

## ALLAN'S WIFE

### CHAPTER I

#### EARLY DAYS

It may be remembered that in the last pages of his diary, written just before his death, Allan Quatermain makes allusion to his long dead wife, stating that he has written of her fully elsewhere.

When his death was known, his papers were handed to myself as his literary executor. Among them I found two manuscripts, of which the following is one. The other is simply a record of events wherein Mr. Quatermain was not personally concerned--a Zulu novel, the story of which was told to him by the hero many years after the tragedy had occurred. But with this we have nothing to do at present.

I have often thought (Mr. Quatermain's manuscript begins) that I would set down on paper the events connected with my marriage, and the loss of my most dear wife. Many years have now passed since that event, and to some extent time has softened the old grief, though Heaven knows it is still keen enough. On two or three occasions I have even begun the record. Once I gave it up because the writing of it depressed me beyond

bearing, once because I was suddenly called away upon a journey, and the third time because a Kaffir boy found my manuscript convenient for lighting the kitchen fire.

But now that I am at leisure here in England, I will make a fourth attempt. If I succeed, the story may serve to interest some one in after years when I am dead and gone; before that I should not wish it to be published. It is a wild tale enough, and suggests some curious reflections.

I am the son of a missionary. My father was originally curate in charge of a small parish in Oxfordshire. He had already been some ten years married to my dear mother when he went there, and he had four children, of whom I was the youngest. I remember faintly the place where we lived. It was an ancient long grey house, facing the road. There was a very large tree of some sort in the garden. It was hollow, and we children used to play about inside of it, and knock knots of wood from the rough bark. We all slept in a kind of attic, and my mother always came and kissed us when we were in bed. I used to wake up and see her bending over me, a candle in her hand. There was a curious kind of pole projecting from the wall over my bed. Once I was dreadfully frightened because my eldest brother made me hang to it by my hands. That is all I remember about our old home. It has been pulled down long ago, or I would journey there to see it.

A little further down the road was a large house with big iron gates to

it, and on the top of the gate pillars sat two stone lions, which were so hideous that I was afraid of them. Perhaps this sentiment was prophetic. One could see the house by peeping through the bars of the gates. It was a gloomy-looking place, with a tall yew hedge round it; but in the summer-time some flowers grew about the sun-dial in the grass plat. This house was called the Hall, and Squire Carson lived there. One Christmas--it must have been the Christmas before my father emigrated, or I should not remember it--we children went to a Christmas-tree festivity at the Hall. There was a great party there, and footmen wearing red waistcoats stood at the door. In the dining-room, which was panelled with black oak, was the Christmas-tree. Squire Carson stood in front of it. He was a tall, dark man, very quiet in his manners, and he wore a bunch of seals on his waistcoat. We used to think him old, but as a matter of fact he was then not more than forty. He had been, as I afterwards learned, a great traveller in his youth, and some six or seven years before this date he married a lady who was half a Spaniard--a papist, my father called her. I can remember her well. She was small and very pretty, with a rounded figure, large black eyes, and glittering teeth. She spoke English with a curious accent. I suppose that I must have been a funny child to look at, and I know that my hair stood up on my head then as it does now, for I still have a sketch of myself that my mother made of me, in which this peculiarity is strongly marked. On this occasion of the Christmas-tree I remember that Mrs. Carson turned to a tall, foreign-looking gentleman who stood beside her, and, tapping him affectionately on the shoulder with her gold eye-glasses, said--

"Look, cousin--look at that droll little boy with the big brown eyes; his hair is like a--what you call him?--scrubbing-brush. Oh, what a droll little boy!"

The tall gentleman pulled at his moustache, and, taking Mrs. Carson's hand in his, began to smooth my hair down with it till I heard her whisper--

"Leave go my hand, cousin. Thomas is looking like--like the thunderstorm."

Thomas was the name of Mr. Carson, her husband.

After that I hid myself as well as I could behind a chair, for I was shy, and watched little Stella Carson, who was the squire's only child, giving the children presents off the tree. She was dressed as Father Christmas, with some soft white stuff round her lovely little face, and she had large dark eyes, which I thought more beautiful than anything I had ever seen. At last it came to my turn to receive a present--oddly enough, considered in the light of future events, it was a large monkey. Stella reached it down from one of the lower boughs of the tree and handed it to me, saying--

"Dat is my Christmas present to you, little Allan Quatermain."

As she did so her sleeve, which was covered with cotton wool, spangled over with something that shone, touched one of the tapers and caught fire--how I do not know--and the flame ran up her arm towards her throat. She stood quite still. I suppose that she was paralysed with fear; and the ladies who were near screamed very loud, but did nothing. Then some impulse seized me--perhaps instinct would be a better word to use, considering my age. I threw myself upon the child, and, beating at the fire with my hands, mercifully succeeded in extinguishing it before it really got hold. My wrists were so badly scorched that they had to be wrapped up in wool for a long time afterwards, but with the exception of a single burn upon her throat, little Stella Carson was not much hurt.

This is all that I remember about the Christmas-tree at the Hall.

What happened afterwards is lost to me, but to this day in my sleep I sometimes see little Stella's sweet face and the stare of terror in her dark eyes as the fire ran up her arm. This, however, is not wonderful, for I had, humanly speaking, saved the life of her who was destined to be my wife.

The next event which I can recall clearly is that my mother and three brothers all fell ill of fever, owing, as I afterwards learned, to the poisoning of our well by some evil-minded person, who threw a dead sheep into it.

It must have been while they were ill that Squire Carson came one day to the vicarage. The weather was still cold, for there was a fire in

the study, and I sat before the fire writing letters on a piece of paper with a pencil, while my father walked up and down the room talking to himself. Afterwards I knew that he was praying for the lives of his wife and children. Presently a servant came to the door and said that some one wanted to see him.

"It is the squire, sir," said the maid, "and he says he particularly wishes to see you."

"Very well," answered my father, wearily, and presently Squire Carson came in. His face was white and haggard, and his eyes shone so fiercely that I was afraid of him.

"Forgive me for intruding on you at such a time, Quatermain," he said, in a hoarse voice, "but to-morrow I leave this place for ever, and I wish to speak to you before I go--indeed, I must speak to you."

"Shall I send Allan away?" said my father, pointing to me.

"No; let him bide. He will not understand." Nor, indeed, did I at the time, but I remembered every word, and in after years their meaning grew on me.

"First tell me," he went on, "how are they?" and he pointed upwards with his thumb.

"My wife and two of the boys are beyond hope," my father answered, with a groan. "I do not know how it will go with the third. The Lord's will be done!"

"The Lord's will be done," the squire echoed, solemnly. "And now, Quatermain, listen--my wife's gone."

"Gone!" my father answered. "Who with?"

"With that foreign cousin of hers. It seems from a letter she left me that she always cared for him, not for me. She married me because she thought me a rich English milord. Now she has run through my property, or most of it, and gone. I don't know where. Luckily, she did not care to encumber her new career with the child; Stella is left to me."

"That is what comes of marrying a papist, Carson," said my father. That was his fault; he was as good and charitable a man as ever lived, but he was bigoted. "What are you going to do--follow her?"

He laughed bitterly in answer.

"Follow her!" he said; "why should I follow her? If I met her I might kill her or him, or both of them, because of the disgrace they have brought upon my child's name. No, I never want to look upon her face again. I trusted her, I tell you, and she has betrayed me. Let her go and find her fate. But I am going too. I am weary of my life."

"Surely, Carson, surely," said my father, "you do not mean----"

"No, no; not that. Death comes soon enough. But I will leave this civilized world which is a lie. We will go right away into the wilds, I and my child, and hide our shame. Where? I don't know where. Anywhere, so long as there are no white faces, no smooth educated tongues----"

"You are mad, Carson," my father answered. "How will you live? How can you educate Stella? Be a man and wear it down."

"I will be a man, and I will wear it down, but not here, Quatermain. Education! Was not she--that woman who was my wife--was not she highly educated?--the cleverest woman in the country forsooth. Too clever for me, Quatermain--too clever by half! No, no, Stella shall be brought up in a different school; if it be possible, she shall forget her very name. Good-bye, old friend, good-bye for ever. Do not try to find me out, henceforth I shall be like one dead to you, to you and all I knew," and he was gone.

"Mad," said my father, with a heavy sigh. "His trouble has turned his brain. But he will think better of it."

At that moment the nurse came hurrying in and whispered something in his ear. My father's face turned deadly pale. He clutched at the table to support himself, then staggered from the room. My mother was dying!



It was some days afterwards, I do not know exactly how long, that my father took me by the hand and led me upstairs into the big room which had been my mother's bedroom. There she lay, dead in her coffin, with flowers in her hand. Along the wall of the room were arranged three little white beds, and on each of the beds lay one of my brothers. They all looked as though they were asleep, and they all had flowers in their hands. My father told me to kiss them, because I should not see them any more, and I did so, though I was very frightened. I did not know why. Then he took me in his arms and kissed me.

"The Lord hath given," he said, "and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

I cried very much, and he took me downstairs, and after that I have only a confused memory of men dressed in black carrying heavy burdens towards the grey churchyard!

Next comes a vision of a great ship and wide tossing waters. My father could no longer bear to live in England after the loss that had fallen on him, and made up his mind to emigrate to South Africa. We must have been poor at the time--indeed, I believe that a large portion of our income went from my father on my mother's death. At any rate we travelled with the steerage passengers, and the intense discomfort of the journey with the rough ways of our fellow emigrants still remain upon my mind. At last it came to an end, and we reached Africa, which I

was not to leave again for many, many years.

In those days civilization had not made any great progress in Southern Africa. My father went up the country and became a missionary among the Kaffirs, near to where the town of Cradock now stands, and here I grew to manhood. There were a few Boer farmers in the neighbourhood, and gradually a little settlement of whites gathered round our mission station--a drunken Scotch blacksmith and wheelwright was about the most interesting character, who, when he was sober, could quote the Scottish poet Burns and the Ingoldsby Legends, then recently published, literally by the page. It was from that I contracted a fondness for the latter amusing writings, which has never left me. Burns I never cared for so much, probably because of the Scottish dialect which repelled me. What little education I got was from my father, but I never had much leaning towards books, nor he much time to teach them to me. On the other hand, I was always a keen observer of the ways of men and nature. By the time that I was twenty I could speak Dutch and three or four Kaffir dialects perfectly, and I doubt if there was anybody in South Africa who understood native ways of thought and action more completely than I did. Also I was really a very good shot and horseman, and I think--as, indeed, my subsequent career proves to have been the case--a great deal tougher than the majority of men. Though I was then, as now, light and small, nothing seemed to tire me. I could bear any amount of exposure and privation, and I never met the native who was my master in feats of endurance. Of course, all that is different now, I am speaking of my early manhood.

It may be wondered that I did not run absolutely wild in such surroundings, but I was held back from this by my father's society. He was one of the gentlest and most refined men that I ever met; even the most savage Kaffir loved him, and his influence was a very good one for me. He used to call himself one of the world's failures. Would that there were more such failures. Every morning when his work was done he would take his prayer-book and, sitting on the little stoep or verandah of our station, would read the evening psalms to himself. Sometimes there was not light enough for this, but it made no difference, he knew them all by heart. When he had finished he would look out across the cultivated lands where the mission Kaffirs had their huts.

But I knew it was not these he saw, but rather the grey English church, and the graves ranged side by side before the yew near the wicket gate.

It was there on the stoep that he died. He had not been well, and one evening I was talking to him, and his mind went back to Oxfordshire and my mother. He spoke of her a good deal, saying that she had never been out of his mind for a single day during all these years, and that he rejoiced to think he was drawing near that land wither she had gone. Then he asked me if I remembered the night when Squire Carson came into the study at the vicarage, and told him that his wife had run away, and that he was going to change his name and bury himself in some remote land.

I answered that I remembered it perfectly.

"I wonder where he went to," said my father, "and if he and his daughter Stella are still alive. Well, well! I shall never meet them again. But life is a strange thing, Allan, and you may. If you ever do, give them my kind love."

After that I left him. We had been suffering more than usual from the depredations of the Kaffir thieves, who stole our sheep at night, and, as I had done before, and not without success, I determined to watch the kraal and see if I could catch them. Indeed, it was from this habit of mine of watching at night that I first got my native name of Macumazahn, which may be roughly translated as "he who sleeps with one eye open." So I took my rifle and rose to go. But he called me to him and kissed me on the forehead, saying, "God bless you, Allan! I hope that you will think of your old father sometimes, and that you will lead a good and happy life."

I remember that I did not much like his tone at the time, but set it down to an attack of low spirits, to which he grew very subject as the years went on. I went down to the kraal and watched till within an hour of sunrise; then, as no thieves appeared, returned to the station. As I came near I was astonished to see a figure sitting in my father's chair. At first I thought it must be a drunken Kaffir, then that my father had fallen asleep there.

And so he had,--for he was dead!