

Chapter XIV. The Under-world

That night we slept well and without fear, being quite certain that after their previous experience the Orofenans would make no further attempts upon us. Indeed our only anxiety was for Tommy, whom we could not find when the time came to give him his supper. Bastin, however, seemed to remember having seen him following the Glittering Lady into the cave. This, of course, was possible, as certainly he had taken an enormous fancy to her and sat himself down as close to her as he could on every occasion. He even seemed to like the ancient Oro, and was not afraid to jump up and plant his dirty paws upon that terrific person's gorgeous robe. Moreover Oro liked him, for several times I observed him pat the dog upon the head; as I think I have said, the only human touch that I had perceived about him. So we gave up searching and calling in the hope that he was safe with our supernatural friends.

The next morning quite early the Lady Yva appeared alone; no, not alone, for with her came our lost Tommy looking extremely spry and well at ease. The faithless little wretch just greeted us in a casual fashion and then went and sat by Yva. In fact when the awkward Bastin managed to stumble over the end of her dress Tommy growled at him and showed his teeth. Moreover the dog was changed. He was blessed with a shiny black coat, but now this coat sparkled in the sunlight, like the Lady Yva's hair.

"The Glittering Lady is all very well, but I'm not sure that I care for a glittering dog. It doesn't look quite natural," said Bastin, contemplating him.

"Why does Tommy shine, Lady?" I asked.

"Because I washed him in certain waters that we have, so that now he looks beautiful and smells sweet," she answered, laughing.

It was true, the dog did smell sweet, which I may add had not always been the case with him, especially when there were dead fish about. Also he appeared to have been fed, for he turned up his nose at the bits we had saved for his breakfast.

"He has drunk of the Life-water," explained Yva, "and will want no food for two days."

Bickley pricked up his ears at this statement and looked incredulous.

"You do not believe, O Bickley," she said, studying him gravely.

"Indeed, you believe nothing. You think my father and I tell you many lies. Bastin there, he believes all. Humphrey? He is not sure; he thinks to himself, I will wait and find out whether or no these funny people cheat me."

Bickley coloured and made some remark about things which were contrary

to experience, also that Tommy in a general way was rather a greedy little dog.

"You, too, like to eat, Bickley" (this was true, he had an excellent appetite), "but when you have drunk the Life-water you will care much less."

"I am glad to hear it," interrupted Bastin, "for Bickley wants a lot of cooking done, and I find it tedious."

"You eat also, Lady," said Bickley.

"Yes, I eat sometimes because I like it, but I can go weeks and not eat, when I have the Life-water. Just now, after so long a sleep, I am hungry. Please give me some of that fruit. No, not the flesh, flesh I hate."

We handed it to her. She took two plantains, peeled and ate them with extraordinary grace. Indeed she reminded me, I do not know why, of some lovely butterfly drawing its food from a flower.

While she ate she observed us closely; nothing seemed to escape the quick glances of those beautiful eyes. Presently she said:

"What, O Humphrey, is that with which you fasten your neckdress?" and she pointed to the little gold statue of Osiris that I used as a pin.

I told her that it was a statuette of a god named Osiris and very, very ancient, probably quite five thousand years old, a statement at which she smiled a little; also that it came from Egypt.

"Ah!" she answered, "is it so? I asked because we have figures that are very like to that one, and they also hold in their hands a staff surmounted by a loop. They are figures of Sleep's brother--Death."

"So is this," I said. "Among the Egyptians Osiris was the god of Death."

She nodded and replied that doubtless the symbol had come down to them.

"One day you shall take me to see this land which you call so very old. Or I will take you, which would be quicker," she added.

We all bowed and said we should be delighted. Even Bastin appeared anxious to revisit Egypt in such company, though when he was there it seemed to bore him. But what she meant about taking us I could not guess. Nor had we time to ask her, for she went on, watching our faces as she spoke.

"The Lord Oro sends you a message, Strangers. He asks whether it is your wish to see where we dwell. He adds that you are not to come if you do not desire, or if you fear danger."

We all answered that there was nothing we should like better, but Bastin added that he had already seen the tomb.

"Do you think, Bastin, that we live in a tomb because we slept there for a while, awaiting the advent of you wanderers at the appointed hour?"

"I don't see where else it could be, unless it is further down that cave," said Bastin. "The top of the mountain would not be convenient as a residence."

"It has not been convenient for many an age, for reasons that I will show you. Think now, before you come. You have naught to fear from us, and I believe that no harm will happen to you. But you will see many strange things that will anger Bickley because he cannot understand them, and perhaps will weary Bastin because his heart turns from what is wondrous and ancient. Only Humphrey will rejoice in them because the doors of his soul are open and he longs--what do you long for, Humphrey?"

"That which I have lost and fear I shall never find again," I answered boldly.

"I know that you have lost many things--last night, for instance, you lost Tommy, and when he slept with me he told me much about you and--others."

"This is ridiculous," broke in Bastin. "Can a dog talk?"

"Everything can talk, if you understand its language, Bastin. But keep a good heart, Humphrey, for the bold seeker finds in the end. Oh! foolish man, do you not understand that all is yours if you have but the soul to conceive and the will to grasp? All, all, below, between, above! Even I know that, I who have so much to learn."

So she spoke and became suddenly magnificent. Her face which had been but that of a super-lovely woman, took on grandeur. Her bosom swelled; her presence radiated some subtle power, much as her hair radiated light.

In a moment it was gone and she was smiling and jesting.

"Will you come, Strangers, where Tommy was not afraid to go, down to the Under-world? Or will you stay here in the sun? Perhaps you will do better to stay here in the sun, for the Under-world has terrors for weak hearts that were born but yesterday, and feeble feet may stumble in the dark."

"I shall take my electric torch," said Bastin with decision, "and I advise you fellows to do the same. I always hated cellars, and the catacombs at Rome are worse, though full of sacred interest."

Then we started, Tommy frisking on ahead in a most provoking way as

though he were bored by a visit to a strange house and going home, and Yva gliding forward with a smile upon her face that was half mystic and half mischievous. We passed the remains of the machines, and Bickley asked her what they were.

"Carriages in which once we travelled through the skies, until we found a better way, and that the uninstructed used till the end," she answered carelessly, leaving me wondering what on earth she meant.

We came to the statue and the sepulchre beneath without trouble, for the glint of her hair, and I may add of Tommy's back, were quite sufficient to guide us through the gloom. The crystal coffins were still there, for Bastin flashed his torch and we saw them, but the boxes of radium had gone.

"Let that light die," she said to Bastin. "Humphrey, give me your right hand and give your left to Bickley. Let Bastin cling to him and fear nothing."

We passed to the end of the tomb and stood against what appeared to be a rock wall, all close together, as she directed.

"Fear nothing," she said again, but next second I was never more full of fear in my life, for we were whirling downwards at a speed that would have made an American elevator attendant turn pale.

"Don't choke me," I heard Bickley say to Bastin, and the latter's murmured reply of:

"I never could bear these moving staircases and tubelifts. They always make me feel sick."

I admit that for my part I also felt rather sick and clung tightly to the hand of the Glittering Lady. She, however, placed her other hand upon my shoulder, saying in a low voice:

"Did I not tell you to have no fear?"

Then I felt comforted, for somehow I knew that it was not her desire to harm and much less to destroy me. Also Tommy was seated quite at his ease with his head resting against my leg, and his absence of alarm was reassuring. The only stoic of the party was Bickley. I have no doubt that he was quite as frightened as we were, but rather than show it he would have died.

"I presume this machinery is pneumatic," he began when suddenly and without shock, we arrived at the end of our journey. How far we had fallen I am sure I do not know, but I should judge from the awful speed at which we travelled, that it must have been several thousand feet, probably four or five.

"Everything seems steady now," remarked Bastin, "so I suppose this

luggage lift has stopped. The odd thing is that I can't see anything of it. There ought to be a shaft, but we seem to be standing on a level floor."

"The odd thing is," said Bickley, "that we can see at all. Where the devil does the light come from thousands of feet underground?"

"I don't know," answered Bastin, "unless there is natural gas here, as I am told there is at a town called Medicine Hat in Canada."

"Natural gas be blowed," said Bickley. "It is more like moonlight magnified ten times."

So it was. The whole place was filled with a soft radiance, equal to that of the sun at noon, but gentler and without heat.

"Where does it come from?" I whispered to Yva.

"Oh!" she replied, as I thought evasively. "It is the light of the Under-world which we know how to use. The earth is full of light, which is not wonderful, is it, seeing that its heart is fire? Now look about you."

I looked and leant on her harder than ever, since amazement made me weak. We were in some vast place whereof the roof seemed almost as far off as the sky at night. At least all that I could make out was a dim

and distant arch which might have been one of cloud. For the rest, in every direction stretched vastness, illuminated far as the eye could reach by the soft light of which I have spoken, that is, probably for several miles. But this vastness was not empty. On the contrary it was occupied by a great city. There were streets much wider than Piccadilly, all bordered by houses, though these, I observed, were roofless, very fine houses, some of them, built of white stone or marble. There were roadways and pavements worn by the passage of feet. There, farther on, were market-places or public squares, and there, lastly, was a huge central enclosure one or two hundred acres in extent, which was filled with majestic buildings that looked like palaces, or town-halls; and, in the midst of them all, a vast temple with courts and a central dome. For here, notwithstanding the lack of necessity, its builders seemed to have adhered to the Over-world tradition, and had roofed their fane.

And now came the terror. All of this enormous city was dead. Had it stood upon the moon it could not have been more dead. None paced its streets; none looked from its window-places. None trafficked in its markets, none worshipped in its temple. Swept, garnished, lighted, practically untouched by the hand of Time, here where no rains fell and no winds blew, it was yet a howling wilderness. For what wilderness is there to equal that which once has been the busy haunt of men? Let those who have stood among the buried cities of Central Asia, or of Anarajapura in Ceylon, or even amid the ruins of Salamis on the coast of Cyprus, answer the question. But here was something infinitely more awful. A huge human haunt in the bowels of the earth utterly devoid of

human beings, and yet as perfect as on the day when these ceased to be.

"I do not care for underground localities," remarked Bastin, his gruff voice echoing strangely in that terrible silence, "but it does seem a pity that all these fine buildings should be wasted. I suppose their inhabitants left them in search of fresh air."

"Why did they leave them?" I asked of Yva.

"Because death took them," she answered solemnly. "Even those who live a thousand years die at last, and if they have no children, with them dies the race."

"Then were you the last of your people?" I asked.

"Inquire of my father," she replied, and led the way through the massive arch of a great building.

It led into a walled courtyard in the centre of which was a plain cupola of marble with a gate of some pale metal that looked like platinum mixed with gold. This gate stood open. Within it was the statue of a woman beautifully executed in white marble and set in a niche of some black stone. The figure was draped as though to conceal the shape, and the face was stern and majestic rather than beautiful. The eyes of the statue were cunningly made of some enamel which gave them a strange and lifelike appearance. They stared upwards as though looking away from the

earth and its concerns. The arms were outstretched. In the right hand was a cup of black marble, in the left a similar cup of white marble. From each of these cups trickled a thin stream of sparkling water, which two streams met and mingled at a distance of about three feet beneath the cups. Then they fell into a metal basin which, although it must have been quite a foot thick, was cut right through by their constant impact, and apparently vanished down some pipe beneath. Out of this metal basin Tommy, who gambolled into the place ahead of us, began to drink in a greedy and demonstrative fashion.

"The Life-water?" I said, looking at our guide.

She nodded and asked in her turn:

"What is the statue and what does it signify, Humphrey?"

I hesitated, but Bastin answered:

"Just a rather ugly woman who hid up her figure because it was bad. Probably she was a relation of the artist who wished to have her likeness done and sat for nothing."

"The goddess of Health," suggested Bickley. "Her proportions are perfect; a robust, a thoroughly normal woman."

"Now, Humphrey," said Yva.

I stared at the work and had not an idea. Then it flashed on me with such suddenness and certainty that I am convinced the answer to the riddle was passed to me from her and did not originate in my own mind.

"It seems quite easy," I said in a superior tone. "The figure symbolises Life and is draped because we only see the face of Life, the rest is hidden. The arms are bare because Life is real and active. One cup is black and one is white because Life brings both good and evil gifts; that is why the streams mingle, to be lost beneath in the darkness of death. The features are stern and even terrifying rather than lovely, because such is the aspect of Life. The eyes look upward and far away from present things, because the real life is not here."

"Of course one may say anything," said Bastin, "but I don't understand all that."

"Imagination goes a long way," broke in Bickley, who was vexed that he had not thought of this interpretation himself. But Yva said:

"I begin to think that you are quite clever, Humphrey. I wonder whence the truth came to you, for such is the meaning of the figure and the cups. Had I told it to you myself, it could not have been better said," and she glanced at me out of the corners of her eyes. "Now, Strangers, will you drink? Once that gate was guarded, and only at a great price or as a great reward were certain of the Highest Blood given the freedom of

this fountain which might touch no common lips. Indeed it was one of the causes of our last war, for all the world which was, desired this water which now is lapped by a stranger's hound."

"I suppose there is nothing medicinal in it?" said Bastin. "Once when I was very thirsty, I made a mistake and drank three tumblers of something of the sort in the dark, thinking that it was Apollinaris, and I don't want to do it again."

"Just the sort of thing you would do," said Bickley. "But, Lady Yva, what are the properties of this water?"

"It is very health-giving," she answered, "and if drunk continually, not less than once each thirty days, it wards off sickness, lessens hunger and postpones death for many, many years. That is why those of the High Blood endured so long and became the rulers of the world, and that, as I have said, is the greatest of the reasons why the peoples who dwelt in the ancient outer countries and never wished to die, made war upon them, to win this secret fountain. Have no fear, O Bastin, for see, I will pledge you in this water."

Then she lifted a strange-looking, shallow, metal cup whereof the handles were formed of twisted serpents, that lay in the basin, filled it from the trickling stream, bowed to us and drank. But as she drank I noted with a thrill of joy that her eyes were fixed on mine as though it were me she pledged and me alone. Again she filled the cup with the

sparkling water, for it did sparkle, like that French liqueur in which are mingled little flakes of gold, and handed it to me.

I bowed to her and drank. I suppose the fluid was water, but to me it tasted more like strong champagne, dashed with Chateau Yquem. It was delicious. More, its effects were distinctly peculiar. Something quick and subtle ran through my veins; something that for a few moments seemed to burn away the obscureness which blurs our thought. I began to understand several problems that had puzzled me, and then lost their explanations in the midst of light, inner light, I mean. Moreover, of a sudden it seemed to me as though a window had been opened in the heart of that Glittering Lady who stood beside me. At least I knew that it was full of wonderful knowledge, wonderful memories and wonderful hopes, and that in the latter two of these I had some part; what part I could not tell. Also I knew that my heart was open to her and that she saw in it something which caused her to marvel and to sigh.

In a few seconds, thirty perhaps, all this was gone. Nothing remained except that I felt extremely strong and well, happier, too, than I had been for years. Mutely I asked her for more of the water, but she shook her head and, taking the cup from me, filled it again and gave it to Bickley, who drank. He flushed, seemed to lose the self-control which was his very strong characteristic, and said in a rather thick voice:

"Curious! but I do not think at this moment there is any operation that has ever been attempted which I could not tackle single-handed and with

success."

Then he was silent, and Bastin's turn came. He drank rather noisily, after his fashion, and began:

"My dear young lady, I think the time has come when I should expound to you--" Here he broke off and commenced singing very badly, for his voice was somewhat raucous:

From Greenland's icy mountains,
From India's coral strand,
Where Afric's sunny fountains
Roll down their golden sand.

Ceasing from melody, he added:

"I determined that I would drink nothing intoxicating while I was on this island that I might be a shining light in a dark place, and now I fear that quite unwittingly I have broken what I look upon as a promise."

Then he, too, grew silent.

"Come," said Yva, "my father, the Lord Oro, awaits you."

We crossed the court of the Water of Life and mounted steps that led

to a wide and impressive portico, Tommy frisking ahead of us in a most excited way for a dog of his experience. Evidently the water had produced its effect upon him as well as upon his masters. This portico was in a solemn style of architecture which I cannot describe, because it differed from any other that I know. It was not Egyptian and not Greek, although its solidity reminded me of the former, and the beauty and grace of some of the columns, of the latter. The profuseness and rather grotesque character of the carvings suggested the ruins of Mexico and Yucatan, and the enormous size of the blocks of stone, those of Peru and Baalbec. In short, all the known forms of ancient architecture might have found their inspiration here, and the general effect was tremendous.

"The palace of the King," said Yva, "whereof we approach the great hall."

We entered through mighty metal doors, one of which stood ajar, into a vestibule which from certain indications I gathered had once been a guard, or perhaps an assembly-room. It was about forty feet deep by a hundred wide. Thence she led us through a smaller door into the hall itself. It was a vast place without columns, for there was no roof to support. The walls of marble or limestone were sculptured like those of Egyptian temples, apparently with battle scenes, though of this I am not sure for I did not go near to them. Except for a broad avenue along the middle, up which we walked, the area was filled with marble benches that would, I presume, have accommodated several thousand people. But they

were empty--empty, and oh! the loneliness of it all.

Far away at the head of the hall was a dais enclosed, and, as it were, roofed in by a towering structure that mingled grace and majesty to a wonderful degree. It was modelled on the pattern of a huge shell. The base of the shell was the platform; behind were the ribs, and above, the overhanging lip of the shell. On this platform was a throne of silvery metal. It was supported on the arched coils of snakes, whereof the tails formed the back and the heads the arms of the throne.

On this throne, arrayed in gorgeous robes, sat the Lord Oro, his white beard flowing over them, and a jewelled cap upon his head. In front of him was a low table on which lay graven sheets of metal, and among them a large ball of crystal.

There he sat, solemn and silent in the midst of this awful solitude, looking in very truth like a god, as we conceive such a being to appear. Small as he was in that huge expanse of buildings, he seemed yet to dominate it, in a sense to fill the emptiness which was accentuated by his presence. I know that the sight of him filled me with true fear which it had never done in the light of day, not even when he arose from his crystal coffin. Now for the first time I felt as though I were really in the presence of a Being Supernatural. Doubtless the surroundings heightened this impression. What were these mighty edifices in the bowels of the world? Whence came this wondrous, all-pervading and translucent light, whereof we could see no origin? Whither had vanished

those who had reared and inhabited them? How did it happen that of them all, this man, if he were a man; and this lovely woman at my side, who, if I might trust my senses and instincts, was certainly a woman, alone survived of their departed multitudes?

The thing was crushing. I looked at Bickley for encouragement, but got none, for he only shook his head. Even Bastin, now that the first effects of the Life-water had departed, seemed overwhelmed, and muttered something about the halls of Hades.

Only the little dog Tommy remained quite cheerful. He trotted down the hall, jumped on to the dais and sat himself comfortably at the feet of its occupant.

"I greet you," Oro said in his slow, resonant voice. "Daughter, lead these strangers to me; I would speak with them."