

CHAPTER XII

THE ROYAL MARRIAGE

A strange rumour ran through Memphis. It was said that the Queen had yielded; it was said that she would marry the Prince Abi, that she was already at the great White House waiting to be made a bride. Men wrangled about in the streets. They swore that it could not be true, for would this high lady, the anointed Pharaoh of Egypt, take her father's murderer, and her own uncle to husband? Would she not rather die in her prison tower on which night by night they had seen her stand and sing? In their hearts they thought that she should die, for thus they had summed her up, this pure, high-hearted daughter of Amen, whom Fate had caught in an evil net. Yes, being men they held that she ought to die, and leave a story in the world, whereof Egypt could be proud for ever.

But their wives and daughters mocked at them. After all she was but a woman, they argued, and was it likely that she would throw aside the pomp of rule and the prospect of long years in order to steal away into the shadows of a forgotten tomb? Henceforth, it was true, she must take second place, for Abi would be a stern master to her. Still, any place was better than a funeral barge. She had felt the pinch of hunger yonder in that old temple; her fierce spirit had been tamed; she had kissed the rod, and after long years of waiting, Abi would be Pharaoh in Egypt.

The dispute grew hot, for even those men who rebelled against her, in

their hearts had set her high, and grieved to think of her, the divine Lady, bowing her neck to the common yoke of circumstance, and selling herself for safety, and a seat on the steps of her own throne. But the women mocked on, and showed them that as they had always said, she was no better than others of her sex.

Presently the matter was settled, for heralds appeared crying throughout the city that the marriage would take place in the great hall of the White House one hour before sundown. Then the women laughed in triumph, and the men were silent.

It was the appointed hour, and that hall was filled to overflowing by all who could gain entrance there. Between the towering obelisks that stood on either side the open cedar doors, folk hung upon its steps like hiving bees; the vast square without and all the streets that led to it were black with them. Here, it is true, they could see nothing, still they fought for the merest foothold, and some of those who fell never rose again. At the head of the hall were set two thrones, the greater and the richer throne for Abi the Prince, the lesser throne for Neter-Tua the Queen. He had arranged it thus since Kaku the cunning pointed out to him that from the first he should show the people that it was he who ruled, and not Pharaoh's daughter.

It was the appointed hour, and at some signal from every temple top rang out the blare of trumpets. Thrice they sounded, and echoed into silence in that hot, still air, thus announcing that in the temple of Hathor,

and the presence of the priests of all the gods, the hands of Abi and Neter-Tua had been joined in marriage.

Another rumour began to run among the crowd; like the ring set circling by a stone in water it spread from mouth to mouth, ever widening as it went.

Marvels had happened in the temple of Hathor, that was the rumour. Moreover it gave details: that the High-Priest had handed to the bride the accustomed lotus-bud, the flower of the goddess, and lo! it opened in her hand. Also, it was said, that presently the stem of it turned to a sceptre of gold, and the cup of the bloom to sapphire stones more perfect far than any from the desert mines.

Nor was this all, so went the tale, for when, as he must, the bridegroom Abi offered the white dove to Hathor in her shrine, a hawk swept through the doorway and smote it in his very hand. Yes, there in the gloom of the shrine smote it and left it dead, blood running from its beak and breast, dead upon the knees of the goddess; left it and was gone again!

Now what hawk, asked the people of each other, dare such a deed as this, unless in truth it was sent by the hawk-headed Horus, the son of Amen-Ra.

Soon these matters were forgotten for the moment, since now it was known that the royal pair were entering the great White Hall, there to show

themselves to the people, and receive the homage of the nobles, chiefs, and captains. First, advancing by the covered way which led from the temple of Hathor, appeared the priests in their robes, chanting as they walked, followed by the masters of ceremonies, butlers, and heralds. Next, surrounded by his officers and guard, came the Prince Abi himself, accompanied by his vizier, Kaku, he whose magic was said to have brought Pharaoh to his end.

Not all his pomp nor the splendour of his apparel, whereof the whiteness, as many noted, was spotted with ill-omened blood, nor even the royal crown which now, for the first time, was set upon his huge, round head, could hide from those who watched that this bridegroom was ill at ease. Even as he stood there, bowing in answer to the obsequious shouts of the multitude, the sceptre in his fat hand shook, and his red lips blanched and trembled. Still he smiled and bowed on, till at length the shouting died away, and quiet fell upon the place.

Abi was forgotten, they waited the coming of the Queen, and though no herald called her advent, yet every heart of all those thousands felt that she drew near to them. Look! Yonder she stood. They had watched closely enough, yet none saw her come, doubtless because the shadows were thick. But there she stood, quite alone upon the edge of the dais in front of the two thrones, and, oh! she was different from what they had expected. Thus now she wore no gorgeous robes, but only a simple garment of purest white, cut low upon her bosom, where the red rays of the sinking sun, striking up the hall, revealed to every eye that dark

mole shaped like the Cross of Life, which was her wondrous birthmark. But two ornaments adorned her, the double snakes of royalty, golden with red eyes, set in front of her tall white head-dress, which none but she might wear, the crowns of Upper and of Lower Egypt, and of all the subject lands, and in her hand a sceptre fashioned of gold, and surmounted by a lotus-bloom of sapphire, that sceptre of which rumour had told the magic tale.

Yes, she was different. They had thought to see a woman weak and pale, her eyes still red with grief, her face still stained with tears, one who had been tamed by misfortune, hunger, and the fear of death, whence she had bought herself by marriage with her conqueror. But it was not so, for never had the Star of Amen shone half so beautiful, never had they seen such majesty in those deep blue eyes that looked them through and through as though they read the secret heart of every one of them. Her tall and lovely form had not wasted, her cheeks were red with the glow of health; power and dignity flowed from her presence, fear seemed beneath her feet.

Now no voice was lifted up; they stared at her, and, smiling a little, she answered them with her calm eyes till their heads sank beneath her gaze. Then at length in the midst of that dead, oppressive silence which none dared to break, she turned, and they heard the sweep of her silken robe upon the alabaster floor.

With an effort two chamberlains stepped forward, their wands of office

in their hands, to lead her to her seat, but she waved them back, and said in her clear voice:

"Nay, here I am alone; of all the millions who serve her, not one is left to lead Amen's daughter and Egypt's Queen to her rightful place. Therefore she takes it of her own strength, now and for evermore."

Then very slowly, still in the midst of silence, she mounted the greater throne that had been prepared for Abi, and there seated herself and waited.

Now murmuring rose among the courtiers and Kaku whispered into Abi's ear, while the multitude held its breath. Abi stamped his foot and issued orders which all seemed to fear to execute. At length he stepped forward, addressing the Queen in a hoarse voice.

"Lady," he said, "doubtless you know it not, but that place is mine; your seat is on my left. Be pleased to take it."

"Why so, Prince Abi?" she asked quietly.

"Lady," he answered, "because the husband takes precedence of the wife, and," he added with savage meaning, "the conqueror of the conquered."

"The conqueror of the conquered?" she repeated after him in a musing voice. "Should you not have said--the murderer of the murdered and his

seed? Nay, Prince Abi, you are wrong. The sovereign of Egypt by right divine, takes precedence of her vassal, even though it has pleased the gods, whose will she has come to execute, to command her to give to him the name of husband until that will is more fully known. Come now and do homage to your Queen, and after you those slaves of yours who dared to lift the sword against her."

Then a great tumult arose, a tumult of rage and of dismay, for well nigh all in that vast place were partners in this crime, and knew that if Neter-Tua prevailed death yawned wide for them.

They shouted to Abi to take no heed of her. They shouted to him to tear her from the throne, to kill her, and seize the crown. They drew their swords and raged like an angry sea. Those who were loyal among them to Pharaoh's House, and those who feared turmoil, began to work their way backwards, and slipped by twos and threes out of the great open doors, till Tua had no friend left in all that hall. But ever as they went, others of the turbulent and the rebellious who had been concerned in the slaughter of Pharaoh's guard, took their place, pouring in from the mob without.

Wild desert-dwellers of the Bedouin tribes, who for thousands of years had been the bitter enemies of Egypt; descendants of the Hyksos, whose forefathers had ruled the land for a dozen generations, and at last been driven out; those Hyksos whose blood ran in Abi's veins, and who looked to him to lift them up again; evil-doers who had sought shelter in his

regiments; hook-nosed Semites from the Lebanon; black, barbarian savages from the shores of Punt--with such as these was that hall filled.

Abi was the hope of every one of them; to him they looked for the spoils of Egypt, and before them on Abi's throne they saw a woman who stood between them and their ends, who in her ancient pride dared to demand that he, her husband, should do homage to her, and who to-morrow, if she conquered, would give them to the sword.

"Tear her to pieces!" they screamed, "the bastard whom childless Pharaoh palmed off upon the land! She is a sorceress who keeps fat on air--an evil spirit. Away with her! Or if you fear, then let us come!"

At length they had roared themselves hoarse; at length they grew still. Then Abi, who all this while had stood there hesitating, and now and again turning to hearken to Kaku who whispered in his ear, looked up at Tua and spoke.

"You see and you hear, Queen," he said. "My people mistrust you, and they are a rough people, I cannot hold them back for long. If once they get at you, very soon that sweet body of yours will be in more fragments than was Osiris after Set had handled him."

Now Tua, who hitherto had sat still and indifferent, like one who takes no heed, seemed to awake, and answered:

"A bad example, Prince, for Osiris rose again, did he not?" Then she leaned back and once more was silent.

"Do you still desire that I should do homage to you, Queen, I, your husband?" he asked presently.

"Why not?" she replied. "I have spoken. A decree of Pharaoh may not be changed, and though a woman, I am--Pharaoh."

Now Abi went white with rage, and turned to his guard to bid them drag her from the throne. But she who was watching him, suddenly lifted her sceptre and spoke in a new voice, a clear, strong voice that rang through the hall, and even reached those who were gathered on the steps without.

"There is a question between you and me, O People," she said, "and it is this--Shall I, your Queen, rule in Egypt, as my fathers ruled, or shall yonder man rule whom by the decree of Amen I have taken for husband? Now you who for the most part have the Hyksos blood running in your veins, as he has, desire that he should rule, and you have slain the good god, my father, and would make Abi king over you, and see me his handmaid, one to give him children of my royal race, no more. See, you are a multitude and my legions are far away, and I--I am alone, one lamb among the jackals, thousands and thousands of jackals who for a long while have been hungry. How, then, shall I match myself against you?"

"You cannot," shouted a wild-eyed spokesman. "Come down, lamb, and kneel before the lion, Abi, or we, the jackals, will rend you. We will not acknowledge you, we who are of the fierce Hyksos blood. While the obelisks stand that were set up by the great Hyksos Pharaoh whose descendant was Abi's mother, while the obelisks stand that are set there for all eternity, we will not acknowledge you. Come down and take your place in our lord's harem, O Pharaoh's bastard daughter."

"Ah!" Tua repeated after him, "while the obelisks stand that the Hyksos thief set up you will not acknowledge me, Pharaoh's bastard daughter!"

Then she paused and seemed to grow disturbed; she sighed, wrung her hands a little, and said in a choking voice:

"I am but one woman alone among you. My father, Pharaoh, is dead, and you bid me lay down my rank and henceforth rule only through him who trapped Pharaoh and brought him to his end. What, then, can I do?"

"Be a good maid and obey your husband, Bastard," mocked a voice, and during the roar of laughter that followed Tua looked at the speaker, an officer of Abi's, who had taken a great part in the slaughter of their escort.

Very strangely she looked at him, and those who stood by the man noted that his lips became white, and that he turned so faint that had it not been for the press about him he would have fallen. Presently he seemed

to recover, and asked the priests who were near to let him join their circle, as among the outer throng the heat was too great for him to bear. Thereon one of them nodded and made room for him, and he passed in, which Tua noted also.

Now she was speaking again.

"Ill names to throw at Egypt's anointed queen, crowned and accepted by the god himself in the sanctuary of his most holy temple," she said, her eyes still resting on the brutal soldier. "Yet it is your hour, and she must bear them who has no friends in Memphis. Oh! what shall I do?" and again she wrung her hands. "Good People, it was sworn to me that Amen, greatest of the gods, set his spirit within me when I was born, and vowed that he would help me in the hour of my need. Of your grace, then, give me space to pray to Amen. Look," and she pointed before her, "yonder sinks the red ball of the sun; soon, soon it will be gone--give me until it enters the gateways of the West to pray to Amen, and then if no help comes I will bow me to your bidding, and do homage to this noble Prince of the Hyksos blood, who snared Pharaoh his brother, and by help of his magicians and of his spy, Merytra, brought him to his end."

"Yes, my people, give her the space she asks," called Abi, who feared nothing from Amen, a somewhat remote personage, and was afraid lest some tumult should happen in the course of which this lovely, new-made wife of his might be slain or injured.

So they gave her the space of time she asked. Standing up, Tua raised her arms and eyes towards heaven, and began to pray aloud:

"Hear me, Amen my Father, in the House of thy Rest, as thou hast sworn to do. O Amen my Father, thou seest my strait. Is it thy will that thy daughter should degrade herself and thee before this man who slew his king and brother, to whom thou hast commanded her to give the name of husband? If it be so, I will obey; but if it be not so, then show thy word by might or marvel, and cause him and his folk who mock my majesty and name me bastard, to bow down before me. O Amen, they deny thee in their hearts who worship other gods, as did the barbarians who begat them and threw down thy shrines in Egypt, but I know that thou sentest me forth, and in thee I put my trust, aye, even if thou slay me. Amen my Father, yonder sinks that glory in which thou dost hide thy spirit. Now, ere it be gone and night falls upon the world, declare thyself in such fashion that all men may know that indeed I am thy child; or if this be thy decree, desert me and Egypt, and leave me to my shame."

She ended her prayer and, sinking back upon the throne, rested her chin upon her hand, and gazed steadily upon the splendour of the sinking sun. Nor did she gaze alone, for every man in that vast hall turned himself about, and stared at its departing glory. There in the red light they stood, and stared, and since the place was open to the sky, the shadows of the two towering obelisks without fell on them like the shadows of swords whereof the points met together at the foot of Tua's throne. They did not believe that anything would happen, no, not even the priests

believed it who here at Memphis, the city of Ptah, thought little of Amen, the god of Thebes. They thought that this piteous prayer was but a last cry of dying faith wrung from a proud and fallen woman in her wretchedness.

And yet, and yet they stared, for she had spoken with a strange certainty like one who knew the god, and was she not named Star of Amen, and were there not wondrous tales as to her birth, and had not a lotus-bloom seemed to turn to gold and jewels in the hand of this young, anointed Queen who bore the Cross of Life upon her breast? No, nothing would happen, but still they stared.

It was a very strange sunset. For days the heat had been great, but now it was fearful, also a marvellous stillness reigned in heaven and earth. Nothing seemed to stir in all the city, no dog barked, no child cried, no leaf quivered upon the tall palms; it might have been a city of the dead.

Dense clouds arose upon the sky, and moved, though no wind blew. Where the sun's rays touched them they were gold and red and purple, but above these of an inky blackness. They took strange shapes those clouds, and marshalled themselves like a host gathering for battle. There were the commanders moving quickly to and fro; there the chariots, and there the sullen lines of footmen with their gleaming spears. Now one cloud higher than the rest seemed to shoot itself across the arch of heaven, and its fashion was that of a woman with outspread hair of gold. Her feet stood

upon the sun, her body bent itself athwart the sky, and upon the far horizon in the east her hands held the pale globe of the rising moon.

The watchers were frightened at this cloud. "It is Isis with the moon in her arms," said one. "Nay, it is the mother goddess Nout brooding upon the world," answered another. And though they only spoke softly, in that awful silence their voices reached Tua on the throne, and for the first time her face changed, for on it came a cold, curious smile.

Kaku began to whisper into Abi's ear, and there was fear in the eyes of both of them. He pointed with his finger at two stars, which of a sudden shone out through the green haze above the sunset glow, and then turned and looked at the Queen, urging his master eagerly. At last Abi spoke.

"Ra is set," he said. "Come, let us make an end of all this folly."

"Not yet," answered Tua quietly, "not yet awhile."

As she said the words, of a sudden, as though at a given signal, all the long lines of palm trees that grew in the rich gardens upon the river banks were seen to bow themselves towards the east, as though they did obeisance to the Queen upon her throne. Thrice they bowed thus, without a wind, and then were straight and still once more. Next the clouds rushed together as though a black pall had been drawn across the heavens, only in the west the half-hidden globe of the sun shone on through an opening in them, shone like a great and furious eye. By slow

degrees it sank, till nothing was left save a little rim of fire. All the hall grew dark, and through the darkness Neter-Tua could be heard calling on the name of Amen.

"Ra is dead!" shouted a voice. "Have done, Bastard, Ra is dead!"

"Aye," she answered in a cold triumphant cry, "but Amen lives. Behold his sword, ye Traitors!"

As the words left her lips the heavens were cleft in twain by a fearful flash of lightning, and in it the people saw that once again the palm-trees bowed themselves, this time almost to the ground. Then with a roar the winds were loosed, and beneath their feet the solid earth began to heave as though a giant lifted it. Thrice it heaved like a heaving wave, and the third time through the thick cover of the darkness there rose a shriek of terror and of agony followed by the awful crash of falling stones.

Now the whole sky seemed to melt in fire, and in that fierce light was seen Tua, Star of Amen, seated on her throne, holding her sceptre to the heavens, and laughing in triumphant merriment. Well might she laugh, for the two great obelisks without the gate that the old Hyksos lion had set up there to stand "to all eternity," had fallen across the low pylons and the doors and crushed them. On to the heads of those who watched beneath they had fallen, shattering in their fall and carrying death to hundreds. Beneath the electrum cap of one of them that had been hurled

from it in its descent right into the circle of the priests, lay a shapeless mass. It was that man who had mocked the Queen and turned faint beneath her gaze.

Through the western ruin of the hall those who were left alive within it fled out, a maddened mob, trampling each other to death by scores, fighting furiously to escape the vengeance of Amen and his daughter. Within the enclosure the priests lay prostrate on their faces, each praying to his god for mercy. In front of the throne, upon his knees, the royal crown shaken from his head, Abi grasped the feet of Neter-Tua and screamed to her to forgive and spare him, whilst above, shining like fire, That which sat upon the throne pointed with her sceptre at the ruin and the rout, and laughed and laughed again.

Soon all were gone save the mumbling priests, the dying, the dead, and Abi with his officers.

The clouds rolled off, the moon and the stars shone out, filling the place with gentle light. Then Tua spoke, looking down at the wretched Abi who grovelled before her.

"Say, now, Husband," she asked, "who is god in Egypt?"

"Amen your father," he gasped.

"And who is Pharaoh in Egypt?"

"You, and no other, O Queen."

"Ah!" she said, "it was over that matter that we quarrelled, did we not? which forced me, whom you thought so helpless, to find helpers. Look, there are their footsteps; they walk heavily, do they not, my Uncle?" and she nodded towards the huge fragments of the broken obelisks.

He glanced behind him at his ruined hall, at the dying and the dead.

"You are Pharaoh and no other," he repeated with a shudder. "Give breath to your servant, and let him live on in your shadow."

"The first is not mine to give," she answered coldly, "though perchance it may please Amen to hold you back a little while from that place where you must settle your account with him who went before me, and his companions who died in your streets. I hope so, for you have work to do. As for the second--arise, you Priests and Officers, and see this Prince of yours do homage to the Queen of Egypt."

They rose, and clung to each other trembling, for all the heart was out of them. Then she pointed to her foot with the sceptre in her hand, and in their presence Abi knelt down and kissed her sandal. After him followed the others, the priests, the captains, the head-stewards, and the butlers, till at length came Kaku, the astrologer, who prostrated himself before her, trembling in every limb. But him she would not suffer even to touch her sandals.

"Tell me," she said, drawing back her foot, "you who are a magician, and have studied the secret writings, how does it chance that you still live on, when for lesser crimes so many lie here dead, you who are stained with the blood of Pharaoh?"

Hearing these words from which he presaged the very worst, Kaku beat his head upon the ground, babbling denials of this awful crime, and at the same time began to implore pardon for what he said he had not committed.

"Cease," she exclaimed, "and learn that your life is spared for a while, yes, and even Merytra's. Also you will retain your office of Vizier--for a while."

Now he began to pour out thanks, but she stopped him, saying:

"Thank me not, seeing that you do not know the end of this matter. Perchance it is hidden from you lest you should go mad, you and your wife, Merytra, she who was the Pharaoh's Lady of the Footstool, and sang him to sleep. Look at me, Wizard, and tell me, who am I?" and she bent down over him.

He glanced up at her, and their eyes met, nor could he turn his head away again.

"Come," she said, "as you may have learned to-night, I also have some

knowledge of the hidden things. For otherwise, why did the earth shake and the everlasting pillars fall at my bidding? Now, between two of a trade there should be no secrets, so I will tell you something that perhaps you have already guessed, since I am sure that you will not repeat it even to your master or to Merytra. For I will add this--that the moment you repeat it will be the moment of your death, and the beginning of that punishment which here I withhold. Now, in the Name of the Eater-up of Souls, listen to me, O fashioner of waxen images!" and, bending down, she whispered into his ear.

Another instant, and, stark horror written on his face, the tall shape of Kaku was seen reeling backward, like to a drunken man. Indeed, had not Abi caught him he would have fallen over the edge of the dais.

"What did she tell you?" he muttered, for the Queen, who seemed to have forgotten all about him, was looking the other way.

But, making no answer, Kaku wrenched himself free and fled the place.