

CHAPTER XIII

THE RED NILE

On the morrow of this night I found the Prince alone for a little while, and put him in mind of certain ancient manuscripts that he wished to read, which could only be consulted at Thebes where I might copy them; also of others that were said to be for sale there. He answered that they could wait, but I replied that the latter might find some other purchaser if I did not go at once.

"You are over fond of long journeys upon my business, Ana," he said. Then he considered me curiously for a while, and since he could read my mind, as indeed I could his, saw that I knew all, and added in a gentle voice:

"You should have done as I told you, and spoken first. If so, who knows----"

"You do, Prince," I answered, "you and another."

"Go, and the gods be with you, friend, but stay not too long copying those rolls, which any scribe can do. I think there is trouble at hand in Egypt, and I shall need you at my side. Another who holds you dear will need you also."

"I thank my lord and that other," I said, bowing, and went.

Moreover, while I was making some humble provision for my journey, I found that this was needless, since a slave came to tell me that the Prince's barge was waiting to sail with the wind. So in that barge I travelled to Thebes like a great noble, or a royal mummy being borne to burial. Only instead of wailing priests, until I sent them back to Memphis, musicians sat upon the prow, and when I willed, dancing girls came to amuse my leisure and, veiled in golden nets, to serve at my table.

So I journeyed as though I were the Prince himself, and as one who was known to have his ear was made much of by the governors of the Nomes, the chief men of the towns, and the high priests of the temples at every city where we moored. For, as I have said, although Amenmeses sat upon the throne, Seti still ruled in the hearts of the folk of Egypt. Moreover, as I sailed further up the Nile to districts where little was known of the Israelites, and the troubles they were bringing on the land, I found this to be so more and more. Why is it, the Great Ones would whisper in my ear, that his Highness the Prince Seti does not hold his father's place? Then I would tell them of the Hebrews, and they would laugh and say:

"Let the Prince unfurl his royal banner here, and we will show him what we think of the question of these Israelitish slaves. May not the Heir of Egypt form his own judgment on such a matter as to whether they

should abide there in the north, or go away into that wilderness which they desire?"

To all of which, and much like it, I would only answer that their words should be reported. More I did not, and indeed did not dare to say, since everywhere I found that I was being followed and watched by the spies of Pharaoh.

At length I came to Thebes and took up my abode in a fine house that was the property of the Prince, which I found that a messenger had commanded should be made ready for me. It stood near by the entrance to the Avenue of Sphinxes, which leads to the greatest of all the Theban temples, where is that mighty columned hall built by the first Seti and his son, Rameses II, the Prince's grandfather.

Here, having entrance to the place, I would often wander at night, and in my spirit draw as near to heaven as ever it has been my lot to travel. Also, crossing the Nile to the western bank, I visited that desolate valley where the rulers of Egypt lie at rest. The tomb of Pharaoh Meneptah was still unsealed, and accompanied by a single priest with torches, I crept down its painted halls and looked upon the sarcophagus of him whom so lately I had seen seated in glory upon the throne, wondering, as I looked, how much or how little he knew of all that passed in Egypt to-day.

Moreover, I copied the papyri that I had come to seek, in which there

was nothing worth preserving, and some of real value that I discovered in the ancient libraries of the temples, and purchased others. One of these indeed told a very strange tale that has given me much cause for thought, especially of late years now when all my friends are dead.

Thus I spent two months, and should have stayed longer had not messengers reached me from the Prince saying that he desired my return. Of these, one followed within three days of the other, and his words were:

"Think you, Scribe Ana, that because I am no more Prince of Egypt I am no longer to be obeyed? If so, bear in mind that the gods may decree that one day I shall grow taller than ever I was before, and then be sure that I will remember your disobedience, and make you shorter by a head. Come swiftly, my friend, for I grow lonely, and need a man to talk with."

To which I replied, that I returned as fast as the barge would carry me, being so heavily laden with the manuscripts that I had copied and purchased.

So I started, being, to tell truth, glad to get away, for this reason.

Two nights before, when I was walking alone from the great temple of the house, a woman dressed in many colours appeared and accosted me as such lost ones do. I tried to shake her off, but she clung to me, and I saw that she had drunk more than enough of wine. Presently she asked, in a

voice that I thought familiar, if I knew who was the officer that had come to Thebes on the business of some Royal One and abode in the dwelling that was known as House of the Prince. I answered that his name was Ana.

"Once I knew an Ana very well," she said, "but I left him."

"Why?" I asked, turning cold in my limbs, for although I could not see her face because of a hood she wore, now I began to be afraid.

"Because he was a poor fool," she answered, "no man at all, but one who was always thinking about writings and making them, and another came my way whom I liked better until he deserted me."

"And what happened to this Ana?" I asked.

"I do not know. I suppose he went on dreaming, or perhaps he took another wife; if so, I am sorry for her. Only, if by chance it is the same that has come to Thebes, he must be wealthy now, and I shall go and claim him and make him keep me well."

"Had you any children?" I asked.

"Only one, thank the gods, and that died--thank the gods again, for otherwise it might have lived to be such as I am," and she sobbed once in a hard fashion and then fell to her vile endearments.

As she did so, the hood slipped from her head and I saw that the face was that of my wife, still beautiful in a bold fashion, but grown dreadful with drink and sin. I trembled from head to foot, then said in the disguised voice that I had used to her.

"Woman, I know this Ana. He is dead and you were his ruin. Still, because I was his friend, take this and go reform your ways," and I drew from my robe and gave to her a bag containing no mean weight of gold.

She snatched it as a hawk snatches, and seeing its contents by the starlight, thanked me, saying:

"Surely Ana dead is worth more than Ana alive. Also it is well that he is dead, for he is gone where the child went, which he loved more than life, neglecting me for its sake and thereby making me what I am. Had he lived, too, being as I have said a fool, he would have had more ill-luck with women, whom he never understood. Farewell, friend of Ana, who have given me that which will enable me to find another husband," and laughing wildly she reeled off behind a sphinx and vanished into the darkness.

For this reason, then, I was glad to escape from Thebes. Moreover, that miserable one had hurt me sorely, making me sure of what I had only guessed, namely, that with women I was but a fool, so great a fool that then and there I swore by my guardian god that never would I look with

love on one of them again, an oath which I have kept well whatever others I may have broken. Again she stabbed me through with the talk of our dead child, for it is true that when that sweet one took flight to Osiris my heart broke and in a fashion has never mended itself again. Lastly, I feared lest it might also be true that I had neglected the mother for the sake of this child which was the jewel of my worship, yes, and is, and thereby helped her on to shame. So much did this thought torment me that through an agent whom I trusted, who believed that I was but providing for one whom I had wronged, I caused enough to be paid to her to keep her in comfort.

She did marry again, a merchant about whom she had cast her toils, and in due course spent his wealth and brought him to ruin, after which he ran away from her. As for her, she died of her evil habits in the third year of the reign of Seti II. But, the gods be thanked she never knew that the private scribe of Pharaoh's chamber was that Ana who had been her husband. Here I will end her story.

Now as I was passing down the Nile with a heart more heavy than the great stone that served as anchor on the barge, we moored at dusk on the third night by the side of a vessel that was sailing up Nile with a strong northerly wind. On board this boat was an officer whom I had known at the Court of Pharaoh Meneptah, travelling to Thebes on duty. This man seemed so much afraid that I asked him if anything weighed upon his mind. Then he took me aside into a palm grove upon the bank, and seating himself on the pole whereby oxen turned a waterwheel, told me

that strange things were passing at Tanis.

It seemed that the Hebrew prophets had once more appeared before Pharaoh, who since his accession had left the Israelites in peace, not attacking them with the sword as Meneptah had wished to do, it was thought through fear lest if he did so he should die as Meneptah died. As before, they had put up their prayer that the people of the Hebrews should be suffered to go to worship in the wilderness, and Pharaoh had refused them. Then when he went down to sail upon the river early in the morning of another day, they had met him and one of them struck the water with his rod, and it had turned to blood. Whereon Ki and Kherheb and his company also struck the water with their rods, and it turned to blood. That was six days ago, and now this officer swore to me that the blood was creeping up the Nile, a tale at which I laughed.

"Come then and see," he said, and led me back to his boat, where all the crew seemed as fearful as he was himself.

He took me forward to a great water jar that stood upon the prow and, behold! it seemed to be full of blood, and in it was a fish dead, and--stinking.

"This water," said he, "I drew from the Nile with my own hands, not five hours sail to the north. But now we have outsped the blood, which follows after us," and taking a lamp he held it over the prow of the boat and I saw that all its planks were splashed as though with blood.

"Be advised by me, learned scribe," he added, "and fill every jar and skin that you can gather with sweet water, lest to-morrow you and your company should go thirsty," and he laughed a very dreary laugh.

Then we parted without more words, for neither of us knew what to say, and about midnight he sailed on with the wind, taking his chance of grounding on the sandbanks in the darkness.

For my part I did as he bade me, though my rowers who had not spoken with his men, thought that I was mad to load up the barge with so much water.

At the first break of day I gave the order to start. Looking over the side of the barge it seemed to me as though the lights of dawn had fallen from the sky into the Nile whereof the water had become pink-hued. Moreover, this hue, which grew ever deeper, was travelling up stream, not down, against the course of nature, and could not therefore have been caused by red soil washed from the southern lands. The bargemen stared and muttered together. Then one of them, leaning over the side, scooped up water in the hollow of his hand and drew some into his mouth, only to spit it out again with a cry of fear.

"'Tis blood," he cried. "Blood! Osiris has been slain afresh, and his holy blood fills the banks of Nile."

So much were they afraid, indeed, that had I not forced them to hold to their course they would have turned and rowed up stream, or beached the boat and fled into the desert. But I cried to them to steer on northwards, for thus perhaps we should sooner be done with this horror, and they obeyed me. Ever as we went the hue of the water grew more red, almost to blackness, till at last it seemed as though we were travelling through a sea of gore in which dead fish floated by the thousand, or struggled dying on the surface. Also the stench was so dreadful that we must bind linen about our nostrils to strain the foetid air.

We came abreast of a town, and from its streets one great wail of terror rose to heaven. Men stood staring as though they were drunken, looking at their red arms which they had dipped in the stream, and women ran to and fro upon the bank, tearing their hair and robes, and crying out such words as--

"Wizard's work! Bewitched! Accursed! The gods have slain each other, and men too must die!" and so forth.

Also we saw peasants digging holes at a distance from the shore to see perchance if they might come to water that was sweet and wholesome. All day long we travelled thus through this horrible flood, while the spray driven by the strong north wind spotted our flesh and garments, till we were like butchers reeking from the shambles. Nor could we eat any food because of the stench from this spray, which made it to taste salt as does fresh blood, only we drank of the water which I had provided, and

the rowers who had held me to be mad now named me the wisest of men; one who knew what would befall in the future.

At length towards evening we noted that the water was growing much less red with every hour that passed, which was another marvel, seeing that above us, upstream, it was the colour of jasper, whereon we paused from our rowing and, all defiled as we were, sang a hymn and gave thanks to Hapi, god of Nile, the Great, the Secret, the Hidden. Before sunset, indeed, the river was clean again, save that on the bank where we made fast for the night the stones and rushes were all stained, and the dead fish lay in thousands polluting the air. To escape the stench we climbed a cliff that here rose quite close to Nile, in which we saw the mouths of ancient tombs that long ago had been robbed and left empty, purposing to sleep in one of them.

A path worn by the feet of men ran to the largest of these tombs, whence, as we drew near, we heard the sound of wailing. Looking in, I saw a woman and some children crouched upon the floor of the tomb, their heads covered with dust who, when they perceived us, cried more loudly than before, though with harsh dry voices, thinking no doubt that we were robbers or perhaps ghosts because of our bloodstained garments. Also there was another child, a little one, that did not cry, because it was dead. I asked the woman what passed, but even when she understood that we were only men who meant her no harm, she could not speak or do more than gasp "Water! Water!" We gave her and the children to drink from the jars which we had brought with us, which they did greedily,

after which I drew her story from her.

She was the wife of a fisherman who made his home in this cave, and said that seven days before the Nile had turned to blood, so that they could not drink of it, and had no water save a little in a pot. Nor could they dig to find it, since here the ground was all rock. Nor could they escape, since when he saw the marvel, her husband in his fear had leapt from his boat and waded to land and the boat had floated away.

I asked where was her husband, and she pointed behind her. I went to look, and there found a man hanging by his neck from a rope that was fixed to the capital of a pillar in the tomb, quite dead and cold.

Returning sick at heart, I inquired of her how this had come about. She answered that when he saw that all the fish had perished, taking away his living, and that thirst had killed his youngest child, he went mad, and creeping to the back of the tomb, without her knowledge hung himself with a net rope. It was a dreadful story.

Having given the widow of our food, we went to sleep in another tomb, not liking the company of those dead ones. Next morning at the dawn we took the woman and her children on board the barge, and rowed them three hours' journey to a town where she had a sister, whom she found. The dead man and the child we left there in the tomb, since my men would not defile themselves by touching them.

So, seeing much terror and misery on our journey, at last we came safe

to Memphis. Leaving the boatmen to draw up the barge, I went to the palace, speaking with none, and was led at once to the Prince. I found him in a shaded chamber seated side by side with the lady Merapi, and holding her hand in such a fashion that they remind me of the life-sized Ka statues of a man and his wife, such as I have seen in the ancient tombs, cut when the sculptors knew how to fashion the perfect likenesses of men and women. This they no longer do to-day, I think because the priests have taught them that it is not lawful. He was talking to her in a low voice, while she listened, smiling sweetly as she ever did, but with eyes, fixed straight before her that were, as it seemed to me, filled with fear. I thought that she looked very beautiful with her hair outspread over her white robe, and held back from her temples by a little fillet of gold. But as I looked, I rejoiced to find that my heart no longer yearned for her as it had upon that night when I had seen her seated beneath the trees without the pleasure-house. Now she was its friend, no more, and so she remained until all was finished, as both the Prince and she knew well enough.

When he saw me Seti sprang from his seat and came to greet me, as a man does the friend whom he loves. I kissed his hand, and going to Merapi, kissed hers also noting that on it now shone that ring which once she had rejected as too large.

"Tell me, Ana, all that has befallen you," he said in his pleasant, eager voice.

"Many things, Prince; one of them very strange and terrible," I answered.

"Strange and terrible things have happened here also," broke in Merapi, "and, alas! this is but the beginning of woes."

So saying, she rose, as though she could trust herself to speak no more, bowed first to her lord and then to me, and left the chamber.

I looked at the Prince and he answered the question in my eyes.

"Jabez has been here," he said, "and filled her heart with forebodings. If Pharaoh will not let the Israelites go, by Amon I wish he would let Jabez go to some place whence he never could return. But tell me, have you also met blood travelling against the stream of Nile? It would seem so," and he glanced at the rusty stains that no washing would remove from my garments.

I nodded and we talked together long and earnestly, but in the end were no wiser for all our talking. For neither of us knew how it came about that men by striking water with a rod could turn it into what seemed to be blood, as the Hebrew prophet and Ki both had done, or how that blood could travel up the Nile against the stream and everywhere endure for a space of seven days; yes, and spread too to all the canals in Egypt, so that men must dig holes for water and dig them fresh each day because the blood crept in and poisoned them. But both of us thought that this

was the work of the gods, and most of all of that god whom the Hebrews worship.

"You remember, Ana," said the Prince, "the message which you brought to me from Jabez, namely that no harm should come to me because of these Israelites and their curses. Well, no harm as come as yet, except the harm of Jabez, for he came. On the day before the news of this blood plague reached us, Jabez appeared disguised as a merchant of Syrian stuffs, all of which he sold to me at three times their value. He obtained admission to the chambers of Merapi, where she is accustomed to see whom she wills, and under pretence of showing her his stuffs, spoke with her and, as I fear, told her what you and I were so careful to hide, that she would bring trouble on me. At the least she has never been quite the same since, and I have thought it wise to make her swear by an oath, which I know she will never break, that now we are one she will not attempt to separate herself from me while we both have life."

"Did he wish her to go away with him, Prince?"

"I do not know. She never told me so. Still I am sure that had he come with his evil talk before that day when you returned from Tanis, she would have gone. Now I hope that there are reasons that will keep her where she is."

"What then did he say, Prince?"

"Little beyond what he had already said to you, that great troubles were about to fall on Egypt. He added that he was sent to save me and mine from these troubles because I had been a friend to the Hebrews in so far as that was possible. Then he walked through this house and all round its gardens, as he went reciting something that was written on a roll, of which I could not understand the meaning, and now and again prostrating himself to pray to his god. Thus, where the canal enters the garden and where it leaves the garden he stayed to pray, as he did at the well whence drinking water is drawn. Moreover, led by Merapi, he visited all my cornlands and those where my cattle are herded, reciting and praying until the servants thought that he was mad. After this he returned with her and, as it chanced, I overheard their parting. She said to him:

"The house you have blessed and it is safe; the fields you have blessed and they are safe; will you not bless me also, O my Uncle, and any that are born of me?"

"He answered, shaking his head, 'I have no command, my Niece, either to bless or to curse you, as did that fool whom the Prince slew. You have chosen your own path apart from your people. It may be well, or it may be ill, or perhaps both, and henceforth you must walk it alone to wherever it may lead. Farewell, for perhaps we shall meet no more.'

"Thus speaking they passed out of earshot, but I could see that still she pleaded and still he shook his head. In the end, however, she gave

him an offering, of all that she had I think, though whether this went to the temple of the Hebrews or into his own pouch I know not. At least it seemed to soften him, for he kissed her on the brow tenderly enough and departed with the air of a happy merchant who has sold his wares. But of all that passed between them Merapi would tell me nothing. Nor did I tell her of what I had overheard."

"And then?"

"And then, Ana, came the story of the Hebrew prophet who made the water into blood, and of Ki and his disciples who did likewise. The latter I did not believe, because I said it would be more reasonable had Ki turned the blood back into water, instead of making more blood of which there was enough already."

"I think that magicians have no reason."

"Or can do mischief only, Ana. At any rate after the story came the blood itself and stayed with us seven whole days, leaving much sickness behind it because of the stench of the rotting fish. Now for the marvel--here about my house there was no blood, though above and below the canal was full of it. The water remained as it has always been and the fish swam in it as they have always done; also that of the well kept sweet and pure. When this came to be known thousands crowded to the place, clamouring for water; that is until they found that outside the gates it grew red in their vessels, after which, although some still

came, they drank the water where they stood, which they must do quickly."

"And what tale do they tell of this in Memphis, Prince?" I asked astonished.

"Certain of them say that not Ki but I am the greatest magician in Egypt--never, Ana, was fame more lightly earned. And certain say that Merapi, of whose doings in the temple at Tanis some tale has reached them, is the real magician, she being an Israelite of the tribe of the Hebrew prophets. Hush! She returns."