

CHAPTER XXVI

THE LAST OF THE SETTLEMENT MEN

On that day of the vanishing of the three Settlement men, Nam paid his weekly visit to "do honour to the gods," and Leonard, who by this time could make himself understood in the tongue of the People of the Mist, attacked him as to the whereabouts of their lost servants.

When he had finished, the priest answered with a cruel smile that he knew nothing of the matter. "Doubtless," he said, "the gods had information as to the fate of their own servants--it was not for him to seek those whom the gods had chosen to put away."

Then turning the subject, he went on to ask when it would please the Mother to intercede with the Snake that he might cause the sun to shine and the corn to spring, for the people murmured, fearing a famine in the land.

Of course Juanna was able to give no satisfactory answer to the priest's questions, and after this the quarters of the Settlement men were changed, and for a few days the survivors slept in safety. On the third night, however, two more of them were taken in the same mysterious manner, and one of those who remained swore that, hearing something stir, he woke and saw the floor open and a vision of great arms dragging his sleeping companions through the hole in it, which closed again

instantly. Leonard hurried to the spot and made a thorough examination of the stone blocks of the pavement, but could find no crack in them. And yet, if the man had dreamed, how was the mystery to be explained?

After this, with the exception of Otter, who, sure of the fate that awaited them, took little heed of how or when it might fall, none of the party could even sleep because of their terror of the unseen foe who struck in silence and in darkness, dragging the victim to some unknown awful end. Leonard and Francisco took it in turns to watch each other's slumbers, laying themselves to rest outside the curtain of Juanna's room. As for the survivors of the Settlement men, their state can scarcely be described. They followed Leonard about, upbraiding him bitterly for leading them into this evil land and cursing the hour when first they had seen his face. It would have been better, they said, that he should have left them to their fate in the slave camp than have brought them here to die thus; the Yellow Devil was at least a man, but these people were sorcerers and lost spirits in human shape.

Nor did the horror stop here, for at last the headman Peter, a man whom they all liked and respected, went mad with fear and ran to and fro in the palace yard while the guards and women watched him with curious eyes as he shrieked out curses upon Juanna and Leonard. This shocking scene continued for some hours, for his companions would not interfere with him, vowing that he was possessed by a spirit, till at length he put a period to it by suddenly committing suicide. In vain did Leonard caution the survivors to keep their heads and watch at night. They flew to the

beer which was supplied to them in plenty, and drank till they were insensible. And still one by one they vanished mysteriously, till at length all were gone.

Never might Leonard forget his feelings when one day at dawn, in the fifth week of their incarceration, he hurried as usual to the chamber where the last two of the unfortunate men were accustomed to sleep, and found them not. There were their blankets, there was the place where they had been, and on it, laid carefully in the form of a St. Andrew's cross by some unknown hand, shone two huge sacrificial knives such as the priests wore at their girdles.

Sick and faint with fear he staggered back to the throne-room.

"Oh! what is it now?" said Juanna, who, early as it was, had risen already, looking at him with terrified eyes and trembling lips.

"Only this," he answered hoarsely; "the last two have been taken, and here is what was left in the place of them," and he cast down the knives on to the pavement.

Then at last Juanna gave way. "Oh! Leonard, Leonard," she said, weeping bitterly, "they were my father's servants whom I have known since I was a child, and I have brought them to this cruel end. Cannot you think of any way of getting out of this place? If not, I shall die of fear. I can

sleep no more. I feel that I am watched at night, though I cannot tell by whom. Last night I thought that I heard some one moving near the curtain where you and Francisco lie, though Soa declares that it is fancy."

"It is impossible," said Leonard; "Francisco was on guard. Ah! here he comes."

As he spoke Francisco entered the room with consternation written on his face.

"Outram," he gasped, "some one must have been in the throne chamber where we slept last night. All the rifles have gone, ours and those of the Settlement men also."

"Great heavens!" said Leonard, "but you were watching."

"I suppose that I must have dozed for a few moments," answered the priest; "it is awful, awful; they are gone and we are weaponless."

"Oh! can we not escape?" moaned Juanna.

"There is no hope of it," answered Leonard gloomily. "We are friendless here except for Olfan, and he has little real power, for the priests have tampered with the captains and the soldiers who fear them. How can we get out of this city? And if we got out what would become of us,

unarmed and alone? All that we can do is to keep heart and hope for the best. Certainly they are right who declare that no good comes of seeking after treasure; though I believe that we shall live to win it yet," he added.

"What! Deliverer," said a satirical voice behind him, "do you still desire the red stones, who whose heart's blood shall soon redden a certain stone yonder? Truly the greed of the white man is great."

Leonard looked round. It was Soa who spoke, Soa who had been listening to their talk, and she was glaring at him with an expression of intense hate in her sullen eyes. A thought came into his mind. "Was it not possible that this woman had something to do with their misfortunes? How came it about that the others were taken while she was left?"

"Who gave you leave, Soa," he said, looking her fixedly in the face, "to hearken to our words and thrust yourself into our talk?"

"You have been glad enough of my counsels hitherto, White Man," she answered furiously. "Who told you the tale of this people? And who led you to their land? Was it I or another?"

"You, I regret to say," said Leonard coolly.

"Yes, White Man, I led you here that you might steal the treasure of my people like a thief. I did it because the Shepherdess my mistress forced

me to the deed, and in those days her will was my law. For her and you I came here to my death, and what has been my reward? I am put away from her, she has no kind word for me now; you are about her always, you hold her counsel, but to me her mind is as a shut door that I can no longer open. Ay! you have poisoned her against me, you and that black swine whom they call a god.

"Moreover, because she has learned to love you, white thief, wanderer without a kraal as you are, at your bidding she has also learned to hate me. Beware, White Man, I am of this people, and you know their temper, it is not gentle; when they hate they find a means to be revenged," and she ceased, gasping with rage.

Indeed, at that moment Soa would have made no bad model for a statue of one of the furies of Greek mythology.

Then Juanna attempted to interfere, but Leonard waved her back.

"So," he said, "as I thought, you are at the bottom of all this business. Perhaps you will not mind telling us what has become of your friends, the Settlement men, or, if you feel a delicacy on that point, how it is that you have escaped while they have vanished."

"I know nothing of the Settlement men," answered the Fury, "except that they have been taken and sacrificed as was their meed, and as yet I have lifted no hand and said no word against you, though a breath from me

would have swept you all to doom. Hitherto I have been spared for the same reason that you and Bald-pate yonder have been spared--because we are the body-servants of the false gods, and are reserved to perish with them when the lie is discovered; or perhaps to live awhile, set in cages in the market-place, to be mocked by the passers-by and to serve as a warning to any whose monkey hearts should dare to plot sacrilege against the divinity of Aca and Jal.

"Now, Shepherdess, take your choice. As you know well, I have loved you from a babe and I love you yet, though you have scorned me for this man's sake. Take your choice, I say; cling to me and trust me, giving the Deliverer to the priests, and I will save you. Cling to him, and I will bring shame and death upon you all, for my love shall turn to hate."

At this juncture Leonard quietly drew his revolver, though at the time nobody noticed it except Francisco. Indeed by now Juanna was almost as angry as Soa herself.

"How dare you speak to me thus?" she said, stamping her foot, "you whom from a child I have thought good and have trusted. What do you say? That I must give him who saved me from death over to death, in order that I may buy back your love and protect myself. You evil woman, I tell you that first I will die as I would have died yonder in the slave camp," and she ceased, for her indignation was too great to allow her to say more.

"So be it, Shepherdess," said Soa solemnly, "I hear you. It was to be expected that you would prefer him whom you love to her who loves you. Yet, Shepherdess, was it not I after all who saved you yonder in the slave camp? Doubtless I dream, but it seems to me that when those men who are dead deserted you, running this way and that in their fear--and, Shepherdess, it is for this that I am glad they are dead, and lifted no hand to save them--I followed you alone. It seems to me that, having followed you far till I could walk no more for hunger and weariness, I used my wit and bribed a certain white man, of the sort who would sell their sisters and blaspheme their mothers for a reward, to attempt your rescue.

"I bribed him with a gem of great price--had there been ten of them, that gem would have bought them all--and with the gem I told him the secret of the treasure which is here. He took the bribe, and being brave and desperate, he drew you out of the clutches of the Yellow Devil, though in that matter also I had some part; and then you loved him. Ah! could I have foreseen it, Shepherdess, I had left you to die in the slave camp, for then you had died loving me who now hate me and cast me off for the sake of this white thief."

Leonard could bear it no longer, and in the interests of their common safety he came to a desperate resolve. With an exclamation, he lifted the pistol and covered Soa. Both Francisco and Juanna saw the act and sprang to him, the latter exclaiming, "Oh! what are you going to do?"

"I propose to kill this woman before she kills us, that is all," he answered coldly.

"No! no!" cried Juanna, "she has been faithful to me for many years. I cannot see her shot."

"Let the butcher do his work," mocked Soa; "it shall avail him little. Doubtless he is angry because I have spoken the truth about him," and she folded her arms upon her breast, awaiting the bullet.

"What is to be done?" said Leonard desperately. "If I do not shoot her, she will certainly betray us."

"Then let her betray," said Francisco; "it is written that you shall do no murder."

"If you fear to shoot a woman, send for your black dog, White Man," mocked Soa. "He would have killed my father, and doubtless this task also will be to his liking."

"I can't do it. Get a rope and tie her up, Francisco," said Leonard.

"We must watch her day and night; it will be a pleasant addition to our occupations. After all it is only one more risk, which is no great matter among so many. I fancy the game is about played out, anyhow."

Francisco went for the rope and presently returned accompanied by Otter. A month of furious dissipation had left its mark even on the dwarf's iron frame. His bright black eyes were bloodshot and unsteady, his hand shook, and he did not walk altogether straight.

"You have been drinking again, you sot," said Leonard. "Go back to your drink; we are in sorrow here and want no drunkards in our company. Now then, Francisco, give me that rope."

"Yes, Baas, I have been drinking," answered the dwarf humbly; "it is well to drink before one dies, since we may not drink afterwards and I think that the hour of death is at hand. Oh! Shepherdess of the heavens, they said down yonder at the Settlement that you were a great rain-maker: now if you can make the rain to fall, can you not make the sun to shine? Wind and water are all very well, but we have too much of them here."

"Hearken," said Leonard, "while you revelled, the last of Mavoom's men vanished, and these are left in their place," and he pointed to the knives.

"Is it so, Baas?" answered Otter with a hiccough. "Well, they were a poor lot, and we shall not miss them. And yet I wish I were a man again and had my hands on the throat of that wizard Nam. Wow! but I would squeeze it."

"It is your throat that will be squeezed soon, Otter," said Leonard.

"Look here, god or no god, get you sober or I will beat you."

"I am sober, Baas, I am indeed. Last night I was drunk, to-day nothing is left but a pain here," and he tapped his great head. "Why are you tying up that old cow Soa, Baas?"

"Because she threatens to use her horns, Otter. She says that she will betray us all."

"Indeed, Baas! Well, it is in my mind that she has betrayed us already. Why do you not kill her and have done?"

"Because the Shepherdess here will have none of it," answered Leonard; "also I do not like the task."

"I will kill her if you wish, Baas," said Otter with another hiccough.

"She is wicked, let her die."

"I have told you that the Shepherdess will have none of it. Listen: we must watch this woman; we will guard her to-day and you must take your turn to-night--it will keep you from your drink."

"Yes, Baas, I will watch, though it would be better to kill her at once, for thus we should be spared trouble."

Then they bound Soa securely and set her in a corner of the throne chamber, and all that day Leonard and Francisco mounted guard over her alternately. She made no resistance and said nothing; indeed it seemed as if a certain lassitude had followed her outbreak of rage, for she leaned her head back and slept, or made pretence to sleep.

The day passed uneventfully. Olfan visited them as usual, and told them that the excitement grew in the city. Indeed the unprecedented prolongation of the cold weather was driving the people into a state of superstitious fury that must soon express itself in violence of one form or another, and the priests were doing everything in their power to foment the trouble. No immediate danger was to be apprehended, however.

After sundown Leonard and Francisco went out into the courtyard to inspect the weather according to their custom. There was no sign of a change; the wind blew as bitterly as ever from the mountains, the sky was ashen, and the stars seemed far off and cold.

"Will it never break?" said Leonard with a sigh, and re-entered the palace, followed by Francisco.

Then, having solemnly cautioned Otter to keep a strict guard over Soa, they wrapped themselves up in their blankets in order to get some rest, which both of them needed sadly. Juanna had retired already, laying herself to sleep immediately on the other side of the curtain, for she feared to be alone; indeed they could see the tips of her fingers

appearing beneath the bottom of the curtain.

Very soon they were asleep, for even terror must yield at last to the necessities of rest, and a dense silence reigned over the palace, broken only by the tramp of the sentries without.

Once Leonard opened his eyes, hearing something move, and instantly stretched out his hand to assure himself of Juanna's safety. She was there, for in her sleep her fingers closed instinctively upon his own. Then he turned round and saw what had disturbed him. In the doorway of the chamber stood the bride of the Snake, Saga, a lighted torch in one hand and a gourd in the other, and very picturesque that handsome young woman looked with her noble figure illumined by the glare of the torchlight.

"What is the matter?" said Leonard.

"It is all right, Baas," answered Otter; "the old woman here is as safe as a stone statue yonder and quite as quiet. Saga brings me some water, that is all. I bade her do so because of the fire that rages inside me and the pain in my head. Fear not, Baas, I do not drink beer when I am on guard."

"Beer or water, I wish you would keep your wife at a distance," answered Leonard; "come, tell her to be off."

Then he looked at his watch, the hands of which he could just distinguish by the distant glare of the torch, and went to sleep again. This took place at ten minutes past eleven. When he awoke again dawn was breaking and Otter was calling to him in a loud, hoarse voice.

"Baas," he said, "come here, Baas."

Leonard jumped up and ran to him, to find the dwarf on his feet and staring vacantly at the wall against which Soa had been sitting. She was gone, but there on the floor lay the ropes with which she had been tied.

Leonard sprang at Otter and seized him by the shoulders.

"Wretched man!" he cried, "you have been sleeping, and now she has escaped and we are lost."

"Yes, Baas, I have been sleeping. Kill me if you wish, for I deserve it. And yet, Baas, never was I more wide-awake in my life until I drank that water. I am not wont to sleep on guard, Baas."

"Otter," said Leonard, "that wife of yours has drugged you."

"It may be so, Baas. At least the woman has gone, and, say, whither has she gone?"

"To Nam, her father," answered Leonard.