

CHAPTER XXVIII

JUANNA PREVARICATES

The morrow drew towards its evening. Like those that had gone before it, this day had been misty and miserable, only distinguished from its predecessors by the fall of some sharp showers of sleet. Now, as the afternoon waned, the sky began to clear in its accustomed fashion; but the bitter wind sweeping down the mountains, though it drove away the fog, gave no promise of any break in the weather. At sunset Leonard went to the palace gates and looked towards the temple, about the walls of which a number of people were already gathering, as though in anticipation of some great event. They caught sight of him, and drew as near to the gates of the palace as they dared, howling curses and shaking their fists.

"This is a foretaste of what we must expect to-night, I suppose," said Leonard to Francisco, who had followed him, as they retreated across the courtyard. "We are in trouble now, friend. I do not so much care for my own sake, but it breaks my heart to think of Juanna. What will be the end of it, I wonder?"

"For me, Outram, the end will be death, of that I am sure; well, I have long expected it, and I am ready to die. What your fate will be I cannot say; but as to the Senora, comfort yourself; for many weeks I have had a presentiment that she will escape safely."

"In that case I am ready enough to go," answered Leonard. "Life is as dear to me as to other men; but I tell you, Francisco, that I would pay mine down gladly to-night as the price of her deliverance."

"I know it, Outram; we are both of one mind there, and perhaps before many hours are over we shall be called upon to practise what we preach."

By now they had reached the throne-room, where Otter, who for the last twenty hours had been quite sober, was squatted on the floor at the foot of his throne, a picture of repentant misery, while Juanna walked swiftly up and down the long room, lost in reflection.

"Any news, Leonard?" she said as they came in.

"None, except that there are great preparations going on yonder," and he nodded towards the temple; "also a mob is howling at the gates."

"Oh!" groaned Otter, addressing Juanna, "cannot you, who are named Shepherdess of the Heavens, prophesy to these people that the weather will break, and so save us from the Snake?"

"I can prophesy," she answered; "but it will not change to-night, nor, I think, to-morrow. However, I will try."

Then came a silence: nobody seemed to have anything to say. It was

broken by the entrance of Olfan, whose face showed the disturbance of his mind.

"What passes, Olfan?" asked Juanna.

"Queen," he answered sadly, "there is great trouble at hand. The people rave for the blood of you, their gods. Nam told you that ye are summoned this night to confer with the people. Alas! I must tell you otherwise. This night ye will be put upon your trial before the Council of the Elders."

"That we guessed, Olfan, and if the verdict goes against us, what then?"

"Alas that I must say it! Then, Queen, you will be hurled, all of you, into the pool of the Snake, to be food for the Snake."

"Cannot you protect us, Olfan?"

"I cannot, O Queen, except with my own life. The soldiers are under my command indeed; but in this matter they will not obey me, for the priests have whispered in their ears, and if the sun does not shine they too must starve next winter. Pardon me, Queen, but if you are gods, how is it that you need help from me who am but a man? Cannot the gods then protect themselves and be avenged upon their enemies?"

Juanna looked despairingly at Leonard, who sat by her side pulling at

his beard, as was his fashion when perplexed.

"I think that you had better tell him," he said in English. "Our situation is desperate. Probably in a few hours he will know us to be impostors; indeed, he guesses it already. It is better that he should learn the truth from our own lips. The man is honest; moreover, he owes his life to us, though it is true that were it not for us he would never have been in danger of his life. Now we must trust him and take our chance; if we make a mistake, it does not greatly matter--we have made so many already."

Juanna bowed her head and thought awhile, then she lifted it and spoke.

"Olfan," she said, "are we alone? That which I have to say must be overheard by none."

"We are alone, Queen," he answered, glancing round, "but these walls have ears."

"Olfan, draw near."

He obeyed, and leaning forward she spoke to him almost in a whisper, while the others clustered round to hear her words.

"You must call me Queen no more," she said in a voice broken with humiliation. "I am no goddess, I am but a mortal woman, and this man,"

and she pointed to Otter, "is no god, he is only a black dwarf."

She paused, watching the effect of her words. An expression of astonishment swept across the king's face, but it was her boldness rather than the purport of her speech that caused it. Then he smiled.

"Perhaps I have guessed as much," he answered. "And yet I must still call you by that name, seeing that you are the queen of all women, for say, where is there another so lovely, so brave, or so great? Here at least there are none," and he bowed before her with a stately courtesy that would have become any European gentleman.

Now it was Leonard's turn to look astonished. There was nothing in the king's words to which he could take objection, and yet he did not like their tone; it was too full of admiration. Moreover it seemed to him that Olfan was not in the least disappointed to discover as a fact that Juanna was only a woman--a supposition which was fully established by his next speech.

"I am glad to learn from your own lips, Queen, that you are no goddess, but a mortal lady, seeing that goddesses are far away and we men must worship them from afar, whereas women--we may love," and again he bowed.

"My word!" said Leonard to himself, "this king is setting himself up as my rival. I almost wish I had put things on a more satisfactory footing; but of course it is absurd. Poor Juanna!"

As for Juanna herself, she started and blushed; here was a new trouble, but however disagreeable it might prove to be, now was no time to show displeasure.

"Listen, Olfan," she said, "this is not an hour for pretty speeches which mean nothing, for it seems that before the light dawns again I may well be dead and far beyond all love and worship. This is our tale: we came to your land to seek adventures, and also to win those red stones that you name the blood of Aca, which among the white people are much prized as ornaments for their women. That is why I, who am a woman, urged the Deliverer to undertake this journey, and it is because of my folly that now we stand in danger of our lives."

"Your pardon, Queen," said Olfan bluntly, "but I would ask you one question before you tell me the end of your tale. What is this white man to you?"

Now Juanna was "in a cleft stick"; if she said that Leonard was nothing to her, it might possibly be better for him, though it was doubtful whether Olfan would believe her. If, on the other hand, she said that he was her husband, it might be better for herself, and protect her from the advances of this dignified savage; but against this course her pride revolted. Had she not always indignantly repudiated the validity of that hateful marriage, and though she loved him, were not she and Leonard in a sense at daggers drawn? Still she must decide, and quickly; her

common-sense told her that under the circumstances it was her pride which must give way.

"He is my husband," she said boldly.

Olfan's face fell; then a look of doubt came into it, for Juanna's mode of life, every detail of which was known to him, seemed to contradict her statement.

Seeing that he did not believe her, Juanna plunged still deeper into the mire.

"He is my husband," she said again. "This man," and she pointed to Francisco, "who is a priest among us, married us according to our customs some six moons since, and Otter yonder was witness to the marriage."

"Is this so?" asked Olfan.

"It is so, King," replied Francisco. "I married them, and they are man and wife."

"Yes, yes, it is so," put in Otter, "for I saw it done, and we celebrated a great sacrifice in honour of that wedding feast. I would that we could have such another here to-night."

"Fear not, Dwarf," answered Olfan with a touch of irritation, "you will see enough of sacrifices before all is ended."

Then a new thought struck him, and he added, "You say that the Deliverer is your husband, Queen, and these men bear witness to it, all except your lord himself! Now tell me one thing more: do you love him and would you be sorry if he died?"

Juanna's brow burnt red as the ruby stone upon it, for with the exception of her black robe she was prepared to proceed to the temple. But there was no help for it now; she must speak clearly, however much it shamed her to do so, lest Olfan might take her silence as a hint, and the "husband" for whom she disavowed affection should be removed from her life for ever.

"You have little right to put such a question to me, King, yet I will answer it. I love him, and if he died I should die also."

Leonard suppressed an exclamation with difficulty, for here was Juanna appearing in a new light indeed.

"I am answered, Queen," said Olfan in tones of deep depression. "Now, if it pleases you, will you end your tale?"

"There is not much to tell," replied Juanna, heaving a sigh of relief, for this cross-examination as to her exact relations with Leonard had

been somewhat trying. "The woman Soa, my servant, is of your people; indeed, she is a daughter to Nam the priest, and fled the land forty years ago because she was destined to the Snake."

"Where is she now?" interrupted Olfan, looking round.

"We do not know; last night she vanished as our other servants have vanished."

"Perhaps Nam knows, and if so you may see her again soon. Proceed, Queen."

"After the Deliverer and I were married, Soa, who had been my nurse for many years, told us of the Great People her brethren, among whom she wished to die."

"May her desire be gratified!" put in Otter.

"And said that if we would escort her thither we could buy many such stones as that upon my brow, which she had brought with her from this country and given to me. Then it was that I, desiring the playthings, tormented my husband till he consented to lead me hither, though his own heart spoke against it. So we came, and the journey was long and terrible, but at last we reached the cliff yonder which borders the Land of Mist, and it was then for the first time, when it was too late to go back, that Soa told us the tale of the gods of your people, and showed

us that either we must do sacrilege and feign to be those gods come back, as the prophecy promised, or perish miserably. Indeed this was her plot, to set up false gods over you, having first told the secret to the priests that she might gain honour with them and save herself alive.

"And now, Olfan, that is all the tale. We have played the game and we have lost, or so it seems--that is, unless you help us;" and she clasped her hands and looked upon him pleadingly.

The king dropped his eyes as though he were not willing to contemplate the loveliness which, as he now learned, belonged to the white stranger at Juanna's side.

"Have I not said that my power is little, Queen?" he answered somewhat sullenly. "Also, why should I help those who came to this land to trick us, and who have brought the anger of the gods upon its children?"

"Because we saved your life, Olfan, and you swore to be loyal to us."

"Had it not been for you, Queen, my life would not have been in danger; moreover, I swore fealty to gods, and now the gods are mortals, upon whom the true gods will be avenged. Why then should I help you?"

"Because we have been friends, Olfan. You shall help us for my sake."

"For your sake, Queen," he said bitterly, "for your sake, who tell me

that you are this man's wife and that you love him to the death. Nay, this is much to ask. Had it been otherwise, had you been unwed and willing to look upon me, the king of this land, with favour, then doubtless I had died for your sake if there were need. But now--! Have you then no better reasons to show why I should risk my life for you and for these men?"

"I have two more reasons, King, and if they are not enough, then leave us to our fate, and let us, who must prepare to die, waste no more breath in words. The first is that we are your friends and have trusted you, saving your life at the danger of our own and telling you this tale of our own free will. Therefore in the name of friendship, which you should hold sacred, who are no common man but a king, we demand your help, we who have put our lives in the hollow of your hand, knowing that you are of noble mind and will not betray us.

"The second is that our interest is your interest: we strive against Nam and the priests, and so do you. If Nam conquers us to-day, to-morrow it will be your turn, and the Snake, whose fangs we must feel, shall in days to come feed upon you also. Now is the hour of destiny for you and your descendants: cling to us and break the yoke of Nam and the priests, or desert us and bind that yoke upon your shoulders to your doom. I have spoken--choose."

Olfan thought awhile and answered:

"Truly your mind is great, Queen, and sees far into the darkness of things such as our women have no knowledge of. You should have ruled this country and not I, for then by now Nam, who is my master, would have begged his daily bread at the gates of your palace, and the priests his servants had become the hewers of your wood and the drawers of your water. But I will not talk to you of policy, for time is short. Nay, I will deal with your first reason and that alone.

"You have conjured me in the name of friendship and of my oath, and by the memory of service done, and not in vain. I am a man different from that race of men of whom you are, a wild chief of a wild tribe, having little wisdom; yet I have learned these things--never to break a promise, never to desert a friend, and never to forget a service. Therefore, because I swore fealty to you, because you are my friend, and because you saved my life, I will protect you to the last, though it may well chance that I can do nothing except die for you. For, Queen, although you can be nought to me while yonder man lives, still I am ready to give my life for you. As for the others I will say this only, that I will not harm them or betray them.

"Now I go to speak with certain of the great men who are friends to me and hate the priest, so that when this matter comes on for judgment they may lift up their voices in your favour, for nothing can be done except by policy--that is, not now. Shortly I will return to lead you to the temple. Till then, farewell," and he bowed and was gone.

When the curtain had swung to behind Olfan, Juanna sank back in her chair and sighed, but Leonard sprang up and said:

"Juanna, that savage is right, you should have been a queen. I know what it must have cost you to say what you did."

"Pray, to what do you refer, Leonard?" she said, interrupting him coldly.

"I mean about our being married and the rest."

"Oh! yes. Well, you see it is sometimes necessary to tell white lies, and I think that after to-night I am entitled to a prize for general proficiency in this respect. Of course," she added, dropping her sarcastic tone, "you will not misinterpret anything that I was forced to say to Olfan with reference to yourself, because you know that those statements were the biggest fibs of all. Just then, had it been needful, I should have been prepared to swear that I was married to Otter and deeply attached to him, or even to the king himself, who, by the way, strikes me as the most satisfactory savage that I have ever come across--in short, as a gentleman."

Leonard turned pale with anger.

"Really, Juanna," he said, "I think that you might wait until I seek to

take some advantage of our friendship and accidental relations before you rebuke me as you think fit to do. It is little short of an insult, and were we in any civilised country I would never speak to you again."

"Don't get angry, Leonard," she said appealingly, for Juanna seemed to have every mood at her command and ready to be assumed at a moment's notice. Perhaps this gift was one of the secrets of her charm, since monotony is a thing to be avoided by women who seek to rule, even the monotony of sweetness. "It is very unkind of you," she went on, "to speak crossly to me when I am so tired with talking to that savage and we may all be dead and buried in a few hours," and she looked as though she were going to cry.

Leonard collapsed instantly, for Juanna's plaintive mood was the one that he could resist the least of any.

"You would make me angry if I were on my death-bed," he said, "that is, when you talk like that. But there it is, I cannot change you, so let us change the subject. Have you any of that poison to spare? If so, you might serve us out a little; we may want it before the evening is over."

Juanna put her hand to her hair and after some manipulation produced a tiny skin bag, from which she extracted a brown ball of about the size of a rifle bullet.

"I can afford to be generous," she said with a little laugh; "there is

enough here to kill twenty of us."

Then Leonard took a knife and chipped off three fragments from the ball, taking one himself and presenting the other two to Francisco and Otter. The priest received it doubtfully, but the dwarf would have none of it.

"Keep it for yourself, Baas," he said, "keep it for yourself. Whatever way I die it shall not be thus. I do not love a medicine that causes men to tie themselves into knots and then turns them green. No, no; first I will face the jaws of the Snake."

So Leonard took that piece also.