

The Peasant and the Workman

The Preface

A tale of the Ninth Dynasty, which from the number of copies extant would seem to have been very popular, relates how a peasant succeeded in obtaining justice after he had been robbed. Justice was not very easily obtained in Egypt in those times, for it seems to have been requisite that a peasant should attract the judge's attention by some special means, if his case were to be heard at all. The story runs thus:

In the Salt Country there dwelt a sekhti (peasant) with his family. He made his living by trading with Henenseten in salt, natron, rushes, and the other products of his country, and as he journeyed thither he had to pass through the lands of the house of Fefa. Now there dwelt by the canal a man named Tehuti-nekht, the son of Asri, a serf to the High Steward Meruitensa. Tehuti-nekht had so far encroached on the path- for roads and paths were not protected by law in Egypt as in other countries- that there was but a narrow strip left, with the canal on one side and a cornfield on the other. When Tehuti-nekht saw the sekhti approaching with his burdened asses, his evil heart coveted the beasts and the goods they bore, and he called to the gods to open a way for him to steal the possessions of the sekhti.

This was the plan he conceived. "I will take," said he, "a shawl, and will spread it upon the path. If the sekhti drives his asses over it- and there is no other way- then I shall easily pick a quarrel with him." He had no sooner thought of the project than it was carried into effect. A servant, at Tehuti-nekht's bidding, fetched a shawl and spread it over the path so that one end was in the water, the other among the corn.

When the sekhti drew nigh he drove his asses over the shawl. He had no alternative.

"Hold!" cried Tehuti-nekht with well-simulated wrath, "surely you do not intend to drive your beasts over my clothes!"

"I will try to avoid them," responded the good-natured peasant, and he caused the rest of his asses to pass higher up, among the corn.

"Do you, then, drive your asses through my corn?," said Tehuti-nekht, more wrathfully than ever.

"There is no other way," said the harassed peasant. "You have blocked the path with your shawl, and I must leave the path."

While the two argued upon the matter one of the asses helped itself to a mouthful of corn, whereupon Tehuti-nekht's complaints broke out afresh.

"Behold!" he cried, "your ass is eating my corn. I will take your ass, and he shall pay for the theft."

"Shall I be robbed, cried the sekhti, "in the lands of the Lord Steward Meruitensa who treateth robbers so hardly? Behold, I will go to him. He will not suffer this misdeed of thine."

"Poor as thou art, who will concern himself with thy woes?"

"Thinkest thou he will hearken to thy plaint?" sneered Tehuti-nekht. "Poor as thou art, who will concern himself with thy woes? Lo, I am the Lord Steward Meruitensa," and so saying he beat the sekhti sorely, stole all his asses and drove them into pasture.

In vain the sekhti wept and implored him restore his property. Tehuti-nekht bade him hold his peace, threatening to send him to the Demon of Silence if he continued to complain. Nevertheless, the sekhti petitioned him for a whole day. At length, finding that he was wasting his breath, the peasant betook himself to Henen-ni-sut, there to lay his case before the Lord

Steward Meruitensa. On his arrival he found the latter preparing to embark in his boat, which was to carry him to the judgment-hall. The sekhti bowed himself to the ground, and told the Lord Steward that he had a grievance to lay before him, praying him to send one of his followers to hear the tale. The Lord Steward granted the suppliant's request and sent to him one from among his train. To the messenger the sekhti revealed all that had befallen him on his journey, the manner in which Tehuti-nekht had closed the path so as to force him to trespass on the corn, and the cruelty with which he had beaten him and stolen his property. In due time these matters were told to the Lord Steward, who laid the case before the nobles who were with him in the judgment-hall.

"Let this sekhti bring a witness," they said, "and if he establish his case, it may be necessary to beat Tehuti-nekht, or perchance he will be made to pay a trifle for the salt and natron he has stolen."

The Lord Steward said nothing, and the sekhti himself came unto him and hailed him as the greatest of the great, the orphan's father, the widow's husband, the guide of the needy, and so on.

Very eloquent was the sekhti, and in his florid speech he skillfully combined eulogy with his plea for justice, so that the Lord Steward was interested and flattered in spite of himself.

Now at that time there sat upon the throne of Egypt the King Neb-ka-n-ra, and to him came the Lord Steward Meruitensa, saying:

"Behold my lord, I have been sought by a sekhti whose goods were stolen. Most eloquent of mortals is he. What would my lord that I do unto him?"

"Do not answer his speeches, said the king, "but put his words in writing and bring them to us. See that he and his wife and children are supplied with meat and drink, but do not let him know who provides it."

The Lord Steward did as the king had commanded him. He gave to the peasant a daily ration of bread and beer, and to his wife sufficient corn to feed herself and her children. But the sekhti knew not whence the provisions came.

A second time the peasant sought the judgment hall and poured forth his complaint to the Lord Steward; and yet a third time he came, and the Lord Steward commanded that he be beaten with staves, to see whether he would desist. But no, the sekhti came a fourth, a fifth, a sixth time, endeavoring with pleasant speeches to open the ear of the judge. Meruitensa hearkened to him not at all, yet the sekhti did not despair, but came again unto the ninth time. And at the ninth time the Lord Steward sent two of his followers to the sekhti, and the peasant trembled exceedingly, for he feared that he was about to be beaten once more because of his importunity. The message, however, was a reassuring one. Meruitensa declared that he had been greatly delighted by the peasant's eloquence and would see that he obtained satisfaction. He then caused the sekhti's petitions to be written on clean papyri and sent to the king, according as the monarch had commanded. Neb-ka-n-ra was also much pleased with the speeches, but the giving of judgment he left entirely in the hands of the Lord Steward.

Meruitensa therefore deprived Tehuti-nekht of all his offices and his property, and gave them to the sekhti, who thenceforth dwelt at the king's palace with all his family. And the sekhti became the chief overseer of Neb-ka-n-ra, and was greatly beloved by him.