

CHAPTER VII

THE DIARY

Reflecting that time evidently had made little change in Jeekie, Alan studied this route map with care, and found that it started from Old Calabar, in the Bight of Biafra, on the west coast of Africa, whence it ran up to the Great Qua River, which it followed for a long way. Then it struck across country marked "dense forest," northwards, and came to a river called Katsena, along the banks of which the route went eastwards. Thence it turned northward again through swamps, and ended in mountains called Shaku. In the middle of these mountains was written "Asiki People live here on Raaba River."

The map was roughly drawn to scale, and Alan, who was an engineer accustomed to such things, easily calculated that the distance of this Raaba River from Old Calabar was about 350 miles as the crow flies, though probably the actual route to be travelled was nearer five hundred miles.

Having mastered the map, he opened the water-soaked diary. Turning page after page, only here and there could he make out a sentence, such as "so I defied that beautiful but terrific woman. I, a Christian minister, the husband of a heathen priestess! Perish the thought. Sooner would I be sacrificed to Bonsa."

Then came more illegible pages and again a paragraph that could be read--"They gave me 'The Bean' in a gold cup, and knowing its deadly nature I prepared myself for death. But happily for me my stomach, always delicate, rejected it at once, though I felt queer for days afterwards. Whereon they clapped their hands and said I was evidently innocent and a great medicine man."

And again, further on--"never did I see so much gold whether in dust, nuggets, or worked articles. I imagine it must be worth millions, but at that time gold was the last thing with which I wished to trouble myself."

After this entry many pages were utterly effaced.

The last legible passage ran as follows--"So guided by the lad Jeekie, and wearing the gold mask, Little Bonsa, on my head, I ran through them all, holding him by the hand as though I were dragging him away. A strange spectacle I must have been with my old black clergyman's coat buttoned about me, my naked legs and the gold mask, as pretending to be a devil such as they worship, I rushed through them in the moonlight, blowing the whistle in the mask and bellowing like a bull. . . . Such was the beginning of my dreadful six months' journey to the coast. Setting aside the mercy of Providence that preserved me for its own purposes, I could never have lived to reach it had it not been for Little Bonsa, since curiously enough I found this fetish known and dreaded for hundreds of miles, and that by people who had never seen it,

yes, even by the wild cannibals. Whenever it was produced food, bearers, canoes, or whatever else I might want were forthcoming as though by magic. Great is the fame of Big and Little Bansa in all that part of West Africa, although, strange as it may seem, the outlying tribes seldom mention them by name. If they must speak of either of these images which are supposed to be man and wife, they call it the 'Yellow-God-who-lives-yonder.'"

Not another word of all this strange history could Alan decipher, so with aching eyes he shut up the stained and tattered volume, and at last, just as the day was breaking, fell asleep.

At eleven o'clock on that same morning, for he had slept late, Alan rose from his breakfast and went to smoke his pipe at the open door of the beautiful old hall in Yarleys that was clad with brown Elizabethan oak for which any dealer would have given hundreds of pounds. It was a charming morning, one of those that comes to us sometimes in an English April when the air is soft like that of Italy and the smell of the earth rises like that of incense, and little clouds float idly across a sky of tender blue. Standing thus he looked out upon the park where the elms already showed a tinge of green and the ash-buds were coal black. Only the walnuts and the great oaks, some of them pollards of a thousand years of age, remained stark and stern in their winter dress.

Alan was in a reflective mood and involuntarily began to wonder how many of his forefathers had stood in that same spot upon such April mornings

and looked out upon those identical trees wakening in the breath of spring. Only the trees and the landscape knew, those trees which had seen every one of them borne to baptism, to bridal and to burial. The men and women themselves were forgotten. Their portraits, each in the garb of his or her generation, hung here and there upon the walls of the ancient house which once they had owned or inhabited, but who remembered anything of them to-day? In many cases their names even were lost, for believing that they, so important in their time, could never sink into oblivion, they had not thought it necessary to record them upon their pictures.

And now the thing was coming to an end. Unless in this way or in that he could save it, what remained of the old place, for the outlying lands had long since been sold, must go to the hammer and become the property of some pushing and successful person who desired to found a family, and perhaps in days to be would claim these very pictures that hung upon the walls as those of his own ancestors, declaring that he had brought in the estate because he was a relative of the ancient and ruined race.

Well, it was the way of the world, and perhaps it must be so, but the thought of it made Alan Vernon sad. If he could have continued that business, it might have been otherwise. By this hour his late partners, Sir Robert Aylward and Mr. Champers-Haswell, were doubtless sitting in their granite office in the City, probably in consultation with Lord Specton, who had taken his place upon the Board of the great Company which was being subscribed that day. No doubt applications for shares

were pouring in by the early posts and by telegram, and from time to time Mr. Jeffreys respectfully reported their number and amount, while Sir Robert looked unconcerned and Mr. Haswell rubbed his hands and whistled cheerfully. Almost he could envy them, these men who were realizing great fortunes amidst the bustle and excitement of that fierce financial life, whilst he stood penniless and stared at the trees and the ewes which wandered among them with their lambs, he who, after all his work, was but a failure. With a sigh he turned away to fetch his cap and go out walking--there was a tenant whom he must see, a shifty, new-fangled kind of man who was always clamouring for fresh buildings and reductions in his rent. How was he to pay for more buildings? He must put him off, or let him go.

Just then a sharp sound caught his ear, that of an electric bell. It came from the telephone which, since he had been a member of a City firm, he had caused to be put into Yarleys at considerable expense in order that he might be able to communicate with the office in London. "Were they calling him up from force of habit?" he wondered. He went to the instrument which was fixed in a little room he used as a study, and took down the receiver.

"Who is it?" he asked. "I am Yarleys. Alan Vernon."

"And I am Barbara," came the answer. "How are you, dear? Did you sleep well?"

"No, very badly."

"Nerves--Alan, you have got nerves. Now although I had a worse day than you did, I went to bed at nine, and protected by a perfect conscience, slumbered till nine this morning, exactly twelve hours. Isn't it clever of me to think of this telephone, which is more than you would ever have done? My uncle has departed to London vowing that no letter from you shall enter this house, but he forgot that there is a telephone in every room, and in fact at this moment I am speaking round by his office within a yard or two of his head. However, he can't hear, so that doesn't matter. My blessing be on the man who invented telephones, which hitherto I have always thought an awful nuisance. Are you feeling cheerful, Alan?"

"Very much the reverse," he answered; "never was more gloomy in my life, not even when I thought I had to die within six hours of blackwater fever. Also I have lots that I want to talk to you about and I can't do it at the end of this confounded wire that your uncle may be tapping."

"I thought it might be so," answered Barbara, "so I just rang you up to wish you good-morning and to say that I am coming over in the motor to lunch with my maid Snell as chaperone. All right, don't remonstrate, I am coming over to lunch--I can't hear you--never mind what people will say. I am coming over to lunch at one o'clock, mind you are in. Good-bye, I don't want much to eat, but have something for Snell and the chauffeur. Good-bye."

Then the wire went dead, nor could all Alan's "Hello's" and "Are you there's?" extract another syllable.

Having ordered the best luncheon that his old housekeeper could provide Alan went off for his walk in much better spirits, which were further improved by his success in persuading the tenant to do without the new buildings for another year. In a year, he reflected, anything might happen. Then he returned by the wood where a number of new-felled oaks lay ready for barking. This was not a cheerful sight; it seemed so cruel to kill the great trees just as they were pushing their buds for another summer of life. But he consoled himself by recalling that they had been too crowded and that the timber was really needed on the estate. As he reached the house again carrying a bunch of white violets which he had plucked in a sheltered place for Barbara, he perceived a motor travelling at much more than the legal speed up the walnut avenue which was the pride of the place. In it sat that young lady herself, and her maid, Snell, a middle-aged woman with whom, as it chanced, he was on very good terms, as once, at some trouble to himself, he had been able to do her a kindness.

The motor pulled up at the front door and out of it sprang Barbara, laughing pleasantly and looking fresh and charming as the spring itself.

"There will be a row over this, dear," said Alan, shaking his head doubtfully when at last they were alone together in the hall.

"Of course, there'll be a row," she answered. "I mean that there should be a row. I mean to have a row every day if necessary, until they leave me alone to follow my own road, and if they won't, as I said, to go to the Court of Chancery for protection. Oh! by the way, I have brought you a copy of The Judge. There's a most awful article in it about that Sahara flotation, and among other things it announces that you have left the firm and congratulates you upon having done so."

"They'll think I have put it in," groaned Alan as he glanced at the headlines, which were almost libellous in their vigour, and the summaries of the financial careers of Sir Robert Aylward and Mr. Champers-Haswell. "It will make them hate me more than ever, and I say, Barbara, we can't live in an atmosphere of perpetual warfare for the next two years."

"I can, if need be," answered that determined young woman. "But I admit that it would be trying for you, if you stay here."

"That's just the point, Barbara. I must not stay here, I must go away, the further the better, until you are your own mistress."

"Where to, Alan?"

"To West Africa, I think."

"To West Africa?" repeated Barbara, her voice trembling a little. "After

that treasure, Alan?"

"Yes, Barbara. But first come and have your lunch, then we will talk. I have got lots to tell and show you."

So they lunched, speaking of indifferent things, for the servant was there waiting on them. Just as they were finishing their meal Jeekie entered the room carrying a box and a large envelope addressed to his master, which he said had been sent by special messenger from the office in London.

"What's in the box?" asked Alan, looking somewhat nervously at the envelope, which was addressed in a writing that he knew.

"Don't know for certain, Major," answered Jeekie, "but think Little Bonga; think I smell her through wood."

"Well, look and see," replied Alan, while he broke the seal of the envelope and drew out its contents. They proved to be sundry documents sent by the firm's lawyers, among which were a notice of the formal dissolution of partnership to be approved by him before it appeared in the Gazette, a second notice calling in a mortgage for fifteen thousand and odd pounds on Yarleys, which as a matter of business had been taken over by the firm while he was a partner; a cash account showing a small balance against him, and finally a receipt for him to sign acknowledging the return of the gold image that was his property.

"You see," said Alan with a sigh, pushing over the papers to Barbara, who read them carefully one by one.

"I see," she answered presently. "It is war to the knife. Alan, I hate the idea of it, but perhaps you had better go away. While you are here they will harass the life out of you."

Meanwhile with the aid of a big jack-knife and the dining-room poker, Jeekie had prized off the lid of the box. Chancing to look round Barbara saw him on his knees muttering something in a strange tongue, and bowing his white head until it touched an object that lay within the box.

"What are you doing, Jeekie?" she asked.

"Make bow to Little Bonsa, Miss Barbara, tell her how glad I am see her come back from town. She like feel welcome. Now you come bow too, Little Bonsa take that as compliment."

"I won't bow, but I will look, Jeekie, for although I have heard so much about it I have never really examined this Yellow God."

"Very good, you come look, miss," and Jeekie propped up the case upon the end of the dining-room table. As from its height and position she could not see its contents very well whilst standing above it, Barbara knelt down to get a better view of it.

"My goodness!" she exclaimed, "what a terrible face, beautiful too in its way."

Hardly had the words left her lips when for some reason unexplained that probably had to do with the shifting of the centre of gravity, Little Bonsa appeared to glide or fall out of her box with a startling suddenness, and project herself straight at Barbara, who, with a faint scream, fearing lest the precious thing should be injured, caught it in her arms and for a moment hugged it to her breast.

"Saved!" she exclaimed, recovering herself and placing it on the table, whereon Jeekie, to their astonishment, began to execute a kind of war dance.

"Oh! yes," he said, "saved, very much saved. All saved, most magnificent omen. Lady kneel to Little Bonsa and Little Bonsa nip out of box, make bow and jump in lady's arms. That splendid, first-class luck, for miss and everybody. When Little Bonsa do that need fear nothing no more. All come right as rain."

"Nonsense," said Barbara, laughing. Then from a cautious distance she continued her examination of the fetish.

"See," said Jeekie, pointing to the misshapen little gold legs which were yet so designed that it could be stood up upon them, "when anyone

wear Little Bansa, tie her on head behind by these legs; look, here same old leather string. Now I put her on, for she like to be worn again," and with a quick movement he clapped the mask on to his face, manipulated the greasy black leather thongs and made them fast. Thus adorned the great negro looked no less than terrific.

"I see you, miss," he said, turning the fixed eyes of opal-like stone, bloodshot with little rubites, upon Barbara, "I see you, though you no see me, for these eyes made very cunning. But listen, you hear me," and suddenly from the mask, produced by some contrivance set within it, there proceeded an awful, howling sound that made her shiver.

"Take that thing off, Jeekie," said Alan, "we don't want any banshees here."

"Banshees? Not know him, he poor English fetish p'raps," said Jeekie, as he removed the mask. "This real African god, howl banshee and all that sort into middle of next week. This Little Bansa and no mistake, ten thousand years old and more, eat up lives, so many that no one can count them, and go on eating for ever, yes unto the third and fourth generation, as Ten Commandments lay it down for benefit of Christian man, like me. Look at her again, Miss Barbara."

Miss Barbara took the hateful, ancient thing in her hands and studied it. No one could doubt its antiquity, for the gold plate of which it was made was literally worn away wherever it had touched the foreheads of

the high priests or priestesses who donned it upon festive occasions or days of sacrifice, showing that hundreds and hundreds of them must have used it thus in succession. So was the vocal apparatus within the mouth, and so were the little toad-like feet upon which it was stood up. Also the substance of the gold itself as here and there pitted as though with acid or salts, though what those salts were she did not inquire.

And yet, so consummate was the art with which it had originally been fashioned, that the battered beautiful face of Little Bonsa still peered at them with the same devilish smile that it had worn when it left the hands of its maker, perhaps before Mohammed preached his holy war, or even earlier.

"What is all that writing on the back of it?" asked Barbara, pointing to the long lines of rune-like characters which were inscribed within it.

"Not know, miss, think they dead tongue cut in the beginning when black men could write. But Asiki priests swear they remember every one of them, and that why no one can copy Little Bonsa, for they look inside and see if marks all right. They say they names of those who died for Little Bonsa, and when they all done, Little Bonsa begin again, for Little Bonsa never die. But p'raps priests lie."

"I daresay," said Barbara, "but take Little Bonsa away, for however lucky she may be, she makes me feel sick."

"Where I put her, Major?" asked Jeekie of Alan. "In box in library where

she used to live, or in plate-safe with spoons? Or under your bed where she always keep eye on you?"

"Oh! put her with the spoons," said Alan angrily, and Jeekie departed with his treasure.

"I think, dear," remarked Barbara as the door closed behind him, "that if I come to lunch here any more, I shall bring my own christening present with me, for I can't eat off silver that has been shut up with that thing. Now let us get to business--show me the diary and the map."

"Dearest Alan," wrote Barbara from The Court two days later, "I have been thinking everything over, and since you are so set upon it, I suppose that you had better go. To me the whole adventure seems perfectly mad, but at the same time I believe in our luck, or rather in the Providence which watches over us, and I don't believe that you, or I either, will come to any harm. If you stop here, you will only eat your heart out and communication between us must become increasingly difficult. My uncle is furious with you, and since he discovered that we were talking over the telephone, to his own great inconvenience he has had the wires cut outside the house. That horrid letter of his to you saying that you had 'compromised' me in pursuance of a 'mercenary scheme' is all part and parcel of the same thing. How are you to stop here and submit to such insults? I went to see my friend the lawyer, and he tells me that of course we can marry if we like, but in that case my father's will, which he has consulted at Somerset House, is absolutely

definite, and if I do so in opposition to my uncle's wishes, I must lose everything except £200 a year. Now I am no money-grubber, but I will not give my uncle the satisfaction of robbing me of my fortune, which may be useful to both of us by and by. The lawyer says also that he does not think that the Court of Chancery would interfere, having no power to do so as far as the will is concerned, and not being able to make a ward of a person like myself who is over age and has the protection of the common law of the country. So it seems to me that the only thing to do is to be patient, and wait until time unties the knot.

"Meanwhile, if you can make some money in Africa, so much the better. So go, Alan, go as soon as you like, for I do not wish to prolong this agony, or to see you exposed daily to all you have to bear. Whenever you return you will find me waiting for you, and if you do not return, still I shall wait, as you in like circumstances will wait for me. But I think you will return."

Then followed much that need not be written, and at the end a postscript which ran:

"I am glad to hear that you have succeeded in shifting the mortgage on Yarleys, although the interest is so high. Write to me whenever you get a chance, to the care of the lawyer, for then the letters will reach me, but never to this house, or they may be stopped. I will do the same to you to the address you give. Good-bye, dearest Alan, my true and only lover. I wonder where and when we shall meet again. God be with us both

and enable us to bear our trial.

"P.P.S. I hear that the Sahara flotation was really a success, notwithstanding the Judge attacks. Sir Robert and my uncle have made millions. I wonder how long they will keep them."

A week after he received this letter Alan was on the seas heading for the shores of Western Africa.