

CHAPTER X

QUICK LIGHTS A MATCH

"Here we begin to turn, for this cave is a great circle," said Maqueda over her shoulder.

But Oliver, whom she addressed, had left her side and was engaged in taking observations behind the hunchback's funeral chair with an instrument which he had produced from his pocket.

She followed him and asked curiously what this thing might be, and why he made use of it here.

"We call it a compass," he answered, "and it tells me that beyond us lies the east, where the sun rises; also it shows at what height we stand above the sea, that great water which you have never seen, O Child of Kings. Say now, if we could walk through this rock, what should we find out yonder?"

"The lion-headed idol of the Fung, I have been told," she answered.

"That which you saw before you blew up the gate of the city Harmac. But how far off it may be I do not know, for I cannot see through stone. Friend Adams, help me to refill the lamps, for they burn low, and all these dead would be ill company in the dark. So at least my people think, since there is not one of them that dares to enter this place.

When first we found it only a few years ago and saw the company it held, they fled, and left me to search it alone. Look, yonder are my footsteps in the dust."

So I refilled the shallow hand-lamps, and while I did so Orme took some hasty observations of which he jotted down the results in his pocket-book.

"What have you learned?" she asked, when at last he rejoined us somewhat unwillingly, for she had been calling to him to come.

"Not so much as I should have done if you could have given me more time," he replied, adding in explanation, "Lady, I was brought up as an engineer, that is, one who executes works, and to do so takes measurements and makes calculations. For instance, those dead men who hollowed or dressed these caves must have been engineers and no mean ones."

"We have such among us now," she said. "They raise dams and make drains and houses, though not so good as those which were built of old. But again I ask--what have you learned, O wise Engineer?"

"Only that here we stand not so very far above the city Harmac, of which I chanced to take the level, and that behind yonder chair there was, I think, once a passage which has been built up. But be pleased to say nothing of the matter, Lady, and to ask me no more questions at present,

as I cannot answer them with certainty."

"I see that you are discreet as well as wise," she replied with some sarcasm. "Well, since I may not be trusted with your counsel, keep it to yourself."

Oliver bowed and obeyed this curt instruction.

Then we began our return journey, passing many more groups of skeletons which now we scarcely troubled to look at, perhaps because the heavy air filled with dust that once had been the flesh of men, was telling on our energies. Only I noticed, or rather the observant Quick called my attention to the fact, that as we went the kings in their chairs were surrounded by fewer and fewer attendants and women, and that the offerings placed at their feet were of an ever-lessening value. Indeed, after we had passed another five or six of them, their murdered retinues dwindled to a few female skeletons, doubtless those of favourite wives who had been singled out for this particular honour.

At length there were none at all, the poor monarchs, who now were crowded close together, being left to explore the shades alone, adorned merely with their own jewellery and regalia. Ultimately even these were replaced by funeral gold-foil ornaments, and the trays of treasure by earthenware jars which appeared to have contained nothing but food and wine, and added to these a few spears and other weapons. The last of the occupied chairs, for there were empty ones beyond, contained bones

which, from their slenderness and the small size of the bracelets among them, I saw at once had belonged to a woman who had been sent to the grave without companions or any offerings at all.

"Doubtless," said Maqueda, when I pointed this out to her, "at that time the ancients had grown weak and poor, since after so many kings they permitted a woman to rule over them and had no wealth to waste upon her burial. That may have been after the earthquake, when only a few people were left in Mur before the Abati took possession of it."

"Where, then, are those of your own house buried?" asked Oliver, staring at the empty chairs.

"Oh! not in this place," she answered; "I have told you it was discovered but a few years ago. We rest in tombs outside, and for my part I will sleep in the simple earth, so that I may live on in grass and flowers, if in no other way. But enough of death and doom. Soon, who can tell how soon? we shall be as these are," and she shuddered. "Meanwhile, we breathe, so let us make the best of breath. You have seen your fee, say, does it content you?"

"What fee?" he asked. "Death, the reward of Life? How can I tell until I have passed its gate?"

Here this philosophical discussion was interrupted by the sudden decease of Quick's lamp.

"Thought there was something wrong with the blooming thing," said the Sergeant, "but couldn't turn it up, as it hasn't got a screw, without which these old-fashioned colza oils never were no good. Hullo! Doctor, there goes yours," and as he spoke, go it did.

"The wicks!" exclaimed Maqueda, "we forgot to bring new wicks, and without them of what use is oil? Come, be swift; we are still far from the mouth of this cave, where none except the high priests will dare to seek us," and, taking Oliver by the hand, she began to run, leaving us two to follow as best we could.

"Steady, Doctor," said Quick, "steady. In the presence of disaster comrades should always stick together, as it says in the Red-book presented by the crown to warrant officers, but paid for out of their deferred allowance. Take my arm, Doctor. Ah! I thought so, the more haste the less speed. Look there," and he pointed to the flying shapes ahead, now a long way off, and with only one lamp between them.

Next instant Maqueda turned round holding up this remaining lamp and called to us. I saw the faint light gleam upon her beautiful face and glitter down the silver ornaments of her dress. Very wild and strange she looked in that huge vault, seen thus for a single moment, then seen no more, for presently where the flame had been was but a red spark, and then nothing at all.

"Stop still till we come back to you," cried Oliver, "and shout at intervals."

"Yes, sir," said Quick, and instantly let off a fearful yell, which echoed backward and forward across the vault till I was quite bewildered.

"All right, coming," answered Oliver, and his voice sounded so far to the left that Quick thought it wise to yell again.

To cut a long story short, we next heard him on our right and then behind us.

"Can't trust sounds here, sir, echoes are too uncertain," said the Sergeant; "but come on, I think I've placed them now," and calling to them not to move, we headed in what we were sure was the right direction.

The end of that adventure was that presently I tripped up over a skeleton and found myself lying half stunned amidst trays of treasure, affectionately clasping a skull under the impression that it was Quick's boot.

He hauled me up again somehow, and, as we did not know what to do, we sat down amidst the dead and listened. By now the others were apparently so far off that the sound of Oliver's calling only reached us in faint,

mysterious notes that came from we knew not whence.

"As, like idiots, we started in such a hurry that we forgot to bring any matches with us, there is nothing to be done, except wait," I said. "No doubt in due course those Abati will get over their fear of ghosts and come to look for us."

"Wish I could do the same, sir. I didn't mind those deaders in the light, but the dark's a different matter. Can't you hear them rattling their shanks and talking all round us?"

"Certainly I do hear something," I answered, "but I think it must be the echo of our own voices."

"Well, let us hold our jaw, sir, and perhaps they will hold theirs, for this kind of conversation ain't nice."

So we were silent, but the strange murmuring still went on, coming apparently from the wall of the cave behind us, and it occurred to me that I had once heard something like it before, though at the time I could not think where. Afterwards I remembered that it was when, as a boy, I had been taken to see the Whispering Gallery in St. Paul's Cathedral in London.

Half-an-hour or so went by in this fashion, and still there were no signs of the Abati or of our missing pair. Quick began to fumble among

his clothes. I asked him what he was doing.

"Can't help thinking I've got a wax match somewhere, Doctor. I remember feeling it in one of the pockets of this coat on the day before we left London, and thinking afterwards it wasn't safe to have had it packed in a box marked 'Hold.' Now if only I could find that match, we have got plenty of torches, for I've stuck to my bundle all through, although I never thought of them when the lamps were going out."

Having small belief in the Sergeant's match, I made no answer, and the search went on till presently I heard him ejaculate:

"By Jingo, here it is, in the lining. Yes, and the head feels all right. Now, Doctor, hold two of the torches toward me; make ready, present, fire!" and he struck the match and applied it to the heads of the resinous torches.

Instantly these blazed up, giving an intense light in that awful darkness. By this light, for one moment only, we saw a strange, and not unattractive spectacle. I think I forgot to say that in the centre of this vault stood a kind of altar, which until that moment, indeed, I had not seen. This altar, which, doubtless, had been used for ceremonial purposes at the funerals of the ancient Kings, consisted of a plain block of basalt stone, whereon was cut the symbol of a human eye, the stone being approached by steps and supported upon carved and crouching sphinxes.

On the lowest of these steps, near enough to enable us to see them quite clearly, were seated Oliver Orme and Maqueda, Child of Kings. They were seated very close together; indeed, if I must tell the truth, Oliver's arm was about Maqueda's waist, her head rested upon his shoulder, and apparently he was engaged in kissing her upon the lips.

"Right about face," hissed the Sergeant, in a tone of command, "and mark time!"

So we right-abouted for a decent period, then, coughing loudly--because of the irritant smoke of the torches--advanced to cross the cavern, and by accident stumbled upon our lost companions. I confess that I had nothing to say, but Quick rose to the occasion nobly.

"Glad to see you, Captain," he said to Oliver. "Was getting very anxious about you, sir, until by good luck I found a match in the lining of my coat. If the Professor had been here he'd have had plenty, which is an argument in favour of continuous smoking, even when ladies are present. Ah! no wonder her Majesty is faint in this hot place, poor young thing. It's lucky you didn't leave hold of her, sir. Do you think you could manage to support her, sir, as we ought to be moving. Can't offer to do so myself, as I have lamed my foot with the tooth of a dead king, also my arms are full of torches. But if you prefer the Doctor--what do you say, sir? That you can manage? There is such an echo in this vault that it is difficult to hear--very well, let us go on, for these torches

won't last for ever, and you wouldn't like us to have to spend a whole night here with the lady in such a delicate condition, would you, especially as those nasty-tempered Abati might say that you had done it on purpose? Take her Majesty's arm, Doctor, and let us trek. I'll go ahead with the torches."

To all this artless harangue Oliver answered not a single word, but glared at us suspiciously over the shape of Maqueda, who apparently had fainted. Only when I ventured to offer her some professional assistance she recovered, and said that she could get on quite well alone, which meant upon Orme's arm.

Well, the end of it was that she got on, and so did we, for the torches lasted until we reached the narrow, sloping passage, and, rounding the corner, saw the lantern burning in the hole in the wall, after which, of course, things were easy.

"Doctor," said Oliver to me in a voice of studied nonchalance that night, as we were preparing to turn in, "did you notice anything in the Vault of Kings this afternoon?"

"Oh, yes," I answered, "lots! Of course, myself, I am not given to archæology, like poor Higgs, but the sight struck me as absolutely unique. If I were inclined to moralize, for instance, what a contrast

between those dead rulers and their young and beautiful successor, full of life and love"--here he looked at me sharply--"love of her people, such as I have no doubt in their day----"

"Oh, shut it, Adams! I don't want a philosophical lecture with historical comparisons. Did you notice anything except bones and gold when that unutterable ass, Quick, suddenly turned on the lights--I mean struck the match which unfortunately he had with him."

Now I gave it up and faced the situation.

"Well, if you want the truth," I said, "not very much myself, for my sight isn't as good as it used to be. But the Sergeant, who has extraordinarily sharp eyes, thought that he saw you kissing Maqueda, a supposition that your relative attitudes seemed to confirm, which explains, moreover, some of the curious sounds we heard before he lit the torches. That's why he asked me to turn my back. But, of course, we may have been mistaken. Do I understand you to say that the Sergeant was mistaken?"

Oliver consigned the Sergeant's eyes to an ultimate fate worse than that which befell those of Peeping Tom; then, in a burst of candour, for subterfuge never was his forte, owned up:

"You made no mistake," he said, "we love each other, and it came out suddenly in the dark. I suppose that the unusual surroundings acted on

our nerves."

"From a moral point of view I am glad that you love each other," I remarked, "since embraces that are merely nervous cannot be commended. But from every other, in our circumstances the resulting situation strikes me as a little short of awful, although Quick, a most observant man, warned me to expect it from the first."

"Curse Quick," said Oliver again, with the utmost energy. "I'll give him a month's notice this very night."

"Don't," I said, "for then you'll oblige him to take service with Barung, where he would be most dangerous. Look here, Orme, to drop chaff, this is a pretty mess."

"Why? What's wrong about it, Doctor?" he asked indignantly. "Of course, she's a Jew of some diluted sort or other, and I'm a Christian; but those things adapt themselves. Of course, too, she's my superior, but after all hers is a strictly local rank, and in Europe we should be on much the same footing. As for her being an Eastern, what does that matter? Surely it is not an objection which should have weight with you. And for the rest, did you ever see her equal?"

"Never, never, never!" I answered with enthusiasm. "The young lady to whom any gentleman has just engaged himself is always absolutely unequalled, and, let me admit at once that this is perhaps the most

original and charming that I have ever met in all Central Africa. Only, whatever may be the case with you, I don't know whether this fact will console me and Quick when our throats are being cut. Look here, Orme," I added, "didn't I tell you long ago that the one thing you must not do was to make love to the Child of Kings?"

"Did you? Really, I forget; you told me such a lot of things, Doctor," he answered coolly enough, only unfortunately the colour that rose in his cheeks betrayed his lips.

At this moment, Quick, who had entered the room unobserved, gave a dry cough, and remarked:

"Don't blame the Captain, Doctor, because he don't remember. There's nothing like shock from an explosion for upsetting the memory. I've seen that often in the Boer war, when, after a big shell had gone off somewhere near them, the very bravest soldiers would clean forget that it was their duty to stand still and not run like rabbits; indeed, it happened to me myself."

I laughed, and Oliver said something which I could not hear, but Quick went on imperturbably:

"Still, truth is truth, and if the Captain has forgotten, the more reason that we should remind him. That evening at the Professor's house in London you did warn him, sir, and he answered that you needn't bother

your head about the fascinations of a nigger woman----"

"Nigger woman," broke out Oliver; "I never used such words; I never even thought them, and you are an impertinent fellow to put them into my mouth. Nigger woman! Good heavens! It's desecration."

"Very sorry, Captain, now I come to think of it, I believe you said black woman, speaking in your haste. Yes and I begged you not to brag, seeing that if you did we might live to see you crawling after her, with myself, Samuel Quick bringing up the rear. Well, there it is we are, and the worst of it is that I can't blame you, being as anticipated in the prophecy--for that's what it was though I didn't know it myself at the time--exactly in the same state myself, though, of course, at a distance, bringing up the rear respectfully, as said."

"You don't mean that you are in love with the Child of Kings?" said Oliver, staring at the Sergeant's grim and battered figure.

"Begging your pardon, Captain, that is exactly what I do mean. If a cat may look at a queen, why mayn't a man love her? Howsoever, my kind of love ain't likely to interfere with yours. My kind means sentry-go and perhaps a knife in my gizzard; yours--well, we saw what yours means this afternoon, though what it will all lead to we didn't see. Still, Captain, speaking as one who hasn't been keen on the sex heretofore, I say--sail in, since it's worth it, even if you've got to sink afterwards, for this lady, although she is half a Jew, and I never

could abide Jews, is the sweetest and the loveliest and the best and the bravest little woman that ever walked God's earth."

At this point Oliver seized his hand and shook it warmly, and I may mention that I think some report of Quick's summary of her character must have reached Maqueda's ears. At any rate, thenceforward until the end she always treated the old fellow with what the French call the "most distinguished consideration."

But, as I was not in love, no one shook my hand, so, leaving the other two to discuss the virtues and graces of the Child of Kings, I went off to bed filled with the gloomiest forbodings. What a fool I had been not to insist that whatever expert accompanied Higgs should be a married man. And yet, now when I came to think of it, that might not have bettered matters, and perhaps would only have added to the transaction a degree of moral turpitude which at present was lacking, since even married men are sometimes weak.

The truth was that Maqueda's attractions were extraordinarily great. To her remarkable beauty she added a wonderful charm of manner and force of mind. Also her situation must touch the heart and pity of any man, so helpless was she in the midst of all her hollow grandeur, so lonely amongst a nation of curs whom she strove in vain to save, and should she escape destruction with them, doomed to so sad and repulsive a fate, namely to become the wife of a fat poltroon who was her own uncle. Well, we know to what emotion pity is akin, and the catastrophe had occurred a

little sooner than I had expected, that was all.

Doubtless to her, in comparison with the men to whom she was accustomed and allowed by etiquette to take as her associates, this brave and handsome young Englishman, who had come into her care sick and shattered after the doing of a great deed, must have seemed a veritable fairy prince. And she had helped to nurse him, and he had shown himself grateful for her kindness and condescension, and--the rest followed, as surely as the day follows the night.

But how would it end? Sooner or later the secret must come out, for already the Abati nobles, if I may call them so for want of a better name, and especially Joshua, were bitterly jealous of the favour their lady showed to the foreigner, and watched them both. Then what--what would happen? Under the Abati law it was death for any one outside of the permitted degree of relationship to tamper with the affections of the Child of Kings. Nor was this wonderful, since that person held her seat in virtue of her supposed direct descent from Solomon and the first Maqueda, Queen of Sheba, and therefore the introduction of any alien blood could not be tolerated.

Moreover, Orme, having sworn an oath of allegiance, had become subject to those laws. Lastly, I could not in the least hope from the character of the pair concerned that this was but a passing flirtation.

Oh! without a doubt these two had signed their own death-warrant yonder

in the Cave of Death, and incidentally ours also. This must be the end of our adventure and my long search for the son whom I had lost.