

The Block of Bronze.

BY HERBERT W. CROTZER.



O you good people thought I gave you 'the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth,' did you?"

"Well, yes," I replied; "we all noticed how your story coincided with what has been published concerning your operations, and we were especially struck with the way you seemed to cover all the details of the job; how anxious, in fact, you appeared to be to leave out no point or circumstance that would throw light on your subject."

"Just so," said my friend; "I noticed that you all seemed to take it in as gospel truth, but the fact is, Frank, the most remarkable thing that happened over there was omitted from my yarn altogether."

I gazed at the speaker in astonishment, but he pulled away at his disreputable old pipe as unconcernedly as if he had said the most natural thing in the world.

Edward Van Zant, the explorer, was my lifelong friend, college chum, and now my honored guest.

At college, Ned went in for dead and hidden things, archæology, and all that; and, after absorbing all that the best schools of this and other countries could teach on those lines, he started in, digging here, prodding there, until he had punctured holes in the earth's crust in pretty much every country on the globe.

Now, after ten years of this sort of thing, he was back in his native city, with a hat full of medals and decorations, and his fame as an explorer and archæologist established throughout civilization.

We had just returned from a dinner given in his honor by a local scientific body, and had adjourned to the library for a smoke and a chat before retiring.

Our talk, so far, had referred to his little speech concerning his latest most important discoveries in Egypt, and to the effect it had produced upon his hearers.

That he should now acknowledge having intentionally omitted facts of importance bearing upon his work was, to put it mildly, an eye-opener, and I could only look the astonishment I felt.

After a few thoughtful puffs, Ned said: "Frank, what really did happen is so strange, so inconceivable, that were I to tell the story to the world, it would laugh at me, say I lied, or was crazy."

"See here," he exclaimed, throwing off coat and collar, and uncovering the upper portion of his brawny chest and shoulders; "here's a bit of evidence of the truth of my tale, that I always carry with me."

I looked, and on his throat, underneath the heavy beard, I beheld a lot of scars which, extending downward, spread out into rows that covered every inch almost of the body exposed to view. It looked as if some sharp-toothed instrument, like a rake, had gouged out the flesh, or as though the man had been seared by hot irons.

"Good heavens!" I cried. "What beast or thing did that?"

"Aye, you may well put it that way," replied Ned, resuming his garments and seat; "it was a Thing, the most horrible God ever allowed on His footstool.

"I told you this evening," he went on, "that I had set out to investigate a small pyramid which stood in the desert, a mile or two from the oasis that had been my base of operations while exploring in that part of Egypt. I explained how we spent weeks digging and sounding before success rewarded us; how we finally broke into the tomb underneath the pyramid, and discovered the mummies and the stores of jewels and ornaments, which proved that the bodies had lain there, undisturbed by mortal hand, since the days they were buried—six thousand years before. All these things occurred precisely as I stated. There was nothing here to conceal.

"You also heard of the attempt made to steal some of our treasures from the building in which they were temporarily stored; how one of my men on guard at the time was murdered,

and how I, while seeking traces of the murderer in the camp of a band of roving Arabs, was attacked in the tent of the sheik, and forced to kill that individual to save my own life. That part of the story was true enough, so far as it went, but the most important facts were omitted. What actually did occur was this:—

“After working for weeks on the job, and gaining nothing but hard labor for our pains, I got discouraged, and one evening I announced to the men that if the next day or two brought no better luck, I would abandon the undertaking. I also told them that, in order to be in good trim for what might be our last attempt, they should do no work next day, and suggested that they should go to headquarters at once and take a rest. They were glad enough to get a holiday, after working as they had done, and soon all hands were on their way to the oasis, where my party, with the exception of the native laborers, put up when off duty.

“I remained in camp, and early next morning made a tour of the diggings. I examined every hole and sounding, made careful measurements, and tried to think out some new plan of operation that would yield tangible results. Finally, I returned to my tent and was about to seat myself in front of it, when I happened to see far out on the desert what my field-glass showed me was a caravan. It was a small affair—a dozen camels, loaded, and as many horsemen. It was headed for the oasis, and would come no nearer to the pyramid.

“As I stood watching the travelers, a horseman, riding ahead, left the column, and followed closely by what seemed, at that distance, a child, also mounted, rode rapidly towards me, the rest continuing on their way. When they got within several rods of me the pair pulled up, and the man, dismounting, stood quietly while his little companion proceeded to the pyramid and passed behind it, out of sight, followed by the riderless horse. Then the stranger walked forward until but a few yards separated us, when he stopped, and, instead of the usual salaam, made a profound bow. He uttered not a word, but stood with arms folded, as if waiting for me to address him. He was very tall, straight as a spear, and wore the ordinary long white garment of the desert tribes.

“Irritated by the man’s silence, I finally cried out, in Arabic, ‘Who are you, and what do you want?’

“At this, my visitor came up close to me, replying as he did so, ‘Who I am matters little; what I want you will give me in return for services I shall render you.’

“I was astonished, as you may well suppose, but ere I could speak, he continued: ‘I know you are Edward Van Zant, the explorer. I know what you expect to find here, and how you have worked, without avail, until you have become discouraged. How I know these things concerns me alone. What concerns you is the fact that I, and I alone, can show you how to enter the tomb, which is here, as you surmise, and I will do so, provided you give me my choice of what you may find in it.’

“Although amazed at the man’s knowledge of me and my movements, and distrusting him instinctively, I determined to force his hand, if possible, and find out his demands and what he proposed to do.

“Inviting him to sit down on a block of stone at my side, I said, ‘You seem to know so much, and to be so powerful, why haven’t you opened this tomb yourself?’

“‘Because,’ he replied, ‘to do so requires engineering skill and mechanical appliances, which it is impossible for me to obtain hereabouts.’

“‘What do you require in payment for your services?’ was my next query.

“‘A mummy,’ he replied.

“‘A mummy!’ I exclaimed; ‘why, these are the things I am most anxious to find myself, and you may demand what is of the greatest value to me.’

“‘Listen,’ said the man; ‘you will find bodies of kings and queens who lived at a time of which man has no record. These shall be yours, together with all the jewels and ornaments buried with them. You will also discover a case in which is the body of a dwarf, an insignificant thing compared with the other treasures. This case and contents are all I ask, and I swear there is nothing in them that would be of value to you. As a guarantee that I am not trifling or trying to deceive you, take these;’ saying which, he drew out a small pouch, from which he poured into my hands a

dozen or more of the finest diamonds I ever saw. 'If I fail you in any way,' he continued, 'or you do not find everything as I say, these shall be yours.'

"To be brief, I agreed to the proposal, the Arab accepting my verbal promise to live up to the contract.

"'Now,' said he, when the preliminaries were settled — and here is where the incomprehensible part of the affair begins — 'I will fulfill my part of the agreement.'

"With this he gave a shrill whistle, following upon which the little fellow came out from behind the pyramid, and, with the other horse by his side, rode up to us and dismounted. Making a low bow to me, he stepped in front of the other and gazed, without a word, into his face, as if awaiting a command.

"I now saw that, instead of being a child, the newcomer was a dwarf, twenty years old, or thereabouts. He was a handsome, dark-eyed little fellow, with a red fez and zouave-like outfit that became him well. That he was uncommonly active and powerful, I had reason to thank my stars later on.

"At a word, in some strange dialect, the dwarf detached from the Arab's saddle and handed him a scimitar, the hilt and scabbard of which were covered with some scaly material that I afterward found to be the skin of a snake.

"Another word or two, in the same unknown tongue, and the little man drew back and faced the big one. As he did so, I caught a look of aversion on his face, and his eyes gleamed as if with hatred or defiance. The Arab noticed the look and returned it with an ugly scowl and a growl that sounded like a threat.

"Arising from his seat, he unsheathed the blade, and the next moment the dwarf seemed to be standing in the midst of a rain of fire. The Arab was laying about him with the weapon, and such sword play, I'm free to say, I never saw before, and never will see again while I live.

"The exhibition ceased as suddenly as it began. The dwarf stood with arms folded, and a queer, far-away look in his eyes. The Arab gazed at him a moment, and then, tearing the covering from the hilt, held that part of the scimitar close to his face.

"The hilt was of gold, beautifully chased and set with gems. On the end was an immense diamond that blazed in the sunlight

like flame, and this was waved slowly before the dwarf's eyes until the lids dropped and he seemingly slept.

"As the Arab sheathed the sword and replaced the covering on the hilt, he said, 'Ali grows rebellious and objects to serving me; he must be disciplined.' Then, producing a sheet of paper and pencil, he laid them on the stone he had vacated, and, stepping in front of his subject, he gave what seemed to be a command in a loud, imperious tone, and in the same outlandish tongue he had used before.

"In a few moments the dwarf made reply in a muffled voice that sounded as if it came from underground.

"Then, as though interpreting, the Arab said, 'He tells me a great rock closes the entrance to the tunnel leading to the tomb, but he has passed through it.'

"For the next few minutes not a word was spoken. Then came a little cry from the dwarf, followed by a few sentences in a broken, gasping voice, as of one utterly exhausted. At another command, he staggered to the stone, and, seizing the pencil, he rapidly laid off on the paper what looked like the ground plan of a building. A lot of writing followed, and when this was completed the Arab handed me what turned out to be an accurate plan of the tomb and tunnel, with full directions for entering them.

"As Ali finished, he fell over in a dead faint; but a few drops from a vial, which the Arab held to his lips, soon restored him. Then the strange pair mounted and set off towards the oasis, and that was the last I saw of them for some days.

"In the evening I rode back to camp, where I learned that the newcomers had pitched their tents on the outskirts of the oasis, and seemed a quiet, well-disposed lot.

"I told my associates that the sheik had visited me and given me certain directions for finding and entering the tomb, for which, if they proved correct, he was to receive an ordinary mummy, in case any such were found.

"Not until we broke into the tomb and laid profane hands upon its contents, did the sheik put in an appearance at the workings.

"On that momentous day he came, bright and early, accom-

panied by four of his people, big, solemn-looking fellows. Seeking me out, he obtained permission to enter the tomb with me, and while there, no movement of ours, as we opened sarcophagi and took out mummies, jewels, and what not, escaped his watchful eye.

“For a long time there was no sign of the wooden case, but when most of the things had been removed he called attention to a crack in the wall in front of him. A few blows of a pick disclosed a niche, the front of which had been walled up. Within stood upright a covered box, and in this we found, as the Arab foretold, the body of a dwarf. It was that of a man with immensely broad shoulders, and arms reaching nearly to the knees. The face was hideous, and a ferocious smile had drawn the thin lips apart, disclosing teeth sharp, and gleaming like those of a beast.

“Strange to say, the body was not swathed in bandages, as mummies always are, but was clothed in a loose garment of some peculiar stuff that bore our rough handling without a break.

“Great bunches of muscle covered the frame, and nowhere was there an opening or, in fact, any indication that an internal organ had been removed, as is always done in the case of mummies.

“The body, with its stiffened limbs, was like that of one in a cataleptic fit or trance, and represented, as I supposed, some strange and wonderful process of embalming, of which this was the only specimen in existence.

“The head rested on an oblong block, covered with a piece of the same material of which the garment was made, and on this odd pillow the Arab's eyes were fastened with the most intense eagerness. Before I could lay a hand on it, he had replaced the lid of the box, saying as he did so, ‘I suppose I may take this now? You have seen how insignificant it is, and I desire to get it to my tent at once.’

“Reluctantly I gave my consent, and his own men carried the case to the surface and placed it in the cart I loaned him to convey his prize to camp.

“An hour or two after they left, we found in the niche, under some rubbish, what I took to be a block of bronze. It was about

twice the size of a common brick, quite heavy, and on every side it was inlaid with gold in strange designs. I sent it up to be put with the other stuff in the storeroom, and shortly afterward was told that the sheik was above, asking to see me privately. When, at my request, he joined me in the tomb, he was greatly excited, and his first words were, 'I have lost a small bronze block belonging to that case; have you seen it about here?'

"My friend," I said, "in return for your services I agreed to give you a certain case and contents. Have I fulfilled my promise?" He replied, "Yes, but" — "All bronze blocks," I put in, "and everything else, outside the case, belong to me and I shall keep them."

"At this the sheik said not another word, but, with a murderous scowl on his face, turned and left the pit.

"Upon quitting work for the day, I went to the storeroom and hid the block in a corner, under a pile of tools. Later, when my assistants had gone back to headquarters, and the laborers had settled down for the night, I called in Sam, my African servant, and one of the native laborers, an intelligent, trustworthy Arab, and arranged with them for guarding the storehouse during the night. I was to take the first and longest watch, Sam the next, and the native the last, which would end when the camp was astir in the morning.

"This plan was carried out, and nothing occurred while either myself or Sam was on duty. When the Arab took his post, I examined the building inside and out, but found the block in place and everything in proper condition.

"Upon resuming my bunk, where I had slept like a top through Sam's watch, I found that sleep had deserted me, and for more than an hour I tossed about, unable to close my eyes. At last I dropped off into a doze, from which, a few minutes later, I awoke with a start. Something had disturbed me, I knew not what, but a faint echo seemed to ring in my ears, as of a voice calling for help.

"Jumping up, I made for the storehouse at the top of my speed.

"The moon had not yet gone down, so that objects near by were fairly visible.

"When close to the building, I saw what brought me up standing.

"The door stood wide open, and some one was moving about inside!

"The Arab was nowhere in sight.

"Approaching close to the opening, I called out the man's name. There was no reply, and the noise within ceased.

"As I stood there, peering into the dark room, there was a sudden scrambling, a horrible, snarling cry, and out of the doorway came something on all fours which, leaping past me like a flash, was out of sight almost before I could move.

"Recovering my wits, which, I confess, were scared out of me for the moment, I was inside the room and at the hiding place with a lantern in short order.

"The block was gone!

"A hasty examination showed that nothing else was disturbed, and that the door had been forced by pressure from without; the broken lock, and screws torn from the wood, indicating that extraordinary force had been applied.

"Outside, lying on his back, close to the building, I found the watchman. The poor fellow was dead. His neck was broken, his face distorted with fear and horror, and upon his throat were deep scratches, from which the blood was still flowing.

"Arousing the camp, I had the body taken to the hospital tent, and explained to the men that their comrade had been murdered by a burglar who failed to secure anything of value.

"What it was that did the deed, I could not imagine, but I felt assured that the sheik was the responsible party, and determined to visit him at an early hour.

"Soon after sunrise, I was standing in front of my tent, when, to my surprise, Ali, the dwarf, rode up at a furious gallop. Without dismounting or uttering a word, he thrust into my hand a folded paper and, turning, was off again like a shot. The paper contained these words:—

"The sheik sleeps, and I have stolen away. He has sworn you shall die as did your guard. If you are brave, come to his tent at midnight with axe and knife. The guards will sleep, and I will help you. The block is —'

"Here the note broke off abruptly, as though the writer had been interrupted, and just what he meant by that reference to the block I'd have given something to know.

"That evening I went back to headquarters with the rest, leaving the storehouse in charge of an assistant and armed guards.

"I believed that Ali's note was written in good faith, and determined to act as he advised, but alone, and without the knowledge of any of my people.

"Shortly before midnight I was in the vicinity of the sheik's tent, which stood near the edge of the oasis, its entrance facing the desert.

"As I cautiously approached the door, the moonlight enabled me to see, stretched on the ground in front of it, the body of a man, his hands clasping a long gun. Already one of Ali's statements was verified. The guard slept, and soundly too, I could see that.

"Just then the sheik's voice rang out in a sort of wild chant, and I prepared for action.

"Securing the broad-bladed hatchet I had brought with me, to my wrist, by means of a leather loop on the handle, and carrying a stout hunting knife in the other hand, I stepped over the sleeper and peered into the tent. A tall screen in front of the door cut off my view completely. Then I crawled through the opening and stood behind the screen. Cutting a slit in this with my knife, I could see that rugs and skins covered the ground, and screens stood at the sides, and at the opposite end of the tent, which was large and oblong in shape. In the center was a table, draped in black, and in front of this, with his back towards me, stood the Arab.

"He wore a black robe that reached from his neck to his heels, and in his right hand was a short, black rod, which waved back and forth in unison with the chant.

"On the table I could see the bronze block, and beside it lay the beautiful scimitar, its hilt glittering in the rays of the lamp that hung from the top of the tent.

"Neither Ali nor the case was in sight, but I felt confident that the dwarf was near, ready to lend a hand, if necessary.

"With weapons ready for instant use, I moved towards the table, and my hand was already on the block before the Arab knew I was there.

"A startled cry fell from his lips as he saw me. His hand flew to the sword, and, quicker than I can tell it, he aimed a blow which, had it reached me, would have split me to the shoulders.

"A leap aside, however, saved me, and before he could straighten himself, I dropped the hatchet and sent in a right-hander that nearly lifted him off his feet. He recovered himself, though, like a born prize-fighter, and, with blood streaming from his nose and mouth, and a hellish fire blazing in his eyes, he sprang at me again.

"But just then a gleam of light flashed by me and I heard a dull, crunching sound. The Arab's rush was suddenly checked. His sword wavered an instant, and then fell to the ground. The hand that held it dropped and closed convulsively upon something that protruded from his breast. It was instantly withdrawn, and with it, the fingers already stiffening around the haft, came a long, broad-bladed knife, dripping with blood. A dark stream followed and flowed over the long robe.

"The Arab swayed to and fro several times; then, with a gurgling, choking cry, he fell to the ground, dead!

"As if in response to the cry, and before I could turn to see where the knife came from, I heard a savage snarl, and something sprang upon me from behind. A pair of long, brown arms were clasped round my neck, and instantly my clothing was being torn to shreds and my flesh gashed by fingers that were more like claws of steel.

"So sudden and fierce was the attack that I staggered forward and would have fallen, had not my assailant's backward tug kept me on my feet.

"My throat seemed to be the point aimed at, and in its mad efforts to reach this, the beast, or whatever it was, soon had my shoulders laid bare and channels dug into my flesh, from which the blood ran in streams.

"I am a powerful man, as you know, Frank, but in the grasp of this fiend I was helpless as a child. Try as I might, I could

not shake him off, and my utmost exertions failed to prevent his inhuman gouging and tearing.

"I had dropped my knife when first attacked, and all I could do was to hold my head down to protect my throat, and make an occasional futile stroke with the hatchet.

"Soon I began to grow weak from loss of blood.

"I wondered vaguely what had become of Ali, and, in a voice scarcely audible, I called upon him for help.

"As I did so, my head went back with a jerk and the sharp claws sank into my throat.

"Death in a frightful form was very close to me when Ali's shout of encouragement reached my ears, and I felt, rather than heard, quick blows falling upon the body of my assailant.

"The pressure on my throat relaxed, the terrible arms dropped from my shoulders, and I was free!

"I fell against the table, gasping for breath, but still conscious that another struggle was going on near me, and that Ali might be needing help, as I had.

"Pulling myself together, I turned to take a hand, when, as I am a living man, Frank, *I found myself gazing upon the mummy we had resurrected!*

"There was no mistaking that stumpy, powerful body, or those features, now distorted with rage, and more horrible than ever.

"Just now it was facing me, making short, savage rushes at Ali, who, knife in hand, eluded the attacks with wonderful agility, driving the blade into the Thing at its every attempt to reach him.

"Stiff with horror and unable to stir, I watched the fight until Ali, in avoiding a vicious rush, slipped and, ere he could recover himself, was in the clutches of the monster.

"With one long arm it hugged the little fellow close to its body, and the free hand was already at his throat before the power to move returned to me.

"Then, staggering forward, I raised the heavy hatchet and, with all the strength in me, I brought it down squarely upon the top of the ugly head.

"I heard the crash and saw the blade eat its way through the skull to the neck,—and then I fainted.

"The next thing I knew, I was lying on a pile of rugs, and Ali

was busy patching me up. So potent were his remedies and treatment that, in a little while, I was on my feet nearly as strong as ever, and feeling only a trifling pain from my injuries.

“ ‘Where is the mummy?’ was my first query.

“ ‘I chopped the accursed thing up, and my men are now burning it,’ Ali replied.

“ ‘You and I, this night,’ he went on, ‘rid the world of two monsters. How the sheik put life into the Thing, I know not. He had strange powers. He knew yon tomb existed, and that in it was the body of one who, ages ago, had been a high priest and mighty magician. He knew that with the priest were buried his profoundest secrets— those by which he controlled the elements, and even life itself.

“ ‘He knew, moreover, by what dread means the priest had preserved his trance-like existence through all these centuries, and had acquired the formula by which life could be restored to the body.

“ ‘Many of his mysteries he learned through me by various unholy methods, one of which you witnessed; but his prying into things forbidden was hateful to me, and I often refused to aid him, until beaten into submission.

“ ‘The sheik was aware that the priest’s secrets were contained in a bronze casket, and this, he believed, was in the case with the body. In the thing under the priest’s head he was sure he beheld the object of his search, and when he found this to be nothing but a block of wood, he was mad with rage and disappointment. He knew, then, that the casket must be in your possession, and your refusal to give it to him did not tend to lessen his anger. So furious, indeed, was he, that he beat me cruelly, and swore he would get the casket if he had to kill you all.

“ ‘I then swore I would kill him for beating me.

“ ‘At night the miracle was performed that let loose the evil one, whose first act was to murder your guard and bring back the box.

“ ‘This night he would have opened it and disclosed its mysteries to the sheik, who, once master of them, would have made the other his slave, else taken his life for good.

“ ‘Here is the casket,’ continued Ali, handing me what I had

hitherto thought to be a block of bronze; 'take it, but never dream of looking inside. The contents would make one, able to secure and use them, the most powerful of all created beings; but woe to him who would handle them, or even attempt to open the casket, without proper knowledge. This knowledge is now lost forever, and I would bury the unholy thing where none would ever find it, were I not sure it would be safe with you.

" 'Take this, also, as a token of my regard and slight return for saving my life,' and he put into my hand the magnificent scimitar, sheathed, and in its snakeskin covering.

" 'The sheik,' he went on, ignoring my objections to receiving so valuable a gift, 'claimed to be my father. He lied; but as I am recognized as his son by my tribe, I shall succeed him, and all his possessions are mine.'

" Here I endeavored to force upon him the diamonds left by the sheik as a pledge; but Ali refused them, saying, that as the sheik had broken his agreement, the jewels were rightfully mine.

" As to the death of the sheik, that had been explained, he said, to his people as the result of an attempt of the Arab's to murder me; and having been a cruel task-master, his death caused joy rather than grief.

" Already the body was being prepared for removal, and in a few hours, the boy explained, they would start for home.

" Where that home was, or how reached, however, Ali obstinately refused to tell me, and from the moment when I rode away from the door of his tent, where he stood motionless, watching me until he faded out of sight, I have never seen nor heard from this savior of my life.

" My wounds I had no occasion to exhibit, and so easily accounted for as the result of my fight with the Arab, my version of which was the more readily accepted as that night the strangers disappeared, leaving no trace behind them.

" Thanks to Ali's ointment, my injuries soon healed, and to this day, Frank, you are the only one to whom I have ever told their history.

" Do you wonder at my silence? "