

CHAPTER XVII

THE DREAM OF MERAPI

A while went by; it may have been fourteen days, during which we heard that the Israelites had started on their journey. They were a mighty multitude who bore with them the coffin and the mummy of their prophet, a man of their blood, Vizier, it is reported, to that Pharaoh who welcomed them to Egypt hundreds of years before. Some said they went this way and some that, but Bakenkhonsu, who knew everything, declared that they were heading for the Lake of Crocodiles, which others name Sea of Reeds, whereby they would cross into the desert beyond, and thence to Syria. I asked him how, seeing that at its narrowest part, this lake was six thousand paces in width, and that the depth of its mud was unfathomable. He replied that he did not know, but that I might do well to inquire of the lady Merapi.

"So you have changed your mind, and also think her a witch," I said, to which he answered:

"One must breathe the wind that blows, and Egypt is so full of witchcraft that it is difficult to say. Also it was she and no other who destroyed the ancient statue of Amon. Oh! yes, witch or no witch, it might be well to ask her how her people purpose to cross the Sea of Reeds, especially if Pharaoh's chariots chance to be behind them."

So I did ask her, but she answered that she knew nothing of the matter, and wished to know nothing, seeing that she had separated from her people, and remained in Egypt.

Then Ki came, I know not whence, and having made his peace with Seti as to the dressing of Merapi in the robes of Isis which, he vowed, was done by the priests against his wish, told us that Pharaoh and a great host had started to pursue the Israelites. The Prince asked him why he had not gone with the host, to which he replied that he was no soldier, also that Pharaoh hid his face from him. In return he asked the Prince why he had not gone.

Seti answered, because had been deprived of his command with his other officers and had no wish to take share in this business as a private citizen.

"You are wise, as always, Prince," said Ki.

It was on the following night, very late, while the Prince, Ki, Bakenkhonsu and I, Ana, sat talking, that suddenly the lady Merapi broke in upon us as she had risen from her bed, wild-eyed, and with her hair flowing down her robes.

"I have dreamed a dream!" she cried. "I dreamed that I saw all the thousands of my people following after a flame that burned from earth to heaven. They came to the edge of a great water and behind them rushed

Pharaoh and all the hosts of the Egyptians. Then my people ran on to the face of the water, and it bore them as though it were sound land.

Now the soldiers of the Pharaoh were following, but the gods of Egypt appeared, Amon, Osiris, Horus, Isis, Hathor, and the rest, and would have turned them back. Still they refused to listen, and dragging the gods with them, rushed out upon the water. Then darkness fell, and in the darkness sounds of wailing and of a mighty laughter. It passed, the moon rose, shining upon emptiness. I awoke, trembling in my limbs. Interpret me this dream if you can, O Ki, Master of Magic."

"Where is the need, Lady," he answered, awaking as though from sleep, "when the dreamer is also the seer? Shall the pupil venture to instruct the teacher, or the novice to make plain the mysteries to the high-priestess of the temple? Nay, Lady, I and all the magicians of Egypt are beneath your feet."

"Why will you ever mock me?" she said, and as she spoke, she shivered.

Then Bakenkhonsu opened his lips, saying:

"The wisdom of Ki has been buried in a cloud of late, and gives no light to us, his disciples. Yet the meaning of this dream is plain, though whether it be also true I do not know. It is that all the host of Egypt, and with it the gods of Egypt, are threatened with destruction because of the Israelites, unless one to whom they will hearken can be found to turn them from some purpose that I do not understand. But to whom will

the mad hearken, oh! to whom will they hearken?" and lifting his great head, he looked straight at the Prince.

"Not to me, I fear, who now am no one in Egypt," said Seti.

"Why not to you, O Prince, who to-morrow may be everyone in Egypt?" asked Bakenkhonsu. "Always you have pleaded the cause of the Hebrews, and said that naught but evil would befall Egypt because of them, as has happened. To whom, then, will the people and the army listen more readily?"

"Moreover, O Prince," broke in Ki, "a lady of your household has dreamed a very evil dream, of which, if naught be said, it might be held that it was no dream, but a spell of power aimed against the majesty of Egypt; such a spell as that which cast great Amon from his throne, such a spell as that which has set a magic fence around this house and field."

"Again I tell you that I weave no spells, O Ki, who with my own child have paid the price of them."

"Yet spells were woven, Lady, and has been known from of old, strength is perfected in sacrifice alone," Ki answered darkly.

"Have done with your talk of spells, Magician," exclaimed the Prince, "or if you must speak of them, speak of your own, which are many. It was Jabez who protected us here against the plagues, and the statue of Amon

was shattered by some god."

"I ask your pardon, Prince," said Ki bowing, "it was not this lady but her uncle who fenced your house against the plagues which ravaged Egypt, and it was not this lady but some god working in her which overthrew Amon of Tanis. The Prince has said it. Yet this lady has dreamed a certain dream which Bakenkhonsu has interpreted although I cannot, and I think that Pharaoh and his captains should be told of the dream, that on it they may form their own judgment."

"Then why do you not tell them, Ki?"

"It has pleased Pharaoh, O Prince, to dismiss me from his service as one who failed and to give my office of Kherheb to another. If I appear before the face of Pharaoh I shall be killed."

Now I, Ana, listening, wished that Ki would appear before the face of Pharaoh, although I did not believe that he could be killed by him or by anybody else, since against death he had charms. For I was afraid of Ki, and felt in myself that again he was plotting evil to Merapi whom I knew to be innocent.

The Prince walked up and down the chamber as was his fashion when lost in thought. Presently he stopped opposite to me and said:

"Friend Ana, be pleased to command that my chariots be made ready with

a general's escort of a hundred men and spare horses to each chariot. We ride at dawn, you and I, to seek out the army of Pharaoh and pray audience of Pharaoh."

"My lord," said Merapi in a kind of cry, "I pray you go not, leaving me alone."

"Why should I leave you, Lady? Come with me if you will." She shook her head, saying:

"I dare not. Prince, there has been some charm upon me of late that draws me back to my own people. Twice in the night I have awakened and found myself in the gardens with my face set towards the north, and heard a voice in my ears, even that of my father who is dead, saying:

"'Moon of Israel, thy people wander in the wilderness and need thy light.'

"It is certain therefore that if I came near to them I should be dragged down as wood is dragged of an eddy, nor would Egypt see me any more."

"Then I pray you bide where you are, Merapi," said the Prince, laughing a little, "since it is certain that where you go I must follow, who have no desire to wander in the wilderness with your Hebrew folk. Well, it seems that as you do not wish to leave Memphis and will not come with me, I must stay with you."

Ki fixed his piercing eyes upon the pair of them.

"Let the Prince forgive me," he said, "but I swear it by the gods that never did I think to live to hear the Prince Seti Meneptah set a woman's whims before his honour."

"Your words are rough," said Seti, drawing himself up, "and had they been spoken in other days, mayhap, Ki----"

"Oh! my lord," said Ki prostrating himself till his forehead touched the ground, "bethink you then how great must be the need which makes me dare to speak them. When first I came hither from the court of Tanis, the spirit that is within me speaking through my lips gave certain titles to your Highness, for which your Highness was pleased to reprove me. Yet the spirit in me cannot lie and I know well, and bid all here make record of my words, that to-night I stand in the presence of him who ere two moons have passed will be crowned Pharaoh."

"Truly you were ever a bearer of ill-tidings, Ki, but if so, what of it?"

"This your Highness: Were it not that the spirits of Truth and Right compel me for their own reasons, should I, who have blood that can be shed or bones that can be broken, dare to hurl hard words at him who will be Pharaoh? Should I dare to cross the will of the sweet dove who

nestles on his heart, the wise, white dove that murmurs the mysteries of heaven, whence she came, and is stronger than the vulture of Isis and swifter than the hawk of Ra; the dove that, were she angry, could rend me into more fragments than did Set Osiris?"

Now I saw Bakenkhonsu begin to swell with inward laughter like a frog about to croak, but Seti answered in a weary voice:

"By all the birds of Egypt with the sacred crocodiles thrown in, I do not know, since that mind of yours, Ki, is not an open writing which can be read by the passer-by. Still, if you would tell me what is the reason with which the goddesses of Truth and Justice have inspired you----"

"The reason is, O Prince, that the fate of all Egypt's army may be hidden in your hand. The time is short and I will be plain. Deny it as she will this lady here, who seems to be but a thing of love and beauty, is the greatest sorceress in Egypt, as I whom she has mastered know well. She matched herself against the high god of Egypt and smote him to the dust, and has paid back upon him, his prophets, and his worshippers the ills that he would have worked to her, as in the like case any of our fellowship would do. Now she has dreamed a dream, or her spirit has told her that the army of Egypt is in danger of destruction, and I know that this dream is true. Hasten then, O Prince, to save the hosts of Egypt, which you will surely need when you come to sit upon its throne."

"I am no sorceress," cried Merapi, "and yet--alas! that I must say

it--this smiling-featured, cold-eyed wizard's words are true. The sword of death hangs over the hosts of Egypt!"

"Command that the chariots be made ready," said Seti again.

Eight days had gone by. It was sunset and we drew rein over against the Sea of Reeds. Day and night we had followed the army of Pharaoh across the wilderness on a road beaten down by his chariot wheels and soldiers, and by the tens of thousands of the Israelites who had passed that way before them. Now from the ridge where we had halted we saw it encamped beneath us, a very great army. Moreover, stragglers told us that beyond, also encamped, was the countless horde of the Israelites, and beyond these the vast Sea of Reeds which barred their path. But we could not see them for a very strange reason. Between these and the army of Pharaoh rose a black wall of cloud, built as it were from earth to heaven. One of those stragglers of whom I have spoken, told us that this cloud travelled before the Israelites by day, but at night was turned into a pillar of fire. Only on this day, when the army of Pharaoh approached, it had moved round and come between the people of Israel and the army.

Now when the Prince, Bakenkhonsu, and I heard these things we looked at each other and were silent. Only presently the Prince laughed a little, and said:

"We should have brought Ki with us, even if we had to carry him bound, that he might interpret this marvel, for it is sure that no one else can."

"It would be hard to keep Ki bound, Prince, if he wished to go free," answered Bakenkhonsu. "Moreover, before ever we entered the chariots at Memphis he had departed south for Thebes. I saw him go."

"And I gave orders that he should not be allowed to return, for I hold him an ill guest, or so thinks the lady Merapi," replied Seti with a sigh.

"Now that we are here what would the Prince do?" I asked.

"Descend to the camp of Pharaoh and say what we have to say, Ana."

"And if he will not listen, Prince?"

"Then cry our message aloud and return."

"And if he will not suffer us to return, Prince?"

"Then stand still and live or die as the gods may decree."

"Truly our lord has a great heart!" exclaimed Bakenkhonsu, "and though

I feel over young to die, I am minded to see the end of this matter with him," and he laughed aloud.

But I who was afraid thought that O-ho-ho of his, which the sky seemed to echo back upon our heads, a strange and indeed a fearful sound.

Then we put on robes of ceremony that we had brought with us, but neither swords nor armour, and having eaten some food, drove on with the half of our guard towards the place where we saw the banners of Pharaoh flying about his pavilion. The rest of our guard we left encamped, bidding them, if aught happened to us, to return and make report at Memphis and in the other great cities. As we drew near to the camp the outposts saw us and challenged. But when they perceived by the light of the setting sun who it was that they challenged, a murmur went through them, of:

"The Prince of Egypt! The Prince of Egypt!" for so they had never ceased to name Seti, and they saluted with their spears and let us pass.

So at length we came to the pavilion of Pharaoh, round about which a whole regiment stood on guard. The sides of it were looped up high because of the heat of the night which was great, and within sat Pharaoh, his captains, his councillors, his priests, his magicians, and many others at meat or serving food and drink. They sat at a table that was bent like a bow, with their faces towards the entrance, and Pharaoh was in the centre of the table with his fan-bearers and butlers behind

him.

We advanced into the pavilion, the Prince in the centre, Bakenkhonsu leaning on his staff on the right hand, and I, wearing the gold chain that Pharaoh Meneptah had given me, on the left, but those with us remained among the guard at the entrance.

"Who are these?" asked Amenmeses, looking up, "who come here unbidden?"

"Three citizens of Egypt who have a message for Pharaoh," answered Seti in his quiet voice, "which we have travelled fast and far to speak in time."

"How are you named, citizens of Egypt, and who sends your message?"

"We are named, Seti Meneptah aforetime Prince of Egypt, and heir to its crown; Bakenkhonsu the aged Councillor, and Ana the scribe and King's Companion, and our message is from the gods."

"We have heard those names, who has not?" said Pharaoh, and as he spoke all, or very nearly all, the company rose, or half rose, and bowed towards the Prince. "Will you and your companions be seated and eat, Prince Seti Meneptah?"

"We thank the divine Pharaoh, but we have already eaten. Have we Pharaoh's leave to deliver our message?"

"Speak on, Prince."

"O Pharaoh, many moons have gone by, since last we looked upon each other face to face, on that day when my father, the good god Meneptah, disinherited me, and afterwards fled hence to Osiris. Pharaoh will remember why I was thus cut off from the royal root of Egypt. It was because of the matter of these Israelites, who in my judgment had been evilly dealt by, and should be suffered to leave our land. The good god Meneptah, being so advised by you and others, O Pharaoh, would have smitten the Israelites with the sword, making an end of them, and to this he demanded my assent as the Heir of Egypt. I refused that assent and was cast out, and since then, you, O Pharaoh, have worn the double crown, while I have dwelt as a citizen of Memphis, living upon such lands and revenues as are my own. Between that hour and this, O Pharaoh, many griefs have smitten Egypt, and the last of them cost you your first-born, and me mine. Yet through them all, O Pharaoh, you have refused to let these Hebrews go, as I counselled should be done at the beginning. At length after the death of the first-born, your decree was issued that they might go. Yet now you follow them with a great army and purpose to do to them what my father, the good god Meneptah, would have done, had I consented, namely--to destroy them with the sword. Hear me, Pharaoh!"

"I hear; also the case is well if briefly set. What else would the Prince Seti say?"

"This, O Pharaoh. That I pray you to return with all your host from the following of these Hebrews, not to-morrow or the next day, but at once--this night."

"Why, O Prince?"

"Because of a certain dream that a lady of my household who is Hebrew has dreamed, which dream foretells destruction to you and the army of Egypt, unless you hearken to these words of mine."

"I think that we know of this snake whom you have taken to dwell in your bosom, whence it may spit poison upon Egypt. It is named Merapi, Moon of Israel, is it not?"

"That is the name of the lady who dreamed the dream," replied Seti in a cold voice, though I felt him tremble with anger at my side, "the dream that if Pharaoh wills my companions here shall set out word for word to his magicians."

"Pharaoh does not will it," shouted Amenmeses smiting the board with his fist, "because Pharaoh knows that it is but another trick to save these wizards and thieves from the doom that they have earned."

"Am I then a worker of tricks, O Pharaoh? If I had been such, why have I journeyed hither to give warning, when by sitting yonder at Memphis

to-morrow, I might once more have become heir to the double crown? For if you will not hearken to me, I tell you that very soon you shall be dead, and with you these"--and he pointed to all those who sat at table--"and with them the great army that lies without. Ere you speak, tell me, what is that black cloud which stands before the camp of the Hebrews? Is there no answer? Then I will give you the answer. It is the pall that shall wrap the bones of every one of you."

Now the company shivered with fear, yes, even the priests and the magicians shivered. But Pharaoh went mad with rage. Springing from his seat, he snatched at the double crown upon his head, and hurled it to the ground, and I noted that the golden uræus band about it, rolled away, and rested upon Seti's sandalled foot. He tore his robes and shouted:

"At least our fate shall be your fate, Renegade, who have sold Egypt to the Hebrew witch in payment of her kisses. Seize this man and his companions, and when we go down to battle against these Israelites to-morrow after the darkness lifts, let them be set with the captains of the van. So shall the truth be known at last."

Thus Pharaoh commanded, and Seti, answering nothing, folded his arms upon his breast and waited.

Men rose from their seats as though to obey Pharaoh and sank back to them again. Guards started forward and yet remained standing where they

were. Then Bakenkhonsu burst into one of his great laughs.

"O-ho-ho," he laughed, "Pharaohs have I seen come and go, one and two and three, and four and five, but never yet have I seen a Pharaoh whom none of his councillors or guards could obey however much they willed it. When you are Pharaoh, Prince Seti, may your luck be better. Your arm, Ana, my friend, and lead on, Royal Heir of Egypt. The truth is shown to blind eyes that will not see. The word is spoken to deaf ears that will not hearken, and the duty done. Night falls. Sleep ye well, ye bidden of Osiris, sleep ye well!"

Then we turned and walked from that pavilion. At its entrance I looked back, and in the low light that precedes the darkness, it seemed to me as though all seated there were already dead. Blue were their faces and hollow shone their eyes, and from their lips there came no word. Only they stared at us as we went, and stared and stared again.

Without the door of the pavilion, by command of the Prince, I called aloud the substance of the lady Merapi's dream, and warned all within earshot to cease from pursuing the people of Israel, if they would continue to live to look upon the sun. Yet even now, although to speak thus was treason against Pharaoh, none lifted a hand against the Prince, or against me his servant. Often since then I have wondered why this was so, and found no answer to my questionings. Mayhap it was because of the majesty of my master, whom all knew to be the true Pharaoh, and loved at heart. Mayhap it was because they were sure that he would not have

travelled so far and placed himself in the power of Amenmeses save to work the armies of Egypt good, and not ill, and to bring them a message that had been spoken by the gods themselves.

Or mayhap it was because he was still hedged about by that protection which the Hebrews had vowed to him through their prophets with the voice of Jabez. At least so it happened. Pharaoh might command, but his servants would not obey. Moreover, the story spread, and that night many deserted from the host of Pharaoh and encamped about us, or fled back towards the cities whence they came. Also with them were not a few councillors and priests who had talked secretly with Bakenkhonsu. So it chanced that even if Pharaoh desired to make an end of us, as perhaps he purposed to do in the midnight watches, he thought it wisest to let the matter lie until he had finished with the people of Israel.

It was a very strange night, silent, with a heavy, stirless air. There were no stars, but the curtain of black cloud which seemed to hang beyond the camp of the Egyptians was alive with lightnings which appeared to shape themselves to letters that I could not read.

"Behold the Book of Fate written in fire by the hand of God!" said Bakenkhonsu, as he watched.

About midnight a mighty east wind began to blow, so strongly that we

must lie upon our faces under the lee of the chariots. Then the wind died away and we heard tumult and shoutings, both from the camp of Egypt, and from the camp of Israel beyond the cloud. Next there came a shock as of earthquake, which threw those of us who were standing to the ground, and by a blood-red moon that now appeared we perceived that all the army of Pharaoh was beginning to move towards the sea.

"Whither go they?" I asked of the Prince who clung to my arm.

"To doom, I think," he answered, "but to what doom I do not know."

After this we said no more, because we were too much afraid.

Dawn came at last, showing the most awful sight that was ever beheld by the eye of man.

The wall of cloud had disappeared, and in the clear light of the morning, we perceived that the deep waters of the Sea of Reeds had divided themselves, leaving a raised roadway that seemed to have been cleared by the wind, or perchance to have been thrown up by the earthquake. Who can say? Not I who never set foot upon that path of death. Along this wide road streamed the tens of thousands of the Israelites, passing between the water on the right hand, and the water on the left, and after them followed all the army of Pharaoh, save those

who had deserted, and stood or lay around us, watching. We could even see the golden chariots that marked the presence of Pharaoh himself, and of his bodyguard, deep in the heart of the broken host that struggled forward without discipline or order.

"What now? Oh! what now?" murmured Seti, and as he spoke there was a second shock of earthquake. Then to the west on the sea there arose a mighty wave, whereof the crest seemed to be high as a pyramid. It rolled forward with a curved and foaming head, and in the hollow of it for a moment, no more, we saw the army of Egypt. Yet in that moment I seemed to see mighty shapes fleeing landwards along the crest of the wave, which shapes I took to be the gods of Egypt, pursued by a form of light and glory that drove them as with a scourge. They came, they went, accompanied by a sound of wailing, and the wave fell.

But beyond it, the hordes of Israel still marched--upon the further shore.

Dense gloom followed, and through the gloom I saw, or thought I saw, Merapi, Moon of Israel, standing before us with a troubled face and heard or thought I heard her cry:

"Oh! help me, my lord Seti! Help me, my lord Seti!"

Then she too was gone.

"Harness the chariots!" cried Seti, in a hollow voice.