

CHAPTER XI

THE DREAM OF ABI

On the night of the drawing-forth of the Ka of Neter-Tua, Kaku the wizard, and Merytra the spy, she who had been Lady of the Footstool to Pharaoh, sat together in that high chamber where Merytra had vowed her vow, and received the magic image.

"Why do you look so disturbed?" asked the astrologer of his accomplice who glanced continually over her shoulder, and seemed very ill at ease.

"All has gone well. If Set himself had fashioned that image, it could not have done its work more thoroughly."

"Thoroughly, indeed," broke in Merytra in an angry voice. "You have tricked me, Wizard, I promised to help you to lame Pharaoh, not to murder him!"

"Hush! Beloved," said Kaku nervously, "murder is an ugly word, and murderers come to ugly ends--sometimes. Is it your fault if an accursed fool of a priest chose to burn the mannikin upon an altar, and thus bring this god to his lamented end?"

"No," answered Merytra, "not mine, or the priest's, but yours, and that hog, Abi's; and Set's the master of both of you. But I shall get the blame of it, for the Queen and Asti know the truth, and soon or late it

will come out, and they will burn me as a sorceress, sending me to the Underworld with the blood of Pharaoh upon my hands. Pharaoh who never did me aught but good. And then, what will happen to me?"

Evidently Kaku did not know, for he rose and stood opposite to her, scratching his lean chin and smiling in a sickly, indeterminate fashion that enraged Merytra.

"Cease grinning at me like an ape of the rocks," she said, "and tell me, what is to be the end of this evil business?"

"Why trouble about ends, Fair One?" he asked. "They are always a long way off; indeed, the best philosophers hold that there is no such thing as an end. You know the sacred symbol of a snake with its tail in its mouth that surrounds the whole world, but begins where it ends, and ends where it begins. It may be seen in any tomb----"

"Cease your talk of snakes and tombs," burst in Merytra. "The thought of them makes me shudder."

"By all means, Beloved. I have always held that we Egyptians dwell too much on tombs, and--whatever it may be that lies beyond them, which after all remains a matter of doubt--fortunately. So let us turn from tombs and corpses to palaces and life. As I said just now, although we grieve over the accident of Pharaoh's death, and that of all his guard --and I may add, of Abi's four legitimate sons, things have gone

well for us. To-day I have received from the Prince, in writing, my appointment as Vizier, and first King's companion, to come into force when he mounts the throne as he must do, and to-day you have received from me, with all the usual public rites and ceremonies, the name of wife, as I promised that you should. Merytra, you are the wife of the great Vizier, the pre-eminent lord, the sole Companion of the King of Egypt, a high position for one who after all during the late reign was but Pharaoh's favourite, and Lady of the Footstool."

"A footstool of silk is more comfortable to sit on than a state chair fashioned of blood-stained swords. Hearken you, Kaku! I am afraid. You say that you are the greatest of seers, and can read the future. Well, I desire to know the future, so if you are not a charlatan, show it to me."

"A charlatan! How can you suggest it, Merytra, remembering the adventure of the image?"

"That may have been an accident. Pharaoh was sickly for years, and had a stroke before. If you are not a cheat show me the future in that magic crystal. I would learn the worst, so that I may know how to meet it when it comes."

"Well, Wife, we will try, though to see such high visions the spirit should be calm, which I fear yours is not--nay, be not angry. We will try, we will try. Sit here now, and gaze, and above all be silent while

I say the appropriate spells."

So the ball of crystal having been set upon the table, the pair stared into it as Kaku muttered his charms and invocations. For a long while Merytra saw nothing, till suddenly a shadow gathered in the ball, which slowly cleared away, revealing the image of dead Pharaoh clothed in his mummy wrappings. As she started back to scream the image seemed to loose its hands from the cloths that bound them, and strike outwards, whereon the crystal suddenly shattered, so that the pieces of it flew about the room, one of which struck her on the mouth, knocking out two of her front teeth, and gashing her lips.

Merytra uttered a cry, and fell backwards to the floor, while Kaku sprang from his chair as though to run away, then thought better of it, and stood still, shivering with fear.

"What was that?" said Merytra, rising from the ground, and wiping the blood from her cut mouth.

"I do not know," answered Kaku, in a quavering voice. "It would seem that the gods deny to us that knowledge of the future which you sought. Be content with the present, Merytra."

"Content with the present," she screamed, infuriated. "Look at what the present has given me--a mouthful of blood and teeth. I, who was beautiful, am spoiled for ever; I am become an old hag. Pharaoh burst

the ball with his hand, and threw the pieces at me. I saw him do it, and you set him there. Wretch, I will pay you back for this evil trick," and springing at Kaku, she tore of his astrologer's cap, and the wig beneath it, and beat his bald head with them till he cried for mercy.

It was at this moment that the door opened, and through it, breathless, white with terror, half-clothed, appeared none other than the Prince Abi.

"What passes here?" he gasped, sinking into a chair. "Is this the way you conduct your midnight studies, Kaku?"

"Certainly not, most high Lord," replied the astrologer, trying to bow with his eye fixed on Merytra, who stood by him, the torn wig in her hand, in the act of striking. "Certainly not, exalted Prince. A domestic difference, that is all. This wild cat of a woman whom I have married having met with an accident, gave way to her devilish temper."

"Repeat that," exclaimed Merytra, "and I will throw you from the window-place to find out whether your sorceries can make paving-stones as soft as air. See, Lord, what he has done to me by his accursed wizardry," and she exhibited her two front teeth in her shaking hand. "I say that he set the spirit of Pharaoh whom he beguiled me to do to death, in the crystal, for I saw him there wrapped in his mummy clothes, and caused dead Pharaoh to burst the crystal and stone me with its fragments."

"Be silent, Woman," shouted Abi, "or I will have you beaten with rods, till your feet hurt more than your mouth. What is this about the spirit of Pharaoh, Kaku? Is he everywhere, for know, it is of Pharaoh, the dweller in Osiris, that I came to speak to you."

"Most exalted Ruler of the North, Son of Royal Blood, Hereditary Count who shall be King----"

"Cease your titles, Knave," exclaimed Abi, "and listen, for I need counsel, and if you cannot give it I will find one who can. Just now I lay on my bed asleep, and a dreadful vision came to me. I dreamed that I woke up, and feeling a weight on the bed beside me turned to learn what it was, and saw there the body of my brother, Pharaoh, in his death-wrappings----"

"As I saw him in the ball," broke in Merytra. "Did he pelt you also, O Abi?"

"Nay, Woman, he did worse, he spoke to me. He said--'You, my brother, to whom I forgave all your sins, you and the woman-snake that I cherished in my bosom, and your servant, the black-souled magician, her accomplice, have done me miserably to death, and set the Queen of both the Lands, Amen's royal child, to starve in yonder tower with the noble lady Asti, until she dies or takes you to be her husband--you, her uncle, who seek her beauty and my throne. Now I have a message for

you from the gods, who write down these things in their eternal books against the day of judgment, when we all shall meet and plead our cause before them, Osiris the Redeemer standing on the right hand, and the Eater-up of Souls standing on the left.

"This is the message, O Abi--Go to the Temple of Sekhet at the dawn. There you shall find that Royal Loveliness which you desire. Take it to be your wife as you desire, for it shall not say you nay. Be wedded to that Loveliness with pomp before all the eyes of Egypt, and reign by right of that Royalty, until you meet one Rames, son of Mermes, whom you also murdered, and with him a certain Beggar-man who is charged with another message for you, O Abi. Ascend the Nile to Thebes, and lay this body of mine in the splendid tomb which I have made ready and sit in my seat, and do those things which that Royal Loveliness you have wed, commands to you, for It you shall obey. But hasten, hasten, Abi, to hollow for yourself a grave, and let it be near to mine, for when you are dead this my Ka would come to visit you, as it does to-night.'

"Then the Ka or the body of Pharaoh--I know not which it was--ceased from speaking, and lay there a while staring at me with its cold eyes, till at length the spirits of my four sons who are dead entered the chamber and, lifting up the shape, carried it away. I awoke, shaking like a reed in the wind, and ran hither up a thousand steps to find you brawling with this low-born slut, dead Pharaoh's worn-out shoe that in bygone years I kicked from off my foot."

Now Merytra would have answered, for she loved not such names, but the two men looked at her so fiercely that her rage died, and she was silent.

"Read me this vision, Man, and be swift, for the torment of it haunts me," went on Abi. "If you cannot I strip you of your offices, and give your carcase to the rods until you find wisdom. It was you who set me on this path, and by the gods you shall keep me safe in it or die by inches."

Now, seeing his great danger, Kaku grew cold and cunning.

"It is true, O Prince," he said, "that I set you on this path, this high and splendid path, and it is true also that from the beginning I have kept you safe in it. Had it not been for me and my counsel, long ago you would have become but a forgotten traitor. Remember that night at Thebes, when in your pride you desired to smite at the heart of Pharaoh, and how I held your hand, and remember how, many a time, my wisdom has been your guide, when left to your own rash folly you must have failed or perished. It is true also, Prince, that in the future as in the past, with me and by me you stand or fall. Yet if you think otherwise, find some wiser man to lead you, and wait the end. All the rods in Egypt cannot be broken on my back, O Abi. Now shall I speak who alone have knowledge, or will you seek another counsellor?"

"Speak on," answered Abi sullenly, "we are fish in the same net, and

share each other's fortune to the end, whether it be Set's gridiron or fat Egypt's pleasure pond. Fear not, what I have promised you shall have while it is mine to give."

"Just now you promised rods," remarked Kaku, making a wry face and replacing the remains of his wig upon his bald head, "but let that pass. Now as to this dream of yours, I find its meaning good. How did Pharaoh come to you? Not as a living spirit, but in the fashion of a dead man, and who cares for dead men?"

"I do, for one, when they cut my mouth with broken crystals," interrupted Merytra, who was bathing her wounds in a basin of water.

"Would that they had cut your tongue instead of your lips, Woman," snarled Abi. "Continue, Kaku, and heed her not."

"And what was his message?" went on the magician. "Why, that you shall marry the Majesty of Egypt, and rule in her right and sit in the seat of kings. Are not these the very things that you desire, and have worked for years to win?"

"Yes, Kaku, but you forget all that about one Rames, and the tomb that I must hollow, and the rest."

"Rames? Merytra here can tell you of him, Prince. He is the madcap young Count who killed the Prince of Kesh, and was sent by Neter-Tua far to

the South-lands, that the barbarians there might make an end of him without scandal. If ever he should come back with the Beggar-man and his message, which is not likely, you can answer him with the halter he deserves."

"Aye, Kaku, but how will the Queen answer him? There are stories afloat----"

"Lies, every one of them, Prince. She would have executed him at once had it not been for the influence of Mermes, and her foster-mother, Asti. This Rames has in him the royal blood of the last dynasty, and the Star of Amen is not one who will share her sky with a rival star, unless he be her lawful Lord, which is your part. If Rames or the foul Beggar brings you any message it will be that you are King of Kesh as well as of Egypt, and then you can kill him and take the heritage. A fig for Rames and its stalk for the Beggar!"

"Perhaps," replied Abi more cheerfully, "at any rate I do not fear that risk; but how about all Pharaoh's talk of tombs?"

"Being dead, Prince, it is natural that the mind of his Ka should run on tombs, and his own royal burial, which as a matter of policy we must give to him. Besides there the prophesy was safe, since to these same tombs all must come, especially those of us who have seen the Nile rise over sixty times--as I have," he added hastily. "When we reach the tomb it will be time to deal with its affairs; till then let us be content

with life, and the good things it offers, such as thrones, and find the love of the most beautiful woman in the world, and the rest. Harvest your corn when it is ripe, Prince, and do not trouble about next year's crop or whether in his grave Pharaoh's Double eats white bread or brown. Pharaoh's daughter--or Amen's--is your business, not his ghost."

"Yes, good soothsayer," said Abi, "she is my business. But one more question. Why did that accursed mummy speak of her as 'It'--in my dream I mean--as though she were no woman, but something beyond woman?"

For a moment Kaku hesitated, for the point was hard to answer, then he replied boldly:

"Because as I believe, Prince, this Queen with whom the gods are rewarding your deserts is in truth more than woman, being Amen's very daughter, and therefore in those realms whence the dream came, she is known not as woman, but by her title of Royal Loveliness. Oh!" went on Kaku, simulating an enthusiasm that in truth did not glow within his breast, "great and glorious is your lot, King of the world, and splendid the path which I have opened to your triumphant feet. It was I who showed you how Pharaoh might be trapped in Memphis, being but a poor fool easy to deceive, and it was I--or rather Merytra yonder--who rid you of him. And now it is I, the Master whom you threatened with rods, that alone can interpret to you the happy omen of a dream which you thought fearsome. Think of the end of it, Prince, and banish every doubt. Who bore away the shape of Pharaoh? Why the spirits of your sons,

thus symbolising the triumph of your House."

"At least they will have no share in it, Kaku, for they are dead," said Abi with a groan, for he had loved his sons.

"What of that, Prince? They died bravely, and we mourn them, but here again Fortune is with you, for had they lived trouble might have arisen between them and those other sons which the Queen of Egypt shall bear to you."

"Mayhap, mayhap," replied Abi, waving his hand, for the subject was painful to him, "but this Queen is not yet my wife. She is starving in yonder tower, and what am I to do? If I try to force my presence upon her, she will destroy herself as she swore, and if I leave her there any longer, being mortal, she must die. Moreover, I dare not, for even these folk of Memphis, who love me, begin to murmur. Egypt's Queen is Egypt's Queen, and they will not suffer that she should perish miserably, being beautiful and young, and one who takes all hearts. This night at sunset they gathered in tens of thousands round the tower to hear her sing that evening hymn to Ra, and afterwards marched past my palace, shouting in the darkness, 'Give food to Her Majesty, and free her, or we will.' Moreover, by now the news must have come to Thebes, and there a great army will gather to liberate or avenge her. What am I to do, Prophet?"

"Do what dead Pharaoh bade you in your dream, Prince. At the hour of dawn go to the Temple of Sekhet, where you will find the Queen become

obedient to your wishes, for did not the dream declare that she will not say you nay? Then lead her to your palace, and marry her in the face of all men, and rule by right of her Majesty and of your own conquering arm."

"It can be tried," said Abi, "for then, at least, we shall learn what truth there is in dreams. But what of this Asti her companion?"

"Asti has been an ill guide to her Majesty, Prince," replied Kaku, rubbing his chin as he always did when there was mischief in his mind. "Moreover, she is advanced in years, and must be weak with grief and hunger. If she still lives Merytra here will take her in charge and care for her. You are old friends, are you not, Merytra?"

"Very," answered that lady with emphasis, "like the cat and the bird which were pets of the same master. Well, we shall have much to say to each other. Only, beware, Husband, Asti is no weakling. Your magic may be strong, but hers is stronger, for she is a great priestess and draws it from gods--not devils."

So it came about that at dawn Prince Abi, clad in magnificent robes, and accompanied by Councillors, among them Kaku, and by a small guard, was carried in a litter to the gates of the old temple of Sekhet, being too heavy to walk so far, and there descended. As there were none to defend

them these gates were opened easily enough, and they passed through, leaving the guard without. When they came to the inner court, Abi stopped and asked where they should search.

"In one place only, your Highness," answered Kaku, "that pylon tower which overlooks the Nile, for there her Majesty starves with Asti."

"Pylon tower," grumbled Abi. "Have I not climbed enough steps this night? Still, lead on."

So they went to the narrow stair, up which the thin Kaku ran like a cat, while the officers pushed and led the huge Abi behind him. On the third landing they all halted at Abi's command.

"Hurry not," he said in a thick whisper. "Her Majesty dwells on the next floor of this hateful tower, and since Asti is with her she cannot be surprised. Beware, then, of frightening her by your sudden appearance, lest she should run to the top of the pylon, and hurl herself into the Nile, as she has sworn that she will do. Halt now, and I will call to her when I have got my breath."

So after a while he called, saying:

"O Queen, cease to starve yourself in this miserable abode, and come down to dwell in plenty with your faithful subject."

He called it once, and twice, and thrice, but there was no answer. Now Abi grew afraid.

"She must have perished," he said, "and Egypt will demand her blood at my hands. Kaku, go up and see what has happened. You are a magician, and have nothing to fear."

But the astrologer thought otherwise, and hesitated, till Abi in a rage lifted his cedar wand to strike him on the back. Then he went, step by step, slowly, pausing at each step to address prayers and praises to her Majesty of Egypt. At length he came to the door of the Queen's chamber, and kneeling down, peeped into it, to see that it was quite empty. Next he crawled across the landing to the chamber opposite, that which had been Asti's, and found it empty also. Then, made bold by fear, he ascended to the pylon roof. But here, too, there was no one to be seen. So he returned, and told Abi, who shouted:

"By Ptah, great Lord of Memphis! either she has escaped to raise Egypt on me, or she has sought death in the Nile to raise the gods upon me, which is worse. So much for your interpretation of dreams, O Cheat."

"Wait till you are sure before you call me such names, Prince," replied Kaku indignantly. "Let us search the temple, she may be elsewhere."

So they searched it court by court, and chamber by chamber, till they came to that inner hall in front of the Sanctuary where Pharaoh had set

up his throne while he sojourned at Memphis. This hall was a dark place, into which light flowed only through the gratings in the clerestory, being roofed in with blocks of granite laid upon its lotus-shaped columns. Now, at the hour of sunrise, the gloom in it was still deep, so deep that the searchers felt their way from pillar to pillar, seeing nothing. Presently, however, a ray of light from the rising sun sped through the opening shaped like the eye of Osiris in the eastern wall, and as it had done for thousands of years, struck upon the shrine of the goddess, and the throne that was set in front of it, revealing the throne, and seated thereon Neter-Tua, her Majesty of Egypt.

Glorious she looked indeed, a figure of flame set in the midst of darkness. The royal robe she wore glittered in the sunlight, glittered her sceptre, her jewels, and the uræi on her Double Crown, but more than all of them glittered her fierce and splendid eyes. Indeed, there was something so terrible in those eyes that the beholders who discovered them thus suddenly, shrank back, whispering to each other that here sat a goddess, not a woman. For in her calmness, her proud beauty and her silence, she seemed like an immortal, one victorious who had triumphed over death, not a woman who for seven days had starved within a tower.

They shrank back, they huddled themselves together in the doorway, and there remained whispering till the growing light fell on them also. But the figure on the throne took no heed, only stared over their heads as though it were lost in mystery and thought.

At length Kaku, gathering courage, said to Abi:

"O Prince, there is your bride, such a bride as never man had before. Go now and take her," and all the others echoed:

"Go now, O Prince, and take her."

Thus adjured for very shame's sake Abi advanced, looking often behind him, till he came to the foot of the throne, and stood there bowing.

For a long while he stood bowing thus, till he grew weary indeed, for he knew not what to say. Then suddenly a clear and silvery voice spoke above him, asking:

"What do you here, Lord of Memphis? Why are you not in the cell where Pharaoh bound you? Oh! I remember--the footstool-bearer, Merytra, your paid spy, let you out, did she not? Why is she not here with Kaku the Sorcerer, who fashioned the enchanted image that did Pharaoh to death? Is it because she stays to doctor those false lips of hers that were cut last night before you went to ask yonder Kaku to interpret a certain dream which came to you?"

"How did you learn these things? Have you spies in my palace, O Queen?"

"Yes, my uncle, I have spies in your palace and everywhere. What Amen

sees his daughter knows. Now you have come to lead me away to be your wife, have you not? Well, I await you, I am ready. Do it if you dare!"

"If I dare? Why should I not dare, O Queen?" asked Abi in a doubtful voice.

"Surely that question is one for you to answer, Count of Memphis and its subject nomes. Yet tell me this--why did the magic crystal burst asunder without cause in the chamber of Kaku last night, and why do you suppose that Kaku interpreted to you all the meaning of your dream--he who will never tell the truth unless it be beneath the rods?"

"I do not know, Queen," answered Abi, "but with Kaku I can speak later, if need be after the fashion you suggest," and he glanced at the magician wrathfully.

"No, Prince Abi, you know nothing, and Kaku knows nothing, save that rods break the backs of snakes, unless they can find a wall to hide in," and she pointed to the astrologer slinking back into the shadow. "No one knows anything save me, to whom Amen gives wisdom with sight of the future, and what I know I keep. Were it otherwise, O Abi, I could tell you things that would turn your grey hair white, and to Kaku and Merytra the spy, promise rewards that would make the torture-chamber seem a bed of down. But it is not lawful, nor would they sound pleasant in this bridal hour."

Now while Kaku between his chattering teeth muttered the words of Protection in the shadow, Abi and his courtiers stared at this terrible queen as boys seeking wild fowls' eggs in the reeds, and stumbling on a lion, stare ere they fly. Twice, indeed, the Prince turned looking towards the door and the pleasant light without, for it seemed to him that he was entering on a dark and doubtful road. Then he said:

"Your words, O Queen, cut like a two-edged sword, and methinks they leave a poison in the wound. Say now, if you are human, how it comes about that after seven days of want your flesh is not minished nor has your beauty waned. Say also who brought to you those glorious robes you wear here in this empty temple, and where is your foster-mother, Asti?"

"The gods fed me," answered the Queen gently, "and brought me these robes that I might seem the more worthy of you, O Prince. And as for Asti, I sent her to Cyprus to fetch a scent they make there and nowhere else. No, I forgot, it was yesterday she went to bring the scent from Cyprus that now is on my hair; to-day she is in Thebes, seeing to a business of mine. That is no secret, I will tell it you--it is as to the carving of all the history of his murder and betrayal in the first chamber of the Pharaoh's tomb."

Now at these magical and ill-omened words the courage of the company left them, so that they began to walk backwards towards the door, Abi going with them.

"What!" cried the Queen in a voice of sorrow that yet seemed laden with mockery. "Would you leave me here alone? Do my power and my wisdom frighten you? Alas! I cannot help them, for when the full vase is tilted the wine will run out, and when light is set behind alabaster, then the white stone must shine. Yet am I one meet to adorn the palace of the King, even such a king as you shall be, O Abi, whom Osiris loves. See, now, I will dance and sing to you as once I sang to the Prince of Kesh before the sword of Rames took away his life, so that you may judge of me, Abi, you, who have looked upon so many lovely women."

As she spoke, very slowly, so slowly that they could scarcely see her move, she glided from the throne, and standing before them, began to move her feet and body, and to chant a song.

What were the words of that song none could ever remember, but to every man there present it opened a door in his heart, and brought back the knowledge of youth. She whom he had loved best danced before him, her tender hands caressed him; the words she sang were sighs which the dead had whispered in his ears. Even to Abi, old, unwieldy and steeped in cunning, these soft visions came, although it is true that it seemed to him that this lovely singer led him to a precipice, and that when she ceased her song and appeared to vanish, to seek her he leapt into the clouds that rushed beneath.

Now the dance was done, and the last echoes of the music died away against the ancient walls whence the images of Sekhet the cat-headed

watched them with her cruel smile of vengeance. The dance was done, and the beautiful dancer stood before them unflushed, unheated, but laughing gently.

"Now go, divine Prince," she said, "and you his followers, go, all of you, and leave me to my lonely house, until Pharaoh sends for me to share that new realm which he inherits beyond the West."

But they would not go and could not if they would, for some power bound them to her, while, as for Abi he scarce could take his eyes from her, but heedless of who heard them, babbled out his passion at her feet, while the rest glowered on him jealously. She listened always smiling that same smile that was so sweet, yet so inhuman. Then when he stopped exhausted, at last she spoke, saying:

"What! do you love now more greatly than you fear, as the divine Prince of Kesh loved after Amen's Star had sung to him. May your fate be happier, O noble Abi, but that, since it is not lawful that I should tell it to you, you shall discover. Abi, there shall be a royal marriage in Memphis of such joy and feasting as has not been known in the history of the Northern or the Southern Land, and for your allotted span you shall sit by the side of Egypt's Queen and shine in her light. Have you not earned the place by right of blood, O conqueror of Pharaoh, and did not Pharaoh promise it to you in your sleep? Come, the sun of this new day shines, let us walk in it, and bid farewell to shadows."