

CHAPTER XXII

THE TEMPLE OF JAL

In considerable agitation of mind Leonard bid good-bye to Juanna, promising to return soon, and went to visit the Settlement men, whom he had not seen since the previous evening.

He found them in good case enough, so far as their material comfort was concerned, for they were well supplied with food and warmly lodged. So much could not be said, however, of their mental state, for they were terrified by the multitude of solemn priests and warriors who watched them as cats watch mice. Crouching round him dejectedly they implored Leonard not to leave them, saying that they expected to be murdered every minute. He pacified them as well as he could and left them with the assurance that he would return presently, having first reminded them that the lives of all depended upon the maintenance of the delusion as to the divinity of Otter and the Shepherdess.

The remainder of that day passed heavily enough. After the first excitement of their strange position had gone by a reaction set in, and everybody was much depressed. As the hours drew on, the mist, which had lifted a little about ten o'clock, closed in very densely, throwing the ill-lighted chamber where they sat into a deep gloom. In such an atmosphere conversation languished; indeed, at times it died altogether, and the only sound to be heard was that of the monotonous voices of the

priests without the curtains, as they muttered prayers unceasingly. At length Leonard could bear it no longer, but rose, declaring that he was going out to see whatever might be seen. Juanna tried faintly to dissuade him, and Otter wished to come too, which was impossible. The end of it was that he went alone.

First he revisited the Settlement men and tried to cheer them, and sadly did they need cheering. Then he passed to the great gates of the palace yard and looked through them. The mist had lifted a little, and about a hundred paces away he could perceive the doors of the temple, on either side of which rose Cyclopean walls fifty feet or more in height. It was obvious that here preparations for some ceremony were in progress, and on a large scale, for immense crowds of people were gathered about the doors, through which bodies of priests and armed men passed continually. More he could not learn, for the gates of the palace yard were barred and guarded, and the soldiers would not let him through. He stood by them watching till sunset, then returning to the others, he told them what he had seen.

Another hour passed, and suddenly the curtains were drawn aside and a body of priests entered, twelve in number, bearing large candles of fat in their hands, and headed by their chief, Nam. Prostrating themselves before Juanna and Otter they remained plunged in silence.

"Speak on," said Juanna at length.

"We come, O Mother, and O Snake," said the priest Nam, "to lead you to the temple that the people may look upon their gods."

"It is well; lead on," Juanna answered.

"First you must be robed, Mother," said Nam, "for without the temple none may look upon your divinity, save your priests alone."

Rising as he spoke, he produced a black dress from a grass bag, which was carried by an attendant. This dress was very curious. It fastened in front with buttons of horn, and either was, or seemed to be, woven in a single piece from the softest hair of black-fleeced goats. Moreover, it had sleeves just long enough to leave the hands of the wearer visible, and beneath its peaked cap was a sort of mask with three slits, two for the eyes and one for the mouth.

Juanna retired to put on this hideous garment over her white robe, and reappeared presently, looking like the black ghost of a mediaeval monk. Then the priests gave her two flowers, a red lily and a white, to be held in either hand, and it appeared that her equipment was complete. Next they came to Otter and bound a scarlet fringe of hair about his forehead in such fashion that the fringe hid his eyes, at the same time placing in his hand a sceptre of ivory, apparently of very ancient workmanship, and fashioned in the shape of a snake standing on its tail.

"All is prepared," said Nam.

"Lead on," answered Juanna again. "But let our servants come with us, both those here and those without, save the woman only, who stays to make ready for our return."

Juanna spoke thus because Soa had announced her wish to be left behind when they went to the temple. Juanna had consulted Leonard on the subject, who gave it as his opinion that Soa had good reasons of her own for making this request. Also he pointed out that in case of disturbance she could scarcely help them, and might possibly prove an encumbrance.

"They wait," answered Nam; "all is prepared for them also": and as he spoke a sardonic smile flickered on his withered countenance that made Leonard feel very uncomfortable. What was prepared, he wondered?

They passed through the curtains into the courtyard, where soldiers, clad in goat-skin cloaks, waited with two litters. Here also were the Settlement men, armed, but in an extremity of fear, for they were guarded by about fifty of the Great People, also armed.

Juanna and Otter entered the litters, behind which Leonard formed up his little band, going in front of it himself with Francisco, both of them having rifles in their hands and revolvers at their girdles, of which no attempt was made to deprive them, for none knew their use.

Then they started, surrounded by the bare-breasted priests, who chanted

and waved torches as they walked, and preceded and followed by the grim files of tall soldiers, on whose spears the torch-light flashed ominously. As they came the gates of the palace yard were opened. They passed them and across the space beyond until they reached the doors of the temple, which were thrown wide before them.

Here Otter and Juanna descended from the litters, and all the torches were extinguished, leaving them in darkness.

Leonard felt his hand seized and was led along, he knew not where, for the misty gloom was intense. He could scarcely see the face even of the priest who conducted them, but from the sounds he gathered that all their party were being guided in a similar fashion. Once or twice also he heard the voice of a Settlement man speaking in accents of fear or complaint, but such demonstrations were followed quickly by the sound of a heavy blow, dealt, no doubt, by the priest or soldier in charge of that individual. Evidently it was expected that all should be silent. Presently Leonard became aware that they had left the open space across which they were walking, for the air grew close and their footsteps rang hollow on the rocky floor.

"I believe that we are in a tunnel," whispered Francisco.

"Silence, dog," hissed a priest in his ear. "Silence, this place is holy."

They did not understand the meaning of the words at the moment, but the tone in which they were spoken made their purport sufficiently clear. Leonard took the hint, and at the same time clutched his rifle more tightly. He began to be afraid for their safety. Whither were they being led--to a dungeon? Well, they would soon know, and at the worst it was not probable that these barbarians would harm Juanna. They followed the tunnel or passage for about a hundred and fifty paces; at first it sloped downwards, then the floor became level till at length they began to ascend a stair. There were sixty-one stone steps in this stairway, for Leonard counted them, each about ten inches high, and when all were climbed they advanced eleven paces along a tunnel that echoed strangely to their steps, and was so low that they must bend their heads to pass it. Emerging from this tunnel through a narrow opening, they stood upon a platform also of stone, and once more the chill night air fanned their brows.

So dense was the gloom that Leonard could tell nothing of the place where they might be, but from far beneath them rose a hissing sound as of seething water, and combined with it another sound of faint murmuring, as though thousands of people whispered each to each. Also from time to time he heard a rustling like that of a forest when a gentle wind stirs its leaves, or the rustling of the robes of innumerable women.

This sense of the presence of hidden waters and of an unseen multitude was strange and terrifying in the extreme. It was as though, without

perceiving them, their human faculties suddenly became aware of the spirits of the unnumbered dead, thronging, watching, following--there, but intangible; speaking without words, touching without hands.

Leonard was tempted to cry aloud, so great was the strain upon his nerves, which usually were strong enough; nor was he alone in this desire. Presently a sound arose from below him, as of some person in hysterics, and he heard a priest command silence in a fierce voice. The sobbing and laughter went on till it culminated in a shrill scream. After the scream came the thud of a blow, a heavy fall, a groan, and once again the invisible multitudes whispered and rustled.

"Someone has been killed," muttered Francisco in Leonard's ear; "who is it, I wonder?"

Leonard shuddered, but made no answer, for a great hand was placed upon his mouth in warning.

At length the portentous silence was broken and a voice spoke, the voice of Nam the priest. In the silence all that he uttered could be heard plainly, but his words came from far away, and the sound of them was still and small. This was what he said, as Juanna told it to them after the ceremony.

"Hear me, ye Children of the Snake, ye ancient People of the Mist!
Hearken to me, Nam, the priest of the Snake! Many a generation gone in

the beginning of time, so runs the legend, the Mother goddess whom we worship from of old, descended from heaven and came hither to us, and with her came the Snake, her child. While she tarried in the land the crime of crimes was wrought, the Darkness slew the Daylight, and she passed hence, we know not how, or where; and from that hour the land has been a land of mist, and its people have wandered in the mist, for he whose name is Darkness has ruled over them, answering their prayers with death. But this doom was on the Snake, that because of his wickedness he must put off the flesh of men and descend into the holy place of waters, where, as we and our fathers have known, his symbol dwells eternally, taking tribute of the lives of men.

"Yet ere that crime was wrought the Mother gave a word of promise to her people. 'Now that I am about to die at the hands of him I bore, for so it is fated,' she said. 'But not for ever do I leave you, and not for ever shall the Snake be punished by putting off the flesh of men. Many generations shall go by and we will return again and rule over you, and the veil of mist shall be lifted from your land, and ye shall be great in the earth. Till then, choose you kings and let them govern you; moreover, forget not my worship, and see to it that throughout the ages the altar of the Snake is wet with blood, and that he lacks not the food he loves. And I will give you a sign by which we shall be known when at length the fate is accomplished, and the hour of forgiveness is at hand.

"As a fair maid will I come again, a maid lovely and white, but because of his sin the Snake shall appear in the shape of that which sits within

your temple, and his hue shall be black and his face hideous. Out of the earth will we arise, and we will call to you and ye shall know us, and we will tell you our holy names that shall not be spoken aloud from this hour to that hour of our coming. But beware lest ye be deceived and false gods set themselves up among you, for then shall the last evil fall upon you and the sun shall hide his face.'

"Thus, Children of the Mist, did the Mother speak to him who was her chief priest in the long ago, and he graved her words with iron on the stone of that whereon I stand, but none can read that writing, for its secret is lost to us, although the prophecy remains. And now the time is full, and it has been given to me, his successor, in my old age, to see the fulfilment of the saying.

"The time is full, and this night the promise of the past is accomplished, for, People of the Mist, the immortal gods, whose names are holy, have appeared to rule their children. Yesterday they came, ye saw them, and in your ears they called aloud the sacred names. As a maiden fair and white, and as a dwarf black and hideous, have they come, and Aca is the name of the maiden, and Jal is the name of the dwarf."

He ceased, and his voice died away in the echoes of the great place. Once again there was silence, broken only by the seething sound of waters and the indefinable murmur of an unseen throng beneath.

Leonard stood awhile, then edged himself gently forward with the design of discovering where and upon what they were standing. His curiosity soon met with a violent check, for before he had gone a yard he felt that his right foot was dangling in space, and it was only by a strong effort that he prevented himself from falling, whither he knew not.

Recovering his balance, he shuffled himself back again to the side of Francisco, and whispered a warning to him not to move if he valued his life. As Leonard spoke, he noticed that the blackness of the night was turning grey with the light of the unrisen moon. Already her rays, striking upwards, brightened the sky above and the mountains behind, and from them fell a pale reflection, which grew gradually stronger and clearer.

Now he could discover that close upon him to the left a black mass towered high into the air, and that far beneath him gleamed something like the foam on broken water. For a time he watched this water, or whatever it might be, until a smothered exclamation from Francisco caused him to look up again. As he looked, the edge of the moon rose above the temple wall, and by slow degrees a wonderful sight was revealed to him. Not till the moon was fully visible did he see everything, and to describe all as he discovered it, piecemeal, would be difficult. This was what Leonard saw at length.

Before him and underneath him lay a vast and roofless building, open to the east, covering some two acres of ground, and surrounded by Titanic

walls, fifty feet or more in height. This building was shaped like a Roman amphitheatre, but, with the exception of the space immediately below him, its area was filled with stone seats, and round its wide circumference stone seats rose tier on tier. These were all occupied by men and women in hundreds, and, except at the further end, scarcely a place was empty. At the western extremity of the temple a huge statue towered seventy or eighty feet into the air, hewn, to all appearance, from a mass of living rock. Behind this colossus, and not more than a hundred paces from it, the sheer mountain rose, precipice upon precipice, to the foot of a white peak clad in eternal snow. It was the peak that they had seen from the plain when the mist lifted, and the statue was the dark mass beneath it which had excited their curiosity.

This fearful colossus was fashioned to the shape of a huge dwarf of hideous countenance, seated with bent arms outstretched in a forward direction, and palms turned upwards as though to bear the weight of the sky. The statue stood, or rather sat, upon a platform of rock; and not more than four paces from its base, so that the outstretched hands and slightly bowed head overhung it indeed, was a circular gulf measuring, perhaps, thirty yards across, in which seething waters raged and boiled. Whence they came and whither they went it was impossible to see, but Leonard discovered afterwards that here was the source of the river which they had followed for so many days. Escaping from the gulf by underground passages that it had hollowed for itself through the solid rock, the two branches of the torrent passed round the walls of the town, to unite again in the plain below. How the pool itself was

supplied Leonard was destined to learn in after days.

Between the steep polished sides of the rock basin and the feet of the statue was placed an altar, or sacrificial stone. Here on this ledge, which covered an area no greater than that of a small room, and in front of the altar, stood a man bound, in whom Leonard recognised Olfan, the king, while on either side of him were priests, naked to the waist, and armed with knives. Behind them again stood the little band of Settlement men, trembling with terror. Nor were their fears groundless, for there among them lay one of their number, dead. This was the man whose nerve had broken down, who shrieked aloud in the darkness, and in reward had been smitten into everlasting silence.

All this Leonard saw by degrees, but the first thing that he saw has not yet been told. Long before the brilliant rays of the moon lit the amphitheatre they struck upon the huge head of the dwarf idol, and there, on this giddy perch, some seventy feet from the ground, and nearly a hundred above the level of the pool of seething water, sat Juanna herself, enthroned in an ivory chair. She had been divested of her black cloak, and was clad in the robe of snowy linen cut low upon her breast, and fastened round her waist with a girdle. Her dark hair flowed about her shoulders; in either hand she held the lilies, red and white, and upon her forehead glowed the ruby like a blood-red star. She sat quite still, her eyes set wide in horror; and first the moonlight gleamed upon the gem bound to her forehead, next it showed the pale and lovely face beneath, then her snowy arms and breast, the whiteness of

her robes, and the hideous demon head whereon her throne was fixed.

No spirit could have seemed more beautiful than this woman set thus on high in that dark place of blood and fear. Indeed, in the unearthly light she looked like a spirit, the spirit of beauty triumphing over the hideousness of hell, the angel of light trampling the Devil and his works.

It was not wonderful that this fierce and barbarous people sighed like reeds before the wind when her loveliness dawned upon them, made ethereal by the moon, or that thenceforth Leonard could never think of her quite as he thought of any other woman. Under such conditions most well-favoured women would have appeared beautiful; Juanna did more, she seemed divine.

As the light grew downward and the shadows thinned before it, Leonard followed with his eyes, and presently he discovered Otter. The dwarf, naked except for his girdle and the fringe upon his head, was also enthroned, holding the ivory sceptre in his hand, but in a seat of ebony placed upon the knees of the colossus, nearly forty feet below Juanna.

Then Leonard turned to consider Francisco's position and his own, and found it terrible enough. Indeed, the moment that he discovered it was nigh to being his last. In company with two priests of the Snake, they were standing on the palm of the right hand of the idol, that formed a little platform some six feet square, which they had won in the darkness

through a tunnel hewn in the arm of stone. There they stood unprotected by any railing or support, and before them and on either side of them was a sheer drop of some ninety feet to the water beneath or of fifty to the rock of the platform.

Leonard saw, and for a moment turned faint and dizzy, then, setting the butt of his rifle on to the stone, he leaned upon the barrel till his brain cleared. It was well for him that he had not known what lay beneath when, but now, he thrust his foot into vacancy, for then his senses might have failed him.

Suddenly he remembered Francisco, and opened his eyes, which he had closed to shut out the sight of the yawning gulf beneath. It was not too soon. The priest had seen also, and consciousness was deserting him; even as Leonard turned his knees gave way, and he sank forward and downward.

Quick as thought Leonard stretched out his right hand and caught Francisco by the robe he wore, then, resting his weight upon the rifle, he strained at the priest's falling body with all his force in such a manner that its direction was turned, and it fell sideways upon the platform, not downwards into space. Leonard dragged at him again, and thrust him into the mouth of the little tunnel through which they had reached this dreadful eminence, where he lay quiet and safe, lost in blessed insensibility.

All this took place in a few seconds. The two priests of the Snake, who stood by them as calmly as though their feet were still on the solid earth, saw, but made no movement. Only Leonard thought that they smiled grimly, and a horrible fear struck his heart like a breath of ice. What if they waited a signal to cast him down? It might well be so. Already he had seen enough of their rites to enable him to guess that theirs was a religion of blood and human sacrifice.

He shivered, and again turned faint, so faint indeed that he did not dare to keep his feet, but sank into a sitting posture, resting his back against the stone of the idol's thumb.