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JOSHUA

By Georg Ebers

Volume 3.

CHAPTER XV.

For a long time nothing was heard beneath the sycamore save Miriam's low moans and the impatient footsteps of the warrior who, while struggling for composure, did not venture to disturb her.

He could not yet understand what had suddenly towered like a mountain between him and the object of his love.

He had learned from Hur's words that his father and Moses rejected all mediation, yet the promises he was bearing to the people seemed to him a merciful gift from the Most High. None of his race yet knew it and, if Moses was the man whom he believed him to be, the Lord must open his eyes and show him that he had chosen him, Hosea, to lead the people through his mediation to a fairer future; nor did he doubt that He could easily win his father over to his side. He would even have declared a second time, with the firmest faith, that it was the Most High who had pointed out his path, and after reflecting upon all this he approached Miriam, who had at last risen, with fresh confidence. His loving heart prompted him to clasp her in his arms, but she thrust him back and her voice, usually so pure and clear, sounded harsh and muffled as she asked why he had lingered so long and what he intended to confide to her.

While cowering under the sycamore, she had not only struggled and prayed for composure, but also

gazed into her own soul. She loved Hosea, but she suspected that he came with proposals similar to those of Uri, and the wrathful words of hoary Nun rang in her ears more loudly than ever. The fear that the man she loved was walking in mistaken paths, and the startling act of Hur had made the towering waves of her passion subside and her mind, now capable of calmer reflection, desired first of all to know what had so long detained him whom she had summoned in the name of her God, and why he came alone, without Ephraim.

The clear sky was full of stars, and these heavenly bodies, which seem to have been appointed to look down upon the bliss of united human lovers, now witnessed the anxious questions of a tortured girl and the impatient answers of a fiery, bitterly disappointed man.

He began with the assurance of his love and that he had come to make her his wife; but, though she permitted him to hold her hand in his clasp, she entreated him to cease pleading his suit and first tell her what she desired to know.

On his way he had received various reports concerning Ephraim through a brother-in-arms from Tanis, so he could tell her that the lad had been disobedient and, probably from foolish curiosity, had gone, ill and wounded, to the city, where he had found shelter and care in the house of a friend. But this troubled Miriam, who seemed to regard it as a reproach to know that the orphaned, inexperienced lad, who had grown up under her own eyes and whom she herself had sent forth among strangers, was beneath an Egyptian roof.

But Hosea declared that he would undertake the task of bringing him back to his people and as, nevertheless she continued to show her anxiety, asked whether he had forfeited her confidence and love. Instead of giving him a consoling answer, she began to put more questions, desiring to know what had delayed his coming, and so, with a sorely troubled and wounded heart, he was forced to make his report and, in truth, begin at the end of his story.

While she listened, leaning against the trunk of the sycamore, he paced to and fro, urged by longing and impatience, sometimes pausing directly in front of her. Naught in this hour seemed to him worthy of being clothed in words, save the hope and passion which filled his heart. Had he been sure that hers was estranged he would have dashed away again, after having revealed his whole soul to his father, and risked the ride into unknown regions to seek Moses. To win Miriam and save himself from perjury were his only desires, and momentous as had been his experiences and expectations, during the last few days, he answered her questions hastily, as if they concerned the most trivial things.

He began his narrative in hurried words, and the more frequently she interrupted him, the more impatiently he bore it, the deeper grew the lines in his forehead.

Hosea, accompanied by his attendant, had ridden southward several hours full of gladsome courage and rich in budding hopes, when just before dusk he saw a vast multitude moving in advance of him. At first he supposed he had encountered the rear-guard of the migrating Hebrews, and had urged his horse to greater speed. But, ere he overtook the wayfarers, some peasants and carters who had abandoned their wains and beasts of burden rushed past him with loud outcries and shouts of warning which told him that the people moving in front were lepers. And the fugitives' warning had been but too well founded; for the first, who turned with the heart-rending cry: "Unclean! Unclean!" bore the signs of those attacked by the fell disease, and from their distorted faces covered with white dust and scurf, lustreless eyes, destitute of brows, gazed at him.

Hosea soon recognized individuals, here Egyptian priests with shaven heads, yonder Hebrew men and women. With the stern composure of a soldier, he questioned both and learned that they were marching from the stone quarries opposite Memphis to their place of isolation on the eastern shore of the Nile. Several of the Hebrews among them had heard from their relatives that their people had left Egypt and gone to seek a land which the Lord had promised them. Many had therefore resolved to put their trust also in the mighty God of their fathers and follow the wanderers; the Egyptian priests, bound to the Hebrews by the tie of a common misfortune, had accompanied them, and fixed upon Succoth as the goal of their journey, knowing that Moses intended to lead his people there first. But every one who could have directed them on their way had fled before them, so they had kept too far northward and wandered near the fortress of Thabne. Hosea had met them a mile from this spot and advised them to turn back, that they might not bring their misfortune upon their fugitive brethren.

During this conversation, a body of Egyptian soldiers had marched from the fortress toward the lepers to drive them from the road; but their commander, who knew Hosea, used no violence, and both men persuaded the leaders of the lepers to accept the proposal to be guided to the peninsula of Sinai, where in the midst of the mountains, not far from the mines, a colony of lepers had settled. They had agreed to this plan because Hosea promised them that, if the tribes went eastward, they would meet them and receive everyone who was healed; but if the Hebrews remained in Egypt, nevertheless the

pure air of the desert would bring health to many a sufferer, and every one who recovered would be free to return home.

These negotiations had consumed much time, and the first delay was followed by many others; for as Hosea had been in such close contact with the lepers, he was obliged to ride to Thabne, there with the commander of the garrison, who had stood by his side, to be sprinkled with bird's blood, put on new garments, and submit to certain ceremonies which he himself considered necessary and which could be performed only in the bright sunlight. His servant had been kept in the fortress because the kind-hearted man had shaken hands with a relative whom he met among the hapless wretches.

The cause of the delay had been both sorrowful and repulsive, and not until after Hosea had left Thabne in the afternoon and proceeded on his way to Succoth, did hope and joy again revive at the thought of seeing Miriam once more and bringing to his people a message that promised so much good.

His heart had never throbbed faster or with more joyous anticipation than on the nocturnal ride which led him to his father and the woman he loved, and on reaching his goal, instead of the utmost happiness, he now found only bitter disappointment.

He had reluctantly described in brief, disconnected sentences his meeting with the lepers, though he believed he had done his best for the welfare of these unfortunates. All of his warrior comrades had uttered a word of praise; but when he paused she whose approval he valued above aught else, pointed to a portion of the camp and said sadly: "They are of our blood, and our God is theirs. The lepers in Zoan, Pha-kos and Phibeseth followed the others at a certain distance, and their tents are pitched outside the camp. Those in Succoth—there are not many—will also be permitted to go forth with us; for when the Lord promised the people the Land for which they long, He meant lofty and lowly, poor and humble, and surely also the hapless ones who must now remain in the hands of the foe. Would you not have done better to separate the Hebrews from the Egyptians, and guide those of our own blood to us?"

The warrior's manly pride rebelled and his answer sounded grave and stern: "In war we must resolve to sacrifice hundreds in order to save thousands. The shepherds separate the scabby sheep to protect the flock."

"True," replied Miriam eagerly; "for the shepherd is a feeble man, who knows no remedy against contagion; but the Lord, who calls all His people, will suffer no harm to arise from rigid obedience."

"That is a woman's mode of thought," replied Hosea; "but what pity dictates to her must not weigh too heavily in the balance in the councils of men. You willingly obey the voice of the heart, which is most proper, but you should not forget what befits you and your sex."

A deep flush crimsoned Miriam's cheeks; for she felt the sting contained in this speech with two-fold pain because it was Hosea who dealt the thrust. How many pangs she had been compelled to endure that day on account of her sex, and now he, too, made her feel that she was not his peer because she was a woman. In the presence of the stones Hur had gathered, and on which her hand now rested, he had appealed to her verdict, as though she were one of the leaders of the people, and now he abruptly thrust her, who felt herself inferior to no man in intellect and talent, back into a woman's narrow sphere.

But he, too, felt his dignity wounded, and her bearing showed him that this hour would decide whether he or she would have the mastery in their future union. He stood proudly before her, his mien stern in its majesty—never before had he seemed so manly, so worthy of admiration. Yet the desire to battle for her insulted womanly dignity gained supremacy over every other feeling, and it was she who at last broke the brief, painful silence that had followed his last words, and with a composure won only by the exertion of all her strength of will, she began:

"We have both forgotten what detains us here so late at night. You wished to confide to me what brings you to your people and to hear, not what Miriam, the weak woman, but the confidante of the Lord decides."

"I hoped also to hear the voice of the maiden on whose love I rely," he answered gloomily.

"You shall hear it," she replied quickly, taking her hand from the stones. "Yet it may be that I cannot agree with the opinion of the man whose strength and wisdom are so far superior to mine, yet you have just shown that you cannot tolerate the opposition of a woman, not even mine."

"Miriam," he interrupted reproachfully, but she continued still more eagerly: "I have felt it, and because it would be the greatest grief of my life to lose your heart, you must learn to understand me, ere you call upon me to express my opinion."

"First hear my message."

"No, no!" she answered quickly. "The reply would die upon my lips. Let me first tell you of the woman who has a loving heart, and yet knows something else that stands higher than love. Do you smile? You have a right to do so, you have so long been a stranger to the secret I mean to confide. . . ."

"Speak then!" he interrupted, in a tone which betrayed how difficult it was for him to control his impatience.

"I thank you," she answered warmly. Then leaning against the trunk of the ancient tree, while he sank down on the bench, gazing alternately at the ground and into her face, she began:

"Childhood already lies behind me, and youth will soon follow. When I was a little girl, there was not much to distinguish me from others. I played like them and, though my mother had taught me to pray to the God of our fathers, I was well pleased to listen to the other children's tales of the goddess Isis. Nay, I stole into her temple, bought spices, plundered our little garden for her, anointed her altar, and brought flowers for offerings. I was taller and stronger than many of my companions, and was also the daughter of Amram, so they followed me and readily did what I suggested. When I was eight years old, we moved hither from Zoan. Ere I again found a girl-playfellow, you came to Gamaliel, your sister's husband, to be cured of the wound dealt by a Libyan's lance. Do you remember that time when you, a youth, made the little girl a companion? I brought you what you needed and prattled to you of the things I knew, but you told me of bloody battles and victories, of flashing armor, and the steeds and chariots of the warrior, You showed me the ring your daring had won, and when the wound in your breast was cured, we roved over the pastures. Isis, whom you also loved, had a temple here, and how often I secretly slipped into the forecourt to pray for you and offer her my holiday-cakes. I had heard so much from you of Pharaoh and his splendor, of the Egyptians, and their wisdom, their art, and luxurious life, that my little heart longed to live among them in the capital; besides, it had reached my ears that my brother Moses had received great favors in Pharaoh's palace and risen to distinction in the priesthood. I no longer cared for our own people; they seemed to me inferior to the Egyptians in all respects.

"Then came the parting from you and, as my little heart was devout and expected all good gifts from the divine power, no matter what name it bore, I prayed for Pharaoh and his army, in whose ranks you were fighting.

"My mother sometimes spoke of the God of our fathers as a mighty protector, to whom the people in former days owed much gratitude, and told me many beautiful tales of Him; but she herself often offered sacrifices in the temple of Seth, or carried clover blossoms to the sacred bull of the sun-god. She, too, was kindly disposed toward the Egyptians, among whom her pride and joy, our Moses, had attained such high honors.

"So in happy intercourse with the others I reached my fifteenth year. In the evening, when the shepherds returned home, I sat with the young people around the fire, and was pleased when the sons of the shepherd princes preferred me to my companions and sought my love; but I refused them all, even the Egyptian captain who commanded the garrison of the storehouse; for I remembered you, the companion of my youth. My best possession would not have seemed too dear a price to pay for some magic spell that would have brought you to us when, at the festal games, I danced and sang to the tambourine while the loudest shouts of applause greeted me. Whenever many were listening I thought of you—then I poured forth like the lark the feelings that filled my heart, then my song was inspired by you and not by the fame of the Most High, to whom it was consecrated."

Here passion, with renewed power, seized the man, to whom the woman he loved was confessing so many blissful memories. Suddenly starting up, he extended his arms toward her; but she sternly repulsed him, that she might control the yearning which threatened to overpower her also.

Yet her deep voice had gained a new, strange tone as, at first rapidly and softly, then in louder and firmer accents, she continued:

"So I attained my eighteenth year and was no longer satisfied to dwell in Succoth. An indescribable longing, and not for you only, had taken possession of my soul. What had formerly afforded me pleasure now seemed shallow, and the monotony of life here in the remote frontier city amid shepherds and flocks, appeared dull and pitiful.

"Eleasar, Aaron's son, had taught me to read and brought me books, full of tales which could never have happened, yet which stirred the heart. Many also contained hymns and fervent songs such as one lover sings to another. These made a deep impression on my soul and, whenever I was alone in the evening, or at noon-day when the shepherds and flocks were far away in the fields, I repeated these

songs or composed new ones, most of which were hymns in praise of the deity. Sometimes they extolled Amon with the ram's head, sometimes cow-headed Isis, and often, too, the great and omnipotent God who revealed Himself to Abraham, and of whom my mother spoke more and more frequently as she advanced in years. To compose such hymns in quiet hours, wait for visions revealing God's grandeur and splendor, or beautiful angels and horrible demons, became my favorite occupation. The merry child had grown a dreamy maiden, who let household affairs go as they would. And there was no one who could have warned me, for my mother had followed my father to the grave; and I now lived alone with my old aunt Rachel, unhappy myself, and a source of joy to no one. Aaron, the oldest of our family, had removed to the dwelling of his father-in-law Amminadab: the house of Amram, his heritage, had become too small and plain for him and he left it to me. My companions avoided me; for my mirthfulness had departed and I patronized them with wretched arrogance because I could compose songs and beheld more in my visions than all the other maidens.

"Nineteen years passed and, on the evening of my birthday, which no one remembered save Milcah, Eleasar's daughter, the Most High for the first time sent me a messenger. He came in the guise of an angel, and bade me set the house in order; for a guest, the person dearest to me on earth, was on the way.

"It was early and under this very tree; but I went home and, with old Rachel's help, set the house in order, and provided food, wine, and all else we offer to an honored guest. Noon came, the afternoon passed away, evening deepened into night, and morning returned, yet I still waited for the guest. But when the sun of that day was nearing the western horizon, the dogs began to bark loudly, and when I went to the door a powerful man, with tangled grey hair and beard, clad in the tattered white robes of a priest, hurried toward me. The dogs shrank back whining; but I recognized my brother.

"Our meeting after so long a separation at first brought me more fear than pleasure; for Moses was flying from the officers of the law because he had slain the overseer. You know the story.

"Wrath still glowed in his flashing eyes. He seemed to me like the god Seth in his fury, and each one of his slow words was graven upon my soul as by a hammer and chisel. Thrice seven days and nights he remained under my roof, and as I was alone with him and deaf Rachel, and he was compelled to remain concealed, no one came between us, and he taught me to know Him who is the God of our fathers.

"Trembling and despairing, I listened to his powerful words, which seemed to fall like rocks upon my breast, when he admonished me of God's requirements, or described the grandeur and wrath of Him whom no mind can comprehend, and no name can describe. Ah, when he spoke of Him and of the Egyptian gods, it seemed as if the God of my people stood before me like a giant, whose head touched the sky, and the other gods were creeping in the dust at his feet like whining curs.

"He taught me also that we alone were the people whom the Lord had chosen, we and no other. Then for the first time I was filled with pride at being a descendant of Abraham, and every Hebrew seemed a brother, every daughter of Israel a sister. Now, too, I perceived how cruelly my people had been enslaved and tortured. I had been blind to their suffering, but Moses opened my eyes and sowed in my heart hate, intense hate of their oppressors, and from this hate sprang love for the victims. I vowed to follow my brother and await the summons of my God. And lo, he did not tarry and Jehovah's voice spoke to me as with tongues.

"Old Rachel died. At Moses' bidding I gave up my solitary life and accepted the invitation of Aaron and Amminadab.

"So I became a guest in their household, yet led a separate life among them all. They did not interfere with me, and the sycamore here on their land became my special property. Beneath its shadow God commanded me to summon you and bestow on you the name "Help of Jehovah"—and you, no longer Hosea, but Joshua, will obey the mandate of God and His prophetess."

Here the warrior interrupted the maiden's words, to which he had listened earnestly, yet with increasing disappointment:

"Ay, I have obeyed you and the Most High. But what it cost me you disdain to ask. Your story has reached the present time, yet you have made no mention of the days following my mother's death, during which you were our guest in Tanis. Have you forgotten what first your eyes and then your lips confessed? Have the day of your departure and the evening on the sea, when you bade me hope for and remember you, quite vanished from your memory? Did the hatred Moses implanted in your heart kill love as well as every other feeling?"

"Love?" asked Miriam, raising her large eyes mournfully to his. "Oh no. How could I forget that time, the happiest of my life! Yet from the day Moses returned from the wilderness by God's command to

release the people from bondage—three months after my separation from you—I have taken no note of years and months, days and nights."

"Then you have forgotten those also?" Hosea asked harshly.

"Not so," Miriam answered, gazing beseechingly into his face. "The love that grew up in the child and did not wither in the maiden's heart, cannot be killed; but whoever consecrates one's life to the Lord....."

Here she suddenly paused, raised her hands and eyes rapturously, as if borne out of herself, and cried imploringly: "Thou art near me, Omnipotent One, and seest my heart! Thou knowest why Miriam took no note of days and years, and asked nothing save to be Thy instrument until her people, who are, also, this man's people, received what Thou didst promise."

During this appeal, which rose from the inmost depths of the maiden's heart, the light wind which precedes the coming of dawn had risen, and the foliage in the thick crown of the sycamore above Miriam's head rustled; but Hosea fairly devoured with his eyes the tall majestic figure, half illumined, half veiled by the faint glimmering light. What he heard and saw seemed like a miracle. The lofty future she anticipated for her people, and which must be realized ere she would permit herself to yield to the desire of her own heart, he believed that he was hearing to them as a messenger of the Lord. As if rapt by the noble enthusiasm of her soul, he rushed toward her, seized her hand, and cried in glad emotion: "Then the hour has come which will again permit you to distinguish months from days and listen to the wishes of your own soul. For to I, Joshua, no longer Hosea, but Joshua, come as the envoy of the Lord, and my message promises to the people whom I will learn to love as you do, new prosperity, and thus fulfils the promise of a new and better home, bestowed by the Most High."

Miriam's eyes sparkled brightly and, overwhelmed with grateful joy, she exclaimed:

"Thou hast come to lead us into the land which Jehovah promised to His people? Oh Lord, how measureless is Thy goodness! He, he comes as Thy messenger."

"He comes, he is here!" Joshua enthusiastically replied, and she did not resist when he clasped her to his breast and, thrilling with joy, she returned his kiss.

CHAPTER XVI.

Fear of her own weakness soon made Miriam release herself from her lover's embrace, but she listened with eager happiness, seeking some new sign from the Most High in Joshua's brief account of everything he had felt and experienced since her summons.

He first described the terrible conflict he endured, then how he regained entire faith and, obedient to the God of his people and his father's summons, went to the palace expecting imprisonment or death, to obtain release from his oath.

He told her how graciously the sorrowing royal pair had received him, and how he had at last taken upon himself the office of urging the leaders of his nation to guide them into the wilderness for a short time only, and then take them home to Egypt, where a new and beautiful region on the western bank of the river should be allotted to them. There no foreign overseer should henceforward oppress the workmen, but the affairs of the Hebrews should be directed by their own elders, and a man chosen by themselves appointed their head.

Lastly he said that he, Joshua, would be placed in command of the Hebrew forces and, as regent, mediate and settle disputes between them and the Egyptians whenever it seemed necessary.

United to her, a happy husband, he would care in the new land for even the lowliest of his race. On the ride hither he had felt as men do after a bloody battle, when the blast of trumpets proclaim victory. He had indeed a right to regard himself as the envoy of the Most High.

Here, however, he interrupted himself; for Miriam, who at first had listened with open ears and sparkling eyes, now showed a more and more anxious and troubled mien. When he at last spoke of making the people happy as her husband, she withdrew her hand, gazed timidly at his manly features, glowing with joyful excitement, and then as if striving to maintain her calmness, fixed her eyes upon the ground.

Without suspecting what was passing in her mind, Hosea drew nearer. He supposed that her tongue was paralyzed by maidenly shame at the first token of favor she had bestowed upon a man. But when at his last words, designating himself as the true messenger of God, she shook her head disapprovingly, he burst forth again, almost incapable of self-control in his sore disappointment:

"So you believe that the Lord has protected me by a miracle from the wrath of the mightiest sovereign, and permitted me to obtain from his powerful hand favors for my people, such as the stronger never grant to the weaker, simply to trifle with the joyous confidence of a man whom he Himself summoned to serve Him."

Miriam, struggling to force back her tears, answered in a hollow tone: "The stronger to the weaker! If that is your opinion, you compel me to ask, in the words of your own father: 'Who is the more powerful, the Lord our God or the weakling on the throne, whose first-born son withered like grass at a sign from the Most High. Oh, Hosea! Hosea!'"

"Joshua!" he interrupted fiercely. "Do you grudge me even the name your God bestowed? I relied upon His help when I entered the palace of the mighty king. I sought under God's guidance rescue and salvation for the people, and I found them. But you, you . . ."

"Your father and Moses, nay, all the believing heads of the tribes, see no salvation for us among the Egyptians," she answered, panting for breath. "What they promise the Hebrews will be their ruin. The grass sowed by us withers where their feet touch it! And you, whose honest heart they deceive, are the whistler whom the bird-catcher uses to decoy his feathered victims into the snare. They put the hammer into your hand to rivet more firmly than before the chains which, with God's aid, we have sundered. Before my mind's eye I perceive . . ."

"Too much!" replied the warrior, grinding his teeth with rage. "Hate dims your clear intellect. If the bird-catcher really—what was your comparison—if the bird-catcher really made me his whistler, deceived and misled me, he might learn from you, ay, from you! Encouraged by you, I relied upon your love and faith. From you I hoped all things—and where is this love? As you spared me nothing that could cause me pain, I will, pitiless to myself, confess the whole truth to you. It was not alone because the God of my fathers called me, but because His summons reached me through you and my father that I came. You yearn for a land in the far uncertain distance, which the Lord has promised you; but I opened to the people the door of a new and sure home. Not for their sakes—what hitherto have they been to me?—but first of all to live there in happiness with you whom I loved, and my old father. Yet you, whose cold heart knows naught of love, with my kiss still on your lips, disdain what I offer, from hatred of the hand to which I owe it. Your life, your conflicts have made you masculine. What other women would trample the highest blessings under foot?"

Miriam could bear no more and, sobbing aloud, covered her convulsed face with her hands.

At the grey light of dawn the sleepers in the camp began to stir, and men and maid servants came out of the dwellings of Amminadab and Naashon. All whom the morning had roused were moving toward the wells and watering places, but she did not see them.

How her heart had expanded and rejoiced when her lover exclaimed that he had come to lead them to the land which the Lord had promised to his people. Gladly had she rested on his breast to enjoy one brief moment of the greatest bliss; but how quickly had bitter disappointment expelled joy! While the morning breeze had stirred the crown of the sycamore and Joshua had told her what Pharaoh would grant to the Hebrews, the rustling among the branches had seemed to her like the voice of God's wrath and she fancied she again heard the angry words of hoary-headed Nun. The latter's reproaches had dismayed Uri like the flash of lightning, the roll of thunder, yet how did Joshua's proposition differ from Uri's?

The people—she had heard it also from the lips of Moses—were lost if, faithless to their God, they yielded to the temptations of Pharaoh. To wed a man who came to destroy all for which she, her brothers, and his own father lived and labored, was base treachery. Yet she loved Joshua and, instead of harshly repulsing him, she would have again nestled ah, how gladly, to the heart which she knew loved her so ardently.

But the leaves in the top of the tree continued to rustle and it seemed as if they reminded her of Aaron's warning, so she forced herself to remain firm.

The whispering above came from God, who had chosen her for His prophetess, and when Joshua, in passionate excitement, owned that the longing for her was his principal motive for toiling for the people, who were as unknown to him as they were dear to her, her heart suddenly seemed to stop beating and, in her mortal agony, she could not help sobbing aloud.

Unheeding Joshua, or the stir in the camp, she again flung herself down with uplifted arms under the sycamore, gazing upward with dilated, tearful eyes, as if expecting a new revelation. But the morning breeze continued to rustle in the summit of the tree, and suddenly everything seemed as bright as sunshine, not only within but around her, as always happened when she, the prophetess, was to behold a vision. And in this light she saw a figure whose face startled her, not Joshua, but another to whom her heart did not incline. Yet there he stood before the eyes of her soul in all his stately height, surrounded by radiance, and with a solemn gesture he laid his hand on the stones he had piled up.

With quickened breath, she gazed upward to the face, yet she would gladly have closed her eyes and lost her hearing, that she might neither see it nor catch the voices from the tree. But suddenly the figure vanished, the voices died away, and she appeared to behold in a bright, fiery glow, the first man her virgin lips had kissed, as with uplifted sword, leading the shepherds of her people, he dashed toward an invisible foe.

Swiftly as the going and coming of a flash of lightning, the vision appeared and vanished, yet ere it had wholly disappeared she knew its meaning.

The man whom she called "Joshua" and who seemed fitted in every respect to be the shield and leader of his people, must not be turned aside by love from the lofty duty to which the Most High had summoned him. None of the people must learn the message he brought, lest it should tempt them to turn aside from the dangerous path they had entered.

Her course was as plain as the vision which had just vanished. And, as if the Most High desired to show her that she had rightly understood its meaning, Hur's voice was heard near the sycamore—ere she had risen to prepare her lover for the sorrow to which she must condemn herself and him—commanding the multitude flocking from all directions to prepare for the departure.

The way to save him from himself lay before her; but Joshua had not yet ventured to disturb her devotions.

He had been wounded and angered to the inmost depths of his soul by her denial. But as he gazed down at her and saw her tall figure shaken by a sudden chill, and her eyes and hands raised heavenward as though, spell-bound, he had felt that something grand and sacred dwelt within her breast which it would be sacrilege to disturb; nay, he had been unable to resist the feeling that it would be presumptuous to seek to wed a woman united to the Lord by so close a tie. It must be bliss indeed to call this exalted creature his own, yet it would be hard to see her place another, even though it were the Almighty Himself, so far above her lover and husband.

Men and cattle had already passed close by the sycamore and just as he was in the act of calling Miriam and pointing to the approaching throng, she rose, turned toward him, and forced from her troubled breast the words:

"I have communed with the Lord, Joshua, and now know His will. Do you remember the words by which God called you?"

He bent his head in assent; but she went on:

"Well then, you must also know what the Most High confided to your father, to Moses, and to me. He desires to lead us out of the land of Egypt, to a distant country where neither Pharaoh nor his viceroy shall rule over us, and He alone shall be our king. That is His will, and if He requires you to serve Him, you must follow us and, in case of war, command the men of our people."

Joshua struck his broad breast, exclaiming in violent agitation: "An oath binds me to return to Tanis to inform Pharaoh how the leaders of the people received the message with which I was sent forth. Though my heart should break, I cannot perjure myself."

"And mine shall break," gasped Miriam, "ere I will be disloyal to the Lord our God. We have both chosen, so let what once united us be sundered before these stones."

He rushed frantically toward her to seize her hand; but with an imperious gesture she waved him back, turned away, and went toward the multitude which, with sheep and cattle, were pressing around the wells.

Old and young respectfully made way for her as, with haughty bearing, she approached Hur, who was giving orders to the shepherds; but he came forward to meet her and, after hearing the promise she whispered, he laid his hand upon her head and said with solemn earnestness:

"Then may the Lord bless our alliance."

Hand in hand with the grey-haired man to whom she had given herself, Miriam approached Joshua. Nothing betrayed the deep emotion of her soul, save the rapid rise and fall of her bosom, for though her cheeks were pale, her eyes were tearless and her bearing was as erect as ever.

She left to Hur to explain to the lover whom she had forever resigned what she had granted him, and when Joshua heard it, he started back as though a gulf yawned at his feet.

His lips were bloodless as he stared at the unequally matched pair. A jeering laugh seemed the only fitting answer to such a surprise, but Miriam's grave face helped him to repress it and conceal the tumult of his soul by trivial words.

But he felt that he could not long succeed in maintaining a successful display of indifference, so he took leave of Miriam. He must greet his father, he said hastily, and induce him to summon the elders.

Ere he finished several shepherds hurried up, disputing wrathfully and appealed to Hur to decide what place in the procession belonged to each tribe. He followed them, and as soon as Miriam found herself alone with Joshua, she said softly, yet earnestly, with beseeching eyes:

"A hasty deed was needful to sever the tie that bound us, but a loftier hope unites us. As I sacrificed what was dearest to my heart to remain faithful to my God and people, do you, too, renounce everything to which your soul clings. Obey the Most High, who called you Joshua! This hour transformed the sweetest joy to bitter grief; may it be the salvation of our people! Remain a son of the race which gave you your father and mother! Be what the Lord called you to become, a leader of your race! If you insist on fulfilling your oath to Pharaoh, and tell the elders the promises with which you came, you will win them over, I know. Few will resist you, but of those few the first will surely be your own father. I can hear him raise his voice loudly and angrily against his own dear son; but if you close your ears even to his warning, the people will follow your summons instead of God's, and you will rule the Hebrews as a mighty man. But when the time comes that the Egyptian casts his promises to the winds, when you see your people in still worse bondage than before and behold them turn from the God of their fathers to again worship animal-headed idols, your father's curse will overtake you, the wrath of the Most High will strike the blinded man, and despair will be the lot of him who led to ruin the weak masses for whose shield the Most High chose him. So I, a feeble woman, yet the servant of the Most High and the maiden who was dearer to you than life, cry in tones of warning: Fear your father's curse and the punishment of the Lord! Beware of tempting the people."

Here she was interrupted by a female slave, who summoned her to her house—and she added in low, hurried accents: "Only this one thing more. If you do not desire to be weaker than the woman whose opposition roused your wrath, sacrifice your own wishes for the welfare of yonder thousands, who are of the same blood! With your hand on these stones you must swear . . ."

But here her voice failed. Her hands groped vainly for some support, and with a loud cry she sank on her knees beside Hur's token.

Joshua's strong arms saved her from falling prostrate, and several women who hurried up at his shout soon recalled the fainting maiden to life.

Her eyes wandered restlessly from one to another, and not until her glance rested on Joshua's anxious face did she become conscious where she was and what she had done. Then she hurriedly drank the water a shepherd's wife handed to her, wiped the tears from her eyes, sighed painfully, and with a faint smile whispered to Joshua: "I am but a weak woman after all."

Then she walked toward the house, but after the first few steps turned, beckoned to the warrior, and said softly:

"You see how they are forming into ranks. They will soon begin to move. Is your resolution still unshaken? There is still time to call the elders."

He shook his head, and as he met her tearful, grateful glance, answered gently:

"I shall remember these stones and this hour, wife of Hur. Greet my father for me and tell him that I love him. Repeat to him also the name by which his son, according to the command of the Most High, will henceforth be called, that its promise of Jehovah's aid may give him confidence when he hears whither I am going to keep the oath I have sworn."

With these words he waved his hand to Miriam and turned toward the camp, where his horse had been fed and watered; but she called after him: "Only one last word: Moses left a message for you in the hollow trunk of the tree."

Joshua turned back to the sycamore and read what the man of God had written for him. "Be strong and steadfast" were the brief contents, and raising his head he joyfully exclaimed: "Those words are balm to my soul. We meet here for the last time, wife of Hur, and, if I go to my death, be sure that I shall know how to die strong and steadfast; but show my old father what kindness you can."

He swung himself upon his horse and while trotting toward Tanis, faithful to his oath, his soul was free from fear, though he did not conceal from himself that he was going to meet great perils. His fairest hopes were destroyed, yet deep grief struggled with glad exaltation. A new and lofty emotion, which pervaded his whole being, had waked within him and was but slightly dimmed, though he had experienced a sorrow bitter enough to darken the light of any other man's existence. Naught could surpass the noble objects to which he intended to devote his blood and life—his God and his people. He perceived with amazement this new feeling which had power to thrust far into the background every other emotion of his breast—even love.

True, his head often drooped sorrowfully when he thought of his old father; but he had done right in repressing the eager yearning to clasp him to his heart. The old man would scarcely have understood his motives, and it was better for both to part without seeing each other rather than in open strife.

Often it seemed as though his experiences had been but a dream, and while he felt bewildered by the excitements of the last few hours, his strong frame was little wearied by the fatigues he had undergone.

At a well-known hostelry on the road, where he met many soldiers and among them several military commanders with whom he was well acquainted, he at last allowed his horse and himself a little rest and food; and as he rode on refreshed active life asserted its claims; for as far as the gate of the city of Rameses he passed bands of soldiers, and learned that they were ordered to join the cohorts he had himself brought from Libya.

At last he rode into the capital and as he passed the temple of Amon he heard loud lamentations, though he had learned on the way that the plague had ceased. What many a sign told him was confirmed at last by some passing guards—the first prophet and high-priest of Amon, the grey-haired Rui, had died in the ninety-eighth year of his life. Bai, the second prophet, who had so warmly protested his friendship and gratitude to Hosea, had now become Rui's successor and was high-priest and judge, keeper of the seals and treasurer, in short, the most powerful man in the realm.

CHAPTER XVII.

"Help of Jehovah!" murmured a state-prisoner, laden with heavy chains, five days later, smiling bitterly as, with forty companions in misfortune, he was led through the gate of victory in Tanis toward the east.

The mines in the Sinai peninsula, where more convict labor was needed, were the goal of these unfortunate men.

The prisoner's smile lingered a short time, then drawing up his muscular frame, his bearded lips murmured: "Strong and steadfast!" and as if he desired to transmit the support he had himself found he whispered to the youth marching at his side: "Courage, Ephraim, courage! Don't gaze down at the dust, but upward, whatever may come."

"Silence in the ranks!" shouted one of the armed Libyan guards, who accompanied the convicts, to the older prisoner, raising his whip with a significant gesture. The man thus threatened was Joshua, and his companion in suffering Ephraim, who had been sentenced to share his fate.

What this was every child in Egypt knew, for "May I be sent to the mines!" was one of the most terrible oaths of the common people, and no prisoner's lot was half so hard as that of the convicted state-criminals.

A series of the most terrible humiliations and tortures awaited them. The vigor of the robust was broken by unmitigated toil; the exhausted were forced to execute tasks so far beyond their strength that they soon found the eternal rest for which their tortured souls longed. To be sent to the mines meant to be doomed to a slow, torturing death; yet life is so dear to men that it was considered a milder punishment to be dragged to forced labor in the mines than to be delivered up to the executioner.

Joshua's encouraging words had little effect upon Ephraim; but when, a few minutes later, a chariot shaded by an umbrella, passed the prisoners, a chariot in which a slender woman of aristocratic bearing stood beside a matron behind the driver, he turned with a hasty movement and gazed after the equipage with sparkling eyes till it vanished in the dust of the road.

The younger woman had been closely veiled, but Ephraim thought he recognized her for whose sake he had gone to his ruin, and whose lightest sign he would still have obeyed.

And he was right; the lady in the chariot was Kasana, the daughter of Hornecht, captain of the archers, and the matron was her nurse.

At a little temple by the road-side, where, in the midst of a grove of Nile acacias, a well was maintained for travellers, she bade the matron wait for her and, springing lightly from the chariot which had left the prisoners some distance behind, she began to pace up and down with drooping head in the shadow of the trees, until the whirling clouds of dust announced the approach of the convicts.

Taking from her robe the gold rings she had ready for this purpose, she went to the man who was riding at its head on an ass and who led the mournful procession. While she was talking with him and pointing to Joshua, the guard cast a sly glance at the rings which had been slipped into his hand, and seeing a welcome yellow glitter when his modesty had expected only silver, his features instantly assumed an expression of obliging good-will.

True, his face darkened at Kasana's request, but another promise from the young widow brightened it again, and he now turned eagerly to his subordinates, exclaiming: "To the well with the moles, men! Let them drink. They must be fresh and healthy under the ground!"

Then riding up to the prisoners, he shouted to Joshua:

"You once commanded many soldiers, and look more stiff-necked now than beseems you and me. Watch the others, guards, I have a word or two to say to this man alone."

He clapped his hands as if he were driving hens out of a garden, and while the prisoners took pails and with the guards, enjoyed the refreshing drink, their leader drew Joshua and Ephraim away from the road—they could not be separated on account of the chain which bound their ankles together.

The little temple soon hid them from the eyes of the others, and the warder sat down on a step some distance off, first showing the two Hebrews, with a gesture whose meaning was easily understood, the heavy spear he carried in his hand and the hounds which lay at his feet.

He kept his eyes open, too, during the conversation that followed. They could say whatever they chose; he knew the duties of his office and though, for the sake of good money he could wink at a farewell, for twenty years, though there had been many attempts to escape, not one of his moles—a name he was fond of giving to the future miners—had succeeded in eluding his watchfulness.

Yonder fair lady doubtless loved the stately man who, he had been told, was formerly a chief in the army. But he had already numbered among his "moles," personages even more distinguished, and if the veiled woman managed to slip files or gold into the prisoner's hands, he would not object, for that very evening the persons of both would be thoroughly searched, even the youth's black locks, which would not have remained unshorn, had not everything been in confusion prior to the departure of the convicts, which took place just before the march of Pharaoh's army.

The watcher could not hear the whispered words exchanged between the degraded chief and the lady, but her humble manner and bearing led him to suppose that it was she who had brought the proud warrior to his ruin. Ah, these women! And the fettered youth! The looks he fixed upon the slender figure were ardent enough to scorch her veil. But patience! Mighty Father Amon! His moles were going to a school where people learned modesty!

Now the lady had removed her veil. She was a beautiful woman! It must be hard to part from such a sweetheart. And now she was weeping.

The rude warder's heart grew as soft as his office permitted; but he would fain have raised his scourge against the older prisoner; for was it not a shame to have such a sweetheart and stand there like a stone?

At first the wretch did not even hold out his hand to the woman who evidently loved him, while he, the watcher, would gladly have witnessed both a kiss and an embrace.

Or was this beauty the prisoner's wife who had betrayed him? No, no! How kindly he was now gazing at her. That was the manner of a father speaking to his child; but his mole was probably too young to

have such a daughter. A mystery! But he felt no anxiety concerning its solution; during the march he had the power to make the most reserved convict an open book.

Yet not only the rude gaoler, but anyone would have marvelled what had brought this beautiful, aristocratic woman, in the grey light of dawn, out on the highway to meet the hapless man loaded with chains.

In sooth, nothing would have induced Kasana to take this step save the torturing dread of being scorned and execrated as a base traitress by the man whom she loved. A terrible destiny awaited him, and her vivid imagination had shown her Joshua in the mines, languishing, disheartened, drooping, dying, always with a curse upon her on his lips.

On the evening of, the day Ephraim had been brought to the house, shivering with the chill caused by burning fever, and half stifled with the dust of the road, her father had told her that in the youthful Hebrew they possessed a hostage to compel Hosea to return to Tanis and submit to the wishes of the prophet Bai, with whom she knew her father was leagued in a secret conspiracy. He also confided to her that not only great distinction and high offices, but a marriage with herself had been arranged to bind Hosea to the Egyptians and to a cause from which the chief of the archers expected the greatest blessings for himself, his house, and his whole country.

These tidings had filled her heart with joyous hope of a long desired happiness, and she confessed it to the prisoner with drooping head amid floods of tears, by the little wayside temple; for he was now forever lost to her, and though he did not return the love she had lavished on him from his childhood, he must not hate and condemn her without having heard her story.

Joshua listened willingly and assured her that nothing would lighten his heart more than to have her clear herself from the charge of having consigned him and the youth at his side to their most terrible fate.

Kasana sobbed aloud and was forced to struggle hard for composure ere she succeeded in telling her tale with some degree of calmness.

Shortly after Hosea's departure the chief-priest died and, on the same day Bai, the second prophet, became his successor. Many changes now took place, and the most powerful man in the kingdom filled Pharaoh with hatred of the Hebrews and their leader, Mesu, whom he and the queen had hitherto protected and feared. He had even persuaded the monarch to pursue the fugitives, and an army had been instantly summoned to compel their return. Kasana had feared that Hosea could not be induced to fight against the men of his own blood, and that he must feel incensed at being sent to make treaties which the Egyptians began to violate even before they knew whether their offers had been accepted.

When he returned—as he knew only too well—Pharaoh had had him watched like a prisoner and would not suffer him to leave his presence until he had sworn to again lead his troops and be a faithful servant to the king. Bai, the new chief priest, however, had not forgotten that Hosea had saved his life and showed himself well disposed and grateful to him; she knew also that he hoped to involve him in a secret enterprise, with which her father, too, was associated. It was Bai who had prevailed upon Pharaoh, if Hosea would renew his oath of fealty, to absolve him from fighting against his own race, put him in command of the foreign mercenaries and raise him to the rank of a "friend of the king." All these events, of course, were familiar to him; for the new chief priest had himself set before him the tempting dishes which, with such strong, manly defiance, he had thrust aside.

Her father had also sided with him, and for the first time ceased to reproach him with his origin.

But, on the third day after Hosea's return, Hornecht had gone to talk with him and since then everything had changed for the worse. He must be best aware what had caused the man of whom she, his daughter, must think no evil, to be changed from a friend to a mortal foe.

She had looked enquiringly at him as she spoke, and he did not refuse to answer—Hornecht had told him that he would be a welcome son-in-law.

"And you?" asked Kasana, gazing anxiously into his face.

"I," replied the prisoner, "was forced to say that though you had been dear and precious to me from your childhood, many causes forbade me to unite a woman's fate to mine."

Kasana's eyes flashed, and she exclaimed:

"Because you love another, a woman of your own people, the one who sent Ephraim to you!"

But Joshua shook his head and answered pleasantly:

"You are wrong, Kasana! She of whom you speak is the wife of another."

"Then," cried the young widow with fresh animation, gazing at him with loving entreaty, "why were you compelled to rebuff my father so harshly?"

"That was far from my intention, dear child," he replied warmly, laying his hand on her head. "I thought of you with all the tenderness of which my nature is capable. If I could not fulfil his wish, it was because grave necessity forbids me to yearn for the peaceful happiness by my own hearth-stone for which others strive. Had they given me my liberty, my life would have been one of restlessness and conflict."

"Yet how many bear sword and shield," replied Kasana, "and still, on their return, rejoice in the love of their wives and the dear ones sheltered beneath their roof."

"True, true," he answered gravely; "but special duties, unknown to the Egyptians, summon me. I am a son of my people."

"And you intend to serve them?" asked Kasana. "Oh, I understand you. Yet... why then did you return to Tanis? Why did you put yourself into Pharaoh's power?"

"Because a sacred oath compelled me, poor child," he answered kindly.

"An oath," she cried, "which places death and imprisonment between you and those whom you love and still desire to serve. Oh, would that you had never returned to this abode of injustice, treachery, and ingratitude! To how many hearts this vow will bring grief and tears! But what do you men care for the suffering you inflict on others? You have spoiled all the pleasure of life for my hapless self, and among your own people dwells a noble father whose only son you are. How often I have seen the dear old man, the stately figure with sparkling eyes and snow-white hair. So would you look when you, too, had reached a ripe old age, as I said to myself, when I met him at the harbor, or in the fore-court of the palace, directing the shepherds who were driving the cattle and fleecy sheep to the tax-receiver's table. And now his son's obstinacy must embitter every day of his old age."

"Now," replied Joshua, "he has a son who is going, laden with chains, to endure a life of misery, but who can hold his head higher than those who betrayed him. They, and Pharaoh at their head, have forgotten that he has shed his heart's blood for them on many a battlefield, and kept faith with the king at every peril. Menephtah, his vice-roy and chief, whose life I saved, and many who formerly called me friend, have abandoned and hurled me and this guiltless boy into wretchedness, but those who have done this, woman, who have committed this crime, may they all. . . ."

"Do not curse them!" interrupted Kasana with glowing cheeks.

But Joshua, unheeding her entreaty, exclaimed "Should I be a man, if I forgot vengeance?"

The young widow clung anxiously to his arm, gasping in beseeching accents:

"How could you forgive him? Only you must not curse him; for my father became your foe through love for me. You know his hot blood, which so easily carries him to extremes, despite his years. He concealed from me what he regarded as an insult; for he saw many woo me, and I am his greatest treasure. Pharaoh can pardon rebels more easily than my father can forgive the man who disdained his jewel. He behaved like one possessed when he returned. Every word he uttered was an invective. He could not endure to stay at home and raged just as furiously elsewhere. But no doubt he would have calmed himself at last, as he so often did before, had not some one who desired to pour oil on the flames met him in the fore-court of the palace. I learned all this from Bai's wife; for she, too, repents what she did to injure you; her husband used every effort to save you. She, who is as brave as any man, was ready to aid him and open the door of your prison; for she has not forgotten that you saved her husband's life in Libya. Ephraim's chains were to fall with yours, and everything was ready to aid your flight."

"I know it," Hosea interrupted gloomily, "and I will thank the God of my fathers if those were wrong from whom I heard that you are to blame, Kasana, for having our dungeon door locked more firmly."

"Should I be here, if that were so!" cried the beautiful, grieving woman with impassioned eagerness. True, resentment did stir within me as it does in every woman whose lover scorns her; but the misfortune that befell you speedily transformed resentment into compassion, and fanned the old flames anew. So surely as I hope for a mild judgment before the tribunal of the dead, I am innocent and have

not ceased to hope for your liberation. Not until yesterday evening, when all was too late, did I learn that Bai's proposal had been futile. The chief priest can do much, but he will not oppose the man who made himself my father's ally."

"You mean Prince Siptah, Pharaoh's nephew!" cried Joshua in excited tones. "They intimated to me the scheme they were weaving in his interest; they wished to put me in the place of the Syrian Aarsu, the commander of the mercenaries, if I would consent to let them have their way with my people and desert those of my own blood. But I would rather die twenty deaths than sully myself with such treachery. Aarsu is better suited to carry out their dark plans, but he will finally betray them all. So far as I am concerned, the prince has good reason to hate me."

Kasana laid her hand upon his lips, pointed anxiously to Ephraim and the guide, and said gently:

"Spare my father! The prince—what roused his enmity....."

"The profligate seeks to lure you into his snare and has learned that you favor me," the warrior broke in. She bent her head with a gesture of assent, and added blushing:

"That is why Aarsu, whom he has won over to his cause, watches you so strictly."

"And the Syrian will keep his eyes sufficiently wide open," cried Joshua. "Now let us talk no more of this. I believe you and thank you warmly for following us hapless mortals. How fondly I used to think, while serving in the field, of the pretty child, whom I saw blooming into maidenhood."

"And you will think of her still with neither wrath nor rancor?"

"Gladly, most gladly."

The young widow, with passionate emotion, seized the prisoner's hand to raise it to her lips, but he withdrew it; and, gazing at him with tears in her eyes, she said mournfully:

"You deny me the favor a benefactor does not refuse even to a beggar." Then, suddenly drawing herself up to her full height, she exclaimed so loudly that the warder started and glanced at the sun: "But I tell you the time will come when you will sue for the favor of kissing this hand in gratitude. For when the messenger arrives bringing to you and to this youth the liberty for which you have longed, it will be Kasana to whom you owe it."

Rapt by the fervor of the wish that animated her, her beautiful face glowed with a crimson flush. Joshua seized her right hand, exclaiming:

"Ah, if you could attain what your loyal soul desires! How could I dissuade you from mitigating the great misfortune which overtook this youth in your house? Yet, as an honest man, I must tell you that I shall never return to the service of the Egyptians; for, come what may, I shall in future cleave, body and soul, to those you persecute and despise, and to whom belonged the mother who bore me."

Kasana's graceful head drooped; but directly after she raised it again, saying:

"No other man is so noble, so truthful, that I have known from my childhood. If I can find no one among my own nation whom I can honor, I will remember you, whose every thought is true and lofty, whose nature is faultless. Put if poor Kasana succeeds in liberating you, do not scorn her, if you find her worse than when you left her, for however she may humiliate herself, whatever shame may come upon her"

"What do you intend?" Hosea anxiously interrupted; but she had no time to answer; for the captain of the guard had risen and, clapping his hands, shouted: "Forward, you moles!" and "Step briskly."

The warrior's stout heart was overwhelmed with tender sadness and, obeying a hasty impulse, he kissed the beautiful unhappy woman on the brow and hair, whispering:

"Leave me in my misery, if our freedom will cost your humiliation. We shall probably never meet again; for, whatever may happen, my life will henceforth be nothing but battle and sacrifice. Darkness will shroud us in deeper and deeper gloom, but however black the night may be, one star will still shine for this boy and for me—the remembrance of you, my faithful, beloved child."

He pointed to Ephraim as he spoke and the youth, as if out of his senses, pressed his lips on the hand and arm of the sobbing woman.

"Forward!" shouted the leader again, and with a grateful smile helped the generous lady into the chariot, marvelling at the happy, radiant gaze with which her tearful eyes followed the convicts.

The horses started, fresh shouts arose, blows from the whips fell on bare shoulders, now and then a cry of pain rang on the morning air, and the train of prisoners again moved eastward. The chain on the ankles of the companions in suffering stirred the dust, which shrouded the little band like the grief, hate, and fear darkening the soul of each.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A long hour's walk beyond the little temple where the prisoners had rested the road, leading to Succoth and the western arm of the Red Sea, branched off from the one that ran in a southeasterly direction past the fortifications on the isthmus to the mines.

Shortly after the departure of the prisoners, the army which had been gathered to pursue the Hebrews left the city of Rameses, and as the convicts had rested some time at the well, the troops almost overtook them. They had not proceeded far when several runners came hurrying up to clear the road for the advancing army. They ordered the prisoners to move aside and defer their march until the swifter baggage train, bearing Pharaoh's tents and travelling equipments, whose chariot wheels could already be heard, had passed them.

The prisoners' guards were glad to stop, they were in no hurry. The day was hot, and if they reached their destination later, it would be the fault of the army.

The interruption was welcome to Joshua, too; for his young companion had been gazing into vacancy as if bewildered, and either made no answer to his questions or gave such incoherent ones that the older man grew anxious; he knew how many of those sentenced to forced labor went mad or fell into melancholy. Now a portion of the army would pass them, and the spectacle was new to Ephraim and promised to put an end to his dull brooding.

A sand-hill overgrown with tamarisk bushes rose beside the road, and thither the leader guided the party of convicts. He was a stern man, but not a cruel one, so he permitted his "moles" to lie down on the sand, for the troops would doubtless be a long time in passing. As soon as the convicts had thrown themselves on the ground the rattle of wheels, the neighing of fiery steeds, shouts of command, and sometimes the disagreeable braying of an ass were heard.

When the first chariots appeared Ephraim asked if Pharaoh was coming; but Joshua, smiling, informed him that when the king accompanied the troops to the field, the camp equipage followed directly behind the vanguard, for Pharaoh and his dignitaries wished to find the tents pitched and the tables laid, when the day's march was over and the soldiers and officers expected a night's repose.

Joshua had not finished speaking when a number of empty carts and unladen asses appeared. They were to carry the contributions of bread and meal, animals and poultry, wine and beer, levied on every village the sovereign passed on the march, and which had been delivered to the tax-gatherers the day before.

Soon after a division of chariot warriors followed. Every pair of horses drew a small, two-wheeled chariot, cased in bronze, and in each stood a warrior and the driver of the team. Huge quivers were fastened to the front of the chariots, and the soldiers leaned on their lances or on gigantic bows. Shirts covered with brazen scales, or padded coats of mail with gay overmantle, a helmet, and the front of the chariot protected the warrior from the missiles of the foe. This troop, which Joshua said was the van, went by at a slow trot and was followed by a great number of carts and wagons, drawn by horses, mules, or oxen, as well as whole troops of heavily-laden asses.

The uncle now pointed out to his nephew the long masts, poles, and heavy rolls of costly stuffs intended for the royal tent, and borne by numerous beasts of burden, as well as the asses and carts with the kitchen utensils and field forges. Among the baggage heaped on the asses, which were followed by nimble drivers, rode the physicians, tailors, salve-makers, cooks, weavers of garlands, attendants, and slaves belonging to the camp. Their departure had been so recent that they were still fresh and inclined to jest, and whoever caught sight of the convicts, flung them, in the Egyptian fashion, a caustic quip which many sought to palliate by the gift of alms. Others, who said nothing, also sent by the ass-drivers fruit and trifling gifts; for those who were free to-day might share the fate of these hapless men to-morrow. The captain permitted it, and when a passing slave, whom Joshua had sold for thieving, shouted the name of Hosea, pointing to him with a malicious gesture, the rough but kind-hearted officer offered his insulted prisoner a sip of wine from his own flask.

Ephraim, who had walked from Succoth to Tanis with a staff in his hand, and a small bundle containing bread, dried lamb, radishes, and dates, expressed his amazement at the countless people and things a single man needed for his comfort, and then relapsed into his former melancholy until his uncle roused him with farther explanations.

As soon as the baggage train had passed, the commander of the band of prisoners wished to set off, but the "openers of the way," who preceded the archers, forbade him, because it was not seemly for convicts to mingle with soldiers. So they remained on their hillock and continued to watch the troops.

The archers were followed by heavily-armed troops, bearing shields covered with strong hide so large that they extended from the feet to above the middle of the tallest men, and Hosea now told the youth that in the evening they set them side by side, thus surrounding the royal tent like a fence. Besides this weapon of defence they carried a lance, a short dagger-like sword, or a battle-sickle, and as these thousands were succeeded by a body of men armed with slings Ephraim for the first time spoke without being questioned and said that the slings the shepherds had taught him to make were far better than those of the soldiers and, encouraged by his uncle, he described in language so eager that the prisoners lying by his side listened, how he had succeeded in slaying not only jackals, wolves, and panthers, but even vultures, with stones hurled from a sling. Meanwhile he interrupted himself to ask the meaning of the standards and the names of the separate divisions.

Many thousands had already passed, when another troop of warriors in chariots appeared, and the chief warder of the prisoners exclaimed:

"The good god! The lord of two worlds! May life, happiness, and health be his!" With these words he fell upon his knees in the attitude of worship, while the convicts prostrated themselves to kiss the earth and be ready to obey the captain's bidding and join at the right moment in the cry: "Life, happiness, and health!"

But they had a long time to wait ere the expected sovereign appeared; for, after the warriors in the chariots had passed, the body-guard followed, foot-soldiers of foreign birth with singular ornaments on their helmets and huge swords, and then numerous images of the gods, a large band of priests and wearers of plumes. They were followed by more body-guards, and then Pharaoh appeared with his attendants. At their head rode the chief priest Bai in a gilded battle-chariot drawn by magnificent bay stallions. He who had formerly led troops in the field, had assumed the command of this pursuing expedition ordered by the gods and, though clad in priestly robes, he also wore the helmet and battle-axe of a general. At last, directly behind his equipage, came Pharaoh himself; but he did not go to battle like his warlike predecessors in a war-chariot, but preferred to be carried on a throne. A magnificent canopy protected him above, and large, thick, round ostrich feather fans, carried by his fan-bearers, sheltered him on both sides from the scorching rays of the sun.

After Menephtah had left the city and the gate of victory behind him, and the exulting acclamations of the multitude had ceased to amuse him, he had gone to sleep and the shading fans would have concealed his face and figure from the prisoners, had not their shouts been loud enough to rouse him and induce him to turn his head toward them. The gracious wave of his right hand showed that he had expected to see different people from convicts and, ere the shouts of the hapless men had died away, his eyes again closed.

Ephraim's silent brooding had now yielded to the deepest interest, and as the empty golden war-chariot of the king, before which pranced the most superb steeds he had ever seen, rolled by, he burst into loud exclamations of admiration.

These noble animals, on whose intelligent heads large bunches of feathers nodded, and whose rich harness glittered with gold and gems, were indeed a splendid sight. The large gold quivers set with emeralds, fastened on the sides of the chariot, were filled with arrows.

The feeble man to whose weak hand the guidance of a great nation was entrusted, the weakling who shrunk from every exertion, regained his lost energy whenever hunting was in prospect; he considered this campaign a chase on the grandest scale and as it seemed royal pastime to discharge his arrows at the human beings he had so lately feared, instead of at game, he had obeyed the chief priest's summons and joined the expedition. It had been undertaken by the mandate of the great god Amon, so he had little to dread from Mesu's terrible power.

When he captured him he would make him atone for having caused Pharaoh and his queen to tremble before him and shed so many tears on his account.

While Joshua was still telling the youth from which Phoenician city the golden chariots came, he suddenly felt Ephraim's right hand clutch his wrist, and heard him exclaim: "She! She! Look yonder! It

is she!" The youth had flushed crimson, and he was not mistaken; the beautiful Kasana was passing amid Pharaoh's train in the same chariot in which she had pursued the convicts, and with her came a considerable number of ladies who had joined what the commander of the foot-soldiers, a brave old warrior, who had served under the great Rameses, termed "a pleasure party."

On campaigns through the desert and into Syria, Libya, or Ethiopia the sovereign was accompanied only by a chosen band of concubines in curtained chariots, guarded by eunuchs; but this time, though the queen had remained at home, the wife of the chief priest Bai and other aristocratic ladies had set the example of joining the troops, and it was doubtless tempting enough to many to enjoy the excitements of war without peril.

Kasana had surprised her friend by her appearance an hour before; only yesterday the young widow could not be persuaded to accompany the troops. Obeying an inspiration, without consulting her father, so unprepared that she lacked the necessary traveling equipments, she had joined the expedition, and it seemed as if a man whom she had hitherto avoided, though he was no less a personage than Siptah, the king's nephew, had become a magnet to her.

When she passed the prisoners, the prince was standing in the chariot beside the young beauty in her nurse's place, explaining in jesting tones the significance of the flowers in a bouquet, which Kasana declared could not possibly have been intended for her, because an hour and a quarter before she had not thought of going with the army.

But Siptah protested that the Hathors had revealed at sunrise the happiness in store for him, and that the choice of each single blossom proved his assertion.

Several young courtiers who were walking in front of their chariots, surrounded them and joined in the laughter and merry conversation, in which the vivacious wife of the chief priest shared, having left her large travelling-chariot to be carried in a litter.

None of these things escaped Joshua's notice and, as he saw Kasana, who a short time before had thought of the prince with aversion, now saucily tap his hand with her fan, his brow darkened and he asked himself whether the young widow was not carelessly trifling with his misery.

But the prisoners' chief warder had now noticed the locks on Siptah's temples, which marked him as a prince of the royal household and his loud "Hail! Hall!" in which the other guards and the captives joined, was heard by Kasana and her companions. They looked toward the tamarisk-bushes, whence the cry proceeded, and Joshua saw the young widow turn pale and then point with a hasty gesture to the convicts. She must undoubtedly have given Siptah some command, for the latter at first shrugged his shoulders disapprovingly then, after a somewhat lengthy discussion, half grave, half jesting, he sprang from the chariot and beckoned to the chief gaoler.

"Have these men," he called from the road so loudly that Kasana could not fail to hear, "seen the face of the good god, the lord of both worlds?" And when he received a reluctant answer, he went on arrogantly:

"No matter! At least they beheld mine and that of the fairest of women, and if they hope for favor on that account they are right. You know who I am. Let the chains that bind them together be removed." Then, beckoning to the man, he whispered:

"But keep your eyes open all the wider; I have no liking for the fellow beside the bush, the ex-chief Hosea. After returning home, report to me and bring news of this man. The quieter he has become, the deeper my hand will sink in my purse. Do you understand?"

The warder bowed, thinking: "I'll take care, my prince, and also see that no one attempts to take the life of any of my moles. The greater the rank of these gentlemen, the more bloody and strange are their requests! How many have come to me with similar ones. He releases the poor wretches' feet, and wants me to burden my soul with a shameful murder. Siptah has tried the wrong man! Here, Heter, bring the bag of tools and open the moles' chains."

While the files were grating on the sand-hill by the road and the prisoners were being released from the fetters on their ancles,—though for the sake of security each man's arms were bound together,—Pharaoh's host marched by.

Kasana had commanded Prince Siptah to release from their iron burden the unfortunates who were being dragged to a life of misery, openly confessing that she could not bear to see a chief who had so often been a guest of her house so cruelly humiliated. Bai's wife had supported her wish, and the prince was obliged to yield.

Joshua knew to whom he and Ephraim owed this favor, and received it with grateful joy.

Walking had been made easier for him, but his mind was more and more sorely oppressed with anxious cares.

The army passing yonder would have been enough to destroy down to the last man a force ten times greater than the number of his people. His people, and with them his father and Miriam,—who had caused him such keen suffering, yet to whom he was indebted for having found the way which, even in prison, he had recognized as the only right one—seemed to him marked out for a bloody doom; for, however powerful might be the God whose greatness the prophetess had praised in such glowing words, and to whom he himself had learned to look up with devout admiration,—untrained and unarmed bands of shepherds must surely and hopelessly succumb to the assault of this army. This certainty, strengthened by each advancing division, pierced his very soul. Never before had he felt such burning anguish, which was terribly sharpened when he beheld the familiar faces of his own troops, which he had so lately commanded, pass before him under the leadership of another. This time they were taking the field to hew down men of his own blood. This was pain indeed, and Ephraim's conduct gave him cause for fresh anxiety; since Kasana's appearance and interference in behalf of him and his companions in suffering, the youth had again lapsed into silence and gazed with wandering eyes at the army or into vacancy.

Now he, too, was freed from the chain, and Joshua asked in a whisper if he did not long to return to his people to help them resist so powerful a force, but Ephraim merely answered:

"When confronted with those hosts, they can do nothing but yield. What did we lack before the exodus? You were a Hebrew, and yet became a mighty chief among the Egyptians ere you obeyed Miriam's summons. In your place, I would have pursued a different course."

"What would you have done?" asked Joshua sternly.

"What?" replied the youth, the fire of his young soul blazing. "What? Only this, I would have remained where there is honor and fame and everything beautiful. You might have been the greatest of the great, the happiest of the happy—this I have learned, but you made a different choice."

"Because duty commanded it," Joshua answered gravely, "because I will no longer serve any one save the people among whom I was born."

"The people?" exclaimed Ephraim, contemptuously. "I know them, and you met them at Succoth. The poor are miserable wretches who cringe under the lash; the rich value their cattle above all else and, if they are the heads of the tribes, quarrel with one another. No one knows aught of what pleases the eye and the heart. They call me one of the richest of the race and yet I shudder when I think of the house I inherited, one of the best and largest. One who has seen more beautiful ones ceases to long for such an abode."

The vein on Joshua's brow swelled, and he wrathfully rebuked the youth for denying his own blood, and being a traitor to his people.

The guard commanded silence, for Joshua had raised his reproving voice louder, and this order seemed welcome to the defiant youth. When, during their march, his uncle looked sternly into his face or asked whether he had thought of his words, he turned angrily away, and remained mute and sullen until the first star had risen, the night camp had been made under the open sky, and the scanty prison rations had been served.

Joshua dug with his hands a resting place in the sand, and with care and skill helped the youth to prepare a similar one.

Ephraim silently accepted this help; but as they lay side by side, and the uncle began to speak to his nephew of the God of his people on whose aid they must rely, if they were not to fall victims to despair in the mines, the youth interrupted him, exclaiming in low tones, but with fierce resolution:

"They will not take me to the mines alive! I would rather die, while making my escape, than pine away in such wretchedness."

Joshua whispered words of warning, and again reminded him of his duties to his people. But Ephraim begged to be let alone; yet soon after he touched his uncle and asked softly:

"What are they planning with Prince Siptah?"

"I don't know; nothing good, that is certain."

"And where is Aarsu, the Syrian, your foe, who commands the Asiatic mercenaries, and who was to watch us with such fierce zeal? I did not see him with the others."

"He remained in Tanis with his troops."

"To guard the palace?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Then he commands many soldiers, and Pharaoh has confidence in him?"

"The utmost, though he ill deserves it."

"And he is a Syrian, and therefore of our blood."

"And more closely allied to us than to the Egyptians, at least so far as language and appearance are concerned."

"I should have taken him for a man of our race, yet he is, as you were, one of the leaders in the army."

"Other Syrians and Libyans command large troops of mercenaries, and the herald Ben Mazana, one of the highest dignitaries of the court—the Egyptians call him Rameses in the sanctuary of Ra—has a Hebrew father."

"And neither he nor the others are scorned on account of their birth?"

"This is not quite so. But why do you ask these questions?"

"I could not sleep."

"And so such thoughts came to you. But you have some definite idea in your mind and, if my inference is correct, it would cause me pain. You wished to enter Pharaoh's service!"

Both were silent a long time, then Ephraim spoke again and, though he addressed Joshua, it seemed as if he were talking to himself:

"They will destroy our people; bondage and shame await those who survive. My house is now left to ruin, not a head of my splendid herds of cattle remains, and the gold and silver I inherited, of which there was said to be a goodly store, they are carrying with them, for your father has charge of my wealth, and it will soon fall as booty into the hands of the Egyptians. Shall I, if I obtain my liberty, return to my people and make bricks? Shall I bow my back and suffer blows and abuse?"

Joshua eagerly whispered:

"You must appeal to the God of your fathers, that he may protect and defend His people. Yet, if the Most High has willed the destruction of our race, be a man and learn to hate with all the might of your young soul those who trample your people under their feet. Fly to the Syrians, offer them your strong young arm, and take no rest till you have avenged yourself on those who have shed the blood of your people and load you, though innocent, with chains."

Again silence reigned for some time, nothing was heard from Ephraim's rude couch save a dull, low moan from his oppressed breast; but at last he answered softly:

"The chains no longer weigh upon us, and how could I hate her who released us from them?"

"Remain grateful to Kasana," was the whispered reply, "but hate her nation."

Hosea heard the youth toss restlessly, and again sigh heavily and moan.

It was past midnight, the waxing moon rode high in the heavens, and the sleepless man did not cease to listen for sounds from the youth; but the latter remained silent, though slumber had evidently fled from him also; for a noise as if he were grinding his teeth came from his place of rest. Or had mice wandered to this barren place, where hard brown blades of grass grew between the crusts of salt and the bare spots, and were gnawing the prisoners' hard bread?

Such gnawing and grinding disturb the sleep of one who longs for slumber; but Joshua desired to keep awake to continue to open the eyes of the blinded youth, yet he waited in vain for any sign of life from his nephew.

At last he was about to lay his hand on the lad's shoulder, but paused as by the moonlight he saw Ephraim raise one arm though, before he lay down, both hands were tied more firmly than before.

Joshua now knew that it was the youth's sharp teeth gnawing the rope which had caused the noise that had just surprised him, and he immediately stood up and looked first upward and then around him.

Holding his breath, the older man watched every movement, and his heart began to throb anxiously. Ephraim meant to fly, and the first step toward escape had already succeeded! Would that the others might prosper too! But he feared that the liberated youth might enter the wrong path. He was the only son of his beloved sister, a fatherless and motherless lad, so he had never enjoyed the uninterrupted succession of precepts and lessons which only a mother can give and a defiant young spirit will accept from her alone. The hands of strangers had bound the sapling to a stake and it had shot straight upward, but a mother's love would have ennobled it with carefully chosen grafts. He had grown up beside another hearth than his parents', yet the latter is the only true home for youth. What marvel if he felt himself a stranger among his people.

Amid such thoughts a great sense of compassion stole over Joshua and, with it, the consciousness that he was deeply accountable for this youth who, for his sake, while on the way to bring him a message, had fallen into such sore misfortune. But much as he longed to warn him once more against treason and perjury, he refrained, fearing to imperil his success. Any noise might attract the attention of the guards, and he took as keen an interest in the attempt at liberation, as if Ephraim had made it at his suggestion.

So instead of annoying the youth with fruitless warnings, he kept watch for him; life had taught him that good advice is more frequently unheeded than followed, and only personal experiences possess resistless power of instruction.

The chief's practiced eye soon showed him the way by which Ephraim, if fortune favored him, could escape.

He called softly, and directly after his nephew whispered:

"I'll loose your ropes, if you will hold up your hands to me. Mine are free!"

Joshua's tense features brightened.

The defiant lad was a noble fellow, after all, and risked his own chance in behalf of one who, if he escaped with him, threatened to bar the way in which, in youthful blindness, he hoped to find happiness.

CHAPTER XIX.

Joshua gazed intently around him. The sky was still bright, but if the north wind continued to blow, the clouds which seemed to be rising from the sea must soon cover it.

The air had grown sultry, but the guards kept awake and regularly relieved one another. It was difficult to elude their attention; yet close by Ephraim's couch, which his uncle, for greater comfort, had helped him make on the side of a gently sloping hill, a narrow ravine ran down to the valley. White veins of gypsum and glittering mica sparkled in the moonlight along its bare edges. If the agile youth could reach this cleft unseen, and crawl through as far as the pool of saltwater, overgrown with tall grass and tangled desert shrubs, at which it ended, he might, aided by the clouds, succeed.

After arriving at this conviction Joshua considered, as deliberately as if the matter concerned directing one of his soldiers on his way, whether he himself, in case he regained the use of his hands, could succeed in following Ephraim without endangering his project. And he was forced to answer this question in the negative; for the guard who sometimes sat, sometimes paced to and fro on a higher part of the crest of the hill a few paces away, could but too easily perceive, by the moonlight, the youth's efforts to loose the firmly-knotted bonds. The cloud approaching the moon might perhaps darken it, ere the work was completed. Thus Ephraim might, on his account, incur the peril of losing the one fortunate moment which promised escape. Would it not be the basest of crimes, merely for the sake of the uncertain chance of flight, to bar the path to liberty of the youth whose natural protector he was? So he whispered to Ephraim:

"I cannot go with you. Creep through the chasm at your right to the salt-pool. I will watch the guards. As soon as the cloud passes over the moon and I clear my throat, start off. If you escape, join our

people. Greet my old father, assure him of my love and fidelity, and tell him where I am being taken. Listen to his advice and Miriam's; theirs is the best counsel. The cloud is approaching the moon,—not another word now!"

As Ephraim still continued to urge him in a whisper to hold up his pinioned arms, he ordered him to keep silence and, as soon as the moon was obscured and the guard, who was pacing to and fro above their heads began a conversation with the man who came to relieve him, Joshua cleared his throat and, holding his breath, listened with a throbbing heart for some sound in the direction of the chasm.

He first heard a faint scraping and, by the light of the fire which the guards kept on the hill-top as a protection against wild beasts, he saw Ephraim's empty couch.

He uttered a sigh of relief; for the youth must have entered the ravine. But though he strained his ears to follow the crawling or sliding of the fugitive he heard nothing save the footsteps and voices of the warders.

Yet he caught only the sound, not the meaning of their words, so intently did he fix his powers of hearing upon the course taken by the fugitive. How nimbly and cautiously the agile fellow must move! He was still in the chasm, yet meanwhile the moon struggled victoriously with the clouds and suddenly her silver disk pierced the heavy black curtain that concealed her from the gaze of men, and her light was reflected like a slender, glittering pillar from the motionless pool of salt-water, enabling the watching Joshua to see what was passing below; but he perceived nothing that resembled a human form.

Had the fugitive encountered any obstacle in the chasm? Did some precipice or abyss hold him in its gloomy depths? Had—and at the thought he fancied that his heart had stopped beating—Had some gulf swallowed the lad when he was groping his way through the night?

How he longed for some noise, even the faintest, from the ravine! The silence was terrible. But now! Oh, would that it had continued! Now the sound of falling stones and the crash of earth sliding after echoed loudly through the still night air. Again the moonlight burst through the cloud-curtain, and Joshua perceived near the pool a living creature which resembled an animal more than a human being, for it seemed to be crawling on four feet. Now the water sent up a shower of glittering spray. The figure below had leaped into the pool. Then the clouds again swallowed the lamp of night, and darkness covered everything.

With a sigh of relief Joshua told himself that he had seen the flying Ephraim and that, come what might, the escaping youth had gained a considerable start of his pursuers.

But the latter neither remained inert nor allowed themselves to be deceived; for though, to mislead them, he had shouted loudly: "A jackal!" they uttered a long, shrill whistle, which roused their sleeping comrades. A few seconds later the chief warder stood before him with a burning torch, threw its light on his face, and sighed with relief when he saw him. Not in vain had he bound him with double ropes; for he would have been called to a severe reckoning at home had this particular man escaped.

But while he was feeling the ropes on the prisoner's arms, the glare of the burning torch, which lighted him, fell on the fugitive's rude, deserted couch. There, as if in mockery, lay the gnawed rope. Taking it up, he flung it at Joshua's feet, blew his whistle again and again, and shouted: "Escaped! The Hebrew! Young Curly-head!"

Paying no farther heed to Joshua, he began the pursuit. Hoarse with fury, he issued order after order, each one sensible and eagerly obeyed.

While some of the guards dragged the prisoners together, counted them, and tied them with ropes, their commander, with the others and his dogs, set off on the track of the fugitive.

Joshua saw him make the intelligent animals smell Ephraim's gnawed bonds and resting-place, and beheld them instantly rush to the ravine. Gasping for breath, he also noted that they remained in it quite a long time, and at last—the moon meanwhile scattered the clouds more and more—darted out of the ravine, and dashed to the water. He felt that it was fortunate Ephraim had waded through instead of passing round it; for at its edge the dogs lost the scent, and minute after minute elapsed while the commander of the guards walked along the shore with the eager animals, which fairly thrust their noses into the fugitive's steps, in order to again get on the right trail. Their loud, joyous barking at last announced that they had found it. Yet, even if they persisted in following the runaway, the captive warrior no longer feared the worst, for Ephraim had gained a long advance of his pursuers. Still, his heart beat loudly enough and time seemed to stand still until the chief-warder returned exhausted and unsuccessful.

The older man, it is true, could never have overtaken the swift-footed youth, but the youngest and most active guards had been sent after the fugitive. This statement the captain of the guards himself made with an angry jeer.

The kindly-natured man seemed completely transformed,—for he felt what had occurred as a disgrace which could scarcely be overcome, nay, a positive misfortune.

The prisoner who had tried to deceive him by the shout of 'jackal!' was doubtless the fugitive's accomplice. Prince Siptah, too, who had interfered with the duties of his office, he loudly cursed. But nothing of the sort should happen again; and he would make the whole band feel what had fallen to his lot through Ephraim. Therefore he ordered the prisoners to be again loaded with chains, the ex-chief fastened to a coughing old man, and all made to stand in rank and file before the fire till morning dawned.

Joshua gave no answer to the questions his new companion-in-chains addressed to him; he was waiting with an anxious heart for the return of the pursuers. At times he strove to collect his thoughts to pray, and commended to the God who had promised His aid, his own destiny and that of the fugitive boy. True, he was often rudely interrupted by the captain of the guards, who vented his rage upon him.

Yet the man who had once commanded thousands of soldiers quietly submitted to everything, forcing himself to accept it like the unavoidable discomfort of hail or rain; nay, it cost him an effort to conceal his joyful emotion when, toward sunrise, the young warders sent in pursuit returned with tangled hair, panting for breath, and bringing nothing save one of the dogs with a broken skull.

The only thing left for the captain of the guards to do was to report what had occurred at the first fortress on the Etham border, which the prisoners were obliged in any case to pass, and toward this they were now driven.

Since Ephraim's flight a new and more cruel spirit had taken possession of the warders. While yesterday they had permitted the unfortunate men to move forward at an easy pace, they now forced them to the utmost possible speed. Besides, the atmosphere was sultry, and the scorching sun struggled with the thunderclouds gathering in heavy masses at the north.

Joshua's frame, inured to fatigues of every kind, resisted the tortures of this hurried march; but his weaker companion, who had grown grey in a scribe's duties, often gave way and at last lay prostrate beside him.

The captain was obliged to have the hapless man placed on an ass and chain another prisoner to Joshua. He was his former yoke-mate's brother, an inspector of the king's stables, a stalwart Egyptian, condemned to the mines solely on account of the unfortunate circumstance of being the nearest blood relative of a state criminal.

It was easier to walk with this vigorous companion, and Joshua listened with deep sympathy and tried to comfort him when, in a low voice, he made him the confidant of his yearning, and lamented the heaviness of heart with which he had left wife and child in want and suffering. Two sons had died of the pestilence, and it sorely oppressed his soul that he had been unable to provide for their burial—now his darlings would be lost to him in the other world also and forever.

At the second halt the troubled father became franker still. An ardent thirst for vengeance filled his soul, and he attributed the same feeling to his stern-eyed companion, whom he saw had plunged into misfortune from a high station in life. The ex-inspector of the stables had a sister-in-law, who was one of Pharaoh's concubines, and through her and his wife, her sister, he had learned that a conspiracy was brewing against the king in the House of the Separated.—[Harem]. He even knew whom the women desired to place in Menephtah's place.

As Joshua looked at him, half questioning, half doubting, his companion whispered. "Siptah, the king's nephew, and his noble mother, are at the head of the plot. When I am once more free, I will remember you, for my sister-in-law certainly will not forget me." Then he asked what was taking his companion to the mines, and Joshua frankly told his name. But when the Egyptian learned that he was fettered to a Hebrew, he tore wildly at his chain and cursed his fate. His rage, however, soon subsided in the presence of the strange composure with which his companion in misfortune bore the rudest insults, and Joshua was glad to have the other beset him less frequently with complaints and questions.

He now walked on for hours undisturbed, free to yield to his longing to collect his thoughts, analyze the new and lofty emotions which had ruled his soul during the past few days, and accommodate himself to his novel and terrible position.

This quiet reflection and self-examination relieved him and, during the following night, he was

invigorated by a deep, refreshing sleep.

When he awoke the setting stars were still in the sky and reminded him of the sycamore in Succoth, and the momentous morning when his lost love had won him for his God and his people. The glittering firmament arched over his head, and he had never so distinctly felt the presence of the Most High. He believed in His limitless power and, for the first time, felt a dawning hope that the Mighty Lord who had created heaven and earth would find ways and means to save His chosen people from the thousands of the Egyptian hosts.

After fervently imploring God to extend His protecting hand over the feeble bands who, obedient to His command, had left so much behind them and marched so confidently through an unknown and distant land, and commended to His special charge the aged father whom he himself could not defend, a wonderful sense of peace filled his soul.

The shouts of the guards, the rattling of the chain, his wretched companions in misfortune, nay, all that surrounded him, could not fail to recall the fate awaiting him. He was to grow grey in slavish toil within a close, hot pit, whose atmosphere choked the lungs, deprived of the bliss of breathing the fresh air and beholding the sunlight; loaded with chains, beaten and insulted, starving and thirsting, spending days and nights in a monotony destructive alike to soul and body,—yet not for one moment did he lose the confident belief that this horrible lot might befall any one rather than himself, and something must interpose to save him.

On the march farther eastward, which began with the first grey dawn of morning, he called this resolute confidence folly, yet strove to retain it and succeeded.

The road led through the desert, and at the end of a few hours' rapid march they reached the first fort, called the Fortress of Seti. Long before, they had seen it through the clear desert air, apparently within a bowshot.

Unrelieved by the green foliage of bush or palmtree, it rose from the bare, stony, sandy soil, with its wooden palisades, its rampart, its escarped walls, and its lookout, with broad, flat roof, swarming with armed warriors. The latter had heard from Pithom that the Hebrews were preparing to break through the chain of fortresses on the isthmus and had at first mistaken the approaching band of prisoners for the vanguard of the wandering Israelites.

From the summits of the strong projections, which jutted like galleries from every direction along the entire height of the escarped walls to prevent the planting of scaling-ladders, soldiers looked through the embrasures at the advancing convicts; yet the archers had replaced their arrows in the quivers, for the watchmen in the towers perceived how few were the numbers of the approaching troop, and a messenger had already delivered to the commander of the garrison an order from his superior authorizing him to permit the passage of the prisoners.

The gate of the palisade was now opened, and the captain of the guards allowed the prisoners to lie down on the glowing pavement within.

No one could escape hence, even if the guards withdrew; for the high fence was almost insurmountable, and from the battlements on the top of the jutting walls darts could easily reach a fugitive.

The ex-chief did not fail to note that everything was ready, as if in the midst of war, for defence against a foe. Every man was at his post, and beside the huge brazen disk on the tower stood sentinels, each holding in his hand a heavy club to deal a blow at the approach of the expected enemy; for though as far as the eye could reach, neither tree nor house was visible, the sound of the metal plate would be heard at the next fortress in the Etham line, and warn or summon its garrison.

To be stationed in the solitude of this wilderness was not a punishment, but a misfortune; and the commander of the army therefore provided that the same troops should never remain long in the desert.

Joshua himself, in former days, had been in command of the most southerly of these fortresses, called the Migdol of the South; for each one of the fortifications bore the name of Migdol, which in the Semitic tongue means the tower of a fortress.

His people were evidently expected here; and it was not to be supposed that Moses had led the tribes back to Egypt. So they must have remained in Succoth or have turned southward. But in that direction rolled the waters of the Bitter Lakes and the Red Sea, and how could the Hebrew hosts pass through the deep waters?

Hosea's heart throbbed anxiously at this thought, and all his fears were to find speedy confirmation; for he heard the commander of the fortress tell the captain of the prisoners' guards, that the Hebrews had approached the line of fortifications several days before, but soon after, without assaulting the garrison, had turned southward. Since then they seemed to have been wandering in the desert between Pithom and the Red Sea.

All this had been instantly reported at Tanis, but the king was forced to delay the departure of the army for several days until the week of general mourning for the heir to the throne had expired. The fugitives might have turned this to account, but news had come by a carrier dove that the blinded multitude had encamped at Pihahiroth, not far from the Red Sea. So it would be easy for the army to drive them into the water like a herd of cattle; there was no escape for them in any other direction.

The captain listened to these tidings with satisfaction; then he whispered a few words to the commander of the fortress and pointed with his finger to Joshua, who had long recognized him as a brother-in-arms who had commanded a hundred men in his own cohorts and to whom he had done many a kindness. He was reluctant to reveal his identity in this wretched plight to his former subordinate, who was also his debtor; but the commander flushed as he saw him, shrugged his shoulders as though he desired to express to Joshua regret for his fate and the impossibility of doing anything for him, and then exclaimed so loudly that he could not fail to hear:

"The regulations forbid any conversation with prisoners of state, but I knew this man in better days, and will send you some wine which I beg you to share with him."

As he walked with the other to the gate, and the latter remarked that Hosea deserved such favor less than the meanest of the band, because he had connived at the escape of the fugitive of whom he had just spoken, the commander ran his hand through his hair, and answered:

"I would gladly have shown him some kindness, though he is much indebted to me; but if that is the case, we will omit the wine; you have rested long enough at any rate."

The captain angrily gave the order for departure, and drove the hapless band deeper into the desert toward the mines.

This time Joshua walked with drooping head. Every fibre of his being rebelled against the misfortune of being dragged through the wilderness at this decisive hour, far from his people and the father whom he knew to be in such imminent danger. Under his guidance the wanderers might perchance have found some means of escape. His fist clenched when he thought of the fettered limbs which forbade him to utilize the plans his brain devised for the welfare of his people; yet he would not lose courage, and whenever he said to himself that the Hebrews were lost and must succumb in this struggle, he heard the new name God Himself had bestowed upon him ring in his ears and at the same moment the flames of hate and vengeance on all Egyptians, which had been fanned anew by the fortress commander's base conduct, blazed up still more brightly. His whole nature was in the most violent tumult and as the captain noted his flushed cheeks and the gloomy light in his eyes he thought that this strong man, too, had been seized by the fever to which so many convicts fell victims on the march.

When, at the approach of darkness, the wretched band sought a night's rest in the midst of the wilderness, a terrible conflict of emotions was seething in Joshua's soul, and the scene around him fitly harmonized with his mood; for black clouds had again risen in the north from the sea and, before the thunder and lightning burst forth and the rain poured in torrents, howling, whistling winds swept masses of scorching sand upon the recumbent prisoners.

After these dense clouds had been their coverlet, pools and ponds were their beds. The guards had bound them together hand and foot and, dripping and shivering, held the ends of the ropes in their hands; for the night was as black as the embers of their fire which the rain had extinguished, and who could have pursued a fugitive through such darkness and tempest.

But Joshua had no thought of secret flight. While the Egyptians were trembling and moaning, when they fancied they heard the wrathful voice of Seth, and the blinding sheets of fire flamed from the clouds, he only felt the approach of the angry God, whose fury he shared, whose hatred was also his own. He felt himself a witness of His all-destroying omnipotence, and his breast swelled more proudly as he told himself that he was summoned to wield the sword in the service of this Mightiest of the Mighty.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

A school where people learned modesty
But what do you men care for the suffering you inflict on others
Childhood already lies behind me, and youth will soon follow
Good advice is more frequently unheeded than followed
Precepts and lessons which only a mother can give
Should I be a man, if I forgot vengeance?
To the mines meant to be doomed to a slow, torturing death
What had formerly afforded me pleasure now seemed shallow

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK JOSHUA — VOLUME 3 ***

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