

CHAPTER XX

THE COMING OF ACA

Leonard turned and looked at his companions with something like dismay written on his face.

"What is to be done now?" he said.

"We must wait for them until they come near," answered Juanna, "then Otter and I are to meet them alone, and I will sing the song which Soa has taught me. Do not be afraid, I have learned my lesson, and, if things go right, they will think that we are their lost gods; or, at least, so Soa says."

"Yes, if things go right. But if they don't?"

"Then good-bye," answered Juanna, with a shrug of her shoulders. "At any rate, I must get ready for the experiment. Come, Soa, bring the bundle to those rocks over there--quick! Stop a minute--I forgot, Mr. Outram, you must lend me that ruby. I have to make use of it."

Leonard handed over the ruby, reflecting that he would probably never see it again, since it seemed almost certain that one of the Great People would steal it. However, at the moment he was thinking of that which was far above rubies, namely, of what chance they had of escaping

with their lives.

So soon as she had possession of the stone, Juanna ran to a little ring of boulders that were scattered on the plain about fifty paces from them, followed by Soa, who carried a bundle in her hand.

Ten minutes passed, and Soa appeared from behind the shelter of the stones and beckoned to them. Advancing in obedience to her summons, they saw a curious sight. Standing in the ring of rocks was Juanna, but Juanna transformed. She wore a white robe cut low upon the neck and shoulders; indeed, it was the Arab dress in which she had escaped from the slave camp, that Soa had brought with them in preparation for this moment of trial. Nor was this all; for Juanna had loosened her dark hair--which was of great length and unusual beauty--so that it hung about her almost to her knees, and upon her forehead, gleaming like a red eye, was set the great ruby, ingeniously fastened thereto by Soa in a band of linen pierced in its centre to the size of the stone.

"Behold the goddess and do homage," said Juanna with mock solemnity, although Leonard could see that she was trembling with excitement.

"I do not quite understand what you are going to do, but you look the part well," he answered shortly. And, indeed, until that moment he had never known how beautiful she was.

Juanna blushed a little at the evident admiration in his eyes; then,

turning to the dwarf, she said:

"Now, Otter, you must make ready too. And remember what Soa told you. Whatever you see or hear, you are not to open your mouth. Walk side by side with me and do as I do, that is all."

Otter grunted in assent, and proceeded to "make ready." The process was simple, consisting only in the shedding of his coat and trousers--an old pair of Leonard's, very much cut down--which left him naked, except for a moocha that he wore beneath them in accordance with native custom.

"What does all this mean?" asked the headman Peter, who, like his companions, was trembling with fear.

"It means," said Juanna, "that Otter and I are impersonating the gods of this people, Peter. If they receive us as gods, it is well; if not, we are doomed. Be careful, should we be so received, lest any of you betray the trick. Be wise and silent, I say, and do what we shall tell you from time to time, if you would live to look upon the sun."

Peter fell back astonished, while Leonard and Francisco turned their attention to the approaching soldiers of the People of the Mist.

They advanced slowly and in silence, but their measured tread shook the earth. At last they halted about a hundred and fifty yards away, presenting a truly terrifying spectacle to the little band among the

rocks. So far as Leonard could see, there was not a man among them who stood less than six feet in height, and they were broad in proportion--hugely made. In appearance they were neither handsome nor repulsive, but solemn-looking, large-eyed, thick-haired--between black and yellow in hue--and wearing an expression of dreadful calm, like the calm of an archaic statue. For the rest they seemed to be well disciplined, each company being under the command of a captain, who, in addition to his arms, carried a trumpet fashioned from a wild bull's horn.

The regiment stood silent, gazing at the group of strangers, or, rather, at the boulders behind which they were concealed. In the centre of their hollow square was a knot of men, one of them young, and huge even in comparison with his companions. This man Leonard took to be a chief or king. Behind were orderlies and counsellors, and before him three aged persons of stately appearance and a cruel cast of countenance. These men were naked to the waist and unarmed, except for a knife or hanger fixed at the girdle. On their broad breasts, covering more than half the skin-surface, the head of a huge snake was tattooed in vivid blue. Evidently they were medicine-men or priests.

While the adventurers watched and wondered, the king or chief issued an order to his attendants, who ran to the corners of the square and called it aloud. Then he raised his great spear, and every captain blew upon his horn, making a deafening sound.

Now the enemy stood still for a while, staring towards the stones, and the three medicine-men drew near to the chief in the centre of the square and talked with him, as though debating what should be done.

"This is our chance," said Juanna excitedly. "If once they attack us it will be all over; a single volley of arrows would kill every one of us. Come, Otter."

"No, no!" said Leonard. "I am afraid of your venturing yourself among those savages. The danger is too great."

"Danger! Can the danger be more than it is here? In a minute we may all be dead. Nonsense! I will go! I know what to do and have made up my mind to it. Do not fear for me. Remember that, if the worst comes to the worst, I have the means to protect myself. You are not afraid to come, are you, Otter?"

"No, Shepherdess," said the dwarf. "Here all roads are alike."

Leonard thought awhile. Bitterly did he reproach himself in that he had been the cause of leading his ward into such a position. But now there was no help for it--she must go. And after all it could make no difference if she were killed or captured five minutes hence or half an hour later. But Francisco, who could not take such a philosophical view of the situation, implored her not to venture herself alone among those horrible savages.

"Go if you like, Juanna," said Leonard, not heeding the priest's importunities. "If anything happens I will try to avenge you before I follow. Go, but forgive me."

"What have I to forgive?" she said, looking at him with shining eyes. "Did you not once dare a greater danger for me?"

"Yes, go, Shepherdess," said Soa, who till now had been staring with all her eyes at the three aged men in the centre of the square; "there is little to fear, if this fool of a dwarf will but keep his tongue silent. I know my people, and I tell you that if you sing that song, and say the words which I have taught you, you and the black one here shall be proclaimed gods of the land. But be swift, for the soldiers are about to shoot."

As Soa spoke, Leonard saw that the conference in the square had come to an end. The messengers were calling commands to the captains, which the captains repeated to the soldiers, and then followed a mighty rattling of quivers. Another instant and the light shone upon many hundreds of arrow-heads, every one of which was pointed towards them.

Juanna saw also, and springing forward on to a rock, stood there for a moment in the full glare of the sun. Instantly a murmur went up from the host; a great voice called a command; the barbs of steel flickered like innumerable stars, and sank downwards.

Now Otter, naked except for his moocha, sprang on to the rock by Juanna's side, and the murmur of the soldiers of the Great People grew into a hoarse roar of astonishment and dismay. Wonder had turned to fear, though why this multitude of warriors should fear a lovely white girl and a black dwarf was not apparent.

For a moment the ill-assorted pair stood together on the rock; then Juanna leapt to the plain, Otter following her. For twenty yards or so she walked in silence, holding the dwarf by the hand; then suddenly she burst into singing wild and sweet. This was the refrain of the sacred song which she sang in the ancient language of the People of the Mist, the tongue that Soa had taught her as a child:

"I do but sleep.

Have ye wept for me awhile?

Hush! I did but sleep.

I shall awake, my people!

I am not dead, nor can I ever die.

See, I have but slept!

See, I come again, made beautiful!

Have ye not seen me in the faces of the children?

Have ye not heard me in the voices of the children?

Look on me now, the sleeper arisen;

Look on me, who wandered, whose name is the Dawning!

Why have ye mourned me, the sleeper awakened?"

Thus she sang, ever more sweetly and louder, till her voice rang through the still air like the song of a bird in winter. Hushed were the companies of the Great Men as she drew towards them with slow gliding steps--hushed with fear and wonder, as though her presence awoke a memory or fulfilled a promise.

Now she was in front of their foremost rank, and, halting there, was silent for a moment. Then she changed her song.

"Will ye not greet me, children of my children?
Have ye forgotten the promise of the dead?
Shall I return to the dream-land whence I wander?
Will ye refuse me, the Mother of the Snake?"

The soldiers looked upon one another and murmured each to each. Now she saw that they understood her words and were terror-stricken by them. For another moment there was silence, then suddenly the three priests or medicine-men, who had drawn near together, passed through the ranks and stood before her, accompanied by the warrior-chief.

Then one of them, the most aged, a man who must have numbered ninety years, spoke in the midst of an intense silence. To Juanna's joy, as they had understood her, so she understood him, for his language was the same that Soa taught her many years before, and in which, for the sake of practice, they had always conversed together for the last two months.

"Art thou woman, or spirit?" asked the ancient priest.

"I am both woman and spirit," she answered.

"And he with thee, he whom we know of"--went on the priest, pointing tremblingly to Otter--"is he god or man?"

"He is both god and man," she answered.

"And those yonder; who are they?"

"They are our ministers and servants, white for the white, and black for the black, the companions of our wanderings, men and not spirits."

The three priests consulted together, while the chief looked on Juanna's beauty with wondering eyes. Then the oldest of them spoke again:

"Thou tellest us in our own tongue of things that have long been hidden, though perchance they are remembered. Either, O Beautiful, thou hast learned these things and liest to us, and then food are ye all for the Snake against whom thou dost blaspheme, or ye are gods indeed, and as gods ye shall be worshipped. Tell us now thy name, and the name of yonder dwarf, of whom we know."

"I am named the Shepherdess of Heaven among men. He is named Otter,

Dweller in the Waters, among men. Once we had other names."

"Tell us the other names, O Shepherdess."

"Once in the far past I was named Brightness, I was named Dawn, I was named Daylight. Once in the far past he was named Silence, he was named Terror, he was named Darkness. Yet at the beginning we had other names. Perchance ye know them, Ministers of the Snake."

"Perchance we know them, O thou who art named Shepherdess of Heaven, O thou who wert named Brightness, and Dawn, and Daylight; O thou who art named Dweller in the Waters, and wert named Silence, and Terror, and Darkness! Perchance we know them, although they be known to few, and are never spoken, save in utter gloom and with hidden head. But do ye know them, those names of the beginning? For if ye know them not, O Beautiful, ye lie and ye blaspheme, and ye are food for the Snake."

"Seldom through all the years have those holy names been spoken save in utter darkness and with covered heads," Juanna answered boldly; "but now is the new hour, the hour of the coming, and now they shall be called aloud in the light of day from open lips and with uplifted eyes.

Hearken, Children of the Snake, these are the names by which we were known in the beginning: Aca is my name, the Mother of the Snake. Jal is he named, who is the Snake. Say, do ye know us now?"

As these words rang on her lips a groan of terror burst from every man

who heard them. Then the aged priest cried aloud: "Down upon your faces, ye Children of the Snake; Worship, all ye People of the Spear, Dwellers in the Mist! Aca, the Queen immortal, has come home again: Jal, the god, has put on the flesh of men. Olfan, lay down thy kingship, it is his: ye priests, throw wide the temples, they are theirs. Worship the Mother, do honour to the god!"

The multitude heard and prostrated themselves like a single man, every one of them crying in a shout of thunder:

"Aca, the Queen of life, has come; Jal, the doom-god, has put on flesh. Worship the Mother, do honour to the god!"

It was as though the army had suddenly been smitten with death, and of the hundreds there, Juanna and Otter alone were left standing. There was one exception, however, and that was Olfan, the warrior chief, who remained upon his feet, not seeming to relish the command to abdicate his authority thus brusquely in favour of a dwarf, were he god or man.

Otter, who was utterly bewildered, not comprehending a word of what had been said, and being unable to fathom the meaning of these strange antics, pointed at the chief with his spear by way of calling Juanna's attention to the fact that he was still standing. But the great man interpreted the action otherwise; evidently he thought that the newly arrived god was invoking destruction on him. His pride yielded to his superstition, and he sank to his knees also.

When the sound of the worshipping had passed away Juanna spoke again, addressing the old priest.

"Rise, my child," she said--he might well have been her great-grandfather--"and rise all ye, soldiers of the Spear and servants of the Snake, and hear my words. Ye know me now, ye know me by the holy name, ye know me by the fashion of my face, and by the red stone that gleams upon my brow. In the beginning my blood fell yonder and was frozen into such gems as these, which to-day ye offer yearly to him who is my child, and slew me. Now the fate is accomplished and his reign is finished. I come with him indeed, and he is still a god, but he loves me as a son again, and bows the knee to me in service.

"Enough, ye know the ancient tale that is fulfilled this day. Now we pass on towards our city, there to sojourn with you awhile and to proclaim the law of the Ending, and we pass alone. There, in our city, let a place be made ready for us, a place apart, but nigh to the temple; and let food be brought to the place, that my servants may eat. At the gates of the city also let men be waiting to bear us to that dwelling. Let none spy upon us, lest an evil fate attend you all; and let none be disobedient, lest we pass from you back to the land of Death and Dreams. Perchance we shall not tarry here for long, perchance we come to bring a blessing and to depart again. Therefore hasten to do our bidding, and do it all. For this time farewell, my servants."

Having spoken thus with much dignity, accompanied by Otter, whose hand she held as before, Juanna withdrew herself, stepping backwards very slowly towards the circle of rocks, and singing as she went.