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THE PEOPLE OF THE MIST.

By H. RIDER HAGGARD.

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Very gradually the light increased, and it seemed to Otter that the mist was somewhat thinner than was usual at this hour, though as yet it hung densely between them and the mountain snow. Now he could trace the walls of the amphitheater; now he could see the black shimmer of the water beneath and distinguish the glitter of many hundreds of upturned eyeballs as they glared at him and beyond him. The silence grew more and more intense, for none spoke or moved. All were waiting to see the light fall upon the slope of snow and wondering would it be red or white. Would the gods die or live? So intense and fearful did it grow, indeed, unbroken as it was even by a breath of air or the calling of a bird, that Otter could bear it no longer, but suddenly burst out into song.

He had a fine deep voice, and it was a Zulu warsong that he sang, a triumphant chant of the rush of conquering impis interspersed with the wails of women and the groans of the dying. Louder, louder he sang, stamping his naked feet upon the rock, while the people wondered at the marvel. Surely this was a god, they thought, who could sing thus exultingly in strange tongue while men waited to see him cast into the jaws of the snake. No man about to die so soon and thus could find the heart to sing, and much less could he sing such a song as that they had heard.

"He is a god!" cried a voice far away, and the cry was echoed on every side till at length, on a sudden, men grew silent, and Otter also ceased from his singing, for he had turned his head and seen. Lo, the veil of mist that hid the mountain's upper snow grew thin! It was the moment of dawn, but would it be a red dawn or a white? Suddenly the vapors disappeared from the peak, though they still lay thick upon the slopes below, and in their place were seen its smooth and shining outlines clothed in their cloak of everlasting snows.

The ordeal was ended. No touch of color, no golden sunbeam or crimson shadow stained the ghastly surface of those snows. They were pallid as the faces of the dead.

"A white dawn, a white dawn!" roared the populace. "Away with the false gods! Hurl them to the snake!"

"It is finished," whispered Otter again into Francisco's ear. "Now take your medicine, and, friend, farewell!"

The priest heard and turned his tormented face, in which the soft eyes shone upward, toward the heavens, clasping his thin hands together. For some seconds he sat thus. Then Otter, peering beneath his hood, saw his countenance change, and once more a glory seemed to come upon it as it had come when, for sake of the woman whom he loved, Francisco promised to do the deed that now he was about to dare. Again there was silence below, for the spokesman of the council of elders had risen and was crying the formal question to the priest above, "Is the dawn white or red, ye who stand on high?"

Nam turned and looked upon the snow.

"The dawn is fully dawned, and it is white," he answered.

"Be swift," whispered Otter into Francisco's ear once more.

Then the priest, the glory still shining on his face, unclasped his hands and put one of them to his lips, as though to partake of the sacrament of death. A moment later, and he let it fall again with a sigh, whispering back to Otter: "I cannot. It is a deadly sin. Let them kill me, for I will not kill myself." Then, before the dwarf could answer, nature, more merciful than his conscience, did that for Francisco which he refused to do for himself, for of a sudden he swooned. His face turned ashen, and slowly he began to sink backward so that he would have fallen had not Nam, who saw that he had fainted with fear, caught him by the shoulders and held him upright.

"The dawn is white. We see it with our eyes," answered the spokesman of the elders. "O ye who stand on high, cast down the false gods according to the judgment of the People of the Mist."

Otter heard and knew that the moment had come to leap, for now he need trouble himself with Francisco no more. Swiftly he turned his head, looking at Nam, for he would know if he might carry out a purpose that he had formed. It was to seize the high priest and bear him to the depths below.

No, it was not possible. He was out of reach. Moreover, were he to snatch him away Francisco would fall backward, and the others might see that this was not the Shepherdess. He stood up upon his feet, kicking the stool on which he had sat off the platform and watching its flight. It fell into the water, never touching the rock, and then Otter knew that he had planned well.

Now Nam and one priest seized the fainting form of Francisco, and the other two stepped toward him. The dwarf waited till their hands were outstretched to grasp him, then suddenly sprang at the man upon his right, and shouting aloud, "Come thou with me!" he gripped him about the middle in his iron grasp, and putting out all his strength hurled himself and his burden into sheer space beneath.

The priest shrieked aloud, and a gasp of wonder went up from the watching thousands as the dwarf and his victim rushed downward like a stone. They cleared the edge of the pool by an inch or two—no more—and struck the boiling waters, sinking through them till Otter thought that they would never rise again, but at last they did rise. Then Otter loosed the dead or senseless priest, and at that moment the body of Francisco, cast hither by Nam, struck the water beside him and straightway vanished.

Otter loosed his grip, and diving beneath the surface swam hard for the north side of the pool, for there he had noticed that the current was least strong, and there also the rock bank overhung a little. He reached it safely, and rising once more grasped a knob of rock with one hand and lay still where, in the shadow and the swirl of waters, he could not be discovered by any watching from above. First he breathed deeply and moved his limbs. It was well. He was unhurt. The priest whom he had taken with him, being heavier, had met the water first, so that though the leap was so great the shock had been little.

"Ha!" said Otter to himself. "Thus far my spirit has been with me, and here I could lie for hours and never be seen. But there is still the snake to deal with." And hastily he seized the weapon that he had constructed out of the two knives and unwound a portion of the cord that was made fast about his middle. Then again he looked across the surface of the waters. Some ten fathoms from him, in the exact center of the whirlpool, the body of the priest was still visible, for the vortex bore it round and round, but of Francisco there was nothing to be seen. Only 30 feet above him Otter could see lines of heads bending over the rocky edges of the pool and gazing at the priest as he was tossed about like a straw in the eddy.

"Now, if he is still there and awake," thought Otter, "surely the father of crocodiles will take this bait. Therefore I shall do best to be still awhile and see what happens."

As he reflected thus a louder shout than any he had heard before reached his ears from the multitude in the temple above him, so tumultuous a shout indeed that for a few moments even the turmoil of the waters was lost in it.

"Now, what chances up there, I wonder?" thought Otter again. Then his attention was distracted in a somewhat unpleasant fashion.

This was the cause of the shout: A miracle, or what the People of the Mist took to be a miracle, had come about, for suddenly, for the first time within the memory of man, the white dawn had changed to red. Blood red was the snow upon the mountain, and, lo! its peaks were turned to fire. For awhile all who witnessed this phenomenon stood aghast; then there arose that babel which had reached the ears of Otter as he lurked under the bank of rock.

"The gods have been sacrificed unjustly," yelled the people. "They are true gods, for, see, the dawn is red!"

The situation was curious and most unexpected, but Nam, who had not been high priest for more than 50 years for nothing, rose to the occasion.

"This is a marvel, indeed!" he cried, when silence had at length been restored, "for no such thing is told of in our history as that a white dawn upon the mountain should turn to red. Yet, O People of the Mist, those whom we thought gods have not been offered up wrongfully. Nay, this is the meaning of the sign. Now are the true gods, Aca and Jal, appeased, because those who dared to usurp their power have gone down to doom. Therefore the curse is lifted from the land, and the sunlight has come back to bless us."

Again, as he finished speaking, the tumult broke out, some crying this thing and some that, but no action was taken, for Nam's excuse was ready and plausible and the minds of men were confused. So the assembly broke up in disorder. Only the priests and as many more as could find place, Olfan among them, crowded round the edges of the pool to see what happened in its depths.

This was what had attracted Otter's notice, causing him to think no more of the shouting above him than of the humming of last year's gnats. Suffering his eyes to travel round the circumference of the rocky wall, he saw the mouth of a circular hole, that was situated immediately under the base of the idol and may have measured some 8 feet in diameter. The lower edge of this hole stood about six inches above the level of the pool, and water ran out of it in a thin stream. Passing down this stream, half swimming and half waddling, appeared that huge and ungainly reptile which was the real object of the worship of the People of the Mist.

Great as it was in length and bulk, the dwarf saw it but for a few moments, so swift were its movements. Then it vanished into the deep waters, to reappear presently by the side of the dead priest, who was now beginning to sink. Its horrible head rose upon the waters as on that night when the woman had been thrown to it. It opened its huge jaws, and seizing the body of the man across the middle it disappeared beneath the foam. Otter watched the mouth of the hole, and not in vain, for before he could have counted ten the monster was crawling through it, bearing its prey into the cave. Now once more the dwarf felt afraid, for the snake, or rather the crocodile, at close quarters was far more fearful than anything that his imagination had portrayed. Keeping his place beneath the ledge, which, except for the coldness of the water, he found himself able to do with little fatigue or difficulty, he searched the walls of the pool, seeking for some possible avenue of escape, for somehow his ardor for personal conflict with this creature had evaporated, but search as he would he could find nothing. The walls were full 30 feet high and sloped inward, like the sides of an inverted funnel, and wherever the exits to the pool might be they were invisible; also notwithstanding his strength and skill Otter did not dare to swim into the furious eddy to look for them. One thing he noticed indeed. Immediately above the entrance to the crocodile's den, and some 20 feet from the level of the water, two holes were pierced in the rock, six feet or so apart, each measuring about 12 inches square, but these holes were not to be reached, and even if reached they were too small to pass, so Otter thought no more of them.

Now the cold was beginning to nip him, and he felt that if he staid in the water much longer he would become paralyzed by it, for it was fed from the ice and snow above. Therefore it would seem that there was but one thing to do—to face the reptile in its lair. To this, then, Otter made up his mind, albeit with loathing and a doubtful heart.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Keeping himself carefully under the overshadowing ledge of the rock bank and holding his double bladed knife ready in one hand, Otter swam to the mouth of the snake's den. As he approached it he perceived by the great upward force of the water that the real body of the stream entered the pool from below, the hole where the crocodile lived being but a supplementary exit, which doubtless the river followed in times of flood.

He reached the mouth of the tunnel without any great difficulty, and watching his opportunity lifted himself on his hands and slipped through it quickly, for he did not desire to be seen by those who were gathered above. Nor indeed was he seen, for his red fringe and the goatskin cloak had been washed away or cast off in the pool, and in that light his black body made little show against the black rock beneath.

Now he was inside the hole and found himself crouching upon a bed of sand, or rather disintegrated rock, brought down by the waters. The gloom of the place was great, but the light of the white dawn, which had turned to red, was gathering swiftly on the surface of the pool without as the mist melted and was reflected thence into the tunnel. So it came about that very soon Otter, who had the gift, not uncommon among savages, of seeing in anything short of absolute darkness, was able to make out his surroundings with tolerable accuracy. The place in the corner of which he squatted was a cave of no great height or width, hollowed in the solid rock by the force of water as smoothly as though it had been hewn through it by the hand of man—in short, an enormous natural drain pipe, but constructed of rock instead of earthenware. In the bottom of this drain trickled a stream of water nowhere more than six inches in depth, on either side of which, for ten feet or more, lay a thick bed of debris, ground small. How far the cave stretched, of course, he could not see, nor as yet could he discover the whereabouts of its hideous occupant, though traces of its presence were plentiful, for the sandy floor was marked with its huge footprints, and the air reeked with an abominable stink.

"Now, where has this evil spirit gone?" thought Otter. "He must be near, and yet I can see nothing of him. Perhaps he lives farther up the cave," and he crept a pace or two forward and again peered into the gloom.

Now he perceived what hitherto escaped him—namely, that some eight yards from the mouth of the tunnel a table shaped fragment of stone rose from its floor to within six feet of the roof, having on its hither side a sloping plane that connected its summit with the stream bed beneath. Doubtless this fragment, or bowlder, being of some harder material than the surrounding rock, had resisted the wear of the rushing river, the top of it, as was shown by the high water marks on the sides of the cave, being above the level of the torrent, which, although it was now represented only by a rivulet, evidently at certain seasons of the year poured down with great force and volume.

"Here is a bed on which a crocodile might sleep," thought Otter, creeping a little farther forward and staring at the mass of rock, and more especially at a triangular shaped object that was poised on the top of the sloping plane, and on something which lay beneath it. "Now, if that thing be another stone," thought Otter again, "how comes it that it does not slip into the water as it should do, and what is that upon which it rests?" and he took a step to one side to prevent his body from intercepting any portion of the ray of light that momentarily shone clearer and pierced the darkness of the cave to a greater distance.

Then he looked again and almost fell in his horror, for now he could see all. The thing that he had taken for a stone set upon the rock table was the head of the dweller in the waters, for there in it two dreadful eyes gleamed with a dull and changing fire as the light struck on them. Moreover, he discovered what was the object which lay under the throat of the reptile. It was the body of that priest whom Otter had taken with him in his leap from the statue, for he could see its face projecting on one side.

"Perhaps if I wait awhile he will begin to eat him," reflected the dwarf, remembering the habits of crocodiles, "and then I can attack him when he rests and sleeps afterward." And acting on the thought he stood still, watching the green fire as it throbbed and quivered, waxed and waned in the monster's eyes.

How long he remained thus Otter never knew. At least after a time he became conscious that the eyes had taken hold of him and were drawing him toward them, though whether the reptile saw him or not he could not tell. For a space he struggled against this unholy fascination. Then, overcome by dread, he strove to fly back to the pool or anywhere out of reach of those devilish orbs. Alas! it was too late. No step could he move backward—no, not to save his life. Now he must go on. It was as though the water dweller had read his mind and drew the foe toward itself to put the matter to the test. Otter took one step forward—rather would he have walked again off the head of the colossus—and the eyes glowed more dreadfully than ever, as though in triumph. Then in his despair he sank to the ground, hiding his face in his hands and groaning in his heart.

"This is a devil that I have come to fight, a devil with magic in his eyes," he thought. "And how can I do battle against the king of evil spirits, clothed in the shape of a crocodile?"

Even now when he could not see them he felt the eyes drawing him. Yet, as they were no longer visible, his courage and mind came back to him sufficiently to enable him to think again.

"Otter," he said to himself, "if you stay thus soon, the magic will do its work. Your sense will leave you, and that devil will eat you as a cobra devours a meercat. Yes, he will swallow you, and his inside will be your grave, and that is no end for one who has been called a god. Men, let alone gods, should die fighting, whether it be with other men, with wild beasts, with snakes or with devils. Think now, if your master, the deliverer, saw you crouch thus like a toad before an adder how he would laugh and say: 'Ho! I thought this man brave. Ho! He talked very loud about fighting the water dweller, he who came of a line of warriors, but now I laugh at him, for I see that he is but a crossbred cur and a coward.' Yes, yes, you can hear his words, Otter. Say, now, will you bear their shame and sit here until you are picked up and swallowed?"

Thus the dwarf addressed himself, and it seemed to his bewildered mind that the words which he had imagined were true, and that Leonard really stood by and mocked him. At the least he sprang to his feet, and crying "Never, baas!" so loudly that the cave rang with the echoes of his shout he rushed straight at the foe, holding the two bladed knife in his right hand.

The crocodile, that had been waiting for him to fall insensible, as had ever been the custom of the victims on whom it fixed its baneful glare, heard his cry and awoke from its seeming torpor. It lifted its head: fire seemed to flash from its dull eyes; its vast length began to stir. Higher and higher it reared its head; then of a sudden it leaped from the slope of rock, as alligators when disturbed leap from a river bank into the water, coming so heavily to the ground that the shock caused the cave to tremble, and stood before the dwarf with its tail arched upward over its back.

Again Otter shouted, half in rage and half in terror, and the sound seemed to make the beast more furious. At any rate, it opened its huge mouth as though to seize him and ran a few paces forward, halting within six feet of him. Now the dwarf's chance had come, and he knew it, for with the opportunity all his courage and skill returned to him. It was he who sprang, and not the crocodile. He sprang, he thrust his arm and the double knife far into the yawning mouth, and for a second held it there, one end pointing upward to the brain and one to the tongue beneath. He felt the jaws close, but their rows of yellow fangs never touched his arm, for there was that between them which held them some little space apart. Then he cast himself on one side and to the ground, leaving the weapon in the reptile's throat.

For a few moments it shook its horrid head, while Otter watched gasping. Twice it opened its great jaws and spat, and twice it strove to close them. Oh, what if it should rid itself of the knife or drive it through the soft flesh of the throat! Then he was lost indeed. But this it might not do, for the lower blade caught upon the jawbone, and at each effort it drove the sharp point of the upper knife deeper toward its brain. Moreover, so good was the steel and so firm were the hide lashings of the handles, shrunken as they were with the wet, that nothing broke or gave.

"Now he will trample me or dash me to pieces with his tail," said Otter. But as yet the snake had no such mind. Indeed in its agony it seemed to have forgotten the presence of its foe. It writhed upon the floor of the cave, lashing the rock with its tail, gasping horribly the while. Then suddenly it started forward past him, and the tough hide rope about Otter's middle ran out like the line from the bow of a whaleboat when the harpoon has gone home in the quarry.

Thrice the dwarf spun round violently; then he felt himself dragged in great jerks along the rocky floor, which, happily for him, was smooth. A fourth jerk, and once more he was in the waters of the pool—aye, and being carried to its remotest depths.

"Now, that man is a fool," thought Otter, "who ties himself to such a fish as this, for it will drown me ere it dies."

Had it been any other man doubtless this would have been so. But the dwarf was as nearly amphibious as a human being can be, and could dive and swim and hold his breath—aye, and see—beneath the surface as well as the animal from which he took his name. Never did these gifts stand their owner in better stead than during the minutes of this strange duel. Twice the tortured reptile sank to the bottom of the pool—and its depth was great—dragging the dwarf after him, though, as it chanced, between each dive it rose to the surface, giving him time to breathe. A third time it dived, and Otter must follow it, on this occasion to the mouth of one of the subterranean exits of the water, into which the dwarf was sucked. Now the brute turned, heading up the pool with a rush like that of a salmon, and Otter, who had prayed that the line would break, now prayed that it might hold, for he knew that even he could never hope to swim against that undertow.

It held, and once more they rose to the surface, where the reptile lay lashing the waters in its pain, blood pouring from its mouth and nostrils. Very glad was the dwarf to be able to breathe again, for during that last rush he had gone near to suffocation. He lifted his head, inhaling the air with great gulps, and saw that the banks of the pool were lined with spectators, who shouted and surged in a state of mad excitement. After that he did not see much more for awhile, since just then it seemed to occur to the crocodile for the first time that the man alongside of him was the cause of his suffering. At least it wallowed round, causing the waters to boil about its horny sides, and charged him. With its fangs it could not bite. Therefore it struck at him with its tail.

Twice Otter dived, avoiding the blows, but the third time he was not so successful, for the reptile followed him into the deep water and dealt him a fearful blow before he could either sink or rise. He felt the rough scales cut into his flesh and a sensation as though every bone in his body was breaking and his eyes were starting from his head. Faintly and more faintly he struggled, but in vain, for now life and sense were leaving him together, and everything grew black.

But suddenly there came a change, and Otter knew vaguely that once more he was being dragged through the water and over rock. Then darkness took him, and he remembered no more.

When he awoke again, it was to find himself lying on the floor of the cave, but not alone, for by his side, twisted into a last and hideous contortion, was the snake god—dead! The upper blade of the double knife had worked itself into its brain, and with a dying effort it sought the den where it had lived for centuries, dragging Otter with it, and there expired, how or when he knew not. But the dwarf had triumphed. Before him lay the ancient terror of the People of the Mist, the symbol and indeed the object of their worship, slain by his skill and valor.

Otter saw and understood, and, bruised and shaken as he was, his heart swelled with pride, for had he not done a deed single handed such as was not told of in the stories of his land? "Oh, that the baas were here to see this sight!" he said as he crawled along the length of his dead enemy and seated himself upon its flat and loathsome head. "Alas! he cannot," he added, "but I pray that my watching spirit may spare my life, that I may live to sing this song of the slaying of the devil of the People of the Mist. Wow! That was a fight. When shall a man see such another? And, lo! save for many bruises and the cutting of the rope about my middle, I am not greatly hurt, for the water broke the weight of his tail when he smote me with it. After all, it is well that the line held, for it served to drag me from the pool as it dragged me into it, and otherwise I had surely drowned there. See, though, it is nearly done with." And taking that end of it in his hand which issued from the jaws of the crocodile he broke it with a jerk, for, with the exception of half a strand, it was frayed through by the yellow fangs. Then, when he had recovered himself a little and washed the worst of his hurts with water, Otter set himself to consider the position. First, however, he made an utterly ineffectual effort to extact the great knives. Ten men could not have moved them, for the upper blade was driven many inches deep into the bone and muscles of the reptile's massive head. But for this indeed it would soon have shaken itself clear of them. But, as it was, every contortion and gnashing of its jaws had only served to drive the steel in deeper—up to the hilt indeed.

Abandoning this attempt, the dwarf crept cautiously to the mouth of the cave and peered up at the farther banks of the pool, whence he could hear shouts and see men moving to and fro, apparently in a state of great excitement.

"Now, I am weary of that pool," he said to himself, "and if I am seen in it the great people will surely shoot at me with arrows and kill me. What shall I do, then? I cannot stay in this place of stinks with the dead devil and the bones of those whom he has devoured until I die of hunger. Now, this water must come from somewhere. Therefore it seems best that I should follow it awhile, searching for the spot where it enters the cave. It will be dark walking, but the walls and the floor are smooth, so that I shall not hurt myself, and if I find nothing I can return again and strive to escape from the pool by night."

Having decided upon the adventure, Otter began to carry it out with characteristic promptness, the more readily, indeed, because his long immersion in the water had chilled him, and he felt a weariness creeping over him as a result of the terrible struggle and emotions that he had passed through. Coiling the hide rope about his middle, which was sadly cut by its chafing, he started with an uncertain gait, for he was still very weak. A few steps brought him to that rock on which he had discovered the head of the reptile, and he paused to examine it. Climbing the sloping stone—no easy task, for it was as smooth as ice—he came to the tablelike top. On its edge lay the body of the priest who had shared his fall from the head of the colossus.

Then he inspected the surface of the rock, and for the first time understood how old that monster must have been which he had conquered in single combat, for there, where its body had lain from generation to generation and perhaps from century to century, the hard material was worn away to the depth of two feet or more, while at the top of the sloping stone was a still deeper niche, wherein its head reposed as it lay keeping its sleepless watch on the waters of the pool. Around this depression and strewn on the floor of the cave itself were the remains of many victims, a considerable number of whom had not been devoured. In every case, however, the larger bones were broken, and from this circumstance Otter judged that, although it was the custom of this dreadful reptile to crush the life out of all who were thrown to it with a bite of its fangs, yet, like that of other animals, his appetite was limited, and it was only occasionally that he consumed what he had killed.

The sight of these remains were so unpleasant and suggestive that even Otter, who certainly could not be called squeamish, hastened to descend the rock. As he passed round it his attention was attracted by the skeleton of a man who, from various indications, must have been alive within the last few weeks. It was clad in a priest's cloak, of which Otter, who was trembling with cold, hastened to possess himself. As he picked up the robe with one hand he observed beneath it a bag of tanned ox hide that doubtless had once been carried by the owner of the cloak.

"Perhaps he had food in this," thought Otter, "though what he who comes to visit the water dweller should want with food I cannot guess. At the least it will be bad by now, so I will leave it and be gone. Only a vulture could stay for long in this house of the dead." Then he started forward.

For a few yards more he had light to guide his steps, but very soon the darkness became complete. Still the cave was not difficult to travel, for everywhere the rock was smooth and the water shallow. All that he needed to do was to walk straight on, keeping touch of the side of the tunnel with one hand. Indeed he had but two things to fear—that he should fall into some pit, and that he might suddenly encounter another crocodile, "for doubtless," thought Otter, "the devil was married."

But he fell into no hole and saw no crocodile, for, as it chanced, the water dweller of the People of the Mist was a bachelor.

When the dwarf had traveled up a steep slope for rather more than half an hour, to his intense joy he saw light before him and hurried toward it. Presently he reached the farther mouth of the cavern that was almost closed by blocks of ice, among which a little water trickled. Creeping through an aperture, he found himself upon the crest of the impassable precipice at the back of the city, and that before him a vast glacier of green ice stretched upward on which the sun shone gloriously.

CHAPTER XXIV.

It will be remembered that some hours before Otter, after his conquest of the reptile god, found himself in the light of day Leonard found himself in a very different place—namely, in a secret passage, bearing the senseless form of Juanna in his arms and in process of being guided by Soa, whither he knew not.

On they went through various tunnels, of the turnings of which Leonard tried to keep count in his mind, till at length Soa ushered him into a rock hewn cell that evidently had been prepared for their reception, for on one side of it was a bed and ambulance of skin blankets, and on the other a table provided with the best food that the country could offer. At a sign from Soa he laid Juanna down upon the bed, whereupon the woman instantly covered her with skin blankets so as to hide her face from the eyes of the curious. Then suddenly Leonard felt himself seized from behind, and while his arms were held by two of the priests a third, under Soa's direction, removed his revolver and hunting knife, which weapons he carried away.

"You devil," said Leonard to Soa, "be careful lest I kill you."

"To kill me, deliverer, would be to kill yourself and another. These things are taken away from you because it is not safe that you should have them. Such toys are not for angry children. Stay," she said to a fourth priest. "Search his pockets."

The man did as he was ordered, placing everything that Leonard had about him, such as his watch, Francisco's notebook and rosary and the great ruby stone, in a little pile upon the table. Presently he came to the fragment of poison Juanna had given him, which was wrapped in a square of kidskin. Soa took it and after examination said, "Why, deliverer, you have been borrowing medicine that will bring you bad luck if you keep it," and going to a small aperture in the wall of the cell she threw the tiny packet out of it and after it a second packet, which Leonard recognized as having been taken from Juanna's hair.

"There, now you cannot hurt yourself," she said in Portuguese. "Let me tell you something. So long as you remain quiet all will be well, but if you attempt violence or escape then you will be bound and placed by yourself; also you will bring about the death of the Shepherdess yonder. Be warned, then, by me, white man, and turn gentle, for remember you are in my power."

"That is very clear, my estimable friend," answered Leonard, controlling his wrath as best he might. "But for your sake I hope that the hour will never come when you shall be in mine, for then I may remember all this. I do not in the least understand what you are aiming at, nor do I much care so long as a certain person is protected."

"Do not fear, deliverer. She shall be protected. As you know, I hate you, and yet I keep you alive because without you she might die. Therefore for her sake be careful. Attempt no violence toward me or my father if we visit you alone, for we shall do so in order that she may not be discovered, and the moment that you lift a hand against us will be the beginning of her doom. And now I must leave you for awhile, for something passes in the temple which I would see. If she awakes before I return, be careful not to frighten her. Farewell." Then Soa went, taking the priests with her, and the massive timber door was closed upon them.

After he had restored his various belongings to his pockets, the revolver and knife, which had been removed, excepted, Leonard turned down the rug and looked at Juanna, who appeared to be plunged in a deep and happy sleep, for there was a smile upon her face. Then he examined the place where they were confined. It had two doors, that by which they had entered and a second of equal solidity. The only other opening was the slit out of which Soa had dropped the poison. It was shaped like an inverted loophole, the narrow end facing inward. This aperture attracted Leonard's attention both on account of its unusual shape and because of the sounds that reached him through it. Of these the first and most pervading was a noise of rushing water. Then after awhile he distinguished a roar as of a multitude shouting that was repeated again and again at intervals. Now he knew where they must be. They were hidden away in the rock of the temple somewhere in the immediate neighborhood of the raging pool that lay in front of the colossus, and these sounds which he heard rose from the people who watched the fate of Otter and Francisco.

Juanna still slept heavily under the influence of the drug, and he was glad of it, for when she woke it must be to a worse misery than any that had gone before. Partly for something to do and partly because the cravings of nature made themselves felt even through his sorrows he turned to the table and ate and drank of the viands there, though not without fear that they might be doctored. As the food took effect upon him some share of hope and courage entered into his heart, for it is a true saying that a full stomach makes a brave man. After all, the two still breathed and were unharmed in body, nor was it absolutely certain that they would be called upon to give up the ghost at present. This was much. Moreover, he had lived long enough to win the love of the fearless and beautiful girl who slept beside him, and though perhaps under such circumstances love, however true and passionate, ceases to occupy a commanding place in a man's heart, even then he felt that this was more, and that happier days might dawn when it would be, if not everything, at least most of all.

As he thought thus he saw color creep into Juanna's pale face. Then she sighed, opened her eyes and sat up.

"Where am I?" she said, glancing around wildly. "This is not the bed on which I lay down. Oh," and she started, "is it over?"

"Hush, dear, hush. I am with you," said Leonard, taking her hand.

"So I see. But where are the others, and what is this dreadful place? Are we buried alive, Leonard? It looks like a tomb."

"No, we are only prisoners. Come, eat and drink something, and then I will tell you the story."

She rose to obey him, and for the first time her eyes fell upon the robe she wore.

"Why, this is Francisco's. Where is Francisco?"

"Eat and drink," he repeated.

She did his bidding mechanically, watching his face the while with wondering and frightened eyes.

"Now," she said, "tell me. I can bear this no longer. Where are Francisco and Otter?"

"Alas, Juanna, they are dead!" he answered solemnly.

"Dead!" she wailed, wringing her hands. "Francisco dead? Why, then, are we still alive?"

"Bear up and listen, Juanna. After you went to sleep in the palace Soa came to us with a plan which we accepted."

"What was the plan?" she asked hoarsely.

Twice he strove to tell her, and twice he failed. The words would not come.

"Go on. Why do you torment me?"

"It was this, Juanna—that Francisco should be dressed in the robe of Aca and offered up with Otter in your place, while you were hidden away."

"Has it been done?" she whispered.

"I believe so," Leonard replied, bowing his head to his breast. "We are prisoners in a secret cell beneath the feet of the statue. There have been great noise and confusion without and now for some time silence."

Then Juanna sprang up and stood over him, with flashing eyes.

"How dared you do this?" she said. "Who gave you leave to do it? I thought you were a man. Now I see that you are a coward."

"Really, Juanna, it is useless for you to go on like this. Whatever was done was done for your sake, not for that of anybody else."

"Oh, yes, you say so now, but I believe that you made a plot with Soa to murder Francisco in order that you might save your own life! I have done with you. I will never speak to you again."

"You can please yourself about that," answered Leonard, who by now was thoroughly enraged, "but I am going to speak to you. Look here, you have said words to me for which, were you a man, I would do my best to be avenged upon you. But as you are a woman I can only answer them and then wash my hands of you. As you must know or will know when you come to your right mind, I would gladly have taken Francisco's place. But it was impossible, for had I attempted to dress myself up in the robe of Aca I should instantly have been discovered, and you would have paid the price of my folly. We all knew this, and after we had consulted things were arranged as I have told you. I only consented to your being brought here on the condition that I was allowed to accompany you for your protection. Now I wish that I had left it alone and gone with Francisco; then perhaps I should have found peace instead of bitter words and reproaches. However, do not be afraid, for I think it probable that I shall soon follow him. I know that you were very fond of this man—this hero—and also, either by accident or design, that you had succeeded in making him a great deal too fond of you for his peace of mind. Therefore I make excuses for your conduct, which, with all such deductions, still remains perfectly intolerable."

He paused and looked at her as she sat on the edge of the couch, biting her lip and glancing toward him now and again with a curious expression on her beautiful face, in which grief, pride and anger all had their share. Yet at that moment Juanna was thinking not of Francisco and his sacrifice, but of the man before her whom she had never loved so well as now, when he spoke to her thus bitterly, paying her back in her own coin.

"I cannot pretend to match you in scolding and violence," she said. "Therefore I will give up argument. Perhaps, however, when you come to your right mind, you will remember that my life is my own and that I gave nobody permission to save it at the cost of another person's."

"What is done is done," answered Leonard moodily, for his anger had burnt out. Another time I will not interfere without your express wish. By the way, my poor friend asked me to give you these," and he handed her the rosary and the notebook. "He has written something for you to read on the last sheet of the journal, and he bade me say that, should you live to escape, he hoped that you will wear this," and he touched the crucifix, "in memory of him, and also that you would not forget him in your prayers."

Juanna took the journal, and holding it to the light opened it at hazard. The first thing that she saw was her own name, for in truth it contained, among many other matters, a record of the priest's unhappy infatuation from the first moment of their meeting and also of his efforts to overcome it. Turning the pages rapidly, she came to the last on which there was any writing. It ran as follows: