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“Tybalt is coming. He has found me. I shall be free . . .”

I was happy. Had I ever known such exaltation? Only when one is about to lose it does one realize how sweet life is.

The lantern was flickering. Never mind. They are coming. The door is moving.

Soon now.

Then I was no longer alone. I was caught up.

“Judith . . .”

It was Tybalt, as I had known it would be. He was holding me in his arms and I thought: I did not die of fear, but I shall die of bliss.

“My love,” he said. “Judith, my love.”

“It’s all right, Tybalt,” I said, comforting him. “It’s all right . . . now . . .”

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**Victoria Holt**

**THE CURSE  
of  
THE KINGS**

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## I The Curse

When Sir Edward Travers died suddenly and mysteriously, there was consternation and speculation, not only in the neighborhood of his home, but throughout the country.

Headlines in the newspapers ran: **DEATH OF EMINENT ARCHAEOLOGIST. WAS SIR EDWARD TRAVERS A VICTIM OF THE CURSE?**

A paragraph in our local paper stated:

With the death of Sir Edward Travers, who recently left this country to carry out excavations among the tombs of the Pharaohs, it is being asked: Is there any truth in the ancient belief that he who meddles with the resting places of the dead invites their enmity? Sir Edward's swift and sudden death has brought the expedition to an abrupt end.

Sir Ralph Bodrean, our local squire and Sir Edward's closest friend, had given financial aid to the expedition and when, a few days after the announcement of Sir Edward's death, Sir Ralph had a stroke, there was



further speculation. He had, however, suffered a similar affliction some years before, and although he recovered from this second as he had from the first, his health was considerably impaired. It was, as might be expected, hinted that these misfortunes were the result of the Curse.

Sir Edward's body was brought back and buried in our churchyard, and Tybalt, Sir Edward's only son and himself a brilliant man who had already attained some distinction in the same profession as his father, was, of course, chief mourner.

The funeral was one of the grandest our little twelfth-century church had ever seen. There were people present from the academic world as well as friends of the family, and, of course, the press.

I was at the time companion to Lady Bodrean, wife of Sir Ralph, a post which did not suit my nature but which my financial needs had forced me to take.

I accompanied Lady Bodrean to the church for the funeral service and there I could not take my eyes from Tybalt.

I had loved him, foolishly because hopelessly, from the time I had first seen him, for what chance had a humble companion with such a distinguished man? He seemed to me to possess all the masculine virtues. He was by no means handsome by conventional standards, but he was distinguished looking—very tall, lean and neither fair nor dark; he had the brow of a scholar yet there was a touch of sensuality about his mouth; his nose was large and a trifle arrogant, and his grey eyes deep set and veiled. One would never be quite certain what he was thinking. He was aloof and mysterious. I often said to myself: "It would take a lifetime to understand him." And what a stimulating voyage of discovery that would be!

Immediately after the funeral I returned to Keverall Court with Lady Bodrean. She was exhausted she said, and was indeed more complaining and fretful than usual. Her temper did not improve when she learned that reporters had been to the court to discover the state of Sir Ralph's health.

"They are like vultures!" she declared. "They are hoping

for the worst because a double death would fit in so well with this foolish story of the Curse."

A few days after the funeral I took Lady Bodrean's dogs for their daily walk and my footsteps led me out of habit to Giza House, the home of the Traverses. I stood at the wrought-iron gate, where I had stood so many times, looking along the path to the house. Now that the funeral was over and the blinds had been drawn up it no longer looked melancholy. It had regained that air of mystery with which I had always associated it, for it was a house which had always fascinated me, even before the Traverses came to live there.

To my embarrassment Tybalt came out of the house and it was too late for me to turn away because he had seen me.

"Good afternoon, Judith," he said.

I quickly invented a reason for being there. "Lady Bodrean was anxious to know how you were getting on," I said.

"Oh, well enough," he answered. "But you must come in."

He smiled at me which made me feel ridiculously happy. It was absurd. Practical, sensible, proud Judith Osmond to feel so intensely about another human being! Judith Osmond in love! How had I ever fallen into such a state and so hopelessly too?

He led me up the path through somewhat overgrown shrubs and pushed open the door with the knocker which Sir Edward had brought from some foreign country. It was cunningly wrought into the shape of a face . . . a rather evil one. I wondered whether Sir Edward had put it there to discourage visitors.

The carpets were thick at Giza House so that footsteps were noiseless. Tybalt took me into the drawing room where the heavy midnight blue velvet curtains were fringed with gold and the carpet was deep blue with a velvety pile. Sir Edward had found noise distracting, I had heard. There was evidence of his vocation in that room. I knew some of the weird figures were casts of his more spectacular finds. This was the Chinese room, but the grand

piano which dominated it brought with it the flavor of Victorian England.

Tybalt signed to me to sit down and did the same.

"We're planning another expedition to the place where my father died," he said.

"Oh!" I had said I did not believe in this story of the Curse yet the thought of his going back there alarmed me. "You think that wise?" I asked.

"Surely you don't believe these rumors about my father's death, do you, Judith?"

"Of course not."

"He was a healthy man, it was true. And suddenly he was struck down. I believe he was on the verge of a great discovery. It was something he said to me the day before he died. He said: 'I believe shortly I am going to prove to everyone that this expedition was very much worth while.' He would say no more than that. How I wish he had."

"There was an autopsy."

"Yes, here in England. But they were unable to find the cause. It was very mysterious. And now Sir Ralph's stroke."

"You don't think there is a connection?"

He shook his head. "I think my father's old friend was shocked by his sudden death. Sir Ralph has always been somewhat apoplectic and had a mild stroke once before. I know that doctors have been warning him for years to show a little moderation. No, Sir Ralph's illness has nothing to do with what was happening in Egypt. Well, I am going back and I shall attempt to find out what it was my father was on the point of discovering and . . . if this had anything to do with his death."

"Take care," I said before I could stop myself.

He smiled. "I believe it is what my father would have wished."

"When will you leave?"

"It will take us three months to get ready."

The door opened and Tabitha Grey came in. Like everyone at Giza House she interested me. She was beautiful in an unobtrusive way. It was only after one had seen

her many times that one realized the charm of those features and the fascination of that air of resignation, a kind of acceptance of life. I had never been quite sure of her position at Giza House; she was a sort of specially privileged housekeeper.

"Judith has called with Lady Bodrean's good wishes."

"Would you like some tea, Judith?" asked Tabitha.

I declined with thanks, explaining that I should be going back without delay, or I should be missed. Tabitha smiled sympathetically implying that she understood Lady Bodrean was no easy taskmistress.

Tybalt said he would walk back with me and this he did. He talked all the time about the expedition. I was fascinated by it.

"I believe you wish you were going with us," he said.

"With all my heart."

"Would you be prepared to face the Curse of the Pharaohs, Miss Osmond?" he asked ironically.

"Yes, I certainly should."

He smiled at me.

"I wish," he said earnestly, "that you *could* join our expedition."

I went back to Keveall Court bemused. I scarcely heard Lady Bodrean's complaints. I was in a dream. He *wished* that I could join them. Only by a miracle could I do that.

Then Sir Ralph died and there was more talk of the Curse. The man who had led the expedition and the man who had helped to finance it—and both dead! There must be some significance in this.

And then . . . my miracle happened. It was incredible; it was wonderful; it was like something from a dream. It was as fantastic as the fairy story. Cinderella was to go—not to the ball—but with the expedition to Egypt.

I could only marvel at the wonder of it; and I thought constantly of everything that had led up to this.

It really began on my fourteenth birthday when I found the piece of bronze in Josiah Polgrey's grave.



## II The Bronze Shield

My fourteenth birthday was one of the most eventful days of my life because on it not only did I find the bronze shield but I learned some truths about myself.

The shield came first. I found it during the hot July afternoon. The house was quiet for neither Dorcas, Alison, nor the cook and the two maids were anywhere to be seen. I suspected that the maids were exchanging confidences about their sweethearts in their attic bedroom; that cook was drowsing in the kitchen; that Dorcas was in her garden; that Alison was mending, or embroidering; and that the Reverend James Osmond was in his study pretending to prepare next Sunday's sermon and in fact dozing in his chair—now and then being awakened by a sudden jerk of the head or his own genteel snore and murmuring: "Bless my soul!" and pretending to himself—as there was no one else to pretend to—that he had been working on his sermon all the time.

I was wrong, at least about Dorcas and Alison; they were most certainly in one of their bedrooms discussing

how best they could tell the child—myself—for now that she was fourteen years old they believed she should no longer be kept in the dark.

I was in the graveyard watching Pegger, the sexton, dig a grave. I was fascinated by the churchyard. Sometimes I would wake in the night and think of it. Often I would get out of bed, kneel on the window seat and look down at it. In the mist it would seem very ghostly indeed and the grey tombstones were like figures risen from the dead; in the bright moonlight they were clearly gravestones but they lost none of their eeriness for that. Sometimes it was pitch dark, and the rain might be teeming down, the wind howling through the branches of the oaks and buffeting the ancient yews; then I would imagine that the dead had left their graves and were prowling round the churchyard just below my window.

It was years ago that I had begun to feel this morbid interest. It probably started when Dorcas first took me to put flowers on Lavinia's grave. We did that every Sunday. Now we had planted a rosemary bush within the marble curb.

"That's for remembrance," said Dorcas. "It will be green all the year round."

On this hot July afternoon Pegger paused in his digging to mop his forehead with a red bandanna handkerchief and regarded me in the stern way he regarded everybody.

"You've a taste for graveyards, Miss Judith," he said. "You'm like me, I reckon. As I stand here, turning over the earth, I think of the one who'll be laid to rest in this deep dark grave. Like as not I've known 'un all me life—for that's how it be in a parish like St. Erno's."

Pegger spoke in a sepulchral voice. I suppose this was due to his connection with the church. He had been sexton all his life and his father before him. He looked like one of the prophets from the Old Testament with his mane of white hair and beard, and his righteous indignation against the sinners of the world into which category all but himself and a very chosen few seemed to fall. Even his conversation had a biblical flavor.

"This be the last resting place of Josiah Polgrey. He's

lived his threescore year and ten and now he's to face his Maker." Pegger shook his head gravely as though he did not think highly of Josiah's chances in the next world.

I said: "God may not be as stern as you, Mr. Pegger."

"You come near to blasphemy, Miss Judith," he said. "You should guard well your tongue."

"Well, what would be the use of that, Mr. Pegger? The recording angel would know what was in my mind whether I said it or not—so even to think it might be just as bad, and how can you help what you think?"

Mr. Pegger raised his eyes to the sky as though he thought I might have invited the wrath of God to descend on me.

"Never mind," I soothed him. "Why you haven't had your lunch yet. It must be two o'clock."

On the next grave lay another red bandanna handkerchief similar to that with which Mr. Pegger had mopped his brow, but this one, I knew, was tied about a bottle containing cold tea and a pasty which Mrs. Pegger would have made on the previous night so that it would be ready for her husband to bring with him.

He stepped out of the grave and seating himself on the curb round the next grave untied the knot in the handkerchief and took out his food.

"How many graves have you dug in your whole lifetime?" I asked.

He shook his head. "More than I can say, Miss Judith," he replied.

"And Matthew will dig them after you. Just think of that." Matthew was not his eldest son who should have inherited the doubtful privilege of digging graves of those who had lived and died in the village of St. Erno's. Luke, the eldest, had run away to sea, a fact which would never be forgiven him.

"If it be the Lord's will I'll dig a few more yet," he answered.

"You must dig all sorts and sizes," I mused. "Well, you wouldn't need the same size for little Mrs. Edney and Sir Ralph Bodrean, would you?"

This was a plot of mine to bring Sir Ralph into the

conversation. The sins of his neighbors was, I think, Mr. Pegger's favorite subject, and since everything about Sir Ralph was bigger than that belonging to anyone else, so were his sins.

I found Sir Ralph, our Squire, fascinating. I was excited when he passed on the road either in his carriage or on one of his thoroughbreds. I would bob a little curtsy—as taught by Dorcas—and he would nod and raise a hand in a quick imperious kind of gesture and for a moment those heavy lidded eyes would be on me. Some had said of him—as long ago someone had said of Julius Caesar—“Hide your daughters when he passes by.” Well, he was the Caesar of our village. He owned most of it; the outlying farmlands were on his estate; to those who worked with him he was said to be a good master, and as long as the men touched their forelocks with due respect and remembered he *was* the master and the girls did not deny him those favors which he desired, he was a good master, which meant that men were assured of work and a roof over their heads and any results which might ensue from his dallying with the maidens were taken care of. There were plenty of “results” in the village now and they were always granted the extra privileges over those who had been sired elsewhere.

But to Mr. Pegger the Squire was Sin personified.

Out of respect for my youth he could not talk of our Squire's major qualifications for hell fire, so he gave himself the pleasure of touching on his smaller ones—all of which, in Mr. Pegger's opinion, would have ensured his entry.

There were houseparties at Keverall Court almost every weekend; in the various seasons the guests came to hunt foxes, otters, and stags, or to shoot pheasants which were bred on the Keverall estate for this purpose, or merely to make merry in the baronial hall. They were rich, elegant—often noisy—people from Plymouth and sometimes as far as London. I always enjoyed seeing them. They brightened the countryside, but in Mr. Pegger's estimation they desecrated it.

I considered myself very lucky to visit Keverall Court



every day except Saturday and Sunday. This had been a special concession because the Squire's daughter and nephew had a governess and were also taught by Oliver Shrimpton, our curate. The rather impecunious rector could not afford a governess for me, and Sir Ralph had graciously given his consent—or perhaps had raised no objection to the proposal—that I should join his daughter and nephew in their schoolroom and profit from the instruction given there. This meant that every day—except Saturdays and Sundays—I passed under the old portcullis into the courtyard, gave an ecstatic sniff at the stables, touched the mounting block for luck, entered the great hall with its minstrels' gallery, mounted the wide staircase as though I were one of the lady visitors from London, with a flowing train and diamonds glittering on my fingers, passed along the gallery where all the dead—and some living—Bodreans looked down on me with varying expressions of scorn, amusement, or indifference and into the schoolroom where Theodosia and Hadrian would be already seated and Miss Graham the governess would be busy at her books.

Life had certainly become more interesting since it had been decided that I share lessons with the Bodreans.

On this July afternoon I was interested to learn that the Squire's current sin was, as Mr. Pegger said, "putting in his nose where God hadn't intended it should go."

"And where is that, Mr. Pegger?"

"In Carter's Meadow, that's where. He wants to set up digging there. Disturbing God's earth. It's all along of these people who've been coming here. Filling the place with heathen ideas."

"What are they going to dig for, Mr. Pegger?" I asked.

"For worms I'd reckon." That was meant to be a joke for Mr. Pegger's face creased into what did service for a smile.

"So they're all coming down to dig, are they?" I pictured them—ladies in silks and velvets, gentlemen in white cravats and velvet smoking jackets all with their little spades in Carter's Meadow.

Mr. Pegger brushed the pasty crumbs from his coat