

CHAPTER XXVII

FATHER AND DAUGHTER

While Leonard and Otter spoke thus in their amazement, had they but known it, a still more interesting conversation was being carried on some three hundred yards away. Its scene was a secret chamber hollowed in the thickness of the temple wall, and the *dramatis personae* consisted of Nam, the high priest, Soa, Juanna's servant, and Saga, wife of the Snake.

Nam was an early riser, perhaps because his conscience would not allow him to sleep, or because on this occasion he had business of importance to attend to. At any rate, on the morning in question, long before the break of dawn, he was seated in his little room alone, musing; and indeed his thoughts gave him much food for reflection. As has been said, he was a very aged man, and whatever may have been his faults, at least he was earnestly desirous of carrying on the worship of the gods according to the strict letter of the customs which had descended to him from his forefathers, and which he himself had followed all his life. In truth, from long consideration of them, their attributes, and the traditions concerning them, Nam had come to believe in the actual existence of these gods, although the belief was a qualified one and somewhat half-hearted. Or, to put it less strongly, he had never allowed his mind to entertain active doubt of the spiritual beings whose earthly worship was so powerful a factor in his own material rule and

prosperity, and in that of his class. In its issues this half-faith of his had been sufficiently real to induce him to accept Otter and Juanna when they arrived mysteriously in the land.

It had been prophesied that they should arrive thus--that was a fact; and their outward appearance exactly fitted every detail of the prophecy--that was another fact; and these two facts together seemed to point to a conclusion so irresistible that, shrewd and experienced as he was, Nam, was unable to set it down to mere coincidence. Therefore in the first rush of his religious enthusiasm he had accorded a hearty welcome to the incarnations of the divinities whom for some eighty years he had worshipped as powers spiritual.

But though pious zeal had much to do with this action, as Olfan informed Juanna, it was not devoid of worldly motives. He desired the glory of being the discoverer of the gods, he desired also the consolidation of the rule which his cruelties had shaken, that must result from their advent.

All this was well enough, but he had never even dreamed that the first step of these new-born divinities would be to discard the ancient ceremonial without which his office would become a sinecure and his power a myth, and even to declare an active hostility against himself.

Were they or were they not gods? This was the question that exercised his mind. If there was truth in prophesies they should be gods. On the

other hand he could discover nothing particularly divine about their persons, characters, or attributes--that is to say, nothing sufficiently divine to deceive Nam himself, whatever impression they produced upon the vulgar. Thus Juanna might be no more than a very beautiful woman white in colour, and Otter only what he knew him to be through his spies, a somewhat dissolute dwarf.

That they had no great power was also evident, seeing that he, Nam, without incurring the heavenly vengeance, had been able to abstract, and afterwards to sacrifice comfortably, the greater number of their servants. Another thing which pleaded against their celestial origin was that so far, instead of peace and prosperity blessing the land as it should have done immediately on their arrival, the present season was proving itself the worst on record, and the country was face to face with a prospect of famine in the ensuing winter.

And yet, if they were not gods, who were they? Would any human beings in their senses venture among such people as the Children of the Mist, merely to play off a huge practical joke of which the finale was likely to be so serious to themselves? The idea was preposterous, since they had nothing to gain by so doing, for Nam, it may be observed, was ignorant of the value of rubies, which to him were only emblems employed in their symbolical ceremonies. Think as he would, he could come to no definite conclusion. One thing was clear, however, that it was now very much to his interest to demonstrate their non-celestial origin, though to do so would be to stultify himself and to prove that his judgment was

not infallible. Otherwise, did the "gods" succeed in establishing their power, he and his authority seemed likely to come to a sudden end in the jaws of that monster, which his order had fostered for so many generations.

Thus reflected Nam in perplexity of soul, wishing to himself the while that he had retired from his office before he was called upon to face questions so difficult and so dangerous.

"I must be patient," he muttered to himself at last; "time will show the truth, or, if the weather does not change, the people will settle the matter for me."

As it chanced he had not long to wait, for just then there was a knock upon his door.

"Enter," he said, arranging his goat-skin robe about his broad shoulders.

A priest came in bearing a torch, for there was no window to the chamber, and after him two women.

"Who is this?" said Nam, pointing to the second of the women.

"This is she who is servant to Aca, Father," answered the priest.

"How comes she here?" said Nam again. "I gave no orders that she should be taken."

"She comes of her own free will, Father, having somewhat to say to you."

"Fool, how can she speak to me when she does not know our tongue? But of her presently; take her aside and watch her. Now, Saga, your report. First, what of the weather?"

"It is grey and pitiless, father. The mist is dense and no sun can be seen."

"I thought it, because of the cold," and he drew his robe closer round him. "A few more days of this----" and he stopped, then went on. "Tell me of Jal, your lord."

"Jal is as Jal was, merry and somewhat drunken. He speaks our language very ill, yet when he was last in liquor he sang a song which told of deeds that he, and he whom they name the Deliverer, had wrought together down in the south, rescuing the goddess Aca from some who had taken her captive. At least, so I understood that song."

"Perhaps you understood it wrong," answered Nam. "Say, niece, do you still worship this god?"

"I worship the god Jal, but the man, Dweller in the Waters, I hate," she

said fiercely.

"Why, how is this? But two days gone you told me that you loved him, and that there was no such god as this man, and no such man as this god."

"That was so, father, but since then he has thrust me aside, saying that I weary him, and courts a handmaid of mine own, and therefore I demand the life of that handmaiden."

Nam smiled grimly. "Perchance you demand the life of the god also?"

"Yes," she replied without hesitation, "I would see him dead if it can be brought about."

Again Nam smiled. "Truly, niece, your temper is that of my sister, your grandmother, who brought three men to sacrifice because she grew jealous of them. Well, well, these are strange times, and you may live to see your desire satisfied by the death of the god. Now, what of that woman? How comes she to be with you?"

"She was bound by the order of Aca, father, and Jal was set to watch her; but I drugged Jal, and loosing her bonds I led her down the secret way, for she desires to speak to you."

"How can that be, niece? Can I then understand her language?"

"Nay, father, but she understands ours. Had she been bred in the land she could not speak it better."

Nam looked astonished, and going to the door he called to the priest without to lead in the stranger.

"You have words to say to me," he said.

"Yes, lord, but not before these. That which I have to say is secret."

Nam hesitated.

"Have no fear, lord," said Soa, reading his thoughts. "See, I am unarmed."

Then he commanded the others to go, and when the door had closed behind them, he looked at her inquiringly.

"Tell me, lord, who am I?" asked Soa, throwing the wrapping from her head and turning her face to the glare of the torchlight.

"How can I know who you are, wanderer? Yet, had I met you by chance, I should have said that you were of our blood."

"That is so, lord, I am of your blood. Cast your mind back and think if you can remember a certain daughter whom you loved many years ago, but

who through the workings of your foes was chosen to be a bride to the Snake," and she paused.

"Speak on," said Nam in a low voice.

"Perchance you can recall, lord, that, moved to it by love and pity, on the night of the sacrifice you helped that daughter to escape the fangs of the Snake."

"I remember something of it," he replied cautiously; "but tidings were brought to me that this woman of whom you speak was overtaken by the vengeance of the god, and died on her journey."

"That is not so, lord. I am your daughter, and you are none other than my father. I knew you when I first saw your face, though you did not know me."

"Prove it, and beware how you lie," he said. "Show me the secret sign, and whisper the hidden word into my ear."

Then, glancing suspiciously behind her, Soa came to him, and made some movements with her hands in the shadow of the table. Next bending forward, she whispered awhile into his ear. When she had finished, her father looked up, and there were tears in his aged eyes.

"Welcome, daughter," he said. "I thought that I was alone, and that none

of my issue lived anywhere upon the earth. Welcome! Your life is forfeit to the Snake, but, forgetting my vows, I will protect you, ay, even at the cost of my own."

Then the two embraced each other with every sign of tenderness, a spectacle that would have struck anyone acquainted with their characters as both curious and interesting.

Presently Nam left the chamber, and having dismissed the attendant priest and his great-niece, Saga, who were waiting outside, he returned and prayed his daughter to explain the reason of her presence in the train of Aca.

"First, you shall swear an oath to me, my father," said Soa, "and if you swear it not, I will tell you no word of my story. You shall swear by the blood of Aca that you will do nothing against the life of that Queen with whom I journeyed hither. For the others, you may work your will upon them, but her you shall not harm."

"Why should I swear this, daughter?" he asked.

"You shall swear it because I, whom you love, love her, and also because so you shall gain the greater honour."

"Who am I that I should lift my hand against the gods, daughter? I swear it by the blood of Aca, and if I break my oath, then may Jal deal with

me as once he dealt with Aca."

Then Soa went on freely, for she knew that this was a vow that could not be broken. Beginning at its commencement, she told him all the story of her life since, forty years ago, she had fled from among the People of the Mist, passing on rapidly, however, to that part of it which had to do with the capture and rescue of Juanna from the slave-traders, and with the promise that she had made to Leonard as the price of his assistance. This promise, she was careful to explain, she had not intended to fulfil until she was forced to do so by Juanna herself. Then she gave him a minute history of the object and details of their expedition, down to her final quarrel with Leonard and her mistress on the previous day.

To say that the old priest was thunderstruck at these extraordinary revelations would be too little; he was overwhelmed--so overwhelmed that for a while he could scarcely speak.

"It is fortunate for this jade of a mistress of yours, who dares to make a mockery of our goddess that she may steal her wealth, that I have sworn to save her from harm, daughter," he gasped at length, "else she had died, and swiftly. At least, the others remain to me," and he sprang to his feet.

"Stay awhile, father," said Soa, catching his cloak, "what is your plan?"

"My plan? To drag them to the temple and denounce them. What else is there to do?"

"And thereby denounce yourself also, who proclaimed them gods. I think I have a better."

"Tell it then, daughter."

"It is this. Do you pass in before the gods this day, speak humbly to the gods, praying them to change the face of the heavens that the sun may shine; telling them also that strange talk has come to your ears by the mouth of Saga and the other women, of words that have been spoken by the god Jal, which would seem to show that he is no god, but that of this you believe nothing as yet. Then say to them that if the face of the heavens remains grey on the morrow, you will know that this talk is true, and that they will be brought to the temple, there to be judged and dealt with according to the finding of the people, who have heard these things also."

"And what if the weather should change, daughter?"

"It will not change yet awhile; but if that should chance, we must make another plan."

"Just now I swore to you that I would not harm her whom you love, and

yet, daughter, if she is proved to be a false goddess in the face of all the multitude, how shall she escape harm, for then her end must be quick and terrible?"

"She shall escape because she will not be there, father. You have seen the white man with her--not the Deliverer, the other. Were that man dressed in the robes of Aca, and sat on high upon the head of the statue when the light is low, who should say that he was not Aca?"

"Then you would give all the others to death, daughter?"

"Nay, I would save the Deliverer alive, for a while at least."

"And wherefore? You are too subtle for me."

"For this reason, father; he loves her who is named Aca, and trusts to marry her, to marry her fully according to the custom of his people: therefore I would that he should see her given to another."

"To another! To whom then?"

"To Olfan the king, who also loves her."

Now Nam held up his hands in perplexity, saying:

"Oh! my daughter, be plain, I pray of you, for I cannot understand your

counsels. Were it not better to give to these people the red stones which they desire, and send them secretly from the land, saying that they had vanished into the earth again, for so it seems to me we should be rid of much shame and trouble?"

"Listen, my father, and I will tell you. Were she whom I love to leave this land, I should see her face no more, and this madness has come upon me that I cannot live without the sight of her. Also, how can these people escape the dangers of the road? But four of them are left alive, and even were they without our borders, they must journey for three months before they come to any place where white men live, passing through swamps and deserts and tribes of wild men. This they could hardly do with arms such as those whereby the Deliverer slew the priests, and now their arms are gone, you alone know where, my father."

"The instruments of which you speak lie in the deep waters of the temple pool, daughter, for there I caused them to be cast."

"Their arms are gone," said Soa, "they are alone, here they must live or die. Three of them I will give to death, and the fourth I would make the wife of the King, seeing that nothing better can be done for her. Let her be hidden awhile, and then let Olfan take her. As for the tale that we shall tell of the matter to the ears of the people, doubtless time will show it. I say that Olfan loves her and will buy her with a great price, and the price which you must ask shall be that henceforth he obeys you in everything."

"The scheme is good, daughter; at the least, bearing my oath in mind, I have none better, though were it not for my oath, either I should kill them all or set them free. Yet who can say that it shall succeed? It is in the hands of fate, let it go as fate wills. And now follow me, that I may place you where you shall dwell in comfort, then after we have eaten I will speak with these gods whom you have let loose upon us."

That morning passed heavily enough to the four wretched prisoners in the palace. For some hours they sat together in the throne-room almost silent, for they were crushed by misfortune and fear; the toils were closing on them, and they knew it, nor could they lift a finger to save themselves.

Francisco knelt and prayed, Leonard and Juanna sat hand in hand listening to him, while Otter wandered to and fro like an unquiet spirit, cursing Soa, Saga, and all women in many languages and with a resource and vigour that struck his hearers as unparalleled. At length he vanished through the curtains, to get drunk probably, Leonard reflected.

However, the dwarf sought not drink, but vengeance. A few minutes later, hearing screams in the courtyard, Leonard ran out to find himself witness to a curious scene. There on the ground, surrounded by a group of other women, her companions, who were laughing at her discomfiture, lay the stately Saga, bride of the Snake. Over her stood her lord and

master, the god Jal, his left hand twisted in her long hair, while with his right, in which he grasped a leather thong, despite her screams and entreaties, he administered to her one of the soundest and, be it added, best deserved thrashings that ever fell to the lot of erring woman.

"What are you doing?" said Leonard.

"I am teaching this wife of mine that it is not well to drug a god, Baas," gasped Otter; then added with a final and most ferocious cut, "There, get you gone, witch, and let me see your ugly face no more."

The woman rose and went, cursing and weeping, while the dwarf followed Leonard back into the throne-room.

"You have done it now, Otter," said Leonard. "Well, it does not much matter. I fancy she is gone for good, any way."

"Yes, Baas, she has gone, and she has gone sore," replied Otter with a faint grin.

At that moment a messenger arrived announcing that Nam was without waiting for an audience.

"Let him be admitted," said Juanna with a sigh, and seated herself on one of the thrones, Otter clambering into the other.

They had scarcely taken their places when the curtains were thrown back and the ancient priest entered, attended by about a score of his fellows. He bowed himself humbly before Juanna and the dwarf and then spoke.

"Oh! ye gods," he said, "I come in the name of the People of the Mist to take counsel with you. Why it is we do not know, but things have gone amiss in the land: the sun does not shine as in past years before you came to bless us, neither does the grain spring. Therefore your people are threatened with a famine, and they pray that you may comfort them out of the store of your wisdom."

"And if we have no comfort to give, Nam?"

"Then, Queen, the people ask that you will be pleased to meet them to-morrow in the temple at the moon-rise, when the night is one hour old, that they may talk with you there through the mouth of me, your servant."

"And if we weary of your temple and will not come, Nam?" asked Juanna.

"Then this is the command of the people, O Aca: that we bring you thither, and it is a command that may not be disobeyed," answered the high priest slowly.

"Beware, Nam," replied Juanna; "strange things happen here that call for vengeance. Our servants pass away like shadows, and in their place we find such weapons as you carry," and she pointed to the priests' knives. "We will come to-morrow night at the rising of the moon, but again I say to you, beware, for now our mercy is but as a frayed rope, and it were well for you all that the cord should not break."

"Ye know best whither your servants have wandered, O Aca," said the priest, stretching out his hands in deprecation, and speaking in a tone of which the humility did not veil the insolence, "for true gods such as ye are can guard their servants. We thank you for your words, O ye gods, and we pray you to be merciful to us, for the threats of true gods are very terrible. And now one little word. I ask justice of you, O ye gods. She who was given to be bride of the Snake, my niece who is named Saga, has been cruelly beaten by some evil-doer here in the palace, as I know, for but now I met her bruised and weeping. I ask of you then that ye search out this evil-doer and punish him with death or stripes. Farewell, O ye high gods."

Leonard looked at the priest as he bowed humbly before the thrones, and a desire to take Otter's advice and kill him entered his heart, for he knew that he had come to drag them to their trial and perhaps to doom. He still had his revolver, and it would have been easy to shoot him, for Nam's broad breast was a target that few could miss. And yet, what could it help them to shed his blood? There were many to fill his place if he died, and violence would certainly be answered with violence. No, he

would let him be, and they must bide their fate.