

MOSES

Man of the Mountain

BY

ZORA NEALE HURSTON, 1901-

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XXXIII

MOSES WALKED UP THE HIGH STEPS OF THE PALACE next Wednesday with Aaron right behind him, and they told him Pharaoh was in the parlor waiting on him to come. The whole temple of priests were standing around just as Moses expected. He saw the expression of the face of Pharaoh and knew that Ta-Phar was treating the whole thing as a farce.

"Well, Moses, what you got to say today?" Pharaoh asked sort of offhand like he already knew the answer.

"The Lord says, 'Pharaoh, let my people go.'"

"And I say they won't."

"We beg to differ with you, Pharaoh, and that's why we are here."

"Don't make a bit of difference to me and that's why I am here."

"You know, Pharaoh, I figgered you was going to say that, because you and your servants and friends are trying to take us for a joke, so I better give you a sign and something to wonder about."

"Go right ahead, Moses. But I'm telling you in advance that anything you do, I, that is, my priests, are prepared to turn it right back on you."

"Well, that is your privilege. Anyhow the Lord told me to lift my right hand against you."

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Moses walked to the center of the room and turned his face to the east and lifted his hand. He turned to the north and lifted his hand again. He turned to the west and last to the south and did the same. Then he stood perfectly motionless facing Pharaoh and lifted his right hand stiffly with his rod extended and held the position solemn and motionless for a space. Then he lowered it and said, "The Lord has spoken."

"Is that all?" Pharaoh sneered.

"Just ask for a drink of water and you will find out." Pharaoh immediately ordered a glass of water. The attendant came in, bowed and hurried out after the drink of water. But in a minute he was back followed by the steward and the whole palace staff. They knelt in terror and told Pharaoh that all the water around the palace had turned to blood.

"Well, get off the palace grounds and find me some that isn't blood. I don't want no foolishness about my drinking water."

In a short space of time they were back saying that every well and spring in the city was flowing blood. Through the windows came the sounds of terror and dismay. People were running to the palace and to the temples. They wanted water. Their beasts wanted water. Carriers were sent to the river and came back screaming that the Nile was running blood. Fish were dying and floating on the bloody stream. Pharaoh commanded men to dig wells lest all Egypt perish for want of water. Pharaoh went outside himself to witness this thing of Egypt running down in blood as if it had been wounded like a beast. He saw and he heard the dismay of the people. Quickly

he assembled the court and sat in council.

"What is it?" everybody wanted to know.

"Oh, some trick of Moses," Pharaoh answered. "He's trying to scare us into elevating him to power. What else could he want?"

"Arrest him!"

"No, that wouldn't do."

"Why?"

"If I do that," Pharaoh explained, "the people will hear about it and believe in him."

"That would be terrible. Why, that man is a radical. He would have the common people talking about equality."

"Yes, and he would free the Hebrews."

"And what would we do without slaves?"

"Oh, that would never do. We must not let that happen."

"Don't you worry about that," Pharaoh assured them.

"I'll see to that; we must beat him at his own game."

"But how? And we've got to have water to drink. Blood won't do."

"Yes, indeed we must have water."

"How are we going to get it?"

"Let Pharaoh go out and command the river to run water. It can't fail to obey."

Everybody looked towards Pharaoh and an embarrassing pause fell on the room as he hesitated. Finally he spoke.

"That will hardly be necessary. I have a better plan."

"What is it?"

"I shall trick Moses into turning this blood into water again. I'll promise to do what he wants—that is, let the Hebrews leave Egypt."

"No! No! we need our slaves."

"But I don't intend to deprive ourselves. When he has done his work, we'll change our minds and laugh at him."

Everybody beamed and grew calm.

"That is a splendid idea, Pharaoh. Meet trickery with tricks. Serve that radical just right, too."

"But what about the people? Won't they go over to him when they find out we had to go to him and make him promises?"

"They need never know. Listen, each of you must go out and spread reports that I, Pharaoh, turned the waters of Egypt into blood to prove my powers, and turned it back into water to prove my will. The priests will never deny it. They feel ashamed as it is."

"Sounds reasonable. Where is this Moses?"

"In Goshen, but we must pretend to ignore his existence. This is a strictly Egyptian affair. Don't mention his name at all."

"We'll all go out and calm the people."

"Fine, and I'll send secretly for Moses and trick him. By tomorrow night everything will be as it was."

"Perhaps we had better give him some sort of office to keep him quiet."

"No!" Pharaoh said with fury in his voice. "Never! and those priests had better do something to take the edge off of this thing or they are going to hear from me."

The priests went to the temple in a body. The next morning they sent word to Pharaoh that they could also cause streams to bleed like a wound. Pharaoh sent for Moses and Aaron and they and the priests assembled about a well that had been sunk in the palace grounds. The

priests huddled about it and performed a ceremony. Finally they announced that they had produced blood by magic and Moses and Aaron looked down and saw it was red.

"So you admit my priests have turned your trick back on you," Pharaoh asked scornfully.

"Yes, they really did," Moses said meekly.

"So your god can't be very original, Moses, and I can't see any reason for letting him change my plans. Bring me a better trick than that one before you come back here wasting my time."

"Well, one bellyful won't fatten you. How about next Wednesday at the same time?"

"Good. My priests will be ready and waiting. You amateurs need a good straightening out and we might as well give it to you. Guards, see that these men get off the place."

Pharaoh flouted his skirt contemptuously as he mounted the steps and went inside. Moses walked away without breaking another breath with him, and Aaron brushed past him and passed out of the palace gates before him.

He let Moses overtake him down the road a piece and fell in beside him. "Moses," he said, "it looks like your project got a back-set today."

"You think so?"

"I couldn't help it from what happened. Looks like those priests know just as much as you do."

"You reckon?"

"Seems so, don't it? You think it's any use in us going back to see Pharaoh any more?"

"He'll be looking for us next Wednesday for sure. We

couldn't hardly back out of it now, do you think?"

"Oh, I don't know. Well, this is your movement and if you want to go back it's up to you."

"I'll be going back all right. Don't you worry about that."

So next Wednesday Moses and Aaron went up the steps to the palace again.

"Well, what did your Lord say today, Moses?" Pharaoh asked.

"He said to tell you, 'Let my people go.'"

"And what do you aim to do about it?"

"What He told me to do. Just a little sign to let you know that He means business."

"Well, my priests are here to teach you some more."

"I can't learn no younger, so I might as well begin. Let's all go outside for my lesson this time."

Pharaoh got right up and went outside where his flower garden was and Moses and the priests went out behind him.

Moses didn't lose any time. He walked to the made pond in the garden and lifted up his rod in his right hand and frogs swarmed out of the pond all over the garden. They filled the garden and the grounds and still they poured out of the fish pond. Hundreds and thousands and millions struggled over each other in the shallow water, clambered to the stone wall about the pond and leaped off in all directions. Moses still stood with his right hand lifted and the frogs kept on coming. Little frogs, big frogs, green frogs, toad frogs, rain frogs, bull frogs, every kind of frog that ever leaped or hopped. The foundation of the world seemed made of frogs and they came pouring out of that

pond. The world croaked and leaped. The party fled inside but the palace was full of frogs. The streets and the citizens were full. They leaped all over everywhere. They poured their millions out of the Nile, and every other stream and spring and still Moses held up his hand. The frogs kept coming till sundown. By that time the palace was besieged by citizens crying for relief from frogs. So Pharaoh commanded his priests to dispel them. They begged for time, so Pharaoh asked Moses to do away with the things.

"I'll be back tomorrow and talk it over," Moses said and went home.

The next morning streets, yards, fields and gardens held mounds of dead and stinking frogs. Moses saw piles and furrows of dead frogs as he made his way to the palace through a terrified populace.

"What! Your priests haven't done anything about this plague of frogs yet?" Moses demanded of Pharaoh.

"The worthless creatures who live in wealth off my bounty have done nothing yet," Pharaoh admitted as he hurled a cup of water full of tadpoles out of the window.

"Then I reckon the Lord with my poor help will have to do it," Moses said. He lifted up his rod and went outside and the millions of frogs began their march to the Nile. From all over the city and the province they hopped solemnly riverward and leaped in till only the dead and rotting heaps and furrows were left in streets and fields. Moses ordered these to be buried. Men, women and children worked all day and all night and by mid-afternoon the third day of the plague of frogs, Egypt was free of the sending. So Moses went home again.

But the next day a messenger came hurriedly for him and Aaron.

"We fixed him that time," Aaron gloated on the way.

"I'll bet he wants to tell us he's glad to let us Hebrews go."

"That may be so, Aaron, but I doubt it."

"Why?"

"Because, if Pharaoh lets me lead off the Hebrews, he will be driven from his throne by the nobles. They think they can't exist without slaves and Pharaoh wouldn't dare to go against them, not that he wants to anyway."

"He sent us a mighty nice message to come."

"Yes, to come and be assassinated in secret, but by now he knows that won't do."

"Why?"

"Because my death wouldn't do him any good if the common people knew why, and I have taken pains to let them know how all those frogs happened in Egypt and Pharaoh knows that they know."

"Moses, I hope this time he means to set us free. I don't want to believe nothing else."

"You are going to find out you are wrong."

"What else could he want with us? We beat him and he wants to give up, that's all."

"I hope not. I want to show that man a thing or two."

When they got to the palace, fresh and clean again, Pharaoh and the priests were assembled.

"Did you want to see me about something?" Moses asked.

"Yes, I want to see you about that frog trick you pulled," the King said shortly. "My priests want to teach you their version of the same thing. In fact, one of the

priests says he remembered teaching you that stunt some years back when you used to hang around the temple so much."

"He never did," Moses retorted. "But I am here to be taught."

They went outside and the frogs poured again. When they began to be plentiful in the garden, Pharaoh held up his hand and said, "That's aplenty—a gracious plenty. Now send them on off like Moses did."

The officiating priest stopped in his tracks and looked right sheepish at Pharaoh. The frogs kept on coming.

"I said stop," Pharaoh said coldly. The frogs kept on coming.

"You heard me!" Pharaoh roared. "I said stop those frogs and I mean stop. That's too many frogs already. Enough is enough and more than that is nothing but a nuisance."

The frogs kept right on coming.

"You chuckle-headed fool! Head those frogs for the river!"

The chief priest made motions, he waved his wand, he chanted something and the whole college of priests began to whirl. But the frogs kept right on coming and filling up the grounds. The priest pointed his rod towards the river but the frogs hopped in every other direction. They had to bring something for Pharaoh to stand on.

Finally Moses lifted his hand and the frogs in solemn procession and in a sort of rhythm moved on to the river as the others had done.

"I'll have another message for you next Wednesday this time," Moses said with a bow and walked off with Aaron

at his heels.

Pharaoh didn't send for the court and the nobles, and this time they sent to him asking for an audience.

"The people are holding meetings and protesting against frogs," they told Pharaoh.

"But the frogs are all gone. Not a frog, well, no more than the usual amount to be found anywhere."

"They think you sent them."

"But why would I want to plague my people with frogs?"

"Oh, they remember about the bloody streams and they think you sent frogs to show your power again."

"Oh."

"I don't see why the army couldn't be called out to put a stop to things like that."

"How?"

"Well, er—"

"It's getting around that a great man is doing these things and people want to know him."

"I think it would be a good thing to order that Moses to leave Egypt before sundown. Get rid of him!"

"No!" Pharaoh said forcefully. "He'll go off as he did before and come back to make more trouble. I want to beat him at his own tricks and ruin him forever. Finish him! That's my will and intention. Besides, he might have an army somewhere outside the country. Humble him and then destroy him. That's my plan and I mean to go through with it if it is the last thing I do."

"No more frogs, I hope," said one courtier wearily.

"What must we tell the people?"

"Tell them that we are forever striving for their good."

We will pass a law: frogs must stay out of the houses of the people."

The people thought that Pharaoh was very thoughtful of their comfort and needs when they heard about the law.

The very next week on Wednesday, Moses went to the sitting room of the palace and Pharaoh was waiting.

"I have a little sign from the Lord to let you know. He says, 'Let my people go,' Moses stated as soon as they had gotten through with the manners necessary around the court.

"I'm not letting them go, so you better show me your sign. But I'm telling you right now, no more frogs, Moses."

"This sign is also for your counsellors and judges. So you better call them in, too."

Pharaoh pointed out that he made a habit of making up his own mind, but if Moses wanted to entertain some more people with his tricks he would have them called. Moses had to wait for a long time before they all got there.

When the chairs were all full of nobles with their shaved heads and shoulders wrapped in cloaks, Moses lifted his right hand with his rod and all the others in the room began first to twitch, then to squirm and then to scratch and claw madly at their persons. One aged noble picked something off the edge of his cloak and gasped in disgusted surprise. "A louse! No, I mean lice!" But he could have saved his breath, for everyone present from Pharaoh down to the palace cat had made the same discovery.

"I pronounce on all Egypt, except Goshen, the plague of lice," Moses said solemnly and turned to go. Pharaoh screamed at his college of priests. "Do some-

thing about this plague of lice and do it quick. And another thing, don't you dare scratch yourselves in front of me. Do something!"

The itching, twitching college of priests stood before Pharaoh as solemn as they could and the chief priest said, "Pharaoh, this plague is the finger of God. We don't know how it is done at all." But as they hurried out as fast as the priestly gait would allow, the chief priest said to his associates, "I mean to know this trick by next planting season."

"Moses!" Pharaoh called after him down the long corridor. "Moses!"

"Don't know just when I'll be back," Moses said over his shoulder, "but I'm coming."

A little further down the hall he called back, "I'd let them children of Israel go if I were you, but don't let me over-persuade you." Then he went on home to think.

And behind Pharaoh's outward show of indifference, he was beginning to worry a little. The thought came to him that if he issued a public order expelling the Hebrews from Egypt it would save his face and rid him of the harassment of Moses. He hinted as much to his courtiers, but they refused to listen. They had no intention of depriving themselves of their slaves like that. So Pharaoh issued a statement that the people themselves had brought on the plague of lice. The gods of Egypt had noticed their vice and loose living and had punished them. The people were silenced by the surprise of the thing.

"I haven't slept with more women than usual," one farmer asserted. "The gods are getting very strict these days."