

Chapter X. The Dwellers in the Tomb

By now it was drawing towards sunset, so we made such preparations as we could for the night. One of these was to collect dry driftwood, of which an abundance lay upon the shore, to serve us for firing, though unfortunately we had nothing that we could cook for our meal.

While we were thus engaged we saw a canoe approaching the table-rock and perceived that in it were the chief Marama and a priest. After hovering about for a while they paddled the canoe near enough to allow of conversation which, taking no notice of their presence, we left it to them to begin.

"O, Friend-from-the-Sea," called Marama, addressing myself, "we come to pray you and the Great Healer to return to us to be our guests as before. The people are covered with darkness because of the loss of your wisdom, and the sick cry aloud for the Healer; indeed two of those whom he has cut with knives are dying."

"And what of the Bellower?" I asked, indicating Bastin.

"We should like to see him back also, Friend-from-the-Sea, that we may sacrifice and eat him, who destroyed our god with fire and caused the Healer to kill his priest."

"That is most unjust," exclaimed Bastin. "I deeply regret the blood that was shed on the occasion, unnecessarily as I think."

"Then go and atone for it with your own," said Bickley, "and everybody will be pleased."

Waving to them to be silent, I said:

"Are you mad, Marama, that you should ask us to return to sojourn among people who tried to kill us, merely because the Bellower caused fire to burn an image of wood and its head to fly from its shoulders, just to show you that it had no power to hold itself together, although you call it a god? Not so, we wash our hands of you; we leave you to go your own way while we go ours, till perchance in a day to come, after many misfortunes have overtaken you, you creep about our feet and with prayers and offerings beg us to return."

I paused to observe the effect of my words. It was excellent, for both Marama and the priest wrung their hands and groaned. Then I went on:

"Meanwhile we have something to tell you. We have entered the cave where you said no man might set a foot, and have seen him who sits within, the true god." (Here Bastin tried to interrupt, but was suppressed by Bickley.)

They looked at each other in a frightened way and groaned more loudly

than before.

"He sends you a message, which, as he told us of your approach, we came to the shore to deliver to you."

"How can you say that?" began Bastin, but was again violently suppressed by Bickley.

"It is that he, the real Oro, rejoices that the false Oro, whose face is copied from his face, has been destroyed. It is that he commands you day by day to bring food in plenty and lay it upon the Rock of Offerings, not forgetting a supply of fresh fish from the sea, and with it all those things that are stored in the house wherein we, the strangers from the sea, deigned to dwell awhile until we left you because in your wickedness you wished to murder us."

"And if we refuse--what then?" asked the priest, speaking for the first time.

"Then Oro will send death and destruction upon you. Then your food shall fail and you shall perish of sickness and want, and the Oromatuas, the spirits of the great dead, shall haunt you in your sleep, and Oro shall eat up your souls."

At these horrible threats both of them uttered a kind of wail, after which, Marama asked:

"And if we consent, what then, Friend-from-the-Sea?"

"Then, perchance," I answered, "in some day to come we may return to you, that I may give you of my wisdom and the Great Healer may cure your sick and the Bellower may lead you through his gate, and in his kindness make you to see with his eyes."

This last clause of my ultimatum did not seem to appeal to the priest, who argued a while with Marama, though what he said we could not hear. In the end he appeared to give way. At any rate Marama called out that all should be done as we wished, and that meanwhile they prayed us to intercede with Oro in the cave, and to keep back the ghosts from haunting them, and to protect them from misfortune. I replied that we would do our best, but could guarantee nothing since their offence was very great.

Then, to show that the conversation was at an end, we walked away with dignity, pushing Bastin in front of us, lest he should spoil the effect by some of his ill-timed and often over-true remarks.

"That's capital," said Bickley, when we were out of hearing. "The enemy has capitulated. We can stop here as long as we like, provisioned from the mainland, and if for any reason we wish to leave, be sure of our line of retreat."

"I don't know what you call capital," exclaimed Bastin. "It seems to me that all the lies which Arbuthnot has just told are sufficient to bring a judgment upon us. Indeed, I think that I will go back with Marama and explain the truth."

"I never before knew anybody who was so anxious to be cooked and eaten," remarked Bickley. "Moreover, you are too late, for the canoe is a hundred yards away by now, and you shan't have ours. Remember the Pauline maxims, old fellow, which you are so fond of quoting, and be all things to all men, and another that is more modern, that when you are at Rome, you must do as the Romans do; also a third, that necessity has no law, and for the matter of that, a fourth, that all is fair in love and war."

"I am sure, Bickley, that Paul never meant his words to bear the debased sense which you attribute to them--" began Bastin, but at this point I hustled him off to light a fire--a process at which I pointed out he had shown himself an expert.

We slept that night under the overhanging rock just to one side of the cave, not in the mouth, because of the draught which drew in and out of the great place. In that soft and balmy clime this was no hardship, although we lacked blankets. And yet, tired though I was, I could not rest as I should have done. Bastin snored away contentedly, quite unaffected by his escape which to him was merely an incident in the day's work; and so, too, slumbered Bickley, except that he did not

snore. But the amazement and the mystery of all that we had discovered and of all that might be left for us to discover, held me back from sleep.

What did it mean? What could it mean? My nerves were taut as harp strings and seemed to vibrate to the touch of invisible fingers, although I could not interpret the music that they made. Once or twice also I thought I heard actual music with my physical ears, and that of a strange quality. Soft and low and dreamful, it appeared to well from the recesses of the vast cave, a wailing song in an unknown tongue from the lips of women, or of a woman, multiplied mysteriously by echoes. This, however, must have been pure fancy, since there was no singer there.

Presently I dozed off, to be awakened by the sudden sound of a great fish leaping in the lake. I sat up and stared, fearing lest it might be the splash of a paddle, for I could not put from my mind the possibility of attack. All I saw, however, was the low line of the distant shore, and above it the bright and setting stars that heralded the coming of the sun. Then I woke the others, and we washed and ate, since once the sun rose time would be precious.

At length it appeared, splendid in a cloudless sky, and, as I had hoped, directly opposite to the mouth of the cave. Taking our candles and some stout pieces of driftwood which, with our knives, we had shaped on the previous evening to serve us as levers and rough shovels, we entered the cave. Bickley and I were filled with excitement and hope of what we knew

not, but Bastin showed little enthusiasm for our quest. His heart was with his half-converted savages beyond the lake, and of them, quite rightly I have no doubt, he thought more than he did of all the archaeological treasures in the whole earth. Still, he came, bearing the blackened head of Oro with him which, with unconscious humour, he had used as a pillow through the night because, as he said, "it was after all softer than stone." Also, I believe that in his heart he hoped that he might find an opportunity of destroying the bigger and earlier edition of Oro in the cave, before it was discovered by the natives who might wish to make it an object of worship. Tommy came also, with greater alacrity than I expected, since dogs do not as a rule like dark places. When we reached the statue I learned the reason; he remembered the smell he had detected at its base on the previous day, which Bastin supposed to proceed from a rat, and was anxious to continue his investigations.

We went straight to the statue, although Bickley passed the half-buried machines with evident regret. As we had hoped, the strong light of the rising sun fell upon it in a vivid ray, revealing all its wondrous workmanship and the majesty--for no other word describes it--of the somewhat terrifying countenance that appeared above the wrappings of the shroud. Indeed, I was convinced that originally this monument had been placed here in order that on certain days of the year the sun might fall upon it thus, when probably worshippers assembled to adore their hallowed symbol. After all, this was common in ancient days: witness the instance of the awful Three who sit in the deepest recesses of the

temple of Abu Simbel, on the Nile.

We gazed and gazed our fill, at least Bickley and I did, for Bastin was occupied in making a careful comparison between the head of his wooden Oro and that of the statue.

"There is no doubt that they are very much alike," he said. "Why, whatever is that dog doing? I think it is going mad," and he pointed to Tommy who was digging furiously at the base of the lowest step, as at home I have seen him do at roots that sheltered a rabbit.

Tommy's energy was so remarkable that at length it seriously attracted our attention. Evidently he meant that it should do so, for occasionally he sprang back to me barking, then returned and sniffed and scratched. Bickley knelt down and smelt at the stone.

"It is an odd thing, Humphrey," he said, "but there is a strange odour here, a very pleasant odour like that of sandal-wood or attar of roses."

"I never heard of a rat that smelt like sandal-wood or attar of roses," said Bastin. "Look out that it isn't a snake."

I knelt down beside Bickley, and in clearing away the deep dust from what seemed to be the bottom of the step, which was perhaps four feet in height, by accident thrust my amateur spade somewhat strongly against its base where it rested upon the rocky floor.

Next moment a wonder came to pass. The whole massive rock began to turn outwards as though upon a pivot! I saw it coming and grabbed Bickley by the collar, dragging him back so that we just rolled clear before the great block, which must have weighed several tons, fell down and crushed us. Tommy saw it too, and fled, though a little late, for the edge of the block caught the tip of his tail and caused him to emit a most piercing howl. But we did not think of Tommy and his woes; we did not think of our own escape or of anything else because of the marvel that appeared to us. Seated there upon the ground, after our backward tumble, we could see into the space which lay behind the fallen step, for there the light of the sun penetrated.

The first idea it gave me was that of the jewelled shrine of some mediaeval saint which, by good fortune, had escaped the plunderers; there are still such existing in the world. It shone and glittered, apparently with gold and diamonds, although, as a matter of fact, there were no diamonds, nor was it gold which gleamed, but some ancient metal, or rather amalgam, which is now lost to the world, the same that was used in the tubes of the air-machines. I think that it contained gold, but I do not know. At any rate, it was equally lasting and even more beautiful, though lighter in colour.

For the rest this adorned recess which resembled that of a large funeral vault, occupying the whole space beneath the base of the statue that was supported on its arch, was empty save for two flashing objects that lay

side by side but with nearly the whole width of the vault between them.

I pointed at them to Bickley with my finger, for really I could not speak.

"Coffins, by Jove!" he whispered. "Glass or crystal coffins and people in them. Come on!"

A few seconds later we were crawling into that vault while Bastin, still nursing the head of Oro as though it were a baby, stood confused outside muttering something about desecrating hallowed graves.

Just as we reached the interior, owing to the heightening of the sun, the light passed away, leaving us in a kind of twilight. Bickley produced carriage candles from his pocket and fumbled for matches. While he was doing so I noticed two things--firstly, that the place really did smell like a scent-shop, and, secondly, that the coffins seemed to glow with a kind of phosphorescent light of their own, not very strong, but sufficient to reveal their outlines in the gloom. Then the candles burnt up and we saw.

Within the coffin that stood on our left hand as we entered, for this crystal was as transparent as plate glass, lay a most wonderful old man, clad in a gleaming, embroidered robe. His long hair, which was parted in the middle, as we could see beneath the edge of the pearl-sewn and broided cap he wore, also his beard were snowy white. The man was

tall, at least six feet four inches in height, and rather spare. His hands were long and thin, very delicately made, as were his sandalled feet.

But it was his face that fixed our gaze, for it was marvelous, like the face of a god, and, as we noticed at once, with some resemblance to that of the statue above. Thus the brow was broad and massive, the nose straight and long, the mouth stern and clear-cut, while the cheekbones were rather high, and the eyebrows arched. Such are the characteristics of many handsome old men of good blood, and as the mummies of Seti and others show us, such they have been for thousands of years. Only this man differed from all others because of the fearful dignity stamped upon his features. Looking at him I began to think at once of the prophet Elijah as he must have appeared rising to heaven, enhanced by the more earthly glory of Solomon, for although the appearance of these patriarchs is unknown, of them one conceives ideas. Only it seemed probable that Elijah may have looked more benign. Here there was no benignity, only terrible force and infinite wisdom.

Contemplating him I shivered a little and felt thankful that he was dead. For to tell the truth I was afraid of that awesome countenance which, I should add, was of the whiteness of paper, although the cheeks still showed tinges of colour, so perfect was the preservation of the corpse.

I was still gazing at it when Bickley said in a voice of amazement:

"I say, look here, in the other coffin."

I turned, looked, and nearly collapsed on the floor of the vault, since beauty can sometimes strike us like a blow. Oh! there before me lay all loveliness, such loveliness that there burst from my lips an involuntary cry:

"Alas! that she should be dead!"

A young woman, I supposed, at least she looked young, perhaps five or six and twenty years of age, or so I judged. There she lay, her tall and delicate shape half hidden in masses of rich-hued hair in colour of a ruddy blackness. I know not how else to describe it, since never have I seen any of the same tint. Moreover, it shone with a life of its own as though it had been dusted with gold. From between the masses of this hair appeared a face which I can only call divine. There was every beauty that woman can boast, from the curving eyelashes of extraordinary length to the sweet and human mouth. To these charms also were added a wondrous smile and an air of kind dignity, very different from the fierce pride stamped upon the countenance of the old man who was her companion in death.

She was clothed in some close-fitting robe of white brodered with gold; pearls were about her neck, lying far down upon the perfect bosom, a girdle of gold and shining gems encircled her slender waist, and on her

little feet were sandals fastened with red stones like rubies. In truth, she was a splendid creature, and yet, I know not how, her beauty suggested more of the spirit than of the flesh. Indeed, in a way, it was unearthly. My senses were smitten, it pulled at my heart-strings, and yet its unutterable strangeness seemed to awake memories within me, though of what I could not tell. A wild fancy came to me that I must have known this heavenly creature in some past life.

By now Bastin had joined us, and, attracted by my exclamation and by the attitude of Bickley, who was staring down at the coffin with a fixed look upon his face, not unlike that of a pointer when he scents game, he began to contemplate the wonder within it in his slow way.

"Well, I never!" he said. "Do you think the Glittering Lady in there is human?"

"The Glittering Lady is dead, but I suppose that she was human in her life," I answered in an awed whisper.

"Of course she is dead, otherwise she would not be in that glass coffin. I think I should like to read the Burial Service over her, which I daresay was never done when she was put in there."

"How do you know she is dead?" asked Bickley in a sharp voice and speaking for the first time. "I have seen hundreds of corpses, and mummies too, but never any that looked like these."

I stared at him. It was strange to hear Bickley, the scoffer at miracles, suggesting that this greatest of all miracles might be possible.

"They must have been here a long time," I said, "for although human, they are not, I think, of any people known to the world to-day; their dress, everything, shows it, though perhaps thousands of years ago--" and I stopped.

"Quite so," answered Bickley; "I agree. That is why I suggest that they may have belonged to a race who knew what we do not, namely, how to suspend animation for great periods of time."

I said no more, nor did Bastin, who was now engaged in studying the old man, and for once, wonderstruck and overcome. Bickley, however, took one of the candles and began to make a close examination of the coffins. So did Tommy, who sniffed along the join of that of the Glittering Lady until his nose reached a certain spot, where it remained, while his black tail began to wag in a delighted fashion. Bickley pushed him away and investigated.

"As I thought," he said--"air-holes. See!"

I looked, and there, bored through the crystal of the coffin in a line with the face of its occupant, were a number of little holes that either

by accident or design outlined the shape of a human mouth.

"They are not airtight," murmured Bickley; "and if air can enter, how can dead flesh remain like that for ages?"

Then he continued his search upon the other side.

"The lid of this coffin works on hinges," he said. "Here they are, fashioned of the crystal itself. A living person within could have pulled it down before the senses departed."

"No," I answered; "for look, here is a crystal bolt at the end and it is shot from without."

This puzzled him; then as though struck by an idea, he began to examine the other coffin.

"I've got it!" he exclaimed presently. "The old god in here" (somehow we all thought of this old man as not quite normal) "shut down the Glittering Lady's coffin and bolted it. His own is not bolted, although the bolt exists in the same place. He just got in and pulled down the lid. Oh! what nonsense I am talking--for how can such things be? Let us get out and think."

So we crept from the sepulchre in which the perfumed air had begun to oppress us and sat ourselves down upon the floor of the cave, where for

a while we remained silent.

"I am very thirsty," said Bastin presently. "Those smells seem to have dried me up. I am going to get some tea--I mean water, as unfortunately there is no tea," and he set off towards the mouth of the cave.

We followed him, I don't quite know why, except that we wished to breathe freely outside, also we knew that the sepulchre and its contents would be as safe as they had been for--well, how long?

It proved to be a beautiful morning outside. We walked up and down enjoying it sub-consciously, for really our--that is Bickley's and my own--intelligences were concentrated on that sepulchre and its contents. Where Bastin's may have been I do not know, perhaps in a visionary teapot, since I was sure that it would take him a day or two to appreciate the significance of our discoveries. At any rate, he wandered off, making no remarks about them, to drink water, I suppose.

Presently he began to shout to us from the end of the table-rock and we went to see the reason of his noise. It proved to be very satisfactory, for while we were in the cave the Orofenans had brought absolutely everything belonging to us, together with a large supply of food from the main island. Not a single article was missing; even our books, a can with the bottom out, and the broken pieces of a little pocket mirror had been religiously transported, and with these a few articles that had been stolen from us, notably my pocket-knife. Evidently a great taboo

had been laid upon all our possessions. They were now carefully arranged in one of the grooves of the rock that Bickley supposed had been made by the wheels of aeroplanes, which was why we had not seen them at once.

Each of us rushed for what we desired most--Bastin for one of the canisters of tea, I for my diaries, and Bickley for his chest of instruments and medicines. These were removed to the mouth of the cave, and after them the other things and the food; also a bell tent and some camp furniture that we had brought from the ship. Then Bastin made some tea of which he drank four large pannikins, having first said grace over it with unwonted fervour. Nor did we disdain our share of the beverage, although Bickley preferred cocoa and I coffee. Cocoa and coffee we had no time to make then, and in view of that sepulchre in the cave, what had we to do with cocoa and coffee?

So Bickley and I said to each other, and yet presently he changed his mind and in a special metal machine carefully made some extremely strong black coffee which he poured into a thermos flask, previously warmed with hot water, adding thereto about a claret glass of brandy. Also he extracted certain drugs from his medicine-chest, and with them, as I noted, a hypodermic syringe, which he first boiled in a kettle and then shut up in a little tube with a glass stopper.

These preparations finished, he called to Tommy to give him the scraps of our meal. But there was no Tommy. The dog was missing, and though we hunted everywhere we could not find him. Finally we concluded that he

had wandered off down the beach on business of his own and would return in due course. We could not bother about Tommy just then.

After making some further preparations and fidgeting about a little, Bickley announced that as we had now some proper paraffin lamps of the powerful sort which are known as "hurricane," he proposed by their aid to carry out further examinations in the cave.

"I think I shall stop where I am," said Bastin, helping himself from the kettle to a fifth pannikin of tea. "Those corpses are very interesting, but I don't see any use in staring at them again at present. One can always do that at any time. I have missed Marama once already by being away in that cave, and I have a lot to say to him about my people; I don't want to be absent in case he should return."

"To wash up the things, I suppose," said Bickley with a sniff; "or perhaps to eat the tea-leaves."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I have noticed that these natives have a peculiar taste for tea-leaves. I think they believe them to be a medicine, but I don't suppose they would come so far for them, though perhaps they might in the hope of getting the head of Oro. Anyhow, I am going to stop here."

"Pray do," said Bickley. "Are you ready, Humphrey?"

I nodded, and he handed to me a felt-covered flask of the non-conducting kind, filled with boiling water, a tin of preserved milk, and a little bottle of meat extract of a most concentrated sort. Then, having lit two of the hurricane lamps and seen that they were full of oil, we started back up the cave.