

CHAPTER X

BONSA TOWN

When consciousness returned to Alan, the first thing of which he became dimly aware was the slow, swaying motion of a litter. He raised himself, for he was lying at full length, and in so doing felt that there was something over his face.

"That confounded Little Bonsa," he thought. "Am I expected to spend the rest of my life with it on my head like the man in the iron mask?"

Then he put up his hand and felt the thing, to find that it was not Little Bonsa, but something made apparently of thin, fine linen, fitted to the shape of his face, for there was a nose on it, and eyeholes through which he could see, yes, and a mouth whereof the lips by some ingenious contrivance could be moved up and down.

"Little Bonsa's undress uniform, I expect," he muttered, and tried to drag it off. This, however, proved to be impossible, for it was fitted tightly to his head and laced or fastened at the back of his neck so securely that he could not undo it. Being still weak, soon he gave up the attempt and began to look about him.

He was in a litter, a very fine litter hung round with beautifully woven and coloured grass mats, inside of which were a kind of couch and

cushions of soft wool or hair, so arranged that he could either sit up or lie down. He peeped between two of these mats and saw that they were travelling in a mountainous country over a well-beaten road or trail, and that his litter was borne upon the shoulders of a double line of white-robed men, while all around him marched numbers of other men. They seemed to be soldiers, for they were arranged in companies and carried large spears and shields. Also some of them wore torques and bracelets of yellow metal that might be either brass or gold. Turning himself about he found an eyehole in the back of the litter so contrived that its occupant could see without being seen, and perceived that his escort amounted to a veritable army of splendid-looking, but sombre-faced savages of a somewhat Semitic cast of countenance. Indeed many of them had aquiline features and hair that, although crisped, was long and carefully arranged in something like the old Egyptian fashion. Also he saw that about thirty yards behind and separated from him by a bodyguard, was borne a second litter. By means of a similar aperture in front he discovered yet more soldiers, and beyond them, at the head of the procession, was what appeared to be a body of white-robed men and women bearing strange emblems and banners. These he took to be priests and priestesses.

Having examined everything that was within reach of his eye, Alan sank back upon his cushions and began to realize that he was very faint and hungry. It was just then that the sound of a familiar voice reached his ears. It was the voice of Jeekie, and he did not speak, he chanted in English to a melody which Alan at once recognized as a Gregorian tone,

apparently from the second litter.

"Oh, Major," he sang, "have you yet awoke from refre-e-eshing sleep? If so, please answer me in same tone of voice, for remember that you de-e-evil of a swell, Lord of the Little Bonsa, and must not speak like co-o-ommon cad."

Feeble as he was Alan nearly burst out laughing, then remembering that probably he was expected not to laugh, chanted his answer as directed, which having a good tenor voice, he did with some effect, to the evident awe and delight of all the escort within hearing.

"I am awake, most excellent Jee-e-ekie, and feel the need of food, if you have such a thing abou-ou-out you and it is lawful for the Lord of Little Bonsa to take nu-tri-ment."

Instantly Jeekie's deep voice rose in reply.

"That good tidings upon the mountain tops, Ma-ajor. Can't come out to bring you chop because too i-i-infra dig, for now I also biggish bug, the little bird what sit upon the rose, as poet sa-a-ays. I tell these Johnnies bring you grub, which you eat without qualm, for Asiki Al coo-o-ook."

Then followed loud orders issued by Jeekie to his immediate entourage, and some confusion.

As a result presently Alan's litter was halted, the curtains were opened and kneeling women thrust through them platters of wood upon which, wrapped up in leaves, were the dismembered limbs of a bird which he took to be chicken or guinea-fowl, and a gold cup containing water pleasantly flavoured with some essence. This cup interested him very much both on account of its shape and workmanship, which if rude, was striking in design, resembling those drinking vessels that have been found in Mycenaean graves. Also it proved to him that Jeekie's stories of the abundance of the precious metal among the Asiki had not been exaggerated. If it were not very plentiful, they would scarcely, he thought, make their travelling cups of gold. Evidently there was wealth in the land.

After the food had been handed to him the litter went on again, and seated upon his cushions, he ate and drank heartily enough, for now that the worst of his fatigue had passed away, his hunger was great. In some absurd fashion this meal reminded him of that which a traveller makes out of a luncheon basket upon a railway line in Europe or America. Only there the cups are not of gold and among the Asiki were no paper napkins, no salt and mustard, and no three and sixpence or dollar to pay. Further, until he got used to it, luncheon in a linen mask with a moveable mouth was not easy. This difficulty he overcame at last by propping the imitation lips apart with a piece of bone, after which things were easier.

When he had finished he threw the platter and the remains out of the litter, retaining the cup for further examination, and recommenced his intoned and poetical converse with Jeekie.

To set it out at length would be wearisome, but in the course of an hour or so he collected a good deal of information. Thus he learned that they were due to arrive at the Asiki city, which was called Bonsa Town, by nightfall, or a little after. Also he was informed that the mask he wore was, as he had guessed, a kind of undress uniform without which he must never appear, since for anyone except the Asika herself to look upon the naked countenance of an individual so mysteriously mixed up with Little Bonsa, was sacrilege of the worst sort. Indeed Jeekie assured him that the priests who had put on the headdress when he was insensible were first blindfolded.

This news depressed Alan very much, since the prospect of living in a linen mask for an indefinite period was not cheerful. Recovering, he chanted a query as to the fate of the Ogula crew and their chief Fahni.

"Not de-ad," intoned Jeekie in reply, "and not gone back. A-all alive-O, somewhere behind there. Fanny very sick about it, for he think Asiki bring them along for sacrifice, poo-or beg-gars."

Finally he inquired where Little Bonsa was and was answered that he himself as its lawful guardian, was sitting on the fetish in its tin

box, tidings that he was able to verify by groping beneath the cushions.

After this his voice gave out, though Jeekie continued to sing items of interesting news from time to time. Indeed there were other things that absorbed Alan's attention. Looking through the peepholes and cracks in the curtains, he saw that at last they had reached the crest of a ridge up which they had been climbing for hours. Before them lay a vast and fertile valley, much of which seemed to be under cultivation, and down it flowed a broad and placid river. Opposite to him and facing west a great tongue of land ran up to a wall of mountains with stark precipices of black rock that seemed to be hundreds, or even thousands, of feet high, and at the tip of this tongue a mighty waterfall rushed over the precipice, looking at that distance like a cascade of smoke. This torrent, which he remembered was called Raaba, fell into a great pool and there divided itself into two rushing branches that enclosed an ellipse of ground, surrounded on all sides by water, for on its westernmost extremity the branches met again and after flowing a while as one river, divided once more and wound away quietly to north and south further than the eye could reach. On the island thus formed, which may have been three miles long by two in breadth, stood thousands of straw-roofed, square-built huts with verandas, neatly arranged in blocks and lines and having between them streets that were edged with palms.

On the hither side of the pool was what looked like a park, for here grew great, black trees, which from their flat shape Alan took to be some variety of cedar, and standing alone in the midst of this park

where no other habitations could be discovered, was a large, low building with dark-coloured walls and gabled roofs that flashed like fire.

"The Gold House!" said Alan to himself with a gasp. "So it is not a dream or a lie."

The details at that distance he could not discover, nor did he try to do so, for the general glory of the scene held him in its grip. At this evening hour, for a little while, the level rays of the setting sun poured straight up the huge, water-hollowed kloof. They struck upon the face of the fall, staining it and the clouds of mist that hung above, to a hundred glorious hues; indeed the substance of the foaming water seemed to be interlaced with rainbows whereof the arch reached their crest and the feet were lost in the sullen blackness of the pool beneath. Beautiful too was the valley, glowing in the quiet light of evening, and even the native town thus gilded and glorified, looked like some happy home of peace.

The sun was sinking rapidly, and before the litter reached the foot of the hill and began to cross the rich valley, all the glory had departed and only the cataract showed white and ghost-like through the gloom. But still the light, which seemed to gather to itself, gleamed upon that golden roof amid the cedar trees; then the moon rose and the gold was turned to silver. Alan lay back upon his cushions full of wonder, almost of awe. It was a marvellous thing that he should have lived to reach

this secret place hidden in the heart of Africa and defended by swamps, mountains and savages to which, so far as he knew, only one white man had ever penetrated. And to think of it! That white man, his own uncle, had never even held it worth while to make public any account of its wonders, which apparently had seemed to him of no importance. Or perhaps he thought that if he did he would not be believed. Well, there they were before and about him, and now the question was, what would be his fate in this Gold House where the great fetish dwelt with its priestess?

Ah! that priestess! Somehow he shivered a little when he thought of her; it was as though her influence were over him already. Next moment he forgot her for a while, for they had come to the river brink and the litter was being carried on to a barge or ferry, about which were gathered many armed men. Evidently the Gold House was well defended both by Nature and otherwise. The ferry was pulled or rowed across the river, he could not see which, and they passed through a gateway into the town and up a broad street where hundreds of people watched his advent. They did not seem to speak, or if they spoke their voices were lost in the sound of the thunder of the great cataract which dominated the place with its sullen, continuous roar. It took Alan days to become accustomed to that roar, but by the inhabitants of Asiki-land apparently it was not noticed; their ears and voices were attuned to overcome its volume which their fathers had known from the beginning.

Presently they were through the town and a wooden gate in an inner wall which surrounded the park where the cedars grew. At this spot Alan noted

that everybody left them except the bearers and a few men whom he took to be priests. On they stole like ghosts beneath the mighty trees, from whose limbs hung long festoons of moss. It was very dark there, only in places where a bough was broken the moonlight lay in white gules upon the ground. Another wall and another gate, and suddenly the litter was set down. Its curtains opened, torches flashed, women appeared clad in white robes, veiled and mysterious, who bowed before him, then half led and half lifted him from his litter. He could feel their eyes on him through their veils, but he could not see their faces. He could see nothing except their naked, copper-coloured arms and long thin hands stretched out to assist him.

Alan descended from the litter as slowly as he could, for somehow he shrank from the quaint, carved portal which he saw before him. He did not wish to pass it; its aspect filled him with reluctance. The women drew him on, their hands pulled at his arms, their shoulders pressed him from behind. Still he hung back, looking about him, till to his delight he saw the other litter arrive and out of it emerge Jeekie, still wearing his sun-helmet with its fringe of tattered mosquito curtain.

"Here we are, Major," he said in his cheerful voice, "turned up all right like a bad ha'penny, but in odd situation."

"Very odd," echoed Alan. "Could you persuade these ladies to let go of me?"

"Don't know," answered Jeekie. "'Spect they doubtfully your wives; 'spect you have lots of wives here; don't get white man every day, so make most of him. Best thing you do, kick out and teach them place. Rub nose in dirt at once and make them good, that first-class plan with female. I no like interfere in such delicate matter."

Terrified by this information, Alan put out his strength and shook the women off him, whereon without seeming to take any offence they drew back to a little distance and began to bow, like automata. Then Jeekie addressed them in their own language, asking them what they meant by defiling this mighty lord, born of the Heavens, with the touch of their hands, whereat they went on bowing more humbly than before. Next he threw aside the cushions of the litter and finding the tin box containing Little Bonsa, held it before him in both hands and bade the women lead on.

The march began, a bewildering march. It was like a nightmare. Veiled women with torches before and behind, Jeekie stalking ahead carrying the battered tin box, long passages lined with gold, a vision of black water edged with a wide promenade, and finally a large lamp-lit room whereof the roof was supported by gilded columns, and in the room couches of cushions, wooden stools inlaid with ivory, vessels of water, great basins made of some black, hard wood, and in the centre a block of stone that looked like an altar.

Jeekie set down the tin box upon the altar-like stone, then he turned

to the crowd of women and said, "Bring food." Instantly they departed, closing the door of the room behind them.

"Now for a wash," said Alan, "unlace this confounded mask, Jeekie."

"Mustn't, Major, mustn't. Priests tell me that. If those girls see you without mask, perhaps they kill them. Wait till they gone after supper, then take it off. No one allowed see you without mask except Asika herself."

Alan stepped to one of the wooden bowls full of water which stood under a lamp, and gazed at his own reflection. The mask was gilded; the sham lips were painted red and round the eye-holes were black lines.

"Why, it is horrible," he exclaimed, starting back. "I look like a devil crossed with Guy Fawkes. Do you mean to tell me that I have got to live in this thing?"

"Afraid so, Major, upon all public occasion. At least they say that. You holy, not lawful see your sacred face."

"Who do the Asiki think I am, then, Jeekie?"

"They think you your reverend uncle come back after many, many year. You see, Major, they not believe uncle run away with Little Bonsa; they believe Little Bonsa run away with uncle just for change of air and so

on, and that now, when she tired of strange land, she bring him back again. That why you so holy, favourite of Little Bonsa who live with you all this time and keep you just same age, bloom of youth."

"In Heaven's name," asked Alan, exasperated, "what is Little Bonsa, beyond an ancient and ugly gold fetish?"

"Hush," said Jeekie, "mustn't call her names here in her own house. Little Bonsa much more than fetish, Little Bonsa alive, or so," he added doubtfully, "these silly niggers say. She wife of Big Bonsa, you see, to-morrow p'raps. But their story this, that she get dead sick of Big Bonsa and bolt with white Medicine man, who dare preach she nothing but heathen idol. She want show him whether or no she only idol. That the yarn, priests tell it me to-day. They always watch for her there by the edge of the lake. They always sure Little Bonsa come back. Not at all surprised, but as she love you once, you stop holy; and I holy also, thank goodness, because she take me too as servant. Therefore we sleep in peace, for they not cut out throats, at any rate at present, though I think," he added mournfully, "they not let us go either."

Alan sat down on a stool and groaned at the appalling prospect suggested by this information.

"Cheer up, Major," said Jeekie sympathetically. "Perhaps manage hook it somehow, and meanwhile make best of bad business and have high old time. You see you want to come Asiki-land, though I tell you it rum place,

and," he added with certitude and a circular sweep of his hand, "by Jingo! you here now and I daresay they give you all the gold you want."

"What's the good of gold unless one can get away with it? What's the good of anything if we are prisoners among these devils?"

"Perhaps time show, Major. Hush! here come dinner. You sit still on stool and look holy."

The door opened and through it appeared four of the women bearing dishes and cups full of drink, fashioned of gold like that which had been given to Alan in the litter. He noticed at once that they had removed their veils and outer garments, if indeed they were the same women, and now, like many other Africans, were but lightly clad in linen capes open in front that hung over their shoulders, short petticoats or skirts about their middles, and sandals. Such was their attire which, scanty as it might be, was yet becoming enough and extremely rich. Thus the cape was fastened with a brooch of worked gold, so were the sandal straps, while the petticoat was adorned with beads of gold that jingled as they walked, and amongst them strings of other beads of various and beautiful colours, that might be glass or might be precious stones. Moreover, these women were young and handsome, having splendid figures and well-cut features, soft, dark eyes and rather long hair worn in the formal and attractive fashion that has been described.

Advancing to Alan two of them knelt before him, holding out the trays

upon which was the food. So they remained while he ate, like bronze statues, nor would they consent to change their posture even when he told them in their language to be pleased to go away. On hearing themselves addressed in the Asiki language, they seemed surprised, for their faces changed a little, but go they would not. The result was that Alan grew extremely nervous and ate and drank so rapidly that he scarcely noted what he was putting into his mouth. Then before Jeekie, to whom the women did not kneel, had half finished his dinner, Alan rose and walked away, whereon two of the women gathered up everything, including the dishes that had been given to Jeekie, and in spite of his remonstrances carried them out of the room.

"I say, Major," said Jeekie, "if you gobble chop so fast you go ill inside. Poor nigger like me can't keep up with you and sleep hungry to-night."

"I am sorry, Jeekie," said Alan with a little laugh, "but I can't eat off living tables, especially when they stare at one like that. You tell them that to-morrow we will breakfast alone."

"Oh, yes, I tell them, Major, but I don't know if they listen. They mean it great compliment and only think you not like those girls and send others."

"Look here, Jeekie," exclaimed Alan, turning his masked face towards the two who remained, "let us come to an understanding at once. Clear them

out. Tell them I am so holy that Little Bonsa is enough for me. Say I can't bear the sight of females, and that if they stop here I will sacrifice them. Say anything you like, only get rid of them and lock the door."

Thus adjured, Jeekie began to reason with the women, and as they treated his remarks with lofty disdain, at last seized first one and then the other by the elbows and literally ran them out of the room.

"There," he said, "baggage gone since you make such fuss about it, though I 'spect they try to give me Bean for this job" (here he spoke not in figurative English slang, but of the Calabar bean, which is a favourite native poison). "Well, dinner gone and girls gone, and we tired, so best go to bed. Think we all private here now, though in Gold House never can be sure," and he looked round him suspiciously, adding, "rummy place, Gold House, full of all sort of holes made by old fellows thousand year ago, which no one know but Bonsa priests. Still, best risk it and take off your face so that you have decent wash," and he began to unlace the mask on his master's head.

Never has a City clerk dressed up for a fancy ball in the armour of a Norman knight, been more glad to get rid of his costume than was Alan of that hateful head-dress. At length it was gone with his other garments and the much-needed wash accomplished, after which he clothed himself in a kind of linen gown which apparently had been provided for him, and lay down on one of the couches, placing his revolver by his side.

"Will those lamps burn all night, Jeekie?" he asked.

"Hope so, Major, as we haven't got no match. Not fond of dark in Gold House," answered Jeekie sleepily. Then he began to snore.

Alan fell asleep, but was too excited and tired to rest very soundly.

All sorts of dreams came to him, one of which he remembered on awakening, perhaps because it was the last. He dreamed that he heard some noise and opened his eyes, to see that they were no longer alone in the room. The oil lamps had burned quite low, indeed some of them were out, but by the light of those that remained he saw a tall figure which seemed to appear at the edge of the surrounding blackness, a woman's figure. It walked forward to the altar-like stone upon which lay the tin box containing Little Bonsa, and after several rather awkward attempts, succeeded in opening it, thereby making a noise which, in his dream, finally awoke Alan. For a while the figure gazed at the fetish. Then it shut the box, glided to his bed and bent down as though to study him. Out of the corners of his eyes he peered up at it, pretending all the while to be fast asleep.

It was that of a woman wonderfully clad in gold-spangled, veil-like garments with round bosses shaped to the breast, covered with thin plates of gold fashioned like the scales of a fish which showed off the extraordinary elegance of her lithe form. The low lamp-light shone upon her face and the coronet of gold set upon her dark hair. What a face it

was! Never in all his days had he seen its like for evil loveliness. The great, languid, oblong eyes, the rich red lips bent like a bow, the cruel smile of the mouth, the broad forehead on which the hair grew low, the delicately arched eyebrows and the long curving lashes of the heavy lids beneath them, the rounded cheeks, smooth as a ripe fruit, the firm, shapely chin, the snake-like poise of the head, the long bending neck, and the feline smile; all of these combined made such a dream-vision as he had never seen before, and to tell the truth, notwithstanding its beauty, for that could not be doubted, never wished to see again. Somehow he felt that if Satan should happen to have a copper-coloured wife, the exact picture of that lady had projected itself upon his sleeping senses.

She seemed to study him very earnestly, with a kind of passionate eagerness, indeed, moving a little now and again to let the light fall upon some part that was in shadow. Once even she stretched out her rounded arm and just lifted the edge of the blanket so as to expose his hand, the left. As it chanced on the little finger of this hand Alan wore a plain gold ring which Barbara had given him; once it had been her grandfather's signet. This ring, which had a coat of arms cut upon its bezel seemed to interest her very much as she examined it for a long while. Then she drew off from her own finger another ring of gold fashioned of two snakes curiously intertwined, and gently, so gently that in his sleep he scarcely felt it, slipped it on to his finger above Barbara's ring.

After this she seemed to vanish away, and Alan slept soundly until the morning, when he awoke to find the light of the sun pouring into the room through the high-set latticed window places.