



The Persistence of Perneb

BY CLARENCE DAY, JR.

JUST what kind of a time he had while he was alive no one knows; but the adventures he had after his death were—startling.

He was a dignified-looking man. He had a fine, slightly arched nose, and firm mouth. He married a lady of somewhat nobler birth than himself; and one of his sons was a clergyman. So much for his family.

As to his possessions, he had been fortunate. He had several country estates, and a position at court. On one estate he raised onions, on another figs; and he kept powerful cattle. He used to go out in a litter to see them.

This isn't an imaginary story. Perneb really existed. He had his work to do and his worries, like everyone else. One thing that bothered him, for instance, was the matter of death. People told him that after death his spirit would keep right on living; and—this was the awkward part—would continue to wish food and shelter. It was up to him to make all the arrangements for this before dying.

Perneb put it off and put it off. He planned it out, but he didn't get round to it. There are a good many other things to do while a man is alive. But everyone round him was arranging as best they could for their future, buying land and building mortuary chambers; and at last he too did this.

His home was in Memphis, on the west bank of the Nile, south of Cairo. Along the edge of the desert, near by, a cemetery stretched out for miles. It had streets and broad avenues, and long rows of tombs, and some pyramids. Perneb bought a nice plot of land there, near a pyramid, and began to put up a fine building on it.

And then Perneb died.

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They had to complete the thing in a hurry. This was rather unfortunate. Some of the decorations couldn't be finished, some were left out altogether; and the walls of the south part were hastily put up any which way, in a cheap and inferior manner.

Still, it was a good tomb. A stately stone structure, fifty-odd feet long, forty wide, with inner chambers which were high-ceilinged and handsome and cool. There was one reserved especially for Perneb, which no one could enter, the door being



THEY LOOTED HIS HOME

merely a slit in a thick wall of stone. Perneb didn't need even this slit himself, being a spirit, but they wanted the smell of food to drift in to him when dinner was ready.

This walled-up chamber was fairly private, but not private enough for all purposes. It would do as a sitting room for the spirit, but not as a bedroom for sleep. So the builders dug down through the floor and through the building's foundations, and down and down into the solid rock under the ground. At a depth of about fifty feet they stopped, and hewed out a room deep in the rock, a secret subterranean chamber, which they furnished completely; and when Perneb died they lowered him down the shaft and laid him to rest in this room. Then they walled up the door of this hidden place, and they filled in the shaft, putting back all the stone which they had excavated, till it was completely blocked up and sealed.

Perneb took all the pains that he could to keep out visitors.

Instead of leaving his fortune to others, such as to his family or charities, Perneb left a good part of it to himself; that is to say, to his tomb. He arranged to endow it, to make sure he would get proper care. The salaries of several priests were provided for—it is not known how many, but one of Perneb's fellow-officials provided for eight—beside which there was food and drink, and maintenance and repairs, and incense, and so forth. He assigned the income from his fig farm and his onion farm and some other estates to keep the place going forever. He seemed safely fixed.

Generation and generation passed by and the tomb stood in peace. The priests conducted services in it, the farms sent in food. But gradually, as the cemetery grew, the old parts were neglected, and a time came when Perneb's tomb was no longer properly cared for. Thieves began to rummage round at night, to secure things of value. They broke into the sitting-room chamber and ran off with its ornaments. And as things grew worse they came back and actually dug down into that shaft; yes, dug out all the stone again, and got down into that deep secret bedroom. They hacked at Perneb's sarcophagus and jerked him out and stripped off his gold. They knocked down and broke his little dishes that stood on a shelf. They didn't wreck his home, but they looted it, and mussed it all up.

Perneb felt done for and shattered. Those

were rough days to live in. There were political fights going on in Memphis, law and order seemed dead. To the conservatives in the cemetery it must have seemed like the end of the world.

Then Memphis decayed. Men grew listless.

And then the sands drifted in . . .

In jungles it is the rank vegetation that swallows men's work. On seacoasts, the sea. In dry, barren countries it is the sands that sift in from the desert: that thick inland sea which forever is shifting its borders. The old plundered cemetery disappeared, buried from sight.

Perneb's spirit, which had been so unsettled, had a fresh chance to rest. His food and attendants were gone, but the robbers were too. He wasn't having as luxurious an after-life as he had arranged for, but at least it was quiet enough for a person to sleep.

As the years went on the city recovered. New kings ruled in Egypt. Also, new vulgar rich men sprang up who seized the old farms. These lords needed stone for their edifices. But the quarries were distant. They dug instead in the sand in the cemetery—there were fine old stones there. When they struck the roof of a tomb in their digging they lifted out its great blocks, and carried them off to use for new buildings. It was so much less work.

The earlier plunderers had been bad enough; but this seemed the end. Many a respectable old spirit was now left with no home at all. Perneb was in the greatest peril. Nevertheless, he escaped. A few blocks were taken from his roof, but then the diggers found other structures; and, in turning aside to strip these, they threw the debris and rubble on Perneb's. This saved him. It was not a dignified road to salvation, to be used as a dump; but Perneb accepted it as one of his many adventures.

A great mound of rubbish was left above him which stood there for ages, protecting him far more effectively than anything else could have done. Nobody suspected there was anything under the dump-heap. Century after century passed, while the vast cemetery still yielded stone to the lazy, degenerate generations that lived after Perneb's.

For he belonged to old times. Far older times than King Tut-ankh-amen's. Perneb was born over a thousand years before that usurper. Even in Perneb's day, the tombs weren't built as solidly as in his predecessors';

the masons used facings; but they weren't as cheap as those who came after.

Meanwhile in other countries, other groups of men grew up with fresh hearts, and created new beauties, building solidly and well—for a time. The marble temples of Greece, the Parthenon; the Colosseum of Rome; Roman aqueducts; strong Roman roads running over the world. Then these mighty men too had their climax, leaving lesser descendants, who strut about unabashed, even to-day, past their ruins. To the north there were newer men still, who built Gothic cathedrals. Their descendants are using their energies to fight immense wars. . . .

Along in the eighteen-hundred-and-forties, as we count the years, Perneb's spirit was again made uneasy. *He* didn't know what year it was; he looked at time in a large way, he was getting the geologic point of view and learning to count time in eras; but a new era seemed to be coming in, and Perneb was bothered. Not by his fellow-countrymen this time, but by a small group of foreigners, who came poking around in the graveyard, talking about archaeology.

In the squalid little villages round about, the successors of Memphis, these foreigners had noticed many houses built of blocks from the cemetery—blocks bearing inscriptions or relief which made each of them precious. The head foreigner, Lepsius, wrote a letter home:

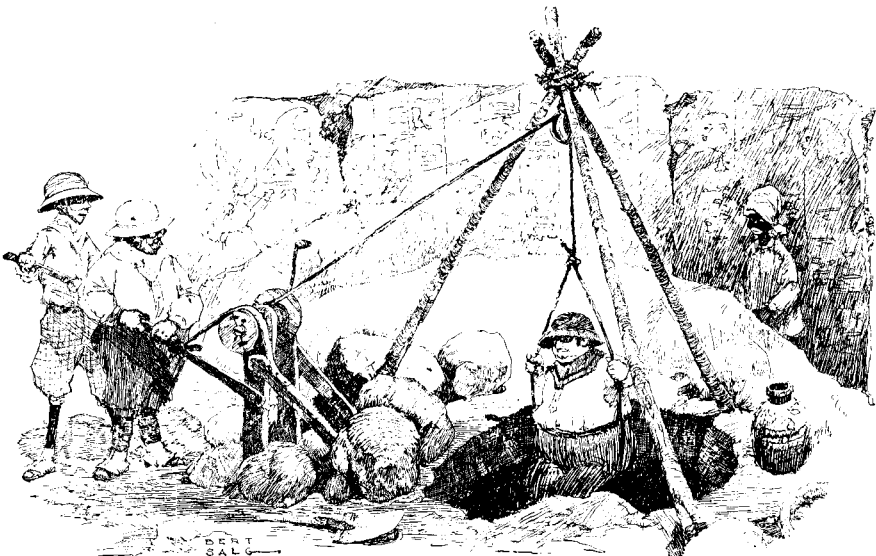
It is really revolting to see how long lines of camels from the neighboring villages come here daily, and march off again, loaded with building stone. . . . Yesterday a beautiful standing pillar, covered with inscriptions, which was just going to be sketched, was overturned by the robbers behind our backs. They do not seem to have succeeded in breaking it to pieces. The people here are so degenerate that their strength is quite insufficient, with all their assiduity, to destroy what their great predecessors have erected.

These wretched natives had never bothered Perneb, because of the dump. But the foreigners seemed to be especially attracted by dumps—they kept pecking at him inquisitively—they made a man nervous. Lepsius went to work, digging, and unearthed the tomb right next to Perneb's, cleared the sand from its chambers, and studied the scenes on its walls. However, he left without looking farther. Another escape!

In the next decade a foreigner named Mariette appeared with more diggers. They cleared several more tombs, near the dump-heap. But then they too stopped.

After this, strangely enough, things grew quiet once more. Half a century drifted by, peacefully. There was no more disturbance. The new archaeological danger appeared to have ended—or, at least, to have passed over Perneb, and gone on elsewhere.

But just as he had gone to sleep an American Expedition marched in.



THE AMERICAN EXPEDITION LET THEMSELVES DOWN AND DROPPED IN

The leader of this expedition fixed his eyes on the dump-heap. He ordered his men to attack it. Perneb listened inside. Thud, thud, came the sound of the picks and the spades, growing nearer. Perneb saw that this would be a close call for him; but he was used to close calls. He still had a chance of escaping, as so often before. But no! These Americans kept on. They found Perneb's roof. One of the blocks had been broken by the weight of the dump-heap. Through this opening, the American Expedition let themselves down and dropped in.

Perneb groaned.

They found the chamber half full of sand, and the walls in bad shape. The weight on top had buckled the south wall, which had partly collapsed. But there were the stately courtyard, and the rooms with colored figures and scenes, and the portrait of Perneb, standing in full dress at the door.

Those painted scenes told the Americans much about Perneb. One scene was a family-group picture, showing Perneb comfortably seated on cushions, and his family all crouching before him in the most subservient manner. A man's family seldom really crouch to him as much as he'd like, but there's no reason why he shouldn't have them painted that way for his pleasure. Perneb evidently had wished to give this tomb of his an ideal home atmosphere. He had even had himself painted very large and his wife and sons small in this picture. A modern psychologist would probably call that an effort to compensate; it would make him suspect that as a matter of fact Perneb was smaller than any of them. But anyhow, he knew how he wanted things to look in his tomb. It is a picture that any husband's subconscious mind would be soothed by.

Another scene showed him carefully inspecting the food men were bringing. His secretary stood by, with a piece of papyrus ready for notes. Two other accountants were near, with reports under their arms. The men of his day, it is said, were intensely fond of good living—they enjoyed dancing and yachting, for instance, and they delighted in banquets. Perneb hadn't expected to do much yachting apparently or to dance, after death, but he certainly had intended to continue the pleasure of eating. The pictures on the walls showed what a banquet he had planned for himself. There were long strings of figures, all walking toward his inner chamber, carrying baskets

and jars, and large joints of meat, and live birds, and bread, and traysful of figs, and many fruits and drinks, to keep Perneb busy. Some men would have preferred long strings of postmen, bringing them letters from friends; but Perneb was too self-sufficient to care about that. Other figures were bringing him calves to eat, and gazelles, and whole oxen. Groups of butchers were sharpening their knives, and carving, and saving the blood; a slave was taking the cover off an incense-burner to make the place fragrant. And in addition to this enormous commissary, all for one man, there were pictures of additional piles of food, which he could turn to when needed. One pile, for instance, had lettering above it, describing its contents: "one thousand portions of wild-fowl, one thousand portions of beef, one thousand loaves of bread, one thousand jars of beer."

As the Americans examined things, Perneb's spirit saw they admired his residence. But their admiration was so great that it led to something that filled him with horror. They asked the Egyptian Government to allow them to buy his home, and walk off with it! They wished to take it to America, a land that Perneb had not before heard of; so new a place it had only been discovered a few hundred years.

The government accepted the money, and Perneb lay stunned by this utterly unexpected move on the part of his tomb: that tomb which he had certainly thought would stay where he put it "forever." Bit by bit, the fine-grained limestone blocks were all taken apart. On the backs of them the Americans found the masons' marks, scrawled in red ochre; and finger-prints left by the workmen were still in the mortar. Under a heap of plaster in an inner wall, where a workman had thrown them, were the scattered shells of the nuts he had had for lunch, all those centuries back.

The blocks were packed into six hundred boxes, and loaded on camels. The procession started off across the desert. Imagine the feelings of Perneb! But suddenly he found that he, too, was being packed in a box. He had been sold by the Egyptians, and was going across the desert himself.

Two steamers were waiting at Suez. Perneb and his home went to sea. He sailed all the way through the Mediterranean, and on past Gibraltar, out into a wide, stormy ocean, beyond any land. They came at length to



WHEN VISITORS PEEK THROUGH THE SLIT THEY CAN SEE THIS STRANGER

the weird modern Memphis which men call New York.

In New York things were active. Learned experts carefully unpacked and treated the stones, to preserve them, so that the change to a strange climate should not make them decay. They worked on them a year. Then men began re-erecting the tomb in the great Metropolitan Museum. To get room, they had to break open one of the museum's long walls, and construct a special building large enough to house the old edifice: an edifice which was erected in the lifetime of Noah.

Biographies are interesting, but how short they are: they end with one's death. A necrography of all that comes afterward—that's the real story. Columbus's biography is most incomplete without his necrography. Napoleon's, too: he died as an exile, defeated and lonely; but after that, he left St. Helena in triumph for Paris, receiving more glory than ever, to rest in a shrine.

Perneb's tomb is now a shrine, in one sense. Visitors come at all hours. They walk in and stare at its massive dignity and the scenes on its walls. Perneb ought to be happy and thankful that he has come through so well. But it isn't all sunshine. He had planned to be exclusive, for one thing, and there's none of that now. Anybody at all can come right in without his permission. And another thing: as the statue of Perneb was destroyed by those early plunderers—the one that used to stand in that inner sitting room in great

state—the museum authorities have put in another man's statue instead. When visitors peer in through the slit, they can see him, this stranger, making himself entirely at home there, as though he owned the whole business. He is a broad-faced, flat-nosed looking fellow, no resemblance to Perneb; but there he stands in Perneb's nest, like a confounded cuckoo. And those long strings of figures on the walls now bring *him* Perneb's dinner—the joints of meat and live birds and beer and the trayfuls of figs.

And where then is Perneb? Well, he isn't in his tomb—he's outside. There was no other place for him. He is by his front door in a show case.

There isn't much of him—only part of his head and some bones. Those robbers who broke into his bedroom knocked him about pretty hard. But, never mind; at least there is some of him left—he's still there.

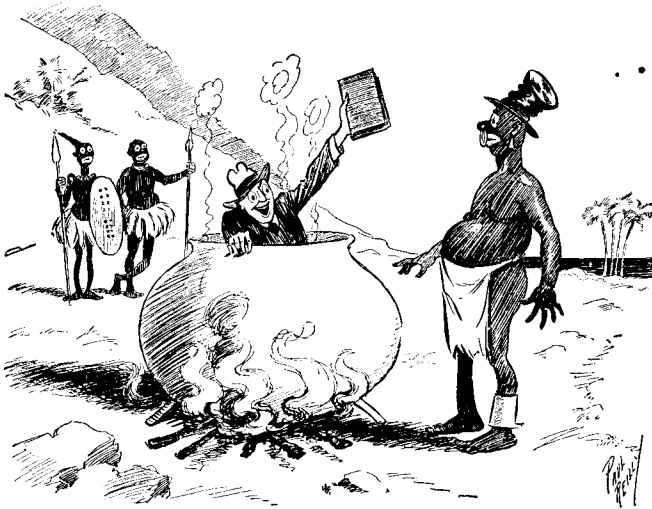
A museum attendant keeps Perneb company during the day. He leans over the case and sells pamphlets to a mixed lot of visitors. Perneb never sees a familiar face among them. Not a single old friend.

However, at night the museum is closed, and Perneb has a chance to be quiet. Even then there is the mental annoyance of that man in his sitting room, but that probably isn't the principal thing on his mind. He is wondering how long this place will last.

A man of Perneb's experience knows that great changes come unforeseen, and that the

life of the average museum is only a few hundred years. New York may last longer—it might last, say, a couple of thousand. But that's only chicken feed, to Perneb. What will come after that? Will he then be carried away to some other distant civilization? Suppose they took his tomb and the stranger and left him behind?

Well, that's all of this story. He hears us moderns talking resignedly about dust to dust, like a lot of ephemeral insects; but he isn't that kind. His outlook is not rosy—the museum is bound to fall to pieces, and he himself has more or less fallen to pieces already. Yet there he still sticks, what is left of him. He isn't through yet.



THE DYED-IN-THE-WOOL BOOK SALESMAN: "Can I interest you in a book of recipes?"

Bumped

A GROUP of British navvies was proceeding along a street, all convulsed with laughter. Every now and then they would stop and slap one another on the back. A policeman, seeing them, wished to share in the joke, and going up to them asked: "What's the game?"

This occasioned another outburst from the navvies, and then they explained:

"You know that 'igh buildin' at the end of the street? That was on fire. Not a blessed stair was left, an' old Bill 'e was on the top an' dancing abaht like a bantam. So I yells to 'im, 'Bill, jump, an' we'll catch yer in a blanket,' an' 'e jumped, but we 'adn't got no bloomin' blanket."

John Bull Abroad

A FRENCHMAN now in this country tells of the discovery in Paris of the most "nervy" of all tourists, an Englishman, who entered a well-known café, accompanied by two little girls, ordered a bottle of mineral water and three plates, and began to eat sandwiches, which he had brought with him in his pockets.

The manager, overcome by this outrage, approached the Briton, and said, "I should like to inform you that this is not a—"

"Who are you?" interrupted the Englishman.

"I am the manager."

"Oh, you are the manager, are you? That is good. I was just going to send for you. Why isn't the band playing?"