

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE PASSING OF THE BRIDGE

Lifting his head very cautiously, Leonard looked over his shoulder and the mystery was explained. In her madness and the fury of her love for the mistress whom she had outraged and betrayed, Soa had striven to throw herself upon the stone with them so soon as she saw it commence to move. She was too late, and feeling herself slipping forward, she grasped despairingly at the first thing that came to her hand, which chanced to be Leonard's ankle. Now she must accompany them upon their awesome journey; only, while they rode upon the stone, she was dragged after them upon her breast.

A flash of pity passed through Leonard's brain as he realised her fearful plight. Then for a while he forgot all about her, since his attention was amply occupied with his own and Juanna's peril. Now they were rushing down the long slope with an ever-increasing velocity, and now they breasted the first rise, during the last ten yards of which, as in the case of Otter, the pace of the stone slowed down so much in proportion to the progressive exhaustion of its momentum, that Leonard thought they were coming to a standstill. Then it was that he kicked out viciously, striving to free himself from the weight of Soa, which threatened to bring them to a common ruin. But she clung to him like ivy to a tree, and he desisted from his efforts, fearing lest he should cause their sledge to alter its course.

On the very top of the rise the motion of the stone decreased almost to nothingness, then little by little increased once more as they traversed a short sharp dip, the same in which they had lost sight of Otter, to be succeeded by a gentle rise. So far, though exciting and novel, their journey had been comparatively safe, for the path was broad and the ice perfectly smooth. Its terrors were to come.

Looking forward, Leonard saw that they were at the commencement of a decline measuring four or five hundred yards in length, and so steep that, even had it offered a good foothold, human beings could scarcely have stood upon it. As yet the tongue of ice was fifty paces or more in width, but it narrowed rapidly as it fell, till at length near the opposite shore of the ravine, it fined away to a point like that of a great white needle, and then seemed to break off altogether.

Now they were well under way, and now they sped down the steep green ice at a pace that can hardly be imagined, though perhaps it is sometimes equalled by an eagle rushing on its quarry from some vast height of air. Indeed it is possible that the sensations of an eagle making his headlong descent and those of Leonard may have been very similar, with the important exception that the bird feels no fear, whereas absolute terror are the only words wherewith to describe the mental state of the man. So smooth was the ice and so precipitous its pitch that he felt as though he were falling through space, unsupported by anything, for travelling at that speed the friction of the stone was imperceptible.

Only the air shrieked as they clove it, and Juanna's long tresses, torn by it from their fastenings, streamed out behind her like a veil.

Down they went, still down; half--two-thirds of the distance was done, then he looked again and saw the horror that lay before them. Already the bridge was narrow, barely the width of a small room; sixty yards further on it tapered to so fine a point that their stone would almost cover its breadth, and beneath it on either side yawned that unmeasured gulf wherein Nam was lost with the jewels. Nor was this all, for at its narrowest the ice band was broken away for a space of ten or twelve feet, to continue on the further side of the gap for a few yards at a somewhat lower level, and then run upwards at a steep incline to the breast of snow where Otter sat in safety.

On they whizzed, ice beneath them and before them, and ice in Leonard's heart, for he was frozen with fear. His breath had left him because of the rush of their progress, but his senses remained painfully acute. Involuntarily he glanced over the edge of the stone, saw the sheer depths below him, and found himself wondering what was the law that kept their sledge upon this ribbon of ice, when it seemed so easy for it to whirl off into space.

Now the gap was immediately in front of them. "God help us!" he murmured, or rather thought, for there was no time for words, and they had left the road of ice and were flying through the air as though the stone which carried them were a living thing, that, seeing the peril,

had gathered up its energies and sprung forward for its life.

What happened? Leonard never knew for certain, and Otter swore that his heart leaped from his bosom and stood in front of his eyes so that he could not see. Before they touched the further point of ice--while they were in the air, indeed--they, or rather Leonard, heard a hideous scream, and felt a jerk so violent that his hold of the stone was loosened, and it passed from beneath them. Then came a shock, less heavy than might have been expected, and lo! they were spinning onwards down the polished surface of the ice, while the stone which had borne them so far sped on in front like a horse that has thrown its rider.

Leonard felt the rubbing of the ice burn him like hot iron. He felt also that his ankle was freed from the hand that had held it, then for some minutes he knew no more, for his senses left him. When they returned, it was to hear the voice of Otter crying, "Lie still, lie still, Baas, do not stir for your life; I come."

Instantly he was wide awake, and, moving his head ever so little, saw their situation. Then he wished that he had remained asleep, for it was this:

The impetus of their rush had carried them almost to the line where the ice stopped and the rock and snow began, within some fifteen feet of it, indeed. But those fifteen feet were of the smoothest ice and very sheer, so smooth and sheer that no man could hope to climb them. Below them the

slope continued for about thirteen or fourteen yards, till it met the corresponding incline that led to the gap in the bridge.

On this surface of ice they were lying spread-eagled. For a moment Leonard wondered how it was that they did not slide back to the bottom of the slope, there to remain till they perished, for without ropes and proper implements no human being could scale it. Then he saw that a chance had befallen them, which in after-days he was wont to attribute to the direct intervention of Providence.

It will be remembered that when they started, Leonard had pushed the rock off with a spear which Olfan had given them. This spear he drew in again as they began to move, placing it between his chest and the stone, for he thought that it might be of service to him should they succeed in crossing the gulf. When they were jerked from the sledge, and left to slide along the ice on the further side of the gap, in obedience to the impetus given to them by the frightful speed at which they were travelling, the spear, obeying the same laws of motion, accompanied them, but, being of a less specific gravity, lagged behind in the race, just as the stone, which was heaviest, outstripped them.

As it happened, near the top of the rise there was a fissure in the ice, and in this fissure the weapon had become fixed, its weighted blade causing it to assume an upright position. When the senseless bodies of Leonard and Juanna had slid as far up the slope as the unexpended energy of their impetus would allow, naturally enough they began to move back

again in accordance with the laws of gravity. Then it was, as luck would have it, that the spear, fixed in the crevice of the ice, saved them from destruction; for it chanced that the descent of their two forms, passing on either side of it, was checked by the handle of the weapon, which caught the hide rope whereby they were bound together.

All of this Leonard took in by degrees; also he discovered that Juanna was either dead or senseless, at the time he could not tell which.

"What are you going to do?" he asked of Otter, who by now was on the verge of the ice fifteen feet above them.

"Cut steps and pull you up, Baas," answered the dwarf cheerfully.

"It will not be easy," said Leonard, glancing over his shoulder at the long slope beneath, "and if we slip or the rope breaks----"

"Do not talk of slipping, Baas," replied Otter, as he began to hack at the ice with the priest's heavy knife, "and as for the rope, if it was strong enough for the Water-Dweller to drag me round the pool by, it is strong enough to hold you two, although it has seen some wear. I only wish I had such another, for then this matter would be simple."

Working furiously, Otter hacked at the hard surface of the ice. The first two steps he hollowed from the top of the slope lying on his stomach. After this difficulties presented themselves which seemed

insuperable, for he could not chip at the ice when he had nothing by which to support himself.

"What is to be done now?" said Leonard.

"Keep cool, Baas, and give me time to think," and for a moment Otter squatted down and was silent.

"I have it," he said presently, and rising he took off his goat-skin cloak and cut it into strips, each strip measuring about two inches in width by two feet six inches in length. These strips he knotted together firmly, making a serviceable rope of them, long enough to reach to where Leonard and Juanna were suspended on the stout handle of the spear.

Then he took the stake which had already done him such good service, and, sharpening its point, fixed it as deeply as he could into the snow and earth on the border of the ice belt, and tied the skin rope to it.

"Now, Baas," he said, "all is well, for I can begin from the bottom."

And, without further words, he let himself down till he hung beside them.

"Is the Shepherdess dead, Baas?" he asked, glancing at Juanna's pale face and closed eyes, "or does she only sleep?"

"I think that she is in a swoon," answered Leonard; "but for heaven's sake be quick, Otter, for I am being frozen on this ice. What is your plan now?"

"This, Baas: to tie about your middle the end of the rope that I have made from the cloak, then to undo the cord that binds you and the Shepherdess together, and return to the top of the slope. Once there I can pull her up by the hide line, for it is strong, and she will slip easily over the ice, and you can follow."

"Good!" said Leonard.

Then hanging by one hand the dwarf managed, with such assistance as Leonard could give him, to knot beneath Leonard's arms the end of the rope which he had constructed from the skin garment. Next he set to work to untie the hide cord, thereby freeing him from Juanna. And now came the most difficult and dangerous part of the task, for Leonard, suspended from the shaft of the spear by one hand, must support Juanna's senseless form with the other, while Otter made shift to drag himself to the summit of the ice, holding the hide line in his teeth. The spear bent dreadfully, and Leonard did not dare to put any extra strain upon the roughly fastened cord of goat-skin, by which the dwarf was hauling himself up the ice, for if it gave they must all be precipitated to the dip below, there to perish miserably. Faint and frozen as he was, it seemed hours to him before Otter reached the top and called to him to get go of Juanna.

Leonard obeyed, and seating himself on the snow, his feet supported by the edge of the ice, the dwarf put out his strength and began to pull her up. Strong as he was, it proved as much as he was able to do; indeed, had Juanna lain on any other material than ice, he could not have done it at all. But in the end he succeeded, and with a gasp of gratitude Leonard saw her stretched safe upon the snow.

Now Otter, hastily undoing the cord from Juanna's waist, made it into a running noose which he threw down to Leonard, who placed it over his shoulders. Having lifted the spear from the cleft in which it stood, he commenced his ascent. His first movements cost him a pang of agony, and no wonder, for the blood from wounds that had been caused by the friction of his flesh as he was hurled along the surface of the slide, had congealed, freezing his limbs to the ice, whence they could not easily be loosened. The pain, sharp as it was, did him good, however, for it aroused his benumbed energies and enabled him to drag on the goat-skin cord with all his strength, while Otter tugged at that which was beneath his arms.

Well for him was it that the dwarf had taken the precaution of throwing down this second line, for presently Otter's stake, which had no firm hold in the frozen earth, came out and slid away, striking Leonard as it passed and bearing the knotted lengths of the cloak with it. The dwarf cried aloud and bent forward as though he were about to fall. By a fearful effort he recovered himself and held fast the rope in his hand,

while Leonard, suspended by it, swung to and fro on the surface of the ice like the pendulum of a clock.

Then followed the most terrible moments of all their struggle against the difficulties of this merciless place. The dwarf held fast above, and Leonard, ceasing to swing, lay with hands and legs outstretched on the face of the ice.

"Now, Baas," said Otter, "be brave, and when I pull, do you wriggle forward."

He tugged till the thin hide rope stretched, while Leonard clawed and kicked at the ice with his toes, knees, and disengaged hand.

Alas! it gave no hold--he might as well have tried to climb a dome of plate glass at an angle of sixty degrees.

"Rest awhile, Baas," said the dwarf, whose breath was coming in great sobs, "then make a little nick in the ice with the blade of the spear, and when next I pull, try to set some of your weight upon it."

Leonard did as he was bid without speaking.

"Now," said the dwarf, and with a push and a struggle Leonard was two feet higher up the incline. Again the process was repeated, and this time he got his left hand into the lowest of the two steps that Otter

had hacked with the knife, and once more they paused for breath. A third effort, the fiercest of them all, a clasping of hands, and he was lying trembling like a frightened child above the glacier's lip.

The ordeal was over, that danger was done with, but at what a cost! Leonard's nerves were completely shattered, he could not stand, his face was bleeding, his nails were broken, and the bone of one knee was exposed by the friction of the ice, to say nothing of the shock to the system and the bruises which he had received when he was hurled from the stone. Otter's condition was a little better, but his hands were cut by the rope and he was utterly exhausted with toil and the strain of suspense. Indeed, of the three Juanna had come off by far the best, for she swooned at the very beginning of the passage of the bridge, and when they were jerked from the stone, being lighter than Leonard, she had fallen upon him. Moreover, the thick goat-skin cloak which was wrapped about her had protected her from all hurt beyond a few trifling cuts and bruises. Of their horrible position when they were hanging to the spear, and the rest of the adventure, including the death of Soa, she knew nothing, and it was well for her reason that this was so.

"Otter," murmured Leonard in a shaking voice, "have you lost that gourd of spirit?"

"No, Baas, it is safe."

"Thank Heaven!" he said; "hold it to my lips if you can."

The dwarf lifted it with a trembling hand, and Leonard gulped down the fiery liquor.

"That's better," he said; "take some yourself."

"Nay, Baas, I have sworn to touch drink no more," Otter answered, looking at the gourd longingly; "besides you and the Shepherdess will want it all. I have some food here and I will eat."

"What happened to Soa, Otter?"

"I could not see rightly, Baas, I was too frightened, much more frightened than I had been when I rode the stone myself; but I think that her legs caught in the ice on this side of the hole, and so she fell. It was a good end for her, the vicious old cow!" he added, with a touch of satisfaction.

"It was very near being a bad end for us," answered Leonard, "but we have managed to come out of it alive somehow. Not for all the rubies in the world would I cross that place again."

"Nor I, Baas. Wow! it was awful. Now my stomach went through my head, and now my head went through my stomach, and the air was red and green and blue, and devils shouted at me out of it. Yes, and when I came to the hole, there I saw the Water-Dweller all fashioned in fire waiting

with an open mouth to eat me. It was the drink that made me think of these things, Baas, and that is why I have sworn to touch it no more. Yes, I swore it as I flew through the air and saw the flaming Water-Dweller beneath me. And now, Baas, I am a little rested, so let us try and wake up the Shepherdess, and get us gone."

"Yes," said Leonard, "though I am sure I do not know where we are to go to. It can't be far, for I am nearly spent."

Then crawling to where Juanna lay wrapped in her cloak, Otter poured some of the native spirit down her throat while Leonard rubbed her hands. Presently this treatment produced its effect, for she sat up with a start, and seeing the ice before her, began to shriek, saying, "Take me away; I can't do it, Leonard, I can't indeed."

"All right, dear," he answered, "you have done it. We are over."

"Oh!" she said, "I am thankful. But where is Soa? I thought that I heard her throw herself down behind us."

"Soa is dead," he answered. "She fell down the gulf and nearly pulled us with her. I will tell you all about it afterwards; you are not fit to hear it now. Come, dear, let us be going out of this accursed place."

Juanna staggered to her feet.

"I am so stiff and sore that I can hardly stand," she said, "but, Leonard, what is the matter with you? You are covered with blood."

"I will tell you afterwards," he replied again.

Then Otter collected their baggage, which consisted chiefly of the hide line and the spear, and they crawled forward up the snow-slope. Some twenty or thirty yards ahead of them, and almost side by side, lay the two glacier stones on which they had passed the bridge, and near them those which Otter had despatched as pioneers on the previous morning. They looked at them wondering. Who could have believed that these inert things, not an hour before, had been speeding down the icy way quicker than any express train that ever travelled, and they with them?

One thing was certain: did they remain unbroken for another two or three million years, and that is a short life for a stone, they would never again make so strange a journey.

Then the three toiled on to the top of the snow-slope, which was about four hundred yards away.

"Look, Baas," said Otter, who had turned to gaze a fond farewell at the gulf behind; "there are people yonder on the further side."

He was right. On the far brink of the crevasse were the forms of men, who seemed to be waving their arms in the air and shouting. But whether

these were the priests who, having overcome the resistance of Olfan, had pursued the fugitives to kill them, or the soldiers of the king who had conquered the priests, the distance would not allow them to see. The fate of Olfan and the further domestic history of the People of the Mist were now sealed books to them, for they never heard any more of these matters, nor are they likely to do so.

Then the travellers began to descend from field to field of snow, the great peak above alone remaining to remind them that they were near to the country of the Mist. Once they stopped to eat a little of such food as they had with them, and often enough to rest, for their strength was small. Indeed, as they dragged themselves wearily forward, each of the men holding Juanna by the hand, Leonard found himself wondering how it came about, putting aside the bodily perils from which they had escaped, that they had survived the exhaustion and the horrors, physical and mental, of the last forty-eight hours.

But there they were still alive, though in a sorry plight, and before evening they found themselves below the snow line in a warm and genial climate.

"I must stop," said Juanna as the sun began to set; "I can drag myself no further."

Leonard looked at Otter in despair.

"There is a big tree yonder, Baas," said the dwarf with an attempt at cheerfulness, "and water by it. It is a good place to camp, and here the air is warm, we shall not suffer from cold. Nay, we are lucky indeed; think how we passed last night."

They reached the tree, and Juanna sank down half fainting against its bole. With difficulty Leonard persuaded her to swallow a little meat and a mouthful of spirit, and then, to his relief, she relapsed into a condition with partook more of the nature of stupor than of sleep.