

CHAPTER XIX

THE END OF THE JOURNEY

An hour later the party began the ascent of the wall of rock, which proved to be an even more difficult business than they had anticipated. There was no path, for those who lived beyond this natural barrier never came down it, and few of the dwellers in the plains had ever ventured to go up. It was possible, for Soa herself had descended here in bygone years, and this was all that could be said for it.

In default of a better road they followed the course of the river, which thundered down the face of the precipice in four great waterfalls, connected by as many sullen pools, whose cavities had been hollowed out in the course of centuries from the rock. The second of these ledges proved so insurmountable that at one time Leonard thought that they would be obliged to abandon their attempt, and follow the foot of the cliff till they found some easier route. But at last Otter, who could climb like a cat, succeeded in passing the most dangerous part at the risk of his life, bearing a rope with him by means of which the rest of the party and the loads of goods were hauled up one by one. It was evening before the height was scaled, and they proceeded to encamp upon its summit, making a scanty meal of some meat which they had brought with them.

That night they passed in great discomfort, for it was mid-winter and

here the climate proved to be very cold. Bitter winds swept across the vast plain before them and searched them through, all the clothing and blankets they had scarcely sufficing to keep them warm; indeed, the Settlement men and Francisco, who had been bred in a southern clime, suffered severely. Nor were matters improved when, on the breaking of the light, they woke from a troubled sleep to find the plain hidden in a dense mist. However, they rose, made a fire with reeds and dead wood which they gathered on the banks of the river, and ate, waiting for the fog to vanish.

But it did not vanish, so about nine o'clock they continued their journey under Soa's guidance, following the east bank of the river northwards. The ground proved easy to travel over, for, with the exception of isolated water-worn boulders of granite, the plain was perfectly smooth and covered with turf as fine as any that grows in northern lands.

All that day they marched on, wandering like ghosts through the mist, and guided in their path by the murmuring sound of the river. They met no man, but once or twice great herds of hairy creatures thundered past them. Leonard fired into one of these herds with an express rifle, for they wanted meat, and a prodigious snorting and bellowing told him that his shot had taken effect. Running to the spot whence the sounds came, he found a huge white bull kicking in its death struggle. The animal was covered with long white hair like that of the British breed of wild cattle, and measured at least seventeen hands in height. Round it stood

others snorting with fear and wonder, that, when they saw Leonard, put down their heads threateningly, tearing up the turf with their great horns. He shouted aloud and fired another shot, whereon they turned and disappeared into the mist.

This happened towards nightfall, so they determined to camp upon the spot; but while they were engaged in skinning the bull an incident occurred that did not tend to raise their spirits. At sunset the sky cleared a little--at least the sinking sun showed red through the mist as it does in a London fog of the third density. Against this red ball of the sun, and some dozen yards away, suddenly there appeared the gigantic figure of a man, for, unless the fog deceived them, he must have been between six and seven feet high and broad in proportion. Of his face they could see nothing, but he was clad in goat-skins, and armed with a great spear and a bow slung upon his back.

Juanna was the first to see and point him out to Leonard with a start of fear, as he stood watching them in solemn silence. Obeying the impulse of the moment, Leonard stepped forward towards the vision holding his rifle ready, but before he reached the spot where it had stood the figure vanished.

Then he walked back again to Juanna. "I think we have heard so much of giants that we begin to believe we see them," he said laughing.

As he spoke something clove the air between them and stuck in the earth

beyond. They went to it. It was a large arrow having a barbed point and flighted with red feathers.

"This is a very tangible fancy at any rate," Juanna answered, drawing the shaft out of the ground. "We have had a narrow escape."

Leonard did not speak, but raising his rifle he fired it at a venture in the direction whence the arrow had sped. Then he ran to put their little band in a position of defence, Juanna following him. But, as it chanced, he might have spared himself the trouble, for nothing further happened; indeed, the net outward and visible result of this mysterious apparition was that they spent a miserable night, waiting in the fog and wet--for it had come on to rain, or rather drizzle--for an enemy who, to their intense relief, never appeared.

But the inward and spiritual consequences were much greater, for now they knew that Soa spoke truth and that the legend of the bushmen as to "great men covered with hair" was no mere savage invention.

At length the morning came. It was damp and wretched, and they were all half starved with cold and oppressed by fears. Indeed some of the Settlement men were so terrified that they openly lamented having suffered their sense of shame and loyalty to overcome their determination to retreat. Now they could not do so, for the malcontents among them did not dare to retrace their steps alone; moreover, Leonard spoke plainly on the matter, telling them that he would drive away the

first man who attempted any insubordination.

Soaked through, shivering, and miserable, they pursued their march across the unknown plain, Soa, who seemed to grow hourly grimmer now that she was in her own country, stalking ahead of them as guide. It was warmer walking than sitting still, and in one respect their lot was bettered, for a little wind stirring the mist from time to time revealed gleams of the watery sun. All that day they journeyed on, seeing no more of the man who had shot the arrow, or his fellows, till at length darkness drew near again.

Then they halted, and Leonard and Otter walked to and fro searching for a suitable place to make the camp and pitch their solitary tent. Presently Otter shouted aloud. Leonard ran towards him, and found him staring into the mist at something that loomed largely about a hundred yards away.

"Look, Baas," he said, "there is a house, a house of stone with grass growing on the roof."

"Nonsense," said Leonard, "it must be some more boulders. However, we can soon find out."

They crept cautiously towards the object, that, as soon became evident, was a house or a very good apology for one, built of huge undressed boulders, bedded in turf by way of mortar, and roofed with the trunks

of small trees and a thick thatch of sods whereon the grass grew green. This building may have measured forty feet in length by twenty in depth, and seventeen from the ground-line to the wall-plate. Also it had a doorway of remarkable height and two window-places, but all these openings were unclosed, except by curtains of hide which hung before them. Leonard called Soa and asked her what the place was.

"Doubtless the house of a herdsman," she answered, "who is set here to watch the cattle of the king, or of the priests. It may chance that this is the dwelling of that man who shot the arrow yesterday."

Having assured themselves that here was a human habitation, it remained to be ascertained whether it was tenanted. After waiting awhile to see if anyone passed in or out, Otter undertook this task. Going down on his hands and knees he crept up to the wall, then along it to the doorway, and after listening there awhile he lifted a corner of the hide curtain and peeped into the interior. Presently he rose, saying:

"All right, Baas, the place is empty."

Then they both entered and examined the dwelling with curiosity. It was rude enough. The walls were unplastered, and the damp streamed down them; the floor was of trodden mud, and a hole in the roof served as a chimney; but, by way of compensation, the internal space was divided into two apartments, one of them a living room, and the other a sleeping chamber. It was evident that the place had not been long deserted, for

fire still smouldered on the hearth, round which stood various earthen cooking dishes, and in the sleeping-room was a rough bedstead of wood whereon lay wrappings made from the hides of cattle and goats. When they had seen everything there was to be seen, they hurried back to the others to report their discovery, and just then the rain set in more heavily than before.

"A house!" said Juanna; "then for goodness' sake let us get into it. We are all half dead with the cold and wet."

"Yes," answered Leonard, "I think we had better take possession, though it may be a little awkward if the rightful owners come back."

The best that can be said for the night which they spent in this stone shanty, undisturbed by any visit from its lawful tenant, is that it passed a shade more comfortably than it would have done outside. They were dry, though the place was damp, and they had a fire. Still, until you are used to it, it is trying to sit in the company of a score of black people and of many thousand fleas, enveloped with a cloud of pungent smoke, according to the custom of our Norse ancestors.

Soon Juanna gave up the attempt and retired to the great bed in the inner chamber, wondering much who had occupied it last. A herdsman, she judged, as Soa had suggested, for in a corner of the room stood an ox-goad hugely fashioned. But it was a bed, and she slept as soundly in it as its numerous insect occupants would allow. The others were not so

fortunate: they had the insects indeed, but no bed.

Again the morning came, wet, miserable, and misty, and through the mist and rain they pursued their course, whither they knew not. All day they wandered on by the banks of the river till night fell and they camped, this time without shelter. Now they had reached the extreme of wretchedness, for they had little or no food left, and could not find fuel to make a fire. Leonard took Soa aside and questioned her, for he saw clearly that a couple more days of this suffering would put an end to all of them.

"You say these people of yours have a city, Soa?"

"They have a city, Deliverer," she answered, "but whether they will allow you to enter it, except as a victim for sacrifice, is another matter."

"None of us will enter it unless we find shelter soon," he answered.

"How far is the place away?"

"It should be a day's journey, Deliverer. Were the mist gone you could see it now. The city is built at the foot of great mountains, there are none higher, but the fog hides everything. To-morrow, if it lifts, you will see that I speak truth."

"Are there any houses near where we can shelter?" he asked again.

"How can I tell?" she answered. "It is forty years since I passed this road, and here, where the land is barren, none dwell except the herdsmen. Perhaps there is a house at hand, or perhaps there is none for many miles. Who can say?"

Finding that Soa could give no further information, Leonard returned to the others, and they huddled themselves together for warmth on the wet ground as best they might, and sat out the hours in silence, not attempting to sleep. The Settlement men were numb with cold, and Juanna also was overcome for the first time, though she tried hard to be cheerful. Francisco and Leonard heaped their own blankets on her, pretending that they had found spare ones, but the wraps were wringing wet, and gave her little comfort. Soa alone did not appear to suffer, perhaps because it was her native climate, and Otter kept his spirits, which neither heat, nor cold, nor hunger seemed to affect.

"While my heart is warm I am warm," he said cheerfully, when Leonard asked him how he fared. As for Leonard himself, he sat silent listening to the moans of the Settlement men, and reflecting that twenty-four hours more of this misery would bring the troubles of most of them to an end. Without food or shelter it was very certain that few of those alive to-night would live to see a second dawn.

At last the light came and to their wonder and exceeding joy they found that the rain had ceased and the mist was melting.

Once more they beheld the face of the sun, and rejoiced in its warmth as only those can rejoice who for days and nights have lived in semi-darkness, wet to the skin and frozen to the marrow.

The worst of the mist was gone indeed, but it was not until they had breakfasted off a buck which Otter shot in the reeds by the river, that the lingering veils of vapour withdrew themselves from the more distant landscape. At last they had vanished, and for the first time the wanderers saw the land through which they were travelling. They stood upon a vast plain that sloped upwards gradually till it ended at the foot of a mighty range of snow-capped mountains named, as they learned in after-days, the Bina Mountains.

This range was shaped like a half-moon, or a bent bow, and the nearest point of the curve, formed by a soaring snowy peak, was exactly opposite to them, and to all appearance not more than five-and-twenty miles away. On either side of this peak the unbroken line of mountains receded with a vast and majestic sweep till the eye could follow them no more. The plain about them was barren and everywhere strewn with granite boulders, between which wandered herds of wild cattle, mixed with groups of antelopes; but the lower slopes of the mountains were clothed with dense juniper forests, and among them were clearings, presumably of cultivated land. Otter searched the scene with his eyes, that were as those of a hawk; then said quietly:

"Look yonder, Baas; the old hag has not lied to us. There is the city of the People of the Mist."

Following the line of the dwarf's outstretched hand, Leonard saw what had at first escaped him, that standing back in a wide bend at the foot of the great mountain in front of them were a multitude of houses, built of grey stone and roofed with green turf. Indeed, had not his attention been called to it, the town might well have missed observation until he was quite close to its walls, for the materials of which it was constructed resembled those of the boulders that lay about them in thousands, and the vivid green of its roofs gave it the appearance of a distant space of grassy land.

"Yes, there is the kraal of the Great People," said Otter again, "and it is a strong kraal. See, Baas, they know how to defend themselves. The mountain is behind them that none can climb, and all around their walls the river runs, joining itself together again on the plain beyond. It would go ill with the 'impi' which tried to take that kraal."

For a while they all stood still and stared amazed. It seemed strange that they should have reached this fabled city; and now that they were there, how would they be received within its walls? This was the question which each one of them was asking of himself. There was but one way to find out--they must go and see; no retreat was now possible. Even the Settlement people felt this. "Better to die at the hands of the Great Men," said one of them aloud, "than to perish miserably in the

mist and cold."

"Be of good cheer," Leonard answered; "you are not yet dead. The sun shines once more. It is a happy omen."

When they had rested and dried their clothes they marched on with a certain sense of relief. There before them was the goal they had travelled so far to win; soon they would know the worst that could befall, and anything was better than this long suspense.

By midday they had covered about fifteen miles of ground, and could now see the city clearly. It was a great town, surrounded by a Cyclopean wall of boulders, about which the river ran on every side, forming a natural moat. The buildings within the wall seemed to be arranged in streets, and to be build on a plan similar to that of the house in which they had slept two nights before, the vast conglomeration of grass-covered roofs giving the city the appearance of a broken field of turf hillocks supported upon walls of stone.

For the rest the place was laid out upon a slope, and at its head, immediately beneath the sheer steps of the mountain side stood two edifices very much larger in size than any of those below. One of these resembled the other houses in construction, and was surrounded by a separate enclosure; but the second, which was placed on higher ground, so far as they could judge at that distance, was roofless, and had all the characteristics of a Roman amphitheatre. At the far end of this

amphitheatre stood a huge mass of polished rock, bearing a grotesque resemblance to the figure of a man.

"What are those buildings, Soa?" asked Leonard.

"The lower one is the house of the king, White Man, and that above is the Temple of Deep Waters, where the river rises from the bowels of the mountain."

"And what is the black stone beyond the temple?"

"That, White Man, is the statue of the god who sits there for ever, watching over the city of his people."

"He must be a great god," said Leonard, alluding to the size of the statue.

"He is great," she answered, "and my heart is afraid at the sight of him."

After resting for two hours they marched on again, and soon it became apparent that their movements were watched. The roadway which they were following--if a track beaten flat by the feet of men and cattle could be called a road--wound to and fro between boulders of rock, and here and there standing upon the boulders were men clad in goat-skins, each of them carrying a spear, a bow and a horn. So soon as their party came

within five or six hundred yards of one of these men, he would shoot an arrow in their direction, which, when picked up, proved to be barbed with iron, and flighted with red feathers like the first that they had seen. Then the sentry would blow his horn, either as a signal or in token of defiance, bound from the rock, and vanish. This did not look encouraging, but there was worse to come. Presently, as they drew near to the city, they descried large bodies of armed men crossing the river that surrounded it in boats and on rafts, and mustering on the hither side. At length all of them were across, and the regiment, which appeared to number more than a thousand men, formed up in a hollow square and advanced upon them at the double.

The crisis was at hand.