

The Grave Robbers

From the dry wash where they sat in camp chairs beneath an improvised ramada built of box-elder poles with armloads of cut greasewood laid on top, they could just make out, through the brush that obscured the wash, the wide, shallow cave arched thinly across the enigmatic yellow face of the opposing sandstone cliff. Lance Barber turned his wrist over to read the time.

"The day's nearly shot already," he observed. "Night comes on before you know it down in these godforsaken canyons. It seems like it's always later than you think. Paquito—you have the gear packed up and set to go?"

"All ready, Dr. Barber," Paquito answered cheerfully. Paquito was always cheerful and bright; an agreeable boy, almost overeager to please.

"And don't use your headlamp until we get started climbing this evening. It's not a toy, and we can't afford to waste more batteries."

There were three of them beneath the ramada, waiting for dark: a man, a woman, and an Indian boy. Lance Barber, though he liked to describe himself as a grave robber, was actually an archaeologist who had conducted unauthorized diggings in the Mediterranean Basin, Chaldean Mesopotamia, and northeast Africa, where he had located a hitherto undiscovered Coptic Christian burial site, from which he had removed rare artifacts worth a large sum of money on the black market. A tall, lanky, sandy-haired, sun-reddened man with a long jaw and a wispy beard, he had little or no interest, anthropological or otherwise, in the cultures he casually and thoughtlessly violated; nor did he value them, except for the profit and—even more—the adventure they offered him. The woman, in her early forties, had been his mistress for nearly a year already: prematurely gray, with a mane striking and silken like a young blonde's, her silhouette was well proportioned and sweeping as an ocean liner's, her hazel eyes feline and searching. She had stayed with Lance Barber eleven months because he really was a nice man, though she understood he had no morals. He had no morals simply because he lacked imagination, moral or

otherwise, although he had plenty of education. The boy, a Ute-Navajo of seventeen, had been hired off the reservation near Price by Barber, after being offered twice what the man calculated his knowledge of the backcountry made him worth and sworn to the strictest secrecy through an oath reinforced by a vague, yet unmistakable, threat. The lowering sun, glaring hot still beyond the isolated coolness under the ramada, had reached by late afternoon to the back wall of the cave, lighting the brick granaries and the ivory skulls behind them. Aligned in a seated position against the ochre rock streaked white with the guano of swallows and bats, the mummies faced blankly toward the wash from under the smoke-blackened overhang of the cave.

"A thousand years is a long time to sit staring at nothing," Lance Barber remarked.

"Maybe they're looking inward," Susan suggested, "like Buddha."

"Don't pay them no attention," Paquito protested. "Don't even talk about them, or they'll be coming round here to haunt us."

"I'll haunt you myself if you don't quit messing with that damn lamp," Barber told him. "When I was your age, I wasn't afraid of anything or anyone. In fact, I thought nothing and no one could hurt me. I was quite certain I was never going to die."

"I ain't scared of nothing, except *chindis*," the boy muttered. "Anyone has any sense is afraid of *chindis*."

"Are you saying I don't have sense?" Barber, amused rather than irritated, asked him.

"Don't pick on the boy, Lance," Susan said. "You have your way of thinking. He has his."

"I don't mean to pick on Paquito," Barber told her. "I just don't want him to panic when we climb up there and begin work tonight."

"I ain't going to panic," the boy promised. "I'm a Ute," he added, proudly.

"I don't expect you will," Barber finished. "There's not a thing in this world to be scared of. Except getting caught in here red-handed, of course."

A thousand years before, the long sand-



stone escarpment, dark with piñon and juniper forest, had sheltered several-dozen villages of Fremont Indians, cousins to the Anasazi farther south. A few hundred years later, the Indians were mysteriously gone, leaving their homes intact. Some centuries after, a white man, who had bought the vast tract of land to run cattle on, discovered one of the villages while running down a straggler that had strayed to the top of a steep, shovel-fronted cliff. For nearly half a century, the rancher guarded his secret carefully. But rumors had arisen concerning a major archaeological site so perfectly preserved that arrowheads lay around attached to their wooden shafts; so that the man, finding his hand forced, held a press conference at which he simultaneously announced the discovery itself and his transfer of the property deed to the state of Utah. The tribes, which had been entirely ignorant of the villages' existence, insisted that access should be restricted solely to Native American visitors. But with the state besieged by applications from archaeologists from around the country, it was already too late for that. The extreme remoteness of the site, approachable only by the rancher's primitive two-track road, made enforcement of the access laws a reasonably simple task. Lance Barber alone, it seemed, had refused to be discouraged. "You can't keep Lance out," he had promised Susan after reading the news story in the *New York Times*. Now, scarcely a month later, he'd made good on that promise.

Shadow pooled in the wash and rose against the surrounding cliffs as evening came on. The air grew suddenly chill, and the lowering sun seemed to draw life away with it, along with the light. The harsh green of the mesas dulled to flat black, and the glowing rock flared out and expired, leaving the canyon as cold and

dead as a graveyard in winter. The Barber party ate a supper of tinned deviled ham, dried fruit, and nuts, and then Paquito, taking the gallon canteen with him, climbed out of the wash and hiked over to the spring for water. The birdsong that had started up at sundown ceased abruptly as he approached the box-elder grove where the water welled up through moss-covered rock surrounded by maidenhair fern. Paquito had risen from his knees beside the spring and was starting back to the ramada with the canteen slung on his shoulder when they all heard the airplane coming up fast over the canyon from behind the mesa. Barber and Susan saw the Indian look round over his shoulder, and then he simply wasn't there at all—vanished like a ghost in the gathering dark. When Paquito materialized again, his head barely showing above the greasewood, he was less than ten yards from the ramada and the plane, a twin-engine model, had been reduced to two winking lights receding rapidly between an invisible wingspan toward the distant escarpment.

"I don't think they saw me," Paquito hissed, as he set the dripping canteen in the dust.

"They weren't looking for you to begin with," Lance Barber assured him, clipping the holstered semiautomatic pistol to his belt. "There isn't a soul suspects we're around. Go ahead and fill the water bottles now, and we'll get started."

"It's going to storm again tonight," Paquito muttered. "I can smell it coming."

In the darkness, without benefit of the headlamps, they lugged the packs through the brush, across the canyon to the cliffside. The belaying stakes were already anchored in the brittle rock, fifty feet above their heads. Barber shouldered the largest and heaviest pack and rappelled rapidly to the floor of the cave. Susan followed slowly with the specimen bags folded over into an empty backpack; lastly, Paquito struggled up carrying the water bottles, a packet of sandwiches, and more tools. Barber assisted each of them over the water-smoothed lip until all three stood together, facing out from under the sandstone vault toward the night sky that seemed suddenly bright as daylight. There was a smell of primeval rock and bone-dry dust, compounded with the dung of bats and cliff swallows. When Paquito took hold of the packs to pull them back inside the cave, Lance Barber switched on his lamp to help him.

Susan made a sudden choking sound,

and even Barber, seeing the line of figures ranged against the back wall, caught his breath. More skeletons than mummies, they sat surrounded by potsherds and corn cobs, scattered charcoal, metates, and a variety of stone tools. In the blue halogen light, the knobby skulls gleamed like porphyry above broken double rows of brown teeth.

"I'm sorry," Susan apologized. "I didn't mean to act like an amateur."

"It's truly something," Barber said in a hushed voice. "Hardly anything as pristine as this has been seen by white men since Weatherill's time."

"I don't like it," Paquito said. "I don't like it, at all."

"Relax, kid," Barber urged him. "Just a few hours and we'll be done with this place and on our way. Any *chindi* dumb enough to mess with us earns himself a dose of lead poisoning."

He and Susan inventoried the cave, selecting the most valuable artifacts that were easily portable. These they sealed in the plastic bags and stowed the bags carefully in the packs; when each was fully loaded, Paquito strapped it to his back and rappelled down to the canyon floor. Barber noticed that the boy kept as far as possible to the cliff edge, hardly venturing into the cave; also, that he worked with unusual speed and efficiency.

"Needs must when the devil drives," he joked to Susan.

"You don't believe in the devil," she answered him. "But I'm beginning to think I do."

They had been at work for nearly three hours when lightning began to flash along the Western horizon. Paquito called up to them above the roll of distant thunder to say that one of the packs had come undone and he was having difficulty refastening it, and Barber descended to help. He climbed back to the cave to find Susan standing as far away as she could get from the mummies, in a kind of grotto plastered with bats' nests.

"Look there," the woman said, pointing, as soon as his head lifted into view.

The skeleton at the end of the row of mummies was lying on its side in the dust and guano, staring at him from its fathomless eyes, its fixed grin unchanged.

"It fell over," she added in a trembling voice, "just like that. I never touched it, or anything. It just fell over."

Barber struggled to a standing position on the cave floor and regarded the mummy skeptically.

"It's been sitting there a thousand

years," Susan went on, "and we've been here just three hours."

Lance Barber felt confused, and angry in his confusion.

"What of it?" he demanded. "Odd things happen at times, you know. I remember in Italy once—"

"That was Europe," she insisted, "the truly New World. This Old World has something different—something primeval, unimaginably darker, unutterably evil. Here, there's no patience, no comprehension, no forgiveness for what we're doing—don't you feel it, Lance? Can't you *understand*?"

A flash of lightning illuminated the cave just as Paquito's head emerged above the rimrock. "O my Lord Jesus Christ!" the boy exclaimed at the sight of the fallen-over mummy.

Lance Barber, swinging round, saw, in the beam of the headlamp, what he recognized as a second mummified face suspended in darkness below the overhang. He heard Susan's scream, but not the deafening rapid-fire shots, nor the thump of the Indian's body on the hardpan fifty feet below. Automatically, he reholstered the pistol, not forgetting to thumb the safety lever first.

Susan took her hands away from her face.

"What did you do it for?" she asked slowly.

Barber crossed to the back of the cave in four quick steps, seized the mummy by the shoulder, and pulled it roughly upright beside its fellows.

"He was going to report us to the authorities," he told her. "I've known it for days now."

Barber thought for one terrible moment she was going to laugh in his face; instead, Susan shook her head. "You killed him because you were afraid," she said.

He was old enough to know the futility of lying to women about two things: other women, and yourself. Lance Barber sat down on the granary nearest him and began to cry. In early manhood, he had come to terms at last with death. The fact that he must die, someday, was not what had hit him. Instead, the sudden, overwhelming realization that he was never going to live impelled him to draw his pistol for the second time in something like ninety seconds. But, once again, the woman was ahead of him, so that, before he could properly position the barrel behind his ear, the gun was gone from his hand and sailing out through the cave mouth into the black night beyond. <c

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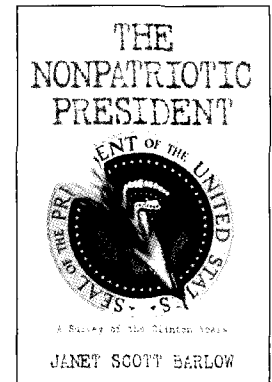
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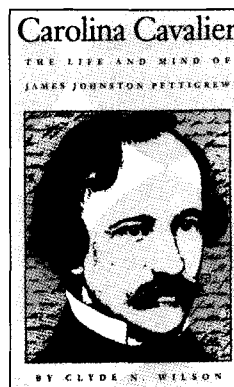
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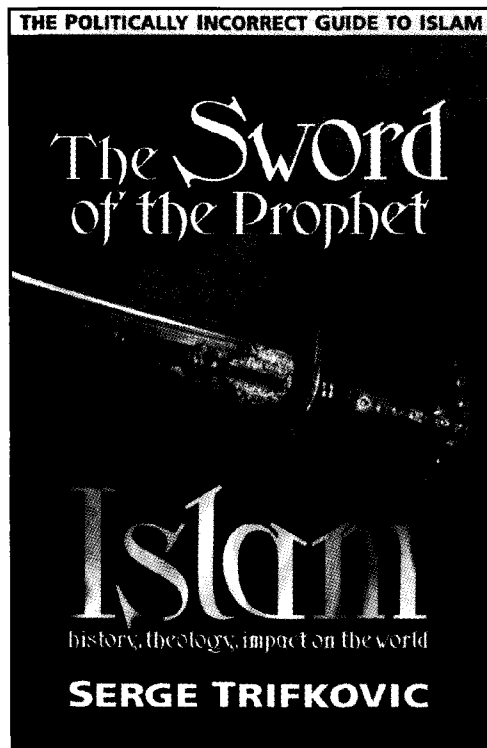
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