

## CHAPTER XII

### A CHOICE LOT

At the moment of Leonard's and Otter's introduction to his society, the Yellow Devil was about to make a speech, and all eyes were fixed on him so intently that none saw or heard the pair approach.

"Now, my friends, make a path, if you please," said Leonard in a loud voice and speaking in Portuguese. "I wish to pay my respects to your chief."

A dozen men wheeled round at once.

"Who are you?" they cried, seeing a stranger.

"If you will be so kind as to let me pass, I shall be most happy to explain," Leonard answered, pushing his way through the throng.

"Who is that?" cried Pereira in coarse, thick tones. "Bring him here."

"There, you hear him--let us through, friends," said Leonard, "let us through!"

Thus adjured the throng opened a path, and Leonard and Otter passed down it, many suspicious eyes scanning them as they went.

"A greeting to you, senor," said Leonard when they had emerged in front of the verandah.

"Curse your greeting! Who in Satan's name are you?"

"A humble member of your honourable profession," said Leonard coolly, "come to pay his respects and do a little business."

"Are you? You don't look it. You look like an Englishman. And who is that abortion, pray?" and he pointed to Otter. "I believe that you are spies, and, by the Saints, if you are, I am the man to deal with you!"

"This is a likely story," said Leonard laughing, "that one man and a black dog should venture into the headquarters of gentlemen like you, not being of the cloth. But I think there is a noble gentleman among you--I mean the Senor Xavier--who can vouch for me. Did he not send a note to Captain Pierre, whose dhow lies in the harbour yonder, hailing from Madagascar? Well, Captain Pierre has the honour of accepting his invitation and arrives here, not without difficulty. Now he begins to think that he would have done better to stick to his ship."

"That is all right, Pereira," said Xavier, a huge Portuguese with a dash of negro blood and a villainous countenance, the same man whom they had followed through the gate. "I sent a note to the Senor. I told you of it."

"Then I wish you had left it alone," snarled Pereira for an answer. "I don't like your friend's looks. He might be the captain of an English man-of-war rigged up in our dress."

At the words "English man-of-war" a murmur of fear and anger went through the assembly. Some of those present had experience of these hated vessels and their bigoted crews, who loved not this honest commerce, and to all they were names of ill-omen. Things looked serious, and Leonard saw that he must do something, and quickly. So he lost his temper, or pretended to do so.

"Curse you all for a pack of suspicious curs!" he said; "I tell you that my dhow lies yonder. I am half an Englishman and half a Creole, and as good a man as any of you. Now look here, Dom Pereira, if you, or any of your crew, dare to doubt my word, just step out, and I will ram this down your lying throat;" and placing his hand on the hilt of his sabre, he took a pace forward and scowled.

The effect was instantaneous. Pereira turned a little pale beneath his yellow skin, for like most cruel men he was a great coward.

"Put up your pig-sticker," he said; "I see you are one of the right sort. I only wanted to try you. As you know, we must be careful in our business. Come and shake hands, brother, and be welcome. I trust you now, and old Antonio never does things by halves."

"Perhaps you had better try him a little further," said a young man who was standing near Pereira, as Leonard prepared to accept the invitation; "send for a slave and let us have the old test--there is none better."

Pereira hesitated and Leonard's blood turned cold.

"Look here, young man," he said more furiously than before, "I have cut the throats of more men than you have whipped, but if you want a test, I will give you one. Come down, my young cockerel, come down; there is plenty of light for comb-snipping."

The man turned white with rage, but stood a moment contemplating Leonard's athletic form and keen eyes. Apparently he found that in them which gave him pause, for instead of springing at him, he burst into a volume of threats and filthy abuse.

How the matter would have ended it is difficult to say, but at this juncture Pereira thought it well to interfere, and vigorously.

"Peace!" he thundered in his great voice, his white hair bristling with rage. "I have welcomed this man, and he is welcome. Is my word to be set aside by a drunken young brawler like you? Shut your ugly mouth or, by the Saints, I will have you clapped in irons."

The slave-driver obeyed; perhaps he was not sorry for an excuse to

escape the quarrel. At any rate with a scowl at Leonard he dropped back and was silent.

Harmony being thus restored, Pereira proceeded with the business of the evening. First, however, he called Leonard to him, shook him by the hand, and bade a slave-girl bring him drink. Then he addressed the company thus:

"My lambs, my dear companions, my true and trusted friends, this is a sad moment for me, your old leader, for I stand here to bid you good-bye. To-morrow the Nest will know the Yellow Devil no more, and you must find another captain. Alas! I grow old, I am no longer up to the work, and trade is not what it was, thanks to those infernal Englishmen and their cruisers, which prowl up and down our waters, seeking to rob honest men of the fruits of their enterprise. For nearly fifty years I have been connected with the business, and I think that the natives of these parts will remember me--not angrily, oh! no, but as a benefactor. For have not some twenty thousand of their young people passed through my hands, rescued by me from the curse of barbarism and sent to learn the blessings of civilisation and the arts of peace in the homes of kind and indulgent masters?

"Sometimes, not often, but now and again, there has been bloodshed in the course of our little expeditions. I regret it. But what will you?

These people are so obstinate that they cannot see how well it is for them to come under my wing. And if they try to injure us in our good

work, why, we must fight. We all know the bitterness of ingratitude, but we have to put up with it. It is a trial sent to us from Heaven, my lambs, always remember that. So I retire with such modest gains as I have won by a life of labour--indeed, they have gone before me, lest some of you might be put in the way of temptation--to spend the evening of my day in peace and prayer.

"And now there is one more little thing. As it chanced during our last journey, the daughter of an accursed Englishman fell into our hands. I took her and brought her here, and as her guardian I have asked you to meet me to-night, that I may choose her a husband, as it is my duty to do. I cannot keep her myself, for among the settled people near Mozambique, where I am going to live, her presence might lead to awkward questions. So I will be generous and pass her on to another.

"But to whom shall I give this prize, this pearl, this sweet and lovely maid? Among so many worthy gentlemen how can I set one above the others and declare him most deserving of the girl? I cannot, so I must leave it to chance, for I know that Heaven will choose better than I. Therefore to him who is ready to make the largest present to me I will give this maid, to comfort him with her love; to make a present, mind you, not to pay a price. Still, perhaps, it will be best that the amount of the donation should be ascertained in the usual way, by bidding--in ounces of gold, if you please!

"One condition more, there shall be nothing irregular in this matter, my

friends. The Church shall have its say in it, and he whom I select must wed the maid, here, before us all. Have we not a priest at hand, and shall we find no work for him? Now, my children, time draws on. Ho! you, bring out the English girl."

This speech was not delivered quite so continuously as it is printed here. On the contrary, it was subject to many interruptions, mostly of an ironical nature, the allusions to "a present" to be given for the girl and to the proposed marriage ceremony being received with screams of ribald laughter.

Now the noise died away, for every eye watched for the appearance of Juanna.

In a few moments a figure clad in white and guarded by several men was seen advancing from the direction of the arms-house. This figure came on through the moonlight with a swift agile step, looking neither to the right nor to the left, till it arrived in front of the verandah and halted. Then it was that Leonard first saw Juanna Rodd. She was very tall and slight, her dark hair was twisted into a single knot at the back of her shapely head, her features were small, her face fair in colouring and somewhat rounded in form. So much he saw at a glance, but it was not until she looked up and round her that Leonard discovered the girl's peculiar glory, the glory of her eyes. Then and in that light he was unable to distinguish their colour, a difficult task at any time, for they varied from grey to blue according to the shadows which fell

upon them, but he could see that they were wide and splendid, fearless and yet soft. For the rest she was clad in an Arab robe richly worked, and wore sandals upon her feet.

Juanna stopped in front of the verandah and searched it with her eyes. Presently they ceased their searching and she spoke in a clear, sweet voice.

"What do you want with me now, Dom Antonio Pereira?" she said.

"My dove," he answered in his coarse, mocking tones, "do not be angry with your slave. I promised you, my dove, that I would find a husband for you, and now all these gallant gentlemen are gathered for the choice. It is your marriage-hour, my dove."

"Dom Antonio Pereira," the girl answered, "for the last time I plead to you. I am helpless here among you, and I have done you no injury: let me go unharmed, I pray of you."

"Let you go unharmed? Why, who would hurt you, my dove?" answered the satyr. "Yes, that is what I mean to do. I will let you go to a husband."

"I shall never go to any husband of your choosing, Dom Antonio," Juanna said again in a low and steady voice. "Be assured of that, all of you. I have no fear of you, for God will help me in my need. And now, as I have pleaded to you for the last time, so for the last time I warn you, Dom



Antonio, and your wicked companions also. Go on with this iniquity if you will, but a judgment awaits you. Death from Heaven above is near to you, you murderer, and after death, vengeance."

Thus she spoke, not loud indeed, but with conviction, a power, and a dignity of mien that carried terror to the hearts of the most hardened villains there. It was at the conclusion of her speech that her eyes first met those of Leonard Outram. He was bending forward to listen, and in his grief and anger he had forgotten to preserve the truculent expression which it was his part to wear. Once more Leonard's face was the face of an English gentleman, noble and open, if somewhat stern.

Their eyes met, and there was that in his which caused Juanna to pause. She looked at him swiftly as though she would read his very soul, and in answer he put all his will and heart's desire into his gaze, the will and the desire that she should know him to be her friend. They had never met before, she did not even dream of his existence, and there was little in Leonard's outward appearance to distinguish him from the ruffians by whom he was surrounded. Yet her quick sense, sharpened by despair, read what was written in his eyes, and read it aright. From that moment Juanna felt that she was not alone among these wolves, that there was one person at least who would save her if he could.

In an instant she had searched his face and dropped her eyes again, fearing lest she should awake suspicion. Then came a pause, for the minds of men were disturbed; she had aroused some remnant of conscience

in them, she had called to life a lively terror of vengeance to come, of vengeance very near at hand. All were affected more or less, but chiefly was he affected to whom she had addressed her words. The Yellow Devil sank back into the chair from which he had risen to speak, a wonderful chair made of ebony inlaid with ivory, and string-seated, with a footstool attached to it. Superstitious dread took hold of him, and he shivered visibly.

The scene was one which Leonard never forgot. Above the bright moon shone in the heavens, before him were rank upon rank of evil faces, each marked with some new emotion, and standing alone in their midst was the beautiful girl, proud in the depth of her shame, defiant even in the power of foes gathered to destroy her.

For a while the wind had dropped and the silence was deep, so deep was it that Leonard could hear the mew of a kitten which had crept from the verandah, and was rubbing itself against Juanna's feet. She heard it also, and, stooping, lifted the little creature and held it to her breast.

"Let her go!" said a voice from the crowd. "She is a witch and will bring ill-luck upon us."

At the sound Pereira seemed to awake. With a hideous oath he flung himself from the chair and waddled down the steps towards his victim.

"Curse you, you slut!" he said, "do you think to frighten men with your threats? Let God help you if He can. The Yellow Devil is god here. You are as much in my power as this brute," and he snatched the kitten from her arms and dashed it to the ground. "You see, God does not help the kitten, and He will not help you. Here, let men see what they are going to buy," and gripping the breast of her white robe he rent it open.

With one hand Juanna gathered up the torn dress, and with the other she began to do something to her hair. An agony of fear took hold of Leonard. He knew the story of the poison which she carried: was she about to use it?

Once again their eyes met, and there was warning in his glance. Juanna loosed her hair indeed, and let it fall about her shoulders, covering her rent robe to the waist, but she did no more. Only after this Leonard saw that she kept her right hand closed, and knew that her death was hidden within it. Then she spoke once more to Pereira.

"In your last hour may you remember these two deeds!" she said, pointing to the writhing kitten and to her torn dress.

Now slaves drew near to do their master's bidding, but that audience would not suffer this.

"Leave her alone," they said; "we can see that the girl is fair and perfect."

Then the slaves hung back, nor did Pereira repeat his commands.

Returning to the verandah, he stood by the chair, and, taking an empty glass in his hand by way of an auctioneer's hammer, he began:

"Gentlemen, I am going to offer you a very choice lot, so choice that it makes up all the sale. The lot is a white girl, half English and half Portuguese by blood. She is well educated and devout; as to her docility I can say nothing, that will be for her husband to attend to. Of her beauty I need not speak; you can all see it yourselves. Look at that figure, that hair, those eyes; have any of you known their equal?"

"Well, this lot will be sold to him among you who is inclined to make me the largest present in compensation; yes, he may take her this very hour, and my blessing with her. But there are conditions: he whom I approve must be lawfully married to the girl by the priest Francisco here," and turning he pointed to a small melancholy-looking man, with a womanish face and dark blue eyes, who stood in the background, clothed in a somewhat tattered priest's robe. "Then I shall have done my duty by her. One more thing, gentlemen: we are not going to waste time in little bids; the upset price will be thirty ounces."

"Silver?" said a voice.

"Silver? No, of course not. Do you think you are bidding for a nigger

girl, fool? Gold, man, gold! Thirty ounces of gold, and payment to be made on the nail."

There was a groan of disappointment, and one ruffian cried out:

"What are we poor fellows to do? Thirty ounces for a beginning! Where is our chance?"

"What are you to do? Why, work hard at your profession, and grow rich, of course! Do you suppose that these prizes are for the poor? Now then, the fair is open. Who bids for the white girl Juanna? Thirty ounces is offered. What advance, what advance?"

"Thirty-five," said a wizened little man with a hectic cough, who looked fitter for a burial than a bridal.

"Forty!" cried another, a pure-bred Arab of stately appearance and saturnine expression, who wished to add to his harem.

"Forty-five," answered the wizened man.

Then the Arab bid fifty, and for a while it seemed that these two alone were competitors. When the bids had reached seventy ounces the Arab muttered "Allah!" and gave up. He preferred to wait for the houris.

"Knock her down," said the wizened man, "she is mine."

"Hold on a bit, my little friend," said the great Portugee, Xavier, who had passed the water-gate before Leonard and his companions. "I am going to begin now. Seventy-five."

"Eighty," said the little man.

"Eighty-five," answered Xavier.

"Ninety," screamed the other.

"Ninety-five," said Xavier.

"A hundred," yelled the small man, snapping his fingers.

"A hundred and five," replied Xavier, triumphantly capping his bid.

Then with a curse his antagonist gave up also, and the mob shouted, thinking that Xavier had won.

"Knock her down, Pereira," said Xavier in his turn, as he surveyed his prize with affected nonchalance.

"Wait a moment," put in Leonard, speaking for the first time. "I am going to begin now. A hundred and ten."

The multitude shouted again, the contest was growing exciting. Xavier glared at Leonard and bit his fingers with rage. He was very near his limit of possible expenditure.

"Now then," cried Pereira, licking his lips for joy, since the price had already run twenty ounces higher than he expected, "Now then, friend Xavier, am I to knock down this beauty to the stranger captain Pierre? It sounds a lot, but she is cheap at the price, dirt cheap. Look at her and bid up. But mind, it is cash down--no credit, no, not for an ounce."

"A hundred and fifteen," said Xavier, with the air of a man making his last throw for fortune.

"A hundred and twenty," replied Leonard quietly.

He had bid to the last ounce in his possession, and if Xavier went further he must give in, unless, indeed, he chose to offer Soa's ruby in payment. This, needless to say, he was not anxious to do; moreover, no one would believe a stone of that size to be genuine. Of all this, however, Leonard showed nothing in his face, but turning coolly he called to a slave-girl to bring him spirits and busied himself with filling his glass. His hand never trembled, for he knew well that his antagonist was watching for a cue, and if he showed uncertainty all might be lost. But in his heart, Leonard wondered what he should do if another ounce was bid.

Meanwhile the spectators were shouting encouragement, and Pereira was urging Xavier to increase his offer. For a while the Portugee hesitated, surveying Juanna, who stood pale and silent, her head bowed upon her breast. At this juncture Leonard turned, the glass still in his hand.

"Did you make any advance, senor?" he asked.

"No, curse you! Take her. I will not put down another ounce for her or any woman on the earth."

Leonard only smiled and looked at Pereira.

"Going!" said that worthy; "the white girl, Juanna, is going to the stranger Pierre for one hundred and twenty ounces of gold. Going! Come, Xavier, don't lose her. If you do you will only be sorry once, and that will be always. Now, for the last time," and he lifted his glass in his hand and paused.

Xavier made a step forward and opened his lips to speak.

Leonard's heart stood still, but presently the Portugee changed his mind and turned away.

"Gone!" screamed Pereira, bringing the glass down so heavily on the arm of his chair that it flew into fragments.