

CHAPTER II

THE ADVICE OF SERGEANT QUICK

AT this moment a fearful hubbub arose without. The front door slammed, a cab drove off furiously, a policeman's whistle blew, heavy feet were heard trampling; then came an invocation of "In the King's name," answered by "Yes, and the Queen's, and the rest of the Royal Family's, and if you want it, take it, you chuckle-headed, flat-footed, pot-bellied Peelers."

Then followed tumult indescribable as of heavy men and things rolling down the stairs, with cries of fear and indignation.

"What the dickens is that?" asked Higgs.

"The voice sounded like that of Samuel—I mean Sergeant Quick," answered Captain Orme with evident alarm; "what can he be after? Oh, I know, it is something to do with that infernal mummy you unwrapped this afternoon, and asked him to bring round after dinner."

Just then the door burst open, and a tall, soldier-like form stalked in, carrying in his arms a corpse wrapped in a sheet, which he laid upon the table among the wine glasses.

"I'm sorry, Captain," he said, addressing Orme, "but I've lost the head of the departed. I think it's at the bottom of the stairs with the police. Had nothing else to defend myself with, sir, against their unwarranted attacks, so brought the body to the present and charged, thinking it very stiff and strong, but regret to say

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neck snapped, and that deceased's head is now under arrest."

As Sergeant Quick finished speaking, the door opened again, and through it appeared two very flurried and dishevelled policemen, one of whom held, as far as possible from his person, the grizzly head of a mummy by the long hair which still adhered to the skull.

"What do you mean by breaking into my rooms like this? Where's your warrant?" asked the indignant Higgs in his high voice.

"There!" answered the first policeman, pointing to the sheet-wrapped form upon the table.

"And here!" added the second, holding up the awful head. "As in duty bound, we ask explanation from that man of the secret conveyance of a corpse through the open streets, whereon he assaults us with the same, for which assault, pending investigation of the corpse, I arrest him. Now, Guv'nor" (addressing Sergeant Quick), "will you come along with us quietly, or must we take you?"

The Sergeant, who seemed to be inarticulate with wrath, made a dash for the shrouded object on the table, with the intention, apparently, of once more using it as a weapon of offence, and the policemen drew their batons.

"Stop," said Orme, thrusting himself between the combatants, "are you all mad? Do you know that this woman died about four thousand years ago?"

"Oh, Lord!" said the policeman who held the head, addressing his companion, "it must be one of them mummies what they dig up in the British Museum. Seems pretty ancient and spicy, don't it?" and he sniffed at the head, then set it down upon the table.

Explanations followed, and after the wounded dignity of the two officers of the Force had been soothed with sundry glasses of port wine and a written list of the names of all concerned, including that of the mummy, they departed.

"You take my advice, Bobbies," I heard the indignant Sergeant declaim outside the door, "and don't you believe things is always what they seem. A party ain't necessarily drunk because he rolls about and falls down in the street; he may be mad, or 'ungry, or epileptic, and a body ain't always a body jest because it's dead and cold and stiff. Why, men, as you've seen, it may be a mummy, which is quite a different thing. If I was to put on that blue coat of yours, would that make me a policeman? Good heavens! I should hope not, for the sake of the Army to which I still belong, being in the Reserve. What you bobbies need is to study human nature and cultivate observation, which will learn you the difference between a new-laid corpse and a mummy, and many other things. Now you lay my words to heart, and you'll both of you rise to superintendents, instead of running in daily 'drunks' until you retire on a pension. Good-night."

Peace having been restored, and the headless mummy removed into the Professor's bedroom, since Captain Orme declared that he could not talk business in the presence of a body, however ancient, we resumed our discussion. First of all, at Higgs's suggestion I drew up a brief memorandum of agreement which set out the objects of the expedition, and provided for the equal division among us of any profit that might accrue; in the event of the death of one or more of us, the survivors or survivor to take their or his share.

To this arrangement personally I objected, who desired neither treasure nor antiquities, but only the rescue of my son. The others pointed out, however, that, like most people, I might in future want something to live on, or that if I did not, in the event of his escape, my boy certainly would; so in the end I gave way.

Then Captain Orme very sensibly asked for a definition of our respective duties, and it was settled that I was to be guide to the expedition; Higgs, antiquarian, interpreter, and, on account of his vast knowledge, general

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referee ; and Captain Orme, engineer and military commander, with the proviso that, in the event of a difference of opinion, the dissentient was to loyally accept the decision of the majority.

This curious document having been copied out fair, I signed and passed it to the Professor, who hesitated a little, but, after refreshing himself with a further minute examination of Sheba's ring, signed also, remarking that he was an infernal fool for his pains, and pushed the paper across the table to Orme.

"Stop a minute," said the Captain ; "I forgot something. I should like my old servant, Sergeant Quick, to accompany us. He's a very handy man at a pinch, especially if, as I understand, we are expected to deal with explosives with which he has had a lot to do in the Engineers and elsewhere. If you agree I will call him, and ask if he will go. I expect he's somewhere round."

I nodded, judging from the episode of the mummy and the policemen that the Sergeant was likely to be a useful man. As I was sitting next to it, I opened the door for the Captain, whereon the erect shape of Sergeant Quick, who clearly had been leaning against it, literally fell into the room, reminding me much of an upset wooden soldier.

"Hullo!" said Orme as, without the slightest change of countenance, his retainer recovered himself and stood to attention. "What the deuce are you doing there?"

"Sentry go, Captain. Thought the police might change their minds and come back. Any orders, Captain?"

"Yes. I am going to North Central Africa. When can you be ready to start?"

"The Brindisi mail leaves to-morrow night, Captain, if you travel by Egypt, but if you go by Tunis, 7.15 a.m. Saturday is the time from Charing Cross. Only, as I understand that high explosives and arms have to be provided, these might take awhile to lay in and pack so as to deceive customs."

"You understand!" said Orme. "Pray, how do you understand?"

"Doors in these old houses are apt to get away from their frames, Captain, and the gentleman there"—and he pointed to the Professor—"has a voice that carries like a dog-whistle. Oh, no offence, sir. A clear voice is an excellent thing—that is, if the doors fit"—and although Sergeant Quick's wooden face did not move, I saw his humorous grey eyes twinkle beneath the bushy eyebrows.

We burst out laughing, including Higgs.

"So you are willing to go?" said Orme. "But I hope you clearly understand that this is a risky business, and that you may not come back?"

"Spion Kop was a bit risky, Captain, and so was that business in the donga, where every one was hit except you and me and the sailor man, but we came back, for all that. Begging your pardon, Captain, there ain't no such thing as risk. Man comes here when he must, and dies when he must, and what he does between don't make a ha'porth of difference."

"Hear, hear," I said; "we are much of the same way of thinking."

"There have been several who held those views, sir, since old Solomon gave the lady that"—and he pointed to Sheba's ring, which was lying on the table. "But excuse me, Captain; how about local allowances? Not having been a marrying man myself, I've none dependent upon me, but, as you know, I've sisters that have, and a soldier's pension goes with him. Don't think me greedy, Captain," he added hastily, "but, as you gentlemen understand, black and white at the beginning saves bother at the end"—and he pointed to the agreement.

"Quite right. What do you want, Sergeant?" asked Orme.

"Nothing beyond my pay, if we get nothing, Captain, but if we get something, would five per cent. be too much?"

"It might be ten," I suggested. "Sergeant Quick has a life to lose like the rest of us."

"Thank you kindly, sir," he answered; "but that, in my opinion, would be too much. Five per cent. was what I suggested."

So it was written down that Sergeant Samuel Quick was to receive five per cent. of the total profits, if any, provided that he behaved himself and obeyed orders. Then he also signed the agreement, and was furnished with a glass of whisky and water to drink to its good health.

"Now, gentlemen," he said, declining the chair which Higgs offered to him, apparently because, from long custom, he preferred his wooden-soldier attitude against the wall, "as a humble five-per-cent. private in this very adventurous company I'll ask permission to say a word."

Permission was given accordingly, and the Sergeant proceeded to inquire what weight of rock it was wished to remove.

I told him that I did not know, as I had never seen the Fung idol, but I understood that its size was enormous, probably as large as St. Paul's Cathedral.

"Which, if solid, would take some stirring," remarked the Sergeant. "Dynamite might do it, but it is too bulky to be carried across the desert on camels in that quantity. Captain, how about them picrates? You remember those new Boer shells that blew a lot of us to kingdom come, and poisoned the rest?"

"Yes," answered Orme; "I remember; but now they have stronger stuffs—azo-imides, I think they call them—terrific new compounds of nitrogen. We will inquire to-morrow, Sergeant."

"Yes, Captain," he answered; "but the point is, who'll pay? You can't buy hell-fire in bulk for nothing. I calculate that, allowing for the purchase of the explosives and, say, fifty military rifles with ammunition and all other necessaries, not including camels, the outfit of this expedition can't come to less than £1,500."

"I think I have that amount in gold," I answered, "of which the lady of the Abati gave me as much as I could carry in comfort."

"If not," broke in Orme, "although I am a poor man now, I could find £500 or so at a pinch. So don't let us bother about the money. The question is—Are we all agreed that we will undertake this expedition and see it through to the end, whatever that may be?"

We answered that we were.

"Then has anybody anything more to say?"

"Yes," I replied; "I forgot to tell you that if we should ever get to Mur, none of you must make love to the Walda Nagasta. She is a kind of holy person, who can only marry into her own family, and to do so might mean that our throats would be cut."

"Do you hear that, Oliver?" said the Professor. "I suppose that the Doctor's warning is meant for you, as the rest of us are rather past that kind of thing."

"Indeed," replied the Captain, colouring again after his fashion. "Well, to tell you the truth, I feel a bit past it myself, and, so far as I am concerned, I don't think we need take the fascinations of this black lady into account."

"Don't brag, Captain. Please don't brag," said Sergeant Quick in a hollow whisper. "Woman is just the one thing about which you never can be sure. To-day she's poison, and to-morrow honey—God and the climate alone know why. Please don't brag, or we may live to see you crawling after this one on your knees, with the gent in the specs behind, and Samuel Quick, who hates the whole tribe of them, bringing up the rear. Tempt Providence if you like, Captain, but don't tempt woman, lest she should turn round and tempt you, as she has done before to-day."

"Will you be so good as to stop talking nonsense, and call a cab," said Captain Orme coldly. But Higgs began to laugh in his rude fashion, and I, remembering the appearance of "Bud of the Rose" when she lifted her

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veil of ceremony, and the soft earnestness of her voice, fell into reflection. "Black lady" indeed! What, I wondered, would this young gentleman think if ever he should live to set his eyes upon her sweet and comely face?

It seemed to me that Sergeant Quick was not so foolish as his master chose to imagine. Captain Orme undoubtedly was in every way qualified to be a partner in our venture; still, I could have wished either that he had been an older man, or that the lady to whom he was recently affianced had not chosen this occasion to break her engagement. In dealing with difficult and dangerous combinations, my experience has been that it is always well to eliminate the possibility of a love affair, especially in the East.

