

## CHAPTER XI

### THAT HERO OTTER

"Help me to secure the gate," said Leonard presently.

In another minute the great iron bar had been dropped into its place, and Leonard withdrew the key and put it in his pocket.

"Why do you secure the door, Baas?" whispered Otter.

"To keep the real Pierre out, in case he should come this way. Two Pierres would be one too many at this game. Now we must win or perish."

Then they crept along the embankment till they gained the shelter of the hut or barrack-shed which stood with its back to the dike that separated the Nest from the slave camp. Happily none saw them, and there were no dogs in the place. Dogs make a noise at inconvenient times, therefore slave-dealers do not love them.

The end of the shed behind which they were crouching was situated some eight or ten paces from the drawbridge, that formed the only path of entry to the slave camp.

"Baas," said Otter, "let me go forward and look. My eyes are the eyes of a cat; I can see in the dark. Perhaps the bridge is down."

Without waiting for an answer, he crept forward on his hands and knees so quietly that they could scarcely hear a movement. Notwithstanding his white dress, there was little chance of his being seen, for the shadow of the shed was dense and a fringe of rushes grew along the edge of the dike.

Five minutes passed--ten minutes passed, and Otter did not return. Leonard's anxiety grew very keen.

"Let us go and see what happened, mother," he whispered to Soa.

They crept along to the end of the shed. Within a yard of it they discovered the arms and clothes of Otter. But Otter! Where was he?

"The Black One has deserted us," said Soa beneath her breath.

"Never!" answered Leonard.

By now the clouds were breaking before the wind, which was rising steadily, and some stars shone out, giving a little light. The dike lay deep between its banks and was not more than twenty feet in width, so that the air did not ruffle it; moreover, as any observer of nature will have noticed, the surface of still water is never quite dark, even on much blacker nights than this.

Why had Otter taken off his clothes, Leonard wondered? Evidently that he might go into the water. And what could he want to go into the water for, unless it was that his heart failed him and, as Soa suggested, he had deserted. But this was impossible, for he knew well that the dwarf would die first. In his great perplexity Leonard stared at the dike.

Now he could see that on its further side rose a flight of wooden steps, protected at the top by gates and that a man was seated on the lowest step, with a rifle beside him, his feet hanging down to within a few inches of the surface of the dike. It must be the sentry.

Next instant Leonard saw something else. Beneath the feet of the man a ripple grew on the face of the deep water, and something gleamed in the ripple like to the flash of steel. Then a small black object projected itself towards the feet of the sentry, who was half asleep and humming to himself drowsily. Suddenly he saw the man slide from his seat as though by magic. He said nothing, but making one ineffectual grasp at some rushes, he vanished into the deeps below. For a minute or more Leonard could distinguish a slight disturbance on the surface of the water, and that was all.

Now he guessed what had happened. Otter had dived, and rising beneath the feet of the man, he seized him, and with a sudden movement dragged him down to death by drowning. Either this, or an alligator had taken him, and that flash was the flash of his fangs.

As Leonard thought thus a dark form rose gasping at the foot of the

steps; it drew itself out of the water and slipped stealthily up them. It was Otter, and he held a knife in his hand. Now the dwarf vanished through the gates into the little guard-house at the top of the embankment. Another minute, and ropes began to creak. Then the tall drawbridge, standing upright like a scaffold against the sky, was seen to bend itself forward. Down it came very softly, and the slave-camp was open to them. Again the black shape appeared, this time on the bridge.

"Come along," whispered Leonard to his companion; "that hero Otter has drowned the sentry and won the bridge. Stop, pick up his clothes and arms."

At that moment Otter himself arrived. "Quick," he said, "come over, Baas, before they see that the bridge is down. Give me my clothes and the gun."

"All right, here they are," answered Leonard, and in another minute they were over the bridge and standing on the parapet of the slave-camp.

"Into the guard-house, Baas; the windlass is there, but no man."

They entered: a lamp was burning in the place. Otter seized the handle of the windlass and began to wind. He was naked, and it was a wonderful sight to see the muscles starting out in knots on his huge but dwarfish frame as he strained at the weight of the bridge.

Presently it was up, and, leaning on the handle of the wheel, Otter chuckled aloud.

"Now we are safe for a time," he said, "and I will dress myself. Let the Baas forgive me for appearing thus before him--I, who am so ugly."

"Tell us the tale, Otter."

"It is short, Baas," the dwarf replied, as he put on his robe and turban. "When I left you I watched, I who can see in the dark, and in a little while I saw the guard come down the steps and sit by the edge of the water. He was sleepy, for he yawned and lit a roll of paper to smoke it. Presently it went out, and he had no more matches. He looked up to the house there, but was too lazy to fetch them; then I guessed that he was alone, for else he would have called to his companion for fire. Now he grew sleepier, and I said to myself, 'Otter, Otter, how can you kill this man silently? You must not shoot, because of the noise; and if you throw a knife or a spear, you may miss, or wound him only.' And my snake spoke in my heart and answered, 'Otter, Otter, dive, seize his feet, and drag him down swiftly and stamp him into the mud, you who are half a fish and can swim as no other man can swim. Do it at once, Otter, before the light comes and men can see the drawbridge move.'

"Well, and so I did it, Baas. Wow! I trod him deep into the mire, I trampled him as an ox tramples corn upon a threshing-floor. Never will he come up again. After that I rose and ran into the guard-house,

fearing lest there might be another whom I must silence also, for when I was a slave two always kept watch. But the place was empty, so I let the bridge down. Ah! I remembered how it worked. And that is the tale, Baas."

"A great tale, Otter, but it is not finished yet. Now let us to the slaves. Come, take the light and lead the way. Here we are safe, is it not so?"

"Here, Baas, we are safe, for none can reach us except by storm, and yonder is the big gun which turns upon itself. Let us twist the gun round first, so that, if need be, we can fire into the camp."

"I don't know much of cannon," said Leonard doubtfully.

"But I know something, White Man," said Soa, speaking for the first time. "Mavoom, my master, has a small one up at the Settlement, and often I have helped to fire it for practice and as a signal to boats on the river, and so have many of the men who were carried away, if we can find them yonder."

"Good," said Leonard.

A path ran along the top of the embankment to the platform on which the gun was mounted. It was a six-pounder muzzle-loader. Leonard unhooked the rammer and ran it down the muzzle.

"She is loaded," he said; "now let us swing her round."

They did so easily enough, bringing the muzzle down upon the Nest camp; then they entered the little hut which stood alongside. Piled up in it, in case of emergency, were half-a-dozen rounds of grape-shot and powder.

"Lots of ammunition, if we should want to use it," said Leonard. "It never occurred to those gentlemen that a gun can shoot two ways. And now, Otter, lead us to the slaves, quick."

"This way, Baas, but first we must find the tools; they are in the guard-hut, I suppose."

So they crept back to the hut, holding their heads as low as possible, for the light was increasing, although the moon was not yet up, and they feared lest they should be seen against the sky-line. Here they found boxes containing nippers, chisels, and other instruments such as are used to undo the irons upon slaves. Also they found the keys of the padlocks that locked the iron bars to which the captives were tethered. Taking a lantern with them, but leaving another burning as before in the hut, lest its absence should excite suspicion, they passed through two strong gates and down the steps on the further side of the embankment. A few paces beyond stood the first slave-shed, a rough erection supported on posts, but without sides.

They entered the shed, Otter leading the way with the lantern. In the middle of it was a path, and on either side of this path ran the long bars to which the captives were fastened in a double row. Perhaps there might have been two hundred and fifty of them in this shed. Here the sights and scenes were such as need not be described. Of the miserable captives some lay on the wet ground, men and women together, trying to forget their sorrows in sleep; but the most part of them were awake, and the sound of moans ran up and down their lines like the moaning of trees in the wind.

When they saw the light the slaves ceased moaning, and crouched upon the ground like dogs that await the whip, for they thought that this was a visit from their captors. Some of them, indeed, stretched out their manacled hands imploring pity, but these were the exceptions; the most of them had abandoned hope and were sunk in dull despair. It was pitiful to see the glance of their terror-filled eyes and the answering quiver of their wealed frames whenever an arm was lifted or a sudden movement made.

Soa went down the line, rapidly examining the faces of the slaves.

"Do you see any of Mavoom's people?" asked Leonard anxiously.

"Not here, White Man; let us go to the next shed, unless you want to loose these."



"No good in that, mother," said Otter; "they would only betray us."

So they went to the next shed--in all there were four--and here at the second man who was sleeping, his head bowed on his chained hands, Soa stopped suddenly like a pointer dog when he scents game.

"Peter, Peter," she said.

The man awoke--he was a fine fellow about thirty years of age--and glared round wildly.

"Who called me by my old name?" he said hoarsely. "Nay, I dream, Peter is dead."

"Peter," said the woman again, "awake, child of Mavoom; it is I, Soa, who am come to save you."

The man cried aloud and began to tremble, but the other slaves took no notice, thinking only that he had been smitten with a scourge.

"Be silent," said Soa again, "or we are lost. Loose the bar, Black One; this is a head-man from the Settlement, a brave man."

Soon the bar was undone, then Otter bade Peter hold out his wrists while he twisted off the fetters. Presently they were gone, and in the ecstasy of his recovered liberty the man leaped high into the air, then fell at

Otter's feet as though he would embrace them.

"Get up, you fool," said the dwarf roughly, "and if there are any more of the men of Mavoom here, show them to us: quick, or you will soon be fast again."

"There should be forty or more," Peter answered, recovering himself, "besides a few women and children. The rest of us are dead, except the Shepherdess alone, and she is yonder."

Then they went down the lines slipping the chains from the Settlement captives. Soon they had unmanacled ten or more men whom Soa selected, and others stood round them with their hands still chained. As they went about the work Soa explained something of the position to Peter, who was fortunately a native of intelligence. He grasped the situation at once and earnestly seconded Leonard's efforts to preserve silence and to prevent confusion.

"Come," said Leonard to Soa, "we have got enough to begin with. I must be off. You can loose the rest at your leisure; the moon is rising, it is a quarter to twelve, and we have not a moment to lose. Now, Otter, before we go, how can we send men to fire the reeds--through the garden?"

"No, Baas, I have thought of a better way, the way by which I escaped myself--that is, if these men can swim."

"They can all swim," said Soa; "they were bred on the banks of a river."

"Good. Then they must swim down the dike where I killed the sentry, four of them. At the end are bars of wood, but in my day they were rotten; at the worst they can be climbed. Then they will find themselves in the morass among thick reeds. But they must not fire these till they have worked round to the place of the sunrise, whence the wind blows strongly. Then they must go from spot to spot and bend down the driest of the reeds, setting fire to them. Afterwards they can get to the back of the fire and wait till all is done one way or the other. If we win they will find us, if we are killed they can try to run away. But will the men go?"

Soa stepped forward and chose four of their number, but Peter she did not choose, for he also knew something of the working of cannon.

"Listen," she said, "you have heard the words of this Black One. Now, obey. And if you depart from them by one jot, may----" and she poured out so fearful a curse upon them that Leonard stared at her astonished.

"Ay!" added Otter, "and if I live through this I will cut your throats."

"No need to threaten," said one of the men; "we will do our best for our own sakes, as well as for yours and that of the Shepherdess. We understand the plan, but to light reeds we must have fire."

"Here are matches," said Otter.

"Wet matches will not light, and we must swim," answered the spokesman.

"Fool, do you then swim with your head under water? Tie them in your hair."

"Ah! he is clever," said the spokesman. "Now, if we live to reach them, when shall we fire the reeds?"

"As soon as you are ready," answered Otter. "You will not come easily to the back of them. Farewell, my children, and if you dare to fail, pray that you may die rather than look upon my face again."

"Ou! We have seen it once, is that not enough?" answered the spokesman, looking at Otter's huge nose with wonder not untouched by fear.

Two minutes later the four men were swimming swiftly down the dike, taking their chance of the alligators.

"Drop the bridge," said Leonard; "we must start."

Otter lowered it, at the same time explaining its mechanism, which was very simple, to Soa, Peter, and some of the other Settlement men.

"Now, mother, good-bye," said Leonard. "Loose all the men you can, and keep a keen look-out, so as to be ready to lower the bridge if you should see us or your mistress coming towards it. If we should not come by dawn, be ready also, for then we shall probably be dead, or prisoners, and you must act for yourself."

"I hear you, Lord," answered Soa, "and I say that you are a brave man. Whether you win or lose, the red stone is well earned already."

Another minute and they were gone.

Having crossed the bridge, which was instantly hoisted again, Leonard and Otter avoided observation by creeping back towards the water-gate as they had come--that is, behind the shelter of the shed. Emerging from this, they ran a few yards till they were opposite the gate, then walked leisurely across the open space, a distance of fifty paces or more, to the thatched hut where the sale of slaves was carried on.

There was nobody in this hut, but looking between the posts upon which it was supported, they could see by the light of the moon, now growing momentarily clearer, that a great and uproarious concourse of people was gathered beyond in front of the verandah of the Nest itself.

"Come on, Otter," whispered Leonard, "we must go among these gentry. Watch me closely, do what I do, keep your weapons ready, and if it comes

to blows, get behind my back and fight like a fiend. Above all, don't be taken prisoner."

Leonard spoke calmly, but his heart was in his mouth, and his sensations were such as must have been known to Daniel when he went into the lions' den, for, as in the case of the prophet, he felt that nothing short of a special Providence could save them. They were round the shed now, and immediately in front of them was a mixed gathering of desperadoes--Portuguese, Arabs, Bastards, and black men of various tribes--such as Leonard had never seen in all his experience.

Villainy and greed were written on every countenance; it was a crew of human demons, and an extensive one. These wretches, most of whom had already drunk too freely and were drinking more, stood with their backs to them, looking towards the verandah of the Nest. On the steps of this verandah, surrounded by a choice group of companions, all of them gaudily dressed, a man was standing whom Leonard would have had no difficulty in identifying as the Dom Pereira, even without Otter's warning whisper of "See! The Yellow Devil!"

This remarkable person demands some description as he stood in glory that night, at the apex and, though he knew it not, the conclusion of his long career of infamy. He was old, perhaps seventy, his hair was white and venerable-looking, and his person obese. His black eyes were small, cunning, cold, and bright, and they had the peculiarity of avoiding the face of any person with whom he chanced to be in

conversation, at least when that person was looking his way. Their glance passed over him, under him, round him, anywhere but at him.

As his sobriquet suggested, the colouring of Pereira's flesh was yellow, and the loose skin hung in huge wrinkles upon his cheeks. His mouth was large and coarse, and his fat hands twitched and grasped continually, as though with a desire of clutching money. For the rest he was gorgeously dressed, and, like his companions, somewhat in liquor.

Such was the outward appearance of Pereira, the fountain-head of the slave-trade on this part of the coast, who was believed in his day to be the very worst man in Africa, a pre-eminence to which few can hope to attain. Until his face had been seen, stamped as it was with the traces of long and unmentionable wickedness, few honest men could guess to what depths humanity can sink. Some indeed have declared that to see him was to understand the Evil One and all his works.