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Nov. 21.

KING SOLOMON'S MINES

A MOST ATTRACTIVE STORY.

When the ceremony was over we waited upon Ignosi, and informed him that we were now anxious to investigate the mystery of the mines to which Solomon's Road ran, asking him if he had discovered anything about them.

"My friends," he answered, "this have I discovered. It is there that the three figures sit, who here are called the 'Silent Ones,' and to whom Twaia would have offered the girl Foulati, as a sacrifice. It is there, too, in a great cave deep in the mountain, that the kings of the land are buried; there shall ye find Twaia's body, sitting with those who went before him. There, too, is a great pit, which, at some time, long-lead men dug out, mayhap for the stones ye speak of, such as I have heard men in Nital speak of at Kimberley. There, too, in the Place of Death is a secret chamber, known to none but the king and Gagool. But Twaia, who knew it, is dead, and I know it not, nor know I what it is in it. But there is a legend in the land that one, many generations ago, a white man crossed the mountains, and was led by a woman to the secret chamber, and I showa the way to him, but before he could take it she betrayed him, and he was driven by the king of that day back to the mountains, and since then no man has entered the chamber."

"The story is surely true, Ignosi, for on the mountains we found the white man," I said.

"Yes, we found him. And now I have promised ye that if ye can find that chamber, and the stones are there—"

"The stone upon thy forehead proves that they are there," I put in, pointing to the great diamond I had taken from Twaia's dead brow.

"My hap; if they are there," he said, "ye shall have as many as ye can take home—if, indeed, ye would leave me no others."

"First we must find the chamber," said I. "There is but one who can show it to thee—Gagool."

"And if she will not?"

"Then shall she die," said Ignosi, sternly. "I have saved her life but for this. Stay, she shall choose," and calling to a messenger he ordered Gagool to be brought.

In a few minutes she came, hurried along by two guards, whom she was cursing as she walked.

"Leave her," said the king to the guards. As soon as their support was withdrawn the withered old bundle—for she looked more like a bundle than anything else—sunk into a heap on the floor, out of which her two bright, wicked eyes gleamed like a snake's.

"What will ye with me, Ignosi?" she piped. "Ye dare not touch me. If ye touch me I will blast ye as ye sit. Beware of my magic."

"Thy magic could not save Twaia, old she-wolf, and it cannot hurt me," was the answer. "Listen; I will tell of thee, that thou reveal where is the chamber where are the shining stones."

"Ha! ha!" she piped, "none know but I, and I will never tell thee. This white devil shall go hence empty-handed."

"Thou wilt tell me. I will make thee tell me."

"How, O king? Thou art great, but can thy power wing the truth from a woman?"

"It is difficult, yet will I do it."

"How, O king?"

"Nay, thus; if thou tellest not thou shalt die."

"Die!" she shrieked, in terror and fury; "ye dare not touch me—man, ye know not who I am. How old think ye am? I knew your fathers, and your fathers' fathers' fathers. When the country was young I was here, when the country grows old I shall still be here. I cannot die unless I be killed by chance, for none dare slay me."

"Yet will I slay thee. See Gagool, mother of evil, thou art so old thou canst no longer love life. What can life be to such a hag as thee, who hast no shape, no form, nor hair, nor teeth—last naught, save wickedness and evil eyes? It will be mercy to slay thee, Gagool."

"Thou fool," shrieked the old fiend, "thou accusedst fool, thinkest thou that life is sweet only to the young? It is not so, and naught thou knowest of the heart of man to think of it. To the young, indeed, death is sometimes welcome, for the young can feel. They love and suffer, and it wrings them to see their beloved pass to the land of shadow. But the old feel not, they love not, and, ha! ha! they laugh to see another go out into the dark; ha! ha! they laugh to see the evil that is done under the sun. All they love is life, the warm, warm sun, and the sweet, sweet air. They are afraid of the cold, afraid of the cold and dark, ha! ha! ha!" and the old hag writhed in ghastly merriment on the ground.

"Cease thine evil talk and answer me," said Ignosi, angrily. "Wilt thou show the place where the stones are, or wilt thou not? If thou wilt not thou diest even now, and he seized a spear and held it over her."

"I will not show it; thou darrest not kill me, darrest not. He who slays me will be accursed forever."

"Slowly Ignosi brought down the spear till it pricked the prostrate heap of rags. With a wild yell she sprang to her feet, and then again fell and rolled upon the floor.

"Nay, I will show it. Only let me live; let me sit in the sun and have a bit of meat to suck, and I will show thee."

"It is well. I thought I should find a way to reason with thee. To-morrow thou shalt go with Infados and my white brothers to the place; and beware how thou faltest, for if thou showest it not then shalt thou die. I have spoken."

"I will not fail, Ignosi. I always keep my word; ha! ha! ha! Once a woman showed the place to a white man before, and behold, evil befell him; and here her wicked eyes glistened. Her name was Gagool, too. Perchance I was that woman."

Great Road ran.

Our party consist of our three selves and Foulati, who waited on us—especially on Good—Infados, Gagool, who was borne along in a litter, inside which she could be heard muttering and cursing all day long, and a party of guards and attendants.

I had better leave the feelings of intense excitement with which we set out on our march that morning to the imagination of those who read this history. At last we were drawing near to the wonderful mines that had been the cause of the miserable death of the old Portuguese don, three centuries ago, of my poor friend, his ill-starred descendant, and also, as we feared, of George Curtis, Sir Henry's brother. Were we destined, after all that we had gone through, to fare any better? Evil befell them; as that old fiend Gagool said, would also befall us. Somehow, as we were marching up that last stretch of beautiful road, I could not help feeling a little superstitious about the matter, and so I think did Good and Sir Henry.

For an hour and a half or more we tramped on up the heather-fringed road, going so fast in our excitement that the bearers with Gagool's hammock could scarcely keep pace with us, and its occupant piped out to us to stop.

"Go more slowly, white men," she said, projecting her hideous shriveled countenance between the curtains, and fixing her gleaming eyes upon us; "why will ye run to meet the evil that shall befall ye, ye seekers after treasure?" and she laughed that horrible laugh which always sent a cold shiver down my back, and which for a while quite took the enthusiasm out of us.

However, on we went, till we saw before us, and between ourselves and the peak, a vast circular hole with sloping sides, three hundred feet or more in depth, and quite half a mile round.

"Can't you guess what this is?" I said to Sir Henry and Good, who were staring in astonishment down into the awful pit before us.

"They shook their heads.

"Then it is clear that you have never seen the diamond mines at Kimberley. You may depend on that this is Solomon's Diamond Mine; look there," I said pointing to the stiff, blue clay which was yet to be seen among the grass and bushes which clothed the sides of the pit, "the formation is the same. I'll be bound that if we went down there we should find 'pipes' of soapy brecciated rock. Look, too," and I pointed to a series of worn flat slabs of rock which were placed on a gentle slope below the level of a water-course which had in some past age been cut out of the solid rock; "if those are not tables once used to wash the 'stuff,' I'm a Dutchman."

At the edge of this vast hole, which was the pit marked on the old don's map, the great road branched into two and circumvented it. In many places this circumventing road was built entirely of vast blocks of stone, apparently with the object of supporting the edges of the pit and preventing falls of reef. Along this road we pressed, driven by curiosity to see what the three towering objects were which we could discern from the hither side of the great hole. As we got nearer we perceived that they were colossal of some sort or another, and rightly conjectured that these were the three "Silent Ones" that were held in such awe by the Kukuana people. But it was not until we got quite close that we recognized the full majesty of these "Silent Ones."

There, upon huge pedestals of dark rock, sculptured in unknown characters, twenty pairs—two each, and looking down the road which crossed some sixty miles of plain to Loob, were three colossal seated figures—two male and one female—each measuring about twenty feet from the crown of the head to the pedestal.

Before we had finished examining these extraordinary relics of remote antiquity, Infados came up, and, having saluted the "Silent Ones" by lifting his spear, asked us if we intended entering the "Place of Death" at once, or if we would wait till after we had taken food to-morrow. If we were ready to go at once Gagool had announced her willingness to guide us. As it was not more than seven o'clock, we drew to it by a little fire, and by a little announced our intention of proceeding at once, and I suggested that, in case we should be detained in the cave, we should take some food with us. Accordingly Gagool's litter was brought up and that lady herself assisted out of it, and, meanwhile, Foulati, at my request, stored some "bontong," or dried game-flesh together with a couple of gourds of water in a reed basket. Straight in front of us, at a distance of some fifty paces from the backs of the colossal, rose a sheer wall of rock, eighty feet or more in height, that gradually sloped up till it formed the base of the lofty snow-crowned peak, which soared up into the air three thousand feet above us. As soon as she was clear of her hammock, Gagool cast one evil grin upon us, and then, leaning on a stick, hobbled off toward the sheer face of the rock. We followed her till we came to a narrow portal solidly arched, that looked like the opening of a gallery of a mine.

Here Gagool was waiting for us, still with that evil grin upon her horrid face.

"Now, white men from the stars," she piped; "great warriors, Incubus, Bougwau, and Macumazani, the wise, are ye ready? Behold, I am here to do the bidding of my lord the king, and to show ye the store of bright stones."

"We are ready," I said.

"Good! good! Make strong your hearts to bear what ye shall see. Comest thou too, Infados, who betrayed thy master?"

Infados frowned as he answered: "Nay, I come not, it is not for me to enter there. But thou Gagool, curb thy tongue, and beware how thou dealest with my lords. At thy hands will I require them and if a hair of them be hurt, Gagool, be thou fifty times a witch, thou shalt die. Hearest thou?"

"I hear, Infados; I know thee, thou didst ever love big words; when thou wast a babe I remember thou didst threaten thine own mother. That was but the other day. But fear not, fear not, I live but to do the bidding of my king. I have done the bidding of many kings, Infados, till in the end they did mine. Ha! ha! I go to look upon their faces—once more, and Twaia's, too! Come on, come on, here is the lamp," and she drew a great gourd full of oil, and fitted with a rush wick, from under her fur cloke.

"Art thou coming, Foulati?" asked Good in his villainous kitchen Kukuana, in which he had been improving himself under that young lady's tuition.

"I fear my lord," the girl answered timidly.

"Then give me the basket."

"Nay, my lord, whether thou goest, there will I go also."

"The deuce you will!" thought I to myself; "that will be rather awkward if ever we get out of this."

With a further ado Gagool plunged into the cave, which was wide enough to ad-

mit of two walking abreast, and quite dark, we following her voice as she piped to us to come on, in some fear and trembling, which was not allayed by the sound of a sudden rush of wings.

"Hullo! what's that?" halloed Good; "somebody hit me in the face."

"Bats," said I; "on you go."

When we had, so far as we could judge, gone some fifty paces, we perceived that the passage was growing faintly light. Another minute, we stood in the most wonderful place that the eyes of living man ever lit on.

(To be Continued.)

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