

## Chapter XXVI. Tommy

I lay still a while, on my back as I had fallen, and beneath the shield-like defence which Yva had given to me. Notwithstanding the fire-resisting, metalised stuff of which it was made, I noted that it was twisted and almost burnt through. Doubtless the stored-up electricity or earth magnetism, or whatever it may have been that had leapt out of that hole, being diffused by the resistance with which it was met, had grazed me with its outer edge, and had it not been for the shield and cloak, I also should have been burned up. I wished, oh! how I wished that it had been so. Then, by now all must have finished and I should have known the truth as to what awaits us beyond the change: sleep, or dreams, or perchance the fullest life. Also I should not have learned alone.

Lying there thus, idly, as though in a half-sleep, I felt Tommy licking my face, and throwing my arm about the poor little frightened beast, I watched the great world-balance as it retreated on its eternal journey. At one time its vast projecting rim had overshadowed us and almost seemed to touch the cliff of rock against which we leant. I remember that the effect of that shining arch a thousand feet or so above our heads was wonderful. It reminded me of a canopy of blackest thunder clouds supported upon a framework of wheeling rainbows, while beneath it all the children of the devil shouted together in joy. I noted this effect only a few seconds before Yva spoke to me and leapt into the path

of the flash.

Now, however, it was far away, a mere flaming wheel that became gradually smaller, and its Satanic voices were growing faint. As I have said, I watched its disappearance idly, reflecting that I should never look upon its like again; also that it was something well worth going forth to see. Then I became aware that the humming, howling din had decreased sufficiently to enable me to hear human voices without effort. Bastin was addressing Bickley--like myself they were both upon the ground.

"Her translation, as you may have noticed, Bickley, if you were not too frightened, was really very remarkable. No doubt it will have reminded you, as it did me, of that of Elijah. She had exactly the appearance of a person going up to Heaven in a vehicle of fire. The destination was certainly the same, and even the cloak she wore added a familiar touch and increased the similarity."

"At any rate it did not fall upon you," answered Bickley with something like a sob, in a voice of mingled awe and exasperation. "For goodness' sake! Bastin, stop your Biblical parallels and let us adore, yes, let us adore the divinest creature that the earth has borne!"

Never have I loved Bickley more than when I heard him utter those words.

"'Divinest' is a large term, Bickley, and one to which I hesitate to

subscribe, remembering as I do certain of the prophets and the Early Fathers with all their faults, not of course to mention the Apostles. But--" here he paused, for suddenly all three of us became aware of Oro.

He also has been thrown to the ground by the strength of the prisoned forces which he gathered and loosed upon their unholy errand, but, as I rejoiced to observe, had suffered from them much more than ourselves. Doubtless this was owing to the fact that he had sprung forward in a last wild effort to save his daughter, or to prevent her from interfering with his experiment, I know not which. As a result his right cheek was much scorched, his right arm was withered and helpless, and his magnificent beard was half burnt off him. Further, very evidently he was suffering from severe shock, for he rocked upon his feet and shook like an aspen leaf. All this, however, did not interfere with the liveliness of his grief and rage.

There he stood, a towering shape, like a lightning-smitten statue, and cursed us, especially Bastin.

"My daughter has gone!" he cried, "burned up by the fiery power that is my servant. Nothing remains of her but dust, and, Priest, this is your doing. You poisoned her heart with your childish doctrines of mercy and sacrifice, and the rest, so that she threw herself into the path of the flash to save some miserable races that she had never even known."

He paused exhausted, whereon Bastin answered him with spirit:

"Yes, Oro, she being a holy woman, has gone where you will never follow her. Also it is your own fault since you should have listened to her entreaties instead of boxing her ears like the brute you are."

"My daughter is gone," went on Oro, recovering his strength, "and my great designs are ruined. Yet only for a while," he added, "for the world-balance will return again, if not till long after your life-spans are done."

"If you don't doctor yourself, Lord Oro," said Bickley, also rising, "I may tell you as one who understands such things, that most likely it will be after your life-span is done also. Although their effect may be delayed, severe shocks from burns and over-excitement are apt to prove fatal to the aged."

Oro snarled at him; no other word describes it.

"And there are other things, Physician," he said, "which are apt to prove fatal to the young. At least now you will no longer deny my power."

"I am not so sure," answered Bickley, "since it seems that there is a greater Power, namely that of a woman's love and sacrifice."

"And a greater still," interrupted Bastin, "Which put those ideas into

her head."

"As for you, Humphrey," went on Oro, "I rejoice to think that you at least have lost two things that man desires above all other things--the woman you sought and the future kingship of the world."

I stood up and faced him.

"The first I have gained, although how, you do not understand, Oro," I answered. "And of the second, seeing that it would have come through you, on your conditions, I am indeed glad to be rid. I wish no power that springs from murder, and no gifts from one who answered his daughter's prayer with blows."

For a moment he seemed remorseful.

"She vexed me with her foolishness," he said. Then his rage blazed up again:

"And it was you who taught it to her," he went on. "You are guilty, all three of you, and therefore I am left with none to serve me in my age; therefore also my mighty schemes are overthrown."

"Also, Oro, if you speak truth, therefore half the world is saved," I added quietly, "and one has left it of whom it was unworthy."

"You think that these civilisations of yours, as you are pleased to call them, are saved, do you?" he sneered. "Yet, even if Bickley were right and I should die and become powerless, I tell you that they are already damned. I have studied them in your books and seen them with my eyes, and I say that they are rotten before ever they are ripe, and that their end shall be the end of the Sons of Wisdom, to die for lack of increase. That is why I would have saved the East, because in it alone there is increase, and thence alone can rise the great last race of man which I would have given to your children for an heritage. Moreover, think not that you Westerners have done with wars. I tell you that they are but begun and that the sword shall eat you up, and what the sword spares class shall snatch from class in the struggle for supremacy and ease."

Thus he spoke with extraordinary and concentrated bitterness that I confess would have frightened me, had I been capable of fear, which at the moment I was not. Who is afraid when he has lost all?

Nor was Bastin alarmed, if for other reasons.

"I think it right to tell you, Oro," he said, "that the only future you need trouble about is your own. God Almighty will look after the western civilisations in whatever way He may think best, as you may remember He did just now. Only I am sure you won't be here to see how it is done."

Again fury blazed in Oro's eyes.

"At least I will look after you, you half-bred dogs, who yap out ill-omened prophecies of death into my face. Since the three of you loved my daughter whom you brought to her doom, and were by her beloved,

if differently, I think it best that you should follow on her road.

How? That is the question? Shall I leave you to starve in these great caves?--Nay, look not towards the road of escape which doubtless she pointed out to you, for, as Humphrey knows, I can travel swiftly and I will make sure that you find it blocked. Or shall I--" and he glanced upwards at the great globes of wandering fire, as though he purposed to summon them to be our death, as doubtless he could have done.

"I do not care what you do," I answered wearily. "Only I would beg you to strike quickly. Yet for my friends I am sorry, since it was I who led them on this quest, and for you, too, Tommy," I added, looking at the poor little hound. "You were foolish, Tommy," I went on, "when you scented out that old tyrant in his coffin, at least for our own sake."

Indeed the dog was terribly scared. He whined continually and from time to time ran a little way and then returned to us, suggesting that we should go from this horror-haunted spot. Lastly, as though he understood that it was Oro who kept us there, he went to him and jumping up, licked his hand in a beseeching fashion.

The super-man looked at the dog and as he looked the rage went out of his face and was replaced by something resembling pity.

"I do not wish the beast to die," he muttered to himself in low reflective tones, as though he thought aloud, "for of them all it alone liked and did not fear me. I might take it with me but still it would perish of grief in the loneliness of the caves. Moreover, she loved it whom I shall see no more; yes, Yva--" as he spoke the name his voice broke a little. "Yet if I suffer them to escape they will tell my story to the world and make me a laughingstock. Well, if they do, what does it matter? None of those Western fools would believe it; thinking that they knew all; like Bickley they would mock and say that they were mad, or liars."

Again Tommy licked his hand, but more confidently, as though instinct told him something of what was passing in Oro's mind. I watched with an idle wonder, marvelling whether it were possible that this merciless being would after all spare us for the sake of the dog.

So, strange to say, it came about, for suddenly Oro looked up and said:

"Get you gone, and quickly, before my mood changes. The hound has saved you. For its sake I give you your lives, who otherwise should certainly have died. She who has gone pointed out to you, I doubt not, a road that runs to the upper air. I think that it is still open. Indeed," he added, closing his eyes for a moment, "I see that it is still open, if long and difficult. Follow it, and should you win through, take your boat and sail away as swiftly as you can. Whether you die or live I care nothing,



but my hands will be clean of your blood, although yours are stained with Yva's. Begone! and my curse go with you."

Without waiting for further words we went to fetch our lanterns, water-bottles and bag of food which we had laid down at a little distance. As we approached them I looked up and saw Oro standing some way off. The light from one of the blue globes of fire which passed close above his head, shone upon him and made him ghastly. Moreover, it seemed to me as though approaching death had written its name upon his malevolent countenance.

I turned my head away, for about his aspect in those sinister surroundings there was something horrible, something menacing and repellent to man and of him I wished to see no more. Nor indeed did I, for when I glanced in that direction again Oro was gone. I suppose that he had retreated into the shadows where no light played.

We gathered up our gear, and while the others were relighting the lanterns, I walked a few paces forward to the spot where Yva had been dissolved in the devouring fire. Something caught my eye upon the rocky floor. I picked it up. It was the ring, or rather the remains of the ring that I had given her on that night when we declared our love amidst the ruins by the crater lake. She had never worn it on her hand but for her own reasons, as she told me, suspended it upon her breast beneath her robe. It was an ancient ring that I had bought in Egypt, fashioned

of gold in which was set a very hard basalt or other black stone. On this was engraved the ank or looped cross, which was the Egyptian symbol of Life, and round it a snake, the symbol of Eternity. The gold was for the most part melted, but the stone, being so hard and protected by the shield and asbestos cloak, for such I suppose it was, had resisted the fury of the flash. Only now it was white instead of black, like a burnt onyx that had known the funeral pyre. Indeed, perhaps it was an onyx. I kissed it and hid it away, for it seemed to me to convey a greeting and with it a promise.

Then we started, a very sad and dejected trio. Leaving with a shudder that vast place where the blue lights played eternally, we came to the shaft up and down which the travelling stone pursued its endless path, and saw it arrive and depart again.

"I wonder he did not send us that way," said Bickley, pointing to it.

"I am sure I am very glad it never occurred to him," answered Bastin, "for I am certain that we could not have made the journey again without our guide, Yva."

I looked at him and he ceased. Somehow I could not bear, as yet, to hear her beloved name spoken by other lips.

Then we entered the passage that she pointed out to us, and began a most terrible journey which, so far as we could judge, for we lost any exact

count of time, took us about sixty hours. The road, it is true, was smooth and unblocked, but the ascent was fearfully steep and slippery; so much so that often we were obliged to pull each other up it and lie down to rest.

Had it not been for those large, felt-covered bottles of Life-water, I am sure we should never have won through. But this marvelous elixir, drunk a little at a time, always re-invigorated us and gave us strength to push on. Also we had some food, and fortunately our spare oil held out, for the darkness in that tunnel was complete. Tommy became so exhausted that at length we must carry him by turns. He would have died had it not been for the water; indeed I thought that he was going to die.

After our last rest and a short sleep, however, he seemed to begin to recover, and generally there was something in his manner which suggested to us that he knew himself to be not far from the surface of the earth towards which we had crawled upwards for thousands upon thousands of feet, fortunately without meeting with any zone of heat which was not bearable.

We were right, for when we had staggered forward a little further, suddenly Tommy ran ahead of us and vanished. Then we heard him barking but where we could not see, since the tunnel appeared to take a turn and continue, but this time on a downward course, while the sound of the barks came from our right. We searched with the lanterns which were

now beginning to die and found a little hole almost filled with fallen pieces of rock. We scooped these away with our hands, making an aperture large enough to creep through. A few more yards and we saw light, the blessed light of the moon, and in it stood Tommy barking hoarsely. Next we heard the sound of the sea. We struggled on desperately and presently pushed our way through bushes and vegetation on to a steep declivity. Down this we rolled and scrambled, to find ourselves at last lying upon a sandy beach, whilst above us the full moon shone in the heavens.

Here, with a prayer of thankfulness, we flung ourselves down and slept.

If it had not been for Tommy and we had gone further along the tunnel, which I have little doubt stretched on beneath the sea, where, I wonder, should we have slept that night?

When we woke the sun was shining high in the heavens. Evidently there had been rain towards the dawn, though as we were lying beneath the shelter of some broad-leaved tree, from it we had suffered little inconvenience. Oh! how beautiful, after our sojourn in those unholy caves, were the sun and the sea and the sweet air and the raindrops hanging on the leaves.

We did not wake of ourselves; indeed if we had been left alone I am sure that we should have slept the clock round, for we were terribly exhausted. What woke us was the chatter of a crowd of Orofenans who were gathered at a distance from the tree and engaged in staring at us in a

frightened way, also the barks of Tommy who objected to their intrusion. Among the people I recognised our old friend the chief Marama by his feather cloak, and sitting up, beckoned to him to approach. After a good deal of hesitation he came, walking delicately like Agag, and stopping from time to time to study us, as though he were not sure that we were real.

"What frightens you, Marama?" I asked him.

"You frighten us, O Friend-from-the-Sea. Whence did you and the Healer and the Bellower come and why do your faces look like those of ghosts and why is the little black beast so large-eyed and so thin? Over the lake we know you did not come, for we have watched day and night; moreover there is no canoe upon the shore. Also it would not have been possible."

"Why not?" I asked idly.

"Come and see," he answered.

Rising stiffly we emerged from beneath the tree and perceived that we were at the foot of the cliff against which the remains of the yacht had been borne by the great tempest. Indeed there it was within a couple of hundred yards of us.

Following Marama we climbed the sloping path which ran up the cliff

and ascended a knoll whence we could see the lake and the cone of the volcano in its centre. At least we used to be able to see this cone, but now, at any rate with the naked eye, we could make out nothing, except a small brown spot in the midst of the waters of the lake.

"The mountain which rose up many feet in that storm which brought you to Orofena, Friend-from-the-Sea, has now sunk till only the very top of it is to be seen," said Marama solemnly. "Even the Rock of Offerings has vanished beneath the water, and with it the house that we built for you."

"Yes," I said, affecting no surprise. "But when did that happen?"

"Five nights ago the world shook, Friend-from-the-Sea, and when the sun rose we saw that the mouth of the cave which appeared on the day of your coming, had vanished, and that the holy mountain itself had sunk deep, so that now only the crest of it is left above the water."

"Such things happen," I replied carelessly.

"Yes, Friend-from-the-Sea. Like many other marvels they happen where you and your companions are. Therefore we beg you who can arise out of the earth like spirits, to leave us at once before our island and all of us who dwell thereon are drowned beneath the ocean. Leave us before we kill you, if indeed you be men, or die at your hands if, as we think, you be evil spirits who can throw up mountains and drag them down, and create

gods that slay, and move about in the bowels of the world."

"That is our intention, for our business here is done," I answered calmly. "Come now and help us to depart. But first bring us food. Bring it in plenty, for we must victual our boat."

Marama bowed and issued the necessary orders. Indeed food sufficient for our immediate needs was already there as an offering, and of it we ate with thankfulness.

Then we boarded the ship and examined the lifeboat. Thanks to our precautions it was still in very fair order and only needed some little caulking which we did with grass fibre and pitch from the stores. After this with the help of the Orofenans who worked hard in their desperate desire to be rid of us, we drew the boat into the sea, and provisioned her with stores from the ship, and with an ample supply of water. Everything being ready at last, we waited for the evening wind which always blew off shore, to start. As it was not due for half an hour or more, I walked back to the tree under which we had slept and tried to find the hole whence we had emerged from the tunnel on to the face of the cliff.

My hurried search proved useless. The declivity of the cliff was covered with tropical growth, and the heavy rain had washed away every trace of our descent, and very likely filled the hole itself with earth. At any rate, of it I could discover nothing. Then as the breeze began to blow

I returned to the boat and here bade adieu to Marama, who gave me his feather cloak as a farewell gift.

"Good-bye, Friend-from-the-Sea," he said to me. "We are glad to have seen you and thank you for many things. But we do not wish to see you any more."

"Good-bye, Marama," I answered. "What you say, we echo. At least you have now no great lump upon your neck and we have rid you of your wizards. But beware of the god Oro who dwells in the mountain, for if you anger him he will sink your island beneath the sea."

"And remember all that I have taught you," shouted Bastin.

Marama shivered, though whether at the mention of the god Oro, of whose powers the Orofenans had so painful a recollection, or at the result of Bastin's teachings, I do not know. And that was the last we shall ever see of each other in this world.

The island faded behind us and, sore at heart because of all that we had found and lost again, for three days we sailed northward with a fair and steady wind. On the fourth evening by an extraordinary stroke of fortune, we fell in with an American tramp steamer, trading from the South Sea Islands to San Francisco. To the captain, who treated us very kindly, we said simply that we were a party of Englishmen whose yacht had been wrecked on a small island several hundreds of miles away, of



which we knew neither the name, if it had one, nor the position.

This story was accepted without question, for such things often happen in those latitudes, and in due course we were landed at San Francisco, where we made certain depositions before the British Consul as to the loss of the yacht Star of the South. Then we crossed America, having obtained funds by cable, and sailed for England in a steamer flying the flag of the United States.

Of the great war which made this desirable I do not speak since it has nothing, or rather little, to do with this history. In the end we arrived safely at Liverpool, and thence travelled to our homes in Devonshire.

Thus ended the history of our dealings with Oro, the super-man who began his life more than two hundred and fifty thousand years ago, and with his daughter, Yva, whom Bastin still often calls the Glittering Lady.