

## CHAPTER XXIV

### OLFAN TELLS OF THE RUBIES

It was at this juncture that Francisco recovered his senses. "Oh!" he gasped, opening his eyes and sitting up, "is it done, and am I dead?"

"No, no, you are alive and safe," answered Leonard. "Stay where you are and don't look over the edge, or you will faint again. Here, take my hand. Now, you brute," and he made energetic motions to the surviving priest, indicating that he must lead them back along the path by which they had come, at the same time tapping his rifle significantly.

The man understood and started down the darksome tunnel as though he were glad to go, Leonard holding his robe with one hand, while with the other he pressed the muzzle of the loaded rifle against the back of his neck. Francisco followed, leaning on Leonard's shoulder, for he could not walk alone.

As they had come so they returned. They passed down the steps of stone which were hollowed in the body of the colossus; they traversed the long underground tunnel, and at length, to their intense relief, once more they stood upon the solid ground and in the open air. Now that the moon was up, and the mist which had darkened the night had melted, they could see their whereabouts. They had emerged upon a platform of rock within a bowshot of the great gates of the palace, from whence the secret

subterranean passage used by the priests was gained, its opening being hidden cunningly among the stone-work of the temple.

"I wonder where the others are," asked Leonard anxiously of Francisco.

As he spoke, Juanna, wrapped in her dark cloak, appeared, apparently out of the stones of the wall, and with her Otter, the Settlement men bearing their dead companion, and a considerable company of priests, among whom, however, Nam was not to be seen.

"Oh, is that you, Leonard?" said Juanna in English, and in a voice broken with fear. "Thank Heaven that you are safe!"

"Thank Heaven that we are all safe," he answered. "Come, let us get on. No, we can walk, thank you," and he waved away the priests, who produced the litters from where they had hidden them under the wall.

The men fell back and they walked on. At the gate of the palace a welcome sight met their eyes, for here stood Olfan, and with him at least a hundred captains and soldiers, who lifted their spears in salute as they advanced.

"Olfan, hear our bidding," said Juanna. "Suffer no priest of the Snake to enter the palace gates. We give you command over them, even to death. Set guards at every doorway and come with us."

The ex-king bowed and issued some orders, in obedience to which the sullen priests fell back murmuring. Then they all passed the gates, crossed the courtyard, and presently stood in the torch-lit throne-room, where Juanna had slept on the previous night. Here food had been prepared for them by Soa, who looked at them curiously, especially at Leonard and Francisco, as though, indeed, she had never expected to see them again.

"Hearken, Olfan," said Juanna, "we have saved your life to-night and you have sworn fealty to us; is it not so?"

"It is so, Queen," the warrior answered. "And I will be faithful to my oath. This heart, that but for you had now been cold, beats for you alone. The life you gave back to me is yours, and for you I live and die."

As he spoke he glanced at her with an expression in which, as it seemed to Juanna, human feeling was mixed with supernatural awe. Was it possible, she wondered with a thrill of fear, that this savage king was mingling his worship of the goddess with admiration of the woman? And did he begin to suspect that she was no goddess after all? Time would show, but at least the look in his eyes alarmed her.

"Fear not," he went on; "a thousand men shall guard you night and day. The power of Nam is broken for a while, and now all this company may sleep in peace."

"It is well, Olfan. To-morrow morning, after we have eaten, we will talk with you again, for we have much to say. Till then, watch!"

The great man bowed and went, and at last they were alone.

"Let us eat," said Leonard. "What is this? Spirit, or a very good imitation of it. Well, I never wanted a glass of brandy more in my life."

When they had finished their meal, at the request of Leonard Juanna translated all that had been said in the temple, and among her listeners there was none more interested than Soa.

"Say, Soa," said Leonard, when she had finished, "you did not expect to see us come back alive, did you? Is that why you stayed away?"

"No, Deliverer," she answered. "I thought that you would be killed, every one of you. And so it must have come about, had it not been for the Shepherdess. Also, I stayed away because those who have looked upon the Snake once do not desire to see him again. Many years ago I was bride to the Snake, Deliverer, and, had I not fled, my fate would have been the fate of her who died this night."

"Well, I do not wonder that you chose to go," said Leonard.

"Oh, Baas," broke in Otter, "why did you not shoot that old medicine-man as I told you? It would have been easy when you were about it, Baas, and now he would have been broken like an eggshell thrown from a house-top, and not alive and full of the meat of malice. He is mad with rage and wickedness, and I say that he will kill us all if he can."

"I rather wish I had," said Leonard, pulling his beard. "I thought of it, but could not do everything; and on future occasions, Otter, will you remember that your name is Silence? Luckily, these people do not understand you: if they did you would ruin us all. What is the matter, Soa?"

"Nothing, Deliverer," she answered; "only I was thinking that Nam is my father, and I am glad that you did not shoot him, as this black dog, who is named a god, suggests."

"Of gods I know nothing, you old cow," answered Otter angrily; "they are a far-off people, though it seems that I am one of them, at any rate among these fools, your kinsmen. But of dogs I can tell you something, and it is that they bite."

"Yes, and cows toss dogs," said Soa, showing her teeth.

"Here is another complication," thought Leonard to himself; "one day this woman will make friends with her venerable parent and betray us, and then where shall we be? Well, among so many dangers an extra one

does not matter."

"I must go to bed," said Juanna faintly; "my head is swimming. I cannot forget those horrors and that giddy place. When first I saw where I was, I nearly fainted and fell, but after a while I grew more used to it. Indeed, while I was speaking to the people I quite forgot my fear, and the height seemed to exhilarate me. What a sight it was! When all is said and done, it is a grand thing to have lived through such an experience. I wonder if anyone has ever seen its like."

"You are a marvellous woman, Juanna," said Leonard, with admiration. "We owe our lives to your wit and courage."

"You see I was right in insisting on coming with you," she answered somewhat aggressively.

"For our sakes, yes; for your own I am not so sure. To tell you the truth, I think that we should have done better never to have started on this mad expedition. However, things look a little more promising now, though Nam and his company have still to be reckoned with, and we don't seem much nearer the rubies, which are our main object."

"No," said Juanna, "they are gone, and we shall be lucky if we do not follow them into the home of that hideous snake. Good night."

"Francisco," said Leonard, as he rolled himself up in his blanket, "you

had a narrow escape to-night. If I had missed my hold!"

"Yes, Outram, it was lucky for me that your arm is strong and your mind quick. Ah, I am a dreadful coward, and I can see the place now;" and he shuddered. "Always from a child I have believed that I shall die by a fall from some height, and to-night I thought that my hour had come. At first I did not understand, for I was watching the Senora's face in the moonlight, and to me she looked like an angel. Then I saw, and my senses left me. It was as though hands were stretched up from the blackness to drag me down--yes, I saw the hands. But you saved me, Outram, though that will not help me, for I shall perish in some such way at last. So be it. It is best that I should die, who cannot conquer the evil of my heart."

"Nonsense, my friend," said Leonard; "don't talk like that about dying. We can none of us afford to die just at present--that is, unless we are obliged to do so. Your nerves are upset, and no wonder! As for 'the evil of your heart,' I wish that most men had as little--the world would be better. Come, go to sleep; you will feel very differently to-morrow."

Francisco smiled sadly and shook his head, then he knelt and began to say his prayers. The last thing that Leonard saw before his eyes closed in sleep was the rapt girlish face of the priest, round which the light of the taper fell like an aureole, as he knelt muttering prayer after prayer with his pale lips.

It was nine o'clock before Leonard awoke next morning--for they had not slept till nearly four--to find Francisco already up, dressed, and, as usual, praying. When Leonard was ready they adjourned to Juanna's room, where breakfast was prepared for them. Here they found Otter, looking somewhat disturbed.

"Baas, Baas," he said, "they have come and will not go away!"

"Who?" asked Leonard.

"The woman, Baas: she who was given to me to wife, and many other women--her servants--with her. There are more than twenty of them outside, Baas, and all of them very big. Now, what shall I do with her, Baas? I came here to serve you and to seek the red stones that you desire, and not a woman tall enough to be my grandmother."

"I really don't know and don't care," answered Leonard. "If you will be a god you must take the consequences. Only beware, Otter: lock up your tongue, for this woman will teach you to speak her language, and she may be a spy."

"Yes, Baas, I will see to that. Is not my name Silence, and shall women make me talk--me, who have always hated them? But--the Baas would not like to marry her himself? I am a god, as you say, though it was you who made me one, Baas, not I, and my heart is large; I will give her to you, Baas."



"Certainly not," answered Leonard decidedly. "See if the breakfast is ready. No, I forgot, you are a god, so climb up into the throne and look the part, if you can."

As he spoke, Juanna came from her room, looking a little pale, and they sat down to breakfast. Before they had finished their meal, Soa announced that Olfan was waiting without. Juanna ordered him to be admitted, and presently he entered.

"Is all well, Olfan?" asked Juanna.

"All is well, Queen," he answered. "Nam and three hundred of his following held council at dawn in the house of the priests yonder. There is much stir and talk in the city, but the hearts of the people are light because their ancient gods have come back to us, bringing peace with them."

"Good," said Juanna. Then she began to question him artfully on many things, and by degrees they learnt more of the People of the Mist.

It seemed, as Leonard had already guessed, that they were a very ancient race, having existed for countless generations on the same misty upland plains. They were not, however, altogether isolated, for occasionally they made war with other savage tribes. But they never intermarried with these tribes, all the captives taken in their wars being offered

in sacrifice at the religious festivals. The real governing power in the community was the Society of the Priests of the Snake, who held their office by hereditary tenure, outsiders being admitted to their body only under very exceptional circumstances. The council of this society chose the kings, and when they were weary of one of them, they sacrificed him and chose another, either from among his issue or elsewhere. This being the custom, as may be imagined, the relations between church and state were much strained, but hitherto, as Olfan explained with suppressed rage, the church had been supreme.

Indeed, the king for the time being was only its mouthpiece, or executive officer. He led the armies, but the superstitions of the people, and even of the soldiers themselves, prevented him from wielding any real power; and, unless he chanced to die naturally, his end was nearly always the same: to be sacrificed when the seasons were bad or "Jal was angry."

The country was large but sparsely populated, the fighting men numbered not more than four thousand, of whom about half lived in the great city, the rest occupying villages here and there on the mountain slopes. As a rule the people were monogamous, except the priests. It was the custom of sacrifice which kept down the population to its low level, made the power of the priests absolute, and their wealth greater than that of all the other inhabitants of the country put together, for they chose the victims that had offended against Jal or against the mother-goddess, and confiscated their possessions to "the service of the temple." Thus the

great herds of half-wild cattle which the travellers had seen on the plains belonged to the priests, and the priests took a fourth of the produce of every man's field and garden--that is, when they did not take it all, and his life with it.

Twice in every year great festivals were held in the temple of Jal, at the beginning of the spring season and in the autumn after the ingathering of the crops. At each of these festivals many victims were offered in sacrifice, some upon the stone and some by being hurled into the boiling pool beneath the statue, there to be consumed by the Snake or swept down the secret course of the underground river. The feast celebrated in the spring was sacred to Jal, and that in the autumn to the mother-goddess. But there was this difference between them--that at the spring ceremony female victims only were sacrificed to Jal to propitiate him and to avert his evil influence, while at the autumn celebration males alone were offered up to the mother-goddess in gratitude for her gifts of plenty. Also criminals were occasionally thrown to the Snake that his hunger might be satisfied. The priests had other rites, Olfan added, and these they would have an opportunity of witnessing if the spring festival, which should be celebrated on the second day from that date, were held according to custom.

"It shall not be celebrated," said Juanna, almost fiercely.

Then Leonard, who had hitherto listened in silence, asked a question through Juanna. "How is it," he said, "that Nam and his fellows, being

already in absolute power, were so willing to accept the gods Jal and Aca when they appeared in person, seeing that henceforth they must obey, not rule?"

"For two reasons, lord," Olfan answered; "first, because the gods are gods, and their servants know them; and secondly, because Nam has of late stood in danger of losing his authority. Of all the chief priests that have been told of, Nam is the most cruel and the most greedy. For three years he has doubled the tale of sacrifices, and though the people love these sights of death, they murmur, for none know upon whom the knife shall fall. Therefore he was glad to greet the gods come back, since he thought that they would confirm his power, and set him higher than he sat before. Now he is astonished because they proclaim peace and will have none of the sacrifice of men, for Nam does not love such gentle gods."

"Yet he shall obey them," said Otter, speaking for the first time by the mouth of Juanna, who all this while was acting as interpreter, "or drink his own medicine, for I myself will sacrifice him to myself."

When Juanna had translated the dwarf's bloodthirsty threat, Olfan bowed his head meekly and smiled; clearly the prospect of Nam's removal did not cause him unmixed grief. It was curious to see this stately warrior chief humbling his pride before the misshapen, knob-nosed Kaffir.

"Say, Olfan," asked Leonard, "who cut from the rock the great statue on

which we sat last night, and what is that reptile we saw when the woman was thrown into the pool of troubled waters?"

"Ask the Water-dweller of the water-dweller, the Snake of the snake, and the Dwarf of his image," answered Olfan, nodding towards Otter. "How can I, who am but a man, tell of such things, lord? I only know that the statue was fashioned in the far past, when we, who are now but a remnant, were a great people; and as for the Snake, he has always lived there in his holy place. Our grandfather's grandfathers knew him, and since that day he has not changed."

"Interesting fact in natural history," said Leonard; "I wish I could get him home alive to the Zoological Gardens."

Then he asked another question. "Tell me, Olfan, what became of the red stones yesterday, and of him who offended in offering them to the god yonder?"

"The most of them were cast into the pit of waters, lord, there to be hidden for ever. There were three hide sacks full."

"Oh, heavens!" groaned Leonard when Juanna had translated this. "Otter, you have something to answer for!"

"But the choicest," went on Olfan, "were put in a smaller bag, and tied about the neck of the man who had sinned. There were not many, but among

them were the largest stones, that until yesterday shone in the eyes of the idol, stones blue and red together. Also, there was that stone, shaped like a human heart, which hitherto has been worn by the high priest on the days of sacrifice, and with it the image of the Dwarf fashioned from a single gem, and that of the Water-dweller cut from the great blue stone, and other smaller ones chosen because of their beauty and also because they have been known for long in the land. For although many of these pebbles are found where the priests dig for them, but few are large and perfect, and the art of shaping them is lost."

"And what became of the man?" Leonard asked, speaking as quietly as he could, for his excitement was great.

"Nay, I do not know," answered Olfan. "I only know that he was let down with ropes into the home of the Snake, and that he gained that holy place, for it was told to me that he dragged rope after him, perhaps as he fled before the Snake.

"Now it was promised to the man that when he had laid the bag of stones in the place of the Snake, for the Snake to guard for ever, his sins would be purged, and, if it pleased the Water-dweller to spare him, that he should be drawn up again. Thus Nam swore to him, but he did not keep his oath, for when the man had entered the cave he bade those who held the ropes to cast them loose, and I know not what happened to him, but doubtless he is food for the Snake. None who look upon that holy place may live to see the sun again."

"I only hope that the brute did not swallow the rubies as well as their bearer," said Leonard to Juanna; "not that there is much chance of our getting them, anyway."

Then Olfan went, nor did he return till the afternoon, when he announced that Nam and his two principal priests waited without to speak with them. Juanna ordered that they should be admitted, and presently they came in. Their air was humble, and their heads were bowed; but Leonard saw fury gleaming in their sombre eyes, and was not deceived by this mask of humility.

"We come, O ye gods," said Nam, addressing Juanna and Otter, who sat side by side on the throne-like chairs: "we come to ask your will, for ye have laid down a new law which we do not understand. On the third day from now is the feast of Jal, and fifty women are made ready to be offered to Jal that his wrath may be appeased with their blood, and that he may number their spirits among his servants, and withhold his anger from the People of the Mist, giving them a good season. This has been the custom of the land for many a generation, and whenever that custom was broken then the sun has not shone, nor the corn grown, nor have the cattle and the goats multiplied after their kind. But now, O ye gods, ye have proclaimed a new law, and I, who am yet your servant, come hither to ask your will. How shall the feast go, and what sacrifice shall be offered unto you?"

"The feast shall go thus," answered Juanna. "Ye shall offer us a sacrifice indeed; to each of us shall ye offer an ox and a goat, and the ox and the goat shall be given to the Snake to feed him, but not the flesh of men; moreover, the feast shall be held at noon and not in the night-time."

"An ox and a goat--to each an ox and a goat!" said Nam humbly, but in a voice of bitterest sarcasm. "As ye will so let it be, O ye gentle-hearted gods. And the festival shall be held at noon, and not in the night season as of old. As ye will, O ye kind gods. Your word is my law, O Aca, and O Jal;" and bowing to the ground the aged man withdrew himself, followed by his satellites.

"That devilish priest makes my flesh creep," said Juanna, when she had translated his words.

"Oh! Baas, Baas," echoed Otter, "why did you not shoot him while you might? Now he will surely live to throw us to the Snake."

As he spoke Soa advanced from behind the thrones where she had taken refuge when Nam entered.

"It is not well for a dog who gives himself out as a god to threaten the life of one whom he has tricked," said she meaningly. "Perchance the hour shall come when the true god will avenge himself on the false, and by the hand of his faithful servant, whom you would do to death, you



base-born dwarf." And before anyone could answer she left the chamber, casting a malevolent look at Otter as she went.

"That servant of yours makes my flesh creep, Juanna," said Leonard.

"One thing is clear enough, we must not allow her to overhear any more of our plans; she knows a great deal too much already."

"I cannot understand what has happened to Soa," said Juanna; "she seems so changed."

"You made that remark before, Juanna; but for my part I don't think she is changed. The sight of her amiable parent has developed her hidden virtues, that is all."