

CHAPTER XVII

I FIND MY SON

Our road toward the pass ran through the camping ground of the newly created Abati army, and what we saw on our journey thither told us more vividly than any words or reports could do, how utter was the demoralization of that people. Where should have been sentries were no sentries; where should have been soldiers were groups of officers talking with women; where should have been officers were camp followers drinking.

Through this confusion and excitement we made our way unobserved, or, at any rate, unquestioned, till at length we came to the regiment of the Mountaineers, who, for the most part, were goatherds, poor people who lived upon the slopes of the precipices that enclosed the land of Mur. These folk, having little to do with their more prosperous brethren of the plain, were hardy and primitive of nature, and therefore retained some of the primeval virtues of mankind, such as courage and loyalty.

It was for the first of these reasons, and, indeed, for the second also, that they had been posted by Joshua at the mouth of the pass, which he knew well they alone could be trusted to defend in the event of serious attack. Moreover, it was desirable, from his point of view, to keep them out of the way while he developed his plans against the person of the Child of Kings, for whom these simple-minded men had a hereditary and

almost a superstitious reverence.

As soon as we were within the lines of these Mountaineers we found the difference between them and the rest of the Abati. The other regiments we had passed unchallenged, but here we were instantly stopped by a picket. Japhet whispered something into the ear of its officer that caused him to stare hard at us. Then this officer saluted the veiled figure of the Child of Kings and led us to where the commander of the band and his subordinates were seated near a fire sitting together. At some sign or word that did not reach us the commander, an old fellow with a long grey beard, rose and said:

"Your pardon, but be pleased to show your faces."

Maqueda threw back her hood and turned so that the light of the moon fell full upon her, whereon the old man dropped to his knee, saying:

"Your commands, O Walda Nagasta."

"Summon your regiment and I will give them," she answered, and seated herself on a bench by the fire, we three and Japhet standing behind her.

The commander issued orders to his captains, and presently the Mountaineers formed up on three sides of a square above us, to the number of a little over five hundred men. When all were gathered Maqueda mounted the bench upon which she had been sitting, threw back her hood

so that every one could see her face in the light of the fire, and addressed them:

"Men of the mountain-side, this night just after the idol of the Fung had been destroyed, the Prince Joshua, my uncle, came to me demanding my surrender to him, whether to kill me or to imprison me in his castle beyond the end of the lake, for reasons of State as he said, or for other vile purposes, I do not know."

At these words a murmur rose from the audience.

"Wait," said Maqueda, holding up her hand, "there is worse to come. I told my uncle, Prince Joshua, that he was a traitor and had best be gone. He went, threatening me and, when I do not know, withdrew the guards that should be stationed at my palace gates. Now, some rumour of my danger had reached the foreigners in my service, and two of them, he who is called Black Windows, whom we rescued from the Fung, and the soldier named Quick, came to watch over me, while the Lord Orme and the Doctor Adams stayed in the cave to send out that spark of fire which should destroy the idol. Nor did they come back without need, for presently arrived a band of Prince Joshua's men to take me.

"Then Black Windows and the soldier his companion fought a good fight, they two holding the narrow passage against many, and slaying a number of them with their terrible weapons. The end of it was, men of the mountains, that the warrior Quick, charging down the passage, drove

away those servants of Joshua who remained alive. But in so doing he was wounded to the death. Yes, that brave man lies dead, having given his life to save the Child of Kings from the hands of her own people. Black Windows also was wounded--see the bandages about his head. Then came the Lord Orme and the Doctor Adams, and with them your brother Japhet, who had barely escaped with their lives from the cave city, and knowing that I was no longer safe in the palace, where even my sleeping-room has been drenched with blood, with them I have fled to you for succour. Will you not protect me, O men of the mountain-side?"

"Yes, yes," they answered with a great shout. "Command we obey. What shall we do, O Child of Kings?"

Now Maqueda called the officers of the regiment apart and consulted with them, asking their opinions, one by one. Some of them were in favour of finding out where Joshua might be, and attacking him at once. "Crush the snake's head and its tail will soon cease wriggling!" these said, and I confess this was a view that in many ways commended itself to us.

But Maqueda would have none of it.

"What!" she exclaimed, "shall I begin a civil war among my people when for aught I know the enemy is at our gates?" adding aside to us, "also, how can these few hundred men, brave though they be, hope to stand against the thousands under the command of Joshua?"

"What, then, would you do?" asked Orme.

"Return to the palace with these Mountaineers, O Oliver, and by help of that garrison, hold it against all enemies."

"Very well," he replied. "To those who are quite lost one road is as good as another; they must trust to the stars to guide them."

"Quite so," echoed Higgs; "and the sooner we go the better, for my leg hurts, and I want a sleep."

So Maqueda gave her commands to the officers, by whom they were conveyed to the regiment, which received them with a shout, and instantly began to strike its camp.

Then it was, coming hot-foot after so much sorrow, loss and doubt, that there followed the happiest event of all my life. Utterly tired out and very despondent, I was seated on an arrow-chest awaiting the order to march, idly watching Oliver and Maqueda talking with great earnestness at a little distance, and in the intervals trying to prevent poor Higgs at my side from falling asleep. While I was thus engaged, suddenly I heard a disturbance, and by the bright moonlight caught sight of a man being led into the camp in charge of a guard of Abati soldiers, whom from their dress I knew to belong to a company that just then was employed in watching the lower gates of the pass.

I took no particular heed of the incident, thinking only that they might have captured some spy, till a murmur of astonishment, and the general stir, warned me that something unusual had occurred. So I rose from my box and strolled towards the man, who now was hidden from me by a group of Mountaineers. As I advanced this group opened, the men who composed it bowing to me with a kind of wondering respect that impressed me, I did not know why.

Then for the first time I saw the prisoner. He was a tall, athletic young man, dressed in festal robes with a heavy gold chain about his neck, and I wondered vaguely what such a person should be doing here in this time of national commotion. He turned his head so that the moonlight showed his dark eyes, his somewhat oval-shaped face ending in a peaked black beard, and his finely cut features. In an instant I knew him.

It was my son Roderick!

Next moment, for the first time for very many years, he was in my arms.

The first thing that I remember saying to him was a typically Anglo-Saxon remark, for however much we live in the East or elsewhere, we never really shake off our native conventions, and habits of speech. It was, "How are you, my boy, and how on earth did you come here?" to which he answered, slowly, it is true, and speaking with a foreign accent:

"All right, thank you, father. I ran upon my legs."

By this time Higgs hobbled up, and was greeting my son warmly, for, of course, they were old friends.

"Thought you were to be married to-night, Roderick?" he said.

"Yes, yes," he answered, "I am half married according to Fung custom, which counts not to my soul. Look, this is the dress of marriage," and he pointed to his fine embroidered robe and rich ornaments.

"Then, where's your wife?" asked Higgs.

"I do not know and I do not care," he answered, "for I did not like that wife. Also it is all nothing as I am not quite married to her. Fung marriage between big people takes two days to finish, and if not finished does not matter. So she marry some one else if she like, and I too."

"What happened then?" I asked.

"Oh, this, father. When we had eaten the marriage feast, but before we past before priest, suddenly we hear a thunder and see a pillar of fire shoot up into sky, and sitting on top of it head of Harmac, which vanish into heaven and stop there. Then everybody jump up and say:

"Magic of white man! Magic of white man! White man kill the god who sit there from beginning of world, now day of Fung finished according to prophecy. Run away, people of Fung, run away!"

"Barung the Sultan tear his clothes too, and say--'Run away, Fung,' and my half-wife, she tear her clothes and say nothing, but run like antelope. So they all run toward east, where great river is, and leave me alone. Then I get up and run too--toward west, for I know from Black Windows," and he pointed to Higgs, "when we shut up together in belly of god before he let down to lions, what all this game mean, and therefore not frightened. Well, I run, meeting no one in night, till I come to pass, run up it, and find guards, to whom I tell story, so they not kill me, but let me through, and at last I come here, quite safe, without Fung wife, thank God, and that end of tale."

"I am afraid you are wrong there, my boy," I said, "out of the frying-pan into the fire, that's all."

"Out of frying-pan into fire," he repeated. "Not understand; father must remember I only little fellow when Khalifa's people take me, and since then speak no English till I meet Black Windows. Only he give me Bible-book that he have in pocket when he go down to be eat by lions." (Here Higgs blushed, for no one ever suspected him, a severe critic of all religions, of carrying a Bible in his pocket, and muttered something about "ancient customs of the Hebrews.")

"Well," went on Roderick, "read that book ever since, and, as you see, all my English come back."

"The question is," said Higgs, evidently in haste to talk of something else, "will the Fung come back?"

"Oh! Black Windows, don't know, can't say. Think not. Their prophecy was that Harmac move to Mur, but when they see his head jump into sky and stop there, they run every man toward the sunrise, and I think go on running."

"But Harmac has come to Mur, Roderick," I said; "at least his head has fallen on to the cliff that overlooks the city."

"Oh! my father," he answered, "then that make great difference. When Fung find out that head of Harmac has come here, no doubt they come after him, for head his most holy bit, especially as they want hang all the Abati whom they not like."

"Well, let's hope that they don't find out anything about it," I replied, to change the subject. Then taking Roderick by the hand I led him to where Maqueda stood a yard or two apart, listening to our talk, but, of course, understanding very little of it, and introduced him to her, explaining in a few words the wonderful thing that had happened. She welcomed him very kindly, and congratulated me upon my son's escape.

Meanwhile, Roderick had been staring at her with evident admiration. Now he turned to us and said in his quaint broken English:

"Walda Nagasta most lovely woman! No wonder King Solomon love her mother. If Barung's daughter, my wife, had been like her, think I run through great river into rising sun with Fung."

Oliver instantly translated this remark, which made us all laugh, including Maqueda herself, and very grateful we were to find the opportunity for a little innocent merriment upon that tragic night.

By this time the regiment was ready to start, and had formed up into companies. Before the march actually began, however, the officer of the Abati patrol, in whose charge Roderick had been brought to us, demanded his surrender that he might deliver his prisoner to the Commander-in-Chief, Prince Joshua. Of course, this was refused, whereon the man asked roughly:

"By whose order?"

As it happened, Maqueda, of whose presence he was not aware, heard him, and acting on some impulse, came forward, and unveiled.

"By mine," she said. "Know that the Child of Kings rules the Abati, not the Prince Joshua, and that prisoners taken by her soldiers are hers, not his. Be gone back to your post!"

The captain stared, saluted, and went with his companions, not to the pass, indeed, as he had been ordered, but to Joshua. To him he reported the arrival of the Gentile's son, and the news he brought that the nation of the Fung, dismayed by the destruction of their god, were in full flight from the plains of Harmac, purposing to cross the great river and to return no more.

This glad tidings spread like wildfire; so fast, indeed, that almost before we had begun our march, we heard the shouts of exultation with which it was received by the terrified mob gathered in the great square. The cloud of terror was suddenly lifted from them. They went mad in their delight; they lit bonfires, they drank, they feasted, they embraced each other and boasted of their bravery that had caused the mighty nation of the Fung to flee away for ever.

Meanwhile, our advance had begun, nor in the midst of the general jubilation was any particular notice taken of us till we were in the middle of the square of Mur and within half a mile of the palace, when we saw by the moonlight that a large body of troops, two or three thousand of them, were drawn up in front of us, apparently to bar our way. Still we went on till a number of officers rode up, and addressing the commander of the regiment of Mountaineers, demanded to know why he had left his post, and whither he went.

"I go whither I am ordered," he answered, "for there is one here greater

than I."

"If you mean the Gentile Orme and his fellows, the command of the Prince Joshua is that you hand them over to us that they may make report to him of their doings this night."

"And the command of the Child of Kings is," replied the captain of the Mountaineers, "that I take them with her back to the palace."

"It has no weight," said the spokesman insolently, "not being endorsed by the Council. Surrender the Gentiles, hand over to us the person of the Child of Kings of whom you have taken possession, and return to your post till the pleasure of the Prince Joshua be known."

Then the wrath of Maqueda blazed up.

"Seize those men!" she said, and it was done instantly. "Now, cut the head from him who dared to demand the surrender of my person and of my officers, and give it to his companions to take back to the Prince Joshua as my answer to his message."

The man heard, and being a coward like all the Abati, flung himself upon his face before Maqueda, trying to kiss her robe and pleading for mercy.

"Dog!" she answered, "you were one of those who this very night dared to attack my chamber. Oh! lie not, I knew your voice and heard your

fellow-traitors call you by your name. Away with him!"

We tried to interfere, but she would not listen, even to Orme.

"Would you plead for your brother's murderer?" she asked, alluding to Quick. "I have spoken!"

So they dragged him off behind us, and presently we saw a melancholy procession returning whence they came, carrying something on a shield. It reached the opposing ranks, whence there arose a murmur of wrath and fear.

"March on!" said Maqueda, "and gain the palace."

So the regiment formed into a square, and, setting Maqueda and ourselves in the centre of it, advanced again.

Then the fight began. Great numbers of the Abati surrounded us and, as they did not dare to make a direct attack, commenced shooting arrows, which killed and wounded a number of men. But the Highlanders also were archers, and carried stronger bows. The square was halted, the first ranks kneeling and the second standing behind them. Then, at a given word, the stiff bows which these hardy people used against the lion and the buffalo upon their hills were drawn to the ear and loosed again and again with terrible effect.

On that open place it was almost impossible to miss the mobs of the Abati who, having no experience of war, were fighting without order. Nor could the light mail they wore withstand the rush of the heavy barbed arrows which pierced them through and through. In two minutes they began to give, in three they were flying back to their main body, those who were left of them, a huddled rout of men and horses. So the French must have fled before the terrible longbows of the English at Crécy and Poitiers, for, in fact, we were taking part in just such a mediæval battle.

Oliver, who was watching intently, went to Japhet and whispered something in his ear. He nodded and ran to seek the commander of the regiment. Presently the result of that whisper became apparent, for the sides of the hollow square wheeled outward and the rear moved up to strengthen the centre.

Now the Mountaineers were ranged in a double or triple line, behind which were only about a dozen soldiers, who marched round Maqueda, holding their shields aloft in order to protect her from stray arrows. With these, too, came our four selves, a number of camp-followers and others, carrying on their shields those of the regiment who were too badly wounded to walk.

Leaving the dead where they lay, we began to advance, pouring in volleys of arrows as we went. Twice the Abati tried to charge us, and twice those dreadful arrows drove them back. Then at the word of command, the

Highlanders slung their bows upon their backs, drew their short swords, and in their turn charged.

Five minutes afterwards everything was over. Joshua's soldiers threw down their arms, and ran or galloped to right and left, save a number of them who fled through the gates of the palace, which they had opened, and across the drawbridge into the courtyards within. After them, or, rather, mixed up with them, followed the Mountaineers, killing all whom they could find, for they were out of hand and would not listen to the commands of Maqueda and their officers, that they should show mercy.

So, just as the dawn broke this strange moonlit battle ended, a small affair, it is true, for there were only five hundred men engaged upon our side and three or four thousand on the other, yet one that cost a great number of lives and was the beginning of all the ruin that followed.

Well, we were safe for a while, since it was certain, after the lesson which he had just learned, that Joshua would not attempt to storm the double walls and fosse of the palace without long preparation. Yet even now a new trouble awaited us, for by some means, we never discovered how, that wing of the palace in which Maqueda's private rooms were situated suddenly burst into flames.

Personally, I believe that the fire arose through the fact that a lamp had been left burning near the bed of the Child of Kings upon which

was laid the body of Sergeant Quick. Perhaps a wounded man hidden there overturned the lamp; perhaps the draught blowing through the open doors brought the gold-spangled curtains into contact with the wick.

At any rate, the wood-panelled chambers took fire, and had it not happened that the set of the wind was favourable, the whole palace might have been consumed. As it was, we succeeded in confining the conflagration to this particular part of it, which within two hours had burnt out, leaving nothing standing but the stark, stone walls.

Such was the funeral pyre of Sergeant Quick, a noble one, I thought to myself, as I watched it burn.

When the fire was so well under control, for we had pulled down the connecting passage where Higgs and Quick fought their great fight, that there was no longer any danger of its spreading, and the watches had been set, at length we got some rest.

Maqueda and two or three of her ladies, one of them, I remember, her old nurse who had brought her up, for her mother died at her birth, took possession of some empty rooms, of which there were many in the palace, while we lay, or rather fell, down in the guest-chambers, where we had always slept, and never opened our eyes again until the evening.

I remember that I woke thinking that I was the victim of some wonderful dream of mingled joy and tragedy. Oliver and Higgs were sleeping like

logs, but my son Roderick, still dressed in his bridal robes, had risen and sat by my bed staring at me, a puzzled look upon his handsome face.

"So you are here," I said, taking his hand. "I thought I dreamed."

"No, Father," he answered in his odd English, "no dream; all true.

This is a strange world, Father. Look at me! For how many years--twelve--fourteen, slave of savage peoples for whom I sing, priest of Fung idol, always near death but never die. Then Sultan Barung take fancy to me, say I come of white blood and must be his daughter's husband. Then your brother Higgs made prisoner with me and tell me that you hunt me all these years. Then Higgs thrown to lions and you save him. Then yesterday I married to Sultan's daughter, whom I never see before but twice at fast of idol. Then Harmac's head fly off to heaven, and all Fung people run away, and I run too, and find you. Then battle, and many killed, and arrow scratch my neck but not hurt me," and he pointed to a graze just over his jugular vein, "and now we together. Oh! Father, very strange world! I think there God somewhere who look after us!"

"I think so, too, my boy," I answered, "and I hope that He will continue to do so, for I tell you we are in a worse place than ever you were among the Fung."

"Oh, don't mind that, Father," he answered gaily, for Roderick is a cheerful soul. "As Fung say, there no house without door, although

plenty people made blind and can't see it. But we not blind, or we dead long ago. Find door by and by, but here come man to talk to you."

The man proved to be Japhet, who had been sent by the Child of Kings to summon us, as she had news to tell. So I woke the others, and after I had dressed the Professor's flesh wounds, which were stiff and sore, we joined her where she sat in the gateway tower of the inner wall. She greeted us rather sadly, asked Oliver how he had slept and Higgs if his cuts hurt him. Then she turned to my son, and congratulated him upon his wonderful escape and upon having found a father if he had lost a wife.

"Truly," she added, "you are a fortunate man to be so well loved, O son of Adams. To how many sons are given fathers who for fourteen long years, abandoning all else, would search for them in peril of their lives, enduring slavery and blows and starvation and the desert's heat and cold for the sake of a long-lost face? Such faithfulness is that of my forefather David for his brother Jonathan, and such love it is that passes the love of women. See that you pay it back to him, and to his memory until the last hour of your life, child of Adams."

"I will, indeed, I will, O Walda Nagasta," answered Roderick, and throwing his arms about my neck he embraced me before them all. It is not too much to say that this kiss of filial devotion more than repaid me for all I had undergone for his beloved sake. For now I knew that I had not toiled and suffered for one of no worth, as is so often the lot of true hearts in this bitter world.

Just then some of Maqueda's ladies brought food, and at her bidding we breakfasted.

"Be sparing," she said with a melancholy little laugh, "for I know not how long our store will last. Listen! I have received a last offer from my uncle Joshua. An arrow brought it--not a man; I think that no man would come lest his fate should be that of the traitor of yesterday," and she produced a slip of parchment that had been tied to the shaft of an arrow and, unfolding it, read as follows--

"O Walda Nagasta, deliver up to death the Gentiles who have bewitched you and led you to shed the blood of so many of your people, and with them the officers of the Mountaineers, and the rest shall be spared. You also I will forgive and make my wife. Resist, and all who cling to you shall be put to the sword, and to yourself I promise nothing.

"Written by order of the Council,

"Joshua, Prince of the Abati."

"What answer shall I send?" she asked, looking at us curiously.

"Upon my word," replied Orme, shrugging his shoulders, "if it were not for those faithful officers I am not sure but that you would be wise

to accept the terms. We are cooped up here, but a few surrounded by thousands, who, if they dare not assault, still can starve us out, as this place is not victualled for a siege."

"You forget one of those terms, O Oliver!" she said slowly, pointing with her finger to the passage in the letter which stated that Joshua would make her his wife, "Now do you still counsel surrender?"

"How can I?" he answered, flushing, and was silent.

"Well, it does not matter what you counsel," she went on with a smile, "seeing that I have already sent my answer, also by arrow. See, here is a copy of it," and she read--

"To my rebellious People of the Abati:

"Surrender to me Joshua, my uncle, and the members of the Council who have lifted sword against me, to be dealt with according to the ancient law, and the rest of you shall go unharmed. Refuse, and I swear to you that before the night of the new moon has passed there shall be such woe in Mur as fell upon the city of David when the barbarian standards were set upon her walls. Such is the counsel that has come to me, the Child of Solomon, in the watches of the night, and I tell you that it is true. Do what you will, people of the Abati, or what you must, since your fate and ours are written. But be sure that in me and the Western lords lies your only hope.

"Walda Nagasta."

"What do you mean, O Maqueda," I asked, "about the counsel that came to you in the watches of the night?"

"What I say, O Adams," she answered calmly. "After we parted at dawn I slept heavily, and in my sleep a dark and royal woman stood before me whom I knew to be my great ancestress, the beloved of Solomon. She looked on me sadly, yet as I thought with love. Then she drew back, as it were, a curtain of thick cloud that hid the future and revealed to me the young moon riding the sky and beneath it Mur, a blackened ruin, her streets filled with dead. Yes, and she showed to me other things, though I may not tell them, which also shall come to pass, then held her hands over me as if in blessing, and was gone."

"Old Hebrew prophet business! Very interesting," I heard Higgs mutter below his breath, while in my own heart I set the dream down to excitement and want of food. In fact, only two of us were impressed, my son very much, and Oliver a little, perhaps because everything Maqueda said was gospel to him.

"Doubtless all will come to pass as you say, Walda Nagasta," said Roderick with conviction. "The day of the Abati is finished."

"Why do you say that, Son?" I asked.

"Because, Father, among the Fung people from a child I have two offices, that of Singer to the God and that of Reader of Dreams. Oh! do not laugh. I can tell you many that have come true as I read them; thus the dream of Barung which I read to mean that the head of Harmac would come to Mur, and see, there it sit," and turning, he pointed through the doorway of the tower to the grim lion-head of the idol crouched upon the top of the precipice, watching Mur as a beast of prey watches the victim upon which it is about to spring. "I know when dreams true and when dreams false; it my gift, like my voice. I know that this dream true, that all," and as he ceased speaking I saw his eyes catch Maqueda's, and a very curious glance pass between them.

As for Orme, he only said:

"You Easterns are strange people, and if you believe a thing, Maqueda, there may be something in it. But you understand that this message of yours means war to the last, a very unequal war," and he looked at the hordes of the Abati gathering on the great square.

"Yes," she answered quietly, "I understand, but however sore our straits, and however strange may seem the things that happen, have no fear of the end of that war, O my friends."