

CHAPTER XV

TUA AND THE KING OF TAT

In the morning, after Tua and Asti had put on the clean robes that lay to their hands, and eaten, suddenly they looked up and perceived that Kepher, the ancient beggar of the desert, was in the room with them, though neither of them had heard or seen him enter.

"You come silently, Friend," said Asti, looking at him with a curious eye. "A Double could not move with less noise, and--where is your shadow?" she added, staring first at the sun without, and then at the floor upon which he stood.

"I forgot it," he answered in his deep voice. "One so poor as I am cannot always afford a shadow. But look, there it is now. And for the rest, what do you know of Doubles which those who are uninstructed cannot discern? Now I have heard of a Lady in Egypt who by some chance bore your name, and who has the power, not only to see the Double, but to draw it forth from the body of the living, and furnish it with every semblance of mortal life. Also I have heard that she who reigns in Egypt to-day has such a Ka or Double that can take her place, and none know the difference, save that this Ka, which Amen gave her at her birth, works the vengeance of the gods without pity or remorse. Tell me, Friend Asti, when you were a slave-woman in Egypt did you ever hear talk of such things as these?"

Now he looked at Asti, and Asti looked at him, till at length he moved his old hands in a certain fashion, whereon she bowed her head and was silent.

But Tua, who was terrified at this talk, for she knew not what would befall them if the truth were guessed, broke in, saying:

"Welcome, Father, however it may please you to come, and with or without a shadow. Surely we have much to thank you for who have found us this fine house and servants and food--by the way, will you not eat again?"

"Nay," he answered, smiling, "as you may have guessed yesterday, I touch meat seldom; as a rule, once only in three days, and then take my fill. Life is so short that I cannot waste time in eating."

"Oh!" said Tua, "if you feel thus whose youth began more than a hundred years ago, how must it seem to the rest of us? But, Father Kepher, what are we to do in this town Tat?"

"I have told you, Maiden. Asti here will deal in pearls and other goods, and you will sing, but always behind the curtain, since here in Tat you must suffer no man to see your beauty, and least of all him who rules it. Now give me two more pearls, for I go out to buy for you other things that are needful, and after that perhaps you will see me no more for a long while. Yet if trouble should fall upon you, go to the

window-place wherever you may be, and strike upon that harp of yours, and call thrice upon the name of Kepher. Doubtless there will be some listening who will hear you and bring me the news in the Desert, where I dwell who do not love towns, and then I may be able to help you."

"I thank you, my Father, and I will remember. But pardon me if I ask how can one so----" and she paused.

"So old, so ragged and so miserable give help to man or woman--that is what you would say, Daughter Neferte, is it not? Well, judge not from the outward seeming; good wine is often found in jars of common clay, and the fire hid in a rough flint can destroy a city."

"And therefore a wanderer who can swallow his own shadow can aid another wanderer in distress," remarked Tua drily. "My Father, I understand, who although I am still young, have seen many things and ere now been dragged out of deep water by strange hands."

"Such as those of Phoenician pirates," suggested Kepher. "Well, good-bye. I go to purchase what you need with the price of these pearls, and then the Desert calls me for a while. Remember what I told you, and do not seek to leave this town of Tat until the rain has fallen on the mountains, and there is water in the wells. Good-bye, Friend Asti, also; when I come again we will talk more of Doubles, until which time may the great god of Egypt--he is called Amen, is he not?--have you and your Lady in his keeping."

Then he turned and went.

"What is that man?" asked Tua when they had heard the door of the house close behind him.

"Man?" answered Asti. "I have told you that he is no man. Do men unfold their shadows like a garment? He is a god or a ghost, wearing a beggar's shape."

"Man or ghost, I like him well for he has befriended us in our need, Nurse."

"That we shall know when he has done with us," answered Asti.

An hour later, whilst they were still talking of Kepher and all the marvels that had befallen them, porters began to arrive, bearing bundles which, when opened, were found to contain silks and broideries in gold and silver thread, and leather richly worked, such as the Arabs make, and alabaster pots of ointments, and brass work from Syria, and copper jars from Cyprus, with many other goods, all very costly, and in number more than enough for a wealthy trader's store.

These goods the porters set out on the mats and shelves of the large front room of the house that opened to the street, which room seemed to have been built to receive them. Then they departed, asking no fees,

and there appeared a man riding a fine white horse, who dismounted, and, bowing low towards the screen of pierced wood-work behind which Tua and Asti were hidden, laid a writing upon a little table, and rode away.

When he had gone Asti opened the door in the screen and took the writing which she found she could read well enough, for it was in the Egyptian character and language.

It proved to be the title-deed of the house and garden conveyed to them jointly, and also of the rich goods which the porters had brought. At the foot of this document was written--

"Received by Kepher the Wanderer in payment of the above house and land and goods, three pearls and one full meal of meat and dates."

Then followed the seal of Kepher in wax, a finely cut scarabæus holding the symbol of the sun between its two front feet.

"A proud seal for a tattered wanderer, though it is but his name writ in wax," said Tua.

But Asti only answered:

"If small pearls have such value in this city, what price will the large ones bring? Well, let us to our business, for we have time upon our hands, and cannot live upon pearls and costly stuffs."

So it happened that Neter-Tua, Star of Amen, Queen of Egypt, and Asti her Nurse, the Mistress of Magic, became merchants in the town of Tat.

This was the manner of their trade. For one hour in the morning, and one in the afternoon, Asti, heavily veiled, and a woman of the servants whom they had found in the house, would sit on stools amidst the goods and traffic with all comers, selling to those who would buy, and taking payment in gold dust or other articles of value, or buying from those who would sell. Then when the hour drew towards its close Tua would sweep her harp behind the screen that hid her and begin to sing, whereon all would cease from their chaffering and listen, for never before had they heard so sweet a voice. Indeed, at these times the broad street in front of their house was packed with people, for the fame of this singing of hers went through the city and far into the country that lay beyond. Then the traffic came to an end, with her song, and leaving their goods in charge of the servants, Tua and Asti departed to the back rooms of the house, and ate their meals or wandered in the large, walled garden that lay behind.

Thus the weeks went on and soon, although they sold few of the pearls, and those the smallest, for of the larger gems they said little or nothing, they began to grow rich, and to hoard up such a weight of gold in dust and nuggets, and so many precious things, that they scarcely knew what they should do with them. Still Tat seemed to be a peaceful

city, or at the least none tried to rob or molest them, perhaps because a rumour was abroad that these strangers who had come out of the Unknown were under the protection of some god.

There was nothing to show how or why this rumour had arisen in the city, but on account of it, if for no other reason, these pearl-merchants, as they were called, suffered no wrong, and although they were only undefended women, whatever credit they might give, the debt was always paid. Also their servants, to whom they added as they had means, were all faithful to them. So there they remained and traded, keeping their secrets and awaiting the appointed hour of escape, but never venturing to leave the shelter of their own walls.

Now, as it happened, when they came thither the King of Tat was away making war upon another king whose country lay upon the coast, but after they had dwelt for many weeks in the place, this King, who was named Janees, returned victorious from his war and prepared to celebrate a triumph.

While he was making ready for this triumph his courtiers told him of these pearl-merchants, and, desiring pearls for his adornment on that great day, he went in disguise to the house of those who sold them. As it chanced he arrived late, and requested to see the gems just as Tua, according to her custom, was playing upon her harp. Then she began to sing, and this King Janees, who was a man of under forty years of age, listened intently to her beautiful voice, forgetting all about the

pearls that he had come to buy. Her song finished, the veiled Asti rose, and bowing to all the company gathered in the street, bade her servants shut up the coffers and remove the goods.

"But I would buy pearls, Merchant, if you have such to sell," said Janees.

"Then you must return this afternoon, Purchaser," replied Asti, scanning his pale and haughty face, "for even if you were the King of Tat I would not sell to you out of my hours."

"You speak high words, Woman," exclaimed Janees angrily.

"High or low, they are what I mean," answered Asti, and went away.

The end of it was that this King Janees returned at the evening hour, led thither more by a desire to hear that lovely voice again than to purchase gems. Still he asked to see pearls, and Asti showed him some which he thrust aside as too small. Then she produced those that were larger, and again he thrust them aside, and so it went on for a long while. At length from somewhere in her clothing Asti drew two of the biggest that she had, perfect pearls of the size of the middle nail of a man's finger, and at the sight of these the eyes of Janees brightened, for such gems he had never seen before. Then he asked the price. Asti answered carelessly that it was doubtless more than he would wish to pay, since there were few such pearls in the whole world, and she named

a weight in gold that caused him to step back from her amazed, for it was a quarter of the tribute that he had taken from his new-conquered kingdom.

"Woman, you jest," he said, "surely there is some abatement."

"Man," she answered, "I jest not; there is no abatement," and she replaced the pearls in her garments.

Now he grew very angry, and asked:

"Did you know that I am the King of Tat, and if I will, can take your pearls without any payment at all?"

"Are you?" asked Asti, looking at him coolly. "I should never have guessed it. Well, if you steal my goods, as you say you can, you will be King of Thieves also."

Now those who heard this saying laughed, and the King thought it best to join in their merriment. Then the bargaining went on, but before it was finished, at her appointed hour Tua began to sing behind the screen.

"Have done," said the King to Asti, "to-morrow you shall be paid your price. I would listen to that music which is above price."

So Janees listened like one fascinated, for Tua was singing her best.

Step by step he drew ever nearer to the screen, though this Asti did not notice, for she was engaged in locking up her goods. At length he reached it, and thrusting his fingers through the openings in the pierced woodwork, rested his weight upon it like a man who is faint, as perhaps he was with the sweetness of that music. Then of a sudden, by craft or chance, he swung himself backward, and with him came the frail screen. Down it clattered to the floor, and lo! beyond it, unveiled, but clad in rich attire, stood Tua sweeping her harp of ivory and gold. Like sunlight from a cloud the bright vision of her beauty struck the eyes of the people gathered there, and seemed to dazzle them, since for a while they were silent. Then one said:

"Surely this woman is a queen," and another answered:

"Nay, she is a goddess," but ere the words had left his lips Tua was gone.

As for Janees the King, he stared at her open-mouthed, reeling a little upon his feet, then, as she fled, turned to Asti, saying:

"Is this Lady your slave?"

"Nay, King, my daughter, whom you have done ill to spy upon."

"Then," said Janees slowly, "I who might do less, desire to make this daughter of yours my Queen--do you understand, Merchant of Pearls--my

Queen, and as a gift you shall have as much gold again as I have promised for your gems."

"Other kings have desired as much and offered more, but she is not for you or any of them," answered Asti, looking him in the face.

Now Janees made a movement as though he would strike her, then seemed to change his mind, for he replied only:

"A rough answer to a fair offer, seeing that none know who you are or whence you come. But there are eyes upon us. I will talk with you again to-morrow; till then, rest in peace."

"It is useless," began Asti, but he was already gone.

Presently Asti found Tua in the garden, and told her everything.

"Now I wish that Kepher of the Desert were at hand," said Tua nervously, "for it seems that I am in a snare, who like this Janees no better than I did Abi or the Prince of Kesh, and will never be his Queen."

"Then I think we had better fly to the wilderness and seek him there this very night, for, Lady, you know what chances to men who look upon your loveliness."

"I know what chanced to the Prince of Kesh, and what will chance to Abi

at the hands of one I left behind me, I can guess; perhaps this Janees will fare no better. Still, let us go."

Asti nodded, then by an afterthought went into the house and asked some questions of the servants. Presently she returned, and said:

"It is useless; soldiers are already stationed about the place, and some of our women who tried to go out have been turned back, for they say that by the King's order none may leave our door."

"Now shall I strike upon the harp and call upon the name of Kepher, as he bade me?" asked Tua.

"I think not yet awhile, Lady. This danger may pass by or the night bring counsel, and then he would be angry if you summoned him for naught. Let us go in and eat."

So they went in, and while they sat at their food suddenly they heard a noise, and looking up, perceived by the light of the lamp that women were crowding into the room led by two eunuchs.

Tua drew a dagger from her robe and sprang up, but the head eunuch, an old, white-haired man, bowed low before her, and said:

"Lady, you can kill me if you will, for I am unarmed, but there are many more of us without, and to resist is useless. Hearken; no harm shall be

done to you or to your companion, but it is the King's desire that one so royal and beautiful should be better lodged than in this place of traffic. Therefore he has commanded me to take you and all your household and all your goods to no less a place than his own palace, where he would speak with you."

"Sheathe the dagger and waste no words upon these slaves, Daughter," said Asti. "Since we have no choice, let us go."

So after they had veiled and robed, they suffered themselves to be led out and placed in a double litter with their pearls and gold, while the King's women collected all the rest of their goods and took them away together with their servants, leaving the house quite empty. Then, guarded by soldiers, they were borne through the silent streets till they came to great gates which closed behind them, and having passed up many stairs, the litter was set down in a large and beautiful room lit with silver lamps of scented oil. Here, and in other rooms beyond, they found women of the royal household and their own servants already arranging their possessions.

Soon it was done, and food and wine having been set for them, they were left alone in that room, and stood looking at each other.

"Now shall I strike and call?" said Tua, lifting the harp which she had brought with her. "Look, yonder is a window-place such as that of which Kepher spoke."

"Not yet, I think, Lady. Let us learn all our case ere we call for help," and as the words left her lips the door opened, and through it, clad in his royal robes, walked Janees the King.

Now in the centre of this great room was a marble basin filled with pure water which, perhaps, had served as the bath of the queens who dwelt there in former days, or, perhaps, was so designed for the sake of coolness in times of heat. Tua and Asti stood upon one side of this basin, and to the other came the King, so that the water lay between them. Thrice he bowed to Tua, then said:

"Lady, who, as your servants tell me, are known as Neferte, a maiden of Egypt, and for lack of the true name, doubtless this will serve, Lady, I come to ask your pardon for what must seem to you to be a grievous wrong. O Lady Neferte, this must be my excuse, that I have no choice. By fortune, good or ill, I know not which, this day I beheld your face, and now but one desire is left to me, to behold it again, and for all my life. Lady, the Goddess of Love, she, whom in Egypt you name Hathor, has made me her slave, so that I no longer think of pomp or power or wealth, or of other women, but of you and you only. Lady, I would do you no harm, for I offer you half my throne. You and you alone shall be my Queen. Speak now."

"King Janees," answered Tua, "what evil spirit has entered into you that you should wish to make a Queen of a singing-girl, the daughter of a

merchant who has wandered to your city? Let me go, and keep that high place for one of the great ones of the earth. Send now to Abi, who I have heard rules as Pharaoh in Egypt, and ask a daughter of his blood, for they say that he has several; or to some of the princes of Syria, or to the King of Byblos by Lebanon, or to the lords of Kesh, or across the desert to the Emperor of Punt, and let this poor singing-girl go her ways."

"This poor singing-girl," repeated Janees after her, "who, or whose mother," and he bowed to Asti with a smile, "has pearls to sell that are worth the revenue of a kingdom; this singing-girl, the ivory figure on whose harp is crowned with the royal uræi of Egypt; this singing-girl whose chiselled loveliness is such as might be found perhaps among the daughters of ancient kings; this singing-girl whose voice can ravish the hearts of men and beasts! Well, Lady Neferte, I thank you for your warning, still I am ready to take my chance, hoping that my children will not be made ashamed by the blood of such a singing-girl as this, who, as I saw when that screen fell, has stamped upon her throat the holy sign they worship on the Nile."

"I am honoured," answered Tua coldly, "yet it may not be. Among my own humble folk I have a lover, and him I will wed or no man."

"You have a lover! Then hide his name from me, lest presently I should play Set to his Osiris and rend him into pieces. You shake your head, knowing doubtless that the man is great, yet I tell you that I will

conquer him and rend him into pieces for the crime of being loved by you. Listen now! I would make you my Queen, but Queen or not, mine you shall be who lie in my power. I will not force you, I will give you time. But if on the morning of the third day from this night you still refuse to share my throne, why, then you shall sit upon its footstool."

Now, in her anger, Tua threw back her veil, and met him eye to eye.

"You think me great," she said, "and truly you are right, for whatever is my rank, with me go my gods, and in their strength my innocence is great. Let me be, you petty King of Tat, lest I lift up my voice to heaven, and call down upon you the anger of the gods."

"Already, Lady, you have called down upon me the anger of a goddess, that Hathor of whom I spoke, and for the rest I fear them not. Let them do their worst. On the third night from this night, as Queen or slave, I swear that you shall be mine. This woman here, whom you call your mother, shall be witness to my oath, and to its end."

"Aye, King," broke in Asti, "I will be witness, but as to the end of that oath I do not know it yet. Would you like to learn? In my own country I was held to have something of a gift, I mean in the way of magic. It came to me, I know not whence, and it is very uncertain--at times it is my servant, and at times I can do nothing. Still, for your sake, I would try. Is it your pleasure to see that end of which you spoke, the end of your attempt to force yonder maiden to be your queen

or love?"

"Aye, Woman," answered Janees, "if you have a trick, show it--why not?"

"So be it, King; but, of course, I have your word that you will not blame me if by any chance the trick should not prove to your liking--your royal word. Now stand you there, and look into this water while I pray our gods, the gods of my own country, to be gracious, and to show you what shall be your state at this same hour on the third night from now, which you say and hope shall be the night of your wedding. Sing, my Daughter, sing that old and sacred song which I have taught you. It will serve to while away the tedium of our waiting until the gods declare themselves, if such be their will."

Then Asti knelt down by the pool, and bent her head, and stretched out her hands over the water, and Tua touched the strings of her harp and began to chant very solemnly in an unknown tongue. The words of that chant were low and sweet, yet it seemed to Janees that they fell like ice upon his hot blood, and froze it within his veins. At first he kept his eyes fixed upon her beauty, but by slow degrees something drew them down to the water of the pool.

Look! A mist gathered on its blackness. It broke and cleared and there, as in a mirror, he saw a picture. He saw himself lying stripped and dead, a poor, naked corpse with wide eyes that stared to heaven, and gashed throat and sides whence the blood ran upon the marble floor of

his own great hall, ruined by fire, with its scorched pillars pointing like fingers to the moon. There he lay alone, and by him stood a hound, his own hound, that lifted up its head and seemed to howl.

The last words of Tua's chant died away, and with them that picture passed. Janees leapt back from the edge of the pool, glaring at Asti.

"Sorceress!" he cried, "were you not my guest who names herself the mother of her who shall be my Queen, I swear that to-night you should die by torture in payment of this foul trick of yours."

"Yet as it is," answered Asti, "I think that I shall not die, since those who call upon the gods must not quarrel with their oracle. Moreover, I know now what you saw, and it may be nothing but a fantasy of your brain or of mine. Now let us sleep, I pray you, O King, for we are weary, and leave its secrets to the future. In three days we shall know what they may be."

Then, without another word, Janees turned and left them.

"What was it that lay in the pool, Nurse?" asked Tua. "I saw nothing."

"The shadow of a dead man, I think," answered Asti grimly. "Some jealous god has looked upon this poor King whose crime is that he desires you, and therefore he must die. Of a truth it goes ill with your lovers, O Star of Amen, and sometimes I wonder if one who is dear to me will meet

with better fortune at those royal eyes of yours. If ill befalls him I think that at the last I may learn to hate you, whom from the first I cherished."

Now at the thought that she might bring death to Rames also, Tua's tears began to gather, and her voice choked in her throat.

"Say not such evil-omened words," she sobbed, "since you know well that if he is taken hence for whose sake I endure all these things, then I must follow him over the edge of the world. Moreover, you are unjust. Did I slay the Prince of Kesh, or was it another?"

"Another, Queen, but for your sake."

"And would you have had me wed Abi the hog, the murderer of my father, and of your lord? Again, was it I who but now showed this barbarian chief a shadow in the water, or was it Asti the witch, Asti the prophetess of Amen? Lastly, will the man die, if die he must, because he loves me, which, being a woman I can forgive him, or because he laid the hands of violence upon me to force me to be his queen or mistress, which I forgive him not? Oh! Asti, you know well I am not as other women are. Perchance it is true that some blood that is not human runs in me; at least I fulfil a doom laid on me before my birth, and working woe or working weal, I go as my feet are led by ghosts and gods. Why, then, do you upbraid me?" and she ceased and wept outright.

"Nay, nay, be comforted, I upbraid you not," answered Asti, drawing her to her breast. "Who am I that I should cast reproaches at Amen's Star and daughter and my Queen? I know well that the house of your fate is built, that sail you up stream or sail you down stream, you must pass its gate at last. It was fear for Rames that made me speak so bitterly, Rames my only child, if, indeed, he is left to me, for I who have so much wisdom cannot learn from man or spirit whether he lives here or with Osiris, since some black veil hangs between our souls. I fear lest the gods, grown jealous of that high love of yours, should wreak their wrath upon him who has dared to win it, and bring Rames to the grave before his time, and the thought of it rends my heart."

Now it was Tua's turn to play the comforter.

"Surely," she said, "surely, my Foster-mother, you forget the promise of Amen, King of the Gods, which he made ere I was born, to Ahura who bore me, that I should find a royal lover, and that from his love and mine should spring many kings and princes, and that this being so, Rames must live."

"Why must he live, Lady, seeing that even if he can be called royal, there are others?"

"Nay, Asti," murmured Tua, laying her head upon her breast, "for me there are no others, nor shall any child of mine be born that does not name Rames father. Whatever else is doubtful, this is sure. Therefore

Rames lives, and will live, or the King of the gods has lied."

"You reason well," said Asti, and kissed her. Then she thought for a moment, and added: "Now to our work, it is the hour. Take the harp, go to the window-place, and call as the beggar-man bade you do in your need."

So Tua went to the window-place and looked down on the great courtyard beneath that was lit with the light of the moon. Then she struck on the harp, and thrice she cried aloud:

"Kepher! Kepher! Kepher!"

And each time the echo of her cry came back louder and still more loud, till it seemed as though earth and heaven were filled with the sound of the name of Kepher.