

A King in Babylon

(Continued from preceding page.)

"What do you want with Mustafa?"
"Fact is," said Davis, "if I can't get Mustafa to help, I will have to do the job myself. I tried to set the natives at it this afternoon, and they refused. Refused point-blank. I couldn't budge them."

"What was the matter?"

"Some ignorant superstition. Perhaps they know the meaning of that sign—it is wonderful how those old superstitions persist sometimes! Anyway, I couldn't get them near that wall."

"But Mustafa is a native," Creel objected.

"He's a Copt—it isn't exactly the same thing. He doesn't believe in signs—at least not in old heathen ones. I think he reasons that a heathen sign couldn't have any potency against a Christian. Anyway, he is willing to take the risk."

"For a consideration, I suppose?"

"Exactly. May I have him?"

"I'll see," said Creel, somewhat grudgingly, and handed back the torch. "You can have him part of the day, I guess."

"Thanks. It won't be any great job to make a hole in that wall big enough to squeeze through. That's all I want."

"I don't suppose there is any use trying to dissuade you?"

"Not a bit," said Davis, briskly. "It's all in the day's work, you know. I wouldn't be playing the game if I didn't open it."

"I understand," Creel nodded. "But there is one thing—I wish you wouldn't say anything about it. My people have quieted down; I have a feeling that if they knew about this, it would upset them."

"All right," Davis agreed; and with that we went out and joined the others at the table.

"What were you men gassing about so long in there?" Ma Creel demanded.

"Davis has brought over his great find," Creel explained; "the coffin of Sekenyen-Re, erstwhile King of Upper and Lower Egypt—with the gentleman inside—at least, part of him! There is also a small box which, I understand, contains his innards."

"But look here," objected Ma Creel, "I don't fancy sleeping so near the thing. I abhor corpses."

"My dear madam," said Davis, "this corpse has been dead four thousand years, and I don't see how it could possibly harm anyone!"

"I don't see what that has to do with it," retorted Ma Creel. "It isn't any deader after four thousand years than it was the first day!"

"But this is quite a consecrated mummy, Mary," said Creel. "It is going to prove that the Bible is true!"

Ma Creel sniffed.

"As if I needed a mummy to prove that! I don't think you ought to joke about such things, Warrie."

"I wasn't joking," Creel protested. "I was merely repeating what the professor told me."

"It is true, madam," said Davis. "I hope to find, in the hieroglyphs on that coffin—perhaps also in papyrus documents inside the wrappings—proof of the sojourn of the Children of Israel in the land of Egypt."

We were all silent for a while, after that. I suppose we were all a little awed. I know I was—the thought was rather overpowering. I glanced at Jimmy and Mlle. Roland, where they sat opposite each other at the far end of the table, to see how they took it; but they seemed quite unaffected. They had taken no part in the conversation; they had gone on with the meal as though they had not heard it. Now, as I looked at them, they gave me the vivid impression of talking together. They did not so much as glance at each other, but somehow I was sure they were in communication—close, confidential communication—as though their spirits were talking, without need of words . . .

And I saw again those two shadowy shapes crossing the desert, hand in hand . . .

"Wake up, Billy!" said Creel's voice, and he gave me a startling slap on the shoulder. "Come along!"

"Along where?" I asked, and looked around to find that the others were already on their feet.

"Davis is going to show the ladies his great find. Are you coming Jimmy?"

Jimmy looked across at Mlle. Roland, a little smile twitching the corners of his lips.

"Shall we go?" he asked; and there was an undercurrent of challenge in the words.

"I certainly intend to go," she answered, rising.

Somehow I found Mollie's hand snuggled close in mine.

"I'm frightened!" she breathed as she pressed against me.

"Then don't go," I said.

"Yes, yes; I want to see it—I want to see . . ."

She stopped and drew away. But I knew what she meant; she wanted to see if that painted face really looked like Jimmy Allen.

Creel had taken the lamp from the table; Davis had produced his flashlight; the rest of us crowded into the tent after them.

I should explain, perhaps, that our tent was not divided by canvas curtains as the women's was. It was quite open, with our five cots set side by side, with just room for a small folding-chair and a bag for our personal belongings in between. Davis's was nearest the entrance, and then came Jimmy's, and then mine, and then Creel's, and then Digby's. It was on Davis's cot the coffin had been placed, and we were right on it as soon as we were inside the tent.

"Oh, oh!" cried Ma Creel. "It is gorgeous!"

And then we stood looking down at it while Davis pointed out the royal cartouche, and explained the meaning of some of the symbols with which it was covered. Mollie had pressed up closer, still holding my hand, and stood staring down at the painted face.

"Well?" I whispered.

She shook her head slightly, and I saw her screwing up her eyes; and then she gave a sudden gasp of horror—and I knew that the face had changed . . .

"Come away!" I whispered; but again she shook her head, and stood as though fascinated . . .

I looked around at the others—Davis, intent and eager; Creel deeply interested, evolving another feature perhaps; Digby and Ma Creel with furrowed brows, trying to understand; Jimmy listening with that little ironic smile, as though he knew far more about it than Davis, but found it not worth while to say so or to correct his mistakes; Mlle. Roland, close beside him, clutching his arm with a revealing intimacy; her face very white, her lips working . . .

Jimmy turned and looked down at her. "Don't you think it a good likeness?" he whispered.

I saw her close her eyes and sway forward . . .

"Look out!" I cried.

And the next instant, before I could so much as move, she crashed heavily forward across the coffin.

CHAPTER XXVI.

I KNEW that Jimmy Allen had whispered those words to test her; I knew that he felt her going, and that he could have caught her if he wished; but he never so much as moved a finger, and for a long breath, he stood quite still, looking down at her. Then he bent and caught her up with sudden fierceness, and turned and faced us, and I saw that his face was a-glow with triumph.

It was as though he had won a great victory after desperate struggle; and he stood a moment so, holding her close against him with a sort of ownership, and looking around at us defiantly.

It was Ma Creel who got her wits back first.

"Take her over to our tent, Jimmy," she said authoritatively. "We'll undress her and get her to bed. The poor thing has been worked to death." And she shot her husband an accusing glance. "Come along, Mollie—I'll need your help."

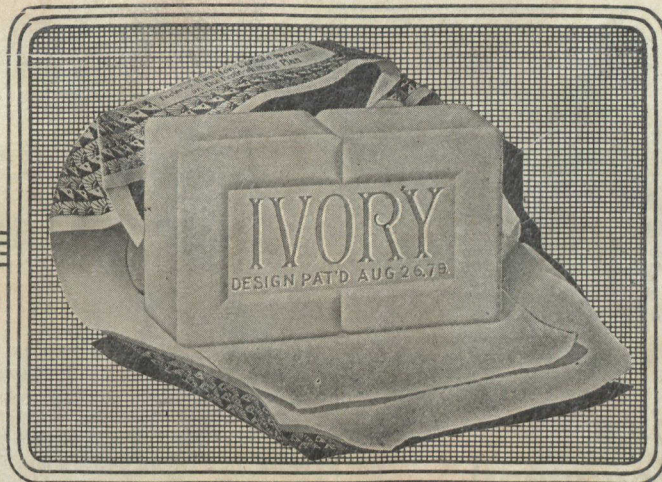
I half expected Jimmy to disregard the order, and walk away into the desert with the girl in his arms. But he didn't. Ma Creel was too matter-of-fact, perhaps, to permit of any heroics. At any rate, after the merest instant's hesitation, he walked quietly out of the tent, the two women after him.

Creel drew a long breath.

"Well!" he began, and ran tremulous fingers through his hair. "We've got to go through all that again, it seems! Do you really think it is overwork?" he asked, turning to Davis.

"No," said the latter, "I don't. It's an overwrought emotional state. These fainting spells are clearly cataleptic."

(Continued on following page.)



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