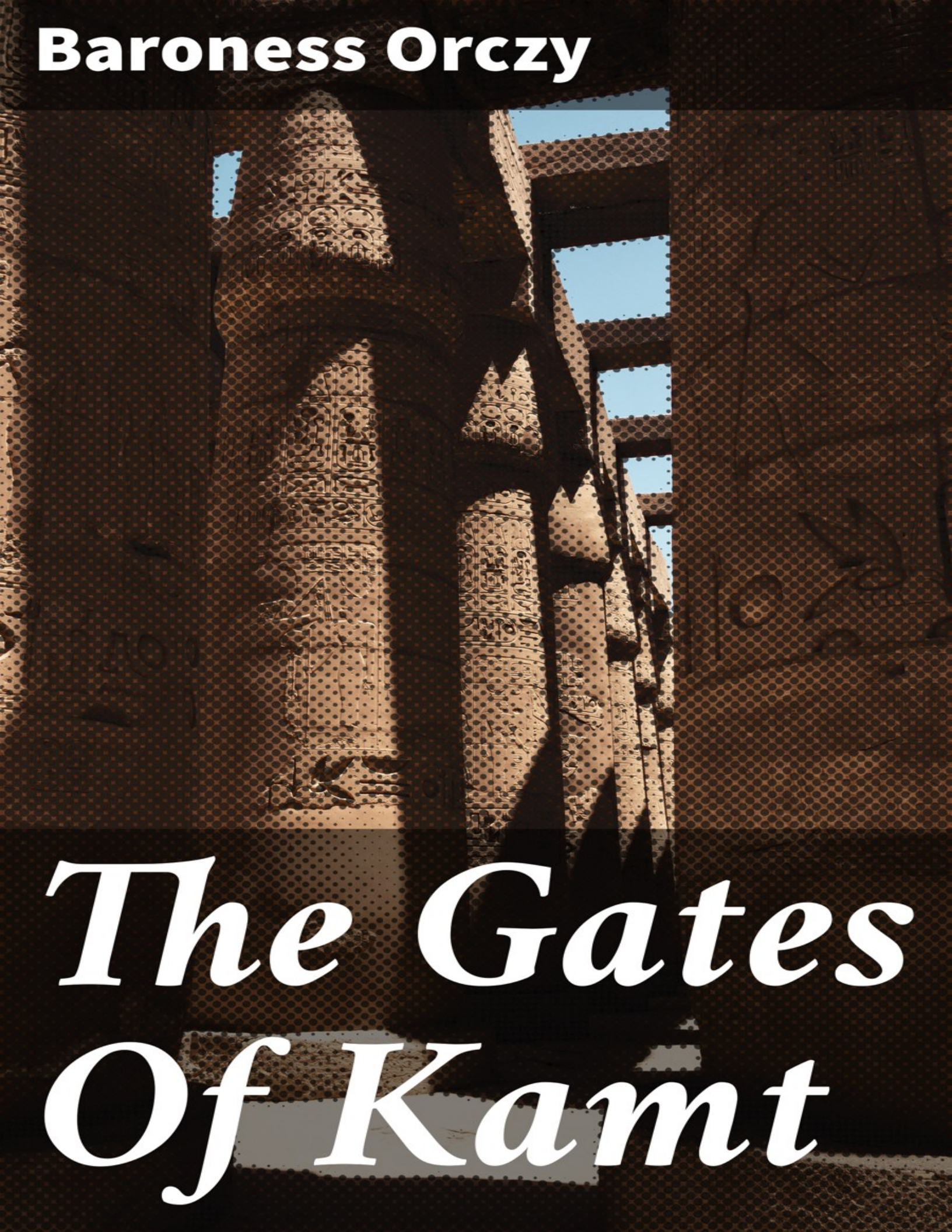
Baroness Orczy



The Gates Of Kamt

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Chapter 1
Tankerville’s Hobby

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It is a curious fact that, although Hugh Tankerville was destined to play such an all-absorbing part in the strange and mystic drama which filled both our lives, I have no distinct recollection of my first meeting with him.

We were at St. Paul’s School together, and I, a boisterous schoolboy of the usual pattern, have but a vague memory of the silent, dark-eyed lad, who hated football, and was generally voted to be a “bookworm,” called “Sawnie Girlie,” and was, without exception, the most unpopular boy in the school.

The masters must have thought a great deal of him, for, in recreation time, we often saw him go to one of their rooms and emerge thence, when the bell rang, in close conversation with old Foster, or Crabtree, the Greek or history master. This, together with the fact that he carried off every prize and scholarship with utmost ease, did not tend to make him more popular. I, for one, who was captain of our football team and the champion boxer of the school, held the taciturn bookworm in withering contempt, until one day—and this is my first distinct recollection of him he and I had … well! a few words;—I forget what about. I think that I wanted him to join in a tug-of-war and he wouldn’t; anyway, I indulged in the words—grand, sound, British schoolboy vocabulary it was, too—and he indulged in contemptuous silence for fully five minutes, while the floods of my eloquence were poured over his dark, unresisting head. Yes,

contemptuous, if you please, towards *me!* the captain of the football team, the champion boxer of the school. I could hear that ass, Snipey, and Bathroom Slippers sniggering behind me like a pair of apes; and contempt in the front, derision in the rear, soon became more than schoolboy nature could bear.

Well, I don't know exactly how it happened. Did my language wax more forcibly eloquent still, or did my champion fist actually come in aid to my words? I cannot say; certain it is that there was a shout, a draught that sent my cap flying to the other end of the schoolroom, a whirlwind which caught both sides of my head at once, and Sawnie Girlie was all over me in a minute. Where I was during that minute I would not venture to state definitely. I was vaguely conscious of a pair of dark eyes blazing down at me like the hall gas, and of a husky voice hissing at intervals, "How dare you? how dare you?" whilst I, blinded, breathless, bruised and sore, contrived to wonder how, indeed, I had dared.

When the whirlwind had at last subsided, I found myself in an unaccustomed position on the floor, underneath one of the forms; those blithering cowards, Snipey and Bathroom Slippers, were disappearing through the door, and Sawnie Girlie was quietly knocking the dust off his nether garments.

Well! after that interesting downfall of the champion boxer of St. Paul's, nobody who knows anything of schoolboy nature will wonder that Sawnie Girlie and I became the closest of chums, and that, with that well-deserved licking, Hugh Tankerville laid the foundations of

that friendship and admiration which has lasted throughout my life.

Silent and taciturn he remained towards the others, but from the moment that I—having struggled to my feet, after my ignominious downfall—went up to him and offered him my hand, in token of my admiration for his prowess, he and I were practically inseparable.

Gradually the strange influence, which savoured of the mystical, and which he seemed to exercise over all those with whom he came in contact, asserted itself over me, and I began to find pleasure in other things besides football and boxing. It was he who kindled in me a spark of that enthusiasm for the great past which was so overwhelming in him, and after a few months of our friendship I had one or two fairly stiff tussles with him for a top place in Classics or History. I will do myself the justice to say that never once did I succeed in getting that top place, but it certainly was not for want of trying.

Never shall I forget the memorable day when Sawnie Girlie—for so I still continued to call him—asked me to go home with him to afternoon tea one Saturday.

He lived in Hammersmith, he told me, and I, whose parents lived in Kensington, vaguely wondered what sort of mud-hut or hovel could be situated in such an out-of-the-way suburb as Hammersmith. I had never been down King Street, and as we two boys picked our way through the barrows on the edge of the kerb, and among the dense, not altogether sober crowd, I marvelled more and more how any civilised being could live in this extraordinary neighbourhood, when suddenly, having left King Street

behind us, Sawnie Girlie stopped before a large, old-fashioned iron gate, behind which tall chestnuts and oak trees threw a delightfully mysterious shadow on the ground.

“Here we are!” he said, as he pushed open the gate, and I followed, astonished at this quaint bit of old-world garden in the midst of the turmoil and tawdriness of suburban London. Beyond those gates everything seemed cool, peaceful, silent; only a few birds twittered in the great trees. The ground was covered with the first fallen leaves of autumn, and they made a curious, sweet-sounding “Hush-sh-sh” as we walked. Obviously the place had been, from a strictly landscape-gardening point of view, sadly neglected, but I did not notice this. I only saw the great, tall trees, smelt the delicious aroma of the damp, fallen leaves, and stopped a moment, anxious and awed, expecting to see down the cool alley some cavalier with plume and sword walking arm-in-arm with his lady, in great hooped skirt and farthingale.

Hugh Tankerville had taken no notice of me. He walked on ahead towards the house, which must have lain far back from the road, for it was not discernible from the gates. The scene was, of course, familiar to him, and he knew that no plumes or farthingales were left anywhere about, but from the moment that he had pushed those great gates open his whole being seemed to have changed. He walked more erect, he threw back his head, opened wide his nostrils and seemed, as it were, to breathe freedom in at every pore.

I was but a mere raw school lad at the time, and no doubt my impression of the old-fashioned house and garden was exaggerated in my mind, through its very

unexpectedness after the picture of sordid Saturday afternoon Hammersmith. The house itself was as picturesque as the garden, with a quaint terrace and stone stairs leading up to a glass door. Sawnie Girlie led me through this and across a hall, and presently I found myself in the most wonderful spot which up to that moment it had been my happy lot to see.

The room into which I followed Hugh Tankerville was low and square, with a great bow window that looked out onto another bit of tangled, old-fashioned garden; but to my delighted fancy it was crammed with everything that could fill a boy’s soul with delight.

There were great cases filled with all sorts of strange arms and shields, spears with flint heads, axes and quivers of arrows; there were great slabs of stone, covered with curious writing and adorned with weird and wonderful images; there were strange little figures of men and women in funny garbs, some with heads of beasts on their shoulders, others with human heads on fantastic bodies; but what seemed to me more strange than all, and made me stop awestruck at the door, was that the whole length of two walls there stood a row of mummies, such as I had once seen in the British Museum, some in their coffins, but others showing their human shape distinctly through the linen bandages—dark and discoloured with age—that covered them.

Hugh’s voice roused me from my stupor. “Father, this is Mark,” he said, and at the further end of the room, from behind a huge desk, littered with ponderous books and pyramids of papers, there emerged a head which I, in my

excited imagination, fancied to be one of those mummies come temporarily to life. It was yellow and wrinkled all over, and a reading lamp which, in spite of the daylight, stood burning on the table, threw a weird blue light on the thin, sharp features. The eyes, however, bright and small, looked across very kindly at us both and a voice said:

“Well! you two boys had better go and get your tea, and after that you may come up and Mark shall see the museum.”

I was delighted; I had no idea that this was the treat my newly-found friend had prepared for me. Even with me he had been strangely reserved about his home and about his father. I knew nothing of either.

We had a delicious tea, and were waited on by a dear old thing, who evidently was more a friend than a servant, for she hugged and kissed Hugh as if he were her greatest treasure; and though she did not kiss me, she shook hands and said how anxious she had been to see me, having heard so much about me from “the young master.” I blushed and wondered if Sawnie Girlie had also told of that memorable whirlwind episode, and did not enjoy my first slice of sally-lunn in consequence.

But it was a glorious tea, and I, no doubt, in true schoolboy fashion, would have contrived to stow most of the delicious cakes and muffins away had I had time to do so; but I remembered that after tea we were to go up and see the museum, so after my third cup and seventh slice of cake I stopped.

Oh, the delights of that museum! A real museum all to yourself, where there is no horrid attendant behind you to

tell you not to touch, but where every piece is actually put into your hands and you are allowed to turn it over, and look at every one of its sides, just as you please. I shall never forget the feeling of delicious horror that crept over me when first I absolutely touched one of the mummies with my hand. Mr. Tankerville was more than kind. He answered every one of my schoolboy questions with cheerful patience, explained everything, showed everything. It was—I think I may safely say—the happiest day of my life.

From that eventful afternoon I became—for as long as we were schoolfellows together—a constant visitor at The Chestnuts. Mr. Tankerville, who was one of the greatest archæologists and Egyptologists of his generation, took a keen delight in initiating us boys into the half-veiled mysteries of ancient Egyptian history. We were never tired of hearing about Ra and Horus, about the building of the great Pyramids, about the tombs and the wonders of Thebes and Memphis. But above all did he delight our ears with tales of that mysterious period which immediately followed the death of Queen Neit-akrit and the close of the Sixth Dynasty. This, so far as the scientific world is concerned, also marks the close of the old Empire. Strangers appear to have overrun the country, and for over 400 years the history of ancient Egypt is a blank; neither tombs nor temples mark the changes and vicissitudes which befel that wonderful nation, only a few royal names appear on scarabs, or tablets, but of the great people themselves, and of their ancient civilisation, the people who built the great Pyramids and carved the immortal Sphinx, of them there is not a trace.

When once more the veil is lifted from Egyptian history the whole aspect of the land is changed; we see a new Empire, and it is a new people that dwells along the banks of the sacred Nile.

What had happened to the old? This blank page in Egyptian history Mr. Tankerville had reconstructed on a theory all his own, and his fancy had filled it with warriors and conquests, with downfalls and regeneration. Open-eyed, open-mouthed, we listened to him for hours, while, sitting round the huge, old-fashioned grate, with the light of the great log fire illumining his shrivelled features, he told us of Neit-akrit and of the strangers who overran the land, and of the great Egyptian people, the old, original builders of the most ancient monuments, they who disappeared, no one knew whither, to make way for the new Empire, with its new art, its new architecture, its new religion.

This point in history was his hobby, and I learned long afterwards with what derision the scientific world looked upon it; but we boys listened to these tales as if to the words of a prophet preaching the Gospel. Hugh’s eyes would then begin to glow, his hands would be tightly clenched, he would hang on every word his father uttered; and I too listened, awed and amazed, while before my eyes Cheops and Khefren and the mysterious Neit-akrit wandered in gorgeous and ghost-like procession.

Then, as we both grew older, gradually Mr. Tankerville extended our knowledge of that most ancient of all histories. His erudition was perfectly amazing, but his hobby —at least I looked upon it as a hobby then—was the language of ancient Kamt. Upon Dr. Young’s and

Champollion’s methods he had constructed a complete, though somewhat complicated, grammar, and this, with marvellous patience, he began slowly and thoroughly to teach to us, together with the hieroglyphic and cuneiform writings practised by the ancient Egyptians.

In the literal sense of the word, he put new life into the dead language; no word in it, no construction of sentence was a mystery to him. He read it all as easily as he did his Latin and Greek. Hugh, naturally, was a most apt pupil. He worshipped his father, and was passionately enthusiastic about the mystic science. I tried to follow Hugh in his ardour and aptitude, and I don’t think that I was often left far behind.

I remember that my uncle, who had charge of my education since I had lost both my parents, shrugged his shoulders very contemptuously when I spoke to him of Mr. Tankerville. “That old fool,” was my Aunt Charlotte’s more forcible comment; “I hope to goodness you are not wasting your time cramming *his* nonsense into your head.” After that I never mentioned my friend’s name to either of them, but spent more and more time at The Chestnuts, imbibing that fascinating and semi-mystic lore of the great people of the past.

Such as Mr. Tankerville had reconstructed it, ancient Egyptian was not a difficult language, not nearly so difficult as Greek, for instance, and, certainly to me, in no sense as complicated as German. By the time that we were lads of about sixteen we could read almost any inscription on steles or potteries of old Egypt, more readily than we could have read a French poem, and Hugh was not quite seventeen

when he translated parts of the Gospel of St. John into ancient Egyptian.

No wonder then that after some five years of that happy time my heart well-nigh broke when the exigencies of my future demanded that I should go to college. I was destined for the medical profession and was to spend three years at Oxford, while Hugh meant to remain as an active help to his father in his scientific researches. With many protestations of eternal friendship I bade good-bye to the museum, the mummies and the phantom of Queen Neit-akrit.

When at the first vacation my eager thought was to go and see my kind friends at once, I learned with much sorrow that Mr. Tankerville was seriously ill. Hugh came to the door to speak to me for a moment. He looked pale and worn from long-continued night watches.

During the weary period of his father’s terrible illness, through which he nursed him with heroic patience and devotion, I saw practically nothing of Hugh. While I was at college I frequently wrote him long letters, to which he barely sent a short reply. Then I read of Mr. Tankerville’s death, and to my horror and amazement read also in various papers satirical and seldom kind comments on the scientific visionary who had just passed away. It seemed to me as if profane hands had dared to touch at my most cherished illusions. I had imagined that the whole of the scientific world would go into mourning for the illustrious antiquarian gone to where all nations, young and old, mingle in the vast mansions; and lo and behold! a shrug of the shoulders was the only tribute paid to his memory. I sincerely hoped that Hugh would be too busy to read the

obituary notices about his father. I longed for the vacation so that I might go and see him. I knew he would preserve intact the old chestnut trees, the old-world garden, the museum and the mummies, and I looked forward to once more watching in imagination by the fitful light of the great log fire the shade of Queen Neit-akrit wandering before my enraptured gaze.

Chapter 2
The Shade Of Neit-akrit

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My uncle died soon after my return from college. After that I was supposed to be busy laying the foundations of a good consulting practice in Harley Street, but in reality was enjoying life and the newly-acquired delights of a substantial fortune left to me by a distant relative.

My Aunt Charlotte kept house for me and tyrannised over me to her heart's content. To her I had not yet begun to grow up; I was still the raw schoolboy, prone to mischief and to catching cold, who was in need of sound advice since he no longer had the inestimable boon of the birch-rod vigorously applied by loving hands.

Dear Aunt Charlotte!—she really was a very worthy soul, but she held most uncomfortable views on the subject of duty, which, according to her code, chiefly consisted in making oneself disagreeable to other people "for their own good." She had those twin characteristics peculiar to Englishwomen of a certain stamp and an uncertain age—self-righteousness and a narrow mind.

She ruled my servants, my household, my one or two patients and me with a rod of iron, and it never seriously entered my head to dispute her rule. I was born with a temperament which always preferred to follow rather than to lead. Had I ever married I should have been hopelessly henpecked; as it was, my Aunt Charlotte decided how many servants I should keep, and what entertainments I should give. She said the final word on the subject of my suggested holidays and on the price of my new pyjamas.

Still, with all her faults, she was a good sort, and as she took all household cares from off my shoulders, I was duly grateful to her for that.

I saw less and less of Hugh Tankerville during all this time. At first, whenever I could, I found my way to the silent and cool Chestnuts, but as often as not Hugh seemed absorbed in thoughts or in work; his mind, evidently, while I chatted and we smoked, seemed so far removed from his surroundings that by-and-by I began to wonder whether my visits were as welcome as they used to be, and I took to spacing them out at longer intervals. Once—I remember I had not been to see him for over two months—I was bidding him good-bye after a very short and silent visit; he placed his hand on my shoulder, and said, with some of his old wonted cordiality:

"I am not as inhospitable as I seem, old chap, and soon, very soon now, you will see me quite myself again. It is always delightful to see you, but the work I am doing now is so great, so absorbing, that I must appear hideously unresponsive to your kindness to me."

"I guessed, old Girlie," I said, with a laugh, "that you must be busy over something terribly scientific. But," I added, noting suddenly how hot his hand felt, and how feverishly his eyes seemed to glow, "it strikes me that you are overworking yourself, and that as a fully qualified medical man I have the right to advise you …"

"Advise nothing just now, old chap," he said, very seriously, "I should not follow it. Give me two years more, and my work will be done. Then …"

"Two years, at this sort of work? Girlie, you'll be a dead man before then at this rate."

He shook his head.

“Ah! but it’s no use shaking your head, old man! The dinners you do not eat, the bed you don’t sleep in, the fresh air you do not breathe, all will have their revenge upon you for your studied neglect. Look here! you say you want to do another two years’ work; I say your health will not stand the strain if you do. Will you pander to our old friendship to the extent of listening to me for once, and coming away with me for one month to the sea—preferably Margate—and after that I promise you I shall not say a word about your health for the next half-year at least.”

Again he shook his head.

“I could not live if you parted me from my work now.”

And he looked so determined, his eyes glowed with such a strange inward fire, while there was such indomitable will expressed in his whole being, that I was not fool enough to pursue my point.

“Look here, Hugh,” I said, “I don’t want, of course, to interfere in your secrets. You have never thought fit to tell me what this all-absorbing work is that you pursue at risk of physical damage to yourself. But I want you to remember, Girlie, that I have independent means, that my time is my own, and that your father often used to tell me, when I was a great many years younger, of some of his labours, and of his work; once I helped him—do you remember?—over some …”

“My father was too fond of talking about his work,” he interrupted. “I don’t mean to offend you by saying this, old chap, but you must remember the purport of most of the obituary notices written about one of the most scientific men that ever lived. He toiled all his life, contracted the illness of which he died, wore himself out, body and soul, in pursuit of one great object: when he died, with that great object

unattained, the world shrugged its shoulders and called him a fool for his pains. But I am here now. I am still young. What he could not complete I have already almost accomplished. Give me two years, old chap, and the world will stand gaping round in speechless amazement at the tearing asunder of its own veil of ignorance, torn by me from before its eyes, by me, and by my father: ‘mad Tankerville’ they called him! Then it will bow and fawn at my feet, place laurel wreaths on my father’s tomb, and confer all the honours it can upon his memory; and I …”

“You will be sadly in need of laurel wreaths too, Girlie, by then,” I said half crossly, half in grudging admiration at his enthusiasm, “for you will have worked yourself into your grave long before that halcyon time.”

He pulled himself together as if he were half-ashamed of his outburst, and said, with a mirthless laugh:

“You are talking just like your Aunt Charlotte, old Mark.”

I suppose my flippancy had jarred on him in his present highly nervous state. Before I finally went, I said to him:

“Promise me one thing, Girlie.”

“What is it?”

“How cautious you are! Will you promise? It is for your good and for mine.”

“In that case I will promise.”

“Promise me that, if you want any kind of help in your work, you will send for me.”

“I promise.”

I did not see him for the whole of those two years. I wrote: he did not reply. I called: he would not leave his study to see me. It was useless being offended with him. I waited.

Then one day I had a telegram:—

“Come at once if you can.”

I jumped into a hansom, and half an hour later was seated in the dear old museum once more, beside the great log fire, which burned cheerfully in the grate. I had said nothing when first I saw Hugh. I was too much shocked at his altered, emaciated appearance: he looked like his own ghost, wandering about among the mummies. I could see that he was terribly excited: he was pacing about the room, muttering strange and incoherent words. For a moment I had feared that his reason had begun to give way under the terrible strain of absorbing brain work.

“It was good of you to come, Mark.”

“I was only too happy that you sent for me, old Girlie,” I said sadly.

“I have done the work.”

“Thank God for that!”

“And now I must have your help.”

“Thank God again, Girlie! What is it?”

Silently he took my hand and led me across the room, behind the ponderous desk which I remembered so well in his father’s lifetime.

“Here is the work, it took forty years—my father’s whole life and my own youth—to complete.”

He pointed to a large flat case, placed slanting on the desk, so as to receive the full light from the window. The top of the case was a sheet of clear plate-glass, beneath which I saw, what I at first took to be a piece of brown rag, frayed and irregular at the edges and full of holes. Again the terrible thought flashed across my mind that Hugh Tankerville had

suffered from nerve tension and that his reason had given way under the strain.

“You don’t see what this is?” he asked in reproachful amazement.

I looked again while he turned the strong light of the reading-lamp on the case, and then I realised that I had before me a piece of parchment rendered brown with age, made up of an infinity of fragments, some too minute even to see with the naked eye, and covered with those strange Egyptian hieroglyphics with which dear old Mr. Tankerville had originally rendered me familiar. Inquiringly I looked up at Hugh.

“When my father first found this parchment,” he said, while strong excitement seemed to choke the words as they rose in his throat, “it was little else than a handful of dust, with a few larger pieces among it, interesting enough to encourage his desire to know its contents and to whet his enthusiasm. At first, for he was then but a young man, though already considered a distinguished Egyptologist, he amused himself by placing the larger fragments together, just as a child would be amused by piecing a Chinese puzzle; but gradually the secrets that these fragments revealed were so wonderful, and yet so incomplete, that restlessly, by day and by night, with the help of the strongest magnifying glasses money could procure, he continued the task of evolving from that handful of dust a page of history which for thousands of years has remained an impenetrable mystery.”

He paused a moment as his hand, which was trembling with inward fever, wandered lovingly over the glass that covered the precious parchment.

“Illness and death overtook him in the midst of a task but half accomplished, but before he died he initiated me into the

secrets of his work; it was not necessary that he should request me to continue it. One glance at the parchment, then still in a very fragmentary condition, was sufficient to kindle in me the same mad enthusiasm for the secrets it revealed which had animated, then exhausted, him. I was young, my sight was at its prime, my patience unbounded. He had all his life helped me to a knowledge of hieroglyphics as great as his own. The sneer of the scientific Press at what it called ‘mad Tankerville’s hobby,’ his visions, acted but as a spur to my enthusiasm. It is six years since my father died, and to-day I fitted the last fragment of the parchment into its proper place.”

Amazed, I listened to this wonderful tale of toil and patience, extending over the greater part of half a century, and amazed, I looked down at the result of this labour of Sisyphus, the framents of brown dust—they could have been little else—which now, after thousands of years, had revealed secrets which Hugh said would set the world gaping. My knowledge of Egyptology and hieroglyphics had become somewhat rusty since the happy days when, sitting in the room in the fitful light of the fire, I used to hear from the dear old man’s lips the wonders of Khefren and the mysteries of Queen Neit-akrit; but, as I looked, suddenly the old familiar cartouche, the name of the Queen, caught my eye. There it was

Neit-akrit, Child of the Sun, my queen as I called her then; and as Hugh was silent and the shades of evening began to draw in, I thought I saw, as I did in my schoolboy days, the glorious procession of Pharaohs, priests and gods pass before my eyes again.

Then Hugh began to tell me of the contents of the parchment. His voice sounded distant and muffled, as if the very shades that peopled this dear old museum were themselves telling me their history. It was the same old theme, so familiar and yet so mysterious still, with which Mr. Tankerville used to rejoice our schoolboy hearts; the blank page in Egyptian history when, after the reign of Queen Neit-akrit and the close of the Sixth Dynasty, the grand old people, who built the great Pyramid and carved the mystic Sphinx, disappeared from the scene, gone—no one knows whither—to make way some hundreds of years later for a new people with new ideas, new kings, new art, new gods.

To me it seemed, as Hugh was speaking, that it was the shade of Neit-akrit herself who was telling me in that soft, sing-song Egyptian tongue how her Empire had been run over by the stranger. How she was weak, being a woman, and how she allowed herself to be dominated by him, for he was handsome, brave and masterful. Then I seemed to hear the voice of the high priest of Ra, bewailing the influence of the

stranger and his hordes over the great people of Egypt, whose origin was lost in the rolling billows of primæval chaos: and I saw the uprising of the multitude, the bloody battles, I saw the ultimate triumph of the stranger, as he spread his conquest from Net-amen to Men-ne-fer, from Tanis to Assuan; and at last I saw the people, the owners of that land which had once been so great, which they had covered with monuments that stood towering skywards, defying the rolling ages, that same people I saw, as Hugh still spoke, wandering off in one dense horde, driven onwards by the remorseless hand of the usurping stranger,—homeless, on, ever on, across the vast wilderness, to be heard of no more.

"No more until this day," now sounded Hugh's voice, clear and distinct in my ears, "until I, and my father before me, have lifted the veil which hid this strange and mysterious past, and are prepared to show the world once more this great people, whose work, whose art, whose science has set it agape since hundreds of years."

He seemed like a prophet inspired, whilst I, having forcibly aroused myself from my stupor and my visions, was gradually returning to the prosy realities of life. It seemed suddenly absurd that two sane Englishmen—at least I could vouch for the sanity of one of them—should get into a state of excitement over the fact as to whether a certain people five thousand years ago had had a war, been licked and had wandered across the desert or not.

I even caught myself wondering in what light Aunt Charlotte—as being a good typical example of the narrow and sane-minded, unimaginative Englishwoman—in what light she would regard the disappearance of the most ancient, civilised

people of this world, and what importance she would attach to their problematical wanderings across the desert.

Personally, though the subject had had a weird and unaccountable fascination for me, I soon felt that I did not care much whether Mr. Tankerville or other historians were correct about the Seventh, Eighth or Tenth Dynasty or not, and I asked, with a last semblance of interest:

“Then this parchment sets forth all these historical facts, no doubt; they are invaluable to the scientific world, but personally I, as one of the vulgar, do not consider that they were worth either your father or you wearing yourselves into your coffins about them.”

He looked at me in complete amazement, and passed his hand across his forehead once or twice, as if to collect his thoughts.

“Ah, yes! I see, of course, you do not understand. How could you? You have not spent years in this work, till it has become a part and parcel of your very life.”

“Well, I certainly do not understand, old man, why you should work yourself into a brain fever for the sake of a people, however interesting, who have disappeared from this world for the last five thousand years.”

“Disappeared?” he almost shrieked. “I see now why you did not understand. But come, old chap, sit here by the fire. Have a pipe, I’ll have one too…. I’ll tell you all about it, quite calmly. Of course, you thought me mad—a maniac … Matches? Here you are. Shall we have the lamps?”

He rang the bell. Old Janet, more wrinkled and pleasant than ever, brought in the lamp. She threw a log on the fire and left a delicious atmosphere of prosy cheerfulness behind her as she left. We were now both comfortably installed by the

fire, smoking. Hugh seemed quite calm, only his eyes stared, large and glowing, into the fire.

Chapter 3
The Tomb Of The Greek Priest

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“I don’t wonder that you think me mad, Mark, old chap,” began Hugh very calmly after a little while; “the work has been so close, that no doubt it did get on to my nerves a bit. When I actually put the finishing touches on it to-day, my only other thought, besides that of exultant triumph, was that of sharing my delights with you. Then you came, so ready to help me since I had called to you, and I, like a foolish enthusiast, never reflected on the all-important necessity of putting the facts clearly and coherently before you.”

He pointed to one of the mummies that stood upright in a glass case at the further end of the museum. The human outline was clear and distinct under the few linen wrappings, painted all over with designs and devices and the portrait of the deceased, after the fashion introduced into Egypt by the Greeks.

“When you and I were schoolboys together all those mummies were our friends, and our imaginations ran riot when my father, in his picturesque way, explained to us the meaning of the various inscriptions which recorded their lives. We knew in those days that this particular mummy had once been a Greek priest and scribe of Assuan, who had expressed a desire to be buried in a peculiarly lonely spot in the desert land, opposite what is now Wady-Halfa. A pious friend or relative had evidently carried out this wish, for it was in that desolate spot that my father found this mummy

in its solitary tomb. I remember how, for my part, I loved to think of that pious friend sailing down the silent Nile, with the body of the dead scribe lying at rest in the prow of his dahabijeh, while the great goddess Isis smiled down approvingly at the reverent deed, and the sacred crocodiles watched curiously the silent craft, flitting ghost-like amidst the lotus leaves. More than two thousand years later my father visited this lonely desert tomb. It was before the days that a strict surveillance was kept over tourists and amateur explorers, and he was alone, save for an old and faithful fellah—dead now—who was his constant attendant in his scientific researches. Beside the mummy of the dead scribe stood the four canopic jars, dedicated to the children of Horus and containing the heart and other entrails of the deceased; my father, with less reverence than scientific enthusiasm, had with his penknife loosened the top of one of the jars, when, to his astonishment, he saw that it contained in addition to the embalmed heart a papyrus closely written in Greek."

"In Greek? Not this one, then?"

"No, another, equally priceless, equally valuable, but only as a solution, a complement of the first."

He went up to the desk, and from one of the drawers took out a papyrus, faded and yellow with age, and placed it before me.

"I have made a translation of it, old fellow," he said with a smile, seeing my look of perplexity; "you were a pretty good classic scholar, though, at one time, and you will be able to verify that mine is a correct rendering of the original."

He took a paper out of his pocket-book and began to read, whilst I listened more and more amazed and bewildered, still wondering why Hugh Tankerville had worked himself to such a pitch of excitement for the sake of a dead and vanished past.

“I pray to Osiris and to Isis that I may be buried on the spot where my footsteps led me that day, when I was still young. Oh, mother Isis! what was thy sacred wish when thou didst guide mine eyes to read the mysteries of thy people? I pray to be buried within that same tomb where I found the papyrus, that guided my way to the land of wheat and barley of ancient Kamt, that lies beyond the wilderness of the sand from the east to the west. I stood upon the spot and I, too, shot my arrow into the heart of Osiris as he disappears behind Manou, into the valley of perpetual night, on the first day that Hapi gives forth goodness to the land. I, too, crossed the sands from the east to the west, and I, too, rejoiced when I saw the Rock of Anubis, and found the way no longer barred to me, to that land of plenty, wherein dwell the chosen people of Ra, secure from all enemies—great, solitary and eternal. But, alas! it was not for me to dwell in their midst! Enough! They are! and Ra and his children have surrounded them with a barrier, which no child of man can traverse.”

I had to confess that after hearing the contents of this so-called explanatory papyrus I was more perplexed than before.

“You don’t understand this, do you, old Mark?” resumed Hugh, “any more than my father did; but the whole thing seemed so enigmatical to him, and yet so real, so strange,

that he looked round him eagerly for a solution. One by one he opened each of the other three canopic jars, and it was in the last one that he found the priceless papyrus, of a date some three thousand years previous to the existence of the scribe in whose tomb it rested. Here was obviously the key to the puzzle propounded in the Greek priest's writing, and the explanation of his mysterious statements; but alas! the moment the outer air reached the ancient treasure, it fell before my father's very eyes into more than a thousand minute fragments."

He paused, then added, as if he wished every one of his words to impress itself indelibly on my mind:

"It has taken forty years of ceaseless toil to solve that great and glorious mystery, but now at last it is done, and I, Hugh Tankerville, am ready, with your help, to prove to the world that those great people, who were driven off by the stranger across the desert, did not perish in the wilderness: that they found a land which lies beyond the rolling billows of sand and shingle, where they formed an empire more great and vast, more wonderful and glorious, than aught we have dreamed of in our so-called science."

"This is a theory," I said with a smile.

"It is a fact," he replied earnestly; "at least it was a fact two thousand years ago, when that same Greek priest wandered across the wilderness in search of the vanished hordes of Egypt: when he with simple conviction, perhaps with his dying breath, pronounced, 'Enough! They are!'"

"Then do you mean to tell me? …" I began.

"I tell you, Mark, that beyond those inaccessible sand dunes that surround the Libyan desert, in that so-called arid