

The Book of Thoth

By Lafcadio Hearn

An Egyptian tale of weirdness, as told in a demotic papyrus found in the necropolis of Deir-el-Medineh among the ruins of hundred-gated Thebes. . . . Written, in the thirty-fifth year of the reins of some forgotten Ptolomæus, and in the month of Tybi completed by a scribe famous among magicians. . . . Dedicated, doubtless, to Thoth, Lord of all Scribes, Grand Master of all Sorcerers; whose grace had been reverently invoiced upon whomsoever might speak well concerning the same papyrus.

. . . Thoth, the divine, lord of scribes, most excellent of workers, prince of wizards, once, it is said, wrote with his own hand a book surpassing all other books, and containing two magical formulas only. Whosoever could recite the first of these formulas would become forthwith second only to the gods,—for by its simple utterance the mountains and the valleys, the ocean and the clouds, the heights of heaven and the deeps of hell, would be made subject unto his will; while the birds of air, the reptiles of darkness, and the fishes of the waters, would be thereby compelled to appear, and to make manifest the thoughts secreted within their hearts. But whosoever could recite the second formula might never know death,—for even though buried within the entrails of the earth, he would still behold heaven through the darkness and hear the voices of earth athwart the silence; even in the necropolis he would still see the rising and setting of the sun, and the Cycle of the Gods, and the waxing and waning of the moon, and the eternal lights of the firmament.

And the god Thoth deposited his book within a casket of gold, and the casket of gold within a casket of silver, and the casket of silver within a casket of ivory and ebony, and the casket of ivory and ebony within a casket of palm-wood, and the casket of palm-wood within a casket of bronze, and the casket of bronze within a casket of iron. And he buried the same in the bed of the great river of Egypt where it flows through the Nome of Coptos; and immortal river monsters coiled about the casket to guard it from all magicians.

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Now, of all magicians, Noferkephtah, the son of King Minibphtah (to whom be life, health, and strength forevermore!), first by cunning discovered the place where the wondrous book was hidden, and found courage to possess himself thereof. For after he had well paid the wisest of the ancient priests to direct his way, Noferkephtah obtained from his father Pharaoh a royal cangia, well supplied and stoutly manned, wherein he journeyed to Coptos in search of the hidden treasure. Coming to Coptos after many days, he created him a magical boat and a magical crew by reciting mystic words; and he and the shadowy crew with him toiled to find the casket; and by the building of dams they were enabled to find it. Then Noferkephtah prevailed also against the immortal serpent by dint of sorcery; and he obtained the book, and read the mystic formulas, and made himself second only to the gods.

But the divinities, being wroth with him, caused his sister and wife Ahouri to fall into the Nile, and his son also. Noferkephtah indeed compelled the river to restore them; but although the power of the book maintained their life after a strange fashion, they lived not as before, so that he had to bury them in the necropolis at Coptos. Seeing these things and fearing to return to the king alone, he tied the book above his heart, and also allowed himself to drown. The power of the book, indeed, maintained his life after a strange fashion; but he lived not as before, so that they took him back to Thebes as one who had passed over to Amenthi, and there laid him with his fathers, and the book also.

Yet, by the power of the book, he lived within the darkness of the tomb, and beheld the sun rising, and the Cycle of the Gods, and the phases of the moon, and the stars of the night. By the power of the, book, also, he summoned to him the shadow of his sister Ahouri, buried at Coptos,—whom he had made his wife according to the custom of the Egyptians; and there was light within their dwelling-place. Thus Noferkephtah knew ghostly happiness in the company of the *Ka*, or shadow, of his wife Ahouri, and the *Ka* of his son Mikhonsou.

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Now, four generations had passed since the time of King Minibphtah; and the Pharaoh of Egypt was Ousirmari. Ousirmari had two sons who were learned among the Egyptians,—Satni was the name of the elder; Anhathorerôou that of the younger. There was not in all Egypt so wise a scribe as Satni. He knew how to read the sacred writings, and the inscriptions upon the amulets, and the sentences within the tombs, and the words graven upon the stehæ, and the books of that sacerdotal library called the “Double House of Life.” Also he knew the composition of all formulas of sorcery and of all sentences which spirits obey, so that there was no enchanter like him in all Egypt. And Satni heard of Noferkephtah and the book of Thoth from a certain aged priest, and resolved that he would obtain it. But the aged priest warned him, saying, “Beware thou dost not wrest the book from Noferkephtah, else thou wilt be enchanted by him, and compelled to bear it back to him within the tomb, and do great penance.”

Nevertheless Satni sought and obtained permission of the king to descend into the necropolis of Thebes, and to take away, if he might, the book from thence. So he went thither with his brother.

Three days and three nights the brothers sought for the tomb of Noferkephtah in the immeasurable city of the dead; and after they had threaded many miles of black corridors, and descended into many hundred burial pits, and were weary with the deciphering of innumerable inscriptions by quivering light of lamps, they found his resting-place at last. Now, when they entered the tomb their eyes were dazzled; for Noferkephtah was lying there with his wife Ahouri beside him; and the book of Thoth, placed between them, shed such a light around, that it seemed like the brightness of the sun. And when Satni entered, the Shadow of Ahouri rose against the light; and she asked him, “Who art thou?”

Then Satni answered: “I am Satni, son of King Ousirmari; and I come for the book of Thoth which is between thee and Noferkephtah; and if thou wilt not give it me, I shall wrest it away by force.”

But the Shadow of the woman replied to him:

“Nay, be not unreasoning in thy words! Do not ask for this book. For we, in obtaining it, were deprived of the pleasure of living upon earth for the term naturally allotted us; neither is this

enchanted life within the tomb like unto the life of Egypt. Nowise can the book serve thee; therefore listen rather to the recital of all those sorrows which befell us by reason of this book. . . .”

But after hearing the story of Ahouri, the heart of Satni remained as bronze; and he only repeated:—

“If thou wilt not give me the book which is between thee and Noferkephtah, I shall wrest it away by force.”

Then Noferkephtah rose up within the tomb, and laughed, saying: “O Satni, if thou art indeed a true scribe, win this book from me by thy skill! If thou art not afraid, play against me a game for the possession of this book,—a game of *fifty-two!*” Now there was a chess-board within the tomb.

Then Satni played a game of chess with Noferkephtah, while the *Kas*, the Shadows, the Doubles of Ahouri, and the large-eyed boy looked on. But the eyes with which they gazed upon him, and the eyes of Noferkephtah also, strangely disturbed him, so that Satni’s brain whirled, and the web of his thought became entangled, and he lost! Noferkephtah laughed, and uttered a magical word, and placed the chess-board upon Satni’s head; and Satni sank to his knees into the floor of the tomb.

Again they played, and the result was the same. Then Noferkephtah uttered another magical word, and again placed the chess-board upon Satni’s head; and Satni sank to his hips into the floor of the tomb.

Once more they played, and the result was the same. Then Noferkephtah uttered a third magical word, and laid the chess-board on Satni’s head, and Satni sank up to his ears into the floor of the tomb!

Then Satni shrieked to his brother to bring him certain talismans quickly; and the brother fetched the talismans, and placed them upon Satni’s head, and by magical amulets saved him from the power of Noferkephtah. But having done this, Anhathorerôou fell dead within the tomb.

And Satni put forth his hand and took the book from Noferkephtah, and went out of the tomb into the corridors; while the book lighted the way for him, so that a great brightness travelled before him, and deep blackness went after him. Into the darkness Ahouri followed him, lamenting, and crying out: “Woe! woe upon us! The light that gave life is taken from us; the hideous Nothingness will come upon us! Now, indeed, will annihilation enter into the tomb!” But Noferkephtah called Ahouri to him, and bade her cease to weep, saying to her: “Grieve not after the book; for I shall make him bring it back to me, with a fork and stick in his hand and a lighted brazier upon his head.”

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But when the king Ousirmari heard of all that had taken place, he became very much alarmed for his son, and said to him: “Behold! thy folly has already caused the death of thy brother Anhathorerôou; take heed, therefore, lest it bring about thine own destruction likewise. Noferkephtah dead is even a mightier magician than thou. Take back the book forthwith, lest he destroy thee.”

And Satni replied: “Lo! never have I owned a sensual wish, nor done evil to *living* creature; how, then, can the dead prevail against me? It is only the foolish scribe—the scribe who hath not learned the mastery of passions—that may he overcome by enchantment.”

And he kept the book.

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Now it came to pass that a few days after, while Satni stood upon the parvis of the temple of Pthah, he beheld a woman so beautiful that from the moment his eyes fell upon her he ceased to act like one living, and all the world grew like a dream about him. And while the young woman was praying in the temple, Satni heard that her name was Thoutboui, daughter of a prophet. Whereupon he sent a messenger to her, saying: "Thus declares my master: I, the Prince Satni, son of King Ousirmari, do so love thee that I feel as one about to die. . . . If thou wilt love me as I desire, thou shalt have kingliest gifts; otherwise, know that I have the power to bury thee alive among the dead, so that none may ever see thee again."

And Thoutboui on hearing these words appeared not at all astonished, nor angered, nor terrified; but her great black eyes laughed, and she answered, saying. "Tell thy master, Prince Satni, son of King Ousirmari, to visit me within my house at Bubastes, whither I am even now going." . . . Thereupon she went away with her retinue of maidens.

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So Satni hastened forthwith to Bubastes by the river, and to the house of Thoutboui, the prophet's daughter. In all the place there was no house like unto her house; it was lofty and long, and surrounded by a garden all encircled with a white wall. And Satni followed Thoutboui's serving-maid into the house, and by a coiling stairway to an upper chamber wherein were broad beds of ebony and ivory, and rich furniture curiously carved, and tripods with burning perfumes, and tables of cedar with cups of gold. And the walls were coated with lapis-lazuli inlaid with emerald, making a strange and pleasant light. . . . Thoutboui appeared upon the threshold, robed in textures of white, transparent as the dresses of those dancing women limned upon the walls of the Pharaohs' palace; and as she stood against the light, Satni, beholding the litheness of her limbs, the flexibility of her body, felt his heart cease to beat within him, so that he could not speak. But she served him with wine, and took from his hands the gifts which he had brought,—and she suffered him to kiss her.

Then said Thoutboui: "Not lightly is my love to be bought with gifts. Yet will I test thee, since thou dost so desire. If thou wilt be loved by me, therefore, make over to me by deed all thou hast,—thy gold and thy silver, thy lands and houses, thy goods and all that belongs to thee. So that the house wherein I dwell may become thy house!"

And Satni, looking into the long black jewels of her eyes, forgot the worth of all that he possessed; and a scribe was summoned, and the scribe drew up the deed giving to Thoutboui all the goods of Satni.

Then said Thoutboui: "Still will I test thee, since thou dost so desire. If thou wilt have my love, make over to me thy children, also, as my slaves, lest they should seek dispute with my children concerning that which was thine. So that the house in which I dwell may become thy house!"

And Satni, gazing upon the witchery of her bosom, curved like ivory carving, rounded like the eggs of the ostrich, forgot his loving children; and the deed was written. . . . Even at that moment a messenger came, saying: "O Satni, thy children are below, and await thee." And he said: "Bid them ascend hither."

Then said Thoutboui: "Still will I test thee, since thou dost so desire. If thou wilt have my love, let thy children be put to death, lest at some future time they seek to claim that which thou last given. So that the house in which I dwell may be thy house!"

And Satni, enchanted with the enchantment of her pliant stature, of her palmy grace, of her ivory beauty, forgot even his fatherhood, and answered: "Be it so; were I ruler of heaven, even heaven would I give thee for a kiss."

Then Thoutbouï had the children of Satni slain before his eyes; yet he sought not to save them!

She bade her servant cast their bodies from the windows to the cats and to the dogs below; yet Satni lifted not his hand to prevent it! And while he drank wine with Thoutbouï, he could hear the growling of the animals that were eating the flesh of his children. But he only moaned to her:

"Give me thy love! I am as one in hell for thy sake I? And she arose, and, entering another chamber, turned and held out her wonderful arms to him, and drew him to her with the sorcery of her unutterable eyes. . . .

But as Satni sought to clasp her and to kiss her, lo! her ruddy mouth opened and extended and broadened and deepened,—yawning wider, darker, quickly, vastly,—a blackness as of necropoles, a vastness as of Amenthi! And Satni beheld only a gulf before him, deepening and shadowing like night; and from out the gulf a burst of tempest roared up, and bore him with it, and whirled him abroad as a leaf. And his senses left him. . . .

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. . . When he came again to himself, he was lying naked at the entrance of the subterranean sepulchres; and a great horror and despair came upon him, so that he purposed ending his life. But the servants of the king found him, and bore him safely to his father. And Ousirmari heard the ghostly tale.

Then said Ousirmari: "O Satni, Noferkephtah dead is a mightier magician than even thou living. Know, my son, first of all that thy children are alive and well in my own care; know, also, that the woman by whose beauty thou wert bewitched, and for whom thou hast in thought committed all heinous crimes, was a phantom wrought by Noferkephtah's magic. Thus, by exciting thee to passion, did he bring thy magical power to nought. And now, my dear son, haste with the book to Noferkephtah, lest thou perish Utterly, with all thy kindred."

So Satni took the book of Thoth, and, carrying a fork and stick in his hands and a lighted brazier upon his head, carried it to the Theban necropolis and into the tomb of Noferkephtah. And Ahouri clapped her bands, and smiled to see the light again return. And Noferkephtah laughed, saying: "Did I not tell thee beforehand?" "Aye!" said Ahouri, "thou wert enchanted, O Satni!" But Satni, prostrating himself before Noferkephtah, asked how he might make atonement.

"O Satni," answered Noferkephtah "my wife and my son are indeed buried at Coptos; these whom thou seest here are their Doubles only,—their Shadows, their *Kas*,—maintained with me by enchantment. Seek out their resting-place at Coptos, therefore, and bury their bodies with me, that we may all be thus reunited, and that thou mayst do penance.

So Satni went to Coptos, and there found an ancient priest, who told him the place of Ahouri's sepulture, saying: "The father of the father of my father told it to my father's father, who told it to my father." . . . Then Satni found the bodies, and restored to Noferkephtah his wife and his son; and thus did penance. After which the tomb of Noferkephtah was sealed up forever by Pharaoh's order; and no man knoweth more the place of Noferkephtah's sepulture.