CHAPTER VII

EXCAVATIONS IN EGYPT

THERE came to the camp of a certain professor, who was engaged in excavating the ruins of an ancient Egyptian city, a young and faultlessly-attired Englishman, whose thirst for dramatic adventure had led him to offer his services as an unpaid assistant digger. This immaculate personage had read in novels and tales many an account of the wonders which the spade of the excavator could reveal, and he firmly believed that it was only necessary to set a "nigger" to dig a little hole in the ground to open the way to the treasuries of the Pharaohs. Gold, silver, and precious stones gleamed before him, in his imagination, as he hurried along subterranean passages to the vaults of long-dead kings. He expected to slide upon the seat of his very well-made breeches down the staircase of the ruined palace which he had entered by way of the skylight, and to find himself, at the bottom, in the presence of the bejewelled dead. In the intervals between such experiences he was of opinion that a little quiet gazelle shooting would agreeably fill in the swiftly passing hours; and at the end of the season's work he pictured himself returning to the bosom of his family with such a tale to tell that every ear would be opened to him.

On his arrival at the camp he was conducted to the site of his future labours; and his horrified gaze was directed over a large area of mud-pie, knee-deep in which a few bedraggled natives slushed their way downwards. After three weeks' work on this distressing site, the professor announced that he had managed to trace through the mud the outline of the palace walls, once the feature of

the city, and that the work here might now be regarded as finished. He was then conducted to a desolate spot in the desert, and until the day on which he fled back to England he was kept to the monotonous task of superintending a gang of natives whose sole business it was to dig a very large hole in the sand, day after day and week after week.

It is, however, sometimes the fortune of the excavator to make a discovery which almost rivals in dramatic interest the tales of his youth. Such an experience fell to the lot of Emil Brugsch Pasha when he was lowered into an ancient tomb and found himself face to face with a score of the Pharaohs of Egypt, each lying in his coffin; or when Howard Carter and Lord Carnarvon climbed into the tomb of Tutankhamen, and saw before them the glorious funeral paraphernalia of the Pharaoh; or again, when Monsieur de Morgan discovered the great mass of royal jewels in one of the pyramids at Dachour. But such finds can be counted on the fingers, and more often an excavation is a fruitless drudgery. Moreover, the life of a digger is not always a pleasant one.

It will perhaps be of interest to the reader of romances to illustrate the above remarks by the narration of some of my own experiences; but there are only a few interesting and unusual episodes in which I have had the peculiarly good fortune to be an actor. There will probably be some drama to be felt in the account of the more important discoveries (for there certainly is to the antiquarian himself): but it should be pointed out that the interest of these rare finds pales before the description which many of us have heard, of how the archæologists of a past century discovered the body of Charlemagne clad in his royal robes and seated upon his throne—which, by the way, is quite untrue. In spite of all that is said to the contrary, truth is seldom stranger than fiction; and the reader who desires to be told of the discovery of buried cities whose streets are paved with gold should take warning in time and return at once to his novels.

If the dawning interest of the reader has now been thoroughly cooled by these words, it may be presumed that it will be utterly annihilated by the following narration of my first fruitless excavation ; and thus one will be able to continue the story with the relieved consciousness that nobody is attending.

In the capacity of assistant to Professor Flinders Petrie, I was set, many years ago, to the task of excavating a supposed royal cemetery in the desert behind the ancient city of Abydos, in Upper Egypt. Two mounds were first attacked ; and after many weeks of work in digging through the sand, the superstructure of two great tombs was bared. In the case of the first of these several fine passages of good masonry were cleared, and at last the burial chamber was reached. In the huge sarcophagus which was there found great hopes were entertained that the body and funeral-offerings of the dead prince would be discovered ; but when at last the interior was laid bare the solitary article found was a copy of a French newspaper left behind by the last, and equally disgusted, excavator. The second tomb defied the most ardent exploration, and failed to show any traces of a burial. The mystery was at last solved by Professor Petrie, who, with his usual keen perception, soon came to the conclusion that the whole tomb was a dummy, built solely to hide an enormous mass of rock chippings, the presence of which had been a puzzle for some time. These mason's chippings were evidently the output from some large cutting in the rock, and it became apparent that there must be a great rock tomb in the neighbourhood. Trial trenches in the vicinity presently revealed the existence of a long wall, which, being followed in either direction, proved to be the boundary of a vast court or enclosure built upon the desert at the foot of a conspicuous cliff. A ramp led up to the entrance ; but as it was slightly askew and pointed to the southern end of the enclosure, it was supposed that the rock tomb, which presumably ran into the cliff from somewhere inside this area, was situated

at that end. The next few weeks were occupied in the tedious task of probing the sand hereabouts, and at length in clearing it away altogether down to the surface of the underlying rock. Nothing was found, however; and sadly we turned to the exact middle of the court, and began to work slowly to the foot of the cliff. Here, in the very middle of the back wall, a pillared chamber was found, and it seemed certain that the entrance to the tomb would now be discovered.

The best men were placed to dig out this chamber, and the excavator—it was many years ago—went about his work with the weight of fame upon his shoulders and an expression of intense mystery upon his sorely sun-scorched face. How clearly memory recalls the letter home that week, "We are on the eve of a great discovery"; and how vividly rises the picture of the baking desert sand into which the sweating workmen were slowly digging their way! But our hopes were short-lived, for it very soon became apparent that there was no tomb entrance in this part of the enclosure. There remained the north end of the area, and on to this all the available men were turned. Deeper and deeper they dug their way, until the mounds of sand thrown out formed, as it were, the lip of a great crater. At last, some forty or fifty feet down, the underlying rock was struck, and presently the mouth of a great shaft was exposed leading down into the bowels of the earth. The royal tomb had at last been discovered, and it only remained to effect an entrance. The days were now filled with excitement, and, the thoughts being concentrated on the question of the identity of the royal occupant of the tomb, it was soon fixed in our minds that we were about to enter the burial-place of no less a personage than the great Pharaoh Senusert III (Sesostris), the same king whose jewels were found at Dachour.

One evening, just after I had left the work, the men came down to the distant camp to say that the last barrier was now reached and that an entrance could be

effected at once. In the pale light of the moon, therefore, I hastened back to the desert with a few trusted men. As we walked along, one of these natives very cheerfully remarked that we should all probably get our throats cut, as the brigands of the neighbourhood had got wind of the discovery, and were sure to attempt to enter the tomb that night. With this pleasing prospect before us we walked with some caution over the silent desert. Reaching the mound of sand which surrounded our excavation, we crept to the top and peeped over into the crater. At once we observed a dim light below us, and almost immediately an agitated but polite voice from the opposite mound called out in Arabic, "Go away, mister. We have all got guns." This remark was followed by a shot which whistled past me; and therewith I slid down the hill once more, and heartily wished myself safe in my bed. Our party then spread round the crater, and at a given word we proposed to rush the place. But the enemy was too quick for us, and after the briefest scrimmage, and the exchanging of a harmless shot or two, we found ourselves in possession of the tomb, and were able to pretend that we were not a bit frightened.

Then into the dark depths of the shaft we descended, and ascertained that the robbers had not effected an entrance. A long night watch followed, and the next day we had the satisfaction of arresting some of the criminals. The tomb was found to penetrate several hundred feet into the cliff, and at the end of the long and beautifully worked passage the great royal sarcophagus was found—empty! So ended a very strenuous season's work.

If the experiences of a digger in Professor Petrie's camp are to be regarded as typical, they will probably serve to damp the ardour of eager young gentlemen in search of ancient Egyptian treasure. One lives in a bare little hut constructed of mud, and roofed with cornstalks or corrugated iron; and if by chance there happens to be a rain storm, as there was when I was a member of the community, one may watch the frail building gently

subside in a liquid stream upon one's bed and books. For seven days in the week one's work continues, and it is only to the real enthusiast that that work is not monotonous and tiresome.

A few years later it fell to my lot to excavate for the Government the funeral temple of Thutmosis III at Thebes, and a fairly large sum was spent upon the undertaking. Although the site was most promising in appearance, a couple of months' work brought to light hardly a single object of importance, whereas exactly similar sites in the same neighbourhood had produced inscriptions of the greatest value. Many years ago Lord Carnarvon began his work upon a site of my own selection, the net result of which, after six weeks' labour, was one mummified cat! To sit over the work day after day, as did that patient excavator, then new to this sort of adventure, with the flies buzzing around his face and the sun blazing down upon him from a relentless sky, was hardly a pleasurable task; and to watch the clouds of dust go up from the tip-heap, where tons of unprofitable rubbish rolled down the hillside all day long, was an occupation for the damned. Yet that is excavating as it is usually found to be.

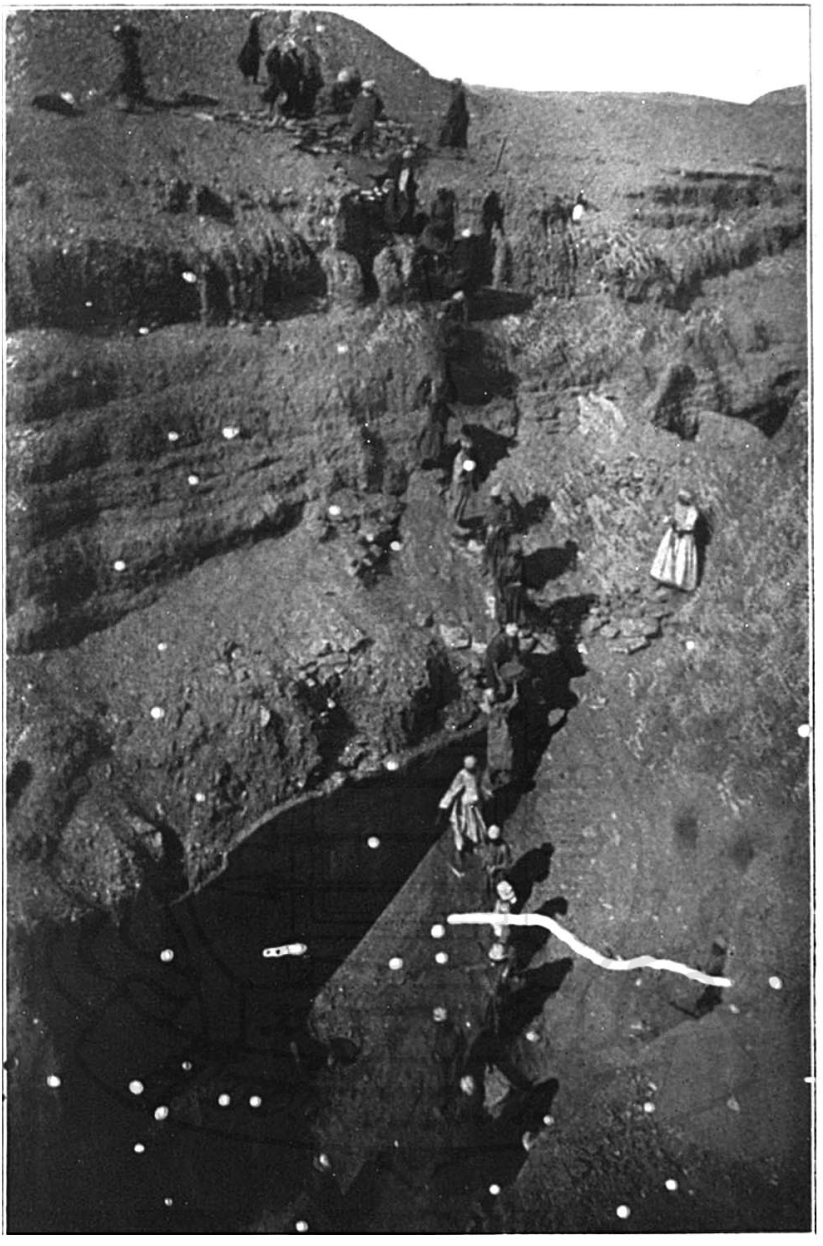
Now let us consider the other side of the story. In the Valley of the Tombs of the Kings at Thebes excavations were conducted for some years at the expense of Mr. Theodore M. Davis, of Newport, Rhode Island, by special arrangement with the Department of Antiquities of the Egyptian Government; and as the representative of that Department I had to supervise the work. The finding of the tomb of Yuaa and Tuau during these excavations was an event only eclipsed by Lord Carnarvon's recent discovery, and one which came somewhere near to the standard of romance set by the novelists. Yuaa and Tuau were the parents of Queen Tiy, the discovery of whose tomb is recorded in the next chapter. When the entrance of their tomb was cleared, a flight of steps was exposed, leading down to a passage blocked by a wall of loose

stones. In the top right hand corner a small hole, large enough to admit a man, had been made in ancient times, and through this we could look down into a dark passage. As it was too late in the day to enter at once, we postponed that exciting experience until the morrow, and some police were sent for to guard the entrance during the night. I had slept the previous night over the mouth, and there was now no possibility of leaving the place for several more nights, so a rough camp was formed on the spot.

Here I settled myself down for the long watch, and speculated on the events of the next morning, when Mr. Davis and one or two well-known Egyptologists were to come to the valley to be present at the opening of the sepulchre. Presently, in the silent darkness, a slight noise was heard on the hillside, and immediately the challenge of the sentry rang out. This was answered by a distant call, and after some moments of alertness on our part we observed two figures approaching us. These, to my surprise, proved to be a well-known American artist and his wife,[1] who had obviously come on the expectation that trouble was ahead; but though in this they were destined to suffer disappointment, still, out of respect for the absolute unconcern of both visitors, it may be mentioned that the mouth of a lonely tomb already said by native rumour to contain incalculable wealth is not perhaps the safest place in the world. Here, then, on a level patch of rock we three lay down and slept fitfully until the dawn. Soon after breakfast the wall at the mouth of the tomb was pulled down, and the party passed into the low passage which sloped down to the burial chamber. At the bottom of this passage there was a second wall blocking the way; but when a few layers had been taken off the top we were able to climb, one by one, into the chamber.

Imagine entering a town house which had been closed for the summer; imagine the stuffy room, the stiff, silent

[1] Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Lindon Smith.



Excavating the Osireion at Abydos. A chain of boys handing up baskets of sand to the surface

[Photograph by the Author]

appearance of the furniture, the feeling that some ghostly occupants of the vacant chairs have just been disturbed, the desire to throw open the windows to let life into the room once more. That was perhaps the first sensation as we stood, really dumbfounded, and stared around at the relics of the life of over three thousand years ago, all of which were as new almost as when they graced the palace of Prince Yuaa. Three arm-chairs were perhaps the first objects to attract the attention: beautiful carved wooden chairs, decorated with gold. Belonging to one of these was a pillow made of down and covered with linen. It was so perfectly preserved that one might have sat upon it or tossed it from this chair to that without doing it injury. Here were fine alabaster vases, and in one of these we were startled to find a liquid, like honey or syrup, still unsolidified by time. Boxes of exquisite workmanship stood in various parts of the room, some resting on delicately wrought legs. Now the eye was directed to a wicker trunk fitted with trays and partitions, and ventilated with little apertures, since the scents were doubtless strong. Two most comfortable beds were to be observed, fitted with springy string mattresses and decorated with charming designs in gold. There in the far corner, placed upon the top of a number of large white jars, stood the light chariot which Yuaa had owned in his lifetime. In all directions stood objects gleaming with gold undulled by a speck of dust, and one looked from one article to another with the feeling that the entire human conception of Time was wrong. These were the things of yesterday, of a year or so ago. Why, here were meats prepared for the feasts in the Underworld; here were Yuaa's favourite joints, each neatly placed in a wooden box as though for a journey. Here was his staff, and here were his sandals—a new pair and an old. In another corner there stood the magical figures by the power of which the prince was to make his way through Hades. The words of the mystical "Chapter of the Flame" and of the "Chapter of the Magical Figure

of the North Wall " were inscribed upon them ; and upon a great roll of papyrus twenty-two yards in length other efficacious prayers were written.

But though the eyes passed from object to object, they ever returned to the two lidless gilded coffins in which the owners of this room of the dead lay as though peacefully sleeping. First above Yuaa and then above his wife the electric lamps were held, and as one looked down into their quiet faces (from which the bandages had been removed by some ancient robber), there was almost the feeling that they would presently open their eyes and blink at the light. The stern features of the old man commanded one's attention, and again and again our gaze was turned from this mass of wealth to this sleeping figure in whose honour it had been placed here.

At last we returned to the surface to allow the thoughts opportunity to collect themselves and the pulses time to quiet down, for, even to the most unemotional, a discovery of this kind, bringing one into the very presence of the past, has really an unsteadying effect. Then once more we descended, and made the preliminary arrangements for the cataloguing of the antiquities. It was now that the real work began, and, once the excitement was passed, there was a monotony of labour to be faced which put a very considerable strain on the powers of all concerned. The hot days when one sweated over the heavy packing-cases, and the bitterly cold nights when one lay at the mouth of the tomb under the stars, dragged on for many a week ; and when at last the long train of boxes was carried down to the Nile *en route* for the Cairo Museum, it was with a sigh of relief that I returned to my regular work.

This, of course, was a very exceptional discovery. We afterwards made other great finds, but to me they did not equal in dramatic interest the discovery just recorded. Even in this royal valley, however, there is much drudgery to be faced, and for a large part of the season's work it is the excavator's business to turn over

endless masses of rock chippings, and to dig huge holes which have no interest for the patient digger. Sometimes the mouth of a tomb is bared, and is entered with the profoundest hopes, which are at once dashed by the sudden abrupt ending of the cutting a few yards from the surface. At other times a tomb-chamber is reached and is found to be absolutely empty.

At another part of Thebes, the well-known Italian Egyptologist, Professor Schiaparelli, had excavated for a number of years without finding anything of much importance, when suddenly one fine day he struck the mouth of a large tomb which was evidently intact. I was at once informed of the discovery, and proceeded to the spot as quickly as possible. The mouth of the tomb was approached down a flight of steep, rough steps, still half-choked with *débris*. At the bottom of this the entrance of a passage running into the hillside was blocked by a wall of rough stones. After photographing and removing this, we found ourselves in a long, low tunnel, blocked by a second wall a few yards ahead. Both these walls were intact, and we realised that we were about to see what probably no living man had ever seen before: the absolutely intact remains of a rich Theban of the Imperial Age—*i.e.*, about 1200 or 1300 B.C. When this second wall was taken down we passed into a carefully cut passage high enough to permit of our standing upright.

At the end of this passage a plain wooden door barred our progress. The wood retained the light colour of fresh deal, and looked for all the world as though it had been set up but yesterday. A heavy wooden lock, such as is used at the present day, held the door fast. A neat bronze handle on the side of the door was connected by a string to a wooden knob set in the masonry door-post; and this string was carefully sealed with a small dab of stamped clay. The whole contrivance seemed so modern that Professor Schiaparelli called to his servant for the key, who quite seriously replied, "I don't know where it is, sir." He then thumped the door with his hand to see

whether it would be likely to give; and, as the echoes reverberated through the tomb, one felt that the mummy, in the darkness beyond, might well think that his resurrection call had come. One almost expected him to rise, like the dead knights of Kildare in the Irish legend, and to ask, "Is it time?" for the three thousand years which his religion had told him was the duration of his life in the tomb was already long past.

Meanwhile we turned our attention to the objects which stood in the passage, having been placed there at the time of the funeral, owing to the lack of room in the burial-chamber. Here a vase, rising upon a delicately shaped stand, attracted the eye by its beauty of form; and here a bedstead caused us to exclaim at its modern appearance. A palm-leaf fan, used by the ancient Egyptians to keep the flies off their wines and unguents, stood near a now empty jar; and near by a basket of dried-up fruit was to be seen. This dried fruit gave the impression that the tomb was perhaps a few months old, but there was nothing else to be seen which suggested that the objects were even as much as a year old. It was almost impossible to believe, and quite impossible to realise, that we were standing where no man had stood for well over three thousand years; and that we were actually breathing the air which had remained sealed in the passage since the ancient priests had closed the entrance thirteen hundred years before Christ.

Before we could proceed farther, many flashlight photographs had to be taken, and drawings made of the doorway; and after this a panel of the woodwork had to be removed with a fretsaw in order that the lock and seal might not be damaged. At last, however, this was accomplished, and the way into the tomb-chamber was open. Stepping through the frame of the door, we found ourselves in an unencumbered portion of the floor, while around us in all directions stood the funeral furniture, and on our left the coffins of the deceased noble and his wife loomed large. Everything looked new and undecayed,

and even the order in which the objects were arranged suggested a tidying-up done that very morning. The gravel on the floor was neatly smoothed, and not a speck of dust was anywhere to be observed. Over the large outer coffin a pall of fine linen was laid, not rotting and falling to pieces like the cloth of mediæval times we see in our museums, but soft and strong like the sheets of our beds. In the clear space before the coffin stood a wooden pedestal in the form of a miniature lotus column. On the top of this, resting on three wooden prongs, was a small copper dish, in which were the ashes of incense, and the little stick used for stirring them. One asked oneself in bewilderment whether the ashes here, seemingly not cold, had truly ceased to glow at a time when Rome and Greece were undreamt of, when Assyria did not exist, and when the Exodus of the Children of Israel was yet unaccomplished.

On low tables round cakes of bread were laid out, not cracked and shrivelled, but smooth and brown, with a kind of white-of-egg glaze upon them. Onions and fruit were also spread out; and the fruit of the *dôm* palm was to be seen in plenty. In various parts of the chamber there were numerous bronze vessels of different shapes, intended for the holding of milk or wine.

Well supplied with food and drink, the senses of the dead man were soothed by a profusion of flowers, which lay withered but not decayed beside the coffin, and which at the time of the funeral must have filled the chamber with their sweetness. Near the doorway stood an upright wooden chest closed with a lid. Opening this, we found it to contain the great ceremonial wig of the deceased man, which was suspended from a rail passing across the top of the chest, and hung free of the sides and bottom. The black hair was plaited into hundreds of little tails, but in size the wig was not unlike those of the early eighteenth century in Europe. Chairs, beds, and other pieces of furniture were arranged around the room, and at one side there were a number of small chests and

boxes piled up against the wall. We opened one or two of these, and found them to contain delicate little vases of glass, stone and metal, wrapped round with rags to prevent them breaking. These, like everything else in the tomb, were new and fresh, and showed no trace of the passing of the years.

The coffins, of course, were hidden by the great casing in which each rested, and which itself was partly hidden by the linen pall. Nothing could be touched for many days until photographs had been taken and records made; and we therefore returned through the long passage to the light of the day.

There must have been a large number of intact tombs to be found when the first modern interest in Egyptian antiquities developed; but the market thus created had to be supplied, and gangs of illicit diggers made short work of the most accessible tombs. This illegal excavation, of course, continues to some extent at the present day, in spite of all precautions, but the results are becoming less and less proportionate to the labour expended and risk taken. A native likes best to do a little quiet digging in his own back yard and to admit nobody else into the business. To illustrate this, I may mention a tragedy which was brought to my notice a few years ago. A certain native discovered the entrance of a tomb in the floor of his stable, and at once proceeded to worm his way down the tunnel. That was the end of the native. His wife, finding that he had not returned two hours or so later, went down the newly found tunnel after him. That was the end of her also. In turn, three other members of the family went down into the darkness, and that was the end of them. A native official was then called, and, lighting his way with a candle, penetrated down the winding passage. The air was so foul that he was soon obliged to retreat, but he stated that he was just able to see in the distance ahead the bodies of the unfortunate peasants, all of whom had been overcome by what he quaintly described as "the evil lighting and bad climate."

Various attempts at the rescue of the dead bodies during the day and the night having failed, I gave orders that this tomb should be regarded as their sepulchre, and that its mouth should be sealed up. According to the natives, there was evidently a vast hoard of wealth stored at the bottom of this tomb, and the would-be robbers had met their death at the hands of the demon in charge of it, who had seized each man by the throat as he came down the tunnel and had strangled him.

The Egyptian peasants have a very strong belief in the power of such creatures of the spirit world. A native who was attempting recently to discover hidden treasure in a certain part of the desert, sacrificed a lamb each night above the spot where he believed the treasure to lie, in order to propitiate the *djin* who guarded it. On the other hand, however, they have no superstition as regards the sanctity of the ancient dead, and they do not hesitate on that ground to rifle the tombs. Thousands of graves have been desecrated by these seekers after treasure, and it is very largely the result of this that scientific excavation is often so fruitless nowadays. When an excavator states that he has discovered a tomb, one takes it for granted that he means a *plundered* tomb, unless he definitely says that it was intact, in which case one calls him a lucky fellow and regards him with green envy.

And thus we come back to my remarks at the beginning of this chapter, that there is a painful disillusionment awaiting the man who comes to dig in Egypt in the hope of finding the golden cities of the Pharaohs or the bejewelled bodies of their dead.