

CHAPTER ONE

My Recall

The public official reception was over. The sentence had been read, the name of Phorenice, the Empress, adored, and the new Viceroy installed with all that vast and ponderous ceremonial which had gained its pomp and majesty from the ages. Formally, I had delivered up the reins of my government; formally Tatho had seated himself on the snake-throne, and had put over his neck the chain of gems which symbolised the supreme office; and then, whilst the drums and the trumpets made their proclamation of clamour, he had risen to his feet for his first state progress round that gilded council chamber, as Viceroy of the Province of Yucatan.

With folded arms and bended head, I followed him between the glittering lines of soldiers, and the brilliant throng of courtiers, and chiefs, and statesmen. The roof-beams quivered to the cries of Long Live Tatho!" "Flourish the Empress!" which came forth as in duty bound, and the new ruler acknowledged the welcome with stately inclinations of the head. In turn he went to the three lesser thrones of the lesser governors—in the East, the North, and the South, and received homage from each as the ritual was; and I, the man whom his coming had deposed, followed with the prescribed meekness in his train.

It was a hard task, but we who hold the higher offices learn to carry before the people a passionless face. Once, twenty years before, these same fine obeisances had been made to me; now the Gods had seen fit to make fortune change. But as I walked bent and humbly on behind the heels of Tatho, though etiquette forbad noisy salutations to myself,

it could not inhibit kindly glances, and these came from every soldier, every courtier, and every chief who stood there in that gilded hall, and they fell upon me very gratefully. It is not often that the fallen meet such tender looks.

The form goes, handed down from immemorial custom, that on these great ceremonial days of changing a ruler, those of the people being present may bring forward petitions and requests; may make accusations against their retiring head with sure immunity from his vengeance; or may state their own private theories for the better government of the State in the future. I think it may be pardoned to my vanity if I record that not a voice was raised against me, or against any of the items of my twenty years of rule. Nor did any speak out for alterations in the future. Yes, even though we made the circuit for the three prescribed times, all present showed their approval in generous silence.

Then, one behind the other, the new Viceroy and the old, we marched with formal step over golden tiles of that council hall beneath the pyramid, and the great officers of state left their stations and joined in our train; and at the farther wall we came to the door of those private chambers which an hour ago had been mine own.

Ah, well! I had no home now in any of those wondrous cities of Yucatan, and I could not help feeling a bitterness, though in sooth I should have been thankful enough to return to the Continent of Atlantis with my head still in its proper station.

Tatho gave his formal summons of "Open ye to the Viceroy," which the ritual commands, and the slaves within sent the massive stone valves of the door gaping wide. Tatho entered, I at his heels; the others halted, sending valedictions from the threshold and the valves of the door clanged on the lock behind us. We passed on to the chamber beyond, and then, when for the first time we were alone together, and the forced etiquette of courts was behind us, the new Viceroy turned with meekly folded arms, and bowed low before me.

"Deucalion," he said, "believe me that I have not sought this office. It was thrust upon me. Had I not accepted, my head would have paid forfeit, and another man—your enemy—would have been sent out as viceroy in your place. The Empress does not permit that her will shall ever be questioned."

“My friend,” I made answer, “my brother in all but blood, there is no man living in all Atlantis or her territories to whom I had liefer hand over my government. For twenty years now have I ruled this country of Yucatan, and Mexico beyond, first under the old King, and then as minister to this new Empress. I know my colony like a book. I am intimate with all her wonderful cities, with their palaces, their pyramids, and their peoples. I have hunted the beasts and the savages in the forests. I have built roads, and made the rivers so that they will carry shipping. I have fostered the arts and crafts like a merchant; I have discoursed, three times each day, the cult of the Gods with mine own lips. Through evil years and through good have I ruled here, striving only for the prosperity of the land and the strengthening of Atlantis, and I have grown to love the peoples like a father. To you I bequeath them, Tatho, with tender supplications for their interest.”

“It is not I that can carry on Deucalion’s work with Deucalion’s power, but rest content, my friend, that I shall do my humble best to follow exactly on in your footsteps. Believe me, I came out to this government with a thousand regrets, but I would have died sooner than take your place had I known how vigorously the supplanting would trouble you.”

“We are alone here,” I said, “away from the formalities of formal assemblies, and a man may give vent to his natural self without fear of tarnishing a ceremony. Your coming was something of the suddenest. Till an hour ago, when you demanded audience, I had thought to rule on longer; and even now I do not know for what cause I am deposed.”

“The proclamation said: ‘We relieve our well-beloved Deucalion of his present service, because we have great need of his powers at home in our kingdom of Atlantis.’”

“A mere formality.”

Tatho looked uneasily round the hangings of the chamber, and drew me with him to its centre, and lowered his voice.

“I do not think so,” he whispered. “I believe she has need of you. There are troublous times on hand, and Phorenice wants the ablest men in the kingdom ready to her call.”

“You may speak openly,” I said, “and without fear of eavesdroppers. We are in the heart of the pyramid here, built in every way by a man’s

length of solid stone. Myself, I oversaw the laying of every course. And besides, here in Yucatan, we have not the niceties of your old world diplomacy, and do not listen, because we count it shame to do so.”

Tatho shrugged his shoulders. “I acted only according to mine education. At home, a loose tongue makes a loose head, and there are those whose trade it is to carry tales. Still, what I say is this: The throne shakes, and Phorenice sees the need of sturdy props. So she has sent this proclamation.”

“But why come to me? It is twenty years since I sailed to this colony, and from that day I have not returned to Atlantis once. I know little of the old country’s politics. What small parcel of news drifts out to us across the ocean, reads with slender interest here. Yucatan is another world, my Tatho, as you in the course of your government will learn, with new interests, new people, new everything. To us here, Atlantis is only a figment, a shadow, far away across the waters. It is for this new world of Yucatan that I have striven through all these years.”

“If Deucalion has small time to spare from his government for brooding over his fatherland, Atlantis, at least, has found leisure to admire the deeds of her brilliant son. Why, sir, over yonder at home, your name carries magic with it. When you and I were lads together, it was the custom in the colleges to teach that the men of the past were the greatest this world has ever seen; but to-day this teaching is changed. It is Deucalion who is held up as the model and example. Mothers name their sons Deucalion, as the most valuable birth-gift they can make. Deucalion is a household word. Indeed, there is only one name that is near to it in familiarity.”

“You trouble me,” I said frowning. “I have tried to do my duty for its own sake, and for the country’s sake, not for the pappings and fondlings of the vulgar. And besides, if there are names to be in every one’s mouth, they should be the names of the Gods.”

Tatho shrugged his shoulders. “The Gods? They occupy us very little these latter years. With our modern science, we have grown past the tether of the older Gods, and no new one has appeared. No, my Lord Deucalion, if it were merely the Gods who were your competitors on men’s lips, your name would be a thousand times the better known.”

“Of mere human names,” I said, “the name of this new Empress should come first in Atlantis, our lord the old King being now dead.”

“She certainly would have it so,” replied Tatho, and there was something in his tone which made me see that more was meant behind the words. I drew him to one of the marble seats, and bent myself familiarly towards him. “I am speaking,” I said, “not to the new Viceroy of Yucatan, but to my old friend Tatho, a member of the Priests’ Clan, like myself, with whom I worked side by side in a score of the smaller home governments, in hamlets, in villages, in smaller towns, in greater towns, as we gained experience in war and knowledge in the art of ruling people, and so tediously won our promotion. I am speaking in Tatho’s private abode, that was mine own not two hours since, and I would have an answer with that plainness which we always then used to one another.”

The new Viceroy sighed whimsically. “I almost forget how to speak in plain words now,” he said. “We have grown so polished in these latter days, that mere bald truth would be hissed as indelicate. But for the memory of those early years, when we expended as much law and thought over the ownership of a hay-byre as we should now over the fate of a rebellious city, I will try and speak plain to you even now, Deucalion. Tell me, old friend, what is it?”

“What of this new Empress?”

He frowned. “I might have guessed your subject,” he said.

“Then speak upon it. Tell me of all the changes that have been made. What has this Phorenice done to make her throne unstable in Atlantis?”

Tatho frowned still. “If I did not know you to be as honest as our Lord the Sun, your questions would carry mischief with them. Phorenice has a short way with those who are daring enough to discuss her policies for other purpose than politely to praise them.”

“You can leave me ignorant if you wish,” I said with a touch of chill. This Tatho seemed to be different from the Tatho I had known at home, Tatho my workmate, Tatho who had read with me in the College of Priests, who had run with me in many a furious charge, who had laboured with me so heavily that the peoples under us might prosper. But he was quick enough to see my change of tone.

“You force me back to my old self,” he said, with a half smile, “though it is hard enough to forget the caution one has learned during this last twenty years, even when speaking with you. Still, whatever may have happened to the rest of us, it is clear to see that you at least have not changed, and, old friend, I am ready to trust you with my life if you ask it. In fact, you do ask me that very thing when you tell me to speak all I know of Phorenice.”

I nodded. This was more like the old times, when there was full confidence between us. “The Gods will it now that I return to Atlantis,” I said, “and what happens after that the Gods alone know. But it would be of service to me if I could land on her shores with some knowledge of this Phorenice, for at present I am as ignorant concerning her as some savage from Europe or mid-Africa.”

“What would you have me tell?”

“Tell all. I know only that she, a woman, reigns, where, by the ancient law of the land, a man should rule; that she is not even of the Priestly Clan from which the law says all rulers must be drawn; and that, from what you say, she has caused the throne to totter. The throne was as firm as the everlasting hills in the old King’s day, Tatho.”

“History has moved with pace since then, and Phorenice has spurred it. You know her origin?”

“I know only the exact little I have told you.”

“She was a swineherd’s daughter from the mountains, though this is never even whispered now, as she has declared herself to be a daughter of the Gods, with a miraculous birth and upbringing. As she has decreed it a sacrilege to question this parentage, and has ordered to be burnt all those that seem to recollect her more earthly origin, the fable passes current for truth. You see the faith I put in you, Deucalion, by telling you what you wish to learn.”

“There has always been trust between us.”

“I know; but this habit of suspicion is hard to cast off, even with you. However, let me put your good faith between me and the torture further. Zaemon, you remember, was governor of the swineherd’s province, and Zaemon’s wife saw Phorenice and took her away to adopt and bring up as her own. It is said that the swineherd and his woman objected;

perhaps they did; anyway I know they died; and Phorenice was taught the arts and graces, and brought up as a daughter of the Priestly Clan.”

“But still she was an adopted daughter only,” I objected.

“The omission of the ‘adopted’ was her will at an early age,” said Tatho drily, “and she learnt early to have her wishes carried into fact. It was notorious that before she had grown to fifteen years she ruled not only the women of the household, but Zaemon also, and the province that was beyond Zaemon.”

“Zaemon was learned,” I said, “and a devout follower of the Gods, and searcher into the higher mysteries; but, as a ruler, he was always a flabby fellow.”

“I do not say that opportunities have not come usefully in Phorenice’s way, but she has genius as well. For her to have raised herself at all from what she was, was remarkable. Not one woman out of a thousand, placed as she was, would have grown to be aught higher than a mere wife of some sturdy countryman, who was sufficiently simple to care nothing for pedigree. But look at Phorenice: it was her whim to take exercise as a man-at-arms and practise with all the utensils of war; and then, before any one quite knows how or why it happened, a rebellion had broken out in the province, and here was she, a slip of a girl, leading Zaemon’s troops.”

“Zaemon, when I knew him, was a mere derision in the field.”

“Hear me on. Phorenice put down the rebellion in masterly fashion, and gave the conquered a choice between sword and service. They fell into her ranks at once, and were faithful to her from that moment. I tell you, Deucalion, there is a marvellous fascination about the woman.”

“Her present historian seems to have felt it.”

“Of course I have. Every one who sees her comes under her spell. And frankly, I am in love with her also, and look upon my coming here as detestable exile. Every one near to Phorenice, high and low, loves her just the same, even though they know it may be her whim to send them to execution next minute.”

Perhaps I let my scorn of this appear.

“You feel contempt for our weakness? You were always a strong man, Deucalion.”

“At any rate you see me still unmarried. I have found no time to palter with the fripperies of women.”

“Ah, but these colonists here are crude and un fascinating. Wait till you see the ladies of the court, my ascetic.”

“It comes to my mind,” I said drily, “that I lived in Atlantis before I came out here, and at that time I used to see as much of court life as most men. Yet then, also, I felt no inducement to marry.”

Tatho chuckled. “Atlantis has changed so that you would hardly know the country to-day. A new era has come over everything, especially over the other sex. Well do I remember the women of the old King’s time, how monstrous uncomely they were, how little they knew how to walk or carry themselves, how painfully barbaric was their notion of dress. I dare swear that your ladies here in Yucatan are not so provincial to-day as ours were then. But you should see them now at home. They are delicious. And above all in charm is the Empress. Oh, Deucalion, you shall see Phorenice in all her glorious beauty and her magnificence one of these fine days soon, and believe me you will go down on your knees and repent.”

“I may see, and (because you say so) I may alter my life’s ways. The Gods make all things possible. But for the present I remain as I am, celibate, and not wishful to be otherwise; and so in the meantime I would hear the continuance of your history.”

“It is one long story of success. She deposed Zaemon from his government in name as well as in fact, and the news was spread, and the Priestly Clan rose in its wrath. The two neighbouring governors were bidden join forces, take her captive, and bring her for execution. Poor men! they tried to obey their orders; they attacked her surely enough, but in battle she could laugh at them. She killed both, and made some slaughter amongst their troops; and to those that remained alive and became her prisoners, she made her usual offer—the sword or service. Naturally they were not long over making their choice: to these common people one ruler is much the same as another: and so again her army was reinforced.

Three times were bodies of soldiery sent against her, and three times was she victorious. The last was a final effort. Before, it had been customary to despise this adventuress who had sprung up so suddenly.

But then the priests began to realise their peril; to see that the throne itself was in danger; and to know that if she were to be crushed, they would have to put forth their utmost. Every man who could carry arms was pressed into the service. Every known art of war was ordered to be put into employment. It was the largest army, and the best equipped army that Atlantis then had ever raised, and the Priestly Clan saw fit to put in supreme command their general, Tatho.”

“You!” I cried.

“Even myself, Deucalion. And mark you, I fought my utmost. I was not her creature then; and when I set out (because they wanted to spur me to the uttermost) the High Council of the priests pointed out my prospects. The King we had known so long, was ailing and wearily old; he was so wrapped up in the study of the mysteries, and the joy of closely knowing them, that earthly matters had grown nauseous to him; and at any time he might decide to die. The Priestly Clan uses its own discretion in the election of a new king, but it takes note of popular sentiment; and a general who at the critical time could come home victorious from a great campaign, which moreover would release a harassed people from the constant application of arms, would be the idol of the moment. These things were pointed out to me solemnly and in the full council.”

“What! they promised you the throne?”

“Even that. So you see I set out with a high stake before me. Phorenice I had never seen, and I swore to take her alive, and give her to be the sport of my soldiery. I had a fine confidence in my own strategy then, Deucalion. But the old Gods, in whom I trusted then, remained old, and taught me no new thing. I drilled and exercised my army according to the forms you and I learnt together, old comrade, and in many a tough fight found to serve well; I armed them with the choicest weapons we knew of then, with sling and mace, with bow and spear, with axe and knife, with sword and the throwing fire; their bodies I covered with metal plates; even their bellies I cared for, with droves of cattle driven in the rear of the fighting troops.

“But, when the encounter came, they might have been men of straw for all the harm they did. Out of her own brain Phorenice had made fire-tubes that cast a dart which would kill beyond two bowshots, and the

fashion in which she handled her troops dazzled me. They threatened us on one flank, they harassed us on the other. It was not war as we had been accustomed to it. It was a newer and more deadly game, and I had to watch my splendid army eaten away as waves eat a sandhill. Never once did I get a chance of forcing close action. These new tactics that had come from Phorenice's invention, were beyond my art to meet or understand. We were eight to her one, and our close-packed numbers only made us so much the more easy for slaughter. A panic came, and those who could fled. Myself, I had no wish to go back and earn the axe that waits for the unsuccessful general, I tried to die there fighting where I stood. But death would not come. It was a fine *mêlée*, Deucalion, that last one."

"And so she took you?"

"I stood with three others back to back, with a ring of dead round us, and a ring of the enemy hemming us in. We taunted them to come on. But at hand-to-hand courtesies we had shown we could hold our own, and so they were calling for fire-tubes with which they could strike us down in safety from a distance. Then up came Phorenice. 'What is this to-do?' says she. 'We seek to kill Lord Tatho, who led against you,' say they. 'So that is Tatho?' says she. 'A fine figure of a man indeed, and a pretty fighter seemingly, after the old manner. Doubtless he is one who would acquire the newer method. See now, Tatho,' says she, 'it is my custom to offer those I vanquish either the sword (which, believe me, was never nearer your neck than now) or service under my banner. Will you make a choice?'

"'Woman,' I said, 'fairest that ever I saw, finest general the world has ever borne, you tempt me sorely by your qualities, but there is a tradition in our Clan that we should be true to the salt we eat. I am the King's man still, and so I can take no service from you.'

"'The King is dead,' says she. 'A runner has just brought the tidings, meaning them to have fallen into your hands. And I am the Empress.'

"'Who made you Empress?' I asked.

"'The same most capable hand that has given me this battle,' says she. 'It is a capable hand, as you have seen: it can be a kind hand also, as you may learn if you choose. With the King dead Tatho is masterless man now. Is Tatho in want of a mistress?'

“Such a glorious mistress as you,’ I said, ‘yes.’ And from that moment, Deucalion, I have been her slave. Oh, you may frown; you may get up from this seat and walk away if you will. But I ask you this: keep back your worst judgment of me, old friend, till after you have seen Phorenice herself in the warm and lovely flesh. Then your own ears and your own senses will be my advocates, to win me back your old esteem.”