

From **A Thousand Miles Up the Nile**

By Amelia B. Edwards

I

It is a long and shelterless ride from the palms to the desert; but we come to the end of it at last, mounting just such another sand-slope as that which leads up from the Giza road to the foot of the Great Pyramid. The edge of the plateau here rises abruptly from the plain in one long range of low perpendicular cliffs pierced with dark mouths of rock-cut sepulchres, while the sand-slope by which we are climbing pours down through a breach in the rock, as an Alpine snowdrift flows through a mountain gap from the ice-level above.

And now, having dismounted through compassion for our unfortunate little donkeys, the first thing we observe is the curious mixture of debris underfoot. At Giza one treads only sand and pebbles; but here at Sakkara the whole plateau is thickly strewn with scraps of broken pottery, limestone, marble, and alabaster; flakes of green and blue glaze; bleached bones; shreds of yellow linen; and lumps of some odd-looking dark brown substance, like dried-up sponge. Presently someone picks up a little noseless head of one of the common blue-ware funereal statuettes, and immediately we all fall to work, grubbing for treasure—a pure waste of precious time; for though the sand is full of debris, it has been sifted so often and so carefully by the that it no longer contains anything worth looking for. Meanwhile, one finds a fragment of iridescent glass—another, a morsel of shattered vase—a third, an opaque bead of some kind of yellow paste. And then, with a shock which the present writer, at all events, will not soon forget, we suddenly discover that these scattered bones are human—that those linen shreds are shreds of cerement cloths—that yonder odd-looking brown lumps are rent fragments of what once was living flesh! And now for the first time we realize that every inch of this ground on which we are standing, and all these hillocks and hollows and pits in the sand, are violated graves.

“Ce n’est que le premier pas que coûte.” We soon became quite hardened to such sights, and learned to rummage among dusty sepulchres with no more compunction than would have befitted a gang of professional body-snatchers. These are experiences upon which one looks back afterwards with wonder, and something like remorse; but so infectious is the universal callousness, and so overmastering is the passion for relic-hunting, that I do not doubt we should again do the same things under the same circumstances. Most Egyptian travelers, if questioned, would have to make a similar confession. Shocked at first, they denounce with horror the whole system of sepulchral excavation, legal as well as predatory; acquiring, however, a taste for scarabs and funerary statuettes, they soon begin to buy with eagerness the spoils of the dead; finally they forget all their former scruples, and ask no better fortune, than to discover and confiscate a tomb for themselves. . . .

The thing that. . . caught the painter’s eye. . . was a long crack running transversely down the face of the rock. It was such a crack as might have been caused, one would say, by blasting.

He stooped—cleared the sand away a little with his hand—observed that the crack widened—poked in the point of his stick; and found that it penetrated to a depth of two or three feet. Even then, it seemed to him to stop, not because it encountered any obstacle, but because the crack was not wide enough to admit the thick end of the stick.

This surprised him. No mere fault in the natural rock, he thought, would go so deep. He scooped away a little more sand; and still the cleft widened. He introduced the stick a second time. It was a long palm-stick like an alpenstock, and it measured about five feet in length. When he probed the cleft with it this second time, it went in freely up to where he held it in his hand—that is to say, to a depth of quite four feet.

Convinced now that there was some hidden cavity in the rock, he carefully examined the surface. There were yet visible a few hieroglyphic characters and part of two cartouches, as well as some battered outlines of what had once been figures. The heads of these figures were gone (the face of the rock, with whatever may have been sculptured upon it, having come away bodily at this point), while from the waist downwards they were hidden under the sand. Only some hands and arms, in short, could be made out.

They were the hands and arms, apparently, of four figures; two in the center of the composition, and two at the extremities. The two center ones, which seemed to be back to back, probably represented gods; the outer ones, worshippers.

All at once, it flashed upon the painter that he had seen this kind of group many a time before—and *generally over a doorway*.

Feeling sure now that he was on the brink of a discovery, he came back; fetched away Salame and Mehemet Ali; and, without saying a syllable to anyone, set to work with these two to scrape away the sand at the spot where the crack widened.

Meanwhile, the luncheon bell having rung thrice, we concluded that the painter had rambled off somewhere into the desert; and so sat down without him. Towards the close of the meal, however, came a penciled note, the contents of which ran as follows:

“Pray come immediately—I have found the entrance to a tomb. Please send some sandwiches—A. M’C.”

To follow the messenger at once to the scene of action was the general impulse. In less than ten minutes we were there, asking breathless questions, peeping in through the fast-widening aperture, and helping to clear away the sand.

All that Sunday afternoon, heedless of possible sunstroke, unconscious of fatigue, we toiled upon our hands and knees, as for bare life, under the burning sun. We had all the crew up, working like tigers. Every one helped; even the dragoman and the two maids. More than once, when we paused for a moment’s breathing space, we said to each other: “If those at home could see us, what would they say!”

And now, more than ever, we felt the need of implements. With a spade or two and a wheelbarrow, we could have done wonders; but with only one small fire-shovel, a birch broom, a couple of charcoal baskets, and about twenty pairs of hands, we were poor indeed. What was wanted in means, however, was made up in method. Some scraped away the sand; some gathered it into baskets; some carried the baskets to the edge of the cliff, and emptied them into the river. The Idle Man distinguished himself by scooping out a channel where the slope was steepest; which greatly facilitated the work. Emptied down this shoot and kept continually going, the sand poured off in a steady stream like water.

Meanwhile the opening grew rapidly larger. When we first came up—that is, when the painter and the two sailors had been working on it for about an hour—we found a hole scarcely as large as one’s hand, through which it was just possible to catch a dim glimpse of painted walls within. By sunset, the top of the doorway was laid bare, and where the crack ended in a large triangular fracture, there was an aperture about a foot and a half square, into which Mehemet Au was the

first to squeeze his way. We passed him in a candle and a box of matches; but he came out again directly, saying that it was a most beautiful Birbeh, and quite light within.

The writer wriggled in next. She found herself looking down from the top of a sandslope into a small square chamber. This sand-drift, which here rose to within a foot and a half of the top of the doorway, was heaped to the ceiling in the corner behind the door, and thence sloped steeply down, completely covering the floor. There was light enough to see every detail distinctly—the painted frieze running round just under the ceiling; the bas-relief sculptures on the walls, gorgeous with unfaded color; the smooth sand, pitted near the top, where Mehemet Ali had trodden, but undisturbed elsewhere by human foot; the great gap in the middle of the ceiling, where the rock had given way; the fallen fragments on the floor, now almost buried in sand.

Satisfied that the place was absolutely fresh and untouched, the writer crawled out, and the others, one by one, crawled in. When each had seen it in turn, the opening was barricaded for the night; the sailors being forbidden to enter it, lest they should injure the decorations.