

CHAPTER XIII

ABI LEARNS THE TRUTH

A moon had gone by, and on the first day of the new month Kaku the Vizier sat in the Hall of the Great Officers at Memphis, checking the public accounts of the city. It was not easy work, for during the past ten days twice these accounts had been sent back to him by the command of the Queen, or the Pharaoh as she called herself, with requests for information as to their items, and other awkward queries. Abi had overlooked such matters, recognising that a faithful servant was worthy of his hire--provided that he paid himself. But now it seemed that things were different, and that the amount received was the exact amount that had to be handed over to the Crown, neither more nor less. Well, there was a large discrepancy which must be made up from somewhere, or, in other words, from Kaku's private store.

In a rage he caused the two head collectors of taxes to be brought before him, and as they would not pay, bade the executioners throw them down and beat them on the feet until they promised to produce the missing sums, most of which he himself had stolen.

Then, somewhat soothed, he retired from the hall into his own office, to find himself face to face with Abi, who was waiting for him. So changed was the Prince from his old, portly self, so aged and thin and miserable did he look, that in the dusk of that chamber Kaku failed to recognise

him. Thinking that he was some suppliant, he began to revile him and order him to be gone. Then the fury of Abi broke out.

Rushing at him, he seized the astrologer by the beard and smote him on the ears, saying: "Dog, is it thus that you speak to your king? Well, on you at least I can revenge myself."

"Pardon, your Majesty," said Kaku, "I did not know you in these shadows. Your Majesty is changed of late."

"Changed!" said Abi, letting him go. "Who would not be changed who suffers as I do ever since I listened to your cursed counsel, and tried to climb into the seat of Pharaoh? Before that I was happy. I had my sons, I had my wives, as many as I wished. I had my revenues and armies. Now everything has gone. My sons are dead, my women are driven away, my revenues are taken from me, my armies serve another."

"At least," suggested Kaku, "you are Pharaoh, and the husband of the most beautiful and the wisest woman in the world."

"Pharaoh!" groaned Abi. "The humblest mummy in the common city vaults is a greater king than I am, and as for the rest----" and he stopped and groaned again.

"What is the matter with your Majesty?" asked Kaku.

"The matter is that I have fallen under the influence of an evil planet."

"The Star of Amen," suggested the astrologer.

"Yes, the Star of Amen, that lovely Terror whom you call my wife. Man, she is no wife to me. Listen--there in the harem I went into the chamber where she was, none forbidding me, and found her sitting before her mirror and singing, clothed only in a thin robe of white, and her dark hair--O Kaku, never did you see such hair--which fell almost to the ground. She smiled on me, she spoke me fair, she drew me with those glittering eyes of hers--yes, she even called me husband, and sighed and talked of love, till at length I drew near to her and threw my arms about her."

"And then----"

"And then, Kaku, she was gone, and where her sweet face should have been I saw the yellow, mummied head of Pharaoh, he who is with Osiris, that seemed to grin at me. I opened my arms again, and lo! there she sat, laughing and shaking perfume from her hair, asking me, too, what ailed me that I turned so white, and if such were the way of husbands?"

"Well, that was nigh a month ago, and as it began, so it has gone on. I seek my wife, and I find the mummied head of Pharaoh, and all the while she mocks me. Nor may I see the others any more, for she has caused them

to be hunted hence, even those who have dwelt with me for years, saying that she must rule alone."

"Is that all?" asked Kaku.

"No, indeed, for as she torments me, so she torments every other man who comes near to her. She nets them with smiles, she bewitches them with her eyes till they go mad for love of her, and then, still smiling, she sends them about their business. Already two of them who were leaders in the great plot have died by their own hands, and another is mad, while the rest have become my secret but my bitter foes, because they love my Queen and think that I stand between her and them."

"Is that all?" asked Kaku again.

"No, not all, for my power is taken from me. I who was great, after Pharaoh the greatest in all the land, now am but a slave. From morning to night I must work at tasks I hate; I must build temples to Amen, I must dig canals, I must truckle to the common herd, and redress their grievances and remit their taxes. More, I must chastise the Bedouin who have ever been my friends, and--next month undertake a war against that King of Khita, with whom I made a secret treaty, and whose daughter that I married has been sent back to him because I loved her."

"And then?" asked Kaku.

"Oh! then when the Khita have been destroyed and made subject to Egypt, then her Majesty purposes to return in state to Thebes 'to attend to the fashioning of my sepulchre' since, so she says, this is a matter that will not bear delay. Indeed, already she makes drawings for it, horrible and mystic drawings that I cannot understand, and brings them to me to see. Moreover, Friend, know this, out of it opens another smaller tomb for you. Indeed, but this morning she sent an expedition to the desert quarries to bring thence three blocks of stone, one for my sarcophagus, one for yours, and one for that of your wife, Merytra. For she says that after the old fashion she purposes to honour both of you with these gifts."

At these words Kaku could no longer control himself, but began to walk up and down the room, muttering and snatching at his beard.

"How can you suffer it?" he said at length, "You who were a great prince, to become a woman's slave, to be made as dirt beneath her feet, to be held up to the mockery of those you rule, to see your wives and household driven away from you, to be tormented, to be mocked, to look on other men favoured before your eyes, to be threatened with early death. Oh! how can you suffer it? Why do you not kill her, and make an end?"

"Because," answered Abi, "because I dare not, since if I dreamed of such a thing she would guess my thought and kill me. Fool, do you not remember the fall of the eternal obelisks upon my captains, and what

befell that man who mocked her, calling her Bastard, and sought refuge among the priests? No, I dare not lift a finger against her."

"Then, Prince, you must carry your yoke until it wears through to the marrow, which will be when that sepulchre is ready."

"Not so," answered Abi, shivering, "for I have another plan; it is of it that I am come to speak with you. Friend Kaku, you must kill her. Listen: you are a master of spells. The magic which prevailed against the father will overcome the daughter also. You have but to make a waxen image or two and breathe strength into them, and the thing is done, and then--think of the reward."

"Indeed I am thinking, most noble Prince," replied the astrologer with sarcasm. "Shall I tell you of that reward? It would be my death by slow torture. Moreover, it is impossible, for if you would know the truth, she cannot be killed."

"What do you mean, Fool?" asked Abi angrily. "Flesh and blood must bow to death."

A sickly smile spread itself over Kaku's thin face as he answered:

"A saying worthy of your wisdom, Prince. Certainly the experience of mankind is that flesh and blood must bow to death. Yes, yes, flesh and blood!"

"Cease grinning at me, you ape of the rocks," hissed the enraged Abi, "or I will prove as much on your mocking throat," and snatching out his sword he threatened him with it, adding: "Now tell me what you mean, or----"

"Prince," ejaculated Kaku, falling to his knees, "I may not, I cannot. Spare me, it is a secret of the gods."

"Then get you gone to the gods, you lying cur, and talk it over with them," answered Abi, lifting the sword, "for at least she will not blame me if I send you there."

"Mercy, mercy!" gasped Kaku, sprawling on the ground, while his lord held the sword above his bald head, thinking that he would choose speech rather than death.

It was at this moment, while the astrologer's fate trembled in the balance, that a sound of voices reached their ears, and above them the ring of a light, clear laugh which they knew well. Forgetting his purpose, Abi stepped to the window-place, and looked through the opening of the shutters. Presently he turned, beckoning to Kaku, and whispered:

"Come and look; there is always time for you to die."

The Vizier heard, and, creeping on his hands and knees to the

window-place, raised himself and peeped through the shutter. This was what he saw. In the walled garden below, the secret garden of the palace, stood the queen Neter-Tua, and the sunlight piercing through the boughs of a flowering tree, fell in bright bars upon her beauty. She was not alone, for before her knelt a man wearing the rich robes of a noble. Kaku knew him at once, for although still young, he was Abi's favourite captain, an officer whom he loved, and had raised to high place because of his wit and valour, having given him one of his daughters in marriage. Also he had played a chief part in the great plot against Pharaoh, and it was he who had dealt the death-blow to Mermes, the husband of the lady Asti.

Now he was playing another part, namely that of lover to the Queen, for he clasped the hem of her robe in his hands, and kissed it with his lips, and pleaded with her passionately. They could catch some of his words.

He had risked his life to climb the wall. He worshipped her. He could not live without her. He was ready to do her bidding in all things--to gather a band and slay Abi; it would be easy, for every man was jealous of the Prince, and thought him quite unworthy of her. Let her give him her love, and he would make her sole Pharaoh of Egypt again, and be content to serve her as a slave. At least let her say one kind word to him.

Thus he spoke, wildly, imploringly, like a man that is drunk with

passion and knows not what he says or does, while Neter-Tua listened calmly, and now and again laughed that light, low laugh of hers.

At length he rose and strove to take her hand, but, still laughing, she waved him back, then said suddenly:

"You slew Mermes when he was weak with wounds, did you not, and he was my foster-father. Well, well, it was done in war, and you must be a brave man, as brave as you are handsome, for otherwise you would scarcely have ventured here where a word of mine would give you to your death. And now get you gone, Friend, back to my Lord's daughter who is your wife, and if you dare--tell her where you have been and why, you who are so brave a man," and once more she laughed.

Again he began his passionate implorings, begging for some token, till at length she seemed to melt and take pity on him, for stretching out her hand, she chose a flower from the many that grew near, and gave it to him, then pointed to the trees that hid the wall, among which presently he vanished, reeling in the delirium of his joy.

She watched him go, smiling very strangely, then, still smiling, looked down at the bush whence she had plucked the flower, and Kaku noted that it was one used only by the embalmers to furnish coronals for the dead.

But Abi noted no such thing. Forgetting his quarrel with Kaku and all else, he gasped, and foamed in his jealous rage, muttering that he would

kill that captain, yes, and the false Queen, too, who dared to listen to a tale of love and give the lover flowers. Yes, were she ten times Pharaoh he would kill her, as he had the right to do, and, the naked sword still in his hand, he turned to leave the place.

"If that is your will, Lord," said Kaku in a strained voice, "bide here."

"Why, man?" asked Abi.

"Because her Majesty comes," he answered, "and this chamber is quiet and fitting. None enter it save myself."

As he spoke the words the door opened, and closed again, and before them stood Neter-Tua, Star of Amen.

In the dusk of that room the first thing that seemed to catch her eye was the bared blade in Abi's hand. For a moment she looked at it and him, also at Kaku crouching in the corner, then asked in her quiet voice:

"Why is your sword drawn, O Husband?"

"To kill you, O Wife," he answered furiously, for his rage mastered him.

She continued to look at him a little while and said, smiling in her

strange fashion:

"Indeed? But why more now than at any other time? Has Kaku's counsel given you courage?"

"Need you ask, shameless woman? Does not this window-place open on to yonder garden?"

"Oh! I remember, that captain of yours--he who slew Mermes, your daughter's husband who made love to me--so well that I rewarded him with a funeral flower, knowing that you watched us. Settle your account with him as you and his wife may wish; it is no matter of mine. But I warn you that if you would take men's lives for such a fault as this, soon you will have no servants left, since they all are sinners who desire to usurp your place."

Then Abi's fury broke out. He cursed and reviled her, he called her by ill names, swearing that she should die, who bewitched all men and was the love of none, and who made him a mock and a shame in the sight of Egypt. But Neter-Tua only listened until at length he raved himself to silence.

"You talk much and do little," she said at length. "The sword is in your hand, use it, I am here."

Maddened by her scorn he lifted the weapon and rushed at her, only to

reel back again as though he had been smitten by some power unseen. He rested against the wall, then again rushed and again reeled back.

"You are a poor butcher," she said at length, "after so many years of practice. Let Kaku yonder try. I think he has more skill in murder."

"Oh! your Majesty," broke in the astrologer, "unsay those cruel words, you who know that rather than lift hands against you I would die a thousand times."

"Yes," she answered gravely, "the Prince Abi suggested it to you but now, did he not, after you had suggested it to him, and you refused--for your own reasons?"

Then the sword fell from Abi's hand, and there was silence in that chamber.

"What were you talking of, Abi, before you peeped through the shutters and saw that captain of yours and me together in the garden, and why did you wish to kill this dog?" she went on presently. "Must I answer for you? You were talking of how you might be rid of me, and you wished to kill him because he did not dare to tell you why he could not do the deed, knowing that if he did so he must die. Well, since you desire to know, you shall learn, and now. Look on me, wretched Man, whom men name my husband. Look on me, accursed Slave, whom Amen has given into my hand to punish here upon the earth, until you pass to his yonder in the

Under-world."

He looked up, and Kaku looked also, because he could not help it, but what they saw they never told. Only they fell down upon their faces, both of them, and groaned; beating the floor with their foreheads.

At length the icy terror seemed to be lifted from their hearts, and they dared to glance up again, and saw that she was as she had been, a most royal and lovely woman, but no more.

"What are you?" gasped Abi. "The goddess Sekhet in the flesh, or Isis, Queen of Death, or but dead Tua's ghost sent here for vengeance?"

"All of them, or none of them, as you will, though, Man, it is true that I am sent here for vengeance. Ask the Wizard yonder. He knows, and I give him leave to say."

"She is the Double of Amen's daughter," moaned Kaku. "She is her Ka set free to bring doom upon those who would have wronged her. She is a ghost armed with the might of the gods, and all we who have sinned against dead Pharaoh and her and her father Amen are given into her hand to be tormented and brought to doom."

"Where, then, is Neter-Tua, who was Queen of Egypt?" gasped Abi, rolling his great eyes. "Is she with Osiris?"

"I will tell you, Man," answered the royal Shape. "She is not dead--she lives, and is gone to seek one she loves. When she returns with him and a certain Beggar, then I shall depart and you will die, both of you, for such is the punishment decreed upon you. Until then, arise and do my bidding."