

## CHAPTER II

### THE PROMISE OF THE GOD

It was morning at Thebes, and the great city glowed in the rays of the new-risen sun. In a royal barge sat Abi the prince, splendidly apparelled, and with him Kaku, his astrologer, his captain of the guard and three other of his officers, while in a second barge followed slaves who escorted two chiefs and some fair women captured in war, also the chests of salted heads and hands, offerings to Pharaoh.

The white-robed rowers bent to their oars, and the swift boat shot forward up the Nile through a double line of ships of war, all of them crowded with soldiers. Abi looked at these ships which Pharaoh had gathered there to meet him, and thought to himself that Kaku had given wise counsel when he prayed him to attempt no rash deed, for against such surprises clearly Pharaoh was well prepared. He thought it again when on reaching the quay of cut stones he saw foot and horse-men marshalled there in companies and squadrons, and on the walls above hundreds of other men, all armed, for now he saw what would have happened to him, if with his little desperate band he had tried to pierce that iron ring of watching soldiers.

At the steps generals met him in their mail and priests in their full robes, bowing and doing him honour. Thus royally escorted, Abi passed through the open gates and the pylons of the splendid temple dedicated

to the Trinity of Thebes, "the House of Amen in the Southern Apt," where gay banners fluttered from the pointed masts, up the long street bordered with tall houses set in their gardens, till he came to the palace wall. Here more guards rolled back the brazen gates which in his folly of a few hours gone he had thought that he could force, and through the avenues of blooming trees he was led to the great pillared hall of audience.

After the brightness without, that hall seemed almost dark, only a ray of sunshine flowing from an unshuttered space in the clerestory above, fell full on the end of it, and revealed the crowned Pharaoh and his queen seated in state upon their thrones of ivory and gold. Gathered round and about him also were scribes and councillors and captains, and beyond these other queens in their carved chairs and attended, each of them, by beautiful women of the household in their gala dress. Moreover, behind the thrones, and at intervals between the columns, stood the famous Nubian guard of two hundred men, the servants of the body of Pharaoh as they were called, each of them chosen for faithfulness and courage.

The centre of all this magnificence was Pharaoh, on him the sunlight beat, to him every eye was turned, and where his glance fell there heads bowed and knees were bent. A small thin man of about forty years of age with a puckered, kindly and anxious face, and a brow that seemed to sink beneath the weight of the double crown that, save for its royal snake-crest of hollow gold, was after all but of linen, a man with

thin, nervous hands which played amongst the embroideries of his golden robe--such was Pharaoh, the mightiest monarch in the world, the ruler whom millions that had never seen him worshipped as a god.

Abi, the burly framed, thick-lipped, dark-skinned, round-eyed Abi, born of the same father, stared at him with wonderment, for years had passed since last they met, and in the palace when they were children a gulf had been set between the offspring of a royal mother and the child of a Hyksos concubine taken into the Household for reasons of state. In his vigour, and the might of his manhood, he stared at this weakling, the son of a brother and a sister, and the grandson of a brother and a sister. Yet there was something in that gentle eye, an essence of inherited royalty, before which his rude nature bowed. The body might be contemptible, but within it dwelt the proud spirit of the descendant of a hundred kings.

Abi advanced to the steps of the throne and knelt there, till after a little pause Pharaoh stretched out the sceptre in his hand for him to kiss. Then he spoke in his light, quick voice.

"Welcome, Prince and my brother," he said. "We quarrelled long ago, did we not, and many years have passed since we met, but Time heals all wounds and--welcome, son of my father. I need not ask if you are well," and he glanced enviously at the great-framed man who knelt before him.

"Hail to your divine Majesty!" answered Abi in his deep voice. "Health

and strength be with you, Holder of the Scourge of Osiris, Wearer of the Feathers of Amen, Mortal crowned with the glory of Ra."

"I thank you, Prince," answered Pharaoh gently, "and that health and strength I need, who fear that I shall only find them when I have yielded up the Scourge of Osiris whereof you speak to him who lent it me. But enough of myself. Let us to business, afterwards we will talk of such matters together. Why have you left your government at Memphis without leave asked, to visit me here in my City of the Gates?"

"Be not wrath with me," answered Abi humbly. "A while ago, in obedience to your divine command, I attacked the barbarians who threatened your dominions in the desert. Like Menthu, god of war, I fell upon them. I took them by surprise, I smote them, thousands of them bit the dust before me. Two of their kings I captured with their women--they wait without, to be slain by your Majesty. I bring with me the heads of a hundred of their captains and the hands of five hundred of their soldiers, in earnest of the truth of my word. Let them be spread out before you. I report to your divine Majesty that those barbarians are no more, that for a generation, at least, I have made the land safe to your uttermost dominions in the north. Suffer that the heads and the hands be brought in and counted out before your Majesty, that the smell of them may rise like incense to your divine nostrils."

"No, no," said Pharaoh, "my officers shall count them without, for I love not such sights of death, and I take your word for the number. What

payment do you ask for this service, my brother, for with great gifts would I reward you, who have done so well for me and Egypt?"

Before he answered Abi looked at the beautiful queen, Ahura, who sat at Pharaoh's side, and at the other royal consorts and women.

"Your Majesty," he said, "I see here many wives and ladies, but royal children I do not see. Grant--for doubtless they are in their own chambers--grant, O Pharaoh, that they may be led hither that my eyes may feed upon their loveliness, and that I may tell of them, each of them, to their cousins who await me at Memphis."

At these words a flush as of shame spread itself over the lovely face of Ahura, the royal wife, the Lady of the Two Lands; while the women turned their heads away whispering to each other bitterly, for the insult hurt them. Only Pharaoh set his pale face and answered with dignity.

"Prince Abi, to affront those whom the gods have smitten, be they kings or peasants, is an unworthy deed which the gods will not forget. You know well that I have no children. Why then do you ask me to show you their loveliness?"

"I had heard rumours, O Pharaoh," answered the Prince, "no more. Indeed, I did not believe them, for where there are so many wives I was certain that there would be some mothers. Therefore I asked to be sure before I proffered a petition which now I will make to you not for my own sake

but for Egypt's and yours, O Pharaoh. Have I your leave to speak here in public?"

"Speak on," said Pharaoh sternly. "Let aught that is for the welfare of Egypt be heard by Egypt."

"Your Majesty has told me," replied Abi bowing, "that the gods, being wrath, have denied you children. Not so much as one girl of your blood have they given to you to fill your throne after you when in due season it pleases you to depart to Osiris. Were it otherwise, were there even but a single woman-child of your divine race, I would say nothing, I would be silent as the grave. But so it is, and though your queens be fair and many, so it would seem that it must remain, since the ears of the gods having been deaf to your pleadings for so long, although you have built them glorious temples and made them offerings without count, will scarcely now be opened. Even Amen your father, Amen, whose name you bear, will perform no miracle for you, O Pharaoh, who are so great that he has decreed that you shall shine alone like the full moon at night, not sharing your glory with a single star."

Now Ahura the Queen, who all this while had been listening intently, spoke for the first time in a quick angry voice, saying,

"How know you that, Prince of Memphis? Sometimes the gods relent and that which they have withheld for a space, they give. My lord lives, and I live, and a child of his may yet fill the throne of Egypt."

"It may be so, O Queen," said Abi bowing, "and for my part I pray that it will be so, for who am I that I should know the purpose of the kings of heaven? If but one girl be born of you and Pharaoh, then I take back my words and give to you that title which for many years has been written falsely upon your thrones and monuments, the title of Royal Mother."

Now Ahura would have answered again, for this sneering taunt stung her to the quick. But Pharaoh laid his hand upon her knee and said,

"Continue, Prince and brother. We have heard from you that which we already know too well--that I am childless. Tell us what we do not know, the desire of your heart which lies hid beneath all these words."

"Pharaoh, it is this--I am of your holy blood, sprung of the same divine father----"

"But of a mother who was not divine," broke in Ahura; "of a mother taken from a race that has brought many a curse upon Khem, as any mirror will show you, Prince of Memphis."

"Pharaoh," went on Abi without heeding her, "you grow weak; heaven desires you, the earth melts beneath you. In the north and in the south many dangers threaten Egypt. Should you die suddenly without an heir, barbarians will flow in from the north and from the south, and the great

ones of the land will struggle for your place. Pharaoh, I am a warrior; I am built strong; my children are many; my house is built upon a rock; the army trusts me; the millions of the people love me. Take me then to rule with you and in the hearing of all the earth name me and my sons as your successors, so that our royal race may continue for generation after generation. So shall you end your days in peace and hope. I have spoken."

Now, as the meaning of this bold request sank into their hearts, all the court there gathered gasped and whispered, while the Queen Ahura in her anger crushed the lotus flower which she held in her hand and cast it to the floor. Only Pharaoh sat still and silent, his head bent and his eyes shut as though in prayer. For a minute or more he sat thus, and when he lifted his pale, pure face, there was a smile upon it.

"Abi, my brother," he said in his gentle voice, "listen to me. There are those who filled this throne before me, who on hearing such words would have pointed to you with their sceptres, whereon, Abi, those lips of yours would have grown still for ever, and you and your name and the names of all your House would have been blotted out by death. But, Abi, you were ever bold, and I forgive you for laying open the thoughts of your heart to me. Still, Abi, you have not told us all of them. You have not told us, for instance," he went on slowly, and in the midst of an intense silence, "that but last night you debated whether it would not be possible with that guard of yours to break into my palace and put me to the sword and name yourself Pharaoh--by right of blood, Abi; yes, by



right of blood--my blood shed by you, my brother."

As these words left the royal lips a tumult arose in the hall, the women and the great officers sprang up, the captains stepped forward drawing their swords to avenge so horrible a sacrilege. But Pharaoh waved his sceptre, and they were still, only Abi cried in a great voice.

"Who has dared to whisper a lie so monstrous?" And he glared first at Kaku and then at the captain of his guard who stood behind him, and choked in wrath, or fear, or both.

"Suspect not your officers, Prince," went on the Pharaoh, still smiling, "for on my royal word they are innocent. Yet, Abi, a pavilion set upon the deck of a ship is no good place to plot the death of kings. Pharaoh has many spies, also, at times, the gods, to whom as you say he is so near, whisper tidings to him in his sleep. Suspect not your officers, Abi, although I think that to yonder Master of the Stars who stands behind you, I should be grateful, since, had you attempted to execute this madness, but for him I might have been forced to kill you, Abi, as one kills a snake that creeps beneath his mat. Astrologer, you shall have a gift from me, for you are a wise man. It may take the place, perhaps, of one that you have lost; was it not a certain woman slave whom your master gave to you last night--after he had punished her for no fault?"

Kaku prostrated himself before the glory of Pharaoh, understanding at

last that it was the lost girl Merytra who had overheard and betrayed them. But heeding him no more, his Majesty went on.

"Abi, Prince and brother, I forgive you a deed that you purposed but did not attempt. May the gods and the spirits of our fathers forgive you also, if they will. Now as to your demand. You are my only living brother, and therefore I will weigh it. Perchance, if I should die without issue, although you are not all royal, although there flows in your veins a blood that Egypt hates; although you could plot the murder of your lord and king, it may be well that when I am gone you should fill my place, for you are brave and of the ancient race on one side, if base-born on the other. But I am not yet dead, and children may still come to me. Abi, will you be a prisoner until Osiris calls me, or will you swear an oath?"

"I will swear an oath," answered the Prince hoarsely, for he knew his shame and danger.

"Then kneel here, and by the dreadful Name swear that you will lift no hand and plot no plot against me. Swear that if a child, male or female, should be given to me, you will serve such a child truly as your lord and lawful Pharaoh. In the presence of all this company, swear, knowing that if you break the oath in letter or in spirit, then all the gods of Egypt shall pour their curse upon your head in life, and in death shall give you over to the everlasting torments of the damned."

So, having little choice, Abi swore by the Name and kissed the sceptre in token of his oath.

It was night. Dark and solemn was the innermost shrine of the vast temple, the "House of Amen in the Northern Apt," which we call Karnak, the very holy of holies where, fashioned of stone, and with the feathered crown upon his head, stood the statue of Amen-ra, father of the gods. Here, where none but the high-priest and the royalties of Egypt might enter, Pharaoh and his wife Ahura, wrapped in brown cloaks like common folk, knelt at the feet of the god and prayed. With tears and supplications did they pray that a child might be given to them.

There in the sacred place, lit only by a single lamp which burned from age to age, they told the story of their grief, whilst high above them the cold, calm countenance of the god seemed to stare through the gloom, as for a thousand years, in joy or sorrow, it had stared at those that went before them. They told of the mocking words of Abi who had demanded to see their children, the children that were not; they told of their terror of the people who demanded that an heir should be declared; they told of the doom that threatened their ancient house, which from Pharaoh to Pharaoh, all of one blood, for generations had worshipped in this place. They promised gifts and offerings, stately temples and wide lands, if only their desire might be fulfilled.

"Let me no more be made a mock among men," cried the beautiful queen, beating her forehead upon the stone feet of the god. "Let me bear a child to fill the seat of my lord the King, and then if thou wilt, take my life in payment."

But the god made no answer, and wearied out at length they rose and departed. At the door of the sanctuary they found the high-priest awaiting them, a wizened, aged man.

"The god gave no sign, O High-priest," said Pharaoh sadly; "no voice spoke to us."

The old priest looked at the weeping queen, and a light of pity crept into his eyes.

"To me, watching without," he said, "a voice seemed to speak, though what it said I may not reveal. Go to your palace now, O Pharaoh, and O Queen Ahura, and take your rest side by side. I think that in your sleep a sign will come to you, for Amen is pitiful, and loves his children who love him. According to that sign so speak to the Prince Abi, speak without fear or doubt, since for good or ill it shall be fulfilled."

Then like shadows, hand in hand, this royal pair glided down the vast, pillared halls till at the pylon gates, which were opened for them, they found their litters, and were borne along the great avenue of ram-headed sphinxes back to a secret door in the palace wall.

It was past midnight. Deep darkness and heavy silence lay upon Thebes, broken only by dogs howling at the stars and the occasional challenge of soldiers on the walls. Side by side in their golden bed the wearied Pharaoh and his queen slept heavily. Presently Ahura woke. She started up in the bed; she stared at the darkness about her with frightened eyes; she stretched out her hand and clasping Pharaoh by the arm, whispered in a thrilling voice,

"Awake, awake! I have that which I must tell you."

Pharaoh roused himself, for there was something in Ahura's voice which swept away the veils of sleep.

"What has chanced, Ahura?" he asked.

"O Pharaoh, I have dreamed a dream, if indeed it were but a dream. It seemed to me that the darkness opened, and that standing in the darkness I saw a Glory which had neither shape nor form. Yet a voice spoke from the Glory, a low, sweet voice: 'Queen Ahura, my daughter,' it said, 'I am that Spirit to whom thou and thy husband did pray this night in the sanctuary of my temple. It seemed to both of you that your prayers remained unheard, yet it was not so, as my priest knew well. Queen Ahura, thou and Pharaoh thy husband have put your trust in me these many

years, and not in vain. A daughter shall be given to thee and Pharaoh, and my Spirit shall be in that child. She shall be beautiful and glorious as no woman was before her, for I clothe her with health and power and wisdom. She shall rule over the Northern and the Southern Lands; yea, for many years the double crown shall rest upon her brow, and no king that went before her, and no king that follows after her, shall be more great in Egypt. Troubles and dangers shall threaten her, but the Spirit that I give to her shall protect her in them all, and she shall tread her enemy beneath her feet. A royal lover shall come to her also, and she shall rejoice in his love and from it shall spring many kings and princes. Neter-Tua, Morning Star, shall be her name, and high-priestess of Amen--no less--shall be her office, for she is my child whom I have taken from heaven and sent down to earth; the child that I have given to Pharaoh and to thee, and I love her and appoint the good goddesses to be her companions, and command Osiris to receive her at the last.

"Behold, in token of these things I lay my symbol on thy breast, and on her breast also shall that symbol be. When I lift it from thee and thou dost open thy eyes, then awaken Pharaoh at thy side and let these my words be written in a roll, so that none of them are forgotten.'

"Then, O Pharaoh," went on Ahura, "from the Glory there came forth a hand, and in the hand was the Symbol of Life shining as though with fire, and the hand laid it upon my breast and it burned me as though with fire, and I awoke and lo! darkness was all about me, nothing but

darkness, and at my side I heard you sleeping."

Now when Pharaoh had listened to this dream, he kissed the queen and blessed her because of its good omen, and clapped his hands to summon the women of honour who slept without. They ran in bearing lights, and by the lights he saw that beneath the throat of the Queen upon her fair skin, appeared a red mark, and the shape of it was the shape of the Sign of Life; yes, there was the loop, and beneath the loop the cross.

Then Pharaoh commanded that the chief of his scribes should come to him with papyrus and writing tools, and that the high-priest of Amen should be brought swiftly from the temple. So the scribe came to the bed-chamber of the King, and in the presence of the high-priest all the words of Amen were written down, not one of them was omitted, and Pharaoh and the Queen signed the roll, and the high-priest witnessed it and, copies having been made, bore it away to hide it in the secret treasury of Amen. But the mark of the Cross of Life remained upon the breast of the Queen Ahura till the day that she died.

Now in the morning Pharaoh summoned his Court and commanded that the Prince Abi should be brought before him. So the Prince came and Pharaoh addressed him kindly.

"Son of my father," he said, "I have considered your request that I

should take you to rule with me on the throne of Egypt, and name you and your sons to be Pharaohs after me, and it is refused. Know that it has been revealed to me and to the royal wife, Ahura, by the greatest of the gods, that a daughter shall be born to us in due season, who shall be called Morning Star of Amen, and that she and her seed shall be Pharaohs after me. Therefore rejoice with us and return to your government, Prince Abi, and be happy in our love, and in the goods and greatness that the gods have given you."

Now Abi shook with anger, for he thought that all this tale was a trick and a snare. But knowing that his peril was great there in the hand of Pharaoh, he answered only that when this Morning Star arose, his star should do it reverence, though as the words passed his lips he remembered the prophecy of his astrologer Kaku, that the Morning Star of Amen should blot out that star of his.

"You think that I speak falsely, Prince Abi, yes, that I stain my lips with lies," said Pharaoh with indignation. "Well, I forgive you this also. Go hence and await the issue and know by this sign that truth is in my heart. When the Princess Neter-Tua is born, upon her breast shall be seen the symbol of the Sign of Life. Depart now, lest I grow angry. The gifts I have promised shall follow you to Memphis."

So Abi returned to the white-walled city of Memphis and sat there sullenly, putting it about that a plot was on foot to deprive him of his heritage. But Kaku shook his head, saying in secret that the Star,



Neter-Tua, would arise, for so it was decreed by Amen, father of the gods.