

CHAPTER III

RAMES, THE PRINCESS, AND THE CROCODILE

At the appointed time to Ahura, the royal wife, was born a child, a girl with a fresh and lovely face and waving hair and eyes that from the first were blue like the summer sky at even. Also on her breast was a mole of the length of a finger nail, which mole was shaped like the holy Sign of Life.

Now Pharaoh and his house and the priests in every temple, and indeed all Egypt went mad with joy, though there were many who in secret mourned over the sex of the infant, whispering that a man and not a woman should wear the Double Crown. But in public they said nothing, since the story of this child had gone abroad and folk declared that it was sent by the gods, and divine, and that the goddesses, Isis, Nephthys, and Hathor, with Khemu, the Maker of Mankind, were seen in the birth chamber, glowing like gold.

Also Pharaoh issued a decree that wherever the name of the Queen Ahura was graven in all the land, to it should be added the title "By the will of Amen, Mother of his Morning Star," and that a new hall should be built in the temple of Amen in the Northern Apt, and all about it carved the story of the coming of Prince Abi and of the vision of the Queen.

But Ahura never lived to see this glorious place, since from the hour of

her daughter's birth she began to sink. On the fourteenth day, the day of purification, she bade the nurse bring the beautiful babe, and gazed at it long and blessed it, and spoke with the Ka or Double of the child, which she said she saw lying on her arm beside it, bidding that Ka protect it well through the dangers of life and death until the hour of resurrection. Then she said that she heard Amen calling to her to pay the price which she had promised for the gift of the divine child, the price of her own life, and smiled upon Pharaoh her husband, and died happily with a radiant face.

Now joy was turned to mourning, and during all the days of embalming Egypt wept for Ahura until, at length, the time came when her body was rowed across the Nile to the splendid tomb which she had made ready in the Valley of the Queens, causing masons and artists to labour at it without cease. For Ahura knew from the day of her vision that she was doomed to die, and remembered that the tombs of the dead remain as the live hands leave them, since few waste gold and toil upon the eternal house of one who is dead.

So Ahura was buried with great pomp and all her jewels, and Pharaoh, who mourned her truly, made splendid offerings in the chapel of her tomb, and having laid in the mouth of it the funeral boat in which she was borne across the Nile, he built it up for ever, and poured sand over the rock, so that none should find its place until the Day of Awakening.

Meanwhile, the infant grew and flourished, and when it was six months

old, was taken to the college of the priestesses of Amen, there to be reared and taught.

Now on the day of the birth of the Princess Neter-Tua, there happened another birth with which our story has to do. The captain of the guard of the temple of Amen was one Mermes, who had married his own half-sister, Asti, the enchantress. As was well known, this Mermes was by right and true descent the last of that house of Pharaohs which had filled the throne of Egypt until their line was cast down generations before by the dynasty that now ruled the land, whereof the reigning Pharaoh and his daughter Neter-Tua alone remained. A long while past, in the early days of his reign, his council has whispered in Pharaoh's ear that he should kill Mermes and his sister, lest a day should come when they rebelled against him, proclaiming that they did so by right of blood. But Pharaoh, who was gentle and hated murder, instead of slaying Mermes sent for him and told him all.

Then Mermes, a noble-looking man as became the stock from which he sprang, prostrated himself and said,

"O Pharaoh, why should you kill me? It has pleased the gods to debase my House and to set up yours. Have I ever lifted up my heel against you because my forefathers were kings, or plotted with the discontent to overthrow you! See, I am satisfied with my station, which is that of a

noble and a soldier in your army. Therefore let me and my half-sister, the wise lady Asti whom I purpose to marry, dwell on in peace as your true and humble servants. Dip not your hands in our innocent blood, O Pharaoh, lest the gods send a curse upon you and your House and our ghosts come back from the grave to haunt you."

When Pharaoh heard these words, his heart was moved in him, and he stretched out his sceptre for Mermes to kiss, thereby granting to him life and protection.

"Mermes," he said, "you are an honourable man, and my equal in blood if not in place. For their own purposes the gods raise up one and cast down another that at last their ends may be fulfilled. I believe that you will work no harm against me and mine, and, therefore, I will work no harm against you and your sister Asti, Mistress of Magic. Rather shall you be my friend and counsellor."

Then Pharaoh offered high rank and office to him, but Mermes would not take them, answering that if he did, envy would be stirred up against him, and in this way or that bring him to his death, since tall trees are the first to fall. So in the end Pharaoh made Mermes Captain of the Guard of Amen, and gave him land and houses enough to enable him to live as a noble of good estate, but no more. Also he became a friend of Pharaoh and one of his inner Council, to whose voice he always listened, for Mermes was a true-hearted man.

Afterwards Mermes married Asti, but like Pharaoh for a long while he remained childless, since he took no other wives. On the day of the birth of the Princess Tua, the Morning Star of Amen, however, Asti bore a son, a royal-looking child of great strength and beauty and very fair in colour, as tradition said that the kings of his race had been before him, but with black and shining eyes.

"See," said the midwife, "here is a head shaped to wear a crown."

Whereon Asti, his mother, forgetting her caution in her joy, or perhaps inspired by the gods, for from her childhood she was a prophetess, answered,

"Yes, and I think that this head and a crown will come close together," and she kissed him and named him Rames after her royal forefather, the founder of their line.

As it chanced a spy overheard this saying and reported it to the Council, and the Council urged Pharaoh to cause the boy to be put away, as they had urged in the case of his father, Mermes, because of the words of omen that Asti had spoken, and because she had given her son a royal name, naming him after the majesty of Ra, as though he were indeed the child of a king. But Pharaoh would not, asking with his soft smile whether they wished him to baptise his daughter in the blood of another infant who drew his first breath upon the same day, and adding:

"Ra sheds his glory upon all, and this high-born boy may live to be a friend in need to her whom Amen has given to Egypt. Let things befall as the gods decree. Who am I that I should make myself a god and destroy a life that they have fashioned?"

So the boy Rames lived and throve, and Mermes and Asti, when they came to hear of these things, thanked Pharaoh and blessed him.

Now the house of Mermes, as Captain of the Guard, was within the wall of the great temple of Amen, near to the palace of the priestesses of Amen where the Princess Neter-Tua was nurtured. Thus it came about that when the Queen Ahura died, the lady Asti was named as nurse to the Princess, since Pharaoh said that she should drink no milk save that of one in whose veins ran royal blood. So Asti was Tua's foster mother, and night by night she slept in her arms together with her own son, Rames. Afterwards, too, when they were weaned the babes were taught to walk and speak together, and later, as children, they became playmates.

Thus from the first these two loved each other, as brother and sister love when they are twins. But although the boy was bold and brave, this little princess always had the mastery of him, not because she was a princess and heir to the throne of Egypt--for all the high titles they gave her fell idly on her ears, nor did she think anything of the bowings of courtiers and of priests--but from some strength within herself. She it was that set the games they played, and when she talked he was obliged to listen, for although she was so sound and healthy,

this Tua differed from other children.

Thus she had what she called her "silent hours" when she would suffer no one to come near her, not her ladies or her foster-mother, Asti herself, nor even Rames. Then, followed by the women at a distance, she would wander among the great columns of the temple and study the sculptures on the walls; and, since all places were open to her, Pharaoh's child, enter the sanctuaries, and stare at the gods that sat in them fashioned in granite and in alabaster. This she would do even in the solemn moonlight when mortals were afraid to approach these sacred shrines, and come thence unconcerned and smiling.

"What do you see there, O Morning Star?" asked little Rames of her once.

"They are dull things, those stone gods that have never moved since the beginning of the world; also they frighten me, especially when Ra is set."

"They are not dull, and they do not frighten me," answered Tua; "they talk to me, and although I cannot understand all they say, I am happy with them."

"Talk!" he said contemptuously, "how can stones talk?"

"I do not know. I think it is their spirits that talk, telling me stories which happened before I was born and that shall happen after I am dead, yes, and after they seem to be dead. Now be silent--I say

that they talk to me--it is enough."

"For me it would be more than enough," said the boy, "but then I am not called Child of Amen, who only worship Menthu, God of War."

When Rames was seven years of age, every morning he was taken to school in the temple, where the priests taught him to write with pens of reed upon tablets of wood, and told him more about the gods of Egypt than he ever wanted to hear again. During these hours, except when she was being instructed by the great ladies of the Court, or by high-priestesses, Tua was left solitary, since by the command of Pharaoh no other children were allowed to play with her, perhaps because there were none in the temple of her age whose birth was noble.

Once when he came back from his school in the evening Rames asked her if she had not been lonely without him. She answered, No, as she had another companion.

"Who is it?" he asked jealously. "Show me and I will fight him."

"No one that you can see, Rames," she replied. "Only my own Ka."

"Your Ka! I have heard of Kas, but I never saw one. What is it like?"

"Just like me, except that it throws no shadow, and only comes when I am quite by myself, and then, although I hear it often, I see it rarely, for it is mixed up with the light."

"I don't believe in Kas," exclaimed Rames scornfully, "you make them up out of your head."

A little while after this talk something happened that caused Rames to change his mind about Kas, or at any rate the Ka of Tua. In a hidden court of the temple was a deep pool of water with cemented sides, where, it was said, lived a sacred crocodile, an enormous beast that had dwelt there for hundreds of years. Rames and Tua having heard of this crocodile, often talked of it and longed to see it, but could not for there was a high wall round the tank, and in it a door of copper that was kept locked, except when once in every eight days the priests took in food to the crocodile--living goats and sheep, and sometimes a calf, none of which ever came back again.

Now one day Rames watching them return, saw the priest, who was called Guardian of the Door, put his hand behind him to thrust the key with which he had just locked the door, into his wallet, and missing the mouth of the wallet, let it fall upon the sand, then go upon his way knowing nothing of what he had done.

When he had gone in a great hurry, for he was a fat old priest and the dinner hour was at hand, Rames pounced upon the key and hid it in his

robe. Then he sought out the princess and said,

"Morning Star, this evening, when I come back from school and am allowed to play with you, we can look at the wonderful beast in the tank, for look, I have the key which that fat priest will not search for till seven days are gone by, before which I can take it to him, saying that I found it in the sand, or perhaps put it back into his wallet."

When she heard this Tua's eyes shone, since above all things she desired to see this holy monster. But in the evening when the boy came running to her eagerly--for he had thought of nothing but the crocodile all day, and had bought a pigeon from a school-fellow with which to feed the brute--he found Tua in a different mood.

"I don't think that we will go to see the holy crocodile, Rames," she said, looking at him thoughtfully.

"Why not?" he asked amazed. "There is no one about, and I have put fat upon the key so that it will make no noise."

"Because my Ka has been with me, Rames, and told me that it is a bad act and if we do trouble will come to us."

"Oh! may the fiend Set take your Ka," replied the lad in a rage. "Show it to me and I will talk with it."

"I cannot, Rames, for it is me. Moreover, if Set took it, he would take me also, and you are wicked to wish such a thing."

Now the boy began to cry with vexation, sobbing out that she was not to be trusted, and that he had paid away his bronze knife, which Pharaoh had given him when last he visited the temple, for a pigeon to tempt the beast to the top of the water, so that they might see it, although the knife was worth many pigeons, and Pharaoh would be angry if he heard that he had parted with it.

"Why should we take the life of a poor pigeon to please ourselves?" asked Tua, softening a little at the sight of his grief.

"It's taken already," he answered. "It fluttered so that I had to sit on it to hide it from the priest, and when he had gone it was dead. Look," and he opened the linen bag he held, and showed her the dove cold and stiff.

"As you did not mean to kill it, that makes a difference," said Tua judicially. "Well, perhaps my Ka did not mean that we should not have one peep, and it is a pity to waste the poor pigeon, which then will have died for nothing."

Rames agreed that it would be the greatest of pities, so the two children slipped away through the trees of the garden into the shadow of the wall, along which they crept till they came to the bronze door. Then

guiltily enough Rames put the great key into the lock, and with the help of a piece of wood which he had also made ready, that he set in the ring of the key to act as a lever, the two of them turning together shot back the heavy bolts.

Taking out the key lest it should betray them, they opened the door a little and squeezed themselves through into the forbidden place. No sooner had they done so than almost they wished themselves back again, for there was something about the spot that frightened them, to say nothing of the horrible smell which made Tua feel ill. It was a great tank, with a little artificial island in its centre, full of slimy water that looked almost black because of the shadow of the high walls, and round it ran a narrow stone path. At one spot in this path, however, where grew some dank-looking trees and bushes, was a slope, also of stone, and on the slope with its prow resting in the water a little boat, and in the boat, oars. But of the crocodile there was nothing to be seen.

"It is asleep somewhere," whispered Tua, "let us go away, I do not like this stench."

"Stench," answered Rames. "I smell nothing except the lilies on the water. Let us wake it up, it would be silly to go now. Surely you are not afraid, O Star."

"Oh, no! I am not afraid," answered Tua proudly. "Only wake it up

quickly, please."

What Rames did not add was that it would be impossible to retreat as the door had closed behind them, and there was no keyhole on its inner side.

So they walked round the tank, but wherever it might lurk, the sleeping crocodile refused to wake.

"Let us get into the boat and look for it," suggested Rames. "Perhaps it is hiding on the island."

So he led her to the stone slope, where to her horror Tua saw the remains of the crocodile's last meal, a sight that caused her to forget her doubts and jump into the boat very quickly. Then Rames gave it a push and sprang in after her, so that they found themselves floating on the water. Now, standing in the bow, the boy took an oar and paddled round the island, but still there were no signs of the crocodile.

"I don't believe it is here at all," he said, recovering his courage.

"You might try the pigeon," suggested Tua, who, now that there was less smell, felt her curiosity returning.

This was a good thought upon which Rames acted at once. Taking the dead bird from the bag he spread out its wings to make it look as though it were alive, and threw it into the water, exclaiming, "Arise, O Holy

Crocodile!"

Then with fearful suddenness, whence they knew not, that crocodile arose. An awful scaly head appeared with dull eyes and countless flashing fangs, and behind the head cubit upon cubit of monstrous form. The fangs closed upon the pigeon and everything vanished.

"That was the Holy Crocodile," said Rames abstractedly as he stared at the boiling waters, "which has lived here during the reigns of eight Pharaohs, and perhaps longer. Now we have seen it."

"Yes," answered Tua, "and I never want to see it again. Get me away quick, or I will tell your father."

Thus adjured the boy, nothing loth, seized his oar, when suddenly the ancient crocodile, having swallowed the dove, thrust up its snout immediately beneath them and began to follow the boat. Now Tua screamed aloud and said something about her Ka.

"Tell it to keep off the crocodile," shouted Rames as he worked the oar furiously. "Nothing can hurt a Ka."

But the crocodile would not be kept off. On the contrary, it thrust its grey snout and one of its claws over the stern of the boat in such a fashion that Rames could no longer work the oar, dragging it almost under water, and snapped with its horrible jaws.

"Oh! it is coming in; we are going to be eaten," cried Tua.

At that moment the boat touched the landing-place and swung round, so that its bow, where Tua was, struck the head of the crocodile, which seemed to infuriate the beast. At least, it hurled itself upon the boat, causing the fore part to heel over, fill with water, and begin to sink. Then the little lad, Rames, showed the courage that was in him. Shouting to Tua:

"Get on shore, get on shore!" he plunged past her and smote the huge reptile upon the head with the blade of his oar. It opened its hideous mouth, and he thrust the oar into it and held on.

"Leave go," cried Tua, as she scrambled to land.

But Rames would not leave go, for in his brave little heart he thought that if he did the crocodile would follow Tua and eat her. So he clung to the handle till it was wrenched from him. Indeed he did more, for seeing that the crocodile had bitten the wooden blade in two and, having dropped it, was still advancing towards the slope where it was accustomed to be fed, he leapt into the water and struck it in the eye with his little fist. Feeling the pain of the blow the monster snapped at him, and catching him by the hand began to sink back into deep water, dragging the lad after it.

Rames said nothing, but Tua, who already was at the head of the stage, looked round and saw the agony on his face.

"Help me, Amen!" she cried, and flying back, grasped Rames by his left arm just as he was falling over, then set her heels in a crack of the rock and held on. For one moment she was dragged forward till she thought that she must fall upon her face and be drowned or eaten with Rames, but the next something yielded, and she and the boy tumbled in a heap upon the stones. They rose and staggered together to the terrace. As they went Tua saw that Rames was looking at his right hand curiously; also that it was covered with blood, and that the little finger was torn off it. Then she remembered nothing further, except a sound of shouts and of heavy hammering at the copper door.

When she recovered it was to find herself in the house of Mermes with the lady Asti bending over her and weeping.

"Why do you weep, Nurse?" she asked, "seeing that I am safe?"

"I weep for my son, Princess," she answered between her sobs.

"Is he dead of his wounds, then, Asti?"

"No, O Morning Star, he lies sick in his chamber. But soon Pharaoh will kill him because he led her who will be Queen of Egypt into great danger of her life."

"Not so," said Tua, springing up, "for he saved my life."

As she spoke the door opened and in came Pharaoh himself, who had been summoned hastily from the palace. His face was white and he shook with fear, for it had been reported to him that his only child was drowned. When he saw that she lived and was not even hurt, he could not contain his joy, but casting his arms about her, sank to his knees giving thanks to the gods and the guardian spirits. She kissed him, and studying his face with her wise eyes, asked why he was so much afraid.

"Because I thought you had been killed, my daughter."

"Why did you think that, O my father, seeing that the great god, Amen, before I was born promised to protect me always, though it is true that had it not been for Rames----"

Now at the mention of this name Pharaoh was filled with rage.

"Speak not of that wicked lad," he exclaimed, "now or ever more, for he shall be scourged till he dies!"

"My father," answered Tua, springing up, "forget those words, for if Rames dies I will die also. It is I who am to blame, not he, for my Ka warned me not to look upon the beast, but to Rames no Ka spoke. Moreover, when that evil god would have eaten me it was Rames who fought

with it and offered himself to its jaws in my place. Listen, my father, while I tell you all the story."

So Pharaoh listened, and when it was done he sent for Rames. Presently the boy was carried in, for he had lost so much blood that he could not walk, and was placed upon a stool before him.

"Slay me now, O Pharaoh," he said in a weak voice, "for I have sinned. Moreover, I shall die happy since my spirit gave me strength to beat off the evil beast from the Princess whom I led into trouble."

"Truly you have done wickedly," said Pharaoh, shaking his head at him, "and, therefore, perhaps, you will lose your hand and even your life. Yet, child, you have a royal heart, who first saved your playmate and then, even in my presence, take all the blame upon yourself. Therefore I forgive you, son of Mermes; moreover, I see that I was wise not to listen to those who counselled that you should be put away at birth," and bending over the boy, Pharaoh kissed him on the brow.

Also he gave orders that the greatest physicians in the land should attend upon him and purge the poison of the crocodile's teeth from his body, and when he recovered--which save for the loss of the little finger of his right hand, he did completely--he sent him a sword with a handle of gold fashioned to the shape of a crocodile, in place of the knife which he had paid away for the pigeon, bidding him use it bravely all his life in defence of her who would be his queen. Further, although

he was still so young, he gave to him the high title of Count in earnest of his love and favour, and with it a name that meant Defender of the Royal Lady.

After he had gone Asti the prophetess looked at the sword which Pharaoh had given to her son.

"I see royal blood on it," she said, and handed it back to Rames.

But Rames and Tua were no more allowed to play together alone, for always after this the Princess was accompanied by women of honour and an armed guard. Also, within a year or two the boy was placed in charge of a general to be brought up as a soldier, a trade that he liked well enough, so that from this time forward he and Neter-Tua met but seldom. Still there was a bond between them which could not be broken by absence, for already they loved each other, and every night and morning when Tua made her petitions to Amen, after praying for Pharaoh her father, and for the spirit of her royal mother, Ahura, she prayed for Rames, and that they might meet soon. For the months when her eyes did not fall upon his face were wearisome to Tua.