

CHAPTER III

THE PROFESSOR GOES OUT SHOOTING

Of all our tremendous journey across the desert until we had passed the forest and reached the plains which surrounded the mountains of Mur, there are, I think, but few incidents with which the reader need be troubled. The first of these was at Assouan, where a letter and various telegrams overtook Captain Orme, which, as by this time we had become intimate, he showed to me. They informed him that the clandestine infant whom his uncle left behind him had suddenly sickened and died of some childish ailment, so that he was once again heir to the large property which he thought he had lost, since the widow only took a life interest in some of the personalty. I congratulated him and said I supposed this meant that we should not have the pleasure of his company to Mur.

"Why not?" he asked. "I said I was going and I mean to go; indeed, I signed a document to that effect."

"I daresay," I answered, "but circumstances alter cases. If I might say so, an adventure that perhaps was good enough for a young and well-born man of spirit and enterprise without any particular resources, is no longer good enough for one who has the ball at his feet. Think what a ball it is to a man of your birth, intelligence, record, and now, great fortune come to you in youth. Why, with these advantages there is absolutely nothing that you cannot do in England. You can go into

Parliament and rule the country; if you like you can become a peer. You can marry any one who isn't of the blood royal; in short, with uncommonly little effort of your own, your career is made for you. Don't throw away a silver spoon like that in order, perhaps, to die of thirst in the desert or be killed in a fight among unknown tribes."

"Oh, I don't know," he answered. "I never set heart much on spoons, silver or other. When I lost this one I didn't cry, and now that I have found it again I shan't sing. Anyway, I am going on with you, and you can't prevent me under the agreement. Only as I have got such a lot to leave, I suppose I had better make a will first and post it home, which is a bore."

Just then the Professor came in, followed by an Arab thief of a dealer, with whom he was trying to bargain for some object of antiquity. When the dealer had been ejected and the position explained to him, Higgs, who whatever may be his failings in small matters, is unselfish enough in big ones, said that he agreed with me and thought that under the circumstances, in his own interest, Orme ought to leave us and return home.

"You may save your breath, old fellow," answered the Captain, "for this reason if for no other," and he threw him a letter across the table, which letter I saw afterwards. To be brief, it was from the young lady to whom he had been engaged to be married, and who on his loss of fortune had jilted him. Now she seemed to have changed her mind

again, and, although she did not mention the matter, it is perhaps not uncharitable to suppose that the news of the death of the inconvenient child had something to do with her decision.

"Have you answered this?" asked Higgs.

"No," answered Orme, setting his mouth. "I have not answered, and I am not going to answer it, either in writing or in person. I intend to start to-morrow for Mur and to travel as far on that road as it pleases fate to allow, and now I am going to look at the rock sculptures by the cataract."

"Well, that's flat," said Higgs after he had departed, "and for my part I am glad of it, for somehow I think he will be a useful man among those Fung. Also, if he went I expect that the Sergeant would go too, and where should we be without Quick, I should like to know?"

Afterwards I conversed with the said Quick about this same matter, repeating to him my opinions, to which the Sergeant listened with the deference which he was always kind enough to show to me.

"Begging your pardon, sir," he said, when I had finished, "but I think you are both right and wrong. Everything has two ends, hasn't it? You say that it would be wicked for the Captain to get himself killed, there being now so much money for him to live for, seeing that life is common as dirt while money is precious, rare and hard to come by. It ain't

the kings we admire, it's their crowns; it ain't the millionaires, it's their millions; but, after all, the millionaires don't take their millions with them, for Providence, that, like Nature, hates waste, knows that if they did they'd melt, so one man dead gives another bread, as the saying goes, or p'raps I should say gingerbread in such cases.

"Still, on the whole, sir, I admit you are right as to the sinfulness of wasting luck. But now comes the other end. I know this young lady what the Captain was engaged to, which he never would have been if he had taken my advice, since of all the fish-blooded little serpents that ever I set eyes on she's the serpentest, though pretty, I allow. Solomon said in his haste that an honest woman he had not found, but if he had met the Honourable Miss--well, never mind her name--he'd have said it at his leisure, and gone on saying it. Now, no one should never take back a servant what has given notice and then says he's sorry, for if he does the sorrow will be on the other side before it's all done; and much less should he take back a fiancée (Quick said a 'finance'), on the whole, he'd better drown himself--I tried it once, and I know. So that's the tail of the business.

"But," he went on, "it has a couple of fins as well, like that eel beast I caught in the Nile. One of them is that the Captain promised and vowed to go through with this expedition, and if a man's got to die, he'd better die honest without breaking his word. And the other is what I said to you in London when I signed on, that he won't die a minute before his time, and nothing won't happen to him, but what's bound

to happen, and therefore it ain't a ha'porth of use bothering about anything, and that's where the East's well ahead of the West.

"And now, sir, I'll go and look after the camels and those half-bred Jew boys what you call Abati, but I call rotten sneaks, for if they get their thieving fingers into those canisters of picric salts, thinking they're jam, as I found them trying to do yesterday, something may happen in Egypt that'll make the Pharaohs turn in their graves and the Ten Plagues look silly."

So, having finished his oration, Quick went, and in due course we started for Mur.

The second incident that is perhaps worth recording was an adventure that happened to us when we had completed about two of our four months' journey.

After weeks of weary desert travel--if I remember right, it was exactly a fortnight after the dog Pharaoh, of which I shall soon have plenty to say, had come into Orme's possession--we reached an oasis called Zeu, where I had halted upon my road down to Egypt. In this oasis, which, although not large in extent, possesses springs of beautiful water and groves of date-trees, we were, as it chanced, very welcome, since when I was there before, I had been fortunate enough to cure its sheik of an attack of ophthalmia and to doctor several of his people for various ailments with good results. So, although I was burning to get forward, I

agreed with the others that it would be wise to accede to the request of the leader of our caravan, a clever and resourceful, but to my mind untrustworthy Abati of the name of Shadrach, and camp in Zeu for a week or so to rest and feed our camels, which had wasted almost to nothing on the scant herbage of the desert.

This Shadrach, I may add here, whom his companions, for some reason unknown to me at that time, called the Cat, was remarkable for a triple line of scars upon his face, which, he informed me, had been set there by the claws of a lion. Now the great enemies of this people of Zeu were lions, which at certain seasons of the year, I suppose when food grew scarce, descended from the slopes of a range of hills that stretched east and west at a distance of about fifty miles north of the oasis, and, crossing the intervening desert, killed many of the Zeu sheep, camels, and other cattle, and often enough any of the tribe whom they could catch. As these poor Zeu practically possessed no firearms, they were at the mercy of the lions, which grew correspondingly bold. Indeed, their only resource was to kraal their animals within stone walls at night and take refuge in their huts, which they seldom left between sunset and dawn, except to replenish the fires that they lit to scare any beast of prey which might be prowling through the town.

Though the lion season was now in full swing, as it happened, for the first five days of our stay at Zeu we saw none of these great cats, although in the darkness we heard them roaring in the distance. On the sixth night, however, we were awakened by a sound of wailing, which came

from the village about a quarter of a mile away, and when we went out at dawn to see what was the matter, were met by a melancholy procession advancing from its walls. At the head of it marched the grey-haired old chief, followed by a number of screaming women, who in their excitement, or perhaps as a sign of mourning, had omitted to make their toilette, and by four men, who carried something horrid on a wickerwork door.

Soon we learned what had happened. It seemed that hungry lions, two or three of them, had broken through the palm-leaf roof of the hut of one of the sheik's wives, she whose remains were stretched upon the door, and, in addition to killing her, had actually carried off his son.

Now he came to implore us white men who had guns to revenge him on the lions, which otherwise, having once tasted human flesh, would destroy many more of his people.

Through an interpreter who knew Arabic, for not even Higgs could understand the peculiar Zeu dialect, he explained in excited and incoherent words that the beasts lay up among the sand-hills not very far away, where some thick reeds grew around a little spring of water. Would we not come out and kill them and earn the blessing of the Zeus?

Now I said nothing, for the simple reason that, having such big matters on hand, although I was always fond of sport, I did not wish any of us to be led off after these lions. There is a time to hunt and a time to cease from hunting, and it seemed to me, except for the purposes of food, that this journey of ours was the latter. However, as I expected,

Oliver Orme literally leaped at the idea. So did Higgs, who of late had been practising with a rifle and began to fancy himself a shot. He exclaimed loudly that nothing would give him greater pleasure, especially as he was sure that lions were in fact cowardly and overrated beasts.

From that moment I foreboded disaster in my heart. Still, I said I would come too, partly because I had not shot a lion for many a day and had a score to settle with those beasts which, it may be remembered, nearly killed me on the Mountain of Mur, and partly because, knowing the desert and also the Zeu people much better than either the Professor or Orme, I thought that I might possibly be of service.

So we fetched our rifles and cartridges, to which by an afterthought we added two large water-bottles, and ate a hearty breakfast. As we were preparing to start, Shadrach, the leader of the Abati camel-drivers, that man with the scarred face who was nicknamed the Cat, came up to me and asked me whither we were going. I told him, whereon he said:

"What have you to do with these savages and their troubles, lords? If a few of them are killed it is no matter, but as you should know, O Doctor, if you wish to hunt lions there are plenty in that land whither you travel, seeing that the lion is the fetish of the Fung and therefore never killed. But the desert about Zeu is dangerous and harm may come to you."

"Then accompany us," broke in the Professor, between whom and Shadrach there was no love lost, "for, of course, with you we should be quite safe."

"Not so," he replied, "I and my people rest; only madmen would go to hunt worthless wild beasts when they might rest. Have we not enough of the desert and its dangers as it is? If you knew all that I do of lions you would leave them alone."

"Of the desert we have plenty also, but of shooting very little," remarked the Captain, who talked Arabic well. "Lie in your beds; we go to kill the beasts that harass the poor people who have treated us so kindly."

"So be it," said Shadrach with a smile that struck me as malicious. "A lion made this"--pointing to the dreadful threefold scar upon his face. "May the God of Israel protect you from lions. Remember, lords, that, the camels being fresh again, we march the day after to-morrow, should the weather hold, for if the wind blows on yonder sand-hills, no man may live among them;" and, putting up his hand, he studied the sky carefully from beneath its shadow, then, with a grunt, turned and vanished behind a hut.

All this while Sergeant Quick was engaged at a little distance in washing up the tin breakfast things, to all appearance quite unconscious of what was going on. Orme called him, whereupon he advanced and

stood to attention. I remember thinking how curious he looked in those surroundings--his tall, bony frame clothed in semi-military garments, his wooden face perfectly shaved, his iron-grey hair neatly parted and plastered down upon his head with pomade or some equivalent after the old private soldier fashion, and his sharp ferret-like grey eyes taking in everything.

"Are you coming with us, Sergeant?" asked Orme.

"Not unless ordered so to do, Captain. I like a bit of hunting well enough, but, with all three officers away, some one should mount guard over the stores and transport, so I think the dog Pharaoh and I had best stop behind."

"Perhaps you are right, Sergeant, only tie Pharaoh up, or he'll follow me. Well, what do you want to say? Out with it."

"Only this, Captain. Although I have served in three campaigns among these here Arabians (to Quick, all African natives north of the Equator were Arabians, and all south of it, niggers), I can't say I talk their lingo well. Still, I made out that the fellow they call Cat don't like this trip of yours, and, begging your pardon, Captain, whatever else Cat may be, he ain't no fool."

"Can't help it, Sergeant. For one thing, it would never do to give in to his fancies now."

"That's true, Captain. When once it's hoist, right or wrong, keep the flag flying, and no doubt you'll come back safe and sound if you're meant to."

Then, having relieved his mind, the Sergeant ran his eye over our equipment to see that nothing had been forgotten, rapidly assured himself that the rifles were in working order, reported all well, and returned to his dishes. Little did any of us guess under what circumstances we should next meet with him.

After leaving the town and marching for a mile or so along the oasis, accompanied by a mob of the Zeus armed with spears and bows, we were led by the bereaved chief, who also acted as tracker, out into the surrounding sands. The desert here, although I remembered it well enough, was different from any that we had yet encountered upon this journey, being composed of huge and abrupt sand-hills, some of which were quite three hundred feet high, separated from each other by deep, wind-cut valleys.

For a distance, while they were within reach of the moist air of the oasis, these sand-mountains produced vegetation of various sorts. Presently, however, we passed out into the wilderness proper, and for a while climbed up and down the steep, shifting slopes, till from the crest of one of them the chief pointed out what in South Africa is called a pan, or vlei, covered with green reeds, and explained by

signs that in these lay the lions. Descending a steep declivity, we posted ourselves, I at the top, and Higgs and Orme a little way down either side of this vlei. This done, we dispatched the Zeus to beat it out towards us, for although the reeds grew thick along the course of the underground water, it was but a narrow place, and not more than a quarter of a mile in length.

Scarcely had the beaters entered the tall reeds, evidently with trepidation, for a good many of them held back from the adventure, when a sound of loud wailing informed us that something had happened. A minute or two later we saw two of them bearing away what appeared to be the mangled remains of the chief's son who had been carried off on the previous night.

Just then, too, we saw something else, for half-way down the marsh a great male lion broke cover, and began to steal off toward the sand-hills. It was about two hundred yards from Higgs, who chanced to be nearest to it, and, therefore, as any big-game hunter will know, for practical purposes, far out of shot. But the Professor, who was quite unaccustomed to this, or, indeed, any kind of sport, and, like all beginners, wildly anxious for blood, lifted his rifle and fired, as he might have done at a rabbit. By some marvellous accident the aim was good, and the bullet from the express, striking the lion fair behind the shoulder, passed through its heart, and knocked it over dead as a stone.

"By Jingo! Did you see that?" screamed Higgs in his delight. Then,

without even stopping to reload the empty barrel, he set off at the top of his speed toward the prostrate beast, followed by myself and by Orme, as fast as our astonishment would allow.

Running along the edge of the marsh, Higgs had covered about a hundred yards of the distance, when suddenly, charging straight at him out of the tall reeds, appeared a second lion, or rather lioness. Higgs wheeled round, and wildly fired the left barrel of his rifle without touching the infuriated brute. Next instant, to our horror, we saw him upon his back, with the lioness standing over him, lashing her tail, and growling.

We shouted as we ran, and so did the Zeus, although they made no attempt at rescue, with the result that the lioness, instead of tearing Higgs to pieces, turned her head confusedly first to one side and then to the other. By now I, who had a long start of Orme, was quite close, say within thirty yards, though fire I dared not as yet, fearing lest, should I do so, I might kill my friend. At this moment the lioness, recovering her nerves, squatted down on the prostrate Higgs, and though he hit at her with his fists, dropped her muzzle, evidently with the intention of biting him through the head.

Now I felt that if I hesitated any more, all would be finished. The lioness was much longer than Higgs--a short, stout man--and her hind quarters projected beyond his feet. At these I aimed rapidly, and, pressing the trigger, next second heard the bullet clap upon the great

beast's hide. Up she sprang with a roar, one hind leg dangling, and after a moment's hesitation, fled toward the sand-hill.

Now Orme, who was behind me, fired also, knocking up the dust beneath the lioness's belly, but although he had more cartridges in his rifle, which was a repeater, before either he or I could get another chance, it vanished behind a mound. Leaving it to go where it would, we ran on towards Higgs, expecting to find him either dead or badly mauled, but, to our amazement and delight, up jumped the Professor, his blue spectacles still on his nose, and, loading his rifle as he went, charged away after the wounded lioness.

"Come back," shouted the Captain as he followed.

"Not for Joe!" yelled Higgs in his high voice. "If you fellows think that I'm going to let a great cat sit on my stomach for nothing, you are jolly well mistaken."

At the top of the first rise the long-legged Orme caught him, but persuade him to return was more than he, or I when I arrived, could do. Beyond a scratch on his nose, which had stung him and covered him with blood, we found that he was quite uninjured, except in temper and dignity. But in vain did we beg him to be content with his luck and the honours he had won.

"Why?" he answered, "Adams wounded the beast, and I'd rather kill two

lions than one; also I have a score to square. But if you fellows are afraid, you go home."

Well, I confess I felt inclined to accept the invitation, but Orme, who was nettled, replied:

"Come, come; that settles the question, doesn't it? You must be shaken by your fall, or you would not talk like that, Higgs. Look, here runs the spoor--see the blood? Well, let's go steady and keep our wind. We may come on her anywhere, but don't you try any more long distance shots. You won't kill another lion at two hundred and fifty yards."

"All right," said Higgs, "don't be offended. I didn't mean anything, except that I am going to teach that beast the difference between a white man and a Zeu."

Then we began our march, following the blood tracks up and down the steep sand-slopes. When we had been at it for about half-an-hour our spirits were cheered by catching sight of the lioness on a ridge five hundred yards away. Just then, too, some of the Zeus overtook us and joined the hunt, though without zeal.

Meanwhile, as the day grew, the heat increased until it was so intense that the hot air danced above the sand slopes like billions of midges, and this although the sun was not visible, being hidden by a sort of mist. A strange silence, unusual even in the desert, pervaded the earth

and sky; we could hear the grains of sand trickling from the ridges.

The Zeus, who accompanied us, grew uneasy, and pointed upward with their spears, then behind toward the oasis of which we had long lost sight.

Finally, when we were not looking, they disappeared.

Now I would have followed them, guessing that they had some good reason for this sudden departure. But Higgs refused to come, and Orme, in whom his foolish taunt seemed still to rankle, only shrugged his shoulders and said nothing.

"Let the black curs go," exclaimed the Professor as he polished his blue spectacles and mopped his face. "They are a white-livered lot of sneaks. Look! There she is, creeping off to the left. If we run round that sand-hill we shall meet her."

So we ran round the sand-hill, but we did not meet her, although after long hunting we struck the blood spoor afresh, and followed it for several miles, first in this direction, and then in that, until Orme and I wondered at Higgs's obstinacy and endurance. At length, when even he was beginning to despair, we put up the lioness in a hollow, and fired several shots at her as she hobbled over the opposing slope, one of which hit her, for she rolled over, then picked herself up again, roaring. As a matter of fact, it came from the Captain's rifle, but Higgs, who, like many an inexperienced person was a jealous sportsman, declared that it was his and we did not think it worth while to contradict him.

On we toiled, and, just beyond the ridge, walked straight into the lioness, sitting up like a great dog, so injured that she could do nothing but snarl hideously and paw at the air.

"Now it is my turn, old lady," ejaculated Higgs, and straightway missed her clean from a distance of five yards. A second shot was more successful, and she rolled over, dead.

"Come on," said the exultant Professor, "and we'll skin her. She sat on me, and I mean to sit on her for many a day."

So we began the job, although I, who had large experience of this desert, and did not like the appearance of the weather, wished to leave the beast where it lay and get back to the oasis. It proved long, for I was the only one of us who had any practical knowledge of flaying animals, and in that heat extremely unpleasant.

At length it was done, and, having doubled the hide over a rifle for two of us to carry in turns, we refreshed ourselves from the water-bottles (I even caught the Professor washing the blood off his face and hands with some of the precious fluid). Then we started for the oasis, only to discover, though we were all sure that we knew the way, that not one of us had a slightest idea of its real direction. In the hurry of our departure we had forgotten to bring a compass, and the sun, that would have been our guide in ordinary circumstances, and to which we always

trusted in the open desert, was hidden by the curious haze that has been described.

So, sensibly enough, we determined to return to the sand crest where we had killed the lioness, and then trace our own footprints backward. This seemed simple enough, for there, within half-a-mile, rose the identical ridge.

We reached it, grumbling, for the lion-skin was heavy, only to discover that it was a totally different ridge. Now, after reflection and argument, we saw our exact mistake, and made for what was obviously the real ridge--with the same result.

We were lost in the desert!