

CHAPTER VI

MR. HASWELL LOSES HIS TEMPER

Alan and Barbara sat in Mr. Champers-Haswell's private sitting-room with the awful decorations, and before them by the fire Mr. Champers-Haswell reclined upon his couch. Alan in a few, brief, soldier-like words had just informed him of his engagement to Barbara. During the recital of this interesting fact Barbara said nothing, but Mr. Haswell had whistled several times. Now at length he spoke, in that tone of forced geniality which he generally adopted towards his cousin.

"You are asking for the hand of a considerable heiress, Alan my boy," he said, "but you have neglected to inform me of your own position."

"Where is the use of telling you what you know already, Mr. Haswell? I have left the firm, therefore I have practically nothing."

"You have practically nothing, and yet----Well, in my young days men were more delicate, they did not like being called fortune-hunters, but of course times have changed."

Alan bit his lip and Barbara sat up quite straight in her chair, observing which indications, Mr. Haswell went on hurriedly:

"Now if you had stopped in the firm and earned the very handsome

competence in a small way which would have become due to you this week, instead of throwing us over at the last moment for some quixotic reasons of your own, it might have been a different matter. I do not say it would have been, I say it might have been, and you may remember a proverb about winks and nods and blind horses. So I ask you whether you are inclined to withdraw that resignation of yours and bring up this question again let us say, next Sunday?"

Alan thought a while before he answered. As he understood Mr. Haswell practically was promising to assent to the engagement upon these terms. The temptation was enormously great, the fiercest that he had ever been called upon to face. He looked at Barbara. She had closed her eyes and made absolutely no sign. For some reason of her own she had elected that he should determine this vital point without the slightest assistance from her. And it must be determined at once; procrastination was impossible. For a moment he hesitated. On the one side was Barbara, on the other his conscience. After long doubts he had come to a certain conclusion which he quite understood to be inconvenient to his partners. Should he throw it over now? Should he even try to make a sure and certain bargain as the price of his surrender? Probably he would not suffer if he did. The flotation was underwritten and bound to go through; the scandal would come afterwards, months or years hence, long before which he might get out, as most of the others meant to do. No, he could not. His conscience was too much for him.

"I do not see any use in reconsidering that question, Mr. Haswell," he

said quietly; "we settled it on Friday night."

Barbara reopened her brown eyes and stared amiably at the painted ceiling, and Mr. Haswell whistled.

"Then I am afraid," he said, "that I do not see any use in discussing your kind proposal for my niece's hand. Listen--I will be quite open with you. I have other views for Barbara, and as it happens I have the power to enforce them, or at any rate to prevent their frustration by you. If Barbara marries against my will before she is five and twenty, that is within the next two years, her entire fortune, with the exception of a pittance, goes elsewhere. This I am sure is a fact that will influence you, who have nothing and even if it did not, I presume that you are scarcely so selfish as to wish to beggar her."

"No," answered Alan, "you need not fear that, for it would be wrong. I understand that you absolutely refuse to sanction my suit on the ground of my poverty, which under the circumstances is perhaps not wonderful. Well, the only thing to do is to wait for two years, a long time, but not endless, and meanwhile I can try to better my position."

"Do what you will, Alan," said Mr. Haswell harshly, for now all his faux bonhomme manner had gone, leaving him revealed in his true character of an unscrupulous tradesman with dark ends of his own to serve. "Do what you will, but understand that I forbid all communication between you and my niece, and that the sooner you cease to trespass upon

a hospitality which you have abused, the better I shall be pleased."

"I will go at once," said Alan, rising, "before my temper gets the better of me and I tell you some truths that I might regret, for after all you are Barbara's uncle. But on your part I ask you to understand that I refuse to cut off from my cousin, who is of full age and has promised to be my wife," and he turned to go.

"Stop a minute, Alan," said Barbara, who all this while had sat silent.

"I have something to say which I wish you to hear. You told us just now, uncle, that you have other views for me, by which you meant that you wish me to marry Sir Robert Aylward, whom, as you are probably aware, I refused definitely this afternoon. Now I wish to make it clear at once that no earthly power will induce me to take as a husband a man whom I dislike, and whose wealth, of which you think so much, has in my opinion been dishonestly acquired."

"What are you saying?" broke in her uncle furiously. "He has been my partner for years, you are reflecting upon me."

"I am sorry, uncle, but I withdraw nothing. Even if Alan here were dead, I would not marry that man, and perhaps you will make him understand this," she added with emphasis. "Indeed I had sooner die myself. You told us also that if I marry against your will, you can take away all the property that my father left to me. Uncle, I shall not give you that satisfaction. I shall wait until I am twenty-five and do what I please

with myself and my fortune. Lastly, you said that you forbade us to see each other or to correspond. I answer that I shall both write to and see Alan as often as I like. If you attempt to prevent me from doing so, I shall go to the Court of Chancery, lay all the facts before it, as I have been advised that I can do--not by Alan--please remember, all the facts, and ask for its protection and for a separate maintenance out of my estate until I am twenty-five. I am sure that the Court would grant me this and would declare that considering his distinguished family and record Alan is a perfectly proper person to be my affianced husband. I think that is all I have to say."

"All you have to say!" gasped Mr. Haswell, "all you have to say, you impertinent and ungrateful minx!" Then he fell into a furious fit of rage and in language that need not be repeated, poured a stream of threats and abuse upon Alan and herself. Barbara waited until he ceased from exhaustion.

"Uncle," she said, "you should remember that your heart is weak and you must not overexcite yourself, also when you are calmer, that if you speak to me like that again, I shall go to the Court at once, for I will not be sworn at by you or by any other man. I apologize to you, Alan; I am afraid I have brought you into strange company. Come, my dear, we will go and order your dogcart," and putting her arm affectionately through his, she went with him from the room.

"I wonder who put her up to all this?" gasped Haswell, as the door

closed behind them. "Some infernal lawyer, I'll be bound. Well, she has got the whip hand of me, and I can't face an investigation in Chancery, especially as the only thing against Vernon is that the value of his land has fallen. But I swear that she shall never marry him while I live," he ended in a kind of shout and the domed and painted ceiling echoed back his words--"while I live" after which the room was silent, save for the heavy thumping of his heart.

When Alan reached home that night after his ten-mile drive he sent Jeekie to tell the housekeeper to find him some food. In his mysterious African fashion the negro had already collected much intelligence as to the events of the day, mostly in the servants' hall, and more particularly from the two golf-caddies, sons of one of the gardeners, who it seemed instead of retiring with the clubs, had taken shelter in some tall whins and thence followed the interview between Barbara and Sir Robert with the intensest interest. Reflecting that this was not the time to satisfy his burning curiosity, Jeekie went and in due course returned with some cold mutton and a bottle of claret. Then came his chance, for Alan could scarcely touch the mutton and demanded toast and butter.

"Very inferior chop"--that was his West African word for food--"for a gentleman, Major," he said, shaking his white head sympathetically and pointing to the mutton,--"specially when he has unexpectedly departed

from magnificent eating of The Court. Why did you not wait till after dinner, Major, before retiring?"

Alan laughed at the man's inflated English, and answered in a more nervous and colloquial style:

"Because I was kicked out, Jeekie."

"Ah! I gathered that kicking was in the wind, Major. Sir Robert Aylward, Bart., he also was kicked out, but by smaller toe."

Again Alan laughed and, as it was a relief to talk even to Jeekie, asked him:

"How do you know that?"

"I gathered it out of atmosphere, Major; from Sir Robert's gentleman, from two youths who watch Sir Robert and Miss Barbara talking upon golf green No. 9, from the machine driver of Sir Robert whose eyes he damn in public, and last but not least from his own noble countenance."

"I see that you are observant, Jeekie."

"Observation, Major, it is art of life. I see Miss Barbara's eyes red like morning sky and I deduct. I see you shot out and gloomy like evening cloud, and I deduct. I listen at door of Mr. Haswell's room,

I hear him curse and swear like holy saint in Book, and you and Miss Barbara answer him not like saint, though what you speak I cannot hear, and I deduct. Jeekie deduct this--that you make love to Miss Barbara in proper gentlemanlike, 'nogamous, Christian fashion such as your late Reverend Uncle approve, and Miss Barbara, she make love to you with ten per cent. compound interest, but old gent with whistle, he not approve; he say, 'Where corresponding cash!' He say 'Noble Sir Robert have much cash and interested in identical business. I prefer Sir Robert. Get out, you Cashless.' Often I see this same thing when boy in West Africa, very common wherever sun shine. I note all these matters and I deduct--that Jeekie's way and Jeekie seldom wrong."

Alan laughed for the third time, until the tears ran down his face indeed.

"Jeekie," he said, "you are a great rascal----"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Jeekie, "great rascal. Best thing to be in this world, Major. Honourable Sir Robert, Bart., M.P., and Mr. Champers-Haswell, D.L., J.P., they find that out long ago and sit on top of tree of opulent renown. Jeekie great rascal and therefore have Savings Bank account--go on, Major."

"Well, Jeekie, because if you are a rascal you are kind-hearted and because I believe that you care for me----"

"Oh! Major," broke in Jeekie again, "that most 'utterably true. Honour bright I love you, Major, better than anyone on earth, except my late old woman, now happily dead, gone and forgotten in best oak coffin, £4 10 without fittings but polished, and perhaps your holy uncle, Reverend Mr. Austin, also coffined and departed, who saved me from early extinction in a dark place. Major, I no like graves, I see too much of them, and can't tell what lie on other side. Though everyone say they know, Jeekie not quite sure. May be all light and crowns of glory, may be damp black hole and no way out. But this at least true, that I love you better, yes, better than Miss Barbara, for love of woman very poor, uncertain thing, quick come, quick go. Jeekie find that out--often. Yes, if need be, though death most nasty, if need be I say I die for you, which great unpleasant sacrifice," and Jeekie in the genuine enthusiasm of his warm heart, throwing himself upon his knees after the African fashion, seized his master's hand and kissed it.

"Thanks, Jeekie," said Alan, "very kind of you, I am sure. But we haven't come to that yet, though no one knows what may happen later on. Now sit upon that chair and take a little whisky--not too much--for I am going to ask your advice."

"Major," said Jeekie, "I obey," and seizing the whisky bottle in a casual manner, he poured out half a tumbler full, for Jeekie was fond of whisky. Indeed before now this taste had brought him into conflict with the local magistrates.

"Put back three parts of that," said Alan, and Jeekie did so. "Now," he went on, "listen: this is the case, Miss Barbara and I are----" and he hesitated.

"Oh! I know; like me and Mrs. Jeekie once," said Jeekie, gulping down some of the neat whisky. "Go on, Major."

"And Sir Robert Aylward is----"

"Same thing, Major. Continue."

"And Mr. Haswell has----"

"Those facts all ascertained, Major," said Jeekie, contemplating his glass with a mournful eye. "Now come to the point, Major."

"Well, the point is, Jeekie, that I am what you called just now cashless, and therefore----"

"Therefore," interrupted Jeekie again, "stick fast in honourable intention towards Miss Barbara owing to obstinate opposition of Mr. Haswell, legal uncle with control of property fomented by noble Sir Robert who desire same girl."

"Quite right, Jeekie, but if you would talk a little less and let me talk a little more, we might get on better."

"I henceforth silent, Major," and lifting his empty tumbler Jeekie looked through it as if it were a telescope, a hint that Alan ignored.

"Jeekie, you infernal old fool, I want money."

"Yes, Major, I understand, Major. Forgive me for breaking conspiracy of silence, but if £500 in Savings Bank any use, very much at your service, Major; also £20 more extracted last night from terror of wealthy Jew who fear fetish."

"Jeekie, you old donkey, I don't want your £500; I want a great deal more, £50,000 or £500,000. Tell me how to get it."

"City best place, Major. But you chuck City, too much honest man, great mistake to be honest in this terrestrial sphere. Often notice that in West Africa."

"Perhaps, Jeekie, but I have done with the City. As you would say, for me it is 'wipe out, finish.'"

"Yes, Major, too much pickpocket, too much dirt. Bottom always drop out of bucket shop at last. I understand, end in police court and severe magistrate, or perhaps even 'Gentlemen of Jury'; etcetera."

"Well, Jeekie, then what remains? Now last night when you told us that

amazing yarn of yours, you said something about a mountain full of gold, and houses full of gold, among your people. Jeekie, do you think----" and he paused, looking at him.

Jeekie rolled his black eyes round the room and in a fit of absentmindedness helped himself to some more whisky.

"Do I think, Major, that this useless lucre could be converted into coin of gracious King Edward? Not at all, Major, by no one, Major, by no one whatsoever, except possibly by Major Alan Vernon, D.S.O., and by one, Jeekie, Christian surname Smith."

"Proceed, Jeekie," said Alan, removing the whisky bottle, "proceed and explain."

"Major, thus: The Asiki tribe care nothing about all that gold, it no good to them. Dead people who live long, long ago, no one know when, dig it up and store it there and make the great fetish which they call Bonsa to keep away enemy who want to steal. Also old custom when any one in country round find big nugget, or pretty stone, like ladies wear on bosom, to bring it as offering to Bonsa, so that there now great plenty of all this stuff. But no one use it for anything except to set on walls of house of Asiki, or to make basin, stool, table and pot to cook with. Once Arab come there and I see the priests give him weight in gold for iron hoe, though afterwards they murder him, not for the gold, but lest he go away and tell their secret."

"One might trade with them then, Jeekie?"

He shook his white head doubtfully.

"Yes, perhaps, if you can find anything they want buy and can carry it there. But I think there only one thing they want, and you got that, Major."

"I, Jeekie! What have I got?"

The negro leant forward and tapped his master on the knee, saying in a portentous whisper:

"You got Little Bonsa, which much more holy than anything, even than Big Bonsa her husband, I mean greater, more powerful devil. That Little Bonsa sit in front room Asika's house, and when she want see things, she put it in big basin of gold, but I no tell you what it float in. Also once or twice every year they take out Little Bonsa; Asika wear it on head as mask, and whoever they meet they kill as offering to Little Bonsa, so that spirit come back to world to be priest of Bonsa. I tell you, Major, that Yellow God see many thousand of people die."

"Indeed," said Alan. "A pleasing fetish truly. I should think that the Asiki must be glad it is gone."

"No, not glad, very sorry. No luck for them when Little Bonga go away, but plenty luck for those who got her. That why firm Aylward & Haswell make so much money when you join them and bring her to office. She drop green in eye of public so they no smell rat. That why you so lucky, not die of blackwater fever when you should; get safe out of den of thieves in City with good name; win love of sweet maiden, Miss Barbara. Little Bonga do all those things for you, and by and by do plenty more, as Little Bonga bring my old master, your holy uncle, safe out of that country because all the Asiki run away when they see him wear her on head, for they think she come sacrifice them after she eat up my life."

"I don't wonder that they ran," said Alan, laughing, for the vision of a missionary with Little Bonga on his head caught his fancy. "But come to the point, you old heathen. What do you mean that I should do?"

"Jeekie not heathen now, Major, but plenty other things true in this world, besides Christian religion. I no want you do anything, but I say this--you go back to Asiki wearing Little Bonga on head and dressed like Reverend uncle whom you very like, for he just your age then thirty years ago, and they give you all the gold you want, if you give them back Little Bonga whom they love and worship for ever and ever, for Little Bonga very, very old."

Alan sat up in his chair and stared at Jeekie, while Jeekie nodded his head at him.

"There is something in it," he said slowly, speaking more to himself than to the negro, "and perhaps that is why I would not sell the fetish, for as you say, there are plenty of true things in the world besides those which we believe. But, Jeekie, how should I find the way?"

"No trouble, Major, Little Bonsa find way, want to get back home, very hungry by now, much need sacrifice. Think it good thing kill pig to Little Bonsa--or even lamb. She know you do your best, since human being not to be come at in Christian land, and say 'thank you for life of pig.'"

"Stop that rubbish," said Alan. "I want a guide; if I go, will you come with me?"

At this suggestion the negro looked exceedingly uncomfortable.

"Not like to, not like to at all," he said, rolling his eyes.

"Asiki-land very funny place for native-born. But," he added sadly, "if you go Jeekie must, for I servant of Little Bonsa and if I stay behind, she angry and kill me because I not attend her where she walk. But perhaps if I go and take her to Gold House again, she pleased and let me off. Also I able help you there. Yes, if you and Little Bonsa go, think I go too."

After this announcement Jeekie rose and walked down the room, carrying the cold mutton in his hand. Then he returned, replaced it on the table

and standing in front of Alan, said earnestly:

"Major, I tell you all truth, just this once. Jeekie believe he got go with you to Asiki-land. Jeekie have plenty bad dream lately, Little Bonsa come in middle of the night and sit on his stomach and scratch his face with her gold leg, and say, 'Jeekie, Jeekie, you son of Bonsa, you get up quick and take me back Bonsa Town, for I darned tired of City fog and finished all I come here to do. Now I want jolly good sacrifice and got plenty business attend to there at home, things you not understand just yet. You take me back sharp, or I make you sit up, Jeekie, my boy,'" and he paused.

"Indeed," said Alan; "and did she tell you anything else in her midnight visitations?"

"Yes, Major. She say, 'You take that white master of yours along also, for I want come back Asiki-land on his head, and someone wish see him there, old pal, what he forget but what not forget him. You tell him Little Bonsa got score she wants settle with that party and wish use him to square account. You tell him too that she pay him well for trip; he lose nothing if he play her game 'cause she got no score against him. But if he not go, that another matter, then he look out, for Little Bonsa very nasty customer if she riled, as his late partners find out one day.'"

"Oh! shut up, Jeekie. What's the use of wasting time telling me your

nightmares?"

"Very well, Major, just as you like, Major. But I got other reasons why I willing go. Jeekie want see his ma."

"Your ma? I never heard you had a ma. Besides she must be dead long ago."

"No, Major, 'cause she turn up in dream too, very much alive, swear at me 'cause I bag her blanket. Also she tough old woman, take lot kill her."

"Perhaps you have a pa too," suggested Alan.

"Think not, Major, my ma always say she forget him. What she mean, she not like talk about him, he such a swell. Why Jeekie so strong, so clever and with such beautiful face? No doubt because he is son of very great man. All this true reason why he want to go with you, Major. Still, p'raps poor old Jeekie make mistake, p'raps he dream 'cause he eat too much supper, p'raps his ma dead, after all. If so, p'raps better stay at home--not know."

"No," answered Alan, "not know. What between Little Bonsa and one thing and another my head is swimming--like Little Bonsa in the water."

"Big Bonsa swim in water," interrupted Jeekie. "Little Bonsa swim in

gold tub."

"Well, Big Bonga, or Little Bonga, I don't care which. I'm going to bed and you had better clear away these things and do the same. But, Jeekie, if you say a word of our talk to anyone, I shall be very angry. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Major, I understand. I understand that if I tell secrets of Little Bonga to anyone except you with whom she live in strange land far away from home, Little Bonga come at me like one lion, and cut my throat. No fear Jeekie split on Little Bonga, oh! no fear at all," and still shaking his head solemnly, for the second time he seized the cold mutton and vanished from the room.

"A farrago of superstitious nonsense," thought Alan to himself when he had gone. "But still there may be something to be made out of it. Evidently there is lots of gold in this Asiki country, if only one can persuade the people to deal."

Then weary of Jeekie and his tribal gods, Alan lit his pipe and sat a while thinking of Barbara and all the events of that tumultuous day. Notwithstanding his rebuff at the hands of Mr. Haswell and the difficulties and dangers which threatened, he felt even then that it had been a happy and a fortunate day. For had he not discovered that Barbara loved him with all her heart and soul as he loved Barbara? And as this was so, he did not care a--Little Bonga about anything else. The future

must look to itself, sufficient to the day was the abiding joy thereof.

So he went to bed and for a while to sleep, but he did not sleep very long, for presently he fell to dreaming, something about Big Bansa and Little Bansa which sat, or rather floated on either side of his couch and held an interminable conversation over him, while Jeekie and Sir Robert Aylward, perched respectively at its head and its foot, like the symbols of the good and evil genii on a Mahomedan tomb, acted as a kind of insane chorus. He struck his repeater, it was only one o'clock, so he tried to go to sleep again, but failed utterly. Never had he been more painfully awake.

For an hour or more Alan persevered, then at last in despair he jumped out of bed wondering what he could do to occupy his mind. Suddenly he remembered the diary of his uncle, the Rev. Mr. Austin, which he had inherited with the Yellow God and a few other possessions, but never examined. They had been put away in a box in the library about fifteen years before, just at the time he entered the army, and there doubtless they remained. Well, as he could not sleep, why should he not examine them now, and thus get through some of this weary night?

He lit a candle and went down to the library, an ancient and beautiful apartment with black oak panelling between the bookcases, set there in the time of Elizabeth. In this panelling there were cupboards, and in one of the cupboards was the box he sought, made of teak wood. On its lid was painted, "The Reverend Henry Austin. Passenger to Acra," showing

that it had once been his uncle's cabin box. The key hung from the handle, and having lit more candles, Alan drew it out and unlocked it, to be greeted by a smell of musty documents done up in great bundles. One by one he placed them on the floor. It was a dreary occupation alone there in that great, silent room at the dead of night, one indeed with which he was soon satisfied, for somehow it reminded him of rifling coffins in a vault. Before him so carefully put away lay the records of a good if not a distinguished life, and until this moment he had never found the energy even to look through them.

At length he came to the end of the bundles and saw that beneath lay a number of manuscript books packed closely with their backs upwards, marked--"Journal"--and with the year and sometimes the place of the author's residence. As he glanced at them in dismay, for they were many, his eye caught the title of one inscribed--as were several others--"West Africa," and written in brackets beneath--"This vol. contains all that is left of the notes of my escape with Jeekie from the Asiki Devil-worshippers."

Alan drew it out, and having refilled and closed the box, bore it off to his room, where he proceeded to read it in bed. As a matter of fact he found that there was not very much to read, for the reason that most of the closely-written volume had been so damaged by water, that the pencilled writing had run and become utterly illegible. The centre pages, however, not having been soaked, could still be deciphered, at any rate in part, also there was a large manuscript map, executed in

ink, apparently at a later date, on the back of which was written: "I purpose, D.V., to re-write at some convenient time all the history of my visit to the unknown Asiki people, as my original notes were practically destroyed when the canoe upset in the rapids and most of our few possessions were lost, except this book and the gold fetish mask which is called Little Bonsa or Small Swimming Head. This I think I can do with the aid of Jeekie from memory, but as the matter has only a personal and no religious interest, seeing that I was not able even to preach the Word among those benighted and blood-thirsty savages in whose country, as I verily believe, the Devil has one of his principal habitations, it must stand over till a convenient season, such as the time of old age or sickness. H.A."

"P.S. I ought to add with gratitude that even out of this hell fire I was enabled to snatch one brand from the burning, namely, the negro lad, Jeekie, to whose extraordinary resource and faithfulness I owe my escape. After a long hesitation I have been able to baptize him, although I fear that the taint of heathenism still clings to him. Thus not six months ago I caught him sacrificing a white cock to the image, Little Bonsa, in gratitude, as to my horror he explained, for my having been appointed an Honorary Canon of the Cathedral. I have told him to take that ugly mask which has been so often soaked in human blood, and melt it down over the kitchen stove, after picking out the gems in the eyes, that the proceeds may be given to the poor. Note. I had better see to this myself, as where Little Bonsa is concerned, Jeekie is not to be trusted. He says (with some excuse) that it has magic, and that if

he melts it down, he will melt down too, and so shall I. How dark and ridiculous are the superstitions of the heathen! Perhaps, however, instead of destroying the thing, which is certainly unique, I might sell it to a museum, and thus spare the feelings of that weak vessel, Jeekie, who otherwise would very likely take it into his head to waste away and die, as these Africans do when their nerves are affected by terror of their fetish."