

CHAPTER X

THE COMING OF THE KA

Now it was morning, and while the physicians embalmed the body of Pharaoh as best they could, Tua consulted with her officers. Long and earnest was that council, for all of them felt that their danger was very great. Abi had escaped, and if he were re-taken, none knew better than he that his death and that of all his House would be the reward of his crimes and sorceries which could only be covered up in one way--by marriage with the Queen of Egypt. Moreover, he had thousands of soldiers in the city and around it, all of them sworn to his service, whereas the royal guard was but five companies, each of a hundred men, trapped in a snare of streets and stone.

One of them suggested that they should break a way through the wall of the temple, and escape to the royal barges that lay moored on the Nile beneath them, and this plan was approved. But when they went to set about the work it was seen that these barges had been seized and were already sailing away up the river. So but two alternatives remained--to bide within the fortifications of the old temple, and send out messengers for help, or to march through the city boldly, break down the gates if these were shut against them, seize boats, and sail up the Nile for some loyal town, or if that could not be done, to take their chance in the open lands.

Now some favoured one scheme, and some the other, so that at last the decision was left with her Majesty. She thought awhile, then said:

"Here I will not stay, to be starved out as we must ere ever an army could be gathered to rescue us, and be given into the power of that vile and wicked man, the murderer of the good god, my father. Better that I should die fighting in the streets, for then at least I shall pass undefiled to join him in his eternal habitation beyond the sun. We march at midnight."

So they bowed beneath her word, and made ready while the women of his household raised a death-wail for Pharaoh, and criers standing on the high towers proclaimed the accession of Neter-Tua, Morning-Star of Amen, Glorious in Ra, Hathor, Strong in Beauty, as sole Lord and Sovereign of the North and South, and of Egypt's subject lands. Again and again they proclaimed it, and of the multitudes who listened some cheered, but the most remained silent, fearing the vengeance of their Prince, whom the heralds summoned to do homage, but who made no sign.

Night came at last. At a signal the gates were opened, and through them, borne upon the shoulders of his Councillors, preceded by a small body of guards, and followed by his women and household, went the remains of Pharaoh, in a coffin roughly fashioned from the sycamore timbers of the temple. With solemn step and slow, they went as though they feared no harm, the priests and singers chanting some ancient, funeral hymn. Next followed the baggage bearers, and after these the royal bodyguard in the

midst of whom the Queen, clad in mail, as a man, rode in a chariot, and with her the waiting-lady, Asti, wife of Mermes.

At first all went well, for the great square in front of the temple was empty. The procession of the body of Pharaoh passed it, and vanished down the street that led to the main gate, a mile away. Now the guard formed into line to enter this street also, when suddenly, barring the mouth of it, appeared great companies of men who had been hidden in other streets.

A voice cried "Halt!" and while the guards re-shaped themselves into a square about the person of the Queen, an embassy of officers, among whom were recognised the four lawful sons of Abi, advanced and demanded in the Prince's name that her Majesty should be given over to them, saying that she would be treated with all honour, and that those who accompanied her might go free.

"Answer that the Queen of Egypt does not yield herself into the hands of rebels, and of murderers; then fall on them, and slay them all," cried Neter-Tua when Mermes, her captain, had given her this message.

So he went forward and returned the answer, and next moment a flight of arrows from the Queen's guard laid low the four sons of Abi, and most of those who were with them.

Then the fight began, one of the fiercest that had been known in Egypt

for many a generation. The royal regiment, it is true, was but small, but they were picked men, and mad with despair and rage. Moreover, Tua the Queen played no woman's part that night, for when these charged, striving to cut a path through the opposing hosts, she charged with them, and by the moonlight was seen standing like an angry goddess in her chariot, and loosing arrows from her bow. Also no hurt came to her or those with her, or even to the horses that drew her. It was as though she were protected by some unseen strength, that caught the sword cuts and turned aside the points of spears.

Yet it availed not, for the men of Abi were a multitude, and the royal guard but very few. Slowly, an ever-lessening band, they were pressed back, first to the walls of the old temple of Sekhet, and then within its outer court. Now all who were left of them, not fifty men under the command of Mermes, strove to hold the gate. Desperately they fought, and one by one went down to death beneath the rain of spears.

Tua had dismounted from her chariot, and leaning on her bow, for all her arrows were spent, watched the fray with Asti at her side. With a yell the troops of Abi rushed through the gate, killing as they came. Now, surrounded by all who remained to her, not a dozen men, they were driven back through the inner courts, through the halls, to the pylon stairs.

Here the last stand was made. Step by step they held the stairs, till at length there were left upon their feet only Tua, Asti and Mermes, her husband, who was sorely wounded in many places. At the little landing

between the rooms of the Queen and Asti while the assailants paused a moment, the Captain Mermes, mad with grief and pain, turned and kissed his wife. Next he bowed before the Queen, saying:

"What a man may do, I have done to save your Majesty. Now I go to make report to Pharaoh, leaving you in charge of Amen, who shall protect you, and to Rames, my son, the heritage of vengeance. Farewell, O Daughter of Amen, till I see your star rise in the darkness of the Under-World, and to you, beloved wife, farewell."

Then, uttering the war-cry of his fathers, those Pharaohs who once had ruled in Egypt, the tall and noble Mermes grasped his sword in both his hands, and rushed upon the advancing foe, slaying and slaying until he himself was slain.

"Come with me, O Wife of a royal hero," said Tua to Asti, who had covered her eyes with her hand, and was leaning against the wall.

"Widow, not wife, Queen. Did you not see his spirit pass?"

Then Tua led her up more steps to the top of the pylon tower, where Asti sank down moaning in her misery. Tua walked to the outermost edge of the tower and stood there waiting the end. It was the moment of dawn. On the eastern horizon the red rim of the sun arose out of the desert in a clear sky. There upon that lofty pinnacle, clad in shining mail, and wearing a helm shaped like the crown of Lower Egypt, Tua stood in its

glorious rays that turned her to a figure of fire set above a world of shadow. The thousands of the people watching from the streets below, and from boats upon the Nile, saw her, and raised a shout of wonder and of adoration.

"The Daughter of Amen-Ra!" they cried. "Behold her clad in the glory of the god!"

Soldiers crept up the stairs to the pylon roof and saw her also, while, now that the fray was ended, with them came the Prince Abi.

"Seize her," he panted, for the stairs were steep and robbed him of his breath.

But the soldiers looked and shrank back before the Majesty of Egypt, wrapped in her robe of light.

"We fear," they answered, "the ghost of Pharaoh stands before her."

Then Neter-Tua spoke, saying:

"Abi, once a Prince of Egypt and Hereditary Lord of Memphis, but now an outcast murderer, black with the blood of your King, and of many a loyal man, hear me, the anointed Queen of Egypt, hear me, O man upon whom I decree the judgment of the first and second death. Come but one step near to my Majesty, and before your eyes, and the eyes of all the

multitude who watch, I hurl myself from this hideous place into the waters of the Nile. Yet ere I go to join dead Pharaoh, and side by side with him to lay our plaint against you before the eternal gods, listen to our curse upon you. From this day forward a snake shall prey upon your vitals, gnawing upwards to your heart. The spirits of Pharaoh and of all his servants whom you have slain shall haunt your sleep; never shall you know one more hour of happy rest. Through life henceforth you shall fly from a shadow, and if you climb a throne, it shall be such a one as that on which I stand encircled with the perilous depths of darkness. Thence you shall fall at last, dying by a death of shame, and the evil gods shall seize upon you, O Traitor, and drag you to the maw of the Eater-up of Souls, and therein you shall vanish for ever for aye, you and all your House, and all those who cling to you. Thus saith Neter-Tua, speaking with the voice of Amen who created her, her father and the god of gods."

Now when the soldiers heard these dreadful words, one by one they turned and crept down the stairs, till at last there were left upon the pylon roof only the Queen, Asti crouching at her feet, and the monstrous Abi, her uncle.

He looked at her, and thrice he tried to speak but failed, for the words choked in his throat. A fourth time he tried, and they came hoarsely:

"Take off your curse, O mighty Queen," he said, "and I will let you go. I am old, to-night all my lawful sons are dead; take off your curse,

leave me in my Government, and though I desire you more than the throne of Egypt, O Beautiful, still I will let you go."

"Nay," answered the Queen, "I cannot if I would. It is not I who spoke, but a Spirit in my mouth. Do your worst, O son of Set. The curse remains upon you."

Now Abi shook in the fury of his fear, and answered:

"So be it, Star of Amen, having nothing more to dread I will do my worst. Pharaoh my enemy is dead, and you, his daughter, shall be my wife of your own free will, or since no man will lay a finger upon you, here in this tower you shall starve. Death is not yet; I shall have my day, it is sworn to me. Reign with me if you will, or starve without me if you will--I tell you, Daughter of Amen, that I shall have my day."

"And I tell you, Son of Set, that after the day comes the long terror of that night which knows no morrow."

Then finding no answer, he too turned and went.

When he was gone Neter-Tua stood a while looking down upon the thousands of people gathered in the great square where the battle had been fought, who stared up at her in a deadly silence. Then she descended from the coping-stone, and, taking Asti by the arm, led her from the roof to the little chamber where she had slept.

Six days had gone by, and Queen Neter-Tua starved in the pylon tower. Till now the water had held out for there was a good supply of it in jars, but at last it was done, while, as for food, they had eaten nothing except a store of honey which Asti took at night from the bees that hived among the topmost pylon stones. That day the honey was done also, and if had not been, without water to wash it down they could have swallowed no more of the sickly stuff. Indeed, although in after years in memory of its help, Neter-Tua chose the bee as her royal symbol, never again could she bring herself to eat of the fruit of its labours.

"Come, Nurse," said Tua, "let us go to the roof, and watch the setting of Ra, perhaps for the last time, since I think that we follow him through the Western Gates."

So they went, supporting each other up the steps, for they grew weak. From this lofty place they saw that save on the Nile side of it which was patrolled by the warships of Abi, all the temple was surrounded by a double ring of soldiers, while beyond the soldiers, on the square where the great fight had been, were gathered thousands of the people who knew that the starving Queen was wont to appear thus upon the pylon at sunset.

At the sight of her, clad in the mail which she still wore, a murmur

rose from them like the murmur of the sea, followed by a deep silence since they dared not declare the pity which moved them all. In the midst of this silence, whilst the sun sank behind the Pyramids of the ancient kings, Neter-Tua lifted up her glorious voice and sang the evening hymn to Amen-Ra. As the last notes died away in the still air, again the murmur rose while the darkness gathered about the pylon, hiding her from the gaze of men.

Hand in hand as they had come, the two deserted women descended the stair to their sleeping-place.

"They dare not help us, Asti," said Tua, "let us lie down and die."

"Nay, Queen," answered Asti, "let us turn to one that giveth help to the helpless. Do you remember the words spoken by the shining spirit of Ahura the Divine?"

"I remember them, Asti."

"Queen, I have waited long, since the spell she whispered to me may be used once only, but now I am sure that the moment is at hand when that which dwells within you must be called forth to save you."

"Then call it forth, Asti," answered Tua wearily, "if you have the power. If not, oh! let us die. But say, whom would you summon? The glory of Amen or the ghost of Pharaoh, or Ahura, my mother, or one of the

guardian gods?"

"None of these," answered Asti, "for I have been bidden otherwise. Lie you down and sleep, my fosterling, for I have much to do in the hours of darkness. When you awake you shall learn all."

"Aye," said Tua, "when I awake, if ever I do awake. Is it in your mind to kill me in my sleep, Asti? Is that your command? Well, if so, I shall not blame you, for then I will break this long fast of mine with Pharaoh and the divine mother, Ahura, who bore me, and together in the pleasant Fields of Peace we will wait for Rames, my lover and your son. Being a queen, they will give my burial in my father's tomb, and that is all I crave of them, and of this weary world. Sing me to rest, Nurse, as you were wont to do when I was little, and, if it be your will, tarry not long behind me."

So she laid herself down upon the bed, and, taking her hand that had grown so thin, the tall and noble Asti bent over her in the darkness, and began to sing a gentle chant or lullaby.

Tua's eyes closed, her breath came slow and deep. Then Asti the magician ceased her song and, gathering up her secret strength, put out her prayers, prayer after prayer, till at length all her soul was pure, and she dared to utter the awful spell that Ahura had whispered in her ear. At the muttered, holy words wild voices cried through the night, the solid pylon rocked, and in the city the crystal globe into which Kaku

and Merytra gazed was suddenly shattered between them, and, white with terror at he knew not what, Abi sprang from his couch.

Then Asti also sank into sleep or swoon, and all was silent in that chamber, silent as the grave.

Neter-Tua awoke. Through the pylon window-place crept the first grey light of dawn. Her eyes searching the gloom fell first upon the dark-robed figure of Asti sleeping in a chair, her head resting upon her hand. Then a brightness drew them to the foot of her bed, and there, clothed in a faint, white light, that seemed as though it were drawn from the stars and the moon, wearing the Double Crown, and arrayed in all the royal robes of Egypt, she saw--herself.

Now Tua knew that she dreamed, and for a long while lay still, for it pleased her, starved and wretched as she was, a prisoner in the hands of her foes, a netted bird, to let her fancy dwell upon this splendid image of what she had been before an evil fate, speaking with the voice of Merytra, Lady of the Footstool, had beguiled dead Pharaoh to Memphis. If things had gone well with her, she should be as that image was to-day, that image which wore her crown and robes of state, yes, and her very jewels. Such were the changes of fortune even in the lives of princes whose throne seemed to be set upon a rock, princes whom the god of gods had fathered. Never before in her young life had the thing come so home

to her, for until now, even through the hunger and the fear, her pride had borne her up. But in this chilly hour that precedes the dawn, the hour when, as they say, men are wont to die, it was otherwise with her. Her end was near--she knew it and understood that between the mightiest monarch in the world and the humblest peasant maid at the last there is no difference, save perchance a difference of the soul within.

Here she lay, a shadow, who must choose between a miserable end by thirst and hunger, or a loathsome marriage. And what availed it that she was called Morning-Star of Amen, she the only child of Pharaoh and of his royal wife, and that when she was dead they would grant her a state funeral, and inscribe her name among the lists of kings, while Abi, the foul usurper, sat upon her throne. Here on the bed lay what she was, there at the foot of it stood what she should be if the gods had not deserted her.

Her poor heart was filled with bitterness like a cup with vinegar, bitterness flowed through her in the place of blood. It seemed hard to die so young, she whom men named a god; to die robbed of her crown, robbed of her vengeance, and taking with her her deep, unfruitful love. Would she and Rames meet beyond the grave, she wondered? Would they wed and bear children there, who should rule as Pharaohs in the Under-world? Would Osiris redeem her mortal flesh, and Amen the Father, receive her; or would she rush down into everlasting blackness where sleep is all in all?

Oh! for one hour of strength and freedom, one short hour while at the head of her armies she rolled down upon rebellious Memphis in her might, and trod its high walls flat, and gave its palaces to the flames, and cast its accursed prince to the jaws of crocodiles. Her sunk eyes flashed at the thought of it, and her wasted bosom heaved, and lo! the eyes of that royal queen of her dreams flashed also as though in answer, and on its breast the jewels rose as though pride or anger lifted them.

Then this marvel came to pass, for the beautiful face--could her own ever have been so beautiful?--the imperial face, bent forward a little, and from the red lips came a soft voice, her own rich voice, that said:

"Speak your will, Queen, and it shall be done. I, who stand here, am your servant to command, O Morning-Star, O Amen's royal child."

Tua sat up in her bed and laughed at the vision.

"My will!" she said. "O Dream, why do you mock me? Let me think. What is my will? Well, Dream, it is that of the beggar at the gate--I desire a drink of water, and a crust of bread."

"They are there," answered the figure, pointing with the crystal sceptre in her hand to the table beside the couch.

Idly enough Tua looked, and so it was! On the table stood pure water in a silver cup, and by it cakes of bread upon a golden platter. She

stretched out her hand, for surely this fantasy was pleasant, and took that ghost of a silver cup, her own cup that Pharaoh had given her as a child, and brought it to her lips and drank, and lo! water pure and cold flowed down her throat, until at length even her raging thirst was satisfied. Then she stretched out her hand again, and took the loaves of bread, and ate them hungrily till all were gone, and as she swallowed the last of them, exclaimed in bitter shame:

"Oh! what a selfish wretch am I who have drunk and eaten all, leaving nothing for my foster-mother, Asti, who lies asleep, and dies of want as I did."

"Fear not," answered the Dream. "Look, there are more for Asti." And it was true, for the silver cup brimmed once more with cold water, and on the golden platter were other cakes.

Now the Dream spoke again:

"Surely," it said, "there were other wishes in your heart, O Morning-Star, than that for human sustenance?"

"Aye, O Dream, I wished for vengeance upon Abi, the traitor, Abi the murderer of my father, who would bring me to the last shame of womanhood. I wished for vengeance upon Abi, and all who cling to him."

The bright figure bowed, stretching out its jewelled hands, and

answered:

"I am your servant to obey. It shall be worked, O Queen, such vengeance as you cannot dream of, vengeance poured drop by drop like poison in his veins, the torment of disappointed love, the torment of horrible fear, the torment of power given and snatched away, the torment of a death of shame, and the everlasting torment of the Eater-up of Souls--this vengeance shall be worked upon Abi and all who cling to him. Was there not another wish in your heart, O Morning-Star, O Queen divine?"

"Aye," answered Tua, "but I may not speak it all even to myself in sleep."

"It shall be given to you, O Morning-Star. You shall find your love though far away beyond the horizon, and he shall return with you, and you twain shall rule in the Upper and the Lower Land, and in all the lands beyond with glory such as has not been known in Egypt."

Now, at length, Tua seemed to awake. She rubbed her eyes and looked. There was the sleeping Asti; there on the table beside her were the water and the bread; there at the foot of the couch, glimmering in the low lights of dawn, was the glorious figure of herself draped in the splendid robes.

"Who, and what are you?" she cried. "Are you a god or a spirit, or are you but a mocking vision caught in the web of my madness?"

"I am none of these things, O Morning-Star, I am yourself. I am that Ka whom our father Amen gave to you at birth to dwell with you and protect you. Do you not remember me when as a child we played together?"

"I remember," answered Tua. "You warned me of the danger of the sacred crocodile in the Temple tank, but since then I have never seen you. What gives you the strength to appear in the flesh before me, O Double?"

"The magic of Asti with which she has been endowed from on high to save you, Neter-Tua, that gives me strength. Know that although you cannot always see me, I am your eternal companion. Through life I go with you, and when you die I watch in your tomb, perfect, incorruptible, preserving your wisdom, your loveliness, and all that is yours, until the day of resurrection. I have power, I have the secret knowledge which dwells in you, although you cannot grasp it; I remember the Past, the infinite, infinite Past that you forget, I foresee the Future, the endless, endless Future that is hidden from you, to which the life you know is but as a single leaf upon the tree, but as one grain of sand in the billions of the Desert. I look upon the faces of the gods, and hear their whisperings; Fate gives me his book to read; I sleep secure in the presence of the Eternal who sent me forth, and to whom at last I return again, my journey ended, my work fulfilled, bearing you in my holy arms. O Morning-Star, the spells of Asti have clothed me in this magic flesh, the might of Amen has set me on my feet. I am here, your servant, to obey."

Now, amazed, bewildered, Tua called out:

"Awake, Nurse, awake, for I am mad. It seems to me that a messenger from on high, robed in my own flesh, stands before me and speaks with me."

Asti opened her eyes, and, perceiving the beautiful figure, rose and did obeisance to it, but said no word.

"Be seated," said the Ka, "and hear me, time is short. I awoke at the summons, I came forth, I am present, I endure until the spell is taken off me, and I return whence I came. O Interpreter, speak the will of her of whom I am, that I may do it in my own fashion. There is food--eat and drink, then speak."

So Asti ate and drank as Tua had done, and when she had finished and was satisfied, behold! the cup and the platter vanished away. Next in a slow, quiet voice she spoke, saying:

"O Shadow of this royal Star, by my spells incorporate, this is our case: Here we starve in misery, and without the gate Abi waits the end. If the Queen lives, he will take her who hates him to be his wife; if she dies he will seize her throne. Our wisdom is finished. What must we do to save this Star that it may shine serene until its appointed hour of setting?"

"Is that all you seek?" asked the Double, when she had finished.

"Nay," broke in Tua hurriedly, "I would not shine alone, I seek another Star to share my sky with me."

"Have you faith and will you obey?" asked the Double again. "For without faith I can do nothing."

Now Asti looked at Tua who bowed her head in assent to an unspoken question, then she answered:

"We have faith, we will obey."

"So be it," said the Shadow. "Presently Abi will come to ask whether the Queen consents to be his wife, or whether she will bide here until she dies. I who wear the fashion of the Queen will go forth and be his wife, oh! such a wife as man never had before," and as she spoke the words an awful look swept across her face, and her deep eyes flamed. "Ill goes it with the mortal man who weds a wraith that hates him and is commanded to work his woe," she added.

Now Asti and Tua understood and smiled, then the Queen said:

"So you will sit in my seat, O Shadow, and as your lord, Abi will sit on Pharaoh's throne and find it hard. But what of Egypt and my people?"

"Fear not for Egypt and your people, O Morning Star. With these it shall go well enough until you come back to claim them."

"And what of my companion and myself?" asked Tua.

The Double raised her sceptre, and pointed to the open window-space between them, beneath which, hundreds of feet beneath, ran the milky waters of the river.

"You shall trust yourselves to the bosom of Father Nile," she answered solemnly.

Now the Queen and Asti stared at each other.

"That means," said Tua, "that we must trust ourselves to Osiris, for none can fall so far and live."

"Think you so, O Star? Where, then, is that faith you promised, without which I can do nothing? Nay, I tell no more. Do my bidding, or let me go, and deal with Abi as it pleases you. Choose now, he draws near," and as she spoke the words they heard the bronze gates of the temple clash upon their hinges.

Tua shivered at the sound, then sprang from the couch, and drew herself to her full height, exclaiming:

"For my part I have chosen. Never shall it be said that Pharaoh's daughter was a coward. Better the breast of Osiris than the arms of Abi, or slow death in a dungeon. In Amen and in thee, O Double, I put my trust."

The Shadow looked from her to Asti, who answered briefly:

"Where my Lady goes there I follow, knowing that Mermes always waits. What shall we do?"

The Ka motioned to them to stand together in the narrow winding-place, and this they did, their arms about each other. Next she lifted her sceptre and spoke some word.

Then fire flashed before their eyes, a rush of wind beat upon their brows, and they knew no more.