

MORNING STAR

by H. Rider Haggard

CHAPTER I

THE PLOT OF ABI

It was evening in Egypt, thousands of years ago, when the Prince Abi, governor of Memphis and of great territories in the Delta, made fast his ship of state to a quay beneath the outermost walls of the mighty city of Uast or Thebes, which we moderns know as Luxor and Karnac on the Nile. Abi, a large man, very dark of skin, for his mother was one of the hated Hyksos barbarians who once had usurped the throne of Egypt, sat upon the deck of his ship and stared at the setting sun which for a few moments seemed to rest, a round ball of fire, upon the bare and rugged mountains, that ring round the Tombs of the Kings.

He was angry, as the slave-women, who stood on either side fanning him, could see well enough by the scowl on his coarse face and the fire in his large black eyes. Presently they felt it also, for one of them, staring at the temples and palaces of the wonderful city made glorious by the light of the setting sun, that city of which she had heard so

often, touched his head with the feathers of her fan. Thereon, as though glad of an excuse to express his ill-humour, Abi sprang up and boxed her ears so heavily that the poor girl fell to the deck.

"Awkward cat," he cried, "do that again and you shall be flogged until your robe sticks to your back!"

"Pardon, mighty Lord," she said, beginning to weep, "it was an accident; the wind caught my fan."

"So the rod shall catch your skin, if you are not more careful, Merytra. Stop that snivelling and go send Kaku the Astrologer here. Go, both, I weary of the sight of your ugly faces."

The girl rose, and with her fellow slave ran swiftly to the ladder that led to the waist of the ship.

"He called me a cat," Merytra hissed through her white teeth to her companion. "Well, if so, Sekhet the cat-headed is my godmother, and she is the Lady of Vengeance."

"Yes," answered the other, "and he said that we were both ugly--we, whom every lord who comes near the Court admires so much! Oh! I wish a holy crocodile would eat him, black pig!"

"Then why don't they buy us? Abi would sell his daughters, much more his

fan-bearers--at a price."

"Because they hope to get us for nothing, my dear, and what is more, if I can manage it one of them shall, for I am tired of this life. Have your fling while you can, I say. Who knows at which corner Osiris, Lord of Death, is waiting."

"Hush!" whispered Merytra, "there is that knave of an astrologer, and he looks cross, too."

Then, hand in hand, they went to this lean and learned man and humbly bowed themselves before him.

"Master of the Stars," said Merytra, "we have a message for you. No, do not look at my cheek, please, the marks are not magical, only those of the divine fingers of the glorious hand of the most exalted Prince Abi, son of the Pharaoh happily ruling in Osiris, etc., etc., etc., of the right, royal blood of Egypt--that is on one side, and on the other of a divine lady whom Khem the Spirit, or Ptah the Creator, thought fit to dip in a vat of black dye."

"Hem!" said Kaku glancing nervously over his shoulder. Then, seeing that there was no one near, he added, "you had better be careful what you say, my dear. The royal Abi does not like to hear the colour of his late mother defined so closely. But why did he slap your face?"

She told him.

"Well," he answered, "if I had been in his place I would rather have kissed it, for it is pretty, decidedly pretty," and this learned man forgot himself so far as to wink at Merytra.

"There, Sister," said the girl, "I always told you that rough shells have sweet nuts inside of them. Thank you for your compliment, Master of learning. Will you tell us our fortune for nothing?"

"Yes, yes," he answered; "at least the fee I want will cost you nothing. Now stop this nonsense," he added, anxiously, "I gather that he is cross."

"I never saw him crosser, Kaku. I am glad it is you who reads the stars, not I. Listen!"

As he spoke an angry roar reached them from the high deck above.

"Where is that accursed astrologer?" said the roar.

"There, what did I tell you? Oh! never mind the rest of the papers, go at once. Your robe is full of rolls as it is."

"Yes," answered Kaku as he ran to the ladder, "but the question is, how will he like what is in the rolls?"

"The gods be with you!" cried one of the girls after him, "you will need them all."

"And if you get back alive, don't forget your promise about the fortunes," said the other.

A minute later this searcher of the heavens, a tall, hook-nosed man, was prostrating himself before Abi in his pavilion on the upper deck, so low that his Syrian-shaped cap fell from his bald head.

"Why were you so long in coming?" asked Abi.

"Because your slaves could not find me, royal Son of the Sun. I was at work in my cabin."

"Indeed, I thought I heard them giggling with you down there. What did you call me? Royal Son of the Sun? That is Pharaoh's name! Have the stars shown you----?" and he looked at him eagerly.

"No, Prince, not exactly that. I did not think it needful to search them on a matter which seems established, more or less."

"More or less," answered Abi gloomily. "What do you mean by your 'more or less'? Here am I at the turning-point of my fortunes, not knowing whether I am to be Pharaoh of the Upper and Lower Lands, or only the

petty lord of a city and a few provinces in the Delta, and you satisfy my hunger for the truth with an empty dish of 'more or less.' Man, what do you mean?"

"If your Majesty will be pleased to tell his servant exactly what you desire to know, perhaps I may be able to answer the question," replied Kaku humbly.

"Majesty! Well, I desire to know by what warrant you call me 'Majesty,' who am only Prince of Memphis. Did the stars give it to you? Have you obeyed me and asked them of the future?"

"Certainly, certainly. How could I disobey? I observed them all last night, and have been working out the results till this moment; indeed, they are not yet finished. Question and I will answer."

"You will answer, yes, but what will you answer? Not the truth, I fancy, because you are a coward, though if anyone can read the truth, it is you. Man," he added fiercely, "if you dare to lie to me I will cut your head off and take it to Pharaoh as a traitor's; and your body shall lie, not in that fine tomb which you have made, but in the belly of a crocodile whence there is no resurrection. Do you understand? Then let us come to the point. Look, the sun sets there behind the Tombs of Kings, where the departed Pharaohs of Egypt take their rest till the Day of Awakening. It is a bad omen for me, I know, who wished to reach this city in the morning when Ra was in the House of Life, the East, and not

in the House of Death, the West; but that accursed wind sent by Typhon, held me back and I could not. Well, let us begin at the end which must come after all. Tell me, you reader of the heavens, shall I sleep at last in that valley?"

"I think so, Prince; at least, so says your planet. Look, yonder, it springs to life above you," and he pointed to an orb that appeared at the topmost edge of the red glow of the sunset.

"You are keeping something back from me," said Abi, searching Kaku's face with his fierce eyes. "Shall I sleep in the tomb of Pharaoh, in my own everlasting house that I shall have made ready to receive me?"

"Son of Ra, I cannot say," answered the astrologer. "Divine One, I will be frank with you. Though you be wrath, yet will I tell you the truth as you command me. An evil influence is at work in your House of Life. Another star crosses and re-crosses your path, and though for a long time you seem to swallow it up, yet at the last it eclipses you--it and one that goes with it."

"What star?" asked Abi hoarsely, "Pharaoh's?"

"Nay, Prince, the star of Amen."

"Amen! What Amen?"

"Amen the god, Prince, the mighty father of the gods."

"Amen the god," repeated Abi in an awed voice. "How can a man fight against a god?"

"Say rather against two gods, for with the star of Amen goes the star of Hathor, Queen of Love. Not for many periods of thousands of years have they been together, but now they draw near to each other, and so will remain for all your life. Look," and Kaku pointed to the Eastern horizon where a faint rosy glow still lingered reflected from the western sky.

As they watched this glow melted, and there in the pure heavens, lying just where it met the distant land, seeming to rest upon the land, indeed, appeared a bright and beautiful star, and so close to it that, to the eye, they almost touched, a twin star. For a few minutes only were they seen; then they vanished beneath the line of the horizon.

"The morning star of Amen, and with it the star of Hathor," said the astrologer.

"Well, Fool, what of it?" exclaimed Abi. "They are far enough from my star; moreover, it is they that sink, not I, who ride higher every moment."

"Aye, Prince, but in a year to come they will certainly eclipse that star of yours. Prince, Amen and Hathor are against you. Look, I will

show you their journeyings on this scroll and you shall see where they eat you up yonder, yes, yonder over the Valley of dead Kings, though twenty years and more must go by ere then, and take this for your comfort, during those years you shine alone," and he began to unfold a papyrus roll.

Abi snatched it from him, crumpled it up and threw it in his face.

"You cheat!" he said. "Do you think to frighten me with this nonsense about stars? Here is my star," and he drew the short sword at his side and shook it over the head of the trembling Kaku. "This sharp bronze is the star I follow, and be careful lest it should eclipse you, you father of lies."

"I have told the truth as I see it," answered the poor astrologer with some dignity, "but if you wish, O Prince, that in the future I should indeed prophesy pleasant things to you, why, it can be done easily enough. Moreover, it seems to me that this horoscope of yours is not so evil, seeing that it gives to you over twenty years of life and power, more by far than most men can expect--at your age. If after that come troubles and the end, what of it?"

"That is so," replied Abi mollified. "It was my ill-temper, everything has gone cross to-day. Well, a gold cup, my own, shall pay the price of it. Bear me no ill-will, I pray you, learned scribe, and above all tell me no falsehood as the message of the stars you serve. It is the truth

I seek, the truth. If only she may be seen, and clasped, I care not how ill-favoured is her face."

Rejoicing at the turn which things had taken, and especially at the promise of the priceless cup which he had long coveted, Kaku bowed obsequiously. He picked up his crumpled roll and was about to retire when through the gloom of the falling night, some men mounted upon asses were seen riding over the mud flats that border the Nile at this spot, towards that bank where the ship was moored.

"The captain of my guard," said Abi, who saw the starlight gleam upon a bronze helmet, "who brings me Pharaoh's answer. Nay, go not, bide and hear it, Kaku, and give us your counsel on it, your true counsel."

So the astrologer stood aside and waited, till presently the captain appeared saluting.

"What says Pharaoh, my brother?" asked the Prince.

"Lord, he says that he will receive you, though as he did not send for you, he thinks that you can scarcely come upon any necessary errand, as he has heard long ago of your victory over the desert-dwelling barbarians, and does not want the offering of the salted heads of their officers which you bring to him."

"Good," said Abi contemptuously. "The divine Pharaoh was ever a woman in

such matters, as in others. Let him be thankful that he has generals who know how to make war and to cut off the heads of his enemies in defence of the kingdom. We will wait upon him to-morrow."

"Lord," added the captain, "that is not all Pharaoh's message. He says that it has been reported to him that you are accompanied by a guard of three hundred soldiers. These soldiers he refuses to allow within the gates. He directs that you shall appear before his Majesty attended by five persons only."

"Indeed," answered Abi with a scornful laugh. "Does Pharaoh fear, then, lest I should capture him and his armies and the great city with three hundred soldiers?"

"No, Prince," answered the captain bluntly; "but I think he fears lest you should kill him and declare yourself Pharaoh as next in blood."

"Ah!" said Abi, "as next of blood. Then I suppose that there are still no children at the Court?"

"None, O Prince. I saw Ahura, the royal wife, the Lady of the Two Lands, that fairest of women, and other lesser wives and beautiful slave girls without number, but never a one of them had an infant on her breast or at her knee. Pharaoh remains childless."

"Ah!" said Abi again. Then he walked forward out of the pavilion whereof

the curtains were drawn back, and stood a while upon the prow of the vessel.

By now night had fallen, and the great moon, rising from the earth as it were, poured her flood of silver light over the desert, the mountains, the limitless city of Thebes, and the wide rippling bosom of the Nile. The pylons and obelisks, glittering with copper and with gold, towered to the tender sky. In the window places of palaces and of ten thousand homes lamps shone like stars. From gardens, streets and the courts of temples floated the faint sound of singing and of music, while on the great embattled walls the watchmen called the hour from post to post.

It was a wondrous scene, and the heart of Abi swelled as he gazed upon it. What wealth lay yonder, and what power. There was the glorious house of his brother, Pharaoh, the god in human form who for all his godship had never a child to follow after him when he ascended to Osiris, as he who was sickly probably must do before so very long.

Yes, but before then a miracle might happen; in this way or in that a successor to the throne might be found and acknowledged, for were not Pharaoh and his House beloved by all the priests of Amen, and by the people, and was not he, Abi, feared and disliked because he was fierce, and the hated savage blood flowed in his veins? Oh! what evil god had put it in his father's heart to give him a princess of the Hyksos for a mother, the Hyksos, whom the Egyptians loathed, when he had the fairest women of the world from whom to choose? Well, it was done and could

not be undone, though because of it he might lose his heritage of the greatest throne in all the earth. Also was it not to this fierce Hyksos blood that he owed his strength and vigour?

Why should he wait? Why should he not set his fortune on a cast? He had three hundred soldiers with him, picked men and brave, children of the sea and the desert, sworn to his House and interests. It was a time of festival, those gates were ill-guarded. Why should he not force them at the dead of night, make his way to the palace, cause Pharaoh to be gathered to his fathers, and at the dawn discover himself seated upon Pharaoh's throne? At the thought of it Abi's heart leapt in his breast, his wide nostrils spread themselves, and he erected his strong head as though already he felt upon it the weight of the double crown. Then he turned and walked back to the pavilion.

"I am minded to strike a blow," he said. "Say now, my officer, would you and the soldiers follow me into the heart of yonder city to-night to win a throne--or a grave? If it were the first, you should be the general of all my army, and you, astrologer, should become vizier, yes, after Pharaoh you two should be the greatest men in all the land."

They looked at him and gasped.

"A venturesome deed, Prince," said the captain at length; "yet with such a prize to win I think that I would dare it, though for the soldiers I cannot speak. First they must be told what is on foot, and out of so

many, how know we that the heart of one or more would not fail? A word from a traitor and before this time to-morrow the embalmers, or the jackals, would be busy."

Abi heard and looked from him to his companion.

"Prince," said Kaku, "put such thoughts from you. Bury them deep. Let them rise no more. In the heavens I read something of this business, but then I did not understand, but now I see the black depths of hell opening beneath our feet. Yes, hell would be our home if we dared to lift hand against the divine person of the Pharaoh. I say that the gods themselves would fight against us. Let it be, Prince, let it be, and you shall have many years of rule, who, if you strike now, will win nothing but a crown of shame, a nameless grave, and the everlasting torment of the damned."

As he spoke Abi considered the man's face and saw that all craft had left it. This was no charlatan that spoke to him, but one in earnest who believed what he said.

"So be it," he answered. "I accept your judgment, and will wait upon my fortune. Moreover, you are both right, the thing is too dangerous, and evil often falls on the heads of those who shoot arrows at a god, especially if they have not enough arrows. Let Pharaoh live on while I make ready. Perhaps to-morrow I may work upon him to name me his heir."

The astrologer sighed in relief, nor did the captain seem disappointed.

"My head feels firmer on my shoulders than it did just now," he said:

"and doubtless there are times when wisdom is better than valour.

Sleep well, Prince; Pharaoh will receive you to-morrow two hours after sunrise. Have we your leave to retire?"

"If I were wise," said Abi, fingering the hilt of his sword as he spoke,

"you would both of you retire for ever who know all the secret of my heart, and with a whisper could bring doom upon me."

Now the pair looked at each other with frightened eyes, and, like his master, the captain began to play with his sword.

"Life is sweet to all men, Prince," he said significantly, "and we have never given you cause to doubt us."

"No," answered Abi, "had it been otherwise I should have struck first and spoken afterwards. Only you must swear by the oath which may not be broken that in life or death no word of this shall pass your lips."

So they swore, both of them, by the holy name of Osiris, the judge and the redeemer.

"Captain," said Abi, "you have served me well. Your pay is doubled, and I confirm the promise that I made to you--should I ever rule yonder you

shall be my general."

While the soldier bowed his thanks, the prince said to Kaku,

"Master of the stars, my gold cup is yours. Is there aught else of mine that you desire?"

"That slave," answered the learned man, "Merytra, whose ears you boxed just now----"

"How do you know that I boxed her ears?" asked Abi quickly. "Did the stars tell you that also? Well, I am tired of the sly hussy--take her. Soon I think she will box yours."

But when Kaku sought Merytra to tell her the glad tidings that she was his, he could not find her.

Merytra had disappeared.