

CHAPTER XVI

HARMAC COMES TO MUR

Slowly and in very bad spirits I retraced my steps to the old temple, following the line of the telephone wire which Higgs and Quick had unreeled as they went. In the Sergeant's prognostications of evil I had no particular belief, as they seemed to me to be born of the circumstances which surrounded us, and in different ways affected all our minds, even that of the buoyant Higgs.

To take my own case, for instance. Here I was about to assist in an act which for aught I knew might involve the destruction of my only son. It was true we believed that this was the night of his marriage at the town of Harmac, some miles away, and that the tale of our spies supported this information. But how could we be sure that the date, or the place of the ceremony, had not been changed at the last moment? Supposing, for instance, that it was held, not in the town, as arranged, but in the courts of the idol, and that the fearful activities of the fiery agent which we were about to wake to life should sweep the celebrants into nothingness.

The thought made me turn cold, and yet the deed must be done; Roderick must take his chance. And if all were well, and he escaped that danger, were there not worse behind? Think of him, a Christian man, the husband of a savage woman who worshipped a stone image with a lion's head, bound

to her and her tribe, a state prisoner, trebly guarded, whom, so far as I could see, there would be no hope of rescuing. It was awful. Then there were other complications. If the plan succeeded and the idol was destroyed, my own belief was that the Fung must thereby be exasperated. Evidently they knew some road into this stronghold. It would be used. They would pour their thousands up it, a general massacre would follow, of which, justly, we should be the first victims.

I reached the chamber where Oliver sat brooding alone, for Japhet was patrolling the line.

"I am not happy about Maqueda, Doctor," he said to me. "I am afraid there is something in that story. She wanted to be with us; indeed, she begged to be allowed to come almost with tears. But I wouldn't have it, since accidents may always happen; the vibration might shake in the roof or something; in fact, I don't think you should be here. Why don't you go away and leave me?"

I answered that nothing would induce me to do so, for such a job should not be left to one man.

"No, you're right," he said; "I might faint or lose my head or anything. I wish now that we had arranged to send the spark from the palace, which perhaps we might have done by joining the telephone wire on to the others. But, to tell you the truth, I'm afraid of the batteries.

The cells are new but very weak, for time and the climate have affected

them, and I thought it possible the extra difference might make the difference and that they would fail to work. That's why I fixed this as the firing point. Hullo, there's the bell. What have they got to say?"

I snatched the receiver, and presently heard the cheerful voice of Higgs announcing that they had arrived safely in the little anteroom to Maqueda's private apartments.

"The palace seems very empty," he added; "we only met one sentry, for I think that everybody else, except Maqueda and a few of her ladies, have cleared out, being afraid lest rocks should fall on them when the explosion occurs."

"Did the man say so?" I asked of Higgs.

"Yes, something of that sort; also he wanted to forbid us to come here, saying that it was against the Prince Joshua's orders that we Gentiles should approach the private apartments of the Child of Kings. Well, we soon settled that, and he bolted. Where to? Oh! I don't know; to report, he said."

"How's Quick?" I asked.

"Much the same as usual. In fact, he is saying his prayers in the corner, looking like a melancholy brigand with rifles, revolvers, and knives stuck all over him. I wish he wouldn't say his prayers," added

Higgs, and his voice reached me in an indignant squeak; "it makes me feel uncomfortable, as though I ought to join him. But not having been brought up a Dissenter or a Moslem, I can't pray in public as he does. Hullo! Wait a minute, will you?"

Then followed a longish pause, and after it Higgs's voice again.

"It's all right," it said. "Only one of Maqueda's ladies who had heard us and come to see who we were. When she learns I expect she will join us here, as the girl says she's nervous and can't sleep."

Higgs proved right in his anticipations, for in about ten minutes we were rung up again, this time by Maqueda herself, whereon I handed the receiver to Oliver and retired to the other end of the room.

Nor, to tell the truth, was I sorry for the interruption, since it cheered up Oliver and helped to pass the time.

The next thing worth telling that happened was that, an hour or more later, Japhet arrived, looking very frightened. We asked him our usual question: if anything was wrong with the wires. With a groan he answered "No," the wires seemed all right, but he had met a ghost.

"What ghost, you donkey?" I said.

"The ghost of one of the dead kings, O Physician, yonder in the burial

cave. It was he with the bent bones who sits in the farthest chair. Only he had put some flesh on his bones, and I tell you he looked fearful, a very fierce man, or rather ghost."

"Indeed, and did he say anything to you, Japhet?"

"Oh! yes, plenty, O Physician, only I could not understand it all, because his language was somewhat different to mine, and he spat out his words as a green log spits out sparks. I think that he asked me, however, how my miserable people dared to destroy his god, Harmac. I answered that I was only a servant and did not know, adding that he should put his questions to you."

"And what did he say to that, Japhet?"

"I think he said that Harmac would come to Mur and settle his account with the Abati, and that the foreign men would be wise to fly fast and far. That's all I understood; ask me no more, who would not return into that cave to be made a prince."

"He's got hold of what Barung's envoys told us," said Oliver, indifferently, "and no wonder, this place is enough to make anybody see ghosts. I'll repeat it to Maqueda; it will amuse her."

"I wouldn't if I were you," I answered, "for it isn't exactly a cheerful yarn, and perhaps she's afraid of ghosts too. Also," and I pointed

to the watch that lay on the table beside the batteries, "it is five minutes to ten."

Oh! that last five minutes! It seemed as many centuries. Like stone statues we sat, each of us lost in his own thoughts, though for my part the power of clear thinking appeared to have left me. Visions of a sort flowed over my mind without sinking into it, as water flows over marble. All I could do was fix my eyes on the face of that watch, of which in the flickering lamp-light the second-hand seemed to my excited fancy to grow enormous and jump from one side of the room to the other.

Orme began to count aloud. "One, two, three, four, five--now!" and almost simultaneously he touched the knob first of one battery and next of the other. Before his finger pressed the left-hand knob I felt the solid rock beneath us surge--no other word conveys its movement. Then the great stone cross-piece, weighing several tons, that was set as a transom above the tall door of our room, dislodged itself, and fell quite gently into the doorway, which it completely blocked.

Other rocks fell also at a distance, making a great noise, and somehow I found myself on the ground, my stool had slid away from me. Next followed a muffled, awful roar, and with it came a blast of wind blowing where wind never blew before since the beginning of the world, that with a terrible wailing howled itself to silence in the thousand recesses of the cave city. As it passed our lamps went out. Lastly, quite a minute later I should think, there was a thud, as though something of enormous

weight had fallen on the surface of the earth far above us.

Then all was as it had been; all was darkness and utter quietude.

"Well, that's over," said Oliver, in a strained voice which sounded very small and far away through that thick darkness; "all over for good or ill. I needn't have been anxious; the first battery was strong enough, for I felt the mine spring as I touched the second. I wonder," he went on, as though speaking to himself, "what amount of damage nearly a ton and a half of that awful azo-imide compound has done to the old sphinx. According to my calculations it ought to have been enough to break the thing up, if we could have spread the charge more. But, as it is, I am by no means certain. It may only have driven a hole in its bulk, especially if there were hollows through which the gases could run. Well, with luck, we may know more about it later. Strike a match, Adams, and light those lamps. Why, what's that? Listen!"

As he spoke, from somewhere came a series of tiny noises, that, though they were so faint and small, suggested rifles fired at a great distance. Crack, crack, crack! went the infinitesimal noises.

I groped about, and finding the receiver of the field telephone, set it to my ear. In an instant all grew plain to me. Guns were being fired near the other end of the wire, and the transmitter was sending us the sound of them. Very faintly but with distinctness I could hear Higgs's high voice saying, "Look out, Sergeant, there's another rush coming!"

and Quick answering, "Shoot low, Professor; for the Lord's sake shoot low. You are empty, sir. Load up, load up! Here's a clip of cartridges. Don't fire too fast. Ah! that devil got me, but I've got him; he'll never throw another spear."

"They are being attacked!" I exclaimed. "Quick is wounded. Now Maqueda is talking to you. She says, 'Oliver, come! Joshua's men assail me. Oliver, come!'"

Then followed a great sound of shouting answered by more shots, and just as Orme snatched the receiver from my hand the wire went dead. In vain he called down it in an agonized voice. As well might he have addressed the planet Saturn.

"The wire's cut," he exclaimed, dashing down the receiver and seizing the lantern which Japhet had just succeeded in re-lighting; "come on, there's murder being done," and he sprang to the doorway, only to stagger back again from the great stone with which it was blocked.

"Good God!" he screamed, "we're shut in. How can we get out? How can we get out?" and he began to run round and round the room, and even to spring at the walls like a frightened cat. Thrice he sprang, striving to climb to the coping, for the place had no roof, each time falling back, since it was too high for him to grasp. I caught him round the middle, and held him by main force, although he struck at me.

"Be quiet," I said; "do you want to kill yourself? You will be no good dead or maimed. Let me think."

Meanwhile Japhet was acting on his own account, for he, too, had heard the tiny, ominous sounds given out by the telephone and guessed their purport. First he ran to the massive transom that blocked the doorway and pushed. It was useless; not even an elephant could have stirred it. Then he stepped back, examining it carefully.

"I think it can be climbed, Physician," he said. "Help me now," and he motioned to me to take one end of the heavy table on which the batteries stood. We dragged it to the doorway, and, seeing his purpose, Oliver jumped on to it with him. Then at Japhet's direction, while I supported the table to prevent its oversetting, Orme rested his forehead against the stone, making what schoolboy's call "a back," up which the mountaineer climbed actively until he stood upon his shoulders, and by stretching himself was able to grasp the end of the fallen transom. Next, while I held up the lamp to give him light, he gripped the roughnesses of the hewn stone with his toes, and in a few moments was upon the coping of the wall, twenty feet or more above the floor line.

The rest was comparatively easy, for taking off his linen robe, Japhet knotted it once or twice, and let it down to us. By the help of this improvised rope, with Orme supporting me beneath, I, too, was dragged up to the coping of the wall. Then both of us pulled up Oliver, who, without a word, swung himself over the wall, hanging to Japhet's arms,

and loosing his hold, dropped to the ground on the farther side. Next came my turn. It was a long fall, and had not Oliver caught me I think that I should have hurt myself. As it was, the breath was shaken out of me. Lastly, Japhet swung himself down, landing lightly as a cat. The lamps he had already dropped to us, and in another minute they were all lighted, and we were speeding down the great cavern.

"Be careful," I cried; "there may be fallen rocks about."

As it happened I was right, for at that moment Oliver struck his legs against one of them and fell, cutting himself a good deal. In a moment he was up again, but after this our progress grew slow, for hundreds of tons of stone had been shaken from the roof and blocked the path. Also, whole buildings of the ancient and underground city had been thrown down, although these were mostly blown inward by the rush of air. At length we came to the end of the cave, and halted dismayed, for here, where the blast of the explosion had been brought to a full stop, the place seemed to be crowded with rocks which it had rolled before it.

"My God! I believe we are shut in," exclaimed Oliver in despair.

But Japhet, lantern in hand, was already leaping from block to block, and presently, from the top of the débris, called to us to come to him.

"I think there is a road left, though a bad one, lords," he said, and pointed to a jagged, well-like hole blown out, as I believe, by the

recoil of the blast. With difficulty and danger, for many of the piled up stones were loose, we climbed down this place, and at its bottom squeezed ourselves through a narrow aperture on to the floor of the cave, praying that the huge door which led to the passage beyond might not be jammed, since if it were, as we knew well, our small strength would not avail to move it. Happily, this fear at least proved groundless, since it opened outward, and the force of the compressed air had torn it from its massive stone hinges and thrown it shattered to the ground.

We scrambled over it, and advanced down the passage, our revolvers in our hands. We reached the audience hall, which was empty and in darkness. We turned to the left, crossing various chambers, and in the last of them, through which one of the gates of the palace could be approached, met with the first signs of the tragedy, for there were bloodstains on the floor.

Orme pointed to them as he hurried on, and suddenly a man leapt out of the darkness as a buck leaps from a bush, and ran past us, holding his hands to his side, where evidently he had some grievous hurt. Now we entered the corridor leading to the private apartments of the Child of Kings, and found ourselves walking on the bodies of dead and dying men. One of the former I observed, as one does notice little things at such a moment, held in his hand the broken wire of the field telephone. I presume that he had snatched and severed it in his death pang at the moment when communication ceased between us and the palace.

We rushed into the little antechamber, in which lights were burning, and there saw a sight that I for one never shall forget.

In the foreground lay more dead men, all of them wearing the livery of Prince Joshua. Beyond was Sergeant Quick, seated on a chair. He seemed to be literally hacked to pieces. An arrow that no one had attempted to remove was fast in his shoulder; his head, which Maqueda was sponging with wet cloths--well, I will not describe his wounds.

Leaning against the wall near by stood Higgs, also bleeding, and apparently quite exhausted. Behind, besides Maqueda herself, were two or three of her ladies, wringing their hands and weeping. In face of this terrible spectacle we came to a sudden halt. No word was spoken of by any one, for the power of speech had left us.

The dying Quick opened his eyes, lifted his hand, upon which there was a ghastly sword-cut, to his forehead, as though to shade them from the light--ah! how well I recall that pathetic motion--and from beneath this screen stared at us a while. Then he rose from the chair, touched his throat to show that he could not speak, as I suppose, saluted Orme, turned and pointed to Maqueda, and with a triumphant smile sank down and--died.

Such was the noble end of Sergeant Quick.

To describe what followed is not easy, for the scene was confused. Also shock and sorrow have blurred its recollection in my mind. I remember Maqueda and Orme falling into each other's arms before everybody. I remember her drawing herself up in that imperial way of hers, and saying, as she pointed to the body of Quick:

"There lies one who has shown us how to die. This countryman of yours was a hero, O Oliver, and you should hold his memory in honour, since he saved me from worse than death."

"What's the story?" asked Orme of Higgs.

"A simple one enough," he answered. "We got here all right, as we told you over the wire. Then Maqueda talked to you for a long while until you rang off, saying you wanted to speak to Japhet. After that, at ten o'clock precisely, we heard the thud of the explosion. Next, as we were preparing to go out to see what had happened, Joshua arrived alone, announced that the idol Harmac had been destroyed, and demanded that the Child of Kings, 'for State reasons,' should accompany him to his own castle. She declined and, as he insisted, I took it upon myself to kick him out of the place. He retired, and we saw no more of him, but a few minutes later there came a shower of arrows down the passage, and after them a rush of men, who called, 'Death to the Gentiles. Rescue the Rose.'

"So we began to shoot and knocked over a lot of them, but Quick got

that arrow through his shoulder. Three times they came on like that, and three times we drove them back. At last our cartridges ran low, and we only had our revolvers left, which we emptied into them. They hung a moment, but moved forward again, and all seemed up.

"Then Quick went mad. He snatched the sword of a dead Abati and ran at them roaring like a bull. They hacked and cut at him, but the end of it was that he drove them right out of the passage, while I followed, firing past him.

"Well, those who were left of the blackguards bolted, and when they had gone the Sergeant tumbled down. The women and I carried him back here, but he never said another word, and at last you turned up. Now he's gone, God rest him, for if ever there was a hero in this world he was christened Samuel Quick!" and, turning aside, the Professor pushed up the blue spectacles he always wore on to his forehead, and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

With grief more bitter than I can describe we lifted up the body of the gallant Quick and, bearing it into Maqueda's private apartment, placed it on her own bed, for she insisted that the man who had died to protect her should be laid nowhere else. It was strange to see the grim old soldier, whose face, now that I had washed his wounds, looked calm and even beautiful, laid out to sleep his last sleep upon the couch of the Child of Kings. That bed, I remember, was a rich and splendid thing, made of some black wood inlaid with scrolls of gold, and having hung

about its curtains of white net embroidered with golden stars, such as Maqueda wore upon her official veil.

There upon the scented pillows and silken coverlet we set our burden down, the work-worn hands clasped upon the breast in an attitude of prayer, and one by one bid our farewell to this faithful and upright man, whose face, as it chanced, we were never to see again, except in the glass of memory. Well, he had died as he had lived and would have wished to die--doing his duty and in war. And so we left him. Peace be to his honoured spirit!

In the blood-stained ante-room, while I dressed and stitched up the Professor's wounds, a sword-cut on the head, an arrow-graze along the face, and a spear-prick in the thigh, none of them happily at all deep or dangerous, we held a brief council.

"Friends," said Maqueda, who was leaning on her lover's arm, "it is not safe that we should stop here. My uncle's plot has failed for the moment, but it was only a small and secret thing. I think that soon he will return again with a thousand at his back, and then----"

"What is in your mind?" asked Oliver. "To fly from Mur?"

"How can we fly," she answered, "when the pass is guarded by Joshua's men, and the Fung wait for us without? The Abati hate you, my friends, and now that you have done your work I think that they will kill you if

they can, whom they bore with only till it was done. Alas! alas! that I should have brought you to this false and ungrateful country," and she began to weep, while we stared at each other, helpless.

Then Japhet, who all this while had been crouched on the floor, rocking himself too and fro and mourning in his Eastern fashion for Quick, whom he had loved, rose, and, coming to the Child of Kings, prostrated himself before her.

"O Walda Nagasta," he said, "hear the words of your servant. Only three miles away, near to the mouth of the pass, are encamped five hundred men of my own people, the Mountaineers, who hate Prince Joshua and his following. Fly to them, O Walda Nagasta, for they will cleave to you and listen to me whom you have made a chief among them. Afterwards you can act as may seem wisest."

Maqueda looked at Oliver questioningly.

"I think that is good advice," he said. "At any rate, we can't be worse off among the Mountaineers than we are in this undefended place. Tell your women to bring cloaks that we can throw over our heads, and let us go."

Five minutes later, a forlorn group filled with fears, we had stolen over the dead and dying in the passage, and made our way to the side gate of the palace that we found open, and over the bridge that spanned

the moat beyond, which was down. Doubtless Joshua's ruffians had used it in their approach and retreat. Disguised in the long cloaks with monk-like hoods that the Abati wore at night or when the weather was cold and wet, we hurried across the great square. Here, since we could not escape them, we mingled with the crowd that was gathered at its farther end, all of them--men, women and children--chattering like monkeys in the tree-tops, and pointing to the cliff at the back of the palace, beneath which, it will be remembered, lay the underground city.

A band of soldiers rode by, thrusting their way through the people, and in order to avoid them we thought it wise to take refuge in the shadow of a walk of green-leaved trees which grew close at hand, for we feared lest they might recognize Oliver by his height. Here we turned and looked up at the cliff, to discover what it was at which every one was staring. At that moment the full moon, which had been obscured by a cloud, broke out, and we saw a spectacle that under the circumstances was nothing less than terrifying.

The cliff behind the palace rose to a height of about a hundred and fifty feet, and, as it chanced, just there a portion of it jutted out in an oblong shape, which the Abati called the Lion Rock, although personally, heretofore, I had never been able to see in it any great resemblance to a lion. Now, however, it was different, for on the very extremity of this rock, staring down at Mur, sat the head and neck of the huge lion-faced idol of the Fung. Indeed, in that light, with the promontory stretching away behind it, it looked as though it were

the idol itself, moved from the valley upon the farther side of the precipice to the top of the cliff above.

"Oh! oh! oh!" groaned Japhet, "the prophecy is fulfilled--the head of Harmac has come to sleep at Mur."

"You mean that we have sent him there," whispered Higgs. "Don't be frightened, man; can't you understand that the power of our medicine has blown the head off the sphinx high into the air, and landed it where it sits now?"

"Yes," I put in, "and what we felt in the cave was the shock of its fall."

"I don't care what brought him," replied Japhet, who seemed quite unstrung by all that he had gone through. "All I know is that the prophecy is fulfilled, and Harmac has come to Mur, and where Harmac goes the Fung follow."

"So much the better," said the irreverent Higgs. "I may be able to sketch and measure him now."

But I saw that Maqueda was trembling, for she, too, thought this occurrence a very bad omen, and even Oliver remained silent, perhaps because he feared its effect upon the Abati.

Nor was this wonderful since, from the talk around us, clearly that effect was great. Evidently the people were terrified, like Japhet. We could hear them foreboding ill, and cursing us Gentiles as wizards, who had not destroyed the idol of the Fung as we promised, but had only caused him to fly to Mur.

Here I may mention that as a matter of fact they were right. As we discovered afterwards, the whole force of the explosion, instead of shattering the vast bulk of the stone image, had rushed up through the hollow chambers in its interior until it struck against the solid head. Lifting this as though it were a toy, the expanding gas had hurled that mighty mass an unknown distance into the air, to light upon the crest of the cliffs of Mur, where probably it will remain forever.

"Well," I said, when we had stared a little while at this extraordinary phenomenon, "thank God it did not travel farther, and fall upon the palace."

"Oh! had it done so," whispered Maqueda in a tearful voice, "I think you might have thanked God indeed, for then at least I should be free from all my troubles. Come, friends, let us be going before we are discovered."