THE PEOPLE OF THE MIST.

By H. RIDER HAGGARD.

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"Well, Otter, I can tell you one thing. I have come a long way on this job, and I am not going to turn my back on it now. I have never yet turned my back on a venture, and I will not begin with this, though I dare say that my death lies in it.

"Come, Soa," he continued, "we have traveled here to please you. Now give us the benefit of your suggestions. How are we going to get your mistress out of that camp?"

"Loose the slaves and let them kill their masters," Soa answered laconically.

"I doubt that there is much fight in slaves," said Leonard.

"There should be 50 of Mavoom's men there," she replied, "and they will fight well enough if they have arms."

Then Leonard looked at Otter, seeking further ideas.

"My shake puts it into my head," said the dwarf, "that fire is a good friend when men are few and foes many; also that the reeds yonder are dry, and the sea wind rises and will blow hard before midnight. Moreover, all these houses are thatched, and in a wind fire jumps. But can a regiment have two generals? You are our captain, baas. Speak, and we will do your bidding. Here one counsel is as good as another. Let fate speak through your mouth."

"Very well," said Leonard. "This is my plan. It goes a little further than yours, that is all. We must gain entrance to the nest while it is still dark, before the moon arises. I know the watchword—'Devil.' Disguised as we are, perhaps the sentry will let us pass unquestioned. If not, we must kill him, and silently."

"Good!" said Otter, "but how about the woman here?"

"We will have her hidden in the bush. She could be of no help in the camp and might hinder us."

"No, white man," broke in Soa. "Where you go I go also. Moreover, my mistress is yonder, and I would seek her."

"As you like," answered Leonard, then went on: "We must get between the hut—there is only one—and the low wall that borders the canal separating the nest from the slave camp, and if the drawbridge is up and no other means can be found we swim the dike, dispose of the sentry there also and gain the slave camp. There we must try to free some of the slaves and send them round through the garden into the morass to fire the reeds should the wind blow strong enough. Meanwhile I propose to walk boldly into the camp, salute Pereira, pass myself off as a slaver, with a dhow at the mouth of the river, and say that I have come to buy slaves, and, above all, to bid for the white girl. Luckily we have a good deal of gold. This is my plan so far as it goes, and the rest we must leave to chance. If I can buy the Shepherdess, I will; if not, I must try to get her off in some other way."

"Good, baas, and now let us eat, for we shall need all our strength tonight. Then we will go down to the landing place and take our chance."

As yet the night was intensely dark, and the gloom did not tend to raise their spirits; also, as Otter had predicted, the wind was getting up and soughed the reeds and willows in melancholy notes.

So the time passed till it was 9 o'clock.

"We must move down to the landing place," said Leonard. "There will soon be some light—enough for us to work by."

Then Otter took the lead, and slowly, step by step, they crept back to the road and followed it down the shore of the canal opposite the water gate. Here was a place where boats and canoes were tied, both for convenience in crossing the canal to and from the camp and for the use of the slave dealers when they passed to the secret harbor six miles away, where the dhows embarked their cargoes.

Here they waited awhile. From the nest came the sound of revelry; from the slave camp there rose other sounds—the voice of groaning, broken by an occasional wail wrung out of the misery of some lost creature who lay there in hell. Gradually the sky brightened a little.

"Perhaps we had better be making a start," said Leonard. "There is a canoe which will serve our turn."

Before the words were out of his mouth they heard a sound of oars, and a boat crept past them and made fast to the water gate 20 yards away.

"Who goes there?" came the challenge of the sentry in Portuguese. "Speak quick, or I fire."

"Don't be in such a hurry with your rifle, fool!" answered a coarse voice. "The very best of friends goes here, an honest trader called Xavier, who comes from his plantation on the coast to tell you all good news."

"Pardon, senor," said the sentry, "but how was a man to see in the dark, big as you are? What is the news, then? Are the dhows in sight?"

"Come down and help us to tie up this cursed boat, and I will tell you. You know where the post is, and we can't find it."

The sentry obeyed with alacrity, and the man called Xavier went on. "Yes, the dhows are in sight, but I don't think that they will get in tonight because of the wind, so you may look for a busy day tomorrow loading up the blackbirds. One is in, by the way, a small one, from Madagascar. The captain is a stranger, a big Frenchman named Pierre, or he may be an Englishman for anything I know. I hailed him and found that he is all right, but I didn't see him. However, I sent him a note to tell him that there was fun on here tonight, which was generous of me, as he may be a rival bidder."

"Is he coming, senor?" I ask, "because, if so, I must look out for him."

"I don't know. He answered that he would if he could, but how is the English girl? She is to be put up tonight, isn't she?"

"Oh, yes, senor, there will be a great deal to do at 12, when the moon is high. As soon as she has been bought the priest Francisco is to marry her to the lucky man there and then. The old fellow insists on it. He has grown superstitious about the girl and says she shall be properly married."

Xavier laughed aloud. "Has he, now? He is getting into his dotage. Well, what does it matter? We have a good law of divorce in these parts, friend. I am going in for that girl. If I give a hundred ounces for her, I will buy her, and I have brought the gold with me."

"A hundred ounces for one girl! It is a large sum, senor, but you are rich, not like us poor devils, who get all the risk and little profit."

By this time the men had finished tying up the boat and getting some baggage or provisions out of her, Leonard could not see which. Then Xavier and the sentry went up the steps together, followed by the two boatmen, and the gates were shut behind them.

"Well," whispered Leonard, "we have learned something at any rate. Now, Otter, I am Pierre, the French slave trader from Madagascar, and, understand, you are my servant. As for Soa, she is the cook, or interpreter, or any one you like. We must pass the gates, but the real Pierre must never pass them. There must be no sentry to let him in. Do you think that you can manage it, Otter, or must I?"

"It comes into my head, baas, that we may learn a lesson from this Xavier. I might forget something in the canoe, and the sentry might help me to find it after you have passed the gates. For the rest I am quick and strong and silent."

"Quick and strong and silent you must be. A noise, and all is lost."

Then they crept to the canoe which they had selected and loosened her. They got in, and Otter took the paddle. First he let her float gently down stream and under cover of the shore for a distance of about 50 yards. Then he put about, and the pair began.

"Now, you fool, where are you paddling to?" said Leonard in a loud voice to Otter, speaking in the bastard Arabic which passes current for a language on this coast.

"You will have us into the bank, I tell you. Curse this wind and the darkness! Steady now, you ugly black dog! Those must be the gates the letter told of. Hold on with the boat hook, can't you!"

A wicket in the gate above them rattled, and the voice of the sentry challenged them.

"A friend, a friend," answered Leonard in Portuguese, "one who is a stranger and would pay his respects to your leader, Dom Antonio Pereira, with a view to business."

"What is your name?" asked the guard suspiciously.

"Pierre is my name. Dog is the name of the dwarf, my servant, and, as for the old woman, you can call her anything you like."

"The password," said the sentry. "None comes in here without the word."

"The word—ah, what did the Dom Xavier say it was in his letter? 'Fiend?' No; I have it. 'Devil' is the word."

"Where do you hail from?"

"From Madagascar, where the goods you have to supply are in some demand just now. Come, let us go. We don't want to sit here all night and miss the fun."

The man began to unbar the door and stopped, struck by a fresh doubt.

"You are not of our people," he said. "You speak Portuguese like a cursed Englishman."

"No; I should hope not. I am a 'cursed Englishman'—that is, half—son of an English lord and a French creole, born in the Mauritius, at your service, and let me ask you to be a little more civil, for cross bred dogs are fierce."

Now at length the sentry opened one side of the gate, grumbling, and Leonard swaggered up the steps, followed by the other two. Already they were through it, when suddenly he turned and struck Otter in the face.

"Why, dog," he said angrily, "you have forgotten to bring up the keg of brandy, my little present for the dom! Go and fetch it! Quick, now!"

"Pardon, chief," answered Otter, "but I am a small man, and the keg is heavy for me alone. If you will deign to help me, for the old woman is too weak."

"Do you take me for a porter that I should roll kegs of brandy up steps? Here, my friend," he went on, addressing the sentry, "if you wish to earn a little present and a drink, perhaps you will give this fellow a hand with the keg. There is a spigot in it, and you can try the quality afterward."

"Right, senor," said the man briskly and led the way down the steps.

A look of dreadful intelligence passed between the dwarf and his master. Then Otter followed, his hand upon the hilt of the Arab saber which he wore, while Leonard and Soa waited above. They heard the man's heavily booted feet going down the steps, followed by Otter's naked footfall.

"Where is your keg? I don't see it," said the sentry presently.

"Lean over, senor, lean over," answered Otter. "It is in the stern of the canoe. Let me help you."

There was a moment's pause; to the listeners it seemed hours. Then came the sound of a blow and a heavy splash. They harkened on, but nothing more was to be heard except the beating of their hearts and the noise of the revelry from the camp.

Three more seconds, and Otter stood beside them, and in the dim light Leonard could see that his eyes stared wide and his nostrils twitched.

"Quick was the blow; strong was the blow; silent is the man forever," whispered Otter. "So the baas commanded, so it is."

CHAPTER VI.

"Help me to bar the gate," said Leonard presently.

In another minute the great iron bar had been dropped into its place, and Leonard withdrew the key and put it in his pocket.

"Why do you lock the door, baas?" whispered Otter.

"To keep the real Pierre out in case he should come this way. Two Pierres would be one too many at this game. Now we must win or perish."

Then they crept along the embankment till they gained the shelter of the hut or barrack shed which stood with its back to the dike that separated the nest from the slave camp. Happily none saw them, and there were no dogs in the place. Dogs make a noise at inconvenient times; therefore slave dealers do not love them.

The end of the shed behind which they were crouching was situated some eight or ten paces from the drawbridge that formed the only path of entry to the slave camp.

"Baas," said Otter, "let me go forward and look. My eyes are the eyes of a cat. I can see in the dark. Perhaps the bridge is down."

And without waiting for an answer he crept forward on his hands and knees so quietly that they could scarcely hear a movement. Notwithstanding his white dress there was little chance of his being seen, for the shadow of the shed was dense, and a fringe of rushes grew along the edge of the dike.

Five minutes passed, ten minutes passed, and Otter did not return. Leonard's anxiety grew very keen.

"Let us go and see what has happened, mother," he whispered to Soa.

They crept along to the end of the shed. Within a yard of it they discovered the arms and clothes of Otter, but Otter? Where was he?

"The black one has deserted us," said Soa beneath her breath.

"Never!" answered Leonard.

By now the clouds were breaking before the wind, which was rising steadily, and some stars shone out, giving a little light. The dike lay deep between its banks and was not more than 20 feet in width, so that the air did not ruffle it. Moreover, as any observer of nature will have noticed, the surface of still water is never quite dark, even on much blacker nights than this.

Why had Otter taken off his clothes? Leonard wondered. Evidently that he might go into the water. And what could he want to go into the water for unless it was that his heart failed him, and, as Soa suggested, he had deserted? But this was impossible, for he knew well that he would die first. In his great perplexity Leonard stared at the dike.

Now he could see that on its farther side was a flight of wooden steps, protected by gates, and that a man was seated on the lowest step, with a rifle beside him, his feet hanging down to within a few inches of the surface of the dike. It must be the sentry. Next instant Leonard saw something else. Beneath the feet of the man a ripple grew on the face of the deep water, and something flashed in the ripple like the flash of steel. Then a small black object projected itself toward the feet of the sentry, who was half asleep and humming to himself drowsily. Suddenly they saw the man slide from his seat as though by magic. He said nothing; but, making one ineffectual grasp at some rushes, he vanished into the depths below. For a minute or more Leonard could distinguish a slight disturbance on the surface of the water, and that was all.

Now he guessed what had happened. Otter had dived, and rising beneath the feet of the man, had seized him, and with a sudden movement dragged him down to death by drowning. Either this or an alligator had taken him, and that flash was the flash of his fangs.

As Leonard thought thus a dark form rose gasping at the foot of the steps. It drew itself out of the water and slipped stealthily up them. It was Otter, and he held a knife in his hand. Now the dwarf vanished through the gates into the little guardhouse at the top of the embankment. Another minute, and ropes began to creak. Then the tall drawbridge, standing upright like a scaffold against the sky, was seen to bend itself forward. Down it came very softly, and the slave camp was open to them. Again the black shape appeared, this time on the bridge.

"Come along," whispered Leonard to his companion. "That hero, Otter, has drowned the sentry and won the bridge. Stop; pick up his clothes and arms."

At that moment Otter arrived himself. "Quick," he said. "Come over, baas, before they see that the bridge is down. Give me my clothes and the gun."

"All right; here they are," answered Leonard, and in another minute they were over the bridge and standing on the parapet of the slave camp.

"Into the guardhouse, baas. The windlass is there, but no man."

They entered. A lamp was burning in the place. Otter seized the handle of the windlass and began to wind. He was naked, and it was a wonderful sight to see the muscles starting out in knots on his huge but dwarfish frame as he strained at the weight of the bridge.

Presently it was up, and leaning on the handle of the wheel Otter chuckled aloud.

"Now we are safe for a time," he said, "and I will dress myself. Let the baas forgive me for appearing thus before him, I who am so ugly."

"Tell us the tale, Otter."

"It is short, baas," the dwarf replied as he put on his robe and turban. "When I left you, I watched, I who can see in the dark, and in a little while I saw the guard come down the steps and sit by the edge of the water. He was sleepy, for he yawned and lit a roll of paper to smoke it. Presently it went out, and he had no more matches. He looked up to the house here, but was too lazy to fetch them. Then I guessed that he was alone, for else he would have called to his companion for fire. Now he grew sleepier, and I said to myself: 'Otter, Otter, how can you kill this man silently? You must not shoot, because of the noise, and if you throw a knife or a spear you may miss or wound him only.'

"And my snake spoke in my heart and answered: 'Otter, Otter, dive, seize his feet and drag him down swiftly and stamp him into the mud, you who are half a fish and can swim as no other man can swim. Do it at once, Otter, before the light comes and men can see the drawbridge move.' Well, and so I did it, baas. Wow! I trod him deep into the mire! Never will he come up again. After that I rose and ran into the guardhouse, fearing lest there might be another. When I was a slave, two always kept watch there, but there was none, so I let the bridge down. Ah, I remember how it worked! And this is the tale, baas."

"A great tale, Otter, but it is not finished yet. Now let us to the slaves. Come, take the light and lead the way. Here we are safe. Is it not so?"

"Here, baas, we are safe, for none can reach us except by storm, and yonder is the big gun which turns upon itself. Let us twist the gun round first, so that if need be we can fire into the camp."

"I don't know much of cannon," said Leonard doubtfully.

"But I know something, white man," said Soa, speaking for the first time. 'Mavoom, my master, had a small one up at the settlement, and often I have helped to fire it for practice and as a signal to boats on the river, and so have many of the men who were carried away, if we can find them yonder."

"Good," said Leonard.

A path ran along the top of the embankment to the platform on which the gun was mounted. It was a six pounder muzzle loading gun. Leonard unhooked the rammer and ran it down the muzzle.

"The gun is loaded," he said. "Now let us swing her round."

They did so easily enough, bringing the muzzle down upon the nest camp, and then they entered the little ammunition hut which stood alongside. Filed up in it, in case of emergency, were half a dozen rounds of grapnel shot and powder.

"Lots of ammunition, if we should want to use it," said Leonard. "It never occurred to those gentlemen that a gun can shoot two ways. And now, Otter, lead us to the slaves, quick."

"This way, baas, but first we must get the tools. They are in the guard hut, I suppose."

So they crept back to the hut, holding their heads as low as possible, for the light was increasing, although the moon was not yet up, and they feared lest they should be seen against the sky line. Here they found boxes containing nippers, chisels and other instruments such as are used to undo the irons upon slaves; also they found the keys of the padlocks that locked the iron bars to which the captives were tethered. Taking a lantern with them, but leaving another burning, as before, in the hut, lest its absence should excite suspicion, they passed through two strong gates and down the steps on the farther side of the embankment. A few paces beyond was the first slave shed, a rough erection supported on posts, but without sides.

They entered the shed, Otter leading the way with the lantern. In the middle was a pathway, and on either side of this pathway ran the long bars to which the captives were fastened in a double row. Perhaps there might have been 250 of them in this shed. Here the sights and scenes were such as need not be described. Of the miserable captives some lay on the wet ground, men and women together, trying to forget their sorrows in sleep, but the most part of them were awake, and the sound of moans ran up and down their lines like the moaning of trees in gusts of wind. When they saw the light, the slaves ceased moaning, for they thought that this was a visit from their captors, and crouched upon the ground like dogs that await the whip.

Some of them indeed stretched up their manacled hands, imploring pity, but these were the exceptions. The most of them had abandoned hope and were sunk in dull despair. It was pitiful to see the glance of their terror filled eyes and the sympathetic quiver of their wheated frames whenever an arm was lifted or a sudden movement made.

Soa went down the line, rapidly examining the faces of the slaves.

"Do you see any of Mavoom's people?" asked Leonard anxiously.

"Not here, white man. Let us go to the next shed unless you want to loose these."

"No good in that, mother," said Otter. "They would only betray us."

So they went to the next shed—in all there were four—and here at the second man who was sleeping, his head bowed on his chained hands, Soa stopped suddenly like a pointer dog when he scents game.

"Peter, Peter," she said.

The man awoke—he was a fine fellow about 30 years of age—and glared round wildly.

"Who called me by my old name?" he said hoarsely. "Nay, I dream. Peter is dead."

"Peter," said the woman again, "awake, child of Mavoom. It is I, Soa, who am come to save you."

The man cried aloud and began to tremble, but the other slaves took no notice, thinking only that he had been smitten with a scourge.

"Be silent," said Soa again, "or we are lost. Loose the bar, black one. This is a headman from the settlement, a brave man." Soon the bar was undone. Then Otter bade Peter hold out his wrists while he twisted off the fetters. Presently they were gone, and in the ecstasy of his recovered liberty the man leaped high into the air, then fell at Otter's feet as though he would embrace them.

"Get up, you fool," said the dwarf roughly, "and if there are any more of the men of Mavoom here show them to us. Quick, or you will soon be fast again!"

"There should be 40 or more," Peter answered, recovering himself, "besides a few women and children. The rest of us are dead, except the Shepherdess alone, and she is yonder."

Then they went down the lines, slipping the chains from the settlement men. Soon they had unmanacled ten or more men whom Soa selected, and others stood about them with their hands still chained. As they went about the work Soa explained something of the position to Peter, who was fortunately a native of intelligence. He soon grasped it and earnestly seconded Leonard's efforts to preserve silence and to prevent confusion.

"Come," said Leonard to Soa, "we have got enough to begin with. I must be off. You can loose the rest at your leisure. The moon is rising, it is a quarter to 12, and we have not a moment to lose. Now, Otter, before we go, how can we send men to fire the reeds through the garden?"

"No, baas, I have thought of a better way, the way by which I escaped myself—that is, if these men can swim."

"They can all swim," said Soa. "They were bred on the banks of the river."

"Good. Then they must swim down the dike where I killed the sentry, four of them. At the end are bars of wood, but in my day they were rotten. At the worst they can be climbed. Then they will find themselves in the morass among thick reeds. But they must not fire these until they have worked round to the place of the sunrise, whence the wind blows strongly. Then they must go from spot to spot and bend down the driest of the reeds, setting fire to them. Afterward they can get to the back of the fire and wait till all is done, one way or the other. If we win, they will find us; if we are killed, they can try to run away. But will the men go?"

Soa stepped forward and chose four of their number, but Peter she did not choose, for he also knew something of the working of cannon.

"Listen," she said. "You have heard the words of this black one. Now obey, and if you depart from them by one jot may"— and she poured out so fearful a curse upon them that Leonard stared at her astonished.

"Aye," added Otter, "and if I live through this I will cut your throats!"

"No need to threaten," said one of the men. "We will do our best for our own sakes as well as for yours and that of the shepherdess. We understand the plan, but to light the reeds we must have fire."

"Here are matches," said Otter.

"Wet matches will not light, and we must swim," answered the spokesman.

"Fool, do you then swim with your head under water? Tie them in your hair."

"Ah, he is clever!" said the spokesman. "Now, if we live to reach them, when shall we fire the reeds?"

"As soon as you are ready," answered Otter. "You will not come easily to the back of them. Farewell, my children, and if you dare to fall pray that you may die rather than look upon my face again!"

"Ou! We have seen it once. Is that not enough?" answered the spokesman, looking at Otter's huge nose with wonder not untouched by fear.

Two minutes later the four men were swimming swiftly down the dike, taking their chance of the alligators.

"Drop the bridge," said Leonard. "We must be off."

Otter lowered it, at the same time explaining its mechanism, which was very simple, to Soa, Peter and some other of the settlement men.

"Now, mother, goodby," said Leonard. "Loose all the men you can and keep a keen lookout, so as to be ready to lower the bridge if you should see us or your mistress coming toward it. If we should not come by dawn, be ready also, for then we shall probably be dead or prisoners, and you must act for yourself."

"I hear you, lord," answered Soa, "and I say that you are a brave man. Whether you win or lose, the red stone is well earned already."

Another minute, and they were gone.

Having crossed the bridge, which was instantly hoisted again, Leonard and Otter avoided observation by creeping back toward the water gate as they had come—that is, behind the shelter of the shed. Emerging from this, they ran a few yards till they were opposite the gate, then walked leisurely across the open space, a distance of 50 yards or more, till they reached the thatched hut where the sale of slaves was carried on. There was nobody in this hut; but, looking between the posts on which it was supported, they could see by the light of the moon, now growing momentarily clearer, that a great and uproarious concourse of people was gathered beyond in front of the veranda of the nest itself.

"Come on, Otter," whispered Leonard. "We must go among these gentry. Watch me closely, do what I do, keep your weapons ready, and if it comes to blows get behind my back and fight like a devil. Above all, don't be taken prisoner."

Leonard spoke calmly, but his heart was in his mouth, and his sensations were such as must have been known to Daniel when he went into the lions' den, for, as in the case of the prophet, he felt that nothing short of a special providence could save them. They were round the shed now, and immediately in front of them was a mixed gathering of desperadoes—Portuguese, Arabs, bastards and black men of various tribes—such as Leonard had never seen in all his varied experience.

Villainy and greed were written on every countenance. It was a crew of human demons, and an extensive one. These wretches, most of whom had already drunk too freely and were drinking more, stood with their backs to them, looking toward the veranda of the nest. On the steps of this veranda, surrounded by a choice group of companions, all of them gaudily dressed, a man was standing whom Leonard would have had no difficulty in identifying as the Dom Pereira, even without Otter's warning whisper of "See! The Yellow Devil!"

This remarkable person demands some description as he stood in glory that night at the apex, and, though he knew it not, the conclusion of his long career of infamy. He was old, perhaps 70, his hair was white and venerable looking and his person obese. His black eyes were small, cunning, cold and bright, and they had the peculiarity of avoiding the gaze of any person with whom he was in conversation—at least when that person was looking his way. Their glance passed over him, under him, round him—anywhere but at him. As his sobriquet suggested, the coloring of Pereira's flesh was yellow, and the loose skin hung in huge wrinkles upon his cheeks. His mouth was large and coarse, and his fat hands twitched and grasped continually, as though with a desire of clutching gold. For the rest he was gorgeously dressed, and, like his companions, somewhat in liquor.

Such was the outward appearance of Pereira, who was believed in his day to be the very wickedest man in Africa, a preeminence to which few can hope to attain, and the fountain head of the slave trade on this part of the coast. Until his face had been seen, stamped as it was with the traces of long and unmentionable evil, few honest men could guess to what depths humanity can sink. Some indeed have declared that to see him was to understand the devil and all his works.

CHAPTER VII.

At the moment of Leonard's and Otter's introduction to his society the Yellow Devil was about to make a speech, and every eye was fixed upon him so intently that none saw or heard the pair approach.

"Now, my friends, make a path, if you please," said Leonard in a loud voice and speaking in Portuguese. "I wish to pay my respects to your chief."

A dozen men wheeled round at once.

"Who are you?" they cried, seeing a stranger.

"If you will be so kind as to let me pass, I shall be most happy to explain," Leonard answered, pushing his way through the throng.

"Who is that?" cried Pereira in coarse, thick tones. "Bring him here."

"There, you hear him. Let us through, friends," said Leonard. "Let us through."

Thus adjured, the throng opened a path, and Leonard and Otter passed down it, many suspicious eyes scanning them as they went.

"A greeting to you, senor," said Leonard when they had emerged in front of the veranda.

"Curse your greeting! Who in satan's name are you?"

"A humble member of your honorable profession," said Leonard coolly, "come to pay his respects and do a little business."

"Are you? You don't look it. You look like an Englishman. And who is that abortion, pray?" And he pointed to Otter.

"I believe that you are spies, and, by heaven, if you are, I am the man to deal with you!"

"This is a likely story," said Leonard, laughing, "that one man and a black dog should venture into the headquarters of gentlemen like you, not being of the cloth. But I think there is a noble gentleman among you—I mean the Senor Xavier—who can vouch for me. Did he not send a note to one Captain Pierre, whose dhow lies in the harbor yonder, hailing from Madagascar? Well, Captain Pierre has the honor of accepting his invitation and arrives here, not without difficulty. Now he begins to think that he would have done better to stick to his ship."

"That is all right, Pereira," said Xavier, a huge Portuguese with a dash of negro blood and a villainous countenance, the same man whom they had followed through the gate. "I sent a note to the senor. I told you of it."

"Then I wish you had left it alone," snarled Pereira for an answer. "I don't like your friend's looks. He might be the captain of an English man-of-war rigged up in our dress." At the words "English man-of-war" a murmur of fear and anger went through the assembly. Some of those present had experience of these hated vessels and their bigoted crews, who loved not this honest commerce, and to all they were names of ill omen. Things looked serious, and Leonard saw that he must do something, and quickly, so he lost his temper, or pretended to.

"Curse you all for a pack of suspicious curs!" he said. "I tell you that my dhow lies yonder. I am half an Englishman and half a creole and as good a man as any of you. Now, look here, Dom Pereira, if you or any other man dares to doubt my word, just step out, and I will ram this down your lying throat," and placing his hand on the hilt of his saber he took a pace forward and scowled. The effect was instantaneous. Pereira turned a little pale beneath his yellow skin, for, like most cruel men, he was a great coward.

"Put up your pig sticker," he said. "I see you are one of the right sort. I only wanted to try you. As you know, we must be careful in our business. Come and shake hands, brother, and be welcome. I trust you now, and old Antonio never does things by halves."

"Perhaps you had better try him a little further," said a young man who was standing near Pereira as Leonard prepared to accept the invitation. "Send for a slave and let us have the old test. There is none better."

Pereira hesitated, and Leonard's blood turned cold.

"Look here, young man," he said more furiously than before, "I have cut the throats of more men than you have whipped, and if you want a test I will give you one. Come down, my young cockerel, come down. There is plenty of light for comb snipping."

The man turned white with rage, but stood a moment contemplating Leonard's athletic form and keen eyes. Apparently he found that in them which gave him pause, for instead of springing at him he burst into a volume of threats and filthy abuse.

How the matter would have ended it is difficult to say, but at this junction Pereira thought it well to interfere and vigorously.

"Peace!" he thundered in his great voice, his white hair bristling with rage. "I have welcomed this man, and he is welcome. Is my word to be set aside by a drunken young brawler like you? Shut your ugly mouth, or, by the saints, I will have you clapped in irons."

The slave driver obeyed. Perhaps he was not sorry for an excuse to escape the quarrel. At any rate, with a scowl at Leonard, he dropped back and was silent.

Harmony being thus restored, Pereira proceeded with the business of the evening. First, however, he called Leonard to him, shook him by the hand and bade a slave girl bring him drink. Then he addressed the company thus:

"My lambs, my dear companions, my true and trusted friends, this is a sad moment for me, your old leader, for I stand here to bid you goodby. Tomorrow the nest will know the Yellow Devil no more, and you must find another captain. Alas! I grow old and am no longer up to the work, and the trade is not what it was, thanks to those infernal Englishmen and their cruisers, which prowl up and down our waters, seeking to rob honest men of the fruits of their enterprise.

"So I retire with such modest gains as I have won by a life of labor—indeed they have gone before me, lest some of you might be put in the way of temptation—to spend the evening of my day in peace and prayer. And now there is one more little thing. As it chanced during our last journey, the daughter of an accursed Englishman fell into our hands. I took her and brought her here, and as her guardian I have asked you to meet me tonight that I may choose her a husband, as it is my duty to do. I cannot help myself. I am far too old for such vanities, and among the settled people near Mozambique, where I am going to live, it might excite remarks. So I will be generous and pass her on to another, but to whom shall I give this prize? Among so many worthy gentlemen how can I set one above the others and declare him the worthiest of the girls? I cannot, so I must leave it to chance, for I know that fortune will choose better than I. Therefore to him who is ready to make the largest present to me I will give this maid, to comfort him with her love—to make a present, mind you, not to pay a price. Still perhaps it will be best that the amount of the present should be ascertained in the usual way—by bidding—in ounces of gold, if you please! One condition more. There shall be nothing immoral in this matter, nothing irregular, my friends. The church shall have its say in it, and he whom I select must wed the maid here, before us all. Have we not a priest at hand, and shall we find no work for him? Now, my children, time draws on. Ho, you, bring on the English maid!"

This speech was not delivered quite so continuously as it is printed here. On the contrary, it was subject to many interruptions, mostly of an ironical nature, the allusions to "a present" to be given for the girl and to the proposed marriage ceremony being received with screams of ribald laughter. Now all this died away, for every eye was watching for the appearance of Juanna.

In a few moments a figure clad in white and guarded by several men was seen advancing from the direction of the armshouse. The figure came on through the moonlight with a swift, agile step, looking neither to the right nor the left till it arrived in front of the veranda and halted. Then it was that Leonard first saw Juanna Rodd. She was very tall and slight; her dark hair was twisted into a single knot at the back of her shapely head; her features were small; her face fair in coloring and somewhat rounded in form. So much he saw at a glance, but it was not until she looked up and round her that Leonard discovered the girl's peculiar glory, the glory of her eyes. Then and in that light he could not tell their color, a difficult task at any time, for they varied from gray to blue, according to the shadows which fell upon them, but he could see that they were wide and splendid, fearless and yet soft. For the rest she was clad in an Arab robe, richly worked, and wore sandals on her feet.

Juanna stopped in front of the veranda and searched it with her eyes. Presently they ceased searching, and she spoke in a clear, low voice.

"What do you want with me now, Dom Antonio Pereira?" she said.

"My dove," he answered in his coarse, mocking tones, "do not be angry with your slave. I promised you, my dove, that I would find a husband for you, and now all these gallant gentlemen are gathered for the choice. It is your marriage hour, my dove."

"Dom Antonio Pereira," the girl answered, "for the last time I plead to you. I am helpless here among you, and I have done you no injury. Let me go unharmed, I pray of you!"

"Let you go unharmed? Why, who would hurt you, my dove?" answered the satyr. "You go to a husband."

"I shall never go to any husband of your choosing, Dom Antonio," Juanna said again in a low and steady voice. "Be assured of that, all of you. I have no fear of you, for God will help me in the last resource. And now, as I have pleaded to you for the last time, so for the last time I warn you, Dom Antonio, and your wicked companions also. Go on with this if you will, but a judgment awaits you. Death is near to you, you murderer, and after death vengeance!"

Thus she spoke, not loud indeed, but with a conviction, a power and a dignity of mien that carried terror to the hearts of the most hardened villains there. It was at the conclusion of her speech that her eyes first met those of Leonard Outram. He was bending forward to listen, and in his grief and anger he had forgotten to preserve the truculent expression which was his part to wear. Once more Leonard's face was the face of an English gentleman, noble and open, if somewhat stern. Their eyes met, and there was that in his which caused Juanna to pause. She looked at him swiftly, as though she would read his very soul, and in answer he put all his will and heart's desire into his gaze, the will and the desire that she should know him to be her friend. They had never met before. She did not even dream of his existence, and there was little in Leonard's outward appearance to distinguish him from the ruffians by whom he was surrounded. And yet her quick sense, sharpened by despair, read what was written in his eyes and read it aright. From that moment Juanna felt that she was not alone among these wolves; that there was one at least who would save her if he could. In an instant she had searched his face and dropped her eyes again, fearing lest she should awake suspicion.

The scene was one which Leonard never forgot. Above the bright moon shone in the heavens, before him were rank upon rank of evil faces, each marked with some new emotion, and standing alone in their midst was the beautiful girl, proud in the depth of shame, defiant even in the power of foes gathered to destroy her.

For awhile the wind had dropped, and the silence was deep—so deep was it that Leonard could hear the mew of a kitten which had crept from the veranda and was rubbing itself against Juanna's feet. She heard it also, and, stooping, picked up the little creature and held it to her breast.

"Let her go!" said a voice from the crowd. "She is a witch and will bring ill luck upon us."

At the sound Pereira seemed to awake. With a hideous oath he flung himself from the chair and waddled down the steps toward his victim.

"Curse you, you slut!" he said. "Do you think to frighten men with your threats? Let God help you if he can. The Yellow Devil is god here. You are as much in my power as this brute." And he snatched the kitten from her arms and dashed it to the ground, where it lay broken. "You see, God does not help the kitten, and he will not help you. Here, strip her. Let men see what they were going to buy." And, gripping the breast of her white robe, he rent it open.

With one hand Juanna gathered up the torn dress, and with the other she began to do something to her hair. An agony of fear took hold of Leonard. He knew the story of the poison which she carried. Was she about to use it?

Once again their eyes met, and there was warning in his glance. She loosed her dark hair indeed and let it fall about her shoulders, covering her rent robe to the waist, but she did no more. Only after that Leonard saw that she kept her right hand closed, and he knew that her death was hidden within it. Then she spoke once more to Pereira.

"In your last hour may you remember these two deeds," she said, pointing to the writhing kitten and to her torn dress. Now slaves drew near to do their master's bidding, but even that audience would not suffer this.

"Leave her alone," they said. "We can see that the girl is fair and perfect."

Then the slaves hung back, nor did Pereira repeat his commands.

Returning to the veranda, he stood by the chair, and taking an empty glass in his hand by way of an auctioneer's hammer began:

"Gentlemen, I am going to offer you a very choice lot, so choice that it makes up all the sale. The lot is a white girl, half English and half Portuguese by blood. She is well educated and devout. As to her docility I can say nothing. That will be for her husband to attend to. Of her beauty I need not speak. You can all see it for yourselves. Look at that figure, that hair, those eyes. Have any of you known their equal? Well, this lot will be to him among you who is inclined to make me the largest present in compensation—yea, yea, he may take her this very night, and my blessing with her. But there are conditions. He whom I approve must be lawfully married to the girl by the priest Francisco here," and turning he pointed to a small, melancholy looking man, with a womanish face and dark blue eyes, who stood in the background clothed in a priest's robe. "Then I shall have done my duty by her. One more thing, gentlemen. We are not going to waste time in little bids. The upset price will be 30 ounces."

"Silver?" said a voice.

"Silver? No, of course not. Do you think you are bidding for a nigger girl, fool? Gold, man, gold! Thirty ounces of gold, and payment to be made on the nail."

There was a groan of disappointment, and one man cried out:

"What are we poor fellows to do? Thirty ounces for a beginning! Where is our chance?"

"What are you to do? Why, work hard at your profession and grow rich, of course! Do you suppose that these prizes are for the poor? Now, then, the fair is open. Who bids for the white girl Juanna? Thirty ounces is offered. What advance, what advance?"

"Thirty-five!" said a wizened little man, with a hectic cough, who looked fitter for a burial than a bridal.

"Forty!" cried another, a pure bred Arab of stately appearance and saturnine expression, who wished to add to his harem.

"Forty-five!" answered the wizened man.

Then the Arab bid 50, and for awhile it seemed that these two alone were competitors.

When the bids had reached 70 ounces, the Arab muttered "Allah!" and gave up. He preferred to wait for the houris.

"Knock her down," said the wizened man. "She is mine."

"Wait awhile, my little friend," said the great Portugee, Xavier, who had passed the water gate before Leonard and his companions. "I am going to begin now. Seventy-five!"

"Eighty!" said the little man.

"Eighty-five!" answered Xavier.

"Ninety!" screamed the other.

"Ninety-five!" said Xavier.

"A hundred!" yelled the small man.

"A hundred and five!" replied Xavier, triumphantly capping his bid.

Then, with a curse, his antagonist gave up also, and the mob shouted, thinking that Xavier had won.

"Knock her down, Pereira," said Xavier in his turn as he surveyed his prize with affected unconcern.

"Wait a moment," put in Leonard, speaking for the first time. "I am going to begin now. A hundred and ten!"

The multitude shouted again. The contest was growing exciting. Xavier glared at Leonard and bit his fingers with rage. He was very near his limit of possible expenditure.

"Now, then," cried Pereira, licking his lips for joy, since the price had already run 20 ounces higher than he expected. "Now, then, friend Xavier, am I to knock down this beauty to the stranger Captain Pierre? It sounds a lot, but she is cheap at the price, dirt cheap. Look at her and bid up. But mind, it is cash down, no credit—no, not for an ounce."

"A hundred and fifteen," said Xavier, with the air of a man making his last throw for fortune.

"A hundred and twenty," said Leonard quietly.

He had bid to the last ounce in his possession, and if Xavier went further he must give in unless indeed he chose to offer Soa's ruby in payment. This, needless to say, he was not anxious to do. Moreover, no one would believe a stone of that size to be genuine. But of all this he showed nothing in his face; but, turning coolly, he called to a slave girl to bring him spirits and busied himself with filling his glass. His hand never trembled, for he knew well that his antagonist was watching for a cue, and if he showed uncertainty all might be lost. But in his heart Leonard wondered what he should do if another ounce was bid.

Meanwhile the spectators were shouting encouragement, and Pereira was urging Xavier to increase his offer. For awhile the Portugee hesitated, surveying Juanna, who stood pale and silent, her head bowed upon her breast. At this juncture Leonard turned, the glass still in his hand.

"Did you make any advance, senor?" he asked.

"No, curse you. Take her. I will not put down another ounce for her or any woman on the earth."

Leonard only smiled and looked at Pereira.

"Going!" said that worthy. "The white girl, Juanna, is going to the stranger Pierre for 120 ounces of gold. Going! Come, Xavier, don't lose her. If you do, you will only be sorry once, and that will be always. Now for the last time," and he lifted the glass in his hand and paused.

Xavier made a step forward and opened his lips to speak. Leonard's heart stood still, but presently the Portugee changed his mind and turned away.

"Gone!" screamed Pereira, bringing the glass down so heavily on the arm of his chair that it flew into fragments.

CHAPTER VIII.

"Gone!" said Pereira again. "And now, fri