

CHAPTER XXXI

THE WHITE DAWN

Lifting Juanna in his arms, Leonard hurried from the sleeping apartment to the throne-room, where he halted hesitating, for he did not know what was to happen next. Soa, who had preceded him, surrounded by the four priests and with a torch in her hand, stood against that wall of the chamber where she had lain bound on the night of the drugging of Otter.

"Bald-pate has fainted with fear, he is a coward," she said to the priests, pointing to the burden in Leonard's arms; "open the secret way, and let us pass on."

Then a priest came forward, and pressed upon a stone in the wall, which gave way, leaving a space sufficiently large for him to insert his hand and pull upon some hidden mechanism with all his force. Thereon a piece of the wall swung outward as though upon a pivot, revealing a flight of steps, beyond which ran a narrow passage. Soa descended first, bearing the light, which she was careful to hold in such a way as to keep the figure of Leonard, and the burden that he bore, in comparative darkness. After her went two priests, followed by Leonard, carrying Juanna, the rear being brought up by the remaining priests, who closed the secret door behind them.

"So that is how it is done," thought Leonard to himself, turning his

head to watch the process, no detail of which escaped him.

Otter, who had followed Leonard from Juanna's chamber, saw them go, though from some little distance, for, like a cat, the dwarf could see in the dark. When the rock had closed again, he returned to Francisco, who sat upon the bed lost in prayer or thought.

"I have seen how they make a hole in the wall," he said, "and pass through it. Doubtless our comrades, the Settlement men, went that way. Say, shall we try it?"

"What is the use, Otter?" answered the priest. "The road leads only to the dungeons of the temple; if we got so far we should be caught there, and everything would be discovered, including this trick," and he pointed to the robes of Aca, which he wore.

"That is true," said Otter. "Come, then, let us go and sit upon the thrones and wait till they fetch us."

So they went to the great chairs and sat themselves down in them, listening to the tramp of the guards outside the doorway. Here Francisco resumed his prayers, while Otter sang songs of the deeds that he had done, and more especially a very long one which he had composed upon the taking of the slave camp--"to keep his heart alive," as he explained to Francisco.

A quarter of an hour passed and the curtains were drawn aside, admitting a band of priests, headed by Nam, and bearing two litters.

"Now silence, Otter," whispered Francisco, drawing his hood over his face.

"Here sit the gods," said Nam, waving the torch that he carried towards the two quiet figures on the thrones. "Descend, ye gods, that we may bear you to the temple and seat you in a lofty place, whence ye shall watch the glories of the rising sun."

Then, without more ado, Otter and Francisco came down from their seats, and took their places in the litters. Presently they felt themselves being borne forward at a considerable speed. When they were outside the palace gates Otter peeped through the curtain in the hope of perceiving some change in the weather. In vain; the mist was denser than usual, although it grew grey with the light of the coming dawn. Now they were at those gates of the temple that were nearest to the colossal idol, and here, at the mouth of one of the numerous underground passages, guards assisted them to descend.

"Farewell, Queen," whispered the voice of Olfan into Francisco's ear; "I would have given my life to save you, but I have failed; as it is, I live to avenge you upon Nam and all his servants."

Francisco made no answer, but pressed on down the passage holding his

head low. Soon they were at the foot of the idol, and, led by priests, began to ascend the stairway in the interior of the statue. Up they toiled slowly in the utter darkness; indeed, to Francisco this, the last journey of his life, seemed the longest.

At length they emerged upon the head of the colossus, where neither of them had been before. It formed a flat platform about eight feet square, quite unprotected at the edges, beneath which curved the sheer outlines of the sculptured head. The ivory throne whereon Juanna had sat when first she visited the temple was gone, and instead of it, placed at the very verge of the forehead, were two wooden stools upon which the victims must seat themselves. From this horrible elevation could be seen that narrow space of rock between the feet of the colossus and the wall of the pool where was the stone altar, although, owing to the slope of the bowed head, he who stood upon it almost overhung the waters of the well.

Otter and Francisco seated themselves on the stools, and behind them Nam and three other priests took their stand, Nam placing himself in such a position that his companions could not see anything of Francisco's slight form, which they believed to be that of the Shepherdess.

"Hold me, Otter," whispered Francisco. "My senses will leave me, and I shall fall."

"Shut your eyes and lean back, then you will see nothing," answered

Otter. "Moreover, make ready your medicine, for the time is at hand."

"It is ready," he answered. "May I be forgiven the sin, for I cannot bear to be hurled living to the Snake!"

Otter made no answer, but set himself to watch the scene beneath him. The temple was filled with mist that from the great height looked like smoke, and through this veil he could just distinguish the black and moving mass of the vast assembly, who had sat the long night through waiting to witness the consummation of the tragedy, while the sound of their voices as they spoke together in hushed tones reached him like that of the murmuring of distant waters. Behind him stood the four priests or executioners in a solemn, silent line, their eyes fixed upon the grey mist, while above them, around them, and beneath them was nothing but sheer and giddy space.

It was a hideous position, heightened by every terror that man and nature can command, and even the intrepid dwarf, who feared neither death nor devil, and over whom religious doubts had no power, began to feel its chilling influence grip his heart. As for Francisco, such mind as he had left to him was taken up with fervent prayer, so it is possible that he did not suffer so much as might have been expected.

Five minutes or more passed thus; then a voice spoke from the mist below, saying:

"Are those who are named Aca and Jal on high, O priest?"

"They are on high," answered Nam.

"Is it the hour of dawn, O priest?" said the voice again, and this time Otter knew it for that of the spokesman of the elders.

"Not yet awhile," answered Nam, and he glanced at the snow peak that towered thousands of feet into the air behind and above the temple.

Indeed every eye in that assembly was staring at this peak, although its gigantic outline could only be seen dimly through the mist, dimly as the shape of a corpse buried in a winding-sheet of snow. Here, upon the loftiest precipices of the mountain the full light of morning struck first and struck always, for their pinnacles soared far above the level of the mist wreaths, and by the quality of that light this people judged the weather of the new-born day. If the snow was rosy-red, then they knew that ere long the sun would shine upon them. If, on the other hand, it gleamed cold and white, or, still worse, grey, it was a sign that the coming day would be misty in the city and on the plains. Therefore in this, the hour of the trial of the gods whom they had set up, all that company watched the mountain peak as they had never watched before, to see if it should show white or red.

Very gradually the light increased, and it seemed to Otter that the mist was somewhat thinner than was usual at this hour, though as yet it hung

densely between them and the mountain snows. Now he could trace the walls of the amphitheatre, now he could see the black shimmer of the water beneath, and distinguish the glitter of many hundreds of upturned eyeballs as they glared at him and beyond him. The silence grew more and more intense, for none spoke or moved: all were waiting to see the dawn break upon the slope of snow, and wondering--would it be red or white? Must the gods die or live? So intense and fearful was the hush, unbroken by a breath of air or the calling of a bird, that Otter could bear it no longer, but suddenly burst into song.

He had a fine deep voice, and it was a Zulu war-song that he sang, a triumphant paean of the rush of conquering impis interspersed with the wails of women and the groans of the dying. Louder and louder he sang, stamping his naked feet upon the rock, while the people wondered at the marvel. Surely this was a god, they thought, who chanted thus exultingly in a strange tongue while men waited to see him cast into the jaws of the Snake. No mortal about to die so soon and thus terribly could find the heart to sing, and much less could he sing such a song as that they heard.

"He is a god," cried a voice far away, and the cry was echoed on every side till at length, suddenly, men grew silent, and Otter also ceased from his singing, for he had turned his head and seen. Lo! the veil of mist that hid the mountain's upper heights grew thin:--it was the moment of dawn, but would it be a red dawn or a white? As he looked the vapours disappeared from the peak, though they still lay thick upon the slopes

below, and in their place were seen its smooth and shining outlines clothed in a cloak of everlasting snows.

The ordeal was ended. No touch of colour, no golden sunbeam or crimson shadow stained the ghastly surface of those snows, they were pallid as the faces of the dead.

"A white dawn! A white dawn!" roared the populace. "Away with the false gods! Hurl them to the Snake!"

"It is finished," whispered Otter again into Francisco's ear; "now take your medicine, and, friend, farewell!"

The priest heard and, clasping his thin hands together, turned his tormented face, in which the soft eyes shone, upwards towards the heavens. For some seconds he sat thus; then Otter, peering beneath his hood, saw his countenance change, and once more a glory seemed to shine upon it as it had shone when, some hours since, Francisco promised to do the deed that now he was about to dare.

Again there was silence below, for the spokesman of the Council of Elders had risen, and was crying the formal question to the priests above:

"Is the dawn white or red, ye who stand on high?"

Nam turned and looked upon the snow.

"The dawn is fully dawned and it is white!" he answered.

"Be swift," whispered Otter into Francisco's ear.

Then the priest raised his right hand to his lips, as though to partake of the sacrament of death.

A moment later and he let it fall with a sigh, whispering back to Otter:

"I cannot, it is a deadly sin. They must kill me, for I will not kill myself."

Before the dwarf could answer, Nature, more merciful than his conscience, did that for Francisco which he refused to do for himself, for of a sudden he swooned. His face turned ashen and slowly he began to sink backwards, so that he would have fallen had not Nam, who saw that he had fainted with fear, caught him by the shoulders and held him upright.

"The dawn is white! We see it with our eyes," answered the spokesmen of the elders. "O ye who stand on high, cast down the false gods according to the judgment of the People of the Mist."

Otter heard and knew that the moment had come to leap, for now he need trouble himself with Francisco no more.

Swiftly he turned his head, looking at Nam, for he would know if he might carry out a purpose that he had formed. It was to seize the high priest and bear him to the depths below.

It was not possible, he was out of reach; moreover, were he to snatch Nam away, Francisco would fall backwards, and the others might see that this was not the Shepherdess. Otter stood up upon his feet, and kicking the stool on which he had sat off the platform, he watched its flight. It flew into the water, never touching the rock, and then the dwarf knew that he had planned well.

Now Nam and one priest seized the fainting form of Francisco and the other two stepped towards Otter. The dwarf waited till their hands were outstretched to grasp him, then suddenly he sprang at the man upon his right, and shouting "Come thou with me," he gripped him about the middle in his iron grasp, and, putting out all his strength, hurled himself and his burden into sheer space beneath.

The priest shrieked aloud, and a gasp of wonder went up from the watching thousands as the dwarf and his victim rushed downward like a stone. They cleared the edge of the pool by an inch or two--no more, and struck the boiling waters, sinking through them till Otter thought they would never rise again. But at last they did rise. Then Otter loosed the dead or senseless priest, and at that moment the body of Francisco, cast thither by Nam, struck the water beside him and straightway vanished for

ever.

Otter loosed his grip, and diving beneath the surface swam hard for the north side of the pool, for there he had noticed that the current was least strong, and there also the rock bank overhung a little. He reached it safely, and rising once more grasped a knob of rock with one hand, and lay still where in the shadow and the swirl of waters he could not be discovered by any watching from above. He breathed deeply and moved his limbs; it was well, he was unhurt. The priest whom he had taken with him, being heaviest, had met the water first, so that though the leap was great the shock had been little.

"Ha!" said Otter to himself, "thus far my Spirit has been with me, and here I could lie for hours and never be seen. But there is still the Snake to contend with," and hastily he seized the weapon that he had constructed out of the two knives, and unwound a portion of the cord that was fast about his middle. Then again he looked across the surface of the waters. Some ten fathoms from him, in the exact centre of the whirlpool, the body of the priest was still visible, for the vortex bore it round and round, but of Francisco there was nothing to be seen. Only thirty feet above him Otter could see lines of heads bending over the rocky edges of the pool and gazing at the priest as he was tossed about like a straw in an eddy.

"Now, if he is still there and awake," thought Otter, "surely the father of crocodiles will take this bait; therefore I shall do best to be still

awhile and see what happens."

As he reflected thus a louder shout than any he had heard before reached his ears from the multitude in the temple above him, so tumultuous a shout indeed, that for a few moments even the turmoil of the waters was lost in it.

"Now what chances up there, I wonder?" thought Otter again. Then his attention was diverted in a somewhat unpleasant fashion.

This was the cause of that shout: a miracle, or what the People of the Mist took to be a miracle, had come about; for suddenly, for the first time within the memory of man, the white dawn had changed to red. Blood-red was the snow upon the mountain, and lo! its peaks were turned to fire.

For a while all those who witnessed this phenomenon stood aghast, then there arose that babel of voices which had reached the ears of Otter as he lurked under the bank of rock.

"The gods have been sacrificed unjustly," yelled the people. "They are true gods; see, the dawn is red!"

The situation was curious and most unexpected, but Nam, who had been a high priest for more than fifty years, proved himself equal to it.

"This is a marvel indeed!" he cried, when silence had at length been restored; "for no such thing is told of in our history as that a white dawn upon the mountain should turn to red. Yet, O People of the Mist, those whom we thought gods have not been offered up wrongfully. Nay, this is the meaning of the sign: now are the true gods, Aca and Jal, appeased, because those who dared to usurp their power have gone down to doom. Therefore the curse is lifted from the land and the sunlight has come back to bless us."

As he finished speaking, again the tumult broke out, some crying this thing and some that. But no action was taken, for Nam's excuse was ready and plausible, and the minds of men were confused. So the assembly broke up in disorder; only the priests and as many more as could find place, Olfan among them, crowded round the edges of the pool to see what happened in its depths.

Meanwhile Otter had seen that which caused him to think no more of the shouting above him than of the humming of last year's gnats. Suffering his eyes to travel round the circumference of the rocky wall, he saw the mouth of a circular hole, situated immediately under the base of the idol, which may have measured some eight feet in diameter. The lower edge of this hole stood about six inches above the level of the pool, and water ran out of it in a thin stream. Passing down this stream, half swimming and half waddling, appeared that huge and ungainly reptile which was the real object of the worship of the People of the Mist.

Great as were its length and bulk, the dwarf saw it but for a few moments, so swift were its movements; then the creature vanished into the deep waters, to reappear presently by the side of the dead priest, who was now beginning to sink. Its horrible head rose upon the waters as on that night when the woman had been thrown to it; it opened its huge jaws, and, seizing the body of the man across the middle, it disappeared beneath the foam. Otter watched the mouth of the hole, and not in vain; for before he could have counted ten the monster was crawling through it, bearing its prey into the cave.

Now once more the dwarf felt afraid, for the Snake, or rather the crocodile, at close quarters was far more fearful than anything that his imagination had portrayed. Keeping his place beneath the ledge, which, except for the coldness of the water, he found himself able to do with little fatigue or difficulty, Otter searched the walls of the pool, seeking for some possible avenue of escape, since his ardour for personal conflict with this reptile had evaporated. But search as he would he could find nothing; the walls were full thirty feet high, and sloped inwards, like the sides of an inverted funnel. Wherever the exits from the pool might be, they were invisible; also, notwithstanding his strength and skill, Otter did not dare to swim into the furious eddy to look for them.

One thing he noticed, indeed: immediately above the entrance to the crocodile's den, and some twenty feet from the level of the water, two holes were pierced in the rock, six feet or so apart, each measuring

about twelve inches square. But these holes were not to be reached, and even if reached they were too small to pass, so Otter thought no more of them.

Now the cold was beginning to nip him, and he felt that if he stayed where he was much longer he would become paralyzed by it, for it was fed from the ice and snow above. Therefore, it would seem that there was but one thing to do--to face the Water Dweller in his lair. To this, then, Otter made up his mind, albeit with loathing and a doubtful heart.