

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE DEATH OF MAVOOM

One more day's journeying brought the party to the ruined Settlement, which they found in much the same condition as the Arabs had left it a few weeks before. Fortunately the destruction was not nearly so great as it appeared. The inside of the house, indeed, was burnt out, but its walls still remained intact, also many of the huts of the natives were still standing.

Messengers who left the canoes at dawn had spread the news of the rescue and return of the Shepherdess among the people of the neighbouring kraals, who flocked by scores to the landing-place. With these were at least a hundred of Mr. Rodd's own people, who had escaped the clutches of the slaver-traders by hiding, absence, and various other accidents, and now returned to greet his daughter and their own relatives as they would have greeted one risen from the grave. Indeed the welcome accorded to Juanna was most touching. Men, women, and children ran to her, the men saluting her with guttural voices and uplifted arms, the women and children gesticulating, chattering, and kissing her dress and hand.

Waving them aside impatiently, Juanna asked the men if anything had been seen or heard of her father. They answered, "No." Some of their number had started up the river to search for him on the same day when she was captured, but they had not returned, and no tidings had come from them

or him.

"Do not be alarmed," said Leonard, seeing the distress and anxiety written on her face; "doubtless he has gone further than he anticipated, and the men have not been able to find him."

"I fear that something has happened to him," she answered; "he should have been back by now: he promised to return within the fortnight."

By this time the story of the capture and destruction of the slave camp was spread abroad among the people by the rescued men, and the excitement rose to its height. Otter, seeing a favourable opportunity to trumpet his master's fame, swaggered to and fro through the crowd shaking a spear and chanting Leonard's praises after the Zulu fashion.

"Wow!" he said, "wow! Look at him, ye people, and be astonished.

"Look at him, the White Elephant, and hear his deeds.

"In the night he fell upon them.

"He fell upon them, the armed men in a fenced place.

"He did it alone: no one helped him but a black monkey and a woman with a shaking hand.

"He beguiled them with a tongue of honey, he smote them with a spear of iron.

"He won the Shepherdess from the midst of them to be a wife to him.

"He satisfied the Yellow Devil, he satisfied him with gold.

"The praying man prayed over them, then strife arose.

"Their greatest warrior gave him battle, he broke him with his fist.

"Then the Monkey played his tricks, and the Shaking Hand made a great noise, a noise of thunder.

"They fell dead, they fell dead in heaps.

"The fire roared behind them, in front of them the bullets hailed.

"They cried like women, but the fire stayed not; it licked up their strength.

"Ashes are all that is left of them; they are dead, the armed men.

"No more shall they bring desolation; the day of slavery is gone by.

"Who did it? He did it, the terrible lion, the black-maned lion with the

white face.

"He gave the slavers to the sword; he doomed their captain to death.

"He loosened the irons of the captives. Now they shall eat the bread of freedom.

"Praise him, ye people, who broke the strength of the oppressor.

"Praise him, the Shepherd of the Shepherdess, who led her from the house of the wicked.

"Praise him, ye Children of Mavoom, in whose hands are death and life.

"No such deeds have been told of in the land. Praise him, the Deliverer, who gives you back your children!"

"Ay, praise him!" said Juanna, who was standing by. "Praise him, children of my father, since but for him none of us would see the light to-day."

At this juncture Leonard himself arrived upon the scene, just in time to hear Juanna's words. All the people of the Settlement took up the cry, and hundreds of other natives collected there joined in it. They rushed towards him shouting: "Praise to thee, Shepherd of the Shepherdess! Praise to thee, Deliverer!"

Then Leonard, in a fury, caught hold of Otter, vowing that if he dared to say another word he would instantly break his neck, and the tumult ceased. But from that day forward he was known among the natives as "The Deliverer," and by no other name.

That evening, as Leonard, Juanna, and the priest sat at meat within the walls of the Settlement-house, with the plunder of the slave camp piled about them, talking anxiously of the fate of Mr. Rodd and wondering if anything could be done to discover his whereabouts, they heard a stir among the natives without. At this moment Otter rushed in, crying: "Mavoom has come!"

Instantly they sprang to their feet and ran outside the house, headed by Juanna. There, borne on the shoulders of six travel-worn men, and followed by a crowd of natives, they saw a litter, upon which lay the figure of a man covered with blankets.

"Oh! he is dead!" said Juanna, stopping suddenly, and pressing her hands to her heart.

For a moment Leonard thought that she was right. Before he could speak, however, they heard a feeble voice calling to the men who carried the litter to be more careful in their movements, and once more Juanna sprang forward, crying, "Father! Father!"

Then the bearers brought their burden into the house and set it down upon the floor. Leonard, looking, saw before him a tall and handsome man of about fifty years of age, and saw also by many unmistakable signs that he was at the point of death.

"Juanna," gasped her father, "is that you? Then you have escaped. Thank God! Now I can die happy."

It would serve little purpose to set out in detail the broken conversation which followed, but by degrees Leonard learnt the story. It seemed that Mr. Rodd was disappointed in his purpose of purchasing the hoard of ivory which he went out to seek, and, unwilling to return empty-handed, pushed on up the river with the hope of obtaining more. In this he failed also, and had just begun his homeward journey when he was met by the party which Soa despatched, and heard the terrible tidings of the abduction of his daughter by Pereira. It was nightfall when the messengers arrived, and too dark to travel.

For a while Mr. Rodd sat brooding over the news of this crushing disaster, perhaps the most fearful that could come to a father's ears; then he did what he was but too prone to do--flew for refuge to the bottle.

When he had drunk enough to destroy his judgment, he rose, and insisted upon continuing their march through the inky darkness of the night. In vain did his men remonstrate, saying that the road was rocky and full of

danger. He would take no denial; indeed, he vowed that if they refused to come he would shoot them. So they started, Mr. Rodd leading the way, while his people stumbled after him through trees and over rocks as best they might.

The march was not a long one, however, for presently the men heard an oath and a crash, and their master vanished; nor could they find him till the dawn came to give them light. Then they discovered that they had halted upon the edge of a small but precipitous cliff, and at the bottom of the donga beneath lay Mavoom--not dead, indeed, but senseless, and with three ribs and his right ankle broken. For some days they nursed him there, till at length he decided upon being carried forward in a litter. So notwithstanding his sufferings, which were intense, they bore him homewards by short stages, till ultimately they reached the Settlement.

That night Leonard examined Mr. Rodd's injuries, and found that they were fatal; indeed, mortification had already set in about the region of the broken ribs. Still he lived awhile.

On the following morning the dying man sent for Leonard. Entering the room, he found him lying on the floor, his head supported in his daughter's lap, while the priest Francisco prayed beside him. He suffered no pain now, for when mortification begins pain passes, and his mind was quite clear.

"Mr. Outram," he said, "I have learnt all the story of the taking of the slave camp and your rescue of my daughter. It was the pluckiest thing that I ever heard of, and I only wish that I had been there to help in it."

"Don't speak of it!" said Leonard. "Perhaps you have heard also that I did it for a consideration."

"Yes, they told me that too, and small blame to you. If only that old fool Soa had let me into the secret of those rubies, I would have had a try for them years ago, as of course you will when I am gone. Well, I hope that you may get them. But I have no time to talk of rubies, for death has caught me at last, through my own fault as usual. If you ever take a drop, Outram, be warned by me and give it up; but you don't look as if you did; you look as I used to, before I learnt to tackle a bottle of rum at a sitting.

"Now listen, comrade, I am in a hole, not about myself, for that must have come sooner or later, and it does not much matter when the world is rid of a useless fellow like me; but about my girl here. What is to become of her? I have not got a cent; those cursed slavers have cleared me out, and she has no friend. How should she have, when I have been thirty years away from England?

"Look here, I am going to do the only thing I can do. I am going to leave my daughter in your charge, though it is rough on you, and as you

deal with her, so may Heaven deal with you! I understand that there was some ceremony of marriage between you down yonder. I don't know how you take that, either of you, or how far the matter will go when I am dead. But if it goes any way at all, I trust to your honour, as an English gentleman, to repeat that ceremony the first time you come to a civilised country. If you do not care for each other, however, then Juanna must shift, as other women have to do, poor things. She can look after herself, and I suppose that her face will help her to a husband some time. There is one thing: though she hasn't a pound, she is the best girl that ever stepped, and of as good blood as you can be. There is no older family than the Rodds in Lincolnshire, and she is the last of them that I know of; also, her mother was well-born, although she was a Portugee.

"And now, do you accept the trust?"

"I would gladly," answered Leonard, "but how can I? I propose to go after these rubies. Would it not be better that Father Francisco here should take your daughter to the coast? I have a little money which is at her disposal."

"No," answered the dying man with energy, "I will only trust her to you. If you want to search for these rubies, and you would be a fool not to, she must accompany you--that is all. I know that you will look after her, and if the worst comes to the worst, she has a medicine to protect herself with, the same that she so nearly used in the slave camp. Now,

what do you say?"

Leonard thought for a moment, while the dying man watched his face anxiously.

"It is a heavy responsibility," he said, "and the circumstances make it an awkward one. But I accept it. I will take care of her as though she were my wife, or--my daughter."

"Thank you for that," answered Rodd. "I believe you, and as to the relationship, you will settle that for yourselves. And now good-bye. I like you. I wish that we had known one another before I got into trouble at home, became a Zambesi trader, and--a drunkard."

Leonard took the hand which Mr. Rodd lifted with a visible effort, and when he released it, it fell heavily, like the hand of a dead man. Then, as he turned to go, he glanced at Juanna's face, but could make nothing of it, for it was as the face of a sphinx.

There the girl sat, her back resting against the wall, her dying father's head pillowed upon her knee, motionless as if carved in stone. She was staring straight before her with eyes wide open and curved lips set apart, as though she were about to speak and suddenly had been stricken to silence. So still was she that Leonard could scarcely note any movement of her breast. Even her eyelids had ceased to quiver, and the very pallor of her face seemed fixed like that of a waxen image. He

wondered what she was thinking of; but even had she been willing to bare her thoughts to him, it is doubtful whether she could have made them intelligible. Her mind was confused, but two things struggled one against the other within it, the sense of loss and the sense of shame.

The father whom, notwithstanding his faults, she loved dearly, who indeed had been her companion, her teacher, her playmate and her friend, the dearest she had known, lay dying before her eyes, and with his last breath he consigned her to the care of the man whom she loved, and from whom, as she believed, she was for ever separated. Would there, then, be no end to the obligations under which she laboured at the hands of this stranger, who had suddenly taken possession of her life? And what fate was on her that she should thus be forced into false positions, whence there was no escape?

Did she wish to escape even? Juanna knew not; but as she sat there with a sphinx-like face, trouble and doubt, and many another fear and feeling, took so firm a hold of her that at length her mind, bewildered with its own tumult, lost its grip of present realities, and sought refuge in dreams which he could not disentangle. No wonder, then, that Leonard failed to guess her thoughts, as she watched him go from the death-bed.

Mr. Rodd died peacefully that evening, and on the following afternoon they buried him, Francisco performing the service. Three more days passed before Leonard had any conversation with Juanna, who moved about

the place, pale, self-contained, and silent. Nor would he have spoken to her then had she not taken the initiative.

"Mr. Outram," she said, "when do you propose to start upon this journey?"

"Really, I do not know. I am not sure that I shall start at all. It depends upon you. You see I am responsible for you now, and I can scarcely reconcile it with my conscience to take on you such a wild-goose chase."

"Please do not talk like that," she answered. "If it will simplify matters I may as well tell you at once that I have made up my mind to go."

"You cannot unless I go too," he answered smiling.

"You are wrong there," Juanna replied defiantly. "I can, and what is more, I will, and Soa shall guide me. It is you who cannot go without me--that is, if Soa tells the truth.

"For good or evil we are yoked together in this matter, Mr. Outram, so it is useless for us to try to pull different ways. Before he died, my dear father told you his views plainly, and even if there were no other considerations involved, such as that of the agreement--for, whatever you may think to the contrary, woman have some sense of honour, Mr.

Outram--I would not disregard his wishes. Besides, what else are we to do? We are both adventurers now, and both penniless, or pretty nearly so. Perhaps if we succeed in finding this treasure, and it is sufficiently large, you will be generous and give me a share of it, say five per cent., on which to support my declining years," and she turned and left him.

"Beginning to show temper again," said Leonard to himself. "I will ask Francisco what he thinks of it."

Of late, things had gone a little better between Leonard and the priest. Not that the former had as yet any complete confidence in the latter. Still, he understood now that Francisco was a man of honest mind and gentle instincts, and naturally in this dilemma he turned to seek for counsel to his only white companion. Francisco listened to the story quietly; indeed, for the most part it was already known to him.

"Well," he said, when Leonard had finished, "I suppose that you must go. The Senora Juanna is not a young lady to change her mind when once she has made it up, and if you were to refuse to start, mark my words, she would make the expedition by herself, or try to do so. As to this story of treasure, and the possibility of winning it, I can only say that it seems strange enough to be true, and that the undertaking is so impracticable that it will probably be successfully accomplished."

"Hum!" said Leonard, "sounds a little paradoxical, but after that slave

camp business, like you I am inclined to believe in paradoxes. And now, Father, what do you propose to do?"

"I? to accompany you, of course, if you will allow me. I am a priest and will play the part of chaperon, if I can do nothing else," he added with a smile.

Leonard whistled and asked, "Why on earth do you mix yourself up in such a doubtful business? You have all your life before you; you are able, and may make a career for yourself in religion; there is nothing for you to gain by this journey; on the contrary, it may bring you death--or," he added with meaning, "sorrow which cannot be forgotten."

"My life and death are in the hand of God," the priest answered humbly.

"He appointed the beginning and He will appoint the end. As for that sorrow which cannot be forgotten, what if it is already with me?" And he touched his breast and looked up.

The eyes of the two men met, and they understood each other.

"Why don't you go away and try to forget her?" said Leonard.

The speech was blunt, but Francisco did not resent it.

"I do not go," he answered, "because it would be useless. So far as I am concerned the mischief is done; for her there is none to fear. While I

stay it is possible that I may be able to do her some service, feeble as I am. I have sinned a great sin, but she does not know, and will never know it while I live, for you are a man of honour and will tell her nothing, and she has no eyes to see. What am I to her? I am a priest--no man. I am like a woman friend, and as such she is fond of me. No, I have sinned against Heaven, against myself, and her, and you. Alas! who could help it? She was like an angel in that Inferno, so kind, so sweet, so lovely, and the heart is evil."

"Why do you say that you sinned against me, Francisco? As to the rules of your Church, I have my own opinion of them. Still, there they are, and perhaps they prick your conscience. But what harm have you done to me?"

"I told you," he answered, "on the second night after the slave camp was burnt, that I believed you to be man and wife. I believe it yet, and have I not sinned doubly therefore in worshipping a woman who is wedded? Still, I pray that as you are one before Heaven and the Church, so you may become one in heart and deed. And when this is so, as I think that it will be, cherish her, Outram, for there is no such woman in the world, and for you she will turn the earth to heaven."

"She might turn it to the other place; such things have happened," said Leonard moodily. Then he stretched out his arm and grasped the priest's delicate hand. "You are a true gentleman," he added, "and I am a fool. I saw something of all this and I suspected you. As for the marriage,

there is none, and the lady cares nothing for me; if anything, she dislikes me, and I do not wonder at it: most women would under the circumstances. But whatever befalls, I honour you and always shall honour you. I must go this journey, it is laid on me that I should, and she insists upon going also, more from perversity than for any other reason, I fancy. So you are coming too: well, we will do our best to protect her, both of us, and the future must look to itself."

"Thank you for your words," Francisco answered gently, and turned away, understanding that Leonard thought himself his companion in misfortune.

When the Father had gone, Leonard stood for a while musing upon the curiously tangled web in which he found himself involved. Here he was, committed to a strange and desperate enterprise. Nor was this all, for about him were other complications, totally different from those which might be expected in connection with such a mediaeval adventure, complications which, though they are frequent enough in the civilised life of men, were scarcely to be looked for in the wilds of Africa, and amidst savages. Among his companions were his ward, who chanced also to be the lady whom he loved and desired to make his wife, but who, as he thought, cared nothing for him; and a priest who was enamoured platonically of the same lady, and yet wished, with rare self-sacrifice, to bring about her union with another man. Here were materials enough for a romance, leaving the journey and the fabled treasure out of it; only then the scene should be laid elsewhere.

Leonard laughed aloud as he thought of these things; it was so curious that all this should be heaped upon him at once, so inartistic and yet so like life, in which the great events are frequently crowded together without sense of distance or proportion.

But even as he laughed, he remembered that this was no joking matter for anybody concerned, unless it were Juanna. Alas! already she was more to him than any treasure, and, as he thought, less attainable. Well, there it was, he accepted it as it stood. She had entered into his life, whether for good or for evil remained to be seen. He had no desire to repeat the experiment of his youth--to wear out his heart and exhaust himself in efforts to attain happiness, which might after all turn to wormwood on his lips. This time things should take their chance. The business of life remained to him, and he would follow it, for that is the mission of man. Its happiness must look to itself, for that is the gift of Heaven, after which it is useless to seek and to strive.

Meantime he could find time to pity Francisco, the priest with so noble a heart.