

CHAPTER XI

THE RESCUE FAILS

Our breakfast on the following morning was a somewhat gloomy meal. By common consent no allusion was made to the events of the previous day, or to our conversation at bedtime.

Indeed, there was no talk at all to speak of, since, not knowing what else to do, I thought I could best show my attitude of mind by preserving a severe silence, while Quick seemed to be absorbed in philosophical reflections, and Orme looked rather excited and dishevelled, as though he had been writing poetry, as I daresay was the case. In the midst of this dreary meal a messenger arrived, who announced that the Walda Nagasta would be pleased to see us all within half-an-hour.

Fearing lest Orme should say something foolish, I answered briefly that we would wait upon her, and the man went, leaving us wondering what had happened to cause her to desire our presence.

At the appointed time we were shown into the small audience room, and, as we passed its door, I ventured to whisper to Oliver:

"For your own sake and hers, as well as that of the rest of us, I implore you to be careful. Your face is watched as well as your words."

"All right, old fellow," he answered, colouring a little. "You may trust me."

"I wish I could," I muttered.

Then we were shown in ceremoniously, and made our bows to Maqueda, who was seated, surrounded by some of the judges and officers, among them, Prince Joshua, and talking to two rough-looking men clad in ordinary brown robes. She greeted us, and after the exchange of the usual compliments, said:

"Friends, I have summoned you for this reason. This morning when the traitor Shadrach was being led out to execution at the hands of these men, the officers of the law, he begged for a delay. When asked why, as his petition for reprieve had been refused, he said that if his life was spared he could show how your companion, he whom they call Black Windows, may be rescued from the Fung."

"How?" asked Orme and I in one breath.

"I do not know," she answered, "but wisely they spared the man. Let him be brought in."

A door opened, and Shadrach entered, his hands bound behind his back and shackles on his feet. He was a very fearful and much chastened Shadrach,

for his eyes rolled and his teeth chattered with terror, as, having prostrated himself to the Walda Nagasta, he wriggled round and tried to kiss Orme's boot. The guards pulled him to his feet again, and Maqueda said:

"What have you to tell us, traitor, before you die?"

"The thing is secret, O Bud of the Rose. Must I speak before so many?"

"Nay," she answered, and ordered most of those present to leave the room, including the executioners and soldiers.

"The man is desperate, and there will be none left to guard him," said Joshua nervously.

"I'll do that, your Highness," answered Quick in his bad Arabic, and stepping up behind Shadrach he added in English, "Now then, Pussy, you behave, or it will be the worse for you."

When all had gone again Shadrach was commanded to speak and say how he could save the Englishman whom he had betrayed into the hands of the Fung.

"Thus, Child of Kings," he answered, "Black Windows, as we know, is imprisoned in the body of the great idol."

"How do you know it, man?"

"O Lady, I do know it, and also the Sultan said so, did he not? Well, I can show a secret road to that idol whence he may be reached and rescued. In my boyhood I, who am called Cat, because I can climb so well, found that road, and when the Fung took me afterward and threw me to the lions, where I got these scars upon my face, by it I escaped. Spare me, and I will show it to you."

"It is not enough to show the road," said Maqueda. "Dog, you must save the foreign lord whom you betrayed. If you do not save him you die. Do you understand?"

"That is a hard saying, Lady," answered the man. "Am I God that I should promise to save this stranger who perchance is already dead? Yet I will do my best, knowing that if I fail you will kill me, and that if I succeed I shall be spared. At any rate, I will show you the road to where he is or was imprisoned, although I warn you that it is a rough one."

"Where you can travel we can follow," said Maqueda. "Tell us now what we must do."

So he told her, and when he had done the Prince Joshua intervened, saying that it was not fitting that the Child of Kings in her own sacred person should undertake such a dangerous journey. She listened to his

remonstrances and thanked him for his care of her.

"Still I am going," she said, "not for the sake of the stranger who is called Black Windows, but because, if there is a secret way out of Mur I think it well that I should know that way. Yet I agree with you, my uncle, that on such a journey I ought not to be unprotected, and therefore I pray that you will be ready to start with us at noon, since I am sure that then we shall all be safe."

Now Joshua began to make excuses, but she would not listen to them.

"No, no," she said, "you are too honest. The honour of the Abati is involved in this manner, since, alas! it was an Abati that betrayed Black Windows, and an Abati--namely, yourself--must save him. You have often told me, my uncle, how clever you are at climbing rocks, and now you shall make proof of your skill and courage before these foreigners. It is a command, speak no more," and she rose, to show that the audience was finished.

That same afternoon Shadrach, by mountain paths that were known to him, led a little company of people to the crest of the western precipice of Mur. Fifteen hundred feet or more beneath us lay the great plains upon which, some miles away, could be seen the city of Harmac. But the idol in the valley we could not see, because here the precipice bent over and

hid it from our sight.

"What now, fellow," said Maqueda, who was clad in the rough sheepskin of a peasant woman, which somehow looked charming upon her. "Here is the cliff, there lies the plain; I see no road between the two, and my wise uncle, the prince, tells me that he never heard of one."

"Lady," answered the man, "now I take command, and you must follow me. But first let us see that nobody and nothing are lacking."

Then he went round the company and numbered them. In all we were sixteen; Maqueda and Joshua, we three Englishmen, armed with repeating rifles and revolvers, our guide Shadrach, and some picked Mountaineers chosen for their skill and courage. For even in Mur there were brave men left, especially among the shepherds and huntsmen, whose homes were on the cliffs. These sturdy guides were laden with ropes, lamps, and long, slender ladders that could be strapped together.

When everything had been checked and all the ladders and straps tested, Shadrach went to a clump of bushes which grew feebly on the wind-swept crest of the precipice. In the midst of these he found and removed a large flat stone, revealing what evidently had been the head of a stair, although now its steps were much worn and crumbled by the water that in the wet season followed this natural drain to the depths below.

"This is that road the ancients made for purposes of their own,"

explained Shadrach, "which, as I have said, I chanced to discover when I was a boy. But let none follow it who are afraid, for it is steep and rough."

Now Joshua, who was already weary with his long ride and walk up to the crest of the precipice, implored Maqueda almost passionately to abandon the idea of entering this horrid hole, while Oliver backed up his entreaties with few words but many appealing glances, for on this point, though for different reasons, the prince and he were at one.

But she would not listen.

"My uncle," she said, "with you, the experienced mountaineer, why should I be afraid? If the Doctor here, who is old enough to be the father of either of us" (so far as Joshua was concerned this remark lacked truth), "is willing to go, surely I can go also? Moreover, if I remained behind, you would wish to stay to guard me, and never should I forgive myself if I deprived you of such a great adventure. Also, like you, I love climbing. Come, let us waste no more time."

So we were roped up. First went Shadrach, with Quick next to him, a position which the Sergeant insisted upon occupying as his custodian, and several of the Mountaineers, carrying ladders, lamps, oil, food and other things. Then in a second gang came two more of these men, Oliver, Maqueda, myself, and next to me, Joshua. The remaining mountaineers brought up the rear, carrying spare stores, ladders, and so forth. When

all was ready the lamps were lit, and we started upon a very strange journey.

For the first two hundred feet or so the stairs, though worn and almost perpendicular, for the place was like the shaft of a mine, were not difficult to descend, to any of us except Joshua, whom I heard puffing and groaning behind me. Then came a gallery running eastward at a steep slope for perhaps fifty paces, and at the end of it a second shaft of about the same depth as the first, but with the stairs much more worn, apparently by the washing of water, of which a good deal trickled out of the sides of the shaft. Another difficulty was that the air rushing up from below made it hard to keep the lamps alight.

Toward the bottom of this section there was scarcely any stair left, and the climbing became very dangerous. Here, indeed, Joshua slipped, and with a wail of terror slid down the shaft and landed with his legs across my back in such a fashion that had I not happened to have good hand and foot hold at the time, he would have propelled me on to Maqueda, and we must have all rolled down headlong, probably to our deaths.

As it was, this fat and terrified fellow cast his arms about my neck, to which he clung, nearly choking me, until, just when I was about to faint beneath his weight and pressure, the Mountaineers in the third party arrived and dragged him off. When they had got him in charge, for I refused to move another step while he was immediately behind me, we

descended by a ladder which the first party had set up, to the second level, where began another long, eastward sloping passage that ended at the mouth of a third pit.

Here arose the great question as to what was to be done with the Prince Joshua, who vowed that he could go no farther, and demanded loudly to be taken back to the top of the cliff, although Shadrach assured him that thenceforward the road was much easier. At length we were obliged to refer the matter to Maqueda, who settled it in very few words.

"My uncle," she said, "you tell us that you cannot come on, and it is certain that we cannot spare the time and men to send you back. Therefore, it seems that you must stop where you are until we return, and if we should not return, make the best of your own way up the shaft. Farewell, my uncle, this place is safe and comfortable, and if you are wise you will rest awhile."

"Heartless woman!" gobbled Joshua, who was shaking like a jelly with fear and rage. "Would you leave your affianced lord and lover alone in this haunted hole while you scramble down rocks like a wild cat with strangers? If I must stay, do you stay with me?"

"Certainly not," replied Maqueda with decision. "Shall it be said that the Child of Kings is afraid to go where her guests can travel?"

Well, the end of it was that Joshua came on in the centre of the third

body of Mountaineers, who were practically obliged to carry him.

Shadrach was right, since for some reason or other the stairs thenceforward remained more perfect. Only they seemed almost endless, and before we reached our goal I calculated that we must have descended quite twelve hundred feet into the bowels of the rock. At length, when I was almost tired out and Maqueda was so breathless that she was obliged to lean on Oliver, dragging me behind her like a dog on a string, of a sudden we saw a glimmer of daylight that crept into the tunnel through a small hole. By the mouth of yet another pit or shaft, we found Shadrach and the others waiting for us. Saluting, he said that we must unrope, leave our lamps behind, and follow him. Oliver asked him whither this last shaft led.

"To a still lower level, lord," he answered, "but one which you will scarcely care to explore, since it ends in the great pit where the Fung keep their sacred lions."

"Indeed," said Oliver, much interested for reasons of his own, and he glanced at Quick, who nodded his head and whistled.

Then we all followed Shadrach to find ourselves presently upon a plateau about the size of a racquet court which, either by nature or by the hand of man, had been recessed into the face of that gigantic cliff. Going to the edge of this plateau, whereon grew many tree-ferns and some thick green bushes that would have made us invisible from below even had there

been any one to see us, we saw that the sheer precipice ran down beneath for several hundred feet. Of these yawning depths, however, we did not at the moment make out much, partly because they were plunged in shadow and partly for another reason.

Rising out of the gulf below was what we took at first to be a rounded hill of black rock, oblong in shape, from which projected a gigantic shaft of stone ending in a kind of fretted bush that alone was of the size of a cottage. The point of this bush-like rock was exactly opposite the little plateau on to which we had emerged and distant from it not more than thirty, or at most, forty feet.

"What is that?" asked Maqueda, of Shadrach, pointing in front of her, as she handed back to one of the Mountaineers a cup from which she had been drinking water.

"That, O Walda Nagasta," he answered, "is nothing else than the back of the mighty idol of the Fung, which is shaped like a lion. The great shaft of rock with the bush at the end of it is the tail of the lion.

Doubtless this platform on which we stand is a place whence the old priests, when they owned Mur as well as the land of the Fung, used to hide themselves to watch whatever it was they wanted to see. Look," and he pointed to certain grooves in the face of the rock, "I think that here there was once a bridge which could be let down at will on to the tail of the lion-god, though long ago it has rotted away. Yet ere now I have travelled this road without it."

We stared at him astonished, and in the silence that followed I heard Maqueda whisper to Oliver:

"Perhaps that is how he whom we call Cat escaped from the Fung; or perhaps that is how he communicates with them as a spy."

"Or perhaps he is a liar, my Lady," interrupted Quick, who had also overheard their talk, a solution which, I confess, commended itself to me.

"Why have you brought us here?" asked Maqueda presently.

"Did I not tell you in Mur, Lady--to rescue Black Windows? Listen, now, it is the custom of the Fung to allow those who are imprisoned within the idol to walk unguarded upon its back at dawn and sunset. At least, this is their custom with Black Windows--ask me not how I know it; this is truth, I swear it on my life, which is at stake. Now this is my plan. We have with us a ladder which will reach from where we stand to the tail of the idol. Should the foreign lord appear upon the back of the god, which, if he still lives, as I believe he does, he is almost sure to do at sundown, as a man who dwells in the dark all day will love the light and air when he can get them, then some of us must cross and bring him back with us. Perhaps it had best be you, my lord Orme, since if I went alone, or even with these men, after what is past Black Windows might not altogether trust me."

"Fool," broke in Maqueda, "how can a man do such a thing?"

"O Lady, it is not so difficult as it looks. A few steps across the gulf, and then a hundred feet or so along the tail of the lion which is flat on the top and so broad that one may run down it if careful to follow the curves, that is on a still day--nothing more. But, of course, if the Lord Orme is afraid, which I did not think who have heard so much of his courage----" and the rogue shrugged his shoulders and paused.

"Afraid, fellow," said Oliver, "well, I am not ashamed to be afraid of such a journey. Yet if there is need I will make it, though not before I see my brother alone yonder on the rock, since all this may be but a trick of yours to deliver me to the Fung, among whom I know that you have friends."

"It is madness; you shall not go," said Maqueda. "You will fall and be dashed to pieces. I say that you shall not go."

"Why should he not go, my niece?" interrupted Joshua. "Shadrach is right; we have heard much of the courage of this Gentile. Now let us see him do something."

She turned on the Prince like a tiger.

"Very good, my uncle, then you shall go with him. Surely one of the

ancient blood of the Abati will not shirk from what a 'Gentile' dares."

On hearing this Joshua relapsed into silence, and I have no clear memory of what he did or said in connection with the rest of that thrilling scene.

Now followed a pause in the midst of which Oliver sat down and began to take off his boots.

"Why do you undress yourself, friend?" asked Maqueda nervously.

"Because, Lady," he answered, "if I have to walk yonder road it is safer to do so in my stockings. Have no fear," he added gently, "from boyhood I have been accustomed to such feats, and when I served in my country's army it was my pleasure to give instruction in them, although it is true that this one surpasses all that ever I attempted."

"Still I do fear," she said.

Meanwhile Quick had sat down and begun to take off his boots.

"What are you doing, Sergeant?" I asked.

"Getting ready to accompany the Captain upon forlorn hope, Doctor."

"Nonsense," I said, "you are too old for the game, Sergeant. If any one

goes, I should, seeing that I believe my son is over there, but I can't try it, as I know my head would give out, and I should fall in a second, which would only upset everybody."

"Of course," broke in Oliver, who had overheard us, "I'm in command here, and my orders are that neither of you shall come. Remember, Sergeant, that if anything happens to me it is your business to take over the stores and use them if necessary, which you alone can do. Now go and see to the preparations, and find out the plan of campaign, for I want to rest and keep quiet. I daresay the whole thing is humbug, and we shall see nothing of the Professor; still, one may as well be prepared."

So Quick and I went to superintend the lashing of two of the light ladders together and the securing of some planks which we had brought with us upon the top of the rungs, so as to make these ladders easy to walk on. I asked who would be of the party besides Shadrach and Orme, and was told no one, as all were afraid. Ultimately, however, a man named Japhet, one of the Mountaineers, volunteered upon being promised a grant of land from the Child of Kings herself, which grant she proclaimed before them all was to be given to his relatives in the event of his death.

At length everything was ready, and there came another spell of silence, for the nerves of all of us were so strained that we did not seem able to talk. It was broken by a sound of sudden and terrible roaring that arose from the gulf beneath.

"It is the hour of the feeding of the sacred lions which the Fung keep in the pit about the base of the idol," explained Shadrach. Then he added, "Unless he should be rescued, I believe that Black Windows will be given to the lions to-night, which is that of full moon and a festival of Harmac, though maybe he will be kept till the next full moon when all the Fung come up to worship."

This information did not tend to raise anyone's spirits, although Quick, who always tried to be cheerful, remarked that it was probably false.

The shadows began to gather in the Valley of Harmac, whereby we knew that the sun was setting behind the mountains. Indeed, had it not been for a clear and curious glow reflected from the eastern sky, the gulf would have plunged us in gloom. Presently, far away upon a rise of rock which we knew must be the sphinx head of the huge idol, a little figure appeared outlined against the sky, and there began to sing. The moment that I heard the distant voice I went near to fainting, and indeed should have fallen had not Quick caught me.

"What is it, Adams?" asked Oliver, looking up from where he and Maqueda sat whispering to each other while the fat Joshua glowered at them in the background. "Has Higgs appeared?"

"No," I answered, "but, thank God, my son still lives. That is his voice. Oh! if you can, save him, too."

Now there was much suppressed excitement, and some one thrust a pair of field-glasses into my hand, but either they were wrongly set or the state of my nerves would not allow me to see through them. So Quick took them and reported.

"Tall, slim figure wearing a white robe, but at the distance in this light can't make out the face. One might hail him, perhaps, only it would give us away. Ah! the hymn is done and he's gone; seemed to jump into a hole in the rock, which shows that he's all right, anyway, or he couldn't jump. So cheer up, Doctor, for you have much to be thankful for."

"Yes," I repeated after him, "much to be thankful for, but still I would that I had more after all these years to search. To think that I should be so close to him and he know nothing of it."

After the ceasing of the song and the departure of my son, there appeared upon the back of the idol three Fung warriors, fine fellows clad in long robes and armed with spears, and behind them a trumpeter who carried a horn or hollowed elephant's tusk. These men marched up and down the length of the platform from the rise of the neck to the root of the tail, apparently to make an inspection. Having found nothing, for, of course, they could not see us hidden behind the bushes on our little plateau, of which no doubt they did not even know the existence, and much less that it was connected with the mountain plain of Mur, the

trumpeter blew a shrill blast upon his horn, and before the echoes of it had died away, vanished with his companions.

"Sunset tour of inspection. Seen the same kind of thing as at Gib.," said the Sergeant. "Oh! by Jingo! Pussy isn't lying after all--there he is," and he pointed to a figure that rose suddenly out of the black stone of the idol's back just as the guards had done.

It was Higgs, Higgs without a doubt; Higgs wearing his battered sun-helmet and his dark spectacles; Higgs smoking his big meerschaum pipe, and engaged in making notes in a pocket-book as calmly as though he sat before a new object in the British Museum.

I gasped with astonishment, for somehow I had never expected that we should really see him, but Orme, rising very quietly from his seat beside Maqueda, only said:

"Yes, that's the old fellow right enough. Well, now for it. You, Shadrach, run out your ladder and cross first that I may be sure you play no trick."

"Nay," broke in Maqueda, "this dog shall not go, for never would he return from his friends the Fung. Man," she said, addressing Japhet, the Mountaineer to whom she had promised land, "go you over first and hold the end of the ladder while this lord crosses. If he returns safe your reward is doubled."

Japhet saluted, the ladder was run out and its end set upon the roughnesses in the rock that represented the hair of the sphinx's tail. The Mountaineer paused a moment with hands and face uplifted; evidently he was praying. Then bidding his companions hold the hither end of the ladder, and having first tested it with his foot and found that it hung firm, calmly he walked across, being a brave fellow, and presently was seen seated on the opposing mass of rock.

Now came Oliver's turn. He nodded to Maqueda, who went white as a sheet, muttering some words to her that did not reach me. Then he turned and shook my hand.

"If you can, save my son also," I whispered.

"I'll do my best if I can get hold of him," he answered. "Sergeant, if anything happens to me you know your duty."

"I'll try and follow your example, Captain, under all circumstances, though that will be hard," replied Quick in a rather shaky voice.

Oliver stepped out on the ladder. I reckoned that twelve or fourteen short paces would take him across, and the first half of these he accomplished with quiet certainty. When he was in the exact middle of the passage, however, the end of one of the uprights of the ladder at the farther side slipped a little, notwithstanding the efforts of Japhet

to keep it straight, with the result that the plank bound on the rungs lost its level, sinking an inch or so to the right, and nearly causing Oliver to fall from it into the gulf. He wavered like a wind-shaken reed, attempted to step forward, hesitated, stopped, and slowly sank on to his hands and knees.

"Ah!" panted Maqueda.

"The Gentile has lost his head," began Joshua in a voice full of the triumph that he could not hide. "He--will----"

Joshua got no further, for Quick, turning, threatened him savagely with his fist, saying in English:

"Stow your jaw if you don't want to follow him, you swine," whereon Joshua, who understood the gesture, if not the words, relapsed into silence.

Now the Mountaineer on the farther side spoke, saying:

"Have no fear, the ladder is safe."

For a moment Oliver remained in his crouching posture on the board, which was all that separated him from an awful death in the gulf beneath. Next, while we watched, agonized, he rose to his feet again, and with perfect calmness walked across to its other end.

"Well done our side!" said Quick, addressing Joshua, "why don't your Royal Highness cheer? No, you leave that knife alone, or presently there'll be a hog the less in this world," and stooping down he relieved the Prince of the weapon which he was fingering with his round eyes fixed upon the Sergeant.

Maqueda, who had noted all, now interfered.

"My uncle," she said, "brave men are risking their lives yonder while we sit in safety. Be silent and cease from quarrelling, I pray you."

Next moment we had forgotten all about Joshua, being utterly absorbed in watching the drama in progress upon the farther side of the gulf. After a slight pause to recover his nerve or breath, Orme rose, and preceded by Japhet, climbed up the bush-like rock till he reached the shaft of the sphinx's tail. Here he turned and waved his hand to us, then following the Mountaineer, walked, apparently with the utmost confidence, along the curves of the tail to where it sprang from the body of the idol. At this spot there was a little difficulty in climbing over the smooth slope of rock on to the broad terrace-like back. Soon, however, they surmounted it, and vanishing for a few seconds into the hollow of the loins, which, of course, was a good many feet deep, re-appeared moving toward the shoulders. Between these we could see Higgs standing with his back toward us, utterly unconscious of all that was passing behind him.

Passing Japhet, Oliver walked up to the Professor and touched him on the arm. Higgs turned, stared at the pair for a moment, and then, in his astonishment, or so we guessed, sat down plump upon the rock. They pulled him to his feet, Orme pointing to the cliff behind, and evidently explaining the situation and what must be done. Then followed a short and animated talk. Through the glasses we could even see Higgs shaking his head. He told them something, they came to a determination, for now he turned, stepped forward a pace or two, and vanished, as I learnt afterwards, to fetch my son, without whom he would not try to escape.

A while went by; it seemed an age, but really was under a minute. We heard the sound of shouts. Higgs's white helmet reappeared, and then his body, with two Fung guards clinging on to him. He yelled out in English and the words reached us faintly:

"Save yourself! I'll hold these devils. Run, you infernal fool, run!"

Oliver hesitated, although the Mountaineer was pulling at him, till the heads of more Fung appeared. Then, with a gesture of despair, he turned and fled. First ran Oliver, then Japhet, whom he had outpaced, and after them came a number of priests or guards, waving knives, while in the background Higgs rolled on the rock with his captors.

The rest was very short. Orme slid down the rump of the idol on to the tail, followed by the Mountaineer, and after them in single file came

three Fung, who apparently thought no more of the perilous nature of their foothold than do the sheiks of the Egyptian pyramids when they swarm about those monuments like lizards. Nor, for the matter of that, did Oliver or Japhet, who doubled down the tail as though it were a race track. Oliver swung himself on to the ladder, and in a second was half across it, we holding its other end, when suddenly he heard his companion cry out. A Fung had got hold of Japhet by the leg and he lay face downward on the board.

Oliver halted and slowly turned round, drawing his revolver as he did so. Then he aimed and fired, and the Fung, leaving go of Japhet's leg, threw up his arms and plunged headlong into the gulf beneath. The next thing I remember is that they were both among us, and somebody shouted, "Pull in the ladder."

"No," said Quick, "wait a bit."

Vaguely I wondered why, till I perceived that three of those courageous Fung were following across it, resting their hands upon each other's shoulders, while their companions cheered them.

"Now, pull, brothers, pull!" shouted the Sergeant, and pull we did. Poor Fung! they deserved a better fate.

"Always inflict loss upon the enemy when you get a chance," remarked the Sergeant, as he opened fire with his repeating rifle upon other Fung

who by now were clustering upon the back of the idol. This position, however, they soon abandoned as untenable, except one or two of them who remained there, dead or wounded.

A silence followed, in the midst of which I heard Quick saying to Joshua in his very worst Arabic:

"Now does your Royal Highness think that we Gentiles are cowards, although it is true those Fung are as good men as we any day?"

Joshua declined argument, and I turned to watch Oliver, who had covered his face with his hands, and seemed to be weeping.

"What is it, O friend, what is it?" I heard Maqueda say in her gentle voice--a voice full of tears, tears of gratitude I think. "You have done a great deed; you have returned safe; all is well."

"Nay," he answered, forgetting her titles in his distress, "all is ill. I have failed, and to-night they throw my brother to the lions. He told me so."

Maqueda, finding no answer, stretched out her hand to the Mountaineer, his companion in adventure, who kissed it.

"Japhet," she said, "I am proud of you; your reward is fourfold, and henceforth you are a captain of my Mountaineers."

"Tell us what happened," I said to Oliver.

"This," he answered: "I remembered about your son, and so did Higgs. In fact, he spoke of him first--they seem to have become friends. He said he would not escape without him, and could fetch him in a moment, as he was only just below. Well, he went to do so, and must have found the guard instead, who, I suppose, had heard us talking. You know as much about the rest as I do. To-night, when the full moon is two hours high, there is to be a ceremony of sacrifice, and poor Higgs will be let down into the den of lions. He was writing his will in a note-book when we saw him, as Barung had promised to send it to us."

"Doctor," said the Sergeant, in a confidential voice, when he had digested this information, "would you translate for me a bit, as I want to have a talk with Cat there, and my Arabic don't run to it?"

I nodded, and we went to that corner of the plateau where Shadrach stood apart, watching and listening.

"Now, Cat," said the Sergeant (I give his remarks in his own language, leaving out my rendering) "just listen to me, and understand that if you tell lies or play games either you or I don't reach the top of this cliff again alive. Do you catch on?"

Shadrach replied that he caught on.

"Very well. You've told us that once you were a prisoner among the Fung and thrown to these holy lions, but got out. Now just explain what happened."

"This, O Quick. After ceremonies that do not matter, I was let down in the food-basket into the feeding-den, and thrown out of the basket like any other meat. Then the gates were lifted up by the chains, and the lions came in to devour me according to their custom."

"And what happened next, Shadrach?"

"What happened? Why, of course I hid myself in the shadow as much as possible, right against the walls of the precipice, until a satan of a she-lion snuffled me out and gave a stroke at me. Look, here are the marks of her claws," and he pointed to the scars upon his face. "Those claws stung like scorpions; they made me mad. The terror which I had lost when I saw their yellow eyes came back to me. I rushed at the precipice as a cat that is hunted by a dog rushes at a wall. I clung to its smooth side with my nails, with my toes, with my teeth. A lion leaped up and tore the flesh of my leg, here, here," and he showed the marks, which we could scarcely see in that dim light. "He ran back for another spring. Above me I saw a tiny ledge, big enough for a hawk to sit on--no more. I jumped, I caught it, drawing up my legs so that the lion missed me. I made the effort a man makes once in his life. Somehow I dragged myself to that ledge; I rested one thigh upon it and pressed

against the rock to steady myself. Then the rock gave, and I tumbled backward into the bottom of a tunnel. Afterwards I escaped to the top of the cliff in the dark, O God of Israel! in the dark, smelling my way, climbing like a baboon, risking death a thousand times. It took me two whole days and nights, and the last of those nights I knew not what I did. Yet I found my way, and that is why my people name me Cat."

"I understand," said Quick in a new and more respectful voice, "and however big a rascal you may be, you've got pluck. Now, say, remembering what I told you," and he tapped the handle of his revolver, "is that feeding-den where it used to be?"

"I believe so, O Quick; why should it be changed? The victims are let down from the belly of the god, just there between his thighs where are doors. The feeding-place lies in a hollow of the cliff; this platform on which we stand is over it. None saw my escape, therefore none searched for the means of it, since they thought that the lions had devoured me, as they have devoured thousands. No one enters there, only when the beasts have fed full they draw back to their sleeping-dens, and those who watch above let down the bars. Listen," and as he spoke we heard a crash and a rattle far below. "They fall now, the lions having eaten. When Black Windows and perhaps others are thrown to them, by and by, they will be drawn up again."

"Is that hole in the rock still there, Shadrach?"

"Without doubt, though I have not been down to look."

"Then, my boy, you are going now," remarked Quick grimly.