

The Scarab Heart

by Michael Gallagher

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— CHAPTER I —
PORT SAID

‘LIZZIE, HAVE YOU had any news of Albert?’

Boats drifted slowly out to the starboard side of our ship—small fishing vessels that from the stern of the *Prometheus* looked no bigger than walnut-shells.

‘I got a letter from him a couple of days before we set sail from London.’

Miss Otis smiled. ‘And how is the young man?’

‘He says Mrs Thorne is keeping him busy setting up the orphanage.’

‘And your sister?’

‘He says Mary’s improving all the time thanks to the good food and the clean mountain air.’ I caught the smell of salt on the breeze. ‘Oh! Look—’

‘What is it, Lizzie?’

‘A huge fish! Oh! And there’s another...leaping right out of the water!’ I steered my blind friend towards the railing and began to describe what I could see. ‘Lord, I think they’ve hooked one: they’re pulling it in now.’ The poor creature was thrashing about wildly as they hauled it on deck. ‘Why, it’s enormous...it’s almost as big as the boat itself!’

‘Tunny fish,’ the old lady chuckled. ‘A common sight throughout the Mediterranean. Not only do they grow to

the size of cows, but their flesh apparently tastes like beef. They're considered quite a delicacy in these parts.'

'How strange! Fish that tastes of beef...I don't think I'd fancy that.' As I watched, the fish in question grew weaker and weaker until all it could manage was the occasional jerk.

'Are you worried, Lizzie?'

'Worried?'

'About the food they'll serve us in Egypt.'

'Not exactly...'

'Consider this an adventure, my dear. The truth is, you'll never know what you might enjoy until you try it. I understand that Egyptians use a lot of beans in their cookery. A kind of broad bean. Do you like broad beans?'

'Oh, yes, of course.' I was trying to remember whether I'd ever eaten broad beans in my life.

'Broad beans and onions, and a kind of flat bread. And though they do tend to season their dishes with a host of different spices, I have it on good authority that they only use a pinch or two of each.' Miss Otis turned her face towards the sea. 'What's happening now?'

'Your spirit-guides still aren't talking to you, are they?'

'Charles and Henry? I'm afraid not. After five months of getting to know you, even now they're so enthralled by your powers that they ignore me completely.'

'I'm sorry, Miss Otis.' Sorrier than she could have imagined, for I'd come to an important decision—a decision she was not going to like. 'Remind me again where we're going,' I said, hoping to steer the conversation

around to the subject gradually.

‘To the Valley of the Kings, my dear—to an archaeological dig run by a man called Edward Peyton.’

‘He’s a friend of yours, isn’t he?’

‘In a sense. Our two families have been linked for generations. My father, the judge, was a bosom companion of Edward’s great-grandfather, who, as it happens, was an earl. Actually, the pair of them were inseparable, even though Lord Peyton was an inveterate gambler and drinker who came up before the courts on numerous occasions. Sadly, both men are long since dead, and it’s Edward’s father who now holds the family title.’

‘How did Mr Peyton come to be in Egypt?’

‘Ah...’

‘Miss Otis?’

‘Well, it’s a little delicate. Edward is an eligible bachelor in his early thirties—a very *good-looking* bachelor, or so I’m reliably informed. Unfortunately, being so good-looking, he attracted the attention of a number of rather well-connected, determined young ladies, all of whom competed to trick the poor man into marriage. They even formed a club: the Would-be Wives of Edward Society. Most distasteful! He felt that the only way to escape their clutches was to quit the country and go abroad. He chanced upon Egypt, fell in love with the place, and decided to buy up the rights to dig in the Valley of the Kings. As we still keep in touch, he was kind enough to invite me to stay for a month or so.’

‘Miss Otis, the people at the dig...do they know about

me?’

Miss Otis blinked. ‘They know you will be accompanying me,’ she said carefully.

‘That’s not what I mean.’

‘Lizzie...’

‘I don’t want them to know about me!’

‘Why ever not, child?’

‘I’ve been giving this a lot of thought, Miss Otis, and, well, I’ve made up my mind. I don’t want to use my powers—’

‘That’s quite understandable,’ the old lady interrupted. ‘We shall think of this as a nice, relaxing holiday.’

‘You’re not letting me finish. The fact is, I don’t want to use my powers ever again.’

‘*What?*’ The woman’s face turned sharply.

‘No, really,’ I insisted, biting my lip. ‘I hate what I go through when I bring someone back from the dead.’

‘But I thought it was becoming easier for you with each materialization?’

‘Easier, perhaps, but no less painful. I may not have to stab myself to become a “bridge” any longer, but I still get that awful feeling that I’m drowning.’ My mind went back to the fish I’d seen thrashing about on the boat. ‘To be honest, Miss Otis, I’m fed up with the whole thing. I hate being stared at in the street. And I can’t bear being thought of as a freak.’

‘A *freak*?’ The old lady looked hurt. ‘But what about the people who come to you for help? Do they count for nothing?’

I stared miserably at the deck.

‘Lizzie Blaylock, you have been given a gift—*God* has given you a gift and it’s your Christian duty to use it. There are many out there in distress, whose loved ones have passed over and who are desperate for the kind of comfort that only you can provide.’

‘But what about me?’ I argued. ‘What about what I need? Every time I help somebody, it feels as if I’m going to die.’

Miss Otis’s cheeks flushed pink. ‘Can you truly tell me that you’ve given this matter its proper consideration?’

‘I think so.’

‘I see. Then I suppose there’s no point in discussing it further.’

‘Miss Otis, you’re annoyed—’

‘Annoyed...no. Disappointed, yes. Extremely so. What a terrible waste of talent! Powers like yours expect to be used! Who knows what will happen if you choose to ignore them?’ Fingering her brow, she turned away and set off along the deck, tapping and waving her cane around more than was strictly necessary.

‘Miss Otis, where are you going?’

‘To my cabin—no, no...please don’t bother to assist me; I can manage perfectly well. We shall be in port soon and I need to rest. Perhaps you’ll be good enough to wake me when the *Prometheus* is about to dock?’

‘Yes...yes, of course,’ I promised as I watched her go, all the while feeling as though I’d somehow betrayed her.

‘Excuse me,’ came a voice at my shoulder, ‘I’m afraid I

couldn't help overhearing. My name is Rose—Rose Clements. Do I take it that you are *the* Lizzie Blaylock, the girl I read about in the newspapers a few months back?

As much as I would have loved to, I could hardly deny what the woman had heard.

'Please,' Miss Clements begged, 'you must forgive me; it's just that I noticed your name on the Purser's list and I couldn't help wondering if you were *she*...'

'I'd rather not talk about it, if you don't mind.'

'Lord, I don't blame you! I bet you get every Tom, Dick and Harry pestering you for messages from their dead Uncle William, wondering where the old boy stashed the family silver! Horrendous!' Miss Clements fluttered her long, thick eyelashes at me and broke into a smile. 'I am, however, curious to know why you're travelling to Egypt,' she continued. 'There aren't many women who would be prepared to put up with the rigours of such a journey—'

'Oh! But I adore Egypt—or, at least, the thought of Egypt, since I haven't been there yet.'

'Well, now, isn't that interesting! So do I! You may find this hard to believe, but the truth is I'm going out there to work on an archaeological dig! As I'm to be married in ten months time, I wanted to try my hand at something different while I still have my independence. You know, even in this day and age, you'd be hard-pressed to find *anything* more different than a stint at archaeology!'

Miss Clements laughed and, to my surprise, I found myself laughing too.

'Where will you be stationed?' I asked.

‘In the Valley of the Kings itself! Can you believe it? Soooo romantic!’

‘The Valley of the Kings?’

‘Yes! Why? Is that on your itinerary too?’

‘No, strangely enough, that’s where we’re headed as well.’

‘What? To Edward Peyton’s dig? You and your aunt? Well, fancy that!’

‘Miss Otis? Oh, she’s not my aunt.’

‘I do beg your pardon. I didn’t mean to pry.’

‘No, it’s all right, really. Miss Otis is a friend of Mr Peyton’s, so we’ve been invited out for a short holiday. And what about you, Miss Clements? What will you be doing there?’

‘It’s Rose! Please, call me Rose!’

‘Rose...’

The woman smiled. ‘Oh, I expect I shall have to muck in with all the chores; but actually I’ve been taken on as their resident artist—you know the drill: they get me to make detailed drawings of the various artefacts they find. It’s nice to think that my many years of art training will finally serve some purpose, tedious though they were. There’s nothing worse than attempting to sketch from life while an ogre of a drawing master creeps up on you from behind and makes corrections with his horrid, stubby pencil! Life is too short for that, don’t you agree?’

I had to laugh. ‘I wouldn’t know,’ I said. ‘We barely had enough money to keep me in school until I was thirteen—’

The woman’s eyebrows rose. ‘*Genteel* poverty, I take it?’

‘One-step-from-the-workhouse poverty, more like!’

‘No! I don’t believe it for a second! If you’ll forgive me for saying, Miss Blaylock—’

‘Lizzie. I want you to call me Lizzie.’

‘Well, Lizzie, it strikes me that you’re one thoroughly charming, well brought-up young lady. And I’m not simply going by appearances. It’s your sense of confidence; your excellent manners...these things simply don’t add up to a notion of poverty—’

‘That was probably my mother’s doing,’ I mumbled, feeling annoyed that we’d somehow stumbled on to the worst subject possible. My mother—the woman who had walked out on me six years earlier.

‘Married down, did she?’ asked Rose. ‘Married for love, as they say? Well, good for her! I think everyone should marry for love, don’t you? Lizzie? Lizzie? Are you all right?’

Being forced to think about my mother was making me feel faint, though thankfully I knew that it wasn’t one of my fits coming on—there was no smell of pears. I reached out and grabbed the railing to try and steady myself, but lost my balance as the ship suddenly lurched. Amazingly, I didn’t topple. Strong arms caught me and held me tight.

‘There,’ I heard a voice say, ‘I’ve got you.’

I looked up. Gazing down at me with the clearest, kindest eyes was a young man in his late twenties. He had sandy-blond hair and a neatly trimmed moustache.

‘My friend seems to have been overcome by a little *mal de mer*,’ Rose explained as he carried me to one of the

nearby benches.

‘Seasickness can affect us all,’ he replied gallantly. ‘Would you like me to go and hunt out the Purser? Your friend may require medical attention.’

‘No, I’ll be fine,’ I insisted. ‘Just sitting here, I’m beginning to feel better already.’

‘Are you sure?’ He peered down at me with concern.

‘I’m positive. Really.’

Tipping his hat to us both, he began to move on.

‘*Phew!*’ whistled Rose. ‘I wish I’d had the presence of mind to faint!’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Didn’t you see? He was gorgeous!’

‘Rose! I thought you said you were engaged to be married!’

Rose’s eyes lit up with pure naughtiness and she flashed me another of her winning smiles.

‘I did,’ she admitted at last. ‘But let’s just keep that little fact between ourselves, shall we? We’re both modern women and, though we may be travelling to an antique land, our affairs are still our own, do you not think? This is 1885, after all!’

I blushed. I was only fourteen, yet she’d called me a woman!

In the distance I heard the cry of gulls. The passengers who’d gathered at the ship’s prow were beginning to point.

‘Rose, it’s clear that you know who I am. Will you promise me something?’

‘Anything, Lizzie.’

‘When we get to the dig, please don’t tell anyone about me.’

‘Of course I won’t, if that’s what you want.’

‘Promise?’

‘God’s honour. Look!—it seems that we’re arriving. Would you like me to escort you to your cabin?’

‘No, I’m fine now. I can manage.’

‘Then I’ll see you on the dock.’

‘Yes, on the dock—and Rose...it was *really* nice meeting you.’

‘Likewise, I’m sure.’

As the woman moved away I suddenly realized something—something that had been rankling with me all the time we’d been talking. Rose Clements didn’t wear a ring. Not even a simple, plain band. And that, I thought, for a woman who was engaged to be married, was distinctly odd.

*

Port Said is actually a new town, built only twenty-six years ago for the sole purpose of housing the men who were to work on the Suez Canal. As every schoolchild in England can tell you, “*the Suez Canal is that great feat of engineering, a man-made waterway that links the Mediterranean with the Red Sea*”. What they probably won’t know is how Britain got hold of it—simply by buying it up at a knock-down price when Egypt’s ruler, the *Khedive* Ismail, couldn’t meet the interest payments on its construction. The deal was so dodgy, I’m surprised my

father didn't have a hand in it.

Even though the work was now finished, the town of Port Said remained. These days it served as the main seaport for Cairo—even though Cairo was a hundred miles away to the south.

The docks at Port Said are a little strange. Ships as large as ours are too big to moor up at the quayside. They have to drop anchor out in the canal, then passengers are either taken ashore by boat, or, as happened in our case, someone sends out a pontoon—a kind of floating bridge, made up of lots of little segments arranged end-to-end. Miss Otis said that she thought it was the Romans who had invented pontoons. 'Probably as some kind of torture,' I mumbled, hoping the damned thing wasn't about to capsize around us and send us all to our watery graves.

As long as I live I'll never forget my first impressions of Egypt. To start with, it was much hotter than I'd expected. We'd arrived in the middle of October, yet the temperature was like the hottest summer's day back in England. This was a bit unfortunate as most of my fellow passengers were still wearing their coats from the voyage. I was also surprised to see how clean and bright everything looked—extraordinarily bright—and there was a smell to the place: an ancient smell that was powdery and as dry as a bone. And sand! Everything, from the tops of the orange-tiled roofs to the silvery pavements below, seemed to be covered in a fine layer of sand.

Having had our passports checked, Miss Otis, Miss Clements and I took our luggage and struggled out on to

the boulevard that stretched the entire length of the harbour. Dark-skinned boys in long white robes lunged at us from all sides, tugging at our sleeves and shouting phrases in English that they'd clearly learned by heart, some of which were so obscene they had me blushing scarlet!

Just as I was wondering if I would ever be able to look Rose in the eye again, a man hurried over and shooed the little hooligans away. He was an Englishman of about my father's age, with gingery-blond hair, watery-grey eyes and skin that was brick-red from the sun. He wore a crumpled, buff-coloured suit, with a belt fastened around the outside of his jacket that only served to emphasize his growing paunch. On his head he sported an old, battered hat, its rim already ringed with a dark band of sweat. If this was Mr Peyton, I'd have to say that he wasn't good looking in the least.

'Oh, my God! It's true...it's perfectly true!' he cried, staring at Miss Otis open-mouthed. 'You really *are* blind. Lord have mercy, I thought they were pulling my leg...'

Miss Otis rounded on him in an instant, her lips puckering as sourly as if she'd been sucking on a lemon.

'This one's clearly the girl companion,' he continued, ignoring her and then dismissing me, 'so who in God's name are *you*?'

'I—I'm Rose Clements,' Rose spluttered. 'And you are Mr Peyton, I presume?'

'Certainly not! The name's Cotterell. Andrew Cotterell. Second-in-command.'

Rose took a deep breath and attempted to win him over with one of her smiles. ‘Well, Mr Cotterell, I’m your new artist.’

‘Artist! *Hmmph!* So you’re Mr Barry’s replacement?’ He eyed her up and down as if she were some badly butchered joint of meat. ‘Well, considering the short notice, I suppose we have to be grateful for whatever we get.’

‘Quite,’ said Rose, at a loss to know how else to respond.

It was Miss Otis who broke the embarrassing silence, though her voice was decidedly chilly. ‘As you have already observed, Mr Cotterell, I am Miss Otis. I was under the impression that Mr Peyton would be meeting us here today. Am I to understand that he’s been delayed?’

‘Not at all; he’s not coming.’

‘Not coming?’

‘No, there was a message waiting for us when we got here. It seems we’ve had a few problems at the site, so Edward and the others went on ahead to try and straighten things out. But don’t go bothering that fluffy little brain of yours; *I* will be escorting you.’

‘Fluffy little brain—?’

For someone whose own tone of voice left a lot to be desired, he seemed quick to find fault in others. He placed his hands on his hips and leaned forward until his forehead was almost touching hers.

‘Saints preserve us from touchy women! Always rushing to take offence where none was intended! I warn you now, madam: we have a long journey ahead of us, and I will thank you to keep whatever female sensitivities you may

have to yourself!’

‘*Why, you ill-mannered, impudent, oafish, little—*’

‘And now she’s getting hysterical.’

‘How long a journey?’ Rose butted in quickly, in an effort to save the situation.

Oh, fourteen or fifteen days, provided we get a fair wind behind us.’

‘Fair wind? Then we’ll be travelling by *ship*?’ she gasped.

‘Not a ship exactly,’ our horrid escort informed her. ‘*Felucca*. Native sailboat. Up the main canal as far as Ismailiya, and then a side canal till we hit Cairo. After that it’s straight on down the Nile. So, if you women are ready?’

Miss Otis coughed. ‘Mr Cotterell? I believe you’ve forgotten something.’

‘Forgotten something? I very much doubt it!’

‘Our luggage. Our trunks are *this* way.’

Praise for *The Scarab Heart*:

“As much as I loved *The Bridge of Dead Things* ~ I adored *The Scarab Heart*! These books are marvelous, really and truly something special!”

★★★★★—Paula Fetty-King, Goodreads Reviewer

“...The author did his homework, I'm a bit of a Victorian buff and reenactor, and the details, dialog, and characters are all appropriate to the period...The action flows smoothly, the plot develops nicely, and all the loose ends are tied up in the end as they should be in a well written whodunnit.”

★★★★★—Emilious Tarr, Smashwords Reviewer

“How Lizzie gets herself in, and out, of encounters with the far past and the present, is a captivating escape from everyday life. The imagery is fabulous, the characters are likeable, and the story is believably enthralling.”

★★★★★—Nightwing, Goodreads Reviewer

“I have got to say, these books are unlike any other I have read...almost impossible to put down.”

★★★★★—Helene Gårdsvold, Amazon.com Reviewer

“I thoroughly enjoyed this book! The combination of Lizzie (a bridge to souls) and the Egyptian dig, and the Queen of Egypt manifestation through Lizzie's dreams, was totally cohesive and enjoyable. Throw in the murder & theft of artefacts...and my attention was taken.”

★★★★★—M M Plante, LibraryThing Early Reviewer

“This is a great vacation read...I look forward to reading more.”

★★★★★—Bella55075, LibraryThing Early Reviewer

“I really enjoyed it!...The book kept me guessing as to the thief and killer right to the end. Lots of twists, turns and suspense! I would definitely read more in this series.”

★★★★★—Suzy Schettler, LibraryThing Early Reviewer

“As a fan of...the archaeological mystery (from Agatha Christie to Elizabeth Peters)...I pride myself on being quick to know the guilty party. I will say that I had a brief idea, but was still taken by surprise with the reveal...Michael Gallagher did a great job with ‘The Scarab Heart’...Overall, a really nice read. I look forward to reading more about Lizzie.”



—Sherri S, LibraryThing Early Reviewer

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