

A King in Babylon

(Continued from preceding page.)

"Oh, Jimmy has got over his!" said Creel. "You should have seen him this morning hugging that mummy—quite as if he liked it! No, it isn't nerves—it is something deeper. What do you expect to find behind that door?"

"I don't know," answered Davis; "but I do know one thing, and it is this: there is something there—something unusual—something terrible, perhaps. That sign was never used without good reason. No Egyptian would dare disregard it."

"Ah, you see," Creel began.

"But I am not an Egyptian," Davis broke in. "I'm a scientist—I have left those old superstitions behind me. That sign, instead of warning me away, lures me on. I am determined to see what is behind that door!"

His eyes were shining with excitement. Creel gazed into them a moment without speaking.

"I see," he said, at last. "I dare say I should feel the same way, in your place. Well, let's go to lunch," and he turned away toward the corridor.

CHAPTER XXII.

CREEL and Mustafa had a strenuous time, that afternoon, getting our cohort of natives into shape. They were so excited by the prospect of dressing up in masquerade that they behaved like a lot of children.

Mustafa opened the proceedings by an oration in what I suppose was Arabic, and the fellahin listened respectfully, squatted in a semi-circle before him. It was the first time I had had occasion to observe them *en masse* and closely, and I was struck by their strange similarity of appearance—a similarity much greater than that of negroes or even Chinamen. The almond-shaped eyes, with their thick fringe of lashes, the smooth straight eyebrows, the wide-lipped mouth, the high cheek-bones, the receding forehead, the broad flat nose—all these gave to that circle of bronze faces a uniformity almost startling, especially since every face was crowned with a close-fitting skull-cap, converted into a sort of turban by winding a strip of dirty white cloth around it; and add to this the fact that their bodies, thin almost to emaciation, were all clothed alike in long brown smocks and baggy white trousers—why, it almost seemed as if Mustafa's audience was composed not of fifty men, but of fifty replicas of the same man!

They listened to the dragoman's remarks in silence and with impassive faces until, toward the end, he rose to what I supposed to be a more impassioned flight, for then they grinned and nodded approval, and chattered to each other like a lot of blackbirds. I found out afterwards that what had won this applause was not any trick of oratory, but the promise of an extra hundred piastres for the crowd, if it would do faithfully what was required of it. A hundred piastres runs all the way to five dollars, and Creel afterwards paid it cheerfully.

But our troubles were just beginning. The natives, under the stimulus of this brilliant reward, were willing enough and donned joyously the gorgeous raiment prepared for them, but to get them to do what we wanted them to do brought Creel to the verge of hysteria. All credit to him that he finally succeeded, except when . . . but I mustn't get ahead of my story.

The first scene we took was in front of the tent, showing the erstwhile favorite being dragged away to her fate, while the king looked cynically on, with his eunuchs and other minions in the background. Digby and Mustafa did the dragging, and they had their hands so full that it looked to me as though Creel would have to don that coat of bronze and help!

From the instant Mlle. Roland came in sight between her captors, I knew we were in for an afternoon of excitement. Her face was deathly pale, her eyes filmed with horror, her whole being vibrant with desperate agony. I have never seen a glance more heartrending than that she cast at Jimmy; but his cynical smile did not waver and he urged her executioners on. The effect on the natives was extraordinary—just the effect we wanted, as Creel observed delightedly, for they moved uneasily, staring with open mouths, evidently divided between fear of Jimmy, who looked very regal indeed in his purple robes, and sympathy for his victim, who had never seemed more beautiful.

"Great!" said Creel, when the scene was finished, and Mlle. Roland stood pale and panting, while Mustafa scraped the sweat from his face with a hooked finger. (Poor Digby didn't dare wipe his, for fear the bronze would come off!) "It couldn't be better, Princess. Now we'll take another, out at the edge of the oasis."

She walked away without answering, and there was something in her face which made me vaguely uneasy—the same look which Jimmy's face had had the day before—a look which seemed to say that this wasn't acting at all, but grim reality. And there was something in the look which Jimmy sent after her I didn't like, either—a kind of infernal gloating . . .

I got my camera set up with a beautiful clump of palms as a background, while Creel and Mustafa marshalled the players, and then we did a scene with

the whole crowd starting across the desert toward the tomb. The Princess had ceased struggling, and walked with drooping shoulders and bowed head, as though she recognized the uselessness of resistance. As she passed the camera, she looked straight into it with the most tragic glance I ever saw. To look into the camera is usually an error of technique; but it wasn't in this case. I could guess how that glance would thrill the audience!

Then we did a third scene on the steps—a terrific close-up; for when she reached the steps, and looked across the court, and saw the open tomb waiting to receive her, she was like a mad woman, shrieking, clawing, writhing . . .

It was only by putting forth their utmost strength that Digby and Mustafa managed to drag her down.

"Look here," I heard Digby pant, "we can't help hurting you, you know, if you don't let up a little!"

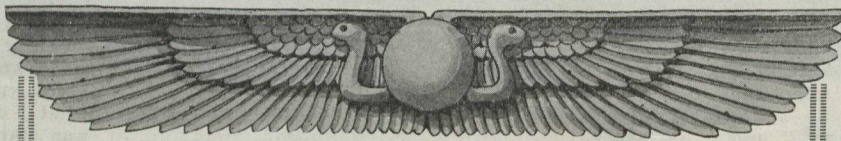
But she didn't let up—only looked at him as though he had uttered an insult, and spat in his face; and I fancied I could see Digby go pale under his bronze as he bit his lips and dragged her on; and I heard something else that sent a chill over me—a sort of guttural murmur from the natives, as they realized what was about to happen.

Digby and Mustafa had dropped their prisoner the instant the scene was over, and when I got down the steps, she was leaning against the wall with staring eyes, her lips drawn back in an ugly snarl, her bosom rising and falling convulsively. To me she seemed on the verge of collapse—but she didn't even look at me when I asked her if there was anything I could do—just stood there, clutching at the wall for support, and staring toward the tomb . . .

Digby and Mustafa were expostulating with Creel. "My God, saar," said Mustafa, "it iss too much—I can not do it!"

"She spat in my face!" growled Digby.

"Oh, shut up!" snapped Creel. "It was great—consummate! Suppose she *did* spit in your face? That won't hurt you! No—don't you dare wipe it off!"



THE STORY UP TO THE PRESENT

A NEW YORK company of moving picture actors goes to Egypt to film a great 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 outer entrance of 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. In the preceding chapter Jimmy disappeared within the opening to the tomb, and in searching for him Creel's hand was struck and his light knocked to the ground. He seemed to see a gray figure disappear just at that instant. On his hand there was a red welt,—something had certainly hit him.

"But I don't like it. It's going too far! It's not right!"

"It's gloriously right!"

"But, saar," Mustafa protested, "the fellahin—they not understand. They make trouble."

"Trouble?"

"Did you not hear them? It iss bad when they make that noise—vurry bad! They think she iss to be killed!"

"Oh, well, explain that it is only make-believe," said Creel impatiently. "I thought they understood that!"

"It iss impossible," said Mustafa, "for them to understand. It iss something beyond them."

"Promise them another hundred piastres, then," said Creel, and while Mustafa began another oration to the excited natives, he walked over to Mlle. Roland. "It is perfectly gorgeous, Princess!" he said, and I saw that he himself was too excited to notice how near prostration she was. "It's the greatest scene I ever filmed! If you can only keep it up . . ."

She looked at him strangely, without replying, and he might have noticed something then, had not Mustafa hurried up, rubbing his hands.

"It iss all right, saar," he said. "What do we do now?"

"Line them up in front of the tomb, along the carpet. Put your camera here, Billy. Jimmy, stand here under the shelter. Ready? Now, Princess, the final struggle. Get hold of her, Digby; get hold of her, Mustafa. Shove her into the tomb!"

It must be by a sort of sixth sense a camera-man

grinds out his foot a second; at least, when that scene was over, I could not remember that I had cranked at all, and for an instant turned sick and dizzy; but when I glanced at my indicator, I saw it was all right . . .

I thought they would break her wrists, dragging her forward. She dug her heels into the sand, she tried to throw herself prostrate, she twined herself about the men—and such cries, such shrieks . . .

And then, when they got her to the tomb, she wrenched herself free and sprang at Jimmy, who stood looking coldly on, and I verily believe she would have clawed his eyes out if Digby and Mustafa had not seized her and dragged her back.

And then she begged for mercy, the tears streaming down her face . . .

"Look—I am young—I am beautiful—see this body, so soft and tender—so full of delight—and it is yours—yours . . ."

I swear I came within an ace of rushing forward and rescuing her myself! And I could have torn Jimmy limb from limb when he shook his head and motioned her away . . .

And then the struggle began again, more terrible than ever; and I saw her bend swiftly and sink her teeth into Mustafa's arm; and I saw the purple rage which flashed into his face, as he whirled her from her feet and thrust her into the tomb . . .

"Bring your box up here, Billy," cried Creel.

"Now, Digby, quick—the stones!"

And Digby, with shaking hands, began to set in place the stones which Mustafa handed up to him. Once her face appeared at the opening, livid—scarcely a living face—and Mustafa thrust it back into the darkness with one ruthless blow; and then all the stones were in but the last square one, with its oval cartouche—and through the hole her hands were thrust, begging, imploring for mercy, and I could hear her voice, faint and inarticulate . . .

Digby hesitated, the stone in his hands, and glanced at Jimmy. It was the supreme touch,—how it would register!—and Jimmy nodded coldly. "Put it in!" he said; and Digby dabbed it with the black mortar and thrust it into place.

"Now," cried Creel, "walk slowly away, all of you, out of the picture . . ."

But that touch was destined never to be added, for with a hoarse cry, the fellahin swept over us, and began to claw frantically at that sealed opening.

"Crank, Billy, crank!" yelled Creel, and he told me afterwards that the thought had flashed into his head that he might use the scene somehow—but he never did. I saw it the other day, when we were testing out the film, and even on the screen, it gave me the horrors, for it brought that frantic minute so clearly back to me . . .

I cranked away during the sixty seconds it took those desperate blacks to claw those stones out again . . .

"By God, saar, she bit me!" I heard Mustafa saying, and saw that a dark stain was spreading across his white sleeve. "She iss no woman—she is a devil! She should stay in there!"

"Davis and three or four men are in there, too," answered Creel, with a smile. "We can't very well abandon them! Anyhow those blacks of yours have settled the matter. They've got the stones out—call them off, Mustafa, and get those clothes off of them before they're torn to shreds. My wife will dress your wound—and I'll give you ten dollars extra into the bargain . . ."

Mustafa's face, which had been sullen and threatening, cleared as if by magic, and he waded into his men with some of the most energetic language I ever heard. And such is the force of habit, ingrained through long centuries of oppression, that his men slunk back and

pulled off their gay attire and piled it in a heap under Digby's direction. But they were evidently not satisfied, for they hung about the border of the excavation, watching sullenly to see what would happen next.

For Mlle. Roland had not reappeared at the opening in the tomb.

I had expected to see her standing there, the instant the stones were pulled away, pale, panting and triumphant—but there was only the blackness of the tomb; and then Creel ran forward and disappeared inside. And then, as I unslung my camera with trembling hands—for I knew that it would not be needed again that day!—I was astonished to see Jimmy in all his war-paint as king of Egypt, calmly mounting the steps out of the excavation, as though he had no possible concern in the girl's fate. Or as though he knew that fate was settled—that he had buried her alive and was leaving her to die! That was what his look seemed to say, so cruel and impassive . . .

Then Creel's face re-appeared at the opening.

"Turn your box over to Digby, Billy," he called, "and come here."

A moment later, I was clambering through the opening.

"No! no!" called Creel's voice. "Stay outside—wait a minute!"

"What's the matter?" I gasped.

"Nothing serious; the Princess has fainted," and then he came toward me out of the darkness, with

(Continued on following page.)