

CHAPTER XVI

THE BEGGAR AND THE KING

It was the afternoon of the third day. Tua and Asti, seated in the window-place of their splendid prison, looked through the wooden screen down into the court below, where, according to his custom at this hour, Janees the King sat in the shadow to administer justice and hear the petitions of his subjects. The two women were ill at ease, for the time of respite had almost passed.

"Night draws near," said Tua, "and with it will come Janees. Look how he eyes this window, like a hungry lion waiting to be fed. Kepher has made no sign; perchance after all he is but a wandering beggar-man filled with strange fancies, or perchance he is dead, as may well happen at his age. At least, he makes no sign, nor does Amen, to whom I have prayed so hard, send any answer to my prayers. I am forsaken. Oh! Asti, you who are wise, tell me, what shall I do?"

"Trust in the gods," said Asti. "There are still three hours to sundown, and in three hours the gods, to whom time is nothing, can destroy the world and build it up again. Remember when we starved in the pylon tower at Memphis, and what befell us there. Remember the leap to death and the Boat of Ra, and those by whom it was captained. Remember and trust in the gods."

"I trust--in truth I trust, Asti, but yet--oh! let us talk of something else. I wonder what has chanced in Memphis since we left it in so strange a fashion? Do you think that awful Ka of mine queens it there with Abi for a husband? If so, I almost grieve for Abi, for she had something in her eyes which chilled my mortal blood, and yet you say she is a part of me, a spirit who cannot die, cast in my mould, and given to me at birth. I would I had another Ka, and that you could draw it forth again, Asti, to bewitch this Janees, and hold him while we fled. See, that case draws to an end at length. Janees is giving judgment, or rather his councillor is, for he prompts him all the time. Can you not hear his whispers? As for Janees himself, his thoughts are here, I feel his eyes burn me through this wooden screen. He is about to rise. Why! Who comes? Awake, Nurse, and look."

Asti obeyed. There in the gate of the court she saw a tall man, white-bearded, yellow-faced, horny-eyed, ancient, who, clad in a tattered robe, leaned upon his staff of thornwood, and stared about him blindly as though the sun bewildered him. The guards came to thrust him away, but he waved his staff, and they fell back from him as though there were power in that staff. Now his slow, tortoise-like eyes seemed to catch sight of the glittering throne, and of him who sat upon it, and with long strides he walked to the throne and halted in front of it, again leaning on his staff.

"Who is this fellow," asked Janees in an angry voice, "who stands here and makes no obeisance to the King?"

"Are you a king?" asked Kepher. "I am very blind. I thought you were but a common man such as I am, only clad in bright clothes. Tell me, what is it like to be a king, and have all things beneath your feet. Do you still hope and suffer, and fear death like a common man? Is the flesh beneath your gold and purple the same as mine beneath my rags? Do old memories torment you, memories of the dead who come no more? Can you feel griefs, and the ache of disappointment?"

"Do I sit here to answer riddles, Fool?" answered Janees angrily. "Turn the fellow out. I have business."

Now guards sprang forward to do the King's bidding, but again Kepher waved his staff, and again they fell back. Certainly it seemed as though there were power in that staff.

"Business, King," he said. "Not of the State, I think, but with one who lodges yonder," and he nodded towards the shuttered room whence Tua watched him. "Well, that is three hours hence after the sun has set, so you still have time to listen to my prayer, which you will do, as it is of this same lady with whom you have business."

"What do you know of the lady, you old knave, and of my dealings with her?" asked Janees angrily.

"Much of both, O King, for I am her father, and--shall I tell the rest?"

"Her father, you hoary liar!" broke in Janees.

"Aye, her father, and I have come to tell you that as our blood is more ancient than yours, I will not have you for a son-in-law, any more than that daughter of mine will have you for a husband."

Now some of the courtiers who heard these words laughed outright, but Janees did not laugh, his dark face turned white with rage, and he gasped for breath.

"Drag this madman forth," he shouted at length, "and cut out his insolent tongue."

Again the guards sprang forward, but before ever they reached him Kepher was speaking in a new voice, a voice so terrible that at the sound of it they stopped, leaving him untouched.

"Beware how you lay a finger on me, you men of Tat," he cried, "for how know you who dwells within these rags? Janees, you who call yourself a King, listen to the commands of a greater king, whose throne is yonder above the sun. Ere night falls upon the earth, set that maiden upon whom you would force yourself and her companion and all her goods without your southern gate, and leave them there unharmed. Such is the command of the King of kings, who dwells on high."

"And what if I mock at the command of this King?" asked Janees.

"Mock not," replied Kepher. "Bethink you of a certain picture that the lady Asti showed you in the water, and mock not."

"It was but an Egyptian trick, Wizard, and one in which I see you had a hand. Begone, I defy you and your sorceries, and your King. To-night that maid shall be my wife."

"Then, Janees, Lord of Tat, listen to the doom that I am sent to decree upon you. To-night you shall have another bride, and her name is Death. Moreover, for their sins, and because their eyes are evil, and they have rejected the worship of the gods, many of your people shall accompany you to darkness, and to-morrow another King, who is not of your House, shall rule in Tat."

Kepher ceased speaking, then turned and walked slowly down the court of judgment and through its gates, nor did any so much as lift a finger to stay him, for now about this old man there seemed to be a majesty which made them strengthless.

"Bring that wizard back and kill him here," shouted Janees presently, as the spell passed off them, and like hounds from a leash they sprang forward to do the bidding of the King.

But without the walls they could not find him. A woman had seen him

here, a child had seen him there, some slaves had watched him pass yonder, and ran away because they noted that he had no shadow. At length, after many a false turn, they tracked him to the southern gate, and there the guard said that just such a beggar-man had passed through as they were about to close the gate, vanishing into the sandstorm which blew without. They followed, but so thickly blew that sand that they lost each other in their search, and but just before sundown returned to the palace singly, where in his rage the king commanded them to be beaten with rods upon their feet.

Now the darkness came, and at the appointed hour Janees, hardening his heart, went up into the chamber where dwelt Tua and Asti, leaving his guard of eunuchs at the door. The lamps were lit within that chamber, and the window-places closed, but without the desert wind howled loudly, and the air was blind with sand. On the farther side of the marble basin, as once before, Tua and Asti stood awaiting him.

"Lady," he said, "it is the appointed hour, and I seek your answer."

"King," replied Tua, "hear me, and for your own sake--not for mine. I am more than I seem. I have friends in the earth and air, did not one of them visit you to-day in yonder court? Put away this madness and let me be, for I wish you good, not evil, but if you so much as lay a finger on me, then I think that evil draws near, or at the best I die by my own hand."

"Lady," replied Janees in a cold voice, "have done with threats; I await your answer."

"King," said Tua, "for the last time I plead with you. You think that I lie to save myself, but it is not so. I would save you. Look now," and she threw back her veil and opened the wrappings about her throat. "Look at that which is stamped upon my breast, and think--is it well to offer violence to a woman who bears this holy seal?"

"I have heard of such a one," said Janees hoarsely, for the sight of her beauty maddened him. "They say that she was born in Thebes, and of a strange father, though, if so, how came she here? I am told that she reigns as Pharaoh in Egypt."

"Ask that question of your oracles, O King, but remember that rumour does not always lie, and let the daughter of that strange father go."

"There is another who claims to be your father, Lady, if by now my soldiers have not scourged him to his death--a tattered beggar-man."

"Whom those soldiers could not touch or find," broke in Asti, speaking for the first time.

"Well," went on Janees, without heeding her, "whether your father be a beggar or a god, or even if you are Hathor's self come down from heaven to be the death of men, know that I take you for my own. For the third

time, answer, will you be my Queen of your own choice, or must my women drown yonder witch in this water at your feet, and drag you hence?"

Now Tua made no answer. She only let fall her veil, folded her arms upon her breast, and waited. But Asti, mocking him, cried in a loud voice, that he might hear above the howling of the hurricane without:

"Call your women, King, for the air is full of sand that chokes my throat, and I long for the water which you promise me."

Then, in his fury, Janees turned, and shouted:

"Come hither, Slaves, and do what I have commanded you."

As he spoke the door burst open, and through it, no longer clad in rags, but wearing a white robe and head-dress, walked Kepher the Wanderer, while after him, their red swords in their hands, came savage-looking chiefs, bearded, blank-faced, round-eyed, with gold chains that clanked upon their mail, captains of the Desert, men who knew neither fear nor mercy.

Janees looked and understood. He snatched out his sword, and for a moment stayed irresolute, while the great men ringed him round and waited, their eyes fixed on Kepher's face.

"Spare him, Father, if it may be so," said Tua, "since love has made him

mad."

"Too late!" answered Kepher solemnly. "Those who will not accept the warning of the gods must suffer the vengeance of the gods. Janees, you who would do violence to a helpless woman, your palace burns, your city is in my keeping, and the few who stood by you are slain. Janees, to-morrow another shall rule in your place. Amen the Father has decreed your doom."

"Aye," echoed Janees heavily, "too late! Mortals cannot fight against the gods that make their sport of them. Some god commanded that I should love. Some god commands that I shall die. So be it, I am glad to die; would that I had not been born to know grief and death. Tell me, O Prophet, what evil power is there which ordains that we must be born and suffer?"

Kepher beckoned to Tua and to Asti, and they followed him, leaving Janees ringed round by those stern-faced men.

"Farewell, Lady," he called to Tua as she passed. "Here and hereafter remember this of Janees, King of Tat, that he who might have saved his life chose to die for love of you."

Then they went and saw him no more.

They passed the door of the great marble chamber about which they found

guards and eunuchs lying dead; they passed down the stairways, and through the tall gates where more soldiers lay dead, and looking behind them, saw that the palace was in flames. They reached the square without, and at the command of Kepher entered into a litter, and were borne by black slaves whither they knew not.

All that night they were borne, awake or sleeping, till at length the morning came, and they descended from the litter to find themselves in an oasis of the wilderness surrounded by a vast army of the desert men. Of the city of Tat they could see nothing; like a dream it had passed out of their lives, nor did they ever hear of it and its king again. Only in the pavilion that had been provided for them they found their pearls and gold, and Tua's ivory harp.

They laid themselves down and slept, for they were very weary, only to wake when once more the day had dawned. Then they rose and ate of the food that had been placed by them, and went out of the tent. In the shadow of some palm trees stood Kepher, awaiting them, and with him certain of the stern-faced, desert chiefs, who bowed as they advanced.

"Hearken, Lady Neferte, and you, O Asti her companion," said Kepher to them, "I must depart, who, this matter finished, have my bread to beg far from here. Yet, fear not, for know that these Lords of the Desert are your servants, and for this reason were they born, that they may help you on your way. Repeat your orders," he continued, addressing the chiefs.

Then the captain of them all said:

"Wanderer, known to our fathers' grandfathers, Guardian of our race by whom we live and triumph, these are your commands: That we lead this divine Lady and her companion a journey of many moons across the deserts and mountains, till at length we bring her to the gates of the City of Gold, where our task ends. While one man of us remains alive they shall be obeyed."

"You hear," said Kepher to Tua. "Put your trust in these men. Go in peace in the day time, and sleep in peace at night, for be sure that they shall not fail you. But if they, or any other should perchance bring you into trouble, then strike upon the harp and call the name you know, as you called it in the house of Janees the mad, and I think that one will come to you. Lords of the Desert, whose great grandsires were known to me, and who live by my wisdom, this divine Lady is in your keeping. See that you guard her as you should, and when the journey is done, return and make report to me. Farewell."

Then, lifting his staff, without speaking another word to Tua or to Asti, Kepher strode away from amongst them, walking through the ranks of the Desert men who forced their camels to kneel and saluted him as he passed. Presently they saw him standing alone upon a ridge, and looking towards them for a while. Then of a sudden he was gone.

"Who is that man, O Captain, at whose bidding the wilderness swarms with tribesmen and kings are brought to doom?" asked Asti when she had watched him disappear.

"Lady," he answered, "I cannot tell you, but from the beginning he has been Master of the Desert, and those who dwell therein. At his word the sandwind blows as it blew yesterday to cover our advance, at his word the fountains spring and tribes grow great or sink to nothingness. We think that he is a spirit who moves where he lists, and executes the decrees of heaven. At the least, though they but see him from time to time, all the dwellers in the wilderness obey him, as we do, and ill does it go, as you have learned, with those dwellers in cities who know not the power which breathes beneath that tattered robe."

"I thank you," answered Asti. "I think with you that this Wanderer is a spirit, and a great one, so great that I will not name his name. Captains, my Lady is ready to march towards the City of Gold, whither you will lead us."

For day after day, for week after week, for month after month, they marched southward and westward across the Desert, and in the centre of their host, mounted upon camels, rode Tua and Asti veiled. Once the hillmen attacked them in a defile of some rugged mountains, but they beat them back, and once there was a great battle with other tribes of

the wilderness, who, hearing that they had a goddess among them, sought to capture her for themselves. These tribes also they defeated with slaughter, for when the fight hung in the balance Tua herself headed the charge of her horsemen, and at the sight of her in her white robes the enemy fled amazed. Once also they camped for two whole months in an oasis, waiting till rain should fall, for the country beyond lacked water. At length it came, and they went on again, on and on over the endless lands, till on a certain night they pitched their tent upon a hill.

At the first brightening of the dawn Tua and Asti went out, and there, beneath them, near to the banks of a great river, which they knew for the Nile, they saw the pyramids and the temples of Napata the Golden, the southern city of Amen, and thanked the gods who had brought them here in safety.

While they still gazed upon its glories in the red light of the rising sun the captain of the desert men appeared, and bowed before them.

"Divine Lady," he said, "woman or goddess, whichever you may be, we have fulfilled the command given to us by Kepher, the ancient King of the Wilderness. Beneath you lies Napata whither we have journeyed through so many weary months, but we would draw no nearer to its walls, who from generation to generation are sworn not to enter any city save in war.

Lady, our task is done, and our men murmur to be led back to their own place, where their wives and children await them, ere, thinking that we

are enemies, the people of Napata sally forth to attack us."

"It is well," answered Tua. "I thank you and the gods shall give you your reward. Leave us, and go back to your homes, but before you go, take a gift from me."

Then she sent for the gold that they had gathered in their trading in the city of Tat, and gave it to be divided among them, a great and precious treasure. Only the pearls she kept, with a little of the gold. So the captains saluted her, and in the mists of the morning they and their swarthy host stole away, and soon were hidden in a cloud of dust.

From the backs of their camels Tua and Asti watched them go like a dream of the night. Then with no word spoken between them, for their lips were sealed with hope and wonder, wrapping themselves in their dark cloaks, they rode down to the highway by the banks of the Nile, which led to the walls of Napata. Mingling with other travellers, they passed through the Field of Pyramids, and coming to the beautiful northern gate that was covered over with gold, waited there, for this gate was not yet opened. A woman who led three asses laden with green barley and vegetables, which she purposed to sell in the market-place, fell into talk with them, asking them whence they came.

Asti answered, from the city of Meroe, adding that they were singers and dealers in pearls.

"Then you have come to the right place," answered the woman, "for pearls are rare at Napata, which is so far from the sea; also it is said that the young King loves singing if it be good."

"The young King?" asked Asti. "What is his name, and where is the old king?"

"You cannot have dwelt long in Meroe, Strangers," answered the woman suspiciously, "or you would know that the old King dwells with Osiris beneath yonder pyramid, where the general of the Pharaoh of Egypt, he who rules here now, buried him after the great battle. Oh! it is a strange story, and I do not know the rights of it who sell my stuff and take little heed of such things. But at the last high Nile before one this general came with three thousand soldiers of Egypt, and the body of the Prince of Kesh, whom it seems he had slain somewhere, it is said because both of them sought the favour of the Queen of Egypt. As they tell, this was the command of that Queen--that he should submit himself to the King of Napata to be judged for his crime. This he did, and the King in his fury commanded that he should be hanged from the mast of the sacred boat of Amen. The general answered that he was ready to be hanged if the King could hang him. Then there was a war between the people of Napata and the Egyptians, aided by many of the soldiers of the city who hated their master and rebelled against his rule, which was ever cruel. The end of it was that the Egyptians and the rebels won, and the King having fallen in the fight, they crowned the Egyptian general in his place.

"His name?--Oh, I forget it, he has so many, but he is a goodly man to look at, and all love him although he is mad. See, the gates are open at last. Farewell," and dragging her asses by the halter, the peasant woman mingled with the crowd and was gone.

Tua and Asti also mingled with the crowd, and rode on up a wide street till they came to a square planted round with trees, on one side of which was built a splendid palace. Here they halted their camels, not knowing whither they should go, and as they stood irresolute the gates of the palace opened and through them came a body of horsemen clad in armour.

"See the writing on their shields," whispered Asti.

Tua looked and read, and lo! there in the royal cartouche was her own name, and after it new titles--Queen of the Upper and the Lower Land, Opener of the Gates of the South, Divine Lady of Napata by grace of Amen, Father of the Gods.

"It seems that I have subjects here," she murmured, "who elsewhere have none," then ceased.

For now through the gate rode one mounted on a splendid horse, whose shape seemed familiar to her even while he was far away.

"Who is that?" faltered Tua.

"My heart tells me it is Rames my son," answered Asti, grasping at her saddle-rope.