

CHAPTER XVII

TUA FINDS HER LOVER

Rames it was without a doubt; Rames grown older and stern and sad of face, but still Rames, and no other man, and oh! their eyes swam and their hearts beat at the sight of him.

"Say, shall we declare ourselves?" asked Asti.

"Nay," answered Tua, "not here and now. He would not believe, and we cannot unveil before all these men. Also, first I desire to learn more. Let him pass."

Rames rode on till he came opposite to where the two women sat on their white camels beneath a tree, when something seemed to attract his gaze to them. He looked once carelessly and turned his head away. He looked a second time, and again turned his head, though more slowly. He looked a third time, and his eyes remained fixed upon those two veiled women seated on their camels beneath the trees. Then, as though acting upon some impulse, he pulled upon his horse's bit, and rode up to them.

"Who are you, Stranger Ladies," he asked, "who own such fine camels?"

Tua bowed her head that the folds of her veil might hide her shape, but Asti answered in a feigned voice:

"Sir, both of us are merchants, and one is a harper and a singer. We have travelled hither up the Nile to the Golden City because we understand that in Napata pearls are rare, and such we have to sell. Also we were told that the new King of this city loved good singing, and my companion, who sings and harps, learned her art in Egypt, even at Thebes the holy. But who are you, Sir, that question us?"

"Lady," answered Rames, "I am an Egyptian who holds this town on behalf of the Queen of Egypt whom once I knew. Or perhaps I should say that I hold it on behalf of the Pharaoh of Egypt, since my spies tell me that the Star of Amen has taken Abi, Prince of Memphis, to husband, although they add that he finds her a masterful wife," and he laughed bitterly.

"Sir," replied Asti, "it is long since we left holy Thebes, some years indeed, and we know nothing of these things, who ply our trade from place to place. But if you are the governor of this town, show us, we pray you, as countrywomen of yours, where we may lodge in safety, and at your leisure this afternoon permit that we exhibit our pearls before you, and when that is done, and you have bought or refused them, as you may wish, that my companion should sing to you some of the ancient songs of Egypt."

"Ladies," answered Rames, "I am a soldier who would rather buy swords than pearls. Also, as it chances, I am a man who dwells alone, one in whose household no women can be found. Yet because you are of my

country, or by Amen I know not why! I grant you your request. I go out to exercise this company in the arts of war, but after sundown you shall come to my palace, and I will see your wares and hear your songs. Till then, farewell. Officer," he added to a captain who had followed him, "take these Egyptians and their camels and give them a lodging in the guest-house, where they will not be molested, and at sundown bring them to me."

Then, still staring at them as though they held his eyes in their hearts, Rames departed, and the captain led them to their lodging.

It was the hour of sundown, and Tua, adorned in beautiful white raiment, brodered with royal purple, that she carried in her baggage on the camel, with her long hair combed out and scented, a necklace of great pearls upon her bosom, a veil flung over her head, and her harp of gold and ivory in her hand, waited to be led before Rames. Asti, his mother, waited also, but she was clad in a plain black robe, and over her head was a black veil. Presently that captain who had shown them their lodging, came to them and asked if they were ready to be led before the Viceroy of Napata.

"Viceroy?" answered Asti, "I thought he was a King."

"So he is, my good Woman," replied the captain, "but it his fancy to

call himself the Viceroy of Neter-Tua, Star of Amen, wife of Abi the Usurper who rules in Egypt. A mad fancy when he might be a Pharaoh on his own account, but so it is."

"Well, Sir," said Asti, "we merchants have nothing to do with these high matters; lead us to this Pharaoh, or General, or Viceroy, with whom we hope to transact business."

So the captain conducted them to a side gate of the palace, and thence through various passages and halls, in some of which Tua recognised officers of her own whom she had commanded to accompany Rames, to an apartment of no great size, where he bade them be seated. Presently a door opened, and through it came Rames, plainly dressed in the uniform of an Egyptian general, on which they saw he wore no serpent crest or other of the outward signs of royalty. Only on his right hand that lacked the little finger, gleamed a certain royal ring, which Tua knew. With him also were several captains to whom he talked of military affairs.

Seeing the two women, he bowed to them courteously, and asked them to forgive him for having kept them waiting for him. Then he said:

"What was it that you wished to show me, Ladies? Oh! I remember, precious stones. Well, I fear me that you have brought them to a bad market, seeing that although Napata is called the City of Gold, she needs all her wealth for her own purposes, and I draw from it only a

general's pay, and a sum for the sustenance of my household, which is small. Still, let me look at your wares, for if I do not buy myself, perhaps I may be able to find you a customer."

Now when they saw the young man's noble face and bearing, and heard his simple words, the hearts of Asti and Tua, his mother and his love, beat so hard within their breasts that for a while they could scarcely speak. Glad were they, indeed, that the veils they wore hid their troubled faces from his eyes, which, as in the morning, lingered on them curiously.

At length, controlling herself with an effort, Asti answered:

"Perchance, Lord, the Great Lady your wife, or the ladies your companions, will buy if you do not."

"Have I not already told you, Merchant," asked Rames angrily, "that I have no wife, and no companions that are not men?"

"You said so, Sir," she replied humbly, always speaking in her feigned voice, "yet forgive us if we believed you not, since in our journeyings my daughter and I have seen many princes, and know that such a thing is contrary to their nature. Still we will show you our wares, for surely all the men in Napata are not unmarried."

Then, without more ado, she drew out a box of scented cedar and, opening

it, revealed a diadem of pearls worked into the shape of the royal uræus, which they had fashioned thus at Tat, and also a few of their largest single gems.

"Beautiful, indeed," said Rames, looking at them, "though there is but one who has the right to wear this crown, the divine Queen of the Upper and the Lower Land," and he sighed.

"Nay, Lord," replied Asti, "for surely her husband might wear it also."

"It would sit but ill on the fat head of Abi, from all I hear, Lady," he broke in, laughing bitterly.

"Or," went on Asti, taking no heed of his words, "a general who had conquered a great country could usurp it, and find none to reprove him, especially if he himself happened to be of the royal blood."

Now Rames looked at her sharply.

"You speak strange words," he said, "but doubtless it is by chance. Merchant, those pearls of yours are for richer men than I am, shut them in the box again, and let the lady, your daughter, sing some old song of Egypt, for such I long to hear."

"So be it, Lord," answered Asti. "Still, keep the diadem as a gift, since it was made for you alone, and may yet be useful to you--who can

know? It is the price we pay for liberty to trade in your dominions.
Nay, unless you keep it my daughter shall not sing."

"Let it lie there, then, most princely Merchant, and we will talk of the matter afterwards. Now for the song."

Then, her moment come at last, Tua stood up, and holding the ivory harp beneath her veil, she swept its golden chords. Disguising her voice, as Asti had done, she began to sing, somewhat low, a short and gentle love-song, which soon came to an end.

"It is pretty," said Rames, when she had finished, "and reminds me of I know not what. But have you no fuller music at your command? If so, I would listen to it before I bid you good-night."

She bent her head and answered almost in a whisper:

"Lord, if you wish it, I will sing you the story of one who dared to set his heart too high, and of what befell him at the hands of an angry goddess."

"Sing on," he answered. "Once I heard such a story--elsewhere."

Then Tua swept her harp and sang again, but this time with all her strength and soul. As the first glorious notes floated from her lips Rames rose from his seat, and stood staring at her entranced. On went

the song, and on, as she had sung it in the banqueting hall of Pharaoh at Thebes, so she sang it in the chamber of Rames at Napata. The scribe dared the sanctuary, the angry goddess smote him cold in death, the high-priestess wailed and mourned, the Queen of Love relented, and gave him back his life again. Then came that last glorious burst when, lifted up to heaven, the two lovers, forgiven, purged, chanted their triumph to the stars, and, by slow degrees, the music throbbled itself to silence.

Look! white-faced, trembling, Rames clung to a pillar in his chamber, while Tua sank back upon her chair, and the harp she held slipped from her hand down upon the floor.

"Whence came that harp?" he gasped. "Surely there are not two such in the world? Woman, you have stolen it. Nay, how can you have stolen the music, and the voice as well? Lady, forgive me, I have no thought of evil, but oh! grant me a boon. Why, I will tell you afterwards. Grant me a boon--let me look upon your face."

Tua lifted her hands, and undid the fastening of her veil, which slipped from her to her feet, showing her in the rich array of a prince of Egypt. His eyes met her beautiful eyes, and for a while they gazed upon each other like folk who dream.

"What trick is this?" he said angrily at last. "Before me stands the Star of Amen, Egypt's anointed Queen. The harp she bears was the royal gift of the Prince of Kesh, he who fell that night beneath my sword. The

voice is Egypt's voice, the song is Egypt's song. Nay, how can it be?
I am mad, you are magicians come to mock me, for that Star, Amen's
daughter, reigns a thousand miles away with the lord she chose, Abi, her
own uncle, he who, they say, murdered Pharaoh. Get you gone, Sorceress,
lest I cause the priests of Amen, whereof you also make a mock, to cast
you to the flames for blasphemy."

Slowly, very slowly, Tua opened the wrappings about her throat,
revealing the Sign of Life that from her birth was stamped above her
bosom.

"When they see this holy mark, think you that the priests of Amen will
cast me to the flames, O Royal Son of Mermes?" asked Tua softly.

"Why not?" he answered. "If you have power to lie in one thing, you have
power to lie in all. She who can steal the loveliness of Egypt's self,
can also steal the signet of the god."

"Say, did you, O Rames, also steal that other signet on your hand, a
Queen's gift, I think, that once a Pharaoh wore? Say also how did you
lose the little finger of that hand? Was it perchance in the maw of a
certain god that dwells in the secret pool of a temple at holy Thebes?"

So Tua spake, and waited a while, but Rames said nothing. He opened his
mouth to answer, indeed, but a dumbness sealed his lips.

"Nurse," she went on presently, "I cannot persuade this Lord that I am Egypt and no other. Try you."

So Asti loosed her black veil, and let it fall about her feet. He stared at her noble features and grey hair, then, uttering a great cry of "Mother, my Mother, who they swore to me was dead in Memphis," he flung himself upon her breast, and there burst into weeping.

"Aye, Rames," said Asti presently, "your Mother, she who bore you, and no other woman, and with her one who because her royal heart loves you now as from the first, from moon to moon for two whole years has braved the dangers of the desert, and of wicked men, till at last Amen her father brings her safely to your side. Now do you believe?"

"Aye," answered Rames, "I believe."

"Then, O faithful Captain," said Tua, "take this gift from Egypt's Queen, which a while ago you thrust aside, and be its Lord and mine," and lifting the diadem of pearls crested with the royal uræi she set it on his brow, as once before she had done in that hour of dawn when she vowed herself to him in Thebes.

It was night, and all their wonderful story had been told.

"Such is our tale, Rames my Son," said Asti, "and long may you search before you find another that will match it. Now tell us yours."

"It is short, Mother," he answered. "Obeying the commands of her Majesty yonder," and he bowed towards Tua, who sat at the further side of the table at which they ate, "I travelled up the Nile to this city. As the old king, the father of the Prince of Kesh, would have slain me I attacked him first by the help of my Egyptians and his own subjects, and--well, he died. Moreover, none regretted him, for he was a bad king, and I stepped into his place, and ever since have been engaged in righting matters which they needed. Long ago I would have returned to Egypt and reported myself, only my spies told me of all that had happened there. They told me, for instance, of the murder of Pharaoh, by the witchcraft of Abi and his companions; and they told me that Pharaoh's daughter, the Star of Amen, forgetting all things and the oath she swore to me, had married her old uncle Abi that she might save her life and power."

"And you believed them, Rames?" asked Tua reproachfully.

"What else could I do but believe, Lady, seeing that those same spies swore that they had seen your Majesty seated upon your throne at Memphis, and elsewhere, and causing Abi to run to and fro like a little dog, and do your bidding in all things? How could I know that it was your Double, and not yourself that married Abi?"

"I think that Abi knows to-day," answered Tua, "since it seems that a Ka makes but a bad wife to any man. But now what shall we do?"

"Will you not first marry me, Lady?" suggested Rames. "Afterwards, we can think."

"Aye," she answered, "I will marry you as I have promised, but in one place only, the temple of Amen in Egypt. First win me back my throne, then ask for my hand."

"It shall be done," he answered, "though how I know not, seeing that another sits upon that throne of yours, who, perhaps, will not be willing to bid it farewell."

"We will send her a message, Son," said Asti. "Now leave us, for we must sleep."

"Where is your messenger, Mother?" asked Rames as he went.

"Have you known me all these years, my Son, and not learned that I have servants whom you cannot see?" answered Asti.

It was midnight, and in their chamber of the palace of Rames, Asti and Tua knelt side by side in prayer to Amen, Father of the Gods. Then,

their petitions finished, Asti rose to her feet, and once again, as in the pylon tower at Memphis, uttered the awful words that in bygone days had been spoken to her by the spirit of Ahura the divine in Osiris.

There was a sound as of whispering, a sound as of beating wings. Lo! in the shadow beyond the lamplight a mist gathered that brightened by degrees and took shape, the shape of a royal woman clad in the robes and ornaments of Egypt's Queen, whose face was as the face of Neter-Tua, only prouder and more unearthly. In silence it stood before them scanning them with its glittering eyes.

"Whence come you, O Double?" asked Asti.

"From that place where your command found me, O Mistress of Secret Things, from the house of Abi at Thebes, wherein he seems to rule as Pharaoh," the Form answered in its cold voice.

"How fares it with Abi and with Egypt, O Double?"

"With Abi it fares but ill; he wastes in toil and fear and longings, and knows no happy hour. But with Egypt it fares well. Never, O Lady of Strength, was she more great than she is to-day, for in all things I have fulfilled the commandments that were laid upon me, and now I desire to rest in that bosom whence I came," and she pointed to Tua, who stood and watched.

"Not yet, O Double, for there is still work for you to do, and then you shall be at peace till the day of the last Awakening. Hearken: Return to Thebes, and tell a false tale in the ears of Abi and his councillors. Say that Rames the Egyptian, who has seized the rule of Kesh, has declared himself Pharaoh of Egypt by right of race, and your husband by the promise of him who ruled before you whom Abi did to death. Cause this Abi to gather a great army, and to march southward to make an end of Rames. But secretly whisper into the ears of the generals of this army, that it is true the divine Pharaoh who is gone promised you in marriage to Rames with your own consent, and by the command of Amen, Father of the Gods, and of your Spirit. Whisper to them that Amen is wrath with Abi because of his crime, as he will show them in due season, and that those who rebel against him shall have his love and favour. At the Gateway of the South, whence the Nile rushes northward between great walls of rock, Rames shall meet the army of Abi. With him will come her of whom you are, and I whom you must obey; also perchance another who is greater than all of us. There at the Gateway of the South your task shall be accomplished, and you shall find the rest you seek. It is said."

"I hear the command, and it shall be done," answered the Ka in its cold, passionless voice. "Only, Lady of the Secrets, Doer of the Will Divine, delay not, lest, outworn, I should break back like a flame to yonder breast that is my home, slaying as I come, and leaving wreck behind me."

Then as the figure had appeared, so also it disappeared, growing faint

by degrees, and vanishing away into the night out of which it came.

It was morning at Thebes, and Abi sat in the great hall of Pharaoh transacting business of the State, while at his side stood Kaku the Vizier. Changed were both of them, indeed, since they had plotted the death of their guest and king at Memphis, for now Abi was so worn with work and fear and wretchedness, that his royal robes hung about him in loose folds, while Kaku had become an old, old man, who trembled as he walked.

"Is the business finished, Officer?" asked Abi impatiently.

"Nay, Mighty Lord," answered Kaku, "there is still enough to keep you sitting here till noon, and after that you must receive the Council and the Embassies."

"I will not receive them. Let them wait till another day. Knave, would you work me to death, who have never known an hour's rest or peace since the happy time when I ruled as Prince of Memphis?"

"Lord," answered Kaku, bowing humbly, "weary or no you must receive them, for so it has been decreed by her Majesty the Queen, whose command may not be broken."

"The Queen!" exclaimed Abi in a low voice, rolling his hollow eyes around him as though in fear. "Oh, Kaku, would that I had never beheld the Queen. I tell you that she is not a woman, as indeed you know well, but a fiend with a heart of ice, and the venomous cunning of a snake. I am called Pharaoh, yet am but her puppet to carry out her decrees. I am called her husband, yet she is still no wife to me, or to any, although all men love her, and by that love are oftentimes brought to doom. Last night again she vanished from my side as I sat listening to her orders, and after a while, lo! there she was as before, only, as it seemed to me, somewhat weary. I asked her where she had been and she answered: 'Further than I could travel in a year to visit one she loved as much as she hated me. Now who can that be, Kaku?'"

"Rames, I think, Lord, he who has made himself King of Kesh," replied Kaku in an awed whisper. "Without a doubt she loved the man when she was a woman, though whom she loves now the evil gods know alone. We are in her power, and must work her will, for, Lord, if we do not we shall die, and I think that neither of us desires to die, since beyond that gate dead Pharaoh waits for us."

At these words Abi groaned aloud, wiping the sweat from his blanched face with the corner of his robe, and saying:

"There you speak truly. Go, call the scribes, and let us get on with the Queen's business."

Kaku turned to obey, when suddenly heralds entered the empty hall, crying:

"Her Majesty the Queen waits without with a great company, and humbly craves audience of her good lord, the divine Pharaoh of the Upper and the Lower Land."

Abi and Kaku looked at each other, and despair was in their eyes.

"Let her Majesty enter," said the King in a low voice.

The heralds retired, and presently through the cedar doors appeared the Queen in state. She was splendid to behold, splendid in her proud beauty, splendid in her dress, and in her royal ornaments. On she swept up the hall, attended by Merytra, who bore her fan and cushion, for it was her pleasure that this woman should wait upon her day and night without pause or rest, although she who had once been so handsome now was worn almost to nothingness with toil and terror. Behind Merytra came guards and high-priests, and after them the great lords of the Council, who were called the King's Companions and the generals of the army.

On she swept up the hall till reaching the foot of the throne whereon Abi sat, she motioned to Merytra to place the cushion upon its step, and knelt, saying:

"I am come as a loyal wife to make a humble prayer to Pharaoh my Lord in

the presence of his Court."

"Rise and speak on, Great Lady," answered Abi. "It is not fit that you should kneel to me."

"Nay, it is most fit that Pharaoh's Queen should kneel to Pharaoh when she seeks his divine favour." Yet she rose, and, seating herself in a chair that had been brought, spoke thus:

"O Pharaoh, last night I dreamed a dream. I dreamed of the Count Rames, son of Mermes, the last of that royal race which ruled before our House in Egypt. I mean that man who slew the Prince of Kesh in this very hall, and whom, my Father being sick, I sent to Napata, to be judged by the King of Kesh, but who, it seems, overthrew that king and took his kingdom in the name of Egypt.

"I dreamed that this bold and able man, not satisfied with the rich kingdom of Kesh, has made a scheme to attack Egypt; to slay you, most glorious Lord, to proclaim himself Pharaoh by right of ancient blood, and more--to take me, your faithful wife, to be his wife, and thereby secure his throne."

"Without doubt, Queen, this turbulent Rames might think of such things," said Abi, "and so far your dream may be true; yet it should be remembered that at present he is at Napata, which is a very long way off, and has probably only a small army at his command, so why should

you trouble about what he thinks?"

"O Pharaoh, that was not all my dream, for in it I saw two pictures. The first was of this bold Rames attacking Thebes, and conquering it, yes, and dragging me away to be his wife over your very corpse, O Pharaoh. The second was of you and your army meeting him at the Gate of the South Land, and slaying him, and taking possession of the kingdom of Kesh, and its golden city, and ruling them for Egypt, until you die."

"Here be two dreams, O Queen," said Abi. "Tell us now, which would you follow, for both of them cannot be right?"

"How can I know, Pharaoh, and how can you know? Yet by your side stands one who will know, for he is the first of magicians, and a chosen interpreter of the heart of the gods. Grant that he may make this matter clear," and she pointed to Kaku, who stood by the throne.

"Divine Lady," stammered Kaku, "the thing is too high for me. I have no message, I cannot tell you----"

"You were ever over-modest, Kaku," said the Queen. "Command him, O Pharaoh, to shed the light of his wisdom on us, for without doubt he knows the truth."

"Yes, yes," said Abi, "he knows it, he knows everything. Kaku, delay not, interpret the dream of her Majesty."

"I cannot, I will not," spluttered the old astrologer. "Ask my wife, the Lady Merytra there, she is wiser than I am."

"My good friend Merytra has already told me her mind," said the Queen, "now we wait for yours. A prophet must speak when the gods call on him, or," she added slowly, "he must cease to be a prophet who betrays the gods by hiding their high counsel."

Now Kaku could find no way of escape, so, since he feared the very name of Rames, within himself he determined that he would interpret the dream in the sense that Pharaoh should await the attack of this Rames at Thebes, and while every ear listened to him, thus began his tale. Yet as he spoke he felt the glittering eyes of that spirit who was called the Queen, fix themselves upon him and compel his tongue, so that he said just what he did not mean to say.

"A light shines in me," he cried, "and I see that the second vision of her Majesty is the true vision. You must go up with your army to the Gate of the South, O Pharaoh, and there meet this usurper, Rames, that these matters may be brought to their appointed end."

"Their appointed end? What appointed end?" shouted Abi.

"Doubtless that which her Majesty dreamed," answered Kaku. "At least, it is laid upon me to tell you that you must go up to the Gate of the

South."

"Then I wish that the Gate of the South were laid upon you also, O Evil Prophet," exclaimed Abi. "For two years only have I ruled in Egypt, and lo! three wars have been my portion, a war against the people of Syria, a war against the desert men, and a war against the Nine Bow barbarians that invaded the Low Lands. Must I now, in my age, undertake another war against the terrible sons of Kesh also? Let this dog, Rames, come, if come he will, and I will hang him here at the gates of Thebes."

"Nay, nay, O Pharaoh," replied Kaku, "it is laid upon me to tell you that you must hang him in the desert hundreds of miles away from Thebes. That is the interpretation of the vision; that is the command of the gods."

"The gods have spoken by the mouth of their prophet," cried the Queen in a thrilling, triumphant voice. "Now Pharaoh, Priests, Councillors, and Captains of Egypt, let us make ready to travel to the Gate of the South, and there hang the dog Rames in the desert land, that thus Egypt and Egypt's King and Egypt's Queen may be freed from danger, and rest in peace, and the wealth of the City of Gold be divided amongst you all."

"Aye, aye," answered the Priests, Councillors, and Captains, the shrill voice of Kaku leading the chorus, still against his will, "let us go up at once, and let her Majesty accompany us."

"Yes," said the Queen, "I will accompany you, for though I be but a woman, shall I shrink from what Pharaoh, my dear Lord, dares? We will sail at the new moon."

That night Abi and Kaku stood face to face.

"What is this that you have done?" asked Abi. "Do you not remember the words which dead Pharaoh spoke in the awful vision that came to me that night at Memphis, when he bade me take the Royal Loveliness which I desired to be my wife? Do you not remember that he bade me also reign in her right until I met 'one Rames, Son of Mermes' and with him a Beggar-man who is charged with another message for me?"

"I remember," answered Kaku in a hollow voice.

"What, then, is this message, Man, that will come from Rames or the Beggar? Is it not the message of my death and yours, of us whose tombs were finished but yesterday?"

"It may be so, Lord."

"Then why did you interpret the dream of the Queen in the sense that I must hurry southwards to meet this very Rames--and my doom?"

"Because I could not help it," groaned Kaku. "That spirit who is called a Queen compelled me. Abi, there is no escape for us; we are in the net of Fate--unless, unless you dare----" and he looked meaningly at the sword that hung by Pharaoh's side.

"Nay, Kaku," he answered, "I dare not. Let us live while we may, knowing what awaits us beyond the gate."

"Aye," moaned Kaku, "beyond the Gate of the South, where we shall find Rames the Avenger, and that Beggar who is charged with a message for us."