

The People Of The Mist

H. Rider Haggard

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THE PEOPLE OF THE MIST

By H. Rider Haggard

First Published 1894.

DEDICATION

I DEDICATE THIS EFFORT OF
"PRIMEVAL AND TROGLODYTE IMAGINATION"
THIS RECORD OF BAREFACED AND FLAGRANT ADVENTURE

TO MY GODSONS

IN THE HOPE THAT THEREIN THEY MAY FIND
SOME STORE OF HEALTHY AMUSEMENT.

Ditchingham, 1894.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

On several previous occasions it has happened to this writer of romance to be justified of his romances by facts of startling similarity, subsequently brought to light and to his knowledge. In this tale occurs an instance of the sort, a "double-barrelled" instance indeed, that to him seems sufficiently curious to be worthy of telling. The People of the Mist of his adventure story worship a sacred crocodile to which they make sacrifice, but in the original draft of the book this crocodile was a snake--_monstrum horrendum, informe, ingens_. A friend of the writer, an African explorer of great experience who read that draft, suggested that the snake was altogether too unprecedented and impossible. Accordingly, also at his suggestion, a crocodile was substituted. Scarcely was this change effected, however, when Mr. R. T. Coryndon, the slayer of almost the last white rhinoceros, published in the _African Review_ of February 17, 1894, an account of a huge and terrific serpent said to exist in the Dichwi district of Mashonaland, that in many particulars resembled the snake of the story, whose prototype, by the way, really lives and is adored as a divinity by certain natives in the remote province of Chiapas in Mexico. Still, the tale being in type, the alteration was suffered to stand. But now, if the _Zoutpansberg Review_ may be believed, the author can take credit for his crocodile also, since that paper states that in the course of the recent campaign against Malaboch, a chief living in the north of the Transvaal, his fetish or god was captured, and that god, a crocodile fashioned in wood, to which offerings were made. Further, this journal says that among these people (as with the ancient Egyptians), the worship of the crocodile is a recognised cult. Also it congratulates the present writer on his intimate acquaintance with the more secret manifestations of African folklore and beast worship. He must disclaim the compliment in this instance as, when engaged in inventing the 'People of the Mist,' he was totally ignorant that any of the Bantu tribes revered either snake or crocodile divinities. But the coincidence is strange, and once more shows, if further examples of the fact are needed, how impotent are the efforts of imagination to vie with hidden truths--even with the hidden truths of this small and trodden world.

September 20, 1894.

THE PEOPLE OF THE MIST

CHAPTER I

THE SINS OF THE FATHER ARE VISITED ON THE CHILDREN

The January afternoon was passing into night, the air was cold and still, so still that not a single twig of the naked beech-trees stirred; on the grass of the meadows lay a thin white rime, half frost, half snow; the firs stood out blackly against a steel-hued sky, and over the tallest of them hung a single star. Past these bordering firs there ran

a road, on which, in this evening of the opening of our story, a young man stood irresolute, glancing now to the right and now to the left.

To his right were two stately gates of iron fantastically wrought, supported by stone pillars on whose summits stood griffins of black marble embracing coats of arms, and banners inscribed with the device *_Per ardua ad astra_*. Beyond these gates ran a broad carriage drive, lined on either side by a double row of such oaks as England alone can produce under the most favourable circumstances of soil, aided by the nurturing hand of man and three or four centuries of time.

At the head of this avenue, perhaps half a mile from the roadway, although it looked nearer because of the eminence upon which it was placed, stood a mansion of the class that in auctioneers' advertisements is usually described as "noble." Its general appearance was Elizabethan, for in those days some forgotten Outram had practically rebuilt it; but a large part of its fabric was far more ancient than the Tudors, dating back, so said tradition, to the time of King John. As we are not auctioneers, however, it will be unnecessary to specify its many beauties; indeed, at this date, some of the tribe had recently employed their gift of language on these attractions with copious fulness and accuracy of detail, since Outram Hall, for the first time during six centuries, was, or had been, for sale.

Suffice it to say that, like the oaks of its avenue, Outram was such a house as can only be found in England; no mere mass of bricks and mortar, but a thing that seemed to have acquired a life and individuality of its own. Or, if this saying be too far-fetched and poetical, at the least this venerable home bore some stamp and trace of the lives and individualities of many generations of mankind, linked together in thought and feeling by the common bond of blood.

The young man who stood in the roadway looked long and earnestly towards the mass of buildings that frowned upon him from the crest of the hill, and as he looked an expression came into his face which fell little, if at all, short of that of agony, the agony which the young can feel at the shock of an utter and irredeemable loss. The face that wore such evidence of trouble was a handsome one enough, though just now all the charm of youth seemed to have faded from it. It was dark and strong, nor was it difficult to guess that in after-life it might become stern. The form also was shapely and athletic, though not very tall, giving promise of more than common strength, and the bearing that of a gentleman who had not brought himself up to the belief that ancient blood can cover modern deficiencies of mind and manner. Such was the outward appearance of Leonard Outram as he was then, in his twenty-third year.

While Leonard watched and hesitated on the roadway, unable, apparently, to make up his mind to pass those iron gates, and yet desirous of doing so, carts and carriages began to appear hurrying down the avenue towards him.

"I suppose that the sale is over," he muttered to himself. "Well, like death, it is a good thing to have done with."

Then he turned to go; but hearing the crunch of wheels close at hand, stepped back into the shadow of the gateway pillar, fearing lest he should be recognised on the open road. A carriage came up, and, just as

it reached the gates, something being amiss with the harness, a footman descended from the box to set it right. From where he stood Leonard could see its occupants, the wife and daughter of a neighbouring squire, and overhear their conversation. He knew them well; indeed, the younger lady had been one of his favourite partners at the county balls.

"How cheap the things went, Ida! Fancy buying that old oak sideboard for ten pounds, and with all those Outram quarterings on it too! It is as good as an historical document, and I am sure that it must be worth at least fifty. I shall sell ours and put it into the dining-room. I have coveted that sideboard for years."

The daughter sighed and answered with some asperity.

"I am so sorry for the Outrams that I should not care about the sideboard if you had got it for twopence. What an awful smash! Just think of the old place being bought by a Jew! Tom and Leonard are utterly ruined, they say, not a sixpence left. I declare I nearly cried when I saw that man selling Leonard's guns."

"Very sad indeed," answered the mother absently; "but if he is a Jew, what does it matter? He has a title, and they say that he is enormously rich. I expect there will be plenty going on at Outram soon. By the way, my dear Ida, I do wish you would cure yourself of the habit of calling young men by their Christian names--not that it matters about these two, for we shall never see any more of them."

"I am sure I hope that we shall," said Ida defiantly, "and when we do I shall call them by their Christian names as much as ever. You never objected to it before the smash, and I love both of them, so there! Why did you bring me to that horrid sale? You know I did not want to go. I shall be wretched for a week, I----" and the carriage swept on out of hearing.

Leonard emerged from the shadow of the gateway and crossed the road swiftly. On the further side of it he paused, and looking after the retreating carriage said aloud, "God bless you for your kind heart, Ida Hatherley. Good luck go with you! And now for the other business."

A hundred yards or so down the road, was a second gate of much less imposing appearance than those which led to the Outram Hall. Leonard passed through it and presently found himself at the door of a square red brick house, built with no other pretensions than to those of comfort. This was the Rectory, now tenanted by the Reverend and Honourable James Beach, to whom the living had been presented many years before by Leonard's father, Mr. Beach's old college friend.

Leonard rang the bell, and as its distant clamour fell upon his ears a new fear struck him. What sort of reception would he meet with in this house? he wondered. Hitherto his welcome had always been so cordial that until this moment he had never doubted of it, but now circumstances were changed. He was no longer in the position of second son to Sir Thomas Outram of Outram Hall. He was a beggar, an outcast, a wanderer, the son of a fraudulent bankrupt and suicide. The careless words of the woman in the carriage had let a flood of light into his mind, and by it he saw many things which he had never seen before. Now he remembered a little motto that he had often heard, but the full force of which he did not appreciate until to-day. "Friends follow fortune," was the wording of this motto. He remembered also another saying that had frequently been

read to him in church and elsewhere, and the origin of which precluded all doubt as to its truth:--

"Unto every one that hath shall be given, but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath."

Now, as it chanced, Leonard, beggared as he was, had still something left which could be taken away from him, and that something the richest fortune which Providence can give to any man in his youth, the love of a woman whom he also loved. The Reverend and Honourable James Beach was blessed with a daughter, Jane by name, who had the reputation, not undeserved, of being the most beautiful and sweetest-natured girl that the country-side could show. Now, being dark and fair respectively and having lived in close association since childhood, Leonard and Jane, as might be expected from the working of the laws of natural economy, had gravitated towards each other with increasing speed ever since they had come to understand the possibilities of the institution of marriage. In the end thus mutual gravitation led to a shock and confusion of individualities which was not without its charm; or, to put the matter more plainly, Leonard proposed to Jane and had been accepted with many blushes and some tears and kisses.

It was a common little romance enough, but, like everything else with which youth and love are concerned, it had its elements of beauty. Such affairs gain much from being the first in the series. Who is there among us that does not adore his first love and his first poem? And yet when we see them twenty years after!

Presently the Rectory door was opened and Leonard entered. At this moment it occurred to him that he did not quite know why he had come. To be altogether accurate, he knew why he had come well enough. It was to see Jane, and arrive at an understanding with her father. Perhaps it may be well to explain that his engagement to that young lady was of the suppressed order. Her parents had no wish to suppress it, indeed; for though Leonard was a younger son, it was well known that he was destined to inherit his mother's fortune of fifty thousand pounds more or less. Besides, Providence had decreed a delicate constitution to his elder and only brother Thomas. But Sir Thomas Outram, their father, was reputed to be an ambitious man who looked to see his sons marry well, and this marriage would scarcely have been to Leonard's advantage from the family lawyer point of view.

Therefore, when the matter came to the ears of Jane's parents, they determined to forego the outward expression of their pride and delight in the captive whom they owed to the bow and spear of their daughter's loveliness, at any rate for a while, say until Leonard had taken his degree. Often and often in the after-years did they have occasion to bless themselves for their caution. But not the less on this account was Leonard's position as the affianced lover of their daughter recognised among them; indeed, the matter was no secret from anybody, except perhaps from Sir Thomas himself. For his part, Leonard took no pains to conceal it even from him; but the father and son met rarely, and the estrangement between them was so complete, that the younger man saw no advantage in speaking of a matter thus near to his heart until there appeared to be a practical object in so doing.

The Rev. James Beach was a stout person of bland and prepossessing appearance. Never had he looked stouter, more prepossessing, or blander than on this particular evening when Leonard was ushered into his

presence. He was standing before the fire in his drawing-room holding a huge and ancient silver loving-cup in both hands, and in such a position as to give the observer the idea that he had just drained its entire contents. In reality, it may be explained, he was employed in searching for a hall-mark on the bottom of the goblet, discoursing the while to his wife and children--for Jane had a brother--upon its value and beauty. The gleam of the silver caught Leonard's eye as he entered the room, and he recognised the cup as one of the heirlooms of his own family.

Leonard's sudden and unlooked-for advent brought various emotions into active play. There were four people gathered round that comfortable fire--the rector, his wife, his son, and last, but not least, Jane herself. Mr. Beach dropped the cup sufficiently to allow himself to stare at his visitor along its length, for all the world as though he were covering him with a silver blunderbuss. His wife, an active little woman, turned round as if she moved upon wires, exclaiming, "Good gracious, who'd have thought it?" while the son, a robust young man of about Leonard's own age and his college companion, said "Hullo! old fellow, well, I never expected to see you here to-day!"--a remark which, however natural it may have been, scarcely tended to set his friend at ease.

Jane herself, a tall and beautiful girl with bright auburn hair, who was seated on a footstool nursing her knees before the fire, and paying very little heed to her father's lecture upon ancient plate, did none of these things. On the contrary, she sprang up with the utmost animation, her lips apart and her lovely face red with blushes, or the heat of the fire, and came towards him exclaiming, "Oh, Leonard, dear Leonard!"

Mr. Beach turned the silver blunderbuss upon his daughter and fired a single, but most effective shot.

"Jane!" he said in a voice in which fatherly admonition and friendly warning were happily blended.

Jane stopped in full career was though in obedience to some lesson which momentarily she had forgotten. Then Mr. Beach, setting down the flagon, advanced upon Leonard with an ample pitying smile and outstretched hand.

"How are you, my dear boy, how are you?" he said. "We did not expect--"

"To see me here under the circumstances," put in Leonard bitterly. "Nor would you have done so, but Tom and I understood that it was only to be a three days' sale."

"Quite right, Leonard. As first advertised the sale was for three days, but the auctioneer found that he could not get through in the time. The accumulations of such an ancient house as Outram Hall are necessarily vast," and he waved his hand with a large gesture.

"Yes," said Leonard.

"Hum!" went on Mr. Beach, after a pause which was beginning to grow awkward. "Doubtless you will find it a matter for congratulation that on the whole things sold well. It is not always the case, not by any means, for such collections as those of Outram, however interesting and valuable they may have been to the family itself, do not often fetch their worth at a country auction. Yes, they sold decidedly well, thanks

chiefly to the large purchases of the new owner of the estate. This tankard, for instance, which I have bought--hem--as a slight memento of your family, cost me ten shillings an ounce."

"Indeed!" answered Leonard coldly; "I always understood that it was worth fifty."

Then came another pause, during which all who were present, except Mr. Beach and himself, rose one by one and quitted the room. Jane was the last to go, and Leonard noticed, as she passed him, that there were tears in her eyes.

"Jane," said her father in a meaning voice when her hand was already on the door, "you will be careful to be dressed in time for dinner, will you not, love? You remember that young Mr. Cohen is coming, and I should like somebody to be down to receive him."

Jane's only answer to this remark was to pass through the door and slam it behind her. Clearly the prospect of the advent of this guest was not agreeable to her.

"Well, Leonard," went on Mr. Beach when they were alone, in a tone that was meant to be sympathetic but which jarred horribly on his listener's ears, "this is a sad business, very sad. But why are you not sitting down?"

"Because no one asked me to," said Leonard as he took a chair.

"Hem!" continued Mr. Beach; "by the way I believe that Mr. Cohen is a friend of yours, is he not?"

"An acquaintance, not a friend," said Leonard.

"Indeed, I thought that you were at the same college."

"Yes, but I do not like him."

"Prejudice, my dear boy, prejudice. A minor sin indeed, but one against which you must struggle. But there, there, it is natural that you should not feel warmly about the man who will one day own Outram. Ah! as I said, this is all very sad, but it must be a great consolation to you to remember that when everything is settled there will be enough, so I am told, to pay your unhappy father's debts. And now, is there anything that I can do for you or your brother?"

Leonard reflected that whatever may have been his father's misdeeds, and they were many and black, it should scarcely have lain in the mouth of the Rev. James Beach, who owed nearly everything he had in the world to his kindness, to allude to them. But he could not defend his father's memory, it was beyond defence, and just now he must fight for his own hand.

"Yes, Mr. Beach," he said earnestly, "you can help me very much. You know the cruel position in which my brother and I are placed through no fault of our own: our old home is sold, our fortunes have gone utterly, and our honourable name is tarnished. At the present moment I have nothing left in the world except the sum of two hundred pounds which I had saved for a purpose of my own out of my allowance. I have no profession and cannot even take my degree, because I am unable to afford

the expense of remaining at college."

"Black, I must say, very black," murmured Mr. Beach, rubbing his chin. "But under these circumstances what can I do to help you? You must trust in Providence, my boy; it never fails the deserving."

"This," answered Leonard, nervously; "you can show your confidence in me by allowing my engagement to Jane to be proclaimed." Here Mr. Beach waved his hand once more as though to repel some invisible force.

"One moment," continued Leonard. "I know that it seems a great deal to ask, but listen. Although everything looks so dark, I have reliance on myself. With the stimulus which my affection for your daughter will give me, and knowing that in order to win her I must first put myself in a position to support her as she should be supported, I am quite convinced that I shall be able to surmount all difficulties by my own efforts."

"Really, I cannot listen to such nonsense any longer," broke in Mr. Beach angrily. "Leonard, this is nothing less than an impertinence. Of course any understanding that may have existed between you and Jane is quite at an end. Engagement! I heard of no engagement. I knew that there was some boy and girl folly between you indeed, but for my part I never gave the matter another thought."

"You seem to forget, sir," said Leonard, keeping his temper with difficulty, "that not six months ago you and I had a long conversation on this very subject, and decided that nothing should be said to my father of the matter until I had taken my degree."

"I repeat that it is an impertinence," answered Mr. Beach, but with a careful avoidance of the direct issue. "What! You, who have nothing in the world except a name which your father has--well--tarnished--to use your own word, you ask me for my dear daughter's hand? You are so selfish that you wish not only to ruin her chances in life, but also to drag her into the depths of your poverty. Leonard, I should never have thought it of you!"

Then at last Leonard broke out.

"You do not speak the truth. I did not ask you for your daughter's hand. I asked you for the promise of it when I should have shown myself worthy of her. But now there is an end of that. I will go as you bid me but before I go I will tell you the truth. You wish to use Jane's beauty to catch this Jew with. Of her happiness you think nothing, provided only you can secure his money. She is not a strong character, and it is quite possible that you will succeed in your plot, but I tell you it will not prosper. You, who owe everything to our family, now when trouble has overtaken us, turn upon me and rob me of the only good that was left to me. By putting an end to a connection of which everybody knew, you stamp me still deeper into the mire. So be it, but of this I am sure, that such conduct will meet with a due reward, and that a time will come when you will bitterly regret the way in which you have dealt with your daughter and treated me in my misfortunes. Good-bye."

And Leonard turned and left the room and the Rectory.

CHAPTER II

THE SWEARING OF THE OATH

Arthur Beach, Jane's brother, was standing in the hall waiting to speak to Leonard, but he passed without a word, closing the hall door behind him. Outside snow was falling, though not fast enough to obscure the light of the moon which shone through the belt of firs.

Leonard walked on down the drive till he neared the gate, when suddenly he heard the muffled sound of feet pursuing him through the snow. He turned with an exclamation, believing that the footsteps were those of Arthur Beach, for at the moment he was in no mood for further conversation with any male member of that family. As it chanced, however, he found himself face to face not with Arthur, but with Jane herself, who perhaps had never looked more beautiful than she did at this moment in the snow and the moonlight. Indeed, whenever Leonard thought of her in after-years, and that was often, there arose in his mind a vision of a tall and lovely girl, her auburn hair slightly powdered over with the falling flakes, her breast heaving with emotion, and her wide grey eyes gazing piteously upon him.

"Oh! Leonard," she said nervously, "why do you go without saying good-bye to me?"

He looked at her awhile before he answered, for something in his heart told him that this was the last sight which he should win of his love for many a year, and therefore his eyes dwelt upon her as we gaze upon one whom the grave is about to hide from us for ever.

At last he spoke, and his words were practical enough.

"You should not have come out in those thin shoes through the snow, Jane. You will catch cold."

"I wish I could," she answered defiantly, "I wish that I could catch such a cold as would kill me; then I should be out of my troubles. Let us go into the summer-house; they will never think of looking for me there."

"How will you get there?" asked Leonard; "it is a hundred yards away, and the snow always drifts in that path."

"Oh! never mind the snow," she said.

But Leonard did mind it, and presently he hit upon a solution of the difficulty. Having first glanced up the drive to see that nobody was coming, he bent forward and without explanation or excuse put his arms around Jane, and lifting her as though she were a child, he bore her down the path which led to the summer-house. She was heavy, but, sooth to say, he could have wished the journey longer. Presently they were there, and very gently he laid her on her feet again, kissing her upon the lips as he did so. Then he took off his overcoat and wrapped it round her shoulders.

All this while Jane had not spoken. Indeed, the poor girl felt so happy and so safe in her lover's arms that it seemed to her as though she never wished to speak, or to do anything for herself again. It was Leonard who broke the silence.

"You ask me why I left without saying good-bye to you, Jane. It was because your father has dismissed me from the house and forbidden me to have any more to do with you."

"Oh, why?" asked the girl, lifting her hands despairingly.

"Can't you guess?" he answered with a bitter laugh.

"Yes, Leonard," she whispered, taking his hand in sympathy.

"Perhaps I had better put it plainly," said Leonard again; "it may prevent misunderstandings. Your father has dismissed me because _my_ father embezzled all my money. The sins of the father are visited upon the children, you see. Also he has done this with more than usual distinctness and alacrity, because he wishes you to marry young Mr. Cohen, the bullion-broker and the future owner of Outram."

Jane shivered.

"I know, I know," she said, "and oh! Leonard, I hate him!"

"Then perhaps it will be as well not to marry him," he answered.

"I would rather die first," she said with conviction.

"Unfortunately one can't always die when it happens to be convenient, Jane."

"Oh! Leonard, don't be horrid," she said, beginning to cry. "Where are you going, and what shall I do?"

"To the bad probably," he answered. "At least it all depends upon you. Look here, Jane, if you will stick to me I will stick to you. The luck is against me now, but I have it in me to see that through. I love you and I would work myself to death for you; but at the best it must be a question of time, probably of years."

"Oh! Leonard, indeed I will if I can. I am sure that you do not love me more than I love you, but I can never make you understand how odious they all are to me about you, especially Papa."

"Confound him!" said Leonard beneath his breath; and if Jane heard, at that moment her filial affections were not sufficiently strong to induce her to remonstrate.

"Well, Jane," he went on, "the matter lies thus: either you must put up with their treatment or you must give me the go-by. Listen: in six months you will be twenty-one, and in this country all her relations put together can't force a woman to marry a man if she does not wish to, or prevent her from marrying one whom she does wish to marry. Now you know my address at my club in town; letters sent there will always reach me, and it is scarcely possible for your father or anybody else to prevent you from writing and posting a letter. If you want my help or to communicate in any way, I shall expect to hear from you, and if need be, I will take you away and marry you the moment you come of age. If, on the other hand, I do not hear from you, I shall know that it is because you do not choose to write, or because that which you have to write would be too painful for me to read. Do you understand, Jane?"

"Oh! yes, Leonard, but you put things so hardly."

"Things have been put hardly enough to me, love, and I must be plain--this is my last chance of speaking to you."

At this moment an ominous sound echoed through the night; it was none other than the distant voice of Mr. Beach, calling from his front-door step, "Jane! Are you out there, Jane?"

"Oh! heavens!" she said, "there is my father calling me. I came out by the back door, but mother must have been up to my room and found me gone. She watches me all day now. What _shall_ I do?"

"Go back and tell them that you have been saying good-bye to me. It is not a crime; they cannot kill you for it."

"Indeed they can, or just as bad," replied Jane. Then suddenly she threw her arms about her lover's neck and burying her beautiful face upon his breast, she began to sob bitterly, murmuring, "Oh my darling, my darling, what shall I do without you?"

Over the brief and distressing scene which followed it may be well to drop a veil. Leonard's bitterness of mind forsook him now, and he kissed her and comforted her as he might best, even going so far as to mingle his tears with hers, tears of which he had no cause to be ashamed. At length she tore herself loose, for the shouts were growing louder and more insistent.

"I forgot," she sobbed, "here is a farewell present for you; keep it in memory of me, Leonard," and thrusting her hand into the bosom of her dress she drew from it a little packet which she gave to him.

Then once more they kissed and clung together, and in another moment she had vanished back into the snow and darkness, passing out of Leonard's sight and out of his life, though from his mind she could never pass.

"A farewell present. Keep it in memory of me." The words yet echoed in his ears, and to Leonard they seemed fateful--a prophecy of utter loss. Sighing heavily, he opened the packet and examined its contents by the feeble moonlight. They were not large: a prayer-book bound in morocco, her own, with her name on the fly-leaf and a short inscription beneath, and in the pocket of its cover a lock of auburn hair tied round with silk.

"An unlucky gift," said Leonard to himself; then putting on his coat, which was yet warm from Jane's shoulders, he also turned and vanished into the snow and the night, shaping his path towards the village inn.

He reached it in due course, and passed into the little parlour that adjoined the bar. It was a comfortable room enough, notwithstanding its adornments of badly stuffed birds and fishes, and chiefly remarkable for its wide old-fashioned fireplace with wrought-iron dogs. There was no lamp in the room when Leonard entered, but the light of the burning wood was bright, and by it he could see his brother seated in a high-backed chair gazing into the fire, his hand resting on his knee.

Thomas Outram was Leonard's elder by two years and cast in a more fragile mould. His face was the face of a dreamer, the brown eyes were large and reflective, and the mouth sensitive as a child's. He was a

scholar and a philosopher, a man of much desultory reading, with refined tastes and a really intimate knowledge of Greek gems.

"Is that you, Leonard?" he said, looking up absently; "where have you been?"

"To the Rectory," answered his brother.

"What have you been doing there?"

"Do you want to know?"

"Yes, of course. Did you see Jane?"

Then Leonard told him all the story.

"What do you think she will do?" asked Tom when his brother had finished. "Given the situation and the woman, it is rather a curious problem."

"It may be," answered Leonard; "but as I am not an equation in algebra yearning to be worked out, I don't quite see the fun of it. But if you ask me what I think she will do, I should say that she will follow the example of everybody else and desert me."

"You seem to have a poor idea of women, old fellow. I know little of them myself and don't want to know more. But I have always understood that it is the peculiar glory of their sex to come out strong on these exceptional occasions. 'Woman in our hours of ease,' etc."

"Well, we shall see. But it is my opinion that women think a great deal more of their own hours of ease than of those of anybody else. Thank heaven, here comes our dinner!"

Thus spoke Leonard, somewhat cynically and perhaps not in the best of taste. But, his rejoicing over its appearance notwithstanding, he did not do much justice to the dinner when it arrived. Indeed, it would be charitable to make allowances for this young man at that period of his life. He had sustained a most terrible reverse, and do what he might he could never quite escape from the shadow of his father's disgrace, or put out of his mind the stain with which his father had dimmed the honour of his family. And now a new misfortune hung over him. He had just been driven with contumely from a house where hitherto he was the most welcome of guests; he had parted, moreover, from the woman whom he loved dearly, and under circumstances which made it doubtful if their separation would not be final.

Leonard possessed the gift of insight into character, and more common sense than can often be expected from a young man in love. He knew well that the chief characteristic of Jane's nature was a tendency to yield to the circumstances of the hour, and though he hoped against hope, he could find no reason to suppose that she would exhibit greater determination in the matter of their engagement than her general lack of strength might lead him to anticipate. Besides, and here his common sense came in, would it be wise that she should do so? After all, what had he to offer her, and were not his hopes of future advancement nothing better than a dream? Roughly as he had put it, perhaps Mr. Beach was right when he told him that he, Leonard, was both selfish and impertinent, since was it not a selfish impertinence in him to ask any

woman to link her fortune with his in the present state of his affairs?

Let us therefore make excuses for his words and outward behaviour, for at heart Leonard had much to trouble him.

When the cloth had been cleared away and they were alone again, Tom spoke to his brother, who was moodily filling his pipe.

"What shall we do to-night, Leonard?" he said.

"Go to bed, I suppose," he answered.

"See here, Leonard," said his brother again, "what do you say to having a last look at the old place?"

"If you wish, Tom, but it will be painful."

"A little pain more or less can scarcely hurt us, old fellow," said Tom, laying his thin hand on his brother's shoulder.

Then they started. A quarter of an hour's walking brought them to the Hall. The snow had ceased falling now and the night was beautifully clear, but before it ceased it had done a welcome office in hiding from view all the litter and wreckage of the auction, which make the scene of a recent sale one of the most desolate sights in the world. Never had the old house looked grander or more eloquent of the past than it did on that night to the two brothers who were dispossessed of their heritage. They wandered round it in silence, gazing affectionately at each well-known tree and window, till at length they came to the gun-room entrance. More from habit than for any other reason Leonard turned the handle of the door. To his surprise it was open; after the confusion of the sale no one had remembered to lock it.

"Let us go in," he said.

They entered and wandered from room to room till they reached the greater hall, a vast and oak-roofed chamber built after the fashion of the nave of a church, and lighted by a large window of ecclesiastical design. This window was filled with the armorial bearings of many generations of the Outram family, wrought in stained glass and placed in couples, for next to each coat of arms were the arms of its bearer's dame. It was not quite full, however, for in it remained two blank shields, which had been destined to receive the escutcheons of Thomas Outram and his wife.

"They will never be filled now, Leonard," said Tom, pointing to these; "curious, isn't it, not to say sad?"

"Oh! I don't know," answered his brother; "I suppose that the Cohens boast some sort of arms, or if not they can buy them."

"I should think that they would have the good taste to begin a new window for themselves," said Tom.

Then he was silent for a while, and they watched the moonlight streaming through the painted window, the memorial of so much forgotten grandeur, and illumining the portraits of many a dead Outram that gazed upon them from the panelled walls.

"_Per ardua ad astra_," said Tom, absently reading the family motto which alternated pretty regularly with a second device that some members of it had adopted--"For Heart, Home, and Honour."

"'_Per ardua ad astra_'--through struggle to the stars--and 'For Heart, Home, and Honour,'" repeated Tom; "well, I think that our family never needed such consolations more, if indeed there are any to be found in mottoes. Our Heart is broken, our hearth is desolate, and our honour is a byword, but there remain the 'struggle and the stars.'"

As he spoke his face took the fire of a new enthusiasm: "Leonard," he went on, "why should not we retrieve the past? Let us take that motto--the more ancient one--for an omen, and let us fulfil it. I believe it is a good omen, I believe that one of us will fulfil it."

"We can try," answered Leonard. "If we fail in the struggle, at least the stars remain for us as for all human kind."

"Leonard," said his brother almost in a whisper, "will you swear an oath with me? It seems childish, but I think that under some circumstances there is wisdom even in childishness."

"What oath?" asked Leonard.

"This; that we will leave England and seek fortune in some foreign land--sufficient fortune to enable us to repurchase our lost home; that we will never return here until we have won this fortune; and that death alone shall put a stop to our quest."

Leonard hesitated a moment, then answered:

"If Jane fails me, I will swear it."

Tom glanced round as though in search of some familiar object, and presently his eye fell upon what he sought. A great proportion of the furniture of the old house, including the family portraits, had been purchased by the in-coming owner. Among the articles which remained was a very valuable and ancient bible, one of the first ever printed indeed, that stood upon an oaken stand in the centre of the hall, to which it was securely chained. Tom led the way to this bible, followed by his brother. Then they placed their hands upon it, and standing there in the shadow, the elder of them spoke aloud in a voice that left no doubt of the earnestness of his purpose, or of his belief in their mission.

"We swear," he said, "upon this book and before the God who made us that we will leave this home that was ours, and never look upon it again till we can call it ours once more. We swear that we will follow this, the purpose of our lives, till death destroys us and it; and may shame and utter ruin overtake us if, while we have strength and reason, we turn our backs upon this oath! So help us God!"

"So help us God!" repeated Leonard.

Thus in the home of their ancestors, in the presence of their Maker, and of the pictured dead who had gone before them, did Thomas and Leonard Outram devote their lives to this great purpose. Perhaps, as one of them had said, the thing was childish, but if so, at the least it was solemn and touching. Their cause seemed hopeless indeed; but if faith can move mountains, much more can honest endeavour attain its ends. In that hour

they felt this. Yes, they believed that the end would be attained by one of them, though they guessed little what struggles lay between them and the Star they hoped to gain, or how strangely they should be borne thither.

On the morrow they went to London and waited there a while, but no word came from Jane Beach, and for good or ill the chains of the oath that he had taken riveted themselves around Leonard Outram's neck.

Within three months of this night the brothers were nearing the shores of Africa, the land of the Children of the Mist.

CHAPTER III

AFTER SEVEN YEARS

"What is the time, Leonard?"

"Eleven o'clock, Tom."

"Eleven--already? I shall go at dawn, Leonard. You remember Johnston died at dawn, and so did Askew."

"For heaven's sake don't speak like that, Tom! If you think you are going to die, you will die."

The sick man laughed a ghost of a laugh--it was half a death-rattle.

"It is no use talking, Leonard; I feel my life flaring and sinking like a dying fire. My mind is quite clear now, but I shall die at dawn for all that. The fever has burnt me up! Have I been raving, Leonard?"

"A little, old fellow," answered Leonard.

"What about?"

"Home mostly, Tom."

"Home! We have none, Leonard; it is sold. How long have we been away now?"

"Seven years."

"Seven years! Yes. Do you remember how we said good-bye to the old place on that winter night after the auction? And do you remember what we resolved?"

"Yes."

"Repeat it."

"We swore that we would seek wealth enough to buy Outram back till we won it or died, and that we would never return to England till it was won. Then we sailed for Africa. For seven years we have sought and done no more than earn a livelihood, much less a couple of hundred thousand pounds or so."

"Leonard."

"Yes, Tom?"

"You are sole heir to our oath now, and to the old name with it, or you will be in a few hours. I have fulfilled my vow. I have sought till I died. You will take up the quest till you succeed or die. The struggle has been mine, may you live to win the Star. You will persevere, will you not, Leonard?"

"Yes, Tom, I will."

"Give me your hand on it, old fellow."

Leonard Outram knelt down beside his dying brother, and they clasped each other's hands.

"Now let me sleep awhile. I am tired. Do not be afraid, I shall wake before the--end."

Hardly had the words passed his lips when his eyes closed and he sank into stupor or sleep.

His brother Leonard sat down upon a rude seat, improvised out of an empty gin-case. Without the tempest shrieked and howled, the great wind shook the Kaffir hut of grass and wattle, piercing it in a hundred places till the light of the lantern wavered within its glass, and the sick man's hair was lifted from his clammy brow. From time to time fierce squalls of rain fell like sheets of spray, and the water, penetrating the roof of grass, streamed to the earthen floor. Leonard crept on his hands and knees to the doorway of the hut, or rather to the low arched opening which served as a doorway, and, removing the board that secured it, looked out at the night. Their hut stood upon the ridge of a great mountain; below was a sea of bush, and around it rose the fantastic shapes of other mountains. Black clouds drove across the dying moon, but occasionally she peeped out and showed the scene in all its vast solemnity and appalling solitude.

Presently Leonard closed the opening of the doorway, and going back to his brother's side he gazed upon him earnestly. Many years of toil and privation had not robbed Thomas Outram's face of its singular beauty, or found power to mar its refinement. But death was written on it.

Leonard sighed, then, struck by a sudden thought, sought for and found a scrap of looking-glass. Holding it close to the light of the lantern, he examined the reflection of his own features. The glass mirrored a handsome bearded man, dark, keen-eyed like one who is always on the watch for danger, curly-haired and broad-shouldered; not very tall, but having massive limbs and a form which showed strength in every movement. Though he was still young, there was little of youth left about the man; clearly toil and struggle had done an evil work with him, ageing his mind and hardening it as they had hardened the strength and vigour of his body. The face was a good one, but most men would have preferred to see friendship shining in those piercing black eyes rather than the light of enmity. Leonard was a bad enemy, and his long striving with the world sometimes led him to expect foes where they did not exist.

Even now this thought was in his mind: "He is dying," he said to himself, as he laid down the glass with the care of a man who cannot

afford to hazard a belonging however trivial, "and yet his face is not so changed as mine is. My God! he is dying! My brother--the only man--the only living creature I love in the world, except one perhaps, if indeed I love her still. Everything is against us--I should say against me now, for I cannot count him. Our father was our first enemy; he brought us into the world, neglected us, squandered our patrimony, dishonoured our name, and shot himself. And since then what has it been but one continual fight against men and nature? Even the rocks in which I dig for gold are foes--victorious foes--" and he glanced at his hands, scarred and made unshapely by labour. "And the fever, that is a foe. Death is the only friend, but he won't shake hands with me. He takes my brother whom I love as he has taken the others, but me he leaves."

Thus mused Leonard sitting sullenly on the red box, his elbow on his knee, his rough hands held beneath his chin pushing forward the thick black beard till it threw a huge shadow, angular and unnatural, on to the wall of the hut, while without the tempest now raved, now lulled, and now raved again. An hour--two--passed and still he sat not moving, watching the face of the fever-stricken man that from time to time flushed and was troubled, then grew pale and still. It seemed to him as though by some strange harmony of nature the death-smitten blood was striving to keep pace with the beat of the storm, knowing that presently life and storm would pass together into the same domain of silence.

At length Tom Outram opened his eyes and looked at him, but Leonard knew that he did not see him as he was. The dying eyes studied him indeed and were intelligent, but he could feel that they read something on his face that was not known to himself, nor could be visible to any other man--read it as though it were a writing.

So strange was this scrutiny, so meaningless and yet so full of a meaning which he could not grasp, that Leonard shrank beneath it. He spoke to his brother, but no answer came,--only the great hollow eyes read on in that book which was printed upon his face; that book, sealed to him, but to the dying man an open writing.

The sight of the act of death is always terrible; it is terrible to watch the latest wax and ebb of life, and with the intelligence to comprehend that these flickerings, this coming and this going, these sinkings and these last recoveries are the trial flights of the animating and eternal principle--call it soul or what you will--before it trusts itself afar. Still more terrible is it under circumstances of physical and mental desolation such as those present to Leonard Outram in that hour.

But he had looked on death before, on death in many dreadful shapes, and yet he had never been so much afraid. What was it that his brother, or the spirit of his brother, read in his face? What learning had he gathered in that sleep of his, the last before the last? He could not tell--now he longed to know, now he was glad not to know, and now he strove to overcome his fears.

"My nerves are shattered," he said to himself. "He is dying. How shall I bear to see him die?"

A gust of wind shook the hut, rending the thatch apart, and through the rent a little jet of rain fell upon his brother's forehead and ran down his pallid cheeks like tears. Then the strange understanding look passed from the wide eyes, and once more they became human, and the lips were

opened.

"Water," they murmured.

Leonard gave him to drink, with one hand holding the pannikin to his brother's mouth and with the other supporting the dying head. Twice he gulped at it, then with a brusque motion of his wasted arm he knocked the cup aside, spilling the water on the earthen floor.

"Leonard," he said, "you will succeed."

"Succeed in what, Tom?"

"You will get the money and Outram--and found the family afresh--but you will not do it alone. _A woman will help you_."

Then his mind wandered a little and he muttered, "How is Jane? Have you heard from Jane?" or some such words.

At the mention of this name Leonard's face softened, then once more grew hard and anxious.

"I have not heard of Jane for years, old fellow," he said; "probably she is dead or married. But I do not understand."

"Don't waste time, Leonard," Tom answered, rousing himself from his lethargy. "Listen to me. I am going fast. You know dying men see far--sometimes. I dreamed it, or I read it in your face. I tell you--_you_ will die at Outram. Stay here a while after I am dead. Stay a while, Leonard!"

He sank back exhausted, and at that moment a gust of wind, fiercer than any which had gone before, leapt down the mountain gorges, howling with all the voices of the storm. It caught the frail hut and shook it. A cobra hidden in the thick thatch awoke from its lethargy and fell with a soft thud to the floor not a foot from the face of the dying man--then erected itself and hissed aloud with flickering tongue and head swollen by rage. Leonard started back and seized a crowbar which stood near, but before he could strike, the reptile sank down and, drawing its shining shape across his brother's forehead, once more vanished into the thatch.

His eyes did not so much as close, though Leonard saw a momentary reflection of the bright scales in the dilated pupils and shivered at this added terror, shivered as though his own flesh had shrunk beneath the touch of those deadly coils. It was horrible that the snake should creep across his brother's face, it was still more horrible that his brother, yet living, should not understand the horror. It caused him to remember our invisible companion, that ancient enemy of mankind of whom the reptile is an accepted type; it made him think of that long sleep which the touch of such as this has no power to stir.

Ah! now he was going--it was impossible to mistake that change, the last quick quiver of the blood, followed by an ashen pallor, and the sob of the breath slowly lessening into silence. So the day had died last night, with a little purpling of the sky--a little sobbing of the wind--then ashen nothingness and silence. But the silence was broken, the night had grown alive indeed--and with a fearful life. Hark! how the storm yelled! those blasts told of torment, that rain beat like tears.

What if his brother----He did not dare to follow the thought home.

Hark! how the storm yelled!--the very hut wrenched at its strong supports as though the hands of a hundred savage foes were dragging it. It lifted--by heaven it was gone!--gone, crashing down the rocks on the last hurricane blast of the tempest, and there above them lowered the sullen blue of the passing night flecked with scudding clouds, and there in front of them, to the east and between the mountains, flared the splendours of the dawn.

Something had struck Leonard heavily, so heavily that the blood ran down his face; he did not heed it, he scarcely felt it; he only clasped his brother in his arms and, for the first time for many years, he kissed him on the brow, staining it with the blood from his wound.

The dying man looked up. He saw the glory in the East. Now it ran along the mountain sides, now it burned upon their summits, to each summit a pillar of flame, a peculiar splendour of its own diversely shaped; and now the shapes of fire leaped from earth to heaven, peopling the sky with light. The dull clouds caught the light, but they could not hold it all: back it fell to earth again, and the forests lifted up their arms to greet it, and it shone upon the face of the waters.

Thomas Outram saw--and staggering to his knees he stretched out his arms towards the rising sun, muttering with his lips.

Then he sank upon Leonard's breast, and presently all his story was told.

CHAPTER IV

THE LAST VIGIL

For a while Leonard sat by the body of his brother. The daylight grew and gathered about him, the round ball of the sun appeared above the mountains.

The storm was gone. Were it not for some broken fragments of the vanished hut, it would have been difficult to know even that it had been. Insects began to chirrup, lizards ran from the crevices of the rocks, yonder the rain-washed bud of a mountain lily opened before his eyes. Still Leonard sat on, his face stony with grief, till at length a shadow fell upon him from above. He looked up--it was cast by a vulture's wings, as they hurried to the place of death.

Grasping his loaded rifle Leonard sprang to his feet. Nearer and nearer came the bird, wheeling above him in lessening circles: it forgot the presence of the living in its desire for the dead. Leonard lifted the rifle, aimed and fired. The report rang out clearly on the silent air, and was echoed from krantz and kloof and mountain side, and from above answered the thud of the bullet. For a moment the smitten bird swayed upon its wide pinions, then they seemed to crumple beneath its weight, and it fell heavily and lay flapping and striking at the stones with its strong beak.

"I also can kill," said Leonard to himself as he watched it die. "Kill till you are killed--that is the law of life." Then he turned to the

body of his brother and made it ready for burial as best he might, closing the eyes, tying up the chin with a band of twisted grass, and folding the thin toil-worn hands upon the quiet heart.

When all was finished he paused from his dreadful task, and a thought struck him.

"Where are those Kaffirs?" he said aloud--the sound of his voice seemed to dull the edge of solitude--"the lazy hounds, they ought to have been up an hour ago. Hi! Otter, Otter!"

The mountains echoed "Otter, Otter;" there was no other reply. Again he shouted without result. "I don't like to leave it," he said, "but I must go and see;" and, having covered the body with a red blanket to scare away the vultures, he started at a run round some projecting rocks that bordered the little plateau on which the hut had stood. Beyond them the plateau continued, and some fifty paces from the rocks was a hollow in the mountain side, where a softer vein of stone had been eaten away by centuries of weather.

It was here that the Kaffirs slept--four of them--and in front of this cave or grotto it was their custom to make a fire for cooking. But on that morning no fire was burning, and no Kaffirs were to be seen.

"Still asleep," was Leonard's comment as he strode swiftly towards the cave. In another moment he was in it shouting "Otter, Otter!" and saluting with a vigorous kick a prostrate form, of which he could just see the outline. The form did not move, which was strange, for such a kick should have suffered to wake even the laziest Basuto from his soundest sleep. Leonard stopped to examine it, and the next moment started back violently, exclaiming:

"Great heavens! it is Cheat, and he is dead."

At this moment a thick voice spoke from the corner of the cave in Dutch, the voice of Otter:

"I am here, Baas, but I am tied: the Baas must loosen me, I cannot stir."

Leonard advanced, striking a match as he came. Presently it burned up, and he saw the man Otter lying on his back, his legs and arms bound firmly with rimpis of hide, his face and body a mass of contusions. Drawing his hunting-knife Leonard cut the rimpis and brought the man from out the cave, carrying rather than leading him.

Otter was a knob-nosed Kaffir, that is of the Bastard Zulu race. The brothers had found him wandering about the country in a state of semi-starvation, and he had served them faithfully for some years. They had christened him Otter, his native patronymic being quite unpronounceable, because of his extraordinary skill in swimming, which almost equalled that of the animal after which he was named.

In face the man was hideous, though his ugliness was not unpleasant, being due chiefly to a great development of his tribal feature, the nose, and in body he was misshapen to the verge of monstrosity. In fact Otter was a dwarf, measuring little more than four feet in height. But what he lacked in height he made up in breadth; it almost seemed as though, intended by nature to be a man of many inches, he had been

compressed to his present dimensions by art. His vast chest and limbs, indicating strength nearly superhuman, his long iron arms and massive head, all gave colour to this idea. Otter had one redeeming feature, however--his eyes, that when visible, which at this moment was not the case, were large, steady, and, like his skin, of a brilliant black.

"What has happened?" said Leonard, also speaking in Dutch.

"This, Baas! Last night those three Basuto villains, your servants, made up their minds to desert. They told me nothing, and they were so cunning that, though I watched even their thoughts, I never guessed. They knew better than to tell me, for I would have beaten them--yes, all! So they waited till I was sound asleep, then came behind me, the three of them, and tied me fast that I should not hinder them and that they might take away Baas Tom's gun which you lent me, and other things. Soon I found out their plans, and though I laughed in their faces, oh! my heart was black with rage.

"When the Basuto dogs had tied me they mocked me, calling me foul names and saying that I might stop and starve with the white fools, my masters, who always dug for yellow iron and found so little, being fools. Then they got together everything of value, yes, down to the kettle, and made ready to go, and each of them came and slapped me on the face, and one burnt me here upon the nose with a hot brand.

"All this I bore as a man must bear trouble which comes from the skies, but when Cheat took up Baas Tom's gun and the others came with a reim to tie me to the rock, I could bear it no more. So I shouted aloud and drove at Cheat, who held the gun. Ah! they had forgotten that if my arms are strong, my head is stronger! Butting like a bull I caught him fair in the middle, and his back was against the side of the cave. He made one noise, no more; he will never make another noise, for my head smashed him up inside and the rock hurt me through him. Then the other two hit me with kerries--great blows--and my arms being tied I could not defend myself, though I knew that they would soon kill me; so I groaned and dropped down, pretending to be dead--just like a stink-cat.

"At last, thinking that they had finished me, the Basutos ran away in a great hurry, for they feared lest you might hear the shouting and should come after them with rifles. They were so much afraid that they left the gun and most of the other things. After that I fainted; it was silly, but those kerries of theirs are of rhinoceros horn--I should not have minded so much had they been of wood, but the horn bites deep. That is all the story. It will please Baas Tom to know that I saved his gun. When he hears it he will forget his sickness and say 'Well done Otter! Ha! Otter, your head is hard.'"

"Make your heart hard also," said Leonard with a sad smile; "Baas Tom is dead. He died at daybreak in my arms. The fever killed him as it killed the other Inkoosis (chiefs)."

Otter heard, and, letting his bruised head fall upon his mighty chest, remained for a while in silence. At length he lifted it, and Leonard saw two tears wandering down the battered countenance. "Wow," he said, "is it so? Oh! my father, are you dead, you who were brave like a lion and gentle as a girl? Yes, you are dead, my ears have heard it, and were it not for your brother, the Baas Leonard, I think that I would kill myself and follow you. Wow, my father, are you indeed dead, who smiled upon me yesterday?"

"Come," said Leonard; "I dare not leave him long."

And he went, Otter following him with a reeling gait, for he was weak from his injuries. Presently they reached the spot, and Otter saw that the hut was gone.

"Certainly," he said, "our bad spirits were abroad last night. Well, next time it will be the turn of the good ones." Then he drew near to the corpse and saluted it with uplifted hand and voice.

"Chief and Father," he said in Zulu, for Otter had wandered long and knew many tongues, but he loved the Zulu best of all. "While you lived upon earth, you were a good man and brave, though somewhat quick of temper and quarrelsome like a woman. Now you have wearied of this world and flown away like an eagle towards the sun, and there where you live in the light of the sun you will be braver and better yet, and become more patient and not quarrel any more with those who are less clever than you. Chief and Father, I salute you! May he whom you named the Otter serve you and the Inkoosi your brother once more in the House of the Great-Great, if one so ugly and misshapen can enter there. As for the Basuto dog whom I slew and who would have stolen your gun, I see now that I killed him in a fortunate hour, that he might be the slave beneath your feet in the House of the Great-Great. Ah! had I known, I would have sent a better man, for there as here Cheat will still be Cheat. Hail, my father! Hail and farewell! Let your spirit watch over us and be gentle towards us, who love you yet."

And Otter turned away without further ado; and having washed his wounds, he set himself to the task of preparing such coarse food as they had in store.

When it was ready Leonard ate of it, and after he had finished eating, together they bore the body to the little cave for shelter. It was Leonard's purpose to bury his brother at sundown; he might not delay longer, but till then he would watch by him, keeping the last of many vigils. So all that remained of the Basuto Cheat having been dragged forth and thrust unceremoniously into an ant-bear hole by Otter, who while he disposed of the body did not spare to taunt the spirit of his late treacherous foe, the corpse of Thomas Outram was laid in its place, and Leonard sat himself by its side in the gloom of the cave.

About midday Otter, who had been sleeping off his sorrows, physical and mental, came into the cavern. They were short of meat, he said, and with the leave of the Baas he would take the gun of the dead Baas and try to shoot a buck.

Leonard bade him go, but to be back by sundown, as he should require his help.

"Where shall we dig a hole, Baas?" asked the dwarf.

"One is dug," answered Leonard; "he who is dead dug it himself as the others did. We will bury him in the last pit he made looking for gold, to the right of where the hut stood. It is deep and ready."

"Yes, Baas, a good place--though perhaps Baas Tom would not have worked at it so strongly had he known. Wow! Who knows to what end he labours? But perchance it is a little near the donga. Twice that hole has been

flooded while Baas Tom was digging in it. Then he would jump out, but now----"

"I have settled it," said Leonard shortly; "go, and be back half an hour before sundown at latest. Stop! Bring some of those rock-lilies if you can. The Baas was fond of them."

The dwarf saluted and went. "Ah!" he said to himself as he waddled down the hill where he hoped to find game, "ah! you do not fear men dead or living--overmuch; yet, Otter, it is true that you are better here in the sun, though the sun is hot, than yonder in the cave. Say, Otter, why does Baas Tom look so awful now that he is dead--he who was so gentle while yet he lived? Cheat did not look awful, only uglier. But then you killed Cheat, and the Heavens killed Baas Tom and set their own seal upon him. And what will Baas Leonard do now that his brother is dead and the Basutos have run away? Go on digging for the yellow iron which is so hard to find, and of which, when it is found, no man can even make a spear? Nay, what is that to you, Otter? What the Baas does you do--and here be the spoor of an impala buck."

Otter was right. The day was fearfully hot. It was summer in East Africa, or rather autumn, the season of fever, thunder and rain, a time that none who valued their lives would care to spend in those latitudes searching for gold with poor food and but little shelter. But men who seek their fortunes are not chary of hazarding their own lives of those of others. They become fatalists, not avowedly perhaps, but unconsciously. Those who are destined to die must die, they think, the others will live. And, after all, it does not greatly matter which they do, for, as they know well, the world will never miss them.

When Leonard Outram, his brother, and two companions in adventure heard from the natives that at a particular spot on the mountains, nominally in the Portuguese territory near the lowest branch of the Zambesi, gold could be dug out like iron ore, and when, at the price of two Tower muskets and a half-bred greyhound, they received a concession from the actual chief of that territory to dig up and possess the gold without let or hindrance from any person whatsoever, they did not postpone their undertaking because the country was fever-stricken and the unhealthy season drew on. In the first place, their resources were not great at the moment; and in the second, they feared lest some other enterprising person with three Tower muskets and two grey-hounds should persuade the chief to rescind their concession in his favour.

So they journeyed laboriously to the place of hidden wealth, and with the help of such native labour as they could gather began their search. At first they were moderately successful; indeed, wherever they dug they found "colour," and once or twice stumbled upon pockets of nuggets. Their hopes ran high, but presently one of the four--Askew by name--sickened and died of fever. They buried him and persevered with varying luck. Then a second member of their party, Johnston, was taken ill. He lingered for a month and died also.

After this Leonard was for abandoning the enterprise, but, as fate would have it, on the day following Johnston's death they found gold in very promising quantities, and his brother, whose desire to win the wealth necessary was only increased by many disappointments, would not listen to such advice.

So they rebuilt the hut on a higher and healthier spot and stayed. But

on one unfortunate day Thomas Outram went out shooting, and losing his path in the bush was forced to spend a night in the fever-fog. A week afterwards he complained of sickness and pains in the back and head--three weeks later he died as we have seen.

All these events and many others antecedent passed through Leonard's mind as he wore out the long hours seated by the side of his dead brother. Never before had he felt so lonely, so utterly desolate, so bankrupt of all love and hope. It was a fact that at this moment he had no friend in the wide world, unless he could call the knob-nosed native Otter a friend. He had been many years away from England, his few distant relations there troubled themselves no more about him or his brother, outcasts, wanderers in strange lands, and his school and college companions in all probability had forgotten his existence.

There was one indeed, Jane Beach. But since that night of parting, seven years ago, he had heard nothing of her. Twice he had written, but no answer came to his letters. Then he gave up writing, for Leonard was a proud man; moreover he guessed that she did not reply because she could not. As he had said to his brother, Jane might be dead by now, or more probably married to Mr. Cohen. And yet once they had loved each other, and to this hour he still loved her, or thought that he did. At least, through all the weary years of exile, labour, and unceasing search after the unattainable, her image and memory had been with him, a distant dream of sweetness, peace, and beauty, and they were with him yet, though nothing of her remained to him except the parting gift of her prayer-book and the lock of hair within it. The wilderness is not a place where men can forget their earliest love. No, he was alone, absolutely and utterly alone, a wanderer in wild lands, a sojourner with rough unlettered men and savages.

And now, what should he do? This place was played out. There was alluvial gold indeed, but Leonard knew to-day that it was not in the earth, but in the veins of quartz which permeated the mountains, that the real wealth must be sought for, and how could he extract it from the quartz without machinery or capital? Besides, his Kaffir servants had deserted him, worn out with hard work and fever, and there were no others to be had at this season. Well, it was only one more disappointment; he must go back to Natal and take his chance. At the worst he could always earn his living as a transport-rider, and at the best he wearied of this search for wealth which was to build up their family afresh.

Then of a sudden Leonard remembered what he had promised--to go on seeking till he died. Very good, he would keep the promise--till he died. And he remembered also that curious prophecy to which Thomas had given utterance on the previous night, that prophecy of wealth which should come to him.

Of course it was nothing but the distraught fancy of a dying man. For many years his brother had brooded over this possibility of gaining riches, not for their own sake indeed, but that it might be the means of restoring the ancient family, which their father had brought to shame and ruin. It was not wonderful in a man of his excitable temperament that at the hour of his death he should have grasped at some vision of attainment of the object of his life, though by the hand of another. And yet how strangely he had looked at him! With what conviction he had spoken! But all this was beside the point; he, Leonard, had sworn an oath many years ago, and only last night he had promised to continue to

observe that oath. Therefore, come good or ill, he must pursue it to the end.

Thus he mused till he grew weary as he sat hour after hour by the side of that rigid thing, which had been his playmate, his brother, and his friend. From time to time he rose and walked about the cave. As the afternoon waned the air grew hotter and stiller, while a great cloud gathered on the horizon.

"There will be thunder at sundown," said Leonard aloud; "I wish that Otter would come back, so that we might get the funeral over; otherwise we shall have to wait till to-morrow."

At length, about half an hour before nightfall, the dwarf appeared at the mouth of the cave, looking more like a gnome than a man against the lurid background of the angry sky. A buck was tied across his enormous shoulders, and in his hand he held a large bunch of the fragrant mountain lilies.

Then the two of them buried Thomas Outram, there in his lonely grave which he himself had dug by the gully, and the roll of the thunder was his requiem. It seemed a fitting termination to his stormy and laborious life.

CHAPTER V

OTTER GIVES COUNSEL

When the burial was finished and Thomas Outram slept his last sleep beneath six feet of earth and stones, his brother took out the prayer-book that Jane Beach had given him, which in truth formed all his library, and read the funeral service over the grave, ending it by the glare of the lightning flashes. Then he and Otter went back to the cave and ate, speaking no word. After they had done their meal Leonard called to the dwarf, who took his food at a little distance.

"Otter," he said, setting the lantern between them, "you are a faithful man and clever in your way. I would tell you a story and ask you something. At the least," he added to himself in English, "in such a matter your judgment is as good as mine."

"Speak on, Baas," said the dwarf; "my ears are open;" and he squatted down on the further side of the lantern like some great toad, watching his master's face with his black eyes.

"Otter, the Baas who is dead and I journeyed to this country about seven years ago. Before we came here we had been rich men, chiefs in our own place, but we lost our kraals and cattle and lands; they were sold, others took them and we became poor. Yes, we who were fat grew lean as trek oxen at the end of winter. Then we said to each other, 'Here we have no longer any home, the shame of poverty has come upon us, we are broken vessels, empty men of no account; also we are chiefs by blood, and here we cannot let ourselves out to labour like the common people, lest both the common people and the nobles should make a mock of us. Our great stone kraal that has been ours for many generations is taken from us, others dwell in it, strange women order it, and their children shall move about the land. We will go away.'"

"The blood is the blood," broke in Otter, "the wealth is nothing; that comes and goes, but the blood is always the blood. Why did you not gather an impi, my father, and put these strangers to the spear and take your kraal again?"

"In our land this may not be, Otter, for there wealth is more than race. So we should have been brought to still greater shame. Riches alone could give us back our home, and we had none left. Therefore we swore an oath together, the dead Baas and I, that we would journey to this far country and seek to win wealth that we might buy back our lands and kraal and rule over them as in past years, and our children after us."

"A good oath," said Otter, "but here we should have sworn it otherwise, and there would have been a ringing of steel about that kraal, not the chink of yellow iron."

"We came, Otter, and for seven years we have laboured harder than the lowest of our servants; we have travelled to and fro, mixing with many peoples, learning many tongues, and what have we found? The Baas yonder a grave in the wilderness--I the food that the wilderness gives, no more."

"A poor wage so far," said Otter. "Ah! the ways of my people are more simple and better. A red spear is brighter than the red gold, yes, and it is more honest."

"The wealth is unwon, Otter, and I have sworn to win the wealth or die. But last night I swore it again to him who lies dead."

"It is well, Baas; an oath is an oath and true men must keep it. But riches cannot be gathered here, for the gold, most of it, is hid in those rocks that are far too heavy to carry, and who may charm gold out of the rock? Not all the wizards in Zululand. At the least you and I cannot do it alone, even should the fever spare us. We must trek, Baas, and look elsewhere."

"Listen, Otter, the tale is yet to tell. The Baas who is dead dreamed before he died, he dreamed that I should win the gold, that I should win it by the help of a woman, and he bade me wait here a while after he was dead. Say now, Otter, you who come of a people learned in dreams and are the child of a dream-doctor, was this a true dream or a sick man's fancy?"

"Nay, Baas, who can tell for sure?" the dwarf answered; then pondered a while, and set himself to trace lines in the dust of the floor with his finger. "Yet I say," he went on, "that the words of the dead uttered on the edge of death shall come true. He promised that you should win the wealth: you will win it by this way or that, and the great kraal across the water shall be yours again, and the children of strangers shall wander there no more. Let us obey the words of the dead and bide here awhile as he commanded."

Seven days had passed, and on the night of the seventh Leonard Outram and Otter sat together once more in the little cave on Grave Mountain, for so they named this fatal spot. They did not speak, though each of them was speaking after his own fashion, and both had cause for thought. They had been hunting all day, but killed nothing except a guinea-fowl, most of which they had just eaten; it was the only food left to them.

Game seemed to have abandoned the district--at least they could find none.

Since his brother's death Leonard had given up all attempt to dig for gold--it was useless. Time hung heavy on his hands, for a man cannot search all day for buck which are not. Gloom had settled on his mind also; he felt his brother's loss more acutely now than on the day he buried him. Moreover, for the first time he suffered from symptoms of the deadly fever which had carried off his three companions. Alas! he knew too well the meaning of this lassitude and nausea, and of the racking pain which from time to time shot through his head and limbs. That was how his brother's last sickness had begun.

Would his own days end in the same fashion? He did not greatly care, he was reckless as to his fate, for the hard necessities of life had left him little time or inclination to rack himself with spiritual doubts. And yet it was awful to think of. He rehearsed the whole scene in his mind again and yet again until it became a reality to him. He saw his own last struggle for life and Otter watching it. He saw the dwarf bearing him in his great arms to a lonely grave, there to cover him with earth, and then, with a sigh, to flee the haunted spot for ever. Why did he stop to die of fever? Because his brother had bidden him to do so with his dying breath; because of a superstition, a folly, which would move any civilised man to scorn.

Ah! there was the rub, he was no longer a civilised man; he had lived so long with nature and savages that he had come to be as nature makes the savage. His educated reason told him that this was folly, but his instinct--that faculty which had begun to take the place of educated reason with him--spoke in another voice. He had gone back in the scale of life, he had grown primitive; his mind was as the mind of a Norseman or of an Aztec. It did not seem wonderful to him that his brother should have prophesied upon his dying bed; it did not strike him as strange even that he should believe in the prophecy and act upon it. And yet he knew that in all probability this obedience would result in his own death.

Those who have lived much with nature will in some degree be familiar with such sensations, for man and nature are ever at variance, and each would shape the other to its ends. In the issue nature wins. Man boasts continually of his conquests over her, her instincts, her terrors, and her hopes. But let him escape from out his cities and the fellowship of his kind, let him be alone with her for a while, and where is his supremacy? He sinks back on to her breast again and is lost there as in time to be all his labours shall be lost. The grass of the field and the sand of the desert are more powerful than Babylon; they were before her, they are after her; and so it is with everything physical and moral in their degrees, for here rules a nurse whom we human children must obey at last, however much we may defy her.

Thus brooded Leonard as he sat, his hands in his pockets and an empty pipe between his teeth. Their tobacco was done, and yet he drew at the pipe, perhaps from habit. And all the while Otter watched him.

"Baas," he said at length, "you are sick, Baas."

"No," he answered, "that is, perhaps a little."

"Yes, Baas, a little. You have said nothing, but I know, I who watch."

The fever has touched you with his finger, by-and-by he will grip you with his whole hand, and then, Baas----"

"And then, Otter, good night."

"Yes, Baas, for you good night, and for me, what? Baas, you think too much and you have nothing to do, that is why you grow sick. Better that we should go and dig again."

"What for, Otter? Ant-bear holes make good graves."

"Evil talk, Baas. Rather let us go away and wait no more than that you should talk such talk, which is the beginning of death."

Then there was silence for a while.

"The truth is, Otter," said Leonard presently, "we are both fools. It is useless for us to stay here with nothing to eat, nothing to drink, nothing to smoke, and only the fever to look forward to, expecting we know not what. But what does it matter? Fools and wise men all come to one end. Lord! how my head aches and how hot it is! I wish that we had some quinine left. I am going out," and he rose impatiently and left the cave.

Otter followed him. He knew where he would go--to his brother's grave. Presently they were there, standing on the hither edge of a ravine. A cloud had hidden the face of the moon, and they could see nothing, so they stood awhile idly waiting for it to pass.

As they rested thus, suddenly a moaning sound came to their ears, or rather a sound which, beginning with a moan, ended in a long low wail.

"What is that?" asked Leonard, looking towards the shadows on the further side of the ravine, whence the cry seemed to proceed.

"I do not know," answered Otter, "unless it be a ghost, or the voice of one who mourns her dead."

"We are the only mourners here," said Leonard, and as he spoke once more the low and piercing wail thrilled upon the air. Just then the cloud passed, the moonlight shone out brilliantly, and they saw who it was that cried aloud in this desolate place. For there, not twenty paces from them, on the other side of the ravine, crouched upon a stone and rocking herself to and fro as though in an agony of despair and grief, sat a tall and withered woman.

With an exclamation of surprise Leonard started towards her, followed by the dwarf. So absorbed was the woman in her sorrow that she neither saw nor heard them. Even when they stood close to her she did not perceive them, for her face was hidden in her bony hands. Leonard looked at her curiously. She was past middle age, but he could see that once she had been handsome, and, for a native, very light in colour. Her hair was grizzled and crisp rather than woolly, and her hands and feet were slender and finely shaped. At the moment he could discern no more of the woman's personal appearance, for the face was covered, as has been said, and her body wrapped in a tattered blanket.

"Mother," he said, speaking in the Sisutu dialect, "what ails you that you weep here alone?"

The stranger let drop her hands and sprang up with a cry of fear. As it chanced, her gaze fell first upon the dwarf Otter, who was standing in front of her, and at the sight of him the cry died upon her lips, and her sunken cheeks, clear-cut features, and sullen black eyes became as those of one who is petrified with terror. So strange was her aspect indeed that the dwarf and his master neither spoke nor moved; they stood hushed and expectant. It was the woman who broke this silence, speaking in a low voice of awe and adoration and, as she spoke, sinking to her knees.

"And hast thou come to claim me at the last," she said, addressing Otter, "O thou whose name is Darkness, to whom I was given in marriage, and from whom I fled when I was young? Do I see thee in the flesh, Lord of the night, King of blood and terror, and is this thy priest? Or do I but dream? Nay, I dream not; slay on, thou priest, and let my sin be purged."

"Here it seems," said Otter, "that we have to do with one who is mad."

"Nay, Jal," the woman answered, "I am not mad, though madness has been nigh to me of late."

"Neither am I named Jal or Darkness," answered the dwarf with irritation; "cease to speak folly, and tell the White Lord whence you come, for I weary of this talk."

"If you are not Jal, Black One, the thing is strange, for as Jal is so you are. But perchance it does not please you, having put on the flesh, to avow yourself before me. At the least be it as you will. If you are not Jal, then I am safe from your vengeance, and if you are Jal I pray you forget the sins of my youth and spare me."

"Who is Jal?" asked Leonard curiously.

"Nay, I know not," answered the woman, with a sudden change of manner. "Hunger and weariness have turned my brain, and I spoke wandering words. Forget them and give me food, White Man," she added in a piteous tone, "give me food, for I starve."

"There is scant fare here," answered Leonard, "but you are welcome to it. Follow me, mother," and he led the way across the donga to the cave, the woman limping after him painfully.

There Otter gave her meat, and she ate as one eats who has gone hungry for long, greedily and yet with effort. When she had finished she looked at Leonard with her keen dark eyes and said:

"Say, White Lord, are you also a slave-trader?"

"No," he answered grimly, "I am a slave."

"Who is your master then--this Black One here?"

"Nay, he is but the slave of a slave. I have no master, mother; I have a mistress, and she is named Fortune."

"The worst of mistresses," said the old woman, "or the best, for she laughs ever behind her frown and mingles stripes with kisses."

"The stripes I know well, but not the kisses," answered Leonard gloomily; then added in another tone, "What is your errand, mother? How are you named, and what do you seek wandering alone in the mountains?"

"I am named Soa, and I seek succour for one whom I love and who is in sore distress. Will my lord listen to my tale?"

"Speak on," said Leonard.

Then the woman crouched down before him and told this story.

CHAPTER VI

THE TALE OF SOA

"My lord, I, Soa, am the servant of a white man, a trader who lives on the banks of the Zambesi some four days' march from hence, having a house there which he built many years ago."

"How is the white man named?" asked Leonard.

"The black people call him Mavoom, but his white name is Rodd. He is a good master and no common man, but he has this fault, that at times he is drunken. Twenty years ago or more Mavoom, my lord, married a white woman, a Portuguese whose father dwelt at Delagoa Bay, and who was beautiful, ah! beautiful. Then he settled on the banks of the Zambesi and became a trader, building the house where he is now, or rather where its ruins are. Here his wife died in childbirth; yes, she died in my arms, and it was I who reared her daughter Juanna, tending her from the cradle to this day.

"Now, after the death of his wife Mavoom became more drunken. Still, when he is not in liquor he is very clever and a good trader, and several times he has collected ivory and feathers and gold worth much money, and also has bred cattle by hundreds. Then he would say that he must leave the wilderness and go to another country across the water, I know not where, that country whence the Englishmen come.

"Twice he has started to go, and I with him and his daughter Juanna, my mistress, who is named the Shepherdess of Heaven by the black people, because they think that she has the gift of foretelling rain. But once Mavoom stopped in a town, at Durban in Natal, and getting drunk he gambled away all his money in a month, and once he lost it in a river, the boat being overset by a river-horse and the ivory and gold sinking out of sight. Still, the last time that he started he left his daughter, the Shepherdess, at Durban, and there she stayed for three years learning those things that the white women know, for she is very clever, as clever as she is beautiful and good. Now, for nearly two years she has been back at the Settlement, for she came to Delagoa Bay in a ship, and I with her, and Mavoom met us.

"But one month gone my mistress the Shepherdess spoke to her father Mavoom, telling him that she wearied of their lonely life in the wilderness and wished to sail across the waters to the land which is called Home. He listened to her, for Mavoom loves his daughter, and said that it should be so. But he said this also: that first he would go on

a trading journey up the river to buy a store of ivory of which he knew. Now she was against this, saying, 'Let us start at once, we have tempted chance too long, and once again we are rich. Let us go to Natal and pass over the seas.'

"Still he would not listen, for he is a headstrong man. So on the morrow he started to search for the store of ivory, and the lady Juanna his daughter wept, for though she is fearless, it was not fitting that she should be left thus alone; also she hated to be apart from her father, for it is when she is not there to watch that he becomes drunken.

"Mavoom left, and twelve days went by while I and my mistress the Shepherdess sat at the Settlement waiting till he returned. Now it is the custom of my mistress, when she is dressed, to read each morning from a certain holy book in which are written the laws of that Great-Great whom she worships. On the thirteenth morning, therefore, she sat beneath the verandah of the house, reading in the book according to her custom, and I went about my work making food ready. Suddenly I heard a tumult, and looking over the wall which is round the garden and to the left of the house, I saw a great number of men, some of them white, some Arab, and some half-breeds, one mounted and the others on foot, and behind them a long caravan of slaves with the slave-sticks set upon their necks.

"As they came these men fired guns at the people of the Settlement, who ran this way and that. Some of the people fell, and more were made captive, but others of them got away, for they were at work in the fields and had seen the slave-traders coming.

"Now, as I gazed affrighted, I saw my mistress, the Shepherdess, flying towards the wall behind which I stood, the book she was reading being still in her hand. But as she reached it, the man mounted on the mule overtook her, and she turned about and faced him, setting her back against the wall. Then I crouched down and hid myself among some banana-trees, and watched what passed through a crack in the wall.

"The man on the mule was old and fat, his hair was white and his face yellow and wrinkled. I knew him at once, for often I have heard of him before, who has been the terror of this country for many years. He is named the Yellow Devil by the black people, but his Portuguese name is Pereira, and he has his place in a secret spot down by one of the mouths of the Zambesi. Here he collects the slaves, and here the traders come twice a year with their dhows to carry them to market.

"Now this man looked at my mistress as she stood terrified with her back against the wall; then he laughed and cried aloud in Portuguese, 'Here we have a pretty prize. This must be that Juanna of whose beauty I have heard. Where is your father, my dove? Gone trading up the river, has he not? Ah! I knew it, or perhaps I should not have ventured here. But it was wrong of him to leave one so pretty all alone. Well, well, he is about his business, and I must be about mine, for I am a merchant also, my dove, a merchant who trades in blackbirds. One with silver feathers does not often come my way, and I must make the most of her. There is many a young man in our part who will bid briskly for such eyes as yours. Never fear, my dove, we will soon find you a husband.'

"Thus the Yellow Devil spoke, White Man, while the Shepherdess my mistress crouched against the wall and stared at him with frightened eyes, and the slave-traders his servants laughed aloud at his evil

words. Presently she seemed to understand, and I saw her slowly lift her hand towards her head. Then I knew her purpose.

"Now, there is a certain deadly poison, White Man, of which I have the secret, and that secret I taught long ago to my mistress. It is so deadly that a piece of it no larger than the smallest ant can kill a man--yes, the instant after it touches his tongue he will be dead. Living alone as she does in the wilds, it is the custom of my mistress to carry a portion of this poison hidden in her hair, since a time might come when she must use it to save herself from worse than death. Now it seemed to her that this hour was upon her, and I knew that she was about to take the poison. Then in my fear I whispered to her through the crack in the wall, speaking in an ancient tongue which I have taught her, the tongue of my own people, White Man, and saying: 'Hold your hand, Shepherdess; while you live you may escape, but from death there is no escape. It will be time to use the poison when the worst is with you.'

"She heard and understood, for I saw her bow her head slightly, and her hand fell to her side. Then Pereira spoke again:

"'And now, if you are ready,' he said, 'we will be moving, for it is eight days' journey to my little Nest on the coast, and who can tell when the dhows will come to fetch my blackbirds? Have you anything to say before you go, my dove?'

"Now my mistress spoke for the first time, answering, 'I am in your power, but I do not fear you, for if need be I can escape you. But I tell you this: that your wickedness shall bring your own death upon you;' and she glanced round at the bodies of those whom the slave-traders had murdered, at the captives upon whom they were setting chains and forks of wood, and the columns of smoke that were rising from her home, for the roof of the Settlement had been fired.

"For a moment the Portuguese looked frightened, then he laughed aloud and said with an oath, crossing himself after the fashion of his people as a protection against the curse, 'What! you prophesy, do you, my dove, and you can escape me at your will, can you? Well, we shall see. Bring the other mule for this lady, you fellows.'

"The mule was brought, and Juanna, my mistress, was set upon it. Then the slave-traders shot down such of the captives as they thought to be of no value, the drivers flogged the slaves with their three-thonged _sjambochs_ of hippopotamus-hide, and the caravan moved on down the banks of the river.

"When all had gone I crept from my hiding-place and sought out those men of the Settlement who had escaped the slaughter, praying them to find arms and follow on the Yellow Devil's spoor, waiting for an opportunity to rescue the Shepherdess whom they loved. But they would not do this, for the heart was out of them, they were cowed by fear, and most of the head-men had been taken captive. No, they would do nothing except weep over their dead and the burnt kraals. 'You cowards,' I said, 'if you will not come, then I must go alone. At the least let some of you pass up the river and search for Mavoom, to tell him what has chanced here in his house.'

"The men said that they would do this, and taking a blanket and a little food, I followed upon the track of the slave-drivers. For four days I followed, sometimes coming in sight of them, till at length the meat was

done and my strength left me. On the morning of the fifth day I could go no farther, so I crept to the top of a koppie and watched their long line winding across the plain. In its centre were two mules, and on one of these mules sat a woman. Then I knew that no harm had befallen my mistress as yet, for she still lived.

"Now from the koppie I saw a little kraal far away to the right, and to this kraal I came that same afternoon with my last strength. I told its people that I had escaped from the slave-drivers, and they treated me kindly. Here it was also I learnt that some white men from Natal were digging for gold in these mountains, and next day I travelled on in search of them, thinking perchance they would help me, for I know well that the English hate the slave-drivers. And here, my lord, I am come at last with much toil, and now I pray you deliver my mistress the Shepherdess from the hands of the Yellow Devil. Oh! my Lord, I seem poor and wretched; but I tell you that if you can deliver her you shall win a great reward. Yes, I will reveal to you that which I have kept hidden all my life, ay, even from Mavoom my master; _I will reveal to you the secret treasures of my people, 'The Children of the Mist.'_"

Now when Leonard, who all the while had been listening attentively and in silence to Soa's tale, heard her last words, he raised his head and stared at her, thinking that her sorrows had made her mad. There was no look of madness upon the woman's fierce face, however, but only one of the most earnest and indeed passionate entreaty. So, letting this matter go by for the while, he spoke to her:

"Are you then crazed, mother?" he said. "You see that I am alone here with one servant, for my three companions, of whom the people in the kraal told you, are dead through fever, and I myself am smitten with it. And yet you ask me, alone as I am, to travel to this slave-trader's camp that is you know not where, and there, single-handed, to rescue your mistress, if indeed you have a mistress, and your tale is true. Are you then mad, mother?"

"No, Lord, I am not mad, and that which I tell you is true, every word of it. I know that I ask a great thing, but I know also that you Englishmen can do great things when you are well paid. Strive to help me and you shall have your reward. Ay, should you fail, and live, I can still give you a reward; not much perhaps, but more than you have ever earned."

"Never mind the reward now, mother," broke in Leonard testily, for the veiled sarcasm of Soa's speech had stung him, "unless, indeed, you can cure me of the fever," he added with a laugh.

"I can do that," she answered quietly; "to-morrow morning I will cure you."

"So much the better," he said, with an incredulous smile. "And now of your wisdom tell me how am I to look for your mistress, to say nothing of rescuing her, when I do not know whither she has been taken? Probably this Nest of which the Portugee talked is a secret place. How long has she been carried off?"

"This will be the twelfth day, Lord. As for the Nest, it is secret; that I have discovered. It is to your wisdom that I look to find it."

Leonard mused awhile, then a thought struck him. Turning to the dwarf,

who had been sitting by listening to all that was said in stolid silence, his great head resting upon his knees, he spoke to him in Dutch:

"Otter, were you not once taken as a slave?"

"Yes, Baas, once, ten years ago."

"How was it?"

"Thus Baas. I was hunting on the Zambesi with the soldiers of a tribe there--it was after my own people had driven me out because they said that I was too ugly to become their chief, as I was born to be. Then the Yellow Devil, that same man of whom the woman speaks, fell upon us with Arabs, and took us to his place, there to await the slave-dhows. He was a stout man, horrible to see, and elderly. The day the dhows came in I escaped by swimming; and all the others who remained alive were taken off in ships to Zanzibar."

"Could you find your way to that place again, Otter?"

"Yes, Baas. It is a hard spot to find, for the path runs through morasses; moreover the place is secret and protected by water. All of us slaves were blindfolded during the last day's march. But I worked up my bandage with my nose--ah! my big nose served me well that day--and watched the path from beneath it, and Otter never forgets a road over which his feet have travelled. Also I followed that path back."

"Could you find the spot from here?"

"Yes, Baas. I should go along these mountains, ten days' journey or more, till we struck the southernmost mouth of the Zambesi below Luabo. Then I should follow the river down a day's journey. Afterwards two or more days through the swamps and we come to the place. But it is a strong place, Baas, and there are many men armed with guns in it; moreover, there is a big cannon, a 'by-and-by'!"

Again Leonard thought a moment, then he turned to Soa and asked, "Do you understand Dutch? No? Well I have found out something of this Nest from my servant. Pereira said that it was eight days' journey from your master's settlement, so your mistress has been there some three or four days if she ever reached it. Now, from what I know of the habits of slave-traders on this coast, the dhows will not begin to take in their cargoes for another month, because of the monsoon. Therefore, if I am correct, there is plenty of time. Mind you, Mother, I am not saying that I will have anything to do with this business; I must think it over first."

"Yes, you will, White Man," she answered, "when you know the reward; but of that I will tell you to-morrow, after I have cured you of your fever. And now I pray, Black One, show me a place where I may sleep, for I am very weary."

CHAPTER VII

LEONARD SWEARS ON THE BLOOD OF ACA

On the morrow Leonard woke early from a troubled sleep, for his fever would scarcely let him rest. But, early as it was, the woman Soa had been up before him, and on coming out of the cave the first thing that he saw was her tall shape bending over a little fire, whereon a gourd was boiling, the contents of which she stirred from time to time.

"Good morning to you, White Man," she said; "here is that which shall cure you of your sickness as I promised to do;" and she lifted the gourd from the fire.

Leonard took it and sniffed at the liquor, which smelt abominably.

"It is more likely to poison me, mother," he said.

"No, no," she answered with a smile; "drink half of it now and half at midday, and the fever shall trouble you no more."

So soon as the stuff was cool enough Leonard obeyed, though with a doubting heart.

"Well, mother," he said, setting the gourd down with a gasp, "if nastiness is any proof of virtue your medicine should be good."

"It is good," she answered gravely; "many have been dragged from the edge of death by it."

And here it may be stated, whether it was owing to Soa's medicine or to other causes, that Leonard began to mend from that hour. By nightfall he felt a different man, and before three days were over he was as strong as he had ever been in his life. But into the ingredients of the draught he never found the courage to inquire, and perhaps it was as well.

Shortly after he had taken his dose Leonard observed Otter walking up the hill, bearing a huge lump of meat upon his shoulders.

"The old woman has brought us luck," said the dwarf as he loosed himself from his burden. "Once more the bush is full of game; scarcely had I reached it when I killed a young koodoo, fat, ah! fat, and there are many of them about."

Then they prepared breakfast, and ate it, and when the meal was done once more they talked.

"Mother," began Leonard, "last night you asked me to undertake a great venture, and promised a reward in payment. Now, as you said, we Englishmen will do much for gold, and I am a poor man who seeks wealth. You demand of me that I should risk my life; now tell me of its price."

The woman Soa looked at him awhile, and answered:

"White Man, have you ever heard of the People of the Mist?"

"No," he said, "that is, except in London. I mean that I know nothing of such a people. What of them?"

"This: I, Soa, am one of that people. I was the daughter of their head-priest, and I fled from them many many years ago, because I was doomed to be offered up as a sacrifice to the god Jal, he who is shaped like the Black One yonder," and she pointed to Otter.

"This is rather interesting," said Leonard; "go on."

"White Man, that people is a great people. They live in a region of mist, upon high lands beneath the shadow of the tops of snow mountains. They are larger than other men in size, and very cruel, but their women are fair. Now of the beginning of my people I know nothing, for it is lost in the past. But they worship an ancient stone statue fashioned like a dwarf, and to him they offer the blood of men. Beneath the feet of the statue is a pool of water, and beyond the pool is a cave. In that cave, White Man, he dwells whom they adore in effigy above, he, Jal, whose name is Terror."

"Do you mean that a dwarf lives in the cave?" asked Leonard.

"No, White Man, not a dwarf, but a holy crocodile which they name the Snake, the biggest crocodile in the whole world, and the oldest, for he has dwelt there from the beginning. It is this Snake that devours the bodies of those who are offered to the Black One."

"As I remarked before," said Leonard, "all this is very romantic and interesting, but I cannot see that there is much profit to be made out of it."

"White Man, the lives of men are not the only things which the priests of the Children of the Mist offer to their god; they offer also such toys as _this_, White Man," and suddenly she unclosed her hand and exhibited to Leonard's astonished gaze a ruby, or what appeared to be a ruby, of such size and so lovely a colour, that his eyes were dazzled when he looked at it. The gem, though roughly polished, was uncut, but its dimensions were those of a small blackbird's egg, it was of the purest pigeon-blood colour, without a flaw, and worn almost round, apparently by the action of water. Now, as it chanced, Leonard knew something of gems, although unhappily he was less acquainted with the peculiarities of the ruby than with those of most other stones. Thus, although this magnificent specimen might be a true stone, as indeed appeared to be the case, it was quite possible that it was only a spinel, or a garnet, and alas! he had no means of setting his doubts at rest.

"Do your people find many of these pebbles, Soa?" he asked, "and if so, where do they find them?"

"Yes, White Man, they find many, though few of such a size as this. They dig them out of a dry river-bed in some spot that is known to the priests only, and with them other beautiful stones of a blue colour."

"Sapphires probably," said Leonard to himself: "they generally go together."

"Every year they dig them," she went on, "and the biggest of those that are found in their digging they bind upon the brow of her who is to be offered as a wife to the god Jal. Afterwards, before she dies, they take the gem from her brow and store it in a secret place, and there in that secret place are hidden all those that have been worn by the victims of countless years. Moreover the eyes of Jal are made of such stones, and there are others.

"This is the legend of my people, White Man, that Jal, God of Death and

Evil, slew his mother, Aca, in the far past. There where the stones are found he slew her, and the red gems are her blood, and the blue gems are her tears which she shed praying to him for mercy. Therefore the blood of Aca is offered to Jal, and so it shall be offered till Aca comes again to drive his worship from the land."

"A nice bit of mythology, I am sure," said Leonard. "Our old friends the Darkness and the Dawn in an African shape, I suppose. But listen to me, mother. This stone, if it is genuine, is worth many ounces of gold, but there are other stones so like it that none who are not learned can tell the difference, and if it be one of these it is of little value. Still it may happen that this, and the others of which you speak, are true rubies; at any rate I should be willing to take my chance of that. But now, tell me, what is your plan? This is a very pretty story, and the rubies may be there, but how am I to get them?"

"I have a plan, White Man," she answered. "If you will help me, I offer to give you that stone, which I have borne hidden about me for many years, tellings its story to none, no, not even to Mavoom. I offer to give it to you now if you will promise to attempt the rescue of my mistress, for I know by your eyes that if once you promise you will not desert the quest;" and she paused, looking at him keenly.

"Very well," said Leonard, "but considering the risks the price does not seem quite good enough. As I told you, this stone may be worth nothing: you must make a better bid, mother."

"Truly, White Man, I have judged you well," answered Soa with a sneer; "also you are wise: little work for little wage. Listen now, this is the pay I proffer you.

"If you succeed, and the Shepherdess is saved alive from the grip of the Yellow Devil, I promise this on her behalf and on my own: that I will guide you to the land of the People of the Mist, and show you a way to win for yourself all those other countless stones that are hidden there."

"Good," said Leonard, "but why do you promise on behalf of your mistress and yourself? What has she got to do with it?"

"Without her nothing can be done, White Man. This people is great and strong, and we have no force with which to conquer them in war. Here craft must be your spear."

"You must speak more clearly, Soa. I cannot waste time in guessing riddles. How will you conquer this people by craft, and what has Miss Rodd, whom you name the Shepherdess, to do with the matter?"

"That you shall learn by-and-by, after you have rescued her, White Man; till then my lips are shut. I tell you that I have a plan, and this must be enough, for more I will not say. If you are not content, let me go to seek help elsewhere."

Leonard thought a moment, and seeing that she was determined not to be more explicit, said:

"Very well, then. And now how am I to know that your mistress will fall in with this scheme?"

"I answer for her," said Soa, "she will never go back upon my word. Look you, White Man, it is not for a little thing that I would have told you this tale. If you journey to the land of the People of the Mist, I must go with you, and there, should I be discovered, my death waits me. I tell you the tale, or some of it, and I offer you the bribe because I see that you need money, and I am sure that without the chance of winning money you will not hazard your life in this desperate search. But I love my mistress so well that I am ready to hazard mine; ay, I would give six lives, if I had them, to save her from the shame of the slave. Now, White Man, we have talked enough; is it a bargain?"

"What do you say, Otter?" asked Leonard, thoughtfully pulling at his beard, "you have heard all this wonderful tale and you are clever."

"Yes, Baas," said the dwarf, speaking for the first time, "I have heard the tale, and as for being clever, perhaps I am and perhaps I am not. My people said that I was clever, and that is one of the reasons why they would not have me for a chief. If I had been clever only, they could have borne it, they said, or if I had been ugly only, but being both ugly and clever I was no chief for them. They feared lest I should rule them too well and make all the people to be born ugly also. Ah! they were fools; they did not understand that it wants someone cleverer than I to make people so ugly."

"Never mind all that," said Leonard, who understood however that the dwarf was talking thus in order to give himself time to think before he answered. "Show me your mind, Otter."

"Baas, what can I say? I know nothing of the value of that red stone. I do not know whether this woman, of whom my heart tells me no good, speaks truth or lies about a distant people who live in a fog and worship a god shaped as I am. None have ever worshipped me, yet there may be a land where I should be deemed worthy of worship, and if so I should like to travel in that land. But as to the rescue of this Shepherdess from the Nest of the Yellow Devil, I do not know how it can be brought about. Say, mother, how many of the men of Mavoom were taken prisoners with your mistress?"

"Fifty of them perchance," answered Soa.

"Well now," went on the dwarf, "if we could loose those men and if they are brave we might do something, but there are many ifs about it, Baas. Still if you think the pay is good enough we can try. It will be better than sitting here, and it does not matter what happens. Every man to his fate, Baas, and fate to every man."

"A good motto," said Leonard. "Soa, I take your offer, though I am a fool for my pains. And now, with your leave, we will put the matter into writing so that there may be no mistake about it afterwards. Get a little blood from the buck's flesh, Otter, and mix gunpo water with it; that will do for ink if we add some hot water."

While the dwarf was compounding this ominous mixture Leonard sought of paper. He could find none; the last had been lost when the hut was blown away on the night of his brother's death. Then he bethought him of the prayer-book which Jane Beach had given him. He would not use the fly-leaf, because her name was on it, so he must write across the title-page. And thus he wrote in small, neat letters with his mixture of blood and gunpowder straight through the Order of Common Prayer:--

"_Agreement between Leonard Outram and Soa, the native woman._"

"I. The said Leonard Outram agrees to use his best efforts to rescue Juanna, the daughter of Mr. Rodd, now reduced to a state of slavery and believed to be in the power of one Pereira, a slave-dealer.

"II. In consideration of the services of the said Leonard Outram, the said Soa delivers to him a certain stone believed to be a ruby, of which the said Leonard Outram hereby acknowledges the receipt.

"III. Should the rescue be effected, the said Soa hereby agrees, on behalf of herself and the said Juanna Rodd, to conduct the said Leonard Outram to a certain spot in central South Eastern Africa, inhabited by a tribe known as the People of the Mist, there to reveal to him and to help him to gain possession of the store of rubies used in the religious ceremonies of the said tribe. Further, the said Soa agrees, on behalf of the said Juanna Rodd, that she, the said Juanna, will accompany her upon the journey, and will play among the said People of the Mist any part that may be required of her as necessary to the success of this undertaking.

"IV. It is mutually agreed that these enterprises be prosecuted until the said Leonard Outram is satisfied that they are fruitless.

"Signed in the Manica Mountains, Eastern Africa, on the ninth day of May 18--."

When he had finished this document, perhaps one of the most remarkable that were ever written since Pizarro drew up his famous agreement for the division of the prospective spoils of Peru, Leonard read it aloud and laughed heartily to himself. It was the first time that he had laughed for some months. Then he translated it to his companions, not without complaisancy, for it had a truly legal sound, and your layman loves to affect the lawyer.

"What do you think of that, Otter?" he asked when he had finished.

"It is fine, Baas, very fine," answered the dwarf. "Wonderful are the ways of the white man! But, Baas, how can the old woman promise things on behalf of another?"

Leonard pulled his beard reflectively. The dwarf had put his finger upon the weak spot in the document. But he was saved the necessity of answering by Soa herself, who said quietly, "Have no fear, White Man; that which I promise in her name, my mistress will certainly perform, if so be that you can save her. Give me the pen that I may make my mark upon the paper. But first do you swear upon the red stone that you will perform what you undertake in this writing."

So Leonard laughed, swore, and signed, and Soa made her mark. Then Otter affixed his, as witness to the deed, and the thing was finished. Laughing again at the comicality of the transaction, which indeed he had carried out more by way of joke than for any other reason, Leonard put the prayer-book in his pocket and the great ruby into a division of his belt. The old woman watched the stone vanish with an expression of triumph on her face, then she cried exultingly:

"Ah! White Man, you have taken my pay, and now you are my servant to the end. He who swears upon the blood of Aca swears an oath indeed, and woe be to him if he should break it."

"Quite so," answered Leonard; "I have taken your pay and I mean to earn it, so we need not enter into the matter of the blood of Aca. It seems to me more probable that our own blood will be in question before all is said and done. And now we had better make ready to start."

CHAPTER VIII

THE START

Food was their first consideration, and to provide it Leonard bade Otter cut the lump of raw meat into strips and set them upon the rocks to dry in the broiling sun. Then they sorted their goods and selected such of them as they could carry.

Alas! they were but few. A blanket apiece--a spare pair of boots apiece--some calomel and sundries from the medicine-chest--a shot gun and the two best rifles and ammunition--a compass, a water bottle, three knives, a comb, and a small iron cooking-pot made up the total--a considerable weight for two men and a woman to drag across mountains, untravelled plains, and swamps. This baggage was divided into three loads, of which Soa's was the lightest, and that of Otter weighed as much as the other two put together.

"It was nothing," he said, "he could carry the three if need were;" and so great was the dwarf's strength that Leonard knew this to be no idle boast.

At length all was prepared, and the articles that remained were buried in the cave together with the mining tools. It was not likely that they would ever return to seek them; more probably they will lie there till, thousands of years hence, they are dug up and become priceless relics of the Anglo-African age. Still they hid them on the chance. Leonard had melted the fruits of their mining into little ingots. In all there were about a hundred ounces of almost pure gold--the price of three men's lives! Half of these ingots he placed with the ruby in the belt about his middle, and half he gave to Otter, who hid them in his bundle. Leonard's first idea was to leave the bullion, because it entailed the carrying of extra weight; but he remembered in time that gold is always useful, and nowhere more so than among Portuguese and Arab slave-drivers.

By evening everything was ready, and when the edge of the moon showed above the horizon, Leonard rose, and lifting his load, fastened it upon his shoulders with the loops of hide which had been prepared, Otter and Soa following his example. It was their plan to travel by night so long as the state of the moon served them, for thus they would escape the terrible heat and lessen the danger of being observed.

"Follow me in a few minutes," said Leonard to Otter; "you will find me by the donga."

The dwarf nodded. A quarter of an hour later he started also with Soa and found his master standing bareheaded by his brother's grave, taking

a mute farewell of that which lay beneath before he left it for ever to its long sleep in the untrodden wilderness. It was a melancholy parting, but there have been many such in the African fever belt.

With one last look Leonard turned and joined his companions. Then, having taken counsel with them and with the compass, he set his face to the mountain and his heart to the new adventures, hopes, and fears that were beyond it. The past was done with, it lay buried in yonder grave, but by the mercy of God he was still a man, living beneath the sunlight, and the future stretched away before him. What would it bring? He cared little; experience had taught him the futility of anxieties as to the future. Perchance a grave like those which he had left, perchance wealth, love, and honour. Whatever the event he would strive to meet it with patience, dignity, and resignation. It was not his part to ask questions or to reason why; it was his part to struggle on and take such guerdon as it pleased Providence to send him.

Thus thought Leonard, and this is the right spirit for an adventurer to cultivate. It is the right spirit in which to meet the good and ill of life--that greatest of adventures which every one of us must dare. He who meets them thus and holds his heart pure and his hands clean will lay himself down to sleep without a sigh or a regret when mountain, swamp, river, and forest all are travelled, and the unknown innumerable treasure, buried from the olden time far out of reach of man's sight and knowledge, at last is opened to his gaze.

So Leonard started, and his hopes were high notwithstanding the desperate nature of their undertaking. For here it must be confessed that the undesirable element of superstition still held fast upon his mind, and now with some slight cause. Had not his brother spoken of wealth that he should win by the aid of a woman? And had not a woman come to him, bearing in her hand a jewel which, if real, was in itself worth a moderate fortune; promising also, with the help of another woman, to lead him to a land where many such might be found? Yes, these things were so, and it may be pardoned to Leonard if, setting aside the theory of coincidence, he began to believe that the end would be as the beginning had been, that the great adventure would be achieved and the wealth be won.

We shall not need to follow the footsteps of Leonard Outram and his companions day by day. For a week they travelled on, journeying mostly by night as they had proposed. They climbed mountains, they struggled through swamps and forests, they swam rivers. Indeed one of these was in flood, and they never could have crossed it had it not been for Otter's powers of natation. Six times did the dwarf face the torrent, bearing their goods and guns held above the water with one hand. On the seventh journey he was still more heavily weighted, for, with some assistance from Leonard, he must carry the woman Soa, who could swim but little. But he did it, and without any great fatigue. It was not until Otter was seen stemming a heavy current that his vast strength could be measured. Here, indeed, his stunted stature was a positive advantage, for it offered the less surface for the water to act upon.

So they travelled forward, sometimes hungry, sometimes full of meat, and even of what were better, of milk and corn. For the country was not entirely deserted; occasionally they came to scattered kraals, and were able to obtain provisions from their peaceful inhabitants in return for some such trifle as an empty cartridge of brass. At first Leonard was afraid lest Soa should tire, but notwithstanding her years and the

hardships and sufferings which she had undergone, she showed wonderful endurance--endurance so wonderful that he came to the conclusion that it was her spirit which supported the frailty of her body, and the ever-present desire to rescue one whom she loved as a surly dog sometimes loves its master. However this might be, she pushed forward with the rest, rarely speaking except to urge them onwards.

On the eighth night of their journey they halted upon the crest of a high mountain. The moon had set, and it was impossible to go further; moreover, they were weary with long marching. Wrapping themselves up in their blankets--for here the air was piercingly cold--they lay down beneath the shelter of some bushes to sleep till dawn. It was Otter who woke them. "Look, Baas," he said to Leonard, "we have marched straight. There below us is the big river, and there far to the right is the sea."

They looked. Some miles from them, across the great plain of bush that merged gradually into swamp, lay that branch of the Zambesi which they would reach. They could not see it, indeed, for its face was hid by a dense cloak of soft white mist that covered it like a cloud. But there it was, won at last, and there away to the eastward shone the wide glitter of the sea, flecked with faint lines of broken billows whence the sun rose in glory.

"See, Baas," said Otter, when they had satisfied themselves with the beautiful sight, "yonder, some five hours' march from here, the mountains curve down to the edge of the river. Thither we must go, for it is on the further side of those hills that the great swamp lies where the Yellow Devil has his place. I know the spot well; I have passed it twice."

They rested till noonday; but that night, before the moon rose, they stood on the curve of the mountain, close down to the water's edge. At length she came up, and showed them a wonderful scene of desolation. Beyond the curve of hills the mountains trended out again to the south, gradually growing lower till at last they melted into the skyline. In the vast semicircle thus formed ran the river, spotted with green islands, while between it and the high ground, over a space which varied from one mile at the narrowest to twenty miles in width at the broadest of the curve, was spread a huge and dismal swamp, marked by patches of stagnant water, clothed with reeds which grew to the height of small trees, and exhaling a stench as of the rottenness of ages.

The loneliness of the place was dreadful, its waste and desolation were appalling. And yet it lived with a life of its own. Wild fowl flew in wedges from the sea to feed in its recesses, alligators and hippopotami splashed in the waters, bitterns boomed among the rushes, and from every pool and quagmire came the croaking of a thousand frogs.

"Yonder runs the slave road, or yonder it once ran," said Otter, pointing to the foot of a hill.

"Let us go and see," answered Leonard; "we can follow it for a while and camp."

They climbed down the hill. At its foot Otter cast backwards and forwards among the bushes like a hound. Then he held up his hand and whistled.

"I thought so," he said, as the others drew near; "the path is still the

same. Look, Baas."

As he spoke he broke down the branches of a creeping bush with his strong foot. Among them lay the mouldering skeleton of a woman, and by her side that of a child.

"Not long dead," said Otter phlegmatically, "perhaps two weeks. Ah! the Yellow Devil leaves a spoor that all may follow."

Soa bent over the bones and examined them. "One of Mavoom's people," she said; "I know the fashion of the anklets."

Then they marched on for two hours or more, till at length they came to a spot where the trail ran to the edge of the water and stopped.

"What now, Otter?" said Leonard.

"Here the slaves are put on boats, Baas," the dwarf answered. "The boats should be hidden yonder," and he pointed to some thick reeds. "There too they 'weed the corn,' killing out the weakly ones, that they may not be burdened with them. Let us go and look."

They went, Otter leading the way. Presently he halted. "The boats are gone," he said, "all except one canoe; but the 'weeds' lie in a heap as of old."

He was right. Piled in a little open space lay the bodies of some thirty men, women, and children recently dead. In other spaces close by were similar heaps, but these were of bleached bones on which the moonlight shone brightly--mementoes of former sacrifices. Quite close to the first pile of dead was a mooring-place where at least a dozen flat-bottomed boats had been secured, for their impress could yet be seen in the sand. Now they were gone with the exception of the canoe, which was kept there, evidently to facilitate the loading and launching of the large boats.

Nobody made any comment. The sight was beyond comment, but a fierce desire rose in Leonard's heart to come face to face with this "Yellow Devil" who fattened on the blood and agony of helpless human beings, and to avenge them if he might.

"The light is going, we must camp here till the morning," he said after a while.

And there they camped in this Golgotha, this place of bones, every one of which cried to heaven for vengeance.

The night wind swept over them whispering in the giant reeds, fashioning the mists into fantastic shapes that threw strange shadows on the inky surface of the water as it crept slowly to the sea. From time to time the frogs broke into a sudden chorus of croaking, then grew silent again; the heron cried from afar as some alligator or river-horse disturbed its rest, and from high in air came the sound of the wings of wild-fowl that travelled to the ocean. But to Leonard's fancy all these various voices of nature were as one voice that spoke from the piles of skeletons gleaming faintly in the uncertain starlight and cried, "Oh! God, how long shall iniquity have power on the earth? Oh! God, how long shall thy Hand be stayed?"

The darkness passed, the sun shone out merrily, and the travellers arose, brushed the night-dew from their hair, and ate a scanty meal, for they must husband such food as they had with them. Then, as though by common consent, they went to the canoe, bailed her out, and started, Leonard and Otter using the paddles.

Now it was that the dwarf's marvellous memory for locality came into play. Without him they could not have gone a mile, for their course ran through numberless lagoons and canals, cut by nature and the current in the dense banks of reeds. There was nothing to enable them to distinguish one of these canals from another; in truth they all formed a portion of this mouth of the river. There were no landmarks to guide them; everywhere spread a sea of swamp diversified by rush-clothed islands, which to the inexperienced eye presented few points of difference. This was the road that Otter led them on unfalteringly; ten years had passed since he had travelled it, but he never even hesitated. Time upon time they came to new openings in the reeds leading this way and that. Then for a moment the dwarf would consider, and, lifting his hand, point out which water-way they should choose, and they followed it.

Thus they went on for the most part of that day, till towards evening they reached a place where the particular canal that they were following suddenly divided itself into two, one branch running north and one in a southerly direction.

"Which way, Otter?" asked Leonard.

"Nay, Baas, I know not. The water has changed; there was no land here, the cut went straight on."

This was a serious matter, for one false step in such a labyrinth meant that they would be lost utterly. For long they debated which stream to take, and at last decided to try that on the left hand, which Otter thought ran more nearly in the true direction. They had already started in pursuance of his advice when Soa, who had remained silent hitherto, suggested that they should first go a little way down the right-hand stream on the chance of finding a clue. Leonard demurred, but as the woman seemed bent upon it, he yielded, and turning the boat they paddled her some three hundred yards in this new direction. As there was nothing to be seen, however, Otter began to put her about again.

"Stay, White Man," said Soa, who had been searching the surface of the water with her quick eyes, "what is that thing yonder?" and she pointed to a clump of reeds about forty yards away, among which some small white object was just discernible.

"Feathers, I think," Leonard answered, "but we will go and see." In another moment they were there.

"It is paper, Baas," said Otter in a low voice, "paper stuck on a reed."

"Lift it carefully," answered Leonard in the same tone, for his anxiety was keen. How came it that they found paper fixed to a reed in such a place as this?

Otter obeyed, laying the sodden sheet on the thwart of the canoe before Leonard, who with Soa examined it closely.

"This is a leaf from that holy book in which my mistress reads," said the woman with conviction; "I know the shape of it well. She has torn the paper out and affixed it on the reed as a sign to any who might come after her."

"It looks like it," said Leonard; "that was a good thought of yours to turn up here, old lady." Then he bent down and read such verses as were still legible on the page; they ran thus:

"For he hath looked down from the height of his sanctuary; from heaven did the Lord behold the earth;"

"To hear the groaning of the prisoner; to loose those that are appointed to death;"

"The children of thy servants shall continue, and their seed shall be established before thee."

"Hum!" said Leonard to himself, "the quotation seems very appropriate. If one had faith in omens now, a man might say that this was a good one." And in his heart he believed it to be so.

Another hour's journey brought them to the point of the island along which they had been travelling.

"Ah," said Otter, "now I know the path again. This is the right stream, that to the left must be a new one. Had we taken it we should have lost our way, and perhaps have found it no more for days, or not at all."

"Say, Otter," said Leonard, "you escaped from this slave-camp. How did you do it--in a boat?"

"No, Baas. The Baas knows that I am strong, my Spirit who gave me ugliness gave me strength also to make up for it, and it is well, for had I been beautiful as you are, Baas, and not very strong, I should have been a slave now, or dead. With my chained hands I choked him who was set to watch me, and took his knife. Then by my strength I broke the irons--see, Baas, here are the scars of them to this day. When I broke them they cut into my flesh, but they were old irons that had been on many slaves, so I mastered them. Then as others came to kill me I threw myself into the water and dived, and they never saw me more. Afterwards I swam all the way, resting from time to time on the islands and from time to time running along the shore where the reeds were not too thick, till at length I escaped into the open country. I travelled four days to reach it, and most of that time I was in the water."

"And what did you feed on?"

"Roots and the eggs of birds."

"And did not the alligators try to eat you?"

"Yes, one, Baas, but I am quick in the water. I got upon the water-snake's back--ah! my Spirit was with me then--and I drove the knife through his eye into his brain. Then I smeared myself over with his blood, and after that they did not touch me, for they knew the smell and thought that I was their brother."

"Say, Otter, are you not afraid of going back to this place?"

"Somewhat, Baas, for there is that hell of which you white people talk. But where the Baas goes there I can go also; Otter will not linger while you run. Also, Baas, I am not brave, no, no, yet I would look upon that Yellow Devil again, yes, if I myself must die to do it, and kill him with these hands."

And the dwarf dropped the paddle screaming "Kill him! kill him! kill him!" so loudly that the birds rose in affright from the marshes.

"Be quiet," said Leonard angrily; "do you want to bring the Arabs on us?"

But to himself he thought that he should be sorry for Pereira, alias the "Yellow Devil," if once Otter found a chance to fly at his throat.

CHAPTER IX

THE YELLOW DEVIL'S NEST

Sundown came, and, as on the previous night, the three travellers camped upon an island waiting for the moon to rise. They had caught two flapper-ducks in some weeds, and there was a talk of lighting a fire to cook them by. Finally Leonard negatived this idea. "It is dangerous," he said, "for fires can be seen from afar." So they made a wretched meal off a little dried meat and some raw duck's eggs.

It was fortunate that his caution prevailed, since, as the twilight was dying into dark, they heard the stroke of paddles and made out the shapes of canoes passing them. There were several canoes, each of which towed something behind it, and the men in them shouted to one another from time to time, now in Portuguese and now in Arabic.

"Lie still, lie still," whispered Otter, "these are the slave-men taking back the big boats."

Leonard and Soa followed his advice to the letter, and the slavers, paddling furiously up stream, passed within thirty feet of where they crouched in the rushes.

"Give way, comrades," called one man to the captain of the next canoe; "the landing-place is near, and there is rum for those who earn it."

"I hope that they will not stop here," said Leonard beneath his breath.

"Hist!" answered Otter, "I hear them landing."

He was right; the party had disembarked about two hundred yards away. Presently they heard them collecting reeds for burning, and in ten minutes more two bright tongues of flame showed that they had lit their fires.

"We had better get out of this," said Leonard; "if they discover us----"

"They will not discover us, Baas, if we lie still," answered Otter; "let us wait awhile. I have another plan. Listen, Baas." And he whispered in his ear.

So they waited. From the fires below them came the sound of men eating and drinking--especially drinking. An hour passed, and Leonard rose, followed by Otter, who said:

"I will come too, Baas; I can move like a cat."

"Where are you going, White Man?" asked Soa.

"I am going to spy upon those men. I understand Portuguese, and wish to hear what they say. Otter, take your knife and revolver, but no gun."

"Good," said the woman, "but be careful. They are very clever."

"Yes, yes," put in Otter, "but the Baas is clever also, and I, I am clever. Do not fear for us, mother."

Then they started, creeping cautiously through the reeds. When they were within twenty yards of the fires, Leonard missed his footing and fell into a pool of water with a splash. Some of the slave-dealers heard the noise and sprang to their feet. Instantly Otter grunted in exact imitation of a hippopotamus-calf.

"A sea-cow," said a man in Portuguese. "She won't hurt us. The fire will frighten her."

Leonard and Otter waited awhile, then crept to a clump of reeds whence they could hear every word that was spoken. The men round the fire numbered twenty-two. One, their leader, appeared to be a pure-bred Portugee, some of the others were Bastards and the rest Arabs. They were drinking rum and water out of tin pannikins--a great deal of rum and very little water. Many of them seemed half-drunk already, at any rate their tongues were loosened.

"May a curse fall upon our father, the Devil!" said one, a half-breed; "why did he take it into his head to send us back with the boats just now? We shall miss the fun."

"What fun?" answered the leader of the party. "They won't cage the birds for another three or four days; the dhows are not ready, and there is talk of an English cruiser--may she sink to hell!--hanging about outside the river mouth."

"No, not that," said the man who had spoken first, "there is not much sport in driving a lot of stinking niggers on to a dhow. I mean the auction of the white girl, the English trader's daughter, whom we caught up the river yonder. There's a beauty for some lucky dog; I never saw such a one. What eyes she has, and what a spirit! why, most of the little dears would have cried themselves blind by now."

"You needn't think about her," sneered his leader; "she will go too dear for the likes of you; besides it is foolish to spend so much on one girl, white or black. When is the auction?"

"It was to have been the night before the dhows sail, but now the Devil says it shall be to-morrow night. I will tell you why--he is afraid of her. He thinks that she will bring misfortune to him, and wants to be rid of her. Ah! he is a wag, is the old man--he loves a joke, he does. 'All men are brothers,' he said yesterday, 'white or black; therefore

all women are sisters.' So he is going to sell her like a nigger girl. What is good enough for them is good enough for her. Ha! ha! pass the rum, brother, pass the rum."

"Perhaps he will put it off and we may be back in time, after all," said the captain. "Anyhow, here is a health to her, the love. By the way, did some of you think to ask the password before we left this morning? I forgot to do so, myself."

"Yes," said a Bastard, "the old word, 'the Devil.'"

"There is none better, comrades, none better," hiccupped the leader.

Then for an hour or more their talk went on--partly about Juanna, partly about other things. As they grew more drunk the conversation became more and more revolting, till Leonard could scarcely listen to it and lie still. At length it died away, and one by one the men sank into a sound and sodden sleep. They did not set a sentry, for here on the island they had no fear of foes.

Then Otter rose upon his hands and knees, and his face looked fierce in the faint light.

"Baas," he whispered, "shall we----" and he drew his hand across his throat.

Leonard thought awhile. His rage was deep, and yet he shrank from the slaughter of sleeping men, however wicked. Besides, could it be done without noise? Some of them would wake--fear would sober them, and they were many.

"No," he whispered back. "Follow me, we will cut loose the boats."

"Good, good," said Otter.

Then, stealthily as snakes, they crept some thirty yards to where the boats were tied to a low tree--three canoes and five large flat-bottomed punts, containing the arms and provisions of the slave-dealers. Drawing their knives they cut these loose. A gentle push set them moving, then the current caught them, and slowly they floated away into the night.

This done they crawled back again. Their path took them within five paces of where that half-breed ruffian lay who had begun the talk to which they had listened. Leonard looked at him and turned to creep away; already Otter was five paces ahead, when suddenly the edge of the moon showed for the first time and its light fell full upon the slaver's face. The sleeping man awoke, sat up, and saw them.

Now Leonard dared not hesitate, or they were lost. Like a tiger he sprang at the man's throat and had grasped it in his hand before he could even cry aloud. Then came a struggle short and sharp, and a knife flashed. Before Otter could get back to his side it was done--so swiftly and so silently that none of the band had wakened, though one or two of them stirred and muttered in their heavy sleep.

Leonard sprang up unhurt, and together they ran, rather than walked, back to the spot where they had left Soa.

She was watching for them, and pointing to Leonard's coat, asked "How

many?"

"One," answered Otter.

"I would it had been all," Soa muttered fiercely, "but you are only two."

"Quick," said Leonard, "into the canoe with you. They will be after us presently."

In another minute they had pushed off and were clear of the island, which was not more than a quarter of a mile long. They paddled across the river, which at this spot ran rapidly and had a width of some eight hundred yards, so as to hide in the shadow of the opposite bank. When they reached it Otter rested on his paddles and gave vent to a suppressed chuckle, which was his nearest approach to laughter.

"Why do you laugh, Black One?" asked Soa.

"Look yonder," he answered, and he pointed to some specks on the surface of the river which were fast vanishing in the distance. "Yonder go the boats of the slave-dealers, and in them are their arms and food. We cut them loose, the Baas and I. There on the island sleep two-and-twenty men--all save one: there they sleep, and when they wake what will they find? They will find themselves on a little isle in the middle of great waters, into which, even if they could, they will not dare to swim because of the alligators. They can get no food on the island, for they have no guns and ducks do not stop to be caught, but outside the alligators will wait in hundreds to catch them. By-and-by they will grow hungry--they will shout and yell, but none will hear them--then they will become mad, and, falling on each other, they will eat each other and die miserably one by one. Some will take to the water, those will drown or be caught by the alligators, and so it shall go on till they are all dead, every one of them, dead, dead, dead!" and again Otter chuckled.

Leonard did not reprove him; with the talk of these wretches yet echoing in his ears he could feel little pity for the horrible fate which would certainly overtake them.

Hark! a faint sound stole across the quiet waters, a sound which grew into a clamour of fear and rage. The slavers had awakened, they had found the dead man in their midst mysteriously slain by an invisible foe. And now the clamour gathered to a yell, for they had learned that their boats were gone and that they were trapped.

From their shelter on the other side of the river, as they dropped leisurely down the stream, Leonard and Otter could catch distant glimpses of the frantic men rushing to and fro in the bright moonlight and seeking for their boats. But the boats had departed to return no more. By degrees the clamour lessened behind them, till at last it died away, swallowed in the silence of the night.

Then Leonard told Soa what he had heard by the slaver's fire.

"How far is the road, Black One?" she asked when he had finished.

"By sundown to-morrow we shall be at the Yellow Devil's gates!" answered Otter.

Two hours later they overtook the boats which they had cut adrift. Most of them were tied together, and they floated peacefully in a group.

"We had better scuttle them," said Leonard.

"No, Baas," answered Otter, "if we escape we may want them again. Yonder is the place where we must land," and he pointed to a distant tongue of marsh. "Let us go with the boats there and make them fast. Perhaps we may find food in them, and we need food."

The advice was good, and they followed it. Keeping alongside of the punts and directing them, when necessary, with a push of the paddles, they reached the point just as the dawn was breaking. Here in a sheltered bay they found a mooring-place to which they fastened all the boats with ropes that hung ready. Then they searched the lockers and to their joy discovered food in plenty, including cooked meat, spirits, biscuits, bread, and some oranges and bananas. Only those who have been forced to do without farinaceous food for days or weeks will know what this abundance meant to them. Leonard thought that he had never eaten a more delicious meal, or drunk anything so good as the rum and water with which they washed it down.

They found other things also: rifles, cutlasses and ammunition, and, better than all, a chest of clothes which had evidently belonged to the officer or officers of the party. One suit was a kind of uniform plentifully adorned with gold lace, having tall boots and a broad felt hat with a white ostrich feather in it to match. Also there were some long Arab gowns and turbans, the gala clothes of the slave-dealers, which they took with them in order to appear smart on their return.

But the most valuable find of all was a leather bag in the breeches of the uniform, containing the sum of the honest gains of the leader of the party, which he had preferred to keep in his own company even on his travels. On examination this bag was found to hold something over a hundred English sovereigns and a dozen or fifteen pieces of Portuguese gold.

"Now, Baas," said Otter, "this is my word, that we put on these clothes."

"What for?" asked Leonard.

"For this reason: that should we be seen by the slave-traders they will think us of their brethren."

The advantages of this step were so obvious that they immediately adopted it. Thus disguised, with a silk sash round his middle and a pistol stuck in it, Leonard might well have been mistaken for the most ferocious of slave-traders.

Otter too looked sufficiently strange, robed as an Arab and wearing a turban. Being a dwarf, the difficulty was that all the dresses proved too long for him. Finally it was found necessary to cut one down by the primitive process of laying it on a block of wood and chopping through it with a sabre.

When this change of garments had been effected, and their own clothes with the spare arms were hidden away in the rushes on the somewhat

remote chance that they might be useful hereafter, they prepared for a start on foot across the marshes. By an afterthought Leonard fetched the bag of gold and put it in his pocket. He felt few scruples in availing himself of the money of the slave-driver, not for his own use indeed, but because it might help their enterprise.

Now their road ran along marshes and by secret paths that none save those who had travelled them could have found. But Otter had not forgotten. On they went through the broiling heat of the day, since linger they dared not. They met no living man on their path, though here and there they found the body of some wretched slave, whose corpse had been cast into the reeds by the roadside. But the road had been trodden, and recently, by many feet, among which were the tracks of two mules or donkeys.

At last, about an hour before sunset, they came to the home of the Yellow Devil. The Nest was placed thus. It stood upon an island having an area of ten or twelve acres. Of this, however, only about four and a half acres were available for a living space; the rest was a morass hidden by a growth of very tall reeds, which morass, starting from a great lagoon on the northern and eastern sides, ran up to the low enclosure of the buildings that, on these faces, were considered to be sufficiently defended by the swamp and the wide waters beyond. On the southern and western aspects of the camp matters were different, for here the place was strongly fortified both by art and nature. Firstly, a canal ran round these two faces, not very wide or deep indeed, but impassable except in boats, owing to the soft mud at its bottom. On the further side of this canal an earthwork had been constructed, having its crest stoutly palisaded and its steep sides planted with a natural defence of aloes and prickly-pears.

So much for the exterior of the place. Its interior was divided into three principal enclosures. Of these three the easternmost was the site of the Nest itself, a long low thatched building of wood, in front and to the west of which there was an open space or courtyard, with a hard floor. Herein were but two buildings, a shed supported on posts and open from the eaves to the ground, where sales of slaves were carried on, and further to the north, almost continuous with the line of the Nest itself, but separate from it, a small erection, very strongly built of brick and stone, and having a roof made from the tin linings of ammunition and other cases. This was a magazine. All round this enclosure stood rows of straw huts of a native build, evidently occupied as a camp by the Arabs and half-breed slave-traders of the baser sort.

The second enclosure, which was to the west of the Nest, comprised the slave camp. It may have covered an acre of ground, and the only buildings in it were four low sheds, similar in every respect to that where the slaves were sold, only much longer. Here the captives lay picketed in rows to iron bars which ran the length of the sheds, and were fixed into the ground at either end. This camp was separated from the Nest enclosure by a deep canal, thirty feet in width and spanned at one point by a slender and primitive drawbridge that led across the canal to the gate of the camp. Also it was protected on the Nest side by a low wall, and on the slave-camp side by an earthwork, planted as usual with prickly-pears. On this earthwork near the gate and little guard-house a six-pounder cannon was mounted, the muzzle of which frowned down upon the slave camp, a visible warning to its occupants of the fate that awaited the forward. Indeed, all the defences of this part of the island were devised as safeguards against a possible emeute of

the slaves, and also to provide a second line of fortifications should the Nest itself chance to be taken by an enemy.

Beyond the slave camp, lay the garden that could only be approached through it. This also was fortified by water and earthworks, but not so strongly.

Such is a brief description of what was in those days the strongest slave-hold in Africa.

CHAPTER X

LEONARD MAKES A PLAN

The road which Leonard and his companions were following led them to the edge of the main and southernmost canal, debouching exactly opposite the water-gate that gave access to the Nest. But Otter did not venture to guide them to this point, for there they should be seen by the sentries, and, notwithstanding their masquerade dress, awkward questions might be asked which they could not answer. Therefore when they had arrived within five hundred yards of the gate, he struck off to the left into the thick bush that clothed the hither side of the canal. Through this they crawled as best they might till finally they halted near the water's edge, almost opposite to the south-west angle of the slave camp, and under the shadow of a dense clump of willows.

"See, Baas," said the dwarf in a low voice, "the journey is accomplished and I have brought you straight. Yonder is the house of the Yellow Devil--now it remains only to take it, or to rescue the maiden from it."

Leonard looked at the place in dismay. How was it possible that they--two men and a woman--could capture this fortified camp, filled as it was with scores of the most wicked desperadoes in Africa? How was it possible even that they could obtain access to it? Viewed from far off, the thing had seemed small--to be done somehow. But now! And yet they must do something, or all their labour would be in vain, and the poor girl they came to rescue must be handed over to her shameful fate, or, if she chose it in preference and could compass the deed, to self-murder.

"How on earth!" said Leonard aloud, then added, "Well, Otter, I can tell you one thing. I have come a long way on this business, and I am not going to turn my back to it now. I have never yet turned my back on a venture and I will not begin with this, though I dare say that my death lies in it."

"It is all in the hand of to-morrow," answered Otter; "but it is time that we made a plan, for the night draws on. Now, Baas, here is a thick tree shaded by other trees. Shall we climb it and look down into the camp?"

Leonard nodded, and climbing the tree with ease, they peeped down through the leafiest of its boughs. All the camp lay beneath them like a map, and Otter, clinging monkey-wise to a branch, pointed out its details to Leonard. He had been a prisoner there, and the memories of prisoners are long.

The place was peopled by numbers of men in strange costumes, and of different nationalities; dealers in "black ivory" of various degree. Perhaps there may have been more than a hundred of them. Some were strolling about in knots smoking and talking, some were gambling, others were going on their business. One group--captains, to judge from the richness of their attire--were standing round the arms-house and peeping through a grating in the wall, which they reached by sitting upon each other's shoulders. This amusement lasted them for some time, till at length a man, of whom at that distance they could see only that he was old and stout, came and drove them away, and they broke up laughing.

"That is the Yellow Devil," said Otter, "and those men were looking at the maid who is called the Shepherdess. She is locked up there until the hour comes for her to be sold. They will be the bidders."

Leonard made no reply; he was studying the place. Presently a drum was beaten, and men appeared carrying large tin pails of smoking stuff.

"Yonder is the food for the slaves," said Otter again. "See, they are going to feed them."

The men with the pails, accompanied by some of the officers having _sjambochs_ or hide whips in their hands, advanced across the open space till they came to the moat which separated the slave camp from the Nest, whence they called to the sentry on the embankment to let down the drawbridge. He obeyed and they crossed. Each man with a bucket was followed by another who bore a wooden spoon, while a third behind them carried water in a large gourd. Having come to the first of the open sheds, they began their rounds, the man with the wooden spoon ladling out portions of the stiff porridge and throwing it down upon the ground before each slave in turn as food is thrown to a dog. Then the Arab with the gourd poured water into wooden bowls, that the captives might drink.

Presently there was a halt, and the officers gathered together to discuss something.

"A slave is sick," said Otter.

The knot separated, but a big white man with a hippopotamus-hide whip began to strike at a dark thing on the ground which did not seem to move.

The man ceased beating and called aloud. Then two of the Arabs went to the little guard-house that was by the drawbridge and brought tools with which they loosed the fetters on the limbs of the poor creature--apparently a woman--thus freeing her from the long iron bar. This done, some of the officers sauntering after them, they dragged the body to the high enclosure of earth and up a short ladder having a wooden platform at the top of it, that overhung the deep canal below.

"This is how the Yellow Devil buries his dead and cures his sick," said Otter.

"I have seen enough," answered Leonard, and began to descend the tree hastily, an example which Otter followed with more composure.

"Ah! Baas," he said when they reached the ground, "you are but a chicken. The hearts of those who have dwelt in slave camps are strong, and, after all, better the belly of a fish than the hold of a slave

dhow. _Wow!_ who do these things? Is it not the white men, your brothers, and do they not say many prayers to the Great Man up in the sky while they do them?"

"Be still," said Leonard, "and give me some brandy." He was in no mood to discuss the blessings of civilisation as they have often been put into practice in Africa. And to think that this fate might soon be his own!

Leonard drank the brandy and sat awhile in silence, pushing up his beard with his hand and gazing into the gathering gloom with his hawk-like eyes. Thus he had sat beside his dying brother's bed; it was a pose that he adopted unconsciously when lost in thought.

"Come, Soa," he said at length, "we have travelled here to please you; now give us the benefit of your suggestions. How are we going to get your mistress out of that camp?"

"Loose the slaves and let them kill their masters," Soa answered laconically.

"I doubt there is not much pluck in slaves," said Leonard.

"There should be fifty of Mavoom's men there," she replied, "and they will fight well enough if they have arms."

Then Leonard looked at Otter, seeking further ideas.

"My snake puts it into my head," said the dwarf, "that fire is a good friend when men are few and foes are many; also that the reeds yonder are dry, and the sea wind rises and will blow hard before midnight. Moreover all these houses are thatched, and in a wind fire jumps. But can a regiment have two generals? You are our captain, Baas; speak and we will do your bidding. Here one counsel is as good as another. Let fate speak through your mouth."

"Very well," said Leonard. "This is my plan; it goes a little further than yours, that is all. We must gain entrance to the Nest while it is still dark, before the moon rises. I know the watchword, 'Devil,' and disguised as we are, perhaps the sentry will let us pass unquestioned. If not, we must kill him, and silently."

"Good," said Otter, "but how about the woman here?"

"We will leave her hidden in the bush; she could be of no help in the camp and might hinder us."

"No, White Man," broke in Soa, "where you go I go also; moreover my mistress is yonder and I would seek her."

"As you like," answered Leonard, then went on: "we must get between the hut, there is only one, and the low wall that borders the canal separating the Nest from the slave camp, and, if the drawbridge is up and no other means can be found, we must swim the dike, dispose of the sentry there also and gain the slave camp. Then we must try to free some of the slaves and send them round through the garden into the morass to fire the reeds, should the wind blow strong enough. Meanwhile I propose to walk boldly into the camp, salute Pereira, pass myself off as a slaver with a dhow at the mouth of the river, and say that I have come

to buy slaves, and above all to bid for the white girl. Luckily we have a good deal of gold. That is my plan so far as it goes, the rest we must leave to chance. If I can buy the Shepherdess I will. If not, I must try to get her off in some other way."

"So be it, Baas, and now let us eat, for we shall need all our strength to-night. Then we will go down to the landing-place and take our chance."

They ate of the food they had with them and drank sparingly of the slave-dealers' brandy, saying little the while, for the shadow of what was to come lay upon them. Even the phlegmatic and fatalistic Otter was depressed, perhaps because of the associations of the place, which, for him, were painful, perhaps because of the magnitude of their undertaking. Never had he known such a tale, never had he seen such an adventure as this--that two men and an old woman should attack an armed camp. Indeed, although he was not acquainted with the saying, Otter's feelings would have been correctly summed up in the well-known phrase, "_C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la guerre_."

As yet the night was intensely dark, and its gloom did not tend to improve their spirits; also, as Otter had predicted, the wind was rising and souged through the reeds and willows in melancholy notes.

So the time passed till it was nine o'clock.

"We must move down to the landing-place," said Leonard; "there will soon be some light, enough for us to work by."

Then Otter took the lead and slowly, step by step, they crept back to the road and followed it down the shore of the canal opposite the water-gate. Here was a place where boats and canoes were tied, both for convenience in crossing the canal to and from the camp and for the use of the slave-dealers when they passed to the secret harbour six miles away, where the dhows embarked their cargoes.

They waited awhile. From the Nest came the sound of revelry, and from the slave camp there rose other sounds, the voice of groaning broken by an occasional wail wrung out of the misery of some lost creature who lay there in torment. Gradually the sky brightened a little.

"Perhaps we had better be making a start," said Leonard; "there is a canoe which will serve our turn."

Before the words were out of his mouth they heard the splash of oars, and a boat crept past them and made fast to the water-gate twenty yards away.

"Who goes there?" came the challenge of the sentry in Portuguese. "Speak quick or I fire."

"Don't be in such a hurry with your rifle, fool," answered a coarse voice. "The very best of friends goes here. An honest trader called Xavier who comes from his plantation on the coast to tell you all good news."

"Pardon, senhor," said the sentry, "but how was a man to see in the dark, big as you are? What is the news then? Are the dhows in sight?"

"Come down and help us to tie up this cursed boat and I will tell you. You know where the post is, and we can't find it."

The sentry obeyed with alacrity, and the man called Xavier went on: "Yes, the dhows are in sight, but I don't think that they will get in to-night because of this wind, so you may look for a busy day to-morrow loading up the blackbirds. One is in by the way--a small one from Madagascar. The captain is a stranger, a big Frenchman named Pierre, or he may be an Englishman for anything I know. I hailed him and found that he is all right, but I didn't see him. However, I sent him a note to tell him that there was fun on here to-night, which was generous of me, as he may be a rival bidder."

"Is he coming, senor? I ask because, if so, I must look out for him."

"I don't know: he answered that he would if he could. But how is the English girl? She is to be put up to-night, isn't she?"

"Oh, yes, senor, there will be a great to-do at twelve, when the moon is high. So soon as she has been bought, the priest Francisco is to marry her to the lucky man, there and then. The old fellow insists on it; he has grown superstitious about the girl and says that she shall be properly married."

Xavier laughed aloud, "Has he now? He is getting into his dotage. Well, what does it matter? We have a good law of divorce in these parts, friend. I am going in for that girl; if I give a hundred ounces for her I will buy her, and I have brought the gold with me."

"A hundred ounces for one girl! It is a large sum, senor, but you are rich. Not like us poor devils who get all the risk and little profit."

By this time the men had finished tying up the boat and taking some baggage or provisions out of her, Leonard could not see which. Then Xavier and the sentry went up the steps together, followed by the two boatmen, and the gates were shut behind them.

"Well," whispered Leonard, "we have learnt something at any rate. Now, Otter, I am Pierre the French slave-trader from Madagascar, and, understand, you are my servant; as for Soa, she is the guide, or interpreter, or anyone you like. We must pass the gates, but the real Pierre must never pass them. There must be no sentry to let him in. Do you think that you can manage it, Otter, or must I?"

"It comes into my head, Baas, that we may learn a lesson from this Xavier. I might forget something in the canoe, and the sentry might help me to find it after you have passed the gates. For the rest I am quick and strong and silent."

"Quick and strong and silent you must be. A noise, and all is lost."

Then they crept to the canoe which they had selected and loosened her. They embarked and Otter took the paddle. First he let her float gently down stream and under cover of the shore for a distance of about fifty yards. Then he put about and the play began.

"Now, you fool, where are you paddling to?" said Leonard in a loud voice to Otter, speaking in the bastard Arabic which passes current for a language on this coast. "You will have us into the bank, I tell you."

Curse this wind and the darkness! Steady now, you ugly black dog; those must be the gates the letter told of--are they not, woman? Hold on with the boat-hook, can't you?"

A wicket at the gate above rattled and the voice of the sentry challenged them.

"A friend--a friend!" answered Leonard in Portuguese; "one who is a stranger and would pay his respects to your leader, Dom Antonio Pereira, with a view to business."

"What is your name?" asked the guard suspiciously.

"Pierre is my name. Dog is the name of the dwarf my servant, and as for the old woman, you can call her anything you like."

"The password," said the sentry; "none come in here without the word."

"The word--Ah! what did the Dom Xavier say it was in his letter? 'Fiend!' No, I have it, 'Devil' is the word."

"Where do you hail from?"

"From Madagascar, where the goods you have to supply are in some demand just now. Come, let us in; we don't want to sit here all night and miss the fun."

The man began to unbar the door, and stopped, struck by a fresh doubt.

"You are not of our people," he said; "you speak Portuguese like a cursed Englishman."

"No, I should hope not; I am a 'cursed Englishman,' that is half--son of an English lord and a French creole, born in the Mauritius at your service, and let me ask you to be a little more civil, for cross-bred dogs are fierce."

Now at length the sentry opened one side of the gate, grumbling, and Leonard swaggered up the steps followed by the other two. Already they were through it, when suddenly he turned and struck Otter in the face.

"Why, Dog," he said angrily, "you have forgotten to bring up the keg of brandy, my little present for the Dom. Go and fetch it. Quick, now."

"Pardon, Chief," answered Otter, "but I am a small man and the keg is heavy for me alone--if you will deign to help me, for the old woman is too weak."

"Do you take me for a porter that I should roll kegs of cognac up steps? Here, my friend," he went on addressing the sentry, "if you wish to earn a little present and a drink, perhaps you will give this fellow a hand with the cask. There is a spigot in it, and you can try the quality afterwards."

"Right, Senor," said the man briskly, and led the way down the steps.

A look of dreadful intelligence passed between the dwarf and his master. Then Otter followed, his hand upon the hilt of the Arab sabre which he wore, while Leonard and Soa waited above. They heard the man's heavily

booted feet going down the steps followed by Otter's naked footfall.

"Where is your keg? I don't see it," said the sentry presently.

"Lean over, senor, lean over," answered Otter; "it is in the stern of the canoe. Let me help you."

There was a moment's pause, to the listeners it seemed hours. Then came the sound of a blow and a heavy splash. They hearkened on, but nothing more was to be heard except the beating of their hearts and the distant noise of revelry from the camp.

Three seconds passed and Otter stood beside them. In the dim light Leonard could see that his eyes stared wide and his nostrils twitched.

"Quick was the blow, strong was the blow, silent is the man for ever," whispered Otter. "So the Baas commanded, so it is."

CHAPTER XI

THAT HERO OTTER

"Help me to secure the gate," said Leonard presently.

In another minute the great iron bar had been dropped into its place, and Leonard withdrew the key and put it in his pocket.

"Why do you secure the door, Baas?" whispered Otter.

"To keep the real Pierre out, in case he should come this way. Two Pierres would be one too many at this game. Now we must win or perish."

Then they crept along the embankment till they gained the shelter of the hut or barrack-shed which stood with its back to the dike that separated the Nest from the slave camp. Happily none saw them, and there were no dogs in the place. Dogs make a noise at inconvenient times, therefore slave-dealers do not love them.

The end of the shed behind which they were crouching was situated some eight or ten paces from the drawbridge, that formed the only path of entry to the slave camp.

"Baas," said Otter, "let me go forward and look. My eyes are the eyes of a cat; I can see in the dark. Perhaps the bridge is down."

Without waiting for an answer, he crept forward on his hands and knees so quietly that they could scarcely hear a movement. Notwithstanding his white dress, there was little chance of his being seen, for the shadow of the shed was dense and a fringe of rushes grew along the edge of the dike.

Five minutes passed--ten minutes passed, and Otter did not return. Leonard's anxiety grew very keen.

"Let us go and see what happened, mother," he whispered to Soa.

They crept along to the end of the shed. Within a yard of it they

discovered the arms and clothes of Otter. But Otter! Where was he?

"The Black One has deserted us," said Soa beneath her breath.

"Never!" answered Leonard.

By now the clouds were breaking before the wind, which was rising steadily, and some stars shone out, giving a little light. The dike lay deep between its banks and was not more than twenty feet in width, so that the air did not ruffle it; moreover, as any observer of nature will have noticed, the surface of still water is never quite dark, even on much blacker nights than this.

Why had Otter taken off his clothes, Leonard wondered? Evidently that he might go into the water. And what could he want to go into the water for, unless it was that his heart failed him and, as Soa suggested, he had deserted. But this was impossible, for he knew well that the dwarf would die first. In his great perplexity Leonard stared at the dike. Now he could see that on its further side rose a flight of wooden steps, protected at the top by gates and that a man was seated on the lowest step, with a rifle beside him, his feet hanging down to within a few inches of the surface of the dike. It must be the sentry.

Next instant Leonard saw something else. Beneath the feet of the man a ripple grew on the face of the deep water, and something gleamed in the ripple like to the flash of steel. Then a small black object projected itself towards the feet of the sentry, who was half asleep and humming to himself drowsily. Suddenly he saw the man slide from his seat as though by magic. He said nothing, but making one ineffectual grasp at some rushes, he vanished into the deeps below. For a minute or more Leonard could distinguish a slight disturbance on the surface of the water, and that was all.

Now he guessed what had happened. Otter had dived, and rising beneath the feet of the man, he seized him, and with a sudden movement dragged him down to death by drowning. Either this, or an alligator had taken him, and that flash was the flash of his fangs.

As Leonard thought thus a dark form rose gasping at the foot of the steps; it drew itself out of the water and slipped stealthily up them. It was Otter, and he held a knife in his hand. Now the dwarf vanished through the gates into the little guard-house at the top of the embankment. Another minute, and ropes began to creak. Then the tall drawbridge, standing upright like a scaffold against the sky, was seen to bend itself forward. Down it came very softly, and the slave-camp was open to them. Again the black shape appeared, this time on the bridge.

"Come along," whispered Leonard to his companion; "that hero Otter has drowned the sentry and won the bridge. Stop, pick up his clothes and arms."

At that moment Otter himself arrived. "Quick," he said, "come over, Baas, before they see that the bridge is down. Give me my clothes and the gun."

"All right, here they are," answered Leonard, and in another minute they were over the bridge and standing on the parapet of the slave-camp.

"Into the guard-house, Baas; the windlass is there, but no man."

They entered: a lamp was burning in the place. Otter seized the handle of the windlass and began to wind. He was naked, and it was a wonderful sight to see the muscles starting out in knots on his huge but dwarfish frame as he strained at the weight of the bridge.

Presently it was up, and, leaning on the handle of the wheel, Otter chuckled aloud.

"Now we are safe for a time," he said, "and I will dress myself. Let the Baas forgive me for appearing thus before him--I, who am so ugly."

"Tell us the tale, Otter."

"It is short, Baas," the dwarf replied, as he put on his robe and turban. "When I left you I watched, I who can see in the dark, and in a little while I saw the guard come down the steps and sit by the edge of the water. He was sleepy, for he yawned and lit a roll of paper to smoke it. Presently it went out, and he had no more matches. He looked up to the house there, but was too lazy to fetch them; then I guessed that he was alone, for else he would have called to his companion for fire. Now he grew sleepier, and I said to myself, 'Otter, Otter, how can you kill this man silently? You must not shoot, because of the noise; and if you throw a knife or a spear, you may miss, or wound him only.' And my snake spoke in my heart and answered, 'Otter, Otter, dive, seize his feet, and drag him down swiftly and stamp him into the mud, you who are half a fish and can swim as no other man can swim. Do it at once, Otter, before the light comes and men can see the drawbridge move.'

"Well, and so I did it, Baas. _Wow!_ I trod him deep into the mire, I trampled him as an ox tramples corn upon a threshing-floor. Never will he come up again. After that I rose and ran into the guard-house, fearing lest there might be another whom I must silence also, for when I was a slave two always kept watch. But the place was empty, so I let the bridge down. Ah! I remembered how it worked. And that is the tale, Baas."

"A great tale, Otter, but it is not finished yet. Now let us to the slaves. Come, take the light and lead the way. Here we are safe, is it not so?"

"Here, Baas, we are safe, for none can reach us except by storm, and yonder is the big gun which turns upon itself. Let us twist the gun round first, so that, if need be, we can fire into the camp."

"I don't know much of cannon," said Leonard doubtfully.

"But I know something, White Man," said Soa, speaking for the first time. "Mavoom, my master, has a small one up at the Settlement, and often I have helped to fire it for practice and as a signal to boats on the river, and so have many of the men who were carried away, if we can find them yonder."

"Good," said Leonard.

A path ran along the top of the embankment to the platform on which the gun was mounted. It was a six-pounder muzzle-loader. Leonard unhooked the rammer and ran it down the muzzle.

"She is loaded," he said; "now let us swing her round."

They did so easily enough, bringing the muzzle down upon the Nest camp; then they entered the little hut which stood alongside. Piled up in it, in case of emergency, were half-a-dozen rounds of grape-shot and powder.

"Lots of ammunition, if we should want to use it," said Leonard. "It never occurred to those gentlemen that a gun can shoot two ways. And now, Otter, lead us to the slaves, quick."

"This way, Baas, but first we must find the tools; they are in the guard-hut, I suppose."

So they crept back to the hut, holding their heads as low as possible, for the light was increasing, although the moon was not yet up, and they feared lest they should be seen against the sky-line. Here they found boxes containing nippers, chisels, and other instruments such as are used to undo the irons upon slaves. Also they found the keys of the padlocks that locked the iron bars to which the captives were tethered. Taking a lantern with them, but leaving another burning as before in the hut, lest its absence should excite suspicion, they passed through two strong gates and down the steps on the further side of the embankment. A few paces beyond stood the first slave-shed, a rough erection supported on posts, but without sides.

They entered the shed, Otter leading the way with the lantern. In the middle of it was a path, and on either side of this path ran the long bars to which the captives were fastened in a double row. Perhaps there might have been two hundred and fifty of them in this shed. Here the sights and scenes were such as need not be described. Of the miserable captives some lay on the wet ground, men and women together, trying to forget their sorrows in sleep; but the most part of them were awake, and the sound of moans ran up and down their lines like the moaning of trees in the wind.

When they saw the light the slaves ceased moaning, and crouched upon the ground like dogs that await the whip, for they thought that this was a visit from their captors. Some of them, indeed, stretched out their manacled hands imploring pity, but these were the exceptions; the most of them had abandoned hope and were sunk in dull despair. It was pitiful to see the glance of their terror-filled eyes and the answering quiver of their wealed frames whenever an arm was lifted or a sudden movement made.

Soa went down the line, rapidly examining the faces of the slaves.

"Do you see any of Mavoom's people?" asked Leonard anxiously.

"Not here, White Man; let us go to the next shed, unless you want to loose these."

"No good in that, mother," said Otter; "they would only betray us."

So they went to the next shed--in all there were four--and here at the second man who was sleeping, his head bowed on his chained hands, Soa stopped suddenly like a pointer dog when he scents game.

"Peter, Peter," she said.

The man awoke--he was a fine fellow about thirty years of age--and glared round wildly.

"Who called me by my old name?" he said hoarsely. "Nay, I dream, Peter is dead."

"Peter," said the woman again, "awake, child of Mavoom; it is I, Soa, who am come to save you."

The man cried aloud and began to tremble, but the other slaves took no notice, thinking only that he had been smitten with a scourge.

"Be silent," said Soa again, "or we are lost. Loose the bar, Black One; this is a head-man from the Settlement, a brave man."

Soon the bar was undone, then Otter bade Peter hold out his wrists while he twisted off the fetters. Presently they were gone, and in the ecstasy of his recovered liberty the man leaped high into the air, then fell at Otter's feet as though he would embrace them.

"Get up, you fool," said the dwarf roughly, "and if there are any more of the men of Mavoom here, show them to us: quick, or you will soon be fast again."

"There should be forty or more," Peter answered, recovering himself, "besides a few women and children. The rest of us are dead, except the Shepherdess alone, and she is yonder."

Then they went down the lines slipping the chains from the Settlement captives. Soon they had unmanacled ten or more men whom Soa selected, and others stood round them with their hands still chained. As they went about the work Soa explained something of the position to Peter, who was fortunately a native of intelligence. He grasped the situation at once and earnestly seconded Leonard's efforts to preserve silence and to prevent confusion.

"Come," said Leonard to Soa, "we have got enough to begin with. I must be off. You can loose the rest at your leisure; the moon is rising, it is a quarter to twelve, and we have not a moment to lose. Now, Otter, before we go, how can we send men to fire the reeds--through the garden?"

"No, Baas, I have thought of a better way, the way by which I escaped myself--that is, if these men can swim."

"They can all swim," said Soa; "they were bred on the banks of a river."

"Good. Then they must swim down the dike where I killed the sentry, four of them. At the end are bars of wood, but in my day they were rotten; at the worst they can be climbed. Then they will find themselves in the morass among thick reeds. But they must not fire these till they have worked round to the place of the sunrise, whence the wind blows strongly. Then they must go from spot to spot and bend down the driest of the reeds, setting fire to them. Afterwards they can get to the back of the fire and wait till all is done one way or the other. If we win they will find us, if we are killed they can try to run away. But will the men go?"

Soa stepped forward and chose four of their number, but Peter she did

not choose, for he also knew something of the working of cannon.

"Listen," she said, "you have heard the words of this Black One. Now, obey. And if you depart from them by one jot, may----" and she poured out so fearful a curse upon them that Leonard stared at her astonished.

"Ay!" added Otter, "and if I live through this I will cut your throats."

"No need to threaten," said one of the men; "we will do our best for our own sakes, as well as for yours and that of the Shepherdess. We understand the plan, but to light reeds we must have fire."

"Here are matches," said Otter.

"Wet matches will not light, and we must swim," answered the spokesman.

"Fool, do you then swim with your head under water? Tie them in your hair."

"Ah! he is clever," said the spokesman. "Now, if we live to reach them, when shall we fire the reeds?"

"As soon as you are ready," answered Otter. "You will not come easily to the back of them. Farewell, my children, and if you dare to fail, pray that you may die rather than look upon my face again."

"_Ou!_ We have seen it once, is that not enough?" answered the spokesman, looking at Otter's huge nose with wonder not untouched by fear.

Two minutes later the four men were swimming swiftly down the dike, taking their chance of the alligators.

"Drop the bridge," said Leonard; "we must start."

Otter lowered it, at the same time explaining its mechanism, which was very simple, to Soa, Peter, and some of the other Settlement men.

"Now, mother, good-bye," said Leonard. "Loose all the men you can, and keep a keen look-out, so as to be ready to lower the bridge if you should see us or your mistress coming towards it. If we should not come by dawn, be ready also, for then we shall probably be dead, or prisoners, and you must act for yourself."

"I hear you, Lord," answered Soa, "and I say that you are a brave man. Whether you win or lose, the red stone is well earned already."

Another minute and they were gone.

Having crossed the bridge, which was instantly hoisted again, Leonard and Otter avoided observation by creeping back towards the water-gate as they had come--that is, behind the shelter of the shed. Emerging from this, they ran a few yards till they were opposite the gate, then walked leisurely across the open space, a distance of fifty paces or more, to the thatched hut where the sale of slaves was carried on.

There was nobody in this hut, but looking between the posts upon which it was supported, they could see by the light of the moon, now growing momentarily clearer, that a great and uproarious concourse of people was

gathered beyond in front of the verandah of the Nest itself.

"Come on, Otter," whispered Leonard, "we must go among these gentry. Watch me closely, do what I do, keep your weapons ready, and if it comes to blows, get behind my back and fight like a fiend. Above all, don't be taken prisoner."

Leonard spoke calmly, but his heart was in his mouth, and his sensations were such as must have been known to Daniel when he went into the lions' den, for, as in the case of the prophet, he felt that nothing short of a special Providence could save them. They were round the shed now, and immediately in front of them was a mixed gathering of desperadoes--Portuguese, Arabs, Bastards, and black men of various tribes--such as Leonard had never seen in all his experience.

Villainy and greed were written on every countenance; it was a crew of human demons, and an extensive one. These wretches, most of whom had already drunk too freely and were drinking more, stood with their backs to them, looking towards the verandah of the Nest. On the steps of this verandah, surrounded by a choice group of companions, all of them gaudily dressed, a man was standing whom Leonard would have had no difficulty in identifying as the Dom Pereira, even without Otter's warning whisper of "See! The Yellow Devil!"

This remarkable person demands some description as he stood in glory that night, at the apex and, though he knew it not, the conclusion of his long career of infamy. He was old, perhaps seventy, his hair was white and venerable-looking, and his person obese. His black eyes were small, cunning, cold, and bright, and they had the peculiarity of avoiding the face of any person with whom he chanced to be in conversation, at least when that person was looking his way. Their glance passed over him, under him, round him, anywhere but at him.

As his sobriquet suggested, the colouring of Pereira's flesh was yellow, and the loose skin hung in huge wrinkles upon his cheeks. His mouth was large and coarse, and his fat hands twitched and grasped continually, as though with a desire of clutching money. For the rest he was gorgeously dressed, and, like his companions, somewhat in liquor.

Such was the outward appearance of Pereira, the fountain-head of the slave-trade on this part of the coast, who was believed in his day to be the very worst man in Africa, a pre-eminence to which few can hope to attain. Until his face had been seen, stamped as it was with the traces of long and unmentionable wickedness, few honest men could guess to what depths humanity can sink. Some indeed have declared that to see him was to understand the Evil One and all his works.

CHAPTER XII

A CHOICE LOT

At the moment of Leonard's and Otter's introduction to his society, the Yellow Devil was about to make a speech, and all eyes were fixed on him so intently that none saw or heard the pair approach.

"Now, my friends, make a path, if you please," said Leonard in a loud voice and speaking in Portuguese. "I wish to pay my respects to your

chief."

A dozen men wheeled round at once.

"Who are you?" they cried, seeing a stranger.

"If you will be so kind as to let me pass, I shall be most happy to explain," Leonard answered, pushing his way through the throng.

"Who is that?" cried Pereira in coarse, thick tones. "Bring him here."

"There, you hear him--let us through, friends," said Leonard, "let us through!"

Thus adjured the throng opened a path, and Leonard and Otter passed down it, many suspicious eyes scanning them as they went.

"A greeting to you, senor," said Leonard when they had emerged in front of the verandah.

"Curse your greeting! Who in Satan's name are you?"

"A humble member of your honourable profession," said Leonard coolly, "come to pay his respects and do a little business."

"Are you? You don't look it. You look like an Englishman. And who is that abortion, pray?" and he pointed to Otter. "I believe that you are spies, and, by the Saints, if you are, I am the man to deal with you!"

"This is a likely story," said Leonard laughing, "that one man and a black dog should venture into the headquarters of gentlemen like you, not being of the cloth. But I think there is a noble gentleman among you--I mean the Senor Xavier--who can vouch for me. Did he not send a note to Captain Pierre, whose dhow lies in the harbour yonder, hailing from Madagascar? Well, Captain Pierre has the honour of accepting his invitation and arrives here, not without difficulty. Now he begins to think that he would have done better to stick to his ship."

"That is all right, Pereira," said Xavier, a huge Portuguese with a dash of negro blood and a villainous countenance, the same man whom they had followed through the gate. "I sent a note to the Senor. I told you of it."

"Then I wish you had left it alone," snarled Pereira for an answer. "I don't like your friend's looks. He might be the captain of an English man-of-war rigged up in our dress."

At the words "English man-of-war" a murmur of fear and anger went through the assembly. Some of those present had experience of these hated vessels and their bigoted crews, who loved not this honest commerce, and to all they were names of ill-omen. Things looked serious, and Leonard saw that he must do something, and quickly. So he lost his temper, or pretended to do so.

"Curse you all for a pack of suspicious curs!" he said; "I tell you that my dhow lies yonder. I am half an Englishman and half a Creole, and as good a man as any of you. Now look here, Dom Pereira, if you, or any of your crew, dare to doubt my word, just step out, and I will ram this down your lying throat;" and placing his hand on the hilt of his sabre,

he took a pace forward and scowled.

The effect was instantaneous. Pereira turned a little pale beneath his yellow skin, for like most cruel men he was a great coward.

"Put up your pig-sticker," he said; "I see you are one of the right sort. I only wanted to try you. As you know, we must be careful in our business. Come and shake hands, brother, and be welcome. I trust you now, and old Antonio never does things by halves."

"Perhaps you had better try him a little further," said a young man who was standing near Pereira, as Leonard prepared to accept the invitation; "send for a slave and let us have the old test--there is none better."

Pereira hesitated and Leonard's blood turned cold.

"Look here, young man," he said more furiously than before, "I have cut the throats of more men than you have whipped, but if you want a test, I will give you one. Come down, my young cockerel, come down; there is plenty of light for comb-snipping."

The man turned white with rage, but stood a moment contemplating Leonard's athletic form and keen eyes. Apparently he found that in them which gave him pause, for instead of springing at him, he burst into a volume of threats and filthy abuse.

How the matter would have ended it is difficult to say, but at this juncture Pereira thought it well to interfere, and vigorously.

"Peace!" he thundered in his great voice, his white hair bristling with rage. "I have welcomed this man, and he is welcome. Is my word to be set aside by a drunken young brawler like you? Shut your ugly mouth or, by the Saints, I will have you clapped in irons."

The slave-driver obeyed; perhaps he was not sorry for an excuse to escape the quarrel. At any rate with a scowl at Leonard he dropped back and was silent.

Harmony being thus restored, Pereira proceeded with the business of the evening. First, however, he called Leonard to him, shook him by the hand, and bade a slave-girl bring him drink. Then he addressed the company thus:

"My lambs, my dear companions, my true and trusted friends, this is a sad moment for me, your old leader, for I stand here to bid you good-bye. To-morrow the Nest will know the Yellow Devil no more, and you must find another captain. Alas! I grow old, I am no longer up to the work, and trade is not what it was, thanks to those infernal Englishmen and their cruisers, which prowl up and down our waters, seeking to rob honest men of the fruits of their enterprise. For nearly fifty years I have been connected with the business, and I think that the natives of these parts will remember me--not angrily, oh! no, but as a benefactor. For have not some twenty thousand of their young people passed through my hands, rescued by me from the curse of barbarism and sent to learn the blessings of civilisation and the arts of peace in the homes of kind and indulgent masters?"

"Sometimes, not often, but now and again, there has been bloodshed in the course of our little expeditions. I regret it. But what will you?"

These people are so obstinate that they cannot see how well it is for them to come under my wing. And if they try to injure us in our good work, why, we must fight. We all know the bitterness of ingratitude, but we have to put up with it. It is a trial sent to us from Heaven, my lambs, always remember that. So I retire with such modest gains as I have won by a life of labour--indeed, they have gone before me, lest some of you might be put in the way of temptation--to spend the evening of my day in peace and prayer.

"And now there is one more little thing. As it chanced during our last journey, the daughter of an accursed Englishman fell into our hands. I took her and brought her here, and as her guardian I have asked you to meet me to-night, that I may choose her a husband, as it is my duty to do. I cannot keep her myself, for among the settled people near Mozambique, where I am going to live, her presence might lead to awkward questions. So I will be generous and pass her on to another.

"But to whom shall I give this prize, this pearl, this sweet and lovely maid? Among so many worthy gentlemen how can I set one above the others and declare him most deserving of the girl? I cannot, so I must leave it to chance, for I know that Heaven will choose better than I. Therefore to him who is ready to make the largest present to me I will give this maid, to comfort him with her love; to make a present, mind you, not to pay a price. Still, perhaps, it will be best that the amount of the donation should be ascertained in the usual way, by bidding--in ounces of gold, if you please!

"One condition more, there shall be nothing irregular in this matter, my friends. The Church shall have its say in it, and he whom I select must wed the maid, here, before us all. Have we not a priest at hand, and shall we find no work for him? Now, my children, time draws on. Ho! you, bring out the English girl."

This speech was not delivered quite so continuously as it is printed here. On the contrary, it was subject to many interruptions, mostly of an ironical nature, the allusions to "a present" to be given for the girl and to the proposed marriage ceremony being received with screams of ribald laughter.

Now the noise died away, for every eye watched for the appearance of Juanna.

In a few moments a figure clad in white and guarded by several men was seen advancing from the direction of the arms-house. This figure came on through the moonlight with a swift agile step, looking neither to the right nor to the left, till it arrived in front of the verandah and halted. Then it was that Leonard first saw Juanna Rodd. She was very tall and slight, her dark hair was twisted into a single knot at the back of her shapely head, her features were small, her face fair in colouring and somewhat rounded in form. So much he saw at a glance, but it was not until she looked up and round her that Leonard discovered the girl's peculiar glory, the glory of her eyes. Then and in that light he was unable to distinguish their colour, a difficult task at any time, for they varied from grey to blue according to the shadows which fell upon them, but he could see that they were wide and splendid, fearless and yet soft. For the rest she was clad in an Arab robe richly worked, and wore sandals upon her feet.

Juanna stopped in front of the verandah and searched it with her eyes.

Presently they ceased their searching and she spoke in a clear, sweet voice.

"What do you want with me now, Dom Antonio Pereira?" she said.

"My dove," he answered in his coarse, mocking tones, "do not be angry with your slave. I promised you, my dove, that I would find a husband for you, and now all these gallant gentlemen are gathered for the choice. It is your marriage-hour, my dove."

"Dom Antonio Pereira," the girl answered, "for the last time I plead to you. I am helpless here among you, and I have done you no injury: let me go unharmed, I pray of you."

"Let you go unharmed? Why, who would hurt you, my dove?" answered the satyr. "Yes, that is what I mean to do. I will let you go to a husband."

"I shall never go to any husband of your choosing, Dom Antonio," Juanna said again in a low and steady voice. "Be assured of that, all of you. I have no fear of you, for God will help me in my need. And now, as I have pleaded to you for the last time, so for the last time I warn you, Dom Antonio, and your wicked companions also. Go on with this iniquity if you will, but a judgment awaits you. Death from Heaven above is near to you, you murderer, and after death, vengeance."

Thus she spoke, not loud indeed, but with conviction, a power, and a dignity of mien that carried terror to the hearts of the most hardened villains there. It was at the conclusion of her speech that her eyes first met those of Leonard Outram. He was bending forward to listen, and in his grief and anger he had forgotten to preserve the truculent expression which it was his part to wear. Once more Leonard's face was the face of an English gentleman, noble and open, if somewhat stern.

Their eyes met, and there was that in his which caused Juanna to pause. She looked at him swiftly as though she would read his very soul, and in answer he put all his will and heart's desire into his gaze, the will and the desire that she should know him to be her friend. They had never met before, she did not even dream of his existence, and there was little in Leonard's outward appearance to distinguish him from the ruffians by whom he was surrounded. Yet her quick sense, sharpened by despair, read what was written in his eyes, and read it aright. From that moment Juanna felt that she was not alone among these wolves, that there was one person at least who would save her if he could.

In an instant she had searched his face and dropped her eyes again, fearing lest she should awake suspicion. Then came a pause, for the minds of men were disturbed; she had aroused some remnant of conscience in them, she had called to life a lively terror of vengeance to come, of vengeance very near at hand. All were affected more or less, but chiefly was he affected to whom she had addressed her words. The Yellow Devil sank back into the chair from which he had risen to speak, a wonderful chair made of ebony inlaid with ivory, and string-seated, with a footstool attached to it. Superstitious dread took hold of him, and he shivered visibly.

The scene was one which Leonard never forgot. Above the bright moon shone in the heavens, before him were rank upon rank of evil faces, each marked with some new emotion, and standing alone in their midst was the beautiful girl, proud in the depth of her shame, defiant even in the

power of foes gathered to destroy her.

For a while the wind had dropped and the silence was deep, so deep was it that Leonard could hear the mew of a kitten which had crept from the verandah, and was rubbing itself against Juanna's feet. She heard it also, and, stooping, lifted the little creature and held it to her breast.

"Let her go!" said a voice from the crowd. "She is a witch and will bring ill-luck upon us."

At the sound Pereira seemed to awake. With a hideous oath he flung himself from the chair and waddled down the steps towards his victim.

"Curse you, you slut!" he said, "do you think to frighten men with your threats? Let God help you if He can. The Yellow Devil is god here. You are as much in my power as this brute," and he snatched the kitten from her arms and dashed it to the ground. "You see, God does not help the kitten, and He will not help you. Here, let men see what they are going to buy," and gripping the breast of her white robe he rent it open.

With one hand Juanna gathered up the torn dress, and with the other she began to do something to her hair. An agony of fear took hold of Leonard. He knew the story of the poison which she carried: was she about to use it?

Once again their eyes met, and there was warning in his glance. Juanna loosed her hair indeed, and let it fall about her shoulders, covering her rent robe to the waist, but she did no more. Only after this Leonard saw that she kept her right hand closed, and knew that her death was hidden within it. Then she spoke once more to Pereira.

"In your last hour may you remember these two deeds!" she said, pointing to the writhing kitten and to her torn dress.

Now slaves drew near to do their master's bidding, but that audience would not suffer this.

"Leave her alone," they said; "we can see that the girl is fair and perfect."

Then the slaves hung back, nor did Pereira repeat his commands.

Returning to the verandah, he stood by the chair, and, taking an empty glass in his hand by way of an auctioneer's hammer, he began:

"Gentlemen, I am going to offer you a very choice lot, so choice that it makes up all the sale. The lot is a white girl, half English and half Portuguese by blood. She is well educated and devout; as to her docility I can say nothing, that will be for her husband to attend to. Of her beauty I need not speak; you can all see it yourselves. Look at that figure, that hair, those eyes; have any of you known their equal?

"Well, this lot will be sold to him among you who is inclined to make me the largest present in compensation; yes, he may take her this very hour, and my blessing with her. But there are conditions: he whom I approve must be lawfully married to the girl by the priest Francisco here," and turning he pointed to a small melancholy-looking man, with a womanish face and dark blue eyes, who stood in the background, clothed

in a somewhat tattered priest's robe. "Then I shall have done my duty by her. One more thing, gentlemen: we are not going to waste time in little bids; the upset price will be thirty ounces."

"Silver?" said a voice.

"Silver? No, of course not. Do you think you are bidding for a nigger girl, fool? Gold, man, gold! Thirty ounces of gold, and payment to be made on the nail."

There was a groan of disappointment, and one ruffian cried out:

"What are we poor fellows to do? Thirty ounces for a beginning! Where is our chance?"

"What are you to do? Why, work hard at your profession, and grow rich, of course! Do you suppose that these prizes are for the poor? Now then, the fair is open. Who bids for the white girl Juanna? Thirty ounces is offered. What advance, what advance?"

"Thirty-five," said a wizened little man with a hectic cough, who looked fitter for a burial than a bridal.

"Forty!" cried another, a pure-bred Arab of stately appearance and saturnine expression, who wished to add to his harem.

"Forty-five," answered the wizened man.

Then the Arab bid fifty, and for a while it seemed that these two alone were competitors. When the bids had reached seventy ounces the Arab muttered "Allah!" and gave up. He preferred to wait for the houris.

"Knock her down," said the wizened man, "she is mine."

"Hold on a bit, my little friend," said the great Portugee, Xavier, who had passed the water-gate before Leonard and his companions. "I am going to begin now. Seventy-five."

"Eighty," said the little man.

"Eighty-five," answered Xavier.

"Ninety," screamed the other.

"Ninety-five," said Xavier.

"A hundred," yelled the small man, snapping his fingers.

"A hundred and five," replied Xavier, triumphantly capping his bid.

Then with a curse his antagonist gave up also, and the mob shouted, thinking that Xavier had won.

"Knock her down, Pereira," said Xavier in his turn, as he surveyed his prize with affected nonchalance.

"Wait a moment," put in Leonard, speaking for the first time. "I am going to begin now. A hundred and ten."

The multitude shouted again, the contest was growing exciting. Xavier glared at Leonard and bit his fingers with rage. He was very near his limit of possible expenditure.

"Now then," cried Pereira, licking his lips for joy, since the price had already run twenty ounces higher than he expected, "Now then, friend Xavier, am I to knock down this beauty to the stranger captain Pierre? It sounds a lot, but she is cheap at the price, dirt cheap. Look at her and bid up. But mind, it is cash down--no credit, no, not for an ounce."

"A hundred and fifteen," said Xavier, with the air of a man making his last throw for fortune.

"A hundred and twenty," replied Leonard quietly.

He had bid to the last ounce in his possession, and if Xavier went further he must give in, unless, indeed, he chose to offer Soa's ruby in payment. This, needless to say, he was not anxious to do; moreover, no one would believe a stone of that size to be genuine. Of all this, however, Leonard showed nothing in his face, but turning coolly he called to a slave-girl to bring him spirits and busied himself with filling his glass. His hand never trembled, for he knew well that his antagonist was watching for a cue, and if he showed uncertainty all might be lost. But in his heart, Leonard wondered what he should do if another ounce was bid.

Meanwhile the spectators were shouting encouragement, and Pereira was urging Xavier to increase his offer. For a while the Portugee hesitated, surveying Juanna, who stood pale and silent, her head bowed upon her breast. At this juncture Leonard turned, the glass still in his hand.

"Did you make any advance, senor?" he asked.

"No, curse you! Take her. I will not put down another ounce for her or any woman on the earth."

Leonard only smiled and looked at Pereira.

"Going!" said that worthy; "the white girl, Juanna, is going to the stranger Pierre for one hundred and twenty ounces of gold. Going! Come, Xavier, don't lose her. If you do you will only be sorry once, and that will be always. Now, for the last time," and he lifted his glass in his hand and paused.

Xavier made a step forward and opened his lips to speak.

Leonard's heart stood still, but presently the Portugee changed his mind and turned away.

"_Gone!_" screamed Pereira, bringing the glass down so heavily on the arm of his chair that it flew into fragments.

CHAPTER XIII

A MIDNIGHT MARRIAGE

"Gone," said Pereira again. "Now, friend Pierre, before we ratify this

matter by the aid of holy Church, perhaps you will table the gold. This is a cash transaction, remember."

"Certainly," answered Leonard. "Where is that black dog of mine, the dwarf? Ah! there he is. Dog, weigh out the stuff; if you have not enough, here is more." And he unbuckled his belt, from which he had been careful to extract the ruby, and threw it to Otter.

"Now, gentlemen and companions," he went on, "for I hope that we may do business together by and by, drink my health and my bride's. I have paid pretty dear for her, but what of it? A gentleman of our profession should always be ready to back his fancy, for if his is apt to be a short life he may as well make it a merry one."

"She will think the better of you, and you of her for it," cried a voice. "Here is to Captain Pierre and the girl." And they drank, shouting aloud in their half-drunken merriment.

Meanwhile Otter, advancing with obsequious steps, was pouring handful after handful of gold coin and ingots into the large scales which Pereira caused to be held before him. At length all the gold was in, a shining heap.

"The balance does not turn," said Xavier; "I claim the girl."

"Baas," said Otter in a low voice, and speaking in Dutch, "have you more gold? The weight is short."

Leonard glanced carelessly at the scales: they were trembling on the turn.

"As much as you like," he said, "but here is what will do it."

And drawing off his signet ring he threw it on the pile. The ruby excepted, it was the last thing of value that he had about him. Then the scale vibrated and sank down.

"Good," said Pereira, rubbing his hands at the sight of so much treasure. "Bring me the acid that I may test the stuff. No offence, stranger Pierre, but this is a wicked world, in which brass has passed for gold before to-day."

The acid was brought and the ingots were tested at hazard, Pereira holding them up to the light of a lamp.

"They are good," he said. "Now, Father, do your part."

The priest Francisco stepped forward. He was very pale and seemed terrified. Leonard, watching him, wondered what had brought him into such company, for the man's face was good and even refined.

"Dom Antonio," said the priest in a soft girlish voice, "I protest against this. Fate has brought me among you, though not of my own will, and I have been forced to bear the sight of much evil, but I have wrought none. I have shriven the dying, I have ministered to the sick, I have comforted the oppressed, but I have taken no share of the price of blood. I am a priest of our holy Church, and if I wed these two before the sight of men, they will be husband and wife till death, and I shall

have set the seal of the blessing of the Church upon an act of shame. I will not do it."

"You will not do it, you shaveling traitor?" screamed Pereira in a voice hoarse with rage. "Do you want to follow your brother then? Look here, my friend, either you obey me and marry these two or----" and he hissed a horrible threat.

"NO, no," said Leonard, anxious to find an escape from this abominable mockery. "Let him be. What do the cheat's prayers matter? The lady and I can do without them."

"I tell you, stranger, that you shall marry the girl, and this sniveller must marry you. If you don't, I will keep both her and the gold. And as for him, he can choose. Here, slaves, bring the _sjamboch_."

Francisco's delicate face flushed pink. "I am no hero that I can suffer thus," he said; "I will do your bidding, Dom Antonio, and may God forgive me the sin! For you, Pierre and Juanna, I am about to make you man and wife, to join you in a sacrament that is none the less holy and indissoluble because of the dreadful circumstances under which it is celebrated. I say to you, Pierre, abandon your wickedness, and love and cherish this woman, lest a curse from heaven fall upon you. I say to you, Juanna, put your trust in God, the God of the fatherless and oppressed, who will avenge your wrongs--and forgive me. Let water be brought, that I may consecrate it--water and a ring."

"Here, take this one," said Pereira, lifting Leonard's signet ring from the pile of gold. "I give it back for a luck-penny."

And he tossed the ring to the priest.

Water was brought in a basin, and the father consecrated it.

Then he bade Leonard stand by the girl and motioned to the crowd to fall back from them. All this while Leonard had been watching Juanna. She said no word, and her face was calm, but her eyes told him the terror and perplexity which tore her heart.

Once or twice she lifted her clenched right hand towards her lips, then dropped it without touching them. Leonard knew but too well what deed she meditated. He knew also the deadly nature of the drug she carried. If once it touched her tongue! The suspense was terrible. He could bear it no longer; even at the risk of discovery he must speak with her.

In obedience to the priest's direction he sauntered to her side laughing. Then, still laughing, with his hand he separated the tresses of dark hair, as though to look at the beauty of her side face, and bent down as if to kiss her.

She stood pale and rigid, but once more her hand was lifted towards her mouth.

"Stop," he whispered swiftly into her ear, speaking in English, "I have come to rescue you. Go through with this farce, it means nothing. Then, if I bid you, run for the drawbridge into the slave-camp."

She heard, a light of intelligence shone in her eyes, and her hand fell again.

"Come, stop that, friend Pierre," said Pereira suspiciously. "What are you whispering about?"

"I was telling the bride how beautiful I think her," he answered carelessly.

Juanna turned and flashed on him a well-simulated glance of hate and scorn. Then the service began.

The young priest was gifted with a low and beautiful voice, and by the light of the moon he read the ritual of marriage so solemnly that even the villains who stood round ceased their jokes and sneers and were silent. All things were done in order, though Juanna made no reply to the usual questions. With much sham courtesy the loathsome Pereira presided over the ceremony--their hands were joined, the ring was set upon Juanna's finger, the blessing was pronounced, and it was finished.

All this while Leonard stood like a man in a dream. He felt as though he were really being married; it even came into his mind, as he looked upon the loveliness of the mock bride at his side, that a worse fate might befall him. Then of a sudden he woke from his reverie--the farce was played, now they must strive to escape.

"There, that is done with, Dom Antonio," he said, "and I think I heard this lady whisper that with your permission we will bid you good-bye. My canoe----"

"Nonsense, you will stop here to-night," said Pereira.

"Thanks, I think not," answered Leonard. "To-morrow I may return to do a little business of another kind. I have a commission for about fifty, at a good price for the right sort."

As Leonard spoke thus, glancing to the east, he saw dense masses of vapour rising into the air far away. The damp reeds were fired at last. The Settlement men had not failed in their task, and soon the flames would be discovered; he must be gone and swiftly.

"Well, if you must, you must," answered Pereira, and Leonard observed that he looked relieved as he said it. He did not know the reason at the time. It was this: Juanna had told him that the man who bought her would find his death in it. He had a superstitious fear of the girl, and believed her; therefore he was glad that her purchaser should go, lest it might be said that he had murdered him in order to retain both the woman and her price. So he bade him farewell, and Leonard turned to depart, followed by Otter and Juanna, whom he led by the hand.

All might have gone well for that time had it not been for an unlucky chance. Leonard's scheme was to walk towards the water-gate, but, if no better plan of reaching it should offer, to turn suddenly and run for the drawbridge, where Soa and the others would be waiting, and thence, with or without the people of Mavoom, to escape up the banks of the Zambesi.

Already he had started when the great Portuguese, Xavier, who was watching plunged in sullen thought, stepped forward. "At least I will have a kiss for my trouble," he said, and seizing Juanna round the waist, he drew her towards him.

Then it was that Leonard forgot his caution, as under such circumstances a man, with nerves already strained to breaking point, well might do. Doubling his fist, he struck the giant in the face with such force that Xavier fell headlong to the ground, dragging Juanna after him. Leonard would have done better had he suffered her to be insulted, but just then he remembered only that he was protecting a helpless girl.

Juanna was up in a moment and at his side. Xavier also sprang to his feet, cursing with fury and drawing his sabre as he rose.

"Follow me," said Leonard to Juanna and Otter. Then without more ado he took to his heels.

A shout of laughter went up from the mob.

"This is the brave man. This is the French fire-eater," they cried. "He strikes unawares and is afraid to fight." Nor did they stop at words. All of them were jealous of the stranger, and would have rejoiced to see him dead.

"Stop him!" they shouted, and many of the men started, running like dogs to turn a hare.

Still Leonard might have won through, for he was swift of foot. But neither Juanna nor Otter could run so fast as he, and his pace must be their pace. Before he had gone a hundred yards he found himself confronted by a dozen or more of the slavers, some of whom had knives in their hands.

"Stop, coward, stop and fight," they yelled in Portuguese and Arabic, waving their weapons in his face.

"Certainly," answered Leonard, wheeling round and glancing about him.

There, not thirty yards away, was the drawbridge of the slave camp, and he thought that he saw it tremble, as if it was about to fall. At his side were Otter and Juanna, and towards him, his hideous face red with blood, rushed the great Portugee, sabre aloft, and screaming imprecations.

"Otter," Leonard said quickly, as he drew his sword, "guard my back, for when I have killed this one the rest will spring. For you, young lady, reach the bridge if you can. Soa and your people are there."

Now Xavier was upon him with a rush. He struck furiously, and Leonard avoided the blow, springing backwards out of his reach. Twice more he rushed on thus and twice he smote, but each time Leonard ran backward towards the drawbridge, that now was not more than twenty yards away. A fourth time the Portugee came on, and the Englishman could not repeat his tactics, for the mob hemmed him in behind. On sped Xavier and smote his hardest: Leonard saw the steel gleam in the moonlight and lifted his sword to guard. The blow fell, fire sprang from it in sparks, and down rattled fragments of shattered steel. His sword was broken.

"Fight on, Baas," said the voice of Otter, "fight on! Both swords have gone."

Leonard looked up. It was true: the Portugee was casting aside his

broken weapon and clutching at his knife. Now Leonard had no knife, and at the moment he never thought of his revolver. But he still held the hilt of his sword, and with it he sprang straight at Xavier, who rushed to meet him.

They met with a dull shock as bull meets bull. Leonard struck one blow with the broken sword-hilt, then dropped it--it was useless. But the stroke did him good service, for, falling on the right hand of the Portugee, it paralysed his arm for a second, causing him to let fall the dagger. Then they gripped each other, fighting desperately with their naked strength alone. Twice the huge Portugee lifted the Englishman from the ground, striving to throw him, while the crowd yelled with excitement, but twice he failed. Not for nothing had Leonard learnt wrestling as a lad and hardened his iron muscles by years of toil. Xavier may have weighed sixteen stone and Leonard did not weigh thirteen, but his arms were like bars of steel and he was struggling for dear life.

He waited awhile, letting the Portugee exhaust himself in efforts to hurl him to the ground. Then suddenly tightening his grip, Leonard put out all his strength. He could not hope to lift the man, that he knew, but he might throw him. With a sudden movement he hooked his right leg behind Xavier's left calf. Then he cast his weight forward and pushed with all his strength upon the great man's breast.

Xavier tottered, recovered himself, tottered again, and strove to shift his leg. Leonard felt the movement and met it with a supreme effort. Losing his balance, his foe swayed slowly backwards like a falling tree, then fell with a thud that shook the ground. It was a gallant throw, and even the "ranks of Tusculum" as represented by the slave-drivers "could scarce forbear to cheer." Now Leonard lay upon the breast of the man, for he was dragged to earth with him.

For a moment his enemy was still, breathing stertorously, for the shock of their fall had been great. Leonard looked round; there, some eight feet away, was the knife, and he who could grasp it must win this deadly game. But how could he grasp it? Xavier, whose strength and powers were coming back, still hugged him in his fearful grip; he also saw the knife, and would win it. Rapidly, by instinct almost, Leonard measured the distance with his eye. There was but one plan, to roll to it. The first roll would leave him undermost, but the dagger would still be out of Xavier's reach. Then, could he succeed in turning him upon his back once more, Leonard would be uppermost again, and if he was able to free his hand it might grasp the weapon. It was a terrible risk, but he must take it. He lay motionless awhile, husbanding his force, and the Portugee surged and heaved beneath him; he could feel the muscles of his mighty frame start up in knots as he struggled. At last Leonard let him have his way, and over they went, the two of them. Now Xavier was uppermost, and the mob yelled in triumph, for they thought that the stranger's strength was spent.

"The knife, the knife!" gasped Xavier, and one of his servants sprang forward to give it to him. But Otter was watching and started out of the press, naked sabre in hand: his fierce and ugly face was twitching with excitement, his black eyes shone, and his vast shoulders worked to and fro. To Juanna, fascinated by the fearful struggle, the dwarf looked like some black gnome, like a thing of supernatural power, half toad, half human.

"He who touches the knife dies!" he said in guttural Arabic, stretching his long arm and sabre over it. "Let these cocks fight it out, my masters."

The man shrank back: he also was afraid of Otter, deeming him uncanny; nor did any other interfere.

Now came the moment of death or victory. As he could not reach the weapon, with a sudden movement Xavier freed his right hand and grasped the Englishman's throat; but to do this he must lessen the pressure on his breast. Leonard felt the grip, and the knowledge that his end was at hand renewed his powers. Twice he writhed like a snake, gripping the ground with the muscles of his back and legs; once he swung his frame to the right, then a vast effort, and lo! Xavier turned slowly over like a log of wood, and again Leonard lay upon his breast.

Leonard lay upon his breast, and his right arm was free and within reach of the dagger. But the giant's grasp of his throat was cruel; the blood drummed in his ears and his senses began to fail. No, he would not die thus and leave the girl helpless. Where was it? He was blind, he could see nothing but her white face. He must get free--ah, he knew now!

They thought that he was spent: see! his head fell, when suddenly he lifted himself and heaved up his arm.

Crash it came full on the forehead of Xavier, that in its turn was pillowed on the stony earth. The grip slackened. Crash again, a fearful and despairing blow! Leonard's throat was free, and the air rushed into his bursting lungs. Now he could see and grasp the knife, but there was no need to use it. The great man beneath him flung his arms wide, shivered, and grew still.

Then it was, while men paused wondering at those awful blows, that Juanna, mindful of her deliverer's bidding, turned and fled, sick at heart but unhindered, to the edge of the ditch opposite the drawbridge. Otter also rushed up and dragged Leonard from the ground.

"_Wow!_" he cried, "a good fight and a great blow! Dead, by my mother's spirit, and no touch of steel. Awake, my father, awake! for if the boar is down the pigs remain!"

Leonard heard his words dimly and knew their import. With an effort he ceased to stagger and rested his weight upon the dwarf, much as a man might lean upon some sturdy post. His breath came back to him and his mind cleared. He looked round and saw Juanna standing near the bridge like one who hesitates whether to fly or stay.

"Sirs," gasped Leonard, "I have fought and I have won. Now let me go in peace with the girl. Is the man alive?"

A ring of men had crowded round the body of Xavier, and in their centre knelt the priest Francisco. At this moment he rose and said:

"It is useless to minister to him; he is no more."

The slavers looked at Leonard with awe not unmixed with admiration. Who had ever seen such a thing, that one whose strength had been a byword should be slain with the naked fist? They forgot that it is easy to kill the man whose head rests upon a stone.

Presently, however, their wonder gave way to rage. Xavier had been a favourite among them, and they were not minded that he should die unavenged. So they drew round Leonard scowling and cursing.

"Stand back," he said, "and let me pass. I fought your friend fairly; had I wished to take advantage of him, should I not have used this?" And for the first time he remembered and drew his Colt, the sight of which cooled their ardour somewhat, for they gave way. "Perhaps you will give me an arm, Father," Leonard went on, speaking to the priest, who was standing by. "I am much shaken."

Francisco complied, and they started towards Juanna, Otter guarding their rear with his sabre. Before they had gone ten yards, however, Pereira waddled towards them after a hasty consultation with one of his captains.

"Seize that man," he shouted; "he has killed the worthy Dom Xavier: having first insulted him, he has slain him by violence, and he must answer for it."

A dozen ruffians sprang forward at his bidding, only to be met by the sabre and pistol of Otter, with neither of which were they anxious to make a closer acquaintance. Leonard saw that the position was very grave, and a thought came into his mind. "You wish to escape from this place, Father?" he said rapidly to the priest.

"Yes," answered Francisco, "it is a hell."

"Then lead me as swiftly as you may to that bridge; I am hurt and weak, but there is succour beyond."

As he spoke the drawbridge, which was not ten yards away, fell with a crash.

"Run across, Juanna Rodd," cried Leonard in English.

She hesitated, then obeyed. It seemed to Leonard that the look upon her face said, "How can I leave you?"

"Now, Father," said Leonard, "make a rush for it," and leaning on the priest's shoulder he stumbled towards the bridge. But he would never have reached it had it not been for Otter.

"Treason!" roared Pereira; "stop him! Who let down the bridge?"

A man came on the attack; it was the same young captain that Leonard had offered to fight before the auction. In his hand was a knife already uplifted to fall on Leonard's back when Otter's sabre flashed and the man went down.

"Seize the bridge and hold it," roared Pereira again.

"Wind up! wind up!" yelled Otter in answer, as with sabre and pistol he held back the mob.

Those on the further side obeyed with such a will that Leonard and the priest rolled down the slanting planks.

"Otter!" cried Leonard--"good God! he will be killed!"

By way of answer Otter fired the last barrel of his pistol. Then with a yell, before his foes could close upon him he sprang like a wild cat straight at the iron chains of the bridge, which were used to secure it in its place when needful. At the moment they hung four feet or more above his head, but he grasped them and shouted to Soa to hoist away.

A man attempted to seize his legs, but Otter kicked him in the face and he fell into the water. Next second he was out of their reach and rapidly rising high into the air. Some threw knives and some fired pistol-shots after him, but none of these touched him.

"Ah! Yellow Devil," the dwarf cried as he swung, "look behind you: there is another devil, yellower and fiercer than you."

Pereira turned and all his company with him, and at that moment, with a crackling roar, a vast sheet of flame burst up from the morass. The reeds had caught at last in good earnest, and the strengthening wind was bringing the fire down upon them.

CHAPTER XIV

VENGEANCE

"Treachery! treachery!" screamed Pereira. "The reeds are fired, and that witch has betrayed us."

"Ha! ha! ha! ha!" cried Otter again from his airy perch. "Treachery! treachery! And what if the slaves are loosed? And what if the gates be barred?"

Hitherto the mob had been silent in their fear and wonder. There they stood closely packed, a hundred or more of them, staring first at Otter, then at the advancing flames. Now they found tongue.

"He is a fiend! Kill him! Storm the slave camp! To the gates!" they yelled in this language and in that.

For many it was their last earthly cry, since at that moment a sheet of flame burst from the rampart of the camp, followed by the boom of the cannon, and six pounds of canister swept through the crowd. Right through them it swept, leaving a wide lane of dead and dying; and such a shriek went up to heaven as even that place of torment had never heard.

Then they broke and fled this way and that, screaming curses as they went.

When Leonard and the priest had rolled down the rising bridge they found Juanna standing safely by the guard-house, surrounded by some of the Settlement men.

"To the gun!" he cried, "to the gun! Fire into them! I will follow you."

Then it was that he saw Otter left to his death and called out in fear. But Otter saved himself as has been told, and clambered down the bridge safe and sound.

Leaning on the dwarf and Francisco, Leonard, followed by Juanna, staggered along the earthwork to the place where the gun was mounted. Before he had gone a step he caught sight of the figure of Soa, outlined in bold relief against the background of the fire and surrounded by many of the freed Settlement men. At the instant when he saw her she was in the act of springing back from the breach of the gun, the lanyard in her hand. Then came the roar of the shot and the shriek of the smitten.

"_Wow!_" said Otter, "the old woman has not been idle. She is clever as a man, that one."

Another minute and they were helping to reload the piece, that is, except Soa, who was on her knees kissing Juanna's hands.

"Come, stop that!" said Leonard, sinking to the ground, for he was utterly exhausted. "Those devils have gone for their arms. They will try to storm us presently. Is the shot home, Peter? Then run her out, sharp; and you, Soa, screw her nose down." Next he bade the freed slaves arm themselves with stakes or anything that they could find, for of rifles they had but four, two of which they had found in the guard-house.

Presently the slavers came on with a yell, carrying long planks, by the help of which they hoped to cross the dike.

"Look out!" said Leonard, "they are going to open fire. Under the earthwork, every man of you!" And seizing Juanna who was standing near, he pulled her down into cover.

It was not too soon, for next instant a storm of bullets swept over them. Most of the men had understood and taken shelter, but some were too slow or too stupid. Of these one fell dead and two more were hit. Soa and Peter alone took no heed, and yet they remained unhurt. There stood the woman, while the bullets whistled round her, laying the gun as coolly as though she had served in the Royal Artillery, and with her was the head-man, Peter. Peter was shot through the waist-cloth and a ball cut its way through Soa's grizzled hair, but neither of them seemed to notice these trifles.

"They are mad, Baas," cried Otter, who was watching the enemy over the top of the embankment. "See! they are coming across the open."

Leonard looked. The dwarf was right: in their rage and hurry the slavers, half hidden in a cloud of smoke caused by their rapid firing, were advancing across the clear space instead of creeping along the edge of the dike. What was more, the necessity of carrying the planks caused them to pack in groups. Soa gave a final twist with her lever and waited, her hand on the lanyard. A bullet cut it in two, but without firing the gun, and she grasped the shortened cord.

"Now for it!" cried Leonard, as the first party came into the line of fire.

Soa sprang backwards with a yell: again the piece thundered out, and the canister screamed through the air. It tore along the advancing files, then, striking the beaten earth, rebounded and caught those who were following with the ricochet, and with awful effect. Whole groups were mowed down by this one discharge, the destruction being twice as large as that caused by the first shot, for at this greater range the canister

found room to spread. Also the rebounding missiles flying hither and thither among the crowd did no little execution. Down went the men in heaps, and with them the planks they carried. They had no more wish to storm the slave camp; they had but one thought left, the thought of safety, and the survivors of them fled in all directions, yelling with fear and fury.

"Load up, load up!" cried Otter, lifting the charge of powder which lay at hand. "They will try to break open the gates and get out, then they will cut us off."

As he spoke they saw many men run from the auction-shed to the water-gate. But it could not be climbed, the key was gone, and the massive bolts and beams were not easy to break. So they brought hammers and a tree-trunk which had supported an angle of the shed, and battered at the gate. For two minutes or more it held, then it began to give.

"Swift! swift!" cried Otter again as he dragged at the cannon to turn it, "or all will yet be lost."

"Hurry no man's ox, Black One," said Soa, as she laid the gun with the help of Peter.

A cry went up from the slavers; the gate was tottering, but it still held by the upper hinges. A few more blows and it must surely fall. But those blows were never struck. Again Soa sprang backwards, and the roar of the gun was answered by the screams of the slavers as the shrapnel ploughed through them.

Of those who were left the most part fled for shelter to the auction-hut and to the Nest itself. Some ran across to the magazine, but appeared to

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