

NOTE BY MAQUEDA

Once called Walda Nagasta and Takla Warda, that is, Child of Kings and Bud of the Rose, once also by birth Ruler of the Abati people, the Sons of Solomon and Sheba.

I, MAQUEDA, write this by the command of Oliver, my lord, who desires that I should set out certain things in my own words.

Truly all men are fools, and the greatest of them is Oliver, my lord, though perhaps he is almost equalled by the learned man whom the Abati called Black Windows, and by the doctor, Son of Adam. Only he who is named Roderick, child of Adam, is somewhat less blind, because having been brought up among the Fung and other people of the desert, he has gathered a little wisdom. This I know because he has told me that he alone saw through my plan to save all their lives, but said nothing of it because he desired to escape from Mur, where certain death waited on him and his companions. Perhaps, however, he lies to please me.

Now, for the truth of the matter, which not being skilled in writing I will tell briefly.

I was carried out of the cave city with my lord and the others, starving, starving, too weak to kill myself, which otherwise I would have done rather than fall into the hands of my accursed uncle, Joshua. Yet I was stronger than the rest, because as I have learned, they tricked me about those biscuits, pretending to eat when they were not eating, for which never will I forgive them. It was Japhet, a gallant man on one side, but a coward on the

other like the rest of the Abati, who betrayed us, driven thereto by emptiness within, which, after all, is an ill enemy to fight. He went out and told Joshua where we lay hid, and then, of course, they came.

Well, they took away my lord and the others, and me too they bore to another place and fed me till my strength returned, and oh! how good was that honey which first I ate, for I could touch nothing else. When I was strong again came Prince Joshua to me and said, "Now I have you in my net; now you are mine."

Then I answered Joshua, "Fool, your net is of air; I will fly through it."

"How?" he asked. "By death," I answered, "of which a hundred means lie to my hand. You have robbed me of one, but what does that matter when so many remain? I will go where you and your love cannot pursue me."

"Very well, Child of Kings," he said, "but how about that tall Gentile who has caught your eyes, and his companions? They, too, have recovered, and they shall die every one of them after a certain fashion (which, I Maqueda, will not set down, since there are some things that ought not to be written). If you die, they die; as I told you, they die as a wolf dies that is caught by the shepherds; they die as a baboon dies that is caught by the husbandman."

Now I looked this way and that, and found that there was no escape. So I made a bargain.

"Joshua," I said, "let these men go and I swear upon the name of our mother, she of Sheba, that I will marry you. Keep them and kill them, and you will have none of me."

Well, in the end, because he desired me and the power that went with me, he consented.

Then I played my part. My lord and his companions were brought before me, and in presence of all the people I mocked them; I spat in their faces, and oh! fools, fools,

fools, they believed me! I lifted my veil, and showed them my eyes, and they believed also what they seemed to see in my eyes, forgetting that I am a woman who can play a part at need. Yes, they forgot that there were others to deceive as well, all the Abati people, who, if they thought I tricked them, would have torn the foreigners limb from limb. That was my bitterest morsel, that I should have succeeded in making even my lord believe that of all the wicked women that ever trod this world, I was the most vile. Yet I did so, and he cannot deny it, for often we have talked of this thing till he will hear of it no more.

Well, they went with all that I could give them, though I knew well that my lord cared nothing for what I could give, nor the doctor, Child of Adam, either, who cared only for his son that God had restored to him. Only Black Windows cared, not because he loves wealth, but because he worships all that is old and ugly, for of such things he fashions up his god.

They went, for their going was reported to me, and I, I entered into hell because I knew that my lord thought me false, and that he would never learn the truth, namely, that what I did I did to save his life, until at length he came to his own country, if ever he came there, and opened the chests of treasure, if ever he opened them, which perhaps he would not care to do. And all that while he would believe me the wife of Joshua, and—oh! I cannot write of it. And I, I should be dead; I, I could not tell him the truth until he joined me in that land of death, if there men and women can talk together any more.

For this and no other was the road that I had planned to walk. When he and his companions had gone so far that they could not be followed, then I would tell Joshua and the Abati all the truth in such language as should never be forgotten for generations, and kill myself before their eyes, so that Joshua might lack a wife and the Abati a Child of Kings.

I sat through the Feast of Preparation and smiled and smiled. It passed and the next day passed, and came the night of the Feast of Marriage. The glass was broken, the ceremony was fulfilled. Joshua rose up to pledge me before all the priests, lords, and headmen. He devoured me with his hateful eyes, me, who was already his. But I, I handled the knife in my robe, wishing, such was the rage in my heart, that I could kill him also.

Then God spoke, and the dream that I had dreamed came true. Far away there rose a single cry, and after it other cries, and the sounds of shouting and of marching feet. Far away tongues of fire leaped into the air, and each man asked his neighbour, "What is this?" Then from all the thousands of the feasting people rose one great scream, and that scream said, "Fung! Fung! The Fung are on us! Fly, fly, fly!"

"Come," shouted Joshua, seizing me by the arm, but I drew my dagger on him and he let go. Then he fled with the other lords, and I remained in my high seat beneath the golden canopy alone.

The people fled past me without fighting; they fled into the cave city, they fled to the rocks; they hid themselves among the precipices, and after them came the Fung, slaying and burning, till all Mur went up in flames. And I, I sat and watched, waiting till it was time for me to die also.

At last, I know not how long afterward, appeared before me Barung, a red sword in his hand, which he lifted to me in salute.

"Greeting, Child of Kings," he said. "You see Harmac is come to sleep at Mur."

"Yes," I answered, "Harmac is come to sleep at Mur, and many of those who dwelt there sleep with him. What of it? Say, Barung, will you kill me, or shall I kill myself?"

"Neither, Child of Kings," he answered in his high fashion. "Did I not make you a promise yonder in the

Pass of Mur, when I spoke with you and the Western men, and does a Fung Sultan break his word? I have taken back the city that was ours, as I swore to do, and purified it with fire," and he pointed to the raging flames. "Now I will rebuild it, and you shall rule under me."

"Not so," I answered; "but in place of that promise I ask of you three things."

"Name them," said Barung.

"They are these: First, that you give me a good horse and five days' food, and let me go where I will. Secondly, that if he still lives you advance one Japhet, a certain Mountaineer who befriended me and brought others to do likewise, to a place of honour under you. Thirdly, that you spare the rest of the Abati people."

"You shall go whither you desire, and I think I know where you will go," answered Barung. "Certain spies of mine last night saw four white men riding on fine camels towards Egypt, and reported it to me as I led my army to the secret pass that Harmac showed me, which you Abati could never find. But I said, 'Let them go; it is right that brave men who have been the mock of the Abati should be allowed their freedom.' Yes, I said this, although one of them was my daughter's husband, or near to it. But she will have no more of him who fled to his father rather than with her, so it was best that he should go also, since, if I brought him back it must be to his death."

"Yes," I answered boldly, "I go after the Western men; I who have done with these Abati. I wish to see new lands."

"And find an old love who thinks ill of you just now," he said, stroking his beard. "Well, no wonder, for here has been a marriage feast. Say, what were you about to do, O Child of Kings? Take the fat Joshua to your breast?"

"Nay, Barung, I was about to take *this* husband to my

breast," and I showed him the knife that was hidden in my marriage robe.

"No," he said, smiling, "I think the knife was for Joshua first. Still, you are a brave woman who could save the life of him you love at the cost of your own. Yet, bethink you, Child of Kings, for many a generation your mothers have been queens, and under me you may still remain a queen. How will one whose blood has ruled so long endure to serve a Western man in a strange land?"

"That is what I go to find out, Barung, and, if I cannot endure, then I shall come back again, though not to rule the Abati, of whom I wash my hands for ever. Yet, Barung, my heart tells me I shall endure."

"The Child of Kings has spoken," he said, bowing to me. "My best horse awaits her, and five of my bravest guards shall ride with her to keep her safe till she sights the camp of the Western men. I say happy is he of them who was born to wear the sweet-scented Bud of the Rose upon his bosom. For the rest, the man Japhet is in my hands. He yielded himself to me who would not fight for his own people because of what they had done to his friends, the white men. Lastly, already I have given orders that the slaying shall cease, since I need the Abati to be my slaves, they who are cowards, but cunning in many arts. Only one more man shall die," he added sternly, "and that is Joshua, who would have taken me by a trick in the mouth of the pass. So plead not for him, for by the head of Harmac it is in vain."

Now hearing this I did not plead, fearing lest I should anger Barung, and but waste my breath.

At daybreak I started on the horse, having with me the five Fung captains. As we crossed the market-place I met those that remained alive of the Abati, being driven in hordes like beasts, to hear their doom. Among them was Prince Joshua, my uncle, whom a man led by a rope about his neck, while another man

thrust him forward from behind, since Joshua knew that he went to his death and the road was one which he did not wish to travel. He saw me, and cast himself down upon the ground, crying to me to save him. I told him that I could not, though it is the truth, I swear it before God, that, notwithstanding all the evil he had worked toward me, toward Oliver my lord, and his companions, bringing to his end that gallant man who died to protect me, I would still have saved him if I could. But I could not, for although I tried once more, Barung would not listen. So I answered :

“Plead, O Joshua, with him who has the power in Mur to-day, for I have none. You have fashioned your own fate, and must travel the road you chose.”

“What road do you ride, mounted on a horse of the plains, Maqueda? Oh! what need is there for me to ask? You go to seek that accursed Gentile whom I would I had killed by inches, as I would that I could kill you.”

Then calling me by evil names, Joshua sprang at me as though to strike me down, but he who held the rope about his neck jerked him backward, so that he fell and I saw his face no more.

But oh! it was sad, that journey across the great square, for the captive Abati by hundreds—men, women, and children together—with tears and lamentations cried to me to preserve them from death or slavery at the hands of the Fung. But I answered :

“Your sins against me and the brave foreign men who fought so well for you I forgive, but search your hearts, O Abati, and say if you can forgive yourselves? If you had listened to me and to those whom I called in to help us, you might have beaten back the Fung, and remained free for ever. But you were cowards; you would not learn to bear arms like men, you would not even watch your mountain walls, and soon or late the people who refuse to be ready to fight must fall and become the servants of those who are ready.”