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**CHRISTIAN
JACQ**



THE STONE OF LIGHT
NEFER THE SILENT

The Stone of Light

Nefer the Silent

Christian Jacq

Translated by Sue Dyson



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Christian Jacq is one of France's leading Egyptologists. He is the author of the internationally bestselling *Ramses* series, which has been translated into twenty-four languages and sold more than six million copies worldwide. He is also the author of the stand-alone novel *The Black Pharaoh*.

About the translator

Sue Dyson is a prolific author of both fiction and non-fiction, including over thirty novels, both contemporary and historical. She has also translated a wide variety of French fiction.

Also by Christian Jacq:

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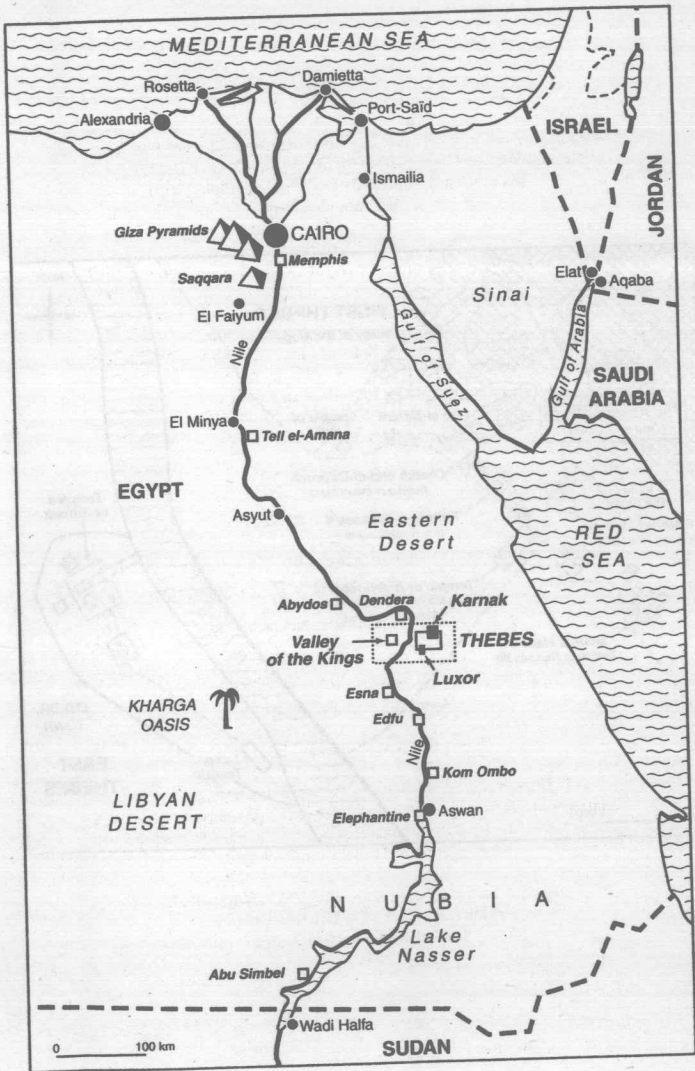
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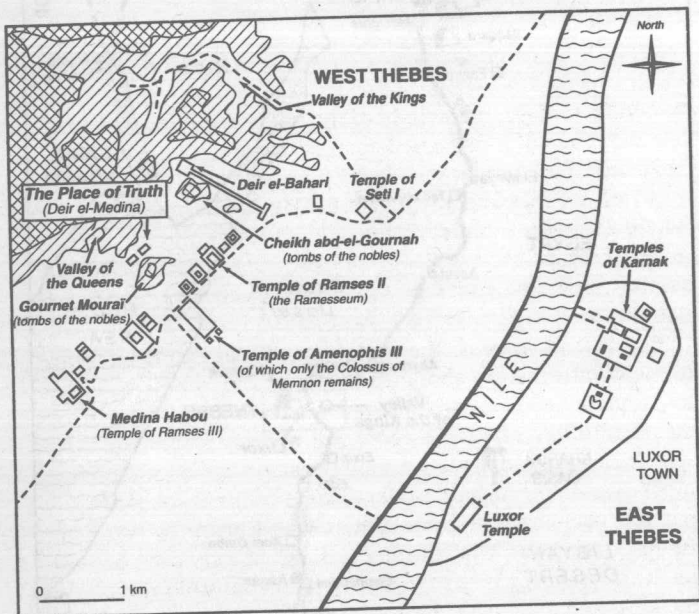
The Stone of Light

Nefer the Silent
The Wise Woman

The Black Pharaoh

The Living Wisdom of Ancient Egypt





Prologue

Around midnight, in the light of the full moon, nine craftsmen left the Place of Truth and began to climb up a narrow path, guided by their overseer.

A hill overlooked the Place of Truth, the desert village where Pharaoh's builders lived, encircled by walls which guarded their secrets from prying eyes. Hidden on the summit, behind a block of limestone, Meh-y stifled a cry of delight.

For several months, the charioteer officer had been trying to glean information about this brotherhood, whose task was to excavate and decorate the tombs in the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens. But nobody knew anything, with the exception of Ramses the Great, protector of the Place of Truth, where masterbuilders, stone-cutters, sculptors and painters were initiated into trades which were essential for Egypt's survival. The artisans' village had its own government, its own legal system, and was responsible directly to the king and his most senior minister, the tjaty.

Meh-y should have concentrated solely on his military career, which promised to be brilliant. But he could never forget that he had applied to join the brotherhood and had been rejected – a noble of his high birth should not have been scorned like that. In his disappointment, Meh-y had directed his ambitions towards the elite corps of charioteers. There his

talent had been recognised immediately, and as a result he had risen swiftly to an important place in the military hierarchy.

Hatred had blossomed in his heart, a hatred which grew with every day that passed, every time he encountered that accursed brotherhood which had humiliated him and whose very existence prevented him from knowing perfect happiness.

So Mehry had taken a decision: either he would discover all the secrets of the Place of Truth and use them to his advantage, or he would destroy this apparently inaccessible settlement, which was so proud of its privileges.

To achieve this, he must make no mistakes and arouse no suspicions. In recent days, he had experienced twinges of doubt. But 'the Servants of the Place of Truth', to give them their official title, were nothing but contemptible braggarts, whose pretended powers were no more than mirages and illusions. And as for the closely guarded Valley of the Kings, surely all it preserved was the corpses of monarchs, frozen in the immobility of death.

By hiding himself in the hills which overlooked the forbidden village, Mehry had hoped to spy upon the rites which no one spoke of; his disappointment had been in proportion to the effort he had expended.

But tonight, at last, it had happened! The event he had been waiting for for so long.

One behind the other, the craftsmen climbed up to the crest of the western hill and walked slowly along the cliff until they reached the pass, where stone huts had been built to house them at certain times of the year. From there, all they had to do was follow the path that led down into the Valley of the Kings.

Despite his feverish excitement, Mehry took care not to dislodge any loose stones which might roll down and betray his presence. He knew the locations of all the observation

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posts, but nevertheless he was risking his life. The posts were manned by armed guards whose duty was to ensure the security of the forbidden valley, and the archers had orders to shoot on sight and without warning.

At the entrance to this most sacred of places, where the pharaohs' mummified bodies had been interred since the beginning of the New Empire, the guards stepped aside to allow the ten Servants of the Place of Truth to pass.

Mehy's heart was pounding as he climbed the steep slope. If he lay on his belly on a flat rock, so that he could see without being seen, he would not miss a single detail of the incredible spectacle.

The overseer stepped away from the group. Turning his attention to the burden he had carried since they left the village, he laid it on the ground, before the entrance to the tomb of Ramses the Great, and removed the white cloth that covered it.

A stone.

A simple stone, hewn into the shape of a cube. Light sprang forth from it, a light so powerful that it lit up the monumental gateway to Pharaoh's House of Eternity. The sun shone in the night, darkness was driven away.

For a long time the ten craftsmen paid homage to the stone, then the overseer picked it up again and held it while two of his subordinates opened the door to the tomb. He entered first, the other craftsmen followed, and the procession vanished from sight, the dark depths lit up by the stone.

Mehy remained utterly dumbstruck for several minutes. No, he had not been dreaming. The brotherhood did indeed possess fabulous treasures. They knew the secret of the light: he had seen the stone from which it came, a stone which was neither an illusion nor a legend. Human beings, and not gods, had fashioned it and knew how to use it. And what about the persistent rumours that they were producing piles of gold in their workshops?

Undreamt-of horizons were opening up before him. He now knew that the origin of Ramses the Great's prodigious fortune was right here, in the Place of Truth. That was why the brotherhood lived apart from the world, hidden behind the walls of their village.

'What are you doing here, fellow?'

Mehy turned round slowly and saw a Nubian guard armed with a cudgel and a dagger.

'I . . . I'm lost.'

'This area is forbidden,' said the guard. 'Who are you?'

'I belong to the king's personal guard and I'm on a special mission,' declared Mehya with a flourish.

'No one told me anything about this.'

'They wouldn't have. No one was to know about it.'

'Why not?'

'Because I have to check that the security measures are being applied with the necessary rigour and that no intruder can get into the Valley of the Kings. Well done, guard. You've just demonstrated that the current system is effective.'

The Nubian looked puzzled. 'All the same, my commander should have warned me.'

'Can't you see that that was impossible?'

'We'll go and see him. I can't just let you go.'

'You are doing your job perfectly.'

Under the light of the full moon, Mehya's conciliatory smile reassured the Nubian and he slipped his cudgel through his belt.

As swiftly as a sand-viper, Mehya charged head-first and struck the guard full in the chest. The unfortunate man staggered backwards and tumbled down the slope, coming to rest on a ledge overlooking the Valley.

At the risk of breaking his neck, Mehya climbed down after him and saw that, in spite of a deep wound on his forehead, the man was still alive. Mehya paid no heed to his victim's

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pleading gaze; he picked up a pointed stone and finished him off with a crushing blow to the skull.

The cold-hearted assassin waited for a few long moments. When he was certain he had not been spotted, he climbed back to the top of the hill, taking great care to find secure hand-holds. Taking even greater precautions than before, he walked away from the forbidden place.

Thanks to this wonderful night, he now had only one idea in his head: to decipher the mystery of the Place of Truth. But how could he achieve that on his own? Since he could not enter the village, he would have to find a means of obtaining reliable information.

The murderer foresaw a splendid future. The secrets and riches of the brotherhood would belong to him, and him alone!

1

Life was so monotonous. Ploughing immediately after the annual Nile flood, sowing, reaping and harvesting, stocking up the granaries, watching out for locusts, rodents and hippos which might lay waste the fields. Then there was irrigation, looking after your tools, plaiting ropes at night instead of sleeping, watching over the flocks and the teams, not to mention forever worrying about your piece of land and never thinking of anything beyond the quality of the wheat and the state of your cows' health . . . Yes, it was utterly monotonous, and Ardent could stand it no longer.

The young man was sitting under a sycamore tree, where the fields met the desert. It offered him plenty of shade, but he was unable to get off to sleep and enjoy a well-deserved rest before heading to the family pastures to tend the oxen. At sixteen, Ardent was over three and a half cubits tall and built like a giant; and he had no desire to settle for the life of a peasant, as his father, grandfather and great-grandfather had done.

Just as he did every day, he had come to this quiet spot and, using a little piece of wood he had whittled, had drawn animals in the sand. Drawing. He would have loved to draw for hours on end, then add colour and recreate a donkey, a dog and a thousand other creatures.

Ardent had great powers of observation. What he saw

entered his heart, which then gave orders to his hand – though his hand was completely free to trace the contours of an image which seemed more alive than everyday reality. What the young boy really needed were papyrus, styli and pigments. But his father was a farmer, and had laughed in his face when the young lad told him what he wanted.

There was only one place where Ardent could find everything he desired: the Place of Truth. Nobody knew what went on inside the walled village, but those walls enclosed the greatest painters and illustrators in the kingdom, those who were authorised to decorate Pharaoh's tomb.

A peasant's son had no chance of entering that fabled brotherhood. Yet the young man could not help dreaming of the happiness of those who could devote themselves wholly to their vocation, forgetting the meanness of daily life.

'Well, Ardent, having a rest, are we?'

The voice, heavy with irony, belonged to a lad of about twenty named Hayseed. He was tall and muscular, and dressed only in a short kilt of plaited rushes. By his side stood his younger brother, Fat-Legs, a stupid smile on his face. At fifteen, Fat-Legs was much heavier than Hayseed, because of all the cakes he gobbled every day.

'Leave me alone, you two,' said Ardent.

'This place doesn't belong to you,' said Hayseed. 'We've a right to come here.'

'I don't want to see you.'

'Ah, but we want to see you. And you've got some explaining to do.'

'What about?'

'As if you didn't know!' said Hayseed. 'Where were you last night?'

'Who do you think you are, a policeman?'

'Does the name Nati mean anything to you?' demanded Hayseed.

Ardent smiled. 'It certainly does.'

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Hayseed took a step towards him. 'You filthy swine! She's betrothed to me, and last night, you . . . you *dared*—'

'It wasn't my idea. Nati came looking for me.'

'You're lying!'

Ardent got to his feet. 'I don't let anyone call me a liar.'

'Because of you, my bride won't be a virgin.'

'So what? If she has any sense, Nati won't marry you at all.'

Hayseed and Fat-Legs produced a leather whip. It was a rough and ready weapon, but a formidable one.

'Let's leave it there,' suggested Ardent. 'Nati and I spent a pleasant moment together, it's true, but that's just nature, isn't it? As a gesture of goodwill, I agree not to see her again — to be frank, I shan't miss her.'

'We're going to spoil your looks,' announced Hayseed. 'With your new face, you won't be seducing any more girls.'

'I'd quite enjoy correcting two imbeciles, but it's hot, and I'd rather finish my siesta.'

Raising his right arm, Fat-Legs threw himself at Ardent. Suddenly, his target disappeared from in front of him and he was lifted up and flung into the air; he fell back down again head first, and crumpled against the trunk of the sycamore, unconscious and unmoving.

Hayseed was rooted to the spot for a moment; then he reacted. He lashed the whip through the air, intending to slice Ardent's face open, but the young giant parried the blow with his arm. An ugly cracking noise put an end to the short struggle. Hayseed dropped the whip and fled, howling with the pain of a dislocated shoulder.

There was not even a drop of sweat on Ardent's brow. Since the age of five he had been used to fighting, and he had taken some real drubbings before learning the winning moves. He never provoked a fight but, confident in his strength, he never walked away from one, either. Life did not hand out gifts, and neither did he.

The thought of spending the afternoon in the pasture and then returning home like a good boy, bearing milk and firewood, made Ardent feel sick.

Tomorrow would be even worse than today, even duller, even more boring, and the young man would continue to lose heart, as if his blood was slowly draining away. What did his family's little farm mean to him? His father dreamt of ripe corn and milch cows, the neighbours envied him his success, the girls already saw Ardent as his father's lucky heir who, thanks to his great strength, would double production and become rich. They dreamt of marrying a wealthy peasant and having lots of children, thus ensuring a happy old age.

Thousands were content with that destiny, but not Ardent. On the contrary, to him it seemed more oppressive than the walls of a prison. Abandoning the cattle, which would be perfectly all right without him, the young man set off into the desert, his gaze fixed on the Peak of the West. It loomed over Thebes, the fantastically rich city of the god Amon, where the sacred precinct of Karnak had been built to house numerous temples.

On the west bank were the valleys of the kings, queens and nobles, which had welcomed the tombs of these illustrious people, and also the pharaohs' houses of eternity, including the Temple of a Million Years built by Ramses. The craftsmen of the Place of Truth had created wonders – people said they had worked hand in hand with the gods, and under their protection.

In the secret heart of Karnak, as in the humblest shrine, the gods and goddesses spoke, but who truly understood their message? As for Ardent, he deciphered the world by drawing in the sand, but he lacked the knowledge to progress further.

He could not accept this injustice. Why did the goddess hidden in the Peak of the West speak to the craftsmen of the Place of Truth, yet remain silent when he begged her to answer his call? The sun-beaten mountain abandoned him to