

CHAPTER VII

LEONARD SWEARS ON THE BLOOD OF ACA

On the morrow Leonard woke early from a troubled sleep, for his fever would scarcely let him rest. But, early as it was, the woman Soa had been up before him, and on coming out of the cave the first thing that he saw was her tall shape bending over a little fire, whereon a gourd was boiling, the contents of which she stirred from time to time.

"Good morning to you, White Man," she said; "here is that which shall cure you of your sickness as I promised to do;" and she lifted the gourd from the fire.

Leonard took it and sniffed at the liquor, which smelt abominably.

"It is more likely to poison me, mother," he said.

"No, no," she answered with a smile; "drink half of it now and half at midday, and the fever shall trouble you no more."

So soon as the stuff was cool enough Leonard obeyed, though with a doubting heart.

"Well, mother," he said, setting the gourd down with a gasp, "if nastiness is any proof of virtue your medicine should be good."

"It is good," she answered gravely; "many have been dragged from the edge of death by it."

And here it may be stated, whether it was owing to Soa's medicine or to other causes, that Leonard began to mend from that hour. By nightfall he felt a different man, and before three days were over he was as strong as he had ever been in his life. But into the ingredients of the draught he never found the courage to inquire, and perhaps it was as well.

Shortly after he had taken his dose Leonard observed Otter walking up the hill, bearing a huge lump of meat upon his shoulders.

"The old woman has brought us luck," said the dwarf as he loosed himself from his burden. "Once more the bush is full of game; scarcely had I reached it when I killed a young koodoo, fat, ah! fat, and there are many of them about."

Then they prepared breakfast, and ate it, and when the meal was done once more they talked.

"Mother," began Leonard, "last night you asked me to undertake a great venture, and promised a reward in payment. Now, as you said, we Englishmen will do much for gold, and I am a poor man who seeks wealth. You demand of me that I should risk my life; now tell me of its price."

The woman Soa looked at him awhile, and answered:

"White Man, have you ever heard of the People of the Mist?"

"No," he said, "that is, except in London. I mean that I know nothing of such a people. What of them?"

"This: I, Soa, am one of that people. I was the daughter of their head-priest, and I fled from them many many years ago, because I was doomed to be offered up as a sacrifice to the god Jal, he who is shaped like the Black One yonder," and she pointed to Otter.

"This is rather interesting," said Leonard; "go on."

"White Man, that people is a great people. They live in a region of mist, upon high lands beneath the shadow of the tops of snow mountains. They are larger than other men in size, and very cruel, but their women are fair. Now of the beginning of my people I know nothing, for it is lost in the past. But they worship an ancient stone statue fashioned like a dwarf, and to him they offer the blood of men. Beneath the feet of the statue is a pool of water, and beyond the pool is a cave. In that cave, White Man, he dwells whom they adore in effigy above, he, Jal, whose name is Terror."

"Do you mean that a dwarf lives in the cave?" asked Leonard.

"No, White Man, not a dwarf, but a holy crocodile which they name the Snake, the biggest crocodile in the whole world, and the oldest, for he has dwelt there from the beginning. It is this Snake that devours the bodies of those who are offered to the Black One."

"As I remarked before," said Leonard, "all this is very romantic and interesting, but I cannot see that there is much profit to be made out of it."

"White Man, the lives of men are not the only things which the priests of the Children of the Mist offer to their god; they offer also such toys as this, White Man," and suddenly she unclosed her hand and exhibited to Leonard's astonished gaze a ruby, or what appeared to be a ruby, of such size and so lovely a colour, that his eyes were dazzled when he looked at it. The gem, though roughly polished, was uncut, but its dimensions were those of a small blackbird's egg, it was of the purest pigeon-blood colour, without a flaw, and worn almost round, apparently by the action of water. Now, as it chanced, Leonard knew something of gems, although unhappily he was less acquainted with the peculiarities of the ruby than with those of most other stones. Thus, although this magnificent specimen might be a true stone, as indeed appeared to be the case, it was quite possible that it was only a spinel, or a garnet, and alas! he had no means of setting his doubts at rest.

"Do your people find many of these pebbles, Soa?" he asked, "and if so,

where do they find them?"

"Yes, White Man, they find many, though few of such a size as this. They dig them out of a dry river-bed in some spot that is known to the priests only, and with them other beautiful stones of a blue colour."

"Sapphires probably," said Leonard to himself: "they generally go together."

"Every year they dig them," she went on, "and the biggest of those that are found in their digging they bind upon the brow of her who is to be offered as a wife to the god Jal. Afterwards, before she dies, they take the gem from her brow and store it in a secret place, and there in that secret place are hidden all those that have been worn by the victims of countless years. Moreover the eyes of Jal are made of such stones, and there are others.

"This is the legend of my people, White Man, that Jal, God of Death and Evil, slew his mother, Aca, in the far past. There where the stones are found he slew her, and the red gems are her blood, and the blue gems are her tears which she shed praying to him for mercy. Therefore the blood of Aca is offered to Jal, and so it shall be offered till Aca comes again to drive his worship from the land."

"A nice bit of mythology, I am sure," said Leonard. "Our old friends the Darkness and the Dawn in an African shape, I suppose. But listen to me,

mother. This stone, if it is genuine, is worth many ounces of gold, but there are other stones so like it that none who are not learned can tell the difference, and if it be one of these it is of little value. Still it may happen that this, and the others of which you speak, are true rubies; at any rate I should be willing to take my chance of that. But now, tell me, what is your plan? This is a very pretty story, and the rubies may be there, but how am I to get them?"

"I have a plan, White Man," she answered. "If you will help me, I offer to give you that stone, which I have borne hidden about me for many years, tellings its story to none, no, not even to Mavoom. I offer to give it to you now if you will promise to attempt the rescue of my mistress, for I know by your eyes that if once you promise you will not desert the quest;" and she paused, looking at him keenly.

"Very well," said Leonard, "but considering the risks the price does not seem quite good enough. As I told you, this stone may be worth nothing: you must make a better bid, mother."

"Truly, White Man, I have judged you well," answered Soa with a sneer; "also you are wise: little work for little wage. Listen now, this is the pay I proffer you.

"If you succeed, and the Shepherdess is saved alive from the grip of the Yellow Devil, I promise this on her behalf and on my own: that I will guide you to the land of the People of the Mist, and show you a way

to win for yourself all those other countless stones that are hidden there."

"Good," said Leonard, "but why do you promise on behalf of your mistress and yourself? What has she got to do with it?"

"Without her nothing can be done, White Man. This people is great and strong, and we have no force with which to conquer them in war. Here craft must be your spear."

"You must speak more clearly, Soa. I cannot waste time in guessing riddles. How will you conquer this people by craft, and what has Miss Rodd, whom you name the Shepherdess, to do with the matter?"

"That you shall learn by-and-by, after you have rescued her, White Man; till then my lips are shut. I tell you that I have a plan, and this must be enough, for more I will not say. If you are not content, let me go to seek help elsewhere."

Leonard thought a moment, and seeing that she was determined not to be more explicit, said:

"Very well, then. And now how am I to know that your mistress will fall in with this scheme?"

"I answer for her," said Soa, "she will never go back upon my word. Look

you, White Man, it is not for a little thing that I would have told you this tale. If you journey to the land of the People of the Mist, I must go with you, and there, should I be discovered, my death waits me. I tell you the tale, or some of it, and I offer you the bribe because I see that you need money, and I am sure that without the chance of winning money you will not hazard your life in this desperate search. But I love my mistress so well that I am ready to hazard mine; ay, I would give six lives, if I had them, to save her from the shame of the slave. Now, White Man, we have talked enough; is it a bargain?"

"What do you say, Otter?" asked Leonard, thoughtfully pulling at his beard, "you have heard all this wonderful tale and you are clever."

"Yes, Baas," said the dwarf, speaking for the first time, "I have heard the tale, and as for being clever, perhaps I am and perhaps I am not. My people said that I was clever, and that is one of the reasons why they would not have me for a chief. If I had been clever only, they could have borne it, they said, or if I had been ugly only, but being both ugly and clever I was no chief for them. They feared lest I should rule them too well and make all the people to be born ugly also. Ah! they were fools; they did not understand that it wants someone cleverer than I to make people so ugly."

"Never mind all that," said Leonard, who understood however that the dwarf was talking thus in order to give himself time to think before he answered. "Show me your mind, Otter."

"Baas, what can I say? I know nothing of the value of that red stone. I do not know whether this woman, of whom my heart tells me no good, speaks truth or lies about a distant people who live in a fog and worship a god shaped as I am. None have ever worshipped me, yet there may be a land where I should be deemed worthy of worship, and if so I should like to travel in that land. But as to the rescue of this Shepherdess from the Nest of the Yellow Devil, I do not know how it can be brought about. Say, mother, how many of the men of Mavoom were taken prisoners with your mistress?"

"Fifty of them perchance," answered Soa.

"Well now," went on the dwarf, "if we could loose those men and if they are brave we might do something, but there are many if's about it, Baas. Still if you think the pay is good enough we can try. It will be better than sitting here, and it does not matter what happens. Every man to his fate, Baas, and fate to every man."

"A good motto," said Leonard. "Soa, I take your offer, though I am a fool for my pains. And now, with your leave, we will put the matter into writing so that there may be no mistake about it afterwards. Get a little blood from the buck's flesh, Otter, and mix gunpo water with it; that will do for ink if we add some hot water."

While the dwarf was compounding this ominous mixture Leonard sought of

paper. He could find none; the last had been lost when the hut was blown away on the night of his brother's death. Then he bethought him of the prayer-book which Jane Beach had given him. He would not use the fly-leaf, because her name was on it, so he must write across the title-page. And thus he wrote in small, neat letters with his mixture of blood and gunpowder straight through the Order of Common Prayer:--

"Agreement between Leonard Outram and Soa, the native woman.

"I. The said Leonard Outram agrees to use his best efforts to rescue Juanna, the daughter of Mr. Rodd, now reduced to a state of slavery and believed to be in the power of one Pereira, a slave-dealer.

"II. In consideration of the services of the said Leonard Outram, the said Soa delivers to him a certain stone believed to be a ruby, of which the said Leonard Outram hereby acknowledges the receipt.

"III. Should the rescue be effected, the said Soa hereby agrees, on behalf of herself and the said Juanna Rodd, to conduct the said Leonard Outram to a certain spot in central South Eastern Africa, inhabited by a tribe known as the People of the Mist, there to reveal to him and to help him to gain possession of the store of rubies used in the religious ceremonies of the said tribe. Further, the said Soa agrees, on behalf of the said Juanna Rodd, that she, the said Juanna, will accompany her upon the journey, and will play among the said People of the Mist any part that may be required of her as necessary to the success of this

undertaking.

"IV. It is mutually agreed that these enterprises be prosecuted until the said Leonard Outram is satisfied that they are fruitless.

"Signed in the Manica Mountains, Eastern Africa, on the ninth day of May 18--."

When he had finished this document, perhaps one of the most remarkable that were ever written since Pizarro drew up his famous agreement for the division of the prospective spoils of Peru, Leonard read it aloud and laughed heartily to himself. It was the first time that he had laughed for some months. Then he translated it to his companions, not without complaisancy, for it had a truly legal sound, and your layman loves to affect the lawyer.

"What do you think of that, Otter?" he asked when he had finished.

"It is fine, Baas, very fine," answered the dwarf. "Wonderful are the ways of the white man! But, Baas, how can the old woman promise things on behalf of another?"

Leonard pulled his beard reflectively. The dwarf had put his finger upon the weak spot in the document. But he was saved the necessity of answering by Soa herself, who said quietly, "Have no fear, White Man;

that which I promise in her name, my mistress will certainly perform, if so be that you can save her. Give me the pen that I may make my mark upon the paper. But first do you swear upon the red stone that you will perform what you undertake in this writing."

So Leonard laughed, swore, and signed, and Soa made her mark. Then Otter affixed his, as witness to the deed, and the thing was finished. Laughing again at the comicality of the transaction, which indeed he had carried out more by way of joke than for any other reason, Leonard put the prayer-book in his pocket and the great ruby into a division of his belt. The old woman watched the stone vanish with an expression of triumph on her face, then she cried exultingly:

"Ah! White Man, you have taken my pay, and now you are my servant to the end. He who swears upon the blood of Aca swears an oath indeed, and woe be to him if he should break it."

"Quite so," answered Leonard; "I have taken your pay and I mean to earn it, so we need not enter into the matter of the blood of Aca. It seems to me more probable that our own blood will be in question before all is said and done. And now we had better make ready to start."