DAUGHTER OF THE SUN

A Tale of Adventure

BY QUIEN SABE (*Who Knows*)

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THIS BEGINS THE STORY

Jim Kendric, a devil-may-care, but wide-hearted, outdoors type of American, with some friends seeks an Aztec treasure hoard in Mexico. His party comes into the power of a mysterious woman, Zoraida, who calls herself the last princess of the Montezumas. He witnesses "camp" barons and West Jim's companion, Zoraida falls in love with Jim, but he scorns her love. He falls in love with Betty Gordon, an American girl, who is held at Zoraida's mountain headquarters for ransom. Zoraida takes Kendric to the cave to assure-pieces, "the heart of ancient Mexico." She tries to bribe him with the great hoard of gems and gold. By something resembling magic in a series of mirrors she shows him his friends, the American girl, Jim's companion, and Jim himself, into which [illegible] Zoraida's savage pet puma. Kendric threatens to kill Zoraida striking such a blow [illegible] that she frees Betty, but [illegible] Jim. Armed with a rifle he measures to escape. Jim and [illegible] the moonlit [illegible]

AND HERE IT CONTINUES

"WE'LL have to dig in somewhere before dawn," said Jim once while they rested. "Where we can stick close during daylight tomorrow."

Betty merely nodded; a single decision were to be left to him. It was his clear-cut task to take care of her; just how he did it was not Betty's concern. So they went on, into the canyon where there was a way, and, under their own some way over a low ridge and slid and rolled down into the next ravine. And here, at the bottom, they found water. A thin trickle from a spring, wending its way down to the larger stream in the valley. They lay down, side by side, and drank. Then they sat back and looked at each other in the starlight.

"Betty," said Jim, impressively, "you're a brick."

"Am I?" said Betty. And by mere voice he knew that she was pleased.

"We're not so far from the house as I'd like," he said presently. "But it will take time to locate a decent hiding place, and we've got to stay within reach of water."

To all of this Betty agreed; personally she'd like to be a thousand miles away from this hideous place, but they would have to make the best of things. That willingness of hers to accept conditions without bemoaning her fate was what had drawn from him his impulsive epithet.

"The thing to do, then," said Kendric, getting up, "is to look for a likely place to spend a long day. And it may be more than one day."

Then Betty made her suggestion, offering it timidly, as though she were entering a discussion in which, right or wrong, she had no part.

"Up yonder," and she pointed to the abrupt ridge cutting black across the stars, "are cliffy places. It's not too far from water. There ought to be hiding places among the broken boulders. And," she concluded, "we might be able to peek out and look down and see what was happening."

No; he had not done her justice. He looked toward her, wondering for a moment. Then he said briefly: "Right," and they drank again and began climbing.

It was Betty who, fifty an hour later, found the retreat which they agreed to utilize. Kendric was somewhere above her, making a hazardous way up a steep bit of cliff, when Betty's voice floated up to him.

"I think, I've got it," were her words, guarded but a thrill with her triumph. "Come see. It's a great hole, hid by bushes. I don't like to go poking into it alone. You can't tell, there might be a bear or a snake or something inside."

He climbed down to where she stood at the edge of a little level space, her gown gathered in a hand at each side, her pretty face thrust forward as she sought to peer into the dark before her. He saw the clump of bushes but not immediately the hole of which she spoke, so was it covered and hidden. But at length he made out the irregular opening and, thrusting the bushes aside with his rifle barrel, judged that Betty had done well. Here was a perpendicular cleft in the rock, one of those cracks which not infrequently result from the splitting of gigantic masses of rock along a well-defined flaw.

In some ancient convulsion this fissure had developed, the two monster fragments of the mountain had been divided, one had slipped a little, and thereafter through the ages they had stood face to face, close together. Kendric could barely squeeze his body through; he found the space slanting off to the side; he groped forward half a dozen steps, encountered an outjutting knob of stone, slipped by it, and found that the split in the cliff now slanted off the other way and widened so that there was a space five to six feet across. How far ahead the fissure extended he could form no idea yet. He turned back for Betty and bumped into her just inside the entrance.

"It's just the place for us tonight," he said. "Though how in the world you stumbled onto it gets me."

"The bushes grew close to the rocks," Betty explained. "I was thinking that we could creep back of them and find a little space where, with the brush on one side and the cliff on the other, we'd be hidden. And I found this hole."

"The air gets in, and it's clean and fresh," he went on. "We couldn't hope for better."

"The walls are so close," whispered Betty, with a little shudder. "They give one the feeling they're going to press in and crush you."

"They widen a bit in a minute." He groped on ahead, came again to the outthrust knob and pressed by. "Here we turn a little to the right and here's room for a dozen people."

Betty hurried and stood close to him. In vain her eyes sought to penetrate the absolute dark; no slightest detail of floor or wall was offered save vaguely through the sense of touch.

"It's dark enough to smother you," she whispered. "I wonder what's ahead of us? I wish we dared have a light!"

He was silent a moment.

"Maybe we do dare," he said thoughtfully. "The crookedness of this place ought to shut off any glow from the outside. Let's go on a little further and we'll try."

He went on slowly, feeling a cautious way with his feet, his hand on the wall of rock at his side, Betty pressing on close behind him. Thus they continued another dozen paces or so. Then they stopped, because they could find no means of continuing; so far as they could tell by groping with their hands the fissure narrowed again until it was not wider than the original entrance, and its irregularities presented difficulties to blind progress.

"Stand here," said Kendric. "Close to the rock. Here's a match. I'll slip back to the mouth of the place and we'll see if there's any glow gets that far."

"Hurry, then," said Betty, with a little shiver, her fingers finding his and taking the match.

Appreciating her sensations he hurried off through the dark. He rounded the turn, called softly to her to strike the match and went on again until he was near the entrance. So still was it that he heard the scratching of the match against the sole of her sandal. But no flare of light came out to him.

"Did you light it?" he asked.

"Yes. Couldn't you see it?"

"Not a glimmer. Wait a minute and I'll bring in some stuff for a fire."

The match burned down and it warmed her fingers and went out. In the dark she waited breathlessly. A sigh of relief escaped her when she heard him coming.

He went down on his knees and made a very small heap of the dry leaves and twigs he had scraped up. When he set fire to it and straightened up she watched the flames eagerly. There was scarcely more light than a candle casts, but even that faint illumination brought something of cheerliness with it. They looked about them curiously. They could see clearly the passageway along which they had come; they could make out its narrowing continuation on into the mass of the mountain. They looked up and saw an ever-dwindling space merging with darkness and finally lost in utter obscurity. Underfoot was debris, rocks and worn away from the cliffs through all the ages, here and there fallen slivers and scale of rock. Shadows moved sombrely, misshapen and grotesque, like brooding spirits of evil stirring in nightmare.

Kendric, threw on a little more fuel and, to make doubly sure, went outside again, standing in the open beyond the fringe of bushes.

"Never a flicker gets through," he announced when he returned. "A man would have to come close enough to hear the wood crackle or smell the smoke to ever guess we had a fire going. And even the smoke is taken care of. They tilted back their heads to see how it crept lazing up and up until it was dissipated among the lofty shadows. "If we can manage water and food," he went on, "I think we would be safe here to rest. The lazy devils taking Zoraida's pay can't make it up this way on horseback, and they're not going to climb on foot up every steep bit of mountainside hereabouts, looking for us."

"A year?" gasped Betty.

"I hope not." He became conscious of a sudden sense of relief after all that the night had offered and his old joyous laughter shone in his eyes. "But there may be wisdom in sticking close for a few days. Until they decide we're gone clear."

It was the time, inevitable though it may be long delayed, of relaxing nerves and muscles. Betty sat down limply, her hands loose in her lap, her eyes drawn to their fire, looking tired and wistful. Kendric, looking at her, felt a hot rush of anger at Zoraida for being the cause of their present condition. Betty lifted her head and caught the expression molding his face. She was wrapped about with her red gown and Zoraida's cloak; her ankles were bare; there were scratches on them; her sandals looked already worn out; her hair was tumbled and snarled. She shook it loose and began combing it through with her fingers, then twisting it up into two loose brown braids.

"If we do have to stay a while," said Betty, gathering her courage in both hands, looking up at him and managing a smile, "I'll show you how I can fix the place up. Tomorrow, while you're doing the man's part and finding us something to eat, I'll show you what a housekeeper I can be. Why, I can make this just like a home; you'll see."

While he was doing the man's part! In her mind, then, it was all simplified and reduced to that. His, naturally, was to be the task of furnishing food, for nothing was clearer than that they must eat and that filling the larder was Jim's affair and not Betty's. Where he was to get food and how and what kind of food it might be was to be left to him. There was Betty for you, quite content to leave such matters where they properly belonged—in a man's hands. But he might rest assured that whatever he brought in, be it a handful of acorns or pine nuts or the carcass of a lean ground squirrel, would be, in Betty's eyes, splendid!

"Somehow," he burst out, "in spite of Zoraida and all the bandits in Mexico, we'll carry on!"

"Of course," said Betty.

He saw that she was leaning back against the rocks, that her whole body drooped, that she looked wearied out.

"I'm going out for some boughs, the softest I can find, handy," he said. "We'll have to sleep on them. And while I'm doing that I've got to figure out a way to bring some water up here. We don't know what's ahead and we'd be in hard luck bottled up here all day tomorrow with nothing to drink. Lord, I'd give a lot for a tin bucket!"

"It's just the place for us tonight," he said

He made a little bean of dead wood close to her hand so that she could keep her fire going, and put down on the other side of her his rifle and the long obsidian knife, planning to use his pocket knife for the work at hand.

"You won't go far?" asked Betty.

"Only a few steps," he assured her. "I'll hear if you call. And you have the rifle handy."

He was going out when Betty's voice arrested him.

"It's the housekeeper's place to have the buckets ready," was what she said.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked.

"I'll show you when you come back. You'll hurry, won't you?"

"Sure thing," he answered. And went about his task.

Now Jim Kendric knew as well as any man that there is no bed to compare with the bed a man may make for himself in the forestlands. But here was no forest, no thicket of young firs aromatic and springy, nothing but the harsher vegetation of a hard land where agaves, the maguey of Mexico, and their kin thrive, where the cactus is the characteristic growth. He'd be in luck to find some small pines or even the dry-looking sparse cedars of the locality. There with handfuls of dry leaves and grass, perhaps some tenderer shoots from the hillside sage, with Zoraida's cloak spread over them, might make for Betty a couch on which she could manage to sleep. It was too dark for picking and choosing and his range was limited to what scant growth found root on these uplands close by.

When he returned with the first armful of branches he informed Betty cheerily that outside her fire was hidden as though a sturdy oak panel shut their door for them. Betty was bending busily over her cloak and still thus occupied when he brought in the second and third trailing armful of boughs. He stood with his hands on his hips, looking down at her curiously. And as at last Betty glanced up brightly there was an air of triumph about her.

"The bucket is ready for the water," she said.

He came closer and she held out something toward him, and again he adjusted his views to fit the companion whom he was growing to know. She had spoiled a very beautiful and expensive cloak, but of it she had improvised something intended to hold water. Not for very long, perhaps; but long enough for the journey here from the creek, if a man did not loiter on the way. With the ancient sacrificial knife she had hacked at a stringy, fibrous bit of vegetation growing near the mouth of their den; she had managed a tough loop some eight or ten inches in diameter. Then she had ripped a square of silk from the cloak which she had shaped cunningly like a deep pocket, binding it securely into the fiber rim by thrusting holes through the silk and running bits of the green fiber through like pack thread.

The final result looked something less like a bucket than some strange oriole's hanging nest.

"It will hold water," vowed Betty, ready for argument. "I've worn bathing caps of a lot poorer grade of silk and never a drop got through. Besides I put a thickness of silk, then a layer of these broad leaves, then another piece of silk, to make sure."

"Fine," he said. "Yes, it will hold water for a while. But it's a long time from daylight until dark, and I'm afraid——"

"As if I hadn't thought of that," said Betty. "I knew that if I looked around I'd find something. I thought of your boots, of course; and I thought of your rifle barrel. But you'll need the boots and may need the gun. Come and I'll show you our reservoir."

She put a handful of leaves and twigs on the fire for the sake of more light, and led the way toward the narrowing fissure further back in their retreat. Here she stopped before a great rudely egg-shaped boulder five or six feet through that lay in a shallow depression in the ground.

"Our water bottle," said Betty.

He supposed that she referred to the depression in the rock floor, since the boulder did not fit in it so exactly as to preclude the possibility of the big rude basin holding water. The word "evaporation" was on his lips when Betty explained. She had hoped to find somewhere a cavity in a rock that would hold their water supply; she had noted this boulder and a flattish place at its top. There her questing fingers had discovered what Kendric's, at her direction, were exploring now. There was a fairly round hole, a couple of inches across. The edges were surprisingly smooth; Kendric could not guess how deep the hole was.

"Poke a stick into it," Betty commanded.

Obeying, he learned that the hole extended eighteen inches or more. Here was a fairly regular cylinder let into a block of hard rock that would contain something like two quarts of water—certainly enough to keep the life in two people for twenty-four hours.

"We'll make a plug to fit into the mouth of it," he said, catching her idea and immediately was as enthusiastic over it as Betty. "And while we're out getting the water we'll find something for straws. There are wild grasses, oats or something that looks like oats, in the canyon."

The night was well spent; dawn would come early. And with the dawn they had no doubt the mountain trails would fill with Zoraida's men, questing like hounds. Hence Betty and Jim lost no more time in making their trip down the steep slope to the trickle of water. They drank again, lying side by side at a pool. Then Jim filled Betty's "bucket" and they returned to their place of refuge. Kendric arranged the boughs for Betty and made her lie down. By the time he had carved and fitted a plug into their "water bottle" Betty was asleep.

To be continued tomorrow

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