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Chapter 19 - The Queen's Story

In the meantime Bertha Kircher was conducted the length of the plaza toward the largest and most pretentious of the buildings surrounding it. This edifice covered the entire width of one end of the plaza. It was several stories in height, the main entrance being approached by a wide flight of stone steps, the bottom of which was guarded by enormous stone lions, while at the top there were two pedestals flanking the entrance and of the same height, upon each of which was the stone image of a large parrot. As the girl neared these latter images she saw that the capital of each column was hewn into the semblance of a human skull upon which the parrots perched. Above the arched doorway and upon the walls of the building were the figures of other parrots, of lions, and of monkeys. Some of these were carved in bas-relief; others were delineated in mosaics, while still others appeared to have been painted upon the surface of the wall.

The colorings of the last were apparently much subdued by age with the result that the general effect was soft and beautiful. The sculpturing and mosaic work were both finely executed, giving evidence of a high degree of artistic skill. Unlike the first building into which she had been conducted, the entrance to which had been doorless, massive doors closed the entrance which she now approached. In the niches formed by the columns which supported the door's arch, and about the base of the pedestals of the stone parrots, as well as in various other places on the broad stairway, lolled some score of armed men. The tunics of these were all of a vivid yellow and upon the breast and back of each was embroidered the figure of a parrot.

As she was conducted up the stairway one of these yellow-coated warriors approached and halted her guides at the top of the steps. Here they exchanged a few words and while they were talking the girl noticed that he who had halted them, as well as those whom she could see of his companions, appeared to be, if possible, of a lower mentality than her original captors.

Their coarse, bristling hair grew so low upon their foreheads as, in some instances, to almost join their eyebrows, while the irises were smaller, exposing more of the white of the eyeball.

After a short parley the man in charge of the doorway, for such he seemed to be, turned and struck upon one of the panels with the butt of his spear, at the same time calling to several of his companions, who rose and came forward at his command. Soon the great doors commenced slowly to swing creakingly open, and presently, as they separated, the girl saw behind them the motive force which operated the massive doors -- to each door a half-dozen naked Negroes.

At the doorway her two guards were turned back and their places taken by a half dozen of the yellow-coated soldiery. These conducted her through the doorway which the blacks, pulling upon heavy chains, closed behind them. And as the girl watched them she noted with horror that the poor creatures were chained by the neck to the doors.

Before her led a broad hallway in the center of which was a little pool of clear water. Here again in floor and walls was repeated in new and ever-changing combinations and designs, the parrots, the monkeys, and the lions, but now many of the figures were of what the girl was convinced must be gold. The walls of the corridor consisted of a series of open archways through which, upon either side, other spacious apartments were visible. The hallway was entirely unfurnished, but the rooms on either side contained benches and tables. Glimpses of some of the walls revealed the fact that they were covered with hangings of some colored fabric, while upon the floors were thick rugs of barbaric design and the skins of black lions and beautifully marked leopards.

The room directly to the right of the entrance was filled with men wearing the yellow tunics of her new guard while the walls were hung with numerous spears and sabers. At the far end of the corridor a low flight of steps led to another closed doorway. Here the guard was again halted. One of the guards at this doorway, after receiving the report of one of those who accompanied her, passed through the door, leaving them standing outside. It was fully fifteen minutes before he returned, when the guard was again changed and the girl conducted into the chamber beyond.

Through three other chambers and past three more massive doors, at each of which her guard was changed, the girl was conducted before she was ushered into a comparatively small room, back and forth across the floor of which paced a man in a scarlet tunic, upon the front and back of which was embroidered an enormous parrot and upon whose head was a barbaric headdress surmounted by a stuffed parrot.

The walls of this room were entirely hidden by hangings upon which hundreds, even thousands, of parrots were embroidered. Inlaid in the floor were golden parrots, while, as thickly as they could be painted, upon the ceiling were brilliant-hued parrots with wings outspread as though in the act of flying.

The man himself was larger of stature than any she had yet seen within the city. His parchment-like skin was wrinkled with age and he was much fatter than any other of his kind that she had seen. His bared arms, however, gave evidence of great strength and his gait was not that of an old man. His facial expression denoted almost utter imbecility and he was quite the most repulsive creature that ever Bertha Kircher had looked upon.

For several minutes after she was conducted into his presence he appeared not to be aware that she was there but continued his restless pacing to and fro. Suddenly, without the slightest warning, and while he was at the far end of the room from her with his back toward her, he wheeled and rushed madly at her. Involuntarily the girl shrank back, extending her open palms toward the frightful creature as though to hold him aloof but a man upon either side of her, the two who had conducted her into the apartment, seized and held her.

Although he rushed violently toward her the man stopped without touching her. For a moment his horrid white-rimmed eyes glared searchingly into her face, immediately following which he burst into maniacal laughter. For two or three minutes the creature gave himself over to merriment and then, stopping as suddenly as he had commenced to laugh, he fell to examining the prisoner. He felt of her hair, her skin, the texture of the garment she wore and by means of signs made her understand she was to open her mouth. In the latter he seemed much interested, calling the attention of one of the guards to her canine teeth and then baring his own sharp fangs for the prisoner to see.

Presently he resumed pacing to and fro across the floor, and it was fully fifteen minutes before he again noticed the prisoner, and then it was to issue a curt order to her guards, who immediately conducted her from the apartment.

The guards now led the girl through a series of corridors and apartments to a narrow stone stairway which led to the floor above, finally stopping before a small door where

stood a naked Negro armed with a spear. At a word the Negro opened the door and the party passed into a low-ceiled apartment, the windows of which immediately caught the girl's attention through the fact that they were heavily barred. The room was furnished similarly to those that she had seen in other parts of the building, the same carved tables and benches, the rugs upon the floor, the decorations upon the walls, although in every respect it was simpler than anything she had seen on the floor below. In one corner was a low couch covered with a rug similar to those on the floor except that it was of a lighter texture, and upon this sat a woman.

As Bertha Kircher's eyes alighted upon the occupant of the room the girl gave a little gasp of astonishment, for she recognized immediately that here was a creature more nearly of her own kind than any she had seen within the city's walls. An old woman it was who looked at her through faded blue eyes, sunken deep in a wrinkled and toothless face. But the eyes were those of a sane and intelligent creature, and the wrinkled face was the face of a white woman.

At sight of the girl the woman rose and came forward, her gait so feeble and unsteady that she was forced to support herself with a long staff which she grasped in both her hands. One of the guards spoke a few words to her and then the men turned and left the apartment. The girl stood just within the door waiting in silence for what might next befall her.

The old woman crossed the room and stopped before her, raising her weak and watery eyes to the fresh young face of the newcomer. Then she scanned her from head to foot and once again the old eyes returned to the girl's face. Bertha Kircher on her part was not less frank in her survey of the little old woman. It was the latter who spoke first. In a thin, cracked voice she spoke, hesitatingly, falteringly, as though she were using unfamiliar words and speaking a strange tongue.

"You are from the outer world?" she asked in English. "God grant that you may speak and understand this tongue."

"English?" the girl exclaimed, "Yes, of course, I speak English."

"Thank God!" cried the little old woman. "I did not know whether I myself might speak it so that another could understand. For sixty years I have spoken only their accursed gibberish. For sixty years I have not heard a word in my native language. Poor creature! Poor creature!" she mumbled. "What accursed misfortune threw you into their hands?"

"You are an English woman?" asked Bertha Kircher. "Did I understand you aright that you are an English woman and have been here for sixty years?"

The old woman nodded her head affirmatively. "For sixty years I have never been outside of this palace. Come," she said, stretching forth a bony hand. "I am very old and cannot stand long. Come and sit with me on my couch."

The girl took the proffered hand and assisted the old lady back to the opposite side of the room and when she was seated the girl sat down beside her.

"Poor child! Poor child!" moaned the old woman. "Far better to have died than to have let them bring you here. At first I might have destroyed myself but there was always the hope that someone would come who would take me away, but none ever comes. Tell me how they got you."

Very briefly the girl narrated the principal incidents which led up to her capture by some of the creatures of the city.

"Then there is a man with you in the city?" asked the old woman.

"Yes," said the girl, "but I do not know where he is nor what are their intentions in regard to him. In fact, I do not know what their intentions toward me are."

"No one might even guess," said the old woman. "They do not know themselves from one minute to the next what their intentions are, but I think you can rest assured, my poor child, that you will never see your friend again."

"But they haven't slain you," the girl reminded her, "and you have been their prisoner, you say, for sixty years."

"No," replied her companion, "they have not killed me, nor will they kill you, though God knows before you have lived long in this horrible place you will beg them to kill you."

"Who are they --" asked Bertha Kircher, "what kind of people? They differ from any that I ever have seen. And tell me, too, how you came here."

"It was long ago," said the old woman, rocking back and forth on the couch. "It was long ago. Oh, how long it was! I was only twenty then. Think of it, child! Look at me. I have no mirror other than my bath, I cannot see what I look like for my eyes are old, but with my fingers I can feel my old and wrinkled face, my sunken eyes, and these flabby lips drawn in over toothless gums. I am old and bent and hideous, but then I was young and they said that I was beautiful. No, I will not be a hypocrite; I was beautiful. My glass told me that.

"My father was a missionary in the interior and one day there came a band of Arabian slave raiders. They took the men and women of the little native village where my father labored, and they took me, too. They did not know much about our part of the country so they were compelled to rely upon the men of our village whom they had captured to guide them. They told me that they never before had been so far south and that they had heard there was a country rich in ivory and slaves west of us. They wanted to go there and from there they would take us north, where I was to be sold into the harem of some black sultan.

"They often discussed the price I would bring, and that that price might not lessen, they guarded me jealously from one another so the journeys were made as little fatiguing for me as possible. I was given the best food at their command and I was not harmed.

"But after a short time, when we had reached the confines of the country with which the men of our village were familiar and had entered upon a desolate and arid desert waste, the Arabs realized at last that we were lost. But they still kept on, ever toward the west, crossing hideous gorges and marching across the face of a burning land beneath the pitiless sun. The poor slaves they had captured were, of course, compelled to carry all the camp equipage and loot and thus heavily burdened, half starved and without water, they soon commenced to die like flies.

"We had not been in the desert land long before the Arabs were forced to kill their horses for food, and when we reached the first gorge, across which it would have been impossible to transport the animals, the balance of them were slaughtered and the meat loaded upon the poor staggering blacks who still survived.

"Thus we continued for two more days and now all but a handful of blacks were dead, and the Arabs themselves had commenced to succumb to hunger and thirst and the intense heat of the desert. As far as the eye could reach back toward the land of plenty from whence we had come, our route was marked by circling vultures in the sky and by the bodies of the dead who lay down in the trackless waste for the last time. The ivory had been abandoned tusk by tusk as the blacks gave out, and along the trail of death was strewn the camp equipage and the horse trappings of a hundred men.

"For some reason the Arab chief favored me to the last, possibly with the idea that of all his other treasures I could be most easily transported, for I was young and strong and after the horses were killed I had walked and kept up with the best of the men. We English, you know, are great walkers, while these Arabians had never walked since they were old enough to ride a horse.

"I cannot tell you how much longer we kept on but at last, with our strength almost gone, a handful of us reached the bottom of a deep gorge. To scale the opposite side was out of the question and so we kept on down along the sands of what must have been the bed of an ancient river, until finally we came to a point where we looked out upon what appeared to be a beautiful valley in which we felt assured that we would find game in plenty.

"By then there were only two of us left -- the chief and my- self. I do not need to tell you what the valley was, for you found it in much the same way as I did. So quickly were we captured that it seemed they must have been waiting for us, and I learned later that such was the case, just as they were waiting for you.

"As you came through the forest you must have seen the monkeys and parrots and since you have entered the palace, how constantly these animals, and the lions, are used in the decorations. At home we were all familiar with talking par- rots who repeated the things that they were taught to say, but these parrots are different in that they all talk in the same lan- guage that the people of the city use, and they say that the monkeys talk to the parrots and the parrots fly to the city and tell the people what the monkeys say. And, although it is hard to believe, I have learned that this is so, for I have lived here among them for sixty years in the palace of their king.

"They brought me, as they brought you, directly to the pal- ace. The Arabian chief was taken elsewhere. I never knew what became of him. Ago XXV was king then. I have seen many kings since that day. He was a terrible man; but then, they are all terrible."

"What is the matter with them?" asked the girl.

"They are a race of maniacs," replied the old woman. "Had you not guessed it? Among them are excellent craftsmen and good farmers and a certain amount of law and order, such as it is.

"They reverence all birds, but the parrot is their chief deity. There is one who is held here in the palace in a very beautiful apartment. He is their god of gods. He is a very old bird. If what Ago told me when I came is true, he must be nearly three hundred years old by now. Their religious rites are re- volting in the extreme, and I believe that it may be the prac- tice of these rites through ages that has brought the race to its present condition of imbecility.

"And yet, as I said, they are not without some redeeming qualities. If legend may be credited, their forebears -- a little handful of men and women who came from somewhere out of the north and became lost in the wilderness of central Af- rica -- found here only a barren desert valley. To my own knowledge rain seldom, if ever, falls here, and yet you have seen a great forest and luxuriant vegetation outside of the city as well as within. This miracle is accomplished by the utilization of natural springs which their ancestors developed, and upon which they have improved to such an extent that the entire valley receives an adequate amount of moisture at all times.

"Ago told me that many generations before his time the forest was irrigated by changing the course of the streams which carried the spring water to the city but that when the trees had sent their roots down to the natural moisture of the soil and required no further irrigation, the course of the stream was changed and other trees were planted. And so the forest grew until today it covers almost the entire floor of the valley except for the open space where the city stands. I do not know that this is true. It may be that the forest has always been here, but it is one of their legends and it is borne out by the fact that there is not sufficient rainfall here to support vegeta- tion.

"They are peculiar people in many respects, not only in their form of worship and religious rites but also in that they breed lions as other people breed cattle. You have seen how they use some of these lions but the majority of them they fatten and eat. At first, I imagine, they ate lion meat as a part of their religious ceremony but after many generations they came to crave it so that now it is practically the only flesh they eat. They would, of course, rather die than eat the flesh of a bird, nor will they eat monkey's meat, while the herbivorous animals they raise only for milk, hides, and flesh for the lions. Upon the south side of the city are the corrals and pastures where the herbivorous animals are raised. Boar, deer, and an- telope are used principally for the lions, while goats are kept for milk for the human inhabitants of the city."

"And you have lived here all these years," exclaimed the girl, "without ever seeing one of your own kind?"

The old woman nodded affirmatively.

"For sixty years you have lived here," continued Bertha Kircher, "and they have not harmed you!"

"I did not say they had not harmed me," said the old wom- an, "they did not kill me, that is all."

"What" -- the girl hesitated -- "what," she continued at last, "was your position among them? Pardon me," she added quickly, "I think I know but I should like to hear from your own lips, for whatever your position was, mine will doubtless be the same."

The old woman nodded. "Yes," she said, "doubtless; if they can keep you away from the women."

"What do you mean?" asked the girl.

"For sixty years I have never been allowed near a woman. They would kill me, even now, if they could reach me. The men are frightful, God knows they are frightful! But heaven keep you from the women!"

"You mean," asked the girl, "that the men will not harm me?"

"Ago XXV made me his queen," said the old woman. "But he had many other queens, nor were they all human. He was not murdered for ten years after I came here. Then the next king took me, and so it has been always. I am the oldest queen now. Very few of their women live to a great age. Not only are they constantly liable to assassination but, owing to their subnormal mentalities, they are subject to periods of de- pression during which they are very likely to destroy them- selves."

She turned suddenly and pointed to the barred windows. "You see this room," she said, "with the black eunuch out- side? Wherever you see these you will know that there are women, for with very few exceptions they are never allowed out of captivity. They are considered and really are more vio- lent than the men."

For several minutes the two sat in silence, and then the younger woman turned to the older.

"Is there no way to escape?" she asked.

The old woman pointed again to the barred windows and then to the door, saying: "And there is the armed eunuch. And if you should pass him, how could you reach the street? And if you reached the street, how could you pass through the city to the outer wall? And even if, by some miracle, you should gain the outer wall, and, by another

miracle, you should be permitted to pass through the gate, could you ever hope to traverse the forest where the great black lions roam and feed upon men? No!" she exclaimed, answering her own question, "there is no escape, for after one had escaped from the palace and the city and the forest it would be but to invite death in the frightful desert land beyond.

"In sixty years you are the first to find this buried city. In a thousand no denizen of this valley has ever left it, and within the memory of man, or even in their legends, none had found them prior to my coming other than a single warlike giant, the story of whom has been handed down from father to son.

"I think from the description that he must have been a Spaniard, a giant of a man in buckler and helmet, who fought his way through the terrible forest to the city gate, who fell upon those who were sent out to capture him and slew them with his mighty sword. And when he had eaten of the vegetables from the gardens, and the fruit from the trees and drank of the water from the stream, he turned about and fought his way back through the forest to the mouth of the gorge. But though he escaped the city and the forest he did not escape the desert. For a legend runs that the king, fearful that he would bring others to attack them, sent a party after him to slay him.

"For three weeks they did not find him, for they went in the wrong direction, but at last they came upon his bones picked clean by the vultures, lying a day's march up the same gorge through which you and I entered the valley. I do not know," continued the old woman, "that this is true. It is just one of their many legends."

"Yes," said the girl, "it is true. I am sure it is true, for I have seen the skeleton and the corroded armor of this great giant."

At this juncture the door was thrown open without ceremony and a Negro entered bearing two flat vessels in which were several smaller ones. These he set down on one of the tables near the women, and, without a word, turned and left. With the entrance of the man with the vessels, a delightful odor of cooked food had aroused the realization in the girl's mind that she was very hungry, and at a word from the old woman she walked to the table to examine the viands. The larger vessels which contained the smaller ones were of pottery while those within them were quite evidently of hammered gold. To her intense surprise she found lying between the smaller vessels a spoon and a fork, which, while of quaint design, were quite as serviceable as any she had seen in more civilized communities. The tines of the fork were quite evidently of iron or steel, the girl did not know which, while the handle and the spoon were of the same material as the smaller vessels.

There was a highly seasoned stew with meat and vegetables, a dish of fresh fruit, and a bowl of milk beside which was a little jug containing something which resembled marmalade. So ravenous was she that she did not even wait for her companion to reach the table, and as she ate she could have sworn that never before had she tasted more palatable food. The old woman came slowly and sat down on one of the benches opposite her.

As she removed the smaller vessels from the larger and arranged them before her on the table a crooked smile twisted her lips as she watched the younger woman eat.

"Hunger is a great leveler," she said with a laugh.

"What do you mean?" asked the girl.

"I venture to say that a few weeks ago you would have been nauseated at the idea of eating cat."

"Cat?" exclaimed the girl.

"Yes," said the old woman. "What is the difference -- a lion is a cat."

"You mean I am eating lion now?"

"Yes," said the old woman, "and as they prepare it, it is very palatable. You will grow very fond of it."

Bertha Kircher smiled a trifle dubiously. "I could not tell it," she said, "from lamb or veal."

"No," said the woman, "it tastes as good to me. But these lions are very carefully kept and very carefully fed and their flesh is so seasoned and prepared that it might be anything so far as taste is concerned."

And so Bertha Kircher broke her long fast upon strange fruits, lion meat, and goat's milk.

Scarcely had she finished when again the door opened and there entered a yellow-coated soldier. He spoke to the old woman.

"The king," she said, "has commanded that you be prepared and brought to him. You are to share these apartments with me. The king knows that I am not like his other women. He never would have dared to put you with them. Herog XVI has occasional lucid intervals. You must have been brought to him during one of these. Like the rest of them he thinks that he alone of all the community is sane, but more than once I have thought that the various men with whom I have come in contact here, including the kings themselves, looked upon me as, at least, less mad than the others. Yet how I have retained my senses all these years is beyond me."

"What do you mean by prepare?" asked Bertha Kircher. "You said that the king had commanded I be prepared and brought to him."

"You will be bathed and furnished with a robe similar to that which I wear."

"Is there no escape?" asked the girl. "Is there no way even in which I can kill myself?"

The woman handed her the fork. "This is the only way," she said, "and you will notice that the tines are very short and blunt."

The girl shuddered and the old woman laid a hand gently upon her shoulder. "He may only look at you and send you away," she said. "Ago XXV sent for me once, tried to talk with me, discovered that I could not understand him and that he could not understand me, ordered that I be taught the language of his people, and then apparently forgot me for a year. Sometimes I do not see the king for a long period. There was one king who ruled for five years whom I never saw. There is always hope; even I whose very memory has doubtless been forgotten beyond these palace walls still hope, though none knows better how futilely."

The old woman led Bertha Kircher to an adjoining apartment in the floor of which was a pool of water. Here the girl bathed and afterward her companion brought her one of the clinging garments of the native women and adjusted it about her figure. The material of the robe was of a gauzy fabric which accentuated the rounded beauty of the girlish form.

"There," said the old woman, as she gave a final pat to one of the folds of the garment, "you are a queen indeed!"

The girl looked down at her naked breasts and but half-concealed limbs in horror. "They are going to lead me into the presence of men in this half-nude condition!" she

ex- claimed.

The old woman smiled her crooked smile. "It is nothing," she said. "You will become accustomed to it as did I who was brought up in the home of a minister of the gospel, where it was considered little short of a crime for a woman to expose her stockinged ankle. By comparison with what you will doubtless see and the things that you may be called upon to undergo, this is but a trifle."

For what seemed hours to the distraught girl she paced the floor of her apartment, awaiting the final summons to the presence of the mad king. Darkness had fallen and the oil flares within the palace had been lighted long before two messengers appeared with instructions that Herog demanded her immediate presence and that the old woman, whom they called Xanila, was to accompany her. The girl felt some slight relief when she discovered that she was to have at least one friend with her, however powerless to assist her the old woman might be.

The messengers conducted the two to a small apartment on the floor below. Xanila explained that this was one of the anterooms off the main throneroom in which the king was accustomed to hold court with his entire retinue. A number of yellow-tunicked warriors sat about upon the benches within the room. For the most part their eyes were bent upon the floor and their attitudes that of moody dejection. As the two women entered several glanced indifferently at them, but for the most part no attention was paid to them.

While they were waiting in the anteroom there entered from another apartment a young man uniformed similarly to the others with the exception that upon his head was a fillet of gold, in the front of which a single parrot feather rose erectly above his forehead. As he entered, the other soldiers in the room rose to their feet.

"That is Metak, one of the king's sons," Xanila whispered to the girl.

The prince was crossing the room toward the audience chamber when his glance happened to fall upon Bertha Kircher. He halted in his tracks and stood looking at her for a full minute without speaking. The girl, embarrassed by his bold stare and her scant attire, flushed and, dropping her gaze to the floor, turned away. Metak suddenly commenced to tremble from head to foot and then, without warning other than a loud, hoarse scream he sprang forward and seized the girl in his arms.

Instantly pandemonium ensued. The two messengers who had been charged with the duty of conducting the girl to the king's presence danced, shrieking, about the prince, waving their arms and gesticulating wildly as though they would force him to relinquish her, the while they dared not lay hands upon royalty. The other guardsmen, as though suffering in sympathy the madness of their prince, ran forward screaming and brandishing their sabers.

The girl fought to release herself from the horrid embrace of the maniac, but with his left arm about her he held her as easily as though she had been but a babe, while with his free hand he drew his saber and struck viciously at those nearest him.

One of the messengers was the first to feel the keen edge of Metak's blade. With a single fierce cut the prince drove through the fellow's collar bone and downward to the center of his chest. With a shrill shriek that rose above the screaming of the other guardsmen the man dropped to the floor, and as the blood gushed from the frightful wound he struggled to rise once more to his feet and then sank back again and died in a great pool of his own blood.

In the meantime Metak, still clinging desperately to the girl, had backed toward the opposite door. At the sight of the blood two of the guardsmen, as though suddenly aroused to maniacal frenzy, dropped their sabers to the floor and fell upon each other with nails and teeth, while some sought to reach the prince and some to defend him. In a corner of the room sat one of the guardsmen laughing uproariously and just as Metak succeeded in reaching the door and taking the girl through, she thought that she saw another of the men spring upon the corpse of the dead messenger and bury his teeth in its flesh.

During the orgy of madness Xanila had kept closely at the girl's side but at the door of the room Metak had seen her and, wheeling suddenly, cut viciously at her. Fortunately for Xanila she was halfway through the door at the time, so that Metak's blade but dented itself upon the stone arch of the portal, and then Xanila, guided doubtless by the wisdom of sixty years of similar experiences, fled down the corridor as fast as her old and tottering legs would carry her.

Metak, once outside the door, returned his saber to its scabbard and lifting the girl bodily from the ground carried her off in the opposite direction from that taken by Xanila.