

The Book of Thoth

Rameses II

Rameses the Great, Pharaoh of Egypt, had a son called Setna who was learned in all the ancient writings, and a magician of note. While the other princes spent their days in hunting or in leading their father's armies to guard the distant parts of his empire, Setna was never so happy as when left alone to study.

Not only could he read even the most ancient hieroglyphic writings on the temple walls, but he was a scribe who could write quickly and easily all the many hundreds of signs that go to make up the ancient Egyptian language. Also, he was a magician whom none could surpass: for he had learned his art from the most secret of the ancient writings which even the priests of Amen-Re, of Ptah and Thoth, could not read.

One day, as he pored over the ancient books written on the two sides of long rolls of papyrus, he came upon the story of another Pharaoh's son several hundred years earlier who had been as great a scribe and as wise a magician as he greater and wiser, indeed, for Nefrekeptah had read the Book of Thoth by which a man might enchant both heaven and earth, and know the language of the birds and beasts.

When Setna read further that the Book of Thoth had been buried with Nefrekeptah in his royal tomb at Memphis, nothing would content him until he had found it and learned all his wisdom.

So he sought out his brother Anherru and said to him, 'Help me to find the Book of Thoth. For without it life has no longer any meaning for me.'

'I will go with you and stand by your side through all dangers,' answered Anherru.

The two brothers set out for Memphis, and it was not hard for them to find the tomb of Nefrekeptah the son of Amen-hotep, the first great Pharaoh of that name, who had reigned three hundred years before their day.

When Setna had made his way into the tomb, to the central chamber where Nefrekeptah was laid to rest, he found the body of the prince lying wrapped in its linen bands, still and awful in death. But beside it on the stone sarcophagus sat two ghostly figures, the Kas, or doubles, of a beautiful young woman and a boy - and between them, on the dead breast of Nefrekeptah lay the Book of Thoth.

Setna bowed reverently to the two Kas, and said, 'May Osiris have you in his keeping, dead son of a dead Pharaoh, Nefrekeptah the great scribe; and you also, who ever you be, whose Kas sit here beside him. Know that I am Setna, the priest of Ptah, son of Rameses the greatest Pharaoh of all - and I come for the Book of Thoth which was yours in your days on earth. I beg you to let me take it in peace - for if not I have the power to take it by force or magic.'

"I come for the Book of Thoth which was yours in your days on earth. I beg you to let me take it in peace."

Then said the Ka of the woman, 'Do not take the Book of Thoth, Setna, son of today's Pharaoh. It will bring you trouble even as it brought trouble upon Nefrekeptah who lies here, and upon me, Ahura his wife, whose body lies at Koptos on the edge of Eastern Thebes together with that of Merab our son - whose Kas you see before you, dwelling with the husband and father whom we loved so dearly. Listen to my tale, and beware!:

'Nefrekeptah and I were the children of the Pharaoh Amen-hotep and, according to the custom, we became husband and wife, and this son Merab was born to us. Nefrekeptah cared above all things for the wisdom of the ancients and for the magic that is to be learned from all

that is carved on the temple walls, and within the tombs and pyramids of long-dead kings and priests in Saqqara, the city of the dead that is all about us here on the edge of Memphis.

'One day as he was studying what is carved on the walls in one of the most ancient shrines of the gods, he heard a priest laugh mockingly and say, "All that you read there is but worthless. I could tell you where lies the Book of Thoth, which the god of wisdom wrote with his own hand. When you have read its first page you will be able to enchant the heaven and the earth, the abyss, the mountains and the sea; and you shall know what the birds and the beasts and the reptiles are saying. And when you have read the second page your eyes will behold all the secrets of the gods themselves, and read all that is hidden in the stars."

'Then said Nefrekeptah to the priest, "By the life of Pharaoh, tell me what you would have me do for you, and I will do it - if only you will tell me where the Book of Thoth is."

'And the priest answered, "If you would learn where it lies, you must first give me a hundred bars of silver for my funeral, and issue orders that when I die my body shall be buried like that of a great king."

"All around the iron box are twisted snakes and scorpions, and it is guarded by a serpent who cannot be slain."

'Nefrekeptah did all that the priest asked; and when he had received the bars of silver, he said, "The Book of Thoth lies beneath the middle of the Nile at Koptos, in an iron box. In the iron box is a box of bronze; in the bronze box is a sycamore box; in the sycamore box is an ivory and ebony box; in the ivory and ebony box is a silver box; in the silver box is a golden box - and in that lies the Book of Thoth. All around the iron box are twisted snakes and scorpions, and it is guarded by a serpent who cannot be slain."

'Nefrekeptah was beside himself with joy. He hastened home from the shrine and told me all that he had learned. But I feared lest evil should come of it, and said to him, "Do not go to Koptos to seek this book, for I know that it will bring great sorrow to you and to those you love."

I tried in vain to hold Nefrekeptah back, but he shook me off and went to Pharaoh, our royal father, and told him what he had learned from the priest.

'Then said Pharaoh, "What is it that you desire?" And Nefrekeptah answered, "Bid your servants make ready the Royal Boat, for I would sail south to Koptos with Ahura my wife and our son Merab to seek this book without delay."

'All was done as he wished, and we sailed up the Nile until we came to Koptos. And there the priests and priestesses of Isis came to welcome us and led us up to the Temple of Isis and Horus. Nefrekeptah made a great sacrifice of an ox, a goose and some wine, and we feasted with the priests and their wives in a fine house looking out upon the river.

'But on the morning of the fifth day, leaving me and Merab to watch from the window of the house, Nefrekeptah went down to the river and made a great enchantment.

'First he created a magic cabin that was full of men and tackle. He cast a spell on it, giving life and breath to the men, and he sank the magic cabin into the river. Then he filled the Royal Boat with sand and put out into the middle of the Nile until he came to the place below which the magic cabin lay. And he spoke words of power, and cried, "Workmen, workmen, work for me even where lies the Book of Thoth!" They toiled without ceasing by day and by night, and on the third day they reached the place where the Book lay.

Then Nefrekeptah cast out the sand and they raised the Book on it until it stood upon a shoal above the level of the river.

'And behold all about the iron box, below it and above it, snakes and scorpions twined. And the serpent that could not die was twined about the box itself. Nefrekeptah cried to the snakes and scorpions a loud and terrible cry - and at his words of magic they became still, nor could one of them move.

'Then Nefrekeptah walked unharmed among the snakes and scorpions until he came to where the serpent that could not die lay curled around the box of iron. The serpent reared itself up for battle, since no charm could work on it, and Nefrekeptah drew his sword and rushing upon it, smote off its head at a single blow. But at once the head and the body sprang together, and the serpent that could not die was whole again and ready for the fray. Once more Nefrekeptah smote off its head, and this time he cast it far away into the river. But at once the head returned to the body, and was joined to the neck, and the serpent that could not die was ready for its next battle.

'Nefrekeptah saw that the serpent could not be slain, but must be overcome by cunning. So once more he struck off its head. But before head and body could come together he put sand on each part so that when they tried to join they could not do so as there was sand between them - and the serpent that could not die lay helpless in two pieces.

'Then Nefrekeptah went to where the iron box lay on the shoal in the river; and the snakes and scorpions watched him; and the head of the serpent that could not die watched him also: but none of them could harm him.

'He opened the iron box and found in it a bronze box; he opened the bronze box and found in it a box of sycamore wood; he opened that and found a box of ivory and ebony, and in that a box of silver, and at the last a box of gold. And when he had opened the golden box he found in it the Book of Thoth. He opened the Book and read the first page - and at once he had power over the heavens and the earth, the abyss, the mountains and the sea; he knew what the birds and the beasts and the fishes were saying. He read the next page of spells, and saw the sun shining in the sky, the moon and the stars, and knew their secrets - and he saw also the gods themselves who are hidden from mortal sight.

'Then, rejoicing that the priest's words had proved true, and the Book of Thoth was his, he cast a spell upon the magic men, saying, "Workmen, workmen, work for me and take me back to the place from which I came!" They brought him back to Koptos where I sat waiting for him,

taking neither food nor drink in my anxiety, but sitting stark and still like one who is gone to the grave.

'When Nefrekeptah came to me, he held out the Book of Thoth and I took it in my hands. And when I read the first page I also had power over the heavens and the earth, the abyss, the mountains and the sea; and I also knew what the birds, the beasts and the fishes were saying. And when I read the second page I saw the sun, the moon and the stars with all the gods, and knew their secrets even as he did.

'Then Nefrekeptah took a clean piece of papyrus and wrote on it all the spells from the Book of Thoth. He took a cup of beer and washed off the words into it and drank it so that the knowledge of the spells entered into his being. But I, who cannot write, do not remember all that is written in the Book of Thoth - for the spells which I had read in it were many and hard.

"...a sudden power seemed to seize our little boy Merab so that he was drawn into the river & sank out of sight."

'After this we entered the Royal Boat and set sail for Memphis. But scarcely had we begun to move, when a sudden power seemed to seize our little boy Merab so that he was drawn into the river and sank out of sight. Seizing the Book of Thoth, Nefrekeptah read from it the necessary spell, and at once the body of Merab rose to the surface of the river and we lifted it on board. But not all the magic in the Book, not that of any magician in Egypt, could bring Merab back to life. Nonetheless Nefrekeptah was able to make his Ka speak to us and tell us what had caused his death. And the Ka of Merab said, "Thoth the great god found that his Book had been taken, and he hastened before Amen-Re, saying, 'Nefrekeptah, son of Pharaoh Amen-hotep, has found my magic box and slain its guards and taken my Book with all the magic that is in it.' And Re replied to him, 'Deal with Nefrekeptah and all that is his as it seems good to you: I send out my power to work sorrow and bring a punishment upon him and upon his wife and child.' And that power from Re, passing through the will of Thoth, drew me into the river and drowned me."

'Then we made great lamentation, for our hearts were well nigh broken at the death of Merab. We put back to shore at Koptos, and there his body was embalmed and laid in a tomb as befitted him.

'When the rites of burial and the lamentations for the dead were ended, Nefrekeptah said to me, "Let us now sail with all haste down to Memphis to tell our father the Pharaoh what has chanced. For his heart will be heavy at the death of Merab. Yet he will rejoice that I have the Book of Thoth."

'So we set sail once more in the Royal Boat. But when it came to the place where Merab had fallen into the water, the power of Re came upon me also and I walked out of the cabin and fell into the river and was drowned. And when Nefrekeptah by his magic arts had raised my body out of the river, and my Ka had told him all, he turned back to Koptos and had my body embalmed and laid in the tomb beside Merab.

'Then he set out once more in bitter sorrow for Memphis. But when it reached that city, and Pharaoh came aboard the Royal Boat, it was to find Nefrekeptah lying dead in the cabin with the Book of Thoth bound upon his breast. So there was mourning throughout all the land of Egypt, and Nefrekeptah was buried with all the rites and honors due to the son of Pharaoh in this tomb where he now lies, and where my Ka and the Ka of Merab come to watch over him.

'And now I have told you all the woe that has befallen us because we took and read the Book of Thoth - the book which you ask us to give up. It is not yours, you have no claim to it, indeed for the sake of it we gave up our lives on earth.'

When Setna had listened to all the tale told by the Ka of Ahura, he was filled with awe. But nevertheless the desire to have the Book of Thoth was so strong upon him that he said, 'Give me that which lies upon the dead breast of Nefrekeptah, or I will take it by force.'

Then the Kas of Ahura and Merab drew away as if in fear of Setna the great magician. But the Ka of Nefrekeptah arose from out of his body and stepped towards him, saying, 'Setna, if after hearing all the tale which Ahura my wife has told you, yet you will take no warning, then the Book of Thoth must be yours. But first you must win it from me, if your skill is great enough, by playing a game of draughts with me - a game of fifty-two points. Dare you do this?'

And Setna answered, 'I am ready to play.'

So the board was set between them, and the game began. And Nefrekeptah won the first game from Setna, and put his spell upon him so that he sank into the ground to above the ankles. And when he won the second game, Setna sank to his waist in the ground. Once more they played and when Nefrekeptah won Setna sank in the ground until only his head was visible. But he cried out to his brother who stood outside the tomb: 'Anherru! Make haste! Run to Pharaoh and beg of him the great Amulet of Ptah, for by it only can I be saved, if you set it upon my head before the last game is played and lost.'

So Anherru sped down the steep road from Saqqara to where Pharaoh sat in his palace at Memphis. And when he heard all, he fastened into the Temple of Ptah, took the great Amulet from its place in the sanctuary, and gave it to Anherru, saying: 'Go with all speed, my son, and rescue your brother Setna from this evil contest with the dead.'

Back to the tomb sped Anherru, and down through the passages to the tomb-chamber where the Ka of Nefrekeptah still played at draughts with Setna. And as he entered, Setna made his last move, and Nefrekeptah reached out his hand with a cry of triumph to make the final move that should win the game and sink Setna out of sight beneath the ground for ever.

But before Nefrekeptah could move the piece, Anherru leapt forward and placed the Amulet of Ptah on Setna's head. And at its touch Setna sprang out of the ground, snatched the Book of Thoth from Nefrekeptah's body and fled with Anherru from the tomb.

As they went they heard the Ka of Ahura cry, 'Alas, all power is gone from him who lies in this tomb.'

But the Ka of Nefrekeptah answered, 'Be not sad: I will make Setna bring back the Book of Thoth, and come as a suppliant to my tomb with a forked stick in his hand and a fire-pan on his head.'

Then Setna and Anherru were outside, and at once the tomb closed behind them and seemed as if it had never been opened.

When Setna stood before his father the great Pharaoh and told him all that had happened, and gave him the Amulet of Ptah, Rameses said, 'My son, I counsel you to take back the Book of Thoth to the tomb of Nefrekeptah like a wise and prudent man. For otherwise be sure that he will bring sorrow and evil upon you, and at the last you will be forced to carry it back as "a suppliant with a forked stick in your hand and a fire-pan on your head."

But Setna would not listen to such advice. Instead, he returned to his own dwelling and spent all his time reading the Book of Thoth and studying all the spells contained in it. And often he would carry it into the Temple of Ptah and read from it to those who sought his wisdom.

"One day as he sat the temple he saw a maiden, more beautiful than any he had ever seen with 52 girls in attendance."

One day as he sat in a shady colonnade of the temple he saw a maiden, more beautiful than any he had ever seen, entering the temple with fifty-two girls in attendance on her. Setna gazed fascinated at this lovely creature with her golden girdle and head-dress of gold and colored jewels, who knelt to make her offerings before the statue of Ptah. Soon he learned that she was called Tabubua, and was the daughter of the high priest of the cat goddess Bastet from the city of Bubastis to the north of Memphis - Bastet who was the bride of the god Ptah of Memphis.

As soon as Setna beheld Tabubua it seemed as if Hathor the goddess of love had cast a spell over him. He forgot all else, even the Book of Thoth, and desired only to win her. And it did not seem as if his suit would be in vain, for when he sent a message to her, she replied that if he wished to seek her he was free to do so - provided he came secretly to her palace in the desert outside Bubastis.

Setna made his way thither in haste, and found a pylon tower in a great garden with a high wall round about it. There Tabubua welcomed him with sweet words and looks, led him to her chamber in the pylon and served him with wine in a golden cup.

When he spoke to her of his love, she answered, 'Be joyful, my sweet lord, for I am destined to be your bride. But remember that I am no common woman but the child of Bastet the Beautiful - and I cannot endure a rival. So before we are wed write me a scroll of divorcement against your present wife; and write also that you give your children to me to be slain and thrown down to the cats of Bastet - for I cannot endure that they shall live and perhaps plot evil against our children.'

'Be it as you wish!' cried Setna. And straightway he took his brush and wrote that Tabubua might cast his wife out to starve and slay his children to feed the sacred cats of Bastet. And when he had done this, she handed him the cup once more and stood before him in all her loveliness, singing a bridal hymn. Presently terrible cries came floating up to the high window of the pylon - the dying cries of his children, for he recognized each voice as it called to him in agony and then was still.

But Setna drained the golden cup and turned to Tabubua, saying, 'My wife is a beggar and my children lie dead at the pylon foot, I have nothing left in the world but you - and I would give all again for you. Come to me, my love!'

Then Tabubua came towards him with outstretched arms, more lovely and desirable than Hathor herself. With a cry of ecstasy Setna caught her to him - and as he did so, on a sudden she changed and faded until his arms held a hideous, withered corpse. Setna cried aloud in

terror, and as he did so the darkness swirled around him, the pylon seemed to crumble away, and when he regained his senses he found himself lying naked in the desert beside the road that led from Bubastis to Memphis.

The passersby on the road mocked at Setna. But one kinder than the rest threw him an old cloak, and with this about him he came back to Memphis like a beggar.

When he reached his own dwelling place and found his wife and children there alive and well, he had but one thought and that was to return the Book of Thoth to Nefrekeptah.

'If Tabubua and all her sorceries were but a dream,' he exclaimed, 'they show me in what terrible danger I stand. For if such another spell is cast upon me, next time it will prove to be no dream.'

So, with the Book of Thoth in his hands, he went before Pharaoh his father and told him what had happened. And Rameses the Great said to him, 'Setna, what I warned you of has come to pass. You would have done better to obey my wishes sooner. Nefrekeptah will certainly kill you if you do not take back the Book of Thoth to where you found it. Therefore go to the tomb as a suppliant, carrying a forked stick in your hand and a fire-pan on your head.'

Setna did as Pharaoh advised. When he came to the tomb and spoke the spell, it opened to him as before, and he went down to the tomb-chamber and found Nefrekeptah lying in his sarcophagus with the Kas of Ahura and Merab sitting on either side. And the Ka of Ahura said, 'Truly it is Ptah, the great god, who has saved you and made it possible for you to return here as a suppliant.'

Then the Ka of Nefrekeptah rose from the body and laughed, saying, 'I told you that you would return as a suppliant, bringing the Book of Thoth. Place it now upon my body where it lay these many years. But do not think that you are yet free of my vengeance. Unless you perform that which I bid you, the dream of Tabubua will be turned into reality.'

Then said Setna, bowing low, 'Nefrekeptah, master of magic, tell me what I may do to turn away your just vengeance. If it be such as a man may perform, I will do it for you.'

'I ask only a little thing,' answered the Ka of Nefrekeptah. 'You know that while my body lies here for you to see, the bodies of Ahura and Merab rest in their tomb at Koptos.

Bring their bodies here to rest with mine until the Day of Awakening when Osiris returns to earth - for we love one another and would not be parted.'

Then Setna went in haste to Pharaoh and begged for the use of the Royal Boat. And Pharaoh was pleased to give command that it should sail with Setna where he would. So Setna voyaged up the Nile to Koptos. And there he made a great sacrifice to Isis and Horus, and begged the priests of the temple to tell him where Ahura and Merab lay buried. But, though they searched the ancient writings in the temple, they could find no record.

Setna was in despair. But he offered a great reward to any who could help him, and presently a very old man came tottering up to the temple and said, 'If you are Setna the great scribe, come with me. For when I was a little child my grandfather's father who was as old as I am now told me that when he was even as I was then his grandfather's father had shown him where Ahura and Merab lay buried - for as a young man in the days of Pharaoh Amen-hotep the First he had helped to lay them in the tomb.'

Setna followed eagerly where the old man led him, and came to a house on the edge of Koptos.

'You must pull down this house and dig beneath it,' said the old man. And when Setna had bought the house for a great sum from the scribe who lived in it, he bade the soldiers whom Pharaoh had sent with him level the house with the ground and dig beneath where it had stood.

They did as he bade them, and presently came to a tomb buried beneath the sand and cut from the rock. And in it lay the bodies of Ahura and Merab. When he saw them, the old man raised his arms and cried aloud; and as he cried he faded from sight and Setna knew that it was the Ka of Nefrekeptah which had taken on that shape to lead him to the tomb.

So he took up the mummies of Ahura and Merab and conveyed them with all honor, as if they had been the bodies of a queen and prince of Egypt, down the Nile in the Royal Boat to Memphis.

And there Pharaoh himself led the funeral procession to Saqqara, and Setna placed the bodies of Ahura and Merab beside that of Nefrekeptah in the secret tomb where lay the Book of Thoth.

When the funeral procession had left the tomb, Setna spoke a charm and the wall closed behind him leaving no trace of a door. Then at Pharaoh's command they heaped sand over the low stone shrine where the entrance to the tomb was hidden; and before long a sandstorm turned it into a great mound, and then leveled it out so that never again could anyone find a trace of the tomb where Nefrekeptah lay with Ahura and Merab and the Book of Thoth, waiting for the Day of Awakening when Osiris shall return to rule over the earth.