

CHAPTER X

THE DEATH OF PHARAOH

It was the appointed day and hour. By command of the Prince I drove with him to the palace of Pharaoh, whither her Highness the Princess refused to be his companion, and for the first time we talked together of that which had passed in the temple.

"Have you seen the lady Merapi?" he asked of me.

I answered No, as I was told that she was sick within her house and lay abed suffering from weariness, or I knew not what.

"She does well to keep there," said Seti, "I think that if she came out those priests would murder her if they could. Also there are others," and he glanced back at the chariot that bore Userti in state. "Say, Ana, can you interpret all this matter?"

"Not I, Prince. I thought that perhaps your Highness, the high-priest of Anon, could give me light."

"The high-priest of Amon wanders in thick darkness. Ki and the rest swear that this Israelite is a sorceress who has outmatched their magic, but to me it seems more simple to believe that what she says is true; that her god is greater than Amon."

"And if this be true, Prince, what are we to do who are sworn to the gods of Egypt?"

"Bow our heads and fall with them, I suppose, Ana, since honour will not suffer us to desert them."

"Even if they be false, Prince?"

"I do not think that they are false, Ana, though mayhap they be less true. At least they are the gods of the Egyptians and we are Egyptians." He paused and glanced at the crowded streets, then added, "See, when I passed this way three days ago I was received with shouts of welcome by the people. Now they are silent, every one."

"Perhaps they have heard of what passed in the temple."

"Doubtless, but it is not that which troubles them who think that the gods can guard themselves. They have heard also that I would befriend the Hebrews whom they hate, and therefore they begin to hate me. Why should I complain when Pharaoh shows them the way?"

"Prince," I whispered, "what will you say to Pharaoh?"

"That depends on what Pharaoh says to me. Ana, if I will not desert our gods because they seem to be the weaker, though it should prove to my

advantage, do you think that I would desert these Hebrews because they seem to be weaker, even to gain a throne?"

"There greatness speaks," I murmured, and as we descended from the chariot he thanked me with a look.

We passed through the great hall to that same chamber where Pharaoh had given me the chain of gold. Already he was there seated at the head of the chamber and wearing on his head the double crown. About him were gathered all those of royal blood and the great officers of state. We made our obeisances, but of these he seemed to take no note. His eyes were almost closed, and to me he looked like a man who is very ill. The Princess Userti entered after us and to her he spoke some words of welcome, giving her his hand to kiss. Then he ordered the doors to be closed. As he did so, an officer of the household entered and said that a messenger had come from the Hebrews who desired speech with Pharaoh.

"Let him enter," said Meneptah, and presently he appeared.

He was a wild-eyed man of middle age, with long hair that fell over his sheepskin robe. To me he looked like a soothsayer. He stood before Pharaoh, making no salutation.

"Deliver your message and be gone," said Nehesi the Vizier.

"These are the words of the Fathers of Israel, spoken by my lips," cried

the man in a voice that rang all round the vaulted chamber. "It has come to our ears, O Pharaoh, that the woman Merapi, daughter of Nathan, who has refuged in your city, she who is named Moon of Israel, has shown herself to be a prophetess of power, one to whom our God has given strength, in that, standing alone amidst the priests and magicians of Amon of the Egyptians, she took no harm from their sorceries and was able with the sword of prayer to smite the idol of Amon to the dust. We demand that this prophetess be restored to us, making oath on our part that she shall be given over safely to her betrothed husband and that no harm shall come to her for any crimes or treasons she may have committed against her people."

"As to this matter," replied Pharaoh quietly, "make your prayer to the Prince of Egypt, in whose household I understand the woman dwells. If it pleases him to surrender her who, I take it, is a witch or a cunning worker of tricks, to her betrothed and her kindred, let him do so. It is not for Pharaoh to judge of the fate of private slaves."

The man wheeled round and addressed Seti, saying:

"You have heard, Son of the King. Will you deliver up this woman?"

"Neither do I promise to deliver her up nor not to deliver her up," answered Seti, "since the lady Merapi is no member of my household, nor have I any authority over her. She who saved my life dwells within my walls for safety's sake. If it pleases her to go, she can go; if it

pleases her to remain, she can remain. When this Court is finished I give you safe-conduct to appear and in my presence learn her pleasure from her lips."

"You have your answer; now be gone," said Nehesi.

"Nay," cried the man, "I have more words to speak. Thus say the Fathers of Israel: We know the black counsel of your heart, O Pharaoh. It has been revealed to us that it is in your mind to put the Hebrews to the sword, as it is in the mind of the Prince of Egypt to save them from the sword. Change that mind of yours, O Pharaoh, and swiftly, lest death fall upon you from heaven above."

"Cease!" thundered Meneptah in a voice that stilled the murmurs of the court. "Dog of a Hebrew, do you dare to threaten Pharaoh on his own throne? I tell you that were you not a messenger, and therefore according to our ancient law safe till the sun sets, you should be hewn limb from limb. Away with him, and if he is found in this city after nightfall let him be slain!"

Then certain of the councillors sprang upon the man and thrust him forth roughly. At the door he wrenched himself free and shouted:

"Think upon my words, Pharaoh, before this sun has set. And you, great ones of Egypt, think on them also before it appears again."

They drove him out with blows and the doors were shut. Once more Meneptah began to speak, saying:

"Now that this brawler is gone, what have you to say to me, Prince of Egypt? Do you still give me the counsel that you wrote in the roll? Do you still refuse, as heir of the Throne, to assent to my decree that these accursed Hebrews be destroyed with the sword of my justice?"

Now all turned their eyes on Seti, who thought a while, and answered:

"Let Pharaoh pardon me, but the counsel that I gave I still give; the assent that I refused I still refuse, because my heart tells me that so it is right to do, and so I think will Egypt be saved from many troubles."

When the scribes had finished writing down these words Pharaoh asked again:

"Prince of Egypt, if in a day to come you should fill my place, is it still your intent to let this people of the Hebrews go unharmed, taking with them the wealth that they have gathered here?"

"Let Pharaoh pardon me, that is still my intent."

Now at these fateful words there arose a sigh of astonishment from all that heard them. Before it had died away Pharaoh had turned to Userti

and was asking:

"Are these your counsel, your will, and your intent also, O Princess of Egypt?"

"Let Pharaoh hear me," answered Userti in a cold, clear voice, "they are not. In this great matter my lord the Prince walks one road and I walk another. My counsel, will, and intent are those of Pharaoh."

"Seti my son," said Meneptah, more kindly than I had ever heard him speak before, "for the last time, not as your king but as your father, I pray you to consider. Remembering that as it lies in your power, being of full age and having been joined with me in many matters of government, to refuse your assent to a great act of state, so it lies in my power with the assent of the high-priests and of my ministers to remove you from my path. Seti, I can disinherit you and set another in your place, and if you persist, that and no less I shall do. Consider, therefore, my son."

In the midst of an intense silence Seti answered:

"I have considered, O my Father, and whatever be the cost to me I cannot go back upon my words."

Then Pharaoh rose and cried:

"Take note all you assembled here, and let it be proclaimed to the people of Egypt without the gates, that they take note also, that I depose Seti my son from his place as Prince of Egypt and declare that he is removed from the succession to the double Crown. Take note that my daughter Userti, Princess of Egypt, wife of the Prince Seti, I do not depose. Whatever rights and heritages are hers as heiress of Egypt let those rights and heritages remain to her, and if a child be born of her and Prince Seti, who lives, let that child be heir to the Throne of Egypt. Take note that, if no such child is born or until it is born, I name my nephew, the count Amenmeses, son of my brother Khaemuas, now gathered to Osiris, to fill the Throne of Egypt when I am no more. Come hither, Count Amenmeses."

He advanced and stood before him. Then Pharaoh lifted from his head the double crown he wore and for a moment set it on the brow of Amenmeses, saying as he replaced it on his own head:

"By this act and token do I name and constitute you, Amenmeses, to be Royal Prince of Egypt in place of my son, Prince Seti, deposed. Withdraw, Royal Prince of Egypt. I have spoken."

"Life! Blood! Strength!" cried all the company bowing before Pharaoh, all save the Prince Seti who neither bowed nor stirred. Only he cried:

"And I have heard. Will Pharaoh be pleased to declare whether with my royal heritage he takes my life? If so, let it be here and now. My

cousin Amenmeses wears a sword."

"Nay, Son," answered Meneptah sadly, "your life is left to you and with it all your private rank and your possessions whatsoever and wherever they may be."

"Let Pharaoh's will be done," replied Seti indifferently, "in this as in all things. Pharaoh spares my life until such time as Amenmeses his successor shall fill his place, when it shall be taken."

Meneptah started; this thought was new to him.

"Stand forth, Amenmeses," he cried, "and swear now the threefold oath that may not be broken. Swear by Amon, by Ptah, and by Osiris, god of death, that never will you attempt to harm the Prince Seti, your cousin, either in body or in such state and prerogative as remain to him. Let Roi, the head-priest of Amon, administer the oath now before us all."

So Roi spoke the oath in the ancient form, which was terrible even to hear, and Amenmeses, unwillingly enough as I thought, repeated it after him, adding however these words at the end, "All these things I swear and all these penalties in this world and the world to be I invoke upon my head, provided only that when the time comes the Prince Seti leaves me in peace upon the throne to which it has pleased Pharaoh to decree to me."

Now some there murmured that this was not enough, since in their hearts there were few who did not love Seti and grieve to see him thus stripped of his royal heritage because his judgment differed from that of Pharaoh over a matter of State policy. But Seti only laughed and said scornfully:

"Let be, for of what value are such oaths? Pharaoh on the throne is above all oaths who must make answer to the gods only and from the hearts of some the gods are far away. Let Amenmeses not fear that I shall quarrel with him over this matter of a crown, I who in truth have never longed for the pomp and cares of royalty and who, deprived of these, still possess all that I can desire. I go my way henceforward as one of many, a noble of Egypt--no more, and if in a day to come it pleases the Pharaoh to be to shorten my wanderings, I am not sure that even then I shall grieve so very much, who am content to accept the judgment of the gods, as in the end he must do also. Yet, Pharaoh my father, before we part I ask leave to speak the thoughts that rise in me."

"Say on," muttered Menepthah.

"Pharaoh, having your leave, I tell you that I think you have done a very evil work this day, one that is displeasing to those Powers which rule the world, whoever and whatsoever they may be, one too that will bring upon Egypt sorrows countless as the sand. I believe that these Hebrews whom you unjustly seek to slay worship a god as great or greater

than our own, and that they and he will triumph over Egypt. I believe also that the mighty heritage which you have taken from me will bring neither joy nor honour to him by whom it has been received."

Here Amenmeses started forward, but Meneptah held up his hand, and he was silent.

"I believe, Pharaoh--alas! that I must say it--that your days on earth are few and that for the last time we look on each other living. Farewell, Pharaoh my father, whom still I love mayhap more in this hour of parting than ever I did before. Farewell, Amenmeses, Prince of Egypt. Take from me this ornament which henceforth should be worn by you only," and lifting from his headdress that royal circlet which marks the heir to the throne, he held it to Amenmeses, who took it and, with a smile of triumph, set it on his brow.

"Farewell, Lords and Councillors; it is my hope that in yonder prince you will find a master more to your liking than ever I could have been. Come, Ana, my friend, if it still pleases you to cling to me for a little while, now that I have nothing left to give."

For a few moments he stood still looking very earnestly at his father, who looked back at him with tears in his deep-set, faded eyes.

Then, though whether this was by chance I cannot say, taking no note of the Princess Userti, who gazed at him perplexed and wrathful, Seti drew

himself up and cried in the ancient form:

"Life! Blood! Strength! Pharaoh! Pharaoh! Pharaoh!" and bowed almost to the ground.

Meneptah heard. Muttering beneath his breath, "Oh! Seti, my son, my most beloved son!" he stretched out his arms as though to call him back or perhaps to clasp him. As he did so I saw his face change. Next instant he fell forward to the ground and lay there still. All the company stood struck with horror, only the royal physician ran to him, while Roi and others who were priests began to mutter prayers.

"Has the good god been gathered to Osiris?" asked Amenmeses presently in a hoarse voice, "because if it be so, I am Pharaoh."

"Nay, Amenmeses," exclaimed Userti, "the decrees have not yet been sealed or promulgated. They have neither strength nor weight."

Before he could answer the physician cried:

"Peace! Pharaoh still lives, his heart beats. This is but a fit which may pass. Begone, every one, he must have quiet."

So we went, but first Seti knelt down and kissed his father on the brow.

An hour later the Princess Userti broke into the room of his palace where the Prince and I were talking.

"Seti," she said, "Pharaoh still lives, but the physicians say he will be dead by dawn. There is yet time. Here I have a writing, sealed with his signet and witnessed, wherein he recalls all that he decreed in the Court to-day, and declares you, his son, to be the true and only heir of the throne of Egypt."

"Is it so, wife? Tell me now how did a dying man in a swoon command and seal this writing?" and he touched the scroll she held in her hand.

"He recovered for a little while; Nehesi will tell you how," she replied, looking him in the face with cold eyes. Then before he could speak, she added, "Waste no more breath in questions, but act and at once. The General of the guards waits below; he is your faithful servant. Through him I have promised a gift to every soldier on the day that you are crowned. Nehesi and most of the officers are on our side. Only the priests are against us because of that Hebrew witch whom you shelter, and of her tribe whom you befriend; but they have not had time to stir up the people nor will they attempt revolt. Act, Seti, act, for none will move without your express command. Moreover, no question will be raised afterwards, since from Thebes to the sea and throughout the world you are known to be the heir of Egypt."

"What would you have me do, wife?" asked Seti, when she paused for lack of breath.

"Cannot you guess? Must I put statecraft into your head as well as a sword into your hand? Why that scribe of yours, who follows your heels like a favoured dog, would be more apt a pupil. Hearken then. Amenmeses has sent out to gather strength, but as yet there are not fifty men about him whom he can trust." She leant forward and whispered fiercely, "Kill the traitor, Amenmeses--all will hold it a righteous act, and the General waits your word. Shall I summon him?"

"I think not," answered Seti. "Because Pharaoh, as he has a right to do, is pleased to name a certain man of royal blood to succeed him, how does this make that man a traitor to Pharaoh who still lives? But, traitor or none, I will not murder my cousin Amenmeses."

"Then he will murder you."

"Maybe. That is a matter between him and the gods which I leave them to settle. The oath he swore to-day is not one to be lightly broken. But whether he breaks it or not, I also swore an oath, at least in my heart, namely that I would not attempt to dispute the will of Pharaoh whom, after all, I love as my father and honour as my king, Pharaoh who still lives and may, as I hope, recover. What should I say to him if he recovered or, at the worst, when at last we meet elsewhere?"

"Pharaoh never will recover; I have spoken to the physician and he told me so. Already they pierce his skull to let out the evil spirit of sickness, after which none of our family have lived for very long."

"Because, as I hold, thereby, whatever priests and physicians may say, they let in the good spirit of death. Ana, I pray you if I----"

"Man," she broke in, striking her hand upon the table by which she stood, "do you understand that while you muse and moralise your crown is passing from you?"

"It has already passed, Lady. Did you not see me give it to Amenmeses?"

"Do you understand that you who should be the greatest king in all the world, in some few hours if indeed you are allowed to live, will be nothing but a private citizen of Egypt, one at whom the very beggars may spit and take no harm?"

"Surely, Wife. Moreover, there is little virtue in what I do, since on the whole I prefer that prospect and am willing to take the risk of being hurried from an evil world. Hearken," he added, with a change of tone and gesture. "You think me a fool and a weakling; a dreamer also, you, the clear-eyed, hard-brained stateswoman who look to the glittering gain of the moment for which you are ready to pay in blood, and guess nothing of what lies beyond. I am none of these things, except, perchance, the last. I am only a man who strives to be just and to do

right, as right seems to me, and if I dream, it is of good, not evil, as I understand good and evil. You are sure that this dreaming of mine will lead me to worldly loss and shame. Even of that I am not sure. The thought comes to me that it may lead me to those very baubles on which you set your heart, but by a path strewn with spices and with flowers, not by one paved with the bones of men and reeking with their gore. Crowns that are bought with the promise of blood and held with cruelty are apt to be lost in blood, Userti."

She waved her hand. "I pray you keep the rest, Seti, till I have more time to listen. Moreover if I need prophecies, I think it better to turn to Ki and those who make them their life-study. For me this is a day of deeds, not dreams, and since you refuse my help, and behave as a sick girl lost in fancies, I must see to myself. As while you live I cannot reign alone or wage war in my own name only, I go to make terms with Amenmeses, who will pay me high for peace."

"You go--and do you return, Userti?"

She drew herself to her full height, looking very royal, and answered slowly:

"I do not return. I, the Princess of Egypt, cannot live as the wife of a common man who falls from a throne to set himself upon the earth, and smears his own brow with mud for a uræus crown. When your prophecies come true, Seti, and you crawl from your dust, then perhaps we may speak

again."

"Aye, Userti, but the question is, what shall we say?"

"Meanwhile," she added, as she turned, "I leave you to your chosen counsellors--yonder scribe, whom foolishness, not wisdom, has whitened before his time, and perchance the Hebrew sorceress, who can give you moonbeams to drink from those false lips of hers. Farewell, Seti, once a prince and my husband."

"Farewell, Userti, who, I fear, must still remain my sister."

Then he watched her go, and turning to me, said:

"To-day, Ana, I have lost both a crown and a wife, yet strange to tell I do not know which of these calamities grieves me least. Yet it is time that fortune turned. Or mayhap all the evils are not done. Would you not go also, Ana? Although she gibes at you in her anger, the Princess thinks well of you, and would keep you in her service. Remember, whoever falls in Egypt, she will be great till the last."

"Oh! Prince," I answered, "have I not borne enough to-day that you must add insult to my load, you with whom I broke the cup and swore the oath?"

"What!" he laughed. "Is there one in Egypt who remembers oaths to his

own loss? I thank you, Ana," and taking my hand he pressed it.

At that moment the door opened, and old Pambasa entered, saying:

"The Hebrew woman, Merapi, would see you; also two Hebrew men."

"Admit them," said Seti. "Note, Ana, how yonder old time-server turns his face from the setting sun. This morning even it would have been 'to see your Highness,' uttered with bows so low that his beard swept the floor. Now it is 'to see you' and not so much as an inclination of the head in common courtesy. This, moreover, from one who has robbed me year by year and grown fat on bribes. It is the first of many bitter lessons, or rather the second--that of her Highness was the first; I pray that I may learn them with humility."

While he mused thus and, having no comfort to offer, I listened sad at heart, Merapi entered, and a moment after her the wide-eyed messenger whom we had seen in Pharaoh's Court, and her uncle Jabez the cunning merchant. She bowed low to Seti, and smiled at me. Then the other two appeared, and with small salutation the messenger began to speak.

"You know my demand, Prince," he said. "It is that this woman should be returned to her people. Jabez, her uncle, will lead her away."

"And you know my answer, Israelite," answered Seti. "It is that I have no power over the coming or the going of the lady Merapi, or at least

wish to claim none. Address yourself to her."

"What is it you wish with me, Priest?" asked Merapi quickly.

"That you should return to the town of Goshen, daughter of Nathan. Have you no ears to hear?"

"I hear, but if I return, what will you of me?"

"That you who have proved yourself a prophetess by your deeds in yonder temple should dedicate your powers to the service of your people, receiving in return full forgiveness for the evils you have wrought against them, which we swear to you in the name of God."

"I am no prophetess, and I have wrought no evils against my people, Priest. I have only saved them from the evil of murdering one who has shown himself their friend, even as I hear to the laying down of his crown for their sake."

"That is for the Fathers of Israel and not for you to judge, woman. Your answer?"

"It is neither for them nor for me, but for God only." She paused, then added, "Is this all you ask of me?"

"It is all the Fathers ask, but Laban asks his affianced wife."

"And am I to be given in marriage to--this assassin?"

"Without doubt you are to be given to this brave soldier, being already his."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then, Daughter of Nathan, it is my part to curse you in the name of God, and to declare you cut off and outcast from the people of God. It is my part to announce to you further that your life is forfeit, and that any Hebrew may kill you when and how he can, and take no blame."

Merapi paled a little, then turning to Jabez, asked:

"You have heard, my uncle. What say you?"

Jabez looked round shiftily, and said in his unctuous voice:

"My niece, surely you must obey the commands of the Elders of Israel who speak the will of Heaven, as you obeyed them when you matched yourself against the might of Amon."

"You gave me a different counsel yesterday, my uncle. Then you said I had better bide where I was."

The messenger turned and glared at him.

"There is a great difference between yesterday and to-day," went on Jabez hurriedly. "Yesterday you were protected by one who would soon be Pharaoh, and might have been able to move his mind in favour of your folk. To-day his greatness is stripped from him, and his will has no more weight in Egypt. A dead lion is not to be feared, my niece."

Seti smiled at this insult, but Merapi's face, like my own, grew red, as though with anger.

"Sleeping lions have been taken for dead ere now, my uncle, as those who would spurn them have discovered to their cost. Prince Seti, have you no word to help me in this strait?"

"What is the strait, Lady? If you wish to go to your people and--to Laban, who, I understand, is recovered from his hurts, there is naught between you and me save my gratitude to you which gives me the right to say you shall not go. If, however, you wish to stay, then perhaps I am still not so powerless to shield or smite as this worthy Jabez thinks, who still remain the greatest lord in Egypt and one with those that love him. Therefore should you desire to remain, I think that you may do so unmolested of any, and least of all by that friend in whose shadow it pleases you to sojourn."

"Those are very gentle words," murmured Merapi, "words that few would

Speak to a maid from whom naught is asked and who has naught to give."

"A truce to this talk," snarled the messenger. "Do you obey or do you rebel? Your answer."

She turned and looked him full in the face, saying:

"I do not return to Goshen and to Laban, of whose sword I have seen enough."

"Mayhap you will see more of it before all is done. For the last time, think ere the curse of your God and your people falls upon you, and after it, death. For fall I say it shall, I, who, as Pharaoh knows to-day, am no false prophet, and as that Prince knows also."

"I do not think that my God, who sees the hearts of those that he has made, will avenge himself upon a woman because she refuses to be wedded to a murderer whom of her own will she never chose, which, Priest, is the fate you offer me. Therefore I am content to leave judgment in the hands of the great Judge of all. For the rest I defy you and your commands. If I must be slaughtered, let me die, but at least let me die mistress of myself and free, who am no man's love, or wife, or slave."

"Well spoken!" whispered Seti to me.

Then this priest became terrible. Waving his arms and rolling his wild

eyes, he poured out some hideous curse upon the head of this poor maid, much of which, as it was spoken rapidly in an ancient form of Hebrew, we did not understand. He cursed her living, dying, and after death. He cursed her in her love and hate, wedded or alone. He cursed her in child-bearing or in barrenness, and he cursed her children after her to all generations. Lastly, he declared her cut off from and rejected by the god she worshipped, and sentenced her to death at the hands of any who could slay her. So horrible was that curse that she shrank away from him, while Jabez crouched about the ground hiding his eyes with his hands, and even I felt my blood turn cold.

At length he paused, foaming at the lips. Then, suddenly, shouting, "After judgment, doom!" he drew a knife from his robe and sprang at her.

She fled behind us. He followed, but Seti, crying, "Ah, I thought it," leapt between them, as he did so drawing the iron sword which he wore with his ceremonial dress. At him he sprang and the next thing I saw was the red point of the sword standing out beyond the priest's shoulders.

Down he fell, babbling:

"Is this how you show your love for Israel, Prince?"

"It is how I show my hate of murderers," answered Seti.

Then the man died.

"Oh!" cried Merapi wringing her hands, "once more I have caused Hebrew blood to flow and now all this curse will fall on me."

"Nay, on me, Lady, if there is anything in curses, which I doubt, for this deed was mine, and at the worst yonder mad brute's knife did not fall on you."

"Yes, life is left if only for a little while. Had it not been for you, Prince, by now, I----" and she shuddered.

"And had it not been for you, Moon of Israel, by now I----" and he smiled, adding, "Surely Fate weaves a strange web round you and me. First you save me from the sword; then I save you. I think, Lady, that in the end we ought to die together and give Ana here stuff for the best of all his stories. Friend Jabez," he went on to the Israelite who was still crouching in the corner with the eyes starting from his head, "get you back to your gentle-hearted people and make it clear to them why the lady Merapi cannot companion you, taking with you that carrion to prove your tale. Tell them that if they send more men to molest your niece a like fate awaits them, but that now as before I do not turn my back upon them because of the deeds of a few madmen or evil-doers, as I have given them proof to-day. Ana, make ready, since soon I leave for Memphis. See that the Lady Merapi, who will travel alone, has fit escort for her journey, that is if it pleases her to depart from Tanis."