

CHAPTER VII

BARUNG

At the sound of this soft voice (the extreme softness of Maqueda's voice was always one of her greatest charms), Orme opened his eyes and stared at her.

"Very queer dream," I heard him mutter. "Must be something in the Mohammedan business after all. Extremely beautiful woman, and that gold thing looks well on her dark hair."

"What does the lord your companion say?" asked Maqueda of me.

Having first explained that he was suffering from shock, I translated word for word, whereon Maqueda blushed to her lovely violet eyes and let fall her veil in a great hurry. In the confusion which ensued, I heard Quick saying to his master:

"No, no, sir; this one ain't no houri. She's a flesh and blood queen, and the pleasantest to look at I ever clapped eyes on, though a benighted African Jew. Wake up, Captain, wake up; you are out of that hell-fire now. It's got the Fung, not you."

The word Fung seemed to rouse Orme.

"Yes," he said; "I understand. The vapour of the stuff poisoned me, but it is passing now. Adams, ask that lady how many men she's got with her. What does she say? About five hundred? Well, then, let her attack Harmac at once. The outer and inner gates are down; the Fung think they have raised the devil and will run. She can inflict a defeat on them from which they will not recover for years, only it must be done at once, before they get their nerve again, for, after all, they are more frightened than hurt."

Maqueda listened to this advice intently.

"It is to my liking; it is very good," she said in her quaint archaic Arabic when I had finished translating. "But I must consult my Council. Where is my uncle, the prince Joshua?"

"Here, Lady," answered a voice from the press behind, out of which presently emerged, mounted on a white horse, a stout man, well advanced in middle age, with a swarthy complexion and remarkably round, prominent eyes. He was clad in the usual Eastern robes, richly worked, over which he wore a shirt of chain-mail, and on his head a helmet, with mail flaps, an attire that gave the general effect of an obese Crusader of the early Norman period without his cross.

"Is that Joshua?" said Orme, who was wandering a little again.

"Rummy-looking cock, isn't he? Sergeant, tell Joshua that the walls of Jericho are down, so there'll be no need to blow his own trumpet. I'm

sure from the look of him that he's a perfect devil with a trumpet."

"What does your companion say?" asked Maqueda again.

I translated the middle part of Orme's remarks, but neither the commencement nor the end, but even these amused her very much, for she burst out laughing, and said, pointing to Harmac, over which still hung a cloud of dust:

"Yes, yes, Joshua, my uncle, the walls of Jericho are down, and the question is, will you not take your opportunity? So in an hour or two we shall be dead, or if God goes with us, perhaps free from the menace of the Fung for years."

The prince Joshua stared at her with his great, prominent eyes, then answered in a thick, gobbling voice:

"Are you mad, Child of Kings? Of us Abati here there are but five hundred men, and of the Fung yonder tens of thousands. If we attacked, they would eat us up. Can five hundred men stand against tens of thousands?"

"It seems that three stood against them this morning, and worked some damage, my uncle, but it is true those three are of a different race from the Abati," she added with bitter sarcasm. Then she turned to those behind her and cried: "Who of my captains and Council will accompany me,

if I who am but a woman dare to advance on Harmac?"

Now here and there a voice cried, "I will," or some gorgeously dressed person stepped forward in a hesitating way, and that was all.

"You see, men of the West!" said Maqueda after a little pause, addressing us three. "I thank you for the great deeds that you have done and for your counsel. But I cannot take it because my people are not--warlike," and she covered her face with her hands.

Now there arose a great tumult among her followers, who all began to talk at once. Joshua in particular drew a large sword and waved it, shouting out a recital of the desperate actions of his youth and the names of Fung chieftains whom he alleged he had killed in single combat.

"Told you that fat cur was a first-class trumpeter," said Orme languidly, while the Sergeant ejaculated in tones of deep disgust:

"Good Lord! what a set. Why, Doctor, they ain't fit to savage a referee in a London football ground. Pharaoh there in his basket (where he was barking loudly) would make the whole lot run, and if he was out--oh my! Now, then, you porpoise"--this he addressed to Joshua, who was flourishing his sword unpleasantly near--"put your pasteboard up, won't you, or I'll knock your fat head off," whereon the Prince, who, if he did not understand Quick's words, at any rate caught their meaning wonderfully well, did as he was told, and fell back.

Just then, indeed, there was a general movement up the pass, in the wide mouth of which all this scene took place, for suddenly three Fung chieftains appeared galloping toward us, one of whom was veiled with a napkin in which were cut eyeholes. So universal was this retreat, in fact, that we three on our camels, and the Child of Kings on her beautiful mare, found ourselves left alone.

"An embassy," said Maqueda, scanning the advancing horsemen, who carried with them a white flag tied to the blade of a spear. "Physician, will you and your friends come with me and speak to these messengers?" And without even waiting for an answer, she rode forward fifty yards or so on to the plain, and there reined up and halted till we could bring our camels round and join her. As we did so, the three Fung, splendid-looking, black-faced fellows, arrived at a furious gallop, their lances pointed at us.

"Stand still, friends," said Maqueda; "they mean no harm."

As the words passed her lips, the Fung pulled the horses to their haunches, Arab-fashion, lifted spears and saluted. Then their leader--not the veiled man, but another--spoke in a dialect that I, who had spent so many years among the savages of the desert, understood well enough, especially as the base of it was Arabic.

"O, Walda Nagasta, Daughter of Solomon," he said, "we are the tongues of

our Sultan Barung, Son of Barung for a hundred generations, and we speak his words to the brave white men who are your guests. Thus says Barung. Like the Fat One whom I have already captured, you white men are heroes. Three of you alone, you held the gate against my army. With the weapons of the white man you killed us from afar, here one and there one. Then, at last, with a great magic of thunder and lightning and earthquake, you sent us by scores into the bosom of our god, and shook down our walls about our ears and out of that hell you escaped yourselves.

"Now, O white men, this is the offer of Barung to you: Leave the curs of the Abati, the baboons who gibber and deck themselves out, the rock-rabbits who seek safety in the cliffs, and come to him. He will give you not only life, but all your heart's desire--lands and wives and horses; great shall you be in his councils and happy shall you live. Moreover, for your sakes he will try to spare your brother, the Fat One, whose eyes look out of black windows, who blows fire from his mouth, and reviles his enemies as never man did before. Yes, although the priests have doomed him to sacrifice at the next feast of Harmac, he will try to spare him, which, perhaps, he can do by making him, like the Singer of Egypt, also a priest of Harmac, and thus dedicate forever to the god with whom, indeed, he says he had been familiar for thousands of years. This is our message, O white men."

Now, when I had translated the substance of this oration to Orme and Quick, for, as I saw by the quiver that passed through her at the Fung insults upon her tribe, Maqueda understood it, their tongues

not differing greatly, Orme who, for the time at any rate, was almost himself again, said:

"Tell these fellows to say to their Sultan that he is a good old boy, and that we thank him very much; also that we are sorry to have been obliged to kill so many of them in a way that he must have thought unsportsmanlike, but we had to do it, as we are sure he will understand, in order to save our skins. Tell him also that, speaking personally, having sampled the Abati yonder and on our journey, I should like to accept his invitation. But although, as yet, we have found no men among them, only, as he says, baboons, rock-rabbits, and boasters without a fight in them, we have"--and here he bowed his bleeding head to Maqueda--"found a woman with a great heart. Of her salt we have eaten, or are about to eat; to serve her we have come from far upon her camels, and, unless she should be pleased to accompany us, we cannot desert her."

All of this I rendered faithfully, while every one, and especially Maqueda, listened with much attention. When they had considered our words, the spokesman of the messengers replied to the effect that the motives of our decision were of a nature that commanded their entire respect and sympathy, especially as their people quite concurred in our estimate of the character of the Abati ruler, Child of Kings. This being so, they would amend their proposition, knowing the mind of their Sultan, and having, indeed, plenipotentiary powers.

"Lady of Mur," he went on, addressing Maqueda directly, "fair daughter of the great god Harmac and a mortal queen, what we have offered to the white lords, your guests, we offer to you also. Barung, our Sultan, shall make you his head wife; or, if that does not please you, you shall wed whom you will"--and, perhaps by accident, the envoy's roving eyes rested for a moment upon Oliver Orme.

"Leave, then, your rock-rabbits, who dare not quit their cliffs when but three messengers wait without with sticks," and he glanced at the spear in his hand, "and come to dwell among men. Listen, high Lady; we know your case. You do your best in a hopeless task. Had it not been for you and your courage, Mur would have been ours three years ago, and it was ours before your tribe wandered thither. But while you can find but a hundred brave warriors to help you, you think the place impregnable, and you have perhaps that number, though we know they are not here; they guard the gates above. Yes, with a few of your Mountaineers whose hearts are as those of their forefathers were, so far as you have defied all the power of the Fung, and when you saw that the end drew near, using your woman's wit, you sent for the white men to come with their magic, promising to pay them with the gold which you have in such plenty in the tombs of our old kings and in the rocks of the mountains."

"Who told you that, O Tongue of Barung?" asked Maqueda in a low voice, speaking for the first time. "The man of the West whom you took prisoner--he whom you call Fat One?"

"No, no, O Walda Nagasta, the lord Black Windows has told us nothing as yet, except sundry things about the history of our god, with whom, as we said, he seems to be familiar, and to whom, therefore, we vowed him at once. But there are others who tell us things, for in times of truce our peoples trade together a little, and cowards are often spies. For instance, we knew that these white men were coming last night, though it is true that we did not know of their fire magic, for, had we done so, we should not have let the camels slip through, since there may be more of it on them----"

"For your comfort, learn that there is--much more," I interrupted.

"Ah!" replied the Tongue, shaking his head sadly, "and yet we suffered Cat, whom you call Shadrach, to make off with that of your fat brother; yes, and even gave it to him after his own beast had been lamed by accident. Well, it is our bad luck, and without doubt Harmac is angry with us to-day. But your answer, O Walda Nagasta, your answer, O Rose of Mur?"

"What can it be, O Voices of Barung the Sultan?" replied Maqueda. "You know that by my blood and by my oath of office I am sworn to protect Mur to the last."

"And so you shall," pleaded the Tongue, "for when we have cleaned it of baboons and rock-rabbits, which, if you were among us, we soon should do, and thus fulfilled our oath to regain our ancient secret City of the

Rocks, we will set you there once more as its Lady, under Barung, and give you a multitude of subjects of whom you may be proud."

"It may not be, O Tongue, for they would be worshippers of Harmac, and between Jehovah, whom I serve, and Harmac there is war," she answered with spirit.

"Yes, sweet-smelling Bud of the Rose, there is war, and let it be admitted that the first battle has gone against Harmac, thanks to the magic of the white men. Yet yonder he sits in his glory as the spirits, his servants, fashioned him in the beginning," and he pointed with his spear toward the valley of the idol. "You know our prophecy--that until Harmac rises from his seat and flies away, for where he goes, the Fung must follow--till then, I say, we shall hold the plains and the city of his name--that is, for ever."

"For ever is a long word, O Mouth of Barung." Then she paused a little, and added slowly, "Did not certain of the gates of Harmac fly far this morning? Now what if your god should follow his gates and those worshippers who went with them, and be seen no more? Or what if the earth should open and swallow him, so that he goes down to hell, whither you cannot follow? Or what if the mountains should fall together and bury him from your sight eternally. Or what if the lightnings should leap out and shatter him to dust?"

At these ominous words the envoys shivered, and it seemed to me that

their faces for a moment turned grey.

"Then, O Child of Kings," answered the spokesman solemnly, "the Fung will acknowledge that your god is greater than our god, and that our glory is departed."

Thus he spoke and was silent, turning his eyes toward the third messenger, he who wore a cloth or napkin upon his head that was pierced with eyeholes and hung down to the breast. With a quick motion, the man dragged off this veil and threw it to the ground, revealing a very noble countenance, not black like that of his followers, but copper-coloured. He was about fifty years of age, with deep-set flashing eyes, hooked nose, and a flowing, grizzled beard. The collar of gold about his neck showed that his rank was high, but when we noticed a second ornament of gold, also upon his brow, we knew that it must be supreme. For this ornament was nothing less than the symbol of royalty, once worn by the ancient Pharaohs of Egypt, the double snakes of the uraeus bending forward as though to strike, which, as we had seen, rose also from the brow of the lion-headed sphinx of Harmac.

As he uncovered, his two companions leapt to the ground and prostrated themselves before him, crying, "Barung! Barung!" while all three of us Englishmen saluted, involuntarily, I think, and even the Child of Kings bowed.

The Sultan acknowledged our greetings by raising his spear. Then he

spoke in a grave measured voice:

"O Walda Nagasta, and you, white men, sons of great fathers, I have listened to the talk between you and my servants; I confirm their words and I add to them. I am sorry that my generals tried to kill you last night. I was making prayer to my god, or it should not have happened. I have been well repaid for that deed, since an army should not make war upon four men, even though by their secret power four men can defeat an army. I beseech you, and you also, Rose of Mur, to accept my proffered friendship, since otherwise, ere long, you will soon be dead, and your wisdom will perish with you for I am weary of this little war against a handful whom we despise.

"O Walda Nagasta, you have breathed threats against the Majesty of Harmac, but he is too strong for you, nor may the might that can turn a few bricks to dust and shatter the bones of men prevail against him who is shaped from the heart of a mountain and holds the spirit of eternity. So at least I think: but even if it is decreed otherwise, what will that avail you? If it should please the god to leave us because of your arts, the Fung will still remain to avenge him ere they follow. Then I swear to you by my majesty and by the bones of my ancestors who sit in the caves of Mur, that I will spare but one of the Abati Jews, yourself, O Child of Kings, because of your great heart, and the three white men, your guests, should they survive the battle, because of their courage and their wisdom. As for their brother, Black Windows, whom I have captured, he must be sacrificed, since I have sworn it, unless you

yield, when I will plead for his life to the god, with what result I cannot tell. Yield, then, and I will not even slay the Abati; they shall live on and serve the Fung as slaves and minister to the glory of Harmac."

"It may not be, it may not be!" Maqueda answered, striking the pommel of her saddle with her small hand. "Shall Jehovah whom Solomon, my father, worshipped, Jehovah of all the generations, do homage to an idol shaped by the hands He made? My people are worn out; they have forgot their faith and gone astray, as did Israel in the desert. I know it. It may even happen that the time has come for them to perish, who are no longer warriors, as of old. Well, if so, let them die free, and not as slaves. At least I, in whom their best blood runs, do not seek your mercy, O Barung. I'll be no plaything in your house, who, at the worst, can always die, having done my duty to my God and those who bred me. Thus I answer you as the Child of many Kings. Yet as a woman," she added in a gentler voice, "I thank you for your courtesy. When I am slain, Barung, if I am fated to be slain, think kindly of me, as one who did her best against mighty odds," and her voice broke.

"That I shall always do," he answered gravely. "Is it ended?"

"Not quite," she answered. "These Western lords, I give them to you; I absolve them from their promise. Why should they perish in a lost cause? If they take their wisdom to you to use against me, you have vowed them their lives, and, perhaps, that of their brother, your captive. There is

a slave of yours also--you spoke of him, or your servant did--Singer of Egypt is his name. One of them knew him as a child; perchance you will not refuse him to that man."

She paused, but Barung made no answer.

"Go, my friends," she went on, turning toward us. "I thank you for your long journey on my behalf and the blow you have struck for me, and in payment I will send you a gift of gold; the Sultan will see it safe into your hands. I thank you. I wish I could have known more of you, but mayhap we shall meet again in war. Farewell."

She ceased, and I could see that she was watching us intently through her thin veil. The Sultan also watched us, stroking his long beard, a look of speculation in his eyes, for evidently this play interested him and he wondered how it would end.

"This won't do," said Orme, when he understood the thing. "Higgs would never forgive us if we ate dirt just on the off-chance of saving him from sacrifice. He's too straight-minded on big things. But, of course, Doctor," he added jerkily, "you have interests of your own and must decide for yourself. I think I can speak for the Sergeant."

"I have decided," I answered. "I hope that my son would never forgive me either; but if it is otherwise, why, so it must be. Also Barung has made no promises about him."

"Tell him, then," said Orme. "My head aches infernally, and I want to go to bed, above ground or under it."

So I told him, although, to speak the truth, I felt like a man with a knife in his heart, for it was bitter to come so near to the desire of years, to the love of life, and then to lose all hope just because of duty to the head woman of a pack of effete curs to whom one had chanced to make a promise in order to gain this very end. If we could have surrendered with honour, at least I should have seen my son, whom now I might never see again.

One thing, however, I added on the spur of the moment--namely, a request that the Sultan would tell the Professor every word that had passed, in order that whatever happened to him he might know the exact situation.

"My Harmac," said Barung when he had heard, "how disappointed should I have been with you if you had answered otherwise when a woman showed you the way. I have heard of you English before--Arabs and traders brought me tales of you. For instance, there was one who died defending a city against a worshipper of the Prophet who called himself a prophet, down yonder at Khartoum on the Nile--a great death, they told me, a great death, which your people avenged afterwards.

"Well I did not quite believe the story, and I wished to judge of it by you. I have judged, white lords, I have judged, and I am sure that your

fat brother, Black Windows, will be proud of you even in the lion's jaws. Fear not; he shall hear every word. The Singer of Egypt, who, it appears, can talk his tongue, shall tell the tale to him, and make a song of it to be sung over your honourable graves. And now farewell; may it be my lot to cross swords with one of you before all is done. That shall not be yet, for you need rest, especially yonder tall son of a god who is wounded," and he pointed to Orme. "Child of Kings with a heart of kings, permit me to kiss your hand and to lead you back to your people, that I would were more worthy of you. Ah! yes, I would that we were your people."

Maqueda stretched out her hand, and, taking it, the Sultan barely touched her fingers with his lips. Then, still holding them, he rode with her toward the pass.

As we approached its mouth, where the Abati were crowded together, watching our conference, I heard them murmur, "The Sultan, the Sultan himself!" and saw the prince Joshua mutter some eager words to the officers about him.

"Look out, Doctor," said Quick into my ear. "Unless I'm mistook, that porpoise is going to play some game."

Hardly were the words out of his mouth when, uttering the most valiant shouts and with swords drawn, Joshua and a body of his companions galloped up and surrounded our little group.

"Now yield, Barung," bellowed Joshua; "yield or die!"

The Sultan stared at him in astonishment, then answered:

"If I had any weapon (he had thrown down his lance when he took Maqueda by the hand), certainly one of us should die, O Hog in man's clothes."

Then he turned to Maqueda and added, "Child of Kings, I knew these people of yours to be cowardly and treacherous, but is it thus that you suffer them to deal with envoys under a flag of peace?"

"Not so, not so," she cried. "My uncle Joshua, you disgrace me; you make our people a shame, a hissing, and a reproach. Stand back; let the Sultan of the Fung go free."

But they would not; the prize was too great to be readily disgorged.

We looked at each other. "Not at all the game," said Orme. "If they collar him, we shall be tarred with their extremely dirty brush. Shove your camel in front, Sergeant, and if that beggar Joshua tries any tricks, put a bullet through him."

Quick did not need to be told twice. Banging his dromedary's ribs with the butt end of his rifle, he drove it straight on to Joshua, shouting:

"Out of the light, porpoise!" with the result that the Prince's horse took fright, and reared up so high that its rider slid off over its tail to find himself seated on the ground, a sorry spectacle in his gorgeous robes and armour.

Taking advantage of the confusion which ensued, we surrounded the Sultan and escorted him out of the throng back to his two companions, who, seeing that there was something amiss, were galloping toward us.

"I am your debtor," said Barung, "but, O White Men, make me more so. Return, I pray you, to that hog in armour, and say that Barung, Sultan of the Fung, understands from his conduct that he desires to challenge him to single combat, and that, seeing he is fully armed, the Sultan, although he wears no mail, awaits him here and now."

So I went at once with the message. But Joshua was far too clever to be drawn into any such dangerous adventure.

Nothing, he said, would have given him greater joy than to hack the head from the shoulders of this dog of a Gentile sheik. But, unhappily, owing to the conduct of one of us foreigners, he had been thrown from his horse, and hurt his back, so that he could scarcely stand, much less fight a duel.

So I returned with my answer, whereat Barung smiled and said nothing. Only, taking from his neck a gold chain which he wore, he proffered it

to Quick, who, as he said, had induced the prince Joshua to show his horsemanship if not his courage. Then he bowed to us, one by one, and before the Abati could make up their mind whether to follow him or not, galloped off swiftly with his companions toward Harmac.

Such was our introduction to Barung, Sultan of the Fung, a barbarian with many good points, among them courage, generosity, and appreciation of those qualities even in a foe, characteristics that may have been intensified by the blood of his mother, who, I am told, was an Arab of high lineage captured by the Fung in war and given as a wife to the father of Barung.