

CHAPTER VIII

THE SHADOW OF FATE

Our ride from the plains up the pass that led to the high tableland of Mur was long and, in its way, wonderful enough. I doubt whether in the whole world there exists another home of men more marvellously defended by nature. Apparently the road by which we climbed was cut in the first instance, not by human hands, but by the action of primæval floods, pouring, perhaps, from the huge lake which doubtless once covered the whole area within the circle of the mountains, although to-day it is but a moderate-sized sheet of water, about twenty miles long by ten in breadth. However this may be, the old inhabitants had worked on it, the marks of their tools may still be seen upon the rock.

For the first mile or two the road is broad and the ascent so gentle that my horse was able to gallop up it on that dreadful night when, after seeing my son's face, accident, or rather Providence, enabled me to escape the Fung. But from the spot where the lions pulled the poor beast down, its character changes. In places it is so narrow that travellers must advance in single file between walls of rock hundreds of feet high, where the sky above looks like a blue ribbon, and even at midday the path below is plunged in gloom. At other spots the slope is so precipitous that beasts of burden can scarcely keep their foothold; indeed, we were soon obliged to transfer ourselves from the camels to horses accustomed to the rocks. At others, again, it follows the brink

of a yawning precipice, an ugly place to ride or turn rectangular corners, which half-a-dozen men could hold against an army, and twice it passes through tunnels, though whether these are natural I do not know.

Besides all these obstacles to an invader there were strong gates at intervals, with towers near by where guards were stationed night and day, and fosses or dry moats in front of them which could only be crossed by means of drawbridges. So the reader will easily understand how it came about that, whatever the cowardice of the Abati, though they strove for generations, the Fung had as yet never been able to recapture the ancient stronghold, which, or so it is said, in the beginning these Abati won from them by means of an Oriental trick.

Here I should add that, although there are two other roads to the plains--that by which, in order to outflank the Fung, the camels were let down when I started on my embassy to Egypt, and that to the north where the great swamps lie--these are both of them equally, if not more, impassable, at any rate to an enemy attacking from below.

A strange cavalcade we must have seemed as we crawled up this terrific approach. First went a body of the Abati notables on horseback, forming a long line of colour and glittering steel, who chattered as they rode, for they seemed to have no idea of discipline. Next came a company of horsemen armed with spears, or rather two companies in the centre of which rode the Child of Kings, some of her courtiers and chief officers, and ourselves, perhaps, as Quick suggested, because infantry in the

event of surprise would find it less easy to run away than those who were mounted upon horses. Last of all rode more cavalry, the duty of whose rear files it was to turn from time to time, and, after inspection, to shout out that we were not pursued.

It cannot be said that we who occupied the centre of the advance were a cheerful band. Orme, although so far he had borne up, was evidently very ill from the shock of the explosion, so much so that men had to be set on each side of him to see that he did not fall from the saddle. Also he was deeply depressed by the fact that honour had forced us to abandon Higgs to what seemed a certain and probably a cruel death; and if he felt thus, what was my own case, who left not only my friend, but also my son, in the hands of savage heathens?

Maqueda's face was not visible because of the thin spangled veil that she wore, but there was something about her attitude suggestive of shame and of despair. The droop of the head and even her back showed this, as I, who rode a little behind and on side of her, could see. I think, too, that she was anxious about Orme, for she turned toward him several times as though studying his condition. Also I am sure that she was indignant with Joshua and others of her officers, for when they spoke to her she would not answer or take the slightest notice of them beyond straightening herself in the saddle. As for the Prince himself, his temper seemed to be much ruffled, although apparently he had overcome the hurt to his back which prevented him from accepting the Sultan's challenge, for at a difficult spot in the road he dismounted and ran

along actively enough. At any rate, when his subordinates addressed him he only answered them with muttered oaths, and his attitude towards us Englishmen, especially Quick, was not amiable. Indeed, if looks could have killed us I am sure that we should all have been dead before ever we reached the Gate of Mur.

This so-called gate was the upper mouth of the pass whence first we saw, lying beneath us, the vast, mountain-ringed plain beyond. It was a beautiful sight in the sunshine. Almost at our feet, half-hidden in palms and other trees, lay the flat-roofed town itself, a place of considerable extent, as every house of any consequence seemed to be set in a garden, since here there was no need for cramping walls and defensive works. Beyond it to the northward, farther than the eye could reach, stretching down a gentle slope to the far-off shores of the great lake of glistening water, were cultivated fields, and amongst them villas and, here and there, hamlets.

Whatever might be the faults of the Abati, evidently they were skilled husbandmen, such as their reputed forefathers, the old inhabitants of Judæa, must have been before them, for of that strain presumably some trace was still present in their veins. However far he may have drifted from such pursuits, originally the Jew was a tiller of the soil, and here, where many of his other characteristics had evaporated under pressure of circumstances--notably the fierce courage that Titus knew--this taste remained to him, if only by tradition.

Indeed, having no other outlet for their energies and none with whom to trade, the interests of the Abati were centred in the land. For and by the land they lived and died, and, since the amount available was limited by the mountain wall, he who had most land was great amongst them, he who had little land was small, he who had no land was practically a slave. Their law was in its essentials a law of the land; their ambitions, their crimes, everything to do with them, were concerned with the land, upon the produce of which they existed and grew rich, some of them, by means of a system of barter. They had no coinage, their money being measures of corn or other produce, horses, camels, acres of their equivalent of soil, and so forth.

And yet, oddly enough, their country is the richest in gold and other metals that I have ever heard of even in Africa--so rich that, according to Higgs, the old Egyptians drew bullion from it to the value of millions of pounds every year. This, indeed, I can well believe, for I have seen the ancient mines which were worked, for the most part as open quarries, still showing plenty of visible gold on the face of the slopes. Yet to these alleged Jews this gold was of no account. Imagine it; as Quick said, such a topsy-turvy state of things was enough to make a mere Christian feel cold down the back and go to bed thinking that the world must be coming to an end.

To return, the prince Joshua, who appeared to be generalissimo of the army, in what was evidently a set phrase, exhorted the guards at the last gates to be brave and, if need were, deal with the heathen as some

one or other dealt with Og, King of Bashan, and other unlucky persons of a different faith. In reply he received their earnest congratulations upon his escape from the frightful dangers of our journey.

These formalities concluded, casting off the iron discipline of war, we descended a joyous mob, or rather the Abati did, to partake of the delights of peace. Really, conquerors returning from some desperate adventure could not have been more warmly greeted. As we entered the suburbs of the town, women, some of them very handsome, ran out and embraced their lords or lovers, holding up babies for them to kiss, and a little farther on children appeared, throwing roses and pomegranate flowers before their triumphant feet. And all this because these gallant men had ridden to the bottom of a pass and back again!

"Heavens! Doctor," exclaimed the sardonic Quick, after taking note of these demonstrations, "Heavens! what a hero I feel myself to be. And to think that when I got back from the war with them Boers, after being left for dead on Spion Kop with a bullet through my lung and mentioned in a dispatch--yes, I, Sergeant Quick, mentioned in a dispatch by the biggest ass of a general as ever I clapped eyes on, for a job that I won't detail, no one in my native village ever took no note of me, although I had written to the parish clerk, who happens to be my brother-in-law, and told him the train I was coming by. I tell you, Doctor, no one so much as stood me a pint of beer, let alone wine," and he pointed to a lady who was proffering that beverage to some one whom she admired.

"And as for chucking their arms round my neck and kissing me," and he indicated another episode, "all my old mother said--she was alive then--was that she 'hoped I'd done fooling about furrin' parts as I called soldiering, and come home to live respectable, better late than never.' Well, Doctor, circumstances alter cases, or blood and climate do, which is the same thing, and I didn't miss what I never expected, why should I when others like the Captain there, who had done so much more, fared worse? But, Lord! these Abati are a sickening lot, and I wish we were clear of them. Old Barung's the boy for me."

Passing down the main street of this charming town of Mur, accompanied by these joyous demonstrators, we came at last to its central square, a large, open space where, in the moist and genial climate, for the high surrounding mountains attracted plentiful showers of rain, trees and flowers grew luxuriantly. At the head of this square stood a long, low building with white-washed walls and gilded domes, backed by the towering cliff, but at a little distance from it, and surrounded by double walls with a moat of water between them, dug for purposes of defence.

This was the palace, which on my previous visit I had only entered once or twice when I was received by the Child of Kings in formal audience. Round the rest of this square, each placed in its own garden, were the houses of the great nobles and officials, and at its western end, among other public buildings, a synagogue or temple which looked like a model

of that built by Solomon in Jerusalem, from the description of which it had indeed been copied, though, of course, upon a small scale.

At the gate of the palace we halted, and Joshua, riding up, asked Maqueda sulkily whether he should conduct "the Gentiles," for that was his polite description of us, to the lodging for pilgrims in the western town.

"No, my uncle," answered Maqueda; "these foreign lords will be housed in the guest-wing of the palace."

"In the guest-wing of the palace? It is not usual," gobbled Joshua, swelling himself out like a great turkey cock. "Remember, O niece, that you are still unmarried. I do not yet dwell in the palace to protect you."

"So I found out in the plain yonder," she replied; "still, I managed to protect myself. Now, I pray you, no words. I think it necessary that these my guests should be where their goods already are, in the safest place in Mur. You, my uncle, as you told us, are badly hurt, by which accident you were prevented from accepting the challenge of the Sultan of the Fung. Go, then, and rest; I will send the court physician to you at once. Good-night, my uncle; when you are recovered we will meet again, for we have much that we must discuss. Nay, nay, you are most kind, but I will not detain you another minute. Seek your bed, my uncle, and forget not to thank God for your escape from many perils."

At this polite mockery Joshua turned perfectly pale with rage, like the turkey cock when his wattles fade from scarlet into white. Before he could make any answer, however, Maqueda had vanished under the archway, so his only resource was to curse us, and especially Quick, who had caused him to fall from his horse. Unfortunately the Sergeant understood quite enough Arabic to be aware of the tenor of his remarks, which he resented and returned:

"Shut it, Porpoise," he said, "and keep your eyes where Nature put 'em, or they'll fall out."

"What says the Gentile?" spluttered Joshua, whereon Orme, waking up from one of his fits of lethargy, replied in Arabic:

"He says that he prays you, O Prince of princes, to close your noble mouth and to keep your high-bred eyes within their sockets lest you should lose them"; at which words those who were listening broke into a fit of laughter, for one redeeming characteristic among the Abati was that they had a sense of humour.

After this I do not quite know what happened for Orme showed signs of fainting, and I had to attend to him. When I looked round again the gates were shut and we were being conducted toward the guest-wing of the palace by a number of gaily dressed attendants.

They took us to our rooms--cool, lofty chambers ornamented with glazed tiles of quaint colour and beautiful design, and furnished somewhat scantily with articles made of rich-hued woods. This guest-wing of the palace, where these rooms were situated, formed, we noted, a separate house, having its own gateway, but, so far as we could see, no passage or other connection joining it to the main building. In front of it was a small garden, and at its back a courtyard with buildings, in which we were informed our camels had been stabled. At the time we noted no more, for night was falling, and, even if it had not been, we were too worn out to make researches.

Moreover, Orme was now desperately ill--so ill that he could scarcely walk leaning even on our shoulders. Still, he would not be satisfied till he was sure that our stores were safe, and, before he could be persuaded to lie down, insisted upon being supported to a vault with copper-bound doors, which the officers opened, revealing the packages that had been taken from the camels.

"Count them, Sergeant," he said, and Quick obeyed by the light of a lamp that the officer held at the open door. "All correct, sir," he said, "so far as I can make out."

"Very good, Sergeant. Lock the door and take the keys."

Again he obeyed, and, when the officer demurred to their surrender, turned on him so fiercely that the man thought better of it and departed

with a shrug of his shoulders, as I supposed to make report to his superiors.

Then at length we got Orme to bed, and, as he complained of intolerable pains in his head and would take nothing but some milk and water, having first ascertained that he had no serious physical injuries that I could discover, I administered to him a strong sleeping-draught from my little travelling medicine case. To our great relief this took effect upon him in about twenty minutes, causing him to sink into a stupor from which he did not awake for many hours.

Quick and I washed ourselves, ate some food that was brought to us, and then took turns to watch Orme throughout the night. When I was at my post about six o'clock on the following morning he woke up and asked for drink, which I gave to him. After swallowing it he began to wander in his mind, and, on taking his temperature, I found that he had over five degrees of fever. The end of it was that he went off to sleep again, only waking up from time to time and asking for more drink.

Twice during the night and early morning Maqueda sent to inquire as to his condition, and, apparently not satisfied with the replies, about ten in the forenoon arrived herself, accompanied by two waiting-ladies and a long-bearded old gentleman who, I understood, was the court physician.

"May I see him?" she asked anxiously.

I answered yes, if she and those with her were quite quiet. Then I led them into the darkened room where Quick stood like a statue at the head of the bed, only acknowledging her presence with a silent salute. She gazed at Oliver's flushed face and the forehead blackened where the gases from the explosion had struck him, and as she gazed I saw her beautiful violet eyes fill with tears. Then abruptly she turned and left the sick-chamber. Outside its doors she waved back her attendants imperiously and asked me in a whisper:

"Will he live?"

"I do not know," I answered, for I thought it best that she should learn the truth. "If he is only suffering from shock, fatigue, and fever, I think so, but if the explosion or the blow on his head where it cut has fractured the skull, then----"

"Save him," she muttered. "I will give you all I--nay, pardon me; what need is there to tempt you, his friend, with reward? Only save him, save him."

"I will do what I can, Lady, but the issue is in other hands than mine," I answered, and just then her attendants came up and put an end to the conversation.

To this day the memory of that old rabbi, the court physician, affects me like a nightmare, for of all the medical fools that ever I met he

was by far the most pre-eminent. All about the place he followed me suggesting remedies that would have been absurd even in the Middle Ages. The least harmful of them, I remember, was that poor Orme's head should be plastered with a compound of butter and the bones of a still-born child, and that he should be given some filthy compound to drink which had been specially blessed by the priests. Others there were also that would certainly have killed him in half-an-hour.

Well, I got rid of him at last for the time, and returned to my vigil. It was melancholy work, since no skill that I had could tell me whether my patient would live or die. Nowadays the young men might know, or say that they did, but it must be remembered that, as a doctor, I am entirely superannuated. How could it be otherwise, seeing that I have passed the best of my life in the desert without any opportunity of keeping up with the times.

Three days went by in this fashion, and very anxious days they were. For my part, although I said nothing of it to any one, I believed that there was some injury to the patient's skull and that he would die, or at best be paralyzed. Quick, however, had a different opinion. He said that he had seen two men in this state before from the concussion caused by the bursting of large shells near to them, and that they both recovered although one of them became an idiot.

But it was Maqueda who first gave me any definite hope. On the third evening she came and sat by Orme for awhile, her attendants standing

at a little distance. When she left him there was a new look upon her face--a very joyful look--which caused me to ask her what had happened.

"Oh! he will live," she answered.

I inquired what made her think so.

"This," she replied, blushing. "Suddenly he looked up and in my own tongue asked me of what colour were my eyes. I answered that it depended upon the light in which they might be seen.

"Not at all,' he said. 'They are always vi-o-let, whether the curtain is drawn or no.' Now, physician Adams, tell me what is this colour vi-o-let?"

"That of a little wild flower which grows in the West in the spring, O Maqueda--a very beautiful and sweet-scented flower which is dark blue like your eyes."

"Indeed, Physician," she said. "Well, I do not know this flower, but what of that? Your friend will live and be sane. A dying man does not trouble about the colour of a lady's eyes, and one who is mad does not give that colour right."

"Are you glad, O Child of Kings?" I asked.

"Of course," she answered, "seeing that I am told that this captain alone can handle the firestuffs which you have brought with you, and, therefore, that it is necessary to me that he should not die."

"I understand," I replied. "Let us pray that we may keep him alive. But there are many kinds of firestuffs, O Maqueda, and of one of them which chances to give out violet flames I am not sure that my friend is master. Yet in this country it may be the most dangerous of all."

Now when she heard these words the Child of Kings looked me up and down angrily. Then suddenly she laughed a little in a kind of silent way that is peculiar to her, and, without saying anything, beckoned to her ladies and left the place.

"Very variegated thing, woman, sir," remarked Quick, who was watching. (I think he meant to say "variable.") "This one, for instance, comes up that passage like a tired horse--shuffle, shuffle, shuffle--for I could hear the heels of her slippers on the floor. But now she goes out like a buck seeking its mate--head in air and hoof lifted. How do you explain it, Doctor?"

"You had better ask the lady herself, Quick. Did the Captain take that soup she brought him?"

"Every drop, sir, and tried to kiss her hand afterward, being still dazed, poor man, poor man! I saw him do it, knowing no better. He'll be

sorry enough when he comes to himself."

"No doubt, Sergeant. But meanwhile let us be glad that both their spirits seem to have improved, and if she brings any more soup when I am not there, I should let him have it. It is always well to humour invalids and women."

"Yes, Doctor; but," he added, with a sudden fall of face, "invalids recover sometimes, and then how about the women."

"Sufficient to the day is the evil thereof," I answered; "you had better go out for exercise; it is my watch." But to myself I thought that Fate was already throwing its ominous shadow before, and that it lay deep in Maqueda's violet eyes.

Well, to cut a long story short, this was the turning-point of Orme's illness, and from that day he recovered rapidly, for, as it proved, there was no secret injury to the skull, and he was suffering from nothing except shock and fever. During his convalescence the Child of Kings came to see him several times, or to be accurate, if my memory serves me right, every afternoon. Of course, her visits were those of ceremony--that is to say, she was always accompanied by several of her ladies, that thorn in my flesh, the old doctor, and one or two secretaries and officers-in-waiting.

But as Oliver was now moved by day into a huge reception room, and these

people of the court were expected to stop at one end of it while she conversed with him at the other, to all intents and purposes, save for the presence of myself and Quick, her calls were of a private nature. Nor were we always present, since, now that my patient was out of danger the Sergeant and I went out riding a good deal--investigating Mur and its surroundings.

It may be asked what they talked about on these occasions. I can only answer that, so far as I heard, the general subject was the politics of Mur and its perpetual war with the Fung. Still, there must have been other topics which I did not hear, since incidently I discovered that Orme was acquainted with many of Maqueda's private affairs whereof he could only have learned from her lips.

Thus when I ventured to remark that perhaps it was not altogether wise for a young man in his position to become so intimate with the hereditary ruler of an exclusive tribe like the Abati, he replied cheerfully that this did not in the least matter, as, of course, according to their ancient laws, she could only marry with one of her own family, a fact which made all complications impossible. I inquired which of her cousins, of whom I knew she had several, was the happy man. He replied:

"None of them. As a matter of fact, I believe that she is officially affianced to that fat uncle of hers, the fellow who blows his own trumpet so much, but I needn't add that this is only a form to which she

submits in order to keep the others off."

"Ah!" I said. "I wonder if Prince Joshua thinks it only a form?"

"Don't know what he thinks, and don't care," he replied, yawning; "I only know that things stand as I say, and that the porpoise-man has as much chance of becoming the husband of Maqueda as you have of marrying the Empress of China. And now, to drop this matrimonial conversation and come to something more important, have you heard anything about Higgs and your son?"

"You are more in the way of learning state secrets than I am, Orme," I answered sarcastically, being rather irritated at the course of events and his foolishness. "What have you heard?"

"This, old fellow. I can't say how she knows it, but Maqueda says that they are both in good health and well treated. Only our friend Barung sticks to his word and proposes to sacrifice poor old Higgs on this day fortnight. Now, of course, that must be prevented somehow, and prevented it shall be if it costs me my life. Don't you suppose that I have been thinking about myself all the time, for it isn't so, only the trouble is that I can't find any plan of rescue which will hold water."

"Then what's to be done, Orme? I haven't spoken much of the matter before for fear of upsetting you when you were still weak, but now that you are all right again we must come to some decision."

"I know, I know," he answered earnestly; "and I tell you this, that rather than let Higgs die alone there, I will give myself up to Barung, and, if I can't save him, suffer with him, or for him if I can. Listen: there is to be a great council held by the Child of Kings on the day after to-morrow which we must attend, for it has only been postponed until I was well enough. At this council that rogue Shadrach is to be put upon his trial, and will, I believe, be condemned to death. Also we are formally to return Sheba's ring which Maqueda lent to you to be used in proof of her story. Well, we may learn something then, or at any rate must make up our minds to definite action. And now I am to have my first ride, am I not? Come on, Pharaoh," he added to the dog, which had stuck at his bedside all through his illness so closely that it was difficult to entice him away even to eat; "we are going for a ride, Pharaoh; do you hear that, you faithful beast?"