

The Valley of the Nile

By David Meadows & Friends



Portents

It was early summer in the 19th year of the reign of Pharaoh Tuthmosis III, some weeks before the flooding of the Nile. In the trading town of Hebenu on the third cataract, the harvest had been gathered and was being shipped down the Nile ahead of the flood, this task occupying almost every available boat and sailor, as it did every year.

And so the court of Nekure, the town administrator, was oddly empty on this morning. Nekure, now old but still a wise and prudent governor, was attended by his two advisors. Standing to the left of his chair, Meriptah, the wily priest and astrologer. To the right, Sabu, leader of the town's garrison, recently returned from the Syrian war. To one side knelt a silent slave girl, ignored by all. Nekure addressed the five people he had summoned to an audience, who now stood silently before him after paying the proper deference to his rank.

'Some nights ago I saw a star fall from the sky in the south. This sign troubles me, for I must know whether it is a sign for good or ill. Meriptah the priest has advised me that it is a matter for the priestesses of Nut to interpret. He tells me I must send envoys to carry my message to the priestesses, with a gift of this slave newly brought from Syria by General Sabu, and beg of them the answer to this conundrum. But the temple of Nut is many days' sail up Mother Nile, and our sailors are all away with the grain harvest. I have only one boat I can send, but I have no crew for it. I ask you, then, will you five discharge this task for me?'

Ptank was a priest of Hathor, a younger cousin of Nekure and thus of noble status, and the obvious man to lead the expedition, as Meriptah had counselled Nekure. He could not shake the feeling that Meriptah had suggested him for the dangerous assignment in order to remove a rival from the court, but neither could he refuse the duty offered to him by his cousin. Covering up his unease, he accepted the burden of leadership with profuse thanks to his cousin for this opportunity to serve him. He was determined to come back safely and covered with glory, and surely then supplant Meriptah as Nekure's favoured servant.

'The journey will only take five days, cousin,' he stated confidently.

Alex was a foreigner, a refugee from the island of Crete far to the north. She had spent many years plying the Nile riverboats since fleeing her own earthquake-ravaged land, before finally washing up here

on the southern rim of the kingdom. She was one of the few free sailors remaining in the town at this busy time, and as Ptank spoke she could not avoid rolling her eyes. The man might be a good priest (though she had little time for gods and priests) but he had clearly never handled a boat in his life.

Not that it took great skill to sail this river. The Nile that these Egyptians so revered was placid and predictable, nothing like the seas Alex was accustomed to sailing. She could sail it in her sleep.

But she held these opinions to herself. She had no boat of her own she was glad of the opportunity to captain the boat that Nekure would furnish the expedition with, and therefore she thanked the governor, in her broken Egyptian, for the opportunity he had presented her with.

Sit-Hathor was one of the town's merchants. She signified that she would join the expedition, and she began talking about the trade goods they would need in order to hire oarsmen for the latter part of their journey, until Nekure silenced her with a promise to furnish her with suitable resources.

Yames, who called himself a Free Stone Mason, was a visitor from a far northern land, beyond even Alex's island home, a land of pale skin and paler hair by the looks of him. He had travelled the length of Egypt to study their monuments, and had already asked permission of Nekure to visit the temple of Nut to the south. In worse Egyptian than Alex's even, he made a short speech to thank Nekure for the chance to join the expedition.

S'Peok, the huge, muscle-bound Nubian hunter and loyal servant of Nekure, leaned on his spear and nodded. He was a man of few words.

The slave girl had no say in the matter, naturally. Though those who watched General Sabu's face may have detected anger at his war booty being taken from him at Nekure's whim.

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Later in the day, Sabu confronted Meriptah in one of the town's many shaded courtyards.

'Priest, did you counsel Nekure to take my slave from me?'

'The priestesses of Nut will not answer Nekure's question without a gift, you know that Sabu.'

'There are many slaves in town, any could have been sent. This one was hard won in Syria by my own sword, and was not yours to give!' Sabu's anger made his scar show whitely against his dark skin, but Meriptah was unimpressed.

'General Sabu,' he said calmly, 'No girl in this town would suit as well as this one. She has a special attraction for the priestesses.'

Sabu's eyes narrowed suspiciously. 'And what does this mean?'

'Alas, I can say no more that you would understand. It is a holy matter, for priests alone to know. Trust the gods, Sabu, and trust that they speak through me.'

'I trust you as far as I would trust a crocodile, priest. And you have not heard the last of this.'

Sabu stalked off, leaving Meriptah troubled.

He was quite sure that Sabu felt no special fondness for this particular slave, just one among many that the general owned. She was not even a particularly attractive slave, with her strange foreign colouring. It was simply the thought that she was being taken against his will that angered the general. It was conceivable that the general would do something most unwise concerning the girl, and that would certainly upset the gods' plans.

This was a matter which would need careful thought, mused the priest.

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The following dawn, the volunteer sailors were introduced to their boat. Alex's face fell. It was a small craft, and, in her opinion, in such a poor state that it should have been retired years ago. Still, it would be comfortable enough for the six-person expedition. While Sit-Hathor supervised the loading of their small stock of goods, Alex went about ensuring that sails and rigging were, if not in good order, then at least sufficiently robust to survive the journey.

In this season, a strong northerly wind blew constantly through the daylight hours, with sufficient force to propel boats up the Nile against the flow of the current. To travel down river, they would simply lower the sail and steer the boat with the current. It was a routine that had driven Nile trade for countless centuries.

Between the Third and Fourth Cataracts, however, the river made a great semi-circular bend, so that for a long stretch it was flowing north. For that part of their journey, both wind and current would be against them, and so the boat would have to be rowed. Their plan was to hire itinerant oarsmen from a town on their route, to allow them to pass this stretch of the river.

Presently, the Nubian S'Peok arrived, escorting the slave. She had been dressed in considerable finery, presumably to make her a more attractive gift to the priestesses. S'Peok indicated that the girl should sit in the sheltered area of the deck, and she complied without a word.

Ptank bustled over.

'Guard her!' he enunciated slowly and clearly as if speaking to a child, while gesturing to emphasise his meaning.'

'I understand your tongue,' the Nubian stated in accented but clear Egyptian, his expression as impassive as always.

Smoothly, Ptank turned to Yames and began discussing their journey. After some minutes of the priest's prattle, Yames shrugged.

'I do not understand any of these details, I am simply a Free Stone Mason. Perhaps you should talk to this woman who is to captain the vessel?'

Ptank moved over to Alex and began giving instructions which she largely ignored.

When preparations were complete, Ptank made an elaborate blessing and called on the gods to favour their journey. Alex, who followed different gods, waited impatiently for it to be over, then signalled the labourers on the stone jetty to cast off the ropes and push the boat away from the shore. Leaning on the steering oar, she kept the prow pointing into the current while the wind filled the triangular sail and carried them out into the centre of the vast river. Then she sat back in contentment while the long miles of unbroken riverbank flowed lazily past.

The current pushing against them was slow and sluggish. With the constant, brisk wind at their backs, they made good time and the town was soon lost in the morning haze.

Ptank and Sit-Hathor were soon engaged in tedious gossip about the affairs of Hebenu. Yames, bored by this, moved to sit next to the Nubian who squatted in the prow, his eyes keenly alert for crocodiles, sandbanks, and other hazards of the river. In his poorly-accented Egyptian, Yames addressed the Nubian with a few pleasantries. S'Peok only grunted.

'Nubians do not make small talk,' called Alex from the stern. Shrugging, Yames moved to join her instead, and requested that the captain teach him about sailing a boat.

When Alex was fairly sure that the northerner could hold the steering oar straight and not run them into the bank, she left him to it and moved to where the slave girl knelt amidships. As a fellow foreign woman in Egypt, she was curious to learn more about the young slave.

'My name is Alex. I am from the island of Crete. What is your name?'

'Esther,' said the girl, keeping her eyes on the deck.

'From?'

'I am Hittite.'

Alex had travelled extensively and knew the Hittites. The girl's red hair, green eyes, and pale skin did not indicate a Hittite origin. And the name Esther was Persian, meaning 'Star' in that language. Here was a puzzle.

Alex spent some more time conversing with the girl, but was not able to draw much more information from her. She had been a slave before General Sabu had captured her from the camp of a defeated Syrian army, and to her mind slavery in Egypt was no different from slavery in Syria. Being a slave to the priestesses of Nut would be no different again.

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The boat sailed on through the afternoon heat. Alex, again at the steering oar, scarcely paid attention to the river, which was wide and free of obstruction. She paid less attention to the featureless, unchanging bank, but happened to be gazing at the nearer bank, the west bank on their right, when she witnessed something strange. It was sufficiently disturbing for her to slacken off the sail and let the boat lose headway while she took a longer look.

‘Why are we slowing?’ asked Ptank peevisly.

‘Pardon me, priest, but is it normal for your people to place your dead in the river?’

‘It most certainly is not! Why do you ask that?’

‘Because I saw a man place a body in the river yonder.’

‘A *dead* body?’ asked the priest incredulously.

Alex gestured at the west bank. ‘If he is not dead, that is an impressive feat of breath holding,’ she said.

The whole party peered at the spot she was pointing at.

A man’s body was floating face down in the river.

To be continued ...