

CHAPTER XXXVI

HOW OTTER CAME BACK

After he had rested awhile at the bottom of the glacier, Otter set to work to explore the cliff on the top of which he found himself, with the view of descending it and hiding at its foot till nightfall, when he hoped to find means of re-entering the city and putting himself in communication with Olfan. Very soon, however, he discovered that if he was to return at all, he must follow the same route by which he had come.

Evidently the tunnel sloped upwards very sharply, for he was standing on the brow of a precipice cut into three steps, which, taken together, may have measured some three hundred feet in height, and, so far as he could see, it was utterly impossible to descend any of these cliffs without the aid of ropes. Nor could he continue his investigations over a wide area, for about four hundred paces to the left of the opening to the subterranean passage--whereof, by the way, he was very careful to note the exact position--the mountain pushed out a snowy shoulder, with declivities so precipitous that he dared not trust himself on them.

Then he tried the right-hand side, but with no better luck, for here he was stopped by a yawning rift in the rock. Now Otter sat down and considered the situation.

The day was still young, and he knew that it would be foolish to attempt escape from the pool before dark. In front of him the mountain rose steeply till, so far as he could judge, it reached a pass which lay some two miles off, at the base of that main peak, on whose snows the priests had watched the breaking of the dawn. Part of this declivity was covered with blocks of green ice, but here and there appeared patches of earth, on which grew stunted trees, shrubs, and even grass and flowers. Being very hungry, it occurred to Otter that he might find edible roots among this scanty vegetation.

With this hope he began to climb the slope, to be rewarded in due course by the discovery of a vegetable that he recognised, for it was the same which had been offered to him on the occasion of his unlucky outbreak that had resulted in the casting away of the rubies.

With this poor food the dwarf filled himself, and having found a bough that made him an excellent staff, he continued his climb, desiring to see what there might be on the other side of the neck.

Arriving there without any great difficulty, Otter stood astonished, although he was not much given to the study of scenery. Below him lay the City of the Mist, with its shining belt of rivers that, fed from the inexhaustible mountain snows, meandered across the vast plains--now no longer hidden in mist--which they had trodden on their journey. Above his head the mighty peak towered thousands of feet into the air, till it ended in a summit shaped like a human finger pointing eternally to the

heavens. Before him the scene was even stranger, made up as it was of snowy fields broken by ridges of black rock, and laid one beneath the other like white sails drying upon the slopes of a sandhill.

Gradually, as the eye travelled downward, these snow-fields grew fewer and fewer, till at last they vanished altogether, and their place was taken, first by stretches of grass-land, and finally, at the foot of the mountain, by what seemed to be a rich and level country interspersed with clumps of bush and forest trees.

The first of these patches of snow lay within five furlongs of where the dwarf stood, but several hundred feet below him.

Between the neck of the pass and this snow stretched a mighty rift or chasm, with sides so sheer that no goat could have kept a footing on them. Yet this gulf was not without its bridge, for a rock wall rose from the bottom of the chasm, forming the bed of a glacier which spanned it from side to side. In some places the wall was comparatively level and in others it showed descents sharp as those of a waterfall. This remarkable bridge of ice--that varied from a hundred paces to a few yards in width--was bordered on either side by the most fearful precipices; while, just where its fall was sheerest and its width narrowest, it seemed to spring across a space of nothingness, like the arch of a bridge thrown from bank to bank of a river. Indeed, at this point its line became so attenuated that in the glittering sunlight Otter was doubtful whether it was not broken through for a distance of

some yards.

Being of an inquiring mind, the dwarf decided to satisfy himself upon the matter. All around him lay slabs of rock, some of which were worn perfectly smooth and to the thinness of a tombstone, by centuries of polishing in the iron jaws of glaciers. Selecting one of these of convenient size, Otter approached the edge of the bridge, pushing the stone before him over the frozen snow. Here the ice was perfect, except for a slight hoar-frost that covered it, for the action of the wind prevented the snow from gathering on the bridge, and whenever the sun was strong enough to melt its surface, it froze again at night, so that no slide upon a parish pond could have been more slippery or free from inequalities.

Otter gave his stone a push, and away it went, sometimes swiftly and sometimes at a trifling speed, according to the nature of the angle down which it passed, leaving a bright green ribbon upon the ice in its wake, whence it swept the hoar-frost as it sped. Once or twice he thought that it was going to stop, but it never did stop. At length it approached the steepest and narrowest part of the descent, down which the stone rushed with fearful velocity.

"Now I shall see whether the bridge is broken," thought Otter; and just then the rock, travelling like an arrow, came to that portion of the glacier where, for a width difficult to estimate, it stretched unsupported over space, and measured only some few feet across. On it

flew, then seemed to leap into the air, and once more sped forward till it reached the further slope of snow, up which it travelled for a distance, and stopped, appearing, even to Otter's keen sight, no larger than a midge upon a table-cloth.

"Now, if a man had been seated on that stone he might have passed this bridge in safety," said Otter to himself; "yet it is one that few would care to travel, unless sure death were behind them."

Then he determined on a second trial, and selecting another and somewhat lighter stone, he sent it upon its journey. It followed precisely the same course as its predecessor, but when it came to the knife-blade of the bridge it vanished.

"I am sorry for that stone," thought Otter, "for doubtless it, that has been whole for many years, is at this moment only little pieces."

A third time he repeated his experiment, choosing the heaviest rock that he could move. This messenger also leaped into the air at the narrowest portion of the bridge, then passed on in safety to the slope of snow beyond.

"A strange place," thought Otter; "and I pray that it may never be my lot to ride one of those stone horses."

Then he turned down the mountain again, for the afternoon was advancing.

When he reached the entrance to the river-bed sunset was at hand. For a while he sat watching the fading light and eating some more roots which he had gathered. Now he crawled into the passage and commenced his darksome journey towards the home of the dead Water Dweller, though what he was to do when he got there he did not know. No accident befell him, and in due course he arrived safely in the den, his journey being much facilitated by the staff he bore, which enabled him to feel his way like a blind man.

Creeping to the edge of the pool he listened to its turmoil, for the shadows were gathering so fast that, with some ghostlike shapes of foam excepted, he could not even see the surface of the water.

"If I go in there how can I get out again?" Otter thought sadly. "After all, perhaps I should have done better to return while it was still light, for then, by the help of my staff and the rope, I might have made shift to climb the overhanging ledge of rock, but to try this now were madness. I will go back and sit in the cave with the ghosts of the god and his dead till the morning comes again, though I do not crave their company."

So he retreated a few paces and sat in silence near the tail of the dead Crocodile. After a while loneliness took hold of him; he tried to sleep and could not, for it seemed to Otter that he saw eyes staring at him from the depths of the cave, and heard dead men whispering to each other tales of their dreadful ends. Moment by moment his fears grew upon

him, for Otter was very superstitious. Now he fancied that he could distinguish the head of the reptile limned in fire and resting on the edge of the rock as he had seen it that morning.

"Doubtless," he thought, "this monster is a devil and has come to life again to be revenged upon me. Wow! I liked him better when he was in the flesh than now that he has turned himself to fire." Then to comfort himself he began to talk aloud saying:

"Otter, unlucky that you are, why did you not die at once instead of living on to be tormented by ghosts? Perhaps your master, the Baas, whom alone you love, is dead already and waits for you to come to serve him. You are very tired; say now, Otter, would it not be well if you took that rope which is about your middle and hanged yourself? Thus you too would become a ghost and be able to do battle with them in their own fashion," and he groaned loudly.

Then of a sudden he grew fearful indeed, the short wool stood up upon his head, his teeth chattered, and, as he said afterwards, his very nose seemed to grow cold with terror. For as he sat he heard, or seemed to hear, a voice speaking to him from the air, and that voice his master's.

"Otter, Otter," said the voice.

He made no answer, he was too frightened.

"Otter, is that you?" whispered the voice again.

Then he spoke. "Yes, Baas, it is I. I know that you are dead and call me. Give me one minute till I can undo my rope, and I will kill myself and come to you."

"Thank you, Otter," said the voice with a ghastly attempt at a laugh, "but if it is all the same, I would much rather that you came alive."

"Yes, Baas, and I too would rather stop alive, but being alive how can I join you who are dead?"

"You fool, I am not dead," said Leonard.

"Then, Baas, how is it that you speak out of the air? Come near to me that I may touch you and be comforted."

"I cannot, Otter; I am bound and in a prison above you. There is a hole in the floor, and if you have a rope, as I heard you say, perhaps you could climb up to me."

Now the dwarf began to understand. Rising, he stretched the long staff he had brought with him high above his head, and found to his delight that he could touch the roof of the cave. Presently the point of the staff ceased to press upon the rock.

"Is the place here, Baas?" said Otter.

"It is here, but you must throw the stick up like a spear through the hole, for I am tied, and cannot put out my hand to take it."

"Stay awhile, Baas; first I must make the line fast to it."

"Good, but be swift, for I am in danger."

Hurriedly Otter undid the hide rope from about his middle, knotting it securely to the centre of the stick. Then some five feet below the stick he made a loop large enough for a man to place his foot in, and having ascertained the exact situation of the opening in the roof of the cave, he hurled the staff upwards and jerked at the line.

"It is fixed," whispered Leonard from above. "Now come up if you can."

The dwarf required no second invitation. Seizing the rope as high as he could reach above his head, he began to drag himself up hand over hand--no easy task, for the hide cord was thin, and cut his fingers and his right leg, round which he had twisted it to get a better purchase. Presently, however, he succeeded in setting his foot in the loop he had prepared, when he found that his head and shoulders were in the hole, and that by reaching upwards he could grasp the staff which lay across it. The rest was easy, and within half a minute he lay gasping at his master's side.

"Have you a knife, Otter?"

"Yes, Baas, my small one, the big ones are down there; I will tell you that story by and by."

"Never mind the story now, Otter. My hands are tied behind my back. Feel for the lashings and cut them, then give me the knife that I may free my legs."

Otter obeyed, and presently Leonard rose and stretched himself with a sigh of relief.

"Where is the Shepherdess, Baas?"

"There, in the next cell. They separated me from her, and since then I have been dangled by the legs over that hole bound and gagged, I think in order to persuade her to consent to something or other by the sight of my danger, for doubtless she was placed where she could see all. Then they left me, and I managed to spit out the gag, but I could not undo the cords. I expect that they will soon be back again."

"Then had we not better fly, Baas? I have found a passage that leads to the mountains."

"How can we fly and leave the Shepherdess, Otter? Since I have been held

down the hole, only two men have visited me from time to time, for they think me helpless. Let us seize these men when they come in and take their knives, for we are unarmed. Then we can think; also we shall have their keys."

"Yes, Baas, we may do that. You take the staff; it is stout."

"And what will you use?" asked Leonard.

"Fear not, Baas. Do these men bear lights?"

"Yes."

"Then in two minutes I will make me a weapon."

And, untying the hide rope from the stick, he began to fumble with it busily.

"Now I am ready, Baas," he said presently. "Where shall we stand?"

"Here," answered Leonard, leading him to the door. "We will crouch in the shadow, one on either side of this door, and when the priests have entered and closed it, and begin to look round for me, then we can spring upon them. Only, Otter, there must be no bungling and no noise."

"I think that there will be none, Baas; they will be too frightened to

cry at first, and after that they will become dumb."

"Otter," whispered Leonard, as they stood in the dark, "did you kill the Water-Dweller?"

"Yes, yes, Baas," he chuckled in answer. "I caught him with the hook that I made ready. But he did not die easily, Baas, and if I had not been able to swim well he would have drowned me."

"I heard something of it from Nam," said Leonard. "You are a wonderful fellow, Otter."

"Oh, Baas! it was no valour of mine; when I saw his eyes I was horribly afraid, only I thought how gladly you would have attacked him had you been there, and what a coward you would hold me, could you have seen me shivering like a little girl before a big lizard, and these thoughts gave me courage."

"Oh, that is all very well!" replied Leonard, and suddenly added, "Hush! be ready!"

As he spoke the door opened, and two great priests came through it, one of them bearing a candle. He who bore the light turned to shut the door, for he suspected nothing. Then, at one and the same instant, Leonard, emerging from the shadow, dealt the first priest a blow upon the head with his staff, which stunned if it did not kill him, for he fell

like an ox beneath the pole-axe, while Otter, standing where he was, dexterously cast his hide rope about the throat of the second man, and drew the noose tight with a jerk that brought him to the earth.

In twenty seconds it was all over. The men, who were the same that had held Leonard suspended in the oubliette, lay senseless or dead, and the dwarf and his master were engaged in possessing themselves of their knives and keys by the light of the candle, which, though it had fallen to the ground, fortunately remained burning.

"That was well done, Otter," said Leonard, "and I am not ashamed to have done it, for these devils kicked me when I was bound. Now we are armed, and have the keys. What next?"

Just then Otter sprang to his feet, crying, "Look out, Baas; here are more."

Leonard glanced up to see, and behold! the second door in the cell was opened, and through it came Juanna, Olfan, Nam, Soa, and three other men.

For a moment there was silence; till one of the captains cried out, "See! Jal the god has come back, and already he claims his victims!" And he pointed to the two priests.

Then followed a scene of confusion, for even Olfan and Nam were amazed

at what seemed to them little short of a miracle, while Leonard and Juanna had eyes for each other only, and the three captains stared at Otter like men who think they see a ghost.

But one person in that company kept her head, and that person was Soa. The captain who guarded her had loosed his hold; silently she slunk back into the shadows, and, unseen of any, vanished through the doorway by which she had been led in. A minute passed, and Otter, thinking that he heard a noise without that door of the cell whereby the two priests had entered, which had been left ajar, went to it and tried to open it. Just then, also, Olfan missed Soa.

"Where is the woman, Nam's daughter?" he cried.

"It seems that she has escaped and shut us in, King," answered Otter, calmly.

Followed by the others, Olfan sprang first to the door of the cell where they were, and then through the connecting passage to that of Juanna's prison. It was true, both were closed.

"It matters nothing, here are the keys," said Leonard.

"They will not avail us, Deliverer," answered Olfan, "for these doors are made fast without by bars of stone thicker than my arm. Now this woman has gone to rouse the college of the priests, who will presently

come to kill us like caged rats."

"Quick!" said Leonard, "waste no time, we must break down the doors."

"Yes, Deliverer," said Nam mockingly; "batter them in with your fists, cut through the stone-work with your spears; surely they are as nothing to your strength!"