

Joshua — Volume 2 eBook

Joshua — Volume 2 by Georg Ebers

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CHAPTER IX.

At the same hour a chamberlain was ushering Hosea into the audience chamber.

Usually subjects summoned to the presence of the king were kept waiting for hours, but the Hebrew's patience was not tried long. During this period of the deepest mourning the spacious rooms of the palace, commonly tenanted by a gay and noisy multitude, were hushed to the stillness of death; for not only the slaves and warders, but many men and women in close attendance on the royal couple had fled from the pestilence, quitting the palace without leave.

Here and there a solitary priest, official, or courtier leaned against a pillar or crouched on the floor, hiding his face in his hands, while awaiting some order. Sentries paced to and fro with lowered weapons, lost in melancholy thoughts. Now and then a few young priests in mourning robes glided through the infected rooms, silently swinging silver censers which diffused a pungent scent of resin and juniper.

A nightmare seemed to weigh upon the palace and its occupants; for in addition to grief for their beloved prince, which saddened many a heart, the dread of death and the desert wind paralyzed alike the energy of mind and body.

Here in the immediate vicinity of the throne where, in former days, all eyes had sparkled with hope, ambition, gratitude, fear, loyalty, or hate, Hosea now encountered only drooping heads and downcast looks.

Bai, the second prophet of Amon, alone seemed untouched alike by sorrow, anxiety, or the enervating atmosphere of the day; he greeted the warrior in the ante-room as vigorously and cheerily as ever, and assured him— though in the lowest whisper—that no one thought of holding him responsible for the misdeeds of his people. But when Hosea volunteered the acknowledgment that, at the moment of his summons to the king, he had been in the act of going to the commander-in-chief to beg a release from military service, the priest interrupted him to remind him of the debt of gratitude he, Bai, owed to him as the preserver of his life. Then he added that he would make every effort in his power to keep him in the army and show that the Egyptians—even against Pharaoh's will, or which he would speak farther with him privately—knew how to honor genuine merit without distinction of person or birth.

The Hebrew had little time to repeat his resolve; the head chamberlain interrupted them to lead Hosea into the presence of the "good god."

The sovereign awaited Hosea in the smaller audience-room adjoining the royal apartments.

It was a stately chamber, and to-day looked more spacious than when, as of yore, it was filled with obsequious throngs. Only a few courtiers and priests, with some of the queen's ladies-in-waiting, all clad in deep mourning, stood in groups near the throne. Opposite to Pharaoh, squatting in a circle on the floor, were the king's councillors and interpreters, each adorned with an ostrich plume.

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All wore tokens of mourning, and the monotonous, piteous plaint of the wailing women, which ever and anon rose into a loud, shrill, tremulous shriek, echoed through the silent rooms within to this hall, announcing that death had claimed a victim even in the royal dwelling.

The king and queen sat on a gold and ivory couch, heavily draped with black. Instead of their usual splendid attire, both wore dark robes, and the royal consort and mother, who mourned her first-born son, leaned motionless, with drooping head, against her kingly husband's shoulder.

Pharaoh, too, gazed fixedly into space, as though lost in a dream. The sceptre had slipped from his hand and lay in his lap.

The queen had been torn away from the corpse of her son, which was now delivered to the embalmers, and it was not until she reached the entrance of the audience-chamber that she had succeeded in checking her tears. She had no thought of resistance; the inexorable ceremonial of court etiquette required the queen to be present at any audience of importance. To-day she would gladly have shunned the task, but Pharaoh had commanded her presence, and she knew and approved the course to be pursued; for she was full of dread of the power of the Hebrew Mesu, called by his own people Moses, and of his God, who had brought such terrible woe on the Egyptians. She had other children to lose, and she had known Mesu from her childhood, and was well aware how highly the great Rameses, her husband's father and predecessor, had prized the wisdom of this stranger who had been reared with his own sons.

Ah, if it were only possible to conciliate this man. But Mesu had departed with the Israelites, and she knew his iron will and had learned that the terrible prophet was armed, not alone against Pharaoh's threats, but also against her own fervent entreaties.

She was now expecting Hosea. He, the son of Nun, the foremost man of all the Hebrews in Tanis, would succeed, if any one could, in carrying out the plan which she and her royal husband deemed best for all parties,—a plan supported also by Rui, the hoary high-priest and first prophet of Amon, the head of the whole Egyptian priesthood, who held the offices of chief judge, chief treasurer, and viceroy of the kingdom, and had followed the court from Thebes to Tanis.

Ere going to the audience hall, she had been twining wreaths for her loved dead and the lotus flowers, larkspurs, mallow and willow-leaves, from which she was to weave them, had been brought there by her desire. They were lying on a small table and in her lap; but she felt paralyzed, and the hand she stretched toward them refused to obey her will.

Rui, the first prophet of Amon, an aged man long past his ninetieth birthday, squatted on a mat at Pharaoh's left hand. A pair of bright eyes, shaded by bushy white brows, glittered in his brown face—seamed and wrinkled like the bark of a gnarled oaklike gay

flowers amid withered leaves, forming a strange contrast to his lean, bowed, and shrivelled form.

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The old man had long since resigned the management of business affairs to the second prophet, Bai, but he held firmly to his honors, his seat at Pharaoh's side, and his place in the council, where, though he said little, his opinion was more frequently followed than that of the eloquent, ardent second prophet, who was many years his junior.

The old man had not quitted Pharaoh's side since the plague entered the palace, yet to-day he felt more vigorous than usual; the hot desert wind, which weakened others, refreshed him. He was constantly shivering, despite the panther-skin which hung over his back and shoulders, and the heat of the day warmed his chilly old blood.

Moses, the Hebrew, had been his pupil, and never had he instructed a nobler nature, a youth more richly endowed with all the gifts of intellect. He had initiated the Israelite into all the highest mysteries, anticipating the greatest results for Egypt and the priesthood, and when the Hebrew one day slew an overseer who had mercilessly beaten one of his race, and then fled into the desert, Rui had secretly mourned the evil deed as if his own son had committed it and must suffer the consequences. His intercession had secured Mesu's pardon; but when the latter returned to Egypt and the change had occurred which other priests termed his "apostasy," the old man had grieved even more keenly than over his flight. Had he, Rui, been younger, he would have hated the man who had thus robbed him of his fairest hopes; but the aged priest, who read men's hearts like an open book and could judge the souls of his fellow-mortals with the calm impartiality of an unclouded mind, confessed that he had been to blame in failing to foresee his pupil's change of thought.

Education and precept had made Mesu an Egyptian priest according to his own heart and that of the divinity; but after having once raised his hand in the defence of his own people against those to whom he had been bound only by human craft and human will, he was lost to the Egyptians and became once more a true son of his race. And where this man of the strong will and lofty soul led the way, others could not fail to follow.

Rui knew likewise full well what the renegade meant to give to his race; he had confessed it himself to the priest-faith in the one God. Mesu had rejected the accusation of perjury, declaring that he would never betray the mysteries to the Hebrews, his sole desire was to lead them back to the God whom they had worshipped ere Joseph and his family came to Egypt. True, the "One" of the initiated resembled the God of the Hebrews in many things, but this very fact had soothed the old sage; for experience had taught him that the masses are not content with a single invisible God, an idea which many, even among the more advanced of his own pupils found difficult to comprehend. The men and women of the lower classes needed visible symbols of every important thing whose

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influence they perceived in and around them, and the Egyptian religion supplied these images. What could an invisible creative power guiding the course of the universe be to a love-sick girl? She sought the friendly Hathor, whose gentle hands held the cords that bound heart to heart, the beautiful mighty representative of her sex—to her she could trustingly pour forth all the sorrows that burdened her bosom. What was the petty grief of a mother who sought to snatch her darling child from death, to the mighty and incomprehensible Deity who governed the entire universe? But the good Isis, who herself had wept her eyes red in bitter anguish, could understand her woe. And how often in Egypt it was the wife who determined her husband's relations to the gods!

Rui had frequently seen Hebrew men and women praying fervently in Egyptian temples. Even if Mesu should induce them to acknowledge his God, the experienced sage clearly foresaw that they would speedily turn from the invisible Spirit, who must ever remain aloof and incomprehensible, and return by hundreds to the gods they understood.

Now Egypt was threatened with the loss of the laborers and builders she so greatly needed, but Rui believed that they might be won back.

"When fair words will answer our purpose, put aside sword and bow," he had replied to Bai, who demanded that the fugitives should be pursued and slain. "We have already too many corpses in our country; what we want is workers. Let us hold fast what we seem on the verge of losing."

These mild words were in full harmony with the mood of Pharaoh, who had had sufficient sorrow, and would have thought it wiser to venture unarmed into a lion's cage than to again defy the wrath of the terrible Hebrew.

So he had closed his ears to the exhortations of the second prophet, whose steadfast, energetic will usually exercised all the greater influence upon him on account of his own irresolution, and upheld old Rui's suggestion that the warrior, Hosea, should be sent after his people to deal with them in Pharaoh's name—a plan that soothed his mind and renewed his hopes.

The second prophet, Bai, had finally assented to the plan; for it afforded a new chance of undermining the throne he intended to overthrow. If the Hebrews were once more settled in the land, Prince Siptah, who regarded no punishment too severe for the race he hated, might perhaps seize the sceptre of the cowardly king Menephtah.

But the fugitives must first be stopped, and Hosea was the right man to do this. But in Bai's eyes no one would be more able to gain the confidence of an unsuspecting soldier than Pharaoh and his royal consort. The venerable high-priest Rui, though wholly

unaware of the conspiracy, shared this opinion, and thus the sovereigns had been persuaded to interrupt the mourning for the dead and speak in person to the Hebrew.

Hosea had prostrated himself before the throne and, when he rose, the king's weary face was bent toward him, sadly, it is true, yet graciously.

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According to custom, the hair and beard of the father who had lost his first-born son had been shaven. Formerly they had encircled his face in a frame of glossy black, but twenty years of anxious government had made them grey, and his figure, too, had lost its erect carriage and seemed bent and feeble, though he had scarcely passed his fifth decade. His regular features were still beautiful in their symmetry, and there was a touch of pathos in their mournful gentleness, so evidently incapable of any firm resolve, especially when a smile lent his mouth a bewitching charm.

The languid indolence of his movements scarcely impaired the natural dignity of his presence, yet his musical voice was wont to have a feeble, beseeching tone. He was no born ruler; thirteen older brothers had died ere the throne of Pharaoh had become his heritage, and up to early manhood he had led a careless, joyous existence—as the handsomest youth in the whole land, the darling of women, the light-hearted favorite of fortune. Then he succeeded his father the great Rameses, but he had scarcely grasped the sceptre ere the Libyans, with numerous allies, rebelled against Egypt. The trained troops and their leaders, who had fought in his predecessor's wars, gained him victory, but during the twenty years which had now passed since Rameses' death, the soldiers had rarely had any rest. Insurrections constantly occurred, sometimes in the East, anon in the West and, instead of living in Thebes, where he had spent many years of happiness, and following the bent of his inclination by enjoying in the splendid palace the blessing of peace and the society of the famous scholars and poets who then made that city their home, he was compelled sometimes to lead his armies in the field, sometimes to live in Tanis, the capital of Lower Egypt, to settle the disturbances of the border land.

This was the desire of the venerable Rui, and the king willingly followed his guidance. During the latter years of Rameses' reign, the temple at Thebes, and with it the chief priest, had risen to power and wealth greater than that possessed by royalty itself, and Menephtah's indolent nature was better suited to be a tool than a guiding hand, so long as he received all the external honors due to Pharaoh. These he guarded with a determination which he never roused himself to display in matters of graver import.

The condescending graciousness of Pharaoh's reception awakened feelings of mingled pleasure and distrust in Hosea's mind, but he summoned courage to frankly express his desire to be relieved from his office and the oath he had sworn to his sovereign.

Pharaoh listened quietly. Not until Hosea confessed that he was induced to take this step by his father's command did he beckon to the high-priest, who began in low, almost inaudible tones:

"The son who resigns great things to remain obedient to his father will be the most loyal of the 'good god's' servants. Go, obey the summons of Nun. The son of the sun, the Lord of Upper and Lower Egypt, sets you free; but through me, the slave of his master, he imposes one condition."

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"What is that?" asked Hosea.

Pharaoh signed to Rui a second time and, as the monarch sank back upon his throne, the old man, fixing his keen eyes on Hosea, replied:

"The demand which the lord of both worlds makes upon you by my lips is easy to fulfil. You must return to be once more his servant and one of us, as soon as your people and their leader, who have brought such terrible woe upon this land, shall have clasped the divine hand which the son of the sun extends to them in reconciliation, and shall have returned to the beneficent shadow of his throne. He intends to attach them to his person and his realm by rich tokens of his favor, as soon as they return from the desert to which they have gone forth to sacrifice to their God. Understand me fully! All the burdens which have oppressed the people of your race shall be removed. The 'great god' will secure to them, by a new law, privileges and great freedom, and whatever we promise shall be written down and witnessed on our part and yours as a new and valid covenant binding on our children and our children's children. When such a compact has been made with an honest purpose on our part to keep it for all time, and your tribes have consented to accept it, will you promise that you will then be one of us again?"

"Accept the office of mediator, Hosea," the queen here interrupted in a low tone, with her sorrowful eyes fixed imploringly on Hosea's face. "I dread the fury of Mesu, and everything in our power shall be done to regain his old friendship. Mention my name and recall the time when he taught little Isisnefert the names of the plants she brought to him and explained to her and her sister their beneficial or their harmful qualities, during his visits to the queen, his second mother, in the women's apartments. The wounds he has dealt our hearts shall be pardoned and forgotten. Be our envoy. Hosea, do not deny us."

"Such words from royal lips are a strict mandate," replied the Hebrew. "And yet they make the heart rejoice. I will accept the office of mediator."

The hoary high-priest nodded approvingly, exclaiming:

"I hope a long period of blessing may arise from this brief hour. But note this. Where potions can aid, surgery must be shunned. Where a bridge spans the stream, beware of swimming through the whirlpool."

"Yes, by all means shun the whirlpool," Pharaoh repeated, and the queen uttered the same words, then once more bent her eyes on the flowers in her lap.

A council now began.

Three private scribes took seats on the floor close by Rui, in order to catch his low tones, and the scribes and councillors in the circle before the throne seized their writing-materials and, holding the papyrus in their left hands, wrote with reed or brush; for nothing which was debated and determined in Pharaoh's presence was suffered to be left unrecorded.

During the continuance of this debate no voice in the audience chamber was raised above a whisper; the courtiers and guards stood motionless at their posts, and the royal pair gazed mutely into vacancy as though lost in reverie.

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Neither Pharaoh nor his queen could possibly have heard the muttered conversation between the men; yet the Egyptians, at the close of every sentence, glanced upward at the king as if to ensure his approbation. Hosea, to whom the custom was perfectly familiar, did the same and, like the rest, lowered his tones. Whenever the voices of Bai or of the chief of the scribes waxed somewhat louder, Pharaoh raised his head and repeated the words of Rui: "Where a bridge spans the stream, beware of swimming through the whirlpool;" for this saying precisely expressed his own desires and those of the queen. No strife! Let us live at peace with the Hebrews, and escape from the anger of their awful leader and his God, without losing the thousands of industrious workers in the departed tribes.

So the discussion went on, and when the murmuring of the debaters and the scratching of the scribes' reeds had continued at least an hour the queen remained in the same position; but Pharaoh began to move and lift up his voice, fearing that the second prophet, who had detested the man whose benedictions he had implored and whose enmity seemed so terrible, was imposing on the mediator requirements impossible to fulfil.

Yet he said nothing save to repeat the warning about the bridge, but his questioning look caused the chief of the scribes to soothe him with the assurance that everything was progressing as well as possible. Hosea had only requested that, in future, the overseers of the workmen should not be of Libyan birth, but Hebrews themselves, chosen by the elders of their tribes with the approval of the Egyptian government.

Pharaoh cast a glance of imploring anxiety at Bai, the second prophet, and the other councillors; but the former shrugged his shoulders deprecatingly and, pretending to yield his own opinion to the divine wisdom of Pharaoh, acceded to Hosea's request.

The divinity on the throne of the world accepted, with a grateful bend of the head, this concession from a man whose wishes had so often opposed his own, and after the "repeater" or herald had read aloud all the separate conditions of the agreement, Hosea was forced to make a solemn vow to return in any case to Tanis, and report to the Sublime Porte how his people had received the king's proposals.

But the wary chief, versed in the wiles and tricks with which the government was but too well supplied, uttered the vow with great reluctance, and only after he had received a written assurance that, whatever might be the result of the negotiations, his liberty should not be restricted in any respect, after he had proved that he had used his utmost efforts to induce the leader of the Hebrews to accept the compact.

At last Pharaoh extended his hand for the warrior to kiss, and when the latter had also pressed his lips to the edge of the queen's garments, Rui signed to the head-chamberlain, who made obeisance to Pharaoh, and the sovereign knew that the hour

had come when he might retire. He did so gladly and with a lighter heart; for he believed that he had done his best to secure his own welfare and that of his people.

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A sunny expression flitted across his handsome, worn features, and when the queen also rose and saw his smile of satisfaction it was reflected on her face. Pharaoh uttered a sigh of relief as he crossed the threshold of the audience chamber and, accosting his wife, said:

"If Hosea wins his cause, we shall cross the bridge safely."

"And need not swim through the whirlpool," the queen answered in the same tone.

"And if the chief succeeds in soothing Mesu, and induces the Hebrews to stay in the land," Pharaoh added:

"Then you will enrol this Hosea—he looks noble and upright—among the kindred of the king," Isisnefert interrupted.

But upon this Pharaoh drew up his languid, drooping figure, exclaiming eagerly:

"How can I? A Hebrew! Were we to admit him among the 'friends' or 'fan-bearers' it would be the highest favor we could bestow! It is no easy matter in such a case to choose between too great or too small a recompense."

The farther the royal pair advanced toward the interior of the palace, the louder rose the wailing voices of the mourning women. Tears once more filled the eyes of the queen; but Pharaoh continued to ponder over what office at court he could bestow on Hosea, should his mission prove successful.

CHAPTER X.

Hosea was forced to hurry in order to overtake the tribes in time; for the farther they proceeded, the harder it would be to induce Moses and the leaders of the people to return and accept the treaty.

The events which had befallen him that morning seemed so strange that he regarded them as a dispensation of the God whom he had found again; he recollected, too, that the name "Joshua," "he who helps Jehovah," had been received through Miriam's message. He would gladly bear it; for though it was no easy matter to resign the name for which he had won renown, still many of his comrades had done likewise. His new one was attesting its truth grandly; never had God's help been more manifest to him than this morning. He had entered Pharaoh's palace expecting to be imprisoned or delivered over to the executioner, as soon as he insisted upon following his people, and how speedily the bonds that held him in the Egyptian army had been sundered. And he had been appointed to discharge a task which seemed in his eyes so grand, so lofty, that he was on the point of believing that the God of his fathers had summoned him to perform it.

He loved Egypt. It was a fair country. Where could his people find a more delightful home? It was only the circumstances under which they had lived there which had been intolerable. Happier times were now in store. The tribes were given the choice between returning to Goshen, or settling on the lake land west of the Nile, with whose fertility and ample supply of water he was well acquainted. No one would have a right to reduce them to bondage, and whoever gave his labor to the service of the state was to have for overseer no stern and cruel foreigner, but a man of his own blood.

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True, he knew that the Hebrews must remain under subjection to Pharaoh. But had not Joseph, Ephraim, and his sons, Hosea's ancestors, been called his subjects and lived content to be numbered among the Egyptians.

If the covenant was made, the elders of the tribes were to direct the private concerns of the people. Spite of Bai's opposition, Moses had been named regent of the new territory, while he, Hosea, himself was to command the soldiers who would defend the frontiers, and marshal fresh troops from the Israelite mercenaries, who had already borne themselves valiantly in many a fray. Ere he had quitted the palace, Bai had made various mysterious allusions, which though vague in purport, betrayed that the priest was cherishing important plans and, as soon as the guidance of the government passed from old Rui's hands into his, a high position, perhaps the command of the whole army, now led by a Syrian named Aarsu, would be conferred on him, Hosea.

But this prospect caused him more anxiety than pleasure, though great was his satisfaction at having gained the concession that every third year the eastern frontiers of the country should be thrown open to his people, that they might go to the desert and there offer sacrifices to their God. Moses had seemed to lay the utmost stress upon this privilege, and according to the existing law, no one was permitted to cross the narrow fortified frontier on the east without the permission of the government. Perhaps granting this desire of the mighty leader might win him to accept a compact so desirable for his nation.

During these negotiations Hosea had again realized his estrangement from his people, he was not even aware—for what purpose the sacrifice in the desert was offered. He also frankly acknowledged to Pharaoh's councillors that he knew neither the grievances nor the requirements of the tribes, a course he pursued to secure to the Hebrews the right of changing or revising in any respect the offers he was to convey.

What better proposals could they or their leader desire?

The future was full of fresh hopes of happiness for his people and himself. If the compact was made, the time had arrived for him to establish a home of his own, and Miriam's image again appeared in all its loftiness and beauty. The thought of gaining this splendid maiden was fairly intoxicating, and he wondered whether he was worthy of her, and if it would not be presumptuous to aspire to the hand of the divinely-inspired, majestic virgin and prophetess.

He was experienced in the affairs of life and knew full well how little reliance could be placed upon the promises of the vacillating man, who found the sceptre too heavy for his feeble hand. But he had exercised caution and, if the elders of the people could but be won over, the agreement would be inscribed on metal tables, sentence by sentence, and hung in the temple at Thebes, with the signatures of Pharaoh

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and the envoys of the Hebrews, like every other binding agreement between Egypt and a foreign nation. Such documents—he had learned this from the treaty of peace concluded with the Cheta—assured and lengthened the brief “eternity” of national covenants. He had certainly neglected no precaution to secure his people from treachery and perjury. Never had he felt more vigorous, more confident, more joyous than when he again entered Pharaoh's chariot to take leave of his subordinates. Bai's mysterious hints and suggestions troubled him very little; he was accustomed to leave future anxieties to be cared for in the future. But at the camp he encountered a grief which belonged to the present; surprised, angry, and troubled, he learned that Ephraim had secretly left the tent, telling no one whither he was going. A hurried investigation drew out the information that the youth had been seen on the road to Tanis, and Hosea hastily bade his trusty shield-bearer search the city for the youth and, if he found him, to order him to follow his uncle to Succoth.

After the chief had said farewell to his men, he set off, attended only by his old groom. He was pleased to have the adone—[Corresponding to the rank of adjutant.]—and subaltern officers who had been with him, the stern warriors, with whom he had shared everything in war and peace, in want and privation, show so plainly the pain of parting. Tears streamed down the bronzed cheeks of many a man who had grown grey in warfare, as he clasped his hand for the last time. Many a bearded lip was pressed to the hem of his robe, to his feet, and to the sleek skin of the noble Libyan steed which, pressing forward with arching neck only to be curbed by its rider's strength, bore him through the ranks. For the first time since his mother's death his own eyes grew dim, as shouts of farewell rang warmly and loudly from the manly breasts of his soldiers.

Never before had he so deeply realized how firmly he was bound to these men, and how he loved his noble profession.

Yet the duty he was now fulfilling was also great and glorious, and the God who had absolved him from his oath and smoothed the way for him to obey his father's commands as a true and upright man, would perhaps bring him back to his comrades in arms, whose cordial farewell he still fancied he heard long after he was out of reach of their voices.

The greatness of the work assigned to him, the enthusiasm of a man who devotes himself with devout earnestness to the performance of a difficult task, the rapturous joy of the lover, who with well-founded hopes of the fulfilment of the purest and fairest desires of his heart, hastens to meet the woman of his choice, first dawned upon him when he had left the city behind and was dashing at a rapid trot toward the south-east across the flat, well-watered plain with its wealth of palm-groves.

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While forcing his steed to a slower pace as he passed through the streets of the capital, and the region near the harbor, his mind was so engrossed by his recent experiences and his anxiety concerning the runaway youth, that he paid little attention to the throng of vessels lying at anchor, the motley crowd of ship owners, traders, sailors, and laborers, representatives of all the nations of Africa and Asia, who sought a livelihood here, and the officials, soldiers, and petitioners, who had followed Pharaoh from Thebes to the city of Rameses.

He had even failed to see two men of high rank, though one, Hornecht, the captain of the archers, had waved his hand to him.

They had retired into the deep gateway formed by the pylons at the entrance of the temple of Seth, to escape the clouds of dust which the desert wind was still blowing along the road.

While Hornecht was vainly trying to arrest the horseman's attention, his companion, Bai, the second prophet of Amon, whispered: "Let him go! He will learn where his nephew is soon enough."

"As you desire," replied the soldier. Then he eagerly continued the story he had just begun. "When they brought the lad in, he looked like a piece of clay in the potter's workshop."

"No wonder," replied the priest; "he had lain long enough in the road in the dust of Typhon. But what was your steward seeking among the soldiers?"

"We had heard from my adon, whom I sent to the camp last evening, that the poor youth was attacked by a severe fever, so Kasana put up some wine and her nurse's balsam, and dispatched the old creature with them to the camp."

"To the youth or to Hosea?" asked the prophet with a mischievous smile.

"To the sufferer," replied Hornecht positively, a frown darkening his brow. But, restraining himself, he added as if apologizing: "Her heart is as soft as wax, and the Hebrew youth--you saw him yesterday....."

"Is a splendid lad, just fitted to win a woman's heart!" replied the priest laughing. "Besides, whoever shows kindness to the nephew does not harm the uncle."

"That was not in her mind," replied Hornecht bluntly. "But the invisible God of the Hebrews is not less watchful of his children than the Immortals whom you serve; for he led Hotepu to the youth just as he was at the point of death. The dreamer would undoubtedly have ridden past him; for the dust had already . . ."

"Transformed him into a bit of potter's clay. But then?"

“Then the old man suddenly saw a glint of gold in the dusty heap.”

“And the stiffest neck will stoop for that.”

“Quite true. My Hotepu did so, and the broad gold circlet the lad wore flashed in the sunlight and preserved his life a second time.”

“The luckiest thing is that we have the lad in our possession.”

“Yes, I was rejoiced to have him open his eyes once more. Then his recovery grew more and more rapid; the doctor says he is like a kitten, and all these mishaps will not cost him his life. But he is in a violent fever, and in his delirium says all sorts of senseless things, which even my daughter’s nurse, a native of Ascalon, cannot clearly comprehend. Only she thought she caught Kasana’s name.”

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"So it is once more a woman who is the source of the trouble."

"Stop these jests, holy father," replied Hornecht, biting his lips. "A modest widow, and that boy with the down still on his lips."

"At his age," replied the unabashed priest, "fullblown roses have a stronger attraction for young beetles than do buds; and in this instance," he added more gravely, "it is a most fortunate accident. We have Hosea's nephew in the snare, and it will be your part not to let him escape."

"Do you mean that we are to deprive him of his liberty?" cried the warrior.

"Even so."

"Yet you value his uncle?"

"Certainly. But the state has a higher claim."

"This boy. . . ."

"Is a desirable hostage. Hosea's sword was an extremely useful tool to us; but if the hand that guides it is directed by the man whose power ever greater things we know . . ."

"You mean the Hebrew, Mesu?"

"Then Hosea will deal us wounds as deep as those he erst inflicted on our foes."

"Yet I have heard you say more than once that he was incapable of perjury."

"And so I say still, he has given wonderful proof of it to-day. Merely for the sake of being released from his oath, he thrust his head into the crocodile's jaws. But though the son of Nun is a lion, he will find his master in Mesu. That man is the mortal foe of the Egyptians, the bare thought of him stirs my gall."

"The cries of the wailing women behind this door admonish us loudly enough to hate him."

"Yet the weakling on the throne has forgotten vengeance, and is now sending Hosea on an errand of reconciliation."

"With your sanction, I think?"

"Ay," replied the priest with a mocking smile. "We send him to build a bridge! Oh, this bridge! A grey-beard's withered brain recommends it to be thrown across the stream,

and the idea just suits this pitiful son of a great father, who would certainly never have shunned swimming through the wildest whirlpool, especially when revenge was to be sought. Let Hosea essay the bridge! If it leads him back across the stream to us, I will offer him a right warm and cordial welcome; but as soon as this one man stands on our shores, may its supports sink under the leaders of his people; we, the only brave souls in Egypt, must see to that."

"So be it. Yet I fear we shall lose the chief, too, if justice overtakes his people."

"It might almost seem so."

"You have greater wisdom than I"

"Yet here you believe me in error."

"How could I venture to . . ."

"As a member of the military council you are entitled to your own opinion, and I consider myself bound to show you the end of the path along which you have hitherto followed us with blindfold eyes. So listen, and judge accordingly when your turn comes to speak in the council. The chief-priest Rui is old . . ."

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“And you now fill half his offices.”

“Would that he might soon be relieved of the last half of his burden. Not on my own account. I love strife, but for the welfare of our native land. It is a deep-seated feeling of our natures to regard the utterances and mandates of age as wisdom, so there are few among the councillors who do not follow the old man’s opinions; yet his policy limps on crutches, like himself. All good projects are swamped under his weak, fainthearted guidance.”

“That is the very reason my vote is at your disposal,” cried the warrior. “That is why I am ready to use all my might to hurl this sleeper from the throne and get rid of his foolish advisers.”

The prophet laid his finger on his lips to warn his companion to be more cautious, drew nearer to him, pointed to his litter, and said in a low, hurried tone:

“I am expected at the Sublime Porte, so listen. If Hosea’s mission is successful his people will return—the guilty with the innocent—and the latter will suffer. Among the former we can include the whole of Hosea’s tribe, who call themselves the sons of Ephraim, from old Nun down to the youth in your dwelling.”

“We may spare them; but Mesu, too, is a Hebrew, and what we do to him...”

“Will not occur in the public street, and it is child’s play to sow enmity between two men who desire to rule in the same sphere. I will make sure that Hosea shall shut his eyes to the other’s death; but Pharaoh, whether his name is Meneptah or”—he lowered his voice—“Siptah, must then raise him to so great a height—and he merits it—that his giddy eyes will never discern aught we desire to conceal. There is one dish that never palls on any man who has once tasted it.”

“And what is that?”

“Power, Hornecht—mighty power! As ruler of a whole province, commander of all the mercenaries in Aarsu’s stead, he will take care not to break with us. I know him. If I can succeed in making him believe Mesu has wronged him—and the imperious man will afford some pretext for it—and can bring him to the conviction that the law directs the punishment we mete out to the sorcerer and the worst of his adherents, he will not only assent but approve it.”

“And if he fails in his mission?”

“He will return at any rate; for he would not be false to his oath. But if Mesu, from whom we may expect anything, should detain him by force, the boy will be of service to us; for Hosea loves him, his people value his life, and he belongs to one of their noblest tribes.

In any case Pharaoh must threaten the lad; we will guard him, and that will unite his uncle to us by fresh ties and lead him to join those who are angry with the king."

"Excellent!"

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"The surest way to attain our object will be by forging still another chain. In short—now I beg you to be quiet, your temper is far too hot for your grey hairs—in short, our Hebrew brother-in-arms, the saviour of my life, the ablest man in the army, who is certain to win the highest place, must be your son-in-law. Kasana's heart is his—my wife has told me so." Hornecht frowned again, and struggled painfully to control his anger. He perceived that he must overcome his objection to giving his daughter to the man whose birth he scorned, much as he liked and esteemed his character. He could not refrain from uttering an oath under his breath, but his answer to the prophet was more calm and sensible than the latter had anticipated. If Kasana was so possessed by demons that this stranger infatuated her, let her have her will. But Hosea had not yet sued for her.

"By the red god Seth, and his seventy companions," he added wrathfully, "neither you, nor any one shall induce me to offer my daughter, who has twenty suitors, to a man who terms himself our friend, yet finds no leisure to greet us in our own house! To keep fast hold of the lad is another thing, I will see to that."

CHAPTER XI.

The midnight heavens, decked with countless stars, spanned with their cloudless azure vault the flat plains of the eastern Delta and the city of Succoth, called by the Egyptians, from their sanctuary, the place of the god Tum, or Pithom.

The March night was drawing toward its end, pallid mists floated over the canal, the work of Hebrew bondmen which, as far as the eye could reach, intersected the plain, watering the fields and pastures along its course.

Eastward and southward the sky was shrouded by dense veils of mist that rose from the large lakes and from the narrow estuaries that ran far up into the isthmus. The hot and dusty desert wind, which the day before had swept over the parched grass and the tents and houses of Succoth, had subsided at nightfall; and the cool atmosphere which in March, even in Egypt, precedes the approach of dawn, made itself felt.

Whoever had formerly entered, between midnight and morning, the humble frontier hamlet with its shepherd tents, wretched hovels of Nile mud, and by no means handsome farms and dwellings, would scarcely have recognized it now. Even the one noticeable building in the place—besides the stately temple of the sungod Turn—the large fortified store-house, presented at this hour an unfamiliar aspect. Its long white-washed walls, it is true, glimmered through the gloom as distinctly as ever, but instead of towering—as usual at this time—mute and lifeless above the slumbering town—the most active bustle was going on within and around it. It was intended also as a defense against the predatory hordes of the Shasu,

[Bedouins, who dwelt as nomads in the desert adjacent to Egypt, now regarded as part of Asia.]

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who had made a circuit around the fortified works on the isthmus, and its indestructible walls contained an Egyptian garrison, who could easily defend it against a force greatly superior in numbers.

To-day it looked as if the sons of the desert had assailed it; but the men and women who were bustling about below and on the broad parapet of the gigantic building were Hebrews, not Shasu. With loud outcries and gesticulations of delight they were seizing the thousands of measures of wheat, barley, rye, and durra, the stores of pulse, dates, and onions they found in the well-filled granaries, and even before sunset had begun to empty the store-rooms and put their contents into sacks, pails, and skins, trays, jugs, and aprons, which were let down by ropes or carried to the ground on ladders.

The better classes took no share in this work, but among the busy throng, spite of the lateness of the hour, were children of all ages, carrying away in pots, jugs, and dishes—borrowed from their mothers' cooking utensils—as much as they could.

Above, beside the unroofed openings of the storerooms, into which the stars were shining, and also at the foot of the ladders, women held torches or lanterns to light the others at their toil.

Pans of blazing pitch were set in front of the strong locked doors of the real fortress, and in their light armed shepherds were pacing to and fro. When heavy stones or kicks belabored the brazen-bound door from within, and threats were uttered in the Egyptian tongue, the Hebrews outside did not fail to retort in words of mockery and scorn.

On the day of the harvest festival, during the first evening watch, runners arrived at Succoth and announced to the Israelites, whose numbers were twenty-fold greater than those of the Egyptians, that they had quitted Tanis in the morning and the tribes intended to leave at night; their kindred in Succoth must be ready to go forth with them. There was great rejoicing among the Hebrews, who like those of their blood in the city of Rameses, had assembled in every house at a festive repast on the night of the new moon after the vernal equinox when the harvest festival usually began. The heads of the tribes had informed them that the day of liberation had arrived, and the Lord would lead them into the Promised Land.

Here, too, as in Tanis, many had been faint-hearted and rebellious, and others had endeavored to separate their lot from the rest and remain behind; but here, too, they were carried away by the majority. Eleasar, the son of Aaron, and the distinguished heads of the tribe of Judah, Hur and Naashon, had addressed the multitude, as Aaron and Nun had done in the city of Rameses. But Miriam, the virgin, the sister of Moses, had gone from house to house, everywhere awakening the fire of enthusiasm in men's hearts, and telling the women that the morrow's sun would usher in for them and their children a new day of happiness, prosperity, and freedom.

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Few had been deaf to the appeals of the prophetess; there was an air of majesty, which compelled obedience, in the bearing of this maiden, whose large black eyes, surmounted by heavy dark eye-brows, which met in the middle, pierced the hearts of those on whom her gaze was bent and seemed to threaten the rebellious with their gloomy radiance.

The members of every household went to rest after the festival with hearts uplifted and full of hope. But what a change had passed over them during the second day, the night that followed it, and the next morning! It seemed as though the desert wind had buried all their courage and confidence in the dust it swept before it. The dread of going forth to face an unknown future had stolen into every heart, and many a man who had waved his staff full of trust and joyful enterprise was now held, as if with clamps and fetters, to his well-tilled garden, the home of his ancestors, and the harvest in the fields, which had just been half gathered.

The Egyptian garrison in the fortified store-house had not failed to notice that the Hebrews were under some special excitement, but they supposed it due to the harvest festival. The commander of the garrison had learned that Moses desired to lead his people into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to their God, and had asked for a reinforcement. But he knew nothing more; for until the morning when the desert wind blew, no Hebrew had disclosed the plans of his kindred. But the more sorely the heat of the day oppressed them, the greater became the dread of the faint-hearted of the pilgrimage through the hot, dusty, waterless desert. The terrible day had given them a foretaste of what was impending and when, toward noon, the dust grew thicker, the air more and more oppressive, a Hebrew trader, from whom the Egyptian soldiers purchased goods, stole into the store-house to ask the commander to prevent his people from rushing to their doom.

Even among the leaders the voices of malcontents had grown loud. Asarja and Michael, with their sons, who grudged the power of Moses and Aaron, had even gone from one to another to try to persuade them, ere departing, to summon the elders again and charge them to enter into fresh negotiations with the Egyptians. While these malcontents were successfully gathering adherents, and the traitor had sought the commander of the Egyptian garrison, two more messengers arrived with tidings that the fugitives would arrive in Succoth between midnight and morning.

Breathless, speechless, dripping with perspiration, and with bleeding lips, the elder messenger sank on the threshold of Amminadab's house, now the home of Miriam also. Both the exhausted men were refreshed with wine and food, ere the least wearied was fully capable of speech. Then, in a hoarse voice, but from a heart overflowing with gratitude and ardent enthusiasm, he reported the scenes which had occurred at the exodus, and how the God of their fathers had filled every heart with His spirit, and instilled new faith into the souls of the cowards.

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Miriam had listened to this story with sparkling eyes; at its close she flung her veil over her head and bade the servants of the household, who had assembled around the messengers, to summon the whole Hebrew people under the sycamore, whose broad summit, the growth of a thousand years, protected a wide space of earth from the scorching sunbeams.

The desert wind was still blowing, but the glad news seemed to have destroyed the baneful power it exerted on man, and when many hundreds of people had flocked together under the sycamore, Miriam had given her hand to Eleasar, the son of her brother Aaron, sprung upon the bench which rested against the huge hollow trunk of the tree, raised her hands and eyes toward heaven in an ecstasy, and began in a loud voice to address a prayer to the Lord, as if she beheld him with her earthly vision.

Then she permitted the messenger to speak, and when the latter again described the events which had occurred in the city of Rameses, and then announced that the fugitives from Tanis would arrive in a few hours, loud shouts of joy burst from the throng. Eleasar, the son of Aaron, proclaimed with glowing enthusiasm what the Lord had done for his people and had promised to them, their children, and children's children.

Each word from the lips of the inspired speaker fell upon the hearts of the Hebrews like the fresh dew of morning on the parched grass. The trusting hearers pressed around him and Miriam with shouts of joy, and the drooping courage of the timorous appeared to put forth new wings. Asarja, Michael, and their followers no longer murmured, nay, most of them had been infected by the general enthusiasm, and when a Hebrew mercenary stole out from the garrison of the store-house and disclosed what had been betrayed to his commander, Eleasar, Naashon, Hur, and others took counsel together, gathered all the shepherds around them, and with glowing words urged them to show in this hour that they were men indeed and did not fear, with their God's mighty aid, to fight for their people and their liberty.

There was no lack of axes, clubs, sickles, brazen spears, heavy staves, slings, the shepherds' weapons of defence against the wild beasts of the desert, or bows and arrows, and as soon as a goodly number of strong men had joined him, Hur fell upon the Egyptian overseers who were watching the labor of several hundred Hebrew slaves. Shouting: "They are coming! Down with the oppressors! The Lord our God is our leader!" they rushed upon the Lybian warders, put them to rout, and released their fellows who were digging the earth, and laying bricks. As soon as the illustrious Naashon had pressed one of the oldest of these hapless men like a brother to his heart, the other liberated bondsmen had flung themselves into the shepherds' arms and thus, still shouting: "They are coming!" and "The Lord, the God of our fathers, is our leader!" they pressed forward in an increasing multitude. When at last the little band of shepherds had grown to a body of several thousand men, Hur led them against the Egyptian soldiers, whom they largely outnumbered.

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The Egyptian bowmen had already discharged a shower of arrows, and stones hurled from the slings of the powerful shepherds had dealt fatal wounds in the front ranks of the foe, when the blast of a trumpet rang out, summoning the garrison of the fortress behind the sloping walls and solid door. The Hebrews seemed to the commander too superior a force to fight, but duty required him to hold the fort until the arrival of the reinforcements he had requested.

Hur, however, had not been satisfied with his first victory. Success had kindled the courage of his followers, as a sharp gust of wind fans a smouldering fire, and wherever an Egyptian showed himself on the battlements of the store-house, the round stone from a shepherd's sling struck heavily upon him. At Naashon's bidding ladders had been brought and, in the twinkling of an eye, hundreds climbed up the building from every direction and, after a short, bloodless struggle, the granaries fell into the Hebrews' hands, though the Egyptians had succeeded in still retaining the fort. During the passage of these events the desert wind had subsided. Some of the liberated bondsmen, furious with rage, had heaped straw, wood, and faggots against the gate of the courtyard into which the Egyptians had been forced. It would have been a light task for the assailants to destroy every one of their foes by fire; but Hur, Naashon, and other prudent leaders had not suffered this to be done, lest the provisions still in the store-rooms should be burned.

It had been no easy matter, in truth, to deter the younger of the ill-treated bondsmen from this act of vengeance; but each one was a member of some family, and when Hur's admonitions were supported by those of the fathers and mothers, they not only allowed themselves to be pacified, but aided the elders to distribute the contents of the magazines among the heads of families and pack them on the beasts of burden and into the carts which were to accompany the fugitives.

The work went forward amid the broad glare of torches, and became a new festival; for neither Hur, Naashon, nor Eleasar could prevent the men and women from opening the wine-jars and skins. They succeeded, however, in preserving the lion's share of the precious booty for a time of need, and thus averted much drunkenness, though the spirit of the grape-juice and the pleasure in obtaining so rich a prize doubtless enhanced the grateful excitement of the throng. When Eleasar finally went among them for the second time to tell them of the Promised Land, men and women listened with uplifted hearts, and joined in the hymn Miriam began to sing.

Devout enthusiasm now took possession of every heart in Succoth, as it had done in Tanis during the hour that preceded the exodus, and when seventy Hebrew men and women, who had concealed themselves in the temple of Turn, heard the jubilant hymn, they came forth into the open air, joined the others, and packed their possessions with as much glad hopefulness and warm trust in the God of their fathers, as if they had never shrunk from the departure.

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As the stars sank lower in the heavens, the joyous excitement increased. Men and women thronged the road to Tanis to meet their approaching kindred. Many a father led his boy by the hand, and many a mother carried her child in her arms; the multitude drawing near contained numerous beloved relatives to be greeted, and the coming dawn could not fail to bring solemn hours of which one would wish no beloved heart to be deprived, and which would linger in the souls of the little ones till they themselves had children and grandchildren.

No bed in tent, hovel, or house was occupied; for everywhere the final packing was going on. The throng of workers at the granaries had lessened; most of them were now supplied with as much food as they could carry.

Men and women equipped for travelling lay around fires hurriedly lighted in front of many tents and houses, and in the larger farms shepherds were driving the cattle and slaughtering the oxen and sheep which were unable to go with the people. The blows of axes and hammers and the creaking of saws were heard in front of many a house; for litters to transport the sick and feeble must be made. Carts and wains were still to be loaded, and the heads of families had a hard task with the women; for a woman's heart often clings more closely to things apparently worthless than to those of the greatest value. When the weaver Rebecca was more eager to find room in the cart for the rude cradle in which her darling had died, than for the beautiful ebony chest inlaid with ivory an Egyptian had pawned to her husband, who could blame her?

Light shone from all the window openings and tent doors, while from the roofs of the largest houses the blaze of torches or lanterns greeted the approaching Hebrews.

At the banquet served on the night of the harvest festival, no table had lacked a roast lamb; during this hour of waiting the housewife offered her family what she could.

The narrow streets of the humble little town were full of active life, and never had the setting stars shone upon features so cheerful, eyes sparkling so brightly with enthusiasm, and faces so transfigured by hope and devout piety.

CHAPTER XII.

When morning dawned, all who had not gone down to meet the fugitives who were to make their first long halt here, had assembled on the roof of one of the largest houses in Succoth.

One after another fleet-footed man or boy, hurrying in advance of the rest, had reached Succoth. Amminadab's house was the goal sought by the majority. It consisted of two buildings, one occupied by Naashon, the owner's son, and his family, the other, a larger dwelling, which sheltered, besides the grey-haired owner and his wife, his son-in-law



Aaron with his wife, children, and grand-children, and Miriam. The aged leader of his tribe, who had assigned the duties of his position to his son Naashon, extended his hand to every messenger and listened to his story with sparkling eyes, often dimmed by tears. He had induced his old wife to sit in the armchair in which she was to be carried after the people, that she might become accustomed to it, and for the same reason he now occupied his own.

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When the old dame heard the messengers boast that the fair future promised to the people was now close at hand, her eyes often sought her husband, and she exclaimed: "Yes, Moses!" for she held her son-in-law's brother in high esteem, and rejoiced to see his prophecy fulfilled. The old people were proud of Aaron, too; but all their love was lavished upon Eleasar, their grandson, whom they beheld growing up into a second Moses. Miriam had been for some time a new and welcome member of the household. True, the warm-hearted old couple's liking for the grave maiden had not increased to parental tenderness, and their daughter Elisheba, Aaron's active wife, had no greater inclination to share the cares of the large family with the prophetess than her son Naashon's spouse, who, moreover, dwelt with her immediate family under her own roof. Yet the old people owed Miriam a debt of gratitude for the care she bestowed upon their granddaughter Milcah, the daughter of Aaron and Elisheba, whom a great misfortune had transformed from a merry-hearted child into a melancholy woman, whose heart seemed dead to every joy.

A few days after her marriage to a beloved husband the latter, carried away by passion, had raised his hand against an Egyptian tax-gatherer, who, while Pharaoh was passing through Succoth toward the east, had attempted to drive off a herd of his finest cattle for "the kitchen of the lord of both worlds." For this act of self-defence the hapless man had been conveyed to the mines as a prisoner of state, and every one knew that the convicts there perished, soul and body, from torturing labor far beyond their strength. Through the influence of old Nun, Hosea's father, the wife and relatives of the condemned man had been saved from sharing his punishment, as the law prescribed. But Milcah languished under the blow, and the only person who could rouse the pale, silent woman from brooding over her grief was Miriam. The desolate heart clung to the prophetess, and she accompanied her when she practised in the huts of the poor the medical skill she had learned and took them medicines and alms.

The last messengers Amninadab and his wife received on the roof described the hardships of the journey and the misery they had witnessed in dark hues; but if one, more tender-hearted than the rest, broke into lamentations over the sufferings endured by the women and children during the prevalence of the desert wind, and recalling the worst horrors impressed upon his memory, uttered mournful predictions for the future, the old man spoke cheering words, telling him of the omnipotence of God, and how custom would inure one to hardship. His wrinkled features expressed firm confidence, while one could read in Miriam's beautiful, yet stern countenance, little of the courageous hope, which youth is wont to possess in a far higher degree than age.

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During the arrival and departure of the messengers she did not quit the old couple's side, leaving to her sister-in-law Elisheba and her servants the duty of offering refreshments to the wearied men. She herself listened intently, with panting breath, but what she heard seemed to awaken her anxiety; for she knew that no one came to the house which sheltered Aaron save those who were adherents of her brothers, the leaders of the people. If such men's blitheness was already waning, what must the outlook be to the lukewarm and refractory!

She rarely added a question of her own to those asked by the old man and, when she did so, the messengers who heard her voice for the first time looked at her in surprise; though musical, the tones were unusually deep.

After several messengers, in reply to her inquiries, declared that Hosea, the son of Nun, had not come with the others, her head drooped and she asked nothing more, till pallid Milcah, who followed her everywhere, raised her dark eyes beseechingly and murmured the name of Reuben, her captive husband. The prophetess kissed the poor desolate wife's forehead, glanced at her as if she had neglected her in some way, and then questioned the messengers with urgent eagerness concerning their news of Reuben, who had been dragged to the mines. One only had learned from a released prisoner that Milcah's husband was living in the copper mines of the province of Bech, in the neighborhood of Mt. Sinai, and Miriam seized upon these tidings to assure Milcah, with great vivacity and warmth, that if the tribes moved eastward they would surely pass the mines and release the Hebrews imprisoned there.

These were welcome words, and Milcah, who nestled to her comforter's breast, would gladly have heard more; but great restlessness had seized upon the people gazing into the distance from the roof of Amminadab's house; a dense cloud of dust was approaching from the north, and soon after a strange murmur arose, then a loud uproar, and finally shouts and cries from thousands of voices, lowing, neighing, and bleating, such as none of the listeners had ever heard,—and then on surged the many-limbed and many-voiced multitude, the endless stream of human beings and herds, which the astrologer's grandson on the observatory of the temple at Tanis had mistaken for the serpent of the nether-world.

Now, too, in the light of early dawn, it might easily have been imagined a host of bodiless spirits driven forth from the realms of the dead; for a whitish-grey column of dust extending to the blue vault of heaven moved before it, and the vast whole, with its many parts and voices, veiled by the clouds of sand, had the appearance of a single form. Often, however, a metal spear-head or a brazen kettle, smitten by a sunbeam, flashed brightly, and individual voices, shouting loudly, fell upon the ear.

The foremost billows of the flood had now reached Amminadab's house, before which pasture lands extended as far as the eye could reach.

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Words of command rang on the air, the procession halted, dispersing as a mountain lake overflows in spring, sending rivulets and streams hither and thither; but the various small runlets speedily united, taking possession of broad patches of the dewy pastures, and wherever such portions of the torrent of human beings and animals rested, the shroud of dust which had concealed them disappeared.

The road remained hidden by the cloud a long time, but on the meadows the morning sunlight shone upon men, women, and children, cattle and donkeys, sheep and goats, and soon tent after tent was pitched on the green sward in front of the dwellings of Amminadab and Naashon, herds were surrounded by pens, stakes and posts were driven into the hard ground, awnings were stretched, cows were fastened to ropes, cattle and sheep were led to water, fires were lighted, and long lines of women, balancing jars on their heads, with their slender, beautifully curved arms, went to the well behind the old sycamore or to the side of the neighboring canal.

This morning, as on every other working-day, a pied ox with a large hump was turning the wheel that raised the water. It watered the land, though the owner of the cattle intended to leave it on the morrow; but the slave who drove it had no thought beyond the present and, as no one forbade him, moistened as he was wont the grass for the foe into whose hands it was to fall.

Hours elapsed ere the advancing multitude reached the camp, and Miriam who stood describing to Amminadab, whose eyes were no longer keen enough to discern distant objects, what was passing below, witnessed many an incident from which she would fain have averted her gaze.

She dared not frankly tell the old man what she beheld, it would have clouded his joyous hope.

Relying, with all the might of an inspired soul upon the God of her fathers and his omnipotence, she had but yesterday fully shared Amminadab's confidence; but the Lord had bestowed upon her spirit the fatal gift of seeing things and hearing words incomprehensible to all other human beings. Usually she distinguished them in dreams, but they often came to her also in solitary hours, when she was deeply absorbed by thoughts of the past or the future.

The words Ephraim had announced to Hosea in her name, as a message from the Most High, had been uttered by unseen lips while she was thinking under the sycamore of the exodus and the man whom she had loved from her childhood—and when that day, between midnight and morning, she again sat beneath the venerable tree and was overpowered by weariness, she had believed she heard the same voice. The words had vanished from her memory when she awoke, but she knew that their purport had been sorrowful and of ill omen.

Spite of the vagueness of the monition, it disturbed her, and the outcries rising from the pastures certainly were not evoked by joy that the people had joined her brothers and the first goal of their wanderings had been successfully gained, as the old man at her side supposed; no, they were the furious shouts of wrathful, undisciplined men, wrangling and fighting with fierce hostility on the meadow for a good place to pitch their tents or the best spot at the wells or on the brink of the canals to water their cattle.

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Wrath, disappointment, despair echoed in the shouts, and when her gaze sought the point whence they rose loudest, she saw the corpse of a woman borne on a piece of tent-cloth by railing bondmen and a pale, death-stricken infant held on the arm of a half naked, frantic man, its father, who shook his disengaged hand in menace toward the spot where she saw her brothers.

The next moment she beheld a grey-haired old man, bowed by heavy toil, raise his fist against Moses. He would have struck him, had he not been dragged away by others.

She could not bear to stay longer on the roof. Pale and panting for breath, she hurried to the camp. Milcah followed, and wherever they encountered people who lived in Succoth, they received respectful greetings.

The new comers from Zoan,—as the Hebrews called Tanis,—Pha-kos, and Bubastis, whom they met on the way, did not know Miriam, yet the tall figure and stately dignity of the prophetess led them also to make way respectfully or pause to answer her questions.

The things she learned were evil and heart-rending; for joyously as the procession had marched forward on the first day, it dragged along sadly and hopelessly on the second. The desert wind had robbed many of the strong of their power of resistance and energy; others, like the bondman's wife and nursling, had been attacked by fever on the pilgrimage through the dust and the oppressive heat of the day, and they pointed out to her the procession which was approaching the burial-place of the Hebrews of Succoth. Those who were being conveyed to the bourn whence there is no return were not only women and children, or those who had been brought from their homes ill, that they might not be left behind, but also men who were in robust health the day before and had broken down under burdens too heavy for their strength, or who had recklessly exposed themselves, while working, to the beams of the noon-day sun.

In one tent, where a young mother was shaking with the chill of a severe attack of fever, Miriam asked the pallid Milcah to bring her medicine chest, and the desolate wife went on her errand with joyous alacrity. On the way she stopped many and timidly asked about her captive husband, but could obtain no news of him. Miriam, however, heard from Nun, Hosea's father, that Eliab, the freedman whom he had left behind, had informed him that his son would be ready to join his people. She also learned that the wounded Ephraim had found shelter in his uncle's tent.

Was the lad's illness serious, or what other cause detained Hosea in Tanis? These questions filled Miriam's heart with fresh anxiety, yet with rare energy she nevertheless lavished help and comfort wherever she went.

Old Nun's cordial greeting had cheered her, and a more vigorous, kind, and lovable old man could not be imagined.

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The mere sight of his venerable head, with its thick snow-white hair and beard, his regular features, and eyes sparkling with the fire of youth, was a pleasure to her, and as, in his vivacious, winning manner, he expressed his joy at meeting her again, as he drew her to his heart and kissed her brow, after she had told him that, in the name of the Most High, she had called Hosea “Joshua” and summoned him back to his people that he might command their forces, she felt as if she had found in him some compensation for her dead father’s loss, and devoted herself with fresh vigor to the arduous duties which everywhere demanded her attention.

And it was no trivial matter for the high-souled maiden to devote herself, with sweet self-sacrifice, to those whose roughness and uncouth manners wounded her. The women, it is true, gladly accepted her aid, but the men, who had grown up under the rod of the overseer, knew neither reserve nor consideration. Their natures were as rude as their persons and when, as soon as they learned her name, they began to assail her with harsh reproaches, asserting that her brother had lured them from an endurable situation to plunge them into the most horrible position, when she heard imprecations and blasphemy, and saw the furious wrath of the black eyes that flashed in the brown faces framed by masses of tangled hair and beards, her heart failed her.

But she succeeded in mastering dread and aversion, and though her heart throbbed violently, and she expected to meet the worst, she reminded those who were repulsive to her and from whom her woman’s weakness urged her to flee, of the God of their fathers and His promises.

She now thought she knew what the sorrowful warning voice under the sycamore had portended, and beside the couch of the young dying mother she raised her hands and heart to Heaven and took an oath unto the Most High that she would exert every power of her being to battle against the faint-hearted lack of faith and rude obstinacy, which threatened to plunge the people into sore perils. Jehovah had promised them the fairest future and they must not be robbed of it by the short-sightedness and defiance of a few deluded individuals; but God himself could scarcely be wroth with those who, content if their bodily wants were satisfied, had unresistingly borne insults and blows like cattle. The multitude even now did not realize that they must pass through the darkness of misery to be worthy of the bright day that awaited them.

The medicines administered by Miriam seemed to relieve the sufferer, and filled with fresh confidence, she left the tent to seek her brothers.

There had been little change in the state of affairs in the camp, and she again beheld scenes from which she recoiled and which made her regret that the sensitive Milcah was her companion.

Some rascally bondmen who had seized cattle and utensils belonging to others had been bound to a palmtree, and the ravens that followed the procession; and had found

ample sustenance on the way, now croaked greedily around the quickly established place of execution.

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No one knew who had been judge or executioner of the sentence; but those who took part in the swift retribution considered it well justified, and rejoiced in the deed.

With rapid steps and averted head Miriam drew the trembling Milcah on and gave her to the care of her uncle Naashon to lead home. The latter had just parted from the man who with him ruled the sons of Judah as a prince of the tribe—Hur, who at the head of the shepherds had won the first victory against the Egyptians, and who now led to the maiden with joyful pride a man and a boy, his son and grandson. Both had been in the service of the Egyptians, practising the trade of goldsmith and worker in metals for Pharaoh at Memphis. The former's skill had won him the name of Uri, which in Egyptian means 'great', and this artificer's son Bezaleel, Hur's grandson, though scarcely beyond boyhood, was reputed to surpass his father in the gifts of genius.

Hur gazed with justifiable pride at son and grandson; for though both had attained much consideration among the Egyptians they had followed their father's messenger without demur, leaving behind them many who were dear to their hearts, and the property gained in Memphis, to join their wandering nation and share its uncertain destiny.

Miriam greeted the new arrivals with the utmost warmth, and the men who, representing three generations, stood before her, presented a picture on which the eyes of any well-disposed person could not fail to rest with pleasure.

The grandfather was approaching his sixtieth year, and though many threads of silver mingled with his ebon-black hair, he held himself as erect as a youth, while his thin, sharply-cut features expressed the unyielding determination, which explained his son's and grandson's prompt obedience to his will.

Uri, too, was a stately man, and Bezaleel a youth who showed that he had industriously utilized his nineteen years and already attained an independent position. His artist eye sparkled with special brilliancy, and after he and his father had taken leave of Miriam to greet Caleb, their grandfather and great-grandfather, she heartily congratulated the man who was one of her brother's most loyal friends, upon such scions of his noble race.

Hur seized her hand and, with a warmth of emotion gushing from a grateful heart that was by no means usual to the stern, imperious nature of this chief of an unruly shepherd tribe, exclaimed:

"Ay, they have remained good, true, and obedient. God has guarded them and prepared this day of happiness for me. Now it depends on you to make it the fairest of all festivals. You must have long perceived that my eyes have followed you and that you have been dear to my heart. To work for our people and their welfare is my highest aim as a man, yours as a woman, and that is a strong bond. But I desired to have a still firmer one unite us, and since your parents are dead, and I cannot go with the bridal dower to Amram, to buy you from him, I now bring my suit to you in person, high-souled



maiden. But ere you say yes or no, you should learn that my son and grandson are ready to pay you the same honor as head of our household that they render me, and your brothers willingly permitted me to approach you as a suitor.”

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Miriam had listened to this offer in silent surprise. She had a high esteem and warm regard for the man who so fervently desired her love. Spite of his age, he stood before her in the full flush of manhood and stately dignity, and the beseeching expression of eyes whose glance was wont to be so imperious and steadfast stirred the inmost depths of her soul.

She, however, was waiting with ardent longing for another, so her sole answer was a troubled shake of the head.

But this man of mature years, a prince of his tribe, who was accustomed to carry his plans persistently into execution, undeterred by her mute refusal, continued even more warmly than before.

“Do not destroy in one short moment the yearning repressed with so much difficulty for years! Do you object to my age?”

Miriam shook her head a second time, but Hur went on:

“That was the source of my anxiety, though I can still vie with many a younger man in vigor. But, if you can overlook your lover’s grey hairs, perhaps you may be induced to weigh the words he now utters. Of the faith and devotion of my soul I will say nothing. No man of my years woos a woman, unless his heart’s strong impulse urges him on. But there is something else which, meseems, is of equal import. I said that I would lead you to my house. Yonder it stands, a building firm and spacious enough; but from tomorrow a tent will be our home, the camp our dwelling-place, and there will be wild work enough within its bounds. No one is secure, not even of life, least of all a woman, however strong she may be, who has made common cause with those against whom thousands murmur. Your parents are dead, your brothers might protect you, but should the people lay hands on them, the same stones on which you cross the stream would drag you down into the depths with them.”

“And were I your wife, you also,” replied Miriam, her thick eye-brows contracting in a heavy frown.

“I will take the risk,” Hur answered. “The destinies of all are in God’s hands, my faith is as firm as yours, and behind me stands the tribe of Judah, who follow me and Naashon as the sheep follow the shepherds. Old Nun and the Ephraimites are with us, and should matters come to the worst, it would mean perishing according to God’s will, or in faithful union, power, and prosperity, awaiting old age in the Promised Land.”

Miriam fearlessly gazed full into his stern eyes, laid her hand on his arm, and answered: “Those words are worthy of the man whom I have honored from childhood, and who has reared such sons; but I cannot be your wife.”

“You cannot?”

“No, my lord, I cannot.”

“A hard sentence, but it must suffice,” replied the other, his head drooping in sorrow; but Miriam exclaimed:

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“Nay, Hur, you have a right to ask the cause of my refusal, and because I honor you, I owe you the truth. Another man of our race reigns in my heart. He met me for the first time when I was still a child. Like your son and grandson, he has lived among the Egyptians, but the summons of our God and of his father reached him as did the message to your sons, and like Uri and Bezaleel, he showed himself obedient. If he still desires to wed me, I shall become his wife, if it is the will of the God whom I serve, and who shows me the favor of suffering me to hear his voice. But I shall think of you with gratitude forever.”

Her large eyes had been glittering through tears as she uttered the words, and there was a tremor in the grey-haired lover’s voice as he asked in hesitating, embarrassed tones:

“And if the man for whom you are waiting—I do not ask his name—shuts his ears to the call that has reached him, if he declines to share the uncertain destiny of his people?”

“That will never happen!” Miriam interrupted, a chill creeping through her veins, but Hur exclaimed:

“There is no ‘never,’ no ‘surely,’ save with God. If, spite of your firm faith, the result should be different from your expectations, will you resign to the Lord the wish which began to stir in your heart, when you were still a foolish child?”

“He who has guided me until now will show me the right way.”

“Well then,” replied Hur, “put your trust in Him, and if the man of your choice is worthy of you, and becomes your lord, my soul will rejoice without envy when the Most High blesses your union. But if God wills otherwise, and you need a strong arm for your support, I am here. The tent and the heart of Hur will ever be open to you.”

With these words he turned away; but Miriam gazed thoughtfully after him as long as the old chief’s stately figure was visible.

At last, still pondering, she moved toward her host’s house, but at the road leading to Tanis, she paused and gazed northward. The dust had subsided, and she could see a long distance, but the one person whom it was to lead back to her and to his people did not appear. Sighing sadly, she moved onward with drooping head, and started violently when her brother Moses’ deep voice called to her from the old sycamore.

CHAPTER XIII.

Aaron and Eleasar, with fiery eloquence, had reminded the murmuring, disheartened people of the power and promises of their God. Whoever had stretched his limbs undisturbed to comfortable rest, whoever had been strengthened by food and drink

regained the confidence that had been lost. The liberated bondmen were told of the hard labor and dishonoring blows which they had escaped and admonished that they must recognize as God's dispensation, among other things, that Pharaoh had not pursued them; but the rich booty still found in the plundered storehouse

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had no small share in the revival of their drooping courage, and the bondmen and lepers—for many of the latter had accompanied them and rested outside the camp—in short, all for whose support Pharaoh had provided, saw themselves safe for a long time from care and privation. Yet there was no lack of malcontents, and here and there, though no one knew who instigated the question, loud discussion arose whether it would not be more advisable to return to Pharaoh and rely on his favor. Whoever raised it, did the work secretly, and was often compelled to submit to sharp, threatening retorts.

Miriam had talked with her brothers and shared the heavy anxieties that oppressed them. Why had the desert wind so speedily destroyed the courage of the people during their brief pilgrimage? How impatient, how weak in faith, how rebellious they had showed themselves at the first obstacle they had encountered, how uncontrollable they had been in following their fierce impulses. When summoned to prayer just before sunrise during their journey, some had turned toward the day-star rising in the east, others had taken out a small idol they had brought with them, and others still had uplifted their eyes to the Nile acacia, which in some provinces of Egypt was regarded as a sacred tree. What did they know of the God who had commanded them to cast so much behind them and take upon themselves such heavy burdens? Even now many were despairing, though they had confronted no serious dangers; for Moses had intended to lead the Hebrews in Succoth over the road to Philistia direct to the Promised Land in Palestine, but the conduct of the people forced him to resign this plan and form another.

To reach the great highway connecting Asia and Africa it was necessary to cross the isthmus, which rather divided than united the two continents; for it was most thoroughly guarded from intruders and, partly by natural, partly by artificial obstacles, barred the path of every fugitive; a series of deep lakes rolled their waves upon its soil, and where these did not stay the march of the travelers strong fortifications, garrisoned by trained Egyptian troops, rose before them.

This chain of forts was called Chetam—or in the Hebrew tongue—Etham, and wayfarers leaving Succoth would reach the nearest and strongest of these forts in a few hours.

When the tribes, full of enthusiasm for their God, and ready for the most arduous enterprises, shook off their chains and, exulting in their new liberty, rushed forward to the Promised Land Moses, and with him the majority of the elders, had believed that, like a mountain torrent, bursting dams and sluices, they would destroy and overthrow everything that ventured to oppose their progress. With these enthusiastic masses, to whom bold advance would secure the highest good, and timid hesitation could bring nothing save death and ruin, they had expected to rush over the Etham line as if it were a pile of faggots. But now since a short chain of difficulties and suffering had stifled the

fire of their souls, now that wherever the eye turned, there were two calm and five dissatisfied or anxious individuals to one upheld by joyous anticipation, to storm the Etham line would have cost rivers of blood and moreover jeopardized all that had been already gained.

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The overpowering of the little garrison in the storehouse of Pithom had occurred under specially favorable circumstances, which could hardly be expected to happen again, so the original plan must be changed, and an attempt made to take a circuit around the fortifications. Instead of moving toward the northeast, the tribes must turn southward.

But, ere carrying this plan into execution, Moses, accompanied by a few trusty men, desired to examine the new route and ascertain whether it would be passable for the great wandering people.

These matters were discussed under the great sycamore in front of Amminadab's house, and Miriam was present, a mute witness.

Women,—even those like herself,—were forced to keep silence when men were holding counsel; yet it was hard for her to remain speechless when it was decided to abstain from attacking the forts, even should the trained warrior, Hosea, whom God Himself had chosen to be his sword, return to his people.

“What avails the best leader, if there is no army to obey him?” Naashon, Amminadab's son, had exclaimed, and the others shared his opinion.

When the council finally broke up, Moses took leave of his sister with fraternal affection. She knew that he was in the act of plunging into fresh dangers and—in the modest manner in which she was always wont to accost the brother who so far surpassed all others in every gift of mind and body,—expressed her anxiety. He looked into her eyes with friendly reproach and raised his right hand toward heaven; but she understood his meaning, and kissing his hand with grateful warmth, replied:

“You stand under the protection of the Most High, and I fear no longer.”

Pressing his lips upon her brow, he bade her give him a tablet, wrote a few words on it, flung it into the hollow trunk of the sycamore, and said:

“For Hosea, no, for Joshua, the son of Nun, if he comes while I am absent. The Lord has great deeds for him to accomplish, when he learns to expect loftier things from the Most High than from the mighty ones of earth.”

With these words he left her; but Aaron who, as the oldest, was the head of her tribe, lingered and told her that a man of worth sought her hand. Miriam, with blanching face, replied:

“I know it.....”

He looked at her in surprise and with earnest monition, added:



“As you choose; yet it will be wise to consider this. Your heart belongs to your God and to your people, and the man whom you wed must be ready, like yourself, to serve both; for two must be one in marriage, and if the highest aim of one is not also that of the other, they will remain two till the end. The voice of the senses, which drew them together, will soon be mute and nothing will be left to them save discord.”

Having said this, he went away, and she, too, was preparing to leave the others; for on the eve of departure she might be needed in the house whose hospitality she enjoyed. But a new incident detained her, as though bound with fetters, under the sycamore.

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What cared she for the packing of perishable wares and providing for bodily needs, when affairs which occupied her whole soul were under discussion! Elisheba, Naashon's wife, any housekeeper and faithful slave could attend to the former wants. Higher things were to be determined here—the weal or woe of her people.

Several men of distinction in the tribes had joined the elders under the sycamore; but Hur had already departed with Moses.

Uri, the son of the former, now appeared beneath the ancient tree. The worker in metals, who had just come from Egypt, had talked in Memphis with persons who were near to the king and learned that Pharaoh was ready to remove great burdens from the Hebrews and grant them new favors, if Moses would render the God whom he served propitious to him and induce the people to return after they had offered sacrifices in the wilderness. Therefore it would be advisable to send envoys to Tanis and enter into negotiations with the Sublime Porte.

These proposals, which Uri had not yet ventured to moot to his father, he, with good intentions, brought before the assembled elders; he hoped that their acceptance might spare the people great suffering. But scarcely had he concluded his clear and convincing speech, when old Nun, Hosea's father, who had with difficulty held his feelings in check, broke in.

The old man's face, usually so cheerful, glowed with wrath, and its fiery hue formed a strange contrast to the thick white locks which framed it. A few hours before he had heard Moses repel similar propositions with harsh decision and crushing reasons; now he had heard them again brought forward and noted many a gesture of assent among the listeners, and saw the whole great enterprise imperilled, the enterprise for whose success he had himself risked and sacrificed more than any other man.

This was too much for the active old man who, with flashing eyes and hand upraised in menace, burst forth "What do you mean? Are we to pick up the ends of the rope the Lord our God has severed? Do you counsel us to fasten it anew, with a looser knot, which will hold as long as the whim of a vacillating weakling who has broken his promises to us and to Moses a score of times? Do you wish to lead us back to the cage whence the Almighty released us by a miracle? Are we to treat the Lord our God like a bad debtor and prefer the spurious gold ring we are offered to the royal treasures He promises? Oh, messenger from the Egyptians— I would . . ."

Here the hot-blooded grey-beard raised his clenched fist in menace but, ere he had uttered the threat that hovered on his lips, he let his arm fall; for Gabriel, the oldest member of the tribe of Zebulun, shouted:

"Remember your own son, who is to-day among the foes of his people."

The words struck home; yet they only dimmed the fiery old man's glad self-reliance a moment and, amid the voices uttering disapproval of the malicious Gabriel and the few who upheld the Zebulunite, he cried:

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“And because I am perhaps in danger of losing, not only the ten thousand acres of land I flung behind me, but a noble son, it is my right to speak here.”

His broad chest heaved with his labored breathing and his eyes, shadowed by thick white brows, rested with a milder expression on the son of Hur, whose face had paled at his vehement words, as he continued:

“Uri is a good and dutiful son to his father and has also been obliged to make great sacrifices in leaving the place where his work was so much praised and his own house in Memphis. The blessing of the Most High will not fail him. But for the very reason that he has hitherto obeyed the command, he must not now seek to destroy what we have commenced under the guidance of the Most High. To you, Gabriel, I answer that my son probably will not tarry among our foes, but obedient to my summons, will join us, like Uri, the first-born of Hur. What still detains him is doubtless some important matter of which Hosea will have as little cause to be ashamed as I, his father. I know and trust him, and whoever expects aught else will sooner or later, by my son’s course of action, be proved a liar.”

Here he paused to push his white hair back from his burning brow and, as no one contradicted him, he turned to the worker in metals, and added with cordial friendliness:

“What angered me, Uri, was certainly not your purpose. That is a good one; but you have measured the greatness and majesty of the God of our fathers by the standard of the false gods of the Egyptians, who die and rise again and, as Aaron has just said, represent only minor attributes of Him who is in all and transcends everything. To serve God, until Moses taught me a better counsel, I deemed meant to sacrifice an ox, a lamb, or a goose upon the altar like the Egyptians; but your eyes, as befell me through Moses, will not be opened to Him who rules the world and has made us His people, until, like me, you, and all of us, and probably my son also, shall each have kindled in his own breast the sacrificial fire which never goes out and consumes everything that does not relate to Him in love and loyalty, faith and reverence. Through Moses, His servant, God has promised us the greatest blessings— deliverance from bondage, the privilege of ruling on our own land as free men in a beautiful country, our own possession and the heritage of our children. We are going forth to receive His gift, and whoever seeks to stop us on our way, whoever urges us to turn and creep back into the net whose brazen meshes we have burst, advises his people to run once more like sheep into the fire from which they have escaped. I am not angry with you; your face shows that you perceive how foolishly you have erred; but all ye who are here must know that I heard only a few hours ago from Moses’ own lips these words: ‘Whoever counsels return and the making of covenants with the Egyptians, I will denounce as a scorner of Jehovah our God, and the destroyer and worst foe of his people!’”

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Uri went to the old man, gave him his hand, and deeply convinced of the justice of his reproaches, exclaimed: "No treaty, no covenant with the Egyptians! I am grateful to you, Nun, for opening my eyes. To me, also, the hour will doubtless come in which you, or some one who stands nearer to Him than I, will teach me to know your God, who is also mine."

As he ceased speaking, he went away with Nun, who put his arm around his shoulders; but Miriam had listened breathlessly to Uri's last words, and as he expressed a desire to know the God of his people, her eyes had sparkled with the light of enthusiasm. She felt that her soul was filled with the greatness of the Most High and that she had the gift of speech to make another familiar with the knowledge she herself possessed. But this time also custom required her to keep silence. Her heart ached, and as she again moved among the multitude and convinced herself that Hosea had not yet come, she went home, as twilight was beginning to gather, and joined the others on the roof.

No one there appeared to have missed her, not even poor melancholy Milcah, and she felt unutterably lonely in this house.

If Hosea would only come, if she might have a strong breast on which to lean, if this sense of being a stranger in her own home, this useless life beneath the roof she was obliged to call hers, though she never felt thoroughly at home under it, would but cease. Moses and Aaron, too, had gone away, taking Hur's grandson with them; but no one had deemed her, who lived and breathed solely for her people and their welfare, worthy to learn whither their journey led or what was its purpose.

Why had the God to whom she devoted her whole life and being made her a woman, yet given her the mind and soul of a man?

She waited, as if to test whether any of the circle of kindly-natured people to which she belonged really loved her, for some one of the elders or the children to accost her; but Eleasar's little ones were pressing around their grandparents, and she had never understood how to make herself agreeable to children. Elisheba was directing the slaves who were putting the finishing touches to the packing; Milcah sat with her cat in her lap, gazing into vacancy. No one heeded or spoke to her.

Bitter pain overpowered Miriam, and after she had shared the evening meal with the others, and forced herself not to disturb by her own sorrowful mood, the joyous excitement of the children, who looked forward to the pilgrimage as a great pleasure, she longed to go out of doors.

Closely veiled, she passed alone through the camp and what she beheld there was certainly ill-suited to dispel the mood that oppressed her. There was plenty of noise, and though sometimes devout hymns, full of joy and hope, echoed on the air, she heard far more frequently savage quarrelling and rebellious words. When her ear caught

threats or reproaches levelled against her noble brother, she quickened her pace, but she could not escape her anxiety concerning what would happen at the departure after sunrise on the morrow, should the malcontents obtain supremacy.

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She knew that the people would be forced to press forward; but her dread of Pharaoh's military power had never permitted her to be at peace—to her it was as it were embodied in Hosea's heroic figure. If the Lord Himself did not fight in the ranks of the wretched bondmen and shepherds who were quarrelling and disputing around her, how were they to withstand the well-trained and equipped hosts of the Egyptians, with their horses and chariots?

She had heard that guards had been posted in all parts of the camp, with orders to sound the horn or strike the cymbal at the approach of the foe, until the men had flocked to the spot whence the warning first echoed.

She had long listened for such an alarm, yet how much more intently for the hoof-beats of a single steed, the firm step and deep voice of the warrior for whom she yearned. On his account she constantly returned to the northern part of the camp which adjoined the road coming from Tanis and where now, at Moses' bidding, the tents of most of the men capable of bearing arms were pitched. Here she had hoped to find true confidence; but as she listened to the talk of the armed soldiers who surrounded the camp-fires in dense circles, she heard that Uri's proposal had reached them also. Most of them were husbands and fathers, had left behind a house, a bit of land, a business, or an office, and though many spoke of the command of the Most High and the beautiful new home God had promised, not a few were disposed to return. How gladly she would have gone among these blinded mortals and exhorted them to obey with fresh faith and confidence the command of the Lord and of her brother. But here, too, she was forced to keep silence. She was permitted to listen only, and she was most strongly attracted to the very places where she might expect to hear rebellious words and proposals.

There was a mysterious charm in this cruel excitement and she felt as if she were deprived of something desirable when many a fire was extinguished, the soldiers went to sleep, and conversation ceased.

She now turned for the last time toward the road leading from Tanis; but nothing was stirring there save the sentries pacing to and fro.

She had not yet doubted Hosea's coming; for the summons she had sent to him in the name of the Lord had undoubtedly reached him; but now that the stars showed her it was past midnight, the thought came vividly before her mind of the many years he had spent among the Egyptians, and that he might perhaps deem it unworthy of a man to obey the call of a woman, even if she uplifted her voice in the name of the Most High. She had experienced humiliations enough that day, why should not this be decreed also?

CHAPTER XIV.

Deeply disturbed and tortured by such thoughts, Miriam walked toward Amminadab's house to seek repose; but just as she was in the act of crossing the threshold, she paused and again listened for sounds coming from the north.

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Hosea must arrive from that direction.

But she heard nothing save the footsteps of a sentinel and the voice of Hur, who was patrolling the camp with a body of armed men.

He, too, had been unable to stay in the house.

The night was mild and starry, the time seemed just suited for dreams under the sycamore. Her bench beneath the venerable tree was empty, and with drooping head she approached the beloved resting-place, which she must leave forever on the morrow.

But ere she had reached the spot so close at hand, she paused with her figure drawn up to its full height and her hand pressed upon her throbbing bosom. This time she was not mistaken, the beat of hoofs echoed on the air, and it came from the north.

Were Pharaoh's chariots approaching to attack the camp? Should she shout to wake the warriors? Or could it be he whom she so longingly expected? Yes, yes, yes! It was the tramp of a single steed, and must be a new arrival; for there were loud voices in the tents, the dogs barked, and shouts, questions, and answers came nearer and nearer with the rider.

It was Hosea, she felt sure. His riding alone through the night, released from the bonds that united him to Pharaoh and his comrades in arms, was a sign of his obedience! Love had steeled his will and quickened the pace of his steed, and the gratitude of answering affection, the reward she could bestow, should be withheld no longer. In her arms he should blissfully perceive that he had resigned great possessions to obtain something still fairer and sweeter! She felt as though the darkness around had suddenly brightened into broad day, as her ear told her that the approaching horseman was riding straight toward the house of her host Amminadab. She now knew that he was obeying her summons, that he had come to find her. Hosea was seeking her ere he went to his own father, who had found shelter in the big empty house of his grandson, Ephraim.

He would gladly have dashed toward her at the swiftest pace of his steed, but it would not do to ride rapidly through the camp. Ah, how long the time seemed ere she at last saw the horseman, ere he swung himself to the ground, and his companion flung the reins of the horse to a man who followed him.

It was he, it was Hosea!

But his companion—she had recognized him distinctly and shrank a little —his companion was Hur, the man who a few hours before had sought her for his wife.

There stood her two suitors side by side in the starlight, illumined by the glare of the pitch torches blazing beside the carts and household utensils which had been packed for the morrow's journey.

The tall figure of the elder Hebrew towered over the sinewy form of the warrior, and the shepherd prince bore himself no whit less erect than the Egyptian hero. Both voices sounded earnest and manly, yet her lover's seemed to Miriam stronger and deeper. They had now advanced so near that she could understand their conversation.

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Hur was telling the newcomer that Moses had gone on a reconnoitring expedition, and Hosea was expressing his regret, because he had important matters to discuss with him.

Then he must set out with the tribes the next morning, Hur replied, for Moses intended to join them on the way.

Then he pointed to Amminadab's house, from which no ray of light gleamed through the darkness, and asked Hosea to spend the remainder of the night beneath his roof, as he probably would not wish to disturb his aged father at so late an hour.

Miriam saw her friend hesitate and gaze intently up to the women's apartments and the roof of her host's house. Knowing what he sought, she could no longer resist the impulse of her heart, but stepped forth from the shadow of the sycamore and gave Hosea a cordial and tender welcome.

He, too, disdained to conceal the joy of his heart, and Hur stood beside the reunited lovers, as they clasped each other's hands, and exchanged greetings, at first mutely, then with warm words.

"I knew you would come!" cried the maiden, and Hosea answered with joyful emotion.

"You might easily suppose so, oh Prophetess; for your own voice was among those that summoned me here."

Then in a calmer tone, he added: "I hoped to find your brother also; I am the bearer of a message of grave import to him, to us, and to the people. I see that you, too, are ready to depart and should grieve to behold the comfort of your aged hosts destroyed by hasty acts that may yet be needless."

"What do you mean?" asked Hur, advancing a step nearer to the other. "I mean," replied Hosea, "that if Moses persists in leading the tribes eastward, much blood will flow uselessly to-morrow; for I learned at Tanis that the garrison of Etham has been ordered to let no man pass, still less the countless throng, whose magnitude surprised me as I rode through the camp. I know Apu, who commands the fortifications and the legions whom he leads. There would be a terrible, fruitless massacre of our half-armed, untrained people, there would be—in short, I have urgent business to discuss with Moses, urgent and immediate, to avert the heaviest misfortune ere it is too late."

"What you fear has not escaped our notice," replied Hur, "and it is in order to guard against this peril that Moses has set forth on a dangerous quest."

"Whither?" asked Hosea.

"That is the secret of the leaders of the tribes."

“Of which my father is one.”

“Certainly; and I have already offered to take you to him. If he assumes the responsibility of informing you ...”

“Should he deem it a breach of duty, he will keep silence. Who is to command the wandering hosts tomorrow?”

“I.”

“You?” asked Hosea in astonishment, and Hur answered calmly:

“You marvel at the audacity of the shepherd who ventures to lead an army; but the Lord of all armies, to whom we trust our cause, is our leader; I rely solely on His guidance.”

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“And so do I,” replied Hosea. “No one save the God through whom Miriam summoned me to this spot, entrusted me—of that I am confident—with the important message which brings me here. I must find Moses ere it is too late.”

“You have already heard that he will be beyond the reach of any one, myself included, until to-morrow, perhaps the day after. Will you speak to Aaron?”

“Is he in the camp?”

“No; but we expect his return before the departure of the people, that is in a few hours.”

“Has he the power to decide important matters in Moses’ absence?”

“No, he merely announces to the people in eloquent language what his illustrious brother commands.”

The warrior bent his eyes with a disappointed expression on the ground, and after a brief pause for reflection eagerly added, fixing his gaze on Miriam:

“It is Moses to whom the Lord our God announces his will; but to you, his august maiden sister, the Most High also reveals himself, to you . . .”

“Oh, Hosea!” interrupted the prophetess, extending her hands toward him with a gesture of mingled entreaty and warning; but the chief, instead of heeding her monition, went on:

“The Lord our God hath commanded you to summon me, His servant, back to the people; He hath commanded you to give me the name for which I am to exchange the one my father and mother bestowed upon me, and which I have borne in honor for thirty years. Obedient to your summons, I have cast aside all that could make me great among men; but on my way through Egypt,—bearing in my heart the image of my God and of you,—braving death, the message I now have to deliver was entrusted to me, and I believe that it came from the Most High Himself. It is my duty to convey it to the leaders of the people; but as I am unable to find Moses, I can confide it to no better one than you who, though only a woman, stand,— next to your brother—nearest to the Most High, so I implore you to listen to me. The tidings I bring are not yet ripe for the ears of a third person.”

Hur drew his figure to a still greater height and, interrupting Hosea, asked Miriam whether she desired to hear the son of Nun without witnesses; she answered with a quiet “yes.”

Then Hur turned haughtily and coldly to the warrior:

“I think that Miriam knows the Lord’s will, as well as her brother’s, and is aware of what befits the women of Israel. If I am not mistaken, it was under this tree that your own father, the worthy Nun, gave to my son Uri the sole answer which Moses must also make to every bearer of a message akin to yours.”

“Do you know it?” asked Hosea in a tone of curt reproof.

“No,” replied the other, “but I suspect its purport, and look here.”

While speaking he stooped with youthful agility and, raising two large stones with his powerful arms, propped them against each other, rolled several smaller ones to their sides, and then, with panting breath, exclaimed:

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“Let this heap be a witness between me and thee, like the stones named Mizpah which Jacob and Laban erected. And as the latter called upon the Lord to watch between him and the other, so do I likewise. I point to this heap that you may remember it, when we are parted one from the other. I lay my hand upon these stones and bear witness that I, Hur, son of Caleb and Ephrath, put my trust in no other than the Lord, the God of our fathers, and am ready to obey His command, which calls us forth from the kingdom of Pharaoh into a land which He promised to us. But of thee, Hosea, son of Nun, I ask and the Lord our God hears thee: Dost thou, too, expect no other help save from the God of Abraham, who has made thy race His chosen people? And wilt thou also testify whether thou wilt ever regard the Egyptians who oppressed us, and from whose bondage the Lord our God delivered us, as the mortal foes of thy God and of thy race?”

The warrior’s bearded features quivered, and he longed to overthrow the heap and answer the troublesome questioner with wrathful words, but Miriam had laid her hand on the top of the pile of stones, and clasping his right hand, exclaimed:

“He is questioning you in the presence of our God and Lord, who is your witness.”

Hosea succeeded in controlling his wrath, and pressing the maiden’s hand more closely, he answered earnestly:

“He questions, but I may not answer; ‘yea’ or ‘nay’ will be of little service here; but I, too, call God to witness, and before this heap you, Miriam, but you alone, shall hear what I propose and for what purpose I have come. Look, Hur! Like you I lay my hand upon this heap and bear witness that I, Hosea, son of Nun, put my sole trust in the Lord and God of our fathers. He stands as a witness between me and thee, and shall decide whether my way is His, or that of an erring mortal. I will obey His will, which He has made known to Moses and to this noble maiden. This I swear by an oath whose witness is the Lord our God.”

Hur had listened intently and, impressed by the earnestness of the words, now exclaimed:

“The Lord our God has heard your vow and against your oath I, in the presence of this heap, take another: If the hour comes when, mindful of this heap of stones, you give the testimony you have refused me, there shall henceforward be no ill-will between us, and if it is in accordance with the will of the Most High, I will cheerfully resign to you the office of commander, which you, trained in many wars, would be better suited to fill than I, who hitherto have ruled only my flocks and shepherds. But you, Miriam, I charge to remember that this heap of stones will also be a witness of the colloquy you are to hold with this man in the presence of God. I remind you of the reproving words you heard beneath this tree from the lips of his father, and call God to witness that I would have darkened the life of my son Uri, who is the joy of my heart, with a father’s curse if he had gone among the people to induce them to favor the message he brought; for it

would have turned those of little faith from their God. Remember this, maiden, and let me say again:

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"If you seek me you will find me, and the door I opened will remain open to you, whatever may happen!"

With these words Hur turned his back upon Miriam and the warrior.

Neither knew what had befallen them, but he who during the long ride beset by many a peril had yearned with ardent anticipations for the hour which was to once more unite him to the object of his love, gazed on the ground full of bewilderment and profound anxiety, while Miriam who, at his approach, had been ready to bestow upon him the highest, sweetest gifts with which a loving woman rewards fidelity and love, had sunk to the earth before the ominous pile of stones close beside the tree and pressed her forehead against its gnarled, hollow trunk.

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