

CHAPTER XIV

THE MOTHER OF JEEKIE

"Jeekie," said Alan next morning, "I tell you again that I have had enough of this place, I want to get out."

"Yes, Major, that just what mouse say when he finish cheese in trap, but missus come along, call him 'Pretty, pretty,' and drown him all the same," and he nodded in the direction of the Asika's house.

"Jeekie, it has got to be done--do you hear me? I had rather die trying to get away than stop here till the next two months are up. If I am here on the night of the next full moon but one, I shall shoot that Asika and then shoot myself, and you must take your chance. Do you understand?"

"Understand that foolish game and poor lookout for Jeekie, Major, but can't think of any plan." Then he rubbed his big nose reflectively and added, "Fahni and his people your slaves now, 'spose we have talk with him. I tell priests to bring him along when they come with breakfast. Leave it to me, Major."

Alan did leave it to him, with the result that after long argument the priests consented or obtained permission to produce Fahni and his followers, and a little while after the great men arrived looking very dejected, and saluted Alan humbly. Bidding the rest of them be seated,

he called Fahni to the end of the room and asked him through Jeekie if he and his men did not wish to return home.

"Indeed we do, white lord," answered the old chief, "but how can we? The Asika has a grudge against our tribe and but for you would have killed every one of us last night. We are snared and must stop here till we die."

"Would not your people help you if they knew, Fahni?"

"Yes, lord, I think so. But how can I tell them who doubtless believe us dead? Nor can I send a messenger, for this place is guarded and he would be killed at once. We came here for your sake because you had Little Bonsa, a god that is known in the east and the west, in the north and the south, and because you saved me from the lion, and here, alas! we must perish."

"Jeekie," said Alan, "can you not find a messenger? Have you, who were born of this people, no friend among them at all?"

Jeekie shook his white head and rolled his eyes. Then suddenly an idea struck him.

"Yes," he said, "I think one, p'raps. I mean my ma."

"Your ma!" said Alan. "Oh! I remember. Have you heard anything more

about her?"

"Yes, Major. Very old girl now, but strong on leg, so they say. Believe she glad go anywhere, because she public nuisance; they tired of her in prison and there no workhouse here, so they want turn her out starve, which of course break my heart. Perhaps she take message. Some use that way. Only think she afraid go Ogula-land because they nasty cannibal and eat old woman."

When all this was translated to Fahni he assured Jeekie with earnestness that nothing would induce the Ogula people to eat his mother; moreover, that for her sake they would never look carnivorously on another old woman, fat or thin.

"Well," said Jeekie, "I try again to get hold of old lady and we see. I pray priests, whom you save other day, let her out of chokey as I sick to fall upon bosom, which quite true, only so much to think of that no time to attend to domestic relation till now."

That very afternoon, on returning to his room from walking in the dismal cedar garden, Alan's ears were greeted by a sound of shrill quarrelling. Looking up he saw an extraordinary sight. A tall, gaunt, withered female who might have been of any age between sixty and a hundred, had got Jeekie's ear in one hand, and with the other was slapping him in the face while she exclaimed:

"O thief, whom by the curse of Bonsa I brought into the world, what have you done with my blanket? Was it not enough that you, my only son, should leave me to earn my own living? Must you also take my best blanket with you, for which reason I have been cold ever since. Where is it, thief, where is it?"

"Worn out, my mother, worn out," he answered, trying to free himself. "You forget, honourable mother, that I grow old and you should have been dead years ago. How can you expect a blanket to last so long? Leave go of my ear, beloved mother, and I will give you another. I have travelled across the world to find you and I want to hear news of your husband."

"My husband, thief, which husband? Do you mean your father, the one with the broken nose, who was sacrificed because you ran away with the white man whom Bonsa loved? Well, you look out for him when you get into the world of ghosts, for he said that he was going to wait for you there with the biggest stick that he could find. Why I haven't thought of him for years, but then I have had three other husbands since his time, bad enough, but better than he was, so who would? And now Bonsa has got the lot, and I have no children alive, and they say I am to be driven out of the prison to starve next week as they won't feed me any longer, I who can still work against any one of them, and--you've got my blanket, you ugly old rascal," and collapsing beneath the weight of her recited woes, the hag burst into a melancholy howl.

"Peace, my mother," said Jeekie, patting her on the head. "Do what I

tell you and you shall have more blankets than you can wear and, as you are still so handsome, another husband too if you like, and a garden and slaves to work for you and plenty to eat."

"How shall I get all these things, my son?" asked the old woman, looking up. "Will you take me to your home and support me, or will that white lord marry me? They told me that the Asika had named him as the Mungana, and she is very jealous, the most jealous Asika that I have ever known."

"No, mother, he would like to, but he dare not, and I cannot support you as I should wish, as here I have no house or property. You will get all this by taking a walk and holding your tongue. You see this man here, he is Fahni, king of a great tribe, the Ogula. He wants you to carry a message for him, and by and by he will marry you, won't you, Fahni?"

"Oh! yes, yes," said Fahni; "I will do anything she likes. No one shall be so rich and honoured in my country, and for her sake we will never eat another old woman, whereas if she stays here she will be driven to the mountains to starve in a week."

"Set out the matter," said the mother of Jeekie, who was by no means so foolish as she seemed.

So they told her what she must do, namely, travel down to the Ogula and tell them of the plight of their chief, bidding them muster all their fighting men and when the swamps were dry enough, advance as near as

they dared to the Asiki country and, if they could not attack it, wait till they had further news.

The end of it was that the mother of Jeekie, who knew her case to be desperate at home, where she was in no good repute, promised to attempt the journey in consideration of advantages to be received. Since she was to be turned adrift to meet her fate with as much food as she could carry, this she could do without exciting any suspicion, for who would trouble about the movements of a useless old thief? Meanwhile Jeekie gave her one of the robes which the Asika had provided for Alan, also various articles which she desired and, having learned Fahni's message by heart and announced that she considered herself his affianced bride, the gaunt old creature departed happy enough after exchanging embraces with her long lost son.

"She will tell somebody all about it and we shall only get our throats cut," said Alan wearily, for the whole thing seemed to him a foolish farce.

"No, no, Major. I make her swear not split on ghosts of all her husbands and by Big Bonsa hisself. She sit tight as wax, because she think they haunt her if she don't and I too by and by when I dead. P'raps she get to Ogula country and p'raps not. If she don't, can't help it and no harm done. Break my heart, but only one old woman less. Anyhow she hold tongue, that main point, and I really very glad find my ma, who never hoped to see again. Heaven very kind to Jeekie, give him back to family

bosom," he added, unctuously.

That day there were no excitements, and to Alan's intense relief he saw nothing of the Asika. After its orgy of witchcraft and bloodshed on the previous night, weariness and silence seemed to have fallen upon the town. At any rate no sound came from it that could be heard above the low, constant thunder of the great waterfall rushing down its precipice, and in the cedar-shadowed garden where Alan walked till he was weary, attended by Jeekie and the Ogula savages, not a soul was to be seen.

On the following morning, when he was sitting moodily in his room, two priests came to conduct him to the Asika. Having no choice, followed by Jeekie, he accompanied them to her house, masked as usual, for without this hateful disguise he was not allowed to stir. He found her lying upon a pile of cushions in a small room that he had never seen before, which was better lighted than most in that melancholy abode, and seemed to serve as her private chamber. In front of her lay the skin of the lion that he had sent as a present, and about her throat hung a necklace made of its claws, heavily set in gold, with which she was playing idly.

At the opening of the door she looked up with a swift smile that turned to a frown when she saw that he was followed by Jeekie.

"Say, Vernoon," she asked in her languorous voice, "can you not stir a yard without that ugly black dog at your heels? Do you bring him to protect your back? If so, what is the need? Have I not sworn that you

are safe in my land?"

Alan made Jeekie interpret this speech, then answered that the reason was that he knew but little of her tongue.

"Can I not teach it to you alone, then, without this low fellow hearing all my words? Well, it will not be for long," and she looked at Jeekie in a way that made him feel very uncomfortable. "Get behind us, dog, and you, Vernoon, come sit on these cushions at my side. Nay, not there, I said upon the cushions--so. Now I will take off that ugly mask of yours, for I would look into your eyes. I find them pleasant, Vernoon," and without waiting for his permission, she sat up and did so. "Ah!" she went on, "we shall be happy when we are married, shall we not? Do not be afraid, Vernoon, I will not eat out your heart as I have those of the men that went before you. We will live together until we are old, and die together at last, and together be born again, and so on and on till the end which even I cannot foresee. Why do you not smile, Vernoon, and say that you are pleased, and that you will be happy with me who loved you from the moment that my eyes fell upon you in sleep? Speak, Vernoon, lest I should grow angry with you."

"I don't know what to say," answered Alan despairingly through Jeekie, "the honour is too great for me, who am but a wandering trader who came here to barter Little Bonsa against the gold I need"--to support my wife and family, he was about to add, then remembering that this statement might not be well received, substituted, "to support my old parents and

eight brothers and sisters who are dependent upon me, and remain hungry until I return to them."

"Then I think they will remain hungry a long time, Vernoon, for while I live you shall never return. Much as I love you I would kill you first," and her eyes glittered as she said the words. "Still," she added, noting the fall in his face, "if it is gold that they need, you shall send it them. Yes, my people shall take all that I gave you down to the coast, and there it can be put in a big canoe and carried across the water. See to the packing of the stuff, you black dog," she said to Jeekie over her shoulder, "and when it is ready I will send it hence."

Alan began to thank her, though he thought it more than probable that even if she kept her word, this bullion would never get to Old Calabar, and much less to England. But she waived the matter aside as one in which she was not interested.

"Tell me," she asked; "would you have me other than I am? First, do you think me beautiful?"

"Yes," answered Alan honestly, "very beautiful when you are quiet as now, not when you are dancing as you did the other night without your robes."

When she understood what he meant the Asika actually blushed a little.

"I am sorry," she answered in a voice that for her was quite humble. "I forget that it might seem strange in your eyes. It has always been the custom for the Asika to do as I did at feasts and sacrifices, but perhaps that is not the fashion among your women; perhaps they always remain veiled, as I have heard the worshippers of the Prophet do, and therefore you thought me immodest. I am very, very sorry, Vernoon. I pray you to forgive me who am ignorant and only do what I have been taught."

"Yes, they always remain veiled," stammered Alan, though he was not referring to their faces, and as the words passed his lips he wondered what the Asika would think if she could see a ballet at a London music-hall.

"Is there anything else wrong?" she went on gently. "If so, tell me that I may set it right."

"I do not like cruelty or sacrifices, O Asika. I have told you that bloodshed is orunda to me, and at the feast those men were poisoned and you mocked them in their pain; also many others were taken away to be killed for no crime."

She opened her beautiful eyes and stared at him, answering:

"But, Vernoon, all this is not my fault; they were sacrifices to the gods, and if I did not sacrifice, I should be sacrificed by the priests

and wizards who live to sacrifice. Yes, myself I should be made to drink the poison and be mocked at while I died like a snake with a broken back. Or even if I escaped the vengeance of the people, the gods themselves would kill me and raise up another in my place. Do they not sacrifice in your country, Vernoon?"

"No, Asika, they fight if necessary and kill those who commit murder. But they have no fetish that asks for blood, and the law they have from heaven is a law of mercy."

She stared at him again.

"All this is strange to me," she said. "I was taught otherwise. Gods are devils and must be appeased, lest they bring misfortune on us; men must be ruled by terror, or they would rebel and pull down the great House; doctors must learn magic, or how could they avert spells? wizards must be killed, or the people would perish in their net. May not we who live in a hell, strive to beat back its flame with the wisdom our forefathers have handed on to us? Tell me, Vernoon, for I would know."

"You make your own hell," answered Alan when with the help of Jeekie he understood her talk.

She pondered over his words for a while, then said:

"I must think. The thing is big. I wander in blackness; I will speak

with you again. Say now, what else is wrong with me?"

Now Alan thought that he saw opportunity for a word in season and made a great mistake.

"I think that you treat your husband, that man whom you call Mungana, very badly. Why should you drive him to his death?"

At these words the Asika leapt up in a rage, and seeking something to vent her temper on, violently boxed Jeekie's ears and kicked him with her sandalled foot.

"The Mungana!" she exclaimed, "that beast! What have I to do with him? I hate him, as I hated the others. The priests thrust him on me. He has had his day, let him go. In your country do they make women live with men whom they loathe? I love you, Bonsa himself knows why? Perhaps because you have a white skin and white thoughts. But I hate that man. What is the use of being Asika if I cannot take what I love and reject what I hate? Go away, Vernoon, go away, you have angered me, and if it were not for what you have said about that new law of mercy, I think that I would cut your throat," and again she boxed Jeekie's ears and kicked him in the shins.

Alan rose and bowed himself towards the door while she stood with her back towards him, sobbing. As he was about to pass it she wheeled round, wiping the tears from her eyes with her hand, and said:

"I forgot, I sent for you to thank you for your presents; that," and she pointed to the lion skin, "which they tell me you killed with some kind of thunder to save the life of that old cannibal, and this," and she pulled off the necklace of claws, then added, "as I am too bad to wear it, you had better take it back again," and she threw it with all her strength straight into Jeekie's face.

Fearing worse things, the much maltreated Jeekie uttered a howl and bolted through the door, while Alan, picking up the necklace, returned it to her with a bow. She took it.

"Stop," she said. "You are leaving the room without your mask and my women are outside. Come here," and she tied the thing upon his head, setting it all awry, then pushed him from the place.

"Very poor joke, Major, very poor indeed," said Jeekie when they had reached their own apartment. "Lady make love to you; you play prig and lecture lady about holy customs of her country and she box my ear till head sing, also kick me all over and throw sharp claws in face. Please you do it no more. The next time, who knows? she stick knife in my gizzard, then kiss you afterward and say she so sorry and hope she no hurt you. But how that help poor departed Jeekie who get all kicks, while you have ha'pence?"

"Oh! be quiet," said Alan; "you are welcome to the halfpence if you

would only leave me the kicks. The question is, how am I to get out of this mess? While she was a beautiful savage devil, one could deal with the thing, but if she is going to become human it is another matter."

Jeekie looked at him with pity in his eyes.

"Always thought white man mad at bottom," he said, shaking his big head. "To benighted black nigger thing so very simple. All you got to do, make love and cut when you get chance. Then she pleased as Punch, everything go smooth and Jeekie get no more kicks. Christian religion business very good, but won't wash in Asiki-land. Your reverend uncle find out that."

Not wishing to pursue the argument, Alan changed the subject by asking his indignant retainer if he thought that the Asika had meant what she said when she offered to send the gold down to the coast.

"Why not, Major? That good lady always mean what she say, and what she do too," and he dabbed wrathfully at the scratches made by the lion's claws on his face, then added, "She know her own mind, not like shilly-shally, see-saw white woman, who get up one thing and go to bed another. If she love she love, if she hate she hate. If she say she send gold, she send it, though pity to part with all that cash, because 'spect someone bag it."

Alan reflected a while.

"Don't you see, Jeekie, that here is a chance, if a very small one, of getting a message to the coast. Also it is quite clear that if we are ever able to escape, it will be impossible for us to carry this heavy stuff, whereas if we send it on ahead, perhaps some of it might get through. We will pack it up, Jeekie, at any rate it will be something to do. Go now and send a message to the Asika, and ask her to let us have some carpenters, and a lot of well-seasoned wood."

The message was sent and an hour later a dozen of the native craftsmen arrived with their rude tools and a supply of planks cut from a kind of iron-wood or ebony tree. They prostrated themselves to Alan, then the master of them rising, instantly began to measure Jeekie with a marked reed. That worthy sprang back and asked what in the name of Bonsa, Big and Little, they were doing, whereon the man explained with humility that the Asika had said that she thought the white lord wanted the wood to make a box to bury his servant in, as he, the said servant, had offended her that morning, and doubtless the white lord wished to kill him on that account, or perhaps to put him away under ground alive.

"Oh, my golly!" said Jeekie, shaking till his great knees knocked together, "oh! my golly! here pretty go. She think you want bury me all alive. That mean she want to be rid of Jeekie, because he got sit there and play gooseberry when she wish talk alone with you. Oh, yes! I see her little game."

"Well, Jeekie," said Alan, bursting into such a roar of laughter that he

nearly shook off his mask, "you had better be careful, for you just told me that the Asika is not like a see-saw white woman and never changes her mind. Say to this man that he must tell the Asika there is a mistake, and that however much I should like to oblige her, I can't bury you because it has been prophesied to me that on the day you are buried, I shall be buried also, and that therefore you must be kept alive."

"Capital notion that, Major," said Jeekie, much relieved. "She not want bury you just at present; next year perhaps, but not now. I tell him." And he did with much vigour.

This slight misconception having been disposed of, they explained to the carpenters what was wanted. First, all the gold was emptied out of the sacks in which it remained as the priests had brought it, and divided into heaps, each of which weighed about forty pounds, a weight that with its box Alan considered would be a good load for a porter. Of these heaps there proved to be fifty-three, their total value, Alan reckoned, amounting to about £100,000 sterling. Then the carpenters were set to work to make a model box, which they did quickly enough and with great ingenuity, cutting the wood with their native saws, dovetailing it as a civilized craftsman would do, and finally securing it everywhere with ebony pegs, driven into holes which they bored with a hot iron. The result was a box that would stand any amount of rough usage and when finally pegged down, one that could only be opened with a hammer and a cold chisel.

This box-making went on for two whole days. As each of them was filled and pegged down, the gold within being packed in sawdust to keep it from rattling, Alan amused himself in adding an address with a feather brush and a supply of red paint such as the Asiki priests used to decorate their bodies. At first he was puzzled to know what address to put, but finally decided upon the following:

Major A. Vernon, care of Miss Champers, The Court, near Kingswell, England. Adding in the corner, From A. V., Asiki Land, Africa.

It was all childish enough, he knew, yet when it was done he regarded his handiwork with a sort of satisfaction. For, reflected Alan, if but one of those boxes should chance to get through to England, it would tell Barbara a great deal, and if it were addressed to himself, her uncle could scarcely dare to take possession of it.

Then he bethought him of sending a letter, but was obliged to abandon the idea, as he had neither pen, pencil, ink, nor paper left to him. Whatever arts remained to them, that of any form of writing was now totally unknown to the Asiki, although marks that might be writing, it will be remembered, did appear on the inner side of the Little Bona mask, an evidence of its great antiquity. Even in the days when they had wrapped up the Egyptian, the Roman, and other early Munganas in sheets of gold and set them in their treasure-house, apparently they had no knowledge of it, for not even an hieroglyph or a rune appeared upon the imperishable metal shrouds. Since that time they had evidently

decreased, not advanced, in learning till at the present day, except for these relics and some dim and meaningless survival of rites that once had been religious and were still offered to the same ancient idols, there was little to distinguish them from other tribes of Central African savages. Still Alan did something, for obtaining a piece of white wood, which he smoothed as well as he was able with a knife, he painted on it this message:

"Messrs. Aston, Old Calabar. Please forward accompanying fifty-three packages, or as many as arrive, and cable as follows (all costs will be remitted): Miss Champers, Kingswell, England. Prisoner among Asiki. No present prospect of escape, but hope for best. Jeekie and I well. Allowed send this, but perhaps no future message possible. Good-bye. Alan."

As it happened just as Alan was finishing this scrawl with a sad heart, he heard a movement and glancing up, perceived standing at his side the Asika, of whom he had seen nothing since the interview when she had beaten Jeekie:

"What are those marks that you make upon the board, Vernoon?" she asked suspiciously.

With the assistance of Jeekie, who kept at a respectful distance, he informed her that they were a message in writing to tell the white men at the coast to forward the gold to his starving family.

"Oh!" she said, "I never heard of writing. You shall teach it me. It will serve to pass the time till we are married, though it will not be of much use afterwards, as we shall never be separated any more and words are better than marks upon a board. But," she added cheerfully, "I can send away this black dog of yours," and she looked at Jeekie, "and he can write to us. No, I cannot, for an accident might happen to him, and they tell me you say that if he dies, you die also, so he must stop here always. What have you in those little boxes?"

"The gold you gave me, Asika, packed in loads."

"A small gift enough," she answered contemptuously; "would you not like more, since you value that stuff? Well, another time you shall send all you want. Meanwhile the porters are waiting, fifty men and three, as you sent me word, and ten spare ones to take the place of any who die. But how they will find their way, I know not, since none of them have ever been to the coast."

An idea occurred to Alan, who had small faith in Jeekie's "ma" as a messenger.

"The Ogula prisoners could show them," he said; "at any rate as far as the forest, and after that they could find out. May they not go, Asika?"

"If you will," she answered carelessly. "Let them be ready to start

to-morrow at the dawn, all except their chief, Fahni, who must stop here as a hostage. I do not trust those Ogula, who more than once have threatened to make war upon us," she added, then turned and bade the priests bring in the bearers to receive their instructions.

Presently they came, picked men all of them, under the command of an Asiki captain, and with them the Ogula, whom she summoned also.

"Go where the white lord sends you," she said in an indifferent voice, "carrying with you these packages. I do not know where it is, but these man-eaters will show you some of the way, and if you fail in the business but live to come back again, you shall be sacrificed to Bonsa at the next feast; if you run away then your wives and children will be sacrificed. Food shall be given you for your journey, and gold to buy more when it is gone. Now, Vernoon, tell them what they have to do."

So Alan, or rather Jeekie, told them, and these directions were so long and minute, that before they were finished the Asika grew tired of listening and went away, saying as she passed the captain of the company:

"Remember my words, man, succeed or die, but of your land and its secrets say nothing."

"I hear," answered the captain, prostrating himself.

That night Alan summoned the Ogula and spoke to them through Jeekie in their own language. At first they declared that they would not leave their chief, preferring to stay and die with him.

"Not so," said Fahni; "go, my children, that I may live. Go and gather the tribe, all the thousands of them who are men and can fight, and bring them up to attack Asiki-land, to rescue me if I still live, or to avenge me if I am dead. As for these bearers, do them no harm, but send them on to the coast with the white man's goods."

So in the end the Ogula said that they would go, and when Alan woke up on the following morning, he was informed that they and the Asiki porters had already departed upon their journey. Then he dismissed the matter from his mind, for to tell the truth he never expected to hear of them any more.