

## CHAPTER XXIX

### THE TRIAL OF THE GODS

Juanna had scarcely restored the remainder of her deadly medicine to its hiding-place, when the curtains were drawn and Nam entered. After his customary salutations, which on this occasion were more copious than usual, he remarked blandly that the moon had risen in a clear sky.

"Which means, I suppose, that it is time for us to start," said Leonard gruffly.

Then they set out, Juanna in her monk-like robe, and Otter in his red fringe and a goat-skin cape which he insisted upon wearing.

"I may as well die warm as cold, Baas," he explained, "for of cold I shall know enough when I am dead."

At the palace gate Olfan and a guard were waiting, but they found no opportunity of speaking with him. Here also were gathered a great number of priests, who preceded and followed them.

The procession being formed, they were led solemnly to a different gate of the temple from that by which they had entered it on their previous visits. On this occasion the secret passages were avoided, and they passed up a broad avenue through the centre of the amphitheatre, to

seats that had been prepared for them on that side of the pool which was furthest from the colossal idol. As before, the temple was crowded with human beings, and their advance through it was very impressive, for the priests chanted as they walked, while the multitude preserved an ominous silence.

At first Leonard was at a loss to know why they were placed on the hither side of the pool, but presently he saw the reason. In front of the chairs to be occupied by Juanna and Otter, an open space of rock was left, semicircular in shape, on which were set other seats to the number of thirty or more. These seats were allotted to elders of the people, who, as Leonard guessed rightly, had been chosen to act as their judges. The position was selected for the convenience of these elders, and in order that the words they spoke might be heard by a larger proportion of their vast audience.

When Juanna and Otter were seated, and Leonard and Francisco had taken their places behind them, Nam came forward to address the Council and the multitude beyond.

"Elders of the People of the Mist," he said, "I have conveyed your wishes to the holy gods, who but lately have deigned to put on the flesh of men to visit us their people; namely, that they should meet you here and talk with you of the trouble which has come upon the land. And now the gracious gods have assented to your wish, and behold, they are face to face with you and with this great company of their children. Be

pleased therefore to make known what you desire to the gods, that they may answer you, either with their own mouths or by the voice of me, their servant."

He ceased, and after a pause, during which the people murmured angrily, an elder rose and said:

"We would know of you how it is, O Aca and O Jal, that the summer has deserted the land. Now our strait is very sorry, for famine will come upon us with the winter snows. A while ago, O Aca and O Jal, you changed the worship of this people, forbidding the victims who had been prepared to be offered up at the spring festival, and lo! there has been no spring. Therefore we ask a word of you on this matter, for the people have consulted together, and say by our voice that they will have no gods who kill the spring. Speak, O ye gods, and you, Nam, speak also, for we would learn the reason of these evils; and from you, O Nam, we would learn how it comes that you have proclaimed gods in the land whose breath has destroyed the sunshine."

"Ye ask me, O People of the Mist," answered Juanna, "why it is that the winter stretches out his hand over the slumber of the spring, forbidding her to awake, and I will answer you in few words and short. It is because of your disobedience and the hardness of your hearts, O ye rebellious children. Did ye not do sacrifice when we forbade you to take the blood of men? Ay, and have not our servants been stolen secretly away and put to death to satisfy your lust for slaughter? It is for this

reason, because of your disobedience, that the heavens have grown hard as your own hearts and will not bless you with their sunshine and their gentle rain. I have answered you."

Then again the spokesman of the elders rose and said:

"We have heard your words, O Aca, and they are words of little comfort, for to sacrifice is the custom of the land, and hitherto no evil has befallen us because of that ancient custom. Yet if there has been offence, it is not we who have offended, but rather the priests in whose hands these matters lie; and as for your servants, we know nothing of them, or of their fate. Now, Nam, make answer to the charges of the gods, and to the questions of the people, for you are the chief of their servants and you have proclaimed them to be true gods and set them over us to rule us."

Thus adjured, Nam stood forward, and his mien was humble and anxious, for he saw well that his accusers were not to be trifled with, and that his life, or at least his power, was at stake, together with those of the gods.

"Children of the Mist," he began, "your words are sharp, yet I do not complain of them, for, as ye shall learn, my fault has been grievous. Truly, I am the chief of the servants of the gods, and I am also the servant of the people, and now it would seem that I have betrayed both gods and people, though not of my own will.

"Listen: ye know the legend that has come down to us, that Aca and Jal should reappear in the land, wearing the shapes of a fair white maiden and of a black dwarf. Ye know also how they came as had been promised, and how I showed them to you here in this temple, and ye accepted them. Ye remember that then they put away the ancient law and forbade the sacrifices, and by the hand of their servant who is named Deliverer, they destroyed two of the priests, my brethren, in a strange and terrible fashion.

"Then I murmured, though they threatened me with death, but ye overruled my words and accepted the new law, and from that hour all things have gone ill. Now I took counsel with my heart, for it seemed wonderful to me that the gods should discard their ancient worship, and I said to my heart: Can these be true gods, or have I perchance been duped? Thenceforward I held my peace, and set myself to watch, and now after much watching--alas! I must say it to my shame--I have discovered that they are no true gods, but wicked liars who have sought to usurp the places of the gods."

He paused, and a roar of rage and astonishment went up from the assembled thousands.

"It has come at last," whispered Leonard into Juanna's ear.

"Yes, it has come," she answered. "Well, I expected it, and now we must

face it out."

When the tumult had subsided, the spokesman of the elders addressed Nam, saying:

"These are heavy words, O Nam, and having uttered them you must prove them, for until they are proved we will not believe readily that there are human beings so wicked that they dare to name themselves as gods. When you proclaimed these strangers to be Aca and Jal, we accepted them, perhaps too easily and after too short a search. Now you denounce them as liars, but we will not disclaim them whom we have once received till we are sure that there is no room for error. It may chance, Nam, that it would please you well to cast aside those gods who have threatened you with death and do not love you."

"I should be bold indeed," answered Nam, "if I dared to speak as I have spoken lacking testimony to establish a charge so dreadful as that which I bring against these wanderers. Nor should I seek to publish my own shame and folly were I not forced thereto by knowledge that, did I conceal it, would make me a partner of their crime. Listen, this is the tale of those whom we have worshipped: the fair woman, as she herself told us, is named Shepherdess of the Heavens, and she is the wife of the white man who is named Deliverer, and the dwarf Dweller in the Waters is their servant, together with the second white man and the others.

"Dwelling in a far country, these men and women chanced to learn the

story of our people--how, I shall show you presently--and also that we find in the earth and use in the ceremonies of our temple certain red and blue stones which among the white people are of priceless value. These they determined to steal, being adventurers who seek after wealth. To this end the Shepherdess learned our language, also she learned how to play the part of Aca, while the dwarf, dog that he is, dared to take the holy name of Jal. I will be short: they accomplished their journey, and the rest you know. But, as it happened, none of the stones they covert have come into their hands, except that gem which the Shepherdess wears upon her forehead, and this she brought with her.

"Now, People of the Mist, when doubts of these gods had entered into me I made a plan: I set spies to watch them in the palace yonder, those spies being the wife who was given to the dwarf and her handmaidens. Also, I caused their black servants to be seized and thrown to the Snake, one or two of them at a time, for of this I was sure, that if they had the power they would protect their servants. But, as the Snake knows, those men were not protected. Meanwhile reports came to me from the women, and more especially from Saga, the granddaughter of my brother, who was given as a bride to Jal. And this was their report: that the dwarf behaved himself like a cur of low birth, and that when he was in liquor, which was often, he babbled of his doings with the Deliverer in other lands, though all that he said they could not tell me because even now he has little knowledge of our tongue.

"When these tales came to my ears, you may guess, O People of the Mist,

that if I had doubted before, now my heart was shaken, and yet I had no proof. In my darkness I prayed to the gods for light, and lo! light came. Among the followers of these wanderers was a woman, and but yesterday this woman visited me and confessed all. Forty years ago she had fled from among our people--I know not why, but she took with her a knowledge of our secrets. It was she who told them of the gods and the story of the gods, and she instructed them how they should deceive us and win the red stones which they desired. But now her heart repents her of the evil, and I will summon her before you, that ye may judge between me and these liars who have brought me to this shame. Bring forth the woman."

There was a silence, and so intense was the interest that no sound came from the audience, which watched for the appearance of the witness. Presently Soa advanced from the shadows at the foot of the colossus, and escorted by two priests took her stand in the centre of the semicircle of judges.

"Speak, woman," said Nam.

Then Soa spoke. "I am of the People of the Mist," she said, "as ye may know by looking on me and hearing me. I was the daughter of a priest, and forty years ago, when I was young and fair, I fled this land for my own reasons, and travelled south for three months' journey, till I came to a village on a mighty river, where I dwelt for twenty years earning a livelihood as a doctress of medicine. Then there came into that village



a white man, whose wife gave birth to a daughter and died. I became the nurse of that daughter; she is the woman who sits before you, and her name is Shepherdess.

"Twenty years more went by, and I desired to return to my own land that I might die among my people. I told the tale of my land and of its wealth to the Shepherdess and to her husband the Deliverer, for I dared not travel alone. Therefore in my wickedness I showed them how they might feign to be the gods of the People of the Mist, come back according to the legend, for I saw that the dwarf, the Deliverer's servant, was shaped like to the shape of the statue of Jal, who sits in stone above you. Being greedy, they fell into the plan, for above all things they desired to win the precious stones. But when we were come hither the true gods visited me in a dream so that my heart was troubled because of the evil which I had done, and yesterday I escaped to Nam and told him all the tale which you have heard. That is the story, People of the Mist, and now I pray your mercy and your pardon."

Soa ceased, and Leonard, who had been watching the multitude, whispered to Juanna:

"Speak quickly if you can think of anything to say. They are silent now because of their astonishment, but in another minute they will break out, and then----"

"People of the Mist," cried Juanna, taking the hint, "you have heard the

words of Nam and the words of her who was my servant. They dare to tell you that we are no gods. So be it: on this matter we will not reason with you, for can the gods descend to prove their godhead? We will not reason, but I will say this in warning: put us away if you wish,--and it may well chance that we shall suffer ourselves to be put away, since the gods do not desire to rule over those who reject them, but would choose rather to return to their own place.

"Yet for you it shall be a sad and an unlucky day when ye lift a hand against our majesty, for in going we will leave you that by which we shall be remembered. Ay, we will bequeath to you three things: famine and pestilence and civil war, which shall rage among you and destroy you till ye are no more a people. Ye have suffered our servants to be murdered, and disobeyed our commands, and it is for this reason, as I have told you, that the sun shines no more and the summer will not come. Complete your wickedness if ye will, and let the gods follow by the path that their servants trod. Then, People of the Mist, ye shall reap as ye have sown, and death and desolation shall be your harvest.

"Now for that base slave who has borne false witness against us. Among the many things she has told you, one thing she has left untold: that she is daughter to Nam the priest; that she fled the land because she was chosen bride to the Snake, and is therefore an apostate worthy of death. One word also as to Nam, her father; if his tale be true, then he himself is condemned by it, for doubtless he knew all at the beginning, from the lips of his daughter Soa.

"Yes, knowing the truth he dared to set up gods in the land whom he believed to be false, trusting thereby to increase his own power and glory, and when these failed him because of his wickedness, then he did not scruple to cry aloud his shame. I have spoken, People of the Mist. Now judge between us and let fate follow judgment, for we renounce you."

She ended, her face alight with anger and her eyes flashing with excitement, and so great was the power of her eloquence and beauty that it seemed to throw a spell of silence over the hearts of her fierce and turbulent audience, while Soa slunk back into the shadow and Nam cowered visibly.

"It is false, O people," he cried in a voice that trembled with rage and fear. "My daughter told me the tale for the first time at dawn to-day."

His words awoke the audience as it were, and instantly there arose a babel of sounds that rent the very skies. "His daughter! He says that she is his daughter! Nam owns his crimes!" yelled some.

"Away with the false gods!" shouted others.

"Touch them not, they are true gods and will bring a curse upon us!" answered a third party, among whom Leonard recognised the voice of Olfan.

And so the clamour went on. For full ten minutes it raged, till the exhaustion of those that made it brought it to its end, and Juanna, who all this while sat silent as some lovely marble statue, became aware that the spokesman of the elders was once more addressing the multitude.

"People of the Mist," he said, "hold your peace, and hearken to me. We have been chosen judges of this matter, and now, having consulted together, we will give judgment, and you shall be bound by it. As to whether these strangers who are named Aca and Jal are true gods or false, we say no word. But if they are false gods, then surely Nam is guilty with them."

Here a shout of assent burst from the audience, and Leonard watching the high priest saw him tremble.

"Yet," he went on, "they have told us by the mouth of her who sits before you, that it is because of our offences that the sun has ceased to shine at their command. Therefore at their command it can be made to shine. Then let them give us a sign or let them die, if indeed they are mortal, for if they are not mortal we cannot kill them. And this shall be the sign which they must give: If to-morrow at the dawn the mists have vanished and the sun shines red and clear on the snows of yonder mountain, then it is well and we will worship them. But if the morning is cold and mist-laden, then, true gods or false, we will hurl them from the head of the statue into the pit of the Snake, there to be dealt with by the Snake, or to deal with him as it may chance. That is our

judgment, People of the Mist, and Nam shall carry it out if need be, for he shall keep his power and his place until all these wonders are made clear, and then himself he shall be judged according to their issue."

Now the great mass of the people cried aloud that this was a wise and just saying, but others were silent, for though they did not agree with it they dared not dispute the sentence. Then Juanna rose and said:

"We have heard your words and we will withdraw to consider them, and by dawn ye shall see us seated on the Black One yonder. But whether we will cause the sun to shine or choose to pass to our own place by the path of boiling waters, we do not know, though it seems to me that the last thing is better than the first, for we weary of your company, People of the Mist, and it is not fitting that we should bless you longer with our presence. Nevertheless, should we choose that path, those evils which I have foretold shall fall upon you. Olfan, lead us hence."

The king stepped forward with his guards and the procession passed back towards the palace solemnly and in silence, for none attempted to bar their way. They reached it safely at exactly ten o'clock by Leonard's watch.

"Now let us eat and drink," said Leonard when they stood alone in the throne-room, "for we shall need all our strength to-night."

"Yes," answered Juanna with a sad smile, "let us eat and drink, for

to-morrow we die."