

## Chapter XV. Oro in His House

We climbed on to the dais by some marble steps, and sat ourselves down in four curious chairs of metal that were more or less copied from that which served Oro as a throne; at least the arms ended in graven heads of snakes. These chairs were so comfortable that I concluded the seats were fixed on springs, also we noticed that they were beautifully polished.

"I wonder how they keep everything so clean," said Bastin as we mounted the dais. "In this big place it must take a lot of housemaids, though I don't see any. But perhaps there is no dust here."

I shrugged my shoulders while we seated ourselves, the Lady Yva and I on Oro's right, Bickley and Bastin on his left, as he indicated by pointing with his finger.

"What say you of this city?" Oro asked after a while of me.

"We do not know what to say," I replied. "It amazes us. In our world there is nothing like to it."

"Perchance there will be in the future when the nations grow more skilled in the arts of war," said Oro darkly.

"Be pleased, Lord Oro," I went on, "if it is your will, to tell us why

the people who built this place chose to live in the bowels of the earth instead of upon its surface."

"They did not choose; it was forced upon them," was the answer. "This is a city of refuge that they occupied in time of war, not because they hated the sun. In time of peace and before the Barbarians dared to attack them, they dwelt in the city Pani which signifies Above. You may have noted some of its remaining ruins on the mount and throughout the island. The rest of them are now beneath the sea. But when trouble came and the foe rained fire on them from the air, they retreated to this town, Nyo, which signifies Beneath."

"And then?"

"And then they died. The Water of Life may prolong life, but it cannot make women bear children. That they will only do beneath the blue of heaven, not deep in the belly of the world where Nature never designed that they should dwell. How would the voices of children sound in such halls as these? Tell me, you, Bickley, who are a physician."

"I cannot. I cannot imagine children in such a place, and if born here they would die," said Bickley.

Oro nodded.

"They did die, and if they went above to Pani they were murdered. So

soon the habit of birth was lost and the Sons of Wisdom perished one by one. Yes, they who ruled the world and by tens of thousands of years of toil had gathered into their bosoms all the secrets of the world, perished, till only a few, and among them I and this daughter of mine, were left."

"And then?"

"Then, Humphrey, having power so to do, I did what long I had threatened, and unchained the forces that work at the world's heart, and destroyed them who were my enemies and evil, so that they perished by millions, and with them all their works. Afterwards we slept, leaving the others, our subjects who had not the secret of this Sleep, to die, as doubtless they did in the course of Nature or by the hand of the foe. The rest you know."

"Can such a thing happen again?" asked Bickley in a voice that did not hide his disbelief.

"Why do you question me, Bickley, you who believe nothing of what I tell you, and therefore make wrath? Still I will say this, that what I caused to happen I can cause once more--only once, I think--as perchance you shall learn before all is done. Now, since you do not believe, I will tell you no more of our mysteries, no, not whence this light comes nor what are the properties of the Water of Life, both of which you long to know, nor how to preserve the vital spark of Being in the grave of

dreamless sleep, like a live jewel in a casket of dead stone, nor aught else. As to these matters, Daughter, I bid you also to be silent, since Bickley mocks at us. Yes, with all this around him, he who saw us rise from the coffins, still mocks at us in his heart. Therefore let him, this little man of a little day, when his few years are done go to the tomb in ignorance, and his companions with him, they who might have been as wise as I am."

Thus Oro spoke in a voice of icy rage, his deep eyes glowing like coals. Hearing him I cursed Bickley in my heart for I was sure that once spoken, his decree was like to that of the Medes and Persians and could not be altered. Bickley, however, was not in the least dismayed. Indeed he argued the point. He told Oro straight out that he would not believe in the impossible until it had been shown to him to be possible, and that the law of Nature never had been and never could be violated. It was no answer, he said, to show him wonders without explaining their cause, since all that he seemed to see might be but mental illusions produced he knew not how.

Oro listened patiently, then answered:

"Good. So be it, they are illusions. I am an illusion; those savages who died upon the rock will tell you so. This fair woman before you is an illusion; Humphrey, I am sure, knows it as you will also before you have done with her. These halls are illusions. Live on in your illusions, O little man of science, who because you see the face of things, think

that you know the body and the heart, and can read the soul at work within. You are a worthy child of tens of thousands of your breed who were before you and are now forgotten."

Bickley looked up to answer, then changed his mind and was silent, thinking further argument dangerous, and Oro went on:

"Now I differ from you, Bickley, in this way. I who have more wisdom in my finger-point than you with all the physicians of your world added to you, have in your brains and bodies, yet desire to learn from those who can give me knowledge. I understand from your words to my daughter that you, Bastin, teach a faith that is new to me, and that this faith tells of life eternal for the children of earth. Is it so?"

"It is," said Bastin eagerly. "I will set out--"

Oro cut him short with a wave of the hand.

"Not now in the presence of Bickley who doubtless disbelieves your faith, as he does all else, holding it with justice or without, to be but another illusion. Yet you shall teach me and on it I will form my own judgment."

"I shall be delighted," said Bastin. Then a doubt struck him, and he added: "But why do you wish to learn? Not that you may make a mock of my religion, is it?"

"I mock at no man's belief, because I think that what men believe is true--for them. I will tell you why I wish to hear of yours, since I never hide the truth. I who am so wise and old, yet must die; though that time may be far away, still I must die, for such is the lot of man born of woman. And I do not desire to die. Therefore I shall rejoice to learn of any faith that promises to the children of earth a life eternal beyond the earth. Tomorrow you shall begin to teach me. Now leave me, Strangers, for I have much to do," and he waved his hand towards the table.

We rose and bowed, wondering what he could have to do down in this luminous hole, he who had been for so many thousands of years out of touch with the world. It occurred to me, however, that during this long period he might have got in touch with other worlds, indeed he looked like it.

"Wait," he said, "I have something to tell you. I have been studying this book of writings, or world pictures," and he pointed to my atlas which, as I now observed for the first time, was also lying upon the table. "It interests me much. Your country is small, very small. When I caused it to be raised up I think that it was larger, but since then that seas have flowed in."

Here Bickley groaned aloud.

"This one is much greater," went on Oro, casting a glance at Bickley that must have penetrated him like a searchlight. Then he opened the map of Europe and with his finger indicated Germany and Austria-Hungary. "I know nothing of the peoples of these lands," he added, "but as you belong to one of them and are my guests, I trust that yours may succeed in the war."

"What war?" we asked with one voice.

"Since Bickley is so clever, surely he should know better than an illusion such as I. All I can tell you is that I have learned that there is war between this country and that," and he pointed to Great Britain and to Germany upon the map; "also between others."

"It is quite possible," I said, remembering many things. "But how do you know?"

"If I told you, Humphrey, Bickley would not believe, so I will not tell. Perhaps I saw it in that crystal, as did the necromancers of the early world. Or perhaps the crystal serves some different purpose and I saw it otherwise--with my soul. At least what I say is true."

"Then who will win?" asked Bastin.

"I cannot read the future, Preacher. If I could, should I ask you to expound to me your religion which probably is of no more worth than a

score of others I have studied, just because it tells of the future?

If I could read the future I should be a god instead of only an earth-lord."

"Your daughter called you a god and you said that you knew we were coming to wake you up, which is reading the future," answered Bastin.

"Every father is a god to his daughter, or should be; also in my day millions named me a god because I saw further and struck harder than they could. As for the rest, it came to me in a vision. Oh! Bickley, if you were wiser than you think you are, you would know that all things to come are born elsewhere and travel hither like the light from stars. Sometimes they come faster before their day into a single mind, and that is what men call prophecy. But this is a gift which cannot be commanded, even by me. Also I did not know that you would come. I knew only that we should awaken and by the help of men, for if none had been present at that destined hour we must have died for lack of warmth and sustenance."

"I deny your hypothesis in toto," exclaimed Bickley, but nobody paid any attention to him.

"My father," said Yva, rising and bowing before him with her swan-like grace, "I have noted your commands. But do you permit that I show the temple to these strangers, also something of our past?"

"Yes, yes," he said. "It will save much talk in a savage tongue that is

difficult to me. But bring them here no more without my command, save Bastin only. When the sun is four hours high in the upper world, let him come tomorrow to teach me, and afterwards if so I desire. Or if he wills, he can sleep here."

"I think I would rather not," said Bastin hurriedly. "I make no pretense to being particular, but this place does not appeal to me as a bedroom. There are degrees in the pleasures of solitude and, in short, I will not disturb your privacy at night."

Oro waved his hand and we departed down that awful and most dreary hall.

"I hope you will spend a pleasant time here, Bastin," I said, looking back from the doorway at its cold, illuminated vastness.

"I don't expect to," he answered, "but duty is duty, and if I can drag that old sinner back from the pit that awaits him, it will be worth doing. Only I have my doubts about him. To me he seems to bear a strong family resemblance to Beelzebub, and he's a bad companion week in and week out."

We went through the portico, Yva leading us, and passed the fountain of Life-water, of which she cautioned us to drink no more at present, and to prevent him from doing so, dragged Tommy past it by his collar. Bickley, however, lingered under the pretence of making a further examination of the statue. As I had seen him emptying into his pocket

the contents of a corked bottle of quinine tabloids which he always carried with him, I guessed very well that his object was to procure a sample of this water for future analysis. Of course I said nothing, and Yva and Bastin took no note of what he was doing.

When we were clear of the palace, of which we had only seen one hall, we walked across an open space made unutterably dreary by the absence of any vegetation or other sign of life, towards a huge building of glorious proportions that was constructed of black stone or marble. It is impossible for me to give any idea of the frightful solemnity of this doomed edifice, for as I think I have said, it alone had a roof, standing there in the midst of that brilliant, unvarying and most unnatural illumination which came from nowhere and yet was everywhere. Thus, when one lifted a foot, there it was between the sole of the boot and the floor, or to express it better, the boot threw no shadow. I think this absence of shadows was perhaps the most terrifying circumstance connected with that universal and pervading light. Through it we walked on to the temple. We passed three courts, pillared all of them, and came to the building which was larger than St. Paul's in London. We entered through huge doors which still stood open, and presently found ourselves beneath the towering dome. There were no windows, why should there be in a place that was full of light? There was no ornamentation, there was nothing except black walls. And yet the general effect was magnificent in its majestic grace.

"In this place," said Yva, and her sweet voice went whispering round

the walls and the arching dome, "were buried the Kings of the Sons of Wisdom. They lie beneath, each in his sepulchre. Its entrance is yonder," and she pointed to what seemed to be a chapel on the right.

"Would you wish to see them?"

"Somehow I don't care to," said Bastin. "The place is dreary enough as it is without the company of a lot of dead kings."

"I should like to dissect one of them, but I suppose that would not be allowed," said Bickley.

"No," she answered. "I think that the Lord Oro would not wish you to cut up his forefathers."

"When you and he went to sleep, why did you not choose the family vault?" asked Bastin.

"Would you have found us there?" she queried by way of answer. Then, understanding that the invitation was refused by general consent, though personally I should have liked to accept it, and have never ceased regretting that I did not, she moved towards a colossal object which stood beneath the centre of the dome.

On a stepped base, not very different from that in the cave but much larger, sat a figure, draped in a cloak on which was graven a number of stars, doubtless to symbolise the heavens. The fastening of the cloak

was shaped like the crescent moon, and the foot-stool on which rested the figure's feet was fashioned to suggest the orb of the sun. This was of gold or some such metal, the only spot of brightness in all that temple. It was impossible to say whether the figure were male or female, for the cloak falling in long, straight folds hid its outlines. Nor did the head tell us, for the hair also was hidden beneath the mantle and the face might have been that of either man or woman. It was terrible in its solemnity and calm, and its expression was as remote and mystic as that of Buddha, only more stern. Also without doubt it was blind; it was impossible to mistake the sightlessness of those staring orbs. Across the knees lay a naked sword and beneath the cloak the arms were hidden. In its complete simplicity the thing was marvelous.

On either side upon the pedestal knelt a figure of the size of life. One was an old and withered man with death stamped upon his face; the other was a beautiful, naked woman, her hands clasped in the attitude of prayer and with vague terror written on her vivid features.

Such was this glorious group of which the meaning could not be mistaken. It was Fate throned upon the sun, wearing the constellations as his garment, armed with the sword of Destiny and worshipped by Life and Death. This interpretation I set out to the others.

Yva knelt before the statue for a little while, bowing her head in prayer, and really I felt inclined to follow her example, though in the end I compromised, as did Bickley, by taking off my hat, which, like the

others, I still wore from force of habit, though in this place none were needed. Only Bastin remained covered.

"Behold the god of my people," said Yva. "Have you no reverence for it, O Bastin?"

"Not much," he answered, "except as a work of art. You see I worship Fate's Master. I might add that your god doesn't seem to have done much for you, Lady Yva, as out of all your greatness there's nothing left but two people and a lot of old walls and caves."

At first she was inclined to be angry, for I saw her start. Then her mood changed, and she said with a sigh:

"Fate's Master! Where does He dwell?"

"Here amongst other places," said Bastin. "I'll soon explain that to you."

"I thank you," she replied gravely. "But why have you not explained it to Bickley?" Then waving her hand to show that she wished for no answer, she went on:

"Friends, would you wish to learn something of the history of my people?"

"Very much," said the irrepressible Bastin, "but I would rather the lecture took place in the open air."

"That is not possible," she answered. "It must be here and now, or not at all. Come, stand by me. Be silent and do not move. I am about to set loose forces that are dangerous if disturbed."