

## KING CHEOPS AND THE MAGICIANS

**T**his cycle of stories about the marvels performed by the lector priests is cast in the form of a series of tales told at the court of Cheops by his sons. The name of the first son is missing together with most of his story. The second son, Khaefre, later became king and is known as the builder of the Second Pyramid at Giza. The third son, Bauefre, is known from other sources; a later text indicates that he may have also become king for a short time. The fourth son, Hardedef, is known as one of the sages of the past, and part of his instruction has survived.

The text derives from a single manuscript of which the beginning and conclusion are missing. The papyrus was inscribed in the Hyksos period before Dynasty 18, but the composition appears to belong to Dynasty 12; the events described are set in the Old Kingdom.

The last story is a prophecy of the end of Cheops's line through the birth of the three kings who founded Dynasty 5. The story of their actual birth is presented as a sort of annex. Elements of the miraculous royal birth are represented in later Egyptian and Near Eastern literature and even are reflected in the biblical accounts. The device of providing stories for the diversion of the king is also represented in *The Prophecies of Neferty*, *The Admonitions*, and *The Eloquent Peasant*, as well as several later compositions. The real substance of the composition is certainly the prophecy of the birth of the kings, and the other tales merely lead up to it. For bibliography and commentary on King

*Cheops and the Magicians (Papyrus Westcar)*, see Lefebvre, *Romans et contes*, 70–90, and Erman, *The Ancient Egyptians (New York, 1966)*, xxiv, lxxviii–lxix, 36–49. *The standard hieroglyphic text with photographs of the papyrus is now A. M. Blackman (ed. W. V. Davies), The Story of King Kheops and the Magicians Transcribed from Papyrus Westcar (Berlin Papyrus 3033) (Reading, Berks, 1988).*

W.K.S.

[FIRST TALE: END OF THE MARVEL IN THE TIME OF  
KING DJOSER]

1,12 [... His Majesty] / the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Khufu (Cheops), the vindicated, [said: Let there be given...], one hundred jugs of beer, an ox, [... to] the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Djoser, the vindicated, [and may there be given...], a haunch of beef, [... to the lector priest...]. [For I] have seen an example of his wisdom. And [they] did according to [everything which His Majesty] commanded.<sup>1</sup>

[SECOND TALE: THE MARVEL WHICH HAPPENED IN THE  
TIME OF KING NEBKA]

1,20 The king's son Khaefre (Chephren) arose [to speak, and he said: I should like to relate to Your Majesty] another marvel, one which happened in the time of [your] father, [the King of Upper and Lower Egypt] Nebka, the vindicated, as he proceeded to the temple of [Ptah,/Lord of] Ankh-towy.<sup>2</sup>

2,1 Now when his Majesty went to [...], His Majesty made an [appeal? ... to] the chief [lector] Webaoner [...]. But the wife of Webaoner [... was enamored / of a townsman. She caused to be brought(?)] to him a chest filled with garments [...], and he returned with [the] housemaid.<sup>3</sup> [Now

1. This is the conclusion of a tale of which the entire narrative section is missing. It concerns a marvel performed by a lector priest in the reign of Djoser, the builder of the Step Pyramid. Perhaps the lector was Iyemhotep himself. There is no way of knowing how much of the composition was lost at the beginning.

2. Nebka of Dynasty 3 is a predecessor of Cheops. Ankh-towy is a designation for Memphis or a part thereof.

3. Evidently the adulterous wife makes a present to the goodlooking townsman and he returns to thank her.

several] days [passed by ...]. There was a pavilion<sup>4</sup> [on the estate] of Webaoner. The townsman [said to the wife of Weba]oner: Is there a pavilion [...] ? [Come], let us pass time in it. [Then said the wife of] Webaoner to the caretaker who [cared for the estate]: Let the pavilion be prepared, 2,10 [...] and she spent the day there drinking / [with the townsman ... and] 'resting' [...]. Now after [evening came ...] he [went to the Lake] and [the] housemaid [...].

2,20 [When day broke, and the second day came, the caretaker informed Webaoner of] this matter [...]. He gave it to his / [...] of the water. Then [he(?)] lit [a fire]. [Then Webaoner said]: Bring me [... my chest] of ebony and electrum [and he made ... and he opened ... and made] a crocodile [of wax ...] seven [fingers long ...]. He read out his [magic words saying ...]: [If anyone] comes [to bathe in my lake ...] the townsman. / 3,1 Then he gave it to [the caretaker], and he said to him: After the townsman goes down to the pool, as is his daily fashion, you shall cast [the] crocodile after him. The [caretaker] went forth and he took the crocodile of wax with him.

3,10 Now the [wife] of Webaoner sent to the caretaker who was in charge of the [garden] saying: Let the pavilion which is in the garden be prepared for I have come to stay in it. The pavilion was prepared [with] every good thing. [They] (the wife and the maid servant?) went forth, and they (spent) / a pleasant day with the townsman. After night fell, the townsman returned as was his daily fashion, and the caretaker threw the crocodile of wax behind him into the water. [At once it grew] into a crocodile of seven cubits,<sup>5</sup> and it took hold of the townsman [...].

3,20 Webaoner tarried with His Majesty the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Nebka, the vindicated, for seven days, all the while the townsman was in the [lake without] breathing. After the seventh day came, His Majesty the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Nebka, the vindicated came forth, and the chief lector Webaoner placed himself in (his) presence and [he] said [to him]: May Your Majesty / come and see the marvel which has taken place in Your Majesty's time. [His Majesty went with] Webaoner. [He called out to the] crocodile and said: Bring back [the] townsman. [The crocodile] came [out of the water ...]. Then the [chief] lector [Webaoner] said: [Open up]! And he [opened up]. Then he placed [...]. Said

4. A sort of garden pavilion.

5. The cubit measures 20.6 inches, hence the crocodile was now about 12 feet long.

4,1 His Majesty the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, / Nebka, the vindicated: this crocodile is indeed 'fearful'! But Webaoner bent down, and he caught it and it became a crocodile of wax in his hand. The chief lector Webaoner told His Majesty the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Nebka, the vindicated, about this affair which the townsman had in his house with his wife. And his Majesty said to the crocodile: Take what belongs to you! The crocodile then went down to the [depths] of the lake, and no one knew the place where he went with him.

4,10 His [Majesty the King of Upper] and Lower Egypt, Nebka, the vindicated, had the wife of Webaoner taken to a plot north of the capital, and he set / fire to her [and threw her in] the river.

'Such' is a marvel which happened [in] the time of your father, the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Nebka, one which the chief lector Webaoner performed. His Majesty the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Khufu, the vindicated, said: Let there be offered to the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Nebka, the vindicated, one thousand loaves of bread, one hundred jugs of beer, an ox, and two cones of incense, and let there be offered to the chief lector Webaoner one large cake, one jug of beer, one joint of meat, and one cone of incense, for I have [seen] an example of his skill. And it was done according to all His Majesty commanded.

[THIRD TALE: THE MARVEL WHICH HAPPENED IN THE REIGN OF KING SNEFRU]

4,20 Bauefre arose to speak, and he said: Let me have [Your] Majesty hear a marvel which took place in the time of your (own) father King Snefru, the vindicated, [one] which the chief lector / Djadjaemonkh [made] and which had not taken place [before] ... [Now His Majesty had searched out all the chambers] of the palace, l.p.h., to seek for him [some diversion ... and he said]: Hasten, bring me the chief [lector] and scribe, [... Djadjaem] onkh! He was brought to him immediately. [His Majesty] said to him: [I have looked through the chambers of the] palace, l.p.h., to seek for myself / some refreshing matter, but I cannot find any. Djadjaemonkh said to him: Let Your Majesty proceed to the lake of the palace, l.p.h., and equip for yourself a boat with all the beauties who are in your palace chamber. The heart of Your Majesty shall be refreshed at the sight of their rowing as they row up and down. You can see the beautiful fish pools of your lake, and you can see its beautiful fields around it. Your heart will be refreshed at this.

5,10 (His Majesty said): I will indeed fit out my rowing excursion. Let there be brought to me twenty oars made of ebony, fitted with gold, with the butts of sandalwood(?) fitted with electrum. Let there be brought to me twenty women, / the most beautiful in form, with 'firm' breasts, with hair well braided, not yet having opened up to give birth. Let there be brought to me twenty nets, and let these nets be given to these women when they have taken off their clothes. Then it was done according to all that His Majesty commanded, and they rowed up and down. The heart of His Majesty was pleased at the sight of their rowing.<sup>6</sup>

5,20 Now one of the strokes combed her tresses, and a fish-shaped charm of new turquoise fell in the water. She became silent and did not row, and her side of the boat became silent and did not row. His Majesty said: Are you not rowing? And they said: Our stroke / is silent and does not row. Then [His] Majesty said to her: [Why] do [you] not row? She said: A fish-shaped charm of new [turquoise] fell into the water. And [His Majesty said to her]: Would you like one to replace [it]? But [she said]: I [prefer] my own [to a look-alike].<sup>7</sup> [His Majesty] said: [Let there be brought again] the [chief] lector [Djadjaemonkh, and he was brought at once]. / His Majesty said: Djadjaemonkh, my brother,<sup>8</sup> I have done as you have said, and the heart of His Majesty was refreshed at the sight of their rowing. But a fish-shaped charm of new turquoise, belonging to one of the leaders, fell into the water. She was silent and did not row. And it came to pass that she ruined her side. I said to her: Why have you stopped rowing? She said to me: It is a fish-shaped charm of new turquoise which has fallen into the water. I said to her: Row! I will replace it! She said to me: I prefer my own to its look-alike. Then said the chief lector Djadjaemonkh his magic sayings. He placed one side of the water of the lake upon the other, and lying upon a potsherd he

6. Philippe Derchain, in *RdE* 21 (1969), 19–25, calls attention to the parallel of the maidens rowing and the goddess Hathor as a rower. The sense of the outing in his view is that of a sort of parody, with the king taking the place of the sun god Re navigating the heavens with the Hathors. The author of our tale would then have stressed the importance of the rulers of Dynasty 5 as the real adherents of Re, in distinction to Snefru as a ruler who merely parodied the god. See H. G. Fischer, in Jan Assmann, Erika Feucht, and Reinhard Grieshammer, eds., *Fragen an die altägyptische Literatur, Studien zum Gedenken an Eberhard Otto*, (Wiesbaden, 1977), 161–65.

7. Evidently a proverb with the sense that she wants the full account of the same thing. See Wm. Spiegelberg, in *ZÄS* 64 (1929): 90–91.

8. This familiar form of address places Snefru in a good light.

6,10 found the fish-shaped charm. Then he brought it back and it was given to its owner. Now as for the water, it was twelve cubits deep, and it amounted to twenty-four cubits after it was folded back. He said his magic sayings, and he brought back the water of the lake to its position. His Majesty passed a holiday with the entire palace, l.p.h. When he came forth, he rewarded the chief lector Djadjaemonkh with all good things.

Such is a marvel which took place in the time of your father, the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Snefru, the vindicated, something done by the chief lector, scribe of the document, Djadjaemonkh. And His Majesty the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Khufu, the vindicated, said: Let there be an offering made to His Majesty the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Snefru, the vindicated, / consisting of one thousand loaves of bread, one hundred jugs of beer, an ox, and two cones of incense, and let there be given a large cake, a jug of beer, and one cone of incense to the chief lector, scribe of the document, Djadjaemonkh. For I have seen an example of his skill. It was done according to all His Majesty commanded.

[THE FOURTH TALE: A MARVEL IN THE TIME OF KING  
KHUFU HIMSELF]

The king's son Hardedef arose to speak, and he said: [You have heard examples of] the skill of those who have passed away, but there one cannot know truth from falsehood. [But there is with] Your Majesty, in your own time, one who is not known [to you ...]. His Majesty said: What is this, Har[dedef, my son? Then said Har]dedef: There is a townsman / named Dedi. He lives in Ded-Snefru, the vindicated. He is a townsman of 110 years, and he eats 500 loaves, a shoulder of beef as meat, and as drink 100 jugs up to this day.<sup>9</sup> He knows how to reattach a head which has been cut off, and he knows how to make a lion go behind him, its tether on the ground. He knows the number of the 'shrines' of the enclosure of Thot. Now His Majesty the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Khufu, the vindicated, had spent much time in seeking for himself these shrines of the enclosure of Thot to fashion for himself their likeness for his horizon. His Majesty said: You yourself, Hardedef, my son, you shall bring him to me.

7,10 Boats were prepared for the king's son, Hardedef, / and he sailed south to Ded-Snefru, the vindicated.

9. The Egyptians often wished for 110 years as an ideal life span.

After these boats were moored at the river bank, he went by land. He sat in a carrying chair of ebony, the poles made of *sesnedjem*-wood and sheathed in gold (leaf).<sup>10</sup> When he reached Dedi, the carrying chair was put down, and he proceeded to address him. It was lying down on a mat at the threshold of his house that he found him, a servant at his head massaging him and another wiping his feet. The king's son Hardedef said: Your condition is like a life before old age, although senility [has come], the time of mooring, burial, and interment. (Yet you) sleep until dawn, free from ailments, and there is no coughing in your throat. Greetings, / O honored one! It is to summon you on the business of my father, King Khufu, the vindicated, that I have come here, and that you may eat the delicacies of the king's giving, the food of those who are in his following, and that he may send you in good time to your fathers who are in the cemetery.

7,20 And this Dedi said: In peace, in peace, Hardedef, king's son, beloved by his father! May your father King Khufu, the vindicated, favor you! May he advance your station among the venerables. May your *Ka* contend with your enemy, and may your *Ba* learn the ways leading to the Portal of the One Who Clothes the Weary One.<sup>11</sup> Greetings, / O king's son!

8,1 The king's son Hardedef stretched out his hands to him and raised him up.<sup>12</sup> He went with him to the riverbank, giving him his arm. Dedi said. Let me have a *kakau*-boat that it may bring me (my) students and my writings. There were made to attend him two boats and their crews.

Dedi went northward in the barge in which the king's son Hardedef was. After he reached the capital, the king's son Hardedef entered to report to His Majesty the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Khufu, the vindicated. The king's son Hardedef said: Sovereign, l.p.h., my lord, I have brought Dedi. His Majesty said: Hasten, bring him to me. His Majesty proceeded to the pillared hall / of the palace, l.p.h., and Dedi was ushered in to him. His Majesty said: What is this, Dedi, my not having seen you (before)? And Dedi said: It is (only) the one who is summoned who comes, Sovereign,

10. Nobles are sometimes shown in such carrying chairs in relief sculpture in the Old Kingdom. A carrying chair much like this one was found in the tomb of Snefru's queen Hetepheres, the mother of Cheops. The chair is now in the Cairo Museum, with a replica in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

11. Formal greetings are exchanged on both sides. The *Ka* and *Ba* are spirits of the dead man and manifestations of his personality. The One Who Clothes the Weary One is the embalmer.

12. Again a signal favor in that a prince condescends to raise up a commoner.

l.p.h. I have been summoned and see I have come. His Majesty said: Is it true, the saying that you know how to reattach a head which has been cut off? Dedi said: Yes, I do know how, Sovereign, l.p.h., my lord. His Majesty said: Let there be brought to me a prisoner who is in confinement, that his punishment may be inflicted. And Dedi said: But not indeed to a man, Sovereign, l.p.h., my lord. For the doing of the like is not commanded unto the august cattle. So there was brought to him a goose, and its head was severed. Then the goose was placed on the western side of the pillared court, and its head on the / eastern side of the pillared court. Dedi said his say of magic words. The goose arose and waddled and likewise its head. After the one (part) reached the other, the goose stood up and cackled. Next he caused a waterfowl to be brought to him, and the like was done with it. Then His Majesty caused that there be brought him an ox, and its head was felled to the ground. Dedi said his say of magic words, and the ox stood up behind him with his tether fallen / to the ground. (The scribe has obviously omitted the recovery of the ox and a paragraph dealing with the lion.)

Then King Khufu, the vindicated, said: Now as for the rumor that you know the number of the 'shrines' of the enclosure of [Thot]? Dedi said: By your favor, I do not know their 'number', Sovereign, l.p.h., my lord, but I do know the place where they are. His Majesty said: Where are they? And Dedi said: There is a chest for flint knives in a chamber called the Inventory in Heliopolis: in that chest.<sup>13</sup> [His Majesty said: Hasten, Bring it to me!] Dedi said: Sovereign, l.p.h., my lord, it is not I who can bring it to you. His Majesty said: Who then can bring it to me? Dedi said: It is the eldest of the three children who are in the womb of Reddedet; he will bring it to you. His Majesty said: I desire this indeed. But [as for] what you say, who is this Reddedet? Dedi said: She is the wife of a *wab*-priest of Re, Lord of Sakhbu, / giving birth to three children of Re, Lord of Sakhbu, of whom it is said that they shall exercise this magisterial office in the entire land. The eldest of them will be chief seer in Heliopolis.<sup>14</sup>

13. The sense of the arrangement or number of the secret chambers is entirely unclear. Possibly they were the architectural plan for a part of the pyramid complex of Cheops, as suggested by the text. In any case, the question of the chambers serves to introduce the matter of Reddedet. E. Hornung, in *ZÄS* 100 (1973): 33–35.

14. In Dynasty 5 a particular emphasis is placed on the sun god Re as the dynastic god. His chief place of worship was On (Greek Heliopolis); Re, Lord of Sakhbu, is a local variant. Sakhbu is in Lower Egyptian Nome II.

As for His Majesty, his heart became very sad at this, and Dedi said: What now is this mood, Sovereign, l.p.h., my lord? Is it because of the three children? I say: First your son, then his son, then one of them.<sup>15</sup> His Majesty said: When shall she give birth, Reddedet? She shall give birth in the month of Proyet on the fifteenth day. His Majesty said: Then the sandbanks of the Two Fishes Canal will be cut off, my servant, (otherwise) I myself could visit it and then I could see the temple of Re, Lord of Sakhbu. Dedi said: I shall cause there to be water four cubits deep on the sandbanks of the Two Fishes Canal. His Majesty proceeded to his palace, and His Majesty said: Let it be commanded to Dedi to (go to) the house of the king's son Hardef that he may dwell there / with him. Fix his rations at one thousand loaves of bread, one hundred jugs of beer, an ox, and one hundred bundles of greens. And one did according to all His Majesty had commanded.

## [THE BIRTH OF THE KINGS]

One of these days it happened that Reddedet took sick and it was with difficulty that she gave birth. The Majesty of Re, Lord of Sakhbu, said to Isis, Nephthys, Meskhenet, Heket, and Khnum:<sup>16</sup> May you proceed that you may deliver Reddedet of the three children who are in her womb; they who shall exercise this magisterial office in the entire land. For they shall build the shrines in your towns, they shall provision your altars, they shall renew your offering tables, and they shall increase your divine offerings.<sup>17</sup> These goddesses proceeded, and they transformed themselves / into musicians, with Khnum accompanying them carrying the birthing-stool. When they reached the house of Rewosre, they found him standing with his apron untied.<sup>18</sup> They proffered to him their necklaces and (their) rattles. But he said to them: My ladies, see, there is a woman in labor, and her bearing is

15. Evidently an abbreviated version of history in which only the builders of the Giza pyramids, Chephren and Mycerinus, are considered as coming between Cheops and the first king of Dynasty 5, Weserkaf.

16. Four goddesses associated with childbirth and the ram god Khnum, regarded as the creator of man on a potter's wheel in one myth.

17. A graphic list of the usefulness of the kings to the gods.

18. Lit. "upside down." E. Staehelin, in *ZÄS* 96 (1970): 125–39, discusses this passage at length. In her view, Rewosre has his apron untied (unknotted) and hanging down as a sort of sympathetic parallel to the untied garments of his wife during childbirth; parallels in other cultures are cited.

difficult. They said to him: Let [us] see her, for we are knowledgeable about childbirth. So he said to them: Proceed! And they entered into the presence of Reddedet. Then they locked the room on her and on themselves. Isis placed herself in front of her, Nephthys behind her, and Hekert hastened the childbirth. Isis then said: Do not be strong (*wsr*) in her womb in this your  
 10,10 name of Wosref (*wsr rf*).<sup>19</sup> / This child slipped forth upon her hands as a child one cubit long, whose bones were firm, the covering of whose limbs was of gold, and whose headdress was of real<sup>20</sup> lapis lazuli. They washed him, his umbilical cord was cut, and he was placed upon a cushion on bricks. Then Meskhenet approached him, and she said: A king who will exercise the kingship in this entire land! Khnum caused his limbs to move.

Next Isis placed herself in front of her (Reddedet), Nephthys behind her, and Heket hastened the childbirth. Isis said: Do not kick (*sab*) in her womb in this your name of Sahure (*sāhu-Re*). And this child slipped out on her hands as a child one cubit long, whose bones were firm, the covering of whose limbs were (of gold), and whose headdress was of real lapis lazuli.  
 10,20 They washed him, his umbilical cord was cut, and he was placed / on a cushion on bricks. Then Meskhenet approached him and she said: A king who will exercise the kingship in this entire land! Khnum caused his limbs to move.

Then Isis placed herself before her, Nephthys behind her, and Heket hastened the childbirth. Isis said: Do not be dark (*kw*) in her womb in this your name of Keku. And this child slipped forth upon her hands as a child one cubit long, whose bones were firm, the covering of whose limbs was of gold, and whose headdress was of real lapis lazuli. Then Meskhenet  
 11,1 approached him, / and she said: A king who will exercise the kingship in this entire land! Khnum caused his limbs to move. They washed him, his umbilical cord was cut, and he was placed on a cushion on bricks.

19. As each child is born, Isis makes a pronouncement involving a pun on the king's name. Weserkaf means "his Ka is strong"; Sahu-Re probably means "one whom Re has well endowed," but there is a pun on *sabu*, "to kick." In Neuserre Kakai there is a pun involving Kakai and Keku, "darkness." H. Altenmüller, in *Chronique d'Égypte* 45 (1970): 223–35, suggested that Reddedet is a pseudonym for Khentkaus, a queen of the end of Dynasty 4, and that she was the mother of the first three kings of Dynasty 5. He further suggests that she may have been the daughter of the same prince Hardedef who introduces the tale. Hence she and her sons would have been descendants of Cheops through a junior branch of the family.

20. As opposed to faience or glass with this color.

Now these goddesses came forth after they had delivered this Reddedet of the three children, and they said: May you be pleased, Rewosre, for there have been born to you three children. And he said to them: My ladies, what can I do for you? Please give this corn to your birthing-stool bearer, and take it as a payment for 'making beer'. And Khnum placed the sack on his back. So they proceeded to the place / from which they came. But Isis  
 11,10 said to these goddesses: What is this, that we are returning without performing a marvel for these children and can report to our father who sent us? So they fashioned three royal crowns, l.p.h., and they placed them in the corn. Then they caused the heavens to turn into a storm and rain, and they turned back to the house and said: Would you please put the corn here in a locked room until we can come back on our northward journey? So they placed the corn in a locked room.<sup>21</sup>

Reddedet cleansed herself in a purification of fourteen days, and she  
 11,20 said to her maidservant: Is the house / prepared? She replied: It is outfitted with everything except for jars (for beer-making), for they have not been brought. Reddedet said: Why haven't the jars been brought? The servant replied: There is not anything here for '(beer-) making', except for some corn of these musicians, which is in the room with their seal. So Reddedet said: Go and bring some of it, for Rewosre will give them its equivalent when he returns. The servant went / and she opened the room.  
 12,1 And she heard the sound of singing, music, dancing, and exultations—everything which is done for a king—in the room. She returned and she repeated everything that she had heard to Reddedet. So she (too) went around the room but could not find the place in which it was being done. Then she put her forehead to the bin and discovered it was being done in it. Then she placed (it) in a chest which was (in turn) placed in another sealed box tied with leather thongs, and she put it in a room with her stores and she sealed it off. When Rewosre came back, returning from the fields, Reddedet related this business to him, and his heart was more pleased than anything. They sat down and celebrated.

After some days had passed, Reddedet had an argument with the maidservant, and she had her punished with a beating. So the maidservant said /  
 12,10 to the people who were in the house: Shall this be done to me? She has given birth to three kings, and I am going and I will tell it to His Majesty the

21. The goddesses leave magical tokens of the kingship for the children in the sack of grain. They invent the storm as an excuse to return.

King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Khufu, the vindicated! So she started out, and she came upon her eldest brother, on her mother's side, tying flax yarn on the threshing floor. He said to her: Where are you off to, little girl? And she told him about this business. Her brother said to her: Is this indeed something to be done, your coming to me thus? And am I to agree to [this] denunciation? Then he took a whip of flax to her, and he gave her a real beating. The maidservant ran to get herself a drink of water and a crocodile

12,20 caught her. Her brother went to tell it to Reddedet, / and he found her sitting with her head on her knee,<sup>22</sup> her heart very sad. He said to her: My lady, why are you so sad? She said: That little girl who grew up in this house, see, she has gone away saying: I am going and I will denounce. Then he put his head down and said: My lady, she stopped by, to tell me [...] that she might go off with me. And I gave her a sound beating, and she went to draw some water, and a crocodile caught her ...

(Here the papyrus breaks off.)

## THE TALE OF THE ELOQUENT PEASANT

**T**his text, dating from the Middle Kingdom, combines the format of the short story with that of a poetic meditation on the need for justice. The narrative of the text is straightforward: a peasant, robbed of his goods, makes appeal to the Chief Steward of the crown. He makes nine separate petitions which constitute the poetic section of the composition. After his first appeal, the Chief Steward is so impressed with the eloquence of the peasant that, following the order of the king, he refuses to help the petitioner. The peasant is thus forced to return time and again, demonstrating each time his ability with rhetoric, and each time his words are recorded for the entertainment of the king. Eventually the peasant receives justice and, in recompense, is given the property of the rich man who had robbed him. The appeal of the text is not so much in its actual content as in the artistic manner in which that content is expressed, for it says nothing new or significant on its subject. The subject of the peasant's speeches is the Egyptian concept of Ma'at. This in itself presents a problem of translation: should we understand the peasant to be speaking about Ma'at, the personalized goddess and abstract concept of order and righteousness? Or is he speaking simply in terms of practical justice? For the purpose of the present translation, I have preferred to retain the Egyptian "Ma'at," as this term, I believe, conveys a better impression of the Egyptian original. The text has been published several times, but the most recent and most convenient edition is:

22. An attitude of mourning or sorrow.