

CHAPTER XIX

STARVATION

I was right. The Abati did think that we had been burned. It never occurred to them that we might have escaped to the underground city. So at least I judged from the fact that they made no attempt to seek us there until they learned the truth in the fashion that I am about to describe. If anything, this safety from our enemies added to the trials of those hideous days and nights. Had there been assaults to repel and the excitement of striving against overwhelming odds, at any rate we should have found occupation for our minds and remaining energies.

But there were none. By turns we listened at the mouth of the passage for the echo of footsteps that never came. Nothing came to break a silence so intense that at last our ears, craving for sound, magnified the soft flutter of the bats into a noise as of eagle's wings, till at last we spoke in whispers, because the full voice of man seemed to affront the solemn quietude, seemed intolerable to our nerves.

Yet for the first day or two we found occupation of a sort. Of course our first need was to secure a supply of food, of which we had only a little originally laid up for our use in the chambers of the old temple, tinned meats that we had brought from London and so forth, now nearly all consumed. We remembered that Maqueda had told us of corn from her estates which was stored annually in pits to provide against the

possibility of a siege of Mur, and asked her where it was.

She led us to a place where round stone covers with rings attached to them were set into the floor of the cave, not unlike those which stop the coal-shoots in a town pavement, only larger. With great difficulty we prised one of these up; to me it did not seem to have been moved since the ancient kings ruled in Mur and, after leaving it open for a long while for the air within to purify, lowered Roderick by a rope we had to report its contents. Next moment we heard him saying: "Want to come up, please. This place is not pleasant."

We pulled him out and asked what he had found.

"Nothing good to eat," he answered, "only plenty of dead bones and one rat that ran up my leg."

We tried the next two pits with the same result--they were full of human bones. Then we cross-examined Maqueda, who, after reflection, informed us that she now remembered that about five generations before a great plague had fallen on Mur, which reduced its population by one-half. She had heard, also, that those stricken with the plague were driven into the underground city in order that they might not infect the others, and supposed that the bones we saw were their remains. This information caused us to close up those pits again in a great hurry, though really it did not matter whether we caught the plague or no.

Still, as she was sure that corn was buried somewhere, we went to another group of pits in a distant chamber, and opened the first one. This time our search was rewarded, to the extent that we found at the bottom of it some mouldering dust that years ago had been grain. The other pits, two of which had been sealed up within three years as the date upon the wax showed, were quite empty.

Then Maqueda understood what had happened.

"Surely the Abati are a people of rogues," she said. "See now, the officers appointed to store away my corn which I gave them have stolen it! Oh! may they live to lack bread even more bitterly than we do to-day."

We went back to our sleeping-place in silence. Well might we be silent, for of food we had only enough left for a single scanty meal. Water there was in plenty, but no food. When we had recovered a little from our horrible disappointment we consulted together.

"If we could get through the mine tunnel," said Oliver, "we might escape into the den of lions, which were probably all destroyed by the explosion, and so out into the open country."

"The Fung would take us there," suggested Higgs.

"No, no," broke in Roderick, "Fung all gone, or if they do, anything

better than this black hole, yes, even my wife."

"Let us look," I said, and we started.

When we reached the passage that led from the city to the Tomb of Kings, it was to find that the wall at the end of it had been blown bodily back into the parent cave, leaving an opening through which we could walk side by side. Of course the contents of the tomb itself were scattered. In all directions lay bones, objects of gold and other metals, or overturned thrones. The roof and walls alone remained as they had been.

"What vandalism!" exclaimed Higgs, indignant even in his misery. "Why wouldn't you let me move the things when I wanted to, Orme?"

"Because they would have thought that we were stealing them, old fellow. Also those Mountaineers were superstitious, and I did not want them to desert. But what does it matter, anyway? If you had, they would have been burned in the palace."

By this time we had reached that end of the vast tomb where the hunchbacked king used to sit, and saw at once that our quest was vain. The tunnel which we had dug beyond was utterly choked with masses of fallen rock that we could never hope to move, even with the aid of explosives, of which we had none left.

So we returned, our last hope gone.

Also another trouble stared us in the face; our supply of the crude mineral oil which the Abati used for lighting purposes was beginning to run low. Measurement of what remained of the store laid up for our use while the mine was being made, revealed the fact that there was only enough left to supply four lamps for about three days and nights: one for Maqueda, one for ourselves, one for the watchman near the tunnel mouth, and one for general purposes.

This general-purpose lamp, as a matter of fact, was mostly made use of by Higgs. Truly, he furnished a striking instance of the ruling passion strong in death. All through those days of starvation and utter misery, until he grew too weak and the oil gave out, he trudged backward and forward between the old temple and the Tomb of Kings carrying a large basket on his arm. Going out with this basket empty, he would bring it back filled with gold cups and other precious objects that he had collected from among the bones and scattered rubbish in the Tomb. These objects he laboriously catalogued in his pocket-book at night, and afterwards packed away in empty cases that had contained our supplies of explosive and other goods, carefully nailing them down when filled.

"What on earth are you doing that for, Higgs?" I asked petulantly, as he finished off another case, I think it was his twentieth.

"I don't know, Doctor," he answered in a thin voice, for like the rest of us he was growing feeble on a water-diet. "I suppose it amuses me

to think how jolly it would be to open all these boxes in my rooms in London after a first-rate dinner of fried sole and steak cut thick," and he smacked his poor, hungry lips. "Yes, yes," he went on, "to take them out one by one and show them to ---- and ----," and he mentioned by name officials of sundry great museums with whom he was at war, "and see them tear their hair with rage and jealousy, while they wondered in their hearts if they could not manage to seize the lot for the Crown as treasure-trove, or do me out of them somehow," and he laughed a little in his old, pleasant fashion.

"Of course I never shall," he added sadly, "but perhaps one day some other fellow will find them here and get them to Europe, and if he is a decent chap, publish my notes and descriptions, of which I have put a duplicate in each box, and so make my name immortal. Well, I'm off again. There are four more cases to fill before the oil gives out, and I must get that great gold head into one of them, though it is an awful job to carry it far at a time. Doctor, what disease is it that makes your legs suddenly give way beneath you, so that you find yourself sitting in a heap on the floor without knowing how you came there? You don't know? Well, no more do I, but I've got it bad. I tell you I'm downright sore behind from continual and unexpected contact with the rock."

Poor old Higgs! I did not like to tell him that his disease was starvation.

Well, he went on with his fetching and carrying and cataloguing and packing. I remember that the last load he brought in was the golden head he had spoken of, the wonderful likeness of some prehistoric king which has since excited so much interest throughout the world. The thing being too heavy for him to carry in his weakened state, for it is much over life-size, he was obliged to roll it before him, which accounts for the present somewhat damaged condition of the nose and semi-Egyptian diadem.

Never shall I forget the sight of the Professor as he appeared out of the darkness, shuffling along upon his knees where his garments were worn into holes, and by the feeble light of the lamp that he moved from time to time, painfully pushing the great yellow object forward, only a foot or two at each push.

"Here it is at last," he gasped triumphantly, whilst we watched him with indifferent eyes. "Japhet, help me to wrap it up in the mat and lift it into the box. No, no, you donkey--face upward--so. Never mind the corners, I'll fill them with ring-money and other trifles," and out of his wide pockets he emptied a golden shower, amongst which he sifted handfuls of dust from the floor and anything else he could find to serve as packing, finally covering all with a goat's-hair blanket which he took from his bed.

Then very slowly he found the lid of the box and nailed it down, resting between every few strokes of the hammer whilst we watched him in our intent, but idle, fashion, wondering at the strange form of his madness.

At length the last nail was driven, and seated on the box he put his hand into an inner pocket to find his note-book, then incontinently fainted. I struggled to my feet and sprinkled water over his face till he revived and rolled on to the floor, where presently he sank into sleep or torpor. As he did so the first lamp gave out.

"Light it, Japhet," said Maqueda, "it is dark in this place."

"O Child of Kings," answered the man, "I would obey if I could, but there is no more oil."

Half-an-hour later the second lamp went out. By the light that remained we made such arrangements as we could, knowing that soon darkness would be on us. They were few and simple: the fetching of a jar or two of water, the placing of arms and ammunition to our hands, and the spreading out of some blankets on which to lie down side by side upon what I for one believed would be our bed of death.

While we were thus engaged, Japhet crawled into our circle from the outer gloom. Suddenly I saw his haggard face appear, looking like that of a spirit rising from the grave.

"My lamp is burned out," he moaned; "it began to fail whilst I was on watch at the tunnel mouth, and before I was half-way here it died altogether. Had it not been for the wire of the 'thing-that-speaks'

which guided me, I could never have reached you. I should have been lost in the darkness of the city and perished alone among the ghosts."

"Well, you are here now," said Oliver. "Have you anything to report?"

"Nothing, lord, or at least very little. I moved some of the small rocks that we piled up, and crept down the hole till I came to a place where the blessed light of day fell upon me, only one little ray of it, but still the light of day. I think that something has fallen upon the tunnel and broken it, perhaps one of the outer walls of the palace. At least I looked through a crack and saw everywhere ruins--ruins that still smoke. From among them I heard the voices of men shouting to each other.

"One of them called to his companion that it was strange, if the Gentiles and the Child of Kings had perished in the fire, that they had not found their bones which would be known by the guns they carried. His friend answered that it was strange indeed, but being magicians, perhaps they had hidden away somewhere. For his part he hoped so, as then sooner or later they would be found and put to death slowly, as they deserved, who had led astray the Child of Kings and brought so many of the heaven-descended Abati to their death. Then fearing lest they should find and kill me, for they drew near as I could tell by their voices, I crept back again, and that is all my story."

We said nothing; there seemed to be nothing to say, but sat in our sad

circle and watched the dying lamp. When it began to flicker, leaping up and down like a thing alive, a sudden panic seized poor Japhet.

"O Walda Nagasta," he cried, throwing himself at her feet, "you have called me a brave man, but I am only brave where the sun and the stars shine. Here in the dark amongst so many angry spirits, and with hunger gnawing at my bowels, I am a great coward; Joshua himself is not such a coward as I. Let us go out into the light while there is yet time. Let us give ourselves up to the Prince. Perhaps he will be merciful and spare our lives, or at least he will spare yours, and if we die, it will be with the sun shining on us."

But Maqueda only shook her head, whereon he turned to Orme and went on:

"Lord, would you have the blood of the Child of Kings upon your hands? Is it thus that you repay her for her love? Lead her forth. No harm will come to her who otherwise must perish here in misery."

"You hear what the man says, Maqueda?" said Orme heavily. "There is some truth in it. It really does not matter to us whether we die in the power of the Abati or here of starvation; in fact, I think that we should prefer the former end, and doubtless no hand will be laid on you. Will you go?"

"Nay," she answered passionately. "A hand would be laid on me, the hand of Joshua, and rather than that he should touch me I will die a hundred

deaths. Let fate take its course, for as I have told you, I believe that then it will open to us some gate we cannot see. And if I believe in vain, why there is another gate which we can pass together, O Oliver, and beyond that gate lies peace. Bid the man be silent, or drive him away. Let him trouble me no more."

The lamp flame sank low. It flickered, once, twice, thrice, each time showing the pale, drawn faces of us six seated about it, like wizards making an incantation, like corpses in a tomb.

Then it went out.

How long were we in that place after this? At least three whole days and nights, I believe, if not more, but of course we soon lost all count of time. At first we suffered agonies from famine, which we strove in vain to assuage with great draughts of water. No doubt these kept us alive, but even Higgs, who it may be remembered was a teetotaller, afterwards confessed to me that he has loathed the sight and taste of water ever since. Indeed he now drinks beer and wine like other people. It was torture; we could have eaten anything. In fact the Professor did manage to catch and eat a bat that got entangled in his red hair. He offered me a bite of it, I remember, and was most grateful when I declined.

The worst of it was also that we had a little food, a few hard ship's

biscuits, which we had saved up for a purpose, namely, to feed Maqueda. This was how we managed it. At certain intervals I would announce that it was time to eat, and hand Maqueda her biscuit. Then we would all pretend to eat also, saying how much we felt refreshed by the food and how we longed for more, smacking our lips and biting on a piece of wood so that she could not help hearing us.

This piteous farce went on for forty-eight hours or more until at last the wretched Japhet, who was quite demoralized and in no mood for acting, betrayed us, exactly how I cannot remember. After this Maqueda would touch nothing more, which did not greatly matter as there was only one biscuit left. I offered it to her, whereon she thanked me and all of us for our courtesy toward a woman, took the biscuit, and gave it to Japhet, who ate it like a wolf.

It was some time after this incident that we discovered Japhet to be missing; at least we could no longer touch him, nor did he answer when we called. Therefore, we concluded that he had crept away to die and, I am sorry to say, thought little more about it for, after all, what he suffered, or had suffered, we suffered also.

I recall that before we were overtaken by the last sleep, a strange fit came upon us. Our pangs passed away, much as the pain does when mortification follows a wound, and with them that horrible craving for nutriment. We grew cheerful and talked a great deal. Thus Roderick gave me the entire history of the Fung people and of his life among them and

other savage tribes. Further, he explained every secret detail of their idol worship to Higgs, who was enormously interested, and tried to make some notes by the aid of our few remaining matches. When even that subject was exhausted, he sang to us in his beautiful voice--English hymns and Arab songs. Oliver and Maqueda also chatted together quite gaily, for I heard them laughing, and gathered that he was engaged in trying to teach her English.

The last thing that I recollect is the scene as it was revealed by the momentary light of one of the last matches. Maqueda sat by Oliver. His arm was about her waist, her head rested upon his shoulder, her long hair flowed loose, her large and tender eyes stared from her white, wan face up toward his face, which was almost that of a mummy.

Then on the other side stood my son, supporting himself against the wall of the room, and beyond him Higgs, a shadow of his former self, feebly waving a pencil in the air and trying, apparently, to write a note upon his Panama straw hat, which he held in his left hand, as I suppose, imagining it to be his pocket-book. The incongruity of that sun-hat in a place where no sun had ever come made me laugh, and as the match went out I regretted that I had forgotten to look at his face to ascertain whether he was still wearing his smoked spectacles.

"What is the use of a straw hat and smoked spectacles in kingdom-come?" I kept repeating to myself, while Roderick, whose arm I knew was about me, seemed to answer:

"The Fung wizards say that the sphinx Harmac once wore a hat, but, my father, I do not know if he had spectacles."

Then a sensation as of being whirled round and round in some vast machine, down the sloping sides of which I sank at last into a vortex of utter blackness, whereof I knew the name was death.

Dimly, very dimly, I became aware that I was being carried. I heard voices in my ears, but what they said I could not understand. Then a feeling of light struck upon my eyeballs which gave me great pain. Agony ran all through me as it does through the limbs of one who is being brought back from death by drowning. After this something warm was poured down my throat, and I went to sleep.

When I awoke again it was to find myself in a large room that I did not know. I was lying on a bed, and by the light of sunrise which streamed through the window-places I saw the three others, my son Roderick, Orme and Higgs lying on the other beds, but they were still asleep.

Abati servants entered the room bringing food, a kind of rough soup with pieces of meat in it of which they gave me a portion in a wooden bowl that I devoured greedily. Also they shook my companions until they awoke and almost automatically ate up the contents of similar bowls, after which they went to sleep again, as I did, thanking heaven that we were all still alive.

Every few hours I had a vision of these men entering with the bowls of soup or porridge, until at last life and reason came back to me in earnest, and I saw Higgs sitting up on the bed opposite and staring at me.

"I say, old fellow," he said, "are we alive, or is this Hades?"

"Can't be Hades," I answered, "because there are Abati here."

"Quite right," he replied. "If the Abati go anywhere, it's to hell, where they haven't whitewashed walls and four-post beds. Oliver, wake up. We are out of that cave, anyway."

Orme raised himself on his hand and stared at us.

"Where's Maqueda?" he asked, a question to which of course, we could give no answer, till presently Roderick woke also and said:

"I remember something. They carried us all out of the cave; Japhet was with them. They took the Child of Kings one way and us another, that is all I know."

Shortly afterwards the Abati servants arrived, bearing food more solid than the soup, and with them came one of their doctors, not that old idiot of a court physician, who examined us, and announced that

we should all recover, a fact which we knew already. We asked many questions of him and the servants, but could get no answer, for evidently they were sworn to silence. However, we persuaded them to bring us water to wash in. It came, and with it a polished piece of metal, such as the Abati use for a looking-glass, in which we saw our faces, the terrible, wasted faces of those who have gone within a hair's breadth of death by starvation in the dark.

Yet although our gaolers would say nothing, something in their aspect told us that we were in sore peril of our lives. They looked at us hungrily, as a terrier looks at rats in a wire cage of which the door will presently be opened. Moreover, Roderick, who, as I think I have said, has very quick ears, overheard one of the attendants whisper to another:

"When does our service on these hounds of Gentiles come to an end?" to which his fellow answered, "The Council has not yet decided, but I think to-morrow or the next day, if they are strong enough. It will be a great show."

Also that evening, about sunset, we heard a mob shouting outside the barrack in which we were imprisoned, for that was its real use, "Give us the Gentiles! Give us the Gentiles! We are tired of waiting," until at length some soldiers drove them away.

Well, we talked the thing over, only to conclude that there was nothing

to be done. We had no friend in the place except Maqueda, and she, it appeared, was a prisoner like ourselves, and therefore could not communicate with us. Nor could we see the slightest possibility of escape.

"Out of the frying-pan into the fire," remarked Higgs gloomily. "I wish now that they had let us die in the cave. It would have been better than being baited to death by a mob of Abati."

"Yes," answered Oliver with a sigh, for he was thinking of Maqueda, "but that's why they saved us, the vindictive beasts, to kill us for what they are pleased to call high treason."

"High treason!" exclaimed Higgs. "I hope to goodness their punishment for the offence is not that of mediæval England; hanging is bad enough--but the rest----!"

"I don't think the Abati study European history," I broke in; "but it is no use disguising from you that they have methods of their own. Look here, friends," I added, "I have kept something about me in case the worst should come to the worst," and I produced a little bottle containing a particularly swift and deadly poison done up into tabloids, and gave one to each of them. "My advice is," I added, "that if you see we are going to be exposed to torture or to any dreadful form of death, you should take one of these, as I mean to do, and cheat the Abati of their vengeance."

"That is all very fine," said the Professor as he pocketed his tabloid, "but I never could swallow a pill without water at the best of times, and I don't believe those beasts will give one any. Well, I suppose I must suck it, that's all. Oh! if only the luck would turn, if only the luck would turn!"

Three more days went by without any sign of Higgs's aspiration being fulfilled. On the contrary, except in one respect, the luck remained steadily against us. The exception was that we got plenty to eat and consequently regained our normal state of health and strength more rapidly than might have been expected. With us it was literally a case of "Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die."

Only somehow I don't think that any of us really believed that we should die, though whether this was because we had all, except poor Quick, survived so much, or from a sneaking faith in Maqueda's optimistic dreams, I cannot say. At any rate we ate our food with appetite, took exercise in an inner yard of the prison, and strove to grow as strong as we could, feeling that soon we might need all our powers. Oliver was the most miserable among us, not for his own sake, but because, poor fellow, he was haunted with fears as to Maqueda and her fate, although of these he said little or nothing to us. On the other hand, my son Roderick was by far the most cheerful. He had lived for so many years upon the brink of death that this familiar gulf seemed to have no terrors for him.

"All come right somehow, my father," he said airily. "Who can know what happen? Perhaps Child of King drag us out of mud-hole, for after all she was very strong cow, or what you call it, heifer, and I think toss Joshua if he drive her into corner. Or perhaps other thing occur."

"What other thing, Roderick?" I asked.

"Oh! don't know, can't say, but I think Fung thing. Believe we not done with Fung yet, believe they not run far. Believe they take thought for morrow and come back again. Only," he added sadly, "hope my wife not come back, for that old girl too full of lofty temper for me. Still, cheer up, not dead yet by long day's march, and meanwhile food good and this very jolly rest after beastly underground city. Now I tell Professor some more stories about Fung religion, den of lions, and so forth."

On the morning after this conversation a crisis came. Just as we had finished breakfast the doors of our chamber were thrown open and in marched a number of soldiers wearing Joshua's badge. They were headed by an officer of his household, who commanded us to rise and follow him.

"Where to?" asked Orme.

"To take your trial before the Child of Kings and her Council, Gentile, upon the charge of having murdered certain of her subjects," answered the officer sternly.

"That's all right," said Higgs with a sigh of relief. "If Maqueda is chairman of the Bench we are pretty certain of an acquittal, for Orme's sake if not for our own."

"Don't you be too sure of that," I whispered into his ear. "The circumstances are peculiar, and women have been known to change their minds."

"Adams," he replied, glaring at me through his smoked spectacles, "If you talk like that we shall quarrel. Maqueda change her mind indeed! Why, it is an insult to suggest such a thing, and if you take my advice you won't let Oliver hear you. Don't you remember, man, that she's in love with him?"

"Oh, yes," I answered, "but I remember also that Prince Joshua is in love with her, and that she is his prisoner."