

## CHAPTER XI

### THE HALL OF THE DEAD

Alan rose and stretched himself, and hearing him, Jeekie, who had a dog's faculty of instantly awaking from what seemed to be the deepest sleep, sat up also.

"You rest well, Major? No dream, eh?" he asked curiously.

"Not very," answered Alan, "and I had a dream, of a woman who stood over me and vanished away, as dreams do."

"Ah!" said Jeekie. "But where you find that new ring on finger, Major?"

Alan stared at his hand and started, for there set on it above that of Barbara, was the little circlet formed of twisted snakes which he had seen in his sleep.

"Then it must have been true," he said in a low and rather frightened voice. "But how did she come and go?"

"Funny place, Gold House. I tell you that yesterday, Major. People come up through hole, like rat. Never quite sure you alone in Gold House. But what this lady like?"

Alan described his visitor to the best of his ability.

"Ah!" said Jeekie, "pretty girl. Big eyes, gold crown, gold stays which fit tight in front, very nice and decent; sort of night-shirt with little gold stars all over--by Jingo! I think that Asika herself. If so--great compliment."

"Confound the compliment, I think it great cheek," answered Alan angrily. "What does she mean by poking about here at night and putting rings on my finger?"

"Don't know, Major, but p'raps she wish make you understand that she like cut of your jib. Find out by and by. Meanwhile you wear ring, for while that on finger no one do you any harm."

"You told me that this Asika is a married woman, did you not?" remarked Alan gloomily.

"Oh, yes, Major, always married; one down, other come on, you see. But she not always like her husband, and then she make him sit up, poor devil, and he die double quick. Great honour to be Asika's husband, but soon all finished. P'raps----"

Then he checked himself and suggested that Alan should have a bath while he cleaned his clothes, an attention that they needed.

Scarcely had Alan finished his toilet, donned the Arab-looking linen robe over his own fragmentary flannels, and above it the hateful mask which Jeekie insisted he must wear, when there came a knocking on the door. Motioning to Alan to take his seat upon a stool, Jeekie undid the bars, and as before women appeared with food and waited while they ate, which this time, having overcome his nervousness, Alan did more leisurely. Their meal done, one of the women asked Jeekie, for to his master they did not seem to dare to speak, whether the white lord did not wish to walk in the garden. Without waiting for an answer she led him to the end of the large room and, unbarring another door that they had not noticed, revealed a passage, beyond which appeared trees and flowers. Then she and her companions went away with the fragments of the meal.

"Come on," said Alan, taking up the box containing Little Bonsa, which he did not dare to leave behind, "and let us get into the air."

So they went down the passage and at the end of it through gates of copper or gold, they knew not which, that had evidently been left open for them, into the garden. It was a large place, a good many acres in extent indeed, and kept with some care, for there were paths in it and flowers that seemed to have been planted. Also here grew certain of the mighty cedar trees that they had seen from far off, beneath those spreading boughs twilight reigned, while beyond, not more than half a mile away, the splendid river-fall thundered down the precipice. For the rest they could find no exit to that garden which on one side was

enclosed by a sheer cliff of living rock, and on the others with steep stone walls beyond which ran a torrent, and by the buildings of the Gold House itself.

For a while they walked up and down the rough paths, till at last Jeekie, wearying of this occupation, remarked:

"Melancholy hole this, Major. Remind me of Westminster Abbey in London fog, where your uncle of blessed mem'ry often take me pray and look at fusty tomb of king. S'pose we go back Gold House and see what happen. Anything better than stand about under cursed old cedar tree."

"All right," said Alan, who through the eyeholes of his mask had been studying the walls to seek a spot in them that could be climbed if necessary, and found none.

So they returned to the room, which had been swept and garnished in their absence. No sooner had they entered it than the door opened and through it came long lines of Asiki priests, each of whom staggered beneath the weight of a hide bag that he bore upon his shoulder, which bags they piled up about the stone altar. Then, as though at some signal, each priest opened the mouth of his bag and Alan saw that they wee filled with gold, gold in dust, gold in nuggets, gold in vessels perfect or broken; more gold than Alan had ever seen before.

"Why do they bring all this stuff here?" he asked, and Jeekie translated

his question.

"It is an offering to the lord of Little Bonga," answered the head priest, bowing, "a gift from the Asika. The heaven-born white man sent word by his Ogula messengers that he desired gold. Here is the gold that he desired."

Alan stared at the treasure, which after all was what he had come to seek. If only he had it safe in England, he would be a rich man and his troubles ended. But how could he get it to England? Here it was worthless as mud.

"I thank the Asika," he said. "I ask for porters to bear her gift back to my own country, since it is too heavy for me and my servant to carry alone."

At these words the priest smiled a little, then said that the Asika desired to see the white lord and to receive from him Little Bonga in return for the gold, and that he could proffer his request to her.

"Good," replied Alan, "lead me to the Asika."

Then they started, Alan bearing the box containing Little Bonga, and Jeekie following after him. They went down passages and through sundry doors till at length they came to a long and narrow hall that seemed to be lined with plates of gold. At the end of this hall was a large chair

of black wood and ivory placed upon a dais, and sitting in this chair with the light pouring on her from some opening above, was the woman of Alan's dream, beautiful to look on in her crown and glittering garments. Upon a stool at the foot of the dais sat a man, a handsome and melancholy man. His hair was tied behind his head in a pigtail and gilded, his face was painted red, white and yellow; he wore ropes of bright-coloured stones about his neck, middle, arms and ankles, and held a kind of sceptre in his hand.

"Who is that creature?" asked Alan over his shoulder to Jeekie. "The Court fool?"

"That husband of Asika, Major. He not fool, very big gun, but look a little low now because his time soon up. Come on, Major, Asika beckon us. Get on stomach and crawl; that custom here," he added, going down on to his hands and knees, as did all the priests who followed them.

"I'll see her hanged first," answered Alan in English.

Then accompanied by the creeping Jeekie and the train of prostrate priests, he marched up the long hall to the edge of the dais and there stood still and bowed to the woman in the chair.

"Greeting, white man," she said in a low voice when she had studied him for a while. "Do you understand my tongue?"

"A little," he answered in Asiki, "moreover, my servant here knows it well and can translate."

"I am glad," she said. "Tell me then, in your country do not people go on to their knees before their queen, and if not, how do they greet her?"

"No," answered Alan with the help of Jeekie. "They greet her by raising their head-dress or kissing her hand."

"Ah!" she said. "Well, you have no head-dress, so kiss my hand," and she stretched it out towards him, at the same time prodding the man whom Jackie had said was her husband, in the back with her foot, apparently to make him get out of the way.

Not knowing what to do, Alan stepped on to the dais, the painted man scowling at him as he passed. Then he halted and said:

"How can I kiss your hand through this mask, Asika?"

"True," she answered, then considered a little and added, "White man, you have brought back Little Bansa, have you not, Little Bansa who ran away with you a great many years ago?"

"I have," he said, ignoring the rest of the question.

"Your messengers said that you required a present of gold in return for Little Bonsa. I have sent you one, is it sufficient? If not, you can have more."

"I cannot say, O Asika, I have not examined it. But I thank you for the present and desire porters to enable me to carry it away."

"You desire porters," she repeated meditatively. "We will talk of that when you have rested here a moon or two. Meanwhile, give me Little Bonsa that she may be restored to her own place."

Alan opened the tin box and lifting out the fetish, gave it to the priestess, who took it and with a serpentine movement of extraordinary grace glided from her chair on to her knees, holding the mask above her head in both hands, then thrice covered her face with it. This done, she called to the priests, bidding them take Little Bonsa to her own place and give notice throughout the land that she was back again. She added that the ancient Feast of Little Bonsa would be held on the night of the full moon within three days, and that all preparations must be made for it as she had commanded.

Then the head medicine-man, raising himself upon his knees, crept on to the dais, took the fetish from her hands, and breaking into a wild song of triumph, he and his companions crawled down the hall and vanished through the door, leaving them alone save for the Asika's husband.



When they had gone the Asika looked at this man in a reflective way, and Alan looked at him also through the eyeholes of his mask, finding him well worth studying. As has been said, notwithstanding his paint and grotesque decorations, he was very good-looking for a native, with well-cut features of an Arab type. Also he was tall and muscular and not more than thirty years of age. What struck Alan most, however, was none of these things, nor his jewelled chains, nor even his gilded pigtail, but his eyes, which were full of terrors. Seeing them, Alan remembered Jeekie's story, which he had told to Mr. Haswell's guests at The Court, of how the husband of the Asika was driven mad by ghosts.

Just then she spoke to the man, addressing him by name and saying:

"Leave us alone, Mungana, I wish to speak with this white lord."

He did not seem to hear her words, but continued to stare at Alan.

"Hearken!" she exclaimed in a voice of ice. "Do my bidding and begone, or you shall sleep alone to-night in a certain chamber that you know of."

Then Mungana rose, looked at her as a dog sometimes does at a cruel master who is about to beat it, yes, with just that same expression, put his hands before his eyes for a little while, and turning, left the hall by a side door which closed behind him. The Asika watched him go, laughed musically and said:

"It is a very dull thing to be married,--but how are you named, white man?"

"Vernon," he answered.

"Vernoon, Vernoon," she repeated, for she could not pronounce the O as we do. "Are you married, Vernoon?"

He shook his head.

"Have you been married?"

"No," he answered, "never, but I am going to be."

"Yes," she repeated, "you are going to be. You remember that you were near to it many years ago, when Little Bonsa got jealous and ran away with you. Well, she won't do that again, for doubtless she is tired of you now, and besides," she added with a flash of ferocity, "I'd melt her with fire first and set her spirit free."

While Jeekie was trying to explain this mysterious speech to Alan, the Asika broke in, asking:

"Do you always want to wear that mask?"

He answered, "Certainly not," whereon she bade Jeekie take it off, which he did.

"Understand me," she said, fixing her great languid eyes upon his in a fashion that made him exceedingly uncomfortable, "understand, Vernoon, that if you go out anywhere, it must be in your mask, which you can only put off when you are alone with me?"

"Why?"

"Because, Vernoon, I do not choose that any other woman should see your face. If a woman looks upon your uncovered face, remember that she dies--not nicely."

Alan stared at her blankly, being unable to find appropriate Asiki words in which to reply to this threat. But the Asika only leaned back in her chair and laughed at his evident confusion and dismay, till a new thought struck her.

"Your lips are free now," she said; "kiss my hand after the fashion of your own country," and she stretched it out to Alan, leaving him no choice but to obey her.

"Why," she went on mischievously, taking his hand and in turn touching it with her red lips, "why, are you a thief, Vernoon? That ring was mine and you have stolen it. How did you steal that ring?"

"I don't know," he answered, through Jeekie, "I found it on my finger. I cannot understand how it came there. I understand nothing of all this talk."

"Well, well, keep it, Vernoon, only give me that other ring of yours in exchange."

"I cannot," he replied, colouring. "I promised to wear it always."

"Whom did you promise?" she asked with a flash of rage. "Was it a woman? Nay, I see, it is a man's ring, and that is well, for otherwise I would bring a curse on her, however far off she may be dwelling. Say no more and forgive my anger. A vow is a vow--keep your ring. But where is that one you used to wear in bygone days? I recall that it had a cross upon it, not this star and figure of an eagle."

Now Alan remembered that his uncle owned such a ring with a cross upon it, and was frightened, for how did this woman know these things?

"Jeekie," he said, "ask the Asika if I am mad, or if she is. How can she know what I used to wear, seeing that I was never in this place till yesterday, and certainly I have not met her anywhere else."

"She mean when you your reverend uncle," said Jeekie, wagging his great head, "she think you identical man."

"What troubles you, Vernoon," the Asika asked softly, then added anything but softly to Jeekie, "Translate, you dog, and be swift."

So Jeekie translated in a great hurry, telling her what Alan had said, and adding on his own account that he, silly white man that he was, could not understand how, as she was quite a young woman, she could have seen him before she was born. If that were so, she would be old and ugly now, not beautiful as she was.

"I never saw you before, and you never saw me, Lady, yet you talk as though we had been friends," broke in Alan in his halting Asiki.

"So we were in the spirit, Vernoon. It was she who went before me who loved that white man whose face was as your face is, but her ghost lives on in me and tells me the tale. There have been many Asikas, for thousands of years they have ruled in this land, yet but one spirit belongs to them all; it is the string upon which the beads of their lives are threaded. White man, I, whom you think young, know everything back to the beginning of the world, back to the time when I was a monkey woman sitting in those cedar trees, and if you wish, I can tell it you."

"I should like to hear it very much indeed," answered Alan, when he had mastered her meaning, "though it is strange that none of the rest of us remember such things. Meanwhile, O Asika, I will tell you that I desire to return to my own land, taking with me that gift of gold that you have

given me. When will it please you to allow me to return?"

"Not yet a while, I think," she said, smiling at him weirdly, for no other word will describe that smile. "My spirit remembers that it was always thus. Those wanderers who came hither always wished to return again to their own country, like the birds in spring. Once there was a white man among them, that was more than twenty hundred years ago; he was a native of a country called Roma, and wore a helmet. He wished to return, but my mother of that day, she kept him and by and by I will show him to you if you like. Before that there was a brown man who came from a land where a great river overflows its banks every year. He was a prince of his own country, who had fled from his king and the desert folk made a slave of him, and so he drifted hither. He wished to return also, for my mother of that day, or my spirit that dwelt in her, showed to him that if he could but be there they would make him king in his own land. But my mother of that day, she would not let him go, and by and by I will show him to you, if you wish."

Bewildered, amazed, Alan listened to her. Evidently the woman was mad, or else she played some mystical part for reasons of her own.

"When will you let me go, O Asika?" he repeated.

"Not yet a while, I think," she said again. "You are too comely and I like you," and she smiled at him. There was nothing coarse in the smile, indeed it had a certain spiritual quality which thrilled him. "I like

you," she went on in her dreamy voice, "I would keep you with me until your spirit is drawn up into my spirit, making it strong and rich as all the spirits that went before have done, those spirits that my mothers loved from the beginning, which dwell in me to-day."

Now Alan grew alarmed, desperate even.

"Queen," he said, "but just now your husband sat here, is it right then that you should talk to me thus?"

"My husband," she answered, laughing. "Why, that man is but a slave who plays the part of husband to satisfy an ancient law. Never has he so much as kissed my finger tips; my women--those who waited on you last night--are his wives, not I,--or may be, if he will. Soon he will die of love for me, and then when he is dead, though not before, I may take another husband, any husband that I choose, and I think that no black man shall be my lord, who have other, purer blood in me. Vernoon, five centuries have gone by since an Asika was really wed to a foreign man who wore a green turban and called himself a son of the Prophet, a man with a hooked nose and flashing eyes, who reviled our gods until they slew him, even though he was the beloved of their priestess. She who went before me also would have married that white man whose face was like your face, but he fled with Little Bansa, or rather Little Bansa fled with him. So she passed away unwed, and in her place I came."

"How did you come, if she whom you call your mother was not your

mother?" asked Alan.

"What is that to you, white man?" she replied haughtily. "I am here, as my spirit has been here from the first. Oh! I see you think I lie to you, come then, come, and I will show you those who from the beginning have been the husbands of the Asika," and rising from her chair she took him by the hand.

They went through doors and by long, half-lit passages till they came to great gates guarded by old priests armed with spears. As they drew near to these priests the Asika loosed a scarf that she wore over her breast-plate of gold fish scales, and threw the star-spangled thing over Alan's head, that even these priests should not see his face. Then she spoke a word to them and they opened the gates. Here Jeekie evinced a disposition to remain, remarking to his master that he thought that place, into which he had never entered, "much too holy for poor nigger like him."

The Asika asked him what he had said and he explained his sense of unworthiness in her own tongue.

"Come, fellow," she exclaimed, "to translate my words and to bear witness that no trick is played upon your lord."

Still Jeekie lingered bashfully, whereon at a sign from her one of the priests pricked him behind with his great spear, and uttering a low howl



he sprang forward.

The Asika led the way down a passage, which they saw ended in a big hall lit with lamps. Now they were in it and Alan became aware that they had entered the treasure house of the Asiki, since here were piled up great heaps of gold, gold in ingots, gold in nuggets, in stone jars filled with dust, in vessels plain or embossed with monstrous shapes in fetishes and in little squares and discs that looked as though they had served as coins. Never had he seen so much gold before.

"You are rich here, Lady," he said, gazing at the piles astonished.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Yes, as I have heard that some people count wealth. These are the offerings brought to our gods from the beginning; also all the gold found in the mountains belongs to the gods, and there is much of it there. The gift I sent to you was taken from this heap, but in truth it is but a poor gift, seeing that although this stuff is bright and serves for cups and other things, it has no use at all and is only offered to the gods because it is harder to come by than other metals. Look, these are prettier than the gold," and from a stone table she picked up at hazard a long necklace of large, uncut stones, red and white in colour and set alternatively, that Alan judged to be crystals and spinels.

"Take it," she said, "and examine it at your leisure. It is very old.

For hundreds of years no more of these necklaces have been made," and

with a careless movement she threw the chain over his head so that it hung upon his shoulders.

Alan thanked her, then remembered that the man called Mungana, who was the husband, real or official, of this priestess, had been somewhat similarly adorned, and shivered a little as though at a presage of advancing fate. Still he did not return the thing, fearing lest he should give offence.

At this moment his attention was taken from the treasure by the sound of a groan behind him. Turning round he perceived Jeekie, his great eyes rolling as though in an extremity of fear.

"Oh my golly! Major," he ejaculated, pointing to the wall, "look there."

Alan looked, but at first in that dim light could only discover long rows of gleaming objects which reached from the floor to the roof.

"Come and see," said the Asika, and taking a lamp from that table on which lay the gems, she led him past the piles of gold to one side of the vault or hall. Then he saw, and although he did not show it, like Jeekie he was afraid.

For there, each in his own niche and standing one above the other, were what looked like hundreds of golden men with gleaming eyes. At first until the utter stillness undeceived him, he thought that they must be

men. Then he understood that this was what they had been; now they were corpses wrapped in sheets of thin gold and wearing golden masks with eyes of crystal, each mask being beaten out to a hideous representation of the man in life.

"All these are the husbands of my spirit," said the priestess, waving the lamp in front of the lowest row of them, "Munganas who were married to the Asikas in the past. Look, here is he who said that he ought to be king of that rich land where year after year the river overflows its banks," and going to one of the first of the figures in the bottom row, she drew out a fastening and suffered the gold mask to fall forward on a hinge, exposing the face within.

Although it had evidently been treated with some preservative, this head now was little more than a skull still covered with dark hair, but set upon its brow appeared an object that Alan recognized at once, a simple band of plain gold, and rising from it the head of an asp. Without doubt it was the uraeus, that symbol which only the royalties of Old Egypt dared to wear. Without doubt also either this man had brought it with him from the Nile, or in memory of his rank and home he had fashioned it of the gold that was so plentiful in the place of his captivity. So this woman's story was true, an ancient Egyptian had once been husband to the Asika of his day.

Meanwhile his guide had passed a long way down the line and halting in front of another gold-wrapped figure, opened its mask.

"This is that man," she said, "who told us he came from a land called Roma. Look, the helmet still rests upon his head, though time has eaten into it, and that ring upon your hand was taken from his finger. I have a head-dress made upon the model of that helmet which I wear sometimes in memory of this man who, my soul remembers, was brave and pleasant and a gallant lover."

"Indeed," answered Alan, looking at the sunken face above which a rim of curls appeared beneath the rusting helmet. "Well, he doesn't look very gallant now, does he?" Then he peered down between the body and its gold casing and saw that in his body hand the man still held a short Roman sword, lifted as though in salute. So she had not lied in this matter either.

Meanwhile the Asika had glided on to the end of the hall behind the heaps of treasure.

"There is one more white man," she said, "though we know little of him, for he was fierce and barbarous and died without learning our tongue, after killing a great number of the priests of that day because they would not let him go; yes, died cutting them down with a battle-axe and singing some wild song of his own country. Come hither, slave, and bend yourself so, resting your hands upon the ground."

Jeekie obeyed, and actively as a cat the priestess leaped on to his

back, and reaching up opened the mask of a corpse in the second row and held her lamp before its face.

It was better preserved than the others, so that its features remained comparatively perfect, and about them hung a tangle of golden hair. Moreover, a broad battle-axe appeared resting on the shoulder.

"A viking," thought Alan. "I wonder how he came here."

When he had looked the Asika leaped from Jeekie's back to the ground and waving her arm around her, began to talk so rapidly that Alan could understand nothing of her words, and asked Jeekie to translate them.

"She say," explained Jeekie between his chattering teeth, "that all rest these Johnnies very poor crew, natives and that lot except one who worship false Prophet and cut throat of Asika of that time, because she infidel and he teach her better; also eat his dinner out of Little Bonsa and chuck her into water. Very wild man, that Arab, but priests catch him at last and fill him with hot gold before Little Bonsa because he no care a damn for ghosts. So he die saying Hip, hip, hurrah! for houri and green field of Prophet and to hell with Asika and Bonsa, Big and Little! Now he sit up there and at night time worst ghost of all the crowd, always come to finish off Mungana. That all she say, and quite enough too. Come on quick, she want you and no like wait."

By now the Asika had passed almost round the hall, and was standing

opposite to an empty niche beyond and above which there were perhaps a score of bodies gold-plated in the usual fashion.

"That is your place, Vernoon," she said gently, contemplating him with her soft and heavy eyes, "for it was prepared for the white man with whom Little Bonsa fled away, and since then, as you see, there have been many Munganas, some of whom belong to me; indeed, that one," and she touched a corpse on which the gold looked very fresh, "only left me last year. But we always knew that Little Bonsa would bring you back again, and so you see, we have kept your place empty."

"Indeed," remarked Alan, "that is very kind of you," and feeling that he would faint if he stayed longer in this horrible and haunted vault, he pushed past her with little ceremony and walked out through the gates into the passage beyond.