

AT THE QUEEN'S  
MERCY  
BY MABEL FULLER BLODGETT

LAMSON, WOLFFE AND COMPANY  
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**AT THE QUEEN'S MERCY** by MABEL FULLER BLODGETT, a captivating novel of Africa complete with lost tribes, a white queen, and daring adventurers, was first published Lamson, Wolfe and Company, Boston, New York and London in 1897.

It is frequently confused with "At the Mercy of the Queen" by Anne Clinard Barnhill, a tale of court intrigue during the reign of Henry VIII. This is a tale of adventure, of two men, John Dering and Gaston Lestrade, who are captured by a tribe of warriors. The narrative unfolds with vivid descriptions of the exotic setting, including a walled city guarded by a serpent god and a temple adorned with precious gems and intricate carvings. Things go from bad to worse when are brought before the High Priest and a mysterious queen, whose beauty and power captivate them. The mysterious priestess queen is named LAH, a name that would be used by another author about fifteen years later for the priestess-queen of his own lost city with a treasure vault. The novel is one of the first examples of the lost-race genre written by an American author.

This long-lost work has been selected by scholars as being culturally important

Born on April 10, 1869, as Mabel Louise Fuller in Bangor, Maine, she was the daughter of Ransom Burritt Fuller and Louise White. Her father became the president of two insurance companies in Boston. She graduated from the Sacred Heart Convent at Elmhurst in Providence, Rhode Island, and wrote her first novel, *At the Queen's Mercy*, (1897) at the age of 19.

*TO MY HUSBAND  
This Book is Dedicated*





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## At the Queen's Mercy

## Chapter I

## A Slave's Secret

I am a plain man, and to do a plain man's work was ever more to my taste than to set down with a clerk's skill such happenings as have befallen.

Nevertheless, something within me spurs me onward; for, to tell the truth, I am loath to die leaving no record of the sights that I have seen; sights to brand the memory and stir the blood, and doings to turn one hot and cold, years after the doers thereof have crumbled into dust.

Fate, fickle jade, has willed a peaceful end for me—a man from whom peace has ever been afar off. Yet by my fireside I am not alone: Zobo, the Mighty, wrestles in the flames; Astolba, my fair white dove Astolba, gently smiles upon my waking dreams, and she, the Queen with deadly wondrous beauty, like some fair poisonous flower, flaunts before my eyes.

But enough of fancies. I must on to the beginning of the marvellous tale in which I was to play so large a part. A tale strange beyond common reckoning; strange beyond belief, were I not known not only as a man whose inches well may bear him out, but also as one little versed in the art of embroidering blunt facts with fine imaginings.

It chanced in this wise:—

We sat by the fire, Gaston Lestrade and I, one dark and stormy evening, for this was the end of the rainy season. We were in the African interior; fortune had dealt hardly with us. It is not needful to the purpose of this tale to tell by what and by whom we had come to so dismal a pass; enough that we found ourselves wet, hungry, surrounded by hostile savages, and, worse than all, poor to nakedness after four months' irksome traffic in ivory and gum. Lestrade sat pulling his fine black mustache, for all his present wretchedness, with the air of a dandy on the Parisian boulevard, though there was not a petticoat within miles, and death, from one cause or another, more like to be our portion than amorous adventure.

A quick eye for a woman had my comrade, and a heart big enough to hold all the sex, or, at least, such as were personable. But over and above all this, Gaston Lestrade was a man to die for

a friend, albeit with a jest on his lips, and I forbore to meddle with his pastimes.

For myself, I cannot deny that women have ever held me in esteem, and once or twice have urged me to retreat by hot advances. The reason of this has ever seemed to me that I am big of limb and brawny withal; that I am slow to speech and anger, yet enduring in that to which I have set my mind. And this is not commonly the manner of the sex, who look up to the power or strength such as the Lord has not given them, whose tongues are nimble, and whose fancies float hither and thither with every breath, like thistledown before the wind. And so they take to that which is not of their fashion.

Every man to his taste, say I—the wooing of maids to one, the clash of arms to another, and for me comfort and plenty, and as little danger as possible, which is in itself a strange thing, since it has been decreed that all my life till now be spent for war and women. But I must hark back to the fireside. We had taken stock of our resources, and with the less trouble, inasmuch as they were few.

“Four biscuit, *mon ami*,” said Lestrade, “and a few strips of smoked meat. Truly, Africa is an excellent place to starve in.” And he yawned as though the subject did not closely concern him.

Which nettled me, and I spoke sharply: “Our powder and shot are nearly spent. The king, next whose village we lie, loves us not; his fourth wife can perhaps tell the reason.”

Here Lestrade yawned again.

“A spiritless wench, but not uncomely,” he murmured in his own tongue.

“The palm-oil wine is gone,” I finished.

Here my comrade was pricked to interest. He raised the flask and set it down with a sigh.

“*Hélas*, thou art ever right, my Dering. What shall it be? Do we fight our way to shore, or on through the jungle, or does it meet with thy judgment that we await here the tender mercies of our royal neighbor yonder?”

I gave the fire an ill-tempered shove with my foot, for I was cold and hungry, and it has ever been my experience that a man's sweetness of temper will suffer from the emptiness of his stomach. “You know it is equally impossible to go or to stay,” I answered shortly. Lestrade held up his hand for silence, and through the heavy patter of the rain on the roof of our hut came



a noise that was not of the jungle. Gaston looked to the priming of his rifle; I held my finger on the trigger of my own.

"Some one running, and for his life," said Lestrade, under his breath, and even as he spoke, the door of our cabin was thrust open, and a man leaped into the fire-lit circle.

He stood a hunted creature, quivering and amazed for an instant, the next, an arrow sped through the doorway and buried its point in his shoulder.

A yell of triumph rang through the forest, and two Fan warriors, hideous in war-paint, followed. They faltered on seeing Lestrade and me, but quickly plucked forth their spears to do us injury.

It was not the time or place for argument. The report from Gaston's rifle rang out sharply, and the first savage pitched headlong and lay still, a thin, dark stream trickling from the body over the earthen threshold. The second, I dropped also, but not so neatly, for he wriggled like a big black snake into the underbrush, and was lost to sight. Seeing which I turned to look at our visitor, but here again Lestrade was quicker than I.

The negro was leaning heavily against the side of the hut, and Gaston held in his hand the slender arrow which he had plucked from the man's shoulder.

"A pin prick," I began, with some contempt, for indeed the stranger's pallor, black though he was, and my comrade's grave face, seemed greater tribute than was needful for so slight a hurt.

"Poisoned," Gaston answered briefly, and even as he said it I knew that it was so.

I took the piece of bamboo in my hand. It was some ten inches long and sharpened at one end. I stooped and picked up the bag of skin that lay on the floor beside the body, still warm, of our fallen foe. Arranged in careful order within were other arrows like to the first, each red-tipped, each a swift and fatal messenger.

There was no hope, and the wounded man knew it.

He was a tall, muscular savage, a little stooped and grizzled with age, but powerful, save for the death sickness that had begun already to loosen his joints.

Many lines crossed and recrossed his face, and as I looked on him more closely, I saw that his features were not those of the neighboring tribe, nor indeed did his face resemble the natives

that I had seen. Furthermore, his skin was more bronze than black.

A curious woven strip falling from one shoulder over the right breast bound his middle. Save for this, the man was naked, and I saw that some strange torture had twisted and distorted his wrists and hands. Moreover, his body bore in several places the mark of hot iron, and my gorge rose at the thought of the infernal cruelties that had been practised.

Meanwhile Lestrade, with something of a woman's touch, and in that was I ever far behind my comrade, well-known as he is for skill and nicety in sickness,—Gaston, I say, had helped the stranger down, had placed a packet beneath his head, and now stood waiting, helpless to do more and pitiful of the drops of agony that stood bead-like upon the forehead of the dying man.

The end would not be long. Presently the savage spoke, and in the dialect of the neighboring tribe, but with the words somewhat clipped and altered as one speaking a strange language to strange ears.

"I am Sagamoso, priest of the Council," he said, "and the door of Shimra opens." He raised himself with pain, upon his elbow, and his eyes glittered strangely in the firelight. "Nevertheless, promise, O men of white countenance, that you will bury me, my feet to the rising sun, ashes upon my breast, in the name of Edba and of Hed; and deep, deep, so that no beast shall rend me, no enemy loose me from my grave. Inasmuch shall I escape the last evil."

"Christian burial, and no heathen mummary shall you have," said I; for in truth I was sore that this savage should have fled to us, as if our case was not evil enough, and so was like to bring the whole tribe of Fan, like a swarm of angry bees, about our ears.

Lestrade was silent, and the stranger catching at my tone looked from one to the other of us, for a space, in silence also.

Then, as if some inward power thrust from him words he fain would have held back, he burst forth:—

"O men of white countenance! My hour is at hand. Swear by Edba and by Hed to bury me as I have besought, and the place of the woman and of the treasure shall be known to you, and, moreover, the secret way."

"The woman!" said Lestrade, drawing in his breath quickly.

"The treasure!" I cried, and neither of us thought of the strangeness of such words from the lips of a savage.

Then by Edba and by Hed we swore; for the man's words had somehow taken hold upon our minds, and afterwards, all-curious, half-believing, for the very strangeness of its telling lured us on, we heard the story of Sagamoso, one time priest of the people of the Walled City, now outcast and slave.

I cannot tell it as he told it there in the African forest, with the rain falling heavily without, and the fire casting strange shadows on the face of the dying man, convulsed now and again by the action of the poison that was eating out his life. But the things that he said are set down in due order, though, as I told you, I am no scribe and cannot cunningly interweave and polish my words as the learned do.

"I am not of this people nor of this place," said Sagamoso; "my home is many miles hence, and the path is hidden and beset with peril. But two of the people of white countenance like to yours have ever come so far,—one a man old, not so much with years as with weariness and the toil of wanderings; the other, his daughter, straight and slender, and fair above the common lot of woman.

"Him we slaughtered there at the outer gate, as is the law for strangers. The maid was at the Queen's behest brought to the palace, but whether as the bride of Hed, I know not. Such service rendered to our god is like to be her portion: nevertheless, three moons must wax and wane before the feast, wherefore you who are of her people can yet save her from the death marriage, unless, indeed, Hed be wroth, or Lah, the Queen, set her will to thwart you.

"Yet even so, surely of maids there are many, but of treasure like to that in the secret storehouse of Edba, there is not in the whole world.

"I, Sagamoso, priest of the Council, tell it you. O men of white countenance! torture like to this,"—and he raised his twisted claw-like hands,—"torture of hot iron and seared flesh could not have wrung it from me. But if I be not buried with the rites of the dread god whose servant I yet am, I must walk forever in the outer darkness, weariness unutterable my portion throughout all ages. Because of the sin that I have sinned, the door of Shimra indeed is shut before my face, but the peace of nothingness is still within my grasp, and for that peace will I betray the secret of

the city that has cast me forth, the secret of the jewels and the fragrant gums, the ivory and precious woods, the gold and rich garments and the wines of price, that lay hid within the bowels of the earth, and guarded by the name that may not be spoken."

Here the stranger's voice faltered and was still, and Lestrade and I looked at each other in amazement that was yet half belief, for the passion in the tones rang through the hut, and that the manner of this heathen burial was to him that asked it of vital import, none might doubt.

"This maiden," said Lestrade, as though the thought of the treasure had passed him by, "what dreadful fate threatens her, and where is this walled city?"

The poison was doing its work all too well. Thickly and with difficulty the words came from the swollen lips of the dying man. He thrust aside the woven strip that covered his breast.

"Look!" he gasped; "the secret way." Lestrade and I bent close and there sure enough, tattooed in lines of blue and red, on a spot above the heart as big as a man's palm, we saw a rude map.

"Straight through the jungle northward," breathed the priest, "by the swamp, by the waterfall, through the mountains, where beyond lieth the Pass of Blood! Behold the sign!"

His wavering forefinger touched the woven garment, and we saw the fantastic outline of an evil, leering god, about whose squat and crooked body twined a monstrous serpent.

"Bid the gate open in the name of Hed!" he continued, his voice growing full and resonant once more. "And look you—speak not of Sagamoso, the betrayer of the trust, the defiler of the sanctuary. Him, they think long since dead. Let his name be forgotten lest it be cursed before the Council."

"But the maid, the maid!" cried Lestrade.

The eyes of the stranger narrowed. A curious light blazed in their depths. With a superhuman effort, the dying man raised himself from the ground.

"I am a priest of the Council," he cried, in a strange, chanting kind of voice. "I have been traitor. I have been slave. To Edba and to Hed have I turned my back. But my gods remember, my gods are strong, my gods punish. Think not to wrest from the Snake, his bride."

The strange, triumphant note broke. "By Edba and by Hed have you sworn," he muttered, and so passed.

Lestrade and I had learned the slave's secret, and the heaven for good or ill was working within us, silently indeed, but with a strange, persistent, and fateful power.

First, without more words, we buried him, and with the rites he had demanded, for I am a man of my word, and Lestrade follows my leading easily in that which affects him not nearly.

Then—for the day was at hand—we considered briefly that which had taken place and that which was to come.

Our present fortunes could well bear mending. The priest's words of a woman to be saved, and a treasure to be gained, had fired our blood. Life held little of safety for us here, and the end of it was that Lestrade's daring spirit weighed down my more prudent advices, and the die was cast.

Once having resolved upon the enterprise, I put from me, as is my habit, all thought against the wisdom of the undertaking, though to perish in the jungle in the pursuit of a phantom city, or to be slain at its gates in reality, seemed like to be our portion.

Sagamoso's last words echoed in my mind. That hatred of the white stranger had lurked in the eyes of the dying man I doubted not, but needs must when the devil drives. Wherefore, without more speech upon the matter, our scanty goods were packed, and Lestrade, with a gay tune upon his lips, and I, the more silent for his light-heartedness, set forth upon our journeyings.

## Chapter II

### The Pass of Blood

The first step now was to flee from the wrath of the Fan tribe.

Cannibals were they, and over and above their just cause for offence I felt that they had long been tempted to try the flavor of a white-man roast. However, I was not minded to end my days in so inglorious a manner; neither would Gaston's high spirit brook the thought of such disgrace. We pushed our canoe, therefore, with all good-will up stream, and by dint of hard paddling, in the art of which I stand second to none, we had soon a comfortable distance between ourselves and our neighbors.

Lestrade had copied with feminine painstaking, on a strip of hide, every line of the rude map tattooed upon Sagamoso's brawny chest. I, for my part, had taken with us the woven garment, which I saw was made of the hair of some animal, a goat probably, and which was colored with vivid dyes in orange, crimson, and blue.

Following, as well as we might, the chart that was now our only guide, towards nightfall we beached our canoe, and I, by great good-luck, speared a small monkey that chattered in the branches of a tree overhead. We quickly made a fire, and Lestrade served a steak which, garnished with plantains, left nothing to be desired.

The howling of a panther sounded faintly through my slumbers that first night of our encampment, but the protecting fire kept the great cat at bay, and he had gone by day-break.

We arose refreshed and ready to look lightly upon our quest, all undisturbed by the slenderness of our ammunition and stores. So one hour passed and another. We had begun to suffer much from the thorns that tore our flesh, from innumerable flies that ran their red-hot needles into every unprotected inch of our bodies and even through our clothes.

Our shoes, too, had by this time been cut in strips, and our feet were swollen and bleeding.

But these were hardships that every traveller looks to, and we were consumed with the desire to find the Walled City and behold the maiden and the treasure that its temple held.

Indeed, we talked of little else. Gaston turned the slave's tale this way and that, and his nimble tongue wove pictures all different in form, but all ending happily with processions of

triumph, where crowned as kings we bore away the damsel and the gold.

Even to my sober thought, these tales lightened much the journey; yet, though I am not given to fancies, the eyes of the heathen god outlined upon the dead priest's garment, at such times seemed to gleam, with a kind of horrible joy and malice, and the snake's crest reared, and I could almost hear the thick hiss in which the python vents its rage.

It is not my purpose to relate each adventure as it happened. Perils from man and beast there were. Once we were captured by a strange tribe and escaped narrowly, leaving behind us much of vital use to us in our journeying. Once I saved Lestrade, helpless and unarmed, from the fury of a gorilla. Once we fled for our lives before the onslaught of an army of brown ants, that strip to the bone every living thing that ventures in the line of its strange march.

So on, and at last we reached the waterfall set down upon our chart, and here a thing happened that kindled anew the fire of our drooping hearts.

It was a thing wonderful in itself, more wonderful as explaining the parting words of the slave Sagamoso, and it clearly showed us that we had not strayed from the right path, and that the jungle had given up its secret.

This waterfall was higher than any I had seen in Africa. It fell with a rush and a roar loud enough to be heard very far off, and it was split at its lowest part by a tall pillar of stone, on which was carved—and this was what cheered us like wine—the grotesque image of the snake-encircled god.

How such a pillar could have been set up by mortal hands in such a place, exposed as it was to the fury of the downpour of this great body of water, was in itself a marvel, and threw a new light on the people that, with our small store of weapons, we two men had set out to brave.

"The waterfall must have been turned from its course," said Lestrade.

And I, seeing no better way out of it, agreed.

Yet was this no time to stop and argue the matter, so we took up our burdens once more, and, with renewed hope, pressed on; and the more certainly in that here the jungle broke, leaving before us a broad track, as though an army of elephants had fled or been driven along the way.

This did not astonish us at the moment, for there are many such clearings in the African forest; but as we sped onward, and the broad thoroughfare still stretched before us, as far as eye could see, we knew this was no common happening.

Night found us yet on this untrammelled and solitary highway; and as the shadows closed, I am not ashamed to confess that a chill settled on my heart, and that even Lestrade grew silent.

However, naught chanced to disturb our slumbers, and looking well to our arms, we marched briskly forward.

Lestrade was a little ahead, and on a sudden he gave a sharp cry and—disappeared. The ground had opened and swallowed him. I pressed forward, and my horrified gaze took in at a flash the devilish trap into which he had fallen.

A pit thirty feet in depth, twenty feet or more in width, stretched, as I afterwards found, from one side of the road to the other. It had been artfully covered with a fine mesh of woven grass, and this mesh by several inches of earth, so that the fiendish contrivance was hidden from the most careful gaze. Air-holes, the use of which I will tell presently, were so arranged as to be concealed by the dense foliage of the jungle. The plaited grass of course could not bear up any weight of moment, although small animals might safely venture across.

But this was not all. A loathsome mass of serpents crawled and twisted upon the bottom of this pit; and hanging by his fingers from a slight projecting rock on the side, some twelve feet down, I saw the agonized form of my friend.

"Courage, Gaston!" I cried, and cheerfully, though my soul was sick within me. "I will save you—or shoot you," I added inwardly.

Even in that moment of horror the old mocking smile played for an instant on the white face beneath.

"Agreed," Lestrade answered, in a voice that he fain would have copied after my own.

I slipped the woven garment of the priest Sagamoso from about my body, and knotted it into a running noose. This I tied securely to the stock of my rifle, and leaning over the pit, I swung it down in the hope that I might fasten it under Gaston's shoulders and so ease the terrible strain that I could see grew instantly more unbearable.

I beheld the white bones of animals or men in the pit beneath. The fetid odor of that nameless place assailed my nostrils, and I saw, merciful heaven! that it should be so—the noose fell short.



I looked heavily upward, and there, carved on a tree that overtopped the pit, I beheld the horrid image of the snake-encircled god.

The face leered down upon me, and the eyes taunted me, vile slits that they were, in the impassive cruelty of that smooth countenance.

Then a frenzy seized me and lent strength to bone and sinew.

"I will save you, man, or I will die with you." The sound came thickly from between my teeth.

I thrust my spear deep into the ground beside the pit. I tied about me one end of the garment of the dead priest, and fastened the other to the spear. Then with my naked hands I made a kind of foothold in the close packed earth, and let myself down over the edge. If there was a flaw in the iron forged by savage hands, the spear would snap. The woven strip of cloth that cut into my flesh might part under the strain, or the stake be pulled from its earthen bed. I dared not look below, but I heard Lestrade's quick, hard breathing.

That twelve feet seemed a hundred, and the snail pace all the slower for the galloping pulses of my heart.

All at once—for the ear grows keen in danger—I heard Gaston's fingers slipping,—slipping along the rock.

"Friend, I can do no more."

The faint whisper was borne upward from the pit. With a superhuman effort I let go my hold with one hand, and my fingers closed upon the collar of Lestrade's shirt.

He hung a dead weight, limp in my grasp, and I thought my arms would start from their sockets. The spear above us swung to one side; the sweat from my forehead ran down and blinded my eyes.

With an animal instinct I clung to the side of the pit. I could feel the veins in my temples full to bursting, and for one brief moment, ease from that terrible rack seemed more to be desired than a friend's life; more precious than sunlight; a better thing than honor itself. The next instant, and my foot, by the Lord's mercy, touched the stone that had stayed Lestrade's fall.

Inch by inch, I, John Dering, lifted that unconscious body, while the birds twittered in the branches overhead, and the pitiless sun beat down, and the god of the people of the Walled City kept evil watch, and the serpents hissed and writhed in the pit beneath.

At last I had one arm over the edge of that place of torment. One final mighty effort, and Lestrade was safe, while the spear shot from its socket, and fell tinkling into the depths below. How I drew myself up to lie upon the edge beside my friend, I do not know. My blood had turned to water in my veins, and I was as weak as a new-born babe. I could not have lifted a finger to have escaped a thousand deaths. Earth and sky came together in one black threatening mass; the next I knew Lestrade was pouring water on my forehead, and moreover kissing me on both cheeks—a foreign practice I could never stomach, and one which soon brought me to my senses.

That day we rested. The next we tore the cover of grass from that foul trap, and left it open to the gaze of men and beasts.

Then because I am a religious man and believe in the right conduct of human undertakings, I swore to set my face the more earnestly towards the object of our travelling. Neither to seek peace or comfort till the Walled City be found; praying that Providence might deliver into my hand the maker of that death pit, that I might presently bring him to a repentance that would be beyond the pale of backsliding forever.

"The Lord do so to me, and more also, if I follow not the leading of my conscience in this matter," said I, and Lestrade answered, "Amen."

Then, because we were not to be put aside like children, from that to which we had set our minds, we felled a tree, and bridged the pit and so crossed.

Much more slowly we now proceeded, for we had been taught caution, yet we marched onward, with little thought to the map, for the course lay plain before us. We were now in a mountainous country, and it had grown cool, a matter for much thanksgiving. We guessed by this and other signs that now our quest was well-nigh over, and we were right; for at length after much toil of travel we came without mishap to our journey's end. Massed across the open appeared a pile of rock, and as we neared, I saw the lines in Lestrade's face deepen. Nor was I untouched, for we did not doubt that before us lay the entrance to the City that we sought. We looked to our guns and came up with all caution.

The noise of the jungle was in our ears, but of human sight or sound there was none. The mass in front towered above us to the sky, and we saw that it had been set in place by some gigantic machinery unknown to the civilized world. The massive barrier

was formed of rock, fitted together with cunning, and smooth like glass.

The nature of the rock was strange to us, for it was splashed here and there by great red stains, like gouts of blood; and the fancy was further heightened by a scarlet creeper that clung and fed itself, and well-nigh covered the base of the ponderous mass.

There was no gate nor doorway nor visible opening of any kind, and on each side of the great wall grew dense a prickly thorn, so tough that it turned the edges of our axes, and we saw the hopelessness of cutting through our way, even if the wall of stone extended not further in the African forest than eye could see.

That this was the mocking work of the people we had come to seek was plain; for here, as before, by the waterfall and overlooking the pit, here on the central rock and far above our heads, was painted the same gross image of their god.

We hoped to find some hidden entrance, and we went over the wall's surface, Lestrade and I, with patient fingers, all the long morning, and again and again, till night had well-nigh settled down upon us. But all in vain. The unyielding mass barred our further progress, and, as before, the serpent god gloated over the failure of our hopes. Mad at this ending, I seized my gun, and aimed it straight at the hideous face above. The ball sped surely, as my shots ever do. It flattened itself against the surface of the rock, between the creature's eyes.

There was a dull rumbling, a sound as of chains that slid and struck against stone or metal. Then the central stone slowly turned, as on a pivot, and forth from the opening poured a wild stream of men.

### Chapter III What Next Befell

On they came, like a swarm of angry bees from a hive; and I saw that they were mostly men of great stature, though mine, I judged, would still overtop the tallest, the which I do not say boastfully, but as one bearing witness to the truth.

Now that we had come at last to open war, my mind was clear, as my hand and heart were steady, and I could take calm note of this, as of other matters.

Lestrade was humming a gay tune at my side, his rifle well aimed, his finger on the trigger.

These people were clearly brethren of the dead priest Sagamoso, for they were of the same bronze color; and as they drew nearer, I perceived the regularity of their features, like to his.

They carried spears and swords that flashed bright in the rays of the setting sun. They called to us in a strange language and with threatening gestures; but I am, as I have said, a peaceful man, and loath to shed blood, so with a word I restrained my more fiery Lestrade, and we abode their onslaught.

Then a spear hurtled through the air and clove the fleshy portion of my arm, and with that, the lust of conflict fell upon me, and my eyes saw red, and verily I was mad with the joy of battle.

The foremost dropped before me, shot through the heart, and the second.

They paused for an instant in their onward rush, but I thought not so much with fear or surprise, as in obedience to a command. Then they pressed forward. My rifle emptied itself into the compact living mass. Lestrade was close behind. I seized the barrel in my hand, and the first oncomer fell like an ox beneath the blow.

So, thrusting, beating down the line of shining weapons, I clove my way through, and for me there was no weariness, nor fear, nor prick of bodily hurt. Only that fierce gladness, that inasmuch as it is the man's portion, transcends the lot of woman. There was one strange thing I noted even in the midst of the tumult. The warriors seemed bound by some observance to disable rather than to wound us. They struck heavily, it is true, but with the flat of their swords, and this I could see was from no love of the stranger.

Hate flashed from their eyes and rang in their voices; so as I laid stoutly about me, I did so with the more good-will in that I felt myself reserved with Lestrade for some more devoted sacrifice than was possible at the moment.

On a sudden the howling horde melted away, and a new enemy appeared. Down the open space, with great leaps, and with a cry, half bestial, half human in its malice, it came. A gray, furry body, fantastically striped in red and blue, two shining, bead-like eyes. This I saw; the next instant two sinewy claw-like hands were at my throat, and we were rolling over and over in the dust, the creature biting and striving to smother me in its embrace. It was strong, and it knew the tricks of wrestling. For a time neither one of us could boast of vantage.

The fight had ceased, and I dimly saw Lestrade trussed into a helpless bundle and lying upon the ground. The people of the Walled City stood in silence, resting upon their arms, like warriors of bronze.

Then the inward fury that consumed me stiffened my muscles to steel. My knee rested on the creature's hairy chest. I seized its jaw in my hand, and forced its head slowly, slowly back.

Its eyes rolled in helpless fury; its great teeth were ground together in a rage that defied me to the worst; the tongue protruded. There was a quick snap like the breaking of sugar-cane. The giant head rolled limply to one side; the long arms relaxed their pressure. A wail of sorrow and of anger rose from the waiting throng; I stood one instant, conqueror and free! In another, I was brought heavily to my knees, and the meshes of a net encompassed me. The horde of warriors fell into line. A litter of crossed spears was quickly made, and Lestrade and I were hoisted up and so with ignominy carried onward as is a bale of goods to the warehouse. Through the cleft in the wall of the Pass of Blood, which closed with ominous silence behind us; on through a passage-way, deep, narrow, hewn out of the solid rock; so once more were we borne close guarded, into the sunlight, and within the City of the worshippers of the serpent god, the City of our golden dreams and the dead priest's promise.

The street that opened was straight and wide, and bordered by houses of good size, generally of one story only, but built in every case of stone. Lestrade and I had never seen the like in all Africa, and the smooth, hard roadbed over which we were carried was another proof of the skill of this strange people.

Now that the stress of battle was over, I could look about me. From the open doorways of the houses peered a curious throng, men, children, and women also, but these last were close veiled, much to my good Gaston's disappointment, as I could see.

Our bodyguard were fine, stalwart fellows; each man had filed his two upper and two lower front teeth to a point, a custom I have elsewhere observed, and one giving the countenance a singularly wolfish look. Their long black locks were braided, and the plats were interwoven with strands of golden wire. They bore spears, and long curved knives stuck in girdles of panther skin. They carried also shields of hide, and on their feet were curious sandals that were laced to the calf with leathern strips.

The heads of the leaders were decorated with feathers held in place by a jewelled clasp, and the size of the gems sent the blood tingling through my veins.

I could now see that one man commanded this array, and I was the more sorry for that inasmuch as the steely glitter of his eye when turned our way, boded his prisoners little good. He was an old man and unlike the rest, covered from neck to heel by a flowing white garment around whose hem appeared strange characters writ in scarlet. A long gray beard fell over his breast, and his hair was bound by a plain gold fillet that crossed the forehead. In his hand he carried a short rod of ebony, and I noted with growing pain the reverence with which his followers observed his every gesture.

On a sudden, he raised his staff, and like one man the warriors halted.

We had stopped before an archway that spanned the street, and which was guarded by a gate of woven bamboo made strong by bars of iron, and bristling with points of the same metal. This gate swung on a pivot, and a man appeared who held earnest conference with our aged leader.

This newcomer looked to be about thirty years of age. I judged that he was not more than five feet tall, but the spread of his shoulders was so enormous that he might well have looked shorter than his real height. His massive arms were covered with bracelets of the precious yellow metal; his garments were striped with gold and blue. He carried no spear or buckler, but a short, straight two-edged sword hung from his side.

The talk was brief but earnest, and its import was clearly not to the satisfaction of our venerable friend. At last, with a

vindictive backward glance at me, he pointed his long, bony finger at the body of the dead ape, for now I knew the kind of creature whose neck I had broken.

He of the broad shoulders looked at it and then at me again with more discernment, and I thought with no less liking than before. Then as the tide of remonstrance from him of the evil eye and white beard did not cease, the other took from a fold in his garments a thing that glistened and glittered like a molten rainbow in the fading light, a girdle whose links were gold fastening squares studded with gems that defied, in their brilliance, the noonday sun.

This he laid upon the outstretched hand of the elder, and his clamor ceased, hushed to muttered murmuring. The armed throng passed the open gate, and as they defiled before him with the jewelled girdle, each touched, with outstretched palm, the breast and forehead, and the broad-shouldered one gravely bent his head in answer to their salute.

So were we borne along through a maze of streets like to that through which we had first come.

At length a halt was called, and we found ourselves before a temple built, indeed, of stone, but ornamented with carvings of fruit and flowers and strange figures of beasts and birds, covered with a curious lacquer in brilliant tints, red, green, violet, and gold.

Six men received us. They wore short, white tunics, and had shaven crowns bound by silver fillets, and they looked, I thought, with ill-concealed pleasure on the body of the dead ape.

Only a small bodyguard followed Lestrade and myself within the portals of this temple. We were borne along a curious labyrinth of passages all going downward and towards a common centre. A door of iron, heavily barred, was loosened and turned upon its pivot. We were carried within. Here our bonds were struck off by order of the chief with broad shoulders, but contrariwise, a metal girdle was locked about our waists, and this in turn was fastened by a stout but sufficiently long chain to a staple in the wall of our prison chamber.

Then the guards withdrew, and through the bars of the door I saw the leader bind the outer bolts with a small cord. This he sealed with wax, and likewise stamped the seal with a square of the jewelled girdle in such manner that none could enter without

having first broken the wax itself. Then he also left us, and Lestrade and I were once more alone.

We turned with one consent, and after we had each spoken somewhat to the other on the marvels of our capture and present escape from death, and had rubbed our arms and legs to a more comfortable complexion, for our bonds had been drawn about us with no light hand, we then took, what was plainly the next thing in order, and examined with due care our forced abiding-place.

The worst thing to be said against it was the darkness, for all light filtered from a distance through slits in the roof. The room was airy enough, however, and cool. The walls were closely overlaid with sticks of bamboo, and the floor was of earth pressed into bricks and colored with some show of art. Two woven sacks were filled to a pleasant thickness with some sweet-smelling leaves, and were each provided with a soft, wide strip of cloth, so that in the matter of beds, these heathen had given us nothing of which to complain.

A long, low settle of heavy black wood was also given over to our use, and this made complete the furnishing of the place.

After some hours of converse, and when darkness had settled like a pall upon the chamber, we heard approaching footsteps, and a lighted torch was thrust through the bars of the upper part of the door and into a socket set for the purpose. Then from the same hand came a wooden platter piled high with steaming meat and plantains, a gourd of water, and three small stone pitchers brimming with palm wine.

The three pitchers, and the fact that the meat was also divided into three portions, puzzled, at the time, both Gaston and myself, but we found afterwards that as I had killed the sacred ape belonging to the service of Hed, I was supposed to be possessed of a devil to whose strength was due this feat.

One portion of all our food was therefore set apart for the use of this same familiar. That I, who am, as I have said, a religious man, should be so thought of, filled me, when I knew the facts, with righteous indignation; but at the time, in my ignorance, I cheerfully abode the insult, and the portion of the evil spirit said to dwell within me was consumed like to the other victuals, with all the zeal and constancy of a hungry man.

After our first prison meal, Lestrade and I betook ourselves to bed, and being a heavy sleeper, I knew no more until a hand shook me roughly by the shoulder. Now I could never abide being



broken of my rest, a thing which was the less to be desired after the wearying events of the bygone day. So it was with little ceremony I struck out, and should perhaps, between sleeping and waking, have done some damage, had not the same hand deftly emptied the gourd of water over my head, while Gaston's familiar voice cried, with less courtesy than need be, "Fool!"

This brought me briskly to my senses, and I was about to argue the point with him, when a new sound hushed my tongue to silence, and I needed not Lestrade's command to listen.

A curious sound it was, and awesome, there in the midnight hour,—a sound not all a wail, not all a chant, but holding a note of jubilee so coldly cruel that it pierced with icy fear the very marrow of him who heard it.

Three times this strange song rose and fell distinctly to our waiting ears. Then it grew fainter and fainter, and died away, at length, in the distance.

I thought of my past sins and of my present straits, and I wished, with all earnestness, that I and my good rifle had not been parted.

Then sleep bore heavy upon my eyelids, and I turned over on my sack of leaves, leaving Lestrade still sitting with the white moonlight shining down through the slits in the roof above us upon his face.

#### Chapter IV At the Queen's Mercy

The next day passed without event of any kind, save the welcome advent of three good meals. I can say, for my part, that no sweet adventure could so well have satisfied my palate; and I bore the lack of present peril with all fortitude. But Lestrade was not of my mind, and ate moodily and more sparsely than is fitting for the wellbeing of a Christian stomach. He spoke, moreover, ungratefully of "fattening for the sacrifice," which, I take it, was neither a wise nor a comfortable saying, inasmuch as there appears, to my way of thinking, little profit in vain forebodings of that which is to come, and much mischief in despising present good for fear of future evil.

To be tied like a dog to a ring in the wall vexed him also, and sorely; nor did my pointing out to him the value of a submissive spirit, and its purpose in mastering the carnal pride of the flesh, greatly avail him.

For myself, I believe in patience until the time be ripe for the chastisement of the enemy, to the hurt, indeed, of his mortal body, but to the everlasting benefit of his heathen soul. But Lestrade is of a fiery nature, that cannot brook delay. Still the day wore on, and at nightfall the sound of footsteps and the clang of metal resounded once more through the rock-hewn corridors without.

Nearer came the approaching feet, and soon the light of torches could be seen by us dimly in the distance.

Then he of the broad shoulders appeared, accompanied by a guard of armed men. The seal of our prison was cut asunder, the door opened, we were loosed from our chains, and cords were bound about our wrists. Then a sign to follow was given, and we went forth.

We passed from the temple into the street, and so on through many other streets, until we halted before a great building, whose walls were set with marbles of rare tints, and embellished with silver that glistened in the moonlight.

No time was given us to look and wonder; the massive gates swung open, and we went within. From Lestrade and myself there broke an exclamation of wonder, for we had come from darkness into the brightness of a hall, the like of which is not, I verily believe, in all Africa.

For a little the glare was blinding, but soon my eyes became used to the light, and I began to look attentively about me.

This then is what I saw. The audience room was brilliant with thousands of torches that hung from silver sockets set in the wall, and depending also from pillars of carved wood that held up the roof. These torches burned clearly and with a sweet smell, and their light was shed on a countless multitude of men that lined the room itself.

The walls, too, of this great hall, though of stone, were enriched with panels of rare woods in pink and in amber, polished like the supporting pillars to a rare excellence of mirror-like brightness.

The floor was fashioned of huge blocks of marble set close and in a curious pattern, and covered towards the centre with a silk rug woven with pictures of strange beasts and birds like to those carved upon the temple we had just left.

The corners of this room were filled with plants bearing vivid flowers that gave forth a strong but very sweet scent. One end of this strange apartment was fenced off from what might be called the outer court, by a silver screen of fine open-work. Opposite this, at the further end, stood a low chair of ebony, round which coiled a carven serpent wrought in the same black wood, but with scales overlaid also in silver.

On this seat, or throne, I beheld the aged man who had commanded the force that had captured us, and whom I felt must be the High Priest of the dread god Hed.

He sat now, his chin in his hand, and he regarded us, I saw, with the same dark disfavor.

Surrounding him were men with shaven crowns and wearing woven garments like to those of the dead priest Sagamoso, and without this circle stood another line of men, but these were clothed in white like the six who had received us at the entrance of our prison house.

Beyond these again were massed warriors, naked save for their leopard-skin girdles, their shields and swords. The outer ring was composed of a curious throng of every age and condition, with women closely veiled, and even children.

Near the silver screen, on each side of the hall, sat, cross-legged, six negroes, natives of a tribe I had never seen. These were richly dressed, and before each was a drum ornamented with gold, and these they beat constantly with long spoon-shaped pieces of wood.

Behind them stood still other negroes thrumming on rude harps; the whole producing a strange, not unmusical sound, very soul-stirring in effect on him who listened. Suddenly there came from behind the silver screen the clash of cymbals. The people bent to the earth, and even the white beard of the haughty High Priest swept the ground. The warriors clashed their shields together; a cry of reverence and of welcome broke from the waiting throng; the silver screen parted. It slipped noiselessly back into the wall on either side.

Lestrade drew a quick breath, and at the same instant my eyes rested on the most beautiful woman that I had ever seen. For a little her loveliness held me fixed as though some spell had been wrought upon my vision. It was not until her voice, full and musical, broke the tense silence, that I turned my eyes away to see what setting held so fair a jewel.

And truly it was worthy. For the throne was of pure gold, and the back a peacock's tail, so encrusted with gems as to quite hide the precious yellow metal, and the seat supported by four elephants' tusks banded at the top by a row of egg-shaped emeralds. Behind the throne crouched a circle of mute veiled women before negro fan-bearers, erect and naked save for turban and loin cloth of golden tissue. Surrounding with drawn swords their royal mistress stood the guard of the household, each a perfect specimen of manhood and each plainly but richly dressed.

Lah, the Queen, was arrayed in some Eastern fabric, not silver and not silk, but partaking of the nature of each, and bound about the waist by the girdle that I had seen in the hands of him who had committed us to the safe keeping of the temple.

This garment was held in its place over the bare shoulder, by a clasp whereof the diamonds were as big as hazel nuts. A fillet shaped like a serpent encircled the Queen's head and kept back from her face the long, braided locks of blue-black hair that hung, heavy also with jewels, to her knees. She alone of all the women present was unveiled. I drank in the glory of her unfathomable eyes darker than midnight. I saw the scarlet of her lips, the warm olive of her skin, the graceful lines of her strong, supple, beautiful body.

But I have little skill in such portraying. To Lestrade that task. Enough that Lah, Queen of the people of the Walled City, was not only fair above the need of woman,—the Lord knoweth the ruin

that hath followed the working of the tenth part of such charm,— but she held also a subtle something in the serene cruelty of her gaze, a something in the calm command that curved her lips, to drive men mad, to fill the heart with a love that was half hatred, and a hate that could not do its worst because of the love that stayed its ordering.

So much let me say in my defence for what has followed. I am a man not easily prone to fall into the toils of women; to whom has been given subtlety to offset their weakness. But to Lah, a man's brain and a woman's wit; a man's will and a woman's will; a man's strength and a woman's beauty. Aye! more than woman's. Look to it, you who would judge me, and remember likewise the end, the end also with the beginning.

But enough. I will now set down for the better ordering of this tale, what befell at the Queen's audience, although it was not for days after that I learned the true import of that fateful evening.

Lah then spoke in this wise:—

"Who are these two strangers, whence their coming, and what their purpose?"

Then arose Agno, the High Priest, and his eyes glowed with a strange fire, and we, watching, saw his aged hand clench fast the staff of office that it held. With a fine gesture of mingled scorn and anger, he threw out the other, palm open, towards us, where, still close guarded, we stood in silence.

"Behold!" he cried, "the invaders of our City, the murderers of the sacred ape, whose hands are red with the blood of our warriors, whose sacrilegious weapons have been turned against the dread god. Yes, I have said it—violators of Hed himself!"

A sudden thrill ran through the people, and there was something in the faces turned towards us, so pitilessly cruel, that a cold chill settled on my heart, and I was well put to it to preserve the calm disdain that sat, as was fitting, upon my countenance.

Only Lah, the Queen, looked straight before her at the speaker, and her lips, I thought, curved slightly with a little smile whose meaning was not plain to me.

Agno turned towards the listening throng with a sudden change of voice and manner.

"O worshippers of the Serpent and of Edba! Shall the wrath of the gods fall upon your heads because they look down from the appointed place and see such deeds unpunished?"

"Nevertheless warmed and fed and unhurt have these two rested by royal order till now in the sacred temple, and the wrath above grows black, and the thirst of the Serpent is not slaked."

I thought I beheld again a swift change pass over the face of the Queen, like a cloud that covers for an instant the glory of the sun, but when I looked closer I saw that I was wrong, since her lips still wore that same curious half-smile.

"Doubtless," went on the High Priest smoothly, "doubtless the Queen, who is ever zealous for the glory of the gods, but bides her time, lest in too swift a death, some pang of body or soul be lost to these defamers. Surely such thought for the honor of Hed and of Edba shall not be without reward. But I warn you," and here his voice rang out with its old passion, "the patience of the Serpent is at an end; the god clamors for vengeance. Woe! woe! to him who setteth a stumbling-block in the way of rightful punishment.

"Let Lah, the Queen, command it! Let the torture that is the portion of these begin! Let their death and the manner of their passing plead for us and turn away, while there be yet time, the wrath that is to come!"

A hoarse murmur of applause rang through the multitude, and of their number, a man richly dressed and I judged a warrior, stepped out from among his fellows and stood in the centre, alone.

"Agno, the High Priest, has said it. We, the people, repeat it. Oh Queen, let the blood of the stranger flow freely that the gods may be appeased."

Lah turned, and I saw then, what, bewildered by the rising storm, I had not noticed; namely, that the Queen's sandalled foot rested upon the head of an enormous tiger that lay motionless before the throne.

She uttered a low, brief word of command, and the great beast rose, stretched himself lazily, and then stepped noiselessly forth.

A shudder ran through the throng. I saw the face blanch of the man who had spoken. The soft, padding footfall sounded now through the tense silence as the tiger drew slowly near.

At length when about ten paces from the warrior, the beast paused. The victim tried to speak, but no words came. His fixed distended eyes were on the lithe form before him. The great cat was crouched to spring, its tail waving gently, its tawny head raised.

Lah's voice broke the silence, caressingly, once more.

The creature bounded lightly through the air. The next instant the warrior lay prone on the marble floor, a swift, wide-spreading pool of blood speaking dumbly yet to heaven, of the doom that had fallen. The Queen turned to Agno.

"Behold," she said, "your answer."

With a graceful gesture she stopped the rising murmur of the multitude, and again her wonderful voice changed. It hid not the majesty of the speaker; no, truly, it hinted at power to enforce the words, but it was sweet, sweet and persuasive, over and above anything that I have ever heard.

"O my people!" thus spoke the Queen. "When, before to-night, has the highest in the land received an order of him who standeth next unto the throne? When before this hour has the chief servant of the Snake set a limit to the will of her who calls herself, and truly, the Snake's Bride? Have I not borne the embrace of the holy one, the python? In the dread hour in the pit itself has not the marriage rite been held, and for this?"

"Turn, O my people, ere it be too late! The fate of yonder man," and she pointed to the loose-limbed, weltering form upon the pavement, "the fate of such as he is naught to the vengeance that shall surely fall on him who sets his neck stiffly against the will of her, the best beloved of Hed. Aye! of the highest! I have said it. Look you to it.

"I am Lah, the Queen, and the just gods have given unto the hollow of my hand all power. As for these," and she turned her beautiful face an instant towards us, "rest quietly. The defamers of the Serpent may not hope for mercy. Nevertheless, in mine own time, and after mine own choosing, shall they pay the penalty.

"Guards, lead the prisoners behind the veil!" She turned smiling to the High Priest.

"More prudence would better befit thy white hairs, most pious Agno," she said, and the clash of cymbals answering to her nod drowned the bitter answer that writhed upon his lips, and proved that the Queen was, after all, but yet a woman, and so holding fast to the sex's dear privilege of the final word.

Obedient to Lah's command, six stalwart negro warriors, gorgeous in loin cloths of scarlet and gold, advanced, and laying hands upon us, hurried us, Lestrade and me, through the gaping multitude, on past the silver screen, by the Queen's glittering

throne, the host of slave girls, the musicians, the courtiers, onward still, until we reached a shimmering network of silk and steel that draped securely an entrance at the back.

With averted eyes the guards drew aside this heavy veil, and we passed within, the plaudits of the fickle throng still ringing in our ears.



## Chapter V

### Astolba's Errand

Lestrade and I looked about us. The face of Lah was still so potently present in my friend's memory that he seemed hardly conscious of the aspect of this new prison. I am, however, of a colder nature, and I scanned with eager gaze the inner hall in which we found ourselves. The guards had halted without the veil that screened from the profane this entrance to the palace of the Queen.

We stood, therefore, quite alone, in a large recess, arched and windowless and tiled with bricks painted in bright colors that showed, I judged, a kind of sacred pictured story. Hanging lamps in red, green, and blue, curiously wrought and giving forth a sweet heavy perfume, depended from the roof above our heads. Another curtain, also formed of tiny rings of silk and steel, screened the further end of this strange anteroom.

I plucked Gaston by the arm, for he was still in a day-dream, and together we walked along, till I, stretching forth my hand, parted the heavy woven folds before us. A massive door of some dark metal that looked like bronze now barred the way, but only for an instant. Invisible hands touched some hidden spring, and again we entered. This time the chamber in which we found ourselves was far richer than the one which we had left, and to which we might not return, since the door had locked into place behind us. Here the floor was of sandalwood, and covered with a rug so thick that our feet sank deep as though we walked on moss, while fair flowers woven in soft hues, still further cheated the eye that gazed upon their beauty. The walls were hung with silken tapestries; four slaves marvellously carved in ebony and clothed in rich garments, stood each in his respective corner, and these held high in one hand a scented torch, while the other grasped a curved and glittering knife. There were couches also here and there, covered with rare stuffs, and a shimmering gauze enriched with silver and turquoise veiled here, as before, the further end of the apartment.

Lestrade's interest quickened. His swift gesture tore aside the curtain and revealed a gate of beaten gold.

My blood leaped at the sight. I put forth my hand and shook the massive bars about which twined garlands of yellow, yellow flowers. My clumsy fingers touched the delicate wreaths of roses and of leaves. They did not melt away before my eyes; not a petal,

not a spray so much as trembled. It was all gold; solid, beautiful, wonderful gold.

I grasped Lestrade by the shoulder, but with an impatience new to him he shook off the touch and pointed to the gate. It was slowly opening; we passed, and it closed behind us. I saw pillars of ivory, the sheen of precious metal, the pink of tulip-wood walls inlaid with silver. I saw tiger skins upon the floor, and stuffed leopards bent to spring; I saw their jewelled eyes and claws of gold. Strange, sweet music floated through the air. I heard the tinkle of distant fountains. Then the blaze of light from the great star above ceased. The darkness of the pit wrapped us round, the thick hiss of a serpent pierced the night. I heard the rustle of garments and struck out valiantly.

There came a mocking peal of feminine laughter, then strong hands seized us from behind, and despite our struggles we were bound hand and foot and carried on and on through a tangled labyrinth, now to the right, now to the left, now doubling on our tracks, and all in the midnight darkness, with the indescribable noises in our ears of a silent attending multitude.

I thought the bearers walked along ground that gradually sloped downward. Afterward I found that I was right. At the moment there was so much else to think of that the true force of this fact did not strike me. I say this that you may note that I am a just man, as well as a modest, that I do not lay claim to a foresight or an understanding of the inwardness of things, over and above that which nature has bestowed on me. This I may say has so far been sufficient for the purpose, as indeed the event has in time borne out. And without former knowledge who could have guessed the hidden secrets of Lah's palace, or the mysteries that gathered thick about the dwelling-place of Edba and of Hed.

I heard Lestrade whistling softly there in the darkness not ten paces away. The sound heartened me wonderfully. We were still together, and what might befall lost half its terror.

All at once our bearers halted. I was gently laid upon a couch. My bonds were loosened, and as I sprang to my feet a light flashed from above, and I found myself standing beside Lestrade. The throng had melted away as if by magic. A woman closely veiled and draped in a white garment, alone stood waiting. Ere I could speak she turned with a quick gesture and threw back the filmy covering that hid her face. Lestrade and I uttered a

smothered exclamation, for the woman's skin was fairer than our own, and as she spoke, we knew on the instant that the tale of Sagamoso was true, and that the daughter of the murdered explorer stood before us. The girl was trembling so that Gaston made haste to lead her to a couch, while I stood stolid, my eyes fixed upon her eyes, luminous and wide with mingled fear and joy, while I waited in breathless silence for her words.

"How I have suffered," she said half to herself, and the English was sweet to me, and the sound of her voice yet sweeter. She looked about her as a frightened fawn looks when the dogs are upon her. "These walls have ears," she said under her breath. "This horrible place is full of treachery. Still I must ask you, for I cannot wait. You are of my people. Have you come to save me?"

Lestrade took her hand in his and kissed it, and his voice was the voice of a mother soothing a tired child.

"It is our sacred purpose, and naught shall turn us," he said.

"That and vengeance on your enemies," I added.

"Hush!" she answered, with a warning gesture. She listened in silence for a moment, and then the folds of her veil once more hid her face, but I had seen the pretty color come back to her lips and cheek, and her smile of trust and gratitude had stirred me mightily. "I am Astolba, handmaid of Lah, the Queen," she continued aloud, and with a subtile change of manner that Lestrade was quick to note and imitate.

As for me, I stood still gazing dumbly, yet drinking in the music of her speech.

"She, the beloved of the gods, has sent me hither, that you may learn from me the language of the people of the Walled City; that their customs and rites may be made known to you. So that, strangers though you be, you may yet stand within the inner circle,—if so the Queen will,—and bring knowledge and power to the followers of Edba and of Hed."

She looked with pleading towards *me*, for with a woman's quick instinct she saw that Gaston had no scruples at learning aught, let it but come from her fair lips.

For me, I have, thank the Lord, small stomach for heathen follies; little patience with holy serpents and sacred apes, with bloody chanting and such like deviltries.

Nevertheless, when Astolba added softly, "It is the Queen's order; will you learn of me?" I nodded, and she, I think, was puzzled and not best pleased, not knowing for certain which

argument had changed the habit of my mind. And that is, let me tell you, an excellent manner to deal with women.

Astolba, therefore,—for so she was called, and the word meaning “white dove” did indeed singularly befit her,—Astolba having told her errand and won consent, began at once her mission.

I cannot fit with nicety the meaning of all she told into the jewelled setting of her speech. I am, as I have said, a plain man, and can but repeat the substance of the strange lesson begun that hour, and continued in due order during many succeeding days, until the language and customs of this strange people became at length known to us.

For Astolba herself, her own story was simple. We already knew much from the dying words of the fugitive priest. Her future fate was to her, as to us, a sealed book, and we forbore to let her see the red light cast upon it by those same last words.

The maid had so far been treated well, with a kind of contemptuous pity, by her beautiful mistress. Lah was curious of all that pertained to Saxon life and usage. She had even learned the language; she had questioned her white prisoner closely about the arts, the doings, the manufactures of the stranger. She had copied in some measure, but secretly, such things as pleased her fancy, or seemed like to extend her power.

“She is wonderful,” said Astolba, “but she is terrible. The Queen’s nature is like a bottomless well. You drop a pebble into its depths, and you listen and listen, and you hear no sound. It is falling, falling, falling. And so with Lah. No one can judge that hidden depth. She is all in one. Childlike, lovable, gentle, then fierce, treacherous, and oh so unspeakably cruel!”

The girl covered her face with her hands as if to shut out some horrid sight.

“You could not bear, strong men that you are, the things that I have seen,” she said in a whisper. Then she went on more calmly, to speak of other matters, but the vision of the icy fear that had pierced her was by me not soon forgotten.

As I look back on it all now, I see how, little by little, we learned the belief of the people of the Walled City.

For better comprehension of this tale, I will now briefly set forth the substance of their strange faith.

Lah and her subjects worshipped chiefly, and with dread, two singular powers: Hed, the serpent god whose spirit dwelt in the

body of a monstrous python, called the holy Snake; and Edba, the moon goddess.

Hed gave victory in battle, revenge over enemies, success in various undertakings. Edba gave the crops and increase to the people.

Hed was worshipped by bloody sacrifices; Edba, by offerings of fruit and flowers, save on the great yearly feast, when she, too, demanded that a human life be poured forth before her altar.

Hed was the god of fear; Edba, the goddess of love. Once every twelve months, a maiden, fair and without blemish, became the bride of the Snake. That is, with songs and rejoicing, the rose-crowned victim was thrown to the python, and crushed to death in the reptile's horrid folds, in the presence of a frenzied multitude.

Two years before our coming a King had ruled with a heavy hand the people of the Walled City. Unlike his royal predecessors, he had made war upon the neighboring country, and he had brought home vast treasure and many slaves, so that the High Priest dared not lift his voice against the practice. To leave the City on any pretext whatsoever was a thing forbidden alike to the Ruler and his people; a thing unheard of for generations, and a thing accursed by Hed. But the King brooked no restraint; the masses were drunk with their new-found liberty, and Agno's maledictions were looked upon as little more than the impotent murmurings of a feeble old man.

Then one day the King returned with a captive, none knew from whence, a woman who despised the customs of the people, the beauty of whose unveiled face made glad like wine the heart of him who beheld it. Her, the King married; one month from that day he died, suddenly, at a banquet, and Lah, upheld by the High Priest, had seized the sceptre.

No woman had ever sat before upon the throne, and the people and army rebelled, the priests alone remaining faithful to their new sovereign.

But Lah faced the rising storm with calm authority. She appealed to an ancient test almost forgotten. She became, by her own wish, the bride of the Snake, and before the very eyes of her wondering subjects, she came forth from the pit, not only alive, but unhurt.

From that moment she became a sacred person. The chief ringleaders of the revolt were cruelly butchered by their quondam followers, and Lah was Queen indeed.

So much for what had taken place before our coming. That there was no longer peace between the High Priest and his sovereign, I already guessed, but I did not know then how near the crisis was, or how the scale of power trembled in the balance.

This, for Astolba's errand. I must now turn to the events that thickly followed on her coming.

## Chapter VI

### The Cup of the Beast

On the noonday that followed Astolba's last visit, our usual meal was not brought to us, but on the hour, a turbaned slave appeared, bearing rich vestments of the barbarous kind worn by the attendants at the Queen's court. These he flung upon the floor of our gilded cage, and by signs, showed us that we were to divest ourselves of our Christian garments and don instead these heathenish trappings.

Lestrade, glad of any divertisement—for of a surety our enforced leisure had become a burden to him—Lestrade, I say, bent himself with something of a child's glee to this mummerly, and I must needs confess showed in the issue bravely enough. But I, with some stubbornness to the messenger's mute importunities, shook my head, and having now achieved some knowledge of the language, I put to the fellow a few questions as to our state, and the term of our imprisonment.

But the slave was silent; and at length, wearied by his sullenness, I seized him by the shoulder, and (it shames me) with no gentle grip, for I was bent on forcing something more reasonable from between his thick lips than the senseless gibbering with which he had so far replied to my inquiries.

The fellow's eyes rolled with fear, and opening his mouth, he pointed inward, dumbly, and I saw that his tongue had been shorn off close to the roots. The sight filled me with such mingled feelings of rage at the hellish cruelty that had been practised, and of pity for the helpless victim, that when the poor creature took from beneath his cloak two covered silver goblets, and with mute entreaties offered one to me and one to Gaston, I followed without a thought my friend's example, and drank off at a draught the spiced wine that the cup contained.

Almost on the instant a mist arose before my eyes, and I saw, as in a dream, Lestrade fall on the marble floor of our prison house. The slave vanished as he had come; sweet music from a distance sounded in my ears, a great joy took hold upon my heart. I looked up and beheld the unveiled countenance of Lah, shining with its wondrous beauty, like a star, above me. I stretched forth my arms to draw the vision nearer, and—I knew no more.

How many hours passed while I lay close wrapped in that dreamless sleep, I cannot say. After a time, long or short as it may be, I awoke, and, piece by piece, what had befallen came

back to my mind. I was still calm, still strangely happy, and loth to break the charmed spell that held my being. But after a little my manhood struggled in the toils. I opened my eyes, and saw, without wholly understanding all as yet, that I was in another chamber, hewn, it appeared, out of solid rock, yet softly draped with silken tapestries. I lay upon a couch covered with the skin of a lion. I idly noted that the claws were of gold and the eyes of emerald. I saw that I was dressed in the garments that the slave had brought; but the sight awoke no anger. I glanced about me, and I beheld Lestrade, sitting motionless, with bowed head, in a distant corner of the room. I spoke to him, but he did not reply. Then I roused me, and again I spoke, and still silence. At this, the fumes of that accursed potion left my brain, and springing to my feet, I went swiftly to him, and again spoke; and this time Gaston raised his head, and his eyes encountered mine. His eyes! Not his, but those of an unthinking beast, with no show of meaning, of friendliness, aye, of barest humanity, in their depths. With trembling hand I touched him upon the shoulder.

"Gaston!" I cried. "Gaston! what has happened? Speak! do you not know me?"

Then, as he answered not, I shook him roughly, in my terror and amazement, and he turned,—turned like a savage dog that is disturbed,—and snapped at my hand. His lips drew back over his white teeth in an angry snarl, a beast-like snarl, and I, sick with horror, let go my hold, and there, with the same smile of cruel, conscious sovereignty, by my side stood Lah.

Then the rage that was in me broke loose; and forgetting everything, her womanhood with her power, I saw only the foul wrong that had been wrought upon the body of my friend, and I seized her soft arm in my hand, and gripped it savagely.

"Cursed sorceress," I cried, "this is your work!"

For an instant the Queen's eyes blazed, and had I not been beside myself with rage, I needs must have blanched before them; then a look of wonderful sweetness came into her face, and she said, with simple dignity, in the language of her people:—

"I will cure your friend."

I let go my hold and such a flood of mingled feeling overbore me, that I knew not what to do or say, or what construction to put upon the matter.



My usual slow thinking but unmoved self was far from me. I was on fire with new thoughts, new feelings, that I knew not how to meet.

I turned from my friend, crouched in bestial fear in the royal presence, to the red marks that I had just brought in my blind fury to the satin surface of the Queen's beautiful bare arm.

Then, with an effort, I shook off the spell of Lah's wonderful presence. I felt myself once more my own master. My eyes looked into her eyes, and I did not flinch.

"Is this your work?" I asked.

Again a subtle change passed over the Queen's face, but whether of anger or no, I could not tell. She motioned me to sit beside her on the couch from which I had just now risen, and I obeyed.

Then she pointed to the marks of my fingers on her flesh.

"This is your work," she answered, "and you yet live."

I looked in silence on Lestrade's cowering form, and again my heart was hot within me. The Queen followed my gaze, and once more she spoke.

"Do you not fear?" she asked. "See to what an end I can bring the gay spirit of your friend. Like a whipped hound he will come to my call. See him cringe as to the lash before my face. Take heed lest his fate be your fate, and your pride in like manner be humbled."

"O Queen," I answered, and my anger made me now again as cold and as calm as I had before been hot and troubled within me. "In your power we are indeed; nevertheless, think not that it can touch, as you have said, the spirit of your captives. Lestrade's body indeed trembles before you, your cruelty has lost him his reason, but his soul has but fled to its innermost retreat. You cannot lay so much as your little finger upon Gaston's real self. It defies you, it remains unchanged despite you. You have turned his outer being by your devilish arts into the likeness of a beast. I doubt not your will or your power to do the same to me."

"Doubt not my power," said Lah, gently, "but doubt my will. Think you another could have done so to me?" and she touched

her bruised arm again. "Could so have used me, the Queen, and have not repaid the insult by a thousand deaths in one? But in you, my Dering," and the name took music on her tongue, "I behold my mate. The people and the priests cry out for your blood. The one shall be appeased; the other balked." She laid her

hand, light as a snow flake upon my brawny arm, and her beautiful face was raised to mine. "What matters this broken slave, once friend to you? I do not command your fear, O my prisoner! but I do beseech your love."

Beneath her touch all my slow nature turned to fire. Her wonderful loveliness beat upon my soul, like the unclouded vision of the noonday sun, unbearable to the eyes. I felt a wave of turbulent and searching passion flood my being, my veins throbbed with the quick pulsing of my heart, and then—then the shivering, grovelling form of my once gallant friend came between me and the sunlight, and I shut my eyes to the beauty that tempted me to disloyalty and dishonor.

Once more Lah's spell was broken. Once more I was my own master. But with self-control came prudence coldly back. I felt that Gaston's life and mine trembled in the balance, and life is strangely sweet. And so it was that I turned to the Queen and bent my head, and kissed in silence the bruise upon her arm, and I felt her tremble, and knew that, for the time at least, I was her master also. And I knew then what to do, and did it as readily as one possessing intimately the knowledge of an instrument plays upon its keys.

"Give back first to my friend his reason," I said and somewhat coldly, and Lah with meekness took from her bosom a golden box, and opening it, plucked forth a strange-shaped nut. With the dagger from her girdle she scraped part of this off to a powder, and this in turn she mixed with water from a pitcher at hand, and poured the whole into a bowl. This cup she raised to Gaston's lips, and he drank greedily and with noise, lapping up the water like a beast. Then at a word he crouched before her, and after a moment his limbs relaxed,—the vacant look passed from his face, he breathed quietly, now once more asleep.

"He will wake," said the Queen to my mute question, "in an hour, and you will once more have your friend."

"I thank you," I answered.

"And is that all?" she asked, still tenderly, but with a warning note of passion in her voice. "Is that all, when men have died, and joyfully, that they might but kiss the hem of my garment, the print of my sandal in the dust?"

"No," said I, boldly, "that is not all; but, Lah, in my country, men's hearts beat not to the ordering of aught save their own will. Neither do they love as slaves, but as masters. Beautiful above

all women as you are, O my Queen, think not I will stoop before you. I am not cold. I could love, strongly, faithfully, to the uttermost, with a passion far outweighing that of these servants who you have said have died content but to kiss the hem of your robe, the print of your sandal. But not, O my Queen, as they, not as the subject to the ruler, not as vassal to his mistress.

You can rend my soul from my body if you will. You cannot make me bend my heart to your ordering. Not fear, not even love, shall sway me. For I love, O most proud, most beautiful of women, even as I have said, not as the slave, but as the master."

Lah turned quickly as if stung. I waited breathless in silence for her answer. Then at last she spoke, and there was new majesty in her bearing, and though she bent her head with a strange humility, I knew not the secret of her inmost thought. Yet the words came. "Be it so," she answered, and in obedience to a secret signal, the door of the cell slowly opened, Lah passed through beyond, and I, save for the presence of my sleeping comrade, was again alone.

## Chapter VII

### The High Priest's Council

Heavy still with the fumes of the Queen's sleeping-potion that the black had brought me, I sat with my head in my hands after Lah's departure, thinking yet but lamely, on all that had just now passed, while Lestrade slumbered in peace in the corner of our prison.

It might have been an hour or mayhap two, when my friend stirred, stretched himself, and at last sat up, his usual happy-go-lucky air giving way to a look of surprise when he saw our new abiding-place.

"How feel you, Gaston?" I asked anxiously, for I still distrusted the Queen's medicine, and the enduring nature of this sudden cure.

"Never better," Lestrade answered brightly; "but what means this sudden change of quarters? As for thyself, man, no popinjay of the tropics ever pricked it more blithely, no strolling mountebank bright with gold and scarlet and jingling bells, no, nor Solomon himself, of a verity, so much as touched the height of thy magnificence. Why, comrade! thy raiment shineth like the sun, and thou in the midst of grandeur, solemn as any owl."

And with that he fell a-laughing mightily, so that I was nettled, and without more ado related briefly, and perchance too sharply, all that had chanced since the slave's coming, save, as was fitting, the last passage between Lah and myself.

And at my story Lestrade grew grave once more, but not as one would fancy because of the danger he had but now passed, but all, if one would believe it, because of the figure he had cut in the Queen's presence. And I was hard put to it, to answer with discretion his many questions, without wounding him to the quick on the one hand, or ministering to his vanity and vain hope of Lah's favor, on the other.

Indeed, I was sore beset, when the door of our cell swung open, and Astolba came in, whereat Lestrade forgot apparently altogether and on the instant, his interest in the Queen's bearing, and turned, with all singleness of mind, to the entertainment of his fair visitor.

She, poor child, was in great spirits, and it was a pretty sight to watch the swift color come and go in her cheek, and note the many innocent little coquetries with which she met Gaston's warm advances.

Not that he took toll of every look and word; there were plenty still for me, of another, and, I could not help thinking, of a deeper nature. However that may be, the reason for her light-heartedness was soon made known to us.

The Queen, she told us, was on our side, and she would bring to naught the cruelty of the priests of Hed. Lah had spoken softly to her, almost as one sister to another, of us whose lives were forfeit to the gods; had promised us powerful protection, and bade Astolba bear to us, with all speed, the message.

Yesterday, it seemed, a missive had reached the throne, which read that Agno plotted, in the name of his unholy office, to tear us from the sanctuary of the very palace itself, and bear us to the altar of torture and of death.

Hearing this, Lah had hidden her wrath, but had given orders to two mutes that we be drugged with a harmless potion, and borne by a secret way back to the Temple of Edba, whence we had come.

"You are now," said Astolba, "in a hidden chamber that is next the Council Room itself. The Queen bids me tell you that at midnight the priests will meet there, and your fate will be the subject of their speech." She drew back the tapestry that masked the wall, and put her finger on the head of a painted snake that was revealed, for the stone was covered with pictured emblems of Hed's most revolting worship.

Once, twice, and once again, she pressed the chosen spot, and noiselessly a huge block of stone slipped back and disclosed a leathern curtain.

Astolba motioned us to silence, and drew forth the jewelled knife that hung from my much bedizened girdle. With it she slit the drapery of hide that screened the opening she had made.

Then she pushed back the heavy folds, but with all caution, and stooping at a sign from her, we gazed through the rent and saw indeed the High Priest's Council Room.

Lestrade, when I had done, scanned the place also with curious eyes. Then we fell back, and Astolba, again pressing, this time a painted emblem of the moon, the huge stone slipped noiselessly into its appointed socket.

"Now," said Astolba, "I have delivered to you the Queen's message, save for this scroll, which I have been also bidden to hand to you." And she placed, I fancied a shade reluctantly, in my hand an ivory tablet.

And in the language of the people of the Walled City, I read:—

"The wiles of the Serpent shall be brought to naught. Behold, even at the twelfth hour the crystal globe shall fall, and into thy hand be delivered the secret of thine enemy. But the wisdom and the power of the lioness no man may measure. Wherefore beware! Yet walk in the light openly, despising not the good gifts of the gods, and all shall, in the day to come, be well."

The Queen's signet, the same as that cut upon the middle stone of her girdle, a hand grasping a writhing snake, was engraved on this missive, which I again read carefully, and at Lestrade's impatient asking, this time aloud.

"A precious epistle," said Gaston, with an expressive shrug; for he was nettled, I make no doubt, that the Queen's majesty had addressed itself to me rather than to him.

"What is this crystal ball of which the letter speaks?" I asked, to change, if might be, the current of my friend's thought.

"Look up," Astolba answered, "and you will behold this people's strange clock. It works, I think, by water. Every hour a ball of lead curiously and differently marked, will drop from the plate above, into the brazen bowl which you see below. At midnight a crystal ball will show you by its fall that the hour to act has come. And now I must say farewell." She smiled upon us each in turn. "Good by for a little, dear friends," she said; "be brave, be fortunate," and had gone.

After Astolba's departure we waited with what patience we might for the appointed hour. A mute, black as ebony, like his brother of the goblets, brought us a supper that did no shame to the hospitality of his royal mistress. Delicious fruits were served to us in massive silver dishes; there was, beside, a steak, from what animal I know not, that was rarely toothsome. There were flat cakes of grain and a jar of ruby-tinted wine that would have made an anchorite forswear himself. So we dined together, Lestrade and I, and little by little, a moodiness that before had wrapped us round, now fell from us like a cloak; the potent grape juice warmed us through, and we were gay.

After the banquet the slave departed, silent as he had come, and Gaston, stretched upon the lion skin, sang snatches of fair French ditties, while I, in a reverie strangely sweet, with Lah's face floating in a glory through the waking dream, watched, motionless and content, the leaden balls fall clanging, on the hour, into the bowl of brass beneath.

At length the longed-for moment came, and with it the crystal ball. Lestrade rose, yawned, and was about to speak, but I, with a warning gesture, pressed thrice the serpent's head painted on our prison wall.

Back, slow and noiseless as before, slipped the massive stone. With a courteous gesture Gaston bade me look. I plucked at the rent in the curtain of hide, and even as I gazed, with measured step, two by two, the priests of Edba and of Hed entered from the farther end of the Council Room.

Lestrade cut with my knife another slit in the folds of the heavy drapery of skins, and together we watched in silence.

The chamber into which we looked was of great size, and seemingly hollowed like our prison cell, from out the solid rock. Massive pillars of stone supported the roof, and these were carved with hideous, leering figures grotesquely entwined.

The walls of the place were covered with painted pictures, rudely drawn but strangely and horribly lifelike. These represented victims suffering all the tortures that a cruel and fertile mind could think of, and through all the horrid story appeared at intervals the emblem of Hed, the serpent, and the sign of Edba, the silver moon; and these were shown forth also on curtains of hide that draped, as before our hiding-place, certain portions of the apartment.

The room was bare, but there was a throne of ebony on a raised platform at the further end, and in front of this stood a round stone altar with a deep groove running through it, that slanted and ended in a large basin or trough. Before this altar burned a fire in a three-cornered and very large brazier, holding not coals, but fagots. From this there shot forth forked tongues of blue flame, and from it also came the only light that illuminated the Council Hall.

Back of the throne I beheld a gigantic figure of black marble, but painted in glaring colors. The eyes of this image were of blazing jewels worth a king's ransom, and in the squat figure I recognized my old enemy, Hed, the snake-encircled god. The firelight shone on the serpent's silver scales, and the reptile seemed to move. With an effort I looked away and saw that beside the revolting figure of Hed, there stood, on a pedestal, a tall, veiled, and graceful statue, all of white and luminous stone, and holding in its hand a crescent jewelled moon. This, then, was Edba.

I turned once more to the advancing priests, and as I did so, a wild blood-curdling chant broke from the on-moving ranks. I looked at Lestrade; his face was white, and I saw that he recognized the song that we had heard once before, at midnight, in our other prison cell beneath the temple. Slowly the priests drew near, forty in number, and ranged themselves about the sides of the apartment, near unto the throne. One brawny fellow took his stand almost in front of me, and so near that I could easily have plucked him by the shoulder.

Twenty of these ministers to the gods were clothed in white garments, and twenty wore robes blood red in hue, and I thought from the glances cast one at the other, that there was little love lost between the two parties. They stood there chanting their heathenish song, and at the end fell flat on their faces on the stone pavement. As they did so, the further door swung open, and Agno advanced through the prostrate ranks, clad in a flowing gown of white and scarlet, and seated himself on the throne. His piercing glance swept the Council Room, and had I not been aware of the thickness of the shadow, the strength of my right arm, and the justice of my cause, even I would have shrunk back before him into the safety of my hiding-place.

The High Priest waited an instant, then struck the dais twice with his staff of office, and these ministers of evil arose.

Then at their leader's command, forth from the red-robed ranks came the foremost of their number, who advanced, thrust his naked hand into the very centre of the blazing pile and drew forth a flaming brand.

Then he turned to the waiting throng, and no sign of pain writhed upon his lips, though he must indeed have been terribly burned.

"I, priest of Hed, do swear for myself and my brethren, by the Snake's head, by the Snake's bride, by the power of blood, by the flame on the altar, to keep secret the counsels of this holy meeting, and of our office, and to obey him sitting upon the throne. May the body of him who betrayeth the trust be tortured to the uttermost, and body and soul forever hereafter! Let Hed himself bear witness."

He paused, and every man, worshipper of the Serpent, bent his head in silent affirmation.

Agno turned to the white-robed throng, and again the foremost stepped from the ranks, caught out from the flames



another brand, and spoke: "I, priest of Edba, do swear for myself and my brethren, by the moon's light, by the yearly victim, by the earth's fruits, by the flame on the altar, to keep secret the counsels of this holy meeting, and of our office, and to obey him sitting upon the throne. May the body of him who betrays the trust be tortured to the uttermost, and body and soul forever hereafter! Let Edba herself bear witness." And again as with the followers of Hed, his nineteen companions gave in solemn silence their consent.

"Friends," said Agno, "the time is ripe, the hour of vengeance is at hand. Let the followers of Edba and of Hed forget their impious quarrels, and unite in peace and strength against the stranger. Yes, brethren, our altar has been defamed, the sacred ape murdered, the power of the gods scorned, and even we threatened in the exercise of our holy office. Aye, and worst of all, the sacrilegious wretches are sheltered beneath the royal mantle of the Queen."

A low murmur broke from the listening throng, and the wily Agno hastened to say on.

"Nay, brethren, think not that I bear malice against the throne. Rather as a father would I defend the person of our mistress from the sorceries of the stranger. Surely are the eyes of Lah bewitched, since she protects these outcasts, and as surely will their blood, and their blood only, make true again her vision. Look to it, ye priests of the temple. The gods are angry; Hed and Edba cry out, 'Why are my servants slothful? Why do they sit with folded hands appeasing not our outraged majesty?' Shall they withdraw their favor from their ministers? Shall the light of their countenance be turned from us? Shall we perish, that the strangers live?"

Again a low, fierce murmur broke from the assembly. Agno's eyes gleamed, for he saw that his words now sank deep—seed in fruitful soil.

"Nay, more, mark you, followers of Edba, and you, too, worshippers of Hed, already the people scorn us for our weakness.

"Already the gold runs scantily in our coffers; already have fallen away the gifts to the temple. Not twelve hours since, a blemished goat was offered at the altar; already the voice of the multitude is raised against us. Aye, even as I approached this sacred meeting-place, a drunken soldier of the Queen stumbled

rudely against me, and when I cursed him for his awkwardness, he laughed,—yes, my brethren,—laughed in my very face. May the flames consume him! May the Serpent eat his heart!"

Again an angry murmur confirmed his words, and the foremost of the band of Edba spoke in answer.

"We, followers of the Moon, ask peace rather than bloodshed," he began. "Nevertheless, we join with thee, most holy Agno, in clamoring for the punishment of the stranger. Only this much must be granted. Give to us the victims. For long have the worshippers of Hed lorded it over the adorers of Edba. Now grant to us the sole honor of bringing to the altar these unbelieving dogs, and rest assured, their fate shall be such as to content even the thirsty souls of our red-robed brethren."

"Never!" shouted, as with one voice, the followers of the Serpent; and an angry tumult arose on the instant, hardly stilled when Agno commanded peace by all that was sacred, and with mingled threats and prayers enforced his words.

The calm ranks of the forty priests were broken, and the worshippers of Edba and of Hed mingled together. Eyes gleamed hatred, and hot words broke from the lips of the humblest.

At length one voice bore down the rest, and the clamor was hushed for the moment. It came from him of the scarlet garment, who had thrust his hand into the burning pile.

"My brothers, my brothers, let there be no strife amongst us," he cried aloud. "Rather turn this burst of fury upon the strangers. Are there not two victims? Let the priests of Edba give one unbeliever, bound hand and foot, unto the mercies of the Mad Man of the Moon; we, of Hed, will take care that the Serpent be avenged upon the other."

A troubled silence succeeded this speech, and I saw that each side feared to give advantage to the other by the renewal of the strife.

Clearly, if nothing happened to prevent it, a temporary peace, bad indeed for our prospects, would prevail.

I looked at Lestrade, and I saw the same dare-devil thought spring into his mind. I noted that the sacred fire burned low, unnoticed in the tumult. The room was well-nigh wrapped in darkness. A scarlet robe and a white were well within reach. Gaston and I, as one man, thrust forth our arms through the rents made in the curtain by our knives.

I struck him of the red robe, right joyously, a well-planted buffet on the cheek. He reeled with the shock, and I saw Gaston slyly prick, with his dagger, the fat side of the priest before him.

In an instant all was confusion. A cry of treason was raised, and the sons of Edba and of Hed flew like a pack of ill-bred curs straight at each other's throats.

Agno shouted in vain; and I promise you the sight was such a merry one, that forgetting the risk we ran, I laughed aloud for very joy of it.

In the general scuffle over went the brazier, and the only light in the Council Room came now from a few dying embers.

Gaston's rash spirit rose within him, and before I could utter a word, he had pushed aside the heavy folds of the leathern curtain, and leaped through the opening in the wall of our prison, straight into the thickest of the fray. I could not leave my comrade, though my cooler spirit saw little glory and much danger in the adventure into which he had plunged us, and through which I was bound to follow him.

Hoping much from the friendly darkness, however, I also sprang forth, and it would seem unnoticed; and then the lust of battle that abides still in the sinful heart of man arose in me, and in the good giving and taking of blows I forgot all else. On a sudden, as I was struggling right gladly with a fellow in a red cloak, who wrestled all too well to have been a follower of false gods, just, I say, as I had tripped him—for the heathen knew not the trick, and so went down like a bullock under me, but still holding fast manfully; just then Agno—and may the evil one repay him!—Agno threw a powder upon the dying flames, and at once the Hall was brighter than day.

I gave mine enemy a parting blow and sprang for cover, and I saw Lestrade throw back a sturdy fellow, and start to follow. But his foot tripped over a fallen priest, and I, turning to his rescue, was seized and held fast by a dozen eager hands.

We were prisoners again, and in much worse case, and as I stared about me with late repentance that I had ever left my cell, the only comfortable thought for me at all lay in the still fresh evidence of the havoc we had wrought amongst the enemy in whose toils we once more found ourselves.

If I live to a ripe old age, which seems likely though I be now at seventy but little past my prime, I shall, I am sure, never forget the look of rage and triumph upon those dark faces bent above

us. We lay, Lestrade and I, bound and helpless on the stone floor of that bloody Council Room.

Agno would fain have played with us awhile, even as a cat with a mouse, for the sheer love of the sport, but the High Priest's hot-headed followers would have none of it. They clamored for a swift judgment on the culprits, and their wily leader saw their demands had best be satisfied.

So from the throne before the grim and silent images of the gods we had dared, came forth the solemn sentence of our doom.

Lestrade was given over to the worshippers of Hed. A week hence on the high festival day he was to be tied to the horns of the altar, and there done to death. My fate was swifter, but as terrible. Two nights hence the moon would be at its full, and Edba would claim in me her chosen victim.

"Let the stranger," said Agno, "be bound to the stone that stands in the centre of the cleared space within the holy grove. There has Izab, the Mad Man of the Moon, his abiding-place, and there, unpitied, and alone save for the avenger, shall this dog of an unbeliever meet his doom."

"What is your meaning?" I began, for I have always held it the wiser part to learn the worst at once; but in the hoarse roar of satisfied revenge that rose from the priests about, my words were lost, and before I could speak again a gag was thrust, none too tenderly, into my mouth. I saw Lestrade wave his fettered hand to me, in parting, and the brave smile on his white lips made my eyes strangely dim.

Four lusty sons of Edba raised me up, and I was borne from the Council Room and carried through a multitude of passages.

At length my bearers stopped; a door opened, a massive door, but so low that a short man must stoop to enter. The foul smell of a noisome dungeon assailed my nostrils. I was thrust within, still fettered, and so rudely that for a little my head swam with the force of the blow I had received in falling, so that I could not note at once the quality of my new prison.

This, alas! I found quite soon enough, matched but too well the state of my changed fortunes. The hole was unfit for a beast, much less for the chamber of a Christian gentleman. Nevertheless, I had been placed there, and it was cold comfort to reflect that I was not long to trespass on the hospitality of my entertainers.

However, it is ill crying over spilt milk, nor am I a man to waste good time in such thankless observance. So I disposed myself upon the damp floor of the dungeon, as well as the painful tightness of my bonds would permit, and by dint of thrusting my swollen tongue this way and that, I at last got rid, to my great joy, of the foul gag that had so unceremoniously stopped my speech.

My mouth was sore and my throat parched. A rare thirst consumed me, and it was with delight that I observed the slimy coating on the walls made by the constant fall of water from above. I put my lips close to the cold stone, and with much greater patience than I thought could abide in my nature, I waited till little by little, drop by drop, my suffering was assuaged.

It was dark in my prison house. Four small holes pierced the stone roof, and from these came some air and, I hoped, by morning, light also.

I heard the scuffling of a legion of rats; from whence I know not, unless the earthen pipe that thrust its nozzle through the floor gave access to the cell. This, I think, was the case, for soon I felt the pattering of their feet upon my body; the boldest even nibbled at the belt of leather that I wore, and had I not shown signs of life, they might have been yet more uncivil in their advances.

A hundred years passed by, and I was still a prisoner: let one who would assure me that I am wrong, take but my place in that foul spot, and see the bitter truth that lies within such reckoning as mine.

No visitor, grim or otherwise, approached my cell. I would, I believe, have welcomed, in my extremity, Satan himself, but he came not, nor his ministers. The Queen's hand could not reach me here; Gaston, my faithful comrade, he too was absent, perhaps in pain like me, perhaps in bonds, forgotten and, like me, well-nigh mad.

My head was light from want of food and drink and sleep. I tossed about from side to side in unavailing anguish, and it was not the agony of the bonds eating into my flesh, that cowed me, but the darkness and the solitude.

There in that place of torment my manliness fought against such odds as even now I dread to think on. But praise to Him whose servant I am, at last my braver self prevailed, and when, after those hours of interminable horror, Agno appeared, I did not

grovel at his feet, but faced him calmly and, at least in outward seeming, unafraid.

A day had come and gone; the High Priest said my hour was at hand. By his order my bonds were loosed, and the blood rushed painfully through my numbed body, that pricked as with millions of needles.

"What of my friend?" I managed to ask.

Agno smiled with subtile malice.

"The stranger waits his doom in the company of fair woman, with revel and sweet minstrelsy. Goodly wines and rich meats are his portion, and soft garments wrap him round. Yet in six short days shall the Snake receive his own."

At least he knows not the torments of such a dungeon as this, I thought, and my heart was a little lightened, which I think fell hardly within the reckoning of the High Priest of Hed when he disclosed the fate of my fellow captive.

But there was no time to ponder this or other matters. At a sign from their leader the guard closed in upon me. I was led along through a maze of underground passages as before, and at last into the open. Before we reached the outer wall my eyes were blindfolded, my hands tied, and I was muffled in the folds of a cloak.

In this fashion I was marched along, to my great inward misgiving; but at length a halt was called and the bandage was taken from my eyes.

## Chapter VIII

### In the Cage

Though I knew from all that had gone before that change of quarters was little likely to bring me comfort, pleasure, or ease, either of mind or of body, my spirits rose, despite my better sense, as I turned my back upon the place of torment that had held me captive.

Neither did the triumphant malice of Agno's dark countenance daunt me. Whatever befell, it was good. Good to be alive and breathe again the pure open air; good to be dazzled, half-blinded even, by a sun I had thought never to shine on me again save in death.

But I had not long in which to rejoice over my shackled freedom; for, still chained, I was thrust rudely into a new and curious prison; a barbarous invention of a barbarous people, a cage like a wild beast's den.

In this, still closely guarded, I was borne along, and through its open bars of stout bamboo, a gaping crowd beheld me, and it sent a hot wave of righteous wrath surging through my veins to feel that I could not, at least, stand upright like a man, and fling back scorn for scorn; but on account of the lowness of my prison, needs must crouch, beast-like, in shameful silence before the taunts of the rabble, this offscouring of the people of the Walled City.

Thus with ignominy was I carried through the broad streets of Lah's capital, and still caged thus, I was placed upon the central stone of the great open market-place, and here, at the High Priest's command, was I left with the staring crowd for company.

Agno himself had gone. I noted, through the open bars of my foul den, that the walls of the storehouses about were hung with gay carpets, and that the business of buying and selling had ceased in favor of the still more urgent and exciting business of seeing an enemy put to scorn, mayhap to death.

The multitude were wreathed with flowers as for a festal day. They jostled one another, it is true, to get a nearer look at the man about to suffer the extremest wrath of the mighty gods; they pushed one another aside, but with merry words and no anger. Their anger was all for him who had defiled the sanctuary. The very women held up their children and taught them words of infamy for me, the captive.

A man loves not to be called a coward. It was not for this that with patience I had learned from Astolba's lips the language of this people.

The time was long. The sun beat down upon my unprotected head. I shook the bars of my cage with savage strength, and the people shrank back, only to return with new-born laughter at my impotence.

And Lah came not.

Thus dragged the weary hours. At last, a few of them that tormented me, bolder or more cruel than the rest, began to fling not only taunts, but stones. Yet some unknown power restrained even these, for the stones they chose were small, and did but sting and bruise the flesh, nor did one of all draw blood. But it was merry sport for them, my enemies. As they warmed to it, 'twas like enough that the unknown bond that held them would have snapped, and I been given over, then and there, to an easy death thus at their hands, when once more an ever-watchful fate stepped between me and vengeance.

The sound of chanting and of bells rose faint from the distance, and, as at a command, the throng fell back, while I, with straining ears and beating heart, waited for what this might portend.

Was it the Queen bent on rescue?

The thought thrilled me with new hope, but the strange chant came nearer yet, and hope died. For I heard it now for the third time. The song of wrath, the song of the Temple of Edba, of the High Priest's Council—the song of death to the stranger, to him within the gates.

The dull beating of drums and the clash of weapons mingled with the hymn. Then the first of a band of warrior priests came into sight, and the people herded together, near to the walls, that the holy ones might have room to pass.

The strange procession circled about my cage. Of them that marched, some bore shields and swords; some carried wands of office; others swung open silver cups laden with sweet-scented spices consumed to the honor of the gods. Some bore wreaths of many-colored flowers. All were in spotless white, and all kept step with order and rhythm to the cadenced measures of that horrible hymn of praise.

But now an awed murmur rose from the waiting throng. Some fell on their faces, and some, and these were women, rushed



forward in a kind of frenzied joy of welcome. The men drew aside with reverent haste to let them pass, and the object of their devotion came in sight.

I saw a canopied litter swung aloft; I saw fan-bearers and all the jewelled trappings of royalty. And again my pulse beat thick with joy, for a veiled figure sat within the litter, and for one fleeting moment I believed that Lah had come to claim me, prisoner. Another instant pricked the bubble of my hope.

One woman and another from out the throng fell, face downward, on the wayside, in the path of her who rode thus immovable, in state, herself, no woman truly, but Edba, the Moon Goddess, come to behold her fallen enemy.

The priests marched steadily along over the prostrate bodies in the dust, nor turned aside for any self-devoted victim. Only when the silver statue reached the centre of the cleared space before my cage, was a halt called. Then with much speech-making, and many strange observances, was I once more committed to my doom.

Surely had I no need to complain of lack of ceremony about my end, save only the incivility with which these pious persons received my own attempt at answer.

But of a truth they may have feared, and rightly, the effect of Christian eloquence. For though I be but a plain man, and one more of deed than of word, I was roused in that hour to a flow of language, a subtlety of wit, and a power of rebuke, that would, I think, have shamed the boldest into silence, and carried me perchance a conqueror, victor not victim, from that place of torment.

But it was not so to be. The beat of drums drowned my voice; at a sign, the bearers of the litter resumed their march.

Edba, too, had gone; another hour had sped. I was still caged, still fettered, still a prisoner.

Some of the people, my former tormentors, had gone on with the Moon Goddess and her train. Others stayed to bear away the victims left behind her in the market-place. Of these some groaned mournfully, others rent the air with cries, and one, a tall woman of some beauty, rose, swayed for a moment, and then fell heavily, and lay motionless, but with a strange smile on her parted lips.

I still had a few spectators of my misery, but their zest at the sight had somehow departed. No one now flung either taunts or

pebbles. I began to solace myself with the idea of an hour's quiet before nightfall in which to think; bitter comfort undisturbed my own thoughts, when a group of chattering slave girls neared my prison. They gathered round it with unseemly jests and laughter. Their tinkling anklets were of gold, and of gold also were the bracelets on their bare brown arms. They belonged, I saw, to some great house, but the thought of them and their concerns did not affect me.

Lestrade, now, in such a case, even such an evil case as mine, would have held discourse with them. He would have saluted, I doubt not, with flattering words, such as through their hampering veils seemed comely.

But I am of sterner stuff. Their chatter irked me, and their light-heartedness was an insult and a cruelty. I would not be a show and a delight to such as these. So I held my head down, and drew my cloak about me, and alike to their questioning and their jibes, maintained a sullen silence. Seeing which, she who seemed the leader in their merriment drew nearer.

"I will have speech of the monster," she cried, somewhat in this wise: "Behold neither sweet words from fair lips, nor jibes, nor hard stones move him. Yet, by the Veiled One I swear it, this I warrant shall quicken his sense—the moody one;" and she drew from her hair a long gold pin. "At least, will I see if his blood be red like that of other mortals."

At these words the other slaves fell back, and some would have stayed her, but with a light laugh she flung aside alike their restraining hands and words, and came close, close to the bars of the cage. Now, I am not a man to fear the prick of a weapon wielded by a woman, nor, for that matter, in fair fight with any man; but I was mad that my quiet be broken, and over and above that, her boldness vexed me, for I was one who never could bear the forwardness of maids.

So, as the pin-point touched my flesh, I seized the bodkin 'twixt thumb and finger, and in my grasp it broke, or came apart, I know not which, and I saw that it was hollow.

At the instant the slave's veil slipped aside a little. I saw her finger seek her lip to caution me to silence. The next moment her shrill scream rang through the air.

"The brute! He has my golden pin," she cried, and wrung her hands, and thus bewailing her loss, passed, after a little, with her companions out of sight.

Then, as soon as I could, being unobserved, I looked closer on the bodkin, and, as I held it this way and that, to catch the meaning of some characters graven faintly on the surface, a small round pellet slipped from out the hollow pin, and rolled along the floor of my cage. It lay upon the very edge, but I had caught the Queen's name in the short sentence before me, so stooped not to pick it up, until I read:

"Within, find help when all fails;"  
and the royal signet,  
"Lah."

I scanned the words with all care. Then my eager fingers sought the fallen pellet, but, in my haste I jarred the cage so that the little ball rolled over the edge, and was gone.

As I gazed upon it, lying there on the bare earth not four feet away, but as much out of my reach as though the world's breadth was between it and me, a dog came up, one of the many that hunt for scraps and offal among the refuse of the market-place. One of these scraps, a strip of dried beef, I think it was, lay, as luck would have it, close to my treasure. The half-starved brute greedily seized on the fragment, and his long tongue licked up as well the pellet,—gift to me from the Queen.

With a wrathful cry I shook my clenched hand at the already retreating brute.

He was not three paces off, but almost on the instant a convulsive tremor seized upon the creature. The mongrel's legs stiffened, he raised his head and gave a despairing howl, a sound choked in the uttering; for, with another shuddering spasm, he dropped and lay still.

A cry of terror rose from the multitude.

"Behold, the captive looked upon the dog in anger, and he is dead! Let us leave this place! Let us fly!"

A panic seized the people at the words. Women snatched up their offspring, covering them from harm beneath their mantles. Strong men trampled upon the weak, that they might escape.

The crowd melted away as if by magic. The sun beat down pitilessly as before, but on an empty market-place. Empty, save for the hapless prisoner crouched within his cage, and for the dead body of the brute beside it,—victim to the mercy of Lah, the Queen.

## Chapter IX

## The Mad Man of the Moon

Thus it was that Agno and his ministers found me. Again, I may say their coming added no new horror to these last hours. It is the interminable waiting that wears to a thread a man's courage. I would, of my own wish, have that which was to come, over quickly. Already was the strain beginning to tell. It would not be an easy death, this I knew, for it was a death of the High Priest's contriving. It was a death feared by Lah, a death from which she would fain have saved me,—and how? After all, I was glad that the Lord had put temptation from me. Brought face to face with unknown terrors, I felt that my strength might have given way before the trial. I set this down plainly with the rest.

Read on, and see what fair foundation of truth had I for doubting mortal strength in such extremity.

Well, a day had come and gone, and Satan's chiefest emissary was at hand. The lagging feet of justice quickened. By Agno's order was I again blindfolded, and by his order was I loosed from my cage.

Supported by two of the priests of Edba,—for my cramped legs refused to do my bidding,—I was half dragged, half led, away.

Still blindfolded, I was laid upon a stone and fastened there securely by a band about my middle, and by thongs that tied me, wrist and ankle, to rings set in the altar's side.

Then my bandage was taken off, but it was some minutes before my dazzled eyes could see clearly, and then I found, to my surprise, that the High Priest and his followers had vanished. For all I knew to the contrary, I was quite alone. I looked about me, and I saw that I was in a cleared space in the form of a circle. This was guarded by a high and thorny hedge of some tropical plant, strange to me, whose narrow leaves bristled like so many bayonets.

The sun beat pitilessly upon my uncovered head, but I knew from its position that night was not far off. I was bound to a rude granite-hewn altar, and carved upon it in many places, amid a throng of grotesque images, I saw the familiar sign of Edba, the crescent moon.

This altar stood at one side of the circle; directly opposite, was reared a hut shaped like a bee-hive, and made of close-woven branches. There was no door to this strange dwelling, but a thin veil of plaited grasses partly hid the entrance. I strained my eyes

in a vain effort to see beyond this curtain. Once or twice a faint rustling from within broke the deathly silence, and that was all. These singular noises made my heart beat faster, for I judged, and rightly, that here was the abode of my enemy, perhaps of my executioner.

The hours wore on. I was giddy from the length of my fast, the horrors of my imprisonment, and the nameless dread of what was to come. A chill crept over me, and though the day was hot, I shivered so that the rings of the altar rattled. I thought I saw two fiery eyes gleam for an instant upon me, from behind the curtain that veiled the entrance to the hut, but when I looked again I knew my own base fears had called up the vision.

I turned my head resolutely away, and scanned the ground about me. As my eyes travelled along the thorny hedge that circled the place, I saw something that gleamed through the green, half hidden by the underbrush. Idly I looked, but the next instant my pulse quickened; for as I gazed, the horrid meaning of the thing leaped to my mind. I had seen the white bones of a mouldering human skeleton.

I set my teeth lest any sound escape me, and some watchful priest staying behind his fellows to gloat over my misery, hear my cry and so have joy over my weakness.

The sun went down, and night fell. A wind arose, and it blew from the silent hut to me, and I smelled the breath of the charnel house, and my stomach turned within me.

But the stars came out, and the moon rode in the sky; a full moon, round and glorious.

Then the curtain of grass was pushed aside, and the Thing that dwelt within leaped into the circle. It was white, with a loathsome whiteness, naked, and painted with spots of red and blue, and it mowed and mumbled and danced uncouthly there in the moonlight.

I watched it with a thick sense of impending horror. It flung its arms wildly about its head and laughed shrilly at its own fantastic shadow.

It rolled over and over on the ground and stretched its limbs in content, while the moonlight bathed them, just as a beast will stretch out comfortably in the warm sunshine.

I moved a little on my bed of stone, and again the rings of the altar rattled.

Then the Thing raised its head, and its eyes rested on me with a look of greed and cunning.

It stopped its hideous play and began to crawl warily but surely towards me.

Nearer it came, and yet nearer. My throat was parched, and I shut fast my lips lest a womanish shriek shame me forever.

At last it reached my resting-place, stood upright, and craftily touched my shackled hands and feet.

Then the Thing, half beast and half human, bent over me, and its teeth met in the flesh of my right arm.

The vengeance of Agno, High Priest of Edba and of Hed, had fallen. The whole sickening knowledge pulsed through my soul, even as the agony of my wound racked my spent body.

My doom was sealed.

I was to be eaten alive by the Mad Man of the Moon, that the gods of the people of the Walled City might be avenged.

Suddenly the Thing let go its hold and raised its shaggy head, and I noted, even in the stupor of horror that had come upon me, that it was listening.

Then a man stepped out from the thorny hedge into the cleared circle—a man naked and quite unarmed.

I saw, as in a dream, the breadth of his massive shoulders, and that he was mighty above his fellows, and as I looked, the truth came to me, and I knew that this was Zobo, the commander of the bodyguard of Lah, the Queen.

The Mad Man of the Moon gave a low snarl, and sprang at the throat of the intruder.

Then began a wrestling match between the two, made terrible by the time and place, by the bestial noises of my would-be murderer, and by the knowledge I somehow had, that this duel was to the death.

Back and forth they strained and fought. I had looked to see my enemy snap like a reed in Zobo's iron grip, but I soon found the demon the creature served had given it unholy powers. It was supple like a snake, and its muscles were of steel. I saw great drops of sweat stand out upon the bare body of the Queen's servant, and, too, the veins in his forehead stand out like whipcord, with the strain of the conflict.

The unclean Thing bit, and foamed at the mouth, and strove with a devil's strength and a man's cunning for the mastery. Zobo

fought with a kind of grim patience; while I, chained hand and foot, waited helpless for the issue.

Suddenly a cloud passed before the moon, and I saw the Mad Man falter. It was only for an instant, but that instant the Keeper of the Seal was quick to seize.

He gripped my foe by the throat, and the two fell, rolling over and over on the hard ground, not far from where I lay.

The man-beast writhed in fury, and tore at the hands that held him, but in vain. I saw his head fall limply back, and his limbs relax. Zobo, with a deep breath, let go his hold, and I beheld on his face a look of mingled fear and loathing for the deed he had done.

Then I looked back on the prostrate form of mine enemy, and I cried out in warning, for the Mad Man had but feigned death.

Quick as thought, the Queen's soldier turned also, but too late. Izab had seized a stone that lay at hand, and the missile struck Zobo full on the forehead as he tried to rise. The Keeper of the Seal fell backward and was still. I looked to see my enemy rise and trample on the prostrate body, but it was not to be.

The Mad Man's arms moved once above his head; a hoarse, guttural murmur came from beneath his clenched teeth.

The moon shone forth glorious indeed, but the body of my friend and the body of my foe alike lay motionless.

Then the bayonet thicket was parted yet once more, and the form of a woman thickly veiled and wrapped in a mantle appeared in the open.

With a swift, gliding motion she crossed the space; looked once at me and then towards the quiet bodies in the moonlight.

She passed the Mad Man's lifeless form and spurned it contemptuously with her foot. Then she turned to where Zobo lay, with upturned face and staring eyes, before her. Motionless as he, she stayed an instant; then, with an indescribably graceful gesture, she took her cloak from her shoulders, and spread it over Edba's victim.

Once more she faced me, flinging back the veil that shrouded her, and I saw that she was none other than Lah, the Queen.

What happened next is only dimly present in my remembrance. As in a dream, I knew that her lips met mine; that my bonds fell from me at her touch, and that I walked a free man once more, but not firmly, because of weakness, towards the bodies of the dead.

My hand instinctively sought Zobo's heart; and without surprise, because in my weak state nothing could have surprised me, I found that it still beat, though faintly.

"Come," said Lah, imperiously; "I have risked more than you dream of to come thus, and at this hour, and to you. My life with your life trembles in the balance. Now,—even at this moment,—Agno himself may come, and then no power of mine could save us. Leave here the body of my servant to die as he would wish, at my command, for me."

These words I remember sounded in my ears, and more, but I had never yet left a fallen friend in trouble, still less would I desert now one who had all but given his life for mine.

Something of this I said to her, and seeing that I was bent upon my purpose, Lah bade me lift the wounded soldier.

"If you can bear him hence with my aid, not a dozen steps from here in a secret place in the thicket help will meet you," said the Queen, but as one who grudged to yield her will to mine.

How I did it I never knew. Weakness and long fast had made even my own weight a sore burden, but I steeled my shrinking muscles to their duty, and Lah, with supple strength beyond her sex, helped me in the task.

So, half dragging, half supporting, the unconscious form we went, till at a word from the Queen I halted.

Lah stooped and knocked twice and then twice again upon a block of granite that rose from the ground.

I heard a dull noise sounding distantly from somewhere, and behold, before us, the earth itself had opened.

At Lah's command I swung myself down into the black depth.

Strong hands seized me; Lah called that she and Zobo followed, and—I knew no more.



## Chapter X

## The Red Witch holds her Revel

It may have been hours or days. I do not fix the space of my captivity.

A man in my state,—may it be reckoned with heavy reckoning against this son of darkness, this foul priest of Hed,—a man, as I say, in my condition of mind and body notes not the flight of time. Neither do I deny that I may perchance have dreamed somewhat. That witch's cave wherein at length I came again to life was a likely enough nest for the hatching of nightmares, aye! and worse things to follow. But this I hold,—upon my honor as an honest man and a God-fearing gentleman, and to defend the truth of the same, I will do violence to him who doubts me,—I saw, and saw with waking eyes, and waking brain, the things I now relate to you who read these pages.

So, defending if need be every jot and tittle of my tale, I will set forth in plain unvarnished words what fate set me to see of the red witch and her revel.

The last thing I remember was the fall of some heavy substance above my head, as half-carried by Lah, the Queen, I was let down into that dark hole, beyond which lay the moment's safety, and perchance escape.

Then came a swift rushing and surging as of mighty waters about and above me; fiery darts shot through my brain and danced before my eyes. Then distant voices, and figures passing and repassing, but ever afar off. Lastly, a glimmer of light, and the touch of cooling bandages bound tight about my head. After a time the darkness wholly passed; I lay on a couch of skins, and a bowl full of some evil-smelling mixture was pressed against my lips.

At this, I remember I was wroth, and would have smote the unseen nurse that teased me, but my hand, when I tried to raise it, fell, heavy as lead, by my side. I heard a hoarse cackling laugh, and against my will I drank of the cup held out to me.

Nor, save for a slightly bitter flavor, was the draught nauseous. Indeed, it warmed like wine. I felt new strength run tingling from limb to limb, and I opened my eyes, my own man once more, a little weak and stiff in the joints still, yet whole and sound again and ready for the morrow and its burden.

Looking about me I found that I lay in a corner of a cave barely six feet high, whose end was lost in darkness. This cavern was

lighted from above, by torches stuck in rude brackets here and there in the rocky wall. I saw, too, that the earth of the floor had been pounded hard and smooth, and was covered over with intermingling lines of black and white, red, blue, and yellow.

I followed these lines with my eyes, and I beheld, without understanding it, that the network had a meaning. Sometimes a line would end abruptly with a star, sometimes it was cut clean across, often other lines met the first, so that the colors ran thickly together; but at all times there was a certain order like the lines of a map, or a puzzle in geometry.

After a time I grew giddy watching this never-ending maze, and I turned upon my side that I might better see the other portion of my prison house. A fire smouldered in a distant corner, and a leaping flame showed the edge of a great cauldron that stood in the cave's centre, from which came the quick shimmer and sparkle of precious metal and of gems. A dark mass near by uncoiled itself slowly, and two unwinking, lidless, fiery eyes looked straight at me and beyond. The thing slipped away without noise into the farther darkness, and I sat up. A draught of air played about my head. It was damp, and pleasantly cool in this underground retreat, and save for the crackling of the fire all was silent.

I am not, I trust, a coward, but I tell this as it happened, leaving out nothing, altering nothing. For all I knew I was alone, safe and alone, but on a sudden my heart began to beat thickly, my hair stood erect, and my tongue clave to the roof of my mouth. Cold sweat stood in beads upon my body, and some inner force compelled me to look where I would not.

And there, crouching by the fire, I saw the bent figure of a woman, hardly larger than a child, but old beyond man's counting.

She swayed backward and forward. She was perfectly bald, and her face was a mass of wrinkles, though the ashen, parchment-like skin was drawn tight over the bones.

I saw that the creature was wrapped in a red mantle. She turned her head and opened her eyes full upon me. Such eyes! Two sparks of living fire, deep set, that ate through bone and muscle, flesh and sinew, and laid bare the soul. I shrank back, and the head of the red witch dropped down once more between her shoulders. I felt the terror that had seized me pass, but I had lost all wish to move. So I waited, in patience and unsurprised,

the pleasure of the shrivelled hag, to whose lair the Queen had brought me.

For a space the red witch sat still as some carven image. As the firelight fell on the wizened, peering face, the peaked features took on new shapes of ugliness; the lips writhed in a terrible smile, yet stirred not, and I drew back into the shadows and waited for that which was to come. As I did so, the hag arose. For an instant I feared that she was about to approach my couch, but she passed into the outer darkness with never a backward glance.

Another moment and she had come again, walking slowly and with evident pain, and indeed with so much feebleness that I thought every step would be her last.

Upheld by her skinny arms was a curious image in painted stone, the god Hed, as I saw at once.

The weight of the thing must have been a tax on the strength of a man even of my inches, but this strange woman now held it aloft, and without pausing, lightly as though lifting a feather, set the god in a niche prepared for him above and opposite the cauldron.

Then she drew from her withered bosom a small bag, and took from it a pinch of powder. This she threw into the pot, and at once a thin blue vapor arose from its depths.

The hag squatted beside her brew, and began a monotonous beating with her hands upon a hollow log, across either end of which a tanned skin had been tightly drawn.

Then she commenced to sing in a curious cracked voice, and the song had no melody, but instead a kind of rhythm that met with the drum beats, and stirred, I know not how or why, to frenzy him who listened.

This is a fragment of the song as near as I can remember. For reasons that I shall tell presently I stopped my ears in horror before its end. It was no common chanting; for even as it rose, *the thin blue smoke took on form and substance and imaged what she sang.*

"I am Hubla the witch, and I hold in my palm the lives of men.

Blood shall flow that I may not thirst; and the white dove shall flutter in the net at my command.

I am the ruler of the night, and the things that fly in the darkness.

And the things that crawl are mine, and jewels and gold are to me as grains of sand.

I alone hold the flower of death, I alone read the scroll of days.

Come, hatred and strife, that Hubla may have joy.

Come, devils and men, and work my will.

Come, you fair Queen, and you white maid, you, stranger, and you, priest of Hed.

Here by my brew I sit and sing;

Come ye and do my pleasuring."

And here it was that as a Christian man I stopped my ears. For I come of honest yeoman stock, and God forbid that I should so much as listen to such foul mouthings.

That the devils the witch called were there, I doubted not, for as I have said, even as the words passed her lips, the blue vapor from the cauldron took shape, and I saw floating therein all those whom she had named. But more was still to come. For presently my own image was joined to theirs and was swept with them into a kind of evil dance. Faster and faster the vapor figures whirled. There was despair and envy, and wrath and sorrow and dismay, on the swift revolving faces. I could not turn my eyes away, and my heart was as water in my breast.

Then on a sudden the lips of the hag ceased to move, and like drifted smoke the vision passed.

I would have cried aloud in wrath against such practices, but the sound died in my throat.

Then Hubla spoke, but not to me.

She had risen, and now stood before the hideous image of the Serpent god, and in one hand she held a slender iron rod whose end was white hot, and whose middle part glowed red from the flames.

"False and perjured god!" I heard her cry, and the tones struck ice to my breast, so full were they of malice and of rage. "Between me and thee is the struggle yet to come. Think not that Hubla fears thee. Take this, and this, in token of thy shame and thy defeat."

And as she spoke she smote with all her force, with the rod, the stolid squatting figure.

Drops of foam fell from the witch's lips, and again her shrill voice rang through the cavern.

"I have shielded thine enemy. Out of the toils of thy priests I have delivered him. Lo! he shall live, and the blast of thy anger

shall not smite him. Neither shall thy breath consume him. For I have thrown my mantle about him, and he shall live to mock thee in thy courts."

Then once more, with all her might she smote, and the stone image fell with a crash from its narrow ledge, and lay prone in the glowing embers beneath the cauldron.

Peal after peal of shrill laughter came from the shrivelled figure, and straightway the witch began to dance,—a strange heathenish dance, in which she flung about her withered arms, and took grotesque steps with bare feet that trod upon the smouldering logs strewn about her fallen enemy.

Then at length she threw upon the flames another powder. A deafening report followed; the cavern shook, and a column of red flame shot up to the ceiling. The heat was intolerable, and the place was crimsoned as with blood.

I gasped for breath, and shielded my face as well as I might from the awful scorch of that fiery pillar, nor, I think, could my mortal body have withstood the flame; but after a moment's space Hubla clapped her hands, and on the instant the fire died down.

Save from the flickering light from the torches, all was darkness; the red witch crouched as before, motionless, before the embers.

For a little she sat thus; then once more those fiery points that lay behind her eyelids glowed on me, and I saw the skinny hand beckon.

"Rise, son," said the red witch. "Thy hour is come. Go boldly forward. Death lies waiting with open maw, but Hubla bids you fear him not. Rise! the treasures of the ages await thee."

## Chapter XI

## The Treasure House of Edba and of Hed

As a man in a dream, I rose at her behest, and found that little of my old strength had left me. Only my feet and legs prickled as though I walked through nettles, but this in turn passed off.

Hubla, the witch, had vanished into the darkness of the cavern's other end. I followed, stumbling over bones and other litter that strewn the earthen floor, and once something slipped, all too softly, out from beneath my tread. I am no coward, as I have said, but I take no shame to myself that I was glad when I felt the cool night air upon my face, and saw that I had left the cave's mouth.

The red witch still appeared some paces ahead, and old as she was, I had all that I cared to do to keep the distance from widening between us. She walked on and on, evenly, and without word or sign to me who followed. Once she stopped and listened with head raised and nostrils distended like a beast. Our course was winding, and I thought we doubled on our tracks. Sometimes it was grass that my feet walked upon, sometimes smooth rock, and again we crossed a torrent bridged by a single tree trunk.

All at once Hubla vanished. I stared stupidly at the empty air, and I think another in my place would have run with all good speed from the spot where such devil's tricks and things of ill omen could happen. I did indeed commend me to the holy four, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, as is my wont before I lay me to rest. It is a worthy practice, and a comfort to a man in my evil case. And that it was Hubla, the red witch, who answered, shakes not my faith, seeing even the end with the beginning. Her words coming almost from beneath my feet did both startle and enrage me. It was, indeed, well for her who spoke that she was old, and if a foul she-monster, that she still wore the shape of woman.

"Son of a pig! Why standest thou staring? Is the golden apple of fortune overripe that it should fall into that gaping mouth of thine?"

At the same time I felt an iron clutch about my ankle, and the solid earth gave way beneath my feet. Also, at the moment, a chain slipped through my fingers.

"Struggle not and hold, on your life," said the same voice in my ear, and I obeyed, because it was borne in upon me, that to obey was all that there was left to do. I felt about me the swift fall of

gravel and small stones that went tinkling down into some abyss on which I dared not think.

Then once again I found a foothold, and clung to it with vigor and all earnestness. I stood now upon a narrow platform bridging a bottomless well, and the chain had vanished, pulled from my grasp by the turn of an invisible windlass. At the opening far above me I saw the dark blue sky and a single golden star.

There was many a thing a man might have said to such a guide as this, but Hubla waited not the hot words that burned upon my tongue. Instead, she thrust into my hand a crooked piece of iron, and by signs showed me how it might be made to fit an opening in the rock before me. She had held her claw-like hand like a vice upon my wrist, but now she relaxed her hold, and in another instant had gone, cat-like,—only no cat could have done it,—up and up the side of this strange prison, until, reaching the top, she sprang over the edge, without so much as a backward glance, and I was left alone.

Then, as one having no other outlet, I put my shoulder against the rock, and with all my might I leaned upon the bar of iron that I held. Slowly, slowly the great stone yielded to the strain, and presently there yawned an opening big enough for a man of substance, like myself, to crawl through. I had no stomach for further acquaintance with my latest dungeon, so, grasping the iron as my one hope and weapon, I plunged feet foremost through the hole. I swung for a moment thus, helpless, with no resting-place within reach; then, as I could not hope to better my lot by such procedure, I commended my soul to Heaven, and loosed my fingers from their hold upon the ledge. Fortunately, the fall was not a bad one. I picked myself up but little bruised and shaken, and found that I was in a narrow passage whose sides I could touch on either hand.

Walking thus, and moving with all caution, I advanced, until at length further progress was barred by a door of stone. I went carefully over its surface with my fingers and found a small opening. Into this I thrust my strange key, and the rock giving way on a sudden to my touch, I fell headlong into the next chamber. For a moment I was blinded by the dazzle of light with which the room was flooded. But after a little I opened my eyes, and as I did so, my heart leaped in my breast, and a sudden faintness seized me, for I saw that I stood on the threshold of the hidden storehouse, and the treasure of the kings of the people of the

Walled City, aye, and of their gods, had been delivered into my hand.

I am an old man now, but my pulse beats faster even to this day, when I think of what it was mine to see in that same wondrous treasure house. I noted not that the door had closed behind me, and that there was no opening on the inner side into which my key might fit. I saw only that I stood on piled-up ingots of yellow yellow gold; that bags of skins lay bursting and brimming over with pearls by my side; that half-opened wooden chests held each its store of many-colored jewels; that the gem-encrusted weapons, crowns, and girdles of a dead and bygone royalty littered the very floor. I saw great rough-hewn blocks of silver, curios of many kinds, and mass on mass of ivory tusks. There were, also, beautiful woven tapestries, and rugs of silken lustre, and great sealed jars that I found held wine, fragrant and honey-colored, and fit for an emperor's banquet.

The room was an exact circle, not over large, and lighted from above by countless hanging lamps. The roof of solid rock was held up by massive pillars. A hollowed block of stone made a kind of altar at one side. It was like the altar in the Council Chamber, and it had the same red stain. Above it leered the serpent god, a brazen image with emerald eyes, and bracelets on wrists and ankles of diamonds, such as Lah in all her magnificence had never worn.

Twelve tiger skins, twelve lion skins, and twelve skins of the panther, each one beyond common size, of great beauty and quite perfect, lay spread upon the rocky floor. With some of these I made a couch, and, wearied, sat me down to muse upon the secret of the storehouse and to plan how I might best escape with some prudently chosen portion of the treasure; how meet Astolba and Lestrade, and so journey swiftly and safely away from this wicked city and its people, whose mad lust for blood had well-nigh ended all our lives.

It was sweet to dream of a peaceful homecoming, and rare sport to let handful after handful of glittering jewels trickle through my fingers, as thus I sat and pondered. I am not, I hope, a man covetous above my fellows, but my soul within me warmed at the sight of all this countless treasure, and the gold and gems were as meat and drink to my body. Neither felt I now any weariness or fear. I laughed aloud, and the sound echoed back



from the rocky walls, and again I laughed, and Hed the serpent god laughed too, but silently.

And then, even then, I felt the touch of a hand upon my shoulder, and looking upward I saw Lah, the Queen! She stood smiling and without words, for a moment, and I, not knowing what the visit might portend, spoke not.

Being a woman I knew she must soon have speech with me, and that I should then find whether the future should make peace between us, or war.

When at length she did open her lips, I found too that I had forgotten the power of that musical voice; at least its tones sent a sudden thrill through all my being, and I listened, spellbound, against my will.

"Thou art a man," said Lah; "therefore I say not to thee, let fear slip from thee as a garment. Fear lodges not in this breast of thine, else thou hadst not thrust thyself, by what means I know not, thus into the jaws of death; aye! into the secret storeroom of the Kings of the House, where lies the very treasure of the gods themselves."

Now I liked not much this address, for I saw the lady meant not all she said. Nevertheless the time was ripe for action, and so with a swift movement I put my arm about the Queen's waist, and pulled her gently but firmly down beside me.

Then I slipped my hand beneath her chin, and looked straight into her eyes. You who have looked without blanching into the eyes of a lioness aroused will know that I did this deed yet boast not.

"Come you as friend or as foe?" I said.

I saw the Queen's hand tremble as she grasped the hilt of the dagger at her girdle. Then she relaxed her hold, and her beautiful head bent with a kind of proud humility.

"My lord himself shall say," she answered. Then swifter than an arrow's flight her mood changed. With a regal gesture she drew back from my embrace.

"Tell me, stranger to me and to my people. Lay bare thy heart and lie not. Is it I whom you love, or does thy fancy hold yet to that weak thing, that white-faced girl Astolba?"

The attack was so sudden that I knew not well how to stand against it. For the first time in my life I wished for the nimble tongue of my friend Lestrade, and somewhat too of his wider knowledge of the wiles of women.

"Answer, slave!" cried Lah, imperiously.

I looked up, and the half-contemptuous tone stung me to a sullen defiance.

"I love neither you nor the other," I said doggedly.

"By Edba and by Hed!" breathed the Queen sharply, and I saw her face grow ashen.

She laughed, but not loudly, and I disliked the sound; and again silence fell upon us. Then once more Lah's voice, cruel, beautiful as her face, and as calmly cold:—

"Thou shalt die a dog's death," she said. "Even now is thy doom upon thee," and she pointed to the place where we stood.

I looked down, and saw as I did so that a thin stream of water crawled upon the floor and now had reached and wet the sole of my sandal.

"What does this mean?" I asked, with strange foreboding, and again the Queen laughed noiselessly at the question.

The stream slowly widened; now it lapped the foot of the altar of stone; a little further and an ingot of gold blocked its course, but only for an instant. The emerald-eyed god looked on, serenely pitiless.

Then the horrible truth flashed across me. I seized the Queen by the arm, and she swayed backward and forward in my grasp.

"Woman," I cried in my despair, "what devil's work is this?"

Then, because I could not bear the terrible joy in her eyes, I became by a mighty effort calm once more.

"Little by little, and this rock-hewn chamber shall be filled even to the roof with water, as thou seest," said Lah, smiling. "I was passing by a secret way, and I heard the noise of a fall in this the treasure house. Without delay I touched the spring that sets free the waters that they may do their work, avenge the gods, keep clean from the touch of thieves, this my heritage and theirs. Then! O stranger, it was borne in upon me that I should see the face in life of him who thus boldly dared entrance to this place. The face was thine." She was silent for a moment. "And there was time for flight, for freedom before the waters came."

"And you?" I asked.

"The first thin stream locked fast the door behind me," she calmly answered. "What matters it? I also meet my doom." She turned and held forth her hand. "We die—together."

There was silence for a space, and then her voice fell again on my ear, and now sweet beyond human fancying.

"See," she said softly. "The time is short; we were mated from the beginning. O lion heart, since so soon we both must pass, forgive me, even as thus I forgive you."

She stooped and kissed me once upon the forehead, and I in a frenzy born of the hour and of her beauty, caught her to me, and kissed her also, not once, but many times, on hair and hands and lips.

And all the time the water rose with a swift relentless quiet that knew no rest. No rest till its murderous task was done, and I, fool that I was, and she, the Queen, should die, like rats in a trap, inglorious, if together.

My brief passion grew cold at the thought. Yet my despair was not all for myself. It seemed too cruel a thing for truth, that one like to this woman, so splendidly alive, so perfect a work of nature, should be blotted out of existence by this cold, creeping, ignorant, pitiless force.

For now the water was ankle deep. I looked into the eyes of Lah, and they met mine with a soft serenity. Women are queer creatures. I do not doubt that in the very face of this slow and evil death, she, the Queen, was altogether happy.

I could not bear her gaze. Neither could I stand idle, while the treacherous flood rose about us.

It was wild and useless labor, but with a frenzy of energy I pulled together two jewel chests, piled on blocks of silver that felt like featherweights to my mad strength, took ivory tusks and casks of wine, and built a throne higher than his who sat unmoved, the serpent god looking upon our misery. Then, bearing her in my arms, on the topmost part I set the Queen, and she, seeing that I would have it so, obeyed, while I, a little lower, took my stand by her side.

And still the water rose, and still with wide-open eyes, all undismayed, sat Lah, while our swift heart-beats measured off the time,—the all too little time that for us two meant the whole remaining span of life.

The flood now had reached my knees, and had wet the hem of the Queen's garment. It seemed to rise more quickly. I measured the space left to the roof of the storehouse and saw that soon our torture would be over.

Then a great rage took hold on me that thus we two should perish. I would at least make one more try for life. I would swim

close to the walls of this infernal trap and see if somewhere, somehow, there lay not a chance of rescue.

I turned to the Queen and told her of my purpose. She smiled, but forbade me not. "There is no hope," she said, "or I should know of it. But see, take this my dagger, and just before the end—promise me—I would go first along the dark way that leads to the gate of Shimra. Swear to me. I would not die alone."

I was no Christian in that hour. I take shame to me that it was so. The Queen had her will with me, and I gave her the promise that she craved.

Then I struck out boldly, for the time was short. Round and round I circled, swimming slowly and looking well for any crack or fissure in stone or pillar. But the walls were as smooth as glass to my touch, and I found no opening.

He of the emerald eyes gloated over me, over us two. His massive knees lent me a moment's foothold, and in childish rage I struck him furiously across the face with my dagger's hilt. And at the sound the Queen sprang to her feet.

"Look!" she cried breathlessly; "look, the god is hollow!"

Men's wits work nimbly at such a time as this. Without pausing, I swam behind the great metal image—and it was true: cleverly hidden in the back I saw a door. But the water had now reached its base.

"Swim for your life!" I called to the Queen, but she shook her head.

"I know not how the trick is done," she answered steadily. "Save then yourself."

But I was half-way across the space between. The rest seems now like some fantasy of the brain. I have said evil things of Hed. Let me now put down in black and white one good thing to his memory: the door that saved us was not locked.

'Twas like the heathenish way of the priests who set it there to taunt with bolts the maddened wretch who thus sought safety. Yet it was so, even as I have written it. The door yielded to my pressure and revealed a small winding staircase.

Already the water flowed a torrent through the opening, but I had the Queen safe in, and now had followed. Quickly I shut the barrier in place behind me. And then—then safe at last in the darkness it was Lah who sighed, so strange are the ways of women:—

"I know not. But I had joy in death, and now life has been yet once more thrust upon me."

## Chapter XII

### The Dance of the Maidens

So I had come empty handed, after all, from out the Treasure House of Kings.

We groped our way down the spiral staircase, the Queen and I, and both were silent. Far be it from me to guess the thoughts of the woman at my side; as for my own, I fear that man is but an ungrateful animal at best. For I thought little of our wonderful escape, and much of the rubies, the ivory and pearls, and other goodly store of wealth that I had left behind.

Some day, I vowed to myself, I would wrest once more the secret of the entrance to that room of death and gold, and then it should go hard with me indeed, did I come forth as now, with not so much as a yellow ingot to show for the adventure.

I am a man of even temper, but I was cold and hungry and out of conceit with myself and the world about me. Had some priest of Edba or of Hed stayed our retreating steps, I could have stopped his protesting clamor with more good-will than brotherly love. But we reached without let or hindrance the last stair, and a door opening to my touch showed a long corridor but dimly lighted, and winding before us.

"Follow me," whispered the Queen; "make no noise, but come quickly. From this spot I can reach my own Palace, and once there, woe to him who should so much as lay a finger on you, my lord."

She led the way with swift and silent footsteps, and I came close behind. Then on a sudden she paused and signed to me to step within a recess formed by the angle of two walls.

I obeyed with rather an ill grace, I fear; for I had heard nothing, and indeed was willing to run some risk, that I might the more readily find dry raiment and victuals even of heathen cooking, but so that I might eat.

Yet Lah with finger on lip tarried, and I saw her bosom rise and fall with her quick breathing. If such a woman could know fear, it was fear now that looked from her eyes, as I gazed into their depths. And before the end I knew that it *was* terror that blanched her face, and that the danger she shunned was danger to me.

And then, just as I was about to protest against this useless dallying, I heard in the distance the patter of loosely tied sandals

upon the stone floor, and soon a light showed forth like a glow-worm's torch in the blackness of the further end.

There were voices too. A goodly company, I judged. Lah stood, a living statue, her dagger drawn, the folds of her dripping mantle spread to shield me as with unconscious force she thrust me back into the dark corner of the recess.

As for me, I pondered where and how it were best to strike, and if I should find in the leader my old acquaintance, Agno, the High Priest. The voices came nearer. The men were disputing, for now I caught stray fragments of their speech.

"Surely the god himself would strike down the thief," said one, "did not the water do its work."

"Since none of us knows the secret of the entrance," said a second, "we can do naught but guard the corridor till Agno comes."

"You are blind, both of you, as the bats that hang in the Temple's inner court," sneered a third. "The stranger has strong magic. He has killed the sacred ape; he has defied both Edba and Hed; he has escaped, though bound, from the very Mad Man of the Moon, whom first he slew. Why should we stand like fools watching for that which comes not? If the strangers seek the treasures of the gods, why, let the gods defend their own!"

"Blasphemer!" cried one in anger, and there was a hoarse clamor of assent, and I thought they would have fallen then and there, like wolves, upon the grumbler, but a new voice sternly bade the clamor cease.

"Get ye onward, and for him who lags or murmurs there shall be both stripes and fasting. For him who compasses the death of the thief of the Treasure House, honor and riches here, and glory hereafter. Forward!"

The voices and the light were very near now, and two by two, I saw the armed company turn the angle of the wall and march steadily on.

We crouched closer in the inky shadow that befriended us, and I knew that if they did but reach the further turning without beholding us, we were safe.

There were eight in all, and so deep were they in their now whispered talk, or so much in awe of their leader, that they did not so much as turn their heads our way, but marched steadily by.

I began to breathe easily again. The whole array had passed the place, the foremost had even reached the next turning, when the last man, with a muttered oath, tripped on the loosened latchet of his sandal.

His companions hurried on, and he, kneeling, stooped to fasten the leathern thong. He had laid his torch beside him on the stone, and now he turned to raise it. As ill-luck would have it, the light flashed for a moment on our hiding-place. I saw his jaw drop and his look of wonder. His fellow-guardsmen had just now turned the corner.

I started forward, but I was too late. With the noiseless, supple spring of a tigress, Lah was upon him. There was a swift flash of steel, and the thing was over. The Queen even caught the reeling figure and laid it quietly upon the stone.

"I knew his voice," she said. "'Tis he who called upon the gods to defend their own. They will think that Edba and Hed have avenged the insult. It is well. Let us come."

And so once more, half dazed, I followed. It was a very labyrinth we threaded, but at length we reached its last winding, and I found myself in the very chamber to which Lestrade and I had first been taken.

The sight of it brought back my old companion to my mind. False friend and comrade that I was! The events of the last hours had quite effaced his image from my mind.

He had fallen victim like me into the hands of these bloody and treacherous priests.

How long had I been prisoner unconscious in the lair of the red witch Hubla? what was Gaston's fate? and what of her whom I had given my word to rescue?

Filled with shame, I caught the Queen's mantle as, with the promise of the quick ministry of slaves, she turned to leave me.

"My friend!" I said, in an agony of fear. "Tell me of his fate."

"He lives," Lah answered.

"Unhurt?"

"Unhurt—as yet."

"And she—Astolba?"

The Queen's eyes narrowed, but she spoke calmly.

"She lives also, but the feast of Edba is at hand."

"When?" I asked, shuddering; for I could not conceal the horror of my soul.



"To-night. At the sixth hour I will come for thee. Meanwhile rest quietly; be warmed, be fed. Thou hast my promise; thou shalt see all."

Then I flung myself before the Queen in her pitiless beauty, and, as a man distraught, I raved and pleaded, that she would protect this poor girl, that she at least would give me the chance to die fighting by her side. That she would save Astolba, sweet, innocent, frightened child, alone in the hands of demons. That she would save Gaston, my friend—

And all the time the face of Lah was as marble, and I saw no mercy in those firm closed lips.

At length, wearying of my suit, without a word she tore the hem of her garment from my frantic grasp, and had gone.

I sat stupefied with grief, my head in my hands. And then I raged in helpless passion against fate, against a heaven that could let such things be done, and against myself, thus safe in hiding, while she whom I had sworn to protect, and he, my best, my faithful friend, went forth to meet the lingering agony of a cruel death.

Slaves came, and against my will I was clothed in warm and jewelled raiment. Meat and wine and fruit were brought in golden salvers and set before me. I turned from it all in loathing, and then the thought came to me that the Queen had given her word that I should see the end. I would eat then and drink, and force myself to rest, and it would go hard if, at the appointed hour, I broke not my bonds, and took my rightful place beside my friends.

Without knowing it, a tender feeling stole into my heart for that poor child, about to be thrown a sacrifice to the hideous god. I could not bear that she should be hurt or frightened. And the tenderness grew until it was something very like to love that found its place within my breast, and I vowed that if the Queen should really let this monstrous thing be done, that did she care for me as she had said, I would wring her heart without pity and without remorse, in just revenge. But it should not be. Neither should my brave and gallant Lestrade perish, a victim to this horrid worship.

I paced up and down the marble floor like a caged beast, and then I remembered that I must husband my strength, and so, with all my power of will, lay motionless upon the couch and watched the weary hours go slowly by.

But at length the fateful moment came, and with it Lah, resplendent in her jewelled garments, the crown upon her head, the girdle of power about her waist. She had never been more beautiful, and her beauty had never touched me less. Indeed, it was almost hatred that I felt for her in that hour, and I said to her in her own language that which was in my heart.

"If these two die, then never between me and thee is there peace again. Thou shalt be my bitterest foe, and may this right hand of mine wither ere it clasp thine in friendship. May I taste death rather than the honeyed poison of thy lips. The choice is thine. I have spoken. Thou knowest if I keep my word."

She turned proudly.

"He is a fool who breathes threats into the ear of the Queen, and the portion of fools is fire," she said, and in the proverb I read my answer.

Then she signed to me to follow, and I obeyed. The way led through the same dark tangle of underground passages, as those we threaded in our escape from the Treasure House, but the journey was not so long, and at length it ended in a kind of antechamber richly hung with rugs and skins.

Two giant slaves advanced and fell prostrate on the ground before the face of Lah.

"Take this man," she said, "and array him as a member of my household. See that he is veiled and that his cloak covers him from head to foot. When I am seated upon my throne let him take his stand by my right hand. As for you, choose well your station. Watch your prisoner closely. At his first movement, his first outcry, seize him and bear him from the court. Let there be no struggle and no noise. I have spoken. Look you to it." And without so much as a backward glance at me, the Queen had gone.

It was therefore after the manner now set forth that I entered into the inner Temple of Edba, and waited that which was to come.

Already like thousands of ants, black and brown, the people swarmed within the enclosure, filled the wooden balconies to overflowing, and massed themselves in crowds upon the raised platform that lined the walls.

A band of musicians, stationed near the centre, beat monotonously on their hidebound drums and chanted a doleful hymn of praise.

With a refinement of cruelty, Lah had placed me where I could at once see best the torment of my friends, and do least to relieve

it. I watched with cold fury the holiday look on the face and garb of the people. They came to this hideous spectacle with the light laughter and noisy bustle of a merrymaking.

Yet the slow-moving, solemn files of priests pleased me no better, and the calm of the close ranks of soldiery alike called forth my wrath. There was not one in all that vast multitude that thought with pity on the fate of her destined to be the Snake's unhappy bride. Not one but longed for the fall of the knife that was to sever for all time the thread of life of him I called my friend.

I thought how but the veil of silken tissue that I wore stood between me and death; yet, I say it not with boasting, my pulse beat not faster for the fact. I was as a man carried out of himself. I waited, immovable as the very image of Hed himself whose squat figure presided side by side with Edba, over this heathen revel.

There was a stir among the people, as when the wind blows through the trees of the forest. I heard the royal salute, the clash of arms, and Lah had taken her place on the throne beside me. Then Agno raised his staff, and the band of players in the centre of the court struck from their rude instruments the first measures of a dance. At the wild fantastic prelude, two doors at the Temple's end swung back on their central pivot, and from each appeared six maidens clad in white. They wore silver girdles, and the veils on their heads were caught each with a crescent of silver.

These were the twelve, the fairest in the land, chosen by the priests from out the people. They were to dance before the statue of the god, and the god himself would show by his nod, which of the number was to be his bride.

I knew but all too well that on Astolba the lot would fall; but these poor girls, her companions, were ignorant of their fate, and bound by their awful rites, as I knew them to be, not one among them but looked her anguish and her fear. With a slow gliding movement in time to the music they took their stand before the veiled figure of Edba and the leering image of Hed. I saw Astolba take her place with the rest, and I glanced at the watchful eyes of my two guards who hung, ready to spring, like eager mastiffs at either hand.

Then the music changed. Again Agno raised his staff, and, with a wild barbaric gush of melody, the centre door swung open. Four

priests in costly scarlet raiment advanced, bearing on their shoulders a litter garlanded with flowers, and on this litter, attired as a king, but bound a prisoner, I saw my friend Lestrade.

The royal salute was given, and the people fell on their faces. Then the bearers put the litter down and knelt with bowed heads before their captive. Again Agno waved his wand of office.

A deep shuddering sigh ran through the waiting throng as they stood erect. The bearers, too, had risen. I saw them strike the fetters from the victim's feet and hands. Then, closely guarded, he was bound to the horns of the altar, the sacrificial stone standing in the centre of the inner circle, before the statues of the gods. I noted that between that stone and me lay a pit sunk in the floor of the court, and in the pit a giant python coiled asleep.

But once more the musicians struck their instruments and began the fantastic strains that heralded the dance. I saw the reptile move uneasily. Then its great head was raised. It swayed from side to side, as the music rose and fell.

Agno gave the signal, and the maidens began their dance. It was a kind of raised platform of marble on which they moved, and it was strangely inlaid with tiles both green and white. Only in the centre, just before the image of Hed, was set a single blood-red stone, and over this each maiden was forced in the mazes of the dance to go.

I saw them tremble and falter with terror as they stepped upon this tile, and how their courage rose when once it was safely passed.

The people watched with horrible eagerness all the scene. I glanced covertly at my guard, and I perceived with joy that I was forgotten for the moment.

As for the Queen, she sat immovable, her level brows knit, one bare sandalled foot resting on her tiger's head. Something told me that the moment had come. I saw Lah raise her hand. On the instant the head of the serpent god fell forward, his chin resting on his breast.

Astolba was standing, helpless as a bird in the snare of the fowler, her feet resting on the centre crimson stone.

A hush fell on the multitude. I saw a wreath of roses flung upon the victim's head, while at the same time a slender cord, sent swift through the air by an unseen hand, coiled itself about the body of the shuddering girl.

"The great god Hed has chosen!" shrieked the people. "To the pit with the bride! To the pit!"

Then I knew my time had come. No human power could have held me back. I tore the clinging veil and mantle from my limbs. I gave one burly slave a backward blow that sent him reeling upon his fellows; the other I tripped easily with my foot as he started to lay hold upon me. With a quick leap I cleared the amazed circle of the guard. Zobo, back again in life, and warned by the Queen's cry, sprang to seize me as I fled, but I slipped beneath his outstretched arm.

The multitude seeing my face, which I grant was hardly human in that hour, screamed aloud for very fear. I saw them huddled like sheep together.

A voice cried: "The Magician is upon us!"

I had passed the serpent pit and reached the altar stone. The sacrificial knife, broad-bladed, sharp of edge, lay close to my hand. Another moment and Lestrade was free.

Then together we had reached Astolba. Gaston seized the brazier of live coals that stood before Hed's image, and flung it full in the face of the first pursuing priest. His cheerful voice rang out. Even in that dread moment I could have sworn that his gaze had rested with instant approval on the shapely ankle of a flying white-robed maiden. He swung the empty brazier with right good-will, and I kept about me a clean circle with my glittering knife.

But already the end was near. Like a cloud of enraged insects the priests swept down upon us, and the reluctant soldiery, fearing they knew not what, came too at Agno's shrill command. I gave myself three minutes yet of life. My shoulder was bleeding from the stab of a spear, but I felt no pain. With my back to the statue of Hed I fought on blindly.

The circle, bristling with swords and spears, narrowed. Some one had thrown his dagger at me from afar, and the hilt had cut open my forehead just above the eye. It was an irksome wound because I needed then, if ever, clear sight, and the blood that trickled down did the more sadly vex me in that I found no instant when I could pause and brush away the teasing drops.

As I have said, the end was near. Gaston, fighting still beside me, cried out that it was so, and bade me "farewell and God speed." I saw the sword of a burly soldier within an inch of my breast. There was no time for thrust or parry. I gave but one brief

thought to the sweet earth, and not, it shames me, to near heaven. Then on the second I saw the sword struck upward. There was the blue flash of a weapon wielded strong and well, and there by my side, with one foot on the body of a fallen foe, stood Lah, a lioness at bay!

There followed a moment's pause. Then Zobo, with his tunic torn and bloody from the struggle, leaped into the ring and took his place by the woman he loved and served.

"Back!" cried the Queen, "back! The priests outnumber us and the people thirst for blood. On to the Palace; the guards will fight their way to me and follow."

I saw the wisdom of her words, and it was plain to me that we must do her bidding, and urgently, for our lives' sake. I thought with longing of the door just at my back. It is a comfortable thing, a strong-barred door, when one has reached the side of safety and left the howling mob without.

So with all caution, step by step, we slowly gave way. There were still shrewd blows struck, for the Queen's presence had but made the fight with the priests yet hotter, though now the warriors hung back, and would not be spurred forward to battle by the curses freely poured forth on them by Agno. A yard of ground thus counted by inches is longer than many a mile. But the mighty Zobo fought as never man fought before. The Queen, unwearied, guarded now my left, Lestrade, my right.

All honor to such goodly company—they saved the day. Astolba, half led, half carried by me, reached first the sheltering door. When all had entered, it was made fast, and without a word Lah led onward.

Back through the honeycombed passages, till the door of the harem swung open at the royal order, a shattered remnant of the bodyguard greeting us, and we were in the citadel at last.

Then I saw the true spirit that reigned in the soul of her who ruled that place: how, at her command, the gates were made fast, the slaves armed, the secret entrance blocked,—one sent to this post, one to that. This woman with a man's brain thought of all these things and more; and I, beholding, marvelled. And though I fain would have had it otherwise, the marvel grew.

For all being done, she turned to me at last, and proudly, though her eyes were filled with tears.

"I, who have flung away a kingdom for thy sake, ask now this question: between me and thee, is it war or peace?"

And I, clasping her hand in mine, the memory of her service wiping out the past, answered right readily, and from my heart, that it was peace.

### Chapter XIII A Strange Story

What had befallen during my captivity I shall now relate in the words of my comrade, Gaston Lestrade. It was long after that he thus set forth the matter, and I transcribe it, leaving nothing out, not even such reflections on me as have no bearing on the story, but with which, nevertheless, he saw fit to garnish his strange tale.

It was with pain [said he] that I saw you, my good friend Dering, vanish in the distance in the company of that black priest and his followers.

It was my folly, and mine alone, that had brought you to that pass, but I did not let the thought deaden my hopes, or cause me to dwell less confidently on plans for our escape.

The beautiful, the adorable Lah, she would see to it, I felt sure, that two gallant gentlemen be not foully murdered; and I set myself to compose on the moment a love ditty in which I should relate to her not only my admiration for her charms, but also my earnest expectation of rescue at her fair hands and speedy safety for my friend as for myself.

Meanwhile I too was borne along out from that blood-stained and evil Council Room, and at a sign from that arch-traitor Agno, I was carried down a long passage, hewn also from solid rock, and ending in a massive door.

This, after some delay, was opened, and I was set once more upon my feet; my bonds were loosed and my guards left me, going out by the way they had come.

I was alone in an immense hall ornamented with colored marbles and hung with colored lights, but quite bare of furniture of any kind. At one end of this apartment hung a heavy curtain embroidered with mystic symbols in both gold and silver.

Soft music and the rippling laughter of women came faintly from beyond, and without more ado I pressed forward, for the sound was strangely sweet and inviting to a man perilously encompassed with dangers as I was.

I found that the tapestry of which I have spoken hid another door. This stood ajar, and I entered without mishap into the next chamber.

You, Dering, cold Puritan that you are, cannot imagine the delight that filled my heart as I stood on that threshold and gazed about me.



Every sad thought fled on the instant, for I had strayed before my time into Mahomet's paradise, and the houris that inhabit it were not wanting.

That room, Dering, was lovely beyond a poet's dream and rich above a miser's wildest hopes. But it was not the room, beautiful as it was, that caught and held me spellbound. It was the multitude of fair and gracious women that it contained, each one a rare and perfect flower, and each bending low in welcome and a kind of worship, as I approached. The foremost—a tall, willowy creature, Dering, with blue-black waving mass of hair and glorious violet eyes—advanced and kneeling bade me look upon her and her companions as my slaves.

"For seven days it is our mission to do you homage," said she; "for seven days you are our lord, and your pleasure, ours."

Then as she paused, I gallantly, as became a gentleman, raised her up and taking the thread of her discourse, I said:—

"And the seven days passing, what then, loveliest of women?"

But she pointed back to the way by which I had come.

"The door behind the veil shall open, and we shall know you no more," she answered. "Yet till then what is the pleasure of my lord?"

Now I am a man who lives from one hour to the next. In this wise have I escaped much bitterness of spirit, and garnered in great store of sweet. It was plainly, then, the part of wisdom to let the future be, just as it was the part of a chivalrous man to let no shadow hang upon the converse that I should hold with this beauteous maid and her companions. So I drank of the wine they pressed upon me. I tasted of this flower-wreathed dish and that. I listened to the songs they sang, and sang in turn for their entertaining.

I was a king, but I was none the less a gentleman. I think I may say with truth, these fair ladies of my court grew fast to think with dread on that veiled door, and the moment that should mean farewell for them and me.

So the time went smoothly. I had it even in my heart to thank the dark-browed priest to whose command I owed this interval.

Had it not been for the captivity of my friend Dering and doubts of his fate, for the continued absence of the lady we had come to rescue, and for the cold reserve of Lah, the Queen, I could have flung myself with my whole soul into the delights that by some unknown chance encompassed me, a victim.

But as I have said, mine is a light and joyous nature, and so it was that when I kissed the little hand that held my trencher, my thoughts were more with the slender fingers that I pressed and their beauteous owner, than with black parting and divers other sorrows yet to come.

And now I have to relate a strange thing, and one, beginning with what was to me an impulse stranger yet.

It was the evening of the sixth day. I sat in the midst of my fair court, and was glad of the event, however sinister, that had brought me to that place.

Then on a sudden a yearning came to me to be alone. I am ever one to spare a woman's feelings. If an ungracious thing must indeed be said, I say it, but I wrap the words about with tender nothings, and the wound is dealt so gracefully, that oft times the stricken one forgets the hurt in dreaming on the manner of its coming.

Not so, alas! on this occasion, though I grieve to say it. For I turned as bluntly as ever did my trusty comrade Dering, whose breadth of shoulder does with the fair sex what his tongue would ever again undo, only that there is no counting on a petticoat, and it is oft times the whim of the fickle ones to follow, spaniel-like, him who most derides them.

Well, as I have said, I turned in the midst of the pretty tinkle of feminine laughter and silvery speech, and asked almost roughly, if there were not some spot in all that Palace, where a man, prisoner though he be, might find a welcome solitude.

Then she who chiefly tended on my wants bent her sweet head, and with a new timidity besought that I should go with her.

As in a dream I left behind the now silent and wondering bevy of maidens, and my guide, pointing to a door I oft had noted, told me that beyond that portal I could rest undisturbed by the idle chatter of my slaves.

"We are forbidden to enter there," she said, "but to the King all things are possible."

So I pushed open the door and passed within, and the cold air as of a vault struck full on my face as I did so. My heart, too, felt that icy chill, but I pushed on, as one driven by another's will, and when my eyes had grown accustomed to the gloom of the place, I looked about, and the truth came to me: I stood within the Burial Hall of Kings.

The chamber was hewn from stone resembling granite, and was supported by pillars of the same dull gray hue. Lamps hanging from these lit the Hall but dimly, yet I could see with all distinctness the thrones, also of massive rock, that lined the walls. Save one in the centre each was filled.

I love not the company of such as these, yet something held me fast. I thought with longing of that outer room, so bright, so gay; of the flower-like faces and graceful forms I had but now left behind, and all the while I stood rooted to the spot, in the dark shadow of a column, and waited, though I knew it not, for that which was to be. The flickering light of the lamps did strange things to the grim faces about me.

There they sat, those kings who once had ruled the people of the Walled City. A greater Ruler than they had touched each with His sceptre, and the passing of centuries was to each as the dry leaves that are blown from the trees, in autumn, by the wind.

I gazed upon them, and their silent majesty awed me, as a living, breathing presence never could have done. Even now the dead king at my right grasped in his hand the staff of power. Crowned and robed with royalty sat he, yet the mouse that gnawed his sandal's strap was more potent far, for good or ill.

As the thought crossed my mind I heard a faint noise like the trailing of garments upon the floor. It was an eerie sound in such a place, but as before, I stood motionless, held still by the same curious spell, and the sound came nearer.

Then from between two thrones at the Hall's further end there glided a woman clad all in white. It was impossible to mistake that grace and dignity. I would fain have flung myself at her feet, but something in the hushed look of her face held me back. I even closed my eyes, that look so plainly was not meant for me. For the mask had fallen, and I saw straight into the bared heart of her who was at once more and less than other women, the heart of Lah, the Queen. A stifled sob reached my ears, and behold, she had thrown herself upon the hard stone of the floor, and with clasped hands, knelt, a suppliant, before the unmoved figures of the royal dead.

Then her voice, her wonderful, beautiful voice, broke the silence.

"O Rulers of the people of the Walled City! I cry out to you. The gods have turned away in anger. Edba, herself once a woman, heeds me no longer. I am not of your race. I have come a stranger

to this land, but I ask you, have I not given back good measure for all that the land has given me? Surely, has prosperity come upon your people, O Throned Ones who sit and answer not. Much riches have I brought to them; my rule has been strong; my justice known abroad. The wicked tremble before my face, and the doer of brave deeds have I exalted! See, an empty throne awaits me in your midst. Does that anger you that I, a woman and a stranger, should there take my place? Then listen, Great Ones. Give me but a single little gift from out your store. Turn to me the heart of the stranger. Behold, I kneel to you, I, Lah, who kneel not even to the gods. Hear then my oath: my throne shall remain empty throughout the ages. Take back your kingdom if it please you. Strip from me my riches. Take all—I care not, but turn to me this one heart. Leave but my beauty and my lover.”

Her voice died away, and again there was silence. Then the Queen rose from her knees, and a splendid passion clothed her from head to foot.

“Ye answer not, O Rulers of the people of the Walled City! In peace have I come to you. Look to it that I come not again in war. For neither the dead nor the living shall stay my will. Ye sit upon thrones indeed, but at my pleasure. If the stranger love me, it is well, for me and for ye also. For I can scatter your ashes to the winds, and I can fling ye, one and all, upon a funeral pyre. For Lah can hate, as well as love, and when she comes again, she comes your friend or foe.”

Then she passed. And I, in mute amazement that was half terror, stayed her not, but went back softly, groping in the dark for the door that had let me within this sepulchre.

For this woman was not as other women, and her words were not meant for me to hear. So I locked them away in my breast, and only thus after many days do I set them down, that he, my friend, may take from them some comfort.

For I know now, without room for doubt, whose love it was for which the Queen pleaded of the silent dead, within the Burial Hall of Kings.

## Chapter XIV

### The Flower of Death

We were now in the Palace, and the place was besieged. About its walls (and they were thick indeed, or this tale had not been written) a howling mob surged through the day and still unwearied made hideous the night.

The people of the Walled City, maddened by their priests, cried out for blood, and it added an unfailing interest to the cry that we who heard it knew right well for whose blood they were thus loudly clamoring.

But the Queen was deaf to the tumult, nor did she seem to heed the fact that as the days wore on, the multitude, grown bolder, now cursed the name of her who shielded thus the enemies of the gods.

Agno was not idle. Abroad the wolves leaped at the gates; the royal archers shot them down by hundreds, and in turn were slain. Grim death walked thus a hundred paces off, and we within, moved by the will of her who reigned supreme, lived softly and spoke not of that which chiefly filled our thoughts. That it was the beginning of the end, we knew, but one forbade the hint of danger, and we obeyed.

Meanwhile the serene, luxurious life of the Palace flowed quietly on, like some broad, placid stream that speeds not nor frets, for all the thunder of the waterfall at hand.

Lestrade, grown strangely moody, and Astolba, with white, hushed face, sat with me, guests in the Queen's banquet-hall; but I alone drank from the royal cup, and on me alone did the eyes of Lah rest with the look that was at once both promise and fulfilment.

I am a prudent man, but a man has need of more than prudence to guard against a foe like this. For the Queen was to me all woman in those days, and the spell of her beauty and her new-born gentleness was on me.

Also the uncertainty of these golden hours, and the sense of ever-present danger, went to my head like wine. I set it down in penance for the sin of my unfaithfulness. I forgot the garnered store of wealth, whose secret I had held; I forgot my friend; I forgot the maid that I had sworn to save. And it was in a mood like this, that Astolba found me, the morning of the fifth day of the siege of the Palace.

I was on my way to meet the Queen, and my whole soul was in my errand, so that I looked with the less kindness and the more impatience on the hand that stayed me. It was a small hand and white, but I am not Lestrade, and I had little thought for its beauty. None the less I am a man, and its weakness should have held me as its fairness might not do. Yet it was with more haste than gentleness that I asked Astolba's errand. Had I been less amorously engaged with my own purpose, I think the terror in the upturned face would have touched me to the quick; as it was, I set her story down more to the vain fears of any maid in such a case, than to the score of her with whom the tale chiefly dealt—for it was of the Queen that Astolba spoke; the Queen, who, as I have said, was all meekness and sweet humility with me. Yet this is what Astolba told me, and little did I think that I should so soon see reason in her speech:—

"It was night at about the eleventh hour," she began; "I lay shivering upon my couch, and I could not sleep. You remember that I had asked Lah's permission to go from the banquet, and as I passed, you had turned kindly to me, and bade me take courage, while even as you spoke the hideous cries from without came faintly to my ears. Perhaps your notice stirred the hatred of the Queen, for indeed of late she does hate me. At least she looked at me, and her look pierced me through and through. The thought of it kept me awake. I was cold with fear though the night was warm. I shall die with terror in this evil place. Oh, if you be a man, help me to escape or kill me quickly! But I tell you I will not longer live this life of horror."

So Astolba cried, and I, with a coldness that I can never enough regret, asked her to speak plainly and to the point; what else of evil had the Queen done? Or had she compassed all wickedness in a single look?

But the maid, like a frightened child, clung to me still, and half-weeping went on with her story.

"It was late, as I have told you, and yet I could not sleep. But at length I was so worn with brooding on the dreadful past, and the black future, that I think I must have dropped into a light slumber. And in my dreams a still more awful horror took hold on me, and I would have cried out but a hand was placed over my mouth, and I awoke. The Queen stood by my side." Astolba covered her face with her hands. "I shall never forget the anger,

the hatred, and the scorn of her look, yet when she spoke, her voice was low, and calm with a cruel quiet.

"Miserable white-faced slave," she said. "Have you wondered why I have so far spared you? Did you think because you have escaped the serpent's pit, that you could hope to escape me? It would have been all too easy to have thrown you to those dogs without the gates, who would have made short work of your slender prettiness."

"Then her passion seemed to break out of the bonds in which she held it. She took hold of my arm—see the mark of her fingers on the flesh. She dragged me half-fainting from the couch, and I swayed to and fro in her iron grasp.

"Look," she said, "look at me well, and ask yourself if your white face can hold a charm for him, now that he has gazed upon my beauty? Yet will I make sure. You have heard many a secret of the Palace; yet you have not heard of the flower of death. But fear not, for of that also you shall know. You shall breathe its perfume, when you think not, and you shall die. Little by little your blood shall dry in your veins, and your fair, white skin shall shrivel and hang loose. Your eyes shall lose their lustre. You shall have pity, perchance, but love shall pass you by. Day by day you will wither. You will seek for death, and death will come all too slowly. Yet in the end, that also shall come, and with it the first and last mercy that shall be rendered to you from the hands of Lah, the Queen—

"Then she left me—"

"And you awoke," said I, half-smiling, as one comforting a child. "For surely, Astolba, you cannot think that such a thing as this could by any chance be true. The flower of death! Are you not already a little ashamed of all this nonsense? As for the Queen, has she not shielded us all at the risk of her own life? And while I am here, and Lestrade, what do you fear? Death could come to you only after it had come first to us. And in truth, it shall go hard if we do not soon find some way to save you and ourselves. But we must trust the Queen. Have patience a little—" and here I stooped, and kissed as a brother might, the soft cheek, now so pale and wan. "Meanwhile dream no more dreams."

And so I left her, with drooping head like a broken flower—left her and sought the woman whose strong hand still held the threads of the tangled web that men call fate.

## Chapter XV

### The White Dove's Flight

Now I had gone from Astolba in the full belief that she had dreamed this thing, yet such is the strangeness of life, an hour had not passed by, when I gave fullest credence both to her story and her danger. For in that hour the mask of womanly gentleness had dropped from the Queen, and with it, the blindness from my eyes. I saw, as long ago I should have seen, had the charm of her great beauty been less, that the Palace of the Walled City was no fit resting-place, and that there was a brave man's work to be done, and by me.

Astolba's story had made me a little late, and Lah loved not to wait the coming of either subject or lover. A dozen slave girls were seated on a rug in the room's centre; as I took my tardy place beside the Queen, they, at the royal word, began a love chant that was strangely sweet and plaintive. Perhaps I praised their voices over much; perhaps the jealous humor that had seized their mistress had not yet been spent. However this may be, I know the musicians were, at a word, dismissed, while, at Lah's command, one of the slaves attending on the Queen's person took the vacant place.

Soft strains of wild, sad music came from a room beyond, and at the royal signal the girl began to dance. Hers was a slender, jewelled figure, and it floated hither and thither, like some gaudy tropical blossom blown by the wind. Her whole body responded to the half-savage harmonies; her arms wreathed themselves to the measures of the melody; her bracelets and anklets tinkled as she swayed.

Then as the strains grew wilder, discordant and yet strangely sweet, I know not how it happened, but the veil that covered the girl's face was thrown back. I saw that she was beautiful, despite her red-bronze skin; saw for an instant only, it is true, but in that instant the Queen beside me was changed from a woman to a wild beast that springs upon its prey.

At the first words I saw the poor girl sink before the feet of Lah, in a mute agony of supplication and of fear,—while from behind the throne two burly blacks came forth to do the Queen's bidding. I do not know how I had wit to use the words I did. Perhaps Astolba's story furnished me the key. But I will say that never was human life in more deadly peril. I thank Heaven that I have not its ending, in some measure, to lay at my door.



Trembling from head to foot the maid passed from the royal presence, to disgrace and imprisonment indeed, but not to death.

The sound of her weeping had not died away before Lah had become her same, sweet, gentle self of the last five days. But I had seen that which could not be forgotten. Astolba's anguish was branded upon my mind. Her white face came between the Queen and me, yet I had learned dark wisdom in that same Palace, and I think I showed not the change that had come upon me.

Nevertheless, I turned over and over in my mind every device that could lead to freedom. But I had now to guard against an enemy more potent and subtle than Agno or any of his priest-ridden mob. I walked slowly, with bent head, towards the women's apartments, and there was little profit in my musing.

Then the thought came to me to match Astolba's wit against the Queen's; and even, as half-smiling I pondered the conceit, a hand fell lightly on my arm, and there before me stood the maid herself.

Now the mild sweetness, even the fears of my gentle fellow-captive held for me a new charm in the light of the tigress's fury of her whose side I had but lately left. It won me the more that she should lean on me. And remorse burned within me that I had laughed at her terrors and left her, hardly more than an hour since, in heaviness of spirit, well nigh in tears.

So I took in my two great hands her little one, and it nestled unresisting but trembling like a bird ensnared by the fowler. Then I looked into the depths of her innocent eyes, and they drew me nearer with a strange power. So near that my lips had in another moment touched hers, and the words that began "Forgive me"—ended with "I love you."

It was pretty to see the pink roses bloom again in that sweet face, raised in perfect trust to mine, and to myself I swore that, come what might, I would do a man's part to keep them there.

"Where is Lestrade?" I asked, and Astolba looking up, I added, "because we prisoners must hold a counsel. I have seen that which makes this Palace no fit shelter for my future wife."

At this she blushed, but after a few moments' dalliance the seriousness of my business urged me to action, and at my repeated question Astolba drew me to a further room, where sat my comrade.

I greeted him with frankness as is my way, and because we had been more like brothers than mere friends, I told him bluntly at once of the good-fortune that had befallen me.

It grieved me then, the more that I had so little expected it, that Lestrade should act as he did. For at my first words the smile left his face, and with one long, and I could have sworn reproachful, look at Astolba, he rushed by me and was gone.

The maid, too, was strangely pale again. Well, I was hurt and puzzled also. Astolba I could see had felt deeply the manner in which Gaston had treated my announcement. But it was no time for idle questioning. The hour to act had struck, and I passed over, in silence, my friend's new mood, and bade Astolba think on that which should best lead to our escape.

And with a woman's instinct she put her finger at once upon the plan most like to aid us.

I had spoken of the dangers round about, and of the new and great danger that was ours in acting thus in secret without the knowledge of the Queen.

"In all this city we have not a friend," I said, when she with a new impatience and insufficient deference cut short the thread of my discourse.

"You have one both willing and powerful. Zobo, the Captain of the Queen's guard, shall aid us."

"Zobo!" cried I, in amazement at her folly. "Zobo! the best friend of Lah!"

"And so yours," she answered. "Can it be you have not seen? He loves the Queen. He fears you as he fears not death. And he is a true man. He will find a way to lead us from the Palace, yet neither will he deliver us to the mob without. Have speech with him at once. For your friend Gaston Lestrade, have no fear. Make your plan, and tell me but the time and place and manner of your going. He and I will follow."

It was thus Astolba spoke, and there was so much wit in what she said, and so much new-born energy and strength in the manner of the saying, that I was convinced of the justice of her words.

Thus she left me, going out by the door through which Lestrade had fled, while I turned my steps to the guard-room of the Palace. Here a piece of good-luck awaited me, for I found Zobo, and alone.

He looked not over pleased at my coming, but with grave courtesy bade me sit.

Then I, with what craft I might, began the task before me, and Zobo stood after the first few words motionless,—a giant statue of bronze. Only his eyes were alive, and they glowed with a strange and savage fire.

When my plan began to unfold, I saw him start, and the great corded muscles of his bare arms knotted as his hands gripped tight the rod of metal that he held. When his fingers relaxed their hold, I saw that he had bent the inch-wide bar, as a child bends a pliant twig. But I was then in the midst of my discourse, and could not be turned aside by trifles.

When I had done, there was silence, the kind of silence that a man feels, like to that which comes upon the face of nature before the tempest breaks. I saw that but a very little thing was needed to turn the unfailing loyalty of the man into its accustomed channel. Then we should be dragged before the Queen to meet the reward of our treachery, for such would be our attempted escape in the eyes of her who reigned over the Walled City. Of that I had no single doubt.

Perhaps a man grows used to danger. Perhaps my nerves were dulled by what had gone before. At least, I can say this with truth, I thought in that moment more on the pattern of the rug at my feet than on the chance of life or death that trembled in the balance. The crucial moment passed. Love triumphed. Zobo was ours.

An hour later I had left the place. We were to make the attempt that night,—Lestrade and myself disguised as priests, and Astolba dressed as a singing-boy attached to Edba's Temple. According to a blessed, if heathenish, custom, we could go veiled. We should leave the Palace by one of the many-tangled secret ways beneath it. The entrance to this, as to all, was of course guarded, but Zobo held the Queen's warrant, and with that we might hope to pass.

Once in the City, a friendly guide should meet us. We should be to him inmates of the royal household fallen under Lah's displeasure, to be saved by Zobo's contrivance. We were to make our way through our foes as best we might, protected by our priestly garb, and wait in hiding in a deserted hut to which our guide would conduct us. There we should be left. And then it was that Zobo showed the greatest proof of friendship. He held with

the Queen alone the knowledge of a hidden door within the City's wall. One by one, we three swore by all that was sacred never to reveal the secret.

Through this door we were to pass, and once without, the wilderness stretched before us. Save for famine, drouth, wild beasts, and roaming savages, we should be safe.

It was a wild and perilous enterprise, but we caught at it with eagerness. The very air of the Palace had grown heavy in my nostrils. I longed for freedom, as a shipwrecked mariner dying of thirst longs for water. Despite the thousand risks we ran, my heart beat high with hope. In secret I helped to pack the little store of food and drink that we were to take with us, and with due care I made our choice of weapons.

Then the hour came. The common danger knit us all closer together. Lestrade and I once more, as in the old days, clasped hands and wished each other luck. Astolba moved before us clad all in white. Zobo the Mighty led the way, his flickering torch casting grotesque shadows on the walls and floor of the underground passage. Sometimes this corridor narrowed suddenly, so that we had to crawl beast-like upon all fours for as much as fifty paces; then it arched high above our heads. I think we were all three captives strangely lighthearted. There was no presentiment of evil. We reached the outer entrance in safety, and in safety passed.

Smoothly, as runs a play, we escaped the multiform dangers that beset our every step. The guide was not too curious; the people of the Walled City gave way with respect before our priestly garments.

We found the hut without misadventure; and his duty done, our guide departed. A little later we had passed from its friendly shelter. A double line of overhanging trees screened us from the curious, but indeed, at that hour, there was none to question us. We were in an old garden, and it reached well-nigh to the City wall. When the sentinel should have passed, we in turn would step from beneath the shadow of the trees, and then the opened door and freedom!

My blood pulsed fast in my veins at the thought. I heard the guard go slowly onward. I whispered to Lestrade, "The White Dove has brought us liberty."

Then I stepped out from the tree's shelter, and at the same moment something dropped from the branches above my head.

Two arms gripped me about the throat and a hoarse chuckle sounded in my ears.

"I am thy friend Hubla," said the voice. "Back, you three! back to your kennel, or I call the guard!"

Chapter XVI  
Zobo the Mighty Wrestles

I would have made a fight for it even then. Had Lestrade and I been alone, I would in truth have done so, but I knew that the sentinel was in easy call of his fellows, and Astolba's presence held my hands.

The insolence of Hubla's fiendish laughter choked me with rage, but I met her taunts in silence; and if Lestrade had but followed my lead in the matter, the red witch would have lacked food for merriment.

As for Astolba—the poor maid was crushed. So near to freedom, and now back to the manifold horrors of the gorgeous gilded cage we called our prison. She followed blindly, as one in a dream, and her white face was the best spur to my resolve to save her. This attempt should not be the last. Edba and Hed and all the powers of darkness; the Queen, the priests, the ravening mob,—all against one man's promise; yet even in the face of this disgraceful entry to the Palace I bound myself again by a new oath, Astolba should be saved.

I like not to think even now of that disgraceful journey to the royal house. I saw the frenzied people shrink from the hag who drove us reluctant onward; even the priests turned aside in fear at her approach.

Thus in the early dawn we came, unmolested and unquestioned, to the secret entrance by which we had left. The guard received us. I saw Hubla whisper a word into the ear of Zobo, and he ungraciously bade us enter. The smiling, malicious face of the red witch was for an instant pressed close to mine. I drew back with a smothered exclamation of disgust. Her jeering laugh rang again through the stone corridor, and she had gone. May she receive a just reward! Through her we were once more prisoners.

After an hour's rest I sought the Queen, for it was no plan of mine to make, without need, a new enemy. One glance at her face assured me that, for reasons of her own, Hubla had kept our secret. As for Zobo, I had no fear. It was for his interest, as much as mine, that he should be silent as to that night's doings.

Lah was pacing up and down the open court where she was wont to receive me. The tinkling fountain, the tapestries, the jewelled banquet cups, the heavy perfumed flowers, the Queen's very beauty, filled me with a new unrest, but I hid the feeling. Lah

was hardly mistress of herself in that hour, else it was very like she would have read me. As it was, I saw that something of importance had happened, and that for the time, at least, I was quite safe.

"Agno's messenger has but now gone," she said. "Some day I will have the neck of that arch-traitor, the High Priest, beneath my heel. But now he knows his power, yet knowing it fears mine.

"This then is his message. The justice of our quarrel shall the gods decide. To-day, if so it be my will, Zobo shall wrestle with the Head Man of Edba's Temple. I know the fellow; he is a giant in size and strength, but slow of wit.

"Agno believes that my faithful Captain is worn with lack of sleep and much watching. It is also in the compact that the People's Champion be oiled from head to foot; he alone, not Zobo. Then shall these two wrestle, and from the gods, judgment. Zobo holds the guard still loyal. If he be slain, then I look for such mercy as the priests may show. But if he be the victor—"

The Queen's eyes glowed with a strange fire. "Then am I once more in my rightful place, the mistress of my people,— " she spoke softly,— "and revenge is strangely sweet."

I stood in silence before her, and Lah took up again the thread of her discourse.

"Behold, every day we grow weaker, and the food less. I had not thought to be a captive in mine own Palace, nor had I thought to give my heart into another's keeping, as weaker women do. Yet have both issues come to pass."

She turned once more to me. "My Dering, I had looked to ask thy wisdom in this matter; but no. On me alone shall rest the burden."

She clapped her hands, and a slave came forward and stood with folded arms and bowed head, awaiting the royal word.

"Go, bid my ministers proclaim from the Palace walls my answer, for which the High Priest waits. Before the people, at the third hour, shall Zobo the Mighty wrestle, and to the friend of Edba and of Hed, victory."

And thus the die was cast. I cannot tell with what feverish eagerness I awaited the result of this new move in the game, whose stakes were life and death. Lestrade was wild with alternate thrills of joy and fear when I told him of the matter. That was his nature. As for me, I saw well what the Queen's defeat

would mean to us, her captives, but I confess that the thought of her victory raised little hope in my breast.

As for the maid, to the blackness of Astolba's despair there was just then no light. The poor girl was haunted by the thought of the flower of death, and the horror of it did what I much doubted the evil blossom itself could do. She was wasting away, and kisses, even mine, could not call back again, as once, the pretty color to her white cheeks. I did my best to comfort her, however, and when the third hour—the time appointed for the wrestling—came, Lestrade arrived and took my place beside her.

So, knowing Astolba to be in good hands, I again sought the Queen, and found from her that the meeting was to be in the open square before the Palace walls.

Already this was black with the mass of waiting people. From within I could see all that went on below, but it irked me that Lah had forbidden me to join her.

A raised platform, richly ornamented and hung with multicolored silks, had been hastily set up directly before the great centre gate. This gate had been opened, and there the Queen was to sit enthroned and surrounded by the guard.

As I watched all this, Zobo passed me, coming from the royal apartments. His face wore a look of such pure and noble resolve and such exalted happiness, that I lowered my eyes before the light in his, with a feeling near to envy, savage and worshipper of idols though he was.

A few moments later and a roar from the mob without bade me look quickly forth. The Queen in all the magnificence of her public presence had taken her place, and the people, from mingled awe, or the force of habit, had given the royal salute.

Even at the distance at which I sat, I thought I could see, through my loophole, the frown on Agno's lowering face; but again a tumult of cheers and cries drew my wandering gaze.

The Head Man of Edba's Temple had stepped into the cleared circle. My spirits raised by my ancient enemy's discomfiture, sank like lead, at the sight of this giant figure. He stood motionless, stolidly waiting for the tumult of welcoming cheers to cease, till at last, at a signal from Agno, silence fell.

Thus it was in the midst of an ominous calm that Zobo, the Queen's Champion, took his place. They stood together for a moment, by an evil design of the High Priest, I doubt not; for it was all too plain that the Head Man's enormous bulk dwarfed



even the burly form of the Captain of the Royal Guard. But in that moment I remembered the look that I had surprised on the face of the friend of Lah, and remembering, hoped on.

Then as I gazed thus, the High Priest's staff clanged once upon the stone beneath his feet, and the two men fell back. They stood eying each other warily, like two great dogs set on to fight. This was to be no common wrestling, for no common stake, and at the latter end it was the victor alone who should leave the field.

I looked at the Queen. She was gently smiling, but I saw her hand tighten on the arm of her throne. At the same moment a savage, exultant roar broke from the waiting throng. The two men had clenched. I saw the glistening limbs of the Head Man wound, snake-like, about the body of his enemy, and, snake-like, slip from the iron grip of the Queen's Champion. Now one had the vantage, now the other.

It was so still that I could hear the hoarse breathing of the wrestlers. Then I laughed aloud, for Zobo's mighty arms were about the trunk of his foe, and I thought the giant's ribs would crack beneath the strain. But the next instant the Head Man was free again, and with a dexterous twist was interlocked once more with his enemy. I knew the trick of that fall and my heart sank. Zobo staggered, and was down.

A mighty shout rose from the priestly ranks, and I saw the Queen lean forward and fix her eyes on the agonized face of her gallant Captain. The giant was grinding the life out of his fallen foe. I turned away, sick with the horror of it, but a terrible fascination drew me back. Zobo was looking straight into the eyes of the woman he loved, and as he did so, that strange, glad, pure light in his, shone forth, undimmed, once more.

With a superhuman effort he raised himself on his arm. The next, he was on his feet once more, his hands at the Head Man's throat. I saw the giant beat the air for an instant with a wild and futile motion. Then the voice of the High Priest rose shrill in the awful quiet, bidding the wrestlers cease. But too late. For even as his words rang out, the massive form of Zobo's foe relaxed, hung limp for a moment, then struck the ground with a dull, lifeless thud.

Zobo, turning, walked straight to the throne of Lah. As he reached it, I saw his lips move in a vain effort at speech. Then his giant body swayed and fell heavily. The Queen's Champion lay,

face downward, at her feet, his hand holding fast the hem of her garment.

From the ranks of the people burst forth the thunder of applause. For, behold the gods had sat in judgment. The Queen was guiltless, and the day was won.

Chapter XVII  
Check to the Queen

From my loophole I had seen it all. From that same post of vantage, I now beheld the arch-traitor Agno come forth at the head of his fawning priests to do homage to his Queen. Through all the false ardor of his congratulations, Lah had not spoken. Indeed, from the very beginning of the conflict till now no word had passed her lips. Only in the midst of Agno's discourse, at a sign from their royal mistress, four slaves had raised the body of the fallen hero, and borne him within the Palace. As they passed, the Queen's hand had rested lightly upon her Champion's forehead, in a mute caress. That was all, but I knew that Lah was not ungrateful.

The High Priest's long-winded flatteries were not done, when at another sign from the Queen, the royal salute broke forth from the guard and was echoed by the people. The mighty clamor drowned the honeyed words, and I saw Agno's face writhe with passion, as Lah, with an imperious gesture, bade him stand aside. But for once her woman's hate had outrun her wisdom. The public affront was too great to be silently borne. Another moment, and Agno, surrounded by his priests, had reached his raised seat of honor, and from thence had begun a wild address to the still waiting throng.

In the face of the late decision of Edba and of Hed, the High Priest dared not impeach the Queen. His words, however, were aimed at her new-born power, and they were full of painful interest to me who listened, for they dealt with me and with my comrade, and with Astolba, my promised bride.

"All glory, honor, and strength to Lah!" he shouted. "Friend of the gods; heaven-born mistress of the people of the Walled City. Behold Zobo the Mighty has wrestled, and to him belongs the victory. I, the High Priest of the Temple, proclaim a festival; a feast of gladness and of thanksgiving.

"On the third day hence shall it be, and on the altar of the gods will we slay the strangers and do to death her, the Snake's chosen bride. So shall the Queen be rid of her enemies, peace and prosperity given to us, and the anger of the great ones turned away."

At these words the bloodthirsty crowd went once again wild with joy. I saw the Queen turn as though about to speak, but the deafening clamor would have drowned her voice. I think at least

she saw Agno's evil, smiling face, and dared not run the risk of insult. So in proud silence she drew back. The Palace gates closed behind her, and I, with a new anxiety gnawing at my heart, turned also to seek my fellow-victims.

This was the sad end of a brilliant beginning. As I passed the Queen's private audience room, the sound of a strange low chant drew me closer. The tapestried curtain was pulled a little aside, and within I saw the red witch bending over a brazier, and showing dim through the blue smoke that coiled upward, serpent-like, from the living embers. She it was who chanted this weird monotonous refrain, and as I looked again, I beheld Lah, pale and rigid, listening, with a look of mingled dread and longing, to the evil song.

Then I passed onward, and as I did so, the four slaves bearing the body of Zobo met me in the passage. I signed for them to stop, and they did so in submissive silence. The Champion lay on his back. There were red stains on the embroidered cloth that covered him, and the giant frame bore marks of the past struggle, that would never be effaced. But I saw with joy that he still breathed deeply and regularly enough, though his wide-open eyes knew me not. They were bringing him to the Queen and to Hubla. The magic touch of the one or the muttered spell of the other would call back again the light of reason to those glazed, unseeing eyes. So much I knew, for I had sojourned already long enough in the Walled City to learn somewhat of its dark wisdom. I drew aside therefore and let the slaves go forward with their burden.

There was deep silence within now, instead of that weird blood-curdling chant, but its dull measures still beat upon my brain like the heavy throb of a piston or the blow of a hammer. The desire filled me to lie at rest and let Astolba's white fingers smooth with light touch my weary head. So thinking, I sought the spot where last we three had met,—Lestrade, the maid, and I. But the place was empty. First calmly, then with a secret dread and fevered anxiety, I sought them,—my fellow-captives, going from room to room. But in vain. The deserted chambers mocked me. A woman's sandal lay upon the floor; it was small and dainty like its owner, the fair girl whom I had lost, but it bore no message. I picked it up and hid it safe within the folds of my tunic, near my heart.

Then I turned, and there in ominous silence stood the Queen. Her eyes met mine, nor did they drop or falter before the imperious question that sprung to my lips. And when her answer came, there was new depth and new sweetness in her voice, so that the very memory of it, even in these days, is a charm to bind me fast.

“What is the loss of these two to me and to thee? O stranger to my gods and to my people! through the lips of Hubla, fate hath spoken. Out of all the world we two stand apart. For life, for death; for good, for ill; for joy, for sorrow, thou and I, together and alone.”

Chapter XVIII  
The Wisdom of Hubla

At first, after the Queen had spoken thus, I answered nothing. The light in her eyes dazzled me, and the new tone of her voice echoed in my heart. But when a second time she broke the silence, a certain menace lurked beneath the sweetness of her words, and that acted as a spur to my faltering impulse.

So I wrestled with temptation and forgot not the peril of my friends, and indeed I spoke sternly, demanding to be told their fate.

"For I have searched, and they are gone from here," I said. "This is no hour for idle dalliance. Your Palace, O Queen! has much that I dislike. In which of its many dungeons shall I look for these two, Astolba and Lestrade?"

At my words the quick color surged to the face of Lah, but she answered calmly. "Question Agno and his servants. In this matter I have no part."

"To believe you is to doubt your power," I said. "Do you tell me that the High Priest has dared—"

But here she stopped me with uplifted hand. "I pray thee, anger me not. O my Dering," and marvellously tender was that wondrous voice, "I am not as other women, even as thou art beyond and above the horde of courtiers and of warriors to whom my word is law, who kiss my sandal's print, rejoicing when I smile, trembling before my frown. Yet even to the meanest of these, comes love. To thy lips, beloved, I hold in my turn the golden cup. Drink deep and forget all care, all sorrow. Together we will stand before Edba's altar. There shalt thou be crowned on the third day, with me, ruler of the people of the Walled City. Agno himself shall bless our union, nor dare to lay a sacrilegious hand upon thy garment's hem.

"Thus shalt thou escape death and gain great glory, and length of years, and fulness of power. Thus, O my Dering, Hubla the red witch hath seen it written in the magic vapor, and behold mine own eyes have been unsealed, and I too have seen us there—we two encircled by the serpent sacred to Hed. And for this day, I thank the gods, and thank them too that I am fair and that I come not empty handed to my lord. Speak quickly, for I bear not pain with patience, and indeed my soul hungers for the love light in thine eyes, and the touch of thy lips on mine. Speak then, my lord. Lah, the Queen, awaits thy answer."

Then it was that I said a cruel thing. In truth, between her beauty and her proffered love, her tempting and the bond of my own oath, I was as a man distraught. Before me rose the sweet, pale face of her whom I had come to save. The vision of Astolba came between me and the Queen, and being made savage by my own misery, I answered bitterly: "Is it thus in thy country? The woman woos the man?"

For a moment's space she looked at me, and that look is branded forever on my memory. The next, her hand leaped to her dagger's hilt. I did not move. In truth, death held for me then no terrors. The flash of the blade passed before my eyes. The point struck through the flesh to the bone and glanced off. Slowly the red stain spread upon the fold of my white tunic. The Queen's eyes, wide with horror, followed it in silence. Then with a wild cry, Lah flung herself at my feet. She wept not as a woman weeps, but as a man—not easily, but with low, strangling sobs that caught and tore at the throat.

Then because hers was no fit place for a woman I raised her up. Well, I can bear most things, but I cannot bear to hear a woman cry. So I comforted her with words: "Your tears against my blood; then we are quits." And kissed her once, and with the kiss I signed away my freedom and my honor, for I said:—

"Save but my friends, and on the third day, if we both live, then will I meet you at Edba's altar, and you shall have your will with me, for at your bidding I am prisoner of yours until the end."

"Nay, not my prisoner, but my lord," Lah answered, and she plucked from her girdle the centre ring, that one which bore the signet stone, and this by a chain of gold she hung about my neck, saying, "Nor yet my lord alone, but master also of the people of the Walled City."

But I was silent, for I knew too well that I was but fate's plaything, and master not even of my plighted word. Thus Hubla's dark wisdom triumphed, and I being but a man,—on my head be the shame,—seeing the Queen's beauty, was not wholly sad.

Then it was that a strange thing happened. Lah bade me take up the ring that held the signet, and obedient to her wish in the matter, I fixed my eyes upon the centre jewel. This was a ruby as large as a hazel nut, and as I looked into its glorious depth I thought a crimson flame leaped from its heart, a flame that waxed and waned, and changed from violet to scarlet; a flame

that, even as I gazed spellbound upon it, ceased suddenly as it had come.

Then the Queen took my hand in hers, and like a child I followed whither she led me, for the dancing flame was still before my eyes; I felt the jewel pulsing as it lay upon my breast, and I had no will but her will, and no thought for anything in this world or the next, save of the ruby, the wondrous jewel that was mine. So, in unbroken silence we went together, out from the empty chambers that had held my lost love, lost and too soon forgotten; out through the long winding corridors, and then ever downward.

At length Lah pushed aside a heavy curtain, and we stood, still hand in hand, within the Burial Hall of Kings. You have heard already Lestrade's account of this same fearsome sepulchre. Now to his word I add my own, for as I am a living man, thus I, too, crossed the threshold of that awful place and stood within.

The dead Kings stirred not as we came; neither spoke they word of welcome. But had they risen one and all to repel the stranger whose footfall thus boldly broke the peace of centuries, I should still have been unsurprised and unafraid. For it was of the ruby, and of the ruby alone, that I thought, and so I put forth no claim to bravery, other than is natural to me, but relate the simple truth of what then followed.

Without pausing, Lah drew me forward until we reached the single empty throne, and there, by a sign, she bade me sit. So, at her command, I, a living man, as yet uncrowned, took my place with these, the monarchs of the past. Then, with averted face, the Queen withdrew, and I, save for the awful presence of the dead, was quite alone.

A curious drowsiness clouded my brain and lulled to rest my every sense. I thought the ruby's fire scorched my flesh, and the pain of it was not all pain, but pleasure, too, intermingled in a way of which I now find it hard to rightly tell, though to this day I bear upon my breast a scar which up to that strange hour was not there.

Thus for a time I sat, and then the dead King at my right spoke, though his lips moved not, and his words fell coldly on the silence.

"O my brethren, the hour is at hand; the curse is fallen. The glory of Edba and of Hed is darkened, and our bodies, revered throughout the ages, shall crumble to dust, and be scattered



through the world by every varying wind. A woman hath wrought great things for the Walled City. A woman shall pluck down even that which she hath set up. Speak, O my brothers! What price shall the stranger pay?"

Then a low, wrathful murmur filled that ancient Hall, to which I, still gloating over my treasure, my ruby without price, listened without fear.

*"He shall taste of love and die athirst,"* said one.

*"He shall hold in the hollow of his hand great wealth, and behold it shall avail him not,"* answered a third.

*"Woe! woe!"* cried another; *"Death shall stay from him afar off. The weariness of years and the coldness of friends be his portion."*

Then again there was silence, and as I waited, lo! a great light filled the Burial Hall, and from a distance came a glorious voice not mortal, wholly sweet, yet full of power. And before it the dead Kings bent their heads, and at its sound I forgot the jewel that I wore, and the voice spoke to me, and of me, and with it both joy and sorrow overflowed my heart. As for the words it spoke I know them not.

But this I know, that it called me both blessed and cursed in the love that raised me above my fellows; and bade me be of good cheer, for of the blackness of the night is born the glory of the dawn, and both the darkness and the light were to be mine throughout the years; and in the latter end, peace, unknowable in time, endless throughout eternity.

Then the voice was stilled, and I awoke, and descending from the throne I sought the Queen's presence. But all these things I kept close locked in my heart, nor at her eager questioning would I tell my dream.

## Chapter XIX

## For Life, for Love, for Freedom

It was near to midnight. I was weary, mind and body, for I had been urging the Queen to tell me plainly of the fate of my friends, and she had pleaded ignorance, and either could not or would not give me satisfaction.

To a reasonable man like myself it is a tedious process and one bearing little fruit, to thread the mazes of a woman's mind, yet this had been my task, and after all these hours I now laid me to rest with the comfortable knowledge that I had perchance been cajoled, and at any rate altogether baffled.

Yet she was beautiful, my Queen, and I could not be wholly discontent. Her very contrariness was a charm, or would have been, had I felt less bondsman to the cause of my friends. And this was the more strange, in that I have always loved obedience in a woman, and reckoned docility the chief of female virtues.

I put this down that men may read. You that wonder at my folly may perchance go further and with less cause, when the touch of the blind god comes to you as to me. As for you who smile on, knowing no better, from your lonely height, you have missed wholly the inwardness of life and its savor, and so my pity may well match your own and with the greater reason.

Well, I have said that it was close to midnight when I sought my couch, and not five minutes after when I was wrapped in deepest slumber, therefore I cannot say when the scent of coming trouble filled my nostrils, or when the heavy burden of the foreknowledge of sorrow broke my rest. But this I do know: I breathed with difficulty. A heavy weight seemed pressing on my chest, and in the distance, even in my sleep, I heard a thunderous rumble as of the chariot wheels of the gods.

With that thought I woke, and waking, knew that the air was full of sulphur and that something lay across me, motionless, in the darkness. I put forth my strength and pushed the thing away, and it was cold, and it rolled from off the couch, and fell on the floor beside it, with a dull sound I liked but little.

The lamp that lit my chamber had gone out, and the slave that was wont to sleep at my feet had left his accustomed place. With a strange inward shrinking I passed my hand swiftly over the huddled shape on the pavement, and as I thus learned the sickening truth, a lurid flash of lightning showed the distorted

features of him whom I had called, and proved the reason of his silence.

Then a clap of thunder shook the very Palace. I heard the shrill scream of a frightened woman, and I groped my way to the door. As I reached it, a dull red glare lit up faintly the stone corridor, and I saw that it came from without and through a loophole that pierced the massive wall.

There was an indescribable murmur also that was deadened by the thickness of outer stone of the fortress Palace. This murmur sounded to me very much like the angry hum of a horde of bees. Hurrying feet, bare of sandals, ran this way and that. The royal household was astir and affrighted.

Soon I saw again a blinding flash of blue light and heard the deafening peal of thunder that followed. All this time there was no sound of falling rain, but the air was heavy and stagnant and full of a curious mineral odor that stank in my nostrils.

Then as I groped my way onward through the tangled labyrinth that lay between me and the Queen, I felt a hand fall on my shoulder, and a voice spoke low in my ear through all the tumult. I turned, and the voice whined on, and in a moment I had caught the sense of that which it uttered.

"For behold, I have given gifts of price to the Temple, yet doth fire from heaven even now destroy my household. Woe is me! but the magic of the white stranger is strong. Follow, my lord, and I will lead you to your friends. So shall the shadow of your protecting mantle fall upon me, and my miserable life be spared."

Thus the creature grovelled before me, and even as he spoke, a forked tongue of light struck a cornice above our heads, and a great fragment of carved stone fell at my feet.

I bade the whimpering fellow rise and be a man and lead me, as he valued his black skin, with all speed, to the dungeon where lay my comrade and the maid.

So at his word I turned me back once more, and, drawing my knife, I let the shivering wretch gaze on the bright polish of its metal, that he might forswear all thought of treachery. I think, however, that the deadly fear of the storm that consumed him would have kept him true.

At least, without mischance, he led me downward, by a way new to me, till at length, in the bowels of the earth, I rejoined my friends. It was a hasty, if a joyous, greeting that we gave one another. There was no time to lose. Astolba's face told me that,

as did the feverish pressure with which my good comrade Lestrade grasped my hands.

So with eloquent maledictions in the native tongue, and in round English, I swore the jailer, my trembling guide, to silence, and once again we three together began the business of escape.

Well for us that the friendly darkness covered us, and that before the dreadful onslaught of the storm the sentinels had fled. Our hard-earned knowledge of the network of dungeon, chamber, and corridor stood us in good stead; fear lent us strength and pricked us onward, and it was not long as we count by minutes before we paused for breath—we three together without the Palace, and so far safe, within the shadow of its wall.

Then it was that my heart sank like lead within my bosom. In the excitement of the flight, I had not thought of the Queen, and that escape meant farewell and forever.

One lives long in an hour like that, and in a flash I saw that I was bound to Lah by a stronger chain than any that could be forged by the word of a heathen priest before Edba's altar.

But awful peril faced us, and if ever a maid needed the service of two stalwart men, such a one was Astolba, in the midst of this terrible danger alike from the heavens and from the beasts about us.

So, privately in the darkness, I kissed the ruby that lay upon my breast. This also I set down,—I care not who reads it,—and with the kiss I sealed a compact that led me from my desire to my duty.

Then I resolutely turned my back upon the Palace.

The dull roar was not so distant or so muffled now. It came from a maddened crowd that surged about the royal entrance gates.

Ghostly figures joined the mob, by twos and threes, showing not white, but black, against the red glare of burning buildings; and over all hung the sulphurous vapor; from above, peal upon peal of deafening thunder—the serpent flash of light.

The people of the Walled City were mad with fear, and in their terror lay our best pledge of safety. Lestrade supported the maid and tenderly urged her onward, and I in silence led the way, with naked sword to answer him who should unwisely question us.

My comrade bore with him such weapons as he had time to choose in our hasty flight, and Astolba, with a woman's foresight, had carried from the cell provisions and a flask of water.

The secret door of the outer wall was near, and freedom within our grasp, but I took no joy of it. Lah's face, beautiful and reproachful, rose before me and filled me with a mighty longing that would not be stilled. I even half hoped that we, or at least that I, would be challenged, captured, and so stand once more a prisoner in that queenly presence; but no man stayed us, and without let or hindrance we passed through the door in the wall, and stood once again beyond the boundaries of the City of the worshippers of Edba and of Hed.

But even in that moment the shrill voice of Hubla reached my ears, strangely broken with wild, strangling sobs, and though I knew it not, the voice of Hubla was the voice of fate. How or by what means she had tracked us, I cannot tell.

Lestrade, mindful of her past malice, strode forth quickly with upraised spear, but I withheld his hand.

There was no power for evil in the shrunken, huddled figure at my feet. Even her witch's deviltry had fallen from her as a garment.

It was not the sorceress who clasped my knees, but an old old woman, half-mad with frantic grief and terror; and at her first words my blood leaped in my veins, for she bade me save the Queen.

I saw Astolba come forward from the shelter of Lestrade's protecting arm, and as in a dream, I heard her, with a strange hardness in her voice, bid the red witch cease her lamentations, for she said coldly, "What is Lah's fate to you?"

Then with something of her old fire, Hubla stood upright.

"What is the Queen to me?" she repeated, with scorn in look and tone. "For whom have I toiled? For whom have I betrayed the secrets of the gods? Who sits, by my contriving, upon the throne of Kings? For whom have I shed without mercy the blood of friend and foe? And she is all in all to me. The wrath of Edba and Hed strike me alone. I am their rightful victim; let them spare my child."

"Your child!" I cried in amazement, but she turned upon me with her old savagery.

"And you, her lover, waste the time in idle words. You stand here prating, while the mob, maddened by the priests, fire the Palace and tear in pieces Lah, their Queen."

I turned, stricken dumb by the horror of her words, and it was Lestrade who put the question that trembled on my lips.

"The hag is distraught or worse," he said, with contempt. "Think not to cheat us by so clumsy a trick. Did not Agno himself at the wrestling do homage to the Queen?"

Hubla answered, but it was to me she spoke.

"If you have pity, hasten. By the gods I swear I tell nothing but the bare truth. This storm has set the people wild with fear, and the crafty priests have dared to say that Edba and Hed have sent it in punishment of the Queen's sins. In mercy, come quickly, for the end is near."

"And if we believe this likely tale," sneered Lestrade, "what can one man do? what is my friend among so many?"

"The fire of the pit smite you!" raved the witch, beside herself with passion. Then once again she clung to me, beseeching, "Come; for she loves you."

And I answered, "I will come."

Then it was that Astolba spoke, and I knew not till then how pitiless can be a woman's voice.

"Is this thing true?" she asked. "Promised to me as you are, do you love this woman?"

The lash of her scorn cut me like a knife, but I felt that the time for half-truths was over. So I said humbly but yet steadfastly, "I do not know. Nevertheless I cannot leave her to perish. Remember she has saved your life and mine."

"Go then," she cried bitterly. "We waste time. I thank Heaven there beats yet one loyal heart; one who will stand my friend. If we part here, it is forever."

"Forever if it be your will," I answered, with sad pride.

And with that I saw Lestrade draw the maid close, and together, without a word, they passed from me, and the darkness swallowed them; and I, turning, bade Hubla lead onward to the Queen.

## Chapter XX

## The Beginning of the End

How little a man sees of what is before him. A week hence I would have scorned the thought that, once free, I should enter willingly again the City of heathen gods; that monster city that stretched before me, pitiless and dark, and full of mystery. Full, too, of the thirst of blood and of nameless deeds.

Surely the measure of its iniquity had overflowed. Within its walls there was little room for a man of peace like myself, but in these days I was not the master of my acts that I had once been; an inward fire consumed me. I will not make out my case one whit better than it was. Looking back in the calm of these latter days, I see Astolba was not all wrong.

It was not duty simply that drove me back; the duty of man to woman. It was, too, a strange half-bitter gladness that rose within me, as by Hubla's side I went back, to face death, if need be, with her whose peril called me,—Lah, the Queen.

When the red witch had clutched my knees beseeching, she had seemed too feeble for further effort. Now, however, as once before had chanced, as we sought the road to the Palace, I had much ado to keep up with the swiftness of her halting gait.

For all my efforts she was ever in front, and as we had naught to say to each other, it was not long before we reached one of the secret entrances to the place, within which the uncanny figure of Hubla vanished, flitting like a bat through the darkness.

On the threshold I paused for an instant. One wing of the Palace was already aflame; the great square in front was packed with a howling mob. It had not yet surrounded the royal residence, but I knew it would soon do so; for if the magic of the Queen's eloquence had, as I surmised, held it thus far in check, the spell now had lost its power.

Already the maddened people swarmed up the front of the massive building. The bodyguard within was faithful, and hurled back the rebels as they came. But the struggle I knew was but too unequal.

Fascinated by the spectacle, I still lingered. I saw one and another of the enemy bearing off rich spoil: jewelled garments, costly furnishings, goblets, skins, tapestries.

In the midst of the foe stood Agno, urging on the plunderers by word and gesture. His place was directly beneath the great

statue of the god, Hed, and even as I looked a blue flame shot from above, and the stone image reeled.

The High Priest with a cry of terror flung himself back, but too late. The stone crashed downward. In a moment's space all was over. Agno, the arch-traitor, had received from his master a just reward.

With a lighter heart I stepped within the Palace. Now that our chief enemy was dead hope rose again within my breast. It would go hard indeed if having received from Heaven this signal favor, I did not save the Queen.

Hubla had disappeared, but I had threaded the labyrinth before me too often to need a guide. The thick walls of the place deadened the sound of the storm without. Only the echo of my running feet jarred on the silence.

The lust of the battle was upon me. First, I would give a lesson to these knaves, and that before the face of Lah; then, if need be, we would fly together. So would I pay my debt.

The clash of arms and the cries of the wounded told me all too surely which way to turn. Breathless, I rushed into the Queen's own chamber. This place the last desperate handful of her followers had made their stronghold.

In their midst, clothed right royally, as for a festal day, stood Lah, their mistress and my own. When she saw me, the fire in her eyes gave place to a look of such glad wonder that I was humbled at the sight, and would have knelt before her, save that the hour and place were for more active service.

The great tawny beast, the tiger that she fondled, stood guard on one side; Zobo the Mighty, with drawn sword, had taken his stand on the other.

The same look of hostile jealousy leaped into the eyes of both man and brute, as I advanced; but Lah saw it, and with a word made peace between us. She was so lovely, so wondrously lovely, in that hour! All Queen and yet all woman.

And not ten paces off, and drawing ever nearer, came the ravening mob. Agno's death had not turned them from their purpose, as I had hoped.

It was the beginning of the end; but I swore within me that it was life with Lah, or death for me. It is thus fate laughs at the oaths of men. In this hour I am whole and strong, while she—

But I must not let the bitterness of memory stay my hand. I have, I know it well, but little art in picturing out the past, and



even now I could not if I would dwell on what followed next. The wound, for all these intervening years, is still too fresh.

She stood there thus, my Queen, the love light in her eyes, in the full radiance of her beauty.

With my oath freshly sworn, I stepped forward to take my part in her defence. That second a spear, flung from a distance, clove the air and buried its point in Lah's fair breast. It needed no surgeon's skill to know the hurt was mortal. With a roar like that of an angry beast Zobo sprang forward to avenge the murder.

The Queen swayed heavily forward, and I caught her in my arms. She clasped her small hands round the spear's shaft and tried with a man's courage to pull out the cruel steel, but I saw the useless agony it gave her, and gently begged her cease. The tears rolled down my face, and I cared not who should see them.

Lah's beautiful head lay on my shoulder. She rested there as a tired child rests in its mother's arms. The great brute, the tiger she had loved, now lapped the hand that fell in piteous helplessness by her side.

The roar of battle came nearer, but I heeded it not. For me the worst was over.

With a mighty effort the Queen raised her head. She spoke no word to me, but what need was there of words between us in that hour? But faintly, in a strange tongue, she called to Zobo, and in the midst of all the din and turmoil round about, he heard that cry. I saw his face convulsed with agony, but again Lah spoke, with a sweet beseeching eagerness, and, falling on his knees before her, the warrior kissed her garment's hem and bent his head in token of obedience. Then he turned to me.

I looked once more into the depths of the Queen's beautiful eyes. Then their lids drooped. The tiger uttered a long, terrible cry.

Zobo picked me up like a child in his giant arms and bore me from the chamber. I saw the great tawny brute standing over the body of his mistress. With burning shame and anger, I struggled to be free, but the Captain of the Guard held me close.

A forked tongue of flame licked the curtained tapestry that screened the room from which he carried me. The threads of gold shone bright amongst those of baser metal. The hanging fell into place behind us. At a word from my captor four brawny slaves that waited took hold on me and bore me onward. Zobo tore down the burning tapestry and smothered the flame in his hands. He

knelt beside the motionless body of the Queen. As he did so, the last of the gallant guard reeled back pierced by a hundred hungry knives. Then a turn in the winding corridor hid the room from sight.

Spurred by the fear of capture and of death, but bound by I know not what strange spell of obedience, my captors hurried onward, but ever with their burden.

So ingloriously was I borne without the Palace, and when at last they let me go, I saw a sheet of flame rise from its massive roof. The great palace with its fearsome Burial Hall, its beautiful Throne Room, and its wondrous Treasure Chamber, was even now a ruin—a fitting funeral pyre for her whose fair body lay within.

So once more I turned. And because in that hour, death would have been a sweet and not a bitter draught, Heaven withheld the cup from my thirsting lips. No man molested me, and at last I stood utterly alone once again and for the last time at the secret door that led through the wall of the City to the jungle without. Then that door, too, slipped into place behind me.

The dawn was breaking, the great storm was over, and I was free.

All this was, as I have said, many many years ago. I am an old man now, and having done my self-allotted task, I can die in peace at the appointed hour.

I have never mated. I have seen fair women, but none like her whose ashes lie within the dark circle of the City of Edba and of Hed. I have heard sweet voices, but none like hers.

Astolba, a matron now, passed me by on the arm of my one time gay comrade, Gaston Lestrade. He bore himself not so lightheartedly, I thought. Neither glanced at me as they passed on, but Astolba's face turned from rose to white. But I do not blame them. I know too much which they would have forgotten.

So I sit beside the fire alone, save for my dreams and for the ruby that hangs upon my breast. When I hold the gem, I bear within the hollow of my hand untold wealth. This I know full well, but the riches of the universe would not tempt me to sell the parting gift of Lah, the Queen.

Is this love? Again I say I know not. Only this: in life the jewel rests upon my heart, and at my death he will be a bold man and not wise, who shall dare to wrest it from me.

THE END