

## Chapter XXII. The Command

I think that both Bastin and Bickley, by instinct as it were, knew what had passed between Yva and myself and that she had promised herself to me. They showed this by the way in which they avoided any mention of her name. Also they began to talk of their own plans for the future as matters in which I had no part. Thus I heard them discussing the possibility of escape from the island whereof suddenly they seemed to have grown weary, and whether by any means two men (two, not three) could manage to sail and steer the lifeboat that remained upon the wreck. In short, as in all such cases, the woman had come between; also the pressure of a common loss caused them to forget their differences and to draw closer together. I who had succeeded where they both had failed, was, they seemed to think, out of their lives, so much that our ancient intimacy had ended.

This attitude hurt me, perhaps because in many respects the situation was awkward. They had, it is true, taken their failures extremely well, still the fact remained that both of them had fallen in love with the wonderful creature, woman and yet more than woman, who had bound herself to me. How then could we go on living together, I in prospective possession of the object that all had desired, and they without the pale?

Moreover, they were jealous in another and quite a different fashion

because they both loved me in their own ways and were convinced that I who had hitherto loved them, henceforward should have no affection left to spare, since surely this Glittering Lady, this marvel of wisdom and physical perfections would take it all. Of course they were in error, since even if I could have been so base and selfish, this was no conduct that Yva would have wished or even suffered. Still that was their thought.

Mastering the situation I reflected a little while and then spoke straight out to them.

"My friends," I said, "as I see that you have guessed, Yva and I are affianced to each other and love each other perfectly."

"Yes, Arbuthnot," said Bastin, "we saw that in your face, and in hers as she bade us good night before she went into the cave, and we congratulate you and wish you every happiness."

"We wish you every happiness, old fellow," chimed in Bickley. He paused a while, then added, "But to be honest, I am not sure that I congratulate you."

"Why not, Bickley?"

"Not for the reason that you may suspect, Arbuthnot, I mean not because you have won where we have lost, as it was only to be expected that you

would do, but on account of something totally different. I told you a while ago and repetition is useless and painful. I need only add therefore that since then my conviction has strengthened and I am sure, sorry as I am to say it, that in this matter you must prepare for disappointment and calamity. That woman, if woman she really is, will never be the wife of mortal man. Now be angry with me if you like, or laugh as you have the right to do, seeing that like Bastin and yourself, I also asked her to marry me, but something makes me speak what I believe to be the truth."

"Like Cassandra," I suggested.

"Yes, like Cassandra who was not a popular person." At first I was inclined to resent Bickley's words--who would not have been in the circumstances? Then of a sudden there rushed in upon my mind the conviction that he spoke the truth. In this world Yva was not for me or any man. Moreover she knew it, the knowledge peeped out of every word she spoke in our passionate love scene by the lake. She was aware, and subconsciously I was aware, that we were plighting our troth, not for time but for eternity. With time we had little left to do; not for long would she wear the ring I gave her on that holy night.

Even Bastin, whose perceptions normally were not acute, felt that the situation was strained and awkward and broke in with a curious air of forced satisfaction:

"It's uncommonly lucky for you, old boy, that you happen to have a clergyman in your party, as I shall be able to marry you in a respectable fashion. Of course I can't say that the Glittering Lady is as yet absolutely converted to our faith, but I am certain that she has absorbed enough of its principles to justify me in uniting her in Christian wedlock."

"Yes," I answered, "she has absorbed its principles; she told me as much herself. Sacrifice, for instance," and as I spoke the word my eyes filled with tears.

"Sacrifice!" broke in Bickley with an angry snort, for he needed a vent to his mental disturbance. "Rubbish. Why should every religion demand sacrifice as savages do? By it alone they stand condemned."

"Because as I think, sacrifice is the law of life, at least of all life that is worth the living," I answered sadly enough. "Anyhow I believe you are right, Bickley, and that Bastin will not be troubled to marry us."

"You don't mean," broke in Bastin with a horrified air, "that you propose to dispense--"

"No, Bastin, I don't mean that. What I mean is that it comes upon me that something will prevent this marriage. Sacrifice, perhaps, though in what shape I do not know. And now good night. I am tired."

That night in the chill dead hour before the dawn Oro came again. I woke up to see him seated by my bed, majestic, and, as it seemed to me, lambent, though this may have been my imagination.

"You take strange liberties with my daughter, Barbarian, or she takes strange liberties with you, it does not matter which," he said, regarding me with his calm and terrible eyes.

"Why do you presume to call me Barbarian?" I asked, avoiding the main issue.

"For this reason, Humphrey. All men are the same. They have the same organs, the same instincts, the same desires, which in essence are but two, food and rebirth that Nature commands; though it is true that millions of years before I was born, as I have learned from the records of the Sons of Wisdom, it was said that they were half ape. Yet being the same there is between them a whole sea of difference, since some have knowledge and others none, or little. Those who have none or little, among whom you must be numbered, are Barbarians. Those who have much, among whom my daughter and I are the sole survivors, are the Instructed."

"There are nearly two thousand millions of living people in this world," I said, "and you name all of them Barbarians?"

"All, Humphrey, excepting, of course, myself and my daughter who are not known to be alive. You think that you have learned much, whereas in truth you are most ignorant. The commonest of the outer nations, when I destroyed them, knew more than your wisest know today."

"You are mistaken, Oro; since then we have learned something of the soul."

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "that interests me and perhaps it is true. Also, if true it is very important, as I have told you before--or was it Bastin? If a man has a soul, he lives, whereas even we Sons of Wisdom die, and in Death what is the use of Wisdom? Because you can believe, you have souls and are therefore, perhaps, heirs to life, foolish and ignorant as you are today. Therefore I admit you and Bastin to be my equals, though Bickley, who like myself believes nothing, is but a common chemist and doctor of disease."

"Then you bow to Faith, Oro?"

"Yes, and I think that my god Fate also bows to Faith. Perhaps, indeed, Faith shapes Fate, not Fate, Faith. But whence comes that faith which even I with all my learning cannot command? Why is it denied to me and given to you and Bastin?"

"Because as Bastin would tell you, it is a gift, though one that is

never granted to the proud and self-sufficient. Become humble as a child, Oro, and perchance you too may acquire faith."

"And how shall I become humble?"

"By putting away all dreams of power and its exercise, if such you have, and in repentance walking quietly to the Gates of Death," I replied.

"For you, Humphrey, who have little or none of these things, that may be easy. But for me who have much, if not all, it is otherwise. You ask me to abandon the certain for the uncertain, the known for the unknown, and from a half-god communing with the stars, to become an earthworm crawling in mud and lifting blind eyes towards the darkness of everlasting night."

"A god who must die is no god, half or whole, Oro; the earthworm that lives on is greater than he."

"Mayhap. Yet while I endure I will be as a god, so that when night comes, if come it must, I shall have played my part and left my mark upon this little world of ours. Have done!" he added with a burst of impatience. "What will you of my daughter?"

"What man has always willed of woman--herself, body and soul."

"Her soul perchance is yours, if she has one, but her body is mine to

give or withhold. Yet it can be bought at a price," he added slowly.

"So she told me, Oro."

"I can guess what she told you. Did I not watch you yonder by the lake when you gave her a ring graven with the signs of Life and Everlastingness? The question is, will you pay the price?"

"Not so; the question is--what is the price?"

"This; to enter my service and henceforth do my will--without debate or cavil."

"For what reward, Oro?"

"Yva and the dominion of the earth while you shall live, neither more nor less."

"And what is your will?"

"That you shall learn in due course. On the second night from this I command the three of you to wait upon me at sundown in the buried halls of Nyo. Till then you see no more of Yva, for I do not trust her. She, too, has powers, though as yet she does not use them, and perchance she would forget her oaths, and following some new star of love, for a little while vanish with you out of my reach. Be in the sepulchre at the



hour of sundown on the second day from this, all three of you, if you would continue to live upon the earth. Afterwards you shall learn my will and make your choice between Yva with majesty and her loss with death."

Then suddenly he was gone.

Next morning I told the others what had passed, and we talked the matter over. The trouble was, of course, that Bickley did not believe me. He had no faith in my alleged interviews with Oro, which he set down to delusions of a semi-mesmeric character. This was not strange, since it appeared that on the previous night he had watched the door of my sleeping-place until dawn broke, which it did long after Oro had departed, and he had not seen him either come or go, although the moon was shining brightly.

When he told me this I could only answer that all the same he had been there as, if he could speak, Tommy would have been able to certify. As it chanced the dog was sleeping with me and at the first sound of the approach of someone, woke up and growled. Then recognising Oro, he went to him, wagged his tail and curled himself up at his feet.

Bastin believed my story readily enough, saying that Oro was a peculiar person who no doubt had ways of coming and going which we did not understand. His point was, however, that he did not in the least wish to

visit Nyo any more. The wonders of its underground palaces and temples had no charms for him. Also he did not think he could do any good by going, since after "sucking him as dry as an orange" with reference to religious matters "that old vampire-bat Oro had just thrown him away like the rind," and, he might add, "seemed no better for the juice he had absorbed."

"I doubt," continued Bastin, "whether St. Paul himself could have converted Oro, even if he performed miracles before him. What is the use of showing miracles to a man who could always work a bigger one himself?"

In short, Bastin's one idea, and Bickley's also for the matter of that, was to get away to the main island and thence escape by means of the boat, or in some other fashion.

I pointed out that Oro had said we must obey at the peril of our lives; indeed that he had put it even more strongly, using words to the effect that if we did not he would kill us.

"I'd take the risk," said Bickley, "since I believe that you dreamt it all, Arbuthnot. However, putting that aside, there is a natural reason why you should wish to go, and for my own part, so do I in a way. I want to see what that old fellow has up his extremely long sleeve, if there is anything there at all."

"Well, if you ask me, Bickley," I answered, "I believe it is the destruction of half the earth, or some little matter of that sort."

At this suggestion Bickley only snorted, but Bastin said cheerfully:

"I dare say. He is bad enough even for that. But as I am quite convinced that it will never be allowed, his intentions do not trouble me."

I remarked that he seemed to have carried them out once before.

"Oh! you mean the Deluge. Well, no doubt there was a deluge, but I am sure that Oro had no more to do with it than you or I, as I think I have said already. Anyhow it is impossible to leave you to descend into that hole alone. I suggest, therefore, that we should go into the sepulchre at the time which you believe Oro appointed, and see what happens. If you are not mistaken, the Glittering Lady will come there to fetch us, since it is quite certain that we cannot work the lift or whatever it is, alone. If you are mistaken we can just go back to bed as usual."

"Yes, that's the best plan," said Bickley, shortly, after which the conversation came to an end.

All that day and the next I watched and waited in vain for the coming of Yva, but no Yva appeared. I even went as far as the sepulchre, but it was as empty as were the two crystal coffins, and after waiting a while I returned. Although I did not say so to Bickley, to me it was evident

that Oro, as he had said, was determined to cut off all communication between us.

The second day drew to its close. Our simple preparations were complete. They consisted mainly in making ready our hurricane lamps and packing up a little food, enough to keep us for three or four days if necessary, together with some matches and a good supply of oil, since, as Bastin put it, he was determined not to be caught like the foolish virgins in the parable.

"You see," he added, "one never knows when it might please that old wretch to turn off the incandescent gas or electric light, or whatever it is he uses to illumine his family catacombs, and then it would be awkward if we had no oil."

"For the matter of that he might steal our lamps," suggested Bickley, "in which case we should be where Moses was when the light went out."

"I have considered that possibility," answered Bastin, "and therefore, although it is a dangerous weapon to carry loaded, I am determined to take my revolver. If necessary I shall consider myself quite justified in shooting him to save our lives and those of thousands of others."

At this we both laughed; somehow the idea of Bastin trying to shoot Oro struck us as intensely ludicrous. Yet that very thing was to happen.

It was a peculiarly beautiful sunset over the southern seas. To the west the great flaming orb sank into the ocean, to the east appeared the silver circle of the full moon. To my excited fancy they were like scales hanging from the hand of a materialised spirit of calm. Over the volcano and the lake, over the island with its palm trees, over the seas beyond, this calm brooded. Save for a few travelling birds the sky was empty; no cloud disturbed its peace; the world seemed steeped in innocence and quiet.

All these things struck me, as I think they did the others, because by the action of some simultaneous thought it came to our minds that very probably we were looking on them for the last time. It is all very well to talk of the Unknown and the Infinite whereof we are assured we are the heirs, but that does not make it any easier for us to part with the Known and the Finite. The contemplation of the wonders of Eternity does not conceal the advantages of actual and existent Time. In short there is no one of us, from a sainted archbishop down to a sinful suicide, who does not regret the necessity of farewell to the pleasant light and the kindly race of men wherewith we are acquainted.

For after all, who can be quite certain of the Beyond? It may be splendid, but it will probably be strange, and from strangeness, after a certain age, we shrink. We know that all things will be different there; that our human relationships will be utterly changed, that perhaps sex which shapes so many of them, will vanish to be replaced by something

unknown, that ambitions will lose their hold of us, and that, at the best, the mere loss of hopes and fears will leave us empty. So at least we think, who seek not variation but continuance, since the spirit must differ from the body and that thought alarms our intelligence.

At least some of us think so; others, like Bickley, write down the future as a black and endless night, which after all has its consolations since, as has been wisely suggested, perhaps oblivion is better than any memories. Others again, like Bastin, would say of it with the Frenchman, *plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose*. Yet others, like Oro, consider it as a realm of possibilities, probably unpleasant and perhaps non-existent; just this and nothing more. Only one thing is certain, that no creature which has life desires to leap into the fire and from the dross of doubts, to resolve the gold--or the lead--of certainty.

"It is time to be going," said Bastin. "In these skies the sun seems to tumble down, not to set decently as it does in England, and if we wait any longer we shall be late for our appointment in the sepulchre. I am sorry because although I don't often notice scenery, everything looks rather beautiful this evening. That star, for instance, I think it is called Venus."

"And therefore one that Arbuthnot should admire," broke in Bickley, attempting to lighten matters with a joke. "But come on and let us be rid of this fool's errand. Certainly the world is a lovely place after

all, and for my part I hope that we haven't seen the last of it," he added with a sigh.

"So do I," said Bastin, "though of course, Faith teaches us that there are much better ones beyond. It is no use bothering about what they are like, but I hope that the road to them doesn't run through the hole that the old reprobate, Oro, calls Nyo."

A few minutes later we started, each of us carrying his share of the impedimenta. I think that Tommy was the only really cheerful member of the party, for he skipped about and barked, running backwards and forwards into the mouth of the cave, as though to hurry our movements.

"Really," said Bastin, "it is quite unholy to see an animal going on in that way when it knows that it is about to descend into the bowels of the earth. I suppose it must like them."

"Oh! no," commented Bickley, "it only likes what is in them--like Arbuthnot. Since that little beast came in contact with the Lady Yva, it has never been happy out of her company."

"I think that is so," said Bastin. "At any rate I have noticed that it has been moping for the last two days, as it always does when she is not present. It even seems to like Oro who gives me the creeps, perhaps because he is her father. Dogs must be very charitable animals."

By now we were in the cave marching past the wrecks of the half-buried flying-machines, which Bickley, as he remarked regretfully, had never found time thoroughly to examine. Indeed, to do so would have needed more digging than we could do without proper instruments, since the machines were big and deeply entombed in dust.

We came to the sepulchre and entered.

"Well," said Bickley, seating himself on the edge of one of the coffins and holding up his lamp to look about him, "this place seems fairly empty. No one is keeping the assignation, Arbuthnot, although the sun is well down."

As he spoke the words Yva stood before us. Whence she came we did not see, for all our backs were turned at the moment of her arrival. But there she was, calm, beautiful, radiating light.