

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE CROWNING OF MERAPI

Fast as sped our horses, rumour, or rather the truth, carried by those who had gone before us, flew faster. Oh! that journey was as a dream begotten by the evil gods. On we galloped through the day and through the night and lo! at every town and village women rushed upon us crying:

"Is it true, O travellers, is it true that Pharaoh and his host are perished in the sea?"

Then old Bakenkhonsu would call in answer:

"It is true that he who was Pharaoh and his host are perished in the sea. But lo! here is he who is Pharaoh," and he pointed to the Prince, who took no heed and said nothing, save:

"On! On!"

Then forward we would plunge again till once more the sound of wailing died into silence.

It was sunset, and at length we drew near to the gates of Memphis. The Prince turned to me and spoke.

"Heretofore I have not dared to ask," he said, "but tell me, Ana. In the gloom after the great cliff of water fell and the shapes of terror swept by, did you seem to see a woman stand before us and did you seem to hear her speak?"

"I did, O Prince."

"Who was that woman and what did she say?"

"She was one who bore a child to you, O Prince, which child is not, and she said, 'Oh! help me, my lord Seti. Help me, my lord Seti!'"

His face grew ashen even beneath its veil of dust, and he groaned.

"Two who loved her have seen and two who loved her have heard," he said.

"There is no room for doubt. Ana, she is dead!"

"I pray the gods----"

"Pray not, for the gods of Egypt are also dead, slain by the god of Israel. Ana, who has murdered her?"

With my finger I who am a draughtsman drew in the thick dust that lay on the board of the chariot the brows of a man and beneath them two deep eyes. The gilt on the board where the sun caught it looked like light in the eyes.

The Prince nodded and said:

"Now we shall learn whether great magicians such as Ki can die like other men. Yes, if need be, to learn that I will put on Pharaoh's crown."

We halted at the gates of Memphis. They were shut and barred, but from within the vast city rose a sound of tumult.

"Open!" cried the Prince to the guard.

"Who bids me open?" answered the captain of the gate peering at us, for the low sun lay behind.

"Pharaoh bids you open."

"Pharaoh!" said the man. "We have sure tidings that Pharaoh and his armies are slain by wizardry in the sea."

"Fool!" thundered the Prince, "Pharaoh never dies. Pharaoh Amenmeses is with Osiris but the good god Seti Meneptah who is Pharaoh bids you open."

Then the bronze gates rolled back, and those who guarded them prostrated themselves in the dust.

"Man," I called to the captain, "what means yonder shouting?"

"Sir," he answered, "I do not know, but I am told that the witch who has brought woe on Egypt and by magic caused the death of Pharaoh Amenmeses and his armies, dies by fire in the place before the temple."

"By whose command?" I cried again as the charioteer flogged the horses, but no answer reached our ears.

We rushed on up the wide street to the great place that was packed with tens of thousands of the people. We drove the horses at them.

"Way for Pharaoh! Way for the Mighty One, the good god, Seti Meneptah, King of the Upper and the Lower Land!" shouted the escort.

The people turned and saw the tall shape of the Prince still clad in the robes of state which he had worn when he stood before Amenmeses in the pavilion by the sea.

"Pharaoh! Pharaoh! Hail to Pharaoh!" they cried, prostrating themselves, and the cry passed on through Memphis like a wind.

Now we were come to the centre of the place, and there in front of the great gates of the temple burned a vast pyre of wood. Before the pyre moved figures, in one of whom I knew Ki dressed in his magician's robe.

Outside of these there was a double circle of soldiers who kept the people back, which these needed, for they raved like madmen and shook their fists. A group of priests near the fire separated, and I saw that among them stood a man and a woman, the latter with dishevelled hair and torn robes as though she had been roughly handled. At this moment her strength seemed to fail her and she sank to the ground, lifting her face as she did so. It was the face of Merapi, Moon of Israel.

So she was not dead. The man at her side stooped as though to lift her up, but a stone thrown out of the shadow struck him in the back and caused him to straighten himself, which he did with a curse at the thrower. I knew the voice at once, although the speaker was disguised.

It was that of Laban the Israelite, he who had been betrothed to Merapi, and had striven to murder us in the land of Goshen. What did he here? I wondered dimly.

Ki was speaking. "Hark how the Hebrew cat spits," he said. "Well, the cause has been tried and the verdict given, and I think that the familiar should feed the flames before the witch. Watch him now, and perhaps he will change into something else."

All this he said, smiling in his usual pleasant fashion, even when he made a sign to certain black temple slaves who stood near. They leapt forward, and I saw the firelight shone upon their copper armlets as they gripped Laban. He fought furiously, shouting:

"Where are your armies, Egyptians, and where is your dog of a Pharaoh? Go dig them from the Sea of Reeds. Farewell, Moon of Israel. Look how your royal lover crowns you at the last, O faithless----"

He said no more, for at this moment the slaves hurled him headlong into the heart of the great fire, which blackened for a little and burned bright again.

Then it was that Merapi struggled to her feet and cried in a ringing voice those very words which the Prince and I had seemed to hear her speak far away by the Sea of Reeds--"Oh! help me my lord Seti! Help me, my lord Seti!" Yes, the same words which had echoed in our ears days before they passed her lips, or so we believed.

Now all this while our chariots had been forcing their way foot by foot through the wall of the watching crowd, perhaps while a man might count a hundred, no more. As the echoes of her cry died away at length we were through and leaping to the ground.

"The witch calls on one who sups to-night at the board of Osiris with Pharaoh and his host," sneered Ki. "Well, let her go to seek him there if the guardian gods will suffer it," and again he made a sign to the black slaves.

But Merapi had seen or felt Seti advancing from the shadows and seeing

flung herself upon his breast. He kissed her on the brow before them all, then bade me hold her up and turned to face the people.

"Bow down. Bow down. Bow down!" cried the deep voice of Bakenkhonsu. "Life! Blood! Strength! Pharaoh! Pharaoh! Pharaoh!" and what he said the escort echoed.

Then of a sudden the multitude understood. To their knees they fell and from every side rose the ancient salutation. Seti held up his hand and blessed them. Watching, I saw Ki slip towards the darkness, and whispered a word to the guards, who sprang upon him and brought him back.

Then the Prince spoke:

"Ye name me Pharaoh, people of Memphis, and Pharaoh I fear I am by descent of blood to-day, though whether I will consent to bear the burdens of government, should Egypt wish it of me, as yet I know not. Still he who wore the double crown is, I believe, dead in the midst of the sea; at the least I saw the waters overwhelm him and his army. Therefore, if only for an hour, I will be Pharaoh, that as Pharaoh I may judge of certain matters. Lady Merapi, tell me, I pray you, how came you to this pass?"

"My lord," she answered, in a low voice, "after you had gone to warn the army of Pharaoh because of that dream I dreamed, Ki, who departed on

the same day, returned again. Through one of the women of the household, over whom he had power, or so I think, he obtained access to me when I was alone in my chamber. There he made me this offer:

"Give me,' he said, 'the secret of your magic that I may be avenged upon the wizards of the Hebrews who have brought about my downfall, and upon the Hebrews themselves, and also upon all my other enemies, and thus once more become the greatest man in Egypt. In turn I will fulfil all your desires, and make you, and no other, Queen of Egypt, and be your faithful servant, and that of your lord Seti who shall be Pharaoh, until the end of your lives. Refuse, and I will stir up the people against you, and before ever the Prince returns, if he returns at all, they who believe you to be an evil sorceress shall mete out to you the fate of a sorceress.'

"My lord, I answered to Ki what I have often told him before, that I had no magic to reveal to him, I who knew nothing of the black arts of sorcery, seeing that it was not I who destroyed the statue of Amon in the temple at Tanis, but that same Power which since then has brought all the plagues on Egypt. I said, too, that I cared nothing for the gifts he offered to me, as I had no wish to be Queen of Egypt. My lord, he laughed in my face, saying I should find that he was one ill to mock, as others had found before me. Then he pointed at me with his wand and muttered some spell over me, which seemed to numb my limbs and voice, holding me helpless till he had been gone a long while, and could not be found by your servants, whom I commanded in your name to seize, and keep



him till your return.

"From that hour the people began to threaten me. They crowded about the palace gates in thousands, crying day and night that they were going to kill me, the witch. I prayed for help, but from me, a sinner, heaven has grown so far away that my prayers seem to fall back unheard upon my head. Even the servants in the palace turned against me, and would not look upon my face. I grew mad with fear and loneliness, since all fled before me. At last one night towards the dawn I went on to the terrace, and since no god would hear me, I turned towards the north whither I knew that you had gone, and cried to you to help me in those same words which I cried again just now before you appeared." (Here the Prince looked at me and I Ana looked at him.) "Then it was that from among the bushes of the garden appeared a man, hidden in a long, sheepskin cloak, so that I could not see his face, who said to me:

"Moon of Israel, I have been sent by his Highness, the Prince Seti, to tell you that you are in danger of your life, as he is in danger of his, wherefore he cannot come to you. His command is that you come to him, that together you may flee away out of Egypt to a land where you will both be safe until all these troubles are finished.'

"How know I that you of the veiled face are a true messenger?' I asked.  
'Give me a sign.'

"Then he held out to me that scarabæus of lapis-lazuli which your

Highness gave to me far away in the land of Goshen, the same that you asked back from me as a love token when we plighted troth, and you gave me your royal ring, which scarabæus I had seen in your robe when you drove away with Ana."

"I lost it on our journey to the Sea of Reeds, but said nothing of it to you, Ana, because I thought the omen evil, having dreamed in the night that Ki appeared and stole it from me," whispered the Prince to me.

"'It is not enough,' I answered. 'This jewel may have been thieved away, or snatched from the dead body of the Prince, or taken from him by magic.'

"The cloaked man thought a while and said, 'This night, not an hour ago, Pharaoh and his chariots were overwhelmed in the Sea of Reeds. Let that serve as a sign.'

"'How can this be?' I answered, 'since the Sea of Reeds is far away, and such tidings cannot travel thence in an hour. Get you gone, false tempter.'

"'Yet it is so,' he answered.

"'When you prove it to me, I will believe, and come.'

"'Good,' he said, and was gone.

"Next day a rumour began to run that this awful thing had happened. It grew stronger and stronger, until all swore that it had happened. Now the fury of the people rose against me, and they ravened round the palace like lions of the desert, roaring for my blood. Yet it was as though they could not enter here, since whenever they rushed at the gates or walls, they fell back again, for some spirit seemed to protect the place. The days went by; the night came again and at the dawn, this dawn that is past, once more I stood upon the terrace, and once more the cloaked man appeared from among the trees.

"Now you have heard, Moon of Israel,' he said, 'and now you must believe and come, although you think yourself safe because at the beginning of the plagues this, the home of Seti, was enchanted against evil, so that none within it can be harmed.'

"I have heard, and I think that I believe, though how the tidings reached Memphis in an hour I do not understand. Yet, stranger, I say to you that it is not enough.'

"Then the man drew a papyrus roll from his bosom and threw it at my feet. I opened it and read. The writing was the writing of Ana as I knew well, and the signature was the signature of you, my lord, and it was sealed with your seal, and with the seal of Bakenkhonsu as a witness. Here it is," and from the breast of her garment, she drew out a roll and gave it to me upon whom she rested all this while.

I opened it, and by the light of torches the Prince, Bakenkhonsu, and I read. It was as she had told us in what seemed to be my writing, and signed and sealed as she had said. The words ran:

"To Merapi, Moon of Israel, in my house at Memphis.

"Come, Lady, Flower of Love, to me your lord, to whom the bearer of this will guide you safely. Come at once, for I am in great danger, as you are, and together only can we be safe."

"Ana, what means this?" asked the Prince in a terrible voice. "If you have betrayed me and her----"

"By the gods," I began angrily, "am I a man that I should live to hear even your Highness speak thus to me, or am I but a dog of the desert?"

I ceased, for at that moment Bakenkhonsu began to laugh.

"Look at the letter!" he laughed. "Look at the letter."

We looked, and as we looked, behold the writing on it turned first to the colour of blood and then faded away, till presently there was nothing in my hand but a blank sheet of papyrus.

"Oho-ho!" laughed Bakenkhonsu. "Truly, friend Ki, you are the first

of magicians, save those prophets of the Israelites who have brought you--Whither have they brought you, friend Ki?"

Then for the first time the painted smile left the face of Ki, and it became like a block of stone in which were set two angry jewels that were his eyes.

"Continue, Lady," said the Prince.

"I obeyed the letter. I fled away with the man who said he had a chariot waiting. We passed out by the little gate.

"Where is the chariot?' I asked.

"We go by boat,' he answered, and led the way towards the river. As we threaded the big palm grove men appeared from between the trees.

"You have betrayed me,' I cried.

"Nay,' he answered, 'I am myself betrayed.'

"Then for the first time I knew his voice for that of Laban.

"The men seized us; at the head of them was Ki.

"This is the witch,' he said, 'who, her wickedness finished, flies with

her Hebrew lover, who is also the familiar of her sorceries.'

"They tore the cloak and the false beard from him and there before me stood Laban. I cursed him to his face. But all he answered was:

"Merapi, what I have done I did for love of you. It was my purpose to take you away to our people, for here I knew that they would kill you. This magician promised you to me if I could tempt you from the safety of the palace, in return for certain tidings that I have given him.'

"These were the only words that passed between us till the end. They dragged us to the secret prison of the great temple where we were separated. Here all day long Ki and the priests tormented me with questions, to which I gave no answer. Towards the evening they brought me out and led me here with Laban at my side. When the people saw me a great cry went up of 'Sorceress! Hebrew witch!' They broke through the guard; they seized me, threw me to the ground and beat me. Laban strove to protect me but was torn away. At length the people were driven off, and oh! my lord, you know the rest. I have spoken truth, I can no more."

So saying her knees loosened beneath her and she swooned. We bore her to the chariot.

"You have heard, Ki," said the Prince. "Now, what answer?"

"None, O Pharaoh," he replied coldly, "for Pharaoh you are, as I

promised that you should be. My spirit has deserted me, those Hebrews have stolen it away. That writing should have faded from the scroll as soon as it was read by yonder lady, and then I would have told you another story; a story of secret love, of betrayal and attempted flight with her lover. But some evil god kept it there until you also had read, you who knew that you had not written what appeared before your eyes. Pharaoh, I am conquered. Do your will with me, and farewell. Beloved you shall always be as you have always been, but happy never in this world."

"O People," cried Seti, "I will not be judge in my own cause. You have heard, do you judge. For this wizard, what reward?"

Then there went up a great cry of "Death! Death by fire. The death he had made ready for the innocent!"

That was the end, but they told me afterwards that, when the great pyre had burned out, in it was found the head of Ki looking like a red-hot stone. When the sunlight fell on it, however, it crumbled and faded away, as the writing had faded from the roll. If this be true I do not know, who was not present at the time.

We bore Merapi to the palace. She lived but three days, she whose body and spirit were broken. The last time I saw her was when she sent for me not an hour before death came. She was lying in Seti's arms babbling to him of their child and looking very sweet and happy. She thanked me for

my friendship, smiling the while in a way which showed me that she knew it was more than friendship, and bade me tend my master well until we all met again elsewhere. Then she gave me her hand to kiss and I went away weeping.

After she was dead a strange fancy took Seti. In the great hall of the palace he caused a golden throne to be put up, and on this throne he set her in regal garments, with pectoral and necklaces of gems, crowned like a queen of Egypt, and thus he showed her to the lords of Memphis. Then he caused her to be embalmed and buried in a secret sepulchre, the place of which I have sworn never to reveal, but without any rites because she was not of the faith of Egypt.

There then she sleeps in her eternal house until the Day of Resurrection, and with her sleeps her little son.

It was within a moon of this funeral that the great ones of Egypt came to Memphis to name the Prince as Pharaoh, and with them came her Highness, the Queen Userti. I was present at the ceremony, which to me was very strange. There was the Vizier Nehesi; there was the high-priest Roi and with him many other priests; and there was even the old chamberlain Pambasa, pompous yet grovelling as before, although he had deserted the household of the Prince after his disinheritance for that of the Pharaoh Amenmeses. His appearance with his wand of office and long white beard, of which he was so proud because it was his own, drew



from Seti the only laugh I had heard him utter for many weeks.

"So you are back again, Chamberlain Pambasa," he said.

"O most Holy, O most Royal," answered the old knave, "has Pambasa, the grain of dust beneath your feet, ever deserted the House of Pharaoh, or that of him who will be Pharaoh?"

"No," replied Seti, "it is only when you think that he will not be Pharaoh that you desert. Well, get you to your duties, rogue, who perhaps at bottom are as honest as the rest."

Then followed the great and ancient ceremony of the Offering of the Crown, in which spoke priests disguised as gods and other priests disguised as mighty Pharaohs of the past; also the nobles of the Nomes and the chief men of cities. When all had finished Seti answered:

"I take this, my heritage," and he touched the double crown, "not because I desire it but because it is my duty, as I swore that I would to one who has departed. Blow upon blow have smitten Egypt which, I think, had my voice been listened to, would never have fallen. Egypt lies bleeding and well-nigh dead. Let it be your work and mine to try to nurse her back to life. For no long while am I with you, who also have been smitten, how it matters not, yet while I am here, I who seem to reign will be your servant and that of Egypt. It is my decree that no feasts or ceremonials shall mark this my accession, and that the wealth

which would have been scattered upon them shall be distributed among the widows and children of those who perished in the Sea of Reeds. Depart!"

They went, humble yet happy, since here was a Pharaoh who knew the needs of Egypt, one too who loved her and who alone had shown himself wise of heart while others were filled with madness. Then her Highness entered, splendidly apparelled, crowned and followed by her household, and made obeisance.

"Greeting to Pharaoh," she cried.

"Greeting to the Royal Princess of Egypt," he answered.

"Nay, Pharaoh, the Queen of Egypt."

By Seti's side there was another throne, that in which he had set dead Merapi with a crown upon her head. He turned and looked at it a while. Then, he said:

"I see that this seat is empty. Let the Queen of Egypt take her place there if so she wills."

She stared at him as if she thought that he was mad, though doubtless she had heard something of that story, then swept up the steps and sat herself down in the royal chair.

"Your Majesty has been long absent," said Seti.

"Yes," she answered, "but as my Majesty promised she would do, she has returned to her lawful place at the side of Pharaoh--never to leave it more."

"Pharaoh thanks her Majesty," said Seti, bowing low.

Some six years had gone by, when one night I was seated with the Pharaoh Seti Meneptah in his palace at Memphis, for there he always chose to dwell when matters of State allowed.

It was on the anniversary of the Death of the Firstborn, and of this matter it pleased him to talk to me. Up and down the chamber he walked and, watching him by the lamplight, I noted that of a sudden he seemed to have grown much older, and that his face had become sweeter even than it was before. He was more thin also, and his eyes had in them a look of one who stares at distances.

"You remember that night, Friend, do you not," he said; "perhaps the most terrible night the world has ever seen, at least in the little piece of it called Egypt." He ceased, lifted a curtain, and pointed to a spot on the pillared portico without. "There she sat," he went on; "there you stood; there lay the boy and there crouched his nurse--by the way, I grieve to hear that she is ill. You are caring for her, are you

not, Ana? Say to her that Pharaoh will come to visit her--when he may, when he may."

"I remember it all, Pharaoh."

"Yes, of course you would remember, because you loved her, did you not, and the boy too, and even me, the father. And so you will love us always when we reach a land where sex with its walls and fires are forgotten, and love alone survives--as we shall love you."

"Yes," I answered, "since love is the key of life, and those alone are accursed who have never learned to love."

"Why accursed, Ana, seeing that, if life continues, they still may learn?" He paused a while, then went on: "I am glad that he died, Ana, although had he lived, as the Queen will have no children, he might have become Pharaoh after me. But what is it to be Pharaoh? For six years now I have reigned, and I think that I am beloved; reigned over a broken land which I have striven to bind together, reigned over a sick land which I have striven to heal, reigned over a desolated land which I have striven to make forget. Oh! the curse of those Hebrews worked well. And I think that it was my fault, Ana, for had I been more of a man, instead of casting aside my burden, I should have stood up against my father Meneptah and his policy and, if need were, have raised the people. Then the Israelites would have gone, and no plagues would have smitten Egypt. Well, what I did, I did because I must, perhaps, and what has happened,

has happened. And now my time comes to an end, and I go hence to balance my account as best I may, praying that I may find judges who understand, and are gentle."

"Why does Pharaoh speak thus?" I asked.

"I do not know, Ana, yet that Hebrew wife of mine has been much in my mind of late. She was wise in her way, as wise as loving, was she not, and if we could see her once again, perhaps she would answer the question. But although she seems so near to me, I never can see her, quite. Can you, Ana?"

"No, Pharaoh, though one night old Bakenkhonsu vowed that he perceived her passing before us, and looking at me earnestly as she passed."

"Ah! Bakenkhonsu. Well, he is wise too, and loved her in his fashion. Also the flesh fades from him, though mayhap he will live to make offerings at both our tombs. Well, Bakenkhonsu is at Tanis, or is it at Thebes, with her Majesty, whom he ever loves to observe, as I do. So he can tell us nothing of what he thought he saw. This chamber is hot, Ana, let us stand without."

So we passed the curtain, and stood upon the portico, looking at the garden misty with moonlight, and talking of this and that--about the Israelites, I think, who, as we heard, were wandering in the deserts of Sinai. Then of a sudden we grew silent, both of us.

A cloud floated over the face of the moon, leaving the world in darkness. It passed, and I became aware that we were no longer alone. There in front of us was a mat, and on the mat lay a dead child, the royal child named Seti; there by the mat stood a woman with agony in her eyes, looking at the dead child, the Hebrew woman named Moon of Israel.

Seti touched me, and pointed to her, and I pointed to the child. We stood breathless. Then of a sudden, stooping down, Merapi lifted up the child and held it towards its father. But, lo! now no longer was it dead; nay, it laughed and laughed, and seeing him, seemed to throw its arms about his neck, and to kiss him on the lips. Moreover, the agony in the woman's eyes turned to joy unspeakable, and she became more beautiful than a star. Then, laughing like the child, Merapi turned to Seti, beckoned, and was gone.

"We have seen the dead," he said to me presently, "and, oh! Ana, the dead still live!"

That night, ere dawn, a cry rang through the palace, waking me from my sleep. This was the cry:

"The good god Pharaoh is no more! The hawk Seti has flown to heaven!"

At the burial of Pharaoh, I laid the halves of the broken cup upon his breast, that he might drink therefrom in the Day of Resurrection.

Here ends the writing of the Scribe Ana, the Counsellor and Companion of the King, by him beloved.