

CHAPTER IX

THE YELLOW DEVIL'S NEST

Sundown came, and, as on the previous night, the three travellers camped upon an island waiting for the moon to rise. They had caught two flapper-ducks in some weeds, and there was a talk of lighting a fire to cook them by. Finally Leonard negated this idea. "It is dangerous," he said, "for fires can be seen from afar." So they made a wretched meal off a little dried meat and some raw duck's eggs.

It was fortunate that his caution prevailed, since, as the twilight was dying into dark, they heard the stroke of paddles and made out the shapes of canoes passing them. There were several canoes, each of which towed something behind it, and the men in them shouted to one another from time to time, now in Portuguese and now in Arabic.

"Lie still, lie still," whispered Otter, "these are the slave-men taking back the big boats."

Leonard and Soa followed his advice to the letter, and the slavers, paddling furiously up stream, passed within thirty feet of where they crouched in the rushes.

"Give way, comrades," called one man to the captain of the next canoe; "the landing-place is near, and there is rum for those who earn it."

"I hope that they will not stop here," said Leonard beneath his breath.

"Hist!" answered Otter, "I hear them landing."

He was right; the party had disembarked about two hundred yards away. Presently they heard them collecting reeds for burning, and in ten minutes more two bright tongues of flame showed that they had lit their fires.

"We had better get out of this," said Leonard; "if they discover us----"

"They will not discover us, Baas, if we lie still," answered Otter; "let us wait awhile. I have another plan. Listen, Baas." And he whispered in his ear.

So they waited. From the fires below them came the sound of men eating and drinking--especially drinking. An hour passed, and Leonard rose, followed by Otter, who said:

"I will come too, Baas; I can move like a cat."

"Where are you going, White Man?" asked Soa.

"I am going to spy upon those men. I understand Portuguese, and wish to hear what they say. Otter, take your knife and revolver, but no gun."

"Good," said the woman, "but be careful. They are very clever."

"Yes, yes," put in Otter, "but the Baas is clever also, and I, I am clever. Do not fear for us, mother."

Then they started, creeping cautiously through the reeds. When they were within twenty yards of the fires, Leonard missed his footing and fell into a pool of water with a splash. Some of the slave-dealers heard the noise and sprang to their feet. Instantly Otter grunted in exact imitation of a hippopotamus-calf.

"A sea-cow," said a man in Portuguese. "She won't hurt us. The fire will frighten her."

Leonard and Otter waited awhile, then crept to a clump of reeds whence they could hear every word that was spoken. The men round the fire numbered twenty-two. One, their leader, appeared to be a pure-bred Portugee, some of the others were Bastards and the rest Arabs. They were drinking rum and water out of tin pannikins--a great deal of rum and very little water. Many of them seemed half-drunk already, at any rate their tongues were loosened.

"May a curse fall upon our father, the Devil!" said one, a half-breed; "why did he take it into his head to send us back with the boats just now? We shall miss the fun."

"What fun?" answered the leader of the party. "They won't cage the birds for another three or four days; the dhows are not ready, and there is talk of an English cruiser--may she sink to hell!--hanging about outside the river mouth."

"No, not that," said the man who had spoken first, "there is not much sport in driving a lot of stinking niggers on to a dhow. I mean the auction of the white girl, the English trader's daughter, whom we caught up the river yonder. There's a beauty for some lucky dog; I never saw such a one. What eyes she has, and what a spirit! why, most of the little dears would have cried themselves blind by now."

"You needn't think about her," sneered his leader; "she will go too dear for the likes of you; besides it is foolish to spend so much on one girl, white or black. When is the auction?"

"It was to have been the night before the dhows sail, but now the Devil says it shall be to-morrow night. I will tell you why--he is afraid of her. He thinks that she will bring misfortune to him, and wants to be rid of her. Ah! he is a wag, is the old man--he loves a joke, he does. 'All men are brothers,' he said yesterday, 'white or black; therefore all women are sisters.' So he is going to sell her like a nigger girl. What is good enough for them is good enough for her. Ha! ha! pass the rum, brother, pass the rum."

"Perhaps he will put it off and we may be back in time, after all," said the captain. "Anyhow, here is a health to her, the love. By the way, did some of you think to ask the password before we left this morning? I forgot to do so, myself."

"Yes," said a Bastard, "the old word, 'the Devil.'"

"There is none better, comrades, none better," hiccupped the leader.

Then for an hour or more their talk went on--partly about Juanna, partly about other things. As they grew more drunk the conversation became more and more revolting, till Leonard could scarcely listen to it and lie still. At length it died away, and one by one the men sank into a sound and sodden sleep. They did not set a sentry, for here on the island they had no fear of foes.

Then Otter rose upon his hands and knees, and his face looked fierce in the faint light.

"Baas," he whispered, "shall we----" and he drew his hand across his throat.

Leonard thought awhile. His rage was deep, and yet he shrank from the slaughter of sleeping men, however wicked. Besides, could it be done without noise? Some of them would wake--fear would sober them, and they were many.

"No," he whispered back. "Follow me, we will cut loose the boats."

"Good, good," said Otter.

Then, stealthily as snakes, they crept some thirty yards to where the boats were tied to a low tree--three canoes and five large flat-bottomed punts, containing the arms and provisions of the slave-dealers. Drawing their knives they cut these loose. A gentle push set them moving, then the current caught them, and slowly they floated away into the night.

This done they crawled back again. Their path took them within five paces of where that half-breed ruffian lay who had begun the talk to which they had listened. Leonard looked at him and turned to creep away; already Otter was five paces ahead, when suddenly the edge of the moon showed for the first time and its light fell full upon the slaver's face. The sleeping man awoke, sat up, and saw them.

Now Leonard dared not hesitate, or they were lost. Like a tiger he sprang at the man's throat and had grasped it in his hand before he could even cry aloud. Then came a struggle short and sharp, and a knife flashed. Before Otter could get back to his side it was done--so swiftly and so silently that none of the band had wakened, though one or two of them stirred and muttered in their heavy sleep.

Leonard sprang up unhurt, and together they ran, rather than walked,

back to the spot where they had left Soa.

She was watching for them, and pointing to Leonard's coat, asked "How many?"

"One," answered Otter.

"I would it had been all," Soa muttered fiercely, "but you are only two."

"Quick," said Leonard, "into the canoe with you. They will be after us presently."

In another minute they had pushed off and were clear of the island, which was not more than a quarter of a mile long. They paddled across the river, which at this spot ran rapidly and had a width of some eight hundred yards, so as to hide in the shadow of the opposite bank. When they reached it Otter rested on his paddles and gave vent to a suppressed chuckle, which was his nearest approach to laughter.

"Why do you laugh, Black One?" asked Soa.

"Look yonder," he answered, and he pointed to some specks on the surface of the river which were fast vanishing in the distance. "Yonder go the boats of the slave-dealers, and in them are their arms and food. We cut them loose, the Baas and I. There on the island sleep two-and-twenty

men--all save one: there they sleep, and when they wake what will they find? They will find themselves on a little isle in the middle of great waters, into which, even if they could, they will not dare to swim because of the alligators. They can get no food on the island, for they have no guns and ducks do not stop to be caught, but outside the alligators will wait in hundreds to catch them. By-and-by they will grow hungry--they will shout and yell, but none will hear them--then they will become mad, and, falling on each other, they will eat each other and die miserably one by one. Some will take to the water, those will drown or be caught by the alligators, and so it shall go on till they are all dead, every one of them, dead, dead, dead!" and again Otter chuckled.

Leonard did not reprove him; with the talk of these wretches yet echoing in his ears he could feel little pity for the horrible fate which would certainly overtake them.

Hark! a faint sound stole across the quiet waters, a sound which grew into a clamour of fear and rage. The slavers had awakened, they had found the dead man in their midst mysteriously slain by an invisible foe. And now the clamour gathered to a yell, for they had learned that their boats were gone and that they were trapped.

From their shelter on the other side of the river, as they dropped leisurely down the stream, Leonard and Otter could catch distant glimpses of the frantic men rushing to and fro in the bright moonlight

and seeking for their boats. But the boats had departed to return no more. By degrees the clamour lessened behind them, till at last it died away, swallowed in the silence of the night.

Then Leonard told Soa what he had heard by the slaver's fire.

"How far is the road, Black One?" she asked when he had finished.

"By sundown to-morrow we shall be at the Yellow Devil's gates!" answered Otter.

Two hours later they overtook the boats which they had cut adrift. Most of them were tied together, and they floated peacefully in a group.

"We had better scuttle them," said Leonard.

"No, Baas," answered Otter, "if we escape we may want them again. Yonder is the place where we must land," and he pointed to a distant tongue of marsh. "Let us go with the boats there and make them fast. Perhaps we may find food in them, and we need food."

The advice was good, and they followed it. Keeping alongside of the punts and directing them, when necessary, with a push of the paddles, they reached the point just as the dawn was breaking. Here in a sheltered bay they found a mooring-place to which they fastened all the boats with ropes that hung ready. Then they searched the lockers and

to their joy discovered food in plenty, including cooked meat, spirits, biscuits, bread, and some oranges and bananas. Only those who have been forced to do without farinaceous food for days or weeks will know what this abundance meant to them. Leonard thought that he had never eaten a more delicious meal, or drunk anything so good as the rum and water with which they washed it down.

They found other things also: rifles, cutlasses and ammunition, and, better than all, a chest of clothes which had evidently belonged to the officer or officers of the party. One suit was a kind of uniform plentifully adorned with gold lace, having tall boots and a broad felt hat with a white ostrich feather in it to match. Also there were some long Arab gowns and turbans, the gala clothes of the slave-dealers, which they took with them in order to appear smart on their return.

But the most valuable find of all was a leather bag in the breeches of the uniform, containing the sum of the honest gains of the leader of the party, which he had preferred to keep in his own company even on his travels. On examination this bag was found to hold something over a hundred English sovereigns and a dozen or fifteen pieces of Portuguese gold.

"Now, Baas," said Otter, "this is my word, that we put on these clothes."

"What for?" asked Leonard.

"For this reason: that should we be seen by the slave-traders they will think us of their brethren."

The advantages of this step were so obvious that they immediately adopted it. Thus disguised, with a silk sash round his middle and a pistol stuck in it, Leonard might well have been mistaken for the most ferocious of slave-traders.

Otter too looked sufficiently strange, robed as an Arab and wearing a turban. Being a dwarf, the difficulty was that all the dresses proved too long for him. Finally it was found necessary to cut one down by the primitive process of laying it on a block of wood and chopping through it with a sabre.

When this change of garments had been effected, and their own clothes with the spare arms were hidden away in the rushes on the somewhat remote chance that they might be useful hereafter, they prepared for a start on foot across the marshes. By an afterthought Leonard fetched the bag of gold and put it in his pocket. He felt few scruples in availing himself of the money of the slave-driver, not for his own use indeed, but because it might help their enterprise.

Now their road ran along marshes and by secret paths that none save those who had travelled them could have found. But Otter had not forgotten. On they went through the broiling heat of the day, since

linger they dared not. They met no living man on their path, though here and there they found the body of some wretched slave, whose corpse had been cast into the reeds by the roadside. But the road had been trodden, and recently, by many feet, among which were the tracks of two mules or donkeys.

At last, about an hour before sunset, they came to the home of the Yellow Devil. The Nest was placed thus. It stood upon an island having an area of ten or twelve acres. Of this, however, only about four and a half acres were available for a living space; the rest was a morass hidden by a growth of very tall reeds, which morass, starting from a great lagoon on the northern and eastern sides, ran up to the low enclosure of the buildings that, on these faces, were considered to be sufficiently defended by the swamp and the wide waters beyond. On the southern and western aspects of the camp matters were different, for here the place was strongly fortified both by art and nature. Firstly, a canal ran round these two faces, not very wide or deep indeed, but impassable except in boats, owing to the soft mud at its bottom. On the further side of this canal an earthwork had been constructed, having its crest stoutly palisaded and its steep sides planted with a natural defence of aloes and prickly-pears.

So much for the exterior of the place. Its interior was divided into three principal enclosures. Of these three the easternmost was the site of the Nest itself, a long low thatched building of wood, in front and to the west of which there was an open space or courtyard, with a hard

floor. Herein were but two buildings, a shed supported on posts and open from the eaves to the ground, where sales of slaves were carried on, and further to the north, almost continuous with the line of the Nest itself, but separate from it, a small erection, very strongly built of brick and stone, and having a roof made from the tin linings of ammunition and other cases. This was a magazine. All round this enclosure stood rows of straw huts of a native build, evidently occupied as a camp by the Arabs and half-breed slave-traders of the baser sort.

The second enclosure, which was to the west of the Nest, comprised the slave camp. It may have covered an acre of ground, and the only buildings in it were four low sheds, similar in every respect to that where the slaves were sold, only much longer. Here the captives lay picketed in rows to iron bars which ran the length of the sheds, and were fixed into the ground at either end. This camp was separated from the Nest enclosure by a deep canal, thirty feet in width and spanned at one point by a slender and primitive drawbridge that led across the canal to the gate of the camp. Also it was protected on the Nest side by a low wall, and on the slave-camp side by an earthwork, planted as usual with prickly-pears. On this earthwork near the gate and little guard-house a six-pounder cannon was mounted, the muzzle of which frowned down upon the slave camp, a visible warning to its occupants of the fate that awaited the froward. Indeed, all the defences of this part of the island were devised as safeguards against a possible emeute of the slaves, and also to provide a second line of fortifications should the Nest itself chance to be taken by an enemy.

Beyond the slave camp, lay the garden that could only be approached through it. This also was fortified by water and earthworks, but not so strongly.

Such is a brief description of what was in those days the strongest slave-hold in Africa.