

## CHAPTER XX

### THE CHOICE OF YAHN TSYN-DEH

**A**ND while Yahn Tsyn-deh laid the trap, and the medicine drums sounded, and the women gathered the children close because of the trembling earth, one girl robed in the skin of a mountain lion waited alone at the portal of the star, and knelt in the shadow, and looked with eyes of fear at the great pieces of severed cliff, or ancient wall sent crashing downwards by the force of the earth shock.

Past her portal they had crashed until it seemed the roof must fall also, and she gathered the robe of Tahn-té about her, and came as far as might be into the open — and watched with longing eyes the trail across the mesa to the great river! — for that trail was as the path of the sun to her,— or the rainbow in the sky!

The feet of Tahn-té had touched that trail, and when the night came, and the moon rose in the great circle over the eastern hills — over that trail would he come, and though the mountains themselves crashed downwards to the mesa, he would hold her close, and the very spirits of darkness could send no more fear!

She kept very still there waiting at the portal, for strange noises were heard on the mesa, a dislodged stone rumbling down the long slope — or a bit of loose clay falling from the ancient walls. At times the smaller sounds suggested passing feet — and

above all things must she remain hidden from people until he came for her — he — the god-like one who had brought her to this dwelling so akin to the dwellings of the Divine Ones of the Navahu land in the place called Tsé-ye. The difference was that the Tsé-ye dwellings were deep in the heart of the world — while these dwellings were lifted high above the world.

But she knew without words that he indeed belonged to the Divine Ones ere he brought her to the ancient dwellings. That her name had been in his heart, and on his lips before she herself had told him, was but a part of the strange sweet magic of the new life into which he had led her.

Through the storms — and the dark nights — and the long days of loneliness had she lived since he had hidden her first from the scouts of Te-gat-ha — but they had passed over her as dreams of sweetness pass. — That the groves of pine, or the mesa of the river, hid him from her sight, did not mean to her that he had quite gone away, the wonderful magic wrought by him made it possible for her to feel his arms about her even when she lay alone in the darkness of the dwelling of the star. To be hidden like that, and to watch for his coming, was to be granted much joy by the gods. That the gods exact payment for all joys more than mortal, was one secret Tahn-té did not whisper to her, though the thought had clouded his own eyes more than once as he clasped her close to him.

What the gods would exact he did not know, but daily and nightly he made prayers to the mediators of the spirit land, and hoped in his heart that the god of his people prove not akin to the jealous god of the men of iron; — for a jealous god would, without

doubt, take her from him! Against men he could protect her — but if the gods awoke — and were jealous —

And he remembered the fastings, and the penance, and the prayers by which he had, unknown to all others, dedicated his life to the gods alone!

But of this he said no word — only held her more close in his thoughts — but ever a gray shadow moved beside him — the shadow of an unknown fear — and it was the same shadow by which he had been led to count over the seeds of the sacred growth — that he be sure it was in his power to make the death sleep beautiful to her, if the death sleep should shorten their trail together in the Earth Life.

She knew nothing of his fear, and watched each lengthening shadow with delight — since the growing shadows were heralds of his coming! Even the trembling of the earth was forgotten in that joy — and she scarcely noted that the air had grown strangely sultry — almost a thing of weight it seemed; — a brooding, waiting spirit, silencing even the whisper of the pines — and the whisper of the pine was sacred music to the Te-hua people; — through all the ages it had whispered, until in a good hour it had given voice to their earth-born god!

She knew not anything of the gods of her own people, and the ominous silence of the pines meant not to her what they would mean to a girl of the river villages. But the magic of the place did make itself felt to her when her robe, as she touched it, sent out little snappings as of fireflies' wings, and far across the land tiny flashes flamed from earth to sky as the dusk grew. When she shook loose her hair that she might arrange it more pleasing for his sight, she was startled by the tiny crackling, like finest of twigs in a

blaze — and to smooth it into braids silenced none of the strange magic; — each time her hand touched it, the little sparks flashed — under the heavy brooding atmosphere, electric forces were at work in strange ways — and on the heights of Puyé they have for ages been proof of the magic in those mountains.

Therefore is it a place for prayer.

Startled by the strange earth breathings, the girl crept within the portal for her waiting — and the dusk was too deep for sight across the rolling land of ancient field, and piñon wood far below.

Had she kept the watch she might have seen more than one figure approach the heights from different ways — only a glimpse could be had, but through the dusk of piñon groves certainly two figures moved together, a man and a woman, and even before them one man stole alone from the south, and halted often as if to plan the better way of approach.

The man and woman skirted the foot of the mesa, and crept upward on the side to the north.

“It is the hard way to climb you have come,” said the man, and the strange heavy air caused them to stop for breath, and as she reached to cling to the hand of the man, he drew back with a gasp of terror. As their hands touched, a little electric shock ran through each, — it was plain they had reached the domain where the witch of evil powers held sway.

“It is not I whom you need fear,” said Yahn Tsyn-deh, — “it is the witch maid of Tahn-té, and we have come to see the killing.”

“And if — if Gonzalvo grows weak on the trail — or if his men take fear from this evil magic of the mesa of Puyé?”

“No other men come with him — we talked — we two! Alone he will do it: — for me!” she said

proudly. "He knows the strong bow, with it he will send the arrow first to the man,— that will be when they stand clear in the moonlight. Then to the witch:— that all people may see they were near to each other. The arrows are good and the bow is good. I saw that it was so;— also I saw that no man of our people can use it better than can Gonzalvo. By the river I watched him. He needs no fire sticks to find the heart of an enemy — alone he can do it with an arrow."

Ka-yemo looked at her sullenly,— she was giving much of praise to the man she would have him destroy!

"How are you sure that he does not bring the thunder and lightning stick also?" he demanded,— "and how are you sure that it is not used for me?"

"Oh — fool you! — who make fears out of shadows — yet are so big to fight!" she breathed softly. "Why is it that the Navahu or the other wild people do not make you fear — yet the Castilians —"

"They are truly men of iron. As a boy I saw the things they could do," he answered.— "Not as men do I fear them, but it is their strong god who tames their beasts."

"Your arrows are good," said Yahn Tsyn-deh with conviction,— "when you see him dead as other men die, you will know that our own gods are also strong."

The dark had fallen heavily, and only the Ancient Star gleamed threatening as it waited for the moon. The smaller stars were not seen and the shadows were very dense.

Because of this a strange thing came to them as they reached the summit. Strong as was the heart of Yahn the Apache, she was struck by terror, and

Ka-yemo knew that the great god of the men of iron had sent a threat for his eyes to see.

For, still and erect against a dark wall of the Lost Others, stood a man outlined in fire. In Castilian war dress he stood, and little flickering lines of fire ran along helmet and breastplate and lance. No face could they see of the horror, which added to, rather than lessened the terror of Ka-yemo. A living face he could meet and fight — but this burning ghost of a man not yet dead —!

He turned and stumbled downward blindly, and Yahn Tsyn-deh clung to him and gripped his hand cruelly for silence, and when they sank at last beside a great boulder, her arms were around him, as though that clasp kept the solid world from crumbling beneath her feet.

“No — no — no!” muttered Ka-yemo as though she had actually uttered words of persuasion,—“it is what their padre said long ago. Their strong god has an army of saints, and of angels,—they stand guard;—all who go against them are swept into the flames of their Underworld! It is what the Padre Luis said—and now it has been seen by my eyes! Their altars are the stronger altars,—we will go there—we will both go;—the fire of their hell will not reach us at their altar—the medicine prayers of their padre are strong prayers—we will go to him—”

The old fear of his boyhood had enveloped him as the unchained electric force had enveloped the heights. Yahn Tsyn-deh put up her hand to her throat;—she felt herself strangle for breath as she listened.

“It was some trick!” she insisted—though she also had trembled with awe—Listen to me!—they have many tricks—these white men! Because of

a trick will you go to their altars, and be shamed in your clan? Their priest is the head of all things — will you follow the steps of another when you can wear the feathers of a leader? Will you be laughed at by the tribe? Hear — oh hear! — and let your heart listen! Never again will the gods send you this chance to be great — this is your day and your night!”

“Their devils keep guard — the flames of their hell no man can fight!”

“Ka-yemo! — I am holding you close — I give myself to you! — one arrow only must you send when the witch maid is killed, and Tahn-té is killed, — one arrow, and forever you are the highest, and I am your slave to give you love! Ka-yemo!”

The light of the moon was sending a glow above Na-im-be mountains. The moon itself was not yet seen, but enough light was on the mesa for the pleading girl to see the face of the man she adored.

The face was averted and turned from her. In terror he bent the arrow shafts across his knee, and flung the bow far down into the shadows.

“*Ka-yemo!*” — she moaned as the last vestige of her idol was destroyed by his own hand; — “do you give me then to the Castilian? Must *I* pay the debt?”

“Against the gods of their hell I will not send arrows,” he muttered — “He may not claim you — the sign sent to me here is a strong sign — a god of fire is a strong god — and I am only a man! It may be that if we go to their padre — and if we confess —”

She could see that he was blindly groping in his mind for some chance — some little chance, to be

forgiven — to be forgiven by the Castilians whose feet would be on his neck — and on hers!

It was his day and his night, and he had thrown it away! Never again could the day dawn in joy for those two.

She drew him to her as the light grew, and looked in the face she had loved from babyhood. It was a long look, and a strange one. She was thinking of the archer above them who waited to send death to a man and a maid!

“What is it?” he asked as her fingers slipped from his shoulder along his arm and clasped his hand with the closeness, the firmness of settled resolve.

“It is that you have chosen,” she said quietly. “It is the right of the man to choose; — and it will be well. It is the right of the woman to follow: and before the moon comes again from the blanket of the east we will know — and the gods will know, that the choice is a good choice!”

She held his hand and led him upwards; — steadily, yet without haste. The edge of the moon showed red, and the moon was to be clear of the mountains when Tahn-té came to the portal of the star — thus had his mother told the girl while Yahn listened like a coiled snake close to the well.

To Ka-yemo, Yahn seemed again the adoring creature of love. She held him close, and whispered endearing things. Never had Yahn, the Apache tigress, let him see how completely her love could make her gentle and make him master. The sweetness of it, and the absolute relief when the arrows were destroyed — gave him a sense of security; — It would be easy to confess to the padre; — the Castilians would be glad of converts — and Juan Gon-



zalvo — someway they could make words to Juan Gonzalvo — and padre would help — and —

Holding closely his hand she led him up the ancient stairway, and the little doorways of the cliff dwellings showed black, for the moon had slipped above the far hills and shone, a dulled ball of fire through the sultry haze. Enough light it threw on the white cliffs to show any moving creature, and Ka-yemo glanced fearfully towards the portal of the star, for surely a movement was there!

But Yahn Tsyn-deh at the head of the stairway looked straight ahead where a man with a strong bow held himself close in the shadow of a great rock. When the twang of the bow string sounded, she loosened not her hand from that of Ka-yemo as he fell, but with her other hand she pulled aside the robe from her breast — also the necklace of the white metal, that not anything turn aside the point of the arrow which was to follow.

And when it came she fell to her knees, and then over the huddled body of the man she had loved and led to death.

She loosened not her hand, and only once she spoke.

“It is a good choice,” she whispered, but he had led the way into the Twilight Land — and she followed as she had said was the right of a woman.

And the clan of Ka-yemo could chant songs of bravery all their days and not know that Yahn the Apache had saved the pride of her father's people, and had hidden the weakness of Ka-yemo on the heights of Puyé!