

## Chapter XXIV. The Chariot of the Pit

Oro came and of necessity alone. Yet there was that in his air as he advanced into the temple, which suggested a monarch surrounded by the pomp and panoply of a great court. He marched, his head held high, as though heralds and pursuivants went in front of him, as though nobles surrounded him and guards or regiments followed after him. Let it be admitted that he was a great figure in his gorgeous robes, with his long white beard, his hawk-like features, his tall shape and his glittering eyes, which even at that distance I could see. Indeed once or twice I thought that he glanced out of the corners of them towards the chapel where we were hid. But this I think was fancy. For as Yva said, his thoughts were set elsewhere.

He reached the statue of Fate and stood for a while contemplating it and the suppliant figures on either side, as though he were waiting for his invisible court to arrange itself. Then he doffed his jewelled cap to the effigy, and knelt before it. Yes, Oro the Ancient, the Super-man, the God, as the early peoples of the earth fancied such a being, namely, one full of wrath, revenge, jealousy, caprice and power, knelt in supplication to this image of stone which he believed to be the home of a spirit, thereby showing himself to be after all not so far removed from the savages whose idol Bastin had destroyed. More, in a clear and resonant voice which reached us even across that great space, he put up his prayer. It ran something as follows, for although I did not

understand the language in which he spoke Yva translated it to me in a whisper:

"God of the Sons of Wisdom, God of the whole earth, only God to whom must bow every other Power and Dominion, to thee I, Oro the Great King, make prayer and offer sacrifice. Twenty times ten thousand years and more have gone by since I, Oro, visited this, thy temple and knelt before this, thy living effigy, yet thou, ruler of the world, dost remember the prayer I made and the sacrifice I offered. The prayer was for triumph over my enemies and the sacrifice a promise of the lives of half of those who in that day dwelt upon the earth. Thou heardest the prayer, thou didst bow thy head and accept the sacrifice. Yea, the prayer was granted and the sacrifice was made, and in it were counted the number of my foes.

"Then I slept. Through countless generations I slept on and at my side was the one child of my body that was left to me. What chanced to my spirit and to hers during that sleep, thou knowest alone, but doubtless they went forth to work thy ends.

"At the appointed time which thou didst decree, I awoke again and found in my house strangers from another land. In the company of one of those whose spirit I drew forth, I visited the peoples of the new earth, and found them even baser and more evil than those whom I had known. Therefore, since they cannot be bettered. I purpose to destroy them also, and on their wreck to rebuild a glorious empire, such as was that

of the Sons of Wisdom at its prime.

"A sign! O Fate, ruler of the world, give me a sign that my desire shall be fulfilled."

He paused, stretching out his arms and staring upwards. While he waited I felt the solid rock on which I stood quiver and sway beneath my feet so that Yva and I clung to each other lest we should fall. This chanced also. The shock of the earth tremor, for such without doubt it was, threw down the figures of the ancient man and the lovely woman which knelt as though making prayers to Fate, and shook the marble sword from off its knees. As it fell Oro caught it by the hilt, and, rising, waved it in triumph.

"I thank thee, God of my people from the beginning," he cried. "Thou hast given to me, thy last servant, thine own sword and I will use it well. For these worshippers of thine who have fallen, thou shalt have others, yes, all those who dwell in the new world that is to be. My daughter and the man whom she has chosen to be the father of the kings of the earth, and with him his companions, shall be the first of the hundreds of millions that are to follow, for they shall kiss thy feet or perish. Thou shalt set thy foot upon the necks of all other gods; thou shalt rule and thou alone, and, as of old, Oro be thy minister."

Still holding the sword, he flung himself down as though in an ecstasy, and was silent.

"I read the omen otherwise," whispered Yva. "The worshippers of Fate are overthrown. His sword of power is fallen, but not into the hands that clasped it, and he totters on his throne. A greater God asserts dominion of the world and this Fate is but his instrument."

Oro rose again.

"One prayer more," he cried. "Give me life, long life, that I may execute thy decrees. By word or gesture show me a sign that I shall be satisfied with life, a year for every year that I have lived, or twain!"

He waited, staring about him, but no token came; the idol did not speak or bow its head, as Yva had told me it was wont to do in sign of accepted prayer, how, she knew not. Only I thought I heard the echo of Oro's cries run in a whisper of mockery round the soaring dome.

Once more Oro flung himself upon his knees and began to pray in a veritable agony.

"God of my forefathers, God of my lost people, I will hide naught from thee," he said. "I who fear nothing else, fear death. The priest-fool yonder with his new faith, has spoken blundering words of judgment and damnation which, though I do not believe them, yet stick in my heart like arrows. I will stamp out his faith, and with this ancient sword of thine drive back the new gods into the darkness whence they came. Yet

what if some water of Truth flows through the channel of his leaden lips, and what if because I have ruled and will rule as thou didst decree, therefore, in some dim place of souls, I must bear these burdens of terror and of doom which I have bound upon the backs of others! Nay, it cannot be, for what power is there in all the universe that dares to make a slave of Oro and to afflict him with stripes?

"Yet this can be and mayhap will be, that presently I lose my path in the ways of everlasting darkness, and become strengthless and forgotten as are those who went before me, while my crown of Power shines on younger brows. Alas! I grow old, since aeons of sleep have not renewed my strength. My time is short and yet I would not die as mortals must. Oh! God of my people, whom I have served so well, save me from the death I dread. For I would not die. Give me a sign; give me the ancient, sacred sign!"

So he spoke, lifting his proud and splendid head and watching the statue with wide, expectant eyes.

"Thou dost not answer," he cried again. "Wouldst thou desert me, Fate? Then beware lest I set up some new god against thee and hurl thee from thine immemorial throne. While I live I still have powers, I who am the last of thy worshippers, since it seems that my daughter turns her back on thee. I will get me to the sepulchre of the kings and take counsel with the dust of that wizard who first taught me wisdom. Even from the depths of death he must come to my call clad in a mockery of life, and

comfort me. A little while yet I will wait, and if thou answer not, then Fate, soon I'll tear the sceptre from thy hand, and thou shalt join the company of dead gods." And throwing aside the sword, again Oro laid down his head upon the ground and stretched out his arms in the last abasement of supplication.

"Come," whispered Yva, "while there is yet time. Presently he will seek this place to descend to the sepulchre, and if he learns that we have read his heart and know him for a coward deserted of his outworn god, surely he will blot us out. Come, and be swift and silent."

We crept out of the chapel, Yva leading, and along the circle of the great dome till we reached the gates. Here I glanced back and perceived that Oro, looking unutterably small in that vastness, looking like a dead man, still lay outstretched before the stern-faced, unanswering Effigy which, with all his wisdom, he believed to be living and divine. Perhaps once it was, but if so its star had set for ever, like those of Amon, Jupiter and Baal, and he was its last worshipper.

Now we were safe, but still we sped on till we reached the portico of our sleeping place. Then Yva turned and spoke.

"It is horrible," she said, "and my soul sickens. Oh, I thank the Strength which made it that I have no desire to rule the earth, and, being innocent of death, do not fear to die and cross his threshold."

"Yes, it is horrible," I answered. "Yet all men fear death."

"Not when they have found love, Humphrey, for that I think is his true name, and, with it written on his brow, he stands upon the neck of Fate who is still my father's god."

"Then he is not yours, Yva?"

"Nay. Once it was so, but now I reject him; he is no longer mine. As Oro threatens, and perchance dare do in his rage, I have broken his chain, though in another fashion. Ask me no more; perhaps one day you will learn the path I trod to freedom."

Then before I could speak, she went off:

"Rest now, for within a few hours I must come to lead you and your companions to a terrible place. Yet whatever you may see or hear, be not afraid, Humphrey, for I think that Oro's god has no power over you, strong though he was, and that Oro's plans will fail, while I, who too have knowledge, shall find strength to save the world."

Then of a sudden, once again she grew splendid, almost divine; no more a woman but as it were an angel. Some fire of pure purpose seemed to burn up in her and to shine out of her eyes. Yet she said little. Only this indeed:

"To everyone, I think, there comes the moment of opportunity when choice must be made between what is great and what is small, between self and its desires and the good of other wanderers in the way. This day that moment may draw near to you or me, and if so, surely we shall greet it well. Such is Bastin's lesson, which I have striven to learn."

Then she flung her arms about me and kissed me on the brow as a mother might, and was gone.

Strangely enough, perhaps because of my mental exhaustion, for what I had passed through seemed to overwhelm me so that I could no longer so much as think with clearness, even after all that I have described I slept like a child and awoke refreshed and well.

I looked at my watch to find that it was now eight o'clock in the morning in this horrible place where there was neither morn, nor noon, nor night, but only an eternal brightness that came I knew not whence, and never learned.

I found that I was alone, since Bickley and Bastin had gone to fill our bottles with the Life-water. Presently they returned and we ate a little; with that water to drink one did not need much food. It was a somewhat silent meal, for our circumstances were a check on talk; moreover, I thought that the others looked at me rather oddly. Perhaps they guessed something of my midnight visit to the temple, but if so



they thought it wisest to say nothing. Nor did I enlighten them.

Shortly after we had finished Yva appeared. She was wonderfully quiet and gentle in her manner, calm also, and greeted all of us with much sweetness. Of our experiences during the night she said no word to me, even when we were alone. One difference I noticed about her, however; that she was clothed in garments such as I had never seen her wear before. They were close fitting, save for a flowing cape, and made of some grey material, not unlike a coarse homespun or even asbestos cloth. Still they became her very well, and when I remarked upon them, all she answered was that part of our road would be rough. Even her feet were shod with high buskins of this grey stuff.

Presently she touched Bastin on the shoulder and said that she would speak with him apart. They went together into one of the chambers of that dwelling and there remained for perhaps the half of an hour. It was towards the end of this time that in the intense silence I heard a crash from the direction of the temple, as though something heavy had fallen to the rocky floor. Bickley also heard this sound. When the two reappeared I noticed that though still quite calm, Yva looked radiant, and, if I may say so, even more human and womanly than I had ever seen her, while Bastin also seemed very happy.

"One has strange experiences in life, yes, very strange," he remarked, apparently addressing the air, which left me wondering to what particular experience he might refer. Well, I thought that I could

guess.

"Friends," said Yva, "it is time for us to be going and I am your guide. You will meet the Lord Oro at the end of your journey. I pray you to bring those lamps of yours with you, since all the road is not lightened like this place."

"I should like to ask," said Bickley, "whither we go and for what object, points on which up to the present we have had no definite information."

"We go, friend Bickley, deep into the bowels of the world, far deeper, I think, than any mortal men have gone hitherto, that is, of your race."

"Then we shall perish of heat," said Bickley, "for with every thousand feet the temperature rises many degrees."

"Not so. You will pass through a zone of heat, but so swiftly that if you hold your breath you will not suffer overmuch. Then you will come to a place where a great draught blows which will keep you cool, and thence travel on to the end."

"Yes, but to what end, Lady Yva?"

"That you will see for yourselves, and with it other wondrous things."

Here some new idea seemed to strike her, and after a little hesitation she added:

"Yet why should you go? Oro has commanded it, it is true, but I think that at the last he will forget. It must be decided swiftly. There is yet time. I can place you in safety in the sepulchre of Sleep where you found us. Thence cross to the main island and sail away quickly in your boat out into the great sea, where I believe you will find succour. Know that after disobeying him, you must meet Oro no more lest it should be the worse for you. If that be your will, let us start. What say you?"

She looked at me.

"I say, Yva, that I am willing to go if you come with us. Not otherwise."

"I say," said Bickley, "that I want to see all this supernatural rubbish thoroughly exploded, and that therefore I should prefer to go on with the business."

"And I say," said Bastin, "that my most earnest desire is to be clear of the whole thing, which wearies and perplexes me more than I can tell. Only I am not going to run away, unless you think it desirable to do so too, Lady Yva. I want you to understand that I am not in the least afraid of the Lord Oro, and do not for one moment believe that he will be allowed to bring about disaster to the world, as I understand is

his wicked object. Therefore on the whole I am indifferent and quite prepared to accept any decision at which the rest of you may arrive."

"Be it understood," said Yva with a little smile when Bastin had finished his sermonette, "that I must join my father in the bowels of the earth for a reason which will be made plain afterwards. Therefore, if you go we part, as I think to meet no more. Still my advice is that you should go." [\*]

[ \* It is fortunate that we did not accept Yva's offer. Had we done so we should have found ourselves shut in, and perished, as shall be told.--H. A. ]

To this our only answer was to attend to the lighting of our lamps and the disposal of our small impedimenta, such as our tins of oil and water bottles. Yva noted this and laughed outright.

"Courage did not die with the Sons of Wisdom," she said.

Then we set out, Yva walking ahead of us and Tommy frisking at her side.

Our road led us through the temple. As we passed the great gates I started, for there, in the centre of that glorious building, I perceived a change. The statue of Fate was no more! It lay broken upon the pavement among those fragments of its two worshippers which I had seen

shaken down some hours before.

"What does this mean?" I whispered to Yva. "I have felt no other earthquake."

"I do not know," she answered, "or if I know I may not say. Yet learn that no god can live on without a single worshipper, and, in a fashion, that idol was alive, though this you will not believe."

"How very remarkable," said Bastin, contemplating the ruin. "If I were superstitious, which I am not, I should say that this occurrence was an omen indicating the final fall of a false god. At any rate it is dead now, and I wonder what caused it?"

"I felt an earth tremor last night," said Bickley, "though it is odd that it should only have affected this particular statue. A thousand pities, for it was a wonderful work of art."

Then I remembered and reminded Bickley of the crash which we had heard while Yva and Bastin were absent on some secret business in the chamber.

Walking the length of the great church, if so it could be called, we came to an apse at the head of it where, had it been Christian, the altar would have stood. In this apse was a little open door through which we passed. Beyond it lay a space of rough rock that looked as though it had been partially prepared for the erection of buildings and

then abandoned. All this space was lighted, however, like the rest of the City of Nyo, and in the same mysterious way. Led by Yva, we threaded our path between the rough stones, following a steep downward slope. Thus we walked for perhaps half a mile, till at length we came to the mouth of a huge pit that must, I imagine, have lain quite a thousand feet below the level of the temple.

I looked over the edge of this pit and shrank back terrified. It seemed to be bottomless. Moreover, a great wind rushed up it with a roaring sound like to that of an angry sea. Or rather there were two winds, perhaps draughts would be a better term, if I may apply it to an air movement of so fierce and terrible a nature. One of these rushed up the pit, and one rushed down. Or it may have been that the up rush alternated with the down rush. Really it is impossible to say.

"What is this place?" I asked, clinging to the others and shrinking back in alarm from its sheer edge and bottomless depth, for that this was enormous we could see by the shaft of light which flowed downwards farther than the eye could follow.

"It is a vent up and down which air passes from and to the central hollows of the earth," Yva answered. "Doubtless in the beginning through it travelled that mighty force which blew out these caves in the heated rocks, as the craftsman blows out glass."

"I understand," said Bastin. "Just like one blows out a bubble on a

pipe, only on a larger scale. Well, it is very interesting, but I have seen enough of it. Also I am afraid of being blown away."

"I fear that you must see more," answered Yva with a smile, "since we are about to descend this pit."

"Do you mean that we are to go down that hole, and if so, how? I don't see any lift, or moving staircase, or anything of that sort."

"Easily and safely enough, Bastin. See."

As she spoke a great flat rock of the size of a small room appeared, borne upwards, as I suppose, by the terrific draught which roared past us on its upward course. When it reached the lip of the shaft, it hung a little while, then moved across and began to descend with such incredible swiftness that in a few seconds it had vanished from view.

"Oh!" said Bastin, with his eyes almost starting out of his head, "that's the lift, is it? Well, I tell you at once I don't like the look of the thing. It gives me the creeps. Suppose it tilted."

"It does not tilt," answered Yva, still smiling. "I tell you, Bastin, that there is naught to fear. Only yesterday, I rode this rock and returned unharmed."

"That is all very well, Lady Yva, but you may know how to balance it;

also when to get on and off."

"If you are afraid, Bastin, remain here until your companions return. They, I think, will make the journey."

Bickley and I intimated that we would, though to tell the truth, if less frank we were quite as alarmed as Bastin.

"No, I'll come too. I suppose one may as well die this way as any other, and if anything were to happen to them and I were left alone, it would be worse still."

"Then be prepared," said Yva, "for presently this air-chariot of ours will return. When it appears and hangs upon the edge, step on to it and throw yourselves upon your faces and all will be well. At the foot of the shaft the motion lessens till it almost stops, and it is easy to spring, or even crawl to the firm earth."

Then she stooped down and lifted Tommy who was sniffing suspiciously at the edge of the pit, his long ears blown straight above his head, holding him beneath her left arm and under her cloak, that he might not see and be frightened.

We waited a while in silence, perhaps for five or six minutes, among the most disagreeable, I think, that I ever passed. Then far down in the brightness below appeared a black speck that seemed to grow in size as



it rushed upwards.

"It comes," said Yva. "Prepare and do as I do. Do not spring, or run, lest you should go too far. Step gently on to the rock and to its centre, and there lie down. Trust in me, all of you."

"There's nothing else to do," groaned Bastin.

The great stone appeared and, as before, hung at the edge of the pit. Yva stepped on to it quietly, as she did so, catching hold of my wrist with her disengaged hand. I followed her feeling very sick, and promptly sat down. Then came Bickley with the air of the virtuous hero of a romance walking a pirate's plank, and also sat down. Only Bastin hesitated until the stone began to move away. Then with an ejaculation of "Here goes!" he jumped over the intervening crack of space and landed in the middle of us like a sack of coal. Had I not been seated really I think he would have knocked me off the rock. As it was, with one hand he gripped me by the beard and with the other grasped Yva's robe, of neither of which would he leave go for quite a long time, although we forced him on to his face. The lantern which he held flew from his grasp and descended the shaft on its own account.

"You silly fool!" exclaimed Bickley whose perturbation showed itself in anger. "There goes one of our lamps."

"Hang the lamp!" muttered the prostrate Bastin. "We shan't want it in

Heaven, or the other place either."

Now the stone which had quivered a little beneath the impact of Bastin, steadied itself again and with a slow and majestic movement sailed to the other side of the gulf. There it felt the force of gravity, or perhaps the weight of the returning air pressed on it, which I do not know. At any rate it began to fall, slowly at first, then more swiftly, and afterwards at an incredible pace, so that in a few seconds the mouth of the pit above us grew small and presently vanished quite away. I looked up at Yva who was standing composedly in the midst of our prostrate shapes. She bent down and called in my ear:

"All is well. The heat begins, but it will not endure for long."

I nodded and glanced over the edge of the stone at Bastin's lantern which was sailing alongside of us, till presently we passed it. Bastin had lit it before we started, I think in a moment of aberration, and it burned for quite a long while, showing like a star when the shaft grew darker as it did by degrees, a circumstance that testifies to the excellence of the make, which is one advertised not to go out in any wind. Not that we felt wind, or even draught, perhaps because we were travelling with it.

Then we entered the heat zone. About this there was no doubt, for the perspiration burst out all over me and the burning air scorched my lungs. Also Tommy thrust his head from beneath the cloak with his tongue

hanging out and his mouth wide open.

"Hold your breaths!" cried Yva, and we obeyed until we nearly burst. At least I did, but what happened to the others I do not know.

Fortunately it was soon over and the air began to grow cool again. By now we had travelled an enormous distance, it seemed to be miles on miles, and I noticed that our terrific speed was slackening, also that the shaft grew more narrow, till at length there were only a few feet between the edge of the stone and its walls. The result of this, or so I supposed, was that the compressed air acted as a buffer, lessening our momentum, till at length the huge stone moved but very slowly.

"Be ready to follow me," cried Yva again, and we rose to our feet, that is, Bickley and I did, but poor Bastin was semi-comatose. The stone stopped and Yva sprang from it to a rock platform level with which it lay. We followed, dragging Bastin between us. As we did so something hit me gently on the head. It was Bastin's lamp, which I seized.

"We are safe. Sit down and rest," said Yva, leading us a few paces away.

We obeyed and presently by the dim light saw the stone begin to stir again, this time upwards. In another twenty seconds it was away on its never-ending journey.

"Does it always go on like that?" said Bastin, sitting up and staring

after it.

"Tens of thousands of years ago it was journeying thus, and tens of thousands of years hence it will still be journeying, or so I think," she replied. "Why not, since the strength of the draught never changes and there is nothing to wear it except the air?"

Somehow the vision of this huge stone, first loosed and set in motion by heaven knows what agency, travelling from aeon to aeon up and down that shaft in obedience to some law I did not understand, impressed my imagination like a nightmare. Indeed I often dream of it to this day.

I looked about me. We were in some cavernous place that could be but dimly seen, for here the light that flowed down the shaft from the upper caves where it was mysteriously created, scarcely shone, and often indeed was entirely cut off, when the ever-journeying stone was in the narrowest parts of the passage. I could see, however, that this cavern stretched away both to right and left of us, while I felt that from the left, as we sat facing the shaft, there drew down a strong blast of fresh air which suggested that somewhere, however far away, it must open on to the upper world. For the rest its bottom and walls seemed to be smooth as though they had been planed in the past ages by the action of cosmic forces. Bickley noticed this the first and pointed it out to me. We had little time to observe, however, for presently Yva said:

"If you are rested, friends, I pray you light those lamps of yours,

since we must walk a while in darkness."

We did and started, still travelling downhill. Yva walked ahead with me and Tommy who seemed somewhat depressed and clung close to our heels. The other two followed, arguing strenuously about I know not what. It was their way of working off irritation and alarms.

I asked Yva what was about to happen, for a great fear oppressed me.

"I am not sure, Beloved," she answered in a sweet and gentle voice, "who do not know all Oro's secrets, but as I think, great things. We are now deep in the bowels of the world, and presently, perhaps, you will see some of its mighty forces whereof your ignorant races have no knowledge, doing their everlasting work."

"Then how is it that we can breathe here?" I asked. "Because this road that we are following connects with the upper air or used to do so, since once I followed it. It is a long road and the climb is steep, but at last it leads to the light of the blessed sun, nor are there any pitfalls in the path. Would that we might tread it together, Humphrey," she added with passion, "and be rid of mysteries and the gloom, or that light which is worse than gloom."

"Why not?" I asked eagerly. "Why should we not turn and flee?"

"Who can flee from my father, the Lord Oro?" she replied. "He would

snare us before we had gone a mile. Moreover, if we fled, by tomorrow half the world must perish."

"And how can we save it by not flying, Yva?"

"I do not know, Humphrey, yet I think it will be saved, perchance by sacrifice. That is the keystone of your faith, is it not? Therefore if it is asked of you to save the world, you will not shrink from it, will you, Humphrey?"

"I hope not," I replied, without enthusiasm, I admit. Indeed it struck me that a business of this sort was better fitted to Bastin than to myself, or at any rate to his profession. I think she guessed my thoughts, for by the light of the lamp I saw her smile in her dazzling way. Then after a swift glance behind her, she turned and suddenly kissed me, as she did so calling down everlasting blessings on my head and on my spirit. There was something very wonderful about this benediction of Yva's and it thrilled me through and through, so that to it I could make no answer.

Next moment it was too late to retreat, for our narrowing passage turned and we found ourselves in a wondrous place. I call it wondrous because of it we could see neither the beginning nor the end, nor the roof, nor aught else save the rock on which we walked, and the side or wall that our hands touched. Nor was this because of darkness, since although it was not illuminated like the upper caverns, light of a sort was present.

It was a very strange light, consisting of brilliant and intermittent flashes, or globes of blue and lambent flame which seemed to leap from nowhere into nowhere, or sometimes to hang poised in mid air.

"How odd they are," said the voice of Bastin behind me. "They remind me of those blue sparks which jump up from the wires of the tramways in London on a dark night. You know, don't you, Bickley? I mean when the conductor pulls round that long stick with an iron wheel on the top of it."

"Nobody but you could have thought of such a comparison, Bastin," answered Bickley. "Still, multiplied a thousandfold they are not unlike."

Nor indeed were they, except that each blue flash was as big as the full moon and in one place or another they were so continuous that one could have read a letter by their light. Also the effect of them was ghastly and most unnatural, terrifying, too, since even their brilliance could not reveal the extent of that gigantic hollow in the bowels of the world wherein they leapt to and fro like lightnings, or hung like huge, uncanny lanterns.