

CHAPTER XIV

HOW PHARAOH MET SHADRACH

WHEN the ambassadors had gone, at first there was silence, a very heavy silence, since even the frivolous Abati felt that the hour was big with fate. Of a sudden, however, the members of the Council began to chatter like so many monkeys, each talking without listening to what his neighbour said, till at length a gorgeously dressed person, I understood that he was a priest, stepped forward, and shouted down the others.

Then he spoke in an excited and venomous fashion. He pointed out that we Gentiles had brought all this trouble upon Mur, since before we came the Abati, although threatened, had lived in peace and glory—he actually used the word glory!—for generations. But now we had stung the Fung, as a hornet stings a bull, and made them mad, so that they wished to toss the Abati. He proposed, therefore, that we should at once be ejected from Mur.

At this point I saw Joshua whisper into the ear of a man, who called out:—

“No, no, for then they would go to their friend, Barung, a savage like themselves, and having learned our secrets, would doubtless use them against us. I say that they must be killed instantly,” and he drew a sword, and waved it.

Quick walked up to the fellow and clapped a pistol to his head

"Drop that sword," he said, "or *you*'ll never hear the end of the story," and he obeyed, whereupon Quick came back.

Now Maqueda began to speak, quietly enough, although I could see that she was quaking with passion.

"These men are our guests," she said, "come hither to serve us. Do you desire to murder our guests? Moreover, of what use would that be? One thing alone can save us, the destruction of the god of the Fung, since, according to the ancient saying of that people, when the idol is destroyed the Fung will leave their city of Harmac. Moreover, as to this new prophecy of the priests of the idol, that before the gathering in of harvest his head shall sleep above the plain of Mur, how can that happen if it is destroyed, unless indeed it means that Harmac shall sleep in the heavens. Therefore what have you to fear from threats built upon that which cannot happen?"

"But can *you* destroy this false god Harmac, or dare *you* fight the Fung? You know that it is not so, for had it been so what need was there for me to send for these Westerns? And if you murder them, will Barung thereby be appeased? Nay, I tell you that being a brave and honourable man, although our enemy, he will become ten times more wroth with you than he was before, and exact a vengeance even more terrible. I tell you also, that then you must find another Walda Nagasta to rule over you, since I, Maqueda, will do so no more."

"That is impossible," said some one, "you are the last woman of the true blood."

"Then you can choose one of blood that is not true, or elect a king, as the Jews elected Saul, for if my guests are butchered I shall die of very shame."

These words of hers seemed to cow the Council, one of whom asked what would she have them do?

"Do?" she replied, throwing back her veil, "why, be men, raise an army of every male who can carry a

sword ; help the foreigners, and they will lead you to victory. People of the Abati, would you be slaughtered, would you see your women slaves, and your ancient name blotted out from the list of peoples ? ”

Now some of them cried, “ No. ”

“ Then save yourselves. You are still many, the strangers here have skill in war, they can lead if you will follow. Be brave a while, and I swear to you that by harvest the Abati shall sit in the city of Harmac and not the Fung in Mur. I have spoken, now do what you will, ” and rising from her chair of state Maqueda left the chamber, motioning to us to do likewise.

The end of all this business was that a peace was made between us and the Council of the Abati. After their pompous, pedantic fashion they swore solemnly on the roll of the Law that they would aid us in every way to overcome the Fung, and even obey such military orders as we might give them, subject to the confirmation of these orders by a small council of their generals. In short, being very frightened, for a time they forgot their hatred of us foreigners.

So a scheme of operations was agreed upon, and some law passed by the Council, the only governing body among the Abati, for they possessed no representative institutions, under which law a kind of conscription was established for a while. Let me say at once that it met with the most intense opposition. The Abati were agriculturists who loathed military service. From their childhood they had heard of the imminence of invasion, but no actual invasion had ever yet taken place. The Fung were always without, and they were always within, an inland isle, the wall of rock that they thought impassable being their sea which protected them from danger.

They had no experience of slaughter and rapine, their imaginations were not sufficiently strong to enable them to understand what these things meant ; they were lost

in the pettinesses of daily life and its pressing local interests. Their homes in flames, they themselves massacred, their women and children dragged off to be the slaves of the victors, a poor remnant left to die of starvation among the wasted fields or to become wild men of the rocks! All these things they looked upon as a mere tale, a romance such as their local poets repeated in the evenings of a wet season, dim and far-off events which might have happened to the Canaanites and Jebusites and Amalekites in the ancient days whereof the book of their Law told them, but which could never happen to *them*, the comfortable Abati. In that book the Israelites always conquered in the end, although the Philistines, alias Fung, sat at their gates. For it will be remembered that it includes no account of the final fall of Jerusalem and awful destruction of its citizens, of which they had little if any knowledge.

So it came about that our recruiting parties, perhaps press gangs would be a better term, were not well received. I know it, for this branch of the business was handed over to me, of course as adviser to the Abati captains, and on several occasions, when riding round the villages on the shores of their beautiful lake, we were met by showers of stones, and were even the object of active attacks which had to be put down with bloodshed. Still, an army of five or six thousand men was got together somehow, and formed into camps, whence desertions were incessant, once or twice accompanied by the murder of officers.

"It's 'opeless, downright 'opeless, Doctor," said Quick to me, dropping his h's, as he sometimes did in the excitement of the moment. "What can one do with a crowd of pigs, everyone of them bent on bolting to his own sty, or anywhere except toward the enemy? The sooner the Fung get them the better for all concerned, say I, and if it wasn't for our Lady yonder" (Quick always called Maqueda "our Lady," after it had been impressed upon him that "her Majesty" was an incorrect title),

my advice to the Captain and you gentlemen would be : Get out of this infernal hole as quick as your legs can carry you, and let's do a bit of hunting on the way home, leaving the Abati to settle their own affairs."

"You forget, Sergeant, that I have a reason for staying in this part of the world, and so perhaps have the others. For instance, the Professor is very fond of those old skeletons down in the cave," and I paused.

"Yes, Doctor, and the Captain is very fond of something much better than a skeleton, and so are we all. Well, we've got to see it through, but somehow I don't think that every one of us will have that luck, though it's true that when a man has lived fairly straight according to his lights a few years more or less don't matter much one way or the other. After all, except you gentlemen, who is there that will miss Samuel Quick?"

Then without waiting for an answer, drawing himself up straight as a ramrod he marched off to assist some popinjays of Abati officers, whom he hated and who hated him, to instil the elements of drill into a newly raised company, leaving me to wonder what fears or premonitions filled his honest soul.

But this was not Quick's principal work, since for at least six hours of every day he was engaged in helping Oliver in our great enterprise of driving a tunnel from the end of the Tomb of Kings deep into the solid rock that formed the base of the mighty idol of the Fung. The task was stupendous, and would indeed have been impossible had not Orme's conjecture that some passage had once run from the extremity of the cave toward the idol proved to be perfectly accurate. Such a passage indeed was found walled up at the back of the chair containing the bones of the hunchbacked king. It descended very sharply for a distance of several hundred yards, after which for another hundred yards or more its walls and roof were so riven and shaky that, for fear of accidents, we found it necessary to timber them as we went.

At last we came to a place where they had fallen in

altogether, shaken down, I presume, by the great earthquake which had destroyed so much of the ancient cavity. At this spot, if Oliver's instruments and calculations could be trusted, we were within about two hundred feet of the floor of the den of lions, to which it seemed probable that the passage once led, and of course the question arose as to what should be done.

A Council was held to discuss this problem, at which Maqueda and a few of the Abati notables were present. To these Oliver explained that even if that were possible it would be useless to clear out the old passage and at the end find ourselves once more in the den of lions.

"What, then, is your plan?" asked Maqueda.

"Lady," he answered, "I, your servant, am instructed to attempt to destroy the idol, Harmac, by means of the explosives which we have brought with us from England. First, I would ask you if you still cling to that design?"

"Why should it be abandoned?" inquired Maqueda.

"What have you against it?"

"Two things, Lady. As an act of war the deed seems useless, since supposing that the sphinx is shattered and a certain number of priests and guards are destroyed, how will that advance your cause? Secondly, such destruction will be very difficult, if it can be done at all. The stuff we have with us, it is true, is of fearful strength, yet who can be sure that there is enough of it to move this mountain of hard rock, of which I cannot calculate the weight, not having the measurements or any knowledge of the size of the cavities within its bulk. Lastly, if the attempt is to be made, a tunnel must be hollowed of not less than three hundred feet in length, first downward and then upward into the very base of the idol, and if this is to be done within six weeks, that is, by the night of the marriage of the daughter of Barung, the work will be very hard, if indeed it can be completed at all, although hundreds of men labour day and night."

Now Maqueda thought a while, then looked up and said :

"Friend, you are brave and skilful, tell us all your mind. If you sat in my place, what would you do?"

"Lady, I would lead out every able-bodied man and attack the city of the Fung, say, on the night of the great festival when they are off their guard. I would blow in the gates of the city of Harmac, and storm it and drive away the Fung, and afterwards take possession of the idol, and if it is thought necessary, destroy it piecemeal from within.

Now Maqueda consulted with her councillors, who appeared to be much disturbed at this suggestion, and finally called us back and gave us her decision.

"These lords of the Council," she said, speaking with a ring of contempt in her voice, "declare that your plan is mad, and that they will never sanction it because the Abati could not be persuaded to undertake so dangerous an enterprise as an attack upon the city of Harmac, which would end, they think, in all of them being killed. They point out, O Orme, that the prophecy is that the Fung will leave the plain of Harmac when their god is destroyed and not before, and that therefore it must be destroyed. They say, further, O Orme, that for a year you and your companions are the sworn servants of the Abati, and that it is your business to receive orders, not to give them, also that the condition upon which you earn your pay is that you destroy the idol of the Fung. This is the decision of the Council, spoken by the mouth of the prince Joshua, who command further that you shall at once set about the business to execute which you and your companions are present here in Mur."

"Is that *your* command also, O Child of Kings?" answered Oliver, colouring.

"Since I also think that the Abati can never be forced to attack the city of the Fung, it is, O Orme, though the words in which it is couched are not my words."

"Very well, O Child of Kings, I will do my best. Only blame us not if the end of this matter is other than these advisers of yours expect. Prophecies are two-edged swords to play with, and I do not believe that a race of fighting men like the Fung will fly and leave you triumphant just because a stone image is shattered, if that can be done in the time and with the means which we possess. Meanwhile, I ask that you should give me two hundred and fifty picked men of the Mountaineers, not of the townspeople, under the captaincy of Japhet, who must choose them, to assist us in our work."

"It shall be done," she answered, and we made our bows and went. As we passed through the Council we heard Joshua say in a loud voice meant for us to hear :

"Thanks be to God, these hired Gentiles have been taught their place at last."

Oliver turned on him so fiercely that he recoiled, thinking that he was about to strike him.

"Be careful, Prince Joshua," he said, "that before this business is finished you are not taught yours, which I think may be lowly," and he looked meaningly at the ground.

So the labour began, and it was heavy indeed as well as dangerous. Fortunately, in addition to the picrate compounds that Quick called "azure stinging bees," we had brought with us a few cases of dynamite, of which we now made use for blasting purposes. A hole was drilled in the face of the tunnel, and the charge inserted. Then all retreated back into the Tomb of Kings till the cartridge had exploded, and the smoke cleared off, which took a long while, when our people advanced with iron bars and baskets, and cleared away the débris, after which the process must be repeated.

Oh! the heat of that narrow hole deep in the bowels of the rock, and the reek of the stagnant air which sometimes was so bad that the lights would scarcely burn. Indeed, after a hundred feet had been completed, we thought that it would be impossible to proceed, since

two men died of asphyxiation and the others, although they were good fellows enough, refused to return into the tunnel. At length, however, Orme and Japhet persuaded some of the best of them to do so, and shortly after this the atmosphere improved very much, I suppose because we cut some cranny or shaft which communicated with the open air.

There were other dangers also, notably that of the collapse of the whole roof where the rock was rotten, as we found it to be in places. Then it proved very hard to deal with the water, for once or twice we struck small springs impregnated with copper or some other mineral that blistered the feet and skin, since every drop of this acid water had to be carried out in wooden pails. That difficulty we overcame at last by sinking a narrow well down to the level of the ancient tunnel of which I have spoken as having been shaken in by the earthquake.

Thus we, or rather Oliver and Quick with the Mountaineers, toiled on. Higgs did his best, but after a while proved quite unable to bear the heat, which became too much for so stout a man. The end of it was that he devoted himself to the superintendence of the removal of the rubbish into the Tomb of Kings, the care of the stores and so forth. At least that was supposed to be his business, but really, he employed most of his time in drawing and cataloguing the objects of antiquity and the groups of bones that were buried there, and in exploring the remains of the underground city. In truth, this task of destruction was most repellent to the poor Professor.

"To think," he said to us, "to think that I, who all my life have preached the iniquity of not conserving every relic of the past, should now be employed in attempting to obliterate the most wonderful object ever fashioned by the ancients! It is enough to make a Vandal weep, and I pray heaven that you may not succeed in your infamous design. What does it matter if the Abati are wiped out, as lots of better people have

been before them? What does it matter if we accompany them to oblivion so long as that noble sphinx is preserved to be the wonder of future generations? Well, thank goodness, at any rate I have seen it, which is more, probably, than any of you will ever do. There, another brute is dumping his rubbish over the skull of No. 14!"

Thus we laboured continually, each at his different task, for the work in the mine never stopped, Oliver being in charge during the day and Quick at night for a whole week, since on each Sunday they changed with their gangs, Quick taking the day shift and Oliver the night, or *vice versa*. Sometimes Maqueda came down the cave to inspect progress, always, I noticed, at those hours when Oliver happened to be off duty. Then on this pretext or on that they would wander away together to visit I know not what in the recesses of the underground city, or elsewhere. In vain did I warn them that their every step was dogged, and that their every word and action were noted by spies who crept after them continually, since twice I caught one of these gentry in the act. They were infatuated, and would not listen.

At this time Oliver only left the underground city twice or thrice a week to breathe the fresh air for an hour or two. In truth, he had no leisure. For this same reason he fitted himself up a bed in what had been a priest's chamber, or a sanctuary in the old temple, and slept there, generally with no other guard but the great dog, Pharaoh, his constant companion even in the recesses of the mine.

It was curious to see how this faithful beast accustomed itself to the darkness, and made its other senses, especially that of smell, serve the purpose of eyes as do the blind. By degrees, too, it learned all the details of the operations; thus, when the cartridge was in place for firing, it would rise and begin to walk out of the tunnel even before the men in charge.

One night the tragedy that I feared very nearly happened, and indeed must have happened had it not been for this same hound, Pharaoh. About six o'clock in the evening Oliver came off duty after an eight-hour shift in the tunnel, leaving Higgs in command for a little while until it was time for Quick to take charge. I had been at work outside all day in connection with the new conscript army, a regiment of which was in revolt, because the men, most of whom were what we should call smallholders, declared that they wanted to go home to weed their crops. Indeed, it had proved necessary for the Child of Kings herself to be summoned to plead with them and condemn some of the ringleaders to punishment.

When at length this business was over we left together, and the poor lady, exasperated almost to madness, sharply refusing the escort of any of her people, requested me to accompany her to the mine.

At the mouth of the tunnel she met Oliver, as probably she had arranged to do, and after he had reported progress to her, wandered away with him as usual, each of them carrying a lamp, into some recess of the buried city. I followed them at a distance, not from curiosity, or because I wished to see more of the wonders of that city whereof I was heartily sick, but because I suspected that they were being spied upon.

The pair vanished round a corner that I knew ended in a *cul-de-sac*, so extinguishing my lamp, I sat down on a fallen column and waited till I should see their light reappear, when I proposed to effect my retreat. Whilst I sat thus, thinking on many things and, to tell the truth, very depressed in mind, I heard a sound as of some one moving, and instantly struck a match. The light of it fell full upon the face of a man whom I recognized at once as a body-servant of the prince Joshua, though whether he was passing me toward the pair or returning from their direction I could not be sure.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"What is that to you, Physician?" he answered.

Then the match burnt out, and before I could light another he had vanished, like a snake into a stone wall.

My first impulse was to warn Maqueda and Oliver that they were being watched, but reflecting that the business was awkward, and that the spy would doubtless have given over his task for this day, I left it alone, and went down to the Tomb of the Kings to help Higgs. Just afterwards Quick came on duty, long before his time, the fact being that he had no confidence in the Professor as a director of mining operations. When he appeared Higgs and I retreated from that close and filthy tunnel, and, by way of recreation, put in an hour or so at the cataloguing and archæological research in which his soul delighted.

"If only we could get all this lot out of Mur," he said, with a sweep of his hand, "we should be the most famous men in Europe for at least three days, and rich into the bargain."

"Ptolemy," I answered, "we shall be fortunate if we get ourselves alive out of Mur, let alone these bones and ancient treasures," and I told him what I had seen that evening.

His fat and kindly face grew anxious.

"Ah!" he said. "Well, I don't blame him; should probably do the same myself if I got the chance, and so would you—if you were twenty years younger. No, I don't blame him, or her either, for the fact is that although their race, education, and circumstances are so different, they are one of Nature's pairs, and while they are alive nothing will keep them apart. You might as well expect a magnet and a bit of iron to remain separate on a sheet of notepaper. Moreover, they give themselves away, as people in that state always do. The pursuit of archæology has its dangers, but it is a jolly sight safer

than that of woman, though it did land me in a den of lions. What's going to happen, old fellow?"

"Can't say, but I think it very probable that Oliver will be murdered, and that we shall follow the same road, or, if we are lucky, be only bundled out of Mur. Well, it's time for dinner; if I get a chance I will give them a hint."

So we made our way to the old temple in the great cave, where we kept our stores and Oliver had his headquarters. Here we found him waiting for us and our meal ready, for food was always brought to us by the palace servants. When we had eaten and these men had cleared away, we lit our pipes and fed the dog Pharaoh upon the scraps that had been reserved for him. Then I told Oliver about the spy whom I had caught tracking him and Maqueda.

"Well, what of it?" he said, colouring in his tell-tale fashion; "she only took me to see what she believed to be an ancient inscription on a column in that northern aisle."

"Then she'd have done better to take me, my boy," said Higgs. "What was the character like?"

"Don't know," he answered guiltily. "She could not find it again."

An awkward silence followed, which I broke.

"Oliver," I said, "I don't think you ought to go on sleeping here alone. You have too many enemies in this place."

"Rubbish," he answered, "though it's true Pharaoh seemed uneasy last night, and that once I woke up and thought I heard footsteps in the court outside. I set them down to ghosts, in which I have almost come to believe in this haunted place, and went to sleep again."

"Ghosts be blowed!" said Higgs vulgarly, "if there were such things I have slept with too many mummies not to see them. That confounded Joshua is the wizard

who raises your ghosts. Look here, old boy," he added, "let me camp with you to-night, since Quick must be in the tunnel, and Adams has to sleep outside in case he is wanted on the army business."

"Not a bit of it," he answered; you know you are too asthmatical to get a wink in this atmosphere. I won't hear of such a thing."

"Then come and sleep with us in the guest-house."

"Can't be done; the Sergeant has got a very nasty job down there about one o'clock, and I promised to be handy in case he calls me up," and he pointed to the portable field telephone that fortunately we had brought with us from England, which was fixed close by, adding, "if only that silly thing had another few hundred yards of wire, I'd come; but, you see, it hasn't and I must be in touch with the work."

At this moment the bell tinkled, and Orme made a jump for the receiver through which for the next five minutes he was engaged in giving rapid and to us quite unintelligible directions.

"There you are," he said, when he had replaced the mouthpiece on its hook, "if I hadn't been here they would probably have had the roof of the tunnel down and killed some people. No, no; I can't leave that receiver unless I go back to the mine, which I am too tired to do. However, don't you fret. With a pistol, a telephone, and Pharaoh I'm safe enough. And now, good night; you fellows had better be getting home as I must be up early to-morrow and want to sleep while I can."

On the following morning about five o'clock Higgs and I were awakened by some one knocking at our door. I rose and opened it, whereon in walked Quick, a grim and grimy figure, for, as his soaked clothes and soiled face told us, he had but just left his work in the mine.

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"Captain wants to see you as soon as possible, gentlemen," he said.

"What's the matter, Sergeant?" asked Higgs, as we got into our garments.

"You'll see for yourself presently, Professor," was the laconic reply, nor could we get anything more out of him.

Five minutes later we were advancing at a run through the dense darkness of the underground city, each of us carrying a lamp. I reached the ruins of the old temple first, for Quick seemed very tired and lagged behind, and in that atmosphere Higgs was scant of breath and could not travel fast. At the doorway of the place where he slept stood the tall form of Oliver holding a lamp aloft. Evidently he was waiting for us. By his side sat the big yellow dog, Pharaoh, that, when he smelt us, gambolled forward, wagging his tail in greeting.

"Come here," said Orme, in a low and solemn voice, "I have something to show you," and he led the way into the priest's chamber, or sanctuary, or whatever it may have been, where he slept upon a rough, native-made bedstead. At the doorway he halted, lowered the lamp he held, and pointed to something dark on the floor to the right of his bedstead, saying, "Look!"

There lay a dead man, and by his side a great knife that evidently had fallen from his hand. At the first glance we recognised the face which, by the way, was singularly peaceful, as though it were that of one plunged in deep sleep. This seemed odd, since the throat below was literally torn out.

"Shadrach!" we said, with one voice.

Shadrach it was; Shadrach, our former guide, who had betrayed us; Shadrach who, to save his own life, had shown us how to rescue Higgs, and for that service been pardoned, as I think I mentioned. Shadrach and no other!

"Pussy seems to have been on the prowl and to have met a dog," remarked Quick.

"Do you understand what has happened?" asked Oliver, in a dry, hard voice. "Perhaps I had better explain before anything is moved. Shadrach must have crept in here last night—I don't know at what time, for I slept through it all—for purposes of his own. But he forgot his old enemy Pharaoh, and Pharaoh killed him. See his throat? When Pharaoh bites he doesn't growl, and, of course, Shadrach could say nothing, or, as he had dropped his knife, for the matter of that, do anything either. When I was woke up about an hour ago by the telephone bell the dog was fast asleep, for he is accustomed to that bell, with his head resting upon the body of Shadrach. Now why did Shadrach come into my room at night with a drawn knife in his hand?"

"Doesn't seem a difficult question to answer," replied Higgs, in the high voice which was common to him when excited. "He came here to murder you, and Pharaoh was too quick for him, that's all. That dog was the cheapest purchase you ever made, friend Oliver."

"Yes," answered Orme, "he came here to murder me—you were right about the risk, after all—but what I wonder is, who sent him?"

"And so you may go on wondering for the rest of your life, Captain," exclaimed Quick. "Still, I think we might guess if we tried."

Then news of what had happened was sent to the palace, and within little over an hour Maqueda arrived, accompanied by Joshua and several other members of her Council. When she saw and understood everything she was horrified, and sternly asked Joshua what he knew of this business. Of course, he proved to be completely innocent, and had not the slightest idea of who had set the murderer on to work this deed of darkness. Nor

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had anybody else, the general suggestion being that Shadrach had attempted it out of revenge, and met with the due reward of his crime.

Only that day poor Pharaoh was poisoned. Well, he had done his work, and his memory is blessed.

