

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE TRIUMPH OF NAM

"Which way are we to go now?" said Juanna; "must we climb down this great gulf?"

"No, Shepherdess," answered Otter; "see, before you is a bridge," and he pointed to the band of ice and rock which traversed the wide ravine.

"A bridge?" gasped Juanna, "why it is as slippery as a slide and steep as the side of a house. A fly could not keep its footing on it."

"Look here, Otter," put in Leonard, "either you are joking or you are mad. How can we cross that place? We should be dashed to pieces before we had gone ten yards."

"Thus, Baas: we must sit each of us on one of the flat stones that lie round here, then the stone will take us across of itself. I know, for I have tried it."

"Do you mean to tell me that you have been over there on a rock?"

"No, Baas, but I have sent three stones over. Two crossed safely, I watched them go the whole way, and one vanished in the middle. I think that there is a hole there, but we must risk that. If the stone is heavy

enough it will jump it, if not, then we shall go down the hole and be no more troubled."

"Great heavens!" said Leonard, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand, "this is practical tobogganing with a vengeance. Is there no other way?"

"I can see none, Baas, except for the birds, and I think that we had better stop talking and make ready, for the priests are still behind us. If you will watch on the neck here so that we are not surprised, I will seek stones to carry us."

"How about this man?" said Leonard, pointing to Nam, who lay face downwards on the snow, apparently in a dead faint.

"Oh! we must keep him a while, Baas; he may be useful if those priests come. If not, I will talk with him before we start. He is asleep and cannot run away."

Then Leonard went to the top of the neck, which was distant some twenty yards, and Otter began to search for stones suitable to his purpose.

As for Juanna, she turned her back to the ice-bridge, at which she scarcely dared to look, and sat herself upon a rock. In doing so the jewels in the bag struck against her knee and jingled, and the thought came into her mind that she would examine them while she waited, partly

because she desired to distract her thoughts from the vision of this new and terrible ordeal which lay before her, and partly to gratify a not unnatural curiosity.

Opening the mouth of the bag, she thrust her fingers into it, and one by one drew out the biggest gems which were jumbled together there, placing them on the rock beside her. In less than a minute she was feasting her eyes upon such a collection of priceless jewels as had never before gladdened the sight of any white woman, even in her wildest dreams; indeed, till now Juanna had not thought it possible that stones so splendid could exist on the hither side of the walls of heaven.

First there were great sapphires roughly squared, and two enormous round star rubies: these had formed the eyes of the colossus, which were removed on the morrow of their arrival, the star rubies representing the blood-red pupils. Then there was a heart-shaped ruby of perfect colour and without flaw, almost as large as a jackdaw's egg, which on the days of sacrifice had adorned the breasts of the chief priests of the People of the Mist for many generations. Next came the greatest wonders of this treasure, two marvellous stones, one a sapphire and one a ruby, fashioned respectively into models of the statue of the Dwarf and of the hideous shape of the Water-Dweller. Then there were others--dozens of them--some rudely cut and polished, and some as they came from the earth, but every one of them singled out for its remarkable size and flawlessness, or its perfect fire and beauty.

Juanna arranged them in rows and stared at them with ecstasy--where is the woman who would not have done so?--till in contemplating them she even forgot the present terrors of her position--forgot everything except the gorgeous loveliness and infinite value of the wealth of gems, which she had been the means of winning for Leonard.

Among other things that passed from her mind at this moment was the presence of Nam, who, overcome by rage and exhaustion, lay in a seeming faint upon the snow within twelve paces of her. She never saw him lift his head and look at her with an expression as cold and cruel as that which Otter had seen in the eyes of the Water-Dweller, when he lifted his head from its bed of rock. She never saw him roll slowly over and over across the snow towards her, pausing a while between each turn of his body, for now she was occupied in replacing the jewels one by one into their bag of leather.

At last all were in, and with a sigh--for it was sad to lose sight of objects so beautiful--Juanna drew the mouth of the bag tight and prepared to place it round her neck.

At this moment it was that a hand, withered and lean with age, passed beneath her eyes, and, swiftly as the snatch of an eagle's talon, seized the bag and rent it from her grasp. She sprang up with a cry of dismay, and well might she be dismayed, for there, running from her with incredible speed, was Nam, the jewels in his hand.

Otter and Leonard heard her cry, and, thinking that the priest was escaping, sped to cut him off. But he had no idea of escape, at least not of such escape as they expected. Some forty yards from where Juanna had been sitting, a little promontory of rock jutted out over the unclimbable gulf below them and towards this spot Nam directed his steps. Running along the ridge he halted at its end: indeed he must do, unless he would fall a thousand feet or more to the bottom of the ravine beneath. Then he turned and faced his pursuers, who by now had reached the edge of the cliff.

"Come one step nearer," he cried, "and I let this bag fall whence you shall never recover it, for no foot can tread these walls of rock, and there is water at the bottom of the gulf."

Leonard and Otter stopped, trembling for the fate of the jewels.

"Listen, Deliverer," cried Nam; "you came to this land to seek these trinkets, is it not so? And now you have found them and would be gone with them? But before you go you wish to kill me for vengeance' sake, because I have shown you to be cheats, and have sought to offer you up to those gods whom you have blasphemed. But the red stones you desire are in my hands, and if I unclasp my fingers they will be lost to you and all the world for ever. Say now, if I bring them back to you in safety, will you swear to give me my life and suffer me to go my ways in peace?"

"Yes, we will swear it," answered Leonard, who could not conceal the anguish of his anxiety. "Come back, Nam, and you shall depart unharmed; but if you let the stones fall, then you shall follow them."

"You swear it," said the priest contemptuously: "you are come to this, that you will sacrifice your revenge to satisfy your greed, O White Man with a noble heart! Now I will outdo you, for I, who am not noble, will sacrifice my life to disappoint you of your desires. What! shall the ancient holy treasure of the People of the Mist be stolen by two white thieves and their black hound? Never! I would have killed you all had time been granted to me, but in that I failed, and I am glad that I have failed, for now I will deal you a bitterer blow than any death. May the curse of Jal and Aca cleave to you, you dogs without a kennel! May you live outcasts and die in the dirt, and may your fathers and your mothers and your children spit upon your bones as I do! Farewell!"

And shaking his disengaged hand at them he spat towards them; then with a sudden motion Nam hurled himself backwards off the point of rock and vanished into space, bearing the treasure with him.

For a while the three stood aghast and stared at each other and the point of rock which had been occupied by the venerable form of the late high priest; then Juanna sank upon the snow sobbing.

"It is my fault," she wailed, "all my fault. Just now I was boasting to myself that I had won wealth for you, and I have lost everything. And we

have suffered for nothing, and, Leonard, you are a beggar. Oh! it is too much--too much!"

"Go out there, Otter," said Leonard in a hoarse voice, pointing to the place where Nam had hurled himself, "and see whether there is any chance of our being able to climb down into the gulf."

The dwarf obeyed and presently returned shaking his head.

"It is impossible, Baas," he said; "the walls of rock are sheer as though they had been cut with a knife; moreover there is water at the bottom of them, as the old wizard said, for I can hear the sound of it. Oh! Baas, Baas, why did you not kill him at first, or let me kill him afterwards? Surely I told you that he would bring evil on us. Well, they are gone and we can never find them again, so let us save our lives if we may, for after all these are more to us than bright stones. Come now and help me, Baas, for I have found two flat rocks that will serve our turn, a big one for you and the Shepherdess, since doubtless she will fear to make this journey alone, and a smaller one for myself."

Leonard followed him without a word; he was too heart-broken to speak, while Juanna rose and returned to the spot where Nam had robbed her. Looking up presently, her eyes still blurred with tears, she saw Leonard and the dwarf laboriously pushing two heavy stones across the snow towards her.

"Come, do not cry, Juanna," said Leonard, ceasing from his labours and laying his hand kindly upon her shoulder, "they are gone and there is an end of it. Now we must think of other things."

"Oh!" she answered, "if only you had seen them, you would never stop crying all your life."

"Then I dare say that the fit will be a short one," replied Leonard grimly, glancing at the awful bridge which stretched between them and safety.

"Listen, Juanna, you and I must lie upon this stone, and it will--so says Otter--carry us across to the other side of the ravine."

"I cannot, I cannot," she gasped, "I shall faint and fall off. I am sure that I shall."

"But you must, Juanna," answered Leonard. "At least you must choose between this and returning to the City of the Mist."

"I will come," she said. "I know that I shall be killed, but it is better than going back to those horrible priests; and besides, it does not matter now that I have lost the jewels."

"Jewels are not everything, Juanna."

"Listen, Shepherdess," put in Otter, "the thing is easy, though it looks difficult. All that you have to do is to shut your eyes and lie still, then the stone will carry you over. I am not afraid. I will go first to show you the way, and where a black dwarf can pass, there you white people who are so much braver can follow. But before I start, I will tie you and the Deliverer together with my cord, for so you will feel safer."

Then Otter dragged both stones to the very verge of the incline, and having passed the rope about the waists of Juanna and Leonard, he prepared himself for the journey.

"Now, Deliverer," he said, "when I am safe across, all that you must do it to lie flat upon the stone, both of you, and to push a little with the spear. Then before you know it, you will be by my side."

"All right," said Leonard doubtfully. "Well, I suppose that you had better start; waiting won't make the matter any easier."

"Yes, Baas, I will go now. Ah! little did I think that I should ever be forced to take such a ride as this. Well, it will be something to make songs about afterwards."

And Otter laid himself face downwards on the stone with a little laugh, though Leonard noticed that, however brave his spirit might be, he could not prevent his flesh from revealing its natural weakness, for it

quivered pitifully.

"Now, Baas," he said, gripping the edges of the stone with his large hands, "when I give the word do you push gently, and then you will see how a black bird can fly. Put your head lower, Baas."

Leonard obeyed, and the dwarf whispered in his ear:

"I only want to say, Baas, in case we should not meet again, for accidents will happen even on the safest roads, that I am sorry that I made such a pig of myself yonder; it was so dull down there in that hole of a palace, and the fog made me see all things wrong. Moreover, drink and a wife have corrupted many a better man. Don't answer, Baas, but start me, for I am growing afraid."

Placing his hand at the back of the stone, Leonard gave it a slight push. It began to move, very slowly at first, then more fast and faster yet, till it was rushing over the smooth ice pathway with a whirring sound like that produced by the flight of a bird. Presently it had reached the bottom of the first long slope and was climbing the gentle rise opposite, but so slowly that for a while Leonard thought that it was going to stop. It crossed its brow, however, and vanished for a few seconds into a dip where the watchers could not see it, then it appeared again at the head of the second and longest slope, of which the angle was very steep. Down this the stone rushed like an arrow from a bow, till it reached the narrow waist of the bridge, whereof the general

conformation bore some resemblance to that of a dead wasp lying on its back. Indeed, from where Leonard and Juanna stood, the span of ice at this point seemed to be no thicker than a silver thread, while Otter and the stone might have been a fly upon the thread. Now of a sudden Leonard distinctly saw the rock sledge and its living burden, which just then was travelling its swiftest, move upwards as though it had leaped into the air and then continue its course along the rising place which represented the throat of the wasp, till at length it stopped.

Leonard looked at his watch; the time occupied by the transit was just fifty seconds, and the distance could not have been much less than half a mile.

"See," he cried to Juanna, who all this while had sat with her hand before her eyes to shut out the vision of the dwarf's dreadful progress, "he has crossed safely!" and he pointed to a figure that appeared to be dancing with glee upon the breast of the snow slope.

As he spoke a faint sound reached their ears, for in those immense silences sound can travel far. It was Otter shouting, and his words seemed to be, "Come on, Baas; it is easy."

"I am glad he is safe," said Juanna faintly, "but now we must follow him. Take my handkerchief, Leonard, and tie it over my eyes, please, for I cannot bear to look. The idol's head was nothing to this."

Leonard obeyed her, bidding her not to be afraid.

"Oh! but I am terribly afraid," she said. "I never was so much frightened in all my life, and I--I have lost the jewels! Leonard, do forgive me for behaving so badly to you. I know that I have behaved badly in many ways, though I have been too proud to admit it before. But now, when I am going to die, I want to beg your pardon. I hope you will think kindly of me, Leonard, when I am dead, for I do love you with all my heart, indeed I do." And tears began to roll down beneath the bandage.

"Dearest," he answered, kissing her tenderly, "as we are tied together, it seems that if you die I must die too. Do not break down now after you have borne so much."

"It is the jewels," she sobbed, "the jewels; I feel as though I had committed a murder."

"Oh! bother the jewels!" said Leonard. "We can think about them afterwards." And he advanced towards the flat stone, Juanna feeling the while as though they were two of Carrier's victims about to know the Marriage of the Loire.

As they came to the stone Leonard heard a sound behind him, a sound of footsteps muffled by the snow, and glancing round he saw Soa rushing towards them, almost naked, a spear-wound in her side, and the light of

madness shining in her eyes.

"Get back," he said sternly, "or----" and he lifted the great spear.

"Oh! Shepherdess," she wailed, "take me with you, Shepherdess, for I cannot live without you."

"Tell her to go away," said Juanna, recognising the voice; "I never want to see her any more."

"You hear, Soa," answered Leonard. "Stay, how has it gone yonder? Speak truly."

"I know not, Deliverer; when I left, Olfan and his brother still held the mouth of the tunnel and were unhurt, but the captain was dead. I slipped past them and got this as I went," and she pointed to the gash in her side.

"If he can hold out a little longer, help may reach him," muttered Leonard. Then without more words, he laid himself and Juanna face downwards on the broad stone.

"Now, Juanna," he said, "we are going to start. Grip fast with your right hand, and see that you do not leave go of the edge of the stone, or we shall both slip off it."

"Oh! take me with you, Shepherdess, take me with you, and I will be wickered no more, but serve you as of old," shrilled the voice of Soa in so despairing a cry that the rocks rang.

"Hold fast," said Leonard through his set teeth, as, disengaging his right hand from about Juanna's waist, he seized the handle of the spear and pressed its broad blade against a knob of rock behind them. Now the stone, that was balanced on the very verge of the declivity, trembled beneath them, and now, slowly and majestically as a vessel starting from her slips when the launching cord is severed, it began to move down the icy way.

For the first second it scarcely seemed to stir, then the motion grew palpable, and at that instant Leonard heard a noise behind him and felt his left foot clasped by a human hand. There was a jerk that nearly dragged them off their sledge, but he held fast to the front edge of the stone, and though he could still feel the hand upon his ankle, the strain became almost imperceptible.