

CLEOPATRA

INTRODUCTION

In the recesses of the desolate Libyan mountains that lie behind the temple and city of Abydus, the supposed burying place of the holy Osiris, a tomb was recently discovered, among the contents of which were the papyrus rolls whereupon this history is written. The tomb itself is spacious, but otherwise remarkable only for the depth of the shaft which descends vertically from the rock-hewn cave, that once served as the mortuary chapel for the friends and relatives of the departed, to the coffin-chamber beneath. This shaft is no less than eighty-nine feet in depth. The chamber at its foot was found to contain three coffins only, though it is large enough for many more. Two of these, which in all probability inclosed the bodies of the High Priest, Amenemhat, and of his wife, father and mother of Harmachis, the hero of this history, the shameless Arabs who discovered them there and then broke up.

The Arabs broke the bodies up. With unhallowed hands they tore the holy Amenemhat and the frame of her who had, as it is written, been filled with the spirit of the Hathors--tore them limb from limb, searching for treasure amidst their bones--perhaps, as is their custom, selling the very bones for a few piastres to the last ignorant tourist who came their way, seeking what he might destroy. For in Egypt the unhappy, the

living find their bread in the tombs of the great men who were before them.

But as it chanced, some little while afterwards, one who is known to this writer, and a doctor by profession, passed up the Nile to Abydos, and became acquainted with the men who had done this thing. They revealed to him the secret of the place, telling him that one coffin yet remained entombed. It seemed to be the coffin of a poor person, they said, and therefore, being pressed for time, they had left it unviolated. Moved by curiosity to explore the recesses of a tomb as yet unprofaned by tourists, my friend bribed the Arabs to show it to him. What ensued I will give in his own words, exactly as he wrote it to me:

"I slept that night near the Temple of Seti, and started before daybreak on the following morning. With me were a cross-eyed rascal named Ali--Ali Baba I named him--the man from whom I got the ring which I am sending you, and a small but choice assortment of his fellow thieves. Within an hour after sunrise we reached the valley where the tomb is. It is a desolate place, into which the sun pours his scorching heat all the long day through, till the huge brown rocks which are strewn about become so hot that one can scarcely bear to touch them, and the sand scorches the feet. It was already too hot to walk, so we rode on donkeys, some way up the valley--where a vulture floating far in the blue overhead was the only other visitor--till we came to an enormous boulder polished by centuries of action of sun and sand. Here Ali halted, saying that the tomb was under the stone. Accordingly, we dismounted, and, leaving the donkeys in charge of a fellah boy, went up

to the rock. Beneath it was a small hole, barely large enough for a man to creep through. Indeed it had been dug by jackals, for the doorway and some part of the cave were entirely silted up, and it was by means of this jackal hole that the tomb had been discovered. Ali crept in on his hands and knees, and I followed, to find myself in a place cold after the hot outside air, and, in contrast with the light, filled with a dazzling darkness. We lit our candles, and, the select body of thieves having arrived, I made an examination. We were in a cave the size of a large room, and hollowed by hand, the further part of the cave being almost free from drift-dust. On the walls are religious paintings of the usual Ptolemaic character, and among them one of a majestic old man with a long white beard, who is seated in a carved chair holding a wand in his hand.[*] Before him passes a procession of priests bearing sacred images. In the right hand corner of the tomb is the shaft of the mummy-pit, a square-mouthed well cut in the black rock. We had brought a beam of thorn-wood, and this was now laid across the pit and a rope made fast to it. Then Ali--who, to do him justice, is a courageous thief--took hold of the rope, and, putting some candles into the breast of his robe, placed his bare feet against the smooth sides of the well and began to descent with great rapidity. Very soon he had vanished into blackness, and the agitation of the cord alone told us that anything was going on below. At last the rope ceased shaking and a faint shout came rumbling up the well, announcing Ali's safe arrival. Then, far below, a tiny star of light appeared. He had lit the candle, thereby disturbing hundreds of bats that flitted up in an endless stream and as silently as spirits. The rope was hauled up again, and now it was my turn; but, as I declined to trust my neck to the hand-over-hand method of descent, the

end of the cord was made fast round my middle and I was lowered bodily into those sacred depths. Nor was it a pleasant journey, for, if the masters of the situation above had made any mistake, I should have been dashed to pieces. Also, the bats continually flew into my face and clung to my hair, and I have a great dislike of bats. At last, after some minutes of jerking and dangling, I found myself standing in a narrow passage by the side of the worthy Ali, covered with bats and perspiration, and with the skin rubbed off my knees and knuckles. Then another man came down, hand over hand like a sailor, and as the rest were told to stop above we were ready to go on. Ali went first with his candle--of course we each had a candle--leading the way down a long passage about five feet high. At length the passage widened out, and we were in the tomb-chamber: I think the hottest and most silent place that I ever entered. It was simply stifling. This chamber is a square room cut in the rock and totally devoid of paintings or sculpture. I held up the candles and looked round. About the place were strewn the coffin lids and the mummied remains of the two bodies that the Arabs had previously violated. The paintings on the former were, I noticed, of great beauty, though, having no knowledge of hieroglyphics, I could not decipher them. Beads and spiced wrappings lay around the remains, which, I saw, were those of a man and a woman.[+] The head had been broken off the body of the man. I took it up and looked at it. It had been closely shaved--after death, I should say, from the general indications--and the features were disfigured with gold leaf. But notwithstanding this, and the shrinkage of the flesh, I think the face was one of the most imposing and beautiful that I ever saw. It was that of a very old man, and his dead countenance still wore so calm and solemn, indeed, so awful

a look, that I grew quite superstitious (though as you know, I am pretty well accustomed to dead people), and put the head down in a hurry. There were still some wrappings left upon the face of the second body, and I did not remove them; but she must have been a fine large woman in her day.

[*] This, I take it, is a portrait of Amenemhat himself.--

Editor.

[+] Doubtless Amenemhat and his wife.--Editor.

"There the other mummy,' said Ali, pointing to a large and solid case that seemed to have been carelessly thrown down in a corner, for it was lying on its side.

"I went up to it and carefully examined it. It was well made, but of perfectly plain cedar-wood--not an inscription, not a solitary God on it.

"Never see one like him before,' said Ali. 'Bury great hurry, he no "mafish," no "fineesh." Throw him down here on side.'

"I looked at the plain case till at last my interest was thoroughly aroused. I was so shocked by the sight of the scattered dust of the departed that I had made up my mind not to touch the remaining coffin--but now my curiosity overcame me, and we set to work.

"Ali had brought a mallet and a cold chisel with him, and, having set the coffin straight, he began upon it with all the zeal of an experienced tomb-breaker. And then he pointed out another thing. Most mummy-cases are fastened by four little tongues of wood, two on either side, which are fixed in the upper half, and, passing into mortices cut to receive them in the thickness of the lower half, are there held fast by pegs of hard wood. But this mummy case had eight such tongues. Evidently it had been thought well to secure it firmly. At last, with great difficulty, we raised the massive lid, which was nearly three inches thick, and there, covered over with a deep layer of loose spices (a very unusual thing), was the body.

"Ali looked at it with open eyes--and no wonder. For this mummy was not as other mummies are. Mummies in general lie upon their backs, as stiff and calm as though they were cut from wood; but this mummy lay upon its side, and, the wrappings notwithstanding, its knees were slightly bent. More than that, indeed, the gold mask, which, after the fashion of the Ptolemaic period, had been set upon the face, had worked down, and was literally pounded up beneath the hooded head.

"It was impossible, seeing these things, to avoid the conclusion that the mummy before us had moved with violence since it was put in the coffin.

"'Him very funny mummy. Him not "mafish" when him go in there,' said Ali.

"Nonsense!" I said. 'Who ever heard of a live mummy?'

"We lifted the body out of the coffin, nearly choking ourselves with mummy dust in the process, and there beneath it half hidden among the spices, we made our first find. It was a roll of papyrus, carelessly fastened and wrapped in a piece of mummy cloth, having to all appearance been thrown into the coffin at the moment of closing.[*]

[*] This roll contained the third unfinished book of the history. The other two rolls were neatly fastened in the usual fashion. All three are written by one hand in the Demotic character.--Editor.

"Ali eyed the papyrus greedily, but I seized it and put it in my pocket, for it was agreed that I was to have all that might be discovered. Then we began to unwrap the body. It was covered with very broad strong bandages, thickly wound and roughly tied, sometimes by means of simple knots, the whole working the appearance of having been executed in great haste and with difficulty. Just over the head was a large lump. Presently, the bandages covering it were off, and there, on the face, lay a second roll of papyrus. I put down my hand to lift it, but it would not come away. It appeared to be fixed to the stout seamless shroud which was drawn over the whole body, and tied beneath the feet--as a farmer ties sacks. This shroud, which was also thickly waxed, was in one piece, being made to fit the form like a garment. I took a candle and examined the roll and then I saw why it was fast. The spices had congealed and glued it to the sack-like shroud. It was impossible to

get it away without tearing the outer sheets of papyrus.[*]

[*] This accounts for the gaps in the last sheets of the second roll. --Editor.

"At last, however, I wrenched it loose and put it with the other in my pocket.

"Then we went on with our dreadful task in silence. With much care we ripped loose the sack-like garment, and at last the body of a man lay before us. Between his knees was a third roll of papyrus. I secured it, then held down the light and looked at him. One glance at his face was enough to tell a doctor how he had died.

"This body was not much dried up. Evidently it had not passed the allotted seventy days in natron, and therefore the expression and likeness were better preserved than is usual. Without entering into particulars, I will only say that I hope I shall never see such another look as that which was frozen on this dead man's face. Even the Arabs recoiled from it in horror and began to mutter prayers.

"For the rest, the usual opening on the left side through which the embalmers did their work was absent; the finely-cut features were those of a person of middle age, although the hair was already grey, and the frame was that of a very powerful man, the shoulders being of an extraordinary width. I had not time to examine very closely, however, for within a few seconds from its uncovering, the unembalmed body began

to crumble now that it was exposed to the action of the air. In five or six minutes there was literally nothing left of it but a wisp of hair, the skull, and a few of the larger bones. I noticed that one of the tibiae--I forget if it was the right or the left--had been fractured and very badly set. It must have been quite an inch shorter than the other.

"Well, there was nothing more to find, and now that the excitement was over, what between the heat, the exertion, and the smell of mummy dust and spices, I felt more dead than alive.

"I am tired of writing, and this ship rolls. This letter, of course, goes overland, and I am coming by 'long sea,' but I hope to be in London within ten days after you get it. Then I will tell you of my pleasing experiences in the course of the ascent from the tomb-chamber, and of how that prince of rascals, Ali Baba, and his thieves tried to frighten me into handing over the papyri, and how I worsted them. Then, too, we will get the rolls deciphered. I expect that they only contain the usual thing, copies of the 'Book of the Dead,' but there may be something else in them. Needless to say, I did not narrate this little adventure in Egypt, or I should have had the Boulac Museum people on my track. Good-bye, 'Mafish Fineesh,' as Ali Baba always said."

In due course, my friend, the writer of the letter from which I have quoted, arrived in London, and on the very next day we paid a visit to a learned acquaintance well versed in Hieroglyphics and Demotic writing. The anxiety with which we watched him skilfully damping and unfolding

one of the rolls and peering through his gold-rimmed glasses at the mysterious characters may well be imagined.

"Hum," he said, "whatever it is, this is not a copy of the 'Book of the Dead.' By George, what's this? Cle--Cleo--Cleopatra----Why, my dear Sirs, as I am a living man, this is the history of somebody who lived in the days of Cleopatra, the Cleopatra, for here's Antony's name with hers! Well, there's six months' work before me here--six months, at the very least!" And in that joyful prospect he fairly lost control of himself, and skipped about the room, shaking hands with us at intervals, and saying "I'll translate--I'll translate it if it kills me, and we will publish it; and, by the living Osiris, it shall drive every Egyptologist in Europe mad with envy! Oh, what a find! what a most glorious find!"

And O you whose eyes fall upon these pages, see, they have been translated, and they have been printed, and here they lie before you--an undiscovered land wherein you are free to travel!

Harmachis speaks to you from his forgotten tomb. The walls of Time fall down, and, as at the lightning's leap, a picture from the past starts upon your view, framed in the darkness of the ages.

He shows you those two Egypts which the silent pyramids looked down upon long centuries ago--the Egypt of the Greek, the Roman, and the Ptolemy, and that other outworn Egypt of the Hierophant, hoary with years, heavy

with the legends of antiquity and the memory of long-lost honours.

He tells you how the smouldering loyalty of the land of Khem blazed up before it died, and how fiercely the old Time-consecrated Faith struggled against the conquering tide of Change that rose, like Nile at flood, and drowned the ancient Gods of Egypt.

Here, in his pages, you shall learn the glory of Isis the Many-shaped, the Executrix of Decrees. Here you shall make acquaintance with the shade of Cleopatra, that "Thing of Flame," whose passion-breathing beauty shaped the destiny of Empires. Here you shall read how the soul of Charmion was slain of the sword her vengeance smithied.

Here Harmachis, the doomed Egyptian, being about to die, salutes you who follow on the path he trod. In the story of his broken years he shows to you what may in its degree be the story of your own. Crying aloud from that dim Amenti[*] where to-day he wears out his long atoning time, he tells, in the history of his fall, the fate of him who, however sorely tried, forgets his God, his Honour, and his Country.

[*] The Egyptian Hades or Purgatory.--Editor.