THE PEOPLE OF THE MIST.

By H. RIDER HAGGARD.

[Copyright, 189, by the Author.]

Leonard ran backward toward the drawbridge that now was not more than 20 yards away. A fourth time the Portuguese came on, and the Englishman could not repeat his tactics, for the mob hemmed him in behind. On sped Xavier and smote his hardest. Leonard saw the steel gleam in the moonlight and lifted his sword to guard. The blow fell, fire sprung from it in sparks, and down rattled the fragments of shattered steel. His sword was broken.

"Fight on, baas," said the voice of Otter. "Fight on. Both swords have gone."

Leonard looked up. It was true. The Portugee was casting aside his broken weapon and clutching at his knife. Now, Leonard had no knife, and at the moment he never thought of his revolver. But he still held the hilt of his sword, and with it he sprang straight at Xavier, who rushed to meet him. They met with a dull shock as bull meets bull. He struck one blow with the broken sword hilt, then dropped it. It was useless.

But the stroke did him good service, for falling on the right hand of the Portugee it paralyzed it for a second, causing him to let fall the dagger. Then they gripped each other, fighting desperately with their naked strength alone. Twice the huge Portugee lifted the Englishman from the ground, striving to throw him, while the crowd yelled with excitement. But twice he failed. Not for nothing had Leonard learned wrestling as a lad and hardened his iron muscles by years of toil. Xavier may have weighed 16 stone, and he did not weigh 13, but his arms were like bars of steel, and he was struggling for his life. He waited awhile, letting the Portugee exhaust himself in efforts to hurl him to the ground. Then, suddenly tightening his grip, Leonard put out his strength. He could not hope to lift the man, that he knew, but he might throw him. With a sudden movement he hooked his right leg behind Xavier's left calf. Then he cast his weight forward and pushed with all his strength upon the great man's breast. Xavier tottered, recovered himself, tottered again and strove to shift his leg. Leonard felt the movement and met it with a supreme effort. Losing his balance, his foe swayed slowly backward like a falling tree then fell with a thud that shook the ground. It was a gallant throw, and even the "ranks of Tusculum" as represented by the slave drivers could scarce forbear to cheer. Now Leonard lay upon the breast of the man, for he was pulled down with him.

For a moment his enemy was still breathing stertorously, for the shock of the fall had been great. Leonard looked around. There, some eight feet away, was the knife, and he who could grasp it must win this deadly game. But how could he grasp it? Xavier, whose strength and powers were coming back, still hugged him in his fearful grip. He also saw the knife and would win it. Rapidly, almost instinctively, Leonard measured the distance with his eye. There was but one plan—to roll to it. The first roll would leave him undermost, but the dagger would still be out of Xavier's reach. Then if he could only succeed in turning him upon his back once more Leonard would be uppermost again, and if he was able to free his hand it might grasp the dagger. It was a terrible risk, but he must take it.

He lay motionless awhile, husbanding his force, and the Portugee surged and heaved beneath him. He could feel the muscles of his mighty frame start up in knots as he struggled. At last he let him have his way, and over they went, the two of them. Now Xavier was uppermost, and the mob yelled in triumph, for they thought that the stranger's strength was spent.

"The knife, the knife!" gasped Xavier, and one of his servants sprang forward to give it to him. But Otter was watching and started out of the press, naked saber in hand. His fierce and ugly face was twitching with excitement; his black eyes shone, and his vast shoulders worked to and fro. To Juanna, fascinated by the fierce struggle, the dwarf looked like some black gnome, like a thing of supernatural power, half toad, half human.

"He who touches the knife dies!" he said in guttural Arabic, stretching his long arm and saber over it. "Let these cocks fight it out, my masters."

The man shrank back. He also was afraid of Otter, deeming him uncanny. Nor did any others interfere.

And now came the moment of death or victory. As he could not reach the weapon, with a sudden movement Xavier freed his right hand and grasped the Englishman's throat, but to do this he must lessen the pressure on his breast. Leonard felt the grip, and the knowledge that his end was at hand renewed his powers. Twice he writhed like a snake, gripping the ground with the muscles of his back and legs. Once he swung his frame to the right, then one vast effort, and, lo! Xavier turned slowly over like a log of wood, and again Leonard lay upon his breast.

Leonard lay upon his breast, and his right arm was free and within reach of the dagger. But the giant's grip of his throat was cruel. The blood drummed in his ears, and his senses began to go. No, he would not die thus and leave the girl helpless. Where was it? He was blind. He could see nothing but her white face. He must get free—ah, he knew how! They thought that he was done. See, his head fell, when suddenly he reared himself up, and his arm heaved in the air. Crash it came fell on the forehead of Xavier, that in its turn was pillowed on the stony earth. The grip slackened. Crash again, a fearful and despairing blow. Leonard's throat was free, and the air rushed into his bursting lungs. Now he could see the knife and grasp it, but there was no need to use it. The great man beneath him flung his arms wide, shivered and was still.

Then it was, while men paused wondering at those awful blows, that Juanna, mindful of her deliverer's bidding, turned and fled, sick at heart, but unhindered, to the edge of the ditch opposite the drawbridge. Otter also rushed up and dragged Leonard from the ground.

"Wow," he cried, "a good fight and a great blow! Dead, by my father's spirit—dead, and no touch of steel! Awake, my father, awake, for if the boar is down the pigs remain."

Leonard heard his words dimly and knew their import. With an effort he ceased to stagger and rested his weight upon the dwarf, much as a man might lean upon some sturdy post. His breath came back to him, and his mind cleared.

He looked round and saw Juanna standing near the bridge, like one who hesitates whether to fly or stay.

"Sirs," gasped Leonard, "I have fought, and I have won. Now let me go in peace with the girl. Is the man alive?"

There was a ring of men round the body of Xavier, and in their center knelt the priest Francisco. At this moment he rose and said:

"It is useless to minister to him. He is dead."

The slavers looked at Leonard with awe not unmixed with admiration. Who had ever seen such a thing—that one whose strength had been a byword should be slain by the naked fist? They forgot that it is comparatively easy to kill a man whose head rests upon a stone.

Presently, however, their wonder gave way to rage. Xavier had been a favorite among them, and they were not minded that he should die unavenged. So they drew round Leonard, scowling and cursing.

"Stand back," he said, "and let me pass. I have fought the man fairly. Had I wished to take advantage of him should I not have used this?" And for the first time he remembered and drew his colt, the sight of which cooled their ardor somewhat, for they gave way. "Perhaps you will give me an arm, father," Leonard went on, speaking to the priest, who was standing by. "I am much shaken."

Francisco complied, and they started toward Juanna, Otter guarding the rear with his saber. Before they had gone ten yards, however, after a hasty consultation with one of his captains Pereira waddled toward them.

"Seize that man!" he shouted. "He has killed the worthy Dom Xavier. Having first insulted him, he has killed him by violence, and he must answer for it."

A dozen ruffians sprang forward at his bidding, only to be met by the saber and pistol of Otter, with neither of which were they anxious to make closer acquaintance. Leonard saw that the position was very grave, and a thought came into his mind. "You wish to escape from this place, father?" he said rapidly to the priest.

"Yes," answered Francisco. "It is a hell."

"Then lead me as swift as you may to that bridge. I am hurt and weak, and there is succor beyond."

As he spoke the drawbridge, which was not ten yards away, fell with a crash.

"Run across, Juanna Rodd," cried Leonard in English.

She hesitated, then obeyed. It seemed to Leonard that the look upon her face said, "How can I leave you?"

"Now, father," said Leonard, "make a rush for it." And leaning on the priest's shoulder he stumbled toward the bridge. But he would never have reached it had it not been for Otter.

"Treason!" roared Pereira. "Stop him! Who let down the bridge?"

A man came on to the attack. It was the same young captain that Leonard had offered to fight before the auction. In his hand was a knife already uplifted to fall on Leonard's back, when Otter's saber flashed, and the man went down.

"Seize the bridge and hold it!" roared Pereira again.

"Wind up, wind up," yelled Otter in answer as with saber and pistol he held back the mob.

Those on the farther side obeyed with such a will that Leonard and the priest rolled down the slanting planks.

"Otter!" cried Leonard. "Good God, he will be killed!"

By way of answer Otter fired the last barrel of his pistol. Then with a yell, before they could close upon him, he sprang like a wildcat straight at the iron chains of the bridge, which were used to secure it in its place when needful. At the moment they hung four feet or more above his head, but he grasped them, shouting to Soa to hoist away.

A man attempted to seize his legs, but Otter kicked him in the face, and he fell into the water. Next second he was out of their reach and rapidly rising high into the air. Some threw knives and some fired pistol shots after him, but none of these touched him.

"Ah, Yellow Devil," he cried as he swung, "look behind you. There is another devil, yellower and fiercer than you." Pereira turned and all the company with him, and at that moment, with a crackling roar, a vast sheet of flame burst up from the morass. The reeds had caught at last and in good earnest, and the strengthening wind was bringing the fire down upon them.

CHAPTER IX.

"Treachery, treachery!" screamed Pereira. "The morass is fired, and that witch has betrayed us."

"Ha, ha, ha, ha!" cried Otter again from his airy perch. "Treachery, treachery! And what if the slaves are loosed? And what if the gates be barred?"

Hitherto the mob had been silent in their fear and wonder. There they stood closely packed, 100 or more of them, staring first at Otter, then at the advancing fire. Now they found tongue.

"He is a fiend! Kill him! Storm the slave camp! To the gates!" they yelled in this language and in that.

For many it was their last earthly cry, since at that moment a sheet of flame burst from the ramparts of the camp, followed by the boom of the cannon, and six pounds of canister shot through the crowd. Right through them it swept, leaving a wide lane of dead and dying, and such a shriek went up to heaven as even that place of torment had never heard.

Then they broke and fled this way and that, screaming curses as they went.

When Leonard and the priest had rolled down the rising bridge, they found Juanna standing safely by the guardhouse, surrounded by some of the settlement men.

"To the gun!" he cried, "to the gun! Fire into them! I will follow you!"

Then it was that he saw Otter left to his death and called out in fear. But Otter saved himself, as has been told, and clambered down the bridge safe and sound.

Leaning on the dwarf and Francisco, Leonard staggered along the earthwork, followed by Juanna, to the place where the gun was mounted. Before he had gone a step he caught sight of the figure of Soa outlined in bold relief against the background of the fire and surrounded by many of the freed settlement men. At the instant when he saw her she was in the act of springing back from the breech of the gun, the lanyard in her hand. Then came the roar of the shot and the shriek of the smitten.

"Wow," said Otter, "the old woman has not been idle. She is clever as a man, that one." Another minute, and they were helping to load the gun—that is, except Soa, who was on her knees kissing Juanna's hands.

"Come, stop that," said Leonard, sinking to the ground, for he was utterly exhausted. "Those devils have gone for their arms. They will try to storm us presently. Is the shot home, Peter? Then run her out sharp, and you, Soa, screw her nose down." Next he bade the freed slaves arm themselves with stakes or anything that they could find, for of rifles they had but four, two of which they had found in the guardhouse.

Presently the slavers came on with a yell, carrying long planks, by the help of which they hoped to cross the dike.

"Look out," said Leonard, "they are going to open fire. Under the earthwork, every man of you!" And seizing Juanna, who was standing near, he pulled her down under cover.

It was none too soon. The next instant a storm of bullets swept over them. Most of the men had understood and taken shelter, but some were too slow or too stupid. Of these one fell dead, and two more were hit. Soa and Peter alone took no heed, and yet they remained unhurt. There stood the woman laying the gun while the bullets whistled round her as coolly as though she had served in the royal artillery, and with her was the head man, Peter. Peter was shot through the waistcloth, and a ball cut its way through Soa's grizzled hair, but neither of them seemed to notice these trifles.

"They are mad, baas," cried Otter, who was watching over the top of the embankment. "See, they are coming across the open."

Then Leonard looked. The dwarf was in the fight. In their rage and hurry the slavers, half hidden in a cloud of smoke caused by their rapid firing, were advancing across the clear space instead of creeping along the edge of the dike. What was more, the necessity of carrying planks caused them to pack in groups. Soa gave a final twist with her lever and waited, her hand on the lanyard. A bullet cut it in two, but without firing the gun, and she grasped the shortened cord.

"Now for it," cried Leonard as the first party came into the line of fire.

Soa sprang backward, with a yell. Again the gun thundered out, and the canister screamed through the air. It tore along the advancing files; then, striking the beaten earth, rebounded and caught those who were following with the ricochet and with awful effect. Whole groups were mowed down by this one discharge, the destruction being twice as large as that caused by the first shot, for at the greater range the canister found room to spread; also the ricochet missiles flying hither and thither among the crowd did no little execution. Down went the men in heaps, and with them the planks they carried. They had no more wish to storm the slave camp. They had but one thought left—the thought of safety—and the survivors fled in all directions, yelling with fear and fury.

"Load up, load up!" cried Otter, lifting the charge of powder which lay at hand.

"They will try to break open the gates and get out; then they will cut us off." As he spoke they saw a number of men run from the auction shed to the water gate. But it could not be climbed. The key was gone, and the massive bolts and beams were not easy to break. So they brought hammers and a tree trunk which had supported an angle of the shed and battered at the gate. For two minutes or more it held, then began to give.

"Swift, swift," cried Otter again as he dragged at the piece to turn it, "or all will yet be lost!"

"Hurry no man's ox, black one," said Soa as she laid the gun with the help of Peter.

"A cry went up from the slaves. The gate was tottering, but it still held by the upper hinges. A few more blows, and it must surely fall. But those blows were never struck. Again Soa sprang backward, and the roar of the gun was answered by the screams of the slavers as the grapnel plowed through them.

Of those who were left the most part fled for shelter to the auction hut and the nest itself. Some ran across to the magazine, but appeared to be unable to enter it, for soon they were seen flying back again, while about a dozen of the boldest remained at the gate trying to complete its destruction. On these Leonard and Otter opened fire with rifles, but it was not until three or four men had fallen that the rest fled to join their companions beneath the shelter of the sheds.

"Oh, look, look!" said Juanna, pointing to the east.

It was indeed a spectacle never to be forgotten. The dense reeds, measuring 12 to 15 feet in height, had been fired between a quarter and a half a mile to the east of the nest, and as the wind gathered to a gale and the fire got a firmer hold it rolled down upon the doomed place in billows and sheets—a sea of flame that sometimes spouted high into the air and sometimes ran swiftly along the ground. The reeds crackled and roared like musketry as the fire ate into them, giving out thick volumes of smoke. At first this smoke had passed above the spectators; now it blew into their faces, half choking them and blotting out the sky, and mixed up with it were showers of sparks and fragments of burning reeds brought forward on the wind.

"The house and sheds will soon catch now," said Leonard. "Then they must take refuge in the open spaces, where we can deal with them," and he nodded at the gun.

As he spoke tongues of flame darted into the air, first from the thatch of the shed, then from the roof of the nest. They were afire.

"We must be careful, baas," said Otter, "or the slave sheds behind us will burn also and all those in them."

"Heavens, I never thought of that," answered Leonard. "Here, father, if you wish to do a good work, take some of these men and the buckets they use to water the slaves. Let three or four men get on to each roof and extinguish the sparks as they fall while others bring them water from the moat."

The priest sprang up and set to the task, at which he labored gallantly for two long hours. Had it not been for his efforts the sheds and the slaves in them must have been burned, for the sparks fell thick upon the dry thatch, which caught again and again.

Now the sights and sounds grew more fearful. Maddened with fear, the remainder of the slave drivers and their servants rushed from the flaming buildings, striving to find shelter from the fire. Some flung themselves desperately into the aloes and prickly pears on the inner rampart, and climbing the palisade beyond escaped into the marsh, while some collected on the open space, and at these the gun was fired from time to time when the smoke lifted. Others again ran to the dike of the slave camp, begging for mercy, there to be shot by Otter, who never wearied in his task of revenge. From behind them also rose the hideous cries of the terrified slaves, who believed that they were about to be burned alive and screamed as they dragged at their manacles.

"Oh, it is like hell!" said Juanna to Leonard as she buried her face in the grass that she might see no more and to escape the suffocating smoke. She was right.

And so the time went on. One by one the roofs of the various buildings fell in, and spouts of flame hot high into the air to descend about them in a rain of sparks. But at last the cries ceased, for the slaves could yell no more. The fire grew less and less, and the wind dropped. Then the sun rose on the scene of death and desolation. The morass was swept bare to the depth of 700 yards, and the camp was a smoking ruin, strewn with the dead. The walls of the nest stood, however, and here and there a charred post remained. Everything else was gone except the magazine, which had escaped the flames, being built of brick and stone and roofed with tin.

The adventurers looked around them in silence. Then they looked at each other. What a spectacle they presented in the clear light of the morning as they stood by the gun which had done them such signal service! All were begrimed with smoke and powder, and their clothes were burned by the falling sparks. Leonard's throat was a mass of bruises; his hands and face were bleeding; he was so stiff and hurt that he could scarcely move. Soa's hair was singed and cut by the bullets which had shaved her head. The priest's robe hung in charred threads, and his hands were blistered with fire. Juanna's broidered Arab dress, torn by the brutal hand of Pereira, scarcely retained a trace of white, and her long dark hair was tangled and powdered with bits of blackened reed. All were utterly exhausted—that is, all except Otter, who advanced to speak to Leonard, begrimed and stripped to the waist, but fresh and fierce as ever.

"What is it, Otter?" he asked.

"Will the baas let me take these men," and he nodded toward the freed slaves who had belonged to the settlement, "and hunt through the camp yonder? Many of the devils still live, and wounded snakes strike hardest."

"As you like," answered Leonard. "Arm them with anything you can find and search the camp thoroughly. But be careful."

In ten minutes Otter was gone, with the men. Then Leonard and the others got water and washed as best they might, the guardhouse being assigned to Juanna and Soa, who made their toilet with the help of a comb they had found there. There also they discovered food, the rations of the sentry and a plentiful supply of meal for the slaves, of which they ate with such appetite as they might.

As they were finishing their meal Otter returned unharmed, though of the men who went out with him five were missing. With him also were two of the four settlement men who had been sent to fire the reeds on the precious night. They were much exhausted, for their task had been no easy one, and fortunately for Leonard it was only after long delay that they succeeded in it. Their two companions were dead. One had been taken by an alligator in the water, and one had fallen into a deep hole in the morass, and striking his head against a log there was drowned.

"Is it finished?" said Leonard to the dwarf.

Otter nodded. "Some are dead, and some are fled," he answered, "but from these we have little to fear. Still that is not all the tale, baas. We have taken one of them alive. Come and look at him, baas."

Leonard clambered up the steps of the embankment, followed by the others. On the farther side stood the group of settlement men who had returned from scouring the camp—thin and haggard fellows, scarred by the slave irons, but very fierce looking. In their midst a white man, bound with ropes, crouched upon the ground, moaning in terror and misery. Just then he lifted his face. It was that of the Yellow Devil himself. There he lay, that aged iniquity, that hoary shame, caught at last in his own snares.

"Where did you find him, Otter?" asked Leonard as they crossed the drawbridge.

"In the magazine, baas, and your gold with him; also many rifles and much powder. He had locked himself up there, but he had not the heart to fire the powder and make an end."

Pereira did not see them as yet; but, raising his head, he moaned for water.

"Give him blood," said one of the men sullenly. "He has drunk it all his days. Let it be his last drink."

Leonard motioned to Francisco, the priest, to bring water, and then Pereira saw them and began to pray for mercy.

"Antonio Pereira," Leonard answered sternly, "last night I and two companions, a woman and a black dwarf, set ourselves a task—to take this armed place of yours and rescue a white girl whom you had condemned to slavery. It did not seem possible that we should do it, but between sunset and sunrise we have done it. Who helped us, then, that we should have carried out this thing which was impossible? I will tell you. God helped us as he helped this lady when she called on him. Cry to God, then, to do that which is still more impossible and to help you. From me you will have no mercy, nor can you expect any."

For a moment Pereira ceased whining, and a flash of the old ferocity came into his eyes.

"Ah, my friend," he muttered, "if I had but known!" Then, turning to Juanna, he said: "My dove, have I not treated you kindly? Will you say no word for me, now that my enemies prevail against me?"

By way of answer Juanna looked first at the human reptile before her, then at the bosom of her torn dress, now roughly pinned up with spikes of aloe leaves, and there was a world of meaning in that look. Then she turned and went.

"Baas," said Otter, "may I speak."

"Speak on," Leonard answered.

"Hearken, Yellow Devil," said the dwarf. "Ten years ago you took me, and I lay in this camp a slave—yes, in yonder shed. There are the marks of the irons, your own seal. Ah, you have forgotten the black dwarf, but he remembers. Who could forget you, Yellow Devil, that once had slept beneath your roofs? I escaped, but as I fled I swore that if I might I would bring vengeance upon you. The years went by, and the hour came at last. I led the baas to this place. I found you this morning, and we are not parted yet, Yellow Devil. What did you boast last night—that you had sent 20,000 of us black people to slavery? Yes, and for every one that you have sold you have killed five—old men white with years, women with child, little children at the breast—you have murdered them all. Ah, yes, I have seen you laugh and kill them before the eyes of their mothers as last night you killed the kitten. And now your time has come at last, Yellow Devil, and I, Otter, the dwarf, will give you to drink of your own medicine. What, you cry for mercy, who never gave it even in a dream? I tell you did my chief yonder bid me loose you I would disobey him, even to force, I who would rather die than put aside his word on any other matter. Look now at these men," and he pointed to the settlement people, who glared hungrily at the crouching wretch, much as hounds glare at the fox that is held aloof by the huntsman, "look at them. Do you see mercy in their eyes? They, whose fathers and mothers you have murdered, whose little children you have stamped to death! Wow, Yellow Devil! The white men tell us of a hell, a place where dead people are tormented. We know nothing of that; it is for the white people, and they may keep it all to themselves. Now you are beginning to taste that hell of yours—only beginning, Yellow Devil. Baas Leonard, I demand this man to be tried by us and dealt with according to our customs, for it is against us black folk that he has sinned most of all, and we ask his blood in payment for our blood."

"Take it," answered Leonard, and though he was not a hard hearted man he said it without a single touch of pity for the cruel demon in the toils. Indeed it seemed to him a most fitting judgment. Not so did it strike Pereira.

"What," he howled, "am I to be given over to these black dogs? Mercy, mercy! Francisco, plead for me. Shrive me. I know I killed your brother. I had to do it. Plead for me!" and he rolled in the dust, trying to clasp Leonard's feet.

"I cannot shrive you," answered the priest, shuddering, "and it is useless to plead. But I will pray for you."

Then the natives pounced upon Pereira and dragged him away, Soa following him, her fierce eyes fixed upon his hideous face.

An hour later Otter reappeared with a shining countenance, but Leonard did not ask him any questions. Turning to him as if nothing had happened, he said:

"Otter, take these men and loose the slaves. Then get the ammunition, rifles and stores out of the armhouse and bring them to the water gate. We must clear out of this place at once, or we shall have the escaped slavers and the crews of the dhows down upon us."

Thus, then, did fate and vengeance at last find out Antonio Pereira, the Yellow Devil.

CHAPTER X.

Once more it was morning, and the travelers were encamped by that ready point where they had left the big boats which they had cut loose from the island. From the earliest dawn Leonard had been superintending the transport across the river of the hundreds of slaves whom they had released. There they were put ashore by the settlement men, provided with a store of meal and left to shift for themselves, it being found utterly impossible to take them any farther.

"There, they are gone," said Otter as the last boatload set out under the charge of Peter. "Well, let them go, the silly sheep. So much the less trouble for us, who, although we have a Shepherdess, can scarcely lead so large a flock. Well, we have pulled the missle yonder out of the slave nest, and the Yellow Devil—ah, we have talked with him and all his crew! And now are we to go on to win the gold, the real yellow devil, baas?"

"I suppose so, Otter," answered Leonard. "That is, if old Soa keeps her word. But it isn't gold, it is rubies. At any rate, we must make for the settlement below Sena to take these men back and see if we can hear anything of Mavoom."

"So," said Otter after a pause. "Well, the Shepherdess, as these settlement people call her, will want to find her father. Say, baas, she is proud, is she not? She looks over our heads and speaks little."

"Yes, Otter, she is proud."

"And she is beautiful. No woman was ever so beautiful."

"Yes, Otter, she is beautiful."

"And she is cold, baas. She does not say 'thank you' nicely for all that you have done."

"Perhaps she thinks it the more, Otter."

"Perhaps she thinks it the more. Still she might say 'thank you' to you, baas, who are her—husband."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean, baas, that you bought her first, according to our custom, and married her afterward, according to your own, and if that does not make her your wife nothing can."

"Stop that fool's talk," said Leonard angrily, "and never let me hear you speak so again."

Juanna looked up and saw him standing before her proud and handsome, an air of command upon his thoughtful face, deep chested, bearded, vigorous, a man among men. She saw the admiration in his eyes and blushed, knowing that, do what she would to prevent it, it was reflected from her own. Another moment, and she was holding out her hand to him and smiling pleasantly.

"Good morning," she said. "I hope that you have slept well, and that you have no bad news."

"I spent eight hours in a state of absolute stupor," he answered, laughing, "and I have no news at all to speak of except that I have got rid of those slaves, poor creatures. I fancy that our friends the slave dealers yonder have had enough of our company and are scarcely likely to follow us."

Juanna turned a shade paler and answered:

"I trust so. At least I have had enough of them. By the way, Mr. Outram, I—I have to thank you for a great deal." Here her eyes caught the gleam of the gold circlet on the third finger of her left hand. "This ring belongs to you. I will return it at once."

"Miss Rodd," said Leonard gravely, "we have passed through a very strange adventure together. Will you not keep the ring in remembrance of it?"

Her strong impulse was to refuse. While she wore this ring the thought of that hateful scene and still more hateful mockery of marriage would be always with her. And yet as the words of prompt refusal were on her lips a feeling, an instinct almost a superstition, caused them to remain unspoken. "You are very kind," she said, "but this is your signet ring. Is not that what you call it? You cannot wish to give it to a chance acquaintance."

"Yes, it is my signet ring, and if you will look at the crest and motto you will see that they are not inappropriate. And I do wish to give it even 'to a chance acquaintance,' if you will allow me no more intimate term."

"I have looked at them," she answered as she examined the ring curiously. It was of plain and somewhat massive gold and deeply cut into the shield face bezel was the Outram crest—a hand holding a drawn sword—beneath which the motto was engraved. "What is the last word of the motto?" she went on. "It is so rubbed that I cannot read it—'For home honor'"—

"'And heart'" said Leonard.

Juanna blushed, though why the word heart should make her blush she knew not.

"Well, I will wear the ring if you wish it, Mr. Outram, in memory of our adventure—that is, until you ask it back again," she said confusedly; then added, with a change of tone, "there is one detail of that adventure that I hope you will not allude to more than you can avoid, for the recollection of it is most painful to me, probably more so than even to you."

"I suppose you mean the ceremony of marriage, Miss Rodd?"

"I mean the wicked and abominable farce in which we were made to play a part," she answered passionately. "Most of the witnesses of that shameful scene are dead and cannot speak of it, and if you will keep your servant, the dwarf, silent I will do the same by Francisco. Let it be forgotten by both of us."

"Certainly, Miss Rodd," said Leonard. "That is, if anything so strange can be forgotten. And now will you come to breakfast?"

She bowed her head in assent and swept past him, the red lilies in her hand.

"I wonder what hold she has got over that priest," thought Leonard to himself, "that she talked of being able to keep him silent."

When he reached the camp, Leonard found the priest talking confidentially to Juanna.

"By the way, father," he said somewhat brusquely, "as you see, I have got rid of those slaves. It was impossible to take them with us, and now they must shift for themselves. At any rate, they are better off than they were yonder. What are your plans? You have behaved well to us, but I cannot forget that we found you in bad company. Perhaps you wish to return to it, and in that case your way lies eastward," and he nodded toward the nest.

"I do not wonder that you mistrust me, senor," said Francisco, his pale and girlish face coloring as he spoke, "for appearances are much against me. But I assure you that, although I came into the company of Antonio Pereira by my own will, it was for no evil purpose. To be brief, senor, I had a brother who fled hither from Portugal because of a crime that he had committed and joined Pereira's band. With much toil I tracked him out and was welcomed at the nest because I am a priest who can comfort the sick and shrive the dying, for wickedness does not console men at the last, senor. I persuaded my brother to return with me, and we made a plan to escape. But Pereira's ears were long. We were betrayed, and my brother was hanged. They did not hang me because I am a priest. Afterward I was kept a prisoner and forced to accompany the band in their expeditions. That is all the story. Now, with your permission, I will follow you, for I have no money and nowhere else to go in this wilderness, though I fear that I am not strong enough to be of much service, and being of another faith you will scarcely need my ministrations."

"Very well, father," answered Leonard coldly, "but please understand that we are still surrounded by many dangers which any treachery might cause to overwhelm us. Therefore I warn you that should I detect anything of the sort my answer to it will be a quick one," and he glanced significantly at his revolver.

"I do not think that you need suspect the father, Mr. Outram," said Juanna indignantly. "I owe him a great deal. Had it not been for his kindness and counsel I should not be alive today. I am most deeply grateful to him."

"If you vouch for him, Miss Rodd, that is enough. You have had the advantage of a closer acquaintance than I can boast."

When their meal was done, they proceeded up the river in the boats which they had captured from the slavers, each boat being towed by the best oarsmen among the settlement men. Including women and children, their party numbered 60 souls. At evening they passed the island where they had left the party of slavers, but could see no sign of life upon it and never learned whether the men perished or escaped. An hour later they encamped for the night upon the bank of the river, and it was while they were sitting around the fire at night that Juanna told Leonard of the horrors that she had undergone during her dreadful sojourn with the slave caravan. She told him also how she had torn leaves from the Bible, which she chanced to have with her, and fixed them upon reeds whenever she could find an opportunity of so doing in the hope that they might guide her father should he return and attempt her rescue.

"It is all like a nightmare," she said, "and, as for that hideous farce of marriage with which it ended, I can scarcely bear to think of it."

Then Francisco, who had been sitting silent, spoke for the first time.

"You speak, senora," he said in his subdued voice, "of that hideous farce of marriage, and I suppose you mean the ceremony which I performed between you and the Senor Outram, being forced to the act by Pereira. It is my duty to tell you both that, however irregular this marriage may have been, I do not believe it to be a farce. I believe that you are lawfully man and wife until death part you unless indeed the pope should annul the union, as he alone can do."

"Nonsense, nonsense," said Leonard. "You forget that we are of another religion, and that the form was necessary to our plot."

"The church knows nothing of the reasons which lead to the undertaking of wedlock," Francisco answered mildly. "They are various, and many of them would not bear investigation. But you were married without protest on your part, on Portuguese territory, according to Portuguese custom, and by a duly qualified priest. The fact that you are of the Protestant religion and were united by the Catholic ritual does not matter in the least. For the purposes of the ceremony you accepted that ritual as when a Catholic marries a Protestant, or vice versa. It is disagreeable for me to have to tell you this, but the truth remains. I believe that you are man and wife in the eyes of God and the world."

Here Juanna sprang to her feet, and even in that light Leonard could see that her breast was heaving and her eyes shone with anger.

"It is intolerable that I should be forced to listen to such falsehoods," she said, "and if ever you repeat them in my hearing, Father Francisco, I will not speak to you again. I utterly repudiate this marriage. Before the ceremony began Mr. Outram whispered to me to go through with the 'farce,' and it was a farce. Had I thought otherwise I should have taken the poison. If there is any truth in what the father says, I have been deceived and entrapped."

"Pardon, senora," said the priest. "But you should not speak so angrily. The Senor Outram and I only did what we were forced to do."

"Supposing that Father Francisco is right, which I do not believe," said Leonard, with sarcasm, "do you think Miss Rodd, that such a sudden undertaking would be more to my liking than to yours? Believe me, had I wished to deceive and entrap you, I could not have done so without involving myself, since if the marriage is binding it is binding on both parties, and even such a humble individual as I am does not take a wife on the faith of a five minutes' acquaintance. To be frank, I undertook your rescue for purposes far other than those of matrimony."

"Might I ask what they were?" replied Juanna in a tone of equal acerbity.

"Certainly, Miss Rodd. But first I must explain that I am no knight errant. I am an almost penniless adventurer, and for urgent reasons of my own I seek to win fortune. Therefore when the woman yonder," and he pointed to Soa, who was sitting watching them just out of range of the firelight, "came to me with a marvelous tale of a countless treasure of rubies, which she promised to reveal to me if I would undertake the little matter of your rescue, and even paid down a specimen stone of considerable value on account, having nothing better to do and nowhere to go, being, in short, desperate, I consented. Indeed I did more. I took the precaution of reducing the matter to writing, I being one contracting party, and Soa, acting on her own behalf and as your attorney, being the other."

"I have not the least idea to what you allude, nor did I ever give Soa any authority to sign documents on my behalf, but may I see this writing?"

"Certainly," Leonard answered, and rising he went to the baggage, whence he returned presently with a lantern and the prayer book.

Juanna placed the lantern beside her and opened the book. The first thing that she saw was a name on the title page, "Jane Beach," and beneath it this inscription, which had evidently been written by some one in great hurry: "To dearest Leonard from Jane. 23 Jan."

"Turn over," he said hastily. "The document is on the other side."

She was not slow to note both the writing and the confusion which her perusal of it caused him. Who was Jane Beach, she wondered, and why did she call Mr. Outram "dearest Leonard?" In a moment, so strange are the hearts of women, Juanna felt herself much prepossessed against her, whoever she might be. But she turned the leaf and read the agreement. It was a pretty sight to see her bending over the cramped writing in the circle of the lantern light, but when at length she had finished and looked up there was a smile upon her lovely face which had more of scorn in it than was pleasant.

"Come hither, Soa," she said, "and tell me what all this nonsense is about rubies and the People of the Mist, among whom I am to play the part of a goddess, if necessary."

"Shepherdess," answered Soa, squatting down on the ground before her, "it is not nonsense. The language that I taught you when you were little is that of this people. It is a true tale, though hitherto I have hidden it from you and your father, Mavoom, lest Mavoom should seek to win the precious stones and come to his death through them. Listen, Shepherdess," and she repeated the outlines of the story with which she had already made Leonard acquainted, ending thus:

"I told this tale to the white man, because I saw that he was greedy, after the fashion of his race, and my strait was desperate. For this reason I bribed him with the red stone, and with the promise that I would lead him to the land of the People of the Mist, for had I not done so he would never have used his wit or put out his strength to rescue you from the Yellow Devil. Therefore it was also that I marked this paper on your behalf and my own, knowing well that I had no right to speak for you, and that by and by you could refuse to abide by it, though I am bound."

"Frank, at any rate," said Leonard to himself. "What a solicitor the old lady would have made!"

"Say, Soa," asked Juanna, "to succeed in the search for these stones is it necessary that I should play the part of a goddess among your people?"

"I can see no other way," she answered. "But what of that? You are free, and what I promised on your behalf is nothing. Let the white man go without his reward. It will save him a long journey."

* * * * * * *

Three months had passed since that day when Juanna declared her determination to accompany Leonard upon his search for the treasures of the People of the Mist.

It was evening, and a party of travelers were encamped on the side of a river that ran through a great and desolate plain. They were a small party, three white people—namely, Leonard, Francisco and Juanna—fifteen of the settlement men under the leadership of Peter—the same headman who had been rescued from the slave camp—and of course the dwarf, Otter, and Juanna's old nurse, Soa.

For 12 weeks they had traveled almost without intermission with Soa for their guide, steering continually northward and westward. First they followed the course of the river in canoes for ten days or more. Then, leaving the main stream, they paddled for three weeks up that of a tributary called Mavuae, which ran for many miles along the foot of a great range of mountains named Mang-anja. Here they made but slow progress because of the frequent rapids, which necessitated the porterage of the canoes over broken ground and for considerable distances. At length they came to a rapid which was so long and so continuous that regretfully enough they were obliged to abandon the canoes altogether and proceed on foot.

The dangers of their water journey had been many, but they were nothing compared to those that now environed them, and in addition to bodily perils they must face the daily and terrible fatigue of long marches through an unknown country, cumbered as they were with arms and other absolutely necessary baggage. The country was named Marengi, a land uninhabited by man, the home of herds of countless game.

On they went northward and upward through a measureless waste; plain succeeded plain in endless monotony, distance gave place to distance, and ever there were more beyond. Gradually the climate grew colder. They were traversing a portion of the unexplored plateau that separates southern from central Africa. Its loneliness was awful, and the bearers began to murmur, saying that they had reached the end of the world and were walking over its edge. Indeed they had only two comforts in this part of their undertaking—the land lay so high that none of them were stricken by fever and they could not well miss the road, which, if Soa was to be believed, ran along the banks of the river that had its source in the territories of the People of the Mist.

Now at length they halted on the boundary of the land of the People of the Mist. There before them, not more than a mile away, towered a huge cliff or wall of rock, varying from 700 to 1,000 feet in height and stretching across the plain like a giant step, far as the eye could reach, down the surface of which the river flowed in a series of beautiful cascades. Before they had finished their evening meal of buck's flesh the moon was up, and by its light the three white people stared hopelessly at this frowning natural fortification, wondering if they could climb it, and wondering also what terrors awaited them upon its farther side.

CHAPTER XI.

The next morning they began the ascent of the wall of rock, which proved to be an even more difficult business than they had anticipated. There was no path, for those who lived beyond this natural barrier never came down it, and few of the dwellers in the plains had ever ventured to go up. It was possible, for Soa herself had descended here in bygone years, and this was all that could be said for it. Day after day they toiled through cold and mist until one morning Otter stopped and pointed.

"Look yonder, baas; the old hag has not lied to us. There is the city of the People of the Mist."

Following the line of the dwarf's outstretched hand Leonard saw what had at first escaped him—that standing back in a wide bend at the foot of the great mountain in front of them were a multitude of houses built of some gray stone and roofed with green turf. Indeed, had not his attention been called to it, the town might well have missed observation until he was quite close to its walls, for the materials of which it was constructed resembled those of the bowlders that lay around them in thousands, and the vivid green of its roofs gave it the appearance of a distant space of grassy land.

"Yes, there is the kraal of the great people," said Otter again, "and it is a strong kraal. Look, baas; they know how to defend themselves. The mountain is behind them that none can climb, and around their walls the river runs in a loop on either side, joining itself together again on the plain beyond. It would go ill with the 'impi' which tried to take that kraal."

For awhile they all stood still and stared amazed. It seemed strange that they should have reached this fabled city, and, now they were there, how would they be received within its walls? That was the question which each of them was asking of himself. There was but one way to find out—they must go and see. No retreat was now possible. Even the settlement men felt this. "Better to die at the