

CHAPTER IX

THE DAWN

Jeekie looked up and down the river and saw that in the centre of it about half a mile away, there was an island on which grew some trees.

"Little Bonsa will camp yonder," he said. "Go, make her house ready, light fire and bring canoe to paddle us across. Now leave us, all of you, for if you look too long upon the face of the Yellow God she will ask a sacrifice, and it is not lawful that you should see where she hides herself away."

At this saying the cannibals departed as one man, and at top speed, some of the canoes and others to warn their fellows who were engaged in the congenial work of hunting and killing the dwarfs, not to dare to approach the white man and his companion. A third party ran to the bank of the river that was opposite to the island to make ready as they had been bidden, so that presently Alan and Jeekie were left quite alone.

"Ah!" said Jeekie, with a gasp of satisfaction, "that all right, everything arranged quite comfortable. Thought Little Bonsa come out top somehow and score off dirty dwarf monkeys. They never get home to tea anyway--stay and dine with Ogula."

"Stop chattering, Jeekie, and untie this infernal mask, I am almost

choked," broke in Alan in a hollow voice.

"Not say 'infernal mask,' Major, say 'face of angel.' Little Bonsa woman and like it better, also true, if on this occasion only, for she save our skins," said Jeekie as he unknotted the thongs and reverently replaced the fetish in its tin box. "My!" he added, contemplating his master's perspiring countenance, "you blush like garden carrot; well, gold hot wear in afternoon sun beneath Tropic of Cancer. Now we walk on quietly and I tell you all I arrange for night's lodging and future progress of joint expedition."

So gathering together what remained of their few possessions, they started leisurely down the slope towards the island, and as they went Jeekie explained all that had happened, since Ogula was not one of the African languages with which Alan was acquainted and he had only been able to understand a word here and there.

"Look," said Jeekie when he had finished, and turning, he pointed to the cannibals who were driving the few survivors of the dwarfs before them to the spot where their canoes were beached. "Those dwarfs done for; capital business, forest road quite safe to travel home by; Ogula best friends in world; very remarkable escape from delicate situation."

"Very remarkable indeed," said Alan; "I shall soon begin to believe in the luck of Little Bonsa."

"Yes, Major, you see she anxious to get home and make path clear. But," he added gloomily, "how she behave when she reach there, can't say."

"Nor can I, Jeekie, but meanwhile I hope she will provide us with some dinner, for I am faint for want of food and all the tinned meat is lost."

"Food," repeated Jeekie. "Yes, necessity for human stomach, which unhappily built that way, so Ogula find out, and so dwarfs find out presently." Then he looked about him and in a kind of aimless manner lifted his gun and fired. "There we are," he said, "Little Bonsa understand bodily needs," and he pointed to a fat buck of the sort that in South Africa is called Duiker, which his keen eyes had discovered in its form against a stone where it now lay shot through the head and dying. "No further trouble on score of grub for next three day," he added. "Come on to camp, Major. I send one savage skin and bring that buck."

So on they went to the river bank, Alan so tired now that the excitement was over, that he was not sorry to lean upon Jeekie's arm. Reaching the stream they drank deep of its water, and finding that it was shallow at this spot, waded through it to the island without waiting for a canoe to ferry them over. Here they found a party of the cannibals already at work clearing reeds with their large, curved knives, in order to make a site for the hut. Another party under the command of their chief himself had gone to the top end of the island, to cut the stems of a willow-like

shrub to serve as uprights. These people stared at Alan, which was not strange, as they had never before seen the face of a white man and were wondering, doubtless, what had become of the ancient and terrible fetish that he had worn. Without entering into explanations Jeekie in a great voice ordered two of them to fetch the buck, which the white man, whom he described as "husband of the goddess," had "slain by thunder." When these had departed upon their errand, leaving Jeekie to superintend the building operations, Alan sat down upon a fallen tree, watching one of the savages making fire with a pointed stick and some tinder.

Just then from the head of the island where the willows were being cut, rose the sound of loud roarings and of men crying out in affright. Seizing his gun Alan ran towards the spot whence the noise came. Forcing his way through a brake of reeds, he saw a curious sight. The Ogula in cutting the willows which grew about some tumbled rocks, had disturbed a lioness that had her lair there, and being fearless savages, had tried to kill her with their spears. The brute, rendered desperate by wounds, and the impossibility of escape, for here the surrounding water was deep, had charged them boldly, and as it chanced, felled to the ground their chief, that yellow-toothed man to whom Jeekie gave his orders. Now she was standing over him looking round her royally, her great paw upon his breast, which it seemed almost to cover, while the Ogula ran round and round shouting, for they feared that if they tried to attack her, she would kill the chief. This indeed she seemed about to do, for just as Alan arrived she dropped her head as though to tear out the man's throat. Instantly he fired. It was a snap shot, but as it chanced a

good one, for the bullet struck the lioness in the back of the neck just forward of and between the shoulders, severing the spine so that without a sound or any further movement she sank stone dead upon the prostrate cannibal. For a while his followers stood astonished. They might have heard of guns from the coast people, but living as they did in the interior where white folk did not dare to travel, they had never seen their terrible effects.

"Magic!" they cried. "Magic!"

"Of course," exclaimed Jeekie, who by now had arrived upon the scene. "What else did you expect from the husband of Little Bonsa? Magic, the greatest of magic. Go, roll that beast away before your chief is crushed to death."

They obeyed, and the man sat up, a fearful spectacle, for he was smothered with the blood of the lion and somewhat cut by her claws, though otherwise unhurt. Then feeling that the life was still whole in him, he crept on his hands and knees to where Alan stood, and kissed his feet.

"Aha!" said Jeekie, "Little Bonsa score again. Cannibal tribe our slave henceforth for evermore. Yes, till kingdom come. Come on, Major, and cook supper in perfect peace."

The supper was cooked and eaten with gratitude, for seldom had two men

needed a square meal more, and never did venison taste better. By the time that it was finished darkness had fallen, and before they turned in to sleep in the neat reed hut that the Ogula had built, Alan and Jeekie walked up the island to see if the lioness had been skinned, as they directed. This they found was done; even the carcass itself had been removed to serve as meat for these foul-feeding people. They climbed on to the pile of rocks in which the beast had made her lair, and looked down the river to where, two hundred yards away, the Ogula were encamped. From this camp there rose a sound of revelry, and by the light of the great fires that burned there, they perceived that the hungry savages were busy feasting, for some of them sat in circles, whilst others, their naked forms looking at that distance like those of imps in the infernal regions, flitted to and fro against the glowing background of the fires, bearing strange-looking joints on prongs of wood.

"I suppose they are eating the lioness," said Alan doubtfully.

"No, no, Major, not lioness; eat dwarf by dozen--just like oysters at seaside. But for Little Bansa we sit on those forks now and look uncommon small."

"Beasts!" said Alan in disgust; "they make me feel uncommon sick. Let us go to bed. I suppose they won't murder us in our sleep, will they?"

"Not they, Major, too much afraid. Also we their blood-brothers now, because we bring them first-class dinner and save chief from lion's

fury. No blame them too much, Major, good fellows really with gentle heart, but grub like that from generation to generation. Every mother's son of them have many men inside, that why they so big and strong. Ogula people cover great multitude like Charity in Book. No doubt sent by Providence to keep down extra pop'lation. Not right to think too hard of poor fellows who, as I say, very kind and gentle at heart and most loving in family relation, except to old women whom they eat also, so that they no get bored with too long life."

Weary and disgusted by this abominable sight though he was, Alan burst out laughing at his retainer's apology for the sweet-natured Ogula, who struck him as the most repulsive blackguards that he had ever met or heard of in all his experience of African savages. Then wishing to see and hear no more of them that night, he retreated rapidly to the hut and was soon fast asleep with his head pillowed on the box that hid the charms of Little Bonsa. When he awoke it was broad daylight. Rising he went down to the river to wash, and never had a bath been more welcome, for during all their journey through the forest no such thing was obtainable. On his return he found his garments well brushed with dry reeds and set upon a rock in the hot sun to air, while Jeekie in a cheerful mood, was engaged cooking breakfast in the frying-pan, to which he had clung through all the vicissitudes of their flight.

"No coffee, Major," he said regretfully, "that stop in forest. But never mind, hot water better for nerve. Ogula messengers gone in little canoe to Asiki at break of day. Travel slow till they work off dwarf, but

afterwards go quick. I send lion skin with them as present from you to great high-priestess Asika, also claws for necklace. No lions there and she think much of that. Also it make her love mighty man who can kill fierce lion like Samson in Book. Love of head woman very valuable ally among beastly savage peoples."

"I am sure I hope it won't," said Alan with earnestness, "but no doubt it is as well to keep on the soft side of the good lady if we can. What time do we start?"

"In one hour, Major. I been to camp already, chosen best canoe and finest men for rowers. Chief--he called Fanny--so grateful that he come with them himself."

"Indeed. That is very kind of him, but I say, Jeekie, what are these fellows going to live on? I can't stand what you call their 'favourite chop.'"

"No, no, Major, that all right. I tell them that when they travel with Little Bansa, they must keep Lent like pious Roman Catholic family that live near Yarleys. They catch plenty fish in river, and perhaps we shoot game, or rich 'potamus, which they like 'cause he fat."

Evidently the Ogula chief, Fahni by name, not Fanny, as Jeekie called him, was a man of his word, for before the hour was up he appeared at the island in command of a large canoe manned by twelve splendid-looking

savages. Springing to land, he prostrated himself before Alan, kissing his feet as he had done on the previous night, and making a long speech.

"That very good spirit," exclaimed Jeekie. "Like to see heathen in his darkness lick white gentleman's boot. He say you his lord and great magician who save his life, and know all Little Bonsa's secrets, which many and unrepeatabe. He say he die for you twice a day if need be, and go on dying to-morrow and all next year. He say he take you safe till you meet Asiki and for your sake, though he hungry, eat no man for one whole month, or perhaps longer. Now we start at once."

So they started up the river that was called Katsena, Alan and Jeekie seated in a lordly fashion near the stern of the canoe beneath an awning made out of some sticks and a grass mat. In truth after their severe toil and adventures in the forest, this method of journeying proved quite luxurious. Except for a rapid here and there over or round which the canoe must be dragged, the river was broad and the scenery on its banks park-like and beautiful. Moreover the country, perhaps owing to the appetites of the Ogula, appeared to be practically uninhabited except by vast herds of every sort of game.

All day they sat in the canoe which the stalwart rowers propelled, in silence for the most part, since they were terribly afraid of the white man, and still more so of the renowned fetish which they knew he carried with him. Then when evening came they moored their craft to the bank and camped till the following morning. Nor did they lack for food, since

game being so plentiful, it was only necessary for Alan to walk a few hundred yards and shoot a fat eland, or hartebeest, or other buck which in its ignorance of guns would allow him to approach quite close. Elephants, rhinoceros, and buffalo were also common, while great herds of giraffe might be seen wandering between the scattered trees, but as they were not upon a hunting trip and their ammunition was very limited, with these they did not interfere.

Having their daily fill of meat which their souls loved, the Ogula oarsmen remained in an excellent mood, indeed the chief, Fahni, informed Alan that if only they had such magic tubes wherewith to slaughter game, he and his tribe would gladly give up cannibalism--except on feast days. He added sadly that soon they would be obliged to do so, or die, since in those parts there were now few people left to eat, and they hated vegetables. Moreover, they kept no cattle, it was not the custom of that tribe, except a very few for milk. Alan advised them to increase their herds, since, as he pointed out to them, "dog should not eat dog" or the human being his own kind.

The chief answered that there was a great deal in what he said, which on his return he would lay before his head men. Indeed Alan, to his astonishment, discovered that Jeekie had been quite right when he alleged that these people, so terrible in their mode of life, were yet "kind and gentle at heart." They preyed upon mankind because for centuries it had been their custom so to do, but if anyone had been there to show them a better way, he grew sure that they would follow it

gladly. At least they were brave and loyal and even after their first fear of the white man had worn off, fulfilled their promises without a murmur. Once, indeed, when he chanced to have gone for a walk unarmed and to be charged by a bull elephant, these Ogula ran at the brute with their spears and drove it away, a rescue in which one of them lost his life, for the "rogue" caught and killed him.

So the days went on while they paddled leisurely up the river, Alan employing the time by taking lessons in the Asiki tongue from Jeekie, a language which he had been studying ever since he left England. The task was not easy, as he had no books and Jeekie himself after some thirty years of absence, was doubtful as to many of its details. Still being a linguist by nature and education and finding in the tongue similarities to other African dialects which he knew, he was now able to speak it a little, in a halting fashion.

On the fifth day of their ascent of the river, they came to a tributary that flowed into it from the north, up which the Ogula said they must proceed to reach Asiki-land. The stream was narrow and sluggish, widening out here and there into great swamps through which it was not easy to find a channel. Also the district was so unhealthy that even several of the Ogula contracted fever, of which Alan cured them by heavy doses of quinine, for fortunately his travelling medicine chest remained to him. These cures were effected after their chief suggested that they should be thrown overboard, or left to die in the swamp as useless, with the result that the white man's magical powers were thenceforth

established beyond doubt or cavil. Indeed the poor Ogula now looked on him as a god superior even to Little Bonsa, whose familiar he was supposed to be.

The journey through that swamp was very trying, since in this wet season often they could find no place on which to sleep at night, but must stay in the canoe tormented by mosquitoes, and in constant danger of being upset by the hippopotami that lived there. Moreover, as no game was now available, they were obliged to live on these beasts, fish when they could catch them, and wildfowl, which sometimes they were unable to cook for lack of fuel. This did not trouble the Ogula, who ate them raw, as did Jeekie when he was hungry. But Alan was obliged to starve until they could make a fire. This it was only possible to do when they found drift or other wood, since at that season the rank vegetation was in full growth. Also the fearful thunderstorms which broke continually and in a few minutes half filled their canoe with water, made the reeds and the soil on which they grew, sodden with wet. As Jeekie said:

"This time of year only fit for duck and crocodile. Human should remember uncontrollable forces of nature and wait till winter come in due course, when quagmire bear sole of his foot."

This elaborate remark he made to Alan during the progress of a particularly fearful tempest. The lightning blazed in the black sky and seemed to strike all about them like stabbing swords of fire, the thunder crashed and bellowed as it may be supposed that it will do on

that day when the great earth, worn out at last, shall reel and stagger to its doom. The rain fell in a straight and solid sheet; the tall reeds waved confusedly like millions of dim arms and while they waved, uttered a vast and groaning noise; the scared wildfowl in their terror, with screams and the sough of wings, rushed past them in flocks a thousand strong, now seen and now lost in the vapours. To keep their canoe afloat the poor, naked Ogula oarsmen, shivering with cold and fear, baled furiously with their hands, or bowls of hollowed wood, and called back to Alan to save them as though he were the master of the elements. Even Jeekie was depressed and appeared to be offering up petitions, though whether these were directed to Little Bonsa or elsewhere it was impossible to know.

As for Alan, the heart was out of him. It is true that so far he had escaped fever or other sickness, which in itself was wonderful, but he was chilled through and through and practically had eaten nothing for two days, and very little for a week, since his stomach turned from half-cooked hippopotamus fat and wildfowl. Moreover, they had lost the channel and seemed to be wandering aimlessly through a wilderness of reeds broken here and there by lines of deeper water.

According to the Ogula they should have reached the confines of the great lake several days before and landed on healthful rising ground that was part of the Asiki territory. But this had not happened, and now he doubted whether it ever would happen. It was more likely that they would come to their deaths, there in the marsh, especially as the few ball and

shot cartridges which they had saved in their flight were now exhausted. Not one was left; nothing was left except their revolvers with some charges, which of course were quite useless for the killing of game. Therefore they were in a fair way to die of hunger, for here if fish existed, they refused to be caught and nought remained for them to fill themselves with except water slugs, and snails which the boatmen were already gathering and crunching up in their great teeth. Or, perhaps the Ogula, forgetting friendship under the pressure of necessity, would murder them as they slept and--revert to their usual diet.

Jeekie was right, he should have remembered the "uncontrollable forces of Nature." Only a madman would have undertaken such an expedition in the rains. No wonder that the Asiki remained a secret and hidden people when their frontier was protected by such a marsh as this upon the one side and, as he understood, by impassable mountains upon the other.

There came a lull in the tempest and the boatmen began to get the better of the water, which now was up to their knees. Alan asked Jeekie if he thought it was over, but that worthy shook his white head mournfully, causing the spray to fly as from a twirling mop, and replied:

"Can't say, cats and dogs not tumble so many for present, only pups and kitties left, so to speak, but think there plenty more up there," and he nodded at the portentous fire-laced cloud which seemed to be spreading over them, its black edges visible even through the gloom.

"Bad business, I am afraid, Jeekie. Shouldn't have brought you here, or those poor beggars either," and he looked at the scared, frozen Ogula.

"I begin to wonder----"

"Never wonder, Major," broke in Jeekie in alarm. "If wonder, not live, if wonder, not be born, too much wonder about everywhere. Can't understand nothing, so give it up. Say, 'Right-O and devil hindermost!' Very good motto for biped in tight place. Better drown here than in City bucket shop. But no drown. Should be dead long ago, but Little Bonsa play the game, she not want to sink in stinking swamp when so near her happy home. Come out all right somehow, as from dwarf. Every cloud have silver lining, Major, even that black chap up there. Oh! my golly!"

This last exclamation was wrung from Jeekie's lips by a sudden development of "forces of Nature" which astonished even him. Instead of a silver lining the "black chap" exhibited one of gold. In an instant it seemed to turn to acres of flame; it was as though the heavens had taken fire. A flash or a thunderbolt struck the water within ten yards of their canoe, causing the boatmen to throw themselves upon their faces through shock or terror. Then came the hurricane, which fortunately was so strong that it permitted no more rain to fall. The tall reeds were beaten flat beneath its breath; the canoe was seized in its grip and whirled round and round, then driven forward like an arrow. Only the weight of the men and the water in it prevented it from oversetting. Dense darkness fell upon them and although they could see no star, they knew that it must be night. On they rushed, driven by that shrieking

gale, and all about and around them this wall of darkness. No one spoke, for hope was abandoned, and if they had, their voices could not have been heard. The last thing that Alan remembered was feeling Jeekie dragging a grass mat over him to protect him a little if he could. Then his senses wavered, as does a dying lamp. He thought that he was back in what Jeekie had rudely called "City bucket shop," bargaining across the telephone wire, upon which came all the sounds of the infernal regions, with a financial paper for an article on a Little Bonsa Syndicate that he proposed to float. He thought he was in The Court woods with Barbara, only the birds in the trees sang so unnaturally loud that he could not hear her voice, and she wore Little Bonsa on her head as a bonnet. Then she departed in flame, leaving him and Death alone.

Alan awoke. Above the sun shone hotly, warming him back to life, but in front was a thick wall of mist and rising beyond it in the distance he saw the rugged swelling forms of mountains. Doubtless these had been visible before, but the tall reeds through which they travelled had hid the sight of them. He looked behind him and there in a heap lay the Ogula around their chief, insensible or sleeping. He counted them and found that two were gone, lost in the tempest, how or where no man ever learned. He looked forward and saw a peculiar sight, for in the prow of the drifting canoe stood Jeekie clad in the remains of his white robe and wearing on his head the battered helmet and about his shoulders the torn fragments of green mosquito net. While Alan was wondering strangely

why he had adopted this ceremonial garb, from out of the mist there came a sound of singing, of wild and solemn singing. Jeekie seemed to listen to it; then he lifted up his great musical voice and sang as though in answer. What he sang Alan could not understand, but he recognized that the language which he used was that of the Asiki people.

A pause and a confused murmuring, and now again the wild song rose and again Jeekie answered.

"What the deuce are you doing? Where are we?" asked Alan faintly.

Jeekie turned and beamed upon him; although his teeth were chattering and his face was hollow, still he beamed.

"You awake, Major?" he said. "Thought good old sun do trick. Feel your heart now and find it beat. Pulse, too, strong, though temp'rature not normal. Well, good news this morning. Little Bonsa come out top as usual. Asiki priests on bank there. Can't see them, but know their song and answer. Same old game as thirty years ago. Asiki never change, which good business when you been away long while."

"Hang the Asiki," said Alan feebly, "I think all these poor beggars are dead, and he pointed to the rowers.

"Look like it, Major, but what that matter now since you and I alive? Plenty more where they come from. Not dead though, think only sleep, no

like cold, like dormouse. But never mind cannibal pig. They serve our turn, if they live, live; if they die, die and God have mercy on souls, if cannibal have soul. Ah! here we are," and from beneath six inches of water he dragged up the tin box containing Little Bonsa, from which he extracted the fetish, wet but uninjured.

"Put her on now, Major. Put her on at once and come sit in prow of canoe. Must reach Asiki-land in proper style. Priests think it your reverend uncle come back again, just as he leave. Make very good impression."

"I can't," said Alan feebly. "I am played out, Jeekie."

"Oh! buck up, Major, buck up!" he replied imploringly. "One kick more and you win race, mustn't spoil ship for ha'porth of tar. You just wear fetish, whistle once on land, and then go to sleep for whole week if you like. I do rest, say it all magic, and so forth--that you been dead and just come out of grave, or anything you like. No matter if you turn up as announced on bill and God bless hurricane that blow us here when we expect die. Come, Major, quick, quick! mist melt and soon they see you." Then without waiting for an answer Jeekie clapped the wet mask on his master's head, tied the thongs and led Alan to the prow of the canoe, where he set him down on a little cross bench, stood behind supporting him and again began to sing in a great triumphant voice.

The mist cleared away, rolling up like a curtain and revealing on the

shore a number of men and women clad in white robes, who were martialled in ranks there, chanting and staring out at the dim waters of the lagoon. Yonder upon the waters, driven forward by the gentle breeze, floated a canoe and lo! in the prow of that canoe sat a white man and on his head the god which they had lost a whole generation gone. On the head of a white man it had departed; on the head of a white man it returned. They saw and fell upon their knees.

"Blow, Major, blow!" whispered Jeekie, and Alan blew a feeble note through the whistle in the mouth of the mask. It was enough, they knew it. They sprang into the water and dragged the canoe to land. They set Alan on the shore and worshipped him. They haled up a lad as though for sacrifice, for a priest flourished a great knife above his head, but Jeekie said something that caused them to let him go. Alan thought it was to the effect that Little Bansa had changed her habits across the Black Water, and wanted no blood, only food. Then he remembered no more; again the darkness fell upon him.