

CHAPTER XVIII

THE JUDGMENT OF THE GODS

Three more months had gone by, and the great host of Pharaoh was encamped beyond the Southern Gate, and the warships of Pharaoh were anchored thick on either bank of the Nile. There they lay prepared for battle, for spies had reported to them that the general, Rames, Lord of Kesh, was advancing northward swiftly, though with so small an army that it could easily be destroyed. Therefore Abi waited there to destroy it without further toil, nor did his terrible Queen gainsay him. She also seemed content to wait.

One evening as the sun sank it was told to them that the troops of Rames had appeared, and occupied the mountains on the right bank of the Nile, being encamped around that temple of Amen which had stood there for thousands of years.

"Good," said the Queen. "To-morrow Pharaoh will go up against him and make an end of this matter. Is it not so, Pharaoh?" and she looked at him with her glittering eyes.

"Yes, yes," answered Abi, "the sooner the better, for I am worn out, and would return to Thebes. Yet," he added in a weak, uncertain voice, "I misdoubt me of this war, I know not why. What is it that you stare at in the heavens so fixedly, O Kaku?"

Now the eyes of the Council were turned on Kaku the Vizier, and they perceived that he was much disturbed.

"Look," he said, pointing with a trembling finger towards the skies.

They looked, and saw hanging just above the evening glow a very bright and wonderful star, and near to it, another, paler star which presently it seemed to cover.

"The Star of Amen," gasped Kaku in a voice that shook, "and your star, O Pharaoh. The Star of Amen eats it up, your star goes out, and will never be seen again by living man. Oh! Abi, that which I foresaw years and years ago has come to pass. Your day is done, and your night is at hand, O Abi."

"If so," shouted Abi in his rage and terror, "be sure of this, Dog--that you shall share it."

As he spoke a sound of screams drew near, and presently into the midst of them rushed Merytra, the wife of Kaku.

"The vengeance of the gods," she screamed, "the vengeance of the gods! Listen, Abi. But now this very evening as I slept in my pavilion, who can never sleep at night, there appeared to me the spirit of dead Pharaoh, of Pharaoh whom we slew by magic, and he said: 'Tell the

murderer, Abi, and the wizard-rogue, Kaku, your husband, that I summon both of them to meet me ere another sun is set, and Woman, come you with them.' Death is at our door, Abi, death and the terrible vengeance of the god!" and Merytra fell down foaming in a fit.

Now Abi went mad in the extremity of his fear.

"They are sorcerers," he shouted, "who would bewitch me. Take them and keep them safe, and let Kaku be beaten with rods till he comes to his right mind again. To-morrow, when I have slain Rames, I will hang this magician at my mast-head."

But the Queen only laughed and repeated after him:

"Yes, yes, my good Lord, to-morrow, when you have killed Rames, this magician shall hang at your mast-head. Fear not, whatever chances I will see that it is done."

Merytra, recovered from her madness, lay upon a bed, when a woman entered and stood over her. Looking up she saw it was the Queen.

"Hearken to me," said the Queen in an icy voice, "and tell the words I speak to Abi. The time is accomplished, and I leave him. If he would look again upon Neter-Tua, Morning Star of Amen, the Great Lady of

Egypt, let him seek her in the camp of Rames. There he shall find her in the temple of Amen, which is set upon the mountain in the midst of the camp."

Then she was gone.

Merytra rose from the bed, and called to the guards to lead her to Abi. So loudly did she call, saying that she had a message for him which must not be delayed, that at length one went and told him of her words, and he came to her.

"What is it now, Sorceress?" he asked. "Have you dreamed more ill-omened dreams?"

"Nay, Pharaoh," she answered, "but the Queen has fled to Rames," and word for word she repeated what had been told her.

"It is a lie," said Abi. "How can she have fled through a triple line of guards?"

"Search, then, and see, O Pharaoh."

So Abi searched, but though none had seen her pass, and none had gone with her, the Queen could not be found.

It was midnight, and while they still searched, by the light of the moon

a tall figure clad in tattered robes, who bore a thornwood staff in his hand, and had a white beard that fell down below his middle, was perceived walking to and fro about the camp.

"Who is that fellow?" asked Abi, and as he spoke the figure cried aloud in a great voice:

"Listen, Councillors, Captains, and Soldiers of Egypt, to the command of Amen, spoken by the lips of his messenger, Kepher the Wanderer. Lift no sword against Rames, Lord of Kesh, for he is my servant, and shall be Pharaoh over you, and husband of your Queen, and father of kings to come. Seize Abi the usurper, the murderer of Pharaoh, his brother, and Kaku the sorcerer, and Merytra the traitress, and lead them at the dawn to my temple upon yonder hill, where I will declare my commands to you in the sanctuary of the temple. So shall peace be upon you and all Egypt, and the breath of life remain in your nostrils."

Now hearing these fearful words, and remembering dead Pharaoh's prophecy of a Beggar who should bring a message to him, Abi drew his sword and rushed at the man. But ere ever he came there, the Wanderer was gone, and lo! they heard him repeating his message far away. Thither they ran also, but now the words of doom were being called upon the ships, and on their prows they saw his tall shape stand--first on this and then on that.

"It is the gods who speak," cried the priests, "let us obey the gods!"

and suddenly they flung themselves upon Abi and bound him, and Kaku and Merytra they bound also, waiting for the dawn. But of the tall, white-bearded man in beggar's robes they saw and heard no more.

At that same time Tua slept in a chamber of the temple upon the hill, while Asti watched her. Presently a wind blew in the chamber, and Asti, looking up, became aware of a Shape that she knew well, the very shape of Tua who slept upon the bed.

"What is your will, O Double?" asked Asti.

"My will is that you give me rest," answered the Ka. "My task is accomplished, I am weary. Speak the secret words of power that you have, and let me return to her from whom I came, and in her bosom sleep till the great Day of Awakening."

So Asti, knowing that she was commanded so to do, uttered those secret words, and as she spoke them the glorious Shape seemed to grow faint and fade away. Only Tua rose upon her bed, stretched out her arms and sighed, fell back again and slept heavily until the morning. Then she awoke, asking what had befallen her, for she was changed.

"This has befallen, Queen. That which went forth from you by the command of Amen has returned to you again, its duty done. Rise up now and adorn

yourself, for this is your day of victory and marriage."

As the sun rose Tua went forth more beautiful than the morning, and at the gates of the temple found Rames awaiting her, clad in his armour, while from the mists below came a sound as of an army approaching.

"What passes?" asked Tua, looking at him, and there was more love in her blue eyes than there is water in the Nile at flood.

"I think that Abi attacks us, Lady," he said, bowing the knee to her, "and I am fearful for you, for our men are few, and his are many."

"Be not afraid of Abi, or of anything, O Rames, though it is true that this day you must lose your liberty," she answered with a sweet and gentle smile, and he wondered at her words.

Then, before he could speak again, two of the captains of his outposts ran in and reported that without were priests and heralds, who came in peace from the army of Abi.

"Summon the officers, and let them be admitted," said Rames, "but be careful, all of you, lest this embassy should hide some trick of war. Come, Queen, it is to you that they should speak, and not to me, who am but a general of your province, Kesh," and he followed her to the inner court, where, in front of the sanctuary, was a chair, on which, at his prayer, she seated herself, as a mighty Queen should do.

Now, conducted by his own officers, the embassy entered, bearing with them three closed litters, and Tua and Rames noted that among that embassy were the greatest generals, and the most holy priests of Egypt. At a given sign they prostrated themselves before the glory of the Queen, all save the soldiers who bore the litters. Next, from among their ranks out stepped the venerable High-Priest of Amen at Thebes, and stood before Tua with bowed head till, with a motion of her hand, she commanded him to speak.

"O Morning-Star of Amen," he began, "after you left our camp last night a messenger came to us from the Father of the Gods----"

"Stay, O High-Priest," broke in Tua. "I did not leave your camp who never tarried there, and who for two long years have set no foot upon the holy soil of Egypt. No, not since I fled from Memphis to save myself from death, or what is worse--the defilement of a forced marriage with Abi, my Uncle, and Pharaoh's murderer."

Now the High-Priest turned and stared at those behind him, and all who were present stared at the Queen.

"Pardon me," he said, "but how can this thing be, seeing that for those two years we have seen your Majesty day by day living among us as the wife of Abi?"

Now Tua looked at Asti, who stood at her side, and the tall and noble
Asti looked at the High-Priest, saying:

"You know me, do you not?"

"Aye, Lady," he answered, "we know you. You were the wife of Mermes,
the last shoot of a royal tree, and you are the mother of the Lord
Rames yonder, against whom we came out to make war. We know you well,
O greatest of all the seers in Egypt, Mistress of Secret Things. But we
believed that you had perished in the temple of Sekhet at Memphis, that
temple where Pharaoh died. Now we understand that, being a magician, you
only vanished thence."

"What bear you there?" asked Asti, glancing at the litters.

"Bring forth the prisoners," said the High-Priest.

Then the curtains were drawn, and the soldiers lifted from the litters
Abi, Kaku, and Merytra, who were bound with cords, and stood them on
their feet before the Queen.

"These are the very murderers of Pharaoh, my Father, who would have also
brought me to shame. Why are my eyes affronted with the sight of them?"
asked Tua indignantly.

"Because the Messenger of the Gods, clothed as a Beggar-man, commanded

it, your Majesty," answered the High-Priest. "Now we understand that they are brought hither to be judged for the murder of Pharaoh, the good god who was your father."

"Shall a wife sit in judgment on her husband?" broke in Abi.

"Man," said Tua, "I never was your wife. How can I have been your wife, who have not seen you since the death of Pharaoh? Listen, now, all of you, to the tale of that marvel which has come to pass. At my birth--you, O High-Priest, should know it well--Amen gave to me a Ka, a Self within myself, to protect me in all dangers. The dangers came upon me, and Asti the Magician, my foster-mother, speaking the words that had been taught to her by the spirit of the divine Ahura who bore me, called forth that Ka of mine, and left it where I had been, to be the wife of Abi, such a wife, I think, as never man had before. But me, Amen, my father, rescued, and with me Asti, bearing us in the Boat of the Sun to far lands, and protecting us in many perils, till at length we came to the city of Napata, where we found a certain servant of mine whom, as it chances, I--love," and she looked at Rames and smiled.

"Meanwhile, my Shadow did the work to which it was appointed, ruling for me in Egypt, and drawing on Abi to his ruin. But last night It returned to me, and will be seen no more by men, except, perchance, in my tomb after I am dead. Judge you if my tale be true, and whether I am indeed Neter-Tua, Daughter of Amen," and opening the wrappings about her throat, she showed the holy sign that was stamped above her breast,

adding:

"The High-Priest yonder should know this mark, for he saw it at my birth."

Now the aged man drew near, looked, and said:

"It is the sign. Here shines the Star of Amen and no other. Still we do not understand. Tell us the tale, O Asti."

So Asti stood forward, and told that tale, omitting nothing, and then Rames told his tale, whereto Tua the Queen added a little, and, although ere they finished the sun was high, none wearied in listening save only Abi, Kaku, and Merytra, who heard death in every word.

It was done at length, and a great silence fell upon the place, for the tongues of men were tied. Presently, the High-Priest, who all this while had stood with bent head, lifted up his eyes to heaven, crying:

"O Amen, Father of the Spirit of this Queen, show now thy will, that we may learn it and obey."

For a while there was silence, till suddenly a sound was heard in the dark sanctuary where stood the statue of the god, a sound as of a stick tapping upon the granite floor. Then the curtains of that sanctuary were drawn, and standing between them there appeared the figure of an

ancient, bearded man, with stony eyes, who was clad in a beggar's robe. It was he who had met Tua and Asti in the wilderness and eaten up their food. It was he who had saved them in the palace of the desert king. It was he who but last night had walked the camp of Abi.

"I am that Messenger whom men from the beginning have called Kepher," he said. "I am the Dweller in the wilderness whom your fathers knew, and your sons shall know. I am he who seeks for charity and pays it back in life and death. I am the pen of Thoth the Recorder, I am the scourge of Osiris. I am the voice of Amen, god above the gods. Hearken you people of Egypt--not for a little end have these things come to pass, but that ye may learn that there is design in heaven, and justice upon earth, and, after justice, judgment. Pharaoh, the good servant of the gods, was basely murdered by his own kin whom he trusted. Neter-Tua, his daughter, and daughter of Amen, was condemned to shame, Rames of the royal race was sent forth to danger or to death, far from her he loved, and who loved him by that divine command which rules the hearts of men. This is the command of the gods--Let these twain be wed and take Egypt as their heritage, and call down upon it peace and greatness. But as for these murderers and wizards"--and he pointed to Abi, to Kaku, and to Merytra--"let them be placed in the sanctuary of Amen, to await what he shall send them."

So spoke Kepher the Messenger, and departed whence he came, nor in that generation did any see him more.

Then they took up Abi, Kaku, and Merytra, and cut their bonds. They threw them into the dark sanctuary before the great stone image of the god. They shut the electrum doors upon them, and left them there wailing and cursing, while the High-Priest of Amen joined the hands of Rames and of Tua, and declared them to be man and wife for ever.

Now, after these things were done, the Pharaoh and his Queen drove through the hosts of Egypt in their golden chariot, and received the homage of the hosts ere they departed northwards for Thebes. At nightfall they returned again and sat side by side at the marriage feast, and once more Tua swept her harp of ivory and gold, and sang the ancient song of him who dared much for love, and won the prize.

So in the dim, forgotten years, their joy fell on Rames and on Tua, Morning-Star of Amen, which still with them remains in the new immortal kingdom that they have won long and long ago.

But when in the morning Asti the wise dared to open the great doors and peer into the sanctuary of Amen, she saw a dreadful sight. For there at the feet of the effigy of the god lay Abi, who slew his brother, and Kaku the sorcerer, and Merytra the traitress, dead, slain by their own or by each other's hand, and the stony eyes of the god stared down upon them.