

The Peasant and the Workman

By Unknown

There dwelt in the Sekhet Hemat—or Salt Country—a peasant called the Sekhti, with his wife and children, his asses and his dogs; and he trafficked in all good things of the Sekhet Hemat to Henenseten. Behold now he went with rushes, natron, and salt, with wood and pods, with stones and seeds, and all good products of the Sekhet Hemat. And this Sekhti journeyed to the south unto Henenseten; and when he came to the lands of the house of Fefa, north of Denat, he found a man there standing on the bank, a man called Hemti—the workman—son of a man called Asri, who was a serf of the high-steward Meruitensa. Now said this Hemti, when he saw the asses of Sekhti, that were pleasing in his eyes, “Oh that some good god would grant me to steal away the goods of Sekhti from him!”

Now the Hemti’s house was by the dike of the tow-path, which was straightened, and not wide, as much as the width of a waistcloth: on the one side of it was the water, and on the other side of it grew his corn. Hemti said then to his servant, “Hasten! bring me a shawl from the house,” and it was brought instantly. Then spread he out this shawl on the face of the dike, and it lay with its fastening on the water and its fringe on the corn.

Now Sekhti approached along the path used by all men. Said Hemti: “Have a care, Sekhti! you are not going to trample on my clothes!” Said Sekhti, “I will do as you like, I will pass carefully.” Then went he up on the higher side. But Hemti said, “Go you over my corn, instead of the path?” Said Sekhti: “I am going carefully; this high field of corn is not my choice, but you have stopped your path with your clothes, and will you then not let us pass by the side of the path?” And one of the asses filled its mouth with a cluster of corn. Said Hemti: “Look you, I shall take away your ass, Sekhti, for eating my corn; behold it will have to pay according to the amount of the injury.” Said Sekhti: “I am going carefully; the one way is stopped, therefore took I my ass by the inclosed ground; and do you seize it for filling its mouth with a cluster of corn? Moreover, I know unto whom this domain belongs, even unto the lord steward Meruitensa. He it is who smites every robber in this whole land; and shall I then be robbed in his domain?”

Said Hemti, “This is the proverb which men speak: ‘A poor man’s name is only his own matter.’ I am he of whom you spake, even the lord steward of whom you think.” Thereon he took to him branches of green tamarisk and scourged all his limbs, took his asses, and drave them into the pasture. And Sekhti wept very greatly, by reason of the pain of what he had suffered. Said Hemti, “Lift not up your voice, Sekhti, or you shall go to the demon of silence.” Sekhti answered: “You beat me, you steal my goods, and now would take away even my voice, O demon of silence! If you will restore my goods, then will I cease to cry out at your violence.”

Sekhti stayed the whole day petitioning Hemti, but he would not give ear unto him. And Sekhti went his way to Khenensuten to complain to the lord steward Meruitensa. He found him coming out from the door of his house to embark on his boat, that he might go to the judgment-hall. Sekhti said:

“Ho! turn, that I may please thy heart with this discourse. Now at this time let one of thy followers, whom thou wilt, come to me that I may send him to thee concerning it.” The lord steward Meruitensa made his follower, whom he chose, go straight unto him, and Sekhti sent him back with an account of all these matters. Then the lord steward Meruitensa accused Hemti

unto the nobles who sat with him; and they said unto him: “By your heave: As to this Sekhti of yours, let him bring a witness. Behold thou it is our custom with our Sekhtis; witnesses come with them; behold, that is our custom. Then it will be fitting to beat this Hemti for a trifle of natron and a trifle of salt; if he is commanded to pay for it, he will pay for it.” But the high steward Meruitensa held his peace; for he would not reply unto these nobles, but would reply unto the Sekhti.

Now Sekhti came to appeal to the lord steward Meruitensa, and said, “O my lord steward, greatest of the great, guide of the needy:

When thou embarkest on the lake of truth—
Mayest thou sail upon it with a fair wind;
May thy mainsail not fly loose.
May there not be lamentation in thy cabin;
May not misfortune come after thee.
May not thy mainstays be snapped;
Mayest thou not run aground.
May not the wave seize thee;
Mayest thou not taste the impurities of the river;
Mayest thou not see the face of fear.

May the fish come to thee without escape;
Mayest thou reach unto plump water-fowl.
For thou art the orphan’s father, the widow’s husband,
The desolate woman’s brother, the garment of the motherless.
Let me celebrate thy name in this land for every virtue.
A guide without greediness of heart;
A great one without any meanness.

Destroying deceit, encouraging justice;
Coming to the cry, and allowing utterance.

Let me speak, do thou hear and do justice;
O praised! whom the praised ones praise.

Abolish oppression, behold me, I am overladen,
Reckon with me, behold me defrauded.”

Now the Sekhti made this speech in the time of the majesty of the King Neb-ka-n-ra, blessed. The lord steward Meruitensa went away straight to the King and said: “My lord, I have found one of these Sekhti, excellent of speech, in very truth; stolen are his goods, and he has come to complain to me of the matter.”

His Majesty said: “As thou wishest that I may see health! lengthen out his complaint, without replying to any of his speeches. He who desireth him to continue speaking should be silent; behold, bring us his words in writing, that we may listen to them. But provide for his wife and his children, and let the Sekhti himself also have a living. Thou must cause one to give him his portion without letting him know that thou art he who is giving it to him.”

There were given to him four loaves and two draughts of beer each day; which the lord steward Meruitensa provided for him, giving it to a friend of his, who furnished it unto him. Then the lord steward Meruitensa sent the governor of the Sekhet Hemat to make provision for the wife of the Sekhti, three rations of corn each day.

Then came the Sekhti a second time, and even a third time, unto the lord steward Meruitensa; but he told two of his followers to go unto the Sekhti, and seize on him, and beat him with staves. But he came again unto him, even unto six times, and said:

“My Lord Steward—
Destroying deceit, and encouraging justice;
Raising up every good thing, and crushing every evil;
As plenty comes removing famine,
As clothing covers nakedness,
As clear sky after storm warms the shivering;
As fire cooks that which is raw,
As water quenches the thirst;
Look with thy face upon my lot; do not covet, but content me without fail; do the right and do not evil,”

But yet Meruitensa would not hearken unto his complaint; and the Sekhti came yet, and yet again, even unto the ninth time. Then the lord steward told two of his followers to go unto the Sekhti; and the Sekhti feared that he should be beaten as at the third request. But the lord steward Meruitensa then said unto him: “Fear not, Sekhti, for what thou hast done. The Sekhti has made many speeches, delightful to the heart of his Majesty, and I take an oath—as I eat bread, and as I drink water—that thou shalt be remembered to eternity.” Said the lord steward, “Moreover, thou shalt be satisfied when thou shalt hear of thy complaints.” He caused to be written on a clean roll of papyrus each petition to the end, and the lord steward Meruitensa sent it to the majesty of the King Neb-ka-n-ra, blessed, and it was good to him more than anything that is in the whole land: but his Majesty said to Meruitensa: “Judge it thyself; I do not desire it.”