

## CHAPTER XXXIV

### NAM'S LAST ARGUMENT

For a moment Juanna stood stupefied; for the manoeuvre had been so sudden that at first she could scarcely realise its results.

"Now, Shepherdess," began Nam blandly, "we can talk in private, for I have words to say to you which it is not fitting that other ears should hear."

"You fiend," she answered fiercely; then comprehending that violence or remonstrance would be useless, she added, "Speak on, I hear you."

"Listen, Shepherdess, and for your own sake I implore you, do not give way to grief or rage. I swear to you that no harm shall come to yonder man if you will but do my bidding. Shepherdess, you are found out; I know, and the people know, that you are no goddess. It had been safer to sacrifice you to-day, but partly because of the pleading of my daughter who loves you, and partly for other reasons, I have caused you to be saved alive. Now, Shepherdess, from this country there is no escape; as you have chosen to come hither, here you must remain for life, and in this cell you cannot live and die. Therefore, for my daughter's sake I have cast about for a means to deliver you from bonds and to set you high in the land, ay, almost at its head," and he paused.

"Perhaps you will come to the point," said Juanna, who was trembling with fear and anger.

"It is this, Shepherdess," Nam answered bowing; "although you are dethroned as a goddess, you may still shine as a queen and rule over us as the wife of our king."

"Indeed," replied Juanna, turning suddenly cold; "and how shall I, who am held to be dead, appear again as a woman wedded to your king? Surely the people would find that strange, Nam?"

"No, Shepherdess, for I have prepared a tale which shall explain the wonder, and already its rumour runs from mouth to mouth. It will be said that you were a goddess and therefore immortal, but that for the sake of love you have put off your godhead and put on the flesh, that you might dwell for some years with him whom you desire."

"Indeed," said Juanna again. "And what if I refuse to consent to this scheme, which, as I think, can have come only from a woman's brain?" and she pointed to Soa.

"You are right, Shepherdess," answered Soa, "the plan is mine; I made it to save you, and also," she added coolly, "to be revenged upon that white thief who loves you, for he shall live to see you the wife of another man, a wild man."

"And have you never thought, Soa, that I may have wishes of my own in this matter?"

"Doubtless, yet the fairest women cannot always have what they may chance to wish. Know, Shepherdess, that this must be both for your own sake and for the sake of Nam, my father. Olfan loves you, and in these troubled times it is necessary that Nam and the priests should gain his support, which has been bought but now by the promise that you will be given to him in marriage on this very day. For you, Shepherdess, although you might have wished to wed one of your own race, at the least you will rule a queen, and that is better than to perish miserably."

"I think otherwise, Soa," Juanna answered calmly, for she saw that neither passion nor pleading would help her, "and of the two I choose to die," and she put her hand to her hair, then started, for she found the poison gone.

"You will choose to die, Shepherdess," said Soa with a cold smile, "but this is not always so easy. I have taken your medicine from you while you slept, and here there are no other means to compass death."

"I can starve, Soa," replied Juanna with dignity.

"That takes some time, Shepherdess, and to-day you will become the wife of Olfan. Still it is needful that you should yourself consent to marry him, for this chief is so foolish that he declares that he will not wed

you till you have accepted him with your own mouth and in the presence of witnesses."

"Then I fear that the wedding will not be celebrated," said Juanna with a bitter laugh, for she could not refrain from giving some outward expression to all the loathing which she felt for this wicked woman, who in her fierce love would save the life of her mistress by selling her to shame.

"I think that it will, Shepherdess," answered Soa, "for it seems that we have a way by which we can win you to speak those words which Olfan desires to hear."

"There is no way, Soa."

"What, none, Shepherdess? Think now: he whom you name Deliverer is a prisoner beyond that door. What if his life hangs upon your choice? What if he were shown to you about to die a fearful death from which you alone could save him by speaking a certain word?"

Now for the first time Juanna fully understood the hideous nature of the plot whereby Soa purposed either to force her to become the wife of a savage, or to thrust upon her the guilt of causing the death of the man whom she loved, and she sank back upon the couch, saying:

"You would have done better to leave me yonder in the slave camp, Soa."

Then, abandoning the tone of forced calm in which she had spoken hitherto, Soa broke out bitterly:

"When you were in the slave camp, Shepherdess, you loved me who have loved you from a child, for then no white dog had come to sow mischief between us and to make you hate and distrust me. Then I would have died for you, ay, and this I would do now. But also I would be revenged upon the white dog, for I, who am husbandless and childless, had but this one thing, and he has taken it from me. You were to me as mother, and lover, and babe are to other women--my all, and now I am left desolate, and I will be revenged upon him before I die. But I still love you, Shepherdess, and could any other plan have been found to help you, I could not have forced this marriage on you. No such plan can be found; thus alone can you live and become great and happy; and thus alone can I continue to feast my eyes upon you, though it be from far."

She ceased, trembling with the strength of the passions that shook her, to which indeed her words had given but feeble expression.

"Go," said Juanna, "I would have time to think."

Then Nam spoke again.

"We go, Shepherdess, in obedience to your wish, but before evening we shall return to hear your answer. Do not attempt to work mischief upon

yourself, for know that you will be watched though you cannot see the eyes that watch you. If you do but so much as lift a hand against your life, or even strive to cut off the light that flows through yonder hole, then at once you will be seized and bound, and my daughter will be set to guard you. Shepherdess, farewell."

And they went, leaving Juanna alone and a prey to such thoughts as can scarcely be written.

For several hours she sat there upon the couch, allowing no hint of what she felt to appear upon her face, for she was too proud to suffer the eyes which she knew were spying on her, though whence she could not tell, to read her secret anguish.

As she sat thus in her desolation several things grew clear to Juanna, and the first of them was that Soa must be mad. The love and hate that seethed in her fierce heart had tainted her brain, making her more relentless than a leopard robbed of its young. From the beginning she had detested Leonard and been jealous of him, and incautiously enough he had always shown his dislike and distrust of her. By slow degrees these feelings had hardened into insanity, and to gratify the vile promptings of her disordered mind she would hesitate at nothing.

From Soa, therefore, she could hope for no relenting. Nor had she better prospect with Nam, for it was evident that in his case political considerations operated as strongly as did those of a personal character

with his daughter. He was so much involved, he had committed himself so deeply in this matter of the false gods, that, rightly or wrongly, he conceived Soa's plan to offer the only feasible chance of escape from the religious complications by which he was surrounded, that threatened to bring his life and power to a simultaneous end.

It was out of the question, therefore, to expect help from the high-priest, who was in the position of a man on a runaway horse with precipices on either side of him, unless, indeed, she could show him some safer path. Failing this, it would avail her nothing that he hated and feared Olfan, and only promoted this marriage in order to bribe the king into standing his friend during the expected political convulsions. Indeed, as she guessed rightly, Nam would much better like to know her safely over the borders of the Mist-land than to be called upon to greet her as its queen. This was obvious, seeing that should she return to power, religious or temporal, it was scarcely to be hoped that she would forget the wrongs which she had suffered at his hands. The marriage was merely a temporary expedient designed to ward off immediate evil, but should it come about and the crisis be tided over, it was plain that the struggle between the false goddess and the perjured priest must be carried on until it ended in the death of one or both of them. However, all these things lay in the future as Nam foretold it, a future which Juanna never meant to live to see.

There remained Leonard and Olfan. The former, of course, was powerless, at least for the present, having suffered himself to be entrapped,

though his lack of caution mattered little, for doubtless if guile had failed, force would have been employed. It was she who must save Leonard, for he could do nothing to save her.

The more Juanna thought of the matter, the more she became convinced that her only hope lay in Olfan himself, who had sworn friendship to her, and who certainly was no traitor. She remembered that in their conversation of the day before he had admitted that she could be nothing to him while Leonard lived. Probably Nam had told her that the Deliverer was dead, and then it was, actuated by his passion which she knew to be genuine enough, that he had entered into a bargain with the priest. These must be the terms of the compact, that the game of the false gods being played, Olfan undertook to support Nam and the rest of his party to the best of his power, for the consideration to be received of her hand in marriage, stipulating, however, that she should give it of her own free will.

This of course she would never do; therefore Olfan's proviso gave her a loophole of escape, though Juanna was well aware that it would not be wise to rely too implicitly on the generosity of the savage chief in matters upon which savages are apt to be neither generous nor delicate. On this she must fall back as a last resource, or rather as a last resource but one. Meanwhile, she would fight Nam and Soa step by step, yielding only when she saw that further obstinacy on her part would involve Leonard's destruction. It was possible, indeed it was probable, that everything might fail her, and in that event she must not fail



herself; in other words, although the poison had been taken from her, she must find a means of death.

Having thought these problems out so far as it was in her power to do, Juanna rose and began to walk up and down the cell, noting its construction and peculiarities. Doubtless Leonard was behind yonder door, but it was so thick that she could hear nothing of his movements. For the rest, it seemed clear that escape was impossible. Excepting the doors, the shaft in the rock was the only other opening that she was able to see, but through this no child could pass, and if he might it would be to fall into the pool of raging water.

Had Otter lived through the fight with the snake god, she wondered? There was small chance of it, but at least he had made an end worthy of his reputation, and she felt proud of him. And the other--Francisco. Of him also she was proud indeed, but for herself she was ashamed, for she knew that she had been to blame, though not designedly. Who would have guessed that this frail timid man could prove himself such a hero, or who could estimate the power of the unsought and unhappy love which enabled him to conquer the fear of death?

She had been wrong to be angry with Leonard, for she knew well that, if it could have been so, he would gladly have given his own life for hers. Alas! it seemed that she was always wrong, for her temper was quick and the tongue is an unruly member. They had both of them been ready to die for her, and one of them had done so; well, now it was probable that the

tables would be turned before many hours were over, and that she would be called upon to offer herself to save her lover. If this came about, she would not forget the example of Francisco, but would rather try to equal it in the heroism of her end.

The day passed slowly, and at length the gloom gathering in the little cell told her that night was near. Before it fell, however, Soa and Nam entered, bearing candles, which they fixed upon brackets in the walls.

"We come, Shepherdess, to hear your answer," said Nam. "Will you consent to take Olfan for a husband, or will you not?"

"I will not consent."

"Think again, Shepherdess."

"I have thought. You have my answer."

At the words Nam seized her arm, saying, "Come hither, Shepherdess; I would show you something," and he led her to that door in passing which Leonard had been entrapped. At the same time Soa extinguished one of the candles, and taking the other in her hand she left the cell, bolting the door behind her, so that Nam and Juanna stood in darkness.

"Shepherdess," said Nam sternly, "you are about to see him whom you name the Deliverer. Now remember this, if you cry out or speak above a

whisper--he dies."

Juanna made no answer, although she felt her heart grow faint within her. Five minutes or more passed, and of a sudden a panel slid back in the upper part of the door which connected the two cells, so that Juanna could see through it, although those who stood on the further side could not see her, for they were in light and she was in darkness.

And this was what she saw: Ranged against the wall of the second prison, and opposite to her, were three priests holding candles in their hands, whereof the light shone upon their sullen, cruel faces, and the snake's head tattooed on their naked breasts. In front of these men stood two other priests, and between them was Leonard bound and gagged.

On the hither side of the cell, and not more than two feet from the open panel, stood Soa, on whom the eyes of the executioners were fixed, as though awaiting a command. Between Soa and these men yawned an open hole in the rock floor.

When Juanna had gazed upon this scene for some twenty seconds the sliding panel was closed, apparently by Soa, and Nam spoke:

"You have seen, Shepherdess," he said, "that the Deliverer is bound, and you have seen also that before him is a hole in the floor of the prison. He who falls down that hole, Shepherdess, finds himself in the den of the Snake beneath, from the visiting of whom no man has ever returned

alive, for it is through it that we feed the Water-dweller at certain seasons of the year, and when there is no sacrifice. Now, Shepherdess, you must choose between two things; either to wed Olfan of your own free will this night, or to see the Deliverer thrown to the Snake before your eyes, and afterwards to wed Olfan whether you will it or not. What do you say, Shepherdess?"

Juanna took counsel with herself, and came to the conclusion that she would resist a little longer, for she thought that this scene might have been planned merely to try her fortitude.

"I refuse to marry Olfan," she answered.

Then Nam opened the panel and whispered a word into the ear of Soa, who uttered a command. Instantly the two executioner priests flung Leonard on to his back upon the ground, an easy task seeing that his legs were fastened with ropes, and dragged him forward until his head hung over the oubliette-like hole. Then they paused as though waiting for some further order. Nam drew Juanna some few paces away from the door.

"What is your word now, Shepherdess?" he said. "Is the man to die or be saved? Speak swiftly."

Juanna glanced through the opening and saw that now Leonard's head and shoulders had vanished down the oubliette, while one of the priests held him by the ankles, watching Soa for the sign to let him fall.

"Loose him," said Juanna faintly. "I will marry Olfan."

Stepping forward, Nam whispered to Soa, who issued another order. Thereupon the priests drew Leonard from his perilous position, and, unwillingly enough, rolled him to the side of the cell, for they would have preferred to be rid of him. At that moment also the shutter was closed.

"I said loose him," repeated Juanna; "now the man lies unable to move like a fallen tree, on the ground."

"No, Shepherdess," replied Nam; "perchance you may yet change your mind, and then it would be troublesome to bind him afresh, for he is very strong and violent. Listen, Shepherdess; when Olfan comes presently to ask your hand, you must say nothing of that man yonder, for he deems him to be dead, and the moment you speak of him he will be dead. Do you understand?"

"I understand," answered Juanna, "but at least the gag might be taken from his mouth."

"Fear not, Shepherdess, it shall be done--when you have spoken with Olfan. And now, at what hour will it be your pleasure to see him?"

"When you will. The sooner it is finished the better."

"Good. My daughter," he added to Soa, who just then entered the cell, "be pleased to make fire, and then summon the king Olfan, who waits without."

Soa departed upon her errand, and, overcome with terror which she would not show, Juanna sank upon the couch, hiding her face in her hands. For a while there was silence, then the door opened again and, heralded by Soa, Olfan, the king, stood before her.

"Be careful, Shepherdess," whispered Nam as they entered; "one word--and the Deliverer dies."