

CHAPTER XXI

THE FOLLY OF OTTER

Juanna and Otter gained the circle of rocks where the little band lay watching and wonder-struck; that is, all except Soa, who sat apart brooding, her arms clasped upon her breast. Things had befallen as she expected, as they must befall indeed, provided that Juanna did not forget her lesson or show fear, and that the dwarf did nothing foolish. But Soa knew well enough that this was but the beginning of the struggle, and that, though it might be comparatively easy for Juanna and Otter to enter the city, and impose themselves upon its superstition-haunted people as the incarnations of their fabled gods, the maintenance of the imposture was a very different matter. Moreover, she knew, should they be discovered, that escape would be impossible, or at the best, that it must be most difficult. Therefore she sat apart and brooded, for, notwithstanding their present triumph, her heart foreboded evil.

But with the others it was different: they had heard the singing, they had seen the regiment of great men prostrate themselves, and the sound of worshipping had come to their ears like thunder; but of the why and wherefore of it all they could only guess.

"What has happened?" said Leonard eagerly; "your initiation seems to have come off well."

"Bid the men fall back and I will tell you," Juanna answered.

Leonard did so, but instead of speaking she broke into hysterical laughter. Her nerves had been over-strained, and now they sought relief thus.

"You must all be very respectful to Otter and myself," she said at length, "for we really are gods--don't look shocked, Francisco, I begin to believe in it myself. We have only just found it out, but I assure you it is a fact; they accepted us fully, and that after not more than five minutes' cross-examination. Listen!" And she told them all that had passed.

While she was speaking the regiment began to move, no longer in a square, but in a formation of companies. Company by company it rushed past them, shaking the earth with its footsteps, and as each section went by it tossed its spears into the air as a salute, crying: "Glory to the Mother! glory to the Snake!" and fled on towards the city.

At length the story was done and the regiment was gone.

"Well," said Leonard, "so far so good. Juanna, you are the bravest and cleverest girl in the whole world. Most young women would have forgotten everything and gone into hysterics at the critical point."

"I kept them till afterwards," she answered demurely. "And as for being brave and clever, I only repeated what Soa taught me like a parrot; you see I knew that I should be killed if I made any mistake, and such knowledge sharpens the memory. All I have to say is, if the Snake they talk so much about is anything like those which are tattooed upon the old priests' breasts, I have no wish to make a nearer acquaintance with it. I hate snakes. There, don't say any more"--for both Leonard and Francisco were breaking out into fresh protestations of gratitude and admiration; "if you want to thank anybody, thank Soa!"

"And so I do," said Leonard heartily, for his spirits had risen in a most wonderful manner. "Soa, you have told us the truth, and you have managed well and I thank you."

"Did you then take me for a liar?" the woman answered, fixing her gloomy eyes upon Leonard's face. "I told you the truth, Deliverer, when I said that my people would accept the Shepherdess and this black dog of yours as their gods. But did I not tell you also that the death of the rest of us lies in the matter? If not, I say so now. You have not been named a god, Deliverer, nor has yonder Bald-pate"--the natives called Francisco thus because of his tonsure--"and your black dog will betray you by his yapping. When you look down the jaws of the Snake, remember then that Soa told you the truth, Deliverer. Perchance you shall find the red stones you seek hidden in his belly, White Man."

"Be silent," said Juanna indignantly, and Soa slunk back like a whipped

hound.

"Confound the old woman!" put in Leonard with a shiver. "She is a black Jonah, and if I have to go inside this snake I hope that it will be a case of ladies first, that is all."

"I am sure I don't know what has happened to Soa," said Juanna. "Her native air has a very bad effect upon her temper."

"Well, the future must look after itself," answered Leonard, "snake or no snake. At present we must follow our luck. Otter, listen to me. Do you understand that you are a god, the god of this people?"

"The god, Baas? What is a god?"

"Have I not told you, thickhead? You are not a man any more, you are a spirit. Once, so it seems, you ruled this people in the past, and now you will rule them again. You and the Shepherdess are both gods. She is your mother and you are her child."

"Yes, Baas, no doubt; but once I had another mother, a much uglier one."

"Otter, cease to talk folly, else when you are no more a god I will beat you. Now you are a god, and we are all your servants, except the Shepherdess. When you speak to us you must speak roughly, like a great chief to the lowest of his people, calling us dogs and slaves. If you

name me 'Baas' in public, I will beat you privately when you are no more a god. You will do best to speak little or not at all, so that none can take hold of your words, which are always foolish."

"If you say that I am a god, Baas, it is enough, for doubtless you have met the gods and know their ways, though it is strange that none have told me this before. They must be an ugly people, the gods! But how will it be with the Settlement men when they hear that I am a great spirit? They will say: 'Does a spirit wait upon a man and call him chief? Does a spirit clean the guns and cook the food of a man?' They will ask many such things, and the Great people will hear them. And will they think then that I am a god? No, they will know me for a liar, and will kill me and all of us."

"That is true," said Leonard. Then he summoned Peter and the Settlement men and addressed them. He told them that the plot had succeeded, and that Otter and the Shepherdess were accepted as the gods of the People of the Mist. Because of this they were left alive and held in honour, who, but for it, would now be dead, riddled through with the arrows of the Great People. He explained to them for the second time that it was necessary to the safety of all that this delusion as to the divinity of Otter and the Shepherdess should be maintained, since, if the slightest suspicion of the fraud crossed the minds of the Great People, without doubt they would all be sacrificed as impostors.

This was the tale that they must tell:--They should say that all of them

were hunting game in a far country with himself, Soa, and Francisco, when one night they heard a singing, and by the light of the moon they saw the Shepherdess and the dwarf Otter coming towards them. Then the Shepherdess and Otter commanded them to be their servants and travel with them to a new land, and they obeyed them, black and white together, for they saw that they were not mortals.--This was the tale that they must tell; moreover, they must act up to their words if they would continue to look upon the sun.

But their first surprise was past, the Settlement men, who were quick-witted people, entered into the spirit of the plot readily enough; indeed, Peter caused them to repeat the story to him, so that he might be sure that they had its details by heart.

Then they continued their march towards the city on the hill. The two white men went first, next came Juanna and Otter followed by Soa, and last of all walked the Settlement men. An hour's journey brought them to the bank of the river, which, dividing above it, engirdled the town, to reunite near the roadway that they followed. Here canoes were ready to take them across to the island, or rather the peninsula, on which the city was built. On the other side of the river they found priests waiting in the great gateway with two litters that had been prepared for Juanna and Otter respectively. This, the further bank, was lined with some thousands of spectators, who, when the divine pair set their feet upon its shores, prostrated themselves, men, women, and children, and burst into a shout of welcome.

Juanna and Otter took no heed. With such dignity as they could command, and in the dwarf's case it was not much, they entered the litters, drew the hide curtains, and were borne forward swiftly. After them came Leonard, Francisco, and the others, while the population followed in silence.

Now the sun was sinking, but enough of daylight was left to show how strange were the place and the people among which they found themselves. The city, indeed, was rudely built of like materials and in similar fashion to the house in the plain that has been described already. But the streets were roughly paved; each habitation stood apart from the other in its own garden, and the gates were of wood, fastened together with primitive iron bolts. There were drinking-shops, or rather booths, and a large market-place, which they crossed as they ascended the hill, and where, as they afterwards discovered, this people carried on their trade, if trade it could be called, for they had no money, and conducted all transactions like other savages, upon a principle of barter.

As they went Leonard took note of these things, which, to his mind, showed clearly that the inhabitants of this city were the degenerate inheritors of some ancient and forgotten civilisation. Their fortifications, stone-built houses, drinking-shops, and markets indicated this, just as their rude system of theology, with its divinities of Light and Darkness, or of Death and Life, each springing from the other, engaged in an eternal struggle, and yet one, was

probably the survival of some elaborate nature-myth of the early world.

But nothing struck him so much as the appearance of the people. In size they were almost giants, a peculiarity which was shared by the women, some of whom measured six feet in height. In common with other uncivilised races most of these women were little except a girdle and a goat-skin cloak that hung loosely upon their shoulders, displaying their magnificent proportions somewhat freely. They were much handsomer than the men, having splendid solemn eyes, very white teeth, and a remarkable dignity of gait. Their faces, however, wore the same sombre look as those of their husbands and brothers, and they did not chatter after the manner of their sex, but contented themselves with pointing out the peculiarities of the strangers in a few brief words to their children or to one another.

After crossing the market-place the party came to a long and gentle ascent, which terminated at a wall surrounding the lower of the two great buildings that they had seen from the plain. Passing its gates they halted at the doors of the first of these edifices. Here priests stood with torches--at least, they judged them to be priests from the symbol of the snake's head tattooed upon their naked breasts--ready to conduct them to their lodging, for now the night was closing in rapidly. Soon they found themselves within the walls of a great house, built in the usual way with rough boulders, but on three sides of a square, and enclosing a courtyard in which a fountain bubbled. The furniture of the house was rude but grotesquely carved, and in the courtyard stood

a throne, sheltered by a roof of turf, and fashioned of black wood and ivory, with feet shaped like those of a human being. Indeed, as they afterwards discovered, this was the palace of the king, Olfan, who had been summarily ejected by the priests to make room for the newcomers.

Here in this strange dwelling the attendant priests assigned them all quarters, the Settlement men in one wing, Leonard, Francisco and Soa in the other, and Juanna and Otter in two separate apartments in the body of the building. This arrangement involved the separation of the party, but it was difficult to offer objections, so they were forced to acquiesce in it. Presently women entered bearing food, boiled corn, milk in bowls, and roasted flesh in plenty, of which Leonard and Francisco ate with thankfulness.

Before they went to sleep Leonard looked into the courtyard, and was somewhat alarmed to find that guards were stationed at every door, while in front of those leading to the apartments of Juanna and Otter stood a body of priests with torches in their hands. He made an effort to pass through these guards in order to visit Juanna, but without a word they lifted their great spears and stopped him, and for that time he abandoned the attempt.

"Why do the priests stand before the door of the Shepherdess, Soa?" asked Leonard.

"They guard the place of the gods," she answered. "Unless the gods will

it, none may enter there."

"Say, Soa," Leonard asked again, "are you not afraid of being here in your own land?"

"I am much afraid, Deliverer, for if I am found out then I die. Yet many years have gone by since I fled; few live who knew me, and, perchance, none remember me. Also now I do not wear my hair after the fashion of my people, and therefore I may escape, unless the priests discover me by their magic. And now I would sleep."

On the following morning at dawn Leonard rose and, accompanied by Francisco, walked into the courtyard. This time the soldiers did not try to stop them, but the priests were still standing in front of Juanna's door, looking like spectres in the grey mist. They went to them and signified by signs that they would worship the Queen, but were sternly refused admission in words which they could not understand, but that Soa, who was listening, afterwards translated to them.

"The Mother had come to her home," said the spokesman, "and might be profaned no more by the eyes of the vulgar. The Snake also was in his home, and none should look upon him."

When arguments failed Leonard tried to force his way through, and was met by a huge spear pointed at his throat. How things would have ended it is difficult to say had not Juanna herself appeared at this juncture,

standing between the curtains of the doorway. At the sight of her the priests and soldiers fell upon their faces, and Leonard had sufficient presence of mind to follow their example, dragging Francisco down beside him.

"What is this tumult?" she asked the guards in their own tongue.

"I tell you what it is, Juanna," said Leonard, rubbing his head upon the ground and speaking in English. "If you do not come to an understanding with these scoundrels, you will soon be cut off from all communication with us, and what is more, we shall be cut off too in another way. Will you be so good as to issue an order that we are to be admitted when we like?"

Juanna turned towards the priest and spoke angrily:

"Who has dared to forbid my servants to come before me and worship me? My will is my own, and I only make it known. It is my will that these white men and yonder black woman pass in before me at their pleasure."

"Your will is our will, Mother," said the priests humbly.

So they went in, and the curtains were closed behind them.

"I am so thankful to see you," said Juanna. "You don't know how dreadfully lonely it has been in this great room all night, and I am

afraid of those solemn-eyed priests who stand round the doors. The women who brought me food last evening crawled about the place on all fours like dogs; it was horrible!"

"I am sorry that you have been left alone," said Leonard, "but you must try to make better arrangements. Soa might sleep with you, at any rate. Where is Otter? Let us pay him a visit; I want to see how the god is getting on."

Juanna went to the door and addressed the priests, saying that she desired to be led before the Snake, and her servants with her. They demurred a little, then gave way, and all four of them were conducted, first into the courtyard, in which no human being was to be seen, and thence to an adjoining chamber, where a curious sight awaited them. In a huge chair set upon a dais sat Otter, looking furious and by no means at ease; while stretched upon the ground in front of him lay four priests, who muttered prayers unceasingly.

"Welcome, Baas!" he cried in rapture at the sight of Leonard. "Welcome, Shepherdess!"

"You idiot!" answered Leonard in Dutch, but speaking in the most humble voice, and sinking to his knees. "If you will not remember that you are a god, I will pay you out so soon as we are alone. Bid these fellows begone; the Shepherdess will translate for you."

"Go, dogs!" said Otter, taking the hint; "go, and bring me food. I would speak with my servant, who is named Baas, and with my mother."

"These are the words of the Snake that he speaks in the holy tongue," said Juanna, and she translated them.

The four priests rose, and bowing to the earth, crept backwards from the room. So soon as they were gone, Otter leaped from his throne with an exclamation of rage that caused the others to burst out laughing.

"Laugh, Baas, laugh if you will!" said the dwarf, "for you have never been a god, and don't know what it is. What think you, Baas?--all night long I have sat upon that great stool, while those accursed dogs burnt stinking stuff beneath my nostrils and muttered nonsense. One hour more and I should have fallen on them and killed them, for I have had no meat, and hunger makes me mad."

"Hush!" said Leonard, "I hear footsteps! On to your throne, Otter! Quick, Juanna! stand by his side; we will kneel!"

They had barely time to obey when the curtains were drawn, and a priest entered, holding a vessel of wood covered with a cloth. Slowly he crept towards the throne, with his head bent almost to his knees; then, straightening himself suddenly, he lifted up the wooden vessel and cried aloud:

"We bring you food, O Snake. Eat and be satisfied."

Otter took the dish, and, lifting the cloth, gazed upon its contents hungrily, but with an ever-growing dissatisfaction.

"Son of a dog!" he cried in his own tongue, "is this food to set before a man?" And he held the platter downwards, exposing its contents.

They were simple, consisting of various sorts of vegetables and watercress--poor in quality, for the season was winter, and all of them uncooked. In the centre of this fodder--whether placed there in obedience to some religious tradition or by way of ornament, or perhaps to assist the digestive process of the god, as a tenpenny nail is said to assist that of an ostrich--was a fine ruby stone; not so big, indeed, as that which Soa had given to Leonard, but still of considerable size and value. Leonard saw it with delight, but not so the dwarf, the selfish promptings of whose stomach caused him to forget that his master had journeyed far to seek such gems as this. In the fury of his disappointed appetite he stood upon the footstool of the throne, and, seizing the ruby, he hurled it at the priest, hitting him fair between the eyes.

"Am I an eel?" he roared, "that I should live on water-grass, and red gravel?"

Then the priest, terrified at the behaviour of this strange divinity,

picked up the offending gem--to the presence of which he attributed his anger--and fled, never looking behind him.

Juanna and Francisco were seized with uncontrollable laughter, while even Soa deigned to smile. But Leonard did not smile.

"Oh, you last descendant of generations of asses!" he said bitterly.

"You ass with four ears and a tenfold bray! What have you done? You have hurled the precious stone at the head of him who brought it, and now he will bring no more. Had it not been for you, doubtless with every meal such stones would have been offered to you, and though you grew thin we should all of us have become rich, and that without trouble, tricks, or violence."

"Forgive me, Baas," lamented Otter, "but my rage took away my reason, and I forgot. See now what it is to be a god. It is to be fed upon stuff such as would gripe an ox. Oh, Baas, I would that these wild men had made you a god and left me your servant!" And again he gazed with disgust upon the watercress and rows of leathery vegetables resembling turnips.

"You had better eat them, Otter," said Juanna, who was still choking with laughter. "If you don't you may get nothing more for days.

Evidently you are supposed to have a small appetite."

Then, driven to it by his ravening hunger, the wretched Otter fell upon

the turnips and munched them sullenly, Leonard rating him all the while for his unequalled stupidity.

Scarcely had he finished his meal when there was a stir without, and once again priests entered, headed on this occasion by that same aged man who had acted as a spokesman when Juanna declared herself on the previous day, and who, as they had discovered, was named Nam. In fact he had many other and much longer names, but as this was the shortest and most convenient of them, they adopted it.

It chanced that Leonard was standing by Soa, and when this priest entered, whom she now saw face to face for the first time, he noticed that she started, trembled, and then drew back into the shadow of the throne.

"Some friend of the old lady's youth," thought Leonard to himself. "I hope he won't recognise her, that is all."

Nam bent himself in adoration before the gods, then began an address, the substance of which Juanna translated from time to time. Bitterly did he grieve, he said, that such an insult had been offered to the Snake as the presenting to him among his food of the red stone, known as the Blood of Aca. That man who had done this folly was doomed to die, if, indeed, he were not already dead. Well could they understand that, the Mother and Snake having become reconciled, the proffering to Jal of that which reminded him of the sin of long ago was a wickedness that might

bring a curse upon the land. Let the Snake be appeased. Command had been given that all such stones should be hidden in a secret place by him who had wrought the crime, and, as he had said, if the man returned alive from that place he should be slain. But he would not return alive, for to go thither was death, as it should be death henceforth even to mention that stone, of which but one should now be seen in the land, that which the Mother wore in memory of the past.

"O Otter, my friend," murmured Leonard to himself, "if I don't make you pay for this, my name is not Outram!"

But enough of the stones, went on Nam; he had come upon a more important matter. That night an assembly of all the tribe would be held in the great temple an hour before moonrise, that the Mother and the Snake might take up their royalty in the presence of the people. Thither they would come to lead them and their servants at the appointed time. Was this pleasing to the gods?

Juanna bent her head in assent, and the priest turned to go with many obeisances; but before he went he spoke again, asking if all things were as the gods desired.

"Not altogether, my servant," answered Juanna. "It is our will that these, our other servants, should have free access to us at all times and without question. Also, it is our will that their food should be brought to them with our food. Moreover, it is the desire of the Snake

that no more grass should be given to him to eat; for now, in these latter days, having put on the flesh of men, he needs that which will support the flesh. One thing more, my servant; the Snake forgives the affront that was offered him, and I command that some of the greatest of the holy stones should be brought to me, that I may look on the blood which I shed so long ago."

"Alas! it may not be, Mother," answered the priest in tones of sorrow.

"All the stones, both red and blue, have been placed in bags of hide and cast into that place whence they can be brought no more, together with him who offended. Nor can others be gathered at this season of the year, seeing that deep snow covers the place where they lie buried. In the summer, when the sun has melted the snow, more can be found, if your eyes still desire the sight of them."

Juanna made no reply, and the priest went.

"Here is a pretty business," said Leonard. "That idiot Otter has upset everything. We might have become millionaires for the asking, and now we must wait for months before we so much as get sight of a ruby or a sapphire."

Nobody answered. Indeed, the whole party were plunged into consternation at the fatal effects of this accident. As for Otter himself, when he understood fully what he had done, he almost wept for grief.

"Who could have known, Baas?" he groaned. "It was the sight of the green food that bewitched me, who have always hated the taste of grass. And now my folly has undone all, and it seems that I must be a god for many months, if, indeed, they do not find me out."

"Never mind, Otter," said Leonard, moved to pity by the dwarf's genuine grief. "You have lost the stones and you will have to find them again somehow. By the way, Soa, why did you start so when the old priest came in?"

"Because he is my father, Deliverer," she answered.

Leonard whistled; here was a new complication. What if Nam should recognise her?