

CHAPTER VII. BES STEALS THE SIGNET

"Oh! my Master," gulped Bes, "I weep because I am tired, so take no notice. The day was long and during it twice at least there has been but the twinkling of an eyelid, but the thickness of a finger nail, but the weight of a hair between you and death."

"Yes," I said, "and you were the eyelid, the finger nail and the hair."

"No, Master, not I, but something beyond me. The tool carves the statue and the hand holds the tool but the spirit guides the hand. Not once only since the sun rose has my mind been empty as a drum. Then something struck on it, perhaps the holy Tanofir, perhaps another, and it knew what note to sound. So it was when I cursed you in the boat. So it was when I walked back with the eunuch, meaning to kill him on the road, and then remembered that the death of one vile eunuch would not help you at all, whereas alive he could bring me to the presence of the King, if I paid him, as I did out of the gold in your purse which I carried. Moreover he earned his hire, for when the King grew dull, wine not yet having taken a hold on him, it was he who brought me to his mind as one who might amuse him, being so ugly and different from others, if only for a few minutes, after the women dancers had failed to do so."

"And what happened then, Bes?"

"Then I was fetched and did my juggling tricks with that snake I caught

and tamed, which is in my pouch now. You should not hate it any more, Master, for it played your game well. After this the King began to talk to me and I saw that his mind was ill at ease about you whom he knew that he had wronged. So I told him that story of an elephant that my father killed to save a king--it grew up in my mind like a toadstool in the night, Master, did this story of an ungrateful king and what befell him. Then the King became still more unquiet in his heart about you and asked the eunuch, Houman, where you were, to which he answered that by his order you were sleeping in a boat and might not be disturbed. So that arrow of mine missed its mark because the King did not like to eat his own words and cause you to be brought from out the boat, whither he had sent you. Now when everything seemed lost, some god, or perhaps the holy Tanofir who is ever present with me to see that I have not forgotten him, put it into the King's mouth to begin to talk about women and to ask me if I had ever seen any fairer than those dancers whom I met going out as I came in. I answered that I had not noticed them much because they were so ugly, as indeed all women had seemed to me since once upon the banks of Nile I had looked upon one who was as Hathor herself for beauty. The King asked me who this might be and I answered that I did not know since I had never dared to ask the name of one whom even my master held to be as a goddess, although as boy and girl they had been brought up together.

"Then the King saw his opportunity to ease his conscience and inquired of an old councillor if there were not a law which gave the king power to alter his decree if thereby he could satisfy his soul and acquire

knowledge. The councillor answered that there was such a law and began to give examples of its working, till the King cut him short and said that by virtue of it he commanded that you should be brought out of your bed in the boat and led before him to answer a question.

"So you were sent for, Master, but I did not go with the messengers, fearing lest if I did the King would forget all about the matter before you came. Therefore I stayed and amused him with tales of hunting, till I could not think of any more, for you were long in coming. Indeed I began to fear lest he should declare the feast at an end. But at the last, just as he was yawning and spoke to one of his councillors, bidding him send to the House of Women that they might make ready to receive him there, you came, and the rest you know."

Now I looked at Bes and said,

"May the blessing of all the gods of all the lands be on your head, since had it not been for you I should now lie in torment in that boat. Hearken, friend: If ever we reach Egypt again, you will set foot on it, not as a slave but as a free man. You will be rich also, Bes, that is, if we can take the gold I won with us, since half of it is yours."

Bes squatted down upon the floor and looked up at me with a strange smile on his ugly face.

"You have given me three things, Master," he said. "Gold, which I do

not want at present; freedom, which I do not want at present and mayhap, never shall while you live and love me; and the title of friend. This I do want, though why I should care to hear it from your lips I am not sure, seeing that for a long while I have known that it was spoken in your heart. Since you have said it, however, I will tell you something which hitherto I have hid even from you. I have a right to that name, for if your blood is high, O Shabaka, so is mine. Know that this poor dwarf whom you took captive and saved long years ago was more than the petty chief which he declared himself to be. He was and is by right the King of the Ethiopians and that throne with all its wealth and power he could claim to-morrow if he would."

"The King of the Ethiopians!" I said. "Oh! friend Bes, I pray you to remember that we no longer stand in yonder court lying for our lives."

"I speak no lie, O Shabaka, I before you am King of the Ethiopians. Moreover, I laid that kingship down of my own will and should I so desire, can take it up again when I will, since the Ethiopians are faithful to their kings."

"Why?" I asked, astonished.

"Master, for so I will still call you who am not yet upon the land of Egypt where you have promised me freedom, do you remember anything strange about the people of that tribe from among whom you and the Egyptian soldiers captured me by surprise, because they wished to drive

you and your following from their country?"

Now I thought and answered,

"Yes, one thing. I saw no women in their camp, nor any sign of children. This I know because I gave orders that such were to be spared and it was reported to me that there were none, so I supposed that they had fled away."

"There were none to fly, Master. That tribe was a brotherhood which had abjured women. Look on me now. I am misshapen, hideous, am I not? Born thus, it is said, because before my birth my mother was frightened by a dwarf. Yet the law of the Ethiopians is that their kings must marry within a year of their crowning. Therefore I chose a woman to be the queen whom I had long desired in secret. She scorned me, vowing that not for all the thrones of all the world would she be mated to a monster, and that if it were done by force she would kill herself, a saying that went abroad throughout the land. I said that she had spoken well and sent her in safety from the country, after which I too laid down my crown and departed with some who loved me, to form a brotherhood of women-haters further down the Nile, beyond the borders of Ethiopia. There the Egyptian force of which you were in command, attacked us unprepared, and you made me your slave. That is all."

"But why did you do this, Bes, seeing that maidens are many and all would not have thought thus?"

"Because I wished for that one only, Master; also I feared lest I should become the father of a breed of twisted dwarfs. So I who was a king am now a slave, and yet, who knows which way the Grasshopper will jump? One day from a slave I may again grow into a king. And now let us seek that wherein kings are as slaves and slaves as kings--sleep."

So we lay down and slept, I thanking the gods that my bed was not yonder in the boat upon the great river.

When I woke refreshed, though after all I had gone through on the yesterday my brain still swam a little, the light was pouring through the carved work of the shuttered windows. By it I saw Bes seated on the floor engaged in doing something to his bow, which, as I have said, had been restored to us with our other weapons, and asked him sleepily what it was.

"Master," he said, "yonder King demanded your bow and therefore a bow must be sent to him. But there is no need for it to be that with which you shot the lions, which, too, you value above anything you have, seeing that it came down to you from your forefather who was a Pharaoh of Egypt, and has been your companion from boyhood ever since you were strong enough to draw it. As you may remember I copied that bow out of a somewhat lighter wood, which I could bend with ease, and it is the copy that we will give to the King. Only first I must set your string upon it, for that may have been noted; also make one or two marks that are on

your bow which I am finishing now, having begun the task with the dawn."

"You are clever," I said laughing, "and I am glad. The holy Tanofir, looking on my bow, once had a vision. It was that an arrow loosed from it would drink the blood of a great king and save Egypt. But what king and when, he did not see."

The dwarf nodded and answered,

"I have heard that tale and so have others. Therefore I play this trick since it is better that yonder palace dweller should get the arrow than the bow. There, it is finished to the last scratch, and none, save you and I, would know them apart. Till we are clear of this cursed land your bow is mine, Master, and you must find you another of the Eastern make."

"Master," I repeated after him. "Say, Bes, did I dream or did you in truth tell me last night that you are by birth and right the king of a great country?"

"I told you that, Master and it is true, no dream, since joy and suffering mixed unseal the lips and from them comes that at times which the heart would hide. Now I ask a favour of you, that you will speak no more of this matter either to me or to any other, man or woman, unless I should speak of it first. Let it be as though it were indeed a dream."

"It is granted," I said as I rose and clothed myself, not in my own

garments which had been taken from me in the palace, but in the splendid silken robes that had been set upon me after I was loosed from the boat. When this was done and I had washed and combed my long, curling hair, we descended to a lower chamber and called for the woman of the house to bring us food, of which I ate heartily. As we finished our meal we heard shouts in the street outside of, "Make way for the servants of the King!" and looking through the window-place, saw a great cavalcade approaching, headed by two princes on horseback.

"Now I pray that yonder Tyrant has not changed his mind and that these do not come to take me back to the boat," I said in a low voice.

"Have no fear, Master," answered Bes, "seeing that you have touched his sceptre and drunk from his cup which he gave to you. After these things no harm can happen to you in any land he rules. Therefore be at ease and deal with these fellows proudly."

A minute later two princes entered followed by slaves who bore many things, among them those hide bags filled with gold that had been set beneath me in the boat. The elder of them bowed, greeting me with the title of "Lord," and I bowed back to him. Then he handed me certain rolls tied up with silk and sealed, which he said I was to deliver as the King had commanded to the King's Satrap in Egypt, and to the Prince Peroa. Also he gave me other letters addressed to the King's servants on the road and written on tablets of clay in a writing I could not read, with all of which I touched my forehead in the Eastern fashion.

After this he told me that by noon all would be ready for my journey which I should make with the rank of the King's Envoy, duly provisioned and escorted by his servants, with liberty to use the royal horses from post to post. Then he ordered the slaves to bring in the gifts which the King sent to me, and these were many, including even suits of flexible armour that would turn any sword-thrust or arrow.

I thanked him, saying that I would be ready to start by noon, and asked whether the King wished to see me before I rode. He replied that he had so wished, but that as he was suffering in his head from the effects of the sun, he could not. He bade me, however, remember all that he had said to me and to be sure that the beautiful lady Amada, of whom I had spoken, was sent to him without delay. In that case my reward should be great; but if I failed to fulfil his commands, then his wrath would be greater and I should perish miserably as he had promised.

I bowed and made no answer, after which he and his companions opened the bags of gold to show me that it was there, offering to weigh it again against my servant, the dwarf, so that I could see that nothing had been taken away.

I replied that the King's word was truer than any scale, whereon the bags were tied up again and sealed. Then I produced the bow, or rather its counterfeit, and having shown it to the princes, wrapped it and six of my own arrows in a linen cloth, to be taken to the King, with

a message that though hard to draw it was the deadliest weapon in the world. The elder of them took it, bowed and bade me farewell, saying that perhaps we should meet again ere long in Egypt, if my gods gave me a safe journey. So we parted and I was glad to see the last of them.

Scarcely had they gone when the six hunters whom I had won in the wager and thereby saved from death, entered the chamber and fell upon their knees before me, asking for orders as to making ready my gear for the journey. I inquired of them if they were coming also, to which their spokesman replied that they were my slaves to do what I commanded.

"Do you desire to come?" I inquired.

"O Lord Shabaka," answered their spokesman, "we do, though some of us must leave wives and children behind us."

"Why?" I asked.

"For two reasons, Lord. Here we are men disgraced, though through no fault of our own and if you were to leave us in this land, soon the anger of the King would find us out and we should lose not only our wives and children, but with them our lives. Whereas in another land we may get other wives and more children, but never shall we get another life. Therefore we would leave those dear ones to our friends, knowing that soon the women will forget and find other husbands, and that the children will grow up to whatever fate is appointed them, thinking of

us, their fathers, as dead. Secondly we are hunters by trade, and we have seen that you are a great hunter, one whom we shall always be proud to serve in the chase or in war, one, too, who went out of his path to save our lives, because he saw that we had been unjustly doomed to a cruel death. Therefore we desire nothing better than to be your slaves, hoping that perchance we may earn our liberty from you in days to come by our good service."

"Is that the wish of all of you?" I asked.

Speaking one by one, they said that it was, though tears rose in the eyes of some of them who were married at the thought of parting from their women and their little ones, who, it seemed might not be brought with them because they were the people of the King and had not been named in the bet. Moreover, horses could not be found for so many, nor could they travel fast.

"Come then," I said, "and know that while you are faithful to me, I will be good to you, men of my own trade, and perhaps in the end set you free in a land where brave fellows are not given to be torn to pieces by wild beasts at the word of any kind. But if you fail me or betray me, then either I will kill you, or sell you to those who deal in slaves, to work at the oar, or in the mines till you die."

"Henceforth we have no lord but you, O Shabaka," they said, and one after another took my hand and pressed it to their foreheads, vowing to

be true to me in all things while we lived.

So I bade them begone to bid farewell to those they loved and return again within half an hour of noon, never expecting, to tell the truth, that they would come. Indeed I did this to give them the opportunity of escaping if they saw fit, and hiding themselves where they would. But as I have often noted, the trade of hunting breeds honesty in the blood and at the hour appointed all of these men appeared, one of them with a woman who carried a child in her arms, clinging to him and weeping bitterly. When her veil slipped aside I saw that she was young and very fair to look on.

So at noon we left the city of the Great King in the charge of two of his officers who brought me his thanks for the bow I had sent him, which he said he should treasure above everything he possessed, a saying at which Bes rolled his yellow eyes and grinned. We were mounted on splendid stallions from the royal stables and clad in the shirts of mail that had been presented to us, though when we were clear of the city we took these off because of the heat, also because that which Bes wore chafed him, being too long for his squat shape. Our goods together with the bags of gold were laden on sumpter horses which were led by my six hunter slaves. Four picked soldiers brought up the rear, mighty men from the King's own bodyguard, and two of the royal postmen who served us as guides. Also there were cooks and grooms with spare horses.

Thus we started in state and a great crowd watched us go. Our road ran by the river which we must cross in barges lower down, so that in a few minutes we came to that quay whither I had been led on the previous night to die. Yes, there were the watching guards, and there floated the hateful double boat, at the prow of which appeared the tortured face of the eunuch Houman, who rolled his head from side to side to rid himself of the torment of the flies. He caught sight of us and began to scream for pity and forgiveness, whereat Bes smiled. The officers halted our cavalcade and one of them approaching me said,

"It is the King's command, O Lord Shabaka, that you should look upon this villain who traduced you to the King and afterwards dared to strike you. If you will, enter the water and blind him, that your face may be the last thing he sees before he passes into darkness."

I shook my head, but Bes into whose mind some thought had come, whispered to me,

"I wish to speak with yonder eunuch, so give me leave and fear nothing. I will do him no hurt, only good, if I find the chance."

Then I said to the officer,

"It is not for great lords to avenge themselves upon the fallen. Yet my slave here was also wronged and would say a word to yonder Houman."

"So be it," said the officer, "only let him be careful not to hurt him too sorely, lest he should die before the time and escape his punishment."

Then Bes tucked up his robes and waded into the river, flourishing a great knife, while seeing him come, Houman began to scream with fear. He reached the boat and bent over the eunuch, talking to him in a low voice. What he did there I could not see because his cloak was spread out on either side of the man's head. Presently, however, I caught sight of the flash of a knife and heard yells of agony followed by groans, whereat I called to him to return and let the fellow be. For when I remembered that his fate was near to being my own, those sounds made me sick at heart and I grew angry with Bes, though the cruel Easterns only laughed.

At length he came back grinning and washing the blade of his knife in the water. I spoke fiercely to him in my own language, and still he grinned on, making no answer. When we were mounted again and riding away from that horrible boat with its groaning prisoner, watching Bes whose behaviour and silence I could not understand, I saw him sweep his hand across his great mouth and thrust it swiftly into his bosom. After this he spoke readily enough, though in a low voice lest someone who understood Egyptian should overhear him.

"You are a fool, Master," he said, "to think that I should wish to waste

time in torturing that fat knave."

"Then why did you torture him?" I asked.

"Because my god, the Grasshopper, when he fashioned me a dwarf, gave me a big mouth and good teeth," he answered, whereon I stared at him, thinking that he had gone mad.

"Listen, Master. I did not hurt Houman. All I did was to cut his cords nearly through from the under side, so that when night comes he can break them and escape, if he has the wit. Now, Master, you may not have noticed, but I did, that before the King doomed you to death by the boat yesterday, he took a certain round, white seal, a cylinder with gods and signs cut on it, which hung by a gold chain from his girdle, and gave it to Houman to be his warrant for all he did. This seal Houman showed to the Treasurer whereon they produced the gold that was weighed in the scales against me, and to others when he ordered the boat to be prepared for you to lie in. Moreover he forgot to return it, for when he himself was dragged off to the boat by direct command of the King, I caught sight of the chain beneath his robe. Can you guess the rest?"

"Not quite," I answered, for I wished to hear the tale in his own words.

"Well, Master, when I was walking with Houman after he had put you in the boat, I asked him about this seal. He showed it to me and said that he who bore it was for the time the king of all the Empire of the

East. It seems that there is but one such seal which has descended from ancient days from king to king, and that of it every officer, great or small, has an impress in all lands. If the seal is produced to him, he compares it with the impress and should the two agree, he obeys the order that is brought as though the King had given it in person. When we reached the Court doubtless Houman would have returned the seal, but seeing that the King was, or feigned to be drunk, waited for fear lest it should be lost, and with it his life. Then he was seized as you saw, and in his terror forgot all about the seal, as did the King and his officers."

"But, surely, Bes, those who took Houman to the boat would have removed it."

"Master, even the most clear-sighted do not see well at night. At any rate my hope was that they had not done so, and that is why I waded out to prick the eyes of Houman. Moreover, as I had hoped, so it was; there beneath his robe I saw the chain. Then I spoke to him, saying,

"I am come to put out your eyes, as you deserve, seeing how you have treated my master. Still I will spare you at a price. Give me the King's ancient white seal that opens all doors, and I will only make a pretence of blinding you. Moreover I will cut your cords nearly through, so that when the night comes you can break them, roll into the river and escape.'

"Take it if you can,' he said, 'and use it to injure or destroy that accursed one."

"So you took it, Bes."

"Yes, Master, but not easily. Remember, it was on a chain about the man's neck, and I could not draw it over his head, for, like his hands, his throat was tied by a cord, as you remember yours was."

"I remember very well," I said, "for my throat is still sore from the rope that ran to the same staples to which my hands were fastened."

"Yes, Master, and therefore if I drew the chain off his neck, it would still have been on the ropes. I thought of trying to cut it with the knife, but this was not easy because it is thick, and if I had dragged it up on the blade of the knife it would have been seen, for many eyes were watching me, Master. Then I took another counsel. While I pretended to be putting out the eyes of Houman, I bent down and getting the chain between my teeth I bit it through. One tooth broke--see, but the next finished the business. I ate through the soft gold, Master, and then sucked up the chain and the round white seal into my mouth, and that is why I could not answer you just now, because my cheeks were full of chain. So we have the King's seal that all the subject countries know and obey. It may be useful, yonder in Egypt, and at least the gold is of value."

"Clever!" I exclaimed, "very clever. But you have forgotten something, Bes. When that knave escapes, he will tell the whole story and the King will send after us and kill us who have stolen his royal seal."

"I don't think so, Master. First, it is not likely that Houman will escape. He is very fat and soft and already suffers much. After a day in the sun also he will be weak. Moreover I do not think that he can swim, for eunuchs hate the water. So if he gets out of the boat it is probable that he will drown in the river, since he dare not wade to the quay where the guards will be waiting. But if he does escape by swimming across the river, he will hide for his life's sake and never be seen again, and if by chance he is caught, he will say that the seal fell into the water when he was taken to the boat, or that one of the guards had stolen it. What he will not say is that he had bargained it away with someone who in return, cut his cords, since for that crime he must die by worse tortures than those of the boat. Lastly we shall ride so fast that with six hours' start none will catch us. Or if they do I can throw away the chain and swallow the seal."

As Bes said, so it happened. The fate of Houman I never learned, and of the theft of the seal I heard no more until a proclamation was issued to all the kingdoms that a new one was in use. But this was not until long afterwards when it had served my turn and that of Egypt.