

NORTH OF THE ABYSS

By Brian Aldiss

I am not yet born; provide me
with water to dandle me, grass to grow for me, trees
to talk to me, sky to sing to me, birds and a
white light in the back of my mind to guide me.

Louis MacNeice: 'Prayer Before Birth'

The west bank of the river, so the old legends had it, was the bank of death. There the dead went to their tombs, among the sands and the sunsets.

However that might have been, a barque emerged from the mists veiling the west bank and moved towards mid-channel with steady purpose. It was high in prow and stern. In the stern, a dark figure guided the boat by means of a large steering oar.

The figure was alone in the boat. At its feet stood pottery coffers of curious design, their lids taking the form of heads of owl, wolf and cat. More curious was the figure of the ferryman himself. He wore a short tunic with stiff pleated kilt, from the belt of which hung a sword. His brown arms were bare, adorned with ornamental metal bands at wrists and biceps. Round his neck was a wide bead collar, and he wore a thick blue wig to show that this was an official occasion.

The wig enfolded a narrow bony head. The ferryman's sharp nose and shallow jaw, the black fur covering his face, the two sharp erect ears — pointing alertly forward at the *felucca* he was approaching — were those of a jackal. He was not of the world of men and women, although his traffic was with them.

No less disturbing was the unnatural fact that his barque, in its stealthy approach to the *felucca* over the sunset waters, cast no reflection on the darkening flood and no shadow into the depths below its keel.

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The *felucca* had departed from the Aswan Sheraton Hotel on the east bank of the Nile, and was making its way upstream, its sail taut in the light wind blowing from

the north. Not one of the fourteen passengers on the boat had anything to say, as if the gravity of the sunset bore upon their spirits. All fixed their gaze on the distant west bank which, while the sun sank lower, turned apricot against the cloudless sky, as if composed of material more precious than sand.

Oscar North sat in a cramped position in the stern of the *felucca*. He was pervaded by feelings of isolation. There was no one in the boat he recognized, although he believed that they, like him, had embarked on this trip from the immense concrete honeycomb of luxury now falling behind them in ashen distance. No one he recognized, that is, except for a small thin man with sparse hair and hooded eyes into whom North had bumped in the foyer of the hotel on the previous day; this man now turned and regarded North as if he would speak. North evaded his gaze.

North was nearing forty. He had been making every effort to retain a youthful figure, entering into all the sports organized by the department which employed him, while at the same time spending evenings drinking with friends from the office. The features on his wide bony face, in particular his narrow colourless eyes, appeared rather insignificant.

In the files of the multi-national company for which Oscar North worked was a note against his character which said, 'Unpromising background.' Another note consisted of one word: 'Conformist.'

Evading the glances of the thin man, North stared about him. To be on water generally excited him, yet this evening he felt only unease, as if this were a journey into the unknown instead of nothing more than a tourist outing. The great river seemed to gather lightness to itself as the sky overhead darkened. Already stars glittered and a horn of moon shone superb and metallic overhead. The faces of the other people in the boat dimmed, becoming anonymous.

The thin man leaned forward and tapped North's arm.

'There's Philae,' he said.

He pointed in the direction the *felucca* was heading. His voice was confidential, as if he imagined himself to be sharing a secret with North.

All North could see ahead was a confusion of land and rock, black against the cloudless evening sky. The odd palm tree showed like an angry top-knot. The sound of their progress over the waves could almost be the noise of night coming on, closing over Upper Egypt.

The thin man rose from his place and inserted himself on the stern bench next to North.

‘I visited Philae with my father, fifteen years back. I’ve never forgot it. It’s magic, pure magic—out of this world, to coin a phrase.’

He shook his head dismissively, as if in contradiction of his own words.

North found himself unable to make any response. He recognized an obligation to be pleasant to a fellow American, yet he had come on vacation to Egypt largely to escape his compatriots—in search of what exactly he had yet to discover.

Worse, he felt that somehow this guy understood him, understood his weaknesses. Accordingly, he was defensive and reluctant to talk.

The thin man hardly paused for response, going on to say, ‘We had an encounter in the lobby of the hotel, if you recall—you and your wife. Pleasant-looking lady, I’d say. She’s not accompanying you on this little trip?’

‘She didn’t feel like it,’ North said.

‘Why’s that, may I enquire? They say the new *son et lumière* on Philae is just great.’

Again, North found himself unable to reply. Anger and resentment welled up in him as he thought of the violent row with his wife in the hotel room before he left.

‘My name’s Jackson, Joe Jackson, and I’m from Jacksonville, Jax, Florida, mortician by trade, married, divorced, three kids, two grandchildren,’ said the thin man, offering his hand arid shaking his head.

‘Oscar North,’ said North, taking the proffered hand.

It was as if the name released a flood of information from Joe Jackson.

‘Night’s coming on. The ancient Egyptians would claim that Ra, the Sun God, was sailing under the world with the sun safe in his boat... They had many odd beliefs like that. Still, people believe pretty strange things even today, in this age of progress, even in the United States. When the *Jacksonville Bugle* ran a poll on

education recently, they found that sixty-two per cent of the people questioned believe that the sun goes round the Earth, instead of vice versa ...'

'Well, I guess people in cities ...'

'That don't make no difference.' He shook his head. 'They got an alternative frame of beliefs here—different mind-set, as they say. It's a Muslim country. You and your fair lady ever visited Egypt before?'

'This is the first time I've been outside the United States and Europe. Europe's pretty Americanized—we own a good piece of it, as you know.' He laughed uncertainly.

'Belief — that's the important thing in life,' Jackson said. 'Me, I'm a religious man. It alters how you look at facts.'

Afraid the man was about to become philosophical, North said curtly, 'Well, I believe in the Protestant work ethic.' He turned a shoulder to the man from Florida and stared across the bows of the boat.

It had seemed that the *felucca* was scarcely making progress, but suddenly dark shapes of land were swinging about them as the steersman changed course. Rocks moved in close by the side of the boat, intent on invasion, smoothed into elephantine shapes by the countless past inundations of the waterway. The effect was as if they entered among a concourse of great beasts at a waterhole.

Flat-topped stone temples loomed above the mast of the *felucca*, only to disappear behind a shoulder of land. Ahead, as the vessel swung about, they sighted a line of torches illuminating a landing stage and a flight of steps beyond.

Almost as one, the passengers in the boat rose and stood silent, aware they had made a transition from one world to another. Darkness now wrapped them about. Nobody spoke. Couples held on to each other.

The crew jumped ashore and moored the boat at the bottom of the steps. The passengers climbed on to the island and began the ascent. The steps they trod were broad and shallow. Turbaned Egyptians stood by, motioning them on. Other vessels were arriving out of the dark like moths at a flame, other people setting foot on Philae, looking tense and serious.

While climbing ashore, North tried to evade Joe Jackson, but the thin man appeared at his side. North made no sign. He wanted to give himself over entirely

to Philae, without distraction. This was his last evening in Egypt.

‘My profession being mortician, I’ve made a kind of hobby of studying the ancient Egyptians,’ Jackson said. ‘They were wonderful folk. In the arts of embalming they were second to none. Second to none.’

Again he shook his head, as if denying what he was saying.

‘They had secrets and techniques unknown to us today despite all our modern advances. Some experts think they used magic. Maybe they did use magic.’ He chuckled. ‘Of course, they had gods and goddesses for everything. I know quite a bit about them. Like this island of Philae is dedicated to the goddess Isis, who was worshipped hereabouts for over a thousand years ... She was a tricky little bit of goods and no mistake.’

Climbing the stairs, North made no response.

‘Philae’s dedicated to Isis,’ Jackson repeated. ‘I guess you knew that from the guidebooks. How long you and that wife of yours been in Aswan?’

‘Two days.’

‘Two days. That all? What have you seen so far?’

‘Shit, we’ve been resting, Mr Jackson, taking it easy by the pool. What’s it to you?’

‘You and your lady are on the fringe of a wonderful world. Vanished but mysteriously still here.’ His tone suggested he took no offence at North’s tone; bores could not afford to take offence. ‘By day, Egypt’s blanked out under a blaze of light. Quite different from Florida’s light. Then you go down underground into the dark of the tombs and — wham! — a wonderful coloured picture-book of the past opens up. Gods, goddesses, the lot. They sure aren’t Christian but they’re a lot of fun. Don’t miss it.’

‘Back to Geneva in the morning,’ North said.

Flambeaux burning in the low wall on their left made Stygian the waters beyond. The visitors were cut off from the rest of the world. As they mounted the steps, various imposing stone buildings rose into view. Even Jackson fell silent. A general solemnity gripped everyone, as if they were not merely tourists, in search of little besides sunshine and some distraction, but pilgrims to a sacred shrine.

When they gained level ground, before them stretched several temples, picked out of the dark by hidden spotlights, their walls embellished by some of the best-loved gods, Horus the falcon-headed, Hathor, Nephthys, sister of Isis, and Isis herself, alert, slender, her breasts bare. These giant figures stood as they had stood for three thousand years, incised in the stone with a conviction which seemed to grant them immortality.

Above the temples, night had closed in with its glittering horn. Only in the cloudless west a line of ancient rose light remained, fading, fading fast, the colour of regret.

The beauty and tranquillity of the scene before him — a tragic quality in it—made North pause. He wished he had it all to himself, without the intrusive Jackson, without the other tourists. Tomorrow it was back to the pressures of commodity-broking in the Geneva office.

The posting to the Swiss office had represented promotion for the aspiring Oscar North. Winifred had hated leaving the Washington area where her family lived. Their marriage had been in decline ever since. Perhaps he should pray to Isis for better things, the thought occurred to him.

He evaded Jackson in the crowd of anonymous people. Attendants were urging everyone across a paved area. More *feluccas* were arriving at the landing stage, materializing out of the dark, more people pouring in for the show. North moved forward with them, determined to get a good position.

He found a place by the rope which held spectators back. The Temple of Isis presented itself ahead, before it a great stone pylon, dating from the period of the Ptolomaic pharaohs. Its two towers were illuminated so that their tops faded away as if aspiring to the stars themselves. A measure of calm entered North as he took in the spectacle; it was a sensation he hardly recognized. He reflected on the venerable age of the structures, their solidity and grace, and the way in which so many generations had found peace on this small island in the Nile, worshipping the goddess. A feeling of sanctity still prevailed. The little island had been preserved: no one lived here. There were no houses or shops, only the majestic ruins.

Jackson was at his elbow again.

‘Lost you for a minute, Oscar. You don’t object if I stand with you? I just don’t care too much for all these strangers. Guess I’m more accustomed to folk

who've passed on, being a mortician.' He chuckled, shaking his head at the same time.

'It's a wonderful place,' North said.

'Too bad your wife isn't with you.'

He was not going to be led into a discussion of what had happened to Winifred.

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Winnie and Oscar North came in from the hotel's pool area and showered in their room. The heat outside had been almost too intense to bear.

'Let's go and sit in the bar and sink a few,' he said, drying his hair.

'You were drinking all the time we were out by the pool. Haven't you had enough?'

'You would keep talking to that woman, whoever she was.'

'She's nice. She's from Arizona. She's staying a whole two weeks in the hotel. She was telling me —'

'She's a pain in the neck.'

'Osk, you never even spoke to her. How do you know what she's like? She's very well-heeled, I tell you that.'

The phone rang. He moved quickly to answer it.

Covering the receiver, he made a face and said to her, 'It's a call from Geneva. Larry wants to speak to me. Can't be good.'

Winnie was sitting on a chair arm, putting on a shoe. She flung it to the floor in anger. 'No, not Larry. Tell him you're not home. Don't speak to him. Tell him to get lost.'

But Larry, North's immediate boss, was on the line, and Oscar was listening and smiling and saying, 'No, glad to hear from you, Larry, great, just great. How's tricks in Geneva?'

When his face grew serious as he listened, Winny went over and listened too.

‘But the Armour account is fine, Larry. Can’t you possibly handle it till I’m back Monday? We’re only away a week.’

‘You know I have to be in Paris, Oscar.’ Larry, unremitting. ‘If the wrong people get a hold of this story ...’

‘Tell him to get lost,’ Winny said. ‘We’ve only just arrived.’

‘We’ve only just arrived here, Larry.’

‘Well, if you are prepared to let it slide ... That’s your decision, Oscar. You know the stuff Armour handle.’

‘I really don’t think it’s that urgent, Larry. Look, I mean —’

‘If that’s your decision, Oscar, old pal. Of course I’m going to have difficulty explaining it to the meeting tomorrow . . . ’

‘Can’t you just tell them—tell them I’ll be back Friday?... Look, suppose I came back Thursday? ... Wednesday, then?’

‘Tell him to stuff his fucking job, Osk!’

‘That’s entirely up to you, Oscar. Entirely up to you. I don’t want to pressure you, but you know how these things go. And there’s your future in the company to think about.’

‘How about if I come back Tuesday, Larry?’

‘Do you think Armour would understand? I have to ring them back pronto. You know how it will look if I say you are on vacation and are unavailable. But that’s entirely your decision if you want to play it that way.’ Larry’s voice was flat, cold.

‘Oh, Jesus, look, Larry—OK, look, I’ll get a flight back tomorrow morning, OK?’ Forcing sarcasm into his voice he asked, ‘Will that be soon enough to please you?’

'I leave it entirely up to you, Oscar.' The line went dead.

North set the receiver back in its cradle without looking at his wife.

'Oh, you asshole!' she shrieked. 'You spoil everything.'

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A slender moon shone down on the isle of Philae with sceptred gaze. No wind stirred. The great dark flow of the Nile opened its lips to breathe the island as it ran its course from south to north of the ancient land.

Still the tourists were emerging from the river into the light. They felt the dryness of the air. Rain never fell here; life depended on the artery of the river. Vegetation stayed close to its banks, a thin embroidered strip woven into boundless desert sands. And Joe Jackson pointed to one of the giant figures sinuously carved on the temple wall and said, 'See that one? The god with the jackal's head? That's Anubis.'

'I think I've heard of him,' North said. 'What's he do?'

'Anubis mediates between the living and the dead. He connects the visible and the invisible worlds. Quite a boy. He conducts the Act of Judgement which decides whether you spend eternity in the summer stars or the Abyss.'

'He's frightening.'

'I've got a special interest in Anubis.' The hasty shake of the head, the nervous mannerism denying what the mouth had spoken. 'See, he's the god of medicine and embalming. That's why I've got a special interest. He removes the intestines from corpses and embalms them in pots—pots often shaped like animals—so's they are ready for you when you arrive in the Underworld. And what is the special — hold it!'

He interrupted himself, for music suddenly welled out of the dry earth, the shrill music of an earlier day, music of heat and wine and nudity and the Bronze Age.

Illumination faded from the temple walls. They were washed pale and then sank away into dark like ghosts. For an instant, only the night reigned over Philae.

And the moon shone down, transfixing the island with its purity.

Then coloured spots awoke, green, bronze, orange, and the *son et lumière* was under way.

Measured voices, male and female, hired from London, told ancient tales of the gods and goddesses who had once ruled the two kingdoms of Upper and Lower Egypt. Of Ra, the god of the sun, of his grandchildren, Geb and Nut, god of earth and goddess of sky, and of their children, who included Osiris, the god of the dead, and his sister, Isis, later his wife.

As the preposterous story unfolded, new areas of the temples opened, and turbaned attendants ushered the spectators on to hear the next chapter of the tale in a further chamber of the holy ruin.

The visitors filed solemnly past a long colonnade of which no two capitals were alike. Its ceiling was decorated with stars and flying vultures. Two granite lions guarded the way to the inner temple complex. In the Great Court stood the Birth House. Here was represented Isis giving birth to Horus, Horus as a hawk crowned with the Double Crown, Horus being suckled at the breast of Isis. All the weird progeny, alive on the walls, smouldering in ambers and sullen mauve, appearing or disappearing at the will of the narrative.

And the story went on. Incest, murder, mutilation, brother fighting brother, a great conflagration of mortal sins and aspirations, all played out in an earlier world where the reed beds were full of wild fowl and the woods of deer and leopard and the skies of geese and doves and the minds of human beings with the lees of previous existences before intellect was born.

In all this walking between hypostyle hall, sanctuaries, ritual scenes of offerings to the dusky gods, and tales of flood and fury, Oscar North proceeded in a daze, half-attending to the task of avoiding Joe Jackson. As the coloured lights led the crowds on, shepherding them like dogs controlling a flock of sheep, he was aware of the moon, raining down its light on him between the ornamented columns. It seemed to offer refuge from tormented emotions.

As he moved between light and dark, following narrative and physical path, the story conveyed by remote modern lips got to him. It overtook him like an old belief. He was filled with desire for the vivid world that had vanished thousands of years ago, for the hot sunlight that had once contained its people, animals and birds within the narrow ribbon of Egyptian dynastic life. As in his own day of the twentieth century, people had conflicting ideas of the afterlife: some holding that death released one to dwell for ever among the summer stars, others that death

led to a tomb where Anubis would come, dog-faced and dark, to pickle one in preparation for judgement — a judgement that would lead either to the Abyss or to another life, where there were still slaves and dancing girls and wine and perfumes and strips of land to plough.

With all this he compared his own existence, his years in offices and bars and high-rise apartments, his imprisonment by desk and VDU, his anxieties over work and marriage and income. There had never been an Isis in his life, dainty and bloodthirsty. He had submitted to circumstance. There had never been belief. Only fear and a wish to conform.

‘I believe we’re coming to Trajan’s Kiosk,’ said Jackson’s voice at his shoulder. ‘That’s if I remember after all this time. You going to have a bite of supper when you get back to the hotel, Oscar?’

‘I don’t feel like food,’ he said.

His mind was in a torment. He had to escape this little man. Then he could think. Perhaps it would even be possible to set his life back on course.

As the crowd filed into the mighty rectangle of Trajan’s Kiosk, North obeyed an impulse — he ducked away and hid behind a massive block of granite. Shadow enfolded him. The attendants had not seen him go.

From where he crouched, the narrative could still be heard. Disembodied voices acted out the ancient drama of Osiris and Isis, and the death of the god at the hands of his brother.

* * * *

He paced about the hotel room, wearing only a towel round his midriff. Winifred had turned her back on him and stood looking out of the window at the Nile and the desolate expanses of west bank beyond.

‘What else could I do? I had to give in to Larry. You know how these guys ride me. The Geneva office is worse than Washington in that respect. You know that. Besides, the Armour business —’

‘Don’t tell me about the Armour business,’ she said, in a low controlled voice. ‘This isn’t the first time you’ve done this to me.’

‘What do you mean, to you? I haven’t done anything to you. It’s what’s

been done to me. Do you think I can help it?’

He never told her what his work involved. Either Winny did not want to know or could not grasp the details. He felt compelled to explain to her that Armour was one of his most tendentious clients. Through sub-agents, Armour exported thousands of tonnes of nuclear waste from industrial countries to Third World countries. Now a crisis threatened operations. A customer in an African country had used radioactive waste bought from an Armour sub-contractor as hardcore for a new road through the capital city. People were getting sick. The facts, long suppressed, had been leaked to a German news agency.

‘You think I care?’ Winny said, interrupting. ‘All of Africa can drop dead as far as I’m concerned. What gets me is how you in your stupid dumb way have just loused up my vacation. You wimp, why don’t you tell Larry and these Armour people to get lost? How long do you think I’m going to put up with this crap?’

He clutched the nape of his neck, feeling one of his migraines coming on. ‘Get off my back, will you? You think it’s my fault? You think I’m responsible for this almighty cock-up?’

She had finally turned round to face him, looking white-faced and mean. She folded her arms protectively over her breasts.

If North tried—as he sometimes did at night before sleep enfolded him—he could remember a time back in Washington when Winny did not bitch at him. She had changed only when he had been posted to the Geneva office, when promotion became slow.

He had done his best. Taken her on trips with his office buddies at weekends into the Alps or the Haute Savoie. Humoured her wish to have her stupid sister to visit.

The magic between them had long departed. He suppressed the knowledge that what he had done for her—the favour—had been done grudgingly. Her responses now were conditioned by his own lack of grace. But he could not be to blame. Could he?

Once Winny’s face had looked so cute and placid in repose. Now it was flabby and had a dull, cold expression which her grey eyes reinforced. Winny turned that cold expression on her husband now, continuing her diatribe.

‘I heard what Larry said. He said it was your decision. You could have told

him to get lost. You made the wrong decision one more time.'

'What Larry said was a threat. Can't you understand that, you bitch? Larry's a mean careerist bastard.'

'Oh, and what are you? You always put the company first. You're a lackey, Osk, that's what you are, a – a minion! I hate you, you're a creep, an asshole.'

'Don't call me an asshole. I'm Assistant Regional Director and you know how hard I've worked for the post. The Armour account is volatile. If there's a blip, I have to be there. It's as simple as that. What Larry's saying is that they can't do without me. Can't you respect that?'

She crossed the room in fury and confronted him. 'Can't you see what a miserable life we lead? Can't you really? Ever since before we married you've put everything into that company. You've slaved and toadied and kowtowed. I've seen it. I've watched every inch of the way. I've seen the people you brought home. Friends, you call them. Enemies, I call them. People you had to be nice to, drunks, bullies, sadists, hardly able to hide their contempt for you while you proceeded to get smashed before I served dinner. Oh, yes, don't deny it. And all their fancy compliments. Freesias for me — God, how I hate freesias. All the time you've put in —'

'Oh, for Christ's sake, can it, will you?' He turned his back on her and struggled into a clean shirt. 'I have to earn a living. If I was pissed that was your fault. If only you could have been friendly to all —'

'Friendly! Friendly! Listen, you are about as friendly as that wall.' Winifred paused unexpectedly, as if past resentments choked her. She clutched her throat. 'You weren't friendly with these people. We got no friends. Larry you call your friend. He just rides you. As you ride me. You get what you can out of me, he gets what he can out of you. It's the filthy system. What about our one and only beloved son? Why do you think he ran off from home at the age of fourteen? Just because you —'

'Leave Alex out of this. It's a sore point.'

'Of course it's a sore point. Everything's a sore point with you 'Because you've never lived. You've spent your whole life being an asshole. Now you're doing it again, lousing up our one chintzy week off in the sun. Asshole.'

He hit her hard with an upward blow of his right hand, feeling his knuckles

strike the right side of her jaw. He was amazed how flimsy she was. She seemed to blow away. She tumbled across her bed, knocked over the lamp on the locker, fell against her open suitcase, tumbled to the floor in a shower of articles, and lay hidden by the swell of the duvet.

There was silence. North heard a radio playing in the next room.

‘Winnie?’ he said.

* * * *

Voice of Osiris: ‘Our treacherous brother, Seth, held a lavish feast for me when you were away, O divine Isis. With him were seventy-two conspirators and a conniving queen of Ethiopia. We drank and sang while the dancing girls danced in their diaphanous robes and slaves scattered flowers about the room.’

Voice of Narrator: ‘Osiris was then King of Egypt. At the moment of his birth, a heavenly voice announced, “The lord of all the world is born.” Osiris was the first man ever to drink wine. Thus he brought a new thing into the world, and showed his peoples how to plant vines for grapes and cultivate them for the new beverage. He refined the rough customs of his peoples and taught them to honour the gods, and gave them laws. By the same token, he persuaded the ibis-headed god Thoth to invent all the arts, music, sculpture, astronomy and its attendant arithmetic, and, above all, the letters of the alphabet, in order that wisdom might be recorded to pass from one generation to another, in the way that the waters of the Nile were canalized to irrigate distant fields.’

Voice of Osiris: ‘But my brother Seth was jealous of me, and coveted our sister, Isis, for his wife.’

Voice of Isis: ‘While you were away in distant lands, O my Osiris, Seth caused to be made a chest of great value, richly decorated, its metals and jewels worked by the finest artisans. The interior of the chest fitted your measurements exactly.’

Voice of Osiris: ‘At the feast, Seth announced, “He who can lie down in this chest and fit into it exactly, to him shall I give the chest as prize.” No one could win the chest. Then my brother challenged me to try. I did so. The conspirators slammed down the lid upon me.’

Voice of Isis: ‘O my king, how you were trapped! Hot lead was poured about the joins of the chest, so that you suffered and died. I knew you had gone

from this world without the need of telling. Seth threw your coffin into the Nile, where it drifted to the sea and was lost. My sister, Nephthys, the wife of Seth, gave birth to a baby boy whom she deserted. The dogs saved him. Because he had the head of a jackal, I called him Anubis and looked after him. He grew fierce and loyal and joined me in the search for Osiris's body.'

Voice of Narrator: 'The faithful Isis's search was at last rewarded, and she found the chest, some say in the Nile Delta, some off the coast of Syria. Placing the body of her dead husband on the deck of a boat, she sailed home in triumph.'

Voice of Osiris: 'Such was her warmth and her love that she roused me back to life for a brief while. I returned to this world of circumstance, and was so stirred by the beauty of Isis when she revealed herself to me naked that I was able to take her unto me and impregnate her before again returning to the Underworld, there to reign as Lord of the Dead.'

Voice of Isis: 'So I could continue the line of the gods. With the aid of Anubis, I gave birth in the spring to Horus, who flew from my womb fully fledged as a bird. Later, Horus would avenge his father.'

Voice of Narrator: 'This early resurrection myth comes to us from an epoch before the birth of formal religions, from the long golden days of the Bronze Age, when humankind remained still on a par with nature and did not tyrannize it. For her powers as wife and mother, Isis was worshipped here on Philae, her island, sacred to her name, and here, on a night such as this, we may imagine that she still has power over living men and over their hearts.'

Oscar North peered above the slab of masonry which hid him. The crowds of spectators at the light show were now far away. He saw them merely as a black mass, insignificant below the ancient capitals and architraves, a herd who would be leaving shortly and dispersing to their Western-style hotels.

He would be staying.

Tomorrow, he must fly back to work, to the offices in Geneva. Tonight, he would stay here and exorcize — whatever had happened in the hotel room. When he tried to turn his thoughts in that direction, he met with a frightening blank. But the island of Philae would be a sanctuary in which he might be able to repossess himself before confronting the world of Mammon again. The moonlight might remake him. Or the solitude. Or Isis. Or whatever it was lingering out of reach which he had never tasted. It was OK for Osiris, but he, Oscar North, had been imprisoned in a chest all his damned life.

Trust her to complain. Winifred came from a reasonably stable background. Tyrone North, Oscar's father, had always drifted in and out of jobs. There had been no security for the family, little education for the boys, as they moved from one big city to another. When adolescent, Oscar had run away from home, to seize on what opportunities he could. Sure, he had stayed with the company — and had educated himself at night school. Had made something of his life. Of course there had to be sacrifices.

Too bad about Alex, their kid. Alex had taken after his old grandpa, he was a bad coin, and no use thinking about it. Why didn't Winny shut up about Alex? Well, fact was, he'd never hear from her on that subject again.

The *son et lumière* was over. Music came up, and white lights. From his hiding place, North could see the turbaned attendants directing the crowds away, tramping towards the point where the *feluccas* were moored against the harbour wall. That fool Jackson would be among them.

Mortician! What a profession!

The tramp of feet died. The electric lights were switched off.

Moonlight shone down on North. He looked up at the silver horn, thanking it for its light, sub-vocalizing the words. As a small boy, he had been afraid of the moon, afraid that monsters would jump out at him from the shadows it cast.

He rose slowly, and went to stand in the shelter of Trajan's Kiosk. It was probable that the island remained unoccupied during the night; there was no habitation as such; but he could not be sure. What he greatly wished was to be alone here, communing with Isis.

The sound of footsteps came to him, of sandals slapping against stone. North stood rigid. He watched as a shadowy figure approached, carrying a dim torch. It processed through the ancient ruins, passing on the other side of the wall by which North waited.

Slipping off his shoes, North followed the man at a distance. It was a robed Egyptian who smoked a cigarette as he walked along, no doubt checking to see that all was well after the day's intake of visitors.

The man came at last to the water's edge. A little way out on the flood, lights with trembling reflections marked where the *feluccas* had begun to carry their

freight of passengers back to their hotels.

As North's gaze searched the boats, he saw a passenger stand up and wave. It was Jackson. North believed he had been sighted. A moment later he realized that the man from Jacksonville was merely making a dramatic gesture in the direction of the island. It was good to know he was out of the way.

Mindlessly, a woman passenger caught Jackson's gesture and stood up to imitate him. The idea caught on. In no time, everyone stood up sheeplike and was waving to Philae as it faded from their view into the stillness of the night.

Uninterested in the tourist antics, the Egyptian had walked down to the bottom of the shallow steps, where a second man waited. As they talked, the first man threw his cigarette into the Nile. Its spark was instantly quenched. After some while, as North watched and waited, the men climbed into a small boat, hoisted sail, and set their backs resolutely on Philae.

North was left in sole possession.

He stood erect. He raised his arms and stretched.

'Isis!' he called.

The word echoed over the stones, fading towards the ancient buildings, clear and ghostly under the moon. A sense of sanctity came to him like a piped melody.

Cautiously at first, he began to walk about.

The moonlight, raining down, embalmed him in light. It caught under his eyelids. The silence, the mildness of the night, the sense of ancient stones underfoot, the almost unheard meditative utterance of the river — these had the effect of altering his consciousness. He was no longer himself. Rather, he was sensitized to a number of impressions which moved through his mind like a breeze through a copse. All the gods and goddesses of ancient Egypt became possible, in their variety, their human failings, their mischief, their grace. He found himself in tune with their music.

There they were, elusive as a breeze, beauty, night, sunlight—life. Fresh areas of his brain opened to him, like the unsealing of a long-closed tomb. The conventional Western idea of the old Egyptians as being obsessed with death was wrong; they had been possessed by life, their lives lived under an eternal clear

sky, and so in love with that existence they had invented an afterlife which echoed as nearly as possible the delights and freedoms of this, their ribbon of Nile-bound existence which flowed all too swiftly from birth in the far mountains to death in the low delta.

The West had imposed a negative image. It was a transference wish. It was in the West that life had perished, not here. Life in the West had turned itself into a series of non-biodegradable boxes. The hours in the office, the hours spent commuting, the hours spent in negative ways, gossiping in the golf-club bar, watching television. Departmentalized life, shut away in cities, in small apartments.

These notions arose wordlessly in his thoughts, amazing him.

Winnie was right. He had never loved her. He had found no way to express his love.

Yet always on the fringes of his mind — somewhere — had been an awareness of the desert and the river of life flowing through it, of wild life rattling in the marshes and flocks of birds winging overhead. Almost within reach. Just not for him.

And that absurd plurality of gods — perhaps these vanished peoples did not believe in Life with a capital L. They merely had lives, not the abstraction of Life, and the multiplicity of gods reflected that human immediacy. A fecundity of beings! — How much more to be desired than a joyless monotheism!

All this poured into North's awareness.

Instead of bringing despair, it brought him joy. Joy that at last — even if late — even if too late — he had touched a secret reality and found it something to be embraced.

'Isis!' he called. 'Where are you? Come forth.'

He was on her island. This moment in moonlight contained the whole of his imaginative life. It expanded to embrace the world.

He was overwhelmed — or not overwhelmed because not himself.

The night was absolutely still except for a distant bark of a dog, the fluid note of the river accentuating a waiting quality.

Walking in a trance, North patrolled his new-found territory, treading from shade to brightness, brightness to shade. His island was a mere stepping stone between the two banks of the Nile, one hundred and fifty metres long by four hundred and fifty metres wide. He made a circuit through the echoing temples and arrived back at the landing stage.

As he stood looking down the flight of steps at the water, dark in the moonlight, a barque moved noiselessly to the mooring. It carried a black sail, which the sole occupant of the boat expertly hauled down. He stepped ashore almost immediately, ascending the steps without pause, towards North.

North shrank back, but was unable to avoid detection. The figure was beckoning him.

He took in the newcomer's oddity with an ill tremor which ran through his body. His eyes were small and black as black coral. He wore a white tunic, with bracelets at biceps and wrists. And he had the head of a jackal. His ears pointed alertly at North.

'I want you, Oscar,' said Anubis.

* * * *

There was no sound in the bedroom after the last article had fallen out of Winifred's suitcase to the floor. From where Oscar North stood, his wife's body was out of sight behind the bed.

He remained where he was, dressed only in shirt and towel. After a moment, she began to make faint scrabbling noises.

His mouth had gone dry. Padding into the bathroom, he poured himself a glass of mineral water from their bottle and drank it. Then he put on a pair of slacks.

Winifred was sitting up groggily, patting her mouth, which was bleeding.

'Maybe that'll teach you not to call me names,' he said. 'Just keep your trap shut in future.'

She said nothing.

He felt an urge to continue the quarrel. 'I don't want to go back to Geneva any more than you. It's just something I have to do, and you know it.'

She said indistinctly, 'I'm not coming back with you, you bastard.'

He went over to her and looked threatening. 'Oh yes, you are. Let's not get into that hassle again. Remember we had that one when we left Washington. You didn't want to go to Europe.' He put on a silly voice. 'You didn't want to go to Geneva. You were afraid the terrorists might get us. You were afraid the Commies might get us. You were afraid — Christ knows what you weren't afraid of. Fact is, our standard of living has been enhanced since we left the States—not to mention my pay scale. There's a price to be paid for that, and we have to be realists and pay it. That's why we're grabbing a flight back tomorrow, and that's all about it. Now get up and get dressed. Move it.'

She did not reply. She drew up her bare knees and rested her head on them, so that her streak-dyed blonde hair fell forward.

'Come on, Winny,' he said, more gently, 'I didn't hurt you.'

'You did hurt me,' she said, without looking up. 'You're always hurting me. You don't care one bit about me, any more than you cared for Alex. You've even ceased to fake caring about me, and that hurts, too.'

She began to weep.

'Oh, for Jesus's sake,' he said.

He began to pace about the room, threatening her with all kinds of things if she did not pull herself together, threatening her with leaving her on her own—'alone in Egypt', as he put it.

'You didn't want to go to Switzerland because it wasn't America. When I grabbed this chance of a winter holiday you didn't want to come to Egypt because it wasn't Switzerland. What the hell do you want?'

'I want to be consulted, damn you, I want to be a part of your life.'

'Oh, you're part of my life all right,' he said, sarcastically. 'You're my anchor—the part that drags me down.'

Winny looked up then, ghastly, muzzle blood-red, face pallid, like a

tormented animal.

‘Will you show pity for me, Osk? You think I like to be so miserable? I don’t drag you down. You were down. You’ve never grown out of that slum boyhood of yours, that slum father. Try to see beyond your own eyes.’

‘That comes well from you! Spoilt brat, Daddy’s little girl! You’re always phoning him, the old bastard. He poisons you against me, he tells you not to trust any of my buddies, he-’

‘Oh yes, and when did you ever like any of my friends?’

It was true. He disliked her friends, she disliked his. He tucked his shirt into the top of his slacks and turned away.

‘Get up and start packing, and just don’t cross my tracks.’

Quietly, she said, ‘I told you, I’m not coming back with you. I’m through.’

‘You’ll come if I have to drag you on that plane by your hair.’ He swung back towards her, face ugly. She knelt up behind the bed, elbows on it to steady her aim, and pointed a gun at him, clutching it with both hands to control her trembling.

‘You’re not going to touch me again, you bastard. Stay away from me.’

He recognized the weapon at once. It was a small pearl-handled revolver her father had given her some years ago — father, big in electronics, fancying himself as having links with the Old West, buyer up of dude ranches and Remington paintings. Winny had insisted on taking the weapon to Europe, ‘to protect herself’, she had said when they first argued about it. He had no idea she had brought it with her to Egypt.

‘Don’t you dare point that thing at me, you little bitch!’

‘I’ll fire!’ she yelled as he rushed at her. The revolver went off almost simultaneously.

He stopped dead, raising both hands to his chest.

‘Oh, Jesus, Win,’ he said. ‘I loved you ...’

It was amazing how people didn't understand.

* * * *

When the flagstone was lifted, a black rectangle appeared in the expanse of moonlight. Steps led down into the stony night. The sound of rushing water came up from below, and a smell of mould.

Anubis had mysteriously acquired followers, human in shape, blank of face, white of eye. One of the followers came forward, carrying a large concave shield of polished bronze. He positioned the shield at such an angle that moonlight was reflected into the opening, to light a way down the steps.

The jackal-headed god motioned North to proceed. Reluctantly, North moved to the first step; his legs carried him almost automatically down into the depths. He heard Anubis stepping behind him, saw his shadow with its pointed ears extended on the steps in front of him.

The obscurity was lit by the ghostly reflected light. They came to a landing and a bend in the stone staircase. Another of Anubis's slaves was positioned there, with another shield. He reflected the moonlight round the corner, so that they could see to descend still further into the earth.

They reached a quayside where a wooden boat, moored by ropes secured to iron rings set in the stones, awaited them, rocking to and fro under the force of a strong current. Half-naked oarsmen saluted the dark god as he strode up the narrow gangplank. Following, North saw for the first time the tail of Anubis, curling from under his skirt. Sight of it scared him terribly.

Although another slave was positioned with a burnished shield at the quayside, there was little light to see by as they cast off – a mere nimbus of a suspicion of moonlight. North supposed that the blind black beads of Anubis's eyes saw everything.

They swung out into the stream. The oarsmen rowed furiously, the helmsman shouted the time, and they headed for the west bank.

Water rushed by. The ceiling above the river was painted with golden stars and lines of baboons.

After a long battle against the current, they arrived at a mooring and went ashore. North's eyes were now better accustomed to the gloom. He saw immense

colonnades with imposing buildings behind them, incised with columns of hieroglyphic inscription. People moved here like shadows, silent on bare feet. No music sounded, no sun or moon shone; only a ghost of light reflected from shields manoeuvred by slaves paraded along the quayside, each man appearing much like his neighbour and chained to him by a bronze chain, like some grotesquely enlarged Christmas decoration.

Anubis padded forward without looking back. North was torn between fear of following and fear of losing his only guide in this forlorn necropolis. He had little choice but to follow the sturdy figure with its long brush-like tail.

Beyond the imposing facade of the colonnade were buildings of lesser majesty. These inferior buildings soon deteriorated into hovels of mud, their windowless eyes gaping into the street, squares of greater darkness within the darkness. They were thatched casually with branches of palm. North was reminded of the villages he had passed outside Aswan. They came to fields where bare-chested brown workers laboured in the corn. He could see that the corn was poor and thin, the heads withered. A chariot rumbled by, but the horse pulling it was a skeletal beast without eyes. Overhead were doves; their wings were paper-thin; he saw that they were in fact mere papyrus birds suspended from a painted ceiling and designed to simulate reality. When they reached a crossing of the ways, a farmer stood over a fire, but the flames were mere spirit flames, like St Elmo's fire. The farmer himself looked mummified, his features withered and afflicted.

The dirt under foot was dry and rose in clouds as they walked. Dust sprinkled down from nearby palm trees.

'Where are we?' he called in his apprehension.

Anubis made no response, plodding on with dull footfalls.

But an answer to his own question occurred to North. Gods were sustained by religious belief. Belief was their lifeblood. Without belief they withered like vampires without blood. He came from an America where the official god, the Christian god, was withering under many forms of disbelief, science and capitalism among them. Even omnipotence had its day. The great thriving world of belief in ancient Egypt had drawn on centuries of worship from priests and congregations. But that belief—like all beliefs—had gone out like a slow withdrawing tide, defeated by Christianity among other things.

Only on the isle of Philae—perhaps only then by the light of the moon or the

artificial lighting of *son et lumière*—could the old gods still find nourishment. Gradually, the great department store run by Ra, the sun god, and Osiris and Isis, was having to close. It was reduced to showing only second-rate goods in its window. Its lease had expired.

He regretted it.

He knew what had brought this situation about. History. Technological development. The swing of so-called ‘progress’, the most deceitful word in the dictionary. Change. Simple change. The old order changed, giving place to the neo. He was a neo in this old place.

They had arrived at a building like a barn, with an inelegant square door.

‘Hall of Judgement,’ announced Anubis.

The jackal-headed god looked back, reached out, and grasped Oscar North’s hand. He felt the clasp of that dry feral hand as a psychic shock. Anubis dragged him forward into the building.

Isis was there.

He did not need telling who she was.

She was dainty, young, eternal, supreme. She at least—at her Philaean shrine — still had psychic energy and could generate light. The interior of the building glowed with her vitality.

She was dusky, slender, sleek, tall, imposing yet infinitely available. Her great eyes were rimmed with kohl. Hers was the Eye, the great eye of life. She wore on her head as if it were part of her skull a crown of the horns of Hathor, with a solar disc between the horns. From the disc, from her whole body, light flowed, and evil was trodden under her sandal. A golden cobra coiled from her forehead, denoting power.

A plain white sheath dress covered her body. A diadem of green malachite adorned her hair and wig, which were coated with beeswax and resin. Bracelets and anklets of similar stone decorated her limbs. She carried an *ankh*, symbol of life, in one hand.

Anubis raised his hands in the symbol of greeting. North sank to his knees. The goddess radiated powerful perfumes, *balanos*, hibiscus, and other flowers.

And a goddess scent... at once rousing and quelling.

She did not even glance at North, instead exchanging a few words with Anubis, who then dragged at North, pulling him powerfully to his feet again.

The manner in which her glance slid so humiliatingly away from him brought Winny to North's mind. Towards the end, she too had not wished to look at him — until she had to take aim with the revolver.

And she could have been his personal Isis, his woman of radiance and power. Instead, he had slighted her by seeking for power elsewhere, in the air-conditioned offices of the multi-nationals. She had caught a chill from him. He had ruined Winny more thoroughly than he had dehumanized himself...

These belated insights vanished as soon as they dawned, washed out by the luminance pouring from Isis.

Having had eyes only for the gleaming figure of the goddess, North realized belatedly that the chamber they were in was crowded with figures coming and going on mysterious business. Many had human bodies with animal heads. Those with most authority—often directing slaves — were most animal. They wore striking tunics with the Egyptian kilt, and were bewigged, like Anubis, with blue matted hair which hung heavy on their shoulders.

Some of these formidable beings crowded about a gigantic table, one end of which was scrolled. A horrifying surgical operation was taking place on the table, supervised by a stunted being with the head of a crocodile and eyes of a goat. To see this creature engaged in some kind of coordinated activity—wielding a large scalpel, indeed — brought home to North how deeply he was caught up in myth. Here in this dungeon of life were the hieroglyphics of human concern: he was witnessing one corner of what had once been a self-sufficient world-view, embracing the desires and torments of a species emerging from the animal to seek explanations for the wonderful natural world in which it found itself, with its waters, vegetation, wild life, storms, and succession of days and nights ruled over by sun, moon and stars.

As Anubis dragged him nearer the operating table, he saw that a man in the garb of a warrior lay on the table. The warrior still wore a helmet of ferocious aspect, with basketwork armour on chest, abdomen and legs. In attendance on him was a formidable woman dressed in red, very broad, with powerful arms. She had the head of a lioness, which she turned languidly in North's direction; taking him in at a glance, she then swung her head away again. North recognized her

from a guidebook he had looked at on the plane from Geneva. This was Sekhmet, goddess of war, renowned for violence and strength.

She sprawled on the operating table, and purred as the warrior was cut open from throat to pubis. The crocodile-head with his assistants opened the man up like a book. Rib-bones creaked. The warrior lay with open eyes, staring at nothing. Sekhmet purred more deeply.

Jars and glasses of medicaments were brought up, together with rolls of linen and live snakes to be milked of their venom. An embalming process was taking place, all performed with routine care by those involved.

North had little time to regard this fearsome sight, for he was pulled over to a great pair of scales, in which Anubis evinced intense interest. He left North standing in order better to inspect a weighing ceremony which had evidently been awaiting his arrival.

Small men with wolf- and dog-heads, encased in green linen tunics, were fussing over the scales. Towering above them was the god in charge — Thoth, the scribe, the ibis-headed one, his eyes blackly calculating above his long yellow beak. Thoth wore a thick yellow wig, crowned by a crescent moon, from which light poured.

Thoth and Anubis conferred. The former's voice was light and hesitant, while Anubis's was guttural, growling and fast.

As they talked, the amanuenses brought over to the scales the soul of the dead warrior, contained in a small red vase. It was to be placed on one of the bronze pans of the scales, while a feather from a wild goose was to be placed on the other.

This was the ceremony of judgement. Thus was the warrior to be judged, according to whether his life had been good or evil. The scales would decide whether he would be allowed to attain the bliss of the summer stars, or go to the infernal regions, the Abyss.

All this North understood. It was being acted out in front of him. And in the vast chamber other warriors waited, strangers now to the world above and due for embalming and judgement. Their faces were grey and bloody. They stood on their dead feet, submissive to the law of the underworld.

North was not submissive. He was a citizen of the United States. He had no

wish to undergo these alarming processes.

Anubis had his back to him, examining the scales.

North turned to run.

He made a dash for the nearest door.

A sound like a cymbal-clash clanged in his head. He was aware of the red-clad Sekhmet leaping down from the operating table and bounding in his direction with all the energy of a lioness.

But it was Isis who struck. Isis, the beautiful and terrible, mother and destroyer.

It seemed she merely raised a hand in North's direction. He saw the movement from the back of his head. Her luminance increased.

He was grovelling on a grassy bank. She was standing on him, smiling, swinging a great sword.

He was trying to swim the Nile. She was bearing down upon him, riding a crocodile.

He was flying on white wings. She was astride an eagle, firing golden arrows at him.

He lay on his back on the stone floor, paralysed. Isis had already turned away. Two minions were scooping him up and carrying him towards the operating table, from which the body of the warrior, now swathed in linen bandages, was being removed. He could not think. A tiny moon burned in his skull. He could see it, could distinctly see hieroglyphics neatly turned in columns on his skull's inner walls, though their meaning was lost on him.

As he wandered under the neat columns, padding softly up innumerable stairs, he was also aware that the great dark form of Anubis loomed above him, as if to tear him apart. It appeared to him no contradiction that he was at once climbing the many steps inside his skull, glancing into its apartments, and also lying on the operating table. A scalpel shone in the glare of Isis.

'First, something for you to drink,' said Anubis.

He thrust at North a misty beaker in which reposed an inch or two of a dark liquid. Unable to resist, North took it and swallowed. It was a bitter medicine, tasting of wood smoke and herbs.

He was wearing a lion mask and dancing. The papyrus reeds danced also. The music is shrill, with flutes and stringed instruments. The whole village dances about me. This year—plenty—feasting, fat cattle.

He was rushing in his chariot, desert hot about him. Ahead, the waterhole. The excitement of the chase. Dogs by my wheels, yipping as they sight the antelope. Arrows fly, the sun bleeds. But with nets we capture one antelope alive. I hold it, its eyes wild with terror. He embraced it, kissed its foamy mouth.

He was in the flood, fleeing here and there, a fish. The annual inundation. Sparkling shallows, then mud. Bigger fish ahead.

Then being a different fish, tame. I swim round in a vase on the high priest's table. Every day, sounds of worship. The great, the echoing temple. I can foretell eclipses.

Trudging the muddy field, my ox dragging the plough before me. Flies, the hollow curve of my stomach. He is the near-naked farmer. Up before dawn each day. The snake crouching in the ashes of the stove.

It's me, Hathor, the she-ox, named after the goddess so that I may be strong and work all day. Soon, soon, food and shade and the stench of the household. My shoulders creak. Do I command the sun? It follows where I go.

He longs for marshes again. He is the tame goose. Here comes my owner to feed me, except — as he sticks his neck from the basket, he sees the knife in the owner's hand, bright as a sliver of evening sun.

He fights and struggles under his hallucinations. For a moment he is the husband of Isis, bearing her down on a golden shawl. Flashing lips, the secret parts of a goddess, blinding to mortals. Tastes of syrup, overwhelming embraces, a wigwam of hair. Joy, joy, and upward slide, source of merriment and all lived life. A million births born from their union. Genius, triumph, the stars in a great sweet hurricane blowing. The glitter of the dagger.

And all the time the little dark people were hurrying up and down the stairs of his brain, unloading everything, bearing it away. The whole castle denuded, defenceless, empty. The closure of windows, the excluding of light.

Someone with a falcon head was helping him up from the table, another warrior was taking his place. His mind still swam from the dose of anaesthetic Anubis had administered. He was hollow, frail.

It was impossible to take notice of what was happening.

Now it seemed as if he was again in a boat. It had a high curved prow like the beak of a bird, and made good speed over the water. The water was perhaps the Nile, or perhaps that other dark river which flows somewhere far below the Nile.

Anubis told him that his soul had failed the test. He was not destined for the summer stars. That was the judgement.

‘What then?’ North asked.

‘You go to the Abyss.’

‘Is the Abyss very bad? Tell me.’

Anubis nodded his jackal head.

‘It is where the damned go.’

He was still confused by the potion he had been made to drink. It seemed he could hear the creak of oars, rrrurrrk, rrrurrrk, rrrurrrk, or perhaps it was his backbone as he strove to gain a sitting position.

‘My soul was too heavy with sin?’ he asked.

The jackal-headed god made no response, perhaps because none was needed, perhaps because they were pulling rapidly into a quayside.

His sense of sound was distorted. What he thought at first was the noise of a waterfall proved to be the music of a harp, played by a blind harpist sitting with her back to the ship’s mast. She continued to play without interruption as they drew in against the quay.

‘Out you get,’ said Anubis. ‘And take these with you.’

North was looking about him in bewilderment. The light was peculiar,

transfixing buildings as if they were semi-transparent; but it seemed to him, unless he imagined it, that he was back at the Sheraton Hotel. It loomed above them. He could see the corner balcony of the room he shared with Winny.

He took the objects Anubis gave him almost absentmindedly.

'Ra's sunboat will soon achieve the eastern sky,' said the god. Perhaps it was a form of farewell, though the fur-covered face in no way changed its solemn expression. He motioned to his rowers and the boat began to pull back into the river.

Still numb, Oscar North looked down at the objects he had been given.

A small red glass vase, in which his soul fluttered.

A pottery coffer, capped by a lid in the form of a cat's head, heavy to hold because it contained his preserved intestines, which he would certainly need in the Abyss.

And a return ticket to Geneva.

* * * *

Already, the boat was entering the mists which concealed the mid-channel. In the stern, a dark figure with a jackal-head was guiding the boat by means of the large steering oar. He was not of the world of men and women, although his traffic was with them.

His barque in its stealthy retreat cast no reflection on the flood, and no shadow into the depths below its keel.

And the voice of the harpist came faintly to North where he stood:

'Even though you are in the realm of ghosts
Imprisoned by what you most believe
Yet you will see the sun to shine in the sky
And the moon to remind you of the shining truth ...'