

## CHAPTER IX. THE MESSENGERS

We descended at the great gate of the palace and were led through empty halls that were no longer used now when there was no king in Egypt, to the wing of the building in which dwelt the Prince Peroa. Here we were received by a chamberlain, for the Prince of Egypt still kept some state although it was but small, and had about him men who bore the old, high-sounding titles of the "Officers of Pharaoh."

The chamberlain led me and Bes to an ante-chamber of the banqueting hall and left us, saying that he would summon the Prince who wished to see me before he ate. This, however, was not necessary since while he spoke Peroa, who as I guessed had been waiting for me, entered by another door. He was a majestic-looking man of middle age, for grey showed in his hair and beard, clad in white garments with a purple hem and wearing on his brow a golden circlet, from the front of which rose the uræus in the shape of a hooded snake that might be worn by those of royal blood alone. His face was full of thought and his black and piercing eyes looked heavy as though with sleeplessness. Indeed I could see that he was troubled. His gaze fell upon us and his features changed to a pleasant smile.

"Greeting, Cousin Shabaka," he said. "I am glad that you have returned safe from the East, and burn to hear your tidings. I pray that they may be good, for never was good news more needed in Egypt."

"Greeting, Prince," I answered, bowing my knee. "I and my servant here are returned safe, but as for our tidings, well, judge of them for yourself," and drawing the letter of the Great King from my robe, I touched my forehead with the roll and handed it to him.

"I see that you have acquired the Eastern customs, Shabaka," he said as he took it. "But here in my own house which once was the palace of our forefathers, the Pharaohs of Egypt, by your leave I will omit them. Amen be my witness," he added bitterly, "I cannot bear to lay the letter of a foreign king against my brow in token of my country's vassalage."

Then he broke the silk of the seals and read, and as he read his face grew black with rage.

"What!" he cried, casting down the roll and stamping on it. "What! Does this dog of an Eastern king bid me send my niece, by birth the Royal Princess of Egypt, to be his toy until he wearies of her? First I will choke her with my own hands. How comes it, Shabaka, that you care to bring me such a message? Were I Pharaoh now I think your life would pay the price."

"As it would certainly have paid the price, had I not done so. Prince, I brought the letter because I must. Also a copy of it has gone, I believe, to Idernes the Satrap at Sais. It is better to face the truth, Prince, and I think that I may be of more service to you alive than dead. If you do not wish to send the lady Amada to the King, marry her

to someone else, after which he will seek her no more."

He looked at me shrewdly and said,

"To whom then? I cannot marry her, being her uncle and already married.

Do you mean to yourself, Shabaka?"

"I have loved the lady Amada from a child, Prince," I answered boldly.

"Also I have high blood in me and having brought much gold from the East, am rich again and one accustomed to war."

"So you have brought gold from the East! How? Well, you can tell me afterwards. But you fly high. You, a Count of Egypt, wish to marry the Royal Lady of Egypt, for such she is by birth and rank, which, if ever Egypt were free again, would give you a title to the throne."

"I ask no throne, Prince. If there were one to fill I should be content to leave that to you and your heirs."

"So you say, no doubt honestly. But would the children of Amada say the same? Would you even say it if you were her husband, and would she say it? Moreover she is a priestess, sworn not to wed, though perhaps that trouble might be overcome, if she wishes to wed, which I doubt. Mayhap you might discover. Well, you are hungry and worn with long travelling. Come, let us eat, and afterwards you can tell your story. Amada and the others will be glad to hear it, as I shall. Follow me, Count Shabaka."

So we went to the lesser banqueting-hall, I filled with joy because I should see Amada, and yet, much afraid because of that story which I must tell. Gathered there, waiting for the Prince, we found the Princess his wife, a large and kindly woman, also his two eldest daughters and his young son, a lad of about sixteen. Moreover, there were certain officers, while at the tables of the lower hall sat others of the household, men of smaller rank, and their wives, since Peroa still maintained some kind of a shadow of the Court of old Egypt.

The Princess and the others greeted me, and Bes also who had always been a favourite with them, before he went to take his seat at the lowest table, and I greeted them, looking all the while for Amada whom I did not see. Presently, however, as we took our places on the couches, she entered dressed, not as a priestess, but in the beautiful robes of a great lady of Egypt and wearing on her head the uræus circlet that signified her royal blood. As it chanced the only seat left vacant was that next to myself, which she took before she recognized me, for she was engaged in asking pardon for her lateness of the Prince and Princess, saying that she had been detained by the ceremonies at the temple. Seeing suddenly that I was her neighbour, she made as though she would change her place, then altered her mind and stayed where she was.

"Greeting, Cousin Shabaka," she said, "though not for the first time to-day. Oh! my heart was glad when looking up, outside the temple, I caught sight of you clad in that strange Eastern armour, and knew that

you had returned safe from your long wanderings. Yet afterwards I must do penance for it by saying two added prayers, since at such a time my thoughts should have been with the goddess only."

"Greeting, Cousin Amada," I answered, "but she must be a jealous goddess who grudges a thought to a relative--and friend--at such a time."

"She is jealous, Shabaka, as being the Queen of women she must be who demands to reign alone in the hearts of her votaries. But tell me of your travels in the East and how you came by that rope of wondrous pearls, if indeed there can be pearls so large and beautiful."

This at the time I had little chance of doing, however, since the young Princess on the other side of her began to talk to Amada about some forthcoming festival, and the Prince's son next to me who was fond of hunting, to question me about sport in the East and when, unhappily, I said that I had shot lions there, gave me no peace for the rest of that feast. Also the Princess opposite was anxious to learn what food noble people ate in the East, and how it was cooked and how they sat at table, and what was the furniture of their rooms and did women attend feasts as in Egypt, and so forth. So it came about that what between these things and eating and drinking, which, being well-nigh starved, I was obliged to do, for, save a cup of wine, I had taken nothing in my mother's house, I found little chance of talking with the lovely Amada, although I knew that all the while she was studying me out of the corners of her large eyes. Or perhaps it was the rose-hued pearls she studied, I was

not sure.

Only one thing did she say to me when there was a little pause while the cup went round, and she pledged me according to custom and passed it on.

It was,

"You look well, Shabaka, though somewhat tired, but sadder than you used, I think."

"Perhaps because I have seen things to sadden me, Amada. But you too look well but somewhat lovelier than you used, I think, if that be possible."

She smiled and blushed as she replied,

"The Eastern ladies have taught you how to say pretty things. But you should not waste them upon me who have done with women's vanities and have given myself to learning and--religion."

"Have learning and religion no vanities of their own?" I began, when suddenly the Prince gave a signal to end the feast.

Thereon all the lower part of the hall went away and the little tables at which we ate were removed by servants, leaving us only wine-cups in our hands which a butler filled from time to time, mixing the wine with water. This reminded me of something, and having asked leave, I beckoned

to Bes, who still lingered near the door, and took from him that splendid, golden goblet which the Great King had given me, that by my command he had brought wrapped up in linen and hidden beneath his robe. Having undone the wrappings I bowed and offered it to the Prince Peroa.

"What is this wondrous thing?" asked the Prince, when all had finished admiring its workmanship. "Is it a gift that you bring me from the King of the East, Shabaka?"

"It is a gift from myself, O Prince, if you will be pleased to accept it," I answered, adding, "Yet it is true that it comes from the King of the East, since it was his own drinking-cup that he gave me in exchange for a certain bow, though not the one he sought, after he had pledged me."

"You seem to have found much favour in the eyes of this king, Shabaka, which is more than most of us Egyptians do," he exclaimed, then went on hastily, "Still, I thank you for your splendid gift, and however you came by it, shall value it much."

"Perhaps my cousin Shabaka will tell us his story," broke in Amada, her eyes still fixed upon the rose-hued pearls, "and of how he came to win all the beautiful things that dazzle our eyes to-night."

Now I thought of offering her the pearls, but remembering my mother's words, also that the Princess might not like to see another woman bear

off such a prize, did not do so. So I began to tell my story instead, Bes seated on the ground near to me by the Prince's wish, that he might tell his.

The tale was long for in it was much that went before the day when I saw myself in the chariot hunting lions with the King of kings, which I, the modern man who set down all this vision, now learned for the first time. It told of the details of my journey to the East, of my coming to the royal city and the rest, all of which it is needless to repeat. Then I came to the lion hunt, to my winning of the wager, and all that happened to me; of my being condemned to death, of the weighing of Bes against the gold, and of how I was laid in the boat of torment, a story at which I noticed Amada turn pale and tremble.

Here I ceased, saying that Bes knew better than I what had chanced at the Court while I was pinned in the boat, whereon all present cried out to Bes to take up the tale. This he did, and much better than I could have done, bringing out many little things which made the scene appear before them, as Ethiopians have the art of doing. At last he came to the place in his story where the king asked him if he had ever seen a woman fairer than the dancers, and went on thus:

"O Prince, I told the Great King that I had; that there dwelt in Egypt a lady of royal blood with eyes like stars, with hair like silk and long as an unbridled horse's tail, with a shape like to that of a goddess, with breath like flowers, with skin like milk, with a voice like honey,



with learning like to that of the god Thoth, with wit like a razor's edge, with teeth like pearls, with majesty of bearing like to that of the king himself, with fingers like rosebuds set in pink seashells, with motion like that of an antelope, with grace like that of a swan floating upon water, and--I don't remember the rest, O Prince."

"Perhaps it is as well," exclaimed Peroa. "But what did the King say then?"

"He asked her name, O Prince."

"And what name did you give to this wondrous lady who surpasses all the goddesses in loveliness and charm, O dwarf Bes?" inquired Amada much amused.

"What name, O High-born One? Is it needful to ask? Why, what name could I give but your own, for is there any other in the world of whom a man whose heart is filled with truth could speak such things?"

Now hearing this I gasped, but before I could speak Amada leapt up, crying,

"Wretch! You dared to speak my name to this king! Surely you should be scourged till your bones are bare."

"And why not, Lady? Would you have had me sit still and hear those

fat trollops of the East exalted above you? Would you have had me so disloyal to your royal loveliness?"

"You should be scourged," repeated Amada stamping her foot. "My Uncle, I pray you cause this knave to be scourged."

"Nay, nay," said Peroa moodily. "Poor simple man, he knew no better and thought only to sing your praises in a far land. Be not angry with the dwarf, Niece. Had it been Shabaka who gave your name, the thing would be different. What happened next, Bes?"

"Only this, Prince," said Bes, looking upwards and rolling his eyes, as was his fashion when unloading some great lie from his heart. "The King sent his servants to bring my master from the boat, that he might inquire of him whether he had always found me truthful. For, Prince, those Easterns set much store by truth which here in Egypt is worshipped as a goddess. There they do not worship her because she lives in the heart of every man, and some women."

Now all stared at Bes who continued to stare at the ceiling, and I rose to say something, I know not what, when suddenly the doors opened and through them appeared heralds, crying,

"Hearken, Peroa, Prince of Egypt by grace of the Great King. A message from the Great King. Read and obey, O Peroa, Prince of Egypt by grace of the Great King!"

As they cried thus from between them emerged a man whose long Eastern robes were stained with the dust of travel. Advancing without salute he drew out a roll, touched his forehead with it, bowing deeply, and handed it to the prince, saying,

"Kiss the Word. Read the Word. Obey the Word, O servant of our Master, the King of kings, beneath whose feet we are all but dust."

Peroa took the roll, made a semblance of lifting it to his forehead, opened and read it. As he did so I saw the veins swell upon his neck and his eyes flash, but he only said,

"O Messenger, to-night I feast, to-morrow an answer shall be given to you to convey to the Satrap Idernes. My servants will find you food and lodging. You are dismissed."

"Let the answer be given early lest you also should be dismissed, O Peroa," said the man with insolence.

Then he turned his back upon the prince, as one does on an inferior, and walked away, accompanied by the herald.

When they were gone and the doors had been shut, Peroa spoke in a voice that was thick with fury, saying,

"Hearken, all of you, to the words of the writing."

Then he read it.

"From the King of kings, the Ruler of all the earth, to Peroa, one of his servants in the Satrapy of Egypt,

"Deliver over to my servant Idernes without delay, the person of Amada, a lady of the blood of the old Pharaohs of Egypt, who is your relative and in your guardianship, that she may be numbered among the women of my house."

Now all present looked at each other, while Amada stood as though she had been frozen into stone. Before she could speak, Peroa went on,

"See how the King seeks a quarrel against me that he may destroy me and bray Egypt in his mortar, and tan it like a hide to wrap about his feet. Nay, hold your peace, Amada. Have no fear. You shall not be sent to the East; first will I kill you with my own hands. But what answer shall we give, for the matter is urgent and on it hang all our lives? Bethink you, Idernes has a great force yonder at Sais, and if I refuse outright, he will attack us, which indeed is what the King means him to do before we can make preparation. Say then, shall we fight, or shall we fly to Upper Egypt, abandoning Memphis, and there make our stand?"

Now the Councillors present seemed to find no answer, for they did not know what to say. But Bes whispered in my ear,

"Remember, Master, that you hold the King's seal. Let an answer be sent to Idernes under the White Seal, bidding him wait on you."

Then I rose and spoke.

"O Peroa," I said, "as it chances I am the bearer of the private signet of the Great King, which all men must obey in the north and in the south, in the east and in the west, wherever the sun shines over the dominions of the King. Look on it," and taking the ancient White Seal from about my neck, I handed it to him.

He looked and the Councillors looked. Then they said almost with one voice,

"It is the White Seal, the very signet of the Great Kings of the East," and they bowed before the dreadful thing.

"How you came by this we do not know, Shabaka," said Peroa. "That can be inquired of afterwards. Yet in truth it seems to be the old Signet of signets, that which has come down from father to son for countless generations, that which the King of kings carries on his person and affixes to his private orders and to the greatest documents of State,

which afterwards can never be recalled, that of which a copy is emblazoned on his banner."

"It is," I answered, "and from the King's person it came to me for a while. If any doubt, let the impress be brought, that is furnished to all the officers throughout the Empire, and let the seal be set in the impress."

Now one of the officers rose and went to bring the impress which was in his keeping, but Peroa continued,

"If this be the true seal, how would you use it, Shabaka, to help us in our present trouble?"

"Thus, Prince," I answered. "I would send a command under the seal to Idernes to wait upon the holder of the seal here in Memphis. He will suspect a trap and will not come until he has gathered a great army. Then he will come, but meanwhile, you, Prince, can also collect an army."

"That needs gold, Shabaka, and I have little. The King of kings takes all in tribute."

"I have some, Prince, to the weight of a heavy man, and it is at the service of Egypt."

"I thank you, Shabaka. Believe me, such generosity shall not go unrewarded," and he glanced at Amada who dropped her eyes. "But if we can collect the army, what then?"

"Then you can put Memphis into a state of defence. Then too when Idernes comes I will meet him and, as the bearer of the seal, command him under the seal to retreat and disperse his army."

"But if he does, Shabaka, it will only be until he has received fresh orders from the Great King, whereon he will advance again."

"No, Prince, he will not advance, or that army either. For when they are in retreat we will fall on them and destroy them, and declare you, O Prince, Pharaoh of Egypt, though what will happen afterwards I do not know."

When they heard this all gasped. Only Amada whispered,

"Well said!" and Bes clapped his big hands softly in the Ethiopian fashion.

"A bold counsel," said Peroa, "and one on which I must have the night to think. Return here, Shabaka, an hour after sunrise to-morrow, by which time I can gather all the wisest men in Memphis, and we will discuss this matter. Ah! here is the impress. Now let the seal be tried."

A box was brought and opened. In it was a slab of wood on which was an impress of the King's seal in wax, surrounded by those of other seals certifying that it was genuine. Also there was a writing describing the appearance of the seal. I handed the signet to Peroa who, having compared it with the description in the writing, fitted it to the impress on the wax.

"It is the same," he said. "See, all of you."

They looked and nodded. Then he would have given it back to me but I refused to take it, saying,

"It is not well that this mighty symbol should hang about the neck of a private man whence it might be stolen or lost."

"Or who might be murdered for its sake," interrupted Peroa.

"Yes, Prince. Therefore take it and hide it in the safest and most secret place in the palace, and with it these pearls that are too priceless to be flaunted about the streets of Memphis at night, unless indeed----" and I turned to look for Amada, but she was gone.

So the seal and the pearls were taken and locked in the box with the impress and borne away. Nor was I sorry to see the last of them, wisely as it happened. Then I bade the Prince and his company good night, and presently was driving homeward with Bes in the chariot.



Our way led us past some large houses once occupied by officers of the Court of Pharaoh, but now that there was no Court, fallen into ruins. Suddenly from out of these houses sprang a band of men disguised as common robbers, whose faces were hidden by cloths with eye-holes cut in them. They seized the horses by the bridles, and before we could do anything, leapt upon us and held us fast. Then a tall man speaking with a foreign accent, said,

"Search that officer and the dwarf. Take from them the seal upon a gold chain and a rope of rose-hued pearls which they have stolen. But do them no harm."

So they searched us, the tall man himself helping and, aided by others, holding Bes who struggled with them, and searched the chariot also, by the light of the moon, but found nothing. The tall man muttered that I must be the wrong officer, and at a sign they left us and ran away.

"That was a wise thought of mine, Bes, which caused me to leave certain ornaments in the palace," I said. "As it is they have taken nothing."

"Yes, Master," he answered, "though I have taken something from them," a saying that I did not understand at the time. "Those Easterns whom we met by the canal told Idernes about the seal, and he ordered this to be done. That tall man was one of the messengers who came to-night to the palace."

"Then why did they not kill us, Bes?"

"Because murder, especially of one who holds the seal, is an ugly business, that is easily tracked down, whereas thieves are many in Memphis and who troubles about them when they have failed? Oh! the Grasshopper, or Amen, or both, have been with us to-night."

So I thought although I said nothing, for since we had come off scatheless, what did it matter? Well, this. It showed me that the signet of the Great King was indeed to be dreaded and coveted, even here in Egypt. If Idernes could get it into his possession, what might he not do with it? Cause himself to be proclaimed Pharaoh perhaps and become the forefather of an independent dynasty. Why not, when the Empire of the East was taxed with a great war elsewhere? And if this was so why should not Peroa do the same, he who had behind him all Old Egypt, maddened with its wrongs and foreign rule?

That same night before I slept, but after Bes and I had hidden away the bags of gold by burying them beneath the clay floor, I laid the whole matter before my mother who was a very wise woman. She heard me out, answering little, then said,

"The business is very dangerous, and of its end I will not speak until I have heard the counsel of your great-uncle, the holy Tanofir. Still, things having gone so far, it seems to me that boldness may be the best

course, since the great King has his Grecian wars to deal with, and whatever he may say, cannot attack Egypt yet awhile. Therefore if Peroa is able to overcome Idernes and his army he may cause himself to be proclaimed Pharaoh and make Egypt free if only for a time."

"Such is my mind, Mother."

"Not all your mind, Son, I think," she answered smiling, "for you think more of the lovely Amada than of these high policies, at any rate to-night. Well, marry your Amada if you can, though I misdoubt me somewhat of a woman who is so lost in learning and thinks so much about her soul. At least if you marry her and Egypt should become free, as it was for thousands of years, you will be the next heir to the throne as husband of the Great Royal Lady."

"How can that be, Mother, seeing that Peroa has a son?"

"A vain youth with no more in him than a child's rattle. If once Amada ceases to think about her soul she will begin to think about her throne, especially if she has children. But all this is far away and for the present I am glad that neither she nor the thieves have got those pearls, though perhaps they might be safer here than where they are. And now, my son, go rest for you need it, and dream of nothing, not even Amada, who for her part will dream of Isis, if at all. I will wake you before the dawn."

So I went, being too tired to talk more, and slept like a crocodile in the sun, till, as it seemed to me, but a few minutes later I saw my mother standing over me with a lamp, saying that it was time to rise. I rose, unwillingly enough, but refreshed, washed and dressed myself, by which time the sun had begun to appear. Then I ate some food and, calling Bes, made ready to start for the palace.

"My son," said my mother, the lady Tiu, before we parted, "while you have been sleeping I have been thinking, as is the way of the old. Peroa, your cousin, will be glad enough to make use of you, but he does not love you over much because he is jealous of you and fears lest you should become his rival in the future. Still he is an honest man and will keep a bargain which he once has made. Now it seems that above everything on earth you desire Amada on whom you have set your heart since boyhood, but who has always played with you and spoken to you with her arm stretched out. Also life is short and may come to an end any day, as you should know better than most men who have lived among dangers, and therefore it is well that a man should take what he desires, even if he finds afterwards that the rose he crushes to his breast has thorns. For then at least he will have smelt the rose, not only have looked on and longed to smell it. Therefore, before you hand over your gold, and place your wit and strength at the service of Peroa, make your bargain with him; namely, that if thereby you save Amada from the King's House of Women and help to set Peroa on the throne, he shall promise her to you free of any priestly curse, you giving her as dowry the priceless rose-hued pearls that are worth a kingdom. So you will get

your rose till it withers, and if the thorns prick, do not blame me, and one day you may become a king--or a slave, Amen knows which."

Now I laughed and said that I would take her counsel who desired Amada and nothing else. As for all her talk about thorns, I paid no heed to it, knowing that she loved me very much and was jealous of Amada who she thought would take her place with me.