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ROGER LANCELYN GREEN

TALES OF
ANCIENT EGYPT

INTRODUCED BY MICHAEL ROSEN

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.

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MICHAEL ROSEN

Illustrations by HEATHER COPLEY



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To My Niece and God-daughter
Jane Trinder

INTRODUCTION BY

MICHAEL ROSEN

How do we know about the past? One way is for us to look at old buildings – places that have lasted hundreds or thousands of years. Another way is to look at old objects, things that people made. Four thousand years ago the people of Egypt lived in a country ruled by kings called *Pharaohs*. So, we can find out some things about them by looking at their buildings – the most famous of these are the pyramids. We can look at the things people made: statues, toys, tools and the like. But if we want to conjure up what people thought, how they dreamt, what things they believed and imagined, then one of the best ways to do that is to read and listen to their stories.

This is what you have in front of you with this book.

Just as archaeologists have opened up the pyramids of the Pharaohs and looked into the lives and minds of the people who built those tombs, so you can open this book and discover the lives and minds of Ancient Egypt. To start off with, you can savour the names of the gods. Try saying them: Thoth, Khonsu, Horus, Ra, Isis and Osiris. Stories of gods tell us how people believed their way of life began, what were the best and worst ways to behave and what happened to everyone after they died. Stories of the Pharaohs tell us how people thought that their daily lives linked to the gods (a Pharaoh was thought to be a kind of god on Earth). And then we can read stories about the ordinary people: the kind of person who ploughed the land, made and sold things, served their masters or even tried to rob the pyramids.

So welcome to the world of Ancient Egypt. Perhaps one day you might visit a museum like the British Museum* in London or even go on a trip to Egypt, and you will be able to see the objects and buildings of the people who told these stories. Books, films and websites can help us here too. And, you know, getting to know about the past is a way of understanding ourselves now.

Are we the same?

Or different?

Contents

Map

Prologue: The Land of Egypt

TALES OF THE GODS

Ra and his Children

Isis and Osiris

Horus the Avenger

Khnemu of the Nile

The Great Queen Hatshepsut

The Prince and the Sphinx

The Princess and the Demon

TALES OF MAGIC

The Golden Lotus

Teta the Magician

The Book of Thoth

Se-Osiris and the Sealed Letter

The Land of the Dead

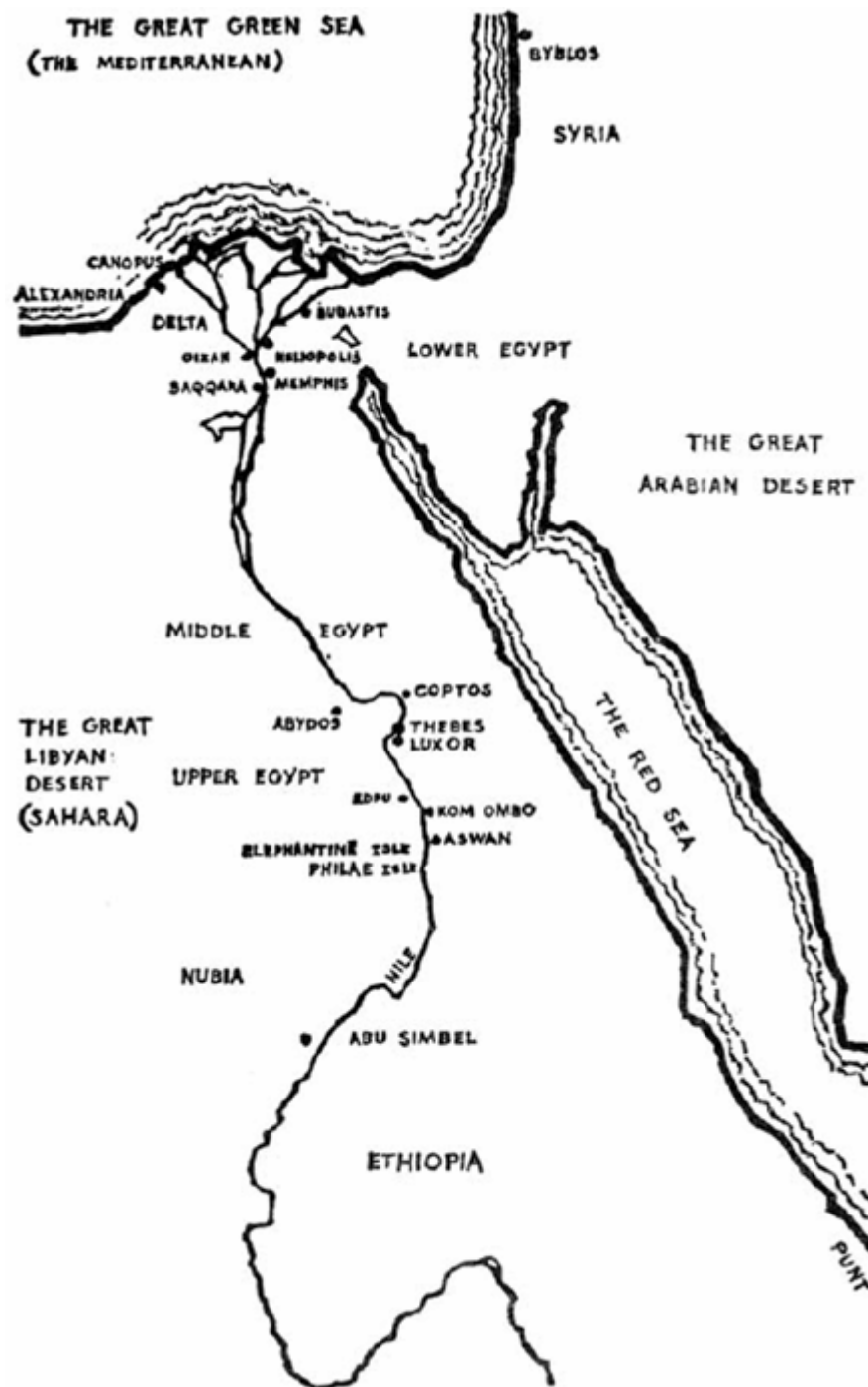
The Tale of the Two Brothers

TALES OF ADVENTURE

The Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor

The Adventures of Sinuhe
The Peasant and the Workman
The Taking of Joppa
The Story of the Greek Princess
The Treasure Thief
The Girl with the Rose-red Slippers

Time Chart



THE WORLD OF ANCIENT EGYPT

Prologue: The Land of Egypt

Egypt has always been a land of mystery and magic – a land different from all others, difficult to understand, apart and alien, yet strangely fascinating. It was the most self-contained of all the countries of the ancient world; it lived its own life, practised its own religion and made up its own stories with hardly any outside influence either from or upon other civilizations.

When the ancient Greeks ‘discovered’ it in about 500 BC and began to write about it, Egyptian civilization was drawing towards the end of its three thousand years of existence. The first Greek historian whose works survive, Herodotus, visited it in about 450 BC and found that only the priests could still read the ancient hieroglyphs in which inscriptions had been carved or written on the monuments since the days when Menes, the first historical Pharaoh, united the ‘Two Lands’ in about 3200 BC. Yet the myths and the stories which the people were still telling had been handed down through all or many of those thirty centuries, and had hardly changed. After the time of Herodotus Ancient Egypt was preserved almost artificially by its Greek conquerors – Alexander the Great and the descendants of his general Ptolemy. It faded under the Romans, and was stamped out completely by the Arab invaders of AD 639–46. It has only been rediscovered during the last hundred and fifty years [now two hundred years], when the hieroglyphs were interpreted, the ancient language translated and the tombs, temples and pyramids excavated and preserved.

The natural conditions in any land are often to a large extent responsible for its religious beliefs, the form its civilization takes, and the stories that evolve into its literature. The dead monotony of mud, with the plains of Mesopotamia stretching to the horizon in every direction, gave Babylon her

dreary religion of hopeless despair; the breath-taking beauty of the mountains and valleys and gulfs of the sea in the glorious light of Greece produced the immortal myths and legends of that most lovely land; and the sharp, cold air and the nearness of bitter winter gave to our Norse ancestors the brilliant heroic fatalism of the sagas.

Egypt is the hardest land to imagine, even from its myths and stories, for those who have not seen it. 'Egypt is the gift of the Nile,' wrote the old Greek historian Hecataeus – and the Nile, indeed, *is* Egypt. Except for the fertile Delta in the north, a triangle of low-lying green land with sides each of roughly 150 miles, Egypt is the narrow valley of the Nile, a cleft in the desert running for many hundreds of miles – and a thousand more if we follow it up through the Sudan into Ethiopia.

'Going up the Nile is like running the gauntlet before Eternity,' wrote Rudyard Kipling fifty years ago on his first visit. 'Till one has seen it, one does not realize the amazing thinness of that little damp trickle of life that steals along undefeated through the jaws of established death. A rifle-shot would cover the widest limits of cultivation, a bow-shot would reach the narrower ... The weight of the Desert is on one, every day and every hour.'

Except in the Delta, if a man walked away from the river in either direction until he needed water, he would have died of thirst before he could walk back again for a drink. There are four thousand miles of desert to the west and nearly half that distance to the east (including the Red Sea).

Moreover, even in Egypt life depended on the annual Inundation – the rising of the Nile, due to heavy rain thousands of miles away in Abyssinia [modern-day Ethiopia], which flooded both the valley and most of the Delta from June to October each year, and left a thick deposit of mud and silt in which the crops grew with amazing fertility – all kinds of corn and vegetables, and fruits such as grapes and melons and dates.

If the Inundation was too small, starvation faced Egypt, and many died of hunger if several 'lean years' came together at a time when the Pharaoh had had no Joseph to store grain in the good years against such a time of want.

With death always so near, the Ancient Egyptians developed an obsession with death, yet not one that seems to have warped their lives. Egypt is a land of great, if peculiar beauty: the river shines in the intense sunlight, the

groves of green date palms and tamarisks shelter for a while each year profusions of bright flowers; the cliffs at the edge of the desert – notably those behind Western Thebes – glow and shine and fade with indescribably lovely colours at sunrise and sunset; and in the sudden cold of darkness the stars shine with extraordinary brilliance in a sky like black velvet.

Ra, or, as he later became, Amen-Ra, the Sun-god was the first and most important of deities – and the River Nile itself came second, sometimes worshipped as Khnemu, but more usually as part of the whole principle of life and reproduction which came to be enshrined in the person of the goddess Isis.

But Osiris, god of the world of the dead, was the brother and husband of Isis and he was the greatest god of all – for all the dead would return to earth when he, the first human Pharaoh of Egypt, came back to be the eternal Pharaoh.

As Osiris had been a human Pharaoh who became a god, so each Pharaoh was held to be a god on earth who would become a god in heaven – in the Duat where Osiris reigned. So, from the earliest times, the tombs of the Pharaohs and the mortuary temples in which they were honoured were built of the most enduring stone that could be found, and covered with carvings, paintings and inscriptions which remain from so many thousands of years ago to tell us about their lives and beliefs, myths and stories. Houses, and palaces, were made of mud bricks for the short tenure of the living, and have nearly all disappeared; but the pyramids and the temples and the rock tombs were built to last for ever, and they are the oldest and still among the mightiest and most imposing of all ancient monuments.

The end of every story in Ancient Egypt, like the end of every life, was the stately funeral procession to the rock-hewn tomb at the edge of the desert on the western side of the Nile. There, after many ceremonies, the body was laid to rest in a safe place until the day when Osiris should return to earth and the spirits of the dead come back with him and abide once more in the bodies that had been their earthly homes – there to dwell for ever in his earthly kingdom of the undying.

Although all the Egyptians did their best to make fine tombs for themselves, and their children tried always to have their parents' bodies

properly preserved and wrapped and laid in these tombs, it was naturally the Pharaohs who were honoured with the finest and most enduring dwelling places.

Those of the early Dynasties, such as Zoser and Khufu and Khafra, built the mighty pyramids for themselves which have survived to be their monuments for five thousand years. Later Pharaohs such as Hatshepsut and Rameses the Great and Seti I hollowed the vast rock tombs in the Valley of the Kings at Western Thebes – chamber beyond chamber going down into the rock for hundreds of feet.

In the heart of the pyramid or in the deepest rock chamber lay the body of the Pharaoh enclosed in a multitude of coffins, the innermost of gold and the outer of the hard granite stone of Syene, the modern Aswan. With him were laid treasures without number, and all his choicest possessions, from chariots and thrones to fans and boxes of sweet ointment; and there also were the Ushabti Figures – little models of men and women performing all the labours of this world, farming, fishing, weaving, cooking, rowing the Royal Boat, and so on: for in the life to come ‘the good god Pharaoh’ would live even as he had done upon earth, and must have all that had been his by right when he dwelt in Egypt.

On the walls of the tomb-chambers were painted and carved not only scenes from this world, but also from the next – so that he who dwelt in the tomb should know what to expect and what to do when he ‘went West’ into the Duat, the Land of the Dead.

How the Ancient Egyptians knew so well what to expect during the journey through the Duat, no one seems quite to know. Doubtless there were stories of magicians and others who had travelled into that strange world and returned to tell of it – but all except one are lost to us, and the only survivor is very fragmentary, though the descriptions of the Duat and the Judgement before Osiris can be restored with the aid of the pictures and inscriptions from the tombs, and the rolls of papyrus called *The Book of the Dead* buried with those who could not afford to have the full instructions painted on the walls.

From the days when Menes became the first Pharaoh of a united Egypt, down almost to the time when Herodotus and other Greek travellers came

as interested tourists, the Ancient Egyptians lived their quiet and almost unchanging lives. There were some minor invasions from outside: once for a hundred years the Delta was held by mysterious invaders called the Hyksōs (who some scholars think may have been the Israelites); during the two hundred years before Herodotus paid his visit, Egypt was conquered for a time by the Assyrians, and then by the Persians. By the time of Rameses the Great (1290–1224 BC) Egypt held an empire over most of Palestine and Syria; but a century later the Greeks of the Mycenaean period were invading the Delta unsuccessfully.

However, ordinary life in Egypt changed little. The people lived simply, and usually fairly prosperously, tilling their fields after the Inundation; building the pyramids and temples and tombs during the four or five months of each year when the valley was under water and all agriculture ceased.

They had a fair amount of leisure: a good deal of it taken up with religious ceremonies, but time also for song and dance and music, and for telling stories. Usually these songs and tales were handed down by word of mouth and not written. Sometimes, if they concerned the gods – which also included the Pharaohs – they were carved in temples and shrines. Thus of the stories in this book *The Prince and the Sphinx* is preserved in hieroglyphs cut into a slab of stone in the tiny temple between the paws of the Great Sphinx at Giza; the story of *The Great Queen Hatshepsut* may be read on the walls of her temple (Der-el-Bahri) at Western Thebes; *The Princess and the Demon* on a sandstone tablet found in the Temple of Khonsu at Thebes and now in Paris, and *Khnemu of the Nile* is carved on the rocks at Elephantinē.

Ra and his Children, *Horus the Avenger*, and many of the descriptions in *The Land of the Dead* are pieced together from carvings and inscriptions in the Pyramid of Zoser, the tombs of Seti I and Rameses II and III, the Temple of Horus at Edfu, *The Book of the Dead* and other papyrus sources buried with those who could not afford to have this ‘Guide to the Land of the Dead’ carved or painted on the walls of their tombs.

Similar sources give fragments of the story of Osiris, but it so happens that the Greek historian and essayist Plutarch, who lived in the first century

AD, told the whole legend in his treatise *Concerning Isis and Osiris* – the reliability of which is proved by the very early inscriptions at Abydos and elsewhere.

Most of the Tales of Magic and Adventure were written or written down during the last two thousand years of Ancient Egypt. *The Golden Lotus* and *Teta the Magician* come from the West-car Papyrus now in Berlin, which is thought to have been written during the Twelfth Dynasty (2000–1785 BC). *The Tale of the Two Brothers* was probably written by Ana, the favourite scribe of Pharaoh Seti II (about 1200 BC); *The Peasant and the Workman* appears in several defective papyri of uncertain date, which can be pieced together to make one complete version; *The Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor* is also very early and may even date from the Twelfth Dynasty, though experts differ about the age of the papyrus, which is now in Moscow.

Se-Osiris and the Sealed Letter, *The Book of Thoth*, *The Adventures of Sinuhe* and *The Taking of Joppa* are all from late manuscripts written after about 715 BC when ‘Demotic’ writing superseded the old hieroglyphs – but of course they are probably much older than the date at which the surviving copies were written and perhaps go back to the Nineteenth or Twentieth Dynasties, the period following the golden age of Rameses the Great.

The last three stories are preserved only in Greek versions. *The Story of the Greek Princess* was first told in Greek by Stesichorus (c. 600 BC) of whose works only fragments remain; it is given several chapters by Herodotus, and was used as the basis for a play by Euripides: but the basic story was obviously Egyptian, for the Greeks could not understand at all about the Princess’s *Ka* or ‘Double’, which appears nowhere else in Greek myth or legend. This Egyptian origin was clearly recognized by Rider Haggard and Andrew Lang who made use of some of the story in their fine romance of the days of Merneptah, son of Rameses the Great, *The World’s Desire*: and Haggard made better use still of the *Ka* in his *Morning Star* which is one of the best re-creations of Ancient Egypt ever written.

The Treasure Thief was told to Herodotus during his visit to Egypt, and he included it in his *History*. As for *The Girl with the Rose-red Slippers*, the

earliest version of the Cinderella story, Herodotus certainly knew of Rhodopis, who was almost his contemporary, though he confused her with an earlier adventuress-queen; but the full tale was given by another Greek, Aelian, in his *Varia Historia* in the third century AD.

And so these tales of Ancient Egypt represent a written literature of over two thousand years, stretching back to more than four thousand years ago, and perhaps as much as five thousand if we assume that the tales of the gods were handed down by word of mouth from the days of the first Pharaohs until Zoser and his successors began to carve them in hieroglyphs on the walls of tomb-chambers and temples. The best of the relatively few that remain out of that distant age have been collected here and retold: the oldest stories in the world, yet most of them stories that never grow old in themselves, though their dress may have the charm of age and distance: stories that catch for us an echo out of that incredibly distant past, that bring us bright, tantalizing glimpses from the lost world of Ancient Egypt:

The murmur of the fallen creeds
Like winds among the wind-shaken reeds
Along the banks of holy Nile.