

CHAPTER IV

THE SUMMONING OF AMEN

The years went by and the Princess Neter-Tua, who was called Morning Star of Amen, came at length to womanhood, and went through the ceremonies of Purification. In all Egypt there was no maiden so wise and spirited or so lovely. Tall and slender was her shape, blue as the sea were her eyes, rosy like the dawn were her cheeks, and when she did not wear it in a net of gold, her black and curling hair fell almost to her waist. Also she was very learned, for priests and priestesses taught her all things that she ought to know, together with the arts of playing on the harp and of singing and dancing, while her own excellent Spirit, that Ka which Amen had given her, instructed her in a deeper wisdom which she gathered unconsciously in sleep and waking dreams, as the slumbering earth gathers dew at night.

Moreover, her father, the wise old Pharaoh, opened to her the craft of statesmanship, by help of which she might govern men and overthrow her enemies. Indeed, he did more, for when her education was finished, he joined her with him in the government of Egypt, saying:

"I who always lacked bodily strength, grow aged and feeble. This mighty crown is too heavy for me to bear alone. Daughter, you must share its weight."

So the young Neter-Tua became a queen, and great was the ceremony of her coronation. The high priests and priestesses, clothed in the robes and symbols of their gods and goddesses, addressed speeches to her and blessed her in their names, giving her every good gift and promising to her eternal life. Princes and nobles made her offerings; foreign chiefs and kings bowed before her by their ambassadors. The Counts and headmen of the Two Lands swore allegiance to her, and, finally, in the presence of all the Court, Pharaoh himself set the double crown upon her brow and gave her her throne-names of "Glorious in Ra and Hathor Strong in Beauty."

So for a while Tua sat splendid on her golden seat while the people adored her, but in that triumphant hour her eyes searched for one face only, that of the tall and gallant captain, Rames, her foster-brother, and for a moment rested there content. Yes, their eyes met, those of the new-crowned Empress on her throne and of the youthful noble in the throng below. Short was the greeting, for next instant she looked away, yet more full of meaning than whole days of speech.

"The Queen does not forget what the child remembered, the goddess is still a woman," it seemed to say. And so sweet was that message that Rames staggered from the Court like one stricken by the sun.

Night came at last, and having dismissed her secretaries, scribes and

tire-women the weary girl, now clad in simple white, sat in her chamber alone. She thought of all the splendours through which she had passed; she thought of the glories of her imperial state, of the power that she wielded, and of the proud future which stretched before her feet.

But most of all she thought of the face of the young Count Rames, the playmate of her childhood, the man she loved, and wondered, ah! how she wondered, if with all her power she could ever draw him to her side.

If not, of what use was this rule over millions, this dominion of her world? They called her a goddess, and in truth, at times, she believed that she was half-divine, but if so, why did her heart ache like that of any common maid?

Moreover, was she really set above the misfortunes of her race? Could a throne, however bright with gold, lift her above the sorrows of human kind? She desired to learn the truth, the very truth. Her mind was urgent, it drove her on to search out things to come, to stand face to face with them, even if they were evil. Well, she believed she had the strength, although, as yet, she had never called it to her aid.

Also this thing could not be done alone. Tua thought a while, then going to the door of her chamber she bade a woman who waited without summon to her the Lady Asti, priestess of Amen, Interpreter of Heaven. Presently Asti came, for now, as always, she was in attendance upon the new-crowned queen, a tall and noble-looking woman with fine-cut features and black hair, that although she was fifty years of age, still showed no trace of grey.

"I was in the Sanctuary when your Majesty summoned me," she said, pointing to the sacred robe she wore. "Let your Majesty pardon me, therefore, if I have been long in coming," and she bowed low before her.

But the Queen lifted her up and kissed her, saying,

"I am weary of those high titles whereof I have heard more than enough to-day. Call me Tua, O my mother, for so you have ever been to me, from whose breast I drew the milk of life."

"What ails you, my child?" asked Asti. "Was the crown too heavy for this young head of yours?" she added, stretching out her delicate hand and stroking the black and curling hair.

"Aye, Mother, the weight of it seemed to crush me with its gems and gold. I am weary and yet I cannot sleep. Tell me, why did Pharaoh summon that Council after the feast? Mermes was one of them, so you must know. And why was not I, who henceforth rule with Pharaoh, present with him?"

"Would you learn?" said Asti with a little smile. "Well, as Queen you have the right. It was because they discussed the matter of your marriage."

For a moment a light shone upon Tua's face. Then she asked anxiously:

"My marriage, and with whom?"

"Oh! many names were mentioned, Child, since she who rules Egypt does not lack for suitors."

"Tell me them quick, Asti."

So she told them, there were seven in all, the Prince of Kesh, the sons of foreign kings, great nobles, and a general of the army who claimed descent from a former Pharaoh.

As each name fell from Asti's lips Tua waved her hand, saying scornful words, such as "I know him not," "Too old," "Fat and hideous," "A foreign dog who spits upon our gods," and so forth, adding at last:

"Go on."

"That is all, Lady, no other name was mentioned, and the Council adjourned to consider these."

"No other name?"

"Do you then miss one, perchance, Tua?"

She made no answer, only her lips seemed to shape themselves to a certain sound that they did not utter. The two women looked each other

in the eyes, then Asti shook her head.

"It may not be," she whispered, "for many reasons, and amongst them that by the solemn decree of long ago whereof I have told you, our blood is barred for ever from the throne. None would dare to break it, not even the Pharaoh himself. You would bring my son to his death, Tua, which such another look as you gave him in yonder hall would surely do."

"No," she answered slowly, "I would not bring him to his death, but to life and honour and--love, and one day I shall be Pharaoh. Only, Asti, if you betray me to him I swear that I will bring you to your death, although you are so dear."

"I shall not betray you," answered the priestess, smiling again. "In truth, most Beautiful, I do not think there is any need, even if I would. Say now, why did a certain captain turn faint and leave the hall to-day when your eyes chanced to fall on him?"

"The heat," suggested Tua, colouring.

"Yes, it was hot, but he is stronger than most men and had borne it long--like others. Still there are fires----"

"Because he was afraid of my majesty," broke in Tua hurriedly. "You know I looked very royal there, Mother."

"Yes, doubtless fear moved him--or some other passion. Yet, Beloved, put that thought from your heart as I do. When you are Pharaoh you will learn that a monarch is a slave to the people and to the law. Breathe but his name in love, and never will you see him more till you meet before Osiris."

Tua hid her eyes in her hands for a moment, then she glanced up and there was another look upon her face, a strange, new look.

"When I am Pharaoh," she answered, "there are certain matters in which I will be my own law, and if the people do not like it, they may find another Pharaoh."

Asti started at her words, and a light of joy shone in her deep eyes.

"Truly your heart is high," she said; "but, oh! if you love me--and another--bury that thought, bury it deep, or he will never live to see you placed alone upon the golden seat. Know, Lady, that already from hour to hour I fear for him--lest he should drink a poisoned cup, lest at night he should chance to stumble against a spear, lest an arrow--shot in sport--should fall against his throat and none know whence it came."

Tua clenched her hands.

"If so, there should be such vengeance as Egypt has not heard of since

Mena ruled."

"Of what use is vengeance, Child, when the heart is empty and the tomb is sealed?"

Again Tua thought. Then she said:

"There are other gods besides Osiris. Now what do men call me, Mother? Nay, not my royal names."

"They call you Morning Star of Amen; they call you Daughter of Amen."

"Is that story true, Asti the Magician?"

"Aye, at least your mother dreamed the dream, for she told it to me and I have read its record, who am a priestess of Amen."

"Then this high god should love me, should he not? He should hear my prayers and give me power--he should protect those who are dear to me. Mother, they say that you, the Mistress of secret things, can open the ears of the gods and cause their mouths to speak. Mother, I command you as your Queen, call up my father Amen before me, so that I may talk with him, for I have words to which he must listen."

"Are you not afraid?" asked Asti, looking at her curiously. "He is the greatest of all the gods, and to summon him lightly is a sacrilege."

"Should a daughter fear her father?" answered Tua.

"When the divine Queen your mother and Pharaoh knelt before him in his shrine, praying that a child might be given to them, Amen did not deign to appear to them, save afterwards in a dream. Will you dare more than they? Lie down and dream, O Star of the Morning."

"Nay, I trust no dreams which change like summer clouds and pass as soon," answered the girl boldly. "If the god is my father, in the spirit or the flesh, I know not which, let him appear before me face to face. I ask his wisdom for myself and his favour for another. Call him, if you have the power, Asti. Call him even if he slay me. Better that I should die than----"

"Hush!" said Asti, laying her hand upon her lips, "speak not that name. Well, I have some skill, and for your sake--and another's--I will try, but not here. Perchance he may listen, perchance not, or, perchance, if he comes you and I must pay the price. Put on your robes, now, O Queen, and over them this veil, and follow me--if you dare."

Along narrow passages they crept and down many a secret-stair, till at length they came to a door at the foot of a long slope of rock.

This door Asti unlocked and thrust open, then when they had entered,

re-locked it behind them.

"What is this place?" whispered Tua.

"The burial crypt of the high priestesses of Amen, where it is said that the god watches. None have entered it for hard on thirty years. See here in the dust run the footsteps of those who bore the last priestess to her rest."

She held up her lamp, and by the light of it Tua saw that they were in a great cave painted with figures of the gods which had on either side of it recesses. In each of these was set a coffin with a gilded face, and behind it an alabaster statue of her who lay therein, and in front of it a table of offerings. At the head of the crypt stood a small altar of black stone, for the rest the place was empty.

Asti led Tua to a step in front of the altar and bidding her kneel, departed with the lamp which she hid away in some side chapel, so that now the darkness was intense. Presently, through the utter silence, Tua heard her creep back towards her, for although she walked so softly the dust seemed to cry beneath her feet, and her every footstep echoed round the vaulted walls. Moreover, a glow came from her, the glow of her life in that place of death. She passed Tua and knelt by the altar and the echo of her movements died away. Only it seemed to Tua that from each of the tombs to the right and to the left rose the Ka of her who was buried there, and drew near to watch and listen. She could not see them, she

could not hear them, yet she knew that they were there and was able to count their number--thirty and two in all--while within herself rose a picture of them, each differing from the other, but all white, expectant, solemn.

Now Tua heard Asti murmuring secret invocations that she did not understand. In that place and silence they sounded weird and dreadful, and as she hearkened to them, for the first time fear crept over her. Kneeling there upon her knees she bent her head almost to the dust and put up prayers to Amen that he might be pleased to hear her and to satisfy the longings of her heart. She prayed and prayed till she grew faint and weary, while always Asti uttered her invocations. But no answer came, no deity appeared, no voice spoke. At length Asti rose, and coming to her, whispered in her ear:

"Let us depart ere the watching spirits, whose rest we have broken, grow wrath with us. The god has shut his ears."

So Tua rose, clinging to Asti, for now, she knew not why, her fear grew and deepened. For a moment she stood upon her feet, then sank to her knees again, for there at the far end of the great tomb, near to the door by which they had entered, appeared a glow upon the darkness. Slowly it took form, the form of a woman clad in the royal robes of Egypt, and bearing in its hand a sceptre. The figure of light advanced towards them, so that presently they saw its face. Tua did not know the face, though it seemed to her to be like her own, but Asti knew it, and

at the sight sank to the ground.

Now the figure stood in front of them, a thing of light framed in the thick darkness, and now in a sweet, low voice it spoke.

"Hail! Queen of Egypt," it said. "Hail! Neter-Tua, Daughter of Amen. Art thou afraid to look on the spirit of her who bore thee, thou that didst dare to summon the Father of the gods to do thy bidding?"

"I am afraid," answered Tua, shaking in all her limbs.

"And thou, Asti the Magician, art thou afraid also, who but now wast bold enough to cry to Amen-Ra--'Come from thy high heaven and make answer'?"

"It is even so, O Queen Ahura," murmured Asti.

"Woman," went on the voice, "thy sin is great, and great is the sin of this royal one at thy side. Had Amen hearkened, how would the two of you have stood before his glory, who at the sight of this shape of mine that once was mortal like yourselves, crouch choking to the earth? I tell you both that had the god arisen, as in your wickedness ye willed, there where ye knelt, there ye would have died. But he who knows all is merciful, and in his place has sent me his messenger that ye may live to look upon to-morrow's sun."

"Let Amen pardon us!" gasped Tua, "it was my sin, O Mother, for I commanded Asti and she obeyed me. On me be the blame, not on her, for I am torn with doubts and fears, for myself and for another. I would know the future."

"Why, O Queen Neter-Tua, why wouldst thou know the future? If hell yawns beneath thy feet, why wouldst thou peep through its golden doors before the time? The future is hid from mortals because, could they pierce its veil, it would crush them with its terrors. If all the woes of life and death lay open the gaze, who would dare to live and who--oh! who could dare to die?"

"Then woes await me, O thou who wast my mother?"

"How can it be otherwise? Light and darkness make the day, joy and sorrow make the life. Thou art human, be content."

"Divine also, O Ahura, if all tales be true."

"Then pay for thy divinity in tears and be satisfied. Content is the guerdon of the beast, but gods are wafted upwards on the wings of pain. How can that gold be pure which has not known the fire?"

"Thou tellest me nothing," wailed Tua, "and it is not for myself I ask. I am fair, I am Amen's daughter, and splendid is my heritage. Yet, O Dweller in Osiris, thou who once didst fill the place I hold to-day, I

tell thee that I would pay away this pomp, could I but be sure that I shall not live loveless, that I shall not be given as a chattel to one whom I hate, that one--whom I do not hate--will live to call me--wife. Great dangers threaten him--and me, Amen is mighty; he is the potter that moulds the clay of men; if I be his child, if his spirit is breathed into me, oh! let him help me now."

"Let thine own faith help thee. Are not the words of Amen, which he spake concerning thee, written down? Study them and ask no more. Love is an arrow that does not miss its mark; it is the immortal fire from on high which winds and waters cannot quench. Therefore love on. Thou shalt not love in vain. Queen and Daughter, fare thee well awhile."

"Nay, nay, one word, Immortal. I thank thee, thou Messenger of the gods, but when these troubles come upon me--and another, when the sea of dangers closes o'er our heads, when shame is near and I am lonely, as well may chance, then to whom shall I turn for succour?"

"Then thou hast one within thee who is strong to aid. It was given to thee at thy birth, O Star of Amen, and Asti can call it forth. Come hither, thou Asti, and swiftly, for I must be gone, and first I would speak with thee."

Asti crept forward, and the glowing shape in the royal robe bent over her so that the light of it shone upon her face. It bent over her and seemed to whisper in her ear. Then it held out its hands towards Tua as

though in blessing, and instantly was not.

Once more the two women stood in Tua's chamber. Pale and shaken they looked into each other's eyes.

"You have had your will, Queen," said Asti; "for if Amen did not come, he sent a messenger, and a royal one."

"Interpret me this vision," answered Tua, "for to me, at any rate, that Spirit said little."

"Nay, it said much. It said that love fails not of its reward, and what more went you out to seek?"

"Then I am glad," exclaimed Tua joyfully.

"Be not too glad, Queen, for to-night we have sinned, both of us, who dared to summon Amen from his throne, and sin also fails not of its reward. Blood is the price of that oracle."

"Whose blood, Asti? Ours?"

"Nay, worse, that of those who are dear to us. Troubles arise in Egypt, Queen."

"You will not leave me when they break, Asti?"

"I may not if I would. The Fates have bound us together till the end,
and that I think is far away. I am yours as once you were mine when you
lay upon my breast, but bid me no more to summon Amen from his throne."