

CHAPTER XXXV

BE NOBLE OR BE BASE

For a while there was silence, then Juanna looked up, searching Olfan's face with her eyes. Nothing was to be read there, for it was impossible to pierce the mask of solemn calm beneath which, in common with all his race, the king was accustomed to hide his thoughts. He leant on the shaft of his broad spear, his head bowed slightly as though in humility, his dark eyes fixed upon her face, immovable, impassive, a picture of savage dignity.

Indeed, Juanna was fain to confess to herself that she had never seen a grander specimen of the natural man than that presented by the chief of the People of the Mist, as he stood before her in her rock prison. The light of the candles fell full upon him, revealing his great girth and stature, beside which those of the finest men of her own race would have seemed insignificant. It shone upon the ivory torques, emblems of royalty, which were about his neck, wrists, and ankles, upon the glossy garments of black goat-skin that hung from his shoulders and middle, and the raven tresses of his hair bound back from his forehead by a narrow band of white linen, which showed in striking contrast against the clear olive colouring of his face and breast.

"Speak, Olfan," said Juanna at length.

"It was told to me, Queen," he answered in a low, full voice, "that you had words to say to me. Nevertheless, now as always, I obey you. Queen, I learn that your husband, he whom you loved, is dead, and believe me, I sorrow for you. In this shameful deed I had no hand; that, together with the end of the other white man and the dwarf, must be set down to the account of this priest, who swears that he was driven to it by the clamour of the people. Queen, they have all gone across the mountains and through the sky beyond, and you, like some weary dove, far travelled from a southern clime, are left a prey among the eagles of the People of the Mist.

"But a few hours since I thought you dead also, for with all the thousands in the temple I believed that it was your fair body which Nam hurled at dawn from the brow of the statue, and I tell you that when I saw it, I, who am a warrior, wept and cursed myself, because, although I was a king, I had no power to save you. Afterwards this man, the high priest, came to me, telling me the truth and a plan that he had made for his own ends, whereby you might be saved alive and lifted up among the people, and he also might be saved, and my rule be made sure in the land." And he ceased.

"What is this plan, Olfan?" asked Juanna, after a pause.

"Queen, it is that you should wed me, and appear before the people no longer as a goddess, but as a woman who has put on the flesh for her love's sake. I know well that I am all unworthy of such honour,

moreover, that your heart must be sore with the loss of one who was dear to you, and little set upon the finding of another husband; also I remember certain words that passed between us and a promise which I made. All these things I told to Nam, and he answered me saying that the matter was urgent, that here you could not be hid away for long, and that if I did not take you to wife then you must die. Therefore, because my love towards you is great, I said to him, 'Go now and ask her if she will smile upon me if I come before her with such words.'

"Nam went, but before he went he made certain agreements with me on matters of policy, under which I must pay a heavy price for you, Lady, and forego revenge and forget many an ancient hate, all of which things I have promised to do should you smile upon me, so great is my love towards you. The hours went by, and Nam came back to me, saying that, having weighed the matter in your mind, your answer was favourable. To this I replied that I did not trust him, and would take it from your lips alone.

"And now, Queen, I am here to listen to your word, and to offer myself to you, to serve you all my life as your husband and your slave. I have little to give you who have been bred up in sunnier lands, and among a more gentle people; I who am but the wild chief of men whose hearts are rugged as our mountains, and gloomy as a winter's day that is heavy with snow to come,--only myself, the service of my soldiers' spears, and the first place among the Children of the Mist.

"Now let me hear your answer, and be it what it may, I will accept it without a murmur, for least of all things do I desire to force myself upon you in marriage. Still I pray you, speak to me plainly once and for all, for if I must lose you I would know the worst; nor can I bear, when you have smiled upon me, to see you turn away. Nay, I would sooner die."

And once more he bowed his head, leaned upon his spear, and was silent.

Juanna considered the position rapidly. It was hopeless and cruel. Nam and Soa were on either side of her, the latter standing near the door with the sliding panel beyond which Leonard lay bound, and she knew well that did she speak a single word of the truth to Olfan, it would be the signal for her lover's death. It was possible that the king might be able to protect her own person from violence, but if Leonard died it mattered little what became of her. There was but one thing that she could do--declare herself willing to become the wife of Olfan. Yet it seemed shameless thus to treat this honourable man, the only friend that they had found among the People of the Mist. But of a truth, such necessities as hers cannot wait while those in their toils weigh scruples or the law of honour.

"Olfan," she said, "I have heard you, and this is my answer: I will take you as my husband. You know my story, you know that he who was my lord is but this day dead," here Soa smiled approvingly at the lie, "and that I loved him. Therefore of your gentleness, you will accord me some few weeks before I pass from him to you, in which I may mourn my widowhood.

I will say no more, but surely you can guess the sorrow of my heart, and all that I have left unsaid."

"It shall be as you wish, Queen," replied Olfan, taking her hand and kissing it, while his sombre face grew radiant with happiness. "You shall pass into my keeping at that time which best pleases you, yet I fear that in one matter you must be troubled now, this very hour."

"What may that be, Olfan?" asked Juanna anxiously.

"Only this, Queen, that the rite of marriage as we practise it must be celebrated between us. It is necessary for many reasons which will be made clear to you to-morrow. Moreover, such was my bargain with Nam sealed by an oath sworn upon the blood of Aca, an oath that I do not dare to break."

"Oh, no, no!" said Juanna in acute distress. "Think, Olfan, how can I, whose husband is not six hours dead, vow myself to another man upon the altar of his grave? Give me some few days, I pray you."

"Most willingly would I do this, Lady, but I may not, it is against my oath. Also, what can it matter? You shall remain alone for so long as it shall please you."

Then Nam spoke for the first time, saying:

"Shepherdess, waste no breath in words, for learn that though this garment of modesty is becoming to one new widowed, yet you must put it from you. More depends upon this ceremony than you know of, the lives of many hang upon it, our own, perchance, among them, and especially the life of one of whom it does not become me to speak," and as though by accident Nam let his eyes rest upon the door of the adjoining cell.

Of his auditors Olfan thought that he was alluding to his own life, but Juanna and his daughter knew well that he spoke of that of Leonard, which would be sacrificed did the former persist in her objections to the instant celebration of the marriage.

"You hear his words, Queen," said Olfan, "and there is weight in them. The times are very dangerous, and if our plot is to be carried through, before midnight I must make oath to the captains and the Council of the Elders that you have come back from death to be my wife."

"Maybe," answered Juanna, catching at a straw in her despair, "but must I, who shall be set over this people as queen, be married thus in secret? At the least I will have witnesses. Let some of the captains whom you trust, Olfan, be brought here to see us wed, otherwise the time may come when I shall be held to be no true wife, and there are none to establish my honour by their words."

"There is little fear of such a thing, Queen," answered Olfan with a faint smile, "yet your demands are just. I will bring three of my

captains here, men who will not betray us, and they shall be witness to this rite," and he turned as though he would go to seek them.

"Do not leave me," said Juanna, catching him by the wrist. "I trust you, but these two I do not trust. I fear to be left alone."

"There is no need for witnesses," exclaimed Nam in a threatening voice.

"The Shepherdess has asked for witnesses, and she shall have them," answered Olfan fiercely. "Old man, you have played with me long enough; hitherto I have been your servant, now I will be your master. Some hours ago your life was forfeit to me, for the white dawn had turned to red, and I meant to take it, but you bribed me with this bait," and he pointed to Juanna. "Nay, do not lay your hand upon your knife; you forget I have my spear. Your priests are without, I know it, but so are my captains, and I have told them where I am; if I vanish as many vanish here, my life will be required at your hands, for, Nam, your power is broken.

"Now, obey me. Bid that woman summon him who guards without. No, you do not stir," and he lifted the spear till its keen blue point quivered over the high priest's naked breast. "Bid her go to the door and summon the guard. I said to the door, but not beyond it, or beware!"

Nam was cowed: his tool had become his master.

"Obey," he said to Soa.

"Obey, but no more," echoed Olfan.

Snarling like a wolf, the woman slipped past them to the door, and opening it a little way, she whistled through the crack.

"Hide yourself, Lady," said Olfan.

Juanna retreated into the shadow behind the candle, and at that moment a voice spoke through the open door, saying, "I am here, father."

"Now, speak," said Olfan, advancing the spear an inch nearer Nam's heart.

"My son," said the priest, "go to the entrance by which the king entered, where you will find three captains, generals of the king. Lead them hither."

"And see that you speak to no one on the way," whispered Olfan in Nam's ear.

"And see that you speak to no one on the way," repeated Nam.

"I hear you, father," replied the priest, and went.

Some ten minutes passed and the door opened again. "The captains are here," whispered a voice.

"Let them enter," said Nam.

The order was obeyed, and three great men armed with spears stalked into the narrow chamber. One of them was brother to the king, and the two others were his chosen friends. Then the door closed.

"My brethren," said Olfan, "I have sent for you to acquaint you with a mystery and to ask you to witness a rite. The goddess Aca, who this day was hurled into the pool of the Snake, has returned to earth as a woman, and is about to become my wife,"--here the captains started--"nay, brethren, ask no questions; these things are so, it is enough. Now, priest, play your part."

After that, for a while all seemed a dream to Juanna, a dream of which she was never able to recover any exact memory. She could recollect standing side by side with Olfan, while Nam muttered prayers and invocations over them, administering to them terrible oaths, which they took, calling upon the names of Aca and of Jal, and swearing by the symbol of the Snake. Beyond that everything went blank. Indeed, her mind flew back to another marriage ceremony, when she stood beside Leonard in the slave camp, and the priest, Francisco, prayed over them and blessed them. It was that scene which she saw, and not the one enacting before her eyes, and with its visions were mixed up strange impersonal

reflections on the irony of fate, which had brought it about that she should figure as the chief actor in two such dramas, the first of which Leonard had gone through to save her, and the second of which she must go through to save him.

At last it was done, and once more Olfan was bowing before her and kissing her hand.

"Greeting, Shepherdess. Hail! Queen of the People of the Mist," he said, and the captains repeated his words.

Juanna awoke from her stupor. What was to be done now? she wondered. What could be done? Everything seemed lost. Then of a sudden an inspiration took her.

"It is true that I am a queen, is it not, Olfan?"

"It is true, Lady."

"And as Queen of the People of the Mist I have power, have I not, Olfan."

"Even to life and death," he answered gravely; "though if you kill, you must answer to the Council of the Elders and to me. All in this land are your servants, Lady, and none dare to disobey you except on matters of religion."

"Good," said Juanna. Then addressing the captains in a tone of command, she added, "Seize that priest who is named Nam, and the woman with him."

Olfan looked astonished and the captains hesitated. As for Nam, he did not hesitate, but made a bound towards the door.

"Stay awhile, Nam," said the king, making a barrier before him with his spear; "doubtless the Queen has reasons, and you would wish to hear them. Hold them, my captains, since the Queen commands it."

Then the three men sprang upon them. Once Nam tried to draw his knife, but failing in his attempt he submitted without further struggle. With Soa it was different. She bit and tore like a wild-cat, and Juanna saw that she was striving to reach the panel and to speak through it.

"On your lives do not suffer her to come to that door," she said; "presently you shall know why."

Then the brother of the king dragged Soa to the couch, and throwing her down upon it stood over her, his spear-point at her throat.

"Now, Queen," said Olfan, "your will is done, and perhaps it may please you to explain."

"Listen, King, and listen, you, captains," she answered. "These liars

told you that the Deliverer was dead, was it not so? He is not dead, he lies bound in yonder cell, but had I spoken a word to you, then he would have died. Olfan, do you know how my consent was won to be your wife? A shutter within that door was opened, and he, my husband, was shown to me, gagged and bound, and being held over the mouth of a hideous pit in the floor of his prison, that leads I know not whither.

"Consent, or he dies,' they said, and for my love's sake I consented. This was the plot, Olfan: to marry me to you, partly because the woman yonder, who was my nurse, did not desire my death, and partly that Nam might use me to save himself from the anger of the people. But do not think that you would have kept me long, Olfan; for this was in the plot also, that when you had served their purpose you should die by secret means, as one who knew too much."

"It is a lie," said Nam.

"Silence!" answered Juanna. "Let that door be opened, and you shall see if I have lied."

"Wait awhile, Queen," said Olfan, who appeared utterly overcome. "If I understand you right, your husband lives, and therefore you say that the words which we have spoken and the oaths that we have sworn mean nothing, for you are not my wife."

"That is so, Olfan."

"Then now I am minded to turn wicked and let him die," said the king slowly, "for know this, Lady, I cannot give you up."

Juanna grew pale as death, understanding that this man's passions, now that once he had given them way, had passed beyond his control.

"I cannot give you up," he repeated. "Have I not dealt well with you? Did I not say to you, 'Consent or refuse, as it shall please you, but having once consented you must not go back upon your words'? What have I to do with the reasons that prompted them? My heart heard them and believed them. Queen, you are wed to me; those oaths that you have sworn may not be broken. It is too late; now you are mine, nor can I suffer you to pass from me back to another man, even though he was your husband before me."

"But the Deliverer! must I then become my husband's murderer?"

"Nay, I will protect him, and, if it may be, find means to send him from the land."

Juanna stood silent and despairing, and at this moment Soa, lying on the couch, broke into a shrill and mocking laugh that stung her like a whip and roused her from her lethargy.

"King," she said, "I am at your mercy, not through any wanton folly of

my own, but because fate has made a sport of me. King, you have been hardly used, and, as you say, hitherto you have dealt well with me. Now I pray you let the end be as the beginning was, so that I may always think of you as the noblest among men, except one who died this day to save me. King, you say you love me; tell me then if my life hung upon a word of yours, would that word remain unspoken?

"Such was my case: I spoke the word and for one short hour I betrayed you. Will you, whose heart is great, bind me by such an oath as this, an oath wrung from me to save my darling from the power of those dogs? If this is so, then I have erred strangely in my reading of your mind, for till now I have held you to be a man who would perish ere he fell so low as to force a helpless woman to be his wife, one whose crime is that she deceived him to save her husband."

She paused, and, clasping her hands as though in prayer, looked up into his troubled face with beseeching eyes; then, as he did not speak, she went on:

"King, I have one more word to say. You are the strongest and you can take me, but you cannot hold me, for that hour would be my last, and you but the richer by your broken honour and a dead bride."

Olfan was about to answer when Soa, fearing lest Juanna's pleading should prevail against his passion, broke in saying, "Be not fooled, King, by a woman's pretty speeches, or by her idle threats that she will

kill herself. She will not kill herself, I know her well, she loves her life too much; and soon, when you are wed, she will love you also, for it is the nature of us women to worship those who master us. Moreover, that man, the Deliverer, is not her husband, except in name; for months I have lived with them and I know it. Take her, King, take her now, this hour, or live to mourn her loss and your own folly all your life's days."

"I will not answer that slave's falsehoods," said Juanna, drawing herself up and speaking proudly, "and it were more worthy of you not to listen to them, King. I have spoken; now do your will. Be great or little, be noble or be base, as your nature teaches you."

And suddenly she sank to the ground and, shaking her long hair about her face and arms, she burst into bitter weeping.

Twice the King glanced at her, then he turned his head as though he dare look no more, and spoke keeping his eyes fixed upon the wall.

"Rise, Queen," he said hoarsely, "and cease your tears, since you are safe from me. Now as always I live to do your will, but I pray you, hide your face from me as much as may be, for, Lady, my heart is broken with love for you and I cannot bear to look on that which I have lost."

Still sobbing, but filled with admiration and wonder that a savage could be thus generous, Juanna rose and began to murmur thanks, while the

captains stared, and Soa mocked and cursed them both.

"Thank me not," he said gently. "It seems that you, who can read all hearts, have read mine aright, or perchance you fashioned it as you would have it be. Now, having done with love, let us to war. Woman, what is the secret of that door?"

"Find it for yourself," snarled Soa. "It is easy to open when once you know the spring--like a woman's heart, Olfan. Or if you cannot find it, then it can be forced--like a woman's love, Olfan. Surely you who are so skilled in the winning of a bride need not seek my counsel as to the opening of a door, for when I gave it but now upon the first of these matters, you would not hearken, Olfan, but were melted by the sight of tears that you should have kissed away."

Juanna heard and from that moment made up her mind that whatever happened she had done with Soa. Nor was this wonderful, for few women could have pardoned what she had suffered at her hands.

"Drive the spear into her till she speaks, comrade," said Olfan.

Then at the touch of steel Soa gave up mocking and told the secret of the door.