

A King in Babylon

(Continued from preceding page.)

Jimmy," I said at last, realizing the uselessness of argument. "You said yourself, Professor . . ."

Davis clicked his tongue impatiently. "I know I did—even I get infected with this foolishness sometimes—it's in the air! Well, I'm willing to take a look for him—I see there is no chance for sleep until we do!"

I fumbled around and found my shoes and slipped them on.

"I'm going too," I said; and then, when we got outside, I was surprised to find Creel at my elbow.

"Three fools are no worse than two!" he muttered, but he didn't meet my eyes. "We'll find that idiot sitting under a palm smoking a cigarette. And he'll laugh at us! What the devil is that?" he added, for from the direction of the native camp the night wind bore to our ears a sound as of a low crooning.

It was little more than a murmur; but it rose and fell on a gamut of only three or four notes in a manner inexplicably weird. For an instant Davis was as startled as Creel and I; then I saw him smile.

"The natives have got a chanter at work to keep off the evil spirits," he said. "They have been uneasy since they learned I was going to open that inner tomb."

Creel muttered something to the effect that they couldn't be any more uneasy than he was, but Davis only shrugged, and we walked on across the oasis. We saw no sign of Jimmy, and at last we came to the little slope, right at the edge of the desert, on the other side of which the natives had pitched their camp. From the midst of it, clear and piercing in spite of its subdued tone, came the chant.

And then, as we topped the rise and looked down upon the camp, we saw the chanter, squatted on his haunches, and around him the sleeping fellahin.

"Let's have a word with the fellow," said Davis. "He may have seen our man."

We threaded our way between the natives, huddled in their cloaks and sleeping soundly, evidently with complete faith in the efficacy of the chant to ward off all things evil; and then we came to the chanter where he sat, with head thrown back and eyes fixed on the heavens . . .

He turned his head with a jerk when he heard us coming, and the chant ceased abruptly; then, when he recognized us, he sprang to his feet, and replied in a bated voice to Davis's brief questions. The latter motioned us away at last, and we followed him out from the circle of sleepers. Before we had taken the second step, the chant began again.

Davis led us right to the edge of the oasis. Then he stopped and looked out across the sands.

"He says there are ghosts abroad to-night," he said. "He says they are dancing about the tombs. He says he saw them quite clearly when the moon rose; and that two from the oasis joined them . . ."

He stopped, and we all stood staring out at the group of mounds which marked the ruins. In my own mind, I had not the slightest doubt that Jimmy was over there—and that he was not alone.

"Shall we go and see?" asked Davis abruptly, and peered into our faces.

I shrank back. I didn't want to go. I regretted that I had insisted upon this wild adventure. I didn't want to see—I was afraid to see . . .

But Creel was made of sterner stuff. "Come on," he said, between clenched teeth. "If we are ever going to get to the bottom of this mystery, now is the time!"

And he started resolutely out across the sand.

CHAPTER XXVII.

IF the natives had seen us, they would have been more certain than ever that there were ghosts abroad, for, from a distance, we must have had a sufficiently weird look as we set out across the sand. Close up, we were ridiculous rather than weird, with nothing on but shoes and pajamas; and, as we looked at each other, the tension with which we had started out from the shadow of the trees suddenly relaxed.

"The ghosts will run at the first glimpse of us," laughed Creel. "They will be scared to death. They'll be outghosted! That wouldn't be so bad for a

comedy reel, Billy—the ghosts scared out of their wits by the people they are trying to frighten!"

Davis laughed grimly; and we plodded on in silence. I suppose Creel was turning the idea over in his mind, for he chuckled softly once or twice. And then we were at the edge of the ruins, and clambered up the first of the mounds which topped the excavation.

I don't know what I expected to see there—a *danse macabre*, or some such horror, perhaps—and I strained my eyes from end to end of it at a single glance; but it lay white and empty in the moonlight.

"No ghosts there," said Creel. "Suppose we take a look in the tomb." And he started down the stair.

The black entrance to the tomb seemed to me unspeakably sinister and threatening, but Davis switched on his torch, and he and Creel stepped through without hesitation. I followed, wondering if they were really as fearless as they seemed, or if their knees were secretly knocking together as mine were.

Davis cast the beam of light about the outer chamber, and I saw that it was piled with the debris of the wall which had masked the entrance to the corridor.

"I had to take down nearly all of it before I could get the coffin out," he said; "it was a hard job."

"How about the roof?" Creel asked. "I think it will hold," said Davis, and threw the light up over it. "Hello! There's an ugly crack!"

It was an ugly one, running from side to side across the chamber.

"I'd hate to be in here when that came down," said Creel; "or in the inner tomb. It would mean burial alive for certain!"

Davis was examining the crack attentively.

"The wall was built to brace the roof more than I thought it would be," he said. "The Egyptians must have foreseen the possibility of great masses of sand being heaped above it, and provided in this way for the extra weight. But I don't think it will come down—not for a while, anyway. Of course I could build the wall up again—but that would be an awful bother. Still, it might be worth while, if only to preserve the place."

"If you are going to work in here at all," said Creel, "you ought certainly to do it—unless you're tired of living! I'm not sure I want to go in, even for a minute."

"Nonsense!" said Davis. "It won't fall unless something shakes it," and he stepped forward into the corridor. Then he stopped suddenly and held up his hand. "Wait!" he said. "Listen!"

We listened with bated breath, but not a sound broke the stillness of the tomb.

"What was it you heard?" asked Creel, at last.

"I don't know," Davis answered hesitatingly. "Perhaps it wasn't anything—but it seemed to me there was a sort of rustling . . ."

"Like a woman's dress," I said. "I know. It's in there!"

"Nonsense!" said Davis again, and went resolutely forward.

I don't believe I should have followed, if Creel hadn't been behind me, pressing me on. I knew what was there—I knew what we should see—and every step required an effort of will, for my feet were like lead. And then my heart leaped suffocatingly, for Davis gave a sudden, sharp cry, as the torch was dashed from his hand and fell clattering to the floor. And the next instant, something brushed past me, with a rush of air, and a flicker as of wings . . .

Davis was fumbling around on the floor, swearing softly to himself; and then something clutched my arm.

"It's only me," said Creel's voice. And then, in a lower tone, "Did you feel it?"

"Yes," I said. "Something that rushed past . . ."

"Yes."

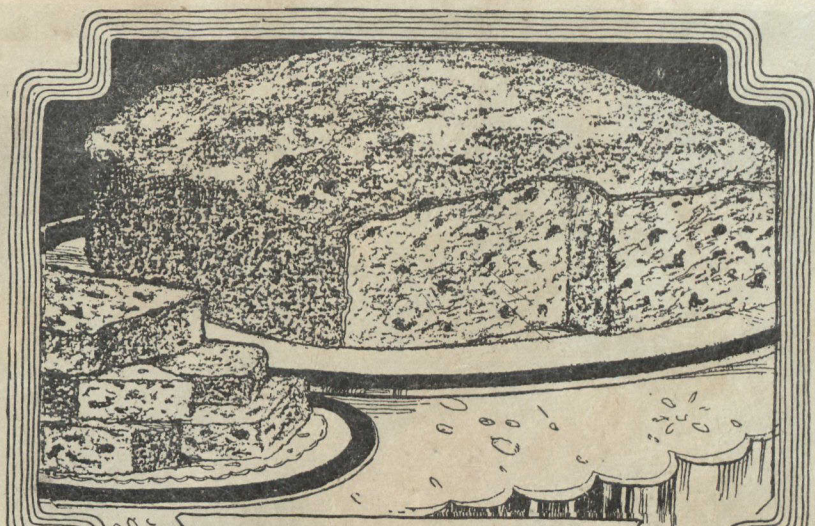
And then the light shot out again.

"Come along, you fellows!" Davis called. "What are you standing there whispering about?"

"Billy and I were comparing notes on the ghost," said Creel. "What did it look like—you must have seen it."

"I saw nothing," said Davis sharply. "There wasn't anything to see."

"I suppose you just dropped the torch," said Creel. "Let me see the back of your hand."



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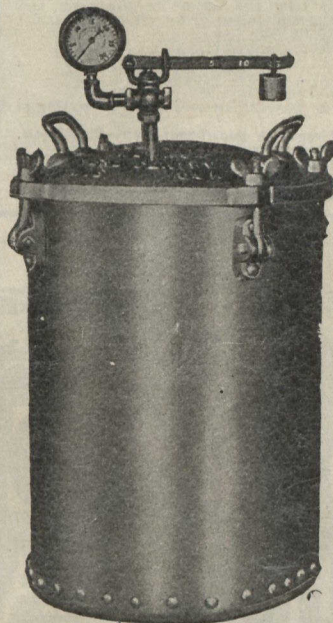
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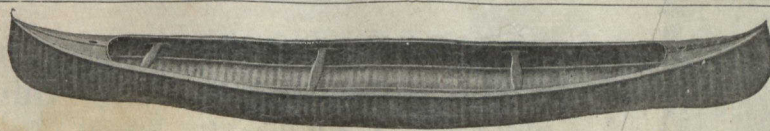
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(Continued on page 27.)