

CHAPTER XVI

MISUNDERSTANDINGS

For some days after the acrimonious conversation that has been reported, the relations between Leonard and Juanna were not a little strained, although the necessities of travel brought them into continual contact. Both felt that they had cause of complaint against the other, and both were at heart somewhat ashamed of the part which they had played. Leonard regretted ever having made the agreement with Soa, and Juanna, now that she had cooled down a little, regretted having spoken as she did upon the subject. Her pride was offended; but, after all, how could he know? Besides, he was an adventurer, and it was natural that he should make terms. Doubtless also his anxiety to win fortune had to do with the lady whose name was written in the prayer-book.

Perhaps this lady was only a maiden aunt, but a great desire seized Juanna to know about her; and when such a wish enters the heart of woman it is probable that she will find a means to satisfy it. Having no one else to ask, Juanna sounded Otter, with whom she was on friendly terms, only to find that the subject of Jane Beach did not interest the dwarf. He hazarded a remark, however, that doubtless she was one of the Baas's wives when he lived in his big kraal over the water.

This disgusted Juanna somewhat, but the allusion to a "big kraal" excited the curiosity, of which she had a certain share, and very

adroitly she questioned the dwarf concerning it. He rose to the fly without hesitation, and told her that his master had been one of the greatest men in the world, and one of the richest, but that he lost his possessions through the wicked arts of foemen, and was come to this country to seek new ones.

Indeed Otter enlarged upon the theme, and, anxious to extol his beloved chief's worth in the eyes of the Shepherdess, it would not be too much to say that he drew upon his own imagination. Leonard, he declared, had owned country as wide as a horse could gallop across in a day; moreover, he had two hundred tribesmen, heads of families, who fed upon oxen killed for them--twenty oxen a week; and ten principal wives had called him husband. Juanna asked for the titles of the wives, whereon the undefeated Otter gave them all Kaffir names, not neglecting to describe their lineage, personal charms, and the number and sex of their children. The tale took about two hours to tell, and after hearing it Juanna conceived a great respect for Otter, but she saw clearly that if she wished for reliable information she must obtain it from Leonard himself.

It was not till the last day of their journey that Juanna found the opportunity she sought. The voyage had been most prosperous, and they expected to reach the ruined Settlement on the morrow, though whether or not they would find Mr. Rodd there was a matter of anxious conjecture, especially to his daughter. Day after day they rowed and sailed up the great river, camping at night upon its banks, which would have been

pleasant had it not been for the mosquitoes. But all this while Leonard and Juanna saw little of each other, though they met often enough. On this particular occasion, however, it chanced that they were journeying in the same boat, alone, except for the rowers.

Possibly Juanna had contrived that it should be so, for as a general rule, in pursuit of his policy of avoiding a disagreeable young person, Leonard travelled with Otter in the first boat, while Juanna was accompanied by Francisco and Soa in the second. To the priest, indeed, she made herself very agreeable, perhaps to show Leonard how charming she could be when she chose. She conversed with him by the hour together as though he were a woman friend, and his melancholy eyes would lighten with pleasure at her talk. Indeed Francisco had something of the feminine in his nature; his very gentleness was womanly, and his slight stature, delicate hands and features heightened this impression. In face he was not unlike Juanna herself, and as time went on the resemblance seemed to grow. Had he been arrayed in a woman's loose attire, it would have been easy to mistake one for the other in the dusk, although she was the taller of the two.

The accident of his profession caused Juanna to admit Francisco to an intimacy which she would have withheld from any other man. She forgot, or did not understand, that she was playing a dangerous game--that after all he was a man, and that the heart of a man beat beneath his cassock. Nobody could be more charming in her manner or more subtle in her mind than Juanna, yet day by day she did not hesitate to display all her

strength before the unfortunate young priest, which, in addition to her beauty, made her somewhat irresistible, at any rate on the Zambesi. Friendship and ignorance of the world were doubtless at the bottom of this reprehensible conduct, but it is also possible that unconscious pique had something to do with it. She was determined to show Leonard that she was not always a disagreeable person whom it was well to avoid, or at least that others did not think so. That all these airs and graces might have a tragic effect upon Francisco never occurred to her till too late.

Well, for once the order of things was changed; Leonard and Juanna sat side by side in the first boat. The evening was lovely, they glided slowly by the reed-fringed bank, watching the long lights play upon the surface of the lonely river, listening to the whistling wings of the countless wildfowl overhead, and counting the herds of various game that roamed upon the plains beyond.

For a while neither of them spoke much. Occasionally Juanna would call her companion's attention to some water-flower or to a great fish darting from the oars, and he would answer by a word or nod. His heart was wroth with the girl, as Otter would have said; he wondered why she had come with him--because she was tired of the priest perhaps. He wished her away, and yet he would have been sorry enough had she gone.

For her part Juanna desired to make him speak, and did not know how to break through his moody silence. Suddenly she leaned back in the boat

and began to sing in a rich contralto voice that moved him. He had never heard her sing before, had never heard any good singing for many years indeed, and he was fond of singing. The song she sang was a Portuguese love-song, very tender and passionate, addressed by a bereaved lover to his dead mistress, and she put much expression into it. Presently she ceased, and he noticed that her beautiful eyes were full of tears. So she could feel!

"That is too sad," she said with a little laugh, and then burst into a Kaffir boat-song, of which the Settlement natives, joyous in the prospect of once more seeing their home, took up the chorus gleefully. Presently she wearied of the boat-chant. "I am tiring you," she said; "I dare say that you do not care for singing."

"On the contrary, Miss Rodd, I am very fond of it. Your voice is good, if you will allow me to say so, and it has been trained. I do not quite understand how you can have had the opportunity to learn so many things--music, for instance."

"I suppose, Mr. Outram, you think that I should be a sort of savage by rights; but as a matter of fact, although we have lived on the Zambesi, I have had some chances. There is always a certain amount of trade on the river, by means of which we often obtain books and other things, and are brought into occasional contact with European merchants, travellers, and missionaries. Then my father is a gently born and well-educated man, though circumstances have caused him to spend his life in these wild

places. He was a scholar in his day and he has taught me a good deal, and I have picked up more by reading. Also, for nearly three years I was at a good school in Durban and did my best to improve myself there. I did not wish to grow up wild because I lived among wild people."

"Indeed, that explains the miracle. And do you like living among savages?"

"I have liked it well enough hitherto, but this last adventure has sickened me. Oh! it was dreadful. Had I not been very strong I could never have endured it; a nervous woman would have been driven mad. Yes, I have liked it well enough; I have always looked upon it as a preparation for life. I think that the society of nature is the best education for the society of man, since until you understand and are in sympathy with the one, you cannot really understand the other. Now I should like to go to Europe and see the world and its civilisations, for I know from what stuff they were evolved. But perhaps I never shall; at any rate, I have to find my dear father first," and she sighed.

Leonard made no answer; he was thinking.

"And you, Mr. Outram, do you care for this life?"

"I!" he exclaimed bitterly. "Like yourself, Miss Rodd, I am the victim of circumstances and must make the best of them. As I told you I am a penniless adventurer seeking my fortune in the rough places of the

earth. Of course I might earn a livelihood in England, but that is of no use to me; I must win wealth, and a great deal of it."

"What is the good?" she said. "Is there any object in wearing out one's life by trying to grow rich?"

"That depends. I have an object, one which I have sworn to fulfil."

She looked at him inquiringly.

"Miss Rodd, I will tell you. My brother, who died of fever some weeks ago, and I were the last male survivors of a very ancient house. We were born to great prospects, or at least he was; but owing to the conduct of our father, everything was lost to us, and the old house, which had been ours for centuries, went to the hammer. That was some seven years ago, when I was a man of three-and-twenty. We swore that we would try to retrieve those fortunes--not for ourselves so much, but for the sake of the family--and came to Africa to do it. My brother is dead, but I inherit the oath and continue the quest, however hopeless it may be. And now, perhaps, you will understand why I signed a certain document."

"Yes," she said, "I understand now. It is a strange history. But tell me, have you no relations left?"

"One, I believe, if she still lives--a maiden aunt, my mother's sister."

"Is she Jane Beach?" she asked quickly. "Forgive me, but I saw that name in the prayer-book."

"No," he said, "she is not Jane Beach."

Juanna hesitated; then curiosity and perhaps other feelings overcame her, and she asked straight out--

"Who is Jane Beach?"

Leonard looked at Juanna and remembered all that he had suffered at her hands. It was impertinent of her to ask such a question, but since she chose to do so she should have an answer. Doubtless she supposed that he was in love with herself, doubtless her conduct was premeditated and aimed at the repression of his hopes. He would show her that there were other women in the world, and that one of them at any rate had not thought so poorly of him. It was foolish conduct on his part, but then people suffering under unmerited snubs, neglect, and mockery at the hands of a lady they admire are apt to lose their judgment and do foolish things. So he answered:

"Jane Beach is the lady to whom I was engaged."

"I guessed it," she replied with a smile and a shiver. "I guessed it when I saw that you always carried the prayer-book about with you."

"You forget, Miss Rodd, that the prayer-book contains an agreement which might become valuable."

Juanna took no heed of his sarcasm, she was too intent on other thoughts.

"And are you engaged to her now?"

"No, I suppose not. Her father broke off the match when we lost our fortunes."

"She must have been very sorry?"

"Yes, she was very sorry."

"How interesting! You must not think me curious, Mr. Outram, but I have never come across a love affair--that is a white love affair--out of a novel. Of course she often writes to you?"

"I have never heard from her since I left England."

"Indeed! Surely she might have written or sent a message?"

"I suppose that her father forbade it," Leonard answered; but in his heart he also thought that Jane might have written or sent a message, and could well guess why none had come.

"Ah! her father. Tell me, was she very beautiful?"

"She was the loveliest woman that I ever saw--except one who is sitting at my side," he added to himself.

"And do you love her very much?"

"Yes, I loved her very much."

If Juanna heard the change of tense she took no note of it; it was such a little thing, only one letter. And yet what a vast gulf there is between love and loved! It is measureless. Still, most people have crossed it in their lives, some of them more than once. He told her the exact truth, but after a woman's fashion she added to the truth. He said that he had loved Jane Beach, and she did not doubt that he still loved her more than ever. How was she to know that the image of this faraway and hateful Jane was fading from his mind, to be replaced by that of a certain present Juanna? She took it all for granted, and filled in the details with a liberal hand and in high colours.

Juanna took it all for granted. Again she shivered, and her lips turned grey with pain. She understood now that she had loved him ever since the night when they first met in the slave camp. It was her love, as yet unrecognised, which, transforming her, had caused her to behave so badly. It had been dreadful to her to think that she should be thrust

upon this man in a mock marriage; it was worse to know that he had entered on her rescue not for her own sake, but in the hope of winning wealth. In the moment of her loss Juanna learned for the first time what she had gained. She had played and lost, and she could never throw those dice again; it was begun and finished.

So Juanna thought and felt. A little more experience of the world might have taught her differently. But she had no experience, and in such novels as she had read the hero seldom varied in the pursuit of his first love, or turned to look upon another. Ah! if all heroes and heroines acted up to this golden rule, what an uncommonly dull world it would be!

Juanna gathered her energies, and spoke in a low steady voice. "Mr. Outram," she said, "I am so much obliged to you for telling me all this. It interests me a great deal, and I earnestly hope that Soa's tale of treasure will turn out to be true, and that you may win it by my help. It will be some slight return for all that you have done for me. Yes, I hope that you will win it, and buy back your home, and after your years of toil and danger live there in honour, and happiness, and--love, as you deserve to do. And now I ask you to forgive me my behaviour, my rudeness, and my bitter speeches. It has been shameful, I know; perhaps you will make some excuse for me when you remember all that I have gone through. My nerves were shaken, I was not myself--I acted like a half-wild minx. There, that is all."

As she spoke Juanna began to draw the signet-ring from her left hand. But she never completed the act. It was his gift to her, the only outward link between her and the man whom she had lost--why should she part with it? It reminded her of so much. She knew now that this mock marriage was in a sense a true one; that is, so far as she was concerned, for from that hour she had indeed given her spirit into his keeping--not herself, but her better half and her love; and those solemn words over her in that dreadful place and time had consecrated the gift. It was nothing, it meant nothing; yet on her it should be binding, though not on him. Yes, all her life she would remain as true to him in mind and act as though she had indeed become his wife on that night of fear. To do so would be her only happiness, she thought, though it is strange that in her sorrow she should turn for comfort to this very event, the mere mention of which had moved her to scorn and bitterness. But so it was, and so let it be.

Leonard saw the look upon her face; he had never seen anything quite like it before. With astonishment he heard her gentle words, and something of the meaning of the look and words came home to him; at any rate he understood that she was suffering. She was changed in his sight, he no longer felt bitter towards her. He loved her; might it not be that she also loved him, and that here was the key to her strange conduct? Once and for all he would settle the matter; he would tell her that Jane Beach had ceased to be more than a tender memory to him, and that she had become all.

"Juanna," he said, addressing her by her Christian name for the first time.

But there, as it was fated, the sentence began and ended, for at that moment a canoe shot alongside of them, and Francisco's voice was heard hailing them through the fog.

"Peter says that you have passed the camping place, senora. He did not stop you because he thought that you knew it well."

"It was the mist, Father," Juanna answered with a little laugh. "We have lost ourselves in a mist."

A few minutes and they were on the bank, and Leonard's declaration remained unspoken. Nor did he make any attempt to renew it. It seemed to him that Juanna had built a wall between them which he could not climb. From that evening forward her whole attitude towards him changed. She no longer angered him by bitter words; indeed, she was gentleness itself, and nothing could be kindlier or more friendly and open than her manner, but there it began and ended. Once or twice, indeed, he attempted some small advance, with the result that instantly she seemed to freeze--to become cold and hard as marble. He could not understand her, he feared her somewhat, and his pride took alarm. At the least he could keep his feelings to himself, he need not expose them to be trampled upon by this incomprehensible girl.

So, although they were destined to live side by side for months, rarely out of each other's sight or thoughts, he went his way and she went hers. But the past and secret trouble left its mark on both. Leonard became sterner, more silent, watchful, and suspicious. Juanna grew suddenly from a girl into a woman of presence and great natural dignity. She did not often laugh during those months as had been her wont, she only smiled, sadly enough at times. Her thoughts would not let her laugh, for they were of what her life might have been had no such person as Jane Beach existed, and of what it must be because of Jane Beach. Indeed this unknown Jane took a great hold of her mind--she haunted her. Juanna pictured her in a dozen different shapes of beauty, endowed with many varying charms, and hated each phantasm worse than the last.

Still, for a while she would set it up as a rival, and try to outmatch its particular fancied grace or loveliness--a strange form of jealousy which at length led Otter to remark that the Shepherdess was not one woman but twenty women, and, therefore, bewitched and to be avoided. But

these fits only took her from time to time. For the most part she moved among them a grave and somewhat stately young lady, careful of many things, fresh and lovely to look upon, a mystery to her white companions, and to the natives little short of a goddess.

But wherever Juanna moved two shadows went with her--her secret passion and the variable image of that far-off English lady who had robbed her of its fruit.