

## CHAPTER XXX

### FRANCISCO'S EXPIATION

When they had finished their meal, which was about as sad an entertainment as can well be conceived, they began to talk.

"Do you see any hope?" asked Juanna of the other three.

Leonard shook his head and answered:

"Unless the sun shines at dawn to-morrow, we are dead men."

"Then there is little chance of that, Baas," groaned Otter, "for the night is as the nights have been for these five weeks. No wonder that this people are fierce and wicked who live in such a climate."

Juanna hid her face in her hands for a while, then spoke:

"They did not say that any harm was to come to you, Leonard, or to Francisco, so perhaps you will escape."

"I doubt it," he answered; "besides, to be perfectly frank, if you are going to die, I would rather die with you."

"Thank you, Leonard," she said gently, "but that will not help either of

us much, will it? What will they do with us? Throw us from the head of the statue?" and she shuddered.

"That seems to be their amiable intention, but at any rate we need none of us go through with it alive. How long does your medicine take to work, Juanna?"

"Half a minute at the outside, I fancy, and sometimes less. Are you sure that you will take none, Otter? Think; the other end is dreadful."

"No, Shepherdess," said the dwarf, who now in the presence of imminent danger was as he had been before he sought comfort in the beer-pot, brave, ready, and collected, "it is not my plan to suffer myself to be hurled into the pit. Nay, when the time comes I shall spring there of my own free will, and if I am not killed--and an otter knows how to leap into a pool--then if I cannot avoid him I will make a fight for it with that great dweller in the water. Yes, and I go to make ready that with which I will fight," and he rose and departed to his sleeping-place.

Just then Francisco followed his example, seeking a quiet place in which to pursue his devotions, and thus Leonard and Juanna were left alone.

For some minutes he watched her as she sat beside him in her white temple dress, her beautiful face looking stern and sad against the dusky background of the torchlight, and a great shame and pity filled his heart. The blood of this girl was on his hands, and he could do nothing

to help her. His selfishness had dragged her into this miserable enterprise, and now its inevitable end was at hand and he was her murderer, the murderer of the woman who was all the world to him, and who had been entrusted to his care with her father's dying breath.

"Forgive me," he said at length with something like a sob, and laying his hand upon hers.

"What have I to forgive, Leonard?" she replied gently. "Now that it is all finished and I look back upon the past few months, it seems to me that it is you who should forgive, for I have often behaved badly to you."

"Nonsense, Juanna, it was my wicked folly that led you into this, and now you are about to be cut off in the beginning of your youth and in the flower of your beauty. I am your murderer, Juanna," and dropping his voice he hesitated, then added: "It may as well out now, for time is short, though I have often sworn that nothing should make me say it: I love you."

She did not start or even stir at his words, but sat staring as before into the darkness: only a pink flush grew upon the pallor of her neck and cheek as she answered:

"You love me, Leonard? You forget--Jane Beach!"

"It is perfectly true, Juanna, that I was once attached to Jane Beach, and it is true that I still think of her with affection, but I have not seen her for many years, and I am certain that she has thrown me over and married another man. Most man pass through several affairs of the heart in their early days; I have had but one, and it is done with.

"When first I saw you in the slave camp I loved you, Juanna, and I have gone on loving you ever since, even after I became aware from your words and conduct that you did not entertain any such affection for myself. I know that your mind has not changed upon the matter, for had it done so, you would scarcely have spoken to me as you did to-day after Olfan left us. Indeed, I do not altogether understand why I have told you this, since it will not interest you very much and may possibly annoy you in your last hours. I suppose it was because I wished to make a clean breast of it before I pass to where we lose all our loves and hopes."

"Or find them," said Juanna, still looking before her.

Then there was silence for a minute or more, till Leonard, believing that he had got his answer, began to think that he would do well to leave her for a while. Just as he was about to rise Juanna made a gentle movement; slowly, very slowly, she turned herself, slowly she stretched out her arms towards him, and laid her head upon his breast.

For a moment Leonard was astounded; he could scarcely believe the evidence of his senses. Then recovering himself, he kissed her tenderly.

Presently Juanna slipped from his embrace and said, "Listen to me, Leonard: are men all blind, I wonder, or are you an exception? I don't know and don't want to know, but certainly it does seem strange that what has been so painfully patent to myself for the last five or six months, should have been invisible to you. Leonard, you were not the only one who fell in love yonder in the slave camp. But you quickly checked my folly by telling me the story of Jane Beach, and of course after that, whatever my thoughts may have been, I did my utmost to hide them from you, with more success, it seems, than I expected. Indeed I am not sure that I am wise to let you see them now, for though you declare that Jane is dead and buried, she might re-arise at any moment. I do not believe that men forget their first loves, Leonard, though they may persuade themselves to the contrary--when they are a long way from them."

"Don't you think that we might drop Jane, dear?" he answered with some impatience, for Juanna's words brought back to his mind visions of another love-scene that had taken place amid the English snows more than seven years before.

"I am sure that I am quite ready to drop her now and for ever. But do not let us begin to spar when so little time is left to us. Let us talk of other things. Tell me that you love me, love me, love me, for those are the words that I would hear ringing in my years before they become deaf to this world and its echoes, and those are the words with which I

hope that you will greet me some few hours hence and in a happier land. Leonard, tell me that you love me for to-day and for to-morrow, now and for ever."

So he told her that and much more, speaking to her earnestly, hopefully, and most tenderly, as a man might speak to the woman whom he worshipped and with whom is about to travel to that shore of which we know nothing, though day and night we hear the waves that bear us forward break yonder on its beach. They talked for long, and ever while they talked Juanna grew gentler and more human, as the barriers of pride melted in the fire of her passion and the shadow of death gathered thicker upon her and the man she loved. At length her strength gave way utterly and she wept upon Leonard's breast like some frightened child, and from weeping sank into deep slumber or swoon, he knew not which. Then he kissed her upon the forehead, and, carrying her to her bed, laid her down to rest awhile before she died, returning himself to the throne-room.

Here he found Francisco and Otter.

"Look, Baas," said the dwarf, producing from beneath his goat-skin cloak an article which he had employed the last hour in constructing. It was a fearful and a wonderful instrument, made out of the two sacrificial knives that had been left by the priests on the occasion of the kidnapping of the last of the Settlement men. The handles of these knives Otter had lashed together immovably with strips of hide, forming from them a weapon two feet or more in length, of which the curved

points projected in opposite directions.

"What is that for, Otter?" said Leonard carelessly, for he was thinking of other things.

"This is for the Crocodile to eat, Baas; I have seen his brothers caught like that before in the marshes of the Zambesi," replied the dwarf with a grin. "Doubtless he thinks to eat me, but I have made another food ready for him. Ah! of one thing I am sure, that if he comes out there will be a good fight, whoever conquers in the end."

Then he proceeded to fix a hide rope to the handles of the knives, and having made it fast about his body with a running noose, he coiled its length, which may have measured some thirty feet, round and round his middle, artfully concealing its bulk together with the knives beneath his cloak and moocha.

"Now I am a man again, Baas," the dwarf said grimly. "I have done with drink and such follies to which I took in my hours of idleness, for the time has come to fight. Ay, and I shall win, Baas; the waters are my home, and I do not fear crocodiles however big--no, not one bit; for, as I told you, I have killed them before. You will see, you will see."

"I am afraid that I shall do nothing of the sort, Otter," answered Leonard sadly, "but I wish you luck, my friend. If you get out of this mess, they will think you a god indeed, and should you only find the

sense to avoid drink, you may rule here till you die of old age."

"There would be no pleasure in that, Baas, if you were dead," answered the dwarf with a heavy sigh. "Alas! my folly has helped to bring you into this trouble, but this I swear, that if I live--and my spirit tells me that I shall not die to-night--it will be to avenge you. Fear not, Baas; when I am a god again, one by one I will kill them all, and when they are dead, then I will kill myself and come to look for you."

"It is very kind of you, Otter, I am sure," said Leonard with something like a laugh, and at that moment the curtains swung aside and Soa stood before them accompanied by four armed priests.

"What do you want, woman?" exclaimed Leonard, springing towards her as though by instinct.

"Go back, Deliverer!" she said, holding up her hand and addressing him in the Sisutu tongue, which of course those with her did not understand. "I am guarded, and my death would be quickly followed by your own. Moreover, it would avail you little to kill me, since I come to bring you hope for the life of her you love and for your own. Listen: the sun will not shine to-morrow at the dawn; already the mist gathers thick and it will hold, therefore the Shepherdess and the Dwarf will be hurled from the head of the statue, while you and the Bald-pate, having witnessed their end, will be kept alive till the autumn sacrifice, then to be offered up with the other victims."



"Why do you come to tell us all this, woman?" said Leonard, "seeing that we knew it already--that is, except the news of the postponement of our own fate, which I for one do not desire. What hope is there in this story? If you have nothing better to say, get you gone, traitress, and let us see your hateful face no more."

"I have something more to say, Deliverer. I still love the Shepherdess as you love her, and," she added with emphasis, "as Bald-pate yonder also loves her. Now this is my plan: two must die at dawn, but of those two the Shepherdess need not be one. The morning will be misty, the statue of the god is high, and but few of the priests will see the victim shrouded in her black robe. What if a substitute can be found so like to her in shape and height and feature that, in the twilight and beneath the shadow of the hood, none shall know them apart?"

Leonard started. "Who can be found?"

Slowly Soa raised her thin hand and pointed to Francisco.

"There stands the man!" she said. "Were he wrapped in the cloak of Aca, who would know him from the Shepherdess? The pool and the Snake do not give back that which they have swallowed."

If Leonard had started before, now he fairly recoiled, as the full meaning of this terrible proposition possessed his mind. He looked at

Francisco, who stood by wondering, for the priest did not understand the Sisutu dialect.

"Tell him," she said.

"Wait awhile," he answered hoarsely; "supposing that this were carried out, what would happen to the Shepherdess?"

"She would be concealed in the dungeons of the temple, in his dress and under his name," and again she pointed to Francisco, "until such time as a chance could be found for her to escape, or to return to rule this people unquestioned and with honour. My father alone knows of this plot, and because of his love for me he suffers me to try it, desperate as it seems. Also, for I will tell you all the truth, he is himself in danger, and he believes that by means of the Shepherdess--who, when she reappears having survived the sacrifice, will be held by the people to be immortal--he may save his life when the day of his own trial comes."

"And do you think," said Leonard, "that I will trust her alone to you, wicked and forsworn as you are, and to the tender mercies of your father? No, it is better that she should die and have done with her fears and torments."

"I did not ask you to do so, Deliverer," said Soa quietly. "You will be taken with her, and if she lives you will live also. Is that not enough? These men here come to bear you and Bald-pate to the dungeons: they will

bear you and the Shepherdess, knowing no difference, that is all. Now tell him; perchance he may not be willing to accept."

"Francisco, come here," said Leonard in a low voice, speaking in Portuguese. Then he told him all, while Soa watched them with her glittering eyes. As the tale went on the priest turned ashen pale and trembled violently, but before it was finished he ceased to tremble, and Leonard, looking at his face, saw that it was alight as with a glory.

"I accept," he said in a clear voice, "for thus will it be given to me to save the life of the Senora, and to atone for my offence. Come, let me make ready."

"Francisco," muttered Leonard, for his emotion would not suffer him to speak aloud, "you are a saint and a hero. I wish that I could go through this in your stead, for most gladly would I do so, but it is not possible."

"It seems then that there are two saints and heroes," replied the priest gently. "But why talk thus? It is the bounden duty of either or both of us to die for her, yet it is far better that I should die leaving you alive to love and comfort her."

Leonard thought a moment. "I suppose it must be so," he said, "but Heaven knows, it is a terrible alternative. How can I trust that woman Soa? And yet if I do not trust her Juanna will be killed at once."

"You must take the chance of it," answered Francisco; "after all she is fond of her mistress, and it was because she grew jealous that she fled to Nam and betrayed us."

"There is another thing," said Leonard; "how are we to get Juanna away? If once she suspects the plot, there will be an end of it. Soa, come thither."

She came, and he put this question to her, telling her at the same time that Francisco consented to the scheme and that Juanna slept behind the curtain and might awake at any moment.

"I have that with me which shall overcome the difficulty, Deliverer," answered Soa, "for I foresaw it. See here," and she drew a small gourd from her dress, "this is that same water of which Saga gave your black dog to drink when I escaped you. Now mix it with some spirit, go to the Shepherdess, awake her, and bid her drink this to comfort her. She will obey, and immediately deep sleep will take her again that shall hold her fast for six hours."

"It is not a poison?" asked Leonard suspiciously.

"No, it is not a poison. What need would there be to poison one who must die at dawn?"

Then Leonard did as she told him. Taking a tin pannikin, one of their few possessions, he emptied the sleeping-draught into it and added enough native brandy to colour the water.

Next he went into Juanna's room and found her lying fast asleep upon the great bed. Going up to her he touched her gently on the shoulder, saying, "Wake, my love." She raised herself and opened her eyes.

"Is that you, Leonard?" she said. "I was dreaming that I was a girl again and at school at Durban, and that it was time to get up for early service at the church. Oh! I remember now. Is it dawn yet?"

"No, dear, but it soon will be," he answered; "here, drink this, it will give you courage."

"How horrid that spirit tastes!" she said, then sank back slowly on the cushion and in another minute fell sound asleep again. The draught was strong and it worked quickly.

Leonard went to the curtain and beckoned to Soa and the others. They all entered except the priests, who remained clustered together near the doorway of the great chamber talking in low tones and apparently taking no notice of what passed.

"Take off that robe, Bald-pate," said Soa; "I must give you another."

He obeyed, and while Soa was engaged in clothing Juanna's senseless form in the gown of the priest, Francisco drew his diary from the pocket in his vest where he kept it. Rapidly he wrote a few lines on a blank page, then shutting the book he handed it to Leonard together with his rosary, saying:

"Let the Senora read what I have written here, after I am dead, not before, and give her these beads in memory of me. Many is the time that I have prayed for her upon them. Perhaps she will wear them after I am gone, and, although she is a Protestant, sometimes offer up a prayer for me."

Leonard took the book and the rosary and placed them in an inner pocket. Then he turned to Otter and rapidly explained to him the meaning of all that was being done.

"Ah, Baas," said the dwarf, "put no faith in that she-devil. And yet perhaps she will try to save the Shepherdess, for she loves her as a lioness loves her young. But I am afraid for you, Baas, for you she hates."

"Never mind about me, Otter," answered Leonard. "Listen: they are going to hide us in the dungeons of the temple; if by any chance you escape, seek out Olfan and try to rescue us. If not, farewell, and may we meet again in another place."

"Oh! Baas, Baas," said Otter with a deep sob, "for myself I care nothing, nor whether I live or die, but it is sad to think that you will perish alone, and I not with you. Oh! why did Baas Tom dream that evil dream? Had it not been for him, we might have been transport-riding in Natal to-day. I would that I had been a better servant to you, Baas, but it is too late now." And as he spoke Leonard felt a great tear fall upon his hand.

"Never mind the servant, Otter," he answered; "you are the best friend, black or white, that ever I had, and Heaven reward you for it. If you can help the Baas yonder at the last, do so. At the least see that he swallows the medicine in time, for he is weak and gentle and not fitted to die such a death," and he turned away.

By this time Soa had arrayed Francisco in the black robe of Aca. The white dress worn in the temple ceremonies he did not put on, for it remained upon Juanna, completely hidden from sight, however, by the priest's gown.

"Who would know them apart now?" asked Soa triumphantly, then added, handing Leonard the great ruby which she had taken from Juanna's forehead, "Here, Deliverer, this belongs to you; do not lose the stone, for you have gone through much to win it."

Leonard took the gem and at first was minded to dash it into the old woman's sneering face, but remembering the uselessness of such a

performance, he thrust it into his pocket together with the rosary.

"Come, let us be going," said Soa. "You must carry the Shepherdess, Deliverer; I will say that it is Bald-pate who has fainted with fear. Farewell, Bald-pate; after all you are a brave man, and I honour you for this deed. Keep the hood well about your face, and if you would preserve the Shepherdess alive, be silent, answering no word whoever addresses you, and uttering no cry however great your fear."

Francisco went to the bed where Juanna lay, and holding out his hand above her as though in blessing, he muttered some words of prayer or farewell. Then turning, he clasped Leonard in his arms, kissed him and blessed him also.

"Good-bye, Francisco," said Leonard in a choking voice; "surely the Kingdom of Heaven is made up of such as you."

"Do not weep, my friend," answered the priest, "for there in that kingdom I hope to greet you and her."

And so these friends parted.