

# Dead Kings

By Rudyard Kipling

Granted that all Egypt is one big undertaker's emporium, what could be more fascinating than to get Government leave to rummage in a corner of it, to form a little company and spend the cold weather trying to pay dividends in the shape of amethyst necklaces, lapis-lazuli scarabs, pots of pure gold, and priceless bits of statuary? Or, if one is rich, what better fun than to grub-stake an expedition on the supposed site of a dead city and see what turns up? There was a big-game hunter who had used most of the Continent, quite carried away by this sport.

"I'm going to take shares in a city next year, and watch the digging myself," he said. "It beats elephants to pieces. In *this* game you're digging up dead things and making them alive. Aren't you going to have a flutter?"

He showed me a seductive little prospectus. Myself, I would sooner not lay hands on a dead man's kit or equipment, especially when he has gone to his grave in the belief that the trinkets guarantee salvation. Of course, there is the other argument, put forward by skeptics, that the Egyptian was a blatant self-advertiser, and that nothing would please him more than the thought that he was being looked at and admired after all these years. Still, one might rob some shrinking soul who didn't see it in that light.

At the end of spring the diggers flock back out of the Desert and exchange chaff and news in the gorgeous verandahs. For example, A's company has made a find of priceless stuff, Heaven knows how old, and is not too meek about it. Company B, less fortunate, hints that if only A knew to what extent their native diggers had been stealing and disposing of the thefts, under their very archeological noses, they would not be so happy.

"Nonsense," says Company A. "Our diggers are above suspicion. Besides, we watched 'em."

"*Are they?*" is the reply. "Well, next time you are in Berlin, go to the Museum and you'll see what the Germans have got hold of. It must have come out of your ground. The Dynasty proves it!" So A's cup is poisoned—till next year.

No collector or curator of a museum should have any moral scruples whatever; and I have never met one who had; though I have been informed by deeply-shocked informants of four nationalities that the Germans are the most flagrant pirates of all.

The business of exploration is about as romantic as earth-work on Indian railways. There are the same narrow-gauge trains and donkeys, the same shining gangs in the borrow-pits and the same skirling dark-blue crowds of women and children with the little earth-baskets. But the hoes are not driven in, nor the clods jerked aside at random, and when the work fringes along the base of some mighty wall, men use their hands carefully. A white man—or he was white at breakfast-time—patrols through the continually renewed dust-haze. Weeks may pass without a single bead, but anything may turn up at any moment, and it is his to answer the shout of discovery.

We had the good fortune to stay a while at the Headquarters of the Metropolitan Museum (New York) in a valley riddled like a rabbit-warren with tombs. Their stables, store-houses, and servants' quarters are old tombs, their talk is of tombs, and their dream (the diggers' dream always) is to discover a virgin tomb where the untouched dead lie with their jewels upon them. Four miles away are the wide-winged, rampant hotels. Here is nothing whatever but the rubbish of death that died thousands of years ago, on whose grave no green thing has ever grown. Villages, expert in two hundred generations of grave-robbing, cower among the mounds of

wastage, and whoop at the daily tourist. Paths made by bare feet run, from one half-tomb, half-mud-heap to the next, not much more distinct than snail smears, but they have been used since....

Time is a dangerous thing to play with. That morning the concierge had toiled for us among steamer-sailings to see if we could save three days. That evening we sat with folk for whom Time had stood still since the Ptolemies. I wondered, at first, how it concerned them or any man if such and such a Pharaoh had used to his own glory the plinths and columns of such another Pharaoh before or after Melchizedek. Their whole background was too inconceivably remote for the mind to work on. But the next morning we were taken to the painted tomb of a noble—a Minister of Agriculture—who died four or five thousand years ago. He said to me, in so many words: “Observe! I was very like your friend, the late Mr. Samuel Pepys, of your Admiralty. I took an enormous interest in life, which I most thoroughly enjoyed, on its human and on its spiritual side. I do not think you will find many departments of State better managed than mine, or a better-kept house, or a nicer set of young people. . . . My daughters! The eldest, as you can see, takes after her mother. The youngest, my favorite, is supposed to favor me. Now I will show you all the things that I did, and delighted in, till it was time for me to present my accounts elsewhere.” And he showed me, detail by detail, in color and in drawing, his cattle, his horses, his crops, his tours in the district, his accountants presenting the revenue returns, and he himself, busiest of the busy, in the good day.

But when we left that broad, gay ante-room and came to the narrower passage where once his body had lain and where all his doom was portrayed, I could not follow him so well. I did not see how he, so experienced in life, could be cowed by friezes of brute-headed apparitions or satisfied by files of repeated figures. He explained, something to this effect:

“We live on the River—a line without breadth or thickness. Behind us is the Desert, which nothing can affect; whither no man goes till he is dead. (One does not use good agricultural ground for cemeteries.) Practically, then, we only move in two dimensions—up stream and down. Take away the Desert, which we don’t consider any more than a healthy man considers death, and you will see that we have no background whatever. Our world is all one straight bar of brown or green earth, and, for some months, mere sky-reflecting water that wipes out everything. You have only to look at the Colossi to realize how enormously and extravagantly man and his works must scale in such a country. Remember, too, that our crops are sure, and our life is very, very easy. Above all, we have no neighbors. That is to say, we must give out, for we cannot take in. Now, I put it to you, what is left for a priest with imagination, except to develop ritual and multiply gods on friezes? Unlimited leisure, limited space of two dimensions, divided by the hypnotizing line of the River, and bounded by visible, unalterable death— must, *ipso facto*—”

“Even so,” I interrupted. “I do not comprehend your Gods—your direct worship of beasts, for instance?”

“You prefer the indirect? The worship of Humanity with a capital H? My Gods, or what I saw in them, contented me.”

“What did you see in your Gods as affecting belief and conduct?”

“You know the answer to the riddle of the Sphinx?”

“No,” I murmured. “What is it?”

“All sensible men are of the same religion, but no sensible man ever tells,” he replied. With that I had to be content, for the passage ended in solid rock. . . .

There is a valley of rocks and stones in every shade of red and brown, called the Valley of the Kings, where a little oil-engine coughs behind its hand all day long, grinding electricity to light the faces of dead Pharaohs a hundred feet underground. All down the valley, during the tourist

season, stand char-a-bancs and donkeys and sand-carts, with here and there exhausted couples who have dropped out of the processions and glisten and fan themselves in some scrap of shade. Along the sides of the valley are the tombs of the kings neatly numbered, as it might be mining adits with concrete steps leading up to them, and iron grilles that lock of nights, and doorkeepers of the Department of Antiquities demanding the proper tickets. One enters, and from deeps below deeps hears the voice of dragomans booming through the names and titles of the illustrious and thrice-puissant dead. Rock-cut steps go down into hot, still darkness, passages twist and are led over blind pits which, men say, the wise builders childishly hoped would be taken for the real tombs by thieves to come. Up and down these alley-ways clatter all the races of Europe with a solid backing of the United States. Their footsteps are suddenly blunted on the floor of a hail paved with immemorial dust that will never dance in any wind. They peer up at the blazoned ceilings, stoop down to the minutely decorated walls, crane and follow the somber splendors of a cornice, draw in their breaths and climb up again to the fierce sunshine to re-dive into the next adit on their program. What they think proper to say, they say aloud—and some of it is very interesting. What they feel you can guess from a certain haste in their movements—something between the shrinking modesty of a man under fire and the Hadn't-we-better-be-getting-on attitude of visitors to a mine. After all, it is not natural for man to go underground except for business or for the last time. He is conscious of the weight of mother-earth overhead, and when to her expectant bulk is added the whole beaked, horned, winged, and crowned hierarchy of a lost faith flaming at every turn of his eye, he naturally wishes to move away. Even the sight of a very great king indeed, sarcophagused under electric light in a hail full of most fortifying pictures, does not hold him too long.

Some men assert, that the crypt of St. Peter's, with only nineteen centuries bearing down on the groining, and the tombs of early popes and kings all about, is more impressive than the Valley of the Kings because it explains how and out of what an existing creed grew. But the Valley of the Kings explains nothing except that most terrible line in Macbeth:

*To the last syllable of recorded time.*

Earth opens her dry lips and says it.