

*

One of the highlights during my stay in Luxor was filming the grave-robber village of Kurna and the Abd el-Rassul family. My problem was that I had no idea of how I could find the famous Abd el-Rassuls, who have been recorded in many of the history books on ancient Egypt - never about anything good. The only exception is the story of Hussein, Howard Carter's assistant. While transporting water canisters on his donkey, Hussein began to clear a place to his wares, when he suddenly noticed a large stone. This was the first step to the tomb of Tutankhamun.

Although Egypt became independent in 1922, the British still wielded authority over the country's archaeological sites. The members of grave robber families knew about the hidden riches, which unfortunately ended up in various museums of the world, mostly in England, not in their poor, dusty village, where they belonged. As the Valley of the Kings situated in their neighbourhood, the temptation to pilfer jewellery and other things from the tombs of the pharaohs was too great to resist.

*

One day walking along the promenade I met a tall man with outstretched arms. He smiled charmingly:

"At last you have arrived!" he said.

He offered me a cup of black tea, which we had on the street in front of his shop.

He was Faruk from the Abd el-Rassul family and he knew Hussein Abd el-Rassul's son Mahmoud, who was now the head of the family. I told Faruk that it would be a great idea to film and interview his family. The date for the interview was immediately agreed.

The filming created quite an excitement as three members of the Abd el-Rassul clan turned

up on the street attired in long, black woollen Sunday cloaks.

They sat in a row and spoke in turns to the camera. I asked them to talk about the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun and their involvement in the selling of mummies. Instead of anecdotes, the Rassuls started an eulogy of the honest, hard working Abd el-Rassul family whose reputation had spread out in all the four corners of the world. They praised the integrity and honesty of all the people living in Luxor, with the Abd el-Rassul family as the best example. They lauded Finns and praised us for being the best and noblest people on earth. And then the recording was ended.

*

The following week I went to the village of Kurna to meet Mahmoud Abd el-Rassul, who owns a restaurant near the ruins of Ramesseum. Apart from the restaurant, Mahmoud also owns an alabaster factory, sugar cane fields, some land on the Red Sea coast, and he is involved in other business ventures as well. Shy but friendly, Mahmoud Abd el-Rassul who is about 65-years- old is widely admired in the village.

According to him, Howard Carter was a good friend of his father. Carter was a handsome and rich man. Since he was obsessed with Tutankhamun, he rejected the advances of many ladies who admired him, including Lord Carnarvon's daughter Lady Evelyn and other Kurna ladies in his household.

Why did you sell Rames's mummy for a pittance?" I ask.

"Well, mummies were difficult to sell then and it was good to get anything out of it," the family patriarch replies.

"What do you think of the spirits, which are said to be guarding Tutankhamun's tomb?"

"There are spirits over there and they do cause troubles. But some people just get normal illnesses," Mahmoud says.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Normal means natural illnesses, which they get from gases in the tomb," he explains.

Mahmoud Abd el-Rassul agreed to being interviewed and filmed the next Saturday when he would speak more about Carter and the secrets of Tutankhamun's tomb. On the appointed day Mahmoud became shy so that he could hardly say anything in front of the camera. We went out for a meal of well-cooked lamb and rice. The evening was calm as the only sounds were the chirping of cicadas and the barking of the village dogs. The stars glimmered on a deep black sky.

Then the desert storm broke out. The wind lashed the palm tree on the restaurant terrace, whirled sand in the plates and swept off the tablecloths into the dark desert. Then as suddenly as it had begun it stopped.

Mahmoud Abd el-Rassul seemed to be scared by the rage of the storm. It was indeed the action of angry spirits. Then the dogs continued barking and village boys returned from their water-fetching errand on the other side of the road. For all its fame, Kurna has no running water yet, as the water pipes could destroy the ancient graves in the area.