

CHAPTER XIII

THE ADVENTURES OF HIGGS

A MORE weary and dishevelled set of people than that which about the hour of dawn finally emerged from the mouth of the ancient shaft on to the cliffs of Mur it has seldom been my lot to behold. Yet with a single exception the party was a happy one, for we had come triumphant through great dangers, and actually effected our object—the rescue of Higgs, which, under the circumstances most people would have thought impossible. Yes, there he was in the flesh before us, having injured his knee and lost his hat, but otherwise quite sound save for a few trifling scratches inflicted by the cub, and still wearing what the natives called his “black windows.”

Even the Prince Joshua was happy, though wrapped in a piece of coarse sacking because the lion had taken most of his posterior clothing, and terribly sore from the deep cuts left by the claws.

Had he not dared the dangers of the den, and thus proved himself a hero whose fame would last for generations? Had I not assured him that his honourable wounds, though painful (as a matter of fact, after they had set, they kept him stiff as a mummy for some days, so that unless he stood upon his feet, he had to be carried, or lie rigid on his face) would probably not prove fatal? And had he not actually survived to reach the upper air again, which was more than he ever expected to do? No wonder that he was happy.

I alone could not share in the general joy, since, although my friend was restored to me, my son still remained a prisoner among the Fung. Yet even in this matter things might have been worse, since I learned that he was well treated, and in no danger. But of that I will write presently.

Never shall I forget the scene after the arrival of Higgs in our hole, when the swinging boulder had been closed and made secure and the lamps lighted. There he sat on the floor, his red hair glowing like a torch, his clothes torn and bloody, his beard ragged and stretching in a Newgate frill to his ears. Indeed, his whole appearance, accentuated by the blue spectacles with wire gauze side-pieces, was more disreputable than words can tell; moreover, he smelt horribly of lion. He put his hand into his pocket, and produced his big pipe, which had remained unbroken in its case.

"Some tobacco, please," he said. (Those were his first words to us!) "I have finished mine, saved up the last to smoke just before they put me into that stinking basket."

I gave him some, and as he lit his pipe the light of the match fell upon the face of Maqueda, who was staring at him with amused astonishment.

"What an uncommonly pretty woman," he said. "What's she doing down here, and who is she?"

I told him, whereon he rose, or rather tried to, felt for his hat, which, of course, had gone, with the idea of taking it off, and instantly addressed her in his beautiful and fluent Arabic, saying how glad he was to have this unexpected honour, and so forth.

She congratulated him on his escape, whereon his face grew serious.

"Yes, a nasty business," he said, "as yet I can hardly remember whether my name is Daniel, or Ptolemy Higgs." Then he turned to us and added, "Look here, you fellows, if I don't thank you it isn't because I am not grateful, but because I can't. The truth is, I'm a

bit dazed. Your son is all right, Adams; he's a good fellow, and we grew great friends. Safe? Oh! yes, he's safe as a church! Old Barung, he's the Sultan, and another good fellow, although he did throw me to the lions—because the priests made him—is very fond of him, and is going to marry him to his daughter."

At this moment the men announced that everything was ready for our ascent, and when I had attended to Joshua with a heart made thankful by Higgs's news, we began that toilsome business, and, as I have already said, at length accomplished it safely. But even then our labours were not ended, since it was necessary to fill up the mouth of the shaft so as to make it impossible that it should be used by the Fung, who now knew of its existence.

Nor was this a business that could be delayed, for as we passed the plateau whence Oliver and Japhet had crossed to the sphinx, we heard the voices of men on the farther side of the rough wall that we had built there. Evidently the priests, or idol guards, infuriated by the rescue of their victim, had already managed to bridge the gulf and were contemplating assault, a knowledge which caused us to hurry our movements considerably. If they had got through before we passed them, our fate would have been terrible, since at the best we must have slowly starved in the pit below.

Indeed, as soon as we reached the top and had blocked it temporarily, Quick, weary as he was, was sent off on horseback, accompanied by Maqueda, Shadrach, now under the terms of his contract once more a free man, and two Mountaineers, to gallop to the palace of Mur, and fetch a supply of explosives. The rest of us, for Higgs declined to leave, and we had no means of carrying Joshua, remained watching the place, or rather the Abati watched while we slept with our rifles in our hands. Before noon Quick returned, accompanied by many men with litters and all things needful.

Then we pulled out the stones, and Oliver, Japhet,

and some others descended to the first level and arranged blasting charges. Awhile after he reappeared with his companions, looking somewhat pale and anxious, and shouted to us to get back. Following our retreat to a certain distance, unwinding a wire as he came, presently he stopped and pressed the button of a battery which he held in his hand. There was a muffled explosion and a tremor of the soil like to that of an earthquake, while from the mouth of the shaft stones leapt into the air.

It was over, and all that could be noted was a sinkage in the ground where the ancient pit had been.

"I am sorry for them," said Oliver presently, "but it had to be done."

"Sorry for whom?" I asked.

"For those Fung priests, or soldiers. The levels below are full of them, dead or alive. They were pouring up at our heels. Well, no one will travel that road again."

Later, in the guest-house at Mur, Higgs told us his story. After his betrayal by Shadrach, which, it appeared, was meant to include us all, for the Professor overheard the hurried talk between him and a Fung captain, he was seized and imprisoned in the body of the great sphinx, where many chambers and dungeons had been hollowed out by the primæval race that fashioned it. Here Barung the Sultan visited him and informed him of his meeting with the rest of us, to whom apparently he had taken a great liking, and also that we had refused to purchase a chance of his release at the price of being false to our trust.

"You know," said Higgs, "that when first I heard this I was very angry with you, and thought you a set of beasts. But on considering things I saw the other side of it, and that you were right, although I never could come to fancy the idea of being sacrificed to a sphinx by being chucked like a piece of horse-flesh to a

lot of holy lions. However, Barung, an excellent fellow in his way, assured me that there was no road out of the matter without giving grave offence to the priests, who are very powerful among the Fung, and bringing a fearful curse on the nation.

"Meanwhile, he made me as comfortable as he could. For instance, I was allowed to walk upon the back of the idol, to associate with the priests, a suspicious and most exclusive set, and to study their entire religious system, from which I have no doubt that of Egypt was derived. Indeed, I have made a great discovery which, if ever we get out of this, will carry my name down to all generations. The forefathers of these Fung were undoubtedly also the forefathers of the pre-dynastic Egyptians, as is shown by the similarity of their customs and spiritual theories. Further, intercourse was kept up between the Fung, who then had their headquarters here in Mur, and the Egyptians in the time of the ancient empire, till the Twentieth Dynasty, indeed, if not later. My friends, in the dungeons in which I was confined there is an inscription, or, rather, a *graffite*, made by a prisoner extradited to Mur by Rameses II., after twenty years' residence in Egypt, which was written by him on the night before he was thrown to the sacred lions, that even in those days were an established institution. And I have got a copy of that inscription in my pocket-book. I tell you," he added in a scream of triumph, "I've got a certified copy of that inscription, thanks to Shadrach, on whose dirty head be blessings!"

I congratulated him heartily upon this triumph, and before he proceeded to give us further archæological details, asked him for some information about my boy.

"Oh," said Higgs, "he is a very nice young man and extremely good looking. Indeed, I am quite proud to have such a godson. He was much interested to hear that you were hunting for him after so many years, quite touched indeed. He still talks English, though

with a Fung accent, and, of course, would like to escape. Meanwhile, he is having a very good time, being chief singer to the god, for his voice is really beautiful, an office which carries with it all sorts of privileges. I told you, didn't I, that he is to be married to Barung's only legitimate daughter on the night of the next full moon but one. The ceremony is to take place in Harmac City, and will be the greatest of its sort for generations, a feast of the entire people in short. I should very much like to be present at it, but being an intelligent young man he has promised to keep notes of everything, which I hope may become available in due course."

"And is he attached to this savage lady?" I asked dismayed.

"Attached? Oh, dear no, I think he said he had never seen her, and only knew that she was rather plain and reported to possess a haughty temper. He is a philosophical young man, however, as might be expected from one who has undergone so many vicissitudes, and, therefore, takes things as they come, thanking heaven that they are no worse. You see, as the husband of the Sultan's daughter, unless the pair quarrel very violently, he will be safe from the lions, and he could never quite say as much before. But we didn't go into these domestic matters very deeply as there were so many more important things to interest us both. He wanted to know all about you and our plans, and naturally I wanted to know all about the Fung and the ritual and traditions connected with the worship of Harmac, so that we were never dull for a single moment. In fact, I wish that we could have had longer together, for we became excellent friends. But whatever happens, I think that I have collected the cream of his information," and he tapped a fat note-book in his hands, adding:

"What an awful thing it would have been if a lion had eaten this. For myself it did not matter; there

may be many better Egyptologists, but I doubt if any one of them will again have such opportunities of original research. However, I took every possible precaution to save my notes by leaving a copy of the most important of them written with native ink upon sheepskin in charge of your son. Indeed, I meant to leave the originals also, but fortunately forgot in the excitement of my very hurried departure."

I agreed with him that his chances had been unique and that he was a most lucky archæologist, and presently he went on puffing at his pipe.

"Of course, when Oliver turned up in that unexpected fashion on the back of the idol, remembering your wishes and natural desire to recover your son, I did my best to rescue him also. But he wasn't in the room beneath, where I thought I should find him. The priests were there instead, and they had heard us talking above, and you know the rest. Well, as it happens, it didn't matter, though that descent into the den of lions—there were two or three hundred feet of it, and the rope seemed worn uncommonly thin with use—was a trying business to the nerves."

"What did you think about all the time?" asked Oliver curiously.

"Think about? I didn't think much, was in too great a fright. I just wondered whether St. Paul had the same sensations when he was let down in a basket; wondered what the early Christian martyrs felt like in the arena; wondered whether Barung, with whom my parting was quite affectionate, would come in the morning and look for me as Darius did for Daniel and how much he would find if he did; hoped that my specs would give one of those brutes appendicitis, and so forth. My word! it was sickening, especially that kind of school-treat swing and bump at the end. I never could bear swinging. Still, it was all for the best, as I shouldn't have gone a yard along that sphinx's tail without tumbling off, tight-rope walking not being in my

line; and I'll tell you what, you are just the best three fellows in the whole world. Don't you think I forget that because I haven't said much. And now let's have your yarn, for I want to hear how things stand, which I never expected to do this side of Judgment-day."

So we told him all, while he listened open-mouthed. When we came to the description of the Tomb of the Kings his excitement could scarcely be restrained.

"You haven't touched them," he almost screamed; "don't say you have been vandals enough to touch them, for every article must be catalogued *in situ*, and drawings must be made. If possible, specimen groups with their surrounding offerings should be moved so that they can be set up again in museums. Why, there's six months' work before me, at least. And to think that if it hadn't been for you, by now I should be in process of digestion by a lion, a stinking, mangy, sacred lion!"

Next morning I was awakened by Higgs limping into my room in some weird sleeping-suit that he had contrived with the help of Quick.

"I say, old fellow," he said, "tell me some more about that girl, Walda Nagasta. What a sweet face she's got, and what pluck! Of course, such things ain't in my line, never looked at a woman these twenty years past, hard enough to remember her next morning, but, by Jingo! the eyes of that one made me feel quite queer here," and he hit the sleeping-suit somewhere in the middle, "though perhaps it was only because she was such a contrast to the lions."

"Ptolemy," I answered in a solemn voice, "let me tell you that she is more dangerous to meddle with than any lion, and what's more, if you don't want to further complicate matters with a flaming row, you had better keep to your old habits and leave her eyes alone. I mean that Oliver is in love with her."

"Of course he is. I never expected anything else, but what's that got to do with it? Why shouldn't I

be in love with her, too? Though I admit," he added sadly, contemplating his rotund form, "the chances are in his favour, especially as he's got the start."

"They are, Ptolemy, for she's in love with him," and I told him what we had seen in the Tomb of Kings.

First he roared with laughter, then on second thoughts grew exceedingly indignant.

"I call it scandalous of Oliver, compromising us all in this way—the lucky dog! These selfish, amorous adventures will let us in for no end of trouble. It is even probable, Adams, that you and I may come to a miserable end, solely because of this young man's erotic tendencies. Just fancy neglecting business in order to run after a pretty, round-faced Jewess, that is if she *is* a Jewess, which I doubt, as the blood must have got considerably mixed by now, and the first Queen of Sheba, if she ever existed, was an Ethiopian. As a friend almost old enough to be his father, I shall speak to him very seriously."

"All right," I called after him as he hobbled off to take his bath, "only if you are wise, you won't speak to Maqueda, for she might misinterpret your motives if you go on staring at her as you did yesterday."

That morning I was summoned to see the Prince Joshua and dress his wounds, which, although not of a serious nature, were very painful. The moment that I entered the man's presence I noticed a change in his face. Like the rest of us I had always set this fellow down as a mere poltroon and windbag, a blower of his own trumpet, as Oliver had called him. Now I got an insight into his real nature which showed me that although he might be these things and worse, he was also a very determined and dangerous person, animated by ambitions which he meant to satisfy at all hazards.

When I had done what I could for him and told him that in my opinion he had no ill results to fear from his hurts, since the thick clothes he was wearing at the time had probably cleaned the lion's paws of any poison that might have been on them, he said,

"Physician, I desire private words with you."

I bowed, and he went on:

"The Child of Kings, hereditary ruler of this land, somewhat against the advice of her Council, has thought fit to employ you and your Gentile companions in order that by your skill and certain arts of which you are masters you may damage its ancient enemies, the Fung, and in reward has promised to pay you well should you succeed in your endeavours. Now, I wish you to understand that though you think yourselves great men, and may for aught I know be great in your own country, here you are but servants like any other mercenaries whom it may please us to hire."

His tone was so offensive that, though it might have been wiser to keep silent, I could not help interrupting him.

"You use hard words, Prince," I said; "let me then explain what is the real pay for which we work and undergo some risks. Mine is the hope of recovering a son who is the slave of your enemies. That of the Captain Orme is the quest of adventure and war, since being a rich man in his own country he needs no further wealth. That of him whom you call Black Windows, but whose name is Higgs, is the pure love of learning. In England and throughout the West he is noted for his knowledge of dead peoples, their languages, and customs, and it is to study these that he has undertaken so terrible a journey. As for Quick, he is Orme's man, who has known him from childhood, an old soldier who has served with him in war and comes hither to be with the master whom he loves."

"Ah!" said Joshua, "a servant, a person of no degree,

who yet dares to threaten me, the premier prince of the Abati, to my face."

"In the presence of death all men are equal, Prince. You acted in a fashion that might have brought his lord, who was daring a desperate deed, to a hideous doom."

"And what do I care about his lord's desperate deeds, Physician? I see that you set store by such things, and think those who accomplish them great and wonderful. Well, we do not. There is no savage among the barbarous Fung would not do all that your Orme does, and more, just because he is a savage. We who are civilized, we who are cultivated, we who are wise, know better. Our lives were given us to enjoy, not to throw away or to lose at the sword's point, and, therefore, no doubt, you would call us cowards."

"Yet, Prince, those who bear that title of coward which you hold one of honour, are apt to perish 'at the sword's point.' The Fung wait without your gates, O Prince."

"And therefore, O Gentile, we hire you to fight the Fung. Still, I bear no grudge against your servant, Quick, who is himself but a white-skinned Fung, for he acted according to his nature, and I forgive him; only in the future let him beware! And now—for a greater matter. The Child of Kings is beautiful, she is young and high spirited; a new face from another land may perchance touch her fancy. But," he added meaningly, "let the owner of that face remember who she is and what he is; let him remember that for any outside the circle of the ancient blood to lift his eyes to the daughter of Solomon is to earn death, death slow and cruel for himself and all who aid and abet him. Let him remember, lastly, that this high-born lady to whom he, an unknown and vagrant Gentile, dares to talk as equal to equal, has from childhood been my affianced, who will shortly be my wife, although it may please her to

seem to flout me after the fashion of maidens, and that we Abati are jealous of the honour of our women. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, Prince," I answered, for by now my temper was roused. "But I would have you understand something also—that we are men of a high race whose arm stretches over half the world, and that we differ from the little tribe of the Abati, whose fame is not known to us, in this—that we are jealous of our own honour, and do not need to hire strangers to fight the foes we fear to face. Next time I come to attend to your wounds, O Prince, I trust that they will be in front, and not behind. One word more, if you will be advised by me you will not threaten that Captain whom you call a Gentile and a mercenary, lest you should learn that it is not always well to be a coward, of blood however ancient."

Then, in a towering rage, I left him, feeling that I had made a thorough fool of myself. But the truth was that I could not sit still and hear men such as my companions, to say nothing of myself, spoken of thus by a bloated cur, who called himself a prince and boasted of his own poltroonery. He glowered at me as I went, and the men of his party who hung about the end of the great room and in his courts, glowered at me also. Clearly he was a very dangerous cur, and I almost wished that instead of threatening to slap his face down in the tunnel, Quick had broken his neck and made an end of him.

So did the others when I told them the story, although I think it opened their eyes, and especially those of Oliver, to the grave and growing dangers of the situation. Afterwards he informed me that he had spoken of the matter with Maqueda, and that she was much frightened for our sakes, and somewhat for her own. Joshua, she said, was a man capable of any crime, who had at his back the great majority of the Abati; a jealous, mean

and intolerant race who made up in cunning for what they lacked in courage.

Yet, as I saw well, the peril of their situation did nothing to separate this pair or to lessen their love. Indeed, rather did it seem to bind them closer together, and to make them more completely one. In short, the tragedy took its appointed course, whilst we stood by and watched it helplessly.

On the afternoon of my angry interview with Joshua we were summoned to a meeting of the Council, whither we went, not without some trepidation, expecting trouble. Trouble there was, but of a different sort to that which we feared. Scarcely had we entered the great room where the Child of Kings was seated in her chair of state surrounded by all the pomp and ceremony of her mimic court, when the big doors at the end of it were opened, and through them marched three gray-bearded men in white robes whom we saw at once were heralds or ambassadors from the Fung. These men bowed to the veiled Maqueda and, turning toward where we stood in a little group apart, bowed to us also.

But of Joshua, who was there supported by two servants, for he could not yet stand alone, and the other notables and priests, of the Abati, they took not the slightest heed.

"Speak," said Maqueda.

"Lady," answered the spokesman of the embassy, "we are sent by our Sultan, Barung, son of Barung, Ruler of the Fung nation. These are the words of Barung: O Walda Nagasta! 'By the hands and the wit of the white lords whom you have called to your aid, you have of late done much evil to the god Harmac and to me his servant. You have destroyed one of the gates of my city, and with it many of my people. You have rescued a prisoner out of my hands, robbing Harmac of his sacrifice and thereby bringing his wrath upon us.

You have slain sundry of the sacred beasts that are the mouth of sacrifice, you have killed certain of the priests and guards of Harmac in a hole of the rocks. Moreover my spies tell me that you plan further ills against the god and against me. Now I send to tell you that for these and other offences I will make an end of the people of the Abati, whom hitherto I have spared. In a little while I marry my daughter to the white man, that priest of Harmac who is called Singer of Egypt, and who is said to be the son of the physician in your service, but after I have celebrated this feast and my people have finished the hoeing of their crops, I take up the sword in earnest, nor will I lay it down again until the Abati are no more.

“Learn that last night after the holy beasts had been slain and the sacrifice snatched away, the god Harmac spoke to his priests in prophecy. And this was his prophecy; that before the gathering in of the harvest his *head* should sleep above the Plain of Mur. We know not the interpretation of the saying, but this I know, that before the gathering of harvest I, or those who rule after me, will lie down to sleep within my city of Mur.”

“Now, choose—surrender forthwith and, save for the dog, Joshua, who the other day tried to entrap me against the custom of peoples, and ten others whom I shall name, I will spare the lives of all of you, though Joshua and these ten I will hang, since they are not worthy to die by the sword. Or resist, and by Harmac himself I swear that every man among the Abati shall die save the white lords whom I honour because they are brave, and that servant of yours who stood with them last night in the den of lions, and that every woman shall be made a slave, save you, O Walda Nagasta, because of your great heart. Your answer, O Lady of the Abati!”

Now Maqueda looked around the faces of her Council,

and saw fear written upon them all. Indeed, as we noted, many of them shook in their terror.

"My answer will be short, ambassadors of Barung," she replied, "still, I am but one woman, and it is fitting that those who represent the people should speak for the people. My uncle, Joshua, you are the first of my Council, what have you to say? Are you willing to give up your life with ten others whose names I do not know, that there may be peace between us and the Fung?"

"What?" answered Joshua, with a splutter of rage, "do I live to hear a Walda Nagasta suggest that the first prince of the land, her uncle and affianced husband, should be surrendered to our hereditary foes to be hanged like a worn-out hound, and do you, O unknown ten, who doubtless stand in this chamber, live to hear it also?"

"My uncle, you do not. I asked if such was your wish, that is all."

"Then I answer that it is not my wish, nor the wish of the ten, nor the wish of the Abati. Nay, we will fight the Fung and destroy them, and of their beast-headed idol Harmac we will make blocks to build our synagogues and stones to pave our roads. Do you hear, savages of the Fung?" and assisted by his two servants he hobbled toward them, grinning in their faces.

The envoys looked him up and down with their quiet eyes. "We hear and we are very glad to hear," their spokesman answered, "since we Fung love to settle our quarrels with the sword and not by treaty. But to you, Joshua, we say: Make haste to die before we enter Mur, since the rope is not the only means of death whereof we know."

Very solemnly the three ambassadors saluted, first the Child of Kings and next ourselves, then turned to go.

“ Kill them ! ” shouted Joshua, “ they have threatened and insulted me, the Prince ! ”

But no one lifted a hand against the men, who passed safely out of the palace to the square, where an escort waited with their horses.

