

CHAPTER X

LEONARD MAKES A PLAN

The road which Leonard and his companions were following led them to the edge of the main and southernmost canal, debouching exactly opposite the water-gate that gave access to the Nest. But Otter did not venture to guide them to this point, for there they should be seen by the sentries, and, notwithstanding their masquerade dress, awkward questions might be asked which they could not answer. Therefore when they had arrived within five hundred yards of the gate, he struck off to the left into the thick bush that clothed the hither side of the canal. Through this they crawled as best they might till finally they halted near the water's edge, almost opposite to the south-west angle of the slave camp, and under the shadow of a dense clump of willows.

"See, Baas," said the dwarf in a low voice, "the journey is accomplished and I have brought you straight. Yonder is the house of the Yellow Devil--now it remains only to take it, or to rescue the maiden from it."

Leonard looked at the place in dismay. How was it possible that they--two men and a woman--could capture this fortified camp, filled as it was with scores of the most wicked desperadoes in Africa? How was it possible even that they could obtain access to it? Viewed from far off, the thing had seemed small--to be done somehow. But now! And yet they must do something, or all their labour would be in vain, and the poor

girl they came to rescue must be handed over to her shameful fate, or, if she chose it in preference and could compass the deed, to self-murder.

"How on earth!" said Leonard aloud, then added, "Well, Otter, I can tell you one thing. I have come a long way on this business, and I am not going to turn my back to it now. I have never yet turned my back on a venture and I will not begin with this, though I dare say that my death lies in it."

"It is all in the hand of to-morrow," answered Otter; "but it is time that we made a plan, for the night draws on. Now, Baas, here is a thick tree shaded by other trees. Shall we climb it and look down into the camp?"

Leonard nodded, and climbing the tree with ease, they peeped down through the leafiest of its boughs. All the camp lay beneath them like a map, and Otter, clinging monkey-wise to a branch, pointed out its details to Leonard. He had been a prisoner there, and the memories of prisoners are long.

The place was peopled by numbers of men in strange costumes, and of different nationalities; dealers in "black ivory" of various degree.

Perhaps there may have been more than a hundred of them. Some were strolling about in knots smoking and talking, some were gambling, others were going on their business. One group--captains, to judge from the

richness of their attire--were standing round the arms-house and peeping through a grating in the wall, which they reached by sitting upon each other's shoulders. This amusement lasted them for some time, till at length a man, of whom at that distance they could see only that he was old and stout, came and drove them away, and they broke up laughing.

"That is the Yellow Devil," said Otter, "and those men were looking at the maid who is called the Shepherdess. She is locked up there until the hour comes for her to be sold. They will be the bidders."

Leonard made no reply; he was studying the place. Presently a drum was beaten, and men appeared carrying large tin pails of smoking stuff.

"Yonder is the food for the slaves," said Otter again. "See, they are going to feed them."

The men with the pails, accompanied by some of the officers having sjambochs or hide whips in their hands, advanced across the open space till they came to the moat which separated the slave camp from the Nest, whence they called to the sentry on the embankment to let down the drawbridge. He obeyed and they crossed. Each man with a bucket was followed by another who bore a wooden spoon, while a third behind them carried water in a large gourd. Having come to the first of the open sheds, they began their rounds, the man with the wooden spoon ladling out portions of the stiff porridge and throwing it down upon the ground before each slave in turn as food is thrown to a dog. Then the Arab with

the gourd poured water into wooden bowls, that the captives might drink.

Presently there was a halt, and the officers gathered together to discuss something.

"A slave is sick," said Otter.

The knot separated, but a big white man with a hippopotamus-hide whip began to strike at a dark thing on the ground which did not seem to move.

The man ceased beating and called aloud. Then two of the Arabs went to the little guard-house that was by the drawbridge and brought tools with which they loosed the fetters on the limbs of the poor creature--apparently a woman--thus freeing her from the long iron bar. This done, some of the officers sauntering after them, they dragged the body to the high enclosure of earth and up a short ladder having a wooden platform at the top of it, that overhung the deep canal below.

"This is how the Yellow Devil buries his dead and cures his sick," said Otter.

"I have seen enough," answered Leonard, and began to descend the tree hastily, an example which Otter followed with more composure.

"Ah! Baas," he said when they reached the ground, "you are but a

chicken. The hearts of those who have dwelt in slave camps are strong, and, after all, better the belly of a fish than the hold of a slave dhow. Wow! who do these things? Is it not the white men, your brothers, and do they not say many prayers to the Great Man up in the sky while they do them?"

"Be still," said Leonard, "and give me some brandy." He was in no mood to discuss the blessings of civilisation as they have often been put into practice in Africa. And to think that this fate might soon be his own!

Leonard drank the brandy and sat awhile in silence, pushing up his beard with his hand and gazing into the gathering gloom with his hawk-like eyes. Thus he had sat beside his dying brother's bed; it was a pose that he adopted unconsciously when lost in thought.

"Come, Soa," he said at length, "we have travelled here to please you; now give us the benefit of your suggestions. How are we going to get your mistress out of that camp?"

"Loose the slaves and let them kill their masters," Soa answered laconically.

"I doubt there is not much pluck in slaves," said Leonard.

"There should be fifty of Mavoom's men there," she replied, "and they

will fight well enough if they have arms."

Then Leonard looked at Otter, seeking further ideas.

"My snake puts it into my head," said the dwarf, "that fire is a good friend when men are few and foes are many; also that the reeds yonder are dry, and the sea wind rises and will blow hard before midnight. Moreover all these houses are thatched, and in a wind fire jumps. But can a regiment have two generals? You are our captain, Baas; speak and we will do your bidding. Here one counsel is as good as another. Let fate speak through your mouth."

"Very well," said Leonard. "This is my plan; it goes a little further than yours, that is all. We must gain entrance to the Nest while it is still dark, before the moon rises. I know the watchword, 'Devil,' and disguised as we are, perhaps the sentry will let us pass unquestioned. If not, we must kill him, and silently."

"Good," said Otter, "but how about the woman here?"

"We will leave her hidden in the bush; she could be of no help in the camp and might hinder us."

"No, White Man," broke in Soa, "where you go I go also; moreover my mistress is yonder and I would seek her."

"As you like," answered Leonard, then went on: "we must get between the hut, there is only one, and the low wall that borders the canal separating the Nest from the slave camp, and, if the drawbridge is up and no other means can be found, we must swim the dike, dispose of the sentry there also and gain the slave camp. Then we must try to free some of the slaves and send them round through the garden into the morass to fire the reeds, should the wind blow strong enough. Meanwhile I propose to walk boldly into the camp, salute Pereira, pass myself off as a slaver with a dhow at the mouth of the river, and say that I have come to buy slaves, and above all to bid for the white girl. Luckily we have a good deal of gold. That is my plan so far as it goes, the rest we must leave to chance. If I can buy the Shepherdess I will. If not, I must try to get her off in some other way."

"So be it, Baas, and now let us eat, for we shall need all our strength to-night. Then we will go down to the landing-place and take our chance."

They ate of the food they had with them and drank sparingly of the slave-dealers' brandy, saying little the while, for the shadow of what was to come lay upon them. Even the phlegmatic and fatalistic Otter was depressed, perhaps because of the associations of the place, which, for him, were painful, perhaps because of the magnitude of their undertaking. Never had he known such a tale, never had he seen such an adventure as this--that two men and an old woman should attack an armed camp. Indeed, although he was not acquainted with the saying, Otter's

feelings would have been correctly summed up in the well-known phrase, "C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la guerre."

As yet the night was intensely dark, and its gloom did not tend to improve their spirits; also, as Otter had predicted, the wind was rising and souged through the reeds and willows in melancholy notes.

So the time passed till it was nine o'clock.

"We must move down to the landing-place," said Leonard; "there will soon be some light, enough for us to work by."

Then Otter took the lead and slowly, step by step, they crept back to the road and followed it down the shore of the canal opposite the water-gate. Here was a place where boats and canoes were tied, both for convenience in crossing the canal to and from the camp and for the use of the slave-dealers when they passed to the secret harbour six miles away, where the dhows embarked their cargoes.

They waited awhile. From the Nest came the sound of revelry, and from the slave camp there rose other sounds, the voice of groaning broken by an occasional wail wrung out of the misery of some lost creature who lay there in torment. Gradually the sky brightened a little.

"Perhaps we had better be making a start," said Leonard; "there is a canoe which will serve our turn."

Before the words were out of his mouth they heard the splash of oars, and a boat crept past them and made fast to the water-gate twenty yards away.

"Who goes there?" came the challenge of the sentry in Portuguese. "Speak quick or I fire."

"Don't be in such a hurry with your rifle, fool," answered a coarse voice. "The very best of friends goes here. An honest trader called Xavier who comes from his plantation on the coast to tell you all good news."

"Pardon, senor," said the sentry, "but how was a man to see in the dark, big as you are? What is the news then? Are the dhows in sight?"

"Come down and help us to tie up this cursed boat and I will tell you. You know where the post is, and we can't find it."

The sentry obeyed with alacrity, and the man called Xavier went on:

"Yes, the dhows are in sight, but I don't think that they will get in to-night because of this wind, so you may look for a busy day to-morrow loading up the blackbirds. One is in by the way--a small one from Madagascar. The captain is a stranger, a big Frenchman named Pierre, or he may be an Englishman for anything I know. I hailed him and found that he is all right, but I didn't see him. However, I sent him a note to

tell him that there was fun on here to-night, which was generous of me, as he may be a rival bidder."

"Is he coming, señor? I ask because, if so, I must look out for him."

"I don't know: he answered that he would if he could. But how is the English girl? She is to be put up to-night, isn't she?"

"Oh, yes, señor, there will be a great to-do at twelve, when the moon is high. So soon as she has been bought, the priest Francisco is to marry her to the lucky man, there and then. The old fellow insists on it; he has grown superstitious about the girl and says that she shall be properly married."

Xavier laughed aloud, "Has he now? He is getting into his dotage. Well, what does it matter? We have a good law of divorce in these parts, friend. I am going in for that girl; if I give a hundred ounces for her I will buy her, and I have brought the gold with me."

"A hundred ounces for one girl! It is a large sum, señor, but you are rich. Not like us poor devils who get all the risk and little profit."

By this time the men had finished tying up the boat and taking some baggage or provisions out of her, Leonard could not see which. Then Xavier and the sentry went up the steps together, followed by the two boatmen, and the gates were shut behind them.

"Well," whispered Leonard, "we have learnt something at any rate. Now, Otter, I am Pierre the French slave-trader from Madagascar, and, understand, you are my servant; as for Soa, she is the guide, or interpreter, or anyone you like. We must pass the gates, but the real Pierre must never pass them. There must be no sentry to let him in. Do you think that you can manage it, Otter, or must I?"

"It comes into my head, Baas, that we may learn a lesson from this Xavier. I might forget something in the canoe, and the sentry might help me to find it after you have passed the gates. For the rest I am quick and strong and silent."

"Quick and strong and silent you must be. A noise, and all is lost."

Then they crept to the canoe which they had selected and loosened her. They embarked and Otter took the paddle. First he let her float gently down stream and under cover of the shore for a distance of about fifty yards. Then he put about and the play began.

"Now, you fool, where are you paddling to?" said Leonard in a loud voice to Otter, speaking in the bastard Arabic which passes current for a language on this coast. "You will have us into the bank, I tell you. Curse this wind and the darkness! Steady now, you ugly black dog; those must be the gates the letter told of--are they not, woman? Hold on with the boat-hook, can't you?"

A wicket at the gate above rattled and the voice of the sentry challenged them.

"A friend--a friend!" answered Leonard in Portuguese; "one who is a stranger and would pay his respects to your leader, Dom Antonio Pereira, with a view to business."

"What is your name?" asked the guard suspiciously.

"Pierre is my name. Dog is the name of the dwarf my servant, and as for the old woman, you can call her anything you like."

"The password," said the sentry; "none come in here without the word."

"The word--Ah! what did the Dom Xavier say it was in his letter?"

'Fiend! No, I have it, 'Devil' is the word."

"Where do you hail from?"

"From Madagascar, where the goods you have to supply are in some demand just now. Come, let us in; we don't want to sit here all night and miss the fun."

The man began to unbar the door, and stopped, struck by a fresh doubt.

"You are not of our people," he said; "you speak Portuguese like a cursed Englishman."

"No, I should hope not; I am a 'cursed Englishman,' that is half--son of an English lord and a French creole, born in the Mauritius at your service, and let me ask you to be a little more civil, for cross-bred dogs are fierce."

Now at length the sentry opened one side of the gate, grumbling, and Leonard swaggered up the steps followed by the other two. Already they were through it, when suddenly he turned and struck Otter in the face.

"Why, Dog," he said angrily, "you have forgotten to bring up the keg of brandy, my little present for the Dom. Go and fetch it. Quick, now."

"Pardon, Chief," answered Otter, "but I am a small man and the keg is heavy for me alone--if you will deign to help me, for the old woman is too weak."

"Do you take me for a porter that I should roll kegs of cognac up steps? Here, my friend," he went on addressing the sentry, "if you wish to earn a little present and a drink, perhaps you will give this fellow a hand with the cask. There is a spigot in it, and you can try the quality afterwards."

"Right, Senor," said the man briskly, and led the way down the steps.

A look of dreadful intelligence passed between the dwarf and his master. Then Otter followed, his hand upon the hilt of the Arab sabre which he wore, while Leonard and Soa waited above. They heard the man's heavily booted feet going down the steps followed by Otter's naked footfall.

"Where is your keg? I don't see it," said the sentry presently.

"Lean over, senor, lean over," answered Otter; "it is in the stern of the canoe. Let me help you."

There was a moment's pause, to the listeners it seemed hours. Then came the sound of a blow and a heavy splash. They hearkened on, but nothing more was to be heard except the beating of their hearts and the distant noise of revelry from the camp.

Three seconds passed and Otter stood beside them. In the dim light Leonard could see that his eyes stared wide and his nostrils twitched.

"Quick was the blow, strong was the blow, silent is the man for ever," whispered Otter. "So the Baas commanded, so it is."