

CHAPTER XXV

THE SACRIFICE AFTER THE NEW ORDER

The third day came, the day of sacrifice after the new order. Nothing particular had happened in the interval: Leonard and Francisco took some walks through the city, guarded by Peter and the Settlement men; that was all.

They did not see much there, except the exteriors of the houses built of stone and roofed with turves, and the cold stare of curiosity with which they were followed by hundreds of eyes gave them a sense of unrest that effectually checked their efforts at closer examination. Once indeed they halted in the market-place, which was thronged; whereon all business ceased, and seller, buyer, herdsmen, and presiding priests flocked around staring at them, half in fear and half in curiosity, for they had never seen white men before. This they could not bear, so they returned to the palace.

Of course Otter and Juanna, being divine, were not allowed to indulge in such recreations. They were gods and must live up to their reputation. For one day Otter endured it; on the second, in spite of Leonard's warnings, he sought refuge in the society of the bridge Saga. This was the beginning of evil, for if no man is a hero to his valet de chambre, much less can he remain a god for long in the eyes of a curious woman. Here, as in other matters, familiarity breeds contempt.

Leonard saw these dangers and spoke seriously to the dwarf on the subject. Still he could not conceal from himself that, putting aside the question of his ennui, which made his conduct natural, at any rate in a savage, Otter's position was a difficult one. So Leonard shrugged his shoulders and consoled himself as best he could with the reflection that, at least, his wife would teach the dwarf something of her language, which, by the way, he himself was practising assiduously under the tuition of Juanna and Soa.

At noon the party adjourned to the temple, escorted by a bevy of priests and soldiers, for in obedience to Juanna's commands the feast was to be celebrated in the daytime and not at night. As before, the vast amphitheatre was crowded with thousands of human beings, but there was a difference in the arrangements.

Juanna and Otter had declined to occupy their lofty thrones, and sat in chairs at the feet of the huge and hideous stone idol, almost on the edge of the pool, Nam alone standing before them, while Leonard, Francisco, and the Settlement men ranged themselves on either side. The day was cold and miserable, and snow fell from time to time in large flakes from an ashen sky.

Presently Nam addressed the multitude.

"People of the Mist," he cried, "ye are gathered here to celebrate the

feast of Jal, according to ancient custom, but the gods have come back to you, as ye know, and the gods in their wisdom have changed the custom. Fifty women were prepared for the sacrifice; this morning they rose rejoicing, deeming that they were destined to the Snake, but now their joy is turned to sorrow, since the gods will not accept them, having chosen a new offering for themselves. Let it be brought forward."

At his word lads appeared from behind the idol, driving two lean bulls, and with them a pair of he-goats.

Whether by accident or design, they drove them so unskilfully that the animals blundered hither and thither over the rocky platform till they were finally despatched with blows from clubs and axes--that is, except one goat, which, escaping its pursuers, rushed down the amphitheatre and scrambled from seat to seat among the audience, uttering a succession of terrified "baa's." Indeed the scene was so comic that even that sombre and silent people began to laugh, accustomed as they were on these occasions to the hideous and impressive ceremonial of the midnight sacrifice of so many human beings.

The ancient feast was a fiasco; this was a fact which could not be concealed.

"Begone, ye People of the Mist," said Nam presently, pointing to the dead animals. "The sacrifice is sacrificed, the festival of Jal is done. May the Mother plead with the Snake that the sun may shine and

fruitfulness bless the land!"

Now scarcely ten minutes had elapsed since the beginning of the ceremony, which in the ordinary course of events lasted through the greater part of the night, for it was the custom to slaughter each victim singly and with appropriate solemnities. A murmur of disapprobation arose from the far end of the amphitheatre, that swelled gradually to a roar. The people had been thankful to accept Juanna's message of peace, but, brutalised as they were by the continual sight of bloodshed, they were not willing to dispense with their carnivals of human sacrifice. A Roman audience gathered to witness a gladiatorial show, to find themselves treated instead to a donkey-race and a cock-fight, could scarcely have shown more fury.

"Bring out the women! Let the victims be offered up to Jal as of old," the multitude yelled in their rage, and ten minutes or more elapsed before they could be quieted.

Then Nam addressed them cunningly.

"People of the Mist," he said, "the gods have given us a new law, a law of the sacrifice of oxen and goats in the place of men and maids, and ye yourselves have welcomed that law. No longer shall the blood of victims flow to Jal beneath the white rays of the moon while the chant of his servants goes up to heaven. Nay, henceforth this holy place must be a shambles for the kine. So be it, my children; in my old age I hear the

gods speaking in an altered voice and I obey them. It is nothing to me who am about to die, yet I tell you that rather would I myself be stretched upon the ancient stone than see the worship of our forefathers thus turned into a mockery. The sacrifice is sacrificed: now may the Maid intercede with the Snake that plenty may bless the land." And he smiled satirically and turned away.

Those of the audience who were near enough to hear his words cried them out to the ranks behind them, and when all understood there followed a scene of most indescribable tumult.

"Blood, give us blood!" roared the populace, their fierce faces alight with rage. "Shall we be mocked with the sacrifice of goats? Offer up the servants of the false gods. Give us blood! Lead forth the victims!"

In the midst of this uproar Juanna, clad in her white robes and with the red stone bound upon her brow, rose from her seat to speak.

"Silence!" cried Nam, "hear the voice of Aca;" and by degrees the shouting died away, and she spoke.

"Do ye dare thus to offer outrages to the gods?" she cried. "Be warned lest we bring death and famine upon you all. Men shall be offered up to us no more. I have spoken."

For a while there was silence, then the clamour broke out with redoubled

violence, and a portion of the multitude made a rush round the edge of the pool towards the rock platform, which was repelled by the soldiers in a very half-hearted way.

"Now," said Olfan, "I think that these will do well to be going," and he pointed to Leonard, Francisco, and the Settlement men. "Doubtless the gods can defend themselves, but if the others do not fly this is sure, that presently they will be torn to pieces."

"Let us all go," said Juanna, whose nerve began to fail her; and suiting the action to the word she led the way towards the rock tunnel, followed by the others.

They were not allowed to reach it unmolested, however, for a number of the crowd, headed, as Leonard noticed, by two priests, forced their way through the cordon of guards and became mixed with the rear of their little party, the members of which they threatened and struck at savagely. This happened just as they were entering the mouth of the tunnel, behind the statue where the gloom was great.

This tunnel was protected by a door, which, so soon as they thought that all had passed, Olfan and Leonard made haste to close, leaving the mob howling without. Then they pressed on to the palace, which they reached in safety, Olfan remaining behind, however, to watch the movements of the mob.

"Oh! why would not you suffer them to sacrifice according to their wicked custom, Shepherdess?" said Otter. "What does it matter if they kill each other? So shall there be fewer of them. Now the end of it must be that the devils will find us out and murder us."

"No, no," said Francisco, "the senora was right. Let us trust in Providence and keep ourselves clean from such iniquity."

As he spoke the roars of wrath in the distance changed to a shout of triumph followed by silence.

"What is that?" said Juanna faintly. At this moment Olfan pushed the curtains aside and entered, and his face was heavy.

"Speak, Olfan," she said.

"The people sacrifice as of old, Queen," he answered. "All of us did not pass the gate; two of your black servants were mixed up with the crowd and left, and now they offer them to Jal, and others with them."

Leonard ran to the yard and counted the Settlement men, who were huddled together in their fear, staring towards the temple through the bars of the gate. Two were missing.

As he returned he met Olfan coming out.

"Where is he going?" he asked of Juanna.

"To guard the gates. He says that he cannot be sure of the soldiers. Is it true about the Settlement men?"

"Alas! yes. Two are gone."

She hid her face in her hands and shuddered.

"Poor creatures!" she said presently in a hoarse voice. "Why did we ever bring them here? Oh! Leonard, is there no escape from this land of demons?"

"I hope so," he answered; then added, "Come, Juanna, do not give way. Things look so bad that they are sure to mend."

"There is need of it," she sobbed.

All that evening and night they watched, hourly expecting to be attacked and dragged forth to sacrifice, but no attack was made. Indeed, on the morrow they learnt from Olfan that the people had dispersed after sacrificing about a score of human beings, and that quiet reigned in the city.

Now began the most dreadful of their trials, and the longest, for it endured five whole weeks. As has been said, the climate of these

vast upland plains, backed by snow-clad mountains, that are the dwelling-place of the People of the Mist, is cold during the winter months to the verge of severity. But at a certain period of a year, almost invariably within a day or two of the celebration of the feast of Jal, the mists and frost vanish and warm weather sets in with bright sunshine.

This is the season of the sowing of crops, and upon the climatic conditions of the few following weeks depends the yield of the harvest. Should the spring be delayed even a week or two, a short crop would certainly result, but if its arrival is postponed for a month, it means something like a famine during the following winter. For although this people dwell on high lands they cultivate the same sorts of grain which are common in these latitudes, namely maize and sundry varieties of Kaffir corn, having no knowledge of wheat and the other hardy cereals. Therefore, it is all important to them that the corn should have a fair start, for if the autumn frosts catch it before it is fit to harvest the great proportion of the crop turns black and is rendered useless.

These agricultural details had no small bearing upon the fate of our adventurers. The feast of Jal was celebrated in order to secure a good seed-bed and springing time for the grain. Juanna and Otter had abolished the hideous ceremonies of that feast, and the People of the Mist watched for the results with a gloomy and superstitious eye. If the season proved more than ordinarily good, all might go well, but if it chanced to be bad----!

And, as was to be expected, seeing how much depended upon it, this spring proved the very worst which any living man could remember in that country. Day after day the face of the sun was hidden with mists that only yielded to the bitter winds which blew from the mountains at night, so that when the spring should have been a month old, the temperature was still that of mid-winter and the corn would not start at all.

Leonard and Juanna soon discovered what this meant for them, and never was the aspect of weather more anxiously scanned than by these two from day to day. In vain; every morning the blanket of cold mist fell like a cloud, blotting out the background of the mountains, and every night the biting wind swept down upon them from the fields of snow, chilling them to the marrow.

This state of things--wretched enough it itself--was only one of many miseries which afflicted them. Otter and Juanna were still treated as gods indeed, and considerable respect was shown to Leonard and Francisco, that is, within the walls of the palace. But if, wearied with the monotony of their life, they went out, which they did twice only during these five dreadful weeks, matters were different. Then they found themselves followed by a mob of men, women, and children, who glared at them ferociously and cursed them aloud, asking what they had their gods had done with the sunshine.

On the second occasion indeed they were forced to fly for their lives,

and after this they gave up making the attempt to walk abroad, and sat in the palace with Juanna and Otter, who of course never dared to leave it.

It was a terrible life; there was nothing to do, nothing to read, and only anxieties to think on. The greater part of the day Leonard and Juanna occupied in talking, for practice, in the language of the People of the Mist. When their conversation was exhausted they told each other tales of their adventures in past years, or even invented stories like children and prisoners; indeed they were prisoners--prisoners, as they feared, under sentence of death.

They grew to know each other very well during those five weeks, so well indeed that each could almost guess the other's thoughts. But no tender word ever passed their lips. On this subject, whatever their hearts might feel, their tongues were sealed, and in their curious perversity the chief object of each was to disguise the truth from the other. Moreover, Leonard never for one moment forgot that Juanna was his ward, a fact that in itself would have sufficed to cause him to conceal any tender emotions he might have felt towards her.

So they lived side by side, lovers at heart, yet talking and acting as brother and sister might, and through it all were still happy after a fashion because they were together.

But Soa was not happy. She felt that her mistress no longer trusted her,

and was at no loss to guess the cause. Day by day she stood behind them like a mummy at an Egyptian feast, and watched Leonard with ever-growing jealousy.

Francisco for his part did not attempt to conceal his fears. He was certain that they were about to perish and sought consolation in the constant practice of religion, which was edifying but scarcely improved him as a companion. As for Otter, he also believed that the hour of death was nigh, but being a fatalist this did not trouble him much. On the contrary, in spite of Leonard's remonstrances he began to live hard, betaking himself freely to the beer-pot. When Leonard remonstrated with him he turned somewhat sulky.

"To-day I am a god, Baas," he answered, "to-morrow I may be carrion. While I am a god, let me drink and be merry. All my days also women have cursed me because I am ugly, but now my wife holds me great and beautiful. What is the good of thinking and looking sad? The end will come soon enough. Already Nam sharpens the knife for our hearts. Come and be merry with me, Baas, if the Shepherdess will let you."

"Do you take me for a pig like yourself?" said Leonard angrily. "Well, go your own way, foolish that you are, but beware of the beer and the spirits. Now you are beginning to know this language, and when you are drunk you talk, and do you think that there are no spies here? That girl, Saga, is great-niece to Nam, and you are besotted with her. Be careful lest you bring us all to death."

"Thither we shall come any way, so let us laugh before we weep, Baas," Otter replied sullenly. "Must I then sit here and do nothing till I die?"

Leonard shrugged his shoulders and went. He could not blame the dwarf, who after all was a savage and looked at things as a savage would, notwithstanding Francisco's earnest efforts to convert him. He sometimes wished, so deep was his depression, that he also was a savage and could do likewise.

But the worst of their trials is still to be told. For the first week the Settlement men stayed in the palace, their fears and the rumours that had reached them of the terrible fate of their two lost companions keeping them quiet. By degrees, however, this dread wore off, and one afternoon, wearied with the sameness of their life, they yielded to the solicitations of some men who spoke to them through the bars of the great gate, and went out in a body without obtaining Leonard's permission. That night they returned drunk--at least ten of them dead; the other two were missing. When they were sober again, Leonard questioned them as to the whereabouts of their companions, but they could give him no satisfactory information. They had been into various houses in the city, they said, where the people had plied them with beer, and they remembered nothing more.

These two men never reappeared, but the rest of them, now thoroughly

frightened, obeyed Leonard's orders and stayed in the palace, although the decoy men still came frequently to the gates and called them. They passed the days in wandering about and drinking to drown their fears, and the nights huddled together for protection from an unseen foe, more terrible and craftier than the leopard of their native rocks. But these precautions were all in vain.

One morning, hearing a tumult among them, Leonard went to see what was the matter. Three more of the Settlement men were missing; they had vanished in the night, none could say how, vanished though the doors were barred and guarded. There where they had slept lay their guns and little possessions, but the men were gone, leaving no trace. When he was consulted Olfan looked very grave, but could throw no light upon the mystery beyond suggesting that there were many secret passages in the palace, of which the openings were known only to the priests, and that possibly the men had been let down them--terrible information enough for people in their position.