

CHAPTER XIII

A MIDNIGHT MARRIAGE

"Gone," said Pereira again. "Now, friend Pierre, before we ratify this matter by the aid of holy Church, perhaps you will table the gold. This is a cash transaction, remember."

"Certainly," answered Leonard. "Where is that black dog of mine, the dwarf? Ah! there he is. Dog, weigh out the stuff; if you have not enough, here is more." And he unbuckled his belt, from which he had been careful to extract the ruby, and threw it to Otter.

"Now, gentlemen and companions," he went on, "for I hope that we may do business together by and by, drink my health and my bride's. I have paid pretty dear for her, but what of it? A gentleman of our profession should always be ready to back his fancy, for if his is apt to be a short life he may as well make it a merry one."

"She will think the better of you, and you of her for it," cried a voice. "Here is to Captain Pierre and the girl." And they drank, shouting aloud in their half-drunken merriment.

Meanwhile Otter, advancing with obsequious steps, was pouring handful after handful of gold coin and ingots into the large scales which Pereira caused to be held before him. At length all the gold was in, a

shining heap.

"The balance does not turn," said Xavier; "I claim the girl."

"Baas," said Otter in a low voice, and speaking in Dutch, "have you more gold? The weight is short."

Leonard glanced carelessly at the scales: they were trembling on the turn.

"As much as you like," he said, "but here is what will do it."

And drawing off his signet ring he threw it on the pile. The ruby excepted, it was the last thing of value that he had about him. Then the scale vibrated and sank down.

"Good," said Pereira, rubbing his hands at the sight of so much treasure. "Bring me the acid that I may test the stuff. No offence, stranger Pierre, but this is a wicked world, in which brass has passed for gold before to-day."

The acid was brought and the ingots were tested at hazard, Pereira holding them up to the light of a lamp.

"They are good," he said. "Now, Father, do your part."

The priest Francisco stepped forward. He was very pale and seemed terrified. Leonard, watching him, wondered what had brought him into such company, for the man's face was good and even refined.

"Dom Antonio," said the priest in a soft girlish voice, "I protest against this. Fate has brought me among you, though not of my own will, and I have been forced to bear the sight of much evil, but I have wrought none. I have shriven the dying, I have ministered to the sick, I have comforted the oppressed, but I have taken no share of the price of blood. I am a priest of our holy Church, and if I wed these two before the sight of men, they will be husband and wife till death, and I shall have set the seal of the blessing of the Church upon an act of shame. I will not do it."

"You will not do it, you shaveling traitor?" screamed Pereira in a voice hoarse with rage. "Do you want to follow your brother then? Look here, my friend, either you obey me and marry these two or----" and he hissed a horrible threat.

"NO, no," said Leonard, anxious to find an escape from this abominable mockery. "Let him be. What do the cheat's prayers matter? The lady and I can do without them."

"I tell you, stranger, that you shall marry the girl, and this sniveller must marry you. If you don't, I will keep both her and the gold. And as for him, he can choose. Here, slaves, bring the sjamboch."

Francisco's delicate face flushed pink. "I am no hero that I can suffer thus," he said; "I will do your bidding, Dom Antonio, and may God forgive me the sin! For you, Pierre and Juanna, I am about to make you man and wife, to join you in a sacrament that is none the less holy and indissoluble because of the dreadful circumstances under which it is celebrated. I say to you, Pierre, abandon your wickedness, and love and cherish this woman, lest a curse from heaven fall upon you. I say to you, Juanna, put your trust in God, the God of the fatherless and oppressed, who will avenge your wrongs--and forgive me. Let water be brought, that I may consecrate it--water and a ring."

"Here, take this one," said Pereira, lifting Leonard's signet ring from the pile of gold. "I give it back for a luck-penny."

And he tossed the ring to the priest.

Water was brought in a basin, and the father consecrated it.

Then he bade Leonard stand by the girl and motioned to the crowd to fall back from them. All this while Leonard had been watching Juanna. She said no word, and her face was calm, but her eyes told him the terror and perplexity which tore her heart.

Once or twice she lifted her clenched right hand towards her lips, then dropped it without touching them. Leonard knew but too well what deed

she meditated. He knew also the deadly nature of the drug she carried. If once it touched her tongue! The suspense was terrible. He could bear it no longer; even at the risk of discovery he must speak with her.

In obedience to the priest's direction he sauntered to her side laughing. Then, still laughing, with his hand he separated the tresses of dark hair, as though to look at the beauty of her side face, and bent down as if to kiss her.

She stood pale and rigid, but once more her hand was lifted towards her mouth.

"Stop," he whispered swiftly into her ear, speaking in English, "I have come to rescue you. Go through with this farce, it means nothing. Then, if I bid you, run for the drawbridge into the slave-camp."

She heard, a light of intelligence shone in her eyes, and her hand fell again.

"Come, stop that, friend Pierre," said Pereira suspiciously. "What are you whispering about?"

"I was telling the bride how beautiful I think her," he answered carelessly.

Juanna turned and flashed on him a well-simulated glance of hate and

scorn. Then the service began.

The young priest was gifted with a low and beautiful voice, and by the light of the moon he read the ritual of marriage so solemnly that even the villains who stood round ceased their jokes and sneers and were silent. All things were done in order, though Juanna made no reply to the usual questions. With much sham courtesy the loathsome Pereira presided over the ceremony--their hands were joined, the ring was set upon Juanna's finger, the blessing was pronounced, and it was finished.

All this while Leonard stood like a man in a dream. He felt as though he were really being married; it even came into his mind, as he looked upon the loveliness of the mock bride at his side, that a worse fate might befall him. Then of a sudden he woke from his reverie--the farce was played, now they must strive to escape.

"There, that is done with, Dom Antonio," he said, "and I think I heard this lady whisper that with your permission we will bid you good-bye. My canoe----"

"Nonsense, you will stop here to-night," said Pereira.

"Thanks, I think not," answered Leonard. "To-morrow I may return to do a little business of another kind. I have a commission for about fifty, at a good price for the right sort."

As Leonard spoke thus, glancing to the east, he saw dense masses of vapour rising into the air far away. The damp reeds were fired at last. The Settlement men had not failed in their task, and soon the flames would be discovered; he must be gone and swiftly.

"Well, if you must, you must," answered Pereira, and Leonard observed that he looked relieved as he said it. He did not know the reason at the time. It was this: Juanna had told him that the man who bought her would find his death in it. He had a superstitious fear of the girl, and believed her; therefore he was glad that her purchaser should go, lest it might be said that he had murdered him in order to retain both the woman and her price. So he bade him farewell, and Leonard turned to depart, followed by Otter and Juanna, whom he led by the hand.

All might have gone well for that time had it not been for an unlucky chance. Leonard's scheme was to walk towards the water-gate, but, if no better plan of reaching it should offer, to turn suddenly and run for the drawbridge, where Soa and the others would be waiting, and thence, with or without the people of Mavoom, to escape up the banks of the Zambesi.

Already he had started when the great Portuguese, Xavier, who was watching plunged in sullen thought, stepped forward. "At least I will have a kiss for my trouble," he said, and seizing Juanna round the waist, he drew her towards him.

Then it was that Leonard forgot his caution, as under such circumstances a man, with nerves already strained to breaking point, well might do. Doubling his fist, he struck the giant in the face with such force that Xavier fell headlong to the ground, dragging Juanna after him. Leonard would have done better had he suffered her to be insulted, but just then he remembered only that he was protecting a helpless girl.

Juanna was up in a moment and at his side. Xavier also sprang to his feet, cursing with fury and drawing his sabre as he rose.

"Follow me," said Leonard to Juanna and Otter. Then without more ado he took to his heels.

A shout of laughter went up from the mob.

"This is the brave man. This is the French fire-eater," they cried. "He strikes unawares and is afraid to fight." Nor did they stop at words. All of them were jealous of the stranger, and would have rejoiced to see him dead.

"Stop him!" they shouted, and many of the men started, running like dogs to turn a hare.

Still Leonard might have won through, for he was swift of foot. But neither Juanna nor Otter could run so fast as he, and his pace must be their pace. Before he had gone a hundred yards he found himself

confronted by a dozen or more of the slavers, some of whom had knives in their hands.

"Stop, coward, stop and fight," they yelled in Portuguese and Arabic, waving their weapons in his face.

"Certainly," answered Leonard, wheeling round and glancing about him.

There, not thirty yards away, was the drawbridge of the slave camp, and he thought that he saw it tremble, as if it was about to fall. At his side were Otter and Juanna, and towards him, his hideous face red with blood, rushed the great Portugee, sabre aloft, and screaming imprecations.

"Otter," Leonard said quickly, as he drew his sword, "guard my back, for when I have killed this one the rest will spring. For you, young lady, reach the bridge if you can. Soa and your people are there."

Now Xavier was upon him with a rush. He struck furiously, and Leonard avoided the blow, springing backwards out of his reach. Twice more he rushed on thus and twice he smote, but each time Leonard ran backward towards the drawbridge, that now was not more than twenty yards away. A fourth time the Portugee came on, and the Englishman could not repeat his tactics, for the mob hemmed him in behind. On sped Xavier and smote his hardest: Leonard saw the steel gleam in the moonlight and lifted his sword to guard. The blow fell, fire sprang from it in sparks, and down

rattled fragments of shattered steel. His sword was broken.

"Fight on, Baas," said the voice of Otter, "fight on! Both swords have gone."

Leonard looked up. It was true: the Portugee was casting aside his broken weapon and clutching at his knife. Now Leonard had no knife, and at the moment he never thought of his revolver. But he still held the hilt of his sword, and with it he sprang straight at Xavier, who rushed to meet him.

They met with a dull shock as bull meets bull. Leonard struck one blow with the broken sword-hilt, then dropped it--it was useless. But the stroke did him good service, for, falling on the right hand of the Portugee, it paralysed his arm for a second, causing him to let fall the dagger. Then they gripped each other, fighting desperately with their naked strength alone. Twice the huge Portugee lifted the Englishman from the ground, striving to throw him, while the crowd yelled with excitement, but twice he failed. Not for nothing had Leonard learnt wrestling as a lad and hardened his iron muscles by years of toil. Xavier may have weighed sixteen stone and Leonard did not weigh thirteen, but his arms were like bars of steel and he was struggling for dear life.

He waited awhile, letting the Portugee exhaust himself in efforts to hurl him to the ground. Then suddenly tightening his grip, Leonard put

out all his strength. He could not hope to lift the man, that he knew, but he might throw him. With a sudden movement he hooked his right leg behind Xavier's left calf. Then he cast his weight forward and pushed with all his strength upon the great man's breast.

Xavier tottered, recovered himself, tottered again, and strove to shift his leg. Leonard felt the movement and met it with a supreme effort. Losing his balance, his foe swayed slowly backwards like a falling tree, then fell with a thud that shook the ground. It was a gallant throw, and even the "ranks of Tusculum" as represented by the slave-drivers "could scarce forbear to cheer." Now Leonard lay upon the breast of the man, for he was dragged to earth with him.

For a moment his enemy was still, breathing stertorously, for the shock of their fall had been great. Leonard looked round; there, some eight feet away, was the knife, and he who could grasp it must win this deadly game. But how could he grasp it? Xavier, whose strength and powers were coming back, still hugged him in his fearful grip; he also saw the knife, and would win it. Rapidly, by instinct almost, Leonard measured the distance with his eye. There was but one plan, to roll to it. The first roll would leave him undermost, but the dagger would still be out of Xavier's reach. Then, could he succeed in turning him upon his back once more, Leonard would be uppermost again, and if he was able to free his hand it might grasp the weapon. It was a terrible risk, but he must take it. He lay motionless awhile, husbanding his force, and the Portugee surged and heaved beneath him; he could feel the muscles of his

mighty frame start up in knots as he struggled. At last Leonard let him have his way, and over they went, the two of them. Now Xavier was uppermost, and the mob yelled in triumph, for they thought that the stranger's strength was spent.

"The knife, the knife!" gasped Xavier, and one of his servants sprang forward to give it to him. But Otter was watching and started out of the press, naked sabre in hand: his fierce and ugly face was twitching with excitement, his black eyes shone, and his vast shoulders worked to and fro. To Juanna, fascinated by the fearful struggle, the dwarf looked like some black gnome, like a thing of supernatural power, half toad, half human.

"He who touches the knife dies!" he said in guttural Arabic, stretching his long arm and sabre over it. "Let these cocks fight it out, my masters."

The man shrank back: he also was afraid of Otter, deeming him uncanny; nor did any other interfere.

Now came the moment of death or victory. As he could not reach the weapon, with a sudden movement Xavier freed his right hand and grasped the Englishman's throat; but to do this he must lessen the pressure on his breast. Leonard felt the grip, and the knowledge that his end was at hand renewed his powers. Twice he writhed like a snake, gripping the ground with the muscles of his back and legs; once he swung his frame to

the right, then a vast effort, and lo! Xavier turned slowly over like a log of wood, and again Leonard lay upon his breast.

Leonard lay upon his breast, and his right arm was free and within reach of the dagger. But the giant's grasp of his throat was cruel; the blood drummed in his ears and his senses began to fail. No, he would not die thus and leave the girl helpless. Where was it? He was blind, he could see nothing but her white face. He must get free--ah, he knew now!

They thought that he was spent: see! his head fell, when suddenly he lifted himself and heaved up his arm.

Crash it came full on the forehead of Xavier, that in its turn was pillowed on the stony earth. The grip slackened. Crash again, a fearful and despairing blow! Leonard's throat was free, and the air rushed into his bursting lungs. Now he could see and grasp the knife, but there was no need to use it. The great man beneath him flung his arms wide, shivered, and grew still.

Then it was, while men paused wondering at those awful blows, that Juanna, mindful of her deliverer's bidding, turned and fled, sick at heart but unhindered, to the edge of the ditch opposite the drawbridge. Otter also rushed up and dragged Leonard from the ground.

"Wow!" he cried, "a good fight and a great blow! Dead, by my mother's spirit, and no touch of steel. Awake, my father, awake! for if the boar

is down the pigs remain!"

Leonard heard his words dimly and knew their import. With an effort he ceased to stagger and rested his weight upon the dwarf, much as a man might lean upon some sturdy post. His breath came back to him and his mind cleared. He looked round and saw Juanna standing near the bridge like one who hesitates whether to fly or stay.

"Sirs," gasped Leonard, "I have fought and I have won. Now let me go in peace with the girl. Is the man alive?"

A ring of men had crowded round the body of Xavier, and in their centre knelt the priest Francisco. At this moment he rose and said:

"It is useless to minister to him; he is no more."

The slavers looked at Leonard with awe not unmixed with admiration. Who had ever seen such a thing, that one whose strength had been a byword should be slain with the naked fist? They forgot that it is easy to kill the man whose head rests upon a stone.

Presently, however, their wonder gave way to rage. Xavier had been a favourite among them, and they were not minded that he should die unavenged. So they drew round Leonard scowling and cursing.

"Stand back," he said, "and let me pass. I fought your friend fairly;

had I wished to take advantage of him, should I not have used this?" And for the first time he remembered and drew his Colt, the sight of which cooled their ardour somewhat, for they gave way. "Perhaps you will give me an arm, Father," Leonard went on, speaking to the priest, who was standing by. "I am much shaken."

Francisco complied, and they started towards Juanna, Otter guarding their rear with his sabre. Before they had gone ten yards, however, Pereira waddled towards them after a hasty consultation with one of his captains.

"Seize that man," he shouted; "he has killed the worthy Dom Xavier: having first insulted him, he has slain him by violence, and he must answer for it."

A dozen ruffians sprang forward at his bidding, only to be met by the sabre and pistol of Otter, with neither of which were they anxious to make a closer acquaintance. Leonard saw that the position was very grave, and a thought came into his mind. "You wish to escape from this place, Father?" he said rapidly to the priest.

"Yes," answered Francisco, "it is a hell."

"Then lead me as swiftly as you may to that bridge; I am hurt and weak, but there is succour beyond."

As he spoke the drawbridge, which was not ten yards away, fell with a crash.

"Run across, Juanna Rodd," cried Leonard in English.

She hesitated, then obeyed. It seemed to Leonard that the look upon her face said, "How can I leave you?"

"Now, Father," said Leonard, "make a rush for it," and leaning on the priest's shoulder he stumbled towards the bridge. But he would never have reached it had it not been for Otter.

"Treason!" roared Pereira; "stop him! Who let down the bridge?"

A man came on the attack; it was the same young captain that Leonard had offered to fight before the auction. In his hand was a knife already uplifted to fall on Leonard's back when Otter's sabre flashed and the man went down.

"Seize the bridge and hold it," roared Pereira again.

"Wind up! wind up!" yelled Otter in answer, as with sabre and pistol he held back the mob.

Those on the further side obeyed with such a will that Leonard and the priest rolled down the slanting planks.

"Otter!" cried Leonard--"good God! he will be killed!"

By way of answer Otter fired the last barrel of his pistol. Then with a yell, before his foes could close upon him he sprang like a wild cat straight at the iron chains of the bridge, which were used to secure it in its place when needful. At the moment they hung four feet or more above his head, but he grasped them and shouted to Soa to hoist away.

A man attempted to seize his legs, but Otter kicked him in the face and he fell into the water. Next second he was out of their reach and rapidly rising high into the air. Some threw knives and some fired pistol-shots after him, but none of these touched him.

"Ah! Yellow Devil," the dwarf cried as he swung, "look behind you: there is another devil, yellower and fiercer than you."

Pereira turned and all his company with him, and at that moment, with a crackling roar, a vast sheet of flame burst up from the morass. The reeds had caught at last in good earnest, and the strengthening wind was bringing the fire down upon them.