

CHAPTER V

PHARAOH MAKES TROUBLE

Another six weeks or so had gone by, and at length the character of the country began to change. At last we were passing out of the endless desert over which we had travelled for so many hundreds of miles; at least a thousand, according to our observations and reckonings, which I checked by those that I had taken upon my eastward journey. Our march, after the great adventure at the oasis, was singularly devoid of startling events. Indeed, it had been awful in its monotony, and yet, oddly enough, not without a certain charm--at any rate for Higgs and Orme, to whom the experience was new.

Day by day to travel on across an endless sea of sand so remote, so unvisited that for whole weeks no man, not even a wandering Bedouin of the desert, crossed our path. Day by day to see the great red sun rise out of the eastern sands, and, its journey finished, sink into the western sands. Night by night to watch the moon, the same moon on which were fixed the million eyes of cities, turning those sands to a silver sea, or, in that pure air, to observe the constellations by which we steered our path making their majestic march through space. And yet to know that this vast region, now so utterly lonesome and desolate, had once been familiar to the feet of long-forgotten men who had trod the sands we walked, and dug the wells at which we drank.

Armies had marched across these deserts, also, and perished there. For once we came to a place where a recent fearful gale had almost denuded the underlying rock, and there found the skeletons of thousands upon thousands of soldiers, with those of their beasts of burden, and among them heads of arrows, sword-blades, fragments of armour and of painted wooden shields.

Here a whole host had died; perhaps Alexander sent it forth, or perhaps some far earlier monarch whose name has ceased to echo on the earth. At least they had died, for there we saw the memorial of that buried enterprise. There lay the kings, the captains, the soldiers, and the concubines, for I found the female bones heaped apart, some with the long hair still upon the skulls, showing where the poor, affrighted women had hived together in the last catastrophe of slaughter or of famine, thirst, and driven sand. Oh, if only those bones could speak, what a tale was theirs to tell!

There had been cities in this desert, too, where once were oases, now overwhelmed, except perhaps for a sand-choked spring. Twice we came upon the foundations of such places, old walls of clay or stone, stark skeletons of ancient homes that the shifting sands had disinterred, which once had been the theatre of human hopes and fears, where once men had been born, loved, and died, where once maidens had been fair, and good and evil wrestled, and little children played. Some Job may have dwelt here and written his immortal plaint, or some king of Sodom, and suffered the uttermost calamity. The world is very old; all we Westerns

learned from the contemplation of these wrecks of men and of their works was just that the world is very old.

One evening against the clear sky there appeared the dim outline of towering cliffs, shaped like a horseshoe. They were the Mountains of Mur many miles away, but still the Mountains of Mur, sighted at last. Next morning we began to descend through wooded land toward a wide river that is, I believe, a tributary of the Nile, though upon this point I have no certain information. Three days later we reached the banks of this river, following some old road, and faring sumptuously all the way, since here there was much game and grass in plenty for the camels that, after their long abstinence, ate until we thought that they would burst. Evidently we had not arrived an hour too soon, for now the Mountains of Mur were hid by clouds, and we could see that it was raining upon the plains which lay between us and them. The wet season was setting in, and, had we been a single week later, it might have been impossible for us to cross the river, which would then have been in flood. As it was, we passed it without difficulty by the ancient ford, the water never rising above the knees of our camels.

Upon its further bank we took counsel, for now we had entered the territory of the Fung, and were face to face with the real dangers of our journey. Fifty miles or so away rose the fortress of Mur, but, as I explained to my companions, the question was how to pass those fifty

miles in safety. Shadrach was called to our conference, and at my request set out the facts.

Yonder, he said, rose the impregnable mountain home of the Abati, but all the vast plain included in the loop of the river which he called Ebur, was the home of the savage Fung race, whose warriors could be counted by the ten thousand, and whose principal city, Harmac, was built opposite to the stone effigy of their idol, that was also called Harmac----

"Harmac--that is Harmachis, god of dawn. Your Fung had something to do with the old Egyptians, or both of them came from a common stock," interrupted Higgs triumphantly.

"I daresay, old fellow," answered Orme; "I think you told us that before in London; but we will go into the archæology afterwards if we survive to do so. Let Shadrach get on with his tale."

This city, which had quite fifty thousand inhabitants, continued Shadrach, commanded the mouth of the pass or cleft by which we must approach Mur, having probably been first built there for that very purpose.

Orme asked if there was no other way into the stronghold, which, he understood, the embassy had left by being let down a precipice. Shadrach answered that this was true, but that although the camels and their

loads had been let down that precipitous place, owing to the formation of its overhanging rocks, it would be perfectly impossible to haul them up it with any tackle that the Abati possessed.

He asked again if there was not a way round, if that circle of mountains had no back door. Shadrach replied that there was such a back door facing to the north some eight days' journey away. Only at this season of the year it could not be reached, since beyond the Mountains of Mur in that direction was a great lake, out of which flowed the river Ebur in two arms that enclosed the whole plain of Fung. By now this lake would be full, swollen with rains that fell on the hills of Northern Africa, and the space between it and the Mur range nothing but an impassable swamp.

Being still unsatisfied, Orme inquired whether, if we abandoned the camels, we could not then climb the precipice down which the embassy had descended. To this the answer, which I corroborated, was that if our approach were known and help given to us from above, it might be possible, provided that we threw away the loads.

"Seeing what these loads are, and the purpose for which we have brought them so far, that is out of the question," said Orme. "Therefore, tell us at once, Shadrach, how we are to win through the Fung to Mur."

"In one way only, O son of Orme, should it be the will of God that we do so at all; by keeping ourselves hidden during the daytime and marching

at night. According to their custom at this season, to-morrow, after sunset, the Fung hold their great spring feast in the city of Harmac, and at dawn go up to make sacrifice to their idol. But after sunset they eat and drink and are merry, and then it is their habit to withdraw their guards, that they may take part in the festival. For this reason I have timed our march that we should arrive on the night of this feast, which I know by the age of the moon, when, in the darkness, with God's help, perchance we may slip past Harmac, and at the first light find ourselves in the mouth of the road that runs up to Mur. Moreover, I will give warning to my people, the Abati, that we are coming, so that they may be at hand to help us if there is need."

"How?" asked Orme.

"By firing the reeds"--and he pointed to the dense masses of dead vegetation about--"as I arranged that I would do before we left Mur many months ago. The Fung, if they see it, will think only that it is the work of some wandering fisherman."

Orme shrugged his shoulders, saying:

"Well, friend Shadrach, you know the place and these people, and I do not, so we must do what you tell us. But I say at once that if, as I understand, yonder Fung will kill us if they can, to me your plan seems very dangerous."

"It is dangerous," he answered, adding with a sneer, "but I thought that you men of England were not cowards."

"Cowards! you son of a dog!" broke in Higgs in his high voice. "How dare you talk to us like that? You see this man here"--and he pointed to Sergeant Quick, who, tall and upright, stood watching this scene grimly, and understanding most of what passed--"well, he is the lowest among us--a servant only" (here the Sergeant saluted), "but I tell you that there is more courage in his little finger than in your whole body, or in that of all the Abati people, so far as I can make out."

Here the Sergeant saluted again, murmuring beneath his breath, "I hope so, sir. Being a Christian, I hope so, but till it comes to the sticking-point, one can never be sure."

"You speak big words, O Higgs," answered Shadrach insolently, for, as I think I have said, he hated the Professor, who smelt the rogue in him, and scourged him continually with his sharp tongue, "but if the Fung get hold of you, then we shall learn the truth."

"Shall I punch his head, sir?" queried Quick in a meditative voice.

"Be quiet, please," interrupted Orme. "We have troubles enough before us, without making more. It will be time to settle our quarrels when we have got through the Fung."

Then he turned to Shadrach and said:

"Friend, this is no time for angry words. You are the guide of this party; lead us as you will, remembering only that if it comes to war, I, by the wish of my companions, am Captain. Also, there is another thing which you should not forget--namely, that in the end you must make answer to your own ruler, she who, I understand from the doctor here, is called Walda Nagasta, the Child of Kings. Now, no more words; we march as you wish and where you wish. On your head be it!"

The Abati heard and bowed sullenly. Then, with a look of hate at Higgs, he turned and went about his business.

"Much better to have let me punch his head," soliloquized Quick. "It would have done him a world of good, and perhaps saved many troubles, for, to tell the truth, I don't trust that quarter-bred Hebrew."

Then he departed to see to the camels and the guns while the rest of us went to our tents to get such sleep as the mosquitoes would allow. In my own case it was not much, since the fear of evil to come weighed upon me. Although I knew the enormous difficulty of entering the mountain stronghold of Mur by any other way, such as that by which I had quitted it, burdened as we were with our long train of camels laden with rifles, ammunition, and explosives, I dreaded the results of an attempt to pass through the Fung savages.

Moreover, it occurred to me that Shadrach had insisted upon this route from a kind of jealous obstinacy, and to be in opposition to us Englishmen, whom he hated in his heart, or perhaps for some dark and secret reason. Still, the fact remained that we were in his power, since owing to the circumstances in which I had entered and left the place, it was impossible for me to act as guide to the party. If I attempted to do so, no doubt he and the Abati with him would desert, leaving the camels and their loads upon our hands. Why should they not, seeing that they would be quite safe in concluding that we should never have an opportunity of laying our side of the case before their ruler?

Just as the sun was setting, Quick came to call me, saying that the camels were being loaded up.

"I don't much like the look of things, Doctor," he said as he helped me to pack my few belongings, "for the fact is I can't trust that Shadrach man. His pals call him 'Cat,' a good name for him, I think. Also, he is showing his claws just now, the truth being that he hates the lot of us, and would like to get back into Purr or Mur, or whatever the name of the place is, having lost us on the road. You should have seen the way he looked at the Professor just now. Oh! I wish the Captain had let me punch his head. I'm sure it would have cleared the air a lot."

As it chanced, Shadrach was destined to get his head "punched" after all, but by another hand. It happened thus. The reeds were fired, as Shadrach had declared it was necessary to do, in order that the Abati

watchmen on the distant mountains might see and report the signal, although in the light of subsequent events I am by no means certain that this warning was not meant for other eyes as well. Then, as arranged, we started out, leaving them burning in a great sheet of flame behind us, and all that night marched by the shine of the stars along some broken-down and undoubtedly ancient road.

At the first sign of dawn we left this road and camped amid the overgrown ruins of a deserted town that had been built almost beneath the precipitous cliffs of Mur, fortunately without having met any one or being challenged. I took the first watch, while the others turned in to sleep after we had all breakfasted off cold meats, for here we dared not light a fire. As the sun grew high, dispelling the mists, I saw that we were entering upon a thickly-populated country which was no stranger to civilization of a sort. Below us, not more than fifteen or sixteen miles away, and clearly visible through my field-glasses, lay the great town of Harmac, which, during my previous visit to this land, I had never seen, as I passed it in the night.

It was a city of the West Central African type, with open market-places and wide streets, containing thousands of white, flat-roofed houses, the most important of which were surrounded by gardens. Round it ran a high and thick wall, built, apparently, of sun-burnt brick, and in front of the gateways, of which I could see two, stood square towers whence these might be protected. All about this city the flat and fertile land was under cultivation, for the season being that of early spring, already

the maize and other crops showed green upon the ground.

Beyond this belt of plough-lands, with the aid of the field-glasses, I could make out great herds of grazing cattle and horses, mixed with wild game, a fact that assured me of the truth of what I had heard during my brief visit to Mur, that the Fung had few or no firearms, since otherwise the buck and quagga would have kept at a distance. Far off, too, and even on the horizon, I saw what appeared to be other towns and villages. Evidently this was a very numerous people, and one which could not justly be described as savage. No wonder that the little Abati tribe feared them so intensely, notwithstanding the mighty precipices by which they were protected from their hate.

About eleven o'clock Orme came on watch, and I turned in, having nothing to report. Soon I was fast asleep, notwithstanding the anxieties that, had I been less weary, might well have kept me wakeful. For these were many. On the coming night we must slip through the Fung, and before midday on the morrow we should either have entered Mur, or failed to have entered Mur, which meant--death, or, what was worse, captivity among barbarians, and subsequent execution, preceded probably by torture of one sort or another.

Of course, however, we might come thither without accident, travelling with good guides on a dark night, for, after all, the place was big, and the road lonely and little used, so that unless we met a watch, which, we were told, would not be there, our little caravan had a good chance

to pass unobserved. Shadrach seemed to think that we should do so, but the worst of it was that, like Quick, I did not trust Shadrach. Even Maqueda, the Lady of the Abati, she whom they called Child of Kings, had her doubts about him, or so it had seemed to me.

At any rate, she had told me before I left Mur that she chose him for this mission because he was bold and cunning, one of the very few of her people also who, in his youth, had crossed the desert and, therefore, knew the road. "Yet, Physician," she added meaningly, "watch him, for is he not named 'Cat'? Yes, watch him, for did I not hold his wife and children hostages, and were I not sure that he desires to win the great reward in land which I have promised to him, I would not trust you to this man's keeping."

Well, after many experiences in his company, my opinion coincided with Maqueda's, and so did that of Quick, no mean judge of men.

"Look at him, Doctor," he said when he came to tell me that I could turn in, for whether it were his watch or not, the Sergeant never seemed to be off duty. "Look, at him," and he pointed to Shadrach, who was seated under the shade of a tree, talking earnestly in whispers with two of his subordinates with a very curious and unpleasing smile upon his face. "If God Almighty ever made a scamp, he's squatting yonder. My belief is that he wanted to be rid of us all at Zeu, so that he might steal our goods, and I hope he won't play the same trick again to-night. Even the dog can't abide him."

Before I could answer, I had proof of this last statement, for the great yellow hound, Pharaoh, that had found us in the desert, hearing our voices, emerged from some corner where it was hidden, and advanced toward us, wagging its tail. As it passed Shadrach, it stopped and growled, the hair rising on its back, whereon he hurled a stone at it and hit its leg. Next instant Pharaoh, a beast of enormous power, was on the top of him, and really, I thought, about to tear out his throat.

Well, we got him off before any harm was done, but Shadrach's face, lined with its livid scars, was a thing to remember. Between rage and fear, it looked like that of a devil.

To return. After this business I went to sleep, wondering if it were my last rest upon the earth, and whether, having endured so much for his sake, it would or would not be my fortune to see the face of my son again, if, indeed, he still lived, yonder not a score of miles away--or anywhere.

Toward evening I was awakened by a fearful hubbub, in which I distinguished the shrill voice of Higgs ejaculating language which I will not repeat, the baying of Pharaoh, and the smothered groans and curses of an Abati. Running from the little tent, I saw a curious sight, that of the Professor with Shadrach's head under his left arm, in chancery, as we used to call it at school, while with his right he punched the said Shadrach's nose and countenance generally with all his

strength, which, I may add, is considerable. Close by, holding Pharaoh by the collar, which we had manufactured for him out of the skin of a camel that had died, stood Sergeant Quick, a look of grim amusement on his wooden face, while around, gesticulating after their Eastern fashion, and uttering guttural sounds of wrath, were several of the Abati drivers. Orme was absent, being, in fact, asleep at the time.

"What are you doing, Higgs?" I shouted.

"Can't--you--see," he spluttered, accompanying each word with a blow on the unfortunate Shadrach's prominent nose. "I am punching this fellow's beastly head. Ah! you'd bite, would you? Then take that, and that and--that. Lord, how hard his teeth are. Well, I think he has had enough," and suddenly he released the Abati, who, a gory and most unpleasant spectacle, fell to the ground and lay there panting. His companions, seeing their chief's melancholy plight, advanced upon the Professor in a threatening fashion; indeed, one of them drew a knife.

"Put up that thing, sonny," said the Sergeant, "or by heaven, I'll loose the dog upon you. Got your revolver handy, Doctor?"

Evidently, if the man did not understand Quick's words, their purport was clear to him, for he sheathed his knife and fell back with the others. Shadrach, too, rose from the ground and went with them. At a distance of a few yards, however, he turned, and, glaring at Higgs out of his swollen eyes, said:

"Be sure, accursed Gentile, that I will remember and repay."

At this moment, too, Orme arrived upon the scene, yawning.

"What the deuce is the matter?" he asked.

"I'd give five bob for a pint of iced stone ginger," replied Higgs inconsequently. Then he drank off a pannikin of warmish, muddy-coloured water which Quick gave to him, and handed it back, saying:

"Thanks, Sergeant; that's better than nothing, and cold drink is always dangerous if you are hot. What's the matter? Oh! not much. Shadrach tried to poison Pharaoh; that's all. I was watching him out of the corner of my eye, and saw him go to the strychnine tin, roll a bit of meat in it which he had first wetted, and throw it to the poor beast. I got hold of it in time, and chucked it over that wall, where you will find it if you care to look. I asked Shadrach why he had done such a thing. He answered, 'To keep the dog quiet while we are passing through the Fung,' adding that anyhow it was a savage beast and best out of the way, as it had tried to bite him that morning. Then I lost my temper and went for the blackguard, and although I gave up boxing twenty years ago, very soon had the best of it, for, as you may have observed, no Oriental can fight with his fists. That's all. Give me another cup of water, Sergeant."

"I hope it may be," answered Orme, shrugging his shoulders. "To tell the truth, old fellow, it would have been wiser to defer blacking Shadrach's eyes till we were safe in Mur. But it's no use talking now, and I daresay I should have done the same myself if I had seen him try to poison Pharaoh," and he patted the head of the great dog, of which we were all exceedingly fond, although in reality it only cared for Orme, merely tolerating the rest of us.

"Doctor," he added, "perhaps you would try to patch up our guide's nose and soothe his feelings. You know him better than we do. Give him a rifle. No, don't do that, or he might shoot some one in the back--by accident done on purpose. Promise him a rifle when we get into Mur; I know he wants one badly, because I caught him trying to steal a carbine from the case. Promise him anything so long as you can square it up."

So I went, taking a bottle of arnica and some court plaster with me, to find Shadrach surrounded by sympathizers and weeping with rage over the insult, which, he said, had been offered to his ancient and distinguished race in his own unworthy person. I did my best for him physically and mentally, pointing out, as I dabbed the arnica on his sadly disfigured countenance, that he had brought the trouble on himself, seeing that he had really no business to poison Pharaoh because he had tried to bite him. He answered that his reason for wishing to kill the dog was quite different, and repeated at great length what he had told the Professor--namely, that it might betray us while we were passing through the Fung. Also he went on so venomously about revenge

that I thought it time to put a stop to the thing.

"See here, Shadrach," I said, "unless you unsay those words and make peace at once, you shall be bound and tried. Perhaps we shall have a better chance of passing safely through the Fung if we leave you dead behind us than if you accompany us as a living enemy."

On hearing this, he changed his note altogether, saying that he saw he had been wrong. Moreover, so soon as his injuries were dressed, he sought out Higgs, whose hand he kissed with many apologies, vowing that he had forgotten everything and that his heart toward him was like that of a twin brother.

"Very good, friend," answered Higgs, who never bore malice, "only don't try to poison Pharaoh again, and, for my part, I'll promise not to remember this matter when we get to Mur."

"Quite a converted character, ain't he, Doctor?" sarcastically remarked Quick, who had been watching this edifying scene. "Nasty Eastern temper all gone; no Hebrew talk of eye for eye or tooth for tooth, but kisses the fist that smote him in the best Christian spirit. All the same, I wouldn't trust the swine further than I could kick him, especially in the dark, which," he added meaningly, "is what it will be to-night."

I made no answer to the Sergeant, for although I agreed with him, there was nothing to be done, and talking about a bad business would only make

it worse.

By now the afternoon drew towards night--a very stormy night, to judge from the gathering clouds and rising wind. We were to start a little after sundown, that is, within an hour, and, having made ready my own baggage and assisted Higgs with his, we went to look for Orme and Quick, whom we found very busy in one of the rooms of an unroofed house. To all appearance they were engaged, Quick in sorting pound tins of tobacco or baking-powder, and Orme in testing an electric battery and carefully examining coils of insulated wire.

"What's your game?" asked the Professor.

"Better than yours, old boy, when Satan taught your idle hands to punch Shadrach's head. But perhaps you had better put that pipe out. These azo-imide compounds are said to burn rather more safely than coal. Still, one never knows; the climate or the journey may have changed their constitution."

Higgs retreated hurriedly, to a distance of fifty yards indeed, whence he returned, having knocked out his pipe and even left his matches on a stone.

"Don't waste time in asking questions," said Orme as the Professor approached with caution. "I'll explain. We are going on a queer journey to-night--four white men with about a dozen half-bred mongrel scamps of

doubtful loyalty, so you see Quick and I thought it as well to have some of this stuff handy. Probably it will never be wanted, and if wanted we shall have no time to use it; still, who knows? There, that will do. Ten canisters; enough to blow up half the Fung if they will kindly sit on them. You take five, Quick, a battery and three hundred yards of wire, and I'll take five, a battery, and three hundred yards of wire. Your detonators are all fixed, aren't they? Well, so are mine," and without more words he proceeded to stow away his share of the apparatus in the poacher pockets of his coat and elsewhere, while Quick did likewise with what remained. Then the case that they had opened was fastened up again and removed to be laden on a camel.