

CHAPTER NINE

Carter withdrew the candle and turned round. He looked dazed, as if he didn't know where he was. He handed the candle to Carnarvon so he could look through the hole, too. What he saw seemed to have the same effect on him. He leant back against the wall, as if he needed it to hold him up. One by one they all looked through. Everyone – except me. They were silent, as if a spell had been cast over them.

Carter began to chip away at the hole again, until it was big enough for him and Carnarvon to look through at the same time. I heard a click as the electric torch was switched on. I still couldn't see anything. But what did they care? To them I was just the boy who fetched and carried their water. It wasn't fair. Would I have to go back without seeing anything at all? "What did you see?", Ahmed and Salim would

ask me. And I'd say "Nothing. Nothing at all." I slumped down by the wall, wishing I'd left that flask where I'd seen it, on the table. I wanted to see the wonderful things they had. It was my right. Tutankhamun was my king!

I glanced up. Carter and Carnarvon had turned away from the door, and gone into a huddle with the others, the foremen fussing around them. They'd forgotten me.

Now was my chance. I crept up to the door and thrust my candle through the hole, gazing in eagerly.

At first I couldn't see anything at all. The hot air in the chamber made the candle flicker. Shadows danced on the wall. Strange shapes began to appear out of the gloom. I gaped as I swung the candle from side to side. I could hardly believe what I was seeing. The chamber was crammed with precious things, and gold – gold everywhere. I felt dizzy. Just wait till I told Ahmed and Salim!



There were golden couches shaped like monstrous

beasts that looked so real I half expected them to turn and snap their jaws at me. An upturned chair wobbled on top. Boxes below. A heap of overturned chariots and wheels that must have been taken apart to fit them in. Vases. A golden throne. A black shrine out of which slid the head of a huge golden snake. My mind spun in wonder.

I swung the candle further to the right. Someone was standing there silently – a tall, dark-skinned boy, gold kilted and sandalled. One hand held a mace, the other a staff. Big staring eyes gazed into mine. On his golden headdress reared a cobra.

By the sacred cobra you shall know a king of Egypt, the words Grandfather had once told me echoed in my skull.

“Tutankhamun!” I gasped. In my hand the candle hissed like a snake and went out, plunging us into darkness. I dropped it with a cry and stumbled backwards.

I heard someone curse, then a hand grabbed me, dragging me back by the neck of my robe.

“What do you think you’re doing?” the foreman

hissed.

“Tutankhamun!” I said. “Tutankhamun! I saw him!”

“Bah! That was just his statue you saw.”

I felt my cheeks burn. To think I’d been frightened of a statue!

The foreman gave me a shove. “Go! I don’t want to see you here again.” He didn’t need to tell me a second time. I tore down the passage and erupted into the sunshine, a huge grin on my face, my fears left behind in the passage. I’d been into Tutankhamun’s tomb! Just wait till they knew!

The boys were hanging over the pit. They flung themselves on me.

“You were a long time in there!”

“Is it the tomb? Is it? Is it?”

I reached for a water bottle and drank thirstily. My mouth felt as dry as the desert.

“Tell us!”

“It’s the tomb all right,” I said. “I saw inside it, too!”

They gazed at me in awe.

“What did you see?”

“Wonderful things!” I said.

“Did you see the mummy?”

“Does it smell?”

“Ugh!”

I wiped drops of water off my chin.

“Come on – tell us what you saw!” Ahmed pulled at my arm.

“Gold!” I said. “Heaps of it!”

I tried to describe it. “Huge golden couches, with the heads of wild beasts.” I screwed up my eyes trying to remember. They weren’t like any animal I’d ever seen before. “As big as...” I studied the pit below us. “About half the size of the pit.”

“Go on with you!”

“Don’t believe me if you don’t want to,” I said, reaching for the bottle and taking another gulp.

“What else? What else?” the boys clamoured.

“Chariots, golden boxes, vases, a throne, and...” I was about to tell them about the statue, but I stopped. I don’t know why. It was just a statue. I’d been an idiot to be frightened. But I didn’t like thinking about it. I didn’t like the way those eyes had stared at me.

“And?” Salim demanded.

All right, he’d asked for it.

“And a snake, a giant snake!” I got up and ran towards him, hissing like a snake. He jumped back.

“You’re joking!”

“Was it alive?” Ahmed asked.

“What do you think?”

“Weren’t you afraid in there?” Salim asked, his sly eyes flickering over me.

“Afraid? Of course not.”

They gazed at me, respect in their eyes. I felt as if I’d grown several feet taller. I, Ali, had been inside Tutankhamun’s tomb!

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s go.” Work had stopped for us that day, not that I had any to do. And I wanted to tell my family what I’d seen. They were never going to believe me.

We raced across the Valley, whooping and somersaulting.

But as I got nearer to my home, my feet began to falter. The boys had run off and now I had to face my family.

What were they going to say when they saw me?

I had run off to the Valley without their permission. Would they forgive me when I told them where I'd been and what I'd seen, or would they punish me?

I'd soon find out.

I crept into the courtyard. Father pounced on me and shook me like a rat. "You scamp!" he said. "What have you got to say for yourself?" He didn't ask where I'd been. He knew all right.

"I blame those boys," he said, letting me go at last. "They're a bad influence."

"Oh, Ali," Mother said sadly. I hung my head. I wanted to crawl away and hide.

Grandfather was sitting on the bench. "Don't be too hard on the lad," he said. He leaned forward, his eyes searching mine. "He's looked on things that none of the rest of us have."

Suddenly I felt as if I was back in the tomb, staring into that dark sombre face. I shivered.

Grandfather hobbled over to me and took my hands in his. "Don't be afraid," he said.

"I saw his face, Grandfather," I whispered. "At least... I thought it was. They said it was a statue.

But... it was so real."

Father looked from Grandfather to me.

"You speak in riddles. What are you saying?"

"He's seen inside the tomb," Grandfather said, releasing my hands.

"You've been inside the tomb?" Father shook his head as if he was trying to clear it.

"Yes, Father."

"Tutankhamun's tomb?"

"Yes, Father."

He gave a sigh. "I should punish you but..." He shook his head again, as if he was still trying to make sense of what I'd said. "A son of mine has seen inside the tomb of Tutankhamun. My son. My Ali."

One or two men were passing outside. At Father's words they stopped and stared at him. Then at me.

Suddenly I found myself at the centre of a clamouring crowd. "It is true, then? They've found the tomb? You have seen inside it? What did you see? Has it not been plundered?" I felt myself lifted up on to a man's shoulders and carried down the street.

Everyone had heard the news now and ran up to gaze

man's shoulders and carried down the street. Everyone had heard the news now and ran up to gaze at me, touch my robe and ask me questions. Again and again I had to tell them what I'd seen. I held my head high. I felt like a hero. Like a king!

Then Father called me in and we sat down to eat.



I hadn't thought I was hungry until then. It was our usual fare – bread and beans. Tonight it felt like a feast. In the street a boy began to sing. A drum beat out the melancholy melody, then the reedy notes of a pipe took up the tune. I could still hear it later as I curled up on my mat and tried to sleep. I lay there smiling to myself. I had been inside Tutankhamun's tomb!