

The Changing World

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THE EMBALMER'S ART

DURING THE WAR I happened to spend two years in Africa and the Middle East. Our headquarters were in Cairo, Egypt, so we had numerous opportunities to visit many spots of great archeological interest. Among these were the Temple of Karnak at Luxor, the Valley of the Kings nearby, the Sakkara at Memphis, the Pyramids of Gizeh, and—most rewarding of all—the vast archeological treasure-house which is the Egyptian Museum of Cairo. Among the many well-preserved relics of a once living past housed in this Museum were various mummified bodies, each a mute attest to the efficiency of the ancient embalmers' art. I recall thinking at the time that the early Egyptian undertakers must have known a thing or two that we moderns haven't yet rediscovered.

Since returning to civilian life, however, I have been obliged to revise this estimate. I have been visiting a few secondary schools whose teachers regard modern education as a species of institutional degradation. In consequence of this experience, I am no longer impressed with the competence of the ancient morticians of the Nile.

In these traditional high schools I have encountered nearly as many mummified relics of a once living past as I saw in the exhibit cases of the Egyptian Museum. I have seen apathetic youngsters working listlessly with antiquarian materials which only a museum should stock. I have observed pupils studying a language every

bit as dead and nearly as useless as a mummy. I have peeked over their shoulders at notebook exercises in science which approximate the sterility of an ossified scarab. I have watched them struggle with a formal mathematics, for about eighty percent of little more functional value than a knowledge of hieroglyphs. I have heard them groan over the memorizing of moldy, quickly-to-be-forgotten dates—useful chiefly on radio quiz programs—but of no more worth than being able to name the site of the Obelisk of Thotmes III or the Temple of Hatshepsut. And who has not noted the antiquarian character of much that is commonly required in English courses in traditional high schools?

I find it completely impossible to believe that King Tutankhamen's undertaker could view these marvelously preserved bodies of long dead materials without taking off his hat to the teachers of the so-called subjects of general education in our traditional high schools. Not only would he take off his hat, he would be green with professional envy.

There is a place for embalmers in the modern community, but that place is assuredly not the American high school. Our pupils are going to live today and tomorrow—not yesterday—and they must be educated accordingly. This can be done only if the curriculum is kept thoroughly alive. Mummified materials can never turn the trick.



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