

## CHAPTER XX

### THE TRIAL AND AFTER

THEY set us in a line, four ragged-looking fellows, all of us with beards of various degrees of growth, that is, all the other three, for mine had been an established fact for years, and everything having been taken away from us, we possessed neither razor nor scissors.

In the courtyard of our barrack we were met by a company of soldiers, who encircled us about with a triple line of men, as we thought to prevent any attempt at escape. So soon as we passed the gates I found, however, that this was done for a different reason, namely, to protect us from the fury of the populace. All the way from the barrack to the courthouse, whither we were being taken now that the palace was burned, the people were gathered in hundreds, literally howling for our blood. It was a strange, and, in a way, a dreadful sight to see even the brightly dressed women and children shaking their fists and spitting at us with faces distorted by hate.

"Why they love you so little, father, when you do so much for them?" asked Roderick, shrugging his shoulders and dodging a stone that nearly hit him on the head.

"For two reasons," I answered. "Because their Lady loves one of us too much, and because through us many of their people have lost their lives. Also they hate strangers, and are by nature cruel, like most cowards,

and now that they have no more fear of the Fung, they think it will be safe to kill us."

"Ah!" said Roderick; "yet Harmac has come to Mur," and he pointed to the great head of the idol seated on the cliff, "and I think where Harmac goes, Fung follow, and if so they make them pay plenty for my life, for I great man among Fung; Fung myself husband of Sultan's daughter. These fools, like children, because they see no Fung, think there are no Fung. Well, in one year, or perhaps one month, they learn."

"I daresay, my boy," I answered, "but I am afraid that won't help us."

By now we were approaching the court-house where the Abati priests and learned men tried civil and some criminal cases. Through a mob of nobles and soldiers who mocked us as we went, we were hustled into the large hall of judgment that was already full to overflowing.

Up the centre of it we marched to a clear space reserved for the parties to a cause, or prisoners and their advocates, beyond which, against the wall, were seats for the judges. These were five members of the Council, one of whom was Joshua, while in the centre as President of the Court, and wearing her veil and beautiful robes of ceremony, sat Maqueda herself.

"Thank God, she's safe!" muttered Oliver with a gasp of relief.

"Yes," answered Higgs, "but what's she doing there? She ought to be in the dock, too, not on the Bench."

We reached the open space, and were thrust by soldiers armed with swords to where we must stand, and although each of us bowed to her, I observed that Maqueda took not the slightest notice of our salutations. She only turned her head and said something to Joshua on her right, which caused him to laugh.

Then with startling suddenness the case began. A kind of public prosecutor stood forward and droned



out the charge against us. It was that we, who were in the employ of the Abati, had traitorously taken advantage of our position as mercenary captains to stir up a civil war, in which many people had lost their lives, and some been actually murdered by ourselves and our companion who was dead. Moreover, that we had caused their palace to be burned and, greatest crime of all, had seized the sacred person of the Walda Nagasta, Rose of Mur, and dragged her away into the recesses of the underground city, whence she was only rescued by the chance of an accomplice of ours, one Japhet, betraying our hiding-place.

This was the charge which, it will be noted, contained no allusion whatever to the love entanglement between Maqueda and Oliver. When it was finished the prosecutor asked us what we pleaded, whereon Oliver answered as our spokesman that it was true there had been fighting and men killed, also that we had been driven into the cave, but as to all the rest the Child of Kings knew the truth, and must speak for us as she wished.

Now the audience began to shout, "They plead guilty! Give them to death!" and so forth, while the judges, rising from their seats, gathered round Maqueda and consulted her.

"By heaven! I believe she is going to give us away!" exclaimed Higgs, whereon Oliver turned on him fiercely and bade him hold his tongue, adding:

"If you were anywhere else you should answer for that slander!"

At length the consultation was finished; the judges resumed their seats, and Maqueda held up her hand. Thereon an intense silence fell upon the place. Then she began to speak in a cold, constrained voice:

"Gentiles," she said, addressing us, "you have pleaded guilty to the stirring up of civil war in Mur, and to the slaying of numbers of its people, facts of which there is no need for evidence, since many widows and fatherless

children can testify to them to-day. Moreover, you did, as alleged by my officer, commit the crime of bearing off my person into the cave and keeping me there by force to be a hostage for your safety."

We heard and gasped, Higgs ejaculating, "Good gracious, what a lie!" But none of the rest of us said anything.

"For these offences," went on Maqueda, "you are all of you justly worthy of a cruel death." Then she paused and added, "Yet, as I have power to do, I remit the sentence. I decree that this day you and all the goods that remain to you which have been found in the cave city, and elsewhere, together with camels for yourselves and your baggage, shall be driven from Mur, and that if any one of you returns hither, he shall without further trial be handed over to the executioners. This I do because at the beginning of your service a certain bargain was made with you, and although you have sinned so deeply I will not suffer that the glorious honour of the Abati people shall be tarnished even by the breath of suspicion. Get you gone, Wanderers, and let us see your faces no more for ever!"

Now the mob gathered in the hall shouted in exultation, though I heard some crying out, "No, kill them! Kill them!"

When the tumult had died down Maqueda spoke again saying:

"O noble and generous Abati, you approve of this deed of mercy; you who would not be held merciless in far lands, O Abati, where, although you may not have heard of them, there are, I believe, other peoples who think themselves as great as you. You would not have it whispered, I say, that we who are the best of the world, we, the children of Solomon, have dealt harshly even with stray dogs that wandered to our gates? Moreover, we called these dogs to hunt a certain beast for us, the lion-headed beast called Fung, and, to be just to them, they hunted well. Therefore spare them the



noose, though they may have deserved it, and let them run hence with their bone, say you, the bone which they think that they have earned. What does a bone more or less matter to the rich Abati, if only their holy ground is not defiled with the blood of Gentile dogs?"

"Nothing at all! Nothing at all!" they shouted. "Tie it to their tails and let them go!"

"It shall be done, O my people! And now that we have finished with these dogs, I have another word to say to you. You may have thought or heard that I was too fond of them, and especially of one of them," and she glanced toward Oliver. "Well, there are certain dogs who will not work unless you pat them on the head. Therefore I patted this one on the head, since, after all, he is a clever dog who knows things that we do not know; for instance, how to destroy the idol of the Fung. O great Abati, can any of you really have believed that I, of the ancient race of Solomon and Sheba, I, the Child of Kings, purposed to give my noble hand to a vagrant Gentile come hither for hire? Can you really have believed that I, the solemnly betrothed to yonder Prince of Princes, Joshua, my uncle, would for a moment even in my heart have preferred to him such a man as that?" And once again she looked at Oliver, who made a wild motion, as though he were about to speak. But before he could so much as open his lips Maqueda went on:

"Well, if you believed, not guessing that all the while I was working for the safety of my people, soon shall you be undeceived, since to-morrow night I invite you to the great ceremony of my nuptials, when, according to the ancient custom, I break the glass with him whom on the following night I take to be my husband," and rising, she bowed thrice to the audience, then stretched out her hand to Joshua:

He, too, rose, puffing himself out like a great turkey-cock, and, taking her hand, kissed it, gobbling some words which we did not catch.

Wild cheering followed, and in the momentary silence which followed Oliver spoke.

"Lady," he said, in a cold and bitter voice, "we 'Gentiles' have heard your words. We thank you for your kind acknowledgment of our services, namely, the destruction of the idol of the Fung at the cost of some risk and labour to ourselves. We thank you also for your generosity in allowing us, as the reward of that service, to depart from Mur, with insult and hard words, and such goods as remain to us, instead of consigning us to death by torture, as you and your Council have the power to do. It is indeed a proof of your generosity, and of that of the Abati people which we shall always remember and repeat in our own land, should we live to reach it. Also we trust that it will come to the ears of the savage Fung, so that at length they may understand that true nobility and greatness lie not in brutal deeds of arms, but in the hearts of men. But now, Walda Nagasta, I have a last request to make of you, namely, that I may see your face once more to be sure that it is you who have spoken to us, and not another beneath your veil, and that if this be so, I may carry away with me a faithful picture of one so true to her country and noble to her guests as you have shown yourself this day."

She listened, then very slowly lifted her veil, revealing such a countenance as I had never seen before. It was Maqueda without doubt, but Maqueda changed. Her face was pale, which was only to be expected after all she had gone through; her eyes glowed in it like coals, her lips were set. But it was her expression, at once defiant and agonized, which impressed me so much that I never shall forget it. I confess I could not read it in the least, but it left upon my mind the belief that she was a false woman, and yet ashamed of her own falsity. There was the greatest triumph of her art, that in those terrible circumstances she should still have succeeded in conveying to me, and to the hundreds of others who watched, this conviction of her own turpitude.



For a moment her eyes met those of Orme, but although he searched them with pleading and despair in his glance, I could trace in hers no relenting sign, but only challenge not unmixed with mockery. Then with a short, hard laugh she let fall her veil again and turned to talk with Joshua. Oliver stood silent a little while, long enough for Higgs to whisper to me:

"I say, isn't this downright awful? I'd rather be back in the den of lions than live to see it."

As he spoke I saw Oliver put his hand to where his revolver usually hung, but, of course, it had been taken from him. Next he began to search in his pocket, and finding that tabloid of poison which I had given him, lifted it toward his mouth. But just as it touched his lips, my son, who was next to him, saw also. With a quick motion he struck it from his fingers, and ground it to powder on the floor beneath his heel.

Oliver raised his arm as though to hit him, then without a sound fell senseless. Evidently Maqueda noted all this also, for I saw a kind of quiver go through her, and her hands gripped the arms of her chair till the knuckles showed white beneath the skin. But she only said:

"This Gentile has fainted because he is disappointed with his reward. Take him hence and let his companion, the Doctor Adams, attend to him. When he is recovered, conduct them all from Mur as I have decreed. See that they go unharmed, taking with them plenty of food lest it be said that we only spared their lives here in order that they might starve without our gates."

Then waving her hand to show that the matter was done with, she rose and, followed by the judges and officers, left the court by some door behind them.

While she spoke a strong body of guards had surrounded us, some of whom came forward and lifted the senseless Oliver on to a stretcher. They carried him down the court, the rest of us following.

"Look," jeered the Abati as he passed, "look at the

Gentile pig who thought to wear the Bud of the Rose upon his bosom. He has got the thorn now, not the rose. Is the swine dead, think you?"

Thus they mocked him and us.

We reached our prison in safety, and there I set to work to revive Oliver, a task in which I succeeded at length. When he had come to himself again he drank a cup of water, and said quite quietly :

"You fellows have seen all, so there is no need for talk and explanations. One thing I beg of you, if you are any friends of mine, and it is that you will not reproach or even speak of Maqueda to me. Doubtless she had reasons for what she did ; moreover, her bringing up has not been the same as ours, and her code is different. Do not let us judge her. I have been a great fool, that is all, and now I am paying for my folly, or, rather, I have paid. Come, let us have some dinner, for we don't know when we shall get another meal."

We listened to this speech in silence, only I saw Roderick turn aside to hide a smile and wondered why he smiled.

Scarcely had we finished eating, or pretending to eat, when an officer entered the room and informed us roughly that it was time for us to be going. As he did so some attendants who had followed him threw us bundles of clothes, and with them four very beautiful camel-hair cloaks to protect us from the cold. With some of these garments we replaced our rags, for they were little more, tying them and the rest of the outfit up into bundles.

Then, clothed as Abati of the upper class, we were taken to the gates of the barrack, where we found a long train of riding camels waiting for us. The moment that I saw these beasts I knew that they were the best in the whole land, and of very great value. Indeed, that to which Oliver was conducted was Maqueda's own favourite dromedary, which upon state occasions she sometimes rode instead of a horse. He recognized it at once, poor fellow. and coloured to the eyes at this unexpected



mark of kindness, the only one she had vouchsafed to him.

• “Come, Gentiles,” said the officer, “and take count of your goods, that you may not say that we have stolen anything from you. Here are your firearms and all the ammunition that is left. These will be given to you at the foot of the pass, but not before, lest you should do more murder on the road. On those camels are fastened the boxes in which you brought up the magic fire. We found them in your quarters in the cave city, ready packed, but what they contain we neither know nor care. Full or empty, take them, they are yours. Those,” and he pointed to two other beasts, “are laden with your pay, which the Child of Kings sends to you, requesting that you will not count it till you reach Egypt or your own land, since she wishes no quarrelling with you as to the amount. The rest carry food for you to eat; also, there are two spare beasts. Now, mount and begone.”

So we climbed into the embroidered saddles of the kneeling dromedaries, and a few minutes later were riding through Mur toward the pass, accompanied by our guard and hooting mobs that once or twice became threatening, but were driven off by the soldiers.

“I say, Doctor,” whispered Higgs to me excitedly, “do you know that we have got all the best of the treasure of the Tomb of Kings in those five-and-twenty cases? I have thought since that I was crazy when I packed them, picking out the most valuable and rare articles with such care, and filling in the cracks with ring money and small curiosities, but now I see it was the inspiration of genius. My subliminal self knew what was going to happen, and was on the job, that’s all. Oh, if only we can get it safe away, I shall not have played Daniel and been nearly starved to death for nothing. Why, I’d go through it all again for that golden head alone. Shove on, shove on, before they change their minds; it seems too good to be true.”

Just then a rotten egg thrown by some sweet Abati

youth landed full on the bridge of his nose, and dispersing itself into his mouth and over his smoked spectacles, cut short the Professor's eloquence, or rather changed its tenor. So absurd was the sight that in spite of myself I burst out laughing, and with that laugh felt my heart grow lighter, as though our clouds of trouble were lifting at length.

At the mouth of the pass we found Joshua himself waiting for us, clad in all his finery and chain armour, and looking more like a porpoise on horseback than he had ever done.

"Farewell, Gentiles," he said, bowing to us in mockery, "we wish you a quick journey to Sheol, or wherever such swine as you may go. Listen, you Orme. I have a message for you from the Walda Nagasta. It is that she is sorry she could not ask you to stop for her nuptial feast, which she would have done had she not been sure that, if you stayed, the people would have cut your throat, and she did not wish the holy soil of Mur to be defiled with your dog's blood. Also she bids me say that she hopes that your stay here will have taught you a lesson, and that in future you will not believe that every woman who makes use of you for her own ends is therefore a victim of your charms. To-morrow night and the night after, I pray you think of our happiness and drink a cup of wine to the Walda Nagasta and her husband. Come, will you not wish me joy, O Gentile?"

Orme turned white as a sheet and gazed at him steadily. Then a strange look came into his grey eyes, almost a look of inspiration.

"Prince Joshua," he said in a very quiet voice, "who knows what may happen before the sun rises thrice on Mur? All things that begin well do not end well, as I have learned, and as you also may live to learn. At least, soon or late, your day of reckoning must come, and you, too, may be betrayed as I have been. Rather should you ask me to forgive your soul the insults that in your hour of triumph you have not been ashamed to heap



upon one who is powerless to avenge them," and he urged his camel past him.

As we followed I saw Joshua's face turn as pale as Oliver's had done, and his great round eyes protrude themselves like those of a fish.

"What does he mean?" said the Prince to his companions. "Pray God he is not a prophet of evil. Even now I have a mind—no, let him go. To break my marriage vow might bring bad luck upon me. Let him go!" and he glared after Oliver with fear and hatred written on his coarse features.

That was the last we ever saw of Joshua, uncle of Maqueda, and first prince among the Abati.

Down the pass we went and through the various gates of the fortifications, which were thrown open as we came and closed behind us. We did not linger on that journey. Why should we when our guards were anxious to be rid of us and we of them? Indeed, so soon as the last gate was behind us, either from fear of the Fung or because they were in a hurry to return to share in the festivities of the approaching marriage, suddenly the Abati wheeled round, bade us farewell with a parting curse, and left us to our own devices.

So, having roped the camels into a long line, we went on alone, truly thankful to be rid of them, and praying, every one of us, that never in this world or the next might we see the face or hear the voice of another Abati.

We emerged on to the plain at the spot where months before we had held our conference with Barung, Sultan of the Fung, and where poor Quick had forced his camel on to Joshua's horse and dismounted that hero. Here we paused awhile to arrange our little caravan and arm ourselves with the rifles, revolvers, and cartridges which until now we had not been allowed to touch.

There were but four of us to manage the long train of camels, so we were obliged to separate. Higgs and I went

ahead, since I was best acquainted with the desert and the road, Oliver took the central station, and Roderick brought up the rear, because he was very keen of sight and hearing and from his long familiarity with them, knew how to drive camels that showed signs of obstinacy or a wish to turn.

On our right lay the great city of Harmac. We noted that it seemed to be quite deserted. There, rebuilt now, frowned the gateway through which we had escaped from the Fung after we had blown so many of them to pieces, but beneath it none passed in or out. The town was empty, and although they were dead ripe the rich crops had not yet been reaped. Apparently the Fung people had left the land.

Now we were opposite to the valley of Harmac, and saw that the huge sphinx still sat there as it had done for unknown thousands of years. Only its head was gone, for that had "moved to Mur," and in its neck and shoulders appeared great clefts, caused by the terrific force of the explosion. Moreover, no sound came from the enclosures where the sacred lions used to be. Doubtless every one of them was dead.

"Don't you think," suggested Higgs, whose archaeological zeal was rekindling fast, "that we might spare half-an-hour to go up the valley and have a look at Harmac from the outside? Of course, both Roderick and I are thoroughly acquainted with his inside, and the den of lions, and so forth, but I would give a great deal just to study the rest of him and take a few measurements. You know one must camp somewhere, and if we can't find the camera, at dawn one might make a sketch."

"Are you mad?" I asked by way of answer, and Higgs collapsed, but to this hour he has never forgiven me.

We looked our last on Harmac, the god whose glory we had destroyed, and went on swiftly till darkness overtook us almost opposite to that ruined village where



Shadrach had tried to poison the hound Pharaoh, which afterwards tore out his throat. Here we unloaded the camels, no light task, and camped, for near this spot there was water and a patch of maize on which the beasts could feed.

Before the light quite faded Roderick rode forward for a little way to reconnoitre, and presently returned announcing shortly that he had seen no one. So we ate of the food with which the Abati had provided us, not without fear lest it should be poisoned, and then held a council of war.

The question was whether we should take the old road toward Egypt, or now that the swamps were dry, strike up northward by the other route of which Shadrach had told us. According to the map this should be shorter, and Higgs advocated it strongly, as I discovered afterwards because he thought there might be more archæological remains in that direction.

I, on the other hand, was in favour of following the road we knew, which, although long and very wearisome, was comparatively safe, as in that vast desert there were few people to attack us, while Oliver, our captain, listened to all we had to say, and reserved his opinion.

Presently, however, the question was settled for us by Roderick, who remarked that if we travelled to the north we should probably fall in with the Fung. I asked what he meant, and he replied that when he made his reconnoissance an hour or so before, although it was true that he had seen no one, not a thousand yards from where we sat he had come across the track of a great army. This army, from various indications, he felt sure was that of Barung, which had passed there within twelve hours.

"Perhaps my wife with them, so I no want go that way, father," he added with sincere simplicity.

"Where could they be travelling?" I asked.

"Don't know," he answered, "but think they go round

to attack Mur from other side, or perhaps to find new land to north."

"We will stick to the old road," said Oliver briefly. "Like Roderick I have had enough of all the inhabitants of this country. Now let us rest awhile; we need it."

About two o'clock we were up again and before it was dawn on the following morning we had loaded our camels and were on the road. By the first faint light we saw that what Roderick had told us was true. We were crossing the track of an army of many thousand men who had passed there recently with laden camels and horses. Moreover, those men were Fung, for we picked up some articles that could have belonged to no other people, such as a head-dress that had been lost or thrown away, and an arrow that had fallen from a quiver.

However, we saw nothing of them, and, travelling fast, to our great relief by midday reached the river Ebur, which we crossed without difficulty, for it was now low. That night we camped in the forest-lands beyond, having all the afternoon marched up the rising ground at the foot of which ran the river.

Toward dawn Higgs, whose turn it was to watch the camels, came and woke me.

"Sorry to disturb you, old fellow," he said, "but there is a most curious sky effect behind us which I thought you might like to see."

I rose and looked. In the clear, starlight night I could just discern the mighty outline of the mountains of Mur. Above them the firmament was suffused with a strange red glow. I formed my own conclusion at once, but only said:

"Let us go to tell Orme," and led the way to where he had lain down under a tree.

He was not sleeping; indeed, I do not think he had closed his eyes all night, the night of Maqueda's marriage. On the contrary, he was standing on a little knoll



staring at the distant mountains and the glow above them.

"Mur is on fire," he said solemnly. "Oh, my God, Mur is on fire!" and turning he walked away.

Just then Roderick joined us.

"Fung got into Mur," he said, "and now cut throat of all Abati. We well out of that, but pig Joshua have very warm wedding feast, because Barung hate Joshua who try to catch him not fairly, which he never forget; often talk of it."

"Poor Maqueda!" I said to Higgs, "what will happen to her?"

"I don't know," he answered, "but although once, like everybody else, I adored that girl, really as a matter of justice she deserves all she gets, the false-hearted little wretch. Still it is true," he added, relenting, "she gave us very good camels, to say nothing of their loads."

But I only repeated, "Poor Maqueda!"

That day we made but a short journey, since we wished to rest ourselves and fill the camels before plunging into the wilderness, and feeling sure that we should not be pursued, had no cause to hurry. At night we camped in a little hollow by a stream that ran at the foot of a rise. As dawn broke we were awakened by the voice of Roderick, who was on watch, calling to us in tones of alarm to get up, as we were followed. We sprang to our feet, seizing our rifles.

"Where are they?" I asked.

"There, there," he said, pointing toward the rise behind us.

We ran round some intervening bushes and looked, to see upon its crest a solitary figure seated on a very tired horse, for it panted and its head drooped. This figure, which was entirely hidden in a long cloak with a hood, appeared to be watching our camp just as a spy might do. Higgs lifted his rifle and fired at it,

but Oliver, who was standing by him, knocked the barrel up so that the bullet went high, saying :

"Don't be a fool. If it is only one man there's no need to shoot him, and if there are more you will bring them on to us."

Then the figure urged the weary horse and advanced slowly, and I noticed that it was very small. "A boy," I thought to myself, "who is bringing some message."

The rider reached us, and slipping from the horse, stood still.

"Who are you?" asked Oliver, scanning the cloaked form.

"One who brings a token to you, lord," was the answer, spoken in a low and muffled voice. "Here it is," and a hand, a very delicate hand, was stretched out, holding between the fingers a ring,

I knew it at once; it was Sheba's ring which Maqueda had lent to me in proof of her good faith when I journeyed for help to England. This ring, it will be remembered, we returned to her with much ceremony at our first public audience. Oliver grew pale at the sight of it.

"How did you come by this?" he asked hoarsely. "Is she who alone may wear it dead?"

"Yes, yes," answered the voice, a feigned voice as I thought. "The Child of Kings whom you knew is dead, and having no more need for this ancient symbol of her power, she bequeathed it to you whom she remembered kindly at the last."

Oliver covered his face with his hands and turned away.

"But," went on the speaker slowly, "the woman Maqueda whom once it is said you loved——"

He dropped his hands and stared.

"—— the woman Maqueda whom once it is said you loved——still lives."

Then the hood slipped back, and in the glow of the rising sun we saw the face beneath.



It was that of Maqueda herself!

A silence followed that in its way was almost awful.

"My Lord Oliver," asked Maqueda presently, "do you accept my offering of Queen Sheba's ring?"

