

## CHAPTER XV

### THE NIGHT OF FEAR

Then came the hail, and some months after the hail the locusts, and Egypt went mad with woe and terror. It was known to us, for with Ki and Bakenkhonsu in the palace we knew everything, that the Hebrew prophets had promised this hail because Pharaoh would not listen to them.

Therefore Seti caused it to be put about through all the land that the Egyptians should shelter their cattle, or such as were left to them, at the first sign of storm. But Pharaoh heard of it and issued a proclamation that this was not to be done, inasmuch as it would be an insult to the gods of Egypt. Still many did so and these saved their cattle. It was strange to see that wall of jagged ice stretching from earth to heaven and destroying all upon which it fell. The tall date-palms were stripped even of their bark; the soil was churned up; men and beasts if caught abroad were slain or shattered.

I stood at the gate and watched it. There, not a yard away, fell the white hail, turning the world to wreck, while here within the gate there was not a single stone. Merapi watched also, and presently came Ki as well, and with him Bakenkhonsu, who for once had never seen anything like this in all his long life. But Ki watched Merapi more than he did the hail, for I saw him searching out her very soul with those merciless eyes of his.

"Lady," he said at length, "tell your servant, I beseech you, how you do this thing?" and he pointed first to the trees and flowers within the gate and then to the wreck without.

At first I thought that she had not heard him because of the roar of the hail, for she stepped forward and opened the side wicket to admit a poor jackal that was scratching at the bars. Still this was not so, for presently she turned and said:

"Does the Kherheb, the greatest magician in Egypt, ask an unlearned woman to teach him of marvels? Well, Ki, I cannot, because I neither do it nor know how it is done."

Bakenkhonsu laughed, and Ki's painted smile grew as it were brighter than before.

"That is not what they say in the land of Goshen, Lady," he answered, "and not what the Hebrew women say here in Memphis. Nor is it what the priests of Amon say. These declare that you have more magic than all the sorcerers of the Nile. Here is the proof of it," and he pointed to the ruin without and the peace within, adding, "Lady, if you can protect your own home, why cannot you protect the innocent people of Egypt?"

"Because I cannot," she answered angrily. "If ever I had such power it is gone from me, who am now the mother of an Egyptian's child. But I have none. There in the temple of Amon some Strength worked through me,

that is all, which never will visit me again because of my sin."

"What sin, Lady?"

"The sin of taking the Prince Seti to lord. Now, if any god spoke through me it would be one of those of the Egyptians, since He of Israel has cast me out."

Ki started as though some new thought had come to him, and at this moment she turned and went away.

"Would that she were high-priestess of Isis that she might work for us and not against us," he said.

Bakenkhonsu shook his head.

"Let that be," he answered. "Be sure that never will an Israelitish woman offer sacrifice to what she would call the abomination of the Egyptians."

"If she will not sacrifice to save the people, let her be careful lest the people sacrifice her to save themselves," said Ki in a cold voice.

Then he too went away.

"I think that if ever that hour comes, then Ki will have his share in

it," laughed Bakenkhonsu. "What is the good of a shepherd who shelters here in comfort, while outside the sheep are dying, eh, Ana?"

It was after the plague of locusts, which ate all there was left to eat in Egypt, so that the poor folk who had done no wrong and had naught to say to the dealings of Pharaoh with the Israelites starved by the thousand, and during that of the great darkness, that Laban came. Now this darkness lay upon the land like a thick cloud for three whole days and nights. Nevertheless, though the shadows were deep, there was no true darkness over the house of Seti at Memphis, which stood in a funnel of grey light stretching from earth to sky.

Now the terror was increased tenfold, and it seemed to me that all the hundreds of thousands of Memphis were gathered outside our walls, so that they might look upon the light, such as it was, if they could do no more. Seti would have admitted as many as the place would hold, but Ki bade him not, saying, that if he did so the darkness would flow in with them. Only Merapi did admit some of the Israelitish women who were married to Egyptians in the city, though for her pains they only cursed her as a witch. For now most of the inhabitants of Memphis were certain that it was Merapi who, keeping herself safe, had brought these woes upon them because she was a worshipper of an alien god.

"If she who is the love of Egypt's heir would but sacrifice to Egypt's gods, these horrors would pass from us," said they, having, as I think, learned their lesson from the lips of Ki. Or perhaps the emissaries of

Userti had taught them.

Once more we stood by the gate watching the people flitting to and fro in the gloom without, for this sight fascinated Merapi, as a snake fascinates a bird. Then it was that Laban appeared. I knew his hooked nose and hawk-like eyes at once, and she knew him also.

"Come away with me, Moon of Israel," he cried, "and all shall yet be forgiven you. But if you will not come, then fearful things shall overtake you."

She stood staring at him, answering never a word, and just then the Prince Seti reached us and saw him.

"Take that man," he commanded, flushing with anger, and guards sprang into the darkness to do his bidding. But Laban was gone.

On the second day of the darkness the tumult was great, on the third it was terrible. A crowd thrust the guard aside, broke down the gates and burst into the palace, humbly demanding that the lady Merapi would come to pray for them, yet showing by their mien that if she would not come they meant to take her.

"What is to be done?" asked Seti of Ki and Bakenkhonsu.

"That is for the Prince to judge," said Ki, "though I do not see how it

can harm the lady Merapi to pray for us in the open square of Memphis."

"Let her go," said Bakenkhonsu, "lest presently we should all go further than we would."

"I do not wish to go," cried Merapi, "not knowing for whom I am to pray or how."

"Be it as you will, Lady," said Seti in his grave and gentle voice.

"Only, hearken to the roar of the mob. If you refuse, I think that very soon every one of us will have reached a land where perhaps it is not needful to pray at all," and he looked at the infant in her arms.

"I will go," she said.

She went forth carrying the child and I walked behind her. So did the Prince, but in that darkness he was cut off by a rush of thousands of folk and I saw him no more till all was over. Bakenkhonsu was with me leaning on my arm, but Ki had gone on before us, for his own ends as I think. A huge mob moved through the dense darkness, in which here and there lights floated like lamps upon a quiet sea. I did not know where we were going until the light of one of these lamps shone upon the knees of the colossal statue of the great Rameses, revealing his cartouche. Then I knew that we were near the gateway of the vast temple of Memphis, the largest perhaps in the whole world.

We went on through court after pillared court, priests leading us by the hand, till we came to a shrine commanding the biggest court of all, which was packed with men and women. It was that of Isis, who held at her breast the infant Horus.

"O friend Ana," cried Merapi, "give help. They are dressing me in strange garments."

I tried to get near to her but was thrust back, a voice, which I thought to be that of Ki, saying:

"On your life, fool!"

Presently a lamp was held up, and by the light of it I saw Merapi seated in a chair dressed like a goddess, in the sacerdotal robes of Isis and wearing the vulture cap headdress--beautiful exceedingly. In her arms was the child dressed as the infant Horus.

"Pray for us, Mother Isis," cried thousands of voices, "that the curse of blackness may be removed."

Then she prayed, saying:

"O my God, take away this curse of blackness from these innocent people," and all of those present, repeated her prayer.

At that moment the sky began to lighten and in less than half an hour the sun shone out. When Merapi saw how she and the child were arrayed she screamed aloud and tore off her jewelled trappings, crying:

"Woe! Woe! Woe! Great woe upon the people of Egypt!"

But in their joy at the new found light few hearkened to her who they were sure had brought back the sun. Again Laban appeared for a moment.

"Witch! Traitress!" he cried. "You have worn the robes of Isis and worshipped in the temple of the gods of the Egyptians. The curse of the God of Israel be on you and that which is born of you."

I sprang at him but he was gone. Then we bore Merapi home swooning.

So this trouble passed by, but from that time forward Merapi would not suffer her son to be taken out of her sight.

"Why do you make so much of him, Lady?" I asked one day.

"Because I would love him well while he is here, Friend," she answered, "but of this say nothing to his father."

A while went by and we heard that still Pharaoh would not let the Israelites go. Then the Prince Seti sent Bakenkhonsu and myself to Tanis to see Pharaoh and to say to him:



"I seek nothing for myself and I forget those evils which you would have worked on me through jealousy. But I say unto you that if you will not let these strangers go great and terrible things shall befall you and all Egypt. Therefore, hear my prayer and let them go."

Now Bakenkhonsu and I came before Pharaoh and we saw that he was greatly aged, for his hair had gone grey about his temples and the flesh hung in bags beneath his eyes. Also not for one minute could he stay still.

"Is your lord, and are you also of the servants of this Hebrew prophet whom the Egyptians worship as a god because he has done them so much ill?" he asked. "It may well be so, since I hear that my cousin Seti keeps an Israelitish witch in his house, who wards off from him all the plagues that have smitten the rest of Egypt, and that to him has fled also Ki the Kherheb, my magician. Moreover, I hear that in payment for these wizardries he has been promised the throne of Egypt by many fickle and fearful ones among my people. Let him be careful lest I lift him up higher than he hopes, who already have enough traitors in this land; and you two with him."

Now I said nothing, who saw that the man was mad, but Bakenkhonsu laughed out loud and answered:

"O Pharaoh, I know little, but I know this although I be old, namely, that after men have ceased to speak your name I shall still hold

converse with the wearer of the Double Crown in Egypt. Now will you let these Hebrews go, or will you bring death upon Egypt?"

Pharaoh glared at him and answered, "I will not let them go."

"Why not, Pharaoh? Tell me, for I am curious."

"Because I cannot," he answered with a groan. "Because something stronger than myself forces me to deny their prayer. Begone!"

So we went, and this was the last time that I looked upon Amenmeses at Tanis.

As we left the chamber I saw the Hebrew prophet entering the presence. Afterwards a rumour reached us that he had threatened to kill all the people in Egypt, but that still Pharaoh would not let the Israelites depart. Indeed, it was said that he had told the prophet that if he appeared before him any more he should be put to death.

Now we journeyed back to Memphis with all these tidings and made report to Seti. When Merapi heard them she went half mad, weeping and wringing her hands. I asked her what she feared. She answered death, which was near to all of us. I said:

"If so, there are worse things, Lady."

"For you mayhap you are faithful and good in your own fashion, but not for me. Do you not understand, friend Ana, that I am one who has broken the law of the God I was taught to worship?"

"And which of us is there who has not broken the law of the god we were taught to worship, Lady? If in truth you have done anything of the sort by flying from a murderous villain to one who loves you well, which I do not believe, surely there is forgiveness for such sins as this."

"Aye, perhaps, but, alas! the thing is blacker far. Have you forgotten what I did? Dressed in the robes of Isis I worshipped in the temple of Isis with my boy playing the part of Horus on my bosom. It is a crime that can never be forgiven to a Hebrew woman, Ana, for my God is a jealous God. Yet it is true that Ki tricked me."

"If he had not, Lady, I think there would have been none of us left to trick, seeing that the people were crazed with the dread of the darkness and believed that it could be lifted by you alone, as indeed happened," I added somewhat doubtfully.

"More of Ki's tricks! Oh! do you not understand that the lifting of the darkness at that moment was Ki's work, because he wished the people to believe that I am indeed a sorceress."

"Why?" I asked.

"I do not know. Perhaps that one day he may find a victim to bind to the altar in his place. At least I know well that it is I who must pay the price, I and my flesh and blood, whatever Ki may promise," and she looked at the sleeping child.

"Do not be afraid, Lady," I said. "Ki has left the palace and you will see him no more."

"Yes, because the Prince was angry with him about the trick in the temple of Isis. Therefore suddenly he went, or pretended to go, for how can one tell where such a man may really be? But he will come back again. Bethink you, Ki was the greatest magician in Egypt; even old Bakenkhonsu can remember none like to him. Then he matches himself against the prophets of my people and fails."

"But did he fail, Lady? What they did he did, sending among the Israelites the plagues that your prophets had sent among us."

"Yes, some of them, but he was outpaced, or feared to be outpaced at last. Is Ki a man to forget that? And if Ki chances really to believe that I am his adversary and his master at this black work, as because of what happened in the temple of Amon thousands believe to-day, will he not mete me my own measure soon or late? Oh! I fear Ki, Ana, and I fear the people of Egypt, and were it not for my lord beloved, I would flee away into the wilderness with my son, and get me out of this haunted land! Hush! he wakes."

From this time forward until the sword fell there was great dread in Egypt. None seemed to know exactly what they dreaded, but all thought that it had to do with death. People went about mournfully looking over their shoulders as though someone were following them, and at night they gathered together in knots and talked in whispers. Only the Hebrews seemed to be glad and happy. Moreover, they were making preparations for something new and strange. Thus those Israelitish women who dwelt in Memphis began to sell what property they had and to borrow of the Egyptians. Especially did they ask for the loan of jewels, saying that they were about to celebrate a feast and wished to look fine in the eyes of their countrymen. None refused them what they asked because all were afraid of them. They even came to the palace and begged her ornaments from Merapi, although she was a countrywoman of their own who had showed them much kindness. Yes, and seeing that her son wore a little gold circlet on his hair, one of them begged that also, nor did she say her nay. But, as it chanced, the Prince entered, and seeing the woman with this royal badge in her hand, grew very angry and forced her to restore it.

"What is the use of crowns without heads to wear them?" she sneered, and fled away laughing, with all that she had gathered.

After she had heard that saying Merapi grew even sadder and more distraught than she was before, and from her the trouble crept to Seti. He too became sad and ill at ease, though when I asked him why he vowed

he did not know, but supposed it was because some new plague drew near.

"Yet," he added, "as I have made shift to live through nine of them, I do not know why I should fear a tenth."

Still he did fear it, so much that he consulted Bakenkhonsu as to whether there were any means by which the anger of the gods could be averted.

Bakenkhonsu laughed and said he thought not, since always if the gods were not angry about one thing they were angry about another. Having made the world they did nothing but quarrel with it, or with other gods who had a hand in its fashioning, and of these quarrels men were the victims.

"Bear your woes, Prince," he added, "if any come, for ere the Nile has risen another fifty times at most, whether they have or have not been, will be the same to you."

"Then you think that when we go west we die indeed, and that Osiris is but another name for the sunset, Bakenkhonsu."

The old Councillor shook his great head, and answered:

"No. If ever you should lose one whom you greatly love, take comfort, Prince, for I do not think that life ends with death. Death is the nurse

that puts it to sleep, no more, and in the morning it will wake again to travel through another day with those who have companioned it from the beginning."

"Where do all the days lead it to at last, Bakenkhonsu?"

"Ask that of Ki; I do not know."

"To Set with Ki, I am angered with him," said the Prince, and went away.

"Not without reason, I think," mused Bakenkhonsu, but when I asked him what he meant, he would not or could not tell me.

So the gloom deepened and the palace, which had been merry in its way, became sad. None knew what was coming, but all knew that something was coming and stretched out their hands to strive to protect that which they loved best from the stroke of the warring gods. In the case of Seti and Merapi this was their son, now a beautiful little lad who could run and prattle, one too of a strange health and vigour for a child of the inbred race of the Ramessids. Never for a minute was this boy allowed to be out of the sight of one or other of his parents; indeed I saw little of Seti in those days and all our learned studies came to nothing, because he was ever concerned with Merapi in playing nurse to this son of his.

When Userti was told of it, she said in the hearing of a friend of mine:

"Without a doubt that is because he trains his bastard to fill the throne of Egypt."

But, alas! all that the little Seti was doomed to fill was a coffin.

It was a still, hot evening, so hot that Merapi had bid the nurse bring the child's bed and set it between two pillars of the great portico. There on the bed he slept, lovely as Horus the divine. She sat by his side in a chair that had feet shaped like to those of an antelope. Seti walked up and down the terrace beyond the portico leaning on my shoulder, and talking by snatches of this or that. Occasionally as he passed he would stay for a while to make sure by the bright moonlight that all was well with Merapi and the child, as of late it had become a habit with him to do. Then without speaking, for fear lest he should awake the boy, he would smile at Merapi, who sat there brooding, her head resting on her hand, and pass on.

The night was very still. The palm leaves did not rustle, no jackals were stirring, and even the shrill-voiced insects had ceased their cries. Moreover, the great city below was quiet as a home of the dead. It was as though the presage of some advancing doom scared the world to silence. For without doubt doom was in the air. All felt it down to the nurse woman, who cowered close as she dared to the chair of her



mistress, and even in that heat shivered from time to time.

Presently little Seti awoke, and began to prattle about something he had dreamed.

"What did you dream, my son?" asked his father.

"I dreamed," he answered in his baby talk, "that a woman, dressed as Mother was in the temple, took me by the hand and led me into the air. I looked down, and saw you and Mother with white faces and crying. I began to cry too, but the woman with the feather cap told me not as she was taking me to a beautiful big star where Mother would soon come to find me."

The Prince and I looked at each other and Merapi feigned to busy herself with hushing the child to sleep again. It drew towards midnight and still no one seemed minded to go to rest. Old Bakenkhonsu appeared and began to say something about the night being very strange and unrestful, when, suddenly, a little bat that was flitting to and fro above us fell upon his head and thence to the ground. We looked at it, and saw that it was dead.

"Strange that the creature should have died thus," said Bakenkhonsu, when, behold! another fell to the ground near by. The black kitten which belonged to Little Seti saw it fall and darted from beside his bed where it was sleeping. Before ever it reached the bat, the creature wheeled

round, stood upon its hind legs, scratching at the air about it, then uttered one pitiful cry and fell over dead.

We stared at it, when suddenly far away a dog howled in a very piercing fashion. Then a cow began to bale as these beasts do when they have lost their calves. Next, quite close at hand but without the gates, there arose the ear-curdling cry of a woman in agony, which on the instant seemed to be echoed from every quarter, till the air was full of wailing.

"Oh, Seti! Seti!" exclaimed Merapi, in a voice that was rather a hiss than a whisper, "look at your son!"

We sprang to where the babe lay, and looked. He had awakened and was staring upward with wide-opened eyes and frozen face. The fear, if such it were, passed from his features, though still he stared. He rose to his little feet, always looking upwards. Then a smile came upon his face, a most beautiful smile; he stretched out his arms, as though to clasp one who bent down towards him, and fell backwards--quite dead.

Seti stood still as a statue; we all stood still, even Merapi. Then she bend down, and lifted the body of the boy.

"Now, my lord," she said, "there has fallen on you that sorrow which Jabez my uncle warned you would come, if ever you had aught to do with me. Now the curse of Israel has pierced my heart, and now our child, as

Ki the evil prophesied, has grown too great for greetings, or even for farewells."

Thus she spoke in a cold and quiet voice, as one might speak of something long expected or foreseen, then made her reverence to the Prince, and departed, bearing the body of the child. Never, I think, did Merapi seem more beautiful to me than in this, her hour of bereavement, since now through her woman's loveliness shone out some shadow of the soul within. Indeed, such were her eyes and such her movements that well might have been a spirit and not a woman who departed from us with that which had been her son.

Seti leaned on my shoulder looking at the empty bed, and at the scared nurse who still sat behind, and I felt a tear drop upon my hand. Old Bakenkhonsu lifted his massive face, and looked at him.

"Grieve not over much, Prince," he said, "since, ere as many years as I have lived out have come and gone, this child will be forgotten and his mother will be forgotten, and even you, O Prince, will live but as a name that once was great in Egypt. And then, O Prince, elsewhere the game will begin afresh, and what you have lost shall be found anew, and the sweeter for it sheltering from the vile breath of men. Ki's magic is not all a lie, or if his is, mine holds some shadow of the truth, and when he said to you yonder in Tanis that not for nothing were you named 'Lord of Rebirths,' he spoke words that you should find comfortable to-night."

"I thank you, Councillor," said Seti, and turning, followed Merapi.

"Now I suppose we shall have more deaths," I exclaimed, hardly knowing what I said in my sorrow.

"I think not, Ana," answered Bakenkhonsu, "since the shield of Jabez, or of his god, is over us. Always he foretold that trouble would come to Merapi, and to Seti through Merapi, but that is all."

I glanced at the kitten.

"It strayed here from the town three days ago, Ana. And the bats also may have flown from the town. Hark to the wailing. Was ever such a sound heard before in Egypt?"