

CHAPTER XIV

VENGEANCE

"Treachery! treachery!" screamed Pereira. "The reeds are fired, and that witch has betrayed us."

"Ha! ha! ha! ha!" cried Otter again from his airy perch. "Treachery! treachery! And what if the slaves are loosed? And what if the gates be barred?"

Hitherto the mob had been silent in their fear and wonder. There they stood closely packed, a hundred or more of them, staring first at Otter, then at the advancing flames. Now they found tongue.

"He is a fiend! Kill him! Storm the slave camp! To the gates!" they yelled in this language and in that.

For many it was their last earthly cry, since at that moment a sheet of flame burst from the rampart of the camp, followed by the boom of the cannon, and six pounds of canister swept through the crowd. Right through them it swept, leaving a wide lane of dead and dying; and such a shriek went up to heaven as even that place of torment had never heard.

Then they broke and fled this way and that, screaming curses as they went.

When Leonard and the priest had rolled down the rising bridge they found Juanna standing safely by the guard-house, surrounded by some of the Settlement men.

"To the gun!" he cried, "to the gun! Fire into them! I will follow you."

Then it was that he saw Otter left to his death and called out in fear. But Otter saved himself as has been told, and clambered down the bridge safe and sound.

Leaning on the dwarf and Francisco, Leonard, followed by Juanna, staggered along the earthwork to the place where the gun was mounted. Before he had gone a step he caught sight of the figure of Soa, outlined in bold relief against the background of the fire and surrounded by many of the freed Settlement men. At the instant when he saw her she was in the act of springing back from the breech of the gun, the lanyard in her hand. Then came the roar of the shot and the shriek of the smitten.

"Wow!" said Otter, "the old woman has not been idle. She is clever as a man, that one."

Another minute and they were helping to reload the piece, that is, except Soa, who was on her knees kissing Juanna's hands.

"Come, stop that!" said Leonard, sinking to the ground, for he was

utterly exhausted. "Those devils have gone for their arms. They will try to storm us presently. Is the shot home, Peter? Then run her out, sharp; and you, Soa, screw her nose down." Next he bade the freed slaves arm themselves with stakes or anything that they could find, for of rifles they had but four, two of which they had found in the guard-house.

Presently the slavers came on with a yell, carrying long planks, by the help of which they hoped to cross the dike.

"Look out!" said Leonard, "they are going to open fire. Under the earthwork, every man of you!" And seizing Juanna who was standing near, he pulled her down into cover.

It was not too soon, for next instant a storm of bullets swept over them. Most of the men had understood and taken shelter, but some were too slow or too stupid. Of these one fell dead and two more were hit. Soa and Peter alone took no heed, and yet they remained unhurt. There stood the woman, while the bullets whistled round her, laying the gun as coolly as though she had served in the Royal Artillery, and with her was the head-man, Peter. Peter was shot through the waist-cloth and a ball cut its way through Soa's grizzled hair, but neither of them seemed to notice these trifles.

"They are mad, Baas," cried Otter, who was watching the enemy over the top of the embankment. "See! they are coming across the open."

Leonard looked. The dwarf was right: in their rage and hurry the slavers, half hidden in a cloud of smoke caused by their rapid firing, were advancing across the clear space instead of creeping along the edge of the dike. What was more, the necessity of carrying the planks caused them to pack in groups. Soa gave a final twist with her lever and waited, her hand on the lanyard. A bullet cut it in two, but without firing the gun, and she grasped the shortened cord.

"Now for it!" cried Leonard, as the first party came into the line of fire.

Soa sprang backwards with a yell: again the piece thundered out, and the canister screamed through the air. It tore along the advancing files, then, striking the beaten earth, rebounded and caught those who were following with the ricochet, and with awful effect. Whole groups were mowed down by this one discharge, the destruction being twice as large as that caused by the first shot, for at this greater range the canister found room to spread. Also the rebounding missiles flying hither and thither among the crowd did no little execution. Down went the men in heaps, and with them the planks they carried. They had no more wish to storm the slave camp; they had but one thought left, the thought of safety, and the survivors of them fled in all directions, yelling with fear and fury.

"Load up, load up!" cried Otter, lifting the charge of powder which lay at hand. "They will try to break open the gates and get out, then they

will cut us off."

As he spoke they saw many men run from the auction-shed to the water-gate. But it could not be climbed, the key was gone, and the massive bolts and beams were not easy to break. So they brought hammers and a tree-trunk which had supported an angle of the shed, and battered at the gate. For two minutes or more it held, then it began to give.

"Swift! swift!" cried Otter again as he dragged at the cannon to turn it, "or all will yet be lost."

"Hurry no man's ox, Black One," said Soa, as she laid the gun with the help of Peter.

A cry went up from the slavers; the gate was tottering, but it still held by the upper hinges. A few more blows and it must surely fall. But those blows were never struck. Again Soa sprang backwards, and the roar of the gun was answered by the screams of the slavers as the shrapnel ploughed through them.

Of those who were left the most part fled for shelter to the auction-hut and to the Nest itself. Some ran across to the magazine, but appeared to be unable to enter it, for soon they were seen flying back again, while about a dozen of the boldest remained at the gate trying to complete its destruction. On these Leonard and Otter opened fire with rifles, but it was not until three or four of them had fallen that the rest fled to

join their companions beneath the shelter of the sheds.

"Oh! look, look!" said Juanna, pointing to the east.

It was indeed a spectacle never to be forgotten.

The dense reeds, measuring twelve to fifteen feet in height, had been fired far to the east of the Nest, and as the wind gathered to a gale and the fire got firmer hold, it rolled down upon the doomed place in billows and sheets--a sea of flame that sometimes spouted high into the air and sometimes ran swiftly along the ground.

The reeds crackled and roared like musketry as the fire ate into them, giving out thick volumes of smoke. At first this smoke had passed above the spectators, now it blew into their faces, half choking them and blotting out the sky, and mixed up with it were showers of sparks and fragments of burning reeds brought forward on the wind.

"The house and sheds will soon catch now," said Leonard; "then they must take refuge in the open spaces, where we can deal with them," and he nodded towards the gun.

As he spoke tongues of flame darted into the air, first from the thatch of the shed, then from the roof of the Nest. They were afire.

"We must be careful, Baas," said Otter, "or the slave-shelters behind us

will burn also, and all those in them."

"Heavens! I never thought of that," answered Leonard. "Here, Father, if you wish to do a good work, take some of these people and the buckets they use to water the slaves. Let three or four men get on to each roof and extinguish the sparks as they fall, while others bring them water from the moat."

The priest sprang up and set to the task, at which he laboured gallantly for two long hours. Had it not been for his efforts, the sheds and the slaves in them must have been burnt, for the sparks fell thick upon the dry thatch, which caught again and again.

Now the sights and sounds grew more and more fearful. Maddened with fear, the remainder of the slave-drivers and their servants rushed from the flaming buildings, striving to escape from the fire. Some flung themselves desperately into the aloes and prickly-pears on the inner rampart, and, climbing the palisade beyond, escaped into the marsh, while some collected on the open space, and at these the gun was fired from time to time when the smoke lifted. Others again ran to the dike of the slave camp begging for mercy, there to be shot by Otter, who never wearied in his task of revenge. From behind them also rose the hideous cries of the slaves, who believed that they were about to be burned alive, and screamed as they dragged at their manacles.

"Oh, it is like hell!" said Juanna to Leonard, as she buried her face

in the grass that she might see no more, and to escape the suffocating smoke. She was right.

So the time went on. One by one the roofs of the various buildings fell in, and spouts of flame shot high into the air to descend about them in a rain of sparks. But at last the cries ceased, for even the slaves could yell no more; the fire grew less and less, and the wind dropped. Then the sun rose on the scene of death and desolation. The morass was swept bare to the depth of many hundred yards, and the camp was a smoking ruin strewn with the dead. The walls of the Nest still stood, however, and here and there a charred post remained. Everything else was gone, except the magazine, which had escaped the flames, being built of brick and stone, and roofed with tin.

The adventurers looked around them in silence, then they looked at each other. What a spectacle they presented in the clear light of the morning, as they stood by the gun which had done them such signal service! All were begrimed with smoke and powder, and their clothes were burnt by the falling sparks. Leonard's throat was a mass of bruises, his hands and face were bleeding, and he was so stiff and hurt that he could scarcely move. Soa's hair was singed and cut by the bullet which had shaved her head; the priest's robe hung in charred threads, and his hands were blistered with fire; Juanna's brodered Arab dress, torn by the brutal hand of Pereira, scarcely retained a trace of white, and her long dark locks were tangled and powdered with bits of blackened reed. All were utterly exhausted--that is, all except Otter, who advanced

to speak to Leonard, begrimed and stripped to the waist, but fresh and fierce as ever.

"What is it, Otter?" he asked.

"Will the Baas let me take these men," and he nodded towards the freed slaves who had belonged to the Settlement, "and hunt through the camp yonder? Many of the devils still live, and wounded snakes strike hardest."

"As you like," answered Leonard. "Arm them with anything you can find, and search the camp thoroughly. But be careful."

In ten minutes Otter was gone with the men. Then Leonard and the others fetched water and washed as best they might, the guard-house being assigned to Juanna and Soa, who made their toilet with the help of a comb they found in it. There also they discovered food, the rations of the sentry, of which they ate with such appetite as they might, and a plentiful supply of meal for the slaves.

As they were finishing their breakfast Otter returned unharmed, though of the men who accompanied him five were missing. With him also were two of the four Settlement men who had been sent to fire the reeds on the previous night. They were much exhausted, for their task had been no easy one, and fortunately for Leonard it was only after long delay that they succeeded in it. Their two companions were dead: one had been taken

by an alligator in the water, and the other had fallen into a deep hole in the morass, and, striking his head against a log, was drowned there.

"Is it finished?" said Leonard to the dwarf.

Otter nodded. "Some are dead and some are fled," he answered; "but from these last we have little to fear, for they believe that an army has come against them. Still that is not all the tale, Baas. We have taken one of them alive. Come and look at him, Baas."

Leonard clambered up the steps of the embankment, followed by the others. On its further side stood the group of Settlement men who had returned from scouring the camp, thin and haggard fellows, scarred by the slave-irons, but very fierce-looking. In their midst a white man crouched upon the ground, moaning with terror and misery. Just then he lifted his face--it was that of the Yellow Devil himself. There lay that aged Iniquity, that hoary Shame caught at last in his own snares.

"Where did you find him, Otter?" asked Leonard as they crossed the drawbridge.

"In the magazine, Baas, and your gold with him, also many rifles and much powder. He had locked himself up there, but he had not the heart to fire the powder and make an end."

Pereira did not see them as yet, but raising his head he begged for

water.

"Give him blood," said one of the men sullenly. "He has drunk it all his days, let it be his last drink."

Leonard motioned to Francisco the priest to bring water, then Pereira saw them and began to pray for mercy.

"Antonio Pereira," Leonard answered sternly, "last night I and two companions, a woman and a black dwarf, set ourselves a task--to take this armed place of yours and rescue a white girl whom you had condemned to slavery. It did not seem possible that we should do it, but between sunset and sunrise we have done it. Who helped us then?--that we should have carried out this thing which was impossible. I will tell you; God helped us as He helped this lady when she called on Him. Cry to God, then, to do that which is still more impossible--to help you. From me you will have justice and no more."

For a moment Pereira ceased whining, and a flash of the old ferocity came into his eyes.

"Ah! my friend," he muttered, "if I had but known!" Then turning to Juanna he said: "My dove, have I not treated you kindly? Will you say no word for me, now that my enemies prevail against me?"

By way of answer Juanna looked first at the human reptile before her,

and next at the bosom of her torn dress, now roughly pinned up with the spikes of aloe leaves. Then she turned and went.

"Baas," said Otter, "may I speak?"

"Speak on," Leonard answered.

"Hearken, Yellow Devil," said the dwarf. "Ten years ago you took me, and I lay in this camp a slave; yes, in yonder shed. Here are the marks of the irons--your own seal. Ah! you have forgotten the black dwarf, or perhaps you never noticed him; but he remembers. Who could forget you, Yellow Devil, that once had slept beneath your roof? I escaped, but as I fled I swore that, if I might, I would bring vengeance upon you. The years went by, and the hour came at last. I led Baas to this place. I found you this morning, and we are not parted yet, Yellow Devil. What did you boast last night--that you had sent twenty thousand of us black people to slavery? Yes, and for every one that you have sold you have killed five--old men white with years, women with child, little children at the breast, you have murdered them all. Ah! yes, I have seen you laugh and kill them before the eyes of their mothers, as last night you killed the kitten.

"And now your time has come at last, Yellow Devil, and I, Otter the dwarf, will give you to drink of your own medicine. What! you cry for mercy, you who never gave it even in a dream? I tell you, did my chief yonder bid me loose you, I would disobey him even to force; I, who would

rather die than put aside his word on any other matter.

"Look now at these men," and he pointed to the Settlement people, who glared hungrily at the crouching wretch, much as hounds glare at a fox that is held aloft by the huntsman; "look at them! Do you see mercy in their eyes? They, whose fathers and mothers you have murdered, whose little children you have stamped to death? Wow! Yellow Devil, the white men tell us of a hell, a place where dead people are tormented. We know nothing of that, it is for the white people, and they may keep it all to themselves. Now you are beginning to taste that hell of yours--only beginning, Yellow Devil.

"Baas Leonard, I demand this man to be tried by us and dealt with according to our customs, for it is against us black folk that he has sinned most of all, and we ask his blood in payment for our blood."

"What!" howled Pereira, "am I to be given over to these black dogs? Mercy! Mercy! Francisco, plead for me. Shrive me. I know I killed your brother, I had to do it. Plead for me!" and he rolled in the dust, trying to clasp Leonard's feet.

"I cannot shrive you," answered the priest shuddering, "but I will pray for you."

Then the hungry-eyed natives pounced upon Pereira to drag him thence, but Leonard broke through them saying:

"I will have none of your savage cruelties here. Let the man be shot if you will, but no more."

As it chanced, however, Pereira was not destined to die by the hand of man, for even as Otter gripped him he turned livid, threw up his arms, groaned, and fell to the earth.

Leonard looked at him; he was dead, dead through the fear of death, for terror had stopped the beating of his wicked heart.

"The Shepherdess prophesied truly," cried Otter presently, "for the Heavens above have robbed us of our vengeance. Wow! it is hard, but at least this one shall work no more evil."

"Carry it away," said Leonard with a shudder, for the dead man's face was ghastly to behold. Then turning to him as if nothing had happened, he added:

"Otter, take these men and loose the rest of the slaves; then get the ammunition, rifles, and stores from the arms-house and bring them to the water-gate. We must clear out of this place at once, or we shall have the escaped slavers and the crews of the dhows down upon us."

Thus then did fate at last find out Antonio Pereira, the Yellow Devil.