

CHAPTER XVIII

THE BURNING OF THE PALACE

Orme was right. Maqueda's defiance did mean war, "an unequal war." This was our position. We were shut up in a long range of buildings, of which one end had been burned, that on account of their moat and double wall, if defended with any vigour, could only be stormed by an enemy of great courage and determination, prepared to face a heavy sacrifice of life. This was a circumstance in our favour, since the Abati were not courageous, and very much disliked the idea of being killed, or even injured.

But here our advantage ended. Deducting those whom we had lost on the previous night, the garrison only amounted to something over four hundred men, of whom about fifty were wounded, some of them dangerously. Moreover, ammunition was short, for they had shot away most of their arrows in the battle of the square, and we had no means of obtaining more. But, worst of all, the palace was not provisioned for a siege, and the mountaineers had with them only three days' rations of sun-dried beef or goat's flesh, and a hard kind of biscuit made of Indian corn mixed with barley meal. Thus, as we saw from the beginning, unless we could manage to secure more food our case must soon grow hopeless.

There remained yet another danger. Although the palace itself was stone-built, its gilded domes and ornamental turrets were of timber, and

therefore liable to be fired, as indeed had already happened. The roof also was of ancient cedar beams, thinly covered with concrete, while the interior containing an enormous quantity of panels, or rather boarding, cut from some resinous wood.

The Abati, on the other hand, were amply supplied with every kind of store and weapon, and could bring a great force to blockade us, though that force was composed of a timid and undisciplined rabble.

Well, we made the best preparations that we could, although of these I did not see much, since all that day my time was occupied in attending to the wounded with the help of my son and a few rough orderlies, whose experience in doctoring had for the most part been confined to cattle. A pitiful business it proved without the aid of anæsthetics or a proper supply of bandages and other appliances. Although my medicine chest had been furnished upon a liberal scale, it proved totally inadequate to the casualties of battle. Still I did my best and saved some lives, though many cases developed gangrene and slipped through my fingers.

Meanwhile Higgs, who worked nobly, notwithstanding his flesh wounds, which pained him considerably, and Orme were also doing their best with the assistance of Japhet and the other officers of the highland regiment. The palace was thoroughly examined, and all weak places in its defences were made good. The available force was divided into watches and stationed to the best advantage. A number of men were set to work to manufacture arrow shafts from cedar beams, of which there were plenty

in the wooden stables and outhouses that lay at the back of the main building, and to point and wing the same from a supply of iron barbs and feathers which fortunately was discovered in one of the guard-houses. A few horses that remained in a shed were killed and salted down for food, and so forth.

Also every possible preparation was made to repel attempts to storm, paving stones being piled up to throw upon the heads of assailants and fires lighted on the walls to heat pitch and oil and water for the same purpose.

But, to our disappointment, no direct assault was delivered, such desperate methods not commending themselves to the Abati. Their plan of attack was to take cover wherever they could, especially among the trees of the garden beyond the gates, and thence shoot arrows at any one who appeared upon the walls, or even fire them in volleys at the clouds, as the Normans did at Hastings, so that they might fall upon the heads of persons in the courtyards. Although these cautious tactics cost us several men, they had the advantage of furnishing us with a supply of ammunition which we sorely needed. All the spent arrows were carefully collected and made use of against the enemy, at whom we shot whenever opportunity offered. We did them but little damage, however, since they were extremely careful not to expose themselves.

In this fashion three dreary days went past, unrelieved by any incident except a feint, for it was scarcely more, which the Abati made upon

the second night, apparently with the object of forcing the great gates under cover of a rainstorm. The advance was discovered at once, and repelled by two or three volleys of arrows and some rifle shots. Of these rifles, indeed, whereof we possessed about a score, the Abati were terribly afraid. Picking out some of the most intelligent soldiers we taught them how to handle our spare guns, and though, of course, their shooting was extremely erratic, the result of it, backed up by our own more accurate marksmanship, was to force the enemy to take cover. Indeed, after one or two experiences of the effect of bullets, not a man would show himself in the open within five hundred yards until night had fallen.

On the third afternoon we held a council to determine what must be done, since for the last twenty-four hours it had been obvious that things could not continue as they were. To begin with, we had only sufficient food left to keep our force from starvation for two more days. Also the spirits of our soldiers, brave men enough when actual fighting was concerned, were beginning to flag in this atmosphere of inaction. Gathered into groups, they talked of their wives and children, and of what would happen to them at the hands of Joshua; also of their cattle and crops, saying that doubtless these were being ravaged and their houses burned. In vain did Maqueda promise them five-fold their loss when the war was ended, for evidently in their hearts they thought it could only end one way. Moreover, as they pointed out, she could not give them back their children if these were killed.

At this melancholy council every possible plan was discussed, to find that these resolved themselves into two alternatives--to surrender, or to take the bull by the horns, sally out of the palace at night and attack Joshua. On the face of it, this latter scheme had the appearance of suicide, but, in fact, it was not so desperate as it seemed. The Abati being such cowards it was quite probable that they would run in their thousands before the onset of a few hundred determined men, and that, if once victory declared itself for the Child of Kings, the bulk of her subjects would return to their allegiance. So we settled on it in preference to surrender, which we knew meant death to ourselves, and for Maqueda a choice between that last grim solution of her troubles and a forced marriage.

But there were others to be convinced, namely, the Mountaineers. Japhet, who had been present at the council, was sent to summon all of them except those actually on guard, and when they were assembled in the large inner court Maqueda went out and addressed them.

I do not remember the exact words of her speech, and I made no note of them, but it was extremely beautiful and touching. She pointed out her plight, and that we could halt no longer between two opinions, who must either fight or yield. For herself she said she did not care, since, although she was young and their ruler, she set no store upon her life, and would give it up gladly rather than be driven into a marriage which she considered shameful, and forced to pass beneath the yoke of traitors.

But for us foreigners she did care. We had come to her country at her invitation, we had served her nobly, one of us had given his life to protect her person, and now, in violation of her safeguard and that of the Council, we were threatened with a dreadful death. Were they, her subjects, so lacking in honour and hospitality that they would suffer such a thing with no blow struck to save us?

Now the majority of them shouted "No," but some were silent, and one old captain advanced, saluted, and spoke.

"Child of Kings," he said, "let us search out the truth of this matter. Is it not because of your love of the foreign soldier, Orme, that all this trouble has arisen? Is not that love unlawful according to our law, and are you not solemnly affianced to the Prince Joshua?"

Maqueda considered awhile before she replied, and said slowly:

"Friend, my heart is my own, therefore upon this point answer your question for yourself. As regards my uncle Joshua, if there existed any abiding contract between us it was broken when a few nights ago he sent his servants armed to attack and drag me off I know not whither. Would you have me marry a traitor and a coward? I have spoken."

"No," again shouted the majority of the soldiers.

Then in the silence that followed the old captain replied, with a canniness that was almost Scotch:

"On the point raised by you, O Child of Kings, I give no opinion, since you, being but a woman, if a high-born one, would not listen to me if I did, but will doubtless follow that heart of yours of which you speak to whatever end is appointed. Settle the matter with your betrothed Joshua as you will. But we also have a matter to settle with Joshua, who is a toad with a long tongue that if he seems slow yet never misses his fly. We took up your cause, and have killed a great number of his people, as he has killed some of ours. This he will not forget. Therefore it seems to me that it will be wise that we should make what we can of the nest that we have built, since it is better to die in battle than on the gallows. For this reason, then, since we can stay here no longer, for my part I am willing to go out and fight for you this night, although Joshua's people being so many and ours so few, I shall think myself fortunate if I live to see another sun."

This hard and reasoned speech seemed to appeal to the dissentients, with the result that they withdrew their opposition, and it was agreed that we should attempt to break our way through the besieging army about one hour before the dawn, when they would be heavily asleep and most liable to panic.

Yet, as it chanced, that sortie was destined never to take place, which perhaps was fortunate for us, since I am convinced that it would have

ended in failure. It is true that we might have forced our way through Joshua's army, but afterwards those of us who remained alive would have been surrounded, starved out, and, when our strength and ammunition were exhausted taken prisoners or cut down.

However that may be, events shaped a different course for us, perhaps because the Abati got wind of our intention and had no stomach for a pitched battle with desperate men. As it happened, this night from sunset on to moonrise was one of a darkness so remarkable that it was impossible to see anything even a foot away, also a wind blowing from the east made sounds very inaudible. Only a few of our men were on guard, since it was necessary that they should be rested till it was time for them to prepare for their great effort. Also, we had little fear of any direct attack.

About eight o'clock, however, my son Roderick, one of the watch stationed in the gateway towers, who was gifted with very quick ears, reported that he thought he heard people moving on the farther side of the massive wooden doors beyond the moat. Accordingly some of us went to listen, but could distinguish nothing, and concluded therefore that he was mistaken. So we retired to our posts and waited patiently for the moon to rise. But as it chanced no moon rose, or rather we could not see her, because the sky was completely covered by thick banks of thunder-clouds presaging the break-up of a period of great heat. These, as the wind had now died down, remained quite stationary upon the face of the sky, blotting out all light.

Perhaps another hour had passed when, chancing to look behind me, I saw what I thought was a meteor falling from the crest of the cliff against which the palace was built, that cliff whither the head of the idol Harmac had been carried by the force of the explosion.

"Look at that shooting star," I said to Oliver, who was at my side.

"It is not a shooting star, it is fire," he replied in a startled voice, and, as he spoke, other streaks of light, scores of them, began to rain down from the brow of the cliff and land upon the wooden buildings to the rear of the palace that were dry as tinder with the drought, and, what was worse, upon the gilded timber domes of the roof.

"Don't you understand the game?" he went on. "They have tied firebrands to arrows and spears to burn us out. Sound the alarm. Sound the alarm!"

It was done, and presently the great range of buildings began to hum like a hive of bees. The soldiers still half asleep, rushed hither and thither shouting. The officers also, developing the characteristic excitement of the Abati race in this hour of panic, yelled and screamed at them, beating them with their fists and swords till some kind of control was established.

Then attempts were made to extinguish the flames, which by this time had got hold in half-a-dozen places. From the beginning the effort was

absolutely hopeless. It is true that there was plenty of water in the moat, which was fed by a perennial stream that flowed down the face of the precipice behind; but pumping engines of any sort were quite unknown to the Abati, who, if a building took fire, just let it burn, contenting themselves with safeguarding those in its neighbourhood. Moreover, even in the palace, such articles as pails, jugs, or other vessels were comparatively few and far between.

Those that we could find, however, were filled with water and passed by lines of men to the places in most danger--that is, practically everywhere--while other men tried to cut off the advance of the flames by pulling down portions of the building.

But as fast as one fire was extinguished others broke out, for the rain of burning darts and of lighted pots or lamps filled with oil descended continuously from the cliff above. A strange and terrible sight it was to see them flashing down through the darkness, like the fiery darts that shall destroy the wicked in the day of Armageddon.

Still, we toiled on despairingly. On the roof we four white men, and some soldiers under the command of Japhet, were pouring water on to several of the gilded domes, which now were well alight. Close by, wrapped in a dark cloak, and attended by some of her ladies, stood Maqueda. She was quite calm, although sundry burning arrows and spears, falling with great force from the cliff above, struck the flat roofs close to where she stood.

Her ladies, however, were not calm. They wept and wrung their hands, while one of them went into violent hysterics in her very natural terror. Maqueda turned and bade them descend to the courtyard of the gateway, where she said she would join them presently. They rushed off, rejoicing to escape the sight of those burning arrows, one of which had just pierced a man and set his clothes and hair on fire, causing him to leap from the roof in his madness.

At Oliver's request I ran to the Child of Kings to lead her to some safer place, if it could be found. But she would not stir.

"Let me be, O Adams," she said. "If I am to die, I will die here. But I do not think that is fated," and with her foot she kicked aside a burning spear that had struck the cement roof, and, rebounding, fallen quite close to her. "If my people will not fight," she went on, with bitter sarcasm, "at least they understand the other arts of war, for this trick of theirs is clever. They are cruel also. Listen to them mocking us in the square. They ask whether we will roast alive or come out and have our throats cut. Oh!" she went on, clenching her hands, "oh! that I should have been born the head of such an accursed race. Let Sheol take them all, for in the day of their tribulation no finger will I lift to save them."

She was silent for a moment, and down below, near the gateway, I heard some brute screaming, "Pretty pigeons! Pretty pigeons, are your feathers

singing? Come then into our pie, pretty pigeons, pretty pigeons!" followed by shouts of ribald laughter.

But it chanced it was this hound himself who went into the "pie." Presently, when the flames were brighter, I saw him, in the midst of a crowd of his admirers, singing his foul song, another verse of it about Maqueda, which I will not repeat, and by good fortune managed to put a bullet through his head. It was not a bad shot considering the light and circumstances, and the only one I fired that night. I trust also that it will be the last I shall ever fire at any human being.

Just as I was about to leave Maqueda and return with her message to Orme, to the effect that she would not move, the final catastrophe occurred. Amongst the stables was a large shed filled with dry fodder for the palace horses and camels. Suddenly this burst into a mass of flame that spread in all directions. Then came the last, hideous panic. From every part of the palace, the Mountaineers, men and officers together, rushed down to the gateway. In a minute, with the single exception of Japhet, we four and Maqueda were left alone upon the roof, where we stood overwhelmed, not knowing what to do. We heard the drawbridge fall; we heard the great doors burst upon beneath the pressure of a mob of men; we heard a coarse voice--I thought it was that of Joshua--yell:

"Kill whom you will, my children, but death to him who harms the Child of Kings. She is my spoil!"

Then followed terrible sights and sounds. The cunning Abati had stretched ropes outside the doors; it was the noise they made at this work which had reached Roderick's ears earlier during the darkness. The terrified soldiers, flying from the fire, stumbled and fell over these ropes, nor could they rise again because of those who pressed behind. What happened to them all I am sure I do not know, but doubtless many were crushed to death and many more killed by Joshua's men. I trust, however, that some of them escaped, since, compared to the rest of the Abati, they were as lions are to cats, although, like all their race, they lacked the stamina to fight an uphill game.

It was at the commencement of this terrific scene that I shot the foul-mouthed singer.

"You shouldn't have done that, old fellow," screamed Higgs in his high voice, striving to make himself heard above the tumult, "as it will show those swine where we are."

"I don't think they will look for us here, anyway," I answered.

Then we watched awhile in silence.

"Come," said Orme at length, taking Maqueda by the hand.

"Where are you going, O Oliver?" she asked, hanging back. "Sooner will I

burn than yield to Joshua."

"I am going to the cave city," he answered; "we have nowhere else to go, and little time to lose. Four men with rifles can hold that place against a thousand. Come."

"I obey," she answered, bowing her head.

We went down the stairway that led from the roof on which the inhabitants of the palace were accustomed to spend much of their day, and even to sleep in hot weather, as is common in the East. Another minute and we should have been too late. The fire from one of the domes had spread to the upper story, and was already appearing in little tongues of flame mingled with jets of black smoke through cracks in the crumbling partition wall.

As a matter of fact this wall fell in just as my son Roderick, the last of us, was passing down the stairs. With the curiosity of youth he had lingered for a few moments to watch the sad scene below, a delay which nearly cost him his life.

On the ground floor we found ourselves out of immediate danger, since the fire was attacking this part of the palace from above and burning downward. We had even time to go to our respective sleeping-places and collect such of our possessions and valuables as we were able to carry. Fortunately, among other things, these included all our note-books,

which to-day are of priceless value. Laden with these articles, we met again in the audience hall, which, although it was very hot, seemed as it had always been, a huge, empty place, whereof the roof, painted with stars, was supported upon thick cedar columns, each of them hewn from a single tree.

Passing down that splendid apartment, which an hour later had ceased to exist, lamps in hand, for these we had found time to fetch and light, we reached the mouth of the passage that led to the underground city without meeting a single human being.

Had the Abati been a different race they could perfectly well have dashed in and made us prisoners, for the drawbridge was still intact. But their cowardice was our salvation, for they feared lest they should be trapped by the fire. So I think at least, but justice compels me to add that, on the spur of the moment, they may have found it impossible to clear the gateways of the mass of fallen or dead soldiers over which it would have been difficult to climb.

Such, at any rate, was the explanation that we heard afterwards.

We reached the mouth of the vast cave in perfect safety, and clambered through the little orifice which was left between the rocks rolled thither by the force of the explosion, or shaken down from the roof. This hole, for it was nothing more, we proceeded to stop with a few stones in such a fashion that it could not be forced without much toil

and considerable noise, only leaving one little tortuous channel through which, if necessary, a man could creep.

The labour of rock-carrying, in which even Maqueda shared, occupied our minds for awhile, and induced a kind of fictitious cheerfulness. But when it was done, and the chilly silence of that enormous cave, so striking in comparison with the roar of the flames and the hideous human tumult which we had left without, fell upon us like sudden cold and blinding night upon a wanderer in windy, sunlit mountains, all our excitement perished. In a flash, we understood our terrible position, we who had but escaped from the red fire to perish slowly in the black darkness.

Still we strove to keep our spirits as best we could. Leaving Higgs to watch the blocked passage, a somewhat superfluous task, since the fire without was our best watchman, the rest of us threaded our way up the cave, following the telephone wire which poor Quick had laid on the night of the blowing-up of the god Harmac, till we came to what had been our headquarters during the digging of the mine. Into the room which was Oliver's, whence we had escaped with so much difficulty after that event, we could not enter because of the transom that blocked the doorway. Still, there were plenty of others at hand in the old temple, although they were foul with the refuse of the bats that wheeled about us in thousands, for these creatures evidently had some unknown access to the open air. One of these rooms had served as our store-chamber, and after a few rough preparations we assigned it to Maqueda.

"Friends," she said, as she surveyed its darksome entrance, "it looks like the door of a tomb. Well, in the tomb there is rest, and rest I must have. Leave me to sleep, who, were it not for you, O Oliver, would pray that I might never wake again.

"Man," she added passionately, before us all, for now in face of the last peril every false shame and wish to conceal the truth had left her; "man, why were you born to bring woe upon my head and joy to my heart? Well, well, the joy outweighs the woe, and even if the angel who led you hither is named Azrael, still I shall bless him who has revealed to me my soul. Yet for you I weep, and if only your life could be spared to fulfil itself in happiness in the land that bore you, oh! for you I would gladly die."

Now Oliver, who seemed deeply moved, stepped to her and began to whisper into her ear, evidently making some proposal of which I think I can guess the nature. She listened to him, smiling sadly, and made a motion with her hand as though to thrust him away.

"Not so," she said, "it is nobly offered, but did I accept, through whatever universes I may wander, those who came after me would know me by my trail of blood, the blood of him who loved me. Perhaps, too, by that crime I should be separated from you for ever. Moreover, I tell you that though all seems black as this thick darkness, I believe that things will yet end well for you and me--in this world or another."

Then she was gone, leaving Orme staring after her like a man in a trance.

"I daresay they will," remarked Higgs sotto voce to me, "and that's first-rate so far as they are concerned. But what I should jolly well like to know is how they are going to end for us who haven't got a charming lady to see us across the Styx."

"You needn't puzzle your brain over that," I answered gloomily, "for I think there will soon be a few more skeletons in this beastly cave, that's all. Don't you see that those Abati will believe we are burned in the palace?"