

A KING IN BABYLON

By
BURTON E.
STEVENSON.

In which the mystery grows more complex, the same gray shape re-appears, this time accompanied by another

CHAPTER XXIV.—(Continued.)

AND then suddenly her voice stopped in her throat with a sort of gurgle, the hands which had been holding me away fell limp, a slow shudder ran through her, and I saw her eyes fix themselves in a stare of horror over my shoulder, out across the sand . . .

It was a moment before I dared turn my head . . . For an instant, I saw nothing; then, far out, a dim shape moved . . . came nearer . . .

It might have been the shadow of a cloud—but there was no cloud in the sky. It might have been a whorl of sand caught up by the wind—but there was no wind or at most a gentle breeze. It came nearer, with a strange, gliding motion, as though swept along on wings; and then my heart gave a sickening thud, for it was the same gray shape I had seen once before—in the tomb! And as I stared, it resolved itself into two shapes, moving side by side—as though hand in hand! In another moment, they reached the first group of palms and disappeared.

I knew what was in my own mind—I knew the same thought was in Mollie's. I dared not look at her; I dared not let her see my eyes; I just sat there, still holding her hand, staring at the spot where I had seen them last!

It was Mollie who stirred first.

"We must be going back," she said, and rose wearily to her feet and brushed the sand from her dress.

I didn't want to go back; I was afraid to go back; suppose that trance was ended . . .

Nevertheless I rose and followed her. There was nothing else to do.

From a little distance, we caught the sound of voices, and saw a dim group sitting around the table. Evidently they had seen nothing—but the shadows would be invisible beneath the trees. . .

I felt Mollie shiver—I shivered myself, as I strained my eyes to see who was in that group; and then I breathed a sigh of relief. There were only Ma Creel and Digby and Creel himself. Perhaps, after all there had been a cloud . . .

Creel saw us first.

"Hurry up!" he called. "We've got some lemonade!"

"Who said lemonade?" asked a voice behind him, and I saw the tent-flap raised, and Jimmy stepped out into the dim light. "Gracious, but I had a sleep!" he added, stretching luxuriously. "What time is it, anyway?"

"It is nearly eleven," said Creel.

"What!"

"Yes—you seemed so tired, we just let you sleep. How do you feel?"

"Like a new man!" said Jimmy.

My eyes had been on the other tent-flap, from the first moment. I knew it would be raised—I knew it!

"And I also!" cried Mlle. Roland, as she came toward us. "Or, at least, like a new woman! I feel as though I had slept a year!"

Jimmy was regarding her with a strange smile, but she walked straight past him, apparently without seeing him, and sat down beside Creel at the table.

"But I am thirsty!" she said, and held out her glass.

CHAPTER XXV.

CREEL had us at work at dawn next morning, and we kept hard at it all day, save for the noon siesta; but there were no such sensational incidents as there had been the day before. Jimmy and the Princess were both effective, but there was no merging of the imaginary in the real—no loss of control. It was just good acting.

And both of them seemed to be their natural selves. The girl had apparently forgotten all that

had happened the day before—though she had still that bruise on her cheek—I could see how carefully she had painted it out—and must have wondered how it came there!—and chatted with all of us impartially and more brightly than had been her habit since the journey into the desert started; while if Jimmy still believed himself to be the re-incarnation of Sekenyen-Re, he certainly gave no sign of it. And we all breathed more freely, and did our best to wipe certain disquieting incidents from our memories, and were even a little hilarious in our reaction from the nervous tension of the previous night. In a word, we were just the average motion-picture company, doing our work as well as we could, and having the best possible time on the side!

During an interval when Creel was getting a scene ready, I walked over to Mollie.

"Things look different by daylight," I remarked; "excursions through dream-land, and such like!"

She looked up at me scornfully.

"You've got a mighty short memory, Billy Williams!" she said.

"I can't make up my mind how much of it is memory and how much imagination!" I retorted. "The more I think of it, the more I am convinced that it was all imagination. We didn't really see anything . . ."

"Didn't we!" she sniffed.

"Or if we did, it was only a drifting shadow. We were all worked up, you know."

"You may have been—I wasn't."

"Mollie," I said, "you don't really believe . . ."

I didn't finish the sentence—it seemed too absurd to express in words. But she understood.

"Yes, I do!" she retorted. "I believe just that!"

"Well," I said, "whatever it was, it came at a most unpropitious moment. May I see you again to-night, Mollie?"

"No," she said; "I've had enough of ghost-hunting."

"I wasn't thinking about ghost-hunting," I began; but just then Creel shouted that he was ready, and I had to leave it at that.

We did the slave-market, and the way Mlle. Roland blazed back contempt and defiance when the king strolled past and looked at her appraisingly was beautiful to see. (Creel had found it impossible to work out Jimmy's idea with the means at his disposal, and had reverted to his own.) She was also superb when the eunuchs dragged her into the king's presence, and he looked her over brutally, and waved her away to the harem. The scenes that followed, where her hate changed gradually to a consuming passion, were also consummately done.

"Of course," said Creel, as these progressed, "we ought to have a palace to do these in, but I'm afraid to wait till we get home. So we will do the best we can out here—and then, if we do get home, we'll make re-takes of some of them."

"Why shouldn't we get home?" I asked, but he only shook his head.

He did wonderfully well, I thought. He had the tent, of course; and one beautiful spot near the pool served as a corner of the palace gardens; and another spot with a lovely clump of palms in the background served as another corner. Always the white-clad eunuchs were on guard; and Ma Creel and Mollie were in attendance—Mollie, the former favorite whom the new one had supplanted, and who was plotting revenge with the prime minister—Digby. We did the slavers' attack—using the native camp, this time; and then we did some caravan stuff—the slavers making off across the desert with their booty—and by that time there wasn't light for anything more, even had we been able to attempt it. We were all dead tired, but Creel was triumphant.

"Another day like this," he said to me, as we were washing up, "and I don't care what happens!"

"It doesn't look as if anything were going to happen," I pointed out. "Everything is normal again."

"Too blamed normal!" Creel growled. "To-day's scenes didn't have the snap that yesterday's had."

"No," I agreed; "nobody spit in anybody's face; nobody bit anybody, nor tried to scratch anybody's eyes out!"

"Maybe we'll have better luck to-morrow," said Creel hopefully.

"Better luck?" I stared.

"It is that sort of stuff which makes a picture, Billy," said Creel; "you know that as well as I do. I'd

have no objection to getting bitten or scratched, if it helped make a good picture. I'd welcome it! Any good actor would! I wish I had more actresses who bit and scratched and raised Cain generally when the action called for it! Hello! What's this?"

There was the tramp of feet outside, and then the curtain-flap was thrust back, and Davis appeared—very dirty and evidently very tired, but with shining eyes; and close behind him toiled six natives, carrying the gilded coffin of Sekenyen-Re, while two others brought up the rear lugging the wooden chest.

"Good Lord!" protested Creel. "You're not going to bring those things in here!"

"I am, though," said Davis, cheerfully. "I want them where I can keep my eyes on them—the coffin especially. It's too precious to take any chances with!"

"But there's scarcely room to turn around, as it is."

"I'm going to put it on my cot," said Davis. "It won't be in the way there—at least, not in anybody's way but mine—and I can sleep on the ground beside it. There's room in that corner for the chest."

Devotion to duty always silenced Creel, and he stood aside now without another word while the natives squeezed past and deposited the mummy case on the professor's cot, and the canopic chest in the corner he had indicated.

"That's all," he said, and waved them away, and then he got out his electric torch and began to examine the hieroglyphics with which the sides of the coffin were covered, quite forgetful of the fact that he was streaked with dirt and that dinner was waiting. He was fairly smacking his lips with joy. Creel's face softened as he looked at him—he understood the artist's enthusiasm.

"Come and get washed up," he said. "Those pot-hooks can wait. Dinner is ready—and you look fagged out."

"I am," Davis admitted, and snapped off his torch. "Getting that wall down was a harder job than I expected. It was like adamant—talk about Roman work—it isn't in the same class with the early Egyptian! And the tomb was like an oven!"

"Let me have your torch," said Creel; and while Davis washed his hands and face and brushed the dust out of his hair we took another look at the coffin. For the first time we appreciated its full beauty. "The face isn't in the least like Jimmy's," said Creel, as the light came to rest on the staring eyes. "I wonder how it ever affected us like that?"

I was squinting down at it, and I wasn't so sure. "Perhaps it was the way we were looking at it," I suggested. "Even now, it looks somehow as though it might change to Jimmy's at any instant."

Creel was squinting too, with his eyes curiously puckered; and after a moment, he nodded without speaking. Then he ran the light around the edge of the lid.

"Have you opened it?" he asked Davis.

"I lifted the lid and looked in, to be sure everything was all right."

"And was it?"

"Oh, yes—the mummy is there, beautifully wrapped. I'll not try to unwrap it till I get it home to the museum—it's too delicate a job."

"Then you're done out here?"

"There is still the rear wall of the tomb to open. I'll do that to-morrow."

"Oh," said Creel, slowly, "so you have quite made up your mind to open that wall, too?"

"Certainly—I thought that was understood. I was wondering if I might have Mustafa."

(Continued on following page.)

What Has Happened in the Previous Chapters

A NEW YORK company of moving picture actors goes to Egypt to film a picture which it is believed will make a tremendous "hit." Davis, an Egyptologist, joins the party at Luxor, and with an outfit of camels, donkeys, etc., they journey into the desert. While Davis accompanies and directs them, his real object is to complete excavations in certain ruins in which he believes he will find the tomb of an ancient king.

He is correct in his supposition and the tomb of Sekenyen-Re is unearthed. The plot of the picture and the real become strangely interwoven in this land of mystery and superstition, and it often remains for the old Egyptologist to give a reasonable solution of the many uncanny happenings.

