

Fullness of Time
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Now, by Pharoah's decree, the slaves labored double in the brickyards. Faster and faster they were driven, heavier and heavier were the loads they carried. And Moses saw this with mounting grief, so that sorrow and pity filled all his days.

Had he been the cause of all this suffering? Had he brought this misery upon them? He who had wanted so to help them. What could he do against the entrenched power of Pharoah, directed now toward the Hebrew slaves?

He could not bear to watch the slaves working. He could not linger in the neighborhood of the brickyards. If his way took him there, he hurried past and tried not to look.

As the days went by it seemed to him incredible that this could be the end of their struggle against Pharoah. Had he not called on Jehovah? Was Jehovah not more powerful than Pharoah? He would not go back to the peaceful life of Midian. Perhaps, after all, some way would be found.

So day followed day, and season followed season, and Moses was still in Egypt, waiting. In the spring the Nile waters rose and filled the irrigation ditches and flooded the fields, and later the farmers plowed and sowed their seed and harvested their crops, and still Moses waited.

In the markets the people bartered onions for oil, oil for honey, honey for wheat, wheat for necklaces. And the dust stirred up by the hoofs of the donkeys covered all with a white powder, and the flies buzzed and droned. And still Moses was there.

Only now the work of the people was heavier than it had been before.

The tax collectors on their rounds were demanding larger amounts of barley or linen, the overseers were exacting heavier labor. And Merneptah's tomb in the cliffs west of the city was slowly rising to colossal proportions, for it was the custom of every Pharaoh to build his tomb and have it ready against the day when his own mummy should be put into it.

There was little complaint among the people now. They accepted the lot life brought them hopelessly. What use was it to complain? Would it bring you more to eat? Yet Moses was never resigned. Surely Jehovah would not tolerate injustice, he kept saying to himself. Surely He would send some sign. And Moses was right; for soon strange things began to happen.

One day Moses was sitting on a low stone wall at the edge of the Nile watching the river craft that went back and forth and up and down the stream. Some of them were cabin boats bearing loads of grain and jars of oil, or animals for the temple sacrifice. Some of the boats carried striped sails, but since there was little breeze, most of the sails were furled and the rowers were bending over painted oars. Now and again the pleasure boat of some nobleman passed him, its painted stern curved up and carved like a lotus flower. The procession on the river was like a pageant passing by, bright and beautiful for anyone who did not look beyond it and see the suffering that was there.

Moses had watched the river for some time when he observed an unusual combination. A great barge loaded with heavy dark red blocks of building stone was moving slowly toward him. It had brought the stone from the mountains far up the Nile, to be used in Merneptah's tomb. Since the stone was so heavy that it weighed the barge down almost to the gunwales, it was necessary to use as many as a dozen small row boats to pull it.

With shouts from the overseers and creaking and splashing of the

oars, the barge slowly made its way to the place where Moses sat. Then the small boats threw off the ropes, and the barge was made fast to the wall.

The master of the barge, a short squat man with a shaven head and a strong muscular frame, sat down beside Moses on the wall.

"There's another piece of the tomb delivered," he said, "Or almost delivered, that is. It takes a long time and much sweat to make a mountain into a tomb."

"How was the trip?' Moses asked him. "Did you have fair winds to help you down the river?"

"The winds were fair enough," the master said. "I have no complaint of them. But there is a queer thing up the river. I never saw anything like it in all the years that I have been going up and down. The water is almost red up there – it looks more like blood than water."

"What makes it red?" Moses asked.

"I don't know what it is," the master said. "Its queer enough anyway."

"Is there some sort of insect in it, or some sort of plant?" Moses asked him.

"It looks more like blood," said the master.

Their talk was interrupted then, for preparations for unloading the barge were complete, and the master wanted to supervise the moving of the building blocks.

The blocks were extremely large and heavy, and moving them was a very slow process. When each one was lowered to the ground, it was

slid along on a drag. Rollers were placed under the drag, and slaves were harnessed to it to pull it across the ground toward the site of the tomb. One block was much heavier than the others. The slaves who were harnessed to it could not budge it, even under the crack of the overseer's whip. So more and more slaves were brought, and when it finally moved, very slowly and very grudgingly, there were a hundred slaves throwing their weight against the weight of the block. Moses felt cold and sick as he watched them.

They dragged the great block on until it came to a hollow, and it moved slowly and heavily down the incline. It seemed as if no force on earth could have stopped it as it rolled downward, but the slaves were kept in harness, so that they could pull it up the other side of the hollow again.

There was one slave, a Hebrew, slighter and younger than the rest. Moses could not see his face, but he noticed that his shoulders were sagging, and that his breath came in sharp gasps. His place was behind the other slaves, nearest to the drag and its weight of the stone. When the stone started to move down the incline, the overseer cried out and the slaves ran forward, but the young slave that Moses was watching suddenly crumpled and fell. He lay still while the great block moved slowly toward him.

Moses sprang forward. Quickly he pulled the boy to one side, while the drag with its great weight of stone moved on. He drew the boy's limp body to the shadow of the wall, and called a passer by to bring a cup of water. After a while the slave stirred into consciousness, and Moses saw the suffering and sorrow of all the world in his dark eyes. Bending close over him Moses heard him speak.

"Why did you save me?" he whispered. "I didn't want to live."

But Moses' hand was cool and firm on his shoulder, and his voice was

clear and definite in his ear. "You have to live," he said. "You and I have to live, and fight."

Moses had good reason for hopefulness now, for though no change had been made in Pharoah's harsh decree, there were certain portents which seemed to him to have meaning. Plagues of frogs and flies and lice followed each along the valley of the Nile in swift succession. Such plagues had been known in Egypt before, of course, but never had they come so fast, one after another. And now murrain fell upon the cattle, and violent hailstorms destroyed the crops just before harvest time.

All these things were of the utmost annoyance to Pharoah, who was accustomed to commanding what he wished. If plagues like these were repeated often they might result in serious shortages and make tax collections impossible. He consulted astrologers and magicians, but they could suggest no remedy. They were in fact extremely nervous and frightened, and their fright took on new proportions when the sun was shut away by the clouds for three whole days – a strange occurrence indeed in that land of cloudless skies.

But if Pharoah and his astrologers were worried by the strange phenomena, Moses found them filled with a possible meaning for the Hebrew people.

"Jehovah is helping us," he said one day to Aaron. "We must be ready. Some day there will be a final, culminating event. I cannot tell what it will be, but we must be ready. When the final blow comes to Pharoah, he will let us go – if no sign comes, we will go anyway."

So for more than a year he worked and planned, that the people might be ready when the time came. He decided to talk with every Hebrew in Heliopolis, and he visited their houses, one after another, paying his visits when the work in quarry, mine or field had stopped because of

darkness. Many were the stories of evil he heard as he talked to the workmen and shared their chunks of bread and mugs of beer. Every night he spoke of an end of their sufferings, and of freedom. But they were tired and discouraged with their struggling and paid little heed to him.

One night he stopped at the house of a man named Nun and, sitting in the doorway, talked to him of the people's apathy. "How can we rouse them," Moses kept saying. "What can we do to stir them?" But Nun could only bow his head. Finally he spoke: "What does a man know of freedom who was born a slave?" he said. "A man who has worked as a slave from one year's end to the next, does not know what freedom is." There was a long silence. Joshua, the son of Nun, had been sitting in the corner of the room, polishing a cane that he had carved. He was a strong, well built youth of about twenty with a handsome face and curly black hair. He rose from the stool where he had been sitting, and stood before Moses and his father now. "Can't we tell them again?" he said. "Can't we go to see them all a second time?... I will go with you." "Come Joshua," Nun said sharply. "What impertinence is this. You, a mere youth, advising Moses what to do? I beg you to forgive his lack of manners," he said turning to Moses. But Moses put his hands on the lad's shoulder. "I think that Joshua is right," he said. "Will you help me, Joshua?" So night after night, Moses continued to talk to the people, and often Joshua was with him. Moses grew very fond of him.

"Do you want your children to work as you have worked?" Moses asked the people who he visited. "What right has any man to strike you with a whip? Are you a beast?"

Gradually the light of understanding came to eyes that had too long been dulled. And slowly one after another they began to grasp what it might mean to be free. Slowly then a great plan began to take shape, and the Hebrew people knew that they would stir themselves to a harder effort than any they had ever made.

"By the night of the spring solstice we should be ready" Moses said. "But we must not go until we have made the spring sacrifice. Each one who has a flock must choose his most perfect lamb, and smear its blood on the lintel, and roast its flesh in the fire. Even though the feast is quickly prepared, and the bread we eat with it is quickly baked without leaven, we must not neglect to make the sacrifice as our fathers have always done. After the sacrifice has been made this year, we will leave Egypt. Pharoah will rage; it may be some of us will die at his hand; but life means nothing to us as we are; we must go in spite of him."

These were the plans that Moses made, repeating them over and over as he went from house to house.

When the night of the spring solstice finally came, not a Hebrew slept. Those who were slaves, and those who had some small possession of flocks or herds – all lay awake. In every house the people whispered together as they made their hushed preparations. Bundles were packed and donkeys harnessed with heavy saddlebags. In the outlying districts of the city, flocks of sheep and goats waited behind their bars. In every house a lamb's blood was smeared on the lintel and doorposts with prayers to Jehovah, and a lamb's flesh was baked in the fire. And in every house men and women, girded and shod, with staves in their hands, stood ready to depart.

They had no way of knowing that events were already beginning to occur in Pharoah's palace which were to help them in their exodus.

A faint, faint moan stirred through the dark of Pharoah's palace. It was soft almost a whisper, yet it was sorrowful as death. Pharoah, lying restless on his couch, heard it. He rose and made his way through the dark to his son's chamber. He put his hand down on the boy's body – and he knew that he was dead. "Awake! Awake!" he cried to any that could hear him. "Awake! Bring lights! Bring Lights! My son!"

Suddenly the palace blazed into light. From every court, from every room, servants and princes, men and boys, women and children, came running. They crowded into the bed chamber with lamps and torches and candles, until the darkness was turned into a flaming light. But the young prince, Pharoah's son, lay still. Dead upon his couch.

The physicians came with ointments and drugs, the magicians brought their spells and incantations, but the young prince did not stir.

"Not the prince only, but the chief steward's son is stricken. And the baker's son. Woe! Woe!" They cried.

"The sickness is spreading through the city. There is none that is safe now. No not the Pharoah's son himself."

"Where is the high priest?" someone said. "Send for the high priest of Amen."

A slave was dispatched to the temple, and soon the high priest of Amen, who was known as "The Great Seer," appeared at the door of the bed chamber. There was a hush among the people who crowded the room, as he made his way slowly toward the bed and stood looking down at the Pharoah's dead son. The gold light of the torches and candles shone down on his shaven head and on his rich embroidered robes. "It is the work of the Hebrews," he said with authority. "Their god, Jehovah, is very powerful. First the Nile ran red as blood, then came the frogs, the flies, the lice, the murrain on the cattle, and the hail that destroyed the crops. Then the darkness when Amen absented himself from his people for three full days. Now this. Moses has said many times that he would call again upon Jehovah. He has called upon Him now."

Lord willing, in Fullness of Time this message will continue...