

## CHAPTER XII

### THE MESSAGE OF JABEZ

That night there were none who rejoiced in the streets of the city, and save in the palace and houses of those of the Court, none who feasted. I walked abroad in the market-place and noted the people going to and fro gloomily, or talking together in whispers. Presently a man whose face was hidden in a hood began to speak with me, saying that he had a message for my master, the Prince Seti. I answered that I took no messages from veiled strangers, whereon he threw back his hood, and I saw that it was Jabez, the uncle of Merapi. I asked him whether he had obeyed the Prince, and borne the body of that prophet back to Goshen and told the elders of the manner of the man's death.

"Yes," he answered, "nor were the Elders angry with the Prince over this matter. They said that their messenger had exceeded his authority, since they had never told him to curse Merapi, and much less attempt to kill her, and that the Prince did right to slay one who would have done murder before his royal eyes. Still they added that the curse, having once been spoken by this priest, would surely fall upon Merapi in this way or in that."

"What then should she do, Jabez?"

"I do not know, Scribe. If she returns to her people, perchance she

will be absolved, but then she must surely marry Laban. It is for her to judge."

"And what would you do if you were in her place, Jabez?"

"I think that I should stay where I was, and make myself very dear to Seti, taking the chance that the curse may pass her by, since it was not lawfully decreed upon her. Whichever way she looks, trouble waits, and at the worst, a woman might wish to satisfy her heart before it falls, especially if that heart should happen to turn to one who will be Pharaoh."

"Why do you say 'who will be Pharaoh,' Jabez?" I asked, for we were standing in an empty place alone.

"That I may not tell you," he replied cunningly, "yet it will come about as I say. He who sits upon the throne is mad as Meneptah was mad, and will fight against a strength that is greater than his until it overwhelms him. In the Prince's heart alone does the light of wisdom shine. That which you saw to-day is only the first of many miracles, Scribe Ana. I can say no more."

"What then is your message, Jabez?"

"This: Because the Prince has striven to deal well with the people of Israel and for their sake has cast aside a crown, whatever may chance

to others, let him fear nothing. No harm shall come to him, or to those about him, such as yourself, Scribe Ana, who also would deal justly by us. Yet it may happen that through my niece Merapi, on whose head the evil word has fallen, a great sorrow may come to both him and her. Therefore, perhaps, although setting this against that, she may be wise to stay in the house of Seti, he, on the balance, may be wise to turn her from his doors."

"What sorrow?" I asked, who grew bewildered with his dark talk, but there was no answer, for he had gone.

Near to my lodging another man met me, and the moonlight shining on his face showed me the terrible eyes of Ki.

"Scribe Ana," he said, "you leave for Memphis to-morrow at the dawn, and not two days hence as you purposed."

"How do you know that, Magician Ki?" I answered, for I had told my change of plan to none, not even to Bakenkhonsu, having indeed only determined upon it since Jabez left me.

"I know nothing, Ana, save that a faithful servant who has learned all you have learned to-day will hurry to make report of it to his master, especially if there is some other to whom he would also wish to make report, as Bakenkhonsu thinks."

"Bakenkhonsu talks too much, whatever he may think," I exclaimed testily.

"The aged grow garrulous. You were at the crowning to-day, were you not?"

"Yes, and if I saw aright from far away, those Hebrew prophets seemed to worst you at your own trade there, Kherheb, which must grieve you, as you were grieved in the temple when Amon fell."

"It does not grieve me, Ana. If I have powers, there may be others who have greater powers, as I learned in the temple of Amon. Why therefore should I feel ashamed?"

"Powers!" I replied with a laugh, for the strings of my mind seemed torn that night, "would not craft be a better word? How do you turn a stick into a snake, a thing which is impossible to man?"

"Craft might be a better word, since craft means knowledge as well as trickery. 'Impossible to man!' After what you saw a while ago in the temple of Amon, do you hold that there is anything impossible to man or woman? Perhaps you could do as much yourself."

"Why do you mock me, Ki? I study books, not snake-charming."

He looked at me in his calm fashion, as though he were reading, not my

face, but the thoughts behind it. Then he looked at the cedar wand in his hand and gave it to me, saying:

"Study this, Ana, and tell me, what is it."

"Am I a child," I answered angrily, "that I should not know a priest's rod when I see one?"

"I think that you are something of a child, Ana," he murmured, all the while keeping those eyes of his fixed upon my face.

Then a horror came about. For the rod began to twist in my hand and when I stared at it, lo! it was a long, yellow snake which I held by the tail. I threw the reptile down with a scream, for it was turning its head as though to strike me, and there in the dust it twisted and writhed away from me and towards Ki. Yet an instant later it was only a stick of yellow cedar-wood, though between me and Ki there was a snake's track in the sand.

"It is somewhat shameless of you, Ana," said Ki, as he lifted the wand, "to reproach me with trickery while you yourself try to confound a poor juggler with such arts as these."

Then I know not what I said to him, save the end of it was that I supposed he would tell me next that I could fill a hall with darkness at noonday and cover a multitude with terror.

"Let us have done with jests," he said, "though these are well enough in their place. Will you take this rod again and point it to the moon? You refuse and you do well, for neither you nor I can cover up her face.

Ana, because you are wise in your way and consort with one who is wiser, and were present in the temple when the statue of Amon was shattered by a certain witch who matched her strength against mine and conquered me, I, the great magician, have come to ask you--whence came that darkness in the hall to-day?"

"From God, I think," I answered in an awed whisper.

"So I think also, Ana. But tell me, or ask Merapi, Moon of Israel, to tell me--from what god? Oh! I say to you that a terrible power is afoot in this land and that the Prince Seti did well to refuse the throne of Egypt and to fly to Memphis. Repeat it to him, Ana."

Then he too was gone.

Now I returned in safety to Memphis and told all these tidings to the Prince, who listened to them eagerly. Once only was he greatly stirred; it was when I repeated to him the words of Userti, that never would she look upon his face again unless it pleased him to turn it towards the throne. On hearing this tears came into his eyes, and rising, he walked

up and down the chamber.

"The fallen must not look for gentleness," he said, "and doubtless, Ana, you think it folly that I should grieve because I am thus deserted."

"Nay, Prince, for I too have been abandoned by a wife and the pain is unforgotten."

"It is not of the wife I think, Ana, since in truth her Highness is no wife to me. For whatever may be the ancient laws of Egypt, how could it happen otherwise, at any rate in my case and hers? It is of the sister. For though my mother was not hers, she and I were brought up together and in our way loved each other, though always it was her pleasure to lord it over me, as it was mine to submit and pay her back in jests. That is why she is so angry because now of a sudden I have thrown off her rule to follow my own will whereby she has lost the throne."

"It has always been the duty of the royal heiress of Egypt to marry the Pharaoh of Egypt, Prince, and having wed one who would be Pharaoh according to that duty, the blow cuts deep."

"Then she had best thrust aside that foolish wife of his and wed him who is Pharaoh. But that she will never do; Amenmeses she has always hated, so much that she loathed to be in the same place with him. Nor indeed would he wed her, who wishes to rule for himself, not through a woman whose title to the crown is better than his own. Well, she has put

me away and there's an end. Henceforth I must go lonely,  
unless--unless----Continue your story, friend. It is kind of her in her  
greatness to promise to protect one so humble. I should remember that,  
although it is true that fallen heads sometimes rise again," he added  
bitterly.

"So at least Jabez thinks, Prince," and I told him how the Israelites  
were sure that he would be Pharaoh, whereat he laughed and said:

"Perhaps, for they are good prophets. For my part I neither know or  
care. Or maybe Jabez sees advantage in talking thus, for as you know he  
is a clever trader."

"I do not think so," I answered and stopped.

"Had Jabez more to say of any other matter, Ana? Of the lady Merapi, for  
instance?"

Now feeling it to be my duty, I told him every word that had passed  
between Jabez and myself, though somewhat shamefacedly.

"This Hebrew takes much for granted, Ana, even as to whom the Moon of  
Israel would wish to shine upon. Why, friend, it might be you whom she  
desires to touch with her light, or some youth in Goshen--not Laban--or  
no one."



"Me, Prince, me!" I exclaimed.

"Well, Ana, I am sure you would have it so. Be advised by me and ask her mind upon the matter. Look not so confused, man, for one who has been married you are too modest. Come tell me of this Crowning."

So glad enough to escape from the matter of Merapi, I spoke at length of all that had happened when Pharaoh Amenmeses took his seat upon the throne. When I described how the rod of the Hebrew prophet had been turned to a snake and how Ki and his company had done likewise, the Prince laughed and said that these were mere jugglers' tricks. But when I told of the darkness that had seemed to gather in the hall and of the gloom that filled the hearts of all men and of the awesome dream of Bakenkhonsu, also of the words of Ki after he had clouded my mind and played his jest upon me, he listened with much earnestness and answered:

"My mind is as Ki's in this matter. I too think that a terrible power is afoot in Egypt, one that has its home in the land of Goshen, and that I did well to refuse the throne. But from what god these fortunes come I do not know. Perhaps time will tell us. Meanwhile if there is aught in the prophecies of these Hebrews, as interpreted by Jabez, at least you and I may sleep in peace, which is more than will chance to Pharaoh on the throne that Userti covets. If so, this play will be worth the watching. You have done your mission well, Ana. Go rest you while I think over all that you have said."

It was evening and as the palace was very hot I went into the garden and making my way to that little pleasure-house where Seti and I were wont to study, I sat myself down there and, being weary, fell asleep. When I awoke from a dream about some woman who was weeping, night had fallen and the full moon shone in the sky, so that its rays fell on the garden before me.

Now in front of this little house, as I have said, grew trees that at this season of the year were covered with white and cup-like blossoms, and between these trees was a seat built up of sun-dried bricks. On this seat sat a woman whom I knew from her shape to be Merapi. Also she was sad, for although her head was bowed and her long hair hid her face I could hear her gentle sighs.

The sight of her moved me very much and I remembered what the Prince had said to me, telling me that I should do well to ask this lady whether she had any mind my way. Therefore if I did so, surely I could not be blamed. Yet I was certain that it was not to me that her heart turned, though to speak the truth, much I wished it otherwise. Who would look at the ibis in the swamp when the wide-winged eagle floated in heaven above?

An evil thought came into my mind, sent by Set. Suppose that this watcher's eyes were fixed upon the eagle, lord of the air. Suppose

that she worshipped this eagle; that she loved it because its home was heaven, because to her it was the king of all the birds. And suppose one told her that if she lured it down to earth from the glorious safety of the skies, she would bring it to captivity or death at the hand of the snarer. Then would not that loving watcher say: "Let it go free and happy, however much I long to look upon it," and when it had sailed from sight, perhaps turn her eyes to the humble ibis in the mud?

Jabez had told me that if this woman and the Prince grew dear to each other she would bring great sorrow on his head. If I repeated his words to her, she who had faith in the prophecies of her people would certainly believe them. Moreover, whatever her heart might prompt, being so high-natured, never would she consent to do what might bring trouble on Seti's head, even if to refuse him should sink her soul in sorrow. Nor would she return to the Hebrews there to fall into the hands of one she hated. Then perhaps I----. Should I tell her? If Jabez had not meant that the matter must be brought to her ears, would he have spoken of it at all? In short was it not my duty to her, and perhaps also to the Prince who thereby might be saved from miseries to come, that is if this talk of future troubles were anything more than an idle story.

Such was the evil reasoning with which Set assailed my spirit. How I beat it down I do not know. Not by my own goodness, I am sure, since at the moment I was aflame with love for the sweet and beautiful lady who sat before me and in my foolishness would, I think, have given my life to kiss her hand. Not altogether for her sake either, since passion

is very selfish. No, I believe it was because the love that I bore the Prince was more deep and real than that which I could feel for any woman, and I knew well that were she not in my sight no such treachery would have overcome my heart. For I was sure, although he had never said so to me, that Seti loved Merapi and above all earthly things desired her as his companion, while if once I spoke those words, whatever my own gain or loss and whatever her secret wish, that she would never be.

So I conquered, though the victory left me trembling like a child, and wishing that I had not been born to know the pangs of love denied. My reward was very swift, for just then Merapi unfastened a gem from the breast of her white robe and held it towards the moon, as though to study it. In an instant I knew it again. It was that royal scarab of lapis-lazuli with which in Goshen the Prince had made fast the bandage on her wounded foot, which also had been snatched from her breast by some power on that night when the statue of Amon was shattered in the temple.

Long and earnestly she looked at it, then having glanced round to make sure she was alone, she pressed it to her lips and kissed it thrice with passion, muttering I know not what between the kisses. Now the scales fell from my eyes and I knew that she loved Seti, and oh! how I thanked my guardian god who had saved me from such useless shame.

I wiped the cold damp from my brow and was about to flee away, discovering myself with as few words as might be, when, looking up, I

saw standing behind Merapi the figure of a man, who was watching her replace the ornament in her robe. While I hesitated a moment the man spoke and I knew the voice for that of Seti. Then again I thought of flight, but being somewhat timid by nature, feared to show myself until it was too late, thinking that afterward the Prince would make me the target of his wit. So I sat close and still, hearing and seeing all despite myself.

"What gem is that, Lady, which you admire and cherish so tenderly?" asked Seti in his slow voice that so often hid a hint of laughter.

She uttered a little scream and springing up, saw him.

"Oh! my lord," she exclaimed, "pardon your servant. I was sitting here in the cool, as you gave me leave to do, and the moon was so bright--that--I wished to be see if by it I could read the writing on this scarab."

Never before, thought I to myself, did I know one who read with her lips, though it is true that first she used her eyes.

"And could you, Lady? Will you suffer me to try?"

Very slowly and colouring, so that even the moonlight showed her blushes, she withdrew the ornament again and held it towards him.

"Surely this is familiar to me? Have I not seen it before?" he asked.

"Perhaps. I wore it that night in the temple, your Highness."

"You must not name me Highness, Lady. I have no longer any rank in Egypt."

"I know--because of--my people. Oh! it was noble."

"But about the scarabæus----" he broke in, with a wave of his hand.

"Surely it is the same with which the bandage was made fast upon your hurt--oh! years ago?"

"Yes, it is the same," she answered, looking down.

"I thought it. And when I gave it to you, I said some words that seemed to me well spoken at the time. What were they? I cannot remember. Have you also forgotten?"

"Yes--I mean--no. You said that now I had all Egypt beneath my foot, speaking of the royal cartouche upon the scarab."

"Ah! I recall. How true, and yet how false the jest, or prophecy."

"How can anything be both true and false, Prince?"

"That I could prove to you very easily, but it would take an hour or more, so it shall be for another time. This scarab is a poor thing, give it back to me and you shall have a better. Or would you choose this signet? As I am no longer Prince of Egypt it is useless to me."

"Keep the scarab, Prince. It is your own. But I will not take the ring because it is----"

"----useless to me, and you would not have that which is without value to the giver. Oh! I string words ill, but they were not what I meant."

"No, Prince, because your royal ring is too large for one so small."

"How can you tell until you have tried? Also that is a fault which might perhaps be mended."

Then he laughed, and she laughed also, but as yet she did not take the ring.

"Have you seen Ana?" he went on. "I believe he set out to search for you, in such a hurry indeed that he could scarcely finish his report to me."

"Did he say that?"

"No, he only looked it. So much so that I suggested he should seek you

at once. He answered that he was going to rest after his long journey, or perhaps I said that he ought to do so. I forget, as often one does, on so beautiful a night when other thoughts seem nearer."

"Why did Ana wish to see me, Prince?"

"How can I tell? Why does a man who is still young--want to see a sweet and beautiful lady? Oh! I remember. He had met your uncle at Tanis who inquired as to your health. Perhaps that is why he wanted to see you."

"I do not wish to hear about my uncle at Tanis. He reminds me of too many things that give pain, and there are nights when one wishes to escape pain, which is sure to be found again on the morrow."

"Are you still of the same mind about returning to your people?" he asked, more earnestly.

"Surely. Oh! do not say that you will send me hence to----"

"Laban, Lady?"

"Laban amongst others. Remember, Prince, that I am one under a curse. If I return to Goshen, in this way or in that, soon I shall die."

"Ana says that your uncle Jabez declares that the mad fellow who tried to murder you had no authority to curse and much less to kill you. You



must ask him to tell you all."

"Yet the curse will cling and crush me at the last. How can I, one lonely woman, stand against the might of the people of Israel and their priests?"

"Are you then lonely?"

"How can it be otherwise with an outcast, Prince?"

"No, it cannot be otherwise. I know it who am also an outcast."

"At least there is her Highness your wife, who doubtless will come to comfort you," she said, looking down.

"Her Highness will not come. If you had seen Ana, he would perhaps have told you that she has sworn not to look upon my face again, unless above it shines a crown."

"Oh! how can a woman be so cruel? Surely, Prince, such a stab must cut you to the heart," she exclaimed, with a little cry of pity.

"Her Highness is not only a woman; she is a Princess of Egypt which is different. For the rest it does cut me to the heart that my royal sister should have deserted me, for that which she loves better--power and pomp. But so it is, unless Ana dreams. It seems therefore that we are in

the same case, both outcasts, you and I, is it not so?"

She made no answer but continued to look upon the ground, and he went on very slowly:

"A thought comes into my mind on which I would ask your judgment. If two who are forlorn came together they would be less forlorn by half, would they not?"

"It would seem so, Prince--that is if they remained forlorn at all. But I do not understand the riddle."

"Yet you have answered it. If you are lonely and I am lonely apart, we should, you say, be less lonely together."

"Prince," she murmured, shrinking away from him, "I spoke no such words."

"No, I spoke them for you. Hearken to me, Merapi. They think me a strange man in Egypt because I have held no woman dear, never having seen one whom I could hold dear." Here she looked at him searchingly, and he went on, "A while ago, before I visited your land of Goshen--Ana can tell you about the matter, for I think he wrote it down--Ki and old Bakenkhonsu came to see me. Now, as you know, Ki is without doubt a great magician, though it would seem not so great as some of your prophets. He told me that he and others had been searching out my future

and that in Goshen I should find a woman whom it was fated I must love. He added that this woman would bring me much joy." Here Seti paused, doubtless remembering this was not all that Ki had said, or Jabez either. "Ki told me also," he went on slowly, "that I had already known this woman for thousands of years."

She started and a strange look came into her face.

"How can that be, Prince?"

"That is what I asked him and got no good answer. Still he said it, not only of the woman but of my friend Ana as well, which indeed would explain much, and it would appear that the other magicians said it also. Then I went to the land of Goshen and there I saw a woman----"

"For the first time, Prince?"

"No, for the third time."

Here she sank upon the bench and covered her eyes with her hands.

"----and loved her, and felt as though I had loved her for 'thousands of years.'"

"It is not true. You mock me, it is not true!" she whispered.

"It is true for if I did not know it then, I knew it afterwards, though never perhaps completely until to-day, when I learned that Userti had deserted me indeed. Moon of Israel, you are that woman. I will not tell you," he went on passionately, "that you are fairer than all other women, or sweeter, or more wise, though these things you seem to me. I will only tell you that I love you, yes, love you, whatever you may be. I cannot offer you the Throne of Egypt, even if the law would suffer it, but I can offer you the throne of this heart of mine. Now, Lady Merapi, what have you to say? Before you speak, remember that although you seem to be my prisoner here at Memphis, you have naught to fear from me. Whatever you may answer, such shelter and such friendship as I can give will be yours while I live, and never shall I attempt to force myself upon you, however much it may pain me to pass you by. I know not the future. It may happen that I shall give you great place and power, it may happen that I shall give you nothing but poverty and exile, or even perhaps a share in my own death, but with either will go the worship of my body and my spirit. Now, speak."

She dropped her hands from her face, looking up at him, and there were tears shining in her beautiful eyes.

"It cannot be, Prince," she murmured.

"You mean you do not wish it to be?"

"I said that it cannot be. Such ties between an Egyptian and an

Israelite are not lawful."

"Some in this city and elsewhere seem to find them so."

"And I am married, I mean perhaps I am married--at least in name."

"And I too am married, I mean----"

"That is different. Also there is another reason, the greatest of all, I am under a curse, and should bring you, not joy as Ki said, but sorrow, or, at the least, sorrow with the joy."

He looked at her searchingly.

"Has Ana----" he began, then continued, "if so what lives have you known that are not compounded of mingled joy and sorrow?"

"None. But the woe I should bring would outweigh the joy--to you. The curse of my God rests upon me and I cannot learn to worship yours. The curse of my people rests upon me, the law of my people divides me from you as with a sword, and should I draw close to you these will be increased upon my head, which matters not, but also upon yours," and she began to sob.

"Tell me," he said, taking her by the hand, "but one thing, and if the answer is No, I will trouble you no more. Is your heart mine?"

"It is," she sighed, "and has been ever since my eyes fell upon you yonder in the streets of Tanis. Oh! then a change came into me and I hated Laban, whom before I had only disliked. Moreover, I too felt that of which Ki spoke, as though I had known you for thousands of years. My heart is yours, my love is yours; all that makes me woman is yours, and never, never can turn from you to any other man. But still we must stay apart, for your sake, my Prince, for your sake."

"Then, were it not for me, you would be ready to run these hazards?"

"Surely! Am I not a woman who loves?"

"If that be so," he said with a little laugh, "being of full age and of an understanding which some have thought good, by your leave I think I will run them also. Oh! foolish woman, do you not understand that there is but one good thing in the world, one thing in which self and its miseries can be forgot, and that thing is love? Mayhap troubles will come. Well, let them come, for what do they matter if only the love or its memory remains, if once we have picked that beautiful flower and for an hour worn it on our breasts. You talk of the difference between the gods we worship and maybe it exists, but all gods send their gifts of love upon the earth, without which it would cease to be. Moreover, my faith teaches me more clearly perhaps than yours, that life does not end with death and therefore that love, being life's soul, must endure while it endures. Last of all, I think, as you think, that in some dim way

there is truth in what the magicians said, and that long ago in the past we have been what once more we are about to be, and that the strength of this invisible tie has drawn us together out of the whole world and will bind us together long after the world is dead. It is not a matter of what we wish to do, Merapi, it is a matter of what Fate has decreed we shall do. Now, answer again."

But she made no answer, and when I looked up after a little moment she was in his arms and her lips were upon his lips.

Thus did Prince Seti of England and Merapi, Moon of Israel, come together at Memphis in Egypt.