

# Se-Osiris and the Sealed Letter

Many tales were told in Ancient Egypt of Setna, the son of Rameses the Great, who was the wisest of all scribes, and who found and read the Book of Thoth. And tales were told also of his son Se-Osiris - 'the Gift of Osiris' - the wonderful child who, at the age of twelve, was the greatest magician Egypt had ever known.

His most famous exploit began on a day when Rameses sat in the great hall of his palace at Thebes with his princes and nobles about him, and the Grand Vizier came bustling in with a look of shocked surprise on his face and prostrated himself before Rameses, crying: 'Life, health, strength be with you, Oh Pharaoh! There has come to your court a rascally Ethiopian seven feet tall who demands speech with you, saying that he is here to prove that the magic of Egypt is nothing compared with the magic of Ethiopia.'

'...you will be a jest on the lips of all men.'

'Bid him enter, commanded Pharaoh, and presently a huge Ethiopian strode into his presence, bowed to the ground, and said: 'King of Egypt, I have brought here in my hand a sealed letter to see if any of your priests or scribes or magicians can read what is written in it without breaking the seal. And if none of them can read it, I will go back to Ethiopia and tell my king and all his people how weak is the magic of the Egyptians, and you will be a jest on the lips of all men.'

Pharaoh was both angry and troubled when he heard this, and he sent in haste for his wise son Setna and told him what had chanced. Setna also was dismayed, but he said, 'O Pharaoh, my father - life, health, strength be to you! - bid this barbarian go and take his rest; let him eat, drink and sleep in the Royal Guest-House until your court is assembled next, when I will bring a magician who will show that we who practice the magic art in Egypt are a match for anyone from the lands beyond Kush.'

'Be it so.' answered Pharaoh, and the Ethiopian was led away to the hospitable entertainment of the Royal Guest-House.

But although he had spoken so confidently, Setna was troubled. Though he had read the Book of Thoth and was the wisest man in Egypt and the most skilled magician, he could not read a letter that was written on a papyrus scroll that was rolled up and sealed without breaking the seal and unrolling the letter.

When he returned to his palace he lay down on his couch to think; and he looked so pale and troubled that his wife came to him fearing that he was ill. With her came their son Se-Osiris, and when Setna had told all his trouble the woman burst into tears but the boy began to laugh gleefully.

'My son,' said Setna with a puzzled look, 'why do you laugh when I tell you of that which has caused so much concern to Pharaoh and such sorrow to me your father?'

'I laugh,' answered Se-Osiris, 'because your trouble is no trouble at all but a gift of the gods to bring great glory to Egypt and humble the proud overbearing King of Ethiopia and his wizards. Cease from sorrow. I will read the sealed letter.'

Setna sprang up and looked searchingly at the small boy who stood so confidently before him.

'You have great powers of magic, I know, my son,' he said. 'But how can I be certain that when we stand before Pharaoh you can indeed read that which is written on a sealed roll of papyrus?'

'Go to your room where your writings are kept,' answered Se-Osiris. 'Choose any papyrus that you like, seal it if it is not sealed already, and I will read it to you without even taking it out of your hand.'

Setna sprang up and fetched a papyrus from his study. And Se-Osiris read what was written on it while his father held it still rolled and sealed with wax.

Next day Pharaoh Rameses summoned his court once more. When all were assembled he bade the Grand Vizier bring the Ethiopian before him with his sealed letter.

Proudly the huge wizard strode into the hall and with hardly a nod to the greatest of all the Pharaohs, he held up the roll of papyrus and cried: 'King of Egypt, let your magicians read what is written in this sealed letter - or else admit that the magic of Ethiopia is greater than the magic of Egypt!'

'Setna, my son,' said Pharaoh, 'You are the greatest magician in Egypt: be pleased to answer this insolent barbarian who, if he were not a messenger, I would have beaten with rods.'

'...my son Se-Osiris, at the age of twelve, shall read his letter.'

'O Pharaoh - life, health, strength be to you!' answered Setna. 'Such a dog as this, who has no reverence for the good god Pharaoh Rameses Usima-res, is not worthy to be pitted against a magician full of years and wisdom. But my son Se-Osiris who, at the age of twelve, is already skilled enough in the secret lore to stand against him, shall read his letter.'

There was a murmur throughout the court and a little ripple of laughter as the small boy stepped forward on one side of Pharaoh's throne and came down to the gigantic Ethiopian who stood scowling at the foot of the dais with the sealed letter held up in his right hand.

'O Pharaoh my grandfather - life, health, strength be to you!' said Se-Osiris in a clear voice that all could hear. 'The sealed roll in this wizard's hand tells the tale of an insult wrought upon one who held the scourge and the crook, one who wore the Double Crown - a Pharaoh of Egypt who sat where you sit five hundred years ago.'

'It tells of a king who ruled as today's king rules over the Ethiopians. He sat one day in his marble summer-house beside the river Nile far away to the south. Between the pillars behind him was a trellis of ebony, and it was grown so thickly with sweet-smelling creepers that it seemed like a thick hedge. In the shade behind it his greatest magicians sat talking together, and the King, listening idly to their words, heard the first say, "In arms we may not be able to stand against Egypt, but in magic we are certainly the masters of Pharaoh our overlord and all his people. Why, even I could bring a great darkness over all the land of Egypt that would last for three days."

"True," said another magician. "I, for example, could bring a blight upon Egypt that would destroy its crops for one season."

'So they went on, each telling of the plague that he could bring upon Egypt, until at last the chief magicians of Ethiopia said, "As for this dog of a Pharaoh who calls himself our overlord, I could bring him here by magic and cause him to be beaten with five hundred strokes of the rod before all the people. Yes, I could do this and carry him back to his palace in Egypt all in the space of five hours."

'When the King heard this, he summoned the magicians before him, and said to the chief of them, "Son of Tnahsit, I have heard your words. If you do to the Pharaoh of Egypt even as you have said, I will give you a greater reward than any magician has ever received."

'The Son of Tnahsit bowed before him and at once set about his spells. He fashioned a litter and four bearers in wax; he chanted words of power over them and he breathed the breath of life into them, and he bade them hasten to Egypt and bring Pharaoh to Ethiopia during the dark hours of that night.'

When he had read so far in the sealed letter, Se-Osiris turned 'to the Ethiopian and said, 'These words that I have read, are they not written in the sealed roll that you hold in your hands? Answer truly, or may Amen-Ra blast you where you stand!'

The Ethiopian bowed before Se-Osiris and gasped, 'These words are indeed written there, my lord.'

So Se-Osiris continued reading from the scaled letter: 'All happened as the Son of Tnahsit had promised. Pharaoh was lifted from his royal bed at Thebes, carried to Ethiopia, beaten in public by the King's servants with five hundred strokes, and taken back again all in the space of five hours. The next morning he woke in great pain, and the marks of the rods on his back told him that it had been no dream.

'So Pharaoh summoned his court and called his magicians before him and told them of the shame that had been wrought.

"I desire vengeance upon the King of, Ethiopia," he ended, "and vengeance upon his magicians. Moreover I wish the land of Egypt and the divine person of her Pharaoh to be protected against these barbarians and their evil and insulting magic."

'Then Pharaoh's Chief Magician, the Kherheb of Egypt, bowed low before him, crying, "O Pharaoh - life, health, strength be to you! - it cannot be that this wickedness of the sons of Set who dwell in Nubia and Ethiopia shall continue against your divine majesty. Tonight I shall seek counsel of Thoth, the god of wisdom and magic, in his great temple; and tomorrow be sure, I shall have a charm that will bring both vengeance and protection."

'So the Kherheb slept in the temple that night, and Thoth with the ibis-head came and stood over his bed and instructed him in all that was to be done for the honor of Egypt and the protection of the good god her Pharaoh.

'No Ethiopian litter-bearers had visited the royal palace that night; but the night after they came again to carry Pharaoh into Ethiopia to be beaten before all the barbarians. But the magic which Thoth the wise had taught to the Kherheb of Egypt was so strong that their magic

was in vain. They could but stand and gibber in the royal bed-chamber: they could not so much as raise their arms to lift Pharaoh on to the magic litter. And presently they faded away and were no more seen in Egypt.

'But next morning, when the Kherheb heard of what had chanced in Pharaoh's bed-chamber he rejoiced exceedingly. And straightway he set about preparing a magic litter of his own, with four bearers who that night carried the King of Ethiopia into the great square before the Temple of Amen-Ra at Thebes and had him beaten with five hundred strokes of the rod before all the people there assembled.

'In the morning the King of Ethiopia woke in his palace sore and troubled. At once he sent for the Son of Tnahsit and bade him find a magic to protect him against the magicians of Egypt and bring vengeance upon Pharaoh.

'But the Son of Tnahsit could do nothing. Three times was the King of Ethiopia carried to Thebes and beaten before all the people. Then he humbled himself before the glory of the good god Pharaoh and was beaten no more. But he caused the Son of Tnahsit to be cast out of his palace with many curses, saying, "In life and in death may you wander the earth until you bring vengeance upon Egypt, upon her Pharaoh and upon her magicians - and until you prove that there is a magic greater than the magic of the magicians of Khem."

Then Se-Osiris pointed to the sealed letter, saying, 'Ethiopian, these words which I have read, are they not written in the roll of papyrus which you hold, still sealed, in your hands? Answer truly, or may Amen-Ra blast you where you stand.'

The Ethiopian fell upon his knees and cried, 'These words are indeed written there, mighty magician!'

Then the seal was broken and the letter was read out loud before Pharaoh and all his court. And the words of the letter were the words Se-Osiris the wonderful child had read: only that,

in reading, he had paid due honor to Pharaoh, and had spoken of the barbarians of Ethiopia in such terms as were proper.

After this the Ethiopian said humbly, 'Mighty Pharaoh, lord of Egypt and overlord of Ethiopia, may I go hence in peace?'

But Se-Osiris spoke quickly, saying, 'Oh Pharaoh - life, health, strength be to you! - this wizard who kneels before you has within him the Ba of the Son of Tnahsit. Yes, he is the wizard who wrought such shame upon him who sat upon the throne of the Two Lands and held the scourge and the crook five hundred years ago. Is it not right that the battle between the magic of Ethiopia and the magic of Egypt should be fought out to the finish here and now before your eyes?'

'Then to the giant Ethiopian he cried, 'Black dog of the south, if you have magic to match against the magic of Egypt, show it now!'

Pharaoh Rameses the Great nodded his head and touched his grandson the wonderful child Se-Osiris with his sceptre, saying, 'Kherheb of today, finish that which the Kherheb of five centuries ago began.' Then to the giant Ethiopian he cried, 'Black dog of the south, if you have magic to match against the magic of Egypt, show it now!'

The Ethiopian laughed grimly. 'White dog of the north!' he cried. 'I defy you! I have such magic at my command that presently Seth will take you as his own, and Apep the Devourer of Souls will soon be feasting upon the Ba of that which was once a Pharaoh of Egypt. Behold!'

The Ethiopian waved the sealed roll as if it had been a wand, and pointed to the floor in front of Pharaoh, muttering a great word of power.

At once there reared up a mighty serpent hissing loudly, its forked tongue flickering evilly and its poisoned fangs bared to kill.

Pharaoh cowered back with a cry. But Se-Osiris laughed merrily, and as he raised his hand the giant cobra dwindled into a little white worm which he picked up between his thumb and first finger and cast out of the window.

The Ethiopian uttered a howl of rage and waved his arms, spitting curses mingled with incantations as he did. At once a cloud of darkness descended upon the great hall, as black as midnight in a tomb and as dense as the smoke of burning bodies.

But Se-Osiris laughed again. Then he took the darkness in his hands, crushed it together until it was no bigger than a ball such as children make of the dark clay beside the Nile, and tossed it out of the window.

A third time the Ethiopian waved his arms, and this time he yelled as if the jaws of Apep had already closed upon him. At once a great sheet of fierce flame leapt up from the floor and moved forward as if to consume Pharaoh and all who stood beside him on the royal dais.

But Se-Osiris laughed for the third time. Then he blew upon the sheet of flame, and it drew back and wrapped itself about the Ethiopian. There was one great cry, and then the flame dwindled and went out like a candle when all the wax is burnt away.

On the floor in front of Pharaoh lay only a little pile of ash; and Se-Osiris said quietly, 'Farewell to the Son of Tnahsit! May his Ba dwell elsewhere for ever, and come not again to trouble Egypt or insult the good god Pharaoh - life, health, strength be to him!'