

H. Rider Haggard

Queen of the Dawn:
A Love Tale of Old Egypt

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Генри Райдер Хаггард

**Queen of the Dawn: A
Love Tale of Old Egypt**

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Sir Henry Rider Haggard was an English writer of adventure novels set in exotic locations, predominantly Africa, and the creator of the Lost World literary genre. Queen of the Dawn is about the overthrow of the Hyksos and reinstatement of the rightful pharaonic line.

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Chapter 1

The Dream of Rima

There was war in Egypt and Egypt was rent in two. At Memphis in the north, at Tanis, and in all the rich lands of the Delta where by many mouths the Nile flows down to the sea, a usurping race held power, that whose forefathers, generations before, had descended upon Egypt like a flood, destroyed its temples and deposed its gods, possessing themselves of the wealth of the land. At Thebes in the south the descendants of the ancient Pharaohs still ruled precariously, again and again attempting to drive out the fierce Semitic or Bedouin kings, named the Shepherds, whose banners flew from the walls of all the northern cities.

They failed because they were too weak, indeed the hour of their final victory was yet far away and of it our tale does not tell.

Nefra the Princess, she who was named the Beautiful and afterwards was known as Uniter of Lands, was the only child of one of these Theban Antefs, Kheperra, born of his Queen, Rima, daughter of Ditanah, the King of Babylon, who had given her to him in marriage to strengthen him in his struggle against the Shepherds, also called the *Aati* or “Plague-bearers.” Nefra was the first and only child of this marriage, for shortly after she was born Kheperra the King, her father, with all the host that he could gather, went down Nile to fight the Aati who marched to meet him from Tanis and from Memphis. They met in a great battle in which Kheperra was slain and his army defeated, though not before it had slaughtered such numbers of the enemy that, abandoning their advance on Thebes, the generals of the Shepherds returned with the remnant of their troops whence they came. Yet by this victory Apepi, the King of the Shepherds, became in fact Pharaoh of all Egypt. Kheperra was dead, leaving behind him but one infant girl, and so were numbers of the great Theban lords, others of whom hastened to submit to the ruler of the North.

The Shepherd people too, like the Egyptians of the South, were weary of war and would not fight again. Therefore, although they were defeated, no cruelties were inflicted upon the followers of Kheperra, nor was great tribute asked of them; also they were allowed to worship their ancient gods in peace, and this in the northern as well as the southern lands. Indeed, by now, although the god of the Shepherds was Baal, to whom they gave the name of Set because already it was well known upon the Nile, the Shepherd kings re-built the temples of Ra and Amen and Ptah, of Isis and of Hathor, that their forefathers had destroyed when first they invaded Egypt, and themselves made offerings in them, acknowledging these divinities.

Only one thing did Apepi demand of the conquered Thebans, namely that Rima the Queen of dead Kheperra, and the babe Nefra, his daughter and lawful heiress of Upper Egypt, should be given up to him, hearing which Rima hid herself away with the child, as shall be told.

Now of the birth of Nefra the Princess there were strange stories. It was said that after she came into the world, a very fair babe, gray-eyed, light-skinned, and black-haired, and the rites had been accomplished, she was laid upon her mother’s bosom. When Rima had looked upon her and she had been shown to the King her father, in a weak voice, for she had suffered much, the Queen demanded to be left alone, so earnestly that the physicians and women thought it best to appear to obey her and withdrew themselves behind certain curtains that divided the birth-chamber from another, where they remained silent.

The night had fallen and the birth-chamber was dark, for as yet Rima could bear no light near her. Yet of a sudden one of the women, a priestess of Hathor named Kemmah, who had nursed the King Kheperra from his birth and now was to fill that office to his child, having remained awake, saw a light glowing through the curtains, and being frightened, peeped between them. Behold! in the birth-chamber, looking down on the Queen, who seemed to be asleep, were two royal and glorious

women or so Kemmah swore and believed, from whose robes and bodies flowed light and whose eyes shone like stars. Queens they seemed to be, no less, for there were crowns upon their heads and they glittered with jewels which only queens could wear. Moreover, one of them held in her hand the Cross of Life fashioned in gold, and the other a looped sistrum with gems strung on golden wires, such as is used to make music when the priestesses walk in procession before the statues of the gods.

This glorious pair, at the sight of whom the knees of the watcher trembled and the power of speech left her, so that she could say no word to wake the others, bent down – first she who held the Cross of Life and then she who held the sistrum – and whispered into the ear of the sleeping Queen. Then she who held the Cross of Life very gently lifted the babe from the mother's breast, kissed it, and laid the Cross upon its lips. This done she gave it to the other goddess, who also kissed it and shook above its head the sistrum, which made a tinkling music ere she laid the infant back upon its mother's breast.

Next instant both were gone and the room that had been filled with brightness grew black with night, while the priestess who had seen, being overcome with fear, swooned away until the sun was risen.

Nor was she the first to speak of this matter which she deemed holy and fearful, being afraid lest she had but dreamed or should be held a teller of tales who took the names of the gods in vain. Yet on the morrow the Queen called for her husband and said that a very strange vision had come to her during the night which she described in these words:

“It seemed to me that when weak with pain I had fallen asleep, two glorious ladies appeared to me clothed in the garments and wearing the emblems of goddesses of Egypt. One of these, who bore in her hand the symbol of Life, spoke to me in my dream, saying, ‘O Daughter of Babylon, by marriage Queen of Egypt and mother of Egypt's heiress, hear us. We are Isis and Hathor, ancient goddesses of Egypt, as you know, who of late, since you came to this land, have worshipped in our temples and made offerings on our altars. Be not afraid, for although you were bred to the service of other gods we come to bless her who is born of you. Know, O Queen, that great troubles await you and bitter loss that shall leave you desolate, nor with all our strength can we save you from these, for they are written in the book of fate and must befall. Nor, for a while, that to mortals must seem long, can we free Egypt from the bonds with which the Shepherds have bound her, as they bind the feet of their own sheep for slaughter, though the time shall come when she shall shake them loose, like a bull breaking through its net, and grow greater than ever she has been. As every living thing suffers for its sins, so must Egypt suffer for her sins who has not been loyal to herself, her faith, or the lessons of the past. Yet in the end, if only for a while, her troubles shall pass like summer clouds, and from behind them shall shine out the bright star of her glory.’

“Now I answered that vision or that goddess, saying: ‘These are heavy words you speak to me, O divine Lady. With Egypt indeed I have little to do, who am but the wife of one of its kings, a princess sprung from another land. Egypt must find the fate that she has shaped, but as a woman I would learn that of my lord whom I love and of the child that has been given to us.’

“‘The fate of this lord of yours shall be glorious,’ answered she who bore the symbol of Life – ‘and in the end, that of your child shall be happy.’

“Then she seemed to bend down and to take the babe in her arms and to kiss it, saying: ‘The blessing of Isis the Mother be upon thee. The strength of Isis be thy strength, and the wisdom of Isis be thy guiding star. Fear not! Be not faint-hearted, O Royal Child, since always Isis is at thy side, and however great thy danger, never shalt thou come to harm. Long shall be thy day and peaceful at the last, and thou shalt see thy grandchildren playing round thy knees. If only for a while, thou shalt bind together that which is divided and thy name shall be Uniter of Lands. Such are the gifts that Isis gives to thee, O Lady of Egypt.’

“So that goddess spoke, holding out the babe in the hollow of her shining arm to the divine sister who stood at her side. She took the child; she too kissed her on the brow and said: ‘Behold! I,

Hathor, goddess of Love and Beauty, bestow upon thee, the Princess of Egypt, all that I have to give. Beautiful exceedingly shalt thou be, and through love thou shalt make smooth the path of millions. Turning neither to right nor left, forgetting crookedness and policies, follow thou Hathor's star and thine own heart, rejoicing in Hathor's gifts and leaving all else to heaven that sees what thou canst not see and works to ends thou dost not know. Thus, O Royal Child, shalt thou sow happiness upon the earth and beyond the earth garner its harvest to thy breast.'

"Thus in my dream those goddesses seemed to speak, and lo! they were gone."

Kheperra the King listened to this tale and made light of it.

"A dream indeed," he said, laughing, "and a happy dream since it prophesies naught but good to this babe of ours, who it seems is to be beautiful and wise, a very Flower of Love and a Uniter of Egypt, if only for a while. What more could we wish for her?"

"Yes, Lord," answered Rima, heavily, "it prophesies good to the child, but, as I fear, ill to others."

"If so, what of it, Wife? One crop must fall before another can be sown and in every crop there are weeds as well as wheat. Such is the law to which all that lives must bow. Nay, do not weep over a phantasy born of pain and darkness. They call me, I must go, for soon the army starts to fight those Shepherds and to conquer them."

Yet Kheperra thought more of this tale than he chose to say, so much indeed that he went to the high priests of Isis and of Hathor and repeated it to them, word for word. These priests, not knowing what to believe, inquired if any had seen aught in the birth-chamber, and thus came to learn of the vision of the Lady Kemmah for, to them, as her superiors, she must tell all.

Now they were astonished indeed, and rejoiced, because they were sure that such a wonder had happened as was not told of in Egypt for generations. Moreover, they caused the words of the dream and the vision of Kemmah to be written down in full and sealed by the Queen and Kemmah, also by themselves as witnesses, in three different rolls, one of which was given to the Queen to keep for the Princess Nefra, while the others were hidden away in the archives of Hathor and Isis. Yet both they and the magicians whom they consulted were frightened at that part of the dream which told of great troubles and bitter loss that were to befall the Queen and leave her desolate.

"What loss," they asked, "could befall her, when happiness and prosperity were promised to her child, save that of the King her husband? – unless, indeed, other children were to be born to her whom Heaven would take away."

Still of these terrors they said nothing, only letting it be known that Isis and Hathor had appeared and blessed the new-born Princess of Egypt. Yet they were true enough, for very soon King Kheperra marched to the war and within two moons came the evil tidings that he was slain, fighting gallantly in the van of his troops, and that his army, although not crushed, was too weak from loss of men and generals to renew the battle and was retreating upon Thebes.

Rima the Queen heard the tidings, which indeed her heart seemed to have taught her before they were spoken. When she had listened to them, all she said was:

"That has happened which the great goddesses of Egypt foretold to me, and so without doubt shall the rest of their words be fulfilled in due season."

Then, according to the Babylonian fashion she withdrew herself to her chamber with the child, and there mourned many days for the husband whom she loved, seeing none save the Lady Kemmah who tended the babe.

At length the army reached Thebes, bringing with it the body of King Kheperra, that had been embalmed, though rudely, on the field of battle. She caused the wrappings to be loosed and for the last time looked upon her lord's face all shattered and marred with wounds.

"The gods have taken him and he died well," she said, "but my heart tells me that as he has died in blood, in a day to come, so in blood shall perish that usurper who brought him to his death."

These words were repeated to Apepi and caused him to go in fear through all his life, for his spirit told him that they were inspired by the god of Vengeance, as did the magicians whom he consulted. Indeed, when he remembered that Queen Rima was by birth of the royal Babylonian House, he grew more afraid than he had been before, because in his family, the Babylonians, to whom once his forefathers had been subject, were held to be the greatest wizards in the world. Therefore he was not surprised at the tale of the vision of Rima which came to her in the night of the birth of her child, though he could not understand why the goddesses of Egypt should appear to a Babylonian.

“If Babylon and Old Egypt come together, what chance will there be for us Shepherd kings who sit astride of the mouths of Nile? Surely our state will be as that of the corn between the upper and the nether millstone and we shall be ground to fine flour,” he said to his wise men.

“Those stones grind slowly, and after all flour is the bread of peoples, O King,” answered the chief of them. “Did not the dream of the wife of dead Kheperra tell – if report be true – that long years would go by before the Egyptians shake off our yoke, and did it not say that this Princess of Egypt who has been born to dead Kheperra and the Babylonian should be a Uniter of Lands? Bring hither the Babylonian widow and her daughter, the Royal Princess, O King, that these things may be accomplished in their season, though as yet we know not how.”

“Why should I admit to dwell in my house one who, inspired by the devils of Babylon, has prophesied that I shall die in blood? Why should I not rather kill her and be done, and her babe with her?” asked Apepi.

“Because, O King,” answered the chief of the Wise Men, “the dead are stronger than the living, and the spirit of this royal lady will smite more shrewdly than can her flesh. Moreover, we think that if the oracle of those Egyptian goddesses be true, this child of hers cannot be killed. Make them captives, O King, and hold them fast, but do not leave them at large to move mighty Babylon and the world against you.”

“You are right,” said Apepi. “It shall be done. Let Rima, the widow of King Kheperra, and her daughter Nefra, Princess of Upper Egypt, be brought to my Court, even if an army must be sent to fetch them. But first try to lead them hither by peaceful words and promises, or if these fail, bribe the Thebans to deliver them into my hand.”

Chapter 2

The Messenger

Rima the Queen heard through her spies that Apepi, King of the Shepherds, purposed to take her and her child and to hold them captive. Having learned that this was the truth, she summoned a council of such lords as remained in Upper Egypt, and of the high priests of the gods, to ask them what she should do.

“Behold,” she said, “I am a widow. My lord and yours fell fighting bravely against the North, leaving his heir, this royal infant. When it became known that he was dead, his army would fight no more but fell back on Thebes, and therefore the Shepherds claim the victory. Now, as I hear, they claim more: namely, that I who was the wife of your king, and our daughter who is your Royal Princess, should be delivered up to them, saying that if this is not done, an army shall be sent to take us. What is your mind, O Lords? Will you defend us from Apepi, or will you not?”

Now some answered one thing and some another. They showed that the people would fight no more, since the King of the Shepherds offered them better terms than ever they could hope to win in battle, and that after the sight of so much blood they longed for peace whoever might be called Pharaoh of Egypt.

“I perceive that I and your Princess have naught to hope from you, Lords, for whom and for whose cause my husband and her father gave his life,” said Rima quietly, adding, “But what say the priests of the gods he worshipped?”

Now these answered with many smooth words. One declared that the will of Heaven must be obeyed; another that perchance she and the Princess would be safer in the court of King Apepi, who swore to treat them both with all honour; a third, that it might be well if she would appeal to her mighty father, the King of Babylon, for succour, and so forth.

When all had finished, Rima laughed bitterly and said:

“I perceive, O Priests, that the gold thrown by the Shepherd king is so heavy that it can travel many leagues of air into the treasuries of your temples. Let me be plain. Will you help me and your Princess to escape from bondage, or will you not? If you will stand by me, I will stand by you to the last, and so I swear will my daughter when she comes to the years of knowledge. If you reject us, then we wash our hands of you, leaving you to go your ways while we go ours, to Babylon or anywhere, save to a prison in the house of the Shepherd kings, where certainly your Royal Princess would be done to death that Egypt might be left without a lawful heir. Now I pray you consult together. I withdraw myself that you may talk freely. But at noon, that is within an hour, I will return to you for your answer.”

Then she bowed to that company, who bowed back to her, and went away.

At the appointed time of noon, accompanied only by Lady Kemmah, the nurse who bore the Princess in her arms, she returned to the Council Hall entering it through the side door by which she had departed. Lo! it was quite empty. The lords and priests had gone, every one of them.

“Now it seems that I am alone,” said Rima the Queen. “Well, such is often the lot of the fallen.”

“Not altogether, Queen,” answered the Lady Kemmah, “since the Royal Princess and I are still the companions of your Majesty. Moreover, I think that in yonder empty chairs I see the shapes of certain of the gods of Egypt who perchance will prove better councillors than those who have deserted us in the hour of need. Now let us talk with them in our hearts and learn of their wisdom.”

So there they sat awhile, gazing at those empty chairs and at the painted pictures of divinities upon the walls beyond, each of them putting up supplications in her own fashion for help and guidance. At length the Lady Kemmah lifted her head and asked:

“Has light come to you, Queen?”

“Nay,” answered Rima, “naught but darkness. This only do my gods tell me – that if we stay here those false lords and priests certainly will seize us and deliver us into the power of Apepi, as I think that they have been bribed to do. Have yours aught else to say to you, nurse Kemmah?”

“Something, Lady. It seems to me that the divine queens of Heaven, godmothers of this royal babe, Isis and Hathor whom I serve, have been whispering in my ears. ‘Fly,’ said the whisper, ‘fly fast and far.’”

“Aye, Kemmah, but whither shall we fly? Where can the Queen of the South and her babe, the Royal Princess of Egypt, be hidden away from Apepi’s spies? Certainly not here in the South where, being fearful or suborned, all would betray us.”

“Nay, Queen, not in the South, but in the North where perhaps none would search for us, since the lion does not seek for the buck at the door of its own den. Harken, Queen. There is a certain aged holy man named Roy, a brother of my grandfather, sprung from an old line of Theban kings. This great-uncle of mine, whom, when a girl, I knew well, was inspired by the gods and became the prophet of a secret brotherhood called the Order of the Dawn, which has its home by the pyramids that stand near to Memphis. There he and his brotherhood, which is very powerful, have dwelt these thirty years or more, since none now dares to approach those pyramids, and least of all any of the Shepherds, because they are haunted.”

“By whom?” asked Rima.

“It is said by a spirit that appears as a beautiful bare-breasted woman, though whether she is the *Ka* of one who is buried in the tombs where my uncle lives, or a ghost from hell, or the shadow of Egypt itself shaped like a woman, is not known. At least because of her no man dares approach those ancient pyramids after night has fallen.”

“Why not? Since when have men been afraid of beautiful unveiled women?”

“Because, Queen, if any looks upon her loveliness he goes mad and wanders off to perish miserably in the wilderness. Or perchance he follows her up to the crest of one of the pyramids, and falling thence, is crushed to powder.”

“An idle tale, as I think, Kemmah. But what of it?”

“This, Queen: that there in those tombs, could we come to them, we might dwell safely enough with my uncle, the Prophet Roy. No man has courage to approach the place, save from time to time some young fool who longs to look upon the loveliness of the ghost and meets his death, or having seen her goes thence a raving madman. Even the wildest Bedouin of the desert dare not pitch his tent within a mile or more of those pyramids, while the Shepherd kings and their subjects hold the place accursed because two of their princes have found doom there; nor would they draw near to it for all the gold in Syria. Also they fear the magic of this brotherhood which is protected by spirits and have sworn to leave it unharmed. At least, such is the tale that I have heard, though doubtless there is more of it that I have not heard.”

“Here then it seems we might rest in peace,” said Rima with a little laugh, “at any rate, for a while until we found opportunity to escape to Babylon, where doubtless the King my father would welcome us. Yet how can we do so, bearing a babe with us, now when there is war all along the frontiers and none can cross the Arabian deserts. But, Kemmah, how are we to know that your uncle would receive us, and if he will, how are we to reach him?”

“As to the first question, Queen, the answer is easy. Strangely enough it chanced that only this day I have received a message from the holy Roy. The captain of a corn boat sailing from Memphis to Thebes brought it to me. He told me that his name is Tau.”

“What did he say to you and where did you meet him, Kemmah?”

“Last night, Queen, I could not sleep, being full of fears for you and the babe, so I rose before the dawn and going out, I stood on the private quay in the palace garden watching the sun rise, that I might make my prayer to Ra when he appeared in the heavens. Presently, as the mist thinned, I saw that I was not alone, for quite close to me a stalwart man who had the air or at least wore the dress of

a seafarer, was leaning against the trunk of a palm, staring at the Nile beneath, near to the bank of which was moored a trading ship. He spoke, saying that he waited for the mist to clear and the wind to rise, that he might sail on to the trading quay and there deliver his cargo. I asked him whence he came and he answered – from Memphis of the White Walls, having permission from the Governor of Thebes and from him of Memphis to trade between the two cities. I wished him good fortune and was about to leave to make my prayer elsewhere, telling him my purpose, when he said:

“Nay, let us pray together, for I too, whose name is Tau, am a worshipper of Ra, and see, the god appears,’ and he made certain signs to me which I who am a priestess understood.

“Our prayer finished, again I prepared to go, but he stayed me, asking me for news as to the state of Thebes and whether it were true that the Queen Rima had died of grief because of the loss of her husband Kheperra, who fell in the battle, or as some said, had been killed with her child. I answered that these things were not true, words at which he seemed glad, for he thanked the gods and said that without doubt the Princess Nefra was the lawful heiress of all Egypt, North and South together. I asked him how he knew the name of this princess. He replied:

“A learned man told it to me, a holy hermit to whom I confess my sins, which alas! are many, who dwells in the wilderness nigh to the Great Pyramids and among the tombs. He told me also that he knew the name of this royal child’s nurse who was a kinswoman of his, and that it is Kemmah, a lady of high blood. Yes, and he charged me with a message for this Lady Kemmah, if I could find her in Thebes, because he said he dared put nothing in writing.’

“Here this Tau, the captain of the ship, stopped and stared at me and I stared back at him, wondering whether he were setting any trap for my feet.

“‘It would be very dangerous, O Tau,’ I said to him, ‘if perchance you gave this secret message to the wrong woman. There may be many Kemmahs in Thebes. How will you know that you find the right one, or that she whom you are told is the nurse of the princess is in truth that nurse?’

“‘It is not so difficult as it seems, Lady. As it chanced, the holy hermit gave to me the half of an amulet of lapis lazuli on which is cut a charm or spell or prayer. He said that on this half the signs read, “May the living Ra protect the wearer of this holy thing at the last nightfall. May that protected one travel in the boat of Ra and – ” Here, Lady, the writing ceases but the holy hermit said that the Lady Kemmah would know the rest,’ and again he looked at me.

“‘Does it perchance run,’ I asked, “‘and may Thoth find the balance even and may Osiris receive this protected one at his table to feast with him eternally?’”

“‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I think that those were the words, or something very like them, that the Holy One repeated to me. Still I cannot be sure because my memory is bad, especially where prayers or writings about the gods are concerned. Since you, Lady, a stranger, know the end of the charm, doubtless it is a common one worn by thousands between Thebes and the sea. She whom I have to find not only knows the charm, but wears its other half, and how to seek her out I cannot think. Can you help me, Lady?’

“‘Perhaps,’ I answered. ‘Show me this amulet, O Tau.’

“He looked round him to see that we were alone. Then he thrust his hand into his garments and from somewhere drew out the upper half of a very ancient tablet carved over with writing, that was fastened about his neck by a woven string of woman’s hair. This tablet was broken or sawn asunder in the middle, not straight across but so as to leave a jagged edge with many points and hollows. I looked at it and knew it at once, since years before Roy the Hermit and my great-uncle had given me its counterpart, bidding me send it to him as a token if ever I had need of help. Then from where it hung upon my breast, I drew out that counterpart and set it against the half that Tau the Sailor held before me. Lo! they fitted exactly, since the stone being very hard had worn but little during the passage of the years.

“Tau looked and nodded his head.

“Strange that I should meet you thus, Lady Kemmah, and quite by chance – oh! quite by chance. Still, the gods know their own business, so why should we trouble ourselves about such things? Yet there might be another half that fitted on to this broken charm that has been lent to me. So before we go farther, tell me the name of the sender and where he dwells and aught else that you know about him.’

“His name is Roy,’ I answered, ‘who in the world was known as Roy the King’s son, though that king died long ago, and as you have said yourself, he lives beneath the shadow of the pyramids. For the rest he is the holy Prophet of a great brotherhood, has a long white beard and hair, is very handsome and pleasant-spoken; can see in the dark like a cat because he has dwelt so much among shadows, has knees that are hornier than the feet of a desert man, because of his continual kneeling in prayer, and when he thinks that he is alone, converses much with his own double, the *Ka* that is always at his side, or perchance with other ghosts, which tell him everything that passes in Egypt. At least, such were his appearance and custom many years ago when he gave me this half of the amulet, but what they are now, I cannot say.’

“The description will serve, Lady. Yes, it will serve well enough, though now the holy Roy has lost most of the hair from the top of his head and is too thin to be called handsome, having something of the air of an ancient and half-famished hulk. Yet without doubt we speak of the same man, as the joined amulet bears us witness. Therefore, Lady Kemmah, whom I have met by chance, yes, quite by chance, just by waiting for you where the holy Roy told me I should do, hearken to my message!’

“Here, Queen, the manner of this seaman changed, and from being light and easy like to that of one whose words conceal a jest, became quick and intent. His pleasant, smiling face changed also, for of a sudden it seemed to grow fierce and eager, the face of one who has great things to carry through and whose honour hangs upon their doing.

“Listen to me, Nurse of Royal Ones,’ he said. ‘The king whom once you dandled on your knees lies in his tomb, slain by the Shepherd spears. Would you see her who is sprung from him and the lady who gave her birth follow by the same road?’

“Your question seems foolish, Tau, seeing that where they go, I must accompany them,’ I answered.

“I know that you would not,’ he went on, ‘and not for your own sake only. Yet the danger is great. There is a plan to take all three of you; it was revealed to the holy Roy. In this city dwell traitors who are parties to the plot. Soon, to-morrow mayhap, or the next day, they will come to the Queen and tell her that she is in peril and that they purpose to hide her away in some safe place. If she is persuaded by them, soon she will find that this safe place is in the prisons of Apepi at Tanis, if ever she lives to reach them – and then – do you understand? Or if she is not persuaded, then they will drag her away by force with the babe and deliver them up to the Shepherds.’

“I nodded my head and answered:

“It would seem that time presses. What is your plan, Messenger?’

“This: Presently I sail on to the city and there deliver a certain cargo to merchants who await it. Also I have passengers on board, travellers from Siout, farmer folk flying from the Shepherds. There are three of them: a woman of middle age not unlike to you in face and form, Lady Kemmah, who passes as my sister; a fair young woman who passes as my wife and nurses in her arms a baby girl of some three months. As such at least I shall describe them to the officers on the quay, nor will those two women question my words. Yet being changeable, they will desert me here for other friends and the place where they slept will be empty. Again, do you understand, Lady Kemmah?’

“I understand that you propose that the Queen and I and the babe should take the place of the three upon your boat. If so, when and how?’

“To-night, Lady Kemmah, I am told there is a religious feast in this city in honour of the god of Nile, to celebrate which hundreds will row out upon the river bearing lanterns and singing hymns. To avoid all these craft I purpose to bring my ship back to this wharf, since I must sail down Nile

with the south wind that springs up ere the dawn. Shall I perchance find two peasant women and a babe waiting among those palms an hour before the rising of Ra?

“Perchance, Messenger. But tell me, if so, where would that journey end?”

“In the shadow of the Great Pyramids, Lady, where a certain Holy One awaits them, since he says that although the lodging be poor, there alone they will be safe.”

“That thought has come to me also, Tau. Yet this flight is very dangerous, and how know I that in it there is not some trap? How know I that you yourself are not in the pay of the Shepherds, or in that of the Theban traitors, and sent to tempt us to our doom?”

“A wise question,” he answered. “You have the message and you have the token of the amulet and you have my oath sworn upon the holy name, to break which will consign me everlastingly to hell. Still, a very wise question when there is so much at stake, and by the gods, I know not how to answer it!”

“We stood still awhile, staring at each other, and my heart was full of doubt and fear. Once we were in this man’s power, what might not befall us? Or rather what might not befall you, O Queen, and the royal child, since it is true, Queen, that for myself I cared and care little.”

“I know it, Kemmah beloved,” answered Rima. “But to your tale. What happened?”

“This, Queen. Of a sudden Tau the Messenger seemed to grow uneasy.

“This place is quiet and lonely,” he said, ‘yet certainly I feel as though we were being watched.’

“Now, Queen, we stood back from the private quay by the single palm that stands in the open place, whither we had withdrawn when we began to talk, for there we could not be seen from the river and I knew that none could overhear us. In the hollow to my left stands that old shrine surmounted by the shattered statue of some god, which once, it is said, was the gateway of a fallen temple; the same, Queen, in which you often sit.”

“I know it well, Kemmah.”

“This shrine, Queen, was still half hidden by the morning mist, and although it was out of earshot, Tau gazed at it earnestly. As he gazed the mist departed from it like a lifted veil, and following his glance, I saw that the shrine was not empty, as I had thought. For there, Queen, kneeling in it as though lost in prayer, was an aged man. He lifted his head and the full light fell upon his face. Lo! it was the face of the holy Roy, my great-uncle, somewhat changed since last I had seen him many years ago when he gave me the half of the broken amulet, but without doubt Roy himself.

“It seems that here also dwells a hermit, Lady Kemmah, as well as in the shadow of the pyramids,” said Tau, ‘and one whom I think I know. Is yonder man perchance the holy Roy, Lady Kemmah?’

“The holy Roy and no other. Why did you not tell me that you had brought him with you on your ship? It would have saved me much trouble of mind. I will speak to him at once.”

“Aye, speak with him and satisfy your heart as to whether I be a true man or a false, Lady Kemmah.”

“I turned and ran to the shrine. It was empty! The holy Roy had gone, nor was there anywhere that he could have hidden himself.

“The ways of prophets and hermits are very strange, Lady Kemmah,” said Tau. ‘Alone of all men, they, or some of them, can be in two places at once. Now perchance I shall find you here tonight, here by this shrine?’

“Yes,” I answered, ‘I think that you will find us. That is, if the Queen consents and nothing hinders us, such as death or bonds. But stay! How can we come by those country women’s garments? There are none such in the palace, and to send out to buy them might awake doubts, for the Queen is well watched.’

“The holy Roy is very foreseeing,” said Tau with a smile, ‘or I am; it matters not which.’

“Then he went to where I first met him and from behind a stone drew a bundle.

“Take this,’ he said. ‘In it I think you will find all that is needful, clean clothes though rough, that it will be safe even for a royal babe to wear. Farewell, Lady Kemmah; the river is clear of mist and I must begone. Guided by the spirit of the holy Roy which, as he can be in two places at once, doubtless will companion you also, I will return to find – my sister, my wife, and her infant babe – one, nay, two hours before to-morrow’s dawn.’

“Then he went, and I went also, full of thoughts. Yet I determined to say nothing of the matter to you, O Queen, till I heard what answer those lords made to your prayer to-day.”

“Have you looked in the bundle, Kemmah?” asked the Queen.

“Yes,” answered Kemmah, “to find that all is as this Tau said. There are two cloaks and other garments such as farmer women use in travelling, suited to your size and mine, also the winter dress of a little child.”

“Let us go to look at them,” said the Queen.

Chapter 3

The Escape

They stood in the private apartments of the palace. Eunuchs guarded, or were supposed to guard, the outer gates, for the Queen Rima was still surrounded by the trappings of royalty, and at the door of her chamber stood the giant Nubian, Ru, he who had been the body-servant of King Kheperra, he who after slaying six of the Shepherds with his own hand had rescued the body of his master, throwing it over his shoulder and bearing it from the battle as a shepherd bears a lamb. The Queen Rima and the Lady Kemmah had examined the garments brought by Tau the Messenger, and hidden them away. Now they were consulting together, near to a little bed on which the infant princess lay asleep.

“Your plan is very dangerous,” said the Queen, who was much disturbed and walked to and fro with her eyes fixed upon the sleeping babe. “You ask me to fly to Memphis, that is, to walk into the jaws of the hyena. This you do because a messenger is come from an aged uncle of yours who is a hermit or a high priest, or a prophet of some secret sect, and who, for aught you know, may have been dead for years and now be but a bait upon a hook to catch us.”

“There is the cut amulet, Queen. See how well the pieces fit and how that white line in the stone runs on from one to the other.”

“Doubtless they fit. Doubtless they are the halves of the same talisman. But such holy things are famous and so is their story. Mayhap someone knew that the priest Roy had given you one half of this charm and took the other from his body, or stole it to be used to deceive you and to give colour to the offer of a hiding place among the dead. Who is this Tau of whom you never heard before? How came he to find you so easily? How is it that he can pass in and out of Thebes without question, he who comes from Memphis, holding all the threads of these plots between his fingers, if plots there be?”

“I do not know who he is,” said Kemmah. “I know only that when these same doubts crossed my mind, this messenger showed me the holy Roy himself in proof of the truth of his message, and that then I believed.”

“Aye, Kemmah, but bethink you. Are you not a priestess, one soaked in the mysteries and magic of the Egyptians from your childhood, like to this uncle of yours before you? Did you not see the vision of the Egyptian goddesses Isis and Hathor blessing my child, which after all is but an old tale retold of those who spring from the bodies of kings? How comes it that no one else saw those goddesses?”

“How comes it that you dreamed of them, O Queen?” asked Kemmah drily.

“A dream is a dream. Who can give weight to dreams that come and go by thousands, flitting round our heads like gnats in sleep to vanish into the darkness whence they rose? A dream is a dream and of no account, but a vision seen with the waking eye is another matter, something that springs from madness – or perchance from truth. And now you have another vision, that of an old man who, if he lives at all, dwells far away, and on this unstable cloud you ask me to build a house of hope and safety. How can I be sure that you are not mad, as indeed the wise men of my country say that most of us are in this way or in that? You behold gods, but are there any gods, and if so, why are the gods of Egypt not the same as those of Babylon, and the gods of Babylon not the same as those of Tyre? If there be gods, why are they all different?”

“Because men are different, Queen, and every nation of them clothes God in its own garments: aye, and every man and woman also.”

“May be, may be! Yet a stranger’s tale and a vision are poor props to lean upon when life and safety hang in the balance and with them the crown of Egypt. I’ll not trust myself and the babe to this man and his boat lest soon both of us should sleep at the bottom of the Nile, or lie awaiting death in

some Shepherd dungeon. Let us bide where we are; your gods can protect us as well here as by the Pyramids of Memphis, should we live to reach them. Or if we must go, let these gods send us some sign; they have still many hours in which to travel from their heaven.”

Thus spoke Queen Rima wildly in her doubt and despair. Kemmah listened and bowed her head.

“Let it be as the Queen pleases,” she said. “If the gods desire, doubtless they will show us a path of escape. If they should not desire so to do, then we can remain here and await their will, since the gods are still the gods. Now, Lady, let us eat and rest, but let us not sleep till that hour is past when we should have embarked upon the ship of Tau the Messenger.”

So they ate, and afterwards, taking a lamp, Kemmah walked through the palace and found it strangely silent. All seemed to have departed; as one weak old slave told her, to attend the feast of the god of the Nile and to sail in boats upon the river.

“Such things would not have been allowed to happen in the old days,” he said querulously, “for then, who ever heard of a palace being deserted by those who were in attendance upon Majesty in order that they might enjoy themselves elsewhere? But since the good god Kheperra was killed by those Shepherd dogs in the battle everything seems to have changed. Nobody thinks anything of service; everybody thinks of himself and what he can get. And there is money going, Lady Kemmah, I tell you there is money going. Oh! sitting in my corner I have seen plenty of it being passed from hand to hand. Where it comes from I do not know. I was even offered some myself, what for I do not know, but I refused it, for what do I want with money who am so old and draw my rations from the stores, as I have done these fifty years, also my summer and winter garments?”

Kemmah contemplated him with her quiet eyes, then answered:

“No, old Friend, you want nothing with money, since I know that your tomb is provided. Tell me, you are acquainted with all the palace doors, are you not, and the gates also?”

“Every one of them, Lady Kemmah, every one of them. When I was stronger it used to be my office to lock them all, and I still have the second set of keys, which no one has taken from me, and remember the tricks of the inner bolts.”

“Then, Friend, grow strong again; even if it be for the last time, go lock those doors and gates and shoot those bolts and bring the keys to me in the private apartments. It will be a good trick to play upon those revellers who are absent without leave when they return and find that they cannot get in to sleep off their drink until after the sun has risen.”

“Yes, yes, Lady Kemmah, a very good trick. I will get the keys and go, following the round as I used to do and shooting the inner bolts that I named after all the gods of the Underworld, so that I might never forget the order in which they came. Oh! I will light my lantern and go at once, as though I were young again, and my wife and little children were waiting to receive me at the end of my round.”

The half of an hour later the old man reappeared at the private chambers, announcing that all the gates and doors were locked, and that strangely enough he had found every one of them open and the keys missing.

“They forgot that I had their twins,” he said, chuckling, “also that I knew how to shoot the inner bolts; I whom they look upon as a silly old fool only fit for the embalmer’s bath. Here are the keys, Lady Kemmah, which I shall be glad to be rid of for they are a great weight. Take them and promise not to tell that it was I who locked the doors and forced all those idle people to sleep out in the cold. For if you do they will beat me to-morrow. Now if you had a cup of wine!”

Kemmah fetched drink and gave it to the aged man, mixed with water that it might not be too strong for him. Then, while he smacked his lips refreshed by the liquor, she bade him go to the little gatehouse of the private apartments and watch there, and if he should see any approaching the gate, to make report to Ru, who kept guard at the door which was at the foot of the eight stairs that led to the ante-chamber of the apartments.

This, encouraged by the wine and by a sense that once more he was taking part in the affairs of life, though what these might be he did not understand, the old fellow said that he would do and departed to his station.

Then Kemmah went and talked earnestly with the giant Ru, who listened, nodding his head and as he did so girt his armour of bull's hide upon his mighty frame. Moreover, he looked to see that his javelins were loose in their sheath and that the edge of his great bronze battle-axe was sharp. Lastly, he set lamps in the niches of the wall in such fashion that if the door were forced their light would fall upon those coming up the stair, while he, standing at the head of it, would remain in shadow.

These things done, Kemmah returned to the Queen, who sat brooding by the bed of the child, but of them to her she said nothing.

“Why do you carry a spear in your hand, Kemmah?” asked Rima, looking up.

“Because it makes a good staff to lean upon, Queen, and one that at need may serve another purpose. This place seems very still and fateful and who knows but that in the stillness we may hear some god speaking ere the dawn, telling us whether we should take ship with Tau, or bide where we are?”

“You are a strange woman, Kemmah,” said the Queen, and once more fell to her brooding till at length she sank to sleep.

But Kemmah did not sleep; she waited and watched the curtains that hid the stair on which Ru kept guard. At length in the intense silence of the night that was broken only now and again by the melancholy note of some dog howling at the moon, for all the inhabitants of the city seemed to be absent at the festival, Kemmah thought she heard the sound as of gates or doors being shaken by someone trying to enter them. Rising softly she went to the curtains beyond which Ru was seated on the topmost stair.

“Did you note anything?” she asked.

“Aye, Lady,” he answered. “Men try to enter by the gates, but find them closed. The old slave reported to me that they were coming and has fled to hide himself. Now go up to the top of the little pylon above this door and tell me if you can see aught.”

Kemmah went, climbing a narrow stair in the dark, and presently found herself on the roof of the pylon some thirty feet above the ground, where in times of trouble a watchman was stationed. Round it ran a battlement with openings through which arrows could be shot or spears thrown. The moon shone brightly, flooding the palace gardens and the great city beyond them with silver light, but the Nile she could not see because of the roofs behind her, though she heard the distant murmur of those who kept festival upon its waters, from which they would not return until the sun had risen.

Presently in the shadow of one of the great gateways she saw a group of men standing and, as it seemed to her, taking counsel together. They moved out of the shadow and she counted them. They were eight in all, armed every one of them, for the light shone upon their spears. They came to some decision, for they began to walk across the open court towards the private door of the royal apartments. Kemmah ran down the stairs and told Ru what she had seen.

“Now were I standing on that roof perhaps I might put a javelin into one or more of these night birds before they come to the doors,” he said.

“Nay,” answered Kemmah. “They may be messengers of peace, or soldiers who will guard the Queen. Wait to smite till they show themselves otherwise.”

He nodded and said:

“Yonder door is old and not of the strongest. It can soon be battered in and then perhaps there will be fighting – one man against eight, Lady Kemmah. What if aught should happen to me, Lady Kemmah? Is there any other way by which the Queen and the royal babe may escape?”

“Nay, for the doors into the great hall where the Council are held are barred; I have tried them. There is no way save by leaping from the palace wall at the back, and a babe's bones are tender. Therefore, Ru, nothing must happen to you. Pray the gods to give you strength and cunning.”

“Of the first I have plenty, of the second I feat but little. Still I will do my best and may Osiris be good to him on whom my axe falls.”

“Hearken, Ru. Should you scotch those snakes or cause them to run, make ready to fly with us and be not astonished if instead of a Queen and a waiting-lady, you see two peasant women and a peasant’s babe.”

“I am not easily astonished, Lady, and I weary of this Thebes since the good god my master fell and all these upstarts began to plot with Apepi, as plot they do. But whither will you fly?”

“I think that a ship waits us by the private quay, and its captain, one Tau, will meet us two hours before the dawn, that is before so very long, in the shadow of the old shrine. You know the place.”

“Aye, I know it. Hush! I hear footsteps.”

“Parley with them as long as you may, Ru, for there are things to be done.”

“Yes, there is plenty to be done,” he answered as she fled back through the curtains.

The Queen woke at her step.

“Your gods have not come, Kemmah,” she said, “or given any sign. So I suppose it is fated that we should stop here.”

“I think that the gods – or devils – are coming, Queen. Now off with those robes and be swift. Nay, talk not, I pray, but do as I bid you.”

Rima glanced at her face and obeyed. Within a very little time, all being prepared to their hands, the three of them were changed into farmer women and a farmer’s babe. Then Kemmah took a sack and thrust into it all the ancient priceless jewels, the regalia of the old Pharaohs of Egypt, and these were not few; also a sum in gold.

“This gear of crowns and sceptres and gems and gold which you have got together so carefully will be too heavy for us to carry, Kemmah, who have that which is more precious to bear between us,” and she glanced at the child.

“There is one yonder who will carry it, Queen, one who carried something else on his shoulder out of the battle. Or if he cannot, then I think it will not matter who takes the gathered wealth of the Pharaohs of the South.”

“You mean that our lives are at hazard, Kemmah?”

“That is what I mean, no less.”

Rima’s beautiful but sorrow-stricken face and eyes seemed to take fire.

“I would that they might be lost,” she said. “Have you ever thought, Friend, of the wonderful things that may lie behind the gates of death, the glories and the harmonies and the eternities, or failing these, the rich darkness of everlasting sleep? Life! I weary of life and would put all to the hazard. Yet there is the babe born of my body, the Royal Princess of Egypt, and for her sake – ”

“Yes,” said the quiet Kemmah, “for her sake!”

There came a thunder of noise upon the door beyond the curtains.

“Open!” shouted voices.

“Open for yourselves. But know that death waits those who would violate her Majesty of Egypt,” answered the deep guttural voice of Ru.

“We come to take the Queen and the Princess to those who will guard them well,” cried one without.

“What better guard can they have than death?” asked Ru in answer.

There was a pause. Then came blows upon the door, heavy blows as of axes, but still it held. Another pause and a tree trunk or some such weighty thing was brought and driven against it, and presently with a crash it fell, burst from its hinges. Rima seized the child and ran into the shadows. Kemmah leapt to the curtains and stood there looking between them, the spear she carried raised in her right hand. This was what she saw.

The giant Nubian stood on the topmost stair in the shadow, for the light of the lamps in the niches struck forward. In his right hand he held a javelin, in his left he grasped the handle of his

battle-axe and a small shield made of the hide of a river horse. Grim and terrible looked the Ethiopian giant outlined thus against the shadow.

A tall man with a sword in his hand scrambled over the fallen door, the moonlight shining on his armour. The javelin flashed and the man fell in a heap, his mail clattering upon the bronze hinges of the door. He was dragged aside. Others rushed in, a number of them. Ru shifted his battle-axe into his right hand, lifted it, leaned forward and waited, advancing the shield to cover his head. Blows fell upon the shield. Then the axe crashed down and a man sank in a heap. Ru began to sing some wild Ethiopian war chant and as he sang he smote, and as he smote men died beneath the blows of that terrible axe driven with the weight of his mighty arm. Yet they pressed forward, for they were desperate. Death might be in front of them, but if they failed death was also behind at the hands of their confederates.

The stair was too wide for Ru to cover. One ran under his arm and appeared between the curtains, where he stood staring. Kemmah saw his face. It was that of a great Theban lord who had fought with Kheperra in the battle and now had been suborned by the Shepherds. Rage seized her. She sprang at him and with all her strength drove the spear she held through his throat. He fell, gasping. She stamped upon his face, crying, "Die, dog! Die, traitor!" and die he did.

On the stairway the blows grew fewer. Presently Ru appeared, laughing and red with blood.

"All are dead," he cried, "save one who fled. But where is the knave who slipped past me?"

"Here," answered Kemmah, pointing to a still form in the shadows.

"Good. Very good!" said Ru. "Now I think better of women than ever I did before. Yet, hurry, hurry! One dog has escaped and he goes to call the pack. What is that? Wine? Give me to drink. Aye, give me wine and a cloak to cover me. I am no seemly sight for queens to look on."

"Are you hurt?" said Kemmah as she brought the goblet.

"Nay, not a scratch; still no seemly sight, though the blood be that of traitors. Here's to the gods of vengeance! Here's to the hell that holds them! This garment is scant for one of my size, but it will serve. What's that sack you drag to me?"

"No matter what it is. Carry it, Ru. You are no warrior now, you are a porter. Carry it, O glorious Ru, and lose it not, for in it lie the crowns of Egypt. Come, Queen, the road is clear, thanks to the axe of Ru."

Rima came, bearing her babe, and at the sight of the red stair and of those who lay upon it or at its foot, shrank back and said in a wavering voice, for she was almost bemused with doubts and terror:

"Is this the message of your gods, Kemmah?" and she pointed to the stains upon the floor and walls. "And are these their messengers? Look at them! I know their faces. They were the friends and captains of dead Kheperra, my lord. Why, O Ru, do you slay the friends of him who was Pharaoh, who came here doubtless to lead me and his child to safety?"

"Aye, Queen," said Kemmah, "to the safety of death or of the prison of Apepi."

"I'll not believe it, woman, nor will I go with you," said Rima, stamping her foot. "Fly if you will, as well you may do with all this blood upon your hands; here I stay with my child."

Kemmah glanced at her, then as though in thought she looked down at the ground while Ru whispered in her ear:

"Command me and I will carry her."

The eyes of Kemmah fell upon that great lord whom she had slain with her own hand, and she noted that from beneath his breastplate there projected the end of a papyrus roll that had been thrust upwards when he fell. She bent down and took it. Opening it swiftly she read, as she who was learned could do well enough. It was addressed to the dead man and his companions and sealed with the seals of the high priest and others. This was the writing:

"In the names of all the gods and for the welfare of Egypt, we command you to take Rima the Babylonian, wife of the good god Pharaoh who is not, and her child, the Royal Princess Nefra,

and to bring them to us, living if may be, that they may be delivered to King Apepi in fulfilment of our oath. Read and obey.”

“Can you read the Egyptian writing, Queen?” asked Kemmah. “If so, herein is a matter that concerns you.”

“Read you. I have little skill,” answered Rima indifferently.

So she read, slowly, that the words might sink into the mind of the Queen.

Rima heard and leaned against her, trembling.

“Why did I ever come to this land of traitors?” she moaned. “Oh! would that I were dead.”

“As you will be if you stay here longer, Queen,” said Kemmah bitterly. “Meanwhile it is the traitors who are dead, or some of them, and now tell their tale to Kheperra, your lord and mine. Come. Come swiftly, there are more villains left in Thebes.”

But Rima sank to the ground, swooning. As she fell Kemmah snatched the child from her and looked at Ru.

“It is good,” said the giant. “Now she can talk no more and I will carry her. But what of that sack? Must we leave it behind? Life is more than crowns.”

“Nay, Ru, set it on my head, for thus peasants bear their burdens. I can hold it with my left hand and clasp the child with my right.”

He did so and lifted the Queen in his great arms.

Thus they passed down the stair, stepping over the dead and out into the night.

Across the open space they went, heading for the palm trees of the garden. The babe wailed feebly but Kemmah stifled its cries beneath her cloak. The weight of the treasures in the sack pressed her down and the sharp edges of the jewelled crowns and sceptres cut into her brow. Still she staggered on bravely. They reached the shadow of the palms where she paused for a moment to look back and get her breath. Behold! Men – numbers of them – were running toward the doors of the private apartments.

“We did not leave too soon. Forward!” said Ru.

On they went, till at length before them in the glade they saw the ruined shrine. Kemmah staggered to it and sank to her knees, for she was spent.

“Now, unless help comes, there is an end,” said Ru. “Two half-dead women I might carry, also the sack upon my head. But how about the babe? Nay, that babe is the Princess of Egypt. Whoever dies, she must be saved.”

“Aye,” said Kemmah faintly. “Leave me, it matters not, but save the child. Take her and her mother and go to the quay. Perchance the boat is there.”

“Perchance it is not,” grumbled Ru, staring about him.

Then help came. For as before from behind a palm appeared the sailor Tau.

“You are somewhat early, Lady Kemmah,” he said, “but fortunately so am I and so is the down Nile wind. At least here you are, all three of you. But who is this?” and he stared at the giant Nubian.

“One who can be vouched for,” answered Ru. “If you doubt it, go look at the stair of the royal apartments. One, too, who, if there be need, can break your bones as a slave breaks sticks.”

“That I can well believe,” said Tau, “but of bone-breaking we can talk afterwards. Now follow me, and swiftly.”

Then he threw the sack over his shoulder, and putting his arm about Kemmah, supported her forward to the quay.

At the foot of the steps was a boat, and at a distance on the Nile appeared a ship riding at anchor, her sail half hoisted. They entered the boat, and seizing the oars Tau rowed them to the ship. A rope was cast which he caught and made fast to the prow of the boat, drawing on it till they came alongside the ship. Hands were stretched out to help them; soon they were all aboard.

“Up anchor!” cried Tau, “and hoist the sail.”

“We hear you, Lord,” answered a voice.

Three minutes later that ship was gliding down the Nile before the strong south wind. Nor was it too soon, for as they passed silently into the night they caught sight of men, some of whom bore lanterns, searching the palm grove that they had left. They laid the women and the child in the cabin. Then Tau said:

“Now, Breaker of Bones, you may have a tale to tell me, and perchance a cup of wine and a bite of food will loose your tongue.”

Thus did Queen Rima, Nefra, Royal Princess of Egypt, and Lady Kemmah and Ru the Ethiopian escape from Thebes and from the hands of traitors.

Chapter 4

The Temple of the Sphinx

For day after day the ship of Tau journeyed on down Nile. At night, or when the wind would not serve, it was tied up to the bank, always in as uninhabited a place as might be but never near a town. Twice this happened in the neighbourhood of great temples that had been wrecked by the Shepherds in the first fury of their invasion and not as yet repaired. Yet after it was dark, out of these desolated fanes or of the sepulchres around them issued men who brought food and other things to sell, but who from the signs that they made, Kemmah, being initiated, well knew to be priests, though of what faith she did not know. These men would talk with Tau apart, showing him much reverence, then on this pretext or on that he would bring them into the cabin where the infant princess lay asleep, whom they would look upon fearfully, and even adore upon their bended knees as though she were divine; then rising, depart blessing her in the names of the gods they worshipped. Moreover, never did they seem to take payment for the food they brought.

All of these things Kemmah noted, as did Ru, although he appeared so simple, but of them Rima the Queen took but little heed. Ever since her lord the Pharaoh Kheperra had been slain in the battle, her spirit had left her, and the discovery of the treason of the lords who had been his counsellors and generals, whereof Ru had slain six and Kemmah one in the fight upon the stairs of the Theban palace, seemed to have crushed her very soul so that now she cared for nothing save to nurse her child.

When she woke from her swoon to find herself upon the ship she asked few questions and from Ru she shrank, although she loved him well, saying that he smelt of blood. Nor would she speak much to Tau because, as she declared, she trusted no man any more. To Kemmah only did she talk freely at times, and then mostly as to how she might escape out of this accursed Egypt with her child, back to her royal father, the King of Babylon.

“So far the gods of Egypt have not served you so ill, Queen,” said the Lady Kemmah, “seeing that they brought you and that Royal One” – and she waved her hand toward the babe – “out of the net of traitors, and when escape seemed impossible, safe on to this ship, doing this after you had declared that you had no faith in them.”

“Mayhap, Kemmah. Yet those gods decreed that my royal husband should be killed and that those whom he and I trusted should prove themselves the foulest of all men who sought to betray his wife and child into the hands of enemies, whence we were saved only by your wit and the strength and courage of an Ethiopian. Also it is not for me, a stranger, that they work, but for Egypt’s royal seed that was born of my body. Nor is this to be wondered at, seeing, although as Pharaoh’s wife I made offerings upon their altars, they are no gods of mine. I tell you that I would get me back to Babylon and ere I die bow my knee again in the temples of my forefathers. Take me back to Babylon, Kemmah, where men are not traitors to the bread they eat and do not strive to sell the seed of those who died for them into captivity or death.”

“This I will do if I may,” answered Kemmah, “but alas! Babylon is far off and all the lands between are ablaze with war. Therefore take heart, Queen, and wait with patience.”

“I have no heart left,” answered Rima, “who desire but one thing – to find my lord again whether he sits at the table of your Osiris, or rides the clouds with Bel, or sleeps in the deep darkness. Where he is, there would I be and nowhere else, and least of all in this accursed Egypt. Give me my child to nurse, that I may hold her while I may. We love that most that we must leave the soonest, Kemmah.”

Then Kemmah gave her the babe and turned away to hide her tears, since she was sure that sorrow was eating out the life of this bereaved widow and daughter of kings.

Once when they were off Memphis which they strove to pass at early dawn before men were abroad, there was danger. Officers came to their ship from a boat, bidding it lie to, a command that Tau thought it best to obey.

“Now play your parts well,” he said to Kemmah, “remembering that you are my sister and that the Queen is my wife who lies sick. Go tell her to forget her woes and be as crafty as a serpent. As for you, Ru, hide that great axe of yours, though where you can find it easily, remembering that you are a slave whom I bought for a great sum in Thebes that I may make money by showing off your strength in market-places, and that you can talk little or no Egyptian.”

The boat came alongside. In it were two officers, young men who seemed to be sleepy, for they yawned, and a common fellow who rowed it. The two officers climbed to the deck and asked for the captain. Tau appeared, very roughly clad, and in a coarse voice inquired of their business.

“It is your business that we want to know, Sailor,” said one of the officers.

“That is easy to tell, sir. I am a trader who take corn up Nile and bring cattle down. There are a number of calves forward there, bred by the best southern bulls. Are you perchance buyers? If so, you might like to look at them. There is one that has the ‘apis’ marks upon it, or something of the kind.”

“Do we look like cattle dealers?” asked the officer haughtily. “Show me your writings.”

“Here they are, sir,” and Tau produced a papyrus sealed by the trade masters at Memphis and other cities.

“A wife and child, a sister – which means another wife grown old – and so many crew. Well, we seek two women and a child, so perhaps we had better see them.”

“Is it necessary?” asked the other. “This does not look like a queen’s warship such as we were told to search for, and the stench of those calves is horrible after a night of feasting.”

“Warship, sir? Did you talk of a warship? Well, there is one following us down the river. We saw her once, but being of such deep draught, she got stuck on a sand bank so that I do not know when she will reach Memphis. She seemed to be a very fine ship with a multitude of armed men on board of her. But it was said that she was going to stop at Siout, the frontier city of the South, or what used to be its frontier city before we beat those proud-stomached Southerners. But come and look at the women, if you will; come and look at them.”

This information about the warship seemed to interest the two officers so much that they followed Tau thinking little of the two women. He took a lantern and thrust it through the curtains into the cabin, saying;

“May an evil spirit take this thing! How badly it burns.”

“An evil stink has taken it already,” answered one of the officers, pinching his nostrils between his finger and thumb as he peered between the curtains. In the low light the place was very dark and all that the officers could see was Kemmah in dirty garments seated on a sack – little did they know that this sack contained the ancient and priceless royal ornaments of Upper Egypt – and engaged in mixing milk and water in a gourd, while beyond on a couch lay a woman with dishevelled hair and holding a bundle to her breast.

Just then the lantern went out and Tau began to talk of finding oil to relight it.

“It is needless, Friend,” said the chief officer, “I think that we have seen enough. Pursue your voyage in peace and sell the calves at the best price you can get.”

Then he turned to the deck where, as ill luck would have it, he caught sight of Ru squatted on the boards and trying to look as small as he could.

“That is a big black man,” he said. “Now did not some spy send a message about a Negro who killed many of our friends up yonder? Stand up, fellow.”

Tau translated, or seemed to do so, and Ru stood up, rolling his big eyes till the white showed and grinning all over a silly face.

“Ah!” said the officer, “a very big man. By the gods! what a chest and arms. Now, Captain, who is this giant and what are you doing with him on board your trading boat?”

“Lords,” answered Tau, “he is a venture of mine in which I have put most of my savings. He is mighty and performs feats of strength, for the sight of which I hope to get much money down in Tanis.”

“Does he?” said the officer, much interested but with suspicion. “Well, fellow, perform a feat of strength.”

Ru shook his head vaguely.

“He does not understand your tongue, sir, who is an Ethiopian. Stay, I will tell him.”

Then he began to address Ru in unknown words. Ru woke up and nodded, grinning. Next instant he sprang at the two officers, seized one of them with either hand by the neckbands of their garments and lifted them from the deck as though they had been infants. Next, roaring with laughter, he stepped to the side of the ship and held them out over the Nile as though he were about to drop them into the water. The officers shouted, Tau swore and tried to drag him back, yelling orders into his ear. Ru turned round astonished, still holding the two men in the air before him and looking at the belly of the ship as though he meant to throw them into it.

At length he seemed to understand and dropped them to the deck, on which they fell flat.

“That is one of his favourite tricks, sirs,” said Tau as he helped them to their feet. “He is so strong that he can carry a third man in his teeth.”

“Is it?” said an officer. “Well, we have had enough of your savage and his tricks, who, I think, will land you in prison before you have done with him. Keep him off now while we get into the boat.”

Thus was the ship of Tau searched by the officers of Apepi.

When the boat had gone and once more the ship was slipping past the quays of Memphis unobserved in the mists drawn by the rising sun from the river, Ru came near to the tiller and said:

“I think, Lord Tau, for a lord or count I hold you to be, although it pleases you to pass as the owner of a small trading boat, that you would have done well to let me drop those two fine fellows into the Nile that tells no stories of those it buries. By and by it will be found that there is no warship such as you talked of so wonderfully, and then -?”

“And then, Breaker of Bones, it may go hard with those officers who chattered of such a ship like finches in the reeds and while they did so let the real prize slip through their fingers. For this, indeed, I am sorry, since those young men were not bad fellows in their way. As for dropping them into the Nile, it might have been well enough, though cruel, had there not been a witness. What would that boatman who rowed them to the ship have reported when he found that they returned from it no more?”

“You are clever,” said Ru admiringly. “I never thought of that.”

“No, Ru. If my brain were added to your brute strength and uninstructed honesty, why, you would rule the world of brutes. But they are not, and therefore you must be content to serve in the yoke, like a bull, which is as strong as you are, or stronger.”

“If it is brains that make a difference, why do you not rule, Lord Tau, who are also a likely man though not so big as I am? Why are you carrying fugitives upon a dirty little merchant ship instead of sitting upon a Pharaoh’s throne? Tell me, who am but a simple black man bred to war and honesty.”

Tau with much skill steered his ship through a fleet of barges poling up Nile laden with fodder. Then calling to a sailor to take his place, for now the river was open with no craft in sight, he sat himself down in the low bulwark, and answered:

“Because mayhap, friend Ru, I also choose to serve. Being stupid, like most honest men, especially if they are strong and one of a simple race that understands nothing except love from which is born mankind, and war that keeps down its numbers, you may not believe me when I tell you that the only true joy in life lies in service of this sort or of that. Pharaohs are served, which is why they are often so blind and so satisfied at being but vain bubbles blown along by a wind they cannot see, springing, although they know it not, from the poisoned breaths of multitudes; for the most part they do more harm than good and are themselves the slaves of slaves. With him who serves it is otherwise,

for, setting aside self-seekings and ambitions, he works humbly for that which is good and in this work finds his reward.”

Ru rubbed his brow, then asked:

“But whom does such an one serve, Lord?”

“He serves God, Ru.”

“God? There are many gods that I have heard of in Ethiopia, in Egypt, and in other lands. What god does he serve and where does he find that god?”

“He finds him in his own heart, Ru, but what his name may be I cannot tell you. Some call it Justice, some call it Freedom, some call it Hope, some call it Spirit.”

“And what do those call it who serve only themselves and their own lusts, careless of all those fine things, Lord?”

“I do not know, Ru, and yet I know that name. It is Death.”

“Yet they live as long as other men, Lord, and often reap a finer harvest.”

“Aye, Ru, but very soon their day is done and then, if they have not repented, their souls die.”

“So you believe that souls can live on, as the priests seem to teach.”

“Yes, Ru, I believe that they can live longer than Ra the sun himself, longer than the stars, and from age to age reap the fruits of honest service. Yet of these matters do not ask me but ask one whom you will soon meet and whose disciple I am.”

“I don’t wish to, Lord, seeing that my brain swims already, but tell me, if it please you, to what end is all this service of yours that causes you to sail up Nile and at great risk to rescue certain ladies and a certain babe?”

“I am not sure, for true service is its own end. Moreover, it is not for me to ask of ends, who am sworn to obey without doubt or question.”

“So you also have a master, Lord. Who is he?”

“That you will learn ere long, Ru. Yet do not think to look upon some king or enthroned high priest surrounded with pomps and ceremonies. Ru, I will instruct you, who are so ignorant. Doubtless you believe that Egypt and the world are ruled by the strength you see, by Pharaohs, by armies, and by wealth. Yet it is not so. There is another strength you do not see which is its guide and conqueror, and its name is Spirit. The priests teach that to every man there is given a *Ka* or a double, an invisible something that is stronger, purer, more enduring than he is. Something that perhaps from time to time looks upon the face of God and whispers of God’s will. Now if this be a parable, yet in a sense it is true since always such a spirit is at the elbow of everyone who lives. Or rather there are two spirits, one of good and one of evil; one that leads upwards and one that leads downwards.”

“I say again that you make my head swim, Lord. But tell me, where and to what is your spirit leading you?”

“Towards the gates of peace, Ru; peace for myself and peace for Egypt; towards a land where you would find little occupation for in it there is no war. Look, yonder are the Great Pyramids, the homes of the dead, and mayhap of their souls which do not die. Come, help me lower the sail since we must drift past them slowly, to return when night has fallen and land certain passengers. There, perhaps, Ru, you will learn more of the meaning of all this talk of mine.”

Night had come. At its approach he who was called Tau had rowed his ship back to a certain landing place which now, at the time of the rising Nile, was not so very far away from the Great Pyramids and the Sphinx that sits near to them staring eternally into nothingness. Here they disembarked, all of them, under shelter of the darkness and of a bed of reeds.

Scarcely were they on shore when they saw boats, which great lanterns hung at their prow and stern showed to be full of armed men, rowing down Nile. Tau watched them go by and said:

“I think some messenger has told those officers at Memphis that there was no warship following us from Thebes and that now they search for a certain trading boat on which travelled two women and

a babe. Well, let them search, for the birds are out of their hands and where they nest no Shepherd will dare to come.”

Then, having given directions to the mate of the boat, a very quiet, secret-faced man, as were all those on board of her, he took Rima the Queen by the hand and led her into the darkness, being followed by Kemmah, who bore the child, and by Ru the Ethiopian, who carried upon his shoulder the sack that contained the jewels of the Pharaohs of Upper Egypt.

For a long while they trudged forward, first between groves of palm trees and then over desert sands, till at length the waning moon rose and they saw a wondrous sight. In front of them appeared the enormous shape of a lion cut from the living rock whose face was not that of a beast but of a man, wearing the headdress of a god or king, and staring towards the east with solemn, terrifying eyes.

“What is that?” asked Rima faintly. “Have we reached the Underworld and is this its god? For surely yonder dreadful smiling countenance must be that of a god.”

“Nay, Lady,” answered Tau, “it is but the symbol of a god, the Sphinx which has sat here for countless ages. Look! Behind it stand the pyramids outlined against the sky, and beneath it are safety and rest for you and for your child.”

“Safety for the child, perhaps,” she said, “and for me, as I think, the longest rest of all. For know, O Tau, that Death looks at me out of those solemn smiling eyes.”

Tau made no answer; indeed, even his calm spirit seemed to be frightened at those words of evil omen, as was Kemmah, who muttered:

“We go to dwell among sepulchres and it is as well, for I think that soon they will be needed.”

Even Ru was frightened, though more by the gigantic figure of the Sphinx towering above him than by the Queen’s words, which he scarcely seemed to understand.

“Here is that which turns my heart to water and loosens my knees,” he said in his savage imagery. “Here is that with which no man, not even I, can fight, and therefore for the first time I am afraid. Here is Fate itself, and what can man do in the face of Fate?”

“Obey its decrees, as all must,” answered Tau solemnly. “Forward now, for the temple of this god is open, and leave the rest – to Fate.”

They came to some steps about fifty paces from the outstretched paws of this mighty monument, and descending them, found themselves facing what seemed to be a huge granite block in a wall. Taking a stone which lay at hand, Tau knocked upon this block in a peculiar fashion. Thrice did he repeat this rhythmic series of blows, each time with some difference. Then he waited, and behold, presently in a silent fashion the great stone turned, leaving a narrow opening through which he beckoned them to follow him. They entered to find themselves in dense darkness and to hear sounds as of passwords being given and received. Next lamps appeared floating towards them through the darkness and they perceived that these were borne by men clothed as white-robed priests who yet carried swords like soldiers and wore knives thrust through their girdles. There were six of these priests and a seventh who appeared to be a leader of them, for he walked ahead. To this man Tau spoke, saying:

“I bring you that I went forth to seek,” and he pointed to the royal child sleeping in the arms of Kemmah and to the Queen and behind her, to the gigantic Ru on whom the priests looked doubtfully.

Tau began to tell them who he was, but the leader of the priests said:

“It is needless. The Holy Prophet has spoken to me of him. Yet let him understand that he who reveals the secrets of this place dies terribly.”

“Is it so?” said Ru. “Well, already I feel as though I were dead and buried.”

Then one by one the priests made obeisance to the babe, and this done, motioned to them to follow.

On they went, down a long passage that seemed to be built of blocks of alabaster, till they came to a great hall, of which the roof was supported by huge columns of granite, in which hall sat solemn statues of gods or kings. Crossing it, they reached a gallery, out of which opened chambers

that served as dwelling rooms, for in them were window-places, which chambers, it seemed, had been made ready for them, since they were furnished with beds and all things necessary, even to clothing such as women wear. Moreover, in one of them a table was set with good food and wine.

“Eat now and sleep,” said Tau. “I go to make report to the Prophet. Tomorrow he will speak with you.”

Chapter 5

The Swearing of the Oath

Early on the following morning Kemmah was awakened by a ray of sunshine striking upon her bed through a window-place in the chamber.

At least we are not dwelling in a tomb, she thought to herself with gratitude, for tombs have no windows; the dead do not need them.

Then she looked at the Queen Rima who lay in another bed with the babe near by, and saw that she was sitting up, staring before her with rapt eyes.

“I see that you are awake, Kemmah,” she said, “for the sun shines upon your eyes, for which I thank the gods because it shows me that we are not in a grave. Hearken, a dream has visited me. I dreamed that the good god my husband, Kheperra who is dead, came to me, saying:

“Wife, you have accomplished all things; you have brought our child to a place where she will be safe, a holy place where the spirits of those who were great in Egypt before her protect and will protect her. Fear not for the child who is safe in their keeping and in that of those about her on the earth. Make ready, Wife beloved, to return to me, your Husband.’

“That is my desire,’ I answered. ‘But tell me, Lord, where shall I find you?’

“Then, Kemmah, in that dream of mine the spirit of King Kheperra showed me a wondrous and beautiful place of which the memory has faded from me, saying:

“Here shall you find me, where are no wars or fears or troubles, and here shall we dwell together happily for many an age, though, what will chance to us in the end I do not know.’

“But the child. What of the child?’ I asked. ‘Must we lose the child?’

“Nay, Beloved,’ he answered, ‘presently she will be with us.’

“Then, Lord, is she also doomed to die to the world before she has known the world?’

“Not so, Beloved, but here there is no time, and soon her hour there will be accomplished and she will be counted of our company.’

“Yet she will never know us, Lord, who died when she was without understanding.’

“The dead know everything; in death all that seems lost is found again; in death all is forgiven, even those priests and princes who would have betrayed you to the Shepherds are forgiven, for some of them whom the axe of Ru sent hither, stand by me and ask pardon of you as I speak. In death are life and understanding. Therefore come hither swiftly and without fear.’

“Then I awoke, happy for the first time since Ru bore the body of King Kheperra out of the battle.”

“A strange dream. A very strange dream, Queen. But who can put faith in such visions of the night?” exclaimed Kemmah, for she was frightened and knew not what to say, adding:

“Now rise, if it pleases you, and let me dress you in these garments that have been provided. Afterwards we will call the Lord Tau, for I am sure that he is no sailor man but a lord, and explore this place, which it would seem might be worse, for here are good food and light and friends and dark caverns where we may hope to hide ourselves away if foes should come.”

“Aye, Kemmah, I will rise, though it should be for the last time, for I would look upon the face of this wondrous Roy the prophet who has brought us here and then commend my child to him ere I pass farther than he can follow.”

“From all that I have heard of Roy I think that would be far indeed, Queen,” said Kemmah.

A while later, when they were seated at their morning meal that was served by priestesses who now appeared for the first time, came Tau, praying them to follow him into the presence of Roy, the prophet and his master.

They obeyed, Rima leaning on the arm of Tau, for now she seemed too weak to walk alone, Kemmah bearing the babe, and Ru bringing up the rear. Presently they heard sounds of singing, and entering a great hall lit by little window-places set high up near the roof and by an opening to the East, saw that in it were gathered a number of men and women, all clad in white robes, the men to the right and the women to the left. At the head of the hall was an altar and behind the altar, in a shrine of alabaster, a life-sized statue of Osiris, god of the dead wrapped in the trappings of the dead. In front of this altar in a chair of black stone sat an aged man clad in white priestly garments over which hung strange-shaped, mystical jewels of gold and gems.

He was a wonderful old man, or so thought Ru staring at him with round eyes, for his beard was long and white as snow, his hands were thin as those of a mummy, his nose was hooked and his eyes were black, piercing, and full of fire. Though she had not seen him in the flesh for many years, Kemmah knew him at once to be none other than the king's son, her great-uncle, Roy the Prophet, whose fame for holiness, secret power, and magic was told of throughout Egypt. Indeed, she remembered that just so had he appeared to her in the ruined shrine that was in the palace gardens at Thebes when she sought a sign that Tau was a true messenger and not one who set a trap.

They drew near while all the company stared at them in silence. Suddenly Roy lifted his head, studying them with his piercing eyes, then in a strong, clear voice asked of Tau:

“Who are these that you bring into the Chapter of the secret Brotherhood of the Dawn, to enter which without authority is death? Answer, O my son in the spirit.”

Thrice Tau made reverence and said:

“O Holy One, O Home of Wisdom, greater than all kings, voice of Heaven upon earth, hear me! On the day of full moon before the last you commanded me, saying:

“‘Priest of our Brotherhood, become a merchant. Sail up Nile to Thebes, and before dawn on the day that you reach the ancient city enter the garden of the palace and take your stand behind a palm tree that grows near to a forgotten shrine. There you will find a woman, a nurse of kings in whom my blood runs. Speak to her. Show her this half of a broken talisman, and if she can show its other half, declare to her that you are my messenger charged with a certain mission. Set out that mission, and if she doubts, pray to me, sending your prayer through space, and I will hear you and come to your aid. Then when she doubts no more, fulfil that mission as shall be made clear to you.’

“I heard your commands, O Holy One, and behold! the mission is fulfilled. Before you appear Rima the Babylonian, daughter of Ditanah the King of Babylon and widow of Kheperra, Pharaoh of Upper Egypt; Lady Kemmah, the royal nurse, your kinswoman, and the royal babe Nefra, Princess of Egypt.”

“I see them, my son, but what of the fourth, the mighty black man, as to whom I gave no command?”

“This, Father: that without his help sent by the gods none of us would be here to-day, seeing that he held the door against traitors and with that axe of his, slew them all, eight in number.”

“Not so, my son, unless my spirit told me falsely, the Lady Kemmah, my kinswoman, slew one of them.”

Now Ru, who had been listening amazed, could contain himself no longer.

“That is right, O Prophet, or O God,” he broke in, in his big voice. “She killed one of them who slipped past me, their captain as I think, with the shrewdest thrust ever driven by a woman's arm – also another escaped. But your sight must be very good, O Prophet, if you can see from here to Thebes and take note of one blow among so many.”

A faint smile flickered on the face of Roy.

“Come hither, Ru, for so I think you are named,” he said.

The giant obeyed and of his own accord knelt down before Roy, who went on:

“Hearken, Ru the Ethiopian. You are a gallant man and a true-hearted. You slew those who slew your King Kheperra and bore his body from the battle. By your gift of strength and skill in war

you saved your lord's child and the Queen her mother from prison and death. Therefore I number you among our Brotherhood into whose company hitherto no black man has ever entered. Afterwards you shall be instructed in its simpler rites and take the lesser oaths. Yet know, O Ru, that if you betray the smallest of its secrets or work harm to any of your fellow servants of the Dawn, you shall die thus," and leaning forward he whispered fiercely into the Negro's ear.

"Have done, I pray you, Prophet," exclaimed Ru in lively terror and springing to his feet. "I have seen and heard of many things but never of such a one as this, in Ethiopia or in Egypt, in war or in peace. Moreover, such threats are needless, since I never betrayed any one except myself, and least of all those whose bread I eat and whom I love," and he glanced towards the Queen and the child.

"I know it, Ru; yet sometimes folly betrays as well as craft. Harken! You are appointed bodyservant and guard to the Royal Princess of Egypt as you were to her father before her. Where she goes, there you go; when she sleeps your bed is without her door. If she fights you stand at her side in battle, shielding her with your life. If she wanders by day or by night, you wander with her, and when at last she dies, you die also and accompany her to the Underworld. For this shall be your reward – that the blessing and the strength that are on her shall be on you also, and that you shall serve her to all eternity. Retire."

"I ask no better fate," muttered Ru as he obeyed.

"Kinswoman, bring me the child," said the Prophet.

Kemmah came forward bearing the sleeping babe and at Roy's bidding held it up to be seen of all, whereon everyone in that company bowed the knee and bent the head.

"Brothers and Sisters of the Company of the Dawn, in the person of this child behold your Queen and Egypt's!" cried Roy, and again they bent the knee and bowed the head.

Then he breathed upon the babe and blessed it, making over it certain mystic signs and calling upon gods and spirits to guard it through life and for ever. This done he kissed the infant and handed it back to Kemmah, saying:

"Blessed be you also, O faithful woman. Aye, and you shall be blessed, and later instructed in our mysteries and numbered of our Company. Go in peace."

Now Roy had spoken to all that company save to the chief of them, Rima the Queen, who sat in front of him in a chair that had been given to her, watching him with empty eyes and listening to his words as though they dealt with far-off matters and moved her not. Yet when he had finished she lifted her head, saying:

"Words and blessings for the slave. Words and blessings for the nurse. Words and adoration for the babe in whom run the royal bloods of Egypt and of Babylon. But what words for the Queen and mother, O Prophet, at whose bidding she and that which was born of her have been brought to this darksome place and habitation of conspirators plotting to ends unknown?"

Now Roy arose from his throne before the altar, a tall, ethereal shape, and advancing to the stricken queen lifted her hand and kissed it.

"For your Majesty I have no message," he said, bending his venerable head, "seeing that already you hold communion with one who is greater than I," and he turned and bowed to the solemn statue of the god Osiris which stared at them from beyond the altar.

"I know it," she answered with a sad smile.

"Yet," he went on, "it is reported to me that in this night that is gone, your Majesty dreamed a dream. Is it not so?"

"It is so, Prophet, though who told you I do not know."

"It matters not who told me. What matters is that I am charged to say to your Majesty that this dream was no phantasy bred of human hopes and longings but the very truth. Learn, O Queen, that this world and its sufferings are but a shadow and a show, and that beyond them, like the pyramids towering above the sands and palm trees at their base, stands the eternal verity whose name is Love.

The sands are blown away and having borne their fruit, the palm trees are torn up by the tempest or grow old and die, but the pyramids remain.”

“I understand and I thank you, Prophet. Now lead me hence for I am weary.”

On the third night from this day Rima the Queen, knowing that the fever which consumed her had done its work and that the time was at hand for her to bid farewell to the world, sent a messenger to Roy the Prophet saying that she would speak with him. He came and she addressed him thus:

“I know not who you are nor what is this Brotherhood of the Dawn of which you speak, and to what ends it works, nor why you have brought the Royal Princess hither, nor what gods you serve, I who take but little count of the gods of Egypt, although it is true that when my child was born two of them seemed to appear to me in a vision. Yet I will add this: my heart tells me that you are a most righteous man and a prophet of power appointed by Fate to fulfil its will; also that you and those about you plan good and not ill for the Princess, who, if there is justice in the world, should one day be Queen of Egypt. There then I leave this matter in the hands of Heaven; I, who, having done all that I can do, find myself dying, unfortunate and powerless. Those things will happen which must happen and there is no more to be said.

“Now I demand an oath of you, Roy, and of the priest Tau, and of all the Brotherhood under you. It is that when I am dead you will embalm my body with all the skill of the Egyptians, and that afterwards, when there is opportunity, you will cause it to be conveyed to Ditanah, the King of Babylon, my father, or to him who sits in his place, with these my dying words written in a scroll on its breast, accompanied, if may be, by my daughter, the Royal Princess of Egypt.

“I demand an oath of you, further, that those who bear my body shall say to the King of Babylon that I, the dead daughter of Babylon, aforetime wife of the King of Egypt, call upon him in the name of our gods and by our common blood to avenge the wrongs that I have suffered in Egypt and the death of my lord beloved, my husband, King Kheperra. I call upon him under the pain of the curse of my spirit, to roll down in his might upon Egypt and to smite these Shepherd dogs who slew my husband and took his heritage, and to establish my daughter, the Princess Nefra, as Queen of Egypt, and to seize those who were traitors to her and would have given her to doom and me with her, and to slay them. This is the oath which I demand of you.”

“Yet, Queen,” answered Roy, “it is one that is little to my liking, seeing that if fulfilled it may breed war and that we, the sons and daughters of the Dawn – for Harmachis whose image is the Sphinx that watches at our door, is the god of Dawn – seek peace and not war. Forgiveness, not vengeance, is the law we follow. It is true that if may be we desire to depose the usurping Shepherd kings and to restore Egypt to the line of its rightful rulers, of whom the Princess Nefra is the heir, or if as yet this is refused to us by the gods, to unite the North and South so that Egypt may grow greater and cease to bleed from the wounds of war.”

“That is what the Shepherds seek also,” said Rima faintly.

“Aye, but their ends are other than ours. They would rivet a yoke upon the neck of Egypt; we would loose that yoke and not by the sword. The Shepherds are many, but the people of Egypt are more, and if the two races can be mingled, then the good Nile wheat which we sow will smother the foreign Shepherd weeds. Already something has been done; already these Shepherd kings bend the knee to the gods of Egypt whose altars once they overthrew, and accept Egypt’s laws and customs.”

“It may be so, Prophet, and in the end all may come about as you desire. But I am of blood different from that of you soft Egyptians and I have suffered grievous wrong. My husband has been slain; those whom he trusted have striven to sell me and my child to slavery and therefore I seek for the justice that I shall never see. Not with soft words and far-sighted plottings would I win that justice, but with spears and arrows. My body is weak and I am near my end, but my soul is aflame. I know, moreover, that all your hopes are centred on this child of mine, as are my own, and my spirit tells me how they may best be brought to harvest. Will you swear the oath? Answer, and quickly. For

if you will not swear, mayhap I may find another counsel. What if I take the babe with me, Prophet, to plead our cause in the Courts above, as I think I can still find the means to do?”

Now Roy considered her, reading her mind, and saw that it was desperate.

“I must take counsel of that which I serve,” he answered. “Perchance It will give me wisdom.”

“And what if I and mayhap another die while you are taking counsel, Prophet? You think that you can remove the babe, who do not know that a mother’s will is very strong and that we Babylonians have secrets of our own, especially at the hour of death, with which we have the power to draw after us those who are born of our bodies.”

“Fear not, Queen Rima. I, too, have my secrets, and I tell you that Osiris will not take you yet.”

“I believe you, Prophet. On such a matter you would not lie. Go, take counsel with your gods and come back quickly.”

“I go,” he said, and went.

A little before the hour of dawn Roy returned to that death chamber and with him came Tau, also she who was the first priestess of the Order of the Dawn. Rima awaited him, supported with pillows upon her bed.

“You spoke truly, Prophet,” she said, “seeing that now I am stronger than when we parted yesterday. Yet be swift, for this strength of mine is but as the brightness of a dying lamp. Speak, and shortly.”

“Queen Rima,” he replied, “I have taken counsel of the Power I serve, who guides my feet here upon the earth. It has been pleased to send an answer to my prayer.”

“What answer, Prophet?” she asked eagerly.

“This, Queen: That I, on behalf of the Order of the Dawn over which I rule, and in the presence of those who stand next to me in that order” – and he pointed to Tau and to the priestess – “should take the oath that you desire, since thus our ends can best be brought about, though how they will be accomplished was not revealed. I swear, therefore, in the name of that Spirit who is above all gods, also by your *Ka* and mine, and by the child who here and now we take for queen, that when there is opportunity, which I think will not be for many years, your body shall be borne to Babylon and your message delivered to its king, if may be – by your daughter’s lips. Moreover, that nothing may be forgotten, all your desire and this oracle are upon this roll which shall be read to you and sealed by you as a letter to the King of Babylon, and with it our oath, sealed by me and by Tau who comes after me.”

“Read,” said the Queen. “Nay, let the Lady Kemmah, who is learned, read.”

So with some help from Tau, Kemmah read.

“It is truly written,” said Rima. “There on the roll the matter is set out well and clearly. Yet, add this – that if my father, the royal Ditanah the King, or he who sits upon his throne after him, denies this my last prayer, then I call down the curse of all the gods of Babylon upon his people, and that I, Rima, will haunt him while he lives and ask account of him when we meet at last in the Underworld.”

“So be it,” said Roy, “though these words are not gentle. Yet write them down, O Tau, for the dying must be obeyed.”

So Tau sat himself upon the floor and wrote upon his knee. Then wax mixed with clay was brought and drawing from her wasted finger a ring on which was cut the figure of a Babylonian god, Rima pressed it on the wax, while Kemmah took a scarab from her breast and sealed as witness.

“Set one copy of this roll with the ring among the wrappings of my mummy that the King of Babylon may find it there, and hide the other in your most secret place,” said Rima.

“It shall be done,” said Roy, and waited.

At this moment the first rays of the rising sun shot like arrows through the window-place. With a strange strength Rima took her child and held her up so that the golden light fell full upon her.

“The Queen of the Dawn!” she cried. “Behold her kissed and crowned of the Dawn. O Queen of the Dawn, rule on triumphant through the perfect day, till night brings you to my breast again.”

Then she embraced the child, and beckoning to Kemmah, gave it into her arms. A moment later, murmuring, "My task is done. My Lord awaits me," she fell back and died.

Chapter 6

Nefra Conquers the Pyramids

Strange, very strange indeed was the book of Life as it opened itself to the child Nefra, Royal Princess of Egypt. Looking back in after years to those of her infancy, all she could remember was a vision of great pillared halls, where stone images stared at her and the carved or painted walls were full of grotesque figures which seemed to pursue each other everlastingly from darkness into darkness. Then there were visions of white-robed men and women who from time to time gathered in these places and sang sad and mellow chants, of which the echoes haunted her sleep from year to year. Also there was the stately shape of the Lady Kemmah, her nurse whom she loved well yet feared a little, and that of the gigantic Ethiopian named Ru, who always seemed to be about her day and night, carrying a great bronze axe in his hand, whom she loved entirely and feared not at all.

Foremost among them, too, was the awful apparition of an aged man with a white beard and black, flashing eyes whom she came to know as the Prophet and whom all worshipped as though he were a god. She remembered waking up at night and seeing him bending over her, a lantern in his hand, or in the daytime meeting her in the dark temple passages and passing by with words of blessing. To her childish imagination, indeed, he was not human but a ghost to be fled from; yet a kindly ghost withal, since sometimes he gave her delicious sweetmeats or even flowers that a Brother carried in a basket.

Infancy passed by and there came childhood. Still the same halls were about her, peopled by the same folk, but now, at times, with Kemmah her nurse and guarded by the giant Ru and others, she was allowed to wander outside of them, most frequently after night had fallen and when the full moon shone in the sky. Thus it was that first she came to know the lion shape of the terrible Sphinx, lying crouched upon the desert. In the beginning she was afraid of this stone creature with its human face painted red, its royal headdress, and its bearded chin, though afterwards, when it grew familiar to her, she learned to love that face, finding something friendly in its smile and its great calm eyes that stared at the sky as though they would search out its secrets. Indeed, at times she would sit on the sand, sending Kemmah and Ru to a little distance, and tell it her childish troubles and ask it questions, furnishing the answers for herself, since from the great lips of the Sphinx none ever came.

Then beyond the Sphinx rose the mighty pyramids, three principal ones that pierced the very sky, with temples at the base of them wherein dead kings had once been worshipped, and others that were smaller which, she fancied, must be their children. She worshipped those pyramids, believing that the gods had made them, till Tau, her tutor, told her that they were built by men to be the graves of kings.

“They must have been great kings that had such graves; I should like to look on them.”

“Perhaps you will some day,” answered Tau, who was a most learned man and her instructor in many things.

Besides herself there were other children of the Order, born of the wedded brothers and sisters. These were formed into a school, Nefra among them, which school was taught by the Instructed among the Brotherhood. Indeed, nearly all of them had learning, for the full members of the Order of the Dawn were no common folk, although their servants and those who tilled the flat lands not far from the Sphinx having their habitations upon the borders of the great Necropolis were, or seemed to be like, any other husbandmen. To look on them, none would have known that they were partakers in mysteries which they were sworn by solemn oaths not to reveal, and indeed never did reveal, even under the fear of death or torture.

Soon Nefra became the head of this school, not because of her rank but for the reason that she was by far the cleverest of all its pupils, and her quick mind drank up knowledge as a dry fleece

of wool drinks up the dew. Yet if any visited that school and watched the children listening to the teacher, or seated on their stools, copying the picture-writing of the Egyptians upon potsherds or fragments of papyrus, save that she sat at the head of a line of them and for something different in her face, they would have found nothing to distinguish her from the other little maidens who were her companions. She wore the same plain robe of white, the same simple sandals to protect her feet from stones and scorpions, while her hair was tied with a stem of dried grass into a single tress after just the same fashion. Indeed, it was a rule of the Order that she should carry on her person no robe or ornament which might reveal that she was not as other children were.

Yet the instruction of Nefra did not end with her lessons in this school, for when these were done or in times of holiday she must learn a deeper lore. Tau, accompanied by Kemmah her nurse, would take her to a little private room that once had been the sleeping place of a priest of the temple in ancient days and there teach her many secret things.

Thus he taught her the Babylonian tongue and writing, or knowledge of the movements of the stars and planets, or the mysteries of religion, showing her that all the gods of all the priests were but symbols of the attributes of an unseen Power, a Spirit that ruled everything and was everywhere, even in her own heart. He taught her that the flesh was but the earthly covering of the soul and that between flesh and soul there reigned eternal war. He taught her that she lived here upon the earth to fulfil the purposes of this almighty Spirit that created her, to whom in a day to come she must return, perchance to be sent out again to this or other worlds; though what those purposes might be were not known even by the wisest men who breathed. And while he taught thus and she listened, watching him with eager eyes, sometimes the old prophet Roy would steal into the chamber and listen also, adding a word here or there, then hold out his hand in blessing and steal away.

Thus, though outwardly Nefra was as are other merry children, inwardly her soul opened like a lotus lily in the sun and she was different from them all.

So the years went on till from a child she grew into a maiden, tall and sweet and very fair. It was at this time in her life that Roy himself and Tau, in the presence of Kemmah only, revealed to her who she was, namely, none other than the Royal Princess of Egypt by right of blood and the appointment of Heaven, and told her the story of her father and her mother and of the kings and queens who went before them; also of the divisions in the land.

When she heard these things Nefra wept and trembled.

“Alas! that it should be so,” she said, “for now no longer can I be happy. Tell me, holy Father, whom men name Home-of-Spirits that, they say, hold converse with you in your sleep, what can a poor maid do to right so many wrongs and to bring peace where there is but bitterness and bloodshed?”

“Princess of Egypt,” said Roy, for the first time giving her her title, “I do not know because it is not revealed to me or to any. Yet it is revealed to me and to certain others that in some way unforeseen you will do these things. Aye, and it was revealed in a dream to your mother, the Queen Rima, when you were born, for in this dream that part of the Universal Spirit whom here in Egypt we know as Mother Isis appeared to her and amongst other gifts gave to you, the royal child, the high name of Uniter of Lands.”

Here Kemmah thought to herself that another goddess appeared as well as Isis and gave to this same child different gifts, and though she said nothing Roy seemed to read her thoughts, for he went on:

“As to this dream and certain mysteries by which it was accompanied, the Lady Kemmah, your nurse and instructress, is commanded to inform you; also to show to you the record of all these matters which at that time was written down and sealed, and with it another record of a certain oath which I and others swore to your mother, the Queen Rima, upon her deathbed, concerning a journey which you must make at the appointed time. Enough of these matters. Now I am commanded to tell you that on a day to come which shall be declared when it is known to me, it is our purpose with

such state as we can compass, to crown you, standing as you do on the threshold of womanhood, as Queen of Egypt.”

“How can that be?” asked Nefra. “Kings and queens are crowned in temples, or so I have been taught, and in the presence of multitudes of courtiers, with pomp and shoutings. But here – ” and she looked about her.

“Is not this a temple and one of the most ancient and holiest in Egypt, Nefra?” asked Roy. “And for the rest, listen. We seem to be but a humble Brotherhood, the inhabitants of tombs and pyramids which few dare approach because they hold them haunted and deadly to the life and soul of any stranger who dares to violate their sanctuary. Yet I tell you that this Order of the Dawn is more powerful and more far-reaching than the Shepherd king himself and all those that cling to him, as you will learn shortly when you are sworn of it. Its disciples are everywhere, from the Cataracts of the Nile down to the sea; aye, and in lands beyond the sea, and, as we believe, in Heaven above; and one and all they obey the commands that issue from these catacombs, accepting them as the voice of God.”

“Then if so, Holy Prophet, why do you not sit at Tanis openly, instead of in secret in these tombs?”

“Because, Princess, visible power and the trappings of power can only be won by war, and we are sworn to wage no war, we whose empire is of the spirit. It may be that in the end it is decreed that war must be waged and that thus all will be accomplished. Yet it is not our Brotherhood that will lift its banners or, save in self-defence, bring men to their deaths, for we are sworn to peace and gentleness.”

“I rejoice to hear it,” said Nefra, “and now, Master, I pray you let me go to rest, for I am overwhelmed.”

A year or more after this day of the revealing of secrets, but before the ceremonies which it foretold, a terrible thing happened to Nefra.

Now it was her custom to wander about the great graveyard that surrounded the pyramids where in their splendid tombs so many of the ancient nobles and princes of Egypt had been laid to rest a thousand years or more before her day, so long ago indeed that none remembered the names of those who slept beneath these monuments. On these wanderings of hers it was her pleasure to go unaccompanied save by her body-servant, Ru, for Kemmah, who now grew aged, had no strength for such rough journeys over tumbled stones and through deep sand.

Moreover, at this time Nefra loved to be alone, that she might find time to think in solitude over all that had been revealed to her as to her history and fate, and the unsought greatness that had been thrust upon her.

Further, being very vigorous in body as she was in mind, she wearied of being cooped up in the narrow precincts of the temple and its neighbourhood and longed for exercise and adventure. By nature she was a climber, one of those who love to scale heights and thence look down upon the world below. Thus it became her pleasure to scramble to the top of great monuments and even of some of the smaller pyramids, which she found she could do with ease, since her feet were sure and no dizziness ever overtook her.

All of these fancies of hers were reported to Kemmah by Ru and others who watched her, and to Roy and Tau by Kemmah when she found that the young princess would not listen to her chidings, but for the first time in her life turned upon her angrily, reminding her that she was no more a child to be led by the hand and would have her way.

These consulted of the matter, and, it would seem, according to their rule, made divination, taking counsel of that Spirit who, as they declared, guided them in all things.

The end of it was that the Prophet Roy bade his great-niece, the Lady Kemmah, to trouble the Princess no more about this business, but to suffer her to walk where it pleased her and to climb what she would, because it was revealed to him that whoever took harm, she would take none.

“It is not wise to thwart her as to such a little thing, Niece,” he went on, “seeing that there is no danger to her and none of the Shepherds or other enemies dare to approach this haunted place.

Also, she goes forth guarded by Ru to talk, not with any man, but only with her own heart amid the holy company of the dead.”

“There are always some who will dare that of which all others are afraid, and who knows whom she may meet and talk with before all is done?” answered Kemmah.

“I have spoken, Niece. Withdraw,” said Roy.

So, having triumphed, Nefra, who was young and headstrong, continued her wanderings and indeed did more.

Now there was a family of Arab blood among those who served and were sworn to the Brotherhood of the Dawn, who from generation to generation had been climbers of the pyramids. These men alone, by following certain cracks in their marble casings and clinging to knobs or hollows that had been worn in them by the blowing of sand during hundreds or thousands of years, had the art and courage to come to the crest of every one of them; nor until they had done so were they counted fit to take a wife. With the Sheik of these men Nefra often talked, and for her pleasure at different times he and his sons scaled every one of the pyramids before her eyes, returning safely from their dizzy journey to her side.

“Why cannot I do as you do?” she asked of this sheik at length. “I am light and surefooted, and my head does not swim upon a height; also I have limbs as long as yours.”

The Captain of the Pyramids, for so he was commonly called, looked at her, astonished, and shook his head.

“It is impossible,” he said. “No woman has ever climbed those stone mountains; that is, except the Spirit of the Pyramids herself.”

“Who is the Spirit of the Pyramids?”

“Lady, we know not,” he answered. “We never ask her, and when we see her in the full moon upon her journeyings, we veil our faces.”

“Why do you veil your faces, Captain?”

“Because if we did not we should go mad, as men have done who looked into her eyes.”

“Why do they go mad?”

“Because too much beauty breeds madness, as perchance you may find out one day, Lady,” he answered; words that brought the colour to Nefra’s brow.

“Who and what is this spirit?” she continued hastily. “And what does she do?”

“We are not certain, but the story tells that long, long ago there was a maiden queen of this land who would not marry because she loved some man of a humble station. Now it came about that strangers invaded Egypt, which was weak and divided, and conquered. Then the king of the strangers, seeing the beauty of this queen and that he might build his throne upon a sure foundation, wished to take her to wife, even by force. But she fled from him and in her despair climbed the greatest of the pyramids, he following after her. Reaching its crest she hurled herself thence and was crushed, seeing which faintness took hold of the king, so that he, too, fell to the ground and died. After this they buried both of them in a secret chamber of one of the pyramids – which is not known, but I think it must have been the second since there the spirit is most often seen.”

“A pretty tale,” said Nefra, “but is that the end of it?”

“Not quite, Lady, since to it hangs a prophecy. It is that when another king follows another Queen of Egypt up the pyramid whence this one fell, whichever it may have been, and there wins her love, the avenging spirit of her who threw herself thence will find rest and no more bring destruction upon men.”

“I would see this spirit,” said Nefra. “As I am a woman she cannot make me mad.”

“Nor being a woman, Lady, do I think that she will appear to you. Nevertheless, it may be her pleasure to possess your soul for her own purposes,” he added thoughtfully.

“My soul is my own and no one shall possess it,” answered Nefra in anger. “Nor indeed do I believe that there is such a spirit, who think that what you and other foolish men have seen was nothing but a moon-cast shadow travelling among the graves. So tell me no more such idle tales.”

“There are one or two mad fellows living among the tombs who know more of that moon-cast shadow than I do, Lady. Still it may be as you say,” replied the Sheik, bowing courteously after the ancient fashion of the East to a superior. “Yes, maybe you are right. Have it as you will,” and he turned to go.

“Stay,” said Nefra, “it is my wish that you who have more skill and knowledge of them than any other man, should teach me to climb those pyramids. Let us begin upon the third, which is the smallest, and at once. The others we can conquer afterwards when I am more accustomed to the work.”

Now the man stared at her and began to protest.

“Have you not the commands of the holy prophet Roy and of the Council of the Order to obey me in all things?” asked Nefra presently.

“That is so, Lady, though why we should obey you I do not know.”

“Nor do I quite, Captain, seeing that you can climb pyramids and I cannot, and you are therefore greater than I. Still, there are the orders and you know what happens to those who break the commands of the Council. Now let us begin.”

The Sheik reasoned and prayed and almost wept, but all that happened was that Nefra exclaimed at last:

“If you are afraid to go up that pyramid, I will go by myself. Then, you know, I may fall.”

So the end of it was that the afflicted Sheik summoned his son, a lissom youth who could climb like a goat, bidding him bring with him a long rope made of twisted palm fibre, which rope he fastened round Nefra’s slender waist. But now there was more trouble, for Ru, who had been listening to all this talk amazed, asked him what he was doing binding his lady like a slave.

The Sheik explained, while Nefra nodded assent.

“But it cannot be,” said Ru. “My duty is to accompany this Noble One everywhere.”

“Then, friend Ru,” said Nefra, “accompany me up the pyramid.”

“Up the pyramid!” said Ru, puffing out his cheeks. “Look at me, I pray you, Mistress, and say whether I am a cat or a monkey that I can climb up a slope of smooth stone from earth to heaven. Ere we had gone the length of that rope I should fall and break my neck. Rather would I fight ten men single-handed than be so mad.”

“It is true. I think that you will make no good scaler of stone mountains, friend Ru,” said Nefra, surveying the Ethiopian’s mighty form which had grown no smaller with the passage of the years. “Now cease from talking, for we waste time. If you cannot go up the pyramid, stand at the bottom of it, just beneath me, and if I slip and fall, catch me as I come.”

“Catch you as you come! Catch you as you come!” gasped Ru.

Without more words Nefra went to the foot of the third pyramid, up which the Sheik, who also seemed to be empty of speech, began to mount by the way he knew, having the end of the rope that was about Nefra tied round his middle. She followed him, her feet bare and her robe tucked up about her knees, as he bade her, while after her came his son watching her every movement.

“Hearken, men,” groaned Ru. “If you suffer my Lady to slip, you had better stop on that pyramid for the rest of your lives, for if you come down I will kill you both.”

“If she slips, we shall slip also. The gods bear me witness that it is no fault of mine,” answered the Sheik, who was lying on his face upon the slope of the pyramid.

Now it is to be told that Nefra proved an apt pupil at this game. She had the eye of a hawk, the courage of a lion, and was sure-footed as an ape. Up she went, setting her hands and feet exactly where her guide had done, till they had conquered half the height.

“It is enough for to-day,” said the Sheik. “No beginner of our race comes farther at the first trial; that is the rule. Rest here awhile, and then descend. My son will place your feet where they should go.”

“I obey,” said Nefra, and turned herself round as her guide had done above her, to see nothing beneath her save a sheer gulf of space and Ru, grown small, standing on the sand at the bottom. Then for the first time she grew dizzy.

“My head swims,” she said faintly.

“Turn about again,” said the Sheik, nor could his quiet voice quite conceal the agony of his fear. She obeyed, and her strength came back to her, her flesh obeying the will within.

“I am well again,” she said.

“Then, Lady, turn once more, for if you do not do so now you never will.”

For the second time she obeyed, and lo! she no longer feared the height, the spirit within her had conquered her mortal tremblings. After this the descent was easy, for she could see where to place her hands and feet in the fissures of that hot and shining marble; moreover, the young man beneath, who, knowing every one of them, was able to keep his face to the pyramid, guided her as to where to set them. So they came safely to the ground, where Nefra sat a little while, panting and smiling at Ru who mopped his brow with his robe, his big eyes starting from his head, for never before had he been so frightened.

“Have you had enough of the pyramids, Lady?” asked the Sheik as he loosed the rope from about her.

“By no means,” answered Nefra, springing up and clapping her sore hands. “I love the work and never shall I have had enough of them till I can climb them all alone by moonlight, as it is said that you can do.”

“Isis, Mother of Heaven!” exclaimed the Sheik, throwing up his hands, “this is no mortal maid; this is a goddess; this is the Spirit of the Pyramids herself appearing in earthly form.”

“Yes,” said Nefra, “I think that is what I am – the Spirit of the Pyramids. Now will it please you to meet me here to-morrow at the same time, when I hope that we may be able to reach the top of the smallest of them.”

Then having put on her sandals, before the unhappy man could answer, she departed at a run followed by Ru, who was so astonished that he could not speak.

This was but a beginning, for what Nefra prophesied, that she performed. At this time all the strength of her young and burning nature was directed to one thing only – the mastery of those pyramids. It was a small ambition, yet to her, in the day of her dawning womanhood, it was everything. She had been told that by birth she was Queen of Egypt. It moved her little, for dwelling amid those deserted temples and tombs the royalty of Egypt seemed to her a dream, or at least something far away. But the pyramids were near, and what she desired was to be Queen of the Pyramids which, she was also told, her far-off ancestors had raised up to be their tombs. Moreover, that story of a spirit which haunted them had stirred her. She did not believe in the Spirit, but since youth is credulous over matters that have to do with love, she believed the story. She saw that fair young queen, such a one as she was, who had also learned to climb the pyramids, flying to the top of the tallest of them and thence hurling herself to doom to escape one whom she hated and who had humbled her country to the dust, thus bringing conquered and conqueror to a common doom. Also she found something beautiful, something that touched the heart in the pendant of this story, namely, that in a day to come another young and lovely queen would fly up one of those pyramids pursued by another alien lover, and that there on the verge of dizzy death, their hate would melt in the fires of passion, thus bringing blessings on the land for the rule of which they fought.

As yet Nefra knew nothing of love, still Nature was at work in her, as it is in the smallest child, and she understood something of the meaning of this beautiful fable, and the dim thoughts that sprang from it warmed her sleeping soul. Meanwhile she had but one desire – to achieve that which seemed to be impossible to woman, to conquer the pyramids, not understanding in those days that the thing

was an allegory and that she, whose strong spirit could enable her to dare so many dangers and to overcome them with her young body, might also in time come to meet subtler perils and tread them beneath her conquering feet.

Moreover, at this time the desire of prayer and the mystery of communion with That which is above mankind, That which the dwellers upon earth called God, came home to her, not from any teaching of Roy or Tau, but, as it were, out of her own soul. Above all things she yearned for this communion, and there fell upon her one of the strange fancies, some would call them madnesses, which often enough possess those who are passing from childhood into the fulness of life, or from the fulness of life into the twilight that precedes the darkness of death. This was her particular dream, or illusion, or vision of the Truth, that she could best make her prayer and come into closest communion with the Spirit which brooded over her and all the world, in utter solitude upon the summit of those pyramids. It was a folly, perhaps, yet a noble folly. At least in the end she reaped its fruit, for within a year she learned to climb them all and this quite alone.

The Sheik of the Pyramids and his sons who had instructed her, the art and craft of whose family it had been for generations to scale these stone mountains for praise and reward on days of festival, were astonished and abased to see themselves equalled or outpassed in their peculiar business by a mere maiden.

At the beginning of the adventure they had been summoned before the Council of the Order, who had grown alarmed at the reports of Ru and Kemmah as to this vagary which had seized upon one whose life was precious, and asked as to its peril. They replied that there was none for those to whom the gift was given, since not for six generations had a single man among them come to his death from following this business. Yet, they added, that to those who were not of their family, it was fatal, since many had tried to share their secret and its fruits, but all of them had perished miserably, an answer that frightened the Council. Yet because of the revelations of Roy, they did nothing to restrain Nefra, who went her way about the matter and took no harm at all, till at length by day or even by night when the moon was at its full, she could reach the top of any of the pyramids as quickly as the Sheik or his sons.

Then that family abased themselves before her and, gathering together, prayed her to accept the captaincy and leadership of them all, since she had outpassed them all. But Nefra only laughed and said that it was nothing and she would not, and ordered that they should be given rewards such as she had to bestow. Thereafter she had the freedom of the pyramids and was allowed to climb them when and how she liked without the attendance of the Sheik or his sons.

Yet of this at last came trouble.

Chapter 7

The Plot of the Vizier

Nefra, as has been said, when the fancy took her made a custom of climbing one or other of the pyramids, generally at the hour of the rising or the setting of the sun, and, standing there upon the topmost flat coping-stones, of praying in that glorious loneliness. Or perchance she would not pray but content herself with looking down upon the world beneath, reflecting the while upon what fortunes it might have to offer her, or on such other matters as come into a maiden's mind.

Now this habit of hers became known, not only among the members of the Order and their dependents, but to many who dwelt or journeyed beyond the boundaries of what was called the Holy Ground, upon which no stranger dared to set his foot. Nor was this strange, seeing that her slender form thus poised between earth and heaven and outlined against the sky at dawn or sunset could be seen from far away, even from the Nile itself when it was in flood. Most held it to be that of the Spirit of the Pyramids herself whose appearance thus heralded trouble in Egypt, for there were few indeed who believed it to be possible that any woman could adventure herself in this fashion, or find the strength and skill to climb up marble like a lizard.

Soon the story of the marvel spread far and wide, and even came to the Court of King Apepi.

One evening Nefra, having climbed the second pyramid in this fashion, descended as usual and because the light was failing chose a somewhat shorter route that brought her to the ground not by the southern face where Ru was waiting to receive her, but just round the angle on that face which looked towards the west where the light of the dying day still shone. Having leapt lightly to the sand, she looked about for Ru and instead of him saw four men approaching her, of whom at first she took little note, thinking in the fading light that these were the Sheik of the Pyramids and his sons who came to inquire of her about the new road she had found upon the western face of this pyramid. So she stood still and they drew near, then hesitated a little as though they were afraid of her, till presently a voice called out:

“Woman or spirit, seize her! Let her not escape us! Think of the great reward and seize her!”

Thus encouraged, with a bound they came at her. Understanding her peril Nefra turned to fly up the pyramid again and already was some feet above the sand when the first of the men caught her by the ankle and dragged her down.

“Ru!” she cried in a clear and piercing voice. “To my aid, Ru. I am snared, Ru!”

Now as it chanced Ru was very near, only just round the angle of the pile indeed, because having lost sight of Nefra in the shadow as she descended, feeling disturbed, he was advancing to the western face where the light was better to discover if perchance she were there. He heard her cry for help; he rushed forward and, turning the corner, saw Nefra on the ground, while round her were the four men, three of them binding her with a rope while the fourth was tying a linen bandage across her face.

With a roar he leapt upon them holding his great axe aloft. He who had the bandage saw him first, a black, gigantic figure whom doubtless he took for some terrible guardian spirit and strove to leap past him and fly. The axe flashed and down he went, dead, cloven through and through. Then the other men who at first thought that a lion had roared, saw also, and for a moment stood amazed. Instantly Ru was on them. Letting fall the axe he gripped the two who were nearest, seizing each of them by the throat. He dashed their heads together, and putting out his mighty strength, cast them far away to right and left in such fashion that where they fell, there they lay, stone dead. The fourth man had drawn a knife either to stab at Ru or to kill Nefra; but when he saw the fate of his fellows all courage left him and, screaming with fear, he let fall the knife and fled away. Ru snatched the knife from the sand and hurled it after him. A yell of pain told him that his aim was true, though

because of the shadows he could no longer see the man. Ru would have started in pursuit, but Nefra, struggling from the ground, cried:

“Nay. Bide here, there may be more of them.”

“True,” he answered, “and the dog has it.”

Then, without more words, snatching up Nefra and holding her to his breast with his left arm as though she were but a babe, he found his axe and, without waiting to look at the dead, sped away with her along the western base of the pyramid, till presently they were among tombs where they could be seen no more.

“This is the end of those tricks of yours, Lady,” he said roughly, for he was shaking, not with fear, but at the thought of what she had escaped.

“Had it not been for you, it might have been worse,” answered Nefra. “Still, I have learned my lesson. Set me down now, O most dear Ru, for my breath has returned to me.”

When presently all this tale was told to Kemmah and to the Council of the Order, fear and dismay took hold of them; even Tau the Wise was dismayed. Only Roy the Prophet remained undisturbed.

“The maid will take no harm,” he said. “I know it from those who cannot lie, and therefore it is that I have permitted her to follow her fancy as to the climbing of the pyramids, for it is ill to cross or to coop up such a one as she, as it is good that she should learn to look upon the face of dangers and to overcome them. Still, doubtless this is the beginning of perils and henceforward we must be upon our guard.”

Then he sent out men to bring in the dead whom Ru had slain and to search for the wounded man and, if he could be found, to capture him alive. This, however, did not happen, for when the light came again of that man there remained only certain bloodstains upon the sand which after a while were lost, showing that he had been able to staunch his hurt, and, by walking upon stones, to leave no tracks behind him.

The dead, however, told their own story, for they were of the Shepherds race and two of them wore garments such as were used in the Court of King Apepi. The third, it would seem, was a guide, though of what people could not be known, seeing that it was on his head that the axe of Ru had fallen, and who could tell aught of whence he came upon whose head the axe of Ru had fallen?

So the bodies of those woman-thieves were thrown to the jackals and the vultures, that their *Kas* might find nothing to inhabit, and their souls with all solemnity were cursed by Roy in a Chapter of the Order, that from age to age they might find no rest because of their double crime. For had they not violated the pact of generations and entered the Holy Ground which was the home of the consecrated Order of the Dawn, and there striven to steal away or perchance to murder a certain lady who in the world without was not known by any name?

Thence the matter ended for a space, except that at dawn or sunset Nefra was no longer seen standing upon the crests of pyramids.

Yet some while later a sick and sorry man with a bandaged back, who from time to time coughed up blood as though from a pierced lung, staggered into the Court at Tanis, where his face was known, and being admitted, told his tale to a great officer, who listened to it wrathfully and commanded a scribe to write it down word for word. When it had finished that officer cursed this man because he had failed in his mission.

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