

CHAPTER XV

DISILLUSION

Once more it was morning, and the travellers were encamped by that reedy point where they had left the big boats which they cut loose from the island. From the earliest dawn Leonard had been superintending the transport across the river of the hundreds of slaves whom they had released. They there were put on shore by the Settlement men, provided with a store of meal, and left to shift for themselves, it being found utterly impossible to take them any further.

"There, they are gone," said Otter, as the last boat-load set out under the charge of Peter. "Well, let them go, the silly sheep. So much the less trouble for us, who, although we have a Shepherdess, can scarcely lead so large a flock. Well, we have pulled the Missie yonder out of the Slave Nest, and the Yellow Devil--ah! we have talked with him and all his crew. And now are we to go on to win the gold--the real Yellow Devil, Baas?"

"I suppose so, Otter," answered Leonard--"that is, if Soa keeps her word. But it isn't gold, it is rubies. At any rate we must make for the Settlement below Sena, to take these men back and see if we can hear anything of Mavoom."

"So," said Otter after a pause. "Well, the Shepherdess, as these

Settlement people call her, will want to find her father. Say, Baas, she is proud, is she not? She looks over our heads and speaks little."

"Yes, Otter, she is proud."

"And she is beautiful; no woman was ever so beautiful."

"Yes, Otter, she is beautiful."

"And she is cold, Baas; she does not say 'thank you' nicely for all that you have done."

"Perhaps she thinks it the more, Otter."

"Perhaps she thinks it the more. Still, she might say 'thank you' to you, Baas, who are her--husband."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, Baas, that you bought her first, according to our custom, and married her afterwards according to your own, and if that does not make her your wife, nothing can."

"Stop that fool's talk," said Leonard angrily, "and never let me hear you repeat it. It was only a game that we played."

"As the Baas desires, so be it. I do but speak from my heart when I say that she is your wife, and some might think that not so ill, for she is fair and clever. Will the Baas rise and come to the river to bathe, that his soreness may leave him?"

Leonard took the suggestion, and came back from his bath a new man, for rest and the cold water had acted on him like magic. He was still stiff, indeed, and remained lame in one leg for ten days or more, but, with the exception of an aching of the throat where Xavier had gripped him, no other ill effects were left. Among the booty of the slave camp was a good supply of clothing, flannel shirts, corduroy suits, and hats. Casting aside the rags of the Portuguese uniform in which he had disguised himself, Leonard put on some of these articles and reappeared in the camp dressed like an ordinary English colonist, roughly indeed, but becomingly.

Meanwhile Juanna had also been making her toilet, with the help of Soa, who took this opportunity to tell her mistress the history of her meeting with Leonard Outram. But, either from design or because she forgot to do so, she did not at this time tell her about the agreement which had been entered into between them. As yet Soa had never spoken fully to her mistress of her early life or of the mysterious People of the Mist from whom she sprang, though she had taught her the language they spoke. Perhaps, for reasons of her own, she did not think this a favourable occasion on which to begin the story.

When Soa had finished Juanna fell into a reverie. She remembered that she had expressed no gratitude to Mr. Outram for his heroic rescue of her. Yet in her heart she was grateful enough. But for him she must now have been dead, and the world of light and love would have closed its gates upon her for ever. Still, mixed up with her gratitude and earnest admiration of the deed of heroism which had been wrought for her sake, was another feeling, a feeling of resentment and alarm. This stranger, this dark, keen-eyed, resolute man had bought her as a slave; more, he had gone through a form of marriage with her that was not all a form, for it had been solemnly celebrated by a priest, and there on her finger was the memorial of it. Of course it meant nothing, but the thought of it angered her and offended her pride.

Like other women, Juanna Rodd had not come to twenty years of age without dreaming of love, and, strange to say, her fancy had always chosen some such man as Leonard for the hero of the story. But that the hero should present himself in this ultra-heroic fashion, that he should buy her with gold, that he should go through a form of marriage with her within an hour of their first meeting--for these things she had not bargained. It was a fact--that marriage was an accomplished fact, although it might be null and void, and the female mind has a great respect for accomplished facts. To a woman of Juanna's somewhat haughty nature this was very galling. Already she felt it to be so, and as time went on the chain of its remembrance irked her more and more, a circumstance which accounts for much of her subsequent conduct.

Thinking such thoughts as these, Juanna strolled back towards the camp along a little pathway in the reeds, and suddenly came face to face with Leonard. She was clad in a white Arab robe, part of the loot, which she had adapted cleverly to the purposes of a dress, fastening it round her slender waist with an embroidered scarf. She wore no hat, and her rich dark hair was twisted into a great knot that shone in the sunlight. In her hand she held some crimson lilies which she had gathered, that made a spot of colour on the whiteness of her dress. The look of haunting terror was gone from her face, whose beauty had come back during her sleep; her changing eyes shone beneath their dark lashes, and she moved with the grace of a fawn.

Seen thus in that pure and pearly light against the green background of the feathered reeds, nothing could have seemed more sweet and lovely than did this girl, this child of the forest and the river, who mingled in herself the different beauty of the Saxon and the Spaniard, ripened by the African sun and dignified by the long companionship of Nature. There was a grace about her movements, a purity in her face, a mystery in the wide eyes and curved and smiling lips, such as Leonard had never seen before, and which overcame him utterly. Alas for the fickleness of the human heart! from that moment the adoration of his youth, the dream of his lonely years of wandering, Jane Beach, began to grow faint and fade away. But though this was so, as yet he did not admit it to himself; indeed, he scarcely knew it.

Juanna looked up and saw him standing before her, proud and handsome,

an air of command upon his thoughtful face, deep-chested, bearded, vigorous, a man amongst men. She saw the admiration in his eyes and blushed, knowing that, do what she would to prevent it, it was reflected in her own. She remembered all that this stranger had done for her, how he had risked his life a hundred times, how she would now have been dead and unlovely were it not for his intrepid deeds, and remembering, something stirred at her heart.

Was it gratitude that moved her thus? She did not know; but whatever it was, she turned her head that he might not read it on her face. Another moment, and she was holding out her hand to him and smiling pleasantly.

"Good morning," she said, "I hope that you have slept well, and that you have no bad news."

"I spent eight hours in a state of absolute stupor," he answered laughing, "and there is no news at all to speak of, except that I have got rid of those slaves, poor creatures. I fancy that our friends, the slave-dealers yonder, have had enough of our company, and are scarcely likely to follow us."

Juanna turned a shade paler, and answered:

"I trust so. At least I have had enough of them. By the way, Mr. Outram, I--I--have to thank you for a great deal;" here her eyes caught the gleam of the gold circlet on the third finger of her left hand--"this

ring belongs to you, I will return it at once."

"Miss Rodd," said Leonard gravely, "we have passed through a very strange adventure together; will you not keep the ring in remembrance of it?"

Her strong impulse was to refuse. While she wore this ring the thought of that hateful scene and still more hateful mockery of marriage would be always with her. And yet, as the words of prompt refusal were on her lips, a feeling, an instinct, almost a superstition caused them to remain unspoken. "You are very kind," she said, "but this is your signet-ring--is not that what you call it? You cannot wish to give it to a chance acquaintance."

"Yes, it is my signet-ring, and if you will look at the crest and motto you will see that they are not inappropriate. And I do wish to give it even 'to a chance acquaintance,' Miss Rodd, if you will allow me no more intimate term."

"I have looked at them," she answered, as she examined the ring curiously. It was of plain and somewhat massive gold, and deeply cut into the shield-faced bezel was the Outram crest, a hand holding a drawn sword, beneath which the motto was engraved. "What is the last word of the motto?" she went on; "it is so rubbed that I cannot read it--'For Home, Honour----'"

"And Heart," said Leonard.

Juanna blushed, though why the word "heart" should make her blush she knew not.

"Well, I will wear the ring, if you wish it, Mr. Outram, in memory of our adventure--that is, until you ask it back again," she said confusedly; then added with a change of tone: "There is one detail of the adventure that I hope you will not allude to more than you can avoid, for the recollection of it is most painful to me, probably more so even than to you."

"I suppose you mean the ceremony of marriage, Miss Rodd."

"I mean the wicked and abominable farce in which we were made to play a part," she answered passionately. "Most of the witnesses of that shameful scene are dead and cannot speak of it, and if you will keep your servant the dwarf silent I will do the same by Father Francisco. Let it be forgotten by both of us."

"Certainly, Miss Rodd," said Leonard, "that is, if anything so strange can be forgotten. And now, will you come to breakfast?"

She bowed her head in assent and swept past him, the red lilies in her hand.

"I wonder what hold she has over that priest," thought Leonard to himself, "that she talked of being able to keep him silent. By the way, I must find out whether we are to have the pleasure of his company. I would rather be without him myself. A strange girl! One can account for her beauty, she inherited that; but it is difficult to understand the manner. By rights she should be a half-wild hoyden, but I never saw an English lady with more grace and dignity. Perhaps I have forgotten; it is so long since I associated with ladies, or perhaps, like beauty, these are natural to her. After all, her father seems to have been a gentleman of birth, and people who live with nature may have every fault in the calendar, but they cannot be vulgar. That is the gift of civilisation."

When he reached the camp, Leonard found the priest talking confidentially to Juanna.

"By the way, Father," he said somewhat brusquely, "as you see, I have got rid of those slaves. It was impossible to take them with us, and now they must shift for themselves: at any rate, they are better off than they were yonder. What are your plans? You have behaved well to us, but I cannot forget that we found you in bad company. Perhaps you wish to return to it, and in that case your way lies eastward," and he nodded towards the Nest.

"I do not wonder that you distrust me, senor," said Francisco, his pale and girlish face colouring as he spoke, "for appearances are much

against me. But I assure you that although I came into the company of Antonio Pereira by my own will, it was for no evil purpose. To be brief, senhor, I had a brother who fled hither from Portugal because of a crime that he had committed, and joined Pereira's band. With much toil I tracked him out, and was welcomed at the Nest because I am a priest who can comfort the sick and shrive the dying, for wickedness does not console men at the last, senhor. I persuaded my brother to return with me, and we made a plan to escape. But Pereira's ears were long: we were betrayed, and my brother was hanged. They did not hang me, because of my calling. Afterwards I was kept a prisoner and forced to accompany the band in their expeditions. That is all the story. Now, with your permission, I will follow you, for I have no money and nowhere else to go in this wilderness, though I fear that I am not strong enough to be of much service, and being of another faith you will scarcely need my ministrations."

"Very well, Father," answered Leonard coldly, "but please understand that we are still surrounded by many dangers, which any treachery might cause to overwhelm us. Therefore I warn you that should I detect anything of the sort my answer to it will be a quick one."

"I do not think that you need suspect the Father, Mr. Outram," said Juanna indignantly. "I owe him a great deal: had it not been for his kindness and counsel, I should not be alive to-day. I am most deeply grateful to him."

"If you vouch for him, Miss Rodd, that is enough. You have had the advantage of a closer acquaintance than I can boast," Leonard answered gravely, mentally contrasting the difference of her manner in acknowledging the priest's services and his own.

From that hour till a certain conversation opened his eyes, struggle as he would against it, Leonard disliked Francisco. He had a foolish British aversion to his class, and Juanna's marked partiality towards this particular individual did not lessen it in this instance. Prejudice is a strong thing, and when it is heightened by suspicion and jealousy, especially jealousy of the unacknowledged kind, it becomes formidable, both to him who entertains it and to him against whom it is entertained.

When their meal was done they proceeded up the river in the boats which they had captured from the slavers, each boat being rowed by the best oarsmen among the Settlement men. Including women and children their party numbered some sixty souls. At evening they passed the island where they had left the company of slavers, but could see no sign of life upon it, and never learned whether the men perished or escaped.

An hour later they encamped upon the bank of the river, and it was while they were sitting round the fire at night that Juanna told Leonard of the horrors which she had undergone during her dreadful sojourn with the slave caravan. She told him also how she had torn leaves from the Bible which she chanced to have with her, and fixed them upon the reeds whenever she could find an opportunity of so doing, in the hope that

they might guide her father, should he return and attempt her rescue.

"It is all like a nightmare," she said; "and as for that hideous farce of marriage with which it ended, I can scarcely bear to think of it."

Then Francisco, who had been sitting silent, spoke for the first time.

"You speak, senora," he said in his subdued voice, "of that 'hideous farce of marriage,' and I suppose you mean the ceremony which I performed between you and the Senor Outram, being forced to the act by Pereira. It is my duty to tell you both that, however irregular this marriage may have been, I do not believe it to be a farce. I believe that you are lawfully man and wife until death shall part you, unless indeed the Pope should annul the union, as he alone can do."

"Nonsense, nonsense," broke in Leonard; "you forget that there was no consent; that we are of another religion, and that the form was necessary to our plot."

"The Church knows nothing of the reasons which lead to the undertaking of wedlock," Francisco answered mildly. "They are various, and many of them would not bear investigation. But you were married without any open protest on your part, on Portuguese territory, according to Portuguese custom, and by a duly qualified priest. The fact that you are of the Protestant religion, and were united by the Catholic ritual, does not matter at all. For the purposes of the ceremony you accepted that

ritual, as is customary when a Protestant marries a Catholic. It is disagreeable for me to have to tell you this, but the truth remains: I believe that you are man and wife before Heaven and the world."[*]

[*] The Editor does not hold himself responsible for Father Francisco's views on ecclesiastical marriage law.

Here Juanna jumped to her feet, and even in that light Leonard could see that her breast was heaving and her eyes shone with anger.

"It is intolerable that I should be forced to listen to such falsehoods," she said, "and if you ever repeat them in my hearing, Father Francisco, I will not speak to you again. I utterly repudiate this marriage. Before the ceremony began, Mr. Outram whispered to me to go through with the 'farce,' and it was a farce. Had I thought otherwise I should have taken the poison. If there is any foundation for what the Father says, I have been deceived and entrapped."

"Pardon, senora," replied the priest; "but you should not speak so angrily. The Senor Outram and I only did what we were forced to do."

"Supposing that Father Francisco is right, which I do not believe," said Leonard, with sarcasm, "do you think, Miss Rodd, that such a sudden undertaking would be more to my liking than to yours? Believe me, had I wished to 'deceive and entrap' you, I could not have done so without involving myself, since, if the marriage is binding, it is binding on

both parties, and even such a humble individual as I am does not take a wife on the faith of a five minutes' acquaintance. To be frank, I undertook your rescue for purposes far other than those of matrimony."

"Might I ask what they were?" replied Juanna, in a tone of equal acerbity.

"Certainly, Miss Rodd. But first I must explain that I am no knight-errant. I am an almost penniless adventurer, and for urgent reasons of my own I seek to win fortune. Therefore, when the woman yonder," and he pointed to Soa, who was sitting watching them just out of range of the firelight, "came to me with a marvellous tale of a countless treasure of rubies, which she promised to reveal to me if I would undertake the little matter of your rescue, and when she even paid down a specimen stone of considerable value on account, having nothing better to do and nowhere to go, being in short desperate, I consented. Indeed, I did more, I took the precaution of reducing the matter to writing, I being one contracting party, and Soa, acting on her own behalf and as your attorney, being the other."

"I have not the least idea to what you allude, nor did I ever give Soa any authority to sign documents on my behalf. But may I see this writing?"

"Certainly," Leonard answered; and rising he went to the baggage, whence he returned presently with a lantern and the prayer-book.

Juanna placed the lantern beside her and opened the book. The first thing that she saw was a name on the fly-leaf, "Jane Beach," and beneath it this inscription, which evidently had been written by some one in a great hurry: "To dearest Leonard from Jane. 23 Jan."

"Turn over," he said hastily; "the document is on the other side."

She was not slow to note both the writing and the confusion which her perusal of it caused him. Who was Jane Beach, she wondered, and why did she call Mr. Outram "dearest Leonard"? In a moment, so strange are the hearts of women, Juanna felt herself much prepossessed against her, whoever she might be. But she turned the leaf and read the agreement. It was a pretty sight to see her bending over the cramped writing in the circle of the lantern light, but when at length she had finished and looked up, there was a smile upon her lovely face which had more of scorn in it than was pleasant.

"Come hither, Soa," she said, "and tell me what all this nonsense means about rubies and the People of the Mist."

"Shepherdess," answered Soa, squatting down on the ground before her, "it is not nonsense. The language which I taught you when you were little is that of this people. It is a true tale, though hitherto I have hid it from you and your father, Mavoom, lest Mavoom should seek to win the precious stones and come to his death through them. Listen,

Shepherdess," and she repeated the outlines of the story with which she had already made Leonard acquainted, ending thus:

"I told this tale to the White Man because I saw that he was greedy, after the fashion of his race, and my strait was desperate. For this reason I bribed him with the red stone, and with the promise that I would lead him to the land of the People of the Mist, for had I not done so he would never have used his wit or put out his strength to rescue you from the Yellow Devil. Therefore it was also that I marked this paper on your behalf and my own, knowing well that I had no right to speak for you, and that by and by you could refuse to abide by it, though I am bound."

"Frank, at any rate," said Leonard to himself. "What an attorney the old lady would have made!"

"Say, Soa," asked Juanna, "to succeed in the search for these stones is it necessary that I should act a part among your people?"

"I can see no other way," she answered. "But what of that? You are free, and what I promised on your behalf is nothing. Let the White Man go without his reward, it will save him a long journey."

"Attorney!" murmured Leonard in admiration; "she ought to be Attorney-General."

"Wow! The wicked old cheat!" put in Otter. "If I had my way I would break her neck, though she is so clever with the big gun."

Juanna took no notice of these asides. For the moment she remained in thought, then looked up smiling.

"Really," she said, "this is a capital legal document. But oh! Mr. Outram, why did you dispel my illusions? You see, I had been making up such a romantic story out of this adventure. You were the knight-errant, and I was the Christian maiden in the hands of the ogre, and when you heard of it you buckled on your armour and started to the rescue. And now you bring me down to the nineteenth century with a run.

"It is not knight-errantry, but a commercial transaction: I am in difficulty, but by playing a certain undefined part you believe that I shall be able to help you to secure treasure; therefore you agree to undertake the risk. I am ignorant of what I am to do, for as yet nobody has explained it to me, but you need have no fear, I shall not repudiate, as Soa suggests with so much candour. Certainly I shall try my best to help you in this business, if I can, for you have worked hard and endangered your life, Mr. Outram, and I am sure that you have earned your money, or rather the prospect of it. Really it is all very amusing," and she laughed merrily.

As for Leonard, he sat before her, mad with secret wrath and burning with shame. What a fool he had been thus to expose himself to the shafts

of this girl's tongue--this girl, whose beauty was only equalled by her malice! He wished that his hand had withered before he wrote that accursed document. But now the only thing to do was to face it out.

"I am glad that you see me in my true light at last, Miss Rodd," he said. "It simplifies matters. I entered into that agreement because it seemed to give me a remote chance of attaining my end, which is money. It does not quite follow, however, that I should not have attempted your rescue had there been no agreement; but, of course, I cannot expect you to believe that."

"I assure you, Mr. Outram, that I am deeply obliged to you for your caution. It has lifted a great weight from my mind, for if in any way I can help you to obtain possession of the valuables of this People of the Mist I shall have paid off an obligation which at present crushes me."

"We shall have to start early to-morrow morning, so with your permission I think that I will be turning in," said Leonard, springing up with singular alacrity.

Juanna watched him go with innocent eyes, and as he passed she saw by the firelight that his face was like a thunderstorm. "I have made him angry this time," she thought to herself, "and I am glad of it. What business had he to rescue me for money? But he is a strange man, and I don't think that I quite understand him. I wonder who Jane Beach is. I suppose that she wants the money. Women generally do, or at least they

did in Durban."

Then she spoke aloud: "Soa, come here while I undress, and tell me again all about your meeting with Mr. Outram, and what he said, forgetting nothing. You have put me to shame, Soa, with your talk, and I will never forgive you. Tell me also how I can help to win the treasure of the People of the Mist!"