

At Abdul Ali's Grave

By E. F. Benson

Luxor, as most of those who have been there will allow, is a place of notable charm, and boasts many attractions for the traveller, chief among which he will reckon an excellent hotel containing a billiard-room, a garden fit for the gods to sit in, any quantity of visitors, at least a weekly dance on board a tourist steamer, quail shooting, a climate as of Avilion, and a number of stupendously ancient monuments for those archeologically inclined. But to certain others, few indeed in number, but almost fanatically convinced of their own orthodoxy, the charm of Luxor, like some sleeping beauty, only wakes when these things cease, when the hotel has grown empty and the billard-marker "has gone for a long rest" to Cairo, when the decimated quail and the decimating tourist have fled northwards, and the Theban plain, Dana to a tropical sun, *is* a gridiron across which no man would willingly make a journey by day, not even if Queen Hatasoo herself should signify that she would give him audience on the terraces of Deir-el-Bahari. A suspicion however that the fanatic few were right, for in other respects they were men of estimable opinions, induced me to examine their convictions for myself, and thus it came about that two years ago, certain days toward the beginning of June saw me still there, a confirmed convert.

Much tobacco and the length of summer days had assisted us to the analysis of the charm of which summer in the south is possessed, and Weston — one of the earliest of the elect — and myself had discussed it at some length, and though we reserved as the principal ingredient a nameless something which baffled the chemist, and must be felt to be understood, we were easily able to detect certain other drugs of sight and sound, which we were agreed contributed to the whole. A few of them are here sub joined.

The waking in the warm darkness just before dawn to find that the desire for stopping in bed fails with the awakening.

The silent start across the Nile in the still air with our horses, who, like us, stand and sniff at the incredible sweetness of the coming morning without apparently finding it less wonderful in repetition.

The moment infinitesimal in duration but infinite in sensation, just before the sun rises, when the grey shrouded river is struck suddenly out of darkness, and becomes a sheet of green bronze.

The rose flush, rapid as a change of colour in some chemical combination, which shoots across the sky from east to west, followed immediately by the sunlight which catches the peaks of the western hills, and flows down like some luminous liquid.

The stir and whisper which goes through the world: a breeze springs up; a lark soars, and sings; the boatman shouts "Yallah, Yallah"; the horses toss their heads.

The subsequent ride.

The subsequent breakfast on our return.

The subsequent absence of anything to do.

At sunset the ride into the desert thick with the scent of warm barren sand, which smells like nothing else in the world, for it smells of nothing at all.

The blaze of the tropical night.

Camel's milk.

Converse with the fellahin, who are the most charming and least accountable people on the

face of the earth except when tourists are about, and when in consequence there is no thought but backsheesh.

Lastly, and with this we are concerned, the possibility of odd experiences.

The beginning of the things which make this tale occurred four days ago, when Abdul Mi, the oldest man in the village, died suddenly, full of days and riches. Both, some thought, had probably been somewhat exaggerated, but his relations affirmed without variation that he had as many years as he had English pounds, and that each was a hundred. The apt roundness of these numbers was incontestable, the thing was too neat not to be true, and before he had been dead for twenty-four hours it was a matter of orthodoxy. But with regard to his relations, that which turned their bereavement, which must soon have occurred, into a source of blank dismay instead of pious resignation, was that not one of these English pounds, not even their less satisfactory equivalent in notes, which, out of the tourist season, are looked upon at Luxor as a not very dependable variety of Philosopher's stone, though certainly capable of producing gold under favourable circumstances, could be found. Abdul Au with his hundred years was dead, his century of sovereigns — they might as well have been an annuity — were dead with him, and his son Mohamed, who had previously enjoyed a sort of brevet rank in anticipation of the event, was considered to be throwing far more dust in the air than the genuine affection even of a chief mourner wholly justified.

Abdul, it is to be feared, was not a man of stereotyped respectability; though full of years and riches, he enjoyed no great reputation for honour. He drank wine whenever he could get it, he ate food during the days of Ramadan, scornful of the fact, when his appetite desired it, he was supposed to have the evil eye, and in his last moments he was attended by the notorious Achmet, who is well known here to be practised in Black Magic, and has been suspected of the much meaner crime of robbing the bodies of those lately dead. For in Egypt, while to despoil the bodies of ancient kings and priests is a privilege for which advanced and learned societies vie with each other, to rob the corpses of your contemporaries is considered the deed of a dog. Mohamed, who soon exchanged the throwing of dust in the air for the more natural mode of expressing chagrin, which is to gnaw the nails, told us in confidence that he suspected Achmet of having ascertained the secret of where his father's money was, but it appeared that Achmet had as blank a face as anybody when his patient, who was striving to make some communication to him, went out into the great silence, and the suspicion that he knew where the money was gave way, in the minds, of those who were competent to form an estimate of his character, to a but dubious regret that he had just failed to learn that very important fact.

So Abdul died and was buried, and we all went to the funeral feast, at which we ate more roast meat than one naturally cares about at five in the afternoon on a June day, in consequence of which Weston and I, not requiring dinner, stopped at home after our return from the ride into the desert, and talked to Mohamed, Abdul's son, and Hussein, Abdul's youngest grandson, a boy of about twenty, who is also our valet, cook and housemaid, and they together woefully narrated of the money that had been and was not, and told us scandalous tales about Achmet concerning his weakness for cemeteries. They drank coffee and smoked, for though Hussein was our servant, we had been that day the guests of his father, and shortly after they had gone, up came Machmout.

Machmout, who says he thinks he is twelve, but does not know for certain, is kitchen-maid, groom and gardener, and has to an extraordinary degree some occult power resembling clairvoyance. Weston, who is a member of the Society for Psychical Research, and the tragedy of

whose life has been the detection of the fraudulent medium Mrs. Blunt, says that it is all thought-reading, and has made notes of many of Machmout's performances, which may subsequently turn out to be of interest. Thought-reading, however, does not seem to me to fully explain the experience which followed Abdul's funeral, and with Machmout I have to put it down to White Magic, which should be a very inclusive term, or to Pure Coincidence, which is even more inclusive, and will cover all the inexplicable phenomena of the world, taken singly. Machmout's method of unloosing the forces of White Magic is simple, being the ink-mirror known by name to many, and it is as follows.

A little black ink is poured into the palm of Machmout's hand, or, as ink has been at a premium lately owing to the last post-boat from Cairo which contained stationery for us having stuck on a sand-bank, a small piece of black American cloth about an inch in diameter is found to be a perfect substitute. Upon this he gazes. After five or ten minutes his shrewd monkey-like expression is struck from his face, his eyes, wide open, remain fixed on the cloth, a complete rigidity sets in over his muscles, and he tells us of the curious things he sees. In whatever position he is, in that position he remains without the deflection of a hair's breadth until the ink is washed off or the cloth removed. Then he looks up and says "Khahás," which means, "It is finished."

We only engaged Machmout's services as second general domestic a fortnight ago, but the first evening he was with us he came upstairs when he had finished his work, and said, "I will show you White Magic; give me ink," and proceeded to describe the front hall of our house in London, saying that there were two horses at the door, and that a man and woman soon came out, gave the horses each a piece of bread and mounted. The thing was so probable that by the next mail I wrote asking my mother to write down exactly what she was doing and where at half-past five (English time) on the evening of June 12. At the corresponding time in Egypt Machmout was describing speaking to us of a "sitt" (lady) having tea in a room which he described with some minuteness, and I am waiting anxiously for her letter. The explanation which Weston gives us of all these phenomena is that a certain picture of people I know is present in my mind, though I may not be aware of it, — present to my subliminal self, I think, he says, — and that I give an unspoken suggestion to the hypnotised Machmout. My explanation is that there isn't any explanation, for no suggestion on my part would make my brother go out and ride at the moment when Machmout says he is so doing (if indeed we find that Machmout's visions are chronologically correct). Consequently I prefer the open mind and am prepared to believe anything. Weston, however, does not speak quite so calmly or scientifically about Machmout's last performance, and since it took place he has almost entirely ceased to urge me to become a member of the Society for Psychological Research, in order that I may no longer be hidebound by vain superstitions.

Machmout will not exercise these powers if his own folk are present, for he says that when he is in this state, if a man who knew Black Magic was in the room, or knew that he was practising White Magic, he could get the spirit who presides over the Black Magic to kill the spirit of White Magic, for the Black Magic is the more potent, and the two are foes. And as the spirit of White Magic is on occasions a powerful friend — he had before now befriended Machmout in a manner which I consider incredible — Machmout is very desirous that he should abide long with him. But Englishmen it appears do not know the Black Magic, so with us he is safe. The spirit of Black Magic, to speak to whom it is death, Machmout saw once "between heaven and earth, and night and day," so he phrases it, on the Karnak road. He may be known, he told us, by the fact that he is of paler skin than his people, that he has two long teeth, one in each

corner of his mouth, and that his eyes, which are white all over, are as big as the eyes of a horse.

Machmout squatted himself comfortably in the corner, and I gave him the piece of black American cloth. As some minutes must elapse before he gets into the hypnotic state in which the visions begin, I strolled out on to the balcony for coolness. It was the hottest night we had yet had, and though the sun had set three hours, the thermometer still registered close on 100°. Above, the sky seemed veiled with grey, where it should have been dark velvety blue, and a fitful puffing wind from the south threatened three days of the sandy intolerable khamseen. A little way up the street to the left was a small café in front of which were glowing and waning little glowworm specks of light from the water pipes of Arabs sitting out there in the dark. From inside came the click of brass castanets in the hands of some dancing-girl, sounding sharp and precise against the wailing bagpipe music of the strings and pipes which accompany these movements which Arabs love and Europeans think so unpleasing. Eastwards the sky was paler and luminous, for the moon was imminently rising, and even as I looked the red rim of the enormous disc cut the line of the desert, and on the instant, with a curious aptness, one of the Arabs outside the café broke out into that wonderful chant—

“I cannot sleep for longing for thee, O full moon.
Far is thy throne over Mecca, slip down, O beloved, to me.”

Immediately afterwards I heard the piping monotone of Machmout’s voice begin, and in a moment or two I went inside.

We have found that the experiments gave the quickest result by contact, a fact which confirmed Weston in his explanation of them by thought transference of some elaborate kind, which I confess I cannot understand. He was writing at a table in the window when I came in, but looked up.

“Take his hand,” he said; “at present he is quite incoherent.”

“Do you explain that?” I asked.

“It is closely analogous, so Myers thinks, to talking in sleep. He has been saying something about a tomb. Do make a suggestion, and see if he gives it right. He is remarkably sensitive, and he responds quicker to you than to me. Probably Abdul’s funeral suggested the tomb!”

A sudden thought struck me.

“Hush!” I said, “I want to listen.”

Machmout’s head was thrown a little back, and he held the hand in which was the piece of cloth rather above his face. As usual he was talking very slowly, and in a high staccato voice, absolutely unlike his usual tones.

“On one side of the grave,” he pipes, “is a tamarisk tree, and the green beetles make *fantasia* about it. On the other side is a mud wall. There are many other graves about, but they are all asleep. This is *the* grave, because it is awake, and it moist and not sandy.”

“I thought so,” said Weston. “It is Abdul’s grave he is talking about.”

“There is a red moon sitting on the desert,” continued Machmout, “and it is now. There is the puffing of khamseen, and much dust coming. The moon is red with dust, and because it is low.”

“Still sensitive to external conditions,” said Weston. “That is rather curious. Pinch him, will you?”

I pinched Machmout; he did not pay the slightest attention.

“In the last house of the street, and in the doorway stands a man. Ah! ah!” cried the boy suddenly, “it is the Black Magic he knows. Don’t let him come. He is going out of the house,” he

shrieked, "he is coming — no, he is going the other way towards the moon and the grave. He has the Black Magic with him, which can raise the dead, and he has a murdering knife, and a spade. I cannot see his face, for the Black Magic is between it and my eyes."

Weston had got up, and, like me, was hanging on Machmout's words.

"We will go there," he said. "Here is an opportunity of testing it. Listen a moment."

"He is walking, walking, walking," piped Machmout, "still walking to the moon and the grave. The moon sits no longer on the desert, but has sprung up a little way."

I pointed out of the window.

"That at any rate is true," I said.

Weston took the cloth out of Machmout's hand, and the piping ceased. In a moment he stretched himself, and rubbed his eyes.

"Khalás," he said.

"Yes, it is Khalás."

"Did I tell you of the sitt in England?" he asked.

"Yes, oh, yes," I answered; "thank you, little Machmout. The White Magic was very good to-night. Get you to bed."

Machmout trotted obediently out of the room, and Weston closed the door after him.

"We must be quick," he said. "It is worth while going and giving the thing a chance, though I wish he had seen something less gruesome. The odd thing is that he was not at the funeral, and yet he describes the grave accurately. What do you make of it?"

"I make that the White Magic has shown Machmout that somebody with black magic is going to Abdul's grave, perhaps to rob it," I answered resolutely.

"What are we to do when we get there?" asked Weston.

"See the Black Magic at work. Personally I am in a blue funk. So are you."

"There is no such thing as Black Magic," said Weston. "Ah, I have it. Give me that orange."

Weston rapidly skinned it, and cut from the rind two circles as big as a five shilling piece, and two long, white fangs of skin. The first he fixed in his eyes, the two latter in the corners of his mouth.

"The Spirit of Black Magic?" I asked.

"The same."

He took up a long black burnous and wrapped it round him. Even in the bright lamp light, the spirit of black magic was a sufficiently terrific personage.

"I don't believe in black magic," he said, "but others do. If it is necessary to put a stop to — to anything that is going on, we will hoist the man on his own petard. Come along. Whom do you suspect it is— I mean, of course, who was the person you were thinking of when your thoughts were transferred to Machmout."

"What Machmout said," I answered, "suggested Achmet to me."

Weston indulged in a laugh of scientific incredulity, and we set off.

The moon, as the boy had told us, was just clear of the horizon, and as it rose higher, its colour at first red and sombre, like the blaze of some distant conflagration, paled to a tawny yellow. The hot wind from the south, blowing no longer fitfully but with a steadily increasing violence, was thick with sand, and of an incredibly scorching heat, and the tops of the palm trees in the garden of the deserted hotel on the right were lashing themselves to and fro with a harsh rattle of dry leaves. The cemetery lay on the outskirts of the village, and, as long as our way lay between the mud walls of the huddling street, the wind came to us only as the heat from behind closed furnace doors. Every now and then with a whisper and whistle rising into a great buffeting

flap, a sudden whirlwind of dust would scour some twenty yards along the road, and then break like a shore-quenched wave against one or other of the mud walls or throw itself heavily against a house and fall in a shower of sand. But once free of obstructions we were opposed to the full heat and blast of the wind which blew full in our teeth. It was the first summer khamseen of the year, and for the moment I wished I had gone north with the tourist and the quail and the billiard marker, for khamseen fetches the marrow out of the bones, and turns the body to blotting paper. We passed no one in the street, and the only sound we heard, except the wind, was the howling of moonstruck dogs.

The cemetery is surrounded by a tall mud-built wall, and sheltering for a few moments under this we discussed our movements. The row of tamarisks close to which the tomb lay went down the centre of the graveyard, and by skirting the wall outside and climbing softly over where they approached it, the fury of the wind might help us to get near the grave without being seen, if anyone happened to be there. We had just decided on this, and were moving on to put the scheme into execution, when the wind dropped for a moment, and in the silence we could hear the chump of the spade being driven into the earth, and what gave me a sudden thrill of intimate horror, the cry of the carrion-feeding hawk from the dusky sky just overhead.

Two minutes later we were creeping up in the shade of the tamarisks, to where Abdul had been buried. The great green beetles which live on the trees were flying about blindly, and once or twice one dashed into my face with a whirr of mail-dad wings. When we were within some twenty yards of the grave we stopped for a moment, and, looking cautiously out from our shelter of tamarisks, saw the figure of a man already waist deep in the earth, digging out the newly turned grave. Weston, who was standing behind me, had adjusted the characteristics of the spirit of Black Magic so as to be ready for emergencies, and turning round suddenly, and finding myself unawares face to face with that realistic impersonation, though my nerves are not precariously strong, I could have found it within me to shriek aloud. But that unsympathetic man of iron only shook with suppressed laughter, and, holding the eyes in his hand, motioned me forward again without speaking to where the trees grew thicker. There we stood not a dozen yards away from the grave.

We waited, I suppose, for some ten minutes, while the man, whom we saw to be Achmet, toiled on at his impious task. He was entirely naked, and his brown skin glistened with the dew of exertion in the moonlight. At times he chattered in a cold uncanny manner to himself, and once or twice he stopped for breath. Then he began scraping the earth away with his hands, and soon afterwards searched in his clothes, which were lying near, for a piece of rope, with which he stepped into the grave, and in a moment reappeared again with both ends in his hands. Then, standing astride the grave, he pulled strongly, and one end of the coffin appeared above the ground. He chipped a piece of the lid away to make sure that he had the right end, and then, setting it upright, wrenched off the top with his knife, and there faced us, leaning against the coffin lid, the small shrivelled figure of the dead Abdul, swathed like a baby in white.

I was just about to motion the spirit of Black Magic to make his appearance, when Machmout's words came into my head: "He had with him the Black Magic which can raise the dead," and sudden overwhelming curiosity, which froze disgust and horror into chill unfeeling things, came over me.

"Wait," I whispered to Weston, "he will use the Black Magic."

Again the wind dropped for a moment, and again, in the silence that came with it, I heard the chiding of the hawk overhead, this time nearer, and thought I heard more birds than one.

Achmet meantime had taken the covering from off the face, and had undone the swathing

band, which at the moment after death is bound round the chin to close the jaw, and in Arab burial is always left there, and from where we stood I could see that the jaw dropped when the bandage was untied, as if, though the wind blew towards us with a ghastly scent of mortality on it, the muscles were not even now set, though the man had been dead sixty hours. But still a rank and burning curiosity to see what this unclean ghoul would do next stifled all other feelings in my mind. He seemed not to notice, or, at any rate, to disregard that mouth gaping awry, and moved about nimbly in the moonlight.

He took from a pocket of his clothes, which were lying near, two small black objects, which now are safely embedded in the mud at the bottom of the Nile, and rubbed them briskly together. By degrees they grew luminous with a sickly yellow pallor of light, and from his hands went up a wavy, phosphorescent flame. One of these cubes he placed in the open mouth of the corpse, the other in his own, and, taking the dead man closely in his arms as though he would indeed dance with death, he breathed long breaths from his mouth into that dead cavern which was pressed to his. Suddenly he started back with a quick-drawn breath of wonder and perhaps of horror, and stood for a space as if irresolute, for the cube which the dead man held instead of lying loosely in the jaw was pressed tight between clenched teeth. After a moment of irresolution he stepped back quickly to his clothes again, and took up from near them the knife with which he had stripped off the coffin lid, and holding this in one hand behind his back, with the other he took out the cube from the dead man's mouth, though with a visible exhibition of force, and spoke.

"Abdul," he said, "I am your friend, and I swear I will give your money to Mohamed, if you will tell me where it is."

Certain I am that the lips of the dead moved, and the eyelids fluttered for a moment like the wings of a wounded bird, but at that sight the horror so grew on me that I was physically incapable of stifling the cry that rose to my lips, and Achmet turned round. Next moment the complete Spirit of Black Magic glided out of the shade of the trees, and stood before him. The wretched man stood for a moment without stirring, then, turning with shaking knees to flee, he stepped back and fell into the grave he had just opened.

Weston turned on me angrily, dropping the eyes and the teeth of the Afrit.

"You spoiled it all," he cried. "It would perhaps have been the most interesting ..." and his eye lighted on the dead Abdul, who peered open-eyed from the coffin, then swayed, tottered, and fell forward, face downwards on the ground close to him. For one moment he lay there, and then the body rolled slowly on to its back without visible cause of movement, and lay staring into the sky. The face was covered with dust, but with the dust was mingled fresh blood. A nail had caught the cloth that wound him, underneath which, as usual, were the clothes in which he had died, for the Arabs do not wash their dead, and it had torn a great rent through them all, leaving the right shoulder bare.

Weston strove to speak once, but failed. Then:

"I will go and inform the police," he said, "if you will stop here, and see that Achmet does not get out."

But this I altogether refused to do, and, after covering the body with the coffin to protect it from the hawks, we secured Achmet's arms with the rope he had already used that night, and took him off to Luxor.

Next morning Mohamed came to see us.

"I thought Achmet knew where the money was," he said exultantly.

"Where was it?"

"In a little purse tied round the shoulder. The dog had already begun stripping it. See" — and

he brought it out of his pocket— “it is all there in those English notes, five pounds each, and there are twenty of them.”

Our conclusion was slightly different, for even Weston will allow that Achmet *hoped* to learn from dead lips the secret of the treasure, and then to kill the man anew and bury him. But that is pure conjecture.

The only other point of interest lies in the two black cubes which we picked up, and found to be graven with curious characters. These I put one evening into Machmout's hand, when he was exhibiting to us his curious powers of “thought transference.” The effect was that he screamed aloud, crying out that the Black Magic had come, and though I did not feel certain about that, I thought they would be safer in mid-Nile. Weston grumbled a little, and said that he had wanted to take them to the British Museum, but that I feel sure was an afterthought.