

CHAPTER XXXII

HOW OTTER FOUGHT THE WATER DWELLER

Keeping himself carefully under the overshadowing edge of the rock-bank, and holding his double-bladed knife ready in one hand, Otter swam to the mouth of the Snake's den. As he approached it he perceived by the great upward force of the water that the real body of the stream entered the pool from below, the hole where the crocodile lived being but a supplementary exit, which doubtless the river followed in times of flood.

Otter reached the mouth of the tunnel without any great difficulty, and, watching his chance, he lifted himself on his hands and slipped through it quickly, for he did not desire to be seen by those who were gathered above. Nor indeed was he seen, for his red head-dress and the goat-skin cloak had been washed away or cast off in the pool, and in that light his black body made little show against the black rock beneath.

Now he was inside the hole, and found himself crouching upon a bed of sand, or rather disintegrated rock, brought down by the waters. The gloom of the place was great, but the light of the white dawn, which had turned to red, was gathering swiftly on the surface of the pool without as the mist melted, and thence was reflected into the tunnel. So it came about that very soon Otter, who had the gift, not uncommon among savages, of seeing in anything short of absolute darkness, was able to

make out his surroundings with tolerable accuracy. The place in a corner of which he squatted was a cave of no great height or width, hollowed in the solid rock by the force of water, as smoothly as though it had been hewn by the hand of man: in short, an enormous natural drain-pipe, but constructed of stone instead of earthenware.

In the bottom of this drain trickled a stream of water nowhere more than six inches in depth, on either side of which, for ten feet or more, lay a thick bed of debris ground small. How far the cave stretched of course he could not see, nor as yet could he discover the whereabouts of its hideous occupant, though traces of its presence were plentiful, for the sandy floor was marked with its huge footprints, and the air reeked with an abominable stink.

"Where has this evil spirit gone to?" thought Otter; "he must be near, and yet I can see nothing of him. Perhaps he lives further up the cave"; and he crept a pace or two forward and again peered into the gloom.

Now he perceived what had hitherto escaped him, namely, that some eight yards from the mouth of the tunnel a table-shaped fragment of stone rose from its floor to within six feet of the roof, having on the hither side a sloping plane that connected its summit with the stream-bed beneath. Doubtless this fragment or boulder, being of some harder material than the surrounding rock, had resisted the wear of the rushing river; the top of it, as was shown by the high-water marks on the sides of the cave, being above the level of the torrent, which, although it was now

represented only by a rivulet, evidently at certain seasons of the year poured down with great force and volume.

"Here is a bed on which a crocodile might sleep," reflected Otter, creeping a little further forward and staring at the mass of rock, and more especially at a triangular-shaped object that was poised on the top of the sloping plane, and on something which lay beneath it.

"Now, if that thing be another stone," thought Otter again, "how comes it that it does not slip into the water as it should do, and what is that upon which it rests?" and he took a step to one side to prevent his body from intercepting any portion of the ray of light that momentarily shone clearer and pierced the darkness of the cave to a greater distance.

Then he looked again and almost fell in his horror, for now he could see all. The thing that he had taken for a stone set upon the rock-table was the head of the Dweller in the Waters, for there in it, as the light struck on them, two dreadful eyes gleamed with a dull and changing fire. Moreover, he discovered what was the object which lay under the throat of the reptile. It was the body of that priest whom Otter had taken with him in his leap from the statue, for he could see the dead face projecting on one side.

"Perhaps if I wait awhile he will begin to eat him," reflected the dwarf, remembering the habits of crocodiles, "and then I can attack him

when he rests and sleeps afterwards"; and, acting on this idea, he stood still, watching the green fire as it throbbed and quivered, waxed and waned in the monster's eyes.

How long he remained thus Otter never knew; but after a time he became conscious that these eyes had taken hold of him and were drawing him towards them, though whether the reptile saw him or not he could not tell. For a space he struggled against this unholy fascination; then, overcome by dread, he strove to fly, back to the pool or anywhere out of reach of those devilish orbs. Alas! it was too late: no step could he move backwards, no, not to save his life.

Now he must go on. It was as though the Water Dweller had read his mind, and drew its foe towards itself to put the matter to the test. Otter took one step forward--rather would he have sprung again off the head of the colossus--and the eyes glowed more dreadfully than ever, as though in triumph.

Then in despair he sank to the ground, hiding his face in his hands and groaning in his heart.

"This is a devil that I have come to fight, a devil with magic in his eyes," he thought. "And how can I, who am but a common Knobnose dwarf, do battle against the king of evil spirits, clothed in the shape of a crocodile?"

Even now, when he could not see them, he felt the eyes drawing him. Yet, as they were no longer visible, his courage and power of mind came back to him sufficiently to enable him to think again.

"Otter," he said to himself, "if you stay thus, soon the magic will do its work. Your sense will leave you, and that devil will eat you up as a cobra devours a meer-cat. Yes, he will swallow you, and his inside will be your grave, and that is no end for one who has been called a god! Men, let alone gods, should die fighting, whether it be with other men, with wild beasts, with snakes, or with devils. Think now, if your master, the Deliverer, saw you crouch thus like a toad before an adder, how he would laugh and say, 'Ho! I thought this man brave. Ho! he talked very loud about fighting the Water Dweller, he who came of a line of warriors; but now I laugh at him, for I see that he is but a cross-bred cur and a coward.'

"Yes, yes, you can hear his words, Otter. Say now, will you bear their shame and sit here until you are snapped up and swallowed?"

Thus the dwarf addressed himself, and it seemed to his bewildered brain that the words which he had imagined were true, and that Leonard really stood by and mocked him.

At last he sprang to his feet, and crying, "Never, Baas!" so loudly that the cave rang with the echoes of his shout, he rushed straight at the foe, holding the two-bladed knife in his right hand.

The crocodile, that was waiting for him to fall insensible, as had ever been the custom of the living victims on whom it fixed its baneful glare, heard his cry and awoke from its seeming torpor. It lifted its head, fire seemed to flash from its dull eyes, its vast length began to stir. Higher and higher it reared its head, then of a sudden it leaped from the slope of rock, as alligators when disturbed leap from a river bank into the water, coming so heavily to the ground that the shock caused the cave to tremble, and stood before the dwarf with its tail arched upwards over its back.

Again Otter shouted, half in rage and half in terror, and the sound seemed to make the brute more furious.

It opened its huge mouth as though to seize him and waddled a few paces forward, halting within six feet of him. Now the dwarf's chance had come and he knew it, for with the opportunity all his courage and skill returned to him. It was he who sprang and not the crocodile. He sprang, he thrust his arm and the double knife far into the yawning mouth, and for a second held it there, one end pointing upwards to the brain and one to the tongue beneath. He felt the jaws close, but their rows of yellow fangs never touched his arm, for there was that between them which held them some little space apart. Then he cast himself on one side and to the ground, leaving the weapon in the reptile's throat.

For a few moments it shook its horrible head, while Otter watched

gasping, for the reek of the brute's breath almost overpowered him. Twice it opened its great jaws and spat, and twice it strove to close them. Oh! what if it should rid itself of the knife, or drive it through the soft flesh of the throat? Then he was lost indeed! But this it might not do, for the lower blade caught upon the jawbone, and at each effort it drove the sharp point of the upper knife deeper towards its brain. Moreover, so good was the steel, and so firm were the hide bindings of the handles, shrunken as they were with the wet, that nothing broke or gave.

"Now he will trample me or dash me to pieces with his tail," said Otter; but as yet the Snake had no such mind--indeed, in its agony it seemed to have forgotten the presence of its foe. It writhed upon the floor of the cave, lashing the rock with its tail, and gasping horribly the while. Then suddenly it started forward past him, and the tough hide rope about Otter's middle ran out like the line from the bow of a whale-boat when the harpoon has gone home in the quarry.

Thrice the dwarf spun round violently, then he felt himself dragged in great jerks along the rocky floor, which, happily for him, was smooth. A fourth jerk, and once more he was in the waters of the pool, ay, and being carried to its remotest depths.

"Now, he is mad," thought Otter, "who ties himself to such a fish as this, for it will drown me ere it dies."

Had Otter been any other man, doubtless this would have been so. But he was as nearly amphibious as a human being can be, and could dive and swim and hold his breath, yes, and see beneath the surface as well as the animal from which he took his name. Never did such gifts stand their owner in better stead than during the minutes of this strange duel.

Twice the tortured reptile sank to the bottom of the pool--and its depth was great--dragging the dwarf after it, though, as it chanced, between dives it rose to the surface, giving him time to breathe. A third time it dived, and Otter must follow it--on this occasion to the mouth of one of the subterranean exits of the water, into which the dwarf was sucked. Then the brute turned, heading up the pool with the speed of a hooked salmon, and Otter, who had prayed that the line would break, now prayed that it might hold, for he knew that even he could never hope to swim against that undertow.

It held, and once more they rose to the surface, where the reptile lay lashing the waters in its pain, blood pouring from its mouth and nostrils. Very glad was Otter to be able to breathe again, for during that last rush he had gone near to suffocation. He lifted his head, inhaling the air with great gulps, and saw that the banks of the pool were lined with spectators who shouted and surged in their mad excitement. After that he did not see much more for a while, since just then it seemed to occur to the crocodile for the first time that the man alongside of him was the cause of his suffering; at least it wallowed round, causing the waters to boil about its horny sides, and charged

him. With its fangs it could not bite, therefore it struck at him with its tail.

Twice Otter dived, avoiding the blows, but the third time he was not so successful, for the reptile followed him into the deep water and dealt him a fearful stroke before he could either sink or rise. He felt the rough scales cut into his flesh and a sensation as though every bone in his body was breaking and his eyes were starting from his head. Faintly and more faintly he struggled, but in vain, for now life and sense were leaving him together, and everything grew black.

But suddenly there came a change, and Otter knew vaguely that again he was being dragged through the water and over rock. Then darkness took him, and he remembered no more.

When the dwarf awoke it was to find himself lying on the floor of the cave, but not alone, for by his side, twisted into a last and hideous contortion, lay the Snake god--dead! The upper part of the double knife had worked itself into its brain, and, with a dying effort, it sought the den where it had lived for centuries, dragging Otter with it, and there expired, how or when he knew not. But the dwarf had triumphed. Before him was stretched the ancient terror of the People of the Mist, the symbol and, indeed, the object of their worship, slain by his skill and valour.

Otter saw, and, bruised and shaken as he was, his heart swelled with

pride, for had he not done a deed single-handed such as was not told of in the stories of his land?

"Oh! that the Baas were here to see this sight!" he said, as he crawled along the length of his dead enemy, and seated himself upon its flat and loathsome snout. "Alas! he cannot," he added, "but I pray that my watching spirit may spare my life, that I may live to sing the song of the slaying of the Devil of the People of the Mist. Wow! that was a fight. When shall a man see another? And lo! save for many bruises and the cutting of the rope about my middle, I am not greatly hurt, for the water broke the weight of his tail when he smote me with it. After all, it is well that the line held, for it served to drag me from the pool as it had dragged me into it, otherwise I had surely drowned there.

"See, though, it is nearly done with," and grasping that end of the cord which hung from the jaws of the crocodile, he broke it with a jerk, for, with the exception of half a strand, it was frayed through by the worn fangs.

Then, having rested himself a little, and washed the worst of his hurts with water, Otter set himself to consider the position. First, however, he made an utterly ineffectual effort to extract the great knives.

Ten men could not have moved them, for the upper blade was driven many inches deep into the bone and muscles of the reptile's massive head. But for this chance it would have soon shaken itself clear of them; but, as it was, every contortion and gnashing of its jaws had only served to

drive the steel deeper--up to the hilt, indeed.

Abandoning this attempt, the dwarf crept cautiously to the mouth of the cave and peered at the further banks of the pool, whence he could hear shouts and see men moving to and fro, apparently in a state of great excitement.

"Now I am weary of that pool," he said to himself, "and if I am seen in it the Great People will surely shoot at me with arrows and kill me. What shall I do, then? I cannot stay in this place of stinks with the dead devil and the bones of those whom he has devoured, until I die of hunger. Yet this water must come from somewhere, therefore it seems best that I should follow it awhile, searching for the spot where it enters the cave. It will be dark walking, but the walls and the floor are smooth, so that I shall not hurt myself, and if I find nothing I can return again and strive to escape from the pool by night."

Having decided upon the adventure, Otter began to carry it out with characteristic promptness, the more readily, indeed, because his long immersion the water had chilled him, and he felt a weariness creeping over him as a result of the terrible struggle and emotions that he had passed through.

Coiling the hide ripe about his middle, which was sadly cut by its chafing, he started with an uncertain gait, for he was still very weak. A few steps brought him to that rock on which he had discovered the

head of the reptile, and he paused to examine it. Climbing the sloping stone--no easy task, for it was smooth as ice--he came to the table-like top. On its edge lay the body of that priest who had shared his fall from the head of the colossus.

Then he inspected the surface of the rock, and for the first time understood how old that monster must have been which he had conquered in single combat. For there, where its body had lain from generation to generation, and perhaps from century to century, the hard material was worn away to the depth of two feet or more, while at the top of the sloping stone was a still deeper niche, wherein its head reposed as it lay keeping its sleepless watch on the waters of the pool.

Around this depression, and strewn about the floor of the cave itself, were the remains of many victims, a considerable number of whom had not been devoured. In every case, however, the larger bones were broken, and from this circumstance Otter judged that, although it was the custom of this dreadful reptile to crush the life out of all who were thrown to it with a bite of its fangs, yet, like that of other animals, its appetite was limited, and it was only occasionally that it consumed what it had killed.

The sight of these remains was so unpleasant and suggestive that even Otter, who certainly could not be called squeamish, hastened to descend the rock. As he passed round it his attention was attracted by the skeleton of a man who, from various indications, must have been alive

within the last few weeks. The bones were clad in a priest's cloak, of which the dwarf, who was trembling with cold, hastened to possess himself. As he picked up the robe he observed beneath it a bag of tanned ox-hide that doubtless had once been carried by the owner of the cloak.

"Perhaps he kept food in this," thought Otter; "though what he who came to visit the Water Dweller should want with food I cannot guess. At the least it will be bad by now, so I will leave it and be gone. Only a vulture would stay for long in this house of the dead." Then he started forward.

For a few yards more he had light to guide his steps, but very soon the darkness became complete; still the cave was not difficult to travel, for everywhere the rock was smooth and the water shallow. All that he needed to do was to walk straight on, keeping touch of one side of the tunnel with one hand. Indeed he had but two things to fear, that he should fall into some pit and that he might suddenly encounter another crocodile, "for doubtless," thought Otter, "the devil was married."

But Otter fell into no hole and he saw no crocodile, since, as it chanced, the Water Dweller of the People of the Mist was a bachelor.

When the dwarf had travelled up a steep slope for rather more than half an hour, to his intense joy he saw light before him and hurried towards it. Presently he reached the further mouth of the cavern that was almost closed by blocks of ice, among which a little water trickled. Creeping

through an aperture he found himself upon the crest of the impassable precipice at the back of the city, and that before him a vast glacier of green ice stretched upwards, whereon the sun shone gloriously.