

Chapter XXV. Sacrifice

"The air in this place must be charged with some form of electricity, but the odd thing is that it does not seem to harm us," said Bickley in a matter-of-fact fashion as though he were determined not to be astonished.

"To me it looks more like marsh fires or St. Elmo lights, though how these can be where there is no vapour, I do not know," I answered.

As I spoke a particularly large ball of flame fell from above. It resembled a shooting star or a meteor more than anything else that I had ever seen, and made me wonder whether we were not perhaps standing beneath some inky, unseen sky.

Next moment I forgot such speculations, for in its blue light, which made him terrible and ghastly, I perceived Oro standing in front of us clad in a long cloak.

"Dear me!" said Bastin, "he looks just like the devil, doesn't he, and now I come to think of it, this isn't at all a bad imitation of hell."

"How do you know it is an imitation?" asked Bickley.

"Because whatever might be the case with you, Bickley, if it were, the

Lady Yva and I should not be here."

Even then I could not help smiling at this repartee, but the argument went no further for Oro held up his hand and Yva bent the knee in greeting to him.

"So you have come, all of you," he said. "I thought that perhaps there were one or two who would not find courage to ride the flying stone. I am glad that it is not so, since otherwise he who had shown himself a coward should have had no share in the rule of that new world which is to be. Therefore I chose yonder road that it might test you."

"Then if you will be so good as to choose another for us to return by, I shall be much obliged to you, Oro," said Bastin.

"How do you know that if I did it would not be more terrible, Preacher? How do you know indeed that this is not your last journey from which there is no return?"

"Of course I can't be sure of anything, Oro, but I think the question is one which you might more appropriately put to yourself. According to your own showing you are now extremely old and therefore your end is likely to come at any moment. Of course, however, if it did you would have one more journey to make, but it wouldn't be polite for me to say in what direction."

Oro heard, and his splendid, icy face was twisted with sudden rage. Remembering the scene in the temple where he had grovelled before his god, uttering agonised, unanswered prayers for added days, I understood the reason of his wrath. It was so great that I feared lest he should kill Bastin (who only a few hours before, be it remembered, had tried to kill him) then and there, as doubtless he could have done if he wished. Fortunately, if he felt it; the impulse passed.

"Miserable fool!" he said. "I warn you to keep a watch upon your words. Yesterday you would have slain me with your toy. Today you stab me with your ill-omened tongue. Be fearful lest I silence it for ever."

"I am not in the least fearful, Oro, since I am sure that you can't hurt me at all any more than I could hurt you last night because, you see, it wasn't permitted. When the time comes for me to die, I shall go, but you will have nothing to do with that. To tell the truth, I am very sorry for you, as with all your greatness, your soul is of the earth, earthy, also sensual and devilish, as the Apostle said, and, I am afraid, very malignant, and you will have a great deal to answer for shortly. Yours won't be a happy deathbed, Oro, because, you see, you glory in your sins and don't know what repentance means."

I must add that when I heard these words I was filled with the most unbounded admiration for Bastin's fearless courage which enabled him thus to beard this super-tyrant in his den. So indeed were we all, for I read it in Yva's face and heard Bickley mutter:

"Bravo! Splendid! After all there is something in faith!"

Even Oro appreciated it with his intellect, if not with his heart, for he stared at the man and made no answer. In the language of the ring, he was quite "knocked out" and, almost humbly, changed the subject.

"We have yet a little while," he said, "before that happens which I have decreed. Come, Humphrey, that I may show you some of the marvels of this bubble blown in the bowels of the world," and he motioned to us to pick up the lanterns.

Then he led us away from the wall of the cavern, if such it was, for a distance of perhaps six or seven hundred paces. Here suddenly we came to a great groove in the rocky floor, as broad as a very wide roadway, and mayhap four feet in depth. The bottom of this groove was polished and glittered; indeed it gave us the impression of being iron, or other ore which had been welded together beneath the grinding of some immeasurable weight. Just at the spot where we struck the groove, it divided into two, for this reason.

In its centre the floor of iron, or whatever it may have been, rose, the fraction of an inch at first, but afterwards more sharply, and this at a spot where the groove had a somewhat steep downward dip which appeared

to extend onwards I know not how far.

Following along this central rise for a great way, nearly a mile, I should think, we observed that it became ever more pronounced, till at length it ended in a razor-edge cliff which stretched up higher than we could see, even by the light of the electrical discharges. Standing against the edge of this cliff, we perceived that at a distance from it there were now two grooves of about equal width. One of these ran away into the darkness on our right as we faced the sharp edge, and at an ever-widening angle, while the other, at a similar angle, ran into the darkness to the left of the knife of cliff. That was all.

No, there were two more notable things. Neither of the grooves now lay within hundreds of yards of the cliff, perhaps a quarter of a mile, for be it remembered we had followed the rising rock between them. To put it quite clearly, it was exactly as though one line of rails had separated into two lines of rails, as often enough they do, and an observer standing on high ground between could see them both vanishing into tunnels to the right and left, but far apart.

The second notable thing was that the right-hand groove, where first we saw it at the point of separation, was not polished like the left-hand groove, although at some time or other it seemed to have been subjected to the pressure of the same terrific weight which cut its fellow out of the bed of rock or iron, as the sharp wheels of a heavily laden wagon sink ruts into a roadway.

"What does it all mean, Lord Oro?" I asked when he had led us back to the spot where the one groove began to be two grooves, that is, a mile or so away from the razor-edged cliff.

"This, Humphrey," he answered. "That which travels along yonder road, when it reaches this spot on which we stand, follows the left-hand path which is made bright with its passage. Yet, could a giant at that moment of its touching this exact spot on which I lay my hand, thrust it with sufficient strength, it would leave the left-hand road and take the right-hand road."

"And if it did, what then; Lord Oro?"

"Then within an hour or so, when it had travelled far enough upon its way, the balance of the earth would be changed, and great things would happen in the world above, as once they happened in bygone days. Now do you understand, Humphrey?"

"Good Heavens! Yes, I understand now," I answered. "But fortunately there is no such giant."

Oro broke into a mocking laugh and his grey old face lit up with a fiendish exultation, as he cried:

"Fool! I, Oro, am that giant. Once in the dead days I turned the balance of the world from the right-hand road which now is dull with disuse, to

the left-hand road which glitters so brightly to your eyes, and the face of the earth was changed. Now again I will turn it from the left-hand road to the right-hand road in which for millions of years it was wont to run, and once more the face of the earth shall change, and those who are left living upon the earth, or who in the course of ages shall come to live upon the new earth, must bow down to Oro and take him and his seed to be their gods and kings."

When I heard this I was overwhelmed and could not answer. Also I remembered a certain confused picture which Yva had shown to us in the Temple of Nyo. But supported by his disbelief, Bickley asked:

"And how often does the balance of which you speak come this way, Lord Oro?"

"Once only in many years; the number is my secret, Bickley," he replied.

"Then there is every reason to hope that it will not trouble us," remarked Bickley with a suspicion of mockery in his voice.

"Do you think so, you learned Bickley?" asked Oro. "If so, I do not. Unless my skill has failed me and my calculations have gone awry, that Traveller of which I tell should presently be with us. Hearken now! What is that sound we hear?"

As he spoke there reached our ears the first, far-off murmurs of

a dreadful music. I cannot describe it in words because that is impossible, but it was something like to the buzz of a thousand humming-tops such as are loved by children because of their weird song.

"Back to the wall!" cried Oro triumphantly. "The time is short!"

So back we went, Oro pausing a while behind and overtaking us with long, determined strides. Yva led us, gliding at my side and, as I thought, now and again glanced at my face with a look that was half anxious and half pitiful. Also twice she stooped and patted Tommy.

We reached the wall, though not quite at the spot whence we had started to examine the grooved roads. At least I think this was so, since now for the first time I observed a kind of little window in its rocky face. It stood about five feet from its floor level, and was perhaps ten inches square, not more. In short, except for its shape it resembled a ship's porthole rather than a window. Its substance appeared to be talc, or some such material, and inches thick, yet through it, after Oro had cast aside some sort of covering, came a glare like that of a search-light. In fact it was a search-light so far as concerned one of its purposes.

By this window or porthole lay a pile of cloaks, also four objects which looked like Zulu battle shields cut in some unknown metal or material. Very deftly, very quietly, Yva lifted these cloaks and wrapped one of them about each of us, and while she was thus employed I noticed that

they were of a substance very similar to that of the gown she wore, which I have described, but harder. Next she gave one of the metal-like shields to each of us, bidding us hold them in front of our bodies and heads, and only to look through certain slits in them in which were eyepieces that appeared to be of the same horny stuff as the searchlight window. Further, she commanded us to stand in a row with our backs against the rock wall, at certain spots which she indicated with great precision, and whatever we saw or heard on no account to move.

So there we stood, Bickley next to me, and beyond him Bastin. Then Yva took the fourth shield, as I noted a much larger one than ours, and placed herself between me and the search-light or porthole. On the other side of this was Oro who had no shield.

These arrangements took some minutes and during that time occupied all our attention. When they were completed, however, our curiosity and fear began to reassert themselves. I looked about me and perceived that Oro had his right hand upon what seemed to be a rough stone rod, in shape not unlike that with which railway points are moved. He shouted to us to stand still and keep the shields over our faces. Then very gently he pressed upon the lever. The porthole sank the fraction of an inch, and instantly there leapt from it a most terrific blaze of lightning, which shot across the blackness in front and, as lightning does, revealed far, far away another wall, or rather cliff, like that against which we leant.

"All works well," exclaimed Oro in a satisfied voice, lifting his hand from the rod, "and the strength which I have stored will be more than enough."

Meanwhile the humming noise came nearer and grew in volume.

"I say," said Bickley, "as you know, I have been sceptical, but I don't like this business. Oro, what are you going to do?"

"Sink half the world beneath the seas," said Oro, "and raise up that which I drowned more than two thousand centuries ago. But as you do not believe that I have this power, Bickley, why do you ask such questions?"

"I believe that you have it, which was why I tried to shoot you yesterday," said Bastin. "For your soul's sake I beg you to desist from an attempt which I am sure will not succeed, but which will certainly involve your eternal damnation, since the failure will be no fault of yours."

Then I spoke also, saying:

"I implore you, Lord Oro, to let this business be. I do not know exactly how much or how little you can do, but I understand that your object is to slay men by millions in order to raise up another world of which you will be the absolute king, as you were of some past empire that has been destroyed, either through your agency or otherwise. No good can come of

such ambitions. Like Bastin, for your soul's sake I pray you to let them be."

"What Humphrey says I repeat," said Yva. "My Father, although you know it not, you seek great evil, and from these hopes you sow you will harvest nothing save a loss of which you do not dream. Moreover, your plans will fail. Now I who am, like yourself, of the Children of Wisdom, have spoken, for the first and last time, and my words are true. I pray you give them weight, my Father."

Oro heard, and grew furious.

"What!" he said. "Are you against me, every one, and my own daughter also? I would lift you up, I would make you rulers of a new world; I would destroy your vile civilisations which I have studied with my eyes, that I may build better! To you, Humphrey, I would give my only child in marriage that from you may spring a divine race of kings! And yet you are against me and set up your puny scruples as a barrier across my path of wisdom. Well, I tread them down, I go on my appointed way. But beware how you try to hold me back. If any one of you should attempt to come between me and my ends, know that I will destroy you all. Obey or die."

"Well, he has had his chance and he won't take it," said Bastin in the silence that followed. "The man must go to the devil his own way and there is nothing more to be said."

I say the silence, but it was no more silent. The distant humming grew to a roar, the roar to a hellish hurricane of sound which presently drowned all attempts at ordinary speech.

Then bellowing like ten millions of bulls, at length far away there appeared something terrible. I can only describe its appearance as that of an attenuated mountain on fire. When it drew nearer I perceived that it was more like a ballet-dancer whirling round and round upon her toes, or rather all the ballet-dancers in the world rolled into one and then multiplied a million times in size. No, it was like a mushroom with two stalks, one above and one below, or a huge top with a point on which it spun, a swelling belly and another point above. But what a top! It must have been two thousand feet high, if it was an inch, and its circumference who could measure?

On it came, dancing, swaying and spinning at a rate inconceivable, so that it looked like a gigantic wheel of fire. Yet it was not fire that clothed it but rather some phosphorescence, since from it came no heat. Yes, a phosphorescence arranged in bands of ghastly blue and lurid red, with streaks of other colours running up between, and a kind of waving fringe of purple.

The fire-mountain thundered on with a voice like to that of avalanches or of icebergs crashing from their parent glaciers to the sea. Its terrific aspect was appalling, and its weight caused the solid rock to quiver like a leaf. Watching it, we felt as ants might feel at the

advent of the crack of doom, for its mere height and girth and size overwhelmed us. We could not even speak. The last words I heard were from the mouth of Oro who screamed out:

"Behold the balance of the World, you miserable, doubting men, and behold me change its path--turning it as the steersman turns a ship!"

Then he made certain signs to Yva, who in obedience to them approached the porthole or search-light to which she did something that I could not distinguish. The effect was to make the beam of light much stronger and sharper, also to shift it on to the point or foot of the spinning mountain and, by an aiming of the lens from time to time, to keep it there.

This went on for a while, since the dreadful thing did not travel fast notwithstanding the frightful speed of its revolutions. I should doubt indeed if it advanced more quickly than a man could walk; at any rate so it seemed to us. But we had no means of judging its real rate of progress whereof we knew as little as we did of the course it followed in the bowels of the earth. Perhaps that was spiral, from the world's deep heart upwards, and this was the highest point it reached. Or perhaps it remained stationary, but still spinning, for scores or hundreds of years in some central powerhouse of its own, whence, in obedience to unknown laws, from time to time it made these terrific journeys.

No one knows, unless perhaps Oro did, in which case he kept the information to himself, and no one will ever know. At any rate there it was, travelling towards us on its giant butt, the peg of the top as it were, which, hidden in a cloud of friction-born sparks that enveloped it like the cup of a curving flower of fire, whirled round and round at an infinite speed. It was on this flaming flower that the search-light played steadily, doubtless that Oro might mark and measure its monstrous progress.

"He is going to try to send the thing down the right-hand path," I shouted into Bickley's ear.

"Can't be done! Nothing can shift a travelling weight of tens of millions of tons one inch," Bickley roared back, trying to look confident.

Clearly, however, Yva thought that it could be done, for of a sudden she cast down her shield and, throwing herself upon her knees, stretched out her hands in supplication to her father. I understood, as did we all, that she was imploring him to abandon his hellish purpose. He glared at her and shook his head. Then, as she still went on praying, he struck her across the face with his hand and pushed her to her feet again. My blood boiled as I saw it and I think I should have sprung at him, had not Bickley caught hold of me, shouting, "Don't, or he will kill her and us too."

Yva lifted her shield and returned to her station, and in the blue discharges which now flashed almost continuously, and the phosphorescent glare of the advancing mountain, I saw that though her beautiful face worked beneath the pain of the blow, her eyes remained serene and purposeful. Even then I wondered--what was the purpose shining through them. Also I wondered if I was about to be called upon to make that sacrifice of which she had spoken, and if so, how. Of one thing I was determined--that if the call came it should not find me deaf. Yet all the while I was horribly afraid.

At another sign from Oro, Yva did something more to the lens--again, being alongside of her, I could not see what it was. The beam of light shifted and wandered till, far away, it fell exactly upon that spot where the rock began to rise into the ridge which separated the two grooves or roads and ended in the razor-edged cliff. Moreover I observed that Oro, who left it the last of us, had either placed something white to mark this first infinitesimal bulging of the floor of the groove, or had smeared it with chalk or shining pigment. I observed also what I had not been able to see before, that a thin white line ran across the floor, no doubt to give the precise direction of this painted rise of rock, and that the glare of the search-light now lay exactly over that line.

The monstrous, flaming gyroscope fashioned in Nature's workshop, for such without doubt it was, was drawing near, emitting as it came a tumult of sounds which, with the echoes that they caused, almost

overwhelmed our senses. Poor little Tommy, already cowed, although he was a bold-natured beast, broke down entirely, and I could see from his open mouth that he was howling with terror. He stared about him, then ran to Yva and pawed at her, evidently asking to be taken into her arms. She thrust him away, almost fiercely, and made signs to me to lift him up and hold him beneath my shield. This I did, reflecting sadly that if I was to be sacrificed, Tommy must share my fate. I even thought of passing him on to Bickley, but had no time. Indeed I could not attract his attention, for Bickley was staring with all his eyes at the nightmare-like spectacle which was in progress about us. Indeed no nightmare, no wild imagination of which the mind of man is capable, could rival the aspect of its stupendous facts.

Think of them! The unmeasured space of blackness threaded by those globes of ghastly incandescence that now hung a while and now shot upwards, downwards, across, apparently without origin or end, like a stream of meteors that had gone mad. Then the travelling mountain, two thousand feet in height, or more, with its enormous saucer-like rim painted round with bands of lurid red and blue, and about its grinding foot the tulip bloom of emitted flame. Then the fierce-faced Oro at his post, his hand upon the rod, waiting, remorseless, to drown half of this great world, with the lovely Yva standing calm-eyed like a saint in hell and watching me above the edge of the shield which such a saint might bear to turn aside the fiery darts of the wicked. And lastly we three men flattened terror-stricken, against the wall.

Nightmare! Imagination! No, these pale before that scene which it was given to our human eyes to witness.

And all the while, bending, bowing towards us--away from us--making obeisance to the path in front as though in greeting, to the path behind as though in farewell; instinct with a horrible life, with a hideous and gigantic grace, that titanic Terror whirled onwards to the mark of fate.

At the moment nothing could persuade me that it was not alive and did not know its awful mission. Visions flashed across my mind. I thought of the peoples of the world sleeping in their beds, or going about their business, or engaged even in the work of war. I thought of the ships upon the seas steaming steadily towards their far-off ports. Then I thought of what presently might happen to them, of the tremors followed by convulsions, of the sudden crashing down of cities, such as we had seen in the picture Yva showed us in the Temple, of the inflow of the waters of the deep piled up in mighty waves, of the woe and desolation as of the end of the world, and of the quiet, following death. So I thought and in my heart prayed to the great Arch-Architect of the Universe to stretch out His Arm to avert this fearsome ruin of His handiwork.

Oro glared, his thin fingers tightened their grip upon the rod, his hair and long beard seemed to bristle with furious and delighted excitement. The purple-fringed rim of the Monster had long overshadowed the whited patch of rock; its grinding foot was scarce ten yards away. Oro made

more signs to Yva who, beneath the shelter of her shield, again bent down and did something that I could not see. Then, as though her part were played, she rose, drew the grey hood of her cloak all about her face so that her eyes alone remained visible, took one step towards me and in the broken English we had taught her, called into my ear.

"Humphrey, God you bless! Humphrey, we meet soon. Forget not me!"

She stepped back again before I could attempt to answer, and next instant with a hideous, concentrated effort, Oro bending himself double, thrust upon the rod, as I could see from his open mouth, shouting while he thrust.

At the same moment, with a swift spring, Yva leapt immediately in front of the lens or window, so that the metallic shield with which she covered herself pressed against its substance.

Simultaneously Oro flung up his arms as though in horror.

Too late! The shutter fell and from behind it there sprang out a rush of living flame. It struck on Yva's shield and expanded to right and left. The insulated shield and garments that she wore seemed to resist it. For a fraction of time she stood there like a glowing angel, wrapped in fire.

Then she was swept outwards and upwards and at a little distance

dissolved like a ghost and vanished from our sight.

Yva was ashes! Yva was gone! The sacrifice was consummated!

And not in vain! Not in vain! On her poor breast she had received the full blast of that hellish lightning flash. Yet whilst destroying, it turned away from her, seeking the free paths of the air. So it came about that its obstructed strength struck the foot of the travelling gyroscope, diffused and did not suffice to thrust it that one necessary inch on which depended the fate of half the world, or missing it altogether, passed away on either side. Even so the huge, gleaming mountain rocked and trembled. Once, twice, thrice, it bowed itself towards us as though in majestic homage to greatness passed away. For a second, too, its course was checked, and at the check the earth quaked and trembled. Yes, then the world shook, and the blue globes of fire went out, while I was thrown to the ground.

When they returned again, the flaming monster was once more sailing majestically upon its way and down the accustomed left-hand path!

Indeed the sacrifice was not in vain. The world shook--but Yva had saved the world!