

CHAPTER VII

TUA COMES TO MEMPHIS

So that day Rames departed for Takensit with what ships and men could be got together in such haste. There, at the frontier post, he waited till the rest of the soldiers should join him, bringing with them the hastily embalmed body of Prince Amathel whom he had slain, and the royal gifts to the King of Kesh. Then, without a moment's delay, he sailed southwards with his little army on the long journey, fearing lest if he tarried, orders might come to him to return to Thebes. Also he desired to reach Napata before the heavy news of the death of the King's son, and without warning of the approach of Egypt's embassy.

With Tua he had no more speech, although as his galley was rowed under the walls of the palace, at a window of the royal apartments he saw a white draped figure that watched them go by. It was standing in the shadow so that he could not recognise the face, but his heart told him that this was none other than the Queen herself, who appeared there to bid him farewell.

So Rames rose from the chair in which he was seated on account of the hurt to his leg and saluted with his sword, and ordered the crew to do likewise by lifting up their oars. Then the slender figure bowed in answer, and he went on to fulfil his destiny, leaving Neter-Tua, Morning Star of Amen, to fulfil hers.

Before he sailed, however, Mermes his father and Asti his mother visited him in a place apart.

"You were born under a strange star, my son," said Mermes, "and I know not whither it will lead you, who pray that it may not be a meteor which blazes suddenly in the heavens and disappears to return no more. All the people talk of the favour the Queen has shown you who, instead of ordering you to be executed for the deed you did which robbed her of a royal husband, has set you in command of an army, you, a mere youth, and received you in secret audience, an honour granted to very few. Fate that has passed me by gives the dice to your young hand, but how the cast will fall I know not, nor shall I live to see, or so I believe."

"Speak no such evil-omened words, my father," answered Rames tenderly, for these two loved each other. "To me it seems more likely that it is I who shall not live, for this is a strange and desperate venture upon which I go, to tell to a great king the news of the death of his only son at my own hand. Mother, you are versed in the books of wisdom and can see that which is hidden to our eyes. Have you no word of comfort for us?"

"My son," answered Asti, "I have searched the future, but with all my skill it will open little of its secrets to my sight. Yet I have learned something. Great fortunes lie before you, and I believe that you and I shall meet again. But to your beloved father bid farewell."

At these words Rames turned his head aside to hide his tears, but Mermes bade him not to grieve, saying:

"Great is the mystery of our fates, my son. Some there be who tell us that we are but bubbles born of the stream to be swallowed up by the stream, clouds born of the sky to be swallowed up by the sky, the offspring of chance like the beasts and the birds, gnats that dance for an hour in the sunlight and are gone. But I believe it not, who hold that the gods clothe us with this robe of flesh for their own purpose, and that the spirit within us has been from the beginning and eternally will be. Therefore I love not life and fear not death, knowing that these are but doors leading to the immortal house that is prepared for us. The royal blood you have come to you from your mother and myself, but that our lots should have been humble, while yours, mayhap, will be splendid, does not move me to envy who perchance have been that you may be. You go forth to fulfil your fortunes which I believe are great, I bide here to fulfil mine which lead me to the tomb. I shall never see you in your power, if power comes to you, nor will your triumphant footsteps stir my sleep.

"Yet, Rames, remember that though you tread on cloth of gold and the bowed necks of your enemies, though love be your companion and diadems your crown, though flatteries float about you like incense in a shrine till, at length, you deem yourself a god, those footsteps of yours still lead to that same dark tomb and through it on to Judgment. Be great if

you can, but be good as well as great. Take no man's life because you have the strength and hate him; wrong no woman because she is defenceless or can be bought. Remember that the beggar child playing in the sand may have a destiny more high than yours when all the earthly count is reckoned. Remember that you share the air you breathe with the cattle and the worm. Go your road rejoicing in your beauty and your youth and the good gifts that are given you, but know, Rames, that at the end of it I, who wait in the shadow of Osiris, I your father, shall ask an account thereof, and that beyond me stand the gods of Justice to test the web that you have woven. Now, Rames, my son, my blessing and the blessing of him who shaped us be with you, and farewell."

Then Mermes kissed him on the brow and, turning, left the room, nor did they ever meet again.

But Asti stayed awhile, and coming to him presently, looked Rames in the eyes, and said:

"Mourn not. Separations are no new thing, death is no new thing; all these sorrows have been on the earth for millions of years, and for millions of years yet shall be. Live out your life, rejoicing if the days be good, content if they be but ill, regretting nothing save your sins, fearing nothing, expecting nothing, since all things are appointed and cannot be changed."

"I hear," he answered humbly, "and I will not forget. Whether I succeed

or fail you shall not be ashamed for me."

Now his mother turned to go also, but paused and said:

"I have a gift for you, Rames, from one whose name may not be spoken."

"Give it to me," he said eagerly, "I feared that it was all but a dream."

"Oh!" replied Asti scanning his face, "so there was a dream, was there? Did it fall upon you last night when the daughter of Amen, my foster-child, instructed you in secret?"

"The gift," said Rames, stretching out his hand.

Then, smiling in her quiet fashion, his mother drew from the bosom of her robe some object that was wrapped in linen and, touching her forehead with the royal seal that fastened it, gave it to Rames. With trembling fingers he broke the seal and there within the linen lay a ring which for some years, as Rames knew, Tua had worn upon the first finger of her right hand. It was massive and of plain gold, and upon the bezel of it was cut the symbol of the sun, on either side of which knelt a man and a woman crowned with the double crown of Egypt, and holding in their right hands the looped Sign of Life which they stretched up towards the glory of the sun.

"Do you know who wore that ring in long past days?" asked Asti of Rames who pressed it to his lips.

He shook his head who remembered only that Tua had worn it.

"It was your forefather and mine, Rames, the last of the royal rulers of our line, who reigned over Egypt and also over the Land of Kesh. A while ago the embalmers re-clothed his divine body in the tomb, and the Princess, who was present there with your father and myself, drew this ring off his dead hand and offered it to Mermes, who would not take it, seeing that it is a royal signet. So she wore it herself, and now for her own reasons she sends it to you, perhaps to give you authority in Kesh where that mighty seal is known."

"I thank the Queen," he murmured. "I shall wear it always."

"Then let it be on your breast till you have passed the frontier, lest some should ask questions that you find it hard to answer. My son," she went on quickly, "you dare to love this queen of ours."

"In truth I do, Mother. Did not you, who know everything, know that? Also it is your fault who brought us up together."

"Nay, my son, the fault of the gods who have so decreed. But--does she love you?"

"You are always with her, Mother, ask her yourself, if you need to ask. At least, she has sent me her own ring. Oh! Mother, Mother, guard her night and day, for if harm comes to her, then I die. Mother, queens cannot give themselves where they will as other women can; it is policy that thrusts their husbands on them. Keep her unwed, Mother. Though it should cost her her throne, still I say let her not be cast into the arms of one she hates. Protect her in her trial, if such should come; and if strength fails and the gods desert her, then hide her in the web of the magic that you have, and preserve her undefiled, for so shall I bless your name for ever."

"You fly at a rare bird, Rames, and there are many stronger hawks about besides that one you slew; yes, royal eagles who may strike down the pair of you. Yet I will do my best, who have long foreseen this hour, and who pray that before my eyes shut in death, they may yet behold you seated on the throne of your forefathers, crowned with power and with such love and beauty as have never yet been given to man. Now hide that ring upon your heart and your secret in it, as I shall, lest you should return no more to Egypt. Moreover, follow your royal Star and no other. Whatever counsel she may have given you, follow it also, stirring not to right or left, for I say that in that maiden breast of hers there dwells the wisdom of the gods."

Then holding up her hands over his head as though in blessing, Asti, too, turned and left him.

So Rames went and was no more seen, and by degrees the talk as to the matter of his victory over the Prince of Kesh, and as to his appointment by the whim of the maiden Queen to command the splendid embassy of atonement which she had despatched to the old King, the dead man's father, died away for lack of anything to feed on.

Tua kept her counsel well, nor was aught known of that midnight interview with the young Count her general. Moreover, Napata was far away, so far that starting at the season when it did, the embassy could scarce return till two years had gone by, if ever it did return. Also few believed that whoever came back, Rames would be one of them, since it was said openly that so soon as he was beyond the frontiers of Egypt, the soldiers had orders to kill him and take on his body as a peace-offering.

Indeed, all praised the wit and wisdom of the Queen, who by this politic device, had rid herself of a troublesome business with as little scandal as possible, and avoided staining her own hands in the blood of a foster-brother. Had she ordered his death forthwith, they said, it would have been supposed also that she had put him away because he was of a royal race, one who, in the future, might prove a rival, or at least cause some rebellion.

Meanwhile greater questions filled the mouths of men. Would Pharaoh die

and leave Neter-Tua, the young and lovely, to hold his throne, and if so, what would happen? It was a thousand years since a woman had reigned in Egypt, and none had reigned who were not wed. Therefore it seemed necessary that a husband should be found for her as soon as might be.

But Pharaoh did not die. On the contrary, though very slowly, he recovered and was stronger than he had been for years, for the fit that struck him down seemed to have cleared his blood. For some three months he lay helpless as a child, amusing himself as a child does with little things, and talking of children whom he had known in his youth, or when some of these chanced to visit him as old men, asking them to play with him with tops or balls.

Then one day came a change, and rising from his bed he commanded the presence of his Councillors, and when they came, inquired of them what had happened, and why he could remember nothing since the feast.

They put him off with soft words, and soon he grew weary and dismissed them. But after they had gone and he had eaten he sent for Mermes, the Captain of the Guard of Amen and his friend, and questioned him.

"The last thing I remember," he said, "was seeing the drunken Prince of Kesh fighting with your son, that handsome, fiery-eyed Count Rames whom some fool, or enemy, had set to wait upon him at table. It was a dog's trick, Mermes, for after all your blood is purer and more ancient than that of the present kings of Kesh. Well, the horror of the sight of my

royal guest, the suitor for my daughter's hand, fighting with an officer of my own guard at my own board, struck me as a butcher strikes an ox, and after it all was blackness. What chanced, Mermes?"

"This, Pharaoh: My son killed Amathel in fair fight, then those black Nubian giants in their fury attacked your guard, but led by Rames the Egyptians, though they were the lesser men, overcame them and slew most of them. I am an old soldier, but never have I seen a finer fray----"

"A finer fray! A finer fray," gasped Pharaoh. "Why this will mean a war between Kesh and Egypt. And then? Did the Council order Rames to be executed, as you must admit he deserved, although you are his father?"

"Not so, O Pharaoh; moreover, I admit nothing, though had he played a coward's part before all the lords of Egypt, gladly would I have slain him with my own hand."

"Ah!" said Pharaoh, "there speaks the soldier and the parent. Well, I understand. He was affronted, was he not, by that bedizened black man? Were I in your place I should say as much. But--what happened?"

"Your Majesty having become unconscious," explained Mermes, "her Majesty the Queen Neter-Tua, Glorious in Ra, took command of affairs according to her Oath of Crowning. She has sent an embassy of atonement of two thousand picked soldiers to the King of Kesh, bearing with them the embalmed body of the divine Amathel and many royal gifts."

"That is good enough in its way," said Pharaoh. "But why two thousand men, whereof the cost will be very great, when a score would have sufficed? It is an army, not an embassy, and when my royal brother of Kesh sees it advancing, bearing with it the ill-omened gift of his only son's body, he may take alarm."

Mermes respectfully agreed that he might do so.

"What general is in command of this embassy, as it pleases you to call it?"

"The Count Rames, my son, is in command, your Majesty."

Now weak as he was still, Pharaoh nearly leapt from his chair:

"Rames! That young cut-throat who killed the Prince! Rames who is the last of the old rightful dynasty of Kesh! Rames, a mere captain, in command of two thousand of my veterans! Oh, I must still be mad! Who gave him the command?"

"The Queen Neter-Tua, Star of Amen, she gave him the command, O Pharaoh. Immediately after the fray in the hall she uttered her decree and caused it to be recorded in the usual fashion."

"Send for the Queen," said Pharaoh with a groan.

So Tua was summoned, and presently swept in gloriously arrayed, and on seeing her father sitting up and well, ran to him and embraced him and for a long time refused to listen to his talk of matters of State. At length, however, he made her sit by him still holding his hand, and asked her why in the name of Amen she had sent that handsome young firebrand, Rames, in command of the expedition to Kesh. Then she answered very sweetly that she would tell him. And tell him she did, at such length that before she had finished, Pharaoh, whose strength as yet was small, had fallen into a doze.

"Now, you understand," she said as he woke up with a start. "The responsibility was thrust upon me, and I had to act as I thought best. To have slain this young Rames would have been impossible, for all hearts were with him."

"But surely, Daughter, you might have got him out of the way."

"My father, that is what I have done. I have sent him to Napata, which is very much out of the way--many months' journey, I am told."

"But what will happen, Tua? Either the King of Kesh will kill him and my two thousand soldiers, or perhaps he will kill the King of Kesh as he killed his son, and seize the throne which his own forefathers held for generations. Have you thought of that?"

"Yes, my father, I thought of it, and if this last should happen through no fault of ours, would Egypt weep, think you?"

Now Pharaoh stared at Tua, and Tua looked back at Pharaoh and smiled.

"I perceive, Daughter," he said slowly, "that in you are the makings of a great queen, for within the silken scabbard of a woman's folly I see the statesman's sword of bronze. Only run not too fast lest you should fall upon that sword and it should pierce you."

Now Tua, who had heard such words before from Asti, smiled again but made no answer.

"You need a husband to hold you back," went on Pharaoh; "some great man whom you can love and respect."

"Find me such a man, my father, and I will wed him gladly," answered Tua in a sweet voice. "Only," she added, "I know not where he may be sought now that the divine Amathel is dead at the hand of the Count Rames, our general and ambassador to Kesh."

So when he grew stronger Pharaoh renewed his search for a husband meet to marry the Queen of Egypt. Now, as before, suitors were not lacking, indeed, his ambassadors and councillors sent in their names by twos and threes, but always when they were submitted to her, Tua found something against everyone of them, till at last it was said that she must be

destined for a god since no mere mortal would serve her turn. But when this was reported to her, Tua only answered with a smile that she was destined to that royal lover of whom Amen had spoken to her mother in a dream; not to a god, but to the Chosen of the god, and that when she saw him, she felt sure she would know him at once and love him much.

After some months had gone by Pharaoh, quite weary of this play, asked the advice of his Council. They suggested to him that he should journey through the great cities of Egypt, both because the change might completely re-establish his divine health, and in the hope that on her travels the Queen Neter-Tua would meet someone of royal blood with whom she could fall in love. For by now it was evident to all of them that unless she did fall in love, she would not marry.

So that very night Pharaoh asked his daughter if she would undertake such a journey.

She answered that nothing would please her better, as she wearied of Thebes, and desired to see the other great cities of the land, to make herself known to those who dwell in them, and in each to be proclaimed as its future ruler. Also she wished to look upon the ocean whereof she had heard that it was so big that all the waters of the Nile flowing into it day and night made no difference to its volume.

Thus then began that pilgrimage which afterwards Tua recorded in the history of her reign on the walls of the wonderful temples that she

built. Her own wish was that they should sail south to the frontiers of Egypt, since there she hoped that she might hear some tidings of Rames and his expedition, whereof latterly no certain word had come. This project, however, was over-ruled because in the south there were no great towns, also the inhabitants of the bordering desert were turbulent, and might choose that moment to attack.

So in the end they went down and not up the Nile, tarrying for a while at every great city, and especially at Atbu, the holy place where the head of Osiris is buried, and tens of thousands of the great men of Egypt have their tombs. Here Tua was crowned afresh in the very shrine of Osiris amidst the rejoicings of the people.

Then they sailed away to On, the City of the Sun, and thence to make offerings at the Great Pyramids which were built by some of the early kings who had ruled Egypt, to serve them as their tombs.

Neter-Tua entered the Pyramids to look upon the bodies of these Pharaohs who had been dead for thousands of years, and whose deeds were all forgotten, though her father would not accompany her there because the ways were so steep that he did not dare to tread them. Afterwards, with Asti and a small guard of the Arab chiefs of the desert, she mounted a dromedary and rode round them in the moonlight, hoping that she would meet the ghosts of those kings, and that they would talk with her as the ghost of her mother had done. But she saw no ghosts, nor would Asti try to summon them from their sleep, although Tua prayed her to do so.

"Leave them alone," said Asti, as they paused in the shadow of the greatest of the pyramids and stared at its shining face engraved from base to summit with many a mystic writing.

"Leave them alone lest they should be angry as Amen was, and tell your Majesty things which you do not wish to hear. Contemplate their mighty works, such as no monarch can build to-day, and suffer them to rest therein undisturbed by weaker folk."

"Do you call these mighty works?" asked Tua contemptuously, for she was angry because Asti would not try to raise the dead. "What are they after all, but so many stones put together by the labour of men to satisfy their own vanity? And of those who built them what story remains? There is none at all save some vain legends. Now if I live I will rear a greater monument, for history shall tell of me till time be dead."

"Perhaps, Neter-Tua, if you live and the gods will it, though for my part I think that these old stones will survive the story of most deeds."

On the morrow of this visit to the Pyramids Pharaoh and the Queen his daughter made their state entry into the great white-walled city of Memphis, where they were royally received by Pharaoh's brother, the

Prince Abi, who was still the ruler of all this town and district. As it chanced these two had not met since Abi, many years before, came to Thebes, asking a share in the government of Egypt and to be nominated as successor to the throne.

Like every other lord and prince, he had been invited to be present at the great ceremony of the Crowning of Neter-Tua, but at the last moment sent his excuses, saying that he was ill, which seemed to be true. At any rate, the spies reported that he was confined to his bed, though whether sickness or his own will took him thither at this moment, there was nothing to show. At the time Pharaoh and his Council wondered a little that he had made no proposal for the marriage of one of his sons, of whom he had four, to their royal cousin, Neter-Tua, but decided that he had not done so because he was sure that it would not be accepted. For the rest, during all this period Abi had kept quiet in his own Government, which he ruled well and strongly, remitting his taxes to Thebes at the proper time with a ceremonial letter of homage, and even increasing the amount of them.

So it came about that Pharaoh, who by nature was kindly and unsuspecting, had long ago put away all mistrust of his brother, whose ambitions, he was sure, had come to an end with the birth of an heiress to the throne.

Yet, when escorted only by five hundred of his guard, for this was a peaceful visit, Pharaoh rode into the mighty city and saw how

impregnable were its walls and how strong its gates; saw also that the streets were lined with thousands of well-armed troops, doubts which he dismissed as unworthy, did creep into his heart. But if he said nothing of them, Tua, who rode in the chariot with him, was not so silent.

"My father," she said in a low voice while the crowds shouted their welcome, for they were alone in the chariot, the horses of which were led, "this uncle of mine keeps a great state in Memphis."

"Yes, Daughter, why should he not? He is its governor."

"A stranger who did not know the truth might think he was its king, my father, and to be plain, if I were Pharaoh, and had chosen to enter here, it would have been with a larger force."

"We can go away when we like, Tua," said Pharaoh uneasily.

"You mean, my father, that we can go away when it pleases the Prince your brother to open those great bronze gates that I heard clash behind us--then and not before."

At this moment their talk came to an end, for the chariot was stayed at the steps of the great hall where Abi waited to receive his royal guests. He stood at the head of the steps, a huge, coarse, vigorous man of about sixty years of age, on whose fat, swarthy face there was still, oddly enough, some resemblance to the delicate, refined-featured

Pharaoh.

Tua summed him up in a single glance, and instantly hated him even more than she had hated Amathel, Prince of Kesh. Also she who had not feared the empty-headed, drunken Amathel, was penetrated with a strange terror of this man whom she felt to be strong and intelligent, and whose great, greedy eyes rested on her beauty as though they could not tear themselves away.

Now they were ascending the steps, and now Prince Abi was welcoming them to his "humble house," giving them their throne names, and saying how rejoiced he was to see them, his sovereigns, within the walls of Memphis, while all the time he stared at Tua.

Pharaoh, who was tired, made no reply, but the young Queen, staring back at him, answered:

"We thank you for your greeting, but then, my uncle Abi, why did you not meet us outside the gates of Memphis where we expected to find its governor waiting to deliver up the keys of Pharaoh's city to the officers of Pharaoh?"

Now Abi, who had thought to see some shrinking child clothed in the emblems of a queen, looked astonished at this tall and royal maiden who had so sharp a tongue, and found no words to answer her. So she swept past him and commanded to be shown where she should lodge in Memphis.

They led her to its greatest palace that had been prepared for Pharaoh and herself, a place surrounded by palm groves in the midst of the city, but having studied it with her quick eyes, she said that it did not please her. So search was made elsewhere, and in the end she chose another smaller palace that once had been a temple of Sekhet, the tiger-headed goddess of vengeance and of chastity, whereof the pylon towers fronted on the Nile which at its flood washed against them. Indeed, they were now part of the wall of Memphis, for the great unused gateway between them had been built up with huge blocks of stone.

Surrounding this palace and outside its courts, lay the old gardens of the temple where the priests of Sekhet used to wander, enclosed within a lofty limestone wall. Here, saying that the air from the river would be more healthy for him, Tua persuaded Pharaoh to establish himself and his Court, and to encamp the guards under the command of his friend Mermes, in the outer colonnades and gardens.

When it was pointed out to the Queen that, owing to the lack of dwelling-rooms, none which were fitting were left for her to occupy, she replied that this mattered nothing, since in the old pylon tower were two small chambers hollowed in the thickness of its walls, which were very pleasing to her, because of the prospect of the Nile and the wide flat lands and the distant Pyramids commanded from the lofty roof and window-places. So these chambers, in which none had dwelt for generations, were hastily cleaned out and furnished, and in them Tua and

Asti her foster-mother, took up their abode.