

CHAPTER XV

ALAN FALLS ILL

After the departure of the messengers a deep melancholy fell upon Alan, who was sure that he had now no further hope of communicating with the outside world. Bitterly did he reproach himself for his folly in having ever journeyed to this hateful place in order to secure--what? About £100,000 worth of gold which of course he never could secure, as it would certainly vanish or be stolen on its way to the coast. For this gold he had become involved in a dreadful complication which must cost him much misery, and sooner or later life itself, since he could not marry that beautiful savage Asika, and if he refused her she would certainly kill him in her outraged pride and fury.

Day by day she sent for him, and when he came, assumed a new character, that of a woman humbled by a sense of her own ignorance, which she was anxious to amend. So he must play the role of tutor to her, telling her of civilized peoples, their laws, customs and religions, and instructing her how to write and read. She listened and learned submissively enough, but all the while Alan felt as one might who is called upon to teach tricks to a drugged panther. The drug in this case was her passion for him, which appeared to be very genuine. But when it passed off, or when he was obliged to refuse her, what, he wondered, would happen then?

Anxiety and confinement told on him far more than all the hardships of

his journey. His health ran down, he began to fall ill. Then as bad luck would have it, walking in that damp, unwholesome cedar garden, out of which he might not stray, he contracted the germ of some kind of fever which in autumn was very common in this poisonous climate. Three days later he became delirious, and for a week after that hung between life and death. Well was it for him that his medicine-chest still remained intact, and that recognizing his own symptoms before his head gave way, he was able to instruct Jeekie what drugs to give him at the different stages of the disease.

For the rest his memories of that dreadful illness always remained very vague. He had visions of Jeekie and of a robed woman whom he knew to be the Asika, bending over him continually. Also it seemed to him that from time to time he was talking with Barbara, which even then he knew must be absurd, for how could they talk across thousands of miles of land and sea.

At length his mind cleared suddenly, and he awoke as from a nightmare to find himself lying in the hall or room where he had always been, feeling quite cool and without pain, but so weak that it was an effort to him to lift his hand. He stared about him and was astonished to see the white head of Jeekie rolling uneasily to and fro upon the cushions of another bed near by.

"Jeekie," he said, "are you ill too, Jeekie?"

At the sound of that voice his retainer started up violently.

"What, Major, you awake?" he said. "Thanks be to all gods, white and black, yes, and yellow too, for I thought your goose cooked. No, no, Major, I not ill, only Asika say so. You go to bed, so she make me go to bed. You get worse, she treat me cruel; you seem better, she stuff me with food till I burst. All because you tell her that you and I die same day. Oh, Lord! poor Jeekie think his end very near just now, for he know quite well that she not let him breathe ten minutes after you peg out. Jeekie never pray so hard for anyone before as he pray this week for you, and by Jingo! I think he do the trick, he and that medicine stuff which make him feel very bad in stomach," and he groaned under the weight of his many miseries.

Weak as he was Alan began to laugh, and that laugh seemed to do him more good than anything that he could remember, for after it he was sure that he would recover.

Just then an agonized whisper reached him from Jeekie.

"Look out!" it said, "here come Asika. Go sleep and seem better, Major, please, or I catch it hot."

So Alan almost shut his eyes and lay still. In another moment she was standing over him and he noticed that her hair was dishevelled and her eyes were red as though with weeping. She scanned him intently for a

little while, then passed round to where Jeekie lay and appeared to pinch his ear so hard that he wriggled and uttered a stifled groan.

"How is your lord, dog?" she whispered.

"Better, O Asika, I think that last medicine do us good, though it make me very sick inside. Just now he spoke to me and said that he hoped that your heart was not sad because of him and that all this time in his dreams he had seen and thought of nobody but you, O Asika."

"Did he?" asked that lady, becoming intensely interested. "Then tell me, dog, why is he ever calling upon one Bar-bar-a? Surely that is a woman's name?"

"Yes, O Asika, that is the name of his mother, also of one of his sisters, whom, after you, he loves best of anyone in the whole world. When you are here he talks of them, but when you are not here he talks of no one but you. Although he is so sick he remembers white man's custom, which tells him that it is very wrong to say sweet things to lady's face till he is quite married to her. After that they say them always."

She looked at him suspiciously and muttering, "Here it is otherwise. For your own sake, man, I trust that you do not lie," left him, and drawing a stool up beside Alan's bed, sat herself down and examined him carefully, touching his face and hands with her long thin fingers.

Then noting how white and wasted he was, of a sudden she began to weep, saying between her sobs:

"Oh! if you should die, Vernoon, I will die also and be born again not as Asika, as I have been for so many generations, but as a white woman that I may be with you. Only first," she added, setting her teeth, "I will sacrifice every wizard in this land, for they have brought the sickness on you by their magic, and I will burn Bonsa-town and cast its gods to melt in the flames, and the Mungana with them. And then amid their ashes I will let out my life," and again she began to weep very piteously and to call him by endearing names and pray him that he would not die.

Now Alan thought it time to wake up. He opened his eyes, stared at her vacantly, and asked if it were raining, which indeed it might have been, for her big tears were falling on his face. She uttered a gasp of joy.

"No, no," she answered, "the weather is very fine. It is I--I who have rained because I thought you die." She wiped his forehead with the soft linen of her robe, then went on, "But you will not die; say that you will live, say that you will live for me, Vernoon."

He looked at her, and feeble though he was, the awfulness of the situation sank into his soul.

"I hope that I shall live," he answered. "I am hungry, please give me

some food."

Next instant there was a tumult near by, and when Alan looked up again it was to see Jeekie, very lightly clad, flying through the door.

"It will be here presently," she said. "Oh! if you knew what I have suffered, if you only knew. Now you will recover whom I thought dead, for this fever passes quickly and there shall be such a sacrifice--no, I forgot, you hate sacrifices--there shall be no sacrifice, there shall be a thanksgiving, and every woman in the land shall break her bonds to husband or to lover and take him whom she desires without reproach or loss. I will do as I would be done by, that is the law you taught me, is it not?"

This novel interpretation of a sacred doctrine, worthy of Jeekie himself, so paralyzed Alan's enfeebled brain that he could make no answer, nor do anything except wonder what would happen in Asiki-land when the decree of its priestess took effect. Then Jeekie arrived with something to drink which he swallowed with the eagerness of the convalescent and almost immediately went to sleep in good earnest.

Alan's recovery was rapid, since as the Asika had told him, if a patient lives through it, the kind of fever that he had taken did not last long enough to exhaust his vital forces. When she asked him if he needed anything to make him well, he answered:

"Yes, air and exercise."

She replied that he should have both, and next morning his hated mask was put upon his face and he was supported by priests to a door where a litter, or rather litters were waiting, one for himself and another for Jeekie who, although in robust health, was still supposed to be officially ill and not allowed to walk upon his own legs. They entered these litters and were borne off till presently they met a third litter of particularly gorgeous design carried by masked bearers, wherein was the Asika herself, wearing her coronet and a splendid robe.

Into this litter, which was fitted with a second seat, Alan was transferred, the Mungana, for whom it was designed, being placed in that vacated by Alan, which either by accident or otherwise, was no more seen that day. They went up the mountain side and to the edge of the great fall and watched the waters thunder down, though the crest of them they could not reach. Next they wandered off into the huge forests that clothed the slopes of the hills and there halted and ate. Then as the sun sank they returned to the gloomy Bonsa-Town beneath them.

For Alan, notwithstanding his weakness and anxieties, it was a heavenly day. The Asika was passive, some new mood being on her, and scarcely troubled him at all except to call his attention to a tree, a flower, or a prospect of the scenery. Here on the mountain side, too, the air was sweet, and for the rest--well, he who had been so near to death, was escaped for an hour from that gloomy home of bloodshed and superstition,

and saw God's sky again.

This journey was the first of many. Every day the litters were waiting and they visited some new place, although into the town itself they never went. Moreover, if they passed through outlying villages, though Alan was forced to wear his mask, their inhabitants had been warned to absent themselves, so that they saw no one. The crops were left untended and the cattle and sheep lowed hungrily in their kraals. On certain days, at Alan's request, they were taken to the spots where the gold was found in the gravel bed of an almost dry stream that during the rains was a torrent.

He descended from the litter and with the help of the Asika and Jeekie, dug a little in this gravel, not without reward, for in it they found several nuggets. Above, too, where they went afterwards, was a huge quartz reef denuded by water, which evidently had been worked in past ages and was still so rich that in it they saw plenty of visible gold. Looking at it Alan bethought him of his City days and of the hundreds of thousands of pounds capital with which this unique proposition might have been floated. Afterwards they were carried to the places where the gems were found, stuck about in the clay, like plums in a pudding, though none ever sought them now. But all these things interested the Asika not at all.

"What is the good of gold," she asked of Alan, "except to make things of, or the bright stones except to play with? What is the good of

anything except food to eat and power and wisdom that can open the secret doors of knowledge, of things seen and things unseen, and love that brings the lover joy and forgetfulness of self and takes away the awful loneliness of the soul, if only for a little while?"

Not wishing to drift into discussion on the matter of love, Alan asked the priestess to define her "soul," whence it came and whither she believed it to be going.

"My soul is I, Vernoon," she answered, "and already very, very old. Thus it has ruled amongst this people for thousands of years."

"How is that?" he asked, "seeing that the Asika dies?"

"Oh! no, Vernoon, she does not die; she only changes. The old body dies, the spirit enters into another body which is waiting. Thus until I was fourteen I was but a common girl, the daughter of a headman of that village yonder, at least so they tell me, for of this time I have no memory. Then the Asika died and as I had the secret marks and the beauty that is hers the priests burnt her body before Big Bansa and suffocated me, the child, in the smoke of the burning. But I awoke again and when I awoke the past was gone and the soul of the Asika filled me, bringing with it its awful memories, its gathered wisdom, its passion of love and hate, and its power to look backward and before."

"Do you ever do these things?" asked Alan.

"Backward, yes, before very little; since you came, not at all, because my heart is a coward and I fear what I might see. Oh! Vernoon, Vernoon, I know you and your thoughts. You think me a beautiful beast who loves like a beast, who loves you because you are white and different from our men. Well, what there is of the beast in me the gods of my people gave, for they are devils and I am their servant. But there is more than that, there is good also which I have won for myself. I knew you would come even before I had seen your face, I knew you would come," she went on passionately, "and that is why I was yours already. But what would befall after you came, that I neither knew, nor know, because I will not seek, who could learn it all."

He looked at her and she saw the doubt in his eyes.

"You do not believe me, Vernoon. Very well, this night you shall see, you and that black dog of yours, that you may know I do not trick you, and he shall tell me what you see, for he being but a low-born pig will speak the truth, not minding if it hurts me, whereas you are gentle and might spare, and myself I have sworn not to search the future by an oath that I may not break."

"What of the past?" asked Alan.

"We will not waste time on it, for I know it all. Vernoon, have you no memories of Asiki-land? Do you think you never visited it before?"

"Never," said Alan; "it was my uncle who came and ran away with Little Bonsa on his head."

"That is news indeed," she replied mockingly. "Did you then think that I believed it to be you, though it is true that she who went before, or my spirit that was in her, fell into error for an hour, and thought that fool-uncle of yours was the Man. When she found her mistake she let him go, and bade the god go with him that it might bring back the appointed Man, as it has done; yes, that Little Bonsa, who knew him of old, might search him out from among all the millions of men, born or unborn, and bring him back to me. Therefore also she chose a young black dog who would live for many years, and bade the god to take him with her, and told him of the wealth of our people that it might be a bait upon the hook. Do you see, Vernoon, that yellow dirt was the bait, that I--I am the hook? Well, you have felt it before, so it should not gall you overmuch."

Now Alan was more frightened than he had been since he set foot in Asiki-land, for of a sudden this woman became terrible to him. He felt that she knew things which were hidden from him. For the first time he believed in her, believed, that she was more than a mere passionate savage set by chance to rule over a bloodthirsty tribe; that she was one who had a part in his destiny.

"Felt the hook?" he muttered. "I do not understand."

"You are very forgetful," she answered. "Vernoon, we have lived and loved before, who were twin souls from the first. That man now, whom I told you lived once on the great river called the Nile, have you no memory of him? Well, well, let it be, I will tell you afterwards. Here we are at the Gold House again, to-night when I am ready I will send for you, and this I promise, you shall leave me wiser than you were."

When they were alone in their room Alan told Jeekie of the expected entertainment of crystal gazing, or whatever it might be, and the part that he was to play in it.

"You say that again, Major," said Jeekie.

Alan repeated the information, giving every detail that he could remember.

"Oh!" said Jeekie, "I see Asika show us things, 'cause she afraid to look at them herself, or take oath, or can't, or something. She no ask you tell her what she see, because you too kind hurt her feeling, if happen to be something beastly. But Jeekie just tell her because he so truthful and not care curse about her feeling. Well, that all right, Jeekie tell her sure enough. Only, Major, don't you interrupt. Quite possible these magic things, I see one show, you see another. So don't you go say, 'Jeekie, that a lie,' and give me away to Asika just because you think you see different, 'cause if so you put me into dirty hole,

and of course I catch it afterwards. You promise, Major?"

"Oh! yes, I promise. But, Jeekie, do you really think we are going to see anything?"

"Can't say, Major," and he shook his head gloomily. "P'raps all put up job. But lots of rum things in world, Major, specially among beastly African savage who very curious and always ready pay blood to bad Spirit. Hope Asika not get this into her head, because no one know what happen. P'raps we see too much and scared all our lives; but p'raps all tommy rot."

"That's it--tommy rot," answered Alan, who was not superstitious. "Well, I suppose that we must go through with it. But oh! Jeekie, I wish you would tell me how to get out of this."

"Don't know, Major, p'raps never get out; p'raps learn how to-night. Have to do something soon if want to go. Mungana's time nearly up, and then--oh my eye!"

It was night, about ten o'clock indeed, the hour at which Alan generally went to bed. No message had come and he began to hope that the Asika had forgotten, or changed her mind, and was just going to say so to Jeekie when a light coming from behind him attracted his attention and he

turned to see her standing in a corner of the great room, holding a lamp in her hand and looking towards him. Her gold breastplate and crown were gone, with every other ornament, and she was clad, or rather muffled in robes of pure white fitted with a kind of nun's hood which lay back upon her shoulders. Also on her arm she carried a shawl or veil. Standing thus, all undecked, with her long hair fastened in a simple knot, she still looked very beautiful, more so than she had ever been, thought Alan, for the cruelty of her face had faded and was replaced by a mystery very strange to see. She did not seem quite like a natural woman, and that was the reason, perhaps, that Alan for the first time felt attracted by her. Hitherto she had always repelled him, but this night it was otherwise.

"How did you come here?" he asked in a more gentle voice than he generally used towards her.

Noting the change in his tone, she smiled shyly and even coloured a little, then answered:

"This house has many secrets, Vernoon. When you are lord of it you shall learn them all, till then I may not tell them to you. But, come, there are other secrets which I hope you shall see to-night, and, Jeekie, come you also, for you shall be the mouth of your lord, so that you may tell me what perhaps he would hide."

"I will tell you everything, everything, O Asika," answered Jeekie,

stretching out his hands and bowing almost to the ground.

Then they started and following many long passages as before, although whether they were the same or others Alan could not tell, came at last to a door which he recognized, that of the Treasure House. As they approached this door it opened and through it, like a hunted thing, ran the bedizened Mungana, husband of the Asika, terror, or madness, shining in his eyes. Catching sight of his wife, who bore the lamp, he threw himself upon his knees and snatching at her robe, addressed some petition to her, speaking so rapidly that Alan could not follow his words.

For a moment she listened, then dragged her dress from his hand and spurned him with her foot. There was something so cruel in the gesture and the action, so full of deadly hate and loathing, that Alan, who witnessed it, experienced a new revulsion of feeling towards the Asika. What kind of a woman must she be, he wondered, who could treat a discarded lover thus in the presence of his successor?

With a groan or a sob, it was difficult to say which, the poor man rose and perceived Alan, whose face he now beheld for the first time, since the Asika had told him not to mask himself as they would meet no one. The sight of it seemed to fill him with jealous fury; at any rate he leapt at his rival, intending, apparently, to catch him by the throat. Alan, who was watching him, stepped aside, so that he came into violent contact with the wall of the passage and, half-stunned by the shock,

reeled onwards into the darkness.

"The hog!" said the Asika, or rather she hissed it, "the hog, who dared to touch me and to strike at you. Well, his time is short--would that I could make it shorter! Did you hear what he sought of me?"

Alan, who wished for no confidences, replied by asking what the Mungana was doing in the Treasure House, to which she answered that the spirits who dwelt there were eating up his soul, and when they had devoured it all he would go quite mad and kill himself.

"Does this happen to all Munganas?" inquired Alan.

"Yes, Vernoon, if the Asika hates them, but if she loves them it is otherwise. Come, let us forget the wretch, who would kill you if he could," and she led the way into the hall and up it, passing between the heaps of gold.

On the table where lay the necklaces of gems she set down her lamp, whereof the light, all there was in that great place, flickered feebly upon the mask of Little Bonsa, which had been moved here apparently for some ceremonial purpose, and still more feebly upon the hideous, golden countenances and winding sheets of the ancient, yellow dead who stood around in scores placed one above the other, each in his appointed niche. It was an awesome scene and one that oppressed Jeekie very much, for he murmured to Alan:

"Oh my! Major, family vault child's play to this hole, just like----"
here his comparison came to an end, for the Asika cut it short with a single glance.

"Sit here in front of me," she said to Alan, "and you, Jeekie, sit at your lord's side, and be silent till I bid you speak."

Then she crouched down in a heap behind them, threw the cloth or veil she carried over her head, and in some way that they did not see, suddenly extinguished the lamp.

Now they were in deep darkness, the darkness of death, and in utter silence, the silence of the dead. No glimmer of light, and yet to Alan it seemed as though he could feel the flash of the crystal eyes of Little Bonsa, and of all the other eyes set in the masks of those departed men who once had been the husbands of the bloodstained priestess of the Asiki, till one by one, as she wearied of them, they were bewitched to madness and to doom. In that utter quiet he thought even that he could hear them stir within their winding sheets, or it may have been that the Asika had risen and moved among them on some errand of her own. Far away something fell to the floor, a very light object, such as flake of rock or a scale of gold. Yet the noise of it struck his nerves loud as a clap of thunder, and those of Jeekie also, for he felt him start at his side and heard the sudden hammerlike beat of his heart.

What was the woman doing in this dreadful place, he wondered. Well, it was easy to guess. Doubtless she had brought them here to scare and impress them. Presently a voice, that of some hidden priest, would speak to them, and they would be asked to believe it a message from the spirit world, or a spirit itself might be arranged--what could be easier in their mood and these surroundings?

Now the Asika was speaking behind them in a muffled voice. From the tone of it she appeared to be engaged in argument or supplication in some strange tongue. At any rate Alan could not understand a word of what she said. The argument, or prayer, went on for a long while, with pauses as though for answers. Then suddenly it ceased and once more they were plunged into that unfathomable silence.