

CHAPTER XII

THE MESSENGER

"He is gone," I panted, "and the world hasn't lost much."

"Well, it didn't give him much, did it, poor devil, so don't let's speak ill of him," answered Leo, who had thrown himself exhausted to the ground. "Perhaps he was all right before they made him mad. At any rate he had pluck, for I don't want to tackle such another."

"How did you manage it?" I asked.

"Dodged in beneath his sword, closed with him, threw him and smashed him up over that lump of stone. Sheer strength, that's all. A cruel business, but it was his life or mine, and there you are. It's lucky I finished it in time to help you before that oven-mouthed brute tore your throat out. Did you ever see such a dog? It looks as large as a young donkey. Are you much hurt, Horace?"

"Oh, my forearm is chewed to a pulp, but nothing else, I think. Let us get down to the water; if I can't drink soon I shall faint. Also the rest of the pack is somewhere about, fifty or more of them."

"I don't think they will trouble us, they have got the horses, poor beasts. Wait a minute and I will come."

Then he rose, found the Khan's sword, a beautiful and ancient weapon, and with a single cut of its keen edge, killed the second dog that I had wounded, which was still yowling and snarling at us. After this he collected the two spears and my knife, saying that they might be useful, and without trouble caught the Khan's horse, which stood with hanging head close by, so tired that even this desperate fight had not frightened it away.

"Now," he said, "up you go, old fellow. You are not fit to walk any farther;" and with his help I climbed into the saddle.

Then slipping the rein over his arm he led the horse, which walked stiffly, on to the river, that ran within a quarter of a mile of us, though to me, tortured as I was by pain and half delirious with exhaustion, the journey seemed long enough.

Still we came there somehow, and, forgetting my wounds, I tumbled from the horse, threw myself flat and drank and drank, more, I think, than ever I did before. Not in all my life have I tasted anything so delicious as was that long draught of water. When I had satisfied my thirst, I dipped my head and made shift to jerk my wounded arm into it, for its coolness seemed to still the pain. Presently Leo rose, the water running from his face and beard, and said--"What shall we do now? The river seems to be wide, over a hundred yards, and it is low, but there may be deep water in the middle. Shall we try to cross, in which case we

might drown, or stop where we are till daylight and take our chance of the death-hounds?"

"I can't go another foot," I murmured faintly, "much less try to ford an unknown river."

Now, about thirty yards from the shore was an island covered with reeds and grasses.

"Perhaps we could reach that," he said. "Come, get on to my back, and we will try."

I obeyed with difficulty, and we set out, he feeling his way with the handle of the spear. The water proved to be quite shallow; indeed, it never came much above his knees, so that we reached the island without trouble. Here Leo laid me down on the soft rushes, and, returning to the mainland, brought over the black horse and the remaining weapons, and having unsaddled the beast, knee-haltered and turned it loose, whereon it immediately lay down, for it was too spent to feed.

Then he set to work to doctor my wounds. Well it proved for me that the sleeve of my garment was so thick, for even through it the flesh of my forearm was torn to ribbons, moreover a bone seemed to be broken. Leo collected a double handful of some soft wet moss and, having washed the arm, wrapped it round with a handkerchief, over which he laid the moss. Then with a second handkerchief and some strips of linen torn from our

undergarments he fastened a couple of split reeds to serve as rough splints to the wounded limb. While he was doing this I suppose that I slept or swooned. At any rate, I remember no more.

Sometime during that night Leo had a strange dream, of which he told me the next morning. I suppose that it must have been a dream as certainly I saw or was aware of nothing. Well, he dreamed--I use his own words as nearly as possible--that again he heard those accursed death-hounds in full cry. Nearer and nearer they came, following our spoor to the edge of the river--all the pack that had run down the horses. At the water's brink they halted and were mute. Then suddenly a puff of wind brought the scent of us upon the island to one of them which lifted up its head and uttered a single bay. The rest clustered about it, and all at once they made a dash at the water.

Leo could see and hear everything. He felt that after all our doom was now at hand, and yet, held in the grip of nightmare, if nightmare it were, he was quite unable to stir or even to cry out to wake and warn me.

Now followed the marvel of this vision. Giving tongue as they came, half swimming and half plunging, the hounds drew near to the island where we slept. Then, suddenly Leo saw that we were no longer alone. In front of us, on the brink of the water, stood the figure of a woman clad in some dark garment. He could not describe her face or appearance, for her back was towards him.

All he knew was that she stood there, like a guard, holding some object in her raised hand, and that suddenly the advancing hounds caught sight of her. In an instant it was as though they were paralysed by fear--for their bays turned to fearful howlings. One or two of those that were nearest to the island seemed to lose their footing and be swept away by the stream. The rest struggled back to the bank, and fled wildly like whipped curs.

Then the dark, commanding figure, which in his dream Leo took to be the guardian Spirit of the Mountain, vanished. That it left no footprints behind it I can vouch, for in the morning we looked to see.

When, awakened by the sharp pangs in my arm, I opened my eyes again, the dawn was breaking. A thin mist hung over the river and the island, and through it I could see Leo sleeping heavily at my side and the shape of the black horse, which had risen and was grazing close at hand. I lay still for a while remembering all that we had undergone and wondering that I should live to wake, till presently above the murmuring of the water I heard a sound which terrified me, the sound of voices. I sat up and peered through the reeds, and there upon the bank, looking enormous in the mist, I saw two figures mounted upon horses, those of a woman and a man.

They were pointing to the ground as though they examined spoor in the sand. I heard the man say something about the dogs not daring to enter

the territory of the Mountain, a remark which came back to my mind again after Leo had told me his dream. Then I remembered how we were placed.

"Wake!" I whispered to Leo. "Wake, we are pursued."

He sprang to his feet, rubbing his eyes and snatching at a spear. Now those upon the bank saw him, and a sweet voice spoke through the mist, saying--"Lay down that weapon, my guest, for we are not come to harm you."

It was the voice of the Khandia Atene, and the man with her was the old Shaman Simbri.

"What shall we do now, Horace?" asked Leo with something like a groan, for in the whole world there were no two people whom he less wished to see.

"Nothing," I answered, "it is for them to play."

"Come to us," called the Khandia across the water. "I swear that we mean no harm. Are we not alone?"

"I do not know," answered Leo, "but it seems unlikely. Where we are we stop until we are ready to march again."

Atene spoke to Simbri. What she said we could not hear, for she

whispered, but she appeared to be arguing with him and persuading him to some course of which he strongly disapproved. Then suddenly both of them put their horses at the water and rode to us through the shallows. Reaching the island, they dismounted, and we stood staring at each other. The old man seemed very weary in body and oppressed in mind, but the Khania was strong and beautiful as ever, nor had passion and fatigue left any trace upon her inscrutable face. It was she who broke the silence, saying--"You have ridden fast and far since last we met, my guests, and left an evil token to mark the path you took. Yonder among the rocks one lies dead. Say, how came he to his end, who has no wound upon him?"

"By these," answered Leo, stretching out his hands.

"I knew it," she answered, "and I blame you not, for fate decreed that death for him, and now it is fulfilled. Still, there are those to whom you must answer for his blood, and I only can protect you from them."

"Or betray me to them," said Leo. "Khania, what do you seek?"

"That answer which you should have given me this twelve hours gone. Remember, before you speak, that I alone can save your life--aye, and will do it and clothe you with that dead madman's crown and mantle."

"You shall have your answer on yonder Mountain," said Leo, pointing to the peak above us, "where I seek mine."

She paled a little and replied, "To find that it is death, for, as I have told you, the place is guarded by savage folk who know no pity."

"So be it. Then Death is the answer that we seek. Come, Horace, let us go to meet him."

"I swear to you," she broke in, "that there dwells not the woman of your dreams. I am that woman, yes, even I, as you are the man of mine."

"Then, lady, prove it yonder upon the Mountain," Leo answered.

"There dwells there no woman," Atene went on hurriedly, "nothing dwells there. It is the home of fire and--a Voice."

"What voice?"

"The Voice of the Oracle that speaks from the fire. The Voice of a Spirit whom no man has ever seen, or shall see."

"Come, Horace," said Leo, and he moved towards the horse.

"Men," broke in the old Shaman, "would you rush upon your doom? Listen; I have visited yonder haunted place, for it was I who according to custom brought thither the body of the Khan Atene's father for burial, and I warn you to set no foot within its temples."

"Which your mistress said that we should never reach," I commented, but Leo only answered--"We thank you for your warning," and added, "Horace, watch them while I saddle the horse, lest they do us a mischief."

So I took the spear in my uninjured hand and stood ready. But they made no attempt to hurt us, only fell back a little and began to talk in hurried whispers. It was evident to me that they were much perturbed. In a few minutes the horse was saddled and Leo assisted me to mount it. Then he said--"We go to accomplish our fate, whatever it may be, but before we part, Khania, I thank you for the kindness you have shown us, and pray you to be wise and forget that we have ever been. Through no will of mine your husband's blood is on my hands, and that alone must separate us for ever. We are divided by the doors of death and destiny. Go back to your people, and pardon me if most unwillingly I have brought you doubt and trouble. Farewell."

She listened with bowed head, then replied, very sadly--"I thank you for your gentle words, but, Leo Vincey, we do not part thus easily. You have summoned me to the Mountain, and even to the Mountain I shall follow you. Aye, and there I will meet its Spirit, as I have always known I must and as the Shaman here has always known I must. Yes, I will match my strength and magic against hers, as it is decreed that I shall do. To the victor be that crown for which we have warred for ages."

Then suddenly Atene sprang to her saddle, and turning her horse's head

rode it back through the water to the shore, followed by old Simbri, who lifted up his crooked hands as though in woe and fear, muttering as he went--"You have entered the forbidden river and now, Atene, the day of decision is upon us all--upon us and her--that predestined day of ruin and of war."

"What do they mean?" asked Leo of me.

"I don't know," I answered; "but I have no doubt we shall find out soon enough and that it will be something unpleasant. Now for this river."

Before we had struggled through it I thought more than once that the day of drowning was upon us also, for in places there were deep rapids which nearly swept us away. But Leo, who waded, leading the Khan's horse by the bridle, felt his path and supported himself with the spear shaft, so that in the end we reached the other bank safely.

Beyond it lay a breadth of marshy lands, that doubtless were overflowed when the torrent was in flood. Through these we pushed our way as fast as we could, for we feared lest the Khania had gone to fetch her escort, which we thought she might have left behind the rise, and would return with it presently to hunt us down. At that time we did not know what we learned afterwards, that with its bordering river the soil of the Mountain was absolutely sacred and, in practice, inviolable. True, it had been invaded by the people of Kaloon in several wars, but on each occasion their army was destroyed or met with terrible disaster. Little

wonder then they had come to believe that the House of Fire was under the protection of some unconquerable Spirit.

Leaving the marsh, we reached a bare, rising plain, which led to the first slope of the Mountain three or four miles away. Here we expected every moment to be attacked by the savages of whom we had heard so much, but no living creature did we see. The place was a desert streaked with veins of rock that once had been molten lava. I do not remember much else about it; indeed, the pain in my arm was so sharp that I had no eyes for physical features. At length the rise ended in a bare, broad donga, quite destitute of vegetation, of which the bottom was buried in lava and a debris of rocks washed down by the rain or melting snows from slopes above. This donga was bordered on the farther side by a cliff, perhaps fifty feet in height, in which we could see no opening.

Still we descended the place, that was dark and rugged; pervaded, moreover, by an extraordinary gloom, and as we went perceived that its lava floor was sprinkled over with a multitude of white objects. Soon we came to the first of these and found that it was the skeleton of a human being. Here was a veritable Valley of Dead Bones, thousands upon thousands of them; a gigantic graveyard. It seemed as though some great army had perished here.

Indeed, we found afterwards that this was the case, for on one of those occasions in the far past when the people of Kaloon had attacked the Mountain tribes, they were trapped and slaughtered in this gully,

leaving their bones as a warning and a token. Among these sad skeletons we wandered disconsolately, seeking a path up the opposing cliff, and finding none, until at length we came to a halt, not knowing which way to turn. Then it was that we met with our first strange experience on the Mountain.

The gulf and its mouldering relics depressed us, so that for awhile we were silent, and, to tell the truth, somewhat afraid. Yes, even the horse seemed afraid, for it snorted a little, hung its head and shivered. Close by us lay a pile of bones, the remains evidently of a number of wretched creatures that, dead or living, had been hurled down from the cliff above, and on the top of the pile was a little huddled heap, which we took for more bones.

"Unless we can find a way out of this accursed charnel-house before long, I think that we shall add to its company," I said, staring round me.

As the words left my lips it seemed to me that from the corner of my eye I saw the heap on the top of the bones stir. I looked round. Yes, it was stirring. It rose, it stood up, a human figure, apparently that of a woman--but of this I could not be sure--wrapped from head to foot in white and wearing a hanging veil over its face, or rather a mask with cut eye-holes. It advanced towards us while we stared at it, till the horse, catching sight of the thing, shied violently and nearly threw me. When at a distance of about ten paces it paused and beckoned with its

hand, that was also swathed in white like the arm of a mummy.

"What the devil are you?" shouted Leo, and his voice echoed drearily among those naked rocks. But the creature did not answer, it only continued to beckon.

Leo walked up to it to assure himself that we were not the victims of some hallucination. As he came it glided back to its heap of bones and stood there like a ghost of one dead arisen from amidst these grinning evidences of death, or rather a swathed corpse, for that is what it resembled. Leo followed with the intention of touching it to assure himself of its reality, whereon it lifted its white-wrapped arm and struck him lightly on the breast. Then as he recoiled it pointed with its hand, first upwards as though to the Peak or the sky, and next at the wall of rock which faced us.

He returned to me saying, "What shall we do?"

"Follow, I suppose. It may be a messenger from above," and I nodded toward the mountain crest.

"From below, more likely," Leo muttered, "for I don't like the look of this guide."

Still he motioned with his hand to the creature to proceed. Apparently it understood, for it turned to the left and began to pick its way

amongst the stones and skeletons swiftly and without noise. We followed for several hundred yards till it reached a shallow cleft in the rock. This cleft we had seen already, but as it appeared to end at a depth of about thirty feet, we passed on. The figure entered here and vanished.

"It must be a shadow," said Leo doubtfully.

"Nonsense," I answered, "shadows don't strike one. Go on."

So he led the horse up the cleft, to find that at the end it turned sharply to the right and that the form was standing there awaiting us. Forward it went again and we after it down a little gorge that grew ever gloomier till it terminated in what might have been a cave, or a gallery cut in the rock.

Here our guide came back to us apparently with the intention of taking the horse by the bridle, but at this nearer sight of it the brute snorted and reared up, so that it almost fell backwards upon me. As it found its feet again the figure struck it on the head in the same passionless, inhuman way that it had struck Leo, whereon the horse trembled and burst into a sweat as though with fear, making no further attempt to escape or to disobey. Then it took one side of the bridle in its swathed hand and, Leo clinging to the other, we plunged into the tunnel.

Our position was not pleasant, for we knew not whither we were being led

by this horrible conductor, and suspected that it might be to meet our deaths in the darkness. Moreover, I guessed that the path was narrow and bordered by some gulf, for as we went I heard stones fall, apparently to a considerable depth, while the poor horse lifted its feet gingerly and snorted in abject fear. At length we saw daylight, and never was I more glad of its advent, although it showed us that there was a gulf on our right, and that the path we travelled could not measure more than ten feet in width.

Now we were out of the tunnel, that evidently had saved us a wide detour, and standing for the first time upon the actual slope of the Mountain, which stretched upwards for a great number of miles till it reached the snow-line above. Here also we saw evidences of human life, for the ground was cultivated in patches and herds of mountain sheep and cattle were visible in the distance.

Presently we entered a gully, following a rough path that led along the edge of a raging torrent. It was a desolate place, half a mile wide or more, having hundreds of fantastic lava boulders strewn about its slopes. Before we had gone a mile I heard a shrill whistle, and suddenly from behind these boulders sprang a number of men, quite fifty of them. All we could note at the time was that they were brawny, savage-looking fellows, for the most part red haired and bearded, although their complexions were rather dark, who wore cloaks of white goat skins and carried spears and shields. I should imagine that they were not unlike the ancient Picts and Scots as they appeared to the invading Romans. At

us they came uttering their shrill, whistling cries, evidently with the intention of spearing us on the spot.

"Now for it," said Leo, drawing his sword, for escape was impossible; they were all round us. "Good-bye, Horace."

"Good-bye," I answered rather faintly, understanding what the Khania and the old Shaman had meant when they said that we should be killed before we ascended the first slope of the Mountain.

Meanwhile our ghastly-looking guide had slipped behind a great boulder, and even then it occurred to me that her part in the tragedy being played, she, if it were a woman at all, was withdrawing herself while we met our miserable fate. But here I did her injustice, for she had, I suppose, come to save us from this very fate which without her presence we must most certainly have suffered. When the savages were within a few yards suddenly she appeared on the top of the boulder, looking like a second Witch of Endor, and stretched out her arm. Not a word did she speak, only stretched out her draped arm, but the effect was remarkable and instantaneous.

At the sight of her down on to their faces went those wild men, every one of them, as though a lightning stroke had in an instant swept them out of existence. Then she let her arm fall and beckoned, whereon a great fellow who, I suppose, was the leader of the band, rose and crept towards her with bowed head, submissive as a beaten dog. To him she

made signs, pointing to us, pointing to the far-off Peak, crossing and uncrossing her white-wrapped arms, but so far as I could hear, speaking no word. It was evident that the chief understood her, however, for he said something in a guttural language. Then he uttered his shrill whistle, whereon the band rose and departed thence at full speed, this way and the other, so that in another minute they had vanished as quickly as they came.

Now our guide motioned to us to proceed, and led the way upward as calmly as though nothing had happened.

For over two hours we went on thus till our path brought us from the ravine on to a grassy declivity, across which it wound its way. Here, to our astonishment, we found a fire burning, and hanging above the fire an earthenware pot, which was on the boil, although we could see no man tending it. The figure signalled to me to dismount, pointing to the pot in token that we were to eat the food which doubtless she had ordered the wild men to prepare for us, and very glad was I to obey her. Provision had been made for the horse also, for near the fire lay a great bundle of green forage.

While Leo off-saddled the beast and spread the provender for it, taking with me a spare earthen vessel that lay ready, I went to the edge of the torrent to drink and steep my wounded arm in its ice-cold stream. This relieved it greatly, though by now I was sure from various symptoms that the brute Master's fangs had fortunately only broken or injured the

small bone, a discovery for which I was thankful enough. Having finished attending to it as well as I was able, I filled the jar with water.

On my way back a thought struck me, and going to where our mysterious guide stood still as Lot's wife after she had been turned into a pillar of salt, I offered it to her, hoping that she would unveil her face and drink. Then for the first time she showed some sign of being human, or so I thought, for it seemed to me that she bowed ever so little in acknowledgment of the courtesy. If so--and I may have been mistaken--this was all, for the next instant she turned her back on me to show that it was declined. So she would not, or for aught I knew, could not drink. Neither would she eat, for when Leo tried her afterwards with food she refused it in like fashion.

Meanwhile he had taken the pot off the fire, and as soon as its contents grew cool enough we fell on them eagerly, for we were starving. After we had eaten and drunk, Leo re-dressed my arm as best he could and we rested awhile. Indeed, I think that, being very tired, we began to doze, for I was awakened by a shadow falling on us and looked up to see our corpse-like guide standing close by and pointing first to the sun, then at the horse, as though to show us that we had far to travel. So we saddled up and went on again somewhat refreshed, for at least we were no longer ravenous.

All the rest of that day we journeyed on up the grassy slopes, seeing no man, although occasionally we heard the wild whistle which told us that

we were being watched by the Mountain savages. By sundown the character of the country had changed, for the grass was replaced with rocks, amongst which grew stunted firs. We had left the lower slopes and were beginning to climb the Mountain itself.

The sun sank and we went on through the twilight. The twilight died and we went on through the dark, our path lit only by the stars and the faint radiance of the glowing pillar of smoke above the Peak, which was reflected on to us from the mighty mantle of its snows. Forward we toiled, whilst a few paces ahead of us walked our unwearying guide. If she had seemed weird and inhuman before, now she appeared a very ghost, as, clad in her graveyard white, upon which the faint light shimmered, never speaking, never looking back, she glided on noiselessly between the black rocks and the twisted, dark-green firs and junipers.

Soon we lost all count of the road. We turned this way and turned that way, we passed an open patch and through the shadows of a grove, till at length as the moon rose we entered a ravine, and following a path that ran down it, came to a place which is best described as a large amphitheatre cut by the hand of nature out of the rock of the Mountain. Evidently it was chosen as a place of defence, for its entrance was narrow and tortuous, built up at the end also, so that only one person could pass its gateway at a time. Within an open space and at its farther side stood low, stone houses built against the rock. In front of these houses, the moonlight shining full upon them, were gathered several hundred men and women arranged in a semicircle and in alternate

companies, who appeared to be engaged in the celebration of some rite.

It was wild enough. In front of them, and in the exact centre of the semi-circle, stood a gigantic, red-bearded man, who was naked except for a skin girdle about his loins. He was swinging himself backwards and forwards, his hands resting upon his hips, and as he swung, shouting something like "Ho, haha, ho!" When he bent towards the audience it bent towards him, and every time he straightened himself it echoed his final shout of "Ho!" in a volume of sound that made the precipices ring. Nor was this all, for perched upon his hairy head, with arched back and waving tail, stood a great white cat.

Anything stranger, and indeed more fantastic than the general effect of this scene, lit by the bright moonlight and set in that wild arena, it was never my lot to witness. The red-haired, half-naked men and women, the gigantic priest, the mystical white cat, that, gripping his scalp with its claws, waved its tail and seemed to take a part in the performance; the unholy chant and its volleying chorus, all helped to make it extraordinarily impressive. This struck us the more, perhaps, because at the time we could not in the least guess its significance, though we imagined that it must be preliminary to some sacrifice or offering. It was like the fragment of a nightmare preserved by the awakened senses in all its mad, meaningless reality.

Now round the open space where these savages were celebrating their worship, or whatever it might be, ran a rough stone wall about six feet

in height, in which wall was a gateway. Towards this we advanced quite unseen, for upon our side of the wall grew many stunted pines. Through these pines our guide led us, till in the thickest of them, some few yards from the open gateway and a little to the right of it, she motioned to us to stop.

Then she went to a low place in the wall and stood there as though she were considering the scene beyond. It seemed to us, indeed, that she saw what she had not expected and was thereby perplexed or angered. Presently she appeared to make up her mind, for again she motioned to us to remain where we were, enjoining silence upon us by placing her swathed hand upon the mask that hid her face. Next moment she was gone. How she went, or whither, I cannot say; all we knew was that she was no longer there.

"What shall we do now?" whispered Leo to me.

"Stay where we are till she comes back again or something happens," I answered.

So there being nothing else to be done, we stayed, hoping that the horse would not betray us by neighing, or that we might not be otherwise discovered, since we were certain that if so we should be in danger of death. Very soon, however, we forgot the anxieties of our own position in the study of the wild scene before us, which now began to develop a fearful interest.

It would seem that what has been described was but preliminary to the drama itself, and that this drama was the trial of certain people for their lives. This we could guess, for after awhile the incantation ceased and the crowd in front of the big man with the cat upon his head opened out, while behind him a column of smoke rose into the air, as though light had been set to some sunk furnace.

Into the space that had thus been cleared were now led seven persons, whose hands were tied behind them. They were of both sexes and included an old man and a woman with a tall and handsome figure, who appeared to be quite young, scarcely more than a girl indeed. These seven were ranged in a line where they stood, clearly in great fear, for the old man fell upon his knees and one of the women began to sob. Thus they were left awhile, perhaps to allow the fire behind them to burn up, which it soon did with great fierceness, throwing a vivid light upon every detail of the spectacle.

Now all was ready, and a man brought a wooden tray to the red-bearded priest, who was seated on a stool, the white cat upon his knees, whither we had seen it leap from his head a little while before. He took the tray by its handles and at a word from him the cat jumped on to it and sat there. Then amidst the most intense silence he rose and uttered some prayer, apparently to the cat, which sat facing him. This done he turned the tray round so that the creature's back was now towards him, and, advancing to the line of prisoners, began to walk up and down in front

of them, which he did several times, at each turn drawing a little nearer.

Holding out the tray, he presented it at the face of the prisoner on the left, whereon the cat rose, arched its back and began to lift its paws up and down. Presently he moved to the next prisoner and held it before him awhile, and so on till he came to the fifth, that young woman of whom I have spoken. Now the cat grew very angry, for in the death-like stillness we could hear it spitting and growling. At length it seemed to lift its paws and strike the girl upon the face, whereon she screamed aloud, a terrible scream. Then all the audience broke out into a shout, a single word, which we understood, for we had heard one very like it used by the people of the Plain. It was "Witch! Witch! Witch!"

Executioners who were waiting for the victim to be chosen in this ordeal by cat, rushed forward and seizing the girl began to drag her towards the fire. The prisoner who was standing by her and whom we rightly guessed to be her husband, tried to protect her, but his arms being bound, poor fellow, he could do nothing. One of the executioners knocked him down with a stick. For a moment his wife escaped and threw herself upon him, but the brutes lifted her up again, haling her towards the fire, whilst all the audience shouted wildly.

"I can't stand this," said Leo, "it's murder--coldblooded murder," and he drew his sword.

"Best leave the beasts alone," I answered doubtfully, though my own blood was boiling in my veins.

Whether he heard or not I do not know, for the next thing I saw was Leo rushing through the gate waving the Khan's sword and shouting at the top of his voice. Then I struck my heels into the ribs of the horse and followed after him. In ten seconds we were among them. As we came the savages fell back this way and that, staring at us amazed, for at first I think they took us for apparitions. Thus Leo on foot and I galloping after him, we came to the place.

The executioners and their victim were near the fire now--a very great fire of resinous pine logs built in a pit that measured about eight feet across. Close to it sat the priest upon his stool, watching the scene with a cruel smile, and rewarding the cat with little gobbets of raw meat, that he took from a leathern pouch at his side, occupations in which he was so deeply engaged that he never saw us until we were right on to him.

Shouting, "Leave her alone, you blackguards," Leo rushed at the executioners, and with a single blow of his sword severed the arm of one of them who gripped the woman by the nape of the neck.

With a yell of pain and rage the man sprang back and stood waving the stump towards the people and staring at it wildly. In the confusion that followed I saw the victim slip from the hands of her astonished would-be

murderers and run into the darkness, where she vanished. Also I saw the witch-doctor spring up, still holding the tray on which the cat was sitting, and heard him begin to shout a perfect torrent of furious abuse at Leo, who in reply waved his sword and cursed him roundly in English and many other languages.

Then of a sudden the cat upon the tray, infuriated, I suppose, by the noise and the interruption of its meal, sprang straight at Leo's face. He appeared to catch it in mid-air with his left hand and with all his strength dashed it to the ground, where it lay writhing and screeching. Then, as though by an afterthought, he stooped, picked the devilish creature up again and hurled it into the heart of the fire, for he was mad with rage and knew not what he did.

At the sight of that awful sacrilege--for such it was to them who worshipped this beast--a gasp of horror rose from the spectators, followed by a howl of execration. Then like a wave of the sea they rushed at us. I saw Leo cut one man down, and next instant I was off the horse and being dragged towards the furnace. At the edge of it I met Leo in like plight, but fighting furiously, for his strength was great and they were half afraid of him.

"Why couldn't you leave the cat alone?" I shouted at him in idiotic remonstrance, for my brain had gone, and all I knew was that we were about to be thrown into the fiery pit. Already I was over it; I felt the flames singe my hair and saw its red caverns awaiting me, when of a

sudden the brutal hands that held me were unloosed and I fell backwards to the ground, where I lay staring upwards.

This was what I saw. Standing in front of the fire, her draped form quivering as though with rage, was our ghostly-looking guide, who pointed with her hand at the gigantic, red-headed witch-doctor. But she was no longer alone, for with her were a score or more of men clad in white robes and armed with swords; black-eyed, ascetic-looking men, with clean-shaved heads and faces, for their scalps shone in the firelight.

At the sight of them terror had seized that multitude which, mad as goaded bulls but a few seconds before, now fled in every direction like sheep frightened by a wolf. The leader of the white-robed priests, a man with a gentle face, which when at rest was clothed in a perpetual smile, was addressing the medicine-man, and I understood something of his talk.

"Dog," he said in effect, speaking in a smooth, measured voice that yet was terrible, "accursed dog, beast-worshipper, what were you about to do to the guests of the mighty Mother of the Mountain? Is it for this that you and your idolatries have been spared so long? Answer, if you have anything to say. Answer quickly, for your time is short."

With a groan of fear the great fellow flung himself upon his knees, not to the head-priest who questioned him, but before the quivering shape of our guide, and to her put up half-articulate prayers for mercy.

"Cease," said the high-priest, "she is the Minister who judges and the Sword that strikes. I am the Ears and the Voice. Speak and tell me--were you about to cast those men, whom you were commanded to receive hospitably, into yonder fire because they saved the victim of your devilries and killed the imp you cherished? Nay, I saw it all. Know that it was but a trap set to catch you, who have been allowed to live too long."

But still the wretch writhed before the draped form and howled for mercy.

"Messenger," said the high-priest, "with thee the power goes. Declare thy decree."

Then our guide lifted her hand slowly and pointed to the fire. At once the man turned ghastly white, groaned and fell back, as I think, quite dead, slain by his own terror.

Now many of the people had fled, but some remained, and to these the priest called in cold tones, bidding them approach. They obeyed, creeping towards him.

"Look," he said, pointing to the man, "look and tremble at the justice of Hes the Mother. Aye, and be sure that as it is with him, so shall it be with every one of you who dares to defy her and to practise sorcery and murder. Lift up that dead dog who was your chief."

Some of them crept forward and did his bidding.

"Now, cast him into the bed which he had made ready for his victims."

Staggering forward to the edge of the flaming pit, they obeyed, and the great body fell with a crash amongst the burning boughs and vanished there.

"Listen, you people," said the priest, "and learn that this man deserved his dreadful doom. Know you why he purposed to kill that woman whom the strangers saved? Because his familiar marked her as a witch, you think. I tell you it was not so. It was because she being fair, he would have taken her from her husband, as he had taken many another, and she refused him. But the Eye saw, the Voice spoke, and the Messenger did judgment. He is caught in his own snare, and so shall you be, every one of you who dares to think evil in his heart or to do it with his hands.

"Such is the just decree of the Hesea, spoken by her from her throne amidst the fires of the Mountain."