

PROLOGUE



The carriage had been booked for over four thousand years, and the driver did not want to be late.

The photographer had no such worries. His name was Bernard Denning, and his breath smelled strongly of the cheap ale he'd been drinking. After his afternoon appointment, there was not enough time to get home to Ealing, so instead he spent the time in the Red Lion a few streets away. A pint and a meat pie was just the ticket.

He was supposed to be there ahead of the guests, but Denning didn't care that he was a little late. Let the guests and the academics mingle and chatter without him. Bernard Denning, Photographer, would be ready and waiting when it mattered.

That was one of the advantages of these new dry-plate methods – a smaller camera he could easily carry. Much faster exposure times, so you could just hold the camera and press the lever. Job done. And with a maga-

zine camera already loaded with a dozen plates, he didn't even have to prepare for the next session.

The evening sounds of London were muffled by the cold, clammy fog. Denning pulled up the collar of his coat with his free hand, the other hand cradling his precious camera. He could feel the February chill seeping into his feet from the cobbled roadway. There was a carriage waiting at the side of the street, barely visible in the gloom – a pencil-sketch shape. Almost like an old, fuzzy photograph itself, the horses were so still and quiet. He could make out the dark profile of the Coachman – heavy, hooded cloak, poised whip. The shadows across the Coachman's face made his eyes seem deep and empty. Like a skull.

Denning shivered, and walked on.

Ahead of him, another shape coalesced out of the fog. A woman. She was standing at the corner of the street. She too wore a large cloak, and the deep red of the material bled into the misty air so it seemed to glow around her. Her face was almost white against the charcoal black of her hair. She turned as Denning approached, hearing the clip of his nailed boots on the cobbles.

The woman stretched out her arms, as if in greeting, and her cloak fell open. Beneath it she was wearing an evening dress that was as red as her cloak. It was cut low,

and her neck was pale and slender. Denning's breath quickened as he saw how very beautiful the lady was. The mist from his breath joined the swirling fog around them. Had he been less distracted, he might have noticed that there was no breath from the woman's scarlet lips.

'You must be the photographer,' the woman said. She smiled, her dark eyes widening. 'The late photographer.'

'Denning,' he said, assuming she had seen the camera under his arm. 'Bernard Denning. At your service.'

'Really? How kind.' She took a step towards him, reaching out a hand to touch his cheek.

It was cold. Even through the long, white glove, her touch was cold as death.

'Are you going to the Unwrapping?' Denning asked, his voice a nervous whisper. He stared into her deep, dark eyes, unable to move as the woman reached out her other hand, holding his head between her chill palms.

'Indeed I am.' She was tall – almost as tall as Denning himself. Leaning forward, smiling, lips parting. Her cold eyes seemed to burn into his.

A sharp intake of breath. Denning leaned away, his feet frozen in position. As he felt the cold of her lips on his neck, he experienced a sudden rush of fear and struggled to pull away. But he was unable to move.

Then there was a crack of sound, like a gunshot, and

the spell was broken. Gasping, Denning took a step backwards. The woman was staring at him, her face twisted into a snarl of angry disappointment. All beauty gone.

The coach drew up slowly out of the fog, and Denning realised that the sound had been the Coachman's whip. The photographer looked up, trying to stammer a thank you. Shadowed by the hood of his cloak, the man's face still looked like a skull.

The woman stepped towards Denning again, teeth bared, hissing at him like an angry snake.

'No,' the Coachman said. He pointed the whip at the woman, and she stopped.

Denning felt another rush of relief. But it was short-lived.

'It must look like an accident, Clarissa.' The Coachman's voice was deep and dark and dry and brittle all at once. 'A tragic accident.'

There was a sudden clatter of carriage wheels across the cobbles. The sound of hoofs. Denning turned in time to see the horses bearing down on him. Nostrils flaring as they snorted – but no mist. The skull-faced Coachman cracked the whip. And the faces of the horses were like skulls too – pale and angular. Denning could see the ribs poking out of their sides. He could see the symbol painted on the door of the carriage as it turned slightly to head

straight for him. He could hear the woman laughing.

Clarissa.

Denning's last thought was that Clarissa was such a lovely name. The last things he heard were her laughter, and the crack of the whip, and the unholy snarl of the horses. And the click of the shutter as he clutched the camera tight.

Clarissa stared longingly at the dark pool growing from under the carriage. She licked her lips, sighed, and turned to go.

The carriage moved slowly away again, back to where the Coachman had been waiting. He had been waiting a very long time, but now the waiting was nearly over . . .

CHAPTER I



Professor Andrew Brinson

AT THE BRITISH MUSEUM,
EGYPTIAN ROOMS

THURSDAY, 11 FEBRUARY
1886

A MUMMY FROM SAQQARA TO
BE UNWRAPPED AT
HALF-PAST EIGHT

TO: *George Archer Esq.*

George Archer had forgotten about the invitation. He felt the stiff card in his inside pocket as he put his jacket on. He took out the invitation and read it again. Tapping it against his fingertips, he considered his options. It was the end of a long day and he had been looking forward to getting home. But now his priorities had changed.

For one thing, he could do with a change, a break, a distraction before setting off. For another, he had argued strongly with Eddie about the invitation. The two of them had met the previous year, when the boy stole George's wallet. George shook his head as he recalled the trouble and danger which had resulted from that.

Another result was that, after their initial distrust of each other, they had become friends and Eddie Hopkins was staying in the spare room of the house that George had inherited from his father. Now, George was pretty much Eddie's surrogate father – though in age he was more of an older brother.

Sir William Protheroe had arranged the invitations and had suggested Eddie come too. But George was adamant that he should not. It was too late for the boy, who had to be awake and alert for school the next day. And it was hardly the sort of event where a recently reformed pick-pocket and street urchin would fit in. Eddie had insisted he would behave and that he was interested. George wasn't convinced of either, and had eventually pacified Eddie

– slightly – by promising he would tell him all about the evening’s events the next day.

So if he went back home now, and admitted he’d not bothered even going to the Unwrapping, he would be in serious trouble with Eddie.

Not to mention Sir William, who must have gone to some trouble to secure the invitations. Egyptology was not an area that Sir William specialised in. He was a curator at the British Museum, but his department was not like Egyptology, or indeed any other. Sir William’s department – the department where George worked as Sir William’s assistant – did not officially exist.

At this moment, George was standing in the middle of an enormous storage area which very few people knew was hidden in the cellars of the Museum. The main room was under the Great Court and the circular Reading Room. The walls were the foundations of the main Museum buildings round the court – rough unfinished stone. Where there were doorways above, so there were below. Doors that led to more rooms, many of which George had yet to explore. But they were not filled with artefacts and relics belonging to the better-known departments of the Museum. This was not a staging area for treasures yet to be displayed or awaiting a suitable exhibition space.

The crates and boxes and cupboards and drawers in

this huge area and the others were filled with things that – like Sir William’s department – did not, officially, exist. That was what the Department of Unclassified Artefacts was for, what it did. It looked after, stored, preserved, and catalogued those items which did not fit into any of the other departments.

Sometimes that was because the object just didn’t match any of the criteria the other departments used for cataloguing. But more often it was because of the very nature of the artefact itself. Anything deemed too strange or unusual, or *dangerous*, anything that defied analysis or which went against modern science or thinking – or which simply could not be understood – was sent to Sir William’s department.

When George first joined Sir William, it was as he was investigating a dead man whose skeleton seemed to be made of dinosaur bones . . .

Thoughts of Sir William reminded George that his superior was certainly expecting George to attend the Unwrapping. But the most compelling reason, George knew (though he scarcely even dared admit it to himself), was that Miss Elizabeth Oldfield would also be there. George had first met Liz when she returned his wallet – the wallet that Eddie had stolen. And before long they had all of them – George, Liz, Eddie and Sir William – been caught up in the devilish plans of a madman.

‘Are you ready for our evening’s entertainment, young man?’

Sir William’s voice brought George back to the present with a jolt. The elderly man was standing beside him, his shock of white hair erupting enthusiastically from his head. He was vigorously polishing his spectacles on a handkerchief. George put the invitation card back into his pocket, and closed the large notebook where he had been describing and sketching several unidentified items in the archive.

‘Of course,’ George said. ‘I’m looking forward to it.’



As they made their way up the wide, stone staircase that led to the Egyptian Rooms, George realised that the invitation was considerably more of a privilege than he had imagined. Sir William seemed unperturbed by the number of people. Men in dark suits and women in long dresses and expensive jewellery conspired to make George feel rather under-dressed.

He ran his hand through his tangle of curly brown hair and tried to look inconspicuous. A man with an impressive handlebar moustache pushed past impatiently, a stick-thin woman with pinched, angular features followed in his wake. She paused just long enough to smile an apology at George. Or perhaps it was sympathy.

‘Everyone is in such a rush these days,’ Sir William said. ‘But there’s really no need to hurry. Brinson won’t start without me.’

‘Is he a friend? A colleague?’

‘Good gracious no,’ the older man announced loudly. ‘Can’t stand the fellow.’

‘Then why would he wait for you?’

They reached the top of the stairs, and found themselves at the back of a short queue of people waiting to move on. Sir William paused to take a deep breath before he answered. ‘Because it’s my mummy he’s unwrapping,’ he told George. ‘That’s why.’

There were two men at the door checking invitations. Sir William produced his crumpled invitation and waved it at one of the men, barely turning to look. George showed his own invitation to the other man at the door.

‘Thank you, sir,’ the man said. ‘Professor Brinson will be starting very soon now, I believe.’

Normally, there were display cases arranged down the middle of the large room where George found himself. For this evening, they had been moved to make space for a dais to be set up at the far end, and the guests to gather in the main part of the room. Being quite tall, George could see over the assembled guests that on the dais there was a sarcophagus. It was raised on trestles

and George could see that the top of the gold, coffin-shaped box was sculpted into the form of a figure.

‘Impressive,’ he said out loud.

Beside him, Sir William sniffed. ‘Rather indifferent, actually. But still a mistake. A violation.’

‘You don’t think Brinson should unwrap the mummy?’

‘I do not,’ Sir William said. ‘Mummies have been unwrapped before, and by better men than Brinson, though I would always dispute the science of destroying that which one is charged with preserving. The only thing Brinson hopes to achieve by this evening’s theatrics is his own aggrandisement.’ Sir William turned to smile at George. ‘But I have said my piece, for all the good it has done.’

‘You said it was your mummy,’ George reminded him.

‘From the Department,’ Sir William said. ‘Been in the collection almost since Xavier Hemming established it. One of our oldest unclassified artefacts.’

‘And why is it unclassified?’

Sir William shrugged. ‘No idea. Perhaps Hemming just fancied having a mummy in the collection when he originally set it up. Who knows? Something he acquired perhaps and never passed on to another department. He was a formidable collector, you know. Maybe we should

hunt around for another one after this evening's over.'

'Did you not give permission for it to be unwrapped?' George wondered.

'Overruled,' Sir William said. 'By some idiot from the Royal Society.' He gave a heavy sigh. 'At least I managed to persuade that fool Brinson to photograph . . . Ah,' he broke off. 'Here he is now.'

An insincere smile appeared on Sir William's face as a rather short, stout man pushed towards them through the mingling guests. He had a round red face, and dabbed at his damp forehead with a grubby handkerchief. In his other hand he held a glass of red wine.

'Sir William, thank goodness.' The man's voice was nasal and almost squeaky with nerves. 'Thank goodness,' he said again.

Sir William reached out for the wine glass. 'For me? How very kind, Professor.'

Professor Brinson hastily moved the glass out of Sir William's reach. 'Oh there is refreshment on the table over there.' He nodded into the distance. 'Have you seen Denning?'

'Denning?'

'Photographer. Dratted man's not turned up. You spoke to him after this afternoon's session. Did he say where he was off to? What his plans were? When he'd be back?'

‘He did mention something about visiting a public house,’ Sir William said. His mouth twitched slightly, and George guessed he was trying not to smile.

‘A public house!’ Brinson squeaked. His face seemed to grow even more red. ‘Oh good grief. He’s probably lying drunk in a gutter, or been arrested on a charge of being disorderly.’

‘I’m sure he will turn up in his own good time,’ Sir William said. ‘He seemed to know his business.’

‘Yes, well, I hope so.’ Brinson had his handkerchief out again. ‘Oh goodness, there’s Sir Harrison Judd, please excuse me.’ He thrust his way into a group of people nearby, and barrelled through towards a tall military-looking gentleman talking loudly in another part of the room.

‘We are not, it seems, as important to Professor Brinson as the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police,’ Sir William said to George. ‘Perhaps we should be grateful for small mercies. Now then, let’s find that wine, shall we?’

The flow of people into the room had all but stopped. George and Sir William helped themselves to a glass of red wine each from the table and made their way back through the assembled guests to a space close to the dais where they would have a good view. But George’s attention was focused on the door, waiting for Liz to arrive.

Or perhaps she was already here. He looked round, hoping to catch sight of his friend.

‘That’s Lord Ruthven from the Royal Society,’ Sir William said, pointing out a pale, gaunt figure standing with a group of others nearby. ‘He’s the chap who eventually insisted I hand over the mummy. Why Brinson couldn’t use some minor character from the Egyptian Department’s own collection I don’t know.’ He took a sip of wine, looking round with interest. ‘And unless I’m mistaken, that’s the Prime Minister’s special adviser, what’s his name?’ Sir William’s forehead creased as he tried to remember. ‘Bradford? Barford? Something like that.’

But George was not listening. His attention had been caught by another figure in the crowd. A woman. She was standing alone, close to the door, wearing a deep red velvet dress that seemed to cling to her body, the neck line plunging daringly low. Her black hair was tied up intricately and for a moment her dark eyes met George’s across the room.

Then someone moved in between them, and he lost sight of her. ‘Who is that?’ he said out loud.

‘Someone important, I’ll be bound,’ Sir William said, glancing without interest in the direction that George was still staring. ‘A gathering of the great and the good. Well,’ he sniffed, ‘the great anyway.’

Intrigued and captivated by the glimpse of the beautiful woman, George was edging away towards the door. 'I'll just go and see,' he said.

Sir William sipped at his wine. 'Don't be long,' he cautioned. 'Expect Brinson will give up on his photographer soon and start anyway.'

There was a general movement towards the dais, and George found he was pushing against the tide of people. 'Excuse me,' he muttered as he collided with a tall woman in a pale green dress.

'Excuse *me*, George Archer,' the woman said, gently catching his arm.

George paused, all thoughts of finding the lady in red suddenly gone. 'Liz?'

'Don't tell me you were looking for someone else?' she joked.

'You look wonderful,' George said quickly, anxious to change the subject. But it was true. Elizabeth Oldfield was wearing a pale green dress that was distinctly more modest than the scarlet dress that had recently attracted George's interest. But her beauty was undeniable, with her lively face, fair hair, and cat-like green eyes.

'I do hope I haven't missed everything,' she was saying. 'I had the devil of a job to persuade Father I should come. I think he believed it was some sort of performance – you know how he cannot abide the theatre.'

George did indeed. He also knew that Liz was of a very different opinion on the subject. Her greatest ambition was to be an actress. But her frail, elderly father the Reverend Oldfield could not be more opposed to the theatre and all the sin – as he saw it – that was bound up with the profession of acting. So Liz was forced to sneak out to the theatre in secret. She was a member of a local acting company where she helped as much as her stolen time would allow. Which was, George knew, little enough. But she never complained at having to look after the old man. She never gave any sign that it was a chore rather than her devoted duty.

He smiled at the thought, and found that Liz was smiling back at him. ‘I said, how is Eddie?’ There was a hint of censure in her voice – she knew he had not been listening.

‘Sorry. He is doing well, I think. School has been a bit of a shock to the lad.’

‘And I imagine that Eddie has been a shock to the school.’

George laughed. ‘I imagine so. He is rather older than most of the children there. But from what little Eddie tells me of what goes on, it sounds as if he is doing well.’

‘Perhaps he is a reformed character,’ Liz suggested.

George nodded. ‘Perhaps he is.’

Any further discussion of Eddie’s progress from

proven sinner to possible saint was cut short by a commotion at the door behind them. There were few people now at the back of the room as everyone pushed forwards to try to get a better sight of the events soon to unfold on the raised dais. So George and Liz were afforded a good view of the man arguing loudly with the two Museum staff at the door as he struggled to get past.

‘I tell you I *do* have an invitation,’ the man stormed. His face was bloodless with anger.

‘Then perhaps I can see it, sir,’ the larger of the two Museum men asked.

‘I had it just a moment ago, I know I did.’ The man was patting his pockets. He was tall and slim with handsome features, slicked-back dark hair, and dressed in an immaculate suit that looked decidedly expensive. ‘Do you know who I am?’ he demanded of the men blocking his way. ‘This is intolerable.’

‘Your invitation, sir,’ the second doorman said calmly. ‘No one is permitted inside without an invitation from Professor Brinson.’

Liz’s voice was hushed with awe. ‘I know who he is,’ she said to George. ‘Don’t you see – it’s Henry Malvern.’

The name meant nothing to George and he shook his head. As the man continued to argue, without effect, another smaller figure in a rather less expensive suit

made a point of flashing his own invitation at the doormen and pushing past. He kept his head down and George was unable to see the young man's face. Nonetheless, he felt there was something very familiar about him. He felt his blood run cold as he realised who it was.

Liz gave a gasp of astonishment as she realised too.

'Oy, guv'nor,' the new arrival said loudly to the closer of the two doormen, 'I think that gentleman dropped his invitation at the top of the stairs. Saw it come out of his pocket I did.' He nodded to Henry Malvern. 'Didn't realise what it was, but I'm sure that's what happened. Just over there, it was.' He pointed, and all three men in the doorway turned to look.

As they turned, the young man flicked the invitation he was holding across the floor. It came to rest, unseen, just outside the door. 'Oh, my mistake,' the lad announced. 'There it is, look.'

One of the doormen picked up the card. 'Henry Malvern?'

Malvern snatched the card. 'Indeed.' He straightened his jacket, glared at each doorman in turn, and then strode into the room. He paused as he passed the lad. 'Thank you,' he said curtly.

'Lucky I was here,' the lad replied. But Malvern had already moved on.

‘Very lucky,’ George said, moving quickly to intercept the young man. ‘Eddie.’ He turned for moral support from Liz. But she was staring open-mouthed after Malvern.

‘Henry Malvern,’ she said.

‘So I gathered,’ George said, unimpressed.

‘But, he’s the manager and leading man at the Parthenon Theatre.’ Liz hurried away. ‘I must speak to him if I possibly can.’ Leaving George glaring at the unrepentant Eddie.

‘You are supposed to be at home,’ George said through gritted teeth. ‘You stole that man’s invitation.’

‘Wasn’t stealing – I gave it back,’ Eddie made a point of looking carefully at George’s half-empty glass of wine. ‘Is there anything to eat?’

‘An important actor and a respected gentleman and you took his invitation to get in here under false pretences.’

‘Yeah, all right, fair enough,’ Eddie conceded. He nodded towards where Liz was standing with a group of people listening to Malvern. ‘Liz seems to like him though.’ Before George could react, Eddie grabbed his arm and dragged him further into the room. ‘Come on, we need to get a better view than this. Look, Sir William’s got a good spot, let’s join him over there.’

George followed Eddie through the guests. He was

still angry, though he found it difficult to distinguish between the annoyance he felt with Eddie and his irritation at Liz's interest in Henry Malvern.

An expectant hush was falling as everyone began to perceive that the evening's events would soon start. Through it, George heard Liz's laughter, and the deep tones of Henry Malvern. He spared them a glance as he and Eddie passed close to their group. Malvern was holding forth as if he was on the stage – thumb hooked into his waistcoat pocket and free hand gesticulating earnestly. The people round him watched enraptured. Especially the ladies.

Especially Liz. Her eyes wide and fixed on the man. Her mouth open in awe. George felt Eddie tug impatiently at his sleeve, and moved on.

Professor Brinson had returned. He looked less flustered, and was accompanied by a short woman of about the same age. His wife, George guessed, from the way she had her arm linked with Brinson's. She seemed very thin next to her husband's ample form. Her skin was pale and delicate and her hair was piled up on her head – a mousy brown streaked at the sides with grey.

'Now don't fuss, dear,' Mrs Brinson was saying. 'I'm sure no one will mind if there isn't a photograph. I certainly shan't. You know I can't abide having my picture taken.'

‘Indeed,’ Sir William agreed. He seemed to be trying to stifle a yawn. He caught sight of George and Eddie. ‘Ah, there you are. You’re looking well, Eddie.’

‘Is that where it’s going to happen?’ Eddie asked, pointing at the sarcophagus on the dais in front of them. There was a row of chairs arranged behind the sarcophagus, and several people were taking their seats there. George could see the imposing figure of Sir Harrison Judd settling himself into the seat next to Lord Ruthven.

‘Yes, yes,’ Brinson said, rubbing his hands together. ‘I rather think we should start.’

‘Can’t see much from down here,’ Eddie complained. ‘Why do they get the best view?’

‘You’re right, Eddie,’ Sir William agreed. ‘We shall see nothing of consequence from down here. If I am to suffer the scientific indignity of having my mummy unwrapped, I do think I should be permitted to see it properly.’ He strode after Brinson. ‘I shall join you on the stage, sir.’

Brinson stopped. ‘What?’

‘Oh don’t worry,’ Sir William assured him, ‘I won’t steal your thunder. Just want to see what you’re up to.’

Brinson’s wife was encouraging the professor towards the dais again. ‘Oh very well,’ he agreed with a sigh.

‘Excellent.’ Sir William clapped his hands together and looked from Eddie to George. ‘Shall we?’

‘I’m not sure the professor understood you to mean us as well,’ George said.

‘My dear George, there is a lot the professor does not understand. But I can’t help feeling that is his problem, not ours. Are you coming?’ He did not wait for an answer, but hurried after Brinson, who was already stepping up on to the makeshift stage.

There were not enough chairs now on the stage for the number of people. Sir William took the last chair, leaving Eddie and George to stand beside him. Eddie seemed not to mind, but George felt embarrassed and uncomfortable as he looked out over the mass of people standing watching. He felt that almost everyone was looking at him, though he knew that could not really be the case.

Right at the front of the spectators was the woman in the red dress. George was sure she was watching him rather than Brinson. But he forced himself to look away, to pay attention to the professor who was now coming to the end of his short speech.

‘His name seems to have been Orabis,’ Brinson was saying. ‘I’m afraid beyond that we know little about him. Judging by the ornate sarcophagus he was an important fellow.’ Brinson paused to wave his hand across the carved figure on the top of the sarcophagus, despite the fact that only those on the stage had a good view of it.

‘Look at this gold leaf. Very expensive, and not to be wasted on just anyone, you know. There is also a lot of silver, here in the details, which I am told is unusual. Perhaps in a moment we will find out more about Orabis.’ Brinson stepped back from the sarcophagus. ‘I shall now remove the lid, and we will see what lies inside.’

Sir Harrison Judd volunteered to assist Brinson in lifting the heavy lid. It was a struggle, even with the two of them, and Lord Ruthven rose to help. Together they swung the lid away from the coffin and set it down at the side of the stage, close to where George and Eddie were standing. The painted eyes of Orabis, long-dead Egyptian, watched George as closely as he imagined the woman in the scarlet dress had done.

Brinson stood at the head of the sarcophagus, looking down at the mummy. It was a crude man-shaped figure, wrapped tight in grey strips of linen. The wrappings were discoloured and stained with age, frayed and torn and ragged. The coverings over the face seemed to have sunk into the rough shape of the dead features beneath. There were shadowy indentations for the eyes, a bump of a nose. The strips of cloth over the mouth had torn and broken, as if to let out the cries of the figure within.

‘Exactly as we would expect,’ Brinson said to the hushed audience. ‘Although there appears to be sand

under the body, and I think the lining of the casket is perhaps rather unusual.'

'Unprecedented,' Sir William said, loud enough for everyone to hear. 'The sarcophagus is lined with silver.'

It made the inside of the casket seem to shine with reflected light. George moved slightly so the glare was not in his eyes. He could see the gleaming sides of the inside of the casket quite clearly, but the mummy itself still seemed wreathed in shadows as well as cloth.

The dignitaries on the stage were leaning forward in their seats to get the best possible view. Lord Ruthven and Harrison Judd stood beside Brinson.

'There is, I see, a chain around the neck. Is that also silver, would you say?'

'It is,' Lord Ruthven said. His voice sounded strained and nervous.

'And on the chain is a device, a piece of jewellery or adornment. A simple loop of what seems to be gold with a stem. The device is called an ankh, I believe.' Brinson cleared his throat. 'Sometimes, jewellery and precious stones were placed between the wrappings. We shall soon discover if that was the case with our friend Orabis.'

He produced a knife from where it had been resting on the end of one of the trestles that supported the sarcophagus. The blade gleamed as it caught the light, and

Brinson made a great show of holding it up for everyone to see.

‘Oh do hurry up,’ Sir William said quietly.

‘I am now cutting, very carefully, through the outer wrappings,’ Brinson announced, leaning into the sarcophagus.

George had a good view of the knife as it sliced through the decaying wrappings. Brinson started at the feet, cutting a straight line up between the legs and up to the chest.

‘We must be extremely careful when we fold back these delicate wrappings,’ he said. ‘I am now about to make a very careful cut across the head, and soon we will look on the ancient face of Orabis. The first people to gaze upon his visage in four thousand years.’

There was a collective intake of breath as Brinson again leaned into the coffin, stretching out with the sharp knife.

Beside the professor, Sir Harrison Judd cleared his throat. ‘Perhaps I can help,’ he said gruffly. ‘Hold the chap’s head still for you.’ He stepped towards where Brinson was concentrating on his work.

And as he stepped, Sir Harrison Judd seemed to stumble and lurched sideways, clutching for support. He caught at Brinson’s arm, almost regained his balance, then slipped again.

It was not much of a stumble, not much of an inconvenience. But from where they were standing. George and Eddie both had a good view of the result, though Eddie was having to stand on tiptoe to see into the sarcophagus. To see the knife knocked sideways and slicing into Brinson's left wrist as the professor held the side of the mummy's head.

Brinson cried out – first in surprise, then fear as he realised he was bleeding. He dropped the knife, which clattered into the coffin. Clutching his left wrist with his right hand, he raised it slowly. The blood was already welling up along the cut. It ran and dripped, falling after the knife. Splashing on to the bandaged face of the mummy.

The pale wrappings were spattered with red. Drips, then a trickle as the blood ran freely. Sir Harrison Judd was holding Brinson's injured wrist between both his hands, gripping it tight in an effort to stop the bleeding. But the immediate effect was to force out a rush of blood. A cascade falling into the open mouth of the wrapped figure.

Seeing the blood, the people on the stage were standing, gasping. Lord Ruthven produced a handkerchief and with help from Judd tied it tight round Brinson's wrist.

The guests standing in the room below were watching, hushed. The woman in the red dress licked her lips.

But George had no time to wonder at that. His attention was fixed once again on the sarcophagus. On the red-stained face of the figure inside. The wrappings seemed to dissolve. Steam was rising from the points where the blood had dripped, drifting away in a faint mist to reveal the weathered, parchment-like skin beneath. A face cracked and sunken with age.

A face that was moving, turning, looking up at the people above.

Then the wrappings seemed to tremble. George cried out in alarm and fright. Eddie grabbed his arm. Sir William took a step backwards knocking into his chair.

A brown, emaciated hand thrust out through the cloth, clutching at the side of the sarcophagus. Slowly, almost majestically, the ancient figure sat up. The wrappings split apart as it hauled itself out of the sarcophagus. A woman screamed. Then another. People were running, shouting.

In amongst them the ancient, long-dead, mummified figure of Orabis stepped heavily down from the stage and staggered towards the door.