was lying round that,’ said the watchman. ‘Head that side, feet this.’

‘The body probably caught up against it on its way downstream,’ said Owen.

‘Well, yes,’ said Mahmoud. ‘Possibly. But you can see from the mud that normally the upper part of the shoal is above the water.’

‘The wash of a boat? The Prince’s boat?’

‘Possibly.’

Mahmoud examined the mud carefully.

‘We’ll have to get the trackers out here,’ he said. ‘I can’t see anything.’

‘Does it matter?’ asked Owen. ‘If anything happened, it happened on the boat. Where the body finishes up is neither here nor there.’

‘Yes,’ said Mahmoud. ‘Except that there’s one thing I find puzzling. I can accept that the body might have been carried high up on to the shoal by an exceptionally heavy wash from a boat. But I find it hard to believe in a second exceptionally heavy wash from a boat in the same morning—one so heavy as to carry the body off again.’

Owen had to go back to his men. He found them, as he expected, doing nothing. They were supposed to be carrying out an arms search. In fact, they were chatting peacefully in the shade.

He put them back to work. The tip had come from a reliable source. You didn’t waste things like that in his business.

According to his informant, the arms had come into the quarter the previous day. The consignment was substantial, at least two donkey-loads. It would be hidden in the quarter until the necessary deals were struck and the arms could be distributed.

For a consignment as large as that hiding-places were limited. The houses in this poor part of town were single-storey, one-room affairs and there was seldom any furniture in the room. The men would simply come into the room, stand and look.

Usually they concentrated their attention on the roof. The roofs were flat and used for storage: onions, maize stalks, cattle dung being dried out for fuel, firewood.

It was under the firewood that arms were usually hidden. The men would run up the outside staircases and make straight for that.

By now, though, the sun was directly overhead and on the roofs it was unbearably hot. It was hot even to step on them. The men winced as their bare feet touched the plaster and Owen could feel the heat even through the soles of his shoes.

That was the trouble about missing a couple of hours. If he had not been called away it would have been done by now.

The men were beginning to slow down. He went round chivvying.

Two men were taking a suspiciously long time on a roof. He went up to see what they were doing.

He had maligned them. They were working. Like many of the roofs, this one had a dovecot. It consisted of large earthenware pots stacked on top of each other on their sides so that the mouths all pointed one way like a battery of guns. The doves flew in at the mouths and made their nests inside.

The trouble was that a number of the birds were inside now and the constables, country boys, were conscientiously taking them out one by one before feeling around inside.

‘That’s all right,’ he said. ‘You don’t need to do that.’

‘You told us to check everything!’

‘Yes, but—’

He was forced to admit they were right. It *could* be a possible hiding-place. Though only for pistols.

‘Don’t do them all,’ he said. ‘Just try a few. Otherwise you’ll be here all day.’

‘We don’t want to miss anything,’ one of them said, reaching unhurriedly into another pot.

‘Yes, but we want to get a move on.’

‘Sure!’ they agreed equably.

They were some of the men he had borrowed from the local District Chief. Out here on the edge of the city life was still close to that of the village and the pace was very different from what it was further in.

He thought it would probably confuse them if he insisted on their moving on. Instead, hoping to expedite matters, he squatted down beside them and gave them a hand.

In the relaxed way of countryfolk, they began to chat.

‘Did you find what you wanted over there?’ asked one of them, inclining his head in the direction of the river.

Over the houses Owen caught a glimpse of blue.

‘No.’

‘Nor here, either. You’re not having much luck this morning, are you?’

‘There’s still time. If we get a move on,’ he said pointedly.

‘Oh yes. Things usually turn out right in the end.’

‘Yes, but only if—’

He stopped himself. It was pointless. One of the things he had learned since coming to Egypt was that the country had its rhythms and that if you were going to get anywhere you had to work with them and not against them.

‘It was a body,’ he said, changing tack. ‘Over there. By the river.’

‘Oh yes.’

‘Yes. Or rather, a body was reported. By the time I got there it had gone.’

The man laughed.

‘Bodies have a way of doing that,’ he said. ‘Or at least, on this part of the river they do.’

‘How’s that?’

‘Oh well, if you find one, that means more work for the Chief, doesn’t it?’

‘So he doesn’t mind too much if one goes missing?’

‘He doesn’t mind at all.’

‘How might they go missing?’

‘All sorts of ways,’ said the man vaguely.

‘They might hit a pole, for instance,’ suggested his friend.

‘What?’

The two men laughed, as at a private joke.

‘They can hit all sorts of things on their way downriver,’ said the first man, looking at his friend chidingly.

‘But what about when they’re washed up?’

‘That’s when they have to be reported.’

The man laughed again.

‘Are there people working the bank?’

‘How do you mean?’

‘On the lookout for things. Things that get washed ashore?’

‘Oh yes.’

‘Regulars?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are they organized? Is there a gang? A society?’

The men looked at each other, then dropped their eyes.

‘We wouldn’t know about that,’ they said.

They worked on carefully through the dovecot. When they had finished they patted the dovecot affectionately and climbed back unhurriedly down the stairs.

Owen sat thinking. It was a new possibility. Suppose the body had not been washed away? Suppose it had been interfered with? Suppose somebody had got to it?

Owen went to see the District Chief afterwards. He had a thing or two he wanted to tell him. To his surprise, when he reached the office he found the green car drawn up outside and the Prince about to go in.

‘Why, Captain Owen!’ said the Prince, pausing for him. ‘How felicitous! I was just making sure that everything was covered.’

‘Isn’t McPhee supposed to be doing that?’

‘Of course. But it sometimes helps if you remind key people which side their bread is buttered on, don’t you think?’

Owen wondered in what sense the District Chief was key.

The District Chief was, in fact, looking rather shaken.

‘After all,’ said the Prince with a wave of his hand, ‘it’s not every day that he gets called on by both Royalty *and* the Head of the Secret Police.’ He gave Owen a sidelong glance. ‘He is probably more impressed by the latter, I’m afraid.’

‘I doubt it, Prince.’

‘You’re his boss, aren’t you?’

‘No. He comes under Mr McPhee.’

‘Not the Mamur Zapt? Don’t they all come under the Mamur Zapt?’

‘No, Prince. The Mamur Zapt is, well, out to one side.’

‘You, too? Of course, things have changed. In my grandfather’s time the Mamur Zapt used to control everything. He was the Khedive’s right-hand man, you know. The man he relied on to keep him in power.’

‘I am afraid his scope is a little more restricted these days, Prince.’

The title ‘Head of the Secret Police’ was in any case something of a misnomer. Head of the Political Branch of the CID was the closest British equivalent. Perhaps, too, in army terms—and some considered Egypt an occupied country—Head of Political Intelligence.

‘Yes. And in the old days he used to serve the Khedive.’

‘He still does, Your Highness.’

The Prince smiled.

‘Well,’ he said. ‘I am sure you have business of your own with our friend here. Please don’t let me interrupt you.’

He walked over to one of the low, shuttered windows and sat on the sill.

‘Do carry on.’

Owen hesitated.

‘Not secret, is it? If it is, I will at once remove myself. Though, as you said a moment ago, you are in a sense one of my servants.’

‘The Khedive’s servants, certainly. No, Your Highness, you are, of course, welcome to stay. I was merely going to ask the Chief why he sent for me this morning.’

‘But is not that obvious?’

‘No, far from it. The proper procedure, you see, when a crime is reported, is to notify the Parquet, not the Mamur Zapt.’

‘I see. Well, man, answer him. Why did you send for him?’

‘The Mamur Zapt was nearby,’ muttered the Chief.

‘Well, that seems reasonable. You *were* nearby. And, by the way, that was very prescient of you.’

‘Hardly. I was conducting a search for arms.’

‘Really? In this vicinity? There does seem to be a lot going on in this neighbourhood. Arms, you say? Well, I suppose that’s important.’

‘Yes. To the Khedive as well as to me.’

‘You think so? Yes, I suppose you’re right. They’re just as likely to be used against us as they are against you. We and the British have a lot in common. We’re both unpopular.’

‘Only with some people, Prince.’

‘Well, yes. These Nationalists! Very trying people. My father keeps wondering whether to bring them in or keep them out. Bring them in and they want to change things. Keep them out and you deny them the chance to share in our unpopularity. Which is hardly wise, don’t you think? I’m all for bringing them in.’

‘You could always go half way. Bring them in so that they share the unpopularity but don’t give them enough power to change anything.’

‘Ah yes. Of course, that is the British solution. And very effective, too. But then, what about these guns? These arms of yours? Don’t you think there’s a danger that if people are disappointed they’re more ready to try extreme solutions? What do you do then?’

‘Conduct arms searches.’

‘I see. Why, Captain Owen, you’ve persuaded me! I am now convinced that your work was very important. Too important to be interrupted. So, fellow, why did you interrupt him?’

The District Chief, who had not altogether followed all this, looked blank.

‘I was wondering whether he’d received a phone call,’ explained Owen. ‘A phone call to suggest that there were other things more important.’

‘Oh, me, you mean? No. I always start at the top. I get round to the bottom later. As, of course, you see.’

‘I was puzzled,’ said Owen. ‘The message from the Chief came first. Before the message from Mr McPhee.’

The Prince looked at him sharply.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘that *is* interesting.’ He slipped off the sill, walked across to the Chief and stood in front of him. ‘That *is* interesting. Well,’ he said silkily, ‘*did* you receive a phone call this morning?’

‘No,’ said the Chief, ‘no phone calls.’

‘Or any other kind of message?’ asked Owen. ‘Did someone come to see you, for instance?’

‘No.’

‘The Mamur Zapt will check,’ warned the Prince. ‘If I were you I’d get it right the first time.’

‘No one came. There were no messages, effendi. I swear it.’

‘So why,’ asked the Prince, ‘did you send for Captain Owen?’

‘I thought—I thought—the Mamur Zapt was near—and—’

‘There may be a simple explanation,’ said Owen. ‘Laziness.’

‘Laziness?’

‘He heard there was someone senior in the neighbourhood and saw it as a golden opportunity to pass on the responsibility.’

‘But isn’t there a difficulty here? You said yourself earlier that you are not his superior, not directly. Yes, and that in any case the normal procedure was for the matter to be reported to the Parquet.’

‘These are facts of which I meant to remind him.’

‘I see. Good.’

The Prince wheeled away.

‘Carry on,’ he said over his shoulder.

‘Another time. Your Highness, I must apologize. I have been delaying you. You yourself had business, I think, with the District Chief?’

‘Well, yes. Certainly.’

‘Don’t let me delay you further. Please carry on.’

He walked over to the window and sat on the sill.

‘Don’t mind me,’ he said encouragingly.

The Prince sat silently for a moment looking at Owen. Then he suddenly smiled.

‘*Touché!*’ he said. ‘However, I don’t mind you hearing.’ He crooked his finger. The Chief came towards him.

‘The body that was washed up this morning: I am interested in it. If I am interested, other people will be, too. Now. One!’ He held up his forefinger. ‘If anyone comes round inquiring, I want to know who they are. Two!’ He held up the second finger. ‘You are to tell them nothing. They may offer you money. If you take it, I shall hear, and you know what to expect, don’t you? On the other

hand, if you report all to me it may be that *I* shall give you money. Understand? Three!’ He clasped the third finger. ‘It may be that you will come across information which you think would interest me. Information about the body, for instance. Not about the girl, I don’t need that. Just the body. I am prepared to pay for such information and pay well. Now, have you got all that?’

‘Yes, Your Highness.’

‘I’m sure you have. But just to make even surer, I am going to ask you to tell me what the three things are that could make you rich.’

He held up his forefinger and looked questioningly at the District Chief.

‘If people come asking,’ said the Chief hoarsely.

‘You are to say nothing. Good. And the second?’

‘I am to tell you who they are.’

‘Excellent!’ The Prince looked at Owen. ‘The man is well on his way to becoming rich, wouldn’t you say?’

‘There are sometimes dangers in trying to get rich too quickly.’

‘Oh, pooh! Don’t be a spoilsport. The man wants to get rich. Let him have his dream! Now, fellow, what is the third thing you have to do?’

He held up the third finger. The Chief kept his eyes fixed on it.

‘To bring you information, Your Highness. Information about the body.’

‘Good.’ The Prince patted him on the back. ‘Good fellow! You have learned your lesson.’

‘Thank you, Your Highness.’

He seemed uncertain, however.

‘Well?’ said the Prince. ‘What is it?’

‘I—I—there is a thing I don’t quite understand, Your Highness.’

‘Yes? What is it?’

‘The body, Your Highness. You said you wanted information about the body, Your Highness.’

‘Yes?’

The District Chief hesitated, then took the plunge.

‘What sort of information, Your Highness? I will go and see the body if you wish and describe it to you. In detail, naturally. But—’

He looked uncomfortably to Owen for support.

‘No, no, no!’ said the Prince hastily. ‘Not that sort of thing!’

‘Then—?’

‘The body has disappeared,’ said Owen.

‘Disappeared?’

‘Gone. From the sandbank where it was apparently found.’

‘Gone?’ said the District Chief, as if he could not believe his ears. ‘Gone?’

‘That’s right. When I got there it had gone.’

‘Abu?’ said the Chief faintly. ‘Ibrahim?’

‘We got there together. It had already gone. Ibrahim rather doubted it had been there in the first place.’

The Chief unexpectedly went ashen. He bowed his head between his hands.

‘God!’ he said. ‘God!’

‘I want to find it,’ said the Prince. ‘Quickly, and before anyone else does. Got it?’

CHAPTER 2

Unusually, there was a meeting on the British side about how to handle it. Garvin was there, Commandant of the Cairo Police and Owen's nominal superior; McPhee, Deputy Commandant, earnest, concerned and straightforward—too straightforward by half to be a Cairo policeman and far too straightforward for something like this; Paul, an aide-de-camp of the Consul-General's; and Owen.

The Consul-General usually steered clear of too direct an involvement in Egyptian policing. Garvin reported formally to the Khedive—and the Consul-General was punctilious about the forms. He was particularly careful of any involvement with the Mamur Zapt, which was why Owen not only reported formally to the Khedive but was nominally subordinate to Garvin.

It was, therefore, unusual to have a meeting of this sort. But then, as Paul, chairing the meeting on behalf of the Consul-General, made clear, the circumstances were unusual.

'It's not every day that an heir to the throne gets involved in something like this.'

'Is he an heir to the throne?'

'One of many. The Khedive has a number of sons and all of them see themselves as potential heirs.'

'Where does this one fit in?'

'He is the son of the Khedive's third wife, so not high up in the stakes. On the other hand, his mother is still a favourite of the Khedive's, which is often significant. He is able and energetic, which makes him stand out among the Khedive's progeny. And front runners in a thing of this sort are unfortunately prone to accidents.'

'He seemed a bit of a playboy to me,' said McPhee.

'That car, of course. But look at it another way: as an indication of Narouz's interest in things modern and things Western.'

'I see.'

'Yes. I thought you would. The Consul-General, and Al-Lurd before him, see him as a man England could do business with.'

Al-Lurd was Lord Cromer, the man who had run Egypt for over twenty years before the present incumbent. If two such people, the one popular with Conservatives, the other a nominee of the new Liberal Government in London, took that view, the Prince had a lot going for him.

'It would be unfortunate,' said Paul, 'if he were to be derailed at this point.'

There was a little silence.

'Is that a directive?' asked Owen.

'A hint, rather. Call it: putting you in the picture. Alerting you to the position of His Majesty's Government.'

'As strong as that?' said Garvin.

'I can relax it a bit, provided you've got the general idea. If he's done anything *really* wicked I don't think HMG would be prepared to go out on a limb on his behalf. There are, after all, other possible candidates. But if it's only mildly wicked we would feel it a pity to be too legalistic.'

'What counts as only mildly wicked?'

'I don't think I'd like to give you a general answer. These things have to be decided in the light of circumstances.'

'I'm not sure I find that very helpful,' said Garvin. 'What exactly is to be our position?'

'Aloof,' said Paul. 'Aloof, but watching.'

'Not get too close to it? Well, that's probably sensible.'

'Should be manageable,' said Garvin. 'After all, it's Parquet business really.'

‘Quite. The police will assist the Parquet and work under their direction as usual. But that’s at the local level. There’s no need for senior involvement.’

‘I quite agree,’ said Garvin. ‘No point in that at all.’

No fool he.

‘McPhee’s involved already,’ said Owen.

‘I think he can drop out now.’

‘The Prince thinks he’s involved.’

‘The Prince, I believe, has changed his mind.’

‘Since yesterday?’

‘Yes.’

‘I see.’

Someone else been making telephone calls?

‘I think that’s very reasonable,’ said Garvin. ‘McPhee’s got enough demands on his time already. When all is said and done, this is just a straightforward crime and we wouldn’t normally put him on to something like this.’

‘We don’t even know it is a crime,’ Paul pointed out.

‘No, no, of course not,’ said Garvin, hurriedly changing tack. ‘Could be just an accident.’

‘It’s for the Parquet to decide how it wants to treat it. Crime or accident.’

He looked at Owen.

‘They’ve put Mahmoud on to it, haven’t they?’

‘Yes.’

‘How will be play it?’

‘Straight.’

‘Mahmoud’s a good chap,’ said McPhee.

‘Mahmoud’s going to have to take some hard decisions,’ said Paul.

He finished his coffee.

‘Which brings me to the final thing we need to discuss. You asked me about the stance we were to adopt. I said aloof. I also said watching.’

‘We wouldn’t want it to go wrong,’ said Garvin.

‘We couldn’t afford for it to go wrong. We’ve got to have someone in there.’

‘I thought you said you didn’t want any senior involvement?’

‘Overt. No overt involvement at the senior level.’

Another little silence.

‘This is hardly straightforward policing,’ said Garvin slowly. ‘I would say it was more—political.’

‘You said it *was* straightforward policing a moment ago. When you wanted to shift it to the Parquet.’

‘A straightforward crime. Not straightforward policing. There are other dimensions here. Political ones.’

‘I think Owen’s the chap,’ said Paul.

‘I don’t like it.’

‘Who does?’

‘I’m not going to get involved in any cover-up.’

‘I don’t think Owen should be asked to cover up anything,’ said McPhee.

‘We’re not asking him to. Not yet, anyway. And I don’t think it need come to that, not if it’s handled in the right way. With a bit of dexterity, I mean. The Press, the politicians, the Prince himself. Mahmoud. The Khedive, too, perhaps.’

‘It’s a tall order.’

‘I’ve every confidence in the boy,’ said Paul, watching him.

‘I still don’t like it. I’m not going to get involved in any covering up.’

‘I hope it won’t be necessary. But this is politics. You know, you policemen are lucky. If you meet a bad guy, you lock him up. If I meet a bad guy I usually have to shake hands with him and do a deal.’

‘I’m not shaking hands,’ said Owen.

Paul smiled.

‘You’re in politics now,’ he said, ‘whether you like it or not. And I think you’ll find you’re going to have to take some hard decisions. Like Mahmoud.’

‘And, of course, there was the harem,’ said the eunuch.

‘The harem?’ said Owen, startled.

‘The Prince always travels with one.’

‘Even to Luxor?’ asked Mahmoud.

‘Certainly to Luxor. The Prince has an estate there.’

‘And that’s where he had been this time?’

‘Yes.’

They were sitting in the cabin of the dahabeeyah. It was a modern one, specially fitted out for the Prince, and had windows. Through the window beside him Owen could see a large rat sunning itself on a mooring rope.

‘I had gathered the impression that the Prince had intended to be away only for a few days,’ said Mahmoud.

‘That is true.’

‘How long did he spend at the estate?’

‘Two days.’

‘Only two days? That is a very short time, especially when you have to travel all that way.’

‘The Prince does not like his estate.’

‘He was principally interested in seeing Luxor, then?’

‘The Prince does not like Luxor, either.’

‘What does he like?’ asked Owen.

‘Cannes.’

In the old days, before the advent of Mr Cook’s steamers, when tourists used to sail down to Luxor by dahabeeyah, the port had been full of the old-fashioned, native sailing craft. The tourist would come and choose one. It would then be towed across the river and sunk—temporarily. This was to get rid of the rats. The trick was, though, to sail away immediately that dahabeeyah had been raised. Otherwise it would be reinfested—along the ropes—at once.

‘What, then, was the purpose of his visit?’ asked Mahmoud.

The eunuch shrugged.

‘I wouldn’t have thought the Prince was one to wish to spend a week admiring the beauties of the river bank.’

‘The Prince spent his time in the cabin playing cards with the Prince Fahid.’

‘Ah? The Prince Fahid was on the boat, too?’

‘Yes.’

‘Had he, too, brought his harem?’

‘The Prince Fahid is too young to have a harem.’

‘He is Prince Narouz’s son?’

‘Nephew.’

‘The Prince was perhaps showing him the sights?’

‘What sights?’

‘Luxor?’

‘The Prince is not interested in antiquities.’

‘What, then, was the point of the journey?’

‘I don’t know. Perhaps you had better ask the Prince.’

Mahmoud sighed. He had warned Owen beforehand to expect this. The Prince’s entourage wouldn’t say anything. He was finding it difficult to extract even the names of the people who had been on the dahabeeyah.

‘Let us go back to the harem,’ he said. ‘How many wives has the Prince?’

‘Four.’

‘And they were all there with him?’

‘Except Latfi, who is having a baby.’

‘Three, then. There were three in the harem quarters?’

‘You spoke of wives only.’

‘There were others, then? How many?’

‘Seven.’

‘Can you give me their names?’ said Mahmoud, taking out a pencil and notebook.

‘I am afraid not.’

‘Are you sure? You knew Latfi’s name.’

‘I know all their names. But it would not be proper for me to tell you the names of His Highness’s wives and concubines.’

‘But I need to know! I am conducting an investigation!’

‘That’s as may be, but a man’s harem is his own affair.’

‘Not when part of it disappears overboard.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You know very well what I mean,’ said Mahmoud, exasperated. ‘I told you! His Highness has reported that a passenger on the dahabeeyah with him—’

‘But she wasn’t in the harem.’

‘She wasn’t?’

‘No!’

‘What was she doing on board, then?’

‘Well ...’ The eunuch hesitated.

‘You may speak,’ said Owen encouragingly. ‘Mr el Zaki puts these questions with the knowledge and agreement of His Highness,’ possibly stretching the truth a little.

‘She was helping to entertain the princes.’

‘Helping?’

‘There were two others. They came on board at Beni Suef.’

‘On the way up to Luxor or on the way back?’

‘On the way up.’

‘Have you any objection to telling me *their* names?’

‘I don’t know their names,’ said the eunuch.

The incident had happened on the return journey. The dahabeeyah had moored for the night and the three girls had been up on the top deck enjoying the evening breeze. They had stayed up there with the princes until it had become dark, early, of course, in Egypt.

Prince Narouz, bored, had descended first. About half an hour later, according to the eunuch, Prince Fahid had followed him, accompanied, possibly reluctantly, by two of the girls. The third had remained on the top deck.

And it was from the top deck, apparently, that she had disappeared. Late, quite late, someone had called up to her, asking when she was going to come down. Some time after, not having received a reply, they had sent the eunuch to fetch her. He had found the top deck empty.

At first he had assumed that she had climbed down to the lower deck and gone forward. Some members of the crew had been sitting in the bows and it was only when they denied having seen her that he began to search seriously.

‘The steersman?’ said Mahmoud. ‘Surely the steersman must have seen?’

On a dahabeeyah the steersman was placed aft, immediately behind the cabin. He usually stood on a little platform raised high enough to enable him to see over and past the cabins when the boat was moving.

After the boat had stopped for the night there was always some work still to be done on the platform. The rudder bar had to be lashed and the ropes stowed. The eunuch said, however, that the steersman had finished his work and gone forward before all this happened.

The eunuch had made a cursory search and then had reported the matter to Prince Narouz. Narouz had been angry, first with the girl for playing the fool and then with the eunuch for not finding her.

He had searched the boat himself. Gradually he came to realize that something was seriously amiss.

By now, of course, it was dark and hard to see anything on the water. The Prince had had all the men up on deck scanning the river with the aid of oil lamps. Meanwhile the eunuch had been concluding a search below.

When he had gone up on deck again he found that the Prince had lowered two small rowing boats and was systematically scouring the river. This had continued all night. As soon as it was light the dahabeeyah had sailed down river with everyone on deck keeping an eye out. They had seen nothing.

In the end they had abandoned the search, set the Prince down so that he could report the incident at once, and sailed on to Bulak.

‘I shall need to speak to the Ship’s Captain, the Rais,’ said Mahmoud. ‘Also to the crew. One by one. Also to the servants. Those girls, of course. Then the harem.’

‘The harem!’ said the eunuch, shocked. ‘Certainly not! What sort of boat do you think this is?’

The dahabeeyah was moored across the river from the main port. This was the traditional mooring place for dahabeeyahs and in the old days, before Mr Cook had come with his steamers, there would have been over two hundred of them nudging the bank. They were the traditional way for the rich to travel by water—and in Egypt everyone travelled by water. The Nile was the main, the only, thoroughfare from north to south and the dahabeeyah was its Daimler.

It was a large, flat-bottomed sailing boat rather like a Thames barge or, as tourists were over-prone to comment, a College houseboat, except that its cabins were all above deck and all aft. This gave it a weird, lop-sided look and might have made it unstable had that not been compensated for by putting the hold forward.

From the point of view of the tourist the arrangement had an additional delight. There was a railed-off space on top of the cabins which served as a kind of open-air lounge, sufficiently high to allow passengers both to enjoy the breeze and to see over the bank. This was important, as in some stretches of the river Mr Cook’s customers might not otherwise have benefited from the remarkable views he had promised them.

Owen himself rather enjoyed the views but he had been a little surprised to learn that they had also drawn the Prince.

‘How long was he up there?’ he asked the Rais, the Ship’s Captain, disbelievingly.

‘Two hours.’

‘Of course, it was cool up there.’

‘Yes.’

‘And he was keeping the women company.’

‘They were already up there,’ said the Rais. There was a note of disapproval in his voice.

‘Really? By themselves?’

Mahmoud clucked sympathetically.

‘By themselves.’

‘That’s not right!’

‘They shouldn’t have been up there at all!’ said the Rais. ‘There’s a place for women. And it’s the harem.’

‘Ah, but these weren’t—I mean, they weren’t properly in the Prince’s harem.’

‘They ought to have been. And they ought to have stayed there.’

‘Were they flaunting themselves?’ asked Mahmoud, commiserating.

The Rais hesitated.

‘It was enough to be there, wasn’t it? My men could hardly take their eyes off them.’

‘Unseemly!’ said Mahmoud.

‘It wasn’t proper,’ said the Rais. ‘The Prince should have known better. Though it is not for me to say that.’

‘Have you captained for him before?’

‘He’s never been on the river before. At least, as far as I know.’

‘So you didn’t know what to expect?’

‘All he told us was that he wanted to go up to Luxor. With the Prince Fahid. He was very particular about that. The Prince had his own room, of course, and Narouz wanted a cabin next to him. He didn’t even want to be with the harem.’

‘Strange! And then, of course, there were those other women.’

‘He didn’t say anything about them. Not until we were nearly at Beni Suef.’

‘They were foreigners, weren’t they?’

‘I’m not saying anything.’

‘They must have been. Our women wouldn’t have behaved like that.’

‘Indecent!’

‘Did they wear veils?’

‘They wore veils,’ the Rais conceded grudgingly. ‘But they showed their ankles!’

‘Oh!’ said Mahmoud, shocked.

‘How could Hassan be expected to steer when they were flaunting their ankles in front of him?’

‘Impossible,’ Mahmoud agreed. ‘Impossible!’

They were standing in the stern of the vessel looking up at the back of the cabins. The steersman’s platform, with the huge horizontal rudder bar he used for steering, was right beside them.

‘But I don’t understand!’ said Mahmoud. ‘The woman who stayed up there alone—’

‘Shameless!’ said the Rais.

‘Shameless!’ agreed Mahmoud. ‘But she was right in front of him. Surely he would have seen if she had—well, fallen off.’

‘Ah, but it was dark, you see. We had stopped for the night.’

‘So the steersman wasn’t there?’

‘No.’

‘Where was he?’

‘I don’t know,’ said the Rais. ‘You’d better ask him.’

‘And where were you?’ asked Mahmoud.

‘I was up here,’ said the steersman. ‘We’d finished for the day, so I tied the rudder and then came up forward.’

They were sitting in the shade of the cook’s galley. It was a small shed, rather like a Dutch oven in shape, set well up into the prow to remove it as far as possible from the passengers’ cabins. The cook stood up on the forward side, so that the shed protected him when there was a favourable wind. They could hear him there now.

The spot was clearly a favourite one with the crew and there had been several men dozing there when Owen and Mahmoud had appeared. They had gone aft to leave them to talk to the steersman in private, but one of them, the cook presumably, had disappeared into the galley.

‘She was still up there at that point?’

‘Yes.’ The steersman’s wrinkled face broke into a smile. ‘I reckoned the midges would soon drive her down.’

‘It was dark by then?’

‘Just. They were up there admiring the sunset but I wanted to stop while there was still a bit of light. There are one or two things you have to do and you can always do them better if you can see what you’re doing. Besides, the Prince didn’t want us to go too far. He wanted another night on the river!’

‘Oh, he did, did he? And why was that?’

‘Why do you think? Perhaps he likes it better on the water.’

‘That’s what it was about, you think?’

‘What else could it be? He goes down to his estate and doesn’t stay there a moment, we call in at Luxor and he doesn’t want to go ashore. We go straight down and straight back and the only thing we stop for is to pick up some women at Beni Suef!’

‘Those women,’ said Mahmoud, ‘what were they like?’

‘Classy. But not the sort you’d want to take home with you.’

‘Foreign.’

The steersman hesitated. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘I don’t know. Two of them were, certainly. The other—that’s the one who finished up in the river—I’m not sure about.’

‘You’re sure about the others, though?’

‘Oh yes. You could hear them talking. Mind you, she was talking with them. I don’t know, of course, but it just seemed to me ... well, and then there were the clothes.’

‘What about the clothes?’

‘Well, they all wore the tob.’ The tob was a loose outer gown. ‘And the burka, of course.’ The burka was a long face veil which reached almost to the ground. ‘But from where I was you could see their legs.’

‘Yes. The Rais told us.’

‘I’ll bet he did! He oughtn’t to have seen that, ought he? I mean, he wouldn’t have noticed if he hadn’t been looking. You’d have thought a man like that, strict, he’s supposed to be—’

‘The women,’ said Mahmoud patiently.

‘Yes, well, the thing was that—I mean, I couldn’t see clearly—but I reckon those two had European clothes on underneath their tobs. You could see their ankles. But the other one, well, I caught a glimpse. She was wearing shintiyān.’

‘Pink ones?’ said Owen.

‘Why, yes,’ said the steersman, surprised. ‘That’s right. How did you know? Oh, I suppose you’ve seen the body.’

‘Never mind that,’ said Mahmoud. ‘Let’s get back to when she was on the top deck. She was up there when you last saw her?’

‘Yes.’

‘Alone?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why didn’t she go down with the others?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Had they been quarrelling?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘You heard them talking.’

‘Well, it was not so much quarrelling. I think the Prince was trying to get her to do something. Like, persuade her.’

‘And she didn’t want to?’

'I couldn't really tell,' confessed the steersman. 'I couldn't understand the language, see? It was just the impression I got. He wasn't nasty or anything, not even angry, really. He was just trying—well, to persuade her, like I said.'

'He didn't get anywhere, though?'

'No.'

'How was she? I mean, was *she* angry?'

'I couldn't really say. You never know what's going on behind those burkas. You think all's going well and the next moment—bing! They've hit you with something. My wife's like that.'

'Were there any tears?'

'Tears? Well, I don't know. Not so much tears but you know how they get sometimes, you think they're going to cry and they don't, they just keep going on and on. A bit like that.'

'With the Prince? When he was trying to persuade her?'

'Yes. And with the girls, too. A bit earlier. Going on and on.'

'Did they get fed up with her?'

'They left her alone after a bit. Then the Prince came up and had a try and he didn't do any better.' He broke off. 'Is this helping?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Good. I like to help. Only—all this talking!' He suddenly pounded on the back of the galley with his fist.

'What's the matter?' asked the cook, sticking his head out.

'How about some tea? I'm so dry I can't speak.'

'It sounded to me as if you were doing all right. I'd have brought you some before only I didn't want to interrupt you.'

He placed a little white enamel cup before each of them and filled it with strong black tea.

'No sugar,' he said. 'You'd think we'd have sugar on board the Prince's dahabeeyah but we don't.'

'It's that eunuch,' said the steersman. 'The stuff never even gets here.'

'It goes somewhere else, does it?' asked Mahmoud sympathetically.

'Into his pocket!' said the steersman.

Mahmoud looked up at the cook.

'You were here that night, weren't you? The night the girl disappeared?'

'Yes. I was just making supper when that stupid eunuch came along making a great commotion.'

'You left the girl there,' Mahmoud said to the steersman, 'and then you came along here. Did you have a cup of tea at that point?'

'Yes,' said the steersman, 'I always have one when I finish.'

'Tea first, then supper,' said the cook.

'And you had a cup with him, perhaps?'

'I did. I always do.'

'Here? Sitting here?'

'Yes. Several of us.'

'And you were still sitting here when the eunuch came?'

'I was,' said the steersman.

'I had just got up,' said the cook. 'To make the supper.'

'So whatever it was that happened,' said Mahmoud, 'happened while you were sitting here.'

'I suppose so,' said the steersman. 'Well, it must have.'

'Yes, it must have. And you still say you saw nothing? Heard nothing?'

'Here, just a minute—!'

'We weren't looking!'

'We were talking!'

'You would have seen a person. Or—'

‘We didn’t see anything!’

‘Two people. On the cabin roof. Together.’

‘Here!’ said the steersman, scrambling to his feet. ‘What are you saying?’

‘I’m asking,’ said Mahmoud. ‘Did you see two people?’

‘No!’

‘Up there together. Whoever they were.’

‘I didn’t see anything!’

‘None of us saw anything!’

‘Thirty feet away and you saw nothing?’

‘We weren’t looking!’

‘You took care not to look.’

‘We were talking!’

‘And nothing attracted your attention? Someone is attacked—’

‘Attacked!’

‘Or falls. And you know nothing about it? If she’d jumped into the water she’d have made a splash.’

‘A splash? Who hears a splash? There are splashes all the time.’

‘One as big as this? You are boatmen. You would have heard.’

‘Truly!’ said the steersman. ‘I swear to God—!’

‘He hears what you say!’ Mahmoud warned him.

‘And sees all that happens. I know. Well, he may have seen what happened to the girl but I didn’t.’

The steersman showed them off the boat. At the gangway he hesitated and then ran up the bank after them.

‘What was it, then? *Was* she knocked on the head?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Mahmoud.

‘I thought you’d seen the body?’

‘No. It’s not turned up yet.’

‘Oh.’ He seemed disappointed. Then he brightened. ‘Tell you what,’ he said, ‘I know where it will fetch up, more than likely.’

‘Yes?’

The steersman pointed downriver to where men were working on a scaffolding which stretched out across the river.

‘See that? That’s the new Bulak bridge. That’s where they finish up these days.’

They were sharing the boat with a kid goat, a pile of onions and the boatman’s wife, who sat, completely muffled in tob and burka, as far away from them as was possible.

It had been the steersman’s idea. They had been about to set out for the main bridge when he had said:

‘Are you going back to Bulak? Why don’t you get Hamid to run you over?’

He had pointed along the bank to where an elderly Arab was standing in the water bent over the gunwale of a small, crazily-built boat. The sides were not so much planks as squares of wood stuck on apparently at hazard. The sail was a small, tattered square sheet.

‘In that? I don’t think so,’ said Owen.

But Mahmoud, fired with enthusiasm for the life marine, was already descending the bank.

With the two of them on board, the stern dipped until the gunwale was inches above the water. The bows, with the woman and the goat, rose heavenward. The boatman inspected this critically for a moment, but then, unlike Owen, seemed satisfied.

He perched himself on the edge of the gunwale and took the two ends of the rope in his hands. One he wedged expertly between his toes. The other he wound round his arm.

The wind caught the sail and he threw himself backwards until the folds of his galabeah were trailing in the water. The boat moved comfortably out into the river.

Now they were in midstream they could see the new bridge more clearly. There were workmen on the scaffolding and, down at the bottom, a small boat nudging its way along the length of the works.

The boatman pointed with his head.

‘That’s the police boat,’ he said. ‘It comes every day to pick up the bodies.’

‘Can you take us over there?’ asked Mahmoud.

The boatman scampered across to the opposite gunwale, turned the boat, turned it again and set off on a long glide which took them close in along the bridge.

‘Bring us in to the boat,’ said Mahmoud.

A tall man in the police boat looked up, saw Mahmoud and waved excitedly.

‘Ya Mahmoud!’ he called.

‘Ya Selim!’ answered Mahmoud warmly.

A couple of policemen caught the boat as it came in alongside and steadied it. Mahmoud and the other man embraced affectionately.

‘Why, Mahmoud, have you done something sensible at last and joined the river police?’

‘Temporarily; this is my boat.’

Selim inspected it critically.

‘The boatman’s all right,’ he said, ‘but I’m not so sure about the boat.’

He shook hands with the boatman.

‘Give me your money,’ said the boatman, ‘and I’ll have a boat as good as yours.’

‘And the Mamur Zapt,’ said Mahmoud.

Selim shook hands again and gave him a second look.

‘I don’t think we’ve met,’ said Owen.

‘No. I’ve met Mahmoud, though. We were working on a case last year.’ He looked at them again. ‘The Mamur Zapt *and* the Parquet,’ he said. ‘This must be important.’

‘It’s the girl,’ said Mahmoud. ‘You’ve received notification, I’m sure.’

‘Pink shintiyān? That the one?’

‘That’s the one.’

‘Not come through yet. When did it happen?’

‘The night before last. About three miles upstream.’

‘She’ll have sunk, then. Otherwise she’d have come through by now.’

Owen looked out along the works. There seemed a lot of water passing through the gaps.

‘Could she have gone through and missed you?’

‘She could. But most of them finish up against the scaffolding. In the old days before we started building the bridge they used to fetch up on a bend about two miles down. That was better for us because it’s in the next district and meant they had to do the work and not us.’

‘Ah, but that meant they missed all the glory, too!’

‘I think the average Chief would prefer to do without the glory!’

Owen laughed. ‘We’ve known a few like that!’

‘Yes. We sometimes get the feeling that not all the bodies that come down to us need have done.’

‘You think so?’

‘Sure of it.’

‘It’s important to pick up this one,’ said Mahmoud.

‘Yes, I’m checking them myself. We’ve had two women through this week. One of them’s old and one of them’s young, but I don’t think the young one could be the one you’re looking for, not unless she changed her trousers on the way down.’

‘The trousers is about all we’ve got at the moment. I hope to add some details later. Keep the young one just in case.’

‘It’ll be some time before she’s traced and identified anyway. They don’t always come from the city. Sometimes it’s a village upstream.’

‘Well, keep her. Just on the off-chance.’

‘If she’s sunk, what then?’ asked Owen.

‘Oh, she’ll come up. Gases. In the body. It’ll take a day or two. Then the body comes up and floats on down to us. We get them all in the end.’

‘I hope you get this one.’

They pushed off. Their boat was now downwind and they had to tack. The boatman tucked up the skirts of his galabeah, hooked his knees over the gunwale and leaned far back over the side. Owen, more confident of his transport now, trailed a hand over the side and turned his face to catch the breeze. Beside him, Mahmoud, hands clasped behind head, was thinking.

In the bows the boatman’s wife sat muffled from head to foot, invisible behind her veil, anonymous.

CHAPTER 3

‘Does this girl have a name?’ demanded Zeinab.

They were lying on cushions in her *appartement*. Very few single women in Cairo had an *appartement* of their own, but Zeinab was rich enough and imperious enough and independent enough to insist on one.

The richness and imperiousness came from her father, Nuri Pasha, not quite one of the Khedive’s family but certainly one of his confidants, not exactly trusted—the Khedive, wisely, trusted nobody—but regularly called upon when the Khedive was reshuffling the greasy pack of his Ministers. Nuri was one of Egypt’s great landowners and the Khedive considered there was sufficient identity of interest between them for him to be able to use Nuri’s services without fear.

Zeinab was Nuri’s daughter: illegitimate, but that, as he explained, was not his fault. Her mother had been a famous courtesan, doted on by all Cairo but in particular by Nuri, who, though a mature man, had taken the reckless step of proposing that she become his wife and a member of his harem.

Unaccountably, the lady had refused. She was more than willing—since Nuri was handsome as well as rich—to extend him her embraces; but enter his harem? She was a fiercely proud, independent woman and these qualities had passed in more than abundant measure to her daughter.

Nuri had gained his way on one thing. Their child had been acknowledged as his daughter and raised in his house, which gave her all the privileges and benefits of belonging to one of Egypt’s leading families. While, admittedly, these were not normally conspicuous in the case of women, for Zeinab they were substantial.

Like most of the Egyptian upper classes, Nuri was a Francophile. He spoke French by preference, read French books and newspapers and followed French intellectual and cultural fashions rather than Egyptian ones. The culture of educated Egyptians was, anyway, in many respects as much French as it was Egyptian. Mahmoud, for instance, had been educated as a lawyer in the French tradition. The Parquet was French through and through.

Zeinab had been brought up in this culture. Her father, finding in her many of the qualities he had admired in her mother, had given her far greater freedom from the harem than was normal and from childhood she had sat in on the political and intellectual discussions her father had with his cronies. She came to share many of his interests and tastes and as she grew up she became something of a companion to him.

All this made Zeinab an interesting woman but a rather unusual one. Men found her formidable and she advanced into her twenties, long past the usual marrying age, without Nuri having received a suitable offer. He began to think of this as a problem.

It was a problem, however, which Zeinab herself solved. She moved out and set up her own establishment. Nuri, though advanced in his thinking, was rather shocked by this. Shocked but intrigued: was Zeinab taking after her mother?

Zeinab, however, was merely following up some of the ideas she had met in her father’s own circle. Among his friends were some writers and artists who formed a somewhat Bohemian set. Zeinab, who had strong musical interests, found their company congenial and enjoyed their artistic debates. This talk, too, was very much influenced by French fashions and preoccupations; and from it Zeinab acquired the notion that it was possible for a single woman to set up house on her own.

She did this and enjoyed it and gradually her father and his friends came to accept it; indeed, not even, any longer, to notice it. And she was living like this when she met Owen.

The intensity of their relationship surprised them both. Zeinab, alarmed at herself, backed off a little and insisted on maintaining an independent life while she was working out how to handle all this. Owen, equally alarmed, was content to let it rest like that while he tried to see a way through the likely complications. Neither of them was getting very far.

Meanwhile they carried on as they were and that went very well. They met every day, usually in Zeinab's *appartement* and Zeinab kept a proprietorial eye on what Owen was doing when he was away from her.

'Of course she has a name,' he said. 'It's just that we haven't found it yet.'

'It was the way you were talking,' said Zeinab.

'Well, it all sounds pretty anonymous, I know—'

'Yes.'

'Until we find out more about her, it's bound to be.'

'I just ask myself,' said Zeinab, 'what kind of woman is likely to be found on Narouz's dahabeeyah.'

'And what answer do you get?'

'Someone like me.'

'What nonsense! What absolute nonsense!'

It disturbed him.

'Nonsense!' he repeated vehemently.

'It's got to be someone like me, hasn't it? It can't be an ordinary girl from an ordinary family because in Egypt ordinary girls are never allowed to be seen. Not even by their husbands, until after they are married.'

'An "ordinary" girl, as you put it, wouldn't get anywhere near a son of the Khedive.'

'No, it would have to be someone from a family of rank, wouldn't it? Like mine.'

'The same thing applies to them. They're kept out of sight, too. More, even, since they know what the Khedive's sons are like. I've been in Egypt four years and I've never seen a Pasha's wife or daughter.'

'Except me.'

'You're different. You're not at all ordinary. In fact,' said Owen, his mind beginning to stray on to a quite different tack, 'you're altogether extraordinary—'

But Zeinab refused to be diverted.

'It would be someone like me,' she said. 'Someone whose family is rich enough for her to meet the Khedive. Someone whose father is, well, modern enough not to care. Someone who's struck out on her own. Someone who's vulnerable.'

Unexpectedly she began to cry.

Owen was taken aback. Zeinab cried frequently at the opera, never, up till now, anywhere else. He took her in his arms.

'For Christ's sake!' he said. 'You don't even know the girl!'

'I can feel!' sobbed Zeinab. 'I can feel!'

'You can get misled by feeling.'

Zeinab pulled herself away. 'You don't have any feeling,' she said, looking at him stormily. This was, however, more like the Zeinab he knew and he felt reassured.

'Aren't you missing out the most likely possibility?' he said. 'That she's foreign?'

'I thought you said—?'

'It's what the steersman said. He thought she was different from the other two and they were certainly foreign. Well, she might have been different but still foreign. And isn't that the most likely thing? You don't get the Egyptian women on their own either on the Prince's boat or off it. He's used to mixing with foreign women. Someone he's met at Cannes? I'd have thought it was pretty likely. After all, the Khedive himself—'

'Well, of course,' said Zeinab, sniffing, 'that's true.'

'It was the clothes, you see, that made him think she was Egyptian. The shintiyān.'

'*Would* a Frenchwoman wear shintiyān?' asked Zeinab, who herself dressed à la Parisienne. 'I certainly wouldn't.'

‘Maybe to please the Prince. Or as a joke or something.’

Zeinab thought it over.

‘The other two were foreign, weren’t they?’

‘Yes. And that’s another thing. My guess is that they were from some cabaret or other. That’s where he might have come across them. You see, you said the girl would have to come from a family of rank. Well, I don’t think girls who let themselves get picked up en masse off the bank to spend a week with a bloke on a dahabeeyah *are* likely to be that high class. Foreign, not too classy, three at a time—that sounds like cabaret to me.’

‘No decent Egyptian woman would let herself be subjected to such a thing,’ said Zeinab, removing Owen’s hand.

‘So,’ said Owen, putting it back, ‘they must either be foreign or—’

‘Or what?’ asked Zeinab.

‘Indecent Egyptian women,’ said Owen, putting his other arm round her.

In front of him was a beautiful old building, very like a small mosque with its domes, its façade of red and white stones intermixed, its ornate panelling and intricate arabesques. It was not, however, a mosque but a hammam, a public bath-house.

The entrance was narrow and below street level. A towel hung over the door.

Owen’s men looked at him inquiringly.

The towel meant that the baths were temporarily occupied by women.

‘Leave it,’ said Owen resignedly. The men moved on. Owen made a note to return to the hammam later when the towel had been taken down.

It was not, however, a good start.

He was conducting yet another search of the quarter. His informant swore blind that the arms were still there. He had even been able to specify a little more precisely the area where he thought they were concealed. They were, he said, somewhere near the souk.

The souk was not located, as markets usually were, in a square of its own but occupied the space created by a crossroads. Its stalls spread over the whole area successfully restricting passage in any direction. Fortunately, this far out of town, there were very few vehicles to pass. The occasional horse-cart laden with stones, the occasional hand-cart carrying ice, were the closest approximation. The Souk Al-Gadira existed only for its immediate neighbourhood.

The stalls were erected and dismantled every day so there was little likelihood of the arms being hidden beneath them. They were far more likely to be concealed in one of the buildings round about and it was here that Owen was concentrating the search.

They had gone through the buildings when they had searched the area previously but on that occasion, as Owen reminded himself crossly, he had been summoned away in the middle by that foolish District Chief and sent on that wild goose chase down to the river.

There would be no repetition of that today, he told himself grimly. He would make damned sure they stuck with it and did the job properly.

Only it was not quite so straightforward. First, there had been the hammam. And now, at the end of the street, just ahead of him, was a mosque.

Again the men looked at him inquiringly. And again he hesitated.

Even the Mamur Zapt entered mosques on police business with caution. It was so easy for minister and congregation to get excited. The smallest thing would set them going. The sight of a Western face was enough.

Well, he could do something about that. He needn’t go in himself, just send the men in.

Just send the men in? The police were only slightly more *grata* than himself. They were seen as the agents of either an alien, infidel force (the British) or a dissolute secular power (the Khedive). In either case they were unwelcome. It needed only one irascible minister to take umbrage at some fancied slight or misdemeanour for there to be trouble.

‘Leave it,’ he said again. If there was trouble he’d have to spend the rest of the day putting it down and wouldn’t be able to get on with the arms search at all.

But this was ridiculous! First, the hammam and now this! This wasn’t a search at all. Suppose the arms were hidden inside? And there would be no coming back to the mosque!

He called the men back.

‘You two,’ he said, picking on men he had brought with him from headquarters and therefore more experienced, ‘you go in and walk through, keeping your eyes open. Don’t cause any trouble and don’t insist if they look like objecting. Just see what you can see and come back and tell me.’

The men nodded and went off. After a while they returned. One of them spread his hands, palms upward, and shrugged.

‘OK,’ said Owen. ‘Worth a try. Get after the others.’

At least it hadn’t created uproar.

He moved on up the street, or would have moved on if he had been able to. The street was one of those which led into the souk and its lower end was completely blocked by stalls. Regardless of the general press of humanity, a funeral procession was attempting to pass down it from the other end. Processions, like deaths, were extremely common in Cairo and everyone stopped to look, including Owen, who was a little surprised to see a funeral so early in the day. Usually they took place in the evening when it was cooler.

As funerals went, this was a very medium affair. First came the Yemeneeyeh, six poor men, mostly blind, proceeding two and two, and chanting mournfully, ‘There is no God but God.’ Then there were male relations of the deceased, few in this case. Next came four schoolboys, one of them carrying an open copy of the Koran placed upon a kind of platform of palm-sticks and covered with an embroidered kerchief. As they walked, they sang: in rather more sprightly tones than the Yemeneeyeh. And then came the bier, its front draped with a shawl to indicate that it carried a woman, which perhaps accounted for the general meagreness of the proceedings.

All the Cairo world loved a good funeral and the bystanders stopped what they were doing, not so much to let the procession pass but to join in the fun. But where were the dervishes, the munshids, with their singing and dancing and flag-waving? There was admittedly a fiki but he was very restrained and seemed anxious to keep himself invisible at the back. This was a poor affair indeed. Even the female mourners, who followed the bier, were few in number and boringly subdued.

Disappointed, the crowd resumed its business. Which, of course, brought the procession to a halt. Owen cursed and tried to wriggle his way round, failed and had to cut across in front of the donkeys laden with bread and water to give to the poor at the tomb. The poor, judging from the size of the loads, would benefit handsomely.

Once past, Owen hurried to catch up with his men. He fell in alongside two of them at the end of the street. They were the two he had talked to on the previous search, the ones who had been taking such pains with the dovecot.

‘Found that body yet?’ one of them asked.

‘No.’

‘You won’t, either.’

Owen stepped aside to let a water-carrier pass with his heavy bags.

‘Why not?’ he asked.

‘It’s the river. Full of tricks.’

‘It’ll come up some time.’

‘Ah yes. But where?’

‘Most of them finish up against the bridge these days, apparently.’

‘Perhaps this one will too. When it gets there.’

Owen didn't quite understand this and would have asked more but the two men ducked into the next house. He continued slowly along the street, noting how long it took them. Everything was going to be under control this time.

There was nothing wrong with the efforts of his men at the moment. They were working through the buildings quickly and, as far as he could tell, efficiently.

They turned up the next street. It contained some taller buildings with shops on the ground floor. This would take them longer. After waiting a little, Owen sauntered on.

Half way up the street was a tall sebil, or fountain-house. It was, like the hammam, an old building, clearly predating the other buildings since the street curved back specially to accommodate it.

It was a delightful building. Its totally curved sides were fenced with grilles of exquisite metalwork and its upper storey was graciously arcaded. There was a little parapet going round the arcade and it suddenly occurred to Owen that it might provide a vantage-point from which he could more pleasantly monitor proceedings.

He climbed up the outside staircase past the fountains surrounded by black-veiled women filling their pots with water and out on to the little parapeted promenade which crowned the second storey.

From inside the arcade came the murmur of children's voices. As with many of the larger sebils, the arcaded upper storey was occupied by a kuttub, a school where little children received their first lessons on the Koran.

Owen smiled. It was an unexpectedly tender insight on the part of the Arabs to accommodate their infants up here where it was airy and cool.

He walked to the parapet and looked over. Down in the street he could see some of his men. They approached a house and went in. Not long afterwards, watching, he saw them appear on the roof. They looked around for a moment and then went down.

From where he stood, high up, he could look down on the roofs of the houses. Most of them were flat and empty, save for the occasional bundle of firewood, the heap of vegetables, the pile of corn-stalks. One or two of the larger houses, though, had roof gardens; and, as he watched, two women came up on to one of these and began watering the plants.

It was a house about two along from the one he had been looking at previously. He hoped the women would have completed their task and departed before his men arrived. Servants would probably warn them but if there was an outside staircase and his men dashed up—?

He watched anxiously. The men went into the next house and worked through it. The women went on watering.

The men finished the house and came out into the street. And at that moment, fortunately, the women left the roof of their own accord.

Owen breathed a sigh of relief. It wouldn't have done for the women to be met by his men. That, yet again, could have caused trouble.

What a country this was to police in! Mosques, bathhouses, roofs—you could offend someone's susceptibilities by searching any of them. What were you to do? If it wasn't religion, it was women!

His men, searching both sides of the street, had covered that block of houses and were now coming up the street towards the fountain-house. He went down to meet them.

'That one next?' said one of the men, indicating the fountain-house with his hand.

'Of course!'

The women watched them curiously as they mounted the stairs. Owen was about to move away when one of his men appeared above the parapet and waved to him urgently.

He ran up.

In an inner room, beyond the chanting class, were some sacks and packaging. The men had picked up the sacks and shaken them out. And out had fallen two new live clips of ammunition.

'Of course, we're holding the teacher,' said Owen.

‘That won’t do much good,’ said Garvin scornfully.

‘They moved the guns this morning right in front of him.’

‘This morning?’

Owen swallowed.

‘Yes, this morning. When we started searching.’

‘I thought you had people on the lookout?’

‘Well, we did. But—’

‘You seem to be mislaying a lot of things lately,’ said Garvin. ‘First, the body. Now the guns.’

‘He says that all he knows is that the men came this morning and took away the guns,’ said Nikos, Owen’s Official Clerk and Office Manager.

‘He must know more than that,’ protested Owen. ‘Where the guns were hidden, for a start.’

‘He says he was told not to use the room.’

‘Who told him?’

‘A man.’

‘What sort of man?’

‘The usual. Galabeeyah and head-dress. The head-dress held across his face.’

‘No description?’

‘No description.’

‘Keep him,’ said Owen. ‘It may help him to see better. And send Georgiades down. See if he can find out anything.’

But this was bolting the door after the horse had gone. The teacher was unimportant and probably genuinely knew nothing. Georgiades questioned several other people: the kuttub’s watchman, a fiki who taught there, people in the neighbouring shops, but to no avail. The fact was that the guns had been there and Owen had missed them twice. The first time because he had allowed himself to be called away in the middle of things and hadn’t been able to supervise the men properly. The second time because—well, because they had been smart enough to smuggle the guns away right under the noses of the men he had posted to make sure that didn’t happen.

He was back where he had started. Only this time without the guns.

And still there were distractions! Mahmoud had traced the girls who had been on the Prince’s dahabeeyah and wanted Owen’s help in interviewing them. Owen could guess why that was. They must be foreign.

Because of treaty concessions imposed on Egypt over the centuries, the nationals of certain foreign powers had legal privileges. Their houses could not be entered by the police, for instance; they had to be tried by courts of their own country, not by Egyptian courts, and so on.

The definition of nationality, already elastic in this cosmopolitan country, was easily stretched and all kinds of dubious people claimed benefit of the Capitulations, as the privileges were called.

It was common practice, for example, for a brothel-keeper brought before a court to claim that he or she belonged to a privileged nationality. It was possible, if the police applied to the Consul of a country, to get the exemptions waived. But by the time the police had secured the exemption and got back to the brothel, the keeper would have changed his nationality and they would have to start all over again.

It was another of those things, like religion and women, that required policing to be resourceful in Cairo.

If you were dealing with a foreign national it often paid to have a representative of a Great Power, like Britain, at your back. But it was probably for another reason that Mahmoud had called on him. In a sensitive case like this, where action against foreign nationals might have diplomatic repercussions, it was wise to get the British on your side first.

Owen knew this and didn’t mind it. There were even advantages in that he might be able to ‘manage’ the affair better from the inside. All the same, just now it was a distraction.

However, he went. The two girls, it transpired, did not work in a cabaret but assisted at a gambling salon. Owen thought he knew what kind of assistance that was but Mahmoud said it was not like that, or not like that entirely.

‘It’s a very high-class salon,’ he said, ‘and the people who go there are more interested in gambling. They tend to be European, though, or Europeanized Egyptians and expect the social style of a club on the Riviera. There’s a reception area where they can sit and talk and the girls sit in there too and help the conversation along.’

At the request of the salon’s owner they met the girls not at the salon but in a hotel nearby. The salon was in the Ismailia quarter where all the best hotels were. They met in the Hotel Continental.

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