

## CHAPTER IV

### ALAN AND BARBARA

There was no bridge or billiards at the Court that night, where ordinarily the play ran high enough. After Mr. Haswell had been carried to his room, some of the guests, among them Sir Robert Aylward, went to bed, remarking that they could do no good by sitting up, while others, more concerned, waited to hear the verdict of the doctor, who must drive from six miles away. He came, and half an hour later Barbara entered the billiard room and told Alan, who was sitting there smoking, that her uncle had recovered from his faint, and that the doctor, who was to stay all night, said that he was in no danger, only suffering from a heart attack brought on apparently by over-work or excitement.

When Alan woke next morning the first thing that he heard through his open window was the sound of the doctor's departing dogcart. Then Jeekie appeared and told him that Mr. Haswell was all right again, but that all night he had shaken "like one jelly." Alan asked what had been the matter with him, but Jeekie only shrugged his shoulders and said that he did not know--"perhaps Yellow God touch him up."

At breakfast, as in her note she had said she would, Barbara appeared wearing a short skirt. Sir Robert, who was there, also looked extremely pale even for him and with black rims round his eyes, asked her if she were going to golf, to which she answered that she would think it over.

It was a somewhat melancholy meal, and as though by common consent no mention was made of Jeekie's tale of the Yellow God, and beyond the usual polite inquiries, very little of their host's seizure.

As Barbara went out she whispered to Alan, who opened the door for her, "Meet me at half-past ten in the kitchen garden."

Accordingly, having changed his clothes surreptitiously, Alan, avoiding the others, made his way by a circuitous route to this kitchen garden, which after the fashion of modern places was hidden behind a belt of trees nearly a quarter of a mile from the house. Here he wandered about till presently he heard Barbara's pleasant voice behind him saying:

"Don't dawdle so, we shall be late for church."

So they started, somewhat furtively like runaway children. As they went Alan asked how her uncle was.

"All right now," she answered, "but he has had a bad shake. It was that Yellow God story which did it. I know, for I was there when he was coming to, with Sir Robert. He kept talking about it in a confused manner, saying that it was swimming to him across the floor, till at last Sir Robert bent over him and told him to be quiet quite sternly. Do you know, Alan, I believe that your pet fetish has been manifesting itself in some unpleasant fashion up there in the office?"

"Indeed. If so, it must be since I left, for I never heard of anything of the sort, nor are Aylward and your uncle likely people to see ghosts. In fact Sir Robert wished to give me about £17,000 for the thing only the day before yesterday, which doesn't look as though it had been frightening him."

"Well, he won't repeat the offer, Alan, for I heard him promise my uncle only this morning that it should be sent back to Yarleys at once. But why did he want to buy it for such a lot of money? Tell me quickly, Alan, I am dying to hear the whole story."

So he began and told her, omitting nothing, while she listened eagerly to every word, hardly interrupting him at all. As he finished his tale they reached the door of the quaint old village church just as the clock was striking eleven.

"Come in, Alan," she said gently, "and thank Heaven for all its mercies, for you should be a grateful man to-day."

Then without giving him time to answer she entered the church and they took their places in the great square pew that for generations had been occupied by the owners of the ancient house which Mr. Haswell pulled down when he built The Court. There were their monuments upon the wall and their gravestones in the chancel floor. But now no one except Barbara ever sat in their pew; even the benches set aside for the servants were empty, for those who frequented The Court were not

church-goers and "like master, like man." Indeed the gentle-faced old clergyman looked quite pleased and surprised when he saw two inhabitants of that palatial residence amongst his congregation, although it is true that Barbara was his friend and helper.

The simple service went on; the first lesson was read. It cried woe upon them that joined house to house and field to field, that draw iniquity with cords of vanity and sin as it were with a cart rope; that call evil good and good evil, that put darkness for light and light for darkness, that justify the wicked for reward; that feast full but regard not the work of the Lord, neither consider the operation of His hand, for of such it prophesied that their houses great and fair should be without inhabitant and desolate.

It was very well read, and Alan, listening, thought that the denunciations of the old seer of thousands of years ago were not inappropriate to the dwellers in some houses great and fair of his own day, who, whatever they did or left undone, regarded not the work of the Lord, neither considered the operation of His hand. Perhaps Barbara thought so too; at any rate a rather sad little smile appeared once or twice upon her sweet, firm face as the immortal poem echoed down the aisle.

The peace that passeth understanding was invoked upon their heads, and rising with the rest of the scanty congregation they went away.

"Shall we walk home by the woods, Alan?" asked Barbara. "It is three miles round, but we don't lunch till two."

He nodded, and presently they were alone in those woods, the beautiful woods through which the breath of spring was breathing, treading upon carpets of bluebells, violet and primrose; quite alone, unaccompanied save by the wild things that stole across their path, undisturbed save by the sound of the singing birds and of the wind among the trees.

"What did you mean, Barbara, when you said that I should be a grateful man to-day?" asked Alan presently.

Barbara looked him in the eyes in that open, virginal fashion of hers and answered in the words of the lesson, "Woe unto them that draw iniquity with the cords of vanity and sin as it were with a cart-rope, that lay house to house," and through an opening in the woods she pointed to the roof of The Court standing on one hill, and to the roof of Old Hall standing upon another--"and field to field," and with a sweep of her hand she indicated all the country round, "for many houses great and fair that have music in their feasts shall be left desolate." Then turning she said:

"Do you understand now, Alan?"

"I think so," he answered. "You mean that I have been in bad company."

"Very bad, Alan. One of them is my own uncle, but the truth remains the truth. Alan, they are no better than thieves; all this wealth is stolen, and I thank God that you have found it out in time before you became one of them in heart as well as in name."

"If you refer to the Sahara Syndicate," he said, "the idea is sound enough; indeed, I am responsible for it. The thing can be done, great benefits would result, too long to go into."

"Yes, yes, Alan, but you know that they never mean to do it, they only mean to get the millions from the public. I have lived with my uncle for ten years, ever since my poor father died, and I know the backstairs of the business. There have been half a dozen schemes like this, and although they have had their bad times, very bad times, he and Sir Robert have grown richer and richer. But what has happened to those who have invested in them? Oh! let us drop the subject, it is unpleasant. For myself it doesn't matter, because although it isn't under my control, I have money of my own. You know we are a plebeian lot on the male side, my grandfather was a draper in a large way of business, my father was a coal-merchant who made a great fortune. His brother, my uncle, in whom my father always believed implicitly, took to what is called Finance, and when my father died he left me, his only child, in his guardianship. Until I am five and twenty I cannot even marry or touch a halfpenny without his consent; in fact if I should marry against his will the most of my money goes to him."

"I expect that he has got it already," said Alan.

"No, I think not. I found out that, although it is not mine, it is not his. He can't draw it without my signature, and I steadily refuse to sign anything. Again and again they have brought me documents, and I have always said that I would consider them at five and twenty, when I came of age under my father's will. I went on the sly to a lawyer in Kingswell and paid him a guinea for his advice, and he put me up to that. 'Sign nothing,' he said, and I have signed nothing, so, except by forgery nothing can have gone. Still for all that it may have gone. For anything I know I am not worth more than the clothes I stand in, although my father was a very rich man."

"If so, we are about in the same boat, Barbara," Alan answered with a laugh, "for my present possessions are Yarleys, which brings in about £100 a year less than the interest on its mortgages and cost of upkeep, and the £1700 that Aylward paid me back on Friday for my shares. If I had stuck to them I understand that in a week or two I should have been worth £100,000, and now you see, here I am, over thirty years of age without a profession, invalided out of the army and having failed in finance, a mere bit of driftwood without hope and without a trade."

Barbara's brown eyes grew soft with sympathy, or was it tears?

"You are a curious creature, Alan," she said. "Why didn't you take the £17,000 for that fetish of yours? It would have been a fair deal and

have set you on your legs."

"I don't know," he answered dejectedly. "It went against the grain, so what is the use of talking about it? I think my old uncle Austin told me it wasn't to be parted with--no, perhaps it was Jeekie. Bother the Yellow God! it is always cropping up."

"Yes," replied Barbara, "the Yellow God is always cropping up, especially in this neighbourhood."

They walked on a while in silence, till suddenly Barbara sat down upon a bole of felled oak and began to cry.

"What is the matter with you?" asked Alan.

"I don't know," she answered. "Everything goes wrong. I live in a kind of gilded hell. I don't like my uncle and I loath the men he brings about the place. I have no friends, I scarcely know a woman intimately, I have troubles I can't tell you and--I am wretched. You are the only creature I have left to talk to, and I suppose that after this row you must go away too to make your living."

Alan looked at her there weeping on the log and his heart swelled within him, for he had loved this girl for years.

"Barbara," he gasped, "please don't cry, it upsets me. You know you are



a great heiress----"

"That remains to be proved," she answered. "But anyway, what has it to do with the case?"

"It has everything to do with it, at least so far as I am concerned. If it hadn't been for that I should have asked you to marry me a long while ago, because I love you, as I would now, but of course it is impossible."

Barbara ceased her weeping, wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, and looked up at him.

"Alan," she said, "I think that you are the biggest fool I ever knew--not but that a fool is rather refreshing when one lives among knaves."

"I know I am a fool," he answered. "If I wasn't I should not have mentioned my misfortune to you, but sometimes things are too much for one. Forget it and forgive me."

"Oh! yes," she said; "I forgive you; a woman can generally forgive a man for being fond of her. Whatever she may be, she is ready to take a lenient view of his human weakness. But as to forgetting, that is a different matter. I don't exactly see why I should be so anxious to forget, who haven't many people to care about me," and she looked at him

in quite a new fashion, one indeed which gave him something of a shock, for he had not thought the nymph-like Barbara capable of such a look as that. She and any sort of passion had always seemed so far apart.

Now after all Alan was very much a man, if a modest one, with all a man's instincts, and therefore there are appearances of the female face which even such as he could not entirely misinterpret.

"You--don't--mean," he said doubtfully, "you don't really mean----" and he stood hesitating before her.

"If you would put your question a little more clearly, Alan, I might be able to give you an answer," she replied, that quaint little smile of hers creeping to the corners of her mouth like sunshine through a mist of rain.

"You don't really mean," he went on, "that you care anything about me, like, like I have cared for you for years?"

"Oh! Alan," she said, laughing outright, "why in the name of goodness shouldn't I care about you? I didn't say that I do, mind, but why shouldn't I? What is the gulf between us?"

"The old one," he answered, "that between Dives and Lazarus--that between the rich and the poor."

"Alan," said Barbara, looking down, "I don't know what has come over me, but for some unexplained and inexplicable reason I am inclined to give Lazarus a lead--across that gulf, the first one, I mean, not the second!"

Like the glance which preceded it, this was a saying that even Alan could not misunderstand. He sat himself on the log beside her, while she, still looking down, watched him out of the corners of her eyes. He went red, he went white, his heart beat very violently. Then he stretched out his big brown hand and took her small white one, and as this familiarity produced no remonstrance, let it fall, and passing his arm about her, drew her to him and embraced her, not once, but often, with such vigour that a squirrel which had been watching these proceedings from a neighbouring tree, bolted round it scandalized and was seen no more.

"I love you, I love you," he said huskily.

"So I gather," she answered in a feeble voice.

"Do you care for me?" he asked.

"It would seem that I must, Alan, otherwise I should scarcely--oh! you foolish Alan," and heedless of her Sunday hat, which never recovered from this encounter, but was kept as a holy relic, she let her head fall upon his shoulder and began to cry again, this time for very happiness.

He kissed her tears away, then as he could think of nothing else to say, asked her if she would marry him.

"It is the general sequel to this kind of thing, I believe," she answered; "or at any rate it ought to be. But if you want a direct answer--yes, I will, if my uncle will let me, which he won't, as you have quarrelled with him, or at any rate two years hence, when I am five and twenty and my own mistress; that is if we have anything to marry on, for one must eat. At present our worldly possessions seem to consist chiefly of a large store of mutual affection, a good stock of clothes and one Yellow God, which after what happened last night, I do not think you will get another chance of turning into cash."

"I must make money somehow," he said.

"Yes, Alan, but I am afraid it is not easy to do--honestly. Nobody wants people without capital whose only stock in trade is a brief but distinguished military career, and a large experience of African fever."

Alan groaned at this veracious but discouraging remark, and she went on quickly:

"I mean to spend another guinea upon my friend the lawyer at Kingswell. Perhaps he can raise the wind, by a post-obit, or something," she added vaguely, "I mean a post-uncle-obit."

"If he does, Barbara, I can't live on your money alone, it isn't right."

"Oh! don't you trouble about that, Alan. If once I can get hold of those dim thousands you will soon be able to make more, for unto him that hath shall be given. But at present they are very dim, and for all I know may be represented by stock in deceased companies. In short, the financial position is extraordinarily depressed, as they say in the Market Intelligence in The Times. But that's no reason why we should be depressed also."

"No, Barbara, for at any rate we have got each other."

"Yes," she answered, springing up, "we have got each other, dear, until Death do us part, and somehow I don't think he'll do that yet awhile; it comes into my heart that he won't do that, Alan, that you and I are going to live out our days. So what does the rest matter? In two years I shall be a free woman. In fact, if the worst comes to the worst, I'll defy them all," and she set her little mouth like a rock, "and marry you straight away, as being over age, I can do, even if it costs me every halfpenny that I've got."

"No, no," he said, "it would be wrong, wrong to yourself and wrong to your descendants."

"Very well, Alan, then, we will wait, or perhaps luck will come our

way--why shouldn't it? At any rate for my part I never felt so happy in my life; for, dear Alan, we have found what we were born to find, found it once and for always, and the rest is mere etceteras. What would be the use of all the gold of the Asiki people that Jeekie was talking about last night, to either of us, if we had not each other? We can get on without the wealth, but we couldn't get on apart, or at least I couldn't and I don't mind saying so."

"No, my darling, no," he answered, turning white at the very thought, "we couldn't get on apart--now. In fact I don't know how I have done so so long already, except that I was always hoping that a time would come when we shouldn't be apart. That is why I went into that infernal business, to make enough money to be able to ask you to marry me. And now I have gone out of the business and asked you just when I shouldn't."

"Yes, so you see you might as well have done it a year or two ago when perhaps things would have been simpler. Well, it is a fine example of the vanity of human plans, and, Alan, we must be going home to lunch. If we don't, Sir Robert will be organizing a search party to look for us; in fact, I shouldn't wonder if he is doing that already, in the wrong direction."

The mention of Sir Robert Aylward's name fell on them both like a blast of cold wind in summer, and for a while they walked in silence.

"You are afraid of that man, Barbara," said Alan presently, guessing her thoughts.

"A little," she answered, "so far as I can be afraid of anything any more. And you?"

"A little also. I think that he will give us trouble. He can be very malevolent and resourceful."

"Resourceful, Alan; well, so can I. I'll back my wits against his any day. He shan't separate us by anything short of murder, which he won't go in for. Men like that don't like to break the law; they have too much to lose. But no doubt he will make things uncomfortable for you, if he can, for several reasons."

Again they walked on lost in reflections, when Barbara suddenly saw her lover's face brighten.

"What is it, Alan?" she asked.

"Something that is rare enough with me, Barbara--an idea. You remember speaking about that Asiki gold just now. Well, why shouldn't I go and get it?"

She stared at him.

"It sounds a little speculative," she said; "something like one of my uncle's companies."

"Not half so speculative as you think. I have no doubt it is there and Jeekie knows the way. Also I seem to remember that there is a map and an account of the whole thing in Uncle Austin's diaries, though to tell you the truth the old fellow wrote such a fearful hand, that I have never taken the trouble to read it. You see," he went on with enthusiasm, "it is the kind of business that I can do. I am thoroughly salted to fever, I know the West Coast, where I spent three years on that Boundary Commission, I have studied the natives and can talk several of their dialects. Of course there would be a risk, but there are risks in everything, and like you I am not afraid about that, for I believe that we have got our lives before us."

"Read up those diaries, Alan, and we will talk the thing over again. I'll pump Jeekie, who will tell me anything by coaxing, and try to get at the truth. Meanwhile what are you going to do about my uncle?"

"Speak to him, of course, and have the row over."

"Yes," she answered, "that is the best and the most honest. Of course he can turn you out, but he can't prevent my seeing you. If he does, go home to Yarleys and I'll come over and call. Here we are, let us go in by the back door," and she pointed to her crushed hat, and laughed.