

CHAPTER IX

THE DOOM OF PHARAOH

On the morrow when the lady Asti came to dress the Queen for that day's ceremony, she asked her if Amen had given her the wisdom that she sought.

"Not so," answered the young Queen, "all he gave me was very bad dreams, and in every one of them was mixed up that waiting woman of my father, Merytra, of whom you spoke to me. If I believed in omens I should say that she was about to bring some evil upon our House."

"It may well be so, Queen," answered Asti, "and in that case I think that she is at the work. At any rate, watching from the little window of my room, by the light of the moon I saw her return across the temple court at midnight. Moreover, it seemed to me that she was carrying something beneath her robe."

"Whence did she return?"

"From the city, I suppose. She has Pharaoh's pass, and can go in and out when she will. I have caused Mermes to question the officer of the guard, and he says that she came to the gate accompanied by a tall man wrapped in a dark cloak, who spoke with her earnestly, and left her. From this description I think it must have been the astrologer, Kaku,

with whom she was talking at the feast."

"That is bad news, Nurse. What else have you to tell?"

"Only this, Queen. The gates are guarded more closely even than we thought. I tried to send out a man to Thebes this morning with a message on my own account--never mind what it was--and the sentries turned him back."

"By the gods!" exclaimed Tua, "before I have reigned a year every gate in Memphis shall be melted down for cooking vessels, and I will set their captains to work in the desert mines. Nay, such threats are foolishness, I'll not threaten, I'll strike when the time comes, but that is not yet. Can I speak with the Pharaoh?"

"No, Queen. He is up already giving audience to the nobles of Memphis, and trying cases from the Lower Land with his Counsellors; until it is time to start for this ceremony of the laying of the foundation-stone of the temple, whither you accompany him in state. Also it is as well--by to-night we may learn more. Come, let me set the crown upon your head that these dogs of Memphis may know their mistress."

The ceremony proved very wearisome. First there was the long chariot ride through the crowded, shouting streets, Pharaoh and Abi going in the

first chariot, and Tua, attended by Abi's eldest daughter, a round-eyed lady much older than herself, in the second. Next came the office of the priests of Amen, over which Neter-Tua as daughter of Amen and high-priestess, must preside, to dedicate the temple to the glory of the god. Then the foundation deposit of little vases of offerings and models of workmen's tools, and a ring drawn from Pharaoh's hand engraved with his royal name, were blessed and set by the masons in hollows prepared for them, and the two great corner-stones let down, hiding them for ever, and declared respectively by Pharaoh and by Neter-Tua, Morning Star of Amen, Joint Sovereign of Egypt, to be well and truly laid.

Afterwards architects, those who "drew the line," exhibited plans of the temple, and received gifts from Pharaoh, and when these things were done came the mid-day feast and speeches.

At length all was over, and the great procession returned by another route to the temple of Sekhet, where Pharaoh lodged, a very tedious journey in the hot sun, since it involved a circuit of the endless walls of Memphis, with stoppages before all the temples of the gods, at each of which Pharaoh must make offerings. Nor, weary as he was, might he rest, for in the outer court of the old shrine thrones had been set up and seated on them he and Tua must hear petitions till sunset and give judgment, or postpone them for further consideration.

At last there came to an end, but, as Pharaoh, tired out, rose from his throne, Abi, his brother, who all this time had not left them, said that

he also had a private petition to prefer. So they went into an inner court that had been a sanctuary, and sat down again, there being present besides the scribes only Pharaoh, the Queen, some councillors, Mermes, captain of the guard, and certain women of the royal household, among them Asti, the Queen's nurse, and Merytra, Pharaoh's favourite attendant. With Abi were his astrologer, Kaku, his two eldest sons, and a few of the great officers of his government, also the high-priests of the temples of Memphis, and three powerful chiefs of the Desert tribes.

"What is your prayer, my brother?" asked Pharaoh, as soon as the doors were closed.

"A great one, your Majesties," answered the Prince, prostrating himself, "which for the good of Egypt, and for your own good, and for my good, who reverence you as a loyal subject, I pray that you will be pleased to grant." Then he drew himself up and said slowly, "I am here to ask the hand of the glorious Queen Neter-Tua, daughter of Amen, in marriage."

Now Pharaoh stared at him, while Tua, who knew well what was coming, turned her head aside, and asked a councillor who stood near, if in the history of the land any Queen of Egypt had ever married her uncle.

The councillor who was noted for his historical studies, answered that at the moment he could recall no such case.

"Then," said Tua coolly, and still addressing him, "it seems that it

would be scarcely wise to create a precedent which other poor young women of the royal race might be called upon to follow."

Pharaoh caught something of the words, though Abi did not for they were spoken in a low voice, and bethought him of a way out of his difficulty.

"The Queen Neter-Tua sits at my side, and is co-regent with me of this kingdom, her mind is my mind, and what she approves it is probable I shall approve. Prefer your request to her," he said.

So Abi turned to the Queen, and laying his hands upon his heart, bowed, ogled, and began:

"A burning love of your most excellent Majesty moves me----"

"I pray you, my Uncle," interrupted Tua, "correct your words, which should begin 'A burning love of your most excellent Majesty's throne and power move me,' and so on."

Now Abi frowned while everyone else smiled, not excepting Pharaoh and the astrologer, Kaku. Again he began his speech, but so confusedly that presently Tua stopped him for the second time, saying:

"I am not deaf, most noble prince, my Uncle. I heard the words you used to Pharaoh, and even understood their import. In fact, I have already consulted our councillor here, a learned master of the law, as to the

legality of such an alliance as you propose, and he gives his judgment against it."

Now Abi glared at the Councillor, a humble, dusty old man who spent all his life among rolls and chronicles.

"May it please your Majesty," this lawyer exclaimed in a thin agitated voice, "I only said there was no record of such a marriage that I can remember, though once I think a queen adopted a nephew, who afterwards became Pharaoh."

"It is the same thing, Friend," replied Tua sweetly, "for that of which there is no record in the long history of Egypt must of necessity be illegal. Still, if my uncle here wishes to adopt me, I thank him, though his lawful heirs may not, and the matter is one that can be considered."

Now, guessing that he was being played with, Abi grew angry.

"I have put a plain question to your Majesty," he said, "and perhaps I am worthy of a plain answer. As all men know, O Queen, it is time that you should be wed, and I offer myself as your husband. It is true that I am somewhat older than you are----"

"In what year was the Prince Abi born, the same as yourself, did you say?" asked Tua in an audible aside of the aged and learned Councillor, who thereon vanished behind the throne, and was seen no more.

"But," went on Abi, taking no notice of this interruption, "on the other hand I have much to offer. I rule here, your Majesties, who am also of the royal blood, and there is some disaffection in the North, especially among the great Bedouin tribes of the Desert who watch the frontier of the Kingdom. Now if this alliance comes about, and in days to be I sit upon the double throne as King-Consort of Egypt, they will be loyal, and north and south will be united more closely than they ever were before. Whereas if it does not come about----" Here Kaku, pretending to brush a fly from his face, caught his hand in Abi's robe, a signal at which his master paused.

"Go on, my Uncle, I pray you," said Tua. "If it does not come about, what then?"

"Then, Queen, there may be trouble. Nay, leave me alone, Magician, I will speak the truth, chance what may. Pharaoh, you have reigned for many years; yes, forty times has the Nile overflowed its banks since we laid our divine father in the tomb. Now, during all those years but one child has been born to you, and that after I came to Thebes to pray you to name me as your heir. Know, Pharaoh, that there are many who find this strange, and wonder whether this beautiful queen, who is called Daughter of Amen, and resembles you so little in body or in mind, sits rightfully on the throne of Egypt. If I marry her these questionings will cease. If I do not marry her the whisperings of men may grow to a wind that will blow the crown from off her head."

Now a grasp of fear and wonder rose from all who heard this bold and treasonable speech, and Tua, reddening to the eyes, bent forward as though to answer. But before ever a word had passed her lips Pharaoh sprang from his seat transformed with rage. All his patient gentleness was gone, and he looked so fierce and royal that everyone present there, even Abi himself, quailed before him.

"Is it for this that I have borne with you for so long, my brother?" he cried, rending at his robes. "Is it for this that I spared you years ago in Thebes, when your life was forfeit for your treachery? Is it for this that I have suffered you to rise to great honour, and to rule here almost as a king in my city of Memphis? Was it not enough that I should sit quiet, while you, an old man, the son of our father's barbarian slave, the loose-living despot, dare to ask for the pure hand of Egypt's Queen in marriage, you, her uncle, who might well be her grandfather also? Must I also hear your foul mouth beslime her royal birth, and the honour of her divine mother, and spit sneers at Amen, Father of the gods? Well, Amen shall deal with you when you come to the doors of his Eternal House, but here on earth I am his son and servant. Mermes, call my guards, and arrest this man and hold him safe. At Thebes, whither we depart to-morrow, he shall be judged according to our law."

Now Mermes blew a shrill call on the silver whistle that hung about his neck, and, springing forward, seized the Prince by the arm. Abi drew his sword to cut him down, and at the sight of the blade, all who were

with him rushed to the door to escape, sweeping before them certain of Pharaoh's ladies, among them the waiting-woman, Merytra. But before ever they could pass it, the guards who had heard the signal of Mermes, ran in with lifted spears, driving them back again. Leaping upon Abi, they tore the sword from his hand, and threw him to the ground, huddling the rest together like frightened sheep.

"Bind this traitor and keep him safe, for to-morrow he accompanies us to Thebes," said Pharaoh.

"What of his sons, and those with him, your Majesty?" asked the officer of the guard.

"Let them go," answered Pharaoh wearily, "for they have not sinned against us. Let them go, and take warning from their master's fate."

Now, as it chanced in the confusion, Merytra had been pushed against Kaku.

"Hearken," whispered the astrologer into the woman's ear. "Do as I bid you last night, and all will yet be well. Do it or die. Do you hear me?"

"I hear, and I will obey," answered Merytra in the same low voice.

Then they were separated, for the guards took Kaku by the arm and thrust him out of the temple together with the sons of Abi.

An hour later Mermes and Asti stood before Pharaoh, and prayed him that he would depart from Memphis that very night, saying that such was the counsel also of the Queen and of his officers. But Pharaoh was tired out, and would not listen.

"To-morrow, when I have slept, will be time enough," he answered.

"Moreover, shall I fly from my own city like a thief when naught is ready for our journey? Why do you press me to such a coward's act?" he added peevishly.

"For this reason, your Majesty," answered Mermes. "We are sure there is a plot to keep you here. This afternoon you could not have gone, had you tried, but to-night, Abi, being a prisoner, his people are dismayed, and having no leader will open the gates. By to-morrow one may be found, and they will be double-barred and guarded."

"What!" asked the King scornfully, "do you mean that I am a prisoner also, and here in Egypt, which I rule? Nay, good friends, at Pharaoh's word those gates will open. Or if they do not, I will pull down Memphis stone by stone, and drive out its people to share their caves with jackals. Do they think because I am kind and gentle, that I cannot lift the sword if there be need? Have they forgotten how I smote those rebels in my youth, and gave their cities to the flames, and set my yoke on Syria, that aided them. We march to-morrow, and not before. I have spoken."

Now Mermes bowed and turned to go, since when those words had passed Pharaoh's lips it was not lawful to answer them. Yet Asti dared to do so.

"O Pharaoh," she said, "be not wrath with your servant. Pharaoh, as you know, I have skill in divination, the spirits of the dead whisper at times in my ears of things that are to be. It seemed to me just now when having left the presence of the Queen, my foster-child, I stood a while alone in the darkness, that the divine Majesty of the great lady, the royal wife, Ahura, who was my friend and mistress, stood beside me and said:

"Go, Asti, to Pharaoh, and say to Pharaoh that great danger threatens him and our royal daughter. Say to him--Fly from Memphis, lest there he should be prepared for burial, and the Star of Amen hidden by a cloud of shame. Bid him beware of one about his throne, and of that evil magician with whom she made a pact last night."

Now Pharaoh looked at Asti and said:

"O dreamer of dreams, interpret your own dream. Who is she about my throne of whom I should beware, and who is the magician with whom she made a pact?"

"The divine Queen did not tell me, Pharaoh," answered Asti stubbornly,

"but my own skill tells me. She is Merytra, your favourite, and the magician is Kaku, whom she visited last night."

"What!" exclaimed Pharaoh, laughing. "That long-legged old astrologer with the painted cap who ran so fast when his master was taken? Why! he is nothing but a spy who has been in my pay for years; a charlatan who pretends to knowledge that he may win the secrets of his Prince. And Merytra, too, Merytra, who in bygone times warned me of this Abi's foolish plot. Asti, you are high-born and wise, one whom I love, and honour much, as does the Queen, my daughter, but you can still be jealous, as I have noted long. Asti, be not deceived, it was jealousy of Merytra that whispered in your ears, not the spirit of the divine Ahura. Now go and take your terrors with you, for this dark conspirator, Merytra, waits in my chamber to unrobe me, and talk me to sleep with her pleasant jests and gossip."

"Pharaoh has spoken, I go," said Asti in her quiet voice. "May Pharaoh's rest be sweet, and his awaking happy."

That night Tua could not sleep. Whenever she shut her eyes visions rose before her mind, terrifying, fantastic visions in all of which the fat and hideous Abi played a part. Thus she saw again the scene at her father's fatal feast to the Priest of Kesh, when Asti by her magic had caused the likeness of a monkey to come from the juggler's vase. Only

now it was Abi who emerged from the vase, a terrible Abi, with a red sword in his hand, and Pharaoh's crown upon his head. He leapt from the mouth of the vase, he devoured her with his greedy eyes, with stealthy steps he came to seize her, and she could not stir an inch, something held her fast upon her throne.

She could bear it no more--she opened her eyes, stared at the darkness, and out of the darkness came voices, telling of death and war. She thrust her fingers into her ears, and tried to fix her thoughts on Rames, that bright-eyed, light-footed lover of hers, whom she so longed to see again, without whom she was so lonely and undefended.

"Where was Rames?" she wondered. "What fate had overtaken him? Something in her seemed to answer--Death. Oh! if Rames were dead, what should she do? Of what use was it to be Queen of Egypt, the first woman in the world, if Rames were dead?"

Loneliness, insufferable loneliness seemed to get a hold of her. She slipped from her bed, and through the doorway of her little pylon chamber. Now she was upon the narrow stair, and in face of her was that other chamber where Asti slept. Someone was talking with her! Perhaps Mermes was with his wife, and if so she could not enter. No, it was Asti's voice, and, listening, she could hear her murmuring prayers or invocations in solemn tones. She pushed open the door and entered. A little lamp burned in the room, and by its feeble light she saw the white-robed Asti, whose long hair fell about her, standing with upturned

eyes and arms outstretched to Heaven. Suddenly Asti saw her also, though but dimly for she stood in the dense shadow, and knew her not.

"Advance, O thou Ghost, and declare thyself, for never was thy help more needed," she said.

"It is no ghost, but I," said Tua. "What dealings are these that you have with ghosts at this dearest hour of the night, Asti? Do not enough terrors encompass us that you must needs call on your familiar spirits to add to them?"

"I call on the spirits to save us from them, Queen, for, like you, I think that we are set in the midst of perils. This night is full of sorcery; I scent it in the air, and strive to match spell with spell. But why do you not sleep?"

"I cannot, Asti, I cannot. Fear has got hold of me. Oh! I would that we had never come to this hateful Memphis, or set eyes upon its ill-omened lord, that foul brute who seeks to make a wife of me."

"Be not afraid, Lady," said Asti, throwing her arms about Tua's slight and quivering form. "To-morrow morning we march; I have it from Pharaoh, and already the guard make preparations, while as for the accursed Abi, he is in prison."

"There is no prison that will hold him, Asti, save the grave. Oh! why

did not my Father command him to be slain, as I would have done? Then, at least, we should be free of him, and he could never marry me."

"Because it was otherwise decreed, O Neter-Tua, and Pharaoh must fulfil his fate and ours, for though he is so gentle, none can turn him."

As she spoke the words, somewhere, far beneath them, arose a cry, a voice of one in dread or woe, and with it the sound of feet upon the stairs.

"What passes?" said Asti, leaping to the door.

"Pharaoh is dead or dying," answered the terrified voice without. "Let her Majesty come to Pharaoh."

They threw on their garments, they ran down the narrow stair and across the halls till they came to the chamber of Pharaoh. There upon his bed he lay and about him were the physicians of his Court. He was speechless, but his eyes were open, and he knew his daughter, for, raising his hand feebly, he beckoned to her, and pointed at his feet.

"What is it, man?" she asked of the head physician, who, by way of answer, lifted the linen on the bed, and showed her Pharaoh's legs and feet, white and withered as though with fire.

"What sickness is this?" asked Tua again.

"We know not, O Queen," answered the physician, "for in all our lives we have never seen its like. The flesh is suddenly wasted, and the limbs are paralysed."

"But I know," broke in Asti. "This is not sickness, it is sorcery. Pharaoh has been smitten by some foul spell of the Prince Abi, or of his wizards. Say, who was with him last?"

"It seems that the Lady of the Footstool, Merytra, sang him to sleep, as was her custom," answered the physician, "and left him about two hours ago, so say the guard. When I came in to see how his Majesty rested but now, I found him thus."

Now Tua lifted up her head and spoke, saying:

"My divine Father is helpless, and therefore again I rule alone in Egypt. Hear me and obey. Let the Prince Abi be brought from his prison to the inner hall, for I would question him at once. Let the waiting-woman, Merytra, be brought also under guard with drawn swords."

The officer of the watch bowed and departed to do the bidding of her Majesty, while others went to light the hall.

Soon he returned to an outer chamber whither Tua had withdrawn herself while the physicians examined Pharaoh.

"O Queen," he said, with a frightened face, "be not wrath, but the Prince Abi has gone. He has escaped out of his prison, and the waiting-woman, Merytra, is gone also."

"How came this about?" asked Tua in a cold voice.

"O Queen, the small gate was open, for people passed in and out of it continually, making preparation for to-morrow's march, it seems that about an hour ago the lady Merytra came to the gate and showed Pharaoh's signet to the officer, saying that she was on Pharaoh's business. With her went a fat man dressed in the robe of a master of camels that in the darkness the officer thought was a certain Arab of the Desert who has been to and fro about the camels. It is believed that this man was none other than the Prince Abi, dressed in the Arab's robe, and that he escaped from his cell by some secret passage which was known to him, a passage of the old priests. The Arab, whose robes he wore, cannot be found, but perhaps he is asleep in some corner."

"Bar the gates," said Tua, "and let none pass in or out. Asti, take men with you, and go search the room where Merytra slept. Perchance she has returned again."

So Asti went, and a while after re-appeared carrying something enveloped in a cloth.

"Merytra has gone, O Queen," she said in an ominous voice, "leaving this behind hidden beneath her bed," and she placed the object on a table.

"What is it? The mummy of a child?" asked Tua, shrinking back.

"Nay, Queen, the image of a man."

Then throwing aside the cloth Asti revealed the waxen figure shaped to the exact likeness of Pharaoh, or rather what remained of it, for the legs were molten and twisted, and in them could be seen the bones of ivory and the sinews of thin wire, about which they had been moulded. Also beneath the chin where the tongue would be, sharp thorns had been thrust up to the root of the mouth. The thing was life-like and horrible, and as it was, so was the dumb and stricken Pharaoh on his bed.

Neter-Tua hid her eyes for a while, and leaned against the wall, then she drew herself up and said:

"Call the physicians and the members of the Council, and those who can be spared of the officers of the guard, that everyone of them may see and bear witness to the hideous crime which has been worked against Pharaoh by his brother, the Prince Abi, and the wizard Kaku, and their accomplice, the woman Merytra."

So they were called, and came, and when they saw the dreadful thing

lying in its waxen whiteness before them, they wailed and cursed those who had wrought this abominable sorcery.

"Curse them not," said Neter-Tua, "who are already accursed, and given over to the Devourer of Souls when their time shall come. Make a record of this deed, O Scribes, and do it swiftly."

So the scribes wrote the matter down, and the Queen and others who were present signed the writings as witnesses. Then Neter-Tua commanded that they should take the image and destroy it before it worked more evil, and a priest of Osiris who was present seized it and departed.

But Neter-Tua went to Pharaoh's room and knelt by his bed, watching him, for he seemed to be asleep. Presently he awoke, and looked round him wildly, moving his lips. For a while he could not speak, then of a sudden his voice burst from him in a hoarse, unnatural cry.

"They have bewitched me! I burn, I burn!" he screamed, rolling himself to and fro upon the bed. "Avenge me, my daughter, and fear nothing, for the gods are about you. I see their awful eyes. Oh! I burn, I burn!"

Then his head fell back, and the peace of death descended on his tortured brow.

Tua kissed his dead brow, and knelt at his side in prayer. After a little while she rose and said:

"It has pleased Pharaoh, the just and perfect, to depart to his everlasting habitation in Osiris. Make it known that this god is dead, and that I rule alone in Egypt. Send hither the priest of Osiris, that he may repeat the Ritual of Departing, and you, physicians, do your office."

So the priest came, but at the door Asti caught him by the hand and asked:

"How did you destroy the image of wax?"

"I burned it upon the altar in the old sanctuary of this temple," he answered.

"O, Fool!" said Asti, "you should have buried it. Know that with the enchanted thing you have burned away the life of Pharaoh also."

Then that priest fell swooning to the ground, and another had to be summoned to utter the Ritual of Departing.