

## CHAPTER VI

### THE OATH OF RAMES AND OF TUA

Still robed Tua lay upon a couch, for she would not seek her bed, while Asti stood near to her, a dark commanding figure.

"Your Majesty has done strange things to-night," said Asti in her quiet voice.

Tua turned her head and looked at her, then answered:

"Very strange, Nurse. You see, the gods and that troublesome son of yours and Pharaoh's sudden sickness threw the strings of Fate into my hand, and--I pulled them. I always had a fancy for the pulling of strings, but the chance never came my way before."

"It seems to me that for a beginner your Majesty pulled somewhat hard," said Asti drily.

"Yes, Nurse, so hard that I think I have pulled your son off the scaffold into a place of some honour, if he knows how to stay there, though it was the Council and the lords and the ladies, who thought that they pulled. You see one must commence as one means to go on."

"Your Majesty is very clever; you will make a great Queen--if you do not

overpull yourself."

"Not half so clever as you were, Asti, when you made that monkey come out of the vase," answered Tua, laughing somewhat hysterically. "Oh! do not look innocent, I know it was your magic, for I could feel it passing over my head. How did you do it, Asti?"

"If your Majesty will tell me how you made the lords of Egypt consent to the sending of an armed expedition to Napata under the command of a lad, a mere captain who had just killed its heir-apparent before their eyes, which decree, if I know anything of Rames, will mean a war between Kesh and Egypt, I will tell you how I made the monkey come out of the vase."

"Then I shall never learn, Nurse, for I can't because I don't know. It came into my mind, as music comes into my throat, that is all. Rames should have been beheaded at once, shouldn't he, for not letting that black boar tusk him? Do you think he poured the wine over Amathel's head on purpose?" and again she laughed.

"Yes, I suppose that he should have been killed, as he would have been if your Majesty had not chanced to be so fond----"

"Talking of wine," broke in Tua, "give me a cup of it. The divine Prince of Kesh who was to have been my husband--did you understand, Asti, that they really meant to make that black barbarian my husband?--I say that the divine Prince, who now sups with Osiris, drank so much that I could

not touch a drop, and I am tired and thirsty, and have still some things to do to-night."

Asti went to a table where stood a flagon of wine wreathed in vine leaves, and by it cups of glass, and filling one of them brought it to Tua.

"Here's to the memory of the divine prince, and may he have left the table of Osiris before I come there. And here's to the hand that sent him thither," said Tua recklessly. Then she drained the wine, every drop of it, and threw the cup to the marble floor where it shattered into bits.

"What god has entered into your Majesty to-night?" asked Asti quietly.

"One that knows his own mind, I think," replied Tua. "There, I feel strong again, I go to visit Pharaoh. Come with me, Asti."

When Tua arrived at the bedside of Pharaoh she found that the worst of the danger was over. Fearing for his life the physicians had bled him, and now the fit had passed away and his eyes were open, although he was unable to speak and did not know her or anyone. She asked whether he would live or die, and was told that he would live, or so his doctors believed, but that for a long while he must lie quite quiet, seeing as few people as possible, and above all being troubled with no business, since, if he were wearied or excited, the fit would certainly return

and kill him. So, rejoicing at this news which was better than she had expected, Tua kissed her father and left him.

"Now will your Majesty go to bed?" asked Asti when she had returned to her own apartments.

"By no means," answered Tua, "I wear Pharaoh's shoes and have much business left to do to-night. Summon Mermes, your husband."

So Mermes came and stood before her. He was still what he had been in the old days when Tua played as an infant in his house, stern, noble-looking and of few words, but now his hair had grown white and his face was drawn with grief, both for the sake of Rames, whose hot blood had brought him into so much danger, and because Pharaoh, who was his friend, lay between life and death.

Tua looked at him and loved him more than ever, for now that he was troubled some new likeness to Rames appeared upon his face which she had never seen before.

"Take heart, noble Mermes," she said gently, "they say that Pharaoh stays with us yet a while."

"I thank Amen," he answered, "for had he died, his blood would have been upon the hands of my House."

"Not so, Mermes; it would have been upon the hands of the gods. You spring from a royal line; say, what would you have thought of your son if after being struck by that fat Nubian, he had cowered at his feet and prayed for his life like any slave?"

Mermes flushed and smiled a little, then said:

"The question is rather---What would you have thought, O Queen?"

"I?" answered Tua. "Well, as a queen I should have praised him much, since then Egypt would have been spared great trouble, but as a woman and a friend I should never have spoken to him again. Honour is more than life, Mermes."

"Certainly honour is more than life," replied Mermes, staring at the ceiling, perhaps to hide the look upon his face, "and for a little while Rames seems to be in the way of it. But those who are set high have far to fall, O Queen, and--forgive me--he is my only child. Now when Pharaoh recovers----"

"Rames will be far away," broke in Tua. "Go, bring him here at once, and with him the Vizier and the chief scribe of the Council. Take this ring, it will open all doors," and she drew the signet from her finger and handed it to him.

"At this hour, your Majesty?" said Mermes in a doubtful voice.

"Have I not spoken," she answered impatiently. "When the welfare of Egypt is at stake I do not sleep."

So Mermes bowed and went, and while he was gone Tua caused Asti to smooth her hair and change her robe and ornaments for others which, although she did not say so, she thought became her better. Then she sat her down in a chair of state in her chamber of audience, and waited, while Asti stood beside her asking no questions, but wondering.

At length the doors were opened, and through them appeared Mermes and the Vizier and the chief of the scribes, both of them trying to hide their yawns, for they had been summoned from their beds who were not wont to do state business at such hours. After them limped Rames, for his wound had grown stiff, who looked bewildered, but otherwise just as he had left the feast.

Now, without waiting for the greetings of ceremony, Tua began to question the Vizier as to what steps had been taken in furtherance of her decrees, and when he assured her that the business was on foot, went into its every detail with him, as to the ships and the officers and the provisioning of the men, and so forth. Next she set herself to dictate despatches to the captains and barons who held the fortresses on the Upper Nile, communicating to them Pharaoh's orders on this matter, and the commission of Rames, whereby he, whose hands had done the ill, was put in command of the great embassy that went to make amends.

These being finished, she sent away the scribe to spend the rest of the night in writing them in duplicate, bidding him bring them to her in the early morning to be sealed. Next addressing Rames, she commanded him to start on the morrow with those troops which were ready to Takenisit above the first Cataract of the Nile, which was the frontier fortress of Egypt, and there wait until the remainder of the soldiers joined them, bearing with them her presents to the King of Kesh, and the embalmed body of the Prince Amathel.

Rames bowed and said that her orders should be obeyed, and the audience being finished, still bowing and supported by Mermes, began to walk backwards towards the door, his eyes fixed upon the face of Tua, who sat with bent head, clasping the arms of her chair like one in difficulty and doubt. When he had gone a few steps she seemed to come to some determination, for with an effort she raised herself and said:

"Return, Count Rames, I have a message to give you for the King of Kesh who, unhappy man, has lost his son and heir, and it is one that no other ears must hear. Leave me a while with this captain, O Mermes and Asti, and see that none listen to our talk. Presently I will summon you to conduct him away."

They hesitated, for this thing seemed strange, then noting the look she gave them, departed through the doors behind the royal seat.

Now Rames and the Queen were left alone in that great, lighted chamber. With bent head and folded arms he stood before her while she looked at him intently, yet seemed to find no words to say. At length she spoke in a sweet, low voice.

"It is many years since we were playmates in the courts of the temple yonder, and since then we have never been alone together, have we, Rames?"

"No, Great Lady," answered Rames, "for you were born to be a queen, and I am but a humble soldier who cannot hope to consort with queens."

"Who cannot hope! Would you wish to then if you could?"

"O Queen," answered Rames, biting his lips, "why does it please you to make a mock of me?"

"It does not please me to do any such thing, for by my father Amen, Rames, I wish that we were children once more, for those were happy days before they separated us and set you to soldiering and me to statecraft."

"You have learnt your part well, Star of the Morning," said Rames, glancing at her quickly.

"Not better than you, playmate Rames, if I may judge from your



sword-play this night. So it seems that we both of us are in the way of becoming masters of our trades."

"What am I to say to your Majesty? You have saved my life when it was forfeit----"

"As once you saved mine when it was forfeit, and at greater risk. Look at your hand, it will remind you. It was but tit for tat. And, friend Rames, this day I came near to being eaten by a worse crocodile than that which dwells in the pool yonder."

"I guessed as much, Queen, and the thought made me mad. Had it not been for that I should only have thrown him down. Now that crocodile will eat no more maidens."

"No," answered Tua, rubbing her chin, "he has gone to be eaten by Set, Devourer of Souls, has he not? But I think there may be trouble between Egypt and Kesh, and what Pharaoh will say when he recovers I am sure I do not know. May the gods protect me from his wrath."

"Tell me, if it pleases your Majesty, what is my fate? I have been named General of this expedition over the heads of many, I who am but a captain and a young man and an evil-doer. Am I to be killed on the journey, or am I to be executed by the King of Kesh?"

"If any kill you on the journey, Rames, they shall render me an account,

be it the gods themselves, and as for the vengeance of the King of Kesh--well, you will have two thousand picked men with you and the means to gather more as you go. Listen now, for this is not in the decree or in the letters," she added, bending towards him and whispering. "Egypt has spies in Kesh, and, being industrious, I have read their reports. The people there hate the upstart race that rules them, and the king, who alone is left now that Amathel is dead, is old and half-witted, for all that family drink too much. So if the worst comes to the worst, do you think that you need be killed, you," she added meaningly, "who, if the House of Amathel were not, would by descent be King of Kesh, as, if I and my House were not, you might be Pharaoh of Egypt?"

Rames studied the floor for a little, then looked up and asked:

"What shall I do?"

"It seems that is for you to find out," replied Tua, in her turn studying the ceiling. "Were I in your place, I think that, if driven to it, I should know what to do. One thing, however, I should not do. Whatever may be the judgment of the divine King of Kesh upon you, and that can easily be guessed, I should not return to Egypt with my escort, until I was quite sure of my welcome. No, I think that I should stop in Napata, which I am told is a rich and pleasant city, and try to put its affairs in order, trusting that Egypt, to which it once belonged, would in the end forgive me for so doing."

"I understand," said Rames, "that whatever happens, I alone am to blame."

"Good, and of course there are no witnesses to this talk of ours. Have you also been taking lessons in statecraft in your spare hours, Rames, much as I have tried to learn something of the art of war?"

Rames made no answer, only these two strange conspirators looked at each other and smiled.

"Your Majesty is weary. I must leave your Majesty," he said presently.

"You must be wearier than I am, Rames, with that wound, which I think has not been dressed, although it is true that we have both fought to-night. Rames, you are going on a far journey. I wonder if we shall ever meet again."

"I do not know," he answered with a groan, "but for my sake it is better that we should not. O Morning Star, why did you save me this night, who would have been glad to die? Did not that Ka of yours tell you that I should have been glad to die, or my mother, who is a magician?"

"I have seen nothing of my Ka, Rames, since we played together in the temple--ah! those were happy days, were they not? And your mother is a discreet lady who does not talk to me about you, except to warn me not to show you any favour, lest others should be jealous and murder you.

Shall you then be sorry if we do not meet again? Scarcely, I suppose, since you seem so anxious to die and be rid of me and all things that we know."

Now Rames pressed his hand upon his heart as though to still its beating, and looked round him in despair. For, indeed, that heart of his felt as though it must burst.

"Tua," he gasped desperately, "can you for a minute forget that you are Queen of the Upper and the Lower Land, who perhaps will soon be Pharaoh, the mightiest monarch in the world, and remember only that you are a woman, and as a woman hear a secret and keep it close?"

"We have been talking secrets, Rames, as we used to do, you remember, long ago, and you will not tell mine which deal with the State. Why, then, should I tell yours? But be short, it grows late, or rather early, and as you know, we shall not meet again."

"Good," he answered. "Queen Neter-Tua, I, your subject, dare to love you."

"What of that, Rames? I have millions of subjects who all profess to love me."

He waved his hand angrily, and went on:

"I dare to love you as a man loves a woman, not as a subject loves a queen."

"Ah!" she answered in a new and broken voice, "that is different, is it not? Well, all women love to be loved, though some are queens and some are peasants, so why should I be angry? Rames, now, as in past days, I thank you for your love."

"It is not enough," he said. "What is the use of giving love? Love should be lent. Love is an usurer that asks high interest. Nay, not the interest only, but the capital and the interest to boot. Oh, Star! what happens to the man who is so mad as to love the Queen of Egypt?"

Tua considered this problem as though it were a riddle to which she was seeking an answer.

"Who knows?" she replied at length in a low voice. "Perhaps it costs him his life, or perhaps--perhaps he marries her and becomes Pharaoh of Egypt. Much might depend on whether the queen chanced to care about such a man."

Now Rames shook like a reed in the evening wind, and he looked at her with glowing eyes.

"Tua," he whispered, "can it be possible--do you mean that I am welcome to you, or are you but drawing me to shame and ruin?"

She made no answer to him in words, only with a certain grave deliberation, laid down the little ivory sceptre that she held, and suffering her troubled eyes to rest upon his eyes, bent forward and stretched out her arms towards him.

"Yes, Rames," she murmured into his ear a minute later, "I am drawing you to whatever may be found upon this breast of mine, love, or majesty, or shame, or ruin, or the death of one or both of us, or all of them together. Are you content to take the chances of this high game, Rames?"

"Ask it not, Tua. You know, you know!"

She kissed him on the lips, and all her heart and all her youth were in that kiss. Then, gently enough, she pushed him from her, saying:

"Stand there, I would speak with you, and as I have said, the time is short. Hearken to me, Rames, you are right; I know, as I have always known, and as you would have known also had you been less foolish than you are. You love me and I love you, for so it was decreed where souls are made, and so it has been from the beginning and so it shall be to the end. You, a gentleman of Egypt, love the Queen of Egypt, and she is yours and no other man's. Such is the decree of him who caused us to be born upon the same day, and to be nursed upon the same kind breast. Well, after all, why not? If love brings death upon us, as well may chance, at least the love will remain which is worth it all, and beyond

death there is something."

"Only this, Tua, I seek the woman not a throne, and alas! through me you may be torn from your high place."

"The throne goes with the woman, Rames, they cannot be separated. But, say, something comes over me; if that happened, if I were an outcast, a wanderer, with nothing save this shape and soul of mine, and it were you that sat upon a throne, would you still love me, Rames?"

"Why ask such questions?" he replied indignantly. "Moreover, your talk is childish. What throne can I ever sit on?"

A change fell upon her at his words. She ceased to be the melting, passionate woman, and became once more the strong, far-seeing queen.

"Rames," she said, "you understand why, although it tears my heart, I am sending you so far away and into so many dangers, do you not? It is to save your life, for after what has chanced to-night in this fashion or in that here you would certainly die, as, had it not been for that plan of mine you must have died two hours ago. There are many who hate you, Rames, and Pharaoh may recover, as I pray the gods he will, and over-ride my will, for you have slain his guest who was brought here to marry me."

"I understand all of these things, Queen."

"Then awake, Rames, look to the future and understand that also, if, as I think, you have the wit. I am sending you with a strong escort, am I not? Well, that King of Kesh is old and feeble, and you have a claim upon his crown. Take it, man, and set it on your head, and as King of Kesh ask the hand of Egypt's Queen in marriage. Then who would say you nay--not Egypt's Queen, I think, or the people of Egypt who hunger for the rich Southern Land which they have lost."

So she spoke, and as these high words passed her lips she looked so splendid and so royal that, dazzled by the greatness of her majesty. Rames bowed himself before her as before the presence of a god. Then, aware that she was trying him in the balance of her judgment, he straightened himself and spoke to her as prince speaks to prince.

"Star of Amen," he said, "it is true that though here we are but your humble subjects, the blood of my father and of myself is as high as yours, and perhaps more ancient, and it is true that now yonder Amathel is dead, after my father, in virtue of those who went before us I have more right than any other to the inheritance of Kesh. Queen, I hear your words, I will take it if I can, not for its own sake, but to win you, and if I fail you will know that I died doing my best. Queen, we part and this is a far journey. Perhaps we may never meet again; at the best we must be separated for long. Queen, you have honoured me with your love, and therefore I ask a promise of you, not as a woman only, but as Queen. I ask that however strait may be the circumstances, whatever



reasons of State may push you on, while I live you will take no other man to husband--no, not even if he offers you half the world in dower."

"I give it," she answered. "If you should learn that I am wed to any man upon the earth then spit upon my name as a woman, and as Queen cast me off and overthrow me if you can. Deal with me, Rames, as in such a case I will deal with you. Only be sure of your tidings ere you believe them. Now there is nothing more to say. Farewell to you, Rames, till we meet again beneath or beyond the sun. Our royal pact is made. Come, seal it and begone."

She rose and stretched out her sceptre to him, which he kissed as her faithful subject. Next, with a swift movement, she lifted the golden uræus circlet from her brow and for a moment set it on his head, crowning him her king, and while it rested there she, the Queen of Egypt, bent the knee before him and did him homage. Then she cast down crown and sceptre, and as woman fell upon her lover's breast while the bright rays of morning, flowing suddenly through the eastern window-place of that splendid hall, struck upon them both, clothing them in a robe of glory and of flame.

Soon, very soon, it was done and Tua, seated there in light, watched Rames depart into the outer shadow, wondering when and how she would see him come again. For her heart was heavy within her, and even in this hour of triumphant love she greatly feared the future and its gifts.