

RIDDLE OF THE MUMMY NOBODY WANTS

No name, no sex, no admirers

BY OUR OWN REPORTER

What is it which has no birth or death certificate, cannot be sold or given away, cannot be burned because it is a human body, yet cannot be buried for the lack of a certificate of death? The answer lies in the cellars of Parliament House, Edinburgh, in a dilapidated wooden coffin—a 3000-year-old Egyptian mummy, property of the Faculty of Advocates.

Even the legal brains which work above its head cannot solve the disposal problem, and the mummy has lain for years in a gloomy, dusty, neglected corner of the cellars, disturbed in its rest only once in recent times—by an expert from the Royal Scottish Museum.

The mummy was gifted to the Faculty in the eighteenth century by an antiquarian who had travelled in Egypt. On his return he thought the ancient bandaged body would provide a fine corner-piece in one of the stately Faculty rooms, and his offer was accepted—whether gratefully or politely is not recorded. In due course the mummy was shifted around until finally it was thought practical to remove it from the polished corridors into a less conspicuous place.

LEFT IN DARK CORNER

The National Library—who had fallen heir to the cellars beneath Parliament Buildings—were prevailed on to store it. So the wooden coffin, now rather shabby, was carried off to the depths and ensconced in a far, dark corner. There it accumulated dust and gradually deteriorated, the brown linen bandages taking on a stained, dirty and tattered appearance, the wooden coffin fast losing any translatable hieroglyphics on its exterior.

No doubt the occasional pilgrimage to sightsee the cellars brought comments about "our mummy" from the guides, and the visitors would mumble something about "And very nice, too," but the ancient Egyptian lay, lonely and forgotten, for many years.

Rather lacking in historical data, it must be assumed that one day an official decided to start negotiations for the removal of the mummy. The Faculty made tentative inquiries: "For sale, Egyptian mummy, needs some renovation, in good archaeological order."

By this time an interested party had removed some of the bandages surrounding the head and, for reasons unknown had exposed a portion of the scalp. Having satisfied his (or her) curiosity, the bandage was left off and the mummy was left sporting a hole in its head. This prompted a National Library official to announce that it was a female body—"Women usually talk through a hole in their head, anyway," he quipped. But a Royal Scottish Museum expert clarified the situation by stating that as the embellishments and writings were obliterated on the wooden coffin it was impossible to tell which sex it was.

NO ONE INTERESTED

The attempted sale was a disappointment. No one was interested in buying a mummy. It was generously offered free to any mummy-fancier — again without success. The Corporation Cleansing Department came into the

story at this point with a refusal to accept the mummy as rubbish, litter or leavings. Officially it was a human body—at least that was the explanation offered me when I inquired—and they could not, or would not, touch it.

So the sad tale dragged on until the next inspiration came from the legal brains. This proposal was to bury the mummified body. As no death certificate was forthcoming, however—the eighteenth century donor omitted to provide one, presumably—it could not legally be buried.

Here the puzzle deepened. The mummy had no birth certificate, either—and, in our modern times an even more heinous crime, no National Insurance card. In other words, it did not exist.

But no one was interested in the mummy's career by that time. It was just a nuisance, not even a decorative one—far from it, for as years passed by it became more and more bedraggled and less and less presentable. The Faculty had more remunerative legal twists to straighten out, so the gloomy depths of the mummy's corner were left unplumbed.

A sudden spark of inspiration that it might be quietly slipped into a furnace was quickly quenched. It was learned that an American museum had run up against an extra religious boiler-man and had had to take their mummy to court, with little satisfaction.

There, for the time being, the story ends. The mummy without a name, without a sex, virtually without a custodian, continues to accumulate cobwebs and dust in Parliament House.

I understand that a certain gentleman in Glasgow University collects such cadavers for research and study. Perhaps he might be the man to solve the problem. If he was interested, it is fairly certain that the Faculty could find a way to transfer possession to him.