

THE SIGN ABOVE THE DOOR

I

CHAPTER I

MASTER AND MAN

MARTIESEN the adon had dismissed his attendants for the night, and, accompanied only by Peshala, his chief scribe or secretary, awaited the return of his lieutenant from Rameses. Martiesen was one of the most opulent Egyptian governors. He was in command of the Nome of the Prince, considered the most prosperous division in Lower Egypt, in which his family had long enjoyed preferment. Its system of canals had been brought to a state of perfection that insured a sufficient supply of water for the irrigation of the gardens at all times, and the harvests that came from its fields were noted for their abundance and uniform excellence. This nome, or political division, lay upon the eastern bank of the Nile; and embraced not only the land of Goshen, in

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which dwelt the Israelitish serfs, but also several populous towns and cities, which had been brought to an advanced condition of prosperity during the reign of Rameses II, the last preceding monarch. Close upon its southern border was located the city of Rameses, in which stood the palace of Meneptah, the Pharaoh, or king, of Egypt, who was devoting the energies of his kingdom to the construction of monuments and public works of considerable magnitude.

The ancestral home of the adon was one of beautiful luxury. It stood near the Nile, that mysterious and wonderful river, which has been a highway and source of wealth for untold thousands of years, and about it clustered the dwellings of the officers, superintendents, workmen, and slaves who were required to administer and conduct the affairs of a villa of such importance. In the house were displayed evidences of that Egyptian art which is still the marvel of the world, and to them had been added many rich and curious trophies won in the successful expeditions in which the adon and his ancestors had participated with the victorious armies of a nation which at that time ruled and exacted tribute, not only from the barbarous tribes of Ethiopia, but from Libya, Syria, and the

Phoenicians. Handsome ebony chairs and fauteuils inlaid with ivory, low seats or divans, rich couches, soft mats and rugs, hangings of delicate texture and brilliant colorings interlaced with threads of gold, and cushions of down covered with the finest linen, were displayed in the salon in profusion. Upon tables set apart for this purpose stood jars of sweet ointments, myrrh, frankincense, and choice odors in various forms, brought from Ethiopia, Syria, and Arabia. The ceiling was decorated with an exquisite pattern of lotus flowers upon a background of dark bronze, displaying refined taste and skillful execution. Above the entrance glistened the golden form of the sacred scarab. Curiously shaped instruments of bronze, ivory, and wood, designed for use in war, each no doubt possessing a story of some hard-fought battle, decorated the walls. About them, in singular contrast, were groups of delicate musical instruments, and articles of feminine adornment, probably swept into the baskets of looting soldiers from the rooms of women in whose veins ran royal blood.

The adon, half reclining in a broad chair of fine workmanship, over which was thrown the glistening skin of a leopard, was minutely examining a roll of papyrus that had been placed

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in his hands by his secretary. Martiesen the adon, scarcely more than twenty-five years of age, was tall, well-formed, and fine-fibered. His countenance bore marks of intellectual cultivation not common to men of that time who devoted themselves either to warfare or to public life, and, from the fact that he read the papyrus with ease, it was apparent that the adon was a scholar as well as a soldier and governor. There was about him that air of firmness which distinguishes the true leader, and it was evident that under his quiet and reserved manner slept both strength and passion, either of which might prove dangerous if provoked. Occasionally, as he perused the text, Martiesen drew the attention of his secretary to omissions or errors, and from the kindly way in which he pointed out the desired corrections, one might argue that he was at once frank and forgiving, for his criticisms were generally in the line of suggestion.

Peshala, the secretary, was of larger frame, but he was not so closely knit as the master, and did not bear the same evidence of force. Upon his face avarice, cunning, and jealousy were blended, with none, however, so marked as to conceal a certain dignified beauty and regularity of features, which enabled him to mask his feelings

when he desired. While his master was bent over the papyrus, the secretary's eyes wandered about the luxurious room, occasionally resting with a hungry, covetous glitter upon some costly ornament set with precious stones, from which the soft lights in the apartment broke back in sparkling rays. Then he would covertly glance at his chief, and over his face would spread a cloud of such malevolent hate that the man for the instant was metamorphosed, and was more the beast than the human being. But when the adon turned, and with a smile requested alterations in the record, Peshala, with an obsequious bow, caught up his stylus, and with apparent cheerfulness complied with the request. Once the adon raised his eyes and discovered the secretary bending forward and examining the sheath of a dagger lying with other curios in a niche near him. The sheath was set with gems in great profusion, and was alone worth the ransom of a king.

“What is it, Peshala?” asked the adon, quietly. “Have you not seen the dagger of the Libyan prince often enough for it no longer to excite your curiosity to such an extent as to make you unheedful of what is passing? Or were you thinking that you would be pleased to call the weapon

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your own?"

"No, my lord adon, it is not that," replied the secretary, quickly recovering himself. "My thoughts turned to the warrior who possessed the weapon before it came into your hands. He was my countryman."

"Yes, I remember that you are a Libyan by birth. But you came to Egypt when scarcely more than a boy, and have been taught all her ways. You can have little love for the arid plains and barren mountains of Libya, which you can scarcely be able to recall with accuracy or pleasure."

Peshala shook his head doubtfully. "Often I dream of those plains and mountains," he said, "but more frequently of the brave men who were swept down by the hosts of Egypt, and lost their lives and treasure."

"Aye, war has ever its rugged edge," said the adon, "and had we not repelled the Libyans, they would have devastated Egypt. As for this dagger, it was taken in honorable battle. I was but a youth when we fought to stay the Libyan invasion, and while the battle waged, I came in contact with a powerful warrior many years my senior. When his chariot bore down upon me, he laughed in derision, as though he considered the contest beneath his caste. I so guided my chargers that

the wheels of our chariots were locked, and the Libyan, still disdainful of my youth, struck carelessly at me with his sword. I parried successfully, and his weapon flew from his hand, and then, before he could seize his spear, I leaped upon his chariot and struck, with my battle-axe, a blow that cleft his skull. As was my right in battle, I took from the Libyan his weapons, of which this dagger was the most curious and valuable. From its appearance I believe it was an heirloom in the family of the man who carried it, and as it was my first trophy in war, I prize it highly."

The adon stepped forward, and raised the dagger from its resting-place. "Look," he said as he drew the blade from its scabbard, "in all Egypt there is not its equal."

The weapon was of superior workmanship, and its hardened and tempered bronze blade, polished like a mirror, was so skillfully wrought that it possessed the pliability of steel. The handle was inlaid with silver and gold, interlaced to form curious figures. The sheath, also of bronze, bore many jewels, several of them of unusual size. As the adon displayed the beautiful object, and drew attention to its perfect shape and workmanship, Peshala could scarcely control his emotion. The adon was so intent upon the weapon that he

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did not observe that his secretary was on the point of springing upon him. The man's eyes contracted, until they were mere points glittering like an angry reptile's, and each instant he crouched lower, like a cat about to leap upon its prey. It was fortunate that the intensity of the situation was at this moment broken by a musical peal from the bars of metal hanging in the portico, announcing the arrival of a guest.

"It is Panas," said the adon as he sheathed the dagger, and replaced it in the niche. "Hasten to admit him."

Peshala hesitated an instant, as a man who has heard, but does not comprehend, and then he started, with unsteady steps, to obey the command; but not until he crossed the salon, and entered the hall leading to the portico, did he regain his composure. Martiesen noted this with curiosity. He knew little concerning the scribe, who had come to him about three months before, bearing recommendations as to equipment for his duties. The adon found him ready, active, and intelligent, but given somewhat to moody silence. Previously he had never shown unusual emotion in the presence of his master, and its display at this time was the source of some surprise. Before

Martiesen satisfied himself as to the cause, the hangings parted, and Panas, followed by Peshala, entered the salon.

“Ah, Panas, your return is welcome; we have awaited your coming since sunset. But I know that the delay was not of your own choice, for tardiness never has been charged against you.”

“No, my lord adon,” replied the lieutenant, as he advanced and accepted the invitation to be seated. “The delay was unavoidable, for the home journey was taken up immediately after the completion of my mission.”

“Of this I have no doubt, Panas, for I am sure you do not especially love the city of our august ruler. But tell me, did you obtain audience with the king?”

“I did not, my lord. The Pharaoh was engaged in the consideration of some plans, in company with the royal architects, and would not permit interruption. I was content, therefore, to lodge your petition in the hands of the ab, who in turn brought it to the attention of Meneptah, when he laid aside the plans and partook of refreshment.”

“And is there a reply?”

“Yes. The king was angered at what he termed your insistence, and, calling his scribe, he dictated

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his commands.”

The lieutenant presented a packet covered with soft, flexible leather, wrapped with three narrow strips of linen, each sealed with the cartouche of the Pharaoh. Martiesen received the packet with due reverence, and, placing it upon a table, authorized his secretary to break the seals. Peshala performed this task with exquisite care. He severed the bands of linen so skillfully that the wax which bore the cartouche was not marred. From the wrappings he drew a papyrus roll, and awaited further commands.

“Read,” said the adon, “and the words written at the command of the Pharaoh shall be obeyed.”

Slowly unrolling the papyrus and speaking as the hieroglyphics came to view, Peshala read:

“Meneptah, Ruler of Lower and Upper Egypt and Wearer of two crowns, Lord and Pharaoh over all this land and of the People within its borders, doth command Martiesen, son of Peturis, Adon and Governor of the Nome of the Prince, and Captain of the Officers and Soldiers of the Pharaoh who have in charge the Hebrew People:

“That he shall not remit one jot or tittle of the

Tasks which have, in the judgment of the King, been placed upon the Hebrews — But shall require of them all that hath been commanded, that they may not waste their Days in Idleness, seeking to stir up Insurrection and Sedition against the Kingdom in which they are held as Slaves — That it is the Will of Meneptah that there be no relaxation of their Work — That the tale of Bricks required of each male Hebrew will not be diminished, lest the workmen of the King in the Treasure-Cities and upon the Monuments which are being built to the Glory of Egypt may have no materials with which to build — And if it be true, what thou sayest by the hand of Panas, that the women of the Hebrews and their children go forth to gather stubble in the fields and sedge in the Canals that the men may complete their work — Then so be it.

Meneptah.

“Executed and confirmed by Erius the son of Phaures, Ab of Meneptah — Pharaoh of all Egypt — Gods of the Beneficent Gods, of the Father-Loving Gods, of the Paternal Gods, and of the Mother-Loving Gods — Amen.”

Silence rested upon the three for a moment

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after the secretary ceased to read. Then the adon spoke:

“In the name of the Pharaoh these commands must be executed, even though Egypt suffer. Peshala, see that the couriers are summoned to report to me at dawn. And you, Panas, seek rest, that you may come in the morning to the court, and there tell me what new rumors you have heard at Rameses.”

The adon and his lieutenant left the apartment, and the secretary, still holding the papyrus in his hands, remained beside the table, until he heard their footsteps cross the court. Then he rolled the papyrus carefully, and restored it to its covering. The linen bands with their unbroken seals were wrapped in a square of silk, and this was deposited in a small casket containing papyrus, stylus, writing-fluids, and wax. Almost noiselessly the man moved about the salon, extinguishing the lamps and tapers, until the room was illumined only by the rays of the moon, which came gently through the opalescent windows. Carefully he crept towards the niche in which reposed the Libyan weapon. His slender fingers lightly passed over the wall, until his hand came to the resting-place of the blade, and then he

seized upon it as a prize, and held it against his breast.

“My father’s dagger,” he whispered, in a voice choking with emotion. “How well I knew there was not in all this world its fellow, and that this which I have found here, and have sought throughout all Egypt, must have been his. To-night, when the murderer boasted how he robbed Libya of her noblest prince, my quest came to an end. Here is the man upon whom I will wreak vengeance — and I, the son, stood by and heard his idle tale, and did not strike him dead, though every muscle in my body throbbled with the desire! But when my arm would strike, I thought that a death that comes so quickly would be no punishment, and so I stayed the blow.”

He stood a moment in silence, with uplifted face, and then he spoke again:

“It was not a truthful tale he told, for neither one, nor two, nor three such as this Egyptian could bring the Prince of Libya to his death. It was told my mother that her husband was surrounded by a score of hired soldiers, who overcame him with spears, and the master of the murderous band plundered his corpse. Yet this Martiesen boasts that he, a boy, won the vantage

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in fair and single-handed contest — and makes the boast to one who knows the claim is false! So I will pull him down, and tread into the dust his power and insolence, and grind his pride under my feet, until he begs his gods to send him death and thus relief.”

The impassioned man swayed from side to side as he held the weapon to his breast, clinging to it with the eagerness and love a mother would shower upon a child from whom she had been long parted. Tenderly he brought it to his lips, and from a great ruby in the handle the pale moonlight was reflected over his face like the scarlet glow of blood. He stood a moment thus, and then tremblingly replaced the venerated heirloom within the niche.

With bowed head and shaking limbs he crept backward to the entrance.

