

CHAPTER IX

THE SMITING OF AMON

That evening I sat ill at ease in my work-chamber in Seti's palace, making pretence to write, I who felt that great evils threatened my lord the Prince, and knew not what to do to turn them from him. The door opened, and old Pambasa the chamberlain appeared and addressed me by my new titles, saying that the Hebrew lady Merapi, who had been my nurse in sickness, wished to speak with me. Presently she came and stood before me.

"Scribe Ana," she said, "I have but just seen my uncle Jabez, who has come, or been sent, with a message to me," and she hesitated.

"Why was he sent, Lady? To bring you news of Laban?"

"Not so. Laban has fled away and none know where he is, and Jabez has only escaped much trouble as the uncle of a traitress by undertaking this mission."

"What is the mission?"

"To pray me, if I would save myself from death and the vengeance of God, to work upon the heart of his Highness, which I know not how to do----"

"Yet I think you might find means, Merapi."

"----save through you, his friend and counsellor," she went on, turning away her face. "Jabez has learned that it is in the mind of Pharaoh utterly to destroy the people of Israel."

"How does he know that, Merapi?"

"I cannot say, but I think all the Hebrews know. I knew it myself though none had told me. He has learned also that this cannot be done under the law of Egypt unless the Prince who is heir to the throne and of full age consents. Now I am come to pray you to pray the Prince not to consent."

"Why not pray to the Prince yourself, Merapi----" I began, when from the shadows behind me I heard the voice of Seti, who had entered by the private door bearing some writings in his hand, saying:

"And what prayer has the lady Merapi to make to me? Nay, rise and speak, Moon of Israel."

"O Prince," she pleaded, "my prayer is that you will save the Hebrews from death by the sword, as you alone have the power to do."

At this moment the doors opened and in swept the royal Userti.

"What does this woman here?" she asked.

"I think that she came to see Ana, wife, as I did, and as doubtless you do. Also being here she prays me to save her people from the sword."

"And I pray you, husband, to give her people to the sword, which they have earned, who would have murdered you."

"And been paid, everyone of them, Userti, unless some still linger beneath the rods," he added with a shudder. "The rest are innocent--why should they die?"

"Because your throne hangs upon it, Seti. I say that if you continue to thwart the will of Pharaoh, as by the law of Egypt you can do, he will disinherit you and set your cousin Amenmeses in your place, as by the law of Egypt he can do."

"I thought it, Userti. Yet why should I turn my back upon the right over a matter of my private fortunes? The question is--is it the right?"

She stared at him in amazement, she who never understood Seti and could not dream that he would throw away the greatest throne in all the world to save a subject people, merely because he thought that they should not die. Still, warned by some instinct, she left the first question unanswered, dealing only with the second.

"It is the right," she said, "for many reasons whereof I need give but

one, for in it lie all the others. The gods of Egypt are the true gods whom we must serve and obey, or perish here and hereafter. The god of the Israelites is a false god and those who worship him are heretics and by their heresy under sentence of death. Therefore it is most right that those whom the true gods have condemned should die by the swords of their servants."

"That is well argued, Userti, and if it be so, mayhap my mind will become as yours in this matter, so that I shall no longer stand between Pharaoh and his desire. But is it so? There's the problem. I will not ask you why you say that the gods of the Egyptians are the true gods, because I know what you would answer, or rather that you could give no answer. But I will ask this lady whether her god is a false god, and if she replies that he is not, I will ask her to prove this to me if she can. If she is able to prove it, then I think that what I said to Pharaoh to-day I shall repeat three days hence. If she is not able to prove it, then I shall consider very earnestly of the matter. Answer now, Moon of Israel, remembering that many thousands of lives may hang on what you say."

"O your Highness," began Merapi. Then she paused, clasped her hands and looked upwards. I think that she was praying, for her lips moved. As she stood thus I saw, and I think Seti saw also, a very wonderful light grow on her face and gather in her eyes, a kind of divine fire of inspiration and resolve.

"How can I, a poor Hebrew maiden, prove to your Highness that my God is the true God and that the gods of Egypt are false gods? I know not, and yet, is there any one god among all the many whom you worship, whom you are prepared to set up against him?"

"Of a surety, Israelite," answered Userti. "There is Amon-Ra, Father of the gods, of whom all other gods have their being, and from whom they draw their strength. Yonder his statue sits in the sanctuary of his ancient temple. Let your god stir him from his place! But what will you bring forward against the majesty of Amon-Ra?"

"My God has no statues, Princess, and his place is in the hearts of men, or so I have been taught by his prophets. I have nothing to bring forward in this war save that which must be offered in all wars--my life."

"What do you mean?" asked Seti, astounded.

"I mean that I, unfriended and alone, will enter the presence of Amon-Ra in his chosen sanctuary, and in the name of my God will challenge him to kill me, if he can."

We stared at her, and Userti exclaimed:

"If he can! Harken now to this blasphemer, and do you, Seti, accept her challenge as hereditary high-priest of the god Amon? Let her life pay

forfeit for her sacrilege."

"And if the great god Amon cannot, or does not deign to kill you, Lady, how will that prove that your god is greater than he?" asked the Prince.

"Perhaps he might smile and in his pity, let the insult pass, as your god did by me."

"Thus it shall be proved, your Highness. If naught happens to me, or if I am protected from anything that does happen, then I will dare to call upon my god to work a sign and a wonder, and to humble Amon-Ra before your eyes."

"And if your god should also smile and let the matter pass, Lady, as he did by me the other day when his priests called upon him, what shall we have learned as to his strength, or as to that of Amon-Ra?"

"O Prince, you will have learned nothing. Yet if I escape from the wrath of Amon and my God is deaf to my prayer, then I am ready to be delivered over into the hands of the priests of Amon that they may avenge my sacrilege upon me."

"There speaks a great heart," said Seti; "yet I am not minded that this lady should set her life upon such an issue. I do not believe that either the high-god of Egypt or the god of the Israelites will stir, but I am quite sure that the priests of Amon will avenge the sacrilege, and that cruelly enough. The dice are loaded against you, Lady. You shall

not prove your faith with blood."

"Why not?" asked Userti. "What is this girl to you, Seti, that you should stand between her and the fruit of her wickedness, you who at least in name are the high-priest of the god whom she blasphemes and who wear his robes at temple feasts? She believes in her god, leave it to her god to help her as she has dared to say he will."

"You believe in Amon, Userti. Are you prepared to stake your life against hers in this contest?"

"I am not so mad and vain, Seti, as to believe that the god of all the world will descend from heaven to save me at my prayer, as this impious girl pretends that she believes."

"You refuse. Then, Ana, what say you, who are a loyal worshipper of Amon?"

"I say, O Prince, that it would be presumptuous of me to take precedence of his high-priest in such a matter."

Seti smiled and answered:

"And the high-priest says that it would be presumptuous of him to push so far the prerogative of a high office which he never sought."

"Your Highness," broke in Merapi in her honeyed, pleading voice, "I pray you to be gracious to me, and to suffer me to make this trial, which I have sought, I know not why. Words such as I have spoken cannot be recalled. Already they are registered in the books of Eternity, and soon or late, in this way or in that, must be fulfilled. My life is staked, and I desire to learn at once if it be forfeit."

Now even Userti looked on her with admiration, but answered only:

"Of a truth, Israelite, I trust that this courage will not forsake you when you are handed over to the mercies of Ki, the Sacrificer of Amon, and the priests, in the vaults of the temple you would profane."

"I also trust that it will not, your Highness, if such should be my fate. Your word, Prince of Egypt."

Seti looked at her standing before him so calmly with bowed head, and hands crossed upon her breast. Then he looked at Userti, who wore a mocking smile upon her face. She read the meaning of that smile as I did. It was that she did not believe that he would allow this beautiful woman, who had saved his life, to risk her life for the sake of any or all the powers of heaven or hell. For a little while he walked to and fro about the chamber, then he stopped and said suddenly addressing, not Merapi, but Userti:

"Have your will, remembering that if this brave woman fails and dies,

her blood is on your hands, and that if she triumphs and lives, I shall hold her to be one of the noblest of her sex, and shall make study of all this matter of religion. Moon of Israel, as titular high-priest of Amon-Ra, I accept your challenge on behalf of the god, though whether he will take note of it I do not know. The trial shall be made to-morrow night in the sanctuary of the temple, at an hour that will be communicated to you. I shall be present to make sure that you meet with justice, as will some others. Register my commands, Scribe Ana, and let the head-priest of Amon, Roi, and the sacrificer to Amon, Ki the Magician, be summoned, that I may speak with them. Farewell, Lady."

She went, but at the door turned and said:

"I thank you, Prince, on my own behalf, and on that of my people. Whatever chances, I beseech you do not forget the prayer that I have made to you to save them, being innocent, from the sword. Now I ask that I may be left quite alone till I am summoned to the temple, who must make such preparation as I can to meet my fate, whatever it may be."

Userti departed also without a word.

"Oh! friend, what have I done?" said Seti. "Are there any gods? Tell me, are there any gods?"

"Perhaps we shall learn to-morrow night, Prince," I answered. "At least Merapi thinks that there is a god, and doubtless has been commanded to

put her faith to proof. This, as I believe, was the real message that Jabez her uncle has brought to her."

It was the hour before the dawn, just when the night is darkest. We stood in the sanctuary of the ancient temple of Amon-Ra, that was lit with many lamps. It was an awful place. On either side the great columns towered to the massive roof. At the head of the sanctuary sat the statue of Amon-Ra, thrice the size of a man. On his brow, rising from the crown, were two tall feathers of stone, and in his hands he held the Scourge of Rule and the symbols of Power and Everlastingness. The lamplight flickered upon his stern and terrible face staring towards the east. To his right was the statue of Mut, the Mother of all things. On her head was the double crown of Egypt and the uræus crest, and in her hand the looped cross, the sign of Life eternal. To his left sat Khonsu, the hawk-headed god of the moon. On his head was the crescent of the young moon carrying the disc of the full moon; in his right hand he also held the looped cross, the sign of Life eternal, and in his left the Staff of Strength. Such was this mighty triad, but of these the greatest was Amon-Ra, to whom the shrine was dedicated. Fearful they stood towering above us against the background of blackness.

Gathered there were Seti the Prince, clothed in a priest's white robe, and wearing a linen headdress, but no ornaments, and Userti the Princess, high-priestess of Hathor, Lady of the West, Goddess of Love

and Nature. She wore Hathor's vulture headdress, and on it the disc of the moon fashioned of silver. Also were present Roi the head-priest, clad in his sacerdotal robes, an old and wizened man with a strong, fierce face, Ki the Sacrificer and Magician, Bakenkhonsu the ancient, myself, and a company of the priests of Amon-Ra, Mut, and Khonsu. From behind the statues came the sound of solemn singing, though who sang we could not see.

Presently from out of the darkness that lay beyond the lamps appeared a woman, led by two priestesses and wrapped in a long cloak. They brought her to an open place in front of the statue of Amon, took from her the cloak and departed, glancing back at her with eyes of hate and fear. There before us stood Merapi, clad in white, with a simple wimple about her head made fast beneath her chin with that scarabæus clasp which Seti had given to her in the city of Goshen, one spot of brightest blue amid a cloud of white. She looked neither to right nor left of her. Once only she glanced at the towering statue of the god that frowned above, then with a little shiver, fixed her eyes upon the pattern of the floor.

"What does she look like?" whispered Bakenkhonsu to me.

"A corpse made ready for the embalmers," I answered.

He shook his great head.

"Then a bride made ready for her husband."

Again he shook his head.

"Then a priestess about to read from the roll of Mysteries."

"Now you have it, Ana, and to understand what she reads, which few priestesses ever do. Also all three answers were right, for in this woman I seem to see doom that is Death, life that is Love, and spirit that is Power. She has a soul which both Heaven and Earth have kissed."

"Aye, but which of them will claim her in the end?"

"That we may learn before the dawn, Ana. Hush! the fight begins."

The head-priest, Roi, advanced and, standing before the god, sprinkled his feet with water and with perfume. Then he stretched out his hands, whereon all present prostrated themselves, save Merapi only, who stood alone in that great place like the survivor of a battle.

"Hail to thee, Amon-Ra," he began, "Lord of Heaven, Establisher of all things, Maker of the gods, who unrolled the skies and built the foundations of the Earth. O god of gods, appears before thee this woman Merapi, daughter of Nathan, a child of the Hebrew race that owns thee not. This woman blasphemes thy might; this woman defies thee; this woman sets up her god above thee. Is it not so, woman?"

"It is so," answered Merapi in a low voice.

"Thus does she defy thee, thou Only One of many Forms, saying 'if the god Amon of the Egyptians be a greater god than my god, let him snatch me out of the arms of my god and here in this the shrine of Amon take the breath from out my lips and leave me a thing of clay.' Are these thy words, O woman?"

"They are my words," she said in the same low voice, and oh! I shivered as I heard.

The priest went on.

"O Lord of Time, Lord of Life, Lord of Spirits and the Divinities of Heaven, Lord of Terror, come forth now in thy majesty and smite this blasphemer to the dust."

Roi withdrew and Seti stood forward.

"Know, O god Amon," he said, addressing the statue as though he were speaking to a living man, "from the lips of me, thy high-priest, by birth the Prince and Heir of Egypt, that great things hang upon this matter here in the Land of Egypt, mayhap even who shall sit upon the throne that thou givest to its kings. This woman of Israel dares thee to thy face, saying that there is a greater god than thou art and that thou canst not harm her through the buckler of his strength. She says,

moreover, that she will call upon her god to work a sign and a wonder upon thee. Lastly, she says that if thou dost not harm her and if her god works no sign upon thee, then she is ready to be handed over to thy priests and die the death of a blasphemer. Thy honour is set against her life, O great God of Egypt, and we, thy worshippers, watch to see the balance turn."

"Well and justly put," muttered Bakenkhonsu to me. "Now if Amon fails us, what will you think of Amon, Ana?"

"I shall learn the high-priest's mind and think what the high-priest thinks," I answered darkly, though in my heart I was terribly afraid for Merapi, and, to speak truth, for myself also, because of the doubts which arose in me and would not be quenched.

Seti withdrew, taking his stand by Userti, and Ki stood forward and said:

"O Amon, I thy Sacrificer, I thy Magician, to whom thou givest power, I the priest and servant of Isis, Mother of Mysteries, Queen of the company of the gods, call upon thee. She who stands before thee is but a Hebrew woman. Yet, as thou knowest well, O Father, in this house she is more than woman, inasmuch as she is the Voice and Sword of thine enemy, Jahveh, god of the Israelites. She thinks, mayhap, that she has come here of her own will, but thou knowest, Father Amon, as I know, that she is sent by the great prophets of her people, those magicians who guide

her soul with spells to work thee evil and to set thee, Amon, beneath the heel of Jahveh. The stake seems small, the life of this one maid, no more; yet it is very great. This is the stake, O Father: Shall Amon rule the world, or Jahveh. If thou fallest to-night, thou fallest for ever; if thou dost triumph to-night, thou dost triumph for ever. In yonder shape of stone hides thy spirit; in yonder shape of woman's flesh hides the spirit of thy foe. Smite her, O Amon, smite her to small dust; let not the strength that is in her prevail against thy strength, lest thy name should be defiled and sorrows and loss should come upon the land which is thy throne; lest, too, the wizards of the Israelites should overcome us thy servants. Thus prayeth Ki thy magician, on whose soul it has pleased thee to pour strength and wisdom."

Then followed a great silence.

Watching the statue of the god, presently I thought that it moved, and as I could see by the stir among them, so did the others. I thought that its stone eyes rolled, I thought that it lifted the Scourge of Power in its granite hand, though whether these things were done by some spirit or by some priest, or by the magic of Ki, I do not know. At the least, a great wind began to blow about the temple, stirring our robes and causing the lamps to flicker. Only the robes of Merapi did not stir. Yet she saw what I could not see, for suddenly her eyes grew frightened.

"The god is awake," whispered Bakenkhonsu. "Now good-bye to your fair Israelite. See, the Prince trembles, Ki smiles, and the face of Userti

glows with triumph."

As he spoke the blue scarabæus was snatched from Merapi's breast as though by a hand. It fell to the floor as did her wimple, so that now she appeared with her rich hair flowing down her robe. Then the eyes of the statue seemed to cease to roll, the wind ceased to blow, and again there was silence.

Merapi stooped, lifted the wimple, replaced it on her head, found the scarabæus clasp, and very quietly, as a woman who was tiring herself might do, made it fast in its place again, a sight at which I heard Userti gasp.

For a long while we waited. Watching the faces of the congregation, I saw amazement and doubt on those of the priests, rage on that of Ki, and on Seti's the flicker of a little smile. Merapi's eyes were closed as though she were asleep. At length she opened them, and turning her head towards the Prince said:

"O high-priest of Amon-Ra, has your god worked his will on me, or must I wait longer before I call upon my God?"

"Do what you will or can, woman, and make an end, for almost it is the moment of dawn when the temple worship opens."

Then Merapi clasped her hands, and looking upwards, prayed aloud very

sweetly and simply, saying:

"O God of my fathers, trusting in Thee, I, a poor maid of Thy people Israel, have set the life Thou gavest me in Thy Hand. If, as I believe, Thou art the God of gods, I pray Thee show a sign and a wonder upon this god of the Egyptians, and thereby declare Thine Honour and keep my breath within my breast. If it pleases Thee not, then let me die, as doubtless for my many sins I deserve to do. O God of my fathers, I have made my prayer. Hear it or reject it according to Thy Will."

So she ended, and listening to her, I felt the tears rising in my eyes, because she was so much alone, and I feared that this god of hers would never come to save her from the torments of the priests. Seti also turned his head away, and stared down the sanctuary at the sky over the open court where the lights of dawn were gathering.

Once more there was silence. Then again that wind blew, very strongly, extinguishing the lamps, and, as it seemed to me, whirling away Merapi from where she was, so that now she stood to one side of the statue. The sanctuary was filled with gloom, till presently the first rays of the rising sun struck upon the roof. They fell down, down, as minute followed minute, till at length they rested like a sword of flame upon the statue of Amon-Ra. Once more that statue seemed to move. I thought that it lifted its stone arms to protect its head. Then in a moment with a rending noise, its mighty mass burst asunder, and fell in small dust about the throne, almost hiding it from sight.

"Behold my God has answered me, the most humble of His servants," said Merapi in the same sweet and gentle voice. "Behold the sign and the wonder!"

"Witch!" screamed the head-priest Roi, and fled away, followed by his fellows.

"Sorceress!" hissed Userti, and fled also, as did all the others, save the Prince, Bakenkhonsu, I Ana, and Ki the Magician.

We stood amazed, and while we did so, Ki turned to Merapi and spoke. His face was terrible with fear and fury, and his eyes shone like lamps. Although he did but whisper, I who was nearest to them heard all that was said, which the others could not do.

"Your magic is good, Israelite," he muttered, "so good that it has overcome mine here in the temple where I serve."

"I have no magic," she answered very low. "I obeyed a command, no more."

He laughed bitterly, and asked:

"Should two of a trade waste time on foolishness? Listen now. Teach me your secrets, and I will teach you mine, and together we will drive Egypt like a chariot."

"I have no secrets, I have only faith," said Merapi again.

"Woman," he went on, "woman or devil, will you take me for friend or foe? Here I have been shamed, since it was to me and not to their gods that the priests trusted to destroy you. Yet I can still forgive. Choose now, knowing that as my friendship will lead you to rule, to life and splendour, so my hate will drive you to shame and death."

"You are beside yourself, and know not what you say. I tell you that I have no magic to give or to withhold," she answered, as one who did not understand or was indifferent, and turned away from him.

Thereon he muttered some curse which I could not catch, bowed to the heap of dust that had been the statue of the god, and vanished away among the pillars of the sanctuary.

"Oho-ho!" laughed Bakenkhonsu. "Not in vain have I lived to be so very old, for now it seems we have a new god in Egypt, and there stands his prophetess."

Merapi came to the prince.

"O high-priest of Amon," she said, "does it please you to let me go, for I am very weary?"