

## CHAPTER XVI

### JABEZ SELLS HORSES

Bakenkhonsu was right. Save the son of Seti alone, none died who dwelt in or about his house, though elsewhere all the first-born of Egypt lay dead, and the first-born of the beasts also. When this came to be known throughout the land a rage seized the Egyptians against Merapi who, they remembered, had called down woe on Egypt after she had been forced to pray in the temple and, as they believed, to lift the darkness from Memphis.

Bakenkhonsu and I and others who loved her pointed out that her own child had died with the rest. To this it was answered, and here I thought I saw the fingers of Userti and of Ki, that it was nothing, since witches did not love children. Moreover, they said she could have as many as she liked and when she liked, making them to look like children out of clay figures and to grow up into evil spirits to torment the land. Lastly, people swore that she had been heard to say that, although to do it she must kill her own lord's son, she would not on that account forego her vengeance on the Egyptians, who once had treated her as a slave and murdered her father. Further, the Israelites themselves, or some of them, mayhap Laban among them, were reported to have told the Egyptians that it was the sorceress who had bewitched Prince Seti who brought such great troubles on them.

So it happened that the Egyptians came to hate Merapi, who of all women was the sweetest and the most to be loved, and to her other supposed crimes, added this also, that by her witcheries she had stolen the heart of Seti away from his lawful wife and made him to turn that lady, the Royal Princess of Egypt, even from his gates, so that she was forced to dwell alone at Tanis. For in all these matters none blamed Seti, whom everyone in Egypt loved, because it was known that he would have dealt with the Israelites in a very different fashion, and thus averted all the woes that had desolated the ancient land of Khem. As for this matter of the Hebrew girl with the big eyes who chanced to have thrown a spell upon him, that was his ill-fortune, nothing more. Amongst the many women with whom they believed he filled his house, as was the way of princes, it was not strange that one favourite should be a witch. Indeed, I am certain that only because he was known to love her, was Merapi saved from death by poison or in some other secret fashion, at any rate for a while.

Now came the glad tidings that the pride of Pharaoh was broken at last (for his first-born child had died with the others), or that the cloud of madness had lifted from his brain, whichever it might be, and that he had decreed that the Children of Israel might depart from Egypt when and whither they would. Then the people breathed again, seeing hope that their miseries might end.

It was at this time that Jabez appeared once more at Memphis, driving a number of chariot horses, which he said he wished to sell to the Prince,

as he did not desire them to pass into any other hands. He was admitted and stated the price of his horses, according to which they must have been beasts of great value.

"Why do you wish to sell your horses?" asked Seti.

"Because I go with my people into lands where there is little water and there they might die, O Prince."

"I will buy the horses. See to it, Ana," said Seti, although I knew well that already he had more than he needed.

The Prince rose to show that the interview was ended, whereon Jabez, who was bowing his thanks, said hurriedly:

"I rejoice to learn, O Royal One, that things have befallen as I foretold, or rather was bidden to foretell, and that the troubles which have afflicted Egypt have passed by your dwelling."

"Then you rejoice to learn a falsehood, Hebrew, since the worst of those troubles has made its home here. My son is dead," and he turned away.

Jabez lifted his shifty eyes from the floor and glanced at him.

"Prince," he said, "I know and grieve because this loss has cut you to the heart. Yet it was no fault of mine or of my people. If you think,

you will remember that both when I built a wall of protection about this place because of your good deeds to Israel, O Prince, and before, I warned, and caused you to be warned, that if you and my niece, Moon of Israel, came together a great trouble might fall on you through her who, having become the woman of an Egyptian in defiance of command, must bear the fate of Egyptian women."

"It may be so," said the Prince. "The matter is not one of which I care to talk. If this death were wrought by the magic of your wizards I have only this to say--that it is an ill payment to me in return for all that I have striven to do on behalf of the Hebrews. Yet, what else could I expect from such a people in such a world? Farewell."

"One prayer, O Prince. I would ask your leave to speak with my niece, Merapi."

"She is veiled. Since the murder of her child by wizardry, she sees no man."

"Still I think she will see her uncle, O Prince."

"What then do you wish to say to her?"

"O Prince, through the clemency of Pharaoh we poor slaves are about to leave the land of Egypt never to return. Therefore, if my niece remains behind, it is natural that I should wish to bid her farewell, and to

confide to her certain matters connected with our race and family, which she might desire to pass on to her children."

Now when he heard this word "children" Seti softened.

"I do not trust you," he said. "You may be charged with more of your Hebrew curses against Merapi, or you may say words to her that will make her even unhappier than she is. Yet if you would wish to see her in my presence----"

"My lord Prince, I will not trouble you so far. Farewell. Be pleased to convey----"

"Or if that does not suit you," interrupted Seti, "in the presence of Ana here you can do so, unless she refuses to receive you."

Jabez reflected for a moment, and answered:

"Then in the presence of Ana let it be, since he is a man who knows when to be silent."

Jabez made obeisance and departed, and at a sign from the Prince I followed him. Presently we were ushered into the chamber of the lady Merapi, where she sat looking most sad and lonely, with a veil of black upon her head.

"Greeting, my uncle," she said, after glancing at me, whose presence I think she understood. "Are you the bearer of more prophecies? I pray not, since your last were overtrue," and she touched the black veil with her finger.

"I am the bearer of tidings, and of a prayer, Niece. The tidings are that the people of Israel are about to leave Egypt. The prayer, which is also a command, is--that you make ready to accompany them----"

"To Laban?" she asked, looking up.

"No, my niece. Laban would not wish as a wife one who has been the mistress of an Egyptian, but to play your part, however humble, in the fortunes of our people."

"I am glad that Laban does not wish what he never could obtain, my uncle. Tell me, I pray you, why should I hearken to this prayer, or this command?"

"For a good reason, Niece--that your life hangs on it. Heretofore you have been suffered to take your heart's desire. But if you bide in Egypt where you have no longer a mission to fulfil, having done all that was sought of you in keeping with the mind of your lover, the Prince Seti, true to the cause of Israel, you will surely die."

"You mean that our people will kill me?"

"No, not our people. Still you will die."

She took a step towards him, and looked him in the eyes.

"You are certain that I shall die, my uncle?"

"I am, or at least others are certain."

Now she laughed; it was the first time I had seen her laugh for several moons.

"Then I will stay here," she said.

Jabez stared at her.

"I thought that you loved this Egyptian, who indeed is worthy of any woman's love," he muttered into his beard.

"Perhaps it is because I love him that I wish to die. I have given him all I have to give; there is nothing left of my poor treasure except what will bring trouble and misfortune on his head. Therefore the greater the love--and it is more great than all those pyramids massed to one--the greater the need that it should be buried for a while. Do you understand?"

He shook his head.

"I understand only that you are a very strange woman, different from any other that I have known."

"My child, who was slain with the rest, was all the world to me, and I would be where he is. Do you understand now?"

"You would leave your life, in which, being young, you may have more children, to lie in a tomb with your dead son?" he asked slowly, like one astonished.

"I only care for life while it can serve him whom I love, and if a day comes when he sits upon the throne how will a daughter of the hated Israelites serve him then? Also I do not wish for more children. Living or dead, he that is gone owns all my heart; there is no room in it for others. That love at least is pure and perfect, and having been embalmed by death, can never change. Moreover, it is not in a tomb that I shall lie with him, or so I believe. The faith of these Egyptians which we despise tells of a life eternal in the heavens, and thither I would go to seek that which is lost, and to wait that which is left behind awhile."

"Ah!" said Jabez. "For my part I do not trouble myself with these problems, who find in a life temporal on the earth enough to fill my thoughts and hands. Yet, Merapi, you are a rebel, and whether in heaven



or on earth, how are rebels received by the king against whom they have rebelled?"

"You say I am rebel," she said, turning on him with flashing eyes. "Why? Because I would not dishonour myself by marrying a man I hate, one also who is a murderer, and because while I live I will not desert a man whom I love to return to those who have done me naught but evil. Did God then make women to be sold like cattle of the field for the pleasure and the profit of him who can pay the highest?"

"It seems so," said Jabez, spreading out his hands.

"It seems that you think so, who fashion God as you would wish him to be, but for my part I do not believe it, and if I did, I should seek another king. My uncle, I appeal from the priest and the elder to That which made both them and me, and by Its judgment I will stand or fall."

"Always a very dangerous thing to do," reflected Jabez aloud, "since the priest is apt to take the law into his own hands before the cause can be pleaded elsewhere. Still, who am I that I should set up my reasonings against one who can grind Amon to powder in his own sanctuary, and who therefore may have warrant for all she thinks and does?"

Merapi stamped her foot.

"You know well it was you who brought me the command to dare the god

Amon in his temple. It was not I----" she began.

"I do know," replied Jabez waving his hand. "I know also that is what every wizard says, whatever his nation or his gods, and what no one ever believes. Thus because, having faith, you obeyed the command and through you Amon was smitten, among both the Israelites and the Egyptians you are held to be the greatest sorceress that has looked upon the Nile, and that is a dangerous repute, my niece."

"One to which I lay no claim, and never sought."

"Just so, but which all the same has come to you. Well, knowing as without doubt you do all that will soon befall in Egypt, and having been warned, if you needed warning, of the danger with which you yourself are threatened, you still refuse to obey this second command which it is my duty to deliver to you?"

"I refuse."

"Then on your own head be it, and farewell. Oh! I would add that there is a certain property in cattle, and the fruit of lands which descends to you from your father. In the event of your death----"

"Take it all, uncle, and may it prosper you. Farewell."

"A great woman, friend Ana, and a beautiful," said the old Hebrew, after

he had watched her go. "I grieve that I shall never see her again, and, indeed, that no one will see her for very long; for, remember, she is my niece of whom I am fond. Now I too must be going, having completed my errand. All good fortune to you, Ana. You are no longer a soldier, are you? No? Believe me, it is as well, as you will learn. My homage to the Prince. Think of me at times, when you grow old, and not unkindly, seeing that I have served you as best I could, and your master also, who I hope will soon find again that which he lost awhile ago."

"Her Highness, Princess Userti," I suggested.

"The Princess Userti among other things, Ana. Tell the Prince, if he should deem them costly, that those horses which I sold him are really of the finest Syrian blood, and of a strain that my family has owned for generations. If you should chance to have any friend whose welfare you desire, let him not go into the desert soldiering during the next few moons, especially if Pharaoh be in command. Nay, I know nothing, but it is a season of great storm. Farewell, friend Ana, and again farewell."

"Now what did he mean by that?" thought I to myself, as I departed to make my report to Seti. But no answer to the question rose in my mind.

Very soon I began to understand. It appeared that at length the Israelites were leaving Egypt, a vast horde of them, and with them tens of thousands of Arabs of various tribes who worshipped their god and were, some of them, descended from the people of the Hyksos, the

shepherds who once ruled in Egypt. That this was true was proved to us by the tidings which reached us that all the Hebrew women who dwelt in Memphis, even those of them who were married to Egyptians, had departed from the city, leaving behind them their men and sometimes their children. Indeed, before these went, certain of them who had been friends visited Merapi, and asked her if she were not coming also. She shook her head as she replied:

"Why do you go? Are you so fond of journeyings in the desert that for the sake of them you are ready never again to look upon the men you love and the children of your bodies?"

"No, Lady," they answered, weeping. "We are happy here in white-walled Memphis and here, listening to the murmur of the Nile, we would grow old and die, rather than strive to keep house in some desert tent with a stranger or alone. Yet fear drives us hence."

"Fear of what?"

"Of the Egyptians who, when they come to understand all that they have suffered at our hands in return for the wealth and shelter which they have given us for many generations, whereby we have grown from a handful into a great people, will certainly kill any Israelite whom they find left among them. Also we fear the curses of our priests who bid us to depart."

"Then I should fear these things also," said Merapi.

"Not so, Lady, seeing that being the only beloved of the Prince of Egypt who, rumour tells us, will soon be Pharaoh of Egypt, by him you will be protected from the anger of the Egyptians. And being, as we all know well, the greatest sorceress in the world, the overthrower of Amon-Ra the mighty, and one who by sacrificing her child was able to ward away every plague from the household where she dwelt, you have naught to fear from priests and their magic."

Then Merapi sprang up, bidding them to leave her to her fate and to be gone to their own, which they did hastily enough, fearing lest she should cast some spell upon them. So it came about that presently the fair Moon of Israel and certain children of mixed blood were all of the Hebrew race that were left in Egypt. Then, notwithstanding the miseries and misfortunes that during the past few years by terror, death, and famine had reduced them to perhaps one half of their number, the people of Egypt rejoiced with a great joy.

In every temple of every god processions were held and offerings made by those who had anything left to offer, while the statues of the gods were dressed in fine new garments and hung about with garlandings of flowers. Moreover, on the Nile and on the sacred lakes boats floated to and fro, adorned with lanterns as at the feast of the Rising of Osiris. As titular high-priest of Amon, an office of which he could not be deprived while he lived, Prince Seti attended these demonstrations, which indeed

he must do, in the great temple of Memphis, whither I accompanied him. When the ceremonies were over he led the procession through the masses of the worshippers, clad in his splendid sacerdotal robes, whereon every throat of the thousands present there greeted him in a shout of thunder as "Pharaoh!" or at least as Pharaoh's heir.

When at length the shouting died, he turned upon them and said:

"Friends, if you would send me to be of the company that sits at the table of Osiris and not at Pharaoh's feasts, you will repeat this foolish greeting, whereof our Lord Amenmeses will hear with little joy."

In the silence that followed a voice called out:

"Have no fear, O Prince, while the Hebrew witch sleeps night by night upon your bosom. She who could smite Egypt with so many plagues can certainly shelter you from harm;" whereon the roars of acclamation went up again.

It was on the following day that Bakenkhonsu the aged returned with more tidings from Tanis, where he had been upon a visit. It seemed that a great council had been held there in the largest hall of one of the largest temples. At this council, which was open to all the people, Amenmeses had given report on the matter of the Israelites who, he stated, were departing in their thousands. Also offerings were made to appease the angry gods of Egypt. When the ceremony was finished, but

before the company broke up in a heavy mood, her Highness the Princess Userti rose in her place, and addressed Pharaoh:

"By the spirits of our fathers," she cried, "and more especially by that of the good god Meneptah, my begetter, I ask of you, Pharaoh, and I ask of you, O people, whether the affront that has been put upon us by these Hebrew slaves and their magicians is one that the proud land of Egypt should be called upon to bear? Our gods have been smitten and defied; woes great and terrible, such as history tells not of, have fallen upon us through magic; tens of thousands, from the first-born child of Pharaoh down, have perished in a single night. And now these Hebrews, who have murdered them by sorcery, for they are sorcerers all, men and women together, especially one of them who sits at Memphis, of whom I will not speak because she has wrought me private harm, by the decree of Pharaoh are to be suffered to leave the land. More, they are to take with them all their cattle, all their threshed corn, all the treasure they have hoarded for generations, and all the ornaments of price and wealth that they have wrung by terror from our own people, borrowing that which they never purpose to return. Therefore I, the Royal Princess of Egypt, would ask of Pharaoh, is this the decree of Pharaoh?"

"Now," said Bakenkhonsu, "Pharaoh sat with hanging head upon his throne and made no answer."

"Pharaoh does not speak," went on Userti. "Then I ask, is this the decree of the Council of Pharaoh and of the people of Egypt? There

is still a great army in Egypt, hundreds of chariots and thousands of footmen. Is this army to sit still while these slaves depart into the desert there to rouse our enemies of Syria against us and return with them to butcher us?"

"At these words," continued Bakenkhonsu, "from all that multitude there went up a shout of 'No.'"

"The people say No. What saith Pharaoh?" cried Userti.

There followed a silence, till suddenly Amenmeses rose and spoke:

"Have it as you will, Princess, and on your head and the heads of all these whom you have stirred up let the evil fall if evil comes, though I think it is your husband, the Prince Seti, who should stand where you stand and put up this prayer in your place."

"My husband, the Prince Seti, is tied to Memphis by a rope of witch's hair, or so they tell me," she sneered, while the people murmured in assent.

"I know not," went on Amenmeses, "but this I know that always the Prince would have let these Hebrews go from among us, and at times, as sorrow followed sorrow, I have thought that he was right. Truly more than once I also would have let them go, but ever some Strength, I know not what, descended on my heart, turning it to stone, and wrung from me words that



I did not desire to utter. Even now I would let them go, but all of you are against me, and, perchance, if I withstand you, I shall pay for it with my life and throne. Captains, command that my armies be made ready, and let them assemble here at Tanis that I myself may lead them after the people of Israel and share their dangers."

Then with a mighty shouting the company broke up, so that at the last all were gone and only Pharaoh remained seated upon his throne, staring at the ground with the air, said Bakenkhonsu, rather of one who is dead than of a living king about to wage war upon his foes.

To all these words the Prince listened in silence, but when they were finished he looked up and asked:

"What think you, Bakenkhonsu?"

"I think, O Prince," answered the wise old man, "that her Highness did ill to stir up this matter, though doubtless she spoke with the voices of the priests and of the army, against which Pharaoh was not strong enough to stand."

"What you think, I think," said Seti.

At this moment the lady Merapi entered.

"I hear, my lord," she said, "that Pharaoh purposes to pursue the people

of Israel with his host. I come to pray my lord that he will not join himself to the host of Pharaoh."

"It is but natural, Lady, that you should not wish me to make war upon your kin, and to speak truth I have no mind that way," replied Seti, and, turning, left the chamber with her.

"She is not thinking of her king but of her lover's life," said Bakenkhonsu. "She is not a witch as they declare, but it is true that she knows what we do not."

"Yes," I answered, "it is true."