

CHAPTER XXI

THE LESSON

"Yes," answered Ayesha, laughing very softly, "for that purpose alone, O truth-seeking Allan, whose curiosity is so fierce that the wide world cannot hold it, did you come to Kôr and not to seek wealth or new lands, or to fight more savages. No, not even to look upon a certain Ayesha, of whom the old wizard told you, though I think you have always loved to try to lift the veil that hides women's hearts, if not their faces. Yet it was I who brought you to Kôr for my own purposes, not your desire, nor Zikali's map and talisman, since had not the white lady who lies sick been stolen by Rezu, never would you have pursued the journey nor found the way hither."

"How could you have had anything to do with that business?" I asked testily, for my nerves were on edge and I said the first thing that came into my mind.

"That, Allan, is a question over which you will wonder for a long while either beneath or beyond the sun, as you will wonder concerning much that has to do with me, which your little mind, shut in its iron box of ignorance and pride, cannot understand to-day.

"For example, you have been wondering, I am sure, how the lightning killed those eleven men whose bodies you went to look on an hour or two

ago, and left the rest untouched. Well, I will tell you at once that it was not lightning that killed them, although the strength within me was manifest to you in storm, but rather what that witch-doctor of your following called wizardry. Because they were traitors who betrayed your army to Rezu, I killed them with my wrath and by the wand of my power. Oh! you do not believe, yet perhaps ere long you will, since thus to fulfil your prayer I must also kill you--almost. That is the trouble, Allan. To kill you outright would be easy, but to kill you just enough to set your spirit free and yet leave one crevice of mortal life through which it can creep back again, that is most difficult; a thing that only I can do and even of myself I am not sure."

"Pray do not try the experiment----" I began thoroughly alarmed, but she cut me short.

"Disturb me no more, Allan, with the tremors and changes of your uncertain mind, lest you should work more evil than you think, and making mine uncertain also, spoil my skill. Nay, do not try to fly, for already the net has thrown itself about you and you cannot stir, who are bound like a little gilded wasp in the spider's web, or like birds beneath the eyes of basilisks."

This was true, for I found that, strive as I would, I could not move a limb or even an eyelid. I was frozen to that spot and there was nothing for it except to curse my folly and say my prayers.

All this while she went on talking, but of what she said I have not the faintest idea, because my remaining wits were absorbed in these much-needed implorations.

Presently, of a sudden, I appeared to see Ayesha seated in a temple, for there were columns about her, and behind her was an altar on which a fire burned. All round her, too, were hooded snakes like to that which she wore about her middle, fashioned in gold. To these snakes she sang and they danced to her singing; yes, with flickering tongues they danced upon their tails! What the scene signified I cannot conceive, unless it meant that this mistress of magic was consulting her familiars.

Then that vision vanished and Ayesha's voice began to seem very far away and dreamy, also her wondrous beauty became visible to me through her veil, as though I had acquired a new sense that overcame the limitations of mortal sight. Even in this extremity I reflected it was well that the last thing I looked on should be something so glorious. No, not quite the last thing, for out of the corners of my eyes I saw that Umslopogaas from a sitting position had sunk on to his back and lay, apparently dead, with his axe still gripped tightly and held above his head, as though his arm had been turned to ice.

After this terrible things began to happen to me and I became aware that I was dying. A great wind seemed to catch me up and blow me to and fro,

as a leaf is blown in the eddies of a winter gale. Enormous rushes of darkness flowed over me, to be succeeded by vivid bursts of brightness that dazzled like lightning. I fell off precipices and at the foot of them was caught by some fearful strength and tossed to the very skies.

From those skies I was hurled down again into a kind of whirlpool of inky night, round which I spun perpetually, as it seemed for hours and hours. But worst of all was the awful loneliness from which I suffered. It seemed to me as though there were no other living thing in all the Universe and never had been and never would be any other living thing. I felt as though I were the Universe rushing solitary through space for ages upon ages in a frantic search for fellowship, and finding none.

Then something seemed to grip my throat and I knew that I had died--for the world floated away from beneath me.

Now fear and every mortal sensation left me, to be replaced by a new and spiritual terror. I, or rather my disembodied consciousness, seemed to come up for judgment, and the horror of it was that I appeared to be my own judge. There, a very embodiment of cold justice, my Spirit, grown luminous, sat upon a throne and to it, with dread and merciless particularity I set out all my misdeeds. It was as if some part of me remained mortal, for I could see my two eyes, my mouth and my hands, but nothing else--and strange enough they looked. From the eyes came tears, from the mouth flowed words and the hands were joined, as though in prayer to that throned and adamant Spirit which was ME.

It was as though this Spirit were asking how my body had served its purposes and advanced its mighty ends, and in reply--oh! what a miserable tale I had to tell. Fault upon fault, weakness upon weakness, sin upon sin; never before did I understand how black was my record. I tried to relieve the picture with some incidents of attempted good, but that Spirit would not hearken. It seemed to say that it had gathered up the good and knew it all. It was of the evil that it would learn, not of the good that had bettered it, but of the evil by which it had been harmed.

Hearing this there rose up in my consciousness some memory of what Ayesha had said; namely, that the body lived within the temple of the spirit which is oft defied, and not the spirit in the body.

The story was told and I hearkened for the judgment, my own judgment on myself, which I knew would be accepted without question and registered for good or ill. But none came, since ere the balance sank this way or that, ere it could be uttered, I was swept afar.

Through Infinity I was swept, and as I fled faster than the light, the meaning of what I had seen came home to me. I knew, or seemed to know for the first time, that at the last man must answer to himself, or perhaps to a divine principle within himself, that out of his own

free-will, through long æons and by a million steps, he climbs or sinks to the heights or depths dormant in his nature; that from what he was, springs what he is, and what he is, engenders what he shall be for ever and aye.

Now I envisaged Immortality and splendid and awful was its face. It clasped me to its breast and in the vast circle of its arms I was up-borne, I who knew myself to be without beginning and without end, and yet of the past and of the future knew nothing, save that these were full of mysteries.

As I went I encountered others, or overtook them, making the same journey. Robertson swept past me, and spoke, but in a tongue I could not understand. I noted that the madness had left his eyes and that his fine-cut features were calm and spiritual. The other wanderers I did not know.

I came to a region of blinding light; the thought rose in me that I must have reached the sun, or a sun, though I felt no heat. I stood in a lovely, shining valley about which burned mountains of fire. There were huge trees in that valley, but they glowed like gold and their flowers and fruit were as though they had been fashioned of many-coloured flames.

The place was glorious beyond compare, but very strange to me and not to be described. I sat me down upon a boulder which burned like a ruby, whether with heat or colour I do not know, by the edge of a stream that flowed with what looked like fire and made a lovely music. I stooped down and drank of this water of flames and the scent and the taste of it were as those of the costliest wine.

There, beneath the spreading limbs of a fire-tree I sat, and examined the strange flowers that grew around, coloured like rich jewels and perfumed above imagining. There were birds also which might have been feathered with sapphires, rubies and amethysts, and their song was so sweet that I could have wept to hear it. The scene was wonderful and filled me with exaltation, for I thought of the land where it is promised that there shall be no more night.

People began to appear; men, women, and even children, though whence they came I could not see. They did not fly and they did not walk; they seemed to drift towards me, as unguided boats drift upon the tide. One and all they were very beautiful, but their beauty was not human although their shapes and faces resembled those of men and women made glorious. None were old, and except the children, none seemed very young; it was as though they had grown backwards or forwards to middle life and rested there at their very best.

Now came the marvel; all these uncounted people were known to me, though so far as my knowledge went I had never set eyes on most of them before.

Yet I was aware that in some forgotten life or epoch I had been intimate with every one of them; also that it was the fact of my presence and the call of my sub-conscious mind which drew them to this spot. Yet that presence and that call were not visible or audible to them, who, I suppose, flowed down some stream of sympathy, why or whither they did not know. Had I been as they were perchance they would have seen me, as it was they saw nothing and I could not speak and tell them of my presence.

Some of this multitude, however, I knew well enough even when they had departed years and years ago. But about these I noted this, that every one of them was a man or a woman or a child for whom I had felt love or sympathy or friendship. Not one was a person whom I had disliked or whom I had no wish to see again. If they spoke at all I could not hear--or read--their speech, yet to a certain extent I could hear their thoughts.

Many of these were beyond the power of my appreciation on subjects which I had no knowledge, or that were too high for me, but some were of quite simple things such as concern us upon the earth, such as of friendship, or learning, or journeys made or to be made, or art, or literature, or the wonders of Nature, or of the fruits of the earth, as they knew them in this region.

This I noted too, that each separate thought seemed to be hallowed and enclosed in an atmosphere of prayer or heavenly aspiration, as a seed is enclosed in the heart of a flower, or a fruit in its odorous rind, and

that this prayer or aspiration presently appeared to bear the thought away, whither I knew not. Moreover, all these thoughts, even of the humblest things, were beautiful and spiritual, nothing cruel or impure or even coarse was to be found among them: they radiated charity, purity and goodness.

Among them I perceived were none that had to do with our earth; this and its affairs seemed to be left far behind these thinkers, a truth that chilled my soul was alien to their company. Worse still, so far as I could discover, although I knew that all these bright ones had been near to me at some hour in the measurements of time and space, not one of their musings dwelt upon me or on aught with which I had to do.

Between me and them there was a great gulf fixed and a high wall built.

Oh, look! One came shining like a star, and from far away came another with dove-like eyes and beautiful exceedingly, and with this last a maiden, whose eyes were as hers who my own heart told me was her mother.

Well, I knew them both; they were those whom I had come to seek, the women who had been kind upon the earth, and at the sight of them my spirit thrilled. Surely they would discover me. Surely at least they would speak of me and feel my presence.

But, although they stayed within a pace or two of where I rested, alas! it was not so. They seemed to kiss and to exchange swift thoughts about

many things, high things of which I will not write, and common things; yes, even of the shining robes they wore, but never a one of me! I strove to rise and go to them, but could not; I strove to speak and could not; I strove to throw out my thought to them and could not; it fell back upon my head like a stone hurled heavenward.

They were remote from me, utterly apart. I wept tears of bitterness that I should be so near and yet so far; a dull and jealous rage burned in my heart, and this they did seem to feel, or so I fancied; at any rate, apparently by mutual consent, they moved further from me as though something pained them. Yes, my love could not reach their perfected natures, but my anger hurt them.

As I sat chewing this root of bitterness, a man appeared, a very noble man, in whom I recognised my father grown younger and happier-looking, but still my father, with whom came others, men and women whom I knew to be my brothers and sisters who had died in youth far away in Oxfordshire. Joy leapt up in me, for I thought--these will surely know me and give me welcome, since, though here sex has lost its power, blood must still call to blood.

But it was not so. They spoke, or interchanged their thoughts, but not one of me. I read something that passed from my father to them. It was a speculation as to what had brought them all together there, and read also the answer hazarded, that perhaps it might be to give welcome to some unknown who was drawing near from below and would feel lonely and

unfriended. Thereon my father replied that he did not see or feel this wanderer, and thought that it could not be so, since it was his mission to greet such on their coming.

Then in an instant all were gone and that lovely, glowing plain was empty, save for myself seated on the ruby-like stone, weeping tears of blood and shame and loss within my soul.

So I sat a long while, till presently I was aware of a new presence, a presence dusky and splendid and arrayed in rich barbaric robes. Straight she came towards me, like a thrown spear, and I knew her for a certain royal and savage woman who on earth was named Mameena, or "Wind-that-wailed." Moreover she divined me, though see me she could not.

"Art there, Watcher-in-the-Night, watching in the light?" she said or thought, I know not which, but the words came to me in the Zulu tongue.

"Aye," she went on, "I know that thou art there; from ten thousand leagues away I felt thy presence and broke from my own place to welcome thee, though I must pay for it with burning chains and bondage. How did those welcome thee whom thou camest out to seek? Did they clasp thee in

their arms and press their kisses on thy brow? Or did they shrink away from thee because the smell of earth was on thy hands and lips?"

I seemed to answer that they did not appear to know that I was there.

"Aye, they did not know because their love is not enough, because they have grown too fine for love. But I, the sinner, I knew well, and here am I ready to suffer all for thee and to give thee place within this stormy heart of mine. Forget them, then, and come to rule with me who still am queen in my own house that thou shalt share. There we will live royally and when our hour comes, at least we shall have had our day."

Now before I could reply, some power seemed to seize this splendid creature and whirl her thence so that she departed, flashing these words from her mind to mine,

"For a little while farewell, but remember always that Mameena, the Wailing Wind, being still as a sinful woman in a woman's love and of the earth, earthy, found thee, whom all the rest forgot. O Watcher-in-the-Night, watch in the night for me, for there thou shalt find me, the Child of Storm, again, and yet again."

She was gone and once more I sat in utter solitude upon that ruby stone, staring at the jewelled flowers and the glorious flaming trees and the lambent waters of the brook. What was the meaning of it all, I wondered, and why was I deserted by everyone save a single savage woman, and why

had she a power to find me which was denied to all the rest? Well, she had given me an answer, because she was "as a sinful woman with a woman's love and of the earth, earthy," while with the rest it was otherwise. Oh! this was clear, that in the heavens man has no friend among the heavenly, save perhaps the greatest Friend of all Who understands both flesh and spirit.

Thus I mused in this burning world which was still so beautiful, this alien world into which I had thrust myself unwanted and unsought. And while I mused this happened. The fiery waters of the stream were disturbed by something and looking up I saw the cause.

A dog had plunged into them and was swimming towards me. At a glance I knew that dog on which my eyes had not fallen for decades. It was a mongrel, half spaniel and half bull-terrier, which for years had been the dear friend of my youth and died at last on the horns of a wounded wildebeeste that attacked me when I had fallen from my horse upon the veld. Boldly it tackled the maddened buck, thus giving me time to scramble to my rifle and shoot it, but not before the poor hound had yielded its life for mine, since presently it died disembowelled, but licking my hand and forgetful of its agonies. This dog, Smut by name, it was that swam or seemed to swim the brook of fire. It scrambled to the hither shore, it nosed the earth and ran to the ruby stone and stared about it whining and sniffing.

At last it seemed to see or feel me, for it stood upon its hind legs

and licked my face, yelping with mad joy, as I could see though I heard nothing. Now I wept in earnest and bent down to hug and kiss the faithful beast, but this I could not do, since like myself it was only shadow.

Then suddenly all dissolved in a cataract of many-coloured flames and I fell down into an infinite gulf of blackness.

Surely Ayesha was talking to me! What did she say? What did she say? I could not catch her words, but I caught her laughter and knew that after her fashion she was making a mock of me. My eyelids were dragged down as though with heavy sleep; it was difficult to lift them. At last they were open and I saw Ayesha seated on her couch before me and--this I noted at once--with her lovely face unveiled. I looked about me, seeking Umslopogaas and Hans. But they were gone as I guessed they must be, since otherwise Ayesha would not have been unveiled. We were quite alone. She was addressing me and in a new fashion, since now she had abandoned the formal "you" and was using the more impressive and intimate "thou," much as is the manner of the French.

"Thou hast made thy journey, Allan," she said, "and what thou hast seen there thou shalt tell me presently. Yet from thy mien I gather this--that thou art glad to look upon flesh and blood again and, after the company of spirits, to find that of mortal woman. Come then and sit

beside me and tell thy tale."

"Where are the others?" I asked as I rose slowly to obey, for my head swam and my feet seemed feeble.

"Gone, Allan, who as I think have had enough of ghosts, which is perhaps thy case also. Come, drink this and be a man once more. Drink it to me whose skill and power have brought thee safe from lands that human feet were never meant to tread," and taking a strange-shaped cup from a stool that stood beside her, she offered it to me.

I drank to the last drop, neither knowing nor caring whether it were wine or poison, since my heart seemed desperate at its failure and my spirit crushed beneath the weight of its great betrayal. I suppose it was the former, for the contents of that cup ran through my veins like fire and gave me back my courage and the joy of life.

I stepped to the dais and sat me down upon the couch, leaning against its rounded end so that I was almost face to face with Ayesha who had turned towards me, and thence could study her unveiled loveliness. For a while she said nothing, only eyed me up and down and smiled and smiled, as though she were waiting for that wine to do its work with me.

"Now that thou art a man again, Allan, tell me what thou didst see when thou wast more--or less--than man."

So I told her all, for some power within her seemed to draw the truth out of me. Nor did the tale appear to cause her much surprise.

"There is truth in thy dream," she said when I had finished; "a lesson also."

"Then it was all a dream?" I interrupted.

"Is not everything a dream, even life itself, Allan? If so, what can this be that thou hast seen, but a dream within a dream, and itself containing other dreams, as in the old days the ball fashioned by the eastern workers of ivory would oft be found to contain another ball, and this yet another and another and another, till at the inmost might be found a bead of gold, or perchance a jewel, which was the prize of him who could draw out ball from ball and leave them all unbroken. That search was difficult and rarely was the jewel come by, if at all, so that some said there was none, save in the maker's mind. Yes, I have seen a man go crazed with seeking and die with the mystery unsolved. How much harder, then, is it to come at the diamond of Truth which lies at the core of all our nest of dreams and without which to rest upon they could not be fashioned to seem realities?"

"But was it really a dream, and if so, what were the truth and the lesson?" I asked, determined not to allow her to bemuse or escape me with her metaphysical talk and illustrations.

"The first question has been answered, Allan, as well as I can answer, who am not the architect of this great globe of dreams, and as yet cannot clearly see the ineffable gem within, whose prisoned rays illuminate their substance, though so dimly that only those with the insight of a god can catch their glamour in the night of thought, since to most they are dark as glow-flies in the glare of noon."

"Then what are the truth and the lesson?" I persisted, perceiving that it was hopeless to extract from her an opinion as to the real nature of my experiences and that I must content myself with her deductions from them.

"Thou tellest me, Allan, that in thy dream or vision thou didst seem to appear before thyself seated on a throne and in that self to find thy judge. That is the Truth whereof I spoke, though how it found its way through the black and ignorant shell of one whose wit is so small, is more than I can guess, since I believed that it was revealed to me alone."

(Now I, Allan, thought to myself that I began to see the origin of all these fantasies and that for once Ayesha had made a slip. If she had a theory and I developed that same theory in a hypnotic condition, it was not difficult to guess its fount. However, I kept my mouth shut, and luckily for once she did not seem to read my mind, perhaps because she was too much occupied in spinning her smooth web of entangling words.)

"All men worship their own god," she went on, "and yet seem not to know that this god dwells within them and that of him they are a part. There he dwells and there they mould him to their own fashion, as the potter moulds his clay, though whatever the shape he seems to take beneath their fingers, still he remains the god infinite and unalterable. Still he is the Seeker and the Sought, the Prayer and its Fulfilment, the Love and the Hate, the Virtue and the Vice, since all these qualities the alchemy of his spirit turns into an ultimate and eternal Good. For the god is in all things and all things are in the god, whom men clothe with such diverse garments and whose countenance they hide beneath so many masks.

"In the tree flows the sap, yet what knows the great tree it nurtures of the sap? In the world's womb burns the fire that gives life, yet what of the fire knows the glorious earth it conceived and will destroy; in the heavens the great globes swing through space and rest not, yet what know they of the Strength that sent them spinning and in a time to come will stay their mighty motions, or turn them to another course? Therefore of everything this all-present god is judge, or rather, not one but many judges, since of each living creature he makes its own magistrate to deal out justice according to that creature's law which in the beginning the god established for it and decreed. Thus in the breast of everyone there is a rule and by that rule, at work through a countless chain of lives, in the end he shall be lifted up to Heaven, or bound about and cast down to Hell and death."

"You mean a conscience," I suggested rather feebly, for her thoughts and images overpowered me.

"Aye, a conscience, if thou wilt, and canst only understand that term, though it fits my theme but ill. This is my meaning, that consciences, as thou namest them, are many. I have one; thou, Allan, hast another; that black Axe-bearer has a third; the little yellow man a fourth, and so on through the tale of living things. For even a dog such as thou sawest has a conscience and--like thyself or I--must in the end be its own judge, because of the spark that comes to it from above, the same spark which in me burns as a great fire, and in thee as a smouldering ember of green wood."

"When you sit in judgment on yourself in a day to come, Ayesha," I could not help interpolating, "I trust that you will remember that humility did not shine among your virtues."

She smiled in her vivid way--only twice or thrice did I see her smile thus and then it was like a flash of summer lightning illumining a clouded sky, since for the most part her face was grave and even sombre.

"Well answered," she said. "Goad the patient ox enough and even it will grow fierce and paw the ground."

"Humility! What have I to do with it, O Allan? Let humility be the part of the humble-souled and lowly, but for those who reign as I do, and

they are few indeed, let there be pride and the glory they have earned. Now I have told thee of the Truth thou sawest in thy vision and wouldst thou hear the Lesson?"

"Yes," I answered, "since I may as well be done with it at once, and doubtless it will be good for me."

"The Lesson, Allan, is one which thou preachest--humility. Vain man and foolish as thou art, thou didst desire to travel the Underworld in search of certain ones who once were all in all to thee--nay, not all in all since of them there were two or more--but at least much. Thus thou wouldst do because, as thou saidest, thou didst seek to know whether they still lived on beyond the gates of Blackness. Yes, thou saidest this, but what thou didst hope to learn in truth was whether they lived on in thee and for thee only. For thou, thou in thy vanity, didst picture these departed souls as doing naught in that Heaven they had won, save think of thee still burrowing on the earth, and, at times lightening thy labours with kisses from other lips than theirs."

"Never!" I exclaimed indignantly. "Never! it is not true."

"Then I pray pardon, Allan, who only judged of thee by others that were as men are made, and being such, not to be blamed if perchance from time to time, they turned to look on women, who alas! were as they are made. So at least it was when I knew the world, but mayhap since then its richest wine has turned to water, whereby I hope it has been bettered.

At the least this was thy thought, that those women who had been thine for an hour, through all eternity could dream of naught else save thy perfections, and hope for naught else than to see thee at their sides through that eternity, or such part of thee as thou couldst spare to each of them. For thou didst forget that where they have gone there may be others even more peerless than thou art and more fit to hold a woman's love, which as we know on earth was ever changeful, and perhaps may so remain where it is certain that new lights must shine and new desires beckon. Dost understand me, Allan?"

"I think so," I answered with a groan. "I understand you to mean that worldly impressions soon wear out and that people who have departed to other spheres may there form new ties and forget the old."

"Yes, Allan, as do those who remain upon this earth, whence these others have departed. Do men and women still re-marry in the world, Allan, as in my day they were wont to do?"

"Of course--it is allowed."

"As many other things, or perchance this same thing, may be allowed elsewhere, for when there are so many habitations from which to choose, why should we always dwell in one of them, however strait the house or poor the prospect?"

Now understanding that I was symbolised by the "strait house" and the

"poor prospect" I should have grown angry, had not a certain sense of humour come to my rescue, who remembered that after all Ayesha's satire was profoundly true. Why, beyond the earth, should anyone desire to remain unalterably tied to and inextricably wrapped up in such a personality as my own, especially if others of superior texture abounded about them? Now that I came to think of it, the thing was absurd and not to be the least expected in the midst of a thousand new and vivid interests. I had met with one more disillusionment, that was all.

"Dost understand, Allan," went on Ayesha, who evidently was determined that I should drink this cup to the last drop, "that these dwellers in the sun, or the far planet where thou hast been according to thy tale, saw thee not and knew naught of thee? It may chance therefore that at this time thou wast not in their minds which at others dream of thee continually. Or it may chance that they never dream of thee at all, having quite forgotten thee, as the weaned cub forgets its mother."

"At least there was one who seemed to remember," I exclaimed, for her poisoned mocking stung the words out of me, "one woman and--a dog."

"Aye, the savage, who being Nature's child, a sinner that departed hence by her own act" (how Ayesha knew this I cannot say, I never told her), "has not yet put on perfection and therefore still remembers him whose kiss was last upon her lips. But surely, Allan, it is not thy desire to pass from the gentle, ordered claspings of those white souls for the tumultuous arms of such a one as this. Still, let that be, for who knows

what men will or will not do in jealousy and disappointed love? And the dog, it remembered also and even sought thee out, since dogs are more faithful and single-hearted than is mankind. There at least thou hast thy lesson, namely to grow more humble and never to think again that thou holdest all a woman's soul for aye, because once she was kind to thee for a little while on earth."

"Yes," I answered, jumping up in a rage, "as you say, I have my lesson, and more of it than I want. So by your leave, I will now bid you farewell, hoping that when it comes to be your turn to learn this lesson, or a worse, Ayesha, as I am sure it will one day, for something tells me so, you may enjoy it more than I have done."