

## CHAPTER XXXVII

"I AM REPAID, QUEEN"

Their position was terrible. Soa had escaped, and Soa knew everything. Moreover, she was mad with hatred and longing for revenge on Leonard, Otter, and in a less degree on Olfan the king. Had they succeeded in revealing themselves to the people, all might have gone well, for Otter and Juanna would certainly have been accepted as true gods, who had passed and repassed the gates of death scatheless. But now the affair was different. Soa would tell the truth to the priests, who, even if they were inclined to desert her father in his extremity, must strike for their own sakes and for that of their order, which was the most powerful among the People of the Mist, and had no desire to be placed under the yoke of secular authority.

It was clear to all of them that if they could not escape, they must fall very shortly into the hands of the priests, who, knowing everything, would not dare to allow them to appeal to the army, or to the superstition of the outside public. The only good card they held was the possession of the person of Nam, though it remained to be seen how far this would help them.

To begin with, there are always some ready to step into the shoes of a high priest, also Nam had blundered so extensively in the matter of the false gods, that the greater part of the fraternity, whom he had

involved in his mistakes, would not sorrow to see the last of him.

These facts, which were perfectly well known to Olfan and guessed at by his companions, sharpened their sense of the danger in which they had been placed by Soa's resource and cunning. Indeed, their escape was a matter of life and death to them and to many hundreds of their adherents. If once they could reach the temple and proclaim the re-arisen gods to the people, all would go well, for the army would suffice to keep the priests from using violence. But if they failed in this, their death-warrant was already signed, for none of them would ever be heard of again.

No wonder, then, that they hurled themselves despairingly upon the stubborn doors. For an hour or more they laboured, but all in vain. The massive timbers of hard wood, six inches or more in thickness, could scarcely be touched by their knives and spears, nor might their united strength serve even to stir the stone bolts and bars that held them fast, and they had nothing that could be used as a battering-ram.

"It is useless," said Leonard at last, throwing down his knife in despair; "this wood is like iron, it would take us a week to cut through it."

"Why not try fire, Baas?" suggested Otter.

Accordingly they attempted to burn down the doors, with the result

that they nearly stifled themselves in the smoke and made but little impression upon the woodwork.

At length they gave up the experiment--it was a failure--and sat looking blankly at each other as they listened to certain sounds which reached them from the passages without, telling them that their enemies were gathering there.

"Has anyone a suggestion to make?" said Leonard at last. "If not, I think that this game is about played."

"Baas," answered Otter, "I have a word to say. We can all go down through that hole by which I came up to you. The Water-Dweller is dead, I slew him with my own hand, so there is nothing to fear from him. Beneath the hole runs a tunnel, and that tunnel leads to the slope of the mountain above. At the top of this slope is an ice-bridge by which men may reach a fair country if they have a mind to."

"Then for heaven's sake let us cross it," put in Juanna.

"I have seen that bridge," said Olfan, while the captains stared wonderingly at the man whose might had prevailed against the ancient Snake, "but never yet have I heard of the traveller who dared to set his foot upon it."

"It is dangerous, but it can be crossed," replied Otter; "at the

least, it is better to try it than to stay here to be murdered by the medicine-men."

"I think that we will go, Leonard," said Juanna; "if I am to die I wish to do so in the open air. Only what is to become of Nam? And perhaps Olfan and the captains would prefer to stop here?"

"Nam will go with us wherever we go," answered Leonard grimly; "we have a long score to settle with that gentleman. As for Olfan and his captains, they must please themselves."

"What will do you, Olfan?" asked Juanna, speaking to him for the first time since the scene in the other prison.

"It seems, Queen," he answered, with downcast eyes, "that I have sworn to defend you to the last, and this I will do the more readily because now my life is of little value. As for my brethren here, I think, like you, that they will choose to die in the open, rather than wait to be murdered by the priests."

The three captains nodded an assent to his words. Then they all set to work.

First they took food and drink, of which there was an ample supply in the other cell, and hurriedly swallowing some of it, disposed the rest about their persons as best they could, for they foresaw that even if

they succeeded in escaping, it was likely that they would go hungry for many days. Then Leonard wrapped Juanna in a goat-skin cloak which he took from one of the fallen priests, placing the second cloak over his own shoulders, for he knew that it would be bitterly cold on the mountains. Lastly, they tied Nam's arms behind him and deprived him of his knife, so that the old man might work none of them a sudden injury in his rage.

All being prepared, Otter made his rope fast to the staff and descended rapidly to the cave below. As his feet touched the ground, the priests began to batter upon the doors of the cell with beams of wood, or some such heavy instruments.

"Quick, Juanna!" said Leonard, "sit in this noose and hold the line, we will let you down. Hurry, those doors cannot stand for long."

Another minute and she was beside Otter, who stood beneath, a candle in his hand. Then Leonard came down.

"By the way, Otter," he said, "have you seen anything of the jewels that are supposed to be here?"

"There is a bag yonder by the Water-Dweller's bed, Baas," answered the dwarf carelessly, "but I did not trouble to look into it. What is the use of the red stones to us now?"

"None, but they may be of use afterwards, if we get away."

"Yes, Baas, if we get away," answered Otter, bethinking himself of the ice-bridge. "Well, we can pick it up as we go along."

Just then Nam arrived, having been let down by Olfan and the captains, and stood glaring round him, not without awe, for neither he nor any of his brethren had ever dared to visit the sacred home of the Snake-god. Then the captains descended, and last of all came Olfan.

"We have little time to spare, Deliverer," said the king; "the door is falling," and as he spoke they heard a great crash above. Otter jerked furiously at the rope, till by good luck one end of the stake slid over the edge of the hole and it fell among them.

"No need to leave this line for them to follow by," he said; "besides it may be useful." At that moment something appeared looking through the hole. It was the head of one of the pursuing priests. Nam saw it and took his opportunity.

"The false gods escape by the tunnel to the mountains," he screamed, "and with them the false king. Follow and fear not, the Water-Dweller is dead. Think not of me, Nam, but slay them."

With an exclamation Otter struck him heavily across the mouth, knocking him backwards, but the mischief was done, for a voice cried in answer:

"We hear you, father, and will find ropes and follow."

Then they started. One moment they paused to look at the huge bulk of the dead crocodile.

"This dwarf is a god in truth," cried one of the captains, "for no man could have wrought such a deed."

"Forward," said Leonard, "we have no time to lose."

Now they were by the crocodile's bed and among the broken bones of his victims.

"The bag, Otter, where is the bag?" asked Leonard.

"Here, Baas," answered the dwarf, dragging it from the mouldering skeleton of the unlucky priest who, having offended the new-found god, had been let down through the hole to lay it in its hiding-place and to perish in the jaws of the Water-Dweller.

Leonard took the bag, and opening its mouth, which was drawn tight with a running strip of hide, he peeped into it while Otter held down the candle that he might see. From its depths came a glimmer of red and blue light that glowed like the heart of some dull fire.

"It is the treasure," he said, in a low tone of exultation. "At last the luck has turned."

"How much does it weigh?" said Juanna, as they sped onwards.

"Some seven or eight pounds, I should say," he answered, still exultantly. "Seven or eight solid pounds of gems, the finest in the world."

"Then give it to me," she said; "I have nothing else to carry. You may have to use both your hands presently."

"True," he answered, and passed the string of the bag over her head.

Now they went on up the smooth sloping bed of the stream, suffering little inconvenience, except from the cold of the water that flowed about their ankles.

"The stream has risen a little, Baas, since I passed it this morning," said Otter. "Doubtless this day's sun has melted some snow at its source. To-morrow we might not have been able to travel this road."

"Very likely," answered Leonard. "I told you that our luck had turned at last."

Twenty minutes more and they reached the mouth of the tunnel, and



passing between the blocks of ice, found themselves upon the mountain side. But, as it chanced, the face of the moon was hidden by clouds, which is often the case in this country at the beginning of the spring season, for whereas in winter the days are almost invariably misty and the nights clear, in spring and summer these atmospheric conditions are frequently reversed. So dark was it indeed, that it proved impossible to attempt the ascent of the mountain until the day broke, since to do so would be to run the risk of losing themselves, and very possibly of breaking their necks among its numerous clefts and precipices.

After a minute's hasty discussion they set to work to fill up the mouth of the tunnel, or rather the cracks between the blocks of ice that already encumbered it, with such material as lay to hand, namely lumps of frozen snow, gravel, and a few large stones which they were fortunate enough to find in the immediate vicinity, for the darkness rendered it impossible to search for these at a distance. While they were thus engaged they heard the voices of priests speaking on the further side of their somewhat inefficient barrier, and worked harder than ever, thinking that the moment of attack had come.

To their astonishment, however, the sound of talking died away.

"Now where have they gone?" said Leonard--"to climb the cliff by another path and cut us off?"

"I think not, Deliverer," answered Olfan, "for I know of no such path.

I think that they have gone to bring heavy beams by means of which they will batter down the ice wall."

"Still there is such a path, King," said one of the captains, "for I myself have often climbed it when I was young, searching for snow-flowers to bring to her whom I courted in those days."

"Can you find it now, friend?" asked Olfan eagerly.

"I do not forget a road that I have trod," said the captain, "but it is one not easy to follow."

"See now, Shepherdess," said Olfan after thinking awhile, "shall we take this man for a guide and return down the cliff to the city, for there, unless fate is against us, we may find friends among the soldiers and fight out this battle with the priests."

"No, no," answered Juanna almost passionately, "I would rather die than go back to that dreadful place to be murdered at last. Do you go if you will, Olfan, and leave us to take our chance."

"That I cannot do, Queen, for I am sworn to a certain service," he said proudly. "But hearken, my friend; follow this path of which you speak, if you can do so in the darkness, and find help. Then return swiftly to this spot where I and your two comrades will hold the priests at bay. Perchance you will not find us living, but this I charge you, if we are

dead give it out that the gods have left the land because they were so evilly dealt with, and rouse up the people to fall upon the priests and make an end of them once and for ever, for thus only shall they win peace and safety."

Making no reply, the man shook Olfan and the other two captains by the hand, saluted Juanna, and vanished into the darkness. Then they all sat down in front of the mouth of the tunnel to wait and watch, and very glad were they of the goat-skin cloaks which had belonged to the priests, for as the night drew towards the dawn, the cold became so bitter that they could scarcely bear it, but were obliged to rise and stamp to and fro to keep their wet feet from freezing.

"Leonard," said Juanna, "you do not know what passed after Nam trapped you," and she told him all the tale.

When she had finished he rose and, taking Olfan by the hand, said:

"King, I thank you. May fortune deal as well with you as you have dealt by me and mine!"

"Say no more, Deliverer," answered Olfan hastily; "I have but done my duty and fulfilled my oath, though at times the path of duty is hard for a man to follow." And he looked towards Juanna and sighed.

Leonard sat down and was silent, but many a time both then and in after-days did he wonder at the nobleness of mind of this savage king,

which enabled him, under circumstances so cruel, to conquer his own passion and show himself willing to lay down life and throne together, that he might carry out his vow to protect the woman who had brought him so much pain and now left him for ever with his successful rival.

At length, looking at the mountain peak above them, they saw its snows begin to blush red with the coming of the dawn, and just then also they heard many voices talking within the tunnel, and caught glimpses of lights flashing through the openings in their rude fortifications. The priests, who no doubt had been delayed by the procuring of the timbers which were to serve as battering-rams, and the labour necessary to drag them up the steep incline of the tunnel, had returned, and in force. A few more minutes and a succession of dull thuds on the further side of the ice wall told the little band of defenders that their enemies were at work.

"The light grows quickly, Deliverer," said Olfan quietly; "I think that now you may begin to ascend the mountain and take no harm."

"What shall we do with this man?" asked Leonard, pointing to Nam.

"Kill him," said Otter.

"No, not yet awhile," answered Olfan. "Take this," and he handed Leonard the spear of the third captain, who had left it when he started down the mountain, fearing that it might encumber him, "and drive him along with

you at its point. Should we be overpowered, you may buy your lives as the price of his. But should we hold them back and you escape, then do with him what you will."

"I know well what I would do," muttered Otter, glowering at the priest.

"And now, farewell," went on Olfan in the same calm voice. "Bring more ice, comrades, or stone if you can see any; the wall cracks."

Leonard and Otter wrung the king's hand in silence, but Juanna could not leave him thus, for her heart was melted at the thought of all his goodness.

"Forgive me," she murmured, "that I have brought you grief, and, as I fear, death to follow grief."

"The grief you could not help, Queen, and be sure I shall welcome death if he should choose me. Go now, and happiness go with you. May you escape in safety with the bright pebbles which you desire! May you and your husband, the Deliverer, be blessed for many years in each other's love, and when you grow old together, from time to time think kindly of that wild man, who worshipped you while you were young and laid down his life to save you."

Juanna listened, and tears sprang to her eyes; then of a sudden she seized the great man's hand and kissed it.

"I am repaid, Queen," he said, "and perchance your husband will not be jealous. Now go, and swiftly."

As he spoke a small portion of the wall fell outwards and the fierce face of a priest appeared at the opening. With a shout Olfan lifted his broad spear and thrust. The priest fell backwards, and just then the captains arrived with stones and stopped the hole.

Then the three turned and fled up the mountain side, Otter driving Nam before him with blows and curses, till at length the old man fell and lay on his face groaning. Nor could the dwarf's blows, which were not of the softest, force him to rise.

"Get up, you treacherous dog," said Leonard, threatening him with the spear.

"Then you must loose my arms, Deliverer," answered the priest; "I am very weak, and I cannot travel up this mountain with my hands bound behind me. Surely you have nothing to fear from one aged and unarmed man."

"Not much at present, I suppose," muttered Leonard, "though we have had enough to fear from you in the past." And taking his knife he cut loose the lashings.

While he did so, Juanna turned and looked behind her. Far below them she could see the forms of Olfan and his companions standing shoulder to shoulder, and even catch the gleams of light reflected from their spears, for now the sun was rising. Beneath them again she saw the grass-grown roofs of that earthly hell, the City of the People of the Mist, and the endless plain beyond through which the river wandered like a silver serpent. There also was the further portion of the huge wall of the temple built by unknown hands in forgotten years, and rising above the edge of that gap in the cliff through which she was looking, appeared a black mass which she knew to be the head and shoulders of the hideous colossus, on whose dizzy brow she had sat in that strange hour when the shouting thousands thundered a welcome to her as their goddess, and whence her most beloved friend, Francisco, had been hurled to his cruel death.

"Oh, what I have suffered in that place!" she thought to herself. "How have I lived through it, I wonder? And yet I have won something," and she glanced at Leonard who was driving Nam towards her, "and if only we survive and I am the means of enabling him to fulfil his vow and buy back his home with these jewels, I shall not regret all that I have endured to win them. Yes, even when he is no longer so very much in love, he must always be grateful to me, for few women will have done as much for their husbands."

Then Nam staggered past her, hissing curses, while the untiring Otter rained blows upon his back, and losing sight of Olfan and his companions

they went on in safety, till they reached the neck and saw the  
ice-bridge glittering before them and the wide fields of snow beyond.