

Chapter XIX. The Proposals of Bastin and Bickley

So far as my body was concerned I grew well with great rapidity, though it was long before I got back my strength. Thus I could not walk far or endure any sustained exertion. With my mind it was otherwise. I can not explain what had happened to it; indeed I do not know, but in a sense it seemed to have become detached and to have assumed a kind of personality of its own. At times it felt as though it were no longer an inhabitant of the body, but rather its more or less independent partner. I was perfectly clear-headed and of insanity I experienced no symptoms. Yet my mind, I use that term from lack of a better, was not entirely under my control. For one thing, at night it appeared to wander far away, though whither it went and what it saw there I could never remember.

I record this because possibly it explains certain mysterious events, if they were events and not dreams, which shortly I must set out. I spoke to Bickley about the matter. He put it by lightly, saying that it was only a result of my long and most severe illness and that I should steady down in time, especially if we could escape from that island and its unnatural atmosphere. Yet as he spoke he glanced at me shrewdly with his quick eyes, and when he turned to go away I heard him mutter something to himself about "unholy influences" and "that confounded old Oro."

The words were spoken to himself and quite beneath his breath, and of

course not meant to reach me. But one of the curious concomitants of my state was that all my senses, and especially my hearing, had become most abnormally acute. A whisper far away was now to me like a loud remark made in a room.

Bickley's reflection, for I can scarcely call it more, set me thinking.

Yva had said that Oro sent me medicine which was administered to me without Bickley's knowledge, and as she believed, saved my life, or certainly my reason. What was in it? I wondered. Then there was that Life-water which Yva brought and insisted upon my drinking every day. Undoubtedly it was a marvelous tonic and did me good. But it had other effects also. Thus, as she said would be the case, after a course of it I conceived the greatest dislike, which I may add has never entirely left me, of any form of meat, also of alcohol. All I seemed to want was this water with fruit, or such native vegetables as there were. Bickley disapproved and made me eat fish occasionally, but even this revolted me, and since I gained steadily in weight, as we found out by a simple contrivance, and remained healthy in every other way, soon he allowed me to choose my own diet.

About this time Oro began to pay me frequent visits. He always came at night, and what is more I knew when he was coming, although he never gave me warning. Here I should explain that during my illness Bastin, who was so ingenious in such matters, had built another hut in which he and Bickley slept, of course when they were not watching me, leaving our old bed-chamber to myself.

Well, I would wake up and be aware that Oro was coming. Then he appeared in a silent and mysterious way, as though he had materialised in the room, for I never saw him pass the doorway. In the moonlight, or the starlight, which flowed through the entrance and the side of the hut that was only enclosed with latticework, I perceived him seat himself upon a certain stool, looking like a most majestic ghost with his flowing robes, long white beard, hooked nose and hawk eyes. In the day-time he much resembled the late General Booth whom I had often seen, except for certain added qualities of height and classic beauty of countenance. At night, however, he resembled no one but himself, indeed there was something mighty and godlike in his appearance, something that made one feel that he was not as are other men.

For a while he would sit and look at me. Then he began to speak in a low, vibrant voice. What did he speak of? Well, many matters. It was as though he were unburdening that hoary soul of his because it could no longer endure the grandeur of its own loneliness. Amongst sundry secret things, he told me of the past history of this world of ours, and of the mighty civilisations which for uncounted ages he and his forefathers had ruled by the strength of their will and knowledge, of the dwindling of their race and of the final destruction of its enemies, although I noticed that now he no longer said that this was his work alone. One night I asked him if he did not miss all such pomp and power.

Then suddenly he broke out, and for the first time I really learned what

ambition can be when it utterly possesses the soul of man.

"Are you mad," he asked, "that you suppose that I, Oro, the King of kings, can be content to dwell solitary in a great cave with none but the shadows of the dead to serve me? Nay, I must rule again and be even greater than before, or else I too will die. Better to face the future, even if it means oblivion, than to remain thus a relic of a glorious past, still living and yet dead, like that statue of the great god Fate which you saw in the temple of my worship."

"Bastin does not think that the future means oblivion," I remarked.

"I know it. I have studied his faith and find it too humble for my taste, also too new. Shall I, Oro, creep a suppliant before any Power, and confess what Bastin is pleased to call my sins? Nay, I who am great will be the equal of all greatness, or nothing."

He paused a while, then went on:

"Bastin speaks of 'eternity.' Where and what then is this eternity which if it has no end can have had no beginning? I know the secret of the suns and their attendant worlds, and they are no more eternal than the insect which glitters for an hour. Out of shapeless, rushing gases they gathered to live their day, and into gases at last they dissolve again with all they bore."

"Yes," I answered, "but they reform into new worlds."

"That have no part with the old. This world, too, will melt, departing to whence it came, as your sacred writings say, and what then of those who dwelt and dwell thereon? No, Man of today, give me Time in which I rule and keep your dreams of an Eternity that is not, and in which you must still crawl and serve, even if it were. Yet, if I might, I confess it, I would live on for ever, but as Master not as Slave."

On another night he began to tempt me, very subtly. "I see a spark of greatness in you, Humphrey," he said, "and it comes into my heart that you, too, might learn to rule. With Yva, the last of my blood, it is otherwise. She is the child of my age and of a race outworn; too gentle, too much all womanly. The soul that triumphs must shine like steel in the sun, and cut if need be; not merely be beautiful and shed perfume like a lily in the shade. Yet she is very wise and fair," here he looked at me, "perchance of her might come children such as were their forefathers, who again would wield the sceptre of the dominion of the earth."

I made no answer, wondering what he meant exactly and thinking it wisest to be silent.

"You are of the short-lived races," he went on, "yet very much a man, not without intelligence, and by the arts I have I can so strengthen

your frame that it will endure the shocks of time for three such lives as yours, or perchance for more, and then--"

Again he paused and went on:

"The Daughter of kings likes you also, perhaps because you resemble--" here he fixed me with his piercing eyes, "a certain kinglet of base blood whom once she also liked, but whom it was my duty to destroy. Well, I must think. I must study this world of yours also and therein you may help me. Perhaps afterwards I will tell you how. Now sleep."

In another moment he was gone, but notwithstanding his powerful command,

for a while I could not sleep. I understood that he was offering Yva to me, but upon what terms? That was the question. With her was to go great dominion over the kingdoms of the earth. I could not help remembering that always this has been and still is Satan's favourite bait. To me it did not particularly appeal. I had been ambitious in my time--who is not that is worth his salt? I could have wished to excel in something, literature or art, or whatever it might be, and thus to ensure the memory of my name in the world.

Of course this is a most futile desire, seeing that soon or late every name must fade out of the world like an unfixd photograph which is exposed to the sun. Even if it could endure, as the old demigod, or demidevil, Oro, had pointed out, very shortly, by comparison with Time's

unmeasured vastness, the whole solar system will also fade. So of what use is this feeble love of fame and this vain attempt to be remembered that animates us so strongly? Moreover, the idea of enjoying mere temporal as opposed to intellectual power, appealed to me not at all. I am a student of history and I know what has been the lot of kings and the evil that, often enough, they work in their little day.

Also if I needed any further example, there was that of Oro himself. He had outlived the greatness of his House, as a royal family is called, and after some gigantic murder, if his own story was to be believed, indulged in a prolonged sleep. Now he awoke to find himself quite alone in the world, save for a daughter with whom he did not agree or sympathise. In short, he was but a kind of animated mummy inspired by one idea which I felt quite sure would be disappointed, namely, to renew his former greatness. To me he seemed as miserable a figure as one could imagine, brooding and plotting in his illuminated cave, at the end of an extended but misspent life.

Also I wondered what he, or rather his ego, had been doing during all those two hundred and fifty thousand years of sleep. Possibly if Yva's theory, as I understood it, were correct, he had reincarnated as Attila, or Tamerlane, or Napoleon, or even as Chaka the terrible Zulu king. At any rate there he was still in the world, filled with the dread of death, but consumed now as ever by his insatiable and most useless finite ambitions.

Yva, also! Her case was his, but yet how different. In all this long night of Time she had but ripened into one of the sweetest and most gentle women that ever the world bore. She, too, was great in her way, it appeared in her every word and gesture, but where was the ferocity of her father? Where his desire to reach to splendour by treading on a blood-stained road paved with broken human hearts? It did not exist. Her nature was different although her body came of a long line of these power-loving kings. Why this profound difference of the spirit? Like everything else it was a mystery. The two were as far apart as the Poles. Everyone must have hated Oro, from the beginning, however much he feared him, but everyone who came in touch with her must have loved Yva.

Here I may break into my personal narrative to say that this, by their own confession, proved to be true of two such various persons as Bastin and Bickley.

"The truth, which I am sure it would be wrong to hide from you, Arbuthnot," said the former to me one day, "is that during your long illness I fell in love, I suppose that is the right word, with the Glittering Lady. After thinking the matter over also, I conceived that it would be proper to tell her so if only to clear the air and prevent future misunderstandings. As I remarked to her on that occasion, I had hesitated long, as I was not certain how she would fill the place of the wife of the incumbent of an English parish."

"Mothers' Meetings, and the rest," I suggested.

"Exactly so, Arbuthnot. Also there were the views of the Bishop to be considered, who might have objected to the introduction into the diocese of a striking person who so recently had been a heathen, and to one in such strong contrast to my late beloved wife."

"I suppose you didn't consider the late Mrs. Bastin's views on the subject of re-marriage. I remember that they were strong," I remarked rather maliciously.

"No, I did not think it necessary, since the Scriptural instructions on the matter are very clear, and in another world no doubt all jealousies, even Sarah's, will be obliterated. Upon that point my conscience was quite easy. So when I found that, unlike her parent, the Lady Yva was much inclined to accept the principles of the faith in which it is my privilege to instruct her, I thought it proper to say to her that if ultimately she made up her mind to do so--of course this was a sine qua non--I should be much honoured, and as a man, not as a priest, it would make me most happy if she would take me as a husband. Of course I explained to her that I considered, under the circumstances, I could quite lawfully perform the marriage ceremony myself with you and Bickley as witnesses, even should Oro refuse to give her away. Also I told her that although after her varied experiences in the past, life at Fulcombe, if we could ever get there, might be a little monotonous, still it would not be entirely devoid of interest."

"You mean Christmas decorations and that sort of thing?"

"Yes, and choir treats and entertaining Deputations and attending other Church activities."

"Well, and what did she say, Bastin?"

"Oh! she was most kind and flattering. Indeed that hour will always remain the pleasantest of my life. I don't know how it happened, but when it was over I felt quite delighted that she had refused me. Indeed on second thoughts, I am not certain but that I shall be much happier in the capacities of a brother and teacher which she asked me to fill, than I should have been as her husband. To tell you the truth, Arbuthnot, there are moments when I am not sure whether I entirely understand the Lady Yva. It was rather like proposing to one's guardian angel."

"Yes," I said, "that's about it, old fellow. 'Guardian Angel' is not a bad name for her."

Afterwards I received the confidence of Bickley.

"Look here, Arbuthnot," he said. "I want to own up to something. I think I ought to, because of certain things I have observed, in order to prevent possible future misunderstandings."

"What's that?" I asked innocently.

"Only this. As you know, I have always been a confirmed bachelor on principle. Women introduce too many complications into life, and although it involves some sacrifice, on the whole, I have thought it best to do without them and leave the carrying on of the world to others."

"Well, what of it? Your views are not singular, Bickley."

"Only this. While you were ill the sweetness of that Lady Yva and her wonderful qualities as a nurse overcame me. I went to pieces all of a sudden. I saw in her a realisation of every ideal I had ever entertained of perfect womanhood. So to speak, my resolves of a lifetime melted like wax in the sun. Notwithstanding her queer history and the marvels with which she is mixed up, I wished to marry her. No doubt her physical loveliness was at the bottom of it, but, however that may be, there it was."

"She is beautiful," I commented; "though I daresay older than she looks."

"That is a point on which I made no inquiries, and I should advise you, when your turn comes, as no doubt it will, to follow my example. You know, Arbuthnot," he mused, "however lovely a woman may be, it would put one off if suddenly she announced that she was--let us say--a hundred

and fifty years old."

"Yes," I admitted, "for nobody wants to marry the contemporary of his great-grandmother. However, she gave her age as twenty-seven years and three moons."

"And doubtless for once did not tell the truth. But, as she does not look more than twenty-five, I think that we may all agree to let it stand at that, namely, twenty-seven, plus an indefinite period of sleep. At any rate, she is a sweet and most gracious woman, apparently in the bloom of youth, and, to cut it short, I fell in love with her."

"Like Bastin," I said.

"Bastin!" exclaimed Bickley indignantly. "You don't mean to say that clerical oaf presumed--well, well, after all, I suppose that he is a man, so one mustn't be hard on him. But who could have thought that he would run so cunning, even when he knew my sentiments towards the lady? I hope she told him her mind."

"The point is, what did she tell you, Bickley?"

"Me? Oh, she was perfectly charming! It really was a pleasure to be refused by her, she puts one so thoroughly at one's ease." (Here, remembering Bastin and his story, I turned away my face to hide a smile.) "She said--what did she say exactly? Such a lot that it is

difficult to remember. Oh! that she was not thinking of marriage. Also, that she had not yet recovered from some recent love affair which left her heart sore, since the time of her sleep did not count. Also, that her father would never consent, and that the mere idea of such a thing would excite his animosity against all of us."

"Is that all?" I asked.

"Not quite. She added that she felt wonderfully flattered and extremely honoured by what I had been so good as to say to her. She hoped, however, that I should never repeat it or even allude to the matter again, as her dearest wish was to be able to look upon me as her most intimate friend to whom she could always come for sympathy and counsel."

"What happened then?"

"Nothing, of course, except that I promised everything that she wished, and mean to stick to it, too. Naturally, I was very sore and upset, but I am getting over it, having always practised self-control."

"I am sorry for you, old fellow."

"Are you?" he asked suspiciously. "Then perhaps you have tried your luck, too?"

"No, Bickley."

His face fell a little at this denial, and he answered:

"Well, it would have been scarcely decent if you had, seeing how lately you were married. But then, so was that artful Bastin. Perhaps you will get over it--recent marriage, I mean--as he has." He hesitated a while, then went on: "Of course you will, old fellow; I know it, and, what is more, I seem to know that when your turn comes you will get a different answer. If so, it will keep her in the family as it were--and good luck to you. Only--"

"Only what?" I asked anxiously.

"To be honest, Arbuthnot, I don't think that there will be real good luck for any one of us over this woman--not in the ordinary sense, I mean. The whole business is too strange and superhuman. Is she quite a woman, and could she really marry a man as others do?"

"It is curious that you should talk like that," I said uneasily. "I thought that you had made up your mind that the whole business was either illusion or trickery--I mean, the odd side of it."

"If it is illusion, Arbuthnot, then a man cannot marry an illusion. And if it is trickery, then he will certainly be tricked. But, supposing that I am wrong, what then?"

"You mean, supposing things are as they seem to be?"

"Yes. In that event, Arbuthnot, I am sure that something will occur to prevent your being united to a woman who lived thousands of years ago. I am sorry to say it, but Fate will intervene. Remember, it is the god of her people that I suppose she worships, and, I may add, to which the whole world bows."

At his words a kind of chill fell upon me. I think he saw or divined it, for after a few remarks upon some indifferent matter, he turned and went away.

Shortly after this Yva came to sit with me. She studied me for a while and I studied her. I had reason to do so, for I observed that of late her dress had become much more modern, and on the present occasion this struck me forcibly. I do not know exactly in what the change, or changes, consisted, because I am not skilled in such matters and can only judge of a woman's garments by their general effect. At any rate, the gorgeous sweeping robes were gone, and though her attire still looked foreign and somewhat oriental, with a touch of barbaric splendour about it--it was simpler than it had been and showed more of her figure, which was delicate, yet gracious.

"You have changed your robes, Lady," I said. "Yes, Humphrey. Bastin gave me pictures of those your women wear." (On further investigation I found that this referred to an old copy of the Queen newspaper, which, somehow

or other, had been brought with the books from the ship.) "I have tried to copy them a little," she added doubtfully.

"How do you do it? Where do you get the material?" I asked.

"Oh!" she answered with an airy wave of her hand, "I make it--it is there."

"I don't understand," I said, but she only smiled radiantly, offering no further explanation. Then, before I could pursue the subject, she asked me suddenly:

"What has Bickley been saying to you about me?" I fenced, answering: "I don't know. Bastin and Bickley talk of little else. You seem to have been a great deal with them while I was ill."

"Yes, a great deal. They are the nearest to you who were so sick. Is it not so?"

"I don't know," I answered again. "In my illness it seemed to me that you were the nearest."

"About Bastin's words I can guess," she went on. "But I ask again--what has Bickley been saying to you about me? Of the first part, let it be; tell me the rest."

I intended to evade her question, but she fixed those violet, compelling eyes upon me and I was obliged to answer.

"I believe you know as well as I do," I said; "but if you will have it, it was that you are not as other human women are, and that he who would treat you as such, must suffer; that was the gist of it."

"Some might be content to suffer for such as I," she answered with quiet sweetness. "Even Bastin and Bickley may be content to suffer in their own little ways."

"You know that is not what I meant," I interrupted angrily, for I felt that she was throwing reflections on me.

"No; you meant that you agreed with Bickley that I am not quite a woman, as you know women."

I was silent, for her words were true.

Then she blazed out into one of her flashes of splendour, like something that takes fire on an instant; like the faint and distant star which flames into sudden glory before the watcher's telescope.

"It is true that I am not as your women are--your poor, pale women, the shadows of an hour with night behind them and before. Because I am humble and patient, do you therefore suppose that I am not great? Man

from the little country across the sea, I lived when the world was young, and gathered up the ancient wisdom of a greater race than yours, and when the world is old I think that I still shall live, though not in this shape or here, with all that wisdom's essence burning in my breast, and with all beauty in my eyes. Bickley does not believe although he worships. You only half believe and do not worship, because memory holds you back, and I myself do not understand. I only know though knowing so much, still I seek roads to learning, even the humble road called Bastin, that yet may lead my feet to the gate of an immortal city."

"Nor do I understand how all this can be, Yva," I said feebly, for she dazzled and overwhelmed me with her blaze of power.

"No, you do not understand. How can you, when even I cannot? Thus for two hundred and fifty thousand years I slept, and they went by as a lightning flash. One moment my father gave me the draught and I laid me down, the next I awoke with you bending over me, or so it seemed. Yet where was I through all those centuries when for me time had ceased? Tell me, Humphrey, did you dream at all while you were ill? I ask because down in that lonely cavern where I sleep a strange dream came to me one night. It was of a journey which, as I thought, you and I seemed to make together, past suns and universes to a very distant earth. It meant nothing, Humphrey. If you and I chanced to have dreamed the same thing, it was only because my dream travelled to you. It is most common, or used to be. Humphrey, Bickley is quite right, I am not altogether as your women are, and I can bring no happiness to any man, or at the

least, to one who cannot wait. Therefore, perhaps you would do well to think less of me, as I have counselled Bastin and Bickley."

Then again she gazed at me with her wonderful, great eyes, and, shaking her glittering head a little, smiled and went.

But oh! that smile drew my heart after her.