

## CHAPTER XXIII

### HOW JUANNA CONQUERED NAM

Still the silence endured, and still the moonlight grew, creeping lower and lower till it shone upon the face of the seething waters, and, except in the immediate shadow of the walls, all the amphitheatre was full of it.

Then the voice of Nam spoke again from far away, and Leonard looked to see whence he spoke. Now he saw. Nam, attended by three priests, was perched like an eagle on the left palm of the colossus, and from this dizzy platform he addressed the multitude. Looking across the breast of the statue, Leonard could just see the outstretched arm and the fierce face of the high priest as he glared down upon the people.

"Hearken, ye Dwellers in the Mist, Children of the Snake! Ye have seen your ancient gods, your Father and your Mother, come back to rule you and to lead you on through war to peace, to wealth, to power, and to glory. Ye see them now by that light and in that place wherein only it is lawful that ye should look upon them. Say, do ye believe and do ye accept them? Answer, every one of you, answer with your voice!"

Then a mighty roar of sound went up from the gathered thousands, a roar that shaped itself into the words:

"We believe and we accept."

"It is well," said Nam when the tumult had died away. "Hearken, ye high gods! O Aca! and O Jal! Bend down your ears and deign to hearken to your priest and servant, speaking in the name of your children, the People of the Mist. Be ye kings to reign over us! Accept the power and the sacrifice, and sit in the place of kings. We give you rule through all the land; the life of every dweller in the land is yours; yours are their cattle and their goats, their city and their armies. For you the altars shall run red, the cry of the victim shall be music in your ears. Ye shall look upon him whom long ago ye set to guard the secret awful place, and he shall crawl beneath your feet. As ye ruled our fathers so ye shall rule us, according to the customs which ye laid down for ever. Glory be to you, O Aca, and to you, O Jal! immortal kings for evermore!"

And in a shout that rent the skies the great audience echoed: "Glory be to you, O Aca, and to you, O Jal, immortal kings for evermore!"

Then Nam spoke again, saying: "Bring forth the virgin, that fair maid who is destined to the Snake, that he may look upon her and accept her as his wife. Bring her forth also who, twelve months gone, was vowed in marriage to the Shape of stone, that she may bid her lord farewell."

As he spoke there was a stir behind the idol, and presently from each side of it a woman was led forward by two priests on to the little space of rock between its feet and the edge of the gulf, and placed one to the

right of the altar, and one to the left. Both these women were tall and lovely with the dark and somewhat terrifying beauty of the People of the Mist, but there the resemblance between them ended. She to the right was naked except for a girdle of snake-skin and the covering of her abundant hair, which was crowned with a wreath of red lilies similar to the flower that the priests had given to Juanna. She to the left, on the contrary, was clothed in a black robe round which was brodered the shape of a blood-red snake, whose head rested upon her breast. Leonard noticed that the appearance of this woman was that of extreme terror, for she shrank and trembled, whereas that of the flower-crowned bride was jubilant and even haughty.

For a moment the two women stood still while the people gazed upon them. Then, at a signal from Nam, she who was crowned with flowers was led before the altar, and thrice she bowed the knee to the idol, or rather to Otter who sat upon it. Now all eyes were fixed on the dwarf, who stared at the girl but made no sign, which was not wonderful, seeing that he had no inkling of the meaning of the ceremony. As it chanced, he could not have acted more wisely, at least in the interests of the bride, for here, as elsewhere, silence was held to give consent.

"Behold, the god accepts," cried Nam, "the beauty of the maid is pleasing in his eyes. Stand aside, Saga, the blessed, that the people may look upon you and know you. Hail to you, wife of the Snake!"

Smiling triumphantly the girl moved back to her place by the altar, and

turned her proud face to the people. Then the multitude shouted:

"Hail to you, bride of the Snake! Hail to you, the blessed, chosen of the god!"

While the tumult still lasted, the woman who was clad in the black robe was led forward, and when it had died away she also made her obeisance before the idol.

"Away with her that she may seek her Lord in his own place," cried Nam.

"Away with her, her day is done," echoed the multitude. Then, before Juanna could interfere, before she could even speak, for, be it remembered, she alone understood all that was said, the two priests who guarded the doomed woman rent the robe from her and with one swing of their strong arms hurled her backwards far into the pool of seething waters.

She fell with a shriek and lay floating on their surface, flung this way and that by the eddy of the whirlpool just where the moonlight beat most brightly. All who could of the multitude bent forward to see her end, and overcome by a fearful fascination, Leonard threw himself on his face, and, craning his head over the stone of the idol's hand, watched also, for the girl's struggling shape was almost immediately beneath him. Another minute and he would have foregone the hope of winning the treasure which he had come so far to seek, not to have yielded to the

impulse.

For as he stared, the waters beneath the feet of the idol were agitated as a pond is agitated by the rush of a pike when he dashes at his prey. Then for an instant the light gleamed upon a dull enormous shape, and suddenly the head of a crocodile reared itself out of the pool. The head of a crocodile, but of such a crocodile as he had never heard or dreamed of, for this head alone was broader than the breast of the biggest man, its dull eyes were the size of a man's fist, its yellow fangs were like the teeth of a lion, and from its lower jaw hung tentacles or lumps of white flesh which at that distance gave it the appearance of being bearded like a goat. Also, the skin of this huge reptile, which could not have measured less than fifty feet in length by four feet in depth, was here and there corroded into rusty excrescences, as though some fungus or lichen had grown upon it like grey moss on an ancient wall. Indeed, its appearance seemed to point to extreme antiquity.[\*]

[\*] Crocodiles are proverbially long-lived, but Leonard could never discover the age of this particular reptile. On enquiry he was able to trace it back for three hundred yards, and tradition said that it had always dwelt among the People of the Mist from "the beginning of time." At least it was very old, and under the name of the Snake had been an object of worship for many generations. How it came among the People of the Mist is difficult to say, for no other specimen appeared to exist in the country. Perhaps it was captured in some distant age and placed in the cave by the priests, to figure as an incarnation of the Snake that

was the object of their worship.

Hearing the disturbance in the water, the reptile had emerged from the cave where it dwelt beneath the feet of the idol, to seek its accustomed food, which consisted of the human victims that were cast to it at certain intervals. It reared its hideous head and glared round, then of a sudden the monster and the victim vanished together into the depths.

Sick with horror Leonard drew himself back into a sitting posture, and glanced up at Juanna. She was crouched in her ivory chair overcome, and her eyes were closed, either through faintness or to shut out the sight of dread. Then he looked down at Otter. The dwarf, staring fixedly at the water, sat still as the stone effigy that supported him. Evidently in all his varied experience he had seen no such thing as this.

"The Snake has accepted the sacrifice," cried Nam again; "the Snake has taken her who was his bride to dwell with him in his holy house. Let the offerings be completed, for this is but the first-fruit. Take Olfan who was king, and offer him up. Cast down the white servants of the Mother, and offer them up. Seize the slaves who stood before her in the plain, and offer them up. Lead forth the captives, and offer them up. Let the sacrifice of the Crowning of Kings be accomplished according to custom, that the god whose name is Jal may be appeased; that he may listen to the pleadings of the Mother, that the sun may shine upon us, that fruitfulness may fill the land and peace be within its gates."

Thus he cried while Leonard felt his blood turn cold and his hair rise upon his head, for though he could not understand the words, he guessed their purport and his instinct told him that a great danger threatened them. He looked at the two priests who stood by, and they glared hungrily on him in answer. Then his courage came back to him; at least he had his rifle and would fight for his life. It must go hard if he could not put a bullet through one or both of them before they got a hold of him.

Meanwhile the priests below had seized the king Olfan, whose giant form they were dragging towards the stone of sacrifice. But of a sudden, for the first time Juanna spoke, and a deep silence fell upon the temple and all within it.

"Hearken, People of the Mist," she said; and her voice falling from that great height seemed small and far away, although so clear that every word was audible in the stillness of the night.

"Hear me, People of the Mist, and ye, priests of the Snake. Aca is come again and Jal is come again, and ye have given them back their rule after many generations, and in their hands lies the life of every one of you. As the old tradition told of them so they are, the Mother and the Child, and the one is clothed with beauty, the symbol of life and of the fruitful earth; and the other is black and hideous, the symbol of death and the evil that walks upon the earth. And ye would do sacrifice to Jal that he may be appeased according to the ancient law, and listen to the

pleading of the Mother that fruitfulness may fill the land. Not so shall Jal be appeased, and not because of the sacrifice of men shall Aca plead with him that prosperity may reign in the land.

"Behold, the old law is done away, and we give you a new law. Now is the hour of reconciliation, now Life and Death walk hand in hand, and the hearts of Aca and Jal have grown gentle through the ages, and they no longer crave the blood of men as an offering to their majesty.

Henceforth ye shall bring them fruits and flowers, and not the lives of men. See, in my hand I hold winter lilies, red and white, blood-red they are and white as snow. Now the red flower, token of sacrifice and slaughter, I crush and cast away, but the white bloom of love and peace I set upon my breast. It is done, gone is the old law; see, it falls into the place of the Snake, its home; but the new law blossoms above my heart and in it. Shall it not be so, my children, People of the Mist? Will ye not accept my mercy and my love?"

The multitude watched the red bloom as, bruised and broken, through the light and through the shadow, they fell slowly to the seething surface of the pool; then it looked up like one man and saw the white lily set upon Juanna's whiter breast. They saw, and, moved by a common impulse, they rose with a sound like the rush of the wind and shouted:

"Gone is the day of blood and sacrifice, come is the day of peace! We thank you, Mother, and we take your mercy and your love."



Then they were silent, and again there was a sound like that of the wind, as all their thousands sank back to the seats of stone.

Now Nam spoke again in a voice of fury that rang through the still air like a clarion.

"What is this that my ears hear?" he cried. "Are ye mad, O ye Dwellers in the Mist? Or does the Mother speak with a charmed voice? Shall the ancient worship be changed in an hour? Nay, not the gods themselves can alter their own worship. Slay on, ye priests, slay on, or ye yourselves shall die the dreadful death."

The priests below heard, and seizing the struggling king they cast him with difficulty down upon the stone.

"Leonard, Leonard," cried Juanna in English, addressing him for the first time by his Christian name, as even then he noticed, but looking straight before her that none might guess to whom she spoke. "These priests are going to kill you and all of us, except Otter and myself. If you can, when you see me point with my hand, shoot that man who is about to sacrifice the king. Make no answer."

Leonard heard and understood all. Resting his back firmly against the thumb of the statue, he shifted his position a little so that the group below him came within his line of sight, and waited, watching Juanna, who now was speaking again in the language of the People of the Mist.

"This I promise you, ministers of blood," she said, "if ye obey me not ye shall indeed die the dreadful death, the death unknown. Hearken, my servant, who are named Deliverer," and she looked down upon Leonard, "and do my bidding. If one of these shall dare to lift his hand against yonder man, slay him swiftly as you know how."

"Smite on," screamed Nam, "smite on and fear not."

Most of the priests drew back affrighted; but one ruffian lifted his knife, and at that moment Juanna pointed with her hand. Then Leonard, stepping forward, covered the priest's great breast with his rifle as surely as the uncertain light would allow. Unconscious of his danger, the executioner muttered an invocation. Now the knife was about to fall upon the throat of Olfan, when fire and smoke sprang out far above him, the rifle rang, and, shot through the heart, the priest leaped high into the air and fell dead. Terror seized the witnesses of this unaccustomed and, to them, most awful sight.

"The gods speak with flame and thunder," one cried, "and death is in the flame."

"Silence, dogs!" screamed Nam, "ye are bewitched. Ho! you that stand on high, cast down the wizard who is named Deliverer, and let us see who will deliver him from death upon the stone."

Then one of the guards who stood by him made a movement to grasp Leonard and throw him down, but the other was terrified and could not stir. The first man stretched out his arm, but before it so much as touched its aim he himself was dead, for, seeing his purpose, Leonard had lifted the rifle, and once more its report rang through the temple. Suddenly the priest threw his arms wide, then fell backwards, and with a mighty rush dived into sheer space to crash lifeless on the stone floor below, where he lay, his head and hands hanging over the edge of the pool.

Now for the first time Otter's emotions overcame him. He stood up on the knees of the dwarf, and shaking the sceptre in his hand, he pointed with it to the dead men on the paving below, at the same time crying in stentorian tones:

"Well done, Baas, well done! Now tumble the old one yonder off his perch, for I weary of his howlings."

This speech of Otter's produced even a greater effect on the spectators, if that were possible, than the mysterious death of the priests. That he whose name was Silence should cry aloud in a strange tongue, of which they understood no single word, was a dread and ominous thing that showed his anger to be deep. But Leonard took no heed, he was too engaged in covering the second guard with the barrel of his repeater. This man, however, had no liking for such a dreadful death. Swiftly he flung himself on to his knees, imploring Leonard to spare him in humble accents, and with gestures that spoke more plainly than his words.

Taking advantage of the pause, again Juanna cried aloud: "Ye see, People of the Mist, I make no idle threats. Where are they now, the disobedient ones? The tongue of flame has licked them and they are dead, and as they have perished, so shall all perish who dare to gainsay my word, or the word of Jal. Ye know us for gods and ye have crowned us kings, and gods and kings we are indeed. Yet fear not, for on the rebellious only shall our anger fall. Answer you, Nam. Will you do our bidding? Or will you die also as your servants died?"

Nam glanced round desperately. He looked down on the multitude and found no help there. Long had they cowered beneath him; now hope was born in their breasts, and in the presence of a power greater than his, if only for a little while, they broke his yoke and the yoke of their red superstitions. He looked at the company of priests; their heart was out of them, they were huddled together like knots of frightened sheep, staring at the corpses of their two companions. Then he bethought him of Otter. Surely there was refuge in the god of blood and evil; and he cried to him:

"The Mother has spoken, but the Mother is not the child. Say, O Jal, what is your command?"

Otter made no answer, because he did not understand; but Juanna replied swiftly:

"I am the mouth of Jal, as Jal is my hand. When I speak I speak the words of Jal. Do his bidding and mine, or die, you disobedient servant."

This was the end of it. Nam was beaten; for the first time in his life he must own a master, and that master the gods whom he had himself discovered and proclaimed.

"So be it," he said suddenly. "The old order passes, and the new order comes. So be it! Let your will be done, O Aca and O Jal. I have striven for your glory, I have fed your altars, and ye threaten me with death and put away my gift. Priests, set free that man who was king. People, have your way, forget your ancient paths, pluck the white flower of peace--and perish! I have said."

So he spoke from on high, shaking his clenched fists above his hoary head, and was gone. Then the executioners unbound the limbs of the ex-king, and he rose from the stone of death.

"Olfan," cried Juanna from on high, "you that were the king, we, who have taken your kingship, give you life, and liberty, and honour; see that in reward you serve us well, lest again you should lie upon that bed of stone. Do you swear fealty to us?"

"For ever and for ever. I swear it by your holy heads," answered Olfan.

"It is well. Now under us once more we give you command of the armies of

this people, our children. Summon your captains and your soldiers. Bid those that brought us hither lead us back whence we came, and there set guards about us, so that none trouble us. For you, our people, for this time fare you well. Go in peace to dwell in peace beneath the shadow of our strength."