

Jerusalem Poker - Prologue

In the first light of an early summer day a naked Junker baron and his naked wife both elderly, both heavily overweight and sweating, stood on top of the Great Pyramid waiting for the sunrise.

The air was warm and the desert still, the year was 1914 and the noble couple from Behind Pomerania had just fulfilled a lifelong dream of making love on the summit of the Great Pyramid at dawn, to the point of a final and exhaustive satisfaction.

A few blocks down from the summit sat the man who had performed these various acts upon them, an experienced black dragoman and former slave named Cairo Martyr. For the baron and his wife it was the rarest moment in their long lives, but for Martyr it was just another routine sunrise that had earned him twenty pounds sterling for services rendered.

He yawned and lit a cigarette.

The sun slipped above the horizon and the baron and baroness spread their arms wide to receive it, their skin and hair so fair they were all but invisible in the desert dawn.

Glistening sweat and decaying fat. Sunrise. Cairo Martyr puffed lazily and turned his gaze north when he heard the distant drone of an airplane.

It was a small triplane carrying the morning mail from Alexandria up the Nile to the capital. Martyr watched it grow larger and realized it was heading straight toward the pyramid. In another moment he could make out the dashing figure in the open cockpit, a grinning English pilot in a leather helmet and flying goggles, his white scarf flowing on the wind.

Down. he yelled, Down

But the delirious baron and baroness heard neither him nor the airplane. The great red ball on the horizon had hypnotized them with the heat it sent rushing through their aging bodies. Gaily the plane dipped its wings in salute to the most impressive monument ever reared by man, then gracefully rolled away and sped on south.

Cairo Martyr got to his feet not believing what he saw. The nearly invisible man and woman still stood on the summit with their arms outstretched, but now they were headless, cleanly decapitated by the slashing lowest wing of the triplane. The hulking bodies lingered a few seconds longer, then slowly toppled over and disappeared down the far side of the pyramid.

Cairo Martyr stared at the new sun. The cigarette burned his fingers and he dropped it.

The morning mail in 1914.

A gay salute to antiquity.

And an astonishing new flying machine smartly cutting a swath through the leisurely old order of the nineteenth century, a world that could no longer survive in a speeding mechanical age suddenly wagging its wings and rolling in raffish chance.

In the dizzying shock of recognition that came that morning on top of the Great Pyramid, Martyr realized that his days of Victorian servitude were gone forever. Never again would he perform for vacationing Europeans in bazaar back rooms or in rowboats listlessly adrift on the Nile. The era of colonialists sunning themselves on the pyramids was over. The Victorian age had lost its head.

For the Junker baron and baroness, and for Martyr as well, the nineteenth century had abruptly come to an end in that early summer dawn in 1914, although elsewhere in the world a few more weeks were to pass before the radical new state of affairs was generally recognized.