

The Treasure Thief

Rameses III as a standard bearer

Rameses the Third, the Pharaoh who, when he first came to the throne, wished to marry Helen of Troy, ruled for many years and Egypt grew prosperous under him. Early in his reign he defeated invasions from both Palestine and Libya; but after this he lived at peace with his neighbours and encouraged trading to such an extent that he became the richest of all the Pharaohs.

Rameses gathered his treasures together in the form of gold and silver and precious stones - and the more he gathered the more anxious he became lest anyone should steal his hoards.

So he sent for his Master Builder, Horemheb, and said to him, 'Build me a mighty treasure house of the hewn stone of Syene; make the floor of solid rock and the walls so thick that no man may pick a hole in them; and rear high the roof with stone into a tall pyramid so that no entrance may be broken through that either.'

Then Horemheb, the Master Builder, kissed the ground before Rameses, crying, 'Oh Pharaoh! Life, health, strength be to you! I will build such a treasure house for you as the world has never seen, nor will any man be able to force a way into it.'

Horemheb set all the stone-masons in the land of Egypt to work day and night quarrying and hewing the stone from the hard rock on the edge of the desert above Syene where the Nile falls from its most northerly cataract near the isle of Elephantine. And when the stone was hewn, he caused it to be drawn on sledges down to the Nile and loaded on boats which bore it down to Western Thebes, where the temple of Rameses was already rising, which stands to this day and is now called Madinet Habu.

Under the care of the Master Builder the walls of the new building were reared and a pyramid was built over the whole, leaving a great treasure chamber in the middle. In the entrance he set sliding doors of stone, and others of iron and bronze; and when the untold riches of Pharaoh Rameses were placed in the chamber, the doors were locked and each was sealed with Pharaoh's great seal, that none might copy on pain of death both here and in the Duat where Osiris reigns.

Yet Horemheb the Master Builder played Pharaoh false. In the thick wall of the Treasure House he made a narrow passage, with a stone at either end turning on a pivot that, when closed, looked and felt like any other part of the smooth, strong wall - except for those who knew where to feel for the hidden spring that held it firmly in place.

By means of this secret entrance Horemheb was able to add to the reward which Pharaoh gave to him when the Treasure House was complete. Yet he did not add much, for very soon a great sickness fell upon him, and presently he died.

But on his death-bed he told his two sons about the secret entrance to the Treasure House; and when he was dead, and they had buried his body with all honour in a rock chamber among the Tombs of the Nobles at Western Thebes the two young men made such good use of their knowledge that Pharaoh soon realized that his treasure was beginning to grow mysteriously less.

Rameses was at a loss to understand how the thieves got in, for the royal seals were never broken, but get in they certainly did. Pharaoh was fast becoming a miser, and he paid frequent visits to his Treasure House and knew every object of value in it - and the treasure continued to go.

At last Pharaoh commanded that cunning traps and meshes should be set near the chests and vessels from which the treasure was disappearing.

This was done secretly; and when next the two brothers made their way into the Treasure House by the secret entrance to collect more gold and jewels, the first to step across the floor towards the chests was caught in one of the traps and knew at once that he could not escape.

"Brother!... I beg you... draw your sword and strike off my head and carry it away with you."

So he called out, 'Brother! I am caught in a snare, and all your cunning cannot get me out of it. Probably I shall be dead by the time Pharaoh sends his guards to find if he has caught the Treasure Thief; if not, he is certain to have me tortured cruelly until I tell all - and then he will put me to death. And whether I live or die, he or one of the royal guards will recognize me, and then they will catch you, and you too will perish miserably - and maybe our mother also. Therefore I beg you, as you hope to pass the judgement of Osiris whither I am bound, that you draw your sword and strike off my head and carry it away with you. Then I shall die quickly and easily; moreover no one will recognize my body, so that you at least will be safe from Pharaoh's vengeance.'

The second brother tried to break the trap. But at last, realizing that it was in vain, and agreeing that it was better for one of them to die than both, and that if his brother were recognized their whole family might suffer, he drew his sword and did as he had begged him to do. Then he went back through the passage, closing the stones carefully behind him, and buried his brother's head with all reverence.

When day dawned Pharaoh came to his Treasure Chamber, and was astonished to find the body of a man, naked and headless, held fast in one of his traps. But there was still no sign of a secret entrance - for the Treasure Thief had been careful to remove all tracks - while it was quite certain that the seals on the doors had not been broken.

Yet Pharaoh was determined to catch the Treasure Thief. So he gave orders that the body should be hung on the outer wall of the palace and a guard of soldiers stationed nearby to catch anyone who might try to take it away for burial, or anyone who came near to weep and lament.

When the mother of the dead man heard that the body of her son was hanging on the palace wall and could not be given the sacred rites of burial, she turned upon her second son, crying, 'If the body of your brother remains unburied, his spirit cannot find peace in the Duat nor come before Osiris where he sits in judgement: instead he will wander for ever as a ghost, lost upon earth. Therefore you must bring me his body - or else I go straight to Pharaoh and beg for it by the love which he bore to your father Horemheb his Master Builder. If he learns that you are the Treasure Thief, I cannot help it; but I will at least bury you with your father and brother in the great tomb of Horemheb.'

At first her son tried to persuade her that the burial of the head was enough: for this' he had set secretly where Horemheb lay. And then he pointed out to her that it was surely better for one of her sons to lie unburied than for both of them to die. But she would not listen to him, and he was forced to promise to do his best to recover his brother's body.

So he disguised himself as an old merchant, loaded two donkeys with skins of wine, and set out along the road which ran by the palace wall.

As he passed the place where the soldiers were encamped he made the donkeys jostle against each other, and he secretly made holes in the wine-skins which had bumped together as if some sharp pieces of metal on their harnesses had done it.

The good red wine ran out onto the ground, and the false merchant wept and lamented loudly, pretending to be so upset that he could not decide which of the skins to save first.

As soon as they saw what was happening, the soldiers of the guard came running to help the merchant - or rather to help themselves. This they proceeded to do until the two damaged skins were empty, and the wine was already on its way to their heads.

By this time the merchant had made friends with his gallant rescuers, and was so grateful to them for saving his wine from being wasted on the desert sand that he made them a present

of another skin of wine, and sat down to share it with them. They did not refuse their help when yet another skin was broached; but before it was emptied they were past saying anything, and lay snoring on the ground with their mouths open.

Darkness was falling by this time, and the false merchant had no difficulty in taking down the body of his brother from the wall, wrapping it in empty wine skins, and carrying it away on one of his donkeys. Then, having cut a lock of hair from one side of each soldier's head, he went triumphantly home to his mother - and the funeral was completed before the morning.

When it was light and Pharaoh discovered that the body had gone, his rage was great, and he caused the guards to be laid out and beaten on the feet with rods as a punishment for their drunkenness.

'Whatever the cost, I must have the Treasure Thief!' cried Pharaoh, and forthwith he invented a new plan to catch him. He disguised one of his own daughters, a royal Princess, as a great lady from a foreign land, and bade her camp before the city gates and offer herself in marriage to the man who could tell her the cleverest and wickedest deed he had done in the whole of his life.

The Treasure Thief guessed at once who the strange maiden was, and why she was asking these questions. But he was determined to outdo Pharaoh in cunning. So he went to visit the Princess just as the sun was sinking, and he carried with him, hidden under his cloak, the hand and arm of a man who had lately been executed for treason by command of Pharaoh.

'Fair Princess, I would win you to be my wife,' he said.

"...tell me the cleverest & the wickedest things that you have ever done."

'Then tell me the cleverest and the wickedest things that you have ever done,' she answered, 'and I will say "yes" to your offer of marriage if they are wickeder and cleverer than any I have yet heard.'

As the sun went down behind the hills that hid the Valley of the Kings, the Treasure Thief told his tale to the Princess.

'And so,' he ended, 'the wickedest thing I ever did was to cut off my own brother's head when he was caught in Pharaoh's trap yonder in the secret chamber of the Treasure House; and the cleverest was to steal his body from under the noses of the soldiers who were set to guard it.'

Then the Princess cried out to the royal attendants who were hidden nearby as she seized the thief, saying, 'Come quickly, for this is the man Pharaoh is seeking! Come quickly, for I am holding him by the arm!'

But when Pharaoh's attendants crowded in with their lighted torches and lamps, the Treasure Thief had already slipped away into the darkness, leaving the dead man's arm in the Princess's hands - and she saw how cleverly she had been tricked.

When Pharaoh Rameses heard of this further example of daring and craftiness, he exclaimed, 'This man is too clever to punish. The land of Khem prides itself on excelling the rest of the world in wisdom: but this man has more wisdom than anyone else in the land of Khem! Go, proclaim through the city of Thebes that I will pardon him for all that he has done, and reward him richly if henceforth he will serve me truly and faithfully.'

So in the end the Treasure Thief married the Princess and became a loyal servant of Pharaoh Rameses III. Nor did he ever have any further need to enter the Royal Treasure Chamber by the secret entrance made into it by Horemheb the Master Builder.