

And without resistance the king suffered himself to be led in silence across the glimmering sand. On one great paw of the Spinx she made him seat himself, and threw herself at his feet.

"Now, my king, canst thou not tell me thy troubles—here, where Fate gave thee me for a wife? We are alone, and no one can hear but thee and I."

But even as she spoke, a tawny form detached itself from the shadows of the forest and stealthily moved toward them. It was the leopard!

"I am not troubled," slowly answered Meneptah. "Nay, more than that, I am filled with joy." And there was a strange light in his eyes and a strange note in his voice which Mercade noticed not.

"Mayhap that is because I am here with thee," softly murmured Mercade. And she caressed his listless hand lovingly, while the tawny form drew nearer.

"Yea, that is indeed the reason. Thou hast guessed aright," answered Meneptah with a ring of triumph in his voice.

The leopard was now directly behind them in the deep shadows. As it heard the king's voice its lips parted in a horrible smile, showing two rows of pearly, glistening, cruel teeth, and it crouched lower upon the sand.

"Dost thou, then, love me so dearly?" pursued Mercade, cooingly.

"Love thee!" cried Meneptah, scornfully. "Yea. I love thee as man loves the snake." And he laughed harshly.

Mercade, stung by the bitter words, sprang to her feet and drew away from the king. The leopard lashed his side with his tail and grinned horribly.

"Canst thou not understand, foolish woman, that I have never loved thee—do not love thee? Canst thou not see that I married thee for thy wealth alone? Dost thou not know that I have long waited for such an opportunity as I now have to kill thee and gain sole command of the kingdom?"

Mercade stood rigid as a statue, her face drawn with pain, her eyes full upon her master. The leopard growled ominously and crouched ready to spring.

"Thou wouldst not dare to kill me," she cried. "Vengeance would fall on thy head for murdering a defenceless woman."

"Meneptah, the king, dares anything," replied he, hotly. "I repeat it—thou shalt die."