

Abyssinia

Excerpt

On the Tekeze River about 20 miles northwest of Axum, Abyssinia. 4 September 1937.

They scoured the bank, looking down for indications of the opening. A few minutes later, Sofia exclaimed in frustration, “Nothing. I don’t see anything familiar on that slope.”

“That’s okay, ‘pardner.’ We’ll find it.” He tossed off his backpack and sat in the soft grass. Let’s attack this problem with our wits. It has to be nearby.”

“Yes, indeed.” Sofia sat next to him. “What’s on your mind?”

He took a swig from his canteen and passed it to Sofia. “No serious germs on this thing.” She drank heartedly, which eased her anxiety.

“Here’s the deal.” We’re going to that waterfall to refresh your memory.” He urged her to recount as best she could the exact sequence of events of her discovery of the cave.

A few minutes later Walter said, “That’s great. The opening should be somewhere about twenty feet from the base of the falls and perhaps about ten feet up from the pool.” He walked off seven paces. “Let’s start our search here.”

They rigged a rope to one of the laurel trees and Walter rappelled down the steeply-inclined bank, which was thickly covered with underbrush. He used a stout tree limb to tap the bank in the areas he could reach. Nothing. There was only solid bank. Over the next hour, they worked this process repeatedly: each time Walter moved his search several feet more toward the falls. Still nothing.

“Time out, Sofia,” Walter shouted. He climbed to the rim of the bank and collapsed, spread-eagle on the grass.

Sofia sat beside him, and rubbed his neck. “Have faith, Walter, I know we are close.”

Soon he sat up and drank deeply from his canteen. “I’m ready. This time we’ll work away from the falls.”

On his third try in that direction, while Sofia was manning the ropes, she heard a ringing, “Eureka!” It’s here.” Sofia tied off the ropes and looked over at the grinning Walter.

“‘Pardner,’ it’s right here.” He used his machete to clear the underbrush away from the opening. “Send down our backpacks and come down.”

An exultant Sofia snapped a smart salute and replied, “As you say, sir.”

After Walter put their backpacks just inside the cave’s opening, Sofia rappelled down and Walter grabbed her waist and held her close to him, perhaps a little too long.

Sofia, delightfully pleased, teased him with, “Kind sir, unhand this fair maiden, who is only slightly soiled.” She turned around and kissed him on the cheek. “That’s just the teaser—more later.”

Before they entered the cave Walter said, “Let’s leave our backpacks here at the entrance on this narrow shelf. No need to lug all that equipment inside. We’ll take in only what we’ll need. He also suggested that they cover their mouth and nose with their bandannas. As he began these tasks, Sofia asked with a puzzled look, “What’s up?”

“A safety precaution. No telling what the musty air in there might contain. Frequently abandoned caves, as this one, are contaminated with a fungus called ‘Valley Fever’—a lung infection that can cause serious problems.”

“That’s new information. Okay.” Sofia tied off her bandanna.

With flashlights on, they entered the cave and carefully moved deeper into it. Walter said with a touch of caution, “Sofia, walk softly and try to minimize kicking up the dust. The fungi could be anywhere.”

In a few short steps, Sofia commented that nothing remained of the reptile she killed. But the expended brass littered the area.

Walter offered, “Probably some scavenger carried the carcass away. And that brass tells us that no one has been here.” As they moved, he noticed in the flashlight beam the fine dust being scattered. Several dozen steps ahead, their light caught one of the amphora.

“Walter, here they are!” she exclaimed. “Grazie a dio!” Within a few feet, the pair were at the edge of the artifact perimeter.

“Sofia, if I may suggest, take your photographs now before we disturb this area,” Walter said with marked emphasis.

“I agree.” The next few minutes Sofia, moving carefully among the artifacts, used her Leica camera, with the flash-bulb reflector attached. On each artifact, she carefully focused the lens, calculated and set the f-stop, pushed the trigger, and a brilliant light filled the cave as the flashbulb exploded. She snapped a complete roll of thirty-six black and white negatives. Some shots were tight close-ups of the lettering on the shards. Finished, she stored her camera and moved to pick up one of the intact amphora.

Walter grabbed her and pulled her away smartly. “No, Sofia! Stay away from those things.”

Slightly miffed at Walter’s harsh treatment and perplexed by his peculiar command, Sofia demanded, “What the Hell is going on, Walter Gregory. You are acting like a madman. What is the matter with you? Tell me now!”

Walter saw the fury in her eyes and was resigned that he could no longer deceive her. “Very well. I’ll meet you at the entrance.” His forehead was wet with nervous perspiration. “I’ll join you in a few minutes. I’ve some work to do.”

“What work, Walter?” She said. This time her voice was tinged with uncertainty and fear.

He did not respond or look at her. Rather, he used his small pick and spade and took rock samples from locations throughout the cave and stored them in a lead foil-lined leather pouch.

Sofia watched him, dumbfounded. Her eyes widened in disbelief. As she glared at him, her lips moved in a near soundless whisper, “What are you doing?” Answer me.”

His task completed, Walter took Sofia’s arm and led her to the entrance. Despondent, with a tinge of regret he said, “My dear Sofia, the dust on those artifacts is contaminated with dangerously-high radioactivity. I had to stop you from touching anything. My scenario regarding valley fever was a ruse to prevent us from breathing that radioactive dust.”

Sofia blinked a couple of times at this staggering information. She drew several steadying breaths, and demanded in a hard, hoarse voice. “Walter, the truth. All of it. Now!”

“Yes, of course.” He paused to bolster his courage. “The bottom line is that I am an American agent on assignment for our State Department’s Office of Research and Intelligence. My task was to get samples of the ore in this cave and smuggle it out so our scientists can evaluate it for reasons that must be kept secret.” His face was grim; his eyes narrowed. “Through clandestine sources, we knew of your activities in Abyssinia and Cairo, and arranged for you to get the visa to return here.”

At first, Sofia was flabbergasted at Walter's explication. Then bitter anger overwhelmed her. Hate flared into her eyes. "Damn you Walter Gregory, you betrayed me! You don't care for me! You stole my affection under a perfidious false flag. You used me as one of your gullible flappers to be tossed aside when through."

She wanted to sob, but held her composure, but could not contain her fury. She wound up a right-handed haymaker and walloped Walter squarely on the tip of his chin. He was sent reeling against the side of the cave and slipped to the floor, stirring clouds of dust that engulfed both of them. "You unholy bastardo, I ought to kill you. She drew and pointed her Beretta 32 at Walter's heart. She tried to squeeze the trigger but her index finger would not function. Searing pain raced through her right hand. She saw it was becoming swollen and brightly discolored. Damn, I broke my finger on that wily hoaxster. With her left hand, she grabbed her damaged hand, slid to the floor, stirring up more dust, ducked her head between her knees, and bawled plaintively.

Walter rubbed his bruised chin, recovered his wits, sat next to Sofia, and held her in his arms and let her sob. Within a few minutes, he said, "Sofia, please get up. We have to get out of this cave. It's dangerous."

Without comment, she rose. They exited the cave and stood on the small ledge. He took her right hand and assessed the damage, "When we're atop of the bank, I'll work on your hand." He evaluated their options. "I'm going up top and then I'll haul you up. Help as much as you can." Within a few minutes, both were on the bank with their backpacks.

Walter took Sofia's right hand and saw the swelling and discoloration. "This will hurt." He slowly and gently moved her damaged finger back and forth.

Sofia emitted a small cry of pain. "Damn you Walter Gregory. You certainly know how to torture a woman. What do you conclude?"

"It's probably not broken but you've damaged some ligaments on my jaw." He trimmed two wooden spoons from his kit to make a splint and wrapped her finger in gauze from his first-aid kit. "That'll do it until we return to Axum."

"Thanks, Walter."