

CHAPTER XIV

THE BOAT OF RA

Tua, Star of Amen, opened her eyes. For some time already she had lain as one lies between sleep and waking, and it seemed to her that she heard the sound of dipping oars, and of water that rippled gently against the sides of a ship. She thought to herself that she dreamed. Doubtless she was in her bed in the palace at Thebes, and presently, when it was light, her ladies would come to waken her.

In the palace at Thebes! Why, now she remembered that it was months since she had seen that royal city, she who had travelled far since then, and come at last to white-walled Memphis, where many terrible things had befallen her. One by one they came into her mind; the snare, Pharaoh's murder by magic, the battle, and the slaughter of her guards, the starvation in the tower, with death on one hand, and the hateful Abi on the other; the wondrous vision of that spirit who wore her face, and said she was the guardian Ka given to her at birth, the words it spoke, and her dread resolve; and last of all Asti and herself standing in the lofty window niche, then a flame of fire before her face, and that fearful downward rush.

Oh! without a doubt it was over; she was dead, and these dreams and memories were such as come to the dwellers in the Under-world. Only then why did she hear the sound of lapping water, and of dipping oars?

Very slowly she opened her eyes, for Tua greatly feared what she might see. Light flowed upon her, the light of the moon which hung in a clear sky like some great lamp of gold. By it she saw that, robed all in white, she lay upon a couch in a pavilion, whereof the silken curtains were drawn back in front, and tied to gilded posts. At her side, wrapped in a grey robe, lay another figure, which she knew for Asti. It was still, so still that she was sure it must be dead, yet she knew that this was Asti. Perchance Asti dreamed also, and could hear in her dreams; at least, she would speak to her.

"Asti," she whispered, "Asti, can you hear me?"

The grey figure at her side stirred, and the head turned towards her. Then the voice of Asti, none other, answered:

"Aye, Lady, I hear and see. But say, where are we now?"

"In the Under-world, I think, Asti. Oh! that fire was death, and now we journey to the Place of Souls."

"If so, Lady, it is strange that we should still have eyes and flesh and voices as mortal women have. Let us sit up and look."

So they sat up, their arms about each other, and peered through the open curtains. Behold! they were on a ship more beautiful than any they had

ever seen, for it seemed to be covered with gold and silver, while sweet odours floated from its hold. Their pavilion was set in the centre of the ship and looking aft, they perceived lines of white-clad rowers seated at their oars in the shadow of the bulwarks, and on the high stern--also robed in white--a tall steersman whose face was veiled, behind whom in the dim glimpses of the moon, they caught sight of a wide and silvery river, and on its distant banks palms and temple towers.

"It is the Boat of Ra," murmured Tua, "which bears us down the River of Death to the Kingdom behind the Sun."

Then she sank back upon her cushions, and once more fell into swoon or sleep.

Tua woke again, and lo! the sun was shining brightly, and at her side sat Asti watching her. Moreover, in front of them was set a table spread with delicate food.

"Tell me what has chanced, Nurse," she said faintly, "for I am bewildered, and know not in what world we wander."

"Our own, Queen, I think," answered Asti, "but in charge of those who are not of it, for surely this is no mortal boat, nor do mortals guide her to her port. Come, we need food. Let us eat while we may."

So they ate and drank heartily enough, and when they had finished even

dared to go out of the pavilion. Looking around them they saw that they stood upon a high deck in the midst of a great ship, but that this ship was enclosed with a net of silver cords in which they could find no opening. Looking through its meshes they noted that the oars were inboard, and the great purple sails set upon the mast, also that the rowers were gone, perchance to rest beneath the deck, while on the forecastle of the ship stood the captain, white-robed and masked, and aft the steersman, also still masked, so that they could see nothing of their faces. Now, too, they were no longer sailing on a river, but down a canal bordered by banks of sand on either side, beyond which stretched desert farther than the eye could reach.

Asti studied the desert, then turned and said:

"I think I know this canal, Lady, for once I sailed it as a child. I think it is that which was dug by the Pharaohs of old, and repaired after the fall of the Hyksos kings, and that it runs from Bubastis to that bay down which wanderers sail towards the rising sun."

"Mayhap," answered Tua. "At least, this is the world that bore us and no other, and by the mercy of Amen and the power of my Spirit we are still alive, and not dead, or so it seems. Call now to the captain on yonder deck; perhaps he will tell whither he bears us in his magic ship."

So Asti called, but the captain made no sign that he saw or heard her. Next she called to the steersman, but although his veiled face was

towards them, he also made no sign, so that at last they believed either that these were spirits or that they were men born deaf and dumb. In the end, growing weary of staring at this beautiful ship, at the canal and the desert beyond it, and of wondering where they were, and how they came thither, they returned to the pavilion to avoid the heat of the sun. Here they found that during their absence some hand unseen had arranged the silken bed-clothing on their couches and cleared away the fragments of their meal, resetting the beautiful table with other foods.

"Truly here is wizardry at work," said Tua, as she sank into a leather-seated ivory chair that was placed ready.

"Who doubts it?" answered Asti calmly. "By wizardry were you born; by wizardry was Pharaoh slain; by wizardry we are saved to an end that we cannot guess; by wizardry, or what men so name, does the whole world move; only being so near we see it not."

Tua thought a while, then said:

"Well, this golden ship is better than the sty of Abi the hog, nor do I believe that we journey to no purpose. Still I wonder what that spirit who named herself my Ka does on the throne of Egypt; also how we came on board this boat, and whither we sail."

"Wonder not, for all these things we shall learn in due season, and for my part, although I hate him I am sorry for Abi," answered Asti drily.

So they sat there in the pavilion watching the desert, over the sands of which their ship seemed to move, till at length the sun grew low, and they went to walk upon the deck. Then they returned to eat of the delicious food that was always provided for them in such plenty, and at nightfall sought their couches, and slept heavily, for they needed rest.

When they awoke again, it was daylight, though no sun shone through the skies, and their vessel rolled onward across a wide and sullen sea out of sight of land. Also the silken pavilion about them was gone, and replaced by a cabin of massive cedar wood, though of this, being sated with marvels, Tua and Asti took little note. Indeed, having neither of them been on an angry ocean before, a strange dizziness overcame them, which caused them to sleep much and think little for three whole days and nights.

At length, one evening as the sun sank, they perceived that the violent motion of the vessel had ceased with the roaring of the gale above, which for all this while had driven them onward at such fearful speed. Venturing from their cedar house, they saw that they had entered the mouth of a great river upon the banks of which grew enormous trees that sent out long crooked roots into the water, and that among these roots crouched crocodiles and other noisome reptiles. Also the white-robed oarsmen had appeared again, and, as there was no wind, rowed the ship up the river, till at length they came to a spit of sand which jutted out into the stream, and here cast anchor.

Now Tua's and Asti's desire for food returned to them, and they ate. Just as they had finished their meal, and the sun was sinking suddenly, there appeared before them two masked men, each of whom bore a basket in his hand. Asti began to question them, but like the captain and the steersman, they seemed to be deaf and dumb. At least they made no answer, only prostrated themselves humbly, and pointed towards the shore where now Tua saw a fire burning on a rock, though who had lit it she did not know.

"They mean us to leave the ship," said Asti. "Come, Queen, let us follow our fortunes, for doubtless these are high."

"As you will," answered Tua, "seeing that we should scarcely have been brought here to no end."

So they accompanied the men to the side of that splendid vessel, for now the netting that confined them had been removed, to find that a gangway had been laid from its bulwark to the shore. As they stepped on to this gangway their masked companions handed to each of them one of the baskets, then again bowed humbly and were gone. Soon they gained the bank, and scarcely had their feet touched it when the gangway was withdrawn, and the great oars began to beat the muddy water.

Round swung the ship, and for a minute hung in midstream. There stood the captain on the foredeck, and there was the steersman at the helm,

and the red light of the sinking sun turned them into figures of flame. Suddenly with a simultaneous motion these men tore off their masks so that for a moment Asti and Tua saw their faces--and behold! the face of the captain was the face of Pharaoh, Tua's father, and the face of the steersman was the face of Mermes, Asti's husband.

For one moment only did they see them, then a dark cloud hid the dying sun, and when it passed that ship was gone, whither they knew not.

The two women looked at each other, and for the first time were much afraid.

"Truly," said Tua, "we are haunted if ever mortals were, for yonder ship has ghosts for mariners."

"Aye, Lady," answered Asti, "so have I thought from the first. Still, take heart, for these ghosts once were men who loved us well, and doubtless they love us still. Be sure that for no ill purpose have we been snatched out of the hand of Abi, and brought living and unharmed by the shades of Pharaoh your sire, and Mermes my husband, to this secret shore. See, yonder burns a fire, let us go to it, and await what may befall bravely, knowing that at least it can be naught but good."

So they went to the rock and, darkness being come, sat themselves down by the fire, alongside of which lay wood for its replenishment, and near the wood soft robes of camel-hair to shield them from the cold.

These robes they put on with thankfulness, and, having fed the flame, bethought them of and opened the baskets which were given to them when they left the ship. The first basket, that which Asti held, they found to contain food, cakes, dried meats and dates, as much as one woman could carry. But the second, that which had been given to Tua, was otherwise provided, for in the mouth of it lay a lovely harp of ivory with golden strings, whereof the frame was fashioned to the shape of a woman. Tua drew it out and looked at it by the light of the fire.

"It is my own harp," she said in an awed voice, "the harp that the Prince of Kesh, whom Rames slew, brought as a gift to me, to the notes of which I sang the Song of the Lovers but just before the giver died. Yes, it is my own harp that I left in Thebes. Say, now, Nurse, how came it here?"

"How came we here?" answered Asti shortly. "Answer my question and I will answer yours."

Then, laying down the harp, Tua looked again into her basket and found that beneath a layer of dried papyrus leaves were hidden pearls, thousands of pearls of all sizes, and of such lustre and beauty as she had never seen. They were strung upon threads of silk, all those of a like size being set upon a single thread, except the very biggest, which were as great as a finger nail, or even larger, that lay wrapped up separately in cloth at the bottom of the basket.

"Surely," said Tua, amazed, "no Queen in all the earth ever had a dower of such priceless pearls. Moreover, what good they and the harp can be to us in this forest I may not guess."

"Doubtless we shall discover in due course," answered Asti; "meanwhile, let us thank the gods for their gifts and eat."

So they ate, and then, having nothing else to do, lay down by the fire and would have slept.

But scarcely had they closed their eyes when the forest seemed to awake. First from down by the river there came dreadful roarings which they knew must be the voice of lions, for there were tame beasts of this sort in the gardens at Thebes. Next they heard the whines and wimperings of wolves and jackals, and mingled with them great snortings such as are made by the rhinoceros and the river-horse.

Nearer, nearer came these awful sounds, till at length they saw yellow eyes moving like stars in the darkness at the edge of the forest, while cross the patch of sand beneath their rock galloped swift shapes which halted and sniffed towards them. Also on the river side of them appeared huge, hog-like beasts, with gleaming tusks, and red cavernous mouths, and beyond these again, crashing through the brushwood, a gigantic brute that bore a single horn upon its snout.

"Now our end is at hand," said Tua faintly, "for surely these creatures

will devour us."

But Asti only threw more wood upon the fire and waited, thinking that the flame would frighten them away. Yet it did not, for so curious, or so hungry were they, that the lions crept and crept nearer, and still more near, till at length they lay lashing their tails in the distance almost within springing distance of the rock, while on the farther side of these, like a court waiting on its monarch, gathered the hyenas and other beasts.

"They will spring presently," whispered Tua.

"Did the Spirits of the divine Pharaoh your father, and of Mermes my lord, bring us here in the Boat of Ra that we should be devoured by wild animals, like lost sheep in the desert?" asked Asti. Then, as though by an inspiration, she added, "Lady, take that harp of yours, and play and sing to it."

So Tua took the harp and swept its golden chords, and, lifting up her lovely voice, she began to sing. At first it trembled a little, but by degrees, as she forgot all save the music, it grew strong, and rang out sweetly in the silence of the forest, and the great, slow-moving river. And lo! as she sang thus, the wild brutes grew still, and seemed to listen as though they were charmed. Yes, even a snake wriggled out from between the rocks and listened, waving its crested head to and fro.

At length Tua ceased, and as the echoes died away the brutes, every one of them, turned and vanished into the forest or the river, all save the snake that coiled itself up and slept where it was. So stillness came again, and Tua and Asti slept also, nor did they wake until the sun was shining in the heavens.

Then they arose wondering, and went down over the patch of sand that was marked with the footprints of all the beasts to the river's brink, and drank and washed themselves, peering the while through the mists, for they thought that perchance they would see that golden ship with the veiled crew which had carried them from Memphis, returned and awaiting them in midstream.

But no ship was there; nothing was there except the river-horses which rose and sank, and the crocodiles on the mud-banks, and the wildfowl that flighted inward from the sea to feed. So they went back to the ashes of their fire and ate of the food in Asti's basket, and, when they had eaten, looked at each other, not knowing what to do. Then Tua said:

"Come, Nurse, let us be going. Up the river and down the river we cannot walk, for there are nothing but weeds and mud, so we must strike out through the forest, whither the gods may lead us."

Asti nodded, and, clad in the light warm clothes of camel-hair, they set the baskets upon their heads after the fashion of the peasant women of Egypt and started forward, the harp of ivory and of gold hanging upon

Tua's back.

For hour after hour they marched thus through the forest, threading their path between the big boles of the trees, and heading always for the south, for that way ran the woodland glades beyond which was dense bush. Great apes chattered above them in the tree tops, and now and again some beast of prey crossed their path and vanished in the underwood, but nothing else did they see. At length, towards midday, the ground began to rise, and the trees grew smaller and farther apart, till at last they reached the edge of a sandy desert, and walked out to a little oasis, where the green grass showed them they would find water. In this oasis there was a spring, and by the edge of it they sat down and drank, and ate of their store of food, and afterwards slept a while.

Suddenly Tua, in her sleep, heard a voice, and, awaking with a start, saw a man who stood near by, leaning on a thornwood staff and contemplating them. He was a very strange man, apparently of great age, for his long white hair fell down upon his shoulders, and his white beard reached to his middle. Once he must have been very tall, but now he was bent with age, and the bones of his gaunt frame thrust out his ragged garments. His dark eyes also were horny, indeed it seemed as though he could scarcely see with them, for he leaned forward to peer at their faces where they lay. His face was scored by a thousand wrinkles, and almost black with exposure to the sun and wind, but yet of a marvellous tenderness and beauty. Indeed, except that it was far more ancient, and the features were on a larger and a grander scale, it

reminded Tua of the face of Pharaoh after he was dead.

"My Father," said Tua, sitting up, for an impulse prompted her to name this wanderer thus, "say whence do you come, and what would you with your servants?"

"My Daughter," answered the old man in a sweet, grave voice, "I come from the wilderness which is my home. Long have I outlived all those of my generation, yes, and their children also. Therefore the wilderness and the forest that do not change are now my only friends, since they alone knew me when I was young. Be pitiful now to me, for I am poor, so poor that for three whole days no food has passed my lips. It was the smell of the meat which you have with you that led me to you. Give me of that meat, Daughter, for I starve."

"It is yours, O----" and she paused.

"I am called Kepher."

"Kepher, Kepher!" repeated Tua, for she thought it strange that a beggar-man should be named after that scarabæus insect which among the Egyptians was the symbol of eternity. "Well, take and eat, O Kepher," she said, and handed him the basket that contained what was left to them of their store.

The beggar took it, and having looked up to heaven as though to ask a

blessing on his meal, sat down upon the sand and began to devour the food ravenously.

"Lady," said Asti, "he will eat it all, and then we shall starve in this desert. He is a locust, not a man," she added, as another cake disappeared.

"He is our guest," answered Tua gravely, "let him take what we have to give."

For a while Asti was silent, then again she broke out into remonstrance.

"Peace, Nurse," replied Tua, "I have said that he is our guest, and the law of hospitality may not be broken."

"Then the law of hospitality will bring us to our deaths," muttered Asti.

"If so, so let it be, Nurse; at least this poor man will be filled, and for the rest, as always, we must trust to Amen our father."

Yet as she spoke the words tears gathered in her eyes, for she knew that Asti was right, and now that all the food was gone, on which with care they might have lived for two days or more, soon they would faint, and perish, unless help came to them, which was not likely in that lonesome place. Once, not so long ago, they had starved for lack of sustenance,

and it was the thought of that slow pain so soon to be renewed, that brought the water to her eyes.

Meanwhile Kepher, whose appetite for one so ancient was sharp indeed, finished the contents of the basket down to the last date, and handed it back to Tua with a bow, saying:

"I thank you, Daughter; the Queen of Egypt could not have entertained me more royally," and he peered at her with his horny eyes. "I who have been empty for long, am full again, and since I cannot reward you I pray to the gods that they will do so. Beautiful Daughter, may you never know what it is to lack a meal."

At this saying Tua could restrain herself no more. A large tear from her eyes fell upon Kepher's rough hand as she answered with a little sob:

"I am glad that you are comforted with meat, but do not mock us, Friend, seeing that we are but lost wanderers who very soon must starve, since now our food is done."

"What, Daughter?" asked the old man in an astonished voice, "what? Can I believe that you gave all you had to a beggar of the wilderness, and sat still while he devoured it? And is it for this reason that you weep?"

"Forgive me, Father, but it is so," answered Tua. "I am ashamed of such weakness, but recently my friend here and I have known hunger, very sore

hunger, and the dread of it moves me. Come, Asti, let us be going while our strength remains in us."

Kepher looked up at the name, then turned to Tua and said:

"Daughter, your face is fair, and your heart is perfect, since otherwise you would not have dealt with me as you have done. Still, it seems that you lack one thing--undoubting faith in the goodness of the gods. Though, surely," he added in a slow voice, "those who have passed yonder lion-haunted forest without hurt should not lack faith. Say, now, how came you there?"

"We are ladies of Egypt," interrupted Asti, "or at least this maiden is, for I am but her old nurse. Man-stealing pirates of Phoenicia seized us while we wandered on the shores of the Nile, and brought us hither in their ship, by what way we do not know. At length they put into yonder river for water, and we fled at night. We are escaped slaves, no more."

"Ah!" said Kepher, "those pirates must mourn their loss. I almost wonder that they did not follow you. Indeed, I thought that you might be other folk, for, strangely enough, as I slept in the sand last night, a certain spirit from the Under-world visited me in my dreams, and told me to search for one Asti and another lady who was with her--I cannot remember the name of that lady. But I do remember the name of the spirit, for he told it to me; it was Mermes."

Now Asti gave a little cry, and, springing up, searched Kepher's face with her eyes, nor did he shrink from her gaze.

"I perceive," she said slowly, "that you who seem to be a beggar are also a seer."

"Mayhap, Asti," he answered. "In my long life I have often noted that sometimes men are more than they seem--and women also. Perhaps you have learned the same, for nurses in great houses may note many things if they choose. But let us say no more. I think it is better that we should say no more. You and your companion--how is she named?"

"Neferte," answered Asti promptly.

"Neferte, ah! Certainly that was not the name which the spirit used, though it is true that other name began with the same sound, or so I think. Well, you and your companion, Neferte, escaped from those wicked pirates, and managed to bring certain things with you, for instance, that beautiful harp, wreathed with the royal uræi, and--but what is in that second basket?"

"Pearls," broke in Tua quickly.

"And a large basket of pearls. Might I see them? Oh! do not be afraid, I shall not rob those whose food I have eaten, it is against the custom of the desert."

"Certainly," answered Tua. "I never thought that you would rob us, for if you were of the tribe of thieves, surely you would be richer, and less hungry than you seem. I only thought that you were almost blind, Father Kepher, and therefore could not know the difference between a pearl and a pebble."

"My feeling still remains to me, Daughter Neferte," he answered with a little smile.

Then Tua gave him the basket. He opened it and drew out the strings of pearls, feeling them, smelling and peering at them, touching them with his tongue, especially the large single ones which were wrapped up by themselves. At length, having handled them all, he restored them to the basket, saying drily:

"It is strange, indeed, Nurse Asti, that those Syrian man-stealers attempted no pursuit of you, for here, whether they were theirs or not, are enough gems to buy a kingdom."

"We cannot eat pearls," answered Asti.

"No, but pearls will buy more than you need to eat."

"Not in a desert," said Asti.

"True, but as it chanced there is a city in this desert, and not so very far away."

"Is it named Napata?" asked Tua eagerly.

"Napata? No, indeed. Yet, I have heard of such a place, the City of Gold they called it. In fact, once I visited it in my youth, over a hundred years ago."

"A hundred years ago! Do you remember the way thither?"

"Yes, more or less, but on foot it is over a year's journey away, and the path thither lies across great deserts and through tribes of savage men. Few live to reach that city."

"Yet I will reach it, or die, Father."

"Perhaps you will, Daughter Neferte, perhaps you will, but I think not at present. Meanwhile, you have a harp, and therefore it is probable that you can play and sing; also you have pearls. Now the inhabitants of this town whereof I spoke to you love music. Also they love pearls, and as you cannot begin your journey to Napata for three months, when the rain on the mountains will have filled the desert wells, I suggest that you would do wisely to settle yourselves there for a while. Nurse Asti here would be a dealer in pearls, and you, her daughter, would be a musician. What say you?"

"I say that I should be glad to settle myself anywhere out of this desert," said Tua wearily. "Lead us on to the city, Father Kepher, if you know the way."

"I know the way, and will guide you thither in payment for that good meal of yours. Now come. Follow me." And taking his long staff he strode away in front of them.

"This Kepher goes at a wonderful pace for an old man," said Tua presently. "When first we saw him he could scarcely hobble."

"Man!" answered Asti. "He is not a man, but a spirit, good or bad, I don't know which, appearing as a beggar. Could a man eat as much as he did--all our basketful of food? Does a man talk of cities that he visited in his youth over a hundred years ago, or declare that my dead husband spoke to him in his dreams? No, no, he is a ghost like those upon the ship."

"So much the better," answered Tua cheerfully, "since ghosts have been good friends to us, for had it not been for them I should have been dead or shamed to-day."

"That we shall find out at the end of the story," said Asti, who was cross and weary, for the heat of the sun was great. "Meanwhile, follow on. There is nothing else to do."

For hour after hour they walked, till at length towards evening, when they were almost exhausted, they struggled up a long rise of sand and rocks, and from the crest of it perceived a large walled town set in a green and fertile valley not very far beneath them. Towards this town Kepher, who marched at a distance in front, guided them till they reached a clump of trees on the outskirts of the cultivated land. Here he halted, and when they came up to him, led them among the trees.

"Now," he said, "drop your veils and bide here, and if any should come to you, say that you are poor wandering players who rest. Also, if it pleases you, give me a small pearl off one of those strings, that I may go into the city, which is named Tat, and sell it to buy you food and a place to dwell in."

"Take a string," said Tua faintly.

"Nay, nay, Daughter, one will be enough, for in this town pearls are rare, and have a great value."

So she gave him the gem, or rather let him take it from the silk, which he re-fastened very neatly for one who seemed to be almost blind, and strode off swiftly towards the town.

"Man or spirit, I wonder if we shall see him again?" said Asti.

Tua made no answer--she was too tired, but resting herself against the bole of a tree, fell into a doze. When she awoke again it was to see that the sun had sunk, and that before her stood the beggar Kepher, and with him two black men, each of whom led a saddled mule.

"Mount, Friends," he said, "for I have found you a lodging."

So they mounted, and were led to the gate of the city which at the word of Kepher was opened for them, and thence down a long street to a house built in a walled garden. Into this house they entered, the black men leading off the mules, to find that it was a well-furnished place with a table ready set in the ante-room, on which was food in plenty. They ate of it, all three of them, and when they had finished Kepher bade a woman who was waiting on them, lead them to their chamber, saying that he himself would sleep in the garden.

Thither then they went without more questions, and throwing themselves down upon beds which were prepared for them, were soon fast asleep.