

CHAPTER XVIII

SOA SHOWS HER TEETH

Three months had passed since that day, when Juanna declared her unalterable determination to accompany Leonard upon his search for the treasures of the People of the Mist.

It was evening, and a party of travellers were encamped on the side of a river that ran through a great and desolate plain. They were a small party, three white people, namely, Leonard, Francisco, and Juanna, fifteen of the Settlement men under the leadership of Peter--that same headman who had been rescued from the slave camp--the dwarf, Otter, and Juanna's old nurse, Soa.

For twelve weeks they had travelled almost without intermission with Soa for their guide, steering continually northward and westward. First they followed the course of the river in canoes for ten days or more; then, leaving the main stream, they paddled for three weeks up that of a tributary called Mavuae, which ran for many miles along the foot of a great range of mountains named Mang-anja. Here they made but slow progress because of the frequent rapids, which necessitated the portorage of the canoes over broken ground, and for considerable distances. At length they came to a rapid which was so long and so continuous that regretfully enough they were obliged to abandon the canoes altogether and proceed on foot.

The dangers of their water journey had been many, but they were nothing compared with those that now environed them, and in addition to bodily perils, they must face the daily and terrible fatigue of long marches through an unknown country, cumbered as they were with arms and other absolutely necessary baggage. The country through which they were now passing was named Marengi, a land uninhabited by man, the home of herds of countless game.

On they went northward and upward through a measureless waste; plain succeeded plain in endless monotony, distance gave place to distance, and ever there were more beyond.

Gradually the climate grew colder: they were traversing a portion of the unexplored plateau that separates southern from central Africa. Its loneliness was awful, and the bearers began to murmur, saying that they had reached the end of the world, and were walking over its edge. Indeed they had only two comforts in this part of their undertaking; the land lay so high that none of them were stricken by fever, and they could not well miss the road, which, if Soa was to be believed, ran along the banks of the river that had its source in the territories of the People of the Mist.

The adventures that befell them were endless, but it is not proposed to describe them in detail. Once they starved for three days, being unable to find game. On another occasion they fell in with a tribe of bushmen

who harassed them with poisoned arrows, killing two of their best men, and were only prevented from annihilating them through the terror inspired by their firearms, which they took for magical instruments.

Escaping from the bushmen, they entered a forest country which teemed with antelope and also with lions, that night by night they must keep at bay as best they could. Then came several days' march through a plain strewn with sharp stones which lamed most of the party; and after this eighty or a hundred miles of dreary rolling veldt, clothed with rank grass just now brown with the winter frosts, that caught their feet at every step.

Now at length they halted on the boundary of the land of the People of the Mist. There before them, not more than a mile away, towered a huge cliff or wall of rock, stretching across the plain like a giant step, far as the eye could reach, and varying from seven hundred to a thousand feet in height. Down the surface of this cliff the river flowed in a series of beautiful cascades.

Before they had finished their evening meal of buck's flesh the moon was up, and by its light the three white people stared hopelessly at this frowning natural fortification, wondering if they could climb it, and wondering also what terrors awaited them upon its further side. They were silent that night, for a great weariness had overcome them, and if the truth must be known, all three of them regretted that they had ever undertaken this mad adventure.

Leonard glanced to the right, where, some fifty paces away, the Settlement men were crouched round the fire. They also were silent, and it was easy to see that the heart was out of them.

"Won't somebody say something?" said Juanna at last with a rather pathetic attempt at playfulness. How could she be cheerful, poor girl, when her feet were sore and her head was aching, and she wished that she were dead, almost?

"Yes," answered Leonard, "I will say that I admire your pluck. I should not have thought it possible for any young lady to have gone through the last two months, and 'come out smiling' at the end of them."

"Oh, I am quite happy. Don't trouble about me," she said, laughing as merrily as though there were no such things as sore feet and headaches in the world.

"Are you?" said Leonard, "then I envy you, that is all. Here comes old Soa, and Otter after her. I wonder what is the matter now. Something disagreeable, I suppose."

Soa arrived and squatted down in front of them, her tall spare form and somewhat sullen face looking more formidable than usual in the moonlight. Otter was beside her, and though he stood and she sat, their heads were almost on a level.

"What is it, Soa?" said Leonard carelessly.

"Deliverer," she answered, for all the natives knew him now by this name, "some months ago, when you were digging for gold yonder, in the Place of Graves, I made a bargain with you, and we set the bargain down on paper. In that paper I promised that if you rescued my mistress I would lead you to the land where precious stones were to be won, and I gave you one of those stones in earnest. You saved my mistress, Mavoom her father died, and the time came when I must fulfil my promise. For my own part I would not have fulfilled it, for I only made it that promise hoping to deceive you. But my mistress yonder refused to listen to me.

"'No,' she said, 'that which you have sworn on my behalf and your own must be carried out. If you will not carry it out, go away, Soa, for I have done with you.'

"Then, Deliverer, rather than part with her whom I loved, and whom I had nursed from a babe, I yielded. And now you stand upon the borders of the country of my people. Say, are you minded to cross them, Deliverer?"

"What else did I come for, Soa?" he asked.

"Nay, I know not. You came out of the folly of your heart, to satisfy the desire of your heart. Listen, that tale I told you is true, and yet I did not tell you all the truth. Beyond that cliff live a people of

great stature, and very fierce; a people whose custom it is to offer up strangers to their gods. Enter there, and they will kill you thus."

"What do you mean, woman?" asked Leonard.

"I mean that if you hold your life dear, or her life," and she pointed to Juanna, "you will turn with the first light and go back whence you came. It is true that the stones are there, but death shall be the reward of him who strives to steal them."

"I must say this is cheerful," replied Leonard. "What did you mean, then, by all that story you told me about a plan that you had to win the treasures of this people? Are you a liar, Soa?"

"I have said that all I told you was true," she answered sullenly.

"Very well, then, I have come a good many hundred miles to put it to the proof, nor am I going to turn back now. You can leave me one and all if you like, but I shall go on. I will not be made a fool of in this way."

"None of us have any wish to be made fools of, Mr. Outram," said Juanna gently; "and, speaking for myself, I would far rather die at once than attempt a return journey just at present. So now, Soa, perhaps you will stop croaking and tell us definitely what we must do to conciliate these charming countrymen of yours, whom we have come so far to spoil. Remember," she added with a flash of her grey eyes, "I am not to be

played with by you, Soa. In this matter the Deliverer's interests are my interests, and his ends my ends. Together we stand or fall, together we live or die, and that shall be an unhappy hour for you, Soa, when you attempt to desert or betray us."

"It is well, Shepherdess," she answered, "your will is my will, for I love you alone in the world, and all the rest I hate," and she glared at Leonard and Otter. "You are my father, and my mother, and my child, and where you are, in death or in life, there is my home. Let us go then among this people of mine, there to perish miserably, so that the Deliverer may seek to glut himself with wealth.

"Listen; this is the law of my people, or this was their law when I left them forty years ago: That every stranger who passes through their gates should be offered as a sacrifice to Aca the mother if the time of his coming should be in summer, and to Jal the son if the time of his coming be in winter, for the Mist-dwellers do not love strangers. But there is a prophecy among my people which tells, when many generations have gone by, that Aca the mother, and Jal the son, shall return to the land which once they ruled, clothed in the flesh of men. And the shape of Aca shall be such a shape as yours, Shepherdess, and the shape of Jal shall be as is the shape of this black dog of a dwarf, whom when first I saw him in my folly I deemed immortal and divine. Then the mother and the son shall rule in the land, and its kings shall cease from kingship, and the priests of the Snake shall be their servants, and with them shall come peace and prosperity that do not pass away.

"Shepherdess, you know the tongue of the People of the Mist, for when you were little I taught it to you, because to me it is the most beautiful of tongues. You know the song also, the holy Song of Re-arising, that shall be on the lips of Aca when she comes again, and which I, being the daughter of the high-priest, learned, with many another secret, before I was doomed to be a bride to the Snake and fled, fearing my doom. Now come apart with me, Shepherdess, and you, Black One, come also, that I may teach you your lesson of what you shall do when we meet the squadrons of the People of the Mist."

Juanna rose to obey her, followed by Otter, grumbling, for he hated the old woman as much as she hated him, and, moreover, he did not take kindly to this notion of masquerading as a god, or, indeed, to the prospect of a lengthened sojourn amongst his adoring, but from all accounts somewhat truculent, worshippers. Before they went, however, Leonard spoke.

"I have heard you, Soa," he said, "and I do not like your words, for they show me that your heart is fierce and evil. Yes, though you love the Shepherdess, your heart is evil. Now hear me. Should you dare to play us false, whatever may befall us, be sure of this, that moment you die. Go!"

"Spare your threats, Deliverer," answered Soa haughtily. "I shall not betray you, because to do so would be to betray the Shepherdess. But are

you then a fool that you think I should fear death at your hands, who to-morrow with a word could give you all to torment? Pray, Deliverer, that the hour may not be near when you shall rejoice to die by the bullet with which you threaten me, so that you may escape worse things." And she turned and went.

"I am not nervous," said Leonard to Francisco, "but that she-devil frightens me. If it were not for Juanna, she would cause us to be murdered on the first possible opportunity, and if only she can secure her safety, I believe that she will do it yet."

"And I believe that she is a witch, Outram," answered the priest with fervour, "a servant of the Evil One, such as are written of in the Scriptures. Last night I saw her praying to her gods; she did not know that I was near, for the place was lonely, but I saw her and I never wish to see anything so horrible again. I will tell you why she hates us all so much, Outram. She is jealous, because the senora--does not hate us. That woman's heart is wicked, wickedness was born in her, yet, as none are altogether evil, she has one virtue, her love of the senora. She is husbandless and childless, for even among the black people, as I have learnt from the Settlement men, all have feared her and shrunk from her notwithstanding her good looks. Therefore, everything that is best in her has gone to nourish this love for the woman whom she nursed from a babe. It was because of her fierceness that the Senor Rodd, who is dead, chose her for his daughter's nurse, when he found that her heart was hungry with love for the child, for he knew that she would die

before she suffered harm to come to her."

"He showed good judgment there," said Leonard. "Had it not been for Soa, Juanna would have been a slave-girl now, or dead."

"That is so, Outram, but whether we showed good judgment in trusting our lives to her tender mercies is quite another matter. Say, friend, do you think it well to go on with this business?"

"Oh, confound it all!" said Leonard with irritation, "how can we turn back now? Just think of the journey and how foolish we should look. Besides, we have none of us got anything to live upon; it took most of the gold that I had to bribe Peter and his men to accompany us. I dare say that we shall all be killed, that seems very probable, but for my part I really shan't be sorry. I am tired of life, Francisco; it is nothing but a struggle and a wretchedness, and I begin to feel that peace is all I can hope to win. I have done my best here according to my lights, so I don't know why I should be afraid of the future, especially as it has been taken out of me pretty well in the present, though of course I am afraid for all that, every man is. The only thing that troubles me is a doubt whether we ought to take Juanna into such a place. But really I do not know but what it would be as dangerous to go back as to proceed: those gentlemen with the poisoned arrows may have recovered from their fear of firearms by now."

"I wish we had nothing worse than the Hereafter to fear," said Francisco

with a sigh. "It is the journey thither that is so terrible. As for our expedition, having undertaken it, I think on the whole that we had better persevere, especially as the senora wishes it, and she is very hard to turn. After all our lives are in the hands of the Almighty, and therefore we shall be just as safe, or unsafe, among the People of the Mist as in a European city. Those of us who are destined to live will live, and those whose hour is at hand must die. And now good night, for I am going to sleep."

Next morning, shortly before dawn, Leonard was awakened by a hubbub among the natives, and creeping out of his blankets, he found that some of them, who had been to the river to draw water, had captured two bushmen belonging to a nomadic tribe that lived by spearing fish. These wretched creatures, who notwithstanding the cold only wore a piece of bark tied round their shoulders, were screaming with fright, and it was not until they had been pacified by gifts of beads and empty brass cartridges that anything could be got out of them.

When confidence had at length been restored, Otter questioned them closely as to the country that lay beyond the wall of rock and the people who dwelt in it, through one of the Settlement men, who spoke a language sufficiently like their own to make himself understood. They replied that they had never been in that country themselves, because they dared not go there, but they had heard of it from others.

The land was very cold and foggy, they said, so foggy that sometimes

people could not see each other for whole days, and in it dwelt a race of great men covered with hair, who sacrificed strangers to a snake which they worshipped, and married all their fairest maidens to a god. That was all they knew of the country and of the great men, for few who visited there ever returned to tell tidings. It was certainly a haunted land.

Finding that there was no more to be learnt from the bushmen, Leonard suffered them to depart, which they did at considerable speed, and ordered the Settlement men to make ready to march. But now a fresh difficulty arose. The interpreter had repeated all the bushmen's story to his companions, among whom, it is needless to say, it produced no small effect. Therefore when the bearers received their orders, instead of striking the little tent in which Juanna slept, and preparing their loads as usual, after a brief consultation they advanced upon Leonard in a body.

"What is it, Peter?" he asked of the headman.

"This, Deliverer: we have travelled with you and the Shepherdess for three full moons, enduring much hardship and passing many dangers. Now we learn that there lies before us a land of cold and darkness, inhabited by devils who worship a devil. Deliverer, we have been good servants to you, and we are not cowards, as you know, but it is true that we fear to enter this land."

"What do you wish to do then, Peter?" asked Leonard.

"We wish to return whence we came, Deliverer. Already we have nearly earned the money that you gave to us before we started, and we will take no more pay if we must win it by crossing yonder wall."

"The way back is far, Peter," answered Leonard, "and you know its perils. How many, think you, will reach their homes alive if I am not there to guide them? For know, Peter, I will not turn back now. Desert me, if you wish, all of you, and still I will enter this country alone, or with Otter only. Alone we took the slave camp and alone we will visit the People of the Mist."

"Your words are true, Deliverer," said Peter, "the homeward way is far and its perils are many; mayhap but very few of us will live to see their huts again, for this is an ill-fated journey. But if we pass yonder," and he pointed to the wall of rock, "then we shall all of us certainly die, and be offered to a devil by devils."

Leonard pulled his beard thoughtfully and said: "It seems there is nothing else to say, Peter, except good-bye."

The headman saluted and was turning away with an abashed countenance when Juanna stopped him. Together with Otter and the others she had been listening to the colloquy in silence, and now spoke for the first time.

"Peter," she said gently, "when you and your companions were in the hands of the Yellow Devil and about to be sold as slaves, who was it that rescued you?"

"The Deliverer, Shepherdess."

"Yes. And now do my ears betray me, or do I hear you say that you and your brethren, who with many another were saved from shame and toil by the Deliverer, are about to leave him in his hour of danger?"

"You have heard aright, Shepherdess," the man answered sadly.

"It is well, Peter. Go, children of Mavoom, my father, who can desert me in my need. For learn, Peter, that where you fear to tread, there I, a white woman, will pass alone with the Deliverer. Go, children of my father, and may peace go with you. Yet, as you know, I, who foretold the doom of the Yellow Devil, am a true prophetess, and I tell you this, that but a very few of you shall live to see your kraal again, and you will not be of their number, Peter. As for those who come home safely, their names shall be a mockery, the little children shall call them coward, and traitor and jackal, and one by one they shall eat out their hearts and die, because they deserted him who saved them from the slave-ship and the scourge. Farewell, children of my father: may peace go with you, and may his ghost not come to haunt you on your path," and with one indignant glance she turned scornfully away.

"Brethren," said Peter after a moment's pause, "is it to be borne that the Shepherdess should mock us thus and tie such ropes of shame about our necks?"

"No," they answered, "we cannot bear it."

Then for a while they consulted together again, and presently Peter stood forward and said: "Deliverer, we will accompany you and the Shepherdess into the country of devils, nor need you fear that we shall desert or betray you. We know well that we go to our death, every one of us; still it is better to die than to live bearing the burden of such bitter words as hide within the Shepherdess's lips."

"Very well," answered Leonard. "Get your loads and let us start."

"Ay! It is well indeed," put in Otter with a snort of indignation. "I tell you this, Peter, that before you left this place the words of the Shepherdess had come true for you and one or two others, for I should have fought you till I was killed, and though I have little wisdom yet I know how to fight."

Leonard smiled at the dwarf's rage, but his heart was heavy within him. He knew that these men had reason on their side, and he feared greatly lest their evil forebodings should come true and the lives of all of them pay forfeit for his rashness.

But it was too late to turn back now: things must befall as they were fated.