

A COFFIN IN EGYPT

BY HORTON FOOTE



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A COFFIN IN EGYPT
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A COFFIN IN EGYPT was originally presented at Bay Street Theatre, Sag Harbor, New York, June – July 1998. It was directed by Leonard Foglia, with the following cast:

MYRTLE BLEDSOE Glynis Johns
JESSIE LYDELL Mindy H. Washington

A COFFIN IN EGYPT was first developed at the HB Playwrights Foundation, where a studio production was presented in 1980. It was directed by Herbert Berghof, with the following cast:

MYRTLE BLEDSOE Sandy Dennis
JESSIE LYDELL Bonita Griffin

CHARACTERS

MYRTLE BLEDSOE

JESSIE LYDELL

DELIA

PLACE

Egypt, Texas

TIME

1968

A COFFIN IN EGYPT

The lights are brought up on the sitting room of Myrtle Bledsoe. It is a small room with a few very handsome pieces in it: a red Chinese chest, a bookcase, a Chippendale American secretary, a small sofa, a small winged chair, a tea table in front of the wing chair. Myrtle, ninety, is still very handsome. Erect and tall, remarkably well-preserved. She is exquisitely dressed in a long red silk dress. Her skin is clear and still quite unwrinkled, and her snow-white hair is worn up on top of her head, accentuating her graceful neck, the firmness of her facial structure. She has several handsome rings: a diamond dinner ring, a ruby and diamond ring. She wears a diamond bar pin and pearls around her neck.

This is the sitting room of the house she came to as a bride. The house is surrounded by cotton fields and is part of a vast plantation. Myrtle, at rise, is seated in the wing chair looking out the window and listening to the singing, which comes from a nearby Negro church. Her companion, Jessie Lydell, sits on the sofa looking at a fashion magazine. The two women listen to the music. Jessie turns the page of her magazine.

MYRTLE. I remember that night so well. How many years ago? (*Jessie closes the magazine.*) It was a Sunday night, and across the fields I could hear the Negroes singing in their church. None of us ever went to church here in this house. Hunter had no religion one found in the churches in Glen Flora or Harrison. Can you hear the Negroes singing? I never cared for their singing, myself. I am not sentimental about Negroes and their religion as many whites I know are. I don't dislike Negroes. Some I like. Some I don't like, just as some whites I like and many, very many, I don't like. Oh, I know I am supposed to be bitter toward the Negro race, because of

the colored mistress Hunter had as a young man. A young man? He preferred colored women until he was forty-five, and then he changed. "Why did you change?" I once asked him. The change almost cost him his life. But from the time he was forty-five on, he only took white mistresses. Common and vulgar, mostly, they were, too.

(Rear projection: a young, very lovely, mulatto girl.) I always thought the mulatto, Maude Jenkins, was the most beautiful, and in some ways the most refined, although when she left him for Walker, the gambler, she ran a house of prostitution, the vamp, across the tracks in Harrison. She has a house in California now, someone said. Left for there after the gambler, Walker, was killed. She's gotten fat, they say, and lost her looks. I only saw her twice when she was a girl, and she was beautiful then ... Copper-colored. She looked like the Tahitian girls in Gauguin pictures. She was a Jenkins. Maude Jenkins. Her mother was the mistress of Cy Merriweather and so she was his child, they say. She was some white man's child, that's for sure. Anyway, I went to Europe because of her. *(Rear projection: Myrtle, as a young woman, with her two daughters standing beside her.)* I took my two girls and stayed eight years over there, traveling around from city to city.

(Rear projection: Algerian male in traditional Sheikh costume.) When I was in Algiers, a Sheikh fell in love with me and wanted me to divorce Hunter and marry him. He was dark-complected and my girls thought he was a colored man. He was an African, of course, and perhaps he did have colored blood somewhere down the line, as they say. Anyway, we traveled all over: Paris, Rome. My girls took ballet lessons. In New York I met Mr. Frohman and he wanted to put me on the stage. I was a close friend of Lily Cahill's sister, and Lily was sweet to me when I was in New York. *(Rear projection: Lily Cahill as a young actress.)* Lily Cahill is an actress. Was an actress. She's dead. She died of a broken heart in San Antonio, Texas, because she couldn't get a job in New York acting anymore, and she came home at the age of sixty-five to her sister in San Antonio, Texas, and tried to start an acting company of some kind, but San Antonio was in the throes of all that mess about unpatriotic books being in the public libraries. And Lily said what you had to go through in San Antonio, Texas, to put a play on was worse than ten Broadways. She died broke, they say. Proud, but broke. Her cousin was Katherine Anne Porter, the writer. Do you know her?
JESSIE. No. I've never heard of her.

MYRTLE. You never heard of her? My! She's a very good writer, they say, although I've never read her. Lily thought highly of her talent. Did you see the movie *Ship of Fools*? (*Jessie shakes her head to signify she hasn't.*) No? Neither did I. But you've heard of it? Well, that was based on a novel of hers. I think it was a "Book of the Month Club" selection. I can't remember anything else she's written, although I have some of her books around here some place. (*She glances over at the bookcase, then back to Jessie.*) Anyway ... I was gone a long time: New York, London, Paris, Rome. And then I came home. I took my girls and came home. I've never known why. But home I came. And it's like I was never, never away. It's like that person with those two young girls, floating around Europe, around Africa, was someone I read about, or was told about, someone I knew once a long time ago. (*She looks around at the room.*) This wasn't my home, you see. (*Rear projection: Hunter as a young man.*) This is Hunter's home. He was born here. Not here in this house he built this for me — but across the road in the old plantation house was where he was born. I was born not far away though, in Eagle Lake. In the town. Not in the country. (*Rear projection: photograph of Myrtle as a young woman.*) And I was a beauty.

JESSIE. You're still beautiful. Very beautiful. A queen ... a princess ...
MYRTLE. Oh, thank you. Thank you. No, I'm not modest. I know I have a certain style now, a certain handsomeness, people tell me that, and I take care of myself, in spite of my age, but still, but still, it's not the same. Then I had remarkable beauty and I was much sought after by the eligible young men, and then this country bumpkin, short, strong as a bull, that's what my family kept telling me, oh, so very rich, came courting. Why? That's what I have asked him so often. "Why me? What did you see in me? My beauty? My intellect? My background?" And he stares at me and shrugs his shoulders and walks away, because he doesn't know. He found me cold, he told me once. My beauty was a cold beauty ... too narcissistic, he said of me once when he wanted to hurt me ...

But I was beautiful. And I refused to live on here and be humiliated while he lived openly with his mulatto woman, Maude Jenkins, who he once told me he loved better than his wife, who he wrote love letters to. Love letters that she would read aloud when she was drunk to the young white boys in Harrison that came to her house of prostitution. (*A pause. She goes to the window.*)

I'll tell you this though, when I came here as a bride, the country

out here was extraordinary. I never tired of looking at its beauty. I would get on my horse early in the morning and ride for miles across the prairies; there was nothing here then for miles, no houses, no fences. The open prairie ... in the spring the wildflowers blanketed the land, bluebonnets and Indian blankets and black-eyed Susans and buttercups and primroses, miles and miles of them thick and tall and I would head east and ride through the wildflowers toward the rising sun. In the late afternoon I would ride toward the west ... toward the setting sun, and you have never seen such loveliness as there was then out here on these prairies. And sometimes when the girls were little and he would stay out all night with his mulatto mistress in Harrison ... I would go across the prairies, when the moon was full, and cry and cry; because I didn't want to cry in the house where my girls or the Negro servants could hear me.

Once, when I was young and couldn't stand the humiliation, or thought I couldn't, I went to visit a friend. I told her I could bear it if he denied it, lied to me even, but denied it; but he denied nothing. He told me he loved her. And when I asked him if he wanted me to divorce him, he said, "It doesn't matter to me. I can't marry her anyway, unless I left here, because there is a law in Texas against black and white marrying." And he wouldn't leave here. Like he said, he would put a fence around all this if he could and keep everybody but himself out. He wouldn't leave here to marry any woman, black or white, and so I left. I was gone seven years, off and on, but I told you that, didn't I?

Some friend, some long-ago, very kind friend, once told me that his father, old Leon, once remarked, "I don't know why any of them want to marry when they can have any nigger on the place for twenty-five cents." Or was it fifty cents? He thought, too, this was the world, this plantation, his father, old Leon, did ... the beginning and the end of everything. He thought all you had to do was to ride your horse through the cotton fields all day and see that the tenants and the hands worked. He thought you should learn to read and write and count money, if you were white, but only if you were white. That any other kind of education was ridiculous and a waste of time. And that all the Negroes needed to know was to farm and work and he could teach them that. And, of course, he thought it would all stay the same. Once the Yankees had gone away, even though we lost the war, he thought since they had survived, that's the father I'm talking about, he was the son of the man that settled

the land first, came here from Alabama with his slaves, a hundred and twenty, I believe. Anyway, he, the father, used to say, since they had survived the war and the loss of their slaves without losing an acre of their land, they could survive anything — low cotton prices, fires, drought, floods, storms, hurricanes — and they did until the thirties and the Depression and they couldn't give their cotton and their cattle away. That's when I had to leave Europe and come home for good.

The girls were grown by then and Lois got married to a man from Atlanta. He was unfaithful; she found out during her second year of her marriage. It broke her heart, and Lorena married a boy from Houston and they went to live in the East. And I came back here, alone in this big old house with Hunter. My father-in-law was dead by then, my brother-in-law and his wife lived in the original plantation house and my other brother-in-law and his wife, the one whose son killed him, built a house over there, and my sister-in-law, Sally, built a house on the corner. And so when I came home, I was surrounded by them and their children, who were all younger than my children, but I wasn't congenial with the wives. Oh, I didn't dislike them, but we weren't congenial and they thought I was snobbish and perhaps I was. Anyway, I went to Rockport and took some lessons and I came home and began to write poetry and paint.

(Rear projection: Degas ballet dancer.) I remember once this famous dancer from New York came out to see me. She was visiting someone in Harrison at the time and they were on their way to attend a service in a Negro church out this way; we have so many I forget which one. And they stopped by to see me and to see if I wanted to go with them. But I decided not to. I asked them back after the service for tea, and when they came back I had taken every picture in the house down and replaced them all with Degas prints of dancers I had, and I must say that dancer lady from New York seemed surprised and pleased. I told her my best friend in San Antonio was a cousin of Katherine Anne Porter's and she had never read Katherine Anne Porter either, but had heard of her. She spoke French and we talked together in French. Turk, our cook, called in all the servants to listen to me outside that door there, as they had never heard French spoken before. Always after that, until the day Turk died, and faithful she was too, every once in a while she'd come up to my door and ask me to say something in French for her. I offered to teach her, and she said no. She was told it might put a spell on you if you learned something like that.

I said to her, "Turk, it's put no spell on me."

But she still wouldn't learn and I thought afterwards maybe she thinks there is a spell on me, and maybe there is. But if there is, it was there long before I learned to speak the French language, long before. Anyway, back here I was, Degas prints and all, and it was the Depression. Not that we had to do without, living out here, except we were short of money and Hunter said he couldn't afford for me to go traveling about the world, with or without my girls. And that I would have to be content out here in the country. And so I came back. I was lonely and I cried a lot, at first, but then Mrs. Carter moved out here with her children. She lived in one of the tenant houses and her husband managed the plantation store for Hunter. And they were poor as Job's turkey, but she was an educated lady from Mississippi, whose husband was shiftless and had no ambition, spent his time away from the store raising gaming chickens and taking them all over Texas for fights. Anyway, she was sweet and friendly and she wrote poetry, too. We got to visiting back and forth and she had so many troubles that it helped take my mind off of mine. I could confide in her, the way I couldn't to my sister-in-law, or to my own family, about how bitter I felt over Hunter's neglect of me.

And it was then I heard somehow that the mulatto, Maude, had left him for the white gambler, and that he had gotten drunk and gone over across the tracks in Harrison and cried and begged her to take him back, and it was then, I heard, she would get drunk and read his love letters to the white boys who came to her whorehouse. That everyone in Harrison was laughing about it, and I was too mortified to go into Harrison even to shop, and it was then I made Hunter get me my own car and a chauffeur so I could ride sixty miles into Houston to shop. Mrs. Carter used to ride with me and we would spend the day shopping together or I would, as she never had the money to buy the least thing. She wrote poems in Negro dialect and somehow she scraped up the money to get them printed. She thought it might be the beginning of her fortune, but my God, the poor thing didn't sell more than fifteen copies of her book. I bought ten of them — she had to give the rest away. Five hundred in all, as birthday and Christmas presents. She wasn't much of a poet, to tell you the truth, but she was sweet and loyal as a friend.

Anyway, I felt no shame before her, and every time I would hear something about Hunter and Maude I would ask her to find out if it was true and she would. I never asked her who she asked to

find out things from ... asked her husband, no doubt. Anyway, that's when I knew that Walker, the gambler, was killed. Maude was drunk all the time grieving over him and was getting fat and losing her looks, they said. And Hunter was staying home for supper then, but he'd be in bed asleep by eight o'clock, as he was always up by four-thirty in the morning. And that was the first time I remember his calling us old. He didn't say it to me, I overheard him talking to his brother and he said, "You know, Myrtle and I are getting old," and I looked up at him and I realized he was sixty and I was fifty-six. Although he rode a horse all day and worked as hard as ever, he was almost sixty and my hair was gray now and I was in my fifties. That was the age then when people considered you old at sixty. I thought, it's 1934 and we've been married thirty-four years, and I'll go crazy if I go on sitting out here with no one to talk to but Turk, the cook, and Mrs. Carter, and listen to her dialect poetry and so I told Hunter, Depression or not, I had to get away for a while or I'd go crazy, and he'd have the expense of keeping me locked up in Austin in the asylum the rest of his life. And he said he couldn't understand that. He said if you wanted to drive him crazy, take him away from here, as he had never been farther than Harrison but four times in his life. Twice to Houston and twice to San Antonio and he didn't ever care if he never even saw Harrison again now, and never left here.

But, I guess he thought I meant it about going crazy, for the next day at breakfast there was a check for a thousand dollars by my plate and he said I could go off as long as that lasted and in those days it could last a long time. I went to visit both my daughters and I got a shock, because one of them, Lorena, told me that she and her sister thought my place was out there with Hunter and that if I hadn't gone off and left him to go traveling around Europe in the first place he wouldn't have acted the way he did and carried on so scandalously with a mulatto field hand, because that's all Maude was before he took up with her. You never knew my daughters, did you? They're both dead now. They both died before you came here to be with me. Lois found out about husbands like I said, long before she died, and I often wondered too, then, if she still agreed with Lorena that it would have made a difference if I'd stayed home, but I didn't ever say anything to her on the subject, except listen to her troubles when she told me how humiliated she was by her husband's unfaithfulness.

Anyway, when my thousand dollars was finally gone and I had

to come back here, I found Hunter still eating his supper here every night and not going out, but getting to bed by eight and Turk said that's how he acted the whole time I was gone. He said to her he was an old man now and his roaming days were over. We were in the Second World War then ... And we had German prisoners out at the fairground. I drove into town with my chauffeur, who could barely read or write, so the Army wouldn't take him, to see them. There were soldiers from all over, up North, and everywhere in Harrison then and I remember back to the First World War and I had gone to a dance at the Opera House with Hunter, although he wouldn't dance. He just sat on the side all evening and watched me dancing, and he was forty-two and I was thirty-eight.

(Rear projection: portrait of Captain Lawson.) There was a captain, a Captain Lawson, who was in his early thirties, dashing and quite handsome and he gave me quite a rush all evening and he was a wonderful dancer and I know he was infatuated with me, because he wrote me a note telling me so, and I wanted badly to slip away somewhere and meet him. But I didn't dare and I got mad at Hunter and I told him what I wanted to do. That I thought it was unfair because he could openly go across the tracks and out to the cabins to his Negro woman and I couldn't be allowed to meet Captain Lawson, who was attractive and found me fascinating. And I told Hunter, hoping it would make him jealous, I suppose, and he said, "You don't fool with white women, white ladies," I believe he said ...

And I said, "Look at Miss Stella Dow, she is white and she gets drunk and sleeps with who she likes."

And he says, "Do you want people to talk about you like they do Stella Dow?"

And I said no, I guess I didn't. And I don't, of course, so I never answered Captain Lawson's note and he married Vivian Fairbain, who was a young widow in town with two children. It was her son that was so brutally murdered by Junior Dawson — cut from here to here and thrown on the steps of the Caney Valley Hospital and left to bleed to death. But that's another long and tragic story and anyway, Captain Lawson and Vivian were married and lived together three years, although without his uniform he didn't seem glamorous or handsome at all. He never could get much of a job and she divorced him and took her first married name back, which was sensible since it was the name of her two children. She behaved as scandalously with men then as Miss Stella Dow, they say, and it must be something

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