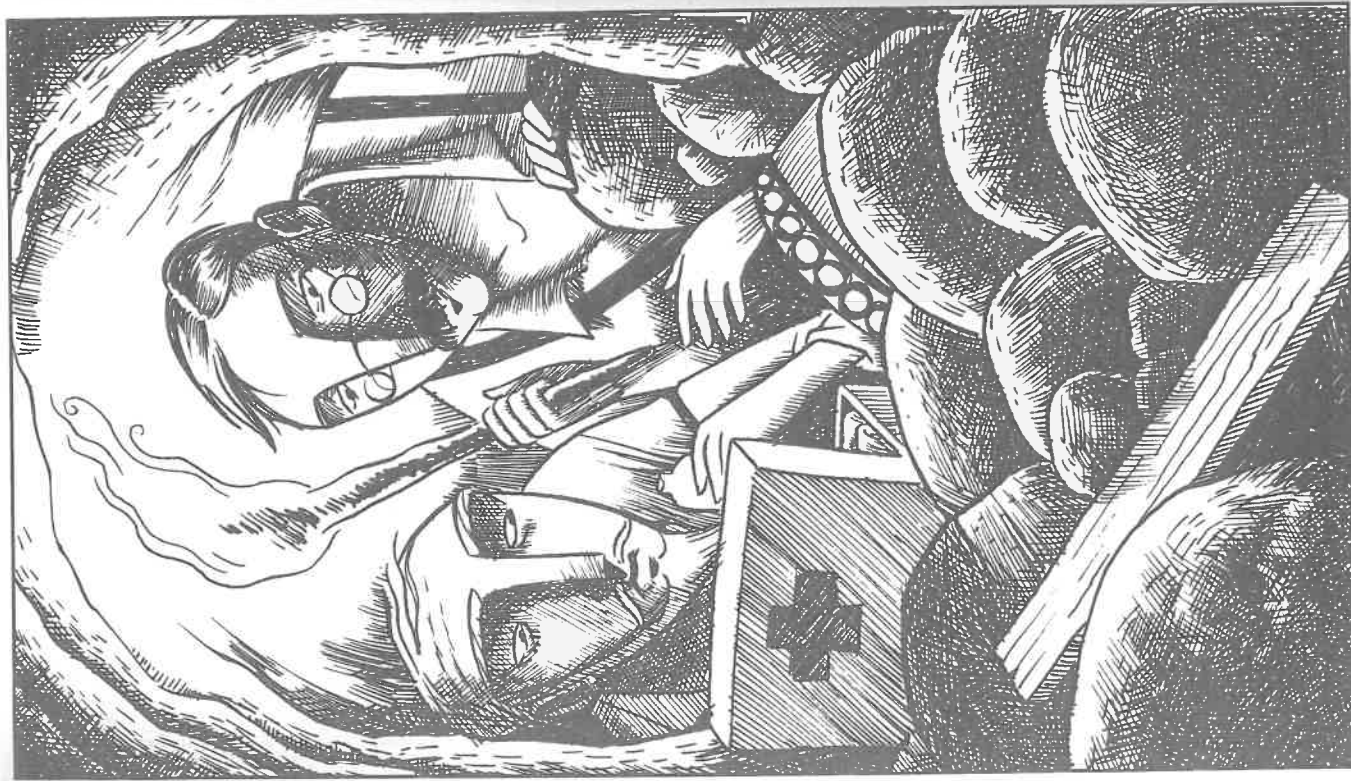




CURSE OF THE PHARAOH

Egypt, 1923

DEATH SHALL COME ON SWIFT Wings to Him Who Disturbs the Peace of the King."

These ominous words, a curse from beyond the grave, were reportedly etched over the doorway of King Tutankhamen's tomb. They weren't.

Like so many of the so-called facts, this curse was invented by newspaper reporters who weren't about to let the truth stand between them and a good story. If there had been such a curse, I should have been the first one struck down. For it was I, Howard Carter of Norfolk, England, who was most responsible for discovering the tomb and removing its riches.

The legend of the curse dogged us almost from the very start. On November 4, 1922, after many years of false hopes, my workman uncovered sixteen steps leading down into the sand of the Valley of the Kings. For the first time, we knew that a tomb of high rank awaited us.

That evening I returned to my house in Luxor to find my Egyptian manservant in a state of nervous agitation. A cobra, it seemed, had killed a pet canary I had brought over with me from England.

"The pharaoh's serpent ate the bird," he said in a breathless moan. The cobra was, of course, one of the pharaoh's symbols. "This is a warning. You must not disturb the tomb."

My response was a practical one, telling him to make sure the cobra was no longer in the house.

Three weeks later, with my financial patron, Lord Carnarvon, by my side, I broke a hole into the outer burial chamber and caught my first glimpse of the treasure that would make "King Tut" a household name.

Shortly thereafter, Lord Carnarvon died from a mysterious fever. On that same night, in faraway England, Carnarvon's favorite hunting dog also died, and the world was suddenly convinced of the pharaoh's curse. Since then, they have connected over twenty other deaths to the curse, from Arthur Mace, an American archeologist who assisted me, to my own dear wife.

Time has passed. The year is now 1938. I'm a man in my mid-sixties. And I suppose whenever I die, of whatever cause, it will be attributed to this same vengeful curse.

If you believe in such nonsense, there is little I can say to dissuade you. But I can tell you of one death that was in no way caused by a curse—for it was a deliberate, cold-blooded murder. I am free to tell the story now, since the players in this drama have all preceded me to the grave.

After the first whirlwind of fame, the flood of official visits to the tomb dwindled. But our work continued. My team was increasingly engaged in the laborious process of cataloging hundreds of delicate artifacts under the hot Egyptian sun.

Abdel Effendi, from Egypt's Department of Antiquities, had joined our desert camp. The small, serious scholar was charged with safeguarding his nation's heritage, and he trusted no one. Throughout each long day, Effendi would list off the statues and jewelry and funerary items emerging from the chambers. After sunset, he would still be at work, checking rumors among the local workmen and sticking his generous nose into every cubbyhole where a thief might hide a priceless artifact.

The routine went unbroken until the last Saturday in May, 1923. I was about to leave camp and join my dear wife in Luxor when the sound of crashing rocks caught my ear and

stopped my heart. Fearing a collapse, I raced out of my tent. "Is it the tomb?" I cried to everyone and no one.

Dr. Jules Grissard stood in front of his own tent. "No," he assured me. "It came from over there." He led the way across camp toward the abandoned, empty tunnels we had dug during the nine previous, fruitless years of our search.

At first, all seemed fine. One of the tunnels had fallen harmlessly into itself. And then we saw the robe and the human hand. Immediately, the workmen began digging. "It's Effendi," said Dr. Grissard. "Mohammed, the kit." He gave the foreman a key from his watch fob and pointed him toward the medical tent.

As the Egyptian foreman lumbered off, we saw that a lucky placement of fallen boulders had prevented Abdel Effendi from being crushed and killed outright. "I must speak," he said weakly. "Important."

"Save your strength," the French physician admonished.

Mohammed returned with a medical kit. "Brand new," he said proudly as he returned the key to the doctor. Inside the kit were perfect rows of white bottles and wrapped gauze.

Grissard grabbed the bottle of smelling salts and turned back to his patient. We all stepped aside, giving him room. But it was no use. Less than a minute later, the Egyptian official gave out a last little gasp.

"He's dead," Grissard said and absently placed the bottle of salts in his pocket.

"The pharaoh's curse," Mohammed muttered darkly.

I didn't scold him for his irresponsible words, said within earshot of so many. Perhaps I should have.

Within an hour, we were on our way to Luxor with Effendi's body, leaving a regiment of soldiers to guard the excavation site in our absence. At the banks of the Nile, we dismounted our horses to rest while the servants loaded the ferry.

We were all of us quite upset by the accident, especially, it seemed, Mustaf, an Egyptian student from the University of Cairo. The boy was small and slight, with a usually sunny

smile. Mustaf was not smiling now. He and Dr. Grissard sat under a stand of palms, munching from a bowl of figs that Mohammed, the foreman, had set out.

"The rocks should not have fallen," Mustaf said. "I was in charge of old tunnels. They were all secure, I swear." And here he lowered his voice. "Did Effendi say anything? Before he died, he spoke of something important..."

"Yes, he did," Grissard said with a scowl. "But that's between him and me—and the authorities." Grissard refused to elaborate, but took another fig and slipped it into his mouth.

The ferry had returned for another loading. Dr. Grissard untied his horse and pushed his way to the head of the queue. But the horse was tramping too close to the bulrushes. Several of us saw the cobra slither from its nest and coil itself to attack. We shouted a general warning, but too late.

In the flash of an eye it was over. The horse bolted wildly. Dr. Grissard tried to control the reins, but he was dragged under the pounding hooves, his ribs crushed by the panicking beast.

Grissard was still conscious when Mustaf knelt down by his side. The doctor seemed desperate to speak, his mouth an inch from the student's ear. And then, before he could say a word, his eyes rolled back and his body went limp. "Mere fainted," Mustaf said, allaying the worst of our fears. Grissard's chest pulsed in quick, shallow breaths. "Quick, the salts."

"In his pocket," Mohammed said.

I reached into Grissard's jacket and retrieved the small brown bottle of salts. Mustaf, flustered and anxious, grabbed it. He was just placing it under the physician's nose, when the injured man opened his eyes.

Grissard seemed confused and disoriented. And then, as if he were recalling some unspeakable horror, his eyes widened. "Murder," he gasped. Twice more he gasped. When he went limp this time, there was no reassuring pulsing of his chest.

"Did he say murder?" asked I. Those at my side assured me that this had indeed been the French doctor's last word.

I was stunned. In just one day, the Valley of the Kings had taken the lives of two of my closest associates.

The Egyptian laborers began milling about the ferry landing, jabbering in hushed tones. I myself would have almost been persuaded to believe in their demonic curse, had it not been for the doctor's one dying word, "Murder."

"How could it be murder?" I asked myself, stumbling away from the doctor's mangled body. The cobra had been real; I'd seen it myself. The horse panicked, as any horse would. How could a murderer have arranged that?

Mohammed slowly returned the men to their tasks. The stolid, competent man personally took charge of the water bottles and foodstuffs, restoring everything to the camel pouches in preparation for our river crossing. I was only marginally aware of his actions, until he tapped me on the shoulder and showed me the still unpacked bowl of figs.

"Smell," Mohammed whispered, holding the bowl up to my nose.

I didn't have to breathe deeply. The smell was pungent and unmistakable. "Ammonia," I whispered back. And underneath the ammonia was another smell, something bitter that I couldn't quite place.

"Poison," Mohammed asserted. "He was poisoned. I saw him eating the figs."

I'd seen it, too, Dr. Grissard and Mustaf eating the figs together. But this memory only served to confuse me more. What part could poison have played in the doctor's death, in his self-proclaimed murder?

It would be several days before I had all the evidence in my possession and could calmly start to unravel this almost supernatural mystery.

(1) Who killed Dr. Grissard? (2) How was it done? (3) What was the original motive?

If you've already solved this mystery, check the Solution on p. 138. To discover additional clues, turn to Gathering Evidence on p. 115.

HISTORICAL NOTES ON
EGYPTIAN TOMBS & THE PHARAOH'S CURSE

ALTHOUGH THERE WAS no curse etched over the entrance to Tutankhamen's tomb, such curses were not uncommon. One authentic curse reads as follows: "As for anyone who shall enter this tomb in his impurity, I shall wring his neck as I would a bird's."

It was Lord Carnarvon's strange death, five months after the tomb's opening, that sparked the legend. Doctors thought it might have been the result of an infection caused by an insect bite on his left cheek. Two years later, when the King Tut mummy was finally unwrapped, a similar mark was said to have been found on the body's left cheek.

By 1929, the press had attributed ten more strange and premature deaths to the pharaoh's curse, including one suicide. Lord Westbury, whose son had earlier died "from the curse," left the following note before jumping to his own death: "I really cannot stand any more horrors and hardly see what good I am going to do here, so I am making my exit."

By 1935, the number of so-called victims had reached twenty-one.

Was there really a curse? Were the deaths all coincidental? Or could it have been a combination of coincidence and a disease accidentally unearthed by the explorers?

In a 1999 study from the University of Leipzig, Dr. Gotthard Kramer suggested that some of the fatalities might have been caused by ancient spores. While analyzing the remains of 40 Egyptian mummies, Kramer found several potentially deadly mold spores, microorganisms that can survive for thousands of years.

Until the very end, Howard Carter was harassed by spiritualists, each with a theory on how to remove the curse hanging over his head. His death finally came in 1939—from natural causes.