

A NIGHT IN THE CATACOMBS OF THE UPPER NILE.

No feature in the mental idiosyncrasy of the Egyptians is so striking as their passion for excavating, building and burrowing under ground. Half the lives of the thoughtful class of the community, who were so numerous and influential as to impress their peculiarities upon the whole nation, was passed in subterranean apartments, nominally constructed for the reception of the dead, but in reality for the use of the living, who loved the grim solitude which the company of mummies and the perpetual presence of death insured to the frequenters of the tombs. Accordingly, there is scarcely a mountain, rock or precipice in any portion of the Nilotic Valley, or of the desert bordering upon it, which does not contain suites, more or less spacious, of sepulchral chambers, adorned with sculpture, painted in brilliant and gorgeous colors, abounding with symbolic representations, with deep shafts, long corridors, endless flights of steps, descending, winding, branching off into the bowels of the earth, with here and there niches for coffins, carved and decorated divans for the living, and beautiful tables running along the wall, on which to arrange the wines, fruits and viands designed to comfort and exhilarate the worshipper of Isis and Osiris.

Once, while roaming about the wastes of Nubia, we learned that there existed far out in the desert something which our informants called a ruin, although whether below or above ground they were unable to decide. Respecting its exact distance from the river they were equally uncertain; some estimating it at one hour, some at three or more. Arriving shortly after dark at the village which was to form our starting point, we found the whole population asleep, or determined to appear so, with the exception of four young men, whom we heard, while groping our way through the dusky streets, or rather lanes, talking and laughing in a ruinous, unlighted building. Our Arab servants, who cherished strong prejudices against all inhabitants of the "black countries," argued that they must be murderers, or at least brigands, otherwise, they could have no motive for sitting together in the dark, after all honest people were in their beds. But, brigands or no brigands, they would probably for money consent to be our guides, which, when we had knocked and made known our wishes, they cheerfully did. It must be said for wild and eastern men in general, that they seldom profess knowledge when conscious of ignorance; so that if they undertake to conduct you to any place, you may be tolerably certain they are familiar with the road, though about distance their ideas are often misty. On the present occasion, our difficulties were multiplied by the circumstance that the guides understood not one word of Arabic, while, with the exception of an ignorant river pilot, we were all equally unacquainted with the Nubian language. Scanty and unsatisfactory, therefore, was our intercommunication; but as they affirmed unhesitatingly that they could lead us to the ruins of which we were in search, we bade them move on, and followed. Soon the village was left behind, and the desert entered upon—the desert, vast, monotonous, lighted up by the most brilliant moon, its sand-hills piled up and modeled by the winds, clothed in some places with tamarisk or the oriental willow, alternating at intervals with barren rocks, rising into peaks, or cloven into vast fissures, through which we wound our way, immersed at times in deep shadow, with the yawning mouths of caverns on either hand. Our attendants, little used to walking over deep sand or rugged rocks, presently became tired, and their weariness perhaps induced them to question us as to whether or not we had brought our firearms with us, since they apprehended that our guides might possibly have a design upon our lives, as they often whispered together and laughed. Our rifles, our pistols, even our daggers had been left behind, so that, had the Nubians intended mischief, they had an excellent opportunity; but they entertained no such ideas, and at length, after a weary march of at least three hours, stopped at the foot of a low mountain, declaring us to be now in possession of the object of which we were in search. As neither column nor obelisk, nor wall nor gateway anywhere appeared, we began to suspect they were really mocking us, and, being roused to anger, fiercely demanded what they meant. The men then, with their spears, pointed to an Egyptian cornice cut in the rock, and all but covered with sand, which, kneeling down, they vigorously moved with their hands, till they laid open a small doorway, through which, being the most eager of the party, I forced my way, like the Egyptian deity, Agathodemon, wriggling into a hole.

Once entered, I beheld by my wax taper one of the most astonishing sights I had ever witnessed. Standing on the sand mounds, blown in by the winds, my head nearly touched the roof, which was completely instinct with life; myriads of small creatures, with sooty wings, open mouths, and glittering head-like eyes hung quivering and trembling from the rock, detaching themselves gradually, and darting madly hither and thither in the unaccustomed light. Leaving my companions to work their way through the sand at their leisure, I advanced, with more than my wonted caution, into the cavern. Nor was caution at all unnecessary, for I had not proceeded many yards before a large square mummy pit yawned before me. Into this pit I threw a stone, and by its frequent bounding and rebounding from side to side, conjectured that the depth of the shaft could not be less than seventy or eighty

feet. After warning my friends of the danger, I skirted the pit, and then paused in profound admiration of the grandeur, extent and magnificence of this subterranean palace, constructed by the lavish industry of the Egyptians, in an out-of-the-way mountain, which they who quenched their thirst at the Nile could have seldom had occasion to visit, unless—which is not improbable—all this portion of the wilderness had been rendered fertile by their genius and energy. The tamarisks, the willows and the mimosas, still growing on several hillocks and hollows, testified to the practicability of such a transformation.

After gazing round me for several minutes, I discerned a square opening in the rock, leading to a lower suite of apartments; and after estimating the depth, which seemed to be from fifteen to eighteen feet, I leaned forwards with my hands on the sides of the opening, and leaped down, followed by a torrent of bats, all apparently intent upon extinguishing my wax taper, and at length, to my no small annoyance, succeeded. They now considered they had got me all to themselves; and, as I stopped to grope about for my candle, I felt them crawling thick upon the ground and put my thumb and finger into their open mouths, while others of their brethren crawled over my head into my bosom, and down the back of my neck—their cold, clammy touch making me shiver with disgust. Into these halls and corridors no light but that of a torch or taper had ever penetrated since the creation; around me was the true Egyptian darkness—a darkness which could be felt, since it weighed upon the spirits, and made the eyeballs strain to catch a glimpse of something visible and tangible. I picked up stones, and threw them in various directions, and as, however far they went they struck against no rock or wall, but always fell on the sandy or stony floor, I conjectured that I stood in the midst of a vast hall, the pavement of which might be pierced with mummy pits or other dangerous cavities. Beginning to be alarmed, since I knew not how to advance or retreat, I shouted with all my might to my companions, who, not knowing what course I had taken, had probably turned off into other galleries, never supposing I could have descended into that chasm. Whether they came to my aid or not, there was not one circumstance which inspired me with the hope that I might find an exit from that dismal den—this was a slight current of air which now and then breathed upon me. Exploring the floor carefully, now with my feet and now with my hands, I moved towards the point from which the air came, but, to my dismay, the little refreshing breeze ceased to blow, and then, a few seconds afterwards, appeared to come from behind. I now resumed my former practice of throwing stones, and at length found that they struck against a wall, which turned out, however, when I reached it, to be only the face of a large square pillar, designed to support the weight of the superincumbent mountain. On a low projection of this pillar I sat down to consider what was next to be done. If I sat there till morning, the returning day would not improve my condition. The stones which strewn the floors were too soft to afford the least spark of fire by collision; all the means of striking a light were with my Arab servants, who, I feared, had given me up for lost and had retreated from the catacombs. At this idea a bewildering terror came over me, and I rose, and, straining my voice to its utmost pitch, sent what resembled a loud roar through the cavern. The echoes took it up and carried it right and left till it became fainter and fainter, and gradually died away in the distance. Visions and phantasms then took possession of my mind. I beheld the slope of a mountain capped with snow, and in a sheltered nook near its base a house, with children, overlooked by a woman, playing on the green sward before it. A baby lay among roses near the woman's feet, who alternately gazed at it and at the page of a book which it was clear she was not reading. Upon this scene I gazed with deep anguish, since it seemed to be the last glimpse I should ever obtain of those figures. Fancy then carried me higher up the mountain, towards where the avalanches roll and rear; and, as I mounted, one of the most enormous bulk appeared to be loosened from its seat, and to be launched like lightning down the steep declivity I was toilsomely climbing. It struck, it overwhelmed, it stunned me—I lost all sensation. When I escaped from the folds of this hideous vision, I beheld my Arab servants, each with a light in his hands, standing before me and inquiring how it happened that I had lost myself and proceeded to so great a distance in the dark.

It was immaterial. We now found ourselves in an immense excavation, whose sides, pillars and niches were glowing with strange imagery, painted in bright colors, and representing, as we conjectured, the passage of the soul from earth to Hades. Descending from amid trees and flowers along a dreary path, the spirit—dim, shadowy, almost colorless—followed two wolf-headed conductors into the presence of the subterranean king, who was to pronounce judgment upon it, and assign it an abode, blithe and joyous, or portentously dismal, according to the tenor of its career on earth. The spirit in question happened to be one of the fortunate, soon passed its examination, and was received by two ladies, who led it by the hand into a place abounding with all those delights upon which the ancient Egyptians set especial value: wine, fruit, flowers, all sorts of delicious viands, choruses of women dancing in circles, while others of the same sex played upon

golden harp, which, from their open mouths, they appeared to be accompanying with their voices. At this reception, the spirit seemed to lose the tenuity of its figure, and was plumped out to respectable dimensions, while its face beamed with joy. Here the artist stopped short, either because his activity had been arrested by death, or wishing to abandon to the imagination the remainder of the scene. In a sculptured niche, close at hand, we discovered a gorgeously-painted coffin, with a face of rare beauty delineated on the lid, having long, black, sweeping eye-lashes, a straight nose, high forehead, and rich, pouting lips, resembling those of a Macedonian rather than of an Egyptian woman; for the chin, too, was Greek—that is, exquisitely rounded, dimpled, and rising over a neck never surely beheld among the genuine natives of the Nilotic Valley. Should we find the mummy within? And if we did, would it answer the flattering indications of the exterior? The discovery was soon made that the coffin had never been opened; and so much like one solid block of wood had time and thick paint rendered it, that it was with no little difficulty we discovered the point of junction between the lid and the coffin. The want of hammers and chisels would have rendered our discovery of no avail, had not our Nubian guides drawn forth heavy crooked daggers from beneath their armpits—one of which I purchased on the spot, and still possess—and suggested the possibility of opening the sarcophagus with them. This we at length did. The mummy, properly speaking, was not visible, being concealed by a thick investiture of swaths and bandages, enveloping its form obliquely, while its face was represented by a painted mask of rare beauty. Round the throat was a necklace, and on the breast a chain of gold beads, exquisitely formed and chased, of which we robbed the mummy. We were, however, thieves of some conscience, for after having appropriated the necklace and the beads, with a blue porcelain ring, worn probably in life by the deceased lady, we replaced the lid, restored the coffin to its niche, and left it either to become a prey to the next travelers from Europe, or to remain there in silence and quietness till the great Osirian resurrection.

It so happens that the Egyptians, even in their sepulchres, where the mysteries of life and death are strangely mingled, invest their spirits with attributes which will not bear to be spoken of. In one place, the imagination is borne up to the highest level of the sublime; in another, it is dashed suddenly to the earth in the most material way. Bodies mutilated in war are piled up before barbarous monarchs; decapitated trunks lie prostrate on the floor, while the heads which have been severed from them are heaped, grim and ghastly, in a corner. Some attempts are occasionally made to suggest an ethnological distribution of the races whose deeds are celebrated on the walls of these tombs; for, where the painters were real Egyptians, we find groups of red men driving forward other groups of white, yellow, or black men, as captives or slaves. By the white men they are supposed to have designated their Macedonian masters; in which case tombs are of recent construction, while the yellow men represent Persians or other Asiatics. A strong objection to this theory, however, is found in the fact that among the oldest tombs in Thebes excavated and painted, in all likelihood, before the siege of Troy, groups of white men are discovered, who may therefore be merely meant to represent white strangers wrecked by storms on the Egyptian coast, and sold as slaves to the princes and grandees of the Thebaid.

When we had sufficiently examined the paintings, we entered a long corridor, which, after ascending and descending for many hundred yards, terminated in a small chamber, in which we noticed a mummy pit, filled with large stones to the top. In the wall was a hole, about four feet and a half from the ground, which looked into another tomb, for through it we could discern long suites of painted passages and apartments. After much consultation and many tempting proposals made to the Nubians and Arabs, no one would consent to be thrust through that hole into the neighboring tomb; some pretended fear of ghouls and efrits, others refused to explain the ground of their apprehensions. I then volunteered, and, having been raised to a horizontal position, my head and neck were thrust thro' the opening in the wall, but no efforts of my friends sufficed to propel my shoulders after them. Growing apparently weary of keeping my body straight, they were on the point of breaking my neck, when, by a violent effort, I forced back my head out of the opening, and dropped among the piles of rubbish. The twinge I then felt in my spine seems to be renewed as I write, as well as the anger with which I reproached my friends and followers for their disregard of my life. Hunger and fatigue now made us think of a retreat; but it was easier to resolve upon it than to make it, for so numerous were the passages, corridors, flights of steps and suites of chambers we had traversed, that no exit for a long while appeared. At length we arrived in the great hall, whose vast roof rose into the mountain far beyond the reach of the light afforded by our tapers and torches, as well as of the stones which, with strong arms, we cast upwards in search of it. It was the opinion of some of our party that, in this instance, the Egyptians had taken advantage of an immense natural cavern in forming this dome, which for height and breadth exceeded the largest cathedrals in the world. Under the impulse of keen appetite,

the taste for the picturesque, however, became faint; so, in spite of the great antiquarian attractions, we hurried towards the exit, and soon found ourselves in the keen, sweet, elastic, refreshing air of the desert. Here we enjoyed a spectacle which threw all the labors of the Egyptians completely into the shade—this was the dawn, which was just then beginning to spread its white skirts over the eastern sky. We forgot the dangers we had passed, forgot our hunger, forgot everything, and climbed the rocky pinnacles of the nearest hill to witness the most glorious show which nature has to present. Along the line of the horizon, just where the eastern desert comes in contact with the sky, a bright flush, every moment becoming more and more luminous, surged up to the firmament, changing rapidly from white to yellow, from yellow to deep saffron, from saffron to pink, to crimson, to purple, till the whole mighty arch of the Orient heaven became one blaze of intermingled colors, flashing, glittering, quivering, as if all the Auroras of the pole had been suddenly thrown together. Not a word escaped from the lips of any one present. In silent astonishment, bordering possibly on adoration, Arab, Nubian, European, gazed at the precursors of the sun, beautiful beyond description, thrilling, absorbing, over-awing, till the vast fiery disc, more resplendent than molten gold, and absolutely blinding through its brightness, thrust up its dazzling rim above the edge of the desert, and in a moment the full day shone upon the earth.

The contrast between the interior of the catacombs, smelling of bats, coffins, mummies, decaying gums, cere-cloths, and wood crumbling under the influence of time, and the buoyant, elastic, etesian breezes blowing up the valley, and diffusing themselves softly over the waste, could hardly be surpassed. Yet it is worthy of remark, that there are no deleterious miasmata in Egyptian tombs. No one was ever the worse for breathing the atmosphere they contain. I have slept whole weeks in the midst of coffins, all containing corpses, and never experienced the slightest inconvenience, though the air occasionally appears close, and on that account, but on that account only, disagreeable.

*Of this we were ourselves afterwards robbed, in our turn, in an Italian custom-house.

"THE LORD'S NO DEAF."

A poor old deaf man, residing in a Fifeshire village, was visited one day by the parish clergyman, who had recently taken a resolution to pay such visits regularly to his parishioners, and therefore made a promise to the wife of this villager that he should call occasionally and pray with him. The minister, however, soon fell through this resolution, and did not pay another visit to the deaf man till three years after, when, happening to go through the alley in which the poor man lived, he found the wife at the door, and therefore could not avoid inquiring for her husband.

"Well, Margaret," said the minister, "how is Thomas?"

"Nae the better o' you," was the rather curt answer.

"How, Margaret?" inquired the minister.

"Oh ye promised twa years syne to ca' and pray ance a fortnight wi' him, and ye ance darkened the door syne."

"Well, well, Margaret, don't be so short. I thought it was not necessary to call and pray with Thomas, for he's deaf, you know, and cannot hear me."

"But, sir," rejoined the woman, "the Lord's no deaf."

The indolent clergyman shrank abashed from the cottage.

SLANG PHRASES.—The use of slang so prevalent among the half-educated and fast portions of the community, is pretty well hit off in the following paragraphs:

If you wish to be a 'A No. 1' woman, you have got to 'toe the mark,' and be less 'bifalutin.' 'You may bet your head on that.' You may sing 'slightly like a martingale,' you may 'spin street yarn' at the rate of 'ten knots an hour,' you may 'talk like a book,' you may dance as if you were on a 'regular break down,' and play the piano 'mighty fine,' but 'I tell you' you 'can't come to tea.' 'You may be handsome but you can't come in.' 'You might just as well 'cave in' first as last, and 'absquatulate,' for you can't 'put it through,' 'any way you can fix it.' 'If you imagine you may 'go it while you are young, for when you get old you can't,' 'you don't come it' 'by a long chalk.' 'Own up' now, and 'do the s'raight thing, and I'll 'set you down' as 'one of the women we read of.' 'If you come up to the scratch,' why I must 'let you slide.' But if you have a 'sneaking notion' for being a 'regular brick,' there is no other way—'not as you knows on'—'n', sirree, boss! If a young man should 'kind o' shine up to you,' and you should 'cotton to him,' and he should hear you say, 'by the jumpin' Moses,' or 'by the living jingo,' or 'my goodness,' or 'I vow,' or 'go it Betsy, I'll hold your bonnet,' or 'mind your eye,' or 'hit 'im again,' or 'take me away,' or 'dry up' now, or 'draw your sled,' or 'cut stick,' or 'give him particular fits,' he would pretty certainly 'evaporate.'

NOVEL TARGET.—A new target, for rifle and fancy shots has been contrived in England. A model of a deer is mounted on a curved railway, and made to descend swiftly from behind one shield to another. The target is a bull's eye placed on the deer's shoulder. If it is hit in the haunches a fine is levied for a miss; if the bull's eye is hit, a prize is won by the shot.