

# BOY OF THE PYRAMIDS

*A Mystery of Ancient Egypt*



THE GOOD AND THE BEAUTIFUL LIBRARY

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# Chapter 1

## Fourteen Copper Rings

The sun, rising over the desert cliffs, shone across the green valley of Egypt and the broad River Nile right into Kaffe's eyes. It woke him up, and Kaffe didn't like to be waked that way. He scowled. Then he sat up in bed with his eyes still shut tight.

"Num!" he called. "Num!"

There was no answer, so he tried again, louder this time: "Num, draw the curtains!"

Still, no answer came. Suddenly Kaffe heard something that sounded very much like a snore. He forgot that he was going to stay sleepy so that he could take another nap after Num had drawn the curtains to keep out the sun. He opened his eyes and bounced out of bed, and there was Num, his black body shining in the sunlight, snoring peacefully on the reed mat at the foot of Kaffe's bed.

"Num," cried Kaffe, "get up!" He put out his foot to give the black man a kick in the ribs. People weren't considerate of their servants long ago in Egypt, and anyway, Num was a slave. He wasn't used to consideration.

But Kaffe's foot stopped short just before it touched Num's ribs. Beyond the slave was a cedarwood chair, and

folded carefully on the chair was Kaffe's kilt of fine white linen. Not his everyday kilt, but his best one, with his copper-and-turquoise collar laid on top of it.

When he saw that, Kaffe remembered everything and forgot to be cross because Num had overslept and let the sun shine in his eyes. For this was the day his father was taking him to Memphis to spend the copper rings he had been saving.

Altogether Kaffe had fourteen copper rings. He was very rich for a ten-year-old Egyptian boy. That was because his father had given him two fields. The harvest from them belonged to Kaffe, and his father had paid him eight copper rings for his first harvest and six for his second. That very morning he was going to the great city of Memphis to spend the copper rings, all fourteen of them.

With a whoop Kaffe bounded over Num, out of his room, through the house, and into the garden. By the time Num had risen sleepily to his feet wondering what all the noise was about, Kaffe was splashing joyfully in the garden pool.

He wondered what he could buy for fourteen copper rings. He had never bought anything before.

"Let's see," he said aloud. "I might buy a new ball. A husk ball covered with leather. But that wouldn't cost very much. Maybe I could get one of the wooden bakers that kneads dough if you pull a string—or I could get Mother a new bracelet."

Then suddenly he had an idea, such a wonderful idea that he dove under the water and kicked his feet in the air. "I shall buy a dagger," he said to himself. "One with a golden handle and a flint blade, or maybe a copper blade. A real dagger." None of the boys he knew had one, but then, none of them owned two fields like Kaffe. "And," he added, "if it doesn't cost too much, I'll get the wooden baker, too."

Blowing and sputtering, Kaffe stuck his head out of the water, only to have it pushed swiftly under again. "What—," he began as soon as he could speak.

"Look out," said a voice above him, "or the crocodile will get you!"

Kaffe winked the water out of his eyes. His father, Socharis, was standing on the edge of the pool. "And I suppose it was the crocodile who dunked me," answered Kaffe, laughing. Then he saw his father's kilt, all freshly pleated, and his newly curled wig, and the black false beard that Socharis wore whenever he went away anywhere.

"Oh, Father," Kaffe cried, "you are ready to go. You'll wait for me, won't you?" He scrambled out of the pool.

"There is no hurry," answered Socharis. "We shall eat our breakfast here while you dry yourself in the sun."

He clapped his hands. Almost like magic a slave appeared carrying a big bowl of dates, figs, bananas, and grapes. Behind him came two more slaves, one with a bowl of milk for Kaffe and the other with a plate of wheat cakes. This was their breakfast.

“Now, Kaffe,” said his father when they had finished, “as soon as you are dressed, we can start. I shall tell the slaves to get the boat ready.”

Kaffe ran into the house and burst into his room. Num was there waiting to hand him his kilt and necklace and help strap on his papyrus sandals. That was all Kaffe wore, so it did not take him long to get dressed. He was ready in almost as short a time as it takes to tell it.

On a little stand near the door was an ebony box with a border of lotus and papyrus flowers carved around the sides and the figures of the god and goddess of the Nile on the top. In this box Kaffe kept his copper rings. He opened it and counted them to be sure that they were all there, then snatched it up and ran from the room. At the garden door he stopped. Just outside two people were talking, and they were talking about him.

“It is a great deal of money for a little boy to spend.” That was Nasha, his mother. Kaffe sighed. He thought he had better not tell her about wanting to buy a dagger. He didn’t think she would like it.

“Now, don’t worry, Nasha,” he heard his father say. “It will turn out all right.”

“I hope so,” she answered. “But don’t let him spend all those rings foolishly, will you, Socharis?”

“Certainly not. Certainly not,” replied Socharis. “Where is that boy?” he asked, looking around.

“Here I am, Father,” called Kaffe, running out of the house. “Good morning, Mother.”

“Good morning, Son.” Nasha bent down to kiss him. One hand, with the fingers dyed henna color, rested lightly on his shoulder. Kaffe thought she was very beautiful. Her hair, without her wig, was short and black like his. The green paint around her eyes made them look very large and dark, and she wore a soft green robe over her white linen dress.

“What are you going to buy in Memphis, Kaffe?” she asked.

Kaffe had been afraid she would ask that. “Oh, something very fine,” he answered. “It’s to be a surprise. You’ll see when we get home.” He hopped first on one foot, then on the other. “Can we go now, Father?” he asked.

“Yes, I think the boat is ready.” Socharis picked up his gold-headed staff and turned to leave.

“Goodbye, Mother,” shouted Kaffe and tore down the garden path to the big stone gateway on the river bank before Nasha had time to ask any more questions.

Beyond the gateway was the boat. It was a very gay boat. The rails and even the big steering oar were painted brightly in blue and red and black and white. In the stern was a painted canopy under which Socharis and Kaffe could sit out of the sun. Twelve slaves were already bowed over their oars in the middle of the boat, and as Socharis came down the steps, other slaves were making fast a smaller boat with a cloth-covered cabin that they would tow down the river after them. This was the kitchen boat, and on it were still more slaves and reed baskets of food to be cooked for their dinner.

Socharis stepped on board and sat down under the canopy. Num followed with the litter they would need to carry them through the streets of Memphis. The steersman shouted an order, the slaves pulled on the oars and began their singsong chant, and the boat swung out into the river.

Kaffe looked back at the shore. Only the tops of the trees and the awning over the flat roof of the house showed above the high garden wall. Outside the wall were fields where many slaves were working in the hot sun. There was one field in the very center. That was one of Kaffe's fields. His other field was next to it, farther away from the river, and far off behind them both rose the yellow cliffs at the valley's edge. Beyond them was the desert.

Soon the house and the field with the fig tree in the center were hidden from sight behind a bend in the river. Kaffe sat down beside Socharis on a low stool. "Where are we going first when we get to Memphis?" he asked.

He hoped his father would say that he could decide, but Socharis said, "I have an errand to do at the slave market. I need a new field hand and another woman for your mother."

"Oh," said Kaffe. He was disappointed. He did not like to go to the slave market. Sometimes the slaves cried when they were separated from their families. This often happened when one man wanted part of a family and another man wanted another part. Kaffe wondered if the trip to Memphis was going to be as much fun as he had thought.



But it was pleasant on the river. They passed little villages and houses, like the one Kaffe lived in, and tall marshes of papyrus plants. These were reeds from which paper and ropes and sandals were made. Then there were all kinds of boats to watch. One that sailed past them carried a mummy case painted in bright colors and decorated with gold. This was a funeral boat, and the mummy case was a coffin made in the shape of a man's figure. The slaves who rowed the boat were chanting mournfully.

“Are they going to Giza where Khufu is building his pyramid, Father?” asked Kaffe. Khufu was the pharaoh of Egypt, the king who ruled over the whole Nile Valley and all the people in it down to the very last slave. Most of the rich noblemen of the country were buried around the great tomb that he was building for himself.

“Yes. They probably are going to Giza,” said Socharis in answer to Kaffe's question.

After the funeral boat had passed them, they met a nobleman who Socharis knew, bound up the river for a picnic. Then they began to see fishing boats floating down to the marshes at the river's mouth, and trading boats from far up the Nile, low in the water with their cargoes of ivory and ebony and gold. As they drew near Memphis, the river seemed alive with boats. It was fun to be with Socharis because he could always tell what a boat had in it if he knew where it came from.

Kaffe pointed to a big boat. “Where is that one from?” he asked. He knew it must have come from far away, for it was big enough to have a mast and sail as well as oars.

“It has come from Syria with a load of cedarwood,” answered Socharis. “You can smell it, Kaffe.” And Kaffe could. The air was spicy with the smell of the wood.

“That smaller boat over there,” Socharis went on, “brings copper from Sinai.” Soon he had told Kaffe where all the boats came from and what goods they were carrying.

All the bigger boats seemed to be trying to land at once. Sailors shouted at each other, oars scraped together, and every so often there was a sharp snap of an overseer’s whip on a slave’s bare back. Socharis’ boat threaded its way toward shore. The slaves shipped their oars, and the boat slid quietly up to the landing stairs.

Then the litter was set down on the ground so that Socharis and Kaffe could step in. This was a kind of chair that was carried on poles by four slaves, and there was plenty of room in it for Kaffe and Socharis to sit side by side. When they had settled themselves comfortably, the slaves picked up the carrying poles and away they went toward the marketplace, with Num running ahead to clear a way for them through the narrow, crowded streets.