

CHAPTER XI

THE CROWNING OF AMENMESES

Now, notwithstanding all the woes that fell on Egypt and a certain secret sorrow of my own, began the happiest of the days which the gods have given me. We went to Mennefer or Memphis, the white-walled city where I was born, the city that I loved. Now no longer did I dwell in a little house near to the enclosure of the temple of Ptah, which is vaster and more splendid than all those of Thebes or Tanis. My home was in the beautiful palace of Seti, which he had inherited from his mother, the Great Royal Wife. It stood, and indeed still stands, on a piled-up mound without the walls near to the temple of the goddess Neit, who always has her habitation to the north of the wall, why I do not know, because even her priests cannot tell me. In front of this palace, facing to the north, is a great portico, whereof the roof is borne upon palm-headed, painted columns whence may be seen the most lovely prospect in Egypt. First the gardens, then the palm-groves, then the cultivated land, then the broad and gentle Nile and, far away, the desert.

Here, then, we dwelt, keeping small state and almost unguarded, but in wealth and comfort, spending our time in the library of the palace, or in those of the temples, and when we wearied of work, in the lovely gardens or, perchance, sailing upon the bosom of the Nile. The lady Merapi dwelt there also, but in a separate wing of the palace, with certain slaves and servants whom Seti had given to her. Sometimes we met

her in the gardens, where it pleased her to walk at the same hours that we did, namely before the sun grew hot, or in the cool of the evening, and now and again when the moon shone at night. Then the three of us would talk together, for Seti never sought her company alone or within walls.

Those talks were very pleasant. Moreover they grew more frequent as time went on, since Merapi had a thirst for learning, and the Prince would bring her rolls to read in a little summer-house there was. Here we would sit, or if the heat was great, outside beneath the shadow of two spreading trees that stretched above the roof of the little pleasure-house, while Seti discoursed of the contents of the rolls and instructed her in the secrets of our writing. Sometimes, too, I read them stories of my making, to which it pleased them both to listen, or so they said, and I, in my vanity, believed. Also we would talk of the mystery and the wonder of the world and of the Hebrews and their fate, or of what passed in Egypt and the neighbouring lands.

Nor was Merapi altogether lonesome, seeing that there dwelt in Memphis certain ladies who had Hebrew blood in their veins, or were born of the Israelites and had married Egyptians against their law. Among these she made friends, and together they worshipped in their own fashion with none to say them nay, since here no priests were allowed to trouble them.

For our part we held intercourse with as many as we pleased, since few

forgot that Seti was by blood the Prince of Egypt, that is, a man almost half divine, and all were eager to visit him. Also he was much beloved for his own sake and more particularly by the poor, whose wants it was his delight to relieve to the full limit of his wealth. Thus it came about that whenever he went abroad, although against his will, he was received with honours and homage that were almost royal, for though Pharaoh could rob him of the Crown he could not empty his veins of the blood of kings.

It was on this account that I feared for his safety, since I was sure that through his spies Amenmeses knew all and would grow jealous of a dethroned prince who was still so much adored by those over whom of right he should have ruled. I told Seti of my doubts and that when he travelled the streets he should be guarded by armed men. But he only laughed and answered that, as the Hebrews had failed to kill him, he did not think that any others would succeed. Moreover he believed there were no Egyptians in the land who would lift a sword against him, or put poison in his drink, whoever bade them. Also he added these words:

"The best way to escape death is to have no fear of death, for then Osiris shuns us."

Now I must tell of the happenings at Tanis. Pharaoh Meneptah lingered but a few hours and never found his mind again before his spirit flew

to Heaven. Then there was great mourning in the land, for, if he was not loved, Meneptah was honoured and feared. Only among the Israelites there was open rejoicing, because he had been their enemy and their prophets had foretold that death was near to him. They gave it out that he had been smitten of their God, which caused the Egyptians to hate them more than ever. There was doubt, too, and bewilderment in Egypt, for though his proclamation disinheriting the Prince Seti had been published abroad, the people, and especially those who dwelt in the south, could not understand why this should have been done over a matter of the shepherd slaves who dwelt in Goshen. Indeed, had the Prince but held up his hand, tens of thousands would have rallied to his standard. Yet this he refused to do, which astonished all the world, who thought it marvellous that any man should refuse a throne which would have lifted him almost to the level of the gods. Indeed, to avoid their importunities he had set out at once for Memphis, and there remained hidden away during the period of mourning for his father. So it came about that Amenmeses succeeded with none to say him nay, since without her husband Userti could not or would not act.

After the days of embalment were accomplished the body of Pharaoh Meneptah was carried up the Nile to be laid in his eternal house, the splendid tomb that he had made ready for himself in the Valley of Dead Kings at Thebes. To this great ceremony the Prince Seti was not bidden, lest, as Bakenkhonsu told me afterwards, his presence should cause some rising in his favour, with or without his will. For this reason also the dead god, as he was named, was not suffered to rest at Memphis on his

last journey up the Nile. Disguised as a man of the people the Prince watched his father's body pass in the funeral barge guarded by shaven, white-robed priests, the centre of a splendid procession. In front went other barges filled with soldiers and officers of state, behind came the new Pharaoh and all the great ones of Egypt, while the sounds of lamentation floated far over the face of the waters. They appeared, they passed, they disappeared, and when they had vanished Seti wept a little, for in his own fashion he loved his father.

"Of what use is it to be a king and named half-divine, Ana," he said to me, "seeing that the end of such gods as these is the same as that of the beggar at the gate?"

"This, Prince," I answered, "that a king can do more good than a beggar while the breath is in his nostrils, and leave behind him a great example to others."

"Or more harm, Ana. Also the beggar can leave a great example, that of patience in affliction. Still, if I were sure that I should do nothing but good, then perhaps I would be a king. But I have noted that those who desire to do the most good often work the greatest harm."

"Which, if followed out, would be an argument for wishing to do evil, Prince."

"Not so," he answered, "because good triumphs at the last. For good is

truth and truth rules earth and heaven."

"Then it is clear, Prince, that you should seek to be a king."

"I will remember the argument, Ana, if ever time brings me an opportunity unstained by blood," he answered.

When the obsequies of Pharaoh were finished, Amenmeses returned to Tanis, and there was crowned as Pharaoh. I attended this great ceremony, bearing coronation gifts of certain royal ornaments which the Prince sent to Pharaoh, saying it was not fit that he, as a private person, should wear them any longer. These I presented to Pharaoh, who took them doubtfully, declaring that he did not understand the Prince Seti's mind and actions.

"They hide no snare, O Pharaoh," I said. "As you rejoice in the glory that the gods have sent you, so the Prince my master rejoices in the rest and peace which the gods have given him, asking no more."

"It may be so, Scribe, but I find this so strange a thing, that sometimes I fear lest the rich flowers of this glory of mine should hide some deadly snake, whereof the Prince knows, if he did not set it there."

"I cannot say, O Pharaoh, but without doubt, although he could work no guile, the Prince is not as are other men. His mind is both wide and

deep."

"Too deep for me," muttered Amenmeses. "Nevertheless, say to my royal cousin that I thank him for his gifts, especially as some of them were worn, when he was heir to Egypt, by my father Khaemuas, who I would had left me his wisdom as well as his blood. Say to him also that while he refrains from working me harm upon the throne, as I know he has done up to the present, he may be sure that I will work him none in the station which he has chosen."

Also I saw the Princess Userti who questioned me closely concerning her lord. I told her everything, keeping naught back. She listened and asked:

"What of that Hebrew woman, Moon of Israel? Without doubt she fills my place."

"Not so, Princess," I answered. "The Prince lives alone. Neither she nor any other woman fills your place. She is a friend to him, no more."

"A friend! Well, at least we know the end of such friendships. Oh! surely the Prince must be stricken with madness from the gods!"

"It may be so, your Highness, but I think that if the gods smote more men with such madness, the world would be better than it is."

"The world is the world, and the business of those who are born to greatness is to rule it as it is, not to hide away amongst books and flowers, and to talk folly with a beautiful outland woman, and a scribe however learned," she answered bitterly, adding, "Oh! if the Prince is not mad, certainly he drives others to madness, and me, his spouse, among them. That throne is his, his; yet he suffers a cross-grained dolt to take his place, and sends him gifts and blessings."

"I think your Highness should wait till the end of the story before you judge of it."

She looked at me sharply, and asked:

"Why do you say that? Is the Prince no fool after all? Do he and you, who both seem to be so simple, perchance play a great and hidden game, as I have known men feign folly in order to do with safety? Or has that witch of an Israelite some secret knowledge in which she instructs you, such as a woman who can shatter the statue of Amon to fine dust might well possess? You make believe not to know, which means that you will not answer. Oh! Scribe Ana, if only it were safe, I think I could find a way to wring the truth out of you, although you do pretend to be but a babe for innocence."

"It pleases your Highness to threaten and without cause."

"No," she answered, changing her voice and manner, "I do not threaten;

it is only the madness that I have caught from Seti. Would you not be mad if you knew that another woman was to be crowned to-morrow in your place, because--because----" and she began to weep, which frightened me more than all her rough words.

Presently she dried her tears, and said:

"Say to my lord that I rejoice to hear that he is well and send him greetings, but that never of my own wish will I look upon his living face again unless indeed he takes another counsel, and sets himself to win that which is his own. Say to him that though he has so little care for me, and pays no heed to my desires, still I watch over his welfare and his safety, as best I may."

"His safety, Princess! Pharaoh assured me not an hour ago that he had naught to fear, as indeed he fears naught."

"Oh! which of you is the more foolish," she exclaimed stamping her foot, "the man or his master? You believe that the Prince has naught to fear because that usurper tells you so, and he believes it--well, because he fears naught. For a little while he may sleep in peace. But let him wait until troubles of this sort or of that arise in Egypt and, understanding that the gods send them on account of the great wickedness that my father wrought when death had him by the throat and his mind was clouded, the people begin to turn their eyes towards their lawful king. Then the usurper will grow jealous, and if he has his way, the Prince

will sleep in peace--for ever. If his throat remains uncut, it will be for one reason only, that I hold back the murderer's hand. Farewell, I can talk no more, for I say to you that my brain is afire--and to-morrow he should have been crowned, and I with him," and she swept away, royal as ever, leaving me wondering what she meant when she spoke of troubles arising in Egypt, or if the words were but uttered at hazard.

Afterwards Bakenkhonsu and I supped together at the college of the temple of Ptah, of which because of his age he was called the father, when I heard more of this matter.

"Ana," he said, "I tell you that such gloom hangs over Egypt as I have never known even when it was thought that the Ninebow Barbarians would conquer and enslave the land. Amenmeses will be the fifth Pharaoh whom I have seen crowned, the first of them when I was but a little child hanging to my mother's robe, and not once have I known such joylessness."

"That may be because the crown passes to one who should not wear it, Bakenkhonsu."

He shook his head. "Not altogether. I think this darkness comes from the heavens as light does. Men are afraid they know not of what."

"The Israelites," I suggested.

"Now you are near to it, Ana, for doubtless they have much to do with the matter. Had it not been for them Seti and not Amenmeses would be crowned to-morrow. Also the tale of the marvel which the beautiful Hebrew woman wrought in the temple yonder has got abroad and is taken as an omen. Did I tell you that six days gone a fine new statue of the god was consecrated there and on the following morning was found lying on its side, or rather with its head resting on the breast of Mut?"

"If so, Merapi is blameless, because she has gone away from this city."

"Of course she has gone away, for has not Seti gone also? But I think she left something behind her. However that may be, even our new divine lord is afraid. He dreams ill, Ana," he added, dropping his voice, "so ill that he has called in Ki, the Kherheb,[*] to interpret his visions."

[*] "Kherheb" was the title of the chief official magician in ancient Egypt.

"And what said Ki?"

"Ki could say nothing or, rather, that the only answer vouchsafed to him and his company, when they made inquiry of their Kas, was that this god's reign would be very short and that it and his life would end together."

"Which perhaps did not please the god Amenmeses, Bakenkhonsu?"

"Which did not please the god at all. He threatened Ki. It is a foolish thing to threaten a great magician, Ana, as the Kherheb Ki, himself indeed told him, looking him in the eyes. Then he prayed his pardon and asked who would succeed him on the throne, but Ki said he did not know, as a Kherheb who had been threatened could never remember anything, which indeed he never can--except to pay back the threatener."

"And did he know, Bakenkhonsu?"

By way of answer the old Councillor crumbled some bread fine upon the table, then with his finger traced among the crumbs the rough likeness of a jackal-headed god and of two feathers, after which with a swift movement he swept the crumbs onto the floor.

"Seti!" I whispered, reading the hieroglyphs of the Prince's name, and he nodded and laughed in his great fashion.

"Men come to their own sometimes, Ana, especially if they do not seek their own," he said. "But if so, much must happen first that is terrible. The new Pharaoh is not the only man who dreams, Ana. Of late years my sleep has been light and sometimes I dream, though I have no magic like to that of Ki."

"What did you dream?"

"I dreamed of a great multitude marching like locusts over Egypt. Before them went a column of fire in which were two hands. One of these held Amon by the throat and one held the new Pharaoh by the throat. After them came a column of cloud, and in it a shape like to that of an unwrapped mummy, a shape of death standing upon water that was full of countless dead."

Now I bethought me of the picture that the Prince and I had seen in the skies yonder in the land of Goshen, but of it I said nothing. Yet I think that Bakenkhonsu saw into my mind, for he asked:

"Do you never dream, Friend? You see visions that come true--Amenmeses on the throne, for instance. Do you not also dream at times? No? Well, then, the Prince? You look like men who might, and the time is ripe and pregnant. Oh! I remember. You are both of you dreaming, not of the pictures that pass across the terrible eyes of Ki, but of those that the moon reflects upon the waters of Memphis, the Moon of Israel. Ana, be advised by me, put away the flesh and increase the spirit, for in it alone is happiness, whereof woman and all our joys are but earthly symbols, shadows thrown by that mortal cloud which lies between us and the Light Above. I see that you understand, because some of that light has struggled to your heart. Do you remember that you saw it shining in the hour when your little daughter died? Ah! I thought so. It was the gift she left you, a gift that will grow and grow in such a breast as yours, if only you will put away the flesh and make room for it, Ana. Man, do not weep--laugh as I do, Oho-ho! Give me my staff, and

good-night. Forget not that we sit together at the crowning to-morrow, for you are a King's Companion and that rank once conferred is one which no new Pharaoh can take away. It is like the gift of the spirit, Ana, which is hard to win, but once won more eternal than the stars. Oh! why do I live so long who would bathe in it, as when a child I used to bathe in Nile?"

On the following day at the appointed hour I went to the great hall of the palace, that in which I had first seen Menepthah, and took my stand in the place allotted to me. It was somewhat far back, perhaps because it was not wished that I, who was known to be the private scribe of Seti, should remind Egypt of him by appearing where all could see me.

Great as was the hall the crowd filled it to its furthest corners.

Moreover no common man was present there, but rather every noble and head-priest in Egypt, and with them their wives and daughters, so that all the dim courts shone with gold and precious gems set upon festal garments. While I was waiting old Bakenkhonsu hobbled towards me, the crowd making way for him, and I could see that there was laughter in his sunken eyes.

"We are ill-placed, Ana," he said. "Still if any of the many gods there are in Egypt should chance to rain fires on Pharaoh, we shall be the safer. Talking of gods," he went on in a whisper, "have you heard what

happened an hour ago in the temple of Ptah of Tanis whence I have just come? Pharaoh and all the Blood-royal--save one--walked according to custom before the statue of the god which, as you know, should bow its head to show that he chooses and accepts the king. In front of Amenmeses went the Princess Userti, and as she passed the head of the god bowed, for I saw it, though all pretended that they did not see. Then came Pharaoh and stood waiting, but it would not bow, though the priests called in the old formula, 'The god greets the king.'

"At length he went on, looking as black as night, and others of the blood of Rameses followed in their order. Last of all limped Saptah and, behold! the god bowed again."

"How and why does it do these things?" I asked, "and at the wrong time?"

"Ask the priests, Ana, or Userti, or Saptah. Perhaps the divine neck has not been oiled of late, or too much oiled, or too little oiled, or prayers--or strings--may have gone wrong. Or Pharaoh may have been niggard in his gifts to that college of the great god of his House. Who am I that I should know the ways of gods? That in the temple where I served at Thebes fifty years ago did not pretend to bow or to trouble himself as to which of the royal race sat upon the throne. Hush! Here comes Pharaoh."

Then in a splendid procession, surrounded by princes, councillors, ladies, priests, and guards, Amenmeses and the Royal Wife, Urnure, a

large woman who walked awkwardly, entered the hall, a glittering band. The high-priest, Roi, and the chancellor, Nehesi, received Pharaoh and led him to his throne. The multitude prostrated itself, trumpets blew and thrice the old salute of "Life! Blood! Strength! Pharaoh! Pharaoh! Pharaoh!" was cried aloud.

Amenmeses rose and bowed, and I saw that his heavy face was troubled and looked older. Then he swore some oath to gods and men which Roi dictated to him, and before all the company put on the double crown and the other emblems, and took in his hands the scourge and golden sickle. Next homage was paid. The Princess Userti came first and kissed Pharaoh's hand, but bent no knee. Indeed first she spoke with him a while. We could not hear what was said, but afterwards learned that she demanded that he should publicly repeat all the promises which her father Meneptah had made to her before him, confirming her in her place and rights. This in the end he did, though it seemed to me unwillingly enough.

So with many forms and ancient celebrations the ceremony went on, till all grew weary waiting for that time when Pharaoh should make his speech to the people. That speech, however, was never made, for presently, thrusting past us, I saw those two prophets of the Israelites who had visited Meneptah in this same hall. Men shrank from them, so that they walked straight up to the throne, nor did even the guards strive to bar their way. What they said there I could not hear, but I believe that they demanded that their people should be allowed to go to worship their

god in their own fashion, and that Amenmeses refused as Meneptah had done.

Then one of them cast down a rod and it turned to a snake which hissed at Pharaoh, whereon the Kherheb Ki and his company also cast down rods that turned to snakes, though I could only hear the hissing. After this a great gloom fell upon the hall, so that men could not see each other's faces and everyone began to call aloud till the company broke up in confusion. Bakenkhonsu and I were borne together to the doorway by the pressure of the people, whence we were glad enough to see the sky again.

Thus ended the crowning of Amenmeses.