

CHAPTER XII

THE DEN OF LIONS

We returned to the others and told them everything that we had learned from Shadrach.

"What's your plan, Sergeant?" asked Oliver when he had heard. "Tell me, for I have none; my head is muddled."

"This, Captain, for what it is worth; that I should go down through the hole that Cat here speaks of, and get into the den. Then when they let down the Professor, if they do, and pull up the gates, that I should keep back the lions with my rifle while he bolts to the ladder which is ready for him, and I follow if I can."

"Capital," said Orme, "but you can't go alone. I'll come too."

"And I also," I said.

"What schemes do you make?" asked Maqueda eagerly, for, of course, she could not understand our talk.

We explained.

"What, my friend," she said to Oliver reproachfully, "would you risk

your life again to-night? Surely it is tempting the goodness of God."

"It would be tempting the goodness of God much more if I left my friend to be eaten by lions, Lady," he answered.

Then followed much discussions. In the end it was agreed that we should descend to the level of the den, if this were possible; that Oliver and Quick should go down into the den with Japhet, who instantly volunteered to accompany them, and that I, with some of the Mountaineers, should stop in the mouth of the hole as a reserve to cover their retreat from the lions. I pleaded to be allowed to take a more active part, but of this they would not hear, saying with some truth, that I was by far the best shot of the three, and could do much more to help them from above, if, as was hoped, the moon should shine brightly.

But I knew they really meant that I was too old to be of service in such an adventure as this. Also they desired to keep me out of risk.

Then came the question as to who should descend the last tunnel to the place of operations. Oliver wished Maqueda to return to the top of the cliff and wait there, but she said at once that she could not think of attempting the ascent without our aid; also that she was determined to see the end of the matter. Even Joshua would not go; I think, that being an unpopular character among them, he distrusted the Mountaineers, whose duty it would have been to escort him.

It was suggested that he should remain where he was until we returned, if we did return, but this idea commended itself to him still less than the other. Indeed he pointed out with much truth what we had overlooked, namely, that now the Fung knew of the passage and were quite capable of playing our own game, that is, of throwing a bridge across from the sphinx's tail and attempting the storm of Mur.

"And then what should I do if they found me here alone?" he added pathetically.

Maqueda answered that she was sure she did not know, but that meanwhile it might be wise to block the mouth of the tunnel by which we had reached the plateau in such a fashion that it could not easily be forced.

"Yes," answered Oliver, "and if we ever get out of this, to blow the shaft in and make sure that it cannot be used."

"That shaft might be useful, Captain," said Quick doubtfully.

"There is a better way, Sergeant, if we want to mine under the sphinx; I mean through the Tomb of Kings. I took the levels roughly, and the end of it can't be far off. Anyhow, this shaft is of no more use to us now that the Fung have found it out."

Then we set to work to fill in the mouth of the passage with such loose

stones as we could find. It was a difficult business, but in the end the Mountaineers made a very fair job of it under our direction, piling the rocks in such a fashion that they could scarcely be cleared away in any short time without the aid of explosives.

While this work was going on, Japhet, Shadrach, and the Sergeant in charge of him, undertook to explore the last shaft which led down to the level of the den. To our relief, just as we had finished building up the hole, they returned with the news that now after they had removed a fallen stone or two it was quite practicable with the aid of ropes and ladders.

So, in the same order as before, we commenced its passage, and in about half-an-hour, for it was under three hundred feet in depth, arrived safely at the foot. Here we found a bat-haunted place like a room that evidently had been hollowed out by man. As Shadrach had said, at its eastern extremity was a large, oblong boulder, so balanced that if even one person pushed on either of its ends it swung around, leaving on each side a passage large enough to allow a man to walk through in a crouching attitude.

Very silently we propped open this primæval door and looked out. Now the full moon was up, and her brilliant light had begun to flood the gulf. By it we saw a dense shadow, that reached from the ground to three hundred feet or so above us. This we knew to be that thrown by the flanks of the gigantic sphinx which projected beyond the mountain of

stone whereon it rested, those flanks whence, according to Shadrach, Higgs would be lowered in a food-basket. In this shadow and on either side of it, covering a space of quite a hundred yards square, lay the feeding-den, whence arose a sickly and horrible odour such as is common to any place frequented by cats, mingled with the more pungent smell of decaying flesh.

This darksome den was surrounded on three sides by precipices, and on the fourth, that toward the east, enclosed by a wall or barrier of rock pierced with several gates made of bars of metal, or so we judged by the light that flowed through them.

From beyond this eastern wall came dreadful sounds of roars, snarls, and whimperings. Evidently there the sacred lions had their home.

Only one more thing need be mentioned. On the rock floor almost immediately beneath us lay remains which, from their torn clothes and hair, we knew must be human. As somebody explained, I think it was Shadrach, they were those of the man whom Orme had shot upon the tail of the sphinx, and of his companions who had been tilted off the ladder.

For awhile we gazed at this horrible hole in silence. Then Oliver took out his watch, which was a repeater, and struck it.

"Higgs told me," he said, "that he was to be thrown to the lions two hours after moonrise, which is within fifteen minutes or so. Sergeant, I

think we had better be getting ready."

"Yes, Captain," answered Quick; "but everything is quite ready, including those brutes, to judge by the noise they make, excepting perhaps Samuel Quick, who never felt less ready for anything in his life. Now then, Pussy, run out that ladder. Here's your rifle, Captain, and six reload clips of cartridges, five hollow-nosed bullets in each. You'll never want more than that, and it's no use carrying extra weight. In your right-hand pocket, Captain, don't forget. I've the same in mine. Doctor, here's a pile for you; laid upon that stone. If you lie there, you'll have a good light and rest for your elbow, and at this range ought to make very pretty shooting, even in the moonlight. Best keep your pistol on the safe, Captain; at least, I'm doing so, as we might get a fall, and these new-fangled weapons are very hair-triggered. Here's Japhet ready, too, so give us your marching orders, sir, and we will go to business; the Doctor will translate to Japhet."

"We descend the ladder," said Orme, "and advance about fifty paces into the shadow, where we can see without being seen; where also, according to Shadrach, the food-basket is let down. There we shall stand and await the arrival of this basket. If it contains the Professor, he whom the Fung and the Abati know as Black Windows, Japhet, you are to seize him and lead, or if necessary carry, him to the ladder, up which some of the mountaineers must be ready to help him. Your duty, Sergeant, and mine, also that of the Doctor firing from above, will be to keep off the lions as best we can, should any lions appear, retreating as we fire. If the

brutes get one of us he must be left, since it is foolish that both lives should be sacrificed needlessly. For the rest, you, Sergeant, and you, Japhet, must be guided by circumstances and act upon your own discretion. Do not wait for special orders from me which I may not be able to give. Now, come on. If we do not return, Adams, you will see the Child of Kings safely up the shafts and conduct her to Mur. Good-bye, Lady."

"Good-bye," answered Maqueda in a brave voice; I could not see her face in the darkness. "Presently, I am sure, you will return with your brother."

Just then Joshua broke in:

"I will not be outdone in courage by these Gentiles," he said. "Lacking their terrible weapons, I cannot advance into the den, but I will descend and guard the foot of the ladder."

"Very well, sir," answered Orme in an astonished voice, "glad to have your company, I am sure. Only remember that you must be quick in going up it again, since hungry lions are active, and let all take notice that we are not responsible for anything that may happen to you."

"Surely you had better stop where you are, my uncle," remarked Maqueda.

"To be mocked by you for ever after, my niece. No, I go to face the

lions," and very slowly he crept through the hole and began to descend the ladder. Indeed, when Quick followed after an interval he found him only half-way down, and had to hurry his movements by accidentally treading on his fingers.

A minute or two later, peeping over the edge, I saw that they were all in the den, that is, except Joshua, who had reascended the ladder to the height of about six feet, and stood on it face outward, holding to the rock on either side with his hands as though he had been crucified. Fearing lest he should be seen there, even in the shadow, I suggested to Maqueda that she should order him either to go down, or to return, which she did vigorously, but without effect. So in the end we left him alone.

Meanwhile the three had vanished into the shadow of the sphinx, and we could see nothing of them. The great round moon rose higher and higher, flooding the rest of the charnel-house with light, and, save for an occasional roar or whimper from the lions beyond the wall, the silence was intense. Now I could make out the metal gates in this wall, and even dark and stealthy forms which passed and repassed beyond their bars. Then I made out something else also, the figures of men gathering on the top of the wall, though whence they came I knew not. By degrees their number increased till there were hundreds of them, for the wall was broad as a roadway.

Evidently these were spectators, come to witness the ceremony of sacrifice.

"Prince," I whispered to Joshua, "you must get down off the ladder or you will betray us all. Nay, it is too late to come up here again, for already the moonlight strikes just above your head. Go down, or we will cast the ladder loose and let you fall."

So he went down and hid himself among some ferns and bushes where we saw no more of him for a while, and, to tell the truth, forgot his existence.

Far, far above us, from the back of the idol I suppose, came a faint sound of solemn chanting. It sank, and we heard shouts. Then suddenly it swelled again. Now Maqueda, who knelt near me, touched my arm and pointed to the shadow which gradually was becoming infiltrated with the moonlight flowing into it from either side. I looked, and high in the air, perhaps two hundred feet from the ground, saw something dark descending slowly. Doubtless it was the basket containing Higgs, and whether by coincidence or no, at this moment the lions on the farther side of the wall burst into peal upon peal of terrific roaring. Perhaps their sentries watching at the gate saw or smelt the familiar basket, and communicated the intelligence to their fellows.

Slowly, slowly it descended, till it was within a few feet of the ground, when it began to sway backward and forward like a pendulum, at each swing covering a wider arc. Presently, when it hung over the edge of the shadow that was nearest to us, it was let down with a run and

overset, and out of it, looking very small in those vast surroundings and that mysterious light, rolled the figure of a man. Although at that distance we could see little of him, accident assured us of his identity, for as he rolled the hat he wore fell from him, and I knew it at once for Higgs's sun-helmet. He rose from the ground, limped very slowly and painfully after the helmet, picked it up, and proceeded to use it to dust his knees. At this moment there was a clanking sound.

"Oh! they lift the gates!" murmured Maqueda.

Then followed more sounds, this time of wild beasts raging for their prey, and of other human beasts shrieking with excitement on the wall above. The Professor turned and saw. For a moment he seemed about to run, then changed his mind, clapped the helmet on his head, folded his arms and stood still, reminding me in some curious way, perhaps, because of the shortness of his thick figure, of a picture I had seen of the great Napoleon contemplating a disaster.

To describe what followed is extremely difficult, for we watched not one but several simultaneous scenes. For instance, there were the lions, which did not behave as might have been expected. I thought that they would rush through the doors and bound upon the victim, but whether it was because they had already been fed that afternoon or because they thought that a single human being was not worth the trouble, they acted differently.

Through the open gates they came, in two indolent yellow lines, male lions, female lions, half-grown lions, cub lions that cuffed each other in play, in all perhaps fifty or sixty of them. Of these only two or three looked towards the Professor, for none of them ran or galloped, while the rest spread over the den, some of them vanishing into the shadow at the edge of the surrounding cliff where the moonlight could not reach.

Here one of them, at any rate, must have travelled fast enough, for it seemed only a few seconds later that we heard a terrific yell beneath us, and craning over the rock I saw the Prince Joshua running up the ladder more swiftly than ever did any London lamplighter when I was a boy.

But quickly as he came, the long, thin, sinuous thing beneath came quicker. It reared itself on its hind legs, it stretched up a great paw--I can see the gleaming claws in it now--and struck or hooked at poor Joshua. The paw caught him in the small of the back, and seemed to pin him against the ladder. Then it was drawn slowly downward, and heaven! how Joshua howled. Up came the other paw to repeat the operation, when, stretching myself outward and downward, with an Abati holding me by the ankles, I managed to shoot the beast through the head so that it fell all of a heap, taking with it a large portion of Joshua's nether garments.

A few seconds later he was among us, and tumbled groaning into a corner,

where he lay in charge of some of the mountaineers, for I had no time to attend to him just then.

When the smoke cleared at length, I saw that Japhet had reached Higgs, and was gesticulating to him to run, while two lions, a male and a female, stood at a little distance, regarding the pair in an interested fashion. Higgs, after some brief words of explanation, pointed to his knee. Evidently he was lamed and could not run. Japhet, rising to the occasion, pointed to his back, and bent down. Higgs flung himself upon it, and was hitched up like a sack of flour. The pair began to advance toward the ladder, Japhet carrying Higgs as one schoolboy carries another.

The lion sat down like a great dog, watching this strange proceeding with mild interest, but the lioness, filled with feminine curiosity, followed sniffing at Higgs, who looked over his shoulder. Taking off his battered helmet, he threw it at the beast, hitting her on the head. She growled, then seized the helmet, playing with it for a moment as a kitten does with a ball of wool, and next instant, finding it unsatisfying, uttered a short and savage roar, ran forward, and crouched to spring, lashing her tail. I could not fire, because a bullet that would hit her must first pass through Japhet and Higgs.

But, just when I thought that the end had come, a rifle went off in the shadow and she rolled over, kicking and biting the rock. Thereon the indolent male lion seemed to awake, and sprang, not at the men, but at

the wounded lioness, and a hellish fight ensued, of which the details and end were lost in a mist of dust and flying hair.

The crowd upon the wall, becoming alive to the real situation, began to scream in indignant excitement which quickly communicated itself to the less savage beasts. These set up a terrible roaring, and ran about, keeping for the most part to the shadows, while Japhet and his burden made slow but steady progress toward the ladder.

Then from the gloom beneath the hind-quarters of the sphinx rose a sound of rapid firing, and presently Orme and Quick emerged into the moonlight, followed by a number of angry lions that advanced in short rushes. Evidently the pair had kept their heads, and were acting on a plan.

One of them emptied his rifle at the pursuing beasts, while the other ran back a few paces, thrusting in a fresh clip of cartridges as he went. Then he began to fire, and his companion in turn retreated behind him. In this way they knocked over a number of lions, for the range was too short for them to miss often, and the expanding bullets did their work very well, paralyzing even when they did not kill. I also opened fire over their heads, and, although in that uncertain light the majority of my shots did no damage, the others disposed of several animals which I saw were becoming dangerous.

So things went on until all four, that is, Japhet with Higgs upon

his back, and Orme and Quick, were within twenty paces of the ladder, although separated from each other by perhaps half the length of a cricket pitch. We thought that they were safe, and shouted in our joy, while the hundreds of spectators on the wall who fortunately dared not descend into the den because of the lions, which are indiscriminating beasts, yelled with rage at the imminent rescue of the sacrifice.

Then of a sudden the position changed. From every quarter fresh lions seemed to arrive, ringing the men round and clearly bent on slaughter, although the shouting and the sound of firearms, which they had never heard before, frightened them and made them cautious.

A half-grown cub rushed in and knocked over Japhet and Higgs. I fired and hit it in the flank. It bit savagely at its wound, then sprang on to the prostrate pair, and stood over them growling, but in such pain that it forgot to kill them. The ring of beasts closed in--we could see their yellow eyes glowing in the gloom. Orme and Quick might have got through by the help of their rifles, but they could not leave the others. The dreadful climax seemed at hand.

"Follow me," said Maqueda, who all this while had watched panting at my side, and rose to run to the ladder. I thrust her back.

"Nay," I shouted. "Follow me, Abati! Shall a woman lead you?"

Of how I descended that ladder I have no recollection, nor do I in the

least know how the Mountaineers came after me, but I think that the most of them rolled and scrambled down the thirty feet of rock. At least, to their honour be it said, they did come, yelling like demons and waving long knives in their hands.

The effect of our sudden arrival from above was extraordinary. Scared by the rush and the noise, the lions gave way, then bolted in every direction, the wounded cub, which could not, or would not move, being stabbed to death where it stood over Higgs and Japhet.

Five minutes more and all of us were safe in the mouth of the tunnel.

That was how we rescued Higgs from the den of the sacred lions which guarded the idol of the Fung.