





# *Mr. Impossible*

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*LORETTA CHASE*

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BERKLEY SENSATION, NEW YORK



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## A Note on Spelling

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An 1898 edition of Baedeker's guide to Egypt laments the difficulties of rendering Arabic into English spelling. "It is greatly to be wished that the Arabs would adopt a simpler alphabet," says the author, "with a regular use of the vowel-signs, and that they would agree to write the ordinary spoken language." In the ordinary spoken language, furthermore, he complains, not everyone pronounces vowels the same way. The consonants are consistent, but some have no equivalent English sound.

More than a century later, we still encounter a mad variety of ways for spelling Arabic and Egyptian words using the English alphabet. I ended up choosing one approach for place names (familiar modern spellings) and one for words and phrases (easiest to read). A number of these words and phrases, like customs—and many monuments—have changed or disappeared since the early 1800s.



# Chapter 1

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*Outskirts of Cairo, Egypt, 2 April 1821*

THANKS TO HIS MOTHER, RUPERT CARSINGTON had hair and eyes as dark as any Egyptian's. This did not mean he blended in with the crowd on the bridge. In the first place, he was easily the tallest man there. In the second, both his manner and attire marked him as an Englishman. The Egyptians and Turks, who judged men by the quality of their dress, noticed, too, that he was not a man of low birth.

The locals had the advantage of the Earl of Hargate's fourth son.

Having arrived in Egypt only six weeks ago, Rupert was not yet able to distinguish among the numerous tribes and nationalities. Certainly he couldn't size up social status at a glance.

He could, however, recognize an unequal match when he saw one.

The soldier was large—a few inches shy of Rupert's six-plus feet—and armed like a man-of-war. Three knives, a pair of swords, a pair of pistols, and ammunition protruded or hung from his wide belt. Oh, yes, he brandished a heavy staff, too—in an unfriendly way at the moment, at a bruised, limping, filthy fellow in front of him.

The poor devil's crime, as far as Rupert could see, was being too slow. The soldier roared some foreign threat or curse. Stumbling away, the terrified peasant fell. The soldier swung his staff at the man's legs. The wretch rolled to one side, and the staff struck the bridge, inches away. Enraged, the soldier raised the weapon and aimed for the unfortunate's head.

Rupert broke through the gathering crowd, shoved the soldier, and yanked the staff from his hand. The soldier reached for a knife, and Rupert swung, knocking the blade to the ground. Before his adversary could draw another weapon from his arsenal, Rupert swung the staff at him. The man dodged, but the edge of the weapon caught him in the hip, and over he went. He reached for his pistol as he fell, and Rupert again swung the staff. His opponent howled in pain, dropping the pistol.

“Go!” Rupert told the dirty cripple, who must have understood the accompanying gesture if not the English word, because he scrambled to his feet and limped away. The crowd parted to let him through.

Rupert started after him a moment too late. Soldiers were forcing their way through the growing mob. In an instant, they'd surrounded him.

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NEWS OF THE altercation, greatly embroidered, traveled swiftly from the bridge to el-Esbeikiya. This quarter of Cairo, about half a mile away, was where European visitors usually lodged.

During the inundation, in late summer, the overflowing Nile turned the square of the Esbeikiya into a lake where boats plied to and fro. The river being low at present, the area was merely a stretch of ground enclosed with buildings.

In one of the larger houses, a mildly anxious Daphne Pembroke awaited her brother Miles. The day was fading. If he did not arrive soon, he would not get in, because the gates were locked after dark. They were also kept locked during times of plague or insurrection, both regular occurrences in Cairo.

Daphne was only half-listening for her brother's arrival, though. She gave the better part of her attention to the documents in front of her.

Among them was a lithographic copy of the Rosetta Stone, a recently acquired papyrus, and a pen-and-ink copy of the latter. She was nearly nine and twenty years old, and had been trying to solve the mystery of Egyptian writing for the last ten years.

The first time she'd seen Egyptian hieroglyphs, Daphne had fallen madly, desperately, and hopelessly in love with them. All her youthful studies had aimed at unlocking their secretive little hearts. She had become infatuated with and wed a man nearly thrice her age because he was (a) poetically handsome, (b) a language scholar, and (c) the owner of a collection of books and documents for which she lusted.

At the time, she'd believed they were ideally suited.

At the time, she'd been nineteen years old, her vision obscured by the stars in her eyes.

She soon learnt, among other painful lessons, that her brilliant scholar husband, exactly like stupider men, believed that intellectual endeavors put too great a strain on the inferior female brain.

Claiming to have her best interests at heart, Virgil Pembroke forbade her studying Egyptian writing. He said that even male scholars familiar with Arabic, Coptic, Greek, Persian, and Hebrew had no hope of deciphering it in her lifetime. This he deemed no great loss: Egyptian civilization being primitive—greatly inferior to that of classical Greece—decipherment would contribute little to the store of human knowledge.

Daphne was a clergyman's daughter. She'd made a sacred vow to love, honor, and obey her husband, and she did try. But when it became clear that she must pursue her studies or go mad with boredom and frustration, she chose to risk perdition and disobey her husband. Thereafter, she continued her work in secret.

Virgil had died five years ago. Sadly, prejudice against women scholars did not die with him. This was why, even now, only her indulgent brother and a select group of friends knew the secret. Everyone else believed her brother Miles was the linguistic genius of the family.

Had he been, he might have known better than to pay two thousand pounds for the papyrus she was studying. However, a merchant named Vanni Anaz had claimed it described the final resting place of a young pharaoh, name unknown—as was the case at present for most Egyptian royalty. The story was clearly the product of the romantic Eastern imagination. No educated person could possibly believe it. Nonetheless, it had apparently captivated Miles, much to her surprise.

He had even gone to Giza again to study the interior of the second pyramid, because, he said, it would help him understand the thinking of ancient tomb builders and aid in locating the young king's tomb and its treasures.

Though Daphne was certain the pyramids could tell him nothing, she held her tongue. He delighted in exploring Egypt's monuments. Why spoil his fun? She merely made sure he took sufficient supplies for the overnight stay he planned.

She declined to accompany him. She'd gone with him once to Giza and explored the two pyramids it was possible to enter. Neither contained any hieroglyphic writing, although various visitors had scratched their profound thoughts upon the stones, e.g., "Suverinus loves Claudia." Equally important, she was not eager for another squeeze through the pyramids' long, small, hot, smelly passageways.

At the moment, however, the pyramids were far from Daphne's thoughts. She was deciding that Dr. Young had incorrectly interpreted the hook and the three tails signs when her maidservant Leena burst through the door.

"A bloodbath!" Leena cried. "Stupid, stupid English hothead! Now the streets will run with blood!"

She tore off the head and face veils she despised but must wear in public, revealing the dark hair and hazel eyes of an older woman of mixed Mediterranean origins. Daphne had hired her in Malta, after her English maid proved unequal to the rigors of foreign travel.

Leena not only spoke English, Greek, Turkish, and Arabic, but could read and write a little in these languages—unheard-of accomplishments for a woman in this part of the world. She was, on the other hand, deeply superstitious and fatalistic, with a tendency to discern the dark cloud attached to every silver lining.

Accustomed to Leena's histrionics, Daphne merely raised her eyebrows and said, "What Englishman? What has happened?"

"A crazy Englishman has been fighting with one of the pasha's men and broke the pig's head. They say it took a hundred soldiers to capture him. The Turks will cut off the Englishman's head and put it on a pike, but that will not be enough. The soldiers will make war on all the Franks, especially the English."

Unlike most of Leena's Impending Doom announcements, this sounded all too plausible.

Egypt's Ottoman rulers would have been right at home in the Dark Ages. Beatings, torture, and beheading were their methods of maintaining order. Egyptian and Turk alike had no great regard for

“Franks,” the despised Europeans. The military—comprising a homicidal assortment of Egyptians, Turks, and Albanian mercenaries—took a hostile view of everybody, including at times their leader Muhammad Ali, Pasha of Egypt. They made Genghis Khan’s Mongol hordes look like giggling schoolgirls.

And Daphne was alone, but for her servants, all of whom were, most intelligently, terrified of the soldiery.

She was aware of alarm stirring within, of a chill and a welter of thoughts tumbling one over another. Outwardly she remained calm. Her marriage had taught her how to hide her true feelings.

“This is difficult to believe,” she said. “Who would be so foolish as to fight one of the pasha’s men?”

“They say the man is new to Cairo,” Leena said. “Only this week he has come from Alexandria to work for the English consul general. They say he is very tall and dark and beautiful. But I think he will not look so beautiful when they carry his head through the town on a pike.”

The revolting image rose in Daphne’s mind. She hastily banished it and said briskly, “The man must be fatally stupid. Which ought not surprise us in the least. The consulate has too much to do with persons of dubious character.” This was because the English consul general, Mr. Salt, was here mainly to collect as many antiquities as he could, and he was not overscrupulous about how the task was accomplished.

Now, thanks to his adding a violent imbecile to his staff, the military had an excuse to run amok. No European in Cairo would be safe.

And *Miles*—on his way back—blond, blue-eyed, tall, and unmistakably English—was all too tempting a target. As was she, a green-eyed redhead like their late mother.

She looked down and saw her hands shaking. *Calm down*, she commanded herself. *Nothing’s happened yet. Think.*

She had a brain, a formidable brain. It must be able to formulate a solution.

She stared at the lines of Greek characters praising Ptolemy while she debated what to do.

Sarah, the wife of the famous explorer Giovanni Belzoni, had a few years earlier donned the dress of an Arab merchant and safely visited a mosque forbidden to women and infidels. With any luck, Daphne could escape Cairo in such a disguise and meet her brother en route. Then they could hire a boat and head upriver, out of danger.

She opened her mouth to tell Leena the plan. At that moment, the courtyard erupted in shouts.

An anguished wail rose above the other voices.

Daphne bounded up from the divan and hurried to the latticed window, Leena beside her. Coming up the stairs from the courtyard was a group of Egyptian men.

They bore the inert body of Miles’s servant Akmed

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*The following morning*

IN A MANSION in another part of the Esbekiya, His Majesty's consul general was reflecting with mixed emotions upon the prospect of Rupert Carsington's head parading on a pike through the city streets.

In the month and a half since the Earl of Hargate's fourth son had arrived in Egypt, he had broken twenty-three separate laws and been jailed nine times. For what Mr. Carsington had cost the consulate in fines and bribes, Mr. Salt might have dismantled and shipped to England one of the smaller temples on the island of Philae.

He now knew exactly why Lord Hargate had sent his twenty-nine-year-old offspring to Egypt. It was not, as his lordship had written, "to assist the consul general in his services on behalf of the nation."

It was to saddle someone else with the responsibility and expense.

Mr. Salt brushed sand from the document before him on the desk. "One ought to be grateful, I suppose," he told his secretary Beechey. "The soldiery might have used this as an excuse for slaughtering the lot of us. Instead they merely demand an extortionate fine and twice the usual assorted bribes."

Amazingly enough, the injured soldier's comrades had not hacked Carsington to pieces and let their superiors make up a law to explain it later. He'd certainly tested their patience on the way to the city. Though outnumbered twenty to one, he attempted escape three times, inflicting many injuries in the process.

Yet the city remained quiet, and Lord Hargate's troublesome son was alive and in possession of all his limbs, confined to a rat-ridden hellhole of a dungeon in Cairo's Citadel.

Though this conveniently kept him out of trouble, one could not leave him in the cesspit indefinitely.

The Earl of Hargate was a very powerful man who could easily arrange for Mr. Salt's exile to some godforsaken, antiquity-less corner of the globe.

But getting Carsington out—Good God! The consul reviewed the figures on the document in front of him. "Must we pay all these people?" he said plaintively.

"I'm afraid so, sir," his secretary said. "The pasha has discovered that Mr. Carsington's father is a great English lord."

Muhammad Ali was an ignorant, illiterate man, but he was not stupid. After someone had read to him Machiavelli's *The Prince*, the pasha of Egypt had said, "I could teach him some things."

One thing Muhammad Ali could do to admiration—besides lead an army of deranged killers repeatedly to victory in his court, and he had counted up a ludicrous sum to free the great English

repeatedly to victory—was count, and he had counted up a ludicrous sum to free the great English lord's son.

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If Mr. Salt paid the sum, his rapidly dwindling funds wouldn't cover his excavation expenses—and the instant he abandoned a site, his French competitors would move in.

If, on the other hand, he did not arrange for Carsington's release, Mr. Salt might easily end up a British ambassador to the Antarctic Peninsula.

"Let me think," said the consul.

The secretary went out.

Five minutes later, he came in again.

"Now what?" said Mr. Salt. "Has Carsington blown up the Citadel? Made off with the pasha's favorite wife?"

"Mrs. Pembroke is here, sir," said the secretary. "A matter of great urgency, she says."

"Ah, yes, Archdale's widowed sister," said the consul. "Something of earthshaking importance, no doubt. Perhaps he has discovered a vowel. I can scarcely contain my excitement."

Though Mr. Salt was mainly interested in acquiring impressive Egyptian artifacts, he did have a scholarly interest, and had made his own attempts at deciphering the baffling code. But today he was not in the mood.

He'd returned from a too-short holiday in the suburbs to the Carsington fiasco. Swiftly sinking into the gloom of his perpetual money troubles, he could not view Mrs. Pembroke with scholarly detachment.

The deep mourning she wore, head to toe—and her elderly husband dead more than five years!—did nothing to raise the consul's spirits. She always put him in mind of certain ghostly shadow figures he'd seen on the walls of royal tombs.

On the other hand, the late Mr. Pembroke had left his young wife everything, and *everything* comprised a magnificent property and an even more magnificent fortune.

If Mr. Salt could feign excitement about whatever little squiggle she imagined Archdale had deciphered, she might feel inclined to invest a part of her wealth in an excavation.

As she entered, Mr. Salt arranged his mouth in a smile of welcome and advanced to greet her.

"My dear lady," he said. "How good of you to call! What an honor this is! Please allow me to offer you refreshment."

"No, thank you." She put back her widow's veil, revealing a pale, heart-shaped face. Shadows ringed the unnaturally green eyes. "I have no time for social pleasantries. I need your help. My brother has been kidnapped."

~~AKMED WAS NOT dead. He had been badly beaten, though, and when at last he reached the Esbekiya, he'd collapsed.~~

It was long past sunset yesterday by the time he regained sufficient strength to speak, and then he was barely intelligible. By the time Daphne made sense of his tale, it was too late to act. At night the streets of Cairo belonged mainly to the police and the felons they hunted.

In any event, Europeans in difficulties must apply to their consul, not local officials. Mr. Salt and his secretary being away yesterday, Daphne had had to wait through the long night.

Now, body and spirit exhausted, she was on the brink of hysteria. She could not succumb. Men were merely humored emotional women. She needed to be listened to. If she wanted men to take action, she must first make them take her seriously.

After her initial shaky declaration, she let Mr. Salt lead her to a shaded portico overlooking the garden. She drank the thick, strong coffee a servant brought. It restored her fortitude.

She told the story from the beginning, as requested.

Her brother, servants, and crew had returned from Giza early yesterday morning. Shortly after Miles disembarked from the ferry at Old Cairo, some men who claimed to be police took him away. When Akmed attempted to follow—to find out where they were taking his master and why—he was taken up, too. The “police” dragged Akmed to a solitary place, beat him senseless, and left him.

“I did not understand why they beat Akmed and abandoned him,” Daphne said. “He believes these men were not police, and logic compels me to agree. If they truly were law officers, why did they not take Akmed to the guardhouse with Miles? Moreover, it is impossible that my brother committed any crime. No person of sound intelligence would dream of running afoul of the local authorities. Everyone knows that diplomatic conventions mean little here.”

“It will turn out to be a silly misunderstanding, I daresay,” said Mr. Salt. “Some of these petty officials are over-quick to take offense at trifles. They are not all as honest as one could wish, either. Still, there is no need for alarm. If Mr. Archdale has been jailed, you may be sure the authorities will inform me before the day is out.”

“I do not believe he has been jailed,” Daphne said. Her voice climbed. “I believe he has been kidnapped.”

“Now, now, I am sure it is nothing of the kind. Merely an official looking for a bribe. An all too common occurrence,” the consul added bitterly. “They seem to think we are made of money.”

“If money was all they wanted, why not send Akmed directly to me with their demands?” Daphne said. “Why beat him senseless? It is illogical.” She waved her hand, impatiently exiling all disorderly thinking from the discussion. “I believe the servant was beaten to prevent his promptly reporting the incident. I believe that while you try to humor me with comfortable explanations, the trail to my brother grows ever colder.”

“The trail?” the consul said, startled. “I hope you do not seriously consider that Mr. Archdale is the victim of a plot of some kind. Who would risk torture and beheading to make off with a harmless scholar?”

“If you, who have been consul general in Egypt for six years, cannot produce a plausible motive it is absurd to ask a woman who has been here scarcely three months,” she said. “It strikes me as illogical as well to debate villains’ motives. It would make more sense to find the persons responsible and ascertain their motives by interrogating them, do you not think? And this ought to be done sooner rather than later, I believe.”

“My dear lady, I beg you to recollect that we are not in England,” he said. “Here we have no Bow Street officers to undertake an investigation. The local police are no substitute, being for the most part pardoned thieves. I dare not abandon my many other responsibilities to search for missing persons, nor can I spare my secretary. None of my agents is within a hundred miles of Cairo at present. As it is we are sadly undermanned and underfunded for the work we are expected to do. We are all of us a great deal occupied, with scarcely a minute to collect our thoughts.”

He added, after the briefest pause, “All of us, that is to say, except one.”

*Two hours later*

ALTHOUGH DAPHNE WAS covered from head to toe, her face veiled, she’d forgotten how clearly her clothes proclaimed, “European, female.” Until she entered the Citadel and became aware of the men staring at her, then looking away and muttering to one another, she hadn’t considered she might be unwelcome.

She told herself that (a) women were unwelcome in all too many places, and (b) these men’s opinions didn’t signify. In addition to her maid Leena and the consul’s secretary Mr. Beechey, she had an official escort, one of the district sheiks. They followed the prison guard down a deeply worn stone stairway that grew steadily darker while the air grew increasingly rank and oppressive.

By the time they reached the bottom, the stench was making her sick, and she was wishing she hadn’t insisted on coming. She might have left it to Mr. Beechey to arrange matters. She didn’t need to be here.

But she hadn’t been thinking clearly. She’d been too aware of time passing, every minute taking Miles more deeply into danger.

She needed help, and the only help available, apparently, was being held in a dungeon deep enough to be flooded during the inundation. Was that one of the tortures employed here? she wondered. Would they leave a man chained, to watch the water rise until it drowned him? Was Miles in such a place?

She gave one quick, involuntary shudder, then firmly banished the image from her mind and squared her shoulders.

Beside her, Leena murmured a charm against evil.

The men waved the odd torches that worked like dark lanterns, lightening the gloom a few degrees. They could not lighten the air, which was thick and unspeakably foul.

“Rejoice, *Ingleezi*,” the guard called out. “See who comes. Not one but *two* women.”

Chains clanked. A dark figure rose. A very tall, dark figure. Daphne could not make out his features in the gloom. Surrounded by protectors, she had no reason to be alarmed. All the same, her heart picked up speed, her skin prickled, and every nerve ending sprang into quivering awareness.

“Mr. Beechey,” she said, her voice not as steady as she could wish, “are you sure this is the man you want?”

An impossibly deep voice, most definitely not Mr. Beechey’s, answered with a laugh, “That would depend, madam, on what it is you want me *for*.”



# Chapter 2

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THE SOUND OF AN ENGLISH VOICE—AN ENGLISH *woman's* voice—was more welcome than Rupert would have guessed.

He had been growing exceedingly bored. The feminine sound instantly revived his good humor.

He knew which of the females had spoken. His eyes had long since grown accustomed to the darkness. Though both women were veiled, the taller wore European dress. He knew she was not only English, but a lady. The cultured accents of her clear, musical voice—a trifle unsteady at present—told him so.

He could not, however, determine whether she was old or young, pretty or not. He knew, too, that one could never be absolutely certain of a woman's figure until she was naked. But looking on the bright side, she must possess all the necessary parts—and if she'd made it down all those hundreds of stairs, she couldn't be decrepit.

“Mrs. Pembroke, may I present Mr. Rupert Carsington,” Beechey said. “Mr. Carsington, Mrs. Pembroke has generously agreed to pay for your release.”

“Have you, indeed, ma'am? That's deuced charitable of you.”

“It is nothing of the kind,” she said stiffly. “I'm buying you.”

“Really? I'd heard the Turks were severe, but I never guessed they'd sell me into slavery. Well, well, you learn something new every—”

“I am buying your services,” she cut in, the musical voice frosty.

“Ah, I stand corrected. And which services would you be requiring?”

Rupert heard her sharp inhalation.

Before she could retort, Beechey said smoothly, “It is an assignment, sir. Mr. Salt has released you from your regular consular duties so that you may assist Mrs. Pembroke in searching for her brother.”

“If all you want is a brother, you're welcome to one of mine,” Rupert said. “I've four. All saints  
Ask anybody.”

---

He was not a saint, and no one had ever mistaken him for one.

The lady turned toward Mr. Beechey. "Are you sure this is the only man available?"

"How did you contrive to lose your brother, by the way?" Rupert said. "In my experience, the feat's impossible. Everywhere I go, there they are. Except here. That was one reason I jumped at the chance when my father offered. It came as a vast relief, I'll admit. When he summoned me to his study, I thought it was going to be one of those devil-and-the-deep-blue-sea choices, like the one he offered Alistair three years ago: 'Get married or suffer a fate worse than death,' or something like that. But it was nothing of the kind. It was, 'Why don't you go to Egypt, there's a good boy, and find your cousin Tryphena some more of those stones with the picture writing on them.' Stones and—Where else did she want? Those brown rolled-up thingums. Paper rice or some such."

"*Papyri*," came the melodious voice, strained through gritted teeth, by the sounds of it. "The singular is *papyrus*. The plural is *papyri*. The Latin word derives from the ancient Greek. It is a paper made, not from rice, sir, but from a reed plant native to these regions. The articles you refer to, furthermore, are not 'thingums,' but valuable ancient documents." She paused, then said in milder, puzzled tones, "Did you say Tryphena? You do not refer to Tryphena Saunders?"

"Yes, my cousin—the one with the hobbyhorse about the comical picture writing."

"*Hieroglyphs*," said the lady. "The decipherment of which—Never mind. Attempting to explain to you their importance would be, I have not the smallest doubt, an expenditure of breath to no purpose."

She turned abruptly, in a delicious rustle of silk, and started away.

Beechey hurried after her. "Madam, I do apologize for detaining you in this disagreeable place. Naturally you are distressed. However, I must beg you to recollect—"

"That man," she said in low but still audible tones, "is an *idiot*."

"Yes, madam, but he's all we've got."

"I may be stupid," Rupert said, "but I'm irresistibly attractive."

"Good grief, conceited, too," she muttered.

"And being a great, dumb ox," he went on, "I'm wonderfully easy to manage."

She paused and turned to Beechey. "Are you sure there's no one else?"

"Not between here and Philae."

Philae must be a good distance from here, else the lady wouldn't be scouring the dungeons of Cairo for help, Rupert thought. "I'm as strong as an ox, too," he said encouragingly. "I could lift you up with one hand and your maid with the other."

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