

PEACE: egg and intrigue

The Urth list — 4 messages, 3 voices, 14 Sep 2002

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/urth/3458>

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StoneOx17 — 14 Sep 2002, 17:10

The recent charge that discussions on this list have become "loony" made me start thinking, and I think part of the problem is that we are concentrating too much on the hard aspects of the books. In my most recent rereading of Peace, I noticed some really nice aspects I hadn't noticed before, but I haven't mentioned them here because they seemed more obvious than most of the discussions here. But on looking through the archives, it's not clear that anybody else has noticed them, either.

In <http://www.urth.net/urth/archives/v0030/0040.shtml>, Adam Stephanides says, on the relation of the embedded princess story to Olivia's life,

... in the Chinese egg affair, Olivia tries to maneuver Macafee into using his trading prowess for her benefit, like the merchant; but her plan backfires somehow, and she ends up buying the egg herself.

It's the "somehow" I will concentrate on in this post. I had always had the general impression that Olivia didn't marry Macafee because he ended up with the egg, and had thought this seemed quite petty of her. Now, I think I understand better what happened.

Both Olivia and Macafee are serious collectors (unexpected connection: as, later, is Stewart Blaine) who covet the Lorns' Chinese egg. Mr. Macafee conveys to Olivia, via Eleanor Bold, the message that he will buy the egg and give it to Olivia for her birthday. Not to be outdone, Olivia sends back the message that she wants to buy the egg and give it to Jimmy Macafee for his birthday. However, her plan actually is to bid the price up, but still let Mr. Macafee buy it for her (possibly as a test of his devotion, as in a fairy tale).

When they go to look at the egg, Aunt Olivia leaves her checkbook at home and brings cash; this way she ensures that Mr. Macafee (who, she knows, will bring his checkbook) will be able to outbid her. She knows the price of the egg already -- the cost of a good sewing machine -- and she brings enough to bid the price substantially above that.

When Em Lorn meets Olivia Weer and James Macafee, however, she likes Olivia a lot more, so she figures out a way of bending the rules against commerce on Sundays so as to allow Olivia but not Jimmy to buy the egg. Mrs. Lorn says she can accept cash--left in a jar--but not a check, because writing her name on the check on Sunday would be the sin. (This is really a fine distinction; I am sure that Mrs. Lorn believes it is a minor sin either way, and came up this rule to ensure that Olivia gets the egg). Later, Olivia realizes that Mr. Macafee could have evaded this restriction by making the check out to cash.

Two questions come to mind: Did Mr. Macafee realize this at the time, but fail to mention it because he wanted Olivia to give him the egg for his birthday? Does Olivia believe he realized it at the time? If she does, this is a somewhat better reason for refusing to marry him, and further, this reason corresponds well to that given in the embedded tale of the princess: that "the heavy purse hanging from his belt bruised her each time they embraced."

While we're on the subject of the egg, in my last rereading I also found the answer to a question asked earlier by Roy Lackey:

Why was there not a single mention or hint of the famous Egg at the birthday party? It should have been the center of attention, but doesn't seem to have been there at all.

It's there, but (as befits an Easter egg) well hidden. At the opening of the chapter containing the stories told at Macafee's birthday party, Dr. Van Ness shows Weer one of the TAT cards:

"Look at this card. Will you describe it for me?"

"There's a woman--at least I think it's a woman, it might be a boy, an adolescent. She's handing that other one something."

"Very good. Now you are to make up a little story for me--a story for which this picture is to be one of the illustrations."

Immediately after this follows the story of the Chinese pillow, so at first it might appear that this is the story the card illustrates, but I think a better reading is that the card illustrates Olivia handing over the egg at Macafee's birthday party.

-- stone ox

Andy Robertson — 14 Sep 2002, 17:47 · follows StoneOx17

----- Original Message -----

From: <StoneOx17 at aol.com>

To: <urth at urth.net>

Sent: Saturday, September 14, 2002 6:10 PM

Subject: (urth) PEACE: egg and intrigue

The recent charge that discussions on this list have become "loony" made me start thinking, and I think part of the problem is that we are concentrating too much on the hard aspects of the books.

I agree: but may remark that it was only one thread I thought "loony". Thanks for this elucidation of PEACE, a work I must re-read and pay some real attention to.

hartshorn

Adam Stephanides — 20 Sep 2002, 17:09 · follows Andy Robertson

A very interesting post, which motivated me to look at those passages again myself. A couple of comments:

on 9/14/02 5:10 PM, StoneOx17 at aol.com at StoneOx17 at aol.com wrote:

When they go to look at the egg, Aunt Olivia leaves her checkbook at home and brings cash; this way she ensures that Mr. Macafee (who, she knows, will bring his checkbook) will be able to outbid her.

Do we know that Olivia has a checkbook? I don't know whether a woman living alone in a small town in 1929 would have automatically had a checking account.

She knows the price of the egg

already -- the cost of a good sewing machine -- and she brings enough to bid the price substantially above that.

It's a minor point, but the sewing machine is just one of the things Em Lorn plans to buy with the money from the egg (p. 78, Harper & Row hc).

Two questions come to mind: Did Mr. Macafee realize this at the time, but fail to mention it because he wanted Olivia to give him the egg for his birthday?

Does Olivia believe he realized it at the time? If she does, this is a somewhat

better reason for refusing to marry him, and further, this reason corresponds well to that given in the embedded tale of the princess: that "the heavy purse

hanging from his belt bruised her each time they embraced."

But she'd been trying to outmaneuver him. If she refused to marry him just because he'd outsmarted her, it still seems pretty petty.

Now my own thoughts upon rereading the egg and Macafee passages:

1) Olivia claims that Macafee's true intent was to prevent her from bidding against him, by letting her think he planned to give it to her, and then to actually give her something else more expensive (but less desirable). But we have no evidence for this aside from Olivia's assertion. And surely it would be look rather awkward for Macafee to withhold the egg after he'd publicly stated he planned to give it to her, especially since it seems to be public knowledge that she covets the egg.

I suspect that Olivia herself doesn't believe this. Her true motive for bidding up the price is that, as an independent woman, she dislikes feeling dependent on Macafee. The Nankeen Nook, she can tell herself, benefits Macafee as well as herself; but to be given the egg is too much. At the same time, she doesn't want to pass up the egg. By arranging things so that, instead of being given the egg freely, she has "forced" Macafee to give it to her (at least in her own eyes), she can have her cake and eat it too.

2) Is there any indication that Olivia ever intended to marry Macafee in the first place, any more than she did the other two suitors? I get the impression that she's happy to keep her suitors on a string indefinitely. Perhaps she won't marry Macafee because she feels that married to such a substantial, almost patriarchal, citizen, she would be too dependent. This would accord even better with the princess's reason for not marrying the merchant in the embedded tale.

--Adam

StoneOx17 — 21 Sep 2002, 01:54 · follows Adam Stephanides

Adam Stephanides writes, in response to my posting on the egg hunt:

StoneOx17 at aol.com wrote:

When they go to look at the egg, Aunt Olivia leaves her checkbook at home and brings cash; this way she ensures that Mr. Macafee (who, she knows, will bring his checkbook) will be able to outbid her.

Do we know that Olivia has a checkbook? I don't know whether a woman living alone in a small town in 1929 would have automatically had a checking account.

Even though a substantial part of her income comes from her brother, Olivia's a fairly well-off woman with expensive tastes (Pekinese, scientific journals, etc.), so she's much more likely to have a checkbook than a typical woman from that era. However, the best argument for her having a checkbook is the irony that her act of leaving the checkbook at home so as to have a

good excuse to stop bidding is the very act that lets Em Lorn find a way to give the egg to the lower bidder.

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It's a minor point, but the sewing machine is just one of the things Em Lorn plans to buy with the money from the egg (p. 78, Harper & Row hc).

I thought I'd reread the relevant parts just before my posting, but clearly not carefully enough. I think the sewing machine still manages to set a ballpark price for the egg, without Eleanor Bold ever having to talk about anything so distasteful as money.

Two questions come to mind: Did Mr. Macafee realize this at the time, but fail to mention it because he wanted Olivia to give him the egg for his birthday?

Does Olivia believe he realized it at the time? If she does, this is a somewhat better reason for refusing to marry him, and further, this reason corresponds well to that given in the embedded tale of the princess: that "the heavy purse hanging from his belt bruised her each time they embraced."

But she'd been trying to outmaneuver him. If she refused to marry him just because he'd outsmarted her, it still seems pretty petty.

It's still petty, but now it's a reason I can believe in, as opposed to the previous pettiness.

Now my own thoughts upon rereading the egg and Macafee passages:

1) ...

Here I've deleted some very good points Adam makes.

2) Is there any indication that Olivia ever intended to marry Macafee in the first place, any more than she did the other two suitors? I get the impression that she's happy to keep her suitors on a string indefinitely.

I somehow got the impression that Olivia was leaning toward Macafee from the adult Weer's conversation from Stewart Blaine, but upon rereading this passage, I think I may have been reading too much into it.

Perhaps she won't marry Macafee because she feels that married to such a substantial, almost patriarchal, citizen, she would be too dependent. This would accord even better with the princess's reason for not marrying the merchant in the embedded tale.

I was interpreting the princess's reason as saying Olivia thought Macafee cared too much about money and material goods, like the egg, and too little about Olivia. This is indeed quite hypocritical on Olivia's part, but I think not out of character.

Finally, I'd like to comment that even if Olivia did realize at the time that Macafee could have made his check out to cash, and avoided Em Lorn's restrictions, I don't see how she could have mentioned this to Macafee. She's been trapped by her own machinations.

-- Stone Ox