ALEXANDER’S TOMB

Even as a boy, Prescott Holt wanted to be an archaeologist. He dreamed about finding the Ark of the Covenant and the actual Holy Grail. In 1911, he eagerly followed the exploits of Hiram Bingham, who revealed to the modern world the existence of the ancient city of Machu Picchu, hidden in the jungles of Peru. In 1923, it was the discovery of fossilized dinosaur eggs in the Gobi Desert of Mongolia by Roy Chapman Andrews of the American Museum of Natural History in New York that sent Holt’s pulse racing as a Yale graduate student. By 1934, Prescott Holt had worked his way up the academic ladder and was heading the newly formed Council of Archeological Studies, as part of the Yale Department of Anthropology.

Holt’s passionate hope was that one day, he would discover the three most important lost tombs in history -- namely those of Moses, Genghis Khan, and Alexander the Great. After acquiring sufficient funding from the National Geographic Society, Prescott and his team spent two years searching for the undiscovered tomb of Moses on the border heights between Israel and Jordan. According to the Bible, Moses -- at age 120 -- had been allowed by God to see the Promised Land of Israel from the top of Mount Nebo, but was forbidden to enter it. There, he died and was buried in a secret location. But Holt was ultimately unsuccessful in finding the tomb. Next, Holt and his team attempted to find the remains of Genghis Khan on the steppes of Central Asia. Legend held that thousands of horses had trampled and thus obscured the place of his burial, and that a river had even been diverted to cover it, and that all those who constructed the gravesite were put to death so as not to reveal its secret location. The two years searching western Mongolia, however, were also unfruitful for Holt, as his funding had likewise ran out.

Prescott had been born in Boston on New Year’s Day, 1900. He grew into a tall, genial, and handsome man, with thick brown hair, hazel eyes behind a pair of tortoise-shell eyeglasses, and a full dark mustache. His father was a respected and wealthy product of Harvard Law School, but he advised his only son to steer clear of the legal profession, because of its stifling tedium, distasteful compromises, and relentless politics. “You would do well to avoid Harvard too, for it produces little except effete snobs. I believe Yale would suit your personality much better, my boy,” Lincoln Holt counseled. Prescott’s mother, Miriam, in turn agreed with her husband. So Yale it was. Prescott married at age 25 to Constance Harris from Providence, Rhode Island, and soon they had an adorable daughter, Camille. Although he was able to return home for two weeks every four months from his field digs abroad, it was hard for Holt to spend so much time away from his family, despite their regular letter-writing and telegrams.

Unable by now in early 1939 to procure further funding from the NGS or any other sponsoring organization due to the possibility of a major war erupting in Europe, Prescott dipped into his own resources to pursue his goal of finding the lost tomb of Alexander. He was forced, therefore, to go alone without his usual Yale team this time. When Constance questioned this unusual financial decision, Prescott flatly stated that “gaining new knowledge for humanity is more important than the money.” She later reluctantly agreed, although she silently dreaded being separated from him yet again. She justifiably felt he was missing all those precious moments as Camille was growing up.

Prescott flew from New York to Casablanca, then continued on to Tripoli, and finally arrived in Alexandria, Egypt -- the former capitol city of Alexander's empire. Once there, he checked into the first-class Steigenberger Cecil Hotel, across from a large park near the harbor on the Mediterranean Sea. The headquarters of the British Royal navy had recently been moved from Malta to Alexandria, as a precaution against the worsening international situation with Germany, and Holt could see the substantial Union Jack fleet from his hotel balcony. He then sent a cable to his wife, Constance, informing her of his safe arrival.

He had chosen Alexandria because it was roughly in the center of his search radius. Holt knew the following facts about Alexander the Great: He died at the palace of Nebuchadnezzar II in Babylon on June 11, 323 BC, at the age of 32. Probable cause of death was typhoid fever, despite rumors of arsenic poisoning or liver failure from excessive drinking. His body was completely coated in wax and then submerged in a vat of honey to preserve it. Two years later, the royal (some even considered him divine) corpse – now in a solid gold double sarcophagus -- was transported west, headed back home to Macedonia in a grand funerary procession, inside an immense wheeled catafalque pulled by hundreds of harnessed horses. But in Syria, the body was diverted by one of Alexander’s generals -- Ptolemy I Soter -- for burial instead in Memphis, Egypt. There it rested until c280 BC, when it was moved to Alexandria. A special tomb was erected there in the center of the city -- at the intersection of Canopica and Soma Streets -- with Alexander’s corpse visible now in a glass or possibly crystal coffin. This ornate tomb was a major tourist attraction, and people came from many lands to view the precious conqueror's remains. In 48 BC, Julius Caesar came. Later, so did the Roman Emperor Augustus, who personally put a golden diadem on Alexander’s head. Next came mad Caligula, who stole Alexander’s golden armor breastplate. In 199 AD, the tomb was sealed up by Septimius Severus, but not before Caracalla had removed Alexander’s ring, tunic, belt and 212 other items. By the 4th Century AD, no one knew where the royal remains were, but rumors placed it first at the Temple of Zeus Ammon at the Siwa Oasis (the place Alexander himself wished to be buried, as he claimed to be the direct spawn of Zeus), then later at the Nabi Daniel Mosque in Alexandria, where he was supposedly buried beneath the grave of the Biblical prophet Daniel (revered by both Moslems and Christians) in a secret crypt in 1823.

Prescott had decided to begin his search in the center of the city, using ancient maps of Alexandria before it was leveled and restructured after a devastating earthquake and tsunami on July 21, 365 AD. (About 50,000 homes were destroyed, with 50,000 deaths in the city and outlying areas, in that single catastrophe.) Canopica Street was now named El Horeya Avenue, and Holt estimated where Soma Street was probably located and where they intersected. Luckily, there was a shop selling historic lithographs and ancient maps nearby. Maybe its owner knew for sure. But before he headed inside, Holt wanted to wander the city for a few hours, seeing as it was his first time in Alexandria though not in Egypt.

Prescott remembered that Alexandria had once boasted of having the world’s largest library – some 40,000-400,000 papyrus scrolls – until its destruction by fire in 48 BC. It also had one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World -- the Lighthouse or Pharos -- built in 280 BC, which towered 450’ over the city’s harbor until an earthquake toppled it in 1303 AD.

Now, in early 1939, Alexandria was more cosmopolitan than Cairo, and less chaotic, hot and dusty, with many Europeans in Western dress mixed in with the light- and dark-skinned locals. Holt, however, encountered no other Americans -- an observation verified as he overheard French, Italian, Arabic, and British English spoken rather than American English. The local men wore traditional galabeya gowns, with either turbans or the red felt tarboosh on their heads. The streets were teeming with camels laden with foodstuffs or dry goods, and crowded also with horse-drawn carts and open-air taxi carriages. The air smelled of the adjacent sea, of camel and horse dung and piss, of fresh fish, spices, and tobacco smoke. Men not working took their ease in sidewalk cafes, talking and drinking coffee or tea, and smoking cigarettes or the hookah water pipe. Boys rushed between offices and market stalls with brass trays carrying small cups of coffee or tea, as in the days of the Ottomans. The wider city thoroughfares had motorcars and rails for streetcars. The Corniche ran by the shores of the Mediterranean near the harbor, past large, well-tended parks filled with palm trees and benches. Prescott rested on his explorations at one such park after purchasing a bag of fresh dates from a street vendor. He needed to shoo away two beggars bawling for baksheesh before he could relax. After a half-hour enjoying the sea air and mild temperatures, he headed back to the area of the lithograph shop, passing first by the Summer Palace of King Farouk and then by Pompey's Pillar, a remnant from the Roman era.

When Prescott later entered the lithograph shop, he was immediately met by the owner. After welcoming his customer in French and then Italian, the man quickly switched to English when he sensed Holt's reaction. "Effendi, you are welcome! Please sit and we shall have tea. I see by your suit that you are not from London, so you must be from America! I would very much like to visit New York one day and see those tall buildings. Can I interest you in some excellent David Roberts engravings? My name is Ali Marzouk, at your service."

Prescott formally introduced himself. "No, thank you. I have his Ancient Egypt series already in my home back in Boston. But I am keenly interested in locating the ancient tomb site of Alexander. It must have been nearby, of course now covered by the modern streets," he explained. A boy then arrived with a tray containing two glasses of tea and a small bowl of sugar cubes.

Ali was dressed in a threadbare but clean older tan suit, and was sporting a distressed red felt fez hat with tassel. He was swarthy, probably a few years older than Prescott, with thick, dark oiled hair and a large mustache. He was shorter than Holt by a few inches, and more hefty. His eyes were dark and penetrating.

"I see..."Ali replied, as he sipped his tea, then lit a cigarette. " Fortunately, I am in possession of some rare ancient maps of the city. Perhaps you would like to see them? Come with me, please, to the back room."

The two men were soon carefully examining some old street layouts which Ali produced from a dusty stack. "Here is where we are now in my shop," Ali indicated on one, "and here is where Alexander's tomb was located before the Great Earthquake," he pointed with his finger. "It is only two blocks from here. Shall we visit it now? My work day is almost finished and I can close a little early," Ali offered. Prescott eagerly agreed.

While the men walked, Holt confessed his obsession with ultimately finding the earthly remains of the great Alexander. Ali, meanwhile, bemoaned the fact that lately business was poor and getting worse, seeing as war tensions were rising between England and Germany (and its new ally Italy), and these fears were scaring away the tourists. "I am indeed suffering, my friend, and my family is woefully in need. I have a wife and four children to feed!" he wailed. "I pray to Allah, but he has not yet answered me. Money worries are ruining me. Life is very hard, Effendi..."

Soon, they arrived at the busy street intersection that Holt wanted to see. In his imagination, he peeled back the years of the current scene, and he could easily picture Alexander's splendid mausoleum with the very corpse of the extraordinary man himself inside! He shared his excitement with Ali, explaining in brief the full timeline journey of the corpse of Alexander.

"I see you are a professional man, an educated man, Mr. Holt," Ali remarked after a long considered pause. "Alas, I am not -- yet a know several learned men like yourself. University men. You truly love history and the past, as do they. Well, honored sir, I have a special proposal to make to you. But it must be done in private and in secret. Can you come with me to my home tonight for a simple dinner? There you will meet my wife and children, and then we can talk further. But I can tell you this now with certainty, my friend: Alexander was never buried in either Siwa or in the Nabi Daniel Mosque," Ali revealed, his voice lowered, after first glancing left and right.

Prescott was immediately interested, so he agreed to accompany Ali home. They took a carriage to the poorer outskirts south of the city. A soft evening was now approaching, offering the pair a picturesque sunset as the horse clip-clopped through the narrow side streets. The call to prayer echoed from various city mosques.

Ali's wife spoke only Arabic, so after her greeting she disappeared in the kitchen to prepare dinner. Ali's four children -- two boys and two girls -- were all under age 12, but were well-behaved. The seven people enjoyed a modest goat stew with vegetables, bread, and tea, and some ripe pomegranates for dessert. Ali then dismissed his family to the other room of his small home, lit a cigarette, and told Holt an amazing story.

"Mr. Holt, I have a close friend who is a professor at Cairo University. Like you, he has spent many years looking for Alexander's final resting place. After many false leads, he made a surprising discovery at Kharga Oasis, about 200 kilometers west of Luxor. He explained to me that after Alexander vanished from Alexandria in the 4th century, he was rumored to have been taken west into the desert for reburial at the Temple of Zeus Ammon at Siwa Oasis. But instead, his remains were secretly transported south along the old caravan route which passes from the Libyan desert into Nubia. This road goes through the Kharga Oasis. The Temple of Hibis is there, so a learned man like yourself probably knows of where I speak. Just slightly northwest of the temple complex ruins is a Christian cemetery, one of the oldest in the world, with mud-brick walls and small buildings for the dead. In one of those structures, my friend admitted, he has seen the natural mummified remains of Alexander with his own eyes!"

Prescott Holt was spellbound, his pulse quickening, his eyes wide, his mind totally alert.

"He told me that the corpse is unwrapped because it was never formally embalmed, and that the face is still visible -- even with some blond hair -- but that the arms and legs are withered, although the torso remains. There is no gold or other artifacts anymore, but the slight smell of honey still exists. Alexander rests in a hidden underground room on a carved white marble bier, carved with images from his many conquests and with other related inscriptions," Ali elaborated. "He is dressed in a simple white linen tunic, and lies under a white linen shroud."

"I must meet your friend as soon as possible!" Holt exclaimed. "Will he see me? Can he take me to the tomb?"

Ali agreed to telephone his professor friend from his shop the following morning. "Please come later to my hotel for dinner as my guest. I'm staying at The Cecil," Holt offered. They decided to meet at 7 p.m.

The next evening, Ali rushed up to Prescott and said, "Wonderful news, Effendi! My friend is eager to meet you. I will share the full details after we dine. My, this is a splendid hotel...I have never been inside before," Ali admitted, still wearing his old tan suit, gazing around the grand lobby. Over soup, salad, and an expertly prepared fish dish in the restaurant, the two men talked further.

"Mr. Holt, that was truly a delicious meal," Ali remarked over dessert and coffee, as he lit a cigarette. "I enjoyed hearing about your family, and about your work at Yale, and about your adventures looking for both Moses and Genghis Khan. As you know, Moses is also highly regarded in my faith. Allah has indeed blessed you with a vigorous life, my friend. Now, let us discuss Alexander."

Ali repositioned his chair so that he was closer to Prescott's ear. In a low voice, he said, "In three days on Saturday, we will meet my professor friend in Kharga at the Ramses Hotel. There he will introduce himself and together we will go to see Alexander's remains. But he is doing all of his research in strictest secrecy. His academic rivals are suspicious at his many unexplained absences away from Cairo, and he obviously cannot ask for any University funds without first revealing his amazing discovery. He cannot risk being usurped by others in his department. Can you appreciate his dilemma? Therefore, he proposes to show you Alexander's tomb and then co-share the official discovery ownership and publication rights with you for a sum of six-thousand American dollars, in cash. What do you say, Mr.Holt?"

Prescott was taken aback. "That is a significant amount of money, Ali. How do I know whether I can trust him or not?" he asked. "This is highly irregular."

"No problem, my friend. You and I will guard the cash together. We will take the train from Alexandria to Luxor, then hire a car to drive us the 200 km. across the desert on the Baris road to Kharga. Once we check in at the Ramses Hotel, the owner -- a good friend of mine, Kassim Badr -- will put the money securely in his office safe. You will not pay the professor until you are completely satisfied after seeing Alexander's body. As friends, we must trust each other, Mr. Holt. There is no other way," Ali urged. "Finally, I must beg a $300 fee from you, Effendi, for my services in this matter," Ali added almost apologetically.

Prescott looked out the window of the hotel restaurant at the Mediterranean Sea for a moment and thought hard. Then he looked Ali in the eye and said, "Agreed. I will go to Barclays tomorrow and have the cash wired from my Boston account. As I once told my wife, gaining new knowledge for humanity is more important than money."

" Very well! Surely, you have decided wisely." Ali smiled broadly and shook Prescott's hand. "I will inform the professor. It will take two days to get from here to Kharga by Saturday. I will meet you tomorrow at the central train station at 10:20 a.m. The Luxor train leaves at 10:45. We overnight on board, then arrive mid-afternoon on Friday. We can then hire a car to drive us to Kharga. We will check in at the Ramses and simply wait for the professor the following morning at breakfast. Is it not exciting that your long-sought prize in nearly won, Mr. Holt?" The archeologist agreed, then the two men said goodnight.

Prescott went next to the hotel's front desk and sent a long telegram to Constance outlining the basics of his amazing potential discovery and his immediate forward plans.

The following morning, he checked out of Cecil's and took a horse carriage to Barclays bank. The $6000 in cash was carefully placed under some clothing in one of Prescott's smaller hand luggage bags.

Holt met Ali on time at the Alexandria Station. His new friend beamed when he was presented with an envelope containing the promised $300. "Allah be praised!" Ali gushed, as he briefly touched the cash to his forehead before thrusting it into his pocket. Prescott then patted his hand luggage confidently, indicating that the much larger amount of money was safe. Next, he bought the two first-class train tickets for Luxor. They departed just a few minutes late.

The journey south was uneventful. The pair conversed on and off, as people tend to do on trains. Ali dozed or smoked, while Prescott tried to contain his mounting excitement by calmly reading some archeology journals or by looking out the right side windows at the Nile scenery. (He also kept a very close eye on his luggage, with its precious cargo.) Their double sleeping berths were comfortable, and the dining car meals were adequate. Soon, they arrived in Luxor. Prescott had been there before, but there was no time now for any return sightseeing. The men quickly found a battered taxi willing to take them across the river to Kharga, after the usual haggling with its driver over price. And the driver was quite happy to get paid in U.S. dollars rather than in Egyptian pounds.

It took three bumpy hours, at around 45 mph, to drive to Kharga over the only available road across these particular desert wastes. Eventually, the green oasis came into view. The car dropped the pair off in front of the Ramses Hotel. The owner, Kassim, came out and embraced his friend, Ali -- kissing him on both cheeks, as was the custom -- then showed the men to their rooms. The sun had just set and the town was peaceful. The evening chill had arrived. After washing up, Prescott met Ali downstairs in the dining room. As previously arranged, the $6000 cash was deposited with Kassim's help in the hotel office safe. After a simple dinner, however, Kassim ran up to Ali with an urgent telegram.

"Hmmm....there appears to be a slight delay on the professor's part," Ali announced as he read the message. "He will not arrive here until Sunday morning...some transportation difficulties in Cairo, no doubt," Ali surmised. "Well, I'll let you decide our next step, Mr. Holt. I know the location of the tomb from my friend's initial description, although I have never been inside. We are very near. We can either go tonight using lanterns, or wait until Sunday for the professor to personally direct us. What do you think, my friend? What is your wish?"

Prescott thought carefully, then said, "I am so close to my goal now that I doubt I could even sleep until I had seen Alexander with my own eyes. So let's go now, Ali, please!"

Kassim provided two candle lanterns, and the two explorers hiked to the Christian cemetery area just past the Temple of Hibis. The night was quite cold by now, but clear and silent, a bright half-moon in the sky, shared with countless stars.

After a few false identifications, Ali found the remote, small grave structure made of mud bricks that he had been searching for, explaining in a whisper that inside there was a wooden panel covered with sand that led underground to Alexander's burial chamber.

The men lit their candle lanterns and entered the little building. Ali crouched and searched with his hand until he found an edge of the wooden panel. Prescott helped him sweep away the thick sand with his hands, then they lifted the panel together and placed it carefully aside upright against a wall. Sure enough, their lanterns revealed a descending staircase carved in the bedrock. Holt imagined this was how Howard Carter must have felt when he at last entered King Tutankhamun's tomb, just seventeen years ago .

As the men descended, Prescott immediately smelled the unmistakable -- though faint -- sweet odor of honey. This, in a remote desert where bees did not exist...Could it really be...?

"Look, there he is! There's Alexander! After twenty-one centuries...Come see!" Ali, in the lead at the bottom, yelled.

But when Prescott joined his guide and turned a corner at the bottom of the stairs, he saw for a split second in his lantern's light that the chamber was completely empty. That was when Ali crushed the back of Holt's head hard with a large stone, killing him instantly.

"I'm truly sorry, my friend...May Allah forgive me," Ali said aloud. "But money is more important than knowledge for humanity, especially when you really need it."

Ali then dragged Prescott's body -- past an open earthen jar filled with honey -- back up to ground level, and buried him in the sand a distance away, using a shovel that was hidden under a specific date palm tree. Holt was buried next to two other corpses, for this ruse had been used twice before to murder and rob curious Westerners over the last few years. Ali then returned and carefully replaced the wooden panel back in the small cemetery building and covered it again with a pile of sand...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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[Postscript: Based on certain particulars found in Prescott's last telegram to his wife, the authorities were ultimately able to apprehend both Ali and his accomplice, Kassim. Tried and convicted, Ali Marzouk was executed for three counts of murder. His cohort, Kassim Badr, was sentenced to nineteen years of hard labor in a Cairo prison. Most of the stolen money was recovered and returned to Constance Holt.]

As for the remains of Alexander the Great, his final resting place is still a mystery. The latest scholarly research hints that he may actually be buried under the altar of St. Mark's Basilica in Venice -- mistakenly interred in place of the actual patron saint of the city, the apostle St. Mark.

In the 1st century AD, St. Mark was martyred and his body burned, according to three independent sources. Yet a church was built in Alexandria in the 3rd century which was said to house his corpse. In the 4th century, Alexander's body vanished from his famous mausoleum in that city, with some believing that his corpse was secretly placed in the empty St. Mark's tomb in his Evangelist church. There, Alexander rested in Alexandria for four more centuries. In 828 AD, however, Islam was on the rise in Egypt, and Christians were under persecution. Two merchants decided to bribe officials to quietly transfer the remains of St. Mark (Alexander, in actuality) to Venice, where a new cathedral would be built in his honor. The corpse was covertly sewn up in canvas and placed in a large basket. Next, it was covered with pork meat, so as to dissuade the Moslem seaport authorities from closely examining the cargo as it was being loaded aboard ship. This was how Alexander's body wound up in Venice.

Although the Catholic Church has declined to open St. Mark's (Alexander's) tomb for examination, if that should occur one day, DNA analysis of the bones -- comparing that DNA with Alexander's father's (Philip II of Macedonia, whose remains were found recently at Vergina) -- should prove conclusive. Alexander also suffered many wounds from spears and arrows in battle which were historically noted and which would be still be visible on his bones.

A final tantalizing clue is a carved stone found under the base of St. Mark's Basilica during a restoration which has the Royal Macedonian 'starburst' design of Alexander and Philip II on it. Could this rare fragment have come from Alexander's demolished mausoleum in Alexandria? And why would it be in Venice, in a Catholic church?

Perhaps one day, we will know for sure...