

## CHAPTER XV

### SERGEANT QUICK HAS A PRESENTIMENT

From this time forward all of us, and especially Oliver, were guarded night and day by picked men who it was believed could not be corrupted. As a consequence, the Tsar of Russia scarcely leads a life more irksome than ours became at Mur. Of privacy there was none left to us, since sentries and detectives lurked at every corner, while tasters were obliged to eat of each dish and drink from each cup before it touched our lips, lest our fate should be that of Pharaoh, whose loss we mourned as much as though the poor dog had been some beloved human being.

Most of all was it irksome, I think, to Oliver and Maqueda, whose opportunities of meeting were much curtailed by the exigencies of this rigid espionage. Who can murmur sweet nothings to his adored when two soldiers armed to the teeth have been instructed never to let him out of their sight? Particularly is this so if the adored happens to be the ruler of those soldiers to whom the person guarded has no right to be making himself agreeable. For when off duty even the most faithful guardians are apt to talk. Of course, the result was that the pair took risks which did not escape observation. Indeed, their intimate relations became a matter of gossip throughout the land.

Still, annoying as they might be, these precautions succeeded, for none of us were poisoned or got our throats cut, although we were constantly

the victims of mysterious accidents. Thus, a heavy rock rolled down upon us when we sat together one evening upon the hill-side, and a flight of arrows passed between us while we were riding along the edge of a thicket, by one of which Higgs's horse was killed. Only when the mountain and the thicket were searched no one could be found. Moreover, a great plot against us was discovered in which some of the lords and priests were implicated, but such was the state of feeling in the country that, beyond warning them privately that their machinations were known, Maqueda did not dare to take proceedings against these men.

A little later on things mended so far as we were concerned, for the following reason: One day two shepherds arrived at the palace with some of their companions, saying that they had news to communicate. On being questioned, these peasants averred that while they were herding their goats upon the western cliffs many miles away, suddenly on the top of the hills appeared a body of fifteen Fung, who bound and blindfolded them, telling them in mocking language to take a message to the Council and to the white men.

This was the message: That they had better make haste to destroy the god Harmac, since otherwise his head would move to Mur according to the prophecy, and that when it did so, the Fung would follow as they knew how to do. Then they set the two men on a rock where they could be seen, and on the following morning were in fact found by some of their fellows, those who accompanied them to the Court and corroborated this story.

Of course the matter was duly investigated, but as I know, for I went with the search party, when we got to the place no trace of the Fung could be found, except one of their spears, of which the handle had been driven into the earth and the blade pointed toward Mur, evidently in threat or defiance. No other token of them remained, for, as it happened, a heavy rain had fallen and obliterated their footprints, which in any case must have been faint on this rocky ground.

Notwithstanding the most diligent search by skilled men, their mode of approach and retreat remained a mystery, as, indeed, it does to this day. The only places where it was supposed to be possible to scale the precipice of Mur were watched continually, so that they could have climbed up by none of these. The inference was, therefore, that the Fung had discovered some unknown path, and, if fifteen men could climb that path, why not fifteen thousand!

Only, where was this path? In vain were great rewards in land and honours offered to him who should discover it, for although such discoveries were continually reported, on investigation these were found to be inventions or mares' nests. Nothing but a bird could have travelled by such roads.

Then at last we saw the Abati thoroughly frightened, for, with additions, the story soon passed from mouth to mouth till the whole people talked of nothing else. It was as though we English learned that

a huge foreign army had suddenly landed on our shores and, having cut the wires and seized the railways, was marching upon London. The effect of such tidings upon a nation that always believed invasion to be impossible may easily be imagined, only I hope that we should take them better than did the Abati.

Their swagger, their self-confidence, their talk about the "rocky walls of Mur," evaporated in an hour. Now it was only of the disciplined and terrible regiments of the Fung, among whom every man was trained to war, and of what would happen to them, the civilized and domesticated Abati, a peace-loving people who rightly enough, as they declared, had refused all martial burdens, should these regiments suddenly appear in their midst. They cried out that they were betrayed--they clamoured for the blood of certain of the Councillors. That carpet knight, Joshua, lost popularity for a while, while Maqueda, who was known always to have been in favour of conscription and perfect readiness to repel attack, gained what he had lost.

Leaving their farms, they crowded together into the towns and villages, where they made what in South Africa are called laagers. Religion, which practically had been dead among them, for they retained but few traces of the Jewish faith if, indeed, they had ever really practised it, became the craze of the hour. Priests were at a premium; sheep and cattle were sacrificed; it was even said that, after the fashion of their foes the Fung, some human beings shared the same fate. At any rate the Almighty was importuned hourly to destroy the hated Fung and

to protect His people--the Abati--from the results of their own base selfishness and cowardly neglect.

Well, the world has seen such exhibitions before to-day, and will doubtless see more of them in the instance of greater peoples who allow luxury and pleasure-seeking to sap their strength and manhood.

The upshot of it all was that the Abati became obsessed with the saying of the Fung scouts to the shepherds, which, after all, was but a repetition of that of their envoys delivered to the Council a little while before: that they should hasten to destroy the idol Harmac, lest he should move himself to Mur. How an idol of such proportions, or even its head, could move at all they did not stop to inquire. It was obvious to them, however, that if he was destroyed there would be nothing to move and, further, that we Gentiles were the only persons who could possibly effect such destruction. So we also became popular for a little while. Everybody was pleasant and flattered us--everybody, even Joshua, bowed when we approached, and took a most lively interest in the progress of our work, which many deputations and prominent individuals urged us to expedite.

Better still, the untoward accidents such as those I have mentioned, ceased. Our dogs, for we had obtained some others, were no longer poisoned; rocks that appeared fixed did not fall; no arrows whistled among us when we went out riding. We even found it safe occasionally to dispense with our guards, since it was every one's interest to keep us

alive--for the present. Still, I for one was not deceived for a single moment, and in season and out of season warned the others that the wind would soon blow again from a less favourable quarter.

We worked, we worked, we worked! Heaven alone knows how we did work. Think of the task, which, after all, was only one of several. A tunnel must be bored, for I forget how far, through virgin rock, with the help of inadequate tools and unskilled labour, and this tunnel must be finished by a certain date. A hundred unexpected difficulties arose, and one by one were conquered. Great dangers must be run, and were avoided, while the responsibility of this tremendous engineering feat lay upon the shoulders of a single individual, Oliver Orme, who, although he had been educated as an engineer, had no great practical experience of such enterprises.

Truly the occasion makes the man, for Orme rose to it in a way that I can only call heroic. When he was not actually in the tunnel he was labouring at his calculations, of which many must be made, or taking levels with such instruments as he had. For if there proved to be the slightest error all this toil would be in vain, and result only in the blowing of a useless hole through a mass of rock. Then there was a great question as to the effect which would be produced by the amount of explosive at his disposal, since terrible as might be the force of the stuff, unless it were scientifically placed and distributed it would assuredly fail to accomplish the desired end.

At last, after superhuman efforts, the mine was finished. Our stock of concentrated explosive, about four full camel loads of it, was set in as many separate chambers, each of them just large enough to receive the charge, hollowed in the primæval rock from which the idol had been hewn.

These chambers were about twenty feet from each other, although if there had been time to prolong the tunnel, the distance should have been at least forty in order to give the stuff a wider range of action.

According to Oliver's mathematical reckoning, they were cut in the exact centre of the base of the idol, and about thirty feet below the actual body of the crouching sphinx. As a matter of fact this reckoning was wrong in several particulars, the charges having been set farther toward the east or head of the sphinx and higher up in the base than he supposed. When it is remembered that he had found no opportunity of measuring the monument which practically we had only seen once from behind under conditions not favourable to accuracy in such respects, or of knowing its actual length and depth, these trifling errors were not remarkable.

What was remarkable is that his general plan of operations, founded upon a mere hypothetical estimate, should have proved as accurate as it did.

At length all was prepared, and the deadly cast-iron flasks had been packed in sand, together with dynamite cartridges, the necessary detonators, electric wires, and so forth, an anxious and indeed awful task executed entirely in that stifling atmosphere by the hands of Orme

and Quick. Then began another labour, that of the filling in of the tunnels. This, it seems, was necessary, or so I understood, lest the expanding gases, following the line of least resistance, should blow back, as it were, through the vent-hole. What made that task the more difficult was the need of cutting a little channel in the rock to contain the wires, and thereby lessen the risk of the fracture of these wires in the course of the building-up process. Of course, if by any accident this should happen, the circuit would be severed, and no explosion would follow when the electric battery was set to work.

The arrangement was that the mine should be fired on the night of that full moon on which we had been told, and spies confirmed the information, the feast of the marriage of Barung's daughter to my son would be celebrated in the city of Harmac. This date was fixed because the Sultan had announced that so soon as that festivity, which coincided with the conclusion of the harvest, was ended, he meant to deliver his attack on Mur.

Also, we were anxious that it should be adhered to for another reason, since we knew that on this day but a small number of priests and guards would be left in charge of the idol, and my son could not be among them. Now, whatever may have been the views of the Abati, we as Christians who bore them no malice did not at all desire to destroy an enormous number of innocent Fung, as might have happened if we had fired our mine when the people were gathered to sacrifice to their god.



The fatal day arrived at last. All was completed, save for the blocking of the passage, which still went on, or, rather, was being reinforced by the piling up of loose rocks against its mouth, at which a hundred or so men laboured incessantly. The firing wires had been led into that little chamber in the old temple where the dog Pharaoh tore out the throat of Shadrach, and no inch of them was left unguarded for fear of accident or treachery.

The electric batteries--two of them, in case one should fail--had been tested but not connected with the wires. There they stood upon the floor, looking innocent enough, and we four sat round them like wizards round their magic pot, who await the working of some spell. We were not cheerful; who could be under so intense a strain? Orme, indeed, who had grown pale and thin with continuous labour of mind and body, seemed quite worn out. He could not eat nor smoke, and with difficulty I persuaded him to drink some of the native wine. He would not even go to look at the completion of the work or to test the wires.

"You can see to it," he said; "I have done all I can. Now things must take their chance."

After our midday meal he lay down and slept quite soundly for several hours. About four o'clock those who were labouring at the piling up of debris over the mouth of the tunnel completed their task, and, in charge of Quick, were marched out of the underground city.

Then Higgs and I took lamps and went along the length of the wires, which lay in a little trench covered over with dust, removing the dust and inspecting them at intervals. Discovering nothing amiss, we returned to the old temple, and at its doorway met the mountaineer, Japhet, who throughout all these proceedings had been our prop and stay. Indeed, without his help and that of his authority over the Abati the mine could never have been completed, at any rate within the time.

The light of the lamp showed that his face was very anxious.

"What is the matter?" I asked.

"O Physician," he answered, "I have words for the ear of the Captain Orme. Be pleased to lead me to him."

We explained that he slept and could not be disturbed, but Japhet only answered as before, adding:

"Come you with me, my words are for your ears as well as his."

So we went into the little room and awoke Oliver, who sprang up in a great fright, thinking that something untoward had happened at the mine.

"What's wrong?" he asked of Japhet. "Have the Fung cut the wires?"

"Nay, O Orme, a worse thing; I have discovered that the Prince Joshua has laid a plot to steal away 'Her-whose-name-is-high.'"

"What do you mean? Set out all the story, Japhet," said Oliver.

"It is short, lord. I have some friends, one of whom--he is of my own blood, but ask me not his name--is in the service of the Prince. We drank a cup of wine together, which I needed, and I suppose it loosed his tongue. At any rate, he told me, and I believed him. This is the story. For his own sake and that of the people the Prince desires that you should destroy the idol of Fung, and therefore he has kept his hands off you of late. Yet should you succeed, he does not know what may happen. He fears lest the Abati in their gratitude should set you up as great men."

"Then he is an ass!" interrupted Quick; "for the Abati have no gratitude."

"He fears," went on Japhet, "other things also. For instance, that the Child of Kings may express that gratitude by a mark of her signal favour toward one of you," and he stared at Orme, who turned his head aside.

"Now, the Prince is affianced to this great lady, whom he desires to wed for two reasons: First, because this marriage will make him the chief man amongst the Abati, and, secondly, because of late he has come to think that he loves her whom he is afraid that he may lose. So he has set a snare."

"What snare?" asked one of us, for Japhet paused.

"I don't know," answered Japhet, "and I do not think that my friend knew either, or, if he did, he would not tell me. But I understand the plot is that the Child of Kings is to be carried off to the Prince Joshua's castle at the other end of the lake, six hours' ride away, and there be forced to marry him at once."

"Indeed," said Orme, "and when is all this to happen?"

"I don't know, lord. I know nothing except what my friend told me, which I thought it right to communicate to you instantly. I asked him the time, however, and he said that he believed the date was fixed for one night after next Sabbath."

"Next Sabbath is five days hence, so that this matter does not seem to be very pressing," remarked Oliver with a sigh of relief. "Are you sure that you can trust your friend, Japhet?"

"No, lord, I am not sure, especially as I have always known him to be a liar. Still, I thought that I ought to tell you."

"Very kind of you, Japhet, but I wish that you had let me have my sleep out first. Now go down the line and see that all is right, then return and report."

Japhet saluted in his native fashion and went.

"What do you think of this story?" asked Oliver, as soon as he was out of hearing.

"All bosh," answered Higgs; "the place is full of talk and rumours, and this is one of them."

He paused and looked at me.

"Oh!" I said, "I agree with Higgs. If Japhet's friend had really anything to tell he would have told it in more detail. I daresay there are a good many things Joshua would like to do, but I expect he will stop there, at any rate, for the present. If you take my advice you will say nothing of the matter, especially to Maqueda."

"Then we are all agreed. But what are you thinking of, Sergeant?" asked Oliver, addressing Quick, who stood in a corner of the room, lost apparently in contemplation of the floor.

"I, Captain," he replied, coming to attention. "Well, begging their pardon, I was thinking that I don't hold with these gentlemen, except in so far that I should say nothing of this job to our Lady, who has plenty to bother her just now, and won't need to be frightened as well. Still, there may be something in it, for though that Japhet is stupid, he's

honest, and honest men sometimes get hold of the right end of the stick. At least, he believes there is something, and that's what weighs with me."

"Well, if that's your opinion, what's best to be done Sergeant? I agree that the Child of Kings should not be told, and I shan't leave this place till after ten o'clock to-night at the earliest, if we stick to our plans, as we had better do, for all that stuff in the tunnel wants a little time to settle, and for other reasons. What are you drawing there?" and he pointed to the floor, in the dust of which Quick was tracing something with his finger.

"A plan of our Lady's private rooms, Captain. She told you she was going to rest at sundown, didn't she, or earlier, for she was up most of last night, and wanted to get a few hours' sleep before--something happens. Well, her bed-chamber is there, isn't it? and another before it, in which her maids sleep, and nothing behind except a high wall and a ditch which cannot be climbed."

"That's quite true," interrupted Higgs. "I got leave to make a plan of the palace, only there is a passage six feet wide and twenty long leading from the guard chamber to the ladies' anteroom."

"Just so, Professor, and that passage has a turn in it, if I remember right, so that two well-armed men could hold it against quite a lot. Supposing now that you and I, Professor, should go and take a nap in

that guard-room, which will be empty, for the watch is set at the palace gate. We shan't be wanted here, since if the Captain can't touch off that mine, no one can, with the Doctor to help him just in case anything goes wrong, and Japhet guarding the line. I daresay there's nothing in this yarn, but who knows? There might be, and then we should blame ourselves. What do you say, Professor?"

"I? Oh, I'll do anything you wish, though I should rather have liked to climb the cliff and watch what happens."

"You'd see nothing, Higgs," interrupted Oliver, "except perhaps the reflection of a flash in the sky; so, if you don't mind, I wish you would go with the Sergeant. Somehow, although I am quite certain that we ought not to alarm Maqueda, I am not easy about her, and if you two fellows were there, I should know she was all right, and it would be a weight off my mind."

"That settles it," said Higgs; "we'll be off presently. Look here, give us that portable telephone, which is of no use anywhere else now. The wire will reach to the palace, and if the machine works all right we can talk to you and tell each other how things are going on."

Ten minutes later they had made their preparations. Quick stepped up to Oliver and stood at attention, saying:

"Ready to march. Any more orders, Captain?"

"I think not, Sergeant," he answered, lifting his eyes from the little batteries that he was watching as though they were live things. "You know the arrangements. At ten o'clock--that is about two hours hence--I touch this switch. Whatever happens it must not be done before, for fear lest the Doctor's son should not have left the idol, to say nothing of all the other poor beggars. The spies say that the marriage feast will not be celebrated until at least three hours after moonrise."

"And that's what I heard when I was a prisoner," interrupted Higgs.

"I daresay," answered Orme; "but it is always well to allow a margin in case the procession should be delayed, or something. So until ten o'clock I've got to stop where I am, and you may be sure, Doctor, that under no circumstances shall I fire the mine before that hour, as indeed you will be here to see. After that I can't say what will happen, but if we don't appear, you two had better come to look for us--in case of accidents, you know. Do your best at your end according to circumstances; the Doctor and I will do our best at ours. I think that is all, Sergeant. Report yourselves by the telephone if the wire is long enough and it will work, which I daresay it won't, and, anyway, look out for us about half-past ten. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye, Captain," answered Quick, then stretched out his hand, shook that of Orme, and without another word took his lamp and left the chamber.



An impulse prompted me to follow him, leaving Orme and Higgs discussing something before they parted. When he had walked about fifty yards in the awful silence of that vast underground town, of which the ruined tenements yawned on either side of us, the Sergeant stopped and said suddenly:

"You don't believe in presentiments, do you, Doctor?"

"Not a bit," I answered.

"Glad of it, Doctor. Still, I have got a bad one now, and it is that I shan't see the Captain or you any more."

"Then that's a poor look-out for us, Quick."

"No, Doctor, for me. I think you are both all right, and the Professor, too. It's my name they are calling up aloft, or so it seems to me. Well, I don't care much, for, though no saint, I have tried to do my duty, and if it is done, it's done. If it's written, it's got to come to pass, hasn't it? For everything is written down for us long before we begin, or so I've always thought. Still, I'll grieve to part from the Captain, seeing that I nursed him as a child, and I'd have liked to know him well out of this hole, and safely married to that sweet lady first, though I don't doubt that it will be so."

"Nonsense, Sergeant," I said sharply; "you are not yourself; all this work and anxiety has got on your nerves."

"As it well might, Doctor, not but I daresay that's true. Anyhow, if the other is the true thing, and you should all see old England again with some of the stuff in that dead-house, I've got three nieces living down at home whom you might remember. Don't say nothing of what I told you to the Captain till this night's game is played, seeing that it might upset him, and he'll need to keep cool up to ten o'clock, and afterwards too, perhaps. Only if we shouldn't meet again, say that Samuel Quick sent him his duty and God's blessing. And the same on yourself, Doctor, and your son, too. And now here comes the Professor, so good-bye."

A minute later they had left me, and I stood watching them until the two stars of light from their lanterns vanished into the blackness.