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King Tut and the Dead Earl

Opening the tomb

THE IDEA OF the mummy curse always conjures up the story of the opening of the tomb of the pharaoh Tutankhamun in the winter of 1922–3 by the archaeologist Howard Carter and his wealthy patron, George Herbert, the Fifth Earl of Carnarvon.

Carter and Carnarvon had worked as a team of excavators in Egypt since 1907, discovering a number of minor tombs in the necropolis of Thebes and publishing a well-regarded scholarly study of their efforts, *Five Years' Explorations at Thebes*, in 1911. In 1914, they finally acquired their long-desired concession, a legal permit to excavate, issued by the Egyptian Antiquities Service, in the Valley of the Kings. They stepped into the concession of the remorseless tomb-hunter Theodore Davis, a retired American lawyer who quitted the area loudly declaring that the Valley of the Kings was an exhausted site with no new tombs left to discover. Davis had a cavalier reputation, however, and Carter was convinced that the tomb of Tutankhamun had not yet been found, despite some tantalizing discoveries bearing the boy-king's royal name. War service then interrupted their planned excavations, Carter returning to the site in 1917.

By early 1922, Carter counted six seasons of systematic searching in vain for signs of the tomb. Their fellaheen – teams of native Egyptian labourers – had moved an estimated 200,000 tons of rubble to no effect. Lord Carnarvon intended to abandon the expense of the project, but was impressed by Carter's commitment to one last season. Carter made his living in Carnarvon's employ,

and as a dealer in Egyptian antiquities. With money made in part from commission-selling Carnarvon's finds to the Metropolitan Museum in New York, Carter offered to fund this last season from his own pocket if the concession was retained. Carnarvon promptly paid for the lot. 'And then', as Carter put it, in his account of the discovery, 'hardly had we set hoe to ground in our last despairing effort than we made a discovery that far exceeded our wildest dreams.'¹ In the rubble beneath the workmen's huts that had been established to work on the tomb of Rameses VI, Carter's fellaheen struck a step and soon uncovered a stairwell of sixteen steps that led to a sealed door. Having established that this was an apparently untouched tomb, Carter immediately re-buried the find. On 6 November 1922, he telegraphed Carnarvon in England in the deferential language of the servant: 'At last have found wonderful discovery in Valley; a magnificent tomb with seals intact; re-covered same for your arrival; congratulations.'²

By 23 November, Lord Carnarvon was on the site with his daughter, Lady Evelyn Herbert. The steps were cleared again, and this time the door was entirely uncovered, revealing the seals of pharaoh Tutankhamun, but also evidence that the door had been breached and poorly re-sealed by tomb robbers in antiquity. This door opened onto a corridor, filled with rubble to protect the tomb, which had also been tunnelled before. In three days, Carter's workers had cleared a passage of thirty feet to a second sealed door. On 26 November, that 'day of days', Carter made a small breach in the upper left-hand corner of the door, and put a candle through the hole:

At first I could see nothing, the hot air escaping from the chamber causing the candle flame to flicker, but presently, as my eyes grew accustomed to the light, details of the room within emerged slowly from the mist, strange animals, statues, and gold – everywhere the glint of gold. For the moment – an eternity it must have seemed to the others standing by – I was struck dumb with amazement, and when Lord Carnarvon, unable to stand the suspense any longer, inquired anxiously, 'Can you see anything?' it was all I could do to get out the words, 'Yes, wonderful things.'³

Carter's account, written (or ghost written) only months later, convincingly conveys his disorientation at the find, referring repeatedly to 'our bewildered brains'.⁴ He speaks of the 'strained expectancy... of the treasure-seeker' only to cancel this out immediately: 'Did these thoughts actually pass through our minds at the time, or have I imagined them since? I cannot tell. It was the discovery that my memory was blank, and not the mere desire for dramatic chapter-ending, that occasioned this digression.'⁵ Where memories were blank, mythologizing would soon step in.

This primal scene with a candle at the door was soon slickly modernized. Within a day, cables brought electric light off the grid serving other tombs in

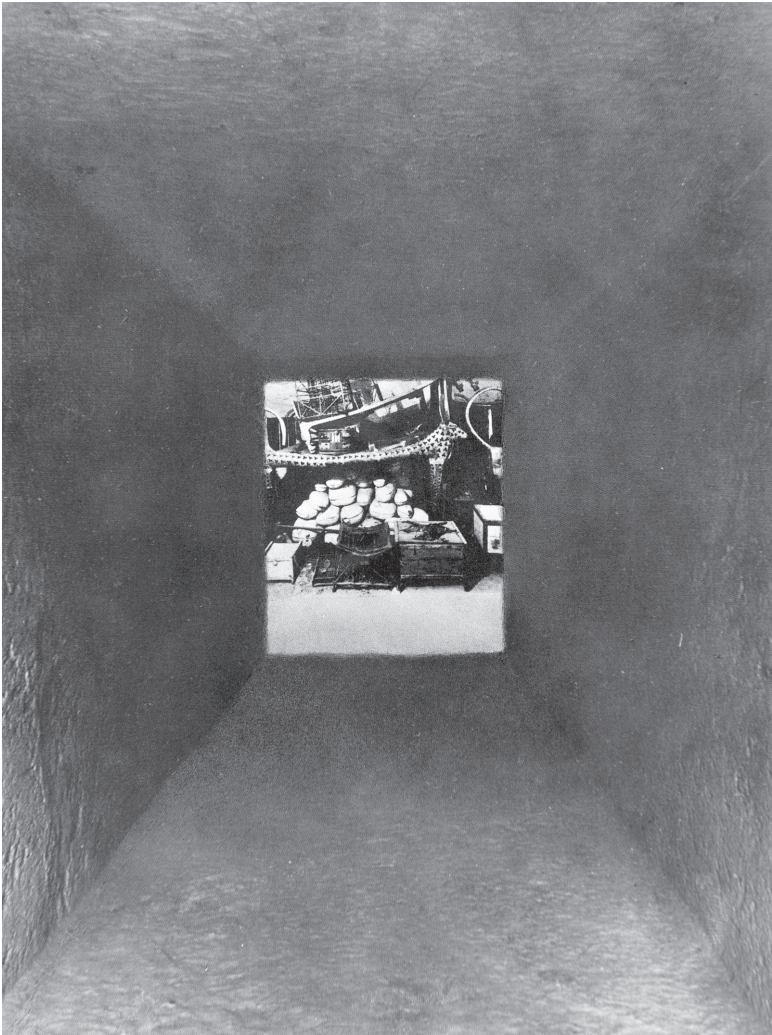


Figure 1.1 Antechamber of the Tomb of Tutankhamun (Griffith collection, University of Oxford).

the valley lit for tourists, through the corridor to the doorway of the antechamber. English and Egyptian dignitaries were conducted to view the bizarre sight of a room stuffed with ritual objects which had been disturbed and scattered by hasty tomb robbers thousands of years before. Ominous sentinels in wood and gold leaf, representations of the pharaoh, guarded another sealed door that

promised more discoveries, including, they hoped, the sarcophagus of the pharaoh himself.

The Times carried the report of its correspondent on 30 November, at which point the discovery of the tomb became a global news story: Tutankhamun became the King Tut of headline writers. *The Times* reported on ‘the most sensational Egyptological discovery of the century’ and expressed amazement that there was anything left to be found in Luxor, where even the ‘smallest urchin’ was an antiquity hunter.⁶ This appeared on the same page as the news that the new Egyptian cabinet had resigned, and in the same month that the Cairo correspondent had ‘feared that public men will be openly murdered’ in the unstable political situation in the capital.⁷ *The Times* could thus moralize in its editorial that Tutankhamun was ‘the patron of a counter-reformation’, perhaps a significant symbol ‘even now when the Eastern lands are trembling between war and peace’⁸

A few days later, the paper carried the view of the Egyptologist Alan Gardiner that ‘one cannot help hoping that Lord Carnarvon, who has worked for so many years in Egypt without any adequate compensation for all his efforts, will be able to bring home what is not absolutely essential for the purposes of the Cairo Museum’.⁹ Concessions given by the Egyptian Antiquities Service carried the proviso that the contents of undisturbed tombs would be the entire property of the Egyptian state. Trouble loomed ahead. As Elliott Colla observes: ‘It is impossible to overestimate the degree to which the discovery of King Tutankhamun’s tomb changed everything about how Egyptian national elites looked at their past.’¹⁰

In early December, the tomb was once again reburied to allow Carter and Carnarvon to make arrangements to manage a site now the focus for Egyptians, tourists and a gathering world media. Carter had a steel door made to specifications to secure the tomb, and began collecting experts to help with the work of cataloguing and preserving the find: English archaeologists, American photographers and draughtsmen, seconded from the New York Metropolitan Museum dig nearby, expert linguists, and a chemist from the Egyptian government department for advice on preservation. Carnarvon returned to England before Christmas.

On 10 January 1923, Carnarvon finalized an exclusive reporting deal with the chairman of *The Times*, his old friend J. J. Astor. The paper paid Carnarvon £5000 and would give him 75% of fees for syndicated reports and photographs. The next day, Carnarvon spoke to a massive audience at a specially convened meeting of the Egyptian Exploration Society at Westminster Hall. *The Times* deal, catastrophically, alienated every rival newspaper as well as the Egyptian press and the nascent nationalist government. Mass circulation newspapers in England would instruct their correspondents to do everything to scupper the exclusive. A. H. Bradstreet, the special correspondent at Luxor for the *Morning Post*, first expressed disbelief at the notion of a London deal, dismissing ‘an amazing rumour... of which no definite knowledge can be obtained here’ that might

even go as far as closing the whole Valley of the Kings. If this happened, he warned, 'it is proposed to hold protest meetings.'¹¹ Once the nature of the deal had been confirmed, Bradstreet expressed disbelief that the Egyptian government, officials at the Antiquities Service or the Egyptian press would countenance their reduction to bystanders given second-hand news. He openly agitated in Cairo for the exclusive to be broken.¹² Bradstreet was said to have told friends that he would 'drive C. and C. out of their minds for having sold a piece of the world's ancient history to the London *Times*.'¹³ Valentine Williams, the correspondent for Reuters, pressured British officials and the Foreign Office to override the deal. Others plumped for journalistic subterfuge, trying to beat *The Times* telegraph to London. As if this wasn't enough, *The Times* noted that 'malicious' rumours against Carter and Carnarvon were beginning to circulate in Egypt: 'the mass of Egyptians are firmly convinced that Lord Carnarvon has stolen the more valuable pieces in the chambers.'¹⁴ There were stories of aircraft landing in the desert in the dead of night to carry the hoard away.

It took seven weeks to clear the antechamber of its objects, each item laboriously documented, photographed and carried out to a nearby empty tomb which was put into service as a temporary laboratory. This took place under the intense gaze of tourist crowds and the restless journalists from the world's press. The *Illustrated London News* offered a double-page sketch of large crowds in the valley 'where the click of cameras has become as familiar as the creak of local water-wheels.'¹⁵ Each day, the press lovingly detailed the 'Knick-Knacks of the King' as they appeared.¹⁶ Only the *Illustrated London News* carried photographs from the tomb, some reprinted in lavish colour editions, each image usually marked with 'The Times World Copyright'. The editor, Bruce Ingram, was personally close to both Carnarvon and Carter, and so was able to carry some of their private photographs too. Bradstreet, in comic mode, spoke of 'social success' in Egypt now being measured by the ability to secure access either to the tomb or to Howard Carter. 'Many deep schemes' were hatched in the Winter Palace Hotel, causing Carter 'overwhelming aggravation.'¹⁷ At the beginning of February, one Cairo dealer wrote to Ernest Wallis Budge, the keeper of Egyptian and Assyrian antiquities at the British Museum, that an exhausted Carter had visited him and privately confessed 'I wish I had never found the tomb.'¹⁸ By 17 February, the team was ready to break the seals on the burial chamber and discover if the pharaoh remained in situ. With self-conscious theatricality, they arranged two arc lamps, one either side of the door, and a wooden stage to stand on, the invited handful of dignitaries sitting in rows of chairs to witness the opening. Beyond the door, the chamber was almost entirely filled with a shrine covered in gold leaf, and shrines within shrines that protected the presumably intact sarcophagus. Edging around this treasure, they found an open store, stuffed with golden statuary and guarded by an impressive Anubis figure. Carter recalled the 'dazed, bewildered look' of the esteemed visitors invited inside.¹⁹



Figure 1.2 The Fifth Earl of Carnarvon (Griffith collection, University of Oxford).

Ten days later, the process of closing the tomb for the summer began; it was reburied again by 1 March. The world would have to wait for the next digging season to discover if Tutankhamun remained where he had been buried.

Days later, however, Lord Carnarvon fell ill. Resting in Aswan after the opening of the burial chamber, he had been bitten on the cheek by a mosquito, and then nicked the wound whilst shaving. He suffered a fever for a few days, rallied to health, but then collapsed again. Lady Evelyn Herbert was sufficiently alarmed to have her father moved to the Continental Savoy Hotel in Cairo. Blood poisoning was complicated by a bout of pneumonia. He hovered on the edge of death; his wife and doctor would soon be flown to his bedside; his son travelled by boat from India, where he was serving with the Seventh Hussars.

The popular press now had a story that did not require privileged access to the tomb. On 24 March, the *Daily Express* recycled a story from the *New York World*: 'Pharaoh guarded by poisons? Lord Carnarvon warned by Marie Corelli.' Corelli, a best-selling author of Christian and mystical novels since the 1890s, had written the following:

I cannot but think that some risks are run by breaking into the last rest of a King of Egypt whose tomb is specially and solemnly guarded, and robbing him of his possessions. According to a rare book which I possess, which is not in the British Museum, entitled 'The Egyptian History of the Pyramids' ... the most dire punishment follows any rash intruder into a sealed tomb. This book gives long and elaborate lists of 'treasures' buried with several of the kings, and among those are named 'divers secret poisons enclosed in boxes in such wise that they who touch them shall not know how they come to suffer'.²⁰

When Wallis Budge denounced such speculations as 'bunkum' in the press, and that the cited text was actually in the British Museum library, Corelli wrote a wounded letter to the Keeper, appealing to her knowledge of 'Egyptian "mysteries"' and 'collection of rare books on this one subject'. She quoted Wallis Budge's own translation of the Egyptian Book of the Dead back to him for the source of the curse: 'I come forth by day against mine enemy'. 'Now,' she said, 'though I am not in any way supposing that Tutankhamen has "come forth" supernaturally to take vengeance on his disturbers, I am inclined to maintain that one of the numerous deadly poisons known in Ancient Egypt *may* have lurked among the objects handled by Lord Carnarvon.'²¹

The Times, the official record, disdained even to mention such speculations, instead delivering only the barest telegraphic reports on Carnarvon's deteriorating condition. He died on 5 April. In contrast to the short *Times* announcement, the *Daily Express* sensationally recorded that at the moment of his death the Continental Hotel had been plunged into darkness: 'This curious occurrence was interpreted by those anxiously awaiting news as an omen of evil.'²² Even so, the *Express* correspondent sent to Cairo, the renowned H. V. Morton, tried to be reasonable:

The queer atmosphere which clings to all things Egyptian is responsible for the wide-spread story that in opening the tomb of Tutankhamen Lord Carnarvon exposed himself to the fury of some malignant influence or that he was poisoned by materials left in the tomb thousands of years ago. When one calls to mind the number of veteran Egyptologists whose lives have been a series of tomb discoveries, those fables are refuted.²³

The next day, however, the *Express* managed to debunk yet recirculate rumours about fears of a curse under the front-page headline 'Egyptian collectors in a

panic'. 'All over the country, people are sending their treasures to the British Museum, anxious to get rid of them because of the superstition that Lord Carnarvon was killed by the "ka" or double of the soul of Tutankhamen.' The Museum had received an anonymous 'avalanche of parcels containing mummies' shrivelled hands and feet', and the authorities were 'not at all grateful for the present flood of gifts.'²⁴ These reports are not backed up in the correspondence files in the British Museum archive. There is one letter from H. Dallas (possibly Helen Dallas, the spiritualist author), enclosing a scarab owned by a friend 'who does not desire to retain it', but little else.²⁵ Indeed, an internal Museum memo expressed exasperation about the *Express* report: 'I happened to mention... that we not seldom had people sending us things anonymously that they considered unlucky, and this is the result.'²⁶

Sternly, the *Morning Post* editorial declared Carnarvon 'a martyr to the cause of archaeological research, not a victim, as some credulous people would have us believe, to the melodramatic curse of a disturbed pharaoh.' Rumours about supernatural intervention allowed the paper to moralize that 'free education does not make mankind any less credulous' or that Europe in post-war disarray embraced the 'entrancing suggestion of a venomous curse'.²⁷

It was too late to be reasonable: coverage had already turned rather Gothic. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle had just stepped off a steamer in New York at the start of another tour to promote spiritualism, for which he had been a leading advocate for several years. Doyle, so the *Morning Post* reported, 'was inclined to support to some extent the opinion that it was dangerous for Lord Carnarvon to enter Tutankhamun's tomb, owing to occult and other spiritual influences. He said: "An evil elemental may have caused Lord Carnarvon's fatal illness."²⁸ The *Express* duly repeated this claim. The *Morning Post* displaced its voice of reason by reporting from Paris that the idea of a curse was 'seriously entertained' by occultists like Dr Mardrus, 'the well-known Egyptologist and traveller': 'Many present-day Parisians believe implicitly that these curses are capable of proving effective even after the lapse of thousands of years.'²⁹ Almost as a direct riposte, this was followed up by an article in the *Express* by the writer of metaphysical horror stories Algernon Blackwood, entitled 'Superstition and the Magic "Curse"'. Blackwood explained that 'A curse is a violent and concentrated stream of thought of which ordinary minds are, fortunately, hardly capable.' He professed belief in this malign magical power, yet weakly reassured readers that 'to credit an Egyptian magician of several thousand years ago with sufficient thought power to kill a man to-day is to lay a heavier burden upon a "curse" than it can bear.'³⁰

H. Rider Haggard, another best-selling romance writer and considerable amateur authority on Ancient Egypt with his own private collection of artefacts, publicly dismissed these stories whilst mourning the sensationalism that embroiled the august Egyptian dead in these displays of vulgar modernity. Talk of magical curses, Haggard stated, 'went to swell the rising tide of superstition

which at present seemed to be overflowing the world.³¹ He had already written to *The Times* in the days before the burial chamber was opened to plead that the royal mummies be examined and photographed but then reentered in the Great Pyramid to avoid the appalling fate of their being made 'the butt of the merry jests of tourists of the baser sort.'³²

A decade later, Ernest Crawley acutely observed in his anthropological study of ill omens that 'the energy of a curse may spread'.³³ Only a week after Carnarvon's death, it was reported that Carter had fallen ill. *The Times* scotched rumours that it refused to print, reassuring readers that Carter was in 'good health'. Their correspondent reported that 'Mr Carter expressed to me great annoyance at the reports circulated of his illness, which caused him and his friends considerable inconvenience and expense.'³⁴ Carter's bad temper was a sign of his inability to cope with the frenzied attention around the discovery. Under stress, he continually made poor decisions. His intemperate responses to Egyptian 'interference' at the site, as he saw it, would lead him to close the dig and lock the gates of the tomb, causing him to be expelled from the excavation for much of the 1924 digging season because he had contravened the conditions of his government-granted concession. Any political leverage the British once had in Egypt was fast draining away.

These sensational stories soon acquired a different, more authoritative source from the Egyptologist Arthur Weigall, who had served as one of four regional Inspector Generals of Antiquities in Egypt between 1905 and 1914, and had long been a rival of Howard Carter. Weigall had been ousted from his post over rumours that he had been attempting illegal sales of artefacts, a story that Carter had heard and brought to the attention of the authorities in a confidential letter. Weigall had left Egypt and survived in the interim as a journalist, popular Egyptologist, novelist and even stage designer and song-writer. He was sent by the *Daily Mail* to cover the opening of the tomb, but like all the other reporters excluded by *The Times* deal, he had to watch in anger and frustration from outside the tomb. In his best-selling book, *Tutankhamen and Other Essays*, Weigall recalled the day of the unsealing of the burial chamber. He confessed himself awed by the 'solemn' event yet appalled by Lord Carnarvon's jocularity:

I turned to the man next to me, and said: 'If he goes down in that spirit, I give him six weeks to live.' I do not know why I said it: it was one of those curious prophetic utterances which seem to issue, without definite intention, from the sub-conscious brain; but in six weeks' time, when Lord Carnarvon was on his death-bed, the man to whom I had addressed the words reminded me of them.³⁵

Weigall's short essay on the tomb opening was bracketed by several pieces that teasingly evoked spooky tales of ominous Egyptian artefacts. These were offered

within a structure of disavowal, at once asserting and rejecting supernatural explanations. 'I have heard the most absurd nonsense talked in Egypt by those who believe in the malevolence of the ancient dead,' Weigall stated, before immediately adding the clause 'but at the same time, I try to keep an open mind on the subject.'³⁶

Weigall recalled helping Lord Carnarvon uncover the sarcophagus of a mummified cat in 1909 (Carnarvon's first success as an excavator in Egypt had indeed been to discover a cat). Weigall stored the mummified creature in his house, where a butler was stung by a scorpion and Weigall had fancied that the cat had 'turned its head to look at me; and I could see the sullen expression of feline anger gathering upon its blank visage as it did so.'³⁷ The cat sarcophagus later burst open, apparently of its own accord. He told the story of a statue of the god Sekhmet in Karnak that had a sinister reputation. English and American tourists had allegedly become supplicants to the statue, holding séances to which Weigall 'had to put an official stop' when he was Inspector General.³⁸ He spoke of a photograph in which 'a shadowy human face has come between the camera and the object which was being photographed.'³⁹ Spirit photography had a big revival in the wake of the Great War; indeed, just four days after Carnarvon died, the *Express* carried a discussion of Mrs Deane's famous spirit photographs of hosts of the war dead gathered above the Cenotaph on Armistice Day.⁴⁰ In other anecdotes, mummified skeletons grasped at him and a priest's tomb exuded 'an unaccountable sense of apprehension.'⁴¹

Weigall had also been associated with an earlier story of the vengeful Egyptian dead. In 1909, Weigall, his wife Hortense, the painter Joseph Lindon Smith and writer F. F. Ogilvie decided to stage a play about the heretic pharaoh Akhenaten in a natural amphitheatre in the Valley of the Queens. Weigall composed the script, and poured his energy into framing a ghost story for the spooky invite, which told a tale of Akhenaten's spirit returning to the valley every year on the same night for three thousand years. At their first rehearsal the cast were struck down with various illnesses (Mrs Smith with ophthalmia and delirium) and the play was abandoned. The story, thrilling with the possibility of malign supernatural intervention, had been widely circulated, reaching as far as the London press. Weigall himself wrote up the events for *Pall Mall Magazine*, where he honed his suspension of disbelief. Despite 'the most absurd nonsense talked in Egypt', he said, 'at the same time I have there become acquainted with certain facts which are far removed from simple explanation.'⁴² He also delighted in spooking tourists in Luxor, writing to his wife that 'the great stunt is to take people to the cave and tell them the story of the play – it never fails to go down.'⁴³

All of these tales were delivered in a book that elsewhere lambasted the native Egyptian for paralysing superstition, living 'in a world much influenced by magic, and thickly populated by spirits, demons, and djins.'⁴⁴ The persistence of

pre-modern superstition in Egypt was one of Weigall's justifications for maintaining a strong European control of the country.

Weigall was sometimes regarded as the ring-leader of disgruntled journalists who sought revenge on Carter and Carnarvon by playing up stories of the Tutankhamun curse. But Weigall was not responsible for its details, or for the way the curse proliferated uncontrollably as a series of rumours. Hans-Joachim Neubauer's study of rumour begins with the observation that 'they so often evade capture that, on the whole, they constitute an invisible literature, one that is forever changing shape.'⁴⁵ A form of interpretation, neither necessarily true nor false, rumours have no origin or destination, but thrive in the very act of their circulation, prospering from denials just as much as assertions. Hearsay 'refers to other, absent narrators, to people who are not there. In the background of conversations in which this voice speaks there is a chain of anonymous speakers begun somewhere indeterminate and leading nowhere in particular. This series... gives rumours their strange authority.'⁴⁶ As Neubauer notes, too, the speed of rumours in permeating a whole society can give them a 'supernatural feel': here, the medium perfectly suits the message.⁴⁷

Tutankhamun rumours are always already cited from somewhere else. *It was said* that on the day that Carter had laid bare the entrance to the tomb his pet canary had been devoured by a cobra, that emblem of pharaonic power. The American Egyptologist James Breasted, closely involved with the Tutankhamun dig, recalled that 'News of this spread quickly and all the natives now said, Alas, that was the king's cobra, revenging itself on the bird for having betrayed the place of the tomb.'⁴⁸ *It was said* that a clay tablet had been discovered in the antechamber of the tomb with the inscription 'Death shall come on swift wings to whoever toucheth the tomb of the Pharaoh.' Carter and Carnarvon allegedly destroyed the tablet to prevent the superstitious fellaheen from abandoning the excavation and so, one believer in the curse states, it was 'wiped from the written record of the tomb's discovery.'⁴⁹ The anthropologist Henry Field, however, remembers on his visit to the tomb that 'Death to those who enter' was in an 'inscription over the door.'⁵⁰ *It was said* that Lord Carnarvon's three-legged dog, Susie, back at Highclere Castle in England, howled mournfully and dropped dead at the precise moment of her master's death, even accounting for the two hour time difference. The Sixth Earl of Carnarvon ascribed this story to a superstitious Scottish servant, using the cliché of the credulous Celt.⁵¹ *It was said* that when the mummy of the king was finally unwrapped, a wound on the cheek exactly matched the place where Carnarvon had been bitten by the fateful mosquito. Soon enough, when anyone loosely connected to Carnarvon or the opening of the tomb died, their deaths were folded into the dreamlike elaboration of the curse rumour.

In May 1923, the American railroad magnate and robber baron George Jay Gould, died in the south of France of pneumonia said to have been contracted

on a visit to the tomb of Tutankhamun. In September 1923, Carnarvon's half-brother Aubrey Herbert, a Tory MP and expert on Turkish and Middle Eastern affairs, died after a long illness. Arthur Mace, Carter's co-worker and co-writer of the first volume of the book of the tomb's discovery, suffered a complete breakdown of health in 1924 and had to retire from Egypt after twenty years in the field. The eminent radiologist Sir Archibald Douglas Reid also died in January 1924. He was said to have aided the X-ray study of the sarcophagus of Tutankhamun (in fact he had been ill for three years with cancer, a fate of many other radiology pioneers).⁵² Later in 1924, the assassination in Cairo of Sir Lee Stack, the Governor General of Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, was also incorporated into the unfolding curse. Other notable victims were said to include French Egyptologist Georges Bénédite, allegedly from a fall outside the tomb in 1926.

Close attention was paid to any association with the original excavation. In November 1929, Captain Richard Bethell, who had worked as Carnarvon's secretary and Carter's gatekeeper, was found dead at his London club in ambiguous circumstances. Three months later, Bethell's father, Lord Westbury, committed suicide by throwing himself from the window of his rooms in St James's Court in London. *The Times* reported that 'Captain Bethell died suddenly in his sleep and is believed to have been troubled by the legendary curse of the pharaohs which is said to fall on those associated with the excavations.'⁵³ Westbury's incoherent suicide note included the line: 'I really can't stand any more horrors.'⁵⁴ A Universal News Service account of the suicide claimed that 'Lord Westbury was frequently heard to mutter "the curse of the pharaohs", as though this had preyed on his mind.'⁵⁵ With an impressive sense of exponentially expanding punishment, later in the same week Lord Westbury's hearse on the way to the cemetery 'knocked down and killed Joseph Green, aged 8... Another boy was injured.'⁵⁶ Later, in 1934, New York's Metropolitan Museum had to fend off rumours that their curator of the Egyptian section, Albert Lythgoe, had a terminal illness related to his presence at the opening of Tutankhamun's tomb. When Arthur Weigall died in the same year, the *Daily Express* carried the headlines 'Arthur Weigall, who denied Tutankhamen's Curse, is Dead', followed the next day by the inevitable assertion: 'A Curse Killed Arthur Weigall.'⁵⁷

Weigall's fate illustrates one of the principal laws of this literature: curses are recursive. That is, there is a tendency for those involved in disseminating curse stories, even those who actively dismiss them, to get caught in their machinations.

The kernel of the rumours around these particular deaths can at least be found in published sources. Gerald O'Farrell's impressive claim that Sigmund Freud was eventually murdered by shadowy authorities for knowing too much about the truth behind Tutankhamun is based only on 'suppressed' evidence entirely beyond verification or falsifiability. This includes the claim that Freud's

first operation – supposedly for cancer – in 1923 was a deception and the first attempt in a conspiracy to kill him.⁵⁸ Other enthusiasts have continued to track the Carnarvon curse into the present day. By 1975, Philipp Vandenberg counted thirty-six victims. Barry Wynne has suggested that the death of Mohammad Ibrahim, Director of Antiquities, in a car accident in 1966, followed the official denunciation of curse stories by the Egyptian government. When treasures from the tomb were displayed at the British Museum in 1972, rumours circulated that the Royal Air Force crew that transported the items from Egypt were also subject to a series of misfortunes.⁵⁹ In 2006, the free London newspaper *Metro* carried the headline ‘Is Boy, 3, latest King Tut Victim?’, regarding a story about the Fifth Earl of Carnarvon’s home in Egypt, ‘a luxury villa said to be jinxed by the Curse of Tutankhamen.’⁶⁰

Such stories have been partly fostered by allegedly authoritative sources. George Herbert’s son, the Sixth Earl, was entirely prepared to contribute to this weird fusion of history, myth and occultism surrounding the circulation of the King Tut story in the 1970s. His memoirs claim that his father was very interested in spiritualism and the occult and that he relied on two psychics for advice, Cheiro and Velma. Cheiro was the stage name of ‘Count’ Louis Harmon, the celebrated chiromancer. Cheiro’s reminiscences described early wanderings in India and Egypt, where ‘I occupied myself with ruined tombs, temples, and kindred things in that land where the children of occultism had built their pyramids.’⁶¹ Part of Cheiro’s shtick was the use of a magical female mummy hand for divinations, given to him, so he said, in Karnak by an initiate of Ancient Egyptian wisdom (he claimed the hand belonged to one of the daughters of the pharaoh Akhenaten, thus dynastically close to Akhenaten’s successor, Tutankhamun). In 1922, Cheiro and his wife noted that the hand began to bleed and they were accosted by spectral visions of an imploring woman. Cheiro received an automatic message (a message assumed to be from a spirit that takes over the body of the medium, often during trance). The message ran: ‘Lord Carnarvon not to enter tomb. Disobey at peril. If ignored would suffer sickness; not recover; death would claim him in Egypt.’⁶²

A letter of warning to Carnarvon apparently prompted the Earl to see a second palmist. ‘Velma, the Seer’ published his memoirs in 1929, in which he recounted the tale that he had read Lord Carnarvon’s hand just before he travelled to meet Carter in November 1922. He had foreseen ‘great peril’. A second sitting soon after showed that ‘spots had greatly increased in density and that the one on his Life Line was perilously near his present age.’ To aid prediction, they then turned to crystal-gazing. Within the crystal, Velma saw Lord Carnarvon ‘in the very storm-centre of a hurricane of occult flashes’ emerging from a tomb.⁶³ Carnarvon is portrayed as a believer in occult influences, an active member of the London Spiritualist Alliance, fearlessly embracing the romance of it all by choosing to travel to Egypt to meet his fate. When the body of

Carnarvon was returned to Highclere Castle to be buried, the Sixth Earl tells the story that a spiritualist medium phoned with a message from his dead father: 'on no account should you ever step inside the tomb of King Tutankhamen' as 'this would mean an end to the House of Herbert'.⁶⁴

One of the Sixth Earl's reminiscences is striking for embroiling all the central figures of the Tutankhamun story in the occult:

I had attended at least two séances which my father had held at Highclere Castle... I had watched Helen Cunliffe-Owen put into a trance on an occasion when Howard Carter had also been present. It had been an eerie, not to say unpleasant, experience which had shaken me considerably... Suddenly she had started talking in an unknown tongue which, to everyone's astonishment, Howard Carter had pronounced as being Coptic... I remembered particularly one séance when my sister had been placed in a trance.⁶⁵

The status of the claims of these stories is inseparable from the intensive traffic in rumour in a mass culture caught up in a frenzy of 'Tutmania'. Art deco was fused with Egyptian stylings in jewellery, furnishings and architectural detailing in one of the most intense periods of Egyptian Revival design. Supernatural thrills were sought elsewhere. Pulp horror magazines seized on mummy curses. *Weird Tales*, associated with H. P. Lovecraft's myths of ancient and implacably malign races and cosmic forces, published many mummy tales in the 1920s and 1930s. From as early as 1901, cinema had exploited trick editing and special effects to reanimate Egyptian mummies, because 'these gave form to cinema's power to rearrange time and space, as well as providing resonances with death'.⁶⁶ By 1932, Karl Freund's film *The Mummy*, an early contribution to the Universal Pictures horror cycle, echoed the bare details of the Tutankhamun find and grafted these onto an older romance template of undying (and undead) love across the centuries. The film begins with a British Museum field expedition in 1921, led by Sir Joseph Whemple, uncovering the tomb of the high priest Imhotep, where they discover his body and a casket sealed with the fearful warning: 'Death – Eternal Punishment – for anyone who opens this casket'. Breaking the seal and intoning the sacrilegious 'Scroll of Thoth' reanimates Imhotep, driving Whemple's assistant insane at what he sees in the tomb. The plot then jumps ten years and eases into the melodramatic mode of the white woman menaced by insatiable foreign desire, chillingly embodied in Boris Karloff's performance as the mesmerizing Imhotep.

The screenplay by John Balderston basically repeats the structure of his adaptation of *Dracula*, one of Universal's first horror successes the year before. Balderston had also been a London-based correspondent in the 1920s, sent by the *New York World* in 1925 to cover the final opening of Tutankhamun's sarcophagus. In November 1925, the situation had completely changed: *The*

Times monopoly had been broken and the Egyptian government was in complete control of information, insisting on priority. Balderston was initially the only foreign journalist in the Valley of the Kings, and was consistently threatened by guards and officials not to break reporting embargoes. Balderston chafed against ‘childish edicts of secrecy’, objecting that ‘the Arabic press shows no interest in Tutankhamen’. Meanwhile Balderston was trying to report on ‘the supreme moment of all archaeological research’.⁶⁷

Any whiff of authenticity to mummy movies, however, was soon swept away in the accelerating cycle of sequels that Universal began to pump out in desperation from 1940 with *The Mummy’s Hand*. This introduced the mute and murderous mummy Kharis, played by Lon Chaney Jr in three further sequels.⁶⁸ Meaningful contexts are lost; the curse is emptied out; the mummy becomes a shuffling dullard dishing out indiscriminate violence in a subgenre of films that even enthusiasts find maddeningly repetitious.⁶⁹ Evelyn Waugh had already complained that the Tutankhamun discovery had been ‘vulgarized in the popular press’ and that Carnarvon’s death had meant ‘the nation wallowed in superstitious depths’, producing an ‘irrelevant bubble of emotion and excitement’.⁷⁰

First interpretations

What to do with this strange confabulation of fact and fiction in the rumours that mutated around Tutankhamun? Where do these stories come from? I mean not just the fantasia of confusing, contradictory detail, but the very *idea* of the curse, for, as weary academic Egyptologists often explain, Ancient Egyptian culture actually had very little concept of the curse. In one of the most authoritative popular accounts of the mummy, Salima Ikram and Aidan Dodson brush past the curse in two paragraphs, declaring that there was no curse in Tutankhamun’s tomb and that ‘only two have been recorded from other tombs’.⁷¹ Charlotte Booth lists three tombs that have formulations that might be regarded as curses on those who transgress tombs.⁷² Rather narrower research has examined the ritualized rhetoric of ‘Execration Texts’, exploring how ‘the names of the king’s enemies were written on pottery bowls or platters which were then smashed into hundreds of fragments, thereby destroying the men whose names were written on them’.⁷³ Later research has focused on what have come to be termed ‘threat formulae’ in Ancient Egyptian culture. As Katarina Nordh explains, formal threat rhetoric exists, but it is nearly always paired with blessings. Where these messages occur in tomb complexes, their posthumous sender praises the visitor to a tomb if he or she honours the name of the dead; the threat is a secondary, alternative consequence if you do not honour the name. This is often presented as the cast-iron guarantee of

safety for any professional Egyptologist, who of course comes to preserve the memory of the name, not destroy it, as a grave-robber might. In the logic of Ancient Egyptian commemorative practices, Egyptologists must be more likely to be considered blessed rather than cursed. Nordh further suggests that ‘curse and blessing formulae seem primarily to have been an internal affair of the scribal profession’ and regards specific instances as working ‘like target-guided missiles ... capable of homing in on only what should be homed in on, and nothing else.’⁷⁴ In other words, the idea of a catch-all curse as an instantly murderous promise written on a tomb wall or sarcophagus is a fantasy, a later cultural imposition. Superstitions attached to tombs and cemeteries are common in North African Arab culture, but in the Anglo-American world these ideas appear incredibly late, in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Usually, the Egyptologist will go no further than issuing a blanket dismissal of such superstitions. ‘There is really nothing to discuss,’ Charlotte Booth firmly concludes.⁷⁵ At least until recently, Egyptology had little interest in reflecting on what kind of cultural work such rumours might do. Instead some ask, as Carter Lupton has, ‘Is Egyptology cursed by the Mummy’s Curse?’ Despite struggling to consider horror fiction and film as cultural forms in their own right, Lupton is constantly aggrieved by cavalier disregard for Egyptological accuracy in popular culture. There is, for instance – as one might be not too surprised to discover – ‘a frustrating lack of consistency regarding Egyptological issues’ displayed by Hammer House of Horror’s *The Mummy* (dir. Terence Fisher, 1959).⁷⁶ The remake of Universal’s 1932 *The Mummy* (dir. Stephen Sommers 1999) is also ‘frustratingly inaccurate’, its sequel further ‘widening the gap with actual Egyptology’.⁷⁷ Frank Holt has similarly asked ‘Have we cursed the pharaohs?’ with superstitious beliefs, suggesting that since the vulgar display of Tutmania in 1923, ‘matters have only grown worse’.⁷⁸ Yet to call this ‘a modern curse’ does nothing to explain the persistence of these rumours. Impatient exasperation can’t break into their circulation but exactly repeats the superstition – presenting us with another form of the recursive curse.

Statistical rationality appears to have no force against the devilish energy of rumour either. A perhaps only semi-serious medical ‘cohort’ study of Westerners who entered Tutankhamun’s tomb between 1923 and 1926, published in the *British Medical Journal*, has pointed out that their average age at death was 70 and that one can find ‘no significant association between exposure to the mummy’s curse and survival’.⁷⁹ Such surveys were conducted within ten years of the tomb being opened. It is often observed that Howard Carter lived to 64 and died of heart disease quietly at home in London in 1939. Has this cohort study and others like it dispelled the myth of the mummy’s curse? Not a chance.

Rationalists might hope that proper scientific education can correct and eliminate false beliefs. A curse might be regarded as an instance of ‘magical

thinking', which has been defined as 'a cognitive intuition or belief in the existence of imperceptible forces or essences'.⁸⁰ Yet recent studies have suggested that far from being associated only with children or 'primitive' people, magical thinking is pervasive, perhaps even adaptive, and certainly able to coexist with more rational cognition in the modern world. 'Magical thinking has stubbornly resisted the aggressive expansion of modern science,' Nemeroff and Rozin observe, 'and, if anything, appears to be making a major resurgence'.⁸¹ Efforts to scientifically disenchant the mummy curse might actively encourage the romance of the curse and aid the efflorescence of rumour, which must clearly be doing a different kind of cultural work than the science of Egyptology.

Howard Carter had his own idea about what this cultural work might be. He found the frenzied attention of the press 'bewildering for us, not to say embarrassing', and reflected: 'One must suppose that at the time the discovery was made the general public was in a state of profound boredom with news of reparations, conferences and mandates'.⁸² Indeed, Charles Breasted colourfully recalled that the story of Tutankhamun broke 'after a summer journalistically so dull that an English farmer's report of a gooseberry the size of a crab apple achieved the main news pages of the London metropolitan dailies'.⁸³ Carter's rare acknowledgement of a world beyond the Valley of the Kings ignored the turmoil of Egyptian politics but gestured at larger geopolitical shifts after the Great War, the Versailles Treaty and the formation of the League of Nations that parcelled strategic land (such as Palestine and newly minted Iraq) into territories governed by mandate. Was it the specific conjuncture of new mass communication media in the 1920s, the competitive conglomerates of 'yellow' journalism in England and America, combined with the rise of radio and cinema that ensured the sensational rumours about Tutankhamun travelled so far and so fast? Was there something about the contagion of the curse that echoed the astonishing range and social penetration of these new tele-technologies?

This suggestion is taken up by Christopher Frayling and Jasmine Day in two of the best accounts of the mummy curse. Day regards the Tutankhamun curse as an instance of media manipulation, twisting the narrative of the curse away from its earlier potential as an ethical critique, albeit in sensational terms, of the violation of tombs. The media effectively 'converted curses from warranted nemeses into merciless afflictions', the mummy becoming an indifferent menace to Westerners that can ultimately justify the 'brazen acquisition fantasy' of films like *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.⁸⁴ Yet when Day suggests that 'it is obvious that the powers-that-be neutralized the subversive power of popular culture when cinema turned the curse from a criticism of grave-robbing into a celebration of it', this offers only a crude version of a culture industry that somehow orchestrates ideological messages across media.⁸⁵ It is not entirely clear who these shady 'powers-that-be' are or how on earth they might have controlled

such a frenzied and unpredictable free market of rumour and superstition. Conspiracy theory is only another form of magical thinking about hidden agencies, mirroring the mechanism of the curse itself.

Other interpretations adopt more abstract modes. As we shall see in a later chapter, the Egyptian mummy was incorporated into the Gothic romance in the course of the nineteenth century, and critical studies of this field provide rich resources for interpreting the circulation of curse narratives. Indeed, it is impossible to tell the story of Tutankhamun without noting how the press framed the story by repeatedly turning to Gothic romancers like Conan Doyle, Rider Haggard or Algernon Blackwood. Gothic monsters are typically understood to negotiate liminal states between animal and human, or East and West, or, most obviously, between life and death. The mummy, like the vampire, exemplifies Freud's reflections on the 'uncanny' object, first published in 1919, as something that hovers unsettlingly between animate and inanimate status, a dead thing that might at any moment stage a fearful return to life. Freud viewed animism as the most primitive set of beliefs, yet observed that he was writing in a post-war era of spiritualist revivalism where 'in our great cities, placards announce lectures that undertake to tell us how to get in touch with the souls of the departed'. Might the dead return or punish the living for the shortcomings of their ritual propitiations? 'Almost all of us think as savages do on this topic,' Freud concluded.⁸⁶ That the dead are tabooed and their bodies carefully contained in symbolic locations is also one of the starting points of Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic account of abjection. Kristeva suggests that the self is consolidated by determining strict bodily and psychic boundaries. Taboos enforce repulsion at what breaches strict categories of inside and outside, clean and unclean, living and dead. Superstitions proliferate where such borders are breached. The mummy's uncanny location suggests it belongs to abjection, a transgressive thing that 'does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.'⁸⁷

In a more political register, Nicholas Daly has argued that Gothic mummy fiction works as a kind of allegory that 'recounts what happens to a category of ambiguous foreign objects/bodies when they enter the British economy'.⁸⁸ Mummies that come to life in museums or private collections, or who curse the violators of their tombs are revenging their expropriation in the increasingly commercial markets for Ancient Egyptian artefacts in the nineteenth century. Marx argued that objects became commodities by a magical infusion of spectral value (transposing the idea of fetishism from anthropology to economics), so stories about animate or vengeful mummies, Daly argues, might be read in Marx's terms as a kind of popular-cultural commodity theory.

Both psychoanalytic and Marxist interpretations are incredibly suggestive but very abstracted modes of reading. Liminality is a general category that incorporates every Gothic monster, from Frankenstein's creature via the vampire and

werewolf to the mummy. Count Dracula has also been read as emblematic of the circulation of capital. So have zombies.⁸⁹ The question of Egypt, and Egypt at this particular historical conjuncture, tends to be reduced to sketchy background just when specificity might be most valuable in exploring the allure of the curse.

Perhaps, then, we need to return to the central actors in the Tutankhamun story. Is there something specific about the fragile Lord Carnarvon that helps precipitate the curse narrative? His sister's memoir began by admitting: 'A story that opens like Aladdin's Cave, and ends like a Greek myth of Nemesis cannot fail to capture the imagination of all men and women who, in this workaday existence, can still be moved by tales of high endeavour and unrelenting doom.'⁹⁰ 'Workaday' euphemistically hides the immense economic and class differences that divided the Earl from the vast majority of readers of popular reports about the discovery of the tomb and its allegedly fatal consequences.

In fact, there was a great fascination with associating aristocratic dynasties with particular 'lucks' and ill omens into which Carnarvon's fate can be neatly slotted. In the 1920s and 1930s, a cluster of books recorded and analysed this tradition. Charles Beard focused on the most famous of these, the Luck of Edenhall, a chalice held by the Musgrave family, allegedly since the fourteenth century, and long claimed to be a cup left behind after a fairy celebration. One eighteenth-century ballad included the couplet: 'When this cup shall break or fall/Farewell the luck of Eden Hall.'⁹¹ Beard limited belief in these lucks to the 'primitive and uninstructed mind' that gave 'superstitious veneration to whatever is derived from a remote or unknown origin.'⁹² This was Edward Lovett's view too, as he built his collection of charms, talismans and superstitious beliefs from the London populace.⁹³ J. G. Lockhart offered a more extensive array of aristocratic curses and repeated folk tales in which powerful dynasties are doomed by those they dispossess. The curse was 'the ordinary way in which the weak retaliated upon the strong.'⁹⁴ The 'Cowdray Curse', for instance, was issued by a monk on the family of Sir Anthony Browne who had been gifted a monastery from Henry VIII during the dissolution. A cast of persecuted Quakers, shepherds and midwives damning their oppressors follows, leading to the famous 'Tichborne Curse' in which the family descended from Sir Roger Tichborne paid a dole to the poor for centuries to fend off a curse on the continuation of the male line should such charity end. Cessation of payment in the nineteenth century coincided, so it was said, with the famous legal 'claim' over the baronetcy that financially ruined the family. To Ernest Crawley, oaths, curses and blessings were rudimentary social forms of redress, superseded in 'the course of ethical evolution' by the law.⁹⁵ Continued beliefs were so-called 'survivals' from earlier phases of development, ritualized forms of resentment that were often associated with the poor, the primitive or the colonized.

Yet anthropological confidence that this was a dying tradition failed to notice a continuing obsession with stories of cursed objects and doomed

dynasties. In 1909, *The Times* reported on the sale of the Hope Diamond to the Cartier jewellers from the collection of the ex-Sultan of Turkey, Abdul Hamid. 'Like most other famous stones,' the report noted, 'its story is largely blended with tragedy.'⁹⁶ Long believed to have been stolen from a Hindu idol in India, the huge blue-tinted diamond was bought by Louis XIV in 1668 before it passed down the royal line into the possession of Marie Antoinette. Several aristocratic ladies were said to have worn the gem as a necklace, only to lose their heads to the guillotine. It was stolen in the Revolution, but reappeared re-cut in the collection of the profligate gambler George IV in England. It was purchased from the king's heavily indebted estate by Henry Hope in 1830. His heirs fought violently over their inheritance and the remaining family fortune and art collection was gambled away by the feckless Lord Henry Hope, who inherited the diamond in 1887. He was forced to sell it in 1902, and it soon spent a year in Constantinople where 'its alleged adventures for the brief space while there seem to beggar the wildest fiction.'⁹⁷ In 1910, Pierre Cartier tempted the American newly-weds Edward and Evelyn Maclean with the romantic history of the stone. Evelyn Walsh, daughter of a fabulously wealthy prospector-turned-businessman, had just married the heir to the *Washington Post* media empire, and their combined wealth had already bought the famous 'Star of the East' diamond. Cartier failed to persuade them in Paris, but travelled to America with the Hope Diamond in 1911 and closed the deal. Richard Kurin suggests Pierre Cartier built on the breathless *Times* account to fashion an alluringly dangerous history, much of it fantastic. The association with the *Washington Post*, however, meant that 'it became instant folklore early in the era of modern mass communication.'⁹⁸ The Maclean family seemed to be impressively doomed. Evelyn was addicted to laudanum and eventually confined to a lunatic asylum in 1933, in the same year that she allegedly pawned the Hope Diamond to help raise the ransom for the kidnapped child of the aviator Charles Lindbergh. Edward Maclean's political ambitions ended in public humiliation, complicated by alcoholism. He declared the *Washington Post* bankrupt in 1932. Their son, Vinson, was killed when hit by a car in May 1919. Their daughter committed suicide in 1946.

Certain gems have been traditionally associated with ill luck. The Koh-i-Noor diamond was rumoured to have accumulated a murderous history and some feared for the British throne when it passed into English hands in 1849 as a result of a series of annexations. It was displayed at the Great Exhibition with great fanfare, before being re-cut and worn by Victoria. It seemed to have no ill effects on British power, however, although a vengeful history gathers around a fictional version of the diamond in Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*.⁹⁹ The Orloff Diamond was imbued with another story of theft from an Indian idol, and the fate of the Russian aristocracy and royal line was rather less rosy than that of their English cousins.

The circulation of rumours about the Hope Diamond and the Tutankhamun curse might be plausibly linked through Thorstein Veblen's reflections on the conspicuous consumption of the 'leisure class'. Veblen developed the theory that superiority of class was demonstrated through the conspicuous refusal to engage in productive work and through ostentatious expenditure on beautiful objects, the taste of the leisure class determined by 'a gratification of our sense of costliness masquerading under the name of beauty'.¹⁰⁰ In an era of unfettered American capitalism, the nouveau riche demonstrated unlimited wealth by consuming 'freely and of the best in food, drink, narcotics, shelter, services, ornaments, apparel, weapons and accoutrements, amusements, amulets, and idols or divinities'.¹⁰¹ As an English aristocrat, George Herbert pursued other signifiers of leisurely wealth: shooting, hunting, collecting. His indulgence in fast cars (he was the third registered car owner in England), led to a near fatal accident and the medical advice that he winter abroad in Egypt for his fragile health. Whilst there, he would have taken up archaeology as another signifier of leisurely labour, not least because it involved doing little work oneself other than to direct teams of fellaheen. Meanwhile, the new intensive methods of excavation required wealth, as did any serious attempt to enter into the market in antiquities.

Intriguingly Veblen suggests that the sense of the right to this wealth of the leisure class was reinforced by a pervasive belief in *luck*. Veblen devotes a whole chapter to how superstitious beliefs in 'an inscrutable preternatural agency' pervade the leisure pursuits of sport and gambling, but also how, across all classes of society, luck helps 'to conserve ... habits of mind favourable to a regime of status'.¹⁰² But if luck signalled resignation at inequality, delight in thrilling stories about curses on the aristocratic or nouveau riche family might suggest a channel where class resentments surfaced. After all, these curse tales rippled through societies riven with labour disputes, union organization and panic about the growing power of socialist and communist political parties.

This reading focuses closely on the historical context of the 1920s. Whilst suggestive, it is limited by a rather telling fact. The curse of Tutankhamun was not the first story to circulate about Englishmen struck down by the Ancient Egyptian dead. Indeed, in many ways the Tutankhamun story followed a script that had already been prepared for it by at least two prior instances that were widely known in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods. Precisely because they circulated as rumours, these stories are poorly remembered, often returning in incoherent or fantastically elaborated fragments to bolster up the Tutankhamun case. To my surprise, no one has properly researched these stories. And yet, to my mind, the peculiar histories of the Victorian gentlemen Thomas Douglas Murray and Walter Herbert Ingram hold the key to the allure of the mummy curse. Let's try to piece together their adventures.

