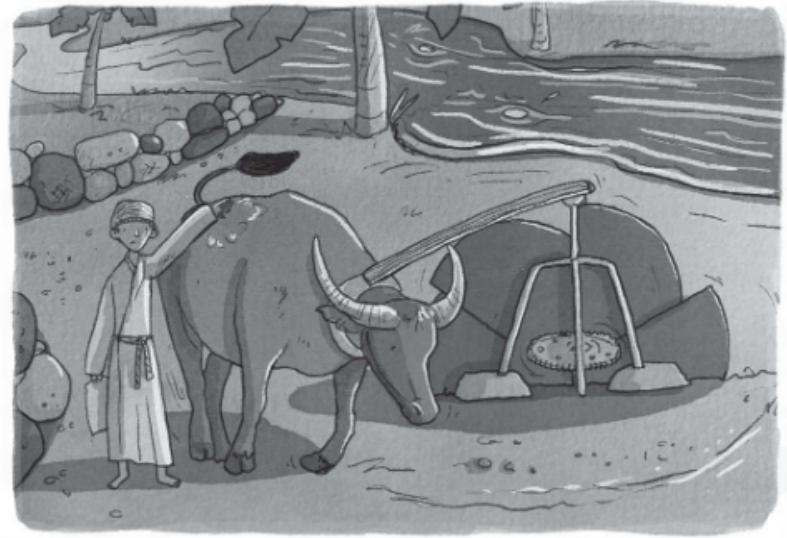


CHAPTER SIX

I gave the buffalo a thwack with a palm leaf. A cloud of flies flew up before settling back down again on the buffalo's sweating back. It turned its head to me and grunted. Like me, it had had enough of walking round and round the waterwheel.



At the end of the field, the river swam lazily past. Boys shouted and splashed among the papyrus reeds near the bank. I slumped down by the wheel and fanned my hot face with the leaf. I wished I could have jumped in and joined them. I wished I were anywhere but in that field, working for my Uncle. Uncle was a kind man but he was childless and he kept me busy.

It was over two weeks since work on the tomb had ceased. It felt like a year.

Each night I made a mark with the end of a burnt twig on the wall in my chamber. It was one day nearer to the day Lord Carnarvon would arrive from England, I told myself. But it didn't make the days go any faster.

Ahmed had been down to the Valley once. He'd found a better way down, he'd said, one that didn't involve rolling down the mountain. He'd told me the men had uncovered more ancient huts. I'd made him promise to tell me when Lord Carnarvon arrived. I never had a chance to sneak away. There were always lots of jobs for me to do. When I wasn't helping Uncle in the field, there was water to fetch, buffalo dung and maize sticks to collect for fuel, or the pots to mend that Hassan laid out to dry in the sun.

"Ali! Ali! Quick!"

Ahmed and Salim were jumping up and down at the edge of the field. I dropped the buffalo's rein and ran to meet them, leaping over the newly ploughed furrows. Their being here could mean only one thing. Lord Carnarvon had arrived in the Valley.

"They're here!" Ahmed said as I reached them.

"They've begun to clear the passage."

I clutched his arm. "Are you sure?"

Ahmed shrugged. "That's what they said."

"Who said?"

"The boys. I saw some of them coming back from the Valley yesterday."

"You'd better hurry if you want that job back," Salim said.

I cast a glance at Uncle. He'd reached the end of a furrow and was turning the oxen round.

"We're going down there now," Salim added.

"Come later!" Ahmed urged. "They'll be there till sunset."

It was probably too late now. If they'd already begun work, they'd have hired another boy to fetch water for them.

I left the boys and ran back across the field. Uncle was driving the ploughshare back towards me. "What did those rascals want?" he growled. Ahmed wasn't his favourite person since the story about the missing goat.

I could ask, couldn't I? He could only say no.

"Mr Carter is back working in the Valley," I said. I looked up at him hopefully.

"And you want me to let you go, too, don't you?"

I nodded.

Uncle grunted. "I'm sorry, Ali. I need your help here today." He hesitated. He'd seen my face. "Ask your father tonight if you may go tomorrow," he said. "Maybe I can spare you for a few days. Now – return to that buffalo, before it tramples my field!"

"What? Will I let you go back to the Valley tomorrow?" Father said that evening, raising his eyebrows. "No, I need the donkey. Besides, there may not be a job for you. And there is plenty of work for you here."

"Could I not take the donkey for one day? Maybe they will give me work again, like before," I pleaded. "I will earn money!" Had Father forgotten that I was paid to carry water? And I gave him every coin I earned.

"See this?" Father said. He picked up a pot. "And

this." With his other hand he reached for a handful of maize. "These make more than they pay you for fetching water."



"I might find something to sell. An ancient pot perhaps. A ... a golden earring. Even a pair!" Somehow I had to persuade Father to let me return to

the Valley.

Father shook his head. “And what did you find last time?” he said. “Nothing. No. I need the donkey. And I need you. In a day or so, well, let us see.” I pretended not to care, but by bedtime I’d made a plan. Early in the morning before anyone was up I was going down to the Valley. No one was going to stop me. I’d found the step and I was going to be there when they opened the tomb, too.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The sky was beginning to lighten when I woke. Next to me, Hassan stirred in his sleep and muttered. I sat up slowly, careful not to disturb him, and crept quietly out of the chamber. The peak of the mountain looked as if it had been painted pink. Everyone would be up soon – I’d have to hurry! I crept past the pen where the animals were tethered. The donkey turned its head and looked at me. If only I could take it with me.

I ran up the path that wound through the village. Soon I was climbing up the mountain. By jumping from boulder to boulder I managed to dodge the guards. The sun was almost up when I reached the Valley. I sat down near the entrance to wait. When the workers arrived I’d slip in among them.

It wasn’t long before I saw them. They gave me a cheerful wave. “Hallo, Ali, where have you been?”

They'd missed me, they said. The new water carrier was lazy. They never had enough to drink.

At the dig, I left them to slip behind a heap of loose chippings. I didn't want the foreman to see me and order me away. The steps were still wrapped in shadow – 16 had been dug up now. I looked around. It wasn't the only thing that had changed. They'd been busy.

All the workmen's huts had been cleared away. Heaps of chippings fringed the path like foothills. Ahmed and Salim were there, burrowing through one of them.

They waved me over. "We found good stuff here yesterday," Ahmed said. "Things one of the men must have stolen," put in Salim. He grinned. "They're not as good at hiding things as me!"

"Come and help us," Ahmed said.

I crouched down next to them, keeping one eye on the dig. The men had gone down the steps and opened a wooden grille at the bottom, which had been erected where the sealed door had stood. I wondered how long it would take them to finish clearing the passage

behind it – and what they'd find when they had.

"It's them!" Ahmed said.

I turned to look. A small party was riding towards us, Mr Carter at their head.

Salim pointed out a skinny man, riding just behind Carter.

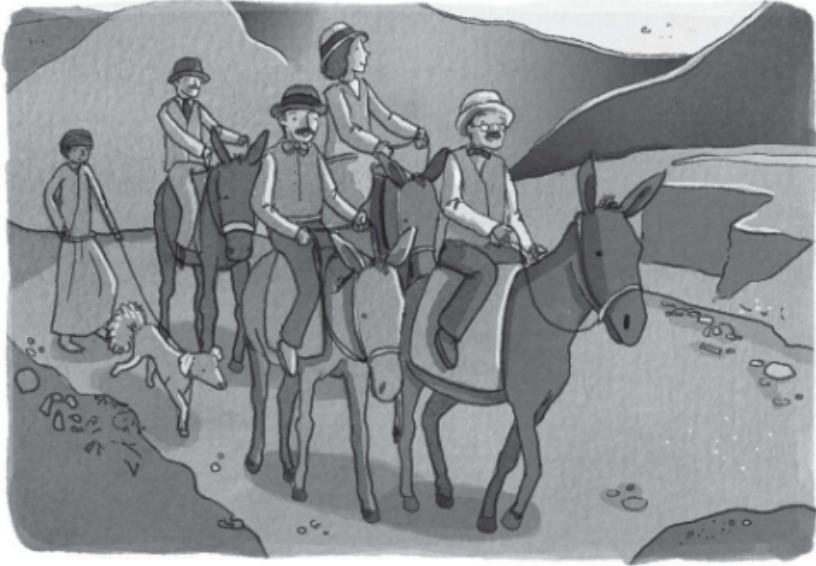
"That's him. Lord Carvan."

"Lord who?"

"I think that's his name," Salim said vaguely. "It's something like that."

He meant Lord Carnarvon, I thought. The man who'd come all the way from England. The man we'd had to wait for.

"And that's his daughter," said Ahmed, pointing out a young woman riding by his side. There was another man in the party. "That's Mr Carter's assistant, Mr Callender," said Ahmed.



They'd found out a lot. Servants trailed behind the party on foot. One of them was leading a dog. "That's Lord Carvan's dog," Salim grinned. It was tall and lean like its master – quite unlike the scrawny creatures that hung around the village. "They should send him into the tomb to sniff out Tutankhamun."

Ahmed giggled. "He might have more luck!"

I wished they wouldn't joke about it. It wasn't funny.

The party reached the dig and began to climb down off their donkeys. Carter ran over to help the girl. Lord Carnarvon was climbing down as if he found it difficult. Leaning on a cane, he made his way over to the tent pitched near the dig. A boy pulled out chairs for him and his daughter. Carter and Callender disappeared down the steps. They didn't look as cheerful as I'd expected.

All morning, basket after basket of rubbish was passed up the steps. When were they going to reach the end of the passage? How far did it go anyway? It could run for miles, twisting and turning all over the Valley, leading... where?

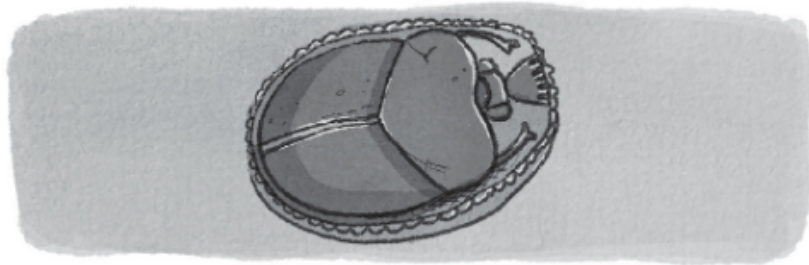
I watched as the sun rose higher and higher. If only they'd hurry. Over in the tent Lord Carnarvon was slumped in his chair, eyes closed, as if he'd given up hope.

The basket boys came up to eat their lunch. Ahmed and Salim had gone back to the dump. I sat down next to the boys, and they told me what they'd found in their baskets. Fragments of painted vases, the handle of an alabaster jar. Fragile, delicate things. The men

were having to dig slowly so as not to damage anything. They'd even found a whole vase. Best of all, when they'd dug down to the sixteenth step, they'd found the seals of Tutankhamun on the door.

"But they're still not sure if it is his tomb," one of the boys said. I felt my mind reel. Why not?

"There was a green carved beetle – a scarab – in my basket yesterday," he explained. "Mr Carter said it was an amulet that belonged to Pharaoh Tuthmosis III."



"They've found things that belonged to other pharaohs, too," another boy said.

I felt my heart sink. What if it wasn't a tomb at all? What if it was just a place where ancient Egyptians hid their treasure? I'd disobeyed Father – and it might all be for nothing.

It had been plundered too, they said. That was why they were finding so much stuff among the rubble. Some of the rubble didn't match the rest either. Robbers had broken in at least once. And later the door had been replastered and resealed.

I tried not to think about it, the robbers blundering around in the passage, grabbing what they could, dropping stuff as they fled down the dark and silent tunnel.

A few weeks' ago Carter had seemed so sure he was on the brink of finding a royal tomb. Now it seemed he might be back where he started.

The boys returned to work and I went to find Ahmed and Salim. They nodded when I told them what I'd heard. "They won't have got it all out," Salim said. "Look at all the stuff they dropped!"

As if that was all it was about.

I bent down and dug through the rubbish with my fingers. What was I going to say when I got home? Father was going to be very angry with me. But maybe he'd forgive me if I could find something to sell – an alabaster vase or even the handle of one.

I was on my way back from the dump, empty-handed still, when I saw Carter sprint up the steps, a broad grin under his bushy moustache. My heart gave a big thump. Something was up! Seeing him, Carnarvon sprang out of his chair. The little group went into a huddle. Were we about to get the answer to the riddle that had puzzled us all for weeks? I wished I could hear what they were saying!

“Have they found it?” Ahmed and Salim had seen Carter too, and run over to join me.

“I don’t know,” I said. I kicked at the sand with my foot. The excitement I’d felt had begun to fizzle away. Who cared what they’d found. Whatever it was, I’d never get to see it. Grandfather wasn’t right this time.

“They’re going down!” Ahmed exclaimed. I looked up to see the party walk down the steps, followed by the foremen.

And I had to watch and wait like everyone else.

“We’ll learn what it is soon,” Ahmed said. I didn’t want to learn what they’d found – I wanted to see it!

A breeze sprang up. The tent flapped lazily. The empty chairs underneath seemed to mock me. On the

table next to them lay some papers and... a flask. In their haste one of them had forgotten their water. I stared at it. I had an idea. More than anything I wanted to see what lay at the end of the passage. And here was my chance.

An underground passage that hadn’t been entered for thousands of years would be hot and airless. Whoever had left that flask behind would be pleased if I took it to them.

I jumped up, ran across to the tent, and snatched up the flask. I shook it. It was half full.

I’d go down there now. Before I lost my nerve. Before it was too late.

Gripping the flask I half ran, half slid down the slope to the steps.

Work had stopped and the men and boys were standing around in groups, talking excitedly – those that weren’t staring down the slope towards the steps. Waiting for news. At every moment I expected someone to bellow at me to go back. But no one did. It was as if I’d become invisible.

I stood at the top of the stairs, gazing down them. I

swallowed. I had no light to help me this time. Halfway down I could no longer see my feet. Sixteen steps down I banged into the wooden grille. No wonder no one had called me back. That wooden grille had been built to keep intruders out. Like me. I fumbled for the catch. It was probably locked, but I had to find out. To my amazement the door swung open. They'd been in too much of a hurry to remember to lock it.

You will see inside the tomb, Grandfather had told me. I'd begun to think he'd been wrong. But maybe he'd been right, after all.