

CHAPTER XII

THE GOLD HOUSE

"How you like Asiki-land, Major?" asked Jeekie, who had followed him and was now leaning against a wall fanning himself feebly with his great hand. "Funny place, isn't it, Major? I tell you so before you come, but you no believe me."

"Very funny," answered Alan, "so funny that I want to get out."

"Ah! Major, that what eel say in trap where he go after lob-worm, but he only get out into frying pan after cook skin him alive-o. Ah! here come cook--I mean Asika. She only stop shut up those stiff 'uns, who all love lob-worm one day. Very pretty woman, Asika, but thank God she not set cap at me, who like to be buried in open like Christian man."

"If you don't stop it, Jeekie," replied Alan in a concentrated rage, "I'll see that you are buried just where you are."

"No offence, Major, no offence, my heart full and bubble up. I wonder what Miss Barbara say if she see you mooing and cooing with dark-eyed girl in gold snake skin?"

Just then the Asika arrived and by way of excuse for his flight, Alan remarked to her that the treasure-hall was hot.

"I did not notice it," she answered, "but he who is called my husband, Mungana, says the same. The Mungana is guardian of the dead," she explained, "and when he is required so to do, he sleeps in the Place of the Treasure and gathers wisdom from the spirits of those Munganas who were before him."

"Indeed. And does he like that bed-chamber?"

"The Mungana likes what I like, not what he likes," she replied haughtily. "Where I send him to sleep, there he sleeps. But come, Vernoon, and I will show you the Holy Water where Big Bansa dwells; also the house in which I have my home, where you shall visit me when you please."

"Who built this place?" asked Alan as she led him through more dark and tortuous passages. "It is very great."

"My spirit does not remember when it was built, Vernoon, so old is it, but I think that the Asiki were once a big and famous people who traded to the water upon the west, and even to the water on the east, and that was how those white men became their slaves and the Munganas of their queens. Now they are small and live only by the might and fame of Big and Little Bansa, not half filling the rich land which is theirs. But," she added reflectively and looking at him, "I think also that this is because in the past fools have been thrust upon my spirit as Munganas."

What it needs is the wisdom of the white man, such wisdom as yours, Vernoon. If that were added to my magic, then the Asiki would grow great again, seeing that they have in such plenty the gold which you have shown me the white man loves. Yes, they would grow great and from coast to coast the people should bow at the name of Bonsa and send him their sons for sacrifice. Perhaps you will live to see that day, Vernoon.

Slave," she added, addressing Jeekie, "set the mask upon your lord's head, for we come where women are."

Alan objected, but she stamped her foot and said it must be so, having once worn Little Bonsa, as her people told her he had done, his naked face might not be seen. So Alan submitted to the hideous head-dress and they entered the Asika's house by some back entrance.

It was a place with many rooms in it, but they were all remarkable for extreme simplicity. With a single exception no gilding or gold was to be seen, although the food vessels were made of this material here as everywhere. The chambers, including those in which the Asika lived and slept, were panelled, or rather boarded with cedar wood that was almost black with age, and their scanty furniture was mostly made of ebony. They were very insufficiently lighted, like his own room, by means of barred openings set high in the wall. Indeed gloom and mystery were the keynotes of this place, amongst the shadows of which handsome, half-naked servants or priestesses flitted to and fro at their tasks, or peered at them out of dark corners. The atmosphere seemed heavy with secret sin; Alan felt that in those rooms unnameable crimes and

cruelties had been committed for hundreds or perhaps thousands of years, and that the place was yet haunted by the ghosts of them. At any rate it struck a chill to his healthy blood, more even than had that Hall of the Dead and of heaped-up golden treasure.

"Does my house please you?" the Asika asked of him.

"Not altogether," he answered, "I think it is dark."

"From the beginning my spirit has ever loved the dark, Vernoon. I think that it was shaped in some black midnight."

They passed through the chief entrance of the house which had pillars of woodwork grotesquely carved, down some steps into a walled and roofed-in yard where the shadows were even more dense than in the house they had left. Only at one spot was there light flowing down through a hole in the roof, as it did apparently in that hall where Alan had found the Asika sitting in state. The light fell on to a pedestal or column made of gold which was placed behind an object like a large Saxon font, also made of gold. The shape of this column reminded Alan of something, namely of a very similar column, although fashioned of a different material which stood in the granite-built office of Messrs. Aylward & Haswell in the City of London. Nor did this seem wonderful to him, since on top of it, squatting on its dwarf legs, stood a horrid but familiar thing, namely Little Bansa herself come home at last. There she sat smiling cruelly, as she had smiled from the beginning, forgetful

doubtless of her wanderings in strange lands, while round her stood a band of priests armed with spears.

Followed by the Asika and Jeekie, Alan walked up and looked her in the face and to his excited imagination she appeared to grin at him in answer. Then while the priests prostrated themselves, he examined the golden basin or laver, and saw that at the further side of it was a little platform approached by steps. On the top of these golden steps were two depressions such as might have been worn out in the course of ages by persons kneeling there. Also the flat edge of the basin which stood about thirty inches above the level of the topmost step, was scored as though by hundreds of sword cuts which had made deep lines in the pure metal. The basin itself was empty.

Seeing that these things interested him, the Asika volunteered the information through Jeekie, that this was a divining-bowl, and that if those who went before her had wished to learn the future, they caused Little Bonsa to float in it and found out all they wanted to know by her movements. She, however, she added, had other and better methods of learning things that were predestined.

"Where does the water come from?" asked Alan thoughtlessly searching the bowl for some tap or inlet.

"Out of the hearts of men," she answered with a low and dreadful laugh.

"These marks are those of swords and every one of them means a life."

Then seeing that he looked incredulous she added, "Stay, I will show you. Little Bonga must be thirsty who has fasted so long, also there are matters that I desire to know. Come hither--you, and you," and she pointed at hazard to the two priests who knelt nearest to her, "and do you bid the executioner bring his axe," she went on to a third.

The dark faces of the men turned ashen, but they made no effort to escape their doom. One of them crept up the steps and laid his neck upon the edge of gold, while the other, uttering no word, threw himself on his face at the foot of them, waiting his turn. Then a door opened and there appeared a great and brutal-looking fellow, naked except for a loin cloth, who bore in his hand a huge weapon, half knife and half axe.

First he looked at the Asika, who nodded almost imperceptibly, then sprang on to a prolongation of the golden steps, bowed to Little Bonga on her column behind and heaved up his knife.

Now for the first time Alan really understood what was about to happen, and that what he had imagined a stage rehearsal, was to become a hideous murder.

"Stop!" he shouted in English, being unable to remember the native word.

The executioner paused with his axe poised in mid-air; the victim turned his head and looked, as though surprised; the second victim and the priests their companions looked also. Jeekie fell on to his knees and

burst into fervent prayer addressed apparently to Little Bonsa. The Asika smiled and did nothing.

Again the weapon was lifted and as he felt that words were no longer of any use, even if he could find them, Alan took refuge in action. Springing on to the other side of the little platform, he hit out with all his strength across the kneeling man. Catching the executioner on the point of the chin, he knocked him straight backwards in such fashion that his head struck upon the floor before any other portion of his body, so that he lay there either dead or stunned. Alan never learned which, since the matter was not thought of sufficient importance to be mentioned.

At this sight the Asika burst into a low laugh, then asked Alan why he had felled the executioner. He answered because he would not stand by and see two innocent men butchered.

"Why not," she said in an astonished voice; "if Little Bonsa, whose priests they are, needs them, and I, who am the Mouth of the gods declare that they should die? Still, she has been in your keeping for a long while and you may know her will, so if you wish it, let them live. Or perhaps you require other victims," and she fixed her eyes upon Jeekie with a glance of suggestive hope.

"Oh my golly!" gasped Jeekie in English, "tell her not for Joe, Major, tell her most improper. Say Yellow God my dearest friend and go mad as

hatter if my throat cut----"

Alan stopped his protestations with a secret kick.

"I choose no victims," he broke in, "nor will I see man's blood shed--to me it is orunda--unholy; I may not look on human blood, and if you cause me to do so, Asika, I shall hate you because you make me break my oath."

The Asika reflected for a moment, while Jeekie behind muttered between his chattering teeth:

"Good missionary talk that, Major. Keep up word in season, Major. If she make Christian martyr of Jeekie, who get you out of this confounded hole?"

Then the Asika spoke.

"Be it as you will, for I desire neither that you should hate me, nor that you should look on that which is unlawful for your eyes to see. The feasts and ceremonies you must attend, but if I can help it, no victim shall be slain in your presence, not even that whimpering hound, your servant," she added with a contemptuous glance at Jeekie, "who it seems, fears to give his life for the glory of the god, but who because he is yours, is safe now and always."

"That very satisfactory," said Jeekie, rising from his knees, his face wreathed in smiles, for he knew well that a decree of the Asika could not be broken. Then he began to explain to the priestess that it was not fear of losing his own life that had moved him, but the certainty that this occurrence would disagree morally with Little Bonsa, whose entire confidence he possessed.

Taking no notice of his words, with a slight reverence to the fetish, she passed on, beckoning to Alan. As he went by the two prostrate priests whose lives he had saved, lifted their heads a little and looked at him with heartfelt gratitude in their eyes; indeed one of them kissed the place where his foot had trodden. Jeekie, following, gave him a kick to intimate that he was taking a liberty, but at the same time stooped down and asked the man his name. It occurred to him that these rescued priests might some day be useful.

Alan followed her through a kind of swing door which opened into another of the endless halls, but when he looked for her there she was nowhere to be seen. A priest who was waiting beyond the door bowed and informed him that the Asika had gone to her own place, and would see him that evening. Then bowing again he led them back by various passages to the room where they had slept.

"Jeekie," said Alan after their food had been brought to them, this time, he observed, by men, for it was now past midday, "you were born in Asiki-land; tell me the truth of this business. What does that

woman mean when she talks about her spirit having been here from the beginning."

"She mean, Major, that every time she die her soul go into someone else, whom priests find out by marks. Also Asika always die young, they never let her become old woman, but how she die and where they bury her, no one know 'cept priests. Sometimes she have girl child who become Asika after her, but if they have boy child, they kill him. I think this Asika daughter of her who make love to your reverend uncle. All that story 'bout her mother not being married, lies, and all her story lies too, she often marry."

"But how about the spirit coming back, Jeekie?"

"Spect that lie too, Major, though she think it solemn fact. Priests teach her all those old things. Still," he added doubtfully, "Asika great medicine-woman and know a lot we don't know, can't say how. Very awkward customer, Major."

"Quite so, Jeekie, I agree with you. But to come to the point, what is her game with me?"

"Oh! Major," he answered with a grin, "that simple enough. She tired of black man, want change, mean to marry you according to law, that is when Mungana dies, and he die jolly quick now. She mustn't kill him, but polish him off all the same, stick him to sleep with those dead uns,

till he go like drunk man and see things and drown himself. Then she marry you. But till he dead, you all right, she only talk and make eyes, 'cause of Asiki law, not 'cause she want to stop there."

"Indeed, Jeekie, and how long do you think that Mungana will last?"

"Perhaps three months, Major, and perhaps two. Think not more than two. Strong man, but he look devilish dicky this morning. Think he begin see snakes."

"Very well, Jeekie. Now listen to me--you've got to get us out of Asiki-land by this day two months. If you don't, that lady will do anything to oblige me and no doubt there are more executioners left."

"Oh! Major, don't talk like silly fool. Jeekie always hate fools and suffer them badly--like holy first missionary bishop. You know very well this no place for ultra-Christian man like Jeekie, who only come here to please you. Both in same bag, Major, if I die, you die and leave Miss Barbara up gum tree. I get you out if I can. But this stuff the trouble," and he pointed to the bags of gold. "Not want to leave all that behind after such arduous walk. No, no, I try get you out, meanwhile you play game."

"The game! What game, Jeekie?"

"What game? Why, Asika-game of course. If she sigh, you sigh; if she

look at you, you look at her; if she squeeze hand, you squeeze hand; if she kiss, you kiss."

"I am hanged if I do, Jeekie."

"Must, Major; must or never get out of Asiki-land. What all that matter?" he added confidentially. "Miss Barbara never know. Jeekie doesn't split, also quite necessary in situation, and you can't be married till that Mungana dead. All matter business, Major; make time pass pleasant as well. Asika jolly enough if you stroke her fur right way, but if you put her back up--oh Lor! No trouble, sit and smile and say, 'Oh, ducky, how beautiful you are!' that not hurt anybody."

In spite of himself Alan burst out laughing.

"But how about the Mungana?" he asked.

"Mungana, he got take that with rest. Also I try make friends with that poor devil. Tell him it all my eye. Perhaps he believe me--not sure. If he me, I no believe him. Mungana," he added oracularly, "Mungana take his chance. What matter? In two months' time he nothing but gold figure, No. 2403; just like one mummy in museum. Now I try catch my ma. I hear she alive somewhere. They tell me she used keep lodging house for Bona pilgrim, but steal grub, say it cat, all that sort of thing, and get run in as thief. Afraid my ma come down very much in world, not society lady now, shut up long way off in suburb. Still p'raps she useful so best

send her message by p'liceman, say how much I love her; say her dear little Jeekie turn up again just to see her sweet face. Only don't know if she swallow that or if they let her out prison unless I pay for all she prig."