

CHAPTER VI

HOW WE ESCAPED FROM HARMAC

As finally arranged this was the order of our march: First went an Abati guide who was said to be conversant with every inch of the way. Then came Orme and Sergeant Quick, conducting the camels that were loaded with the explosives. I followed in order to keep an eye upon these precious beasts and those in charge of them. Next marched some more camels, carrying our baggage, provisions, and sundries, and finally in the rear were the Professor and Shadrach with two Abati.

Shadrach, I should explain, had selected this situation for the reason, as he said, that if he went first, after what had passed, any mistake or untoward occurrence might be set down to his malice, whereas, if he were behind, he could not be thus slandered. On hearing this, Higgs, who is a generous soul, insisted upon showing his confidence in the virtue of Shadrach by accompanying him as a rearguard. So violently did he insist, and so flattered did Shadrach seem to be by this mark of faith, that Orme, who, I should say, if I have not already done so, was in sole command of the party now that hostilities were in the air, consented to the plan, if with evident reluctance.

As I know, his own view was that it would be best for us four Englishmen to remain together, although, if we did so, whatever position we chose, it would be impossible for us in that darkness to keep touch with the

line of camels and their loads, which were almost as important to us as our lives. At least, having made up our minds to deliver them in Mur, we thought that they were important, perhaps because it is the fashion of the Anglo-Saxon race to put even a self-created idea of duty before personal safety or convenience.

Rightly or wrongly, so things were settled, for in such troublous conditions one can only do what seems best at the moment. Criticism subsequent to the event is always easy, as many an unlucky commander has found out when the issue went awry, but in emergency one must decide on something.

The sun set, the darkness fell, and it began to rain and blow. We started quite unobserved, so far as we could tell, and, travelling downward from the overgrown, ruined town, gained the old road, and in complete silence, for the feet of camels make no noise, passed along it toward the lights of Harmac, which now and again, when the storm-clouds lifted, we saw glimmering in front of us and somewhat to our left.

In all my long wanderings I cannot remember a more exciting or a more disagreeable journey. The blackness, relieved only from time to time by distant lightnings, was that of the plagues of Egypt; the driving rain worked through the openings of our camel-hair cloaks and the waterproofs we wore underneath them, and wet us through. The cold, damp wind chilled us to the bone, enervated as we were with the heat of the desert.

But these discomforts, and they were serious enough, we forgot in the

tremendous issue of the enterprise. Should we win through to Mur? Or, as a crown to our many labours and sufferings, should we perish presently on the road? That was the question; as I can assure the reader, one that we found very urgent and interesting.

Three hours had gone by. Now we were opposite to the lights of Harmac, also to other lights that shone up a valley in the mountain to our right. As yet everything was well; for this we knew by the words whispered up and down the line.

Then of a sudden, in front of us a light flashed, although as yet it was a long way off. Next came another whispered message of "Halt!" So we halted, and presently one of the front guides crept back, informing us that a body of Fung cavalry had appeared upon the road ahead. We took counsel. Shadrach arrived from the rear, and said that if we waited awhile they might go away, as he thought that their presence must be accidental and connected with the great festival. He implored us to be quite silent. Accordingly, not knowing what to do, we waited.

Now I think I have forgotten to say that the dog Pharaoh, to prevent accidents, occupied a big basket; this basket, in which he often rode when tired, being fixed upon one side of Orme's camel. Here he lay peaceably enough until, in an unlucky moment, Shadrach left me to go forward to talk to the Captain, whereon, smelling his enemy, Pharaoh burst out into furious baying. After that everything was confusion.

Shadrach darted back toward the rear. The light ahead began to move

quickly, advancing toward us. The front camels left the road, as I presume, following their leader according to the custom of these beasts when marching in line.

Presently, I know not how, Orme, Quick, and myself found ourselves together in the darkness; at the time we thought Higgs was with us also, but in this we were mistaken. We heard shoutings and strange voices speaking a language that we could not understand. By the sudden glare of a flash of lightning, for the thunderstorm was now travelling over us, we saw several things. One of these was the Professor's riding-dromedary, which could not be mistaken because of its pure white colour and queer method of holding its head to one side, passing within ten yards, between us and the road, having a man upon its back who evidently was not the Professor. Then it was that we discovered his absence and feared the worst.

"A Fung has got his camel," I said.

"No," answered Quick; "Shadrach has got it. I saw his ugly mug against the light."

Another vision was that of what appeared to be our baggage camels moving swiftly away from us, but off the road which was occupied by a body of horsemen in white robes. Orme issued a brief order to the effect that we were to follow the camels with which the Professor might be. We started to obey, but before we had covered twenty yards of the cornfield or

whatever it was in which we were standing, heard voices ahead that were not those of Abati. Evidently the flash which showed the Fung to us had done them a like service, and they were now advancing to kill or capture us.

There was only one thing to do--turn and fly--and this we did, heading whither we knew not, but managing to keep touch of each other.

About a quarter of an hour later, just as we were entering a grove of palms or other trees which hid everything in front of us, the lightning blazed again, though much more faintly, for by this time the storm had passed over the Mountains of Mur, leaving heavy rain behind it. By the flash I, who was riding last and, as it chanced, looking back over my shoulder, saw that the Fung horsemen were not fifty yards behind, and hunting for us everywhere, their line being extended over a long front. I was, however, sure that they had not yet caught sight of us in the dense shadow of the trees.

"Get on," I said to the others; "they will be here presently," and heard Quick add:

"Give your camel his head, Captain; he can see in the dark, and perhaps will take us back to the road."

Orme acted on this suggestion, which, as the blackness round us was pitchy, seemed a good one. At any rate it answered, for off we went at a

fair pace, the three camels marching in line, first over soft ground and afterwards on a road. Presently I thought that the rain had stopped, since for a few seconds none fell on us, but concluded from the echo of the camels' feet and its recommencement that we had passed under some archway. On we went, and at length even through the gloom and rain I saw objects that looked like houses, though if so there were no lights in them, perhaps because the night drew toward morning. A dreadful idea struck me: we might be in Harmac! I passed it up for what it was worth.

"Very likely," whispered Orme back. "Perhaps these camels were bred here, and are looking for their stables. Well, there is only one thing to do--go on."

So we went on for a long while, only interfered with by the occasional attentions of some barking dog. Luckily of these Pharaoh, in his basket, took no heed, probably because it was his habit if another dog barked at him to pretend complete indifference until it came so near that he could spring and fight, or kill it. At length we appeared to pass under another archway, after which, a hundred and fifty yards or so further on, the camels came to a sudden stop. Quick dismounted, and presently I heard him say:

"Doors. Can feel the brasswork on them. Tower above, I think, and wall on either side. Seem to be in a trap. Best stop here till light comes. Nothing else to be done."

Accordingly, we stopped, and, having tied the camels to each other to prevent their straying, took shelter from the rain under the tower or whatever it might be. To pass away the time and keep life in us, for we were almost frozen with the wet and cold, we ate some tinned food and biscuits that we carried in our saddle-bags, and drank a dram of brandy from Quick's flask. This warmed us a little, though I do not think that a bottleful would have raised our spirits. Higgs, whom we all loved, was gone, dead, probably, by that time; the Abati had lost or deserted us, and we three white men appeared to have wandered into a savage stronghold, where, as soon as we were seen, we should be trapped like birds in a net, and butchered at our captor's will. Certainly the position was not cheerful.

Overwhelmed with physical and mental misery, I began to doze; Orme grew silent, and the Sergeant, having remarked that there was no need to bother, since what must be must be, consoled himself in a corner by humming over and over again the verse of the hymn which begins:

"There is a blessed home beyond this land of woe,
Where trials never come nor tears of sorrow flow."

Fortunately for us, shortly before dawn the "tears of sorrow" as represented by the rain ceased to flow. The sky cleared, showing the stars; suddenly the vault of heaven was suffused with a wonderful and pearly light, although on the earth the mist remained so thick that we could see nothing. Then above this sea of mist rose the great ball of

the sun, but still we could see nothing that was more than a few yards away from us.

"There is a blessed home beyond this land of woe"

droned Quick beneath his breath for about the fiftieth time, since, apparently, he knew no other hymn which he considered suitable to our circumstances, then ejaculated suddenly:

"Hullo! here's a stair. With your leave I'll go up it, Captain," and he did.

A minute later we heard his voice calling us softly:

"Come here, gentlemen," he said, "and see something worth looking at."

So we scrambled up the steps, and, as I rather expected, found ourselves upon the top of one of two towers set above an archway, which towers were part of a great protective work outside the southern gates of a city that could be none other than Harmac. Soaring above the mist rose the mighty cliffs of Mur that, almost exactly opposite to us, were pierced by a deep valley.

Into this valley the sunlight poured, revealing a wondrous and awe-inspiring object of which the base was surrounded by billowy vapours, a huge, couchant animal fashioned of black stone, with a head

carved to the likeness of that of a lion, and crowned with the uraeus, the asp-crested symbol of majesty in old Egypt. How big the creature might be it was impossible to say at that distance, for we were quite a mile away from it; but it was evident that no other monolithic monument that we had ever seen or heard of could approach its colossal dimensions.

Compared to this tremendous effigy indeed, the boasted Sphinx of Gizeh seemed but a toy. It was no less than a small mountain of rock shaped by the genius and patient labour of some departed race of men to the form of a lion-headed monster. Its majesty and awfulness set thus above the rolling mists in the red light of the morning, reflected on it from the towering precipices beyond, were literally indescribable; even in our miserable state, they oppressed and overcame us, so that for awhile we were silent. Then we spoke, each after his own manner:

"The idol of the Fung!" said I. "No wonder that savages should take it for a god."

"The greatest monolith in all the world," muttered Orme, "and Higgs is dead. Oh! if only he had lived to see it, he would have gone happy. I wish it had been I who was taken; I wish it had been I!" and he wrung his hands, for it is the nature of Oliver Orme always to think of others before himself.

"That's what we have come to blow up," soliloquized Quick. "Well,

those 'azure stinging-bees,' or whatever they call the stuff (he meant azo-imides) are pretty active, but it will take a lot of stirring if ever we get there. Seems a pity, too, for the old pussy is handsome in his way."

"Come down," said Orme. "We must find out where we are; perhaps we can escape in the mist."

"One moment," I answered. "Do you see that?" and I pointed to a needle-like rock that pierced the fog about a mile to the south of the idol valley, and say two miles from where we were. "That's the White Rock; it isn't white really, but the vultures roost on it and make it look so. I have never seen it before, for I passed it in the night, but I know that it marks the beginning of the cleft which runs up to Mur; you remember, Shadrach told us so. Well, if we can get to that White Rock we have a chance of life."

Orme studied it hurriedly and repeated, "Come down; we may be seen up here."

We descended and began our investigations in feverish haste. This was the sum of them: In the arch under the tower were set two great doors covered with plates of copper or bronze beaten into curious shapes to represent animals and men, and apparently very ancient. These huge doors had grilles in them through which their defenders could peep out or shoot arrows. What seemed more important to us, however, was that they

lacked locks, being secured only by thick bronze bolts and bars such as we could undo.

"Let's clear out before the mist lifts," said Orme. "With luck we may get to the pass."

We assented, and I ran to the camels that lay resting just outside the arch. Before I reached them, however, Quick called me back.

"Look through there, Doctor," he said, pointing to one of the peep-holes.

I did so, and in the dense mist saw a body of horsemen advancing toward the door.

They must have seen us on the top of the wall. "Fools that we were to go there!" exclaimed Orme.

Next instant he started back, not a second too soon, for through the hole where his face had been, flashed a spear which struck the ground beyond the archway. Also we heard other spears rattle upon the bronze plates of the doors.

"No luck!" said Orme; "that's all up, they mean to break in. Now I think we had better play a bold game. Got your rifles, Sergeant and Doctor? Yes? Then choose your loopholes, aim, and empty the magazines into

them. Don't waste a shot. For heaven's sake don't waste a shot.

Now--one--two--three, fire!"

Fire we did into the dense mass of men who had dismounted and were running up to the doors to burst them open. At that distance we could scarcely miss and the magazines of the repeating rifles held five shots apiece. As the smoke cleared away I counted quite half-a-dozen Fung down, while some others were staggering off, wounded. Also several of the men and horses beyond were struck by the bullets which had passed through the bodies of the fallen.

The effect of this murderous discharge was instantaneous and remarkable. Brave though the Fung might be, they were quite unaccustomed to magazine rifles. Living as they did perfectly isolated and surrounded by a great river, even if they had heard of such things and occasionally seen an old gaspipe musket that reached them in the course of trade, of modern guns and their terrible power they knew nothing. Small blame to them, therefore, if their courage evaporated in face of a form of sudden death which to them must have been almost magical. At any rate they fled incontinently, leaving their dead and wounded on the ground.

Now again we thought of flight, which perhaps would have proved our wisest course, but hesitated because we could not believe that the Fung had left the road clear, or done more than retreat a little to wait for us. While we lost time thus the mist thinned a great deal, so much indeed that we could see our exact position. In front of us, towards the

city side, lay a wide open space, whereof the walls ended against those of Harmac itself, to which they formed a kind of vestibule or antechamber set there to protect this gateway of the town through which we had ridden in the darkness, not knowing whither we went.

"Those inner doors are open," said Orme, nodding his head toward the great portals upon the farther side of the square. "Let's go see if we can shut them. Otherwise we shan't hold this place long."

So we ran across to the further doors that were similar to those through which we had just fired, only larger, and as we met nobody to interfere with our efforts, found that the united strength of the three of us was just, only just, sufficient to turn first one and then the other of them upon its hinges and work the various bolts and bars into their respective places. Two men could never have done the job, but being three and fairly desperate we managed it. Then we retreated to our archway and, as nothing happened, took the opportunity to eat and drink a few mouthfuls, Quick remarking sagely that we might as well die upon full as upon empty stomachs.

When we had crossed the square the fog was thinning rapidly, but as the sun rose, sucking the vapours from the rain-soaked earth, it thickened again for awhile.

"Sergeant," said Orme presently, "these black men are bound to attack us soon. Now is the time to lay a mine while they can't see what we are

after."

"I was just thinking the same thing, Captain; the sooner the better," replied Quick. "Perhaps the Doctor will keep a watch here over the camels, and if he sees any one stick up his head above the wall, he might bid him good-morning. We know he is a nice shot, is the Doctor," and he tapped my rifle.

I nodded and the two of them set out laden with wires and the packages that looked like tobacco tins, heading for a stone erection in the centre of the square which resembled an altar, but was, I believe, a rostrum whence the native auctioneers sold slaves and other merchandise. What they did there exactly, I am sure I do not know; indeed, I was too much occupied in keeping a watch upon the walls whereof I could clearly see the crest above the mist, to pay much attention to their proceedings.

Presently my vigilance was rewarded, for over the great gateway opposite, at a distance of about a hundred and fifty paces from me, appeared some kind of a chieftain clad in white robes and wearing a very fine turban or coloured head-dress, who paraded up and down, waving a spear defiantly and uttering loud shouts.

This man I covered very carefully, lying down to do so. As Quick had said, I am a good rifle shot, having practised that art for many years; still, one may always miss, which, although I bore no personal grudge

against the poor fellow in the fine head-dress, on this occasion I did not wish to do. The sudden and mysterious death of that savage would, I felt sure, produce a great effect among his people.

At length he stopped exactly over the door and began to execute a kind of war-dance, turning his head from time to time to yell out something to others on the farther side of the wall. This was my opportunity. I covered him with as much care as though I were shooting at a target, with one bull's eye to win. Aiming a little low in case the rifle should throw high, very gently I pressed the trigger. The cartridge exploded, the bullet went on its way, and the man on the wall stopped dancing and shouting and stood quite still. Clearly he had heard the shot or felt the wind of the ball, but was untouched.

I worked the lever jerking out the empty case, preparatory to firing again, but on looking up saw that there was no need, for the Fung captain was spinning round on his heels like a top. Three or four times he whirled thus with incredible rapidity, then suddenly threw his arms wide, and dived headlong from the wall like a bather from a plank, but backward, and was soon no more. Only from the farther side of those gates arose a wail of wrath and consternation.

After this no other Fung appeared upon the wall, so I turned my attention to the spy-hole in the doors behind me, and seeing some horsemen moving about at a distance of four or five hundred yards on a rocky ridge where the mist did not lie, I opened fire on them and at the

second shot was fortunate enough to knock a man out of the saddle. One of those with him, who must have been a brave fellow, instantly jumped down, threw him, dead or living, over the horse, leaped up behind him, and galloped away accompanied by the others, pursued by some probably ineffective bullets that I sent after them.

Now the road to the Pass of Mur seemed to be clear, and I regretted that Orme and Quick were not with me to attempt escape. Indeed, I meditated fetching or calling them, when suddenly I saw them returning, burying a wire or wires in the sand as they came, and at the same time heard a noise of thunderous blows of which I could not mistake the meaning. Evidently the Fung were breaking down the farther bronze doors with some kind of battering-ram. I ran out to meet them and told my news.

"Well done," said Orme in a quiet voice. "Now, Sergeant, just join up those wires to the battery, and be careful to screw them in tight. You have tested it, haven't you? Doctor, be good enough to unbar the gates. No, you can't do that alone; I'll help you presently. Look to the camels and tighten the girths. These Fung will have the doors down in a minute, and then there will be no time to lose."

"What are you going to do?" I asked as I obeyed.

"Show them some fireworks, I hope. Bring the camels into the archway so that they can't foul the wire with their feet. So--stand still, you grumbling brutes! Now for these bolts. Heavens! how stiff they are. I

wonder why the Fung don't grease them. One door will do--never mind the other."

Labouring furiously we got it undone and ajar. So far as we could see there was no one in sight beyond. Scared by our bullets or for other reasons of their own, the guard there appeared to have moved away.

"Shall we take the risk and ride for it?" I suggested.

"No," answered Orme. "If we do, even supposing there are no Fung waiting beyond the rise, those inside the town will soon catch us on their swift horses. We must scare them before we bolt, and then those that are left of them may let us alone. Now listen to me. When I give the word, you two take the camels outside and make them kneel about fifty yards away, not nearer, for I don't know the effective range of these new explosives; it may be greater than I think. I shall wait until the Fung are well over the mine and then fire it, after which I hope to join you. If I don't, ride as hard as you can go to that White Rock, and if you reach Mur give my compliments to the Child of Kings, or whatever she is called, and say that although I have been prevented from waiting upon her, Sergeant Quick understands as much about picrates as I do. Also get Shadrach tried and hanged if he is guilty of Higgs's death. Poor old Higgs! how he would have enjoyed this."

"Beg your pardon, Captain," said Quick, "but I'll stay with you. The doctor can see to the baggage animals."

"Will you be good enough to obey orders and fall to the rear when you are told, Sergeant? Now, no words. It is necessary for the purposes of this expedition that one of us two should try to keep a whole skin."

"Then, sir," pleaded Quick, "mayn't I take charge of the battery?"

"No," he answered sternly. "Ah! the doors are down at last," and he pointed to a horde of Fung, mounted and on foot, who poured through the gateway where they had stood, shouting after their fashion, and went on: "Now then, pick out the captains and pepper away. I want to keep them back a bit, so that they come on in a crowd, not scattered."

We took up our repeating rifles and did as Orme told us, and so dense was the mass of humanity opposite that if we missed one man, we hit another, killing or wounding a number of them. The result of the loss of several of their leaders, to say nothing of meaner folk, was just what Orme had foreseen. The Fung soldiers, instead of rushing on independently, spread to right and left, until the whole farther side of the square filled up with thousands of them, a veritable sea of men, at which we pelted bullets as boys hurl stones at a wave.

At length the pressure of those behind thrust onward those in front, and the whole fierce, tumultuous mob began to flow forward across the square, a multitude bent on the destruction of three white men, armed with these new and terrible weapons. It was a very strange and thrilling

sight; never have I seen its like.

"Now," said Orme, "stop firing and do as I bid you. Kneel the camels fifty yards outside the wall, not less, and wait till you know the end. If we shouldn't meet again, well, good-bye and good luck."

So we went, Quick literally weeping with shame and rage.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed, "good Lord! to think that, after four campaigns, Samuel Quick, Sergeant of Engineers, with five medals, should live to be sent off with the baggage like a pot-bellied bandmaster, leaving his captain to fight about three thousand niggers single-handed. Doctor, if he don't come out, you do the best you can for yourself, for I'm going back to stop with him, that's all. There, that's fifty paces; down you go, you ugly beasts," and he bumped his camel viciously on the head with the butt of his rifle.

From where we had halted we could only see through the archway into the space beyond. By now the square looked like a great Sunday meeting in Hyde Park, being filled up with men of whom the first rows were already past the altar-like rostrum in its centre.

"Why don't he loose off them stinging-bees?" muttered Quick. "Oh! I see his little game. Look," and he pointed to the figure of Orme, who had crept behind the unopened half of the door on our side of it and was looking intently round its edge, holding the battery in his right hand.

"He wants to let them get nearer so as to make a bigger bag. He----"

I heard no more of Quick's remarks, for suddenly something like an earthquake took place, and the whole sky seemed to turn to one great flame. I saw a length of the wall of the square rush outward and upward. I saw the shut half of the bronze-plated door skipping and hopping playfully toward us, and in front of it the figure of a man. Then it began to rain all sorts of things.

For instance, stones, none of which hit us, luckily, and other more unpleasant objects. It is a strange experience to be knocked backward by a dead fist separated from its parent body, yet on this occasion this actually happened to me, and, what is more, the fist had a spear in it. The camels tried to rise and bolt, but they are phlegmatic brutes, and, as ours were tired as well, we succeeded in quieting them.

Whilst we were thus occupied somewhat automatically, for the shock had dazed us, the figure that had been propelled before the dancing door arrived, reeling in a drunken fashion, and through the dust and falling débris we knew it for that of Oliver Orme. His face was blackened, his clothes were torn half off him, and blood from a scalp wound ran down his brown hair. But in his right hand he still held the little electric battery, and I knew at once that he had no limbs broken.

"Very successful mine," he said thickly. "Boer melinite shells aren't in it with this new compound. Come on before the enemy recover from the

shock," and he flung himself upon his camel.

In another minute we had started at a trot toward the White Rock, whilst from the city of Harmac behind us rose a wail of fear and misery. We gained the top of the rise on which I had shot the horseman, and, as I expected, found that the Fung had posted a strong guard in the dip beyond, out of reach of our bullets, in order to cut us off, should we attempt to escape. Now, terrified by what had happened, to them a supernatural catastrophe, they were escaping themselves, for we perceived them galloping off to the left and right as fast as their horses would carry them.

So for awhile we went on unmolested, though not very quickly, because of Orme's condition. When we had covered about half the distance between us and the White Rock, I looked round and became aware that we were being pursued by a body of cavalry about a hundred strong, which I supposed had emerged from some other gate of the city.

"Flog the animals," I shouted to Quick, "or they will catch us after all."

He did so, and we advanced at a shambling gallop, the horsemen gaining on us every moment. Now I thought that all was over, especially when of a sudden from behind the White Rock emerged a second squad of horsemen.

"Cut off!" I exclaimed.

"Suppose so, sir," answered Quick, "but these seem a different crowd."

I scanned them and saw that he was right. They were a very different crowd, for in front of them floated the Abati banner, which I could not mistake, having studied it when I was a guest of the tribe: a curious, triangular, green flag covered with golden Hebrew characters, surrounding the figure of Solomon seated on a throne. Moreover, immediately behind the banner in the midst of a bodyguard rode a delicately shaped woman clothed in pure white. It was the Child of Kings herself!

Two more minutes and we were among them. I halted my camel and looked round to see that the Fung cavalry were retreating. After the events of that morning clearly they had no stomach left for a fight with a superior force.

The lady in white rode up to us.

"Greetings, friend," she exclaimed to me, for she knew me again at once.

"Now, who is captain among you?"

I pointed to the shattered Orme, who sat swaying on his camel with eyes half closed.

"Noble sir," she said, addressing him, "if you can, tell me what has

happened. I am Maqueda of the Abati, she who is named Child of Kings.
Look at the symbol on my brow, and you will see that I speak truth,"
and, throwing back her veil, she revealed the coronet of gold that
showed her rank.