CHAPTER V

OTTER GIVES COUNSEL

When the burial was finished and Thomas Outram slept his last sleep beneath six feet of earth and stones, his brother took out the prayer-book that Jane Beach had given him, which in truth formed all his library, and read the funeral service over the grave, ending it by the glare of the lightning flashes. Then he and Otter went back to the cave and ate, speaking no word. After they had done their meal Leonard called to the dwarf, who took his food at a little distance.

"Otter," he said, setting the lantern between them, "you are a faithful man and clever in your way. I would tell you a story and ask you something. At the least," he added to himself in English, "in such a matter your judgment is as good as mine."

"Speak on, Baas," said the dwarf; "my ears are open;" and he squatted down on the further side of the lantern like some great toad, watching his master's face with his black eyes.

"Otter, the Baas who is dead and I journeyed to this country about seven years ago. Before we came here we had been rich men, chiefs in our own place, but we lost our kraals and cattle and lands; they were sold, others took them and we became poor. Yes, we who were fat grew lean as trek oxen at the end of winter. Then we said to each other, 'Here we

have no longer any home, the shame of poverty has come upon us, we are broken vessels, empty men of no account; also we are chiefs by blood, and here we cannot let ourselves out to labour like the common people, lest both the common people and the nobles should make a mock of us. Our great stone kraal that has been ours for many generations is taken from us, others dwell in it, strange women order it, and their children shall move about the land. We will go away.'"

"The blood is the blood," broke in Otter, "the wealth is nothing; that comes and goes, but the blood is always the blood. Why did you not gather an impi, my father, and put these strangers to the spear and take your kraal again?"

"In our land this may not be, Otter, for there wealth is more than race. So we should have been brought to still greater shame. Riches alone could give us back our home, and we had none left. Therefore we swore an oath together, the dead Baas and I, that we would journey to this far country and seek to win wealth that we might buy back our lands and kraal and rule over them as in past years, and our children after us."

"A good oath," said Otter, "but here we should have sworn it otherwise, and there would have been a ringing of steel about that kraal, not the chink of yellow iron."

"We came, Otter, and for seven years we have laboured harder than the lowest of our servants; we have travelled to and fro, mixing with many

peoples, learning many tongues, and what have we found? The Baas yonder a grave in the wilderness--I the food that the wilderness gives, no more."

"A poor wage so far," said Otter. "Ah! the ways of my people are more simple and better. A red spear is brighter than the red gold, yes, and it is more honest."

"The wealth is unwon, Otter, and I have sworn to win the wealth or die. But last night I swore it again to him who lies dead."

"It is well, Baas; an oath is an oath and true men must keep it. But riches cannot be gathered here, for the gold, most of it, is hid in those rocks that are far too heavy to carry, and who may charm gold out of the rock? Not all the wizards in Zululand. At the least you and I cannot do it alone, even should the fever spare us. We must trek, Baas, and look elsewhere."

"Listen, Otter, the tale is yet to tell. The Baas who is dead dreamed before he died, he dreamed that I should win the gold, that I should win it by the help of a woman, and he bade me wait here a while after he was dead. Say now, Otter, you who come of a people learned in dreams and are the child of a dream-doctor, was this a true dream or a sick man's fancy?"

"Nay, Baas, who can tell for sure?" the dwarf answered; then pondered a

while, and set himself to trace lines in the dust of the floor with his finger. "Yet I say," he went on, "that the words of the dead uttered on the edge of death shall come true. He promised that you should win the wealth: you will win it by this way or that, and the great kraal across the water shall be yours again, and the children of strangers shall wander there no more. Let us obey the words of the dead and bide here awhile as he commanded."

Seven days had passed, and on the night of the seventh Leonard Outram and Otter sat together once more in the little cave on Grave Mountain, for so they named this fatal spot. They did not speak, though each of them was speaking after his own fashion, and both had cause for thought. They had been hunting all day, but killed nothing except a guinea-fowl, most of which they had just eaten; it was the only food left to them. Game seemed to have abandoned the district--at least they could find none.

Since his brother's death Leonard had given up all attempt to dig for gold--it was useless. Time hung heavy on his hands, for a man cannot search all day for buck which are not. Gloom had settled on his mind also; he felt his brother's loss more acutely now than on the day he buried him. Moreover, for the first time he suffered from symptoms of the deadly fever which had carried off his three companions. Alas! he knew too well the meaning of this lassitude and nausea, and of the racking pain which from time to time shot through his head and limbs. That was how his brother's last sickness had begun.

Would his own days end in the same fashion? He did not greatly care, he was reckless as to his fate, for the hard necessities of life had left him little time or inclination to rack himself with spiritual doubts. And yet it was awful to think of. He rehearsed the whole scene in his mind again and yet again until it became a reality to him. He saw his own last struggle for life and Otter watching it. He saw the dwarf bearing him in his great arms to a lonely grave, there to cover him with earth, and then, with a sigh, to flee the haunted spot for ever. Why did he stop to die of fever? Because his brother had bidden him to do so with his dying breath; because of a superstition, a folly, which would move any civilised man to scorn.

Ah! there was the rub, he was no longer a civilised man; he had lived so long with nature and savages that he had come to be as nature makes the savage. His educated reason told him that this was folly, but his instinct--that faculty which had begun to take the place of educated reason with him--spoke in another voice. He had gone back in the scale of life, he had grown primitive; his mind was as the mind of a Norseman or of an Aztec. It did not seem wonderful to him that his brother should have prophesied upon his dying bed; it did not strike him as strange even that he should believe in the prophecy and act upon it. And yet he knew that in all probability this obedience would result in his own death.

Those who have lived much with nature will in some degree be familiar

with such sensations, for man and nature are ever at variance, and each would shape the other to its ends. In the issue nature wins. Man boasts continually of his conquests over her, her instincts, her terrors, and her hopes. But let him escape from out his cities and the fellowship of his kind, let him be alone with her for a while, and where is his supremacy? He sinks back on to her breast again and is lost there as in time to be all his labours shall be lost. The grass of the field and the sand of the desert are more powerful than Babylon; they were before her, they are after her; and so it is with everything physical and moral in their degrees, for here rules a nurse whom we human children must obey at last, however much we may defy her.

Thus brooded Leonard as he sat, his hands in his pockets and an empty pipe between his teeth. Their tobacco was done, and yet he drew at the pipe, perhaps from habit. And all the while Otter watched him.

"Baas," he said at length, "you are sick, Baas."

"No," he answered, "that is, perhaps a little."

"Yes, Baas, a little. You have said nothing, but I know, I who watch. The fever has touched you with his finger, by-and-by he will grip you with his whole hand, and then, Baas----"

"And then, Otter, good night."

"Yes, Baas, for you good night, and for me, what? Baas, you think too much and you have nothing to do, that is why you grow sick. Better that we should go and dig again."

"What for, Otter? Ant-bear holes make good graves."

"Evil talk, Baas. Rather let us go away and wait no more than that you should talk such talk, which is the beginning of death."

Then there was silence for a while.

"The truth is, Otter," said Leonard presently, "we are both fools. It is useless for us to stay here with nothing to eat, nothing to drink, nothing to smoke, and only the fever to look forward to, expecting we know not what. But what does it matter? Fools and wise men all come to one end. Lord! how my head aches and how hot it is! I wish that we had some quinine left. I am going out," and he rose impatiently and left the cave.

Otter followed him. He knew where he would go--to his brother's grave. Presently they were there, standing on the hither edge of a ravine. A cloud had hidden the face of the moon, and they could see nothing, so they stood awhile idly waiting for it to pass.

As they rested thus, suddenly a moaning sound came to their ears, or rather a sound which, beginning with a moan, ended in a long low wail.

"What is that?" asked Leonard, looking towards the shadows on the further side of the ravine, whence the cry seemed to proceed.

"I do not know," answered Otter, "unless it be a ghost, or the voice of one who mourns her dead."

"We are the only mourners here," said Leonard, and as he spoke once more the low and piercing wail thrilled upon the air. Just then the cloud passed, the moonlight shone out brilliantly, and they saw who it was that cried aloud in this desolate place. For there, not twenty paces from them, on the other side of the ravine, crouched upon a stone and rocking herself to and fro as though in an agony of despair and grief, sat a tall and withered woman.

With an exclamation of surprise Leonard started towards her, followed by the dwarf. So absorbed was the woman in her sorrow that she neither saw nor heard them. Even when they stood close to her she did not perceive them, for her face was hidden in her bony hands. Leonard looked at her curiously. She was past middle age, but he could see that once she had been handsome, and, for a native, very light in colour. Her hair was grizzled and crisp rather than woolly, and her hands and feet were slender and finely shaped. At the moment he could discern no more of the woman's personal appearance, for the face was covered, as has been said, and her body wrapped in a tattered blanket.

"Mother," he said, speaking in the Sisutu dialect, "what ails you that you weep here alone?"

The stranger let drop her hands and sprang up with a cry of fear. As it chanced, her gaze fell first upon the dwarf Otter, who was standing in front of her, and at the sight of him the cry died upon her lips, and her sunken cheeks, clear-cut features, and sullen black eyes became as those of one who is petrified with terror. So strange was her aspect indeed that the dwarf and his master neither spoke nor moved; they stood hushed and expectant. It was the woman who broke this silence, speaking in a low voice of awe and adoration and, as she spoke, sinking to her knees.

"And hast thou come to claim me at the last," she said, addressing Otter, "O thou whose name is Darkness, to whom I was given in marriage, and from whom I fled when I was young? Do I see thee in the flesh, Lord of the night, King of blood and terror, and is this thy priest? Or do I but dream? Nay, I dream not; slay on, thou priest, and let my sin be purged."

"Here it seems," said Otter, "that we have to do with one who is mad."

"Nay, Jal," the woman answered, "I am not mad, though madness has been nigh to me of late."

"Neither am I named Jal or Darkness," answered the dwarf with

irritation; "cease to speak folly, and tell the White Lord whence you come, for I weary of this talk."

"If you are not Jal, Black One, the thing is strange, for as Jal is so you are. But perchance it does not please you, having put on the flesh, to avow yourself before me. At the least be it as you will. If you are not Jal, then I am safe from your vengeance, and if you are Jal I pray you forget the sins of my youth and spare me."

"Who is Jal?" asked Leonard curiously.

"Nay, I know not," answered the woman, with a sudden change of manner. "Hunger and weariness have turned my brain, and I spoke wandering words. Forget them and give me food, White Man," she added in a piteous tone, "give me food, for I starve."

"There is scant fare here," answered Leonard, "but you are welcome to it. Follow me, mother," and he led the way across the donga to the cave, the woman limping after him painfully.

There Otter gave her meat, and she ate as one eats who has gone hungry for long, greedily and yet with effort. When she had finished she looked at Leonard with her keen dark eyes and said:

"Say, White Lord, are you also a slave-trader?"

"No," he answered grimly, "I am a slave."

"Who is your master then--this Black One here?"

"Nay, he is but the slave of a slave. I have no master, mother; I have a mistress, and she is named Fortune."

"The worst of mistresses," said the old woman, "or the best, for she laughs ever behind her frown and mingles stripes with kisses."

"The stripes I know well, but not the kisses," answered Leonard gloomily; then added in another tone, "What is your errand, mother? How are you named, and what do you seek wandering alone in the mountains?"

"I am named Soa, and I seek succour for one whom I love and who is in sore distress. Will my lord listen to my tale?"

"Speak on," said Leonard.

Then the woman crouched down before him and told this story.