



TOM
HOLLAND

The
SLEEPER
in the
SANDS



THE SLEEPER IN THE SANDS

By
TOM HOLLAND

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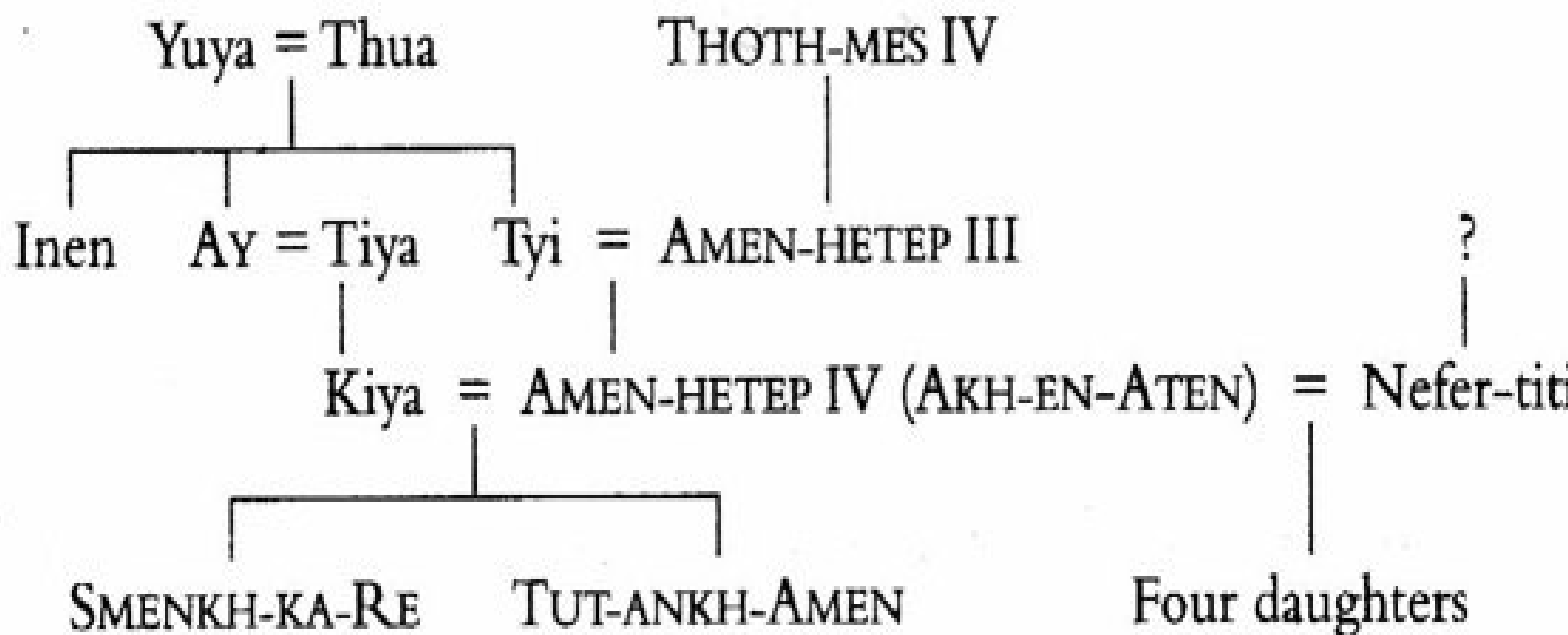
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ISBN 0 349 11221 5

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To Mattos,
A Pharaoh amongst friends

Author's Note There are many ways of spelling Egyptian names. Throughout this novel, I have copied Carter's own.



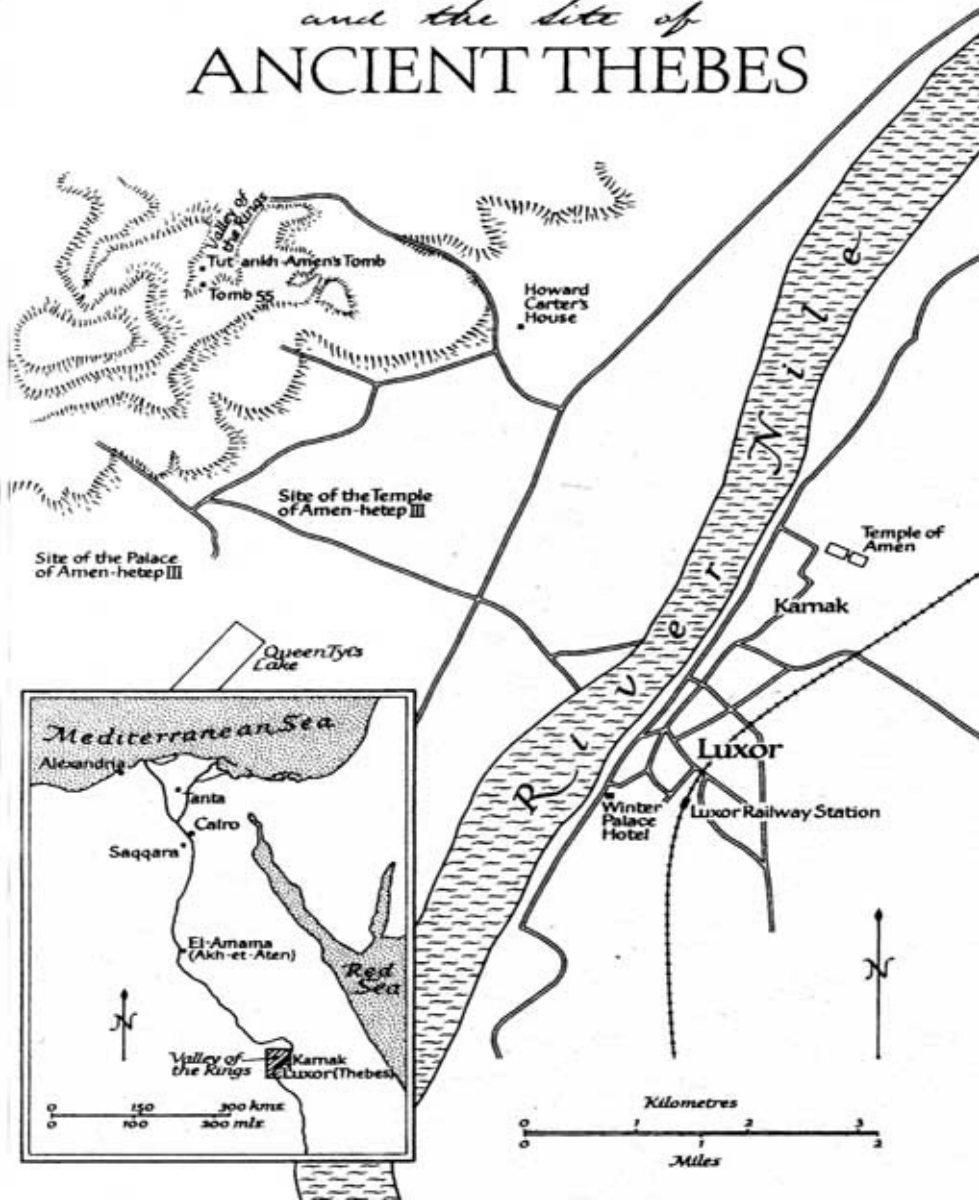
The Late Eighteenth Dynasty

The names of Pharaohs are capitalised.

Say: I seek refuge with the Lord of the Dawn,
 From the mischief of created things;
 From the mischief of Darkness as it overspreads;
 From the mischief of those who practise Secret Arts;
 And from the mischief of the envious one as he practises envy.

‘Surah al-Falaq’ (The Daybreak), from the Koran

LUXOR *and the site of* ANCIENT THEBES



THE TALE OF THE GOLDEN BIRD

All night he dreamed he was searching. He imagined himself lost in a labyrinth of stone, where there was nothing to be found save for shreds of mummy wrapping, and papyri from which the writing had long since been erased. Yet always, even as he stumbled through the darkness and the dust, he knew that ahead of him, buried somewhere in the rock, there was a chamber waiting, a wondrous, hidden tomb; and it was this certainty alone which kept him from despair. Still he stumbled on; and he imagined, as he did so, that he was drawing near the tomb. He reached out with his arms, as though to part the rock. For a moment he imagined that he caught a glint of gold, and at once he felt a joy that seemed to justify his life. When he looked again, though, the glint had disappeared, and he knew that the mysteries of both his life and a far more distant past remained in darkness. He reached out a second time. He thrashed with his arms. But still no sign of gold - only rock and sand and dust . . .

All at once, Howard Carter jerked awake. He sat up, breathing very hard -- and yet realising, as he did so, that he felt almost refreshed. He blinked. The early morning sun, still warm despite the lateness of the year, was already casting a bright rectangle across the far side of the room -- and yet it was not the sun which had woken him. Carter blinked again, and rubbed his eyes. As he did so, he heard it: the singing of a bird.

He gazed across the room. He had brought the canary with him from Cairo just a week before, a golden bird inside a gilded cage. He rose from his bed, and crossed to it. He remembered what the workmen had cried when he had first arrived back to start the season's digging, his servant carrying the gilded cage behind him. 'A bird of gold,' they had proclaimed, 'it will surely bring us luck! This year we will find, *inshallah*, a tomb of gold!'

Howard Carter certainly trusted so. Yet even as he bent down to feed the canary, his smile was grim. For he did not need reminding that he was in desperate need of luck - more luck, certainly, than he had been granted in the past six years. So much effort -- and for so little return. His patron, he knew, was already losing faith; it was only with difficulty that Lord Carnarvon had been persuaded to fund one further, final season. If they were to locate the tomb, the sealed tomb of gold, the tomb which might win them an undying renown, then it would have to be within the next few months. The next few months ... or not at all.

And yet, no matter that an unplundered tomb had never been found in the Valley before, he knew that it was out there. Not once had he doubted it. Howard Carter paused a moment, gazing at the bird; then he rose suddenly and crossed to a desk, where he reached for a key and unlocked the bottom-most drawer. From its depths he drew out a sheaf of faded papers. His grip on them tightened as he pressed them hard against his chest.

Suddenly, the bird began to sing again, and the music that it made, in the clear light of the Theban dawn, did indeed seem golden.

Howard Carter returned the papers to their place and locked up the drawer. He had work to do. An excavation was awaiting him in the Valley of the Kings.

The water-boy grimaced and settled down his load. The day's work on the site had only just begun, and the great earthen jar was still full up to the brim. The boy rubbed his shoulders, then gazed enviously about him. He wanted the chance to dig, the chance to find the hidden tomb of gold. Carrying water about all day, running and fetching for the older men, what hope did he have of finding anything at all?

He scuffed the dirt before him idly with his toes. Scratching at it, he felt flat rock just beneath. He crouched down and began to sweep more energetically, using his hands. As he exposed it, the rock seemed to fall suddenly away.

One of the workmen called out to the boy, demanding water, but the boy ignored him. The workman crossed to him, angry, his hand upraised. Then all at once his arm dropped back by his side as he gazed in silence at what the boy had exposed.

There was a step. It had been hewn from the rock. It seemed to lead downwards, down into the earth.

The silence still lay thick in the air, like the haze of white dust, when Howard Carter arrived at the site. The labourers were all staring at him, and he knew at once that something had been found. Ahmed Girigar, his foreman, stepped out from the crowd. He bowed, his face set, and pointed with his arm.

For a moment, Carter imagined that his heart had stopped: that all the Valley, the very sky, were melting and plunging into that single moment.

Then he nodded brusquely. Still silent, he passed through the line of workmen. As he did so he heard muttered amongst them, rising fast into cries of excitement and awe, that what had been found was 'the tomb of the bird'.

He had ordered the canary brought to the site, to encourage the workmen as they cleared away the rubble. It was also -Carter could not deny this to himself - a feeble attempt to calm his own raging nerves, for since his boyhood he had always been a lover of birds, and found in their singing a source of great comfort. But although his expression, that first long day and the next, appeared perfectly composed, his thoughts remained a tumult of terrors and wild hopes, and he barely heard the canary's song. Nothing filled his ears but the chink of spade upon rock, as slowly, step by step, a stairway was revealed.

It was almost sunset when the first part of a doorway was at last exposed. Howard Carter stood at the top of the steps, barely able to move, every nerve numbed by his sudden doubts. To be so close to a miraculous success . . . and then to be disappointed -- the horrible possibility shadowed all his imaginings. Yet his step remained measured as he slowly descended towards the door, and his face as granite-calm as it had been throughout the day.

His hands, though, were unsteady as he reached out to brush the dirt from the doorway. There was a seal upon it, he realised suddenly; and he began to shake so much that he had to rest his palms upon the ground. As he did so, he inspected the seal. He recognised it at once: a jackal triumphant above nine bound captives -- the motif of the necropolis of the Valley of the Kings.

Carter breathed in deeply. He had seen the symbol often enough before, stamped upon the other tombs of the Valley -- but they had all been plundered. He reached out to touch the block of stone before him now, to trace with his fingertip the pattern of the seal. Elsewhere, the guardianship of the jackal had been in vain; what reason to believe that it might not have been so here? Again, Carter began to sweep at the dirt upon the doorway, and as he did so he observed a heavy wooden lintel at the top of the block. At once he called for a pick and, using its point, very delicately began to carve out a peephole. When it was completed, he pulled a flashlight from his pocket, then narrowed his eyes and peered through the gap.

He could make out rubble. It was blocking a passageway. Stones had been tightly packed from the floor to the ceiling. There appeared no evidence of the rubble having ever been disturbed. Whatever lay beyond it was surely still in place.

Slowly, Carter lowered his flashlight. He rested his forehead against the dusty block of stone.

Something, clearly, was waiting to be found. Something which had been immured with the utmost care.

But what?

What?

Carter rocked back with sudden impatience on to his haunches. He had to know; he had to make certain. He began to sweep at the doorway again, examining it carefully for a different seal, one which would identify the owner of the tomb. It seemed impossible that it could not be there, for it had been the remembrance of a name, he knew, in the Ancients' philosophy, which had served to keep the soul of the departed alive. And who was to say, Carter thought with a sudden lurch of wonder, that such an assumption had not been correct -- that fame was indeed the truest immortality?

Still, though, he could find nothing exposed to his view, and even as he continued to sweep, he grew suddenly frantic with uncertainty. He began to scrabble at the dirt with his fingers, seeking to lay bare a further portion of the door -and then, as he did so, he suddenly froze. He had felt his fingers brush something and as he began work again, clearing the dirt now with all the care he could muster, he saw that he was exposing a tablet of baked clay. It appeared to be intact, stamped along one side with a line of hieroglyphics. Carter eased the tablet free. He rose to his feet, studying it carefully, his lips mouthing the words as he sought to make sense of the script.

It seemed to the workmen, studying their employer, that the colour had suddenly drained from his face.

'Please,' Ahmed Girigar, the foreman, asked, 'what is it, sir, what does it say?'

Carter appeared to start, and then his expression grew as frozen as it had been all that day. He made no

reply but, climbing the steps, reached for a cloth and carefully swaddled the tablet in its folds. Then he turned to the foreman as he gestured at the stairway. 'Fill it in,' he ordered. 'We can proceed no further until Lord Carnarvon has arrived. Fill it to the surface, then conceal the site with rocks. I want it to seem as though the tomb was never here.'

Not until late had Howard Carter ridden home. The cliffs had loomed steeping against the brightness of the stars, and upon the winding road which led from the Valley, lonely and abandoned, the shadow had seemed black with the silence of the dead. There had been no one to observe him, no one to glimpse the expression on his face. Yet only as he drew near to his house did Carter permit himself to relax the muscles in his jaw, to betray with a sudden smile his sense of triumph and joy. He remembered the guards he had left up on the site, the most trustworthy of his workmen, how excited they had seemed - almost, he thought, as excited as himself. He smiled once again. Almost - but not quite.

As he swung down from his saddle, he glanced about him as though to make certain that he was not somehow still lost within a dream. All, though, was just as he had left it that morning: his house a fragile oasis of green amidst the jagged rocks and dust, as near to the ancient realm of death as it was possible for any man to live. All still seemed silent, but Carter knew that here, away from the Valley, amidst his lovingly tended trees and straggling flowers, the night would be filled with the motions of life. He glanced up. He had heard the sudden beating of wings and saw a bird swooping at great speed then turning intricately, in pursuit of insects. It was well disguised, but Carter could recognise the mottling of the nightjar all the same, for there was not a bird in all Egypt which he did not know. '*Teyr-el-mat*' he murmured to himself, employing the phrase which the local Arabs used. 'Corpse-fowl', it meant -- a bird of ill-omen.

And at once he remembered what he had in his bag. He tried to look for the nightjar again, but it was gone, and so he turned instead into the house, carrying the bag. Feeling the weight of what lay wrapped up in its folds, he flushed with sudden uneasiness. He had always been proud to follow the highest standards of his profession, he thought, to work to illumine, not purloin, the hidden past - for what other justification could there be for the excavation of tombs, save that of the cause of enlightenment and science? Certainly, he reflected, he had never before removed an object from a dig, unlike many of his colleagues, richer, more amateur, less scrupulous than he. Yet on this one occasion surely, he had been justified in his action? He knew how superstitious the natives could be. He could not afford to lose them now, not when his goal was so tantalisingly near - not on account of foolish rumours and fears.

His servant appeared and at once Carter found himself gripping his bag more tightly, almost clutching it to his chest; then, muttering a brief salutation to the man, he hurried past. He continued briskly on his way through the house into the study; once arrived there, he closed the door and lit a lamp. All was silent. The canary, brought back earlier that evening, appeared asleep, and nothing stirred save the flickering shadows. Carter stood motionless a moment more in the wash of the lamp, then carried it to his desk and pulled up a chair. He laid his bag down before him and unfastened it; he reached inside. Very gently, he drew the tablet out.

He parted back the folds to expose it. As he did so, he realised that his heart was beating fast and that he had begun to twist the end of his moustache. Furious with himself, he sought to steady his nerves.

Such folly! He was a professional, a man of science! Had he fought so hard to gain that status for himself only to betray those efforts now, at the very climax of their success? Carter shook his head impatiently. He began to study the line of hieroglyphics again, tracing the pattern of each one with his finger. When he had finished, he sat back in his chair.

‘ “Death”,’ he whispered, ‘ “on swift wings will come, to whosoever toucheth the tomb of the Pharaoh”.’

The words still seemed to linger in the silence which followed.

He repeated the translation aloud once again -- and then, despite himself, he glanced suddenly round. He was certain he had heard something. A blind was stirring very gently in the breeze, but the room was empty and there was no one there. Carter rose briskly and crossed to the window. Outside everything was still, save for the twinkling of the stars in the warm velvet sky.

Carter returned to his chair. As he sat down again, his attention was caught by a statue on the desk, silhouetted by the flickering of the lamp. He reached for it. The statue was only small, carved from a block of the blackest granite, but the detail was exquisite -- as fresh, so Carter imagined, as when it had first been fashioned, almost three and a half millennia before. He gazed at the figure. Its face was a young man's, no more than twenty at the very most; yet for all its youth there was an implacability to the statue's stare, and a timelessness to its features, which made it seem a thing of death, barely human at all. In his hands the young man grasped the symbols of immortality, and upon his head he wore the regalia of a Pharaoh of Egypt. Carter gazed at the cobra still preserved upon the head-dress: the sacred *uraeus*, hooded and raised, poised to spit poison at the enemies of the King. *Wadjyt* -- the guardian of the royal tombs.

And suddenly, even as he thought this, Carter felt his dread start to evaporate and his mood of triumph and excitement to return. He laid the statue aside, and turned to inspect the tablet again. What could its imprecations mean, after all, save that what he had discovered was indeed a Pharaoh's tomb -- not just any Pharaoh's, but the very one he had long sworn to find? He glanced at the statue again, then felt in his pocket and drew out his keys. When he unlocked the bottom drawer of his desk, he saw to his relief that the faded papers were lying folded as he had left them. He drew them out and placed them gently on the tablet, then laid them back with the tablet at the rear of the drawer. He secured the lock. There they would stay until such time as Lord Carnarvon could arrive in Egypt. For now that the tomb had been located at last, there was much, Carter knew, he had sworn he would explain - to his patron at least, if to no one else. The secret had always been a burden to shoulder, and Carter realised - almost with surprise, for it was his custom to think of himself as a self-sufficient man -- that he would welcome the chance to share its weight at last.

He reached for a scrap of paper, then unscrewed the lid from the top of his pen. ‘NOVEMBER 4TH,’ he wrote down. ‘1922. TO LORD CARNARVON, HIGHCLERE CASTLE, HAMPSHIRE, ENGLAND.’ he paused a moment, then continued to write. ‘AT LAST HAVE MADE WONDERFUL DISCOVERY IN THE VALLEY. A MAGNIFICENT TOMB WITH SEALS INTACT. RE-COVERED SAME FOR YOUR ARRIVAL. CONGRATULATIONS. CARTER.’ He blotted the message. He would have the cable sent the following morning - as early as possible. Carter smiled grimly. He could endure to wait, but he had no wish needlessly to extend the torture of delay.

Before he retired to bed, he reached once again for the statue of the king and placed it upon the

message to serve as a paperweight. He was gazing into its face, holding the lantern aloft, when all of sudden the eyes appeared to blink. A trick of the light, though -- for even as Carter inspected the face more closely, he saw how its stare grew blank once again, the blackness deeper and more pitted by shadow.

There was much to keep him busy in the following days. Lord Carnarvon had wired back promptly: he would be arriving in Alexandria within the following fortnight, accompanied by his daughter, Lady Evelyn Herbert. He had lately been ill, he confessed, and was still somewhat under the weather; yet news of the tomb had been just the tonic he had needed. Both he and Lady Evelyn were filled with the utmost excitement.

That they might not be disappointed in their anticipation, Carter filled the two weeks with meticulous planning. There was equipment to be gathered and experts to be recruited, problems to be foreseen and opportunities second-guessed. Planning was all. Carter had not come so far, nor endured so long, to rush and stumble at the final fence. The steps to the doorway were buried under rubble; the tablet and his papers were locked within his drawer. In his mind too, he sought to keep them hidden, where they could not be disturbed nor even beheld.

In his sleep, though, in his nightmares, the bonds of self-restraint were easier to slip. Again and again Carter would dream that the steps had been unearthed. He would imagine himself standing before the doorway, now wholly exposed. In his hands would be the tablet, and its curse would seem written in symbols of blood. He would know that the seals had to stay unbroken -- but he would order the doorway opened all the same. As he did so, the tablet would shatter in his hands, and Carter would think himself suddenly awake. But the dust of the tablet would linger in the darkness, and seem to form the shadows of strange figures in his room.

Such nightmares, when he truly awoke from them, angered Carter. Drawn so near at last to the object of his quest, he discovered that he could not endure to be reminded of that mystery which had led him to the very doorway of the tomb, and which he had chosen to keep locked within the drawer of his desk. He began to blame his sense of guilt that he had ever removed the tablet from the sands; yet he knew he could not return it there, nor announce its discovery, for he was still unwilling to provoke the workmen's fears. Nor could he keep it upon his person, for he did not care to feel that he was somehow grown a thief. A vexing problem, exceedingly vexing -- and yet Carter knew that a solution had to be found.

For all the while, as the date of Lord Carnarvon's arrival drew nearer, so his dreams were growing steadily worse.

He had regretted bringing it almost at once. As it had done before, when he had brought it from the site of the discovery, the tablet weighed heavily in his bag. Carter shifted it from one hand to the other. A boy approached him, offering to take the portmanteau; but the very prospect of surrendering his precious burden made Carter grip it all the more tightly. He ordered the boy away.

He watched as the rest of his luggage was loaded upon the felucca. Only when all was readied did he

prepare to board the vessel himself. He clambered along the gang-plank and for a brief moment, just the briefest, he thought of turning round, taking the bag and its load back to his house. But he knew there could be no delay: he could not afford to miss the train, for Lord Carnarvon was expecting him in Cairo, and he only had three days to spare in the capital - there was no time to lose. So Carter continued up the gang-plank, greeting the captain and then taking his seat. He nestled the portmanteau by his side, and watched as the boat began to drift out from its moorings to join the widening flow of the Nile.

Carter shifted and looked about. He could see a night heron above him, soaring gracefully through the early-morning light, still abroad in the last half-hour before sunrise. Nervously, even as he watched the bird, Carter began to fiddle with his bag and, despite not meaning to, pressed on the catch. He opened it; peered inside; felt with his hand to support the evidence of his eyes, that the sheaf of papers were still where he had placed them, sealed within an envelope at the bottom of the bag.

Then, almost by accident, he brushed against the tablet with his fingertips. At the same moment he glanced round guiltily, to make certain that no one had been observing him. As stealthily as he could he drew out the tablet and rested it upon his lap, then stared over the side of the boat. The Nile was flowing deeply, its waters very dark.

Carter sat hunched a long while, frozen by his feelings of doubt and self-reproach. He knew that what he was planning was an act of cowardice, and worse -- a dereliction of all he had ever sought to be, a betrayal of every standard he held dear. He glanced back inside his bag, at the thick, sealed envelope, and shook his head. For almost twenty years the contents of that envelope had served to draw him on, strengthening his resolve, granting him self-belief, even when direct corroboration had been lacking. Now at last, so it seemed, proof of the manuscript's value lay upon his lap -- for what, after all, had the argument been, if not that the Pharaoh's tomb was indeed beneath a curse? Carter smiled to himself ruefully, and stroked his moustache. He knew, of course, that there was no need to take such nonsense literally. Indeed, it had been the very presence within the manuscript of fantastical wonders, and secrets born of long-abandoned superstitions, which had first persuaded him that it might hint at something more, for he had long since learned how the myths of an age can be as distinctive as their tombs, and just as important for the archaeologist to date.

Why then, knowing all that as he did, had he found himself so unsettled by the warning on the tablet? He glanced down at it once again. Had he simply lived too long with the manuscript, he wondered, with its worlds of mystery, and impossible powers? Had it touched him more than he had ever dared think?

Carter sighed. It was the dread that his reason might indeed have been affected, the dread that it might even come to inhibit his work, which had decided him in the end. He had been presumptuous in his fears of the workmen's superstitions; for his own, it appeared, were far more insidious a threat. Carter smiled faintly. If it took a single sacrifice to put them to rest, to appease them, well . . . the Ancients at least might have understood.

He glanced round again, to make certain that he was still not being watched. Satisfied, he raised the tablet from his lap. He rested it on the boat's edge . . . then let it drop. There was a soft splash. Carter stared behind him at where the tablet had sunk, as the boat glided on. The waters of the Nile flowed as silently as before. Only the night heron, disturbed by the noise, wheeled and cried in a startled manner as it flew away before the coming of the dawn.

At the same moment, in Carter's house, his servant was sitting on the front porch, listening to the notes of the canary in its cage, when suddenly there rose a faint, almost human cry. It was followed by a silence and the servant, straining to hear more, realised that even the canary's song had been stilled. He rose to his feet, then hurried to the room from where the scream had seemed to come. It was Mr Carter's study and upon entering it, almost instinctively, the servant turned to gaze at the cage.

It seemed filled by a monstrous form. As the servant drew nearer, he recognised the hood of a cobra, and saw that the canary was already limp within its jaws. A flicker passed through the cobra's coils, and it began to sway its head as though to strike once again. But then it reduced its hood and, dropping the bird, slipped out between the bars. As it glided towards him the servant backed against the desk, then watched in horror as the cobra drew nearer still. Fumbling desperately behind him, he found a small figurine; turning again, he raised it in his hand, but the cobra was already slipping past him, coiling up around the leg of the desk, then out through the window until, with a final, dismissive flicker of its tail, it was gone.

The servant pushed the desk aside, and hurried to the window to mark the cobra's progress across the empty yard outside. But he could see no trace of it, not even a trail left upon the dust. He shuddered suddenly, and muttered a prayer -- for it was as though the cobra had vanished into air.

He turned back and crossed to the cage. Reaching inside it, very gently, he scooped out the corpse of the bird. It was only as he did so that he realised he was still clutching the tiny figurine in his other hand, and as he inspected it, so his knuckles whitened even more. For he could recognise the statue now: it was a figure of the King whose tomb had been found, and was soon to be disturbed; whose head-dress bore the figure of a cobra upraised -- the King whose name, he had learned, had been Tut-ankh-Amen.

THE TALE OF THE SLEEPER IN THE SANDS

Letter from Howard Carter to Lord Carnarvon

The Turf Club, Cairo,
20 November 1922

My dear Lord Carnarvon,

You will know how I have ever enjoyed my time spent with you, and yet on this occasion above all others, how pleasant, how gloriously pleasant, has been the cause of our meeting with each other once again! Even so the best, I may venture to hope, is still to come and I shall duly await, with the keenest sense of anticipation, your following me onwards within the next two days. By then, I trust, all should be readied for yourself and Lady Evelyn, for my preparations here in Cairo have gone exceedingly well, and everything is now purchased which we shall require to complete our excavation. I am therefore confident that between your arrival in Thebes and the commencement of our work within the Valley of the Kings, there will be no cause for delay.

You asked me last night what I thought we might discover beyond the doorway of our - as yet - unidentified tomb. I hesitated then, in the company of others, to reply with due

confidence; but now, putting pen to paper, I dare to proclaim that we are indeed on the threshold of a magnificent discovery, one which may grant us immortality in the annals of archaeological science. Anything - literally anything -- may lie beyond the passageway. I do not speak only of artefacts or gold but of treasures, it may be a hundred times more valuable. For unless I am much mistaken, the tomb we have uncovered is that of King Tut-ankh-Amen; and if such should indeed prove to be the case, then we shall discover within it, I prophesy, the proofs of a great and ancient mystery. Once the tomb has been opened and its contents examined, our understanding of the past may be remarkably and forever changed.

You will doubtless wonder what inspires me to make such a boast, and all the more so when you recall the six years of failure we have had to endure -- barren, it must have seemed to you, of even the faintest promise. Yet you will recall as well my assurances, made with all the earnestness and vigour I could muster, that the Valley of the Kings had *not* been exhausted, and how when, this summer, you finally contemplated abandoning our work, I swore that I was certain that a tomb lay undisturbed. You did not then press me to justify myself, but did me the honour instead of accepting my word. I shall ever be grateful for that mark of trust, since it is certain that, but for your untiring generosity and constant encouragement, our labours would long ago have come to naught.

Now, though, let us trust, the hour of triumph is at hand. At such a moment, my continued silence can no longer be justified. Yet as you read the papers which I have given to you, it may be you will understand my former reticence, for the story they tell is certainly a strange one. I would not have cared to stake my reputation upon it - and yet without it, as you will see, I would never have dared to

believe that a Pharaoh's tomb could indeed lie undiscovered. Therefore -- please, if you can find the time, read the papers enclosed with this letter. Some are my own: biographical reminiscences -- composed over the course of the past month or so, once I had learned for certain that this season -- unless successful - would be my last in the Valley. The other stories have a stranger origin. They have been in my possession now for many years -- and yet you are the first to whom I have ever shown them. I do not, of course, need to ask you to keep silent about their contents. As you will doubtless understand once you have completed your perusal of them, the papers raise matters of considerable interest. Let us discuss them in confidence once you have joined me again at Thebes.

Until then, conserve all your energy and keep yourself well -- for I do not doubt we have a good deal of hard work still ahead of us! Yet how mightily we have laboured, and how long we have searched -- and now at last journey's end is drawing very near!

Look after yourself, my dear Lord Carnarvon. These papers are yours -- for so also is my success.

H.C.

Narrative composed by Howard Carter, early autumn 1922

Castle Carter,
Elwat el-Diban,
The Valley of the Kings.

I am not a man who thrives upon company, and yet tonight I feel - not despair, I would say - but rather the strangest compulsion to share my confidences and to justify the unfulfilled exertions of my career. Of course, should I finish this account I shall have to keep it locked from any prying eye, and yet even so it would do me good, I believe, tonight and over the course of succeeding nights, to imagine a colleague or a friend -- Lord Carnarvon, perhaps -- seated opposite me, able to listen to my words even as I commit them to paper.

Nor, I must hope -- even at this eleventh hour -- will they moulder forever in my drawer unread. It is true that King Tut-ankh-Amen and his tomb still defy my excavations -- yet though my final season in the Valley approaches, I remain confident. He shall be found - *he must be found* -- for to think otherwise would indeed be to despair of my entire career. I shall never marry, I fear, and yet in truth have been married for a long while to my hunt for this- tomb. For I realise now that I had been set upon Tut-ankh-Amen's trail,

without my ever knowing it, within the earliest months of my arrival in Egypt -- and indeed, it may be before even that occasion, for I recollect now an event in my youth, seemingly trivial and yet serving so it strikes me at this distant remove, almost as a portent of much which was to come. It is not surprising that I failed to understand this at the time, for my prospects then were limited and circumscribed, and my passions confined to a self-taught knowledge of birds -not a great deal of use, sadly, to one having to make his way in the world. Indeed my education, as I have always regretted, was miserably incomplete, and yet there was no help for it, for there were bills to be paid and I had

been set to earn my living at a very tender age. I did so at first as an assistant to my father, who worked as an illustrator in London and a portraitist in the country, a mode of employment which necessitated staying at many grand country residences. My favourite, and the one where my father was most employed, was Didlington Hall in the county of Norfolk -- for the family who lived there possessed both great talent and great taste, nor did they believe that quality need necessarily be determined by good birth. Certainly, they were gracious enough to recognise within me certain talents as an artist, and so to give me the run of much of their house, for they were wonderful collectors and their every room and corridor seemed adorned with treasures. To my youthful eyes, such a trove of riches seemed a fairy tale made true, and it soon became my ambition - no, my most passionate dream -- to hunt out and recover such marvels for myself.

Yet though generous and open in all other matters, there was one room to which the family barred my entry, for I was warned that its contents were especially precious. Naturally, I sought to respect their wishes - but equally naturally my interest was piqued, for human nature, I suppose, is always what it is, and all the more so when that nature is a child's.

So it was that in the end, like Bluebeard's wife, I could no longer hold out against my curiosity and crept away, while my father was occupied with his painting, to inspect the secret room. I discovered, to my surprise, that the door was unlocked and, opening it stealthily, I passed inside. The room beyond was in darkness, and for several seconds I could make out nothing at all. Feeling my way along the side of the wall, therefore, I reached for a curtain and pulled it aside, allowing a shaft of sunlight into the room. At once I gasped in wonder and surprise, as I viewed the collection of objects before me. Never had I seen such strangeness before! There were figures of stone and clay and gold, pictures painted on panels of wood, and the body of a mummy swathed in tight cloth -- laid out within its coffin, for all the world as though it were asleep. The idea inspired in me a remarkable fascination, and a shiver of mingled dread and delight. I approached the mummy and gazed at it in stupefaction for a long while, then went from object to object, inspecting each one with the minutest attention. What a bizarre nature these people must have had, I thought, what bizarre patterns of behaviour, and assumptions, and beliefs, to have created such things -- and yet, as was evident, they had been human, just like me!

Of course, lost in my astonishment, I was at length discovered in the room -- and yet, such was the kindness of my hosts and so evident, no doubt, the brightness in my eye, that I was not punished but encouraged in my enthusiasm. During the next few years, such became my taste for Egyptian art that I came to have the greatest longing to visit Egypt itself. It was now that I regretted my poverty all the more, and my lack of education too, for in truth I knew nothing of Egyptology save what I had seen at Didlington Hall, and so my understanding of it continued very small. Yet in the end, at the age of seventeen, it was to be my skill in draughtsmanship which gave me my chance to journey there, for it had been decided that a survey was required of all that country's monuments before the art upon their walls began to crumble into dust, and I was recommended by the kindness of my patrons for the post. It was not as an excavator, then, nor as anyone with any claims to specialist knowledge, but rather as a humble copyist that I first of all entered an Egyptian tomb.

What paintings I discovered there! And again, in the next tomb, and again after that -- endless galleries of wonder and beauty! Alone amidst such work, with the darkness illumined only by a feeble torch, I felt all those emotions I had experienced years before amidst the private collection at Didlington Hall, yet multiplied now a thousand times, for I was standing where the Ancients had once

stood themselves, and this affected me more strongly than I had ever imagined possible. I found myself impressed by a profoundest sense of timelessness, so that I would almost forget the long roll of centuries and imagine that the figures before me were freshly painted - or even, sometimes, alive upon the wall!

I recall, for instance, one example in particular which somehow served to place all my feelings on the matter into focus. It happened one afternoon that I had been copying the painted image of a hoopoe. When I had finished my work for the day, I walked to the entranceway to the tomb where I saw, to my astonishment, a living example of the very same bird -- its plumage, its posture, the angle of its head precisely the same! I felt almost shaken by the coincidence; and all the more so when, having mentioned it to my superior on the surveying team, Mr Percy Newberry, he told me that to the Ancients the hoopoe had been a bird of magical significance. I answered him that I could well believe it - for indeed, I had felt a little touched by magic myself! The idea that both I and an artist who had lived more than 4,000 years before my time could have observed and represented the same species of bird struck me with the force of a thunderclap -- and I felt once again the strangest sense of how the present and the distant past might yet be linked. Inspired by such fancies, I found my own work steadily prospering and my fascination with the world of ancient Egypt, my concern to penetrate its mysteries, growing all the more. Nor did I ever cease to be struck, copying the figures before me, by how familiar they seemed -- and yet, at the same moment, how very haunting and strange.

I mentioned this seeming paradox to Mr Newberry one day. He gazed at me narrowly, then asked me what I thought the explanation might be. I answered him, somewhat hesitantly, that it was perhaps a reflection upon the formalised nature of the art: that we soon grew to recognise the conventions which had governed it, while never ceasing to find them exotic. Newberry nodded slowly. 'And yet the strangest Egyptian art,' he replied, 'certainly which I have seen, is also the art in which the conventions are most radically overthrown. Some have called the result life-like.' He paused, then made a face. 'I call it grotesque.'

'Indeed?' I asked, intrigued.

'Yes,' said Newberry hurriedly. I wanted to ask him more; but he rose to his feet, and even as I opened my mouth he cut me short. 'Grotesque,' he repeated, then walked briskly away. I watched him leave, puzzled by his abruptness -- for I had always found him a most communicative man. I wondered what the art could be which had affected him in such a way, but in the days which followed I chose not to press him, and Newberry himself did not mention it again. But then, shortly before Christmas, when we were due for a break from our work upon the tombs, Newberry approached me in a confidential manner and asked me if I would care to make a short trip across the desert. Not yet having left the cultivated borders of the Nile, I replied that nothing would give me greater pleasure, and indeed I felt flattered, for I was only one of three assistants upon the site and Newberry had sworn me, in offering the invitation, not to repeat it to the other two. Still, though, it seemed I was not altogether trusted, for when I asked him what our destination was to be, Newberry would only tap the side of his nose. 'You shall see,' was all he would add.

We left that same afternoon upon camels. I had never ridden upon such a beast before, and my body was very soon aching all over. Newberry must have observed my discomfort, for he laughed at me and told me I would soon be distracted from all thoughts of my bruises. Again, I pressed him to tell me what, but he continued reticent. Instead, he urged his camel onwards and together, lumbering and

swaying along the dusty track, we had soon left the palm groves of the Nile behind and passed into the desert. I was astonished by the suddenness of the transformation: one moment there had been cattle, and crops, and trees, the next nothing but a vast expanse of rock and sand. The dunes would sometimes be skimmed by a blast of hot wind, the dust lifted in a momentary veil, but otherwise all was deathly still. It was as though the very world had ended, and I at once understood, gazing out at the fiery sands, why for the Ancient Egyptians the colour of evil had been red.

Certainly, the landscape through which we rode -- savage and barren, and littered with boulders -- might have seemed a fitting haunt for restless demons, and I felt something almost like relief when we suddenly joined the edge of a cliff and saw the ribbon of the Nile once again below us, fringed with the green of fields and trees. We continued to follow the edge of the cliff, until at length it curved away from the river and we saw before us, hollowed out to form a natural amphitheatre, the crescent of a sandy plain. There appeared nothing of great interest upon it, only scrub and the odd low pebble-strewn mound; but I could see, toiling in the centre of the plain, gangs of white-clad workmen and, just beyond them, a line of baked-mud huts. We began to descend the cliff towards them, and as we did so, unable to restrain my curiosity any further, I demanded to know from Newberry what it was we had come to see. He answered me by sweeping outwards with his arm. 'This is known today as the plain of El-Amarna,' he replied, 'but its ancient name was Akh-et-Aten, and there once stood here, though for barely fifteen years, the capital city of a Pharaoh of Egypt.'

'Indeed?' I pointed towards the workmen. 'Then that is what is being excavated here?'

I saw a gleam of excitement in Newberry's eyes as he nodded.

'Who is leading it?' I asked.

'Mr Petrie,' he replied.

'Not Mr Flinders Petrie?'

'The very same.'

I heard this with considerable interest. Of course, I had known of that celebrated archaeologist even before my arrival in Egypt, for he had long been the dominant figure in his field. In Cairo, though, during the few days I had passed there, I had been fortunate enough to meet with him and to learn some of his opinions on Egyptology. He had struck me then as a man of considerable eccentricity, but also of remarkable discernment and vision, and so I welcomed the chance to see him at his work. As we approached the line of mud huts, Newberry called out his name and I saw -emerging from the doorway, his black beard vivid against the glare of the sands -- the figure I remembered so well from before.

Yet he greeted us with no particular show of enthusiasm, making it perfectly plain that we had distracted him from his work, and asking us brusquely what our purpose was. Newberry answered that he had heard reports of a find. Petrie grunted noncommittally. 'Well,' he muttered, 'since you have ridden all this way, you had best come and see it.' First, though, he demanded that we descend from our mounts, for it was an eccentricity of his that he would never ride anywhere but always go on foot and I, for one, was glad to leave my camel behind. We trudged together towards some distant mound, Petrie muttering as we did so about the iniquities of the French. This was a favourite topic of his, it

seemed, for the French, then as now, had a vice-like grip upon the country's *Service des Antiquites* and were determined, so Petrie claimed, to thwart his projects at every turn. 'Can you believe it,' he muttered, 'but they almost denied me the concession to dig here? *Me -- Flinders Petrie!* And even as it is, I cannot excavate anywhere but here, upon the plain.' I noticed that Newberry grew pale at this and gazed around at the cliffs, almost as though he feared to see them crawling with Frenchmen. There was no one there, of course -- but I found myself wondering all the more what his interest in this strange site could be.

I was soon to find out, and soon to discover what it was he hoped to find. Here, though, let me pause, for I have suddenly realised how it is grown very late, and there is work -- hard work! -- to be done in the morning. Let me resume, then -- if my labours have not been too exhausting! -- when I can, tomorrow night.

So then - to continue - the plain of El-Amarna. As we drew near to our destination, Petrie began to break into a trot. 'This was once the Great Palace,' he proclaimed as he ran up the side of the mound, then back down again to seize me by my arm. 'You, Carter,' he said. 'Are you not a painter?' But he did not wait for an answer, and I found myself being tugged across a series of mounds, still at a trot, until we came to a halt at last before a walkway of planks. It had clearly been raised with meticulous care, and I remembered Petrie's dictum, delivered to me in Cairo, that an archaeologist's duty was not only to uncover but also to be the guardian of the past. 'Come,' he said, still tugging on my arm. I followed him on to the walkway. 'There,' he said, jabbing downwards with his forefinger. 'If you are truly an artist, then tell me -- what do you make of that?'

I gazed down in wonder, and not a little awe, at a pavement painted with the most exquisite designs. They had all been drawn from the beauties of nature: fish swam in lotus-filled pools, spotted cattle gambolled through fields, and cats lay stretched with eyes half-closed in the sun. Above such beasts, everywhere, seated on trees or rising up on the wing, were birds, and it was these which attracted my particular attention, for I found that I could identify almost every one. Swallows were there, and kingfishers, geese and ducks, ibises and hoopoes, all the varied birdlife which characterised the Nile. And with what freshness had they been represented, with what vivid accuracy! Certainly, in my limited experience of Egyptian art, I had seen nothing to compare with these paintings, neither for the pleasure they suggested in the world of living things nor for their exquisite naturalism of style. I turned in surprise to Newberry. 'But these are not grotesque!' I exclaimed. 'These are very miracles of delicacy!'

'Naturally,' Petrie grunted. 'It is the most important discovery, artistically, which I have ever made.'

Newberry nodded slowly. 'Then it must suggest,' he murmured, 'that the Pharaoh who commissioned such a work, the Pharaoh who desired to live in such a place, was even more extraordinary a man than we had hitherto thought.'

For see -- no chariots, no armies, no violent scenes of war. Only -- yes . . .' -- his eyes grew wide - 'the richness of life.'

Still rapt, he continued to gaze at the floor and even Petrie, surveying his find, seemed to lose some of his former gruffness. He suddenly smiled, with something almost like pride. 'He was clearly a most

extraordinary man.'

I glanced at him. 'Who was?'

'Why, the Pharaoh.'

'Which Pharaoh?'

Petrie's eyebrows bristled with evident surprise 'Why, Newberry' he exclaimed, 'you mean you have not told your assistant of Akh-en-Aten?'

'He is very new to Egypt,' answered Newberry defensively. 'You know full well that I do not tell just anyone of my hopes for this place.'

'Your hopes?' Petrie laughed dismissively. 'You are wasting your time on that particular score.'

'I cannot believe so.'

'I tell you, the French have the concession to all the cliffs hereabouts. They will have got to the tomb

There was an angry silence.

'Got to what tomb?' I dared to ask.

Newberry glanced at me, hesitation still in his eyes.

'Please,' I protested. I turned back to gaze down at the floor. 'If there is a mystery relating to this Akh-en-Aten, then I would dearly love to hear more about it.' I gestured towards the exquisite paintings. 'For anyone who could have delighted in the beauty of such animals and birds is surely worthy of further study'

Petrie laughed suddenly, and clapped me on the shoulder. 'Well, you are a good-natured lad,' he exclaimed, 'and if you are concerned to know more about the Heretic King, then I shall tell you what I can, for so much at least is public property'

'"The Heretic King"?' I asked.

'Indeed,' Petrie answered. 'For it was not in his taste alone that Akh-en-Aten was a rebel.' He clapped me on the shoulder again; then, with a sideways glance at Newberry, he began to steer me down the side of the mound and towards a further series of planks and tents. 'We found it this morning,' he said as he lifted a flap and gestured towards a fragment of stone resting against the far side of the tent. 'Sadly damaged, but not without interest all the same.'

I approached it uncertainly, Newberry with an eagerness he did not bother to conceal. We gazed at it together in silence; and then, after an interval of several moments, Newberry glanced at me. 'You see?' he whispered. 'Did I not tell you it was remarkably grotesque?'

I did not reply, but continued to stare at the carving with astonishment. It represented a group of figures, clearly Egyptian but unlike anything I had ever seen before. There was a Pharaoh -- I could

tell as much from the insignia of his rank -- but this one did not seem like a hero or a god. Instead he appeared strangely, almost cruelly deformed: his belly and thighs were rounded like a woman's, his calves and arms preternaturally thin, while his skull was domed and his face very long, his lips very fleshy, and his eyes like almonds. Gazing upon this extraordinary figure, I felt the touch of something icy running down my spine, for it seemed more like the portrait of a eunuch than a man, and I could not deny that it was indeed repellent and -- yes -- grotesque. Yet its grotesqueness did not fully explain my response to it; for there seemed something more, something which was serving to counter my initial feelings of disgust. It took me a moment to realise what this was - and then I understood. For the Pharaoh was not the only figure represented on the tablet; he was surrounded by three girls, strange-skulled like himself, two by his feet, and one in his arms, whom the Pharaoh was kissing very gently on her brow. I thought of the tombs in which I had been working, and of the books I had studied; and of how I had seen nothing in Egyptian art, nothing at all, to compare with such a tender and domestic scene of love. 'They are his daughters?' I asked.

Petrie nodded. 'Affection for his family, it would appear, was held up as the Pharaoh's great ideal of life. In the context of royal portraiture, that is something utterly extraordinary and new.'

'And why is the style of art so very strange?'

Petrie shrugged. 'Who can know what the reason was? Something remarkable, certainly, to have overturned the ancient traditions of his people.'

'There are clues,' said Newberry hurriedly. 'Scattered all about us.' He glanced at Petrie. 'Is that not so?'

'Why' -- Petrie swept with his hand -- 'this whole vast site is a clue.'

'Indeed?' I gazed out through the tent at the sands and scrub of the plain beyond. 'But I can see nothing.'

'Exactly!' Petrie nodded, then swept his hand again towards the barren plain. 'You can see nothing - just as Akh-en-Aten himself would have seen nothing when he first arrived here to have his city built. Yet he already had a rich and splendid capital in Thebes, beautified by his forefathers over many years -- for Akh-en-Aten was the heir to Egypt's greatest kings, and Thebes itself was at its very apogee of wealth. Why, then, did Akh-en-Aten choose to abandon it? Why come to this barren spot, more than two hundred miles from any city at all?'

I gazed at him in bemusement, then shook my head. 'I confess, I cannot imagine a reason.'

Petrie narrowed his eyes. 'You have not yet, I assume, had the chance to visit the site of Thebes?'

'Not yet.'

'Then I trust that one day you will have the opportunity. For when you go there, you will discover that its crowning glory is the temple of Karnak, a place of stupefying, overwhelming size, a place still so vast, despite the ravages of time, that you will wonder by what power it was ever built. And yet indeed, the answer is quite simple -- it was built with the tribute paid to superstition. Karnak was the home to Amen-Ra, the King of Egypt's great galaxy of gods -- and therefore the focus of all the

country's hopes and fears.'

'And yet Akh-en-Aten . . .'

'Abandoned it.' A faint smile flickered beneath Petrie's moustache as he knelt down almost tenderly beside the fragment of stone. 'For did I not tell you,' he asked, looking up again, 'that he had been a rebel against more than just the conventions of art?'

'What . . .' I frowned -- 'so he abandoned the worship of Amen-Ra as well?'

'Proscribed him. Erased his name throughout the length of the land. That of Amen, and Osiris, and all the gods, all the ancient and myriad divinities - save only one . . .' Petrie paused and turned again to gaze at the carving. 'Save only one.' He pointed to the top of the stone, where a fragment had broken away. There were still traces there of what appeared to be hands raised in blessing over the head of the King, the arms radiating downwards like the spokes of a wheel. 'These represent the rays of the sun,' said Petrie, pointing to what I had mistaken for arms. 'The other half of the stone would have portrayed its disk.'

I gazed at the fragment's broken edge. 'So that was Akh-en-Aten's god?'

Petrie nodded. 'The sun -- the Aten - the life-giving Aten, in whose honour the Pharaoh even changed his name. For once, like his father, he had been Amen-hetep -- "Amen is content" -- but when he came here such a title would no longer do. "Akh-en-Aten".' Petrie gazed a moment more at the figure of the King, then lumbered back to his feet. 'Which means, very simply -- "the Glory of the Sun".'

He stepped out from the tent. Newberry and I joined him, and we stood there together in silence for a while. Beyond the dust-humped mounds of El-Amarna and the silhouetted palm trees of the distant Nile, the sky was clouding into dusk, and I knew that all of us were gazing at the red disk of the sun. "Living in Truth",' murmured Petrie at length, 'that was Akh-en-Aten's motto - "*Ankh em maat*". And truthful, I think, he could indeed claim to be, when he chose to enshrine the sun's radiant energy. There is not a rag of superstition or of falsity to be found in such a worship, but rather a philosophy which our own modern science can confirm. For what is the sun indeed, if not the source of all life, power and force in our world?'

Newberry shivered suddenly. 'And yet still,' he said, pointing, 'you see how it sets.'

Petrie glanced at him strangely. 'Yes.' He grunted. 'Yet only so that it may rise once again.'

Newberry did not answer, and we left soon afterwards, for the shadows were indeed beginning to lengthen. Petrie accompanied us to our camels, and as we walked Newberry extracted solemn promises from our host that he would keep nothing from us of what he might find. Yet still the precise object of Newberry's ambitions was kept veiled from me, and I began to despair that it might ever be revealed. Once we had mounted our steeds, however, he did not retrace the path by which we had arrived but rather spurred his camel along the side of the cliffs, so that he remained upon the plain, following the edge of its curve. I assumed that this meant he had something more to show to me, and so I urged my camel after him and, once by his side, dared to ask him again what it was he hoped to find.

Newberry shifted in his saddle to inspect the distant tents and mounds of the excavation. 'Petrie is a great archaeologist,' he said at last. 'He has a flair for the minutiae of history. He can erect whole structures of understanding from the fragment of a pot. And yet . . .' - he turned again to face me -- 'there are those who hunt prizes much greater than pots.'

'You are one of them, I presume?'

Newberry nodded abruptly; and I could see how, despite the shadow of the cliff, his eyes were glinting brightly. 'My God, Carter,' he exclaimed suddenly, as though his words were a torrent barely dammed until that moment, 'have you ever thought, ever considered, how little we understand of the Ancients? Yes, Petrie digs his mounds, and temples, and pots, but what do they truly tell us? No more than a skull can tell us of what a dead man once dreamed. And what dreams - what wondrous dreams! -- the people who dwelt in this land must have had. Those are what I hunt!' In his passion he had reached across from his saddle, and now he pulled upon my arm. 'The long-forgotten mysteries of those ancient times!'

'Mysteries?' I frowned at him. 'I don't understand. What can you mean?'

Newberry checked himself as though suddenly embarrassed. 'The Greeks spoke of them.' His tone was more reserved and sober once again. 'Even the Egyptians themselves, in dark, uncertain hints, in terms of nervous awe. Of the wisdom possessed by the priests -- something ancient, very ancient, and impossibly strange.' He swallowed, then looked away. 'Nor, I believe . . .' he swallowed again -- 'the rumours that I spoke of. . . they are not altogether dead.'

'What do you mean?' I exclaimed a second time.

'The peasants hereabouts - the *fellahin* . . .' - he turned back to me -- 'they too have strange stories.'

'Of what?'

Newberry shook his head.

'I am intrigued,' I continued, 'but I can scarcely believe . . .'

'What? That the past might run so deep?'

I did not answer him, astonished by the sudden violence of his tone. Newberry must have observed my look of surprise, for he reached out again and gently squeezed my arm. 'History around here is like the Nile itself he said, more calmly now. 'An eternal, ceaseless flow. Statues and pots lie preserved beneath the sands. Why should not traditions linger on as well?'

I trusted that my expression did not betray my feelings of doubt. 'And what is the particular tradition you have heard?'

'That there is a tomb hereabouts, still hidden, the object of a curse.' Newberry paused. 'A tomb which had once belonged to a King.'

'Akh-en-Aten?'

Newberry shrugged very faintly. ‘This is what the folk tales report of the King. He had not been a worshipper of idols like the other Pharaohs, but rather a true Muslim; for he had believed in Allah, the one and only God. In the name of this God, the King had driven all the demons from the land, and their priests from the temples which they had stained with living blood. But the ambitions of the King betrayed him in the end, for he was afraid of death and wished to live for ever; and so he sought to discover the hidden name of God. He fell like Lucifer, whom the peasants hereabouts know as Iblis, Prince of the Jinn. A curse was laid upon his tomb that he, who had sought eternal life, should now for ever be restless in death. And so he remains even to this day, a demon whose breath is the winds of the desert -- and the womenfolk scare their children with his tale.’

He paused, then smiled. ‘I apologise,’ he murmured, suddenly diffident, ‘for the perhaps melodramatic nature of my tone. Yet it is an intriguing story, I think you will agree.’

‘But. . .’ I frowned, and shook my head. ‘A myth, surely?’

‘And what are myths, if not the expression of some hidden or forgotten truth?’

Yet . . . the vast length of time we are talking about -- what exactly were Akh-en-Aten’s dates?’

‘He reigned, it is thought, around 1350 BC

‘Then how could the tradition possibly have been preserved from such a time?’

‘Oh, with the greatest ease,’ answered Newberry airily. ‘Arab folk tales are directly descended from the traditions of Ancient Egypt. If you do not believe me, then you need only compare the Westcar Papyrus with the cycle of “The Arabian Nights”.’

Never then having heard of the Westcar Papyrus, I did not know how to reply to this assertion; but I must still have looked doubtful, for Newberry began impatiently to list the parallels between Akh-en-Aten and the peasants’ folk tale king -- how they had both sought to overthrow an ancient priestcraft, how they had both been the worshippers of a single god . . .

‘And his end?’ I interrupted him. ‘What did happen to Akh-en-Aten in the end?’

‘We cannot be certain,’ Newberry answered promptly. ‘But his revolution’ -- he shifted in his saddle to gaze back at the dusty, abandoned plain -- ‘it clearly did not last.’

‘And his children?’

Newberry frowned. ‘What do you mean?’

‘In the fragment Petrie showed us - the King appeared surrounded by his children. He must have had heirs.’

‘Two sons, Petrie thinks.’

‘Then what happened to them? Why did they not carry on their father’s work?’

‘Again’ -- Newberry shrugged -- ‘we cannot be certain. The first son, it would appear from the

evidence of Petrie's excavations, reigned here no more than two or three years. And then in the second son's reign - we can be confident of this much at least - El-Amarna was abandoned, and the court restored to Thebes.'

'Why can we be so confident?'

'Because, just as his father had changed his name, so did this King as well. He had first been known as Tut-ankh-Aten -- or in English, "the Living Image of the Sun". But when he returned to Thebes, and the influence of the priests of Karnak, such a title was clearly impossible to keep. So you can imagine what new name he chose to adopt.'

'Indeed?'

'Think, Carter, think.'

I shook my head.

'Why what else could it have been' - Newberry paused to smile - 'but Tut-ankh-Amen? "The Living Image of Amen" -- you see?' His smile grew wistful. '*Tut-ankh-Amen.*'

And so I heard, for the first time, the name of that King who was one day to shadow all my ambitions and hopes, and become in due course the very object of my life. And indeed, almost as though in witness of the moment, even as Newberry pronounced the fateful name so we rounded an outcrop of jagged rock and I saw ahead of us, guarding the entrance to a narrow ravine, a carving hewn out from the wall of the cliff. Newberry gestured to it. 'You can see here,' he proclaimed, 'what on Petrie's fragment had been incomplete.' I gazed up at the carving. Although still seated in my saddle, the figures it portrayed rose high beyond my eye-level. I recognised the Pharaoh, Akh-en-Aten, at once: his appearance was, if anything, more grotesque than it had seemed upon the earlier frieze. He was standing with arms outstretched to greet the welcoming rays of the sun. Two girls were behind him, very small, their appearance likewise even more bizarre than before. But there was also a second adult figure, a woman, who wore upon her head the crown of a queen; and she, although just as distorted in her features as the others, did not seem, for all that, grotesque in the least. Far from it - for the strangeness of her appearance lent her a loveliness which was both unsettling and profound, a beauty which seemed almost to be not of this world. I strained to inspect her more closely, puzzled by this mystery; and even as I urged my camel closer to the carving, so the angle of the sunlight changed and all the figures were stained a dark red, and then the beam itself was gone and the carving cast into darkness.

'We must hurry,' said Newberry. 'We do not want to be out in the desert late at night.' Yet even as he said this, he continued to stare up at the weird carving of the Pharaoh, as though he could not bear to look away. 'It would be a grand thing,' he whispered, 'to discover the tomb. A grand thing indeed.'

'And if we were successful' -- I paused -- 'what then? What do you hope to discover inside?'

It took Newberry a moment to reply. 'A darkness rendered light,' he answered at last, 'a mystery solved. For that the fate of Akh-en-Aten is a mystery, both science and legend can agree.'

I laughed. 'Legend claims that he never even rested in the tomb.'

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